

# KLEMENS METTERNICH AND THE EUROPEAN RESTORATION

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**A**s most of us know, great historical transformations trigger counterforces. These become particularly strong when changes aim at basic conditions or privileges of certain groups, or when a change is violent and supported by armed violence.

No surprise, then, that the French Revolution released countermeasures and gathered coalitions of states and interests which sought to roll back, by any available motives and methods, what had been achieved by the revolutionary forces. One should add that the time we are dealing with is called *restorative*, implying that it merely sought to bring back what had been lost.

It may not be that simple, however, but we will get back to that.

That a set of persons in the French case opposed the revolutionary left was not just a reaction that occurred after the Jacobins had completed the first phase of their programme. Already in the French National Assembly (1791-1792) moderate fractions had arisen, such as the Girondists. These men, who represented pragmatic merchant circles, for instance in Gironde and around a commercial and mar-

itime town like Bordeaux, wanted to fight the Jacobins. A working legal order and equal rights was on their agenda.

Among the wider opposition against 1789, we find the aristocratic and bourgeois so-called emigrés who fled their country only to collaborate with brothers in Austria and elsewhere. These exiled Frenchmen were seen by the Jacobins as a dangerous and perfidious group, despite the fact that their opposition remained weak and ineffective.

Before the international opposition against revolutionary France formed, it had had its forerunners. There was a difference, in that the later international opposition was more well thought-out and better organized, and if you like, more professional. It was also carried, to a growing degree, by statesmen and military planners rather than by isolated fugitives and adventurers. The question how the new France should be dealt with was thus brought to the government level and with the take-over of Napoleon in 1799 the question became acute. A slow but steady process was started, which engaged the monarchs and political advisors of the mightiest European countries.

Klemens Metternich belonged to a leading princely family in Germany. Since the Middle Ages, its family members had been entrusted with important official tasks and the family had won respect by loyally and competently serving German princes, not least the house of Habsburg.

This has sometimes been interpreted as though Klemens Metternich was a person embossed in and limited by the patterns and expectations of an old empire. But from persons who aspired to become trusted servants of their realm, the Habsburg dynasty expected something else – diligence, a keen judgement and integrity. Klemens Metternich possessed these traits in rich measure.

Besides, his education had started early. To its components belonged not only to learn how to act in a self-conscious and urbane manner, to command languages and customs as well as proving in every way

and situation one's cosmopolitan frame of mind. Further, anyone who aspired to a career in Austria at the time had to learn to know this huge kingdom and its people, and to take part in its daily administration or diplomacy. Metternich had studied in Strasbourg under the tutelage of the greatest and most advanced authorities in law and public administration. It is obvious that this gave him great lead even in his own social circles.

Obviously those who have portrayed Metternich as a mere rigid bureaucrat lacking longer views have been wrong. More recent historians have understood that his home was enlightened and both parents liberally minded in the sense that his time and class gave the concept.

One may well ask when Metternich and his close circuit began to realise his talents for political matters and diplomacy. In fact it became clear quite early, when Klemens was around 20 years of age and already served under his father, Franz Metternich, who held high offices in Austria.

It resembled an apprenticeship during which the young man was introduced by his father into the reality of contemporary politics and higher administration, but also was enabled to meet, observe, and build friendships with paramount European politicians and diplomats. The importance of his father's posts and commissions also enabled them to be in a number of places where significant events occurred, a fact that gave young Metternich experiences with which few of his age could compete.

Still, Metternich could have settled for a more ordinary career. His interests widened under pressure of truly cataclysmic events, however, and offered him a challenge he could not resist. Step by step, his vision of a reasonably peaceful and balanced Europe formed. The purpose of his vision was to solve the great conflict of the day, that between revolution and a reformistic social order. For this purpose Metternich wanted to apply Enlightenment ideas in a pragmatic

spirit, but he also wished to avoid hurting the political order which had emerged in response to wars and conflicts in previous centuries.

When the French revolution broke out, Metternich was only 16 years old. Already a critical and analytical mind, he foresaw the wide consequences which such an event would bring.

It is remarkable how well his early apprehensions would be fulfilled. For example, he thought that the revolution would be radicalized as its most extreme wing – the Jacobin faction – acquired more power. The same applies to the consequences of Napoleon's power grab which Metternich suspected would spread the revolution all over Europe.

Metternich received ever higher positions because his early achievements gained respect with the emperor. Metternich received diplomatic assignments and key commissions where he could represent Austria, but also was able to make observations of great value for his future career. (The Metternich archive is full of his numerous memorabilia and other comments). In Sachsen and even more in France he got acquainted with persons in leading circles. He diligently collected information and personal impressions of the political situation and of its leading actors.

In France Metternich became ambassador at a time when Napoleon was already launching his manipulative and expansive policies. At an early stage Metternich realized that the French regime would never be content with peaceful and persuasive measures to achieve its ends. A military confrontation with the other European powers seemed inevitable, sooner or later.

The wars against Napoleon were preceded by a delicate and lengthy preparation on the part of those states which were most hit by, or concerned with, his long unstoppable rampage. In a skillfull and cunning fashion Metternich sought to win Prussia, Russia, Great Britain and his own Austria for a forceful campaign against Napoleon. Starting with diplomatc pressure, but also gradually gath-

ering military force, these countries became ready for the complex campaign and for its violent grand finale. Napoleon would make great efforts to split the forces set against him, so Metternich had to play carefully and appeal to the self-interest as well as to the fear of Austria and her allied powers.

What, then, did Metternich really think of the actors that he had to bring into his plans?

In fact, he was far from uncritical towards them. Some of them and their leaders he even regarded as saboteurs whose ignorance, poor judgement, vanity and self-mindedness, although personal, amounted to key obstacles for his plans. To the European politicians whom Metternich found it easiest to work with, one must count the French foreign minister Count Talleyrand (who held this position in periods between 1797-1815) and his British colleague lord Castlereagh (1812-1822). To them one might add some of the other actors, such as the Prussian state chancellor Hardenberg, although he was hampered by loyalty to his country's policies.

What about Metternich's relation to the other German-speaking states? One might have expected a deep soul-matery or sympathy between these states and the Austrian chancellor. But in Metternich's opinion, the Prussian foreign politicians and King Wilhelm III were at best a mixed blessing. They appeared as expansionists, unwilling to become part of the plans for a carefully balanced European order that were Metternich's vision. Also, it was hard to get their wholehearted support for building a powerful coalition against Napoleon. In Czar Alexander, Metternich saw an indispensable yet a naïve idealist, but also a vain choleric whose primary wish was to seek glory and victories on the battlefield. Alexander never realized the need for carefully crafted diplomatic solutions. The Czar had another blatant weakness as he lacked the ability to pick the right moment for launching military operations.

At least as important for Metternich as his ability to build coalitions were his encounters with Napoleon and the observations which he was able to make then. Without the assessments that Metternich made on those occasions, his task of reforming the European order would have been even more difficult.

So, how did Metternich handle Napoleon at their private meetings?

Whether as an Austrian ambassador or in other missions, Metternich took an attitude of cool distance, while at the same time recognizing the analytical capability and strategic gaze of the French leader. Realizing that in him the older states had a formidable opponent whom Europe had all the reasons to fear, nevertheless Metternich saw through Napoleon and understood that his ability to mislead and undermine his opponents also sowed the seed to his own downfall. As Metternich's latest biographer Wolfram Siemann reminds us<sup>1</sup>, in an essay written the year before Napoleon's death in 1821, the Austrian skilfully scrutinized his old antagonist in an unprejudiced and passion-free manner. What Metternich primarily recognized was Napoleon's ability to foresee future consequences of different measures, but also his obvious ability to pick the individuals from whose services he might benefit the most. Metternich in turn impressed him by his courage to tell the Frenchman his upright opinion.

Did Metternich then consider Napoleon an evil person? No, his opinion was rather that the emperor was a coldly rational man who acted without passions or vengeance. Napoleon gave himself a right to clear out of the way persons who might sabotage his plans, all while he spared his affection and empathy for his immediate family.

Napoleon was a field commander – one of the greatest ever. Obviously, Metternich was a public servant, not an officer. Yet he was quite familiar with military issues – in his early years he had

1 Wolfram Siemann, *Metternich: Strategist and Visionary*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap 2019.

been present or in the vicinity when crucial battles were fought – and to some extent able to judge the strategies of a military man like Napoleon. Still, his main interest was the greater strategy and long-range political manipulations of the French commander.

Metternich also saw the intention when Napoleon created the Rhine Federation in order to get a buffer zone against attacks from “reactionary” states. Metternich conducted his own campaign against Napoleon, built on the assessments which he had started early and which he continually updated. To persuade like-minded states and leaders to get along with Austria became his goal. Just as splitting Napoleon’s coalition in different ways – among other things through breaking into the Rhine Federation created by France and winning over its constituent states to Austria and her allies. Of course Metternich knew that the task was nearly insurmountable and he invested almost unimaginably his personal time and powers to solve it.

We now come to the question of political philosophy.

Was Metternich a solitary thinker or part of the greater conservative mainstream?

In traditional interpretations, he has long been held to be highly different from Edmund Burke, the “father” of Conservatism. As Metternich’s latest biographer Wolfram Siemann seeks to show,<sup>2</sup> though, making a sharp distinction between the two is misleading, just like seeing the continental tradition per se as much differing from the Anglo-saxon “Old Whig” tradition to which Burke belonged. The fact is that Metternich took an evolutionary view of historic events. He had studied, as we noted above, with some of the most renowned German jurists of his day. He had attended a liberal school and his family was formed by enlightened ideals and a “liberal education.” As a young man he came to spend some time in London where he was much pleased to experience Britain’s pragmatic, common

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2 Ibidem, xiv, and pp. 116-121.

sense kind of politics. Not least Metternich got to know the British Parliament, in which he particularly liked to attend the House of Lords. It was a forum whose combination of sharp polemics and over-arching consensus and dignified tone appealed to him. He also followed sessions in the House of Representatives and listened to its more prominent speakers. Metternich had the opportunity to visit House sessions when important issues were on the table, such as the war with France and the accusations against Hastings, the governor in India. In all these debates, Burke was prominent. We may suspect that Burke's criticism of King George III, for instance, although in a way anti-royal, appealed to Metternich because of his dislike of absolutism. He also heard Burke recommend war against France and probably got more than a hunch of Burke's deep dislike for the French revolution. We know that in 1790 Metternich had bought a copy of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. He now immersed himself in Burke's ideas on the matter, a fact which is also reflected in Metternich's notes from the gallery. The evidence for his deep sympathy for Burke's position have become stronger as the archives have been investigated. Other traits in Burke such as his deep admiration for the ideal of chivalry, and his belief in a step-wise, evolutionary development of law, must have found a willing recipient in the imperial prince.

Because of his high social background, Metternich was able to meet with the British elites starting with the royal court, where he was received in audience by King George III. He also spoke to members of the cabinet and kept himself informed through the country's media, debating clubs and similar institutions.

Also in the mid 1800s, when Metternich had been pushed away from Austrian politics, he went into exile in London, where among others he got to know the young Disraeli, who would later become the country's Prime minister.

Through his effort to build a Europa on simple and clearly understood principles, Metternich not only became skeptical towards



radical remaking of society, but also towards purely restaurative solutions. He did not want old regimes to persist no matter how illegitimate or incompetent their ruling princes were.

Metternich was by no means hostile to modern solutions. Born into a partly feudal society – at the time integrated with the fading, but (until 1806) formally still existing Holy Roman Empire. In fact Metternich promoted, both as a political thinker and as a squire, an early form of industrial business. He stood among those who recommended a modernity which upheld the best of the older European traditions.

For this reason, Metternich was deeply skeptical towards the French emigrés with their ill-considered demands for politics unfit to cope with new challenges. With Burke he might have said that a state which is unable to promote necessary reforms is also unable to conserve its basic political principles. As fragile and imperfectly conceived Metternich also regarded the Holy Alliance, the initiative launched in 1815 by Alexander I to introduce a European thinking directly built on Christian teachings.

As mentioned, Prince Metternich had put an almost inhuman amount of work in forming the peace order which he had sought since he begun his public career. During the years which followed upon the Congress of Vienna he continued (up till 1821) to act as Austria's foreign minister, and thereafter as its prime minister, till 1848. He now saw himself as guardian of the European peace order. He took the right to intervene with remarks and demands whenever he thought that the other states acted against the spirit and letter of the treaty which regulated the dealings in Europe after Napoleon.

But new forces were asserting themselves. Gradually, a national power politics emerged which put new population strata and their interests above the balance conducive to the *communum bonum*. Had Metternich foreseen the force of this challenge? Maybe not. He

managed to fend off the first nationalistic onslaught in 1830, but not the second one which culminated in 1848, when he was forced to resign and flee his country.

One should remember that the new nationalism was a cultural movement more than a political one, even if it was getting support from Napoleon's fiery rhetoric with its promises of equalization and steady progress. To issue such promises was politically contagious. In many countries, not least in southern Europe, young people, not seldom students, appeared and asked their peers to contribute to the *spring of their nation*. While such a perspective began to tempt many, others saw it as equally dangerous and destabilizing.

Conventional historiography describes the negative reactions to the nationalistic movements as merely retrogressive. But in fact, the upsurge of youthful enthusiasm was not to be taken casually and far from benign. Inspired as it often was by left radical models, it rightly caused fear among people who considered themselves law-abiding and *gutbürgerlich*. Violence was practiced and even murders occurred. The reason was the explosive and divisive nature of the nationalist propaganda. In Metternich's eyes, the multinational empires had been able to do without such agitation and ought to continue along those lines.

Some extremists excelled in rhetoric, music and literature which incited young persons, not least students. This fact explains the so-called Carlsbad Decrees which were in force between 1819 and 1848 and which brought heavy censorship and surveillance to the German-speaking universities.

Metternich had expected a regular conflict-solving to take place on the basis of constitutional law and mutual agreements between the European nations after 1815, but his hope did not come true. Conflicts, minor wars and rebellions occurred despite the regulations enacted. Still, and that was a tribute to his peacekeeping efforts, no major wars broke out until 1914.

In Austria a number of bureaucratic reforms took place, even if they left major institutions pristine. Even if Metternich had long wanted such reforms to happen, he was critical towards the so-called neoabsolutism which also resulted.

Still, Metternich in his later years could think that he had witnessed a re-design of the empire that brought it from late feudalism to early capitalism. As a squire he was part of his country's modernization in that he ran a profitable business in winemaking as well as a successful manufacture. His reputation as a rigid, bureaucratic person lacking financial knowledge in retrospect must be looked upon as a sheer caricature. Metternich was far-sighted and receptive. He saw what consequences suggested solutions would have. He saw beyond the present power relations and was positive to changes, in case they did not pose fatal threats to the current order in Europe. His assessments and the advice he presented after having left active service bore traces of deep legal and historical knowledge.

Historians influenced by liberalism and by the idea of sovereign nation states as a universal solution tend to belittle Metternich. Persons born during the interwar years of the 20th century saw him, by contrast, as a far-sighted European, a peacemaker and an excellent international diplomat. (Helmut Rumpler largely interprets Metternich<sup>3</sup> in an understanding and sympathetic manner). Others have assigned to him clichés as an absolutist and oppressor, a self-deceiving and anti-democratic person.

The influential but strangely ambivalent biography which was published in the 1920s by the Austrian historian Heinrich von Srbik<sup>4</sup> designates Metternich as a forerunner to Nazism with its Rousseauistic idea of a sacred "Volkstum" and further saw him as a mystic

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3 Helmut Rumpler, *Österreichische Geschichte, 1804–1914: Eine Chance für Mitteleuropa: Bürgerliche Emanzipation und Staatsverfall in der Habsburgermonarchie*. Vienna: Ueberreuter, 1997.

4 Heinrich von Srbik, *Metternich: Der Staatsmann und der Mensch*. 2 vols. Munich, 1925 (Vols. 1 and 2 republished Munich 1956.)

link between the folk soul and the nation. As we may conclude, Srbik is insinuating an inclination in the famous chancellor which has little to do with his real convictions. The lack of “heroism” which Srbik ascribes to Metternich in turn appears more like an advantage than as a character error.

Metternich’s view of the Austrian empire was not hierarchical, as some have believed, since its constituent parts were mutually equal. Metternich all his life saw his Austria as a non-nation state. In the last instance, he built his Europe “not on national entities, but on historic-legal countries-formations, and he did not want to let [federalism] go further than to the legal-administrative sphere,” Srbik contends (as quoted by Siemann.<sup>5</sup>)

Thereby Metternich – despite the injuries to his reputation inflicted by the friends of 19th century nationalists – can well deserve to be acclaimed by those who in our days struggle with the problems of a stable world order.

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5 Ibidem, p. 13.