

RUSSIA AND THE NAPOLEONIC WARS: A HISTORICAL REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

Russia's status as a major European power was already established by the dawn of the 19th century. The foreign policy of France (another big European power) under Napoleon Bonaparte who ruled between 1799 and 1815 was dominated by warfare. In the Napoleonic wars, Napoleon at different times had to take on Russia, Britain, Austria and Prussia who had formed coalitions against her. Russia's refusal to join the Continental System, an economic warfare mechanism initiated by Napoleon in 1806 to weaken British power by destroying her trade, led to Napoleon's attack against Russia in 1812. Due to a combination of military resilience and diplomatic cum strategic savvy on the part of Russia, Napoleon eventually lost the war, recording one of the costliest retreats in military history. Russia proceeded to play a pivotal role in the post-Napoleonic wars diplomatic and international cooperation arrangements hatched by the great powers after the fall of Napoleon. This paper is an evaluation of Russia's role in European politics and diplomacy between 1803 and 1815 with particular respect to the Napoleonic wars of that period, and the post-war international diplomacy initiatives of the great powers. The paper concludes that the outcome of the Russian war of 1812 in favour of Russia coupled with her active participation in the Vienna congress of 1815 and subsequent conferences of that era strengthened Russia's sense of its own greatness as a modern state and great power, and also set the stage for her epochal roles in European international relations during subsequent decades.

Keywords: Russia, Napoleonic Wars, Great powers, European Diplomacy.

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Introduction

This Paper is a bird-eye account of Russia in European Politics and diplomacy especially as it concerns her role in the Napoleonic wars of 1803 – 1815. The essay seeks to explain Russia's foreign policy behaviour towards Napoleon's France, shed more light on the basis and impact of Russia's involvement in the various wars, and properly situate the role of Russia in the international cooperation experiments that followed the fall of Napoleon.

Origin of Modern russia

Modern Russia was founded by Peter the Great (1695 -1725). During the first quarter of the eighteenth century, he transformed Russia, ending her isolation from European influence, and setting the course of a policy later to be followed by his successors, subsequently, making Russia a leading European power. Prior to the reign of Peter the Great, the Tsardom of Muscovy as Russia was originally known, was centered on Moscow and the River Volga. It included Astrakhan and the middle Volga regions which had been conquered by the first Tsar, Ivan the Terrible, in the mid-Sixteenth century. An eastward expansion led to the acquisition of the Urals and Siberia. Although huge in size, the vast tracts of tundra, forest lands were thinly populated by about eight million people, ruled by the Tsar who had absolute power. 'Russian' society at this time was feudal, and social classes and status were still determined and defined by birth and wealth. (Alade, 2008; Southgate, 1966).

Towns were small, and although the towns inhabitants were freemen, they were constrained by regulations. Merchants and traders formed a very small despised fraction of the total population. However, there were signs of a growth in their importance towards the end of the seventeenth century as trade and industry began to develop. Russia's wealth lay mainly in her hides, flax, furs and timber which were traded with the West. Indeed, contacts with the West were growing, although majority of the people were still alien to this new awareness of the civilizing influence of Europe. The Asiatic influence of the Tartars and Greek Orthodox Church was partly responsible for this isolation. (Alade, 2008; South gate, 1966).

However, through the various reforms and policies initiated by Peter the Great by 1725 Russia had emerged as a European Power, and was to later play important roles in European politics and international relations in the decades that followed.

The Napoleonic Wars

Napoleon Bonaparte became a central figure in French politics when he was appointed the First Consul in the government (Consulate) that was established in France in 1799. Napoleon's Foreign policy was dominated by warfare. The brief period (thirteen months) of peace especially following the 1802 Treaty of Amiens which ended the French Revolutionary War was followed by wars with longer duration and greater intensity. In these wars, Napoleon at different times had to take on Russia, Britain, Austria and Prussia who had formed coalitions against her. (Adeogun, 1998).

British grievances against Napoleon can be located in the alleged attempt by Napoleon to invade Egypt, India and the Levant areas which were under the British sphere of influence. Moreover, Britain also complained that Napoleon deliberately closed the French Market against British goods, thereby stifling her commerce. Napoleon on his part was embittered by the British press criticism of his activities. These mutual animosity led to war in 1803. Britain had entered into a coalition with Russia, Austria and Sweden. Napoleon defeated Russia and Austria but Britain managed to remain unbeaten due to her superior naval power. (Grant & Temperly, 1976; Lipson, 1960).

By the end of 1805, Napoleon was in control of a large territory in Europe. He distributed kingdoms and principalities to his relatives and supporters but he remained their lord. In 1805, Napoleon made his brother, Louis, the King of Holland. In 1806, he defeated Prussia. In 1807, he forced Russia to sign the Treaty of Tilsit. In fact, the year 1807 marked the pinnacle of Napoleon's power in Europe. He had conquered every enemy except Britain, as all other kings trembled before him. Having subdued Russia and all other powers, Napoleon was now free to concentrate his energy and resources on the vital quest to defeat Britain. (Leslie, 1964; Lipson,

1960; Peacock, 1982). Significantly, Britain was very powerful on sea while Napoleon's France was equally powerful on land.

Economic Warfare

Napoleon resorted to economic warfare otherwise called 'Continental System' from 1806 to 1807 because he believed that British power was due to her export trade and that the nations of Europe provided her market. Napoleon thus decided to weaken British power by destroying her trade. To achieve this, he tried to exclude Britain and her colonies from all markets in Europe. He hoped to ruin British overseas trade and bring about unemployment, financial chaos and general hardship which would force the British government to make peace.

The Continental System was embodied in the Berlin Decrees of 21st November, 1806. Napoleon pursued this policy vigorously. In 1806, he forced Fredrick William III of Prussia to accept. In 1807, he persuaded Alexander of Russia to join. The refusal of Sweden to joined earned her ruler Gustarvo IV deposition. Overtime, other countries like Austria, Holland and Spain were also compelled to join. But the policy caused great discontent in Europe. Many merchants suffered from inability to trade with the British as most of them had their goods destroyed. Particularly, the merchants of Holland and industries in Switzerland were ruined. This policy fuelled opposition to Napoleon by the merchant class of Europe and played a major part in the nationalist movements which developed against Napoleon and facilitated his eventual downfall. (Rude, 2000; Ford, 1970)

Napoleon's desperate bid to enforce the Continental System failed largely because he lacked the navy to successfully enforce it. He attempted to secure the use of the Danish fleet but the British destroyed the fleet at the Battle of Compenhagen in 1806. What followed, therefore was widespread smuggling of British goods into Europe through Portugal, Heligoland and Sicily. It is important to note that the Continental System caused immense suffering in Britain. The exclusion of British goods from European markets led to a rise in the price of gold which was exported to pay for imports. There was inflation in paper currency as there was a rise in the price of

commodities, which ultimately heightened the distress of the poor people. (Rude, 2000; Thomson, 1990).

The Russian War

By 1812, Russia (like Portugal did earlier in 1808) refused to enforce the Continental System any longer. Alexander I was alarmed at the damage done to Russian trade by the system. He therefore removed all restrictions on the importation of British goods in 1811 and made peace with Britain in 1812. It must be stated here that the British had been able to mitigate some of the most adverse effects of the Continental System on their economy by the diversification of their exports. Britain had colonies all over the world where she could sell her goods if they could not be sold in Europe. Moreover, British goods on account of their superior quality were in high demand in Europe and many European countries embarked on the illegal importation of British goods, which weakened the Continental System. (Thomson, 1990; Ford, 1970).

Russia's defiance led to Napoleon's attack against her. In 1812, Napoleon advanced from Eastern Germany into Russia, and immediately faced difficulties. He ran short of supplies, some of his troops deserted him, while sickness reduced the number of those who remained loyal to him. He was unable to win a decisive victory because the Russians deliberately and tactically avoided a pitched battle, retreated as the French came on and laid waste the territory they abandoned so that the invaders found nothing to survive on in the country. But the French pressed on, believing that an entry into Moscow would win the war for them. However by 14th September Napoleon found Moscow deserted and in flames. He thus had no option but open negotiations for peace. Significantly, Russia deliberately protracted the negotiations until the beginning of winter and then allowed them to collapse. Having been outwitted, Napoleon returned back to France. (Peacock, 1982; Grant & Temperly, 1976).

The severity of the Russian winter greatly affected the retreating French soldiers. The Russians pursued and constantly attacked the enemy's rearguard. When Napoleon realized that the Russians would not surrender coupled with the hopelessness of the situation and fearful of its effects on his position in France, he left the army and

began making his way back, later to be followed by a mere remnant of the contingent with which he had set out. Napoleon's retreat marked one of the most costly retreats in military history. By the time he returned to Paris in December 1812 with less than 50,000 men, only 20,000 of the original figure had died of cold and malnutrition.(Napoleonic Society.com, 2011; Mcgrady, 1947). From this time on, it was only a matter of time for the Napoleonic Empire to collapse. Clearly, the outcome of the Russian War had shown that Napoleon could be beaten even on land.

International Cooperation

Russia played an important role in experiments made in international diplomacy and cooperation by the great powers of Europe after the Napoleonic wars. In 1815, the European powers decided to settle the affairs of Europe and prevent further wars through international diplomacy exemplified by the Congress of Vienna of that year. The congress actually started in December 1814 and was dominated by Russia, Austria, Britain, Prussia and later France. The Work of the congress was based on two basic principles, namely, Legitimacy and Balance of Power. The principle of legitimacy meant the recognition of the rights of those former sovereign princes who had been deprived of their power and territory by Napoleon. The principle of balance of power meant a distribution of territory and population among the European states such that no one of them would be able to threaten or torment the rest, as Napoleon did. (Adeogun, 2004).

Based on these principles, the congress adopted four aims. First, it decided to establish a ring of strong states round France in order to prevent the possibility of any further aggression from France. Second, it was to restore as far as possible the political map of Europe as it had existed in 1793. Third, the congress was determined to secure the peace of Europe, and lastly, to reward those powers which had been members of the final coalition against Napoleon. Holland was united with Belgium and those German states not incorporated with Prussia were associated in the German Confederation under Austria. The Swiss Confederation was expanded to include Valois, Geneva and Naif-chatel, while Genoa was given to Sardinia.

The principle of legitimacy was applied in an attempt to revive pre-revolutionary Europe. Thus, the Emperor of Austria recovered Lombardy and Venetia, the King of Sardinia was restored in Piedmont, Nile and Savoy, while Bourbon rulers returned to Naples, Sicily and Spain. The temporal power of the Papacy was re-established by the recreation of the Papal states in mid-Italy, while Parma, Tuscany and Modena got back their Hapsburg rulers. Prussia, alongside her gains along the Rhine, also received part of Saxony and the former Swedish Pomerania. Russia got Finland, Warsaw and the surrounding district. (Kaganetal, 1995; Nicolson, 2001).

Russia's Tsar Alexander I was the one who showed the greatest desire and commitment in fashioning means to prevent future war. He proposed the formation of a Holy alliance, whose member states would undertake to settle their differences in accordance with the principles of Christianity. Britain refused to join because Lord Castlereagh viewed such alliance as sheer mysticism and nonsense. A more practical arrangement, the Quadruple Alliance thus developed. The new alliance consisting of Russia, Prussia, Austria and Britain was formed to preserve the settlement of 1815 and to solve international problems without resort to war. Periodic conferences were to be convened for this purpose.

The Vienna Congress has been criticized on account of certain flaws. The most outstanding criticism against the peace makers of Vienna was their neglect of certain principles, namely the principle of Liberalism, and the fact that small powers were parceled to the big powers. Clearly, the diplomats erred by ignoring the spirit of nationalism which had contributed immensely to the defeat of Napoleon. The merging of Catholic and Latin Belgium with Protestant and Germanic Holland, the redivision of Italy among princes of non-Italian blood, the partition of Poland between Russia and Prussia, the union of Norway with Sweden and the re-establishment of Austrian supremacy in Germany were all contradictions of the desire of European peoples to be ruled by members of their own national group. Similarly, it was an error to pay so much attention to the interests of the ruling houses and families at the expense of the wishes of the people. This was a direct contradiction of another growing principle, that of representative or democratic government. (Adeogun, 2004; Thomson, 1990).

These and other criticisms notwithstanding, the Vienna Congress remains a watershed in both European and global international relations. Before it, there had never been such an assembly of celebrities, gathered for a conference. It was attended by Emperors, kings, princes and prominent diplomats. It was the first time that European leaders met at a round table conference under one roof to discuss common European problems with a view to proffering solutions to them. European nations had fallen to Napoleon like a pack of cards because there was no cooperation among them. The Vienna Congress of 1815 thus marked the beginning of Congress Diplomacy. The congress created a tradition of international cooperation in periodic conferences. The congress also takes credit for endorsing the abolition of slave trade. (Adeogun, 1998; Emmott, 1965; Nicolson, 2001). On the whole, the Vienna congress preserved peace in Europe for the next forty years as no major war broke out during the period, until the Crimean War of 1855. Thus, for the first time Europe recuperated from wars which had devastated the continent for twenty five years.

Conclusion

This foregoing study examined the role of Russia in the Napoleonic wars of 1803 – 1815, as well as her participation in the international cooperation experiments initiated by the big powers of Europe after the fall of Napoleon. The coalition entered into by Russia with Britain, Austria and Sweden in 1803 could not stop Napoleon as he defeated Russia and Austria, while Britain managed to avoid defeat on account of her superior naval power. In the Russian war of 1812 occasioned by Napoleon's desperate bid to enforce the Continental System, Russia's war strategy coupled with her severe winter forced Napoleon into negotiations and ultimately showed that he could be defeated even on land. Significantly, the outcome of this war in favour of Russia profoundly transformed her perception of itself. It strengthened Russia's sense of its own greatness as a modern state and great power.

Finally, Russia played a major role in the experiments made in international cooperation (after Napoleon's fall) alongside other European powers like Britain, Austria, Prussia and later France. The active participation of Russia in the Vienna Congress of 1815 and subsequent conferences of that era clearly set the stage for her epochal roles in European international relations in the decades that followed.

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