

## Roman Empire 201

### Chapter 201: The "Holy Roman Empire Faction" Takes Action

On December 4, 1852, the Vienna to Salzburg railway officially commenced operation. Other than the news being published in newspapers, it did not cause much sensation.

In recent times, there have been quite a lot of Austrian railway openings already. Other than initial surprise, by now the Austrian masses were already used to it.

The most significant impact has been on the railway companies, who, after investing substantial funds, are finally seeing returns. This was directly reflected in the stock market where railway operations were thriving, once again stimulating stock price rises.

As for the strategic value of this railway, not many people seem to be paying attention. Even with the convenience of railway transportation, can it really compare to the Danube River?

Franz was naturally pleased with the situation. The idea of German unification was gaining momentum, and now it was time to initiate the next phase of the plan.

Franz jokingly said, "Prime Minister, your visit to the various states of Germany this time is an important mission. If you can convince everyone to rebuild the Holy Roman Empire, then we'll profit immensely."

Convincing everyone to agree to rebuild the Holy Roman Empire is no easy task unless Austria holds a dagger to their throats. Why else would they abandon the comfy status quo to accept a leader ruling over them?

In the present time, German nationalism has awakened in the region. Even if the governments of the states have high degrees of freedom, the emergence of a central government would harm their interests.

In this era, no matter how loose the empire may be, a constitution is inevitable. The autonomy of various state governments will be significantly reduced.

Forget about independent diplomatic powers; currency unification is also unavoidable. Tariffs will surely be abolished. Just these three factors imply that the central government won't be an empty shell anymore.

With these elements in place, Franz can responsibly say that, through political means, he can control most of the small states.

If they could afford being a bit shameless, provoking an external war, they could obtain command over the armies of each state using the excuse of war.

This was exactly what the Americans did. Relying on gaining command over the states' armies during the war to increase the authority of the central government. In the end, they transformed a loosely federated union into a unified country.

Prime Minister Felix smiled: "Your Majesty, this joke is not funny at all. If I could truly convince them, what use would there be for the army?"

Franz's butterfly effect came into play again. Felix Schwarzenberg, who was supposed to have died in an accident on April 5th this year, was still alive and well.

A change in the prime minister was out of the question. Felix's political skills were quite good, and he handled the cabinet's work with ease. Franz wasn't Emperor Chongzhen; he didn't like unnecessary troubles.

Felix understood very well what this diplomatic mission was about. Convincing the various states to rebuild the Holy Roman Empire was just a smokescreen. The real purpose was to create a pretext for war.

Only after the efforts for peaceful unification fail, can the Austrian government launch a war for unification to gain the support of the people.

No, it should be a military unification of Southern Germany, at most including Central Germany. Any more, and it would be too much to handle. The Kingdom of Prussia is not that easy to deal with.

Of course, the slogan should naturally be the unification of Germany. Otherwise, the nationalists wouldn't buy it, and without their support, this war would be hard to fight.

Franz solemnly said: "No matter, there are so many German states. Dupe them one by one. I do not believe that among so many small states, there are none foolish enough."

Franz wasn't making this up. Historically, Prussia had already succeeded in duping some small states to cheer them on. After making use of them, those states were directly swallowed up.

On the contrary, the Southern German States that resisted fiercely preserved far greater rights. Due to the fear of intervention from great powers, after the Austro-Prussian War, the Prussians did not dare to continue the civil war and had no choice but to compromise with the Southern German States.

"Your Majesty, I plan to start with the most difficult one, Prussia. After all, among the German states, besides us, the Kingdom of Prussia has the most influence. As long as they oppose, we can generate enough momentum.

However, doing so will likely increase diplomatic pressure. European countries generally don't want to see unification in Germany." Prime Minister Felix said.

Metternich responded: "Prime Minister, diplomatic problems are easy to resolve. We utilize negotiations to resolve German unification issues. I estimate many would see it as a joke.

What we must do now is make this plan seem even more like a joke. So long as they see all German states opposing our proposals, the pressure we face would in truth not amount to much."

Everyone chuckled. It's true that many countries would oppose German unification. However, if Austria merely shouts slogans without taking practical action, others wouldn't be interested in intervening.

After all, you can't make the Austrians shut up. Everyone plays politics, and politicians understand shouting slogans. Just listening to them is enough.

Even to make this play more convincing, several years ago, the Austrian cabinet began role-playing, and all of Europe knew the political stances of these cabinet ministers.

Prime Minister Felix played the role of the peace unification faction, or one could say the rebuilding of the “Holy Roman Empire faction”. The supporter within the cabinet is Finance Minister Karl, and the two of them constitute the leaders of the Austrian “Holy Roman Empire faction”.

Concurrently they were also leaders of the German “Holy Roman Empire faction”, currently supported by at least 35% of Germans, or at least sympathizing with their political philosophy.

Metternich played the role of the opposition, which has been his consistent political stance, known throughout Europe.

Otherwise, when the Vienna System was established, Austria should have chosen the Kingdom of Bavaria, not the economically prosperous Lombardy.

Within the cabinet, Archduke Louis is a supporter of Metternich. Their declared position is: German unification is impossible because the various states have been independent for a long time, and European countries will not tolerate German unity.

For this reason, both of them are often scolded harshly by German nationalists.

Due to public support, currently, the “Holy Roman Empire faction” led by Prime Minister Felix holds the advantage within the Austrian government.

So at this time, for Felix to step out advocating “rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire,” there was no problem whatsoever.

After Christmas, amidst the farewell of the people, Felix embarked on his journey.

In the eyes of German nationalists, this is a crucial step toward unification.

As the leader of the German Confederation, the Austrian government has already started efforts towards unity, marking a turning point in history.

Regardless of the negotiation results, wherever Felix traveled, there were welcoming crowds everywhere.

It’s not that the “Holy Roman Empire” label is popular; in fact, many people don’t have strong feelings about the dissolved Holy Roman Empire.

However, for those who desire the unification of Germany without wishing for war, the “revival of the Holy Roman Empire” is the best choice, hands down.

The “Holy Roman Empire faction” has become the mainstream ideology in German nationalism simply because people hope for a peaceful unification of Germany and was also known as the “peaceful unification faction.”

Unfortunately, these individuals cannot influence Germany, as the rulers of each state first consider their own interests.

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Berlin

Although Frederick William IV supports the unification movement, it is merely a political necessity and does not mean he is willing to sacrifice his own interests for the unification of Germany.

Prussia's pursuit of German unification has always excluded Austria. If this goal cannot be achieved, such unification was worthless to them.

Historically, Frederick William IV relied on the "Three Emperors' League" core concept, attempting to utilize the Erfurt Union to exclude Austria.

This was also the political view of the "Lesser Germany" ideology, with the simple reason for excluding Austria: a German Empire including Austria would be too massive, to the extent that it would be intolerable for various European countries.

Of course that was only one reason. There were still many other reasons, for example: Austria contained far too many other ethnic groups that could taint German racial purity...

Prime Minister Joseph Von Radowitz said in full seriousness: "The ambitions of the Austrians have been exposed, and considering the current international situation, they are likely to have gained support from the Russians.

The Russo-Austrian secret treaty we have been speculating about is probably Austria's support for the Russians in annexing the Ottoman Empire, in exchange for Russian support for their rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire.

We have to admit, the Austrians are ruthless; they are even willing to negotiate with the tiger for its skin. Now they have chosen a good time, as the British and French have already declared war, diverting a significant amount of their attention.

If they were to intervene in Germany, we would have to allow the Russians to annex the Ottoman Empire. Napoleon III might prioritize intervening in Central Europe, but the British government will surely hesitate.

If the Austrian government can unify Germany through diplomatic means, even if only nominally, the French would not dare to take reckless actions."

If the Russians annex the Ottoman Empire, the French would only lose interests in the Near East and Egypt. In the Mediterranean, the French navy could still suppress the Russians.

For the British, it was a different story. Their losses wouldn't be confined to the interests in the Mediterranean. In Palmerston's words: If we cannot stop the Russians on the Balkan Peninsula, then we will have to stop them at the Indus River in India.

Once the Russians annex the Ottoman Empire, Persia won't be able to halt their advance, posing a threat to India.

In this era, Britain only controls India and hasn't entirely absorbed it yet. If the Russians emerge to disrupt the situation, their most vital colony might be at risk.

Faced with this dilemma, hesitation was inevitable.

After all, the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire remains a loose entity. Before achieving internal consolidation, expansion abroad is not feasible. Moreover, with the French blocking the way, the British are not likely to face an immediate threat in the short term.

Frederick William IV sneered, "The Austrians are thinking too optimistically. Franz, that little brat, probably got fooled into believing nonsense!

As long as we don't agree, the German states cannot unify. Does he really think the German states are willing to be unified by the Austrians?

If they can't rebuild the Holy Roman Empire through political means, what will the Austrians do? Is there a possibility that they'll use military force to unify the German states?"

Joseph Von Radowitz shook his head: "Your Majesty, that's impossible. While Austria's military strength is formidable, it's unlikely that they can unify the German states in the presence of the great powers' intervention.

Once Austria resorts to force, we can form an alliance with the German states to resist their invasion.

We can even deliberately allow the Austrians to eliminate the military forces of these small states. As long as we don't rashly engage in a decisive battle with them and delay until the French intervene, Austria is bound to lose.

If we handle it well, after the war, these small German states will be severely weakened, and our opportunity to unify the German states will emerge.

Metternich, that old fox, cannot possibly fail to see this. Felix is also pushing for peaceful unification precisely because of this. With them in the Austrian government, it's impossible for them to take risks."

Prime Minister Joseph Von Radowitz's judgment was not wrong. This was also one reason Franz did not dare take risks.

As long as the Prussian army did not come out for a decisive battle against Austria, whether they defend the cities or retreat, it would be impossible to eliminate their main forces in the short term.

With the French intervention force arriving within one or two months, the joint resistance of Prussia and France would be too much for Austria to handle.

If it were delayed for a few more days, intervention forces from Britain, Spain, and other small European countries would also join.

In such a situation, Austria could not see any hope of victory. Betting everything on a risky move, once it failed, it would be disastrous.

Could they expect the Austrian army to suddenly erupt with overwhelming strength and defeat both Prussia and France before the intervention forces from various countries arrive?

Major countries pursued stability while minor countries took risks.

Having thoroughly studied history, Franz was clear that only the last survivor could truly claim victory. Nations that relied solely on a burst of victories often ended in tragic outcomes.

Japan and Germany are typical examples, both boasting formidable combat capabilities, erupting with overwhelming strength, only to be collectively beaten down by others, relinquishing their earlier gains.

On the contrary, Italy, which had consistently maintained a low profile, managed to end up on the winning side in both World Wars, reaping significant benefits.

Even the mighty French, after suffering a setback, understood the value of playing it safe and avoiding unnecessary risks.

With so many historical precedents, Franz dared not be reckless. Despite the apparent strength of the Austrian army after training, the issue was that they could only unleash a short burst of power!

Once they couldn't achieve a swift and decisive victory, the weaknesses of Austria, a multi-ethnic country, would be exposed over time.

According to their current plan, the operation would be safer, focusing on regions with a stable population base. The smaller the scale of the operation, the lower the risk.

After completing the operation, internal consolidation could be achieved in the shortest possible time. If the French dared to intervene, they would be seen as aggressors, allowing Austria to benefit from the morale boost of defending their homeland.

Frederick William IV sighed and said, "It's a pity. If it weren't for these old foxes, we could still send someone to try. Now, we should find a way to disrupt the Austrians' plan, preferably without arousing public resentment. Our reputation really can't afford more trouble."

Once a reputation is tarnished, everything becomes difficult. After being collectively deceived by the German states, Prussia's government reputation has been poor up to the present moment.

Not only in Germany but also domestically, Prussian citizens are not particularly fond of the government.

No matter how they explain, the promises made by the government have not been fulfilled, and people always feel the government has cheated them out of their money. Nationalists, in particular, are dissatisfied with the government's compromise with the Russians.

## Chapter 202: The Pinnacle of Deception (BONUS)

As British troops had just arrived in Balkan Peninsula, before they even finished taking over all defense zones, Bulgarian guerrillas launched a total counterattack. The Russians also cooperated closely, firmly pinning down allied forces at the frontlines.

It turned out that Plovdiv was indeed set up by the British as bait, intending to encircle and annihilate the main force of the Bulgarian guerrilla forces here. However, they only controlled the beginning of the battle and failed to control the outcome.

As soon as the battle began, the situation changed. More than a dozen cities, including Plovdiv, simultaneously came under attack from the guerrilla forces.

Most of these were feigned attacks, but in the chaos, the British unfinished defense arrangements were exposed.

There was no other way. Although the Greeks were not powerful, they chose the timing perfectly. Who knew if they would advance all the way to Constantinople? For safety reasons, the Ottoman Empire had to divert forces to block them.

With insufficient defensive forces and the presence of collaborators inside the city, even feigned attacks could breach the defenses. If these places were lost, the allied forces in Sofia would be trapped in a siege. The British would have no other choice but to send reinforcements.

Bulgarian guerrilla firepower was far too weak. Bullying second-rate Ottoman forces was fine, but they still could not match the British in frontal combat.

However, being unable to win did not mean they had no means to fight. The arrogant British commanders of the newly arrived British forces, who had yet to clash with them, were already treating the Bulgarians disdainfully, directly viewing them as colonial natives.

This understanding was not entirely wrong. In theory, Bulgaria could be considered a colony of the Ottoman Empire, albeit directly ruled instead.

In terms of strength, there was a significant gap. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian guerrilla forces had received training from Russian and Austrian instructors, and coupled with their high morale, they demonstrated formidable combat prowess.

With a resounding “boom,” the marching British forces were once again attacked by the guerrilla forces. After a moment, the gunfire abruptly ceased, indicating that the guerrilla forces had retreated.

A young military officer with a pale face reported, “General, we’ve been attacked by the enemy again. Two soldiers have been killed, and seven soldiers are injured!”

“Is this the first time we have been attacked by the enemy?” Inquired Major General Oliver.

“The eighteenth time!” the young officer replied in a low voice.

“Then stop blabbering. Dispatch troops to pursue them immediately!” Commanded Major General Oliver.

The casualties inflicted by the Bulgarian guerrilla forces were not substantial, but the frequency of the attacks not only slowed down their march but also significantly dampened the morale of the troops.

Major General Oliver was not one to take losses without retaliation; of course, a counterattack was in order.

Due to a lack of experience in fighting guerrilla forces, most of the time, the enemy disappeared halfway through the pursuit. If luck was not on their side, there would be more traps waiting for them along the way.

In this round of engagements, the British army not only failed to gain any advantage but, more importantly, it delayed the optimal opportunity for a decisive battle. By the time they reached their destination, the main force of the guerrilla forces had long vanished.

Everyone knew that the headquarters of the Bulgarian guerrilla forces was in the Balkan Mountains, and Major General Oliver’s orders were to encircle and eliminate them.

However, entering the Balkan Mountains meant fighting on the enemy’s home turf. The main forces would have difficulty moving, and artillery would lose its effectiveness. In such an environment, casualties on both sides would almost be in a 1:1 ratio.

Exchanging one British soldier for one guerrilla fighter was out of the question for Major General Oliver. If he dared to do so, he would soon be facing a military tribunal.

This was Major General Oliver's first time commanding troops in combat. If he hadn't been an influential figure, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to take on this unlucky mission.

The British generals who had been in the Balkan Peninsula for a long time would rather confront the Russians on the frontlines than venturing into mountainous terrain to encircle guerrilla forces.

In the former, the enemy was visible, and the British military had a slight upper hand in combat. As long as they didn't face multiple times their own numbers, the risks were manageable. In the latter, the apparent risk seemed smaller — guerrilla forces were unlikely to defeat regular forces. However, once they enter the mountains, the situation would change.

Major General Oliver believed he had succeeded by setting up a bait to lure the Bulgarian guerrilla forces into a trap.

The current outcome was evident: the enemy took the bait, but unfortunately, he overestimated the marching speed of the British army. Under the enemy's surprise attack, they couldn't close the encirclement formation in time.

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Plovdiv, this strategically important city, had already been mostly occupied by enemy forces, but the defending forces continued to resist tenaciously. Urban warfare wasn't the guerrilla forces' strong suit, and even with internal collaborators and support, they couldn't capture the city in one go.

Guerrilla commander Edimir ordered all troops: "Command the troops to stop the attack. Gather strategic supplies as much as possible. Take what we can carry, and burn what we can't. We can't leave anything for the enemy."

A middle-aged officer reluctantly said, "Commander, isn't it a waste to burn so many valuable resources? If we organize civilians to help us transport them, we might still be able to get them out."

Edimir glared at him and said, "Stop talking nonsense. With this much equipment, do you think we can run? If the British catch up with us, even if our forces increase tenfold, we won't be their match!"

Being able to destroy this portion of supplies already satisfied Edimir. Although they hadn't taken the entire Plovdiv, politically, they could declare that they had captured the city and negotiate for a better position with the Russians.

The Russians are very practical. Initially, the treatment of Bulgarian guerrillas only prevented outright starvation. But ever since they broke through the Sardinian army's frontlines and infiltrated into the enemy's rear, the treatment of the guerrillas became comparable to that of the Russian military.

Although they couldn't receive logistical support for the time being, the Russians still provided them with a batch of weapons and equipment, delivered through the narrow paths of the Balkan Mountains.

Many guerrilla officers, including Edimir, were granted formal Russian military ranks, and they now had official positions.



Gorchakov even promised that those willing to join the military after the war could obtain official Russian military designations and be responsible for guarding Bulgaria. Those who wanted to retire could also enter government departments and receive corresponding benefits.

“Independence?” Keep dreaming. The Russians didn’t come here to do charity. After enduring so much hardship for so long, all of it wasn’t for the sake of granting independence to the Bulgarians.

Present Bulgarian aspirations were not that high with autonomy being their ultimate goal. Most people still hope to receive protection from the Russians to ensure they were not subjected to Ottoman subjugation.

Especially within the religious community, they were staunchly pro-Russian, holding high expectations for Bulgaria to join the large family of the Russian Empire.

The future of Bulgaria could either be a province, an autonomous region, or it might join Russia under the name of an autonomous principality. The specific situation will depend on the decisions of the Russian government.

The prerequisite was that the Russians win this war. If they lose, all these considerations become irrelevant; the defeated side has no right to enjoy the spoils of war.

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Sofia

At the Allied Forces Headquarters. By now, Lieutenant General FitzRoy Somerset mentally cursed out Major General Oliver’s whole family already. Betraying allies was unacceptable, let alone betraying one’s own people.

If it weren’t for Oliver’s delay in organizing the so-called encirclement, the Bulgarian guerrilla forces wouldn’t have had the chance to infiltrate and capture three and a half cities in just one week.

While these cities may have belonged to the Ottoman Empire, FitzRoy Somerset wasn’t worried about that at all, but the supplies stored within these cities, which now fell into the hands of the guerrillas.

Even though the British Empire is vast and can absorb such losses, political considerations cannot be ignored.

The immediate consequence was that FitzRoy Somerset got embarrassed in front of the French. On a deeper level, the instability in the Bulgarian region was increasing, with more people seeing hope in breaking free from Ottoman rule and were starting to support the guerrilla forces instead.

“Send orders to Major General Oliver immediately to recapture the lost territory and ensure the smooth operation of our army’s logistics supply lines,” ordered FitzRoy Somerset.

As for the matter of besieging the guerrilla forces, that could be dealt with later. If necessary, they would leave it to the Ottomans. After all, this was not the territory of the British Empire, and FitzRoy Somerset didn’t want to bother with it.

“Yes, sir!” the aide responded.

At the time of issuing this order, FitzRoy Somerset had not yet noticed that danger was approaching. Gorchakov had already been planning for a major decisive battle.

Initially, in the Sofia front, there was the Russian army with 73,000 troops plus 20,000 Bulgarian guerrillas against the allied forces comprising 50,000 British troops, 20,000 Sardinian troops, and 30,000 Ottoman troops, making their strengths roughly equal.

Now, after Russian reinforcements, their total forces still exceeded 70,000. On the side of the allied forces, the Ottoman forces were reduced to less than 10,000, with only 35,000 out of 42,000 British troops remaining on the front lines. Meanwhile, the Sardinian forces still had 19,000 troops.

It must be said that Italians are skilled at preserving their lives, having the lowest casualty rates among all the parties involved in the war. The battlefield survival manual that was circulated by Franz back in the day has now become deeply ingrained in the Sardinian army.

This means that, when the reinforcements of the allied forces were being held back by the Bulgarian guerrilla forces, the Russian army already had an absolute advantage on the battlefield.

The Ottoman army has been crippled, and the Sardinian forces are essentially idling on the field. Even if the remaining British forces are formidable, they cannot withstand double the amount of Russian troops.

On December 27, 1852, led by Gorchakov, the Russian army launched a fierce attack in Sofia.

Unlike the previous attacks, this time the Russian army targeted the weak points in the Sardinian defense line. Since the Bulgarian guerrilla forces had broken through from this area, Gorchakov realized that this was a vulnerability in the allied forces' defense line.

However, he missed the opportunity at that time. To prevent the British from sealing this gap, this area later became the target of feigned attacks by the Russian army, with intense artillery bombardments, but without significant actual engagement.

The Sardinian forces on the opposite side also coordinated very well, firing into the air as a common practice. Both sides made it look like they were engaged in intense combat.

FitzRoy Somerset was deceived, genuinely believing that, when the Bulgarian guerrilla forces tore through the defense lines, the Sardinian defense lines were penetrated due to their unfamiliarity with the terrain and the guerrilla forces finding a small path to break through.

Coupled with the strain on their forces, the Sardinians seemed to be making extra efforts, putting up a vivid display on the battlefield, holding off the Russian onslaught. Thus, FitzRoy Somerset did not let his British forces join them.

From a long-term perspective, FitzRoy Somerset's approach was correct. If the British and Sardinian forces defended together, it was estimated that this elite British force wouldn't last much longer.

Mantuya might not be a great general, but he was undoubtedly a good superior. To reduce casualties, he always emphasized safety first, earning him the soldiers' affection.

For the Sardinian soldiers, this wasn't their war; they were on the battlefield just to earn their wages. Therefore, they were always ready to slack off and avoid exerting themselves.

General Mantuya, who deeply understood human nature, was well aware that this army would be his political capital upon returning to the Kingdom of Sardinia. Winning the soldiers' hearts was a necessary task.

Leading them to victory in battles, seizing loot for wealth — these were things he couldn't achieve. So, the only option was to lead them to preserve their lives. A general who valued the lives of his soldiers would undoubtedly be welcomed.

Now, things were getting troublesome. The Russian forces on the opposite side were unexpectedly uncooperative, giving Mantuya a headache. He thought of abandoning the defense line and running away, but if he really did it, the enraged British would probably execute him on the spot.

What about them being allies? Could the Kingdom of Sardinia do anything to the British other than protest?

A middle-aged officer suggested, "General, why don't we open a gap at the border with the British defense line and let the Russians through? Even if the British find fault with us after the war, we can shift the blame to them."

Being scolded by the British every day had made the Sardinians quite irritable, and the disparity in treatment had only intensified this dissatisfaction.

In theory, everyone received the same rations, but upon arrival, the British always managed to obtain some supplies like fruits, vegetables, potatoes, and bread.

Due to the limited quantity, only British officers could receive them, leaving the Sardinians with nothing.

Even generals like Mantuya didn't enjoy significantly better treatment, and if they wanted to improve their food, they had to dig into their pockets to bribe British quartermasters.

They did protest to the British, but the British bureaucrats presented the contract signed by the two nations, clearly stating: The British Empire provides logistical support for twenty thousand Sardinian soldiers.

Since the agreement specified "soldiers," they could only enjoy the treatment reserved for soldiers. To the Sardinian officers, equating them with soldiers was not just a matter of treatment, it insulted their dignity.

Even a commander of the allied forces, Lieutenant General FitzRoy Somerset, seemed powerless in this situation.

London bureaucrats were not people he could afford to provoke. They operated according to regulations, fully complying with British law, and appealing domestically would be useless.

As for seeking assistance from the Ottoman forces, that was clearly impossible.

Judging by the condition of the Ottoman army, aside from the well-treated high-ranking officers, the lower-ranking soldiers relied on the British for support.

If it weren't for the mechanical approach of London bureaucrats, who continued to distribute supplies based on the initial number of troops, and FitzRoy Somerset sharing some extra beef jerky and biscuits with the Ottoman soldiers, the Ottoman soldiers on the frontlines would still be going into battle on empty stomachs.

Mantuya shook his head: “We can’t do it this way. If they investigate later, we’ll be in trouble.”

Sabotaging allies is possible, but it must be done skillfully. If they don’t do it well, it might backfire on them. Mantuya was not willing to undertake a move like opening the defense line without careful consideration.

“How do we proceed? The Russian offensive is so fierce, and our losses are devastating. I’m afraid we can’t hold on for much longer,” a military officer said with a wry smile.

Mantuya furrowed his brow and lowered his voice, saying, “This war cannot go on. We don’t need to stay here and sacrifice ourselves for the Ottomans.

Order the troops to abandon the frontline positions. Also, conveniently misplace the deployment information of the British forces on the battlefield, and make the markings clear.

Remember to use Bulgarian, as the Russians can understand it anyway. We can only let the blame fall on the Ottoman forces; having Russian spies in their midst is entirely normal.

Once the defense line is breached, we’ll retract our forces and move into Kosovo, then return to Thrace from Macedonia.”

Clearly, he had prepared for this, and even the escape route had been planned. If the British prove formidable and manage to block the Russian advance, they will be investigating the Russian spies in the allied forces!

The primary suspects would be the Ottoman forces. In theory, both the British and the Sardinians were foreign to the region, and the Russians wouldn’t have had time to infiltrate them.

## Chapter 203: Turning Point

### Vienna

After the actual combat tests of the new rifle from the Hordas Armory were successful, it entered the Austrian military’s list of alternative equipment for standard issue. It was named the Holman-Strehlen M1852 rifle.

This seemed to be a European habit; designers often like to name the weapons they create after themselves.

These were trivial matters for Franz, who had no interest in delving into details. Being included in the army’s list of alternative equipment did not necessarily mean widespread adoption.

Breech-loading rifles had been around for over thirty years, starting with the American Hall M1819. Unfortunately, this rifle had a tendency to veer to the left after 45.7 meters.

Next came Prussia’s Dreyse M1841, which the Prussian army had already started to equip. However, many generals held opposing views, indicating that its performance had not yet won over the public.

This rifle only truly shone during the Prussian-Danish War and the Austro-Prussian War in 1864. However, its advantages over breech-loading rifles were not as legendary as later accounts boast, evident from the fact that the Prussian army did not universally adopt it.

Despite its four to five times faster rate of fire compared to muzzle-loading rifles, its firing pin was prone to damage. Early production runs were mocked as unusable on the battlefield unless you have spare firing pins.

Breech-loading rifles also frequently experienced gas leaks, with the leaking gas easily disrupting shooting and, in severe cases, causing burns to the skin, or, in unlucky situations, potentially blinding the shooter.

As production techniques improved later on, the performance gradually stabilized, and the Dreyse M1841 began to shine.

Franz encountered many similar rifles, and while their performance in the laboratory was excellent, they weren't viable for mass production.

Either the cost was too high or the performance was reduced. This wasn't a nuclear weapon so Franz naturally has to consider costs. Sacrificing performance was even more undesirable — what was the point of equipping a rifle without performance advantages?

Until the Holman-Strehlen M1852 came into existence. In terms of performance, it was similar to the historical Chassepot rifle, with just a slightly shorter effective range.

These were minor issues. Ensuring an effective range of 650 meters was sufficient. The rifle could shoot even farther, at over 1500 meters, good for intimidating enemies.

Franz had always believed that in actual combat, hitting an enemy accurately within 150 meters already made a soldier excellent. For longer distances, it was better to rely on instincts!

“Marshal, what do you think of this rifle? Should we consider switching to it?” Franz asked.

Marshal Radetzky replied with a smile, “Your Majesty, based on the collected data, the performance seems good, and it has the potential for large-scale deployment. However, the quoted price from the arsenal is thirty percent higher than that of ordinary rifles, and the ammunition consumption may be two to three times higher.”

Clearly, Marshal Radetzky was experienced and didn't expect this rifle to achieve the theoretical maximum of 15 rounds on the battlefield. Otherwise, the increase in ammunition consumption would be much higher.

Franz remained calm and said, “A slight increase in cost is acceptable, especially considering that it will decrease after large-scale industrial production. As long as its effectiveness justifies the price, it's fine.

If we give the order to focus on mass production immediately, the more than twenty arms manufacturers in Austria can produce thirty to forty thousand of these rifles each month without any issues.”

This is thanks to the outbreak of the Near East War, and Austria's arsenals having expanded their production capacity. Compared to a year ago, Austria's military production capacity has surged by fifty percent.

If they were to produce muzzle-loading rifles, there would be no problem with mass-producing one hundred thousand per month now, otherwise, the Russian army wouldn't have been able to switch so quickly.

Marshal Radetzky calmly said, "Your Majesty, it's better to be cautious. Let's procure one hundred thousand for trial first. If the performance on the battlefield is good, then we can consider mass adoption. Currently, nations around the world are still using muzzle-loading rifles, and our current rifles are not outdated."

Franz nodded. It was too late for a large-scale rearmament unless he ordered a national mobilization now. Austria's industrial capacity still had significant untapped potential.

This situation was similar to when automatic rifles were introduced. Everyone knew it was a good weapon, but the terrifying ammunition consumption — could the logistics support it?

The limit of ammunition consumption would only be revealed on the battlefield. Just like the Montenegrin Army, after testing the rifle and despite being very satisfied with its performance, they abandoned the idea of purchasing it after witnessing the terrifying ammunition consumption.

You're saying it has a high hit rate? That was true. The enemy can fire at most two or three rounds per minute, while you can casually fire seven or eight rounds per minute. Naturally, your chances of hitting the enemy are higher; this was normal.

But this increase in hit rate was not two or three times; it was only about twenty to thirty percent, and that was just when the enemy was not used to it. If they adapt to it, it might continue to decrease.

At first glance, it doesn't seem like much, but if you consider how many bullets it takes to kill an enemy, you'll realize it's quite costly.

In the muzzle-loading rifle era, on average, it took double-digit bullets to kill one enemy. In the breech-loading rifle era, it increased to four digits...

There's no way around it; the era of single-shot rifles has ended. Everyone is lying on the ground to shoot, making it even more challenging to hit enemies. The later emergence of trenches and machine guns further increased ammunition consumption.

In the era of semi-automatic rifles, it rose to five digits. Going forward, using individual rounds as a unit makes the number too large, so using tons as a unit is more appropriate.

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Sofia Battlefield

An indignant Sardinian officer exclaimed, "General, the Russians are still relentless against us. What should we do now?"

Even after leaking all the British military intelligence to the Russians, they dared to continue their attack here. It was simply too much.

Mantuya, gritting his teeth, said, "We can't retreat now. This is related to our honor and the glory of the Kingdom of Sardinia. Do you want to return home under the name of a defeated general and face military court? We absolutely cannot be the first to lose our position."

Since the Russians have gone too far, let's give them a harsh lesson and show them that we are not easy to bully.

Tell the soldiers that our wages are still in the hands of the British. If anyone dares to run away, I'll kill him on the spot."

"Yes, General!" the young officer immediately responded.

Mantuya added uneasily, "Wait a moment. Spread the word privately, saying that the British are about to collapse. Once their defenses crumble, we'll retreat immediately."

As it turned out, the Sardinian army still had combat effectiveness when they fought with determination. The term "heavy casualties" depended on the standard used.

If there were a few casualties, they could add two or three zeros to the report, making it seem like heavy casualties.

If anyone paid attention to the casualty reports that the Sardinian army submitted to the allied forces earlier, they would have noticed that their casualty rate was approaching one-fifth.

The British believed this report because their own casualty situation was not too far from these numbers. Seeing themselves in the same situation as the others, the British never doubted it.

Facing the sudden eruption of the Sardinian army, the Russians realized that this "soft target" wasn't easy to handle.

Gorchakov decided to test if the intelligence they obtained was accurate. After all, throughout their journey, the Bulgarians provided them with a wealth of information, and it wouldn't be surprising if there were Bulgarians among the enemy forces.

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As soon as the Russians took action, FitzRoy Somerset was nearly driven mad by the recent battle report. Suddenly, a barrage of artillery fire erupted, accurately hitting their artillery positions.

If it had been just one location, it might have been attributed to luck. However, every single artillery position was targeted, receiving the full brunt of the attack.

And the misfortune didn't end there. After the artillery positions took a hit, the military supply warehouses were accurately bombarded as well.

Even though the Russian artillery had a low hit rate from a distance, after this relentless barrage, their losses were substantial.

After the shelling ceased, the Russian forces accurately identified their weak points and launched the most vigorous assault.

FitzRoy Somerset knew that someone had betrayed them by leaking information, but given the current situation, he had no choice but to call for reinforcements. Even if they had to settle scores later, the priority was to stop the Russian advance.

"How much longer until that idiot Oliver arrives at the front lines?" FitzRoy Somerset asked again.

The aide nervously replied, “Major General Oliver reported that they have just recaptured Plovdiv from the guerrillas. It is expected that they will reach Sofia in about a week.”

With a distance of over 120 kilometers, a week’s time was reasonable. The normal marching speed of the British forces was about thirty kilometers per day. Considering possible delays due to guerrilla attacks, the timeline seemed understandable.

FitzRoy Somerset ordered, “Order that fool to come faster. They must reach the front lines within three days, or face military discipline!”

“Yes, Commander!” the aide immediately responded.

FitzRoy Somerset, still uneasy, added, “Wait a moment. Tell that fool to first send half of the troops with light equipment to hasten their march. Leave the logistical supplies with the rear forces to increase their speed.”

The Russians are relying on a gamble, and this situation holds both risks and opportunities. As long as the reinforcements can arrive on time, the allied forces can turn the tide.

Otherwise, FitzRoy Somerset would have fled long ago. If the Sardinians don’t want to continue the fight, they can find a way to make the British the scapegoats. Why can’t FitzRoy Somerset let the Sardinians take the blame in return?

As a commander of the allied forces, he had plenty of ways to trick people.

Currently, the British and Ottoman forces were sharing the burden on the battlefield. If he yielded some territory to the Sardinian and Ottoman forces for joint defense, it was estimated that in less than a day, the Russians would break through the defense line.

FitzRoy Somerset still desired military achievements. If he lost Sofia, even if he let allies take the blame, he, as the commander, would have a hard time avoiding blame and leaving a permanent stain on his record.

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Oliver was still capable; it’s just that it was his first time on the battlefield, therefore lacking experience, which led to a series of failures.

Upon receiving FitzRoy Somerset’s orders, he had already accelerated the marching speed, but the roads along the way were treacherous.

Being the operational area of the Bulgarian guerrilla forces, how could the roads not be sabotaged? They were repairing the roads as they marched, all the while dealing with ambushes from unknown locations.

Occasionally, there were unexpected landmines, generously sponsored by Franz. Worried about Russian defeat, he had prepared a batch in advance to obstruct pursuers.

Unexpectedly, the allied forces kept making mistakes, with each one refusing to contribute and inadvertently squandering their advantages.

The Russians didn’t appreciate these rubbish bombs, so they gave them to the Bulgarian guerrilla forces. Now, they became the cause of Oliver’s headache.



These landmines were the simplest to bury, making them easy to clear, with the only requirement being time.

With no better solution, the crude method seemed like the right approach. The British herded their livestock through the minefields, inevitably delaying their marching speed.

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On January 2, 1853, the Bulgarian guerrilla forces suddenly attacked the rear of the British military position. Chaos ensued within the allied forces, and at this critical moment, the Sardinians fled, collapsing the defense line painstakingly built by FitzRoy Somerset.

With insufficient manpower, FitzRoy Somerset couldn't adequately defend against the possibility of Bulgarian guerrilla attacks from the rear, catching him off guard.

The most embarrassing thing was that, at this moment, the reinforcements were less than fifteen kilometers away from the front lines. If the Sardinian forces had not fled and had instead dedicated all their efforts to assisting, they might have held on until the reinforcements arrived.

Clearly lacking the determination to face the Russians to the death, Mantuya wasted no time in fleeing. Since the British defense line collapsed, they couldn't be blamed for this responsibility.

To avoid being blamed for this, Mantuya even took along some British soldiers and ran away with them.

This escape proved fatal for FitzRoy Somerset. As a defeated commander, he was not that far away from facing a military tribunal. If he managed to survive and return, he would inevitably face the consequences.

Oliver, who hurriedly marched to the scene, became the second unfortunate person. Exhausted and disregarding losses, he finally arrived just in time, only to immediately face a skirmish with the Russians.

Without any surprises, those with fewer people on the battlefield always suffer. Oliver, in his haste, didn't bring any cannons, resulting in a disadvantage when they clashed.

After a tough battle, Oliver successfully led his troops to retreat. In the process, he also rescued a group of scattered British soldiers, making his efforts worthwhile.

The Russians, worn out and fatigued, lacked the energy to pursue further. Seeing the situation, Gorchakov naturally chose to cease the pursuit.

FitzRoy Somerset had long considered the impracticality of holding Sofia. Unfortunately, the city had been severely affected by the Ottomans, and its fortifications were long gone.

The city's inhabitants harbored deep resentment against the allied forces. Relying on the city to fight battles on the streets alongside the Russians, they were the first to be drawn into a people's war.

Moreover, the efficiency of the Ottoman government was too low. The supplies stockpiled in Sofia were not enough to sustain the allied forces for even a single month. If they dared to remain in the besieged city, they could expect total annihilation!

At this stage of the war, the allied forces were already stretched thin, and there was no hope of anyone coming to their rescue.

Even if reinforcements were called in from the homeland, there wouldn't be enough time. After the battle's failure, the allied forces were all eager to flee.

The front line, spanning over a dozen kilometers, makes total annihilation impossible. The Russians have only torn open a segment of the allied forces' defenses anyway.

If it weren't for the need to rescue more soldiers, Oliver wouldn't have needed to rush over to engage in a confrontation with the Russians. They could have simply turned and fled, and the Russians wouldn't have pursued them.

After six months of intense fighting, a battle involving nearly two hundred thousand troops concludes with a tragic victory for the Russians.

Looking at the casualty reports, Gorchakov can responsibly say that he successfully completed the tasks assigned by the Russian government. He truly achieved victory at the cost of considerable casualties.

The total casualties, including both the early and later stages, reached a staggering 67,000. The Russian soldiers were practically replaced entirely, with 26,000 of them killed, including the wounded who couldn't be saved.

Despite a continuous influx of reinforcements from the rear, the Russian army now needs substantial rest and recovery. The final assault clearly indicates a decline in the combat effectiveness of the Russian forces.

With such a significant cost, the achievements were as follows: defeated 100,000 soldiers of the allied forces, killed 34,000 soldiers, and captured 25,000 including over 11,000 wounded.

Looking at the casualties on both sides, it would appear that the Russians were the ones who suffered defeat in this battle. If not for the sudden breakthrough of the Bulgarian guerrilla forces, the outcome of this campaign would have remained uncertain.

In order to save face, Gorchakov did not hesitate to swallow the achievements of the Bulgarian guerrilla forces and ignored the losses they suffered.

Of course, to ensure the continued loyalty of the Bulgarians, Gorchakov also sought recognition for them domestically, emphasizing the significant contribution of the Bulgarian guerrilla forces in delaying enemy reinforcements and making an outstanding contribution to the victory of the war.

After that, there was nothing more. Just this point alone was enough to convince the Russian government to agree to the conditions promised earlier.

Originally, the Russian government was considering annexing Bulgaria and was concerned that these guerrilla forces might become an obstacle. Now that they could be incorporated, how could Nicholas I possibly refuse?

Regardless of the losses on both sides, they could not overshadow the historical significance of this campaign. Historians widely acknowledge this battle as a turning point in the Second Battle of Bulgaria.

Chapter 204: How Deserters are Born

After the Battle of Sofia ended, FitzRoy Somerset, who had escaped the disaster, was summoned back to London by the British government where a military tribunal awaited him. This time, the British had lost face badly.

Despite FitzRoy Somerset's repeated explanations that the war was lost due to the betrayal of some traitors, it was of no use.

Defeat is defeat. Even though tactically they had inflicted greater casualties on the Russians, everyone knew that the allied forces had lost this battle.

The main culprit for the defeat was that the British army had failed to hold the line and allowed the Russians to break through. The fact that they were then caught between a pincer attack by guerrilla forces from both front and back was conveniently ignored — the British were too embarrassed to even mention this.

For his meritorious rescue efforts, Oliver was promoted to be the commander of the British forces. Although a promotion would typically be a cause for joy, Major General Oliver had no trace of happiness.

He was self-aware enough to know that the so-called meritorious rescue efforts were just an excuse. If not for his deep background, he would also have had to shoulder some of the blame for the failure of this war.

He had intended to wipe out the guerrilla forces in one stroke by stationing reinforcements at key locations in advance. His plan backfired when the guerrillas used it as an opportunity to gather together and launch a surprise attack from the rear. In actual fact, this battle was lost because he had sabotaged FitzRoy Somerset.

While such tricks may fool the bureaucrats at home and the soldiers who fought, it was impossible to pull the wool over the eyes of frontline commanders who had fought in the battles.

Under such circumstances, could he gain the trust of everyone as the commander of the expeditionary force?

“Have our casualties been counted?” Oliver asked.

A middle-aged officer with a beard replied: “We’ve only tallied up part of it so far. For the 3rd Army Corps of the Expeditionary Force, the total casualties, including those killed in action, missing, or captured, amount to 6,876, with 2,847 injured.

For the 1st and 2nd Army Corps of the Expeditionary Force, the casualties are still being counted. So far we have rounded up 11,621 stragglers, including 924 wounded. It is said that some of the stragglers, along with the Sardinians, have retreated to Macedonia.”

This was no longer just heavy losses. The expeditionary force had basically been crippled. With half a month having passed and still not returning to base, the odds of them regrouping were already very low.

There was no helping it, after suffering defeat they had fled in a hurry for their lives, with no one caring which direction they were running to.

With the defeat in the Battle of Sofia, the entire southwestern part of Bulgaria was now Russian territory. How many managed to escape the pursuit of the Russians and Bulgarian guerrilla forces was unknown.

In this era of poor communication, and the soldiers unable to understand the local languages, even if they escaped, it would be very difficult for them to find their way back.

If their sense of direction was weak, it was not impossible they might have fled in the complete opposite direction.

Oliver knocked his head and sighed. Of the 80,000 strong British expeditionary force, he now had just over 30,000 men left. Even adding those who had fled to Macedonia with the Sardinians, it would not exceed 40,000.

More crucially, the morale of the troops was completely shattered. After prolonged and arduous fighting, these soldiers were filled with war-weariness, even the recently arrived Third Corps was no exception.

If the combat effectiveness of the British forces was a 10 before, now it was reduced to a mere 5. Without at least six months of recuperation, there was simply no way to restore their combat capabilities.

Yet, the war must go on. The French had already requested that they build defensive lines to block the enemy from attacking from the west.

If possible, Oliver did not mind retreating all the way to fight a defensive battle in Constantinople. Fighting in coastal regions would allow them to obtain naval fire support, making it easier for them to gain the advantage.

However, this was clearly impossible. Not to mention the opinions of the Ottoman Empire, the allied forces were still fiercely battling with the Russians in Sliven, making a retreat practically impossible.

Blindly retreating could easily turn into a rout, and the consequences would be severe.

Oliver said solemnly: "In any case, we must now stop the Russians at Kazanlak and Stara Zagora, otherwise the allied forces would lose this war.

The British government has ordered us to fight to the last man. We absolutely cannot cause the war to fail because of us.

I have already requested reinforcements from the homeland, and the Cabinet has guaranteed that at least fifty thousand troops will arrive within the next two months.

After the Battle of Sofia, Russian casualties were also extremely heavy. They will also need time to recuperate, and should not launch any major offenses in the next two months."

A young officer raised a question, "Commander, forgive my frankness, even if the Russians launch a probing attack, I doubt we can withstand it. During the retreat, we lost all of our artillery, and one-third of the soldiers currently don't even have a rifle. Without proper reorganization, the troops have virtually no combat capability."

This was no exaggeration. If the Russians sent a main force division over at this time, these 30,000 plus British soldiers would have to continue fleeing.

Oliver glared at him and said: “Colonel Frew, you’re overthinking this. Weapon and equipment losses have already been supplemented by the homeland. At most it will take half a month for them to arrive.

As for the morale issue, we’ll have to rely on everyone’s efforts. Right now, we won’t have any new combat missions. Just focus on defense and wait for the reinforcements to arrive.”

Whether it was passive or not, Oliver couldn’t afford to consider too much at this point. He knows that if they rely on fortress defenses, the soldiers can still exert some combat capability. If they take the initiative to attack, they might end up writing a book titled “How Deserters Are Born.”

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Kraljevo, Serbia

Lieutenant Colonel Haydn of the 3rd Battalion of the 4th Regiment of the newly formed 7th Division of the Austrian army encountered a major problem: a large number of retreating soldiers appeared in his defense sector.

A young officer, around 22 to 23 years old, spoke softly: “Lieutenant Colonel, a representative from the British have arrived.”

Haydn responded calmly, “Invite him in.”

The current situation was somewhat special. Austria maintained neutrality in the war between Britain and Russia, but Austria was also an ally of Russia. Furthermore, Austria was at war with the Ottoman Empire, an ally of Britain.

These complex international relations put Lieutenant Colonel Haydn in a difficult spot. If this was Austrian territory, as a neutral nation, disarming the British soldiers and repatriating them after the war would be simple.

Unfortunately, Serbia was still Ottoman territory at present. If the British were uncooperative, Lieutenant Colonel Haydn did not know if he should forcibly disarm them, or expel them from the area.

Shortly after, a somewhat disheveled British officer walked in. Lieutenant Colonel Haydn said: “Nice to meet you, Colonel Daniel. Would you like something to drink?”

Daniel politely replied: “Thank you, some coffee would be nice. Best if there are some pastries too.”

It was obvious his stomach was protesting again. “Grumbling” noises could be heard, reminding him it was time to eat.

Lieutenant Colonel Haydn shrugged and said: “Sorry, I don’t have any pastries here. But there’s still bread, canned food and beef jerky. Would you like some?”

This was the battlefield, the Austrian army could not afford the luxury of supplying pastries even in Kraljevo City.

Colonel Daniel straightforwardly said: “Bread and canned food will do.”

During their escape, they carried only the most basic beef jerky, and now they were nauseated from consuming it. At this point, having some bread would be nice.

Lieutenant Colonel Haydn ordered, "Guard, make a cup of coffee for Colonel Daniel, and bring some bread and two cans of food."

Both men were soldiers, and communication between soldiers was always straightforward.

After a brief pause, Lieutenant Colonel Haydn stated the conditions, "Colonel Daniel, you have two choices:

Either, following international conventions, we, as a neutral third party, will disarm your troops. Subsequent issues will be addressed through communication between the British government and Vienna. After the war, you will be repatriated.

Or, you can leave immediately now. For the sake of the friendship between our nations, I can pretend I haven't seen anything. If you leave through Kosovo now, you might still make it to Macedonia."

He did not want conflict with the British at this time. Currently, there were quite a lot of British soldiers entering Kraljevo. If the situation wasn't handled promptly, it could lead to trouble.

Colonel Daniel answered without hesitation: "We choose the first option. The Russians have already occupied Kosovo, and our retreat route has been cut off.

We agree to be disarmed, but you must provide us with treatment matching our status and guarantee that we will only be repatriated after the war."

Upon hearing Daniel's blatant lies, Lieutenant Colonel Haydn did not know whether to laugh or cry. He finally understood why these people had strayed into Kraljevo.

They had not strayed here at all. They had intentionally come here.

The war had gone on for nearly a year, with Britain participating for over half a year. Without any rotation of troops after fighting for so long, some war-weariness was only natural.

In this era, the treatment of British Army soldiers wasn't high, as evident from the logistical supplies. If they had status, the bureaucratic officials in the logistics department wouldn't dare to be so careless.

Compared to the navy, they were treated like stepchildren, receiving only one-third of the treatment given to navy soldiers. This differential treatment naturally fueled their dissatisfaction.

Now with morale low, they naturally sought ways to evade the war. Becoming a deserter was not advisable as it would lead to military punishment.

With the defeat in the Battle of Sofia, their opportunity came. This time, facing a complete defeat, they certainly had to flee for their lives.

If they returned, they would inevitably have to go back to the battlefield. Surrendering to the Russians was not appealing either, given the bad reputation of the "Russkies" at the time, and they feared being massacred by them.

Moreover, becoming a prisoner of war was not honorable, especially since the Russians were their enemies. Surrendering to them would not even give them a chance to negotiate for better treatment.

At this time, some clever individuals thought of a solution: run to a neutral country, get disarmed, and then wait to be repatriated after the war.

This way, they could avoid the war and not worry about repercussions back home. It was normal to be confused on the battlefield, and who knew that the Austrians had occupied Serbia?

Since the British government didn't send documents notifying them, everyone could feign ignorance. They could claim it was a normal retreat and then accidentally entered Austrian territory.

The bureaucrats of the British government had to admit that this was in accordance with regulations. They operated based on these mechanical rules to uphold their own interests and naturally wouldn't easily break them.

In fact, it wasn't only the British who did this; even some soldiers from the Sardinian army followed suit. However, due to their enmity with Austria, there were fewer of them who ran over.

As for whether this would cause trouble for the British government or affect Anglo-Austrian relations, that was not within their consideration.

Anyway, the Austrians had to treat them well with good food and drinks, which could be a bargaining chip with the British government.

To make their argument more convincing, they even found a pretext, insisting that the Russians had already occupied the Kosovo region, cutting off their route home.

Lieutenant Colonel Haydn thought for a moment and said: "Okay, but all British soldiers must sign the agreement confirming you accidentally strayed into Kraljevo, and due to the Russians cutting off your path of retreat, you lost access to logistical support and had to seek our aid."

By changing the wording a bit, everyone's dignity was taken care of. The alternative phrasing for disarmament also avoided potential conflicts between Britain and Austria over this issue.

Colonel Daniel complained, "No problem. Lieutenant Colonel Haydn, please provide us with supplies as soon as possible. On this journey, we haven't had a decent meal for several days."

Lieutenant Colonel Haydn asked: "Alright, how many people do you have? I'll immediately send someone to deliver a batch of supplies to you."

Colonel Daniel replied: "There's a total of 1,531 people, including 426 Sardinian troops who must enjoy equal treatment. There are also 62 injured in need of medical aid. There should be some more troops coming later, and this number may continue to increase in the future. It would be best for you to prepare more supplies."

This was not some individuals deserting, it was officers leading whole units to flee together, and fleeing so openly at that.

Lieutenant Colonel Haydn nodded and ordered his men to prepare supplies. In any case, they had to settle down these British soldiers first before anything else.

He had no issues with Daniel's insistence they uphold solidarity. After all, the British government would foot the bill.

## Chapter 205: Just Waiting to Fall into a Trap

### Vienna

Due to the impact of the Battle of Sofia, negotiations between the Austrian government and the Ottoman Empire achieved initial results, but some details were still under discussion.

Franz was not very concerned about the negotiation results. Even if the two countries signed an agreement, the possibility of it being fulfilled in the future was less than one-third.

The international situation was ever-changing. The outcome of the Near East War would directly affect Austria's gains. From the perspective of interests, it would of course be best if Russia achieved a disastrous victory.

That would allow them to take the lead in pulling hatred and sharing Austria's pressure. Yet would not let Russia truly soar into the skies and lose its restrictions.

The Minister of War, Prince Windisch-Grätz, said with a strange expression, "Your Majesty, there is a report from the Serbian front. A group of British soldiers mistakenly entered there, and we have disarmed them."

Franz asked in puzzlement: "Surely the Near East War does not extend so far? Kosovo is still in the middle, right?"

This deviation was a bit too huge. Even with their defeat at the Battle of Sofia, Kosovo was still under Ottoman control. They could have easily requested the local authorities to provide guides.

Prince Windisch-Grätz handed over the battle report, and Franz glanced over it. Finally, he understood why the prince's expression was so strange.

After some thought, Franz said, "This can be considered a good thing. We now have an additional small bargaining chip. Notify the British through the Foreign Ministry, ask them to send representatives to discuss repatriating these people."

Without a doubt, these people would certainly be detained until after the war. Informing the British now was nothing more than telling them Austria had a group of British military officers and men in custody.

At present, these individuals may not be of much use. However, as the news of heavy casualties among the frontline British forces in the Near East War reaches the homeland and causes a sensation, the British government will have to take these soldiers seriously.

Franz couldn't help but admire the person who came up with this idea.

What a genius! While others were struggling and hiding after becoming deserters, worrying about not being able to return home after the war, these individuals, also deserters, managed to be allowed to stay comfortably in Austria until the end of the war.

Their salaries and benefits, which the British government can't afford to cut, will ensure they are taken back home after the war.

Fortunately, there aren't many individuals like this. If tens of thousands of British soldiers came to Austria to enjoy the good life, the British government would spit blood.

As for the Sardinian troops who came along to enjoy the good life, Franz simply ignored them. This was normal. If they didn't all come together, it indicated that, for now, they still considered themselves part of the Kingdom of Sardinia and not Italy.

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Metternich's face was all smiles as he said, "Your Majesty, Prime Minister Felix's trip to Berlin has failed. The Kingdom of Prussia rejected the proposal to rebuild the Holy Roman Empire.



To avoid public condemnation, Frederick William IV is quite cunning. He chose to delay and publicly declared respect for the choice of the German people.

Prime Minister Felix proposed a national referendum, but it was decisively rejected. It seems that the Prussians are up to something.”

It was not the Prussians making trouble they feared, it was the Prussians not making trouble. If they were to rebuild the Holy Roman Empire under the guise of a national referendum, it would be a disaster for Franz.

An elected emperor might seem like a good idea, but in essence, it was several levels below absolute monarchy. If they could be elected, they could also be deposed. It was worse than the imperial election system of the past.

Regardless of whether it was good or bad for the country, it was undoubtedly disastrous for the royal family. Unless there was no other choice, no emperor would willingly accept an elected position.

At least, Franz would not accept it. There were many families in Germany eligible to be elected as emperors. Even if one family won once, the next time it could change hands again. By then, being an emperor and a lifetime president would only have differences in name.

It was not just Franz who could not accept this, the Austrian government could not either. If Austria couldn't control the Holy Roman Empire, what was the point of rebuilding it?

The Prussians were worried Austria would use this empire to restrict them, not realizing Austria harbored similar worries about being unable to control the empire.

Based on interests, once the empire unified, Prussia's awkward situation among the German states would immediately change. The small states would support them against Austria.

Of course, this support could only be behind the scenes. Publicly, no one would openly oppose the central government. These states would likely play a balancing act, that is, maintaining a delicate balance between the central government led by Austria and the local power faction represented by the Kingdom of Prussia.

Finance Minister Karl said with uncertainty, “The Prussians haven't taken up the banner of opposition, which is somewhat surprising. Could it be that they are counting on the small states to openly oppose us?”

Under the influence of nationalist sentiments, the idea of unification has been accepted by many. Openly opposing national unity would undoubtedly attract public resentment.

Of course, the current strength of the nationalist groups was not significant enough to influence the government's stance nor could it dictate government decisions.

If they wait for another twenty or thirty years, and Austria raises the banner of “Rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire — Peaceful Unification” again, there might be a chance of success.

“It's unclear at this point. There will always be someone leading the charge. If this plan succeeds, the Prussian government will have to pay a higher price to oppose it.

Now, it depends on which unlucky fellow they managed to convince. Whoever stands up against it will likely be despised by the nationalist factions in the future,” analyzed Metternich.

Franz pondered for a moment and said, "It would be best if it were Bavaria. We need the Bavarian government to come forward in opposition. It's a suitable choice for us."

Metternich analyzed, "Your Majesty, for Bavaria to be on board, we also need to push them personally. I reckon the Prussians would also want to use Bavaria as a pawn."

As the third-largest state in the Confederation, only their influence is substantial enough to make everyone respond collectively.

If the Bavarian government wants to gain the support of the smaller states, this is an opportunity. If successful, they would become the leader of the German small states."

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While the Austrian government was discussing how to make the Kingdom of Bavaria take the bait, far away in Saint Petersburg, the Russian government was also discussing their next strategy.

With the Battle of Sofia concluded, the second Battle of Bulgaria has entered a new phase, presenting two options: concentrate forces to advance toward Sliven, or first occupy the regions of Kosovo and Macedonia, before joining forces with Montenegro and Greece.

Finance Minister Fyodor Vronchenko proposed: "Your Majesty, it would be wise to first capture Sliven, clear the obstacles on the way to Constantinople, and swiftly take Constantinople in one go. By then, the British and French would have no choice but to withdraw."

This was a strategy for a quick and decisive victory, financially speaking, it minimized the cost of winning the war.

The prerequisite, however, was the ability to win. If they lost then naturally this was out of the question. High returns naturally came with high risks.

Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode objected: "No, the Battle of Sofia has just concluded. Frontline troops urgently need time to recuperate. Fighting another major battle now would place too much pressure on them."

It would be better to target the weaker areas of the enemy first and occupy Kosovo, Macedonia, and Thrace. Then join forces with Montenegro and Greece, and launch an attack from the enemy's flank.

Although this approach may be a bit slower, it is like fighting a downwind battle. It provides an opportunity to train new recruits and quickly restore combat effectiveness to the troops."

Watching the Finance Minister and the Foreign Minister finish their arguments, the Minister of War awkwardly realized that he had nothing more to say.

Whom to support? This was a difficult question. Before implementation, no one knew which strategy would be more reliable. Alexander Chernyshyov judged from a professional perspective that both strategies were theoretically feasible.

In practice, a flanking maneuver sounded wonderful, but logistics might become a nightmare. One couldn't rely on Montenegro and Greece to provide logistics support, and while occupying these areas, Russian forces would have to be split to garrison and ensure a smooth logistics supply line.

Immediately dispatching troops for another major battle, Chernyshyov knew that this was too challenging. The frontline forces were already exhausted, and if they didn't take the time to recuperate, it would be difficult to guarantee their combat effectiveness.

After a moment of hesitation, Minister of War Chernyshyov provided his professional analysis, "Your Majesty, the Ministry of War suggests mobilizing new forces to replace some of the heavily damaged units on the front lines. Withdraw them to the Danube River Basin for reorganization, and relegate them to army reserve.

After the rotation, engage the enemy in battle. Currently, the British expeditionary force is also significantly weakened, and with just two main divisions, we can defeat them.

Now, it's a race against time with the enemy. Whoever can reinforce the front lines faster will likely win this war."

Undoubtedly, he did not support either of the proposed strategies. Chernyshyov was highly dissatisfied with the approach of two amateurs acting as professionals, but he couldn't afford to provoke the two bigwigs.

As a military man, Nicholas I's military knowledge was not worth discussing, but he still had a grasp of the basics. Naturally, he understood Chernyshyov's suggestion was much more reliable than the previous two.

"Deploy the five divisions from Lviv, replacing the units that participated in the Battle of Sofia. Then mobilize the eight divisions from Moscow to replace the heavily damaged units on the Sliven front.

Order the troops in Ukraine to strictly guard against enemy landings, especially in the Crimean Peninsula. Do not let the enemy find an opening."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Chernyshyov answered.

The advantage of having a large number of troops became apparent at this moment, allowing the Russians to mobilize reinforcements in the shortest possible time.

Unfortunately, this advantage was somewhat impotent on the battlefield. Poor transportation and logistics constrained the speed of Russian troop movements.

The Battle of Sofia had ended over half a month ago. By the time the Tsar's court had come to this decision, massive amounts of time had been wasted. By the time these troops arrive at the front lines, more than a month would have passed.

Regardless, the Russian performance in the Battle of Sofia was satisfactory. The Ottoman Empire's control over the Balkan Peninsula grew increasingly precarious. At this point, the Ottoman government had no strength left to reinforce the front lines.

This signified the end of the good days for France. In half a year, the Ottoman Empire had suffered losses exceeding three hundred thousand. Now, the Sultanate was busy dealing with Greece invading Thrace, without even spare capacity to supplement its forces.

Aimable Pélissier discovered for the first time how crucial the Ottoman Empire was. With insufficient cannon fodder, the French expeditionary force had to shoulder the burden themselves.

A war of attrition was no joke. Almost every day, a regiment would be crippled, and such losses were not easy to bear. Previously, they were relying on Ottoman cannon fodder, so they didn't think much of it. Now, they realize how horrifying the situation has become.

Menshikov adopted a completely reckless approach, launching major offensives every few days. After each battle, both sides were left in a state of mourning.

Out of the 170,000 French expeditionary force, only fewer than 100,000 remained combat-effective. The remaining didn't all die or turn into casualties but their units had been so severely damaged that they had to be withdrawn for reorganization.

In reality, the French losses were similar to the British, both suffering casualties of over 40,000. However, with a larger army, the French could withstand such heavy losses.

France had provided them with two rounds of reinforcements, totaling up to 48,000 troops, so the overall number of French forces had not decreased. Aimable Pélissier had experience and knew to rotate units on the battlefield, avoiding wearing down a single unit.

Even so, at the company and battalion levels, their formations were frequently shattered. This was unavoidable when enemy offenses landed on them, often wiping out the first few leading companies.

From this perspective, the British were far behind. Of course, this is the difference between a continental power and a maritime power. Even when Napoleon III was purging dissidents, he did not engage in any petty maneuvers on these issues.

Therefore, at this stage of the war, the French still had considerable strength. If given one or two months to regroup and rebuild the lost units, they could return to their peak form.

Time, however, was a limiting factor, and the Russians were unlikely to provide them with such an opportunity, despite their own significant casualties. The Russian soldiers were easy to fool.

In the face of the promising future promised by Menshikov, Russian soldiers once again summoned the courage to step onto the battlefield, a trait that the British and French forces could never match.

The Russian Bear's serf soldiers had simple minds and were mostly illiterate, only needing promises of freedom and land for them to be willing to sacrifice their lives on the battlefield.

In contrast, if it were the British or French soldiers, none of them would even listen. Everyone has become astute. These little tricks won't tempt them, and the crucial point was that everyone knew there was no land to be had back home.

Trying to hoodwink them with colonial land was just asking for trouble. In those godforsaken places a pound could buy a whole farm's worth of land. Yet the government still expected them to die for that?

While it was difficult to persuade them, they still had to find ways to persuade them. Aimable Pélissier decisively brought out the enmity between Russia and France to stir up morale. That worked initially, but the effects were negligible now.

If anyone paid attention, they would notice the French army gradually falling back, seemingly already preparing to retreat.

Aimable Pélissier was extremely frustrated inside. This battle was of great significance, directly related to the prestige of their leader, Napoleon III. Therefore, losing was absolutely unacceptable.

Even if they had to pay a heavy price, achieving a symbolic victory was still worthwhile. Since losing was not an option, he naturally had to consider an exit strategy, and in case it was truly unavoidable, he must find someone to blame!

Of course, winning the war would be even better, as the extent of losses still had some impact. At this point, Aimable Pélissier regretted not going all-in for a decisive battle against the Russians, especially since the British turned out to be so useless.

A pyrrhic victory, with both sides suffering losses, would still be a victory.

Moreover, their leader originally intended to eliminate dissidents, eradicating forces loyal to the House of Orleans. Even if they returned with a pyrrhic victory, it would still be a significant achievement.

However, Aimable Pélissier, with a lingering conscience, was reluctant to let so many French youths be buried. Therefore, he chose the safest approach, leading to a war of attrition.

Unfortunately, the resilience of the Russian forces on the battlefield was superior to that of the allied forces. This resulted into the French suffering losses.

Missing the opportunity for a decisive battle, even if they wanted to take a risk now, the current state of the French army would likely not surpass that of the Russians. Aimable Pélissier didn't want to become a stepping stone for the Russians, allowing them to enhance their reputation as the world's leading land power.

#### Chapter 206: Felix's Journey Through Germany

The front-line defeat intensified the internal struggles within the British government. Combined with the recent political scandal, Prime Minister John Russell was forced to resign.

The Whigs lost in the new general elections. And the Peelites and Conservatives joined together to form a new cabinet, propelling George Hamilton-Gordon onto the historical stage.

With a new government came a new atmosphere. For George Hamilton-Gordon's cabinet, the most important matter presently was the Near East War.

Retreat was impossible. This concerned Britain's international status. This was an era dominated by two great powers, Britain and Russia and if the British government retreated at this time, it would be admitting weakness to Russia, essentially acknowledging Russia's world dominance.

Not to mention the heavy losses in terms of interest, the psychological blow alone would be unacceptable to the British public.

As the leader of the anti-war faction, George Hamilton-Gordon understood John Russell's difficulties. This was a war that had to be fought, no matter how great the casualties.

If the expansion of the Russians were not curbed now, the future cost to the British Empire would be even greater.

10 Downing Street

“Gentlemen, now it’s our turn to clean up this mess. The situation at the Balkan front is extremely disadvantageous to us. According to front-line reports, the Allied forces could face a disastrous defeat at any moment.

The current question is whether we should continue to open a second front or rather a third front.” Prime Minister George Hamilton-Gordon inquired.

It was evident that Prime Minister George Hamilton-Gordon’s inner thoughts were far from calm, as the few wrinkles between his brows betrayed his inner unrest.

First Lord of the Admiralty James Graham replied: “Prime Minister, from a strategic perspective, opening a second front in the Crimean Peninsula poses no problems.

Although the Russians have formidable strength, they are constrained by their domestic transportation, limiting the deployment of their forces. Due to prior preparations, the Russians can sustain both the Caucasus and Balkan front lines.

In reality, on the Balkan front, the Russians heavily rely on logistical support from Austria; otherwise, they would have been immobilized long ago.

If we open another front, it would soon exceed the Russians’ endurance limit. Even if we can’t completely win on the battlefield, we can still bleed them dry.

Now that the Russian Black Sea Fleet is no more, we can launch an attack at any time. If necessary, we can turn the entire Ukrainian coast and the Crimean Peninsula into a battlefield, greatly exhausting the Russians.”

There might have been a change of the Cabinet but there haven’t been major changes in the government’s top echelons, and those high-ranking officials related to the war effort have all retained their positions.

It was unsurprising for the First Lord of the Admiralty to support this plan. How else could they demonstrate the importance of the Navy without opening a second front?

Power struggles were everywhere, and there was no escaping them. Even though the Royal Navy had an absolute advantage and firmly suppressed the army, they occasionally needed to emerge to assert their dominance.

“Opening a second front is acceptable, but the situation on the Crimean Peninsula is somewhat complex. The climate on the island differs significantly from the mainland, and if we launch an attack hastily, non-combat casualties will be severe.

It might be better to land along the Ukrainian coast first, cut off the connection between the Crimean Peninsula and the mainland from behind, and trap the Russian forces on the island,” proposed Secretary of State for War Edward Smith-Stanley.

“Mr. Stanley, isn’t the main force for this attack the French?” inquired First Lord of the Admiralty James Graham.

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The dispute over the attack route had turned into a struggle for dominance between the army and navy.

The British Navy was obviously much more powerful than the army. Hence the outcome of this contest over leadership was self-evident.

Paris

Napoleon III couldn't contain himself any longer. While the military can afford to lose, politically, France cannot afford to lose, and personally, he cannot afford to lose.

Upon receiving notification from the British, the French government made a decision at the fastest speed possible. They deployed two hundred thousand troops to launch the Crimean War.

After negotiations, on February 12, 1853, England and France reached an agreement to jointly deploy three hundred thousand troops and open a second front on the Crimean Peninsula.

At this time, the major battle in the Balkan Peninsula was coming to an end. Under the relentless attacks by the Russian forces disregarding casualties, the allied forces were unable to hold onto Sliven.

Aimable Pélissier successfully shifted the blame onto the Ottomans. On the surface, it appeared that the Russians had breached the Ottoman defenses and completed the encirclement.

Seeing the unfavorable situation, on February 14, 1853, Pélissier ordered the French forces to break out. The well-prepared French army effortlessly broke through the Russian encirclement.

Their escape was smooth, leaving the Allied forces in a predicament. The Ottoman army, which was betrayed, suffered significant losses. Out of over thirty thousand troops, less than three thousand survived.

The British also tragically fell victim to this. While they were busy reorganizing their forces to restore combat capability, the Russians attacked from behind. Caught unprepared, they fled in disarray.

During the assessment of losses, Major General Oliver was so infuriated that he was speechless. Although the failure of this battle was not directly their fault, the battlefield losses were disheartening.

Needless to say, he, the commander of the expeditionary force, was demoted. He could barely be considered a division commander now. But at least he retained command over nine thousand troops, right?

The rest had naturally dispersed, and only God knows how many were killed in action, how many were captured, and how many simply went missing.

Allied General Headquarters, Constantinople

Oliver roared menacingly, "Pélissier, you bastard, you better give me a reasonable explanation, or the British Empire won't rest until it's settled!"

Of course, there was no possibility of letting it go. With such heavy losses for the British expeditionary force, how could they explain this back home without an explanation?

“General Oliver, calm down first. Our position was suddenly breached by the enemy, and we found ourselves surrounded; we could not notify you,” Aimable Pélissier explained forcefully.

“Rubbish! Such excuses can only fool children. Even if the Russians broke through your lines, encirclement would be impossible immediately. You had no time to send men to inform us?

If it weren’t for you treating us as distractions, the French forces wouldn’t have been able to withdraw so intact!” Major General Oliver sneered.

“We can’t be blamed for this. Your government promised fifty thousand reinforcements, which should have arrived twenty days ago. There’s still no sign of them. If this unit hadn’t been delayed, the outcome of this battle wouldn’t have been a loss.

Now that it has come to this, you also share the blame. It was the misinformation provided by your side that directly misled the military deployment of the allied forces, leading to this failure,” Aimable Pélissier sharply retorted.

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Shifting blame was a common tactic, especially in a crisis. At a critical moment, one would naturally prioritize their own survival. Without the allied forces holding back the pursuing Russian troops, could the French have successfully withdrawn almost fully intact?

If there had been advance notice, allowing the British to escape, the Russian forces they were holding back could have flanked the French from the side, potentially resulting in the complete destruction of the French army.

Even if the French forces performed exceptionally well under such circumstances, facing enemy forces in the front and pursuers at the rear, it would have been nothing short of a miracle to successfully withdraw half of their troops.

The situation was now much better. With only over twenty thousand casualties, the French managed to retrieve their main force.

With naval support, they can now secure Constantinople. From the perspective of French interests, Aimable Pélissier’s decision was not wrong.

However, the aftermath was severe. Except for the Sardinians, who have been coasting along, the main forces of the alliance in the Balkans now only consist of the French.

The Ottoman Empire emerged as the biggest loser, losing even their underwear. Upon receiving the news, Abdulmejid I was so infuriated that he fainted.

Unfortunately for the Ottoman government, they had nowhere to vent their anger. Unlike Oliver, they didn’t have the mighty British Empire backing them up.

Now, the French have the final say in the Balkan Peninsula. If they provoke Aimable Pélissier, he might resort to violence. Can the Ottoman government really afford to step in?



Regardless of their unwillingness, they will have to take the blame. As long as the French hold onto Constantinople, the British government will have to acquiesce to this outcome.

In the world of politics, interests always weigh more heavily than the truth. Even if they got deceived and vomited blood, the Ottoman government had no choice but to continue relying on the French.

Over 70% of Ottoman fiscal revenue came from the Balkans. Most of their industry was also concentrated around Constantinople (Istanbul area).

Losing the Balkans would reduce the Ottoman Empire's strength to a level below that of Sweden or Belgium, a consequence the Sultanate could not afford to bear.

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Aimable Pélissier's approach was successful militarily, but politically it brought endless troubles to the French government.

Of course, these troubles were what Napoleon III himself was willing to face. Conflicting interests causing international political troubles still influenced French interests less than outright losing on the battlefield, which would shake his rule's foundations.

Having learned from experience, Major General Oliver was now very appreciative of his predecessor's foresight. He was now vehemently opposed to joint action with the French.

The British government was similarly unsatisfied with the French actions, pressuring Napoleon III via political means to provide an explanation.

With the British taking the lead, the Ottoman Empire naturally joined in with their own protest. Under pressure from his allies, Napoleon III made concessions.

In the upcoming Balkan battles, French forces will independently bear the responsibility of blocking the Russians and defending Constantinople. The British and Sardinians will be responsible for dealing with Greece and Montenegro, while the Ottomans, with the heaviest losses, can take it easy as a consolation.

Regarding war funds, undoubtedly, the British will bear the lion's share of 50%, with the French and Ottomans each contributing 25%. If there is a shortage of funds, British consortiums will provide loan services.

With a clear division of combat duties, internal allied contradictions were resolved, but it also cast a shadow over the upcoming Crimean War.

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In a short period of just over two months, Prime Minister Felix traveled to more than twenty German states and has now arrived in Frankfurt, where the Federal Parliament is located.

After this extended period of diplomatic efforts, Prime Minister Felix has made some gains. At least several free cities have openly expressed their support for the "Holy Roman Empire."

Nothing was surprising about this. These free cities were regions most heavily influenced by nationalist sentiments, and their governments were deeply influenced by public opinion.

As for the remaining states, they either expressed opposition or hesitation. In any case, everyone was clever, finding excuses to delay their decision. No one foolishly expressed direct opposition to German unification.

The Kingdom of Prussia had not been idle either. Their representatives often arrived ahead of Felix, engaging in early communication with various governments to jointly oppose the rebuilding of the “Holy Roman Empire.”

The situation at the top was not clear to the public, but the majority of the German population held an optimistic attitude toward peaceful unification. The reason was very simple — no state government has directly opposed it yet.

The public could freely express their opinions, but state governments of the various German states could not dare to speak recklessly. After all, they couldn’t simply say that because the “Holy Roman Empire” was unreliable, using military force was the only way to truly unify Germany, right?

Austria had been preparing for so long, and even Franz did not dare to raise the banner of military unification. As for the governments of these small states, it was naturally the same.

As the targets of unification, they were still scrambling to oppose this, so how could they possibly support it? Moreover, to safeguard their own interests, they could not completely block the path of rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire.

In case unification was inevitable, rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire was the path most aligned with their interests. Therefore, the attitudes of most rulers of the German states were quite complex.

They want to oppose the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire but cannot directly express it. They could only hope that someone would step forward and disrupt Austria’s plans.

By now, the slogan “Rebuild the Holy Roman Empire” had echoed in every corner of Germany. Wherever Felix went, he was warmly welcomed by the local population.

If things continue like this, Felix would very likely be remembered by future generations as the “Father of Germany,” and his reputation as the “Butcher” would fade away.

At this moment, he had become the spokesperson for pacifism, and in the future, he might even become the Iron Chancellor. Anyway, Franz was not going to steal the limelight.

Fooling others was no easy task, especially a group of old foxes. Felix continuously promised all kinds of benefits after unification to the various interest groups, while also having to answer everyone’s doubts from time to time.

Touting the benefits of a grand market to capitalists, guaranteeing the nobility’s interests would not be harmed, selling nationalist groups dreams of a powerful country...

In short, it was all a bluff. Regardless of whether they believed him or if he could fulfill these promises, Prime Minister Felix wantonly bluffed all the way.

To quote a saying: “Every politician is an excellent salesman.”

Despite bluffing until his mouth went dry, the actual effects merely reduced everyone’s determination to resist.

Most still chose to remain neutral. They could accept rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire, but contributing their efforts to this was out of the question.

Everyone was playing the waiting game; they wouldn't commit until they saw the benefits.

Felix was quite satisfied with this outcome. Originally, he only wanted them to stay neutral, and now, being able to obtain a few supporters, he considered this a win.

The focus of this PR campaign was Southern Germany, where Austria's influence was the greatest, and there were many shared interests. Winning these people over was his true aim.

## Chapter 207: The Point of No Return (BONUS)

### Munich

Ever since learning about Felix's journey through Germany and the fact that the final stop would be in the Kingdom of Bavaria, Maximilian II had not had a good night's sleep.

While other states could do Tai Chi and stall for time, as the last country, what options do they have?

Without a doubt, each state hoped that Bavaria could step forward to prevent Austria's actions. As the leader of the small states, Bavaria could not escape this.

Especially since Maximilian II came to power and implemented the strategy of a three-way division of Germany, it has pushed Bavaria into a corner.

Since the Kingdom of Prussia was being alienated by everyone, Frederick William IV felt no pressure playing dumb since he was not afraid of offending anyone anyway.

Bavaria was different. If it wanted to be the leader of the small states, it must step forward now. Whether supporting Austria's plan or opposing it, either option was better than being an ostrich.

Maximilian II said cautiously, "Gentlemen, Felix will arrive in Munich shortly, and we have little time left. Today, we must make a choice."

This was the price that had to be paid for the previous diplomatic mistakes. Duped by Prussia previously to announce the strategy of dividing Germany into three, they had offended many small states.

At this moment, the Bavarian government was faced with the choice of either aligning with Austria, joining the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire with everyone and becoming one of its minor shareholders.

Or obstructing Austria's plan, voicing the thoughts in many German states' hearts, regaining everyone's support. After all, national ties were maintained by common interests. With aligned interests, everyone would remain friends.

Prime Minister Karl von Abel analyzed: "Your Majesty, stopping Austria's plan is easy, but the consequences would be extremely severe.

Firstly, we would gravely offend Austria. Restoring friendly ties between both nations would be difficult then. Secondly, domestic public opinion would be hard to appease. Currently, most citizens hope for peaceful German unification.

Although we all know German unification is impossible, as the ones personally closing this door, we would inevitably face condemnation from the public."

Karl von Abel had already sensed the dangers. After the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, the Austrians established the German Federal Parliament to prevent French invasion.

Unexpectedly, the French remained quiet for decades, rendering Austria's efforts futile. Now that the French had reestablished their military, Bavaria's western borders were no longer secure.

If they did not improve relations with their eastern neighbor Austria now, who knew when disaster might strike? After all, Maximilian II had made numerous foolish decisions since ascending the throne.

Ambition needed sufficient strength to support it. Germany split three ways was what Britain, France and Russia hoped to see most. There would be no lack of international support, it was just that Bavaria lacked the power to realize this plan.

In theory, if the Kingdom of Bavaria's strength doubled and they had the support of the great powers, they could strive for this.

However, Maximilian II's efforts were premature. With insufficient strength and the loss of support from many small states, their influence within the confederation became negligible.

Finance Minister Karl von Schrenck opposed: "Prime Minister, these pressures can be resisted. Once we accept Austria's conditions, the Holy Roman Empire will be resurrected.

Now is different from the past. Nationalism has awakened, and the central government is no longer a dispensable rubber stamp. They can use public opinion to pressure us to make concessions.

Austria is already the largest state in Germany, whether in terms of population, territory, or even the economy. They nearly match all our states combined.

If they obtain the rights of the central government, they will have the moral high ground, and we will have no choice but to compromise.

Perhaps initially, it's just about unifying currency and abolishing tariffs, and it seems like we won't have to pay much.

However, over time, you will find that control over the military, finances, and diplomacy will fall into the hands of the central government, and we will be, at most, a highly autonomous government."

This would happen sooner or later. Any central government would find ways to centralize power.

However, the various German states were not fully united. For example, those free cities wouldn't mind becoming highly autonomous regions, which was a good thing for the capitalists.

The compromise acceptable by most small states would also be far greater. To them, these were unimportant powers, but undoubtedly substantive interests for the larger states.

From this aspect, the royal houses stood to lose the most. With an emperor above them, they no longer hold supreme authority, and if certain policies were unpopular, the public could appeal to the central government.

Assaulted from within and without, royal power would soon be whittled to nothing, with the cabinet governments slowly decaying into provincial governments as their powers decline significantly.

Thus, bureaucrats from every state firmly opposed this.

Prime Minister Karl von Abel shook his head and said: “Mr. Schrenck, I think you’ve misunderstood. I’m only against directly opposing Austria, not suggesting that we should support them.

With so many parties unwilling to see the Holy Roman Empire reappear, do we need to pull hatred onto ourselves? Why should everyone share the benefits but we alone bear the resentment?

Our current stance should be in line with most of the other states. If no one opposes Austria’s plans, then we won’t either.

Dragging down all the state governments, either everyone opposes the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire, or we all return to the imperial era together.”

“Prime Minister, I’m afraid it is not so simple. Now all the German states want us to take a stand, even the three powers, Britain, France, and Russia, hope for our opposition. Hoping to muddle through this is likely impossible. At least diplomatically, we can’t justify it,” Foreign Minister Ludwig von der Pfordten opposed.

In simple terms, Bavaria wanted to shrink back but many big shots were forcing them forward. Ignoring the opinions of the great powers, the Bavarian government wasn’t that audacious to do so.

Maximilian II frowned. Why were they pressuring him when this was Austria’s problem? This was clearly bullying the weak!

Prussia itself was unwilling to take the lead, so they pushed Bavaria forward. Britain and France couldn’t intimidate Austria and couldn’t influence Prussia’s decisions, so they seized the opportunity to bully Bavaria instead.

Russia pushed them to oppose, purely to trouble Austria and delay the unification of their ally.

With all these factors combined, the Bavarian government found itself at the forefront. Faced with diplomatic pressure, even Prime Minister Karl von Abel, who vehemently opposed, had to yield.

Only with the support of the great powers could Bavaria preserve its standing within the Confederation. Essentially, they were just a small state, comparable in overall strength to Belgium.

A small nation was a small nation, with little territory and population. They had no choice but to rely on large nations to survive.

This was also why Maximilian II sought to integrate many small German states. Only by bringing these states together could they form a medium-sized country, possessing the ability to be independent.

For a medium-sized nation, as long as they developed well, they could become a minor power, much like the current Kingdom of Prussia. With the strength of a medium-sized nation, they had the possibility of entering the ranks of the great powers.

In order to achieve this, Bavaria first needed the support of the great powers. Without Britain, France and Russia restricting Austria and Prussia, when would Bavaria have the chance to consolidate the many small German states?

During the debate of ideologies, Maximilian II also proposed the “Lesser Germany” plan with Bavaria at its core. Unfortunately, even the people of Bavaria lacked interest in it.

The reason was very simple — it was too small, not meeting everyone’s expectations of the “dreams of a great nation.”

Any nation with a rich history harbored dreams of becoming a great power, and how could the German people be an exception? Since it was the dream of becoming a great power, it had to be sufficiently large. This was also the reason why Austria was currently popular.

The new Holy Roman Empire would truly be massive. Once established, its area would exceed 1.1 million square kilometers, surpassing neighboring France in every metric, satisfying the dreams of many of it being a great nation.

The German-French conflict was the result of the House of Habsburg and the French clashing for centuries. The Franco-Prussian War in history was just a continuation of this conflict.

Surpassing the French also held a special meaning among the Germans. This was also why, after the Franco-Prussian War, Prussia was able to integrate the loosely connected German states.

With national vanity satisfied and national pride emerging, national identity also rose, transforming “Germany” from a regional name into a country.

Maximilian II sneered and said, “Since everyone wants Bavaria and Austria to be enemies, then we can only go along with it.

This is also an opportunity. As long as we stand up against Austria, we can gain the support of the great powers. With their support, the possibility of successfully integrating the various German states is very high.

Neither Britain, France, nor Russia wants to see the emergence of a colossal German Empire. Our plan aligns well with their interests. With their support, the likelihood of ultimate success is very high.”

Unable to go against the great powers, Maximilian II reluctantly acknowledged this fact. Still fantasizing over that beautiful future, he did not know this one step had set him on the point of no return.

## Chapter 208: The Time is Ripe

On March 16, 1853, Prime Minister Felix arrived in Munich. After a week-long negotiation, it ended in failure.

The Bavarian government firmly opposed rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire, resulting in failure for Felix’s diplomatic efforts.

Under public pressure, the Bavarian government proposed the reopening of the Federal Parliament on March 27 to decide whether or not to rebuild the Holy Roman Empire.

On March 28, Prime Minister Felix delivered a speech at the University of Munich, publicly responding to the Bavarian government:

“I have a dream, to witness the unification of Germany in my lifetime. It’s the genuine unity of the German nation, not the nominal German Confederation, which is nothing but a joke.

Today is an awful day; the Bavarian government has closed the door to rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire, and all our efforts have failed.

It seems that my dream has a long way to go before becoming a reality. If I can't see it, I hope you can continue the journey. As elites of Germany, it is your responsibility and duty.

We all know that rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire is the best choice for the unity of Germany. It is the only way to swiftly achieve national unity.

The German states have been divided for so long, each forming its own system, making it difficult to achieve unity overnight.

Let the Federal Parliament decide? In reality, we all know this is not a simple majority rule, nor is it a child's game of playing house.

Rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire must obtain full approval from all states. Forcibly merging an empire together despite dissent will inevitably make it collapse from internal contradictions.

The consequences of coercion are clear. Switzerland gained independence, Belgium gained independence, the Netherlands gained independence, and even Luxembourg gained independence. These were their own choices, and there is no need to delve into historical reasons today.

Now, if we don't handle this well, a new wave of independence will emerge. Don't doubt it; international forces are already plotting to divide Germany, and they have even colluded with internal forces.

Therefore, I must be cautious, fearing that one wrong step might make me a sinner of Germany.

A unified German Empire must be an empire recognized by all. If this cannot be achieved, it will be just a federation, not an empire.

I know many people oppose the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire because they feel the empire is too loose, with too much power in regional governments and too little in the central government, a system that doesn't appeal to everyone.

But one thing to note is, if you want the approval of the entire population, you cannot shed blood, or at least not too much blood.

If a civil war breaks out due to unification, with rivers of blood flowing, can everyone sit down calmly after the war?

The answer is no. Under the guidance of certain individuals, such hatred will quickly take root and sprout, ultimately leading to division..."

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Felix entered the zone, unleashing a barrage of words.

The officials of the Bavarian government in the audience were already livid but couldn't react aggressively as diplomatic etiquette still had to be maintained. Although Felix was ranting vehemently, he didn't explicitly criticize the Bavarian government.

If they were to step forward and stop the speech, wouldn't it indicate a guilty conscience? Moreover, the emotions of the students had already been stirred up. Stimulating them at this moment might lead to some teenagers shouting for revolution in a fit of adolescent fervor.

This was not unprecedented; over 90% of European revolutions were sparked by a casual remark from a passionate youth, followed by blind adherence.

For example, the February Revolution in France, the March Revolution in Vienna, the March Revolution in Berlin, and so on. These revolutions had no well-organized structures beforehand. With a passionate slogan, everyone blindly followed and unknowingly got involved in the upheaval.

Since the Bavarian government made its decision, they have increased security measures, guarding against any rebellious actions by the youths.

For instance, at this moment in the University of Munich, there were over a hundred police officers, ostensibly to protect Prime Minister Felix's safety. In reality, this was also to monitor the people he interacted with.

It was important to note that Prime Minister Felix was currently the most unstable factor in the Kingdom of Bavaria. However, due to his high status, the Bavarian government could only hope that he leaves sooner rather than later.

As much as the government dislikes him, the public welcomes him. Most Bavarian citizens hold great respect for this pacifist Austrian prime minister.

After over an hour, Felix concluded his speech and opened the floor for interaction.

A young student excitedly said, "Respected Prime Minister Felix, I would like to ask how we can ensure that the Holy Roman Empire can treat each state fairly?"

Felix has answered this question many times along his journey. He repeated:

"This question is very simple, relying on a system, a fair system. I don't believe in so-called rule of man because people all have personal interests, and they are naturally biased. The only solution is through a fair system.

This system will be jointly formulated by all states, and it will be publicly announced nationwide for everyone to judge its fairness."

He entered bullshitting mode and applause erupted from the audience. The accompanying officials from the Bavarian government closed their eyes, seemingly wanting to turn a blind eye.

Another curious young student asked, "Honorable Prime Minister, does such a perfect system exist?"

Felix answered without hesitation, "It does not exist!"

Ignoring the commotion in the audience, he continued, "There is no perfect system in the world. The system that seems perfect today may be outdated tomorrow. What we can do is constantly update the system to make it more suitable for us.

From the origin of human society, the earliest tribal civilizations, the matriarchal family system, then the patriarchal system, and then entering the era of slavery, the earliest appearance of nations...

This series of social changes is all about self-adjustment and perfecting social systems. From our perspective today, the current system is more advanced than the past.

But in reality, if our ancestors had adopted the advanced regulations of today, the Germanic people would have become history, perhaps even absent from the history books.



Is it a problem with the system? Obviously not!

Social productive forces determine the production system, so don't just criticize the past social systems as decadent and backward. At least for their time, those systems met their needs."

The topic has inevitably deviated. Everyone's thoughts are too active, and the questions are too tricky. Felix had to steer the conversation into a broader context, trying to control the pace as much as possible.

"Mr. Prime Minister, if the Holy Roman Empire is rebuilt, won't Austria becoming the new central government be unfair to other states?" A question from a young student brought the discussion back.

"You're mistaken. The central government is jointly formed by all the states. If Austria assumes the role of the central government, who can it effectively command?

As for fairness, I believe it can only be ensured through a just constitution. Large and small states will have different political influences. Forcing them to be equal is unfair to the larger states.

Real fairness is impartial treatment, not privilege. The ideal Holy Roman Empire in my mind is a world without privileges.

Your contribution to this country determines your reward — whether it's in terms of money or social status.

In other words, it opens the door to the upper echelons of society, even if that door may only open a crack." Prime Minister Felix continued to spin his narrative.

Mixing truth with lies made his speech more convincing.

Revealing the harsh reality of society, where no state has privileges but individual differences in social status persist.

This speaking style was the result of careful research by the Austrian government's staff. It had to be capable of mobilizing public sentiment without letting it spiral out of control.

Balancing this was a delicate act, since if they stirred up fervent nationalism, Austria would find itself in a difficult position.

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Due to the heightened vigilance of the Bavarian government, Prime Minister Felix, after delivering a few speeches, soon departed.

Undoubtedly, this diplomatic mission ended in failure. Except for a very small number of German states expressing support for the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire, most either subtly opposed or remained silent.

Especially after the Bavarian government openly expressed its opposition, a wave of criticism against the Holy Roman Empire swept through the German territories.

Of course, governments across the countries did not dig up dark histories. Local governments resisting the central authority were considered a stain, an absolute political mistake that couldn't be brought up.

Vienna

Upon hearing Felix's report, Franz realized that the situation in Germany was far more complex than he had imagined.

Most German people are single-minded, and once they set their minds on something, it's challenging to change their views.

This means that they must be fully convinced. If they cannot gain their approval, unifying Germany would be like chasing a fleeting dream.

If mishandled, as Felix mentioned in his speech, there could be an outbreak of a wave of independence.

"Your Majesty, nationalism is developing rapidly in Germany. If we can manipulate national sentiments now, we still have hope of achieving unification through political means," suggested Prime Minister Felix.

Perhaps getting too immersed in the situation, Felix was now seriously considering using political means to achieve German unification.

Franz shook his head and said, "This is impossible to succeed. If we really revive the Holy Roman Empire, Britain, France, and Russia will probably immediately cease hostilities to spoil things for us."

German unification would mean the end of Russia's dominance on the continent, the shattering of France's continental hegemony dream, and the collapse of Britain's continental balance policy.

This is a conflict of core interests that relates to their future development and survival. To avoid such a situation, they will certainly take action without a doubt.

Even though Britain, France, and Russia are fiercely fighting in the Near East, in reality, secret contacts between the three governments have never ceased.

Franz was certain Britain and France no longer wished for the continuance of the war. If not for being unable to back down after things have gotten into this point, they likely would have compromised with Russia already.

Now, they want to compromise, and the prerequisite is that the Russians make concessions; otherwise, they cannot justify it domestically.

Does the Russian government want to continue the war? The answer is no. The cruelty of the war has awakened many, and they are in the same predicament.

Making concessions may sound simple, but it's difficult to do! Once the Russian government makes concessions, internal conflicts will erupt, and Nicholas I naturally wants to end the war with a brilliant victory.

Now, Constantinople is right in front of them. As long as they capture this fortress city, all crises will be resolved, and he will become the greatest Tsar in Russian history.

As for other interests, the Black Sea Fleet was already finished. Even if they enter the Mediterranean, they can't really swim towards there, right?

Annex the Ottoman Empire? Wars require money, and the Russians have the military strength but not the matching financial resources.

They can even interfere in the German territories while locked in war. With the Kingdom of Prussia around, a few shouts from Britain, France, and Russia, and the Holy Roman Empire will dissolve again.

Pointed out by Franz, Felix immediately woke up. The Holy Roman Empire is far from being a real empire. Without external threats, they can slowly solve their problems. The current issue is collusion from within and without.

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Metternich spoke, "Your Majesty, the timing is ripe now. We can proceed with the next phase of the plan."

Franz nodded, indicating his approval.

Austria has not reached the point of starting a war at the drop of a hat. Without reasons acceptable to everyone, if they incur public anger without just cause, it would be a boon for the Prussians.

Mere political differences are not enough to constitute a cause for war. Now, they need to add fuel to the fire to give the Bavarian government its final historical portrayal.

#### Chapter 209: Pretext for War (BONUS)

Following Franz's order, Bavaria became lively.

Prime Minister Felix's speeches in Munich still had some effect. The younger generation in Bavaria was mostly influenced, and every single one of them was contemplating how to unify Germany.

This line of thinking led to problems. Given their limited social experiences, they couldn't thoroughly consider the issues, making it easy for them to take it to extremes.

If there wasn't someone guiding the narrative, it might have been fine. Unfortunately, Franz, who was well-prepared, wouldn't miss this opportunity.

Various experts and scholars jumped out to express their opinions, criticizing the ruling authorities in Bavaria for selfishly undermining German unification.

In the eyes of most people, rebuilding the Holy Roman Empire might not be the best choice, but it seemed to be the most suitable one. With the path of peaceful unification blocked, only forceful unification remained.

Perhaps some people aspired to achieve success in war, but this was definitely not going to be a civil war.

Influenced by Prime Minister Felix's speech, these self-proclaimed elite students couldn't bear it any longer. They believed they should do something for national unity and couldn't just watch the government make a mess of things.

Protests and demonstrations, seen as meaningful activities, were considered by them as the best way to voice their opinions.

As intellectuals, even in their protests, they could find legal justifications. The former king, Ludwig I, had given a speech before abdicating, which became everyone's rallying point.

This was a political time bomb detonating in Maximilian II's face. Even though there wasn't an immutable law of primogeniture in Europe, the former king's statements before abdicating still held some political weight.

Now everyone wanted the king to come forward and explain. The royal house vowed to strive for German unification, yet the current government was going against that. What explanation could they provide?

Not only the king but also the cabinet ministers faced questioning from the public. The people's stance was clear: opposing the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire was fine, but you have to present a plan for German unity, right?

Regardless of its feasibility, at least it had to theoretically convince everyone and gain the approval of the majority.

Maximilian II anxiously asked, "What should we do now? The citizens outside are waiting for our response."

They were not unprepared, just that their prior contingency plans were for handling unrest. The present problem was these people were not being unruly!

The crowd participating in the protests this time was of much higher quality than usual. It wasn't just workers and students; there were also middle-class individuals, capitalists, sociologists, and even nobles participating.

With such broad coverage, it involved people of all walks of life in the Kingdom of Bavaria. Even if the Bavarian government suspected that this was organized by someone, without evidence, they didn't dare to act recklessly.

The recent memory of the Great Revolution was still fresh, and everyone was cautious, afraid to stir up social unrest.

Prime Minister Karl von Abel replied: "Your Majesty, the best method now is to present a German unification proposal and try to convince the masses as much as possible."

In reality, across the entire German territories, each state government was preparing its own unity plan. Since they wanted to oppose the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire, they naturally had to offer a new alternative.

Otherwise, as Felix criticized, they would be seen as "doing nothing productive, just opposing for the sake of opposing."

"Prime Minister, do you have any ideas?" Maximilian II asked.

Karl von Abel replied: "Your Majesty, we can change the previous plan and simply give a new face to the Three-State Cabinet Plan.

The reason remains the same: there are too many states in Germany, and if everyone is involved in decision-making, it would lead to constant arguments.

The best choice is for Bavaria to represent the numerous small states, creating a balance with Austria and Prussia in the central government, jointly reigning this empire.

Of course, this proposal is unlikely to gain support from other states, but it is feasible to persuade the citizens. Bavaria can gain the maximum benefits from this.

As long as the Austrians can accept the formation of the Three-State Cabinet, we will support the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire.”

After hesitating for a moment, Maximilian II made up his mind and said, “Alright, let’s go with that.”

This approach would offend the small states, but it was a matter of weighing the pros and cons. Offending these small states would only result in a few protests. But if they couldn’t provide an explanation to the domestic population, it would affect their regime’s stability.

Since gaining the support of the great powers, the Bavarian government had become much bolder. If not for Prussia and Austria being too powerful, they would have considered forcefully unifying the numerous small states in Germany.

Moreover, this time, the Bavarian government had stood up for everyone, thwarting Austria’s plan for the Holy Roman Empire. Even if the slogans were a bit excessive now, it was likely that people would understand.

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On March 4, 1853, the Crimean War was ignited by Britain and France, disrupting Russian deployments as soon as they attacked.

The British strategy was not wrong; the Russian government was truly struggling. With the addition of a new front, the logistical supply for Russian forces in the Balkan Peninsula completely fell on Austria.

To the surprise of the allied forces, the Russian troops involved in the Crimean War not only had low combat effectiveness but also possessed surprisingly poor weapons and equipment. They could be considered a poorly equipped army.

The Russian government was helpless in this situation. The elite forces of the Russian army were mostly deployed to the Balkans, or had gone to the Caucasus front. What remained were second-tier or reserve forces.

With insufficient training and inadequate equipment, the Russian forces suffered significant losses once the battle erupted. If it weren’t for the challenging terrain and climate of the Crimean War that disadvantaged the unaccustomed allied forces, the outcome might have already been decided.

Vienna

Finance Minister Karl said in a solemn tone, “Your Majesty, the Russians have once again applied for a loan from us. The sale of the Russian government’s bonds in the market is facing a cold reception, and the majority of investors are worried that they will default.”

Franz couldn’t be bothered to mock the Russians anymore. Their reputation had deteriorated to such an extent that hardly anyone trusted them. Even if they provided collateral, investors were concerned about potential defaults.

This wasn’t baseless worry; the Russians had a precedent. Not only did they default on regular debts, but even debts with collateral were subject to excuses for non-payment.

For example, if a mine was mortgaged, they could impose all sorts of chaotic taxes on that mine, forcing investors to withdraw.

Another example was when tax revenue was mortgaged, they might let the creditor collect it themselves, provided they could actually collect it.

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The sins of the ancestors have come back to haunt Nicholas I. The harsh lessons of the past have left the capital markets wary of them.

Even though Nicholas I is making efforts to restore their reputation, it was proving futile. Without the efforts of several generations, their credit with the markets would be hard to restore.

Seeing that various European countries are issuing paper currency, while they continue to use gold and silver directly as currency, reflects not only the lack of credibility in international markets but also the domestic capital market's skepticism towards the Russian government.

Franz, without hesitation, said, "Tell the Russians that our finances are also having difficulties, and we are unable to provide them with massive loans. I suggest they try the capital markets of neutral countries."

He was afraid. Russia had already borrowed 202 million Austrian guilders from Austria, with 130 million in government loans and 72 million in private loans. Franz's Royal Bank itself had provided a massive loan of 5 million.

Of course, government loans come with ultra-low interest rates. Meanwhile, private loans followed market rules. Dealing with a business partner with a bad reputation like the Russian government, a monthly interest rate below 0.7% was out of the question.

After deducting various fees, the interest that the Russians have to pay was, in reality, exceeding a 1% monthly interest rate.

Don't think of this as usury. Even with such interest rates, there were very few financial consortiums willing to lend money to Russia.

High risk corresponds to high returns. If it weren't for the stipulation that this money could only be used in Austria, these loans would never have been approved.

Some private loans come with additional conditions, such as specifying that the money is used to purchase products from a particular company, among other stipulations.

Naturally, the Russian government was keen on seeking loans from the Austrian government. Private loans not only have high interest rates but also come with a host of restrictions. The Russian government cannot tolerate such conditions.

Even if the Russians are backing up the loans, Franz doesn't dare to print money recklessly. Who knows when the Near East War will end? What if it ends sooner than expected?

In that case, if Austria hasn't accumulated enough capital and an economic crisis erupts, the Russians who received loans might turn into opportunists.

In the face of interests, precautions must be taken. Essentially, the Russians would have to import a certain amount of gold and silver into Austria to ensure that there won't be currency devaluation before Franz is willing to lend them money.

Franz acknowledged that he was being quite conservative and was unfamiliar with economic issues. However, the needs of a country differ from those of a business; a country requires steady development rather than explosive growth.

Metternich spoke up, “Your Majesty, at this time, we need to stabilize our relations with Russia. We can help them sell a batch of bonds in an emergency. Tax season is approaching, and by then, Russia should be able to recover.”

It’s not easy to trick the Bavarian government. Austria has set up many traps for them, but they’ve managed to evade most of them.

For example, if the Bavarian government suppressed the protesters, Austria could use the persecution of nationalist activists by the Bavarian government as an excuse to intervene, accusing them of attempting to split Germany.

Without even the need of declaring war, Austrian troops could appear on the streets of Munich, and perhaps even be welcomed in.

Clearly, the Bavarians were not foolish. Even if they were unaware that Austria intended to act against them, they understood military crackdowns could destabilize their rule.

However, in avoiding this pit, they dug one for themselves. On the surface, offending these small states might not seem significant since they’re just shouting slogans at home.

However, Austria’s meddling changes the game. While the governments of these states may stay calm, the public cannot.

According to Austria’s plan, they were, after all, shareholders of the Holy Roman Empire, all being masters of their country. But according to Bavaria’s plan, they have become shareholders in name only, lacking decision-making qualifications and even being deprived of dividend rights.

It would be strange for them not to get upset in this situation. As long as they get upset at Bavaria, when Austria takes action against Bavaria, they will oppose intervention by their governments. The opposition of the ordinary people will undoubtedly make the governments of these small states hesitate.

If they don’t send troops to help immediately, the Kingdom of Bavaria won’t withstand the first wave. This would create a fait accompli of Austria annexing Bavaria, and by the time they decide to intervene, it would be already too late.

Without the Kingdom of Bavaria, these small states would have to face Austria directly. Their strength is limited, and they simply don’t have the power to resist Austria. With morale weakened, the subsequent issues become easier to handle.

Although these Germanic states may seem inconspicuous individually, if they unite, their strength is not to be underestimated.

They could mobilize three to four hundred thousand troops, and there was still the Kingdom of Prussia. If they can’t quickly defeat them one by one, once they fall into a stalemate, the entire plan would fail.

Therefore, political deception is crucial. Even if they don't completely fool the governments of these countries, as long as they hesitate for a moment and let Austria crush Bavaria, the overall situation would be decided.

On the surface, it appears that the Austrian government is currently dominated by the advocates of peaceful unification, followed closely by those opposing Germanic unification. As for the voices advocating military unification of Germany, they are practically nonexistent unless it was at the lower levels.

From a political analysis, no matter how you look at it, the Austrian government lacks both the motivation and the conditions to take military action.

To some extent, politicians' political stances can influence a country's decisions, much like when Lincoln, an advocate for abolition of slavery, was elected, leading to the outbreak of the American Civil War.

If the Austrian government were dominated by warmongers, the German states would be on high alert, much like how everyone is wary of the Kingdom of Prussia now.

Even though their strength may not match Austria's, their prime ministers are all military figures, classic hardliners who give off a threatening aura.

Franz readily agreed, "Alright, let's help the Russians withstand this wave. They'll probably start collecting war taxes again, so the Russian government shouldn't be short of money this year."

War taxes are a unique type of tax in Europe. Before the modern era, monarchs usually funded their wars through war taxes.

Even though Austria also has war taxes, Franz wouldn't collect them unless absolutely necessary. Once he collects the money, it means they can't afford to lose the war; otherwise, the consequences would be severe.

Marshal Radetzky reminded, "Your Majesty, it's time to create a pretext for war. The process of dividing and weakening the German states has reached this point; pushing further might be counterproductive."

After some thought, Franz said, "Proceed according to the plan!"

## Chapter 210: Punishing the Traitors

Ever since Prime Minister Felix began his visit to the German states, the topic of unity has been hyped by the media. It seems like if you don't discuss this topic for a day, you'll be left behind by the world.

Especially after the failure of Felix's visit to Bavaria, the impact has been even greater, and German nationalists have naturally been greatly disappointed.

Regardless of whether they agree with the Holy Roman Empire or not, they have to admit that this was the most likely solution to achieve unity in Germany.

When the Bavaria government's unification proposal appeared, it was immediately transmitted to various parts of Germany by interested parties, causing a sensation.



Austria naturally disdained it; a tripartite balance of power required strength. Although the Kingdom of Prussia was only a medium-sized country, their military power had reached the level of great powers, even if barely qualifying in this aspect.

But what about Bavaria? On what basis do they deserve equal status, simply representing numerous small states? Who would agree to that?

If their strength was close to that of Prussia, then there was no argument; a tripartite balance of power was inevitable. There would be no need for Austria to expand westward, it would just calmly develop the Balkan Peninsula instead.

The Kingdom of Prussia was also not buying into the idea of a tripartite balance of power. They couldn't gain any benefits from such a political system. Whether it was the Lesser Germany Plan or the North-South Germany Plan, both are more aligned with their interests than this plan.

The two major states were dissatisfied and laughed it off, at most ridiculing Bavaria's government as overestimating their capabilities in the newspapers.

The small states in Germany were also in an uproar, being represented like this. Did they even agree to this?

Guided by the newspapers, public opinion instantly exploded. All sorts of critics emerged, as if they had to criticize Bavaria to feel at ease.

The Rheinische Zeitung (Rhenish Newspaper) published an article titled "Bavaria's Ambitions," which even published the strategic plan of Bavaria's government to annex the various German states. The details were so meticulous, it seemed real.

Whether it was true or false, no one cared; everyone just wished to believe it was true. Otherwise, with so many states in Germany, how could it be a three-states cabinet?

If they can't annex these states, why should they represent them in the empire?

It didn't take long for someone to uncover Bavaria's plan to split Germany and Italy in collusion with Britain, France and Russia in an attempt to kick Austria and Prussia out.

This was true because Britain and France did propose this suggestion, and the Bavarian government was willing to accept it. However, before it could begin, it was jointly suppressed by Austria and Prussia.

Even the Bavarian government had secretly supported this plan. However, its influence was too small, and was not even mainstream in the Kingdom of Bavaria, let alone spreading further.

Nowadays, what the media discovers is of course nonsense. For a newspaper that does not perform artistic processing, can they dare to call themselves journalists?

Franz did indeed provide funding. Without Austrian backing, so many German newspapers could not have coordinated such targeted assaults on Bavaria.

Of course, this likely also related to Bavarian leadership blunders, overvaluing Great Power backing.

Reliance on Great Powers was common among small nations. Over time, they inevitably became influenced by them.

People all have ambitions, and Maximilian II is no exception. Balancing between Austria and Prussia every day can become tiresome over time.

With Britain, France and Russia egging them on, such ambitions could no longer be restrained. Theoretically, Bavaria's plans were not impossible either. Had history not changed, their tripartite German strategy could likely have become reality.

However, this diplomatic maneuver requires a relatively high level of difficulty, and the Kingdom of Bavaria needs to level up a bit, at least to possess an army of two hundred thousand elite soldiers.

Chances of success were frighteningly high if they could successfully ambush the Kingdom of Prussia after Prussian victory over Austria.

Anyway, Britain, France, and Russia will all support them. As long as they win this round, it's their victory. The strategy of small countries relies on taking risks; if they don't dare to take risks, how can they counterattack?

Possibilities were lower now with Austria not embarking on a ruinous path. Their current comprehensive strength was at least two Bavarias greater than in the same period in history, which was simply incomparable.

Regardless of whether there was a chance, dreams would always exist. Just like Franz still dreamed of unifying the entirety of Germany.

Unable to achieve this, they could only compromise with the Southern Germany strategy, instantly reducing difficulty to manageable levels.

Even the execution of the Southern Germany strategy had been divided. The first step was to take down Bavaria. If they could achieve this, then they could discuss the other plans; if not, everything would go down the drain.

Now, even Bavaria's annexation strategy was appearing in newspapers, openly and boldly.

Step 1: Manufacture a justification to work with Prussia, Britain, France, and Russia to force Austria out of the German Confederation.

Step 2: Work with Britain, France and Russia to force Prussia out of the German Confederation.

Step 3: ...

No matter how ridiculous these plans were, everyone became furious. Weren't the Bavarian government's plans not an insult to everyone's intelligence?

Even Maximilian II was angry. He swore to God with all his heart that he had absolutely nothing to do with such a childish plan.

Naturally, the current Bavarian government was unrelated either. Even if they considered this, it would at most be wild fantasies in their dreams! Who would dare put such content down in writing?

And even when framing them, shouldn't things be somewhat credible? Step 1 of relying on foreign Great Powers to coerce Austria was already impossible to begin with.

As for the Prussians, they have their own motives, hoping to see Austria leave. The issue was who didn't know of the bitter struggle between Britain and France versus Russia? What leverage did Bavaria possess to make them cooperate?

At least there should be some common interests, right? For example, if Austria angers everyone and faces joint resistance, but this hasn't happened yet.

Could Bavaria cooperating with Prussia really force Austria to withdraw? This plan likely would have enraged Austria upon being proposed.

Does anyone believe in such a childish plan? The answer is: yes, and quite a few of them too.

At least Franz believed it, and so did the Austrian government. On April 11, 1853, the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a diplomatic note to the Bavarian government, warning them not to play with fire.

Public opinion was in an uproar, but most people still supported it. After all, Austria had only issued a diplomatic warning, which was quite satisfying for many small German states.

If Austria were to actually take military action, people's views might change, as this reason was not convincing enough.

Franz was a good-tempered emperor. He would not rashly raise troops in anger. This only added another entry in the war justification notes after the warnings.

After being warned, the Bavarian government immediately clarified. The aforementioned situation was purely slander and they absolutely did not have any plans to partition Germany.

After this brief interlude, the third wave of opinion manipulation concluded.

The fourth wave soon began in May, with focus shifting to "how to unify Germany".

This topic was extremely sensitive. Various governments shut their mouths. Only the public discussed things spiritedly. The most disappointed were the supporters of the Holy Roman Empire. They were the first to be eliminated.

The Bavarian government played the scapegoat and became the target of everyone's anger. Of course, in the eyes of Maximilian II, this was worthwhile. Despite receiving a lot of criticism, they gained tangible benefits.

The three countries of Britain, France, and Russia issued public diplomatic statements, criticizing the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire as a destabilizing factor in the balance of Europe, and warning Austria not to play with fire.

Franz, however, was too lazy to read these statements. He casually tossed them into a corner, considering it done.

The Bavarian government, on the other hand, received high praise from the great powers. If not for the deep conflicts among Britain, France, and Russia, they would have personally stepped in to help Bavaria achieve its strategic goals.

Maximilian II probably didn't believe this narrative; diplomatic words were just for show. If he really believed it, he should prepare to be disappointed!

On the surface, the Kingdom of Bavaria had the upper hand in this political chess game. Austria had just threatened them, and now they were warned by the great powers in turn.

Comparing all the scenarios, people reluctantly found that the most likely to succeed was the one that was eliminated first. The opportunity for the impressionable youth seemed to have arrived.

“When the door of peace closes, force will become the only choice, and Germany will eventually be unified.”

After this slogan was shouted, it quickly spread throughout Germany. The passionate and impressionable youth didn't know what it meant but still went along in shouting it.

This instantly frightened many people, especially the governments of various small states. They were the most worried about the prospect of using force to unify Germany.

While the rebuilding of the Holy Roman Empire still ensured the interests of the many small states, once it turned into a military unification of the entire nation, undoubtedly, they would be the ones to be assimilated.

National unity achieved through bloodshed naturally meant eliminating these reactionary elements disrupting the unity of the country. The smell of gunpowder in Germany grew thicker by the day.

The moment Franz bitterly awaited finally arrived. The support of the masses was already in place. Everyone reluctantly accepted the reality of military unification of Germany.

This was not the time to delay. The people's fiery passion couldn't be sustained indefinitely. If they waited until the people cooled down, it would be too late.

Within the Austrian government, the war faction's influence began to rise. On June 1, 1853, Prime Minister Felix delivered a speech at the National Assembly in Vienna, known as the Iron Curtain Speech.

“After our continuous efforts, the plan to unify Germany through peaceful means, undermined by the collusion of domestic and foreign enemies, has ultimately ended in failure.

But Germany will eventually be unified; this is the mission history has bestowed upon us.

At this moment, perhaps we should adopt a different approach to achieve national unification.

Great Germany has been filled with iron and blood since its birth, and now we have no other choice.

Since someone has forced us into this path, let's use iron and blood to sweep away this decaying world and forge a new glory for the empire!

...”

Everyone knew Austria had undergone a transformation. The Prime Minister of the peace faction has become part of the war faction, with Austria's national policy undergoing a significant change.

In the following days, high-ranking officials in Austria delivered speeches echoing similar sentiments, and the entire Austrian government shifted to a political stance supporting war.

In summary: We love peace, but we love Germany more. For the unity of Germany, we are ready for war.

These public statements instantly stirred up public opinion in Germany, and many people suddenly realized, was war imminent?

Not making everyone wait for long, on June 5, 1853, Franz published his “Letter to the German People.”

“Peace is dead, and there is only one path left for the unity of Germany, and that is war.

History has bestowed a responsibility that I cannot evade because of my deep love for this land and country.

To prevent the fragmentation of Germany, we must eliminate any attempt to divide Germany.

Now, with God as my witness, I have decided to eliminate traitors, to eradicate a decadent regime conspiring with foreign enemies, attempting to divide Germany.

...”

Regardless of whether everyone believed it or not, Franz firmly believed that the Bavarian government conspired with Britain, France, and Russia, attempting to divide Germany.

The “Letter to the German People” was a declaration of war. While Franz was making the announcement, the Austrian government had already delivered a declaration of war to Bavaria.

The cover of the war declaration boldly stated: “Exterminating Traitors of the Country.”

The Bavarian government, still not realizing what had happened, was dumbfounded. The change in Austria’s stance happened too quickly.

Not long ago, the great powers collectively warned Austria. Under normal circumstances, they would not resort to the use of force under such circumstances.

Maximilian II, without the time to investigate why, decisively ordered, “Immediately seek assistance from Britain, France, and Russia. Ask them to intervene. Domestically, immediately carry out a national mobilization and simultaneously request assistance from the German states to send troops for support immediately.”

Prime Minister Karl von Abel supplemented: “Your Majesty, we must immediately clarify externally that we absolutely cannot acknowledge the charges Austria has imposed on us; otherwise, it will be disastrous!”

Military issues can be addressed, even if there’s a defeat, with the intervention of the great powers, there’s still a chance to retain political power. But political failure would doom them regardless of whether Austrians were driven away or not.

Foreign Minister Karl Ludwig von der Pfordten cried out: “Not good! Austria plotted this, and we have fallen into their trap!”

Maximilian II urgently asked, “What’s going on? Speak!”

Foreign Minister Karl Ludwig von der Pfordten’s expression darkened as he bitterly smiled and said: “Your Majesty, public opinion is extremely unfavorable to us. With the string of preceding incidents, we have been tied together with Britain, France and Russia already.

I fear many German citizens now see us as traitors to the nation colluding with foreign powers. Even if we try to explain, it’s unlikely to reverse this situation in a short time.

Austria has significant influence in Bavaria. If the citizens believe us as traitors then I fear...”

Everyone understood before he could finish speaking. At this moment, if Britain, France, and Russia intervene, it proves collusion between the Bavarian government and them. If they don't intervene, Austria could easily swallow Bavaria.

It's a dilemma — either choice leads to a pitfall. The question is, which one to jump into.

Maximilian II gritted his teeth and said, "We can't worry about that now, let's get through this current crisis first.

The Austrians probably took the risk because they anticipated that Britain, France, and Russia are locked in a fierce battle and may not coordinate their actions to interfere with them.

But they don't know that we have agreements with Britain, France, and Russia, and they will definitely intervene. A unified German Empire is too terrifying; no European power can tolerate such a situation.

If Austria acts now, it's equivalent to getting themselves out of the game. We must seize this opportunity to kick them out of Germany!"