

Roman Empire 121

Chapter 121: Austrian Civil Service Examination

The Austrian government has been very busy lately. It needs to fulfill its promises of military honors and rewards after the war has ended. It also recently took over properties from the church, which require management. Additionally, there's a need for widespread compulsory education, which requires strong cooperation from local governments...

With so much on the government's plate, it's facing a shortage of manpower. When there's a personnel shortage, external recruitment becomes necessary.

In this world, there can be a shortage of all kinds of talents, but one thing that will never be in short supply is people who want to become government officials.

Of course, there may be exceptions in harsh conditions, but in Austria itself, that is simply impossible.

It was unknown how many noble children are currently unemployed at home, struggling to find opportunities, gradually regressing into idleness.

Now that an opportunity has arisen, they naturally want to join the ruling group.

It shouldn't be mistaken that grassroots civil servants are not in demand. For fallen nobility, finding a respectable job is not easy.

Austria is conservative, and the vast majority of young aristocrats are unwilling to work for capitalists, as it would damage their family's reputation.

They would rather join the military and slowly climb the ranks than work under capitalists for a handsome salary, as it would make them feel insulted and compromise their dignity.

Initially, when Franz proposed a nationwide civil service examination, it faced strong opposition from the government. After analyzing the practical situation, he wisely abandoned this tempting idea.

In this era, intellectuals are not common, mainly consisting of nobility, capitalists, and the middle class. Commoners with the qualifications to participate in such an examination are extremely rare, and even if there were such individuals, Franz would not dare to use them.

As a qualified monarch, the first priority is to ensure the loyalty of one's subordinates. As for their abilities, ordinary civil servants don't need exceptional skills. As long as their intelligence is above the passing grade and they can execute their superiors' orders, they are qualified for the job.

So this time, they selected candidates from among the nobility. All in all, the nobility generally had a higher overall level of ability, and they had inherited some life experiences from their elders that nouveau riche individuals couldn't compare with.

Of course, the Emperor still had his reputation to uphold, so there was still a civil service examination, but this was a uniquely Austrian civil service examination that excluded most people from qualifying.

For example: educational requirements starting from secondary school, passing a social knowledge level examination, having correct political beliefs, no records of misconduct, no criminal records for

the past three generations, industry avoidance policies for parents and relatives, and children not being eligible for supervisory positions...

If it weren't for the nobility's children getting preferential treatment and going directly to the second round, this civil service examination could be considered fair overall.

At least theoretically, the government's eligibility criteria made sense. When these restrictions were published in the newspapers, there was an uproar in public opinion.

What surprised Franz was that these blatantly exclusionary conditions were seen as a significant improvement in Austrian government reform by the outside world, and public opinion gave it high praise.

If he wasn't certain that he didn't manipulate public opinion, he would have suspected that all these positive reviews were the work of paid comments.

There were, of course, people who opposed these conditions. Many young students had their reservations, and given their participation in protests and criticism of the government, these activities might hinder their ability to apply for civil service positions.

However, they had to keep their opinions to themselves. Since the Ministry of Education had strengthened the quality management of school education, their academic workload had increased significantly.

Franz introduced the magic weapon for success known as "examinations" to the Austrian education system. Monthly exams, mid-term exams every six months, and annual exams were implemented.

The results of each exam were publicly posted, so anyone not afraid of losing face could give it a try. The future graduation certificate would include the academic performance during their time at school.

If you fail three consecutive times, you'll likely have to repeat the grade. If repeating doesn't work out, then you'll have to wait for the school to advise you to leave.

Of course, wealthy and willful tycoons can continue to play; if they don't want to repeat, they just need to pay.

The first time requires a fee of 5,000 florins, the second time costs 10,000 florins, the third time demands 20,000 florins...

If you have the money, you can certainly buy your way through; Austrian universities don't mind selling degrees. If you have enough money, you can even modify your academic performance.

Under the high pressure from the Ministry of Education, Austrian students spend their days "happily" studying.

Dare to skip class? You'll be expelled directly. If you have the courage to try, see what good consequences await you after being expelled from school.

The most restricted bourgeoisie collectively remains silent at this time. The Austrian government has been targeting them for quite some time, and there are plenty of restrictive measures in place.

There's no way around it; their fellow conspirators planned that damn March Revolution, and their success has infuriated the Austrian government. Even though those bastards are either dead or gone, the government clearly still holds a grudge.

They were all clever people with extensive experience in social struggle, and they are aware they can't stick their necks out right now. Even if they have some ideas, it would have to wait until things calm down.

Franz foresaw these circumstances in advance. What worries him most is that someone might oppose the privileges of the nobility and trigger domestic unrest.

Originally, the nobility already had the upper hand, and now they go directly to the second round, leaving no chance for others. It's simply not giving others an opportunity.

As it turns out, Franz worried too much. The vast majority of the Austrian people aren't that politically aware. No matter what conditions are set, it's impossible for them to have a chance. They simply don't care as long as it doesn't affect them personally.

Regarding the de facto prohibition of capitalists becoming government officials, everyone strongly agrees. These guys are shady enough already; imagine what they'd do if they were in government positions?

Well, since nobody is expressing any objections, Franz will just assume there aren't any.

The matter has been settled, whether it's through written exams or direct interviews, how each department recruits people, Franz can't be bothered to get involved; he just wants results.

The bureaucrats aren't fools either. The individuals they are currently recruiting are expected to be productive, and they are merely low-level civil servants. How could they possibly bring in a group of aristocrats to cause trouble?

If they don't perform well, it means they'll be held accountable by higher-ranking officials. The Austrian government doesn't have temporary staff positions to use as scapegoats. If subordinates don't perform well, their immediate superiors will suffer as well.

Since Prime Minister Felix took office and cleaned up the Austrian bureaucracy, the government's efficiency has improved significantly.

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The Sch?nbrunn Palace is located in the southwest of Vienna, and its construction began in the 17th century. It underwent several expansions and was finally completed during the reign of Queen Maria Theresa.

With 1441 rooms and a total area of 26,000 square meters, the palace incorporates various regional cultural styles and is second in extravagance only to the Palace of Versailles.

Franz was born in the Sch?nbrunn Palace, and perhaps influenced by memories from his past life, he held a unique affection for this place. After ascending to the throne, he frequently resided here.

Inside the palace, there are dedicated areas designed in Eastern classical styles, such as Chinese rooms adorned with inlaid rosewood, ebony, and ivory, as well as Japanese-style rooms decorated with gold leaf and lacquer.

The interior of the rooms is adorned with decorations in a unified Eastern style. Ceramic objects are embedded in the walls and ceilings. Among the diverse array of ceramics displayed, you can find Chinese celadon, Ming Dynasty Wanli period polychrome porcelain plates, and unique flower vases, to name a few.

Before reincarnating, picking up any of these items could have elevated him from a mediocre life, but now they are displayed before him in wholesale quantities.

Despite the initial excitement, Franz didn't feel much about them anymore. What's the big deal about antiques? At his current status, anything he used would be considered an antique or artifact in later generations.

The condition, of course, is that he continues to succeed. If he were to fail, the value of these objects would plummet.

Franz is well aware that the luxurious Schönbrunn Palace is essentially an unfinished project. When it was originally designed, its scale and grandeur rivaled that of the Palace of Versailles, but due to financial limitations, the original design couldn't be fully realized.

As a person with principles, Franz doesn't mind eventually completing the palace's original design, but that's a matter for the future. At present, he is unwilling to invest money in it.

It's unclear exactly when it started, but Franz has developed a fondness for sitting beneath a giant camphor tree, sipping tea, and reading newspapers.

"Your Majesty, Prince Windisch-Grätz requests an audience."

The melodious voice of a maid interrupted Franz's wandering thoughts, bringing him back to the present.

"Bring him in and fetch an extra chair," Franz instructed.

In informal gatherings with his ministers, Franz maintained an atmosphere of mutual respect. Chairs were casually placed, and everyone was free to sit or stand as they pleased. Coffee, tea, or juice—whatever they preferred; they could simply ask a servant to provide.

Unless it's their first meeting, Franz usually keeps his greetings brief. Afterwards, it's a matter of "you do as you please" because one shouldn't expect the great Emperor to engage in pleasantries every day.

Prince Windisch-Grätz, well aware of Franz's style, swiftly conducted the appropriate courtesies. As a high-ranking nobleman, he possessed his own distinctive manner.

After exchanging greetings and taking a seat, he summoned a cup of coffee from a maid and then began to speak.

"Your Majesty, with the expansion of personnel across government departments, our retired officers need to be accommodated as well. How about assigning them to certain positions?"

In Austria, it was a common practice to promote military officers to civil positions. For example, in Franz's current cabinet, all members were former military officers.

This was the choice of most nobles in the German regions. Adult offsprings were required to serve in the military, even if it was only nominally, just to fulfill the formality.

Given the prevailing environment, transitioning from the military to civilian positions was quite common and unproblematic. When Prince Windisch-Grätz made this request, he was essentially looking to provide preferential treatment.

“In principle, there should be no problem. However, their suitability for specific positions will need to be assessed before any decisions are made,” Franz calmly responded.

Prince Windisch-Grätz continued to advocate, “Your Majesty, these retiring officers have demonstrated their military achievements, and they...”

“I understand all of this. It’s precisely for their own good that I believe they should be placed in positions that suit them.

If they are given roles they are not qualified for, I don’t see it as a reward, but rather as setting them up for failure.

The Austrian government is no longer the same as it used to be. Now, every government employee is expected to be responsible for their work.

If there are problems due to their own lack of ability, they will also be held accountable. Do you want these heroes to suffer a tarnished reputation for the rest of their lives?” Franz asked in response.

Feeling that perhaps he had expressed his thoughts rather strongly, Franz added, “Instead of discussing this here, why don’t we consider providing some training for retired officers at the Ministry of War? If they acquire the necessary skills, they’ll have a better chance to compete with others, don’t you think?”

Franz did indeed favor giving preferential treatment to military personnel, but the fundamental principle of equal opportunity couldn’t be discarded. If their capabilities weren’t up to par, they would have to take on simpler roles.

Chapter 122: The Rise of Napoleon III

France.

After suppressing the June Rebellion, the bourgeois republican government embarked on a series of ill-conceived actions.

In an attempt to appease various interest groups, the bourgeois government chose to compromise with the royalists and religious authorities. First, they abandoned the economic agenda of the bourgeois republicans, and then they reinstated the tax system of the July Monarchy.

On July 3rd, the French government announced the abolition of the nationalization plans for the railways. On July 11th, the French government reinstated high taxes on newspapers and publishers. On August 9th, the French government began to restrict freedom of the press and assembly...

These actions had a more significant impact on the general population and were indeed detrimental. The French government’s decisions continued to escalate:

On August 30th, the government implemented a supplementary tax law, which imposed additional taxes on those aged 45 and above.

On September 6th, the government abolished the 8-hour workday, extending working hours to 12-14 hours.

On September 7th, the government abolished the Labor Protection Law and the Minimum Wage Law...

The French government's actions, including imposing taxes and abolishing laws that protected the interests of the working class, understandably sparked widespread discontent among the French people.

The French citizens were not ones to be easily pushed around. Workers and farmers who had their interests harmed naturally began to resist, and starting from September, uprisings occurred in 23 different provinces.

With such a self-destructive government in place, it was no surprise that the French people used their votes to oust the bourgeoisie government in the upcoming presidential elections.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III) miraculously obtained 75% of the votes. It's important to note that according to Article 44 of the French Constitution, individuals who have lost their French citizenship cannot be elected as president.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte not only lost his French citizenship but also acquired Swiss nationality and even worked as a special constable in Britain. However, such a person managed to become the President of France.

It's rather amusing when you think about it. The aristocrats naturally opposed the republican government and voted for Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, whom they believed had no chance of winning. Similarly, the bourgeoisie, whose interests had been harmed during the revolution, cast their votes for him.

These groups alone did not constitute an absolute majority, but after a period of turmoil, French peasants were reminded of the good times during the era of Napoleon, and so they supported Louis Napoleon Bonaparte.

Of course, there's more to this story than meets the eye, and Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power was not solely due to these factors.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte portrayed himself as the rightful heir of his uncle, Napoleon I, and a staunch advocate of "national unity." He presented an provocative agenda and made enticing promises to various social classes, including:

He pledged "religious freedom" for Catholics.

He assured workers of "eliminating unemployment," "granting amnesty to those arrested in the June Rebellion," "enforcing labor protection laws," and "implementing an eight-hour workday."

He promised farmers "reduced taxes," "protection of small land ownership," and the aim of "eradicating poverty."

He aimed to appease the bourgeoisie with "low-interest loans" and "tax reductions," among other incentives.

However, behind the scenes, Bonaparte was actively working to expand his political influence, forging alliances with royalists and religious authorities, purchasing support from key figures like Morny and Thiers, promoting his loyal confidant Persigny, and utilizing the "Le pouvoir est dans la rue" to further his cause.

He spared no expense, spending not only his own 300,000 francs but also withdrawing 1 million francs from an English bank manager to establish newspapers, distribute pamphlets, compose music scores, and generate public opinion for his election campaign to overcome his opponents.

Due to receiving financial support from the English, the government of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte had to align itself with the London government during its future tenure.

The ascent of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte signaled the beginning of new internal conflicts within the French government and indicated the possibility of new complications in Franco-Austrian relations.

Vienna.

“Your Majesty, after the election of President Louis Napoleon Bonaparte in France, he immediately tore up the Franco-Austrian secret treaty, citing the French government’s commitment to peace. It seems that he may not have good intentions towards the Empire,” Metternich said, furrowing his brow.

It was hard enough to use the Franco-Austrian secret treaty to win over the French, only to have it destroyed by Louis Napoleon Bonaparte.

Franz pondered for a moment and replied, “The Franco-Austrian secret treaty is in the interest of the French people. Even if we lost the best opportunity to annex the Kingdom of Sardinia, having the Franco-Austrian alliance can still help the French government resolve diplomatic challenges.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte is not a fool. His hasty decision to tear up the treaty may have other factors behind it. Let’s investigate whether the British are involved in any schemes.”

John Bull was so notorious that he immediately became the target of suspicion.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Metternich replied.

During this period, Austria faced a relatively relaxed international environment. Even if the French tore up the treaty, it wouldn’t greatly affect Austria.

Under Franz’s leadership, the Austrian government had deepened its alliance with Russia, further developed relations with Britain, and negotiations for a renewed alliance with Prussia were underway.

The British had their motives for disrupting the Franco-Austrian relationship as well. The British Empire had evolved significantly and was no longer the Great Britain of thirty years ago.

With increased power, their political ambitions naturally expanded too. If Austria were to reestablish the Vienna System, the British would find themselves excluded from European politics once again.

From a standpoint of self-interest, the Vienna System had maintained stability in the European continent for three decades, and Austria seemed to be facilitating British interests rather than its own.

Without European affairs to tie up their resources, the British would have the capacity to expand externally and establish a vast colonial empire.

“Your Majesty, if it was the British who took action, should we consider retaliation?” Felix, the Prime Minister, asked with concern.

“We have time; let’s wait for the right opportunity,” Franz replied calmly.

During this era, Austria had little reason to fear the British Empire. They had long been marginalized on the European continent. And the British were also engaged in a competition for hegemony with the Russians and had not yet achieved their dominance in later time.

Following the code of conduct of the great powers, an incident like this would usually warrant retaliation. However, Franz was not one to act on impulse. Retaliating against the British or the French might provide momentary satisfaction, but it wouldn’t yield substantial benefits.

It was better to remember the incident, keep it as a pretext, and wait for a more advantageous opportunity to create obstacles for them in the future.

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Paris.

After tearing up the Franco-Austrian secret treaty, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte began to regret his decision.

The intention to influence Italy was essential for the internal interest groups in France. The Franco-Austrian secret treaty was just their first step. If it weren’t for the June Rebellion, France might have already occupied half of the Kingdom of Sardinia.

Now, by tearing up this advantageous treaty for France, he naturally incurred the dissatisfaction of many people, which was undoubtedly an additional burden for Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, who urgently needed to consolidate his regime.

The support of the British was indeed crucial, but it was still secondary to interests. If Louis Napoleon Bonaparte couldn’t satisfy these interest groups, even as an elected president, he might be at risk of being ousted.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was skilled in political maneuvering. On one hand, he made promises to interest groups about returning to Italy, and on the other hand, he implemented some positive reform policies, such as abolishing the supplementary tax decrees from the republican government and reducing taxes on newspapers and publishers...

While implementing domestic reforms, he also sought to improve diplomatic relations externally. Apart from cozying up to the British, he sent the Marquis of Trentham on diplomatic missions to various European countries in preparation for the restoration.

Chapter 123: Beautiful Misunderstanding

On December 12, 1848, the far-reaching civil service examination began in Austria, marking a fundamental shift in the way talent was selected in the country.

Although this examination still involved internal competition among the nobility, having competition was better than having none at all.

Here, the fallen nobility had the opportunity to regain their position of influence, and the Austrian government once again gained their support.

If this level of competition were placed in later times, many people would probably be celebrating. However, in this era, many people are still complaining about the high pressure.

Inside a small tavern in Vienna, a young man in his twenties lamented, "Damn it, Raul, do you know what the Ministry of Finance is up to this time? We've already made it to the second round, so why another exam?"

"Oh, come on, Weigel. Everyone knows we're exempt from the second-round exams. I heard that more than eight thousand people applied to the Ministry of Finance, but they're only hiring 876. That's a ten-to-one acceptance rate."

"If you're afraid of the competition," Raul said with a cheerful smile as he took a sip of wine, "you can always apply for a grassroots teaching position. There are more slots available there, and fewer people applying."

He wasn't worried about the exams at all. Back in school, he was an honor student, and compared to his friend Weigel, who struggled with academics, he had plenty of confidence in passing the test.

Cheating on the exams? You don't even need to think about it. Nor do you need to look at the kind of people eligible to take the exams. If a group of nobles want to cause trouble, who can possibly control them?

If you have powerful connections, you would have already secured a position in the civil service. Why bother competing here?

"Forget it," Weigel shook his head and said, "I don't want to live in the countryside without bars or friends. That would be the death of me!"

Compared to positions in government departments with real power, the teaching positions recruited by the Ministry of Education were much less desirable. Many people's expressions turned sour when they heard they would have to go to the countryside to teach.

The plan was to recruit fifty thousand teachers, but in the end, fewer than twenty thousand people applied. In order to recruit enough teachers, the Ministry of Education had to build schools in the outskirts of towns.

Since the government covered all compulsory education costs, they could manage the students centrally and even implement a boarding system if necessary.

In most areas, the government had confiscated a significant amount of property from various dissident groups, and with some modifications, these properties could be repurposed as school buildings.

Even so, there were still not many applicants for primary school teaching positions, and in the end, the Ministry of Education had to reduce the number of recruits.

After all, it was impossible to immediately provide compulsory education nationwide. It would take time for gradual expansion, and if there weren't enough teachers, they could be trained over time. The Ministry of Education had already opened its teacher training program to external applicants.

"Well, it's a matter of competition," Raul said with an exaggerated tone. "You should know that the most fiercely competitive position is that of a Senate Secretary. They're

only hiring two people, and yet there are over eight hundred applicants, with the number still increasing.

My goodness, the chances of passing are less than one in four hundred, and there are still people daring to apply. You have to admire their courage.”

A man nearby chimed in, saying, “What’s so surprising about it? Senate Secretaries serve the Cabinet government, rubbing shoulders with top brass every day. There’s much greater potential for advancement in the future.

Everyone wants to make it big, and if by some stroke of luck they get in, they’ll hit the jackpot. If they don’t, well, they’ve just wasted some registration fees.”

Raul pondered and said, “That said, I’m starting to feel tempted. After all, the exam schedules for different departments aren’t all the same. It wouldn’t hurt to give it a try.”

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This civil service exam was not conducted uniformly because different departments had varying talent needs, and Franz did not intend to recruit a bunch of generalists.

As a result, the recruitment criteria varied among departments. Some departments had fierce competition, with written and interview exams, while others had too few applicants and weren’t picky as long as candidates met the basic requirements.

Since it was the first time for such exams, no one knew what to expect. Candidates were anxious, and there was no clear direction for last-minute preparation.

Not only did the candidates not know, but even the government departments overseeing the exams were somewhat perplexed. Everyone lacked experience and had to draw on foreign talent selection systems for guidance.

In this era, the patronage system still prevailed in Europe, but Austria was among the front-runners in breaking away from this system.

Surprisingly, the closest resemblance to the Austrian civil service exams was the Imperial Examination System of the Qing Dynasty in China. If time had permitted, the Cabinet was even considering sending envoys to study it.

In the end, Franz personally offered suggestions. While he hadn’t presided over civil service exams in this lifetime, he had participated in them numerous times in his previous life, accumulating a wealth of experience in being rejected.

Sch?nbrunn Palace.

Prime Minister Felix furrowed his brow and said, “Your Majesty, for this civil service exam, we have provided a total of 128,939 positions, with 589,656 applicants. There is a serious issue of individuals simultaneously applying to multiple departments. Additionally, nearly 35,000 positions have received no interest, most of which are concentrated in the education sector.

Considering this situation, the government has decided to cancel these positions with no applicants and to prohibit individuals from applying to multiple departments, only recognizing their earliest application.”

Austria's civil service exam this time was naturally not as specific as in the internet age, where positions were divided down to the very specifics.

At this point, candidates were only applying to departments, and the final specific positions would be determined based on actual needs. Apart from a few departments that were hiring only a handful of people and specifying exact roles, everything else remained unknown.

For instance, those who applied to the Ministry of Finance could end up staying in Vienna, going to Croatia, or becoming national tax inspectors traveling across the country. The specific job assignments would only be known after the exams concluded.

Hearing about so many unfilled positions, Franz couldn't help but rub his temples. It was his concern about remote positions going unstaffed that led him to consolidate all recruitment under the various departments, with the final distribution to be determined later.

However, he hadn't anticipated that even this approach wouldn't gather enough applicants. At this point, he was considering whether to transfer some personnel from other departments to fill the vacancies.

After some hesitation, he ultimately abandoned this idea. Forcing people into positions wouldn't be pleasant. It would surely lead to resentment and potentially affect the integrity of the government team if that bitterness carried over into their work.

"Any unfilled positions can be canceled altogether, and if we have a shortage, we can train our own people. I suspect that even if they pass the exams, many won't want to go to remote areas.

If they don't want to go, that's their choice, and we shouldn't force them. After all, don't we have demobilized soldiers in the military? These remote areas may not appeal to the children of nobility, but soldiers shouldn't have an issue with them, right?

We can select literate soldiers, provide some training, and have them serve as grassroots civil servants in remote regions.

As for the issue of individuals applying to multiple positions, let's let it slide this time. We didn't establish any rules beforehand, so their actions are technically legal. Consider it a lesson learned.

However, once they pass an exam for one department, they cannot continue to participate in the exams for other departments, and the application fee will not be refunded."

Franz didn't bring up the issue of transitioning military officers. During this era, most Austrian military officers came from noble backgrounds. Even if they themselves had lost their noble title, their parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts were likely to be nobles.

As aristocratic descendants, they received different treatment. Their rank in the military before retirement translated into equivalent status in their civilian roles.

In other words, in the military, they were officers, and after transitioning, they remained officials. If they were incapable of performing their duties, they might be demoted, but their salary and benefits would not be reduced.

Of course, this was limited to those with military achievements. Officers without such achievements did not enjoy such favorable treatment upon transitioning.

Franz's proposal to select talent from among the soldiers for training also applied exclusively to those with military achievements. Enlisted soldiers without combat honors were naturally not within the scope of this training program.

Regarding candidates who applied to multiple departments, Franz was quite understanding. He had experienced it himself in the past – everyone wanted an extra chance, an additional choice. However, he realized that this would increase the workload for the recruiting departments.

Franz had his principles. Since the government hadn't made things clear beforehand, he couldn't shift the blame onto others. If it meant more work, so be it. He believed that if you dug a hole, you should be responsible for filling it.

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With the government's sudden cancellation of over 35,000 positions, the ratio of applicants to positions finally rose to 2:1, indicating a rather fierce competition.

Recruiting departments were still grappling with creating their exam papers, while European public opinion was abuzz.

Mainstream media outlets published various opinions, both in support and against the Austrian civil service exam. In any case, Austria's civil service exam became the focal point of European society.

Engels published an article in the 'Rheinische Zeitung', wholeheartedly praising the Austrian government's civil service examination system.

The reason is quite simple. The eligibility criteria set by the Austrian government excluded the bourgeoisie but did not limit the working class or the peasant class.

In theory, as long as they had the required qualifications, individuals from these backgrounds could enter the government system through the selection process.

Combined with Austria's recent proposal for compulsory education, many left-leaning individuals believed that the Austrian government was actively reforming and preparing to incorporate the working class into the government.

Well, Franz wasn't about to come out and clarify this beautiful misunderstanding. Having more supporters is always a good thing.

As an emperor, what he needed were people with a reasonable level of loyalty who could help him manage the country effectively. Their backgrounds weren't as important.

It can be said that different nations require different staffing mechanisms based on their unique circumstances. In Austria, relying on the nobility was necessary, while in countries like Britain and France, the bourgeoisie could serve as a strong pillar of the nation.

This is determined by the societal context. In an emerging nation without deeply rooted nobility or a powerful bourgeoisie, the working class and peasant class can also become pillars of the country.

If reforms are undertaken blindly and deviate from the support of one's own class, then Wang Mang is a prime example of the consequences.

Chapter 124: Austrian Economic Circle Plan

During the uproar of the civil service exam, far away in the Papal States, the Austrian army embarked on its journey home with the blessings of Pope Pius IX.

Just as he had ascended to the presidency and was considering using interference in the Papal States to establish his presence, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte had to regretfully make the choice to abandon the plan.

The Austrian army had already completed its mission, and Pope Pius IX showed no intention of switching allegiances to a new master. If the French troops continued further, it would be seen as an invasion.

If the Austrian army had not withdrawn, perhaps Pope Pius IX might have considered using the French as a counterbalance. However, now that they are leaving, why should he make things uncomfortable for himself?

At this point, history took a turn. The French influence did not manage to penetrate deeply into Italy, and through their military intervention in the Papal States, Austria preserved its influence among the Italian states.

This was extremely important for Austria's business and industrial sector. Preserving political influence also meant safeguarding a significant commercial market, injecting a boost into the ongoing industrial revolution.

During a new round of government meetings, Finance Minister Karl Ludwig von Bruck spoke enthusiastically, saying, "The development of industry and commerce depends on the markets. Looking at countries around the world, only the British have completed the industrial revolution, and this was built upon the foundation of their vast colonial territories.

Austria lacks vast colonies. If we want to catch up with the British, we need to establish a market that belongs to Austria.

We have initiated a series of reforms to awaken the domestic market, but this will take time to nurture and will not adequately meet the actual needs of our industrial and business development.

By diplomatic means, establishing a commercial sphere led by Austria will significantly boost our domestic economic development and accelerate our industrialization.

Incorporating regions such as the Kingdom of Naples, the Papal States, Tuscany, Bavaria, Württemberg, and others into this economic sphere, we will create a market with a population of 67 million, becoming the largest economy on the European continent."

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Bringing together the Italian states and Southern German states to form the largest economic entity on the European continent is not only about economics; it also serves to solidify Austria's dominance in Southern Europe politically.

Additionally, it can serve as a blow to the rising Kingdom of Prussia. Once the commercial sphere, centered around Austria, is established, the German Customs Union (Zollverein) will be rendered ineffective.

Due to transportation constraints, even if the Prussians were allowed to join this new economic entity, they wouldn't be able to reach the Italian region. Before a comprehensive railway network is established, the transportation costs alone would render their products uncompetitive.

While they can't access the new market, the existing German market would face competition from Austrian goods. The Kingdom of Prussia of today is not the same as the Kingdom of Prussia twenty years from now, and their current manufacturing industry does not hold a competitive advantage over Austria.

While the plan is promising, implementing it won't be easy. The first challenge is convincing everyone that a shared economic entity is in their best interest.

In any alliance, self-interest is the strongest bond. The economic sphere led by Austria is clearly in Austria's interest, but it may not be as clear-cut for the member states.

Austria's industrial revolution relies on external resources, at least in its initial stages, and this is a fact that cannot be denied.

It's only in the later stages that they can present it as a trade balance and leverage high-value-added products for profit, making it look more attractive to others.

Metternich objected, saying, "Mr. Karl, your plan is indeed quite good, but unfortunately, the success rate of this plan is too low. Whether it's the Italian states or the Southern German states, once they feel excessively exploited, they will jump ship. Austria is not their only option."

These small countries are aligning with Austria for their own interests. If Austria can no longer safeguard their interests, then switching to a different leader is certainly a viable option.

When it comes to relations between nations, loyalty is not to be discussed; it simply doesn't exist. The absence of betrayal is merely due to a lack of sufficient incentives for betrayal.

Finance Minister Karl confidently explained, "But Austria is their best choice! A common economic entity indeed offers us the maximum benefits, but that doesn't mean they won't benefit at all.

At least a portion of those who cooperate with us can reap greater benefits. If we can transform the ruling class into this group of beneficiaries, then everything is feasible.

As long as we can maintain the right balance, the lower classes won't feel it. For example, in the German Customs Union, the common people don't resist the Kingdom of Prussia, do they?

Once the industrial revolution is complete, with our technological advantages, we can further promote balanced trade, effectively concealing this plunder of wealth."

Franz was taken aback by this, as it seemed to be promoting the bourgeoisie.

In the Italian region, industrial development was emerging in the north, but the central and southern regions were largely undeveloped in terms of capitalist economies. The Southern German states weren't much better, experiencing slow economic development and flooded markets with goods from the Kingdom of Prussia.

Now, Austria wanted to establish an economic sphere, which, for the ruling classes of these states, wouldn't necessarily harm their interests. In fact, everyone could benefit from cooperation.

“What about the attitudes of the other great powers? If we push forward with this plan, could it lead to an uncontrollable diplomatic situation?” Felix, the Prime Minister, inquired with concern.

Metternich stood up and paced the room for a moment before providing his response.

“It shouldn’t be a major issue. The mentioned regions are within our traditional sphere of influence, and we haven’t overstepped our boundaries. Therefore, the reactions from other great powers should not be overly drastic.

Not too long ago, the British Foreign Secretary, Palmerston, visited Vienna, and we reaffirmed our respective spheres of influence in the Italian region. Even if the British are displeased, they have no legitimate grounds for interference.

As for the Russians, we can anticipate their support. The Tsarist government is unlikely to be concerned about these minor matters.

Meanwhile, the French are preoccupied with their own problems. Louis Napoleon Bonaparte used questionable means to secure his presidency, and he is unlikely to have the support of the Republicans.

With a Republican-dominated cabinet and parliament opposed to the president, the French are unlikely to pose a significant challenge in the near future.

Prussia may strongly object, but their opinions are inconsequential and will not hinder our actions.”

The statement that the British have no grounds for interference might indeed seem optimistic. Franz was inclined to believe that the British lacked the capacity or the compelling interests to take drastic action.

During this era, the British Empire had no shortage of markets. Being the only industrialized nation, coupled with its vast colonial market, they enjoyed comfortable times.

British investments in Italy were mainly concentrated in the Kingdom of Sardinia, as well as Lombardy and Venice. Very few businessmen would invest significantly in the less developed Southern Italy.

The Italian states were still under feudal monarchies, and the commercial market was not of utmost importance to the British. It wasn’t worth risking a confrontation with Austria over this matter.

Indeed, with the support of the Russians, British opposition would be ineffective. Before the Crimean War, the British had not yet gained universal recognition of their hegemonic status. At least Austria did not acknowledge it.

The attitude of the Kingdom of Prussia was not sufficient to make Austria wary. At this point, they had not yet unified Germany, and they were still not the formidable Second Empire of the future.

In 1848, the Kingdom of Prussia had a population of only around one million, which was less than 40% of Austria’s population. Its economic output was roughly half of Austria’s. (Note: Economic output is not equal to industry.)

“What about Spain?” Franz asked with concern.

While other European countries could be disregarded, the attitude of Spain had to be taken into consideration. In the Kingdom of Naples, Spanish influence was significant, if not greater.

Spain was no longer in the era of the Habsburg dynasty; it was now the Bourbon dynasty under Isabella II's reign. Their stance had to be considered as well.

Metternich explained, "Your Majesty, based on the intelligence we have, there are serious internal conflicts within the Kingdom of Spain, and a revolution could erupt at any time.

We are only establishing a commercial alliance, which does not harm their interests, so the likelihood of Spanish government interference is minimal."

Franz nodded. It was just the most common method of pinching soft persimmons. As long as Austria didn't annex the Kingdom of Naples, the Spanish could accept it.

Moreover, considering Spain's current level of industry, there weren't many industrial products being exported to the Kingdom of Naples.

"Mr. Karl, if we expand our market like this, can our domestic industry keep up? If we can't seize the market immediately, and we end up nurturing a bunch of competitors, we'll lose face," Prime Minister Felix asked with a furrowed brow.

No one should laugh, as Austria's industry during this era was not that impressive. In southeastern Europe, it was quite developed, but it lagged far behind the British and even somewhat behind the French.

"Prime Minister, you can rest assured on this point. Our Ministry of Industry can guarantee to defeat any competitors!" confidently stated Minister of Industry Kaschen-Kubek.

His confidence was based on the initial success of the state-owned enterprise system. In contrast to private businesses pursuing profits, the strategic goal of state-owned enterprises was to complete the industrial revolution as quickly as possible, and profits were considered inconsequential.

The Austrian government hadn't been siphoning profits from these enterprises, and all the profits generated by them were naturally reinvested in technological innovation and expanding production.

After recovering from the damages caused by the war, Austria's manufacturing industry was rapidly on the rise.

This speed is not yet the limit, as long as the government is willing to invest more in it, it can continue to improve.

This was within Franz's expectations. Regardless of how future generations may criticize state ownership, during the initial stage of capital accumulation, state-owned enterprises played a positive role.

As long as the management of these enterprises remains effective, state-owned enterprises with numerous advantages are undoubtedly more competitive than private ones.

The Soviet Union is the best example, rapidly developing and establishing a vast empire within a short period.

As for the issue of later decline, Franz completely dismissed it. If there were to be a decline, one would have to rise first. There are no problems yet, so why worry about the distant future?

If the state-owned economy falters in the future, economic transformation can be considered then. After all, Austria doesn't rely solely on state-owned enterprises; private businesses are also developing.

Once the industrial revolution is complete, unprofitable light industry enterprises can be gradually sold off, and the government can maintain control over industries related to international welfare.

Seeing that no one had any further questions, Franz stated, "If there are no more questions, then let's proceed with the vote on the plan to establish an economic circle centered around Austria. Those in favor, please raise your hands."

Democratic voting wasn't an innovation made by Franz; it had been present in Europe for a long time. He simply learned from the advanced experiences of his predecessors.

In Austria, those eligible to participate in decision-making were ministers and higher-ranking officials, primarily for the purpose of checks and balances.

Franz wasn't someone who sought to consolidate power. He delegated most of the government affairs to his cabinet. To prevent being sidelined, he introduced democratic voting during government expansion meetings.

Ministers and officials of ministerial rank were all personally appointed by the king, making it unlikely for them to be influenced by bribery. They were candidates recommended by cabinet leaders and, while they accepted the leadership of the cabinet, they also had a share of cabinet authority.

Chapter 125: Holy Roman Alliance

Since everyone had no objections, the plan to create the Austrian Economic Circle naturally passed with a high vote.

As for how to implement it, honestly, Franz didn't really know. The times were different, and the situations in each country were different, so many things couldn't be simply copied.

Even when it came to recruiting allies, each one had to be persuaded individually, as the promised benefits might vary for each member.

On this matter, Franz had faith in Metternich. After all, this "Architect of Europe" had extensive experience, and balancing the interests of various parties was his expertise.

In Franz's view, this economic alliance could potentially evolve into a political and military alliance in the future, as their interests would become increasingly intertwined with economic development.

Being prepared for the future was crucial.

For example, the name of the alliance had to be representative. Franz believed that naming it the "Holy Roman Alliance" would be a suitable choice.

"Your Majesty, if we name it the Holy Roman Alliance, it may be emotionally difficult for the Italian states to accept," Prime Minister Felix pointed out after giving it some thought.

“What if we place the alliance headquarters in Rome? We could even put it right next to the Vatican. This way, we can have both ‘Holy’ and ‘Roman’ in the name. Would that be acceptable?” Franz countered.

Metternich cautioned, “Your Majesty, locating the alliance headquarters in Rome could damage the Empire’s reputation within the alliance.”

Franz pondered for a moment and replied, “That’s not crucial. The economic alliance essentially revolves around Austria, and we already have the dominant position. The impact on our reputation is minimal. We can also send a signal to the outside world that this is primarily an economic union, reducing other nations’ wariness.”

“We don’t need to bring up that name directly. We can gather everyone for a meeting to decide where to establish the headquarters. As long as Austria doesn’t compete, what place could be more competitive than Rome?

Once the headquarters is settled, we can have His Holiness the Pope suggest that name. Anything that can expand our influence, Pope Pius IX won’t refuse.”

Titles and names were of little concern to him. If the headquarters of the economic alliance were placed in Vienna, even if everyone agreed, Franz wouldn’t dare to invoke the name of the Holy Roman Empire.

Don’t think that just because the Holy Roman Empire fell many years ago, everyone has forgotten about it. European nations are still very vigilant, and if Austria dares to show any intentions of reviving the Holy Roman Empire, they shouldn’t expect an easy diplomatic path.

For now, playing it this way is acceptable. If they place the headquarters near the Holy Vatican City, right next to the Christian world, it can be called both “Holy” and “Roman.” This name would be reasonable.

“Your Majesty, what benefits does this bring to us?” Metternich asked in confusion.

In other words, this could be seen as a religious version of the Holy Roman Alliance. It has nothing to do with the Habsburg Holy Roman Empire, and it also doesn’t seem to offer many advantages to Austria.

“On the surface, of course, there are no immediate benefits, but in reality, ‘Holy Roman Alliance’ and ‘Holy Roman Empire’ only differ by one word.

If our economy continues to develop, in the future, we can even let the media change the name. For example, we can call it the ‘Holy Roman Economic Empire,’ or simply the ‘Holy Roman Empire.’

These are names the media can use on its own, and we won’t be directly associated with them. If the governments of various countries have objections, they will have to reluctantly accept it.” Franz explained calmly.

The influence of the Holy Roman Empire in Europe is profound, especially in the German regions, where it was known as the First Reich, the only empire recognized by the German states.

This was a huge political asset left behind by the Habsburg dynasty, and Franz wouldn’t miss the opportunity to use it.

The more people heard it, the more they would get used to it. Ordinary folks didn't have the time or inclination to differentiate between "this" Holy Roman Empire and "that" Holy Roman Empire.

Once everyone accepted the idea of the Holy Roman Empire, Austria's annexation of the Southern German states would have a solid popular base.

With economic ties and political influence, there might not even be a need for military force to achieve unification in the future.

Only instruments and names cannot be lent to other people.

— Zuo Zhuan, Battle of An

Franz is using the gap in time to preemptively secure naming rights. As long as Austria can develop and strengthen its advantages over other states, it can gradually establish itself as an established fact.

People's minds change, and the unification of the Italian region and the German region in history both happened because the idea of unity became deeply ingrained in people's hearts.

Without this foundation, the Kingdom of Sardinia would not have had the ability to unify the Italian region, and the Kingdom of Prussia would likely have experienced the suffering of the Habsburg dynasty, being severely defeated by external forces in the German states.

Prime Minister Felix smirked and said, "As long as the people of the German region accept it, even if the governments of the various states don't want to acknowledge it, they won't have a choice when the time comes.

To avoid external interference, it's best for us to proceed in secret. Let's start by signing secret treaties with these states one by one. We can announce them publicly once the agreements are reached."

As a staunch supporter of German unification, Prime Minister Felix was not willing to let any opportunity to expand into the German region slip away.

In his view, the Holy Roman Alliance, or the Holy Roman Empire, was the best tool to counter the Prussian idea of "Lesser Germany."

If Prussia and Austria continue to strengthen their power, the German states will be left with only two options in the future: either to join Lesser Germany under Prussian leadership or to join the Holy Roman Empire under Austrian leadership.

That's right, in the future, it won't be the Holy Roman Alliance but the Holy Roman Empire.

Due to religious beliefs, most of the Northern German States are likely to lean towards the Kingdom of Prussia, but it's a different story for the Southern German States; they naturally lean towards Austria.

Under Franz's influence, Austria has already started to advocate for a Prussian-Austrian alliance to absorb the German region, and this idea is not only finding support within Austria but also among Prussian supporters.

Before the unification of the German region, even the Prussians themselves didn't dare to believe they could achieve it. Frederick William IV's highest goal was only to annex the northern German states.

The Junker aristocrats of Prussia were not as influential in those days as they would be in later years. Sending them to defeat Austria or France might have led to them retreating without engaging in a full-scale war.

It's not a matter of whether to fight or not, but rather the fact that they simply couldn't win.

During the later stages of the Crimean War, the Kingdom of Prussia did consider taking action. With the British, French, and Russian forces locked in a bitter struggle, defeating Austria could have allowed Prussia to unify the German region.

Don't be misled by the later image of Germany's invincible military. That was the future, not the present. The rise of the Kingdom of Prussia only entered a period of rapid development after the reforms of 1848.

At the time, Prussia was still a feudal monarchy, and its military strength was limited by its overall resources and capabilities. Historical successes often hinged on a fair amount of chance, and both the Prussian-Austrian War and the Franco-Prussian War were gambles on the nation's fate.

It's not as straightforward as textbooks might suggest, where victory was achieved solely through superior institutions, compulsory education, or overall national power.

If the Austrian government had not made unfortunate decisions, such as poor personnel choices or military strategy errors, the Prussian-Austrian War might not have concluded as easily. Just a few more months of delay, and Prussia might have found itself in a less favorable position.

The Franco-Prussian War was indeed a dramatic turn of events. Napoleon III, who considered himself a reincarnation of a military genius, rushed into war against the Kingdom of Prussia without full national mobilization. With 220,000 French troops against 470,000 Prussian forces, the outcome was quite predictable.

After the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent unification of Germany, the German military's reputation soared. Their combat capabilities reached their zenith.

Successful nations and their leaders certainly deserve respect, and Franz was wary of the rising power of Prussia.

In his view, he had two options: either disrupt Prussia's path to unification or simply allow Prussia to unify the German region while Austria shifted its development focus elsewhere.

The choice in this matter is not solely up to him; reality has already made the decision. The Austrian people cannot tolerate the loss of their position as leaders in Germany, and the Austrian government cannot bear the political consequences of such a loss.

Given these circumstances, Franz can only proceed along the first path. Simply disrupting Prussia's plans won't be enough; if Austria's energy is already tied up in the German region, they should naturally gain something from it.

The idea of a Prussian-Austrian alliance to partition the German region may sound good in theory. As compensation, Austria could support Prussia's expansion in other directions.

Well, this is purely hypothetical. Apart from teenagers with a vivid imagination, most politicians wouldn't believe that Austria would genuinely support Prussian expansion, especially when Prussia doesn't have a clear expansion direction.

Expanding into Northern Europe - Why don't you ask the Russians?

Expanding into the Low Countries - Would the French agree?

Colonizing overseas territories - Where is our formidable navy?

"The issue of negotiations, our Foreign Ministry will handle that. The current question is, what are the shared interests of this alliance, and what can we use to entice them to join?" Metternich asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

Since it's about binding interests, they must first make everyone see where those interests lie.

"We can follow the example of the German Customs Union and collectively lower tariffs to promote the flow of goods.

We can also allocate the sales rights of certain products to powerful countries as a means of buying their loyalty.

For instance, we possess competitive advantages in agricultural products.

Selling directly would certainly harm the interests of local nobility, but if we let them handle the sales, that issue would no longer exist.

Originally, these states had to import grain from outside sources. What does it matter where they buy it from? With lowered tariffs, everyone's profits would increase," explained Finance Minister Karl.

In simple terms, it's about conceding some benefits to local nobility in exchange for smooth access for Austrian industrial products.

The interests of the nobility are satisfied, and naturally, the interests of the capitalists are sacrificed. These states are still feudal monarchies, with nobility holding the reins of power; buying them means buying the government.

"No, if we do this, how will we ensure the profitability of our agricultural products?" Archduke Louis objected.

The profits in any industry are finite, and every link in this supply chain is extracting its share of profits. If one link takes more, another naturally takes less.

"Don't forget, we can enter the market with lower tariffs, giving us a price advantage. We can also manipulate the alliance to increase tariffs on foreign agricultural products, securing everyone's interests.

Once we've pushed out other agricultural products, we can further expand our total grain exports, potentially even monopolizing the grain imports of these states.

Austria's grain production hasn't reached its limit yet, and there is plenty of uncultivated land available.

The liberation of serfs has increased the motivation of farmers to cultivate crops, and domestic grain production is about to enter a period of significant growth.

If we don't open up new markets, we might face a surplus of domestic grain. If we can't sell it, what's the point of talking about profits?

To open up new markets, sacrificing a bit of immediate profit for a potentially greater future gain, isn't that a viable option?" Finance Minister Karl persuaded.

It's undeniable that his idea makes a lot of sense. Regardless of profits, the grain must be sold first. What's the point of discussing profits when it's sitting unsold at home?

This is not too different from modern-day practices of dumping at lower prices, except that the lower prices are mainly at the wholesale level, and the profits end up in the hands of the elites. Market grain prices may not decrease significantly as a result.

Chapter 126: A Cruel Society

No matter how convincingly Karl argues, the fundamental reality remains unchanged: in order to accelerate industrial development, there must be a willingness to sacrifice agriculture.

The original accumulation of capital is bloody, and while expanding markets abroad, there is also a need for internal exploitation.

This is the destiny of the era, and as a ruler with ambitions of becoming an emperor for the ages, Franz is fated to play this role. On the surface, the Austrian government may not have directly exploited the farmers.

They only imposed a mere 5% agricultural tax, which was among the lowest in continental Europe at the time.

In reality, in addition to the agricultural tax, there was also a 10% tithe collected in the name of the Church.

There couldn't be any more. The Austrian government was primarily dominated by the nobility, and policies had to lean towards the ruling class. It was already quite challenging to get them to pay taxes together.

However, for most common people, they also had to pay a land redemption fee, which was the heaviest burden. Ironically, this burden was voluntary.

The Austrian government did not force peasants to redeem land; it was entirely voluntary. The government's rental income from the land was only 30%, and after deducting taxes, it was only 15%, indicating no intention of oppressive exploitation.

If someone wanted to redeem land, they had to pay a redemption fee equal to 20% of the land's income, payable over forty years or in cash.

If the government had forced peasants to pay this land redemption fee, bearing such a heavy burden, it's likely that many would have been highly resistant, and there could have been widespread discontent.

However, when peasants were allowed to voluntarily purchase land, the situation changed. They felt grateful to the emperor for enabling them to acquire land.

Even if the burden was heavy, people were still better off than in the serfdom era. They could fill their stomachs while also possessing a certain amount of disposable property.

Of course, they also worked harder. Working for nobles was often seen as drudgery, and people would do as little as possible. But now, working for themselves, nobody slacked off. If they could cultivate ten acres of land, they wouldn't settle for just five.

Everyone aimed to earn more money, pay off their land redemption fees early, and enjoy a better life.

That's right; in the eyes of the peasants, having land meant having a good life.

After Franz came to power, the Austrian government simplified its taxation system considerably. Various convoluted taxes were gradually abolished.

Apart from the 5% agricultural tax, other taxes were no longer a concern for the peasants; they wouldn't be levied against them.

The tithe didn't count either; it was collected by the Church and had nothing to do with the great Emperor.

Now, the government wants to use low grain prices to buy the interests of various states' groups, which is beneficial in the long run, increasing Austria's market share in agricultural products.

In modern times, Americans engage in low-price dumping, which proves to be profitable. Even if they don't make money in agriculture, they've gained substantial returns elsewhere.

Indeed, the Americans wouldn't persist in such practices if they were constantly losing money. They aren't in it for charity, and who can bear year after year of losses?

If they wanted to, the Americans could certainly join other major grain-producing countries and collectively raise grain prices. They've done it before. There must be larger interests at play for them to continue low-price dumping.

On the surface, the Austrian government's wholesale of low-priced grain might appear to be detrimental to local interest groups. However, the situation changes when Austria gains control over the grain supply in various states.

Whether the governments of other countries like it or not, they must politically align with Austria, and they have no choice in this matter.

No matter how great the strategic vision may be, the farmers and nobility who initially cultivated grain become the sacrifices, as the Austrian Empire doesn't provide grain subsidies.

"How do we strike the right balance here? If we set the price only slightly lower than international grain prices, it might be acceptable. But if it's significantly lower, it could dampen domestic grain production enthusiasm," Prime Minister Felix remarked with a furrowed brow.

From the perspective of personal interests, he should oppose this measure, but as Austria's prime minister, he couldn't solely consider immediate gains.

Karl's persuasion appeared to have succeeded, as everyone understood that Austrian grain production was about to surge. It was clear that domestic demand alone wouldn't suffice, and if they don't seek markets abroad, they would be left with surplus grain rotting in warehouses.

The people's thinking has indeed become somewhat one-sided. In situations like this, there isn't just one solution. For example, they could consider reducing taxes on agricultural products and increasing competitiveness in grain prices.

Alternatively, they could develop complementary industries such as brewing, livestock farming, or engage in deep processing of grain.

"Prime Minister, this loss is only for the short term, for the next few years. Given the current circumstances, if we lower grain prices by 20% according to international prices, we can enter the market early and seize market share.

Once we dominate the market, we can gradually raise prices. The losses incurred now will be recovered in the future.

Furthermore, the government can encourage the export of processed products, focusing on high-value-added products to safeguard everyone's interests," Karl analyzed earnestly.

This deal is something only the Austrian government dares to do. Other grain-exporting countries don't have as many state-owned enterprises capable of controlling grain export prices.

Capital is profit-driven, and the agricultural sector has a low barrier to entry. Capitalists typically prioritize immediate gains over future profits.

They focus on the present and might not even make it to the future if they get outcompeted by rivals along the way.

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The strategy of "low-price dumping" had been set. It was a strategy driven by the pursuit of interests, and who could resist such temptations?

Franz merely furrowed his brow, signaling his approval. Reality could be cruel, and without sufficient benefits, how could they entice others to join their cause?

Fortunately, in this era, industrialization wasn't as highly regarded, and capitalists had limited influence under the feudal system. Otherwise, the cost of Austria establishing this economic alliance would have been even greater.

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Planning might be easy, but implementing the plan in detail is never that simple. The much-publicized Austrian civil service examination began on December 21, 1848.

To avoid difficulties in supervision and rampant cheating in remote areas, the Austrian government decided to hold all examinations in Vienna.

The first examination was for the Ministry of Finance, not because they wanted to stagger the exams, but because the Austrian government didn't have such a large venue.

Unlike the multitude of schools and classrooms in modern times where exams can be easily accommodated, there weren't as many suitable spaces available back then. Many people had to take their exams in open-air squares.

Even the square in front of Franz's palace was borrowed by the government to serve as an examination venue.

On the rooftop of the Vienna Palace, Franz gazed through a telescope at the candidates queuing up for entry, feeling a myriad of emotions.

There was a time when he was also part of the examination throng, with repeated failures and countless attempts. His fate had already taken a turn before the results of his last attempt came out.

With a sigh, Franz put down his telescope and descended from the castle. By this time, the examinations had already begun.

In the examination hall, candidates were diligently answering questions. Some were deep in thought, some wrote furiously, and some scratched their heads. The invigilators quietly patrolled the aisles.

This was Austria's first civil service examination, and the invigilators were highly professional. However, the pressure they unintentionally imposed on the candidates was immense.

Armed soldiers acted as invigilators, and for those with poor nerves, just the sight of this setup might have been unnerving.

As time ticked away, the bell signaling the end of the exam rang, "Ding, ding, ding."

"Everyone immediately stop writing, leave the examination hall. Violators will have their exam results invalidated," the invigilator's cold voice echoed.

Dejectedly, one by one, the candidates left the examination hall. Clearly, most of them didn't feel confident about their performance, with many leaving large blank spaces on their papers.

Outside the examination hall, there was a clamor as groups of three or five gathered together, lamenting.

"Weigel, how did it go for you?"

"What can I say? Who knows why the Ministry of Finance's questions were so biased? It's like they were testing us on everything. How about you?" Weigel sighed.

Politics, history, culture, economics, military affairs, religion, geography, mathematics, music, fine arts, international events... All these subjects are present on the examination papers.

Although specialized knowledge predominates, the wide range of topics on these exams has seriously dampened everyone's morale.

"Me? I'm preparing for the next exam. Regardless of the position, I must pass one, or else I won't be able to explain it back home," said Raul with a serious expression.

The passing rate for this exam has already been announced, with a high fifty percent. Those who don't pass will belong to the eliminated half.

Nobles are all about face, and openly competing and becoming part of the eliminated group can be quite a blow to their pride. They might find it hard to hold their heads high for a long time.

Fortunately, during this era, there weren't many commoner scholars. Otherwise, if they were to lose to commoners, the pressure they bore would likely be even greater.

"You're worried about not being able to explain things to Elena, aren't you? You've certainly boasted a lot in front of her," Weigel bluntly pointed out.

Having his lie exposed, Raul shrugged it off, saying, "So what? I'm just an underachiever, failing the exam is normal. Having a high-achieving graduate like you from the University of Vienna taking the exam with us is already unfair."

Weigel replied calmly, "Are you trying to say that if I don't pass, you'll laugh at me forever? Don't worry, that won't happen!"

Weigel did have confidence in passing the exam, but what he aimed for was the ranking. Passing with a perfect score versus passing with a minimum score of 50 points made a big difference.

Those with better scores would stay at the headquarters, while those with lower scores would be assigned to other places. This was practically an open secret. It wasn't unfair since everyone's scores were earned through their own efforts.

The Austrian government valued efficiency, and as soon as the exams ended, the grading process began. Once the results were ready, they were immediately posted publicly, and candidates were admitted based on their scores.

If two candidates had the same score, then family connections might come into play. Higher social status often led to preferential treatment, and there wasn't much room for argument.

Chapter 127: Investment Preparation

Christmas.

As the most important holiday in the European world, it couldn't be taken lightly. It was evident that the officials and soldiers of the Papal States were all eager to return for the holiday.

As usual, Franz hosted a Christmas banquet at the imperial palace and invited a group of people to attend.

This was the first Christmas after Franz's coronation, and everyone attached great importance to it. Those who were invited and could make it in time all came.

Relatives, friends, officials from both the military and the government, along with their families, made the number of guests exceed four figures. At the banquet, glasses clinked, and conversations flowed freely, creating a joyful and harmonious atmosphere.

Franz could tell that everyone was putting on a happy facade to give him face, but in reality, they were all bored to death, engaging in dry and lifeless conversations.

Court banquets were all about etiquette and didn't allow for much fun. This was especially true for the children, who couldn't wait for the banquet to end so they could enjoy a happier Christmas.

There was no way around it; even the Emperor himself found it quite tiresome. The tableware gleamed with a golden sheen, and at one point, Franz even suspected it might be gold-plated.

However, a practical test confirmed he was mistaken, as it was indeed made of real gold. The servants wouldn't dare to deceive their Emperor.

Well, Franz usually didn't use these utensils anyway. Typically, he used silverware, which was said to have antibacterial properties.

In that era, Western medicine had progressed beyond primitive practices like bloodletting, but it was still far from advanced. Any illness had the potential to be life-threatening, and being someone who valued his life, Franz made a decisive choice.

After enjoying a sumptuous feast, everyone returned to their own homes. Franz had no intention of keeping everyone together to celebrate Christmas; that would only invite trouble.

He was confident that if the court banquet wasn't a display of social status for these people, most of them would prefer not to attend.

Despite the extravagance of the banquet, it only cost several thousand florins (1 florin \approx 11.69 grams of silver) per event. Those who could attend such an event were certainly not destitute.

With the guests gone, Franz and his family celebrated Christmas Eve together. His younger brothers quickly revealed their true selves; today was a special day, and they could let loose.

Franz couldn't help but envy the carefree nature of his younger brothers. Although he was just 18 years old, he felt like he couldn't let loose anymore. What was even more tragic was that his mother's Christmas wish was for him to get married soon.

Being an emperor and still being pressured to marry? Franz felt like he was in a bizarre situation. However, when he thought about the ages of European royal princesses, he felt a bit relieved. He didn't need to worry about it in the short term.

His primary consort, Princess Sisi (Elisabeth Amalie Eugenie), had just turned 11 years old. Even her older sister was only a year or two older. As for other equally eligible princesses, most of them were quite young, and the older ones were already married.

Nevertheless, Franz didn't dare to let his guard down. He was afraid that with one misstep, he might end up with another loli fiancée.

Pre-arranged marriages were quite popular among the nobility. As the Emperor of Austria, Franz was one of the most eligible bachelors among European nobles, and there were certainly many who were interested in him.

Fortunately, Franz was now the Emperor, and he had a say in personal matters. If he firmly disagreed, no one could force him to agree.

Normally, this issue would be discussed with Empress Sophie, but his father, who suffered from laryngitis, had little say in family matters.

At midnight, the tolling of the clock saved Franz from the topic of marriage. The whole family rose to their feet, lit candles, recited the Bible together, exchanged blessings, and then began singing Christmas carols.

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This year, Christmas in Vienna is exceptionally lively. As the earliest designated public holiday, factories closed for the day.

Capitalists weren't willing to pay triple wages for workers to work overtime today. If you happen to come across a more generous boss, you might even receive a Christmas gift.

Vienna's streets and alleys are now filled with the presence of children singing Christmas carols, going from house to house to share the joy.

This is the time for everyone to showcase their grace. Those who are well-off usually prepare some Christmas gifts in advance, such as candies, melon seeds, and the like, which they distribute to the children who come to sing carols.

This Christmas, Franz's wallet has lightened considerably.

Christmas gifts are a significant expense, and he has given a Christmas gift to every hard-working servant, guard, and attendant in the palace.

Family, friends, government officials, even the soldiers on duty, and the orphans housed by the government, all received a Christmas gift from His Majesty the Emperor.

These gifts, such as candies and melon seeds, may not be valuable individually, but when there are many recipients, it adds up. Franz went to great lengths to win hearts through these gestures.

However, there's always a return for what you give. In this era, people have simple hearts, and when faced with unexpected Christmas gifts, many individuals' loyalty to the emperor soared.

Especially for the orphans under government care, for many of them, this was their first Christmas gift ever, and its impact on them was particularly significant.

The cost, on the other hand, was nearly two hundred thousand florins for a single Christmas. If it weren't for the vast resources of the House of Habsburg, the royal pension alone might not be enough to sustain Franz's extravagance.

The royal pension in Austria had been established relatively recently, calculated as one and a half percent of the Austrian treasury's annual revenue, totaling around five to six million florins each year.

These funds weren't spent by Franz alone; the entire royal family had a share, with his uncle, Ferdinand I, and his wife, receiving one and a half million florins.

Other branches of the royal family also had their allocations, leaving approximately three million florins at Franz's disposal, which he had to use to support a large contingent within the palace.

While economizing was possible, it wouldn't be sufficient for his extravagant lifestyle.

After Christmas, Franz was planning to acquire more assets, but he was struggling to decide what to invest in specifically.

There were many ways to make quick money, but most of them were legally questionable. As a great emperor, Franz couldn't afford to break the rules.

At one point, Franz even considered selling study materials for civil service exams, but he quickly dismissed the idea as it was too unscrupulous and wouldn't yield significant returns.

Agriculture was not a consideration either, despite the House of Habsburg having plenty of land. The returns in this field were too low, even if economic crops were cultivated.

Franz ruled out anything related to "drugs" as it would tarnish his illustrious image.

Selling weapons could have been an option, but unfortunately, arms trade was heavily influenced by political factors, and Austria's influence in European conflicts was limited at the time.

The remaining option was the financial industry, but Franz lacked knowledge in this field. During this era, the financial industry was filled with hidden traps, and being swindled could be devastating.

Even an emperor was not immune to being taken advantage of when dealing with profit-driven capitalists.

After careful consideration, Franz decided to invest in the food processing industry, believing that businesses aligned with government policies often had promising prospects.

Once the Holy Roman Economic Alliance is established, it can immediately experience explosive growth. With the House of Habsburg's connections, there would be no worries about establishing a sales network.

The diverse range of snacks from the future cannot be produced. But popcorn, french fries, biscuits, canned goods, and beverages which are products with no technical complexity, are very easy to produce.

Additionally, mining could be a promising industry, not demanding much technical know-how. With a strong backing and the discovery of a rich mining site, one could essentially make money effortlessly.

This seems tailor-made for Franz. At least when it comes to mining in Austria, he would only need to locate the mines and start earning money. He wouldn't need to worry about interference, as nobody would dare to disrupt the Emperor's financial ventures.

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In no time, Franz had written down a bunch of business projects in his notebook, including how to conduct market research on how to implement them.

One common trait among time travelers is their tendency to stay at the forefront of their era. This can be very dangerous and often leads to martyrdom.

Franz was highly vigilant about this and rarely acted unilaterally. In his view, if even the elites of this era couldn't accept something, how could he expect ordinary people to embrace it?

"Jenny, give the information I've compiled to Baron Kass, and ask him to conduct market research on these industries. Collect as much data as possible. I need to select the projects suitable for investment from there," Franz instructed.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Jenny replied.

One of the benefits of being an emperor is that you can order others to do things for you, and there are always people willing to go to great lengths to serve you.

For example, Baron Kass is a loyal servant of the House of Habsburg, with a family history of serving the Habsburgs spanning five generations.

After Franz's regency, in order to strengthen control over government departments, he appointed several individuals, including Baron Kass, and placed them in various positions, such as the Ministry of Commerce.

At this moment, when Franz asked him to handle private matters, Baron Kass was even more dedicated than when dealing with official affairs.

If Franz didn't assign these tasks to him and left them to his colleagues, he might worry about being abandoned by the emperor.

The issue of using public resources for personal purposes was indeed a problem, but in this era, many people couldn't distinguish between the state and the emperor. In the eyes of many, their loyalty was to the emperor rather than the state.

This situation was prevalent in the Austrian Empire, where the bond that connected the various ethnic groups of Austria was not the government but the emperor.

Chapter 128: Reformists

The highly anticipated Austrian civil service examinations continued to create a buzz until February 1849 when they finally concluded. The final results brought mixed feelings among the participants.

For Franz, it was a relief that the process had come to an end successfully. With this promising start, Austria's talent selection system underwent a transformation.

The central government took charge of selecting talent and appointing them to local positions, significantly reducing the influence of regional power brokers and strengthening centralization.

On February 6, 1849, the Austrian National Assembly officially convened, marking the beginning of shared governance among Austria's various ethnic groups and their involvement in shaping the nation's destiny.

A total of 115 representatives from various ethnic groups in Austria participated in the assembly. In theory, the allocation of seats was based on population proportions, but due to practical considerations, it was increased by 15 additional seats.

Many ethnic groups in Austria were scattered throughout the region, so Franz couldn't physically gather them. Instead, the selection of representatives was done by regions.

Candidates were nominated by the esteemed Emperor and then elected through local voting. If a particular ethnic group lacked representation, there was no need to worry; this was simply a matter of being represented indirectly.

Amidst the cheers of the people, the Austrian National Assembly, the nominal highest authority in Austria, was established.

The first order of business for the National Assembly was the passage of the Austrian Compulsory Education Law. The long-anticipated compulsory education had finally been legally established in Austria.

The government had solicited opinions from various sectors of society, and this process had come to a close. Over the course of this effort, they had received hundreds of thousands of suggestions, though the majority of them were repetitive.

To Franz's surprise, there were a significant number of people who opposed compulsory education. Nearly half of the opinions received were advising the government not to burden the people and waste resources on compulsory education.

Yes, in the eyes of many, compulsory education was seen as a burdensome expenditure.

They even gave examples, pointing out that the two great powers of the world today, Britain and Russia, did not implement compulsory education. In contrast, the neighboring Kingdom of Prussia had adopted compulsory education but had not become a world hegemon because of it.

Franz, with his strong inner composure, decisively disregarded these dissenting opinions.

The benefits of Prussia's compulsory education system were not yet apparent at this time. It would only become evident when the Second Industrial Revolution erupts, and people would suddenly realize that Prussia had a large number of skilled workers and engineers.

With a substantial workforce of skilled workers and engineers, Germany's economy would take off and eventually surpass that of Britain during the Second Industrial Revolution.

After several rounds of screening, Franz was left with five feasible options, one of which involved introducing a hands-on, practical education approach.

When he saw this option, Franz became very angry.

"Compulsory education with apprenticeships," in simple terms, meant that children receiving compulsory education would work in factories for half a day and then attend school for the other half, using their earnings from work to cover the costs of their education.

On the surface, it seemed fine, but in reality, it had significant issues. Capitalists collaborating with schools might turn the well-intentioned compulsory education into a source of cheap labor for capitalists.

Even if all of it were arranged in state-owned enterprises, the final outcome wouldn't be much better. State enterprise managers would also pursue their interests, and in the end, they might all collude to turn half-day work into a full day's work. There was nothing surprising about that.

Franz still had his principles, and he couldn't bring himself to exploit children.

Moreover, even the relatively impoverished Kingdom of Prussia had managed to implement compulsory education. There was no reason why it couldn't be done in his realm.

After decisively discarding this option, Franz realized that there were always worse alternatives.

Someone had actually proposed a Church-style compulsory education, which essentially meant entrusting compulsory education to the Church. The government would allocate funds to the Church, and the Church would be responsible for compulsory education.

Franz really wanted to find the bastard who had proposed this and give them a piece of his mind.

In terms of cost, it could indeed save some expenses.

Churches were scattered throughout the country, and students could stay at home, eliminating the need for school construction costs. Clergy had other sources of income and didn't rely on salaries, so they would only need some subsidies.

But what about the consequences? The next generation nurtured by the Church, would they ultimately be loyal to the Emperor or the Church? This was a serious concern.

Franz didn't dare underestimate the influence of religion. From the Middle Ages to the present day, governments in various European countries had been working to reduce the influence of religion. Reversing history like this was impossible.

These seemingly feasible but treacherous suggestions were hiding a sinister agenda. It was frustrating for Franz to see that so many people supported them. He couldn't help but sigh, "We really need to strengthen civic education!"

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Excluding the two dubious suggestions, Franz said, "Prime Minister, submit these three relatively reasonable ideas for discussion in the parliament, and let's choose the one most suitable for Austria's circumstances for compulsory education."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Prime Minister Felix replied.

The so-called discussion was just a formality. The will of the Emperor was the will of the Austrian National Assembly. While members of the council could express their opinions, they couldn't contradict the Emperor's will.

Of course, if there were compelling reasons to persuade Emperor Franz, he was open to accommodating good suggestions.

Minister of Education Count von Thun und Hohenstein handed over a thick document and said, "Your Majesty, the Ministry of Education has prepared the plan for compulsory education. Please review it."

Franz took the document, which was approximately two to three hundred pages long. He didn't rush to open it since it would take some time to go through such a large amount of content.

Austria was a multi-ethnic country with a complex national makeup, so the methods and approaches for implementing compulsory education varied in different ethnic regions. This complexity added to the thickness of the plan.

"Count von Thun und Hohenstein, please give me an overview of where your plan stands currently," Franz inquired with concern.

Count von Thun und Hohenstein quickly responded, "Your Majesty, after extensive field research conducted by the Ministry of Education, we have decided to implement compulsory education in a phased manner. We will begin with the densely populated urban areas and gradually expand to the rural regions.

Our goal for this year is to initiate compulsory education in major cities such as Vienna, Prague, Pecs... and so on. We aim to achieve nationwide coverage of compulsory education within five years.

The selection of school locations in these major cities has been mostly finalized. To address budgetary constraints, we are primarily focusing on renovating existing buildings.

Currently, 1,023 schools have been constructed, with a total recruitment of 34,216 teachers. These teachers are currently undergoing intensive training, and we expect this training to be completed by May.

The Ministry of Education plans to officially commence compulsory education in June of this year. In the initial phase, considering the capacity of schools, we will enroll voluntary student applicants. After five years, we will then make compulsory education mandatory for all eligible children.”

Emperor Franz nodded in agreement, as he was most concerned about government officials rushing projects for the sake of achieving political gains and potentially harming the quality of compulsory education.

“Has the Ministry of Education considered students from more affluent families who can afford to pay tuition and may require better educational facilities?

Shouldn’t they be distinguished from ordinary children in terms of receiving compulsory education resources?” Franz asked with curiosity.

Education for the poor was naturally reserved for the impoverished. It wouldn’t make sense to have the offspring of capitalists and nobles attending classes with sand trays, would it?

Count von Thun und Hohenstein explained, “Your Majesty, Austria already has schools charging fees, and we have not made significant changes to them. These schools are not included in the compulsory education management system.

To ensure fairness in selection, the Ministry of Education will gradually reduce the funding allocated to these schools in the future. Education funding for all schools will be allocated according to the number of students, with a uniform standard.”

Perhaps this isn’t the best choice, but it’s the most suitable one. The Austrian central government provides equal education funding for every student receiving compulsory education, considering the principle of fairness to the greatest extent possible.

If families have the means, they can pay for better schools, and that’s their prerogative. After the government reduces funding for these private schools, tuition fees will naturally increase.

Times have changed. In the past, the Austrian Empire only had to foot the bill for the education of two or three hundred thousand students. Now, with millions of students to educate, educational polarization has become inevitable.

Of course, local finances also contribute to education funding, with wealthier regions providing more while financially challenged areas contribute less. The central government’s allocation of educational funds can only ensure that the most basic students complete compulsory education.

“Let’s proceed with this plan for now. Continue to solicit opinions from domestic education experts. As long as the suggestions are practical and beneficial to Austria, we can accept them,” Franz said after some thought.

Since political theatre is part of the game, they must go the full distance. They already solicited opinions from the public in the earlier stages, and naturally, they should continue to do so.

Regardless of whether the suggestions will ultimately be adopted, at least the Austrian government's relationship with experts and scholars in society has improved significantly after a round of heated discussions.

The Austrian government's crackdown on the rebellion last year led to a rift with cultural figures, which has gradually been eliminated.

Many people's dissatisfaction with the Austrian government stems from the rigid system that hampers the country's development. It doesn't mean these individuals are unpatriotic or seeking rebellion.

In reality, Austria is quite conservative. The revolutionary ideas that prevailed in France don't find much room here; people are more inclined towards reform rather than revolution.

During the Metternich era, while the government constantly touted reform as a slogan, there was no real action, leading to widespread discontent.

During Franz's era, the Austrian government's reforms continued without pause. It began with the abolition of serfdom, followed by the implementation of labor protection laws, civil service exams, and the promotion of compulsory education, among other measures.

While these reform initiatives left room for improvement and didn't result in radical changes, they were sufficient to satisfy the reformists.

Except for teenagers in their rebellious phase, most people didn't seek an all-or-nothing approach. Particularly among the older generation, the preference was for gradual social change, akin to slowly boiling a frog in warm water.

Chapter 129: Laying the Groundwork

With the start of compulsory education, internal reforms in Austria have temporarily come to a halt. The government's resources are limited, and it's impossible to address all issues simultaneously.

Taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the 1848 revolution, Austria has made significant progress in domestic political reforms. Now was the time to consolidate these successes.

Any reform isn't solely achieved by government decrees but requires the policies to be implemented on the field.

With the government at all levels bustling with activity, Franz found himself in a relatively relaxed state. He believed that whenever his bureaucrats were occupied with their tasks, it led to smoother days for the emperor.

However, Franz was acutely aware that once they had idle time, issues could arise. Either internal power struggles within the government might intensify, or factions could unite in an attempt to wrest power from the emperor's hands, or perhaps even both scenarios could unfold simultaneously.

Sch?nbrunn Palace.

Maid Jenny, in a chattering tone, whispered in Emperor Franz's ear, "Your Majesty, this is the finest Longjing tea brought back by Viscount Pavel Korchagin from the Qing Dynasty."

It is said to be from the best water source near the West Lake over there. I never expected tea trees could grow in water. Truly, the world is full of wonders.”

Emperor Franz chuckled and said, “Nonsense, who told you that tea trees grow in water?”

As an emperor, he certainly received no shortage of flattery. Once it became known that Franz enjoyed tea, people naturally tried to cater to his preferences.

As for whether this tea is West Lake Longjing or not, only the heavens know. Franz could at most confirm that it was Longjing tea, but specifying whether it came from West Lake, Yuezhou, or Qiantang was quite a challenge.

Considering the production volume, Franz suspected that even if it was produced in West Lake, it wouldn't be the finest Longjing tea. Most likely, Pavel Korchagin had been deceived by merchants.

During this era, they couldn't venture deep into the inland regions, and many people conducting business there fell victim to scams.

“Could it be that scoundrel Pavel Korchagin deceived me? Hmph! I'll definitely settle the score with him later!” Jenny exclaimed angrily.

She was genuinely upset. As Franz's maid, many people would try to please her.

For example, with all these tea leaves that had been sent, if Franz were to drink them all by himself, they would probably not be finished even in the next century.

Pavel Korchagin had exaggerated the value of these tea leaves and presented a generous gift to get Jenny to mention them casually in front of Franz.

However, it turned into a big misunderstanding, and the little maid, feeling embarrassed, naturally got angry.

Franz comforted Jenny by gently patting her forehead and saying, “It's okay, don't be angry. I suspect he might have been misled too. West Lake Longjing has a history of over a thousand years.

Just a few hundred years ago, it was considered a top-grade tea. In modern times, an emperor from the Qing Dynasty visited West Lake, and he really liked the Longjing tea.

Following his lead, the status of West Lake Longjing in the world of tea rose. The best Longjing teas are now tribute teas and have very limited production, so ordinary people can't really buy them.

In reality, there is no such thing as the absolute best tea in the world. Everyone's taste is different, and what you like the most is the best for you.

This tea is still quite good, with excellent color, aroma, taste, and appearance. It can be considered a top-quality product.”

After this little display of knowledge, Franz successfully gained the admiration of the little maid.

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After this little incident, Franz successfully remembered the name Pavel Korchagin.

Austria was not lacking in talent, even though these individuals may not have left a significant mark in history, primarily due to the circumstances of their time rather than their abilities.

In this era, people who ventured overseas typically fell into three categories: fugitives, those seeking to improve their social status, and those looking to amass wealth.

Regardless of which category they belonged to, Franz considered them to be valuable talents. Once Austria's overseas colonization plans were set in motion, these individuals would find opportunities to contribute.

Drinking tea, reading newspapers, and reading books—this was Franz's leisure time.

He also wished to experience the extravagant and lavish life of indulgence, but unfortunately, he couldn't afford to tarnish his public image.

Why was the original person an ascetic? A sudden change could easily invite trouble. An emperor isn't an ordinary person; every word and action can have political consequences.

If Franz were to lead a corrupt lifestyle, it wouldn't take long for the recently reformed Austrian political scene to fall back into corruption.

For the well-being of over 30 million Austrian citizens, Franz had to continue playing his role, with the most he could allow himself being a little relaxation.

"Your Majesty, Mr. Metternich is here," the maid's voice echoed.

"Bring him in," Franz calmly replied.

The emperor didn't have fixed days off, and Franz had grown accustomed to being interrupted during his moments of rest.

"Your Majesty, we've just received news that the Second Prussian-Danish War has broken out," Metternich spoke up.

After the Berlin Revolution, the Kingdom of Prussia had achieved an initial internal compromise. To divert internal tensions, Frederick William IV and the Liberal Party had deliberately ignited the Prussian-Danish War, hoping to annex the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.

Finally, under strong pressure from Russia, the Kingdom of Prussia had made concessions, leading to a ceasefire agreement.

"What's going on? Did the Prussians inform us beforehand?" Franz inquired with concern.

On the issue of Schleswig and Holstein, the Austrian government was the sole supporter of the Prussians.

Despite only providing verbal support, they should not have given up on trying to gain Austria's support, especially when other European countries were supporting Denmark.

"The conditions between the two sides in the Schleswig-Holstein issue were too far different. Three days ago, negotiations between the two parties broke down, and yesterday, they declared war on each other. Only after the outbreak of the war did the Prussians inform us," Metternich answered with a furrowed brow.

Clearly, he was very unhappy with the actions of the Prussians. Not even notifying them in advance, wasn't this disregarding Austria?

Franz, on the other hand, understood the Prussian government's actions. Even if they had consulted with Austria, the Austrian government would definitely not support their annexation of Schleswig and Holstein.

It was better to create a *fait accompli*. In that case, Austria could do nothing but reluctantly accept it unless they go to war against Prussia.

"In that case, let's contact the Russians and make our stance clear. Let them proceed with confidence, and Austria will only offer nominal support to Prussia," Franz said with a cold smile.

In this era, the Kingdom of Denmark had long been in decline and was no match for the Prussians. However, they managed to secure an alliance with the Russians.

Without full support from Austria, Prussia might have a hard time achieving its goal of annexing Schleswig and Holstein. They first had to check if the Russians would allow it to happen.

While public opinion was important, if it meant getting Prussia and Russia into a conflict, Franz wouldn't mind going against it once. He had already prepared excuses – the Austrian government doesn't have the funds for war.

Besides, the Austrian populace hadn't developed an internationalist spirit. They wouldn't come out to protest for such a small matter. If anyone dared to clamor for war, Franz wouldn't hesitate to confiscate their properties to fund the campaign.

"Your Majesty, it's unlikely for the Russians to launch an attack on the Kingdom of Prussia, otherwise, they would have done so last year.

If we don't intervene, Prussia could indeed occupy Schleswig and Holstein, which would be very unfavorable for us," Metternich analyzed.

The Russians didn't seem inclined to wage war against Prussia for the sake of the Danish people, as it didn't align with their interests.

If the Russians were reluctant to go to war, it was even less likely that other European nations would be eager to do so. While it was easy to shout slogans, the prospect of actually deploying troops and engaging in warfare would likely give most nations pause.

Austria's nominal support has also boosted Prussia's confidence, at least they don't have to worry about the south.

"Express our discontent to the Prussians, and simultaneously encourage Prussia to believe that they have the unwavering support of the German people.

Secretly contact other German states, so that once Prussia occupies Schleswig and Holstein, we can jointly exert pressure to compel Prussia to grant these two duchies independence.

If necessary, we can launch a preemptive war, offering Prussian-controlled Poland to the Russians in exchange for their military assistance," Franz pondered and proposed his strategy.

Very well, this is the most ideal scenario. As long as the Prussians aren't foolish, they should figure it out in advance. After all, they've retreated historically, haven't they?

Franz was laying the groundwork just in case, and if he managed to outwit the Kingdom of Prussia, it would be a huge success.

"Your Majesty, if we want to deceive the Kingdom of Prussia, it's best not to have secret contact with the German states. Having too many participating countries could make it difficult to maintain secrecy," Metternich suggested after some thought.

Even though he didn't believe Franz's plan would succeed, Metternich didn't mind giving it a try. If it failed, the Austrian government could afford to have a futile attempt, but if it succeeded, Austria's position as the leader of the German states would be secure.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will handle this. If the Prussian government doesn't fall for it, we'll rely on the nationalists to exert pressure on them and make the Prussians endure the war for as long as possible," Franz said after some thought.

War is a costly affair, and every day the Prussian-Danish War drags on, the Prussian government would have to spend a significant amount on military expenses.

The more they spent on the war, the less they could invest in domestic development.

While it might not be immediately noticeable after a day or two, if the war dragged on for several months, it could seriously deplete Prussia's annual financial resources.

You see, the revolutionary governments in Schleswig-Holstein also require financial support from Prussia, and these are pure investments with no immediate returns.

Even if Prussia wins against the Kingdom of Denmark, there's no prize for them. With Russia as their backer, the Danes won't have to cede territory or pay reparations.

In history, Prussia succumbed to international pressure and withdrew from this war, only to watch the Schleswig-Holstein revolutionary governments it had supported being wiped out by the Danes.

Chapter 130: Russian-Austrian Secret Treaty

While causing trouble for Prussia, Franz acted almost casually, as the Austrian government was not inclined to allocate too many resources to this endeavor. The foremost priority at the moment was still domestic development.

As the Prussian-Danish War erupted once again, negotiations between Russia and Austria also came to a close. After nearly six months of effort, the two countries finally reached an agreement on their respective interests.

On March 21, 1849, Austrian Ambassador to Russia, Wessenberg, and Russian Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode, signed the "Russia-Austria Trade Agreement" in St. Petersburg.

Treaty Contents:

These hastily drafted commercial trade agreements clearly do not represent the six months of efforts of both governments. What truly deserves mutual attention are the signed secret treaties, including the 'Russian-Austrian Military Alliance' and the 'Russian-Austrian Sphere of Influence Division.'

Contents of the 'Russian-Austrian Military Alliance':

Without a doubt, the 'Russian-Austrian Military Alliance' was an extension of the 'Treaty of Berlin Treaty', and, in fact, it went even further, with the only exception being the absence of Prussia among the contracting parties.

Due to the circumstances of the Prussian-Danish War, Nicholas I had little fondness for the Kingdom of Prussia, and the outbreak of this war marked the end of the 'Three Northern Courts' era.

In comparison to the military alliance, the 'Russian-Austrian Sphere of Influence Division' served as the cornerstone of the alliance between the two countries, allowing each nation to take what it needed and obtain everything required.

Treaty Provisions:

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The agreement between both parties is very explicit: you support my acquisition of the Black Sea Straits, and I support your annexation of the Southern German States. Together, they aim to divide dominance over the Balkan Peninsula and the Mediterranean.

Beyond these core interests, as long as the interests of both parties do not clash, they should provide mutual support.

Russia and Austria have reached consensus in their respective expansions, signifying the nullification of the British-led "Straits Convention." Without Austria's support, it becomes much more challenging for Britain and France to suppress Russian ambitions in the Near East.

According to the agreement between both parties, Austria will acquire the Southern German regions, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a large portion of Serbia, and a significant portion of Romania, as well as parts of Bulgaria.

In terms of territorial size, this still amounts to less than half of what the Russians have. Moreover, in terms of economic development, there is a clear disparity between the two parties.

During this era, the Black Sea Straits were economically prosperous, and the Ottoman Empire's heartland was located there. On the other hand, Austria had yet to fully develop areas outside of the Southern German States.

Looking at the comparison of gains between both parties, Franz also understood why in history, Russia and Austria had conflicts. The Russians were gaining too much, and the Austrian government was envious.

What's even more critical is that once the Russians' ambitions were fulfilled, the Austrian Empire would no longer be able to rest easy.

Initially, Franz thought that offering the benefits of the Black Sea Straits would be enough to satisfy the Russians, perhaps with a little extra in the Balkan Peninsula. However, reality proved him wrong, as the Russians also secured control over the Anatolian Peninsula.

Since the Russian Bear's appetite seemed insatiable, Franz didn't mind giving it a push. Austria acknowledged Russia's control over the Anatolian Peninsula, and in return, the Russians made concessions in the Balkan Peninsula.

The designated spheres of influence in the Balkans, as agreed upon by both parties, weren't of particular concern to Franz. If Austria could secure some territory there, that was good, but if not, it didn't matter. The primary goal was to occupy Belgrade.

The Austrian Empire at this time didn't have such a voracious appetite; it didn't want to overextend itself. If not for the relatively low population in the Balkan Peninsula during this era, Franz would have been even more cautious about getting involved.

However, putting on a show was essential. If Austria's appetite appeared too small, the Russians might start suspecting hidden motives.

Franz boldly speculated that, at this moment, celebrations were likely taking place in the St. Petersburg Court over this great victory.

In history, the Russians had dissolved the "Straits Convention," but they had also sent troops to help Austria suppress the Hungarian uprising in exchange.

In this alternate timeline, with the Austrian government handling the rebellion without any major disruptions, there was no need for outside assistance, and negotiations for rewards for intervention did not even arise.

If the "Straits Convention" had still been in effect, the Crimean War might not have erupted later, as the Russians would not have taken on the combined forces of Britain, France, and Austria alone.

This is also why, in history, Austria's betrayal of the Russians led to severe consequences. From the British and French perspective, if Austria hadn't initially allowed the Russians to act with impunity, the war might not have escalated in the first place.

"Your Majesty, we are at a disadvantage with this treaty. If it ever becomes a reality, there will be no stopping the Russians!" Prime Minister Felix remarked with a furrowed brow.

The policy of annexing the Southern German States had been led by Prime Minister Felix, but upon seeing the cost of compromising with the Russians, he began to regret it.

"If the Russians don't expand significantly, will we have a chance to annex the Southern German regions? Which European countries would be willing to see Austria continue to grow?" Franz asked in response.

Metternich, with a sense of urgency, replied, "Your Majesty, letting the Russians out is easy, but holding them back in is difficult.

Moreover, can we really annex the various Southern German States?

If the Russians truly occupy the aforementioned areas and we still haven't secured the Southern German regions, Austria's future may be at risk."

Franz calmly stated, "Don't let the pursuit of interests blind you. While this treaty appears highly favorable to the Russians on the surface, do you really believe that their national strength can support this plan?

The Russians seem to want to swallow the Ottoman Empire whole this time, and the Ottoman government will undoubtedly fight to the death. This war is unlikely to end in the short term.

The French have significant interests in the Near East, and they won't allow unchecked Russian expansion. It's possible that the Russians' actions may even unite the French government to resist a common external threat.

As for the British, they're a different story. They've never let their guard down against their Russian competitor. Supporting the Ottoman Empire is inevitable for them. They might even pull the French into the fray.

Don't underestimate the British just because their strength seems focused on the seas; they have the wealth to continue a war as long as the Ottomans survive. Even if the Russians are formidable, they will eventually be exhausted.

Unless the Russian government is willing to cut its losses and cease all military actions after capturing Constantinople, focusing on defense in place, holding a fortress city with Russian strength is not difficult. After a few years, the British and French will naturally give up.

Then, the Russians can gradually erode the Ottoman Empire. If all goes well, with around three to five decades of effort, they can likely achieve their goal.

In such a long time, we can accomplish many things. By then, the Austrian Empire may not necessarily be weaker than Russia."

When it came to the French, Franz couldn't help but chuckle. In recent history, there were few who could rival the Habsburg dynasty in the path of ruin, and it would undoubtedly be the French.

The Ottoman Empire wasn't in the same league, as their journey down the same path hadn't officially started yet, and they still held vast territories.

From the 18th century onwards, the French embarked on their tragic journey, and anyone observant enough would notice that during their zenith, the French possessed a genuinely substantial colonial empire.

During the War of the Austrian Succession, France suffered a defeat and lost control of their Indian territories. In the Seven Years' War, they ceded Canada. After supporting American independence, they found themselves in another conflict with the United States during the Quasi-War, and eventually, the United States forcibly acquired the Louisiana Territory from France (Acquiring 2.6 million square kilometers of land for a mere \$15 million).

And that was just the beginning. If history remained unchanged, the French would continue to lose their control of Central America, including the Panama Canal, as well as their dominion over Egypt—a region they controlled.

The French downfall directly contributed to the enrichment and empowerment of the British and American empires. These two major empires would stand on the shoulders of the French as they rose to become world powers.

Of course, the Habsburg dynasty played a significant role in all this as well. Without their selfless contributions, the rise of the British and American empires wouldn't have been possible.

Franz finally managed to convince his cabinet, although the treaty had already been signed, and the die was cast, his efforts still had a significant impact.

In theory, as long as Britain and France exert themselves, it would be challenging for the Russians to achieve their ambitions. The inherent weakness of the Ottoman Empire hadn't been fully revealed, and there was still hope for its recovery.

If the Russians chose a more conservative strategy and proceeded gradually, there would be even less to fear.

With three to five decades of time, it would be sufficient for the Austrian Empire to complete industrialization and, in the process, absorb the Southern German regions.