

BOOK REVIEWS

Crisis among the Great Powers: The Concert of Europe and the Eastern Question.

By Miroslav Sedivy. London: I.B. Tauris, 2017. xviii, 405 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Plates. Maps. \$120.00, hard bound.

doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.214

How stable was the famous “Concert of Europe” that came in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars? When the 1815 Congress of Vienna handed over the Rhine’s left bank to the German Confederation, the French—who felt it to be the natural border between France and the rest of Europe—lost a lot of ground, literally and metaphorically. Twenty-five years later, they tried to get it back. This precipitated a crisis that had wide reverberations. This is a lovely book that shows marvelously how careful treatment of one event can illuminate a vast region and expansive period of history. In this case, such an event is used to interrogate the stability of Europe in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, and to recast long-standing narratives in new ways.

The “event” in question in Sedivy’s new book is the so-called Rhine crisis of 1840, which at first glance appears perhaps as more of a non-event than an event: as Sedivy observes, “it neither lasted nor grew into an armed conflict” (1). The “Rhine Crisis” refers to the ejection of France from the club of Great Powers, after the French Foreign Minister, Adolphe Thiers, pressed for the Rhine River to be reinstated as France’s eastern border. This would have resulted in a significant loss of territory for the German confederation, and would have reversed one of the key components of the Congress of Vienna.

Through meticulous and extensive secondary and primary research—one wonders at Sedivy’s linguistic powers—the author is able to craft a history that is cultural as well as diplomatic and political. His deploys to excellent end a number of contemporary sources to capture the German *zeitgeist* of the time. Klemens von Metternich, for instance, is cited as having said of Thiers that “[he] likes to be compared to Napoleon; well, with respect to Germany, the comparison is perfect, and Mr. Thiers might even surpass him. In only a short time he has achieved in Germany what took [Napoleon] ten years of oppression!” (251).

But on a deeper level, *Crisis Among the Great Powers* is significant in being able to convincingly prod the reader to reconsider one of the most fundamental narratives of modern European history: that the destabilization of Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was caused by Ottoman weakness, and that the Congress of Vienna, by famously propping up Europe’s “weak man,” had addressed Europe’s core problem. Yet in reading through Sedivy’s book, one gradually sees quite a different landscape, one of a feuding and bellicose Europe, untrained in being peaceful and constantly subverting its own stability.

Sedivy thus concludes with a provocative yet convincing proposition: “A historian carefully studying the Rhine Crisis as well as the international relations of that era cannot avoid the impression that it actually was not the Ottoman Empire but the European States System itself that was crumbling” (287). After reading his book, many readers will be convinced. It is to be hoped that this new optic may gradually reframe the way we think about the received truths of modern European history.

KATHERINE E. FLEMING
NYU