

The New Criterion

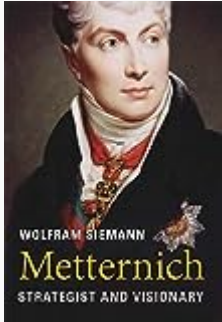
Books November 2019

Metternich's strength in law

by Andrew Roberts

A review of *Metternich: Strategist and Visionary* by Wolfram Siemann

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Wolfram Siemann

Metternich: Strategist and Visionary

Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 928 pages, \$39.95

The legacy of Prince Clemens von Metternich (1773–1859), the Austrian foreign minister from 1809 and also chancellor from 1821 until 1848, has been a hotly debated issue among historians for decades. Was he, as Henry Kissinger and others believe, the infinitely subtle conservative master of realpolitik who brought down Napoleon and saved the peace of Europe for the next four decades? Or was he, as more progressive souls contest, a cynical arch-manipulator and reactionary who held back liberal reforms in Europe and whose sole achievement was to have been a progenitor of today's European Union?

As the subtitle of his engaging and comprehensive biography—“Strategist and Visionary”—implies, Wolfram Siemann, an emeritus history professor at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, believes in the Kissinger view of Metternich, and, by the end of the book's 755 pages of text, his readers will too.¹ The Metternich who emerges is a figure who saved Europe from radical rather than liberal revolution over and over again, until the tsunami of unstoppable revolutions finally drowned him in 1848.

The son of an aristocratic Austrian diplomat, Metternich's early life was entirely bound up with the French Revolution. He was nineteen when he accompanied his father to Koblenz in July 1792, part of the delegation that hoped to create an Austro-Prussian alliance under the Duke of Brunswick that might strangle the Revolution in its cradle, even while King Louis XVI of France was still alive. The catastrophic collapse of that dream affected Metternich profoundly, not least once the French Army occupied the Metternich family estates in the Rhineland in 1794. The experience seared into him a hatred of revolutions.

During an early sojourn in exile in England in 1794, the twenty-one-year-old Metternich listened to Edmund Burke's speeches in the House of Commons whenever he could, having read his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* on its publication in 1790. "For the young Metternich," Siemann records, "Burke's ideas had the quality of a political epiphany." Burke's powerful writing and profound thoughts on the advantages of what Siemann calls "aristocratic constitutionalism" provided the young would-be diplomat with an ideology that would stay with him for life, at least as an ideal to aim at, if not always an immediate path to follow. Metternich's handwritten annotations in his copy of the *Reflections* make it clear how influential that seminal work of conservatism was on the young man, as was an excerpt from a letter of Burke's of 1795 about "the whole order of things" that Metternich kept in his private papers all through his life.

The son of an aristocratic Austrian diplomat, Metternich's early life was entirely bound up with the French Revolution.

Metternich became the ambassador to Saxony in 1801, and the next nine years were spent attempting to shore up coalition after coalition against Napoleon, who knocked them all down on the battlefield. It was only after Napoleon's second capture of Vienna, in the 1809 campaign, and his (albeit pyrrhic)

victories at Aspern-Essling and Wagram, that Emperor Francis I finally recognized that Austria could not beat Napoleon and so had to join him, offering his daughter the Archduchess Marie Louise as a prospective bride to the Corsican minotaur.

Metternich was the diplomat to whom Francis turned in order to negotiate the marriage, and Siemann is good on the process by which the alliance—both marital and strategic—was arranged with Napoleon in 1810. It offended the sensibilities of many Austrians to ally themselves with the country that had defeated them in four successive campaigns since 1792, but Metternich made it work, swallowing his pride and waiting for his moment to strike against the man whose lust for hegemony had so wrecked the balance of power in Europe, a concept that Metternich had believed in implicitly and hoped to restore.

Metternich's sense of timing in turning on Napoleon in June 1813, six months after Napoleon's disastrous retreat from Moscow, was impeccable. Siemann records how the Austrian had told Tsar Alexander I of Russia that negotiations with Napoleon were "necessary in order to gain time for Austria's armament and to be able to portray Napoleon as the aggressor," which at that

stage—with his army heavily outnumbered and outgunned by the rest of Europe after the 1812 campaign—he simply was not. The stage was thus set for five days of meetings between Metternich and Napoleon and his staff at the Palais Marcolini in Dresden from June 26 to 30, 1813, which some historians have mistakenly seen as sealing Napoleon's downfall. In fact, as Metternich's prior explanation to the Tsar proves, that had already been decided.

The Marcolini meeting, as well as many other events in Metternich's life, present methodological problems for historians. Siemann is far too good a scholar to trust Metternich's profoundly unreliable memoirs, which are especially dubious because they claimed to recall verbatim and without contemporaneous notes long conversations that had taken place sixteen years before. Imagine trying to do that in your own life, and you'll recognize the historian's problem. Yet, overall, Siemann thinks that we should trust Metternich's (somewhat self-centered, even vainglorious) account of his outsmarting Napoleon, on the grounds that, "As a former diplomat he possessed an exquisite ability to memorize oral negotiations, which was important when opponents might take a single sentence as grounds for war." (Or peace, in Napoleon's case at that stage.)

Once Napoleon had fallen—indeed even just before the Battle of Waterloo itself—Metternich was the undoubted central figure in the Congress of Vienna that drew up the peace treaty that created the new European settlement. It was a formidable achievement, even more so because he was negotiating with such giants of diplomacy as Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand of France, Viscount Castlereagh of Britain (another of Kissinger's heroes), and Count Nesselrode of Russia.

The subsequent series of conferences in the 1820s, in which Metternich tilted towards Russia and Prussia, and which engendered the creation of what has become known as the Congress System or Metternich System, essentially secured European peace for almost the rest of Metternich's life, until the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853.

Siemann records how Metternich was the best-informed politician in Europe, largely through his extensive personal contacts built up at the top of European society over five decades, his highly professional "Central Commission" spy network, his hand-picked ambassadors in every capital, and his efficient police chief Joseph von Sedlnitzky, who handled domestic matters. He therefore had seen the mid-March 1848 revolution in Vienna coming from as early as the previous December, but was unprepared for the sheer speed and force of it, and that of the other revolutions that suddenly engulfed all of the European continent from the Channel coast to the Russian border.

Metternich was the undoubted central figure in the Congress of Vienna that drew up the peace treaty that created the new

European settlement.

Siemann rightly puts the 1848 revolutions down to “unfulfilled bourgeois demands for political participation; the aspirations for national self-determination and independence; the distress in the pre-industrial crafts; the effects of overpopulation, and proletarianization in the major cities and in many rural areas.” Karl Marx was right when he said that a specter was haunting Europe, just wrong about what it was: it was multi-faceted rather than any yearning for communism.

With revolts in Palermo and Naples and then in Paris in February 1848, Metternich was suddenly faced with calls for freedom of the press, freedom of association, regional representation, and the empowerment of the peasantry. On March 13, the Lower Austrian Diet convened to present Emperor Ferdinand I with demands for a liberal constitution. Mobs gathered; soldiers fired on the crowds, killing several rioters; impoverished workers ripped up gas pipes along the city walls that started fires signaling a general uprising.

All that was needed was a well-placed government insider to persuade the emperor and archdukes to sacrifice the seventy-four-year-old state chancellor in the interests of social order. Step forward Count Franz von Kolowrat, a jealous lieutenant and Metternich’s nemesis, who plotted to use the revolutionary activity to replace him as chancellor but did not foresee the way that he too would be swept away after only a month in office. Metternich was predictably dismissive of Kolowrat, saying, “Although he is an excellent businessman, he lacks that quality which alone makes the statesman. He is incapable of seeing a question as a whole, to capture it, determine how it will develop, and not be distracted by coincidences.” Metternich could behave *de haut en bas* like no one else.

Fearing for his life, Metternich fled Vienna for England. One of the only disappointments of this otherwise excellent book is that it fails to comment on the story that he escaped the Austrian capital dressed as a washerwoman. His passport, reproduced in this book, was in the name of Friedrich Mayern, a wholesaler from Graz, but it was only one of a number of aliases he was forced to use. The month-long escape across revolutionary Europe is the most exciting part of the book, as he was recognized on a number of occasions and nearly captured, but it is here sadly reduced to only a few pages.

The news that Metternich had been overthrown after nearly forty years at the heart of European affairs was the international signal that the revolutions were real, and it gave them a huge boost in every state of the Continent.

Whether Metternich was a reactionary or not used to be a staple exam question in European History papers. Siemann does not believe he ran a police state, not least because Austrian cities, towns, and villages had no police forces. He prefers to consider what relevance Metternich has today, especially as a strategist and visionary. He rightly recalls how Metternich “judged political constitutions according to their suitability to the state in question,” and was therefore not a champion of any particular system but would support any that guaranteed the outcome

demanded by his family's coat of arms, "Strength in law."

He certainly opposed extremism and fanaticism wherever he found them, as one might expect of so sophisticated, frequently cynical, cosmopolitan, and intelligent a statesman.

This was not to be enforced by a powerful army and federal police force—though Metternich believed in having those too—so much as a shared public ethos that valued tradition and order, the better to allow the individual to develop according to his own lights. Siemann thus presents Metternich as a classic conservative rather than a reactionary. Metternich distrusted the radical intelligentsia

of the 1820s and 1830s, especially for their belief in extending the franchise down to a largely illiterate peasantry. He certainly opposed extremism and fanaticism wherever he found them, as one might expect of so sophisticated, frequently cynical, cosmopolitan, and intelligent a statesman.

Siemann rates patience and perseverance among Metternich's best qualities. His inner compass allowed him to survive "all kinds of catastrophe—revolution, war, terrorism, and an almost endless series of deaths in his own family" with a degree of equanimity (Siemann says "consistency") that some readers might think bordered on the inhuman. The author adopts an easy, almost chatty written style with chapter subtitles such as "A Nasty Plot Metternich Never Knew About," and I suspect the book could have been fifty pages shorter if he had been less conversational with the reader. But then it would have lost some of its charm in the process.

Although he changed his mind on many occasions, Metternich was totally and consistently Anglophilic in the extreme. Even when Austria was allied to Napoleon and thus theoretically opposed to Britain, Metternich never resiled from his statement that, "If I were not what I am, I would like to be an Englishman." He admired the British constitution, her strength in law, the way of life of its gentry, and its freedom of speech. He somehow believed all that even when he was closing newspapers and arresting editors and imposing martial law in the Austrian possessions of Northern Italy that ought never to have been Austrian. Only eight months before his death in 1859, he wrote to Benjamin Disraeli, who considered himself a disciple, to say "Eight years have gone by since we met in England, the country which I love."

Siemann does not fall into the common trap of hailing Metternich as the progenitor of the modern European Union. Metternich supported the Holy Roman Empire and the Rhenish Confederation, which Siemann points out were "defensive federal orders" without the territorial ambitions necessary to become a genuine empire, and which were too weak to oppress neighbors. As we have seen from the senior EU official Guy Verhofstadt's recent statement that "The world of tomorrow is not a world order based on nation-states or countries; it is a world order that is based on empires," the European Union has far more Napoleonic imperial ambitions than those of the latter-day Holy Roman Empire and the Rhenish Confederation. Because of Metternich's opposition to expansionist imperial ambition and his support for judging "political constitutions according to their suitability to the state in question," I put this book down convinced that Metternich would

have been a Brexiteer. Whether he would have been or not, Siemann has greatly advanced our knowledge of and admiration for him.

1 *Metternich: Strategist and Visionary*, by Wolfram Siemann, translated by Daniel Steuer; Harvard University Press, 928 pages, \$39.95.

Andrew Roberts is the Roger and Martha Mertz Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 38 Number 3 , on page 69

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/11/metternichs-strength-in-law>