

The Congress of Vienna

What was the Congress System? To what extent did it demonstrate that the great powers share common aims and principles between 1815-1822?

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The Congress System, created in 1815, was a series of meetings between the great powers of Europe following the reign of Napoleon. The four main countries of this system were Austria, Prussia, Russia and Britain, also known as the Quadruple Alliance. Also called the Concert of Europe, the Congress System was set to enforce the ideas and principles of the Congress of Vienna. However, the failure of this system was that these great powers were unable to come to a single goal for the benefit of Europe. Instead they focused too much upon their own aims.

“Its (the Congress of Vienna) purpose was to redraw the continent's political map after the defeat of Napoleonic France the previous spring. The discussions continued despite the ex-Emperor Napoleon I's return from exile and resumption of power in France in March of 1815.”¹

The Congress System participated in four other Congresses apart from Vienna, Aix-la-Chapelle, Tropeau, Laibach and Verona. All of these congresses were used to suppress revolts and revolutionary acts upon the liberals of Europe. Apart from suppressing, the Congress System had many goals, like the preservation of conservatism across Europe. Following the Napoleonic Era, the containment of France was crucial. France was to be contained to avoid another revolution and most importantly another Napoleon. The powers did not want to fight any more wars within their own continent.

Another large goal of the Congress System was to create a balance of power between Europe's strong leaders so that no one country could become too strong and too powerful to override any other countries. Compensation was given to those major powers who fought the wars against Napoleon in forms of land such as smaller states. This increased the level of nationalism for the smaller countries who were now not only influenced by liberalism brought by Napoleon, but they were going to be controlled by foreign countries giving them all the more reason to revolt. Another goal involving power and conservatism was legitimacy. Talleyrand believed that all monarchs were to be restored to their rightful thrones and they were to rule by absolute power.

1 Hannah A. Straus, The Attitude of the Congress of Vienna Toward Nationalism, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1949) Pg. 194

Each of these goals within the Congress System were agreed to by all of the great powers. However, each had separate goals for the benefit of their own country. Thoughts of political power and security strongly influenced their behavior. In general they had a great desire for stability within their domestic and foreign affairs, hope for peace and European cooperation. However, their agreements and common goals only extended so far. They all agreed to follow the aims of the Congress of Vienna but they did not agree for the same reasons.

Lord Castlereagh representing Britain, believed strongly in the protection of Europe by creating a balance of power so that no single nation could contemplate a successful war. Britain had little desire for territory in the Continent.

“Castlereagh wished to safeguard the particular security of Great Britain by defending the independence of the Low Countries against any threat of renewed French aggression.”²

Czar Alexander I of Russia had wanted to place all of Poland, already occupied by his soldiers, under his rule. He believed he was doing this for the good of the Poles, to unite their country. He also supported Prussia's claims on land in Saxony, to compensate for the Polish provinces he wanted.

"The three principle objects of the Emperor Alexander were: 1st, to take possession for ever of the whole, or almost the whole, of the Duchy of Warsaw [Poland]... 2nd, to prevent Austria from profiting too much by the advantages of her new position; 3rd, to enrich Prussia as much as possible... to make her a useful and powerful ally."³

Having recently been defeated by Napoleon, Prussia was weak compared to the other big powers (Austria, Britain, and Russia). Its main goal was to restore its population of 1805 by acquiring new land, preferably in the German country of Saxony.

"Prussia only brought to the Congress an immoderate desire for extending her possessions at the expense of all the world, and without regard to any principle of justice or even decency."⁴

Austria, with the voice of Metternich, believed all nationalistic movements and “jacobin ideas”

2 Harold Nicolson, The Congress of Vienna, (London, Constable & CO LTD, 1946) Pg. 58

3 Sir Charles Webster, The Congress of Vienna, (London, Thames and Hudson, 1963) Pg. 230

4 M.G. Pallain, The Correspondence of Prince Talleyrand and King Louis XVIII, (New York, Da Capo Press, 1973) Pg.459

were to be suppressed for they could lead to revolutionary acts. Austria held great power within the Congress and took full advantage of this role.

“Austria's determination to suppress nationalism was so excessive that it led to an inflexible autocratic conservatism which is especially evident in the treaties concluded with the German and Italian states.”⁵

The great powers shared the basic principles of the Congress System but they only shared these ideas for themselves, to benefit their own countries, not all of Europe. One large problem was Britain's disagreement with suppressing liberalism. Britain did not agree with foreign countries interfering with the revolutions within one country. They would only interfere if foreign countries attacked another country. This was a large problem for Britain and eventually resulted in them leaving the Congress, hurting the alliance. This is just an example of some of the differences between the powers of the Congress. Their agreements were limited.

The Congress System was successful in the sense that it was able to suppress many of the revolts attempting to start a revolution. However, what they failed to realize is that no matter how much they try to suppress or prevent revolutions, they cannot try to stop something the people wanted and fought for. There was no common goal. Each country had their own goal that did not result in success for all of Europe. If these powers were able to work together and think together not just their own country, the Congress System may have been able to realize what was truly best for their people and for all of Europe.

5 Sir Charles Webster, The Congress of Vienna, (London, Thames and Hudson, 1963) Pg.116.

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