

Roman Empire 181

Chapter 181: Everyone Is Playing the Game of Killing with A Borrowed Knife

Clear water, blue sky, and green grass; Vienna is a city where a hundred flowers vie for beauty.

In May, Vienna belongs to the flowers. The streets and alleys are filled with the presence of flowers, as if the people of Vienna have a particular fondness for planting them.

Sch?nbrunn Palace is particularly lively, with flowers of all kinds competing for attention, adding a different charm to the refreshing month of May.

Reading, appreciating flowers, making tea, attending concerts — these are all hobbies of Franz. If not for two little lolis following him, actually appreciating some dancing would not be bad either, especially the long-legged kind.

It's purely an appreciation of art, as Franz's private life is very upright. He doesn't associate with high society ladies, has no vices, and doesn't even have a lover — truly a moral model among the nobility.

If not for him being flanked by two little lolis, it would further prove this point.

Well, for nobles, a bit of chaos in their private life is normal. Life is so tiring, with constant intrigues and power struggles; it's necessary to relax the mind from time to time.

Franz is already quite restrained; at least, he hasn't created any palace scandals. He just teased the two little lolis a bit, which is hardly worth mentioning.

The etiquette in the Habsburg dynasty's court is still quite strict, and the two little lolis, who received court education together, deeply feel this.

Although princesses don't have the same demands as princes, they still have to learn a lot more compared to ordinary people.

Princess Helene was doing well; she quickly adapted and even found joy in it. However, Princess Sisi was in a sorry state. The happy childhood bid her farewell. For a girl yearning for freedom, this is undoubtedly a shocking blow.

Skippping classes? If a school has a hundred and eighty students and one of them skips class, it's not a big deal. But if you're the only student and you skip class, won't the teachers collectively take a vacation? Moreover, in the palace, with strict security, where could she possibly run off to?

Although court life is comfortable, it lacks freedom. For Princess Sisi, this is undoubtedly a form of torment.

The arm can't twist the thigh. Whether willing or not, her mother Princess Ludovika had already decided for her.

If not for the family's poor financial circumstances, Princess Sisi would have already received this education. These court etiquette lessons were basic knowledge all nobles had to grasp.

Princess Helene being with Franz was arranged by Archduchess Sophie, ostensibly to nurture their relationship early. When Princess Sisi joined in, it was purely for the purpose of skipping classes.

The world works in mysterious ways, intertwining the destinies of three individuals. What happened afterward is hard to put into words, but in any case, Franz ended up romantically involved with both young ladies at the same time.

Of course, by the standards of this era, they were no longer young. Princess Helene was nearly 18, Princess Sisi already 15—an age suitable for discussing marriage.

Their mother Princess Ludovika was happy to see this. In the realm of royalty, mismatches in status are common, and to facilitate this union, a bit of drama in the royal family is nothing out of the ordinary.

Archduchess Sophie cared even less. Her son was her own, her nieces were others'. As long as no premarital pregnancy scandals occurred, she would not interfere.

Of course, Franz would not admit to wicked thoughts. Broadly speaking, this beguiled the enemy, making the Kingdom of Bavaria relax its guard. After all, with intermarriage between the royal houses, why worry?

On a smaller scale, he saw it as saving underage girls. The Bavarian royal lineage destined them to marry for political alliances. Sisi's personality ensured that any marriage she entered into would not end well.

Freedom was too extravagant for high nobles. From birth, they shouldered heavy responsibilities.

The 19th century was also the last glory of the nobility, and at this time, wise individuals knew that danger was approaching. Making a wrong move in politics was already tragic, and if one's stance was not firm and easily influenced to participate in politics, the ultimate result could only be a tragic ending.

If added with an unwillingness to have children, it is estimated that no family would be willing to accept them. Love always tends to be eroded by reality, and what can be relied upon to sustain one's appearance in the face of aging?

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Prime Minister Felix said: "Your Majesty, the Battle of Bulgaria has ended. The final result was not unexpected, with the Russians defeating the Ottomans.

However, the performance of the French this time is quite surprising, actually sending reinforcements to the Balkan Peninsula so swiftly. It appears Napoleon III has stabilized domestic affairs."

It is normal for the Russian army to defeat the Ottoman forces, even though the Russian army may be a ragtag group, they are a fierce one. When facing the similarly ragtag Ottoman army, they naturally have the upper hand.

In terms of weapons and equipment, Russia and the Ottomans are considered equally outdated. Just who was more backward ultimately depended on the bureaucrats' integrity.

The efficiency of the French government once again proved that one man making decisions was far more efficient than hundreds deciding together.

While the British government had just persuaded Parliament to dispatch troops, the French had already sent their army onto the battlefield. This fully demonstrated Napoleon III's control over the French government, to the point of his word being the law.

But these were all small issues. Franz did not care about French domestic affairs, as he had no way to intervene anyway.

"How was the French army's combat strength? Anything requiring particular attention?" Franz asked concernedly.

Marshal Radetzky analyzed: "Your Majesty, this French expeditionary force's combat strength was quite good. From the intelligence we gathered, we can ascertain that these 50,000 French troops were the elite forces of the French army.

It seems that Napoleon III has spared no expense this time to achieve commendable military achievements.

However, he should be feeling the pain now. Despite achieving a higher exchange ratio on the battlefield, it is still a pyrrhic victory for them.

At the Battle of Razgrad, the French virtually lost an entire elite division. Replacing these elite soldiers is not easy.

Elite forces are not easily trained, and within the French army, units with such combat capabilities are rare. Now, they are being consumed in an insignificant theater of war.

Not to mention achieving a 1:1.3 casualty ratio against the Russians, even if they achieved a 1:3 exchange ratio, the French would still suffer a significant loss.

If this French force had not blindly engaged in battle, if they had not faced the Russians without adapting to the environment and had instead confronted them after acclimating, their achievements would have been more brilliant.

In a direct confrontation on the battlefield, an elite force of 50,000 like this would be sufficient to defeat 100,000 Russian troops.

If this French army could have arrived half a month earlier and served as the main force in this decisive battle, the outcome of this battle might well have changed."

Franz nodded indifferently. These French troops were indeed elite forces, and their heavy losses had evidently weakened the combat strength of the French army.

However, claiming Napoleon was pained might not be true. These elite troops were amassed during the July Monarchy and were loyal supporters of the regime.

If not for King Louis Philippe's continuous blunders, failing to immediately deploy these forces, suppressing the rebellion would have been easy with them present.

For the country of France, these forces were crucial for national defense, but for Napoleon III personally, they were a hidden danger.

For his own interests, consuming these forces on the battlefield was likely Napoleon III's established strategy.

Current circumstances completely aligned with Napoleon III's interests.

Despite facing unfavorable conditions, the frontline French forces still managed to achieve a high exchange ratio, earning him significant political points.

Through this war, by severely depleting these forces, they would need to rebuild their combat capabilities, inevitably requiring the recruitment of new soldiers.

As long as he exploited this opportunity well, Napoleon III could prop up his own followers to take charge, slowly controlling these forces.

As for the issue of diminished combat strength, in the face of loyalty, it was not worth mentioning at all. If roles were reversed, Franz might have made a similar decision.

Metternich tentatively asked: "Marshal, if we find ways to annihilate these forces, how greatly would it impact France's military power?"

Marshal Radetzky pondered briefly before answering: "These forces comprise around two-tenths of France's current military power. But that does not equal two-tenths of France's military might being these tens of thousands of French soldiers. They can still conduct national conscription, only the combat power of new recruits would be very low."

France was no small country, with considerable military power. Achieving such a significant reduction in the enemy's strength in a short period is already quite remarkable.

Metternich shook his head and said: "If that's the case, then this matter is not worth our involvement. Let's leave this enemy for the Russians to deal with; I believe they would appreciate it."

This French expeditionary force now only has some 36,000 combat ready troops left. After a few more battles with the Russians, they would be virtually annihilated."

The French commitment to the Balkans is too small, and even if their entire force is annihilated, it won't significantly weaken them.

At this point, Austria's optimal choice was not to let the Russians swallow this French elite force in one go, but rather use it as pretext to goad Britain and France into continuously feeding armies into this war.

A major defeat could well make Britain and France reconsider their involvement. Then the plan to consume the strength of Britain, France and Russia through the Near East War would fail.

Napoleon III could borrow the Russian knife to purge dissenters. Austria could also emulate this. Utilizing Russian forces to attack Britain and France, then using British and French forces to attack Russia, was an excellent option.

Chapter 182: The Time of Trial Arrives

Franz disliked playing sinister tricks, but unfortunately, his strength doesn't allow otherwise.

For example, right now, what was clearly a plot against the three nations of Britain, France, and Russia has somehow turned into a conspiracy.

The line between conspiracy and plot is often very thin, and there's no definite answer to which is the strongest or most suitable; it depends on the situation.

What if someone told Nicholas I of Franz's plans? What would happen?

The answer: Nothing would happen. Nicholas I would just laugh it off.

Countries were inherently mutually using each other. Some scheming was normal. Wanting intimate cooperation was foolish — it simply did not exist.

Mature politicians assess what allies have done, anticipate the consequences, weigh the pros and cons, and decide on the relationship between the two countries based on these considerations, rather than worrying about what the ally is thinking.

So, if you want to betray your teammate, you must do it skillfully. If you get betrayed instead because you lack the skills, don't cry — there are plenty more days of being betrayed ahead!

Just like now, Franz was screwing Russia over, but as long as Austria fulfilled its obligations as an ally, it remains Russia's most steadfast ally, and Russo-Austrian relations won't be affected.

In fact, if Franz were to inform Nicholas I that Austria is sending troops to help, the Russians wouldn't be surprised at all. Instead, there's a higher likelihood of them being alarmed.

Expending more strength meant claiming more spoils. This was the Russo-Austrian alliance's basis. Once profit distribution became imbalanced, the alliance would lose value.

The Russo-Austrian alliance is an equal treaty with no subordinate relationships. If Austria fulfills its ally obligations and takes on additional duties, the ultimate distribution of spoils naturally undergoes changes.

Russia did not need Austrian reinforcements for the current war in the Balkans. The Russian government is not particularly fond of expendable pawns. It would not exchange interests for reducing frontline casualties.

Strategically, if Austria attacked the Ottoman Empire, the optimal route was identical to Russia's current one.

This is determined by logistics — transporting strategic supplies through the Danube River and entering Bulgaria from the downstream plains is much more favorable than navigating through the mountainous terrain of Bosnia and Serbia.

What decides the outcome of this war is not how much Ottoman territory was occupied, but whether Constantinople could be taken.

As long as the Russians capture Constantinople, the British and French navies will have to withdraw from the Black Sea Straits. Otherwise, if Russia blockaded the Bosphorus, they would become turtles in a jar.

With control over the Black Sea, they can transport logistical supplies by sea, and with the combined strength of Russia and Austria, supporting a million-strong army in the Balkan Peninsula would not be a significant issue.

Unlike the current situation, where, no matter how hard the Russian forces try to deploy in the Balkans, they can deploy at most four to five hundred thousand troops. Any more would be a logistical burden. If Austrian forces were sent, this number would need to be reduced by at least a quarter.

The Russian expendable soldiers were famed as Europe's cheapest army for a reason. Their logistical needs were the lowest among all great powers' armies.

With backward equipment and few artillery in modern war, logistical pressures were also lower.

Does the Russian government lack soldiers?

If they lose several hundred thousand, it was not problem, they can easily replenish them with another several hundred thousand. If the Austrian army participates in capturing Constantinople, they can't monopolize the Black Sea Straits.

National interests are very practical. Don't expect allies to come with their own provisions to help without a specific purpose.

The Black Sea was small. Russia had long treated it as its domain, unwilling to let Austria take a share.

According to the current alliance, the Russians can gain the maximum benefit, and the cost is nothing more than the casualties of a group of expendable soldiers. The Russian government is not lacking in people anyway.

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Metternich said: "Your Majesty, yesterday the Russian envoy to Vienna approached me. They intend to reinforce the Balkan Peninsula and hope that we can provide more war supplies.

My preliminary judgment is that British and French participation prompted this Russian government decision. It appears they want to pressure Britain and France through reinforcements."

Franz pondered and said: "Providing strategic supplies is an easy matter. As long as the Russians are willing to pay, we can sell it to them.

Marshal, I would like to know how many forces England, France, and the Ottoman Empire can deploy to the Balkan Peninsula. After Russian reinforcements, can they gain the upper hand?"

Marshal Radetzky calculated and replied: "Your Majesty, considering logistics, the British, French and Ottoman side currently cannot commit over 800,000 troops total.

But as the Russian frontline advances, they can commit more forces. If decisive battle occurs in coastal regions, they may potentially commit over a million troops.

However, this is a theoretical figure. Supplying so many troops requires astronomical amounts of strategic supplies.

The Ottoman Empire can provide at most two to three tenths. The remainder must be shipped from Britain and France.

Considering war costs, Britain and France may opt to arm cheap Ottoman cannon fodder to fight Russians. Whether the Russians can gain the upper hand after the reinforcements depends on the proportion of forces held by the English and French.

From a strategic perspective, I am not optimistic about the Russians achieving their goals. Losing control of the Black Sea, the Russian supply relies mainly on the Danube River.

However, as the front line advances, the distance for land transportation also increases.

In a decisive battle in Bulgaria, the Russians can deploy a maximum of 500,000 troops. If they reach Istanbul, the Russians can deploy a maximum of 400,000 troops.

The actual situation may be worse, as the Ottoman Empire has been operating in the Balkans for centuries. After the Russian army occupies these areas, it will be challenging to eliminate their influence in the short term.

The Ottomans will likely organize guerrilla forces specifically to disrupt the Russian supply lines, increasing the logistical difficulties for the Russians.

If the war cannot be resolved quickly, the longer it drags on, the lower the likelihood of the Russians winning the war.”

Franz smiled faintly. This was the outcome he wanted. Unable to win, Russia would be Austria’s ideal ally. Perhaps there would even be a deepening of Russo-Austrian ties under British and French pressure. With a steady rear, Austria could develop in peace.

Franz now hoped that Nicholas I would remain resolute, allowing the war to continue for a longer duration.

Throughout history, every Russian tsar had set a good example. There’s a saying among the Russians: “A tsar who hasn’t fought a war against the Turks is not a good tsar!”

Russo-Turkish Wars typically lasted four to five years, often occurring once in a generation. Except for the previous Russo-Turkish War, the shortest duration was three years, and there were even two instances lasting more than ten years.

From a military perspective, the likelihood of Russia’s failure is very small. If they can win, they’ll attack; if they can’t, they’ll defend.

In a war of attrition, what Russia could not afford was finances, while Britain and France could not afford casualties.

The Russian Bear could expend hundreds of thousands of young soldiers, and throw out hundreds of thousands more. The aristocrats would not care about soldier deaths. On the other hand, if Britain and France lose hundreds of thousands of young soldiers, they have to consider the domestic situation.

As long as the Russians refuse to admit defeat and are willing to sacrifice lives, even if Britain and France exert their utmost efforts, they won’t be able to completely defeat them.

Unless Britain and France dares to invade the Russian homeland, all the way from the Baltic to St. Petersburg, they could not doom the Russian Bear in the Near East, no matter how much they fought.

This also meant that if Russia could not swiftly win, factors deciding the war were testing Russia’s fiscal endurance, and Britain and France’s tolerance for casualties.

After all, this war was not as serious as the World Wars. Britain, France and Russia were not at death’s door, and does not need to go all out.

Franz said indifferently, “Activate our forces to give them a push. The French are already on the scene, but the British expeditionary force is still at home. The stage is set, and we can’t let them miss this good show.”

John Bull’s integrity was truly too low. If they were not shoved into battle, the British government might well make the same choice as Austria.

Besides, if the British don't get a taste of the brutality of land warfare in advance, how could they behave in Austria's subsequent actions?

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Due to the Ottoman Empire's major defeat in the Battle of Bulgaria, Britain's originally symbolic 20,000 man force was clearly insufficient for the needs of the war.

At the recent Paris negotiations, Palmerston had no choice but to raise the number of British troops to 80,000.

80,000 troops may be a small matter for any major land power, easily assembled in ten days to half a month.

However, for the British, with their pocket-sized army totaling just over 100,000, suddenly pulling out so many forces was clearly fraught with difficulties.

"Mr. Palmerston, why did you arbitrarily increase troop numbers? Do you know how much trouble this brings us?" Secretary of State for War Sir Fox Maule-Ramsay asked, dissatisfied.

Palmerston confidently explained: "Sir Maule-Ramsay, this is political necessity. In the recently concluded decisive battle, Ottoman losses were grievous. Our original plans can no longer meet war needs.

To contain Russia's ambitions, we must commit more forces there. The French agreed to commit another 120,000 troops, plus the 50,000 already deployed, totaling 170,000 men. Under such circumstances, we have no choice but to increase troop numbers as well.

Moreover, deploying only 20,000 troops on the battlefield is too risky. There's a chance of a complete annihilation.

With 80,000 troops, it's much safer. We don't have to worry about being swallowed whole by the Russians. The War Office doesn't have to be on tenterhooks all the time."

Maule-Ramsay's anger grew upon hearing Palmerston's explanation. He could acknowledge that British land forces were truly unpresentable compared to the Royal Navy.

But such disdain went too far. British land forces' combat abilities were not poor, only seemingly lacking due to their paltry numbers among great powers.

"Mr. Palmerston, are you questioning the army's combat abilities?" Maule-Ramsay glared at Palmerston, face red with anger.

Thinking about these matters was one thing, but openly demeaning the army was too much. The British army's lack of strength was due to insufficient military funding, not a lack of effort on their part.

Realizing he misspoke, Palmerston immediately tried to remedy the situation: "No, Sir Maule-Ramsay. On the contrary, I think highly of the army's combat abilities. As the saying goes, greater ability comes with greater responsibility on the battlefield. If our forces are too few, we can easily be outmaneuvered by the Russians."

He didn't even believe his own words. Even if Britain contributed the least in the alliance, the role of being cannon fodder would still fall on the Ottomans. How could they possibly risk British troops?

Maule-Ramsay let out a cold snort: "Humph!"

This little interlude passed.

Prime Minister Russell steered the conversation: "Sir Maule-Ramsay, our allies cannot wait any longer. How long does the army need to prepare?"

John Russell deeply disdained the Ottoman Empire's performance.

After all, it was once an empire that dominated all of Europe. Now it was so easily pressed down and beaten by Russia, simply disgracing its ancestors.

Disdain aside, they were still allies for now, and had to ally against their common enemy. Only the Ottomans' say in the alliance further dropped a couple of notches.

Maule-Ramsay had been waiting for this moment, and he responded indirectly, "Prime Minister, let's expand the army!"

It was an awkward topic because the British focus on the navy had prevented the army's size from increasing.

Hundreds of thousands of troops are needed to maintain the vast colonies, how many troops would be left in the homeland?

If they pull out 20,000 soldiers, they could still manage somehow. However, if they were to withdraw 80,000 soldiers, it would mean pulling out all the troops from the homeland.

Certainly, some troops must be left in the homeland, even if it's just to suppress unrest in Ireland. They can't completely withdraw domestic forces.

The number of troops in overseas colonies is also limited, making it impossible to pull more from them. Of course, the British do have a substantial number of colonial troops, and if they could be counted, they could quickly meet the required numbers.

John Russell rubbed his forehead, then asked: "How many troops are you planning to expand it?"

Maule-Ramsay smilingly answered: "Not many. The War Office's demands are modest, just another 120,000 troops."

Upon hearing this number, John Russell shook his head and said: "Sir Maule-Ramsay, expanding by 120,000 troops is not a problem as long as you can convince Parliament."

Maule-Ramsay's face flushed red. If persuading Parliament were so simple, the current British land forces would not be so tiny.

In this era, as the only industrialized nation among the great powers and the world's leading colonial power, the British Empire was truly wealthy. Even if they were to maintain tens of thousands more troops, it wouldn't be considered a problem.

Maule-Ramsay calmly said: "Prime Minister, the army's manpower is limited, and there are too many places to defend. The total force left in the country is just over 70,000."

Sending 20,000 troops is already very difficult. Sending 80,000 troops, even if I include the War Office janitors, we still cannot meet the numbers.”

This was a good opportunity for expanding the army, and the War Office naturally wouldn't give up. Every expansion came with a significant amount of benefits, and Maule-Ramsay naturally wanted to strive for it as much as possible.

“But expanding by 120,000 at once is too many. I cannot persuade Parliament. It's as I said earlier — if you can persuade Parliament, then there's no issue.” Russell rejected expressionlessly.

Chapter 183: Advance and Retreat Are Both Difficult

On June 12, 1852, the British Parliament passed the “Army Expansion Act”.

The 120,000 expansion proposed by Maule-Ramsay was still reduced in the end. Shrewd parliamentarians limited the final expansion number to 80,000. The rationale was naturally arming based on actual needs, and not wasting taxpayers' money.

This frugality directly caused the British army to drag allies down in the Near East War.

Compared to the sluggish British, the French were far more efficient. After confirming reinforcements, Napoleon III embarked on explosive expansion of the military. The French army's total strength quickly increased to 620,000.

It was as if the France that rampaged through Europe long ago had returned. Apart from the Russian Bear, their standing army was the largest in Europe.

To expand France's international influence, Napoleon III performed very actively this time.

Alongside massive expansion, French reinforcements had already departed from the homeland.

At this point, the military strength of mainland France had dropped to its lowest point. Although the number of troops had increased, veteran soldiers and new recruits were entirely different concepts.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the House of Orleans, in order to alleviate international pressure, slowed down the development of the French army, retaining only a small number of elite forces, which only fully recovered after the French Revolution.

Napoleon III's talents did not lie in the military. During the expansion of the army, he overlooked the development of reserve forces and the rational reforms of mobilization mechanisms.

In the historical Franco-Prussian War, the French surrendered after one defeat. This was because France's mobilization mechanism was imperfect, and they couldn't mobilize enough troops in time to defend Paris.

This is a weakness of the French development model, concentrating the core industries mostly around Paris. Once Paris falls, it becomes challenging to make a comeback.

After the Battle of Bulgaria, the Russian army pushed the front line to the Balkan Mountains, and it was now time to test the Russians.

At this time, diverging opinions emerged within the Russian Balkan expeditionary force. The faction led by General Bakh-Ivanov advocated first capturing Sofia. The faction led by General Gorchakov advocated crossing the Balkan Mountains and taking Edirne directly.

The ultimate strategic goal for both factions was the same: to capture Constantinople and blockade the Bosphorus Strait.

The reason for advocating the capture of Sofia first was that the Ottoman Empire had just suffered a major defeat, and the military presence in this area was weak, making it militarily less challenging.

Sofia was the most influential city in Bulgaria. Capturing it was very meaningful politically, able to spur even more Bulgarians to rise up against Ottoman rule.

Another unspoken reason was that by capturing Sofia, even if the Russian army cannot capture Constantinople, it would still occupy most of Bulgaria, laying the groundwork for the next war.

This was the power of tradition. This is already the 9th Russo-Turkish War, and many believe that if the Ottoman Empire is not completely defeated, there will definitely be a 10th Russo-Turkish War in the future. Being prepared for the future is crucial.

The idea of swallowing the Ottoman Empire in one gulp is idealistic. There aren't many who truly believe that Russia can swallow the Ottoman Empire in one gulp.

Politically, shouting slogans is enough. The slogan of overthrowing the Ottoman Empire has been shouted by the Russians for nearly a century, and yet the Ottoman Empire still stands strong.

The reason for advocating a direct advance to Edirne is to save time. This is the shortest route to capture Constantinople. By taking advantage of the fact that the main forces of the British and French reinforcements have not yet arrived, it would increase the chances of attacking Constantinople successfully.

Of course, while the chances of success are higher, the risks are also greater. By not occupying the surrounding areas, Ottoman forces could potentially encircle the Russian army. If Constantinople is not captured, there is a risk of the entire army being annihilated.

Franz was unconcerned about the troubles of the Russian forces. Whether the Russian army will be annihilated or not is not something he worries about.

Considering the situation of the Ottoman Empire, even with the best tactics, they are likely to face difficulties in execution.

Theoretically, cutting Russian supply lines at any critical point along the way would let them win this war.

However, the force responsible for executing this mission must also have sufficient combat power; otherwise, they could be easily defeated by the Russian army in a few moves, rendering the effort useless.

Moreover, close coordination with the surrounding Ottoman forces and local governments is essential. If any link in this chain encounters a problem, it would be impossible to successfully do this.

It was best not to expect the Ottoman Empire capable of such a high-difficulty task. At most they could harass supply lines to force Russian withdrawal, and then both sides would straightforwardly begin a war of attrition.

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Prince Windisch-Grätz smiled and said: “Your Majesty, the Ottomans withdrew forces from Serbia. It seems that the pressure from the Russians was too much for them. Now, they are preparing to concentrate their forces to confront the Russians and have no time to deal with these regions.”

His mood was evidently very good. The House of Habsburg’s grudge with the Ottoman Empire spanned centuries. Naturally, seeing their enemy meet misfortune raised his spirits.

Of course, what’s more important is the political aspect. Despite Marshal Radetzky serving as the Chief of the General Staff now, without any reaction from the Minister of War, in reality, Prince Windisch-Grätz has been constantly seeking opportunities to break through politically.

A military expert does not necessarily transition to a political expert. Archduke Charles is a case in point, as he quietly returned home to write books after his military career.

In fact, Marshal Radetzky, who is highly esteemed in the Austrian army, did not have a remarkable career in Austria before. He had long served in local positions and was not valued but rather excluded from the core of power.

However, the situation changed after Franz ascended to the throne. In order to ensure the smooth implementation of the westward strategy, Marshal Radetzky was brought back to the central command as the Chief of the General Staff.

In this context, Prince Windisch-Grätz, no matter how many reasons he might have, was powerless. Regardless of the reasons, Franz was not going to abandon his support for Marshal Radetzky at this critical moment.

Realizing this, Prince Windisch-Grätz naturally did not make trouble. His deteriorating relations with Radetzky actually stemmed from authority clashes between the General Staff and the Ministry of War.

Position determines one’s standpoint, and the General Staff and the Ministry of War were originally entities meant to balance each other. If their relationship improved, Franz would have to make changes.

Suppressed by Radetzky, Windisch-Grätz was helpless. But an opportunity came. The Ottoman withdrawal from Serbia meant Austria could gain vast lands effortlessly.

The military’s war faction, which is not so easily suppressed, was unaware of Austria’s true strategy. When an opportunity for action arose, they naturally wanted to participate.

At this moment, if Marshal Radetzky couldn’t control his subordinates and let the situation escalate to the Emperor’s attention, it would be a major loss of face. Even if he managed to control them, it would still lead to dissatisfaction among military leaders.

Franz naturally saw through such petty schemes. But he did not plan to intervene. These struggles were just child’s play. Windisch-Grätz used overt methods, which fell within bounds of what’s acceptable.

Struggles among ministers were preferable compared to them conspiring together and openly challenging the Emperor. As long as state affairs were unaffected, Franz pretended not to see both overt faction building and covert struggles.

Where there are people, there are factions. Franz didn't expect the bureaucratic group in the Austrian government to be immaculate.

Franz asked: "What about Belgrade? Have the Ottomans abandoned it?"

Belgrade was traditionally seen as the gateway to the Balkans. Controlling it meant no one could ignore Austria's opinion on future Balkan affairs.

But Austria was not focused on the Balkans now. With the Ottoman's heavy troop presence, Austria did not take Belgrade yet.

If the Ottomans voluntarily abandoned it, sending just 8,000-10,000 troops could occupy it. Franz would not give it up either, Austria had sufficient manpower for such actions.

The more chips one has in hand, the greater the benefits that can be obtained after the war — this simple logic is understood by all.

Wanting to annex Balkan interests while unifying Southern Germany, Austria lacked such appetite currently.

Unless Russia went god mode and took Constantinople, forcing Britain and France to acknowledge Russo-Austrian domination, Austria could then take these fattened morsels.

"No, but the Ottomans did withdraw some forces from Belgrade. The garrison there has now dropped to 20,000 men." Prince Windisch-Grätz replied.

After some hesitation, Franz called out: "Jenny, send word to the cabinet and Marshal Radetzky to convene for a meeting."

Plans always lag behind rapidly changing circumstances. Austria seizing the two Danubian principalities then stopping could still be explained as sitting on a mountain and watching the tigers fight.

But now, with the Ottoman withdrawal from Serbia, Austria not seizing territory was too suspicious. Not just Russia, even other European countries would be doubtful.

Yet occupying all the way meant Austria controlled increasingly more Balkan land. Then problems emerged — the original southern strategy was just to cloak the westward strategy, but it somehow became real.

Don't think that having more meat is always a good thing; it might just make you fat, and dealing with weight loss is the most headache-inducing thing.

Austria now faced similar problems. Taking more land now, could Europe agree postwar?

Jealousy can make people's minds twisted, and if everyone becomes jealous, Austria could end up isolated. Franz doesn't want to face such a passive situation.

But the problem now was the situation completely exceeded Franz's control. The Ottomans are too timid, lacking the fighting spirit of their ancestors.

Even if they just symbolically organized some militias for show, Franz could have pretended to be deceived, failing to discover the enemy's plot in time and missing the opportunity.

Yet now, the Ottomans withdrew forces blatantly, leaving Franz at an impasse over whether to advance or retreat.

Chapter 184: Austrophobia Patients

Abdulmejid I could not understand Franz's troubles. If he knew Austria's plans, he would not have abandoned Serbia.

In fact, it was not just Serbia the Sultanate abandoned this time, but also Bosnia.

The reason is very practical — they can't hold on to them.

Since they knew these areas could not be defended, why waste forces pointlessly? The Ottoman government believed they made the right choice, concentrating elite forces to defend against Russian invasion.

As for Austria, after occupying Serbia and Bosnia, their front line has stretched too long, and there is no time to stabilize the rear. How could they continue the offensive?

Britain and France have already made promises to the Ottoman government: as long as they defeat the Russians, they were confident in making Austria vomit back all it swallowed at the negotiating table.

With so many favorable conditions, Abdulmejid I naturally wanted to concentrate his forces to fight against the Russians.

In order to delay the Austrian army's progress, the Ottoman forces also destroyed roads, bridges along the way, burned granaries, and conscripted a large number of young and able-bodied individuals as they retreated.

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Constantinople

Staring at the large map on the wall, Abdulmejid I sighed. He was unwilling to abandon their ancestral heritage, but reality left him no choice.

As for the promises made by Britain and France, Abdulmejid I had never fully believed in them. For example, at present, the promised reinforcements from Britain have not arrived in sufficient numbers.

The agreed-upon 80,000 reinforcements turned out to be only 20,000, and the rest of the troops would have to wait until they expanded their forces. Currently, they really can't send in the required amount.

This was real. The British army truly could not dispatch so many reinforcements. The British government was not intentionally sabotaging allies this time.

As for Palmerston's promise at the Paris negotiations, without such words, how could they have cajoled France into exerting strength?

Hadn't the French army been duped now? To gain eye-catching achievements, Napoleon III even sent elite forces without padding numbers with recruits.

Abdulmejid I calmed himself and asked: "Have the allied camps been properly arranged?"

“All have been properly arranged. We have evacuated the surrounding residents to ensure that nothing goes wrong.” Minister of War Damat Mehmed Ali Pasha answered solemnly.

During this era, the British and French armies were disciplined when on their home soil, but once abroad, they were not much different from bandits and robbers, engaging in looting as if it was an important business.

When the first batch of French reinforcements arrived, the Ottoman government suffered already, so now they naturally had to learn from that experience.

Abdulmejid I did not mean to disdain British and French discipline. In fact, the Ottoman Empire's forces were even worse. At least the British and French allied forces followed some rules when on their home soil, while the Ottoman army was a scourge domestically.

The difference lay in the fact that the Sultan could still restrain the Ottoman army, but he had no control over the British and French armies.

Abdulmejid I continued asking: “Have Britain and France not yet discussed who will assume the position of the supreme commander of the allied forces?”

The alliance of Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire, unlike the alliance of Austria and Russia, requires coordination in their military operations. Therefore, the issue of command of the allied forces is a significant concern.

Initially, the Ottoman Empire had a say in this matter, but after the defeat in the Battle of Bulgaria, their influence diminished.

Faced with the two big shots which are Britain and France, the Ottoman government, which couldn't afford to provoke either of them, chose to remain silent.

The longstanding enmity between Britain and France, spanning several centuries, has led to deep-seated animosity among their populations, and it is not something that can be easily resolved by a government decree.

The French shattered the British dream of continental dominance, and the British thwarted the French dream of hegemony. After centuries of conflict, it has become unclear who is right or wrong.

Now, the French believe that their land army is the world's most powerful, and therefore, they are entitled to the highest command of the allied forces.

Napoleon III aims to elevate France's global status and secure political prestige for himself. Consequently, the French must contend for control of the allied forces.

On the other hand, the British view themselves as the world's hegemon (although not universally acknowledged), with the most comprehensive national strength globally. Being the world leader naturally entails asserting that dominance, and the British are unwilling to relinquish command.

The British refuse to be commanded by the French, and vice versa. This sentiment is not only prevalent among the high-ranking officials but also among the soldiers on the ground.

Despite being allies, the officers and soldiers of the two armies simply can't stand each other. A cold exchange of glares is considered mild, and physical fights often break out at the slightest disagreement.

Then, Sultan Abdulmejid I found himself in a predicament as the two major powers were incessantly quarreling, and yet, there was a war to be fought!

The Russians halted their offensive, not because they ceased hostilities, but because they were preparing for a new campaign. They were simultaneously expediting the transportation of strategic supplies and having their rested troops await reinforcements.

"No, Britain and France's representatives still stubbornly argue." Foreign Minister Fuad Pasha smiled wryly, answering.

It was not his lack of effort. After Austria covertly provoked British and French domestic opinion, this problem became sensitive. Neither government dared to easily compromise.

In the words of the *The Times*: Don't let Frenchies ride on our heads and shit!

The French media also had similar rhetoric. The position of allied supreme commander had now become a matter of national prestige for both countries.

No one anticipated this situation. Had they known this would happen, the two governments would never have endlessly disputed this issue, giving their opponents a chance.

Austria, despite not having the ability to manipulate public opinion in Britain and France to such an extent, relied on its internal influence to achieve this.

Being able to cause trouble for their political rivals is not only politically correct but also something they have every reason to do.

Abdulmejid I let out a sigh: "Alas!"

He added: "Tell Britain and France's representatives that if they still cannot agree, establish a joint three nation command with each contributing one leader for joint command.

And if that is still not feasible, then let's divide our forces. Each country can command its own troops, as long as there is mutual coordination!"

It's evident that Abdulmejid I also knows that these are not ideal solutions. However, there is no alternative, as the Ottoman government is unable to persuade Britain and France.

With the imminent outbreak of another war and the lingering issue of command, they are at a disadvantage once the Russians launch an attack.

Regardless, they should decide to establish a joint command for the allied forces first. If that doesn't work, they can consider dividing their forces. Abdulmejid I is willing to accept this compromise.

Anyway, Britain only has 20,000 troops now. The main forces were still the Ottoman and French armies. The British can just play the drums on the side.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Fuad Pasha replied.

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Turin

After total defeat in the Austro-Sardinian War, the unfortunate King Charles Albert was abandoned by the people of Sardinia. His son Victor Emmanuel II succeeded the throne.

Unlike in history, this time Charles Albert left behind an enormous mess.

Apart from accumulating massive external debts, the Austrian army's visit devastated Sardinia's economy. Even now, the nation has yet to recover from this.

The legendary Prime Minister Cavour thus entered history's stage. Unfortunately, he was merely a man, not a god, and faced with this colossal mess, he too found himself in an extremely vexing situation.

Development? This matter was temporarily irrelevant to the Kingdom of Sardinia. Recovery came first! Without resolving domestic issues, what development could there be?

"What? Prime Minister, are you actually planning to go to war with the Russians?" Victor Emmanuel II nearly roared.

Ever since the Austro-Sardinian War, Victor Emmanuel II had been haunted by the shadows of war. Hearing that Cavour intended to go to war with the Russians, he immediately erupted.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Prime Minister Cavour replied.

Victor Emmanuel II angrily questioned: "Prime Minister, are you certain you are not joking?"

Prime Minister Cavour calmly replied: "Your Majesty, this is of course serious. How could I joke about such matters?"

Victor Emmanuel II demanded: "Madness! For no reason, why must we fight Russia? Do you have a personal grudge against Russia?"

The Kingdom of Sardinia lacked any conflicts of interest with Russia. Victor Emmanuel II truly could not find any rationale to fight Russia.

Prime Minister Cavour unhurriedly explained: "Your Majesty, I have no enmity with Russia. Even if I dislike them, it would absolutely not rise to the level of hatred.

Currently, Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire are all at war with Russia. Joining this conflict presents an opportunity for us to seek assistance from Britain and France.

Participating in this war allows us to seek an alliance with Britain and France. We can use this opportunity to overcome the domestic economic crisis and lift ourselves out of this predicament."

Victor Emmanuel II pondered seriously. Although Prime Minister Cavour's proposal seemed fanciful, it might not necessarily be unfeasible for the Kingdom of Sardinia.

The Kingdom of Sardinia is far from Russia, and there's no need to worry about a military threat from the Russians. Even if they were to offend them, there's no fear of retaliation.

Victor Emmanuel II shook his head and said: "That's not enough. Simply having the opportunity to form an alliance with Britain and France doesn't hold much value for us.

Currently, we lack bargaining chips for negotiations with Britain and France, and we have no qualification to intervene in the interests of the Near East.

Using the war to overcome the economic crisis — Prime Minister, our current Sardinia would struggle to gather the equipment for an infantry division.

Do you expect Britain and France to provide us weapons and equipment? Taking their equipment would just be sending our young and abled men to become cannon fodder on the battlefield.”

Reality was just that cruel. The Kingdom of Sardinia was too weak. After the Austro-Sardinian War, even the army was disbanded. It wasn’t forced by Austria but compelled by financial constraints.

The British were not charitable. Loans and interest must be repaid not a penny less and repayment on time was compulsory. Sardinia will have money to develop the military.

Since the British are providing them protection for national defense, all they need is an armed force to maintain internal stability, and a police force is sufficient. Currently, the only military force in the Kingdom of Sardinia is the King’s Guard.

Prime Minister Cavour passionately declared, “Your Majesty, I understand it’s not easy to obtain weapons and equipment from Britain and France, and I am reluctant to send young men to the battlefield as cannon fodder. But now, the nation needs it!

If we cannot secure the support of Britain and France, the Kingdom of Sardinia will never have the opportunity to develop and grow. The blood spilled in the Austro-Sardinian War will be in vain if we rely solely on our own strength, and we’ll never be able to seek revenge against the Austrians.

They left us...”

Victor Emmanuel II discontentedly said, “Stop, Prime Minister Cavour. I don’t want to hear your lengthy speech.

Constantly preaching about seeking revenge against Austria, are you worried that the Austrians have forgotten us and need reminding that there is still an enemy in Italy?

In the Austro-Sardinian War, the Kingdom of Sardinia lost 110,000 valiant soldiers, sacrificed 80,000 civilians, and over 100,000 more wounded. The economic losses were immeasurable, and the entire Kingdom of Sardinia wept.

With the casualties of war and the worsening economic situation, from 1848 until now, the total population of the Kingdom of Sardinia has decreased by 670,000.

Do you think we have spare manpower to expend? Even if we gain the support of Britain and France, do we truly have the capability to seek revenge against Austria?”

Revenge? Victor Emmanuel II desires it too, but reality does not permit for such. The Kingdom of Sardinia is merely a tiny country with a territory of 70,000 square kilometers and a population of just over 5 million people.

After enduring a significant blow, not only does Victor Emmanuel II lack confidence at this moment, but the entire Kingdom of Sardinia has also lost its confidence.

The primary purpose of Prime Minister Cavour’s advocacy for seeking revenge against Austria is to harness the power of hatred, hoping to ignite everyone’s fighting spirit for the effort towards the unification of Italy.

Cavour continued to explain, “Your Majesty, the international situation is constantly changing. Currently, Britain and France are allied, while Russia and Austria stand together. It’s only a matter of time before we have to take sides.

Instead of being forced to choose later, it’s better to proactively join now. The Austro-Sardinian War two years ago already determined that we have no choice.

Declaring war on the Russians now is just a statement. Our limited strength means Britain and France will not demand much from us.

With Montenegro and Greece now aligning with the Russians, Britain and France also need support to voice their stance internationally. The strength of the Kingdom of Sardinia is just right for this.”

Upon hearing this explanation, the expression on Victor Emmanuel II’s face eased slightly.

If there’s no need to commit a large number of troops, there’s room for negotiation. After the immense losses suffered in the previous war, his father went from a hero to a laughingstock, ultimately forced to abdicate. Victor Emmanuel II did not want to go through the same fate.

Victor Emmanuel II very calmly said: “We also need to consider Austria’s stance. The Russians may not be able to harm us directly, but they are right next to us. With a single order from the Austrian government, we could find ourselves in exile again within a week.”

Faced with the fear of Austria, Cavour was powerless. It wasn’t just Victor Emmanuel II; many people suffer from “Austrophobia” after the Austro-Sardinian War. Even Cavour himself was not an exception, though he managed to conceal it well.

Such emotions were especially severe among the masses. Having personally experienced war, many now understood its horrors, and fear of Austria intensified.

This is the aftermath of excessive propaganda. During Charles Albert’s era, there was extensive promotion of Austria’s decay, an exaggeration of the Kingdom of Sardinia’s strength, and the cultivation of confidence among the Sardinian people.

Unfortunately, this confidence was shattered during the Austro-Sardinian War, leading to a reactionary outbreak. Those who experienced this war became “Austrophobia” patients.

The nationalists and rebellious youth who were fearless in the past are now subdued. While domestic stability has been achieved, the plan for Italian unification has been thwarted.

After a moment of hesitation, Cavour spoke, “Your Majesty, I will find a way to handle the Austria issue. If they strongly oppose it, we can abandon this opportunity!”

This is an unavoidable issue. If Austria made military threats, even Cavour would cower. Sardinia now completely lacked the strength for another war. Participating in this Near East War, their only role was basically cheering on the sidelines.

Upon hearing Cavour’s response, Victor Emmanuel II nodded in satisfaction, indicating his approval.

Chapter 185: Dont Dig Your Own Hole (BONUS)

Sch?nbrunn Palace

Prince Windisch-Grätz marked the Ottoman forces' retreat routes on the map. Then a group of people from the Austrian government just stared at the map.

Yes, they were just staring, and they were all stunned. Anyone who knew the detailed situation would be surprised at the current actions of the Ottoman Empire.

Withdrawing defense lines was very normal. but the Ottoman's actions this time clearly went too far.

Abandoning the northern plains of Serbia can be understood; it's a vast plain that wouldn't withstand a single attack from the Austrian army. However, why abandon the southern mountainous areas, Kosovo, and Bosnia altogether?

Even if they only left behind a small number of troops, organized some militia, and utilized the advantages of the terrain, they could still have slowed down the Austrian advance.

If the situation was bad they could still flee to the hills as guerrillas, harassing Austrian supply lines. This was basic military common sense.

In other areas, it's uncertain, but at least in Bosnia and Serbia, the Ottoman Empire still has a significant number of supporters. Abandoning them like this is simply a stupid move.

If you're going to give up, just give up. Why hold onto Belgrade in the middle? Even if this city is crucial, having abandoned it from all sides, can a solitary city still be defended?

Anyway, Franz truly could not comprehend the Ottomans' rationale, whether militarily or politically, this made no sense.

This is almost like giving up...more or less.

Feeling intellectually inadequate, Franz asked, "Can someone tell me what the Ottomans are trying to do?"

Metternich speculated, "Your Majesty, it's possible that after the failure of the Battle of Bulgaria, the Ottoman government panicked and wanted to concentrate its forces against the Russians. The decision might have been made hastily.

The unfortunate soul left to guard Belgrade is likely a loser in the power struggle within the Ottoman Empire, a victim of political maneuvering.

There might not even be twenty thousand troops in Belgrade now. It could be a motley crew intentionally left there to meet their doom."

Such peculiar occurrences in the magical realm of the Ottoman Empire were not surprising. The performance of the Ottoman government was still acceptable; at least, they hadn't abandoned the capital and were organizing troops to fight against the Russians. They only gave up the "barbaric and uncivilized" territories.

Everyone nodded. When normal logic doesn't make sense, it must be an issue with the Ottoman government. It seems that, in everyone's impression, they were truly incompetent.

The Sultanate having done many foolish things, one more was not so unacceptable. As one of the world's two most bizarre empires, not doing some flabbergasting things would be the real issue.

Franz waved his hand and said: “Let’s assume the Ottoman government lost their minds. What should we do now? Send troops following behind the Ottomans reclaiming lost lands, or find an excuse to stay put?”

No need to ask why it became reclaiming lost lands. One glance at Franz’s long list of titles and you’ll understand. If they search carefully, they can always find a legal basis.

It’s okay even if it’s a bit far-fetched; it is going to be used as a cover to prove that Austria is not launching an aggressive war but reclaiming its territories anyway.

The House of Habsburg is too ancient, and their talent for intermarriage is a bit too strong, leaving behind a bunch of titles.

These regions, even if they were not ruled by the House of Habsburg, were once ruled by families connected through intermarriage. As long as it’s necessary, it can always be traced back.

Franz did not expect Europe to recognize this. As long as he could dupe some locals it was fine, or provide those who want to defect to Austria an excuse to do so.

In this world, there are many pretentious people, and everyone cares about their reputation. Restoring order and reestablishing legitimate rule is indeed a good reason.

Currently, the progress in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia is quite impressive. Those willing to align with Austria have acknowledged Franz’s legitimacy.

Naturally, those against Austria were Ottoman remnants needing to be struck down. With collaborator aid, they were mostly suppressed already.

Successful governing experiences can be replicated. If Austrianized Romanians can rule Romania, similarly, Austrianized Serbians can govern Serbia.

Recalling something, Franz added: “Let me reiterate, Serbia and Bosnia are not within our goals this time. Austria lacks such an appetite. Regardless of final results, we will not annex these regions this time!”

Prime Minister Felix said: “Your Majesty, at this stage, if we’re putting on a show, let’s go all the way. Mobilize a batch of reserve forces and take over the territories abandoned by the Ottomans first. Even if we decide to relinquish them in the future, we can still negotiate for our interests at the negotiating table.”

To avoid dispersing the main forces, at this moment, the available option is to utilize the reserves. Austria has a massive reserve force, and mobilizing tens of thousands of them was not an issue.

These troops have limited combat capabilities and may face disadvantages against the British and French forces, but would not flinch against Ottomans.

Franz can proudly say that the training of Austria’s reserve forces is stronger than that of the Ottoman regular army.

Finance Minister Karl shook his head and said, “It’s not that simple; the Ottomans are prepared. According to the intelligence we’ve received, the roads and bridges in these areas have been destroyed by the Ottomans.

They’ve also damaged farmlands, burned crops and supplies they couldn’t take, and forcibly conscripted a large number of young and able-bodied individuals to leave with them.

If we occupy these areas, we won't be able to obtain any local reinforcements. It's even difficult to find labor to repair the roads. We'll have to allocate a significant amount of food to aid war refugees. The Ottomans are prepared to use this to slow us down.

But we don't plan to continue the war. Occupying these areas not only brings a heavy financial burden but also provides benefits only in post-war negotiations.

I don't believe the benefits we gain at the negotiation table will offset our current expenses. It might be better to support a local regime and save ourselves from the financial strain, especially since we don't plan to annex these territories."

Faced with the Ottoman Empire's tactic of killing eight hundred enemies at the cost of three thousand of their own, Franz had to admit — he was impressed.

After all this trouble, even if they manage to secure these regions in the future, there's no guarantee of stable rule.

Of course, one could argue they had foresight, understanding that the Balkan Peninsula was no longer defensible and choosing to abandon it, concentrating their forces to defend the core regions along the straits.

Since they decided to abandon it, they couldn't leave anything good for the enemy. If it weren't for the fact that the cities were built of stone and couldn't be burned, they might have considered following Dong Zhuo's example with a fiery destruction of the cities.

Prince Windisch-Grätz objected: "Impossible! Even leaving these regions in Ottoman hands is better than a local regime.

Under Ottoman rule, they won't win the hearts of the people, and we can take them back at any time. If we let them become independent, it might be easy to annex these regions in the future, but ruling them will be difficult.

The territorial boundaries of the European continent are basically stabilized. The only place we can continue to expand is the Balkan Peninsula, and this path must not be blocked.

This concerns Austria's long-term development. Once overseas colonial strategies are obstructed, we can only seek Balkan expansion.

In this era of great conflict, we're going against the current, and if we don't move forward, we'll fall behind. We must leave room for future development."

After listening to Prince Windisch-Grätz's explanation, Franz's eyes brightened. Indeed, those who can leave a great name in history often have extraordinary qualities.

Prince Windisch-Grätz's military abilities might be ordinary, but his strategic vision for national development was accurate.

Especially the phrase 'leave room for future development,' Franz found it extremely insightful.

In the capitalist economy, if the road for external expansion is blocked, then one must rely on internal development. This implies that if external plundering is cut off, it will turn into internal exploitation, and disaster will be imminent.

Historically, did the Germans challenge the world order purely out of ambition?

Reality is extremely cruel; Germany had already developed to its limits. If they didn't provoke a war, they would face only two fates:

Either internal conflicts would intensify, leading to a revolution and a redistribution of wealth;

Or they would artificially suppress the pace of development, using extreme methods to survive the crisis and slowly decline.

Neither of these fates was acceptable to the German government. Faced with a lack of industrial raw materials and markets for selling goods, they chose war to gain the space needed for continued development.

"Militarily, capturing Belgrade is extremely important for Austrian national defense. Controlling this city secures the Pannonian Plain." Marshal Radetzky analyzed.

The Pannonian Plain stretched across Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Czech, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine, with surrounding regions including Slovenia and Bosnia.

It serves as Austria's granary, holding significant strategic importance. Occupying Belgrade not only resolves military threats from the Balkan Peninsula but also turns the strategic situation from defensive to offensive.

Franz is reassured having such a strategic location in Ottoman hands; the declining Ottoman Empire lacks the courage to cause trouble. However, if it were in the hands of a newly emerged Balkan state, it would be a different story.

Historically, Balkan countries have resorted to various suicidal tactics. If the small ally supported now were to stab Austria in the back at a critical moment, it could be deadly.

Franz could not dare to gamble on their integrity. Before national interests, all gratitude and loyalty were illusory, only interests were real.

An intense Serbian nationalism would cause the fledgling regime to diverge from Austria, becoming an unbreakable mortal enemy. Franz couldn't possibly allow himself to give away a significant portion of Austria to a subordinate.

Franz sternly stated, "Serbia must never be allowed to become an independent state in Serbia. No matter the cost, we cannot allow a major power to rise in the Balkan Peninsula, and if it happens, it must be Austria.

If we have to choose, I would rather see the Ottomans occupy the Balkan Peninsula or share it with the Russians than witness their independence.

Austria is a multi-ethnic country. Now is the critical period for ethnic integration. Any independence could bring uncontrollable consequences.

Balkan nationalism has just sprouted. We cannot provide them with a space to develop and grow, at least not the Serbians and Romanians.

Consider what Serbians and Romanians in Austria would think if independent Serbian and Romanian states appeared."

Stance dictated thoughts. Perhaps Franz once sympathized with Balkan states in his past life, but that was no longer the case now.

In this era of the strong devouring the weak, all were desperately strengthening themselves. Right or wrong was irrelevant, only interests mattered.

Changing perspective, the struggles of Balkan countries in history were quite tragic. However, the conflicts of interest were too severe; making concessions meant death, so they had no choice but to fight.

Unfortunately, due to an excessive focus on immediate interests, Balkan countries all ultimately failed, and none of them achieved their goals.

Balkan independence for other ethnicities doesn't matter, as Austria itself doesn't have many of them. However, specifically for Serbia and Romania, it's a different story; these two ethnicities together make up almost nine percent.

Assimilation had just begun with such difficulty. If two independent states appeared, to avoid problems, Franz's only option would be to package and send all these people back to the two nations.

Such a foolish act is something Franz cannot do. He hasn't forgotten that in history, the Austro-Hungarian Empire supported the independence of Serbia and Romania, only to dig a pit for itself and ended up buried.

Chapter 186: Changing Nationalities

On June 25, 1852, Austria once again launched an attack on the Ottoman Empire, traversing hundreds of miles in Serbia and Bosnia within a month, rescuing over a million people enslaved by the Ottoman Empire, and bringing the dawn of civilization to the Balkan Peninsula...

— From Austria's annual government work report

In fact, the Austrian army merely took over local defense after the Ottoman forces withdrew, maintaining social order.

Serbia was relatively easy to manage, with rural serfs being quite obedient. Although there were instances of urban unrest, it remained at the stage of street hoodlums.

Under the iron fist of Austria, the remnants of the Ottoman Empire were quickly eradicated. The remaining population appeared to be well-behaved, which was also related to the fact that the Ottomans took away a significant number of young and able-bodied individuals when they withdrew.

This wasn't an act of goodwill from the Ottomans, nor was it a foolish decision on their part. In warfare, a large number of cannon fodder and laborers are required, and leaving behind these young and able-bodied individuals would be aiding the enemy.

The two principalities in the Danube River Basin are examples of this. Currently, the Russian army has conscripted at least 150,000 laborers from the local population, and when necessary, these laborers can also be transformed into soldiers.

If it weren't for the contributions of these people, the Russians would have had to conscript laborers from their own country. The Russian government is not that foolish, and they would naturally not make that choice.

Drawing too many able-bodied individuals from the domestic population would also impact production, but there are no concerns about conscripting laborers from the two principalities. This area belongs to Austria, and no matter how severe the losses, the Russians wouldn't feel bad.

The Russians don't care, and neither does Franz. Without the atrocities committed by the Russian army, how could Austria's benevolence stand out?

Currently, these Romanians have not yet obtained Austrian nationality; they are not Austrians, nor have they paid taxes to Austria. Therefore, the Austrian government is not obliged to provide them with protection.

As for the resulting economic losses, that's even less worth mentioning. These regions haven't been extensively developed; it's just a matter of reduced food production.

Thinking a bit cynically, if these able-bodied individuals suffer heavy losses on the battlefield, the future difficulty of Austrian rule in the region will decrease a notch.

To avoid Russian conscription, becoming Austrian was the sole choice. Russia would not draft Austrians.

Everyone gets what they need. The Russians obtain a large number of laborers, and Austria grants nationality to many, gaining a group of supporters. In this matter, the cooperation between Russia and Austria is very pleasant.

Even though the Austrian government invested relatively little forces in the conquest of Serbia, it doesn't mean they don't consider it important. On the contrary, Franz places a significant emphasis on this potential source of future trouble.

To nip this European source of conflict in the bud, the Austrian government has also implemented specific measures.

Martial law is necessary, and it is essential to eradicate the local Ottoman influence. For the post-war recovery, Franz specifically ordered the transport of large quantities of flour and bean flour as relief supplies.

Belgrade's geographical location in the Balkans was excellent.

Situated at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers, it is also where the Pannonian Plain meets the Balkan Peninsula. Known as a junction between Europe and the Near East, it has long been hailed as the "Key to the Balkans."

But Belgrade's current commander Isaak Pasha doesn't think of this "Key to the Balkans" as a good place.

With the surrounding areas all abandoned, he is left as the unfortunate one guarding this isolated city.

The thought of abandoning Belgrade and fleeing has crossed his mind more than once, but Isaak Pasha could not dare to do so.

Abdulmejid I gave him a death order to defend this Balkan gateway city, laying foundations for the Ottoman Empire's future counterattack.

In the matter of counterattacking against Serbia, Isaak Pasha scoffed at it. If the Ottoman Empire had the strength, the war wouldn't have reached this point.

The person who proposed this idea was obviously trying to set him up. As a political loser, Isaak Pasha was mentally prepared for this. He had submitted his resignation early on in the campaign in the Near East, only to be rejected.

Now, he only has two options in front of him: either hold onto Belgrade or die on the battlefield. He dare not choose any other path; dying alone is better than his entire family perishing.

Unless the Ottoman Empire wins this war, then finding someone to blame and offering a few gifts might solve the problem.

In Isaak Pasha's view, the chances of that happening are virtually zero. If they can't win this war, a scapegoat is needed, and he, as a political loser, is just the perfect fit for the role.

"Send someone to investigate what the enemy is up to. Why haven't they launched an attack for so long?" commanded Isaak Pasha.

Three days ago, the Austrian army surrounded Belgrade. Besides firing a few shots as part of their daily routine, there has been no further action.

This unusual behavior naturally raised Isaak Pasha's vigilance. No matter how careful he was, the enemy refused to attack. All his preparations were in vain.

Isaak Pasha was anxious, and outside the city, Lieutenant General Feslav was even more anxious. Leading a group of reservists into battle was one thing; after all, the enemy was even more rubbish anyway.

However, the headquarters ordered him to keep casualties below a thousand, which posed a challenge. The previous Ottoman forces had withdrawn, and directly taking over the area basically involved minimal casualties. Now, isn't it impossible to attack Belgrade without paying a price?

Having some political acumen, Lieutenant General Feslav understood that the government was not enthusiastic about this war. Even orders to attack Belgrade were just four words — act based on circumstances.

The higher-ups' actions are obviously related to politics. The Russo-Austrian alliance was no longer secret, with endless rumors about its contents.

Feslav speculates that domestically, there is a reluctance to let the Russians capture Constantinople, but due to the alliance, they have to support the Russians. In this situation, the Austrian military's passive role is somewhat acceptable.

However, for soldiers like them, it's tragic. Without war, there is no military merit. This kind of situation, where they accept territorial gains without actively participating in battles, can only be considered as laborious, and it's not enough for promotions.

Feslav asked, "The terrain map of Belgrade is here, and the enemy is not stupid. The defense is quite tight. Does anyone have a way to take this city without causing significant casualties?"

A young officer eagerly said: "Commander, I don't have a good plan, but I have two evil ones. Do you want to give them a try?"

Feslav showed a delighted smile and said, "Vasim, as long as we can capture Belgrade with reduced casualties, that's already a good plan!"

“Yes, Commander!”

“Belgrade is located at the confluence of the Tisza River and a tributary of the Danube River. We just need to build a dam upstream and use water to conquer this city.

However, as Belgrade is situated in the Pannonian Plain, the destruction caused by flooding the city would be difficult to estimate.

The second method is to drive the local population into the city. There are many locals among the defenders of Belgrade. We can gather soldiers’ families and people leaning towards the Ottoman Empire, and force them all to the outskirts of Belgrade.

If the defenders allow them into the city, these people will intensify the city’s food consumption. If the defenders refuse them entry, then drive these people with sticks to attack the city, consuming the enemy’s ammunition.

However, the consequences of doing this are too great, and after the war, we must keep it under wraps.” Vasim said.

The crowd took in a cold breath. The methods were effective, but they were also quite ruthless.

The use of flooding would have a widespread impact, and the losses would be uncontrollable. Driving the population into the city, and keeping it secret after the war essentially meant killing people to cover it up, and the impact could only be minimized if all those involved were dead.

After much hesitation, Feslav slowly said, “Seek help from the homeland, have the government send water conservancy experts over. We will be flooding Belgrade.

As for driving the people to attack the city, forget about it. The homeland has also mobilized a large amount of relief food. If we harm the people, who will we feed the food sent here?”

Feslav is willing to flood the city, but he cannot bring himself to drive the people to attack the city. The relief food from the homeland is just an excuse.

Serbia’s young and able-bodied individuals were taken by the Ottomans. Finding cannon fodder for an attack was impossible now.

Using the remaining elderly, weak, sick, and disabled — these people have no value in being armed. Sending them with wooden sticks to attack the city is tantamount to sending them to their deaths, purely to waste enemy ammunition as Vasim said.

God knows how many people will have to die to deplete the enemy’s ammunition. If they really go through with it, there will be numerous deserted villages and towns in Serbia after the war.

After taking Belgrade, massive slaughter would be needed to silence witnesses. If they don’t kill enough people to turn the Danube River red, it will be difficult to put an end to this matter.

Vasim’s proposal seems normal in this era. The Americans are massacring Native Americans, the British are engaging in wanton slaughter in Australia and New Zealand, and the Qing Dynasty in the Far East is having a competition on who kills more with the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.

The main characters in this war, Russia and the Ottoman Empire, are both ruthless killers, and killing innocent people for credit is one of their main sources of military achievements.

As their armies pass through, they often leave behind deserted villages. With such a vast territory, the Ottoman army also made outstanding contributions to population control.

In this era of darkness, the Austrian army, after undergoing purification, is like a breath of fresh air. They are known for their strict military discipline in the Near East War.

After calculating pros and cons, Feslav did not drive civilians to attack. The Austrian government also shipped large amounts of relief food, quickly stabilizing Serbia.

Despite the scarcity of young and able-bodied individuals, the Austrian government adopted a policy of using work in exchange for relief food, recruiting local elderly, weak, and disabled individuals to repair roads and restore transportation.

Those who performed exceptionally well during the construction process were eligible to apply for Austrian citizenship. Only with Austrian citizenship could one qualify for official positions.

At this time, with the departure of the Ottoman forces, the original ruling class was finished, and the social order was reshuffled. There was a need for a large number of officials in the area.

Opportunists naturally rushed to apply for Austrian citizenship, as this was the best opportunity to change their social status.

Not to mention the present, even in the past, those who already had Austrian citizenship were more respected here. Ottoman government officials were afraid of causing diplomatic disputes.

People followed blindly. Seeing others naturalized, they followed suit.

From an unknown point in time, news spread that having Austrian citizenship could grant serfs the status of free citizens, and it drove people into a frenzy.

From Bosnia to Serbia, and further to the Danube River Basin's two principalities, many people were eager to naturalize into Austrian, with the majority being serfs.

However, at this time, there were also restrictions. To obtain Austrian citizenship, one must first learn the Austrian language.

This didn't deter them because, after applying, the Austrian government would send language teachers to instruct them. Once they learned everyday language, they could become part of Austria.

Local officials completely replicated Austria's land redemption policies. Ignoring landowners' opinions, they forcibly redeemed lands.

Even if there were objections, it wouldn't matter. Their land ownership was certified by the Ottoman Empire, unrelated to Austria. Without the owners, it could be considered ownerless land.

As for whether the Austrian government's actions were legal, no one thought much about it. Anyway, now Austria has the final say in this area.

Interest is always the best weapon. Austria didn't gain sovereignty over these lands but managed to turn the local population into Austrians first.

If Austria could rule for two or three years, and most of the population naturalized into Austrians, then things would get interesting.

One day, if the Ottoman government negotiated to reclaim these lands, sent officials to take over, and suddenly discovered that foreigners, not their own people, were on Ottoman Empire land, who knows what they would think.

Chapter 187: Pig Teammates Assembled

London

Receiving news of the Kingdom of Sardinia's willingness to join the war, Prime Minister John Russell was extremely pleased. Such a sensible ally is something everyone would appreciate.

After the outbreak of the Near East War, they had supported the Ottomans, putting themselves in opposition to European public opinion. Even within Britain, many media outlets had seized on the opportunity to criticize the government.

Reality once again proved the importance of a good reputation. The Ottoman Empire's reputation was simply too bad, and even a joint effort by Britain and France couldn't whitewash their image.

Public opinion was just a minor issue; being on the opposite side of international public opinion was nothing new for the British. These empty cannons could only grumble, incapable of harming them whatsoever. John Russell couldn't care less for them.

But recently, not only did Montenegro join the side of the Russians, but even Greece started making moves, as if to emphasize how unpopular their alliance with the Ottomans was.

To counter the pressure from the opposition, John Russell urgently needed to show some results and prove the correctness of this action.

With little hope for military breakthroughs, John Russell is not expecting much on that front. The chance is too slim. Relying on the 20,000 British troops on the front lines, achieving any significant results in a war with over 1 million participants is indeed questionable.

If military success is elusive, then perhaps diplomatic efforts can yield results. That's their forte — building alliances.

They've done it before, countering Napoleon's might with the cunningly constructed anti-French coalitions. While the Russian threat is substantial now, it doesn't compare to the dire situation during the Napoleonic Wars.

Unfortunately, all European nations had wised up. Despite their attempts at coercion and temptation, countries are maintaining a stance of neutrality, refusing to be drawn into the fray.

This leaves Prime Minister John Russell with a headache. Hoping for robust support from powerful allies seems unlikely. With only a handful of major European powers, none would be foolish enough to pull chestnuts out of the fire for them.

John Russell lowered his standards. He's content as long as there are a few enthusiastic voices waving flags in support, enough to provide some explanation to the domestic public.

"What are Sardinia's conditions?" John Russell happily asked.

Having made up his mind, he was ready to agree as long as the terms from the Kingdom of Sardinia were not too unreasonable. To establish world hegemony, it was crucial to gather allies, and securing their loyalty often came at a price.

While they had several allies, such as Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, and others, these small allies were not proving very cooperative. Without tangible benefits, they withdrew one by one.

The stance of the Kingdom of Sardinia was particularly significant. Despite their minimal military contribution, having another country vocally supporting them on the political front was crucial.

The Greeks could have filled that role, but their conflicts with the Ottoman Empire were too substantial, making reconciliation impossible.

“Sardinia’s demands are not excessive. They request the allies to purchase a batch of Sardinian goods and, at the same time, extend the repayment of loans until the end of the war,” replied Palmerston casually.

Undoubtedly, the Austro-Sardinian War failure dealt a blow to their confidence, making them more self-aware about their own strength. At this point, they dared not make extravagant demands.

John Russell further asked: “How many troops can Sardinia dispatch?”

Palmerston disdainfully said: “Two infantry regiments, barely better than nothing. Prime Minister Cavour stated that if we provide weapons and equipment and cover war expenses, they can dispatch 20,000 troops.”

John Russell chuckled: “We can agree, but we must secure command authority. Our army has yet to arrive on the battlefield, and our allies are growing discontent. Let’s use the forces of the Kingdom of Sardinia to make up the numbers for now.”

He had already figured out the Kingdom of Sardinia’s plan — seek support from Britain and France to unify Italy.

John Russell found Sardinian confidence somewhat baffling. He didn’t believe that Italy could be unified. After the Austro-Sardinian War, Sardinia’s economy directly regressed twenty years with no sign of recovery yet.

In a normal situation, they should have focused on recuperation, improved relations with Austria, and changed their diplomatic predicament.

After all, Austria held great influence over Italy presently, even establishing the Holy Roman Economic Alliance and excluded Sardinia from Italy.

To unify Italy, Austria was an unavoidable obstacle. Without defeating Austria, all their efforts would be in vain.

While it is true that the British government supports the Kingdom of Sardinia’s quest to unify Italy, this support remains mostly verbal, at most providing them with loans. Direct military intervention is out of the question.

France wants to drive out Austria from Italy, but also opposes Italian unification. If not for unforeseen events, France and Austria would have partitioned Sardinia three years ago.

No matter what, since Sardinia wished to be cannon fodder, how could they refuse?

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Vienna

Franz kept a diary, a habit he developed after transmigrating. With a jumble of memories from his previous life, he worries about forgetting, so Franz records everything.

To maintain secrecy, the contents are coded. The world background is also replaced with a magical setting, and miscellaneous content is mixed together. Except for himself, no one can understand it.

“Your Majesty, Mr. Metternich requests an audience!” The familiar voice of maid Jenny sounded.

“Let him in!” Franz calmly said.

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

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Metternich said, “Your Majesty, the Sardinian government is testing our attitude. They are preparing to declare war on the Russians.”

To be honest, when Metternich first heard this news, he didn’t believe it at all. Sardinia, with its considerable debts, going to war with Russia was something he found hard to fathom.

Only after repeated confirmation did Metternich accept it.

Panic was unnecessary. Sardinia’s military strength is hardly noteworthy, and Austria has the most say in this matter. Such trash isn’t worth serious consideration.

However, the political implications behind it must be taken into account. In case Britain and France promised some benefits to Sardinia, which prompted their involvement in the war, that would be something to watch out for.

After some thought, Franz replied: “Since Sardinia wishes to participate in war, let’s be gracious! Convey to the Sardinian government that Austria has no objections.”

Will Sardinia’s participation in the war affect the Russo-Turkish War? It will certainly have an impact, but this influence is limited to the political sphere. Militarily, as long as they don’t cause trouble for the alliance, it should be fine.

At this moment, Franz suddenly realized that it seemed like the odds were not bad for the Russians. Despite the allied forces’ strength, three out of the four countries were known for being pig teammates. Can the French alone lead the way?

There’s no need to explain about the Ottoman Empire; their army’s combat capabilities can be judged by how they fared against the Russians on the battlefield.

The core of Sardinia’s military has been wiped out, and what remains is a group of demoralized and defeated soldiers. Expecting any significant combat capabilities from the army they’ve assembled would be unrealistic.

The British army, comparatively, has good combat capabilities. Unfortunately, their numbers are not high, their command capabilities are lacking, and they tend to let down their allies at critical moments.

On the other hand, there’s no need to consider so much about the Russians. Except for Austria, which has actual strength, the other two allies are not reliable at all.

Furthermore, in the alliance Austria is playing a supporting role. Unless the Russian forces on the front are defeated, there is simply no opportunity for Austrian troops to enter the scene, and this is determined by logistics.

Greece and Montenegro are both separated from the Russians, and there is no need to consider issues of mutual coordination, let alone worry about being betrayed.

In theory, as long as the Russians can seize the opportunity and defeat the French, they have the potential to defeat each enemy separately.

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After receiving the news that Austria tacitly approved their actions, on July 1, 1852, the Sardinian government declared war on the Russian Empire, once again expanding the scope of the Near East War.

Chapter 188: Russian Counterattack

Saint Petersburg

Suddenly receiving a declaration of war from the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Russian government was furious. Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire were all world powers, but what was the Kingdom of Sardinia?

Did they think Russia had declined to the point where any Tom, Dick, or Harry could come and stir up trouble? Despite the anger, due to the distance, Russia couldn't do much against the Kingdom of Sardinia.

Nicholas I coldly exclaimed, "Hmph!"

"Order the frontline troops to properly greet the Sardinians, and let them know the Russian Empire will not tolerate insults!"

"Yes, Your Majesty." The Minister of War quickly replied.

Little did anyone expect that Nicholas I's command out of anger would become a crucial factor in the future success of the Russian army, leading to a significant victory.

On July 18, 1852, the Russian army launched an offensive in the Caucasus, pushing the Ottoman forces back step by step. Due to the challenging terrain, the Russian forces achieved several victories, but the progress of the frontline was extremely slow.

The Ottoman Empire also had smart strategists who understood the importance of holding onto the favorable terrain in the Caucasus. They had amassed a significant number of troops in the region, quickly deploying new units to replace those defeated in battle.

A fierce and uncompromising struggle ensued, with neither side willing to concede an inch. By August, the Russian army was forced to halt its offensive after suffering significant casualties.

The losses were staggering, with over 70,000 casualties in just over two weeks of fighting, averaging more than 5,000 casualties per day. Victory seemed distant, and the Russian forces could no longer stand it.

To reinforce the troops, logistical supply became a problem, constrained by the challenging terrain. The ability to concentrate a force of 200,000 soldiers was a result of stockpiling strategic resources in advance.

After half a month of fighting, the ammunition supply was running low. It highlighted the backwardness of Russian military equipment, which, ironically, helped ensure basic logistical support. If it were the armies of Britain, France, or Austria, the logistical pressure would have increased by a quarter.

Unable to break through in the Caucasus, the Russians once again turned their attention to the Balkan Peninsula. After a prolonged period of reorganization, the Russian army had regained its fighting capability, with a total strength of 480,000.

The allied forces were even larger, with 170,000 French troops, 20,000 British troops, and 540,000 Ottoman troops. Aside from the Sardinian army that had not yet arrived, their total strength was a formidable 730,000 soldiers.

However, the Russians were not at a significant disadvantage. The Bulgarians formed a 50,000-strong army. Austria was also helping to hold back 70,000 to 80,000 Ottoman troops. Meanwhile, Montenegro mobilized a 20,000-strong army plus the backstabbing Greeks who also organized 70,000 troops.

Overall, the combat strengths of both sides were nearly equal, and the key to determining victory lay in the competence of the commanders.

“Are all the supplies in place?” asked Menshikov.

In the previous Battle of Bulgaria, they had failed to capitalize on their gains. Apart from the unexpected appearance of the French army disrupting their plans, another factor was that logistical supplies could not keep up with consumption.

The Russian army had miscalculated the estimated ammunition consumption on the battlefield, overlooking the fact that after the troops were re-equipped, the consumption of weapons and ammunition would increase significantly.

Russian equipment was outdated. As an ally, Franz naturally would not sit idly by. Once the Near East War broke out, Austria immediately sold a large amount of new weapons and equipment to the Russians.

Although the Russians couldn't afford a widespread rearmament, they did purchase a batch of weapons and equipment for their main forces. About three infantry divisions were equipped with Austrian weaponry, and more than three hundred cannons were acquired to enhance firepower.

It turned out that these weapons and equipment were worth the price. After the rearmament, the combat effectiveness of the Russian army improved significantly, and these divisions were among the first to break through the Ottoman defense lines.

The battlefield became heated, and naturally, the ammunition consumption increased. Taking the example of the newly added three hundred cannons, just one salvo would deplete a ton of ammunition.

The high consumption was a logistical issue, but compared to the frequently problematic Russian equipment, the officers quickly took a liking to the Austrian weapons and equipment and demanded replacements.

If it was peacetime, large-scale purchase of Austrian weapons and equipment would definitely meet staunch opposition from the military-industrial interest groups.

Wartime was different. Having invested so much into this conflict, Nicholas I absolutely could not tolerate anyone dragging their feet at this critical moment. He forcefully approved the military's request for equipment replacement.

During the months of reorganization, the Russians were also not idle. They gradually replaced the equipment of some units. Among the current 480,000 Russian troops, one-third were already using Austrian equipment.

The main force had closed the gap in weapons and equipment with the British and French. Even if there were shortcomings in training, the combat will of a combative nation could compensate for some of it.

Incidents like the previous one where the main force of 90,000 Russian troops couldn't handle 50,000 French troops in open-field combat were now unlikely to occur.

"It's all in place, and some supplies even exceed our pre-planned estimates. It's enough to sustain our entire army in a large-scale battle for three months." The logistics officer responded.

Pleased, Menshikov nodded. He had enough confidence in this war. In the previous Battle of Bulgaria, the main force of the Ottoman army had already been severely damaged.

Even if the current number of troops has not decreased, the inevitable decline in combat effectiveness is apparent. The combat capabilities of new recruits and veterans are entirely different, and the disparity between elite troops and cannon fodder is even more pronounced.

Menshikov said confidently, "Very well, as long as logistics are in place, we've already won half the war. The government has approved our plan of operations, and an additional 300,000 troops will be stationed in Ukraine, ready to replenish our battlefield losses at any time.

The Ottomans are not a concern; Sardinia is just a force brought in by the British to bolster their numbers. Our main enemies are the British and French.

The strategic objective of this decisive battle is to annihilate the main forces of the British and French on the Balkan Peninsula, push the front lines to Edirne, and lay the groundwork for the capture of Constantinople.

For the ultimate victory, we must spare no effort, accept any cost, and, without considering casualties, breach the enemy's defenses in the shortest possible time, encircling and annihilating the British and French forces.

Only by inflicting significant blows on them can we win this war."

The Russian military system was somewhat chaotic, and the Russian government's personnel decisions were also arbitrary. Menshikov, originally from the army, served as a military attaché in

Vienna. He also participated in the Napoleonic Wars, and the Eighth Russo-Turkish War. He also served as a chamberlain to the Tsar.

After retiring from the army, he worked in the Foreign Ministry. Then he entered naval service, successively serving as commander of the Black Sea Fleet, Chief of Staff of the Naval General Staff, and Naval Minister. Now, he was Admiral of the Navy.

While some might think his promotion to the navy and achieving the rank of admiral indicates exceptional naval talent, the reality is quite the opposite, him joining the navy created trouble.

Menshikov's entry into the navy had a direct consequence: it delayed Russia's naval technological progress and combat training. He applied the army's training model to the navy, making him somewhat of a gravedigger for the Russian Navy.

Now, as Admiral, he has been assigned to command several hundred thousand troops, serving as the overall commander of the expeditionary force in the Balkan Peninsula. Naturally, this appointment does not inspire confidence.

Although he originated from the army, having been away for over a decade, Menshikov's professional competence inevitably deteriorated, making him less credible in his new role.

It would be more accurate to call him a politician now rather than a military man. The employment mechanism of the Russian government has cast a shadow over the impending large-scale war.

The Russian Chief of Staff Field Marshal Gorchakov objected: "Commander, one should pick soft persimmons to pinch. To win this war, the easiest breakthrough is clearly with the Ottomans.

What we should do now is look for opportunities to cripple the Ottoman troops, then come to gnaw on the tough bone that is Britain and France.

Without the Ottoman troops as cannon fodder, these less than two hundred thousand British and French troops can be easily annihilated."

Menshikov confidently explained, "If we focus on the Ottomans, the British and French armies will flee at the first sign of trouble. We simply do not have the ability to keep both of them here.

If we cannot inflict significant damage on both Britain and France, even if we occupy Constantinople, the war will continue.

They can continuously send troops to the Balkan Peninsula by sea, and the war will become protracted.

From the outbreak of war until now, we have spent at least 130 million rubles in military expenditures. Adding in the pre-war preparations, our military expenditures have exceeded 200 million rubles, which is the annual fiscal revenue of the Russian Empire.

If the war continues for a long time, our finances will be unsustainable. In terms of financial resources, we cannot compete with Britain and France, even if we add Austria in the equation."

In financial power, the British were invincible in this era. Even if we only look at fiscal revenue, they are in a league of their own. The four nations — France, Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire — in the second tier can't catch up, and everyone is at most at the level of 60-70% of Britain.

This gap can only be gradually closed by each country after completing industrial revolution.

“But Commander, we have no advantage now. The likely result of the war is mutually assured destruction, not achieving our ultimate goal.” Gorchakov frowned and said.

Menshikov shook his head and said, “Even if it means mutual destruction, we must fight. Regardless, we must make Britain and France feel the pain and force them to withdraw from the war.

If we fight steadily, how long will this war last? One year, two years, eight to ten years?

Now is different from before. In the past, we could fight with the Ottoman Empire for more than a decade in a single war, but can we do that now?

The high cost of war has already told us that a swift and decisive victory is the best choice. If we drag it out, the price we pay will only be even more severe.”

Military personnel consider issues primarily from a military perspective. Politicians, on the other hand, consider issues more from a political standpoint.

Menshikov had already transitioned to a politician. He may not care about the losses suffered by the Russian army, but he cannot accept the war continuing indefinitely.

Both the upper and lower echelons of the Russian government understand that the longer the war persists, the more disadvantageous it becomes for them. In the later stages, it will be a matter of who has greater endurance.

To prevent this scenario, the best solution is to use the devastating casualties on the battlefield to frighten Britain and France, forcing them to make concessions.

After the Crimean War in history, the British refrained from interfering in European affairs and tried to avoid direct involvement as much as possible. This laid the foundation for Prussian unification of the German territories.

One could say that the Crimean War indirectly helped the Germans. After the war, internal contradictions in Russia necessitated reforms, and it took more than a decade for them to overcome these challenges. The victorious Britain and France, having experienced the war, were hesitant to immediately intervene when Prussia initiated the war for German unification.

With all in agreement, the Russian military began preparations. Fortunately, in this era, information transmission was not convenient. Although the telegraph had appeared, it was only available in major cities, and the Balkan Peninsula had not yet adopted it widely.

Otherwise, with the Russians’ current approach, the enemy would have received the news and prepared themselves before their actions even began.

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War is always a matter of comparison and contrast. Despite the chaotic command of the Russians, it is still better than the alliance of Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire. The latter is a three-headed force moving forward simultaneously.

Britain and France are not yielding to each other, and the Ottoman Empire can only remain neutral. They are afraid that if things go south and both Britain and France withdraw, they will be doomed.

In history, Aimable Jean Jacques Pélissier served as the supreme commander of the allied forces, barely managing to command their operations. Now, Aimable Jean Jacques Pélissier is just one of the three main commanders.

The aftermath is that, when coordinated operations are needed, everyone must report to the allied command. After reaching a consensus among the three commanders, the operations can then proceed.

While the Russian army is preparing to launch an attack, the allied forces are ignorant of it. The Ottoman Empire does not prioritize intelligence work, and all intelligence comes from their citizens voluntarily providing it.

Within the bureaucratic system, much of this intelligence is not verified and is used directly. Unfortunately, the Russians also do not prioritize intelligence work. Otherwise, passing on some false information could have caused significant losses to the allied forces.

Both England and France are experienced, but they lack the ability to gather intelligence. Their bureaucratic tendencies are also noteworthy, and they simply assume that the Ottoman Empire will handle these matters.

Chapter 189: The Allied Forces' Plan (BONUS)

On August 15, 1852, the Russian army launched the second Battle of Bulgaria, with the main Russian forces pouring over the Balkan Mountains to attack the allied forces.

Franz found it hard to understand the Russians recklessly committing their main force like this. Shouldn't they at least leave enough troops to defend their supply lines? Despite his lack of understanding, Franz had to assist the Russians in handling the aftermath.

Austria needed the war to continue, and only if the Russians and the British and French forces fought fiercely could Austria find an opportunity to advance westward.

Frowning, Franz ordered, "Command the frontline troops to be on standby. Once the allied forces make a move, pretend to be Balkan guerrillas and help the Russians guard the supply line."

Given Austria's multi-ethnic composition, with a significant number of minorities in the military, assisting the Russians posed challenges.

In politics, shamelessness prevailed. As long as the lid was not lifted, and the British and French had no evidence to prove Austria's involvement, everyone would continue to feign ignorance, awaiting the next opportunity for retaliation.

If the lid were lifted, they would have no choice but to stand their ground and fight. Franz disliked such extreme and risky actions.

Marshal Radetzky suggested: "Your Majesty, direct intervention would easily expose us. Why don't we support the Bulgarian local militia and guerrillas?"

The Russians may not take them seriously, but the information provided by the front-line military observers suggests that their fighting spirit is high, and that they have some combat capability.

As long as we provide them a batch of weapons and equipment and arm these people, with them as local big shots here, the allied forces would find it almost be impossible to conduct raids here."

Austria needed the Russians to continue their offensive, but they were not prepared to personally enter the battlefield to assist the Russians, as that would mean the failure of their westward strategy.

One can't rely on the Russians to reciprocate after Austria helps them capture Constantinople. Would the Russians then send troops to help Austria unify the German territories?

Considering the situation from another perspective, if Austria's strategic goals were already achieved, would Franz still be so dedicated to assisting the Russians now?

Genuine cooperation is built on shared interests. Once those interests fade, everyone's stance is likely to change.

Franz shook his head and said, "Supporting the Bulgarians is simple; we are not lacking in military supplies. However, how do we explain this to the Russians? According to the terms of the alliance, Bulgaria is Russian territory so we cannot interfere there."

To avoid conflicts, the Russo-Austrian alliance had very clear agreements. The division of influence between the two countries was well-defined: each could do as they pleased in their own territory, but they couldn't meddle in the other's.

While the Russians were promoting Pan-Slavism in Bulgaria and Montenegro, they hadn't made similar efforts in Serbia and the Danube Principalities.

The Russians were playing by the rules, and Austria couldn't afford to break them. This adherence to rules was the foundation of their alliance, easy to break but difficult to rebuild.

Prime Minister Felix suggested, "What if we arrange for someone to smuggle weapons into Bulgaria? There are many arms dealers active in the Balkans recently. We can find someone to act as an agent."

Metternich opposed, "No. If it's just a few thousand rifles, we can naturally let arms dealers sell them to the Bulgarians.

But now, for the Bulgarians to have the ability to withstand a surprise attack by the allied forces, they need at least one or two divisions' worth of weapons and equipment.

If this many weapons flow into Bulgaria, and we claim ignorance, how could we explain it?

Moreover, the Bulgarians simply don't have the money to buy so many weapons. If arms dealers start giving away weapons for free, the Russians, unless they're fools, will know it's our doing."

Smuggling weapons can only be done on a small scale; once it becomes large enough, it's challenging to maintain secrecy.

The Ottoman Empire has always controlled the flow of weapons and ammunition into Bulgaria. If a large quantity of weapons were to enter Bulgaria from the Austrian-controlled zone now, Austria would have a hard time explaining it.

Franz thought for a moment and said, "Take some of the second-hand weapons from our warehouses, select those that are still usable, and mix them with weapons seized in the Balkans. Have the quartermaster sell them to arms dealers in his name, and we'll take part as well."

Issuing orders to sell weapons in this manner was quite absurd, but it was currently happening.

Large quantities of Austrian equipment appearing in Bulgaria would definitely draw Russian attention. If it was switched to second-hand old equipment flowing into the market, the Russians might even feel a sense of camaraderie.

Currently, the largest arms dealer in Bulgaria is the Russian expeditionary force. Officers sell confiscated weapons and equipment to local guerrilla organizations for profit.

Since the Russian military is involved, it wouldn't be surprising for the Austrian forces to follow suit. Even if the Russians were to discover it, they would likely help cover it up; otherwise, their own involvement in arms dealing would be exposed.

Prime Minister Felix thought for a moment and said, "Your Majesty, this is probably a drop in the bucket. The local militia in Bulgaria is too poor; even purchasing firearms and ammunition is a struggle for them, and they cannot afford artillery.

If the allied forces send troops to the rear to sabotage them, although the number of troops may not be too large, it won't be too small either. At the very least, they would organize regiments. The local militia in Bulgaria is probably not a match for them."

"No need to worry. We just need the Bulgarians to buy us some time. With this buffer time, the Russians should be able to react," Franz said calmly.

Franz is still confident in the combat capability of the Bulgarian militia. He had previously fallen into a misconception, realizing that these people couldn't defeat a regular army on the front lines.

However, defending their homeland, with terrain to their advantage, these Bulgarians should have no problem delaying the enemy's advance.

A raid on the rear is all about speed. If the speed is not fast enough, let alone cutting off the enemy's supply lines, just avoiding detection and not being captured would be an achievement.

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Balkan Peninsula Allied Command

"General Mustafa Pasha, why didn't you inform me about what happened? Why is it that when the Russians launched an attack this time, you have no information at all?

Do not tell me the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of troops completely escaped your notice?" French Commander Aimable Pélissier questioned.

"General Mustafa Pasha, your side is inexcusable for this matter. The Russians have already started their offensive, yet you all did not know until we informed you.

This is your Ottoman Empire's homeland. You cannot even obtain such intelligence. Are all your officials doing nothing but eating shit?" British Commander FitzRoy Somerset rebuked.

Faced with the accusations of the two, Mustafa Pasha had nothing to say. While it might be understandable for foreign troops not to know about the Russian movement, for them, the sovereign of this land, to be oblivious to the military movements under their noses was inexcusable.

“I apologize, gentlemen. We will handle the negligent personnel seriously. Such situations will not occur again. Now that the enemy has come, let's focus on dealing with them!”

After saying this, Mustafa Pasha picked up his command baton, pointed at locations on the military map, and analyzed, “Here and here. These are the focal points contested by the Russian army. Based on the firepower on the battlefield, the Russians’ main target this time should be the strategic key point — Sliven.

Sliven has always been a strategic key point in the Balkans. Once the Russian army occupies it, they will gain a strategic advantage over us.

From here to Edirne, it’s a flat plain, and we will find it difficult to establish an effective defense line. If the Russians leave a hundred thousand troops in Sliven, we will have to leave two hundred thousand troops to keep an eye on them.

In addition, another city that the Russians may focus on attacking is Sofia.

Sofia is located in the southern part of the Sofia Basin, also a strategic key point in the Balkans. If we control this area, we control half of Bulgaria.

If Sofia falls, then the Russians can link up with the Austrians to the north, and our stronghold in Belgrade will also lose its strategic significance.”

Looking at the map, FitzRoy Somerset’s expression changed. The current location where the British forces are stationed is precisely Sofia, accompanied by thirty thousand Ottoman troops.

The decision to defend here was based on the prior internal analysis of the British expeditionary forces, believing that the Russians’ target was Constantinople, and the main focus of the attack would be in Sliven.

If the allied forces win and launch a counterattack, Sofia would again be in a favorable position, allowing them to swiftly advance towards the Danube River, cutting off the Russian retreat. This would be an excellent place to gain military achievements.

However, looking at it now, the Russians may also advance through Sofia. If they capture this area, more than half of the Balkan Peninsula will be under their control, and the political gains would be greater than the military ones.

French Commander Aimable Pélissier coldly analyzed: “If the Russians want to capture Constantinople, Sliven is an unavoidable obstacle. Unless they are not afraid of us cutting off their rear, they must take this region.

Losing Sliven would make our later battles difficult. By then, the Russians could attack or retreat at will, while we could only passively respond.

Now that your country has given up Serbia, even if Sofia is lost, it will only mean losing the central and western parts of Bulgaria, along with Belgrade.

The war is still in its early stages, and the ultimate victor is the one who laughs last. We don’t need to care about the gains and losses of individual cities and territories. It’s worthwhile to temporarily give up some land for the sake of the final victory.”

FitzRoy Somerset strongly opposed: “We cannot simply abandon Sofia. The Russians have already manipulated the Bulgarians, and if we continue, more Balkan nations will be influenced.

By then, we will find that the enemy keeps increasing. With their support, even if we defeat the Russians, we won’t be able to drive them out of the Balkan Peninsula.

The 30,000 relief troops we dispatched from the homeland have already set out. They will arrive on the Balkan Peninsula at the latest the day after tomorrow. The 20,000 troops from the Kingdom of Sardinia have also reached the Balkan Peninsula and will be sent to reinforce Sofia.

Limited by logistics, the Russian forces in the Balkan Peninsula are restricted. They cannot send too many troops to attack Sofia. With 100,000 troops, we can definitely hold our ground.

Sliven is guarded by French forces, and the Russians have almost no chance of breaking through. As long as we withstand this wave of attacks, we can launch a counterattack.

In terms of troop strength, we have an absolute advantage. Even if the Russian army is strong, they are not our match in the Balkan Peninsula.”

Military serves politics. As the first battle for the British army on the Balkan Peninsula, FitzRoy Somerset could not retreat without a fight. This concerned the British army’s face.

The French had already shown their power. Even if the French suffer losses, on the surface, they will appear as victors, with the blame falling on the Ottomans.

The British army also needs to establish its might, proving its strength to the outside world and elevating its status domestically. This means they cannot act together with the French, or they risk being seen as mere spectators.

Mustafa Pasha showed his support by saying: “General Somerset’s proposal is good. Sofia is indispensable and we cannot bear the political impact of losing it.”

Pessimistically speaking, whether they could drive out the Russians was unknown. If the two sides fought to mutual destruction and the Ottoman Empire could not recover the lost lands, abandoning Sofia now would be a huge loss, right?

The British were formidable, but that was thanks to their navy. The French were formidable, but that was the France of Napoleon. The Ottoman Empire was powerful, but that was history.

The Russians are presently powerful, particularly in their land forces. Having faced the Russian army multiple times, the Ottoman government fears the Russian threat. Even Mustafa Pasha cannot avoid being influenced.

The Ottoman government was already prepared to move the capital. If not to boost morale, the Ottoman capital would now be Ankara.

The Russian Bear is a formidable adversary. If they cannot drive them out of the Balkan Peninsula, the Ottoman government would hesitate to keep Constantinople as capital in close proximity to the Russians.

With a 2-1 vote, Aimable Pélissier did not continue to object. They were allies in name but he could only command the French army. He could barely order the Ottoman army. The arrogant John Bull would not even accept his leadership.

Aimable Pélissier proposed: “In that case, let’s divide the responsibilities. The main defense in Sofia will be led by the British and will be named the Left Army, with General FitzRoy Somerset as commander.

Sliven, including Kazanlak, will be guarded by the French, and I will personally serve as the commander, forming the Central Army. The remaining areas will be the responsibility of General Mustafa Pasha, serving as the Right Army.

The frontline situation is critical, and we don’t have time to waste. If there are no issues, let’s take positions as soon as possible.”

FitzRoy Somerset said without hesitation: “There are none. This allocation is very reasonable and can maximize the mobilization of the troops’ combat capabilities.”

Chapter 190: Production Line

Hordas Armory, Bohemia

In the armory, engineers were conducting weapons testing. Twenty testers simultaneously raised their guns and shot at the shooting target ahead.

After the gunshots, weapons designer Holman-Strehlen stepped forward to take a look, calculating the parameters at the fastest speed, and said satisfyingly: “Passed.”

The parameters are as follows:

Caliber: 7.92mm

Weight: 4.2 kg

Length: 1417 mm

Barrel length: 920 mm

Ammunition: Paper cartridge, lead bullet

Loading method: Breech-loaded

Rate of fire: 12-15 rounds/min

Muzzle velocity: 410 m/s

Effective range: 650 m

Maximum range: 1512 m

Feed system: Single shot

Armory director Hordas laughed and walked over, saying: “Congratulations, Mr. Strehlen, you’ve designed another outstanding rifle.

This rifle is outstanding; it allows soldiers to load ammunition while lying down or crawling, and its accuracy in close-range shooting surpasses most rifles.

I heard that the Prussians have changed their equipment on a large scale, and we’ve obtained a few of their rifles for comparison. Their performance is still not as good as our rifle.”

Holman-Strehlen calmly said: “Mr. Hordas, this is just a laboratory product, and whether it can be mass-produced on an industrial scale is still uncertain.

In fact, over the years, we have developed quite a few advanced firearms in the laboratory, but due to production cost considerations, very few have been adopted for military use.

For example, the previous 1850 series rifle had much better overall performance than this one, but due to production costs, we had to reluctantly give it up.”

As a weapons design expert, the first thing one must learn is to give up when necessary. Weapons are not necessarily better the more advanced they are; one must also consider the overall cost.

From a design perspective, a rifle from a hundred years later can still be designed now, but whether it can be produced is unknown.

Holman-Strehlen was already used to it. Over 95% of the weapons he designed stayed in the lab. While this rifle is good, whether it can be adopted by the Austrian army remains uncertain.

Hordas optimistically said: “No worries. The ongoing Near East War is intense. We can market it for trial use in the Principality of Montenegro. As long as this rifle proves its excellence in actual combat, the military will not refuse it.

From a technical standpoint, the production cost of this rifle is much lower than that of the 1850 series. I can preliminarily assess that the production cost won’t be much higher than the current rifles.”

They can’t say that it was an order from His Majesty the Emperor to design a breech-loading rifle suitable for the Austrian army’s use, right?

Currently, almost every Austrian armory has presented sample rifles. Over a dozen breech-loading rifles have appeared on the palace shooting range. Based on experience, Hordas believes that this rifle has a high chance of winning.

Cheap, simple operation, and stable performance were this rifle’s advantages. The only downside was slightly weaker lethality, but the advantages of precise accuracy and the ability to reload while prone can compensate for this.

Now, only the final step is left — field combat test, and the ongoing Near East War provides a good opportunity.

After the outbreak of the war, the Principality of Montenegro relied on Austrian logistical support and has fully equipped its forces with Austrian weapons for the sake of convenient resupply. It has become a testing ground for Austrian weapons.

The Austrian military has also dispatched weapons observers to collect real-world performance data on various weapons, serving as a crucial reference for future equipment upgrades.

Holman-Strehlen earnestly said: “Alright, Mr. Hordas. Please arrange it as soon as possible. This time, I want to personally lead the team to collect data on the battlefield.”

“No! The battlefield is too dangerous. You are the best weapons designer in Austria, you cannot take such risks.” Hordas anxiously said.

Holman-Strehlen smiled and said: "No need to worry. The Montenegrins will protect us well. If you're still concerned, we can request a military escort.

Danger is relative. If God wants to take me away, accidents can happen even if I stay at home."

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Sch?nbrunn Palace

Hordas Armory's new rifle appeared on the shooting range. Franz skillfully completed loading and firing it.

Perhaps due to his lack of talent, his shooting skills was really embarrassing. Hitting fixed targets within 110 meters without missing was by God's grace.

Franz had always believed this was because the rifles performed poorly, with too much recoil causing bullets to go off target. The evidence was the post-war statistics on the bullet lethality, where thousands or even tens of thousands of rounds were needed to eliminate a single enemy.

"Bang, bang, bang..."

After the gunshots ended, Franz's face turned green; unexpectedly, he hit the target beside his. The ability to miss the target was beyond belief.

A snicker sounded. A few little rascals gleefully laughed. Franz glared over, finding the culprits.

"What's so funny? It's just the bullets going off target, what's strange about that?"

Franz, long accustomed to authority, suppressed the laughter of his three younger brothers and two younger cousins, who struggled to contain their amusement.

After quelling the mocking laughter of the little rascals, Franz smilingly said: "Come and give it a try, but be mindful of the distance."

They had never played with these rifles before, and if used like muzzle-loading rifles, as demonstrated by Franz's performance just now, bullets could deviate by more than ten meters.

"Bang, bang, bang..."

A series of gunshots rang out. Glancing at the targets from a distance, Franz rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Were they all expert marksmen?

It turned out he thought too much. Everyone's hit rate was nothing great. Being able to keep the bullets on the target was already considered skillful.

"Cousin Franz, you're still the worst among us all!" Princess Sisi exclaimed.

Franz shot her a stern look, resolving to extend her etiquette lessons when they returned. She really didn't understand manners.

Was it necessary to point out such an obvious thing? After all, the youngest participant in their shooting competition was only ten years old. Where would Franz put his face?

"Elisabeth, pay attention to your image!" Sister Helene reminded her.

"What happened?" Archduchess Sophie's voice sounded from afar.

Seeing Franz's displeased expression and the suppressed laughter of the others, nobody answered the question. Observing the amused yet restrained expressions of everyone and taking a glance at the targets on the field, Archduchess Sophie burst into laughter.

While laughing, she pointed at Franz and said, "Well done, there's progress, Franz. You finally broke the record for hitting outside the bullseye."

At this moment, everyone noticed an extra bullet hole on Franz's target. No one knew who had misfired and caused the stray shot, hitting Franz's target.

Everyone could no longer hold in their laughter. Franz helplessly said, "That's enough. Let's continue live ammunition shooting practice."

Archduke Karl patted Franz on the shoulder with a smile and said, "See, I told you to come hunting with me, but you didn't. Now you know you've embarrassed yourself, right?"

Don't be disheartened. As long as you go hunting with me more often, your marksmanship will catch up with theirs."

Franz nodded in agreement, as if to say: his poor marksmanship was just a result of having too much academic work, lacking regular practice. With diligent training, he believed he could catch up.

As for hunting, that was impossible. Franz was self-aware. With his marksmanship, whether he could hit a large elephant over 100 meters away was unknown.

He was too lazy to even fire at small game like pheasants and rabbits. It would purely be a waste of bullets. Franz now understood why many civilian hunting rifles often fired a large spread of shots.

"Father, how come you didn't go hunting today?" Franz Joseph asked in puzzlement.

"Seeing you all having such a lively time, he came over to guide you on marksmanship," Archduchess Sophie preemptively replied.

"Yes, your marksmanship is too poor, simply embarrassing the nobility. I came to teach you all how to use guns." Archduke Karl aggrievedly said.

Franz Joseph roughly guessed the reason. He decisively said: "Is that so? That's great. You go ahead and teach them. I have something to attend to and will leave first."

After saying that, Franz turned and left, as if he really had something urgent to deal with.

This was a versatile excuse. The Vienna Court had its rules. No one could interfere with the Emperor handling state affairs.

Even if Archduchess Sophie knew Franz Joseph was stalling, she was powerless. In normal circumstances, European nobility would consider the parents' wishes sufficient for engagements. Franz was clearly an abnormal case.

Faced with such a determined son, she also felt the pressure.

Franz also bore tremendous pressure, unsure how the imperial family should proceed after the eruption of conflict over his refusal to marry.

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Saint Petersburg

Within the Kursk Manor, even in the midst of August's summer, the room was still bitterly cold.

"Gentlemen, this cannot continue. The expeditionary forces at the front have been equipping Austrian weapons on a large scale. Before long the entire Russian army will be equipped with weapons produced by the Austrians.

What will we do then? Close down the armories? Or compete in the tiny civilian market, selling some hunting rifles?" An elder said indignantly.

The meeting's host Kursk dissuaded: "Mr. Ivanov, calm down. Things are not that disastrous. The government will not watch us all collapse.

Now is the time of war, and everything has to serve the war effort. We cannot kick out the Austrians supplying our frontline logistics.

After the war, it will be our time. The government also does not want to see the Austrians control our military production, and our market will come back then."

Everyone is here for their interests. The military and the government are very dissatisfied with the inferior weapons they produce, which is why the expeditionary force has undergone a large-scale rearmament with Austrian weapons.

Stupid, bulky, and crude were consistent traits of Russian arms. If these were the only flaws the military could still endure it. The problem was these weapons and equipment frequently jammed, even exploding at times.

If there were no other options, or if everyone had the same type of weapons, it might be acceptable. The problem is that now, Britain, France, and Austria have all surpassed them. Even the Ottomans on the other side are starting to equip themselves with new weapons.

To win the war and increase the chances of survival on the battlefield, frontline officers strongly demand a change in equipment. They can no longer be suppressed by interest groups within the government and can only purchase Austrian equipment to reequip the expeditionary force.

A young man complained, "Mr. Kursk, even if the market comes back, I will still face competition from the Austrians. The military is accustomed to Austrian weapons. Will they still use our inferior goods?

Sorry for being so blunt. Compared to our European counterparts, the weapons we produce are indeed a generation behind.

Doesn't anyone want to change this? The government cannot tolerate this indefinitely, and if we continue like this, we will eventually be eliminated."

Kursk laughed heartily and then explained, "Young Peter, you're still too naive. Hasn't Old Peter told you?

On the surface, it seems like we've monopolized the domestic supply of weapons and equipment, making us immensely wealthy.

In reality, we don't earn much. How much money does the army allocate for weapon and equipment replacement each year? Less than ten million rubles, and nearly half of that is divided among others. What's left is used to purchase equipment.

Developing weapons is full of uncertainties. More than 90% of weapons and equipment that come into existence are not combat viable, and more than 95% of weapons are not profitable.

In this situation, if we cannot maximize the profit of each weapon to the greatest extent, how can we ensure everyone's interests?

Originally, wartime would be the chance for all of us to get rich. Unfortunately, in this Russo-Turkish War, the biggest piece of the pie was taken by the Austrians."

Young Peter lowered his head in disappointment and remained silent. The arms market is limited, and there are too many people dividing the cake.

Coupled with the monopoly, developing new weapons does not bring them greater profits, so everyone is naturally less enthusiastic.

A middle-aged man solemnly said: "Since we cannot prevent the rearmament, we might as well get involved.

Send someone to purchase production lines from the Austrians, and we'll manufacture them ourselves. The expeditionary force needs their logistics support, and we can't compete for that part of the market.

However, we must capture the remaining domestic market. After the war, the domestic arms market will still be ours."

Ivanov, who was angry earlier, said, "This is also a solution. Based on past experience, this short war won't end quickly. Joining in can help compensate for our losses."

Young Peter, more cautious this time, asked with uncertainty, "Will the Austrians sell those to us? You know, it's a good time for them to make money now."

Kursk affirmed, "Yes, they will. These production lines are not exclusive to Austria; if they don't sell, we can find others to buy from, albeit with some modifications required.

We can even produce domestically, just not as good. To save costs, everyone is used to importing from abroad."