The Congress of Vienna: Crash Course European History #23

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So how did Europe restore order after the social and political upheaval of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic regime? Well, European leaders got together and set up a committee--or a "Congress"--that met in Vienna to set things straight.

It's a great town, Vienna. Great sausages. I went there once.

Lots of skeletons under the city. Freaked me out pretty bad. What are we talking about?

Right, the Congress of Vienna. So, when Europe looked around at the previous century with its endless wars, the reign of reason seemed disastrous, and so Europe turned to its past, and a conservatism that embraced monarchies and romanticism. They believed that Enlightenment ideas, like the support of individual rights, had caused too much turmoil and misery, and so they wanted to go back to simpler times--when kings were kings, peasants were landless, and obedience mattered more than thinking. [Intro] So, even as Napoleon was on his way back to the continent in 1815 to retake his empire, the Congress of Vienna had been meeting to restore stability.

Its members included representatives from Russia, the Habsburg Empire, Prussia, Britain, and France, which though defeated was central to discussions of how to return to the old order. The first step was to bring back the French royal family, starting with the executed king's brother, Louis XVIII, who was known as "the desired" because presumably that was the only way to get him to take the job that killed his brother. Like you're desired.

We want you! We're not gonna guillotine you. The second step was to balance out great power interests.

This meant ensuring that France was no longer a menace and that no state felt aggrieved enough to start another war. A major player at the Congress was, oddly enough, a once-leading minister of Napoleon: Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord. Ga, that was great.

In the bajillion years since I graduated high school, my high school French teacher has died, and that is very sad. But at the same time, I'm glad she is not here to hear me speak French. So, during Napoleon's reign, Talleyrand had been a relentless womanizer and also a relentless seeker of bribes.

Like a lot of people who succeed in politics, he was mostly a moth that flew toward the lights of power and influence. With Napoleon's defeats, Talleyrand switched sides to support Louis XVIII, and was just the kind of well-connected wheeler-dealer the Congress needed. The Congress's initial ideas for a settlement with France involved basically leaving France and its restored monarch alone to enjoy a good number of the revolutionary conquests.

But those moderate terms became harsh when Napoleon returned to France in the spring of 1815 to much acclaim from many of his French followers, including especially veterans of his army. After Napoleon and his forces were defeated at Waterloo in June of 1815, the Allies imposed an indemnity, meaning France would be responsible for some of the losses they caused. And the Allies decided that they would occupy France until that indemnity was paid.

The presiding spirit over the Congress and its negotiations was the Austrian minister Prince Klemens von Metternich. Through his arch-conservative eyes, there was a lot to worry about. One concern was the resurgence of revolution, a possibility he worked to prevent through the use of secret police, spies, and censorship.

But for him, stopping revolution also entailed closing down student fraternities as breeding grounds for liberal ideas. Basically, attempts to restore rights, freedom, or achieve any part of the liberal program of the revolutionaries were seen as criminal. Metternich was also concerned about Russia, which was now the strongest continental power, and he wanted to prevent its further expansionism.

He felt a strong monarchy in France would help make France powerful enough to check the power of Russia, thereby bring Europe into sociopolitical balance. Did the center of the world just open? Is there Jenga in there?

So, you're gonna hear this phrase balance of powers a lot in the next 200 years. The idea is that if we can just distribute power among communities, the way that we distribute the load of Jenga pieces...even if something goes wrong, the thing doesn't fall. It's worked great for 200 years.

What's that? Oh gosh, Stan says that there's a World War I coming. The Congress also divvied up available territories and resources.

Britain received some of France's territory in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean for instance, while Prussia was allocated part of Saxony and Austria was given Italian and other territory. There was also the leftover question of Poland; so, remnants of the Duchy of Warsaw state fell to Russian control, with the remaining pieces going to Prussia and Austria. Basically, the Congress of Vienna settlement had something for everyone.

Except for the Poles. We're beginning the "This was good news for everyone except for the Poles" period of European history, which ends --when did it end, Stan? in 1991. In terms of international politics, the Congress's major achievements were twofold.

First, the Congress aimed for a "balance of power," which would guide European international developments for decades to come, and eventually provide a model for 20th century geopolitics as well. We see this emphasis on "balance" in the trade-offs and parceling out of benefits, but also in the general attitudes of great power leaders. So in addition to working toward the balance of powers, the Congress established a "congress" system for arriving at agreements and enforcing them.

And this would become very important. For one thing, it helped change the way we understand how people come into power. like, the Congress did not imagine kingship as deriving from divine power but instead from the decision making of the combined "great powers." And the group acted with one voice, arriving at common policies, which was key to their strength. This system is often called the "Concert of Europe," and in some ways it did presage the contemporary European Union.

Besides establishing the conditions for peacetime, thinkers across Europe were devising political theory for this post-revolutionary age. Leading politicians embraced Edmund Burke's theory of conservatism, for instance, which emphasized tradition and the wisdom enshrined in institutions from the past. Monarchy, according to conservatives, was the primary institution because it had endured for centuries so it provided age-old political stability.

The aristocracy also claimed an acquired superiority simply because of the long-lived leadership of its families. In other words, the middle-classes, who promoted hard work and money-making skills, were no longer really models of capability. Instead, readers flocked to Sir Walter Scott's tales of knights from the past as testimonial to aristocratic bravery—especially when they were defeating the citizen-led armies of Napoleon.

The chivalrous Middle Ages were reborn as a golden age...despite all that black death, famine, and schism in the church. It is truly astonishing what humans can, with time, nostaglicize. Religion emerged as another part of the old regime that needed to be restored.

In tandem with the other terms of the political settlement, Russia, Prussia, and Austria agreed among themselves to a Holy Alliance This alliance would promote religious values and support diverse Christian religions of the three kingdoms, and also emphasize the importance of good old fashioned Christian obedience to the church, no matter which church it is, just please be obedient to it. At the same time, religious activism renewed focus on philanthropy. Aristocratic Catholics in France, for example, called themselves “socialists” because they were concerned that the strong emphasis on individualism had resulted in the deterioration of community and society.

Now, they were unrelated to the Marxist “socialists” who would later preach about revolution. These French “socialists” raised money to aid the poor in their towns and city centers. In Protestant countries, religion made a comeback as part of a second Great Awakening.

Like the First, it emphasized religious feeling instead of strict theological learning. In Britain, Methodist churches sprang up, shunning the fancy ceremonials and religious hierarchies of Anglicanism. Instead of bowing to archbishops and British aristocrats, they worshipped among their own kind in a spirit of democracy.

Another result of conservatism was a new rationale for allegiance to a kingdom or state. Conservatives didn’t promote constitutions and the rule of law, like the French and U. S. revolutionaries did with their Enlightenment-inspired governing structures.

Instead, they saw nations as stemming from historical evolution of noble families, a common language, and common heritage. They collected folk tales and artefacts from the past, considered to be central to a kingdom’s heritage. The way things had always been done was the way they should be done in the present and future.

These ideas brought about clashes within nations between the agrarian interests of the landed aristocracy and the budding wealth of urban industrialists and financiers. Industrialists often wanted progressive change, such as infrastructure that would support their businesses, while landed aristocrats wanted to ensure that traditional hierarchies would not be disturbed, on account of how they benefited from them. Let’s go to the Thought Bubble. 1.

There was another new idea dominating the post-revolutionary era: 2. the culture of Romanticism, which replaced the culture of Enlightenment. 3. Romanticism held that the world of feeling was far superior to the regime of reason; 4. that nature was superior to manufacturing; 5. and that the past was better than the present. 6. Mary Shelley was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft. 7.

And you’ll recall, in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft emphasized the need for knowledge and reason in people’s lives. 8. But her daughter’s novel Frankenstein took the opposite stance, in some ways. 9. It’s a story, in part about what can be wrought by reason run amok. 10.

Although the monster had many abilities, it lacked human love and warmth, 11. so it ended up killing those who had loved and been kind to him. 10. For Shelley, the lack of feeling—not the lack of reason-- lay at the heart of social problems. 11. And unchecked reason, like that of Dr. Frankenstein, created monstrosities. 12. Meanwhile Russian poet Alexander Pushkin wrote the novel Eugene Onegin in the kind of romantic, flowery verse 13. that stands in stark contrast to the cold and rational exposition of Enlightenment novelists like Voltaire. 14. Eugene Onegin tells the story of a tragically ill-timed romance between Onegin and Tatyana 15. as the two attempt to navigate paths between strong emotion and the traditions of Russian courtship. 16.

It’s remembered today in part because it explores the paradoxes of romantic thinking without dismissing any perspective. 17. Indeed, Pushkin himself followed at least one of the conventions of traditional male honor in his own life: 18. He died in a duel with his wife’s purported lover.

Thanks Thought Bubble. Not only did Romantic poets write about nature, they also invoked foreign lands and exoticism—an exoticism that was earlier expressed in material goods like textiles, porcelain, umbrellas, and coffee. Painters depicted nude women in harems (even though none had ever entered a harem much less seen a nude woman in one).

And Samuel Coleridge wrote in “Kubla Khan” of an opium dream in which he is mystically transported to another time and place. Percy Bysshe Shelly, husband of Mary Shelley, wrote of distant Asia. Still others, escaping harsh reality, composed odes to poppies, from which opium is derived.

Sir Walter Scott, like other novelists, wrote about the Middle Ages, but he too reached romantic intensity in part because of his opium addiction. The highs and lows of existence, raging storms, extreme suffering, foreboding moods, all characterized the desire to turn Enlightenment rationality upside down with intense emotion—or even to personally escape from that hyper-reasoned reality. Musicians also conveyed romantic highs and lows.

They did this by juxtaposing thundering choruses with more tender passages. Composer Ludwig von Beethoven, the extremely intense fellow behind me, excelled at creating these types of musical contrasts. The crisp and disciplined compositions of Enlightenment musicians were gone.

Individualism, which had not really entered the eighteenth century Enlightenment world until Rousseau wrote of his individual emotions, also figured in post-revolutionary thought. Romantic individualism emphasized poetic or other forms of genius. Like, during the Enlightenment and revolutionary years, individual rights and liberties for everyone dominated debates.

But in the post-revolutionary era, both history and fiction began to look at--and in a way worship--the individual Great Man. These great individuals--who tended to be cleaned up military stars--were seen to be the central drivers of historical change and the individuals at the center of every great tale, whether fiction or not. And this still shapes our way of looking at history and other stories--while almost all inventions, for instance, are the result of broad and complex networks of collaborators, we still tend to put individuals at the center of those stories, whether it’s Edison and his light bulb or Napoleon and his army.

But try as they might, leaders at the Congress of Vienna and a cultural emphasis on conservatism could not quash the revolutionary spirit, especially the spirit embodied by the idea that people were citizens of a community, rather than subjects of a king. And amid all these political changes, a different revolution was shaking the economic status quo so dramatically that old ways of thinking about peasants and land and aristocrats would soon prove untenable. The nature of work and life were profoundly reshaped by the Industrial Revolution.

In France in 1780, somewhere around 60% of people worked in agriculture. 200 years later, in 1980, only 8% did. The Industrial Revolution will change how we spend our days, how we relate to one another and to the world, what we value, and in some ways, who we are. That's next time.

I'll see you then.