



## The Peace of Westphalia as a model for peace in Europe

If one looks at the peace treaties concluded since the Thirty Years' War, it is striking that the Peace of Westphalia could still serve as an example and model for a sustainable peace in Europe today. Historical analysis.

*René Zittlau*

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### Introduction

Throughout its history, Europe has repeatedly been the scene of cruel and devastating wars. These claimed millions of lives and repeatedly destroyed large parts of the continent, especially in Central Europe and particularly in Germany.

Despite all the devastation, all these wars came to an end at the negotiating table, however brutally and inhumanely they had been waged.

It is incomprehensible that Western politics as a whole and German politics in particular do not want to remember all the painful lessons of European history. But they should.

In this article, we describe the major peace conferences from the Peace of Westphalia onwards and show that the peace agreement that ended the Thirty Years' War and created a lasting and long-lasting peace could well serve as the basis for a peace architecture to resolve the current conflict.

## **The Thirty Years' War and its end (Peace of Westphalia)**

The Thirty Years' War was, among other things, also a religious war.

The slaughter in the name of power, the different Christian faiths and the preservation of outdated claims to power lasted for thirty years. In the German territories alone, almost half of the population was wiped out because the previously all-powerful circles believed they could continue to assert their power with military force before the completely exhausted opponents met at the negotiating table.

Let me emphasize once again: they only met when each of the warring parties realized that they could not achieve a decisive advantage on the battlefield to enforce their interests. They met in October 1648 in the realization that a continuation – a "more of the same" – would lead to Armageddon.

This realization compelled them to agree to a peace treaty that was completely new for Europe and which, in its effect, decisively influenced and advanced political development on the continent in general and in Germany in particular for a very long time. It was only possible because, for the first time in the history of European peace treaties, the agreement was based on compromises between the parties, and not on a victory peace.

The Peace of Westphalia was characterized by two new principles:

First, the contracting parties recognized the equality of sovereign states and their interests, regardless of their power and size. The cornerstone of modern international law was born.

Secondly, this peace agreement also found amicable solutions to the religious issues of the contracting parties. In addition to the Catholic and Lutheran denominations, the Reformed confession was also recognized as equal. At the same time, a kind of protection of minorities was established: although Protestants were in the minority throughout the empire, they were not allowed to be outvoted on religious issues at imperial diets. The fundamental differences in matters of faith continued to exist, but ways were found to deal with competing religious interpretations in a peaceful way.

Without the Peace of Westphalia, the later Enlightenment school of thought, with all its scientific and cultural achievements, which naturally had a lasting effect on society, would probably not have been conceivable.

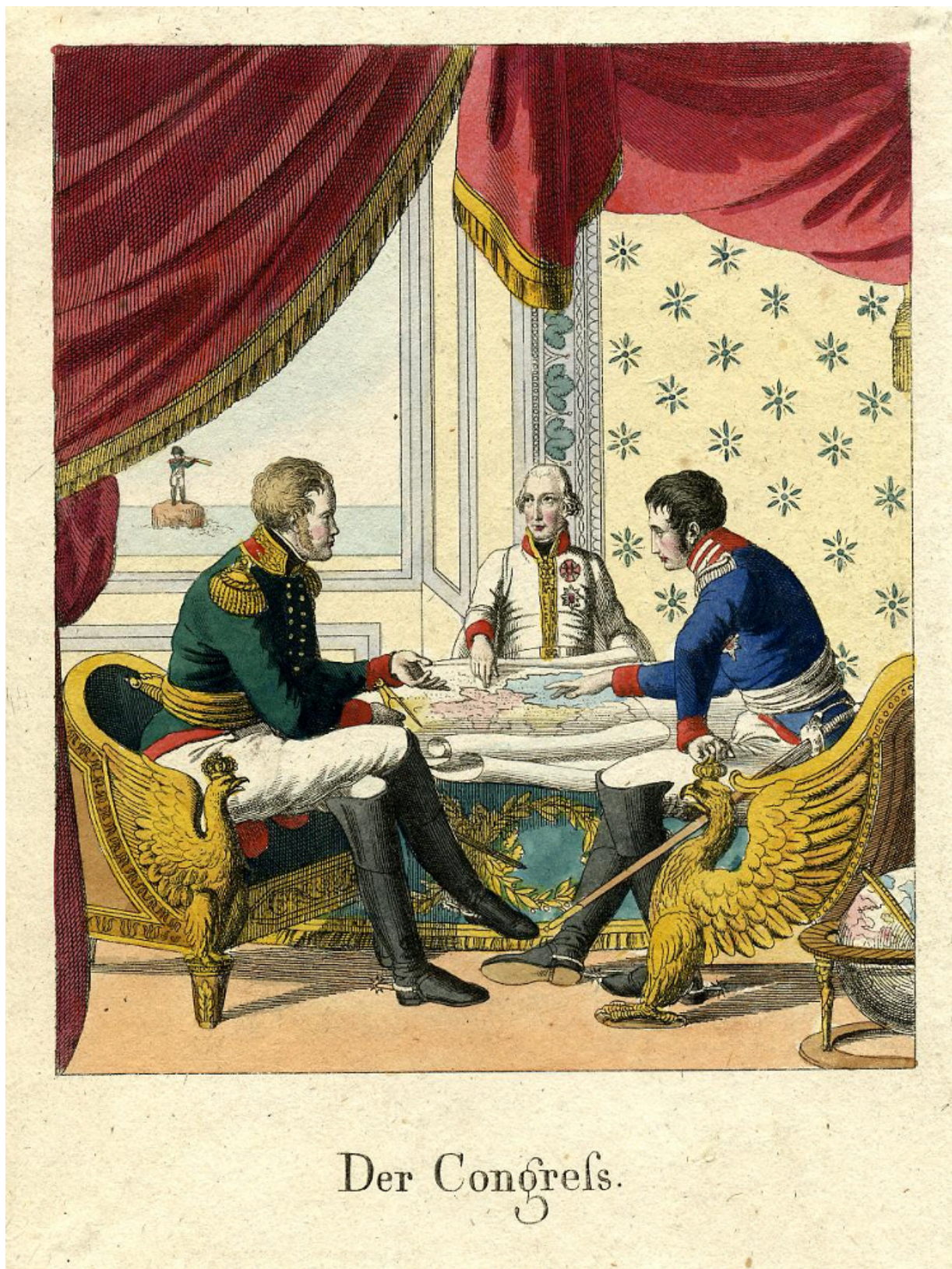
The main result of the Peace Treaty of Osnabrück was the breakthrough of respect and tolerance in the relations between states and religions, which was the starting point for the development of European nation states as we have known them until recently. Thirty years of exhausting war made those in power realize that the accumulated conflicts could not be resolved through intolerance and claims to sole power.

## **Congress of Vienna and Treaty of Versailles**

The end of the later Europe-wide military conflicts was also sealed at the negotiating table, but the principles of the Peace of Westphalia were no longer applied.

After the Napoleonic Wars, the Congress of Vienna in 1815 re-regulated the many open territorial and thus political questions in Europe. Although it was also about a balance of interests, it was in the sense of the victorious powers among themselves, the restoration of monarchical structures in Europe. The aim was to reverse the political changes that had taken place as a result of the French Revolution, and not least to prevent changes in the bourgeois-republican sense.





Contemporary portrayal

Thus, the legitimacy of the royal houses was restored, including that of the Bourbons in France. The aim was therefore to prevent social progress and to restore the balance of power between the great powers.



The treaties that ended the First World War – the Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of Trianon – were also based on the interests of the parties to the treaties, and not on the actual easing of the situation.

In the Treaty of Versailles, for example, Germany, which had been the declared instigator of the war, was imposed conditions that, if fulfilled, would have made it practically impossible for the country to develop and recover. The same applied to Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon, which had to acknowledge its complicity in the war and was forced to give up two-thirds of its territory. This national trauma continues to have an impact to this day.

In contrast to the negotiations of 1648, the victorious great powers determined the outcome in both cases. A reconciliation of interests on the principles of the Peace of Westphalia was out of the question. Consequently, the victors anchored the seeds of future conflicts in the treaties.

Some of the conflict potentials created at that time are still present today and are, for example, part of the current war in Ukraine. The minority problems in western Ukraine and their deliberate instrumentalization should be mentioned here.

## **Potsdam Conference**

The negotiations in Tehran (1943) and Yalta (1945) were preparatory conferences for the one that would determine the post-war order. This was eventually held in Potsdam.

The negotiations in Potsdam were of a different nature than those in for example Versailles. Although the victors were also negotiating in Potsdam about the fate of Germany as the trigger and loser of the greatest catastrophe of humanity, at the same time three of the four victorious powers were concerned with combating the fourth, the Soviet Union. Although Churchill's speech in Fulton in 1946, in which the British prime minister coined the term "Iron Curtain", is communicated as the beginning of the Cold War and thus recorded in history, Potsdam undoubtedly marks the beginning of the Cold War.

The conference saw some seemingly paradoxical constellations. For example, the Soviet Union consistently advocated, albeit with conditions, the reconstruction of Germany as an industrial nation and its preservation as a whole, while the Morgenthau Plan was seriously discussed in the US.

Despite the division of the world resulting from this confrontation between systems – the starting point for the current problems – the Potsdam Conference is a milestone in international relations, for both East and West.

Subsequently, international organizations such as the UN and its sub-organizations were founded, which contributed to conflict resolution and were intended to create the conditions for mutual understanding, and in some cases did so, as exemplified by UNESCO. Despite the deep mistrust, disarmament treaties were negotiated, signed and adhered to.

These agreements represented the lowest common denominator. In contrast to today, states of all orientations were constantly in contact with each other, meeting and talking, despite all the contradictions and sometimes completely opposing views.

As a result of this policy, Europe and North America – as the driving forces behind this development – were able to enjoy the longest period of peace in their history.

## The 1990s

The relatively stable post-war situation changed fundamentally after 1989. The last decade of the century was marked by the political and social upheavals in Central and Eastern Europe. With far-reaching consequences for the previous peace order in the region.

From a position of strength, the West brought the sweeping developments in Eastern Europe under its control. The naive belief in the good intentions of Western politics in the states in transition led to arrangements that led to today's conflicts.

The two German states were united on the basis of the 2+4 Treaty, without the promise made orally by the American Secretary of State James Baker, "Not one inch eastward" regarding NATO's expansion to the east, being unequivocally anchored in this or any other treaty in the interest of all sides.

It is not surprising that the US and NATO had no interest in doing so. The trusting attitude of the Soviet leadership resembles surrender. Just imagine for a moment how Europe could have developed if this promise had become part of an international treaty. How much suffering could have been avoided.

The unilateral withdrawal of the GSFG – the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany – was another incomprehensible act. The Western occupying forces remained until today.

Taking advantage of Russia's economic, political and thus diplomatic weakness, the first Eastern European states joined NATO in 1999. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. In 2004, the next ones followed.

Until the disappearance of the socialist countries at the beginning of the 1990s, there was a strategic balance in the world. It was the basis for the longest period of peace in Europe. With the disappearance of one side of this permanently fragile equilibrium, the corset supporting this development broke.

The US, as the only remaining world power, used this historic window of opportunity, feeling like the victor of history, and pushed developments forward that changed and destroyed the political and military balance worldwide in its favor. In its wake, its vassals in Great Britain and Europe followed suit.

Together with their allies, the Americans systematically undermined the entire system of the post-war order. They abused the UN, the OSCE, sports and cultural organizations such as the Olympic Committee, and organizations of journalists, literature and journalists. Even scientific and research associations were gutted and systematically transformed into instruments for the implementation of American political objectives.

In this way, the US tried to extend the military concept of full-spectrum dominance to all areas of society. The culmination of this deliberately destructive dismantling of post-war developments that served peaceful coexistence is the current military confrontation between Russia and NATO in Ukraine, which has been directly provoked by the US.

## Final remarks

The purpose of diplomacy is to create the right external conditions for the successful development of a state. Once made, mistakes are difficult to correct.

Otto von Bismarck, the first Chancellor of the German Empire, which was established in 1871, is said to have declared:

*"If you want eternal peace, you have to take the interests of others into account."*

Today's German foreign policy no longer even comes close to doing justice to the understanding of its founder.

While the author was writing this article, the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany published the "[Joint Declaration of the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom in Warsaw](#)". Intellectually, this document is based on the political level of the period before the Peace of Westphalia, on the medieval notion of a peace treaty.

It is a document that is solely focused on preparing the above-mentioned countries and their populations for a war against Russia. A war against a nuclear power that cannot be waged and certainly cannot be won for that reason alone.

Although the global balance of power has fundamentally changed in recent years, the US and its vassals still believe that they can end and resolve any crises, not only in Ukraine, by enforcing their interests through violence in any form.

The current political and military confrontation in Europe thus bears parallels to that situation 400 years ago. The West, which has been economically, politically and militarily dominant for decades and centuries, has visibly passed its peak of power. Unable to come to terms with the new realities – which would be entirely possible for its own benefit – it is trying to maintain, impose on others and expand its outdated and obviously obsolete power structures and spheres of influence.

In view of these approaches to a solution, it must be stated that the horizon of Western understanding of the world, of Western diplomacy and politics, has now returned to the level of the late Middle Ages, to the level of the Thirty Years' War. At that time, the warring parties fought each other on the battlefield to the point of complete exhaustion before they realized that respect, tolerance, talking to each other and Wishing to understand represent the only basis for a way out of the crisis.

What clinging to the NATO approach means in terms of today's military technology is something that everyone should try to imagine for themselves.

#### ARTICLE TAGS:

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Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)  
Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG)   UNESCO