"Metternich's Delicate Dance of 1813: Diplomacy Between Eagles"

by Paul van Lunteren

Introduction

At the end of 1812 it became clear that Napoleon had lost his campaign in Russia. In his attempt to stop the Tsar from trading with Great Britain, he had lost a large part of his army. Napoleon knew that his powerful image in Europe had been ruined drastically. Therefore, he rushed to Berlin, even though his army was still in retreat. Napoleon planned to build up a new army in order to start a fresh campaign in the spring of 1813. In the meantime, the Russian Army marched to the west. At the close of the year, a Prussian corps, under the command of Lieutenant General Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg, joined the Russians at Tauroggen (nowadays Tauragé in Latvia).[1] This step brought the Prussian government in a state of embarrassment. Prussia was bound to the Treaty of Tilsit of 1807, making it an unwilling ally–but still an ally(!)—of the French empire. [2]

This changed rapidly during the first months of 1813, when the coalition against Napoleon got expanded with two new members. Great Britain succeeded in luring Sweden into the coalition, while Russia persuaded the Prussian king to take the gamble. [3] At the end of March 1813, France was at war with four countries and Napoleon faced a hard time. The British still controlled the seas, the combined armed forces of Prussia and Russia gathered in Poland and Sweden prepared an expedition to the mainland. At the same time French forces were still bogged down in the bloody civil war in Spain.

Until then, one major power remained out of the conflict: the Austrian Empire. For four years, Austria was in a certain way also bound to France, although it was offered more freedom to act than, for instance, Prussia. Nevertheless, Austria was humiliated by Napoleon in the short war of 1809 and the House of Habsburg was bound to the French dynasty through the marriage of archduchess Marie Louise with Napoleon in 1810, but in the spring of 1813, Austria was confronted—like the rest of Europe—with a new reality and it had to make a choice concerning its position.[4] Should it join the war against Prussia and Russia or should it remain neutral? An alliance gave the French emperor the support of 250.000 soldiers, while observing neutrality meant that the Austrian borders could easier be defended

[1] Adam Zamoyski, *1812. Napoleons fatale veldtocht naar Moskou* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2004), 464.

[2] Eckart Kleßmann, *Napoleon und die Deutschen* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2007), 128 and 130.

[3] In doing so, Great Britain agreed with a future Swedish occupation of Norway and, therefore, sealed the fate of Denmark. Sweden annexed Norway in 1814.

[4] Franz Herre, *Napoleon. Eine biographie* (München: Kreuzlingen, 2006), 156.


Berlin
Stahlstich v. C. E. Weber
1838
C.W.N.L.FÜRST von METTERNICH
Kaiserl. Oesterreich. Staats-Kanzler
Verlag der Richterschen Buchhandlung in Berlin.

against the French. A third scenario, to join the war on the side of Prussia and Russia, seemed hazardous, because in the case of defeat there would not be any guarantee for the Habsburg Monarchy.

Clemens von Metternich, the Austrian foreign minister, was faced with this dilemma in the spring of 1813. He was desperate to maintain a certain balance between France and Russia, but on the other hand knew that things were changing rapidly.[5] It became a delicate case concerning diplomatic ties and interests with France and the Allied countries. How did he react to this? Which steps did he take? And how did he deal with the balance between the belligerents? In this article Metternich's 'delicate dance' of 1813 is examined.

"The first steps on the floor"

Metternich started his 'dance' at the end of May 1813. At that point, the Prussian and Russian armies were pushed into a defensive position along the River Spree after they were beaten in the battles of Lützen and Bautzen. But the war was not lost yet. Both sides paused in order to strengthen its forces.[6] Metternich expected an Allied retreat towards Silesia which, in that case, would drive Austria literally into a corner. For him, the defeat at Bautzen was the sign for Austria to make a choice regarding the conflict:

> I had made my choice. The point was this—to prevent Napoleon's onward march, and to remove all uncertainty as to the decision of the Emperor from the minds of the Emperor Alexander and King Frederick William. The Russian army was much demoralized; it had but one wish—to get back into its own territory.[7]

In the Laxenburg Castle near Vienna, Metternich proposed to Emperor Francis that he should join the Austrian forces in Bohemia. Austria might have been officially a neutral player in the conflict, it nevertheless assembled its main army in Bohemia. Metternich hoped that, when the Austrian Emperor joined this army, his presence alone would exercise a serious impression of Austria's independent position in the conflict, both on France as on Prussia and Russia. At the same time, Austria could not afford it to challenge unnecessarily one or the other party. Therefore, Metternich had to take this step slowly and carefully.

On 31 May, Emperor Francis left the capital of Vienna for Gitschin (now: Jičín). Meanwhile, Metternich dispatched couriers

[5] Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars: An International History, 1803-1815* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 504.

[6] David Hamilton-Williams, *The Fall of Napoleon. The Final Betrayal* (London: Brockhampton Press, 1994), 31.

[7] Clemens von Metternich, *The autobiography 1773-1815* (Welwyn Garden City: Ravenhall Books, 2004), 176.

to the Allied headquarters in Silesia and to the city of Dresden, where Napoleon was staying. They delivered the message that Austria was prepared to be a mediator in the conflict.[8] In doing so, Metternich started to maneuver Austria on the 'dancefloor' of European politics.

On 2 June, while on their way to Gitschin, the Emperor and Metternich met Karl von Nesselrode near the town of Czaslau (now: Čáslav) in Central-Bohemia. Von Nesselrode was the Russian ambassador to Berlin and had been sent by Tsar Alexander I in order to inform him about the Austrian stance in the conflict.[9] But his visit came for Metternich a little bit too soon, for as he had not contacted Napoleon at all, so in order to buy some time, Emperor Francis sent Von Nesselrode back to his master with the following message:

> Go back, and tell the Emperor […] and the King of Prussia, that you met me on my way to the head-quarters of my army in Bohemia. I beg the Emperor to choose a point on the frontiers of Bohemia and Silesia, to which I can send my Minister for Foreign Affairs, in order to make him fully acquainted with my decision.[10]

The next day, the Austrian Emperor and his Minister of Foreign Affairs arrived in Gitschin. For Metternich, this moment was a precarious one. He could offer the Allies nothing, because he had not received an answer from the French. As long as the French point of view was unknown, Austria was in no position to act. So, in his careful approach of the two belligerents, Metternich was temporarily capable of nothing, but this changed rapidly when Metternich was informed that the French had rejected the Austrian proposal of becoming a mediator in the conflict. It was a reaction that Metternich had expected: "I was convinced that the answer of the French minister would be an evasive one; and this was the case."[11]

Nevertheless, France created a possibility for Metternich to step up in his careful 'dance'. Napoleon proposed the Allies a truce for seven weeks, in order to strengthen and reinforce his army. The Prussians and Russians accepted this offer eagerly.[12] On 4 June, the Armistice of Pläswitz was agreed; the truce lasted until 20 July.[13] During this period France got full control over Saxony, while the Allies could retreat safely behind the river Oder. Both sides were now able to recover from the recent campaign, while Austria got

[8] Zamoyski, *De ondergang van Napoleon*, 71-72. Metternich sent his couriers to count Ferdinand Bubna von Littitz, who was the Austrian ambassador at Dresden.

[9] Zamoyski, 72. The Tsar longed for a 'categorical decision' from the Austrian Emperor, and 'on paper.'

[10] Von Metternich, 178.

[11] Von Metternich, 179.

[12] E.M. Almedingen, *The Emperor Alexander I* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 147; and Zamoyski, 69-70.

[13] Wolfram Siemann, *Metternich. Staatsmann zwischen Restauration und Moderne* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2010), 46.

considerable time to build up its army. According to the German historian Franz Herre, Napoleon gave the initiative away at Pläswitz (now: Paszowice).[14] From that moment, Metternich could coordinate his 'dance' with the belligerents.

The next thing Metternich wished, was clarity on the true intentions of the Allies, and in particular that of the Russians. Metternich knew that the Tsar, whom he regarded as an ambivalent monarch, was not keen on the Austrians. His distrust about the Austrian stance in Europe was fueled by the marriage of Marie Louise with Napoleon and the refusal of Vienna to enter into a secret treaty with Russia in 1811. Metternich tried to convince the Tsar that Austria was sincere in its effort to bring peace in Europe:

> As I could not and would not give up the project in which alone I saw safety, I explained to the Emperor that I was ready to lay the whole plan before him, but must not raise any false hope that we could ever give it up, or even make any substantial change in it. I insisted on the absolute necessity of the mediation of Austria, the formal acknowledgment of which I desired to obtain from him.[15]

But the Tsar had his doubts: What will become of our cause, if Napoleon accepts the mediation? Metternich estimated this chance small, but in that case the negotiations would almost certainly fail for Napoleon would show 'to be neither wise nor just.' On the other side, if Napoleon rejected the proposal of mediation, Austria would join the coalition. The Tsar was not convinced immediately, so Metternich proposed a Russian officer to be stationed at the Austrian headquarters in order to inform the Tsar about the (future) plan of operations. It was this proposal that was decisive enough. The Tsar "seemed exceedingly well pleased: he considered this to be a guarantee of our intentions."[16] On 20 June, Metternich returned to Gitschin. His meeting with the Tsar had been important for him. The main target of this diplomatic dance between the two sides, was to buy time for the Austrian army to strengthen its positions. In the end, the Tsar had put faith in Metternich's plan: his 'delicate dance.' Now that the tsar was reassured, Metternich could focus on the other belligerent in the conflict: France.

Back in Gitschin, Metternich found an invitation from his French colleague, Hugues-Bernard Maret, the Duke of Bassano. Metternich's visit to the Tsar was noticed by the French. Now, Napoleon wanted to speak personally with the foreign minister and so he invited him to come over to Dresden. The invitation did not come as a surprise: "This step, which I had foreseen, was a proof to me that Napoleon did not feel strong enough to break with us openly. I begged the Emperor to allow me to accept

[14] Herre, 256.
[15] Von Metternich, 181.
[16] Von Metternich, 182.

the invitation; and immediately informed the Russo-Prussian cabinet assembled at Reichenbach [now: Dzierżoniów], in Silesia, of the matter."[17]

A bold step

Now perhaps the most difficult phase of the dance started. Metternich had to present himself, on behalf of the Austrian Empire, as an independent participant in the conflict, even though Napoleon knew that he had made contact with the Allies. In addition, Metternich could not announce in advance that Austria would join the war in favor of the Allies. In short, Metternich had to continue the play of the impartial negotiator, but he did not go unarmed. In his conversation with the Tsar—and earlier also with the Prussian chancellor Karl von Hardenberg—Metternich had unofficially promised that Austria would join the war in favor of the Allies, if Napoleon would not accept the demands of the Allies. In fact, Metternich brought the French Emperor an ultimatum. So, when the Minister of Foreign Affairs set off for Dresden the same day, he was prepared (again) for the next phase of his delicate dance. In his memoires, Metternich writes that by that time the French nation was split into two parties, namely the Revolutionists and the Royalists:

> The first party lamented the precarious position in which Napoleon's love of conquest had placed their interests; the latter, not yet daring to raise their heads, waited with anxiety to see the result of the new campaign, for which the nation had just made new and enormous efforts. The French army sighed for peace. […] The appearance of the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs at Napoleon's head-quarters could, under such circumstances, only be regarded by the leaders of the French army as decisive in its results.'[18]

Napoleon was staying in the Marcolini Palais, outside of the city of Dresden.[19] Metternich was welcomed here on 26 June by Marshal Louis-Alexandre Berthier, who guided his guest to the reception room. There, in the middle of the room, Napoleon awaited his guest. Even before Metternich could deliver his message, Napoleon confronted him with the prospect of a war with Austria. The Emperor pointed out to him that the Prussians and Russians were defeated at Lützen and Bautzen and that he would gladly fight the next battle near Vienna.[20]

The verbal attack of Napoleon only strengthened Metternich's position. 'I felt myself, at this crisis, the representative of all European society. "'Peace and war,' I answered, 'lie in your Majesty's hands. […]

[17] Von Metternich, 182-83.

[18] Von Metternich, 184-85.

[19] On the contrary to popular movie industry, for example the 2002 TV Mini-Series Napoleón, the famous conversation between Napoleon and Metternich did not take place in Paris, but in Dresden.

[20] Hamilton-Williams, 34.

The world requires peace. In order to secure this peace, you must reduce your power within bounds compatible with the general tranquility, or you will fall in the contest.'"[21] Napoleon was furious and sounded combative. He claimed that it was only his generals who longed for peace. The army remained loyal to him. "'In one night,' the Emperor said, 'I lost thirty thousand horses. I have lost everything, except honour and the consciousness of what I owe to a brave people who, after such enormous misfortunes, have given me fresh proofs of their devotion and their conviction that I alone can rule them.'"[22] Metternich remained calm and stipulated the acceptance of the offer of mediation by Russia and Prussia. Then he named four points, which had to be accepted by Napoleon, if he wanted to conclude a peace. On behalf of the Allies, except the British, Metternich demanded:

1) The dissolution of the Duchy of Warsaw, created by Napoleon six years earlier.

2) The enlargement of Prussia

3) The restitution of the Illyrian provinces to Austria

4) The re-establishment of the Hanseatic towns

Again, Napoleon's reaction sounded combative. He took Metternich with him to another room where he showed him information about the number of troops of the Austrian army. For more than an hour, the gentlemen talked about statistical data, but with no result in getting a better understanding of each other.

Then, the two returned to the reception room. There, Napoleon changed the subject. Metternich noticed this step and found it remarkable. Napoleon did not mention the mediation by the Austrians, but—instead—his campaign in Russia. According to the Emperor, this campaign had failed due to the time of the year. By changing the subject, Napoleon tried to take the lead in the conservation. Metternich, who was still performing his 'dance,' knew that he had to come back to the proposals:

> After I had listened to him for more than half an hour, I interrupted him with the remark, that in what he had just told me I saw strong proof of the necessity of putting an end to so uncertain a fate. "Fortune," I said, 'may play you false a second time, as it did in 1812. In ordinary times, armies are formed of only a small part of the population, today it is the whole people that you have called to arms. Is not your present army anticipated by a generation? I have seen your soldiers: they are mere children."[23]

Again, Napoleon opposed the idea that he had already lost his empire and, with it, his

[21] Von Metternich, 185-86.
[22] Von Metternich, 186.
[23] Von Metternich, 189.

status. The conservation lasted for several (in total: nine!) hours, but without any view on a result. In the end, Metternich left the palace. "No one had ventured to come into the room. Not one pause of silence interrupted this animated discussion, in which I can count no less than six moments in which my words had the weight of a formal declaration of war."[24] At the door, Napoleon grabbed Metternich on the shoulder, stating that Austria in no scenario would make war with France. "'You are lost, Sire,' I said quickly; 'I had the presentiment of it when I came; now, in going, I have the certainty.'"[25]

Starting a new dance

A continental peace with Napoleon was not reached in Dresden. The only benefit of the conversation was the fact that Metternich had persuaded the Emperor to extend the armistice until 10 August.[26] That date was important for the Austrian High Command, because the army would be fully mobilized around that time.[27] For Metternich, this was an enormous result in his 'dance' between France, Russia and Prussia—all in the mood for war. Metternich had bought Austria the time it needed to prepare itself for battle, but a new problem arose on the horizon. Great Britain had been kept ignorant about the proposals of the Allies, but nevertheless regained the information via the Prussians who hoped for continued, financial support from London. Not surprisingly, the government in London was not amused about this separate initiative. This informed Prussia and Russia that it was no longer prepared to subsidize them with equipment and money, unless the interests of London were recognized.

For Metternich, this was an unpleasant development, because it urged him to deal with the mighty position of the British. The Allies—especially Prussia—needed the British funding, so it was necessary to keep the money flow. Britain had to be known in the process. This became even clearer when the news of the British victory at Vitoria came through.[28] On 27 June, Austria semi-officially joined the Allies in the Treaty of Reichenbach. It agreed to the four points, which Metternich had mentioned to Napoleon and promised that it would join the war, if France did not accept these conditions. But war was not declared yet. The armistice lasted till August 10 and in the remaining time, Metternich had to continue his role as a mediator. The dance was not finished yet!

[24] Von Metternich, 191.

[25] Von Metternich, 192.

[26] Von Metternich, 195. This extension was reached several days later. In the meantime, Metternich stayed in Dresden where he (indirect) maintained contact with Napoleon.

[27] Hamilton-Williams, 35.

[28] Peter Snow, *To War with Wellington: From the Peninsula to Waterloo* (London: John Murray, 2010), 203. On 21 June, Wellington defeated the army of King Joseph near this Spanish town, resulting in the rushed retreat of the remaining French forces to the Pyrenees. According to Peter Snow, Metternich told Arthur Wellington later that his victory at Vitoria had determined the Allies to pursue the war.

Metternich invited all parties by the middle of July for a congress in Prague, to discuss the four points. All sides agreed to this proposal, but not with great confidence. The Allies at first did not believe that Napoleon would agree with this proposal. But he did, and so the diplomats were sent to Prague.[29] Napoleon saw the congress as a diversion, for he hoped to make separate deals, especially with the Tsar. For Metternich, the congress was also a diversion as he was trying to win additional time for the Austrian Army to build up its forces. He reassured the Allies that the congress would not succeed, because he would place additional demands on the table on their behalf, Great Britain included.[30] In the Bohemian capital, the congress got off to a slow start. The French conducted a delaying tactic. For example, Napoleon sent diplomat Louis Marie de Narbonne-Lara to Prague, but he had no negotiating mandate and therefore it would have been impossible to conclude a treaty. So, a new representative was sent for: Armand de Caulaincourt, the Duc of Vicenza, who arrived on 28 July in Prague.[31] Precious time had been lost, because there were only thirteen days left until the end of the armistice.

And so, the 'dance' of Metternich entered its final phase. As the chairman of the congress, he proposed a written procedure. This meant that all proposals to be made by the participants, had to be worked out on paper. The same would apply to the reactions on the proposals. By prescribing this procedure, Metternich aimed to prevent secret negotiations between individual representatives and, in that way, coordinate the course of the discussions. The French delegation did not accept the proposed procedure, de facto resulting in the failure of the congress. Metternich knew that there was not enough time left for a new round of negotiations. On August 7 he deliberately offered a new proposal, knowing that Napoleon would never agree with the content. In the new proposal, for which Napoleon only had three days to respond to, Austria again demanded the four points mentioned earlier in Dresden. But now, these were added with the dissolution of the Confederation of the Rhine, the restoration of Prussia within the borders of 1806 and the mutual guarantee of the territorial status of all the involved states. Napoleon has never answered to this new proposal. The armistice ended unnoticed on 10 August. Two days later, Austria declared war on France.

Conclusion

The Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs showed in 1813 that he was a good 'dancer' in the diplomatic field. Metternich had to

[29] Prussia sent Wilhelm von Humbolt, while Russia was represented by Johann Protasius von Anstett. Naturally, Metternich was present on behalf of Austria.

[30] Hamilton-Williams, 31; and Zamoyski, 79. Great Britain wanted Napoleon to quit the Low Countries, respect Britain's maritime rights and give up Hanover and Spain.

[31] Somerset de Chair, ed., *Napoleon on Napoleon. An autobiography of the Emperor* (London: Brockhampton Press, 1992), 229.

deal with several monarchs, whose empires had all their own interests. It meant that he had to maintain contacts with different 'eagles': the eagle of France, the eagle of Russia and the eagle of Prussia. From the end of May until August 12, Metternich played the role of mediator in the conflict. In that delicate dance, two key words characterize his acting: control and coordination. As a mediator, his first challenge was to seize control and hold it. The second challenge was to coordinate the reactions of the participants in the conflict. It was a dizzying task. The first step of this 'dance' was in Czaslau, when Metternich sent Von Nesselrode back to the Tsar. The arrival of the Russian ambassador came too early, so by sending him back, Metternich had bought himself time. He started to take over control. Metternich proposed the Armistice of Pläswitz, in order to buy some more time. While the Austrian army could mobilize in Bohemia, Metternich created for himself the possibility to work on both parties. First, he had to convince the Tsar of the true intensions of Austria. The moment he succeeded, Metternich reassured himself of the willingness to cooperate of the Allies. Again, he had expanded his control over the situation.

A big challenge for Metternich was his conversation with Napoleon in Dresden, for the Emperor was not an easy opponent to talk with. Metternich stayed with his mission, even when Napoleon started to talk about another topic. Later, in Prague, Metternich showed again that he wanted to control the talks. The congress was his proposal, so he did not permit the ambassadors of the involved countries to talk separately or secretly, behind his back. The balance between the belligerents was dealt by Metternich through control and coordination. Unnoticed, Metternich deprived all parties the private initiative, so that he could create the most favorable situation for the Austrian Empire. Vienna got a lead in the Sixth Coalition in the summer of 1813. Years later, Napoleon would state that Metternich's attempts at mediation were only "a pretext—the Court of Vienna had already entered into engagements with Russia and Prussia."[32]

[32] De Chair, 228.