

After Waterloo

Blast Blücher! Without the intervention of the Prussian Field Marshal who came to Wellington's rescue at four-thirty in the afternoon of 18 June 1815, history might have taken another turning. Not because Napoleon was particularly admirable; he had after all overthrown the first continental republic to be born of a popular revolution and went on to have himself crowned. Blast Blücher, because the Battle of Waterloo signalled the victory of something new in occidental history: a coherent and coordinated project for a return to the past. At the same time, Waterloo marked the end of the era it was seeking to revive.

This was, firstly, the last great world-historical battle to be decided in the course of a day, its 'field' unfolding between dawn and dusk. Such was the Battle of Kadesh between Egypt and the Hittites in 1,274 BC, which determined the fate of the Middle East for half a millennium; or the Battles of Cannae and Zama between Rome and Carthage in 216 and 202 BC, for hegemony over the Mediterranean. The Battle of Pharsalus between Caesar and Pompey in 48 BC, and that of Actium, pitching Octavian Augustus against Anthony and Cleopatra in 31 BC, decided the new master of Rome. In the Battle of Poitiers (732), Charles Martel blocked the advance of the Moors into Europe. The Battle of Hastings (1066) Normanized the island of the Anglo-Saxons. The Battle of Pavia (1525) ensured the Hapsburgs' hegemony over Renaissance Europe. In these battles it was the Emperor, the Duke, the great commander who would rise at dawn—if he had slept at all; the Prince of Condé owed his renown to the sound sleep he enjoyed before the Battle of Rocroi (1643), which showed he felt not the slightest worry. By evening, their fate would be settled: either the stars or the stables.

But after Waterloo, battles grew longer. Three days for Gettysburg (1863), two for the Battle of Sedan (1870). Eight days for the Battle of the Marne (1914), three for the Battle of Midway (1942); twelve for the (third) Battle of El Alamein (1942); over four months for the Battle of Stalingrad (1942–43); over two months each for the Battle of the Philippines (1944) and the Battle of Okinawa (1945) between USA and Japan. In the modern world it has become ever more difficult to distinguish between battles

and campaigns. The two-month Tet Offensive (1968) is remembered from the Vietnam War, not any particular battle. Belying the rhetoric, the 'mother of all battles' no longer bears children. It's interesting, too, that the names of the commanders are less important than they used to be; we more often recall a defeated general than a victor. At Gettysburg, everyone knows that Robert E. Lee was vanquished, but who remembers the winner, George Meade? El Alamein signals the defeat of Rommel rather than Montgomery's victory. For Stalingrad, the surrender of Field Marshal Paulus is impressed upon our memory, but who was the winner? (Vasilij Ivanovic Cujkov). Waterloo was also the last engagement in which the head of state led his troops into battle in person. (Napoleon's nephew, Napoleon III, did no commanding at Sedan). It was the last time that political power and military command coincided in a 'fateful day'. Since then, not even the most autocratic of dictators have personally directed frontline operations. In this sense, Waterloo really was the last day of the Ancien Régime.

On its own, none of this would justify marking its bicentenary; what makes Waterloo noteworthy is the Holy Alliance. Aiming to return to the past—restoration of the Crown and the Absolutist order—in reality the monarchs of Austria, Prussia and Russia created a completely novel institution. Never before had a coalition of states arrogated to itself the right to intervene in the internal affairs of subject nations, in the name of humanitarian principles: 'Justice, Christian Charity and Peace'. It was the Holy Alliance which, in the name of peace, waged war against the popular uprisings in 1823, 1830, 1848. In the name of love, it imprisoned what it called 'demagogues' under the Carlsbad Decrees (1822), tightened after the Hambacher Fest (1832).

Well-meaning interventionism—the declared purpose of the three autocrats was to 'consolidate human institutions and remedy their imperfections'—would have a brilliant future. The Holy Alliance invented the concept of 'humanitarian invasion' and 'brotherly intervention', so popular in subsequent centuries. As Article One of the Treaty of the Holy Alliance declared:

According to the Holy Scriptures, which command all men to regard one another as brothers, the three contracting Monarchs will remain united by the bonds of a true and indissoluble fraternity, and considering each other as fellow countrymen, they will lend each other aid and assistance on all occasions and in any place. Regarding themselves towards their subjects and armies as fathers of families, they will lead them, in the same spirit of fraternity with which they are animated, to protect Religion, Peace and Justice.

Like the fraternal parties that, in the name of the Holy Soviet Alliance, intervened in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). Or like the Holy Alliance of the United Nations, an institution which, with the aim of 'preserving peace' and for the 'benefit of humanity', ascribes incontestable powers to the victors of a war fought seventy years ago. The European Union likewise follows the example of the Holy Alliance when, rather than fraternal armies, it sends fraternal bankers, the Troika, to crush the 'demagogues', now called 'populists', in rebellious countries and restore order in the name of 'justice'.

How much longer must we live under a Holy Alliance? Two points may be of relevance here. First, it's worth recalling that, ironically, the coalition of the first Holy Alliance was shattered 161 years ago over the Crimea, the site of the latest crisis. In 1854, Austria dissociated itself from Russia in the Crimean War, despite the help it had received from the Tsar six years earlier in crushing the Hungarian uprising of 1848. The second point is the celebrated opening of the Communist Manifesto: 'A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a *holy alliance* to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police spies.' The difference between then and now is that today, the Holy Alliance has no need for another Waterloo; barely even a ghost stands against it.

Translated by Eleanor Chiari