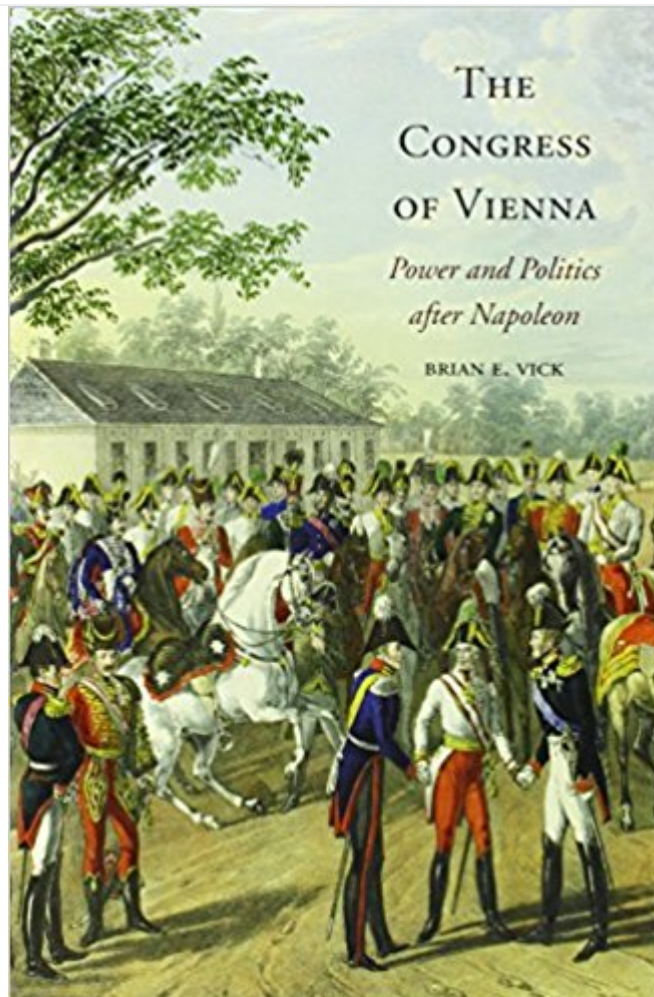


# {essays in history}

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## The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon.* By Brian E. Vick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Pp. 448. Cloth, \$45.00.

The year was 1814. After two decades of warfare stemming from the French Revolution, Europe was exhausted and divided. To settle the status of more than thirty million Europeans living in areas with conflicting ethnic, linguistic, and religious allegiances, monarchs, heads of state, diplomats and members of the Continental social elite assembled in the Austrian capital in September 1814. After nine months of tortuous negotiations, a new order emerged from the basis of an old balance of power.

In a departure from the reigning standard works on the Congress, which include Henry Kissinger's *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822* (1954) and Harold Nicolson's *The Congress of Vienna: A Study in Allied Unity, 1812-1822* (1946), Brian E. Vick robustly explores how culture, intellectual thought, social networks, and public opinion shaped both the peacemakers and the outcome of the august gathering. Recasting the signal diplomatic event of the nineteenth century away from the perspective of *realpolitik*—an engagement between power-maximizing states—Vick has made a significant contribution by illuminating how socio-cultural factors shaped the roles and agendas of the distinguished delegates.

From a similar perspective to the one employed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their classic study of nationalism *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Vick explores the essential function of imagery and rituals in legitimizing the Congress and its aristocratic negotiators in the opening chapter. When the Austrian Emperor welcomed Tsar Alexander I of Russia and King Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia across the Tabor Bridge, the three leaders created an aestheticized scene of royalty, power, and grace for public consumption. Indeed, evocations of patriotism, nationalism, and religious sentiment furnished the ceremony with a transcendent aura— one manufactured and reproduced on a number of occasions during the conference.

Music, which was ever-present in Vienna over the long months of diplomatic wrangling, bridged the chasms between languages, nationalities, and social classes. Both the privileged and the non-privileged lined up to take in the lengthy oratorio *Samson* by George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) in mid-October; they then watched the rhapsodic revolutionary Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) personally conduct his Seventh Symphony and several other pieces including *The Glorious Moment* – a cantata created to celebrate the Congress. Instead of the waltz, it was the wildly-popular polonaise that swept the powerful, the pretentious, and the pretenders onto the dance floors of Vienna.

Over the course of the third chapter, Vick sheds light on the culture of the salons and explores their connections to the city and the conference. Beyond an elite gathering, the salon acted as a conduit for bourgeois public opinion and served as a listening post for delegates and second-tier diplomats. By illuminating how the salons shaped the discourse of the Congress during the heated disputes over Poland and Saxony, for example, Vick establishes (or re-establishes) the importance and influence of social networks to the outcome of negotiations and tangibly measures the effect of public opinion on the course of diplomacy.

If Vick's use of the Wilsonian phrase "self-determination" to describe ethnic claims for statehood initially seems anachronistic, it is consistent with the rising tides of tolerance and nationalism. In a surprisingly progressive and ecumenical dialogue, religious literature was both disseminated and devoured by Catholics and Protestants across doctrinal lines, and the Congress addressed a number of thorny questions pertaining to religious minorities raised by the American and French Revolutions. From the salons to the official negotiations, the question of whether or not to accord equal rights and privileges to Jews was deliberated in the context of "unalienable rights" and the "rights of man." While the nascent states of Belgium and the Netherlands became models in establishing religious freedom for all citizens, the persecution of Jews not only continued in the lands of the late Holy Roman Empire and elsewhere but it also increased after the downfall of Napoleon.

In Chapter Five "Europe in the Wider World," Vick advances scholarship on the Congress by casting its workings within the burgeoning transatlantic humanitarian revolution. Indeed, no contemporary issue more than the ongoing slave trade accelerated the cause of universal

human rights. In the spring and summer of 1814, abolitionists launched a multifaceted campaign strategy to end the inhumane practice. While William Wilberforce (1759-1833) and Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) personally lobbied monarchs and heads of state, abolitionists also exerted diplomatic pressure on the Portuguese and Spanish kingdoms. Across the English Channel, a petition against the trade was signed by more than one million British citizens and submitted to Parliament. At the Congress, Clarkson circulated a tract in both English and German for the purpose of swaying Metternich and other German-speaking notables to declare the slave trade contrary to the principles of “humanity, justice, and religion” (199-200).

To what degree did Vienna establish peace and security for the Continent? In contrast to previous works, Vick renders a more critical judgment on the long-term achievements of the Congress. Although multilateral diplomacy advanced the course of international law and checked Russian power on the Continent, delegates failed to adequately address vexed questions concerning democratic and nationalist aspirations in France, the German Confederation, the Italian states, and Ottoman Greece. As a result, Europe witnessed significant upheaval in the Greek War of Independence (1821-1832), the French Revolution of 1830, the Revolutions of 1848, and the *Risorgimento* – the decades-long movement for Italian unification that was finally realized in 1871. It is here that Vick seems to have missed a grand opportunity to render a more decisive verdict. Could the Congress have more successfully balanced interests and ideals within the parameters of intellectual thought? To what extent did the Congress reflect a departure from the structure of politics? These pressing questions beg sharper analysis.

While two long and volatile centuries have passed since royals and diplomats gathered in Vienna to reorder the Continent, time has not diluted the consequences of their monumental decisions on the fate of peoples and nations. In *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon* (2014), Brian E. Vick has produced an elegantly-written volume restoring the Congress to its historical context as a discursive event lodged between the lingering remnants of the old order and visions of the revolutionary era. As such, it is an indispensable guide to the world of 1814-1815 – and to the one of 2014-2015.

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