

Napoleon III and Europe

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Abstract

Despite his promise that the Empire that he restored in the autumn of 1852 would be a peaceful one, and the fact that throughout his reign he sought to promote the principle of major conferences designed to resolve international tensions peacefully, Napoleon III emerged as a troublemaker in the name of the principle of nationality and French interests. He was, for instance, at the centre of three of the four largest European wars of the period: the Crimean War in 1854-1855, the Italian War of 1859, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The French sovereign initially succeeded in once again placing France at the centre of the game, with the Congress of Paris in 1856 wiping away the humiliation of the Vienna Congress in 1815. However, the war in 1870 exposed French fragility, and led to the disappearance of French primacy on the continent in favour of Germany.

Article

The youth of the future emperor of the French, Napoleon III, predisposed him to take a close interest in Europe. Born in 1808 in the capital of a major European empire founded by his uncle Napoleon I, he was the son of Louis Bonaparte and Hortense de Beauharnais, who ruled over Holland at the time. Upon the fall of the Empire in 1815, he began a life of exile that led him to Switzerland, Bavaria, Baden, Florence, Rome, and England. He had a gift for languages, and quickly learned to express himself in Italian, German, and English with the same ease as he did in French, and in Spanish as well after his marriage.

He tackled the question of Europe from his very first writings. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed that from the Revolution onwards France was fulfilling a mission towards Europe and had to open the way for the emancipation of other peoples. He wrote in the purest idealistic romanticism: "All peoples are brothers and will embrace one another in the face of dethroned tyranny, with the earth consoled and humanity satisfied" If the right of nations to self-determination was not met, the abyss of revolutions risked opening up again, this time irredeemably. He also defended the politics of his uncle as he learned about them reading *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* when it was published in 1823, and as he dreamed of them himself: Napoleon I in fact would have waged only defensive wars to protect the benefits of the Revolution and the integrity of France, with a desire to free subjugated peoples, build a fairer Europe, and ensure peace through a large confederation of nations. The

Congress of Vienna demolished his projects.

Like De Tocqueville, the young prince prophesied the emergence of two giants: Russia and the United States. To ensure its independence in the face of such powers, France had to come to an understanding with other European nations, particularly with other Latin peoples. In fact, he did not wait to be in power to put his ideas into practice. Moved by the Greek revolt against Ottoman domination, he wanted to fight by their side like the rest of the romantic youth from Byron to Delacroix, but as a minor he yielded to the paternal authority which formally forbade him to do so. The Italian cause did not leave him indifferent either. In 1831, he and his older brother took part in the rebellion in Romagna against the temporal power of the Pope and the Austrians, a failure in which his brother died and he himself nearly lost his life.

When he became the president of the Republic, he was not at all a concern for the powers of the Congress of Vienna, because his hands were bound by the constitution, although things changed after his coup d'état. Was he concealing the same ambitions as his uncle? When announcing the re-establishment of the Empire in Bordeaux in October 1852, he meant to be reassuring: "The Empire is peace." He played the English card particularly well, for he enjoyed great sympathy after having lived there for so long, where he had many friends in ruling circles and was thought of as a man of progress. His gesture of being represented at the funeral service for the Duke of Wellington, the victor of Waterloo, was appreciated. Not only did Great Britain recognize Napoleon III, but it used its good offices to have other powers do so as well.

During the first years of his reign, the sovereign was attached to the "*entente cordiale*" with England, which according to him was the best way to break France's isolation. The two countries jointly participated in the Crimean War against Russia. France did not have a direct interest in taking part in this conflict, but its commitment and victory enabled it to resume its place in the Concert of Europe, and to play a role of arbiter within it. One year after the Second World Exhibition, which took place in the Empire's capital, the Congress of Paris in 1856 emerged as a brilliant revenge against that of Vienna. The French sovereign succeeded in breaking the alliance that had united England, Russia, Austria, and Prussia up to that point. It was also thanks to Napoleon III that the Italian question was raised, and that Serbia, Montenegro, and the Romanian principalities obtained broad autonomy.

While he was a partisan of nationalities, the French sovereign was nevertheless realistic. He believed it was necessary to proceed by stages in order not to alienate all of the powers. France also had to benefit, as the motives that led him to support the Piedmont against Austria clearly demonstrate. Aside from a very real desire to liberate Italy, he also intended for France to obtain, as the price for its action, increased influence in the Mediterranean, the annexation of the Savoy and the County of Nice, as well as an end to Italian revolutionary plots. France was victorious during the summer of 1859 and

was enlarged by the addition of Savoy and Nice six months later.

The French emperor enjoyed great prestige at the time and was seen as a generous and peaceful sovereign. In January 1860, he signed the Cobden-Chevalier Commercial Treaty with Great Britain, which liberalized trade between the two countries, and cleared the way for signing many other bilateral treaties during the ensuing years, a path that calmed commercial tensions. In 1865 he launched the Latin Monetary Union that brought together France, Italy, Belgium, and Switzerland which were joined three years later by Greece. Finally, he called for the creation of a European court to peacefully resolve disputes between states and interceded personally between Russians and Poles during the January Uprising of 1863, both of which actually proved unsuccessful. He was also an original head of state who did not respect diplomatic customs. He did not hesitate to use secret diplomacy in addition to dramatic twists and turns. Many did not trust him, seeing him as the primary danger to the balance of power in Europe.

By his own admission, the 1860s were a “black spot” that darkened the horizon, for which he was partly responsible. The misfortune began in Italy, where he sent an expeditionary force that crushed revolutionaries threatening the Pope’s power and remained in place to protect Rome. In doing so, he who had been a hero in the eyes of patriots was henceforth seen as the primary obstacle to the country’s final unification. At the same time, the joint Mexican expedition conducted with England and Spain, and later solely by France, turned into a fiasco. The Austrian Archduke Maximilian, who had been placed on the Mexican imperial throne but proved unable to impose himself, was abandoned, made prisoner, and ultimately shot by the Mexicans. The news came in July 1867 right in the middle of the International Exhibition in Paris, which projected French influence in Europe and across the globe, thereby tarnishing the festivities.

In particular, a succession of errors was made with regard to Bismarck’s Prussia. It firstly resulted in allowing Prussia to lash out at Austria in the name of the principle of nationalities, and then—after its resounding victory in Sadowa in July 1866, by which Prussia imposed itself in Germany—in fruitlessly demanding Luxembourg and Belgium as “tips,” and finally in falling into the trap of the Spanish succession by declaring war four years later. In doing so, France found itself facing all of the German states, while losing the support of England and with nothing more than hypothetical promises of support from Austria and Italy. The debacle at Sedan on September 1, 1870, did not only bring about the fall of the Empire and the exile of Napoleon III, during which he would outline a code for international law and a court of arbitration for ensuring peace in the world, but also marked the advent of German power. Napoleon III brought France back into the centre of the European game. His defeat and fall, however, turned France into a relatively isolated power for two decades, one that was peripheral compared to Germany.

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