

## **The Congress of Vienna.** <sup>1</sup>

With the peace of Paris of 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1814, the deeper, underlying controversies between the allies had not been solved. In fact, the treaty merely provided that the settlement of questions affecting the balance of European power would “be regulated at the Congress upon principles determined by the Allied Powers themselves.” The congress referred to was the one held in Vienna from 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1814 until 8<sup>th</sup> of June 1815.

Wellington formulated the general purpose of this congress “to regulate and settle various points left unsettled by the treaties of peace, not only as between France and the Powers engaged in the war, but questions affecting the relative interests of all, arising out of the long and extensive warfare, the consequence of the French revolution.” <sup>2</sup>

The points and questions alluded to by the duke fell into three categories: territorial arrangements not settled by the treaty of Paris, the new constitution of Germany and general issues, such as the slave trade and navigation on international rivers. <sup>3</sup> In turn, these categories were based upon the principles of restoration of the political situation of 1792, legitimacy and solidarity.

At the congress, Britain was initially represented by viscount Castlereagh. After his return to England early 1815, he was succeeded by the duke of Wellington who reached Vienna on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February. Late March, as Wellington left for the army in the Netherlands, he was in turn succeeded by the earl of Clancarty.

Austria was represented by Von Metternich and by his deputy, Baron Wessenberg. Prussia was represented by Prince Von Hardenberg, the Chancellor, and the diplomat and scholar Von Humboldt, with lieutenant general Von dem Knesebeck as military advisor. Although Russia's official delegation was led by the foreign minister, count Nesselrode, Czar Alexander for the most part acted on his own behalf.

Initially, the representatives of the four victorious powers hoped to exclude the French from serious participation in the negotiations, but Talleyrand, Napoleon's former foreign minister, who had deserted his old master early enough to be accepted by the restored king, managed to skilfully insert himself into the negotiations.

In 1813-1814 the allies were never quite certain until the last moment whether their final objective was the complete elimination of Bonapartism, or whether, under certain safeguards, Napoleon should be allowed to retain his throne. When after much hesitation they decided to reinstall the Bourbons, this restoration in itself became one of their safeguards against a revival of Bonapartism; and they thus found themselves in the illogical position of having on the one hand to enforce guarantees against any renewal of French militarism and on the other to avoid rendering the Bourbon dynasty unacceptable to French opinion by the imposition of humiliating penalties or restrictions. It was upon this weak link in their logic that Talleyrand concentrated his activities. <sup>4</sup> In other words: Talleyrand used the principle of legitimacy and international law permitting him to embarrass others and occupy the moral high ground. <sup>5</sup>

Though the congress was supposed to start in September, it dragged on through October 1814 without agreement even on the procedure for discussing the major issues at question, never mind an examination of the issues themselves, of which the Saxon-Polish question was the main controversy.

A committee of five representatives of the great powers was originally designed to settle this question, but it gradually became the real directing committee of the congress. It worked out the territorial details of the treaty of Vienna. A congress in general was never constituted: it remained a congress of the great powers, who for their convenience had summoned the smaller powers of Europe to meet them. The 5 great powers considered themselves as “Europe” and at the congress they asserted successfully the ascendancy of the great powers, the smaller states were only to be admitted at such times and such terms as suited those who

had great resources and armies at their command. The main states in this group were Spain, Sweden and Portugal.

The primary talk of the congress was the redistribution of the conquered territories. In effecting this redistribution it was necessary to take into account not only the stipulations of the treaties of Paris but also the treaties made in 1813 by the three eastern powers, both among themselves and with the minor states. As has been seen, these powers had so far exhausted in vain every expedient to come to a decision. The principal stumbling-block had been the question of Poland.

In so far as any previous commitments were concerned, Russia and Prussia were distinctly bound together by the convention of Kalisch; Austria was indistinctly bound to the Russo-Prussian solution under the treaty of Reichenbach, and Britain was bound only to settle these grave problems in consultation with her three major allies. France was bound only in so far as her adhesion to the peace of Paris implied that she would accept any arrangement agreed to by Russia, Austria and Great Britain. This created an impossible diplomatic pattern in which the two demanding powers were tied together by a precise previous commitment, whereas the three resisting powers were not united by any specific undertaking towards each other.<sup>6</sup>

The treaty of Paris had settled France's loss of the territories annexed in 1795 – 1810 and the affirmation of this element formed the starting point for the congress of Vienna. Much less so was the so-called Polish-Saxon Crisis, the most contentious subject at the Congress; in fact the issue was one of the main reasons to hold the congress in the first place.

In considering the attitude adopted at the outset of the congress by Prussia, Austria and Britain, it is necessary to realise that for them the Polish problem was indissolubly linked with the problem of Saxony. If an enlarged kingdom of Poland were to be created, then Austria and Prussia would be bound to surrender to it the large provinces they had acquired from the partitions and would have to seek compensation elsewhere. Austria could without undue disturbance find such compensation in Italy and Illyria, but if Prussia were to be compensated she would demand the whole of Saxony and this annexation would in its time entail a fundamental disturbance in the balance of continental power.<sup>7</sup>

a partition of the territory of the grand duchy of Warsaw could be an alternative for the czar's plan for a kingdom of Poland. Yet, what counted for Austria and Prussia was how much they were going to recover of their old Polish territory before they could proceed with a division of spoils and influence in Germany. For this reason, no single border in Germany or any more than the southern and eastern borders of Holland could definitively be fixed.<sup>8</sup>

From a military point of view, the Congress of Vienna began with the disputed territories in the hands of one or other of their claimants. Russia held all of Poland and Saxony, while Prussia held the left bank of the Rhine and Mainz. As such, there was every reason for them to present the other Great Powers with a *fait accompli*. All that was agreed initially was that each power would maintain at least 75,000 men on a war footing as security against France. However, it is revealing that each country also chose to position these troops so as to be able to intervene easily should the territorial disputes among the Allies worsen; they were not in a position to move against France, should that become necessary.<sup>9</sup>

The Russians and Prussians proposed a deal in which much of the Prussian and Austrian shares of the partitions of Poland would go to Russia, which would create an independent Polish Kingdom in personal union with Russia with Alexander as king. In exchange, the Prussians would receive as compensation all of Saxony, whose King was considered to have forfeited his throne because he had not abandoned Napoleon soon enough.

The Austrians, French, and British did not approve of this plan, and their dissent with Russia and Prussia had increased to such an extent that - at the inspiration of Talleyrand - they signed a secret treaty on 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 1815. By now, it had become clear that France, thanks to the exertions of Talleyrand, had forced itself into the inner circle of the great powers and

that it was not willing to relinquish this position. France had little to lose at the Congress of Vienna; she had already abandoned her conquests under the peace of Paris. But she had much to gain, namely her position and influence as a Great Power. The fact that France desired nothing more than the creation of conditions of European stability and repose brought him inevitably into union with Castlereagh and Von Metternich.

The treaty aimed at carrying through the provisions of the treaty of Paris, but it also stipulated that if any of the three contracting powers would be attacked or threatened with attack, the other two would immediately come to its assistance with contingents of 150.000 men each. A secret article stated that Hanover, Holland and Bavaria would be incited to accede to the alliance.<sup>10</sup>

Having signed the treaty, Austria and Britain insisted France to be included in the negotiations over Saxony and Poland. Having heard about the treaty, both Hardenberg and the czar indicated that they were willing to talk. It was the moment for Talleyrand to intervene and it was eventually after intense negotiations that a compromise was finally reached on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February.

Russia received most of the Napoleonic duchy of Warsaw as an autonomous kingdom in personal union with Russia. Yet, the czar did not receive the district of Poznan, which was given to Prussia, nor Krakow, which became a free-city.

Prussia received forty percent of Saxony, while the remainder of Saxony was restored to its ancient dynasty. Additionally, Prussia obtained the grand duchy of Posen, Danzig, and the (northern) Rhineland, Westphalia and Swedish Pomerania. As a result Prussia was firmly shoved towards the west, back into Germany, strengthening the German character of the state. Prussia's gains were thus of far more importance than the Polish territories she had lost. Austria, though she gained Tirol and Salzburg from Bavaria, had retired from Germany to a large extent and abandoned all share in the defence of the west – Austria however maintained her ascendancy in the German confederation while her territorial power was increased in Italy (the former Illyrian Provinces, Lombardy-Venetia and Ragusa in Dalmatia). The former Austrian territory in Southwest Germany remained under the control of Württemberg and Baden, while the Austrian Netherlands were no longer included (see below).

With the resolution of the Polish and Saxon issues, the question of Prussia's other possessions and frontiers could at last be addressed, which in turn meant that Castlereagh could make the final arrangements with respect to the frontiers of Holland and Hanover.

Hanover, ruled by British kings, had been occupied by Prussia for a time before the catastrophe of 1806 and then been incorporated in France until after the battle of Leipzig. Then, Hanover was again coveted by Prussia. Therefore, the idea of creating a great Hanover was abandoned in order to provide Prussia with territory, though she was raised to the dignity of a Kingdom. Hanover ceded Lauenberg to Prussia, which would cede it to Denmark in exchange for Swedish Pomerania and the island of Rügen, which Sweden had finally returned to Denmark. Instead, Hanover acquired the formerly Prussian province of East Frisia, which made it more compact, gave it control of the mouth of the river Ems, and brought it into contact along the whole of its western frontier with the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup>

As a buffer state against France in the north, the Netherlands and the former Austrian Netherlands (Southern Netherlands) were united as a constitutional monarchy, with the House of Orange-Nassau providing the king.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the main focus is upon the main issues respecting the four great powers and those territorial issues which affected the background of the campaign of 1815, wherever applicable.

<sup>2</sup> Wellington, WSD, Vol.X p.514 (memorandum)

<sup>3</sup> Zamoyski, A. – The rites of Peace p.264

<sup>4</sup> Nicolson, H. - The congress of Vienna p.54

<sup>5</sup> Zamoyski, A. – The rites of Peace p.270

<sup>6</sup> Nicolson, H. - The congress of Vienna p.168-169

<sup>7</sup> Nicolson, H. - The congress of Vienna p.150-151

<sup>8</sup> Zamoyski, A. – The rites of Peace p.240

<sup>9</sup> Hofschröder, P. - 1815.The Waterloo campaign. Wellington, his German allies and the battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras p.33

<sup>10</sup> Zamoyski, A. – The rites of Peace p.391

<sup>11</sup> Zamoyski, A. – The rites of Peace p.414

<sup>12</sup> This process and its background will be the subject of a following chapter.