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International politics, peace, and war, 1815–1914

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This chapter has a conventional approach and theme: to analyse the changing character and structure of nineteenth-century European international politics. The procedure is less conventional: to concentrate on explaining peace rather than, as commonly happens, on explaining war. Peace is more artificial and demands more explanation. Wars sometimes just happen; peace is always caused. Moreover, understanding why the nineteenth century was more peaceful than any predecessor in European history helps illuminate why it ended in a war greater than any before.

The most obvious sign of a pacific century in Europe is its relatively few and limited wars: – no general or systemic war (one involving all or most of the great powers) at all from 1815 to 1914; in two extended periods, 1815–54 and 1871–1914, no wars between European great powers. Though five wars between great powers were fought in mid-century, all important in their results, even these were comparatively limited in duration, scope, and casualties. The stability of the actors is equally striking. All the great powers of 1815 survived as such until 1914, despite some changes in rank. Except for the German and Italian states absorbed by unification in mid-century, so did most smaller states, and some new ones emerged.

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Nineteenth-century international institutions and practices likewise changed in the direction of stability. Alliances, in the eighteenth century predominantly instruments for power, security, and concrete advantages, were used primarily for much of the nineteenth century for managing and restraining both opponents and allies and preventing aggrandizement. The nineteenth-century system not only produced durable peace where conflict had been endemic (the Low Countries, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and the Baltic, and for some time the Near East) but also succeeded at times in promoting peaceful change (for example, in the creation of Belgium). It absorbed and survived forcible change by war, and proved capable of integrating new actors, even those produced or transformed by treaty violations and war, into the system. Expansion and imperialism outside Europe, in previous centuries a direct factor in Europe's conflicts and wars, remained for much of the nineteenth century largely separated from them. Most impressive of all, this international system endured and survived the strains of a century of rapid, fundamental changes in European society—industrialization, modernization, revolutions in communications, technology, and science, the rise of the strong state, mass politicization, and the growth of liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and democracy.

The Vienna system

The explanation of this remarkable record, and of its disastrous end, begins with the Vienna system, the network of treaties, institutions, and practices developed in 1813–15 during the last Napoleonic Wars and at the Congress of Vienna. There is wide agreement on some reasons for its unusual stability. It embodied a moderate, sensible territorial settlement that satisfied the main needs and requirements of the victors (Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and their lesser allies) without despoiling or humiliating France. Tied into this were comprehensive negotiated settlements of many particular disputes arising out of the wars from 1787 to 1815. These settlements, combined in a network of mutually supporting treaties, gave all governments a stake in a new system of mutual interlocking rights and obligations. Backing this was a security alliance among the great powers to defend the

settlement against violation or revolutionary aggression, especially by France. Finally, an old but little-used diplomatic principle was implemented, that of a European Concert, by which the five great powers became a governing council or directory for settling serious international questions, using Concert practices such as diplomatic conferences rather than bilateral or multilateral negotiations to achieve agreed solutions.

Another feature of the settlement was equally vital though less obvious: the creation of an independent, confederated, defensively oriented European centre. Throughout the eighteenth century and the revolutionary-Napoleonic era, the instability, weakness, and rivalries plaguing central Europe (the German states, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Poland) had spawned repeated crises and wars as internecine conflicts drew in the competing flank powers. The Vienna Congress took a series of measures to turn this critical area temporarily into a zone of peace (at the cost, to be sure, of some injustice, disappointed expectations, and future trouble). It established a German Confederation uniting the German states in a permanent defensive league under joint Austro-Prussian leadership; gave Austria leadership but not direct control of the various independent states of Italy; established and guaranteed a neutral Swiss Confederation; and maintained the eighteenth-century partition of Poland by Russia, Austria, and Prussia in a modified form. Even the Kingdoms of the Netherlands and Denmark were tied indirectly into this independent, defensive centre.

If there is little disagreement among scholars about these sources of the system's stability, there is some concerning its spirit and operating principles. For many, it worked because a balance of power inhibited new bids for hegemony and monarchs cooperated against war, liberalism, nationalism, and revolution. Once these factors declined, with the balance of power shifting and new ambitions emerging, the system no longer worked. This verdict, though it contains some truth, is inadequate and misleading. The reason most governments supported the equilibrium of power, territory, rights, status, obligations, and security reached in 1815 was not that they were sated by expansion or simply exhausted by war and wanted peace. It was that they had learned that war and expansion could not provide peace and security They accepted, often grudgingly, the painful, delicate compromises of the settlement in order to achieve security in a

system of rights guaranteed by law. Even in France most ministries, if not opposition groups, came to accept and support the settlement on these grounds. And when governments did need to be restrained in this era, the normal method was not balancing, confronting their power with countervailing power, but 'grouping'—using Concert means and group pressure to enforce norms and treaties. In the most important crises, balancing could not have worked, for two great powers, Britain and Russia, were more powerful and far less vulnerable than the other three, and when they worked together, as they did at major junctures in 1815–48, they settled matters. In terms of power, the system was characterized by dual hegemony, British in western Europe, Russian in the east, a hegemony that was tolerable because it was usually latent, inactive, and allowed others lesser spheres of influence.

Just as political equilibrium did not derive from balancing power by countervailing power, so conservative solidarity did not rest simply on restoring and preserving the old regime. In international politics at least, the Vienna system was not a restoration. It preserved most of the territorial, social, and constitutional–political changes brought about in the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, and encouraged or permitted some new ones. Only later, from 1820 on, did policies of repression of dissent and simple maintenance of the status quo dominate in Russia, Austria, and Prussia and their spheres, leading to an ideological split between a liberal-constitutional West and an absolutist East. The solidarity among governments for peace created at Vienna, which transcended and outlived this split, arose from its overall success in satisfying existing demands and harmonizing conflicting claims, based on a general consensus on the practical requirements of peace and a recognition that certain limits had to govern international competition. Rivalries and conflicting aims persisted under the Vienna system as before—Anglo-French competition in Spain and the Mediterranean, Austro-French in Italy, Austro-Prussian in Germany, Austro-Russian in the Balkans, Anglo-Russian in the Middle East. But the stakes, rules, and goals were different. Now the competition was over spheres of interest and leading influence, not territorial aggrandizement, the elimination of the rival, or total control, and preserving general peace remained uppermost. The late eighteenth-century game of high-stakes poker, which the Revolution

and Napoleon had turned into Russian roulette, gave way to contract bridge.

This made Concert rules and practices effective for decades after 1815 in dealing peacefully with international problems and crises, often by repressive means and never without friction and rivalry, but without great-power war or aggrandizement. The examples can only be summarized here.

Revolts in Spain, Naples, and Piedmont in 1820–1. Three great-power conferences in 1820–2 led to their suppression by Austria in Italy and by France in Spain.

The Greek revolt in 1821–5. This profound ethnic–religious revolt and war against Turkish rule repeatedly threatened to cause a Russo-Turkish war but self-restraint by Russia and Concert diplomacy led by Britain and Austria averted it.

Revolutions in Spain's and Portugal's American colonies. All the rebellious colonies gained their independence without foreign intervention, partly because Britain with its navy deterred it, but mainly because the continental monarchies, despite their sympathy for Spain and fear of republican revolution, made no serious effort to intervene.

The Eastern crisis in 1826–9. The intervention of Britain, Russia, and France to save the Greeks from being crushed by the Ottoman Sultan's vassal Egypt, though intended initially to end the fighting by diplomacy and prevent any great power from aggrandizing itself or acting unilaterally, instead escalated into an allied naval battle that destroyed the Turco-Egyptian forces. This led to a Russo-Turkish war, a Russian victory, and the danger that the Ottoman Empire would collapse with Russia picking up the pieces—a likely eighteenth-century-style outcome. Instead, Russia signed a peace treaty that increased its influence at Constantinople but preserved the Sultan's throne; the three allies negotiated the creation of an independent Greek kingdom; and this soon came under Anglo-French influence rather than Russian.

The 1830 revolutions. These revolutions, beginning in July in France and spreading to the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Poland, produced some violence, considerable political and constitutional change, and some international crises, deepening the East–West ideological divide. In international politics, however, the powers demonstrated restraint. They quickly recognized the new Orleanist

monarchy to replace the ousted Bourbons in France, and managed Austro-French tension over Austrian interventions in the Papal State through conference diplomacy. They responded to a Belgian revolt overthrowing the United Netherlands, created in 1815 as a defence against France, by convening a London conference that, despite great obstacles raised mainly by the Dutch and Belgians, finally established and jointly guaranteed an independent Belgian kingdom, bringing peace until 1914 to an area for centuries the cockpit of Europe. Even Russia's crushing of a Polish revolt for independence passed without foreign intervention, serious international crisis, or territorial change.

New Eastern Crises in 1832–41. This time the threat to the Ottoman Empire came from the Sultan's ambitious vassal, the Pasha of Egypt, and his regime, twice defeated and facing overthrow, was rescued by European great powers, Russia in 1832–3 and four powers in 1839–40. The four powers' decision in 1840 finally to act without France led to a crisis and threat of war in Europe, apparently reviving the traditional power-political competition in the Near East and Europe. But the crisis really had more to do with rules and leadership in the Concert than power politics. France always favoured a Concert to defend the Sultan but wished to lead it in partnership with Britain against Russia, the permanent threat to Turkey. Instead Britain, suspicious of French aims, preferred working with Russia, and France reacted mainly out of wounded honour and lost prestige. French preparations for war, directed against Austria and Prussia, were largely a bluff, and, when the four-power concert held fast, France backed down, with the two German powers helping it do so with honour. The crisis illustrates both the Anglo-Russian dual-hegemonic structure of the system and the effectiveness of Concert grouping strategy.

Other troubles of the 1830s and 1840s. These were a mixed bag, including civil wars in Spain and Portugal between absolutists and pseudo-constitutionalists, rising discontent and tensions in Italy, especially at Rome and between Sardinia-Piedmont and Austria, another incipient Polish revolt crushed by the Eastern Powers in 1846 and followed by the annexation of the Free City of Cracow by Austria, and a small Protestant–Catholic civil war in Switzerland. All raised contentious issues between various powers; none came close to threatening international war.

Yet to claim that the system remained effective in preserving peace is not to argue that it was unaffected or unweakened by crisis and

change. The 1830s and 1840s clearly show growing tensions and friction between the powers. The cause usually given for this, as for the 1848 revolutions and the ultimate downfall of the Vienna system, is the growing ideological, political, and economic gap between absolutist and moderate liberal–constitutionalist governments and groups, and the way in which absolutist regimes, increasingly weak and threatened, tried to meet demands for political, social, and economic change and the rise of nationalism by repression rather than reform.

Basically this is true, but it over-simplifies the connection between the absolutist–constitutionalist split in domestic affairs and international relations. Historians often equate the Vienna system (the treaties, rules, and practices for conducting international politics) with the Metternich system (the absolutist prescriptions for the internal governance of states). Since Austria's chancellor Prince Metternich and his allies identified the two, using the Vienna treaties to legitimate their repressive internal and international practices, and since their liberal and radical opponents likewise tarred the two systems with the same brush, this is understandable. None the less, the two were not identical or inseparable, and the actual effects of the ideological contest from 1815 to 1848 show it. Overall, the Vienna system won (peace and the treaties were preserved), while the Metternich system ultimately lost (conservative attempts to hold back constitutionalism, liberal ideas, and economic and social change lost ground throughout the 1830s and 1840s in France, the Low Countries, Germany, northern Italy, and even parts of Austria). Moreover, the ideological rifts produced heated argument but not serious international rivalries or crises between governments. All the important rivalries in Europe both antedated the ideological divide and crossed its boundaries. The ideological dispute between absolutists proclaiming a right of intervention to suppress revolutions and liberals proclaiming a doctrine of non-intervention made little difference in practice. Regardless of doctrine, states intervened in foreign revolutions within their respective spheres of influence, or did not, according to their particular interests. The ideological contest, in other words, did not directly affect the Vienna system's capacity to manage immediate international problems, nor for the most part did it lead governments into dangerous or aggressive policies. The most reactionary great-power regime in 1815–48—Charles X's in France (1824–30)—also had the most dangerously ambitious foreign policy aims.

Yet absolutist policies did undermine the Vienna system and general peace both indirectly, adding to the pressures promoting revolution and discrediting and delegitimizing it by association with Metternichian repression, and directly, by deliberately stunting the Vienna system's capacity to grow and adapt itself to new conditions. From 1819 on Metternich and his allies took the 1815 arrangements for the German Confederation, Italy, and Poland, originally capable of change and development, and reduced them to mere instruments for preserving the status quo, leaving the system still useful for crisis management but not problem-solving. On the other side, the Utopian schemes and reckless actions of nationalist and revolutionary ideologues threatened peace even more directly, while moderate reformers, especially in Britain, gave good advice without ever intending to back it with action or to take responsibility for the consequences. Britain's Lord Palmerston, for example, was often right on the kinds of measures needed to avoid revolution in Germany and Italy; Metternich right about the dangers of urging others to apply them without considering how to manage the results.

Thus its very success in preventing war and managing crises helped prepare the ground for the assault against the Vienna system.

The system undermined and overthrown, 1848–1861

Unlike some revolutions, those that swept western and central Europe from France to the Romanian Principalities in 1848 arose primarily from internal political, social, and economic discontents and movements, not international conflicts. International politics, however, played a certain role in their origins and a bigger one in their course and outcome.

One important factor was nationalism, manifesting itself in two forms, both seeking liberation but from different bonds or restraints and for different ends. The first, voiced by peoples or leaders asserting a particular identity and chafing under foreign rule, called for national 'rights' ranging from local autonomy and privileges through home rule to total independence. This kind of nationalist protest was