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rites of PEACE

*The Fall of Napoleon &
the Congress of Vienna*

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HARPER PERENNIAL
London, New York, Toronto and Sydney

Introduction

The reconstruction of Europe at the Congress of Vienna is probably the most seminal episode in modern history. Not only did the congress redraw the map entirely. It determined which nations were to have a political existence over the next hundred years and which were not. It imposed an ideology on the whole Continent, derived from the interests of four great powers. It attempted to set in stone the agreement between those powers, with the result that their expansionist urges were deflected into Africa and southern Asia. It entirely transformed the conduct of international affairs. Its consequences, direct and indirect, include all that has taken place in Europe since, including aggressive nationalism, Bolshevism, fascism, the two world wars and, ultimately, the creation of the European Union.

The action was played out in a dramatic series of shifts of fortune, by some of the most fascinating characters of European history. At its heart stood Napoleon, fighting desperately for his throne, yet undermining his chances with every move he made and seeming to court disaster with apparent abandon. On the other side, Tsar Alexander of Russia, by now convinced of a divine calling to save the world, could not see that he posed a threat to it in the eyes of everyone else. The consummate political puppeteer Metternich excelled himself as he cajoled and manipulated in order to mould events to his own vision of a safe world. The vulpine Talleyrand weaved about in a

desperate attempt to save something for France, and himself, from the wreckage of Napoleon's empire. The eminently likeable Castlereagh, a thoroughly decent man in every respect, found himself cutting up nations and trading souls as ruthlessly as any practitioner of *realpolitik*. A host of other characters took their places in this great carnival at one time or another, including the Duke of Wellington, who revealed himself to be as good a statesman as he was a general, and a fascinating array of women, who played on the passions and frustrated ambitions of the great men of Europe, leading to moments of high tragedy and low farce. From gore-spattered battlefield and roadside hovel to the gilded boudoirs and ballrooms of Vienna, the scene of the action is eminently worthy of the grandeur and the squalor of the proceedings. And history has passed down an image of courtly elegance and waltzing frivolity familiar to most educated people."

Yet when I typed the words 'Congress of Vienna' into the British Library catalogue, I was rewarded with a list of books on: the First International Meteorological Congress, the Congress on the Biochemical Problems of Lipids, the European Regional Science Association Congress, on congresses statistical, sexual and philatelic, on the congresses of Applied Chemistry, of Bibliophiles, of Dermatology, of Genealogical and Heraldic Sciences, Varicose Veins, Exfoliative Cytology, Birth Defects, Hepatitis B, Electroencephalography, Clinical Neurophysiology, and many, many more, all held in Vienna over the past century or so. Buried amongst these enticing titles were no more than half a dozen which related to the events of 1814-15.

Further searches revealed that literature on the subject is indeed elusive. It is also extremely one-sided and subjective. The voluminous and dense German studies, mostly produced during the nineteenth-century unification of Germany or during the period of Nazi rule, respond to a demanding agenda. The latest French contribution is entitled '*Le Congrès de Vienne. L'Europe Contre la France*', which sums up a viewpoint characteristic of much French writing on the subject. British studies are marked by an ineffable condescension, based on

ignorance of conditions in Europe and a conviction that Britain was a disinterested, and therefore impartial and benign, party. Whatever their provenance, most existing books on the congress are superficial in nature, and the best ones are, ironically, those that honestly set out to cover only the social and sexual side of the proceedings. In short, there is no satisfactory general study of the episode, and as a result most people know little about it, aside from the fact that a great deal of dancing took place.

The reasons for this became clear as I began to grapple with the complexities of the subject. The first is that the Congress of Vienna never actually took place in any formal sense. Just as 'Yalta' stands for negotiations and agreements from 1943 to 1945 and even beyond, 'the Congress of Vienna' is a blanket term for a process that began in the summer of 1812 and did not end until ten years later. As usual in such a long-drawn-out process, it is the minor details left unresolved in the very early stages of the negotiations that come to dominate and distort the proceedings at the crucial final stages. There is therefore no way of producing a comprehensive and comprehensible account of the episode without covering a very long period, which involves a great deal of work and dictates a more complex book than many a historian would wish to embark on.

Another, equally important, factor is the need for anyone intending to approach this subject to have a command of as many European languages as possible. The negotiations of 1812-15 can be likened to a game of poker, and as in poker, the course of the game only becomes comprehensible if one can see what cards each of the players holds and how he plays them. In addition, and this is an aspect that has probably been most difficult for historians brought up in other times to deal with, it is necessary to be able to empathise with the desires and the fears of every player, otherwise their moves and reactions make no sense. The reason it nearly came to war several times during the Congress of Vienna was not that Prussia was being gratuitously aggressive, Russia perverse, or Austria devious, but that each was in dread of being outmanoeuvred by the others.

In writing this book, I set out to give as full an account as possible of the negotiations that led to the peace settlement, in the hope that the succession of events will add up to some explanation of how it was reached. I have tried to present the hopes and fears of each side as dispassionately, but with as much sympathy, as possible, in the firm conviction that there were no 'good' or 'bad' players, merely frightened ones.

The scope of the brief I set myself did not permit me to dwell as long as I would have liked on the politics of the Bourbon restorations, the complex mix of forces attending the resolution of the problem of Italy, let alone the complexities of the German question. One of the most important, if not *the* most important, elements in what we term the Congress of Vienna is the territorial and constitutional reorganisation of Germany, and I have certainly not devoted as much space to this subject as one ought; but I make no apology. It is a story of such layered intricacy that only a seasoned scholar of German history could attempt to do it justice, and only one scarcely less well versed would be able to follow the resulting account. In order to arrive at a comprehensible picture of the congress in its essentials it is necessary to leave aside many contingent issues, however fascinating they might be.

Similarly, in order to make the account easier to follow, I have focused on the principal players and avoided naming some of their second-rank collaborators or antagonists. The numbers of people joining in this great scramble for land, power and influence were so great that many an interesting sub-plot has had to be dropped.

If there is a dearth of good books on the congress, there is no lack of published first-hand evidence, making it virtually unnecessary to delve into archival sources. Not only the acts and treaties, but also the memoranda, *notes verbales*, proclamations, *démarches* and other tools of negotiation have been printed, as have the correspondence of the principal protagonists, their diaries and memoirs. Those of dozens of other participants and onlookers have also been published, as have some of the reports of the Austrian secret police. I did

nevertheless make use of some archival sources, partly out of a wish to penetrate closer the workings of the process – there is nothing like holding an original document in one's hand for understanding the form a relationship or a negotiation took. And when I did explore archives I became aware of the fact that some of the printed primary sources are not as reliable as one would wish, and that the decisions taken at a given meeting were not always recorded the same way by all the parties. I therefore resorted to archival sources for some of the more crucial moments in the negotiations.

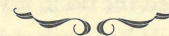
On the vexed question of place names, consistency is difficult to achieve considering the areas covered by the action. I have tended to use the names which were in current use at the time, with the modern names in brackets after the first mention. I have, therefore, kept to the ubiquitous German spelling when referring to the Treaty of Kalisch, even though the town was then formally in the grand duchy of Warsaw and therefore known as Kalisz. But in the case of capitals and larger cities I have used the modern English form. Thus I refer to Frankfurt in that form, even though the city was universally referred to as Frankfort at the time.

In the interests of readability, I have given no more than one source reference per paragraph, and placed it at the end. The order in which the sources are listed accords with the order of facts or quotations in the text.

I would like to thank Aleksandr Sapozhnikov of the National Library of Russia's manuscript department for his help in providing me with the diaries of Mikhailovskii-Danilevskii, and Galina Babkova for obtaining copies of other documents and articles from Russia. I owe a debt of gratitude to Ole Villumsen Krog, Director of the Royal Silver Room in Copenhagen, for his help and his kindness in making available his invaluable work on the Congress of Vienna, and my researcher in matters Danish, Marie-Louise Møller Lange. Also to Barbara Prout of the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire de Genève for sending me copies of manuscripts in that library, and Jennifer

Irwin for her searches at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Angelica von Hase was enormously helpful in penetrating the German literature on the congress and in providing translations of some sources. I am indebted to Barbara de Nicolay for guiding me through the intricacies of the dispute over the duchy of Bouillon. I am grateful to Professor Isabel de Madariaga, Emmanuel de Waresquiel and Dr Philip Mansel for their helpful advice, to Shervie Price for reading the typescript and Richard Foreman for his invaluable advice on titles. I greatly appreciate the reassuring support I received from Richard Johnson, and his forbearance on the subject of deadlines. Robert Lacey has been an exemplary editor and, once again, saved me from making an ass of myself. Perhaps the most noteworthy contribution came from Sophie-Caroline de Margerie, who suggested the subject to me in the first place. And, this time too, my wife Emma has stopped me from going mad, and made life worth living throughout.

Adam Zamoyski
London, January 2007



The Lion at Bay

The clock of the Tuileries had begun striking the last quarter before midnight when a mud-spattered carriage of the ungainly kind known as a *chaise de poste*, drawn at the gallop by four tired horses, swung onto the parade ground in front of the palace. Ignorant of court etiquette, the coachman drove under the central span of the triumphal arch of the Carrousel, reserved exclusively for the Emperor, before the drowsy sentries had time to bar his way. 'That is a good omen,' exclaimed one of the two men sitting inside the carriage, a plump man in a voluminous pelisse with a fur bonnet hiding much of his face.

The vehicle came to a stop at the main doorway, under the clock, and its occupants clambered down. The first, who was the taller of the two, had unbuttoned his greatcoat, revealing a chest covered in gold braid, so the sentries let him and his companion through unchallenged, assuming them to be senior officers bearing urgent despatches.

The two men walked briskly down to the end of the vaulted passage and knocked at a large door. After a while, the concierge appeared in his nightshirt, holding a lantern. The taller of the two men identified himself as the Imperial Master of the Horse, but the concierge and his sleepy wife, who had joined him, took some convincing that the man standing before them was indeed General de Caulaincourt. The

uniform was right, but the man's hair was long and unkempt, his face was weatherbeaten and covered with a two-weeks' growth of stubble, and he looked more like a stage bandit than a senior dignitary of the imperial court.

The concierge's wife opened the door, saying that the Empress had just retired for the night, while her husband went off to summon the duty footmen so they could show in the newcomers. Yawning and rubbing her eyes, she shifted her attention to the other man. Although the flickering lantern lit up only a small part of his face, between the high collar of the pelisse and the fur bonnet pressed over his brow, she thought she recognised the Emperor. That seemed impossible. Only two days before, Paris had been stunned by the twenty-ninth *Bulletin de la Grande Armée*, which announced that he was struggling through the snows of Russia with his beleaguered army.

The two men were led down a gallery, open to the gardens on the right, and turned left into the Empress's apartments. They came in just as her ladies-in-waiting were emerging from her private apartment, having attended her to bed. The ladies started with fright at the sight of the bearded man in his dirty greatcoat, but when he announced that he was the bearer of news from the Emperor they recognised Caulaincourt, and one of them went back into the Empress's apartment to announce the Master of the Horse.

Unable to control his impatience, the shorter of the two men brushed past his companion and made for the door to the Empress's apartment. His pelisse had fallen open, revealing the uniform of the Grenadiers of the Old Guard, and as he marched confidently across the room there was no mistaking the Emperor Napoleon. 'Good night, Caulaincourt,' he said over his shoulder. 'You also need rest.'¹

It was something of an understatement. The General had not slept in a bed for over eight weeks, and had hardly lain down in the past two; he had travelled over 3,000 kilometres in unspeakable conditions, often under fire, all the way from Moscow. Before that he had taken part in the gruelling advance into Russia, which wasted the finest army in Europe, and seen his adored younger brother killed at the

battle of Borodino. He had watched Moscow burn. He had borne the hardships and witnessed the horrors of the disastrous retreat, which had brought the death toll to over half a million French and allied soldiers.

Perhaps the most difficult thing to bear for the thirty-nine-year-old General Armand de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza, an accomplished soldier and diplomat, was that he had been obliged to watch all his worst prophecies come true. As Napoleon's ambassador to Russia from 1807 to 1811 he had done everything in his power to keep the two empires from conflict. He had repeatedly begged Napoleon not to make war on Russia, warning him that it was impossible to win against such an opponent. He had continued to make his case as they travelled across Europe to join the army massing against Russia. Once the campaign had begun he had attempted time and again to persuade Napoleon to cut his losses – while remaining utterly loyal, Caulaincourt was never afraid to speak his mind. All to no avail.

On 5 December 1812, as the remnants of his army struggled along the last leg of the retreat, Napoleon had decided to leave it and race back to Paris. He handed over command to his brother-in-law Joachim Murat, King of Naples, with firm instructions to rally the Grande Armée at Vilna (Vilnius) in Lithuania, which was well stocked with supplies and reinforcements, and to hold that at all costs.

He had set off with Caulaincourt in his travelling *coupé*, which was followed by two other carriages bearing three generals and a couple of valets. They were escorted by a squadron of Chasseurs and another of Polish Cheveau-Légers of the Old Guard, and briefly by some Neapolitan cavalry. At one point the convoy narrowly missed being intercepted by marauding Russian cossacks. Napoleon had a pair of loaded pistols placed in his *coupé* and instructed his companions to kill him if he failed to do so himself in the event of capture.²

Caulaincourt remained constantly at his side, even when they left their escort and companions behind, changing from carriage to improvised sleigh to carriage and to sleigh once again, breaking axles and running half a dozen vehicles into the ground as they flew from

Vilna to Warsaw, Dresden, Leipzig, Weimar, Erfurt, Mainz and eventually to Paris, which they reached in the last minutes of 18 December.

But before he could go home to bed, Caulaincourt had to perform one last duty. He went to the house of the Arch-Chancellor of the Empire, Jean Jacques de Cambacérès, and, after waking him up with the astonishing news of the Emperor's return, instructed him to make the necessary arrangements for the regular imperial *lever* to take place in the morning. Napoleon wanted an immediate resumption of everyday normality.

When on campaign, Napoleon would publish *Bulletins de la Grande Armée* at regular intervals to keep his subjects informed of his actions and to present a heroic picture of his doings. In the twenty-ninth *Bulletin*, published on 16 December, they had for the first time read less than glorious news. It informed them that he had been obliged to abandon Moscow and that his army had suffered terrible losses as a result of the winter weather. Reading between the lines, they could detect a major disaster. But the *Bulletin* ended with the words: 'The Emperor's health has never been better.' His intention was that, two days after hearing the worst, the citizens of France should be able to recover their confidence, with the knowledge that their master was back and in control.

Napoleon's principal reason for abandoning his army and returning to Paris was to muster fresh forces with which to march out and reinforce it in the spring. But there were other motives. One was that he preferred to have his less than reliable Austrian and German allies in front of him rather than at his back. Another, more weighty, was the urgent need he felt to reassert his authority at home. He had been away from his capital for over seven months, and during that time had conducted the affairs of state from his headquarters. This had worked remarkably well, and he had continued to invigilate and order everything from foreign policy to the repertoire of the Paris theatres.

But on the night of 23 October, while he was beginning his retreat from Moscow, an obscure General by the name of Malet and a handful of other officers had attempted to seize power in Paris, claiming that

the Emperor was dead. They came very close to success, and although Malet and his accomplices were tried and shot before Napoleon even came to hear of the attempted coup, it had disturbed him profoundly when he did. It revealed to him the frailty of the foundations of his throne, and gave him much food for thought.

On the morning of 19 December the cannon of the Invalides delivered a salute that announced to the astonished citizens of Paris that the Emperor was back in the capital. They were still stunned by the news of his failure in Russia, and eager for further details and some kind of explanation. The sense of anticipation was particularly keen among the officials and courtiers who hurried to the *lever*. But they were disappointed. The Emperor was stern and uncommunicative, and quickly disappeared into his study, to which he summoned his principal ministers.

He was in no mood to give explanations, but rather to demand them, as the representatives of the legislative and administrative bodies discovered when they called on him the following day to pay their respects. He brought up the matter of the Malet conspiracy to show them up as weak, cowardly and ineffectual. What had touched a particularly raw nerve was that the news of his death in Russia, announced by Malet, had led those who believed it to consider a change of regime, instead of making them proclaim the succession of his son, the King of Rome. 'Our forefathers rallied to the cry: "*The King is dead, long live the King!*"' he reminded them, adding that 'These few words encompass the principal advantages of monarchy.' That they had not been uttered on the night of 23 October revealed to him that for all its trappings, the monarchy he had created lacked consistency, and he was still just a general who had seized power, a *parvenu* with no title to rule beyond his ability to hold on to it. He felt this setback personally, and the sense of insecurity it induced would have a profound effect on how he behaved over the next two years, making him more aggressive and less amenable, and leading inexorably to his downfall.³

Before he embarked on his fatal Russian campaign, in the summer of 1812, Napoleon had been the undisputed master of Europe, wielding greater power than any Roman Emperor. The French Empire and its direct dependencies included the whole of Belgium, Holland and the North Sea coast up to Hamburg, the Rhineland, the whole of Switzerland, Piedmont and Liguria, Tuscany, the Papal States, Illyria (present-day Slovenia and Croatia) and Catalonia as well as France. All the minor states of Germany, including the kingdoms of Saxony, Westphalia, Bavaria and Württemberg, had been incorporated into the Confederation of the Rhine, the Rheinbund, which was an entirely subservient ally of France, as were the grand duchy of Warsaw, the kingdom of Italy, the kingdom of Naples and Spain. Several of these were ruled by Napoleon's siblings or relatives, or connected to him through dynastic marriages. Denmark and Russia were locked into more or less permanent alliance with France, Austria and Prussia were unlikely allies, and in Continental Europe only Sweden remained outside the Napoleonic system.

While there were many who resented this French stranglehold, others either welcomed or at least accepted it. The only open challenge Napoleon faced was from Britain, but while she was supreme on the seas, her only foothold on the Continent was in Spain, where General Wellington's army was operating alongside Spanish regular and guerrilla forces opposed to the rule of Napoleon's brother Joseph. But Britain was also engaged in a difficult and costly war with the United States of America, which restricted her military potential.

The disasters of the Russian campaign had changed all this, but not as profoundly as one might think. Although he was now at war with Russia and had lost an army trying to cow her into submission, Napoleon's overall position had not altered. His system and his alliances were still in place, and the situation in Spain had actually improved, with the setbacks of the summer reversed and the British and Spanish forces under Wellington repulsed.

The only possible threat to his system at this stage could come from Germany, whose many rulers, beginning with Frederick William

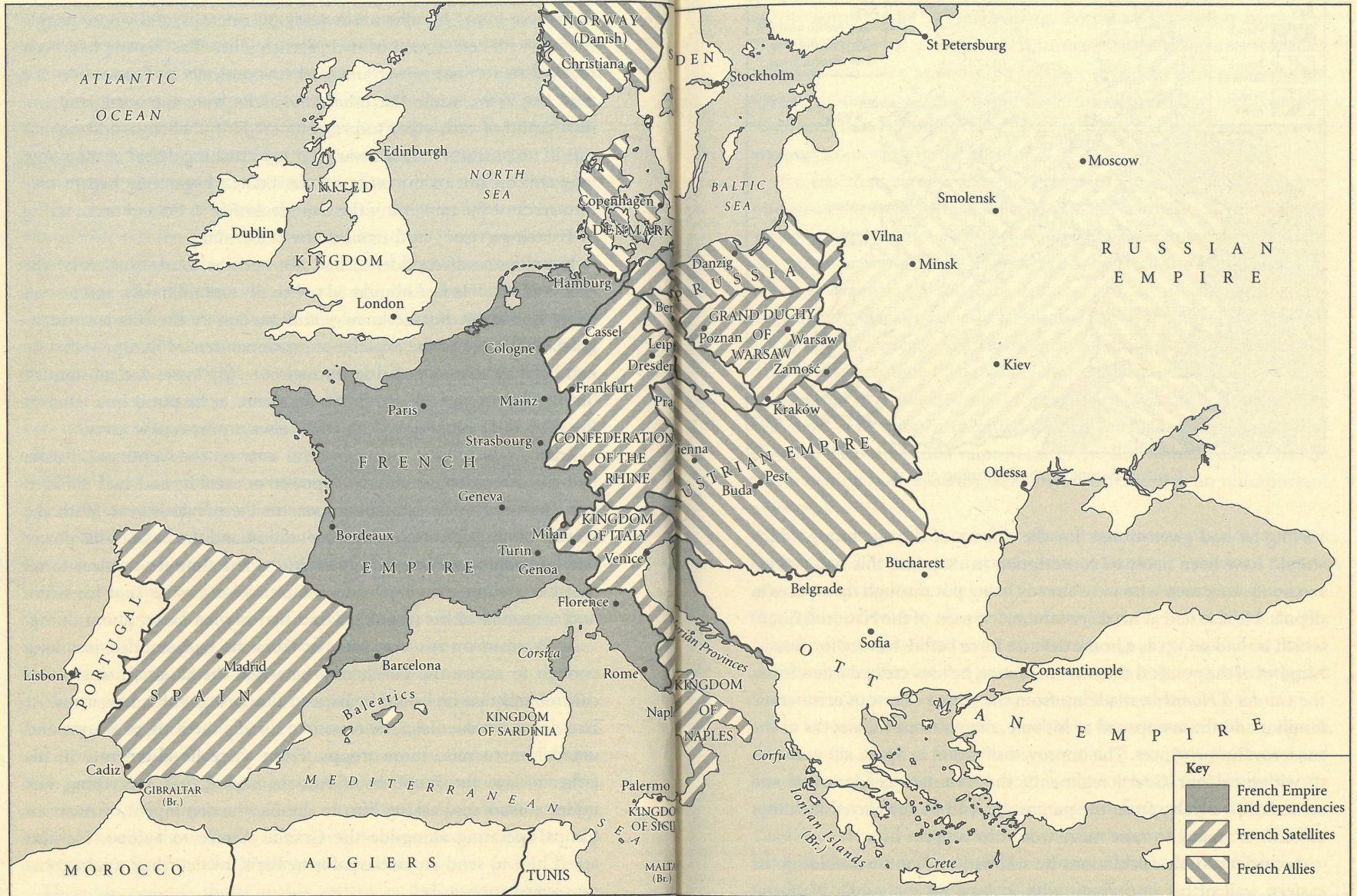
of Prussia, found his alliance increasingly onerous, and whose people burned with resentment of their French allies. But Prussia had been reduced to a minor power and bled economically by France over the past few years, while the other monarchs were too weak and too mistrustful of each other to present a credible challenge, and Austria was in no position to make war after her crushing defeat in 1809. Any who still dreamt of throwing off the French hegemony had to take into account the remains of the Grande Armée in Poland and a string of French garrisons in fortresses across Germany.

Napoleon's self-confidence had not been seriously shaken by the events of 1812. He had blundered politically and militarily, and he had lost a fine army. But he knew – and so, despite the Russian propaganda, did most of the experienced commanders of Europe – that he had been victorious in battle throughout. 'My losses are substantial, but the enemy can take no credit for them,' as he put it in a letter to the King of Denmark. And he could always raise a new army.⁴

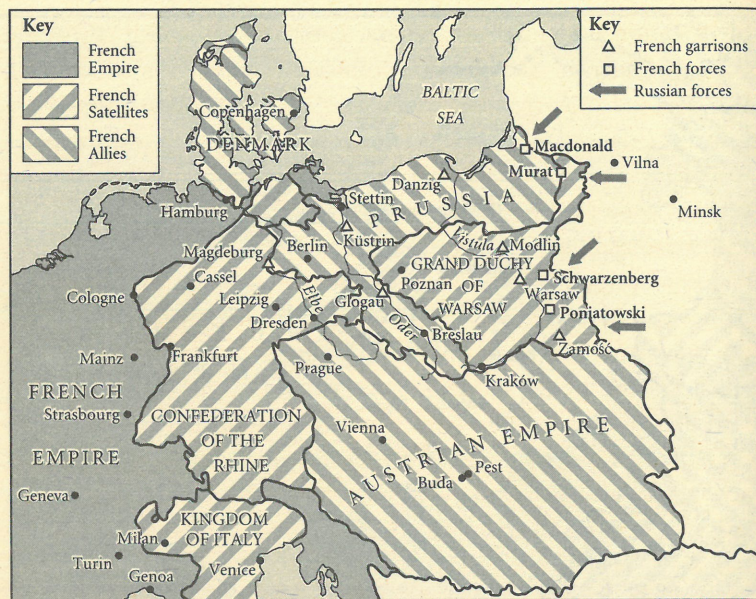
France was still the most powerful state on the Continent. Russia had no comparable reserves of power or wealth, and had suffered greatly from the devastations of war in the previous year. With the benefit of hindsight Napoleon's reputation and the basis of his power had been damaged beyond repair, but at the time it was clear to all that his position remained unassailable as long as he kept his nerve and consolidated his resources. And that is what he set about doing.

At Warsaw, on his way back to Paris, he had stopped just long enough to assure the Polish ministers that the situation was under control and that he would be back in the spring with a new army. At Dresden a few days later, he reassured his ally the King of Saxony and urged him to raise more troops. From there he also wrote to his father-in-law, the Emperor of Austria, saying that everything was under control and asking him to double the contingent of Austrian troops operating alongside the Grande Armée to 60,000. He also asked him to send an ambassador to Paris, so that they might communicate more easily.⁵

On his return to Paris he set to work at rebuilding his forces. Before



Europe at the end of 1812



Central Europe at the beginning of 1813

leaving he had given orders for the call-up of the age group which should have been liable to conscription in 1814, and this had yielded 140,000 young men who were already being put through their paces in depots. He also had at his disposal 100,000 men of the National Guard which he had set up as a home defence force before leaving for Russia. Mindful of the political situation in France, he now created a new force, the *Gardes d'Honneur*, made up from the young scions of aristocratic families and those opposed to his rule, drawn from the depths of the most royalist provinces. The improved situation in Spain allowed him to withdraw four Guard regiments, the mounted gendarmerie and some Polish cavalry from the peninsula. And he instructed his other allies in Germany to raise more troops to support him.

According to his calculations he still had 150,000 men holding the eastern wall of his imperium, with at least 60,000 under Murat at Vilna, 25,000 under Macdonald to the north, 30,000 Austrian allies

to the south under Schwarzenberg, Poniatowski's Polish corps and the remainder of the Saxon contingent under Reynier covering Warsaw, and over 25,000 men in reserve depots or fortresses from Danzig (Gdańsk) on the Baltic down to Zamość. He was therefore confident that he would be able to take the field in Germany with some 350,000 men in the spring.⁶

But less than a week after his return to Paris, on Christmas Eve, bad news came in from Lithuania. As the remnants of the Grande Armée straggled into what they thought was the safe haven of Vilna, the men's endurance had given way to the need for rest. Murat had failed to organise an adequate defence, and the advancing Russians were able to overrun the city with ease. The confusion and panic had prevented an orderly evacuation even by those units still capable of action, and a couple of days later not many more than 10,000 men crossed the river Niemen out of Russia. Napoleon was devastated by the news. He bitterly regretted having left Murat in charge, and dreaded the propaganda value of the event. But within a day or two he put it behind him, assuring Caulaincourt that it was an unimportant setback.⁷

He was certainly not going to allow it to alter his plans or dent his confidence. The requested ambassador of Emperor Francis of Austria had arrived in Paris. He was General Count Ferdinand Bubna, a distinguished soldier whom Napoleon knew well and liked. In the course of their first interview, on the evening of 31 December, Bubna delivered an offer on the part of Austria to help negotiate a peace between France and Russia. Napoleon dismissed it.

He certainly wanted peace, probably more fervently than any of his enemies. He was forty-three years old. 'I am growing heavy and too fat not to like rest, not to need it, not to regard the displacements and activity demanded by war as a great fatigue,' he confessed to Caulaincourt. His only reason for making war on Russia in 1812 had been to oblige Tsar Alexander to enforce a blockade that he believed would bring Britain to the negotiating table.⁸

With nothing better to do during their long drive from Lithuania

to Paris, Napoleon had delivered himself, copiously and unstoppably, of his thoughts, occasionally pinching the cheek or pulling the ear of his travelling companion, as was his wont. Fortunately for posterity, Caulaincourt listened carefully and jotted down these ramblings whenever the Emperor fell into a doze or they stopped to change horses. Napoleon again and again asserted that he longed only for peace and stability in Europe, and that the other Continental powers were blind not to see that their real enemy was Britain, with her monopoly on maritime power and trade. Any peace that did not include Britain was of no value, and Britain was not prepared to envisage a peace on terms acceptable to France. She needed to be forced into compromise.

Three days after dismissing the Austrian offer of mediation Napoleon held a conference with his senior advisers on foreign affairs. The main question discussed was whether it would be better to try to strike a deal directly with Russia, over the heads and possibly at the expense of Austria and Prussia, or to bank on Austria as the principal ally and potential negotiator. The Arch-Chancellor Cambacérès, the former Foreign Minister Talleyrand and Caulaincourt advised the first course of action, the actual Foreign Minister Maret and the others opted for the second. As usual during such conferences, Napoleon listened without committing himself to either course. There would be plenty of time to decide, as he did not intend to negotiate from anything but a position of strength. He would be in that position when he reappeared in Germany at the head of a fresh army, and in the meantime he must concentrate on mustering one.⁹

This was proceeding well. 'Everything is in motion,' he wrote to his chief of staff Marshal Berthier on 9 January 1813. 'There is nothing lacking, neither men, nor money, nor good will.' The only things that were in short supply, he admitted, were officers and a backbone of tried soldiers, but he was confident he would find these among the remains of the Grande Armée, since it was officers and NCOs who generally made up the majority of the survivors. But that very evening, as he returned from a performance at the Théâtre Français,

he received an unwelcome piece of news and one with alarming implications.¹⁰

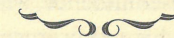
Prussia had been forced into alliance with France and had contributed an army corps to the invasion of Russia. But popular resentment of France was strong, particularly in northern and eastern parts of the country. It was also strong in the army. On 30 December 1812 General Yorck von Wartenburg, commander of the Prussian corps in the Grande Armée, detached it from the French units and effectively signed his own alliance with Russia. As well as making it impossible to hold the line of defence the French had taken up, forcing them to fall back to the Vistula, this development also raised questions about Prussia's loyalty.

Following fast on this news came the assurance that the King of Prussia, Frederick William III, had denounced the move and issued orders dismissing Yorck from his command. Napoleon's ambassador in Berlin, the comte de Saint-Marsan, sent reassuring reports of Prussia's loyalty, and on 12 January the news that Frederick William was entertaining the thought of marrying his son the Crown Prince to a princess of the Bonaparte family to cement the alliance between the two courts. A few days later, Frederick William's special envoy Prince Hatzfeldt arrived in Paris.¹¹

Napoleon was receiving similarly encouraging reports from Vienna. He did not for a moment doubt that his father-in-law the Emperor Francis would stand by him to the end: he was so besotted by his wife Marie-Louise and his son the King of Rome that he assumed Francis must share those feelings for his daughter and grandson. But Francis did not make policy on his own. 'Our alliance with France is so necessary that if you were to break it off today, we would propose to re-establish it tomorrow on the very same conditions,' the Austrian Foreign Minister Metternich had told Napoleon's ambassador in Vienna, Count Otto. Napoleon nevertheless remained on his guard, and decided to replace Otto with someone who could take a fresh look at the situation in Vienna. For this role he chose the comte de Narbonne.¹²

While his recruits were being uniformed and trained, Napoleon attended to the everyday business of government, and relaxed by going hunting at Fontainebleau. He took the opportunity to visit Pope Pius VII, who had been living there as his prisoner following the French occupation of the Papal States in 1809. After some brisk bargaining, Napoleon signed a new concordat with him. This was expedient, as his treatment of the Pope had needlessly antagonised Catholics not only in France, but in the domains of his south German and Austrian allies. But the terms of the agreement were so humiliating that they failed to placate them.

On 14 February he attended the opening of the Legislative Assembly, and made a speech in which he announced that he ardently desired peace. He would do everything to further it, but warned that he would never sign a treaty that would dishonour France. He painted a reassuring picture of the state of international affairs, declaring that the Bonaparte dynasty was secure in Spain, and that there was nothing to fear from the situation in Germany. 'I am satisfied with the conduct of all my allies,' he stated. 'I will not abandon any of them; I shall defend the integrity of their possessions. The Russians will be forced back into their horrible climate.'¹³



The Saviour of Europe

'Gentlemen, you have saved not only Russia, you have saved Europe,' Tsar Alexander had declared to his generals in Vilna on 12 December 1812, shortly after the last French stragglers had left the city. The truth of both assertions is questionable, but it hardly mattered. Thirty-four years old, personable and chivalrous, Alexander was widely perceived as the *beau idéal* of monarchy. His refusal to be cowed by Napoleon and his stalwart defence of his country had inspired universal respect. Although he was almost entirely German, the curious mix of exoticism and spirituality with which European opinion endowed most things Russian lent him an aura of glamour and righteousness, and he was seen as a champion by all those who believed that Europe needed salvation.¹

But while he felt a consuming urge not to disappoint them, he had no clear idea of how that salvation was to be brought about. His intentions were certainly admirable. 'He wished that all men could help each other like brothers, assisting one another in their mutual needs, and that free commerce could be the underlying bond of society,' according to a young lady to whom he opened his heart at this crucial moment. But he lacked the necessary conviction and determination. 'I sometimes want to hit my head against the wall,' he told her, 'and if I could honourably change my condition, I would willingly do so, for there is none more difficult than mine, and I have no vocation for the throne.'²

There was much truth in this. Although kind and generous by temperament, Alexander was quick to take umbrage. Being both weak in character and stubborn, he was easy to influence but difficult to manage. The progressive upbringing to which he had been subjected had destroyed his self-confidence, while his education had been entirely incompatible with his predicament as absolute monarch of the most theocratic and traditionalist power in Europe. They had left him pathetically eager to please, yet determined to prove himself a strong ruler.

'He would willingly have consented to make everyone free, as long as everyone willingly did what he wanted,' in the words of a close friend. He was in thrall to the ideals of the Enlightenment, and liked to project an image of himself as a benefactor of mankind, a tendency that developed with time into a sense of spiritual destiny which would take him very far from those ideals. 'More than ever,' he wrote to his friend Aleksandr Galitzine in January 1813, as he contemplated the salvation of Europe, 'I resign myself to the will of God and submit blindly to His decrees.'³

Alexander had ascended the Russian throne in 1801 at the age of twenty-three, following the assassination of his father Paul I, an event in which he had been heavily implicated. He had promptly set up a 'Secret Committee' of close friends who thought like him to assist him in planning the fundamental reform of the Russian state. The one singled out to consider foreign policy was Prince Adam Czartoryski, who funnelled Alexander's utopian urges into a grand project for a future 'system' to govern all international relations.

In common with a number of other European statesmen, Czartoryski believed that the old system of diplomacy, involving a never-ending pursuit of parity based on achieving a necessarily elusive balance of power, was pointless as well as morally unacceptable. He came up with a blueprint for a supranational security system based on federations of smaller states, grouped according to linguistic or cultural affinities, which would lack both the desire for conquest and the cohesion to make war effectively except in self-defence. Alexander

was greatly taken with this vision, which appeared to justify a deeply rooted Russian aspiration to extend dominion over all lands inhabited by Slavs.⁴

Neither Alexander nor his advisers saw expansion into Europe as being Russia's destiny – that lay in Constantinople and the east. But Russia's meteoric emergence as a major power over the past hundred years impelled her to take an interest in Europe, if only out of an instinct for self-defence. The powers that needed to be watched were, in the first place, Britain, whose maritime supremacy and eastern dominions were thought to constitute an obvious challenge; France, whose traditional alliance with Ottoman Turkey and interest in Egypt and points further east were a source of unease; and, to a lesser degree, Austria, whose possessions in the Balkans were at the very least an inconvenience. In the 1790s Russia had been drawn into war with France, but it was a conflict in which she had no actual interests at stake beyond the forlorn hope of establishing a maritime base in the western Mediterranean.

Alexander's attitude to Napoleon was an ambiguous one. He could not help admiring his talents and energy, and envied the First Consul's achievements as an efficient modern ruler who had put into effect many of the ideals of the Enlightenment. But he was outraged by his arbitrary brutality, and his distaste for the upstart Frenchman turned to disgust when Napoleon had himself crowned Emperor of the French in December 1804.

In October of that year, as Britain and other powers had contemplated the possibility of war with France, Alexander sent Nikolai Novosiltsov to London with a proposal drawn up by Czartoryski containing his vision of a new order in Europe based on liberal principles and 'the sacred rights of humanity'. The British Prime Minister William Pitt was predictably sceptical, but responded with eagerness. He praised Alexander's 'wise, dignified and generous policy', and singled out three of the points as the main aims of the proposed coalition against France: that France should be stripped of her conquests and reduced to her former limits; that those recovered

territories should be safeguarded in such a way that they should never fall to French aggression again; and, most significantly, 'To form, at the restoration of peace, a general agreement and Guarantee for the mutual protection and security of different Powers, and for re-establishing a general system of public law in Europe.'⁵

Nothing came of it, as the coalition which was to usher in this new age was shattered on the fields of Austerlitz, Jena and Friedland. Czartoryski was, reluctantly, dismissed by Alexander in 1806. Taciturn and reserved, he had few friends at court, and was the object of resentment and jealousy on account of his ascendancy over the Tsar. Also, he was a Pole. He had fought against Russia in 1792 in defence of his country, and he had arrived in St Petersburg as a hostage for the good behaviour of his family.

The kingdom of Poland had been wiped off the map in 1795 as a result of a series of agreements between Russia, Prussia and Austria. As well as taking the lion's share of its territory, Alexander's grandmother Catherine the Great had been the prime mover. In common with most enlightened opinion, Alexander condemned this partition of one of the ancient states of Europe, and he also felt a degree of personal guilt. These feelings were intensified by his friendship with Czartoryski, to whom he had vowed that he would restore Poland to freedom when he came to the throne. When the time came he was faced by the impossibility of doing anything quite so contrary to what were perceived as paramount Russian interests. But he never ceased to dream of one day redeeming those vows. This Polish conundrum epitomised the conflict in Alexander's mind between his own ideals and Russian reasons of state, which clashed on many different planes.

Like many Polish patriots, Czartoryski realised that there was no possibility of his country recovering independence in the short term. The best he could hope for was the reunification of its severed portions. He had a vision of Poland as a more or less autonomous province of, possibly even a kingdom within, the Russian Empire, and he served that empire in good faith. But he would never dissipate the suspicions of the court and Russian society in general, which saw

in him only a potential enemy. The situation was made no easier by the fact that he had been the lover of Alexander's wife Elizabeth, who had had a child by him. He was a liability and he had to go.

Czartoryski's fall from grace did not affect Alexander's views on international affairs. Nor did it, as the dismissed minister's patriotic Russian opponents had hoped, do away with what they saw as the Tsar's lamentable obsession with Poland.

But it did affect Alexander's attitude to Britain. Czartoryski considered the British to be unreliable and selfish, but nevertheless a necessary ally in the struggle against France. Alexander had his doubts. He was particularly irked by Britain's insistence on the absolute and exclusive nature of what she termed her 'maritime rights', effectively to search every ship at will and to invigilate the high seas. He had accepted her as a necessary ally in 1804, but felt grievously let down in the winter of 1806-07, when he was left alone fighting Napoleon by Britain's failure to support him by sending an expeditionary force into the Baltic.

Faced with the necessity to treat with Napoleon, Alexander not only made peace: he offered the French Emperor a partnership of the kind he had offered Pitt three years before. He fancied that the resulting alliance, sealed during their meetings at Tilsit in the summer of 1807, would permit him to regenerate his empire and add to it by incorporating Constantinople and other parts of the near east while exerting, in partnership with Napoleon, an enlightened and beneficent tutelage over the continent they dominated.

The débâcle of Austerlitz in December 1805, where Alexander had hoped to shine as a military hero only to have to flee the battlefield as his army disintegrated, and his final defeat at Friedland the following year had been personal humiliations. They had also weakened his position in political terms. While he was still widely loved by his people, they suspected him of weakness and feared his reformist tendencies. Ministers such as Czartoryski and the reforming Speransky were seen as conduits of French/Masonic/Polish/Jewish influence which would corrupt the purity of Russia, and he was obliged to

dismiss them as well as to abandon cherished programmes. He found himself at odds with an increasingly eloquent public opinion which he could not ignore. While the Tsar of Russia was theoretically an autocrat with no limits on his power, the overwhelming majority of educated Russians concentrated in the army, the administration, at court, in St Petersburg or in Moscow represented the sole agency through which the state could function, and without its good will the autocrat was literally powerless.⁶

While it proved uncomfortable and humiliating in many ways, Alexander's alliance with Napoleon between 1807 and 1812 had allowed him to invade and annex Finland and to acquire a couple of additional slices of Polish territory. He hoped to appropriate yet more, and to move into the Balkans. But none of this was enough. Russia's self-respect demanded that he adopt a more defiant and even provocative policy towards France. This had led inexorably to Napoleon's ill-conceived invasion, and as the Russian army followed the defeated remnants of the Grande Armée out of Russia in the last days of 1812, it was clear to all but the most naïve that Russian rule would be extended further west. The grand duchy of Warsaw was there for the taking, giving Alexander the opportunity to pay his debt of guilt towards the Poles by resurrecting the kingdom of Poland.

The establishment of an independent Polish state would preclude Russia making any territorial gains in the west. Worse, it would probably lead to her having to give back Polish provinces she had seized in the past. Alexander could therefore only contemplate establishing a Polish kingdom within the framework of the Russian Empire, with himself as King. This would, he hoped, allay the fears of Russian opinion. But as it would also extend the frontiers of his empire far to the west, it meant that he would have to have a hand in the arrangement of Germany.

Germany had been more profoundly affected than any other part of Europe by the French Revolution and subsequent interference by Napoleon. In 1789 the German lands had belonged to the Holy Roman Empire, a bewildering patchwork of some three hundred independent

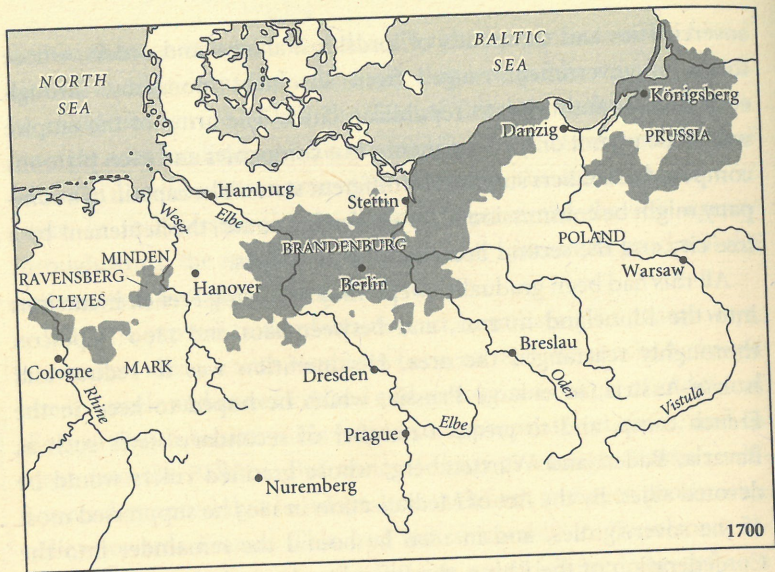
sovereignties and thousands of lordships, abbeys and orders, whose forms of government ranged from absolutist monarchy, through ecclesiastical authority, to republican cities. The army of the empire was made up not only of regiments, but companies and even platoons composed of soldiers supplied by different states. The captain of a company might be commissioned by a sovereign count, the lieutenant by a free city and the second lieutenant by an abbe.

All this had been gradually swept away following French incursions into the Rhineland in 1792, and between 1801 and 1809 Napoleon thoroughly rearranged the area. His intention was to reduce and isolate Austria, to enlarge Prussia, which he hoped to keep in the French camp, and to create a number of secondary states such as Bavaria, Baden and Württemberg, whose gratified rulers would be devoted allies. By the Act of Mediatisation in 1803 he suppressed most of the sovereignties, and in 1806 he bound the remainder into the Confederation of the Rhine, the Rheinbund, of which he made himself protector. While he grouped them together in this way, his hold was based on playing them off against each other and keeping them in a state of dependence. And none of them was entirely master in his own house, as Napoleon had left a number of 'mediatised' counts and knights (*Standesherrn*) within their realms who were subject not to them but to him.

The winners were not only the Electors of Bavaria, Württemberg and Saxony, who became Kings, or the other rulers who had seen their status raised, but also all those such as merchants liberated from archaic restrictive regulations, artisans who could throw off the shackles of the guilds, the Jews who were able to leave their ghettos, and countless others. The losers were the hundreds of dukes, princes, counts palatine, bishops, margraves, burgraves, landgraves, abbots, abbesses, grand masters and imperial knights who lost lands and prerogatives, as well as the free cities, which saw their independence abolished in the process.

The German state that had gained most was Prussia. By making common cause with France against the other German states in 1795,

Rites of Peace

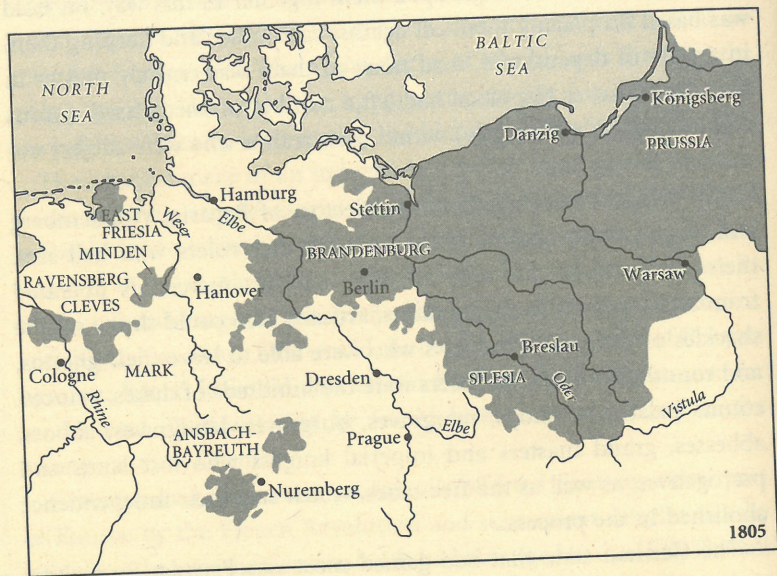


1700

The Saviour of Europe



1750



1805



1807

The rise and fall of Prussia, 1700-1807

she had acquired valuable territories in the Rhineland, which she later exchanged for more extensive ones in central Germany. She took Hanover as the prize for supporting Napoleon against Austria in 1805. But in the following year Prussia had changed sides, and following his crushing victories over her at Jena and Auerstadt in 1806, Napoleon had considered abolishing the Prussian state altogether.

The kingdom of Prussia had only come into existence in 1701, when the Elector of Brandenburg unilaterally assumed the royal title. By 1750 it had grown territorially by over 50 per cent through the conquest of Silesia. It more than doubled in size between then and 1805, becoming a power of the first rank. But it was a curiously fragile one. Its greatest ruler, Frederick II, used to say that its arms should feature not the black eagle but rather a monkey, as all Prussia was good at was aping the great powers. It fielded six times as many soldiers relative to its population as Austria, and most of its resources were dedicated to supporting this vast army, the sole basis of its power.⁷

In the event, Napoleon did not abolish Prussia; he merely stripped her of most of the Polish provinces acquired over the past decades, which he turned into a French satellite under the name of the grand duchy of Warsaw. He thereby reduced Prussia's population from almost nine to less than five million. What remained of Prussia had to accommodate French troops, who extorted money and fodder through officials who took every opportunity to humiliate the Prussians as they spoliated their country. Given the French Emperor's well-known contempt for the Prussians, the existence of the state remained in question. The Prussian army had been reduced to a paltry 42,000, nearly 30,000 of whom would be obliged to take part in Napoleon's Russian campaign in 1812.

Reaction had set in as soon as the shock of the 1806 defeat had worn off. The large numbers of cashiered Prussian officers joined patriotic intellectuals to wallow in sullen resentment of all things French. Many of the officers took service in the armies of Austria or Russia, while the patriots dreamed of a national resurgence and of revenge, and took heart from the example set by the *guerrilleros* of Spain.

Poets such as Ernst Moritz Arndt, Heinrich von Kleist and Theodor Körner encouraged these feelings with patriotic verse and nationalist catechisms; philosophers and publicists argued about what form Germany should take in an ideal world. Young men came together in the *Tugendbund*, the League of Virtue, to discuss and prepare; others followed Friedrich Jahn in physical preparation for the forthcoming war through athletic exercise.

A number of senior officers devoted themselves to the cause in more practical ways. Gerhard Johann Scharnhorst, Gebhard Blücher, Leopold von Boyen and August Gneisenau worked at restructuring the army and instilling military virtues into the population as a whole. Others, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, took a hand to the educational system, or sought to reform the state itself. Foremost among these was a civil servant by the name of Karl Heinrich vom Stein, who was, like many of the other reformers, not actually a Prussian.

Stein had been born in Nassau, a *Freiherr* or imperial knight of the Holy Roman Empire. There was nothing in his origins or station that destined him to become a German patriot – indeed his younger brother Ludwig became an officer in the French army. After law studies at the university of Göttingen, he took service in Prussia, originally in the Directorate of Mines, where he made a name for himself as an energetic administrator, builder of roads and digger of canals.

Stein was a man of austere morals and strict principles who disapproved of all excesses, either political as in the case of the French Revolution or moral as in the case of the sexual licence he deplored in others. But he was more elastic when it came to politics.

Though deeply shocked by the treacherous manner in which, by the Treaty of Bâle (Basel) in 1795, Prussia acquired new lands along the Rhine, he nevertheless applied himself to their incorporation into the Prussian state. Any moral qualms he might have had gave way before his overriding instinct to tidy up the messy medieval legacy and rationalise the whole of Germany into one efficient state. In

common with many patriots all over Germany, he had come to the conclusion that the only way to place their country and its culture beyond the reach of interference from France or any other power was to create a unified German state strong enough to exclude outside influence and resist military aggression.

The philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte was preaching that the nation was a spiritual as well as a physical entity, which embodied something of a higher order than any attachment to a state or a King, and there were many, particularly in the universities, who longed to see a German republic. However much they might have empathised with such views, to patriots such as Stein, Gneisenau and Humboldt it was evident that a united Germany could not be built out of nothing. They therefore served the one German state that appeared to be in a position to gradually engulf the others and bring about the same end – Prussia.

In 1804 Stein was called to a senior post in Berlin. He was horrified at the corruption and inefficiency he encountered there, and dismayed at the mediocrity of the monarch he was serving. He strongly disapproved of Frederick William's alignment with France in 1805 and his consequent seizure of Hanover. Along with others, he persuaded the reluctant Frederick William to switch to the side of the coalition against Napoleon, and when this led to the disasters of Jena and Auerstadt he was dismissed in January 1807, with a string of imprecations from the King.

It was all the more galling for the unfortunate King that a few months later Napoleon, who had reduced Prussia to an entirely subservient condition, having heard that Stein was a good administrator but not that he was a German patriot, instructed Frederick William to nominate him as his principal minister. Stein took the opportunity provided by his new position to introduce an edict of emancipation which transformed Prussia from a feudal monarchy into a modern state, and followed this up with administrative, municipal and military reforms. Barely more than a year later an intercepted letter revealed to the French police the extent of Stein's hatred of the French,

and in consequence Napoleon had him dismissed and declared an outlaw. Rendered penniless at a stroke, Stein took refuge in Austrian-ruled Prague.

In 1812 Stein was summoned to Russia by Tsar Alexander. The two had met in Berlin in 1805 and been drawn to each other by the high-minded ideals – and, no doubt, by the priggishness – they shared. As the Grande Armée advanced into Russia, raising doubts as to the competence of Alexander and his generals, the Tsar suffered moments of self-doubt and emotional stress. In these circumstances Stein's unshakeable belief in him as the champion of the universal anti-French cause proved invaluable as both solace and support. His influence over the Tsar grew in proportion.

He took over the direction of a German Committee set up by Alexander to coordinate pro-Russian sentiment throughout German lands, and turned it into an instrument for his own ends. On 18 September 1812, a couple of days after Napoleon had crushed the Russians' last stand at Borodino outside Moscow, Stein produced a memorandum which sketched out his plan to create a unified German state. He was convinced that Russia would prevail in the end, and argued that having defeated the French she must carry the war into Germany and liberate Europe from their yoke.

When, three months later, the remnants of the Grande Armée straggled back across the frontier, the Russian commander Field Marshal Kutuzov and most of his senior officers argued against pursuing them further. Kutuzov would continue to beg Alexander to make peace and go home, and to advise against crossing the Elbe, until his very death, on 28 April 1813 at Bünzlau (Bolesławiec). Even the most ardent Russian patriots, such as his Minister of the Interior Admiral Shishkov and the Archimandrite Filaret, were against Alexander's proposed liberation of Europe. The consensus was that Russia should help herself to East Prussia and much of Poland, providing herself with some territorial gain and a defensible western border, and leave it at that. But Alexander ignored them.⁸

When the Russian armies did advance, Alexander put Stein in

charge of administering German territory in their rear, and he went to work setting up not only organs of local administration, but representative bodies as well. He recruited volunteers, called up reservists, formed a new militia, the *Landwehr*, to be supported by a home defence force, the *Landsturm*, all in the name of the King of Prussia but without his knowledge, let alone his authority.

Although Alexander's behaviour encouraged Stein in the belief that he was going to be able to put into effect his dream of a united Germany, the Tsar stopped short of endorsing it. He wished to be the healer of past ills and the bringer of happiness to the Germans as well as the Poles, and indeed to all the inhabitants of the Continent. But while he enjoyed being the anticipated saviour, he had no fixed programme. He also needed to keep his options open. Nevertheless, the expectations he aroused introduced unaccountable new elements into what was already a volatile situation.

The first obliged to confront these was King Frederick William of Prussia, and he was a worried man in those early months of 1813. 'Make use of the authority granted you by God to break the chains of your people!' Stein exhorted him from St Petersburg at the end of December 1812. 'May its blood no longer be spilt on behalf of the enemy of humanity.' But the Prussian King was not a born hero.⁹

His innate weakness undermined the advantages of a kindly and God-fearing nature, and made him suspicious as he clung to power, while his sense of failure nourished a false pride and a mean streak. He had been forced to give up half of his kingdom only ten years after acceding to it, and had been gratuitously humiliated by Napoleon. The knowledge that everyone compared him with his famous predecessor and great-uncle Frederick the Great only compounded this sense of failure. The one light in his life had been his Queen, the beautiful and universally admired Louise, to whom he had been attached by a true and mutual love. But she had died in 1810. He hung on to the remains of his realm, seeing in a close association with Napoleon the only means of survival.

General Yorck's defection from the French ranks raised the terrify-

ing possibility of French retaliation. Frederick William therefore loudly denounced it as an act of mutiny and made great show of standing by his alliance with Napoleon. But his ally was far away in Paris mustering a new army, the Russians were flooding into his kingdom from the east, and public opinion was against him.

Frederick William should have had every reason to welcome the approach of the Russians. Back in 1805 when they had met for the first time in Berlin, he and Alexander had sworn eternal friendship at midnight over the tomb of Frederick the Great. That friendship had been only slightly marred by Frederick William's forced contribution of troops to Napoleon's invasion of Russia, and the Prussian King knew that he had the sympathy of Alexander. Yet he viewed the approach of the Russian armies with misgivings and even fear.

Alexander's appointment of Stein was, considering their past relationship, almost an insult. Stein's disregard for Frederick William's authority as he set about administering East Prussia was an open affront. It might signify that Alexander was preparing to detach that province from the Prussian kingdom. Stein's calls for a pan-German war of national liberation were even more alarming. He made no secret of his views that all German rulers who had allied with Napoleon were 'cowards who sold the blood of their people in order to prolong their miserable existence'. The prospect of his being let loose on Germany aroused legitimate fears of social upheaval and even revolution, which Frederick William would be in no position to oppose.¹⁰

He was in an unenviable position. The strong French garrison ensconced in the fortress of Spandau paraded through Berlin daily, reminding him that there were more French than Prussian troops in the country. The probability was that Napoleon would be back in the spring with a fresh army, with which he would crush the Russians. Even if he did not hope for a Russian defeat, Frederick William ardently desired the stability which only such a return could guarantee. What he dreaded above all was the possibility that Alexander and Napoleon might yet reach an accommodation, the principal victim

of which would almost certainly be Prussia: an obvious solution would have been for Russia to take East Prussia and all Polish lands up to the Vistula as the price for continued French control of Germany.

Frederick William calculated that if he could negotiate better terms with Napoleon, he would be in a position to reassert his authority, control the hotheads in his dominions and face Russia on more level terms. It was, of necessity, the lesser of two evils. 'By allying with France, the least that could be expected was a further degree of ruin for the kingdom, which would inevitably become the theatre of the war,' wrote the Prussian chancellor, Baron August von Hardenberg, 'but if one were to enter into alliance with Russia, how could one dare to confront once again the implacable vengeance of Napoleon?'¹¹

Frederick William therefore sent Prince Hatzfeldt to Paris with the proposal of an active alliance against Russia, on condition that France paid the ninety million francs she owed Prussia and agreed to the restitution of some of her former territory in Poland. The alliance was to be sealed by the marriage of the Prussian Crown Prince to a princess of the house of Bonaparte. Failing to get a response, in February 1813 he made two further such proposals to Napoleon.¹²

But Frederick William could not procrastinate much longer. In the absence of any encouraging signal from Napoleon, and in view of the fact that over two-thirds of his army was by then operating in defiance of him, he made a move. On 22 January 1813 he left Berlin, with its French garrison and swarms of French officials, for Breslau (Wrocław), the capital of his province of Silesia. Although the French ambassador Saint-Marsan accompanied him, the King felt less under surveillance there. While making repeated professions of loyalty to Napoleon, he sanctioned the formation of a volunteer corps of Jägers and the call-up of all men aged between twenty and thirty-four, ostensibly in order to be in a position to offer his ally Napoleon fresh troops in the spring.

On 9 February he sent Colonel Knesebeck to Alexander's headquarters at Kalisch (Kalisz) to seek assurances that, provided he did not take Napoleon's side in the forthcoming conflict, Prussia was not

going to be pushed westwards and turned into some kind of buffer state. Alexander was not best pleased by Frederick William's envoy. Knesebeck asked the Tsar to dismiss Stein and to promise that he would hand over Prussia's old Polish provinces, incorporated into the grand duchy of Warsaw in 1807, which were now under Russian occupation. Alexander took this approach as an expression of a lack of faith in his magnanimity. Ignoring Knesebeck, he despatched Stein to Breslau with a letter to Frederick William and the draft of a treaty of alliance between them. Stein's arrival on 25 February was most unwelcome to the King.

Time was running out, as the Russian armies covered ever greater areas of his kingdom, and the German patriots who marched with them incited his subjects to rise and fight regardless of their King. On 19 February Fichte had ended a lecture he was giving at the university in Berlin with the words: 'This course will be suspended until the close of the campaign, when we will resume it in a free fatherland or reconquer our liberty by death.' Young men from all over Germany flocked to join a *Freikorps* under Adolf von Lütow, dedicated to the liberation of Germany. A wave of excitement rippled across the country. 'German spirit, German courage raised hopes of better days,' wrote the patriotic *salonnière* Caroline Pichler, noting that the voices of young men had a fresh, warlike ring.¹³

Frederick William was cornered, and on 27 February he signed the treaty brought by Stein. It was ratified and dated at Kalisch on 1 March. Frederick William set to work raising troops and, as a token of reconciliation with his wayward army, founded the Order of the Iron Cross. Two weeks later Alexander joined Frederick William at Breslau, and on 16 March Prussia declared war on France. Alexander and Frederick William were, for better or worse, allies.

The alliance placed Frederick William in a subservient position. The one promise that he had extracted from Alexander was that in a secret article of the treaty he solemnly undertook 'not to lay down arms as long as Prussia will not be reconstituted in statistical, geographical and financial proportions equal to those she had before'

F.W. had escaped
Berlin for Breslau

1806. Since Alexander was already in possession of all the territory Prussia had lost then, Prussia could only wait for him to either give it back, which seemed unlikely, or to use his power to obtain a comparable tranche of land for her from future conquests elsewhere in Germany. The word used, 'equivalents', was harmless enough, but it left unanswered the question of where they were to be found, and who was to be dispossessed in order to provide them – every piece of land belonged to somebody.¹⁴

While people all over Europe who had grown tired of Napoleonic dominance saw Alexander as a liberator, few appreciated that he had assumed a right to play the decisive role in the future arrangement of Europe. It was not merely a question of his having triumphed over Napoleon. Over the past few years he had come to view his struggle with the French Emperor not only as a personal contest, or as a clash between two empires, but as a veritable Armageddon between good and evil.

The Tsar's idealism coupled with his political disappointments and humiliations on the battlefield had led him towards mysticism. His close friends included followers of Saint-Martin, Swedenborg and Lavater, and he was conversant with the literature of mysticism and with German pietism. As he watched his country being invaded and ravaged in 1812, he had sought solace in resignation to the will of God, and when the fortunes of war swung back in his favour he saw it as a manifestation of that will. From there it was but a short step to seeing himself as its instrument. He interpreted the suffering his country and its people had endured over the previous year as a purifying preparatory ordeal, and saw in it a kind of moral capital that gave him an authority superior to that of any of the other monarchs of Europe.

Like Stein and many German patriots, he had come to see the war as a crusade, not so much against France as against what France stood for – revolution, moral depravity and the usurpation of power. It was this last, Napoleon's almost careless trampling of the ancient rights of other monarchs and his brazen use of force to install and dismiss

sovereigns, that offended most. As he prepared to embark on the next stage of his crusade, the liberation of Germany from the usurper, Alexander called on her legitimate princes to join it.

A proclamation issued on his behalf by Field Marshal Kutuzov stressed that the armies of the Emperor of Russia and the King of Prussia were entering Germany with the sole aim of liberating her people and their princes and restoring to them their 'imprescriptible rights'. 'May every German worthy of the name join us with vigour and promptitude,' it continued. 'Let everyone, whether Prince or noble or from the ranks of the people, support with their wealth and their blood, with their body and their life, the liberating intentions of Russia and Prussia.'

The proclamation announced that the two monarchs had decreed the dissolution of the Rheinbund and intended to replace it with something modelled on 'the ancient spirit of the German People'. And it contained a barely veiled threat to any who would not join them. 'Their Majesties therefore demand a faithful and complete cooperation, particularly from each German Prince, and are pleased to hope in advance that there will not be found one among them who, wishing to betray the cause of Germany, will thereby deserve to be destroyed by the force of public opinion and by the power of the arms taken up so justly by them.'¹⁵

The convention signed by Russia and Prussia at Breslau on 19 March 1813 was more businesslike and precise. It stipulated that all 'liberated' territory would be divided into five districts and placed in the hands of a Central Administrative Council directed by Stein, which would take over the business of collecting taxes, marshalling resources and raising troops. It also restated that all the German rulers would be invited to join the cause, and made it clear that 'any Prince who does not answer this call within a specified period will be threatened with the loss of his state'.¹⁶

It was a curious way to proclaim a crusade for legitimacy against the usurper, and Frederick William's chancellor, Hardenberg, for one, was afraid that 'this appeal to the passions of the day, even to

democratic ideas, so unexpected on the lips of two absolute monarchs, could lead to grave problems in the future'. That was to prove something of an understatement. The two monarchs had in effect adopted the language of the French Revolution and the methods of Napoleon, thereby undermining their own credibility and robbing themselves of the only weapons they would be able to use against the unwonted passions they were arousing.¹⁷

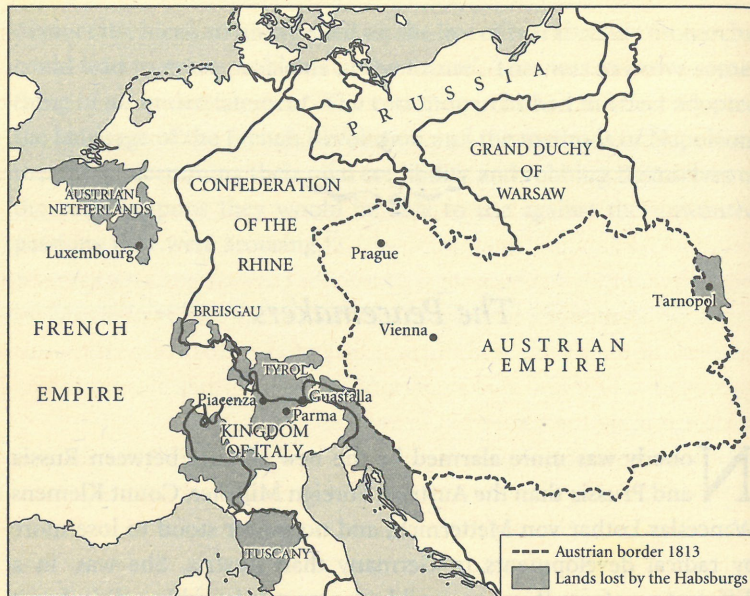


The Peacemakers

Nobody was more alarmed by the new alliance between Russia and Prussia than the Austrian Foreign Minister, Count Klemens Wenceslas Lothar von Metternich, and no power stood to lose more by radical developments in Germany than Austria. She was, in a different way from Prussia, possibly the most vulnerable political unit in Europe.

Her sovereign had been crowned in 1792 as the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II. Besides this prestigious but empty role, he had inherited the huge antiquated realm of the house of Habsburg, an accretion of centuries of conquest, diplomacy and dynastic marriage. It was not long before he had to start ceding outlying provinces of this to Revolutionary France – the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium), Lombardy and the left bank of the Rhine in 1797; Venice and Illyria, as well as the Tyrol, given to France's ally Bavaria, in 1805. The Holy Roman Empire itself was dissolved by Napoleon in 1806, and its sovereign became Emperor Francis I of Austria.

In 1809 an ill-judged attempt to recover some of his provinces while Napoleon was busy fighting in Spain cost him Salzburg, the remains of his possessions along the Adriatic and part of his Polish provinces. He was also forced to seal the ensuing peace by giving Napoleon his favourite daughter Marie-Louise in marriage. He was then obliged to participate in Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812



Habsburg losses, 1792–1810

with a 30,000-strong Austrian auxiliary corps under Prince Schwarzenberg. He was still, at the beginning of 1813, an ally of France.

While both Francis and Metternich were eager to disengage Austria from this alliance and to see French troops and influence excluded from Germany, they also had much to fear from change of any kind. Francis's much-reduced empire was strategically vulnerable, as it was open to attack from every direction. It had no national base, and included large numbers of Slavs, Magyars and other nationalities. The only cement binding this heterogeneous mass together was the monarchy itself, the house of Habsburg. This made it ideologically vulnerable as well. The Enlightenment, the French Revolution and its Napoleonic legacy brought into question everything that made up the monarchy: the execution of the French King Louis XVI in 1793 insulted the divine status of kingship so central to the Habsburg state; the idea of the sovereignty of the people undermined the paternal

absolutism on which the monarchy was predicated; and the concept of nationhood put in question its territorial basis.

In the circumstances, the proclamations issuing from Russian headquarters were a cause for alarm in Vienna. They threatened to arouse revolutionary and nationalist passions that could produce reverberations within the Habsburg dominions. More ominously, they suggested Alexander's intention of exerting an influence over the affairs of Germany, which were of vital interest to Austria. At the same time, the proclamations had a similar effect on all the greater and lesser rulers of the region, and this was likely to make them turn to Austria for protection and make common cause with her against Russia in determining the future of Germany.

Metternich believed that a durable peace could only be achieved if the centre of Europe could be rid of the threat of foreign domination and placed under the twin protection of Prussia and Austria. While this required the exclusion of both French and Russian influence from Germany, it also required their preservation as checks on each other's ambitions. Although he and his country were in an extremely dangerous position, he set out to engineer just such a peace. He did not believe the task to be beyond him.

The Austrian Foreign Minister's most striking characteristic was his vanity. In the words of the eminent nineteenth-century historian Albert Sorel, 'Metternich was in his own opinion the light of the world, and he blinded himself with the rays reflected in the mirror he held up continuously before his eyes. There was in him a chronic hypertrophy of the ego which developed relentlessly.' He was in every sense the centre of his own universe. He would write endlessly about what he had thought, written and done, pointing out, sometimes only for his own benefit, how brilliantly these thoughts, writings and doings reflected on him. This egotism was buttressed by a monumental complacency that was proof against all experience.¹

Metternich was hard-working, honest and cultivated, and not devoid of humour, though of a somewhat ponderous kind. He was very cautious, with plenty of what he used to refer to as 'tact', by

which he appeared to mean the ability never to get so far involved in anything as to be unable to pull out. This made him a perfect diplomat and a formidable negotiator. He knew how to make people believe they were getting their own way while he led them, at their own pace, towards the goal chosen by him. If not highly intelligent, he was very perceptive. Above all, he knew what he wanted, and pursued his aims with dogged consistency.

He was physically handsome, innately elegant and distinguished-looking, but slightly spoiled the effect by fussing too much over his hair and his clothes. Possessed of considerable charm, he was amiable and very sociable, which made him popular in any drawing room. He loved music, which often reduced him to tears. Though not exactly raffish, he had an eye for the ladies, and could be seductive when he wanted. During his lifetime he found his way into the bedrooms of some of the greatest beauties of the age. Having triumphed, he as often as not lapsed into the role of sentimental lover. He would pour out his feelings in mawkish letters and flaunt them in curiously adolescent ways – when he was having an affair with Napoleon's sister Caroline Murat in 1810 he ostentatiously wore a bracelet fashioned from her hair.

His career was meteoric. Born in the Rhineland in 1773, he studied at the universities of Strasbourg and Mainz. At Frankfurt in 1792, at the age of nineteen, he witnessed the coronation of Francis II as Holy Roman Emperor, an event that left a lasting impression. After brief trips to Vienna and London he married Leonore Kaunitz, the daughter of Maria-Theresa's renowned chancellor, and in 1801 took up his first diplomatic post, as the Emperor's minister to the Saxon court in Dresden.

From there he was sent as ambassador to Berlin, where he negotiated the treaty between Austria, Russia and Prussia in 1805, the foundation of the Third Coalition. When that had been defeated he was sent, at Napoleon's request, to Paris as Austria's ambassador. When war broke out between the two countries in 1809 he was first held hostage in Paris and then given the task of negotiating the peace,

legitimacy

which included arranging the marriage of Marie-Louise to Napoleon. That same year he was made Austrian Foreign Minister, a post which he was to hold for the next thirty-nine years.

Metternich was in every sense a product of the *ancien régime*, believing in a natural order of things, based on established religion, monarchy and a defined hierarchy. He viewed any change as potentially revolutionary, and feared the middle classes, as they tended to nourish aspirations which they could not satisfy without displacing others or changing the rules and destroying existing institutions. The French Revolution he saw as the greatest catastrophe to afflict Europe, and he had a natural tendency to despise Napoleon as its product. Yet he admired him for his achievements and, more importantly, valued the fact that he was an effective source of authority who had contained the forces of chaos in France and might – if only he could be contained himself – be a useful partner in the preservation of the 'natural order' in Europe. Indeed, he rated Napoleon higher on this scale of usefulness than he did many legitimate monarchs.

'The world is lost,' Metternich had written to his friend Friedrich von Gentz back in 1806, after Napoleon had abolished the Holy Roman Empire. He could barely disguise his horror at the Frenchman's doings and his abhorrence of his whole 'system'. At the same time he came to appreciate the usefulness of the Rheinbund, with which Napoleon had replaced the Holy Roman Empire, as a basis for the emergence of a more independent Germany. And he did not subscribe to the view that Napoleon must be got rid of at any cost.²

Metternich hoped that the disasters of the Russian campaign would have sobered Napoleon enough for him to realise that his best option was to abandon his dream of a pan-European French Empire and make peace as soon as possible – a peace that Metternich would broker, with attendant advantages to Austria. In order to achieve this, and to keep his options open, he had to somehow extricate Austria from her alliance with France and adopt 'a system of active neutrality'.³

Metternich feared the formation of a new coalition against France, as he foresaw that Russia would be its driving force and therefore its

leader; and what he feared even more than a restoration of French hegemony over Europe was its replacement by a Russian one. At the same time, he realised that if Russia and France did come to negotiate directly, they might well end up dividing Europe between them, cutting Austria out of the deal.

In December 1812, through Bubna, he offered Napoleon Austria's good services in helping France make peace with Russia. He held out the vision of a strong France retaining many of the gains she had made since 1792, a neutralised Germany watched over jointly by France and Austria, with Russia and Prussia held in check in the east. The future of French conquests in Italy was left vague, as Austria and France could settle that question between themselves at a later date.

Although Napoleon dismissed Bubna's proposals with bluster about his intention to march out in the spring and beat his enemies into submission, Metternich did not despair of bringing him round. At the same time, he began to make preparations for all eventualities. The Treaty of Schönbrunn, which he had brokered himself between France and Austria in 1809, had limited the size of the Austrian army to 150,000. But, assuming that Austria would continue as his ally and expecting to need a larger auxiliary corps soon, Napoleon now encouraged its increase, and Metternich seized the opportunity to order rapid mobilisation of all available forces. He also continued to deepen his dialogue with Russia and other powers.

Metternich knew that Napoleon's ultimate aim was a satisfactory settlement with Britain, and that without one no peace he made with any other powers could be considered final. He shared the opinion, common throughout Europe, that Britain was a self-interested power of marginal importance on the Continent, and he could not disguise a certain exasperation with her apparent arrogance, but he felt she must be brought into the proceedings in the interests of all. In February 1813 he sent an unofficial envoy, Count Wessenberg, to London to sound out the British cabinet on whether it would agree to enter into negotiations under Austrian mediation.⁴

The mission was doomed to failure. Since Marie-Louise's marriage

to Napoleon, the view from London was that Austria was a close ally of France and therefore not worth keeping up even unofficial links with. In that year the Foreign Office had stopped paying Friedrich von Gentz, one of its most reliable informants in Austria since 1802. Under the circumstances, the arrival of Wessenberg was seen in London as some kind of intrigue. In matters of foreign policy, the British cabinet was beset by outdated prejudices.⁵

The eighteenth-century view of France as a monstrous and diabolical arch-enemy bent on the destruction of England still prevailed. Another inherited perception was that Britain's natural allies were Russia, Prussia and Sweden. This was based on the notion that Russia was, like Britain, an 'unselfish' power as far as Europe was concerned, and that there were no possible grounds for conflict between the two; that Sweden's interests lay in making common cause with Britain; and that as a northern Protestant power and an erstwhile enemy of France, Prussia must be a sympathetic ally of Britain.

In point of fact, Russia resented Britain's supremacy at sea and foresaw conflict of interest not only over the Balkans and Constantinople, but also in the Mediterranean and, more far-sightedly, over southern Asia. One of the reasons many within the Russian military and political establishment were unwilling to pursue the *Grande Armée* beyond Russia's frontiers and bring about the total defeat of France was that they suspected Britain would end up as the main beneficiary. These considerations were backed up by economic rivalry and widespread ill-will stemming from a belief that Britain's aggressive trading practices constituted an obstacle to the development of the Russian economy.

So while Britain saw Russia as a natural ally, Russia saw Britain as a rival. Her repeated offers to mediate a peace settlement between Britain and the United States were thinly-disguised attempts to shore up the position of the latter, particularly as a naval power that could act as a counterbalance to Britain on the seas, and in the process put in question Britain's cherished 'maritime rights'. And while Russia opened her ports to all when she broke away from Napoleon's

Continental System, she imposed crippling high duties on British traders.⁶

Sweden had not shown herself a reliable ally at any stage in the past two decades, and although her ships and ports did flout the Continental System and continued to trade with Britain, she had, in 1810, opportunistically elected the Napoleonic Marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte as Crown Prince and effective ruler. Prussia too had played a disappointing role. She had fought alongside the French more often than against them, and had perfidiously helped herself to Hanover, a possession of Britain's royal house.

In 1812 Britain acquired a new Foreign Secretary, Viscount Castlereagh. But he was not the man to take a different view or alter policy drastically. He had been born plain Robert Stewart, the son of an Ulster landowner of Scottish Presbyterian stock. His father had become a member of the Dublin Parliament, married well (twice) and made the most of his connections, becoming Baron Londonderry in 1789, Viscount Castlereagh in 1795, Earl of Londonderry in 1796, and would progress to Marquess of Londonderry in 1816.

Young Robert Stewart, who was born in the same year as Napoleon, was prone to all the enthusiasms of his age. He admired the American rebels who had thrown off English rule, he sympathised with the French Revolution, and entered Irish politics as an enthusiastic patriot, drinking toasts to 'the Gallic Constitution', to 'the People', and even on one occasion to 'the rope that shall hang the King'. But trips to France and Belgium in 1792 and 1793 dampened his enthusiasm for things revolutionary, and as he grew up the dour pragmatism of his paternal forebears began to assert itself over the romantic attitudes derived from his aristocratic mother's.

In 1796 he not only inherited the title of Viscount Castlereagh, he also took command of five hundred men to oppose a threatened French landing at Bantry Bay which meant to liberate Ireland from the English yoke. Two years later, in 1798, he played an active part in suppressing the Irish rebellion, and he was one of the most determined architects of the Union with England of 1801, making liberal

use of bribery in order to achieve it. He had betrayed all the fancies of his youth in favour of law and order, which he had come to see as the greatest benefit in public life. This was perhaps not surprising, as by now he had plenty to protect. In 1802 he was nominated President of the Board of Control of the East India Company, and in 1805 he became Secretary of State for War in William Pitt's cabinet. He had arrived at the very heart of the British political establishment.

But it would be wrong to see Castlereagh's change of heart as a self-interested *volte-face*. It stemmed from his acceptance of Pitt's conviction that illegitimate revolution could never bring the kind of stability necessary for the development of civil society, and was reinforced by the common sense that came with age. Nor did it come without a struggle. There can be little doubt that Castlereagh worked hard at reining in the impetuous side of his nature, which occasionally revealed itself in heated words and, most spectacularly, in his challenging George Canning to a duel in 1809 over their political differences.

By his mid-thirties he had become a paragon of middle-class values. He was happily married, abstemious and ordered in his habits, drinking little and rising early, never happier than when he could leave London to spend time on his farm at Cray in Kent, where he indulged his love of gardening and animal husbandry. He enjoyed the company of children. He was kind to servants and generous to the poor. He was industrious and conscientious in his work. He took his ease with books and indulged himself with music, which he loved, playing the cello and singing whenever the opportunity presented itself.

His tenure at the War Office, which came to an end in 1809, had not been deemed a success. His one achievement was to bend rules in order to have General Arthur Wellesley appointed to command the expeditionary force being sent to the Iberian peninsula in 1808. But its benefits did not become apparent until a few years later when, as Lord Wellington, Wellesley won the first decisive British victories over the French. In 1812 Castlereagh became Foreign Secretary, a post altogether better suited to his talents.

Castlereagh was a very able man. He could grasp the complexities of a problem quickly, along with its possible ramifications, and he could write it up in clear, elegant prose. But he was not an original thinker. He knew nothing of European affairs, and lacked the imagination to see what was happening on the Continent. He had imbibed his views on foreign policy from his hero Pitt, and he would remain faithful to them.

When he took over at the Foreign Office Britain was entirely isolated, with no influence on the European mainland. His first actions were therefore aimed at finding allies on the Continent and building up a coalition against Napoleon. Napoleon's invasion of Russia in the summer of 1812 played into his hands, and in July of that year Castlereagh concluded a treaty of alliance with Russia which bound the two countries to help each other in their attempts to bring about the defeat of France.

This was of little comfort to Russia, whose armies were fleeing before the triumphant Grande Armée, and who had to face up to the possibility of other enemies seizing the opportunity to recover lost lands. One such was Turkey, with whom Russia made a hurried peace. Another was Sweden, from which she had taken Finland only three years before, and which would almost certainly wish to recover it. Had Sweden invaded at that moment, Russia's defences would probably have collapsed entirely.

Tsar Alexander opened negotiations with Bernadotte and arranged a personal meeting, at Åbo. In the course of the discussions Alexander managed to convince Bernadotte to let Russia keep Finland, in return for which he would help Sweden take Norway from Denmark, an ally of France. He also undertook to persuade Britain to give Sweden one of the colonies she had taken from France. He did everything to charm the renegade French Marshal, and in order to seal their *entente* he threw out another piece of bait, the prospect of Bernadotte's ascending the throne of France once Napoleon had been defeated.

Shortly after, Castlereagh opened negotiations with Sweden, which culminated in the Treaty of Stockholm, signed on 3 March 1813. The

terms were extraordinarily generous to Sweden. Britain undertook to assist her in taking possession of Norway, with military support if the King of Denmark were to prove recalcitrant, to cede her the former French West Indian island of Guadeloupe, and to pay her the sum of £1 million, in return for which Sweden promised to field 30,000 men against Napoleon.⁷

News of the signature of the Treaty of Kalisch between Russia and Prussia on 1 March 1813 was greeted with joy in London, but Castlereagh was less than thrilled. Britain had not been consulted on the subject of the projected treaty, which suggested that Russia felt she could act independently of her British ally. It also meant that Castlereagh had no idea what secret clauses the treaty might contain. And the fact that Britain, Russia, Sweden and Prussia were now aligned against France did not in itself amount to a coalition. Even were that so, experience taught that coalitions were vulnerable to the slightest reversal of fortune.

The first coalition against France had come together in 1793. It combined Austria, Russia, Prussia, Spain and a number of lesser powers. This formidable alliance proved ineffectual when faced with the *élan* of France's revolutionary armies, and it fell apart in 1796. A second coalition, consisting of Britain, Russia, Austria and Turkey, was cobbled together in 1799, but this disintegrated after the French victories of Marengo and Hohenlinden. A third, painstakingly constructed by Castlereagh's mentor William Pitt in 1805, combined Austria, Russia, Sweden and Prussia with Britain, but this too was shattered by Napoleon's victories at Austerlitz, Jena and Friedland. The one allied victory, Trafalgar, had failed to affect the outcome.

By 1807, when he signed a far-reaching alliance with Russia, Napoleon controlled virtually the whole of Continental Europe, making it impossible for Britain to play any part in its affairs, except in Portugal, where a small expeditionary force hung on precariously. Although she was supreme on the seas, much of the advantage this gave her was negated by a tariff war with France. Napoleon's Continental System excluded the British from trading with any part of

Coalition

Europe, and eventually led to the outbreak of war between Britain and the United States of America.

As he contemplated the possibility of the birth of a new coalition in the spring of 1813, Castlereagh was acutely aware of both the need to direct it and the lack of means at his disposal. Britain's military capabilities were already stretched to breaking point by the double commitment of fighting one war with France in Spain and another with the United States of America across the Atlantic, so all he could contribute was money. And money could not buy sufficient influence to impose unity on a diverse set of allies.

Britain had always been concerned first and foremost with naval matters, and it was only when the armies of Revolutionary France advanced into the Austrian Netherlands in 1792 and threatened to take the estuary of the river Scheldt that a hitherto indifferent Britain felt impelled to go to war. The Scheldt estuary and the port of Antwerp had traditionally been viewed in Whitehall as the ideal base for an invasion of England, and the very thought of their falling into French hands was the stuff of nightmare. Provided the entire Netherlands could be kept in friendly or neutral hands, Britain had no interest in what form of government France saddled herself with. This divided Britain from her allies in the first coalition, who saw it as more of a monarchical crusade against revolution. In time, Britain's views on the subject of France converged with those of her Continental allies, yet significant differences remained. And any coalition was vulnerable to underlying resentments and a distrust based on mutual incomprehension of each other's strategic imperatives.

As an island and a sea power with no land army to speak of, Britain could only participate significantly in the fighting on the Continent through subsidies, which her allies used in order to raise and equip armies. Her naval victories over the French, even when they were on the scale of the battles of the Nile or Trafalgar, made no palpable difference to the situation on the European mainland. It therefore appeared that Britain was not pulling her weight or making the same sacrifices as her allies – the subsidies she contributed were, in their

view, more than covered by the wealth of the French and Dutch colonies that fell into British hands and the riches confiscated on the high seas by her navy.

For a Continental power, a battle won brought no such advantages, while a battle lost often entailed the ravaging of its own territory and the necessity to sue for peace on any terms. The British, safe behind their watery defences, could not understand this predicament. They had no experience of foreign invasion and occupation, and bemoaned their allies' lamentable tendency to sue for peace at the first setback. They tended to look upon any state that had been forced to do so as an enemy. Having no first-hand experience of fighting against Napoleon, the British were inclined to attribute his victories to the failings of their allies' armies and the pusillanimity of their governments. This seemed to be borne out when the one Continental power as strategically invulnerable as Britain, Russia, submitted to Napoleon in 1807.

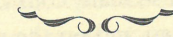
In the event, Russia had only done so because her Austrian ally had been defeated and forced to sue for peace, her Prussian ally had been shattered and reduced to nothing, and her British one was incapable of sending a single regiment to assist her. But Castlereagh, like Pitt before him, could not imagine what it was like to be left isolated facing a victorious Napoleon across a corpse-strewn battlefield. All he knew was that coalitions tended to fall apart, and he ascribed this principally to their not having a clearly defined purpose and a mechanism to ensure that all parties stuck to it until it was achieved.

As he watched events unfold on the Continent in the spring of 1813, Castlereagh determined that he must somehow ensure that the allies in this incipient coalition would make war together and peace together, on terms agreed mutually and properly defined. That was not going to be easy.

Britain's diplomats had been excluded from a large part of the Continent for the past fifteen years and from the rest of it for the past three or four, so there was a dearth of knowledge in London as

to what was going on in various countries and who the important players were. There was a corresponding lack of experienced diplomats, just at the moment when Castlereagh needed them. To Russia he had sent Lord Cathcart, an old soldier with scant diplomatic experience. To Prussian headquarters he now despatched his own half-brother, Sir Charles Stewart, another soldier, and not a particularly distinguished one at that. Stewart was thirty-five years old. He had served on Wellington's staff in the peninsula, where he had displayed impetuous courage but none of the qualities requisite for a command – 'A most gallant fellow, but perfectly mad,' in the words of a brother officer. Stewart would probably have approved of that description. 'My schemes are those of a Hussar at the Outposts,' he wrote to the painter Thomas Lawrence before taking up his first diplomatic post. 'Very short, very decided, and very prompt.'⁸

Castlereagh's instructions to these two dealt mainly with the extent of the subsidies which Britain was to contribute to the allied cause. But they also sketched out the basis of a final settlement towards which they were to work, and expressed the desire to bring about a closer union that would bind the allies to achieving those goals – he did not want this coalition disintegrating like the others, and he did not want the allies making a separate peace once they had achieved their own objectives, leaving Britain out in the cold. He already saw himself in the role of guiding spirit of this budding coalition, and had ambitious plans for it. But he did not as yet contemplate extending it to embrace Austria, and his mistrust of Metternich was so great that he would not even listen to what the Austrian envoy Wessenberg had to say.



A War for Peace

'I desire peace; the world needs it,' Napoleon declared at the opening session of the Legislative Assembly on 14 February 1813. He desired it probably as ardently as anyone. But he could only make it on terms that were, in his own words, 'honourable and in keeping with the interests and the greatness of my Empire'. He could not contemplate the idea of negotiating from a position of weakness, and his instinctive reaction to his predicament was to win a war first.¹

His policy of delivering a shattering blow and then dictating the terms of peace had worked well enough in the past, but each of his victories inevitably appeared less dramatic than the last, while repeated drubbings merely tempered the resistance of his enemies. His *modus operandi* was subject to the inexorable law of diminishing returns, but he appears to have been oblivious to this.

Following his failure to rally the remnants of the Grande Armée at Vilna and then at Königsberg in East Prussia, Murat had left his post and gone back to his kingdom of Naples. The man who took command in his stead was Napoleon's stepson Prince Eugène de Beauharnais, Viceroy of Italy. He had managed to stabilise a front along the Vistula in January, and from his headquarters at Posen (Poznań) worked hard at replenishing the ranks of shattered units. On 27 January Napoleon wrote him a long letter reviewing the possibilities for a spring campaign that would take French forces back across

the Niemen into Russia in August, and by the beginning of February he was making arrangements to despatch his household there.

The one lesson he had learnt from the Russian campaign was that too many attendants and accoutrements only got in the way. 'I want to have much fewer people, not so many cooks, less plate, no great *nécessaire*,' he wrote. 'On campaign and on the march, tables, even mine, will be served with soup, a boiled dish, a roast and vegetables, with no dessert.' He announced that he would be taking no pages, as 'they are of no use to me', apart from some of his more hardy hunting pages.²

By then the French front had been forced back to the line of the Oder, but Napoleon was not unduly worried. On 11 March he wrote again to Prince Eugène, now holding a front along the Elbe, sketching a grandiose plan of attack involving a sweep through Berlin and Danzig into Poland. From Kraków, Poniatowski, supported by the Austrians, was to strike northward and cut the Russian army's lines of communication.³

These plans were disrupted, but his confidence was not particularly shaken, when on 27 March the Prussian ambassador in Paris handed in Prussia's declaration of war on France. Napoleon's reaction was to instruct Narbonne in Vienna to offer Austria the Prussian province of Silesia (which the Prussians had captured from Austria in 1745) as a prize if she supported France in the forthcoming war. Metternich did not want Silesia, and he certainly did not want to go to war again at the side of France. In a last-ditch attempt to bring Napoleon to the negotiating table, he sent Prince Schwarzenberg to Paris.⁴

Schwarzenberg's instructions, dated 28 March 1813, stressed that the moment was 'one of the highest importance for the future fate of Europe, of Austria, and of France in particular', adding that it was 'an urgent necessity' that the two courts reach an understanding. He was to make it clear to Napoleon that while Austria would support France sincerely in pursuit of a fair peace, she did not feel herself bound to do so unconditionally. Metternich was particularly anxious to drive home the fact that Napoleon's marriage to Marie-Louise counted for nothing in the present circumstances. 'Policy made the

marriage, and policy can unmake it,' Schwarzenberg told Maret. But Napoleon was deaf to these hints.⁵

He spent his days reviewing newly-formed regiments on the Champ de Mars before they left for Germany. In the last week of March and the first two of April he made his final preparations. They included setting up a Regency Council which was to administer France while he was on campaign, and to assume control if anything were to happen to him. Schwarzenberg, who had a long interview with him at Saint-Cloud on 13 April, found him less belligerent than in the past, and genuinely eager to avoid war. 'His language was less peremptory and, like his whole demeanour, less self-assured; he gave the impression of a man who fears losing the prestige which surrounded him, and his eyes seemed to be asking me whether I still saw in him the same man as before.' Thirty-six hours later Napoleon left Saint-Cloud for the army, which he joined at Erfurt on 25 April.⁶

Alexander and Frederick William had already taken the offensive. With the Prussian army under General Gebhard Blücher in the van, they invaded Saxony, denouncing its King as a tool of Napoleon and a traitor to the cause. The King, Frederick Augustus, found himself in much the same position as Frederick William a couple of months earlier, but had even less time to make a decision as to which way to jump. The allies had their reasons for forcing the issue in this way, and they were not creditable ones.

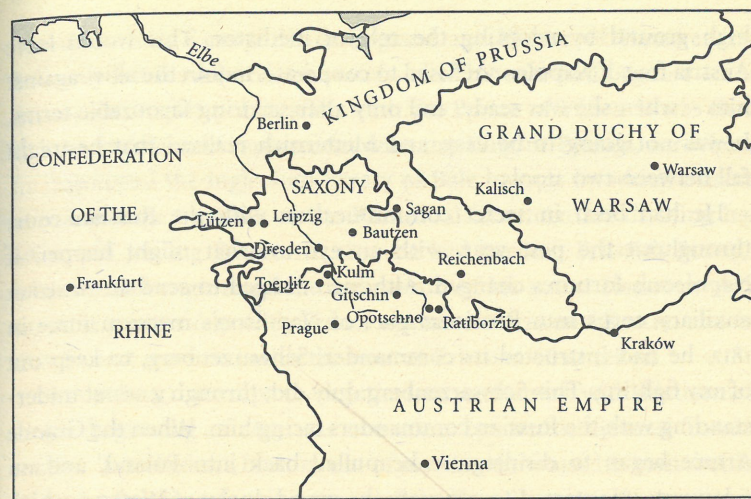
In the secret articles of the Treaty of Kalisch, Russia had promised to restore Prussia to a position of power equal to that she had held before she lost her Polish lands to Napoleon, and to find 'equivalents' for her if necessary. Russia was in possession of those formerly Prussian Polish lands, but made no mention of giving them back, while the use of the word 'equivalents' suggested that Prussia would be rebuilt with German territory. The most desirable block of territory was Saxony. Both Alexander and Frederick William therefore hoped that Frederick Augustus would not declare for the allies and thereby place Saxony in the allied camp.

Frederick Augustus was genuinely attached to Napoleon, to whom he owed his royal crown, and, being endowed with a sense of honour, would have done anything to stand by his ally. But his small army had been annihilated in Russia, and he was now in the front line. He was being urged by Metternich to realign himself, but was both unwilling to do so and afraid of breaking his alliance with Napoleon. He attempted to sidestep the issue by taking refuge in Austria, and on 20 April concluding a treaty with her which guaranteed his continued possession of Saxony. Not long after he left it, his capital Dresden was occupied by Alexander and Frederick William, who marched in at the head of their troops, cheered by the population. But their triumph was to be short-lived.⁷

The allied army, consisting of some 100,000 Russians and Prussians commanded by the Russian General Ferdinand von Winzingerode and the Prussian Gebhard Blücher, marched out to face the French. But Napoleon advanced swiftly and defeated them at Lützen on 2 May. The Russians and Prussians had, according to a British officer attached to allied headquarters, shown bravery and dash, but 'in crowds, without any method'. There had been a general want of direction in the command, and Alexander and Frederick William had only further muddled things by their presence on the battlefield. The retreat was chaotic and bad-tempered, and insults flew between the two allied armies.⁸

The victory demonstrated once again the superiority of French arms, but it was not decisive. Napoleon's shortage of cavalry, a consequence of the previous year's Russian campaign, prevented him from pursuing the enemy and turning their defeat into a rout. Although he trumpeted the news of a great victory for propaganda purposes, he was not satisfied. To Prince Eugène he wrote admitting that in view of the insignificant number of prisoners he had taken it was no victory at all.⁹

Alexander made light of the defeat. 'This retreat was accomplished with admirable calm, tranquillity and order,' he wrote to his sister Catherine, 'and I admit that I would not have thought such a thing



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possible except on a parade-ground.' The defeat nevertheless cast a pall over the allied army, and mutual recriminations followed, with Prussians blaming Russians for not holding firm, and vice-versa. The Prussians had suffered painful losses, including that of General Scharnhorst, and morale was correspondingly low. And although the allied retreat fell short of a rout, Alexander and Frederick William had to abandon Dresden and flee to Silesia. The King of Saxony hastily repudiated his alliance with Austria and hurried back to his capital to greet his ally Napoleon, who appeared to be back in control of events.¹⁰

Metternich was sanguine. He assumed that the defeat of Lützen would have sobered the allies and made them realise how much they needed the support of Austria. At the same time its limited nature would not have given Napoleon enough confidence to make him intransigent. This opened up room for manoeuvre.

Metternich hoped simultaneously to avoid the position of having to make a hasty choice between the two sides and to seize the moral

high ground by adopting the role of mediator. This would leave Austria free, if Napoleon refused to cooperate, to join the allies against him – when she was ready, and only after securing favourable terms. It was not going to be easy, and Metternich realised that he might fall between two stools.

He had been in secret communication with the Russian court throughout the past year, with an eye to what might happen if Napoleon's fortunes changed. Although obliged to send an Austrian auxiliary corps into Russia as part of Napoleon's invasion force in 1812, he had instructed its commander, Schwarzenberg, to keep out of any fighting. This Schwarzenberg duly did, through a secret understanding with the Russian commanders facing him. When the Grande Armée began to disintegrate he pulled back into Poland, and on 6 January 1813 started to evacuate the grand duchy of Warsaw, which he was supposed to defend alongside Poniatowski's Polish army. On 30 January he signed a secret convention similar to the one Yorck had concluded with the Russians and withdrew to Galicia, the Austrian province of Poland. This forced Poniatowski to fall back on Kraków, which opened the whole of Poland and the road west to the Russians.¹¹

At this juncture Metternich would, circumstances permitting, have preferred to combine with Prussia in mediating a peace settlement between Russia and France, before the Russian army advanced any further west and before Napoleon reappeared on the scene with fresh forces. This would have laid the foundations for a peace that excluded both Russian and French influence from Germany and turned it into a neutral zone under Austrian and Prussian protection. Metternich mistrusted Prussia, which had let Austria down in the past and changed sides more than once out of opportunism. But he liked and respected her tall, distinguished-looking, grey-haired chancellor, Baron Karl August von Hardenberg. And, as it happened, Hardenberg had been thinking along the same lines as Metternich, and made the first tentative contact.

Hardenberg was not in fact a Prussian. Born in Hanover in 1750, he had travelled extensively before entering the service of his

sovereign, King George III of England and Elector of Hanover. He had only left his service, reluctantly, after his wife had begun a scandalous and highly public affair with the Prince of Wales. It was then that he had found employment with the King of Prussia, for whom he negotiated the inglorious Treaty of Bâle in 1795, by which Prussia acquired large tranches of the Rhineland in return for ditching her allies and joining France. In 1804 he had become Prussia's Foreign Minister and engineered the annexation of his native Hanover, once again in partnership with France against Austria and Russia, and in 1810 he was rewarded with the post of Prussian Chancellor.

Hardenberg's attempt to negotiate an agreement with Metternich at the beginning of 1813 was overtaken by events; General Yorck's mutiny 'knocked the bottom out of my barrel', to use his own words. With the Russians drawing near and the Prussian army joining them, he could not delay acceding to the alliance Alexander was offering long enough to combine with Metternich in an offer of mediation. Once he saw himself forced to accept the Russian alliance, he tried to persuade Metternich to do likewise, calculating that if Austria and Prussia were to accede together they might do so on better terms. But Metternich was not prepared to take such a chance, and had no desire to swap Austria's subservient alliance with France for a similar one with Russia.¹²

He needed more time to reposition Austria, and for that it was essential to keep both Russia and France at arm's length. Through his secretary Friedrich von Gentz he had secretly assured the Russian acting Foreign Minister, Count Charles Nesselrode, that Austria would break with Napoleon and join the allies, 'for the eternal cause which will assuredly triumph in the end, for that cause which is neither Russian, nor Austrian, which is based on universal and immutable laws', explaining why he could not do so quite yet.¹³

Gentz provided an invaluable conduit for communication with the allies. Born in Prussian Silesia, he had studied in Königsberg under Kant, then worked as a civil servant in Berlin, written for and edited a number of periodicals, and been an agent of the British Foreign

Office before taking service in Austria. He was an old friend of Nesselrode, whom he knew from Berlin, and of Prussia's ambassador in Vienna, Wilhelm von Humboldt. He was a colourful character, sentimental and naïve in his youth, when he had loved deeply and tragically before turning to a rackets life of drinking, gambling and whoring. Along with the poets Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul Richter, the two Humboldt brothers, Clemens Brentano, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he was at the centre of the intellectual circle dominated by the Jewish bluestocking Rahel Lewin, whose members switched lovers and entered into 'intellectual marriages' that did not constrain their freedom. Even after his marriage he carried on an exploitative relationship with Rahel Lewin, sired a child by a mistress, and had a string of affairs with notorious actresses and courtesans.

An extraordinarily hard worker, Gentz continued to study and write throughout. His political development took him from early enthusiasms for the French Revolution, through reactionary monarchism, to more pragmatic views. A clever man, widely travelled and wise in the ways of the world, he was quick to see through people and was an invaluable assistant to Metternich.

Metternich was also in contact with the Russian court through Count Stackelberg, the as yet unofficial Russian envoy in Vienna. And at the beginning of March he had sent his own envoy to allied headquarters at Kalisch. For this mission he had selected Count Louis-Joseph Lebzeltern, a bright young diplomat who had served under him in Paris and in 1810 been sent to St Petersburg to establish a personal link between Alexander and Metternich. Lebzeltern had made himself popular in Russia, which he left only at the outbreak of war in 1812.

When Lebzeltern appeared at Russian headquarters on 5 March he was warmly embraced by Alexander, who expressed the hope that Francis would save Europe by joining the cause. But Lebzeltern detected 'a pronounced mistrust of our intentions'. Alexander's apparent cordiality turned into impatience when he discovered that

Metternich's envoy had brought with him nothing beyond expressions of good will. He demanded immediate commitment, and dismissed the objection that the ground had to be prepared first, declaring that the details could be worked out at a congress to be held later.¹⁴

This conversation had taken place a full week before Prussia's declaration of war against France, so it is hardly surprising that Metternich had not been ready to commit himself and his country. And there were deeper causes for concern. Russia and Prussia were weak. French might and Napoleon's military talents could easily defeat them in the spring. Both had in the past made opportunistic peaces with France, and might do so again. If Austria were to betray her alliance with France now and expose herself to Napoleon's anger, she would end up paying a heavy price. Metternich's caution was strongly reinforced by his imperial master's aversion to risk.

The Emperor Francis was not a heroic figure. Born in Florence in 1768, he was meant to succeed his father as Grand Duke of Tuscany, but his uncle Joseph II's failure to produce an heir placed his father, Leopold, on the imperial throne, which he himself ascended in 1792. According to his uncle Joseph, Francis was 'of a dull and sullen disposition' and 'intellectually lazy'. Although fairly energetic in his performance of the actions of everyday life, he slowed down markedly whenever thought was required, sometimes literally coming to a standstill. Like his uncle Joseph, he was distrustful of new ideas and almost allergic to enthusiasm and passion in others. Humourless by nature, he was indifferent to most forms of entertainment, and unlike his uncle he was very devout.¹⁵

He had learnt his lesson painfully in 1809, when, carried away by a wave of patriotic fervour sweeping the country and the optimism of his then chancellor, Count Johann Philipp Stadion, he had embarked on a war to liberate Germany from French domination while Napoleon's back was turned. The ease with which Napoleon, despite being heavily engaged in Spain at the time, had managed to turn about and defeat Austria had left an indelible impression on Francis and Metternich. The only thing that had saved the Austrian

state from annihilation had been the politic marriage of Francis's daughter Marie-Louise to the French conqueror. She had been sacrificed to ensure the survival of the Habsburg monarchy. There was no knowing what sacrifices Napoleon might demand if he were provoked again.

Metternich's apparent subservience to Napoleon was unpopular in Austria. He had come to power as a result of the fall of Stadion, and was even accused of having engineered it. While Stadion continued to enjoy public esteem, Metternich was regarded as representing a 'peace party' dedicated to a policy of abasement; there had recently even been plots to assassinate him, hatched by bellicose officers.

While he continued to play for time, his opponents did everything to try to force the issue, obliging him to act in ways that only increased his unpopularity. The Emperor's brother Archduke John was at the head of a conspiracy, fed by British money, to raise a revolt against French rule in Carinthia, Tyrol and Illyria, hoping to launch a *guerrilla* similar to that in Spain throughout French-ruled Italy. This was just the kind of thing that Metternich had no time for – it could achieve little, yet if Napoleon were to hear of Austria's complicity, the retaliation could be draconian. On 25 February he arrested the British courier delivering funds to the conspirators, and a few weeks later a number of other conspirators, including the Archduke himself. The courier was given safe-conduct back to London, and furnished with letters for Castlereagh suggesting the resumption of relations and the despatch of a diplomatic envoy.

At the beginning of April, Hardenberg had sent Metternich a message suggesting a secret meeting between them, in the presence of Nesselrode. Metternich had no desire to discuss German affairs in front of a Russian, nor did he wish to arouse Napoleon's suspicions. Narbonne had alerted Napoleon to the fact that there was 'an underground connection' between Vienna and his enemies, and Metternich knew he was being observed.¹⁶

He needed to persuade the allies that he was with them in spirit, yet at the same time manoeuvre them away from pursuing the war

and towards negotiating a peace. For this purpose he selected his predecessor Stadion, who had served a term as ambassador in St Petersburg, who was known to be anti-French and pro-war, and who would therefore enjoy the confidence of the allies. As he was also known to be a rival of Metternich, the latter could disassociate himself from him if the French were to hear of his presence at Russian headquarters.

Stadion's brief was to propose that the allies sign an armistice with Napoleon and enter into negotiations with him. Shortly after his departure, Metternich had a long interview with Narbonne, whom he tried to convince that Austria wanted to help Napoleon make a favourable peace, with minimal concessions. Narbonne correctly suspected that Metternich was hoping to get Napoleon to agree to negotiations in principle, so as to be able to start upping the terms, thereby forcing him either to accept these or to break off the negotiations, which would allow Austria to declare their alliance null. Sensing that he was getting nowhere with Narbonne, Metternich resolved to address Napoleon through Bubna.¹⁷

Napoleon had entered Dresden hot on the heels of Alexander and Frederick William. He set about fortifying the city, which he intended to be the base from which he would strike at the allied armies converging on the Elbe. Wishing to be free of court ceremonial and to dispense with etiquette, he had taken up quarters not in the royal palace but in the summer residence of the former minister Marcolini, set in extensive gardens in the northern suburb of Friedrichstadt. Here he could behave as though he were on campaign, working and resting to a rhythm set by the twin exigencies of war and diplomacy. A daily courier from Paris brought news of everything that was going on not merely in the capital but throughout his realm. Agents all over Germany reported on events and morale. Like a great spider at the centre of his web, he watched and waited.

Bubna had his first interview with Napoleon on 16 May. He put forward Metternich's suggested basis for peace: that Napoleon give

up the grand duchy of Warsaw, relinquish control over German territory east of the Rhine, and return Illyria to Austria. The interview quickly turned into a harangue as Napoleon accused Austria of duplicity, of arming and of negotiating with France's enemies while pretending to remain loyal to her. He pointed out to Bubna that Schwarzenberg's withdrawal from Poland had been a betrayal of their alliance. He reminded him that during their last interview in Paris, Schwarzenberg had solemnly assured him that the 30,000-strong Austrian auxiliary corps was still at his disposal, but that when the campaign had opened Metternich had withdrawn it.

Napoleon laughed at the basis for negotiation put forward by Bubna, declaring that while it was an affront to him it was certainly too minimal to satisfy his enemies (he was not mistaken, as on the very same day, at allied headquarters at Würschen, Nesselrode was busily adding more conditions, extending the basis to include France's cession of Holland and Spain). Napoleon expressed regret at having married Francis's daughter, and swore that he would not give up a single village.

16 / May 1813
He was trying to frighten the Austrians into toeing the line. But he was far from confident, and he suspected that a trap was being set for him. After the interview, which lasted four hours, he asked Caulaincourt to question Bubna further in an attempt to penetrate Metternich's real intentions. He realised that if he refused to go along with the proposed negotiations he would be isolating himself, so at a final interview with the Austrian general he declared that he would agree to an armistice and that he was prepared to make peace in principle, on terms to be discussed in due course.¹⁸

How little Napoleon trusted his Austrian ally by this stage is revealed by the fact that hardly had Bubna left Dresden than he despatched Caulaincourt to the Russian front lines with the request for an immediate ceasefire and for one-to-one talks between France and Russia. If he were going to be forced to give up the grand duchy of Warsaw, he might as well use it to bribe Russia into ditching Prussia and Austria.

This was the nightmare that had been haunting Metternich all along: the possibility of Napoleon and Alexander reaching agreement, necessarily at Austria's as well as Prussia's expense. Metternich knew nothing of Caulaincourt's mission yet, as communications were slow. But the armies were not far apart, war or peace could be made from one day to the next, and all sides lived in suspense. People in Vienna would open their windows at the slightest rumble and listen anxiously for the sound of French guns. These did not remain silent for long.

On 20 May Napoleon struck again. He outflanked the new allied defensive positions behind the river Spree around Bautzen, forcing them to abandon the field and beat a hasty retreat. Although his shortage of cavalry once again prevented him from turning this into a rout and the retreat was relatively orderly, morale on the allied side plummeted as the Russians and Prussians trudged back into Silesia.

The Russian army, some of whose units were down to a quarter of their nominal strength, was in a critical condition, and from the highest to the lowest, the men wanted to return home. The newly-arrived British ambassador Sir Charles Stewart described their mood as 'of a desponding nature' and reported that 'they eagerly looked to their own frontiers'. The rank-and-file, most of whom had been drafted under emergency measures in 1812 to resist the foreign invader, had been promised they could go home once the fatherland had been liberated. Only junior officers, avid for glory and promotion, wanted to take the war into Germany. As far as the rest were concerned, Poland was enough of a prize.¹⁹

That was precisely what Caulaincourt had been instructed to offer the Tsar. But he had reached the allied outposts on 18 May, two days before the battle, and had been told that Alexander would not receive him. It might have been otherwise if he had arrived four days later. By then the Russians were staring disaster in the face; one more push, or even a vigorous pursuit by the French, and, to quote Stewart, 'the military power of Russia might have been crushed for a generation', a judgement confirmed by the Russian General Langeron.²⁰

If Napoleon had continued his advance, the Russians would have been forced to fall back into Poland while the Prussian forces would have had to retreat northwards. The allied army would have split into two forces, easy to defeat separately. Although the French lines of communication would have been extended by such an advance, this would have been more than made up for by the reinforcements Napoleon would have found on the spot in the shape of the garrisons he had left in a string of fortresses from Danzig to Zamość. More to the point, morale in the Russian army would probably have been tipped over the edge and the first flare of a pan-German revolt would have been doused. As it was, the numbers of volunteers coming forward to fight for the liberation of Germany had been disappointing outside East Prussia and Brandenburg.²¹

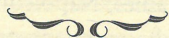
But Napoleon was worried by the state of his own forces. 'The magnificent spirit that had always inspired our battalions was destroyed,' wrote the commander of the 2nd Tirailleurs of the Guard. 'Ambition had replaced emulation. The army was now commanded by officers who may have been brave to the point of temerity, but who lacked experience and instruction. The soldiers only looked for opportunities to leave their units, to get into hospitals, to keep out of danger.' The marches and counter-marches of the past weeks had not only exhausted the troops, they also gave the impression that their commander was not as sure of his actions as before. Shortage of cavalry restricted reconnaissance and pursuit alike. Paucity of not only cavalry horses but also draught animals meant that the quartermastership could not deliver adequate victuals or supplies. To add to the misery, the spring of 1813 was unusually cold and wet. Desertion was rife, particularly in the contingents contributed by Napoleon's German allies, in which whole units would go over to the enemy at night. 'What a war!' Marshal Augereau complained. 'It will do for all of us!'²²

At a more personal level, Napoleon had been deeply saddened by the death, during the opening shots of the Battle of Lützen, of Marshal Bessières, one of his most loyal and capable commanders. He had

been profoundly shaken three weeks later when Marshal Duroc, his sincere friend as well as one of his most trusted collaborators, was hit by a cannonball at Bautzen. Napoleon was at his bedside when Duroc breathed his last.

Instead of pursuing the allies, Napoleon decided to call a halt and wait for reinforcements, so he sent a messenger to allied headquarters with the offer of an armistice of seven weeks. The offer was readily accepted and the armistice concluded at Plesswitz on 4 June.

Napoleon had made a fatal strategic error. The armistice 'saved us and condemned him', as one Russian general put it. Not only did Napoleon save the allies from almost certain defeat, he threw away the initiative, which he would never regain.²³



Intimate Congress

Metternich had received a report of Caulaincourt's mission to Russian headquarters not long before he heard of the allied defeat at Bautzen. The first opened up the terrifying possibility that Napoleon and Alexander might strike a deal over his head, while the second raised the equally alarming one that the allied armies would withdraw into Poland and Prussia respectively, leaving Austria militarily defenceless and at Napoleon's mercy.

The time was fast approaching when Metternich would have to commit Austria to one side or the other, and he was not ready. Schwarzenberg was massing all available Austrian forces at Prague, but would not be ready to take the field before the second week in August at the earliest. Only diplomacy could buy Metternich that time, and when a courier from Dresden brought news of Bautzen at 4 p.m. on the afternoon on 29 May, he sprang into action.

He drove over to the palace of Laxenburg to see the Emperor Francis. He persuaded him to leave Vienna and take up residence at some point midway between Alexander's headquarters and Napoleon's, in order to underline his intention of assuming an autonomous role. The only suitable residence in the area was Wallenstein's former stronghold, the gloomy old castle at Gitschin (Jičín). The move was prepared with the utmost secrecy, but the French ambassador Narbonne got wind of it through his spies at the imperial stables and

rushed to Metternich for an explanation. Metternich fobbed him off with evasive answers. The anxious Narbonne immediately set off for Dresden to warn Napoleon, but Metternich had pre-empted him. He had already sent off two couriers, one to Bubna in Dresden instructing him to renew the offer to Napoleon of Austria's good offices as mediator in reaching a peace settlement, the other to allied headquarters announcing that Francis had left Vienna in order to be closer to his army.

This in itself was hardly likely to convince Alexander of Austria's good faith. He needled Stadion and Lebzeltern about her true intentions, and pointed to signs of her treachery. He was furious when he heard that Austria had allowed Poniatowski's Polish corps, which had been isolated in Kraków, to march through Austrian territory in order to rejoin Napoleon's main forces in Saxony. His suspicions were further aroused when news reached him of Bubna's mission to Dresden.¹

On 1 June, as they were making their way to Gitschin, Francis and Metternich encountered Nesselrode coming the other way. He had been sent by an exasperated Alexander with instructions to pin the Emperor of Austria down to committing himself, on which point he stressed 'that I need a categorical decision, in writing'. The last thing Francis was prepared to do at this stage was to commit himself in writing, but he did give Nesselrode a strong verbal assurance of his intent to join the allies if a satisfactory peace settlement could not be wrenched from Napoleon.²

In the circumstances, the armistice of Plesswitz, which came into effect on 4 June, the day after Francis and Metternich reached Gitschin, was a godsend. 'The first great step has been taken, my dearest friend,' Metternich wrote to his wife on 6 June, making out that the signature of the armistice was somehow the consequence of his own deft diplomacy. In a letter to his daughter written two days later, he complained of the strain of being the prime mover, on whom the eighty million inhabitants of the Continent depended for their salvation. Full of his sense of mission, he set about manipulating events.³

His first move was to provide himself with a stage on which he would be able to direct the actors as he wished. One of his reasons for choosing Gitschin was that it lay not far from Ratiborzitz (Rati-bořic), the estate of Wilhelmina de Biron, Princess of Sagan. She was one of the four daughters of the late Duke of Courland. Originally an autonomous prince under the suzerainty of Poland, he had foreseen the extinction of that kingdom and of his principality with it, and had purchased substantial estates as insurance for the future. One of these was the principality of Sagan (Żagań) in Silesia, which he had left Wilhelmina on his death in 1800. He had also left her the estate of Ratiborzitz, with a simple but luxurious country house set in the grounds of the ancient castle. As this was conveniently close to Gitschin and to the allied headquarters at Reichenbach (Dzierżoniów), which had already attracted her mother the Duchess of Courland, Metternich suggested that she take up residence there. She could not resist the call to be near the epicentre of events; and, like so many ladies in Europe at the time, she worshipped Alexander, so she agreed.

She was joined there by Gentz, whom Metternich wished to have near at hand, since he had planned to arrange a number of meetings at Ratiborzitz that even Napoleon's spies would not get wind of. 'I live here as in heaven,' Gentz wrote to a friend. He loved the relaxed atmosphere that reigned in the elegant house, and was beginning to fall under the spell of its beautiful *châtelaine*.⁴

Metternich had met her a few years before and had even begun a mild flirtation with her in 1810, but this had been interrupted by the appearance of the dashing young Prince Alfred von Windischgraetz, an officer in the Austrian army, with whom she fell in love. She still was, but this did not stop her growing close to Metternich during the spring of 1813, when he was feeling politically isolated and under pressure. He would discuss his ideas and policies with her as though she were a colleague. She would now act as his stage manager as he put together one of the great acts of his career.

* * *

Alexander was in no mood for play-acting. Although he had been obliged to accept Napoleon's offer of the armistice, he was still bent on war. It was not in his nature to back down in the face of adversity. At Bautzen, where he had insisted on exercising command at one point, he had, when informed that his right flank had been turned, declared that 'In war the obstinate will always triumph,' and had nearly been cut off as a result. 'I noticed that the idea of breaking off the war without having achieved the grand results he had allowed himself to dream of tormented him like a gnawing parasite,' Gentz reported to Metternich after a meeting with the Tsar.⁵

The allies had established their headquarters in the little town of Reichenbach, to the south of Breslau, but Alexander himself had taken up quarters a few miles away in a derelict country house at Peterswaldau (Pieszyce). He was attended only by Admiral Shishkov and his chief of police, Aleksandr Balashov, as well as a few aides-de-camp. But he ignored their presence, spending hours alone in the overgrown gardens and orchards of the house or walking over to the nearby colony of Herrnhut Moravian Brethren at Gnadenfrei (Piława Górna), with whom he communed.⁶

Partly out of a growing reluctance to relinquish control and partly out of a sense that, since he was the instrument of God, he did not need advice, Alexander delegated less and less. His Foreign Minister, Chancellor Rumiantsev, had suffered a slight stroke and was in no condition to carry out his duties, but rather than replace him Alexander left him in his post back in St Petersburg and took control of foreign affairs himself. Instead of being elevated to ministerial rank, Rumiantsev's natural successor Nesselrode merely became a sort of secretary to the Tsar.

He was perfectly suited for such a role. Born in Lisbon, the son of a minor Westphalian noble in Russian service, Nesselrode had come to Russia in 1796, aged sixteen, and served as a midshipman in the Baltic fleet. He moved on to a commission in the horseguards, and after a spell as aide-de-camp and chamberlain to Tsar Paul, he transferred to the diplomatic service. As a junior diplomat at the embassy

in Paris, he established and became the link in a secret communication between Alexander and the then French Foreign Minister Talleyrand. Small and ordinary-looking, he challenged no one. He was a competent bureaucrat, loyal, hard-working and always ready to oblige his superiors. Gentz, with whom he also kept up a clandestine correspondence through war and peace, thought him 'a man of upright character, good judgement, born for work and solid things'. Metternich once said that 'If he were a fish, he would be carried away with the current.' He would probably not have minded, as he saw himself primarily as the Tsar's instrument. 'I am called when I am needed,' he explained to his wife. 'I am completely passive.'⁷

With ministers such as Nesselrode around him, Alexander never needed to fear being contradicted. He also had a number of people in his entourage who had their own programmes and who would support him robustly whenever he needed reassurance. One such was Stein, who could be counted on to argue against all the Russians who were for retrenching on their conquests in Poland. Another was Carl'Andrea Pozzo di Borgo.

Corsican by birth, he was a contemporary and erstwhile close friend of Napoleon, with whom he had made common cause during the early stages of the French Revolution. He had gradually drifted away from and eventually turned against his famous compatriot, becoming an implacable enemy whose hatred was kept warm by burning jealousy. After spending some time in London and Vienna, Pozzo had taken service in Russia, where Alexander had rewarded him with the rank of General and the title of Count. He was more cunning than intelligent, and could certainly be counted on to support Alexander in any venture, however risky, aimed at the destruction of Napoleon.

Strong in the conviction that God meant him to save Europe, buoyed up by the vigorous support of the likes of Stein and Pozzo, Alexander was unlikely to be deflected from his aim. Particularly as every day reinforcements marched into camp from the depths of Russia and newly formed Prussian regiments took their place in the allied ranks.

The situation in the Prussian camp was quite the reverse of that in Alexander's entourage. When news of the armistice became known at allied headquarters 'the Prussian officers were so indignant that they tore off their pelisses and trampled them underfoot', according to Stewart. Their exasperation was shared by Hardenberg, and particularly by Humboldt.⁸

Wilhelm von Humboldt was an ardent patriot, and had put his faith in Prussia as the only agency through which the German lands could be freed. A prominent literary figure and a close friend of Schiller, he had neglected his career as a writer to become a Prussian minister and, in 1810, Prussia's ambassador in Vienna. He was now forty-six years old and somewhat overshadowed by the reputation of his younger brother, the renowned naturalist and traveller Alexander von Humboldt. He was highly intelligent and dedicated, yet many found him difficult to like. He was censorious and at times priggish, which did not prevent him from liberally indulging a seedy taste for preferably fat lower-class girls whom he could treat as objects while writing curiously high-minded letters to his wife Caroline, his 'dearest Li'.

On 13 June he wrote to her from Reichenbach venting his anger at the armistice. Not only was it entirely unnecessary, he felt, it was psychologically damaging to the German cause. The first wave of enthusiasm which had brought volunteers flocking to the Prussian colours had spent itself, partisan activity had fizzled out, and if the allied armies remained behind the Elbe for much longer, it would be impossible to breathe fresh life into the movement for the liberation of Germany. The behaviour of the Russian troops towards the German population was undermining the alliance, while the Russian command was growing increasingly war-weary. Humboldt bemoaned the lack of committed leadership, and feared that in these conditions Metternich, whom he distrusted and disliked, would be able to make an 'Austrian peace' that would leave Prussia in the lurch and cancel out all hope of a Germany free from foreign influence. 'The future looks unbelievably dark and uncertain,' he wrote to her on 22 June.⁹

King Frederick William also thought the future looked bleak, but

for different reasons. He did not share his army's spirit of belligerence, and could not make up his mind which threatened him more: the continuation of the war, with its perils and unforeseen consequences, or the conclusion of peace, which would probably take place at the expense of Prussia. His natural inclinations were for the latter course. He would whip himself up into a warlike mood in order to support Alexander, but talk of war raised the spectre of unrest and possible revolution in his mind. 'His Majesty, therefore, cools down rapidly, and sinks back into the same amiable nonentity he has ever been,' noted George Jackson, Stewart's *secrétaire d'ambassade*.¹⁰

Stewart had come from London a few weeks earlier by a round-about route which had taken him by ship through the Baltic to Prussia, and on to allied headquarters at Reichenbach, where he finally delivered his letters of credence to Frederick William. To his intense disappointment, the atmosphere there was anything but warlike.

There were daily parades as Alexander and Frederick William reviewed newly arrived reinforcements, but there were also banquets, lunch parties and excursions to nearby beauty spots and places of interest. The presence of the sovereigns drew minor German princes eager to pay court to what they assumed would be the new powers in Germany, and ladies who had come to see the chivalrous liberator. 'Female society of the most perfect description was within our reach; and its allurements and dissipations often divided the mind of soldier and politician from their more severe duties,' recorded Stewart. Jackson contributed an English flavour. 'We have enlivened our leisure hours by getting up some pony races, which have gone off wonderfully well,' he wrote home. But the British diplomats were far from happy.¹¹

Alexander had withdrawn into himself. In between meditations on the doctrines of the Moravian Brethren and his divine destiny, he was penning love notes to Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya, the wife of one of his aides-de-camp, with whom he had enjoyed a dalliance at Kalisch, and who had gone to Bohemia to await his projected arrival there. While pouring out his heart, he stressed the 'purity' of his

feelings, and affirmed that he felt no scruples about making her unwitting husband carry the notes between them.¹²

While Alexander believed that the sufferings endured by his people over the previous twelve months entitled Russia to special consideration, Britain had, in the course of the past century, acquired a sense of embattled righteousness which translated effortlessly into an arrogant perception of her needs and her God-given right to them. This was the cause of some resentment, and not only among the Russians.

According to Jackson, Hardenberg seemed to regard Britain 'rather as a thorn in his side, and an obstacle to a peaceful settlement of affairs amongst the three Powers, than as an ally making the greatest efforts and sacrifices to aid in restoring permanent tranquillity in Europe'.¹³

In his instructions to Stadion of 7 May, designed to give as much pleasure as possible to the Russians short of committing Austria to an alliance, Metternich insisted that Britain would have to give up some of her maritime rights, adding that 'England's dominion on [the seas] is no less monstrous than Napoleon's on the continent'.¹⁴

Lord Cathcart, who had followed Alexander from St Petersburg, and the newly arrived Stewart, who thought highly of himself, felt they were not given enough respect at allied headquarters. But they were both relatively inferior in rank and personal reputation, and they were dealing with ministers and monarchs. Matters were not improved by the fact that they had taken an instant dislike to each other; as a result they did not always see eye to eye or coordinate their actions.

Neither Cathcart nor Stewart was given any information as to what was going on, and their anxiety mounted as they watched couriers come and go. As far as they were concerned, Austria was still an ally of France, and they found the presence of Stadion and Lebzeltner at allied headquarters puzzling. They had no inkling of what Metternich might be up to, and suspected the worst. 'I fear political treachery,' Stewart wrote excitedly to Castlereagh on 6 June. They were taken aback when they were at last informed that an armistice had been signed with Napoleon.¹⁵

Britain paying + financial members

The one thing Cathcart and Stewart did have going for them was money. Russia and Prussia were both desperate to pay and feed their armies and raise the new divisions they would need in order to confront Napoleon. On 14 June Stewart concluded a treaty with Prussia which bound her to put an extra 80,000 men in the field in exchange for an immediate cash subsidy of £666,000. Prussia also agreed to respect British claims to the lands of the houses of Hanover and Brunswick, while in a secret article Britain pledged herself to support Prussia's right to regain a position at least equivalent to that she had held in 1806. The following day Cathcart signed a twin treaty by which Russia was to receive twice as much money in return for an army of 150,000. Britain also agreed to spend £500,000 on refitting the Russian fleet. The two treaties provided for a further advance of £5 million in the form of 'federal paper', which could be issued by the allies to cover the expenses of war. It was backed by British credit and would be redeemed jointly by all three at the conclusion of the war.¹⁶

Possibly the most important article in the treaties was that which bound the signatories not to enter into any negotiations of any kind with any party without consulting each other. The suspension of hostilities had brought out mistrust between the allies, as each of them considered the possibility that the other might make a separate deal with Napoleon. 'Conjecture was still very busy, and had a wide field of action,' in Stewart's words.¹⁷

The deepest suspicions were focused on Austria, and on Metternich in particular. On 10 June Hardenberg was sent to Gitschin to obtain firmer commitments from Austria. Amongst other things, he wanted to ensure that the bases for negotiation which were to be submitted to Napoleon should not be too acceptable to him; if Metternich were to offer him terms that he could stomach, Napoleon might seize on the opportunity to make a peace that would satisfy neither Russia nor Prussia, and certainly not their British ally.

The conditions proposed by Hardenberg as the starting-point for negotiations with Napoleon were: 1. The dissolution of the grand

duchy of Warsaw and its partition between the three neighbouring powers; 2. The cession to Prussia of Danzig and other areas in northern Germany; 3. The return of Illyria to Austria; 4. The reinstatement of Hanseatic ports such as Hamburg and Lübeck; 5. The dissolution of the Rheinbund; and 6. The reconstruction of Prussia to its pre-1806 status.

When Hardenberg presented these conditions to him, Metternich balked at the inclusion of the last two. He knew they would be unacceptable to Napoleon, and that if they were put to him he would not agree to negotiate at all. This would entail the resumption of hostilities at a moment when Austria was not ready – which in turn would mean that she would have no option but to resume her role as Napoleon's ally. He had also come to the conclusion that it would be politic to preserve the Rheinbund, as this would effectively scotch any plans Alexander and Stein might have for the rearrangement of Germany and any designs Prussia might be nursing with regard to German territory.

Over two days of often heated discussion Metternich managed to make his case that the most important thing was to get Napoleon to agree to negotiations. This would have the twin advantages of buying Austria the time necessary for mobilising her army, and making Napoleon look like the aggressor when the negotiations eventually broke down. That they would break down he had no doubt, because, he explained, the allies would, as soon as the negotiations started, introduce the other two conditions and then include British demands with regard to Spain and the Netherlands. But while he stood by his insistence that Napoleon must be lured into negotiations, he did agree to commit Austria to war when these failed, and a formal convention was to be prepared to that effect.

This went only a little way to dispel mistrust of Metternich at allied headquarters, and the suspicion lingered that he was setting a trap – the awareness of each of the three powers that they could at any moment strike a deal with Napoleon over the heads of the others made them extraordinarily sensitive to the possibility of the others

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doing so, hence the high degree of mistrust emanating from the notes and letters of those involved in these delicate and secretive talks.

Alexander decided to talk to Metternich himself, and a meeting was arranged for 17 June at Opotschno (Opočno). The two had not seen each other since 1805, and although they had been on cordial terms then, much had happened since to make the Tsar suspicious of the Austrian Foreign Minister. But in a long interview Metternich succeeded in allaying those suspicions by explaining his plan of action. He assured Alexander that if Napoleon agreed to talks, 'the negotiations will demonstrate, beyond any doubt, that he has no intention of behaving wisely or justly', and that war would inevitably follow. Alexander accepted the logic of the plan, and left the meeting in a brighter mood. But that only made the Prussians more suspicious.¹⁸

Two days later Metternich had a secret conference in the discreet venue of Wilhelmina de Sagan's house at Ratiborzitz, with Hardenberg and Humboldt representing Prussia and Nesselrode Russia, which the latter described as 'one of the most stormy I have ever attended'. In the end Metternich managed to placate them by declaring that while Austria would only bind herself to join Russia and Prussia in war against France if Napoleon did not accept to negotiate on the first four conditions, he nevertheless agreed that a durable peace could not be achieved without excluding France and French influence entirely from Italy, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands. The fruit of these meetings was the Convention of Reichenbach, signed a few days later, on 27 June.

This defined the conditions on which Napoleon was to be invited to negotiate, and stipulated that if he did not agree to them, or if the negotiations did not lead to peace, Austria would automatically become an ally of Russia and Prussia, and declare war on France.¹⁹

Mistrust nevertheless lingered like an unhealthy fog – with some justification, since the allies had accepted Metternich's assurance that the peace proposals were only a ploy to wrong-foot Napoleon, while he himself was still in favour of making peace provided reasonable terms could be obtained. That seemed infinitely preferable to

embarking on a new war as part of a coalition which, in Gentz's words, was 'a weak, rotten, poorly designed structure in which hardly two pieces fit together'. But a satisfactory peace could only be made with the participation of Britain, and Metternich was doing everything possible to make contact with the British cabinet through Wessenberg and various British agents.²⁰

The British diplomats had been left out of the secret talks between their allies and Metternich, and seemed to be unaware of them. But Castlereagh was anxious. On 13 June he wrote to Cathcart instructing him to write to Metternich himself and pin him down as to Austria's intentions, and enclosing a letter to the Austrian Foreign Minister in which he insisted on 'without loss of time, be[ing] informed in the most authentic and confidential manner of the views and intentions of the Austrian cabinet'.²¹

Stewart, who regarded himself first and foremost as a soldier and longed to get to grips with the enemy, had gone off to Prussia in order to review the troops concentrating for the next stage of the campaign in northern Germany. It was only when he returned a couple of weeks later that he discovered, entirely by chance, that Russia and Prussia had signed a convention with Austria without consulting their British allies, in stark and insulting contradiction to the engagements made in the subsidy treaties signed with them only ten days before.

The British Prime Minister Lord Liverpool and his Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh had already been rattled by the news of their Russian and German allies' signature of the armistice of Plesswitz on 4 June without consulting them. When they were informed of this second breach of faith there was mild panic in London. They had to consider the very real possibility that Austria might succeed in subverting their allies and broker a peace between them and Napoleon which would once again exclude Britain. Faced with this bleak prospect, Castlereagh readjusted his policy.

'You must guard against a Continental peace being made to our exclusion,' he warned Cathcart on 6 July, stressing the weakness of

Britain's position. He hated the prospect of having to take part in a settlement negotiated by Metternich, but there seemed to be no alternative. He had made up his mind to send an envoy to the Austrian court.

'The risk of treating with France is great, but the risk of losing our Continental Allies and the confidence of our own nation is greater,' he argued, instructing Cathcart to inform the allies that Britain would join them in any negotiations they entered into with Napoleon. He listed 'the points on which His Royal Highness can under no circumstances relax', which were that Spain, Portugal and Naples must be returned to their rightful sovereigns, that Hanover be handed back, that an enlarged Holland be restored and that Prussia and Austria be strengthened. A further point concerned Britain's maritime rights, which were not negotiable. To his intense annoyance Russia had recently renewed its offer to mediate in the Anglo-American conflict, which he saw as an attempt to bring these rights up in the international arena.²²

On his return to Gitschin after his crucial conferences with Alexander and the allied ministers, Metternich had found a letter from the French Foreign Minister Maret asking whether Austria still considered herself to be bound by the treaty of 1812 with France, and if so, whether she would designate a plenipotentiary to renegotiate it so as to accommodate Austria's new role as mediator. Metternich replied with a specious document explaining Austria's behaviour towards France, and then set off for Dresden himself.²³

He arrived in the Saxon capital on 25 June, and on the following day he presented himself at the Marcolini villa. On his arrival he was struck by the look of weariness and despondency on the faces of the senior officers in the Emperor's ante-rooms. He found Napoleon standing in the middle of a long gallery, his sword at his side and his hat under his arm. The Emperor opened the conversation with cordial enquiries about Francis's health, but his countenance soon grew sombre. Irritated by Austria's tergiversation, and feeling he was being

betrayed, Napoleon reacted with his usual truculence. 'So it is war you want: very well, you shall have it,' he challenged Metternich. 'I annihilated the Prussian army at Lützen; I beat the Russians at Bautzen; and now you want to have your turn. I shall meet you at Vienna. Men are incorrigible; the lessons of experience are lost on them.'

When Metternich pressed him to make peace, stressing that this was his last opportunity to do so on favourable terms, Napoleon gave full vent to his irritation. 'I might even consider giving Russia a piece of the duchy of Warsaw,' he ranted, 'but I will not give you anything, because you have not beaten me; and I will give nothing to Prussia, because she has betrayed me.' He declared that he could not give up an inch of territory without dishonouring himself. 'Your sovereigns, born on the throne, can afford to let themselves be beaten twenty times and still return to their capitals; I cannot, because I am a *parvenu* soldier,' he said. 'My authority will not survive the day when I will have ceased to be strong, and therefore, to be feared.'

He suspected that the four conditions for negotiation put forward by Metternich were some kind of trick, as they would not buy peace by themselves (if only because British demands would have to be added), so in agreeing to them Napoleon would be entering an open-ended negotiation. And he saw Metternich as the principal intriguer rather than the honest broker the Austrian minister thought himself.

Realising that he could not force Austria to fight at the side of France, Napoleon attempted to buy her neutrality by offering to return her Illyrian provinces. But Metternich stood firm by his insistence that the only role Austria was prepared to play was that of independent mediator. If Napoleon did not accept this, Francis would consider himself relieved of any obligation to stand by their alliance, and free to act as he saw fit. Napoleon tried to browbeat Metternich, by accusing him of treachery and of being in the pay of Britain, by ridiculing Austria's military potential and by threatening to crush her. He lost his temper more than once, threw his hat into the corner in

a rage, only then to resume the conversation on polite, even friendly terms. The meeting lasted more than nine hours, and it was dark outside when the exhausted Metternich left the room.²⁴

That evening Metternich returned to the Marcolini villa at Napoleon's invitation to see a play put on by the actors of the Comédie Française, who had been brought over from Paris. He was astonished to find himself watching the famous actress Mademoiselle Georges playing Racine's *Phèdre*. 'I thought I was at St Cloud,' he wrote to his wife before going to bed, 'all the same faces, the same court, the same people.'²⁵

Over the next days he had a couple of meetings with Maret and another inconclusive one with Napoleon, who kept invoking Austria's obligations under the treaty of 1812. Metternich did everything he could to persuade Napoleon that he wanted to help him make a satisfactory peace, while Napoleon alternated between bullying and trying to convince Metternich that Austria needed France more than France needed Austria.

Metternich filled in his spare time pleasantly enough. The weather had turned fine and there was a festive atmosphere in the beautiful baroque city, which, in the words of Napoleon's secretary Baron Fain, 'presented the curiously mixed aspect of a capital and a military camp'. The armistice had cheered all those who longed for peace, and there were balls and parties for the French officers and members of Napoleon's court.²⁶

Metternich was feeling very pleased with himself. 'I am beginning to believe a little in my star as Napoleon believes in his, when I see that I am now making the whole of Europe turn around a point that I and I alone have determined some months ago,' he wrote to his wife after his second meeting with Napoleon. 'There are crowds of people continually standing under my windows hoping to discover what I think,' he noted with satisfaction, adding that he was frequently stopped in the street and asked whether there would be peace or war. He also took the opportunity to go shopping for presents for his wife and daughter, for which he received touching thanks. But his

mind, when it was not occupied with affairs of state, was elsewhere. Metternich had fallen in love.²⁷

The object of his affections was Wilhelmina, Princess of Sagan. She had, according to Countess Rozalia Rzewuska, who knew her well, 'noble and regular features, a superb figure, and the bearing of a goddess'; but if she was a goddess, she was a fallen one. 'She sins seven times a day and loves as often as others dine,' Metternich would later write, with some justification. But it was not entirely her fault. 'The consequences of a neglected upbringing and the frightening immorality of her paternal home had the most unfortunate influence on the destiny of the young and charming Wilhelmine,' Rzewuska continues. 'Abandoned to the vivacity of her senses, devoid of any religious principles, her imagination branded by pernicious example, Wilhelmine found herself defenceless against the great dangers which her beauty stored up for her.'

As a young girl she was seduced by her mother's lover, the Swedish adventurer Gustav von Armfeldt, and became pregnant. A hasty marriage was arranged to the Prince de Rohan, who tolerated her continuing depravities as she tolerated his. But their '*entente immorale*' was of short duration. They divorced, and Wilhelmina married the Russian Prince Trubetskoy, who was besotted by her and whom she dismissed 'as they left the altar'. She was similarly curt with her third husband, Count Schulemburg. She was enormously rich and generous with it, and she made up in charm and natural wit what she lacked in upbringing and education.²⁸

Metternich had originally regarded her as a friend and confidante, and the passionate feelings she kindled in him took him unawares. In lengthy and somewhat adolescent love letters he expressed his astonishment at the way they had crept up on him. He revelled in the first paroxysms of love, mixing up passionate outpourings with increasingly exalted views on the political situation. 'I am going there like the real man of God, bearing the burden of mankind on my shoulders!' he announced in a note penned hastily as he was leaving for Dresden.²⁹

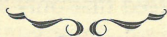
She returned his love, but she did not believe in exclusivity, and continued to receive visits from Windischgraetz whenever he could get leave from the army. She was enjoying life now that her country house had become the nexus of European politics. 'Since the Emperor went to Gitschin at the beginning of June, I established myself here and experienced the most interesting, lively and extraordinary weeks of my life,' Gentz wrote to Wessenberg from Ratiborzitz on 5 July. 'You probably know, my dear friend, that at this strange point in time, when the four foremost sovereigns of the continent, along with their cabinets, ministers, foreign envoys, etc., and with 600,000 men under arms are concentrated in the narrow strip of land between Dresden and Reichenbach, the glamour of the residences and capitals of Europe – that is, as far as interest is concerned – are outshone by three or four Bohemian castles and today, a man of the world no longer speaks of Paris, Vienna, Petersburg, and so on, but of Gitschin, Optoschna and Ratiborzitz. In this last place – on top of everything, a little paradise which the Duchess of Sagan is making into a veritable heaven – one has seen in the last three weeks nothing but crowned heads, prime ministers, diplomatic conferences, couriers, etc.'³⁰

As he was getting nowhere in Dresden, Metternich decided to leave on 30 June. He was in his travelling clothes and his coach was waiting below when he received a note summoning him for an interview with Napoleon. He gave orders for the horses to be unharnessed and went to the Marcolini villa, dressed as he was. He found Napoleon in the same mood as before, and was resigning himself to listen to the habitual torrent of bluster and complaint, when the Emperor suddenly ushered him into a study and sat him down at a table at which Maret was poised to take notes. He then asked him to set out Austria's proposals for the mediation. Metternich obliged, and to his surprise Napoleon gave his assent. A note was drawn up to the effect that the belligerent parties would send plenipotentiaries to a congress to be held under Austrian mediation at Vienna or Prague, to begin in the first days of July.

Napoleon suggested including plenipotentiaries from Britain, the

United States of America and Spain, but Metternich demurred. He considered it so unlikely that Britain would agree to take part that he refused to agree to inviting her, as her probable failure to respond might provide Napoleon with an excuse for declaring the congress invalid. It was therefore agreed that only Spain and the United States be invited to send their representatives.

'Never has an important piece of business been expedited so promptly,' Metternich noted with satisfaction. An hour later his carriage was rolling out of Dresden, and on 1 July he was back with Francis at Gitschin. On 4 July he was at Ratiborzitz, conferring with Hardenberg, Humboldt, Nesselrode and Stadion on how to conduct the negotiations in the congress that was to assemble at Prague in a few days' time.³¹



Farce in Prague

A few days after Metternich's departure from Dresden, Napoleon received unwelcome news from Spain. Wellington had taken the offensive at the end of May, obliging the French to fall back. Threatened with the possibility of being cut off, Napoleon's brother King Joseph was forced to abandon Madrid. The British caught up with him and the retreating French army and routed it at Vittoria on 21 June. It was a shattering defeat, rendered all the more shameful by the loss of all the army's and the King's baggage.

Berthier and other marshals advised Napoleon to evacuate all his garrisons, pull back his forces from Germany and concentrate a powerful army on the Rhine. It would have been the sensible course. But if he were to pull back he would be abandoning his German allies, and such a sign of weakness would give heart to all his enemies; besides which he found the idea of giving ground hard to stomach. He was also haunted by the notion that his people would not tolerate his making peace on any but victorious terms, that if he failed to come up with something that could be dressed up as a victory, what he called his '*magie*' would be dispelled. He therefore held firm, and demonstrated his determination to stand by his allies by signing, on 10 July, a fresh treaty of alliance with Denmark.¹

Napoleon was still hoping that at some point he might be able to strike a deal with Alexander. 'Russia has the right to an advantageous

peace,' he told his secretary Baron Fain. 'She will have bought it with the devastation of her lands, with the loss of her capital and with two years of war. Austria, on the contrary, does not deserve anything. In the present state of affairs, I would not mind a peace that would be glorious for Russia; but I would feel a very real repugnance to see Austria reap the fruit and the honours of a pacification of Europe as the prize for the crime she is committing by betraying our alliance.'²

But Alexander was by now the one monarch least likely to make peace with Napoleon on any terms. And even if his own army was not in belligerent mood, he knew that he was strongly supported by the Prussian generals, who were so sanguine that in the course of a military confabulation at Trachenberg (Žmigród) in mid-July, they came to the conclusion that they could defeat Napoleon without the help of Austria.³

Napoleon's only hope of peace lay with Metternich, who still favoured a peaceful outcome, for a number of practical reasons. Having inherited a virtually bankrupt state in 1809, he had worked hard to rebuild its finances and was unwilling to see these frittered away on war, the most ruinous activity a state could pursue. War was also notoriously unpredictable, and even if successful could produce unexpected political tremors. Finally, the outbreak of war necessarily relegated diplomatists like himself to a secondary, and therefore unacceptable, role. As he took up residence in his roomy palace in Prague, which had been chosen as the venue for the congress due to open on 10 July, he faced with relish 'the grand and immense task' that faced him, and assured Wilhelmina that 'I will do what I can to save this world.'⁴

He was certainly well placed to manage events, and his choice of Prague as the venue for the congress was no whim. The ancient Czech city lay within the Habsburg dominions, and was embraced by the formidable Austrian intelligence apparatus. As well as running the government of the empire, Metternich's State Chancellery controlled a number of auxiliary services, such as the posts, the archives, and so on. It had a codes office to encrypt and decrypt secret correspondence, and

a translation department, since the official language of government for Hungary was Latin, which was also employed in communications with the Vatican and in other state business; the administration of most of the monarchy's German lands was carried on in German; and that of its Italian dominions in Italian, with French remaining the language of diplomacy and the court.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century the sheer quantity of information being processed through this immense machine inspired greater invigilation. With the outbreak of the French Revolution and the supposed threat of Jacobin conspiracy and contagion, the accent was shifted to surveillance. Francis and Metternich shared an almost obsessive fear of conspiracy and revolution, and both believed in being well-informed.

Metternich employed hundreds of spies and battalions of men who were expert at unsealing letters, copying them and resealing them with the speed necessary to avoid arousing suspicion – the letters might be lifted from a post bag while the horses were being changed, or simply removed from a desk in a private house for a few moments. Others would then translate and decrypt the copies. The head of the decryption office once boasted that he had broken eighty-five foreign codes, one of them, used by the Russian diplomatic service, taking him as long as four years to crack. In order to extend the range of his surveillance, Metternich managed, by offering faster communications and cheaper rates, to divert various international postal routes through Austrian dominions, where interesting-looking letters could be examined.⁵

No matter or item was too humble, or for that matter too grand, for the attention of Metternich's spies. The archives of the State Chancellery are to this day full of copies of intercepted letters, some of them of the utmost banality, others of evident diplomatic or political interest, some of them between people of no social or political standing whatever, others quite the opposite. Not only was the public and private correspondence of all foreign diplomats and statesmen to and from Vienna intercepted and scrutinised; even intimate letters

between members of the imperial family, including those sent and received by the Emperor Francis himself, were intercepted and copied just like anyone else's.⁶

In the event, the Congress of Prague turned out to be little short of a farce. Napoleon's nomination as his plenipotentiaries of Caulaincourt and Narbonne, both of them negotiators of the highest rank, suggested that his intent was serious. Narbonne, who reached Prague first, was surprised to discover that Frederick William had sent not Hardenberg, but Humboldt, a man of recognised talents but mediocre diplomatic standing, and a declared advocate of war besides. He was downright shocked when he heard that instead of Nesselrode Alexander had sent as his plenipotentiary Jean Anstett, a man of no experience and of poor reputation who, to make matters worse, was Alsatian by birth and therefore theoretically a renegade French subject. It was an astonishing demonstration of contempt for Napoleon and for the congress, and Narbonne informed Metternich that he could not sit down to talks with them, pending the arrival of Caulaincourt with instructions from Napoleon. On hearing the identity of the allied plenipotentiaries, Napoleon held back Caulaincourt, and when he did finally send him he did not furnish him with the requisite credentials.

This boded ill for the congress's chances of success. The armistice had been prolonged, to 10 August, and if terms were not agreed by midnight on that date hostilities would resume, with Austria in the allied camp. This deadline, the nature of the allied plenipotentiaries and Napoleon's sluggishness raise the question of whether anyone was serious about the congress.

'At heart, nobody truly wanted peace,' Nesselrode would later admit, adding that the congress was a 'joke' and that Alexander and Frederick William had been opposed to it from the start. Hardenberg was similarly sceptical, while in his letters from Prague Humboldt repeatedly assured his wife that nobody, least of all himself, was interested in making peace at this stage.

Metternich probably did favour a peaceful solution, though he was growing increasingly sceptical of its chances with each passing day. And while he reassured an anxious Humboldt that there would be war on 11 August whatever happened, he was determined to make it look as though he had been left with no option.⁷

Ironically, the one person who genuinely hoped to gain something from the congress was Napoleon, even though his motives were questionable. Caulaincourt and Narbonne were very much in earnest, though the latter thought peace a forlorn hope, and they set themselves up in a manner befitting a delegation to proper peace talks, much to Hardenberg's amusement. Their brief was to keep negotiations going independently of the armistice. 'After 10 August the armistice works against us,' Napoleon explained: he believed that the Russians and the Prussians would be ready to take the field, while the Austrians would still be unprepared. This would allow him to defeat the Russians and Prussians while continuing to negotiate with Austria. 'This is what we wish, but we must dissimulate and let them believe that we want the armistice to be prolonged indefinitely,' he wrote. It seems that Napoleon still believed that he could make mischief between the allies, and that he would be able to split them at some stage and make a separate peace with Russia.⁸

His calculations were based on two false premises. The first was that the Austrians would not be ready to take the field on 10 August. The second was that a decisive victory over the Russians and the Prussians would tip the balance in his favour. Over dinner on 3 August Metternich explained to Caulaincourt, in whom he recognised a kindred soul, that times had changed in this respect. A battle lost by the allies now would make no material difference, as it could not change their attitude, which was one of exasperation with Napoleon based on the conviction that it was not possible to make a lasting peace with him. A battle lost by Napoleon on the other hand weakened him fundamentally, since it diminished his military prestige.⁹

The congress never did convene properly. Metternich had proposed that rather than sitting down to open verbal negotiations, the plenipo-

tentiaries of the three powers should put their case in verbal notes addressed to him as mediator. Humboldt and Anstett agreed, while Narbonne and Caulaincourt insisted that there must at least be some verbal negotiation. This difference of opinion quickly degenerated into pointless argument, with both sides invoking various eighteenth-century congresses as precedent. 'Nothing could be more amusing than the story of this supposed Congress, which has already lasted more than three weeks without a single question of *form* having been decided, and which will, it appears, be dissolved before it opens,' Gentz wrote to a friend on 30 July.¹⁰

Gentz was certainly enjoying himself. There was little for him to do, since there were no conferences to minute and no memoranda to draft. The weather was fine, and he would spend the long summer evenings and balmy nights strolling through the beautiful city with Humboldt and Metternich, discussing everything from love to philosophy. Metternich was less happy. Wilhelmina had promised to come to Prague so they could continue their intimacy, but he waited and waited, sending her letter after letter brimming with despair and jealousy. He complained to Humboldt that he had 'lost his *joie de vivre*'.

Humboldt, who was beginning to alter his view of Metternich, assuring his wife that he was intelligent and 'never unreasonable', was in contrastingly high spirits. He was comfortably lodged in a princely palace and filled his spare time with work on his translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. His superior Hardenberg had recently been distracted by an affair with a woman of whom Humboldt apparently disapproved, and this show of 'depravity' encouraged his speculations that he might be able to take over his post himself.¹¹

As the deadline of 10 August approached, Caulaincourt made one last attempt to establish a line of negotiation with Metternich. He explained that Napoleon's suspicions of him were largely based on the fact that the four conditions for negotiation put forward until now were not credible, and invited conjecture as to what others might lurk behind them. If Metternich were to state the allies' full demands

at the outset, Napoleon would know what he was up against and respond accordingly.

On 5 August, just five days before the armistice was to expire, Napoleon sent a note to Caulaincourt instructing him to sound out Metternich on his price for abandoning the allies and returning to the French alliance. Metternich's response was contained in a note dated 8 August which confirmed the same four conditions, with the only difference that he now dropped the one that Illyria be returned to Austria and demanded that instead of dissolving the Rheinbund, Napoleon renounce his protectorate over it. He also added the stipulation that the conclusion of a general peace was to be accompanied by an agreement to be enforced by all sides aimed at protecting weaker powers. Caulaincourt said that if it were up to him, he would accept, but expressed doubt as to whether Napoleon would.¹²

WAR
 'The great moment has arrived at last, my dearest friend,' Metternich wrote to his wife on 10 August. That evening Humboldt, Anstett and all those in favour of war gathered in Metternich's palace. Watches were consulted with impatience, and when the chimes of midnight rang out over the sleeping city Metternich announced that the armistice was over and Austria was now a member of the alliance. He ordered a beacon to be lit which, by a chain reaction, carried the news all the way to the Silesian border and on to allied headquarters at Reichenbach. By the morning Russian and Prussian troops were on the march to join the Austrian army outside Prague. 'Everything is decided, dearest Li,' a delighted Humboldt wrote to his wife.¹³

But in his letter to his wife, Metternich had made it clear that 'the official negotiation has finished today *with no result*'. 'There remain 6 days of *unofficial* negotiation; will it lead to anything or not?' he continued. Although he told her he was preparing his campaign baggage, it seems he was not excluding a last-minute negotiated outcome.¹⁴

On 12 August, just as Caulaincourt and Narbonne were preparing to leave, a courier arrived from Dresden with Napoleon's instructions to make peace at all costs. Caulaincourt called on Metternich without

delay, but was told that it was too late. That very day Austria issued her declaration of war, a document full of mournful complaint detailing how she had been wronged by France.¹⁵

'I am the most unhappy being on earth,' Metternich moaned in a letter to Wilhelmina, who had let him down by not coming to Prague. The probable reason – Alfred Windischgraetz's reappearance at Ratiborzitz – only deepened his despair. 'Adieu! There can be no more happiness for me in this world – may all that remains of it on earth be for you!' he went on, in an interminable letter.¹⁶

It was not only on account of Wilhelmina that he felt disappointment. He had failed to broker a peace, which would not only have been the best solution for Austria but would also have placed him in the pivotal position he aspired to. Everything was now left to the vagaries of war. Having done all he could to prevent it, and incurred the mistrust and insult not only of the allies but also the war party in Austria, his credibility demanded that he pursue it with enthusiasm.

Napoleon had not given up, and he instructed Caulaincourt to delay his departure from Prague in the hope of being able to obtain an interview with Alexander when the latter arrived a couple of days later. On 18 August, by which time the armies were in the field, Maret wrote to Metternich arguing that no peace congress could possibly be expected to take as little as a month, quoting examples drawn from history and proposing that a fresh congress to include all the powers of Europe, great and small, be convoked to some neutral city. But Metternich dismissed the suggestion. 'The 6 days, my dearest, have passed,' he wrote to his wife on 16 August. 'Hostilities begin tomorrow.' And Napoleon's hopes that an interview between Caulaincourt and Alexander might yield something were very wide of the mark. In his eagerness to pursue the war the Tsar had single-handedly scuppered the only real chance of peace.¹⁷

Cathcart had received Castlereagh's instructions to the effect that Britain would be prepared to enter into negotiations with France shortly after Caulaincourt reached Prague. He showed them to Alexander, who determined that they must not be passed on to

Metternich. He had never wavered in his determination to pursue the war against Napoleon, and as Nesselrode explained in a letter of 9 August to Russia's ambassador in London, he had only humoured Francis's desire to negotiate in the conviction that nothing would come of it. Having watched Austria gradually come round to the acceptance that there was nothing to be gained from negotiating, he was certainly not going to produce the British proposal to join the negotiations. It would only 'weaken the energetic resolutions taken by the Austrian cabinet' and encourage Napoleon to take the negotiations more seriously.¹⁸

Had Napoleon known that Britain was willing to participate, he would probably have been prepared to concede a great deal. Britain was his principal enemy. It had been to bring her to the negotiating table that he had invaded Russia. He had wanted Britain included in the Congress of Prague, and hopes had been entertained that she might send a plenipotentiary. The possibility of a general peace with the participation of Britain – involving as it would not only huge economic relief, but also the return of most of the French colonies – could have been dressed up as a victory of sorts and would have allowed Napoleon to claim that he was making peace with honour.¹⁹

The only victory Napoleon could hope for now was on the battlefield, and that was going to be difficult to achieve. The coalition ranged against him was formidable. Facing him was the main allied army under Schwarzenberg, consisting of 120,000 Austrians, 70,000 Russians under Barclay de Tolly and 60,000 Prussians under General Kleist, a total of 250,000. Behind it stood Blücher's army of Silesia, 40,000 Russians under Langeron, 18,000 under Osten-Sacken, and 38,000 Prussians under Yorck. In the north Bernadotte commanded an army of 150,000 Swedes, Russians and Prussians, bringing the total to well over half a million men. Morale, particularly among the German contingents, was reinforced by a sense that the hour of liberation had struck, fostered by an avalanche of poetry and propaganda, and supported by a nationwide commitment in the form of

a 'gold for steel' fund-raising programme and numerous women's welfare committees.

On 19 August Schwarzenberg's combined army paraded before Alexander, Francis and Frederick William. The newly formed units were presented with standards, 'and the three allied sovereigns nailed their respective colours together to the pole, in token of the firmness of their alliance and the intimacy of their union', recorded Jackson. It was, in the words of Jackson's superior, Stewart, 'a most exhilarating moment'. The following day the army took the field.²⁰

Napoleon was already on the march. 'I have an army as fine as any and more than 400,000 men,' he boasted to one of his officials. 'That will suffice to re-establish my affairs in the North.' But later in the conversation he complained that he was short of cavalry and needed more men, particularly seasoned troops. His forces were in fact greatly inferior to those of the allies. His garrisons at Danzig, Stettin (Szczecin), Thorn (Toruń), Cüstrin (Kostrzyn), Glogau (Głogów), Modlin and Zamość accounted for almost a quarter of his nominal army of 400,000, and they were effectively left out of the action. They included a large number of seasoned troops and some experienced generals, while the bulk of the 300,000 or so men at his immediate disposal were conscripts with only rudimentary training. Much the same was true of the army of Italy which Prince Eugène had been forming up to threaten Austria's southern flank. By mid-July it had reached a paper strength of over 50,000 men, but there were nothing like as many actually under arms, while their quality and training left a great deal to be desired.²¹

Morale was remarkably good among the troops under Napoleon's immediate command as they marched out of Dresden on 16 August, and they were cheered by the arrival of Joachim Murat, King of Naples, who was to take command of the cavalry. Napoleon's plan was to push back Blücher and then, leaving Marshal Macdonald to cover him, veer south and outflank the main allied army under Schwarzenberg, which was moving on Dresden. The first part of the operation went according to plan, but at Löwenberg (Lwówek Śląski)

on 23 August, as Napoleon snatched a hurried lunch standing up, a courier arrived with news from Marshal Gouvion Saint-Cyr at Dresden warning him that the main allied army was already threatening the city, which would not be able to hold out much longer. Napoleon smashed the glass of red wine he was holding against the table as he read the despatch.

He hesitated. A potentially decisive victory was within his grasp. But the fall of Dresden might have grave political repercussions given the current mood in Germany. He changed his plan, ordering General Vandamme with a corps of not much more than 10,000 men to continue with the original aim of attacking the allied rear, while he himself hastened back to Dresden with the main forces.

He arrived outside the city on 26 August, and in the course of the next three days defeated all the allies' attempts to break through, putting them to flight on the third. He was taken violently ill with fits of vomiting at the moment of triumph, and had to go back to Dresden. He was much better by 30 August, but on that day he received three disastrous pieces of news: in the north, Marshal Oudinot had been defeated by the Prussians at Grossbeeren; MacDonald had been pushed back with heavy losses by Blücher on the river Katzbach; and finally Vandamme, who had dutifully cut the main allied army's line of retreat, had himself been surrounded and forced to capitulate with his entire force at Kulm (Chlumec). Although he had triumphed at Dresden, all Napoleon could show for the five days' fighting was a loss of some 100,000 men and a considerable quantity of artillery. If he had persevered in his original intention, he would, in Nesselrode's opinion, have routed the allied army and captured all three allied sovereigns and their ministers. 'That's war,' Napoleon said to Maret that night. 'Up there in the morning, down there in the evening.'²²

He did not allow himself to be disheartened by this setback. Two days later he moved to push Blücher back once more, and then advanced into Bohemia, harassing the main allied army. But on 6 September Ney, whom Napoleon had sent out to reinforce Oudinot,

was himself beaten by the Prussians and Swedes under Bernadotte at Dennewitz.

Napoleon displayed extraordinary energy over the next weeks, taking command of one or other of his corps in order to push back the advancing allies. What saved them was the tactic they had agreed on at the conference held at Trachenberg in July of refusing battle and falling back whenever Napoleon himself took command of the armies facing them, and going over to the attack as soon as he had gone, leaving his troops under the command of one of the marshals.

In any other circumstances Napoleon could have pulled back all his remaining forces and struck at one point with all his might, as he always had in the past. But if he retreated now he would be abandoning his German allies, who would then be forced into alliance with his enemies. He therefore carried on thrusting and parrying, keeping greatly superior allied forces in check. Soon after hostilities began, the weather turned wet and cold. The roads turned into muddy morasses, adding to the difficulty of this highly mobile campaign and reducing the effectives of every unit with each march. He could no longer hold on to his exposed position at Dresden, and on 15 October, having abandoned that, he fell back on the second city of Saxony, Leipzig.

However grim the situation looked from Napoleon's headquarters, the view from the other side of the lines was not correspondingly rosy. The three monarchs, their ministers, their military staffs and the diplomats accredited to their courts were crammed into the little spa town of Toeplitz (Teplice) in Bohemia. This normally delightful place was choked with people, quartered on top of each other in hostelries meant for more gracious conditions. The wounded of Dresden and Kulm lay packed into all the larger spaces available. Among them was Stewart, who despite his ambassadorial role could not resist the lure of the battlefield and had taken a wound at Kulm. The streets were knee-deep in mud, continually churned up by the boots and hooves of couriers on duty and units on the march.

'Toeplitz is now a sad place,' Metternich wrote to his daughter Marie. 'Everywhere is full of wounded; in the redoute hall at the entrance to the gardens they have been amputating arms & legs . . .' She was so moved that, like other patriotic ladies, she tore old linen sheets and garments into strips and sent them to the army for dressing wounds.²³

The allies' morale was not good. Losses in the fighting at Dresden, Kulm, on the Katzbach and Dennewitz had been heavy. It was proving difficult to raise troops, and desertion was rife, even among officers. The anticipated surge of volunteers inspired by the idea of liberating Germany from the French yoke had not materialised. According to Hardenberg people 'murmured more than they acted'. And the cause was beginning to look less glorious – General von Walmoden's volunteers went about raping and pillaging with abandon those they were supposed to be liberating. The war had taken a further lurch into barbarism, and some of the Russian commanders regularly massacred French prisoners.²⁴

The 'harmony, confidence and mutual satisfaction' that Cathcart had reported from Trachenberg, where the commanders of the various armies had agreed their plan of action and mutual support, had been dissipated by mistrust, jealousy and recrimination. A struggle for control of the army was under way.²⁵

Alexander had wanted to command the allied army. He had invited General Moreau, the victor of Hohenlinden, who had been in American exile since 1804 when he had been implicated in a royalist plot to overthrow Napoleon, to return to Europe and accept a post on his staff. He assumed that with him and the renegade Swiss General Jomini at his side as advisers, he would be able to realise his dream of proving himself as a commander in the field. The other allies were having none of it, and after acrimonious discussions, which involved Metternich threatening to withdraw Austria from the coalition, Alexander gave way and Schwarzenberg was placed in overall command.

But he was, as Stewart pointed out, in the unprecedented position of having 'two Emperors and a King superintending and controlling not only movements in agitation, but also operations decided on'.

Alexander had interfered during the battle of Dresden, riding about the battlefield issuing orders to individual units without reference to their commanders or the overall plan, and unity of action was further impaired by pronounced hostility and jealousy between the allied commanders. They were mostly mediocre generals, while their troops, a majority of whom were conscripts, reflected all the national and regional prejudices and enmities of their places of origin.

The coalition itself was under constant strain. 'The general desire, whatever may be said to the contrary, is for peace,' noted Jackson, adding that Hardenberg's spirits 'rise and fall, like the weather-glass under atmospheric changes'. Stewart suspected the Austrians of wanting to make a separate peace, while Metternich remarked that he 'had to keep an eye on the allies no less than on the enemy'. There were moments when the only thing that appeared to unite them was the French language in which they communicated with each other.²⁶

Metternich nevertheless remained optimistic. 'Everything is going well, beyond expectation,' he wrote to Wilhelmina. 'Everything is beautiful, perfect, and God appears to be protecting his cause.' While acknowledging the contribution of the Almighty, he did not fail to point out that it was actually his own doing. His optimism may have stemmed from the fact that she was now returning his love with passion. '*Mon amie*, you have given me everything you can, you have made me drunk with happiness, I love you, I love you a hundred times more than my life – I only live and will only ever live for you,' he wrote from Toeplitz a few days later. And a couple of days after that he admitted that he found it difficult to distinguish between her and the other great object in his thoughts. '*Mon amie* and Europe, Europe and *mon amie*!'²⁷

But when not writing to her, he worked at strengthening the coalition, and on 9 September his efforts bore fruit in the new treaties signed by Austria with Russia and Prussia at Toeplitz. These committed the three powers to continue the war together until a durable peace based on 'a just balance' was achieved. The most significant

to be resolved in Vienna

element was contained in article XI, which bound the contracting parties into a coalition.²⁸

The vagueness of the treaties on all other matters, and particularly on territorial arrangements, was intentional. Back in Prague, Metternich had turned his mind to limiting the scope of the war and laying down some ground rules for the eventual peace settlement. 'As far as the allies are concerned, there can be no question of conquest, and, as a result, there must be a return of France, Austria and Prussia to their ancient frontiers,' he wrote. He went on to draw a distinction between '*conquêtes consommées*', by which he meant areas whose cession had been by treaty, and 'territorial incorporations *via facti*, made without the former possessors' formal renunciation of their rights in favour of the conqueror'. Lands falling into the latter category, in which he included Hanover, the mainland possessions of the King of Sardinia, the possessions of the house of Orange, and so on, should be restituted to their rightful owners without discussion. As for '*conquêtes consommées*', as an example of which he gave the lands the Papacy had been forced to cede to Napoleon under the Treaty of Tolentino in 1797, they were to be regarded 'as lands delivered from French domination by the allied powers, as a common acquisition whose disposal should be reserved to the said powers'. The fate of all other liberated areas was to be left to a congress to be held once peace had been made.²⁹

Metternich did not at this stage wish to confront the issue of how those 'common acquisitions' should be disposed of. The only lands that had been 'delivered' to date were those of the grand duchy of Warsaw, some of which had belonged to Austria and Prussia before Napoleon's incursion into the region. The common understanding was that all three powers would recover their fair share as a result of a deal to be made privately between them, or '*à l'amiable*', to use the phrase contained in the Convention of Reichenbach. But nothing had been formally agreed. The whole area was under Russian occupation, and Metternich had no doubts that Alexander had his own plans for it, which did not take into account those of either Prussia or Austria.

A seed of discord was gradually germinating, but Metternich was not going to challenge Alexander over the matter. First, because since he held what he wanted while the 'common acquisitions' that were meant to fall to Austria and Prussia had not yet been acquired, Alexander was in a stronger position than both of them. Second, because however alarmed he was by the threat of Alexander holding on to most of Poland, Metternich was far more anxious about Alexander's possible intentions for Germany.

Metternich and Francis were against the recreation of the Holy Roman Empire in any form. But neither did they relish the idea of a Prussian hegemony over the German lands or the plans being hatched by Stein for a unified German state. Alexander was showing a worrying interest in German affairs, and appeared to be looking to place himself in a position of dominance there. He neither encouraged nor restrained Stein, and kept his cards close to his chest, sensing, rightly, that his position was growing stronger every day. There was still everything to play for, and the stakes were high.³⁰

look him up



The Play for Germany

A lesser man might have been intimidated by the Tsar, but Metternich's vanity never allowed him to waver in his belief that he could make him do his will, and he too had come to believe that he was fulfilling 'the decrees of Heaven', as he put it in a letter to his daughter Marie. He had also just acquired a valuable ally, the new British ambassador to the Austrian court, who had reached Toeplitz on 2 September.¹

Castlereagh had been increasingly alarmed both by the vagueness of the treaties binding the allies and by their omission of matters, such as the future of the Netherlands and the Iberian peninsula, that Britain deemed essential preconditions of a durable peace. Although he persisted in his view of Russia as the principal in the coalition and a natural ally of Britain, and could not shed his mistrust of Metternich, he had come to realise that Britain would have to re-establish direct contact with Vienna.

This was what Metternich had wanted all along, and had gone to some lengths to obtain. At the same time he had been afraid that the British cabinet might send what Gentz described as 'a stock Englishman', who would know nothing and understand nothing. Castlereagh's envoy was no stock Englishman, but he was hardly very qualified.²

George Gordon, Earl of Aberdeen, was only twenty-eight years old

and had no diplomatic experience. He had a poor command of French, in which all international business was conducted. And he was not a natural negotiator. A classical scholar whose Grand Tour had taken him to Greece and Asia Minor in the early 1800s, he had been unjustly vilified by Byron as an accomplice of Lord Elgin, when his only role had been to recommend that the marbles which the latter had stripped off the Parthenon in Athens and brought to London in 1806 should be acquired for the nation and placed in the British Museum. He was a man of homely tastes and a good landlord, managing to plant over fourteen million trees during his lifetime. He had been deeply in love with his wife Catherine, whose death from tuberculosis in 1812 had left him devastated. He had been drawn into politics by Pitt, whom he admired as much as Castlereagh, and had been offered the embassy to Russia and that to the court of Naples in Sicily, but had declined both as well as the governorship of the Ionian Islands. It was with extreme reluctance that he agreed to undertake this mission, citing, in a letter to his father-in-law the Earl of Abercorn, 'a disinclination' to leave his children 'joined to a feeling approaching contempt for the whole diplomatic profession in general'. But he did not, fortunately, follow his father-in-law's advice that 'An undisguised personal and national haughtiness (with a sweet sauce of studied, unremitting, ceremonious, condescending politeness and attention) is much more advantageous than is supposed or guessed' in an ambassador.

Aberdeen's instructions were vague, and his mission consisted principally of penetrating Metternich's real intentions. His route lay through Sweden, Berlin, Frankfurt an der Oder, Breslau – where he narrowly missed capture by the French – and Prague to Toeplitz. Along the way he had been naïvely delighted by the sight of detachments of Bashkir irregulars following in the wake of the Russian advance. 'They have the Chinese face, and are exactly like the fellows one sees painted on tea-boxes,' he informed his sister-in-law. But his amusement turned to horror when he came upon evidence of their unruliness and brutality. He was similarly dismayed, on reaching

Toeplitz, by the conditions in the overcrowded town, and belatedly realised that he had brought the wrong kit, anticipating that he would be fulfilling the role of an ambassador at court, not at a military headquarters on campaign. 'I never expected to be in such a scrape,' he wrote to Castlereagh on arrival.³

Aberdeen presented his credentials on 5 September, four days before the signature of the Treaties of Toeplitz by Russia, Prussia and Austria. He liked the Emperor Francis, and found himself drawn to Metternich, with whom he discussed opera and collecting works of art. He found Alexander 'agreeable and rather clever, but *shewing off*', and most of his generals despondent and eager to go home. He quickly appreciated that this put Austria in a vulnerable position; he expressed the fear that if Napoleon were to inflict one decisive defeat on it, the coalition would fall apart. And such a defeat appeared more than likely. 'The evils of divided command are everywhere apparent,' he reported to Castlereagh on arrival. 'The vigour of every measure is paralysed, the wisdom of every proposition is almost rendered abortive, by the delay which is necessary to procure the approbation of the different Sovereigns and their advisers.'⁴

Aberdeen did not like Cathcart, who returned the feeling frankly. And although he took an immediate liking to Stewart, he realised that he was not up to his job. He was so appalled by everything he saw and heard that within a few days of his arrival he was actually thinking of resigning his post.⁵

He nevertheless concluded the subsidy treaty which had already been agreed, providing Austria with £1 million, to be paid at a rate of £100,000 per month, and then went on to discuss wider issues with Metternich. As instructed, he expressed his disapproval that Britain's priorities had been ignored in the treaties between the other allies. He also voiced Castlereagh's misgivings about Metternich's policy of trying to detach Murat from Napoleon's camp by the offer of guaranteeing his survival as King of Naples.

The Austrian chancellor explained that the British approach, which was to put all British demands on the table and expect them to be

accepted prior to any negotiation, was unhelpful. He stressed the need for a degree of elasticity and warned against statements or actions that forced people or states into the enemy camp. A good example was what had happened with Denmark.

Until 1807 Denmark had been a prosperous power of the second rank, comprising Norway, Schleswig, Holstein, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, as well as a string of colonies in the West Indies, India and Africa. She had always embraced neutrality where possible, but maintained an alliance with Russia aimed at protecting her from Sweden. In 1807 her King, Frederick VI, had, like Alexander, been forced into alliance with Napoleonic France, which resulted in the bombardment of Copenhagen by the British fleet, the capture or burning of her own fleet, and the subsequent loss of most of her colonies. In 1808–09 she had been obliged to go to war with Sweden in defence of Norway, and while she had managed to hang on to her province, it was her ally Russia that had gained from the affair, by acquiring Finland from Sweden.

When compounded by the necessity of applying Napoleon's Continental System, all this had brought Denmark to the verge of bankruptcy. Inflation reached such levels that Frederick was obliged to put his own gold plate at the disposal of the bank. In 1812 Alexander proposed an alliance to Frederick, but it was hardly an alluring one. He suggested that Denmark hand over Norway to Sweden (which would compensate Sweden for Finland, lost to Russia in 1809). In return, Frederick would, when Napoleon was finally defeated, be given Hamburg, Lübeck, Bremen and the whole North Sea coast of Germany, and as much of Holland as he wished. Although things were not going well for him in Russia, Napoleon was still the master of Europe, and the idea that Alexander would ever find himself in a position to dispose of swathes of Germany and Holland was absurd. At the same time, Frederick and most Danes regarded Norway, which had been united with Denmark for over four centuries, as an essential part of their country.⁶

Frederick was a straightforward, honest man with a keen sense of

duty. It was for these qualities as much as for his unaffected *bonhomie* that he was so much loved by his people. Although his natural sympathies had lain with Britain (he was the son of a princess of the English royal house), and although he had joined the alliance with Napoleon only out of necessity, he was inclined to stand by his ally. But as the magnitude of Napoleon's defeat in Russia became evident at the beginning of 1813, he came under increasing pressure to abandon him. Even his cousin Christian Frederick, who would later rule Denmark as Christian VIII, began to advocate switching alliances and joining Russia, Sweden and Britain.

Frederick's Foreign Minister, Count Niels Rosenkrantz, who had spent a long time in Russia and married a Russian aristocrat, and who had many contacts in Britain, also advocated switching alliances. He sent an envoy to Russian headquarters at Kalisch and made overtures to Britain, offering to join the coalition against Napoleon. His conditions were that Russia guarantee Frederick's continued possession of Norway, and that Britain give back his fleet and some of his colonies, as well as some cash with which to fit out an army.

Alexander encouraged Frederick to turn against Napoleon, but all he offered was a 'deferment' of the decision on Norway. The British cabinet informed Frederick that Norway had already been promised to Sweden, and that he would save everyone a great deal of trouble if he handed it over immediately and joined the allies unconditionally. Metternich did everything he could to make Britain take a more accommodating line, arguing that Denmark would be a useful ally, and should be 'rescued' from its alliance with France, but his arguments fell on deaf ears.⁷

In the face of British and Russian intransigence, Frederick had no choice but to fall back into the arms of the one power which was prepared to stand up for his rights, and on 10 July 1813 he signed a new alliance with Napoleon. Metternich did not give up, and sent a secret envoy to Copenhagen in order to keep a door open for Denmark to join the allies. There was little more he could do while Russia, Sweden and Britain did not support him.

On 3 September Denmark duly declared war on Russia for supporting Sweden's claim to Norway, and on 22 September on Sweden itself. Frederick was motivated in equal measure by his sense of loyalty to Napoleon and by his mistrust of Sweden and Russia. Like many Danes, he suspected that they would not keep to any treaty they signed with him, and were bent on partitioning Denmark and establishing a Russian dependency there (Castlereagh himself would later come to share these fears).⁸

Aberdeen quickly came to see that, viewed from the Continent, some of Britain's attitudes and actions looked a good deal less reasonable than they did from London. One of the first things he realised was that far from being a power to be feared, Austria was in many respects Britain's natural ally. He wrote to Castlereagh explaining this, but the Foreign Secretary remained sceptical and dismissive of Metternich. The conduct of the Tsar also appeared different at close quarters, and did not accord with some of the myths held dear in Downing Street.⁹

Alexander always celebrated the anniversary of his coronation, on 27 September, with pomp, and all those assembled at Toeplitz joined in the festivities. After a service of thanksgiving they rode out to Kulm, where the unfortunate Vandamme had been defeated. There they sat down to a banquet for two hundred in a specially erected pavilion decorated with laurels and ribbons. Back in Toeplitz that evening, a select party assembled in Lord Cathcart's quarters for the ceremony of investing Alexander with the Order of the Garter. 'One could not imagine anything more magnificent and more imposing than this chivalrous ceremony,' recorded one of the Tsar's French aides-de-camp, but Alexander's behaviour 'disgusted every Englishman present', according to Jackson. He arrived late, behaved flip-pantly, and did not for a moment wipe the 'broad grin' from his face. 'The whole thing was treated, in fact, as a sort of farcical entertainment.' The Tsar compounded this by appearing at dinner the following day with the garter around his thigh.¹⁰

Alexander's sense of destiny, fanned and flattered wherever he went

in Bohemia and Germany by the sycophancy of numerous petitioners and the adulation of even more numerous ladies, had turned him into a problematic ally. Treated by many as the Agamemnon of the coalition, he not surprisingly acted more and more on his own initiative and in pursuit of his personal vision.

A case in point was the ambitions he had encouraged in the Crown Prince of Sweden, the former French Marshal Bernadotte. Bernadotte had been placed in command of the allied forces operating in northern Germany, which included a Russian contingent, Walmoden's German volunteers and a Prussian corps under Blücher as well as his own Swedish troops. It was soon noted that he used the Prussians and Russians to fight the French, while keeping his Swedes ready in Pomerania poised for an attack on Denmark. There were also suspicions, unfounded as it happens, that he might make a separate peace with Napoleon. As well as being perceived as an unreliable ally, Bernadotte was also viewed as an unpleasant upstart, or, to quote Hardenberg, 'as a bastard that circumstances had obliged us to legitimise'.¹¹

Alexander, however, did not share these reservations. Back in August 1812, when he had met Bernadotte at Åbo to negotiate their alliance, he had dangled before him the idea that if Napoleon were to be defeated, he, Bernadotte, might replace him as ruler of France. He had brought the matter up more than once since then, and encouraged Bernadotte to prepare the ground.

While Bernadotte adopted the role of king-in-waiting, he did not wish to spoil his chances in the event of a restoration of the exiled Bourbons, so he made contact with them, representing himself as a potential strong arm, a kind of French General Monck. Nor did he neglect to court French revolutionaries who loathed the Emperor in Napoleon and longed for a return to the republic. For their sake he posed as a latter-day Cromwell, and kept up secret contacts with various of the marshals across the battle lines. He released captured French officers on parole, hoping they would provide him with a sympathetic following in France. A natural braggart, he attempted to enhance his appeal by aping Murat in fanciful dressing up, particularly on the battlefield.

Bernadotte's attempts to gain popularity were not crowned with much success. When his forces besieged Stettin, he had tried to win over the commander of the French garrison, but his efforts were met with insults. He was nearly hit by a specifically aimed shell as he inspected his outposts, and sent an angry protest (it was not done to try to kill enemy commanders in such inglorious ways), to which he received the reply that the gunner had spotted a French deserter riding along and had acted in accordance with regulations.

But he was encouraged by the support of Alexander's former tutor, the Swiss philosopher Frédéric César de La Harpe, and by people such as the writer Madame de Staël, who had decided that he would make the ideal ruler for France, a new William of Orange who would introduce constitutional monarchy with a strong hand, and, at her prompting, by Benjamin Constant. 'Remember,' Madame de Staël wrote to Bernadotte from London on 11 October 1813, 'that Europe depends upon *you* for its deliverance.' His head swelled to such a degree that at one stage he actually suggested that he might take the title of Duke of Pomerania, which he had occupied, and as such assume the imperial crown of Germany if for one reason or another it did not go to either Austria or Prussia.¹²

Castlereagh was so alarmed by reports of Bernadotte's waywardness that he instructed Stewart to go to his headquarters to keep an eye on him. Stewart's reports only served to deepen that anxiety. General Pozzo di Borgo, whom Alexander had sent to Bernadotte's headquarters, was shocked by the manner in which he was hedging his bets. When Pozzo had taxed him with this, 'The scene that followed would have warranted calling a doctor,' he reported to Alexander. 'I do not believe that I have ever in my whole life had to make such an effort to remain silent as I listened to so much vulgarity, brutishness and nonsense.'¹³

The reports Castlereagh was receiving from his three envoys at allied headquarters confirmed his worst fears as to the fragile state of the coalition, which raised the possibility that some or all of the allies

might make peace with Napoleon without Britain if it suited them. All his efforts had gone into binding them together with obligations not to do so. On 3 October Aberdeen had signed a treaty with Austria whose only specific clause excluded either party entering into any negotiations, talks, armistices, ceasefires or other suspensions of hostilities without mutual agreement. But that was not good enough for Castlereagh, who feared Metternich's propensity for negotiating.¹⁴

In August Castlereagh had begun work on a project for a comprehensive treaty that would solve the problem once and for all. In a letter to Cathcart on 18 September he wondered whether 'a greater degree of union and consistency may not be given to the Confederacy against France than results from the several Treaties which have been successively signed between the respective Powers'. He attached his 'Project for a Treaty of Alliance Offensive and Defensive against France', which he thenceforth referred to as his 'grand design'.

This set out the principal allied war aims, and suggested inviting powers such as Spain and Portugal into the coalition. It not only proposed to make it illegal for any one of the contracting parties to withdraw from the alliance or enter into any communication with the enemy, but repeated the old recommendation of Czartoryski and Pitt that after the conclusion of peace a perpetual defensive alliance would be maintained for the preservation of that peace.¹⁵

In a second letter to Cathcart written on the same day, Castlereagh instructed him to show the project to Alexander first, stressing that Russia was Britain's natural partner in such matters. He reminded Cathcart that Britain's maritime rights must be kept out of the discussion, as, were they to become part of the general negotiation, the French would sooner or later seize on them with a view to splitting the coalition.¹⁶

Conditions were hardly favourable for any kind of diplomatic transactions, and the chances of pinning the allies down to anything as definite as Castlereagh's 'grand design' were slight as the allied armies took the field and the three sovereigns and their ministers set off in their wake.

Metternich had improvised a mobile chancellery, the *Reiseabteilung*, with a number of assistants and secretaries in carriages followed by wagons with desks and chairs, papers, books, maps and even a printing press. The Russians had a similar outfit, but it had come under strain by this stage.

Alexander's First Minister Admiral Shishkov was being bundled around in a carriage with two secretaries and no escort. 'You cannot imagine how sad I am,' he wrote to his wife. 'I am sick, I am terrified, and to cap it all, there is the weather! It is grey, misty and rainy, and the sky is covered from morning till evening with black and purple clouds, as though it were representing the horrors of war.' One moment he would find himself alone on deserted roads fearing capture by the French, then he would run into a jam as he encountered the Tsar's kitchen wagons or a concentration of troops. He often had to beg for a corner of some hut to sleep in. Count Ioannis Capodistrias, a Russian diplomat attached to the general staff and ordered to deal with all diplomatic problems raised by the campaign, found himself sharing roadside hovels with the Russian commander Barclay de Tolly. While the General worked on operational plans, the diplomat wrote out manifestos and memoranda on the same table.¹⁷

Aberdeen, who had succumbed to 'a severe attack of Cholera morbus', was appalled at the conditions and complained that even in the comparative safety of Toeplitz, which he described as a 'vile hole', they had to pack up everything each morning so as to be ready for a quick getaway in the event of a French attack. He was deeply distressed by the sufferings of the soldiers he saw all around him, but lifted his spirits by admiring the landscape and regaling his correspondents with plentiful dendrological observations.¹⁸

'We cannot help laughing as we go about from the early morning in full dress, with swords, decorations and all our finery,' noted Humboldt in a letter to his wife after a meeting with Metternich, explaining that if they did not wear full uniform at all times they would be pushed into the ditch by marching columns or trampled by the horses of cavalry. Humboldt was remarkably impervious to

the carnage, and enjoyed the opportunity this haphazard existence gave him of indulging his taste for raddled whores and fat lower-class women. Metternich was also surprisingly unaffected by the horrors of war, but complained bitterly of its discomforts. 'What roads, my God!' he wrote to Wilhelmina on 1 November. 'I travelled along with 200 cannon, partly on horseback, partly on foot and partly in a carriage. I left in a carriage because it was pouring with rain. I was spilled, so I gave orders for my horses to follow and mounted the most reliable-looking one, but he collapsed, so I walked, and I fell.' He was always chasing after Alexander, who insisted on playing the soldier rather than remaining at headquarters.¹⁹

And if conditions were unfavourable to the conclusion of the 'grand alliance', the project itself betrayed Castlereagh's ignorance of what was going on in Europe. Alexander, Metternich and Frederick William had far more important things on their minds than the question of whether or not to include Spain or Britain's maritime rights in their treaties. They were more concerned at this juncture with what was happening in the crucial area of Germany, not in the Iberian peninsula or beyond the seas. It was what happened there that might split the coalition.

In the course of September 1813, as it became increasingly likely that Napoleon would be in no position to defend them, most of the rulers within the Rheinbund began to look about nervously. The allied armies were drawing closer, and the stark choice that had faced Frederick William at the beginning of the year would soon be facing them. The prospects were anything but enticing.

Alexander's public image preceded the westward march of the allies, growing as it went, and all but the most pro-French public opinion hailed him from afar as a chivalrous liberator and divinely inspired righter of wrongs. But his advance was also accompanied by news of Stein's activities, by a wave of subversive muttering and plotting amongst students, junior officers and malcontents of one sort or another, and by a shiver of hopeful truculence on the part of dispossessed imperial nobles who saw the possibility of revenge, all of which

made the rulers who had made their accommodation with Napoleon highly apprehensive.

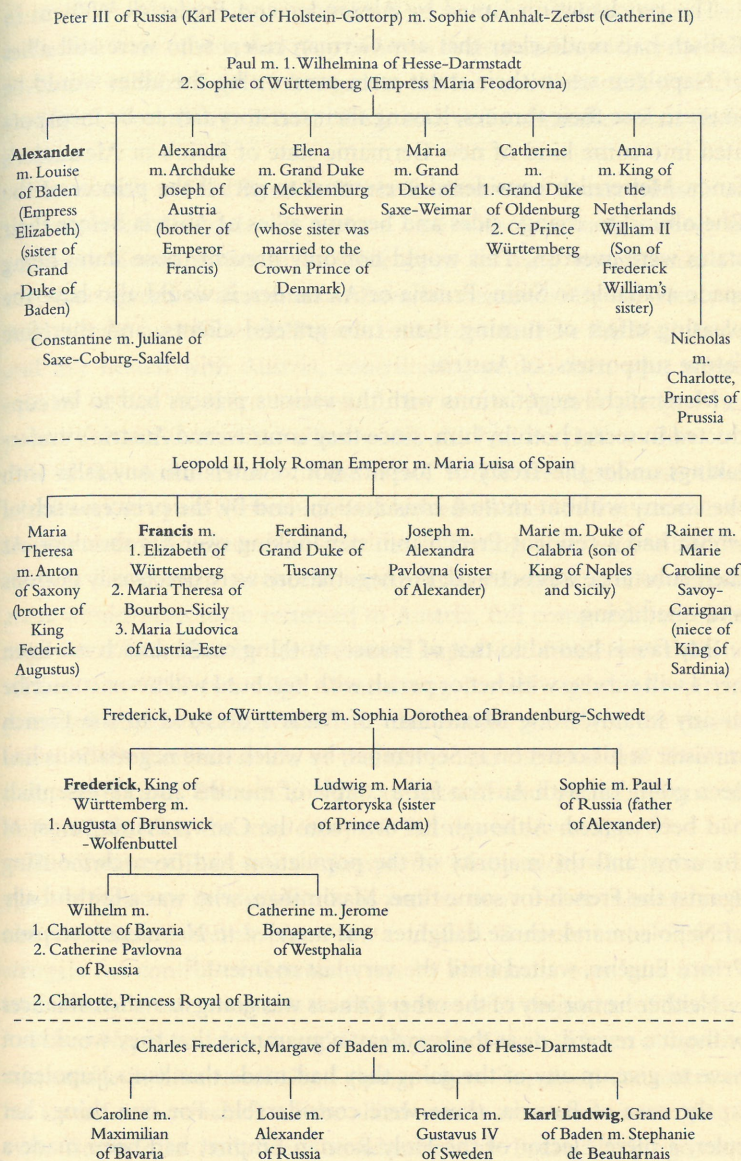
Stein hoped to bring about the establishment of a strong unified German state on the back of a popular uprising fuelled by expectations of social reform as well as national rebirth. His wishful thinking was that a combination of Fichte's lectures, Arndt's poetry and Jahn's gymnastics had produced a nation in the making ready to embrace this dream. His expectations on this score were unrealistic. But his agitation against 'the thirty-six petty despots', as he termed the Rheinbund princes, whom he saw as 'ruinous for the civil liberty and moral fibre of the nation', represented a very real challenge. The convention of 19 March, covering the administration of the occupied territories, had given Stein virtually unlimited powers, and he had established administrative organs answerable only to himself. As soon as he took control of liberated areas of Saxony he doubled the level of requisition imposed by Napoleon, introduced martial law and gave special powers to the police.²⁰

Metternich had begun to view the Rheinbund as a useful structure that could be used to preserve Germany from Stein, which is why he dropped its dissolution from his demands to Napoleon during the Congress of Prague. Hardenberg, who viewed Stein's doings with the same distaste as Metternich did, was nevertheless opposed to the preservation of the Rheinbund. He hoped to scoop as many frightened princes as possible into Prussia's protective embrace, and repeatedly suggested to Metternich that they divide Germany along the river Main into a northern and a southern sphere in which they could impose their respective influence. But Metternich wished to preserve the integrity of Germany, and at the same time feared such an extension of Prussian and, by proxy, Russian power over it. As early as 5 April the Prussian minister at the court of Bavaria had tried to bully that power into joining the Russo-Prussian alliance, threatening dire consequences in the event of refusal. Bavaria's immediate reaction had been to turn to Austria for protection, and Metternich had seized on the chance.²¹

He began to negotiate not only with Bavaria. Through Gentz, he orchestrated a campaign in the German press to oppose Stein and to advocate some kind of federation which could accommodate the existing states and their rulers. Pragmatic as ever, he was even prepared to entertain the possibility of the survival as King of Westphalia of Napoleon's brother Jérôme, solely to keep that area out of Stein's ambit.

Alexander had also yielded to pragmatic considerations. After protests from Count Münster, the plenipotentiary of Britain's Prince Regent for Hanover, he softened the original convention on the administration of liberated territories, thereby clipping Stein's wings a little. It had dawned on him that the national revival Stein hoped for might not only create unstable conditions which would be difficult to control, but might even breed hostility to Russian influence in the future. Such influence could best be exerted through pressure applied discreetly to grateful German princes, and Alexander gradually began to see himself superseding Napoleon as their protector. This seemed particularly apt; through his Holstein-Gottorp grandmother, his Württemberg mother and his Baden wife, many of the German princes were close relatives, and he had begun to receive covert requests for protection. They assumed a certain urgency when two of his relatives, the Dukes of the two Mecklenburgs, who had been the first to desert Napoleon openly, confident that they would be welcomed with open arms, had been treated by Stein as conquered enemies, and had in consequence appealed to Metternich for protection. Stein was becoming a liability to Alexander. While he kept him in place as a useful bogeyman, he excluded him from what was developing into a straightforward scramble between Russia, Prussia and Austria for influence in Germany.

These simplified family trees of the rulers of Russia, Austria, Württemberg and Baden only show the more important direct connections, and can therefore give only a very slight idea of the extraordinary degree to which all the rulers of central and eastern Europe were related by blood.



The proclamation issued by Alexander and Frederick William in Kalisch had made clear that any German rulers who were still allies of Napoleon when their states were overrun by the allies would be likely to lose their thrones, leaving their territory free to be incorporated into some kind of new Germanic state of Stein's or Alexander's fancy. Metternich considered it essential to get all the princes of the Rheinbund to change sides and become allies of Austria before their states were overrun. This would not only prevent those states being made available to Stein, Prussia or Alexander, it would also have the pleasing effect of turning them into grateful clients, and therefore future supporters, of Austria.

Metternich's negotiations with the various princes had to be conducted in secret both by him, since they contravened Austria's undertakings under the Treaty of Toeplitz not to enter into any talks with the enemy without mutual consultation, and by the princes, each of whom had a resident French minister looking over his shoulder. As their substance was betrayal, the negotiations were necessarily devious and unedifying.

'My fate is bound to that of France, nothing could detach me from her; I will survive with her or perish with her, but I will never subscribe to any infamy,' King Maximilian of Bavaria declared to the French minister at his court on 15 September, by which time negotiations had been going on with Austria for a couple of months and all essentials had been agreed. Although his own son the Crown Prince, most of the army and the majority of the population had been clamouring against the French for some time, Maximilian, who was a faithful ally of Napoleon and whose daughter was married to Napoleon's stepson Prince Eugène, waited until the very last moment.²²

Neither he nor any of the other princes was going to switch alliances without a reward, or at the very least a guarantee that they would not have to give up any of the gains they had made thanks to Napoleon. In the case of Bavaria, these were considerable. For one thing, her ruler, a mere Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, had been made a King by Napoleon in 1806. He had benefited from the process of

mediatisation, acquiring a great deal of territory, and had done well out of the wars of 1805 and 1809 between France and Austria, relieving the latter of Salzburg, Berchtesgaden, the Inn and Hausrück districts, the Tyrol, Vorarlberg, Brixen, Trent and various smaller enclaves in Swabia.

Metternich needed Bavaria. If Maximilian were to cast himself on the mercy of Alexander or make a deal with Prussia the whole of southern Germany would be wide open to their interference. He therefore agreed to almost all of Bavaria's demands. By the Treaty of Ried, signed on 8 October, Bavaria undertook to leave the Rheinbund and ally herself with Austria, contributing 36,000 men who would operate under Austrian command. In return, Austria pledged her protection and that of her allies, which she had no right to do.

It is the secret articles of the treaty which are significant. One, which was to cause Metternich and indeed all the other statesmen of Europe many sleepless nights in the following year, guaranteed to Bavaria her current territorial extent and, recognising that certain areas would need to be returned to Austria, full compensation to be negotiated later. But by far the most important article was the one stating that 'The two High Contracting Parties regard one of the principal objects of their efforts in the present war to be the dissolution of the Confederation of the Rhine and the total and absolute independence of Bavaria, so that, unfettered and placed beyond all foreign influence, she may enjoy the fullness of sovereignty.'²³

The Treaty of Ried was a triumph for Metternich, who had managed to enlist an invaluable ally as well as deny one to Alexander. It also overturned Stein's plans for a unified German state. But the struggle for control of Germany was by no means over, and one of its first and greatest victims was King Frederick Augustus of Saxony.

When Napoleon abandoned Dresden the King had been obliged to take refuge in his second city, Leipzig, where Napoleon concentrated his forces, and on which all the allied armies were now converging – even Bernadotte had been browbeaten, by Pozzo di Borgo and Stewart, into joining in the action. The attack opened on 16 October.

The battle for the city, which came to be known as the Battle of the Nations because of the number of nationalities involved, was the largest engagement of the Napoleonic Wars, involving well over half a million men, who were pounded by more than 2,000 pieces of artillery, and lasting three days.

Although heavily outnumbered, Napoleon held his own throughout the first day, delivering some heavy blows at the allies. On the second, the French were gradually obliged to give ground as Blücher appeared in their rear and the full weight of the allied forces was brought to bear. On that day the Saxon contingent in the French army defected and joined the allies, further depleting Napoleon's forces. He lost the initiative, and on the third day his army, which was by then outnumbered by a ratio of two to one, began to lose its cohesion. That evening Napoleon ordered a retreat to the Rhine. Before leaving Leipzig he went to the royal palace and offered Frederick Augustus refuge in France, but the Saxon King declined the offer, stating that he could not abandon his subjects at such a time. Frederick Augustus sent officers to each of the allied monarchs with a request for negotiation, but there was no response.

When Alexander rode into Leipzig he found Bernadotte already in the square before the royal palace, conversing with General Reynier, the French commander of the Saxon army, whom he had just taken prisoner. The King of Saxony was standing at the foot of the stairs with his royal guard. Bernadotte greeted Alexander and offered to present him to Frederick Augustus, but the Tsar snubbed the hapless King and went in to pay his respects to the Queen. A moment later a Russian officer informed the King of Saxony that he was Alexander's prisoner. After some argument as to where the unfortunate Saxon royal couple should be held and by whom, the Prussians took matters into their own hands, and at 4 a.m. on 23 October they were bundled into a carriage and sent under armed escort to captivity in Berlin.²⁴

It was not just that the Saxon King had not declared for the allies right at the beginning, nor that he had gone back to Napoleon's side after Lützen. 'The despoliation of the goodly Frederick Augustus had

become,' as Hardenberg put it, 'a necessity in the interests of making Prussia strong, and therefore in those of Europe.' More precisely, Saxony was the most suitable compensation Alexander could offer Frederick William in return for Prussia's former Polish provinces, which he was intending to hold on to himself.²⁵

The allied victory at Leipzig was decisive. 'I have just returned from the battlefield on which the cause of the world has been won,' Metternich announced in a letter to his wife on 18 October. It was Napoleon's first total defeat, and its scale no less than its psychological impact made it inconceivable that he should ever play a dominant role in Germany again. 'The shame in which he covered us has been washed away by torrents of French blood,' Stein wrote triumphantly to his wife. Humboldt was similarly delighted by his walk over the corpse-strewn battlefield.²⁶

'The deliverance of Europe appears to be at hand,' Aberdeen wrote to Castlereagh. But the letter he wrote to his sister-in-law Maria was more muted in tone. 'For three or four miles the ground is covered with bodies of men and horses, many not dead. Wretches wounded unable to crawl, crying for water amidst heaps of putrefying bodies. Their screams are heard at an immense distance, and still ring in my ears. The living as well as the dead are stripped by the barbarous peasantry, who have not sufficient charity to put the miserable wretches out of their pain. Our victory is most complete. It must be owned that a victory is a fine thing, but one should be at a distance.'²⁷

Two days after the battle, on 20 October, Metternich was honoured by his sovereign with the title of Prince. For a man who believed in hierarchies as deeply as he did, this was gratifying. 'What a range of sensations I have experienced over the past few days!' he wrote to Wilhelmina that evening. 'The world has been reborn under my very eyes; my most daring dreams have come true – my political standing has doubled; I am at the apogee of my career; it will have been accomplished. Yet everything, sensations, calculations, business – the whole world, are eclipsed by a single thought of *mon amie*; the world,

its grandeurs and its miseries are like nothing to me; you, always you – nothing but you!²⁸

After waking him the next morning his valet, Giroux, asked: 'Will Your Serene Highness put on the same suit Your Excellency wore yesterday?' If this did not bring Metternich down to earth, the interview he had with Alexander later that day did.²⁹

The Tsar was also in triumphant mood. The great battle, with its apocalyptic overtones, deepened his conviction that he was fulfilling his destiny as God's instrument for the chastisement of Napoleonic godlessness. He too penned a note to his beloved in his moment of triumph. 'I beg you to believe me when I say that I am, more than ever, yours for life in my heart and my soul, and I would add; *Honi [sic] soit qui mal y pense*,' he wrote to Zinaida Volkonskaya, alluding to his recent decoration with the Garter.³⁰

Metternich's arrangement with Bavaria had not only shattered Stein's plans; it had also profoundly irritated the Tsar, and it hung like a dark cloud over their meeting. Metternich expressed his disapproval at the activities of the Central Administrative Council, which was treating liberated areas like occupied enemy territory, and indeed at their long-term implications. He demanded that Stein be removed from his post. Alexander dismissed his arguments, declaring that he had made a promise to Stein, and that his authority would be compromised if he were obliged to break that promise.

Metternich could achieve little in the circumstances, and this is reflected in the new convention regarding liberated territories signed by the allied powers the following day. The Council was renamed a Central Executive, and although the rights of those princes who had become allies were to be respected, there was considerable ambiguity in the phrasing, which left Stein with virtually unlimited authority throughout the German lands.³¹

Metternich took the setback philosophically. The behaviour of Stein and of the Russian and Prussian soldiery 'liberating' Germany was beginning to produce a reaction at every level of society, and even many of those who had dreamt of this liberation were having second

thoughts. 'I often wonder where our nation is really going,' Humboldt wrote to his wife, lamenting the lack of strong leadership. The poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe was so horrified at the depredations of the supposed liberators in his home city of Weimar that he declared 'The medicine is worse than the illness,' and continued to wear the Légion d'Honneur Napoleon had given him.³²

Metternich played for time. He intensified secret negotiations with the rulers of the southern states, which gratefully accepted Austria's protective embrace. He was confident that he could outmanoeuvre Stein through *faits accomplis*. Above all, he placed his faith in his ability to manipulate Alexander.

'I argued for at least 3 hrs with your fine Emperor, I told him off as I do my son when he has done wrong,' he wrote to Wilhelmina from Weimar on 25 October. 'The result of my strictures will be that for the next week he will not do anything silly, but then he will start again and I shall have to tell him off again. That has been my role for the past 2 months.' The sense of power this gave him was exhilarating. 'I dashed over to Meiningen to arrange a few minor points in the destiny of the world with the Emp. Alexander and then dashed back here to do the same with my master,' he reported to her six days later.³³

The feeling that he was fulfilling some grand destiny led him to ponder that of Napoleon. 'What kind of state must that man be in,' Metternich mused in a letter to Wilhelmina, 'he who once stood at the summit of power, and now sees the levers of such an immense construction shatter in his hands!'³⁴