After Vienna: The French annexation of Savoy and the introduction of self-determination in international relations (around 1860)

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Abstract

Drawing on a variety of sources, this article will revisit the traditional chronology of the introduction of self-determination in international relations. It will argue that, before 1919 and the 'Wilsonian moment', the French annexation of Savoy in 1860 was one of the first instances of the resort to national self-determination for border changes. Due to the prevalence of national interests over the general European interest, this annexation also marked the end of the 'Vienna order' set up in 1815 and relying on a system of 'great power politics' -through the Concert of Europe- enforcing a traditional balance of power system to guarantee peace, stability and a conservative order in Europe. This article will therefore investigate, through the lens of the annexation of Savoy, the end of the post-Napoleonic Vienna order and the dawn of a new system of international relations relying on self-determination as a legitimising mechanism for border changes.

Keywords: Self-determination, Concert of Europe, Savoy, great power politics, borders.

The right to self-determination, enshrined in international law (Article 1 of the United Nations Charter), is a fundamental tenet of international governance and democracy, as well as one of the most contentious and paradoxical concepts in international relations. Its history as a concept can be traced back to the Enlightenment, when it was first theorised by philosophers such as Rousseau and Fichte. It then evolved from individual to collective self-determination in the nineteenth century. However, according to the traditional historical narrative, it was not applied to international relations until the end of the First World War. The 'Wilsonian moment' and the 1919 Peace treaties have indeed long been hailed the starting point of self-determination in international relations.[1] Even a

[1] Sergiusz Bober (ed.), *Post World War One plebiscites and their legacies. Exploring the right of self determination* (New York: Central University Press, 2024), Introduction (unpaginated ebook); Alfred Cobban, *National Self-Determination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 9–11; Volker Prott, *The politics of self determination: remaking territories and national identities in Europe, 1917-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1; Jörg Fisch, *The Right of self determination of peoples. The domestication of an illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11; Allen Lynch, 'Woodrow Wilson and the principle of 'national self-determination': a reconsideration', *Review of International Studies*, 2002, 28, 419–436, 422-423; Michael Hechter, *Containing nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113; James Summers, *Peoples and International Law. How Nationalism and Self-determination Shape a Contemporary Law of Nations* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers,

revisionist historian like Eric Weitz, whilst conceding that self-determination as an intellectual concept has a long pre-twentieth century history,[2] concluded that the First World War was a watershed event separating the Vienna order from what he called the 'Paris order' and that self-determination in practice only started in 1919.[3]

Using the lens of a nineteenth century case of border change -the French annexation of Savoy in 1860- this article seeks to question the traditional chronology by rediscovering the nineteenth century roots of self-determination, or the 'principle of nationalities' as it was then called,[4] and its application to international relations. It will re-assess the significance of the French annexation of Savoy in European history and argue that -

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2007), 124-5; Derek Heater, *National Self-Determination: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), ix.

[2] Eric D. Weitz, 'Self-determination: How a German Enlightenment idea became the slogan of national liberation and a Human right', *The American Historical Review*, Volume 120, Issue 2, April 2015, 462–496.

[3] Eric D. Weitz, 'From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 113, Issue. 5, December 2008, 1313-1343, 1328, 1330, 1331.

[4] Eugene Forcade, 'Chronique de la quinzaine', *Revue des deux Mondes,* 1860, 747-762*,* 754.

alongside contemporary plebiscites held in central Italy to decide on their union with Piedmont-Sardinia- this event can be seen as the first instance of the introduction of the modern principle of national self-determination -the right of a 'people' to choose and shape their own political destiny, which does not necessarily entail state sovereignty-[5] in international politics.

Christopher Clark has persuasively argued that the 1850s witnessed a 'profound transformation in political and administrative practices', a true 'revolution in government'.[6] In international politics too, this was a time of radical innovation. What started off as a typical example of dynastic diplomacy and territorial aggrandisement through secret diplomacy (the July 1858 secret Agreement of Plombières between Piedmont and France and the subsequent Treaty of 26 January 1859 granting Savoy and Nice to France in return for French military support during the 1859 Italian war against the Habsburg empire) turned out to be a turning point in European and international relations. The 1860 plebiscites in Savoy and central Italy initiated the implementation of the 'principle of nationalities' in international politics. The novelty was duly noted by contemporaries, observing that 'in

[5] David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81-118.

[6] Christopher Clark. 'After 1848: The European revolution in government', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. 2012, 22, 171-197, 173.

the manner of the annexation, a great principle, that of the right of a people to choose their own nationality, has been acknowledged and consecrated. A precedent was thus established'.[7] When rumours of a secret French-Piedmontese agreement spread in early 1860, Savoy therefore took centre stage in European politics for a few months, as this annexation signalled the end of the post-Napoleonic political order set up in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna.

The Vienna order was aimed at maintaining stability, peace and a conservative order on a continent emerging from over two decades of revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. It relied on the traditional eighteenth-century system of 'balance of power' and on a newer, more integrated model of European governance, the Concert of Europe, based on informal cooperation between Great Powers acting as custodians of the general European interest and protectors of the interests of smaller states.

The Concert of Europe has often been credited by historians when trying to account for the absence of a major pan-European war on the continent between the deflagration of the Napoleonic wars and the outbreak of the First World War, only interrupted by the Crimean war in the middle of the

[7] *New York Times,* 'FRANCE-the formal annexation of Savoy and Nice to France', 30 June 1860, 1.

century and by more localised conflicts such as the Franco-Prussian war. Henry Kissinger famously used his study of the Concert of Europe system as a model to maintain a Cold War balance of power between the two camps and prevent Soviet expansion and hegemony in the same way that the post-Napoleonic war former Allies tried to contain any resurgence of French expansionism.[8] The role of the Concert of Europe, as well as the hegemony of Britain and its promotion of open trade,[9] have long been considered to be the main drivers of the long period of overall stability in Europe. Some recent studies have challenged the traditional narrative of the *pax Britannica* by emphasizing the waning of Britain's global power in the second part of the nineteenth century.[10] The example of the Savoy annexation confirms the decline of the British hegemon in European politics. It also marks the end of the Vienna order and the beginning of a new system of international relations.

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[8] Henry Kissinger, *A world restored. Metternich, Castlereagh and the problem of peace, 1812-1822* (London: Weidelfeld and Nicolson, 1957).

[9] Robert Gilpin, *War and change in in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Rebecca Berentz Matzke, *Deterrence through strength. British naval power and foreign policy under Pax Britannica* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 6-9.

[10] Daniel Green (ed.), *The two worlds of Nineteenth century international relations. The bifurcated century* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 3; Muriel Chamberlain, *'Pax Britannica'.? British foreign policy, 1789-1914* (London: Pearson, 2014),

The annexation of Savoy has been the subject of a few historical studies, most of them focusing on the impact of this event on Savoyard and/or French history, around issues such as nationalism and the rise of a Savoyard nationalist movement,[11] negotiation between France and Piedmont over the annexation of Savoy and Savoyard identity from the eighteenth to the twentieth century,[12] the institutional transition from Piedmontese to French rule,[13] or commemorations and remembrance of the annexation in the twentieth century.[14] The few studies on the international perspective focus on a specific country, such as Christophe Chevalier's article on the reception of the annexation in Belgian public opinion.[15]

[11] Mark Sawchuk, 'The Daily Plebiscite: political culture and national identity in Nice and Savoy, 1860-1880', PhD Thesis, University of California Berkeley, 2011.

[12] Paul Guichonnet, *Histoire de l'annexion de la Savoie à la France; les véritables dossiers secrets de l'Annexion (*Chambéry: La Fontaine de Siloé, 2003).

[13] Christian Sorrel. 'Quatre-vingt-trois jours décisifs. La Savoie de la signature du traité de Turin à la prise de possession par la France (24 mars-14 juin 1860)', in Marc Ortolanim Bruno Berthier (eds*), Consentement des populations, plébiscites et changements de souveraineté à l'occasion du 150e anniversaire de l'annexion de la Savoie et de Nice à la France* (Nice: Serre, 2013), 301-311.

[14] Sylvain Milbach (ed.), *L'annexion de la Savoie à la France: Histoire et commémorations (1860-1960)* (Milano: Silvana, 2010).

[15] Christophe Chevalier, 'Les réactions en Belgique au traité de Turin de 1860. Enjeux sécuritaires et effervescence patriotique', *Relations internationales,* 2016/2, Vol. 166, 9-24.

This article will contribute to the existing literature on the annexation of Savoy by analysing the mechanisms legitimising the border change. By adopting a transnational perspective highlighting the interplay between the local and the global, between Savoy and Europe, this article will investigate the end of the Vienna order and the dawn of a new era of 'people's politics' and self-determination, thus shedding some light on one of the most pressing issues of modern politics-national self-determination and the making of new national boundaries.

Drawing on diplomatic correspondence, newspaper articles and Savoyard archival sources, and combining a microhistory of the Savoyards' involvement in the annexation process with the 'macro' level of international relations in discussions and debates within the Concert of Europe, this article will expose the sharp contrast between the inaction of the Great Powers and the active and passionate involvement of the Savoyards, thereby demonstrating the shift from 'great power politics' to 'people's politics' and self-determination.

The article is structured in three parts. Part one will analyse how the opposition between two sides -pro-French annexionists and pro-Swiss annexionists- in Savoy and beyond reflected a broader opposition between two alternative bases of legitimacy in international relations: the modern

principle of self-determination and the legitimist principle based on the 1815 Treaties, territorial integrity and 'great power politics'. Part two will investigate the reason for the failure of Concert diplomacy and the Savoyards' involvement in the international debate around their future destiny. Part three will explore the introduction of the principle of self-determination, eventually adopted by both sides as a legitimising mechanism for border change.

I. The confrontation of two alternative bases of legitimacy in international relations: the legitimist principle or self-determination

The question of a French annexation of Savoy agitated all European chancelleries in the spring of 1860, but it had by then already become a central -and divisive- question in Savoy. The rumour of a possible post-war French annexation started to spread there as early as 1859. Apart from a few isolated ultra-nationalists such as lawyer Jean-Jacques Rey,[16] nobody in

[16] Jean-Jacques Rey, *Solution de la question savoisienne: la Savoie indépendante* (Chambéry: Ménard, 1860), 5.

Savoy seriously considered the possibility of asking for the independence of Savoy due to its small size and economic backwardness at the time. The question was therefore to which country they wanted to belong. The Savoyard society soon split into three political camps: the pro-Piedmontese loyalists, the pro-French 'separatists', and the pro-Swiss advocating for a Swiss annexation of northern or Upper Savoy (Chablais and Faucigny).

As early as 1859, some pro-French Savoyards claimed the right to freely choose their own political destiny, asking for any annexation of Savoy to reflect their wishes and align with the principle of nationalities.[17] The desire by some liberal Savoyards to be reunited with France started in 1815, spreading to a larger part of the Savoyard population by 1848,[18] but, in 1859, the prospect of the Italian unification appeared as an opportunity to fulfil it. On 9 February 1859, two leading right-wing Savoyard deputies, Pantaléon Costa de Beauregard and Charles de Viry, openly expressed separatist tendencies in the Piedmontese Parliament.[19] This was widely

[17] F. Renand, *La Savoie libérale: simple question d'actualité* (Chambéry: Philippe, 1859), 3, 110; Jules de la Tournelle, *La question savoisienne: notes rapides à compléter* (Versailles: no publisher name, 1871),10.

[18] Anselme Pétetin, 'De l'annexion de la Savoie', 26 August 1859, in A. Pétetin, *Discussion de politique democratique et melanges, 1834-1861* (Paris: Plon, 1862), 295.

[19] *Gazette de Savoie,* 12 February 1859; Renand, *La Savoie libérale*, 14.

interpreted as a pro-French movement. The *Journal de Bruxelles* saw in these Savoyard separatist speeches a resurgence of the question of nationalities in international politics.[20] Pro-French Savoyards were then emboldened by Piedmontese Prime Minister Camillo Benso di Cavour's reply to the two Savoyard deputies' provocative statements, when he stated that, if the Savoyards expressed the wish to join France, Piedmont would respect it. This was interpreted in Savoy as an allusion to a future consultation to let them decide on the annexation.[21] This prompted the two leaders of the separatist movement in Savoy, lawyer-publicist Charles Berthier and physician Gaspard Dénarié, to formally raise the question of a French annexation in an open letter to the *Courrier de Lyon* in July 1859, followed by a pro-French annexation petition enthusiastically signed by several thousand people.[22]

The opposite camp, led by the urban bourgeoisie of Chablais and Faucigny,[23] was actively supported by Switzerland as their willingness to join Switzerland aligned with the Swiss desire to prevent a French annexation. To

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[20] *Journal de Bruxelles,* quoted in Albert Blanc, *La Savoie et la monarchie constitutionelle* (Chambéry: Baudet, 1859), 30-31.

[21] Renand, *La Savoie libérale*, 16-17.

[22] Charles Dufayard, *Histoire de Savoie* (Paris: Boivin, 1913), 307.

[23] Tournelle, *La question savoisienne,*10

support their cause, they mostly relied on the 1815 Treaties,[24] arguing that a French annexation was a major breach of the 'Vienna order' as both the final Act of the Congress of Vienna (article XCII) and the 20 November 1815 Treaty of Paris (article III) stated that Upper Savoy (Chablais, Faucigny and Genevois) was 'part of the neutrality of Switzerland as it is recognised and guaranteed by the Powers'.[25]

The debates between pro-French and pro-Swiss Savoyards reflected the opposition between the 'Vienna order' or Concert diplomacy based on the 1815 Treaties on the one hand, and the modern principle of nationalities on the other hand. The two systems were then considered mutually exclusive, as the principle of self-determination was clearly rejected at the Congress of Vienna. Pro-French Savoyards, like Polish, Belgian or Italian patriots before them,[26] indeed criticised the 'Vienna order' as oppressive to nationalities, ignoring the consent of local populations when redrawing the map of Europe and restoring Savoy to Piedmont in 1815 despite the Savoyards' vote on 3 October 1792 to be permanently annexed by France,

[24] Alphonse Kern, *Souvenirs politiques* (Berne: Jent et Renert, 1887), 175.

[25] Art. XCII, Final Act of the Congress of Vienna/General Treaty, 9 June 1815.

[26] Mark Jarrett, *Congress of Vienna and its legacy: war and great power diplomacy after Napoleon* (London: Tauris, 2013), 179.

thus treating local populations as 'herds of human cattle that [the Great Powers] divided like the spoils of victory'.[27]

This powerful appeal of the new principle of nationalities was acknowledged by the Great Powers. In a meeting with the Swiss ambassador in Paris, Alphonse Kern, on 31 January, Napoleon III thus asserted that France would not annex Savoy against the will of the local populations.[28] A few days later, the governors of Chambéry and Annecy published proclamations to the Savoyards explaining that they would be asked, through a plebiscite, to opt either for a French annexation or for remaining Piedmontese subjects. Since Savoy was a Piedmontese territory which had been conditionally ceded by Piedmont to France, Switzerland was not included and there was no possibility to vote for a Swiss annexation.[29] This was proof, for the Federal Council, that France had no intention to cede part of Savoy to Switzerland, so they appealed to the Concert of Europe, not on the basis of the principle of nationalities, but, 'the [1815] treaties in hand',[30] asking the Great Powers to intervene to enforce the pledge they made in their Declaration of 20

[27] Pétetin, Letter to the chief editor of *L'Opinion nationale,* 21 February 1860, in A. Pétetin, *Discussion*, 351-2, 362.

[28] Kern, *Souvenirs politiques,* 179-80.

[29] Kern, *Souvenirs politiques,* 182-3.

[30] Louis Vulliemin, *La Suisse dans la question de Savoie* (Lausanne; Genton, 1860), 27-28.

November 1815 to guarantee the neutrality of Upper Savoy.[31] They stated that, in the event of a French annexation of Savoy, a strict enforcement of the 1815 Treaties would require a Swiss annexation of Upper Savoy to ensure its neutrality.

However, the pro-Swiss camp, which relied on the 'Vienna order', was undermined by the paralysis and failures of the Concert of Europe in the recent past. This confirms the evolution in the historiography on the Concert of Europe, the long-held view on its efficacy in regulating international relations for almost a century after the end of the Napoleonic wars being replaced with a much more reserved assessment in recent studies. There is now a general consensus on the weakness and limitations of the Concert of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, some seeing the 1848 revolutions as the beginning of the end,[32] while others suggest a slightly later

[31] Anon., *La Conférence* (Paris: Dentu, 1860), 14-15.

[32] Michael Sheean, *The balance of power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004), 131.

date- around the time of the Crimean war,[33] the Franco-Prussian war[34] or the heyday of the 'alliance system' in the 1890s[35]- for its eventual demise. Interestingly, as was noted by Mark Mazower, while a few historians in the twentieth century re-evaluated the utility and effectiveness of the Concert of Europe in maintaining peace and stability in the nineteenth century, the judgement of contemporaries was much less positive.[36] The example of the annexation of Savoy is a case in point.

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[33] Stella Ghervas. 'The long shadow of the Congress of Vienna: from international peace to domestic disorders', *Journal of modern European History,* 2015, Vol. 13, No 4, 458-463, 458-460; Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert. The Nineteenth Century origins of global governance* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 177-9; Paul W. Schroeder, *Austria, Great-Britain and the Crimean war. The destruction of the European Concert* (Cornell, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972); Glenda Sluga, *The invention of international order. Remaking Europe after Napoleon* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2021), 6.

[34] Karine Varley, *The Franco-Prussian war. Turning points in European experiences and perceptions of military conflict* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2024), 7; Torbjorn Knutsen, *The rise and fall of world orders* (Manchester: Manchester University Press,1999), 95; Mikulas Fabry, *Recognising states. International society and the establishment of new states since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Chapter 3.

[35] Richard Langhorne, *The collapse of the Concert of Europe. International politics (1890-1914)* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981).

[36] Mark Mazower, *Governing the world. The history of an idea* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 21.

Most pro-Swiss contemporary observers lamented about the inaction of the Concert of Europe when faced with such a blatant violation of the 1815 Treaties. Swiss writer William de la Rive eloquently started his pamphlet on the 'Savoy question' with these damning words about the Concert of Europe's impotence:

> So there is a 'Savoy question' (...) Who will resolve it? Ten years ago, one would have said 'Europe', Europe which offered Switzerland the guarantee that they would maintain its neutrality, Europe which would not tolerate any French territorial expansion, Europe which [was] there, arms at the ready, vigilant sentinel [ready] to defend the 1815 Treaties. But Europe (...) let everything pass. Europe, which let Belgium, Cracow and Solferino pass, will let the French annexation of Savoy pass (...) If, therefore, Savoy [opts] to be French, perhaps Europe will protest but it will not go beyond moral resistance which will be defeated in a few days. After which, [Europe} will say 'Let it be'.[37]

What de la Rive referred to as 'Europe' was a loose European organisation, the Concert of Europe, formed by the former wartime allies (Britain, Russia,

[37] William de la Rive, *La question de Savoie* (Geneve: Ramboz, 1860), 5-7.

Prussia, Austria), joined by France in 1818. This led to the creation of 'Great Powers' as a legal category and the residual category of 'small states'.[38] There is a historical debate about the position of the latter within this system. The traditional view, championed by Charles Webster, held that the 'smaller powers' resented the hegemonic nature of the Concert of Europe and viewed the Great Powers with suspicion.[39] The more recent historiography suggests that the Concert of Europe was seen as legitimate and was supported by the 'smaller powers'.[40]

The case of Savoy confirms the latter by demonstrating the agency of smaller powers like Switzerland. They had shown, on several previous occasions (especially during the 1857 Neuchâtel crises with Prussia),[41] that they knew how to use the 1815 Treaties to safeguard their interests. On this occasion too, they were prompt to remind the Great Powers of their role as custodians

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[38] Iver Neumann, Sieglinde Gstohl, 'Lilliputians in Gulliver's world? Small states in international relations', *Centre for small state studies,* Working paper 1-2004, 3-4.

[39] Charles Webster, *The European Alliance, 1815-1825* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1929), 9, cited in Ian Clark, *Hegemony in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76; See also Roy Bridges, Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European states system, 1814-1914* (Taylor and Francis, 2014), 2.

[40] Ian Clark, *Hegemony in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76; Andreas Osiander, *The states system of Europe, 1640-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 245.

[41] Maartje Abbenhuis, *Age of neutrals,* 48-9.

of the European interest, arguing that the neutrality of Upper Savoy, before being vital to Switzerland itself, was first and foremost in the interest of Europe to guarantee the neutrality and inviolability of Switzerland so that they could act as a buffer state to 'block the most violent shocks from international conflicts'.[42] The international guarantee over the neutrality of Switzerland was indeed considered of paramount importance for the peace and stability of Europe.[43]

Switzerland also seized this opportunity to remind the Great Powers of the purpose of international law and treaties, emphasizing their importance for the independence and sovereignty of small states, as was stated in an anonymous Swiss publication in 1860: 'A large state like France can afford to laugh about [international] treaties. Because treaties are made, un-made and modified as they wish by its peers [large states] But small states do not laugh about that, because their lives depend on these treaties. [International] treaties are their safeguard, the condition of their existence, the guarantee of their inviolability. Treaties are made to protect small states, just as the law [is made] to protect the weak'.[44] This encapsulates small

[42] *Courrier des Alpes,* 20 March 1860, 1.

[43] Maartje Abbenhuis, *Age of neutrals: Great power politics, 1815-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)*,* 39, 47.

[44] Anon., *La Conférence*, 5-6.

states' profound sense of insecurity in European affairs at that time.[45] The changing character of war since the Napoleonic wars and the need to maintain large standing armies privileged larger states and increased the sense of vulnerability of smaller states.

Faced with this powerful Swiss appeal brandishing international law -the 1815 Treaties- to try and present the French annexation as illegal, the pro-French Savoyards retorted that the 1815 Treaties *imposed* on Switzerland the heavy burden of guaranteeing the neutrality of the Upper Savoyard districts, in favour and at the request of Piedmont-Sardinia (so that, in the event of a war with France, Sardinian troops pursued by the French could find a safe place in neutral Savoy and, from there, evacuate back to Piedmont).[46] This was therefore, King Victor Emmanuel II of Piedmont claimed, strictly and only in the interest of Piedmont rather than to provide any additional protection for Switzerland or Europe, since Switzerland's most effective protection was its neutrality status.[47] The neutrality of Upper Savoy being contingent to the Piedmontese possession of Savoy, it was no longer guaranteed in European law if it no longer belonged to Piedmont.

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[45] Miroslav Sedivy, *The decline of the Congress system: Metternich, Italy and European diplomacy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 23.

[46] *Salut Public,* 21 March 1860, 1.

[47] *Salut Public,* 1 March 1860, 1.

In addition to this legal argument about the limited scope of the 1815 guarantee over the neutrality of Upper Savoy, supporters of a French annexation also seized as an excuse the recent violations of the 1815 treaties on numerous occasions: Russia violating the semi-autonomous statute of Congress Poland by imposing more direct rule through Russian viceroys after the 1830-31 uprising, the Habsburg empire annexing the 'Free city of Cracow' in 1846, Britain imposing more direct rule on the Ionian Islands after nationalist unrest there caused by the beginning of the Greek revolution in 1821 and annexing Perim in 1857. The dysfunction of the Concert of Europe even before the Savoy annexation seemed to hinder its ability to intervene by undermining its legitimacy and this was eagerly seized by pro-French Savoyards such as Anselme Pétetin who complained, as early as 1859, that the strict enforcement of the 1815 treaties only seemed to concern Europe when the country at fault was France: 'Everybody has violated and still violates the Treaties of 1815: Austria at Cracow, Russia at Warsaw, Britain in the Ionian islands, at Aden, at Perim; and each of them did so and does so for their own profit (...) It seems as though these treaties now only exist [to be used] against us'.[48]

[48] Anselme Pétetin, *De l'annexion de la Savoie* (Paris: Bourdilliat, 1859), 30.

The argument of pro-French Savoyards about the two-tier system of international law was taken up by national and international public opinion in March 1860. The *Gazette Autrichienne* slammed the hypocrisy of the Great Powers - objecting to the French annexation of Savoy while accepting the ongoing process of Italian unification at the expense of the Habsburg empire and in violation of the 1815 treaties: 'The [1815] treaties settled the borders of France, but didn't they settle the borders of Piedmont? Didn't they recognise the Grand Dukes of Tuscany? Didn't they grant Romagna to the Pope?'.[49] French newspaper *Le Monde* concurred: 'It is convenient to violate treaties when they hinder your politics (taking Perim, for example) and then to invoke them when they serve your political objectives (...) Treaties oblige everybody or nobody'.[50]

There is some truth to the contemporary perception of a two-tier system of international law enforcement by the Concert of Europe, depending on who the state at fault was. The Great Powers were indeed more prompt to ask for a strict enforcement of the 1815 Treaties when the country at fault was France, as the 1815 Treaties were designed to prevent a resurgence of French expansionism, the memories of the Napoleonic expansion and wars

[49] *La Gazette autrichienne,* quoted in *Le Monde,* 12 March 1860, 1.

[50] *Le Monde,* 12 March 1860, 1.

being ‘still fresh in the memories of mankind’.[51] The post-Napoleonic order was aimed at constraining France,[52] having it return to its pre-war boundaries and surrounding it with buffer states such as Belgium and Piedmontese Savoy, the latter being seen as a suitable buffer between France and Switzerland. Any prospect of a border change in that strategic part of Europe, to France’s benefit, was therefore seen as a cause for concern.

In March 1860, Swiss newspaper *Berner Zeitung* claimed that ‘European diplomacy (…) moves heaven and earth to stop this annexation’.[53] This bold claim turned out to be overly optimistic. A more realistic account of the (in)action of the Concert of Europe on this occasion was provided by Franco-Polish writer Ladislas Mickiewicz, observing, on 12 April 1860, that ‘there has never been so many dispatches, notes, memorandums and protests [European] Diplomacy has never been more active, and [yet] never has its

[51] Letter by John Russell to Edouard Thouvenel, quoted in *Illustrated Times,* 7 April 1860, 1.

[52] Volker Sellin, ‘France, the Vienna settlement and the Balance of Power’, in Peter Kruger and Paul Schroeder (eds), *The Transformation of European politics, 1763-1848* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2002), 234.

[53] *Berner Zeitung* quoted in *Gazette de Lausanne,* 10 March 1860, 3.

insufficiency been made more apparent (…) [European] diplomacy is so powerless that [national] governments could not agree on anything'.[54]

This power vacuum at the heart of the Concert of Europe appeared as an opportunity for the Savoyards to take their destiny into their own hands. As was demonstrated later by the results of the plebiscite, most of them were in favour of a French annexation. Thus, in this instance, the dysfunction of the Concert of Europe and the inaction of the Great Powers – accepting the French annexation to prevent war- met the interests of the majority Savoyard population.

II. The failure of Concert diplomacy

In early 1860 Savoy, all eyes were on the Concert of Europe. The communications of different European chancelleries on the annexation question made the headlines of the local press on a daily basis. However, it soon became clear to the Savoyard public that their active involvement in the annexation question was not matched by a similar degree of interest by the Great Powers.

[54] Ladislas Mickievicz, *La question polonaise* (Paris: Dentu, 1863), 139.

The European diplomacy proved indeed unable to challenge and prevent the annexation of Savoy. The 'Concert of Europe' was a new form of international governance, based on the acceptance by the Great Powers of their role as custodians of the general European interest, and on their desire to act in concert to guarantee the post-Napoleonic order.[55] The Great Powers were therefore required, to some extent, to prioritise the European interest over national interests,[56] by refraining from imperial ambitions for example. The case of Savoy shows that, in this instance, the Great Powers did put their national interests first.

The Swiss and pro-Swiss Savoyard concern did initially find an echo in Britain, also wary of any French territorial expansion reminiscent of the Napoleonic wars and fearing that the annexation of Savoy would precede a French annexation of Geneva,[57] as had happened in 1798. Britain attempted to mobilise the other Great Powers to firmly oppose Napoleon III's moves, emphasising that this was a major issue 'of so important a bearing on the

[55] Jarrett, *Congress of Vienna and its legacy*, 372, 87-88.

[56] Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert,* 122.

[57] Lord J. Russell to Earl Cowley, 22 March 1860, in *Correspondence relating to the affairs of Italy, Switzerland and Savoy. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by command of Her Majesty* (London: Harrison, 1860), 23.

future peace and welfare of Europe',[58] and formally asked for an official denial by the French government of their annexation project. This was provided by French Secretary of Foreign Affairs Edouard Thouvenel in late January 1860.[59] However, after weeks of active speculation in the French and foreign press, Napoleon III finally confirmed, on 1 March 1860, his project of annexing the 'French slopes of the Alps'.[60]

This sent a shockwave throughout Europe. Belgium was especially concerned,[61] as they feared that the French rhetoric to justify the annexation (relying on the principle of 'natural frontiers' -traditionally used in international relations since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries-[62] and the more modern principle of self- determination) could be invoked to the same effect against their own independence if Napoleon III went on to claim Belgium (populated by a large French-speaking, pro-French Walloon

[58] Lord J. Russell to Sir J. Crampton, 14 March 1860, in *Correspondence respecting the proposed annexation of Savoy and Nice*, 1.

[59] Lord Cowley to Lord Russell, 27 January 1860, *Correspondence respecting the proposed annexation of Savoy and Nice,* 16.

[60] *Le Moniteur Universel,* 2 March 1860, 1.

[61] Chevalier, 'Les réactions en Belgique au traité de Turin de 1860',1.

[62] Alexander C. Diener, Joshua Hagen, *Borders: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 40.

community). There was also deep concern in the Germanic lands,[63] for fear the principle of 'natural frontiers' applied to the Alps was later applied by Napoleon III to the Rhine.[64] It was indeed commonplace for French statesmen, even before Napoleon III, to use the idea of natural frontier 'as a legitimising discourse that [served] to rationalise French claims of territorial expansion.'[65]

Among the Great Powers guarding the post Napoleonic political order, or 'the Potentates who manage Europe'[66] as they were then called, Britain and Prussia were initially the most fiercely opposed to the project. Prussia formally protested in early February[67] and March 1860,[68] but stopped short

[63] Joseph-Francis Heininger, *Prussian Foreign Policy during the New Era, 1858-1862,* vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1961), 355.

[64] Frederick Engels, 'Savoy and Nice', *New York Daily Tribune,* No 5874, 21 February 1860, 1; Anselme Pétetin, 'La Prusse et la Savoie', 18 March 1860, in A. Pétetin, *Discussion de politique democratique et melanges, 1834-1861* (Paris: Plon, 1862), 394-398, 394.

[65] Peter Sahlins, 'Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century', *The American Historical Review*, 1990, 95(5), 1423–1451,1424.

[66] 'French designs on Savoy', *Illustrated Times,* Saturday 4 February 1860, vol. 10, Issue 253, 1.

[67] 'French designs on Savoy', 3.

[68] Schleinitz to Bloomfield 3 March 1860, cited in Hansard, HC, 'Annexation of Savoy to France', vol. 157, debated on 16 March 1860, column 752.

of committing themselves to a common action with Britain.[69] British Members of Parliament convened on 28 February to decide on a motion of formal protest, MP Kinglake emphatically asserting that the Savoy question was not a local border dispute but a truly European question: '[Britain] could not consent to the annexation of Savoy and Nice without defacing the map of Europe (...) The possession of these territories by France would be the unsettlement of Europe'.[70]

As Napoleon III had promised to subject this annexation to a consultation of the Great Powers, Thouvenel sent a statement citing a change in the geopolitical situation compared to 1815 and French security needs to justify the annexation.[71] The annexation of Savoy was deemed critical to prevent all Alpine passes being controlled by a foreign nation. This was rooted in traditional French military strategy. As Peter Sahlins has observed, France pursued 'the strategic principle of conquering and controlling 'natural

[69] Bloomfield to Lord J. Russell, Berlin, 31 March 1860, in *Correspondence relative to the Affairs of Italy, Savoy, and Switzerland,* 107.

[70] Hansard, HC, 'Annexation of Savoy and Nice to France', Debated on Tuesday 28 February 1860, vol. 156, column 1942.

[71] Thouvenel to Comte Persigny, French ambassador in London, 19 March 1860, in *Correspondence relating to the affairs of Italy, Savoy and Switzerland,* 21.

frontiers' ever since the late Middle Ages'.[72] But the prospect of the creation of a larger Italian state on France's South-Eastern border gave even more saliency to the French argument about the necessity of securing a strong 'natural frontier' there. This explanation failed to convince the other Great Powers who objected that 'a country, so rich, so populous and so military [as France], possessing 36,000,000 of inhabitants, without counting its colonies' could not have security concerns towards a weaker, less populated Italian state[73] - with a population then estimated at around 11 Million people, [74] excluding Naples, Sicily, Marche and Umbria[75] which were annexed later.

To counter the risk of a concerted action, the French government's diplomatic strategy consisted in winning over each of the Great Powers one by one, playing on their national self-interests, and having them all recognise

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[72] Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries. The making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 43.

[73] Lord Russell to Earl Cowley, 13 February 1860, *Correspondence respecting the proposed annexation of Savoy and Nice,* 36.

[74] Lord Russell to Earl Cowley, 13 February 1860, *Correspondence,* 36.

[75] *Appletons' Annual Cyclopedia and Register of Important Events. Embracing Political, Military, and Ecclesiastical Affairs; Public Documents; Biography, Statistics, Commerce, Finance, Literature, Science, Agriculture, and Mechanical Industry* (New York: Appleton, 1873), vol. 38, 409.

the *fait accompli*. The odds were in France's favour because of its prominent place in Europe and the lack of intervention of the Concert of Europe to check previous violations of the Vienna order. Even Swiss newspapers cast doubt as to the chances of success of the Swiss appeal as '[European] law in itself, not supported through [military] strength, had been violated so often and with such impunity in recent years that it could appear as not having much weight (...) The European powers were divided (...) and all of them wanted to remain in good terms with the French government'.[76] About half a century after Waterloo, France had indeed been restored as a great political, economic and military power, which also explains the inaction of the signatories of the 1815 Treaties as none of them was willing to risk war over the Savoy question.

The Federal Council retaliated by sending diplomatic legations to London, Berlin and St Petersburg, while acting through its ordinary diplomatic agents in Paris and Vienna.[77]

The Savoyards were far from passive in these diplomatic exchanges. The heated discussions between Britain, supporting Switzerland, and France were mirrored in Savoy by the antagonism between pro-French annexionists

[76] *Journal de Genève,* 11 July 1861, 1.

[77] *Journal de Genève,* 11 July 1861, 1.

and pro-Swiss anti-annexionists. They passionately confronted each other in the press, in demonstrations and through petitions, so much so that Piedmontese Governor of Savoy Orso Serra started to fear the outbreak of violent clashes or riots between the two camps in March 1860.[78]

The internationalisation of the annexation question highlighted the agency of Savoyards. Both camps indeed tried to influence the Great Powers by sending them petitions supporting either a French or Swiss annexation[79] Their efforts were mostly targeted at the international public opinion, so they also sent the petitions to foreign newspapers,[80] which then started regularly reporting on Savoyard press campaigns and petitions.[81] Through public demonstrations, petitions, opinion pieces in the local press, widely relayed by international newspapers, the Savoyards thus (re)claimed the right to decide of their own fate. A pro-Swiss annexation committee of nine Savoyard members launched a petition on 10 February 1860, to let Savoyards -rather than foreign European powers- decide on Savoyard affairs, adding: 'when the whole of Europe is deliberating on our future lot, we too wish to say what

[78] ADS, 12 FI-461, Proclamation of the Governor of Savoy, Orso Serra, to the residents of the province of Chambéry, 10 March 1860.

[79] Joseph Bard, *Histoire de l'annexion de la Savoie* (Genève: Bonnant, 1860), 22-23.

[80] James Howard Harris Earl of Malmesbury, *Memoirs of an ex-Minister: an Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1885), 512.

[81] Bard, *Histoire de l'annexion,* 22-23.

we fear'.[82] In reversal of traditional 'great power politics', the opinion and wishes of the Savoyards were indeed increasingly seen by the international public opinion as a decisive factor in the 'Savoy question'.[83]

Meanwhile, on the diplomatic side, the pro-French lobbying, supported by the majority Savoyard population, won over Russia and the Habsburg Empire.[84] Russia did not consider that their strategic interests were at stake over Savoy[85] and wished to remain passive.[86] This confirmed Russia's withdrawal from European affairs[87] due to inner difficulties and debt following the Crimean war, [88] frustration with the clauses of the 1856 Treaty of Paris, and Tsar Alexander II's vast programme of domestic reforms which required a long period of peace.[89] Even before the outbreak of the Italian war, Russia had already promised Napoleon III to remain neutral and to use their

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[82] *Gazette de Lausanne,* 16 February 1860, 3.

[83] *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art,* 11 February 1860, 176.

[84] *Salut Public,* 1 March 1860, 1.

[85] Prince Gorchakov cited in a Dispatch from Sir J. Crampton to Lord J. Russell, 23 March 1860, in *Correspondence relating to the Affairs of Italy, Savoy and Switzerland*, 73.

[86] *Gazette de Savoie,* 19 and 20 March 1860, 1.

[87] Roy Bridge, *The great powers and the European states system* (London: Routledge, 2013), 129-130.

[88] Charles Greville, *The Greville Memoirs,* (London: Longman, Green and Company, 1896), vol. 8, 307.

[89] Greville, *The Greville Memoirs,* vol. 8, 307.

influence over Prussia to prevent their opposition.[90] The strong support provided by Russia to France in 1860[91] may also be due to their secret alliance since 1859.[92]

The Habsburg empire did not consider that the Savoy annexation was a question of national interest and did not want to get involved in a joint action by the Concert of Europe either.[93] Still reeling after their recent defeat in the Italian war, they were not in a political or financial position to engage in another war.[94] Besides, they were more concerned with and opposed to the Piedmontese annexation of central Italy than to the French annexation of Savoy and Nice.[95] Asked to supply the official position of the Habsburg court on this question, Count von Rechberg, Foreign Affairs Secretary since May

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[90] Cavour to Comte de Launay, Piedmontese envoy in Berlin, 6 December 1858, in Luigi Chiala (ed.), *Lettere edite ed inedite di Cavour* (Torino: Roux e Favale, 1884), vol. 3, XVI.

[91] Edouard Thouvenel to Duc de Gramont, French ambassador in Rome, 8 April 1860, in L. Thouvenel (ed.), *Le secret de l'Empereur. Correspondance inédite échangée entre M. Thouvenel, le duc de Gramont et le comte de Flahault, 1860-1862* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1889), vol. 1, 120.

[92] Benedit Humphrey Sumner. "The Secret Franco-Russian Treaty of 3 March 1859." *The English Historical Review*, 1933, vol. 48, no. 189, 65–83; John Knox Stevens, 'The Franco-Russian Treaty of 1859. New lights and new thoughts', *The Historian*, Vol. 28, February 1966, Vol. 2, 203-223.

[93] *Ost Deutsche Post,* quoted in *Le Monde,* 22 March 1860, 1.

[94] Greville, *The Greville Memoirs*, vol. 8, 307.

[95] *Gazette de Savoie,* 19 and 20 March 1860, 1.

1859 and more cautious than his predecessor Count von Buol-Schauenstein,[96] stated that the Habsburg empire disapproved the Savoy annexation 'on the same grounds as they disapproved the annexation of central Italy to Sardinia''[97] and would not take part in any anti-French coalition.

After their initial condemnation, Prussia adopted a more conciliatory approach too[98] because their focus was more on domestic issues, economic development and on their rivalry or 'struggle for mastery' with the Habsburg empire for influence over German states. [99] Britain was therefore left diplomatically isolated.[100]

The Savoyard public followed eagerly the debates between the Great Powers, which were transcribed *in extenso* in the local press. A journalist

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[96] Duc de Gramont to Thouvenel, 25 February 1860, in *Le Secret de l'Empereur,* vol. 1, 46.

[97] British envoy at Vienna Lord Loftus to Lord Russell, 22 March 1860, in House of Commons, *Parliamentary papers,* 1860, vol. 67, 34.

[98] *Le Monde,* 23 April 1860, 1.

[99] Greville, *The Greville Memoirs,* 307; Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500-2000* (London: Fontana, 1989), 162.

[100] Thouvenel to the French ambassador in Rome, Duc de Gramont, 8 April 1860, in L. Thouvenel, *Le secret de l'Empereur,* vol. 1, 119; Anon., 'No war over Savoy', *The Times,* 31 March 1860.

from the Savoyard *Gazette des Alpes* underlined the powerlessness of the Great Powers with this rhetorical question: 'Which are the Great Powers determined and ready to go to war with France?'.[101]

Indeed, none of the Great Powers wanted to start a general war 'about a few mountain slopes a thousand miles distant',[102] but even firmer diplomatic pressure was not considered. Some British critics, like Lord Normamby, suggested that economic priorities – as Britain was then discussing a commercial treaty with France (the Cobden-Chevalier treaty)- may have sidelined political concerns.[103] Lord Granville flatly replied that it was 'perfectly ridiculous' to suppose that economic concerns could dictate Britain's foreign policy 'on any great European question.'[104] His reply, widely relayed in the Savoyard press, was greeted with enthusiasm by the pro-Swiss Savoyards,[105] but it proved to be just empty words. Even the idea, vented by some, to condition the adoption of the commercial treaty to an agreement

[101] *Gazette des Alpes,* 19-20 March 1860, 2.

[102] Anon., 'No war over Savoy', *The Times,* 31 March 1860, 1.

[103] Hansard, HC, 'Annexation of Savoy to France', debated on Friday 27 January 1860, vol. 156, column 219.

[104] Hansard, HC, 'Annexation of Savoy to France', debated on Friday 27 January 1860, vol. 156, column 219.

[105] *Gazette de Savoie,* 30-31 January 1860, 1.

over the annexation[106] was rejected as the Treaty, popular with British exporters' circles,[107] was considered more essential to British interests than Savoy.[108]

The limitations of British hegemony in European affairs were thus laid bare by the Savoy question, even before the 1863-1864 Polish and Danish crises often seen as the beginning of the waning of British international power.[109] The London *Illustrated Times* noted, in February 1860: 'We initiate nothing just now in things European, but show our influence by acquiescing in, opposing, or modifying, according to circumstances, the course of action commenced by the Emperor of the French. It is, indeed, the essential characteristic of European politics just now that they are directed by France'.[110] This was echoed by Queen Victoria, complaining in May 1860 that 'No country, no human being would ever dream of *disturbing* or *attacking*

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[106] *The Saturday review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art,* No 224, Vol. IX, 11 February 1860, 2.

[107] Anthony Howe, *Free trade and liberal England, 1846-1946* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 94.

[108] Prince Albert to Prince-Wilhelm Prince Regent of Prussia, 15 March 1860, in Theodore Martin, *Le Prince Albert de Saxe-Cobourg*, translated from English by Craven (Paris: Plon, 1883), vol. 2, 375.

[109] Christopher Bartlett, *Defence and Diplomacy. Britain and the Great Powers, 1815-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 69.

[110] Anon., 'The European situation', *Illustrated Times,* 4 February 1860, vol. 10, Issue 253, 1.

France'.[111] Indeed, no country wanted to bear the political and economic consequences of a break in diplomatic relations with France and of a general war. There is generally a strong correlation between stock market volatility and political uncertainty. The spring of 1860 was no exception. The prospect of war saw stock market values plummet.[112] On 15 March 1860, French newspaper *La Presse* observed that the weeks of financial turmoil following the Swiss appeal and Lord Kinglake's motion of protest had come to an end. When fears of a general war over Savoy receded, stock values stabilised at the Stock Exchange.[113]

Britain's attempt to mobilise the other Great Powers therefore failed as they could not reach an agreement on a common action to oppose the annexation.[114] This was heavily criticised by some British members of the Opposition, such as Sir George Bowyer, Liberal MP for Dundalk, who denounced 'mere protestations which were no more than an admission of impotence'.[115] Austrian newspaper *Ost Deutsche Post* highlighted the

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[111] Cited in Glyn Stone, Thomas Otte, *Anglo-French relations since the late 18th century* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 52.

[112] *La Presse,* 7 March 1860, 1.

[113] *La Presse,* 15 March 1860, 1.

[114] *Le Monde,* 23 April 1860, 1.

[115] Hansard, HC, 'Annexation of Savoy and Nice to France', Debated on Tuesday 28 February 1860, vol. 156, column 1964.

collapse of the Concert of Europe on this occasion, the vain protests of the British parliamentary opposition 'only [serving] to painfully shed more light on the weakness of Europe'.[116]

The Great Powers' inaction contrasted with the active involvement of the Savoyards in the debate and with their oft-stated desire to be consulted about their future destiny. This coincided with Napoleon III's strategy to instrumentalise the 'principle of nationalities' -the cornerstone of his foreign policy-[117] to placate any remaining international opposition, although his real motivation for the annexation was French political and military interests. Already in February 1860, French ambassador in Rome (and key confidant of Napoleon III) Duc de Gramont confided to Thouvenel that it may be necessary [*au besoin*] to 'bring the popular consent of the Savoyards and Niçards into the open' to defeat international opposition.[118] It was indeed impossible for the Great Powers to dismiss the results of the plebiscite in Savoy while recognising those of the Italian plebiscites. Napoleon III's traditional use of plebiscites was thus extended to Europe and international

[116] *Ost Deutsche Post,* quoted in *Le Monde,* 22 March 1860, 1.

[117] Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, 'La politique du Second Empire', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (1st April 1872), 536-572, 548.

[118] Duc de Gramont to Secretary of Foreign Affairs Thouvenel, 25 February 1860, in *Le secret de l'Empereur,* vol. 1, 45.

relations, the plebiscite in Savoy being overseen by the Piedmontese authorities[119] to provide more guarantees to Europe over the neutrality of the outcome.

To convince the other Great Powers of the genuine character of this consultation, Napoleon III also vowed to abandon the annexation project in the event of a negative vote.[120] It is impossible to tell whether he would have respected this promise – although a negative vote, strengthening Switzerland's opposition and Piedmont's reluctance, most likely would have made a peaceful annexation difficult - what is significant is not so much whether or not this promise would have been respected but the mere fact that Napoleon III felt compelled to assert that he would respect the outcome. The introduction of self-determination thus served as a legitimising mechanism for this border change. The annexation was to be decided by the Savoyards themselves, which fulfilled the Savoyards' long-held expectations for a popular consultation about the annexation.

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[120] Earl Cowley to Lord J. Russell, 9 March 1860, in *Further Correspondence relating to the affairs of Italy, Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty* (London: Harrisons and Son, 1860), vol. III, 41.

III. The introduction of self-determination as a legitimising mechanism for border change

In a 1860 pamphlet comparing the annexation of Savoy with the Austrian 1846 annexation of Cracow, the anonymous Savoyard author claimed that the former, based on self-determination, heralded 'the policy of the future' whereas the latter belonged to the 'policies of the past'.[121]

The Savoy annexation was indeed a watershed event in international politics. A few recent studies have highlighted the rise of a new sensitivity to local demands in the construction of the border in the nineteenth century, through the collection by state agents (boundary commissions, topographers) of local oral evidence on territorial claims or collective uses of the land.[122] The role of public opinion and direct democracy in international politics took on a new dimension in 1860 Savoy. The formal

[121] Anon., *Les deux annexions* (Paris: A. France, 1860), VIII-IX.

[122] Laura Di Fiore, 'The production of borders in nineteenth-century Europe: between institutional boundaries and transnational practices of space', *European Review of History–Revue Européenne d'Histoire*, 2017 vol. 24, no. 1, 36–57, 40-43; Laura Di Fiore, *Alla frontiera. Confini e documenti di identità nel Mezzogiorno continentale preunitario* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2013); Lucie Bargel, *Dans l'écheveau de la frontière. Alignements, réalignements des attachements politiques dans la Roya* (*XIX^e^ -XXI^e^ siècles*) (Paris: Karthala, 2023), 38, 42, 49.

expression of popular consent was sought -and used- not just to inform the delineation of the boundary but to decide and legitimise the border change itself. The European significance of the plebiscite was duly noted by the Savoyards. The pro-French candidate to the post of municipal councillor in Bonneville (Upper Savoy) Jacques Pelloux called his fellow countrymen to 'boldly show Europe the wishes of the Savoyard population' by casting their vote in the plebiscite.[123]

In the spring of 1860, the Savoyards, deeply aware of the intense interest generated in Europe by the prospect of a French annexation, took the whole European public as witness of their wishes. Opinion pieces in newspapers and formal petitions in favour of or against the annexation were thus actively and eagerly used by the pro-French and pro-Swiss Savoyards camps as tools within the ongoing debate about the future of Savoy. The annexation indeed took place in a post-1848 context of rising influence of public opinion. As Christopher Clark has shown, the 1850s witnessed a 'renegotiation of the relationship between government and its public', marked by less robustly

[123] Archives Départementales de Haute Savoie, 168 J 2, 'Adresse aux électeurs du Faucigny en faveur de l'Annexion et des idées du candidat Joseph Pelloux', 24 March 1860.

enforced press censorship, an increased circulation of political prints and the expansion of a more politicised reading public.[124]

Even before the plebiscite, the Savoyards were informally polled on the subject through rival petitions, for or against a Swiss annexation of Upper Savoy. Not everybody in Switzerland supported this. Some feared that, Savoyards being Roman Catholics, the annexation of Upper Savoy would reinforce the Ultramontane Catholic element -already a source of difficulty for the Federal Council at the time-[125] and would threaten the identity of western Switzerland 'if Geneva [lost[itself and [disappeared] in a foreign population'.[126] The powerful appeal of nationalism for Savoyards was also a matter for concern for Swiss anti-annexionists, fearing that, if Upper Savoy was annexed by Switzerland and merged with Geneva, French Savoyards may one day ask for a reunion of Lower and Upper Savoy (the latter then including Geneva) as a French province.[127] According to them, the annexation of Upper Savoy was not worth taking the risk to lose Geneva to France. Despite these dissenting voices, the Federal Council pursued their

[124] Christopher Clark. 'After 1848: The European revolution in government', 191-194.

[125] Letter from Captain Harris to Lord Russell, 19 January 1860, in *Correspondence respecting the proposed annexation of Savoy and Nice*, 11-12.

[126] *Gazette de Lausanne,* 23 February 1860, 2.

[127] *Gazette de Lausanne,* 23 February 1860, 2.

plan to try and annex Upper Savoy but, as a sign of the replacement of the traditional 'balance of order' policy with the principle of self-determination, they did not base their claims on security concerns alone. They also relied on popular consent, on the allegedly pro-Swiss 'interests, relations and sympathies' of neighbouring Upper Savoy.[128]

This mirrored King Victor Emmanuel II's official declaration to his former Savoyard and Niçard subjects in March 1860, in which he asserted that the main driver for his decision was a consideration of the Savoyard's wishes and interests, based on the alleged greater inclination of the local population towards France rather than Italy due to their geographical location (on the western, French side of the Alps) and to the 'close affinity of race, language and customs'[129] between Savoy and France. Although not the real reason – the Piedmontese king had been forced to accept the cession of his ancestral home to secure France' s support in their war against the Habsburg empire- the mere fact that he felt compelled to present it as the expression of the principle of nationalities in his official speech shows How central this issue was in the annexation process.

[128] *Journal de Genève*, 26 January 1860, 1.

[129] Archives Départementales de Savoie, 12 Fi56, 'Proclamation de Victor Emmanuel aux habitants de la Savoie et de Nice', 1 April 1860.

A large part of the Savoyard population was indeed willing to join France. In addition to economic reasons (access to a large market, French state funding of infrastructures in Savoy) and social reasons (family connections, especially with neighbouring French provinces), the support for a French annexation was also motivated by the contemporary process of Italian unification which would have further reinforced the already peripheral nature of Savoy and Nice if they had remained Italian territories in a larger Italian state on the other side of the Alps.[130] As the expression often stated at the time and attributed to Cavour went, Savoy did not want to become 'Italy's Ireland'.[131]

The Savoyard pro-Swiss camp thus launched a press campaign and collected signatures for a pro-Swiss petition.[132] In March 1860, two delegates travelled to Berne to meet the British envoy and, when handing him the petition signed by 12,062 men above 20 years of age (out of about 30,000 men above 20 years of age then in Upper Savoy according to them), they added that 'the signatures would have been much more numerous but, since the Proclamation of the Governor of Annecy, the population were led

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[130] *Journal de Genève*, 2 March 1860, 1.

[131] L. Paul-Dubois, 'Suisse et Savoie: la zone franche de la Haute-Savoie', *Revue des deux Mondes,* vol. 10, Number 4, August 1912, 794-819, 799.

[132] *Journal de Genève*, 20 March 1860, 1.

to believe that their annexation to France was imminent and they were fearful of exposing themselves to the displeasure of their future rulers'. [133] Their opinion was that, in the event of a referendum asking them to choose between annexation by France or by Switzerland, the vote for Switzerland would win with a large majority.[134]

The Swiss offer of a partition of Savoy was met with fierce resistance from French officials and the majority of the Savoyards because it negated the principle of Savoyard nationality, their strong sense of identity and desire to retain their territorial integrity. It was also criticised because it was more in favour of Swiss than French interests. The Swiss plan for a division of Savoy would have left France with a very small portion of Savoy, thereby cancelling in effect the objectives of the French annexation (to secure its South-Eastern border with Italy). The part of Savoy coveted by Switzerland amounted to 3/5th of the total size and population of Savoy (337,000 out of 582,000 inhabitants and 270 square leagues out of 497) and included the most populated, richest part of Savoy.[135]

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[133] Captain Harris to Lord Russell, 22 March 1860, in *Correspondence respecting the proposed annexation of Savoy and Nice*, 32.

[134] Captain Harris to Lord Russell, 22 March 1860, in *Correspondence respecting the proposed annexation of Savoy and Nice*, 32.

[135] *Courrier des Alpes,* 20 March 1860, 1.

The pro-French Savoyards therefore launched a relentless campaign to try and discredit the pro-Swiss petition, presenting it as the product of Swiss corruption and bribery,[136] including signatures 'almost all collected in cabarets or written by children, women and sometimes mentally retarded people [sic], or supplied for a few coins'.[137] Annexionist newspapers also started publishing open letters by Savoyards denouncing the Swiss propaganda and the way signatures for the pro-Swiss petition were collected from 'ignorant and naïve peasants', [138] questioning the authenticity and spontaneous character of these signatures.[139] The annexationist Savoyard newspaper *Courrier des Alpes* also launched, on 17 February,[140] a counter petition to collect the signatures of the Savoyards opposed to a Swiss annexation of Upper Savoy or, as they put it, 'a petition against the dismemberment of Savoy'.[141]

The propaganda war between the pro-Swiss and the pro-French parties raged on via the medium of their two rival petitions. Savoyard and Swiss newspapers regularly published the latest list of signatures to try and

[136] *Courrier des Alpes,* 7 April 1860, 1.

[137] *Courrier des Alpes,* 13 March 1860, Supplement to Number 33, 1.

[138] *Courrier des Alpes,* 6 March 1860, 2.

[139] *Courrier des Alpes,* 6 March 1860, 2.

[140] *Journal de Genève*, 18 February 1860, 1.

[141] *Journal de Genève*, 21 February 1860, 1.

strengthen their cause by presenting it as the majority wish and undermining their opponent by attacking the credibility of their signatories. The *Courrier des Alpes* published extensive lists (complete with both names and occupations) for the biggest cities of the province. The publication of the list of the 34 signatories from Faucigny and 77 from Chambéry was meant to show that their cause had the support of all the local elites as well as other classes of the Savoyard society (small merchants and craftsmen). They also provided the number of signatures for Annecy (99) and Saint Jean de la Porte (30).[142] This was continued on the next issue on the 3rd of March. [143] Another annexionist Savoy newspaper, *Le Bon Sens* from Annecy, added after the publication of the third list of signatures from Annecy that they would no longer publish any supplementary list because 'it would be easy (...) to publish another thousands. The small size of our journal would not suffice'.[144] The *Courrier des Alpes* even had to publish a *Supplement* to its 13 March issue entirely dedicated to the latest list of signatures.[145]

The method of publication of signatures in rival Savoy and Swiss newspapers was also debated, the *Courrier des Alpes* criticising the *Journal de Genève*

[142] *Courrier des Alpes,* 1 March 1860, 1.

[143] *Courrier des Alpes,* 3 March 1860, 1.

[144] *Le Bon Sens,* quoted in *Courrier des Alpes,* 3 March 1860, 1.

[145] *Courrier des Alpes,* 13 March 1860, Supplement to Number 33.

for alleged frauds by including fanciful names of Savoyards who did not exist, writing (and counting) the same name several times or only providing a total number of signatures without the full list (including names) of signatories,[146] to prevent any process of fact-checking the identity of signatories.

Pro-French Savoyards highlighted the economic interest of a French annexation opening the French market to Savoyard businesses and peasants (especially for their main sources of export such as timber, cattle, cheese, watches, which were more developed and therefore more competitive in Switzerland than in France),[147] but the main focus of the pro-French annexation propaganda was on the themes of Savoyard pride, nationalism and patriotism, sometimes also tainted with an anti-Swiss sentiment based on a difference of religions (Roman Catholicism in Savoy and Calvinism in Switzerland) enhanced by the strong Catholic sentiment of Savoyards,[148] and a conflictual history with memories of the atrocities committed by Swiss people against Upper Savoyards in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries still present in Savoyard folk traditions.[149] They also

[146] *Courrier des Alpes,* 15 March 1860, 1.

[147] Marcel Ussanaz Joris, *De la neutralité de la Savoie* (Paris: Rousseau, 1901), 115.

[148] Anselme Pétetin, 'La Savoie et la Suisse', in A. Pétetin (ed.), *Discussion de politique democratique,* 11 February 1860, 345-354, 353.

[149] Joris, *De la neutralité de la Savoie,* 114-5; Pétetin, 'La Savoie et la Suisse', 353.

emphasised the necessity of retaining the integrity and identity of the whole of Savoy rather than partitioning it between France and Switzerland.

Pro-Swiss annexionists denounced this French propaganda as 'political sentimentalism' - trying to stir up Savoyard patriotism only to defend the narrow and selfish economic interests of Lower Savoy merchants.[150]

The Savoyard diaspora played a central part in the debate. The 60,000 Savoyards living in France,[151] mostly in Paris and Lyon, wrote numerous addresses against any Swiss annexation and issued their own petitions against a partition of Savoy, left in the offices of local newspapers (*Salut Public* and *Courrier de Lyon* in Lyon),[152] in addition to the Savoyard petition against the 'dismemberment' of Savoy which was also circulated in French big cities for Savoyards in exile to sign it.[153] Some of these expatriated Savoyards were also sent by the French government to the parts of Savoy most problematic for a French positive result in the plebiscite, to campaign there for a French annexation.[154]

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[150] Bard, *Histoire de l'annexion,* 12.

[151] *Courrier des Alpes,* 6 March 1860, 2.

[152] *Gazette de Savoie,* 10 March 1860, 2.

[153] *Salut Public,* 2 March 1860, 1.

[154] Sawchuk, 'The Daily Plebiscite', 31.

Similarly, the 10,000 to 12,000 Savoyards living in Geneva set up a committee advocating the annexation of Chablais and Faucigny by Switzerland and sent emissaries to Savoy to campaign for a Swiss annexation,[155] highlighting the political and economic benefits of joining Switzerland (lower taxes, no conscription, democracy).[156] Some of these arguments were used again later, in the April 1860 plebiscite, by pro-Swiss candidates such as Pierre Blanc in Bonneville who advocated for a Swiss annexation 'because only there will you find freedom, wealth and the absence of blood tax [conscription]'.[157]

Napoleon III was initially disposed to let Switzerland annex the northern part of Savoy to appease relations between France and Switzerland but he was then faced with some fierce resistance from the majority Savoyard population,[158] who sent a deputation to Paris to state their strong opposition to any dismemberment of Savoy.[159] One pro-French Savoyard conveyed the opinion of many of his fellow countrymen in a letter to the *Courrier de Lyon*

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[155] *Courrier des Alpes,* 15 March 1860, 1.

[156] *Journal de Genève,* 19 January 1860, 1.

[157] Archives Départementales de Haute Savoie, 168 J 17, 'Adresse aux électeurs de Bonneville en faveur du candidat Pierre Blanc', no date [April 1860].

[158] Archives Départementales de Savoie, 2FS-1, Petition from the provincial councillors of Savoy to Napoleon III, no date [February 1860]

[159] Bard, *Histoire de l'annexion,* 20-21.

in the spring of 1860 by suggesting; 'If my vote for a French annexation of Savoy should lead to the fatal consequence of a dismemberment of my country, I would vote against the annexation'.[160] Fearing that the cession of Chablais and Faucigny to Switzerland would alienate the pro-French Savoyards and lead to a negative response to the plebiscite, Napoleon III then pronounced in favour of the French annexation of all of Savoy.[161]

However, in order to win over the pro-Swiss Upper Savoy population by respecting Savoyard and Genevese economic interests, he offered to establish a 'free zone' (*zone franche*) in Chablais, Faucigny and parts of Upper Genevois, a zone free of customs duties with Switzerland and with lower internal taxes on a number of goods, resulting in lower prices and improved standard of living[162] This recognised that, as many other borderlands,[163] Upper Savoy was a transnational economic space. However, the establishment of a free zone -similar to what already existed in the Gex

[160] Quoted in Joris, *De la neutralité de la Savoie,* 116.

[161] Archives Départementales de Savoie, 2FS-1, Reply from Napoleon III to the provincial councillors of Savoy, no date [February 1860]

[162] L. Paul-Dubois, 'Suisse et Savoie: la zone franche de la Haute-Savoie', *Revue des deux Mondes,* vol. 10, Number 4, August 1912, 794-819 (802, 805).

[163] Laura Di Fiore, 'Security and border making in 19th century southern Italy'*, Journal of the British Academy*, 2021, 9 (s4), 137–150, 146.

county of France since November 1815-[164] was not enough to placate the Swiss and pro-Swiss opposition, all the more that they feared these customs advantages may be abrogated at a later date.[165]

The plebiscite question in Upper Savoy was therefore to opt for or against annexation with three possible options: 'Yes', 'No', or '*France and zone'*. The deliberately ambiguous wording of the plebiscite question (as electors did not know if voting 'No' meant No to annexation or No to annexation *with zone*) was seized by pro-Swiss annexionists as evidence that the plebiscite was rigged. As Joseph Bard put it, 'In front of a question thus worded, we realised that the [electoral] call to Upper Savoy was but an abuse of force that they sought to legitimise in the eyes of Europe and for posterity's sake through a pretence of popular recognition [*consécration populaire*]'.[166] Some Savoyards asserted that local officials handed out leaflets to electors 'encouraging citizens to vote *to get the zone*'.[167] The concession of the free zone was not deemed sufficient by pro-Swiss annexionists who continued

[164] F. Marullaz, 'La Vérité sur la zone franche de la Haute-Savoie', *Mémoires et Documents publiés par l'Académie Chablaisienne*,1915, vol. XXVIII, 3-206, 63.

[165] *Journal de Genève*, 2 March 1860, 1.

[166] Bard, *Histoire de l'annexion,* 28.

[167] *Gazette de Lausanne,* 18 April 1860, 2.

to ask for a separate vote for Upper Savoy and the option for them to vote for a Swiss annexation.[168]

The strong pro-Swiss sentiment in parts of Upper Savoy showed no sign of abating, as can be seen in a leaflet issued by the pro-French municipal committee of Bonneville ahead of the plebiscite. They cautioned electors against any attempt of spoiling the vote by voting for a Swiss annexation by reminding them that the plebiscite question was: 'Does Savoy want to be united with France?', to which they added, for the sake of clarity: 'As you can see, dear fellow countrymen, the question is not to express a preference between France and Piedmont, or between France and Switzerland (...) Switzerland is alien to the Treaty subject to your adhesion. The only vote is for or against union to France, any other vote will be considered null'.[169] Similarly, the candidate to the post of municipal councillor in Faucigny denounced Swiss propaganda or, in his words, the 'manoeuvres of the dedicated agents of Switzerland', in his campaign leaflet.[170] Evidence of the central part played by Switzerland in the electoral campaign can be found in

[168] Bard, *Histoire de l'annexion,* 22.

[169] Archives Départementales de Haute Savoie, 168J3, 'Manifeste pro-annexion du comité municipal des habitants de Bonneville' no date [April 1860].

[170] Archives Départementales de Haute Savoie, 168 J 2. 'Adresse aux électeurs du Faucigny en faveur de l'Annexion et des idées du candidat Joseph Pelloux', 24 March 1860

the main argument supplied by supporters of the pro-French candidate Pelloux, namely that 'faithful to the glorious traditions of Savoy, [he] is opposed to any idea of dismemberment'. [171]

Napoleon III was initially in favour of restricted suffrage for the plebiscite, as French statesmen feared a negative vote by the Savoyards if universal suffrage was used and thought the imposition of universal suffrage was an attempt by Cavour to renege on the Plombières Agreement.[172] The cession of Savoy and Nice came indeed under heavy criticism from the Italian public opinion in the spring of 1860, and, while reluctantly accepting it as the price to pay for the Italian unification (securing thus the support of Napoleon III for the recognition of the plebiscites in central Italy), the Piedmontese authorities were hoping for a negative vote in the plebiscite. Piedmont was thus accused by France of playing double game by asking Piedmontese agents in Savoy to support and facilitate the spread of pro-Swiss petitions.[173] However, Napoleon III finally accepted Cavour's request to use universal male suffrage and secret ballot to enhance the legitimacy of the plebiscite.

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[171] Archives Départementales de Haute Savoie, 168 J 2. 'Adresse aux électeurs du Faucigny en faveur de l'Annexion et des idées du candidat Joseph Pelloux'. (24 mars 1860)', 1860

[172] Duc de Gramont to Thouvenel, 13 March 1860, in L, Thouvenel, *Le secret de l'Empereur,* vol. 1, 75.

[173] *La Patrie,* 2 February 1860.

All Savoyard men over the age of 21 were therefore called to cast their ballot for or against the French annexation.[174]

The plebiscite on 22 April sanctioned the annexation through an overwhelming majority of 'Yes' votes, but the results started another debate about the legitimacy of the vote, as some were suspicious of the very high number of 'Yes' votes and accused Napoleon III of electoral fraud. The Second Empire was indeed infamous for its widespread use of fraud in elections, and this fuelled resistance and calls to abstention by some Savoyard voters such as the author of an anonymous electoral leaflet in April 1860 claiming that 'universal suffrage will only be (...) a way to deceive you (...) The ballot box is in the hands of (...) spies and agents of Bonaparte who are used to tamper with elections, change ballots and use false bottom ballot boxes'.[175]

However, the absence of any evidence of corruption, the active involvement of the population and the very large number of positive votes show that, if there was any corruption, it was at the margins only and the overall result of the vote was genuine. Savoyards indeed clearly engaged with the election

[174] Archives Départementales de Savoie,2 FS-1, 'Proclamation du gouverneur de la province de Chambéry aux habitants', 7 April 1860.

[175] Archives Départementales de Haute Savoie, 168 J 10, 'Adresse aux citoyens savoisiens en faveur de l'abstention au plébiscite', April 1860

process, with a good turnout of 130,839 voters (out of 135,449 registered on the election roll). The results yielded an overwhelming majority in favour of the French annexation, with 131,533 'Yes' and 235 'No'. However, despite the active pre-election anti-Swiss campaign explaining that any vote other than 'Yes', 'No', or 'Yes and Zone' would be considered void, there were still 71 Null votes (31 in Savoy and 45 in Upper Savoy),[176] and it is likely that several of those, especially in Upper Savoy, were spoiled votes in favour of a Swiss annexation.

The concession of a free zone to Upper Savoy was instrumental in the outcome of the plebiscite: out of 47,474 votes in Upper Savoy, 47, 076 were for 'Yes and Zone'.[177] At a more granular level, the results are even more striking. As expected, the vast majority of 'Yes and Zone' votes were to be found in the Chablais and Faucigny parts of Upper Savoy. In the village of Chamonix (province of Faucigny), out of 85 voters, 83 voted 'Yes and Zone', two voted 'No', none voted only 'Yes'.[178] This trend was replicated in all the

[176] Archives Départementales de Haute-Savoie, 2FS-5, 'Etat récapitulatif du vote par arrondissement', 29 April 1860.

[177] L. Paul-Dubois, 'Suisse et Savoie. La zone franche de la Haute Savoie', *Revue des Deux Mondes,* 1 July 1912, 794- (804).

[178] Archives Départementales de Haute-Savoie, 2FS-58, 'Procès-Verbal de la votation sur la question de l'annexion de la Savoie a la France', Commune de Chamonix, 22 April 1860.

other towns and villages of the provinces of Chablais and Faucigny. In Contamines, for example, out of 609 voters, 602 voted 'Yes and Zone', seven voted 'Yes' and one vote was considered null.[179] Whereas in small towns and villages outside of Chablais and Faucigny, 'Yes and Zone' were few and far between. In Epagny, for example, 92 voters out of 92 registered voted 'Yes' (no 'Yes and Zone' vote).[180]

Following an overwhelming majority of pro-annexation votes in both counties, Savoy and Nice officially became French territory on14 June 1860. This was celebrated as a day of national rejoicing in France, with a *Te Deum* and a festival in Paris on 14 June[181] and in other large cities on 16 and 17 June.[182]

The election results were seized by annexionists to evidence the wishes of the majority in all parts of Savoy. Pro-annexion *Courrier des Alpes* celebrated

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[179] Archives Départementales de Haute-Savoie, 2FS-58, 'Procès-Verbal de la votation sur la question de l'annexion de la Savoie a la France', Commune de Contamines, 22 April 1860.

[180] Archives Départementales de Haute-Savoie, 2FS-58, 'Procès-Verbal de la votation sur la question de l'annexion de la Savoie a la France', Commune d'Epagni, 22 April 1860.

[181] *Moniteur Universel,* 15 June 1860, 1.

[182] Archives Départementales de Savoie, 2FS-1, Various speeches during the 'Fête de l'Annexion' in Chambéry, 15 June 1860; *Courrier des Alpes,* 14 June 1860l 2; *Courrier des Alpes,* 18 June 1860, 1.

the good results with this warning to European Great Powers: 'Let England, let Prussia, let Switzerland shut up (...) Above all, let Switzerland no longer talk about the wishes of Upper Savoy. Five constituencies out of six have rejected it and all Savoy, all parts of Savoy now protest against the partition of their country'.[183]

French Emperor Napoleon III boasted, in his 'Speech from the Throne' in February 1861, that his government had succeeded in getting Europe's recognition of the French annexation of Savoy. This was in denial of the refusal of Britain and other countries to sanction its legality.[184] Neither the British government or any other European government had, by then, officially recognised Savoy as French territory. As the *Journal de Genève* asserted in July 1861, 'the occupation by France of the annexed provinces is still considered illegal'.[185]

The Concert of Europe proved unable to stop the French annexation of Savoy. However, the pressure exerted by Switzerland and Britain was not completely in vain. It forced Napoleon III to accept a plebiscite through universal suffrage, thereby starting the use of self-determination in

[183] *Courrier des Alpes,* 7 April 1860, 1.

[184] *Illustrated Times,* 1 September 1860, No 283, Vol. II, 1.

[185] *Journal de Genève,* 11 July 1861,1.

international politics. What took place in Savoy was 'more than just a line moved on the map'.[186] It was the beginning of a new system, when self-determination - or 'the right of peoples' -[187] became the legitimate basis of international relations.[188]

The British and Swiss opposition also led to the imposition of limitations on the French occupation. France had to accept to occupy this portion of Savoy *at the same conditions* than Piedmont beforehand, respecting the neutrality of Upper Savoy. The French state therefore did not have the right to fortify Upper Savoy and could only have limited troops there. In wartime, these troops were to evacuate Upper Savoy to respect its neutrality.

These conditions were criticised by Savoyard deputies in the late nineteenth century, at a time of rising tensions with Italy. They claimed the right to fortify Upper Savoy and send more troops there to defend this portion of the French territory in the event of a foreign invasion. Interestingly, they based their request on their interpretation of the 1815 Treaties, arguing that the

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[186] Archives Départementales de Savoie, 2FS-1, Proclamation of the Prefect of Haute-Savoie, Anselme Pétetin, to the residents, 7 August 1860;

[187] Archives Départementales de Savoie, 2FS-1, Speech of Dupasquier during the 'Fête de l'Annexion, 15 June 1860.

[188] Address of the Municipal council of Annecy to Napoleon III (no date) [June 1860]; Archives Départementales de Savoie, 2FS-1, Report to the Emperor by Thouvenel, no date [June 1860]; Anon., *Napoléon III et la Prusse* (Paris: Balitout, 1866), 20.

neutrality of Switzerland and Upper Savoy, guaranteed by these treaties, did not imply the prohibition of building fortifications, as was evidenced by the building of fortifications by Switzerland itself on all its borders.[189]

Conclusion

The reason why, apart from the Crimean war and some localised wars, peace and stability were maintained in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century was therefore not due to the Concert of Europe or to any supposed self-restraint by the Great Powers but to the prioritisation of their own national interests. In 1860, none of them considered that their vital national interests were at stake over the Savoy annexation. They rather considered that it was in their own interest -political, strategic or economic- to maintain good relations with Napoleon III's France. The overarching European interest -to guard the 1815 Treaties, pillar of European law- therefore failed to supersede national interests, true to Palmerston's famous

[189] Chambre des Députés, Session of 19 February 1891, Proposed law on the establishment of two batallions of infantry in Upper Savoy in peace time by Deputies Orsat, Duval, Thonion, *Annales de la Chambre des Députés. Documents parlementaires* (Paris: Imprimerie des Journaux officiels, 1894), vol. 43, 277.

maxim: ‘Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow’.[190]

Although the Great Powers did not rise to support Switzerland and prevent the annexation, their discontent lasted long after 1860. International recognition of the French annexation of Savoy did not come until after the end of the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles included a section (Article 485), establishing in international law that Savoy and Nice were French territories, to normalise relations between France and Switzerland.[191] However, another controversy ensued over the French unilateral abrogation of the Upper Savoy free zone in 1919, leading to a protracted conflict between France and Switzerland only settled by the Permanent Court of International Justice in 1932.[192]

The annexation of Savoy marked the end of the post-Napoleonic Vienna order by exposing the weakness of the Concert of Europe. It can be seen as a turning point in international relations, from ‘great powers politics’ to

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[190] Lloyd Charles Sanders, *Life of Viscount Palmerston* (London: Allen and Co, 1888), 37.

[191] Llewellyn Jones, ‘Upper Savoy and the free zones around Geneva, and Article 485 of the Treaty of Versailles’, *Transactions of the Grotius Society,* vol. 10, 1924, 173-188, 173.

[192] Jean L’Huillier, ‘L'affaire des zones franches devant la cour permanente de justice internationale’, *Géocarrefour*, 1932. Vol. 8-3-4, 145-170.

'people's politics' based on self-determination. This was made apparent in the international debate around the annexation as all countries involved sought, formally or informally, through petitions or polls, the sanction of popular sovereignty and the support of the local (Savoyard) population.

The central place of the annexation in European politics and public opinion, and the Savoyards' strong engagement with the process, brought to the fore the radical novelty of this form of popular consultation for border change 'without precedent in History'.[193] Although self-determination had yet to be recognised in international law, its initial use in 1860 left a lasting legacy. This is demonstrated by default, as the absence of plebiscite for the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine was seized, both at the time and later, to denounce a forceful annexation.[194] Amongst others, August Bebel criticised the German annexation process for '[trampling the] right to self-determination.'[195] Self-determination had indeed, by then, become a standard of good practice in international politics.[196]

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[193] Archives Départementales de Savoie, 2 FS-1, Speech by the Prefect of Savoy during the 'Fête de l'Annexion', 15 June 1860.

[194] Jörg Fisch, *The right of self-determination of peoples*, 113.

[195] Jürgen Schmidt, *August Bebel: Social Democracy and the founding of the Labour movement* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 71.

[196] Leroy-Beaulieu, 'La politique du Second Empire', 548.

A few months after the commission by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in the autumn of 1917, of a study and compilation of documents on the history and practice of national self-determination,[197] Woodrow Wilson vowed, in 1918, to usher in a new era in international relations, when 'national aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. "Self-determination" (...) is an imperative principle of action'.[198]

A few decades before Wilson's famous speech, in 1860 Savoy, the consent of the population was already sought. A vote, preceded by an active campaign, was held to let the local population express their wishes. This ended the 'Vienna order' and started the era of self-determination in international politics.

[197] Sarah Wambaugh, *A monograph on plebiscites. With a collection of official documents* (New York, N. Y.: Oxford University Press, 1920), viii.

[198] Woodrow Wilson, 'An Address to a joint session of Congress, February 11, 1918', in Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1966-1984), vol. 46, 321.