

The Congress of Vienna (September 1814-June 1815): Background Information

Overarching Questions:

1. What to do with Napoleon?
2. What to do with the rest of Europe (France, Holy Roman Empire, other borders)?

After Napoleon's exile to Elba in April 1814, the Allies were faced with determining the fate of Europe. The major powers that gathered in Vienna had lived through the French Revolution and had seen their territories be overrun by Napoleon. The Congress of Vienna was an almost year-long series of meetings between the four victorious nations (Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia) and defeated France. Hosted by Emperor Francis of Austria, who took little part in its work, the Congress of Vienna was dominated by the following individuals:

- Prince Clemens von Metternich of Austria
- Viscount Castlereagh of Great Britain
- Marquis de Talleyrand of France
- Tsar Alexander I of Russia
- King Frederick William III of Prussia

Along with these five powerful men were thousands of diplomats and agents representing the interests of smaller powers and various associations. The challenge facing these diplomats was to create a stable Europe out of the ruins of the Napoleonic system.

The first guests began arriving in Vienna in late August. In September when Castlereagh, Tsar Alexander and King Frederick William arrived, the host, Emperor Francis, announced their arrival with a cannon salute while huge crowds watched the procession. Over the next nine months, the delegates debated, intrigued, and sometimes threatened one another, all while accompanied by string quartets and lavish banquets and ceremonies. Over three hundred carriages with gilded wheels drawn by horses with their manes plumed with colored ribbons were held in readiness at all times to transport visiting royalty. The glitter of royalty was part of Metternich's plan to make Europe forget about all the revolutionary times and changes they brought and help lead the way towards a return to the "Old Order." (To pay for these excesses, the Emperor imposed a 50% tax increase upon the people of Vienna).

The intrigue of the Congress continued but the atmosphere changed drastically when the news of Napoleon's escape from Elba was received in 1815. At this point all of the leaders put aside their personal differences in a united front against Napoleon (Sweden, Spain and Portugal joined the big 5 powers to fight at Waterloo).

When the Congress met in Paris after Napoleon's second and final defeat, it was tough to keep the agreements in place and to not further punish France for Napoleon's aggressive actions. But Metternich reminded the group that "*a bitter France is a dangerous France.*"

N.B.: The goal of the Congress was not to divide ALL of the land in Europe between the 5 great powers; rather, there would still be many dozens of independent political entities moving forward.

Marquis De Talleyrand

France



Personal Information: History might consider you a master “turncoat” since under the “Old Regime” you had been a bishop and a courtier. As the revolution proceeded, you betrayed the church, but then as Napoleon began to rise you turned your back on the revolution to attach yourself to Napoleon’s coattails. After Napoleon’s defeat and exile to Elba you dedicated yourself to serving the restored Bourbon king, Louis XVIII. Napoleon was not completely charmed by you, however, as he once referred to you as a “*silk stocking filled with mud*.” In your defense, however, it was because of your leadership and political maneuvering that France was admitted to the Congress of Vienna as an equal negotiator, despite being the defeated nation.

Your role at the Congress in the negotiations: You are committed to the principle of *legitimacy*, meaning that you want to restore the traditional (legitimate) rulers to the throne. (For example, Louis XVIII, of the Bourbon dynasty was returned to France’s throne). It was because of your influence in convincing Metternich of the importance of France in the European community that France was invited as a full-fledged member at the Congress of Vienna.

You want to keep France’s losses to a minimum and would like to see France returned to what you consider the natural boundaries (Rhine river and the Alps), even though you realize that as the defeated nation you will probably lose some territory. What you must constantly remind the others about is that weakening France and letting another European nation become too strong will threaten peace and stability in Europe.

One of your important goals is to create an independent Poland and to not let Russia simply take over this entire territory. This will be tough because Russia will demand the territory for all of the destruction that occurred during Napoleon’s invasion. Therefore, you will need support in this goal and you consider Austria and Prussia as most likely to support you in some sort of compromise.

Tsar Alexander I

Russia



Personal Information: As commander of the largest army in the world, you take pride in your Cossack Calvary that rode down the boulevards of Paris in triumph over Napoleon in 1814. You believe in the occult (supernatural), often go to séances, and confide in a mystic, Madame Krudener. At the Congress, you believe that you are there on a great mission ordained by heaven. You think of yourself as an enlightened and just prince ruling over a nation of grateful subjects, but in reality, your Russia was the most autocratic and your subjects had the fewest rights of any nation at the Congress.

You are 37, tall, handsome, and incredibly vain. You believe that you are irresistible to women, and in order to prove this to Metternich (the host), you took one of his former mistresses; though this, you wanted to not only prove yourself equal to Metternich, but you hoped to gain confidential information through her. You begin to hate Metternich, especially after he tried to turn the Prussian Prince against you, so you challenged him to a duel.

While the duel never happened, you do steadfastly ignore him and you insist on your demand of Poland. You skip his receptions and try to avoid him at the Palace where both of your mistresses live; at the palace, you do meet Madame Krudener and your Holy Alliance moves to the front of your mind.

Your role at the Congress in the negotiations: You want to move Russia from the edge of Europe/Asia to be accepted as a truly great power in the European community. You want Poland and Finland as compensation for fighting Napoleon. Your primary goal (some called it a foolish distraction) is to create a Holy Alliance (Russia, Prussia and Austria) to shape foreign policy according to the Jesus' teachings. Prussia and Austria have reservations about your sincerity, but are willing to go along with it (Metternich of Austria refers to it as "*loud sounding nothing*."

King Frederick William III Prussia



Personal Information: You are undoubtedly the least influential of the great representatives at Vienna, largely because you are not very bright and are very timid. You really became the “yes man” for Tsar Alexander of Russia, whom you greatly admired. Another negotiator, the able Karl von Hardenberg, was there with you and did play a role as well, although he suffered from a severe hearing problem at the time of conference that handicapped his performance.

Your role at the Congress in the negotiations: You want to get Saxony, a major German state, but Metternich opposes this (he wants Austria to be the dominant German state, not Prussia). You need support, preferably from Russia, to get Saxony. You also feel that Prussia played a key role in defeating Napoleon, and therefore the principle of compensation should be employed – in other words, Prussia should somehow benefit territorially from France’s defeat.

During the Napoleonic wars you kept Prussia neutral until joining the 3rd coalition in 1805. However, Prussia lost about half of its land (its Polish and western territories), which you are now desperate to regain. You are prepared to join Russia and Austria in the Holy Alliance.



Prince Metternich Austria



Personal Information: You are a vain and arrogant aristocrat who opposes all democratic ideals of the French Revolution. You admire the “Old Regime” institutions of class distinction, a strong monarchy, and huge empires. You fear what the rising revolutionary spirit in the world will do to the ruling Austrian family, the Hapsburgs. Your influence at the Congress of Vienna is so great that some historians have called the period after Napoleon the “Age of Metternich.”

At the Congress, you were the chairman, planner and master of ceremonies. You were admired by the other diplomats for your courtly style. You were often attired in a gold embroidered coat and sash. Although you often let it appear that you were spending time with one of your many mistresses, in actuality you were studying intelligence reports submitted to you by spies who probed wastebaskets and eavesdropped on any conversations they could. Because of a personal disagreement with the Tsar (more info below), only the Tsar did not attend your weekly receptions. When Napoleon escapes, you do finally mend your relationship with the Tsar.

Your role at the Congress in the negotiations: As the key manipulator you are committed to a number of principles: you believe a balance of power in Europe must be maintained. It is critical to Austrian security that Russia and Prussia not expand their influence on Austrian territory. Secondly, like Talleyrand, you believe in legitimacy, that is returning the traditional or legitimate heirs to their thrones. (for example, putting Louis XVIII, a Bourbon king, back on the French throne). Thirdly, you believe in compensation, or rewarding those nations that fought Napoleon.

You are also deeply concerned about Austria’s position. You want Austria to be the dominant state among “the German peoples, consequently you are concerned about Prussia and any expansion of its territory or influence.” You do NOT want to punish and humiliate France because you believe that doing so would lead to a desire for revenge and future wars. So you do not want to strip France of its territory and all its power. Also, you realize that weakening France too much would result in the increased strength of another nation in Europe, and a strong Russia, in particular, would pose a threat to Austrian security and the balance of power. Therefore, along with Castlereagh (Great Britain), you oppose the acquisition of Poland by Russia.

You also oppose the creation of a united Italian nation; in fact, you would like to see Austria acquire some Italian territories.

You are a master at playing countries off one another. In an effort to split up the Prussian-Russian friendship, you sent misinformation Frederick William of Prussia about the Tsar’s plans for Poland. The Tsar challenged you to a duel, but fortunately the duel never happened.

Viscount Castlereagh

Great Britain



Personal Information: You are arrogant, bossy, moody, troubled, and disliked by the public, although you are very bright and capable. At the Congress, your role was critically important as you wanted to maintain peace in Europe and arrange the map so that no great power would feel a need to resort to war. Because of your diplomatic skills you feel that you would be an excellent arbiter between those powers that did have conflicting claims.

Your role at the Congress in the negotiations: One principle that you feel the Congress must follow is to restore a balance of power in Europe. You realize that peace is good for trade, and although you and France under Napoleon have been bitter enemies, France had been your best trade customer. You believe that England, and you in particular, can serve as an arbiter in European disputes since you have no claims to any territory in continental Europe. Also, since you have been at war with France from 1793 during the French Revolution until 1815, you desire territorial compensation from France of some sort (although not in territorial Europe—some French colonies would be nice).

You do believe that the French borders should be decreased and forced back to the ancient boundaries, not the “natural” boundaries that France claims should be hers. And although France should lose territory, you feel strongly that one of the great powers should have mastery in Europe – you realize the danger of a powerful Russia just as much as a powerful France.

You work with Metternich to prevent Russia from getting Poland completely, but you can see that Russia should have some claims to further territorial influence. A primary concern, though, is to be sure that all the Allied powers work together first against Napoleon, and later to restore Europe. You oppose any liberal democratic movements that would threaten to upset the delicate balance of power that you feel is necessary to keep peace in Europe. And finally, representing Britain, you don't lay claim to any territory in Europe, but you feel strongly that Britain should be compensated for their key role in defeating Napoleon by acquiring colonial territory around the world.