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[The Power of Peace: Why 1814 Might Matter More than 1914](#)

[Stella Ghervas and David Armitage](#), Apr 7 2014

A century before the guns of August opened fire on Belgrade in 1914, the Congress of Vienna opened proceedings in September 1814. The contrast between the current memories of these two moments is striking. The centenary of the outbreak of World War I attracts worldwide interest: witness the numerous popular commemorations that will take place in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere this year, on top of the estimated 25,000 books written about the conflict since 1918. Meanwhile, the bicentenary of the Congress has hardly caught the eye of a public beyond the academia. What can this comparison tell us about why we write history? And how might we re-assert the power of peace amid the prevailing talk of war?

All continental wars in the past five centuries of European history ended in disarray. As Winston Churchill aptly noted in 1946, “among the victors there is the babel of jarring voices; among the vanquished the sullen silence of despair.” Yet, order must somehow emerge again from the confusion of war. What has truly shaped the fate of Europe – and often the wider world – in the *longue durée* is the series of great diplomatic conferences like Utrecht (1713), Vienna (1814-15), Versailles (1919), and Yalta (1945). For better or worse, those were the watershed moments; but the proceedings in each case were largely undramatic. Peace-making raises little commotion. What Churchill called “jaw-jaw” has little of the popular pulling power of “war-war.”

The First World War is closer to our time and naturally more vivid than the Congress of Vienna: after all, we have a large supply of photographs and even films from the cauldron of war, but only prints and memoirs to evoke the process of peace. Could the imbalance in our collective memories of peace and war be due to something beyond our contrasting perceptions of screaming soldiers charging against machine guns, and the image of diplomats in 1814 quietly seated around a table in the wake of Napoleon's defeat?

Do we tend to read the hand of fate in violent upsets in a way we do not for such placid negotiations? We assume the First World War was pivotal because it heralded the end of empires and the birth of new nation-states. Yet in August 1914, no one had the faintest idea the war would be long or even consequential – it was not before three long years of war of attrition that empires (starting with the Russian one) would definitively start to fall apart.

Similarly, we assume that Napoleon was inevitably doomed. However, things did not look that way at all in the first decade of the nineteenth century. To say that Europe was in a state of shock in 1806, after Napoleon had obliterated both Austria and Prussia in a matter of months, would be an understatement. The feeling at the time was either elation or a sense of apocalypse. It seemed that the natural order of things had been turned on its head. And Napoleon could have enjoyed his European hegemony for many more years had he not conceived the catastrophic plan of invading Russia.

This tells us that our view of the significance of war may be biased; unless we are primarily interested in the progress of military operations, we tend to confuse origins with outcomes, all in a great blur. Since we

know *a posteriori* who won the war and what its consequences were, we unconsciously add a teleological dimension to the conflict, as if its outcome was written beforehand – even though the process itself was so chaotic as to be entirely unpredictable. In our reading of the already written past, we tend to forget the gut-wrenching feeling of uncertainty that contemporaries felt in the face of their own present and future.

Focusing on the mechanics of peace-making can restore some of that contingency and uncertainty: after all, it was here – at the conference tables of Vienna, not on the battlefields of Europe – where reconstructive surgery took place. After the downfall of Napoleon's empire in 1814, the Great Powers settled down to the task of redefining the political system, giving birth to what was later to be called the Concert of Europe. They set out to undo the disturbance that the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had created, together with great loss of life: for example, the battle of Leipzig in October 1813 had pitted more than half a million men against each other, with casualties possibly as high as a hundred thousand dead, wounded, or lost.

What remained was largely a glorious memory or a reviled one. The French empire was abolished and Napoleon's family lost its title to the throne. The departments outside of France and its vassal states were either abolished or restored to independence. Everywhere, monarchies were re-established. The future of Europe was redefined by an entirely different set of people, on completely different principles, than those that had prevailed under Napoleon's imperial regime.

In 1814, the Russian Tsar Alexander I appealed to the other powers to create a new system of peace in Europe based on active cooperation. He was a man of fairly pacific dispositions, who could hardly be suspected of laziness or cowardice: the Tsar had personally directed the successful defense of Russia against Napoleon's 600,000 strong *Grande Armée*. He was also the man who had led a furious "Blitzkrieg" through Eastern Europe that liberated Prussia and Austria in a matter of months. And when France was brought to its knees, his Cossack Cavalry was the first force to enter Paris through the *Arc de Triomphe*. Despite that, the Russian monarch had neither hate nor contempt for France. The power of peace – a peace for all the great powers – would be his watchword.

By the end of the Congress, the assembled allies had created a new mechanism for collective security for Europe. In the context of its times, this was both novel and forward-looking. It comprised a multilateral directorial system in which the sovereigns and foreign ministers of the great powers were to meet in periodic "congresses" modeled on the proceedings in Vienna. They would reach agreement among themselves and then impose their will upon Europe and, in such matters as the policing of the slave trade, also on the world beyond Europe. They would shape the world in their own image – and call the result peace.

In 1814-15, the monarchs of Russia, Austria, and Prussia, as well as the British Cabinet, made it an explicit policy to maintain international peace at all costs. The reason for their suspicious and disillusioned attitude toward war lies in that particular brand of wisdom bred by hard experience, the twenty years of bloody war on the continent. They banned war among themselves and this worked for nearly forty years until the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853. The Concert of Europe forged in 1814-15 would endure uneasily until 1914, even if the unexpected outbreak of war forestalled any centennial celebration of that achievement.

The idea that the greatest powers should engage in more profitable occupations than threatening each other with large armies was still quite new in the early nineteenth century. It can be traced back only to the early Age of Enlightenment: in 1713, a French abbé by the name of Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre had published the first plan for a "European Society" (which he also called a European "Federation" or "Union") in order to prevent the constant recurrence of wars between France and its neighbors, particularly Austria and Great Britain.

Later philosophers like Rousseau and Kant took up this idea. Among their chief arguments was that industry and trade, as well as internal political stability, would greatly benefit from peace – and,

conversely, that large armies were only a burden to the treasury by increasing debt and producing a risk of state bankruptcy. Their projects have often been taken as the origins of the so-called “democratic peace thesis” – the idea that democracies do not war with one another. More secure historically is the immediate ancestry of the nineteenth-century Congress system.

For example, Tsar Alexander took a leaf directly from Saint-Pierre’s book, but he did not follow him blindly. In truth, he went about his task with an enthusiasm that was not always shared by the Austrian count Metternich, or by members of the British cabinet. There was nevertheless a standing agreement among the great powers of the time that a long period of peace was what Europe absolutely needed above all else after decades of war. Hence they convened every year or so in a different European city to discuss matters of mutual importance. In this way, they replaced an often competitive balance of power with a more active equilibrium through cooperation.

Reflection on the actual consequences of wars and peace treaties poses major questions of periodization of how we perceive the successive epochs of history and their dimensions of change. To be meaningful, historians’ milestones must be moments of actual, significant change. 1814-15, 1919, 1945: those are the turning-points that shaped the *longue durée* of Europe as a zone of peace amid a world often still at war. The French Revolutionary Wars, the stunning campaigns of Napoleon in 1805, his dismal defeat in Russia, and his final downfall: these were spectacular, indeed cataclysmic events. They are the matter of some of the greatest novels that literature has produced, such as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Yet as far as Europe is concerned, they were only *intermezzi* in a longer story of pacification and cooperation.

Is it really fair to discount the fact that so many gave their lives to so little effect during the Napoleonic Wars or during the First World War, while we assume that a few dozen grey-haired men circling a table had more impact on the long course of history? What might this imply about their sacrifice? We must always remember it. In 1922, a disillusioned Anatole France wrote that “they believe they are dying for their homeland, but they are dying for industrialists.”

But what really was the purpose of starting those wars with all the blood and toil, and the loss of much of a young generation, if it always ended with diplomatic discussions? As the incidence of interstate wars has dwindled almost to zero in the decades since 1945, starting first in Europe and then spreading to the wider world, can we hope that humans at last have learned to skip the costly step of war before they get to the inevitable negotiating table?

About The Authors ([Stella Gervas and David Armitage](#)):

[Stella Gervas](#) is a visiting scholar at Harvard University’s Center for European Studies and a senior fellow at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme d’Aquitaine in Bordeaux. Her book, [Réinventer la tradition: Alexandre Stourdza et l’Europe de la Sainte-Alliance](#), was awarded the Guizot Prize of the Académie Française in 2009.

[David Armitage](#) is the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History and Chair of the Department of History at Harvard University. His most recent book is [Foundations of Modern International Thought](#), published by Cambridge University Press in 2013.

They are the organizers of the Harvard symposium “[The Power of Peace: New Perspectives on the Congress of Vienna \(1814-1815\)](#)” on April 11, 2014.