

THE 19TH-CENTURY
INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM
Changes in the Structure
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THE problem to be posed in this essay is a central one in the history of international politics. Having dealt with it intensively in the 19th and early 20th centuries, historians of international politics have long regarded it as basically solved. The question is how to account for the overall peaceful stability of 19th-century European international politics from 1815 on. The phenomenon in question is a familiar one, and the conventional answer is firmly established in the historical literature. In describing in unavoidably oversimplified fashion the phenomenon and the normal explanation, I hope to show that a real question remains and that a different kind of broad answer is more satisfactory.

Most scholars would agree that Europe was more stable from 1815 to 1850 than during any equivalent era in the entire 18th century, and that, taken as a whole, the 19th century was more peaceful than the 18th. Various explanations have been offered: the widespread exhaustion, warweariness, fear of revolution, and desire for peace produced by a generation of war and upheaval from 1789 to 1815; a moderate peace settlement, a stable balance of power, a system of diplomacy by conference, a Concert of Europe, and other diplomatic devices; the prevalence of monarchial conservative ideology; international cooperation to preserve the existing social order; and prudent, skillful statesmanship. The explanations are complementary rather than conflicting, so that historians can disagree on emphases while tacitly accepting that the phenomenon can be explained adequately by some combination of these factors.

The explanations involve an explicit or implicit denial of any systemic change in international politics in this more peaceful, stable era. They do so in three general ways. First, the 1815 settlement is commonly interpreted as a restoration of an 18th-century-style balance of power, a con-

scious return to classical 18th-century political principles.' Second, most if not all historians see the post-1815 change in the character of international politics as temporary, with stability and harmony beginning to fade by 1820 and in definite decline by 1830, and normal political competition back in force after 1848.' Third, peace and stability are usually explained as volitional and dispositional rather than structural-i.e., a matter of what statesmen chose to do and were inclined to do in international politics, rather than what the prevailing system constrained them from doing or permitted them to do.

On these particular counts, this essay disputes the general consensus. It is not exactly wrong, but it leaves important things out. Nineteenth-century international peace and stability derived mainly from systemic change, reflected in major institutionalized arrangements and practices divergent from the 18th-century norm. The 1815 settlement did not restore an 18th-century-type balance of power or revive 18th-century political practices; the European equilibrium established in 1815 and lasting well into the 19th century differed sharply from so-called balances of power in the 18th. The systemic change, moreover, proved enduring; it lasted into the latter part of the century, despite the upheavals of 1848-1850 and the wars of 1854-1871. Furthermore, 18th-century political patterns of conduct differed from their 18th-century counterparts not so much because of the more pacific, conservative

dispositions, aims, and desires of most statesmen—this difference, if it existed, tended to disappear quickly—but because the two prevailing systems afforded different systemic constraints and possibilities for action.

Much of the argument involved in this counter-thesis cannot be presented here, much less demonstrated. To show, for example, how the typical 18th-century conception of the European equilibrium differed from the prevailing 18th-century ideas of balance of power, and how it worked differently, or to explain how new rules and practices of politics emerged in the crucible of the Napoleonic Wars, would require lengthy historical analyses. In this essay, I intend only to present a plausible argument that systemic changes really occurred, and to identify certain ways in which they show up.

To start with, the most impressive aspect of post-1815 European politics is not simply the virtual absence of war. More notable is an array of positive results achieved in international politics in this era, of problems settled and dangers averted by diplomacy. Leaving the remarkable record of the Vienna Congress in this respect aside entirely, a short list of the accomplishments would have to include the following: the speedy evacuation of Allied armies from France and France's quick reintegration into the European Concert; the completion and implementation of the federal constitution of Germany; the suppression of revolutions in Naples, Piedmont, Spain, and the Danubian Principalities by international action, without serious European quarrels; the recognition of Latin American independence; the prevention of war between Russia and Turkey for seven years (1821 to 1828), and a moderate end to that war after it did break out; the creation of an independent Greece; the prompt recognition of a new government in France after the revolution of 1830; the creation of an independent, neutralized Belgium, despite major dangers of war and obstacles to a settlement created mainly by quarrels between the Dutch and the Belgians; the prevention of international conflict in 1830–1832 over revolts in Italy, Germany, and Poland; the managing of civil wars in Spain and Portugal without great-power conflict; and two successful joint European rescue operations for the Ottoman Empire.

One need not accept that all these outcomes represented long-range gains for domestic and international peace and stability in Europe; nor would anyone claim that they were reached without crises, tensions, and crosspurposes. Nonetheless, it remains remarkable that such results could be achieved as all-Chat 19th-century statesmen could, with a certain minimum of good will and effort, repeatedly reach viable, agreed-upon outcomes to hotly disputed critical problems. The 18th century simply does not record diplomatic achievements of this kind. To the contrary, enormous efforts were repeatedly expended by 18th-century statesmen not so much to solve problems as simply to keep them under control and avert breakdown—usually in vain. Consider, for example, how England and France struggled fruitlessly to control Elizabeth Farnese's Spain, and tried not to get into war with each other in 1739–41 and 1754–56; how much useless effort Charles VI put into securing the peaceful accession of Maria Theresa in Austria; how Austria and France unsuccessfully attempted to keep Russia from dominating Poland and the Ottoman Empire or from partitioning them. The list could readily be extended.

WORLD POLITICS

Of course, we are told that European statesmen after 1815 were in a different

mood. But were they? How much so? Previous European wars, allowing for differences in population **and** level of economic development, had been almost as costly and exhausting as those of 1648-1649. The Thirty Years' War had probably been worse and had left behind comparable legacies of war-weariness and fear of revolution. After the conclusion of every great war, in 1648, **1713-1714**, 1763, 1783, 1801, 1807, and 1815, there had been statesmen who desperately yearned for peace, wanting not just peace treaties **but durable** peace settlements. The results achieved in this direction in the early 18th century alone by George I, Stanhope, the Abbé Dubois, Baron Munchausen, Carteret, Cardinal Fleury, Townshend, Walpole, Bernstorff, and others in no way compare with the will and energy expended, or with the record of 1815-1848. The presence or absence of good will and peaceful intentions clearly does not suffice to explain this phenomenon ⁴

Moreover, the conservative "Holy Alliance" spirit of **1815** cannot **mainly** account for 19th-century international stability, for **this** spirit, never universal in Europe, clearly did not survive the revolutions of 1848, while the structural changes in the states system established in 1815 largely did. The upheavals of 1848-1850 affected European international politics in three main ways. First, the revolutions discredited the so-called Metternich system, the attempt to repress liberalism, nationalism, and **revolution** purely by **authoritarian** preventive measures. **After 1850, even** governments that were still basically authoritarian, such as those of Austria, Prussia, and Louis Napoleon's France, tried to deal with national discontent and revolution by active policies of modernization and economic development directed from above; these policies tended to promote rivalry between states, especially in the economic area. Second, the Holy Alliance between the three Eastern powers was undermined. Prussia and Austria once again became open rivals in Germany, and **Russia and Austria were** concealed rivals in the Balkans, **while** France under

Louis Napoleon and to some extent Britain under Palmerston looked for **chances to exploit and widen the rifts. Third, European conservatism** itself made long strides away from the pacific, legalistic internationalism of Metternich's generation, and toward its own union with nationalism. The new generation of leaders, though often almost as conservative in domestic politics as Metternich had been, hoped to defend the existing order not so much by preserving international peace and monarchical solidarity as by maintaining a strong army and an active foreign policy that would attach the masses to the regime.

In other words, the events of 1848 generally undermined the old monarchical-conservative spirit of 1815 and liberated new forces of nationalism and liberalism even in Eastern Europe, thereby changing the tone and character of international politics. With the old motives for a peaceful, stable international system in decline or in disrepute, the system itself should presumably have been overthrown. Yet, despite revolutions in 1848-1850 more widespread than those of 1789-1793 and almost as radical; despite clashes between insurgents and police or armies almost everywhere in Central and Southern Europe, and serious civil conflicts in France, Prussia, Saxony, Southwest Germany, Naples, Lombardy, Venetia, Lower Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, Croatia, Transylvania, and the Rumanian Principalities; despite two wars in strategically vital areas, one in Northern Italy, the other in Schleswig-Holstein, each involving one major power in combat and other major powers in political complications, what actually happened in international politics was that, when everything was over, not one war between Great Powers had broken out, not one international

boundary had been altered, and not one treaty had been torn up. In short, though all the factors that were said to have produced peace and stability after 1815 had been suspended or destroyed, peace had been maintained, and the international crises had been managed.

But, the critic will reply, not for long. When the Crimean War (1853-56) broke out, it wrecked the European Concert and paved the way for the greater convulsions of **1859-1871**. True enough, but not perhaps the most important truth. A.J.P. Taylor indicates the salient fact, without exactly explaining it, in his essay entitled "Crimea: The War that Would Not Boil."~ Considering the explosive elements in it, this war should in

the normal course of events have become a general European conflict. It was the first war between European great powers in 39 years. Britain and Russia, world rivals and the strongest powers in Europe, were pitted against each other. Public opinion, mass passions, and hostile ideologies figured prominently in the outbreak and conduct of the war. It involved the most complicated, persistent, and dangerous question in European politics, the Eastern Question. And above all, two of the major combatants, Britain and France, persistently employed every means at their command to make it a general war by drawing Austria, Prussia, the German Confederation, and other neutrals into it. The leader in this effort, Lord Palmerston, pursued a typical 19th-century war aim, a sweeping reduction of Russia's territory and power, ostensibly to restore the balance of power in Europe.

And what were the results, after two years of costly fighting and unremitting diplomatic pressure? No neutral joined the war except Sardinia-Piedmont, which came in almost as a mercenary auxiliary for reasons of its own. Despite his great energy and popularity in Britain, Palmerston could not even carry his own cabinet along in his extreme war aims; in the end, Britain was persuaded by France, with Austria's help, to end the war and make peace before it wanted to. The war had some profound domestic and international consequences, without a doubt. Russia was humiliated and weakened internally; Austria was left isolated and vulnerable, and the Italian, German, and Balkan questions were thrown open. But France won only a prestige victory, and Britain not even that, while the map of Europe and the treaty system remained almost unchanged. The only real winners, it turned out, were those who could later exploit the war for their individual purposes: Sardinia-Piedmont, Prussia, and the nationalists in the Rumanian Principalities.

To be sure, the wars of Italian and German unification quickly followed, and profoundly altered the map and the treaty system of Europe. They had significant effects upon the European states system, particularly the long-range impact of the so-called unification of Germany? Yet this very period of upheaval in some ways demonstrates the persistent strength of the European system, showing how even in its decline it continued to inhibit conflict and promote international arrangements and stability in a way that could hardly have occurred in the 18th century.

Two striking features of these wars were the difficulties Cavour and

Bismarck encountered in getting them started under the right conditions, and the relative ease and speed with which they were ended. By 1859, Austria and Sardinia-Piedmont had been waging a cold war for a decade; their diplomatic relations had been suspended for a year, and both powers were poised in armed confrontation;

Cavour had concluded a conspiratorial agreement for war with Napoleon III; revolutionary nationalist agitation was rife in Italy and tension was high in Europe; and Austria had almost no friends and many enemies. Despite all this, Cavour was at the point of resigning in despair in April 1859 because his quest for war had been foiled by European diplomacy; at the last moment, Austria rescued him with its fatal ultimatum to Sardinia.¹⁰ When Bismarck became Minister-President of Prussia in 1862, Austria's position was even worse and the prevailing conservative restraints upon the exercise of *Machtpolitik* were still weaker. Bismarck matched or possibly exceeded Cavour in skill, daring, and lack of scruple, and he operated from a far stronger base of power. Yet it took him four years before he could maneuver Austria into war under the right conditions. When he chose to confront France four years later, only a combination of amazing luck and French blunders saved him from political defeat and enabled him to conduct a German national war against France without European interference. In other words, in both 1866 and 1870, despite the undoubted decay of the European system, there remained enough residual resistance to the kind of ruthless 18th-century *Realpolitik* Bismarck frankly espoused to make his task difficult."

Like Palmerston's efforts in the Crimean War, the record of 1866 and 1870 illustrates how 18th-century politics worked when tried in the 19th century. Cavour and Bismarck were in many respects 18th-century-style *Kabinettspolitiker*, pursuing the traditional expansionist policies of the Houses of Brandenburg and Savoy. Their 18th-century predecessors, Frederick the Great and the Dukes of Savoy, had had different problems, however: their wars were easy enough to start, but difficult to control and to end. Historians have often noted the remarkably limited extent, duration, and violence of the wars between 1859 and 1871, considering how

much was at stake in them, and have often explained this as resulting from the skill and moderation of Bismarck and Cavour. Leaving aside the question of whether the aims and tactics of either statesman can be called moderate (Cavour's almost certainly were not and Bismarck's only in a limited sense)," that kind of explanation is clearly inadequate systematically. Cavour did not end the war in 1859; France and Austria did, in good part because of European pressure. Cavour was not responsible for the European response to his actions in 1860-1866, and was not even alive to see Italian unity completed. As for Bismarck, remarkable though his fertility in expedients was, he clearly was working within a framework of limits and opportunities set by the European system, and he always knew it.

Even more surprising than the limited extent and duration of these wars is the rapid integration of their results into the European system. Two states that had aggrandized themselves by methods widely condemned in Europe, defeating and humiliating other European great powers in the process, now sought recognition and acceptance. One leaped in a decade from last to first place in the European pentarchy; the other, though still essentially a second-class state, now demanded recognition as a great power. One was widely feared as being militarist and ruthless, the other generally despised as weak and unreliable. Yet both were readily accepted into the great-power club and, more important, no effort was ever made to reverse this outcome. For the other powers, this involved not merely coming to terms with accomplished facts and present realities. It meant putting aside deeply rooted traditions and goals, and incurring real risks. Austria, for example, has been accused of hoping after 1859 to reverse the outcome in Italy (which is largely true)

and, after 1866, of plotting revenge on Prussia for Sadowa (which is almost wholly false). What needs explanation and ought to catch the attention of historians is instead the astonishing readiness of Austria to come to terms with the new states of Italy and Germany. It involved seeking good relations in the south with a state that was bound to be its rival in the Adriatic and its potential competitor in the Balkans, and that still harbored claims to Austrian territory. At the same time, Austria sought an actual alliance with its historic rival to the north, now expanded into a national state that threatened Austria militarily, jeopardized the loyalty of its most important national group, and undermined its *raison d'être* as a multinational state and European great power.

In a similarly myopic fashion, historians have concentrated their attention on France's refusal to accept the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, and the fatal effect this is supposed to have had on Franco-German relations. Actually, while the war was still going on, France accepted something that proved to be vastly more dangerous for French security and power than the loss of Alsace-Lorraine—namely, the union of South Germany with the North under Prussian control; now, a militarily superior Germany would directly face France along a greatly extended Franco-German frontier. Russia, in accepting German unification under Prussia, swallowed the loss of its most important security asset, a defensive glacis to the west, the cornerstone of which had always been a federal, divided structure for Germany and a rivalry between Austria and Prussia that Russia could rely upon and exploit.

The question is not whether the European powers were wise in thus accepting the *fatu accornplis* presented to them by Sardinia-Piedmont and Prussia. My own view is that in many ways this was a fatal error, and that Italian and German national unification needed at least to be controlled and legalized by Europe in concert, even if after the fact. The important consideration here is that this kind of peaceful accommodation to drastic changes in the system did not happen, and could not have happened, in the 18th century. One only needs to remember, by way of contrast, how long and determinedly Austria resisted the loss of Silesia to Prussia, and France the loss of colonial supremacy to Britain. Some systemic change is required to account for it.

There is another important and general phenomenon of 19th-century international politics; it is suggested in the title of A.J.P. Taylor's *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918*. Actually, for most of the period covered, up to 1890 or 1900 at least, there was no such struggle for mastery in the sense of a conscious drive to achieve preeminent position and dominant power. Although it makes sense to speak of a struggle for mastery in Germany and Italy, no one state ever tried for, much less achieved, such mastery in Europe as a whole, and it is questionable whether any coalition did. Britain enjoyed command of the seas, and for a long while was preeminent in empire, industry, and commerce. But so far as continental Europe is concerned, what Lord Salisbury said was always true and well known: "We are fish." Russia was the strongest member of the Holy Alliance up to the 1850s, but never dominated Europe as

a whole, or even Central Europe; after the Crimean War, it no longer even led the

Eastern bloc. The common view that Russia enjoyed an enormous and growing power and prestige in Europe until the **Crimean War** **broke the** bubble is a great exaggeration.⁵ After 1815, Russia never was the arbiter of Europe or exercised the dominant influence in Germany that Catherine II or Paul I had enjoyed for a time, and the young Alexander I had aspired to. France, Austria, and Italy were never serious candidates for mastery. That leaves only Bismarck's Germany. What it enjoyed (or rather, possessed without really enjoying it) was, in Andreas Hillgruber's phrase, a labile half-hegemony in Europe, an unintended result of Bismarck's policy.⁶ Basically, he had not wanted to control Europe, but to disentangle Prussia and Germany from extraneous European quarrels. Instead, as Lothar Gall's excellent biography shows, he became a sorcerer's apprentice, overwhelmed by his own success, compelled to manage and manipulate European problems he had hoped to be able to **ignore**.⁷ ~

The same thesis applies to 19th-century coalitions and alliances: in contrast to 18th-century ones, they were **not** bids for mastery in Europe. **The** dominant coalition of 1815 was strictly a defensive one against France (and tacitly against one of its members, Russia); it quickly broke down. **After** 1820, the **Holy Alliance** could not control **events** in **Western** Europe, and the Western powers could not control those in Central and Eastern Europe. Near Eastern alignments frequently crossed and shifted. Britain and France could not create a dominant coalition against Russia in the 1850s: Napoleon III toyed with the idea of a dominant Franco-Russian or Franco-Prussian-Italian coalition, but never seriously pursued it. Bismarck's alliance system after 1879 was a reluctant defensive coalition intended to keep France from seeking revenge, and Austria and Italy or Austria and Russia from fighting each other. The rival alliances of the 1890s were basically blocking coalitions in Europe; they were used as bases to compete for world position.

This is not a quarrel over words, or one of those unavoidable but tiresome disputes by historians over periodization or taxonomy. It involves the fundamental nature of the 19th-century international system, and challenges the overall view of **the** history of international politics expounded by Ludwig Dehio⁸ and many others, who saw it as a succession

of bids by various powers for hegemony or supremacy, met ultimately by defeat and the restoration of a balance of power. That thesis may fit other eras (though even here one can have serious doubts). It does not suit the 19th century, which contains no Charles V, Philip II, Louis XIV, Chatham, Catherine the Great, Napoleon, Hitler, or Stalin. The reason is not that 19th-century statesmen were wiser or more restrained, but that the 19th-century system inhibited bids for mastery in Europe.

Certainly there was serious competition in 19th-century international politics. It was essentially competition for advantage, like the competition for shares of the market in an oligopolistic industry. The main advantage sought was the ability to profit from the international system at little cost, to enjoy freedom and choices others did not, and to escape burdens and payments that others had to bear. "Being the arbiter of Europe," "having a free hand," and "holding the balance" were code terms for this advantageous situation. The critical consideration, in any case, is that in the 19th century, unlike in others, the competition for advantage went on for a long time without degenerating into a struggle for mastery.

Some evidence even exists to satisfy those who would like quantifiable **data** to

support the supposed qualitative difference between the 18th- and 19th-century international politics. This evidence lies in the numbers of battlefield deaths in European wars in the two centuries. It should not be pressed too hard, of course. Statistics are not very reliable, calculations are inexact and hard to interpret in this area, and there are many variables, such as the size of the respective armies, the effects of different weaponry, tactics, and strategy, different standards of hygiene and care of the wounded, and so forth. Nonetheless, the contrast between the two centuries is revealing enough as an indicator of the scale and frequency of warfare to be meaningful even if large margins are allowed for error. If one takes the total number of deaths for 1715-1792 (1858,000, according to a recent assessment) and compares it to that for 1815-1914 (639,000), and then figures in the growth in the population of Europe between the two centuries (not quite double) and the greater number of years in the 19th-century sample, the ratio of 18th- to 19th-century battlefield deaths per year is somewhere between 7:1 and 8:1.

Thus, a prima facie case exists that a profound, durable change occurred in international politics after 1815. Three features introduced into international politics in 1815-1825, which became constitutive elements of the system, help to account for this change, and make it systematic in character. They made it possible for 19th-century statesmen to manage three central and perennial problems of international politics in the face of which the 18th century system had been relatively helpless. The three problems were: how to assure a reasonable amount of mutual security and status for all the great powers; how to insulate Europe from extra-European sources of conflict; and how to reconcile the legitimate requirements of smaller states for a secure independence with the equally legitimate and unavoidable quest of great powers for spheres of influence beyond their frontiers.

The three new elements of international politics that served to meet these problems were the treaty system of 1815 and the European Concert; the "fencing off" of the European state system from the extra-European world; and the establishment of a system of intermediary bodies between the great powers. I will make no attempt here to show how these elements arose, on what new bases of collective outlook they rested, how they worked in most individual cases, what led to their gradual breakdown and supersession, and how this affected the system. That sort of historical exposition must be done if the argument is to hold up in the long run, but to attempt it here would shatter the bounds of this essay.

The treaty system of 1815 and the European Concert are the best-known elements, and the easiest to define and illustrate. Beginning with the Vienna settlement, the 19th-century international system guaranteed the existence, security, status, and vital interests of all the European great powers. Between 1815 and 1815, the members of the final coalition against France worked out Europe's boundaries in a way mutually tolerable to all the important powers, including France, and then guaranteed these territorial arrangements by a series of interlocking treaties and a general great-power alliance, from which France was initially excluded, but which it soon joined. A variety of procedures and devices strengthened this network of treaty guarantees, including a system of diplomacy by conference and some general principles of a European Concert. The

later protected the rights, interests, and equal status of the great powers above all, but they also committed these powers to the performance of certain duties connected with those rights—respect for treaties, noninterference in other states' internal affairs, willingness to participate in the Concert's decisions and actions, and a general observance of legality and

restraint in their international actions. This system of guarantees for the rights, status, and existence of the great powers, though egregiously violated and badly strained in the mid-century wars, managed to make something of a comeback and to endure after a fashion till the turn of the century.

By contrast, though 18th-century statesmen and theorists had often talked about such a system,^o the rights, status, vital interests, and very existence of great powers were never safe at that time, and were often deliberately attacked. Attempts to partition the territory of other major powers and to reduce them to second- or third-rank status were a normal part of 18th-century politics—constitutive and necessary features of the system rather than its accidental products.³ Thus, the total destruction of the European balance during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars represents merely the climax of a process begun much earlier, rooted in the conviction shared by all great powers and many smaller ones that, in order to preserve their status and security, they not only needed to aggrandize themselves but also to eliminate the threats posed by the existence of their rivals.

The second major element is not as obvious. In the 19th-century system, international politics within Europe was essentially separated from colonial, maritime, and commercial competition between European powers in the non-European world. In Gustav Adolph Rein's phrase, Europe was hedged in, fenced off from the rest of the world ~ The most striking evidence of this change from the 18th century is what happened to maritime and colonial questions in the peace settlement and after it. Like the major 18th-century wars, the wars of the Revolution and Napoleon were world contests fought around much of the globe. The main stakes in the struggle between France and Britain were maritime and colonial su

premacv which, after 1807, became almost the only reason *for* continuing the war. While France's most effective propaganda weapon in Europe was to denounce Britain's tyranny on the seas, Napoleon's attempt to counter British seapower through the Continental System may have done more than anything else to hasten his ultimate downfall. The maritime and colonial conflict had enormous world-historical results. Among other things, it brought the United States into the war and helped confirm its independence, led to the revolutionary liberation of Latin America, and laid the foundations of Britain's territorial empire in India. Moreover, maritime and colonial issues were heavily involved in European international politics; a good part of the diplomacy of the various allied coalitions, including the final one, consisted of efforts by various continental powers to get Britain to make colonial and maritime concessions to France and its allies in the interests of continental peace. Yet before the war was over, this intimate, seemingly indissoluble connection between European and overseas wars and politics had been severed. Britain flatly barred the issue of maritime law from discussion at the peace table and firmly rejected any Russian or allied mediation of its war with the United States. As to the colonial settlement, the British insisted that though they would be generous (and on the whole they were), in principle they would not make colonial concessions in return for France's agreement to continental peace terms. First Britain's major allies, then

France, and finally its client Holland accepted the terms Britain offered, and that ended it. The only overseas issue discussed at Vienna concerned the slave trade, which involved morality and prestige more than power or material interests. In other words, Europe accepted British naval and colonial supremacy, choosing to live with it and, so far as strictly European politics was concerned, to ignore it.

Something similar happened with regard to the Ottoman Empire, which had become a major zone of European conflict in the late 18th century and the Napoleonic wars. Proposals were made to include it in the general settlement and its guarantees, but they were not pursued. Russia had unsettled grievances against the Turks which it did not want to submit to European control; Metternich—who viewed the Balkans as part of Asia, and Austria's southeastern border with Turkey as equivalent to a sea frontier—wanted the Ottoman Empire left as it was. Other parts of Asia (India, Persia, the Middle East) also underwent major changes in the Napoleonic wars; some historians have traced the origins of Anglo-Russian world rivalry back to 1815 or earlier's But even if certain roots of the

later struggle can be detected at this stage, the British government as a whole did not begin to see Russia as a serious menace to India and the empire until the 1830s; even then, British policy remained Europe-centered overall.⁶ The post-Vienna period, in fact, witnessed the abatement of both rivalry and intimacy in Anglo-Russian relations. Before 1815, Catherine II, Paul I, and Alexander I had each at various times been avowed enemies and close allies of Britain. After 1815, the two powers were neither one nor the other—never enemies until 1853, and never close allies, despite the efforts of Nicholas I and his advisers to reach a partnership with England on European and Near Eastern questions.⁷ In the typical post-Vienna manner, each power saw the other as a potential rival to be managed by ostensible friendship. In any case, the Eastern powers—especially Austria and Prussia, but Russia as well—did not let extra-European questions seriously affect their policies in Europe.⁸

Nor, in the main, did the English and French. Their rivalry overseas never disappeared entirely after 1815, and flared up on occasion over various issues, such as the slave trade, Britain's right of search, Latin America, Madagascar, Tahiti, and Algeria. But this was more an irritant than a serious danger, it kept the two powers from genuine entente but never threatened the peace. In Europe, Britain and France were able to cooperate in a wary fashion in the Iberian Peninsula, Belgium, Greece, and the Near East. The only serious crisis between them, in 1840, arose over a European Concert issue, the Eastern Question, where a perceived insult to France's honor was deemed more important than any blow to her interests.⁹ In a similar way, Britain and the Netherlands remained friends in Europe despite their commercial and colonial rivalries and disputes in the Far East.

To dismiss this shielding of European politics from extra-European quarrels as unimportant, or to attribute it simply to Britain's unchallenged superiority overseas, is to ignore or underrate the sharp contrast between the 18th and 19th centuries in this respect, as well as the change

in outlook that made it possible. The 18th century was filled with wars in North America, the West Indies, India, and on the high seas, which spilled over into Europe, and vice versa. Eighteenth-century statesmen had often tried, without success, to separate European from extra-European quarrels—witness Walpole's

failure in 1739-1740, and Newcastle's in 1754-1756.¹ Nineteenth-century statesmen not only could separate the two if they wished, but found it relatively easy and normal to do so. Europe's acceptance of British maritime and overseas domination does need explanation; it was not automatic. During the latter part of the 18th century and the Napoleonic Wars, British naval practices aroused much resentment of Britain on the continent, as British statesmen were well aware; several major efforts at united action were promoted against them (the Leagues of Armed Neutrality led by Russia in 1780 and 1800-1801, and the Continental System). No such anti-British continental combination was ever contemplated in the 19th century until Russia proposed one during the Boer War, and then it came to nothing. One major reason was that Britain made its maritime and colonial supremacy far more tolerable to other powers, and even advantageous to them in some respects, than it had been in the 18th century. Thus the position advanced by Friedrich von Gentz and other defenders of Britain during the Napoleonic war—that the anti-British arguments about maritime law and neutral rights were spurious and that Britain's control of the seas, though vital to Britain's existence, threatened no one else—was made good in the postwar era. With the gradual transition from a mercantile to a free-trade empire, British maritime supremacy became at worst only an irritant and a latent threat to others, and in some ways even an asset. British naval vessels cleared out pirates in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to the advantage of all nations,² guarded sea lanes all could use, and held colonies with whom all could trade. Moreover, while expanding its own empire, Britain did not for most of the century seriously interfere with imperial expansion and consolidation by other states, especially France and the Netherlands. Nineteenth-century Britain is often praised for maintaining peace and the balance of power within Europe, and criticized for greedy imperialism outside it. So far as the European states system is concerned, the verdict could well be reversed. Britain, in my view, did not really

maintain the European balance and more than once endangered the peace of Europe, but the way Britain ran its empire contributed much to making the 19th-century system work.

I

The third element is the least recognized, but quite possibly the most important. The settlement of 1815 established a broad system of intermediary bodies in Europe: smaller states situated and organized to serve as buffers and spheres of influence. While they separated the great powers, making it more difficult for them to fight, they also linked them by giving them something in common to manage. The importance of intermediary bodies in the 19th-century system has been little recognized not because the facts about them are unknown, but because these facts have been interpreted in a different framework. The arrangements made concerning smaller powers in the Vienna settlement have traditionally been viewed in terms of balance-of-power politics, or a barrier system designed to contain France, or territorial deals and compensations negotiated to meet rival state and dynastic claims. None of these explanations is wrong. Statesmen thought and acted according to these ideas, as the documents show, though they also talked about intermediary bodies and their uses. But here is where one must distinguish between what the leaders intended to do and what they actually did. The system of intermediary bodies emerging from the Vienna settlement was less a product of deliberate planning than it was the ultimate outcome of arrangements reached mainly for other, more immediate purposes. The

most important historic results are often unintentional. Mazzini once said of the Italian *Risorgimento*, "We aimed for ten and achieved two." In 1815, European statesmen aimed for two and achieved six or seven.

The Kingdom of the United Netherlands, formed of the Dutch provinces, Belgium, and Luxemburg, is a good case in point. It was of course designed to be the keystone of the proposed defensive barrier against France. In its actual role and function, however, it was no more simply a barrier state than Poland or Czechoslovakia after World War I were simply part of the French *cordon sanitaire* against Germany and Russia. King William I intended his kingdom to be an independent power playing a meaningful general role in European politics; that is the main reason he fought so stubbornly against the loss of Belgium after 1830.³³ Metternich specifically called the Netherlands an intermediary body linking Austria

to Britain, through South and West Germany, forming a conservative phalanx to keep the restless powers, Russia and France, from weighing on the European center Prussia, once its own conflicts with the Dutch were settled, considered the Netherlands a sphere of influence to be shared with England, linking Prussia and Britain. The other German princes looked at William, a member of the German Confederation as Grand Duke of Luxemburg, as their ally in preserving the independence of middle-sized and small states against Austria and Prussia's. Even Russia considered its influence in the Netherlands important and for this reason promoted a marriage between the Dutch Crown Prince and a Russian Grand Duchess. In short, the United Netherlands served a number of functions as an intermediary body; most of these survived when its role as a barrier against France disappeared with the Belgian revolt of 1830. Belgium itself became an intermediary body with various important functions aside from that of being a neutral barrier against France.³⁶

Scandinavia (Denmark and Sweden-Norway) represents another intermediary body after 1815, but one to which balance-of-power and barrier-system considerations hardly apply at all. Once the territorial struggle between Sweden and Denmark over Norway was settled in 1814, the Baltic was opened to general, peaceful trade. None of the three neighboring great powers, Russia, Prussia, and Britain, tried to dominate it exclusively, but all were anxious to maintain free access through the straits and preserve the status quo. Scandinavia was thus effectively removed from great-power politics, ending the centuries-old Northern Question, which had been a major arena of conflict throughout the 18th century and the Napoleonic wars

Neutral Switzerland is the clearest and most familiar example of an intermediary body, in the peace settlement. It is important to correct an impression fostered by some Swiss historians that, in restoring and neutralizing the Swiss Confederation in the Vienna settlement, the great powers merely reestablished a traditional Swiss arrangement, with the intention of removing Switzerland entirely from European politics. Although the allies certainly based their work on Swiss tradition, the Swiss Confederation of 1815 was distinctly a great-power accomplishment

something the cantons themselves, riddled by internal rivalries, could never have achieved on their own.³⁷ Moreover, in guaranteeing the Swiss federal constitution, the allies were not attempting to remove Switzerland from the European states system, but to ensure that the Swiss played certain important roles within it. An

independent, neutral, loosely federated Switzerland was intended to be part of the barrier system, to hold the Alpine passes, to provide a bulwark against revolution, and to afford a safe sphere of influence for its neighbors. Including the Swiss constitution in the Final Act of Vienna did not mean that no power could say anything about Swiss affairs, but that no one power could have an exclusive say; all had the right to hold Switzerland to the performance of its international obligations. From 1815 to 1848, Switzerland's neighbors made considerable use of their right of intervention in Switzerland, sometimes illegitimately, sometimes with good reason.

The German Confederation (*Deutscher Bund*) was an even more important intermediary body than Switzerland. The conventional textbook view is that the *Bund* represented a good way of organizing Germany for external defense against France and Russia without making it a threat to its neighbors. For internal purposes, however, it was considered unsatisfactory, since it kept the German territory divided into many small states dominated by Austria and Prussia, who used their control to repress liberalism, constitutionalism, and nationalism. This liberal-nationalist view contains some truth, but also considerable distortion, as scholars have long recognized. For one thing, the main foreign policy problem of Germany was not the external threat from France or Russia, but the internal rivalry between Austria and Prussia. Their 18th-century conflicts and wars had devastated Germany, destroyed all chances for reform in the old Empire, promoted both French and Russian influence in German affairs, and ultimately led to conquest by the French;⁹ The partnership between Austria and Prussia and their joint victory in the War of Liberation and the final campaign against France temporarily overcame this rivalry, but did not itself solve the problem. It remained alive during the Congress of Vienna, reaching a climax in the Polish-Saxon question; in 1814-1815, both French and Russian leaders still entertained ideas about regaining their former influence in German affairs by exploiting Austro-Prussian differences. Thus, from the standpoint of the European system, the main function of the German Confederation was to make the problem of Aus

tro-Prussian rivalry manageable, which it did for almost half a century a remarkable achievement. The whole of Germany became an intermediary body for Europe generally and for Austria and Prussia in particular. It was neither divided into separate Austrian and Prussian spheres, as Prussia wanted, nor was the Empire restored under Habsburg leadership. Instead, Germany was united into a princely confederation of independent states which Austria and Prussia had to manage jointly. This same approach served to make Germany's other foreign policy problems, also internal in origin, similarly manageable—it settled rivalries and territorial disputes between various smaller states, between estates and princes, between the beneficiaries and the victims of Napoleonic rule, between Catholics and Protestants, and even between different factions of Catholics and Protestants.

It is equally mistaken to assume that the main forces that the German Confederation of 1815 needed to accommodate, but chose instead to repress, were liberal and nationalist ideas and movements stimulated by the French Revolution and the War of Liberation. These ideas were indeed repressed, especially in 1819-1820 and after; but they had only a narrow following in Germany anyway—among some students, intellectuals, and enlightened state officials. The prevailing political sentiment among rulers and masses alike was much more conservative in 1815 than in 1792. The War of Liberation was fought and won overwhelmingly by regular

standing armies; as for the people (i.e., the peasants), they either did not rise at all in 1813 or did so mainly for God, king, and local country-not for a free and united Germany!' Therefore the main realities of 1792-1813 in Germany with which allied statesmen had to deal-aside from considerable destruction, residual Francophobia, and a heightened aversion to revolution'-were the results of the destruction of the old Empire and Napoleon's Confederation of the Rhine. The princely revolution of 1803 and after, not the French Revolution of 1789 or the German uprising of 1813, represented the dominant political fact of post-Napoleonic Germany. Lacking even the rudimentary bond of the old Empire and its ideal of government based on law rather than power, Germany now included centralized, territorially integrated states, run by new bureaucra

cies and supported by a new state-consciousness. These states had already swallowed up the ecclesiastical principalities, mediatized and absorbed the small semi-independent princes, incorporated most free cities, and were working to uproot old estate, religious, local, and tribal loyalties. This not only cleared the stream bed of German history (as German historians say); it also created divisions more than unity, and promoted state patriotism more than German nationalism, at least in the short run. The main task of German statesmen in 1813-1815, rather than satisfying a popular cry for German unity, lay in bridging conflicts, not merely between states, but especially between the old dispossessed and the new *beati possidentes*.

A further problem: although Germany was intended to be the main component of the defensive system against France, neither Austria nor Prussia wanted that direct responsibility. Both tried to put other states on the front line, distancing themselves from France as much as possible. Witness Austria's refusal to take back its former holdings in the Netherlands, its readiness to shed its old Southwest German territories, and its steady rejection of new territory or obligations on the Rhine; recall also Prussia's effort to annex the whole of Saxony and to compensate the King of Saxony with a new kingdom made up partly of Prussian territory on the Rhine. The rest of Germany, in other words, was supposed to be a buffer and intermediary body between France and Austria and Prussia.

As a result, while the *Bund* was certainly designed to hold France in check, it did not take sensible Frenchmen long to realize that it might be penetrated politically, thereby restoring France's old influence. For years after 1815, French diplomats continued to consider Bavaria as France's natural ally, for example; some leading Bavarians, including the King, agreed with them! To be sure, France failed to exploit the opportunities

it had, and German public opinion even in formerly pro-French circles turned nationalist and, Francophobe, as proved by the crisis of 1840-1841. Yet, even after France lost its chance to regain its former influence and friends, the *Bund* never threatened France, and actually contributed to its security. Certainly it was a safer arrangement than a Germany united under either German great power, or under both of them. If Frenchmen resented the Confederation, it was for the same reasons they resented the whole settlement of 1815: not because it was a danger to France, but because they somehow considered it an insult and a humiliation.

When all this is added up, it becomes clear that the *Bund* really functioned as a great multipurpose intermediary body in Central Europe. It both linked and separated

all the parts of Germany, preserving their individual independence while enabling them to exist in the same space. It separated Germany as a whole from the rest of Europe, preventing the sort of outside intervention common in the 18th century, while linking it to Europe in various ways—to the other great powers, guarantors of the federal constitution through the Final Act of Vienna; to the Netherlands and Denmark, who were part of the *Bund* as owners of Luxemburg and Holstein; to Italy (Istria, Trieste, and the South Tyrol were members); and even to the Slav world (Bohemia and Carinthia). The Prussian and Austrian territories that were not part of the historic Reich (East and West Prussia, Posen, Galicia, Hungary, Dalmatia, Illyria, and Lombardy-Venetia) were not included, however, so that Austria's and Prussia's roles as European great powers were consciously separated from their functions as leaders of Germany. The *Bund* did not unify Germany; that would have been impossible in 1815, and dangerous at any time. But it did a reasonable job of providing for Germany, in Metternich's words, "*Einigkeit ohne Einheit*," concord without union.

In three areas of Europe—Italy, the Balkans, and Poland—the intermediary body interpretation of the 1815 settlement does not seem to work. Even here, however, closer examination alters the initial impression. Italy supposedly came under direct Austrian control in 1815. True, Austria gained Lombardy-Venetia and enjoyed strong dynastic and treaty links to much of the rest of Italy. Metternich used all his diplomatic skill, both in 1814–1815 and later, to try to exclude French and Russian influence. At the same time, Italy was deliberately organized to separate France and Austria, and Austria's leading influence never developed into exclusive control. Various attempts by Metternich to make it so (for ex

ample, his efforts to create a *Lega Italica*, an Austrian-led Italian Confederation) failed in the face of Piedmontese and papal resistance. British influence and naval power remained important. The fact that Austria retained the lead in Italy for two decades after 1815 was due not so much to the peace settlement or Austrian power as to the fact that most Italian governments were even more conservative and fearful of revolution than Austria, and sought Austria's help in time of trouble. France had chances to compete successfully, but threw them away. Had Napoleon not come back from Elba and overthrown Louis XVIII in March 1815, the Bourbons would have been restored at Naples under royal French sponsorship, giving France the lead in southern Italy. In this and other ways, Napoleon's last adventure set back French policy in Italy for a generation. In any case, independent entities such as Sardinia-Piedmont and the Papal States functioned as intermediary bodies, separating France and Austria, making it harder for them to go to war (which was of considerable importance in 1831–32), and giving them common problems that they somehow had to approach jointly. By 1831, France and Austria were involved in an international conference over the Roman question. By the mid-1830s, Metternich was trying to limit French influence rather than to exclude it; and by the mid-1840s, he was actively trying to work with France in Italy.

Although the Ottoman Empire in southeastern Europe was not formally included in the peace settlement, it functioned as an intermediary body between Austria and Russia. It is clear why no formal arrangement was reached: after three generations of growing rivalry in the Balkans—a rivalry that reached its most dangerous stage for Austria in 1809–1812 with Russia's attempt to annex the Rumanian Principalities—both great powers found it wiser to leave the issue alone, since their relations were

strained enough by other questions. Besides, any formal arrangement, such as a guarantee of Turkish territory, would run afoul of Russia's residual territorial claims on Turkey, as well as of traditional Russian interests, ambitions, and claims to a protectorate over the Orthodox Church in the Balkans. Moreover, throughout the first half of the 19th century, Russia's position vis-à-vis Turkey was far stronger than Austria's militarily, strategically, and on ethnic and religious grounds. Thus, the only possible basis for general Austro-Russian cooperation in

Europe (wanted by both sides) was conservative nonintervention in Turkey. So long as Russia was content to preserve the Ottoman Empire as a weak, inoffensive neighbor (which was most of the time), and to accept Austria as a junior partner in this, the two got along well. Whenever Russia seemed headed toward destroying Turkey or dominating it exclusively, it caused an Austro-Russian breach which, as in 1853-1855, could lead to the brink of war. The Balkans served as an intermediary body for other powers as well. In the new kingdom of Greece after 1830, Britain, France, and Russia competed and cooperated as supervisors, while internal Ottoman crises in the 1830s and 1840s made Turkey the central object of Concert diplomacy.

Poland does not fit the general pattern of 18th century, of intermediary bodies separating and linking great powers. It was partitioned in 1772-1795 by Russia, Austria, and Prussia, although these powers knew this would cause trouble by giving them long common frontiers; in 1795-1807, it was re-partitioned in an even more dangerous way, bringing Russia deep into Central Europe. Everyone knew that the partition of Poland violated the rules and made Poland a problem for Europe. Many Austrian leaders admitted privately that the original partition had been a great mistake, and Castlereagh and Talleyrand argued in principle for restoring an independent Poland. But no one really believed in this possibility, and for good reasons. The weaknesses that had promoted Poland's demise in the 18th century had grown worse through war, devastation, and internal divisions. More important still, in 18th century an independent Poland would not have been a barrier to Russian expansion, but an integral part of it, just as an independent Ukraine would have served German imperialism if Germany had won the First World War. The plan Prince Adam Czartoryski presented to Alexander I in 1813 proposed, in fact, to join the kingdom of Poland permanently to Russia and to make it Russia's junior partner in dominating Central Europe.

Poland thus was not restored for much the same reasons as those for which the Holy Roman Empire was not restored: the attempt could not have succeeded, and would have constituted a dangerous power play by one state against the others. What Russia and Prussia actually tried to do in relation to Poland and Saxony was bad enough. The only way the Polish lands could serve intermediary functions after 1807 was the one actually employed: each of the partitioning powers promised to respect Polish nationality and culture and to grant its Polish territories a separate

administration and institutions. The arrangements made for this purpose were unsatisfactory from the outset, and the situation became worse with time and Polish insurrections. Yet the provisions were not worthless, at least at first, and contributed something to the survival of Polish nationality. So far as international politics was concerned, while Poland represented a European problem and a danger to peace, especially in the revolts of 1830-1831 and 1863, in a curious and tragic way it was also

a source of stability—the cement that helped hold the Holy Alliance powers together while simultaneously keeping them potential rivals.

Even apparent exceptions like Poland, then, show how the 1815 settlement involved a network of intermediary bodies in Europe, designed to inhibit great-power conflict and to promote flexible interaction. The system did not make the smaller powers of Europe simply the tools and pawns of the great ones, as some have believed. One of the more striking aspects of the 1815 negotiations is the genuine concern of the allies to ensure the independence of all states, including the smaller ones. The charge of greedy expansionism fits some smaller states (the United Netherlands, Bavaria, Sweden, Sardinia-Piedmont) better than any of the bigger ones. Nor did the European Concert and great-power solidarity, when they existed, mean that the desires and interests of small states could be ignored. Small states could get away with much resistance and obstruction, even in the face of united European pressure. Witness how Bavaria and Württemberg resisted the great powers in 1814–1815 with regard to the *Bund* and territorial questions, and how Holland and Belgium did so from 1815 to 1830. There has never been an era in European history before 1815 or since that time when a small state could feel so confident that it would not be the target of conquest or annexation by some great power. This respect for small-state independence was not based on legitimist dogma, self-denial, or moral sentiments, but on a healthy realism—the recognition that buffers and barriers were needed all round, not just against France, and that the independence of great powers was intertwined with that of lesser states. In the 18th century, by contrast, smaller states had been pawns on the great-power chessboard, continual objects of compensation, exchange, and conquest, while those intermediary bodies that were in existence (the Holy Roman Empire, Scandinavia, Poland, Italy, Turkey) were spongy, riddled with internal weaknesses and rivalries, and thus were vulnerable targets for takeover or arenas of all-out conflict.

If this essay has succeeded in showing that real systemic change occurred in international politics between the 18th and 19th centuries and in identifying some of its structural elements, it still affords no basis for hard conclusions or sweeping generalizations. Historians and political scientists will undoubtedly want to have many questions answered, challenges met, and details clarified before they accept the *prima facie* case made here. Still, if this thesis adds something to the political scientists' fund of concepts and models for analyzing international politics, and encourages diplomatic historians to concentrate more on systemic factors and systemic change, it will not be useless. Moreover, the central problems with which the 19th-century system had to cope are not unique to its time; they may be irreducible constitutive elements of international politics in any era: How to ensure the security and status of great powers while curbing great-power hegemony and imperialism; how to shield the overall system and its central power-political relationships from shocks emanating from peripheral conflicts; how to reconcile the independence and security of smaller states with the inevitable determination of great powers to exercise influence beyond their borders and to protect their wider interests—these are problems that statesmen still face every day, and presumably always will. More light on the reason for the 19th century's relative success may not be irrelevant to today's concerns.