

PAX POST-NAPOLEONICA: RISE AND FALL OF RELATIVELY PEACEFUL PERIOD IN EUROPE

Shohjahon Olimjon o'g'li Kukiboyev

University of World Economy and Diplomacy
International Relations

Abstract: This article examines the Pax Post-Napoleonica, the period of relative stability in Europe from Napoleon's first overthrow in 1814 to the start of the First World War in 1914. It argues that the Congress of Vienna and the Concert of Europe created a new way of managing peace through balance of power and regular consultation. However, rising nationalism, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, and growing great-power rivalry slowly weakened this system. By tracing key events from 1814 to 1914, the article shows how the post-Napoleonic peace was built, challenged, and finally brought to an end.

Key terms: Congress of Vienna, Concert of Europe, Eastern Question, nationalism, balance of power.

INTRODUCTION

The fall of Napoleon in 1814 was a turning point for Europe. After more than twenty years of almost constant warfare, European leaders wanted a way to prevent another major conflict. When the great powers met at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815, they did more than redraw borders. They tried to build a system that could keep peace through cooperation, regular communication, and a careful balance of power. Many historians, such as Paul W. Schroeder in *The Transformation of European Politics* (1994)¹, describe this settlement as one of the most successful diplomatic efforts in modern history.

This new approach later became known as the Concert of Europe. It was not a formal organization but a habit of consultation. Whenever a crisis appeared, the major powers—Britain, Austria, Russia, Prussia, and later France—talked, negotiated, and tried to settle issues together. Henry Kissinger, in *Diplomacy* (1994)², argues that this spirit of cooperation helped Europe avoid another continent-wide war for decades.

However, the period after 1815 was not peaceful in every sense. Inside many states, people demanded national unity, constitutional rights, or independence. The

¹ Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics* (1994)

² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994)

revolutions of 1830 and 1848 showed that society was changing faster than the rulers. At the same time, old empires such as the Ottoman Empire were getting weaker. This created the Eastern Question, a long-term struggle among the great powers over how to deal with Ottoman decline. These tensions put pressure on the Concert system and slowly reduced its ability to manage conflicts.

For these reasons, this article uses the term “Pax Post-Napoleonica” to describe the period from Napoleon’s overthrow in 1814 to the start of the First World War in 1914. It was a time when Europe enjoyed fewer large wars than before, but the peace was fragile. By following key events from 1814 to 1914, we can understand how this relatively stable era began, how it worked, and how it eventually collapsed.

Methods

This article uses a qualitative historical approach and uses well-established secondary sources. By taking the major events between 1814 and 1914 as milestones, it follows the interpretations of some top historians, Paul W. Schroeder, Henry Kissinger, A. J. P. Taylor, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Clark, and Margaret MacMillan, who are the authors of modern history. Their contributions shine quite differently, yet at the same time, they are very complementary, as they deal with the same topics: diplomacy, nationalism, and the balance of power. The paper is organized in a chronological way, which is very helpful for observing the development, alteration, and the ultimate collapse of the post-Napoleonic peace. Besides that, these concepts among others, like the Concert of Europe and the Eastern Question, are presented and elucidated through these academic interpretations. The chosen method seeks to provide a lucid narrative backed not by archival research, but by the academic perspectives deemed trustworthy.

Pax Post-Napoleonica

Napoleon’s initial upending in 1814 marked the conclusion of a prolonged period of hostilities in Europe. All the powers, after a long time of fighting and changing alliances, mainly decided that the continent required a new order to avoid another devastating war. The craving for stability gave birth to the Congress of Vienna, which took place in the years 1814-1815. The diplomats at Vienna—Metternich of Austria, Castlereagh of Britain, and Alexander I of Russia—worked hand in hand to get back the equilibrium of power. The very map they came up with was such that no one nation could ever be the mightiest in the continent any longer. Paul W. Schroeder states that the settlement was “a major restructuring of Europe” which aimed at making large scale war less likely.³

³ Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics*, 1994

To the leaders' advantage, they also presented a new method of crisis management: consorting among the big powers' regularly. Eventually this practice turned into what was later called the Concert of Europe by scholars. It did not take the shape of a formal league but was more like a pact to consult before resorting to violence. In the eyes of Henry Kissinger, the Concert was a system wherein the guiding force behind diplomacy was the common interest and not the military power.⁴ The great powers met frequently in the first decades following 1815. They addressed the insurrections in Italy and Spain, the liberty movements in Latin America, and the issues in the central Europe. Even though there were differences in opinions, still, the practice of communication played an important role in keeping such events from escalating to major wars. But the tranquility had its bounds. A great number of people were longing for national self-determination or political reform. The revolutions of 1830 and 1848 proved that the old rulers could not just silence these demands. Historian Eric Hobsbawm explains that the revolutions of 1848 were a "wave of social and national movements" that creed challenges for the legitimacy of the Vienna system.⁵ Even though the great powers managed to restore order after 1848, their cooperation became weaker. The shared conservative ideology that once united the states was at that time starting to fade.

The Ottoman Empire's gradual decline was more apparent during the same period. This led to the diplomatic challenge called the Eastern Question. The question was straightforward yet very risky: what would be the fate of Ottoman territories as the empire lost power? Each of the great powers had its own view. Russia was looking forward to pushing its borders southward. Britain aimed at safeguarding its trade routes and making sure that Russia did not take over the eastern basin of the Mediterranean. Austria was anxious about the whole of the Balkans, where many nationalities were already hard to govern. M. S. Anderson, a historian, mentions that the Eastern Question was one of the major, if not the most, persistent challenges to the very existence of European stability.⁶

The tensions culminated in the Crimean War (1853–1856). The Ottoman Empire was supported by Britain and France against Russia. This was the first major European war since the times of Napoleon. It indicated that the Concert of Powers was not capable of maintaining peace all the time. Furthermore, the war caused a rift between Russia and the western powers. The period of cooperation was marked with difficulty after Crimea. A majority of the scholars agree that this war was the first major signal of the

⁴ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 1994

⁵ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 1962

⁶ Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, 1966

weakening of the Pax Post-Napoleonica (Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, 1954).

The subsequent decades witnessed even more radical transformations. In both Italy and Germany, nationalistic leaders strove to combine their respective territories. The Italian wars of unification (1859–1861) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) eventually altered the geography of Europe. The emergence of a united Germany under Prussian guidance literally changed the power equation. Historian Christopher Clark argues that the newly formed German Empire was both powerful and greedy, thus, changing the diplomatic scenario.⁷ The erstwhile Vienna order that was based on a harmonious balance could not function the same way any longer.

New rivalries surfaced in the late 19th century. The process of industrialization led to the increase in the number of soldiers in armies and the production of more lethal weapons. The competition for colonies went on in Africa and Asia among the major European powers. The Balkans, which were still politically divided and unstable, turned into the site of conflict. The Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 unmasked the delicacy of the situation. Austria-Hungary and Russia supported opposite camps, which amplified the already existing mistrust. Margaret MacMillan states that these crises brought Europe to the threshold of a war that would change its map.⁸

By 1914, Europe was divided into two major alliance systems: the Triple Entente (France, Russia, Britain) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy). The old Concert idea of acting together had disappeared. When the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand occurred in June 1914, diplomats failed to stop the chain reaction. Within weeks, the First World War began. The system built after 1815 had finally collapsed.

In the year 1914, Europe was basically split into two prominent alliance blocs—the Triple Entente (composed of France, Russia, and Britain) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy). The previously existing idea of the Concert acting jointly had vanished. The murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand which happened in June 1914 went unnoticed by the diplomats who were supposed to contain the reaction. Within a few weeks, World War I broke out. The system created after 1815 had finally fallen apart.

The period between Napoleon's downfall and World War I saw Europe going through a long period of limited great-power wars. Nevertheless, this stability was the result of cooperation that was already undercut gradually. Nationalism, imperial rivalry, shifting

⁷ Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 2006

⁸ MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace*, 2013

power balances, and the Eastern Question were the factors that the post-Napoleonic peace was depending upon and they gradually destroyed the foundations. The consequence was the spectacular end of the Pax Post-Napoleonica in 1914.

Conclusion

During the 1814-1914 period, we can observe how Europe attempted to preserve and finally lost the long-term stability that had been established after the downfall of Napoleon. The Pax Post-Napoleonica was not a perfect but it was a genuine effort to lessen the number of conflicts through the cooperation of the parties involved. At the Congress of Vienna, the major powers acknowledged that the continent should never again be ruled by one single country. Their remedy was the balance of power plus the practice of regular consultations. The latter was indeed a great factor in keeping Europe away from another continent-wide war for almost a century. Historians like Paul W. Schroeder and Henry Kissinger have both claimed that the system established after 1815 was one of the most successful diplomatic frameworks in modern history.

Nevertheless, the system was weak from the very beginning. It relied on the great powers sharing conservative values, and these eventually disappeared as societies underwent changes. The revolutions of 1830 and 1848 were indicators that the people were asking for national unity, political rights, and constitutional government. These demands posed a challenge to the old perception that only the kings could maintain order. Meanwhile, the weakening of the Ottoman Empire resulted in the Eastern Question, which made the great powers compete for influence rather than cooperate. The Crimean War was a clear indication of how the Concert of Europe had lost the strength necessary to oversee the managing of these rivalries.

Starting from the middle of the nineteenth century, the whole of Europe went through a major transformation due to the emergence of new powers. The integration of Italy and Germany not only created new nations but also altered the distribution of power in Europe. The industrialization revolution led to the advancement of military, which involved fire and armies becoming more intricate plus destructive. The rivalry for colonies, the competition for markets, and the ambitions of nationalists made it practically impossible for the countries to work together. By the end of the 1900s, Europe had traversed the path from cooperation through diplomacy to division characterized by military pacts and mistrust.

The incidents of 1914 validated this breakdown. During the crisis in the Balkans, the major powers did not behave any longer like the early Concert by exhibiting a cautious and collective mentality; rather, they reverted to acting through rival alliances, each one getting ready for a fight. Thus, the eruption of the Great War was not, in fact, a

sudden occurrence but rather the last phase of a prolonged decline. Grasping the rise and fall of the centuries helps to illustrate how, even though peace can last for decades, it can still come to an end once the foundations are not strong enough. The Pax Post-Napoleonica was, indeed, a milestone in world history but it could not withstand the onslaught of the forces of nationalism, imperialism, and the changing interests of states that were transforming Europe by 1914.

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