

Roman Empire 231

Chapter 231: Balkan Peninsula Development Plan

In a quaint castle in Prague, an elderly man in his fifties solemnly asked, “Holst, are you really ready?”

Once you accept the government’s arrangement, you will have to live a hard life for a long time in the future. It will be too late for you to regret it then.”

Holst answered seriously, “Father, the Vicks Family has declined. In the last power struggle, our connections in the government suffered heavy losses.

To secure a position in the government, I have no choice but to take the civil service examination. The competition is fierce, and considering our family’s focus on military development, we have no advantage in this area. I’m not sure I can make it.

The situation on the European continent is gradually stabilizing, and there won’t be any wars in Austria for a long time. This eliminates the possibility of fighting on the battlefield for the foreseeable future.

Now there is an opportunity. With the military achievements I have gained on the battlefield, the most I can become is an honorary knight if I stay in the country.

With some money from the family, I can exchange for an estate from the government, but going to the Balkan Peninsula now could elevate me to a hereditary knight, directly owning an estate twice the size.

Under normal circumstances, I might not succeed even if I struggle for twenty years here in our country. In that case, why not take a risk and try?”

In an effort to tighten control over the Balkan Peninsula, the Austrian government initiated a mobilization in the country. As Prime Minister Felix anticipated, the temptation proved too great for many lower nobles to resist.

Compared to establishing overseas colonies, at least the Balkan Peninsula was still close. Even if the situation there was a bit bad, there was still hope for future development.

As one of the strongholds of conservatism, Austria maintained its ancient traditions: the eldest son would inherit the family, while the second son would venture out to carve his own path.

Major nobles had the means to provide sufficient titles for their direct descendants, but collateral relatives or minor nobles had to rely on their own efforts.

To limit the number of nobles in the country and ensure the quality of the aristocracy, the Austrian government was considering the introduction of a “Nobility Law”.

Once this law is enacted, the inheritance of noble titles will have to be evaluated by the Council of Nobles, making it difficult for prodigal scions to inherit titles.

Apart from the eldest son’s inheritance of titles, even non-military titles acquired by the descendants of great nobles would lose their hereditary status.

Due to its significant implications, the law was currently being discussed by the Council of Nobles. After all, this law was not favorable to the declining nobility; the difficulty of passing the assessment was too high for them.

Franz planned on implementing this law in the development of the colonies so that these declining nobles would go to the colonies to seek their fortune.

The domestic pie was only so big, and even with the addition of the Balkan Peninsula territories, there was still not enough for everyone.

The collapse of the British and French colonies was largely attributed to an uneven distribution of interests, where capitalists reap excessive profits while expecting others to sacrifice their lives — how could that be sustainable?

Throughout history, the feudal system has been an effective tool for expansion. The counties and prefectures directly ruled by the central dynasty often suffered losses, while the areas granted as fiefs were rarely divided further. Even when they became independent, they remained influenced by local culture.

Of course, this was only one aspect; the more important factor was the consolidation of class structures. Either expand the pie to provide upward mobility for all, or face the inevitability of revolution — the choice was clear.

After pondering for a moment, the elder said, “Well, I respect your decision, my child. At present, the family can’t offer you much help, but you can recruit a group of people from the estate. This will help relieve the population pressure.

These people have lived under the family’s care for generations, and loyalty is not an issue. With their support, I believe you can make significant progress.”

In this era, the influence of the nobility was significant, not only because of their social status but also because of their control over a group of vassals.

Despite the abolition of serfdom, this influence had not completely disappeared.

The Austrian government was currently encouraging these nobles to move to the Balkan Peninsula for development, and it was not just about the nobles moving there themselves. If they venture out alone, arriving in an unfamiliar place, they might have trouble establishing authority.

Also, the primary industry for many of them was land. You could not expect the nobles to work the land themselves, right?

Organizing migration through these people was much easier than if the Austrian government were to take charge.

The densely populated German territories had already reached the limits of their population capacity in the agricultural era. Relocating some of the population would help alleviate internal conflicts.

Anyway, in this era, industrialization doesn’t have a significant demand for labor. Austria was still the second most populous country in Europe, and if you include the population of the Balkans, it was approaching fifty million.

Currently, the most important aspect is the promotion of ethnic integration. With a unified language and script, the next generation would see a significant increase in mixed-race people. Under such circumstances, who could stir up trouble with nationalism?

It could be said that the present New Holy Roman Empire, as long as Franz remained prudent, had a promising future.

The development of the Balkan Peninsula also brought an unexpected benefit: a reduction in emigration to America.

After all, crossing the ocean in this day and age was risky. Compared to the unknowns of America, the nearby Balkan Peninsula was much safer. Connected by the Danube River, transportation was convenient, and one could return within ten days or half a month.

Especially for those with families, migration to the Balkan Peninsula allowed them to bring their families with them. If they were to go to America, it would be a farewell to their homeland.

Since the revolutions, Germany has experienced a wave of emigration, with an average of sixty to seventy thousand people leaving each year. In Austria alone, about twenty to thirty thousand people leave each year.

These immigrants contributed to rapid population growth in the United States. In 1850, the U.S. received 310,000 immigrants; by 1851, it had received 3.79 million. The U.S. population, which was 23,192,000 in 1850, increased to 31,443,000 in 1860. It was like having cheats in a game.

In this era, immigrants tended to be young and strong making them high-quality labor resources. Since the elderly and those with health problems couldn't endure the hardships of the sea voyage.

Every time he thought about it, Franz could only sigh at the lack of competitiveness of South American countries. Despite having favorable conditions, they inexplicably failed to compete with the United States for immigrants.

Not to mention coordinated efforts, as long as a few countries prioritized attracting immigrants, diverting the U.S. population, America would not have been able to develop as rapidly.

In such a situation, Franz felt helpless. The European countries had not yet recognized the threat posed by the United States and had not taken any measures to limit the growth of its power.

Of course, Franz was not completely inactive. He occasionally published articles in newspapers criticizing the nouveau riche in the United States. This type of entertainment was well-received by the European people and was a popular pastime.

Nevertheless, reducing the number of immigrants to the United States by a few thousand or even tens of thousands might not be a small number in the long run. It could be seen as weakening the strength of a competitor.

It was worth noting that, relying on these immigrants, Germans eventually became the largest ethnic group in the United States, contributing significantly to America's rise.

Vienna

Franz carefully read the "Balkan Peninsula Development Plan" presented by the cabinet.

The strength of a nation was not only determined by its territorial size, population, and abundant resources — these were only some of the necessary conditions. Most importantly, it was the degree of development of its territories.

The Russian Empire was vast, larger than two Europes combined. In terms of land area, resources, and population alone, its power should be comparable to that of the mighty Qin Dynasty, which swept across the lands and conquered everything.

The reality, however, was quite different. Despite these advantages, the Russian Empire, let alone the conquest of Europe, could be troubled by any two great powers joining forces.

The biggest problem was the low level of development in their homeland. If the Russian Empire had already completed industrialization, there was no doubt that conquering the European continent would not be a mere dream.

The New Holy Roman Empire might not be as ambitious as the Russians, but by relying on a comprehensive management system, it could still become one of the top powers.

In Franz's opinion, if the acquired territories could not be effectively cultivated, the lands that could not be transformed into national power would become a heavy burden.

Further expansion on the European continent became challenging and the focus should shift to carefully nurturing and developing existing territories.

Before this, the Austrian government had already formulated numerous development plans. Except for the several states with a high degree of autonomy, the remaining regions have been included in the government's planning outlines, and many areas have already begun to organize and implement these plans.

The current development plan for the Balkan Peninsula was only a preliminary idea, and there was still a long way to go before it was actually implemented.

Franz thought for a while and said, "Prime Minister, according to this development plan, the two Danube principalities will be the second granary of the Empire in the future.

However, we must consider one problem. If Russian-Austrian relations deteriorate, the products of these regions will have to be exported along the Danube to the German territories or transported by land to the sea.

Also, the complementary industries in these areas seem to be more tailored to the Russians. I doubt that Russians have such strong purchasing power.

At present they still have serfdom. Even if they implement social reforms in the future, I believe that the purchasing power of their ordinary citizens will reach at most half of that of the Austrian people.

For industries targeting the Russian market, it's best to take two approaches: either sell high-end products to the aristocracy or take a low-end route and sell to the common people. The prices of these goods must be sufficiently affordable."

Due to their geographical location, the economies of the two Danubian principalities would inevitably be influenced by both Austria and Russia, with Austria serving as the internal market and Russia as the external market.

Economic development must also revolve around these two markets, and only later would other European countries be considered.

Prime Minister Felix stated, “Your Majesty, no one can say for sure what the future of Russian-Austrian relations will be. However, even if relations deteriorate, the likelihood that they will blockade us is very small.

Even if the Russian government wanted to, domestic interest groups in Russia would not approve, and given the Russian government’s execution capabilities, it would be practically impossible to enforce.

We can see this in the present situation. Because of the war, the Russians have cut off trade with the British and the French, but in reality, only Ukraine and the central regions of Russia have really cut off trade.

The main reason for the interruption of trade was not the embargo of the Russian government, but the fact that the war blocked the Black Sea transportation channel. Our goods took over the market in these regions.

British and French goods entering Russia from the Baltic Sea have never stopped. The main reason why they did not enter the central and southern regions is the high cost of transportation, which makes them uncompetitive.

As for the issue of industries, these are only preliminary ideas. The final decision rests with the capitalists, whose sensitivity to the market is undoubtedly superior to ours.

The government will only formulate policies and not invest directly in these light industries. We believe that the capitalists will do a better job.”

Franz nodded. He never harbored any expectations about the execution capabilities of the Russian government, and the possibility of a blockade was indeed low.

Historically, the Russians did not blockade the Danube after Russo-Austrian relations broke down. It was obvious that the Russian government would not rashly take actions that could lead to war.

Regarding the industrial issues, Franz didn’t need to worry about it either. Since the cabinet government was not planning to invest directly, they should let the capitalists handle it themselves. They would bear the consequences of profit and loss, and as the emperor, he didn’t need to concern himself with such matters.

From a development perspective, Russia and Austria were likely to become economic competitors in the future. Russia’s main industry was food export, which was also Austria’s main industry.

It was just that Austria exported processed agricultural products, while Russia directly exported raw agricultural products. But there was still competition between them.

Economic competition and its effects on bilateral relations were almost certain if this situation was not resolved.

From this perspective, Franz had to be thankful that the Russian government was an autocracy and that such conflicts were unlikely to erupt in the short term.

After more than two months of bitter fighting, the allied forces finally defeated the Greek “civilian militia” and achieved the first major British victory since the outbreak of the Near East War.

Major General Oliver’s tense heart finally relaxed; he now had a commendable military achievement. With less than 5,000 casualties on their side, they killed 18,000 enemy soldiers and captured 14,000. No matter how you looked at it, it was a brilliant victory.

The fact that the enemy forces were a ragtag bunch was something he had deliberately ignored. As long as he continued to go on like this and defeat the Montenegrin army, he would have accomplished all of his mission objectives.

A young military officer reported, “General, there’s a military order from the homeland: we have been ordered to pursue the enemy. If the Kingdom of Greece shelters these enemy forces, we are authorized to take the necessary measures.”

Necessary measures? In reality, it meant finding an excuse to invade the Kingdom of Greece and teach the Greek government a lesson. Obviously, the British government was very unhappy with the Greek government and wanted to show them who was the boss.

“Understood,” Major General Oliver replied calmly.

He didn’t have a positive impression of the Greeks. If it hadn’t been for the Greek surprise attack that forced the Ottoman forces to withdraw troops from the front lines, they wouldn’t have lost the Battle of Sofia.

Although Major General Oliver had shifted the blame to others, he still knew that he could not escape responsibility for that battle. It would stay with him for the rest of his life, becoming an everlasting stain on his record.

Now that he had a chance to settle the score with the Greeks, he was not going to let it go.

There would always be excuses. Even if Otto I pretended to give in, the British government still wanted to act against this unruly lackey.

It was obviously impossible to muddle through. It was just that if the Greek government did not admit to this expedition, then the British could not use it as an excuse to do anything to them out in the open.

All of Europe was watching, and if they went too far, other countries would intervene. John Bull was still not at the point of being able to cover the sky with one hand.

Even domestically in Britain, there was no major problem with Greece attacking the Ottomans, it was just that the timing they chose was inappropriate.

At the last moment, the Greek government realized its mistake and did not join the Russian camp. This gave them room to maneuver. Obviously, King Otto I’s political judgment was still passable.

.....

Outside Constantinople, at the Russian Army Headquarters, General Menshikov received another letter of reprimand from Nicholas I.

After such a long assault and hundreds of thousands of casualties, Constantinople was still in the hands of the enemy and showed no signs of being conquered. Needless to say, the Russian government was getting anxious.

Menshikov's pressure increased considerably. If he couldn't find a solution, the Russian government would replace him. The glory of conquering Constantinople would be lost forever, something Menshikov could not tolerate.

A middle-aged officer suggested, "Commander, you should consider the Austrian proposal. As long as we can take Constantinople, the rest will be easier to handle."

Menshikov shook his head and said, "The Austrian proposal is too expensive! They don't want to conquer Constantinople, they want to level it with cannons.

The heavy artillery that they are recommending can only be used as coastal artillery after the siege is over, in addition to being used for sieges. If we follow their suggestion and bring in a few hundred giant cannons, the daily consumption of ammunition would be thousands of tons.

Not to mention whether we can afford it or not, even if the Austrians are producing at full capacity, they may not be able to meet our needs.

To shoot millions of rubles worth of ammunition every day just to conquer Constantinople would require at least hundreds of millions, perhaps even more than a billion rubles in expenses. Do you think we can afford it?"

Even more problematic than the cost was the uncertainty that Constantinople might not be taken even after the money was spent.

The giant cannons recommended by Austria were extremely cumbersome to move on the battlefield. If the enemy destroys the artillery positions, it would be even more disastrous.

The middle-aged officer warned, "But Commander, this seems to be the only way to break through Constantinople.

The enemy on the other side is very stubborn and relies on fortifications for defense. Our six-pound cannons are like scratching an itch for them, and even twelve-pound cannons can only deal with ordinary fortifications.

If we can't destroy these fortifications, how can we take Constantinople? If we miss this opportunity, we will be considered the sinners of Russia."

This was the most frustrating aspect; regardless of the feasibility of this method, it was the only possible way to succeed.

The Russian government wouldn't care, and the local population would care even less. They were already at the gates of Constantinople; if they didn't capture the city, could they face their ancestors?

.....

After inspecting the camp, seeing the dwindling morale, and hearing the pitiful cries, even the stone-hearted Menshikov was involuntarily shaken.

He knew they couldn't go on like this. If the fighting continued, it was likely that the Russian army would revolt before Constantinople was conquered.

Even Russian cannon fodder was merely human. When the casualties reach a certain point, they too will crumble. This was a consequence that Menshikov could not afford.

.....

In a corner of the camp, a group of soldiers were conspiring.

A dirt-covered young soldier with a somber tone said, "Joi, have you figured out the route? If we continue like this, it won't be long before we all die on the battlefield.

You know, just yesterday Rozbicki injured his left leg in an explosion. They had to amputate it to prevent infection. Unable to bear the blow, he committed suicide the same night."

A middle-aged soldier next to him reminded him: "Fuks, don't talk like that. We have to plan the escape route carefully, otherwise, if something goes wrong, we'll be hanged at the gates of the camp!"

To deter deserters, the Russian army used a brutal method: hanging people from a pole and letting them die slowly from heat, thirst, and hunger...

After seeing the expectant faces of the group, Joi sighed and pulled out a sketch, pointing to it as he explained, "The route has been identified, but it's a difficult one. Leaving from here, there are guards all the way. You must evade them and enter the Balkan Mountains to be temporarily safe.

This is only the first stage of the escape. Later, you'll have to cross the Balkan Mountains to enter Austrian-occupied territory.

During this time, you won't receive any supplies from the outside world and will have to forage for food in the forests. In addition to being on the lookout for poisonous creatures and wild animals, you will also have to worry about losing your bearings.

Reaching Austrian-occupied territory doesn't mean you're safe. As our allies, even if you inadvertently enter their territory, you would not be disarmed but likely sent back.

The only way to blend in is to pretend to be a war refugee, and language is a big problem. Russian and Bulgarian are very similar, but there are still differences. Once exposed, no one knows what will happen."

The middle-aged man said solemnly, "We have no choice. You may not be aware of it in the logistics unit, but the casualties on the front lines have been devastating these days.

Every day, you can see familiar faces disappearing from here. Half of our camp has already been gradually replenished. If we continue to stay here, it won't be long before everyone dies.

Joi, whether we can escape or not, thank you.

You can rest assured, we know what to do. When attacking, we'll find an opportunity to play dead, and when it gets dark, we'll quietly leave.

Even if we are discovered, we can say that we were stunned and disoriented by the explosion."

A premeditated escape plan had begun. They were not the first, and they would not be the last. The brutal losses had already driven them to the brink of collapse.

They would rather risk fleeing for an uncertain chance at life than remain here.

Anyway, their whole family were serfs, the property of aristocrats. Even if they were discovered, there was no fear of implicating their families.

.....

The middle-aged man asked in a low voice, "Hurry up, where's Wallace? Why can't we see the boy?"

Fuks replied, "Uncle Marni, I didn't see him coming along. I'm afraid something has happened. Shall we go back and look for him?"

After a moment's thought, the middle-aged man said, "No need to bother with him. Life and death on the battlefield are up to fate. Where can we find him in this darkness?"

Now, everyone, hurry. It's not safe here. If we can't move through here quickly, we won't be able to escape when the light comes."

Their luck was good. With someone providing them with a map, they didn't run in the wrong direction and made it safely through the first day of their escape.

Not everyone was so lucky. Shortly after their departure, another group of deserters unfortunately encountered a patrol and were captured.

The military judge asked, "Commander, last night we caught seven more deserters. Shall we proceed as usual?"

"Mmm."

Menshikov seemed to grunt nonchalantly, but in reality, his mind was not at ease.

The number of deserters was increasing, and as a high-ranking officer who didn't have rocks for brains, he knew that meant the army was nearing its breaking point.

Faced with reality, Menshikov quickly made a compromise. He didn't want to become a traitor to the nation, so he had to fight this battle to the end.

Let the Russian government worry about money. After all, no one could back out now.

Menshikov said, "Somebody, use the Austrian telegraph network to send this telegram to the Russian government!"

Since Austria took control of the Danube principalities, telegraph lines had spread rapidly. By the end of 1853, they were connected to the domestic telegraph network.

At this time, the Russians often borrowed the Austrian telegraph network to transmit messages that were not particularly confidential and could be completed in two or three days.

If they used Russia's own communications network, they would have to go to large cities in Poland or Ukraine to send a telegram. Without ten days or half a month, it would be impossible to get the message back to St. Petersburg.

Obviously, Menshikov did not think that this plan needed to be kept secret from the Austrians. Even if he wanted to keep it secret, it was impossible. After all, they had to buy cannons from Austria.

Menshikov had no intention of relying on the domestic military industry for supplies. If they waited for the artillery to be produced and transported to the front, who knew if it would be a year or two later?

On the question of attacking Constantinople, Nicholas I gave Menshikov his full support. Anyone who made trouble here would be opposing the great Tsar.

Without the Tsar's support, Menshikov would not have been able to change the logistics system of the Russian army in the Balkans. Without change, life at the front would not have been so smooth.

The responsibility was transferred to St. Petersburg. Menshikov explained all the circumstances, and the decision on how to proceed was left to Nicholas I.

TN: This should've been posted yesterday but I got busy with the celebrations and family outing so I could only do so today. Thank you for all the support. Happy New Year! Cheers!

Chapter 233: The Constantinople Demolition Team

St. Petersburg

When Tsar Nicholas I received an urgent telegram from Menshikov, he was disturbed, especially when he saw the estimated ammunition consumption in the following notes. His heart was bleeding. This was all money!

The Russian government had already spent three or four hundred million rubles on this war. If you add the economic losses caused by the war, this figure could easily double.

Where was the victory? This was a question that no one could answer. Looking at the situation on the battlefield, it seemed that the winner was far from being determined between the two sides.

If he had known in advance that the war would lead to the current outcome, Nicholas I could guarantee that he would never have started this conflict.

Casualties were tolerable; Russia was a large country capable of bearing them. But the cost of the war far exceeded his expectations.

Before the British and French entered the war, the Russian government planned to launch several offensives to take Constantinople directly, capture it within three months, and then defeat the Ottoman Empire within a year.

After the British and French entered the war, the Russian government believed that once the Bulgarian campaign was over, the capture of Constantinople would be relatively easy. Once they took Constantinople, negotiations could begin to resolve the issues.

Unexpectedly, when they reached the gates of Constantinople, they encountered the French blocking their way.

With two hundred thousand French troops defending the fortress city, this outcome was enough to make anyone despair. However, there was no choice; under domestic pressure, they had to proceed even if it meant facing seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Even the hardheaded Russians got hammered until they were dazed. After exhausting various means, the final conclusion was that they had to resort to artillery bombardment.

Nicholas I asked, "What do you think of General Menshikov's proposal?"

Minister of War Chernyshyov replied, "Your Majesty, from a military perspective, General Menshikov's proposal is sound."

Constantinople is one of the most formidable fortresses in the world, heavily defended by the enemy. There is no shortcut to conquering it; we can only methodically take one stronghold at a time.

Fortunately, the Ottoman Empire has decayed, neglecting the construction of fortifications. It is only with the use of artillery that we can advance.”

This answer was quite ironic — had the Ottomans not neglected the modernization of their fortifications, even the use of artillery might not have had any effect.

This was the fact — if the Russians could get heavy artillery, could the enemy not get some for themselves? If the war required it, Britain and France could easily produce thousands of artillery pieces.

According to General Menshikov’s proposal, artillery positions could be built a few kilometers away and bombard Constantinople. With such a large target, even if the people could hide, buildings could not.

Two hundred thousand French troops scattered throughout the city definitely don’t have enough bomb shelters to hide in. Just indiscriminate bombing can inflict heavy losses on the French, assuming there are enough cannons and ammunition.

Civilian casualties had never been a consideration for the Russian government. If they did not flee, even if they knew that war was coming, they were seeking death. Cannons and guns do not have eyes.

Finance Minister Vronchenko frowned and said, “Your Majesty, the number of cannons requested by General Menshikov and the terrifying amount of ammunition consumption are quite excessive. Can’t they be more frugal with their usage?

It is not cheap to have these heavy cannons and ammunition. Even if the Austrians don’t take advantage of the situation, it’s still an astronomical figure!”

He wasn’t against the plan itself. He just felt heartbroken about the money. Constantinople must be captured, or else there would be no way to explain it domestically. This was a consensus reached by all.

As for the broader perspective, Vronchenko still had some understanding. The problem was that the Russian government was indeed in financial trouble. It was extremely difficult for them to come up with several hundred million rubles at once.

The fact that Austria did not take advantage of the situation was one of the reasons why the Russian government supported Austria at the Paris Conference, instead of being influenced by the British and French.

Nicholas I was a man of integrity, and as long as it did not exceed his bottom line, he generally kept his promises.

Of course, if it went beyond that line, being the Tsar, he had the same hereditary talent as his ancestors, as evidenced by their practices.

“Mr. Vronchenko, the priority now is to take Constantinople. Once we have achieved this goal, I can negotiate a ceasefire with the British and French.

If the war continues, our military expenditures in the later stages may be even higher than now,” Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode persuaded.

They were all in the same boat; everyone would be in trouble if the boat capsized.

Now the river had begun to rise, and there was a possibility that the waves would overturn the boat at any moment. The only solution was to reach the harbor as quickly as possible and take shelter from the storm.

To reach the shore, they must capture Constantinople. Capturing Constantinople would not only appease internal sentiments but also provide leverage in negotiations with the enemy.

Finance Minister Vronchenko grumbled, “Count Karl, am I the kind of person who can’t see the bigger picture?”

The current problem is that the Ministry of Finance simply doesn’t have enough money to pay for the war expenses.

According to General Menshikov’s plan, it can’t be done without two or three hundred million rubles, and that’s if everything goes smoothly.

In actual battle, unforeseen circumstances are bound to occur, and the cost may increase even more.

On the battlefields of the Caucasus and Crimea, war is being fought on both fronts. Commanders on the front lines are urgently requesting new equipment, and this is an urgent matter that requires funding.

The annual tax revenue of the Russian Empire is only so much. Because of the war, our tax revenues are expected to decrease further this year. Where am I going to get so much money?”

Lack of money was indeed a major problem, especially in times of war. It was manageable in peacetime, but when war broke out, the weaknesses of Russia were exposed. The Russian Empire lagged far behind capitalist countries in terms of raising funds.

To put it bluntly, countries like Britain, France, and Austria could resort to printing more banknotes even when they were running out of money. In the worst case, this could lead to inflation, but it could be a solution to urgent financial needs.

Can the Russian Empire do the same? They use rubles, which have always used real gold and silver. They don’t recognize paper money issued by other European countries, and the international capital market doesn’t recognize paper rubles issued by the Russian government.

Even domestically, not many people trusted paper rubles, mainly because of the government’s questionable reputation from past issues.

“How much are we lacking?” asked Nicholas I, showing his concern.

The shortfall was expected. The key was the magnitude of the shortfall. If it was not too big, they could still find a solution.

Finance Minister Vronchenko analyzed: “Your Majesty, if General Menshikov’s plan is implemented, the preliminary estimate is that our military expenditures in 1854 may exceed four hundred million rubles, which will exceed the total sum of the previous year and a half.

By issuing bonds we can raise 65 million rubles. Government tax revenues can provide 80 million rubles. We can also get 58 million rubles from domestic banks.

Now that Constantinople is within our grasp, we can levy a war tax, which we estimate at 120 million rubles.

The final deficit is 77 million rubles. This is under ideal conditions. If circumstances change, this figure may increase further.”

Nicholas I remained silent; the deficit was too great, and domestic tax revenues had reached their limit. Any further increase could lead to great unrest.

Minister of War Chernyshyov inquired, “Is it possible to obtain loans from abroad, perhaps from Austria?”

Finance Minister Vronchenko shook his head and said, “That is impossible. We have exhausted all the channels available for raising funds overseas.

If the Austrians had not initiated the war of unification last year, they might have been able to provide us with this loan. However, it’s not possible now.

Although they nearly annexed Bavaria without much bloodshed, to deter Britain and France, they mobilized nearly 1.8 million troops, consuming a considerable amount of their government’s financial resources.”

There was no way around it; Austria’s financial situation was only slightly better than Russia’s. However, the Austrian government was accelerating the process of industrialization and channeling a significant portion of its financial resources into domestic development.

Considering the expenses from the previous year’s war, from a professional perspective, Vronchenko assessed that the Austrian government could not come up with this amount of money.

After some hesitation, Nicholas I slowly asked, “If we temporarily suspend the war in the Caucasus, how much military spending can be saved?”

In the current three-front war, the capture of Constantinople was the top priority for the Russian government, followed by Crimea. Both places were non-negotiable.

As for the Caucasus, the Russian forces had an absolute advantage and held the initiative in the war. Stopping the offensive there would only bring relief to the ailing Ottoman Empire and would not provoke them to be active.

After careful consideration, Finance Minister Vronchenko replied, “Approximately 40-50 million rubles can be saved. If we negotiate a ceasefire with the Ottoman Empire, withdraw the majority of our forces, and deploy them to the Crimean front, we could save an additional 10 million rubles.”

This meant a reduction in the number of troops. Since the forces in the Caucasus were withdrawn, there would be no need for additional mobilization, closing the manpower gap.

As the saying goes, “When the cannons roar, a million in gold is spent.” This statement was not an exaggeration; in fact, it might even be an understatement. In this era, war required not just thousands but millions of taels of gold, at the very least.

Nicholas I said resolutely, “Very well, let’s do it this way. We will temporarily spare the Ottomans; in the Caucasus, we will switch from offense to defense, moving troops to reinforce the other two fronts. Once we take Constantinople, we’ll reassess the situation.

As for the remaining deficit, the Ministry of Finance will find a solution. In any case, this is a critical moment, and we cannot let a lack of funds lead to the failure of the war.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Vronchenko replied helplessly.

This was a difficult problem. Although it appeared that a significant portion of the deficit had been addressed, the remaining shortfall was still astronomical.

This was not an easy problem to solve, especially when all fundraising options had been exhausted.

But in his current position, Vronchenko could only steel himself to find a solution.

The problem of financing was solved by a narrow margin, and with unanimous agreement, the Constantinople Demolition Team was officially formed under the leadership of General Menshikov. Their rallying cry was to raze Constantinople to the ground.

As for concerns about preserving historical buildings, the current Russian government couldn’t afford to consider such issues. The priority was to capture Constantinople first, and post-war reconstruction could take care of any collateral damage.

If necessary, the blame could be shifted to the French. Once the Holy City was retaken, no one would care about minor imperfections. It could be said that the Russians ignored everything else in their quest to conquer Constantinople.

Chapter 234

At a crucial moment, the bureaucrats of the Russian government showed rare efficiency.

As intelligent people, they understood the gravity of the consequences. Lack of such insight would have led to their elimination in the internal struggles of the bureaucratic circle.

The demand for weapons and ammunition was so great that it couldn’t be met immediately; orders had to be placed for production. Even if Franz had been prepared, it was impossible to have hundreds of large cannons and tens of thousands of tons of ammunition just lying around.

If the Russians decided not to buy them, whom could he sell these munitions to?

The Austrian army had no use for these bulky behemoths, and the financially strapped navy couldn’t afford so much artillery. Moreover, coastal defense didn’t require such an arsenal.

Once the decision was made, the Russian government immediately sent orders for the weapons to Austria. Unfortunately, there was not enough production capacity for the large cannons.

In normal times, the Austrian army purchased mostly 6-pound and 12-pound cannons, which were the most commonly used active equipment. Very few were equipped with 24-pound field artillery. During this era, the main artillery of naval cruisers was typically 24-pounders, and battleships were equipped with 48-pounders.

However, the power of these cannons was clearly insufficient to attack the fortifications of Constantinople. The Russians needed guns of 68 pounds or heavier, which were generally used as coastal artillery and had very limited actual demand.

(Author's Note: In this era, there was considerable variation in the caliber of cannons. It was common for cannons of the same model and batch to differ by a few millimeters; for cannons of the same model produced by different arms manufacturers, the caliber discrepancy could be more than ten millimeters. Therefore, measuring cannon size by caliber became obsolete).

These heavy cannons were not only effective siege weapons but also posed a deadly threat to British and French warships. Clearly, the Russians wanted to change the current situation where they were only passively enduring attacks.

With a small market demand, the number of production lines set up by military enterprises was naturally limited. Most arms manufacturers could produce large cannons but would start production lines only after receiving orders, which took time.

Not enough production capacity? No problem, Russia and Austria were allies. Franz was eager to help, and even active equipment was for sale. Anything the Austrian army had was up for grabs.

The era of breech-loading artillery was dawning, and these cannons would soon be obsolete. It could be considered preparation for an early equipment upgrade.

Old goods? You don't have to buy them. New ones will be available in a few months.

Obviously, the Russian government couldn't wait, and neither could the Russian troops on the front lines. Old or not, as long as they worked, it was all right. At worst, the Austrians could provide after-sales maintenance services.

Even the cannons ordered by the Austrian navy were intercepted by the Russians. After all, the navy had no immediate battles to fight, and for the sake of Russian-Austrian friendship, it was better to prioritize their ally!

As it turned out, every plan was based on ideal conditions. After a delay of more than two months, the Austrians were able to muster just over 150 large cannons. The rest had to be made up with 24-pound and 48-pound cannons.

Receiving the cannons did not mean that an attack could be launched immediately. Transporting them from Austria across the Danube to Bulgaria was easy, but getting them to the front lines was a major challenge.

These massive artillery pieces, each weighing tens or even hundreds of tons, were quite cumbersome to transport. Originally, these cannons were designed as coastal artillery; as long as they were powerful enough, their weight and size didn't matter much. Now, of course, their transportation naturally became problematic.

With the cannons not yet in place, General Menshikov slowed down the front-line offensive. He didn't want Russian troops to die in vain. Russian cannon fodder might be cheap, but losing too many of them was still a painful loss!

.....

Athens

The Minister of War anxiously said: "Your Majesty, the British, under the pretext of pursuing the enemy, have crossed the border and entered our territory. This is a document from the front asking for instructions on what to do."

Otto I casually dismissed the document. What could be done? Wasn't the answer to such a simple question obvious? Do nothing, of course.

Blocking the British was beyond their capabilities. Even more unthinkable was to help the British chase down fleeing soldiers. Whatever the situation, the Greek government could not stoop so low.

"Let the local governments find ways to hide the returning soldiers. If not, send them to the rear. We must be cautious and not give the British any leverage," ordered Otto I.

At this point, paying a price was inevitable. Politically, the actions of the British actually gave him an opportunity to extricate himself.

The British Empire was a maritime superpower and a top global power. Losing to them was more acceptable to the people than losing to the Ottomans.

It wasn't that the government wasn't trying, it was just that the enemy was too powerful.

If Otto I were more shameless, he could even boast that their campaign against the Ottoman Empire was overwhelmingly successful. They did not expect to be cowardly ambushed by the British, leading to their defeat. This would be considered an injustice that had nothing to do with the actual situation of the war.

As for whether this would create anti-British sentiment among the public, that was no longer a primary concern. Relations had never been good since the last conflict between Britain and Greece, and adding another issue to the mix was unlikely to make much difference.

The Foreign Minister reminded him, "Your Majesty, from the current situation, it would seem that the outcome of this Near East War no longer has anything to do with us.

The British troops have entered the Greek Peninsula and now we have lost the power of choice. We have to think about the consequences."

Although they had confidence in the Russians, the British had already arrived. If they don't come up with a plan soon, they might become a government in exile before the Russians could win.

Thinking of this, Otto I felt a headache coming on. His family had just been expelled from the Kingdom of Bavaria, and if it weren't for Austria's careful handling of the exchange of the throne of the Kingdom of Lombardy, they would already be a government in exile.

Now all the family's resources were invested in the Kingdom of Lombardy, leaving no capacity to support him. After years of pure investment with no return, many in the family were dissatisfied.

Historically, after Otto I abdicated, the Bavarian royal family sent a replacement, but his brothers and nephews didn't want to take over the mess, leading to the ascension of George I.

Without external support, the problems he faced were even more troublesome than in history, and a misstep could lead to being overthrown by the British.

After taking a few steps back and forth, Otto I said, "Let the Ministry of Foreign Affairs begin secret negotiations with the British. Under the present circumstances, we can only minimize our losses.

At the same time, reach out to the Russians, the French, and the Austrians. They probably don't want to see Britain dominate alone. We need their diplomatic support now."

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the Foreign Minister replied.

In the era of great powers, without the support of these powers, escaping this crisis would be as difficult as ascending to heaven.

.....

Otto I's judgment proved to be correct. Although the Kingdom of Greece was weak in power, economically underdeveloped, and lacking in resources, its geographic location was advantageous.

The Russians could not tolerate the British dominating this region and blocking their path to the Mediterranean; the French also did not want the British to expand their influence in the Near East and thus interfere with their interests.

As for Austria, that goes without saying. Across the Adriatic Sea lies Greece, and allowing the British to grow strong there also threatened Austria's maritime security.

.....

Vienna

After receiving a request for help from the Greek government, Franz decided to intervene in the British actions in Greece, but the method of intervention became a problem.

Military intervention was impossible unless he sent the Austrian army over, and as for the navy, well, the Austrian navy was not up to the task.

Metternich suggested, “Your Majesty, this time we can join forces with the French. Napoleon III will not be willing to see his interests seized by the British.

In the Mediterranean region, as long as our two countries are united, the British cannot ignore us.”

Indeed, the Austrian and French navies, even combined, could not match the British, but the British had many colonies and their navy was spread out over many regions.

In contrast, the entire Austrian navy was nestled in the Mediterranean and was the second strongest naval force there after Britain and France. The combined naval forces of Austria and France in the Mediterranean would surpass the British.

Power equals influence. Even though the British were the masters of the seas, they could not ignore the united will of Austria and France.

Historically, the Kingdom of Greece survived by exploiting the contradictions between the powers, and now Otto I made the same choice.

In international politics, allies on one issue in the morning can become enemies on another in the afternoon.

Allies without conflicting interests are almost non-existent in this era. The core factor that determines alliances is whether the mutual interests are greater than the contradictions.

Franz thought for a moment and said, “Let's talk to France first and see what they want. The interests within Greece are not significant enough to make demands; we just need to make sure the British don't get complete control of Greece.”

This lack of desire or demand was Franz's attitude toward Greece. The reason was simple: historically, all nations that invested in Greece ended up losing money.

Unless something unexpected happened, the Kingdom of Greece would soon face financial difficulties, unable to pay back loans to various countries, leading to a period where its finances would be managed by those countries.

This was not the first or second time this had happened. Whoever took on this "little brother" would have to provide loans to keep them afloat.

Countries like Britain and France, where finance was dominant, could engage in this kind of business. Capitalists could use various means to raise funds and seek profits. Even if loans and bonds were defaulted, it was the common people who suffered while they had already secured enough profits.

But Austria couldn't play that game. There wasn't enough idle capital in the country to engage in such speculative activities. If financial groups dared to get involved, the government in Vienna would be the first to disapprove.

These funds are much better spent on domestic development than on trying to buy favor with the Greeks. Under the philosophy of self-development, Austrian financial capital is very low-key in the international capital market.

Being low-key is necessary; compared to the British and French consortiums, Austrian domestic financial groups are too weak. Being too active could lead to falling into traps and being swallowed by others.

Since the end of its westward expansion strategy, the Austrian government has been easing relations with other European nations.

When there are no conflicting interests, diplomatic relations naturally recover quickly. Especially with smaller countries, as soon as the Austrian government extends an olive branch, relations immediately become more amicable.

In international diplomacy, if you hold a grudge, congratulations, soon the whole world will be your enemy.

This includes the issue of leadership in the German Federal Empire, which was actually a compromise between Britain and Austria. If the two countries had continued their disputes, an emperor would not have been chosen so quickly.

Now, the restoration of Franco-Austrian relations has become the focus of the Foreign Ministry's work, and the French government will likely make a similar decision. The reason is simple: it's all about interests!

Don't assume that Britain and France are allies just because Napoleon III is consistently pro-British. In reality, they are allies only when confronted with Russia.

Most of the time Britain and France were on opposite sides. Britain was the world's foremost naval power, while France was second, and the gap between their strengths was not as great as in later times, with the French Navy having about 60-70% of the strength of the Royal Navy.

This disparity was enough for the first power to suppress the second. Moreover, the Anglo-French contradictions were significant because of the added conflicts in their overseas colonies. However, Russia's ability to attract enmity was so strong that it overshadowed Anglo-French contradictions.

With this in mind, Napoleon III, after gaining the upper hand in the Crimean War, quickly negotiated with the Russians, disregarding the feelings of his British allies, because the French needed the Russians to contain the British.

These complex international relations caused Franz a great deal of headaches. Before Austria ventures out to establish overseas colonies, it has relatively few conflicts of interest with other countries.

Once this step is taken, the situation will change dramatically. Conflicts with colonial nations are inevitable, and managing these relationships will become the greatest challenge for the Austrian Foreign Ministry.

In one respect, the British did them a favor. Although their goal was to prevent the outbreak of a continental war in Europe and to seize the opportunity to contain Russia, the creation of the German Federal Empire also helped to avoid direct conflict between France and Austria.

Regardless of the size of this buffer, its existence meant that the governments of France and Austria did not have to face each other's military pressure directly.

Franz feared the French, and Napoleon III likewise feared Austria. On the surface, the two great powers were evenly matched, creating a balance between Western and Central-Southern Europe.

This balance meant stability, and without significant interests at stake, neither Paris nor Vienna would rashly disrupt this equilibrium.

If the French wanted to expand their colonies abroad, they inevitably had to increase their naval investments. For internal security, easing relations with Austria was a natural choice.

Similarly, the Austrian government, also wanting to join this feast of colonization, had to ease relations with France for its own safety.

In this context, a warming of Franco-Austrian relations became inevitable. The joint mediation of the Greek issue created an opportunity to improve relations between the two countries.

Chapter 235: The Dreadful Disease

Palace of Versailles

Foreign Minister Auvergne said, "Your Majesty, the New Holy Roman Empire's envoy in Paris has sent us a diplomatic note. They propose that our two countries take joint action on the Greek issue.

It seems that the Austrian government is worried that the British might take the opportunity to annex the Kingdom of Greece, threatening their interests."

At the time, the population of Greece had just exceeded one million. And in this war, Greece suffered significant losses among its young and strong population.

If the British wanted to make the Kingdom of Greece their colony, it would not be very difficult.

These concerns were clearly not unfounded. Annexing Greece could have significant strategic benefits for the British, not only blocking the Russians from the Mediterranean but also increasing their influence in the Near East.

The French government was equally worried about this situation. The 'cake' of the Near East was only so big; if the British took more, it would inevitably squeeze out their interests in the region.

After some thought, Napoleon III said, "The British annexation of the Kingdom of Greece is very detrimental to our Near East strategy. Send someone to talk to the Austrians. As long as our interests do not conflict too much, we will join forces with them."

Alone, Napoleon III was quite apprehensive about confronting the British, but he was fearless when joining forces with Austria. In this era, the power disparity between Britain, France, Russia, and Austria had not yet widened significantly. Even though the British had the upper hand, they could not face two adversaries simultaneously.

Common interests are always the basis for cooperation. France and the New Holy Roman Empire are involved in a struggle for dominance over continental Europe; theoretically, the two should be in deep conflict.

At the moment, however, the continental overlord is still Russia. Before the "Russian Bear" falls, both countries are only supporting actors and it's not yet time for them to turn against each other.

Influenced by the Napoleonic Wars, every move France made on the European continent was closely watched.

Under such circumstances, any external expansionist action by France on the European continent could be misinterpreted by the outside world and lead to joint resistance against them. Therefore, the French government must keep a low profile at present.

The New Holy Roman Empire is also keeping a low profile. Although Austria has developed considerably in the four years under Franz's leadership, this development has merely allowed Austria to keep up with the times and has not created an advantage over other countries.

After the annexation of Southern Germany, the newly established New Holy Roman Empire entered a period of internal integration. In the short term, they do not have the capacity to stir up trouble, and Franz currently does not have plans to vie for dominance over continental Europe.

Both parties are behaving themselves so that a Franco-Austrian conflict has not yet reached the point of ignition. This undoubtedly creates favorable conditions for their upcoming cooperation.

Minister of the Interior Persigny analyzed: "Your Majesty, the intentions of the Austrians are probably not so simple."

As far as we know, since the failure of the unification of Germany, there have been increasing calls within the Austrian government for the establishment of overseas colonies.

With the situation in Europe now stable and Austria's path to German unification cut off, it's likely that Russia and Austria have already reached an agreement regarding the Balkans.

Regardless of the outcome of the Near East War, Austria's expansion on the European continent has reached its limit. Even the advantages they've gained in the Balkans are questionable as to whether they can be fully absorbed.

Under these circumstances, the Austrians will likely abandon the policy of the Metternich era and resume their overseas colonial strategy.

We need to prepare in advance; a new competitor may soon enter the scene.”

Not long ago, the French government determined its next course of action — temporarily abandoning continental expansion to focus on developing overseas colonies.

Now that Austria has joined the overseas colonial activities, it’s natural for the French to be on alert.

At present, it’s still the era of sail-powered navies, and there’s no revolutionary gap in naval technology between the nations. For the established European powers looking to expand their navies, the difficulty isn’t insurmountable.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that France is afraid of Austria joining the colonial race. On the contrary, France had an absolute advantage over Austria in overseas colonization.

But in the competition for colonies, Austria is not the only rival. There are many competitors, and typically, there’s mutual restraint in the scramble for colonial territories.

As long as it’s not a struggle over core interests, conflicts tend to be limited to power plays in specific regions, and it’s rare to see an all-out effort for domination.

If disputes led directly to war, it would be a winner-take-all situation. This is obviously impractical. With so many competitors, suppressing one will only lead to the emergence of another.

With such a dynamic, nations would be too busy suppressing rivals to have the energy to open up new colonies. There are limits to colonial expansion; blind expansion could lead to catastrophic losses.

Not all land has colonial value; even within the same region, different outcomes may arise depending on which nation governs it.

Colonies with no strategic value and mediocre economic prospects usually go to whoever occupies them first; but for colonies with high strategic value and rich benefits, fierce struggles are inevitable.

After the mid-19th century, various countries had disputes over overseas colonies, but wars between colonial empires caused by the scramble for colonies were very rare.

The reason was that the most fertile lands had already been divided among the powers, and the remaining territories weren’t worth waging war over. Ultimately, everyone was acting for profit, and no one wanted to engage in a losing deal.

After pondering for a moment, Napoleon III said confidently, “This should be a good thing for us. If the Austrians start colonizing overseas, they will inevitably have to increase their naval development efforts.

This will greatly reduce the military pressure we face on our homeland. Compared to the Austrians, our advantage at sea is much greater than on land.

Due to geographical reasons, the Austrians are at a natural strategic disadvantage in the competition for overseas colonies.

If they do not focus on expanding from the Mediterranean to the African continent to develop in other areas, they will have to pass under our watchful eyes, as well as the watchful eyes of the British.

The more they invest in overseas forces, the less they will dare to confront us diplomatically in the future, because we can cut off their supply lines at any time.”

After speaking, Napoleon III’s face darkened. Austria’s situation was indeed as he described it; starting overseas colonization put them at a disadvantage and exposed their weaknesses to their enemies.

But aren’t the British, who control the Strait of Gibraltar, also in a position to cut them off? In the event of a war between the two countries, the British could easily split the French navy in two, preventing them from supporting each other.

Why did the Austrian government give up on establishing overseas colonies in the past? Could it really be that they were not interested in the benefits of colonization?

Of course, this is unlikely, as everyone understands the substantial benefits that overseas colonization can bring. However, for overseas colonization, Austria’s geographical location is a great disadvantage, which can cause them to suffer losses in the process.

As long as they don’t develop and strengthen, it’s okay; relying on Austria’s power, they can maintain colonies of average strategic and economic value. But once they encounter richer opportunities, they definitely can’t compete with the likes of Britain and France.

For a few colonies of low strategic and economic value, investing a large amount of financial resources in the development of a navy seemed disproportionate in terms of cost and benefit from the perspective of the previous Austrian government.

However, times are changing. With the development of industrialization, those overseas colonies that once seemed insignificant are revealing their value again.

Don’t underestimate Austria because of its geography; Franz understands that with the development of naval technology, this weakness will become less important in the future.

In the era of sailing warships, Austrian overseas colonization faced the fatal challenge of having to travel thousands of miles more than Britain and France, significantly increasing both costs and risks.

However, with the advent of the ironclad era and the use of steam engines in warships, the problem of distance would gradually be solved.

Especially after the opening of the Suez Canal, the journey from the Mediterranean to the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans will be much shorter, which will greatly improve safety.

This is also one of the reasons why the Austrian government is easing relations with France. The idea of digging a canal to connect the Mediterranean and the Red Sea was proposed by Franz.

This requires cooperation with the French, as Austria’s influence in Egypt is still too weak. Even after Franz’s rise to power and his efforts to increase his influence in the region, it’s unlikely that they will be able to catch up in a short time.

.....

The Crimean Peninsula was the scene of a fierce war between Great Britain, France, and Russia. However, casualties on the battlefield were still within the tolerance of all parties involved.

But the humid climate, a variety of small insects, and the vicious attack of blood-sucking parasites led to the spread of disease, causing large numbers of non-combat casualties that became unbearable.

In the spring of 1854, for the first time, the number of non-combat casualties among the allied forces exceeded the number of battlefield casualties. The Russians were not spared, of course, but they were better adapted to the local climate, so their non-combat casualties were relatively few.

Russian military commander Gorchakov could never have imagined that it wasn't the arrival of new equipment that equalized the ratio of casualties between the enemy and themselves, but disease instead.

Of course, he didn't yet have the leisure to concentrate on this aspect. Gorchakov was also troubled by the large number of Russian soldiers falling ill, and the harsh reality of the lack of sufficient medical supplies and medical personnel left him feeling helpless.

Had he known about the dire situation of the allied forces, Gorchakov's mood might have improved considerably. If possible, he wouldn't mind having the Russian forces on the island go down with the enemy.

This war was now tied to the fate of the Russian Empire. At this point in the war, over three hundred thousand Russian soldiers had died. On the Crimean Peninsula alone, Russian casualties had exceeded seventy thousand.

A middle-aged officer reported back, "Commander, lately the enemy has slowed down their offensive. According to the prisoners we captured, a large number of their soldiers have fallen ill, reportedly with colds, dysentery, and even... syphilis."

"Syphilis?" Gorchakov asked in confusion.

"Yes, Commander, syphilis!" the middle-aged officer replied affirmatively.

Receiving this answer, Gorchakov didn't know whether to cry or laugh. Aside from warfare, there were very few entertainment activities on the Crimean Peninsula.

Gambling, alcohol, and women were the soldiers' favorites.

Russian soldiers rarely participated in these activities, simply because they were mostly poor. Without money, they naturally couldn't afford such luxuries, and with less participation, the chances of contracting diseases were naturally lower.

The situation was much better for the British and French allied forces. They had military pay, and where there was a market demand, a market would naturally develop. The service industry was booming among the allied forces.

They were all trying to get through the days on the battlefield, living through today without knowing if there would be a tomorrow, so naturally, they sought to enjoy themselves while they could!

Due to a lack of personal hygiene, some unfortunate souls contracted syphilis, which then quickly spread throughout the army via the service industry.

(Author's Note: Historically, in the Crimean War, over ten thousand people died due to syphilis infection.)

At the time, there were no effective treatments for syphilis. The most reliable method was to take antibiotics shortly after infection, but unfortunately, penicillin was still in Franz's laboratory with no expectation of being commercialized anytime soon.

Since there were no drugs, the only option was to leave it to fate and endure. After all, the normal mortality rate for syphilis was only about 20 percent. Those with good luck could mostly survive it.

Given the poor conditions in the military camps and the soldiers' neglect of personal hygiene, the mortality rate was probably even higher.

These were minor problems compared to colds and dysentery, which could also be fatal, and their mortality rates weren't much lower. After all, death is death, no matter the disease.

The lack of medical resources was not unique to the Russians; the allied forces were in a similar situation. The British forces were in even worse shape, with a chaotic logistics system; most soldiers didn't even know where the field hospitals were.

Even getting to a hospital wasn't necessarily helpful, as there were too few doctors to meet everyone's needs. Unless one was an officer, ordinary soldiers couldn't expect good treatment without bribing.

Many of the necessary medical supplies had to be obtained by soldiers bribing the quartermasters; otherwise, they wouldn't even know where the supplies were stored.

Don't be surprised or panic if you find that the medical supplies and the hospital are miles apart. This is standard procedure, and it wouldn't be unusual for them to be several miles away.

The mechanical bureaucrats strictly followed the rules, and often, when the army moved, field hospitals were relocated but the supply depots were left behind. All the procedures had to be completed before they could be moved.

Here's a joke: A transport ship named "Pioneer" delivered over 150 tons of vegetables to Balaklava, but the logistics department suddenly found that the ship's paperwork was incomplete, hence forbidding the unloading of its cargo.

According to the regulations, the ship had to return to London to complete the paperwork before the supplies could be registered and stored. By the time the paperwork was completed, the 150 tons of vegetables had rotted and spoiled.

You would think they would be thrown away, right? However, the mechanical bureaucrats simply stored these supplies in the warehouse and then distributed them to the troops.

As you can imagine, the consequences were severe. Historical post-war statistics show that the losses inflicted on the expeditionary force by the British logistics department far exceeded those inflicted by the Russians.

Chapter 236: Cruelty

Despite the best efforts of British bureaucrats to cover it up, the tragedy on the Crimean Peninsula found its way into the London newspapers.

There was a public outcry, and many of the soldiers' families took to the streets in protest. It was all in vain, as the bureaucrats were simply following the rules and were in full compliance with British law, which absolved them of any responsibility.

The bureaucrats were fearless, but the British Cabinet was under enormous pressure. If they couldn't solve the problem, the next election was likely to be very emotional.

Secretary of War Stanley didn't have to wait for the election to feel the pressure.

"Prime Minister, public opinion is very much against us. The media's exaggeration has caused serious problems in our recruitment efforts."

With a disastrous logistics system, over a third of British soldiers fell ill and were unable to receive effective treatment. The high mortality rate of 42% for ordinary casualties was a harsh reality that deterred many.

After being sensationalized by the media, the Crimean Peninsula was portrayed as a literal hell on earth. It's no wonder that the public resisted conscription.

In essence, if Russia had been a bit wealthier and could have dragged out the war for another three to five years, Britain and France would probably have had to leave in defeat.

This has nothing to do with the war itself. The British and French allied forces can be defeated by disease alone; no army can withstand the ravages of disease.

George Hamilton-Gordon thought for a moment and said, "The opposition party has stirred up public opinion, which is beyond our control. What we can do now is try to change the current situation."

The situation at the front is very bad indeed. Those bureaucrats in the logistics department deserve to be hanged. If the situation doesn't change, we may lose this war not to the Russians but to the bureaucrats in our own logistics department."

Obviously, he was considering taking action against the bureaucrats in the logistics department. These people were practically the best allies of the Russians. With their help in dragging them down, it's only because the bureaucrats of the Russian government are allies of the British that the Russians haven't won the war yet.

Everyone is on the same level, neutralizing each other, and the war continues in a stalemate.

Home Secretary Henry reminded, "Prime Minister, the bureaucrats in the Logistics Department deserve the gallows, but we are powerless against them."

All their actions are carried out according to regulations, and they don't have to bear any responsibility. There are too many interests involved in this, and rash actions could lead to severe consequences."

Why is the bureaucratic system so mechanical? The answer is very simple — interests.

By strictly following the rules, these rule-makers can exploit loopholes for their own benefit without facing legal consequences.

After much thought, George Hamilton-Gordon said helplessly, "If we can't touch them, we can at least order them to change the current situation!"

A compromise was necessary. The real rulers of the British Empire were the large bureaucratic groups. These people had long formed their own circles. If relations were strained, the Cabinet might not necessarily be able to confront them.

At least the Cabinet formed by George Hamilton-Gordon was powerless against these bureaucratic groups. Even though the British Army's logistics department had only 178 people, of whom only 44 were responsible for the Crimean Peninsula, they didn't dare to act rashly against them.

Home Secretary Henry replied, "Of course, that is our right."

A simple order to rectify the situation meant that everything that had happened before was swept under the rug. As a result, thousands of British soldiers died in vain.

Under public pressure, the British government decided to improve the medical conditions of the expeditionary force by recruiting medical personnel nationwide. It was in this context that Florence Nightingale's medical team entered the stage of history.

.....

The historic city of Constantinople was now shrouded in the smoke of war. The cannons the Russian army had anxiously awaited finally arrived, and without any hesitation, Menshikov ordered an attack.

Constantinople is large, yet small as its outer suburbs have already been lost. The French forces are currently defending the city from fortified bunkers, but unfortunately, these fortifications are too old. Even after being reinforced, they still can't withstand the baptism of artillery fire.

6-pound cannons cannot breach these fortresses, nor can 12-pound ones. However, with 24-pound, 48-pound, and even 100-pound cannons, these ancient defensive works cannot hold.

A single shot from these giant cannons can topple a building and inflict heavy casualties on the French troops inside the city. They never know when a shell falling from the sky will claim their lives.

The city is no longer safe. The headquarters of the French army has been moved to a bomb shelter since the original headquarters of Aimable Pélissier is no more.

A middle-aged officer defending the city said with trepidation, "Commander, the enemy's firepower is too fierce. Our city defenses cannot withstand the bombardment. We are suffering heavy casualties."

An officer in charge of maintaining order in the city said bitterly, "Commander, the situation inside the city is even worse. Enemy shells could fall at any moment, causing massive casualties. Order in the city has collapsed.

Just yesterday afternoon, the Ottoman government building also collapsed under enemy fire, killing the official left by the Ottoman government, Mustafa Pasha, on the spot."

The reality is even worse than they describe. Were it not for the inaccuracy of the Russian artillery, their losses would be even greater.

Originally, the inhabitants left behind in the city were supposed to provide services for the French army, allowing the soldiers to enjoy normal life during breaks in the fighting.

That was just an excuse. The real reason was that the Ottoman government lacked the capacity to evacuate so many people from the city. Those who could leave had already fled, leaving behind civilians who wanted to escape but had nowhere to go.

Now the problem has escalated. In the bustling metropolis of Constantinople, Russian shells wreak havoc wherever they land in the city.

The sudden artillery bombardment caused an immediate collapse of order in the city. The Ottoman government had already fled the capital, and the officials left to maintain order were gone as well.

After a moment's reflection, Aimable Pélissier frowned and resolutely ordered, "Order the troops to maintain order in the city. Drive out the rioting crowds and allow the soldiers to shoot anyone who doesn't heed the warnings."

This order was unbelievably cruel. Few in Constantinople spoke French. Even if they wanted to heed the warnings, they couldn't understand them.

Evicting the crowds from the city was pushing them towards a dead end. Don't think it's safe to leave the city. Right now, both sides are engaged in battle. Just imagine what would happen if a group of people suddenly appeared between the two armies.

Do they really expect the Russians to cease hostilities for their sake and let them pass freely before resuming the attack?

What a joke. Imagine what would happen if a group of people who had lost their livelihoods appeared in the Russian-occupied territories.

The Russian army's logistical support is barely adequate for itself, let alone hundreds of thousands more refugees. It would be surprising if it didn't collapse under the strain.

The Russian army is here to fight, not to do charity work. If they were to delay their attack on Constantinople to help the refugees, the Russian government would probably have their heads.

Aimable Pélissier is, of course, well aware of these circumstances.

Originally, Constantinople had sea routes for supplies, so logistics were not a concern. Even with a large civilian population in the city, it was manageable to sustain them, so they were left there.

Now the situation is different. Under Russian artillery fire, the city's order collapsed, and the Ottoman government's terrible executive ability was simply incapable of maintaining order.

To restore order in a short time, suppression is essential.

To avoid giving the enemy an opportunity to exploit, Aimable Pélissier had to make this cruel decision.

"Yes, Commander!" the middle-aged officer replied solemnly.

Constantinople was too important for the French forces. Losing it would mean a major defeat in the Near East War. Everyone in the room understood that if the city was lost, there would be no good days ahead for anyone.

French general, Antoine, suggested, "Commander, we must organize a counterattack. If we just take hits without responding, Constantinople will eventually fall."

Apparently, he was advocating naval gunfire support. At the beginning of the war, the allied navies had provided fire support, although their accuracy was quite poor.

Because of the distance, the British and French navies couldn't even see a shadow of the Russian forces, so they just bombarded in the general direction of the Russians.

It looked impressive, but its actual effectiveness was very limited; it was impossible to aim without being able to find the target.

Of course, even if there was a target, it wouldn't do much good — Constantinople was still in the way.

Given the straight-line distance of several kilometers, most of the naval guns couldn't reach the Russian positions, and many accidentally hit the city due to various mishaps.

The young military officer, Tajik, objected, "No, it won't work. In terms of firepower, the enemy's artillery consists of heavy cannons. Our usual shore batteries, even with naval support, are far inferior to theirs.

We also have to consider the risk of friendly fire. The naval fire support we received earlier caused us more damage than the Russians."

It was still the age of sails, and naval cannons relied more on quantity than power. After all, a 48-pound cannon could sink an enemy ship, and even if they were replaced by several hundred-pound cannons, it would achieve the same effect.

Given the navy's woefully low accuracy, it's better to install more guns to increase the hit rate than to increase the firepower of each one.

Of course, a warship with over a hundred cannons couldn't be equipped with large-caliber artillery. If they tried to install huge cannons weighing one hundred or eighty tons, only a few of them could be installed before reaching the limit.

Besides, even if someone were bold enough to try, the problem would be the large recoil of the large-caliber cannons, which wooden warships simply couldn't withstand.

It's uncertain whether they could hit the enemy, but after firing a few shots, the warship itself would probably sink first. Because of this terrible consequence, no one dares to try.

For English and French naval artillery support to be effective, Constantinople would first have to lose a significant part of it. Otherwise, firing at extreme ranges to hit the enemy would inevitably result in collateral damage.

Surrendering most of Constantinople is not an option for Aimable Pélissier; he hasn't gone mad. Let's not forget that most of the city's fortifications are located there.

Allowing the Russians to come in and fight, with 200,000 French troops crammed into a smaller area and losing most of the defensive fortifications, would be suicidal.

Aimable Pélissier ordered, "I have already asked for reinforcements from the country. It won't be long before we have more artillery than the enemy. For the time being, everyone must hold their positions and not give the enemy a chance."

Countering artillery with artillery is the most effective method. However, Aimable Pélissier is not at ease, as this requires time.

Before the artillery from the country reaches the front, they will have to endure a difficult period. If they can't hold out during this time, allowing the Russians to breach the defenses and reduce the French's operational space, then even if they later receive the artillery, having enough space to deploy it will be a significant issue.

Aimable Pélissier is no military novice; he doesn't naively believe that simply concentrating artillery will automatically make it more powerful.

If the area is too small and the artillery positions are forced to be concentrated together, they could also become easy targets for the enemy.

Chapter 237: The Era of Great Powers

As the battle for Constantinople reached a critical point, a meeting began to decide the fate of the Kingdom of Greece.

The venue was still Paris. Napoleon III, eager to enhance France's international status, had been enthusiastic about hosting such events since his accession to the throne.

No one wanted to compete with them on this small issue. No matter where the negotiation occurred, the result would be the same.

Neither the British nor the Austrian governments lacked this bit of prestige. And it was not that the face of the belligerents was at stake, where they had to insist on winning or losing.

The people of this era weren't lacking in the spirit of internationalism. The Greek government, after lobbying, managed to get many countries to participate. Of course, apart from a few large nations, most countries didn't have a say.

Since Great Britain and France were at war with Russia, and the Greek question was part of this conflict, the British and French unapologetically excluded Russia from the conference, which was also a blow to the Kingdom of Greece.

Originally, Otto I wanted to hold the meeting in Athens, using Greece's status as a neutral nation to invite representatives from various countries, hoping to use international pressure to force the British to withdraw.

Obviously, the Greek government didn't have that kind of influence. When the French proposed to hold the meeting in Paris, the Austrian government was indifferent, and the British didn't want to start a dispute with France over this minor issue, so the matter was settled.

The Greek Foreign Minister, Skvarta, spoke with an angry face: "The allied soldiers entered our territory without permission and seriously violated our sovereignty. As a neutral country, we strongly protest this blatant violation of our sovereignty and demand that the allied forces immediately cease their unlawful actions and withdraw from the Greek Peninsula."

With no talk of compensation, Skvarta lacked confidence, simply hoping for the withdrawal of the allied forces, and was ready to bear their losses for doing so.

The military forces that invaded the Kingdom of Greece included the armies of Britain, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire. Due to France's alliance with these three countries in the Near East conflict, the New Holy Roman Empire emerged as the mediator in this incident.

Indeed, the Austrian Empire and the Ottoman Empire were still at war, but the New Holy Roman Empire was a neutral country.

This kind of bizarre thing happened too often in the era of the Holy Roman Empire. One of the vassal states could be at war with foreigners, while the Holy Roman Empire itself remained neutral.

This was a historical problem that was recognized by European nations, so another occurrence of it wasn't seen as a big deal.

In any case, it wasn't Britain or France that was at war with Austria, so they didn't care if the Ottoman Empire felt insulted. As the war progressed to its current stage, the Ottoman Empire began to play a less significant role in the alliance, with an inevitable decline in its status.

The Ottoman government certainly wouldn't protest over such a minor issue. After all, they had a truce with Austria, and they could even thick-skinnedly claim that the war between the two nations was already over.

The war had thoroughly disheartened the Ottoman government, making them acutely aware of their own lack of strength. It became crucial for them not only to reform and strengthen themselves but also to maintain good relations with the great powers.

The Russians were the only exception, as they were sworn enemies of the Ottoman Empire, there was no possibility of compromise between them, and they were still at war.

British Foreign Secretary Thomas said nonchalantly, "Mr. Skvarta, how can you say that entry into your country was unjustified?"

The entry of the allied forces into your territory was mainly to pursue enemy forces, which was in consideration of your country's security.

We had notified you beforehand and proceeded based on your implicit consent. The allied forces entered your territory only after that.

If you turn over the rebels who have inadvertently entered your territory, we can withdraw our troops immediately."

If protests were effective, what would be the need for an army?

Now that the Kingdom of Greece is playing dumb, the British are naturally following suit with their own stubbornness. Without armed resistance, it's as good as tacit approval, and this interpretation is not wrong.

The British flatly deny that they forced their way into Greek territory, insisting that the Greeks had implicitly allowed them to do so, the proof being that the Greeks did not obstruct them.

Now, asking the Greeks to hand over the rebels is quite a cunning move. Officially, the Greek government cannot admit any connection with these troops, and the British directly consider them rebels of the Ottoman Empire.

Since they are rebels, this is an internal matter for the Ottoman Empire and does not fall under the neutral nation's post-war disarmament and repatriation regulations.

This justifies the British demand for the extradition of the rebels. If the Greek government is unable to extradite these rebels, it implies that it is either harboring or supporting them. This would then justify the military action of the allied forces to cross the border and attack.

Skvarta instantly deflated. When it comes to being unscrupulous, they're no match for the British, who have quickly backed them into a corner.

The Greeks absolutely dared not admit their military offensive against the Ottoman Empire, as both Britain and France were allies of the Ottomans. To admit it would be disastrous for them.

However, they also can't comply with the British demand to hand over the "rebels". What a joke — if they dared to do so, they probably wouldn't have to wait for the British to act; their own citizens would probably revolt first.

No one spoke up for him on this issue. Right and wrong were clear as day, and if they thought they could feign ignorance and get away with it, did they really think the British were fools?

Even though France and Austria didn't want Britain to annex Greece, they couldn't pretend to be as oblivious to the matter as the Greeks. Everyone still has to maintain their dignity, especially when it comes to the British — the dignity of the British Empire is inviolable.

Right from the start of the negotiations, the Greek representative fell into a trap. As the mediator, the representative of the New Holy Roman Empire, Mentenede, naturally couldn't let him continue to fall deeper into this pit.

"The causes and consequences of this matter are clear to everyone here, so let's not beat around the bush any longer. Let's get straight to the point and discuss the most pragmatic issues!"

Mentenede's intention was clear. The British are not people the Greeks can afford to provoke. If you've done something wrong, you must pay the price. Trying to bluff your way through in the face of facts is nothing but wishful thinking.

The great powers don't need evidence to act; they just need to believe that something is true. Not tearing the facade is just an unspoken understanding; in the end, what must be done will still be done.

The French Foreign Minister, Auvergne, tactfully said, "Given the actions of the Greek government in this war, it is necessary to impose certain sanctions."

His intention was obvious. To use sanctions to shut the British up, preventing them from proposing to turn the Kingdom of Greece into a colony.

Did the British government decide to annex the Kingdom of Greece at that time? The answer is no.

The British government, overwhelmed by public opinion and still trying to solve the logistical problems of the expeditionary force, had little energy left to stir up new problems.

The voices within the British government advocating the colonization of the Kingdom of Greece were just beginning to emerge and were far from gaining mainstream support.

If all the countries had not opposed it, they might have gone ahead with the annexation. The British had the appetite to absorb the Kingdom of Greece.

But when the French proposed to convene the Paris Conference and the Austrians pretended to mediate under the guise of the New Holy Roman Empire, Thomas understood that the annexation of the Kingdom of Greece was no longer possible.

Although the strategic value of the Kingdom of Greece was high, its own benefits were not substantial enough to justify the British antagonizing both France and Austria over it.

Thomas said tentatively, "In view of the fact that the Kingdom of Greece has sent troops against our ally, the Ottoman Empire, without a declaration of war, I propose the dissolution of the Greek government and monarchy, with our government taking over the administration of Greece."

Mentenede disagreed, saying, "Mr. Thomas, that seems a bit excessive. The Greek government is directly responsible for this incident, and their dismissal is justified, but abolishing the monarchy goes too far."

The dignity of a monarch is inviolable. The driving force behind this event was the Greek government, not His Majesty Otto I. He should not be held accountable.

After the dismissal of the Greek government, there will inevitably be some chaos. It may be difficult for your country to manage Greece's affairs alone, so why not manage them together?"

Mentenede's stance was faultless. In Europe, the abolition of a monarchy typically occurs only under a few circumstances, such as illegitimacy or expulsion by the populace, and Otto I did not meet these conditions.

As part of the community of monarchies, preserving the dignity of kings is a mandatory course for everyone.

Thomas was merely probing. Insisting on the deposition of Otto I would not have helped his political career. The real interest lay in the administration of the Kingdom of Greece.

"The events in the Kingdom of Greece are indeed an international problem, and we cannot leave your government to bear all the pressure alone. As a responsible great power, France is ready to do its part in this matter," agreed the French Foreign Minister, Auvergne.

No matter how eloquently he spoke, in the end, it came down to interests. Clearly, France was not willing to give up its stakes in the Near East.

The conference quickly devolved into a power play between Britain, France, and Austria, with the Greek representatives sidelined.

Naples, Tuscany, the Papal States, and the Kingdom of Sardinia, all four countries, remained silent throughout the conference.

The very fact that they were able to attend this conference was a gesture of respect on the part of the great powers.

Though the Greek issue affected their interests, they were aware of their place and knew better than to interfere in a dispute between gods, lest they suffer collateral damage as mere mortals.

As for the representatives of other European countries, there's even less to say. Not being Mediterranean countries and not being directly affected by the issue, they naturally stayed out of it, unconcerned and uninvolved.

Why should they get involved in the struggle between the three great powers if they saw no direct benefit for themselves?

In this era, the rulers of small countries that managed to survive in continental Europe were all intelligent; none would act so recklessly.

After more than half a month of intense verbal debates, the three countries finally reached a consensus and signed the "Resolution on the Kingdom of Greece."

The throne of Otto I was preserved. Meanwhile, the Greek cabinet government was held responsible for the incident and had to resign and take responsibility.

An international supervisory group consisting of Great Britain, France, and Austria was established to guide the reform of a new government in the Kingdom of Greece.

In name, the three countries administered Greece, but in terms of the actual distribution of benefits, Britain gained the most, followed by France, with the New Holy Roman Empire contributing the least and benefiting minimally.

It was a case of everyone getting what they needed: Britain secured the greatest interest in Greece, France, and Austria prevented Britain from annexing the Kingdom of Greece, and Otto I successfully retained his throne.

The interests of the Ottoman Empire were sacrificed. They did not receive the war reparations they had hoped for, as the Kingdom of Greece was too impoverished to pay.

Since the Greek government was under the control of the three powers, it was unrealistic to expect compensation for the Ottomans to come from the pockets of these governing nations.

For a considerable period in the future, the finances of the Kingdom of Greece will be dedicated to repaying debts to Britain and France, as the Greek government has already defaulted on several loans due to the war.

Of course, this trusteeship is only temporary. The mutual checks and balances among the three countries prevent any one of them from dominating indefinitely. Naturally, it's not feasible to continue the trusteeship for an extended period. As soon as a new government is established, the powers will be transferred to it.

The financial trusteeship might last a bit longer. The Kingdom of Greece must be able to repay its debts on time before it can regain fiscal sovereignty.

The Greek government fully opened its markets and ports to the three countries. Ships from these countries gained the right of free navigation in Greece, along with the right to station troops. Control of customs, coinage, salt and tobacco taxes, and road construction rights fell into the hands of these three nations.

Clearly, besides the distribution of benefits, this was also aimed at countering Russia. Britain and France established another line of blockade outside the two straits, utilizing the numerous islands of the Aegean Sea, enabling their navies to block the Russians at any time.

It was just a show of force. The Russians hadn't even captured Constantinople, let alone controlled the first Bosphorus Strait and the Aegean was too far away.

With the signing of the "Resolution on the Kingdom of Greece", the era of the Great Powers began in earnest.

In this era, as long as the great powers reached a consensus, they could decide the fate of a country. The fundamental nature of a world where the strong prey on the weak is exemplified to its fullest extent.

Chapter 238: Ironclad Warship

At the time of the outbreak of the Near East War, other regions of the world were also in turmoil. The conflict between Great Britain, France, and Russia presented an opportunity for the United States across the ocean.

First, Cuba created a stir, but their efforts were thwarted by the Spanish, resulting in a major setback. They also faced warnings from Britain and France, forcing them to retreat and lay low.

The Americans did not give up, however. In July 1853, the United States caused the Black Ships incident in Japan, using military threats to force the shogunate to accept their terms, resulting in the signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa.

Given the opportunistic nature of the great powers, they did not want to see the United States monopolize the benefits in Japan. As a result, nations such as Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands quickly followed suit and pressured the shogunate to sign similar treaties.

The news reached Vienna and presented an opportunity for the Austrian colonial faction, which was considering entering the fray. The Austrian government deliberated whether to take advantage of the situation.

Prime Minister Felix spoke up, “Your Majesty, Japan is too far away, and the benefits we can gain there are limited. It’s not worth expending too much effort.

Our focus now should still be on domestic development, especially the consolidation of Southern Germany. Rather than taking action in East Asia, infiltration into the German Federal Empire would be more in line with our interests.”

Navy Minister Filkos disagreed, saying, “Prime Minister, taking action in East Asia doesn’t cost us much. Even the Dutch can pressure the Japanese government into compliance, so it wouldn’t be difficult for us to obtain similar benefits.

Currently, the Japanese government is like a frightened bird, hardly daring to say no to what we want to propose.

Even if diplomatic efforts fail, we have treaties with the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal that allow us to receive supplies from their colonies. It wouldn’t be difficult to send a fleet to Asia to intimidate Japan.”

Austria had made efforts to establish overseas colonies. One such measure was the signing of treaties with declining colonial empires, under the condition that Austria would not covet the colonies of these nations.

In the short term, this was like a blank check, since Austria had no overseas colonies. However, no one doubted Austria’s ability to establish overseas colonies.

As per tradition, a rising empire would inevitably encroach on the spheres of influence of established empires. Since the Austrian government expressed a willingness to coexist peacefully, no one objected.

Metternich analyzed, “There are many countries that covet Japan, and now that they have opened their doors, it’s likely that everyone will rush in.

In fact, the Russians had plans to colonize Japan a long time ago. If it weren’t for the outbreak of the Near East War, the Americans might not have had the chance to get there first.

Under the current international situation, it wouldn't be a big problem for us to join in and take a share, but to obtain greater benefits, we must dispatch a naval fleet."

Austria's navy wasn't very impressive, even after some expansion under Franz's reign.

However, strength is relative. Compared to the naval powerhouses of Britain and France, Austria's navy was hardly worth mentioning. But bullying Japan at this time wouldn't pose any pressure.

Yet, this doesn't justify Austria dispatching a naval fleet to the Far East. The key consideration is still the matter of benefits.

After a moment of hesitation, Franz made a decision: "The Far East is not our focus for expansion. Even if we pursue overseas colonization, we must avoid conflicts with European countries as much as possible.

For now, let's focus on unclaimed territories. Even if they are desolate, it doesn't matter; we can start by accumulating experience.

What we should do now is send out more exploration teams to survey lands not yet occupied by other countries. Any area that is easy to govern, we can take over to practice. There's no need to excessively chase immediate benefits.

As for Japan, we will simply follow the steps of other countries and secure our share of the benefits without further expansion."

Franz spoke these words with apparent ease, but deep down it was with a heavy heart. It was a struggle to catch the last train of the colonial empires, but due to the limitations of the navy, Austria could only pick up the leftovers from Britain and France.

Even older colonial empires such as Spain and the Netherlands, not to mention Britain and France, could cause Austria considerable trouble if it recklessly attempted to seize richer territories.

Overseas colonization was not only about power; it was also about methods of governance. As a newcomer who hastily joined these old empires, these empires do not even need to use force. Just setting a trap for them could cause significant losses.

In the historical case of the Americans seizing the Philippine Islands, it appeared to be a victory, but the difficulties were known only to themselves. The land that was rich under Spanish rule became a loss-making asset in their hands.

This was the case even in the resource-rich Philippine Islands. If this were a more remote and poorer region, the losses would probably be even greater.

Colonization was costly. Without experience in managing colonies, blindly joining the colonial forces was a sure path to financial loss!

In comparison, Franz was more inclined to plant a flag on uninhabited islands, where just a few soldiers could be stationed to declare sovereignty without worrying about competition.

Of course, such islands are either geologically inhospitable or too small to be of much use. At best, they could serve as resource reserves.

Navy Minister Filkos suggested: "Your Majesty, we have always been developing on the European continent and haven't made our presence felt globally, which is very detrimental to our future colonial expansion.

How about organizing a global sea voyage, visiting countries around the world, while looking for opportunities to claim some unclaimed lands as our first step out of Europe?”

Almost every rise of a naval power had been accompanied by a major naval battle. Obviously, Austria lacked such an opportunity and could not find such a stepping stone.

Britain and France are simply unbeatable and would remain so even after twenty years of development. Franz has no intention of courting death by challenging the maritime superpowers.

If Austria had to compromise, it was a pity that there were no other countries worth opposing. Looking at the map, the rest are out of range and have insufficient conflict of interest.

Unless one considers attacking the Ottoman Empire, whose navy once ranked fifth in the world, barely qualifying as a worthy opponent.

However, given the current situation, Franz seriously doubted that the Ottoman government had the financial capacity to build such a fleet.

Without a suitable opponent, the only path left was a different one. After all, Austria was an established empire and didn't need to fight a war to assert its status as a great power. Already on the stage, why bother fighting for a ticket to enter?

As a civilized man, Franz detests war. In his view, war means risk, and those who recklessly start wars without sufficient benefits are doomed to fail in this era.

The current proposal of the Minister of the Navy is actually based on the international political environment. As Austria pursues a conservative colonial strategy, military deterrence becomes crucial.

Even if it can't intimidate Britain and France, it should at least show strength to deter other countries to avoid unnecessary trouble in overseas colonization.

Historically, the United States established its status as a naval power in the early 20th century through an impressive global naval voyage.

This is feasible, but it assumes that the Austrian navy has the necessary strength, which Franz seriously doubts. Crossing the ocean is not so easy in this day and age, and circumnavigating the globe still poses significant challenges.

In the event of an accident along the way, what began as a show of strength could turn into a major embarrassment, and that would be quite a spectacle. The Austrian Navy has no experience in global navigation, and whether their warships can withstand such a voyage is a question in itself.

If a warship broke down en route, where would repairs be made? How would they manage logistical support during long ocean voyages? How would sailors cope with prolonged life at sea? All of these issues must be considered.

Franz asked directly, “Filkos, are you sure our navy can do this without becoming an international joke?”

Of course, given the gravity of the situation, Filkos couldn't guarantee success. Not even the British or French navies would dare to guarantee a trouble-free voyage around the world.

Filkos encouraged, “Your Majesty, this is a medium-term strategic concept, and it’s certainly not feasible at the beginning. We could start by choosing a long ocean route to gain experience, and then attempt to circumnavigate the world when the time is right.

In addition, our navy has been preparing. To close the gap with the naval powers of Britain and France, we have developed our own ironclad ship technology, which is now mature.

We have already placed orders, and the first ironclad is expected to join the Navy within two years.

This epoch-making warship will rewrite naval history, rendering all current naval vessels of other nations obsolete.”

As a new challenger looking to gain an edge in naval power, the best strategy was to drive technological innovation, phase out old warships, and bring everyone back to the same starting line.

Historically, the explosive growth of the German navy was due to the advent of the dreadnought era, which allowed them to catch up with the British.

The Austrian navy was no exception. If they tried to catch up with the British and French by developing sailing warships, nobody had the confidence to bridge such a large gap.

When Franz introduced the concept of ironclad ships three years ago, it caught the attention of the Austrian Navy. After careful study by shipyard engineers, it was determined that ironclad ships were theoretically feasible.

Since they were feasible, it was only natural to proceed with development. In recent years, Austria’s increased naval budget had been largely invested in warship research and development, and now it was finally bearing fruit.

Regardless of how many sailing warships the British and French had, once ironclad ships were introduced, those vessels would become obsolete.

Blocking technology was impossible; at the time, the world’s navies were only a conceptual breakthrough away from ironclad ships, and there were no significant technical barriers.

During this period, the French Navy also began to develop ironclad ships. After receiving information about the French ironclad ships, the British had a similar plan by 1856.

Of course, it will take time to move from research and development to actual service. The introduction of new technology can’t be smooth sailing. Even if research and development had started a few years earlier, Franz wasn’t sure who would be the first to build an ironclad warship.

What he demanded was the construction of ironclad warships, not just ships with a layer of iron on the exterior of the vessel. If it was just adding a layer of iron, that concept had already been around for hundreds of years and wouldn’t require any development.

Prince Windisch-Grätz questioned, “Ironclads? Mr. Filkos, are you sure a fully iron warship, after being armed with cannons, won’t sink and will still be able to move?”

This was the opinion of many, with the first impression being that it would sink. Ironclads would certainly be much heavier than wooden warships. Adding cannons, ammunition, and personnel, whether they could move was a wonder.

Filkos, dissatisfied, said: “Your Highness, please do not question my professionalism. If it’s the same tonnage, an ironclad can’t carry as much as a wooden warship because of its weight.

However, wooden warships are limited by raw materials. With current technology, nations can only build warships with a displacement of about 4,000 tons, but ironclads don't have this limitation.

We just need to increase the tonnage of the warship to compensate for this small issue.

The armor of an ironclad can withstand enemy cannon fire. Even a 48-pound cannon will only cause minor problems.

And because the body of an ironclad is more stable, we can equip it with explosive shell guns. Against sailing warships, as long as it hits a critical spot, one shot can take out the enemy.

Ironclads use steam power, so you don't have to worry about speed; you can look to steamships for reference.

On the battlefield, one ironclad can easily take down a dozen sailing warships."

These are the advantages of ironclads, but of course, their disadvantage is the skyrocketing cost, something Filkos certainly wouldn't mention.

Anyway, as long as Austria wanted to engage in colonial expansion and the Cabinet saw the power of ironclads, they were unlikely to give them up.

Prince Windisch-Grätz continued, "My apologies, Filkos. I'm not questioning your expertise. I'm just puzzled. If ironclads have so many advantages, why aren't other countries building them? Have we become the world's number one in shipbuilding?"

Filkos said confidently, "Your Highness, that statement is not entirely accurate. We are not the only ones interested in ironclads.

As far as I know, the French also have similar designs, but they haven't started implementing them yet.

Both Britain and France have a large number of sailing warships. When the era of ironclads arrives, all these warships will have to be decommissioned.

This is not only an economic loss, but more importantly, they would lose much of their naval advantage. Everyone would have to start from the same starting line.

Therefore, even if they have plans in this direction, they must weigh the pros and cons. Rushing to innovate in shipbuilding technology will not only bring benefits but could also lead to disaster.

As a latecomer, we don't have that kind of pressure. Due to the lack of overseas colonies, our navy can't compare with theirs.

Even if we start from scratch, we are at an advantage. In fact, right now, just two ironclads could match the total tonnage of the Austrian Navy."

Finance Minister Karl exclaimed in shock, "What, the displacement of an ironclad exceeds ten thousand tons? How much money would that cost?"

This was not surprising; naval warships were not very large in this era, and the total tonnage of the Austrian Navy was only this much.

The Finance Minister's surprise wasn't about the size of the ship, but a professional reaction to how much it would cost to build such a warship.

Filkos said calmly, “Not that much. I exaggerated a bit. The displacement of an ironclad is about eight or nine thousand tons.

The exact data will be known once it’s built. As you all know, the effect of new technology is full of uncertainties. A small discrepancy in the final displacement is acceptable.

The cost is a bit higher than ordinary warships, but the outstanding performance of an ironclad is worth the price. Including weapons and equipment, it costs about three to four million guilders, and it won’t exceed five million.

This is the first ironclad, and a lot of the technology has to be experimented with. As we build more, the cost will come down.”

A single warship, including its weapons and equipment, would consume a third of the Navy’s annual budget. Franz knew that the era of the Navy burning through money had arrived.

With the amount of money it takes to build one ironclad, you could build five or six first-class sailing ships. This will inevitably put even more financial pressure on the colonial empires.

Everyone fell into deep thought, beginning to weigh the pros and cons, contemplating whether to spark a new round of naval arms race.

Chapter 239: No Choice

Regarding the issue of future naval development strategy, Franz did not make an immediate decision. That would have to wait until after the end of the Near East War.

However, he quickly approved funding for the construction of ironclad warships. After all, spending several million guilders to gain the honor of the world’s first ironclad warship was politically profitable enough to make the investment worthwhile.

The newly formed New Holy Roman Empire also needed good news to boost public morale. Spending a few million guilders to build warships and buy a wave of national pride was far better than mere face-saving projects.

A voyage around the world was not something that could be accomplished in a short period of time. It would take at least a fleet of ironclad warships to create a truly awe-inspiring effect.

Franz was not a spendthrift. Until the first ironclad proved its superiority, he would not rashly build a bunch of them all at once.

Once the first generation of ironclads had been built and shipyards had gained experience, it would be easier to proceed with technological upgrades.

As for the performance issues of the early ironclads, Franz was not worried at all. If necessary, they could always be upgraded and modified in the future, perhaps even sold to the Americans during the period of the Civil War.

Not only the Americans, but there are also many major international customers. The Russians are a potential major customer, although they are a bit poor.

But Franz isn’t worried. In the future, if necessary, he could persuade the Russians to participate in joint naval research and development under the pretext of saving money.

The French did the same thing before World War I and then dragged the Russians into the same pit. While others were building dreadnoughts, these two countries didn't catch on and ended up producing a bunch of ships that could be retired without ever being commissioned.

Therefore, competing for the honor of "the first ironclad warship" becomes even more important. The brand effect is the foundation for selling at a good price.

Staying half a step ahead in every technological innovation naturally gives the impression of having the most advanced technology.

Don't think that politicians are very professional; in reality, most of them make decisions off the cuff. What they first weigh are interests, followed by impressions.

This is the same as selling normal products. Products with a brand bonus always sell for a higher price, while products without a brand can only be sold at street prices.

Military products obviously can't be sold at street vendor prices. That would be a huge loss.

The weapons that Austria is currently selling to Russia have the same price as on the international market before the war, but the net profit is still no less than 30%. The enormous profit margins in the arms market are evident.

.....

In the Balkan Peninsula, since Britain, France, and Austria reached an agreement on the issue of Greece in the Paris Conference, the allied forces naturally withdrew from the Kingdom of Greece.

Next door is the Principality of Montenegro, which they have to deal with, so Oliver doesn't have the time to keep playing with the Greeks. Under the principle of agreement between great powers, the Greeks no longer have a choice.

Accepting the conditions means becoming a semi-colonial, semi-capitalist state. Under the mutual restraint of the great powers, the Kingdom of Greece can still preserve its territory without worrying about national survival; if they refuse the demands of the countries, they will immediately become history.

After subduing the Greeks, the morale of the allied forces finally recovered. Neither the British nor the Sardinian armies took the Principality of Montenegro seriously, but the Ottoman army which often clashed with Montenegro knew it was a tough nut to crack.

Major General Oliver, now Lieutenant General Oliver, was very unhappy with the Ottoman's foot-dragging. He had just won a battle and was naturally promoted, thus securing the position of commander of the expeditionary force.

He couldn't help but reflect on the importance of support from behind. Compared to other British military leaders, Oliver's rise to the rank of Lieutenant General before the age of forty was enough to make many people feel ashamed.

Liaison Officer Amedeo Biavati said unhappily, "Commander, the Ottomans have refused our request for joint military action, citing the need to regain lost territory and suppress the rebellion."

In his view, everyone was helping the Ottomans in this war, and their allies hadn't let them down, yet the Ottoman army was the first to retreat.

However, he couldn't blame the Ottoman government because, in the previous battle, the British and French had directly caused the destruction of the main force of the Ottoman army.

To appease the Ottomans, the governments of the two countries had promised that the Ottomans could stay out of the subsequent battles.

Oliver thought for a moment and said, "Forget it, the Principality of Montenegro is nothing much. Whether the Ottomans take part in the next battles doesn't matter."

Oliver said this with confidence. The British army had suffered almost no casualties in the attack on Greece, and with the addition of the Sardinian army, they now had a force of 65,000 men.

In contrast, how many troops did the enemy have? Even if the Principality of Montenegro frantically conscripted in the newly occupied territories, there were hardly any young and able-bodied men left. Unfortunately, the Ottomans had already scoured the area first.

The Principality of Montenegro could barely muster an army of 40,000, even if they recruited compatriots from among the prisoners. It remained to be seen how much fighting power they would be able to muster.

Oliver was full of confidence. He thought it was a pipe dream for this hastily assembled rabble to think they could withstand their heavy siege.

Losing a group of Ottoman cannon fodder didn't bother Oliver. As a high-ranking officer, Lieutenant General Oliver understood politics.

The British government now hoped that the Ottoman Empire could retain some strength to guard the gateway to the Black Sea after the war.

They had already seen the strength of the Russians, and the British government did not want another Near East War. They had lost confidence in their ability to defeat the Russians completely.

Even if they won in the Balkans and Crimea, it would not be enough to bring down Russia. Continuing an offensive into Russian territory was a cost they could not afford.

Under these circumstances, they naturally had to resort to diplomatic means. The Ottoman Empire, despite its decay, was exactly what the British government felt comfortable with guarding the vital waterway because of its decay.

This required the Ottoman government to quickly regain its strength, which was obviously very difficult. After the outbreak of the Near East War, the entire Balkan Peninsula was devastated.

Since the Ottomans didn't want to participate in the subsequent battles, Lieutenant General Oliver couldn't force them to. Didn't you see how the French guarded Constantinople on their own?

Now, with such heavy losses, they haven't even made a peep about asking allies for help. Of course, this doesn't rule out the possibility that the French are afraid of being sabotaged by their teammates.

Great powers still need credibility. Once a promise is made, it must be kept. If you keep breaking promises, eventually no one will want to engage with you, not even the British Empire could withstand that!

Without hesitation, Lieutenant General Oliver led the Anglo-Sardinian allied forces mightily into the Albanian region, ready to launch a major battle.

.....

As the formidable allied forces approached, the Principality of Montenegro panicked. Unlike the Ottomans, with whom they had often clashed and no longer feared, the Montenegrins were still very wary of the British.

A sparrow may be small, but it has all its vital organs.

(TN: It means that even something physically little contains everything essential needed for life, so size alone does not determine worth or capability.)

The various departments of the Montenegrin government were still intact, fully proving that they were a nation and not just a mountain stronghold.

Prince Danilo I solemnly said, “Gentlemen, the Near East War has progressed to a point far beyond our control.

After a fierce battle, we successfully captured the Scutari Fortress and seized half of Albania, gaining the coveted seaport we had dreamed of.

Behind these glorious victories, we have also paid a heavy price: nearly 4,000 brave warriors fell on the battlefield, the war has drained our treasury, and we now owe a huge foreign debt to Austria.

Strategically, we have already gained everything we wanted. The Principality of Montenegro is exhausted and lacks the strength to continue fighting.

Now, we all need to think about how we can consolidate and hold onto the territories we already control.”

Clearly, Danilo I’s desire to fight had been exhausted, and he now sought to secure his gains.

There was no choice; the Principality of Montenegro had too little starting capital. The conquest of territories many times larger than their homeland had already pushed them beyond their limits.

For other countries, the loss of 4,000 soldiers might be just a number, but for Montenegro, it was a heavy blow, almost to the point where every family was in mourning.

Even though they knew the enemy was coming to attack, they could only passively defend. They had already done so much in the early stages and invested too much of their capital; now, Danilo I did not dare to continue.

Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Claude Delerich analyzed: “Your Highness, the assimilation of the territories we have occupied is only possible if the Russians win this war. However, how this war will end remains unclear.

The British and French have gained the upper hand in Crimea, but they can’t defeat Russia in a short time; the Russians have an advantage in the Balkans, but they can’t seem to capture Constantinople.

If the Russians lose the war, we will be in big trouble, because we will definitely face retaliation from the enemy after the war.”

Montenegro’s Supreme Commander and Army Minister Mirkov said, “We don’t need to wait for the future; according to the information we have received, the enemy is already on its way and a major battle will break out within a week.

The Greeks, who once boasted that they would share Albania with us, turned out to be so weak that they lacked even the ability to wear down the enemy's forces.

We are about to face an attack by 65,000 British and Sardinian troops. The disparity in strength between us and the enemy is too great. This war will be a tough one."

Despite a hint of resentment in his words, Mirkov seemed somewhat eager to try. While he was wary of the British, he was not intimidated by them.

They had fought for generations to secure an outlet to the sea and to change Montenegro's impoverished situation. Of course, they could not simply give up the gains they had made out of fear of the enemy's strength.

Danilo I asked, "Is it possible to resolve the issue through diplomatic means?"

As a pacifist, he sincerely did not want to continue the war. Montenegro couldn't afford to keep fighting either. As a small country, they could only make a bold move once, and now that this move had been made, it was natural to rest.

"Your Majesty, I'm afraid that won't work. Although the British and the French have contacted us, they haven't shown much sincerity.

Not only do they demand that we join the allied forces and declare war on Russia, but after the war, we would also have to give up most of the gains we've acquired," replied Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Claude Delerich.

Negotiating terms also depends on strength. No matter how impressive the performance of the Montenegrin army on the battlefield, it cannot hide the fact that it is not strong enough. Without strength, it's natural that the British and French wouldn't offer a high price.

Moreover, switching sides also comes with a price. The Russians are not easy targets. The current situation on the battlefield is at a stalemate, and victory or defeat has not yet been decided. If they choose the wrong side, they could be truly doomed.

Chapter 240: Refugee Crisis Erupts

The battle between the British and the Principality of Montenegro went largely unnoticed, as the disparity in strength between the two sides was too great. Such a gap could not be bridged by sheer enthusiasm alone, and the outcome was essentially predetermined from the start.

Even Franz had little hope for the Principality of Montenegro. Its foundations were too weak to withstand prolonged attrition. Even if they managed to repel the Anglo-Sardinian coalition, they would still be on the losing end.

That is the tragedy of small nations. With such a limited population, regardless of their fighting ability, war always means loss of life, and the Principality of Montenegro simply cannot afford such losses.

The war in the Near East has dragged on to this day, and the Balkan Peninsula has already lost more than a million people, perhaps more than two or three million, with a heavy toll among the young and able-bodied.

The Ottomans drafted strong men into the fight, and the Russians showed no less mercy. One example of this is the ongoing Siege of Constantinople, in which the Russians dispatched many young, robust soldiers to serve as cannon fodder on the front lines.

Those Russian soldiers were their own people, and even though they were insignificant, they still belonged to the Tsar's army. They were still worth more than these other cannon foddors.

In the Siege of Constantinople, there were losses of thousands of men each day. Even with Russia's vast manpower, this is not sustainable!

If cannon fodder is used, Menshikov would be under no pressure. If they die, they die. The Austrian government has been very cooperative in this regard.

Before receiving Austrian citizenship, the Austrian government has no obligation to ensure their safety. Recently, the two Danubian Principalities have suffered greatly at the hands of the Russians.

Those who initially resisted learning Austrian are now regretting it too late. There's no choice; failing to meet the language proficiency and political ideology criteria means no citizenship.

Currently, the two Danube Principalities are nominally vassal states of the Ottoman Empire. The Austrians are only temporarily occupying them and are under no obligation to ensure their safety.

Franz could only express his regret at the atrocities committed by the Russian army. To protest, one would have to go to St. Petersburg, since the Russian military was not under his control and he was powerless to change the current situation.

Conscripting strong men was not the worst part; those who understand the Russians know that most of these Russian soldiers receive no military pay. Their only source of income is looting on the battlefield.

According to reports from the front, at least half of the local population has been robbed by the Russian army. Except for areas where the Austrian army is stationed, which are relatively safe, other areas are left to the mercy of the Russians.

Due to the westward strategy, Austria had withdrawn a large number of troops and naturally could not take care of all areas. Only regions well integrated into the Austrian culture had Austrian soldiers stationed there, giving the Russians opportunities.

Franz could guarantee that Austria had absolutely no collusion with the Russians in this matter; these atrocities were spontaneously organized by the Russian soldiers.

Everyone was very willing to cooperate in disposing of the loot. After the Russians had finished their looting, the Austrian-controlled safe zones were the best places for their transactions.

Almost every time the Russian army passed through, it left the area in utter chaos. Those who were lucky enough were only robbed; the less fortunate faced the destruction of their homes and the loss of their lives.

The world is so cruel. By the time the news reached Franz, everything had already happened; it was a fait accompli. The number of local deaths was completely unknown, and could only be slowly tallied after the war.

Not only were the Russians and Ottomans wreaking havoc in the Balkans, but the Anglo-French-Sardinian allied forces were no better. To improve their food supply, everyone took matters into their own hands to make sure they were well-fed and well-clothed.

With so many armies taking turns to ravage the region, the wealthy, including the Ottoman nobility, had long since fled.

These were the wise ones who knew that it was futile to reason with the common soldiers. In times of war and chaos, human life is the cheapest commodity.

Those who could flee did so, leaving behind a group of poor souls. They were either the lowest of the free citizens or serfs, with nowhere to go even if they wanted to escape.

Marshal Radetzky said with a furrowed brow, "Your Majesty, urgent telegrams from the front line report that the Serbian region was being overwhelmed by refugees and has been suppressed by the military.

The atmosphere is now extremely tense, and it's feared that chaos will break out again soon. The newly formed Ninth Division stationed at the front is asking for support from the homeland."

There's no way around it. Every war inevitably creates large numbers of refugees. People lose their livelihoods because of the war and have no choice but to seek a livelihood elsewhere.

Concerned, Franz asked, "How many refugees are gathered at the border?"

Marshal Radetzky thought for a moment before answering, "At least several hundred thousand, possibly over a million. The situation is too chaotic for an effective count.

Initially, we took in tens of thousands of refugees. Later, as the numbers grew too large and there were concerns about disrupting local order, the General Staff ordered a halt to the influx.

This was a failure on the part of our General Staff. Recently, we've been preoccupied with the westward strategy and neglected the refugee issue.

Now, with more and more refugees gathering at our controlled borders, the front-line troops are overwhelmed. We only noticed when they sent a telegram asking for help."

Because of the war, regions such as Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the two Danubian Principalities are all under military administration. Since the Austrian government has not gained sovereignty over these areas, no local governments have been established.

Since it's under military administration, these issues naturally fall on the shoulders of the General Staff. One cannot expect a group of military officers to have strong capabilities in governing localities. The stability they maintain relies on military force.

The Austrian General Staff, including Marshal Radetzky, overlooked the refugee problem and failed to report it to Franz in time. It wasn't until the situation erupted that they began to take it seriously.

Frankly, the General Staff's reaction wasn't wrong. Allowing so many refugees to pass through would have quickly led to a humanitarian tragedy.

The order that Austria had just managed to establish in the region would likely have collapsed immediately.

If social order can be maintained by increasing the number of troops, then the problem of feeding the people is truly unsolvable.

In this era, addressing the food needs of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, without advance preparation is an insurmountable challenge. Where could Franz quickly gather such vast resources?

It's not a lack of resources, but a matter of the limited time to mobilize them. Remember, the Austrian government has already dispatched a significant amount of food for relief efforts.

However, this food is barely enough to sustain the refugees in the Austrian-occupied territories. They are truly powerless in the face of the influx of additional external refugees.

Franz, puzzled, asked, "Isn't it strange? With so many refugees, they should have broken through our blockade by now. Why did this problem only arise after such a large gathering of people?"

Marshal Radetzky replied, "Your Majesty, most of these refugees are old people, women, and children, and there are not enough young and able-bodied men. So at first, when they encountered military blockades, many chose to retreat.

It was only after some of the routed soldiers joined the refugees and took charge that they started rushing our blockade line."

Franz nodded. After the end of the Second Battle of Bulgaria, a large number of routed soldiers appeared on the Balkan Peninsula, wreaking havoc in the region and causing a massive refugee crisis.

By now, they probably can't find anywhere else to loot, so they've ended up among the refugees.

If no one took the lead, no matter how large the group of old and weak people, women, and children became, they wouldn't dare to cross the border. After all, human rights aren't a consideration in this era — the soldiers would dare to open fire as long as someone tried to break through the blockade.

Understanding the situation, Franz also had a headache. Without asking, he could imagine the terrible situation and scenes of people resorting to desperate measures were already forming in his mind.

Yet, letting them in was even more impossible. Without enough food, these people, once in chaos, would only create more refugees.

This isn't the 21st century, where the government could easily mobilize a huge amount of resources if it wanted to. With the current state of transportation relying on ox carts, what could Franz do to send them a huge amount of supplies?

People can do anything when they are extremely hungry. Franz didn't dare to test the nature of human kindness and evil, even in later ages, this remained a dilemma for all nations.

One may argue that this was a thankless job that demanded effort but produced nothing but resentment. Franz was filled with a wave of hatred as he considered this.

If they're going to ignore it, commit to doing so entirely. He wouldn't have had to deal with this headache if they had simply been ignorant, as the British bureaucrats had done. It would have been so much better to follow their lead and do things by the book.

Now that the issue is out in the open, it can't just be ignored, right?

Franz asked, “Prime Minister, how do you think we should handle this problem?”

This was passing the responsibility. Since Franz couldn’t think of a perfect solution, he had to leave it to the cabinet. If there’s a solution, great; if not, the cabinet would have to bear the blame in the end.

Prime Minister Felix hesitantly said, “Your Majesty, first send troops to reinforce the front lines. We must prevent more people from becoming refugees. Then, we can mobilize supplies from within the country for relief.”

Franz understood his words: it meant holding the blockade. By then, after the relief supplies had been mobilized, many of the refugees would probably have died, and there would be enough food for the rest.

Marshal Radetzky thought for a moment and said, “Your Majesty, other areas can be sealed off, but the Bosnia-Herzegovina region may be difficult. The forests there are too dense, and it may be impossible to stop the flow of refugees.”

Finance Minister Karl asked in confusion, “Aren’t we the only ones facing this problem? How are the Kingdom of Greece, the Principality of Montenegro, the Ottomans, and the Russians dealing with it?”

Metternich answered, “The situation in the Kingdom of Greece has been reported by the officials sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That fool Otto I, seeing the refugees, thought it was an opportunity to increase the population and ordered the government to provide relief.

As a result, the influx of refugees was too much for them to handle. With the British army entering and disrupting local order, the area turned chaotic. The new Greek government is now suppressing the riots caused by refugees.

The situation is still not optimistic. Likely, they will soon ask for aid from the three governing countries. I suspect that the British agreed so readily at the Paris Conference after seeing this situation.”

The situation in the other countries is also known. The area controlled by the Ottoman Empire was definitely in chaos. The Ottoman government is incapable of helping the refugees, and the British and French are not philanthropists; they won’t help without a reason.

The Principality of Montenegro is as poor as it gets. They are still at war with the allied forces, and only a fool would go there. If a fool goes there, he can’t expect a good end.

At this moment, Franz began to envy the Russians for their bad reputation. Because of the atrocities of the Russian army, the refugees are too afraid to approach them.

As a result, even the Danube Principalities, under Austrian control because of the Russian blockade, were not affected by the Balkan refugee crisis.

It’s a typical case of bullying the weak and fearing the strong. Austria, with its not-so-terrible reputation and seemingly more prosperous appearance, has become the unfortunate target.

Do you expect Franz to tarnish his reputation by slaughtering refugees? That’s impossible! Perhaps the Russian government would have given such an order.

Franz said with a heavy heart: “If we cannot hold Bosnia and Herzegovina, we might as well not defend it at all. Tell the refugees to go to the coast. Only on the coast can we mobilize enough food for relief.”

This is the harsh reality. Inland transportation is too difficult. Even with the Danube River, the river’s capacity is not unlimited and must prioritize the supply needs of the troops and the Russians.

Traveling from Serbia to the port covers hundreds of kilometers, including crossing mountains and hills. Not many would be able to survive the journey.

It’s not about being cruel; it’s better to have hope than none. Most of Bosnia is mountainous, and Austria has only recently gained control of it. The assimilation work there has been very unsuccessful, so it wouldn’t break Franz’s heart to give it up.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Marshal Radetzky replied softly.

He knew that the Emperor was displeased with this issue, but there was no alternative. The General Staff hadn’t anticipated this and had missed the optimal time to handle the situation.

With so many people gathered together, the local tree bark and roots were likely consumed entirely. When the starving people inevitably stormed the blockade lines, Marshal Radetzky couldn’t bring himself to massacre the refugees, leaving it to Franz.

Prime Minister Felix frowned and said, “Your Majesty, helping these refugees now creates another problem for the future — their resettlement. Allowing them to remain in the Balkans could be a potential threat.”

He was opposed to such relief efforts. Apart from consuming vast amounts of financial and material resources, it would ultimately not even earn a word of gratitude.

Those who manage to survive under these circumstances are usually the morally degraded; the not-so-cruel ones wouldn’t make it to the end.

Franz thought for a moment and said, “Of course, they should all be repatriated to the Ottoman Empire. As soon as these people arrive, they should be immediately put on ships and sent away, and the people from Bosnia should be sent along with them.

If the Ottoman Empire refuses to accept them, then send them all to the African continent, to serve as the first batch of immigrants in our colonization of Africa.

The navy should immediately select suitable landing sites and occupy several strongholds on the African continent, thus marking the early start of Austria’s colonial era.

Organize the ships as soon as possible. Transporting so many people will definitely not be easy, so everyone should be mentally prepared in advance.”

If they were just simple refugees, settling them in the Balkans wouldn’t be a problem; they could be assimilated gradually. Unfortunately, many soldiers that have deserted were mixed in among them and would become a threat.

Given this, the only option is to relocate them. People are less troublesome away from their homeland. Plus, with scattered resettlement in Africa, Franz isn’t worried about them causing trouble.

This would also be a good opportunity to solve the hidden dangers in Bosnia. The Austrian government has spent so much effort and resources, it cannot afford to do so in vain.

These workers, used for the development of the African continent, would be an example of turning waste into wealth. After slowly reforming them overseas for several years they could be brought back. Time can dilute everything.

Reform them gradually over time abroad; everything becomes diluted with time. More priests should then be sent to instruct and reform them.

Permit them to repent from their transgressions, gradually get back to regular life, and eventually integrate into the Austrian system. As Franz considered this, an idea came to him.