

A Rock of Order

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METTERNICH: STRATEGIST AND VISIONARY

by Wolfram Siemann, translated by Daniel Steuer.

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‘I HATE THE WAR and all that it brings: the killing, the pain, the piggishness, the pillaging, the corpses, the amputations, the dead horses – not to forget the rape,’ the Austrian foreign minister Klemens von Metternich told his friend Wilhelmine von Sagan. War’s only positive feature, he observed, was its ability to numb the senses to the immense misery it caused. The congress that drew up the postwar peace settlement at Vienna in 1814-15 began peripatetically, with European envoys and ministers trailing along through the debris of the vying armies as they fought their way towards Paris. And this meant, among other things, that the key decision-makers were confronted in the most visceral way with the scale and human impact of the war. For months they traversed an immense crime scene.

By the middle of February 1814, when Metternich was writing to Sagan, Napoleon had been pushed out of Germany and was retreating westwards across France, pursued by the allied armies of Austria, Russia and Prussia. He no longer possessed the resources to reverse the allied advance, but could still do grave damage to his pursuers. At the Battle of Brienne on 29 January, he mounted a surprise attack on the Prussians, inflicting nearly four thousand casualties; three days later, in heavy drifts of snow, he attacked combined Prussian, Austrian, Russian, Bavarian and Württemberg forces, leaving between six and seven thousand dead and wounded (and absorbing more than five thousand casualties of his own). He struck at the Russians again on 10 February, exacting a further three thousand casualties (and conceding only five hundred). Further French victories followed at Montmirail and Chateau-Thierry, with more than five thousand allied casualties. At the Battle of Vauchamps on 14 February, seven thousand Prussians were killed or wounded. The consequence of a campaign which was only being carried on due to the intransigence of one man, whose ultimate defeat appeared inevitable, these losses must have seemed cruelly pointless. Passing the scene of recent fighting near Troyes in March, Metternich noted that the armies had concerned themselves only with killing; no one had taken the trouble to gather or bury the dead. War, he told Sagan, ‘contaminates everything, even the imagination ... That is why I work for peace.’

Wolfram Siemann’s evocative and deeply researched biography places the quest for peace at the centre of Metternich’s life and thought. Peace did not mean for him the mere absence of war. The vortex of violence that swept across Europe between 1792 and 1815 showed that peace was vulnerable unless it was founded on robust structures and principles, in short on a European order. But this order had to be of a special kind, capable of connecting the arrangements

regulating the interaction between states with factors that ensured a stable social and political order within them.

The young Metternich had watched some of his teachers, amiable figures steeped in the rationalism of the late Enlightenment, align themselves with the violence of the French Revolution. He spent his young adulthood in the borderlands – Strasbourg, Mainz and Brussels – where the European impact of the revolution was initially and most intensely felt. As the revolutionary armies spilled across the borders of France into western Germany, he witnessed the swift destruction of the intricate devolved structures of the old Holy Roman Empire, which his family had served for generations. It was not just a political but a financial disaster: most of the family's Rhenish possessions were lost, leaving them dependent on the income from their Bohemian estate of Königswart. Metternich was an attentive reader of pamphlets and constitutions who understood the power of ideas and of the networks that propagated them. He watched the Jacobin Club in Mainz evolve from a reading circle into an engine of social revolution. And he saw how the revolution had transformed the traditional methods of war. Massive conscription levies flooded the French armies with poorly trained recruits and their commanders adopted open-order tactics designed to deploy their zeal and numerical weight to maximum effect. Troops swarmed across the landscape, taking cover wherever possible and converging for horde attacks on key enemy positions. In an anonymous pamphlet of 1794, Metternich described the consequences: 'Old men and children, willing or unwilling, timid or brave, all fought in the same ranks. Peoples attacked armies and small forces had to resist enormous masses. Thousands fell on one side, and thousands replaced them; hundreds fell on the other, and their places remained empty.'

Deeply impressed by the ambient instability of his youth, Metternich came to see the quest for an all-embracing system of tranquillity as providing the central meaning of his life. When his friend and former employee Alexander von Hübner came to visit the 86-year-old former statesman late in May 1859, only a week before his death, Metternich summed up his own career in politics: 'I was a rock of order' – 'un rocher d'ordre'.

Before order could be established, peace had to be achieved. Between 1792 and 1815, Europe experienced war on an epic scale. During the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802), the French Republic defeated two hostile European coalitions and extended French control to the Rhineland, Italy and the Low Countries. In the Napoleonic Wars that followed (1803-15), the French Empire fought on land and sea against three successive armed coalitions of European powers. In 1805, 1806 and 1809, Napoleon defeated Austrian and Prussian armies at Austerlitz, Jena and Wagram – names that still decorate stations on the Paris Métro. In 1808, he invaded the Iberian peninsula in the hope of forcing Britain into economic isolation. In 1812, he launched a disastrous invasion of Russia. Only in 1813-14 was he pushed out of Germany by the Sixth Coalition, driven back into France and exiled to the island of Elba. Having escaped from exile, returned to France and raised a new army, Napoleon was decisively defeated by the Seventh Coalition in a campaign that culminated at the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815.

By meticulously reconstructing Metternich's role in these events, Siemann dispatches a number of hardy myths from the secondary literature. Metternich was not the chief author of the disastrous Austrian decision to go to war against Napoleon – without allies – in 1809. On the contrary, he repeatedly advised against it, because he understood that such a venture was bound to fail. Metternich knew that only the combined military effort of the Great Powers would suffice to contain Napoleon, and pressed consistently for such a coalition from 1805 onwards. His thinking on these matters was never merely international, Siemann argues, but always European in scope. 'Europe', he told the Prussian foreign minister Karl August von Hardenberg in 1805, should not be

treated as 'a mere object for tactical manoeuvring'. Rather it should be considered as a space 'regulated by international law' to be overseen collaboratively by the Great Powers.

In the spring of 1810, less than a year after the disastrous Austrian defeat at Wagram, the Austrians surprised everybody by suddenly aligning themselves with their former opponent by means of a dynastic match. The 19-year-old Marie Louise, Archduchess of Austria and a great-niece of Marie Antoinette, became Napoleon's second wife. Metternich's central role in the summit negotiations that produced this arrangement has earned him a reputation for spinelessness and lack of principle. But Siemann reads the marriage differently, as a means of tying Napoleon's hands and ensuring Austria's survival. Alliances, as Patricia Weitsman has written, are often not about aggregating capabilities, but about reducing conflict and managing the peace between rivals. The Austrian marriage greatly elevated Metternich's status (he was by now the Austrian ambassador in Paris), strengthened his power to shape events, rendered an attack on Austria less likely and bought the time the country needed to prepare for the next round of the struggle. Unlike his adversary, Metternich was prepared to play a long game.

That there would be a next round was already clear. In 1803, Metternich still wondered whether Napoleon 'might not be persuaded in future to welcome a moderate system of states'. But he soon came to see that this was a vain hope. In some of the most gripping passages in the book, Siemann allows us to see Napoleon through the eyes of Metternich: a 'short and square' man who wore an infantry officer's hat at private audiences and walked about on tiptoes because it made him look taller; a man who combined a childish delight in pomp with an affectation of simplicity, whose sharp mind always cut straight to the chase in conversation, shearing away extraneous chit-chat; a man who could flip from charmer to thug and back again without blinking. The Napoleon whom Metternich came to know resembled a Calabrian crime boss: tender to the point of indulgence with his family, formidably shrewd and utterly pitiless in his dealings with the wider world.

In the course of a face-to-face meeting in Dresden in June 1813, Metternich, by now the Austrian foreign minister, reminded Napoleon of the appalling human cost of his wars. 'In ordinary times,' Metternich observed, 'armies are formed of only a small part of the population. Today it is the whole people that you have called to arms.' This was a matter also of 'future generations', he remarked, in reference to the extreme youth of many in the latest cohort of recruits who had perished on the Russian campaign. Napoleon made an extraordinary reply. 'You are no soldier,' he barked, 'and you do not know what goes on in the soul of a soldier. I was brought up in military camps, I know only the camps, and a man such as I am does not give a fuck about the lives of a million men' – 'un homme comme moi se f(out) de la vie d'un million d'hommes.' Metternich sometimes wondered how Napoleon did not shrink from himself in horror at the pain and injury he had inflicted. Here was the answer. A lasting peace with such a man was not possible. That the Napoleon who turned up to meet Metternich the day after this chilling exchange was the soul of amiability and charm merely confirmed his intuition.

Assembling the European powers into a durable and effective coalition was a task of stupendous complexity. Continental predators had to be inducted into habits of collaboration and mutual trust. Siemann shows how central Metternich was both to clarifying the peace goals of the coalition and to managing its difficult human chemistry. Relations with the British foreign secretary, Lord Castlereagh, were strikingly harmonious – the two men talked endlessly and worked 'like two employees in the same office'. But the Prussians, Austria's rivals in Germany since the era of Frederick II, were suspicious of Metternich. Tsar Alexander I repeatedly refused to obey the allied supreme command, allowed his generals to do whatever they wished and even threatened on occasion to storm out of the coalition altogether, meaning that Metternich had to scurry about smoothing ruffled feathers.

The system of peace management established at Vienna was a world-historical novelty. It assigned privileged status to the most powerful actors and thus created the first durable elite of Great Powers, inaugurating the era of modern summitry that persists today in the form of the G7 and the UN Security Council. The powers gathered at the top table agreed that they ought always to act together when defending or redefining the territorial status quo on the Continent. They established a loose mechanism for consultation and dispute resolution through periodic meetings, at which they revived and elaborated the habits and procedures of collaboration that had evolved within the victorious coalition.

As Kyle Lascuertes pointed out in a Rand Corporation paper of 2017, these features of the 1815 system proved of enduring and exemplary value because they prioritised ‘loose process norms over particularistic norms about substance’: they were about how to do stuff, not about what should be done. The ‘system’ that resulted was embedded in a much broader and more encompassing range of accepted norms than was the case for earlier treaties of comparable moment, such as Westphalia (1648) or Utrecht (1713). The habits of consultation they inaugurated continued to bear fruit, as Beatrice de Graaf has observed, in an emergent European ‘security culture’ marked by a preference for multilateral problem-solving through international congresses, ministerial conferences and international commissions. These achievements were not Metternich’s alone – as Glenda Sluga has shown, they were shaped by contributions from many sources – but they did broadly embody the priorities he had argued for during the final push against Napoleon.

While the peacekeeping aspects of the post-Vienna order continue to attract admiration, the same is not true of the intensified surveillance and repression of dissenting political networks that was another of its key characteristics. The Metternich of the coalition campaigns and the peacemaking process is a sympathetic and admirable figure. The Metternich of the years after 1815 is a different matter. In these decades, Europe’s peacemaker became Europe’s policeman. After the spectacular terrorist murder of the dramatist August von Kotzebue by the mentally deranged radical student Karl Sand in 1819, Metternich coordinated a crackdown on liberal and radical networks, establishing a new transterritorial surveillance agency for the identification and arrest of political suspects; tightening press controls; opening suspects’ letters; and shutting down patriot networks centred on student fraternities and gymnastic clubs. There was another crackdown in the early 1830s, after the July Revolution in Paris triggered revolts in various German and Italian cities. Metternich oversaw armed Austrian interventions to suppress uprisings in Lombardy and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (he had also supported the French intervention to put down the Spanish liberal government in 1823).

Siemann mounts a determined defence of these measures. He vehemently rejects the notion of a ‘Metternich system’ – the various repressive apparatuses constructed after 1815 were not imposed by Metternich, he argues, but reflected the security consensus prevailing among the powers. Particularly interesting are his reflections on Britain, which was strongly supportive of the campaigns against dissident groups and widely admired by Continental governments for the intensity and effectiveness of its policing, especially in Ireland, where the British maintained a paramilitary constabulary that was the envy of the Prussians. On these and many other points, Siemann brilliantly refreshes our understanding of Metternich and his era.

He speaks of ‘walking’ with Metternich through the history of Europe, and it gradually becomes clear that in the course of all this walking, the biographer has become a friend. Siemann likes and admires Metternich; he sees in him a kindred temperament. This is not a bad thing: if we want to understand the motivational structure underlying someone’s behaviour, a friend may be the best person to ask. And readers of this book will find much to like in Siemann’s Metternich: the supple, three-dimensional thinking, the insistence on stepping back from events to examine them in the

largest possible frame, the loyalty to teachers and old friends, the gallantry and ironic civility of a *seigneur* of the late Enlightenment. Metternich was an intellectual in politics of a kind now rare in the modern world (his disciple Henry Kissinger and the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt are possible comparators). And Siemann is as good on his subject's emotional life as on his intellectual life. In one of the most compelling chapters, he undertakes a fascinating, almost ethnographical mapping of Metternich's experience of filial, parental, marital and sexual love. We learn, among many other things, that Metternich's attachments to women were varied, numerous and full of conversations that helped him to think.

Only in the final, post-1815 section of the book does the biographer's urge to defend his subject have a complexity-flattening effect. The patriotic movements of that era are denounced as a toxic form of politics that fed on backwardness and encouraged violence and intolerance (this is not untrue, but neither is it the whole truth). The swivel-eyed teutomane Karl Sand is invoked as a synecdoche for the vast landscape of political dissent in Restoration Europe. But what of the liberal and constitutional movements that stirred across the Continent between 1815 and 1848? Siemann dismisses the 1820 Spanish Revolution – launched in the name of the Cádiz Constitution of 1812 – as an opportunist 'coup' whose suppression in 1823 should give no cause for regret. He cites approvingly Metternich's observation that the constitution was 'the work of caprice or other wild delusion'.

But the Cádiz Constitution represents one of the shining hours of modern constitutional history, a framing law painstakingly pieced together over many months by delegates from across the Iberian world in a church at the heart of a besieged city while cannon balls rained down from French gun batteries. It affirmed freedom of the press, the sovereignty of the Spanish nation (i.e. not the monarchy), the abolition of feudal land tenures, the curtailment of clerical and noble privilege, freedom of enterprise, the separation of powers and parliamentary government within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. The franchise was male and universal but not direct: a complex indirect electoral mechanism geared the system against voters from poorer social strata. Its most radical and distinctive feature was the absence of an upper chamber. This was no work of caprice.

Metternich was flexible and pragmatic in international affairs: he accepted and eventually supported the establishment of a Greek nation-state forged by revolution on formerly Ottoman soil. He acquiesced in the emergence of the Belgian nation-state after the revolutions of 1830 and opposed an international intervention against it. But where he wielded more direct control – the German states, Italy and his own Austrian Empire – he found it increasingly difficult to distinguish between radicals and reformers. 'Liberalism is doing fine,' he quipped in a letter to Dorothea, Princess Lieven. 'It is raining Sands.' But Karl Sand wasn't a liberal; he was a mentally unstable fanatic who hankered after the exaltation he had experienced fighting in the wars against Napoleon and was psychically unable to resituate himself in the present. Perhaps something similar happened to Metternich. Whereas the years 1813-15 occupy a third of his published memoirs, composed in the 1850s from notes and old diaries, the 33 years from 1815 to 1848 take up less than 10 per cent of the text. As Siemann himself puts it: Metternich 'never managed to shake off the past when designing the future'.

In a sympathetic reflection on Metternich's political thought, Kissinger identified what he called 'the conservative dilemma'. Conservatism is the fruit of instability, Kissinger wrote, because in a society that is still cohesive, 'it would occur to no one to be a conservative.' It thus falls to conservatives to defend, in times of change, what had once been taken for granted. And – here is the rub – 'the act of defence introduces rigidity.' The deeper the fissure becomes between the defenders of order and the partisans of change, the greater the 'temptation to dogmatism' until, at some point, no further communication is possible between the contenders, because they no

longer speak the same language. 'Stability and reform, liberty and authority, come to appear as antithetical, and political contests turn doctrinal instead of empirical.'

For all his undeniable gifts, Metternich is a textbook case of this rigidifying effect. His observation at the end of his life that he had always been a 'rock of order' captures his own sense of his immobility, not to mention isolation, in a world where everything was in motion. The brilliance he had shown in managing the forces contending for control of the Continent deserted him when he was faced by the forces awakening in European society. At the conference he convened in 1834 to discuss enhanced policing measures, Metternich sketched a grim panorama: 'Out of the storms of our time, a party has emerged whose boldness has escalated to the point of arrogance. If a rescuing dam is not built soon to contain the streaming flood, then we could soon see even the shadow of monarchical power dissolve.' In 1848, the metaphorical dam would break. For Otto von Bismarck, the dominant statesman of post-revolutionary Central Europe and in some ways Metternich's later 19th-century Prussian analogue, it would no longer be a question of building dams, but of steering one's boat on the broad and turbulent stream of history.
