The invention of an international order: Lessons from 1814

In 1814, an alliance of European empires captured Paris and exiled Napoleon Bonaparte. Drawing on a new book, **Glenda Sluga** *explains how this coalition planted the seeds for today's international order, wedding the idea of a durable peace to multilateralism, diplomacy, philanthropy, and rights, and making Europe its centre.*

These days, memories of the international past, like talk of a foundering international order, tend to stop around the end of the Second World War in 1945, when the US state and US dollar were globally ascendant. Yet, what is actually at stake is at least *two centuries* of thinking and practicing multilateralism.

The moment I have in mind is the peacemaking process beginning in 1814 that marked the end of the Napoleonic wars in Europe and launched a modern era of international relations. Even at the time, the Europeans involved understood they had invented something new in the methods of diplomacy and in the constitution of politics they employed with the aim of averting war. In doing so, they set the terms for a new international order. What was distinctive about this new order is the extent of the politics that were regarded as legitimate for the purpose of diplomacy, and the range of people who invested their own futures in its possibilities.

In a new book, *The Invention of International Order,* I study the end of the Napoleonic wars as a moment that breathed life into new ways of doing politics between states. It was a moment when women as well as men, bourgeois as well as aristocratic, non-state as well as state 'actors' engaged these new political possibilities in unprecedented ways, to diverse ends. At this same moment, I argue, the parameters of political behaviour, whether within or between states, were being closely defined or 'ordered' to determine what counted as politics, and who could be political.

Once we widen the historical lens on the transformation of politics, it is easier to see a broadened horizon of invention, ambition, and expectation. Bankers who had become essential credit providers to states during the Napoleonic wars petitioned for Jews in newly liberated territories to be given equality before the law in rights of purchase, trade, and possession in the post-war period.

Then there was the industrial entrepreneur Robert Owen, who attended the 1818 Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle to petition for economic rights. Owen warned that the technological industrial changes spreading through Europe were exacerbating economic inequality. The science that brought the steam engine and the factory system was undermining the exchangeable value of manual labour and would inevitably provoke revolution unless the existing system of distribution benefitting only one person out of every thousand was reformed.

Women, too, approached the invention of an international order with a determined sense of Europe's political future. They were important articulators and defenders of the values and norms of international order, most predominantly liberalism, patriotism, and a humanitarianism referred to as philanthropy or 'the politics of bandages'. Historians have noticed these women, they just haven't taken them seriously.

This is despite the fact that *at the time* the French writer Madame de Staël was regarded as a 'genius' and one of 'three great powers', alongside Britain, Prussia and Russia. In St Petersburg, Stockholm, London, and in Paris, as the coalition took form, and then negotiated peace, the wealthy Staël was able to work her salon, networks, correspondence and publications in defence of a post-war order that would ensure constitutional guarantees against abuses of political power, freedom of religion, press, and association, meritocratic rather than hereditary government, thriving public spheres, and also the abolition of slavery.

She was not the only spokesperson for many of these views, but she was amongst the most articulate and her influence was at least equal to that of many of the better-known men identified with these events. Indeed, Staël's role underlines an alternative history of diplomacy in which the salon was the training ground of diplomats, and an informal space of foreign policy making, in the *ancien* political order being left behind.

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With all its paradoxes, this longer history of the invention of an international order matters. Just as the international politics seeded 200 years ago resonated at equally significant moments of post-war disruption through the 19th and 20th centuries, so too did its lessons. The enlargement of political ambition, and of political engagement, among women as well as men, the imagining of an international order that impacted individual lives and deserved to be taken seriously as a site of politics – these characteristics tended to surface at critical moments of disruption, not least in 1919 and 1945.

Then, as in 1814, a window briefly opened was soon closed; the world was repeatedly left with the shell of ambition and expectation, and the skeletons of bravely imagined institutions and practices. Ultimately, women, non-Europeans, and non-Christians lost out in the processes of ordering that took place. When we include their histories, the narrative of how an international order was invented is not only about the ideas, practices and institutions that remained influential, but also about long forgotten expectations of what an international politics might be.

For more information, see the author's new book, The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe after Napoleon (Princeton University Press, 2022)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image: Delegates of the Congress of Vienna in a contemporary engraving by Jean Godefroy after the painting by Jean-Baptiste Isabey, numbers added by Maciej Szczepańczyk, image published on Wikimedia Commons from this source image (CC BY-SA 3.0)

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