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Carlos Contente
La Salle University, contentec1@student.lasalle.edu

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Tsar Alexander I and the Congress of Vienna

The Duke of Vincenza, General Armand de Caulaincourt, served as Napoleon’s ambassador to the Russian Empire from 1807 until 1811. During this tenure, he was forced to watch in horror as the fulfillment of his predictions regarding a French invasion of Tsarist Russia. In the end, Caulaincourt was right and eventually Tsar Alexander I rode into Paris as victor and conqueror of Napoleon. However, Alexander’s time on the world stage would not end with this victory. For, much as he shaped the victory, he would also leave an indelible mark on the shaping of the peace that followed. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to answer the question: “What role did Tsar Alexander I play at the Congress of Vienna?” It will show that he played a very influential role by shaping such matters as the creation of an independent Poland and the establishment of the Holy Alliance, while also ensuring the balance of power in continental Europe remained.

One of Tsar Alexander’s lasting legacies which emanated from the Congress of Vienna was the establishment of the Holy Alliance. In the document drawn up by Alexander, the purpose of the alliance was stated as basing “the direction of policy adopted by the Powers in their mutual relations on the sublime truths taught by the eternal religion of God the redeemer.” That the Tsar would propose an agreement which was saturated with Christian language was not surprising. For, as Sophie de Tisenhaus wrote, “Alexander had doubtless his weaknesses, like

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1 Adam Zamoyski *Rites of Peace: The Fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna.* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 3
2 Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace*, 520
many other great men, but his heart was filled with the purest moral and religious sentiments.” Alexander wanted this agreement to serve as a fraternal bond between the rulers who ascended to it and he wanted them to pledge to being “co-rulers of a great Christian family” who would “strive not only to treat each other and their own subjects as Christians should, but to care for their spiritual development.”

Unfortunately for Alexander, not everyone in European politics shared his religious fervor. Some of his adviser urged him to drop the proposal, but when it became apparent that this would not happen, they asked him to put in the form of a proclamation instead of diplomatic agreement. Others, such as Klemens Von Metternich, part of the Austrian delegation, found the “document absurd but harmless.” Therefore, Austria agreed to sign on after a few minor changes. Prussia followed suit and also joined the Holy Alliance. Great Britain, on the other hand, would be a completely different beast. As per Alexander’s request, Robert Stewart, the Viscount of Castlereagh, passed the agreement onto the Prince Regent of Great Britain, George IV, with a warning that Alexander was a religious fanatic. George IV refused to sign, but sent Alexander I the personal note expressing agreement with the principles of the document.

Unfortunately for Alexander, no other nations agreed to join the Holy Alliance; meaning that it would only be composed of Russia, Austria, and Prussia. In keeping with his religious obedience, Alexander I left Vienna around two days after finalizing the alliance. He announced that he was planning to “devote the rest of his life to bringing the reign of Jesus to Russia.”

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4 Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace* 521
5 Ibid
6 Ibid
7 Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace* 522
Another one of Alexander’s projects at the Congress of Vienna, perhaps the one which was the most important, was his actions regarding Poland. Alexander had played a role in wiping Poland off of the map of Europe in 1795. This was part of the reason he had allied himself with Napoleon beginning in 1807, to regain some slivers of Polish territory. However, it had upset him to see one of Europe’s most ancient states erased. The overall issue of what to do with regards to Poland would continue to pit Alexander’s enlightenment ideals against the interest of the Russian state.

Prior to the Congress of Vienna, while in London, Alexander dodged questions about the status of the serfs in Russia, but he freely discussed his plans for the future of Poland. While at the Congress he explained that “If the great interest of universal peace has not permitted the whole of Poland to remain united under the same scepter, I will at least try to soften as much as possible the rigors of their separation and to obtain for them everywhere the peacable enjoyment of their national liberty.” Much like what occurred with the Holy Alliance, the different parties at Vienna had far ranging opinions on the Polish question.

To begin with Prussia had considered waging war against Russia to reconquer some of its old Polish provinces. However, it decided against this course of action upon realization that Russia had 200,000 troops in marching distance from Berlin. Metternich, ever the cunning diplomat, attempted to work with the Prussians and drew up a plan for Russia’s western border. It would give Prussia back her provinces and provide Austria a strong frontier defended by the “strong points of Krakow and Zamosc.” This was occurring against the backdrop of a secret agreement between the British and the Prussians. The British promised to ensure Prussia’s

8 Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace*, 18-20
9 Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace* 212
10 Choiseul-Gouffier, *Historical Memoirs*, 197
11 Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace* 358
12 Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace* 359
seizure of the entirety of Saxony, so long as it promised to oppose any Russian plans for Poland. Alexander was not having any of it. Tisenhaus records that once he defeated Napoleon, Alexander promised to occupy himself completely with the issue of Poland\textsuperscript{13}. As such, he had Prince Czartoryski, himself a Pole and a member of the Tsar’s delegation, draw up a reply to the Metternich’s plans for the Russian western border. It boiled down to Russia intending to ensure the entirety of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. After a breakdown of diplomatic mechanisms and several passionate, almost violent shouting matches involving Tsar Alexander and Metternich, the Russian Tsar conceded the Polish district of Tarnopol to the Austrians and allowed the Tsar to carry through on his intentions regarding the Grand Duchy of Warsaw.

The wrangling over the Polish question cost the Tsar a large amount of political capital and he was forced to make concessions on several other issues. However, in the end, he did essentially get his way with regards to Poland. The very first article in the General Treaty of the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna (June 9, 1815) states that “The duchy of Warsaw, with the exception of the provinces and districts which are otherwise disposed of by the following Articles, is united to the Russian empire, to which it shall be irrevocably attached by its constitution, and be possessed by his majesty the Emperor of all the Russias, his heirs and successors in perpetuity\textsuperscript{14}.” Therefore, one can see that the Tsar was able to ensure stability and control over the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. Furthermore, Article V of the treaty states that “The town of Cracow, with its territory, is declared to be for ever a free, independent, and strictly neutral city, under the protection of Austria, Russia, and Prussia\textsuperscript{15}.” It is evident that the Tsar was unable to achieve his dream of “an independent Polish state” but he was able to ensure the

\textsuperscript{13} Choiseul-Gouffier, \textit{Historical Memoirs}, 159


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid
continued presence of Poland within the framework of the Russian Empire, as well as the freedom and protection for strong points, such as Cracow.

Everyone in attendance at the conference, which included “two emperors, five kings, and 209 principalities, or almost 20,000 people, if you include diplomatic staff, servants, spies, and demimondaines\textsuperscript{16}, was suddenly faced with a new problem when Napoleon landed in France on March 1, 1815. This event led to what became known as the “Hundred Days.” Tsar Alexander I was clearly disturbed by the news and blamed the British for not being more careful in ensuring Napoleon did not leave his exile. Showing skill at political analysis, Tsar Alexander believed that the restored French monarchy would not be able to stand firm against the returning Napoleon. This is evident in a letter that he dispatched to his mother in which the Tsar wrote, “I doubt that the Bourbons would have enough hold to find another army to oppose him, and with a fight between the two becoming impossible, it is very probable that Napoleon would take Paris and re-assume the reins of government\textsuperscript{17}.” Thankfully for the delegates assembled in Vienna, this did not occur. Napoleon was forced to sign his second abdication after being defeated by forces under the command of the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo. Russia did not participate in this battle\textsuperscript{18}.

The Hundred Days caused a resurgence of anger at France and made the negotiations far more difficult for Tsar Alexander I. This is because the Tsar did not desire completely downtrodden France, as this would disrupt the balance of power in continental Europe. When the Prussian and British delegates were beginning to “tighten the screws” on France, Louis XVIII asked the Tsar to intervene and then appointed the Duke of Richelieu, a man who had a good
working relationship with the Tsar, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Due to his influence of having defeated Napoleon the first time around, the Tsar was able to diminish the loss of French territory. It is due to Alexander’s intervention that France was permitted to keep “Alsace, Lorraine, the Franche-Comte, and Burgundy.” It was because of Tsarist intervention in these matters that the Count of Mole, a prominent figure in the Bourbon Restoration, penned in his memoirs, “If France is still France, it is thanks to three men whose it should never forget: Alexander and his two ministers, Kapodistrias and Pozzo de Borgo…Russia had every interest in our remaining a power of the first order.”

However, Tsar Alexander I was not the only powerful actor in Vienna. As such, certain harsh terms were still able to be imposed on France. For example, it was forced to diminish itself back to its pre-1790 borders and was forced to cede “the duchy of Bouillon and the fortress of Phillippeville and Marienburg to Holland, Sarrelouis and Sarrebruck to Prussia, Landau to Bavaria, the Gex region to Switzerland, and a large part of Savoy to Piedmont.” France was also forced to relinquish governance over some of her colonies, such as St. Lucia in the Caribbean and Malta in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, France was to accept a military occupation for five years. Most delegates had originally wanted the occupation to last for seven years, but Tsar Alexander was adamant on it only being five years.

If one looks at the painting of Tsar Alexander I by Sir Thomas Lawrence, one can see the broad chested Russian Tsar looking into the distance, his hands folded in front of him. He is in full military dress and his hat is off to the side. This can be interpreted to depict the Tsar

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19 Ibid
20 Ibid
21 Ibid
22 Rey, *Alexander I*, 288
looking out into the future of Europe; a post-Napoleonic Europe that he fully intended to be the primary architect of. When the Tsar arrived at the Congress of Vienna, he had two clear goals. One of which was to ensure the security and geopolitical power of the Russian Empire; the other one was to maintain equilibrium of power in Europe, particularly keeping Great Britain in check. However, these were not simple goals to accomplish. For, as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote, Castlereagh and other prominent, non-Russian delegates, such as Metternich, feared that Russia was growing too powerful and would become a more frequent actor in continental affairs. For example, Castlereagh viewed Poland as “a Russian appendage extending deep into Central Europe” and that it “would constitute a constant source of disquiet.”

In the end; however, while the Tsar was not able to obtain his goals in the exact process or down to the exact detail that he desired, he was able to fulfill them overall. A large piece of Poland was restored and incorporated into Russia, acting as a buffer against European aggression. Furthermore, the Tsar was able to limit the terms imposed on France and ensured that she could be counted on as an ally in the future and to serve as a check against British and Prussian ambitions. Finally, he was able to create a Holy Alliance upon the Christian principles and on the notion of cooperation in Europe so as to protect the crowns of the various monarchies.

24 Rey, Alexander I, 289
26 Ibid


