

Jesenia Bravo

Professor Hresko

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*A Comparison between Bismarck's Realpolitik and the goals of the Concert of Europe*

After the Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolutionary Wars, Napoleon Bonaparte led France into its resurgence in being the world's strongest power. The French empire controlled the vast majority of Europe through Napoleon's guidance; France had prevailed as the dominant power to start the century. Napoleon had a vision of conquering the world through power and might; his ambition to expand was a never-ending quest that eventually would meet its match. The rest of the world however wasn't going to just bow down at his request. The Napoleonic wars were a series of conflicts involving the almighty French Empire and its allies pitted against the rest of Europe led by the British Empire. Through various coalitions between different countries and powers within rest of the Europe, the alliance eventually succeeded in dethroning France and bringing an end to the Napoleonic reign. Their first priority after dethroning the "king" was to reassemble the Eastern hemisphere. They established a conference between the victorious countries to guide the alliances into an equal division of power and world peace. The main goal of the Congress of Vienna was to establish the terms of long-lasting peace between these European powers and to finalize European boundaries in order to create a balance between each of them. The five powers, Russia, Great Britain, Prussia, Austria and even the defeated France were tasked with essentially remaking Europe. The Concert of Europe was the system of dispute resolution adopted by these major powers to avoid conflicts escalating into war, and to maintain their power primarily based on three principles: the first was the balance of power between the prevailing European powers, second was the legitimacy of the power and lastly was the compensation for lost territory and division of the French empire.

The first principle of the system dealt with the balance of power. The map of Europe was realigned after assigning pieces of the French empire between the rest of the powers. Each member first pursued its self-interested right in wanting to come out of the system not only stronger than before but also being strongest remaining power. For the concert of Europe to work however, each power had to give up some of these self-interests demands and instead offset these requests with the interest of restoring and balancing out Europe as a nation. They reasoned that a legitimacy of power needed to be established. Legitimacy established political stability as each leading power had to justify its authority by having the nations and its majorities interest behind it. Once the war ended, France, having controlled the vast majority of Europe prior to Napoleons defeat, now had to be divided amongst the conference. They agreed to allow the defeated France to retain their country, but divided the immense territories that it had acquired through war and conquer. Balance of power being the European systems first priority was the guide in distributing and compensating the territories in a fair and even approach for the entire system. The concert of Europe was establish to have long lasting peace between the nations with a balance of power established, legitimate regimes, the system rebalanced the Eastern hemisphere and its superpowers.

Mid way through the same 19<sup>th</sup> century, the second industrial revolution had just begun and it helped in evolving these superpowers to another level. This revolution brought along new technology and inventions that further allowed these superpowers to extend their reach. Unfortunately for one of these regimes, the revolution had not yet made its way entirely into Prussia. The rest of the superpowers were growing immensely by expanding their reach and using their financial advantages but unlike the rest of these

superpowers, Prussia wasn't financially interdependent at the time. Without the guidance of the most important political figure in this period, Otto von Bismarck, Germany's succession into unification possibly doesn't happen. Otto von Bismarck was the Chancellor of Prussia who greatly believed in *realpolitik*. This view of government was mostly based on practical matter, politics that focus on reality, as it is, not what you ideally want it to be. Bismarck used this *realpolitik* to unite Prussia and Germany together as one large, powerful country. (Rathbun 2018) "Perhaps most famously, Bismarck prognosticated in his very first speech as Prussia's minister-president that German unification "will not be settled by speeches and majority decisions—that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by blood and iron." *Realpolitik* was an idea that at times, extreme measures such as war or strategic alliances were necessary to progress. Bismarck used this vision to lead the unification of Germany; the wars and conflicts were vital in bringing Prussia and Germany to unite. They had to challenge political standards of always seeking approval from other countries and sentiments and instead push their self interested ideas for their own nation to progress and become this great power once again.

Bismarck's concept was rooted on reality. He believed that politicians must be content with what was possible and not overstress their hand in the pursuit of the ideal, he believed that power was the most decisive factor in international politics, that Prussia must do its best in light of the structural circumstances it faced. This ideology believed that war was necessary if reality calls for it. Bismarck knew that if he instigated wars between Germany and other countries like France and Austria that Prussian and German people will come together, he believed that people come together in crisis or danger, this

was a great use of realpolitik to unite Germany. Unlike the goals that came out of congress of Vienna, Realpolitik dealt with the necessities at the current moment. If it called for unpleasant alliances with ideological enemies such as France or if it called for war with Austria for progression, nothing was off limits. The ideal world with plenty of treaties and deals of peace just wasn't attainable, Bismarck ideology pushed Prussia along the path that it needed to grow. Just like the concert, he established strategic alliances to negotiate peace and to fight together when a common enemy arose. "It depended as well on a common commitment to the status quo that in an age of nationalism, imperialism, and economic rivalry was scarcely to be depended upon." (Showalter 2006, 527) But as with the concert, eventually reality would set in, and the alliances and coalitions would succumb to the interests and necessities of each perspective nation.

The goals of the Concert of Europe and Bismarck's realpolitik are very much alike in some ways yet conflicting in others. Both had one common goal between each other, the progress of the nations. In the case of Prussia, Bismarck believed that his ideology was the change needed to drive them into the level of the other superpower. Germany was the weakest of the super powers in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and thus a drastic new ideology was needed to push them ahead. He believed that with the right guidance, Prussia would level out the balance of power and join the other superpowers. The goals of the concert of Europe also started with the goal of prospering along Europe, it was determined to balance power and establish long lasting peace. The goal was not simply to restore old boundaries but to resize the main powers so they could balance each other and remain at peace. Unlike the ideas of Bismarck that call for violence and aggression if necessary, the European system instead was a conservative idea based on a balance of

power and world peace. The Congress of Vienna was a success because the congress got a balance of power back to the European countries. The congress brought back peace among these nations, peace that for about 40 years. The standards of the Concert of Europe however deteriorated with the onset of the Crimean War in 1854. Reality had struck on the “perfect” agreement. (Lascurettes 2017, 16) “When the Concert was no longer shielded from domestic politics in this way, it became much more difficult for elites to justify to their people their continued cooperation with odious foreign regimes at the expense of seemingly more-immediate national interests. Instances of great powers defecting on the principle of concerted action multiplied. And each time one power pursued unilateral gain at the expense of Concert norms, it became a little easier for others to break out of the Vienna System’s virtuous cycle and give in to short-term temptation.” When reality struck and the nations had to look out for their self interest instead, the system collapsed and as Bismarck believed, reality took precedence over the “perfect” scenarios. He believed in world peace and balance, but also knew that if the times called for it, war and conflict was also needed. With the 19<sup>th</sup> century having 4-5 superpowers, eventually the greed and dreams of the reigning powers would take superiority over this perfect system of peace and balance in Europe.

The moral rules of international affairs are different from those that might apply internally within one nation. The dangerous nature of international politics is such that states must look out for themselves first, and this requires that they do things, most notably, use violence that would be morally unacceptable in other political contexts. As the concert of Europe called for world peace and balance, Realpolitik dealt with reality and its current state. As the concert called for world peace and balance, Prussia had to

defy and violate the rules and standards set for their own nation to progress and balance their power with the others. The difference between these two can be divided into the goals of a nation, do they strive to become the dominant power of the world or do they adhere to the standards and strive for peace? Prussia was the weakest of the five great powers and Bismarck navigated them as best possible to restore their power and gain its Unification. Politics he believed must be happy with what's possible and not overstress the pursuit of perfect. As with the concert, Bismarck's realpolitik was progressive thinking for its nations, and all though they might have differed in terms of how to attain it, they very much both believed in advancement and growth.

## Bibliography

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