

Karel SVOBODA

***Autokrat a jeho doba. Rusko a revoluce v letech
1830–1831***

Praha: Karolinum 2016

ISBN 978-80-2463-018-2, 214 pages

At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, representatives of the Great Powers agreed on a new arrangement for post-war Europe. From the perspective of international relations a new system was created whose main aim was using the common forces of Europe to prevent the outbreak of a revolution and protect the peace amongst European states. The Vienna negotiations also decided upon the creation of a new order of states, new borders or means of government and representation of individual states in Europe. This international system encountered weaknesses even during its formation; however, by the beginning of the 1830s events in Europe were leading towards a definitive change. The situation during this dramatic period is the subject of a book by historian Karel Svoboda.

As the author himself states in the introduction, the book is a revised version of his doctoral thesis. Svoboda is an expert on the history and politics of Russia. His inspiration to publish came from work by William C. Fuller and Paul Kennedy. From a methodological perspective Svoboda

draws on, for example, an article by Wolf D. Gruner, "Grossbritannien und die Julirevolution von 1830" (*Francia*, 9, 1981, pp. 369–410), in which the author emphasises the relationship of an individual state to a specific problem. In Svoboda's case this is the July Revolution in France and reactions to it in Europe, especially in Belgium and Poland.

The work covers a relatively short period during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I. The author's motivation for writing the book was the well-known negative perception of the tsar's personality as portrayed by contemporary historians. The purpose of Svoboda's work, however, is not a revision of Nicholas's policies; rather the aim is to provide the reader with an objective view of the tsar's rule and Russian politics in the revolutionary period 1830–1831. The book is divided into three parts based on chronology and subject matter. The second part deals with events in a Polish context, the third inner political factors in the Russian Empire.

In the introduction, as well as providing a description of the interna-

tional situation in the 1820s, Svoboda demonstrates his multidisciplinary approach to the topic under discussion. He explains the thematically compact content of the analysed period as a means of providing a comprehensive picture of Nicholas's foreign policy with an emphasis on the army, economic situation, structure of the management of Russian diplomacy, as well as on public opinion both at home and abroad. For the Czech reader this is an interesting approach, which may be understood as the political history of one state. At the same time the author provides an excellent explanation of why the topic is limited to the period 1830–1831.

The first chapter is devoted to the July Revolution in France, which disrupted the erstwhile international stability created at the Congress of Vienna. The assumption of power by the unpopular government of Jules de Polignac and the restriction of liberties guaranteed by the constitution brought the French people into the streets. Events developed apace and within two days the French throne had been occupied by Louis Philippe from the cadet branch of the House of Bourbon. In this chapter the author analyses the stance of Nicholas I towards events in France, which the Russian tsar regarded with great dissatisfaction. Svoboda draws attention to the tsar's political motivation, which was based on anti-liberalism, maintaining the equilibrium in Europe and strict compliance with international agreements. For these rea-

sons Russia became the greatest opponent of the changes in France. At the end of this chapter, it is stated that finding common consensus was more a result of the skill of the Russian ambassador Pozzo di Borgo and the tsar's belief in the solidarity of the Great Powers in Europe, rather than the settlement of Russian-French relations.

The second chapter deals with the revolution in Belgium. For Nicholas the uprising in the United Kingdom of Belgium was a matter of change to the existing international system. The book reflects the discrepancy between the standpoint of the tsar and the politics represented by Russian diplomats at the London Conference. Despite the Russian diplomats having no authority, they often had to negotiate based on their own judgment. The effort to find consensus on the question of Belgium was overtaken by an uprising in Congress Poland. In this chapter the author describes how the problems of internal politics paralysed Russian diplomacy in the Belgian question.

The third chapter deals with the organisation of Poland after the Congress of Vienna up to the outbreak of the Polish Uprising in November 1830. Nicholas I "inherited" Poland the way it was from his brother Alexander I. Despite Poland having a special position within the empire and enjoying significant advantages, the tsar was unable to appease the growing dissatisfaction with his rule. Svoboda discusses the

internal political situation in Poland, taking into account its economy, education system and military forces. It was precisely support for the Polish economy that was supposed to avert an anti-Russian uprising, which in the end proved impossible to prevent. This is discussed in the next chapter.

The fourth chapter analyses the origin and character of the uprising and its direct effect on the international politics of Russian. Here the author covers every aspect of the Polish Uprising from the participants themselves, through voices from abroad, to the policy of the tsar. He points to the weakness of the Russian Army, which, moreover, had been decimated by a cholera epidemic. In my opinion, the following chapter, which deals with public opinion in Western Europe, is very interesting. The author describes how the view of the eastern great power changed in the wake of Napoleon's defeat. From celebrated victor, Russia began to be regarded in Western Europe as a barbaric state. It is surprising how many anti-Russian groups were active in Europe; it is precisely these that were considered by the tsar to be the source of permanent tension. The growing influence of public opinion from the beginning of the 1830s was starting to be reflected on the international scene. This influential force could no longer be ignored. The chapter is divided into several subsections which encompass both responses of the public to the Novem-

ber Uprising and the activities of Polish political emigrants and the Russian government in an effort to win over the support of European public opinion.

The concluding section of the book deals with the domestic aspect of Russian policy. The chapter on the structural organisation of foreign policy covers the tasks of personalities in Russian diplomacy, predominantly in the relationship between the tsar, ambassadors and the Russian vice-chancellor. Svoboda's book primarily points out that the tsar's policy was surprisingly more of a compromise between internal and external factors that were putting pressure on Nicholas, rather than the individual dealings of a Russian autocrat. One very interesting observation by the author is the effect of the time factor and the distance between Petrograd and the venues of diplomatic negotiations, which played a fundamental role in the generation of Russian foreign policy. These aspects forced diplomats to come up with decisions independent of the official view of Petrograd. The following seventh chapter analyses the position of the Russian Army. The afore-mentioned problems of the tsar's armed units in suppressing an uprising left its mark on Russian international policy. The author finds the causes of military weakness in exhaustion from the war with the Ottoman Empire in 1829–1830, inadequate training of the men and the effect of a cholera epidemic. The logical outcome of the state of

the Russian army can be seen in the Crimean War, in which Russia was not able even to defend its own territory.

The author also covers the reaction of the Russian public to events connected to the period under analysis. According to Svoboda, Nicholas I attached great importance to the opinions of the Russian public. The final chapter deals with the economic situation in Russia, providing an analysis of its limits and possibilities, which also appeared in the promotion of international interests at both the business and political level.

The publication is rounded off by a bibliography and list of names. Apart from the rigorous accuracy with which the author is able to explain the given issue comprehensively and clearly, one must also commend his working with predominantly foreign professional literature and primary sources, some of which even originate from British and Russian archives. If a criticism is to be made, then above all it would be the absence of some important and recently published works, in partic-

ular the outstanding monograph by British historian Alexander Bitis, *Russia and the Eastern Question. Army, Government, and Society 1815–1833* (Oxford – New York 2006), which in many respects is dealing with the same issue as Svoboda himself.

The book provides a comprehensive picture of Russian foreign policy in 1830–1831. Svoboda has included all the factors influencing the international policy of the Russian Empire. This, however, is more than just a work dealing simply with the history of international relations: it is also an erudite and, in the Czech milieu, almost unique approach to the topic. The work deals with a narrow but nonetheless highly interesting segment of European history. Ultimately it is a work which will help the reader comprehend all aspects of foreign policy, rather than merely providing a picture of historical events. The book can be recommended to all readers with an interest in the given topic, as well as to the general public – and not only on account of its historical overlap.

Jiří Vyčichlo