

“The conflicting interests of the Great Powers made its failure inevitable.”
Discuss this verdict on the Congress System.

In this essay, I'm going to assess to what extent was the conflicting interests between Austria, Russia, Britain, France and Prussia responsible for the Congress System's failure, as the above statement suggests. To do this I will have to analyse how did these contradictory interests lead to the collapse of the System and analyse the other important factors such as: the lack of a common enemy, the change in staff, the lack of set aims and objectives and the lack of organization and look at very important events that started at 1818, where the Great European powers met in a sequence of congresses to discuss some specific affairs. But by the end of 1822, the real purpose of the Congress System was still not understood.

Specific affairs such as the rising revolutions between those 4 years and what was to be done about France led to the preoccupation of the Great Powers, which decided to meet in a sequence of congresses. The first congress, called Aix-la-Chapelle dealt with the France issue and was organized in 1818, where the allies reviewed their dealings with France and even though France was kept under invigilation in case an intervention was necessary, they decided to create to include it in the major powers forming a Quintuple alliance. This congress can be said to be the first example of conflicting interests when the Major Powers tried to agree on some issues that would be essential to maintain international peace and Britain opposes most of these decisions, therefore forbidding them to become actions. This was all because Britain's Prime Minister, Castlereagh, opposed the idea of a union of monarchs to act against revolutions, failed to permit on the creation of an international army and resisted on the implementation of a disarmament policy. The lack of British incentive for crucial decisions that surely influenced on the System's collapse is one good example of how conflicting interests hindered the Congress System's actions.

The second congress, known as the Congress of Troppau, was held in Dec. 1820, is another clear illustration of how the European Powers weren't able at all to agree on important issues because of their own interests. The great powers did not manage to agree on a conclusion to what should be done with the Spain and Naples issue; this was because each leader had ideas that would benefit their own country, taking advantage of their

position and influence. Metternich was totally against the idea of having to cope with a Franco-Russian army, formed with the aim of crushing the Spanish Revolution and used his manipulative skills to persuade the Tsar that Spain was so important and wasn't a critical concern. He believed that there was a Revolutionary plot led by the French, and was able to convince the Tsar also. Even further, he also managed to gain a military partner- Metternich's extremely effective manipulating skills convinced the tsar to discard his liberal ideals and join the strategy of banning revolutions, and talking of radicalism as a 'satanic genius' to stabilise a 'reign of evil' - as Stephen J Lee agrees in his book, *Aspects of European History 1798 – 1980*. This point was when once again the conflicting interests once again arose and the Troppau protocol (aimed to form a united front against revolutions) wasn't signed by France and Britain, who were against this policy. The other main powers started a policy of believing that all of the rebellions were simply fanatic movements instead of understanding that the states were asking for reforms. In LCB Seamen's book, *From Vienna to Versailles*, the historian explains that what Metternich did was that he took two of his possible enemies and joined into an anti-revolutionary alliance so that war was barred, and the Troppau protocol was only a formality of this act. So, by the end of 1822, Metternich was in control of most of the Italian Peninsula and stopping the spread of the Revolutions. However, the revolutions that Metternich did not manage to put down only increased. Using the Tsar in his favour and putting him to act once again against his ideals (as the Russians and Greeks were religiously bonded), Metternich manages to please The Turkey Sultan by avoiding the Russian intervention in the Greek revolt. With all that, as a bonus, Metternich is also able to hinder British (as he had indirect British assistance and the British were quite happy with Metternich's measures) and Russian expansion. Again, the difficulty between the main powers to comprehend the concepts of the happening events was a big obstacle for their common harmony, and the Congress System's fall down was partially due to Metternich's abilities and triumph.

By 1823, Metternich, that was too worried in manipulating other leaders, was incapable of putting down some revolutions and these ones took great proportions. So France seeks this opportunity to prove its independence and invades Spain outside the congress system and stops the revolution. France was also improving diplomatic relations with Russia as they had 2 common enemies; Austria and Britain. In the same year,

Castlereagh dies suddenly and is replaced by Canning- whose policy was to not get involved in European dealings. In 1827, Tsar Alexander dies and is replaced by Nicholas- whose policy was totally against Metternich and he wanted to bring back together Greece and Russia in their religious union. This leads to an invasion in 1827 where a new sovereign Greece is formed. This all proves that if the European Powers really had the intention of securing international harmony and if they had acted accordingly, the Congress System maybe would have been triumphant. But for me to be able to make this affirmation I still have to understand which where the other deficiencies of the Congress System.

Following the order given at the introduction, the next issue to be analyzed is the lack of a common enemy. When Napoleon was in power, the main powers had to unite, as it was the only way they could win their common enemy. But after they had already accomplished their victory over Napoleon and he was exiled in Elba, they had no other common enemies or aims, making it easier for individuality to rise. Russia was inspired to continuing to expand its empire and Austria wanted to stop this at any cost. France wanted to recuperate its European domination while Britain wanted to regain its economy and the profits from its colonies. All of them were very coherent, if you compare their actions at the Congress System and their independent aims, but this takes us back to the conflicting interests problem.

The change in staff was another factor that changed drastically the direction of the events in the Congress System. Tsar Alexander and Castlereagh died and were replaced by Tsar Nicholas I and George Canning respectively. Canning, unlike Castlereagh despised Metternich, and he even called him the greatest rogue and liar the civilised world had seen. This was why the alliance between Austria and Britain was doomed, and would never be carried out by Canning the same way it was by Castlereagh. But this alliance wasn't the only thing that was doomed; Canning had no intent of progressing with the Congress System and as the years passed, Britain was moving far away from its earliest partners. The new Tsar was also relatively absent from the new events and he had no active participation in the new Quadruple alliance or in its activities. The change in staff (even if it was involuntary) promoted an extreme change in the interaction between the major powers and in the

original leader's aims. The new leaders had no interests upon the congress system, making it even weaker.

Another severe weakness of the congress system was its lack of aims and the only way to understand this is to retrospect the birth of the system. The Holy Alliance (designed by Tsar Alexander) intended to promote the spread of peace, justice and mainly of the Catholic religion. The Quadruple Alliance (designed by Castlereagh), however, was mainly based on economical affluence and controlling France's steps. By comparing the purposes for each alliance we can soon perceive that Castlereagh (Britain) and Tsar Alexander (Russia) has different causes for the Congress System, and lacked a actual aim-and the few they had were diverging.

The lack of organisation in the Congress System is another extremely important reason for its failure. It is really easy to spot it, as the congress did not have any kind of foundation document to make the Quintuple Alliance work together and no set of signatures. There were no regular meetings, the congress only occurred when it was necessary. To the actual fact, the congresses were simply meetings of the leaders of the European powers to discuss the problems being faced. This lack of organization decreases the efficiency of the Congress System dramatically as actions took longer to be taken and its reliability was smaller as no signatures and documents were actually produced.

To answer if a system was successful or not, we need to know if it was able to accomplish it's aims. However, the Congress System did not have any aim to achieve, proving its disorganization and irrelevance. The historian LCB Seamen even goes further and says that the Congress System, as many other systems studied in history, was an invention of the historians. Maybe his opinion is too radical, but we can conclude that there were other very significant factors that made the failure of the congress system inevitable apart from the conflicting interests of the major powers - but the conflicting interests were the most significant motive of the collapse of the Congress System.