



An unsigned illustration of the crowned heads of Europe at the Congress of Vienna (1814-15)

## Keepers of the flame

GABRIEL PAQUETTE

Richard Stites

THE FOUR HORSEMEN: RIDING TO  
LIBERTY IN POST-NAPOLEONIC  
EUROPE

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Some dared to resist the counter-revolution in the early 1820s. In Richard Stites's marvelous, posthumously-published book, the lives of four remarkable, if unlikely, rebels are chronicled: a Spanish colonel, Rafael del Riego; a Neapolitan general, Guglielmo Pepe; a Greek general in the service of Russia, Alexandros Ypsilanti, and a Russian colonel, Serge Muraviev-Apostol. All four had fought in the Revolutionary Wars and risen to high military rank (Ypsilanti lost an arm in combat). All four looked with disgust at the post-Vienna settlement. Each failed spectacularly in his pursuit of establishing a new order, and all but one (Pepe) paid for rebellion with their lives.

Stites's book demonstrates the connections linking these four men and the causes each embodied, even though each operated in distant corners of Europe, in different languages, and in utterly incomparable national contexts. They were united in their commitment to constitutional government. They admired and emulated one another. Unsurprisingly, they employed similar tactics, the most notable and ubiquitous of which was the *pronunciamiento*. An untranslatable Spanish word, it was a military uprising to denounce tyranny and rally popular support for the formation of a constitutional government. The four men were initiates of international secret societies, like the Italian Carbonari, whose clandestine networks were indispensable to keeping the ember of revolution burning in spy-ridden Europe.

Riego's revolution was the first as well as the most successful of the four. His 1820 uprising restored constitutional government in Spain for three years. Riego briefly became

an international celebrity. His example was praised, if not always emulated, by aspiring revolutionaries from London to St Petersburg, well after his death on the gallows. Pepe played an analogous role to Riego in Naples, but his revolution was short-lived, crushed by Austrian troops within a year. Pepe avoided extreme corporal punishment and lived on for several decades, embroiled in innumerable failed conspiracies to liberate Naples. Cut from a similar cloth, Ypsilanti dreamt of Greece's independence from the Ottoman empire. He participated in crucial early efforts to realize this goal, but ran foul of the Holy Alliance. He spent much of the 1820s in an Austrian prison while his compatriots, together with an international band of philhellenes, secured Greece's independence. Muraviev-Apostol's trajectory resembled the other three revolutionaries, but his career as a rebel was both shorter and less successful than the others. A key conspirator in the aborted Decembrist movement against Tsar Nicholas in 1825, he was hanged as a traitor.

Posterity's treatment of the four men and their respective causes bore scant relation to their achievements while alive. Greece has been an independent state since the late 1820s and Ypsilanti has long had a place in the pantheon of its national heroes. The Decembrists were eulogized by Pushkin and Herzen before their embrace by twentieth-century Russian revolutionaries. Riego and Pepe, and the ephemeral constitutional regimes they helped usher in, were forgotten, until very recently, even during the transition to democracy in Spain and Italy.

Richard Stites's astute and engagingly written book helps to recover the importance of these men and their lost causes, both for their time as well as ours. They formed a subterranean liberal international, creating far-flung networks to resist tyranny. They believed that toppling a despot in a single country would reverberate across Europe. For them, the fate of Spain was entwined with the fate of Russia. It was not accidental that many refugees from failed revolutions in Spain, Naples, and Rus-

sia later converged on Greece and died there in the cause of independence. Together they forged a primordial European identity that survived their own anclimactic ends in exile, in dungeons, or on the scaffold.

Napoleon's defeat brought to an end a quarter century of revolution and war. The victors convened at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 to make sense of the carnage and devise a framework to avoid future conflicts. They sought to insulate the political system against subversive ideas and aspiring revolutionaries. Monarchs who had lost their thrones regained them, though they now were expected to feign interest in constitutions and representative institutions. Religious authorities, undermined during the revolutionary epoch, reasserted themselves.

To this revamped old order was added a new international regime to ensure its survival. This was the Congress System, or Concert of Europe. Under the sway of the so-called Holy Alliance, consisting of the most conservative of the victors, the most powerful states met periodically to dictate the political fate of Europe. Above all, they plotted interventions in countries threatened by revolution, fearing that revolutionary contagion would spread and eventually convulse all of Europe.

The end of war also prompted demobilization. Rank-and-file soldiers were decommissioned and returned home. Their officers, who had served long years in many countries, went with them. But these officers had imbibed new political ideas and embraced internationalism, a sense that the domestic affairs of each country had significant consequences for the rest. Such new sensibilities survived the geopolitical changes decreed at Vienna.

In fact, the Congress System generated disillusionment among the officers who had fought to liberate Europe from Napoleon's yoke. They cringed as reactionaries installed repressive regimes. Even moderate reforms were rolled back. In Spain, for example, the restored king, Ferdinand VII, abjured the constitution to which he had sworn allegiance and forced into exile those liberals whom he failed to imprison. To many observers, the progress gained in previous decades was lost instantaneously, obliterated in a paroxysm of vengeful despotism.