The Age of Metternich, 1815–48

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Today, more than 150 years after his death, Prince Klemens von Metternich remains a controversial figure. Metternich (1773-1859), chancellor and foreign minister of the Austrian Habsburg Empire, was the longest-serving first minister in the nineteenth century and, arguably, one of the most successful. He not only suppressed nationalistic and democratic trends in Central Europe but was also the architect of a diplomatic system which kept Europe at peace for a century. He is often associated with reconstructing the ancient regime after the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras.

From the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars in 1792 to the exile of Napoleon to Saint Helena in 1815, Europe had been almost constantly at war. During this time, the military conquests of France had resulted in the spread of liberalism throughout much of the continent, resulting in many states adopting the Napoleonic code. Largely as a reaction to the radicalism of the French Revolution, the victorious powers of the Napoleonic Wars resolved to suppress liberalism and nationalism, and revert largely to the status quo of Europe prior to 1789. Metternich was the chief symbol of those forces. So the 'Metternich System' – the expression with which the period is closely linked on account of the dominant role played in it by the State Chancellor – was based on the suppression of all endeavours of a democratic, liberal or national nature.

The Metternich System, also known as the Congress System after the Congress of Vienna, was the balance of power that existed in Europe from the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815) to the outbreak of World War I (1914), albeit with major alterations after the revolutions of 1848. The purpose of Metternich's plan was to keep control of Europe in the hands of conservatives through "Concert of Europe". It was a peacekeeping alliance pledging to maintain a "balance of power" and suppress uprisings.

Its founding powers were Austria, Prussia, the Russian Empire and the United Kingdom, the members of the Quadruple Alliance responsible for the downfall of the First French Empire. In time France was established as a fifth member of the concert. At first, the leading personalities of the system were British foreign secretary Lord Castlereagh, Austrian chancellor Klemens von Metternich and Russian tsar Alexander I.

The Congress of Vienna established an international system of reactionary governments dedicated to maintaining a set of European boundaries, preventing revolutions and changes in government, and stopping any one power from becoming too powerful. To this end, the Congress powers agreed to meet whenever trouble should crop up in Europe to discuss how to fix it.

Early Life of Metternich-

The French Revolution of 1789 and its consequences were referred to by Metternich as the "hateful time". Metternich's family was directly affected by both the Revolution and the fighting. The revolutionary wars forced the Metternich family to flee from Germany into Austria. The young Metternich never forgot this trauma. The rest of his career was, in a sense, one long reaction.

Once Metternich was back in Vienna, his career as a statesman and politician advanced rapidly. His marriage in 1795 to Eleonore von Kaunitz, granddaughter of the Austrian state chancellor, gave him access to the highest social and political circles in the Austrian Empire. His wife's contacts and knowledge were important for an ambitious man who had never before lived in Austria's capital city. After serving as Austrian ambassador to Berlin and Dresden, Metternich was appointed ambassador to France in 1806.

In April of 1809, he appealed to the French emperor's vanity (and cemented a temporary French-Austrian alliance) by marrying Napoleon to Marie Louise, daughter of the Austrian emperor Francis I. But diplomatic success did not come as easily. He sent such optimistic reports back to Vienna—portraying a vulnerable Napoleon who was in danger of being overthrown by a resurgent revolutionary movement in France—that the Austrian government went to war against France and lost. Yet when Metternich gained favorable peace terms from Napoleon, he was rewarded by being appointed the Austrian minister of foreign affairs in October 1809.

At that time the Habsburg Empire was at its lowest point in its struggle against Napoleon. Within a few years, he had pulled the Empire back from the brink of possible extinction. In short, Metternich used his diplomatic skills to outgeneral Napoleon. In 1810 he persuaded the Habsburg Emperor, Francis I, to ally with Napoleon. But when it became clear that the French leader was not prepared to settle down and play the part of an old-fashioned absolute monarch he turned against him and joined the Fourth Coalition, which eventually defeated France. In 1813, he was given the hereditary title of prince.

The year 1815 saw Metternich at the peak of his power and popularity in Austria. In 1810, Napoleon had been master of much of Europe, and Austria had been a virtual puppet of French foreign policy; five years later, Metternich had become a key leader in the coalition of countries which defeated the French emperor twice. Now the victors held the fate of Europe in their hands. When the victorious countries agreed to hold a diplomatic conference at Vienna (the Congress of Vienna), Metternich saw it as a personal triumph.

Metternich's Congresses-

At the Congress, Metternich's mastery of diplomatic maneuvering earned him the title of "the coachman of Europe". More than any other single leader, he seemed to determine the future direction of the Continent. The period of Metternich's congresses defined an era in which the governments in power attempted to create a reactionary international system. The reactionaries believed that if revolution cropped up in one part of Europe, it had to be destroyed, or else would spread like some epidemic.

Some rulers, such as Tsar Alexander, wanted the congress to create an international "police system" to prevent future revolutions and block the emergence of new Napoleons. Metternich sympathized with this aim, but he also wanted to discourage any Russian interest in expanding into Europe. He also was determined to frustrate Austria's main rival in Germany, Prussia.

After 1815 Metternich's aim was uncomplicated, if impossible: to suspend time, or at least, to preserve the Vienna settlement for as long as possible. Despite the confusing nonsense of the Tsar Alexander's so-called Holy Alliance, it was Metternich's Quadruple Alliance and the resultant Congress System that established some sort of mechanism to allow Europe's resurgent superpowers to co-ordinate their efforts to fight the revolutionary fires wherever they should start.

But In international affairs, Metternich's settlement did not last long. Within a few years after the Vienna Congress, it had become clear that the five great powers simply did not have sufficiently similar interests or goals to cooperate on every issue that came before them. After European congresses at Troppau, Laibach, and Verona (1820–22) granted permission to Austria to deal with

revolutions in Italy and to France to do the same in Spain, Britain announced its withdrawal from the Concert of Europe, proclaiming that it wanted no more to do with the conservative Continental powers. Likewise, a revolution in France in 1830 weakened that country's link to Metternich's system, and he even had trouble with Russia, which was greatly upset by Ottoman persecution of Orthodox Christians during the movement for Greek independence (1821–30).

Nevertheless, no overall European war on the scale of the Napoleonic Wars occurred until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. So influential was Metternich's diplomacy that the era from 1815 to 1848 is often referred to as the "Age of Metternich". Thus, for much of his period at the foreign office Metternich was able to mask Austria's relative military weakness by working in tandem with other great powers. This was perhaps always the essence of what has become known, rather too grandly, as the Metternich System.

Internal problems-

After 1815, Metternich devoted increasing amounts of his time to Austria's severe internal problems. In many ways the Habsburg Empire was an inherently unstable structure: over 250,000 square miles in area, populated by 11 different national groups all of whom, with the exception of the Austrian ruling aristocracy, were largely without access to political power.

The French Revolution had proved to be a threat to the multinational Habsburg Empire, since it fanned the nationalism of some groups in the Empire, such as the Hungarians. Metternich saw nationalism and liberalism as serious threats to the survival of the Austrian Empire and tried to suppress both. At the

Congress of Vienna, he also worked to create confederations in both Germany (where he succeeded) and Italy (where he failed).

It is often argued that, in addition to the territorial triumph at the Congress of Vienna, Metternich achieved stability in the Habsburg Empire by creating a 'police state'. Through the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, Austria and Prussia forced the other German states to institute censorship of books, pamphlets, and newspapers; to allow a Central Commission and police spies to identify and hunt "subversives" and to restrict student societies and professors in universities. There can be little doubt that this was a particularly extreme package of repressive legislation and in the way it targeted intellectuals such as professors, writers or students. The censorship, letter opening and bureaucratic interference did not prevent the flow of liberal and nationalist ideas into the Empire. The midnight arrests and occasional disappearances were more irritating than terrifying. For many in Germany, Metternich became a hated symbol of reaction and repression.

Whereas Metternich's name is often equated with oppression, he in fact was not eager to impose harsh and unrelenting rule in his own state or in others. Metternich believed that the best government was absolutism but that it was best because it guaranteed equal justice and fair administration for all.

In many places his appeals went unheeded—in the Papal States, for example—and even in Austria his influence in domestic affairs weakened considerably as time went on. In 1826 Emperor Francis appointed Franz Anton, Kolowart, minister of state, and he steadily reduced Metternich's influence in internal policy. In 1835 Francis died and was succeeded by his son mentally retarded Ferdinand.

If it were not for Metternich's skills in diplomacy, his career would have been regarded as a virtual failure. At times, he himself thought that way. When word arrived that the French monarchy (which had been restored by the Congress of Vienna) had fallen victim to another revolution in 1830, Metternich collapsed at his desk, exclaiming, "My life's work is destroyed!"

When ultimately unsuccessful revolutions broke out in the Austrian Empire in 1848, Metternich, the "last great master of the principle of balance", became the target of angry mobs. Forced to resign, he went into exile in England before returning to Vienna in 1858. He died there a year later. Metternich believed he had unfairly become a symbol of reaction and oppression. His real aim, he said, was to avoid the chaos that he believed would follow in the wake of the major political changes demanded by European revolutionaries.

Success or Failure?

First we will discuss about the series of achievements to his name. The outwitting of Napoleon, the negotiated triumph of Vienna, the establishment of a diplomatic method or system which, to a certain extent, allowed the ruling classes of Europe to co-operate and communicate rather than make war. In addition to this, in the field of domestic policy though he was undoubtedly repressive and intolerant, he nevertheless provided strong central government. So, in many ways Metternich provided the Habsburg Empire and, to a lesser extent, Europe generally, with over 30 years of relative stability: an extraordinary achievement after the convulsions of the Napoleonic era.

And yet, there is still the aura of failure around his name. The reason is very simple, his system ultimately destroyed itself and him with it. To explain a little: it is frequently argued that his systematic implementation of inflexible and repressive

policies actually created the very revolutions that he was trying to prevent. Thus the 1848 revolutions can be read as a kind of historical judgement upon the entire Metternich system, damning him forever.

The real measure of Metternich's success is the fact that for over 30 years he was able to create the illusion of Austrian strength and obscure the reality of her relative weakness. Compared to the other great powers the army was in poor shape but state finances were being crippled by the cost of trying to maintain it. Indeed, the Habsburg Empire was, by 1848, a Great Power in name only. Metternich's most impressive achievement was to hide all of this decaying reality behind the thin façade of his own personal grandeur. Arguably and ironically, this makes him only a success in obscuring the much deeper failure of his system.

If Napoleon had threatened the virtual end of the Habsburg Empire it was Metternich's achievement at the Congress of Vienna to redraw the structure of Europe in such a way that the Habsburgs emerged in an even stronger position than before the Napoleonic era. Control of north Italy was regained, as was control of Germany through the creation of a German Confederation under the permanent presidency of the Habsburgs. Undoubtedly, Metternich lost some of his mastery of European affairs in the last decade at the foreign ministry and he was unable to prevent revolutions occurring right across Europe in 1848, but we should not lose sight of the fact that he had given 'The Old Order' a new start. Besides it Europeans in the late 20th century, recovering from the disasters of World War I and II, tend to see him as a perceptive visionary whose diplomatic ideas kept Europe at peace between 1815 and 1914.