

Roman Empire 111

Chapter 111: Policy Forged Under Pressure

During a pivotal moment in the negotiations between the United Kingdom and Austria, a message from his mother, Princess Sophie, captured Franz's full attention.

Uncle Ferdinand I was planning to abdicate early, preparing for Franz to ascend the throne ahead of schedule.

Crossing his heart, Franz would swear in the name of God that he had no hand in this matter. As the legitimate heir of Austria, he had no need to rush and pressure his uncle into abdication.

The real decision-maker behind this move wasn't Ferdinand I as an individual; it was a collective decision made by the House of Habsburg.

While Austria is known for its conservatism, over the years, the populace's tolerance for this mentally challenged emperor has reached its breaking point, and factors like the Vienna Uprising are indicative of this.

For the House of Habsburg, this was nothing short of a catastrophe, with the dignity of the monarchy in tatters and a constant stream of ridicule. If this were to persist in the long run, it would certainly jeopardize the royal family's standing.

During this time, Franz emerged as a regent, swiftly seizing power and quelling domestic uprisings, which gave many people a glimmer of hope.

The Austrian Empire's influence was steadily declining, a fact not lost on members of the royal family who were anxious but lacked the ability to reverse the tide.

Franz's remarkable performance shone brightly in their eyes, as if the House of Habsburg were about to welcome a leader that will bring about the house's revitalization.

Subsequently, during private discussions, they recognized that they could no longer allow Emperor Ferdinand I to continue tarnishing the family's reputation, as the Habsburgs had become the butt of aristocratic jokes for decades.

Considering their long-term interests, they collectively decided to have Ferdinand I abdicate early, allowing the highly capable Franz to assume the throne and thereby restore the House of Habsburg's honor.

Once the decision was made, they took turns persuading Ferdinand I to step down. More accurately, they were seeking the consent of Queen Maria Anna for the emperor's abdication.

Ferdinand I was at times clear-headed, and at other times, he was confused. He might have agreed to something one moment and then promptly forgotten it the next. His most vivid memory seemed to revolve around ordering his chef: "I am the Emperor, and I want to eat dumplings."

When he was clear-headed, he didn't differ much from a normal person, except for slightly slower reactions and a slightly lower IQ. However, when he fell ill, he seemed to lose all awareness.

The most crucial issue was that he would experience these episodes several times a day, and no one knew when he would be clear-headed or when he would fall ill. It was highly unreliable for him to make decisions, so everyone decided to take charge on his behalf.

To avoid any embarrassments, they needed to persuade Queen Maria Anna. As long as she didn't object, Ferdinand I's personal opinions could be disregarded.

Undoubtedly, Queen Maria Anna was never someone driven by a strong desire for power. Her husband's inability to rule made the Vienna court feel more like a cage to her.

Especially after the outbreak of the Vienna Uprising, she lived in constant fear, dreading a fate similar to that of Louis XVI.

Everyone happily reached a consensus to facilitate Ferdinand I's early abdication and allow Franz to take charge and clean up the mess.

Indeed, in the eyes of many, the Austrian Empire was in a state of disarray. While the rebellion had been quelled, domestic issues remained severe.

In the eyes of many, one of the main reasons for the nationwide rebellion was the erosion of royal dignity, and Ferdinand I was no longer recognized by the various ethnic groups in Austria.

Franz did not reject the idea of ascending the throne ahead of schedule. A legitimate name was crucial for smooth governance, and many tasks were much easier for an emperor to handle than for a crown prince.

Perhaps having had enough, everyone unanimously chose to act swiftly. The date for Ferdinand I's abdication was quickly decided, and Franz's ascension was also set for September 1, 1848, just a little over two months away.

It was now late June, leaving Franz with a little over two months to manage domestic affairs and ensure that there would be no embarrassing incidents during his coronation.

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The outcome of the Anglo-Austrian negotiations was generally pleasing to Franz. Not only did he secure a substantial sum from the Kingdom of Sardinia, but he also gained British support for Austrian-Balkan issues and received a ticket for overseas colonization.

The only cause for concern was the British stance on the German territories. Like all major powers, they opposed Austrian expansion into the German regions.

Austria's influence in the German territories was significant, and the House of Habsburg's reputation was widely recognized. If Austria were to unify the German territories, the repercussions would be far-reaching.

Furthermore, it was worth noting that Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Belgium had all been part of the Habsburg's realm in the past, and the idea of a grand German unification was also prevalent within these countries.

Who knows if Austria has the means to integrate them? Regardless of whether it's possible or not, no one is willing to take the risk.

The influence of the House of Habsburg is a source of great apprehension for everyone. If Austria were to attempt to unify the German regions, it would face a situation similar to Napoleon's campaigns.

In fact, even before the unification of Germany, the interventionist armies of other nations would likely be on the move. This conclusion was deeply disappointing for many, especially the proponents of Greater German nationalism.

There was no way around it; Austria with a core population of just eight million was everyone's ideal ally, but Austria with over forty to fifty million core inhabitants would be a European nightmare.

After unifying the German regions, Austria would surpass Russia in population and France in industrial power, becoming a true Central European powerhouse.

The British were acutely aware of this, so they encouraged Austria to expand into the Balkans, believing that as long as no single ethnic group held absolute dominance, internal divisions were inevitable.

Austria, plagued by internal discord, would be unable to threaten the global supremacy of the British Empire, allowing them to maintain a friendly relationship.

Franz reassured, "The British position was within our expectations. Now, it's not our problem to worry about. The Kingdom of Prussia also aims to unify the German regions, but their options are more limited. While we may not be able to expand into the German territories, we can turn to the Balkans or establish colonies. Austria's progress won't come to a halt."

This was also a form of self-consolation. Prussia was merely an excuse; during this era, the Kingdom of Prussia did not yet possess the capability to unify the German regions.

Austria had the inherent capacity to unify Germany, but the international environment did not allow for it.

The British, who were most likely to remain uninvolved, strongly opposed German unification. As for neighboring Russia, the situation was even more complex - one couldn't afford to be complacent next to them.

Unable to annex the German regions, Austria had no choice but to first address its domestic ethnic tensions and focus on slow, patient accumulation of strength through agricultural efforts.

The so-called expansion efforts were, in reality, more about picking up the leftovers. In the Balkans, Austria had to compromise with the Russians, and in the quest for overseas colonies, concessions had to be made to satisfy the interests of Britain and France.

Felix proposed, "Since the British oppose the unification of the German regions, why don't we consider an alternative approach and partition the German territories with Prussia?"

If we can annex Southern Germany, we can do it even if we have to pay a price for it. We can even give up the Italian regions in exchange for the support of Britain and France. Additionally, we can cede Austrian Poland to the Russians to gain their understanding."

Metternich sighed and said, "It's not that simple. Many of the Southern German states are our allies. How can we expand without betraying our allies? If we turn against our allies, what will become of our reputation in future diplomatic relations? Who would dare form alliances with us?"

If he had known that the international situation would evolve into what it is today, back when constructing the Vienna System, he would have dispatched the House of Württemberg to the Italian region and Austria could have directly absorbed the Kingdom of Bavaria.

Unfortunately, history doesn't entertain "what ifs." In order to guard against the French, Austria had supported the Kingdom of Bavaria as an ally and buffer, and now this ally was blocking Austria's road to expansion.

Before the rise of nationalism, people didn't fully grasp the significance of a dominant ethnic group. However, after experiencing the revolutions, everyone understood the weaknesses of multi-ethnic states.

Hungarians sought independence, Italians sought independence, Poles sought independence, Czechs sought autonomy...

Fortunately, nationalism hadn't permeated the entire society. Those pushing for independence were mainly capitalists and some nobles, and Austria managed to suppress their efforts.

The greatest wealth of the South German region was not its resources but its population of fifteen million.

If they were to annex the South German states with shared religious beliefs, language, and culture, Austria's predominant ethnicity would suddenly become the majority. This would significantly reduce the risk of internal fragmentation.

Franz contemplated for a moment before saying, "Instead of solely focusing on territorial expansion, let's explore solutions internally to address the ethnic diversity. Within our vast empire, there are over twenty million illiterate individuals. How many among them even know to which ethnic group they belong? The Ministry of Education can develop a textbook that connects various ethnicities across regions, tracing their historical ties to the Germanic ethnic group.

For those without clear ethnic connections, we can emphasize ethnic amalgamation. I cannot believe that their ancestors for eighteen generations had no ties to the Germanic ethnic group. In cases where no distinct link exists, we can simply inform them that they belong to the Germanic heritage.

As for minority groups with rich cultural heritages, we can introduce them to the Austrian system, highlighting our diverse ancestry, which inherently includes Germanic roots. If they remain unconvinced, they are free to delve into their family histories. After many years of ethnic integration, I doubt there are many pure-blooded ethnic groups left. Let's first clarify these ethnic relationships, and then gradually promote the use of the German language, or rather, the Austrian language, to replace local dialects."

Franz appeared ready to feign helplessness. If the predominant ethnic group wasn't sufficient, they could manufacture one.

Regardless of whether they are true Germanic people, as long as they believe it themselves, that should suffice. It's a numbers game – the more they convince, the better. With some effort from the bureaucrats, they can quickly expand the Germanic ethnicity within their borders.

In history, even the Kingdom of Prussia underwent Germanization. Initially, their Germanic ethnicity didn't hold a dominant position. Through language and cultural assimilation, they managed to establish their dominance.

Chapter 112: The Poorest Model of Compulsory Education

Politicians often have low bottom lines, and Franz's proposal didn't raise any objections. For the sake of Austria's long-term stability, a bit of manipulation wasn't considered a major issue.

After all, the top levels of the cabinet were composed of nobles from the German regions, genuine members of the Germanic ethnicity, and the Germanization movement wouldn't hurt their national sentiments.

However, the Minister of Education was perplexed. Altering the origins of history was one thing, as history from thousands of years ago was already challenging to clarify. But what in the world was the Austrian language?

"Your Highness, what is the Austrian language?" asked Count Leo von Tussaud-Hohenberg with confusion.

Franz explained, "Simply promoting the German language could easily make other minority groups feel uneasy. To cater to their emotions, I plan to gather Austrian linguists and historians, using German as the core language and incorporating the languages and scripts of various minority groups to create an Austrian language system."

Prime Minister Felix, with a furrowed brow, said, "Your Highness, German is the most widely used language in Austria. Introducing another Austrian language would require everyone to relearn, isn't that too cumbersome?"

Furthermore, having a unique Austrian language might deepen our divide with the German-speaking regions and benefit those petty German nationalists!"

Franz chuckled and said, "It depends on how the Ministry of Education formulates the Austrian language. If we simply modify certain unfamiliar terms while keeping the core of the German language intact, it shouldn't disrupt everyday communication, right?"

After all, there are dialectical differences within the German language itself, aren't there? As long as our Austrian language can be used interchangeably with standard German, there shouldn't be any significant communication barriers."

The others' expressions returned to normal. If the changes primarily involved unfamiliar terms that the average person wouldn't frequently encounter, then there shouldn't be a problem.

Now, the decision rested with the Austrian government, and whatever approach they adopted would determine the way forward. Transitioning from promoting German to promoting the Austrian language was essentially a matter of semantics.

Opposition? It seems that at this moment, Austria's opposition is at its weakest. Those who dared to cause trouble met their end in the rebellion, and the rest are mostly limited to mere verbal opposition.

In any policy, it's impossible to gain the support of everyone. Austria, being conservative, is not like France, where the enthusiasm for revolution runs high among the masses. As long as their interests are not harmed, the people won't rise up or rebel over such trivial matters.

Franz knew that his proposal for the Austrian language was primarily a political gesture, showing that the central government values each ethnicity and respects their language and cultural traditions.

This might not satisfy everyone, but it's better than doing nothing. The Austrian language indeed incorporates the languages and scripts of various ethnicities, even if they are mostly unfamiliar terms.

"Your Highness, language and script assimilation is a long-term investment. To complete this plan, we would need at least twenty years and a continuous infusion of substantial funds," said Count Leo von Tussaud-Hohenberg, the Minister of Education.

Once the promotion of a unified language and culture becomes part of national policy, the Ministry of Education's influence will significantly increase. In the coming decades, it will become one of Austria's most vital departments.

Franz nodded and said, "Certainly, I have discussed the issue of funding with the Prime Minister, and the government will find ways to address it. This effort to unify language and culture will be integrated with Austria's compulsory education system.

Before implementing compulsory education, we still lack a significant number of qualified teachers, and the Ministry of Education must resolve this issue promptly.

If recruitment falls short, we will lower the standards for short-term training. As long as they have the correct three views and can grasp basic primary school knowledge, they will be eligible for the position."

Correct three views?

What are the three views?

Without a doubt, it refers to Franz's version of world view, value, and outlook on life.

In summary, it means one must uphold the illustrious House of Habsburg, remain loyal to His Majesty, the great Emperor, abide by Austrian laws and regulations, and have no detrimental habits.

As long as loyalty is sufficient, even if individual capabilities are lacking, there are ways to make up for it.

Worst-case scenario, they can establish teacher training programs. It may take a bit longer, but they couldn't allow troublemakers to negatively influence the next generation.

Prime Minister Felix remarked, "That's correct. The Cabinet has already outlined a preliminary plan to establish 3,000 public primary schools nationwide, promoting universal compulsory education.

In these new public schools, the curriculum will include Austrian language and mathematics as core subjects. In minority regions, we will also offer courses in ethnic languages, but these will be optional and will not count towards exam scores.

Compulsory education in Austria is initially set at 6 years. All children aged between 6 and 12 must attend school to receive compulsory education.

For adolescents beyond this age range who are willing to join schools for further study, schools must also admit them.

Upon successful completion of the six-year compulsory education, students with outstanding academic records can take the entrance exam to attend secondary schools.

For those who gain admission based on their individual abilities and come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, the government will provide support to help them complete their education, including assistance for university education.”

“Prime Minister, what about the funding? Even if we adopt the most basic configuration for all schools, the annual expenses won’t be less than 50 million ducats. When you add in the budget for higher education, it’s possible that education funding could exceed 100 million ducats in the future.

Relying solely on tuition fees is just a drop in the bucket. Government revenue is limited, and even if we include the funds from the Hungarian region, we’re looking at a maximum of 300 million ducats. Can the government really allocate one-third of its budget to education?” Count Leo von Tussaud-Hohenberg frowned as he spoke.

Don’t assume that just because he’s the Minister of Education, he doesn’t care about other issues. Looking at the bigger picture, the Austrian government cannot realistically allocate one-third of its budget to education. There are many other areas that require government investment, and in this cutthroat era, blindly investing in education may not yield returns before the nation faces serious financial problems.

Felix shook his head and said, “There’s no need to charge any fees; ordinary people simply can’t afford this expense. The government will find a way to cover the funding.

The Ministry of Education should prepare a plan as soon as possible, and we need to calculate the education budget for the next year. Austria will start compulsory education in 1849.”

As for dealing with the Church, that matter is currently in a confidential stage. With Franz’s coronation approaching, Austria is focused on stability above all else, and this is not the time to stir up controversy.

Franz began, saying, “Alright, the specific budgetary issues will be discussed separately by the Cabinet government later. Today, our main focus is on implementing compulsory education.

Austria isn’t wealthy, so we can only afford basic education. With limited funding, our goal is to cultivate as many talents as possible.”

Cultivating talents? It was clear that he wasn’t referring to training highly-skilled experts. Franz couldn’t set such high expectations. Compulsory education was primarily aimed at producing skilled industrial workers with a basic level of cultural knowledge.

Even among the elementary school graduates, with such a large pool of individuals, there would inevitably emerge a group of competent engineers. Their potential for growth would be significantly higher than illiterate laborers stuck in manual labor roles.

“Yes, Your Highness!” replied Education Minister Leo von Tussaud-Hohenberg.

Austria’s compulsory education system was modeled after its neighbor, the Kingdom of Prussia. During this era, the only successful example of compulsory education was found in Prussia, as neither England nor France had initiated such programs yet.

While Austria followed the Prussian framework, the specific details of their systems differed. At this time, Austria’s compulsory education was essentially a form of basic education, focusing on cost-effective methods to provide education to the masses.

According to Franz’s plan, this cost-effective compulsory education system was indeed quite affordable.

For example, schools could be established using existing local facilities, such as churches, or by repurposing confiscated properties from rebels. In some cases, it might even be possible to mobilize the local community to construct simple wooden buildings that would suffice for educational purposes.

Similarly, textbooks were a matter of ensuring that teachers had access to books. Whether students could acquire textbooks depended on the available funds. The expenses for supplies like pens, ink, paper, and inkstones were omitted, and students would typically bring their own slate boards to class.

The most significant expenses were teacher salaries and providing meals for the students.

Franz, having lived through difficult times before his time travel, understood that for many lower-class people, providing three meals a day was a heavy burden.

Requiring parents to bear the cost of their children’s meals was something many families couldn’t afford, which was why there were so many child laborers.

In cases where economic conditions permitted, who could bear to send children of such a young age into dark factories?

It’s important to note that child labor had a high injury and mortality rate, and children who left for work in the morning might not return home in the evening, as accidents were common in these harsh working conditions.

In those times, even in the unfortunate event of a child’s death, nobody would hold the capitalists accountable. At most, they might provide some compensation equivalent to a few years’ worth of wages, and that would be the end of it.

To avoid lowering the birth rate, Franz decided not to increase the burden of education on parents, and the government would continue to bear the cost of compulsory education.

Besides, in this era, people weren’t too picky. No matter how basic the school environment might be, it was still much better than working in factories. Franz was determined to ensure that there would be enough black bread to keep them from going hungry.

Of course, as a high-ranking crown prince, he didn’t want to be the one to propose this solution. It would be better if it came from the lower-class citizens; that would be more convincing.

“We’ll release the news about Austria’s plan to launch compulsory education and solicit public opinions to find the most cost-effective and suitable education model for Austria,” Franz suggested.

Chapter 113: Disrupting Prussian Deployments

Berlin.

Palmerston’s arrival brought troubling news for Frederick William IV, as the British were now aligning against Prussia.

“Your Majesty, the current circumstances are highly unfavorable. European nations are united against us, and even Austria, our primary supporter, offers reluctant assistance without substantial backing,” Prime Minister Joseph von Radowitz stated, his brow furrowed in concern.

Before the conclusion of the Crimean War, no European nation had the audacity to confront Russia alone on land, and Prussia was no different in this regard.

Prussia’s greatest misfortune was having Russia as its neighbor, and since victory seemed unattainable, fostering a friendly relationship appeared to be the wiser course. Prussia’s diplomatic history had always emphasized the importance of its ties with Russia.

“Is the bourgeois government still refusing to compromise?” Frederick William IV asked with concern.

Radowitz took a moment to think and replied, “Yes, Your Majesty. Currently, public morale is high, and with Austria expressing support for us, various German states are rallying behind us. They are trying to use public opinion to pressure us into a conflict with Russia.

The bourgeois government believes that now is not the right time to undermine the people’s morale. They want to wait until Austria resolves its internal issues and then join forces with us to resist Russia’s pressure.”

Indeed, Europe’s Russian gendarmes were truly formidable, something Prussia couldn’t match alone. However, after a Prussian-Austrian alliance, the situation would shift in their favor, as Russia wouldn’t be able to handle a two-front war.

But the real question is, why would Austria position itself against Russia to support Prussia’s territorial expansion? What motivates Austria’s involvement in this situation?

After some consideration, Frederick William IV remarked, “Instruct our associates to take action, calm down domestic public opinion, and inform Arnaud that it’s not the right time to challenge the Russians.”

No one anticipated that the leader of the liberal faction was actually loyal to the king, which explains why Prussia was able to swiftly achieve internal compromises after the outbreak of the revolution.

However, those familiar with history would recognize that this Prussian-Danish War was merely a conflict instigated by Prussia to divert attention from internal discord.

By engaging in foreign wars, they effectively redirected the nation's focus outward, setting the stage for a resurgence of counter-revolutionary forces.

Without someone to steer them, how could the bourgeois government dare to provoke a conflict with Russia before securing its power and status?

Whether it was orchestrating the Polish independence movement or instigating the Prussian-Danish War, both actions pushed the boundaries with Russia. If things escalated, the Kingdom of Prussia would find itself in a precarious situation.

To avoid the situation getting out of hand, Frederick William IV of Prussia halted the proceedings several times and attempted to improve relations. In a way, this also served as a way for Prussia to test its interactions with Russia.

In August 1848, due to international pressure, the Kingdom of Prussia made concessions to Russia, leading to a temporary suspension of hostilities in the Prussian-Danish War. Both nations entered into the “Malmö Ceasefire Agreement,” signifying a break in the conflict.

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Vienna.

Upon receiving the “Malmö Ceasefire Agreement,” the Austrian government believed that the Prussian-Danish War had effectively come to an end. Prussia’s compromise left many nationalists in the German region dissatisfied, and Austria’s plan seemed to have succeeded.

However, only Franz knew that things weren’t as straightforward. Through this testing of waters, the Prussians had received the answer they sought: the Russians were not inclined to engage in a war with them readily.

The primary reason for this was that the Russian government had financial constraints, and the Kingdom of Denmark was similarly incapable of bearing the costs of this war. If a conflict were to erupt between the Kingdom of Prussia and Russia, many of the Russians’ plans would have to be put on hold.

“This ceasefire agreement arrived hastily, and its terms seem heavily biased in favor of the Danes. It’s quite perplexing, considering that Prussia had the upper hand on the battlefield. There’s no reason for them to accept such a disadvantageous deal.

Under normal circumstances, the Prussian government could have held out a bit longer, and the Danes would have likely conceded, perhaps even offering some advantages. How could they possibly accept such a loss?” Franz remarked.

Prussia, while not the top-tier among the European great powers, is still a recognized member of this prestigious group. How can they be willing to accept such a glaring disadvantage?

Despite the immense diplomatic pressure from various nations and the absence of military interference, what justifies their willingness to make such substantial concessions?

Metternich seemed to be onto something but wasn’t entirely certain, so he cautiously asked, “Your Highness, are you suggesting that the Prussians might have a hidden agenda?”

“Yes.”

“As the two largest states in the German region, we have always aspired to unify Germany. Do the Prussians not share this desire for German unification?”

We’ve faced a string of setbacks, coming to the realization that given Austria’s circumstances, other nations wouldn’t permit our vision of German unity. Regrettably, we had no choice but to relinquish that dream.

However, should an opportunity arise for German unification, we won’t readily forgo it.

Now, Prussia has ignited the flames of nationalism, championed the idea of a greater German union, and introduced their unorthodox Lesser Germany plan. What’s the intent behind all of this?

It’s quite evident that the Prussians recognize their limitations when it comes to unifying Germany. Instead, they seem to be settling for an alternative plan—ousting us and establishing a smaller German empire.

Not too long ago, we thwarted their machinations at the Frankfurt Assembly. So why does Frederick William IV refuse to acknowledge the Frankfurt Assembly, which clearly leaned in Prussia’s favor?

Is it truly because the legitimacy of that crown was in question? From where I stand, he’s hesitant. By supporting the Frankfurt Assembly, Prussia would have positioned itself in opposition to the German states.

Given Prussia’s constraints in terms of power, spreading themselves too thin is untenable. Their recent compromise in the Prussian-Danish War likely signals their intention to shake things up within the German region.

The Foreign Ministry should maintain continuous dialogue with the governments of other German states, preventing Prussia from exploiting any opportunities. When necessary, we can even consider deploying troops to help stabilize the situation.”

Franz’s reasoned analysis showcased his prescient advantage.

In history, during this period, Prussia consistently formed alliances with German states, notably the “Three Emperors’ League” aiming to replace Austria’s control over the German Confederation and taking the initial steps toward German unification.

Despite facing setbacks, like the dissolution of the Three Emperors’ League due to Austria’s intervention, the Kingdom of Prussia significantly elevated its position in the German region.

Moreover, they cleverly used this opportunity to feign vulnerability, continuously emphasizing the shame of the “Olmützer Punktation” and downplaying the caution of other major powers towards them.

Franz’s insights were purely his own speculations, and he held a deep admiration for Prussia’s ability to achieve German unification within such constraints.

However, his current role required him to maintain a neutral stance, as he couldn’t afford to be seen as a staunch Prussian supporter—Peter III wouldn’t tolerate any bias.

Therefore, he had to approach Prussia’s actions with a healthy dose of skepticism, ensuring that no opportunities were left for potential adversaries.

With Austria well-prepared, it wouldn't be a simple task for the Prussians to gather allies. When it came to wielding influence in the German region, Prussia simply couldn't compete with Austria.

If the fate of this era were determined by nationwide referendums, Franz could already be preparing for his coronation as the German Emperor, as the House of Habsburg enjoyed a distinct advantage.

"Your Highness, at present, the situations in many German states are quite unstable. If the Prussians wish to get involved, they will likely use stabilizing these states as a condition to attract some of them into forming alliances.

Judging by their strength, the Prussians are likely to initially approach the northern German states before gradually expanding their influence into the southern German states.

Regarding the unification of Germany, it's likely more of a smokescreen. Unifying northern Germany represents the limit to which other countries will tolerate the Kingdom of Prussia," Metternich diplomatically assessed.

Considering the present international situation, it does appear to be the case. However, the future remains uncertain. Throughout history, the Kingdom of Prussia skillfully exploited the conflicts among major powers, systematically defeating its adversaries and unifying the German territory except for Austria.

Despite Austria's undeniable influence in the German region due to geopolitical, religious, and economic factors, the bourgeoisie in northern German states often leaned toward the Kingdom of Prussia, providing Prussia with a popular base for unifying northern Germany.

Nonetheless, Austria cannot currently accept Prussia's early unification of northern Germany because it would bring both sides closer in terms of power.

Franz has not yet completed domestic reforms, and the ascendance of a mighty Kingdom of Prussia would pose a threat to Austria's interests.

"The Foreign Ministry should explore ways to disrupt Prussia's plans and enhance our ties with the southern German states. The government is gearing up for negotiations with the Customs Union, and Austria will also participate.

Should Prussia obstruct, we will mobilize the southern German states to reform the Customs Union. When required, we might even contemplate the fragmentation of the German Confederation!" Franz stated with seriousness.

In northern Germany, Austria simply needs to slow down the unification efforts of the Kingdom of Prussia and, if necessary, engage in negotiations for mutual benefits. However, regarding southern Germany, Franz is resolute in not letting go easily.

Even if the annexation of these countries proves unfeasible, it's crucial to establish alliance relationships and employ political, economic, and cultural means for infiltration.

Deepening existing alliances is a favorable choice, and when necessary, everyone can collaborate to create a loose federal empire.

For instance, taking inspiration from the historical Holy Roman Empire, as long as there is nominal unity, future consolidation can gradually occur through economic and cultural influence.

Chapter 114: (V2C1) - Ascension

Time passed quickly, and in the blink of an eye, it was the end of August. As Franz's coronation ceremony approached, Vienna came alive with activity.

Cheers and laughter helped to diminish the lingering effects of the March Revolution.

The government's wartime economic policies had been instrumental in economic recovery, and Austria had successfully overcome the impact of the economic crisis.

Numerous state-owned businesses emerged, and the enforcement of the Labor Protection Act provided some relief to the working class, leading to an overall improvement in people's lives.

Thanks to the long-standing positive image portrayed in newspapers, Franz had earned a favorable reputation among the common people, who held high expectations for this young monarch.

The House of Habsburg still commanded significant respect, drawing prominent figures from European nobility to attend the coronation, turning Vienna into a hub for the aristocracy.

Franz was now coming to terms with the intricate nature of belonging to the Habsburg dynasty, where relatives were spread across Europe, and their complex relationships were difficult to unravel.

Fortunately, in Europe, strict scrutiny of lineage was not the norm. Otherwise, Franz might have found it overwhelming, as from different perspectives, a relative could be seen as a great-uncle, third cousin, young nephew, or distant cousin...

Partly because of the ongoing instability in Europe, many nobles had been compelled to remain in their respective homelands to oversee matters. Otherwise, Vienna would have been even more vibrant.

The capitalists had every reason to extend their gratitude to Franz, for his coronation ceremony had significantly elevated Vienna's commercial prosperity.

The attendees of the ceremony were all influential individuals, and they typically traveled with a retinue. Consequently, Vienna had suddenly acquired tens of thousands of high-spending, affluent customers, igniting a surge in its business activity.

On the notable date of September 1st, it felt like a special blessing from God, as if He were favoring His faithful followers.

On this particular day, Vienna's sky was unusually high, the air exceptionally refreshing, and the breeze particularly gentle. There was neither scorching summer heat nor bone-chilling winter winds, and the landscape was adorned with lush greenery.

Amid this delightful day, Franz assumed the Austrian Emperor's throne at the Hofburg Palace, marking the commencement of a new chapter in Austrian history.

Regarding the splendid coronation ceremony, Franz chose not to pass judgment; he felt only weariness. Initially, he followed the ceremonial procedures like a marionette, and immediately thereafter, he had to greet a cohort of distinguished guests, leaving him utterly fatigued.

In the evening, upon returning to his bedroom, Franz experienced a profound sense of emptiness. Despite the grandeur of the Vienna Palace, it seemed incapable of providing any warmth.

Emperors were inherently destined for solitude, as a great emperor had to abandon unnecessary emotions, recognizing that emotions were an integral part of the political system.

Emperors stood alone when making decisions, be it in emotional matters, political ideologies, or reforms. They temper their hearts into unyielding fortresses and develop tolerance through solitude.

Thankfully, within the European continent, conflicts within royal families were generally less intense. Under normal circumstances, there was no need to fear siblings conspiring to seize the throne, which was perhaps the only positive aspect of the situation.

Franz was fortunate to have three younger siblings. Discounting his one and only sister, who had tragically passed away before Franz's reincarnation, and thus held no emotional connection, his relationships with the remaining siblings were quite strong.

Following the tradition that younger brothers had certain roles to fulfill, Franz had assigned the responsibility of greeting the guests to his two younger brothers, Maximilian I and Karl Ludwig. This duty was customary for royal family members.

Regarding the youngest brother, Ludwig Victor, Franz didn't want to bother with his playful behavior. Ludwig Victor, at the age of six, was in the midst of a lively and mischievous phase where mischief was one of his preferred activities.

Similar to his father, Archduke Franz Karl, Franz held a deep affection for this young prince. They both indulged him, which presented a challenge for Sophie, Princess of Bavaria, who was committed to nurturing Ludwig Victor into a well-mannered royal.

As Franz gazed at the additional gifts adorning the room, his once frigid heart started to thaw. He delicately unwrapped an exquisitely crafted gift box, revealing a plump clay figurine.

Sitting atop the figurine's head was an object that could be interpreted as either a hat or possibly even a crown, the true meaning left to the observer's imagination.

Retrieving the nearby small note and perusing its contents, Franz couldn't contain a blend of emotions, swinging between laughter and amusement. According to the note, this clay figurine symbolized Franz's imposing presence as seen through the eyes of his youngest brother.

The plumb appearance of the clay figurine was tolerable, considering one couldn't expect too much from a low-quality product. However, the missing arm raised a question: was Franz, as the eldest brother, being portrayed as a disabled person?

Franz attributed this oddity to the Renaissance era. After the European Renaissance, many sculptures in Europe depicted figures with missing limbs, heralded as a form of "the beauty in imperfection."

Unfortunately, this trend had influenced the younger generation, instilling the idea that imperfection was beautiful. Thus, Ludwig Victor's artwork, despite its quirks, couldn't be an exception.

Determined to correct this misguided sense of aesthetics, Franz settled into his bed and quickly drifted into slumber. There was work awaiting him on the morrow, and the time for indulgence had not yet arrived for this young man.

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The next morning, as was his customary routine, Franz woke up early. His good mood was evident as he took a leisurely stroll through the splendid Vienna Palace, choosing to forgo his training session for the day.

As one of Europe's top three renowned palaces, the Vienna Palace boasted undeniable beauty at every turn. It featured dazzling stained glass windows and lifelike marble reliefs, reminiscent of the artistry of Rodin's hands, the spirit of Michelangelo, the genius of da Vinci, and the freedom of Raphael...

"Your Majesty, the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers request an audience," rang the clear voice of a maid named Jenny in Franz's ears. He was still adapting to this change. Until yesterday, he had been known as "Your Highness," but now he was addressed as "Your Majesty."

The moment of discomfort quickly passed, and Franz replied, "Please, let them enter!"

Early in the morning, Prime Minister Felix and the Cabinet Ministers wasted no time in seeking an audience, suggesting the gravity of the matter they wished to discuss.

"Please, take a seat. Jenny, kindly instruct the kitchen to prepare some breakfast."

Franz was aware that their early arrival likely meant they had come on empty stomachs. Being a thoughtful leader, he wanted to ensure the well-being of his subordinates.

"What's happening? Why the urgency in your visit?" Franz inquired.

In preparation for the coronation ceremony, the Austrian government had been implementing stable policies, ensuring peace and security. There shouldn't have been any significant issues.

Prime Minister Felix responded with a grave expression, "Your Majesty, our secret investigation into Church assets is on the verge of being exposed. A related Cabinet document was stolen yesterday, and it has now disappeared."

Upon hearing this news, Franz's positive mood disappeared instantly. The timing of this revelation was far from ideal, given the Church's deep-rooted influence. Investigating their assets wasn't something that could be rushed.

This wasn't akin to suppressing rebel forces, where a direct approach of arrests and house raids could be employed. Dealing with individuals within the Church required a more delicate touch from the Austrian government.

Franz's objective was to acquire their wealth, not to endanger lives. People still depended on the Church for spiritual support, and a heavy-handed approach wouldn't be suitable.

The leak of this information complicated the prospect of a gradual investigation. There were numerous ways to transfer and hide assets. Once these individuals became aware of the situation and took steps to cover their tracks, the Austrian government's chances of recovering significant assets would be greatly reduced.

Franz took a moment to think and then suggested, "Let's take preemptive action. After all, we don't have high hopes of squeezing the Church completely dry; we just need to confiscate their ill-gotten

wealth. When it comes to hiding assets, they may succeed in various ways, but can the Church hide its vast land holdings?

We should have the Foreign Ministry engage in negotiations with Pope Pius IX. We'll request him to issue an order directing all Church institutions in Austria to sell their land to the government. The funds generated from these sales will serve as military funding to aid the Papal States."

The timing was favorable, given that Pope Pius IX had recently been exiled by revolutionary forces. With the imperial coronation just yesterday, Pius IX was conveniently present in Vienna now. It was a straightforward exchange of interests, and Franz didn't expect any refusal from the Pope.

As for the interests of the Austrian Church being harmed, what does it have to do with the Pope?

The Papal States are the foundation of Pope Pius IX's sanctuary, and if the interests of the Austrian Church are affected, it's primarily the local bishops who suffer the most. Paying a small price to regain the Papal States is not a significant concern.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Metternich responded.

Using the Pope to deal with the Church is the best approach. With a righteous cause, the Austrian government can easily pressure these bishops to compromise.

The Austrian government's interest lies in the Church's wealth, not the personal fortunes of their members, which shouldn't motivate them into taking extreme measures.

Having recently quelled domestic uprisings, Austria's regions have seen their share of bloodshed, instilling a sense of reverence for the government among the nobility. This presents an opportune moment for action.

"Your Majesty, how about convening a meeting of bishops from different regions in Vienna in the name of the Pope? During this gathering, announce the decision and anyone who opposes it could face removal from their bishopric by Pope Pius IX," Prime Minister Felix suggested.

Clearly, in an era where ecclesiastical authority is on the decline, the Pope is no longer as untouchable. Prime Minister Felix did not seem to hold Pope Pius IX in particularly high regard; if Austria so wished, replacing a Pope wouldn't be an insurmountable task.

The respect the Austrian government currently shows to Pope Pius IX is primarily due to their past amicable cooperation and their recognition of the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church in a Catholic nation.

When Franz heard Felix's suggestion, he briefly thought of the "Feast at Swan Goose Gate." Bishops aren't positions passed down through inheritance, and the Holy See holds the power to remove them. Although in recent times, most decisions regarding bishop appointments and removals have been made at the local church level, with the Vatican having a more symbolic role.

However, now that the Austrian government has a need for it, this authority can quickly revert to the Pope's control.

Those who submit will prosper; those who resist will perish.

Any intelligent person understands that once they are removed from a prominent position, their wrongdoings will be uncovered swiftly by the Austrian government. The result awaiting them is just one word — death.

“Very well, let’s proceed this way!”

Franz nodded, believing that problems could be resolved through civilized means without the need for bloodshed. The Church’s long-standing greed and corruption were not his concern as a pseudo-Catholic; he had no intention of cleansing the institution on behalf of God.

Chapter 115: (V2C2) - Opening the Doors for the Russians

Franz’s breakfast was quite simple, consisting of bread, jam, milk, along with some fruits and vegetables, similar to the standards of the middle-class.

The only difference was that he preferred milk over coffee, perhaps influenced by his past life, as Franz had no love for coffee and even had a preference for dark bread.

The palace’s black bread was naturally different from the outside world’s bread, which often contained various additives. Following Franz’s request, the palace’s black bread was enriched with ingredients like melon seeds, sesame, and walnut kernels...

With the addition of more people today, the kitchen had prepared a more abundant spread, including coffee, sandwiches, butter, pastries, and ham.

Everyone had different taste preferences, and breakfast was chosen according to their own preferences. The dynamics among European royalty and nobility were different from those in the East, and during meals, they were quite casual, without the same level of meticulousness.

After breakfast, everyone had their own schedules, and they dispersed to begin their day’s work.

“Your Majesty, it’s almost time for your appointment with Grand Duke Aleksándr II Nikoláyevich,” reminded the maid Jenny.

Grand Duke Aleksándr II Nikoláyevich was the eldest son of Nicholas I, famously known as Alexander II in history, who carried out the reform of serfdom in Russia.

He was also a scholar, fluent in four foreign languages: English, German, French, and Polish, making him the most educated among all the Russian tsars.

Aleksándr II Nikoláyevich and Franz had many similarities. Both received military training from a young age, carried themselves with a military demeanor, and were also scholars.

Birds of a feather flock together, and two individuals who shared a common language should have become friends. Unfortunately, after the outbreak of the Crimean War, they found themselves on opposing sides.

Now, history was poised to change. The strategy of making distant allies while maintaining hostilities nearby wasn’t necessarily always the right approach. Austria, situated in the midst of four major conflicts, needed at least one steady ally.

Currently, the best choice appears to be Russia. Because of the voraciousness of the Russian Bear, forming an alliance with them often meant that it was challenging to gain a substantial advantage in terms of interests.

However, alliances with imperial states like Russia were generally more reliable than dealing with the British, who solely pursued their own interests. The Tsar's personal beliefs sometimes took precedence over national interests, reducing the likelihood of being stabbed in the back.

Franz had already decided to abandon the pursuit of dominance in the Near East. If the Russians wanted to occupy Constantinople, so be it. Austria is indifferent to whether their interests in the Balkans increase or decrease anyway.

Of course, the most crucial factor was that Russia, too, was plagued by internal conflicts and was, in many ways, a paper tiger. Before addressing its internal issues, it couldn't truly expand its power.

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Vienna's September weather was refreshingly cool, with a hint of autumn in the air. The rain brought a sense of chill after summer, creating a pleasant autumn atmosphere. The land displayed a bountiful harvest, lifting spirits and inspiring joyful celebrations. Yet, it also left one feeling introspective and contemplative.

People who can talk to each other as equals naturally become close and casual. Aleksándr had visited Austria before; he had visited Vienna as early as 1838.

However, at that time, Franz was just a young lad. They had met and left some impression on each other, but there was no substantial friendship.

As Emperor, Franz couldn't act as a tour guide anymore, except, perhaps, for a beautiful princess if one were to visit.

Aleksándr had already begun to deal with Russia's affairs, and as the heir to the throne, he held significant political influence. Their meeting today was also driven by political matters.

After some pleasantries, they delved into the main topic of today's conversation.

"Russia and Austria share a long history, and in international affairs, it's imperative that we engage in deeper discussions, striving for mutually beneficial cooperation.

The Ottoman Empire is in decline, and regarding the Near East, Russia and Austria should swiftly reach an agreement to prevent giving an opportunity to the likes of England and France," Franz proposed.

Compared to the Ottoman Empire during its peak, the current state of the empire did indeed reflect a decline. The Ottoman Empire still maintains a facade of external strength while being internally weakened which has yet to be exposed, so the major powers haven't started eagerly divvying up the Ottoman Empire.

"Of course, the Ottoman Empire is our common enemy, and ' essential to act swiftly against them. They are undergoing internal reforms, and once those reforms are completed, they won't be as easy to deal with," Aleksándr replied earnestly.

"Are the Russians planning to take action against the Ottoman Empire now?" Franz couldn't help but wonder. Russo-Turkish wars tended to occur every decade or so, and it seemed like the time might be approaching again.

“Given the circumstances, Aleksánder, how about we establish a clear division of spheres of influence in the Balkans to avoid unnecessary conflicts and maintain good relations between our two nations?” Franz proposed.

The idea of dividing the Balkans took Aleksánder by surprise, as it implied Austria wouldn’t oppose Russia’s expansion into the Near East region.

Soon, Aleksánder realized that after the recent Austro-Sardinian War, where Austria abandoned its ambitions of expansion in Italy due to British intervention, Austria’s options were limited.

It could either continue pursuing the unification of the German regions to the west or advance into the Balkans.

If unifying the German regions were as easy as it sounds, the Habsburg dynasty would have done it long ago, so why wait until now?

In the pursuit of unifying the German regions, the House of Habsburg even lost the Holy Roman Empire, and a significant factor in Spain’s decline was its substantial expenditures on the conflicts among the German princes, diverting resources away from industrial development.

“No problem. In order to rescue the people of the Balkans from the clutches of the evil Ottoman Empire, our two countries must cooperate sincerely,” Aleksánder readily agreed.

The detailed negotiations for dividing interests were evidently not a matter to be resolved in a few words; even discussions spanning two or three years would not be surprising, particularly for this matter.

“While rescuing the people of the Balkans is important, the friendship between our two countries is equally crucial. I propose supporting each other’s core interests and, in the event of conflicts, finding compensation in other areas,” Franz suggested.

“Is Austria willing to support Russia’s access to the Black Sea Straits?” Aleksánder couldn’t help but ask.

The Black Sea Straits weren’t limited to just Constantinople; the Russians were looking to expand further, possibly even into Anatolia.

“Of course, Austria has no interest in the Black Sea Straits. It’s not our goal, and as allies, we have no reason to hinder the actions of the Russian Empire!” Franz responded readily.

He wasn’t afraid of Russian greed; he was afraid of Russian indifference. Currently, on the European continent, Britain and Russia stood side by side, and thanks to the reputation earned during the Napoleonic Wars, the Russians considered themselves the strongest ground army in Europe.

Strength and interests are the best catalysts for ambition. Watching the British reap huge profits from overseas colonies, the Russians were no longer content with only dominating the lands.

Russia's maritime territory was vast, but unfortunately, most of it was icy and frigid, with the ports in the Arctic Ocean frozen for a significant portion of the year, making it unsuitable for naval development.

The only viable regions for naval development were the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, and the Russians had already faced setbacks in the Baltic. Now, their sights were set on the Black Sea.

You don't even have to think much about it, anyone with some military knowledge knows that the Black Sea Straits controlled by the Ottoman Empire are blocking the way. Before Russia can move toward the ocean, it must first remove this stumbling block.

Upon hearing the confirmation, Aleksándr's heart was not as calm as he appeared on the surface.

Austria actually lifted its restrictions on Russia, which is different from history. In this timeline, Austria did not seek Russian assistance to suppress domestic revolutions, so there was no need to make compromises.

"Franz, Austria is changing its national policy completely. What do you want in return? The Danube River Basin?" asked Aleksándr.

It's no wonder Aleksándr was so excited. With Austria's support, who can stop Russia from gaining control of the Black Sea Straits?

The French are still busy with internal conflicts, and they don't even have the time to divvy up the nearby Kingdom of Sardinia, let alone prevent Russia from joining the Mediterranean power struggle.

The Ottomans? The British?

None of them can stand in the way. Even if the British give full support to the Ottoman Empire, the Russians won't back down. The Russians were not afraid to face them at sea, not to mention on land where they have immeasurable confidence.

"This matter, I suggest we leave it to the diplomats to discuss. Our positions aren't suitable for quarreling over interests," Franz reminded.

As the Emperor of Austria, Franz had more authority and freedom to make decisions. However, the same couldn't be said for Aleksándr, the heir to the Russian throne.

Without the authorization of the Tsar, even if they reached an agreement, there was no guarantee it wouldn't change later. In such a case, where would Aleksándr's reputation be?

If they reached an agreement now and the Russians acted swiftly, they might even capture Constantinople before the French resolved their internal issues. This could potentially alter the course of history.

If the Russians achieve the extraordinary feat of defeating the British at sea, Franz would have to bow down to the Russians and act as their subordinate. However, the chances of that happening were probably lower than the likelihood of winning the World Cup.

Otherwise, it was likely that Britain and France would use their substantial resources to engage in a protracted conflict with the Russians, resulting in both sides suffering losses.

This was exactly what Franz hoped for the most because, regardless of who won or lost, it would be in Austria's best interests.

If the Russians were defeated, Austria might have a chance to expand further into the Balkans. If Britain and France were defeated, Austria could potentially gain additional overseas colonies.

Chapter 116: Hongmen Banquet

The meeting between Franz and Aleksánder was productive, leading to an improvement in Russo-Austrian relations, and any minor conflicts stemming from the Prussian-Danish War were quickly resolved.

Kingdom of Sardinia.

The Austrian army was in the process of preparing for departure as the ceasefire treaty had already been enacted. Half of the war reparations had been settled, and the remainder was secured by the British government. The time had come for the troops to be withdrawn.

Franz held no intention of causing any unnecessary delays and expressed his willingness to promptly return the army home when possible. Sustaining a substantial overseas military presence incurred significant expenses.

However, considering Austria's occupation of the Kingdom of Sardinia, it was only natural that they wouldn't return empty-handed. It was inconceivable to leave without acquiring anything. Virtually all the soldiers were coming back laden with the spoils of war.

With a substantial amount of spoils of war, transporting them became a logistical challenge. Selling them locally in the recently war-torn Kingdom of Sardinia was out of the question, as they would hardly fetch a fair price, and in some cases, there were no buyers to be found.

Marshal Radetzky was a wise commander and, in order to safeguard the interests of all involved, promptly decided that the army should collectively transport the spoils back to their homeland for sale. The proceeds would then be fairly distributed among the soldiers.

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In the Turin industrial district, a young army major was directing the operations, saying, "Tom, be careful with these machines; they're like precious gems, worth tens of thousands of florins. You can't turn them into scrap metal, or we won't even cover our transportation costs!"

"Don't worry, Major. I won't let anything happen to these gems," replied Tom.

Like combing through the hair, like sorting through cotton, ever since the Austrian government decided to abandon the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Austrian army had taken full initiative and embarked on a journey to amass wealth.

Of course, they weren't interested in plundering the common folk; it wasn't profitable, and it wasted time.

The loot from robbing a noble or a capitalist was much greater than ransacking a village, making this choice quite straightforward.

Marshal Radetzky ruled the army with strict discipline, and everyone organized themselves for the wealth accumulation mission. Each unit had its designated area to operate in.

This also required professional knowledge. European armies had a tradition of looting, and during the Napoleonic Wars, the Kingdom of Sardinia had been visited by French forces several times.

In the process of looting and being looted, everyone learned how to hide their wealth.

Real estate and land weren't a concern; these immovable assets were safe. What everyone needed to be careful of was how to conceal easily carried items like cash, antiques, and artwork.

Nobles and capitalists weren't fools; they began hiding their wealth before the enemy arrived. After all, as long as they didn't resist, armies typically only plundered without causing harm.

How much one could hide became a measure of their skill. Experienced individuals knew they had to hide the most valuable items and leave some cash outside for the soldiers to loot.

If everything was hidden away, most likely there would be nothing left, and there's no way the soldiers would simply give up without any gains. If things got serious, what if they resorted to torture for information?

Torture wasn't exclusive to Li Zicheng; many people had done such things before, but perhaps not as ruthlessly as he did.

Franz, being a man of integrity, would never allow the Austrian army to engage in such barbaric actions.

Before the operation, he had already sent people to train the soldiers. For example, they were taught to handle antique artwork and mechanical equipment with care.

Basements, hidden attics, concealed walls, freshly disturbed earth... These were all the focus of intensive searches, as they were potential hiding places for wealth.

Fear of specialization was justified; highly trained bandits were quite formidable, their proficiency was paying off with abundant spoils of war.

During this era, there were no railways connecting Sardinia to Austria. Transportation primarily relied on manpower and beasts of burden, which was naturally slow.

Since August, the Austrian army had been working on transporting these riches back home, and they were still diligently doing so.

A soldier reported, "Major, we've found a warehouse with a large quantity of black wheat. It's said to have been stored here by a grain merchant."

The major officer furrowed his brow, hesitated for a moment, and said, "We've already seized a large amount of food in advance. We're about to withdraw, and there's no way we can consume all of it. Seal it and don't touch it for now. I'll report this up the chain of command."

Austria wasn't lacking in food supplies, and transporting it back from the Kingdom of Sardinia at a high cost wouldn't yield much profit. This was considered spoils of war with little value.

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At the headquarters of the expeditionary force, Marshal Radetzky had already received numerous reports about the capture of basic supplies such as food, coal, ore, and raw industrial materials.

For Austria, these items were essentially worthless, as the cost of transporting them back would outweigh any potential profit.

However, he was reluctant to leave them for the Sardinian government. After this campaign, it would be unlikely for relations between the two countries to normalize for decades, and weakening the power of the Kingdom of Sardinia further aligned with Austria's interests.

The question was whether to destroy them or not, and Radetzky found himself in a moment of hesitation.

"Marshal, why not sell these supplies at a low price to merchants?" Lieutenant General Edmund Leopold Friedrich suggested.

Pillaging and plundering also had its limits and targets, and foreign businessmen like the English and French were naturally exempt from being plundered. Of course, this exemption only applied to influential big merchants; small-scale merchants were fair game.

After the Austrian army occupied the Kingdom of Sardinia, there were merchants interested in buying their spoils. However, the offered prices were extremely low, and Marshal Radetzky was unwilling to take such a loss, which is why they opted to transport the goods back to Austria for sale.

"Then let's sell them!" Marshal Radetzky said after a moment of hesitation.

No matter who they had issues with, they couldn't afford to have problems with money. With so many basic supplies, no matter how cheaply they sold them, the total would still be a significant sum.

As for the consequences of these supplies falling into the hands of foreign merchants, Marshal Radetzky couldn't be bothered to think about it. After all, for the Kingdom of Sardinia, it wouldn't be a favorable outcome.

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Inside St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, a religious banquet was in progress, and Pope Pius IX personally "attended" this meeting.

Yes, he attended the meeting, despite being the leader of the religious world. However, he was in a vulnerable position, and though he hadn't reached the point of being completely powerless, he had lost some of his authority.

Faced with the conditions set by the Austrians, he couldn't find a reason to refuse.

The fall of the headquarters of the Roman Curia had led to the need to raise funds for military expenses, even if it meant selling some church property. It was a logical step in order to reclaim the headquarters.

Anyone who dared to oppose it would be seen as lacking sufficient faith in God. According to Pope Pius IX, clergy members who lacked devout religious faith were not qualified to continue serving God.

This was Pius IX's perspective, but many Austrian bishops found it highly unreasonable. With the vast wealth of the Holy See, why should they have to sell off all their properties?

"Don't argue. This is an order. If anyone opposes the recovery of the Holy Land, I will immediately remove him from his bishopric!" threatened Pope Pius IX.

Removal from office was likely just the first step, and there might be excommunication as well. That would be truly disastrous.

They were neither Protestant believers who could disregard the Pope's orders nor feudal lords who could lead armies directly to Rome to threaten the Pope to revoke his commands.

People blinded by their interests were never in short supply in this world, and Archbishop Montreux was one of them.

Unlike the long-established archbishops who had already made their fortunes, Montreux had only recently taken up his position. He had staked his entire fortune on this position and hadn't even had the chance to break even yet.

At this moment, the prospect of large-scale sale of Church properties seemed like a direct threat to his financial interests. As he glanced around the room and saw all the bishops looking furious, his courage swelled.

It was not the Middle Ages anymore, what gives the Pope so much power?

"Your Holiness, even clergy need to eat. If we sell off Church properties, what will we eat?" Montreux questioned.

"As servants of God, we are not meant to seek luxury. The Church's income is sufficient to sustain the clergy," Pope Pius IX replied nonchalantly.

The Church also has its own sources of income, and in a devout country like Austria, there's no shortage of donations from the faithful.

Montreux continued to argue, "But, Your Holiness, the Church also needs to function. If we don't have enough funds, we won't be able to maintain the faith of the people."

Pope Pius IX, with a devout expression, replied, "As a devout believer, one must overcome these difficulties. Child, if you are not capable of bearing this responsibility, let someone who is capable handle it!"

Those who had initially prepared to speak up quickly chose to remain silent. It was evident that the Austrian government had set its sights on the Church's wealth, and Pope Pius IX had already sold them out in exchange for the recovery of the Papal States.

Not to mention the dismissal of a bishop; even if they were all dismissed, it would be a minor issue. Without their sacred halo, they were no match for the government.

Seeing the initially indignant bishops now quieted down, Montreux knew he was in deep trouble.

He had inadvertently become the sacrificial lamb to serve as a warning to others. At this point, he didn't even have the courage to defend himself.

Admitting guilt and cooperating might lead to a more lenient punishment, whereas continuing to resist could result in a harsher fate – death might be the lighter outcome, and his entire family might suffer.

It shouldn't be presumed that Europe doesn't engage in collective punishment. Even if it doesn't reach the extent of punishing nine generations, his family would likely still face repercussions.

Observing Montreux's submission, Pope Pius IX felt satisfied with his display of authority.

With no objections forthcoming, Prime Minister Felix was summoned forth.

In the presence of God, Pope Pius IX, representing the Holy See, and Felix, representing the Austrian government, signed the ecclesiastical property transfer agreement.

Chapter 117: Disarmament

With the cooperation of Pope Pius IX, the Austrian government successfully convinced the bishops, and the pressure continued to mount.

Is the law not applicable to everyone?

If there was no such thing, many clergymen would want to be bishops.

Despite losing a significant portion of their church properties, the church continues to be a wealthy organization with ample public funds at their disposal, and there is no oversight in place.

Franz consistently adhered to the principle of persuading people through reason. In this deal with the Church, fairness was maintained, a fact personally confirmed by Pope Pius IX.

For clergy who didn't comprehend the situation, he offered gentle persuasion. If that approach failed, he continued to engage them in constructive discussions and sought to help them amend their perspectives. In cases of more stubborn individuals, a combination of critique and education was employed, ultimately aiding them in rectifying their shortcomings.

Following the dismissal of an archbishop, eighteen regional bishops, auxiliary bishops, and over a hundred priests who were deemed insufficiently devout in their faith, everyone actively cooperated with the government to facilitate the transition.

In regular circumstances, clergy members found lacking in devotion to their faith would typically face dire consequences.

However, this time was an exception, as Franz interceded on their behalf. They only needed to prove themselves as devout believers in the upcoming battle to reclaim the Papal States.

If they could resolve the issue with the Church without bloodshed, it would make the Austrian government realize the importance of the Papal States. Having a pro-Austrian Pope would help manage the clergy effectively.

In simpler terms, if any bishop caused trouble, they could be sent to serve God in the Papal States. For instance, being a guardian of the Holy Land was considered a promising position.

Having received benefits, they naturally had to perform their duties, and Pope Pius IX had fulfilled his role. Now, it was Austria's turn to provide compensation.

Franz harbored a strong aversion to unpaid wages, and he certainly wouldn't want to become the person he disliked the most.

"How is the situation with Marshal Radetzky? Do we need to redeploy troops from the homeland?" Franz inquired.

“Your Majesty, the withdrawal from the Kingdom of Sardinia is nearly complete, and the morale of the troops on the front line is high. They can continue to participate in this campaign.

However, Marshal Radetzky suggests that these soldiers return home while a portion of them be redeployed to intervene in the Papal States,” replied Prince Windisch-Grätz, the Minister of War.

Clearly, he was somewhat dissatisfied with Marshal Radetzky’s suggestion. While it sounded simple to transfer soldiers around, the actual implementation could be troublesome.

The high morale was expected, given that the Sardinian army was relatively inexperienced and had not faced many serious battles. They had essentially encountered little resistance along the way.

Casualties were minimal, yet the spoils of war were incredibly abundant. Even if they were heavily discounted when they were sold, each soldier could expect to receive hundreds of florins, which equated to several years’ worth of income for an ordinary person.

(1 florin \approx 11.69 grams of silver)

In addition to this unexpected windfall, the promised land by Franz was about to be fulfilled. Given this fortunate turn of events, the soldiers were naturally willing to continue fighting.

After considering Marshal Radetzky’s suggestion, Franz believed it was essential to have the new recruits from Austria gain some battlefield experience. There wasn’t much danger in the current situation, and it could be seen as a valuable training opportunity.

The main concern was the defense forces in Vienna, who were equipped with the best weapons but lacked combat experience, potentially making them the weakest link in the Austrian army.

Franz found an excuse, saying, “The frontline soldiers have been in continuous combat for nearly half a year; it’s time to let them rest and recuperate.

Let’s follow Marshal Radetzky’s advice. We’ll rotate some new recruits from the rear to replace them and send the Vienna garrison forces for real combat training.”

Purely from a military perspective, even the most elite unit would feel fatigued after continuous combat for half a year.

In this Austro-Sardinian War, which had officially lasted for four to five months, the actual time of battle between the two sides was less than a month. The Austrian army had managed to push back from Venice to Turin during this period.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Prince Windisch-Grätz replied.

These were all minor issues, and no one would challenge Franz’s authority.

The interference in the Papal States relied more on the deterrent power of force, and the chances of a full-scale war breaking out were slim.

Although the revolutionary party’s government had seized power, there was still a part of the military supporting the Pope in the country. The indecisive bourgeois government was concerned about triggering a civil war and had not yet conducted a major purge of the military.

“Your Majesty,” Prime Minister Felix began, “the domestic situation has now stabilized, and the international circumstances are in our favor. Continuing to maintain such a large military force is placing considerable financial strain on the government. The Cabinet recommends a partial demobilization of our troops, allowing us to redirect the saved resources toward post-war reconstruction and development.”

Increasing the size of the army during times of war and reducing it after the war are common practices.

Currently, despite the unrest caused by the revolutions in Europe, conflicts between countries have not escalated yet. In this context, the likelihood of major conflicts between great powers is nearly nonexistent.

“Prime Minister, how many troops is the government planning to demobilize?” Franz inquired.

Felix responded confidently, “Considering that we are about to intervene in the Papal States and the current situation, the government proposes demobilizing one hundred thousand troops within the year and another one hundred and thirty thousand next year. Our final total force will be maintained at around three hundred and fifty thousand.”

This disarmament primarily targets regular troops. The locally raised temporary forces have been gradually discharged and returned to their home regions after the war ended.

Many areas are still involved in reemployment and resettlement efforts, which was an initiative introduced by Franz himself and was not a common practice in Austria before.

Currently, the government holds a substantial number of industries, and under the planned economy system, there are plenty of positions available to accommodate these individuals.

It’s worth noting that almost all soldiers who received significant land rewards have chosen to return home and engage in farming.

Factories were not seen as desirable destinations for people during this era. If given a choice, most people were reluctant to become laborers.

While the same is true for state-owned factories, they were slightly more popular than privately owned ones, mainly because there was no concern about employers withholding wages in these government-controlled facilities.

After all, these state-owned factories have operated on a piece-rate system from the beginning, meaning that the harder you worked, the more you earned. There was no room for slacking off, so the workload was equally demanding.

At this point, Franz couldn’t help but be thankful for his clear thinking and not blindly absorbing Sardinia. Otherwise, if he had to downsize the military now, it might have led to further expansion.

Tens of thousands of Austrian troops were enough to conquer Sardinia, but to rule it effectively, even two to three hundred thousand soldiers might not suffice.

This was a lingering consequence of nationalist awakenings, and it was challenging to establish control without a significant cleansing process. The best solution was often to relocate the local population entirely, which would then stabilize the region.

If this were the 21st century, relocating five or six million people at once wouldn't be a big deal as long as you were willing to spend the money.

However, it was still the mid-19th century, and even if the Austrian government did nothing else and focused solely on organizing ships to transport people, it would take several years to complete this task.

Once the people were gone, all that remained was a vast expanse of land with no resources and no industry. What would Franz do with it?

If he had the time and resources, it would be more worthwhile to expand into colonial territories. Even if he invested only a fraction of the resources, he could gain many times the land area of the Kingdom of Sardinia.

Prince Windisch-Grätz objected, saying, "Prime Minister, we are currently negotiating with the Russians, and it won't be long before we reach an agreement.

When the time comes, we will inevitably need to send troops to the Balkans. This won't take too long. If we demobilize now and have to re-mobilize later, will we have enough time?

Once we can't achieve a quick victory and end up in a stalemate with the Ottoman Empire, and if Britain and France intervene, our interests will be difficult to safeguard."

For Austria, expanding into the Balkans is indeed an opportunity.

Not long ago, the Austrian government made concessions to the British regarding the issue of Sardinia and gained British support for Austria's expansion in the Balkans.

In order to provoke tensions between Russia and Austria, the British were unusually generous, accepting all of Austria's demands related to its interests in the Balkans. The two nations even reached a memorandum of understanding.

Palmerston could never have imagined that the Austrian government would make a deal with the Russians, especially considering that once the Russians control the Black Sea Straits, Austria's interests in the Mediterranean would also be affected.

If the Russians expand significantly in the Mediterranean, Austria would be trapped in the Adriatic Sea, losing its strategic advantage.

These concerns have indeed crossed the minds of high-ranking Austrian officials, but in the end, they were convinced by Franz.

The reason is quite simple: the Russians can't win against the British at sea, and the British Mediterranean fleet can easily block the Russians in the Black Sea.

Prime Minister Felix shook his head and said, "Who said we are immediately going to join forces with the Russians to start a war? Austria has just experienced a civil conflict, and the most important thing now is to resume production.

Dividing the Balkans with the Russians is a strategic necessity, and setting our interests in advance is just to avoid conflicts.

Turning the treaty's provisions into reality is something for the future. In the short term, the Austrian government has no intention of starting a war.

We have made it clear to the Russians that Austria needs to recuperate for at least ten years and will not expand in the European region during this time.

If they can't wait and decide to act earlier, Austria can provide them with material support, but we won't participate in the conflict ourselves.

This is a prerequisite for our alliance, so you can rest assured about the disarmament. War will not break out in the short term."

This explanation left Prince Windisch-Grätz feeling quite disappointed. As the leader of the Near East Faction, he had already started preparing for war, only to be told suddenly that the war wouldn't happen.

However, the military must serve politics.

Due to the butterfly effect of Franz's actions, the Austrian military's power did not swell significantly. While they had a strong say in domestic and foreign affairs, they lacked decision-making authority.

On this matter, Franz supported the government's stance. Austria's top priority at the moment was to recuperate and strengthen its national power. Expansion could be pursued when the time was right.

Chapter 118: Swiss Mercenaries

Regardless of whether the military is willing or not, Austria's decision to demobilize has been finalized. The government's focus is shifting from the military to local development.

Above all, the most important national policy is compulsory education. To motivate bureaucrats, Franz decided to implement an evaluation system.

That is: to link the effectiveness of compulsory education to the promotion of officials.

The core of this is still the promotion of the Austrian language since the main purpose of compulsory education this time is not purely for education but mainly for the unification of language and culture, laying the foundation for national integration.

"Have the assets acquired from the Church been counted?" Franz asked with concern.

Finance Minister Karl replied, "Your Majesty, it's still in the process of counting. Many of these assets are quite complex and difficult to evaluate.

Preliminary estimates indicate approximately 4.78 million hectares of land, including farmland, forests, pastures, and more; 386 mines of various sizes, including gold, silver, copper, iron, coal, and other minerals; and numerous immovable properties such as shops and residences..."

Franz nodded in understanding. Indeed, these assets are challenging to assess, and the cash and antique artworks, for instance, were likely already divided among the clergy.

Even if there were artworks left, they would be inside the churches, and the Austrian government can't exactly retrieve those.

Some of these immovable properties have become private assets of certain clergy members, but under pressure from the Austrian government, they were forced to surrender them.

They had no choice; immovable properties can't be hidden, and if they didn't hand them over, they would have to serve as part of suicide squads in the Papal States.

"Let's start by estimating the annual income from these assets while we work on assessing their total value. Any rough figures on that?" Franz inquired.

"Approximately around 80 million florins, and this income is quite stable, with minimal fluctuations," replied Karl.

This figure didn't elicit much surprise among those present. Throughout history, religious institutions, especially in the monotheistic systems of Europe, have been wealthy, often eclipsing governments.

They enjoyed various privileges, such as tax exemptions on church property and the freedom to allocate funds raised from believers.

Even in the aftermath of religious revolutions, the Church remained a substantial financial power. In medieval times, the Church even controlled a significant portion of the European continent, with kings and emperors often subservient to its authority.

"What about the tithe?" Franz continued to inquire.

By the mid-19th century, the tithe in Austria was no longer exclusively for the Church; monarchs and aristocrats also received a share of the proceeds.

However, with the introduction of the education tax, this money would now go directly into the treasury, without being shared among various entities.

The tithe has its origins in the Old Testament era and has persisted over the years. It primarily targeted agricultural products, including grains, wheat, fruits, vegetables, and livestock.

The tithe was a fixed 10%, and as far as Franz knows, even in the 21st century, some places still collect this tax.

The tithe was abolished earliest in France, during the French Revolution in the 18th century. European countries gradually followed suit during the 19th century, with the British abolishing it in 1936.

"Your Majesty, the tithe in Austria amounts to approximately 80 to 100 million florins. However, considering the actual situation, we may not be able to directly change it to education tax," Karl explained after giving it some thought.

"And what's the reason?" Franz inquired.

"Your Majesty, compulsory education benefits all Austrian citizens. If we only impose an education tax on land-owning farmers and nobility, it would be unfair," Karl reminded.

Franz immediately understood the point – tax names couldn't be changed arbitrarily and had to consider their social impact.

If it were changed to an education tax, it would need to be levied across all industries to prevent the nobility from evading taxes and potentially sparking social conflict.

To maintain fairness, other taxes would need to be reduced to keep them within the economic capacity of taxpayers.

On the surface, changing the tax might seem feasible, but implementing it was complicated.

The first issue was that the working-class, with limited income, would bear the brunt of this tax. They've already relaxed the tax burden to some extent, and imposing an education tax would immediately reverse that.

Doing such a thing is absolutely out of the question. Franz didn't want to risk jeopardizing the public support he had painstakingly built up.

"What does the Ministry of Finance suggest to avoid this issue?" Franz asked with concern evident in his tone.

Karl thought for a moment and said, "Your Majesty, the Ministry of Finance suggests that tithes should still be collected by the clergy without changing its name. The Ministry of Finance can send inspectors to supervise the process.

We can request His Holiness the Pope to issue an order transferring all of Austria's tithes to the government to serve as educational funds."

It seemed like the Austrian government was preparing to subordinate the Holy See to them. They were leaving the contentious issues to the Church to handle.

Franz considered for a moment and said, "Very well, let's set aside the issue of the educational tax for now and allow the Church to continue collecting tithes."

He couldn't find a valid reason to refuse. For the sake of Austria's compulsory education, he decided to let the Church continue carrying this burden.

After all, God had great powers, and a few complaints wouldn't bother Him. The Church had been collecting tithes for centuries, and a few more decades wouldn't matter.

When the Austrian government became more prosperous, they could find a reason to abolish it.

Not only the Catholic Church but also other smaller religious institutions were targeted by the Austrian government.

However, these smaller churches were not mainstream and had limited influence and wealth. Plundering them wouldn't yield much, so Franz personally didn't pay much attention to them.

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On November 2, 1848, the Austrian government, in response to an invitation from Pope Pius IX, deployed 80,000 troops to help mediate internal disputes over power in the Papal States.

This move faced strong opposition from the reactionary bourgeois regime, leading to a resurgence of anti-Austrian movements in the Italian regions. Countless nationalists gathered in Rome, hoping to deter the Austrian military through their actions.

The outcome of this situation was that Pope Pius IX ordered the suppression of these nationalists, and the courageous Austrian military executed this order by making them meet their maker, resulting in significant casualties among the Italian nationalists.

On November 7, 1848, the Austrian forces launched an attack against the reactionary regime and killed more than eight thousand individuals while capturing over thirty thousand, inflicting severe damage upon the Italian nationalists.

The heartland of Italian nationalism was in the Kingdom of Sardinia, but unfortunately, Sardinia fell to Austrian forces at one point, and the core of the nationalist movement suffered great setbacks.

Upon their return to Sardinia, the government of Charles Albert had been shaken and dared not take any bold actions.

In order to preserve their authority, they sought the support of the British, while also suppressing domestic radicalism, fearing that any provocation of Austria would lead to disastrous consequences.

Disillusioned Italian nationalists flocked to Rome, where they plotted their final counterattack in a last-ditch effort to preserve their remaining stronghold.

The outcome was inevitably tragic. Pope Pius IX returned to Rome and his first action was to suppress these nationalist elements.

While Pius IX was willing to support the unification of Italy under his leadership, he insisted that the primary condition was the unification of the Papal States. If this condition couldn't be met, then preserving the Papal States remained his top priority.

Among the Italian states, the Kingdom of Sardinia was the strongest and most well-developed, with many nationalists supporting its cause.

In the eyes of Pius IX, this was a blatant betrayal, similar to the actions of revolutionary factions. With the support of Austria, he was determined to crack down on these nationalist movements.

Massacres may not solve problems, but they are indeed an effective means of eliminating enemies. After the bloody suppression, the situation in Rome stabilized.

Following the reconquest of Rome, the Papal States' army naturally pledged allegiance to Pope Pius IX, and further military intervention by the Austrian army was no longer necessary.

While in Vienna, Franz had proposed a cunning idea to Pope Pius IX, suggesting that he disband part of his army and use the saved funds to hire Swiss mercenaries to safeguard the security of the Papal States.

This was not without precedent, as Swiss mercenaries were renowned throughout Europe for their combat prowess. They often undertook missions to defend or attack various countries.

Starting from the 16th century, the Papal Guard became composed of Swiss soldiers, and the Swiss earned respect through their actions.

In 1789, during the French Revolution, 138 Swiss mercenaries stationed at the Palace of Versailles swore to defend Louis XVI to the death, all died in battle as none of them chose to flee.

For Pope Pius IX, who had experienced a coup himself, this recommendation from Franz made perfect sense. If Franz had suggested German mercenaries, he might have been concerned about potential conspiracies.

However, with Swiss mercenaries, he had no such worries. Everyone knew about the historical tensions between the Habsburgs and the Swiss. Although relations had improved, most Swiss people still harbored resentment toward the Habsburgs and were unlikely to support them.

Under the influence of Franz's "butterfly effect," the guardians of Rome would no longer be Italians but rather skilled and valiant Swiss mercenaries.

With these mercenaries, who fought for pay, the authority of Pope Pius IX was greatly strengthened.

While other armies might sympathize with the revolution or even support revolutionary movements, these foreign Swiss mercenaries had no interest in such matters.

Of course, this was a development for the future. The Pope's Papal Swiss Guard had not yet been established, and for now, he relied on the armed forces of the Papal States.

Regarding this army, Pope Pius IX did not trust them entirely. He dispatched them to suppress the revolutionary factions, and for his personal security, he still relied on the Austrian military.

Vatican.

A cardinal in red robes joyfully exclaimed, "Your Holiness, we have already contacted three Swiss mercenary groups willing to be hired by us, totaling more than two thousand men."

Pope Pius IX nodded in satisfaction. Swiss mercenaries were a bit costly, but they were worth the investment. These men were loyal and reliable, far better than the regular troops of the Papal States.

Just think, if Louis XVI had not had a mere 138 Swiss mercenaries but 1380, would he have been sent to the guillotine?

He probably would have escaped and rallied Royalist forces to suppress the rebellion.

For example, consider the recently overthrown King Louis Philippe. If he had a Swiss mercenary group at his disposal, he would have easily suppressed the revolution, and there would have been no need for him to flee in haste.

Reflecting on his own experiences, Pope Pius IX realized that if he had two thousand Swiss mercenaries back then, he would have swiftly executed the revolutionaries, and there would have been no need for him to go into exile.

The more he thought about it, the more twisted his perspective became.

Pope Pius IX had forgotten that the need for foreign protection as a monarch was a clear indication of his own failure.

This meant an extreme lack of trust in his subjects, and once this trust was lost, it became nearly impossible to have a close and harmonious relationship between ruler and subjects.

However, this issue didn't bother Pope Pius IX much. After all, his papal throne wasn't hereditary, and as long as he lived comfortably, why bother about the next pope?

Pope Pius IX thought for a moment and said, "Hurry and sign contracts with them, so they can come to Rome and take up their positions immediately."

And continue to contact more Swiss mercenary groups; two thousand men are just the size of one group, and it won't be enough to defend the Papal States."

"Your Holiness, are the Austrians withdrawing their troops?" the cardinal asked with concern.

"Yes, Lieutenant General Edmund has urged us several times to quickly form a loyal army. They also want to return home and spend Christmas with their families," Pope Pius IX replied with a cheerful smile.

Asking the Austrian troops to suppress the rebellion was one thing, but what worried him the most was that it's easy to invite the gods, but difficult to send them away. If the Austrian troops decided to stay, it would be a big problem.

Fortunately, none of that happened. The Austrian troops voluntarily proposed their withdrawal, aligning perfectly with the intentions of Pope Pius IX and saving him from a major predicament.

The conduct of the Austrian troops also greatly pleased Pope Pius IX. They maintained strict discipline, refrained from causing disturbances in the region, and even demonstrated discipline when it came to looting. They did not engage in any disorderly conduct.

Perhaps it was the smooth cooperation between him and the Austrian government that led to such pleasant interactions. The Austrian military commander, Lieutenant General Edmund, held great respect for the Pope, treating him with utmost deference and causing no trouble for him.

Chapter 119: Educational Reform

With a new leader in place, Emperor Franz understood the importance of making significant accomplishments to justify his role as a time traveler.

"Reform" became the central theme of his government. The Austrian Empire faced numerous problems, even after the previous year's major revolution had cleared away much of the debris. However, there were still underlying issues that needed to be addressed.

Franz was cautious about implementing radical reforms, as he feared it might lead to social instability or even violence. While he had already abolished serfdom, resolved land issues, and made attempts to improve the living conditions of the working class, he knew that attempting to solve all the empire's problems at once would be too painful.

The Austrian Empire couldn't afford such drastic changes without causing harm. Instead, he opted to address issues one by one, starting with the liberation of the serfs, resolving land disputes, and ensuring that the working class had access to basic necessities.

The troublesome bourgeoisie and the radicals who dared to cause disturbances had become a rare breed after the recent purges.

Those who survived were generally intelligent individuals who knew what to say and what not to say, as well as what actions were permissible and what were not.

Vienna's citizens, who had experienced a revolution, harbored deep-seated resentment towards the revolutionary parties. Anyone attempting to promote revolutionary ideas among them was met with swift retaliation, often a sound beating followed by a trip to the police station.

So far, the Vienna police had apprehended dozens of such troublemakers. Every capture led to the identification of more, and after several months of maintaining law and order, hundreds of revolutionary activists had been arrested, significantly dampening the arrogance of the revolutionaries.

Many of those arrested were young students, which greatly angered Franz. He was determined to reform Austria's education system.

While freedom of speech was allowed, everyone had to be responsible for their words. Nonsensical talk, spreading rumors, and malicious slander all had consequences, often leading to time in prison.

The idea of schools operating independently from government oversight was abolished, never to return. This was especially enforced in universities.

The days when the University of Vienna refused police entry to arrest revolutionary activists, as happened before the March Revolution, were now inconceivable.

If such a situation indeed occurs, anyone obstructing the execution of official duties will be sent to prison, just like any common criminal. In Austria, there is no immunity from the law.

"Count von Thun und Hohenstein, what specific plans does the Ministry of Education have to strengthen ideological education for young students?" Franz inquired.

Count Leopold von Thun und Hohenstein, the Minister of Education, promptly replied, "Your Majesty, the Ministry of Education has decided to establish teachers specializing in ideological education at schools, who will be responsible for guiding students' thoughts. If any negative tendencies are identified, they will be promptly addressed.

To enhance school management, the Ministry of Education has decreed that the appointment of key school leadership personnel must receive prior approval from the ministry. This requirement also applies to private schools.

Schools are now required to report their annual enrollment figures to the local education authorities. When hiring faculty and staff, schools must ensure that individuals have the correct ideological stance and a clean criminal record.

To strengthen oversight of universities and colleges, the Ministry of Education will provide guidance on the types of programs each school can offer and the number of students they can admit in each program.

Based on the performance of individual institutions, the Ministry of Education will determine their financial allocations for the following year. Schools with recurrent issues may face closure, and individuals responsible for these issues will be held legally accountable."

This means they are going to start by tackling the finances. Running an education system is a costly endeavor, and without government support, most schools would likely have to shut down if they rely solely on tuition fees.

In this era, Austria adopted an elitist education model. Each school had a relatively small number of students, usually only a few hundred, and the staff also numbered around a hundred and eighty.

In such a situation, without funding from the Ministry of Education, if primary and secondary schools were to raise tuition fees significantly, their student body would mainly consist of children from wealthy families, and they might just barely be able to keep themselves afloat.

For universities, it would be even more challenging. Without enough government support, there would be a lack of research resources and highly qualified professors. Even if they only admitted liberal arts students, they wouldn't be able to sustain it.

This was Austria, so charitable donations from society couldn't be expected. Schools that don't have the government's support won't receive favor from social elites either.

Franz pondered for a moment and said, "Regulatory work must be taken seriously. The Ministry of Education's guidance on student enrollment in schools is essential.

Some majors that are not in demand in society shouldn't admit so many students. Graduating into unemployment isn't what we want for our youth, right?

While implementing regulations, we must also establish an educational accountability system, so problems can be traced back to those responsible.

The school principal is the one primarily responsible, and as a principal, they have the responsibility to educate every student. When it comes to classes, we can implement a class teacher responsibility system, assigning one teacher to be in charge of each class.

The specifics can be determined based on the actual situation. Before implementing compulsory education, we need to manage the existing schools.

This kind of management must emphasize strategy, ensuring smooth teaching while also strengthening students' ideological education.

However, there is no need to add dedicated ideological education teachers, as this can easily lead to resistance.

We can integrate this ideological education into subjects such as history, politics, and language, making these topics mandatory for college entrance exams.

The Ministry of Education must effectively oversee the college entrance exams and ensure that there is no room for manipulation. If wealthy individuals want their children to perform poorly academically but still secure admissions, they can contribute to school sponsorship fees. We should not allow these individuals to disrupt our education system."

Franz also took preventive measures. If the wealthy were not given a path, they would find ways to corrupt the education system. Rather than that, why not be transparent about it?

Failing the exams is not an issue. You pay to get in, whether your child graduates or not is their own problem. If it doesn't work out, you can pay again later to buy your child a diploma.

Prime Minister Felix proposed, "Your Majesty, since we have already decided to promote compulsory education, should we consider restricting private education?

These private schools have always been a hidden danger. Education is sacred and should not become a tool for certain individuals to seek personal profit!"

His concerns were not unfounded. Through an investigation into the young students involved in the Vienna Uprising, it was found that nearly eighty percent of them came from private schools.

The young students who frequently participated in protests and demonstrations were mostly from private schools. Public schools usually prohibit students from leaving the campus during class hours.

In other words, the origins of revolutionary ideas mostly stemmed from these privately-run schools that operated independently of the government system, subtly influencing the worldview of young individuals.

Ironically, these private schools also received educational funding from the Austrian government. In the end, the government paid, capitalists profited, and they nurtured a group of anti-government students.

“This is indeed a problem. How does the Ministry of Education plan to address it?” Franz inquired.

As an emperor, Franz did not have the habit of having everything figured out himself and then commanding his subordinates to execute it.

If he did that, his subordinates would have an easy time while he would be overworked. Emperors known for their diligent governance often had relatively short reigns, a phenomenon seen in various historical contexts.

Moreover, lacking sufficient experience could lead to making unwise decisions. Working tirelessly, but ultimately achieving little and facing dissatisfaction, as exemplified by the fate of Emperor Chongzhen in Chinese history, was not an appealing prospect for Franz.

One person’s wisdom is never a match for the collective wisdom of a group, and specialization is essential. Professional matters are best handled by professionals.

As an emperor, you can amend the plans of your subordinates or even discard them, but you should never let them cease making plans.

Count Leopold von Thun und Hohenstein responded, “Your Majesty, the Ministry of Education is still discussing this issue, and there are two potential approaches we can consider.

First, we could prohibit further construction of private schools by civilians and have the government buy the existing private schools, thus bringing education entirely under government management.

Second, we could cease educational funding for private schools, strengthen the approval process for privately-established schools, and enhance our supervision of them.”

Both approaches are aimed at curbing private schools, with the first being more extreme.

Learning from past mistakes, the Ministry of Education now vehemently opposes disorderly and chaotic ideologies. As a result, nearly a hundred teachers have been dismissed from public schools, with some of them even sent for reeducation.

Franz, with a cold smile, remarked, “Let’s stop funding private schools. Since they are private, they should naturally bear their own financial burden.

We should also introduce an investor liability system to enhance management of private schools.

If a private school becomes a hub for the widespread dissemination of unlawful ideologies, let the capitalists behind it and the school administrators go to prison together!”

The Austrian government needs to be mindful of appearances; a one-size-fits-all solution won't work. In European society during this era, education is indeed a business, albeit one with a unique purpose.

Those investing in education at this time are by no means philanthropists; they have specific motives.

Children from lower-class families aren't even eligible for education, even at the cheapest church schools, as they can't even afford the most basic supplies like paper and pens.

In this kind of widespread environment, who has the capacity to sponsor impoverished students? It's not a matter of one or two individuals, nor is it tens of thousands, but rather millions of people in desperate need of education.

The reality is much harsher than what's recorded in textbooks, and being in this era, Franz is acutely aware that it's a dark era.

Chapter 120: The Dark Ages

Who would have thought that in the factories of capitalists, there were three or four-year-old child laborers? And it's not just one or two, but hundreds or even thousands of them.

The lifespan of these child laborers usually did not exceed twenty years. Entering the dark and harsh factories at such a young age subjected their bodies to severe abuse.

Among these, the situation was most insane in the United Kingdom. As the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, the United Kingdom had a small population and limited labor force. In order to reduce costs, capitalists turned their attention to women and children.

The wages of one adult male worker could hire two female workers or employ 3 to 7 child laborers, with lower wage expenses for younger children.

Compared to adults, child laborers were easier to manage and suppressing strikes was simpler. Many factories with less demanding labor intensity were filled with a large number of child laborers.

The sources of these child laborers were diverse. Some came from impoverished families who, out of desperation, sent their children to work in factories. Others were purchased from trade markets.

Yes, at this time, child labor was also treated as a commodity. Orphanages, charitable organizations, and human traffickers were the largest sellers, and a small percentage of children were even sold by their parents.

The blood-stained factories were the most accurate reflection of this era's society.

On one hand, they profited insanely by exploiting child labor, and on the other hand, they portrayed themselves as gentlemen, donating to the church and investing in education under the pretense of supporting impoverished students.

Franz couldn't be bothered to comment on it. He didn't believe that capitalists were so benevolent. Just take a look at the hidden profits in these private schools, and it becomes apparent.

The advanced nature of the capitalist political system was something that would only be realized in the future. In this era, capitalist systems within countries were often even more exploitative than the feudal nobility.

Since the minimum wage law was enacted in Austria, the interest of Austrian capitalists in child labor has significantly decreased, which is also related to the national conditions.

Austria was just beginning to industrialize, and the demand for labor wasn't too high, while there was an abundance of the workforce.

After the implementation of the Minimum Wage Law, capitalists found that the wages they had to pay to child labor had significantly increased and were not much lower than those for adults. This reduced the appeal of employing child labor.

Especially after the government bankrupted several typical cases directly due to violations, everyone remembered that Austria also had a Minimum Wage Law.

Prime Minister Felix jokingly said, "Your Majesty, since we implemented the Minimum Wage Law, the number of homeless children in the country has dramatically increased. Now, the government has become the world's largest daycare center.

According to our statistics, as of three days ago, we have taken in a total of 38,600 children, and this number is still increasing.

It seems that capitalists are ready to give up using child labor, and now they need us to clean up the mess for them."

On the surface, taking in so many orphans may be seen as a burden for the government, but politically, it's very beneficial.

In ancient Austria, the nobility was deeply influenced by the knightly spirit, and as long as it didn't affect their own interests, they were willing to show compassion to the weak.

Now, the Austrian government stepping in to shelter these homeless children puts them in a morally advantageous position in public opinion and also allows them to condemn the heartless capitalists.

Being a "black-hearted capitalist" in Austria is a form of political correctness. As the industrial revolution advances, the power of the bourgeoisie will rapidly grow.

Currently, the Austrian government relies on the aristocracy to suppress the bourgeoisie, but in the future, they may not be able to keep them in check. The growing bourgeoisie, with increased strength, will sooner or later reach out for political power.

Preparing in advance to limit the bourgeoisie is indeed very necessary.

After all, these are all facts, and the media's job is to expose social realities.

The more scandals and the worse the reputation of the capitalists, the more advantageous it is for the Austrian government. In the future, if the bourgeoisie dares to cause trouble, Franz doesn't mind letting them experience what the "Iron fist of the Austrian people's dictatorship" is all about.

Franz thought for a moment and said, "Let's leave this issue to the Ministry of Education. Count von Thun und Hohenstein, recruit enough teachers as soon as possible and get these homeless children into compulsory education.

The government will establish orphanages in major cities specifically for housing homeless children. Some impoverished families cannot afford to raise their children, and those children can be sent to these facilities.”

That’s about all he could do. After completing compulsory education, apart from the one percent of geniuses who could continue to secondary school, these children would have to enter society.

Reality was indeed very harsh. Even after completing compulsory education, these children would only be around twelve or thirteen years old. In the eyes of future generations, it would be seen as child labor exploitation.

Unfortunately, this was the time of the first industrial revolution, and factories worldwide were driven by the need to accumulate primitive capital. Compared to children as young as three or four working in factories, this was considered progress.

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The most important aspect of any law is its enforcement. Compulsory education had become the highest priority national policy of the Austrian government, and therefore, cracking down on the use of child labor by capitalists became an inevitable choice.

Banning child labor entirely was an impossible task. Not only would capitalists resist it, but the lower-income families would also struggle to comply.

In this era, having many children was common among ordinary people. Some families had five or six children, and others even had a dozen or more. How could they afford to raise them all?

If it weren’t for Franz’s understanding of the social situation and the government’s willingness to bear all the expenses of compulsory education, blindly enacting a compulsory education law could have led to another tragic situation for many families.

Vienna.

As the heart of Austria and the birthplace of the Labor Protection Law, the Minimum Wage Law also began its promotion from here.

After the suppression of the Hungarian uprising, the Austrian Empire entered a period of relative peace. The government abolished local tariffs, ended serfdom, and opened up vast rural markets. Vienna’s industrial and commercial sectors began to flourish.

However, Daniel, the owner of a hydraulic cotton spinning mill, did not feel pleased despite the growing daily orders. As the largest victim of the Minimum Wage Law, his cotton spinning factory had a relatively low labor intensity.

With the use of machinery, the physical and technical requirements for workers had decreased. All they needed to do was to handle the threading and cutting of the cotton threads.

In order to reduce labor costs, Daniel had naturally learned from the successful experience of his British counterparts and extensively hired cheaper labor, women and children, to work in his factory.

However, that was no longer an option now. With the Minimum Wage Law in place, child labor in Austria was no longer a cheap option.

Although labor costs were low during this period, and even though they had substantial profits despite the increase in labor expenses, the greed of capitalists knew no bounds.

Directly violating the law was something Daniel dared not do. Real-life examples were right in front of him. One of his competitors had been fined to the point of bankruptcy by the Austrian government for ignoring labor protection laws.

Looking at the factory manager he had “generously” hired, Daniel asked, “Vincent, do you have any way to reduce our labor costs?”

“Sir, how about we switch to a piecework system and set tasks that the workers can't complete, and then deduct their wages?” Vincent suggested cunningly.

Daniel shook his head and said, “It won't work. I've consulted with a lawyer, and the government's reference standards are set by state-owned enterprises. If we exceed these standards with a piecework system, we have no right to deduct wages.

Even if we sign contracts, it won't help. The Austrian government will deem them invalid contracts, and we'll face fines starting at a minimum of a thousand times the amount, with no upper limit.”

Since the March Revolution erupted, the Austrian government had become increasingly hostile towards capitalists, and their previous connections held no sway anymore.

Now, even Daniel spoke with caution. If this had happened in the past, he would have already mobilized with his fellow industrialists to resist such measures, but now he dared not.

If the Austrian government deemed him part of a conspiracy, his head could be on the chopping block in no time. The recent purge in Vienna, which had occurred a few months ago, was still fresh in his memory.

If he hadn't been fortunate enough to fall ill during that period and missed attending the gatherings of capitalists, he might not have been able to continue his work here now.

Capital knows no borders but that's something for the future. In this era, capitalists dare not move recklessly. Without powerful connections, relocating to a foreign place could lead to your complete downfall.

Despite his deep dissatisfaction with the Austrian government, Daniel continued doing business in Vienna. If the profits were slightly lower, so be it. Taking risks was not an option.

Compared to Western European countries like Britain and France, Austria had relatively harmonious labor costs. After all, Austria was an exporter of grain, and the cost of living was lower, with an ample labor force.

In the capitalist world, the highest average wages were in London, about one-third to one-half higher than Vienna's, even after Austria implemented labor protection laws.

Where there are policies from above, there are countermeasures from below.

Daniel still considered ways to reduce labor costs, such as cutting overtime pay, deducting time for workers to use the restroom, and deducting time when the machinery stopped running.

These were standard practices. More cunning capitalists even placed free restrooms several kilometers away from the factory and set up paid restrooms within the factory premises.

Some capitalists went further by making shoddy work uniforms and selling them to workers at high prices.

With expensive work uniforms, high-priced food naturally followed. Capitalists prohibited workers from bringing their own food into the factory and then profited by selling them overpriced food.

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In short, as long as they could think of it, capitalists would do anything to reduce labor costs.