



About secular rhythms in European history and whether it is different this time

[Published on 13. March 2015](#) by [Rui Tavares](#)

First, some good European news. This is the first time, in maybe some five hundred years, that we are not starting off a new century with a war of all against all in the continent.

It's now March 2015. Let's go back one century at a time.

One hundred years ago, we were of course in the first year of World War I, or the Great War as it became instantly known. At this point in time the Great War was about to spread even further. On 9 May we will commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the sinking of the Lusitania, which brought the United States of America not only into that particular European war but also into European affairs for several generations; first with the League of Nations and the accompanying apparatus of Wilsonian idealism (self-determination, international conventions, etc.), and then in super-power mode after WWII. And, in two years' time, there will be the centenary of the Soviet Union, which next to the United States would become the second superpower dominating European history during the Cold War.

Two hundred years ago today, Napoleon was climbing back to power. He had fled the Island of Elba, where he was first exiled, in the end of February 1815. He spent the better part of March, after disembarking on the Mediterranean coast of France in the first day of the month, marching towards Paris. By the end of his first week, he met a regiment of the French army and challenged them to kill him. They didn't. From then on, his road back to the imperial throne was clear. In the beginning of the month, Parisian newspapers had been calling him a monster, 'the ogre', and so on. By the 21st of March, their headlines shouted 'Vive l'Empereur!'

Of course, that was short lived. In a matter of three months Napoleon lost at Waterloo, and the famous Congress of Vienna (there's another one down the line of time) established the famous European Balance of Power (there's also another one before, albeit less famous) in which Empires would stabilise the continent, try to prevent political liberalism from spreading, and repress national self-determination. Those were the days for talented conservative diplomats and politicians like Metternich and Bismarck (not to mention Talleyrand, who dominated French diplomacy whether the country was a republic, an empire or a kingdom, revolutionary or reactionary).

Let's go back three hundred years. We have recently commemorated the tricentenary of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) which established the first European Balance of Power, the one who lasted until Napoleon. The Treaty of Utrecht, — which was not a single treaty but almost thirty

different peace agreements, not all of them negotiated or signed in Utrecht — came at the end of the War of Spanish Succession and successfully prevented the possibility of France and Spain being governed by the same king. Austria, England, the United Provinces (of the Netherlands) and Portugal all had waged war on France and Spain because they wanted to avoid the establishment of a hegemonic continental power (with vast territories in the New World as well).

We could continue down the historic lane. Four hundred years ago we were about to start the catastrophic religious Thirty Years' War. Five hundred years ago we had the Ottoman wars against Hungary (and then Austria) in the east. The first Congress of Vienna, to shore up support in eastern Europe against the Ottomans, was in 1515. Six hundred years ago, the start of European expansion and colonialism with the Portuguese conquest of Ceuta was in 1415. And seven hundred years ago we had the One Hundred Years' War, although that would be a bit too easy to not miss, given its duration.

Let's stick, say, with the last three centuries. What's the point of this exercise, apart from noting the neat fact that there's a kind of secular rhythmic quality to European history which is fun to notice (at a safe distance)?

What WWI, the Napoleonic Wars and the Peace of Utrecht all have in common is that war was both the product and the precondition of an attempt (in each case, successful) to prevent the establishment of a hegemonic European power. The balance of power that was subsequently created by the victorious coalitions was, in the first two occasions, stable and prolonged. The same was not true, of course, of WWI, but if we think of the Versailles peace as a prelude to fascism and WWII, then we do have a new balance of power (between the USA and USSR) that was stable and prolonged, though neither fair nor free for the Europeans.

More importantly, the collapse of the stable order in each phase was sudden and relatively unexpected. Empires, dynasties, alliances, leagues and unions that had lasted centuries were swept away in years and sometimes even months or weeks.

Giving an ominous tone to the title of our blog, in each of these beginnings of centuries, Europe was reshaped in a traumatic way.

Contemporary politics is too hurried. We are always reacting to a short 24 hour news cycle that won't let us listen to the long-scale secular rhythms of history. These echoes from the European past still reverberate today; they become fainter with time until they reappear in force. Only apparently did conflict and tragedy in our continent ever come out of the blue.

There is a fundamental political mismatch between these secular rhythms and our short attention span. What you cannot hear you cannot pay attention to — and hence cannot address, much less resolve. This is a big problem. (Greens, of course, are well acquainted to an even bigger version of this: trying to persuade the public to pay attention to developments in the physical world, like climate change, that are even longer than these centennial examples from moderately recent human history.)

So, if the good news is that we started off a fresh century without widespread European conflict, the bad news is that right now we have the same kind of preconditions that in past centuries led to turmoil.

First and foremost, we already have war on the continent, albeit limited to eastern Ukraine, pitting two very different views of what the continent should be. We have a retrograde vision from Putin's Russia, calling for the restoration, if not of the imperial idea, at least of the hierarchy of dominant powers and spheres of influence from the past. We have a disoriented European Union, hobbled by a financial and economic crisis, and split in half between debtor and surplus countries. We have huge unemployment, particularly among the educated young.

A visitor from the past might look at all this and see it just as a prelude to much bigger turbulence. Or she might say: look at what you have, and prepare yourself to reshape Europe ahead of the crisis. Bring on your 'resolution of conflict' mode without actually having to resort to conflict. Use the imagination of the post-war European project way before getting into any other continental war. The European project is not just an abstract idea; it is based on a very concrete European promise: shared prosperity, fundamental rights, popular sovereignty at both the national and European level. This promise is yours to make or break.

The big question we now have to answer is: what is this post-cold war Europe of ours? A recap of what was born a hundred years ago after WWI, democratic and problematic at the national level, unstable and inevitably in conflict at the European level? Or is it something new?

Or more succinctly: is it a Europe of the past or the future? If we are of the past, we will not be more than the Old Europe, trying to find combinations to manage too much power in such a short continental space. If we are from the future, we will be a worldly Europe, finding transnational democratic solutions to the major global crisis, from the economy to the environment.

It will not have escaped the attentive reader, however, that there is a third possibility: that of a bureaucratically imperial, predictable and stable Europe, agreed between the powers of the moment. This is the Europe of the present. Stable but carrying within itself the hopelessness that is the seed of conflict.

So when we read the daily news in our newspaper, we should keep an ear tuned to the secular rhythms of our time. If astronomers still hear the remnants of the Big Bang, it should not be too difficult for us to recognise in the pages of any newspaper — or the tweets on any cell phone, the posts on any blog — the chronicle of a Europe that failed two hundred years ago and a hundred years ago — and that, with our help, may just about get it right this time.