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The Decline of the Congress System: Metternich, Italy and European Diplomacy

by Miroslav Šedivý, London, I.B. Tauris, 2018, x + 351 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781784538521

Ambrogio A. Caiani

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Decline of the Congress System: Metternich, Italy and European Diplomacy, by Miroslav Šedivý, London, I.B. Tauris, 2018, x + 351 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781784538521

Professor Miroslav has written a challenging book that neither celebrates, nor indulges, in myth making about the consequences of the Vienna settlement for the Italian peninsula. Far from ushering in a century of peace and stability, both the Great Powers and Italian princes continued to view the ‘pursuit of glory’ as their primary goal. The author argues, forcefully, that international relations during the first half of the nineteenth century did not witness a new respect for international law. Equally, after 1830, the monarchies and empires of Europe did not co-ordinate their efforts meaningfully to maintain a general peace. This study covers the period from the aftermath of the July Revolution to the great conflagration that was *il quarantotto* in Italy. The hero of the book, as the title suggests, is Prince Metternich. Unlike the bogeyman image haunting much of *Risorgimento* propaganda and historiography, the Austrian chancellor is portrayed as a force for stability and reform within the peninsula. A desire to maintain the *status quo* and nudge the more reactionary princelings of Italy towards modernising reforms drove Austria, unlike its imperial rivals. Regrettably, the law of unintended consequences placed the Habsburg Monarchy in conflict with its imperial rivals, and its attempt to act as the elder brother to the kings, princes, and dukes of Italy merely elicited suspicion and much resentment.

Šedivý writes a gripping and extremely detailed narrative of high diplomacy in the mould of classic international history. He is at his best in his command of the facts – and knowledge of the activities – of the chanceries of Europe, he is suited perfectly for the polyglot task he has set himself and has visited no fewer than 18 archives across the whole of Europe. This book seeks to rescue the diplomatic incidents, flashpoints, and crises of the 1830s and 1840s from the condescension of posterity. Indeed, previous studies have dismissed most of the events in these pages as trivial or relatively minor. The author makes a compelling case that such events were vital checkpoints in the weakening and undermining of the Vienna settlement long before the advent of Bismarck and Cavour. Cracks had come to the surface long before 1870.

Starting with the Ancona affair and the Sulphur War of the 1830s, an argument put forward is that the Great Powers had little desire to respect the sovereignty of small Italian states when their economic interest or imperial dignity was at stake. The Austrian response to these events highlighted its failure to tackle such difficulties successfully and mediate mutually satisfactory resolutions. As the century progressed into the subsequent decade, the second-tier rulers of Italy felt resentment towards an Austrian ‘guarantor’ that was unreliable when protecting them from other Great Powers, and heavy-handed when giving advice about their domestic affairs. The Salt-Wine debacle and the Ferrara affair of the late 1840s seemed to confirm the worst fears of Italian princes and their domestic public opinion. In Piedmont and the duchies, rulers began to covet new territories, fuelled by a liberal public sphere ravenous for expansion.

Indeed, one of the greatest insights of this book is that ‘liberalism’, for all its claims to pacifism as an ideology, proved remarkably bellicose and imperialistic during the early nineteenth century. France, despite the peaceable intentions of Louis Philippe and

Guizot, was often compelled to indulge in sabre-rattling due to warmongering liberal politicians and their followers. The micro-principalities of the Italian peninsula replicated this attitude. Fear of revolution and powerful imperial neighbours had restrained the ambitions of such medium-sized principalities. Once the revolutionary conflagration of 1848 removed these restraints, Piedmont seized the opportunity launching a war of aggrandisement, euphemistically called the First War of Italian Independence *ex post facto*.

This book is certainly a major intervention in current debates about the aftermath of the Vienna Congress. Many studies on the negotiations in the Habsburg capital in 1814–1815 have tended to see it as heralding an era of sustained peace and prosperity. Some theorists have gone as far as arguing that the Concert of Europe foreshadowed the beginning of modern international law and global institutions. Šedivý, as he has done boldly in the past, questions such hasty conclusions and presents a nuanced and compelling picture. Metternich's Europe, if such a thing ever existed, was very fragile and beset by crises and war scares. The mastery of the subject, and the in-depth research displayed in this study, make it a magisterial work of scholarship. However, I question the author's decision not to delve more into the context of the 1820s in his introduction. The revolutions of Naples and Piedmont were of the utmost importance in re-shaping European diplomacy, and a deeper analysis would have helped the reader better understand the subsequent events and arguments more clearly. Finally, more engagement with Italian historiography would have been helpful. Much exists in the work of Meriggi, Mascilli Migliorini, and others that would further enrich this book. These are, nevertheless, secondary concerns about a successful work that makes a major contribution to the debate on Europe after the Vienna Congress: one lucidly written, clearly argued, and based on some profound research. Scholars and students alike in the field of nineteenth century diplomatic history must read this.

Ambrogio A. Caiani

School of History, Rutherford College, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

✉ a.a.caiani@kent.ac.uk

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War and Diplomacy in the Napoleonic Era, Sir Charles Stewart, Castlereagh and the Balance of Power in Europe, by Reider Payne, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, xvii + 262 pp., £85.00 (hb), ISBN: 9781788315128

In winter 1814, a quarrel erupted between a tall, uniformed gentleman and two Viennese cabbies. Lubricated by alcohol, and in true British sporting fashion, he challenged them to a boxing match. The cabbies declined the confrontation and, instead, proceeded to beat him senseless with their whips. Embarrassingly, the man's face bore the scars of this encounter for some days to come. This incident could be dismissed as trivial were not the gentleman in question Charles Stewart, British ambassador at Vienna and brother of Lord Castlereagh, the foreign secretary. At first glance, the younger sibling of one of the chief architects of Napoleon's defeat is an unlikely subject for a biography. Much to Dr. Payne's credit, he has rescued Stewart from oblivion. There was more to this