

Roman Empire 191

Chapter 191: Which Nation Has the Best Bureaucratic System

The Balkan Peninsula is once again engulfed in the flames of war. This war is the largest in the history of the European continent, with a total force exceeding 1 million deployed along a front line of over 400 kilometers.

Despite the monumental scale, this battle, destined to be recorded in history, unfolded like a comedy. Logically, with the allied forces' unpreparedness, as initiator of the campaign the Russians should have held a significant advantage, possibly even securing a direct victory.

Reality was very tragic. As the attacking side, the Russian army also fell into chaos.

Artillery Commander Preston angrily cursed: "Damn it, we're artillerymen. How could you send us a pile of bullets? Do you want me to feed bullets to the cannons?"

The logistics officer responsible for transporting supplies mechanically replied, "Apologies, Colonel. This is an order from above. If you have any issues, please contact headquarters. Now, please sign for the receipt of supplies."

Preston's artillery unit had just arrived, replacing the infantry unit that had previously held this position. However, the logistics department continued to distribute supplies according to the original plan despite the infantry's advance.

Preston furrowed his brow and replied, "We've already reported this to the higher-ups, Major. These supplies are useless for us right now. You better take them back!"

The major sternly said: "Sir, that's not possible. My orders are to deliver these supplies to the garrison here, and you must sign for them.

As for how you handle these supplies, that's up to you. You can dispose of them privately or just find a place to dump them. After the war, you can simply report them as war losses.

These supplies are meant to sustain an infantry unit for the next week, and there are quite a few valuable items in there. Colonel, you won't lose out on this."

After a moment of hesitation, Preston reluctantly signed his name. Money was being handed to him on a silver platter, and since artillery units were considered treasures by the command, unlike those worthless infantry, a report would ensure their supplies continued to come.

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In this battle, the main force of the Russian army was divided into two. General Gorchakov led four infantry divisions, two artillery regiments, and one cavalry regiment, totaling more than 73,000 troops, all of which were launching an attack towards Sofia.

The battlefield was ever-changing, with frequent troop movements that the logistical system couldn't keep up. Unlike the previous battle, which took place in the Danube River Basin, where resupply was relatively easy that even if mistakes were made, they could be quickly rectified.

Now, things were different; the front line had advanced 200 kilometers, and it took several days to transport logistical supplies. Without telegraphs, they had to rely on messenger communication, leading to delays in the messages received by the logistics department.

The inflexible Russian bureaucracy obliged logistics officers to shuttle resources to assigned points, heedless of circumstances.

Even if the original unit was gone, they still had to transfer the supplies over. Colonel Preston's artillery unit receiving infantry supplies was not an isolated case.

Gorchakov was a good general. He had to address this logistics issue. How could they fight without resolving logistics?

"Order the logistics department to increase the supply quantity for the front-line forces to one month. From now on, the supply deliveries will no longer be at fixed locations; they must be handed over to the respective units.

Units below the division level will no longer have separate transports; all supplies will be sent to the division headquarters for unified distribution. The artillery and cavalry units will receive supplies directly from the headquarters."

A middle-aged officer reminded: "Chief of Staff, this goes against protocol. I'm afraid it would..."

Gorchakov shook his head: "Don't worry; I will explain this matter domestically. Now, send someone to contact Commander Menshikov; I believe he is facing the same issues."

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After changing the logistics supply system, the logistical chaos of the Russian army was barely resolved. Of course, the previously misdelivered supplies could not be recovered and were written off as combat losses.

The Battle of Sofia began. The Russians were only 30 km from Sofia and both sides started to exchange gunfire.

At Sofia Allied Command, Fitzroy Somerset asked: "Have the intelligence on enemy forces been gathered?"

"Commander, it has been gathered. The Russian army has deployed a total of 4 infantry divisions, 2 artillery regiments, and 1 cavalry regiment, totaling 73,000 troops.

In addition, there are about 20,000 Bulgarian guerrillas. However, they seem to have had disagreements with the Russians and are not acting together."

The response came from an Ottoman officer; naturally, they were tasked with reconnaissance. Sending British soldiers for such tasks would be impractical due to language barriers and the risk of getting lost.

Fitzroy Somerset calmly said: "Our reinforcements will arrive tomorrow night. Order the troops not to engage the enemy hastily. Leave a small force to slow down their advance.

Except for a few crucial strongholds that must be defended, withdraw the rest. We will have a decisive battle with the enemy after the reinforcements arrive."

Not being calm was not an option. Fitzroy Somerset was one of the few "veterans" in the British army, having commanded a battalion and suppressed a colonial rebellion of several hundred people.

Unfortunately, for the past decade or so, the British Empire has enjoyed peace and prosperity. Without major wars, the British army, apart from suppressing Irish rebels, can only bully the natives in the colonies.

The largest-scale battles have been limited to battalion-level engagements. Senior officers like Fitzroy Somerset, who have seen actual combat, are not common. Therefore, he has risen to become the commander of the British expeditionary force.

There's nothing wrong with learning on the job. Currently, Fitzroy Somerset is doing well, adhering closely to the principles outlined in military strategy. Even if he can't gain a significant advantage, he's also avoiding major losses.

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Evening

In a camp, soldiers gather in twos and threes, looking up at the stars. A man with a Genoan accent asks, "Arturo, why do you think they sent us from the homeland to the Balkan Peninsula to fight the Russians? What's the point?"

Arturo casually replies, "Those old gentlemen had already said it, didn't they? This time, we're fighting the Russians for revenge. They say in the previous Austro-Sardinian War, the Russians supported Austria. Now, they remained allies.

Alfonso, why are you asking about this? We're all just trying to make a living. If there were jobs back home, who would come here to suffer?"

"No reason, just curious. I always feel there's something off about this. Sending us to the Balkan Peninsula to fight the Russians for no apparent reason doesn't seem normal.

Even if it's for revenge, it's the nobles and capitalists who need to seek revenge. We poor folks haven't suffered any losses, so why come here?" Alfonso shook his head.

Doubts aside, they hadn't received much education, so they didn't think too deeply. They enlisted in the army just to make a living.

"I say, what are you guys talking about? Hurry up and go get tomorrow's rations. If you miss the time, you'll have to figure it out among yourselves."

A familiar voice interrupted them, and the two stopped their conversation, running to join the queue to collect their provisions.

After receiving their food, Alfonso's expression turned sour. He complained, "Damn British bastards, do they really enjoy eating beef jerky and hard biscuits so much?

They don't even provide bread. This life is simply unbearable. They are deliberately mistreating us, and these rations probably don't even compare to what the Ottomans provide!"

In this war, the expenses of the Sardinian army were covered by the British, and naturally, logistical supplies were arranged by the British as well.

It's not deliberate mistreatment, as British soldiers' rations are the same. There's a uniform standard: 2 pounds of beef jerky and three pieces of hardtacks per person per day, and that's all of it. (1 pound is approximately 0.4536 kilograms)

Forget about vegetables and fruits, there was not even a piece of brown bread. The British did not do this to save costs. Cost wasn't a concern as beef is not cheap. Switching to brown bread would have been much more economical.

The cause of this tragedy is the bureaucratic system. The bureaucrats at the British Ordnance Department believed that beef jerky was easy to transport and then it became the supply for the British army in this war.

On the surface, having beef every day seems decent. However, if it's beef jerky every day, the experience would be awful. The first challenge is whether your teeth can handle it.

Not only is the beef tough, but the issued hardtacks are even harder. This might be one of the earliest forms of compressed biscuits. If someone can manage to bite into them without soaking them in water, then they must have iron teeth.

This kind of food is a disaster for Italians who pursue delicious cuisine.

Even if the Kingdom of Sardinia is poor, their army has never skimped on food expenses, and the quality of their food is much higher than that provided by the British.

"Alfonso, don't complain. If the Ottomans find out, they wouldn't mind exchanging with you. Do you really want to trade with them?" Arturo said with a smile.

Happiness was relative. The British rations were at worst unappetizing, but at least they did not risk starving.

The beef jerky can be processed again; if conditions allow, some vegetables can be added and cooked together, without even needing to add salt.

The Ottoman forces' supplies were genuinely abysmal. Soldiers had to pack personal rations when deployed. The quality of food issued was left to chance; getting mostly full was deemed a good occasion.

Constant vacancies in the army units let Ottoman bureaucrats "creatively" cut corners. If a certain unit is at full strength, they would most likely starve.

Alfonso shook his head and said, "Forget what I just said, but the British logistics officers really should be shot. I bet there are more soldiers mistreated to death by them than those who died on the battlefield."

Arturo laughed and said: "We don't know about that. Maybe the British have different stomachs from ours, and they can endure it. Let's not talk about this.

Remember some vegetables you managed to obtain today? I have two potatoes left. Tomorrow, let's stew them with the beef jerky and make do with it!"

The two exchanged smiles. Even with poor rations, Italians could use their talents to improve meals under limited conditions.

In this regard, the Sardinian army also made contributions. Their arrival directly improved the living standards of the British troops and reduced the number of soldiers with scurvy.

The accompanying British soldiers quickly learned from these excellent experiences and rapidly popularized them. In the past, when they went out, it was purely for looting wealth, which was a significant waste.

Now, everyone wised up. Crops and livestock could all become spoils of war. Many soldiers have even learned to preserve food, utilizing any available conditions for food storage.

The direct consequence of this was a significant decrease in marching speed, and military discipline had become even more lax. With the presence of these experienced Sardinian soldiers, no matter how officers command them, they do whatever they want.

With no one to be held accountable collectively, facing a united group of big-headed soldiers, officers dare not do anything to them.

This has also influenced the British soldiers, and everyone has discovered the power of unity. As long as they stand united, officers would not dare to take action against them.

The actual arrival time in Sofia was exactly two days later than Fitzroy Somerset had estimated. In the ever-changing battlefield, two days was a game changer.

The most immediate impact is that the Russian army has already pressed forward. Due to insufficient manpower, Fitzroy Somerset did not allocate too many troops to defend the surrounding strongholds, and now they have all fallen.

The delayed arrival of reinforcements has caused the allied forces to lose the best opportunity. Trying to launch a counterattack while the Russian army was not yet firmly established was now too late.

Fitzroy Somerset angrily roared: "You idiots! It took two extra days for such a short march. Were you sightseeing on the way? Do you even know what military law is?"

Sardinian Major General Mantuya righteously lied: "Commander, our rearguard was raided by guerillas, causing dozens of casualties. We took time to eliminate them."

Everyone understood. To evade punishment they unanimously claimed guerrilla attacks and the wounded were proof of this.

"The guerillas are so rampant that they dare attack you even though you have so many troops?" Fitzroy Somerset asked in puzzlement.

Mantuya quickly came up with an idea and said, "Commander, the guerrillas are very cunning. They avoid direct confrontation with us and only launch sneak attacks stealthily.

They dig pits on the road, shoot arrows at night, making them very tricky and their numbers are not small. In order to prevent these people from cutting off our retreat, we had to eliminate them."

He wasn't making it up; there were indeed soldiers who fell into pits, but it happened when they were searching for game in the mountains and accidentally fell in. Them getting shot by arrows were also real, as some soldiers encountered Ottoman hunters in the mountains and got shot at.

Fitzroy Somerset had never met such a talented liar able to deceive shamelessly. British officers were generally more honest, and were entirely different from Italian officers.

Mantuya had done this before. Back when he followed Marshal Badoglio, they collectively deceived their home country. Now, fooling Fitzroy Somerset, who lacked experience, was naturally a piece of cake.

Fitzroy Somerset coldly snorted: “Hmph!”

Then he began to scold them angrily, “Even so, you shouldn’t have delayed for such a long time. Couldn’t you leave a small force to encircle the guerrillas and bring the main force over?”

Don’t you know how much damage your delay has caused to my army? We even missed the best opportunity for a counterattack!”

However, at this moment, he didn’t bring up military law, and everyone couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. Mantuya didn’t continue to defend himself either; what did he have to fear from being scolded? It wouldn’t cost him anything.

After the Austro-Sardinian War ended in failure, generals who kept their ranks were rare in Sardinia. That Mantuya became one of them was not because he was capable, his military skill was actually very limited.

His greatest ability was eloquence, reading situations, shifting all responsibility to others, and standing by the king’s side at the first moment to gain trust, earning this opportunity to rise from the ashes.

Chapter 192: Russo-Austrian Trade

Even in the summer of Vienna, it remained cool.

Sch?nbrunn Palace

Metternich said, “Your Majesty, the Russians have requested to purchase weapon production lines from us, covering everything from pistols to artillery.”

Franz knew Austria had snatched the Russian arms industry interest group’s benefits. These people would surely make a move, but he did not expect that their method would be to buy weapon production lines.

Thinking about it, it made sense. In this era, the British had the most advanced mechanical equipment technology, followed closely by Austria and France. Meanwhile, Belgium and Prussia had less developed industrial systems.

The Russians’ self-produced mechanical equipment not only had high maintenance costs but also had barely usable performance. The production efficiency couldn’t compare with their counterparts. Purchasing foreign production lines was thus necessary.

At war with Britain and France, even if they could buy production lines from them, the Russians wouldn’t dare to use them. Weapon production equipment was very sensitive, not civilian supplies that could be casually smuggled.

If they were bought from Prussia or Belgium, it could work, but this would jeopardize the maintenance of the Austrian weapons used by the expeditionary forces on the frontlines in the future.

With the financial resources of the Russian government, one should not expect them to discard weapons and equipment worth tens of millions of rubles. The annual maintenance of these devices also constitutes a business worth millions of rubles.

Capitalists are willing to cooperate for the sake of maximizing profits, so it's quite normal for them to purchase Austrian weapon production lines.

Franz indifferently said: "Sell it to them. Even with the same equipment, the weapons produced in Russian hands would fall an entire grade in quality."

This wasn't him looking down on the Russians, but a fact. Due to government corruption, capitalists would undoubtedly cut corners to maximize profits.

Franz knew that Russian arms bought domestically, despite poor quality, cost more than abroad. Thus imports beat their homemade wares.

The weapons and equipment imported from Austria had a domestic budget that was 20% to 50% higher than the actual import price. The specific ratio depended on the officials' integrity and competence involved in the process.

Metternich reminded, "Your Majesty, should we consider placing some restrictions? If the Russians get hold of the complete production line, it could be troublesome for us in the future."

Although the concept of technological blockade didn't exist in this era, in the military industry, not all weapons and equipment were available for purchase, especially not entire weapon production lines.

Franz shook his head: "It's not a problem. Technology is advancing rapidly now. This equipment will be obsolete in ten years, maybe discarded in over a decade."

Since Russia is willing to buy, let them do it. Best to make them long-term customers, using the trade profits to advance our military industry's technological upgrades."

Russia was indeed to be feared, but its industrial technology did not warrant too much concern. Under the rule of a decaying Russian government, substantial development in their industry was impossible.

Metternich continued, "Your Majesty, the Russians have also submitted a loan application. From a commercial trade perspective, in the second and third quarters of 1852, our trade with the Russians has nearly doubled."

The total trade between the two nations reached 292 million guilders, with our imports totaling 88 million guilders, exports totaling 204 million guilders, and a trade surplus of 116 million guilders.

The majority of this trade surplus comes from the export of military equipment and strategic goods, with the export value of these two categories reaching 83 million guilders.

The remaining portion involves trade of civilian goods. Due to the war, British and French products have been largely withdrawn from the Russian market, creating an opportunity for us.

The loans we provided to the Russians have been mostly utilized. The earlier purchase of strategic goods will be nearly exhausted after this battle.

If a decisive victory is not achieved, it is likely that the military expenditure of the Russian government will continue to increase next year."

Franz calculated. In this era, many preferred doing business with the Russians because they used gold and silver for payments instead of paper currency. (Paper rubles had been abandoned, and international trade settled with gold and silver rubles.)

A direct consequence of Russo-Austrian trade was large quantities of gold and silver flowing into the Austrian treasury, which was then printed into banknotes entering the market.

From a currency perspective, this gold and silver inflow allowed Franz to have the central bank print banknotes without risk of inflation. (Banknotes were not issued 1:1 with gold/silver, but set using financial leverage based on economic conditions).

Franz thought for a moment and said, "Take it slow with the Russians. Tell them our financial resources are not abundant, and we don't have the capacity to provide them with a substantial loan.

Minimize loan amounts as much as possible, extend the repayment period, and encourage the Russians to use more gold and silver for payment. Don't ask for too much in loan interest. Attached conditions can also be dropped.

We can also assist them in issuing some bonds, preferably government bonds with collateral. War bonds may not sell well so let the Russians set the interest rates themselves, as long as they can be sold."

If before the outbreak of the Near East War both countries were in a relatively equal position, the initiative shifted increasingly towards Austria with the onset of the conflict.

Now, due to the war, a substantial influx of gold and silver has entered Austria, leading to a distorted economic prosperity domestically. However, behind this prosperity lies significant hidden dangers.

If Austria were to provide a lot of loan assistance to Russia at this point, it would either require diverting funds from the domestic market or increasing currency issuance.

The former is detrimental to Austria's economic development, while the latter could lead to inflation. This is dictated by the economic scale. Given Austria's economic size, a moderate increase in currency can be absorbed by the market, but exceeding that threshold would result in an inability to absorb the excess.

The best method was to first let Russian gold and silver flow in, increasing national reserves and expanding the market, before printing money to avoid inflation.

Metternich suggested: "Your Majesty, perhaps we can request Russia to pay some of their purchase amounts in gold and silver, which can reduce our risk."

Franz shook his head: "It's not necessary for now. Our risk is still within manageable limits. Don't rush to remind Russia. The speed of their gold and silver flowing into our country is already very fast. The rapid development of our domestic economy is not solely dependent on this war.

Mr. Metternich, you might not have noticed, but in the past six months, British and French capital has poured into Austria like crazy, with the total investment more than doubling compared to the same period last year. In fact, Austria's market is already not lacking in gold and silver.

Following the usual practice, the Russo-Turkish War is expected to last a long time. These capitalists are all counting on making a fortune through this war and have been investing in factories in Austria.

Due to the lack of information, they are unaware of how many competitors have recently entered the market, nor have they considered the extent of the Russian demand for goods.

The market is going crazy, and Karl was nearly scared to death, fearing an economic crisis. He has already formulated several contingency plans.

From the perspective of the laws of capitalist market economy, once the war ends, the Austrian economy will immediately face the difficult problem of transition.

Earlier capitalists will be fine, having gained profits to support their transition. The latecomers will suffer — they haven't made money yet and will have to face bankruptcy. At this time, helping the Russians digest some bonds, cooling down the overheated market, is also a good choice."

Since they are aware of the economic crisis, why doesn't the Austrian government intervene? The answer is very practical: to increase fiscal revenue and accelerate domestic development.

If this economic boom continues, in just two or three years, Austria's total economic output could surpass that of France. Even if the bubble bursts, these capitalists will still leave behind a substantial amount of wealth for Austria.

It's easy to pour money in, but it's difficult to pull it out. Once it becomes real estate such as factories and machinery, liquidating those assets is difficult.

These trapped capitalists either continue contributing to Austria's development or cut their losses and leave, as happened in the historical development of the United States.

As long as they gain enough benefits in this war, expanding market capacity, they can minimize the impact of the economic crisis. When that time comes, Franz doesn't mind government intervention in the market, forcibly bringing the economy to a soft landing.

How many capitalists will be harmed by this approach is not Franz's concern. He was no saint.

Investing carries risks and entering the market requires caution.

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At the time when the attention of the outside world was focused on the Near East War, Russia and Austria quietly reached a massive deal without causing any ripples.

The arms trade is highly lucrative, especially when selling weapon production lines and transferring production technology. Adding product value to the equation makes it even more profitable.

The substantial profits pleased both the upper and lower echelons of the Austrian government.

This was not a one-time deal either. If relations between the countries continued to be friendly, judging by capitalists' morals, they might bundle follow-up upgrade business to Austria as well.

The fundamental reason for "buying is better than making" is the high cost of research and development. Why are so many enterprises in the future enthusiastic about imports? Don't they know the benefits of independent research and development?

The crucial point is the investment in research and development. The returns and efforts are often not directly proportional, consuming a considerable amount of time and was also full of uncertainty.

For capitalists who are eager to make money, massive investments in this area may not maximize their profits. If luck is not on their side, they could collapse on the eve of harvest.

Weapon development is even more so. It requires a complementary industrial system. Russia lags behind in these aspects, making the risk of independent research and development even greater.

If a military-industrial enterprise is engaged in research and development, and before they produce results, imported production lines are already in operation, what choice would the Russian government make?

Would they equip the military with technologically mature advanced equipment or wait for products with uncertain performance developed by the enterprise?

Austria lifted all restrictions on weapons exports, allowing Russians to freely choose production lines. The Russian government is naturally very pleased with this rare opportunity.

It's worth noting that, in order to restrict the Russians, European countries mainly export finished products in the military industry and are very cautious about exporting production lines.

If only finished products are purchased, once a war occurs and the supply is cut off, it becomes impossible to continue obtaining these weapons and equipment. Only then does the Russian government support domestic military-industrial enterprises.

There is no such concern for production lines. Nowadays, most of the equipment in Russian military-industrial enterprises is imported, and they don't mind continuing imports as long as it ensures the supply of military hardware.

As for the future, people aren't thinking that far ahead. In theory, as long as overall industrial technology improves, the military-industrial system will naturally follow suit. The two have a mutually beneficial relationship.

In history, the development of Russian military-industrial technology has often occurred during periods of deteriorating relations with the Western world. The more intense the confrontation, the faster their technological progress.

Now during wartime, people are not thinking too much about the future. Even if some see potential crises, they cannot oppose the prevailing mindset.

From a developmental perspective, having ready-made equipment from Austria for disassembly and learning will likely accelerate their technological progress. At the very least, they can imitate and reproduce the technology.

Chapter 193: The Struggle of the Montenegrins

Montenegro

Since the outbreak of the Near East War, this tiny country has been in turmoil. Immediately, the entire nation was mobilized, with men, women, and children all joining the war effort.

The people of Montenegro are proud. They are the only nation on the Balkan Peninsula that has never submitted to the Ottoman Empire. For centuries, they have been at the forefront of resisting the Ottoman rule.

This was a nation where everyone was a soldier. Without the government's coercion, the people voluntarily took up arms and returned to a state of mobilization.

Scutari was right before their eyes. They had fought here countless times, but this time their odds were very good, unlike before.

Not long ago, they had successfully rendezvoused with the Austrians in Bosnia, resolving their weapons and ammunition constraints and greatly boosting the Montenegrin army's combat power.

Montenegrin Army Headquarters

Commander-in-Chief Mirkov spoke cautiously: "I just received word from the Foreign Ministry that the Hordas Armory will come to test a batch of weapons. Lasrich, you lead a battalion to ensure the safety of our Austrian friends. We absolutely cannot afford any mishaps."

Mirkov had no choice but to be cautious. Currently, every rifle and every bullet in the Principality of Montenegro were provided by Austria.

Austria had now replaced the Russians and became their most important ally, without exception.

At this point, when Austria requested to test weapons on the battlefield, they naturally couldn't refuse.

For the impoverished Principality of Montenegro, regardless of the weapon's performance, as long as they could use it, it was good. Testing weapons for Austria now meant gaining a batch of weapons and equipment for free, which, in their eyes, was a profit.

As for risks from using new weapons, nothing could be worse than fighting the Ottomans with cold steel right?

The number of equipment for live testing was not small. For example, this time's rifle testing had Hordas Armory directly sending five hundred new rifles, enough to equip two Montenegrin infantry battalions to participate in live combat testing.

Lasrich complained with a mournful face, "The Austrians are here again. Commander, can't we send someone else? I still want to fight against the Ottomans."

Although Lasrich was just a battalion commander, in the small military of the Principality of Montenegro, even a battalion commander is considered a high-ranking officer.

Observing his colleagues battle vigorously on the front lines, he, being fluent in German, was unfortunately appointed as the exclusive guard commander for the Austrian delegation instead. He has already seen off three successive batches of weapon observation teams.

As a Montenegrin, how could he not be thirsty for battle? He finally got an opportunity, only to have it disrupted by the sudden weapons testing.

Mirkov glared at him and sternly said: "Don't talk about conditions with me. This matter is not negotiable. If the testing is successful, we can acquire five hundred rifles and a batch of ammunition for free, saving our country tens of thousands of guilders."

When it came to funding, Lasrich had nothing to say. Tens of thousands of Austrian guilders might not seem like much, but for the Principality of Montenegro, it represented their financial income for one or two months.

Not all weapon tests were successful; many weapons, while performing exceptionally well in shooting range tests, revealed various issues once on the battlefield.

To encourage domestic armories to develop new weapons, the current costs of field tests were covered by the Austrian government.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, major Austrian armories sent a variety of weapons to the battlefield for testing.

Field testing examined not just weapon performance, but also maintenance, ease of operation in combat, etc.

Some succeeded, but more failed. Many weapons had great lethality, but unstable performance in combat. Or the performance was stable, but maintenance costs were too high.

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Throughout the journey, Holman-Strehlen was struck by Montenegro's total mobilization. He was certain they had over fulfilled the agreed 20,000 troops.

People of all ages who could move were serving in the war. He saw supplies being relayed village by village to the front, like a relay race.

Hardly any young and able-bodied individuals were visible; from start to finish, it was the elderly, the weak, women, and children who were busy with the tasks. The elderly helping had already almost lost all their teeth, and even children of a few years old were contributing.

"Mr. Lasrich, where are your young and able-bodied men?" Holman-Strehlen asked in puzzlement.

Lasrich replied matter-of-factly, "They are all on the battlefield!"

Seeing that Holman-Strehlen seemed to have difficulty understanding, Lasrich added:

"This is our homeland, and there is no danger here. The logistics and transportation are handled by the civilians. After walking a bit further, you'll be able to see our army."

Holman-Strehlen did not speak, only silently recording what he saw in his notebook as they continued on.

Upon reaching the front lines, Holman-Strehlen also spotted the presence of female soldiers. Evidently, for this war, the Principality of Montenegro had staked its entire fate, putting all its chips on the table.

For Austria, this Near East War was just a local conflict where they could gain some advantages. The ultimate outcome of the war would only determine the extent of Austria's gains, and the Ottomans wouldn't dare to retaliate.

For the Russians, it was merely a strategic battle, not a matter of life and death. The Russians hadn't reached the point of desperation yet.

If they lost, they could always come back in a few decades. The Russian people could afford the loss; after all, the Russo-Turkish War had been fought so many times, and adding one more wouldn't make much difference.

The only exception was the Principality of Montenegro, gambling its entire fate. Winning meant growth and expansion, while losing meant everything would be gone.

Holman-Strehlen understood the actions of the Montenegrins; their hatred towards the Ottomans was irreconcilable. For centuries, this was the closest they had come to victory.

The Ottoman Empire was in decline, and was currently at war with both Austria and Russia. If it weren't for the intervention of Britain and France, the war would have already ended.

Given this opportunity, the Montenegrins naturally took the gamble. As a Balkan nation, if they didn't dare to gamble on their fate as a nation, then what kind of Balkan nation were they?

The only pity was Montenegro's tiny population. If they had 10 million people, no, 5 million people, they could have driven the Ottomans out of the Balkans and built their own empire.

Thinking of this, Holman-Strehlen smiled slightly. If Montenegro had such a large population, they would not have become Austria's ally either.

The entire Balkan Peninsula had just over 13 million people, with a significant portion concentrated in Istanbul.

The remaining regions had 2 million in Bulgaria, nearly 1 million in Greece, over 900,000 in Serbia, over 1 million each in the Danubian principalities, over 1 million in Macedonia, a few hundred thousand in Albania, and a few hundred thousand in Bosnia.

No matter how hard Montenegro tries, the limits of their population determine the ceiling of their development.

It's impossible for them to pose a threat to Austria, which allowed them to be allies. For instance, supporting Montenegrin expansion into Albania, propping up a thorn that prevented Balkan unification.

Holman-Strehlen shook his head, discarding these thoughts. These were issues politicians should consider, not a weapons designer like him, thinking about these matters was already overstepping his bounds.

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The war soon began. Through binoculars, Holman-Strehlen's group watched the Montenegrin army launch an attack on the Ottoman positions.

Artillery fire roared, and flesh and blood splattered everywhere.

Holman-Strehlen and his team were too focused on observing the combat capabilities of the new rifles to pay attention to the carnage. He occasionally revealed a satisfied smile.

During the exchange of gunfire, soldiers equipped with these new rifles suffered significantly fewer casualties due to their ability to lie down and reload.

Although combat lethality was slightly weaker, higher accuracy in close combat compensated for this shortcoming.

As long as they could effectively kill the enemy within the effective range, achieving effective lethality, it was sufficient. After all, these were not sniper rifles, and the probability of hitting the enemy at long distances was too small. A slightly lower lethality mattered little.

The first round of testing was considered successful, and Holman-Strehlen breathed a sigh of relief. As long as they met the standards in the subsequent maintenance, they could be considered to have preliminarily met the requirements.

Unlike Holman-Strehlen's satisfaction, Lasrich beside him frowned. After frequent contact with the Austrian testing teams, he had inevitably picked up some professional knowledge.

"Mr. Holman, doesn't this rifle consume too much ammunition? Have you noticed that its high accuracy is actually built on the consumption of ammunition?"

Holman-Strehlen couldn't help asking: "It consumes a lot of ammo?"

Lasrich affirmatively replied: "Of course. Ordinary rifles usually fire two or three rounds per minute, while this rifle can fire more than ten rounds per minute.

This means that the ammunition consumption has increased several times, and the accuracy has only marginally improved. Of course, our casualties have decreased somewhat.

Using such a gun is too expensive, and we can't afford it anyway. I'm afraid its manufacturing cost won't be low either."

Holman-Strehlen nodded and recorded all these details in his notebook. Excessive ammunition consumption is extremely detrimental in war, as it means increased logistical supply difficulties.

For Montenegro, the costs of these breech-loading rifles were too high. Their finances and industry could not support equipping them.

However, for Austria, it may not be the case. This level of ammunition consumption was still within acceptable limits.

The advent of breech-loading rifles also signifies an increase in the cost of war, widening the gap in strength between industrial powers and weaker nations.

Without a powerful industry, one cannot sustain the terrifying ammunition consumption of future wars.

If both sides in this Near East War were equipped with breech-loading rifles, the Russian people would simply be unable to endure the war.

In terms of consumption, Russia and Austria together were still no match for Britain and France. It was still bearable now, partly due to early preparation and also because the ammunition consumption of the muzzle-loading rifles is not as high as that of breech-loading rifles.

"Mr. Lasrich, I can see you have rich experience in weapons testing. Are you interested in joining our team? The salary will absolutely satisfy you." Holman-Strehlen invited.

Weapon testing on the battlefield is a high-risk job. Engaging in this kind of work, one never knows when they might be hit by a stray bullet from who knows where.

High risks naturally came with high pay, at least several times higher than Lasrich's salary as a Montenegrin battalion commander.

No, it could be several tens of times higher. Due to financial difficulties, the officials and soldiers in the Principality of Montenegro receive very low pay, and most of the time, they do not even receive it.

This is not coercion but a voluntary relinquishment of pay. Unless they are really struggling at home, in most cases, they will voluntarily give up their salary.

Lasrich smiled and declined: "Thank you, Mr. Holman. But I think there is no need. This is not about money.

There are more important things than money in this world. My homeland is currently in a bloody battle with the Ottoman Empire, and we need to wash away centuries of shame with our blood.

For me, defeating the Ottoman Empire is my life's goal. If this goal is achieved, I might reconsider my path in life."

Holman-Strehlen bowed and said: "Mr. Lasrich, please forgive my rudeness. You are a true soldier, and should not be insulted by money."

At this moment, Holman-Strehlen truly acknowledged Lasrich, or perhaps he acknowledged Montenegro.

Maybe they are not powerful, but their spirit of fighting for their country and nation against the Ottoman Empire for centuries, with unwavering faith, deserved respect from everyone.

After this little incident, Holman-Strehlen and his team changed their views on them. There was no more arrogance from the past, and relations between the two sides improved significantly.

Chapter 194: Before Troops Are Mobilized, Propaganda Comes First

Winter Palace, Saint Petersburg

The contract for the Russo-Austrian arms trade, as well as documents stating that the loan application was not accepted and Austria's suggestion to issue bonds, had arrived on Nicholas I's desk.

Regarding the purchase of weapons production lines, Nicholas I had no objections and directly approved what was on the document.

There was a huge gap between the Russian Empire's military industry and that of various European countries, a gap that cannot be bridged in the short term. Purchasing production lines was the only choice to quickly narrow this gap.

Nicholas I asked: "What do you think about Austria's proposal to issue bonds?"

Finance Minister Fyodor Vronchenko analyzed: "Your Majesty, this could be very troublesome. We have issued bonds before, but our previous bonds faced a cold reception in the capital market.

Now to sell the bonds, aside from Austria's proposal of collateral, sufficiently high interest will also be needed to attract capital.

This would significantly increase our financial costs. Previously, we obtained loans from Austria with a monthly interest rate of only 0.2%. If we issue bonds, the interest rates would likely need to be substantially raised.

The military expenses for this war far exceed our estimates, and if we further increase financial costs, our future fiscal pressure will be tremendous.”

The Russian government had not anticipated direct military intervention from Britain and France. All plans were made assuming they would be fighting the Ottoman Empire alone.

According to the initial plan, with control over the Black Sea, the Russian military could receive supplies at sea, significantly reducing logistical pressure. This would allow a substantial increase in Russian forces deployed to the Balkan Peninsula.

In theory, with a significant advantage, the Russian forces could defeat the Ottoman Empire in 1852 and conclude the war in the Balkan Peninsula by 1853. Subsequently, they could launch a dual offensive into the Anatolian Peninsula.

But plans could not keep up with changes. The British and French participation disrupted their deployment. The war spiraled out of control from the very beginning, leading to a substantial increase in military expenses.

Nicholas I continued to inquire, “Is it possible to continue obtaining low-interest loans from the Austrian government?”

Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode answered: “Your Majesty, if it’s a small loan, there is no issue. However, obtaining a loan of 200 million rubles at once is likely impossible.

Although Austria has not directly refused our loan request, they have made it clear that the amount is too large and exceeds their capacity.

Our analysts believe that the Austrian government can raise this huge sum, but it would impact domestic development, so they will not provide it without us paying a heavy price.”

Two hundred million rubles was an astronomical sum, equivalent to the annual fiscal revenue of the Russian Empire. Under normal circumstances, the Austrian government would not have the financial capacity for such an amount.

However, the current situation was different. Russian loans don’t require the actual transfer of gold and silver. All the funds remain within Austria and would be gradually introduced into the market through the purchase of goods, deposited initially in Austrian bank accounts.

To illustrate, in a transaction involving the purchase of 1 million worth of goods, the government would receive around 200,000-300,000 in combined transaction tax, value-added tax, corporate tax, customs duties, and other taxes. In the second round, suppliers of raw materials also pay transaction tax, value-added tax, corporate tax, and other taxes, amounting to tens of thousands.

This business, in turn, stimulates the development of transportation, food and other related industries, generating additional tax revenue. As capitalists profit and workers receive wages, they engage in consumption, further driving the development of other industries, all of which contribute to tax revenue.

This was just a simplified example of the circulation of goods, as industrial cycles in reality involve more complex responsibilities. Few enterprises directly purchase raw materials and sell industrial products; most industries operate in cycles of three or more rounds, where funds circulate through taxes back into the government's finances.

In reality, the amount the Austrian government would need to spend from this loan was only half or even less, thanks to these advantages.

Without these advantages, relying solely on the small interest from those few points, powerful nations like Britain and France would not be eager to engage in high-interest loans.

Furthermore, by accelerating the circulation of goods between the two countries through loans and gradually permeating various sectors of a country, especially the financial industry, it becomes more susceptible to penetration.

Nicholas I thought for a bit and said: "Is it because of the interest? We can pay according to international standards, even if it's a bit higher, it doesn't matter. It will still be below bond interest."

Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode replied: "Your Majesty, I'm afraid interest is not the issue. Austria did not ask for higher interest, so they likely have funding difficulties."

The Austrian government places great importance on domestic economic development and won't interrupt it for a slight increase in interest. Unless we make significant political concessions, they won't provide this money."

Nicholas I nodded. Relations between nations are very pragmatic; even allies cannot sacrifice their own interests to help others.

If economic growth had to be sacrificed for a few percent of interest, the choice was obvious.

"Austrian loans cannot be given up; we should strive for as much as possible. The Finance Ministry will formulate a bond issuance plan, not just in Austria but in all of Europe."

We don't know when this war will end, so the government needs to raise funds as much as possible, and a slightly higher interest rate is acceptable."

Nicholas I was a wise man. He avoided increasing domestic war taxes.

In history, Russia faced joint resistance from major European powers, making it unable to raise funds from the international capital market and forcing it to levy taxes domestically.

The consequences of raising taxes were also severe. After the failure of the Crimean War, the foundation of the Russian government was shaken.

Nicholas I, who was in good health after the war, suddenly died. Most historians believe he committed suicide by poisoning to take responsibility for the war's failure, providing an explanation to the outside world and stabilizing the Russian government's rule.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" the Finance Minister replied.

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Nicholas I's exact cause of death was unclear to Franz, but regardless, his death led to a complete deterioration of Russo-Austrian relations.

Whether from a personal or national perspective, Franz hoped that Nicholas I could live a long life.

Nicholas I had good character and was a reliable ally. The Russian government he led had some credibility.

Moreover, the longer he lived, the later the Russian government's serfdom reform would be, making the reform more challenging.

A good ally was one who can't pose a threat. Recalling historical information, Franz couldn't help but be grateful for the fortunate timing.

If nothing unexpected happened, the future generations of Russian Tsars would likely be more subdued. This meant that Austria's rear would be secure for several decades.

As Russia prepared to issue bonds, Franz also prepared to issue bonds. Having more money is better, especially during wartime when it's crucial to stockpile ammunition.

Unlike the Russians, who attracted capital through high-interest rates, Franz was planning to leverage the patriotic sentiments of the nation.

To support Prussia in reclaiming the two duchies in the north, people could donate tens of millions of guilders. Now, for the unification of the German territories, Franz believed that people would be even more enthusiastic.

Franz chose not to add the word "German" in front of the "Unification Bonds", mainly to accommodate other ethnicities within the country. If possible, he wouldn't mind adding the words "Holy Roman Empire" at the beginning.

This bond was still confidential and would be issued simultaneously when the war for unification begins. Since they were for national unification, discussing interest was too vulgar.

The annual interest rate of the 'Unification Bonds' was only 1%, which can be considered barely better than nothing. But Franz remained fully confident they would sell.

Under his influence, Greater Germany nationalism still dominated Austria, and people were very interested in the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire.

To build public opinion, the Austrian government has invested millions of guilders in propaganda for two consecutive years.

Not only Austria but also all the federal states in the German territories are within the scope of propaganda.

"Rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire" had become the hottest topic in the German territories. Whether in support or opposition, this concept has been instilled in everyone's minds.

University of Munich

A debate on the future path of the German territories unfolded here.

Ever since the former king, Ludwig I, issued a royal declaration that the monarchy would strive for the unification of Germany, discussions about the unity of the German territories have been legalized.

Greater Germany nationalism, Lesser Germany nationalism, the division of Northern and Southern Germany, and the recently proposed restoration of the Holy Roman Empire and various miscellaneous plans — all can be openly discussed.

Not only the Kingdom of Bavaria, but also many federal states in the German territories can discuss these issues. The government must also express support; this is a right obtained by the people during the 1848 revolution and was also politically appropriate.

Simply put, one could support any German unification plan, but not oppose unification itself.

Supporter of the Holy Roman Empire, Christian, delivered an impassioned speech: “The German territories have been divided for far too long, and the development models of each federal state are different. It’s extremely difficult to immediately integrate these regions and establish a large empire.

Since this is so, why not compromise? First restore the Holy Roman Empire, gathering everyone under one united imperial framework.

Other issues can be slowly discussed. If one year is not enough then two, if ten years not enough then twenty. After decades, the German territories will have become one.”

After the secret propaganda by the Austrian government, there was strong support for the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire. Even some rulers of small federal states were supporters of this idea.

The Holy Roman Empire is not frightening; this empire has never truly unified. The major federal states below all conduct their own affairs, and the central government only exists in theory, with almost no binding force on the federal states.

If unification was inevitable, such unification could best protect their interests.

For those who prefer peaceful days, talking about the unification of the German territories may sound simple, but in reality, it brings the prospect of war.

Whether Greater or Lesser Germany, military might was needed to force unity and accomplish this great task.

Restoring the Holy Roman Empire was much simpler. Everyone gathers for a meeting, votes for an Emperor, and the German territories would unify.

People’s interests won’t be significantly harmed, and each federal state can continue to operate independently. The only difference is an enhanced economic exchange, and when dealing with external matters, everyone can unite.

If the German territories are unified once again, even if it’s only in name, this empire would be the most powerful empire in the world.

A young student opposed, saying, “This kind of unity is too slow. European countries won’t give us the time to integrate the entire nation. Once a unified German Empire emerges, we will immediately face resistance from various countries.

We might even be besieged by them. Only when the German territories are completely unified, and we become a cohesive whole, can we defeat the enemies and achieve the great revival of Germany.”

As soon as he finished speaking, another person objected, “Don’t forget the lesson of Napoleon. Any country attempting to confront the entire Europe is inviting its own destruction.

In the current international situation, we simply cannot afford to complete national unity step by step. Once there is any sign of unity in the German territories, European countries will inevitably interfere.

Britain, France, Russia, Spain... None would accept German unification. Opposing Europe alone is foolish.

We need to learn to take it step by step. Let’s do the unification of Lesser Germany first. Once the integration is complete and our strength is formidable, we can then aim for the unification of the entire German territories.”

Another person objected, saying, “Unification of Lesser Germany? If that’s the case, we might as well go for the division of Northern and Southern Germany. We can still avoid the joint attacks from the major powers and accumulate strength for the eventual unification of the entire nation. Why should we care about Prussia’s face?”

“No, that divides the nation rather than unifying it. Whether it’s establishing a Lesser Germany or dividing it into Northern and Southern Germany, the ultimate result is the destruction of this empire.

Is a divided Germany still our Germany? Reestablishing the Holy Roman Empire and creating a nominally unified empire is the key to our gradual progress.”

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Without a doubt, Franz was instrumental in spreading these chaotic ideas. Many originated from him personally.

To achieve the goal of their propaganda, it certainly wouldn’t work to directly say, “Austria aims to unify the German territories, and everyone should unite under the banner of the Habsburgs.”

If promoted in such a way, it would likely face suppression from various governments as soon as it started.

By throwing out all these various unification proposals, it dilutes the presence of Austria, and people would perceive it as a spontaneous initiative among the people.

To most, the ideology of Greater Germany and restoration of the Holy Roman Empire might be supported by the Austrian government, and the latter could even represent the intentions of the small German states.

On the other hand, the remaining Lesser Germany ideology and the ideology of dividing into Northern and Southern Germany are obviously concocted by the Prussians, and these two ideas are most widely spread in the Prussian region.

Real or fake, true or false, what is the true political stance of the Austrian government? Franz would say that the actual political stance that align with Austria's interests was the one the Austrian government would adopt.

In the face of interests, national strategies, and political ideologies were subject to change. The reason they haven't changed yet was that the interests at stake weren't substantial enough.

Chapter 195: A War Full of Blunders

Balkan Peninsula

The Russians had been locked in a bloody battle with the allied forces. Notably, the numerically superior Ottoman forces had been relegated to a supporting role, with the main forces now being the British and French.

In Sliven, both sides has reached a stalemate. The French had blocked the advance of the Russian forces, and every step forward now required sacrificing lives.

Because the Ottoman forces were not performing well, they had been held in check by the Russians with a small number of troops. Currently, with 160,000 French troops facing off against 280,000 Russian troops, it is already quite challenging for the French to hold back the Russians, let alone a counterattack.

French Commander Aimable Pélissier was deeply troubled. In the previous battles, he sacrificed 10,000 French troops to eliminate 20,000 Russian troops, achieving significant results.

Unfortunately, their allies were not performing well. The Russians had only dispatched a supplementary division, plus some Bulgarian guerrillas, yet still gained the upper hand against over 400,000 Ottomans. Faced with such allies, anyone would have a headache.

Aimable Pélissier acknowledged that the combat effectiveness of the Ottoman troops was inadequate, mainly due to the tradition of receiving salaries without actual service, resulting in the actual number of troops on the battlefield being only two-thirds to half of the strength they have on paper.

Even after deducting the missing soldiers, the Ottomans still had more than 300,000 troops. With almost double the numbers than the enemy, they were still being pushed back which was simply absurd.

Their plans could not keep up with the ever-changing situation. Overestimating the strength of their allies has turned the war into one of attrition. Even if they win this battle, it will be a pyrrhic victory.

"Sir, there's good news from the frontlines!" A young officer said in a deep voice.

"Read it." Aimable Pélissier calmly replied.

"Yes, sir!" The young officer answered.

"On the morning of September 14, 1852, our 7th Infantry Division engaged the enemy 16th Division east of Sliven after encountering them. After a day of bloody and fierce fighting, our forces defeated the incoming enemy.

In this battle, we killed 1,328 enemy soldiers, captured 16, wounded an unknown number of enemies, and seized 8 horses, 628 rifles, 28 pistols, and some ammunition.

However, our forces also paid a heavy price. The 7th Infantry Division suffered 1,236 casualties, including 784 killed, 652 wounded, and 196 missing. Division Commander Major General Aurelian was hit by concentrated gunfire, and his fate is currently unknown.”

Is this also considered a victory? Aimable Pélissier was very skeptical. His officers seemed to have forgotten the concept of victory.

He had also risen from the bottom and was long tired of such petty tricks. Defeating the enemy? It was clearly just a fight that lasted into the night, then each side dispersed.

If it was a victorious battle, how could nearly two hundred people go missing? If the French army had so many with a poor sense of direction, there would be no need for this war. These people might have ended up in Russian prisoner camps by now.

Aimable Pélissier frowned and ordered: “Send someone to ask if that idiot Aurelian is dead or not. If he’s alive, have him report here at once. If he’s dead, have the Chief of Staff come.”

“Yes, sir!” The young officer promptly replied.

Aimable Pélissier was not inclined to believe the battle report entirely. The casualties of the 7th Infantry Division should be genuine; no one would dare to fabricate such information.

However, the glorious achievements in battle were likely exaggerated. If they had truly won, the number of prisoners would not be so low. Russian soldiers were not known for their willingness to die, and the French would not engage in massacres of prisoners at this stage.

Aimable Pélissier did not care about the outcome of such skirmishes. The battlefield was ever-changing, and occasional setbacks were acceptable.

The expeditionary force from France varied in combat capabilities; some units could easily outclass all Russian forces, while others were not a match for the elite Russian troops.

The 7th Division was average among French forces. Suffering some losses against elite Russian units was unsurprising.

After pondering briefly, Aimable Pélissier ordered: “Command the troops to prioritize defense and try to avoid a decisive battle with the Russians. We only need to hold them here at Sliven. After gaining a breakthrough at Sofia, we can then engage these Russians in battle.”

Given the weak combat capabilities of the Ottoman army and the inability to break through in Sliven, Aimable Pélissier had given up on decisively engaging the Russians here.

This was not France. There was no need to desperately fight for the Ottomans’ sake. Preserving strength was now Aimable Pélissier’s top priority.

By holding the Russian main forces in check, they had already fulfilled their obligation as allies. The failure of the Ottoman army to complete its assigned tasks and the resulting inability to execute the plan were not their responsibility.

After the British achieves victory in Sofia, they could join forces to encircle and annihilate the Russian forces in front of them. After all, the Russian army there was just over 70,000 strong. With

50,000 British troops, 20,000 Sardinian troops, and 30,000 Ottoman troops, they would have an absolute advantage.

Otherwise, if they recklessly fought the Russians now, even if they won the war, there wouldn't be much left of this French expeditionary force.

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Russian Army General Headquarters

Commander Menshikov still didn't know that he had narrowly escaped a disaster. If, at this moment, the French were to recklessly launch a fierce attack, they stood a good chance of winning.

The combat capabilities of the Ottoman army were lacking, particularly in a head-on decisive battle. However, in favorable conditions, their performance might not be as bad.

As long as the French were willing to endure casualties and boldly charge forward, battering Russian morale, the Ottomans could ride this momentum despite their weak combat abilities.

“Order the troops to launch an attack at any cost. We must quickly breach the enemy's defenses. Don't worry about casualties. In the Principality of Wallachia, we have 50,000 reinforcements, and in Ukraine, we have an additional 300,000 troops.

We only need victory. The Russian Empire has awaited this victory for nearly 200 years. Nine generations have struggled for it.

Now, Constantinople is less than 300 kilometers away. Once we breach the enemy's defenses, no one will be able to stop our advance.”

Menshikov passionately spoke, as if at a podium delivering an inspiring speech rather than at headquarters.

How much were the Russians willing to sacrifice for Constantinople? That was an unknown answer, but when framed differently:

Was sacrificing hundreds of thousands worth Constantinople? Russia's answer was: Yes!

From the first Russo-Turkish War to the present, the Russians had sacrificed over a million soldiers for this fortress city. Did they waver?

Menshikov knew the determination of the Russian government — that victory must be achieved.

The small objective of this Russo-Turkish War was to capture Constantinople and control the Bosphorus Strait. The ultimate goal was to occupy the coastal lands of both straits, turning the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea into internal seas of Russia.

Casualties were not a concern by the Russian government from the beginning. As long as victory in the war was achieved, whether it cost tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of casualties, to the Russian government, it was just a number.

Lieutenant General Boulder questioned: “Commander, we have done all we can now. If we increase the intensity of the attack again, it may give the enemy an opportunity.

The combat capabilities of the French are well known to everyone. Apart from a small number of elite forces that can contend with them, we can only rely on numerical superiority.

In the surrounding area of Sliven, on this more than 100 kilometers frontline, we do not have an absolute numerical advantage. In many places, the enemy actually has a numerical advantage.

Now we have the upper hand, but that is because the Ottoman forces are weak. If we blindly attack the French positions, it will consume a large amount of our strength.

If we do not take precautions and the French suddenly launch a surprise attack, we may suffer some minor losses. But when that happens, these weak Ottoman forces might just give us a fatal blow.”

Menshikov shook his head and said, “General Boulder, you are worrying too much. The French indeed have strong combat capabilities, but their forces are too small.

Attacking the French now is engaging them in a battle of attrition. The French are not gods; they will collapse if they suffer heavy casualties.

I’ve said it before. If we cause 3,000 casualties to them every day. Within a month, the French will collapse.

Using hundreds of thousands of casualties to win this decisive victory is completely worth it.

If we don’t eliminate the elite forces of the French but instead bully the Ottoman rabbits, even if we wipe out all these rabbits, the war will still continue.”

When the higher-ups demand an attack, they have no choice but to comply. After all, the casualties are just expendable soldiers, and officers like them don’t need to charge into battle.

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Sofia Battlefield

FitzRoy Somerset was still unaware that his French allies have already shifted the heavy burden of winning the victory to him. Currently, he was still hoping for a breakthrough at Sliven to thoroughly defeat the struggling Russians.

As for commanding the troops, defeating the Russian forces in front of him, then cutting off their rear to win a decisive victory in this battle, such a challenging task was better left to his allies!

In FitzRoy Somerset’s view, the only combat-effective forces he had were the 50,000 British troops, possibly supplemented by another 20,000 Sardinian troops, while the Ottomans were not even worth considering.

The Russian forces on the opposite side number more than 70,000, and there were also Bulgarian guerrillas. The combat capabilities of the guerillas were not worth mentioning, probably on par with the Ottomans, effectively canceling each other out.

With 70,000 against 70,000, even if they win, the casualties would be severe.

FitzRoy Somerset was here for military achievements, not to seek trouble. The bureaucrats back home only cared for contributions on paper — enemies killed versus costs paid.

Simply put, the more enemies killed for fewer costs the better. When the French were deeply surrounded previously, they achieved an exchange ratio of 1:1.3. Now with 100,000 against 70,000, they must achieve an even more impressive result.

The guerrillas were not within the consideration of the London bureaucrats; they were not counted in the military achievements. They only acknowledge regular forces.

Before engaging with the Russian forces, FitzRoy Somerset was quite confident. However, after the encounter, that confidence vanished. In terms of overall combat capability, the British forces do have an advantage, but it was not significant.

At least, 50,000 British troops cannot easily defeat 70,000 Russian troops. If the Russian troops on the opposite side haven't been re-equipped, relying on the firepower advantage, there might still be a chance.

Before re-equipping, the Russian rifles had a range of only 200 yards, while the British rifles exceeded 1000 yards. In terms of firing speed, British rifles were at least thirty percent faster, and the advantage in artillery was even greater.

(Author's Note: 1 yard is approximately equal to 0.91 meters)

In history, during the Crimean War, the Russians suffered a significant equipment disadvantage, leading to being brutally beaten by the British and French forces.

Now things were different; the re-equipped Russian army has caught up in firepower. The forces that initially clashed with the British were these re-equipped units, causing FitzRoy Somerset to overestimate the Russian strength.

Based on this assessment, Fitzroy Somerset made the decision to conduct limited offensives, using the Ottoman forces as cannon fodder to engage the Russians, while the British played a supervisory role.

On the surface, this seemed fine, but in reality, he overlooked that such battles were actually helping the Russians train their troops.

A military unit that wins a battle becomes experienced; winning three to five battles turns it into an elite force. In this era, elite troops were forged through such battles.

Continuous victories not only increase combat experience but also boost confidence and morale.

The Ottoman forces, with low combat effectiveness, leading the charge, were unwittingly providing experience to the Russian troops, aiding them in leveling up.

Fortunately, the Russian Commander, Gorchakov, did not notice this. Otherwise, if he rotated all Russian units, another elite force would have been created.

In that case, the British wouldn't even need to fight in subsequent battles. Although their training was more rigorous than the Russians, elite forces were not established through training alone; they also require the baptism of blood and fire.

Chapter 196: Passing the Buck

Vienna

At the Austrian General Staff Headquarters, Marshal Radetzky was currently convening a group of officers for a practical analysis of the ongoing Balkan campaign.

They were examining the gains and losses of the warring factions based on the intelligence available, seeking to draw lessons from the situation.

In situations like these, those not directly involved often have a clearer perspective.

As spectators, the Austrian General Staff, a group of pencil pushers, criticized both sides of the conflict as having no merit whatsoever.

Russians: Strategic mistakes, did not break through the weak Ottoman forces and instead clashed with the French. Evaluation: Commanders lack military knowledge and flexibility.

Allied Forces: Ambiguous command authority, constant internal conflicts, mutual hindrance, and failure to leverage their numerical advantage. Evaluation: Inevitable result of multinational cooperation, unsolvable by manpower.

Commonalities: Severe bureaucracy, chaotic command, and inadequate logistics systems.

Comprehensive Combat Power Assessment:

French: 9.4

British: 9.6

Russian: 7.8

Montenegro: 10.5

Ottoman: 5

Sardinian: 5

Seeing this assessment report, Franz's expression was quite interesting. The British army's combat power surpassing France's was likely something few could accept.

Even more peculiar was that the combat power of the Montenegrin forces has unexpectedly exceeded that of the major powers.

The rest seemed relatively normal; the Ottoman and Sardinian forces were considered weak with a combat power of only 5, a view widely accepted by the Austrian military.

The Greeks have not yet joined the war, making an accurate assessment impossible. The Bulgarian guerrilla forces, not being regular army units, have also been excluded by the staff.

Seemingly aware of Franz's doubts, Marshal Radetzky explained, "Your Majesty, the Montenegrins have the strongest fighting spirit. Every Montenegrin undergoes military training from childhood, with training no worse than any nation's armies. Coupled with the weapons and equipment we provide, their potential combat power is truly astonishing."

People unafraid of death could not have too poor combat abilities. If well-trained soldiers were equipped with advanced weapons, it was not surprising for their combat power to exceed expectations.

However, this kind of exceptional combat power also depend on the circumstances. Currently, the Montenegrins were fighting for revenge, and their morale was high, naturally resulting in extraordinary combat power.

If the time and place were different, this Montenegrin force might not have such combat power.

Similarly, if the British and French forces were fighting on their home soil, resisting foreign invasions, their combat power could also be exceptional.

Now, as they fight for the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan Peninsula, setting aside factors such as geographical environment and acclimatization and other factors, their morale alone cannot reach its peak. If they can exert 80-90% of their combat effectiveness, they could already be considered well-trained.

In Franz's view, this constantly changing comprehensive assessment was still reliable.

The combat power of any military force was not constant; it can only be maximized in the most suitable environment.

Franz asked in puzzlement: "Marshal, I can accept that the Montenegrin forces have formidable combat power. However, how was the conclusion reached that the combat power of the British forces surpasses that of the French?"

Analyzing their achievements, it is evident that the French are clearly superior, and the British forces hardly have any notable achievements."

Marshal Radetzky explained: "Your Majesty, the British army has never had a large number of troops, but their training is not inferior to any other nation.

Of course, this factor only proves that the British forces are well-trained, and it does not necessarily mean they are superior in combat power to the French.

The fundamental reason lies in Napoleon III's purging of dissidents and using the opportunity of war to replace some high-ranking officers.

Such personnel changes inevitably affect morale in the short term. New officers need time to adapt, leading to a temporary decrease in the combat power of the French forces.

On the Balkan Peninsula, the morale of this French expeditionary force is not high, and as a result, their projected combat power is reduced.

Based on these factors, the General Staff believes that their current combat power is not superior to that of the British.

However, this is not absolute. If the French commanders have stronger leadership, they can compensate for this gap. After all, the British commanders are mostly novices."

Franz nodded, acknowledging that this assessment of combat power could only serve as a reference. Taking it too seriously would likely lead to being proven wrong on the battlefield. The battlefield was ever-changing and there has always been a saying in the military — the weak can defeat the strong.

Franz chuckled, "So, it seems that the two sides in this battle are evenly matched, and it's difficult to determine a winner in the short term.

If the Greeks suddenly unleash their strength and launch a surprise attack on the logistics of the allied forces, wouldn't the odds favor the Russians even more if the allied forces are caught off guard?"

Foreign Minister Metternich explained: "Your Majesty, I'm afraid the Greeks cannot be relied on. Despite aligning with Russia for their own benefit, the Greek government does not want Britain and France as enemies.

Like us, they prefer to only engage in war with the Ottoman Empire, maintaining neutrality in the conflicts between Britain, France, and Russia.

In this battle, the Greeks likely lack the courage to raid the British and French supply lines. Even if they participate in the war, their actions will likely be limited to the surrounding territories and contribute little to the overall situation.”

Other than expressing frustration at having pig teammates, Franz was powerless.

Austria did not send troops to battle with Britain and France because the Balkan Peninsula could only support so many large armies, and the Russian Bear had already taken all available slots. Increasing the number of troops would only lead to logistical challenges.

There was also the issue of post-war benefit distribution. Currently, Austria’s main contribution was in logistics. According to pre-arranged agreements, benefit distribution after the war would be rationalized based on each country’s contribution. Since Russia exerted the most significant effort, it was reasonable for them to receive the largest share of benefits.

If Austria took on a leading role, Russia would not be able to obtain all their desired benefits, which was something the Russian government could not accept.

Apart from these special circumstances, there was a crucial condition: Austria had the strength to remain neutral. Even if Britain and France were dissatisfied, they could not do anything about Austria.

This was different for the Greeks; the British wouldn’t mind giving them a lesson for not being obedient. Once a small country took a side, there was no room for maneuvering, and Britain and France wouldn’t care about their explanations.

The correct course of action for the Greeks was either not to take sides at all or fully commit. Being indecisive would not lead to favorable outcomes, regardless of the final results.

After a moment of contemplation, Franz said, “Then let’s wait a bit longer. The railway from Vienna to Salzburg has already started laying tracks and is expected to be operational by the end of the year.

The railway connecting Munich to Salzburg has also completed its roadbed construction. From a technical standpoint, temporary tracks can be laid in most areas of this railway section.

Even if enemies make an all out last stand, blocking the Danube and Rhine rivers, logistics can still be resolved.”

Franz wasn’t worried about the military strength of the Southern German States. Regardless of the efforts made by the governments of these states, their widespread underground collaborators could not be resisted.

The topic of unification had already been heatedly discussed, a term from this era that people weren’t yet aware of — public opinion hijacking. In reality, the lower and middle-class populations of these small states were largely influenced by public opinion.

When Austrian troops arrive, such notions would undermine the combat morale of the armies. Those who surrender can boldly claim: We are not surrendering; we are contributing our efforts to national unification.

The only risk lies in logistics. If Bavaria chose to do everything possible to resist them, directly blocking the Danube and Rhine rivers, Austrian troops could only rely on land transport for supplies which would be troublesome.

Waiting for Bavaria's domestic railways was too slow, but that was okay. They can also work around it and lay temporary tracks on completed roadbeds.

Due to the terrain, these short-distance railways may only cover small sections of several dozen kilometers, a dozen kilometers, or even just a few kilometers, making it impossible to connect them. However, Franz can't afford to consider all these details. Having something was better than nothing.

Relay transportation of supplies may be troublesome, but it's faster than manual labor. Every minute on the battlefield is precious, and Austria can emulate the relay transportation model of the Principality of Montenegro.

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Balkan Peninsula

The war entered a stalemate, with neither the Russians able to defeat the allied forces nor the allied forces able to overcome the Russians.

What was embarrassing for both sides was that the two most outstanding forces on the battlefield are the Bulgarian guerrilla forces and the army of the Principality of Montenegro.

On October 1, 1852, the Montenegrin army achieved a remarkable victory by capturing the heavily guarded Scutari Fortress (Shkodër Fortress), the gateway to Albania, despite being outnumbered.

In the following month, the Montenegrin army continued its sweeping advance, gaining control over half of Albania. Fortunately, these areas were not strategically crucial, and their capture didn't significantly impact the overall situation.

The performance of the Bulgarian guerrilla forces also stood out. In Sliven, they pressed against the Ottoman forces, occasionally infiltrating their rear and causing significant trouble for the logistical transport of the alliance.

In Sofia, the Bulgarian guerrilla forces successfully broke through the defense lines of the Sardinian army and infiltrated into the rear of the allied forces.

If the British hadn't reacted quickly, swiftly mobilizing heavy forces for a counterattack that crushed them, the allied forces in Sofia would have been surrounded.

When regular troops are scattered, they become disorganized. However, since these were guerrilla forces, after being dispersed, they naturally reverted to guerrilla tactics, causing considerable distress for the alliance commander FitzRoy Somerset.

Nothing could be done. The useless Ottomans turned what was supposed to be a local conflict into a people's war.

After scattering, these Bulgarian guerrillas penetrated deep into the region of Bulgaria, using local support to sporadically strike at them.

At this point, FitzRoy Somerset dared not use Ottoman escorts for the logistics transport of the allied forces. Anything less than 2,000 British troops escorting them would be like providing supplies to the enemy.

Not long ago, when 5,000 Ottoman troops were transporting strategic supplies, they were directly plundered by guerrilla forces midway. If not for Sofia's abundant reserves, the allies would have starved.

Even with powerful escorts, each successful supply delivery came at the cost of 180 British soldiers.

Of course the enemy deaths were higher, but trading British lives for guerrillas was always a loss in FitzRoy Somerset's eyes.

FitzRoy Somerset angrily said: "Have the Foreign Ministry communicate with the Ottoman government to quickly suppress the guerrilla forces. We cannot allow these people to affect our logistics transport."

It's not that he didn't want to send troops to suppress the guerrilla forces, but the Russian forces on the frontline were still watching. As long as he dared to send out the main British forces, the Russians would immediately pounce.

However, the guerrilla forces couldn't be left alone either. Allowing them to rampage like this would eventually lead to the collapse of the allied forces' logistics.

Originally, supplies that could be delivered in a week now took at least ten days. The casualties among the personnel transporting supplies and the loss of materials were constantly increasing.

Therefore, the task of suppressing the guerrilla forces had to be handed over to the Ottoman government. They were the local overlords and were well-suited for this job.

Unfortunately, this was only in theory. Reality was harsh.

British Major General Eberon contemptuously said: "Commander, I'm afraid the Ottomans cannot be relied upon. To suppress this guerrilla force, the Ottomans have already deployed 50,000 troops, and now there are probably only half of them left.

These guys are useless in battle; they wet their pants at the sound of gunfire. Relying on them to suppress the guerrillas is nothing but wishful thinking."

This was an exaggeration. The Ottoman troops were not that useless. The reason these forces had such poor combat abilities was that the Ottoman Empire's main forces had been committed to the battlefield.

They have deployed around 400,000 troops in the Caucasus and lost over 100,000 in the Balkans. Currently, there are still over 400,000 Ottoman troops fighting bloody battles on the battlefield.

Where could they find more troops? With the war progressing to this stage, the Ottoman Empire has already exhausted its strength. This is the maximum force the Ottoman government can mobilize.

Now, in order to suppress the guerrillas, they've hastily assembled another 50,000 troops. Calling them a proper army was giving them too much credit.

Most of these people were conscripted laborers with no military spirit or morale. Once they learn how to shoot a gun, they were considered to have already completed training and are then sent directly to the battlefield.

Their weapons and equipment were all outdated relics, with many weapons being older than the soldiers themselves.

This regular army's firepower was on par with guerrilla forces, and in some cases, even inferior to some guerrilla units.

FitzRoy Somerset angrily said: "Worthless! How could the British Empire have such an ally? It's downright embarrassing. Urge the French to quickly engage the Russians in a decisive battle. What are they dragging their feet for? Do they still want to spend Christmas in the Balkans?"

Chapter 197: Opening a New Front

Constantinople

Abdulmejid I's expression was terrifyingly gloomy. For Britain and France, this Balkan war was just a minor episode, but it would be fatal for the Ottoman government.

For this war, the Ottoman Empire had exhausted all its resources. Without doubt, this was the limit of their strength.

Over 1 million soldiers mobilized in total, combat abilities aside, the Ottoman Empire had thrown everything they had into this conflict.

However, the situation on the battlefield left Abdulmejid I greatly disappointed. Originally, the allied forces should have had a slight advantage, but after the British and French kept vying for command, even that little edge vanished.

Resolve the differences between Britain and France? Don't even dream about it. Historically, during two world wars that concerned life and death, Britain and France could still undermine each other. How could sincere cooperation be expected in their current situation?

Abdulmejid I solemnly said: "Contact the British and French governments through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and tell them that if they continue to preserve their strength on the battlefield, we will lose this war."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Foreign Minister Fuad Pasha replied.

Despite the intensity of the current conflict, the actual casualties for Britain and France were not significant. Most of the casualties on the battlefield were Ottoman soldiers.

Since the British had their guns pointed at the necks of the Ottomans, forcing them to deplete the strength of the Russian forces on the battlefield, the French naturally didn't mind following suit.

In Sliven, the Russians initially gave the French a good beating. To preserve their strength, the French naturally used the Ottoman troops as cannon fodder.

Anyway, the Ottomans were the ones begging for help from Britain and France, even if they behave excessively, the Ottoman government had to endure it.

As the battle progressed, the British and French have lost less than 15% of their forces, including non-combat losses, while Ottoman troop losses have exceeded 25%.

Under normal circumstances, with such large casualties, the Ottoman forces should have collapsed long ago, but things differed with hawks watching over them.

To some extent, having the British and French point guns at their necks and forcing them onto the battlefield had a positive effect, at least causing significant casualties to the Russian forces.

Minister of War Damat Mehmed Ali Pasha anxiously proposed, “Your Majesty, let Britain and France send more troops. According to the current situation, they are unlikely to cooperate well. The only way to win this war is to rely on overwhelming power.

The battle has progressed to this point, and yet we are already at a disadvantage. Even if the British and French are willing to fight desperately, the result will be mutual destruction.”

Abdulmejid I sighed and said with a wry smile, “It’s not that simple. This war is not so important for Britain and France. Even if they lose, it’s not a big deal.

Perhaps in the eyes of Britain and France, placing the battlefield in the coastal areas or having a defensive battle for Constantinople would be more cost-effective.

Moreover, with the lengthening of the frontlines, the logistical pressure on the Russians will increase significantly, and the number of troops they can deploy to the frontlines will inevitably decrease, increasing the chances of the allied forces winning.”

The British and French could afford to do this, but the Ottoman Empire could not. If they were to engage in a decisive battle with the Russians along the coastal areas, the heartland of the Ottoman Empire would become a battlefield.

Even if they were to win the war in the end, their dominance in the Balkan Peninsula would be jeopardized. Preserving the current control over the region would be challenging, let alone recovering the lost territories.

Reality was harsh. The British and French joined forces only to counter the Russians, with little consideration for the life or death of the Ottoman Empire.

For the costs paid in this war, without any gains, and risking losing a significant portion of the Balkan Peninsula, it was understandable for Abdulmejid I to harbor resentment.

Unfortunately, the deep-rooted conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Russians prevented the Sultanate from seeking reconciliation. Even if the Ottoman government wanted to surrender, the Russians would still come after them, forcing them to follow the British and French.

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London

The situation in the Balkan Peninsula has reached a stalemate, causing a headache for the British government. Despite their wealth and power, they cannot afford to ignore the situation.

From a perspective of interest, ending this war as soon as possible and redirecting the focus of the British Empire towards colonial expansion would be the optimal choice.

After dragging on for more than half a year, the promised British troops have finally arrived. The last batch of reinforcements has set sail from the British Isles to the Balkan Peninsula.

This reinforcement was strongly demanded by Lieutenant General FitzRoy Somerset at the frontlines. He no longer believed that the Ottomans could eradicate the guerrilla forces, and he was also uncertain about when the French would defeat the Russians.

The prestige of the British Empire could not be tarnished, and the honor of the army must be upheld. For the sake of reputation, the army’s domestic standing, and future military expenditures, the bureaucrats at the British War Office have surprisingly shown high efficiency.

In theory, the arrival of these 30,000 British troops at the frontlines has a high possibility of breaking the stalemate on the battlefield. However, the British government still lacked confidence.

Since the Napoleonic Wars, the Russian Empire has been the most powerful country on the European continent and the world's foremost land power.

The British government lacked confidence in its own army. They do not believe that this number of troops alone could break the stalemate. In fact, the British government had not even requested the army to launch an offensive.

In the eyes of the British Cabinet, Britain was not inherently a strong land power. As long as they avoid embarrassment on the Balkan battlefield, the responsibility of defeating the Russians would still be left to the French and the Ottomans.

Prime Minister John Russell asked, "The situation on the Balkan Peninsula has reached a stalemate. Without additional reinforcements, it's unlikely to achieve victory in the short term. What are your thoughts?"

Foreign Secretary Palmerston suggested, "Prime Minister, this situation has mainly arisen because the Russians have been meticulously preparing for this war for over two years, while the allied forces hastily responded.

Additionally, the position of the Austrian government has taken us by surprise. The Austrian government has unexpectedly abandoned restrictions on the Russians and even provided them with logistical support.

We have already contacted the Austrian government, and their stance is remarkably firm. Without considering our conditions, they have clearly stated their neutral position.

When we asked them to refuse to supply strategic materials to the Russians, they rejected our request, citing the pretext of free trade."

The concept of 'free trade' was proposed by the British, and it unexpectedly backfired on them so quickly. Unfortunately, they couldn't oppose it as it was the national policy of the British Empire.

In this era, there were no restrictions on neutral countries not exporting strategic materials, at least no mandatory constraints. Austria was currently openly doing business with the Russians.

Palmerston briefly considered raiding the Austrian markets to cut off the Russian supply. However, he gave up the idea after some thought. The domestic capitalists were not to be trifled with.

If the British government purchased Austrian over domestic goods, capitalist backlash could prove fatal.

As a political ally, First Lord of the Admiralty Sir James Graham came to his rescue: "Mr. Palmerston is right. The situation has arisen due to our misjudgment of Russo-Austrian relations.

However, what's done is done, and pointing fingers won't change that. Now, the most crucial thing is to defeat the Russians. Let the past be the past!

Russians also have weaknesses. According to the intelligence we have, more than 80% of the Russian military supplies in the Balkan Peninsula are currently being provided by the Austrians. The remaining supplies are the reserves stockpiled by the Russians.

As for the strategic materials in the Caucasus, they are mostly provided by the Russians themselves.

Most of these strategic materials are stockpiled along the Ukrainian coast. If we can launch a surprise attack in these areas, it would be a significant blow to the Russians.”

Of course, it would be a significant blow; the results of the two years of preparation by the Russians were all here. Originally, they planned to use the Black Sea Fleet to transport logistical supplies for the frontline troops.

However, plans couldn't keep up with the fast changes, and the British and French navies stormed in, cutting off maritime traffic. They could only slowly transport supplies to the frontlines using ox carts and horse-drawn carriages.

If the British manage to raid these supplies, the economic losses alone would make the Russian government weep.

Given the greed of Russian bureaucrats, even if the British just fired a few shots, they would likely exaggerate the damage to these supplies.

Palmerston proposed, “Not only can we destroy these supplies, but in fact, we can also open a second front along the Ukrainian coast.

The Russians have deployed their main forces to the Balkan Peninsula, so we can take advantage of this opportunity to eradicate the Black Sea Fleet's base.

Without these bothersome flies, our troops can land on the Black Sea coast at any time, giving the Russians a headache.

They may let go of other places, but the Crimean Peninsula is something they absolutely cannot afford to lose.

The Russian military strength is not unlimited. After we open a new front, they will not be able to defend both fronts simultaneously for long.”

The British government made a misjudgment in the Russian-Ottoman relations, a mistake caused by the Foreign Ministry, and so Palmerston must find a way to remedy it.

Opening a new front was the strategy devised by his think tank. As long as they defeat the Russians, all previous mistakes would become negligible.

With naval superiority, they could fight along the Black Sea coast as they wish.

The Russians cannot handle three fronts simultaneously; it was clear they were stretched thin. Ignoring the Caucasus was not an option, abandoning the Balkan Peninsula was also impossible as the Russians have invested too much, and they were already at the doorsteps of Constantinople.

Yet, Crimea could not be relinquished either. If they lose this region, the English and French navies would blockade their doorstep daily, making it impossible for the Russians to develop a navy in the Black Sea.

Without a navy, continuing to siege Constantinople would only hold political and religious significance. Even if they conquer it, it would be challenging to maintain control.

Secretary of State Henry John Temple questioned: “Mr. Palmerston, theoretically, opening a second front is excellent, but don't forget, we are also launching a distant expedition. While the Russians will suffer significant losses, our expenses are even greater.

Just like the current war in the Balkans, the military expenditure of the allied forces is double that of the Russians. The Russians directly purchase supplies from Austria, and our transportation costs are also a quarter higher than theirs.

The Ottomans' financial resources are already depleted, and we bear all the expenses for the army of the Kingdom of Sardinia. The financial situation of the French government is not optimistic either.

If we open a new front on the Crimean Peninsula, most of the military expenditure will fall on us, and there is no budget for this in the finances. How do we convince the Parliament?"

No one likes to suffer losses, and now, by opening a new front, the British must play the role of the financial sponsor again. This means spending millions, or even tens of millions of pounds.

Palmerston calmly explained, "Mr. Temple, you're worrying too much. If war breaks out on the Crimean Peninsula, we actually have the advantage.

As long as we destroy the supplies stockpiled by the Russians along the Black Sea coast beforehand, they will have to rely on rearward transportation for resupply.

The cost of this is much higher than purchasing from Austria, and given the Russian government's slow reaction time, they won't be able to adjust in the short term if they suddenly encountered this situation.

In such situations, the more chaotic it gets, the more prone they are to making mistakes, providing us with an opportunity.

Even if they don't make mistakes, fighting on three fronts exceeds their national capacity. We are facing an enemy with shortages in troops, funds, and supplies. Winning this war shouldn't be a problem.

As for the increased military spending, compared to defeating the Russians, the cost is negligible.

After such a major defeat, the suppressed social conflicts under the Russian government will erupt. With internal and external troubles, the possibility of the collapse of the Russian Empire is very high.

At that time, we can completely carve up the Russian Empire according to our will, eliminating this threat once and for all."

In this era, the Russians were the primary enemies of the British. If it was merely defeating the Russians, it was not enough to convince the British Parliament to agree to a significant commitment.

However, if there is a possibility of completely crushing the Russians, then it's a different story. No parliamentarian could refuse such a tempting prospect.

Seeing no further objections, John Russell said: "If there are no other objections, let's proceed to vote now. Those in favor of Mr. Palmerston's proposal, please raise your hands."

After saying this, John Russell raised his own hand. He couldn't resist the temptation of crushing the Russians either. Completing this task would make him one of the greatest Prime Ministers in British history.

After scanning the room, John Russell continued, "Passed. Next week, I will submit the proposal to Parliament on behalf of the Cabinet. Mr. Palmerston, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should immediately communicate with the French to reach a consensus on this matter as soon as possible. It's best to settle this before the parliamentary vote to avoid any complications later on."

No matter how good the strategy is, it still needs people to implement it. The British army has only a limited number of troops, and is not enough to face the Russians, so they have to rely on the French to endure the brunt.

Since Napoleon III wants to gain political prestige from this war, how could he expect to do so without paying a price?

John Bull is no fool; if the French don't make an effort, the conflict is unlikely to escalate.

Chapter 198: Greece Joins the War

As the Balkan war continued, the tide of victory began to shift towards the Russians, and the Greeks who had been watching coldly on the sidelines could no longer restrain themselves.

The Russian Bear was not so easy to deal with. If this dragged on until the Russians won the war, it would be too late for the Greeks to act.

Clearly, the Greek government had made a strategic misjudgment, believing that as long as the Russians won this battle, Britain and France would back down.

In this era, the Russian Bear is still a formidable force, universally recognized as the number one power on the European continent and the number one land power in the world.

The Greeks had great confidence in the Russians. Even if Britain and France joined forces, they were more optimistic about the Russians.

As authorities, they are unaware that their conclusion has been clouded by their interests.

Deep down, they are very eager to expand their territory and restore their former status as a great power. Therefore, they hope for Russian victory, which could provide them an opportunity for territorial expansion.

As for the potential threats that a Russian victory might bring, the Greeks have chosen to ignore them. Blinded by their interests, who would bother considering so much?

On November 12, 1852, Otto I secretly ordered the Greek army to announce their retirement en masse, then changed into civilian clothes and appeared on the battlefield as civilian volunteers, launching an attack on Thessaly and Epirus.

Don't misunderstand; they simply wanted to seize territory and had no intention of assisting Russia in winning the war.

At this time, the Greeks had not forgotten the threat of Britain and France. On the surface, they completely deny any military involvement in this action.

While their rhetoric said they had no relation to it, their actions speak volumes. The Greek government, in reality, shows no restraint. The continuous transport of strategic supplies to the frontlines is sufficient to illustrate this point.

Choosing an opportune moment, the Greek government took advantage of the Ottoman Empire's military forces being fully preoccupied on the battlefield, with only police units left to maintain order.

Although the combat capabilities of the Greek army are not outstanding, facing a mere police force with 70,000 soldiers poses no problem. They immediately routed the Ottomans.

If, at this moment, the Greeks proceed without hesitation and advance all the way to Constantinople, the Ottoman Empire would be unable to mobilize any forces to block their path.

All eyes in Europe turned to Athens, as the key to deciding the outcome of this war unexpectedly fell into the hands of the Greeks.

There was not much to say. It was a matter of bribery and coercion. Representatives from Britain, France, and Russia gathered in Athens, each presenting their conditions.

There were no Austrian representatives, not because Franz was uninterested in courting the Greeks, but because the Austrian government had no need to pay for this at all.

It could be said that bribing the Greeks was too costly, beyond what the Austrian government could bear. Franz had no intention of wasting effort on this matter, and the Austrian government directly gave up on making an offer.

Otto I hesitated, not knowing which option to choose. Regardless of whether the Greek government acknowledged this military operation, everyone believed they did it anyway and the facade was shattered.

On one side was the stern warning from Britain and France, on the other was Russia's enticement. It seemed easy to choose on the surface, but in reality it was full of peril.

The Ottoman Empire was still an ally of Britain and France. The war was still ongoing, and the Ottoman Empire were continuing to make significant contributions to the war effort.

Even if there were thoughts of betraying their ally, Britain and France couldn't possibly do so at this juncture. Great powers also had their reputations to uphold, and what Britain and France offered was more like a sweetener in the form of loans.

It was common knowledge that the Greek government lacked money, especially with their ventures into naval development when they were already in a bad financial situation.

The offer from the Russians seemed more appealing to Otto I. As long as they were willing to send troops to Constantinople, the regions of Thessaly, Epirus, Thrace and Macedonia were all negotiable.

Of course how much they could get depended on whether the Greeks could capture Constantinople. If they could, then it would prove their strength and all these promises could be fulfilled.

If not, the situation would be ugly. Having the Russian Bear as a neighbor, without sufficient strength, they would become prey instead.

The latter situation was naturally ignored by Otto I. Otherwise, they wouldn't take advantage of the situation like they are doing now.

Otto I was very clear that public opinion had already been mobilized. Most of the people participating in this military action were volunteers, and the government had already lost control of the overall situation.

Without these soldiers who brought their own supplies, the Greek government would not have the money to recruit 70,000 troops. With the arrow already on the bowstring, they had no choice but to fire it. Otto I could not turn back now.

The Prime Minister hurried over, flustered as he said: "Your Majesty, something big has happened!"

Otto I asked: "Speak slowly, what on earth happened?"

The Prime Minister gloomily said: "Your Majesty, the news of our negotiations with Britain, France and Russia has been leaked, causing quite a stir among the public.

Just now, countless citizens took to the streets and submitted petitions to the government. They demand that the government reject the conditions of the three countries and have also put forward their own demands."

After receiving the petition and glancing over it briefly, Otto I's expression instantly turned ugly.

He now wishes he could tear the person who leaked the information into pieces. This was clearly sabotage.

Currently, the people are demanding that the government follow their opinions in the negotiations with the three countries. To put it simply: they demand that the government send troops to occupy Constantinople and restore the territorial boundaries of the Byzantine Empire era.

Was this a joke? Otto I also wanted to restore the territory of the Byzantine Empire, but they didn't have the capability to do so!

For this kind of thing, just shouting slogans was enough. If they really went to do it, were they certain they would not be beaten to death?

Otto I angrily said: "Bring out a map of the Byzantine Empire, mark out the spheres of influence of each country, print 10,000 copies, and distribute it nationwide.

Send people to popularize basic knowledge to the public. Let's not have this kind of farce circulate."

This was originally a joke. Given the strength of the Kingdom of Greece, even if it were increased tenfold, shouting this slogan would still be laughable.

If they could increase it a hundredfold, they would barely qualify to implement it. The difficulty of this is by no means easier than unifying the entire European continent.

The Prime Minister said with a gloomy face: "Your Majesty, according to our analysts, this may be a plot by the Ottomans. The current public opinion has gone mad, and no matter how we explain it, it seems futile.

The public's yearning for Constantinople has become an obsession. I guess many people would think that giving up territorial claims on Spain, Italy, and Africa would be seen as a compromise already."

Nationalism was the craziest. Once it went extreme, it would be uncontrollable. Now, the Greek government was hijacked by public opinion, and all of this was Otto I's fault.

In order to gain public support initially, he chose to stand on the side of public opinion. With the king's support of nationalism, it soon spiraled out of control.

Otto I angrily said: "Then the government will not express its opinion. Those fighting the Ottomans now are civilian armed forces and have nothing to do with us."

Send troops to attack Constantinople? Forget about it. It was fine if they didn't capture it, but what if they did and the public refused to give it up? What would they do then?

After offending Britain and France, they will be competing with the Russians for Constantinople too. Did they really think they were the re-emergence of the Byzantine Empire?

Under this guiding principle, Otto I ordered the frontline troops to fight steadily, advancing along the border.

At the same time, more volunteers were recruited domestically, taking the opportunity to send extreme nationalists to the battlefield as cannon fodder. Eliminating threats was an instinct of the ruling class.

Patriotic slogans echoed, and if they showed weakness at this moment, it would be deemed fake patriotism. Those fishing for fame were the easiest to be despised by others.

The Greek government sprung into action at the fastest speed, sending these cannon fodders to the frontlines. The number of frontline troops increased, and the domestic situation also stabilized.

The cost was that the combat effectiveness of the frontline troops dropped. Their combat effectiveness was already low to begin with, and now that a group of big mouths were added, combat effectiveness naturally dropped another level.

Constantinople

In normal times, the Ottoman government wouldn't pay much attention to the Greeks. If it weren't for the intervention of the great powers, they could easily crush the Kingdom of Greece with one hand.

Now, the situation is different. The main forces of the Ottoman Empire are entangled in a deadly struggle with the Russians, and even if the Greeks are relatively weak, they still require military forces to resist them.

"Greece, this little insect, has also come out. What are your thoughts, everyone?" asked Abdulmejid I in a calm tone.

Maybe it was because he had been angry for too long during this period of time, Abdulmejid I was now devoid of anger. Those who knew him understood this was only a facade.

An angry Sultan was terrifying, but a Sultan suppressing his fury was even more terrifying. Only those who experienced the power struggles knew how Abdulmejid I could kill with a smile.

Damat Mehmed Ali Pasha replied: "Your Majesty, although the Greeks' strength is limited, now is a critical moment. We cannot underestimate them taking advantage of the chaos at this time, we must treat this cautiously."

Abdulmejid I scolded: “Don’t talk such useless nonsense, just tell us what to do!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Damat Mehmed Ali Pasha anxiously replied.

“According to the intelligence we have collected and analyzed, the Austrians have already obtained everything they wanted and have no intention of continuing to attack us.

At this time, we can send people to negotiate with the Austrian government. Whether we can reach an agreement or not, stabilizing our relations with Austria first is the priority.

After securing Austria’s cooperation, we can withdraw the forces we have stationed against them and redirect these troops to deal with the Greeks.”

Abdulmejid I looked expectantly at Foreign Minister Fuad Pasha, waiting for his answer.

After pondering for a moment, Fuad Pasha gave his reply: “Your Majesty, to stabilize our relations with Austria, we must offer them great benefits. They are very likely to take this opportunity to force us into ceding the Danubian Principalities and Serbia.”

“Cede territory”. Abdulmejid I hesitated. He had to weigh the pros and cons of compromising with the Austrians now.

“If the Austrians are willing to cut off the logistical supplies to Russia, these territories can all be ceded to them!” Abdulmejid I said fiercely.

Ceding territory made his heart bleed, but it was a small price to pay compared to survival. Being neighbors with Austria was still better than being neighbors with Russia.

If Austria stood between them and the Russians, Abdulmejid I felt that he could finally get a good night’s sleep.

“Your Majesty, I’m afraid this is impossible. There must be an alliance between Russia and Austria. They have likely already divided up spheres of influence in the Balkans and would not sever ties with Russia just for these interests.

It is said that Britain and France have also had secret contacts with the Austrians, but it was all fruitless.” Fuad Pasha explained.

It had to be said, just in case the Sultan’s expectations were too high and they failed in the end again, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would bear the brunt of the misfortune. Fuad Pasha did not believe the Austrians could be easily bought off. Even if they could be bought off, they could not afford the price.

In terms of interests, Britain and France would certainly find it simpler to turn against them. The Ottoman government still had a bottom line after all, they could not make unlimited concessions.

Abdulmejid I thought for a moment and said, “Then we’ll take another step back. As long as Austria is willing to cease hostilities with us, we will also cede the Principality of Moldavia to them.

As for specific negotiations, you guys in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can figure it out yourselves. We already have enough troubles, in short we cannot let the Austrians interfere again.”

The Principality of Moldavia included parts of Northern Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine in later times.

This region is at the border between the Ottoman Empire and Russian territory in the Balkans. In order to not have Russia as a neighbor, Abdulmejid I did not mind tossing out this hot potato.

After pausing for a moment, seemingly feeling this condition was not enough, Abdulmejid I added: "The bottom line is Wallachia. For other areas in the Balkans, only small concessions can be made."

As he said this, he still felt a bit of heartache.

If he had known the war would evolve to this point, he should have agreed to Britain's proposal earlier and tossed the two Danubian principalities to Austria, arousing conflict between them and Russia.

Abdulmejid I was clear that now that the war had progressed this far, even if the allied forces obtained victory, they had no way to restore the pre-war spheres of influence.

This world was ruled by power. Without power, what right did they have to take so many benefits? When the time came, as long as the Great Powers stirred up a bit, the Balkan nations seeking independence would respond in droves.

The Ottoman Empire's ethnic contradictions have been ongoing for a long time. Although the Ottoman government had made many efforts, due to problems with execution at the basic level, the effects were still minimal.

If the tide of independence could not be stopped, decline would become inevitable.

If other countries declined, behaving deferentially and harmlessly remains an option. Regardless, there's no scarcity of small nations across Europe. Currying favor with the powerful could still allow them to develop.

The Ottoman Empire could not do this. Not to mention enemies all over Europe, harboring hatred or resentment does not fill bellies or solve any practical problems. But no matter the apologies made or reparations paid, these issues usually find a way of resolving themselves sooner or later.

Unfortunately, they were not a small country. They have a very robust foundation, and their geographical location was very favorable, situated at the junction of Asia, Europe and Africa, rightly called the heart of the world.

A brief check reveals that among the world's top ten most important straits in the future, among the world's ten most important straits, the Ottoman Empire controlled or influenced three: the Black Sea Straits, the Red Sea Straits (Suez Canal), and the Strait of Hormuz (Persian Gulf).

With so many strategic locations, without sufficient strength to safeguard them, it would be like sitting at home waiting for disaster to strike from the sky.

After the Ottoman Empire declined in history, they would cede territory again and again and again until they tossed away most of these hot potatoes and finally stabilized.

Clearly, this was not acceptable to the Ottoman government. Who doesn't have dreams of being a great power? Even the decadent Ottoman government still aspires to greatness.

Starting from the previous century, their reform and modernization efforts were their attempts at self-preservation. Through these reforms, they had successfully brought the Ottoman Empire back among the ranks of the Great Powers.

Unfortunately, it was only a pseudo great power. And in a war with the Russians, the facade was torn apart, revealing their inherent weakness.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Fuad Pasha cautiously replied.

Pressure — now he felt the heavy pressure. If they succeed in handling this matter, there won’t be any credit, and any territorial concessions or indemnities won’t win them any goodwill.

If negotiations fell through, the Ottoman Empire would be in danger. The Greeks might just be the last straw that breaks their back, and Fuad Pasha was unaware that the Greek government simply wanted to seize territory.

Chapter 199: Scandal

The choice that the Greeks believed to be correct was undoubtedly unsatisfactory to both sides, and it can be said that it displeased everyone.

The Russians could reluctantly accept it. No matter where the Greeks directed their attacks, it still diverted a chunk of the Ottoman Empire’s resources. Now was the critical moment, one more ally meant one more source of strength, increasing the odds of victory.

Britain and France, however, found it unbearable, particularly the British who deemed Greece’s actions a blatant act of betrayal.

The 1850 conflict between the two nations was conveniently brushed aside by the British government. They conveniently overlooked the falling out that occurred years ago when Palmerston ordered the blockade of the port of Piraeus.

Of course, John Bull was also reluctant to provoke the Greeks at this time. In case they charged straight at Constantinople recklessly, cutting off their supply lines along the way, the allied forces on the Balkan Peninsula would be finished in less than half a month.

While the British Parliament pondered opening up a new front, Foreign Secretary Palmerston found himself in hot water. Unable to restrain his lower body, he had an affair with one of the queen’s maids.

This was nothing much, the rotten things aristocrats did were too numerous, one more was harmless. Having a secret affair, even if discovered, it could just be ignored and smoothed over.

Unfortunately, their misfortune lay in their tryst taking place right within the palace, and worse yet, they were caught in the act by Prince Albert himself.

With the matter brought into the open, it became a palace scandal. Prince Albert was furious, and so was Queen Victoria.

If they didn’t take this seriously, where would the dignity of the royal family be?

As the situation escalated, the unfortunate pair, Palmerston and the maid, were apprehended on the spot by the palace guards and were given a thorough “hospitality”.

Under the butterfly effect initiated by Franz, history took a turning point. In history, Palmerston's misdeed with the queen's maid was a private matter.

The facade was not yet shattered, leaving room for a possible turnaround. In history, Palmerston paid a painful price for his actions. Not only was he ousted, but he also had to expend considerable effort to mediate, engaging in exchanges of political interests before finally returning to the political stage.

Now caught red-handed, not to mention what would happen afterwards, just getting through the present calamity was an issue.

If news of the Foreign Secretary's scandalous affair were to spread, it would create quite a stir. The British public's hunger for gossip was exceptionally fierce, and who knows what sensational narratives they might concoct.

John Russell was stunned. He was speechless in admiration for Palmerston. He was impressed by the romantic escapades of this colleague, and Russell was even more impressed by his ability to court death.

Then, he had to find a way to handle the aftermath. The royal family needed an explanation, and his colleague couldn't simply vanish without a trace either.

Palmerston was no small character. Not only was he the Foreign Secretary of the British Empire, he was also the spokesperson of the bourgeoisie in the government, wielding considerable influence among the public.

Prince Albert asked, "Prime Minister, how do you think this issue should be handled?"

After capturing the man, Prince Albert regretted it immediately. There would be countless opportunities to deal with Palmerston later. Why did he have to take action right away?

If they don't keep this under wraps, who knows what kind of narratives would take shape beyond the palace walls? There's a possibility that some might even think this is a scheme concocted by the royal family to persecute a minister.

For the sake of the royal family's reputation, this matter was destined to be handled discreetly. Prince Albert, with his sharp political acumen, naturally chose to shift the responsibility to others.

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The scandal that erupted suddenly, directly affected the efficiency of the British government, delaying the opening of the second front and creating an opportunity for the Russians.

Inside a dilapidated small village in Plovdiv, Bulgarian guerrillas were secretly having a meeting.

"Gentlemen, we have just received intelligence that the Ottoman Empire has withdrawn the troops encircling us. Replacing them are 30,000 British infantry that just arrived.

This is both a challenge and an opportunity. The British are much more formidable in combat than the Ottomans. Without two or three times the superior force, we are simply not their match.

Clearly, we do not have so many troops. This is the challenge we are about to face.

From the mouths of captives, we know that there are deep-seated conflicts between the British and the Ottomans. Despite being allies, the arrogant British only see the Ottomans as cannon fodder.

This is an opportunity. Since there is discord between them, it is very difficult for them to cooperate closely.

After all, the British are outsiders. They are not familiar with the Bulgarian terrain. Right now, they are in the process of taking over from the Ottomans, and short-term chaos is inevitable.

According to the information from insiders, the 5,000 Ottoman troops inside Plovdiv withdrew yesterday. Now, there are fewer than 2,000 remaining, with only 800 of them being British soldiers.

This is an opportunity. If our forces join together to capture Plovdiv in one stroke, dismantling the enemy's supply hub, it will undoubtedly impact the war on the Sofia battlefield."

The speaker was a middle-aged man, one of the main leaders of this alliance of Bulgarian guerrillas, Dimitar.

Despite the Bulgarian guerrillas now having considerable numbers, they don't have an established system. Actually they have not united at all, still fighting independently.

The real reason why the Russians were supporting them was to create chaos for the Ottoman Empire. They had no plans to let them actually gain independence at all, so naturally they would not let them unite.

In this era, Bulgarian nationalism had not yet awakened. Bulgaria's national founding father in later history — Hristo Botev, was still a little kid in kindergarten. (AN: If there were kindergartens at that time)

The driving force behind the Bulgarian resistance mainly stemmed from the Ottoman government's oppression and religious persecution.

A young black-haired, green-eyed military officer stood up and disagreed: "Mr. Dimitar, Plovdiv is only 15 kilometers from Asenovgrad and only 30 kilometers from Pazardzhik.

This means that once we launch an attack at Plovdiv, reinforcements from enemy-occupied Asenovgrad can arrive on the same day, and Pazardzhik's reinforcements will arrive at most by the next day.

Pazardzhik still has 3,000 defending soldiers, and Asenovgrad has 2,000. We would be facing not 2,000 enemies but a total of 7,000.

The enemy has just withdrawn 5,000 troops; they will undoubtedly have new forces coming in to replace them. We haven't received any intelligence on this matter, which is highly unusual.

For this situation to occur, there are only three possibilities: First, the enemy commander forgot and overlooked Plovdiv's importance. Second, something went wrong with our intelligence network. Third, this is the enemy's trap, deliberately trying to lure us in.

The first situation is obviously impossible. The enemy isn't so stupid as to not even see such a simple issue.

The intelligence we receive comes from the Bulgarian people across various regions. Large-scale troop movements cannot be kept secret. Based on the intelligence we have received, there are currently no significant forces heading towards Plovdiv.

So the possibility this is a trap is very high. If we cannot occupy Plovdiv quickly in a short time, within three days at most, the surrounding enemies would swarm over and trap us here.”

Dimitar explained: “Sephillos, you’re right. This very likely could be an enemy trap, but the temptation is just too great.

We all know that the enemy has stockpiled large quantities of supplies in Plovdiv. Even if this is bait, this is an opportunity to destroy those provisions.

Although I’m uncertain just how many strategic supplies the enemy has stocked up in Sofia, looking at the importance they place on logistical transport, I can judge that the stockpile of strategic supplies in Sofia is insufficient to support the frontline troops until the end of the war.

After destroying these supplies, we can retreat. As for the city of Plovdiv, let’s leave it to the Ottomans for now. After this battle is over, we can come back.”

Dimitar’s analysis was well-founded. By now, the battle had progressed to the point enemy forces in Sofia had declined to 80,000 troops. Even then, FitzRoy Somerset still pulled out 15,000 British soldiers to handle logistical transport.

Due to a significant portion of forces being allocated to logistics, the result is the current predicament on the Sofia front where the allied forces are being pounded into the ground by the Russians.

It was because his fighting force was stretched thin that FitzRoy Somerset requested reinforcements from the homeland. Dimitar was impatient to make a breakthrough, mainly because enemy reinforcements would soon arrive. If they do not strike now, victory will become elusive.

This hurried response from the allied forces is a consequence of the ongoing war. The Russians were well-prepared, and as a result, the frontline forces of the alliance suffered heavy losses and had to immediately withdraw for replenishment.

Replacement troops were all sent to Wallachia. They were not directly sent to the frontlines because logistical constraints meant they could only wait by the Danube.

The Ottoman Empire is going all-in, relying on conscripting soldiers for reinforcements. Due to the Balkan Peninsula being mostly under enemy occupation, there’s hardly any place left to conscript soldiers, and the rate of replenishment can no longer keep up with the frontline’s rate of consumption.

Britain and France were too far from the Balkans. Wanting to replenish forces required reporting back to the homeland, then through bureaucratic red tape. By the time it got approved and arrived, the opportunity would have passed.

From this perspective, the British strategy of opening a second front was indeed far-sighted. Once the Crimean Peninsula war kicks off, the Russians would be stretched thin.

Even with thorough preparation, there were limits. The dismal state of internal transportation was undoubtedly the biggest hindrance, restricting the deployment of Russian forces.

A middle-aged man sneered and said: “Mr. Dimitar, even with our guerrilla forces combined, we number barely over 5000 troops. You clearly know the state of our weapons and equipment as well.

If this is a trap, then the enemy would definitely be prepared. On the surface, the enemy force that seems to have combat power are those 800 British soldiers.

But who really knows? The Ottoman army is not without capable fighters either. If they were all useless trash, we would have liberated the country long ago.

What if these 1000 plus Ottoman defenders are the elite forces of the Ottomans, coupled with the eight hundred British soldiers? Their combat strength wouldn't be much inferior to ours.

I believe it's too risky to attack Plovdiv hastily. Even if we have collaborators within the city, the chances of success are too low."

Where there are people, there is a society, and the Bulgarian guerrilla forces were originally divided into many factions, mostly formed based on geographical regions. Many were eyeing leadership within the guerrilla forces.

Dimitar was just the leader in name of these guerrilla forces, and there were quite a few discontented individuals among them. However, in the face of a common enemy, these conflicts were temporarily suppressed.

"What ideas might Mr. Hamil have?" Dimitar asked calmly.

He could tell that Hamil was not opposed to attacking Plovdiv itself, but had other plans.

Hamil smiled slightly: "Ideas might be overstating it. Since we cannot determine if this is a trap or not, we might as well test the waters first.

Let's launch an attack on Pazardzhik, which is thirty kilometers away. We've already figured out the situation there. The 3,000 defending soldiers are all Ottomans, with fairly average combat capabilities. It won't be difficult for us to unite and take them down.

If the enemy does have traps, it would be exposed by then. They cannot possibly set up an encirclement spanning 30 kilometers after all.

If there are no traps, we take shortcuts straight to Plovdiv after capturing Pazardzhik. With surrounding enemies already drawn towards Pazardzhik, chances of our sneak attack succeeding would be very high."

Dimitar thought and said: "This is indeed a good plan that can minimize risk. However, maneuvering between the two places does put too much pressure on the guerrilla forces.

It seems necessary to contact Boris and the others. Let them be responsible for attacking Pazardzhik to break the deadlock, and we'll assist with reinforcements.

Once Plovdiv and Asenovgrad's defenders head out, we destroy them first, reducing the difficulty of besieging the cities."

This would not be the first siege the Bulgarian guerrillas attempted, but it would be their first major counterattack after being defeated in the Battle of Sofia.

After more than two months of recuperation, they had regained their strength. Though not at their peak, their confidence was on the rise.

In this regard, the Sardinian military also deserves credit. If it weren't for them creating an opportunity for the Bulgarians, these guerrilla forces would still be locked in a fierce struggle with the allied forces.

At this point, they would likely have suffered heavy casualties. The Russian Bear was also not easy to get along with. Initially using the guerrillas as cannon fodder already revealed their attitude. They ordered the Bulgarian guerrillas to break through the alliance's defense lines, infiltrating to the rear for a pincer attack, clearly intending to kill with a borrowed knife.

Unfortunately, plans don't always go smoothly. Who knew the Sardinians were actually so timid as to have their positions pierced through by the Bulgarian guerrillas and infiltrated their rear.

The Russians simply did not believe the guerrillas could accomplish this. Unable to coordinate in time, they lost an opportunity to win the war.

Chapter 200: Lessons Learned Through Blood (BONUS)

Snowflakes fluttered as winter came again this year. Wrapped in a layer of silver, Vienna became especially pleasant this winter.

Sch?nbrunn Palace

Metternich reported: "Your Majesty, the British and French envoys have forwarded the Ottoman truce negotiations to the Foreign Ministry. It seems the Ottoman government is preparing to wrap things up."

This was not surprising to Franz. In the current war, the heaviest losses were undoubtedly the Ottomans, then the Russians. Meanwhile, the losses Britain and France suffered were negligible.

Without power, everything was illusionary. The Ottomans would inevitably have to shrink their sphere of influence in the future. Taking advantage of current British and French support to prematurely end the war with Austria and withdraw troops to go beat up the Greeks aligned with their interests more.

Franz thought for a while and said, "Proceed according to our original plan. Slowly negotiate with the Ottomans and figure out their bottom line first."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Metternich replied.

The second Battle of Bulgaria had continued to the point both sides were already exhausted. The soldiers' war-weariness had been increasing day by day due to the continuous high-intensity combat. And the morale of the troops on both sides was inevitably declining.

Other than the Greeks who just entered the war and the Montenegrins drunk on victory, the rest were barely holding on.

On the surface, the Russians seemed to have the upper hand, but Franz was well aware that this was just a facade. It was a battle where both sides were equally battered.

Looking at Russian casualties said it all. After more than four months of fierce fighting, Russian casualties already exceeded 170,000.

Among them, the direct combat fatalities numbered less than 60,000. The remaining more than 100,000 wounded, due to not receiving timely treatment and the shortage of medical care and medicines, resulted in fewer than 80% surviving.

There was no battlefield first aid. Russian medical teams were as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns. They could only ensure the safety of officers. As for soldiers, they were helpless. They had no time!

Cheap cannon fodder was not valued. Upon getting injured, they could only be simply bandaged up, then rely on the soldiers themselves to endure and slowly recover on their own.

The Russian military never conducted any first aid training. It would be more accurate to say they tied up the wounds rather than bandaging them properly. Without professional medical gauze and disinfection, just wrapping a piece of cloth was considered sufficient.

For severely wounded soldiers, survival was virtually impossible, and they were directly counted among the combat fatalities.

Many lightly wounded soldiers, who were hit in non-vital areas such as the arms or thighs, could have survived with proper wound care. Unfortunately, due to inadequate treatment, they also met their demise.

In the Principality of Wallachia, Franz's emergency field hospital was now extremely busy. Every day, wounded Russian soldiers would retreat and rush over to seek medical attention as soon as possible.

"Treatment" was a glorified term. It essentially involved cleaning the wounds, applying some unknown efficacy medicine, and then rebandaging.

The real life-saving measures are wound cleaning and disinfection to prevent infection. The subsequent medications mainly serve psychological purposes, with the added benefit of making money.

Surviving for several days from the front lines to the rear meant the wounds likely were not critical. As long as the wounds do not become infected, most would survive.

The Russian soldiers did not know this. They only saw that after emergency care, mortality plummeted drastically. Naturally, they believed everyone in the hospital to be miracle doctors.

In reality, most of the medical staff were merely soldiers who underwent some battlefield first aid training. Franz used the wounded Russian soldiers as guinea pigs to hone their capabilities.

The effectiveness of medications depends on the situation; you get what you pay for. High-priced drugs are certainly effective, Franz still had that bit of integrity.

As for cheap medicine, they shouldn't expect much from them. They were either various experimental drugs or concoctions made from flour and vegetables.

The most effective among the cheap medicines was herbal soup, which can be simply described as a pot of traditional Chinese medicine for lowering temperature and detoxifying. Unfortunately, many people considered this witchcraft. Most Russian soldiers were unwilling to drink it.

Moreover, this medicine was not meant for treating wounds, so without immediate and visible effects, it did not attract much attention.

Nicholas I could be considered as a relatively good Tsar. At least, he covered the medical expenses for his soldiers. Of course, one shouldn't expect him to spend huge amounts of money on this. The fixed price for each wounded soldier was ten silver rubles and only those who survived got paid. (AN: One silver ruble is approximately equal to half a tael of silver)

Naturally, this bit of money could not possibly buy decent service. Other than the few that could pay out of pocket, most only received the simplest treatment.

For instance, wanting to perform surgery to remove shrapnel from the wounds. Don't even think about it without at least 100 rubles. People that could perform such surgeries were far too scarce, so the prices were naturally steep.

Originally, Franz had planned to outsource battlefield first aid, but considering the high risks on the battlefield and the Russian government's unwillingness to spend a large sum of money, they naturally couldn't reach an agreement.

With such a terrifying casualty rate, even with continuous replenishment from the rear, the combat effectiveness of the army inevitably suffered.

In theory, nursing these wounded soldiers back to health and rearming them for the battlefield, as veterans their combat ability would be stronger.

Unfortunately, Russian officials were notorious for their bureaucracy and did not effectively address the soldiers' mindset. Most wounded soldiers were unwilling to return to the battlefield, and some even bribed medical personnel to deliberately delay their recovery.

This was the case for the Russians, and the situation for the opposing allied forces was even worse. The Ottoman Empire lacked the capability to provide medical care, even for local operations.

The British army's casualties were not significant enough to attract much attention domestically. The angel who pioneered battlefield first aid had not yet reached the frontlines.

Without battlefield first aid, one can only resign oneself to fate and rely on the blessing of God or ***.

This was also why the British and French commanders insisted on using Ottomans as cannon fodder. In order to reduce the casualty rate, they had to let others bear the brunt.

Never forgetting the lessons of the past was the teacher of the future. Naturally, Franz had to learn from the experiences of the Near East War.

Franz had long tasked the General Staff to summarize all these miscellaneous matters, and battlefield cases were distributed to every commander.

The lessons from logistical experiences were not only disseminated among government departments but also organized into specialized knowledge training. In short, similar issues were not allowed to occur in Austria.

To better implement these measures, the Austrian government had already implemented a dual responsibility system for leadership and direct supervisors in logistics departments. If any link encountered issues, the relevant responsible individuals would be court-martialed together.

Franz solemnly said: "Marshal, the General Staff must finalize plans for the westward strategy as soon as possible. This time, we are racing against time."

The army must capture Munich within one week, control all of Bavaria in one month, and sweep across Southern Germany within two months.

If time allows, we also need to extend our reach to Central Germany, occupying advantageous terrain to lay the foundation for the future.”

The terrain of Germany was rather complex. Northern Germany was flat plains, with an average elevation less than 100 meters. Central Germany had east-west mountain ranges of highlands. The Rhine Rift Valley region of Southwestern Germany had mountains on both sides with steep valley walls. While Southern Germany contained the Bavarian plateau and the Alps.

This brought some inconvenience to Austria’s military operations. The optimal choice for a quick and decisive victory was to advance along the Danube River, where all problems could be disregarded.

In case the enemy blocks the river, challenges will arise, requiring a land-based offensive to sweep across this area of over ten thousand square kilometers. Troubles were inevitable.

Fortunately, infrastructure in these regions were developed already. Southern Germany was a plateau, not a mountainous region. Otherwise, accomplishing this task would be outright impossible.

(Author’s Note: Plateaus refer to flat raised areas above 500 meter elevation that may have some undulations)

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Marshal Radetzky answered, brimming with confidence.

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While Austria made its final preparations, Napoleon III also made a decision to send more reinforcements.

There was no other choice. Napoleon III’s participation in this war was not only due to France’s interests in the Near East but also, and more importantly, to gain political prestige.

If Russia emerged victorious, his imperial throne would be unstable. The French masses were not patient. If satisfactory results could not be presented, another revolution might just occur.

If not for the sudden political crisis in the British government, the allied forces of Britain and France would have already marched into Crimea by now.

Although the army did not mobilize, the navy already took action. Starting from late November of 1852, the joint British, French and Ottoman navies continuously bombarded Russian Black Sea coastal port cities. This caused thousands of Russian casualties.

Faced with the unrestrained bombardments from Britain and France, only the bravest dared to stay. Clearly, such brave souls were few, and a large number of Russians fled inland to escape the bombardment.

Saint Petersburg

Upon receiving word that Britain and France were bombarding the coast, Nicholas I became truly enraged. How could this be justified? Britain and France were actually so shameless as to directly fire on civilians!

Civilian casualties aside, the problem was further compounded by the arrival of several hundred thousand refugees, eagerly awaiting relief from the Russian government.

Fortunately, Ukraine was a grain-producing area. Otherwise, human tragedies would unfold again. No, wait, they already occurred.

The inefficiency of Russian bureaucrats was glaringly evident at this moment. Faced with the influx of refugees, local officials failed to take effective measures, mechanically awaiting orders from Saint Petersburg.

The consequences were naturally severe. With Saint Petersburg so far away, before the Tsar's orders arrived, a famine-induced uprising had already erupted.

It couldn't be considered a full-scale rebellion; these people weren't staging a revolt. Instead, they were merely looting for food, and there hadn't been any attacks on cities yet.

In suppressing uprisings, for once, bureaucrats displayed rare efficiency. Ukraine still had many Russian troops waiting to reinforce the Balkan battlefield. Naturally, using them to put down uprisings now was no issue.

The unorganized famine-induced riot was swiftly extinguished as soon as it began.

Nicholas I was naturally unaware of these events, and it was even possible that he might never find out. No official would be foolish enough to bother the great Tsar with such trivial matters.

Nicholas I harshly questioned, "The enemy has attacked our coastal cities for so long, do you not have any solutions at all? What is the Black Sea Fleet doing? Why have they been completely useless?"

The Minister of the Navy said softly: "Your Majesty, the Black Sea Fleet has been gravely weakened after engaging the enemy. Only a few small ships remain, already incapable of fighting."

The term 'gravely weakened' was an understatement. 'Total annihilation' might be more fitting. Faced with encirclement from the combined British, French and Ottoman navies, the Black Sea Fleet simply could not resist at all.

Originally, the Navy Ministry believed that hiding in the harbor with fortress guns for protection would deter the enemy from attacking. However, they never expected that these "advanced" fortress guns would be completely unusable.

Since the decline of the Ottoman Empire, there were no longer foreign threats to the Black Sea coast. Naturally, corrupt bureaucrats of the Russian government economized wherever possible. Even coastal artillery became nothing more than decoration. Most were products from the previous century or even the one before, and many were also inferior imitations.

After some probing, the British and French navies launched an aggressive attack without hesitation. The Black Sea Fleet struggled bitterly for some time before heroically perishing completely.

There was nothing to be ashamed of in this defeat. When the British and French navies joined forces, there was no country in the world that could resist them. The fact that the Black Sea Fleet did not surrender to the enemy was already sufficient proof of their bravery.

Mainly, there were no opportunities to surrender at all and they were directly wiped out. Ever since Menshikov entered the navy, the Russian Navy had been stagnant for decades, consistently lagging two generations behind the enemy.

(AN: The fearsome guy that dared to use army manuals for naval training)

“Hmph!”

Nicholas I snorted coldly to express dissatisfaction simmering in his heart.

Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode persuaded, “Your Majesty, given the current situation, we can only abandon these cities. As long as we can capture Constantinople and block the Bosphorus Strait, such incidents will not happen again.”

At this moment, the desire of the Russian government towards Constantinople further rose. They personally experienced the dire consequences of losing naval supremacy this time around.

Nicholas I nodded. He wasn’t truly angered by the demise of the Black Sea Fleet. Since the day Britain and France joined the war, he had anticipated this outcome.

What truly ignited his fury was how undefended the coastal regions were. Not even a shred of hassle was posed against the enemy. Corruption among the bureaucratic system already reached such alarming levels.

Despite these issues, in wartime, domestic stability took precedence over everything else. Nicholas I couldn’t purge the bureaucratic system at this time.

“Have the losses been calculated?” Nicholas I asked concernedly.

“Your Majesty, it’s just a rough estimate. There is about one-tenth of the strategic supplies stockpiled in the coastal areas remaining. Approximately 300,000 civilians have been displaced. Direct economic losses exceeded 200 million rubles.” Finance Minister Fyodor Vronchenko answered, voice trembling.

Clearly, Vronchenko did not anticipate such audacity from those below. Even if their warehouses storing military provisions were exposed, enemies still should not be able to strike them so accurately, right?

Even shooting at fixed targets, naval accuracy was poor. It was improbable for their supply depots to be entirely bombed out in such a short timeframe.

Did they think the enemy’s artillery shells were free?

Nicholas I said coldly, “Investigate. Send people to thoroughly investigate this for me!”

Even if he currently could not move against them, there was still the phrase called “settling accounts later”. The Tsar had an extremely vengeful personality. He would remember these issues and settle scores in the future.