

## Roman Empire 241

### Chapter 241: The Road to Colonization

The refugee crisis in the Balkans did not attract much attention from the outside world. Although many media outlets reported on it, it was largely glossed over.

“None of my business, I don’t care” is a universal attitude in any era. In this age, the Ottomans were not favorably viewed in the minds of Europeans.

They were almost seen as the epitome of barbarism, and as heretics, they were considered to have no rights.

Of course, people had other concerns — they couldn’t even feed themselves, so who had the energy to care about the fate of the Ottomans?

Franz was happy with the lack of external interest. The type of ‘snowflakes’ of later times, who often criticized without understanding the context, were still in their infancy and had no real voice.

Everyone’s attention was focused on Constantinople and the Crimean Peninsula. The Near East War had reached a point where the combatants were racing against time.

If the Russians captured Constantinople first, they would gain a strategic advantage, able to cut off the Bosphorus Strait. This would leave Britain and France with no choice but to either compromise or continue a hard fight against them in the Balkans.

Conversely, if the British and French forces first captured the Crimean Peninsula, then they would hold the strategic advantage. They could then proceed to destroy the Russian shipbuilding industry in the Black Sea, making the battle for Constantinople unnecessary.

Don’t assume that just because the Russian Black Sea Fleet is defeated, Russia has no capability for a counterattack. In this era, the construction of sail-powered warships was not particularly difficult, and the Russian shipyards in the Sea of Azov had not ceased operations.

After suffering a setback, the Russians inspected and repaired their coastal artillery along the Black Sea. Even the inefficient bureaucrats of the Russian government knew that they couldn’t continue to be passively bombarded.

Important military ports had their coastal artillery redeployed. The British and French navies, not being foolish, naturally wouldn’t engage in a direct artillery duel with these shore batteries.

According to the plan made at St. Petersburg, as long as Constantinople was captured, the British and French fleets entering the Black Sea would be vulnerable, and slowly grinding down the enemy would be a viable strategy.

The Sevastopol Fortress began to crumble, and most of Constantinople had also fallen. The decisive moment that would determine the fate of both sides had arrived.

History had changed, and with Austria’s support, the Russians displayed enhanced combat effectiveness. Under the personal intervention of Nicholas I, who dismissed several logistics officers, the Russian forces in Crimea were finally successfully reequipped.

But logistics became even more challenging. The more advanced the modern weapons, the greater the logistical pressure, which posed a significant challenge to the Russians who relied on ox carts for transportation.

Vienna

Franz was looking at a map of Africa, understanding that colonies couldn't be established haphazardly. Areas already claimed were off-limits, as Austria was not in a position to start major conflicts with established colonial empires.

Secondly, Franz had no interest in poor, resourceless areas with no potential for development. Colonization had to be cost-effective; a perpetually loss-making venture was unsustainable.

Lastly, he intended to avoid confrontation with the powerful natives, as a failed expedition would be a major embarrassment.

After eliminating these three factors, the choices were limited.

The Ottoman Empire territories, including Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, were the nearest targets. However, after some consideration, Franz decisively crossed these options off the list.

The timing was wrong. The Ottomans were still allied with Britain and France, and acting rashly could provoke intervention by these powers, leaving Austria to inadvertently pave the way for them and gain nothing in return.

The most valuable coastal areas of South Africa were already in British hands. Algeria was firmly under French control, and Morocco was eyed by Britain, France, and Spain.

Franz reluctantly realized that all the desirable locations were already claimed by others. Morocco had not yet been divided, and Austria could try to get a piece of it, but this required choosing the right entry point.

In this era, any land not already under the gaze of the great powers hardly existed. Being watched was one thing; as long as it was not yet claimed, everyone had a chance to employ their means.

The list of alternatives quickly emerged: Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Gabon, Congo, Namibia, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Zanzibar, Madagascar...

The inner lands were not under consideration, and areas beyond Africa were also not in the plan, as Franz seriously doubted the long-range capabilities of the Austrian navy.

Franz said, "Our plans cannot keep up with the changes. The refugee crisis in the Balkans is a problem, but it's also an opportunity that we can't afford to miss.

It is very difficult to migrate people from within the country to the African continent. Just look at the British and French; their people would rather go to the distant continent of America than the nearby Africa.

The quality of refugees from the Balkans may not be very high, but they are still better than the natives in some regards. With a population for the initial development of the colonies, our colonization plan must start earlier.

This is a map of Africa. These unmarked areas are unclaimed lands. Let's think about it, where is the best place for us to start?"

At this time, mineral resources and the like are unknown, and European colonizers are not yet able to conduct explorations. Therefore, the current judgment method is very primitive.

They directly look at the level of development and the local wealth to determine if colonization can be profitable. The Austrian government also needs to consider an additional factor: whether the area is suitable for agriculture and if it can sustain these immigrants.

Prime Minister Felix analyzed, "Your Majesty, Guinea is worth considering. The coastal plains are easy to control, and the area has abundant water sources, making it suitable for developing agriculture and establishing an initial colonial foothold.

Geographically, it is also the closest. At present, there are not many competitors here. The French have only coaxed a few chiefs to sign treaties, so their influence in the area is insignificant.

Nigeria is also a good choice, with superior natural conditions and relatively high economic value. However, the local people are quite strong, and the British influence has penetrated deeply there.

Then there's Congo. It has waterways that penetrate into the inner lands, making it easier to control. The region's resources are also decent, and colonizing here should not result in a loss.

At this stage, these three places are the most suitable. We can't guarantee a certain amount of profit, but at least within five years, these three places will allow us to break even.

With the immigrants from the Balkans, after about a decade of activity, a small market could be formed locally, which would also be of some benefit to the domestic industry."

Other areas will be put on hold for the time being. Colonization must take costs into account, and of course, the most advantageous regions will be chosen.

Strategic position and future development aren't on everyone's mind right now. A colony that can make money now is better.

Future problems will be dealt with in the future. Everyone is a realist; a colony is not the mainland, so do not expect people to think too far ahead.

Colonization is also a long-term investment. Being able to quickly recoup costs and realize profits is the goal of colonizers.

Of course, there are also unprofitable colonies. For a country, the calculation of administrative costs and profits cannot be the only consideration.

If a colonial market can promote the development of domestic industry and commerce, or compensate for some resources lacking domestically, enduring a certain loss can be acceptable.

In this respect, the Germans in history serve as a negative example. They occupied a significant area of colonies but with limited development. By 1914, there were just over 20,000 German immigrants in Africa.

The German colonial operations were consistently unprofitable. The vast colonies did not contribute significantly to the development of domestic industry and commerce, with the colonial market contributing only 0.5% to foreign trade.

Naturally, Franz intended to learn from this lesson, starting with controlling the costs of colonization. The domestic management model was not applicable.

Metternich suggested, “Your Majesty, as we are just beginning overseas colonization, we can only afford success, not failure. Now is not the time for risks.

Let’s start with Guinea and the Congo regions. The competitors there are not strong. As long as we act quickly and create a *fait accompli*, that should suffice.”

Colonies differ from the mainland. The areas Austria is targeting are seen as having some value, but not of high value.

With the Near East War entering a critical moment, everyone’s attention is diverted, making it an opportune time to act.

In this era, establishing colonies in Africa entails both risks and opportunities. Britain and France are unlikely to go to war over two mediocre colonies.

Indeed, these are considered mediocre colonies. Britain and France already possess many areas suitable for agricultural production, and Austria’s current targets do not seem to have any specialties.

More importantly, there are no unified local powers of significant strength in these two regions. The once mighty Kingdom of the Congo has long been in decline, lacking the power to hinder Austria.

In contrast, Nigeria is not an easy target, at least it appears to have some strength. The ruling Fulani Empire, still capable of launching a holy war, is a testament to this.

Of course, this is not to say that Austria cannot conquer this territory. It’s a question of cost versus benefit. Regardless of the state of the Fulani Empire, it can’t change the fact that they are just an agrarian nation of a few million people.

The future most populous nation in Africa is still nowhere in sight. The entire African continent has a population of just over twenty million spread over thirty million square kilometers of land, a sparsely populated expanse to the point of hopelessness.

This is also why Metternich opposes rash action. Religious fervor is intense, and once ignited, it could prove quite challenging for Austria.

Additionally, the sparse population and religious fanaticisms could cause headaches. Although suicide bombings haven’t emerged yet, suicide attacks already exist.

It was impractical for Austria to deploy hundreds of thousands of troops to maintain control over the colonies by eradicating these minor forces. Cost is the core of establishing a colonial empire. Without cost control, the collapse of the colonial empire is imminent.

Not hesitating for long, Franz made his decision: “Let’s start with these two areas as our first step in overseas colonization! The General Staff must immediately begin military planning. This operation will require coordination between the army and navy. We can’t afford any blunders, as it would be embarrassing for everyone involved.”

Marshal Radetzky replied, “Yes, Your Majesty!”

Franz’s words also carried a warning. The Balkan refugee crisis hasn’t been resolved yet, and while the General Staff’s responsibility hasn’t been pursued in favor of government stability, it doesn’t mean it won’t be addressed.

If this operation is successful, past mistakes could be forgiven; but if problems arise, even for Marshal Radetzky, there would be significant repercussions.

## Chapter 242: Nobility

Austria's colonial strategy didn't just start at this time; several years ago, the Austrian government had already started funding exploration teams to survey the African continent.

Aside from the inland regions, at least the basic situation of the coastal areas was known, so they wouldn't be completely in the dark when they finally decide to act.

Not just in Africa, but the Austrian government also collected intelligence on many regions worldwide. This intelligence was gathered both by their own agents and purchased from middlemen.

In this era, exploration was also a business. Many private exploration teams sold the information they gathered to colonial governments in exchange for great rewards.

Selling information once or twice was common. As long as the price was right, everything was negotiable. Facing life-threatening risks in exploration naturally demanded adequate compensation.

For safety, Franz dispatched three infantry divisions this time. They were only tasked with securing the coastal regions and not venturing deep inland, which was sufficient for this purpose.

Guinea, being smaller in area, would soon be under Austrian control. The Congo region, however, was uncertain. In this era, the Congo included what would later be known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo.

The area was extraordinarily large, several times the size of Austria itself, so it was clearly impossible to occupy it with just a small number of people.

Like all colonial nations, they prioritized coastal areas, as the interior of Africa was not yet ready for development.

The plan was to first send a group of refugees there. With immigrants in place, they could establish port cities and then gradually develop the land.

As for how to govern these colonial regions, Franz decided to give bureaucrats the utmost autonomy to govern in whichever way was most profitable.

In the evening, inside a small tavern in Trieste, a group of patrons were chatting away. Occasionally, someone whistled at the flamboyantly dressed women near the counter, only to be met with eye rolls.

Most of these people made their living at sea and tended to behave vulgarly, but everyone was used to it and didn't find it strange.

The women appearing here were naturally not upstanding people either, and all were veterans of the entertainment industry, their worldly experience was f\*\*king rich as could be.

In summary, as long as the payment was sufficient, taking them back for the night was an option. Mere flattery couldn't faze them; as the saying goes, "Prostitutes are heartless and entertainers have no righteousness." These men who were their patrons yesterday, would turn into passersby the next day.

The teasing remained verbal, indicating that their pockets were empty; otherwise, they would have already taken action.

Those accustomed to making a living at sea were known for being straightforward, and the women in this line of work naturally didn't mind. Money made one the boss, and there were instances where things were settled then and there.

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Alcohol can embolden even the meek, and under its influence, all sorts of things can slip out. It's not uncommon for a disagreement to escalate into a brawl in such settings.

The tavern owner, seasoned and shrewd, would simply watch these incidents unfold, only stepping in afterward to demand compensation, usually demanding double as a form of authority. Of course, if they encountered someone particularly tough, they'd just have to accept their bad luck.

A drunken middle-aged man blurted out, "Valen, with so many troops gathering here, are we going to war?"

Equally inebriated, Valen replied dismissively, "Nonsense, Tagore, when have you ever seen our navy go to war? Who could they possibly fight? Wait, are you saying the army and navy are going to war together?"

Their voices were loud and unguarded, something they wouldn't normally dare, especially if they risked encountering naval soldiers who were drinking. Even a slight provocation could lead to a beating.

Despite the Austrian navy not being highly regarded or having notable achievements, they were still not to be disrespected by these men.

The geographical location and national policy of Austria meant that its navy had little scope for action and often merely served as a backdrop to the army. However, this did not mean that naval officers and sailors lacked spirit.

Military personnel always crave glory. The Austrian navy had been inactive for many years, largely irrelevant to most of Austria's wars, leaving its sailors lamenting that they were born in the wrong era.

This changed after Franz ascended to power. He undertook a major reorganization and training of the navy and army, forcing the retirement of officers who were just idling. This signaled a shift in Austria's national policy.

Under normal circumstances, the Austrian government wouldn't focus on the navy, especially in peacetime. Strengthening naval training and increasing naval budgets in the absence of war was highly unusual.

There were rumors at the higher levels about establishing overseas colonies, leading many to believe that their opportunity had arrived. However, they ended up waiting for over four years. Despite intensified training and an increase in the number of warships, nothing further went on.

In such a situation, it was natural for the younger personnel to become restless. The slightest provocation could lead to fights and brawls.

Of course, while the fighting might feel satisfying in the moment, the aftermath was often tragic. If the military police didn't catch them, it was manageable, but getting caught meant facing a long period of harsh consequences.

At that time, a few naval soldiers were also in the tavern, but they weren't concerned with the ramblings of the drunkards.

The order for a joint naval and army exercise, involving a significant portion of the navy and even including three infantry divisions, had everyone guessing about whom they might be going to war with. However, no one could figure out the potential adversary.

Fighting against Britain or France? They knew they couldn't win; even if the Navy doubled in size, it wouldn't be a match. It was an absurd idea, and the Austrian government wouldn't issue such a foolish order.

Attacking the Ottoman Empire? Everyone knew that was unlikely. The army had already accomplished its tasks, and Austria had obtained everything it wanted. The Ottoman government had even relocated its capital to Ankara. Pursuing further conflict with them would also have to consider the reactions of Britain and France.

A young man spoke softly, "Those directly involved are often confused, while bystanders see things clearly. Instead of guessing wildly, why not listen to what those drunkards are saying?"

The people who were arguing stopped and listened.

"Valen, you're stupid! We make our living on the seas, don't you know there are indigenous people out there in the world?"

Our navy might not stand a chance against Britain or France, and even facing Spain is tough, but going out and bullying the natives? That's no problem at all.

With the forces gathered here now, we could wipe out a few small countries overseas." The man called Tagore said disdainfully.

Valen, not to be outdone, retorted, "Nonsense! Tagore, you fool. Don't you know that the officials in Vienna have always looked down on overseas ventures? Or do you think you can change their minds?"

"Why can't they suddenly see the light? Our Austria, no, our New Holy Roman Empire, is one of the top powers in Europe, isn't it? What's wrong with grabbing a few colonies?"

These days, without a few colonies, it's almost embarrassing to step outside. Maybe the bigwigs in Vienna got stimulated and had a change of heart," Tagore argued.

Before long, the two drunks were arguing fiercely, wanting to settle their dispute with fists. But being too inebriated to actually fight, two men in the tavern stepped in and dragged them out.

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A young man uncertainly asked, "What they said couldn't possibly be true, right?"

The leader among the youths replied, “It’s more plausible than any of our guesses. We haven’t heard of any conflicts with other countries, so it’s not like we’re just going to randomly start beating up someone, right?”

An impatient man in grey clothes excitedly said, “If we’re really going to establish colonies, doesn’t that mean our chance to make a fortune has arrived?!”

In the eyes of many, colonies in this era symbolized wealth. For those eager to become rich, this was undoubtedly an opportunity.

The young man who seemed to be their leader scolded, “Shut up, Thorin! Stop talking nonsense. Clearly, this is an opportunity to achieve glory and success, not just about making money!”

Thorin quickly responded, “Yes, Captain!”

Clearly, this captain, likely of noble birth and originally destined for service in the army, looked down on those who spoke only of making money. Unpredictably, his fate had shifted, leading him to be sent to a naval officer training school instead.

When he heard the news, he almost collapsed. In this era, the Austrian Navy offered no real chance to make notable achievements. It was almost seen as a haven for the unskilled and unlearned, a place to waste time.

Fortunately, his luck turned with the change in Austria’s national policy. Now, he aimed to quickly earn military honors and secure a noble title.

After all, his family’s title wasn’t hereditary; they were nouveau riche, having risen to prominence only in his father’s generation. He could still claim to be the son of a noble, but the next generation wouldn’t be able to continue this pretense.

It was challenging to obtain a noble title in Austria, especially a hereditary one. After Franz ascended to power, he granted nobility to over a hundred individuals, most of whom were honored for their military service.

The others included several scientists, about a dozen engineers, and a few government officials. Apart from those granted hereditary titles for military achievements, the rest weren’t.

This wasn’t a caprice of Franz; it was an established rule. Non-hereditary titles could be granted freely by the emperor, but hereditary nobility based on military service required significant and commendable achievements.

This rule, set by Franz, had gained wide acceptance within the military.

Differentiating among them was a way to reflect their status. Conveniently, most of the nobility in Germany were military nobles, who were particularly keen on maintaining their status.

As part of the trade-off, Franz revoked the domestic major nobles’ right to confer nobility. This included several states as well; the nobles conferred by kings of these states had to report to the emperor for approval to obtain legal status.

Franz controlled the number of nobles. For hereditary nobility, the eldest son could inherit the title, but younger sons had to strive anew; otherwise, their next generation would be commoners.

This was even more the case for non-hereditary nobles. Continuing the tradition of the European continent, if the next generation did not make an effort, there would be no title to inherit.



Anyone ambitious wouldn't be content with mediocrity; they would seize the opportunity when it arose.

Although Franz's Nobility Law wasn't implemented yet, it was not kept secret either; its content had already spread.

After all, colonies differed from the mainland. If the central government directly ruled them, the cost would be a major issue. If governance was entrusted to meritorious subjects, with the central government controlling only a few key areas and the rest managed by these subjects, administrative pressure would be much reduced.

The main reason it hasn't been implemented yet is the uncertainty of successful colonization. If colonization proves profitable, nobles will naturally be willing to govern these territories.

Anyway, if the colonies weren't profitable, even if the land was given away for free, the nobles would disdain it.

This is determined by the unique national conditions of the New Holy Roman Empire. There are already three kings of federated states within the country, and Franz doesn't mind adding a few more overseas.

At least this could effectively curb corruption. Franz isn't planning to levy heavy taxes in the colonies; a symbolic amount would suffice. The main goal is to expand the market for Austria's industry and commerce; these people can't just swallow their own money, right?

The collapse of the British Empire's colonial system in later generations was due to attacks by the US and USSR, but the high cost of the bureaucratic system was also a significant factor.

To reduce governance costs, they even developed self-governing dominions. This measure was both a success and a failure.

It was successful in that it indeed reduced administrative costs and expanded the market for domestic industry and commerce. However, once the rights were released, they couldn't be taken back, planting the seeds for the collapse of the colonial empire.

The autonomous government's powers were controlled by local capitalists. Capital knows no borders, so it's unsurprising for such things to happen.

Franz may not guarantee the prevention of such occurrences, but he can increase a sense of belonging and delay the collapse.

Relying on government bureaucrats to organize immigration isn't promising, as seen with the Germans moving to America. Franz doesn't believe Austrian bureaucrats can do much better.

It might be better to let nobles organize it themselves. If they succeed, he shares in their success; if they fail, no harm is done. Ennobling several families increases the chances of success.

It's not that Franz underestimates African nations, but supporting any vassal state can make it one of the strongest in Africa, provided they avoid corrupt practices.

This lays the groundwork for future 'thorns' in Africa. Cultural traditions and economic interests are natural ties, uniting the colonies with the mainland.

As long as the populace's loyalty to the motherland remains, independence seems unlikely unless they want to abandon their own legitimacy.

As long as the ruling class remains sane, they won't commit such self-destructive acts.

Being a highly autonomous state under the New Holy Roman Empire, they wouldn't lose any benefits, and the imperial government would continue to be the source of their status.

Conversely, these vassal kings would also become pillars of support for the emperor's authority. Even if royal power declines in the future, to prevent the empire's dissolution, no one would dare undermine the emperor's doctrines.

## Chapter 243: Economic Development

Colonizing overseas has always been a challenging task, especially for a budding colonial empire like Austria, which has much to learn.

In this era, the African continent is anything but benign. The most formidable enemies are not the local natives but the harsh natural environment.

Dangerous insects, fierce beasts, and rampant diseases are the main factors that keep nations from colonizing Africa. Otherwise, the continent would have been carved up long ago.

Frankly, if it weren't for breakthroughs in the production of quinine, which began to address the major issue of dysentery, Franz would not have dared to venture into Africa.

For safety, all Austrian soldiers are being educated in hygiene practices. Personal and camp hygiene are to be strictly adhered to according to established standards.

To avoid contracting local diseases, Franz even issued masks. The soldiers were warned not to casually come into contact with the natives and were especially forbidden from engaging in sexual relations with the locals. Intermarriage was absolutely not an option.

Franz must take these precautions seriously. There are always those with less conventional tastes, and this is even more true in military camps. Fortunately, this batch of immigrants likely includes a considerable number of young women, which should help address this issue.

After more than three months of preparation, the first Austrian colonial expedition set sail from the port of Trieste on April 28, 1854.

Led by two second-class battleships, accompanied by five cruisers and more than ten auxiliary ships, they embarked on the first step of colonization with an infantry regiment, targeting Guinea.

Their opponents this time were native tribes, and the navy's role would be more of a training exercise, perhaps even engaging enemies in canoes. The main fighting force would be the army.

Franz had initially planned to establish a Marine Corps, but this met collective opposition from both the Army and the Navy. The Army did not want to diminish its say in colonial activities, and the Navy simply couldn't afford it.

This wasn't a joke; Austria's navy was indeed lacking funds. To secure more funding, they first needed to prove their value.

Politics often works this way, grounded in pragmatism. The amount of funding allocated reflects the perceived value.

If overseas colonies could bring substantial profits to the empire, then the navy could shift from being a neglected force to a favored one.

Franz had no objections; this was the most rational approach. Without sufficient benefits, rashly expanding the navy would be a complete waste of resources.

Instead of doing that, it made more sense to invest the precious funds into domestic economic development. Although the economic boom in the country hadn't subsided, with railway stocks soaring following the opening of several main lines, almost reaching sky-high levels.

If it weren't for Franz's insistence on prohibiting the construction of duplicate railway lines, Austrian railways would have already followed the example of Britain and America in redundant construction.

Of course, it was precisely because each railway line was granted exclusively to one company that it became so highly coveted by capital investors. In this era, what was the most profitable? Clearly, it was a monopoly.

With such positive developments, the government's mandate to pair popular railway routes with a few less popular ones was also accepted.

To attract foreign investment, even the railway transportation fees were left to be freely determined by the market. Franz wasn't worried at all that these prices would skyrocket.

In a market economy environment, it's certainly the market that decides. The level of prices in society is determined by supply and demand relationships, and the cost of railway freight would naturally be dictated by the maximization of profits.

Capitalists naturally understand the trade-offs. Now, as railways have just emerged to compete with traditional modes of transport, if they don't have a price advantage, how can they snatch customers?

Being able to save costs and time compared to traditional transportation means progress. The potential impact of high freight costs on the circulation of goods will be a matter to consider after the completion of railway construction.

Currently, all of Austria's railway companies are in a state of pure investment. Even though the few main lines that are operational are busy and profitable, their earnings are just a drop in the bucket.

These profits are being reinvested by the railway companies into the construction of new railway lines. Franz is well aware that Austria's railway companies have never distributed dividends since their establishment.

They haven't made any profits yet, so how can they be expected to reduce prices? If they did, the railway industry, which is currently in high demand, would likely become unpopular overnight.

At this time, the Austrian government will certainly not come out to hinder them. The promise of ten years of tax exemption has already been fulfilled. The government is not charging any fees, which is an encouragement for everyone to continue building railways.

"Time is life, time is money."

This slogan has become the motto of all the executives of Austria's railway companies. The sooner a line is put into operation, the sooner it begins to generate revenue.

Up to now, all of Austria's operational railway lines have not disappointed anyone. In the context of free pricing, there are no loss-making routes, which greatly stimulates the nerves of certain individuals.

Numerous British and French capitalists wanted to control Austria's railway network for the sake of monopolistic operations. And so they leaped into the wonderful illusion crafted by Franz, losing themselves in a dream.

Indeed, profits lead to delusion. Everyone is frantically building railroads. Many see this as an opportunity to stake their claim; owning more railroads now means more stable income in the future.

With no concept of a railway bubble at present, and with the advantage of monopoly operations, nobody believes they will make a loss.

In such a context, Franz, who monopolizes the supply of sand and raw materials, naturally makes a fortune. By the end of this year, it is expected that Austria's total railway mileage will exceed 10,000 kilometers.

When Franz came to power, the total length of railroads in Austria was less than 3,000 kilometers. On average, more than 1,400 kilometers of railroad were completed each year.

In this era, only the Americans across the ocean could compare. Like Austria, the United States also experienced a railway investment boom. However, due to some of the capital being diverted to Austria, it wasn't as frenzied as in history.

The total railroad mileage in the entire New Holy Roman Empire exceeded 12,000 kilometers. In fact, the railroad mileage in the small German states alone exceeded 2,000 kilometers.

It can only be described as a frenzy. Historically, the most active period of railway construction was in Germany. By 1850, the total railroad mileage in Germany reached 5,856 kilometers, more than twice that of Austria at the same time.

If Franz had not promoted railway construction in Austria, Germany would now lead Europe in the speed of railway construction, matched only by the French.

Of course, this refers to the era of Napoleon III in France. In 1854, the total railway mileage in Germany was over 3,000 kilometers more than in France.

Starting from 1854, French railways began to grow rapidly. By the time of the Franco-Prussian War, the total railway mileage of France and Germany differed by only a few hundred kilometers.

Among the major European powers, Russia had the slowest railway construction. Due to the Near East War, their railway construction projects were nearly halted altogether, reaching only 1,626 kilometers by 1860.

It was a disgrace among the great powers because even Belgium and Spain had more railroads than they did. Meanwhile, Britain, France, and Germany had all surpassed ten thousand kilometers, not even at the same level as them.

As the national territory grew, the original plan for the railway network naturally expanded. This expansion didn't require any governmental impetus; private railway companies were already spontaneously moving to stake their claims.

The bidding process for Austria's railway lines was quite interesting. The faster the construction started and the earlier it was completed, the more likely it was to win the bid.

Since the railways were granted free of charge, the railway companies had to start and complete construction within the promised time frame. Penalties were imposed for exceeding the deadline, and in severe cases, the government had the right to revoke the construction rights. There were also rewards for early completion.

The test was everyone's capital chain. Franz didn't resort to any tricks or schemes; as long as the railway company's operations were sound and they could be completed on schedule, there were no problems.

Once the capital chain was broken, it would be miserable. If construction hadn't started yet, it would be fine — at worst, pay some penalties and return the unbuilt railway lines.

But if construction had already begun, or even if half of the project was completed but lacked funds for the remaining work, that would result in a significant loss.

All investments would be wasted, with the government taking over unfinished projects to continue construction. Whether the railway companies went through bankruptcy and restructuring or simply collapsed was no longer within Franz's considerations.

After all, these were open strategies, clearly laid out for everyone. The government wasn't deliberately setting traps; everything was clearly stated in the bidding notices.

Despite all these risks, under the temptation of monopoly, everyone still eagerly jumped in. British and French capital came in, and so did Austrian domestic capital. Speculators were rushing to get a piece of the action.

Due to the government providing free labor, the construction costs of Austrian railways were artificially lowered during this era, making the financial statements of various railway companies look very attractive.

It can be said that Franz put his heart and soul into Austria's railway construction. He had to accelerate the pace, as the next economic crisis was only a few years away.

If they couldn't use foreign capital to drive domestic railway construction during the economic boom, then when the economic crisis erupted and the railway bubble burst, all the unfinished projects would have to be taken over by the Austrian government.

How severe was Austria's economic bubble? No one could give Franz an answer, but one aspect was telling: the rate of economic growth.

A product worth 100 guilders, inflated to 1,000 guilders in the market, increases wealth by 900 guilders in theory. If the market accepts this, it's fine, but once the market can't sustain it and the price falls back to the original 100 guilders, the 900 guilders added by the bubble evaporates.

This is why, during economic crises, wealth can seemingly disappear overnight. Essentially, it's the bursting of a bubble, bringing the market back to rationality. However, due to supply and demand dynamics, the final price often falls below the intrinsic value of the goods.

Currently, Austria's economic growth rate is very fast. Even if all other industries in Austria came to a standstill, just the stock market bubble alone would result in at least a 1% annual economic growth.

This era is different from later times when government intervention in the market economy prevented major economic crises.

Now, the market economy is left to develop naturally, with small economic crises occurring every seven or eight years, and major crises every few decades.

With each crisis, industrial output often falls by 20-30% percent, and in severe cases, a drop of 40-50% is not impossible.

In any case, the bigger the bubble, the more violently it would crash in the end. And the earlier the economic growth, the more rapid it would be — a bit like a rollercoaster.

In 1854, the New Holy Roman Empire had a staggering 23,000 kilometers of railways under construction, indicating a severe situation of blind investment in railways.

However, Franz showed no intention of stopping this trend; on the contrary, he was preparing to further fuel the market, aiming to make it even more heated.

The explosive model of economic development is always irresistibly appealing. Every sector in Austria was experiencing explosive growth. Since the outbreak of the Near East War, the industrial growth rate has averaged over 15% annually, and the economic growth rate has also exceeded 10%.

Had it not been for the diversion of the westward expansion strategy midway, these figures might have been even higher by one or two points higher. Rationality was long gone; the market had gone mad, reaching a point where almost any investment seemed profitable.

The contribution of the Russians to this situation was significant. From the start of the Near East War, Austria entered an era of trade surpluses, a stark contrast to its longstanding history of trade deficits.

The illusion in the capital market that “any investment is profitable” was largely due to this sudden Near East War.

Due to the war, a large amount of cash flowed from Russia into Austria, stimulating the economic market. Many capitalists were blindly expanding their production capacities, hoping to make a fortune before the war ended.

Advancing the establishment of overseas colonies was also a strategy to divert domestic economic crises. However, the colonization of Africa was just beginning and would play a negligible role in the upcoming economic crisis.

## Chapter 244: Calamity Descends

At this stage of the Battle of Constantinople, it was impossible to estimate the number of corpses that were left unattended in the city's corners and were beginning to fester.

Only the bodies in their immediate area have been cleared by either side of the conflict, leaving more inside civilian homes and in the city's corners.

August brings a very uncomfortable atmosphere to Constantinople as the scorching heat sets in and the odor of decay permeates the entire city.

The artillery fire continues to roar, leaving only ruins and remnants that speak of the past. The Russians have paid a heavy price to conquer this city.

Menshikov has given up on looking at the daily casualty reports. He is numb from the death toll of thousands every day for several months.

The notoriety of the “Constantinople Meat Grinder” has spread worldwide. Wherever Europeans are found, the brutality of this war is being discussed.

If someone were to tally the numbers, they would find that the Russian losses here have already exceeded the total of the two battles in Bulgaria, yet the Russians remain undaunted.

The peripheral defenses of Constantinople have all been breached, or rather, bombarded into ruins, after the expenditure of tens of thousands of tons of ammunition.

Now that street warfare has started, both sides are facing a period of extreme attrition. From a starting 5:1, the casualty exchange rate declined steadily to 4:1, then 3:1, and finally to 1.3:1.

A middle-aged officer said solemnly, “Commander, our cannon fodder units have been almost completely wiped out, and the recruited Bulgarian guerrilla forces have also suffered heavy losses. Currently, there aren’t many young and able-bodied men left in the Balkan Peninsula. It’s going to be very difficult to replenish our forces now.”

Of course, there aren’t many left. This war has been most devastating to the local population.

The Ottomans conscripted men for the war, the Russians did the same, and while the British and French didn’t, the Ottomans conscripted on their behalf.

The Balkan Peninsula has a total population of just over ten million, and how many of them are young and able-bodied? How could they possibly withstand such relentless depletion?

Before the attack on Constantinople, the Russians mainly used their conscripted men for hard labor and rarely employed the tactic of using civilians to storm cities.

However, the situation changed upon reaching this city. The severe casualties forced the Russians to extensively use these men as cannon fodder.

Menshikov replied in a cold voice, “Understood, make do with whatever we have. Once the cannon fodder is gone, our troops will take their place. The enemy is close to breaking. As long as we capture this last district, we will win the war!

Order the military judiciary to strictly enforce military law: execute those who refuse to advance in battle, those who speak of retreat, and those who disrupt military morale!”

There was no choice; this war was not only crucial for the fate of Russia but also for Menshikov’s own fate.

If he couldn’t capture Constantinople, it would be better for him to die on the battlefield, as many would want to tear him apart otherwise.

From a purely military perspective, Menshikov was a fool, completely engaged in a senseless war with no regard for the casualties of his troops. To sustain this war, the Russian army relied on strict

military law. To establish authority, Menshikov even executed noble officers who violated military regulations on the spot!

The number of noble officers who died by his hand was not just one or two but amounted to dozens over time.

If Constantinople were captured, everything would be fine. He would be hailed as a Russian national hero, and those executed nobles would be branded as cowards, with their families facing disdain.

But if Constantinople were not captured, the situation would be different. Historically, even Nicholas I couldn't bear the consequences of the Crimean War's failure, let alone Menshikov.

Menshikov wasn't ready to die in disgrace, so he was now fighting desperately. No matter who they were or how influential their background was, anyone who dared to violate military law would be executed.

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

Not just Menshikov, but the fate of all high-ranking officers in the expeditionary force was tied together. The Battle of Constantinople was important; if they lost here, none of them could expect to have good days ahead.

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In the Crimean Peninsula, the overwhelmingly superior British-French alliance had not even begun to celebrate when a bolt from the blue struck: in July 1854, cholera broke out in the French military camp.

The hot weather, combined with unsanitary conditions, led to a rapid outbreak of the epidemic, which spread from the French camp to the British camp before the allied forces could react.

Flies and mosquitoes on the Crimean Peninsula became the best helpers in spreading the virus. A large number of allied soldiers began to suffer from vomiting and diarrhea and then died in their tents.

Sanitation in the public areas of the allied forces was practically non-existent, and the health system was in name only. The number of patients rose sharply, and the epidemic reached a point of being out of control.

By early August, 500 British soldiers in Varna had already died from the disease. The death toll in the French forces was even higher, with over 60 dying each day.

And this was just the beginning. The epidemic, which had initially gone unnoticed, spread to other areas as people moved around.

Constantinople

There was a stretch of open ground near the docks where more than 10 French soldiers were resting. All eyes turned to one of the guys who began to vomit out of the blue.

A young man asked with concern, "Alphonse, what's wrong with you?"

The vomiting man replied weakly, "I don't know. I just suddenly felt nauseous and wanted to throw up."



A man who looked like an officer said, “You might have caught a cold. Just take care of yourself. If it’s still the same tomorrow, then you should see a medic.”

He just thought Alphonse had a common cold, a minor ailment that everyone usually overcomes on their own, seeking medical attention only in severe cases.

Despite the French army’s better logistics compared to the British, medical resources were still very scarce. Except for higher-ranking officers, it was difficult for ordinary soldiers to receive effective treatment.

At that moment, another person said, “I can’t hold it, I need to go.”

After saying this, he ran off to a nearby spot to relieve himself without looking back.

Such a minor incident didn’t attract much attention. They were reinforcements who had just arrived a few days ago and were now getting used to the climate of Constantinople.

Everyone was accustomed to seeing some adverse reactions due to the change in environment and climate. Usually, these issues resolve themselves after some time, and if not, the affected person would have to be sent back.

However, most people were reluctant to be sent back, even though the casualty rate on the Constantinople battlefield was exceedingly high.

Adverse reactions caused by the inability to adapt to the climate usually meant that one couldn’t return home safely; most would die on the way.

In this era, the sea was not to be trifled with. The conditions aboard ships were quite harsh, and in the absence of adequate medical care, falling ill was like stepping into the gates of death.

Watching the number of sick soldiers increasing day by day, the French commander, Aimable Pélissier, finally realized something was wrong, but by then it was already too late.

In Constantinople, the death toll was extremely high. In the defense of this fortress city, over a hundred thousand French soldiers had fallen, and the number of Russian casualties was likely even higher. The civilian casualties within the city were incalculable.

Due to the war, the French army was unable to properly clear the corpses within the city. Many bodies were buried under collapsed buildings, making their retrieval and cleanup impossible.

This created an ideal living environment for rats and flies. That summer, the number of rats and flies in Constantinople broke historical records, as if they were the true masters of the city.

Pélissier instructed a guard: “Please call Dr. Ambroise, and hand these documents to him.”

Although he had his suspicions, Pélissier was still not certain that an epidemic had broken out. Until this point, he had not been informed of the outbreak of the plague on the Crimean Peninsula.

Busy with the defense of Constantinople, Pélissier did not have the energy to pay attention to rumors, and even if he wanted to, he might not have taken them seriously.

The allied forces had been plagued by disease since the beginning of their campaign in Crimea, and this was no longer news. Over time, everyone had become accustomed to it.

Moreover, the confirmation of the epidemic outbreak by the allied forces in Crimea only occurred a few days before Pélissier became aware of it. The virus had already entered the city before this.

Because of the war, a large number of people died in the city every day. Over time, people became numb to death. What did a few more deaths from disease matter?

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Ambroise said solemnly, "Commander, I have just visited the hospital and, by combining this data, we can preliminarily conclude that there is indeed a plague."

Pélissier's face darkened. The worst-case scenario had occurred. Constantinople was connected to the sea, allowing for a continuous flow of reinforcements and supplies. He was confident in holding out as long as he was willing to bear the casualties.

However, there was one exception to this: the plague. In the face of disease, humans are vulnerable. Pélissier could defeat the Russians, but he was powerless against this epidemic.

"Can it be controlled?" Pélissier asked with concern.

He was only hoping to control the spread, not a cure. In this era, contracting the plague meant leaving one's fate to chance, as there were no effective treatments available.

Ambroise thought for a moment before responding, "I'm sorry, Commander, I cannot answer that question for you.

It depends on the contagiousness of the plague and determining how many people have already been infected with the virus before we can draw a conclusion.

However, it is currently a time of war, the army is moving too frequently, and we have a severe shortage of doctors. It's impossible to disperse them among the troops for diagnosis and treatment, and we can't determine which cases are common colds and which are the plague.

In fact, from the symptoms alone, common colds could also present these symptoms. If it weren't for the high mortality rate, I might even suspect this is just a highly contagious influenza outbreak."

The reason the plague is so feared is because of its rapid spread and high mortality rate.

Pélissier continued to ask, "Can we determine the nature of this epidemic?"

Plagues are classified into different types, and each type can cause varying levels of destruction.

Ambroise shook his head and said, "At the moment, we have too little information to determine the origin and transmission routes of this epidemic. We cannot rule out the possibility of it being the bubonic plague.

From a professional standpoint, I believe that Constantinople is no longer a suitable place to stay.

Too many people have died in the city, and often we can smell the stench of rotting corpses in the gutters. War itself is a breeding ground for plagues."

Pélissier replied with a wry smile, "Alright then, Dr. Ambroise, the task of investigating and combating the plague is yours. As for whether Constantinople is suitable for habitation, I cannot answer you. This is not just a military issue, but also a political one."

Pélissier knew too well that Constantinople was no longer a viable place to stay; a plague outbreak made it unsuitable.

However, the consequences of abandoning Constantinople were too severe. At least as the commander of the expeditionary force, he could not take responsibility for such a decision, and he didn't even have a say in the matter.

Ambroise responded, "Alright then, Commander. I can only say I will do my best, but I cannot guarantee the outcome!"

## Chapter 245: Add Fuel to the Fire

After confirming the outbreak of the plague in Constantinople, Pélissier did not delay and immediately reported to the French government.

### Palace of Versailles

Napoleon III was in a very bad mood. He had just received news of the plague outbreak in Crimea, and now Constantinople had also succumbed to the epidemic.

He wasn't interested in where the virus came from; what troubled him now was what to do next.

The situation in Crimea could still be managed; with such a vast area, it was possible to disperse and isolate the affected zones to control the spread of the epidemic.

But what about Constantinople? Now reduced to a small area with high population density, and still engaged in street warfare with the Russians, how could the epidemic there be controlled?

Minister of War Arnaud spoke up, "Your Majesty, the outbreak of the plague in Constantinople likely means worsening conditions at the front. Sending reinforcements now would be like throwing our men into the fire. The brave soldiers of France might defeat the Russians, but only God can combat the plague."

Since the beginning of the Battle of Constantinople, the French army had been reinforcing its troops almost every month, not so much as reinforcements but more to replenish the frontline troops and replace some of the decimated units.

Napoleon III had managed this aspect quite well, avoiding the overuse of any single unit. Even in purging dissenters, he typically found excuses to transfer them rather than resorting to mass executions.

The war had reached a point where the French government had long desired to stop, but political factors prevented Napoleon III from compromising.

Now, Arnaud was subtly reminding Napoleon III that he needed to either find an excuse to abandon Constantinople or organize more troops for a decisive battle against the Russians. In any case, he could no longer continue with the tactic of dragging out the conflict with piecemeal reinforcements.

With his high political acumen, Napoleon III quickly grasped the situation and even thought ahead, urgently saying:

"Immediately have the Foreign Ministry negotiate with the Ottoman Empire and ask them to abandon Constantinople. In return, we will ensure that their interests in other regions are protected.

We can jointly pressure them with the British. At this moment, I believe the British government will make a wise decision.

Let the news of the negotiations leak out, suggesting that we aim to reclaim this holy city for the Christian world. Get the Catholic Church involved to help build momentum.

Order Pélissier at the front line to, by any means necessary, ensure the Russians are also infected with the plague!”

At that time, science had not yet taken deep root in the hearts and minds of the people. If action was not taken quickly, the Russians could seize the opportunity to launch a political offensive, and the consequences of that would be unimaginable.

If the plague only broke out among the allied forces while the Russians remained unscathed, the subsequent war would be unnecessary; political maneuvers alone could doom the British and French governments.

The phrase “God shall punish those who aid the heathens” would likely instantly shatter the morale of the troops at the front. Whether Protestant or Catholic, they all worship God.

Constantinople, as a holy site of the Christian world, is imbued with a deep religious significance. Emotionally speaking, no one is keen on aiding the Ottoman Empire in religious terms.

If the public back home were to learn that the government is being punished by God for helping the heathens, would one even need to consider the consequences?

Napoleon III dares not test the devoutness of the French people’s faith. Compared to this dreadful outcome, the importance of the Ottoman Empire as an ally pales into insignificance.

“Better for you to die than me” — to survive a potential political storm, the interests of the Ottoman Empire must be sacrificed.

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As it turned out, Napoleon III’s worries were unfounded. The plague wasn’t a divine punishment, as it indiscriminately affected everyone, including the Russians.

Perhaps due to their robust physiques, the Russians didn’t suffer as severely from the plague as the allied forces did. The impact of being unaccustomed to the local environment was also a significant factor.

Along with the plague, dysentery also appeared, but its symptoms were similar enough that the allied forces hadn’t yet distinguished between the two diseases.

At the Russian command center in the Balkan Peninsula, the top brass of the expeditionary force gathered, all looking pale.

General Menshikov asked with great concern, “Are we certain it’s the plague?”

A middle-aged military doctor answered solemnly, “Commander, the news is confirmed. As of now, we have over 5,000 soldiers exhibiting symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea, exceeding the norm for a regular influenza outbreak.”

Before Menshikov could respond, a middle-aged officer added, “Commander, according to the prisoners we’ve captured, a large number of French soldiers in the city are also falling ill.”

Without much hesitation, Menshikov made his decision: “Order the troops to take epidemic prevention measures, but the attack must not stop. Our situation is bad, but it must be worse for the French inside the city.

I will seek help from St. Petersburg regarding the plague and ask for a large number of medical personnel to be sent here. This epidemic could also be an opportunity. I don’t believe the French can hold out much longer!”

On the surface, Menshikov was tense, but deep down, he was relieved. With the outbreak of the plague, the good days for the French were over.

The logic was simple: the greater the population density, the more conducive it was for the spread of the plague. Under such circumstances, the losses inside the city would definitely be greater than those outside.

Considering the current state of the war, how many people had died inside Constantinople? Was it a hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, or even three hundred thousand, four hundred thousand, or more?

Were these bodies dealt with in time? Perhaps the French dealt with most of them, but even if only 1% were overlooked, that would still amount to thousands of unattended corpses. Haven’t the rats in Constantinople grown fatter?

Decomposing bodies and breeding insects are perfect assistants for the spread of viruses. Even without an external virus, Constantinople itself had the potential for a plague outbreak.

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Vienna

Upon receiving the news of the outbreak of the plague in Constantinople, Franz immediately convened a meeting and instructed the Ministry of Health to oversee the epidemic prevention work.

Although historically this plague had a limited reach, erupting mainly on the Crimean Peninsula, and Austria was only slightly affected but the current situation was different. Since the plague had broken out in Constantinople, could the Balkans be spared? And if the Balkans were affected, wouldn’t Austria be affected as well?

After deploying the epidemic prevention measures, Franz then continued to consider the implications of the plague.

“The outbreak of the plague means that the French won’t be able to hold Constantinople. What do you think will be the next developments in the international situation?”

Metternich reminded, “Your Majesty, from the present situation, the mortality rate of this plague is not too high. If the epidemic is controlled, the French are still capable of holding onto Constantinople.”

Franz laughed and then asked, “Marshal, how long has it been since the Russians cut off Constantinople’s water supply?”

Marshal Radetzky replied, “Your Majesty, it’s been almost sixteen months. However, Constantinople is connected to a port, so they still have an adequate supply of fresh water. There’s no shortage of fresh water in the city right now.”

For geological reasons, Constantinople has no groundwater. Although there are water reservoirs in the city, they are not sufficient to meet the needs of so many people.

Franz shook his head and said, “There are so many people in Constantinople, and the amount of water used daily is not a small number.

Since their water supply has been cut off by the Russians for so long, we can safely assume that the city’s reserve water sources are already depleted.

Now they rely entirely on ships to transport fresh water to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of people in the city.

The amount of fresh water needed daily for so many people is also not small, requiring a large number of ships to transport it.

How many transport ships are active in Constantinople? How much fresh water can they provide after they have finished transporting various materials?

The British and French bureaucrats will, at most, provide the basic survival water needs of these people. The supply of water for daily use is likely to be limited.

Under normal circumstances, when there is a shortage of fresh water supply, people can tolerate it for a while — not bathing, not washing their faces, not washing their hands.

But the situation has changed. Without an adequate supply of fresh water, how can the French army carry out epidemic prevention? If basic sanitary conditions cannot be improved, how can the spread of the virus be contained?”

Due to the epidemic prevention meeting, everyone had brushed up on their knowledge of epidemic prevention. Some of this information was provided by officials from the Austrian Ministry of Health, while some were supplemented by Franz from his memory.

Now everyone understood the importance of hygiene. At this critical moment in the outbreak, the French troops in the city were a prime target for the virus due to their lack of fresh water.

The Russians outside, even if they were similarly negligent about hygiene, did not lack water. They could still manage to bathe occasionally, right?

As for the French soldiers inside the city, it’s not known how long they had been without such an opportunity, or perhaps they never had it at all.

Whether the French were aware of this issue or not, they were powerless to change it.

The gap was not small. Just to meet basic survival needs, a small basin of water per day was enough. However, to improve sanitary conditions, the amount of water required would have to be multiplied many times over.

Where could they find so many water transport ships in such a short time?

Tens of thousands of tons of fresh water were needed every day. Felix estimated that only by diverting all the British and French ships in the Mediterranean to this task could they possibly meet their logistical needs.

After some thought, Felix said, "Your Majesty, if the French cannot solve the epidemic problem, we should prepare to mediate in this war. Once the Russians take Constantinople, this war cannot continue.

The Russian finances are already in crisis. If not for the special political significance of Constantinople, they would have probably compromised already.

Now that the Russians have occupied Bulgaria, letting them take Constantinople will make the future even more uncontrollable. It would be better to contain them."

Metternich disagreed: "Prime Minister, it's already too late to contain the Russians unless we tear up the Russo-Austrian secret treaty. We must support them in the forthcoming negotiations.

With our diplomatic support, as soon as Constantinople is occupied by the Russians, I don't believe the British and French will have the power to force the Russian government to relinquish it.

Don't forget that maintaining the Russo-Austrian alliance is much more important to us at this time than containing Russia. We cannot oppose the Russian annexation of Constantinople.

Since we can't contain them, why should we be the villain?

It might be better to add fuel to the fire instead, letting the Russians continue to foster hatred from the British and French, deepening the conflict between them."

"Adding fuel to the fire," Franz was very interested in this suggestion. To control the Black Sea, it wasn't enough just to have Constantinople; it was also necessary to control both the Balkan and Anatolian Peninsulas.

Could the Russians continue to fight? That was impossible. Even if the Russian government did everything it could, it could only go as far as Constantinople.

If they pushed the British and French too hard, there might even be a chance of a counter-push. The transportation limitations of the Russian Empire limited their exertion of power.

In the Balkans, even with the support of Austria, the Russians could use at most 70-80% of their national strength. How could they compete with Britain and France?

Right now, the Russians had the upper hand only because Britain and France hadn't reacted properly, sabotaging each other on the battlefield.

Once the pressure from the Russians became too great, causing the two countries to set aside their differences and cooperate sincerely, the situation on the battlefield would be completely different.

It didn't matter if the Russians couldn't take it; Franz also didn't want the Russian government to control the Black Sea truly.

The Mediterranean is simply too small, not enough for Britain, France, Austria, and Italy to share, leaving no surplus benefits for Russia.

But that doesn't stop the Russians from having ambitions. After all, by taking Constantinople, they are one step closer to the Mediterranean.

As long as the Russians remain ambitious, they will not be able to compromise with Britain and France. With Britain, France, and Russia in mutual opposition, Austria can remain secure.

That was Bismarck's historical plan, but then Wilhelm II mishandled the diplomacy and unbelievably allowed France and Russia to form an alliance. Of course, it was a tragedy to be caught in the middle.

"The Austro-Russian alliance must not be compromised. Containing the Russians should be left to Britain and France. As an ally, we absolutely cannot go back on our word and abandon morality!"

Franz made his stance clear. He did not want to send the wrong political signal, leading the upper echelons of the government to mistakenly believe that Austria had already gained what it wanted and could therefore abandon the Russians.

From the perspective of national interest, such betrayal is very normal. Aligning with Britain and France now seems more in line with Austria's overseas colonial interests.

But when considering strategic security, the situation is different. Compared to the unstable French government and the ambitious, resurgent Kingdom of Prussia, Franz feels that an alliance with Russia is somewhat more reliable.

Chapter 246: Each Takes What They Need

"There's another dead body over here!"

"Quickly, remove the body and arrange for its cremation as soon as possible!"

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Amidst the shouts, there was a sense of numbness and despair. With a large number of people dying every day, everyone had become desensitized to death.

Unlike previous deaths of the wounded, this time it was a plague, a contagion that even the medical staff couldn't escape. Even a French army major general had succumbed to the disease and ended up in the crematorium.

Safety measures? Unfortunately, the protective measures of the time were very primitive, and even basic disinfection could not be achieved.

In the corners of the quarantine areas, the moans of the sick could be heard occasionally. This place had become a dreaded no man's land, and the medical personnel would only hurriedly distribute some medicine before quickly leaving.

Checking for symptoms? That was non-existent. How many doctors were there in the French army?

Moreover, there was no specific cure for the plague. The medicines being used were more for psychological comfort than actual treatment.

The soldiers in charge of distributing the food were even more averse to the place. They would leave food at the door, shout a message, and then quickly leave.

"Adolf, can you still hold on?"



“Yes. Thank you, Alfonso. I feel much better, I think I can make it through this time.”

“Rest well, if you make it through, everything will be fine.”

Alfonso had such conversations many times every day. As one of the earliest plague victims, Alfonso was fortunate to have survived.

According to tradition, having survived a wave of the plague, it was unlikely that God would call him again soon. Therefore, he had no choice but to stay and act as a caregiver.

As per the doctor’s advice, he needed to stay in the hospital for continued observation and treatment, to ensure nothing went wrong before he could be discharged.

In reality, Alfonso was asked to stay to do the hard work, such as caring for the sick, distributing food, and dealing with the dead. These dreaded tasks fell to him.

Alfonso, enticed by the offer of extra pay, readily accepted this daunting task.

He was a veteran soldier, one of the very first French soldiers to enter the Balkans. Half of his comrades who came with him had already been killed.

To a seasoned soldier like him, death was no longer a fear. Casualties were a daily occurrence on the battlefield, and scenes of bloodshed were common.

He found it much easier to help here than to fight on the battlefield. His daily duties included caring for just over thirty patients, after which he had his own time.

After spending an extended period there, Alfonso realized that the situation was not as horrific as it was perceived from the outside. In the month he had been there, only five had died, while seven had recovered.

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At the French military headquarters in Constantinople, Ambroise brought some bad news.

“Commander, the Russian offensive has sabotaged our epidemic prevention efforts. The spread of the plague is now inevitable!”

This news did not surprise the French commander, Pélissier. He had anticipated that the Russians would not miss this opportunity given the outbreak of the plague.

Besides the French troops, there were civilians in Constantinople. The Ottoman Empire was their ally, and Pélissier could not possibly expel all of Constantinople’s inhabitants from the city.

The denser the population, the more challenging it was to control the plague. The Russian offensive only exacerbated the situation.

Pélissier asked calmly, “What is the situation with the plague in the city?”

Ambroise spoke with a hint of sorrow, “This epidemic might have originated from the recent cholera outbreak in London. There’s also an outbreak in the Crimean Peninsula, and the symptoms are quite similar to ours.

However, it’s peculiar that the plague in Constantinople is highly contagious, far more so than in other areas. We initially suspect that it is transmitted through mosquitoes, flies, and such insects.

The mortality rate is average for a plague. Most young and strong individuals can survive it, with the mortality rate not exceeding 15%. However, the mortality rate is much higher among the elderly and the weak.

The worst cases are among the wounded. Once infected with the plague, they almost always face certain death.”

Pélissier could only curse the British in his mind. The cholera outbreak in London was not serious and was quickly controlled without widespread transmission. Ironically, it was they who suffered the consequences.

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London

Foreign Secretary Thomas spoke gravely, “Prime Minister, we have just received news that the French forces in Constantinople have failed to control the plague, which is now beginning to spread.

Last night, Napoleon III met secretly with the Austrian Ambassador in France at the Palace of Versailles for over two hours.

The analysis from our Foreign Office suggests that this clandestine meeting might be related to the Near East War. The turn of events in Constantinople diminished French confidence in this war.

The French government might unilaterally seek to end the war with Russia. Now, they are using the Austrians to send signals of negotiation to Russia.

According to the intelligence we’ve gathered, the Austrian Envoy in London has also been very active recently, frequently contacting leaders of the peace faction domestically. It seems that the Austrian government is interested in mediating this conflict.”

After pondering for a moment, George Hamilton-Gordon asked, “It’s not surprising that the French are interested in ending the war. What reasons does the Foreign Office have for believing that the Austrians want to mediate the conflict? From a standpoint of interest, the longer this war lasts, the more beneficial it is for Austria.”

International political interests are always the decisive factor. The continuation of the Near East War not only depletes the strength of Britain, France, and Russia but also allows Austria to profit immensely from the war.

From the perspective of interests, it doesn’t make sense for the Austrian government to allow the three countries to end this war prematurely.

Thomas confidently replied, “The Austrians do not want us to truly determine a winner. Although the Vienna System has collapsed, the Austrian government has not given up on the European balance of power strategy.

Whether Russia wins or we do, Austria’s position of neutrality will no longer exist, and a new round of international conflict will inevitably erupt.

While the continuation of the Near East War aligns with Austria’s interests, the eventual outcome is unpredictable.

In this Near East War, Austria has already gained a lot. They now urgently need to assimilate these benefits. Metternich's style has always been to seek stability, so it's normal for them to cash in now while things are looking good."

Prime Minister George nodded, acknowledging that compared to national strategy, minor economic gains were insignificant. Sandwiched between France and Russia, the Austrian government had no choice but to pursue a policy of continental balance.

"What are your plans?" asked Prime Minister George.

Thomas replied, "Prime Minister, the Near East War has reached this point, and our plan to contain Russia has failed. Continuing the fight will only increase casualties without any real significance.

Our advantage lies at sea. Going onto land to desperately fight against Russia is something only our idiotic predecessors would do.

Our future strategy should still be to stir up conflicts between Russia and France, Russia and Austria, and Russia and Prussia. We aim to engage the strength of European countries to contain Russia, while we simply blockade Russia at sea."

War always provides lessons. The Near East War has led the British government to conclude that engaging Russia on land is a foolish endeavor.

Using one's weaknesses against the enemy's strengths is a fool's errand.

Such a mistake, having occurred once, is enough. They would not repeat the same error a second time.

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Vienna

Franz was staring blankly at the map of the Balkan Peninsula.

It seemed that things had escalated considerably. If Russia were to annex these regions, it wouldn't just be a headache for Britain and France; Austria would also be in trouble.

Despite Franz's repeated emphasis on the importance of the Russo-Austrian alliance in government meetings, that was just a political necessity. In reality, he had not refrained from undermining Russia in secret.

At this moment, for example, Franz was considering how to limit Russian expansion. The Russians occupying Constantinople would be enough to draw the attention of Britain and France.

The Istanbul region was also very affluent. Apart from Constantinople, this area housed most of the Ottoman Empire's industry.

Even though the war had caused severe losses, as long as the foundation remained, it wouldn't take long to recover.

If it all fell into Russian hands, then once Alexander II completed the serfdom reforms, Russia's power would become too great.

A maid spoke softly, "Your Majesty, Minister Metternich is here."

Franz responded indifferently, "Invite him in."

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Metternich reminded, “Your Majesty, the Ottoman Empire cannot stop Russian expansion. Given the current situation, it won’t be long after the war before the Russians can annex the Balkan Peninsula.

In this case, there is no need for us to directly confront Russia. The larger the territory they annex, the more they will alarm other European nations, potentially becoming a common enemy of Europe.

If the Russian government cannot handle this well, they might end up like Napoleon Bonaparte, a lesson from the past. We need not worry too much.”

Pointing to the map of the Balkan Peninsula, Franz said, “Look, this is the current control area of the countries. According to the Russo-Austrian secret treaty, we have already received the territories we are entitled to.

The remaining areas, apart from Bulgaria which is under Russian control, and Montenegro which has been driven back by the allied forces, are all in the hands of the allied forces.

If things go as expected, these regions will be governed by the Ottoman Empire after the war. But we all know that as soon as Constantinople falls, the Ottoman government will lack the strength to control these areas.

It would be almost effortless for the Russians to annex these regions. Due to the treaty, we cannot intervene.

Once the Russians control these areas, our pressure in the Balkans will increase significantly. What if we change the rulers of these regions and let them block the Russians? Wouldn’t the outcome be better?”

Metternich asked in surprise, “Your Majesty, do you intend to hand these territories over to the French?”

Franz explained, “It’s not that I want to give these regions to the French, but rather that Napoleon III needs to take these territories to provide an explanation to his people.

After fighting for two to three years, with the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and a substantial amount of military expenditure, and in the end, gaining nothing, how could the proud French people tolerate that?

Now Constantinople is still in French hands. As long as they don’t let go, it won’t be so easy for the Russians to take it.

The Russian government also doesn’t want to continue the war. They just need to occupy Constantinople to satisfy their citizens.

If everyone secretly negotiates, allowing France and Russia to each get what they need, wouldn’t that be more in line with our interests?”

After pondering for a moment, Metternich said, “Your Majesty, I cannot answer this question for you. If we push, there is indeed a high possibility that France and Russia will secretly reach this agreement.

However, where do our interests lie? After this war, at least for the next decade, the Russians won’t instigate a war in the Balkans.

The introduction of the French to counterbalance the Russians is just an ideal situation. It's more likely that relations between France and Russia will ease, or they could even further their alliance."

Franz nodded and said, "That's correct. In theory, France and Russia don't have core conflicting interests. As long as there is a common enemy, there is a very high possibility of an alliance between the two countries.

But under the current international situation, who is qualified to be the common enemy of France and Russia?

The answer is clear to everyone. Apart from Britain, there will be no other choice. The British government will not just watch all this happen.

In case the British government makes a mistake in their maneuver, at worst, we can join this alliance."

#### Chapter 247: Stability

On September 1, 1854, Constantinople fell in the midst of a somber atmosphere. The Russians fulfilled a century-long ambition, sending the Russian Empire into a frenzy and leaving the rest of Europe collectively speechless.

The day after the Battle of Constantinople ended, the New Holy Roman Empire issued a diplomatic note to the warring parties, boldly announcing its intention to mediate the conflict.

This responsible international stance was immediately praised unanimously by France and Russia. After more than two years of war in the Near East, there was finally a glimmer of hope for peace.

The attention of the world turned to London. The Ottoman Empire and the Principality of Montenegro had already been overlooked by everyone. Weaker nations without significant diplomatic influence should keep quiet.

At 10 Downing Street, Prime Minister George angrily threw the cup in his hand. Constantinople had just fallen like that, and the retreat seemed all too conspicuous.

A week ago, the Russians had already stopped their offensive, and the French troops began to evacuate the wounded and sick from the city. The outbreak of disease seemed to be a valid reason to stop the offensive.

Two days earlier, the French envoy had assured him with the utmost certainty that they would defend Constantinople to the death. The 120,000 French troops were supposedly enough to withstand any Russian attack.

Then, last night, he received the news that Constantinople had fallen. Facing defeat in Constantinople, 120,000 French troops miraculously broke through and even conquered Tekirda?, which was heavily defended by Russian troops.

This is what Prime Minister George wanted to say: Don't make your deception so obvious! Such actions really put me in a difficult situation!

Foreign Minister Thomas, his face pale, said: "Everyone, the French have unilaterally ended this battle. We must take action immediately, otherwise we will be passive!"

It was not "we will be passive" but already are passive. No matter what agreement France and Russia reached, it was extremely unfavorable for the British Empire.

The British Empire's carefully crafted policy of continental balance in Europe would collapse if the two countries formed an alliance. In this age, there is no powerful ally to rely on.

Secretary of War Stanley said gravely, "The French have already withdrawn and even sold Constantinople to the Russians. We cannot continue this war any longer."

While the British government had long lost the desire to fight, exiting the war was no simple matter. A misstep could be a source of ammunition for political opponents, which could be a major source of trouble.

Stanley was the most concerned, fearing that if the French betrayed their ally completely, the British forces at the front might be swallowed up by the Russians before the armistice negotiations.

Given the long-standing enmity between Britain and France, such a scenario was not impossible. If it did happen, the rest of Europe would probably be glad to see it.

After hesitating for a moment, Prime Minister George made a decision: "Given the unclear situation, we can only adapt as things develop. Let's accept Austria's mediation for now and deal with the rest diplomatically!"

The next focus of the Foreign Office should be to find ways to isolate the Russians. It is absolutely essential that we do not allow an alliance between France and Russia, otherwise, we will greatly suffer a loss."

Suffer a loss? Who hasn't suffered losses in international politics? Thinking only of gaining advantages and not being able to bear losses is not suitable for politics.

If you lose something today, you find a way to get it back tomorrow. Flexibility is a basic quality of a politician; a temporary defeat cannot, of course, frighten the British.

With the British government's stance, the Vienna Peace Conference was scheduled. After all the consultations, it was finally decided to officially convene on September 21.

History has changed. The Russians were not defeated on the battlefield but gained the upper hand instead. Of course, the peace conference could not be held in Paris because the Russian government also cared about its prestige.

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The Port of Conakry in Guinea, which in later times became the largest port in West Africa, is currently still a wilderness.

Due to the presence of a natural port, it was fortunate to become one of the footholds for the Austrian colonization of Africa, entering the civilized era ahead of time.

Now the area is basically one big construction site. According to the Austrian government's plan, the first step in colonizing Africa is to build a city.

No, it's not quite a city, it's planned to be a small town. It is planned to house eight thousand immigrants, together with a garrison of an Austrian infantry battalion.

Then, with the town as the core, the expansion will gradually begin to move outward until the entire area of the coastal plains is fully occupied.

The Port of Conakry is no longer called Conakry. It has been renamed with a distinctly Austrian flair — Neubruck.

This is only the beginning. If the colonization plan goes smoothly, many Austrian city names will appear here in the future.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephen, the mayor and commander of the garrison in Neubruck, looked at the report in his hands and shook his head helplessly. The newly founded Neubruck was lacking in almost everything.

Especially people — the plan was to settle 8,000 immigrants, but so far, only 1,200 had arrived. In less than two months, 56 people had died from various causes, and another 37 were lying sick in bed.

This mortality rate was only slightly better than that of a plague. If this trend continued, the average life expectancy of the new immigrants would probably not exceed 35 years.

Concerned, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen asked, “When is the next group of immigrants expected to arrive?”

His assistant, Gold, simply replied: “I don’t know!”

Colonial life in Africa was markedly different from that in the homeland. Communication here depended heavily on the coming and going of ships. Without the regular monthly supply shipments, they might have felt completely abandoned.

To ensure constant communication between the colonies, Stephen also had a few small boats that could be used to reach other outposts.

Along Guinea’s more than 300 kilometers of coastline, the Austrian government established three colonial outposts where the first batch of colonists were distributed.

Learning from the successful experiences of other colonial powers, the Austrian colonial forces remained only in the coastal areas, leaving the deeper penetration of the mainland to the future.

Several indigenous tribes in the plains had already been wiped out. For security reasons, even the captives were handed over to the Portuguese.

The slave trade was still rampant in this era, with the United States being the largest buyer of slaves in the world. In recent years, nearly half of the U.S. population growth has been attributed to the purchase of slaves.

The slave market was still in a period of more demand than supply, as the African continent was not exactly hospitable at the time, with its dangerous wildlife and dangerous diseases.

The mortality rate among the immigrants was telling enough. They were just beginning to establish settlements at these outposts. If they ventured deeper into the mainland, the mortality rate would increase significantly.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephen said casually: “You don’t know? Aren’t you going to go ask?”

No sooner had Lieutenant Colonel Stephen finished speaking than he realized his mistake. This was a colony, not the homeland. Direct communication with the homeland would not be possible for decades!

Even at home, the telegraph was widespread only in the cities and had not yet reached the countryside, let alone the African continent.

Undersea cable technology existed, but given the high cost, the current African colonies were clearly not worth such a significant investment by the Austrian government.

“Never mind what I said,” Lieutenant Colonel Stephen added quickly.

Gold, his assistant, spoke seriously, “Lieutenant Colonel, I think we can’t keep waiting like this. If you don’t want to be overtaken by other outposts, we must take more proactive measures now.

Since we are short of manpower, we should just capture it. Look, it’s been more than two months, and we’re still at a standstill. There are no colonizers more well-behaved than us in the whole world.

Must we really wait for the enemy to attack before we can retaliate? We should learn from the Portuguese. Even if we haven’t found any precious minerals, we must find a way to recoup our expenses.

At the present rate of progress, I have serious doubts as to whether we can recoup our colonial investment within a hundred years. By that time, never mind being knighted for our achievements, our graves would be overgrown with weeds.”

Unlike Lieutenant Colonel Stephen, who had a military background, Gold, who had volunteered for the colonial venture, was not one to play it safe.

He had come to the colony with dreams of making a fortune, but now he found himself involved in the day-to-day construction of the outpost. As the town began to take shape, he hadn’t seen a shadow of the wealth he had hoped for.

The coastal plains were indeed promising and would have been highly coveted in Austria. Unfortunately, land was the least valuable commodity on the African continent.

According to Austrian colonial regulations, any Austrian citizen had the right to cultivate these lands. Anyone who established a farm owned it, with the stipulation that once ownership rights were confirmed, the land could not be left fallow.

It was hard enough to make a fortune farming back home, and Gold didn’t think it was possible to get rich farming here. These lands were set aside primarily for immigrant settlement.

The best way to make a fortune in the colonies was to find mines, especially gold and silver mines, which were the easiest means of wealth.

As early colonists, if they discovered mineral resources and reported them to the colonial government, they could receive a share of the profits from the exploitation of those resources. Alternatively, they could sell the discovery directly to the government for a substantial sum of money.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephen shook his head and said, “Gold, be patient. The mood among the immigrants is still unstable; they need our supervision.

Once we have a bountiful harvest of the first batch of crops, the situation will change. That will be the right time for us to start expanding.



If you have some free time now, you could organize the young and able-bodied among the immigrants for some basic training. Many of these people are not exactly ideal, but they would make excellent cannon fodder.

Here's a piece of advice for you: the African continent is no easy place, and the dangers of the inner areas far exceed those of the coastal areas.

There are many opportunities to make a fortune in the colonies, but there is one essential condition: you must be alive to spend it!"

His message was one of stability. From the beginning of the colonial plan, the Austrian government had not expected a return in the first year; that would be very unrealistic.

Even the South African colonies established by the British were not yet profitable. So why should Guinea be expected to break even in the short term?

If it were that easy to make a fortune in the colonies, they would be overcrowded by now. One must never underestimate the passion for making money among the European populace of this era.

#### Chapter 248: Persuasion

After successfully establishing colonies in Guinea, Austria's colonial expansion did not stop there. They turned their attention to the Congo region next.

There was a lot of unclaimed territory in this era, and whoever occupied it could claim ownership. Of course, Franz was not going to be polite.

By October 1854, Austria had successively established thirteen colonial outposts on the African continent and transported over forty thousand immigrants to these colonies.

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Franz asked in confusion, "Prime Minister, why have we stopped sending immigrants to the colonies?"

It's important to note that according to Austria's original plan, the goal was to transfer all refugees there, but so far less than one-tenth of that has been achieved.

Prime Minister Felix explained, "Your Majesty, the plague in the Balkan Peninsula has spread. If we urgently transport immigrants now, we risk bringing the plague to the colonies.

Despite our best efforts to recruit doctors, the medical facilities in the colonies are still not very promising. The consequences would be unimaginable if the plague were to spread there."

Franz shook his head and said, "Prime Minister, you are thinking too much. The colonial population is so small that even if a plague were to break out, it would be very easy to isolate and contain.

Moreover, winter is coming, and this plague should be nearing its end. Even if it were to reach the African continent, the situation would probably not be too serious.

According to the information we've gathered, the death rate among Russian soldiers infected with the plague is only about 70-80%, which is even lower than the natural death rate in the African colonies.

The war in the Balkans is coming to an end, and most of these refugees will probably decide to return home. It will be difficult for us to find immigrants in the future."

This is no exaggeration. In this era, the mortality rate of immigrants to the African continent is indeed alarmingly high, with many dying on the way.

Is the mortality rate lower for refugees left in the Balkans? The answer is no!

In fact, their mortality rate would only be higher if they stayed in the Balkans.

Without sufficient benefits, the Austrian government is unlikely to spend much to help refugees, and the Ottoman Empire is even less likely to help. Can they really expect France to play the role of a savior?

At this time, everyone is struggling just to feed themselves. To help millions of refugees in the Balkans would require a huge expenditure of financial and material resources. Without sufficient benefits, who would be willing to do it?

Without adequate aid, these refugees would turn into bandits, causing more damage to more areas and more people to become refugees.

Before the 20th century, with limited human productive capacity, there were only two ways to deal with a refugee crisis: Provide aid or resort to killing.

Most of the time, the solution was killing, because the feudal dynasties simply could not provide enough aid. There was no question of good or evil; it was all about survival. If there wasn't enough food, it came down to the survival of the fittest.

The Austrian colonization movement of Africa was very cautious, sending about 5,000 to 8,000 immigrants at a time and distributing them among a dozen or so settlements. It wasn't that they didn't want to send more; the amount of food available limited the number of immigrants.

If the goal was just to move people, then organizing a hundred or eighty cargo ships could easily move tens of thousands of people. But then logistics would be a big problem.

The African continent was underdeveloped, and the local indigenous tribes practiced little agriculture and relied entirely on natural resources for survival. The early colonizers in Africa also survived by relying on local natural resources.

Obviously, this was only suitable for a small number of colonists. The distribution of a few thousand people in a colonial settlement was not because Franz didn't have enough people, but more out of concern for unexpected situations where the logistics of the settlement could be cut off.

With fewer people, they could afford to take risks and get enough food from the local area to survive. Once the population grew too large, however, this would no longer be possible.

Prime Minister Felix went on to explain: "Your Majesty, our pace of immigration is already very fast. In terms of the number of immigrants, apart from the French, not even the British have as many immigrants in Africa.

The local areas do not have enough production to support the immigrants, and there is not enough return in the short term. If no valuable mineral resources are found, these areas will be under considerable financial pressure in the future."

Of course, if he didn't know the local resource conditions, Franz would also be concerned about this issue. However, this reason could not be said.

Acting stubbornly was not an option either. Without the cooperation of the upper echelons of the government, it would just turn into a colonization effort by the emperor alone, which would obviously end in tragedy.

Franz said calmly, "Then let's find a solution to this problem. Our colonial outposts are all along the coast; send them several fishing boats and teach the immigrants to fish.

There's so much fertile land nearby, just planting a little of everything should be enough to feed them. Once we get through the initial period, the food problem can be solved gradually.

The colonies do not support the lazy. If they don't want to do anything, organize them to be cannon fodder. Whether it's sending them to fight with the local tribes or using them to explore the interior.

Once the food issue is resolved, the pressure will ease. After the colonies stabilize, we can start mining there. As long as one or two outposts produce results, we can recoup our costs.

These colonial outposts can also provide logistical support to overseas merchant ships, earning some fees to subsidize administrative costs.

If we don't find mineral resources, then we turn to logging. I don't believe there are no timber resources locally; in the plains, whether it's growing grains, cash crops, or raising livestock, maintaining the operation of the colonies is still feasible."

Franz wasn't boasting. Relying on agriculture and animal husbandry might not make one rich, but it was certainly possible to become self-sufficient.

This kind of industrialized management wouldn't make a lot of money, but it definitely wouldn't lose money. Historically, the main reason for colonies running at a loss has been a lack of immigrants.

With an insufficient number of immigrants, effective exploitation of local natural resources was not possible, basic industries could not develop, and colonial governments could not generate enough tax revenue, so losses were the norm.

Prime Minister Felix reminded, "Your Majesty, all of this requires substantial investment. We have already invested millions of guilders in our colonial ventures. To achieve a balanced budget in these areas, this investment will exceed tens of millions of guilders."

Franz replied with a cheerful smile, "Of course, I am fully aware of what we are doing. With this investment of tens of millions of guilders, we will have complete control over the Guinea and Congo regions.

With such large areas, we can make a profit of several million guilders a year just by planting coffee, palm, cotton, cacao, rubber, tobacco, and tea.

This is without even considering mineral resources. Surely we can't be so unlucky as to find nothing?

The math is simple. The reason the major colonial powers like Britain and France haven't done it is not because they don't want to, but because they don't have enough immigrants.

Currently, there are still 400,000 to 500,000 refugees in Dalmatia waiting to be resettled.

We can start with work for relief programs, keeping them in the area to improve local transportation, and then gradually move them to the African colonies.

Everything is hard in the beginning. Once we have completed this initial phase of investment, the period of reaping the benefits will follow. If government funding is not sufficient, we can raise funds from the private sector.

Colonies are different from the mainland. They don't require direct government management. We can delegate those tasks to private companies.

I am even considering allowing individuals to participate in the colonial venture by encouraging the nobility to go overseas and establish colonies."

Prime Minister Felix was convinced. The colonial venture was different from other enterprises; as long as the costs could be recouped, the government would profit.

The colonies might not be very profitable to run, but they could provide sufficient raw materials for domestic industry. The newly opened markets would further stimulate the development of domestic trade and industry.

Another benefit of the colonies was the reduction of emigration from the homeland. This situation might not be apparent now, but it would become more pronounced after industrialization was complete.

Especially after an economic crisis, when people couldn't find work at home and were forced to emigrate overseas to make a living, the role of the colonies would become apparent.

As long as they were reasonably developed, and with some government guidance, they could attract large numbers of immigrants and prevent the outflow of the population.

At present there is a considerable number of emigrants from Germany. If only one-third or even one-fifth could be persuaded to emigrate to Austria's colonies in Africa, there would be no fear of any hostile challenge on the African continent.

To retain these immigrants, it was also essential to develop the local economy. Without sustainable basic industries, it would be impossible to attract settlers.

There is strength in numbers. As long as the population of the Austrian colonies in Africa was substantial, Austria would have an advantage in the next round of African colonial division.

This advantage would have a direct impact on domestic economic development in the future, promoting the growth of domestic trade and industry.

#### Chapter 249: Vienna Peace Conference

Time flew, and the long-awaited Vienna Peace Conference began. Naturally, the main players were the three powers involved, Great Britain, France, and Russia, while there were numerous supporting roles. The European nations had all sent representatives.

It was unclear when this began, but everyone liked to join in whenever a major event occurred on the European continent, regardless of their direct involvement.

On the surface, it's about showing they cared for international politics. In Franz's view, this is just a way of making oneself visible and attracting the attention of the great powers.

Don't think that these small countries with little say are unimportant. It's quite the opposite. When the great powers reach an impasse, the attitude of these small countries often determines the outcome.

There are currently no superpowers on the European continent. The power gap between the great powers isn't huge, and no country can take on two others at once, let alone dominate all other nations.

It's not the case that just because one side is stronger, it can necessarily do whatever it wants to the other. If a war broke out, the more likely scenario would still be both sides suffering great losses.

The recent Near East War has shown everyone that modern warfare comes with high costs, and the ultimate gains often do not proportionately match the expenditures.

Faced with the harsh reality, everyone's attitude has changed, and the governments of various countries are doing their best to avoid war with the large countries.

Against this backdrop, all parties came to the Vienna Peace Conference with sincerity.

The British want to get out of the war in the Near East as quickly as possible and throw themselves into the colonial expansion effort. Because of the war, their pace of colonization has slowed.

The French are no exception. Influenced by the British colonial effort, Napoleon III was very interested in establishing more overseas colonies.

Apart from curbing Russian expansion, the Near East War essentially would not bring France any benefits. The ones contending for world hegemony were Britain and Russia. They did not need to continue this struggle to the bitter end.

Who wants the conflict to end more than the Russians? Even though they obtained Constantinople through under-the-table dealings, Nicholas I didn't mind.

With both political and religious interests secured, continuing the war would bring no benefits, only worsening the already dire financial situation of the Russian Empire.

The Empire, seemingly strong from the outside, is internally fraught with contradictions. The Russian government is in urgent need of respite to recuperate.

The situation in the Ottoman Empire is even worse. The Ottoman government is on the verge of collapse. Continuing the war would only exacerbate the national uprisings that are already a considerable burden.

As for the Principality of Montenegro, they have no say in the matter. Even though they fought bravely, causing substantial casualties to the British, this did not grant them any significant influence or voice.

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Inside the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, the conference moderator, Metternich, spoke solemnly, "Welcome to Vienna. Today's meeting is convened for the sake of world peace.

Throughout human history, too many wars have happened, often bringing disaster. Many of these wars could have been avoided. If there was more communication and dialogue, many misunderstandings would not exist..."

Metternich is widely recognized across Europe as a pacifist. Raising the flag of peace has been a habit of this 'Prime Minister of Europe.'

Politicians are all adept at putting on a show. Representatives from various countries started their performances, and at this moment, it seems as if everyone is a pacifist.

Once everyone had finished pretending and the reporters had been escorted out, the negotiations officially began, and the harmonious atmosphere disappeared.

Ottoman Empire delegate Fuad, representing the lesser ally, was the first to speak up and accuse the Russians of atrocities: "This war was entirely instigated by the Russian Empire. They should bear full responsibility for this conflict..."

Before Fuad could finish, the Russian Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode sharply retorted: "Mr. Fuad, please mind your words. We are merely reclaiming lost territories.

Constantinople is a holy site of the Christian world. Just because you invaded it for a few hundred years does not mean you can become its master.

From the beginning to the end, you are the invaders. We are merely completing the mission that the Crusades failed to achieve. Please do not slander this sacred and righteous war."

Bringing religion into the argument puts the Ottoman Empire at a disadvantage. On this issue, neither Britain nor France dare to deny that Constantinople is a holy site of the Christian world, nor can they admit that it is the territory of the Ottoman Empire.

Even though this has long been recognized by everyone, no one dares to acknowledge it openly in a negotiation meeting to be written in records.

Seeing the Ottoman representative fall into a trap at the outset, Thomas quickly changed the subject: "Count Karl, these historical issues cannot be settled in a few words. At this point in the war, it's pointless to assign blame. Let's discuss how we can end this conflict instead!"

"Certainly," Russian Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode coldly replied.

Thomas spoke earnestly, "For the sake of world peace and the stability of the European continent, I propose that all warring parties return to their pre-war status quo and end this unnecessary war!"

When it came to his interests, Russian Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode immediately objected, "Impossible, we absolutely cannot tolerate Constantinople falling into the hands of infidels."

Thomas, unperturbed, replied, "Count Karl, rest assured that we will not allow Constantinople to fall into the hands of the infidels. As a holy site of the Christian world, Constantinople should be shared by all Christians. I propose an international joint administration of Constantinople."

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This was something the Russians could not accept. Having paid such a high price to seize Constantinople, how could they easily give it up?

The British and Russian representatives began a heated verbal battle, arguing for over an hour without any result. Surprisingly, the French seemed to be staying out of it.

Thomas, who had sensed something was amiss, acted as if nothing was wrong. It wasn't that he was feigning ignorance due to his thick skin; he was testing the extent of the Franco-Russian relationship.

Metternich said cheerfully, “Gentlemen, lunchtime has arrived. How about we continue in the afternoon?”

The negotiations were not going to end so easily. Currently, it was only the British-Russian dispute, but there were still conflicts over Franco-Russian interests, Anglo-French conflicts, and the disputes between Austria and the Ottoman Empire...

In addition to mediating the recent Near East War, the Vienna Peace Conference aimed to establish a new international order, involving many issues.

Since the collapse of the Vienna System, in just a few short years, the European continent had seen the outbreak of the Austro-Sardinian War, the Prusso-Danish War, the German Unification War, and the Near East War.

Great Britain, France, Russia, Austria, and Prussia were all involved, along with the Kingdom of Sardinia, Kingdom of Denmark, Kingdom of Bavaria, Principality of Montenegro, Ottoman Empire, and Kingdom of Greece. Most countries in Europe were involved in the wars.

If this continued, a new European continental war could erupt before long, which nobody wanted.

Fighting to the death on the European continent, in reality, offered minimal benefits. With mutual constraints among nations, no one could easily consume the lion's share.

It was at this moment that everyone realized the importance of the Vienna System. Calls for rebuilding the Vienna System naturally grew louder.

Especially for the numerous smaller countries in Europe, there was an even greater lack of security. They urgently needed a stable order to protect their interests.

Under the common need for stability, Metternich, who had played a leading role in establishing the first Vienna System, was once again pushed to the forefront.

Could the Vienna System be rebuilt? No one could answer this question for sure, but what was clear was that everyone now needed a stable international system.

Russia needed to undertake internal social reforms, while the trio of Britain, France, and Austria needed to expand their overseas colonies. Many small European countries required an international order to safeguard their security, all calling for a stable European continent.

By evening, the results of the first day of negotiations reached Franz, and unsurprisingly, the British were at a disadvantage in these talks.

How could it be easy to regain at the negotiation table what couldn't be won on the battlefield?

The Russians, not easily bullied, coupled with the French starting to lay low, left the British with many of their threatening tactics unusable.

Now, their biggest bargaining chip was their naval superiority. Should negotiations fail, Russian foreign trade, particularly grain exports, would be severely impacted.

Grain exports were Russia's largest source of foreign exchange, and due to the Near East War, this trade had been disrupted.

To purchase strategic materials, the Russian government had to trade a large amount of gold and silver, resulting in a significant outflow of these precious metals and putting severe pressure on the government's finances.

Although the Russian Empire had long been in a trade deficit, a yearly deficit of several million rubles was entirely different from one of over a hundred million rubles.

The Russian Empire, rich in mineral resources, didn't lack gold and silver; a few million rubles were less than what they could mine in a year.

However, a deficit of over a hundred million rubles was a different matter. Such a level of gold and silver outflow was already affecting the Russian financial market. The mined gold and silver would also take time to replenish, and this loss couldn't be compensated for in the short term.

Nevertheless, now that the war had ended and there was no longer a need to import weapons and ammunition from abroad, this trade deficit would quickly decrease. The British threat was insufficient to make the Russians yield.

#### Chapter 250: New Vienna System

Delegations from various countries engaged in complex alliances and power politics at the start of the Vienna Peace Conference.

Russia and France attempted a partition of the rest of the Balkans. The British, who felt that they were being sidelined, were not satisfied and allied themselves with the Ottoman Empire, ready for war if necessary.

The Russians did not fear the British threat. With Constantinople in their hands, they could block the Bosphorus Strait, effectively trapping the British naval fleet in the Black Sea in the event of a confrontation.

As a land power, Russia was willing to offend Britain because it was confident that it had some leverage over them. With vast territories and resources, Russia could afford to break off relations if necessary.

The French government hesitated, not because Napoleon III feared war with Britain, but because, in reality, such a minor issue was unlikely to lead to war.

In the event of conflict, the French Navy had the strength to engage, perhaps not enough to defeat the Royal Navy, but enough to inflict significant damage.

Such a high-risk gamble was not something the British government was likely to take lightly. In the era of sail-powered warships, naval battles were too risky, and a fierce clash between two great powers was unlikely to produce a victor.

First and foremost, it was a matter of interest. Being neighbors with the Russian Bear was always a concern for anyone, and Napoleon III wanted to reap the benefits without bearing the risks.

The prospect of France alone absorbing Macedonia, Albania, Thrace, and Epirus seemed lucrative, but the Balkan economy had already collapsed after the war.

Wartime devastation, refugee crises, and epidemics contributed to a one-third decline in the population of the Balkan Peninsula, with a particularly sharp drop in the labor force.



What had once been a lucrative region in the Balkans was now exhausted. Restoring social order there would require considerable resources.

Simply put, the gains no longer justified the risks for France. If it weren't for political necessity, Napoleon III would not even be interested in the territories of the Balkan Peninsula.

"Gentlemen, continuing this argument is not the solution. What if we each define our spheres of influence and then continue the discussion?" suggested Metternich.

After saying this, he first marked the sphere of influence of Austria on the map and then handed it to the Russian delegate, Karl Nesselrode.

Karl Nesselrode did not hesitate, circling his desired objectives on the map. Russia and Austria had an agreement, so their spheres of influence did not overlap.

The French followed suit and marked their territory. When it was the British's turn, Thomas was surprised.

Indeed, the three powers had carved up the Balkan Peninsula on the map. Even if some islands were left out, they were in the hands of the Ottoman Empire, and the British wouldn't mistreat an ally like that.

Thomas was struck by an idea. He felt he had to stir things up and not let the enemies achieve their goals so easily.

As for the Ottoman Empire, their ally, it unfortunately seemed that they would have to be sacrificed. It was the collective will of all Europeans, including the British public, and Thomas could not swim against the tide.

"Gentlemen, the people of the Balkans, enslaved for years by the Ottoman Empire, are returning to the embrace of the civilized world. We should be helping them with the establishment of independent nations.

How can we continue to enslave them? If such inhumane acts occur, how will the rest of the world view us? What will the international community think?"

Metternich rolled his eyes; the four of them could represent the international community. If one country acted out of line, it might be condemned by other European nations, but if these four powers acted together, they could make sure everyone else stayed silent.

In this era, no entity in the world was brave enough to oppose Britain, France, Russia, and Austria at the same time. Even if all the other countries joined forces, they wouldn't stand a chance against these four.

"Mr. Thomas thinks too much. How could we enslave the people of the Balkan Peninsula? You have to understand that the people there have been under the bloody rule of the Ottoman Empire for a long time, and many of them have been corrupted by the barbaric world. We are actually helping them to return to the civilized world.

According to the information we've gathered, the cultural heritage of the Balkan Peninsula has been severely damaged. The people there are either accomplices in the Ottoman Empire's oppression of

the people, illiterate, or traitors to the civilized world. To suggest that they form independent nations is ludicrous.

Our countries should oversee and guide the local populace back into the civilized world, to prevent the continuation of this tragedy. That's the best choice."

Labeling the Ottoman Empire as barbaric was politically correct in Europe; for centuries, the term 'barbaric' became synonymous with the Ottoman Empire, deeply ingrained in the minds of every European.

Of course, the Ottoman Empire's infamy was well-deserved, as they had committed many heinous acts throughout history. Metternich could produce a plethora of evidence to demonstrate their barbarity.

These facts remained hidden and thus caused no problem, but once they were brought to light, whether they were one hundred or two hundred years old, they served as proof of sin.

In any case, these stains cannot be washed away. At the time, experts still had some integrity and didn't stoop to whitewashing the history of the Ottoman Empire.

As a politician, Thomas could not dare to defend the Ottoman people on this issue, or he would not be forgiven by the British public.

At this time in the Balkan Peninsula, those who had cultural and intellectual heritage were mostly those who had aligned themselves with the Ottoman Empire. Even if they hadn't betrayed their people, their ancestors might have.

From this perspective, it was justified to label these people as remnants of the Ottoman Empire.

Thomas did not dwell on this point but suggested directly: "Mr. Metternich's point is well taken. In that case, how about a joint international administration of the Balkans? We can work together to help them return to the civilized world.

Once they are reintegrated, we can find an appropriate time for the people of the Balkans to establish their own independent nation and thus contribute to the civilized world."

Upon hearing Thomas's proposal, the French representative, Auvergne, seemed somewhat persuaded, but the reaction of the Russian delegate was more intense.

Karl Nesselrode slammed his hand on the table and angrily declared, "This is impossible! The people of the Balkans have suffered greatly under the Ottomans and must be supervised by us to return to civilization."

Metternich rubbed his forehead as he watched the furious Karl Nesselrode. It was obvious that this soldier-turned-diplomat was unaccustomed to the role of diplomat, almost ready to resort to physical confrontation at the slightest disagreement.

It seemed that the Russians might actually be able to resort to physical confrontation during the negotiations.

To prevent the negotiations from deteriorating further, Metternich had to intervene and ask Thomas directly: "The Balkan Peninsula is home to many nationalities and has not had a unified nation since the Byzantine Empire. Mr. Thomas, are you proposing the restoration of the Byzantine Empire?"

Restore the Byzantine Empire? That would be an international joke. Nationalists within Greece may naively chant slogans in favor of it, but who among those present would tolerate the restoration of the Byzantine Empire?

Faced with this question, Thomas calmly explained: “Mr. Metternich misunderstands me. To support the independence of the Balkan peoples is merely to help them return to the civilized world. The Byzantine Empire is long gone. How can we think of restoring it?”

Metternich replied with a cold laugh: “That’s good, otherwise the world would be in turmoil again. As for the question of the Balkan people forming their own nation, I don’t think it’s necessary to discuss it. The people of such regions as Serbia, Wallachia, Moldavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina have already acquired Austrian citizenship. They are people with a homeland!”

Inspired, the Russian Foreign Minister, Karl Nesselrode, immediately spoke up: “We have already granted citizenship to the people of Bulgaria and Constantinople, so Mr. Thomas need not worry about them.”

Whether or not they actually had citizenship at the time was irrelevant; Karl Nesselrode used that excuse first and could always follow up later.

Regardless of Thomas’s tactics, it was unlikely that the Austrians and Russians would agree to allow their territories to form independent nations. That would mean a complete breakdown in relations.

Continue to encroach on French territory? This thought crossed Thomas’s mind. He certainly did not want to face a united front of Russia, Austria, and France. Even with the support of the rest of the world, they would be difficult to resist.

Should he carve out a piece of the Balkans for himself? After looking at the map, Thomas decided not to border these land powers.

The previously silent French representative, Auvergne, suddenly changed the subject: “The most important issue in the Balkans is still the Black Sea. Most international disputes revolve around this area.

For the sake of world peace and stability, I propose an international joint administration of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus Straits. All coastal port cities should become free ports, with no country allowed to station weapons.

Governments must at all times ensure the free passage of ships through the straits without any restrictions or navigation taxes.”

After some consideration, all agreed, although Karl Nesselrode was a little reluctant. However, considering the practical situation, even if they wanted to collect passage fees, they wouldn’t be able to, so he agreed.

They could tax at the Bosphorus, and the British and French could tax at the entrance to the Dardanelles. If merchant ships were deterred from passing through, this golden waterway would be rendered useless.

With the waterway issue resolved, Thomas was no longer interested in further entanglements over the Balkans. The joint control of the Balkans by Russia, France, and Austria could also be seen as a form of balance.

If the Russians advanced from the Black Sea, the French would be the first to confront them, and Austria could not tolerate further Russian expansion either.

Although they didn't benefit directly from the Near East War, they were strategically successful. They blocked the Russians in the Black Sea by using the newly established international order.

After the resolution of the Near East War, the Four Powers of Great Britain, France, Russia, and Austria signed the "Four-Power Treaty," formally redrawing the boundaries of influence for each nation in the form of a treaty.

After the treaty was signed, the governments of the four nations issued a joint statement: the four governments would work together to maintain peace and stability in Europe and to combat any actions that disrupted the status quo.

With the conclusion of the Vienna Peace Conference, a new international order was established. Apart from the free navigation of the Black Sea Straits, the sphere of influence of each country was determined by the territories under its effective control.

The biggest loser was the Ottoman Empire. Lacking the strength to maintain its rule over the Balkans, it was forced to sell regions such as Macedonia, Thrace, Albania, and the Balkans to the French for 200 million francs.

As allies of the Ottoman Empire, the French had to keep up appearances and pay a sum of money for the purchase. Austria and Russia, historical enemies of the Ottomans, annexed the occupied territories without apology.

The Montenegrins probably couldn't figure out whether they lost or gained from the situation. Although they were eventually pushed back to their homeland by the British, with the support of Russia and Austria, their territory doubled and they successfully acquired a coastline.

The doubled territory amounted to just over 10,000 square kilometers, which was still smaller than the Montenegro of later times. It could not be helped, given the small size of their original country.

For the additional 5,000 square kilometers gained, Montenegro suffered the loss of half of its young and able-bodied population. The original total population decreased by 23%, and even after adding the population from the newly occupied territories, the national population barely exceeded 200,000.

The apparent victor, the Russian Empire, was quietly licking its wounds at this time. Although they had captured Constantinople, it was only a superficial victory.

Both the Bulgarian and Constantinople regions had been devastated by the war, resulting in a direct collapse of the local economy.

Particularly in Constantinople, the city was virtually reduced to ruins, with over two-thirds of the buildings suffering various degrees of damage.

However, this could also be seen as an opportunity for reconstruction, allowing for the removal of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of a new image reflecting the glory of the Russian Empire. This would be the case, of course, if financial considerations were put aside.

But a tally of the casualties wiped the smile off Russia's face. In the Balkans alone, the Russians had paid a price of 600,000 lives. Adding the casualties from the Crimean Peninsula and the Caucasus front, the total number of Russian military dead and wounded neared 900,000.

If it weren't for the capture of Constantinople and the political gains that offset all the losses, Nicholas I really wouldn't know how it would have ended for them.

Similarly, Britain and France, who also participated in the battle, did not fare much better. The French army lost 210,000 men and had 45,000 wounded, while the British army lost 78,000 men and had 11,000 wounded.

These figures include losses due to epidemics and disease. Otherwise, the figures could have been reduced by a third. In any case, non-combat losses fortunately did not exceed combat losses.

As for the Ottoman Empire, its losses are something of a mystery. The Ottoman government itself didn't know how to calculate them, but it is clear that their army of one million men was decimated.

With the loss of the Balkans, many of the conscripted soldiers were dispersed and never returned to their ranks.

The Ottoman government, having lost its capital and core areas of control, probably didn't care about the exact number of casualties. Why add to their troubles with the specifics of personnel losses?