



## CONSIDERATION CONCERNING EUROPEAN GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION BETWEEN FRENCH REVOLUTION AND VIENNA PEACE

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**Abstract:** *The French Revolution triggered a series of conflicts over the European continent, through that time empires tried to bring back the absolutist monarchies, the feudal binds and privileges. Napoleon Bonaparte obtained great victories against the coalitions arose to fight him back, but he kneeled all the Europe spreading the ideas of liberty and nation. One may say nowadays Europe is the result of Napoleon's actions even if he was defeated in the end.*

**Key words:** *campaign, coalition, continental system, Directory, Napoleonic Era, Republic, Revolutionary Era*

The French Revolution caused no essential changes in diplomatic techniques or objectives. There was of course a significant increase in the tempo of diplomacy and war. The European equilibrium underwent severe shocks delivered by the powerful expansionist French state, and the efforts of the other great powers to readjust and restore some sort of balance necessarily took an extremely violent form. Threatened with the loss of souls, provinces, and even real sovereignty, statesmen reacted as they had in the days of Louis XIV, forming a series of coalitions that finally blunted the second French bid for hegemony.

The drama and excitement of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Era should not, however, be allowed to obscure the existence of striking similarities between the policies of republican and imperial France and those of the Sun King and his Bourbon successors. The military reforms of Le Tellier and Louvois had provided Louis XIV with a highly effective military machine in the form of large and well-trained forces, which Louis employed in pursuit of an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy. Similarly, the military innovations of 1793 and 1794 gave republican leaders a superior military instrument that they used to defend the state and expand French power well beyond the prewar frontiers.

The great Bourbon monarch also had frequently encouraged revolt and rebellion in the lands of his international rivals. He supported the estates faction against William of Orange in the United Provinces, backed Hungarian rebels against their Hapsburg monarch, and assisted with ships, men, and money an armed rising in Ireland. His successors continued to support foreign revolutions against the enemies of France, and units of the Royal Army played a leading role in securing the independence of the North American colonies from British rule. Republican France pursued a similar policy, working with local revolutionaries in Belgium, the Dutch Republic, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Ireland. Despite the existence of ideological rhetoric, those who guided French foreign policy, royalist and republican alike, never allowed their universal ideals to blind them to the specific interests of the French state. Bourbon rulers had never supported revolutions for the sake of ideological principles. Rather, they promoted rebellion only when it was in their own state's interest. French republicans regarded foreign upheavals in a similar light. The Republic excluded neutrals from the impact of the Propaganda Decrees; and the Directory refused to create a unitary Italian republic that might have been able to pursue an independent policy, manifested a willingness to desert local revolutionaries when established regimes accepted peace on French terms, and assisted revolutions with the intent of using the resulting satellites as pawns in talks with important rivals.

The enemies of France were equally pragmatic. Despite a genuine distaste for the principles of the Revolution, representatives of the old order practiced many of the policies pursued by the radical French. Monarchs seized church lands; nobles conspired against and even murdered kings; and all rulers were interested in expanding the frontiers and power of their kingdoms. When the monarchs of Europe fought the Republic, they were less interested in combating subversion than in expanding their own territories. They did of course employ antirevolutionary rhetoric for propagandistic purposes and because they believed in it, but principle always bowed to

the reality of diplomacy and strategy. They fought the Republic and the Empire out of fear of a loss of power and territory, and in hope of concrete gains in the form of new subjects and dominions, and whatever their opinion of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, they showed themselves willing to negotiate and even ally themselves with their ideological foes when the interest of their state so dictated.

Ideology did of course play an important role during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Era, but its impact was less direct than the overly simple view that the political and social upheaval in France ushered in a new era in the diplomatic history of Europe would have it. Leaders pushed to the fore in the course of the Revolution quickly learned to conduct diplomacy in a manner little different from their Old Regime predecessors. But when defending France from invasion, various republican factions did devise a radically new form of national defense consisting in the application of republican principles to military problems. The revolutionaries implicitly assumed that since the state guaranteed the civic and political rights of the citizens, the citizens had an obligation to defend the state. The result of this outlook was the levée of 1793 and the Conscription Act of 1798. The revolutionary principle of career open to talent coupled with the refusal of the vast majority of aristocratic officers to serve the Republic led the government to pick military leaders on the basis of loyalty and ability and to disregard almost entirely questions of social status. The result was the creation of a corps of first-rate commanders who led the new citizen armies to victory.

The areas conquered by the French during the Revolutionary Era underwent extensive social, political, and economic changes, in contrast to the period of the Old Regime, when a change of political sovereignty produced relatively few alterations in the status quo, and these came about only gradually. In the interest of easing their tasks as occupying forces and to exploit more effectively conquered regions, French armies in the 1790s and early 1800s brought with them a whole complex of innovations, including the abolition of feudalism, the disestablishment of churches, legal reform, the destruction of guild and caste privileges, the introduction of representative political institutions, and frequently extensive territorial changes. Such blows to the status quo often led to violent counterrevolutions and guerrilla wars, proof that old religious and political institutions had not lost their hold on large numbers of Europeans. Genuine fear of revolution also existed among supporters of the old order, and fear of rebellion on several occasions prevented incumbent regimes from attempting to create a mass army to check the French.

These governments were too frightened of their own subjects to put arms in their hands. Thus the implementation of revolutionary doctrine within France enabled French leaders to pursue the traditional goals of foreign policy - security, power, aggrandizement - with tremendous effectiveness, while the application of republican principles abroad transformed the results of French conquest from a simple change of sovereignty into a shattering upheaval of the old order. But, as stated above, French leaders rarely thought in terms of ideological war or of a crusade to revolutionize the globe. Their prime concern was the interest of the French state, and their methods and techniques led them only secondarily to export



their revolution, as a means to political power. Old Regime governments were also interested primarily in security and expansion, but the requirements of internal security and fear of subversion often limited their range of available responses for countering French assaults.

Ironically the wars of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Era did not have their origins in a policy of calculated aggression. Rather, the belligerents sought war to solve limited problems, but soon found themselves engaged in hostilities whose magnitude went far beyond their initial calculations, a frequent occurrence in the course of diplomacy and war. French political factions looked upon war primarily as an instrument in the domestic political struggle for power. The Hapsburg and Hohenzollern monarchs were not primarily concerned with crushing the center of revolutionary subversion, but intended to use the war as part of their traditional search for new subjects and provinces. They expected to fight a limited war and make limited gains. Thus both France and her enemies expected to fight a war of short duration. Neither side anticipated committing a large percentage of its human and material resources.

But as the war grew in extent and intensity the objectives of the statesmen underwent a similar transformation. The French success in blunting the initial allied offensive, the successful but short-lived republican counterthrust into Belgium and the Rhineland, the entrance of additional states into the coalition, the successful allied offensive in 1793, and the French military innovations of 1793-94 drastically altered the nature of the war. The large new French armies began to win victories, and French leaders became determined to obtain compensation for their military expenses and sought additional territory to balance out Austro-Prussian gains in Poland. For their part the British Government were equally determined to deny the Low Countries to France and to expand their colonial empire at French and Dutch expense, and the Hapsburgs refused to abandon Belgium or the Rhineland. In 1795 Prussia and Spain concluded peace with the French Republic, further proof that neither France nor her enemies fought primarily for ideological principles. But in the following year Bonaparte's actions in Italy reversed the trend toward peace.

At the outset of his campaign, the French Government had not wished to make permanent conquests in Italy, and although it authorized its general to deal with Italian democrats, the Directory fully intended to desert its allies and use its conquests as bargaining counters in peace talks with Vienna. But with its popular support resting upon a very narrow basis and with a large percentage of the French populace regarding the regime as a transitional one, the Directory did not even have full control over its generals and, in fact, was forced to rely upon the military to protect the regime from domestic opposition. Consequently, the government had to accept Bonaparte's treaty with the Hapsburgs, a treaty that extended French influence into Italy, did not fully secure the Rhineland for the Republic, and deepened Vienna's resolve to exact revenge. The weakness of the French Government also played a major role in the collapse of peace talks with England. At the Lille negotiations the British received conflicting reports of French intentions and decided to negotiate on the basis of the most favorable reports. The Directory pursued a fluctuating policy because of factional disputes within the executive and legislative branches of the government, and by the time it developed a consistent set of terms and objectives, the British position had hardened, so that constructive talks were no longer possible.

Burdened with a strong army and factionalized political leadership, France failed to conclude her war with her most dangerous foe and was by 1798 faced with the gloomy prospect of devising a means to defeat England or risking perpetual war. The Directory's attempts to employ naval power and overseas expeditions in an effort to defeat England led to major strategic and diplomatic catastrophes. The Republic's policy enabled the British to fight in their chosen element, inflict

serious reverses upon the French, and convince other powers to renew hostilities against the Directory. The Second Coalition, although not including as many members as the first, was nevertheless in many respects stronger than its predecessor. Though plagued by internal rivalries and conflicting objectives, problems common to all alliances, the allies did manage at the outset to establish a basic strategy and a minimal set of political goals. Furthermore, the coalition's armies were large and ably led, and the Polish issue, which had proven so divisive during the First Coalition, was no longer a serious problem. Consequently, the allies scored a whole series of major victories in 1799, bringing France to the brink of disaster. The Directory, however, managed to recover its balance and, taking advantage of growing rivalries within the coalition's ranks, turned the tide of battle. Thus when Bonaparte seized power at the end of the year he took control of a victorious nation that was preparing a massive offensive designed to shatter the remnants of the coalition's military and diplomatic strength. Bonaparte successfully concluded the war and won a favorable if short-lived peace.

Supremely confident of his own abilities, Bonaparte, in the years following the Amiens peace, continued to consolidate and expand French power. He did not actively seek a new war but was so unwilling to limit his objectives and make opportune concessions in order to keep the peace that he convinced other powers the only way to avoid French domination was to offer armed resistance. In the next few years Bonaparte proved that he was a consummate master of the art of war. With a brilliant combination of force and diplomacy Napoleon destroyed the Third Coalition before it could organize an effective offensive or find additional allies. He then reorganized central Germany according to his own wishes, virtually compelled Francis to put an end to the Holy Roman Empire, and destroyed Prussia. He went on to defeat Russia in battle and convince the Tsar to switch alliances and become a French ally.

Thus by 1807 the Emperor of the French, always prone to seek quick, sharp military solutions to complex diplomatic issues, had won a series of amazing and impressive victories. The Continent lay at his feet. No power east of the Channel dared openly defy him. Despite these triumphs, however, Napoleon had failed to establish the basis for a lasting peace. He forced his victims into submission by the imposition of peace terms so rigorous that the treaties invariably were little more than truces under which the defeated powers thirsted for revenge and constantly sought a favorable opportunity to resume their contest of arms. This was due in part to the fact that Bonaparte persistently ignored advisers who advocated a "soft peace", which would have created the option of transforming opponents into useful allies, but rather, transferred his battlefield technique to the diplomatic arena. In combat he sought to obliterate the enemy and render it incapable of offering further resistance to the Grand Army; at the conference table he attempted to weaken his rivals and prevent them from challenging the supremacy of the Grand Empire. He thus surrounded himself with restless satellites and reluctant allies rather than with neutrals and true partners, and he had no alternative other than to maintain the supremacy won in battle by the constant application of armed force. His inability to defeat England, moreover, meant that the British stood ready to help any power that wished to resume hostilities. Napoleon realized that in order to transform his victories into a permanent French hegemony it was necessary to defeat Britain, but like his predecessors he could never overcome her naval supremacy. Direct invasion was therefore out of the question, and his alternative policy, economic strangulation, suffered from the defects of poor enforcement, lack of cooperation from his allies, and underestimation of the ability of British businessmen to find loopholes in the continental system and exploit new markets. Thus, if the Emperor's policy of attaining economic supremacy for his own kingdom by means of protective tariffs and favorable commercial agreements attained occasional successes, it



failed to disrupt completely the British economy and antagonized France's allies and satellites, who suffered serious economic setbacks due to their loss of trade with the island kingdom. It was just another imposition upon them and added to the growing discontent with French domination.

So onerous did the continental system become that Russia, already alarmed by continued French expansion after 1807 and by Napoleon's refusal to grant her equal compensation, deserted him. The Emperor then began to plan a massive campaign to force the Tsar back into the French economic bloc and reduce Russia to the status of a second-rate power. By the time the Grand Army marched east, however, Napoleon was already deeply involved in war south of the Pyrenees. Confident that he could reorganize Spain according to his wishes, he soon found himself engaged in a long, expensive, brutal, and fruitless guerrilla war. Seizing their opportunity to strike directly at France, the British sent an army to Portugal and the Austrians renewed the war on the Danube. Although the Austrians suffered another defeat, the British not only continued to maintain their foothold in Europe but also inflicted severe reverses on the best of Napoleon's marshals and men. Consequently, when the Russian campaign opened Napoleon found himself engaged in a two-front war.

Defeated on both fronts, the Emperor nevertheless refused to sue for peace. He seemed unable to comprehend that any power or alliance could defeat him and constantly subordinated diplomacy to strategy, continuing to seek to impose battlefield techniques upon diplomatic strategy long after purely military solutions were out of the question. The allies, on the other hand, finally formed an effective coalition. Heretofore, the great powers had failed to act together. During the First Coalition, Russia had remained on the sidelines; Prussia had refused to join the Second and Third coalitions, Austria remained aloof from the Fourth, and neither Russia nor Prussia came to Austria's assistance in 1809. In 1812 Prussia and Austria were allies, although reluctant ones, of France, and it was not until 1813 that all the major powers found themselves at war with Napoleon at the same time. Despite divergent objectives, the Fifth Coalition managed to retain its unity and to devise an effective military strategy. Furthermore, the allies had learned not to become disheartened by tactical defeats, doubtless having been affected by the vital lesson of the Spanish and Russian campaigns: A defeat in the field, even several defeats, did not necessarily mean that effective resistance and future counteroffensives were impossible. They were thus able to wear down French strength, bring the Grand Army to battle, defeat it, and drive it from Germany.

The coalition had not at first been dedicated to the total extinction of the Napoleonic dynasty. The Austrians desired to maintain a powerful French state as a counterweight to the growth of Russian influence. And on several occasions the allies made serious peace offers to the French Emperor. Once again, however, Napoleon's supreme confidence in his own genius led him to reject these offers or accept them too late. He persisted in the belief that sooner or later he would turn the tide of the war on the field of battle, and he virtually compelled the allies to fight on to total victory. The Corsican's last campaign was brilliant but futile. The allies finally overwhelmed him and compelled him to abdicate. The Hundred Days and the Battle of Waterloo only reinforced their decision of 1813 and 1814. Banding together, the great powers brought to bear overwhelming strength, and put an end to the threat of French hegemony.

The Congress of Vienna, the Second Peace of Paris, the Quadruple Alliance, and the congress system provided Europe with one of the longest eras of relative peace in its dark and bloody history. The 1815 settlement constructed a balance of power that largely satisfied the major states, and no power sought drastic revisions of the new situation. England retained and expanded her maritime and colonial ascendancy. Austria retained her great power status, attained a predominant position in Italy, and shared with Prussia a

controlling influence in German affairs without having to grant significant concessions to liberal and nationalist sentiment. Prussia recovered her former status and gained new territories, and Russia gained Finland, Bessarabia, and most of Poland. Alexander, moreover, became one of the more influential European statesmen, and he was even able to convince most continental rulers to subscribe to his Holy Alliance of September 1815, under which princes and monarchs except for the Regent of England, the Sultan, and the Pope agreed to conduct their foreign policy according to the precepts of the New Testament.

The Holy Alliance was perhaps not the most practical policy guide, but nevertheless it indicated the extent of Alexander's influence and the general willingness of the powers to try and live in peace. The 1815 settlement also built a series of barrier states around France to check any possible renewal of French aggression. Thus the treaties and agreements of 1815 created a continental balance of power in which the major states could live in reasonable security and no single power was strong enough to threaten the sovereignty of the others. Thus, as in the days of Louis XIV when France had threatened to dominate the Continent, the states of Europe banded together to halt French expansion. After the fall of Napoleon, France never again threatened to dominate the Continent, and the attempt to unify Europe by force remained in the realm of the hypothetical.

The 1815 settlement did not, of course, bring complete European tranquillity, nor did it provide solutions to all problems. Liberals and nationalists throughout the Continent were dissatisfied with the status quo, and the numerous rebellions and revolutions of the ensuing half century - in England, France, Belgium, Austria, Spain, Italy, Germany, the Balkans, Poland, and Russia - testified to the extent and growth of this distaste for the old order. Not all were successful, but they did testify to the extent of the dissatisfaction with the political and social system. Furthermore, despite the efforts of the peacemakers, Europe continued to be beset with constant diplomatic rivalries, alarms, threats of war, and real hostilities. The balance of power also underwent a number of significant alterations. Turkish power continued to deteriorate; Spain lost most of her Latin American empire; England continued to enlarge her overseas domains, and France soon recovered her great power status and, led by Napoleon III, nephew of the great Emperor, resumed her policy of expanding her influence into surrounding regions. Russian influence suffered a temporary eclipse after 1855, but the Romanovs soon recovered their prestige and resumed their expansionist policies in the Balkans, central Asia, and the Far East. Austria suffered a number of major reverses, losing control of Italy and influence in Germany, but as in previous eras, defeats did not deprive the Hapsburgs of their status as one of Europe's leading powers. Italy attained unification and admittance into the ranks of the leading powers, and Prussia united Germany by conquest, replacing France as the single most powerful state in Europe.

Nevertheless, despite all changes and wars, the nineteenth century was one of relative peace. Europe managed to avoid a major war until 1854. The wars of 1859, 1865, 1866, and 1870-71 were limited in scope, if not in impact, and none was as prolonged or as bloody as the American Civil War. Germany's appearance as Europe's greatest land power was of momentous significance, but even the shift of power from Paris to Berlin and the consequent diplomatic realignments did not automatically produce conditions that led to a war involving all of the powers. Despite numerous alarms and confrontations it was not until 1914 that all the great powers became immersed in a major conflict. In an imperfect world in which suspicion and hostility are standard aspects of international relations and war is a normal function of national policy, the Vienna settlement indeed stands as an impressive achievement.



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