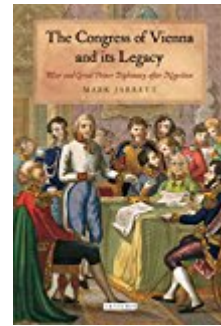


Mark Jarrett. *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy After Napoleon*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. 544 S. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78076-116-9.

Reviewed by Brian W. Refford (Lehigh University)

Published on H-War (February, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



The Mixed Legacy of the Congress System

The acerbic British social theorist Harriet Martineau saw the Congress System of the 1820s as a repressive “alliance of kings against people,” and Congress diplomats “as ogres fighting against the tide of history” (pp. xiv, 367). In *The Congress of Vienna and Its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon*, diplomatic historian Mark Jarrett challenges this view, reenvisioning the Congress of Vienna and the emergence of the postwar Congress System as nothing less than the “the true beginning of our modern era” (p. 353). In a sweeping reinterpretation, Jarrett argues that the Congress System was “a type of international conflict management,” marking the first genuine attempt to forge an “international order” based upon consensus rather than conflict (p. xiv). “Europe was ready,” Jarrett argues, “to accept an unprecedented degree of international cooperation in response to the French Revolution” (p. 187).

Jarrett questions the traditional notion that Congress diplomats were reactionaries committed to maintaining social order at the expense of emergent nationalism and liberal social progress. After decades of revolution and war, the challenge of the postwar period, according to Jarrett, “was to come to terms with these new forces while restoring the rudiments of order and stability lost in the years of revolution and strife” (p. xiii). At first glance, there seems an element of truth in Jarrett’s assessment. In September 1814, well-meaning European lead-

ers descended upon Vienna to “develop ... an ambitious set of new safeguards and institutions ... to cope with international problems” (p. 164). Congress diplomats, Jarrett argues, were on the “verge” of establishing an institutional framework, including periodic conferences and adoption of a set of general principles, “but then pulled back” (p. 365).

According to Jarrett, this great gathering was only in part a “victor’s summit” akin to previous postwar congresses at Munster, Osnabrück, Nijmegen, Ryswick, and Utrecht. Discussions of creating mechanisms to maintain European peace and stability, Jarrett counters, were “scarcely new” (p. 69). Building upon the older work of Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf, for instance, Immanuel Kant wrote a celebrated 1784 essay entitled *On Perpetual Peace* that argued that given the growing incidence of destructive wars, states should enter into constitutions or contracts to form larger “federation(s) of peoples” (p. 37).

In the years after Vienna, Jarrett acknowledges that the principal goal of European diplomats shifted from orderly compromise to combating the threat of social revolution. Tumult cast a foreboding shadow upon post-Napoleonic Europe, witnessing unrest in Germany, Britain, and France, as well as revolution in Latin America, Spain, Portugal, Naples, Piedmont, Greece, and Ro-

mania. In response, Tsar Alexander I, and his archconservative interlocutor Prince Klemens von Metternich, came to see the preservation of the existing social hierarchy as the *raison d'être* of the emerging Congress System, and the only cure for the revolutionary contagion spreading across the face of Europe. As a result, the reaction of the allies to the 1820 Spanish Revolution laid bare the divergence of opinion among the wartime allies regarding the purpose of the Congress system. The “crisis in Spain,” Jarrett notes, served to drive the wartime allies apart (p. 227).

Fear of revolution sowed dissension amongst its members and guaranteed its demise. British resistance to a grand postwar order to safeguard European stability frequently proved an obstacle to the creation of a European alliance system. Fundamentally, British foreign secretary Castlereagh saw the Congress System as little more than a vehicle of antiliberal counterrevolution, suggesting that any attempt to intervene in the affairs of other states “would be repugnant to a constitutional state like Great Britain ... [and] unacceptable to British popular opinion” (p. 230). Castlereagh’s successor, George Canning, saw the Congress System as a “loathsome fetter binding England to despotic states” (p. 318). In basic ways, social and political dissimilarities among the allies and the failure to recognize the importance of the “twin forces of liberalism and nationalism” doomed the Congress System from the outset (p. 367).

“We can laud these statesmen,” Jarrett suggests, “for their vision of international organization even as we condemn their specific policies for obstructing social change” (p. 369). For the most part, the Congress diplomats looked to a reshaping of the international system to provide an anchor for maintaining the existing social order. Even the British agreed in theory that conducting international politics through consensus rather than by

force of arms, and informed by “some degree of moderation and restraint,” held great appeal (p. xiii). However, high-mindedness, it seems, was not enough.

“Perhaps the true failure of the Congress [diplomats],” Jarrett argues, “was not their resistance to the threat of violent revolution, but in their failure ... to countenance a greater degree of moderate change” (p. 378). This is Jarrett’s most important insight. Acceptance by elites of revolutionary political and social change, and the preservation of the rule of law, are often incompatible objectives, particularly when—as Jarrett suggests, “the existing legal order [was] ... created to protect [elite] interests.” This conundrum remains acutely relevant today.

Despite this failure, the Congress System had a profound influence on subsequent European history. Contemporary European reliance on diplomacy as a primary means of conflict resolution; devotion to multilateralism; the emphasis on international organization as a vehicle for preserving peace; the use of concerted action to promote international legitimacy—all these notions, Jarrett suggests, were byproducts of the Congress System. Regardless of the motivations of Congress diplomats, the system they labored to create provided an “international learning experience” that served as a needed precursor to the later League of Nations, the United Nations, and even the European Union (p. 369).

A few minor criticisms are in order. Stylistically, Jarrett’s study suffers from its origins as a doctoral dissertation. Jarrett produces an uneven blend of diplomatic intricacy and occasionally clumsy attempts at narrative. The result can be jarring. Additionally, this highly detailed work is not for the casual reader, as it presumes a great deal of existing knowledge of European diplomatic history. Despite these minor criticisms, this work is a much-needed corrective to previous, more negative accounts of the Congress System.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Brian W. Refford. Review of Jarrett, Mark, *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy After Napoleon*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42429>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.