



Clemens von Metternich. *Metternich: The Autobiography, 1773-1815.* Welwyn: Ravenhall Books, 2004. 265 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-905043-01-9.



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Taking the Moral High Ground

The most prominent political leaders in Europe at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries were artisans of their own legends. This was certainly the case for Napoleon Bonaparte, but also for statesmen such as the marquis de Lafayette and diplomats such as Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand and Metternich. Many different kinds of memoirs were written during this period. Those belonging to the common soldier or officer who had not attained a particularly high rank were often acts of recalling, or of nostalgia, a way of remembering the past, and were not always meant for public consumption. The memoirs of Jérôme Laugier, for example, were donated to the municipal library at Aix in 1835, the year he died, and not published until 1893.[1] Thousands of memoirs written from the French but also the German, Italian, Spanish or Russian perspectives, which detail events and in the process individual lives, were published from the time of Napoleon through the late nineteenth century.

For most of the men involved in politics at the highest levels, memoirs were exercises in self-justification or self-promotion. And it is with this function in mind that

Metternich's memoirs should be read. First published almost simultaneously in English, French and German in 1880-81, a small section of the original eight volume collection has been reedited. The current edition consists of the first of the three books contained in the first volume, titled "Autobiographical Memoir." It is, in fact, the only autobiographical section in the original volumes and covers the period 1801-15. The rest of the volumes are made up of documents and letters, collated by Metternich's son Richard, and are not memoirs in any real sense.[2] Metternich drafted three autobiographical segments in the 1820s and 1840s and left them to his son with instructions that they should not be published until twenty years after his death.[3] Like many of the memoirs from leading statesmen and generals written during this period, these memoirs were written with posterity and history in mind, and were rarely exercises in self-reflection.

Despite claiming to "indicate, with unvarnished truth, the great causes and motives" behind events and to show "the connecting links which are necessary for the right understanding of the events" (pp. 175-6), Metternich excelled at re-writing history in his own likeness,

concealing his mistakes, covering his true intentions, and altering, consciously or unconsciously, descriptions of events to suit his own purposes, all of which is par for the course in memoirs of the period. Metternich's memoirs are above all a political act. Not only is he entering onto the stage of history by recounting his version of events—distorted, unreliable to be sure—but his interpretation is colored by his conservative political views. Like every other prominent politician, he does little more than reconstruct events to suit his own purposes.

Thus, the impression that one might get from reading these memoirs is that he was reluctant to enter the political arena, that he had no ambition, but that he was an implacable enemy of the Revolution (pp. 35, 66, 104, 106). But Metternich was also a realist, willing to negotiate with Napoleon, and anyone else for that matter, for the betterment of Austria's position in Europe. Moreover, Metternich reduces high politics and diplomacy to questions of moral righteousness. He was moral and Napoleon was not. References to his "own conscience" or the "immovable strength of character" of the man he served, that is, the Emperor Francis, are dotted throughout the work and might not exactly warm the contemporary reader to the author, especially since we know that Metternich was more than capable of high political intrigue and corridor politicking when it was in his interests to do so. Nor can his moral positioning be taken too seriously given Metternich's position towards Napoleon after 1809, when he took over the direction of Austria's foreign policy and virtually attached his court to France, and especially in 1813, when Metternich did everything in his power, it would seem, to save Napoleon and his Empire. Metternich claims that he knew beforehand that these attempts would fail, and that he had every intention of joining the Allies, essentially after he had demonstrated that Napoleon was beyond redemption, and that he was only prolonging the negotiations in order to allow the Austrian army to mobilize (pp. 176-200). There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Metternich was either hostile to Napoleon or wanted to overthrow him.^[4] In fact, Metternich was trying to preserve Napoleon in power, if he would accept an independent central Europe. Napoleon, however, was incapable of conceding even that much, which led to Austria's eventual rupture with France and its decision to join the fifth coalition.

None of this political posturing comes through in Metternich's autobiography. Nor do we get much of an insight into Metternich as self-reflective individual. What we see, on the contrary, is Metternich pitted against the great man, Napoleon, and it is Metternich

who outfoxes him (for example, p. 73, where he gets the better of Napoleon in negotiations leading to the Convention of Fontainebleau). It is perhaps no coincidence that there is almost nothing "autobiographical" about Metternich's work after 1815, almost as though his dealings with Napoleon marked the pinnacle of his career and what followed was humdrum in comparison.

The advantage of this pocket edition is to provide a neat, inexpensive paperback containing one of the most interesting sections of the memoirs. It would have greatly benefited, however, from an introduction, or an explanatory preface that might have cast some light on Metternich's role in the momentous events of the period and the circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of the original "memoirs." Certainly a few aptly placed critical notes would have greatly helped the reader along. Instead, students of the period are going to have to muddle their way through Metternich's maze of fabrications, half-truths and omissions, which are sprinkled with a healthy dose of the same moral superiority that must have irked his contemporaries.

Notes

[1]. Alfred Fierro, *Bibliographie critique des mémoires sur la Révolution écrites ou traduits en français* (Paris: Service des travaux historiques de la ville de Paris, 1988), p. 274; Jeanme-Roland Laugier, *Les Cahiers du capitaine Laugier. De la guerre et de l'anarchie, ou mémoires historiques des campagnes et aventures d'un capitaine du 27e régiment d'infanterie légère* (Aix: n.p., 1893).

[2]. A distinction is generally drawn between memoirs, a combination of history and life story that recount people and events, and autobiography, in principle a more introspective look at the life of an individual. Yuval Noah Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History and Identity, 1450-1600* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), p. 6.

[3]. Alan Palmer, *Metternich* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1972), pp. 3-4, 235. Metternich, like many of his contemporaries, regularly read published memoirs and was undoubtedly influenced by other people's recollections. He also discussed his own role, and his memoirs, with his confidant, the arch-conservative Friedrich von Gentz, who read and corrected passages Metternich had written.

[4]. Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 465-66.

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