

## Roman Empire 391

### Chapter 391: Opportunities in War

War is cruel, especially for the civilians caught in the crossfire, who live in constant fear for their lives. The people of East Prussia know this all too well. Ever since they were occupied by the Russians, their good days have come to an end.

Ficks is just an unremarkable little town, but it has not escaped the devastation. The well-connected nobles and merchants have all fled, leaving only the poor behind. And even they could not escape the Russians heavy hand. Since they couldnt squeeze any more wealth out of the town, the Russians decided to conscript manpower instead.

Now the towns only church is filled with people.

A middle-aged man with a furrowed brow asked, The Russians just sent someone over, demanding that the town provide 500 laborers. Father, what should we do?

The church might be the only area spared. Out of respect for God, the Russians did not plunder the towns only church.

Now that the towns prominent figures have fled, among those remaining, Father Bragg, who has the highest prestige, is the only one the townspeople can turn to for help.

As a man of the cloth, Father Bragg cannot and does not need to flee. The influence of European religion is significant. The church will not be harmed by the Russian troops, even if it is a Protestant church.

Father Bragg said regretfully, My child, I am aware of this news as well. I have just negotiated with the Russians, and they demand payment of 20,000 rubles to exempt us from labor.

The Russians have issued a warning that if the required number is not met within a week, they will resort to killing.

Father Bragg had not considered raising the money. If those nobles and merchants hadnt left, perhaps they could have gathered the sum, but it was no longer possible.

It wasnt that the town lacked 20,000 rubles; the issue was liquidity. While the nobles and merchants had left, their properties remained, but the Russians demanded cash.

No one wanted to fight against their own country, but under the current circumstances, people had to yield.

The Russians were not easy to negotiate with. Since they mentioned killing, they would definitely carry out the threat. The young man who initially attempted to resist the Russians now had his head displayed on the towns flagpole.

If one resisted, the whole family was killed; if anyone failed to report partisans, they were killed; those who attacked Russian soldiers meant everyone within 200 meters faced a one-in-five execution; if a group of more than ten resisted, the entire town was massacred...

Under this high-pressure situation, the local people dared to be angry but not to speak out. With the war ongoing, numerous villages and towns in East Prussia had already been massacred by the Russians.

As for international condemnation? Sadly, the Russian government is already used to being vilified, and the debt-ridden nation has little to fear.

Moreover, the Russians were not fools. How could they possibly admit to such actions? Without evidence, the most that could happen was criticism in the newspapers, which the Russians simply ignored.

During this era, cameras were too bulky and the quality of the photographs was poor, making covert photography ineffective. The Prussians could not produce convincing evidence.

These were all excuses. In reality, all countries were powerless against the Russian Bear. And its easier to just look the other way than risk damaging their own reputations.

What should we do then? Lets run! someone suggested. Serving forced labor on the battlefield is no easy task, especially when its for the Russians.

Word has already spread that the Russian army likes to use forced labor as cannon fodder. This was a lesson they learned from the Near East War. Capturing laborers on the spot to use as cannon fodder can reduce troop losses.

An elderly man asked, With Russians everywhere, where can we run to?

Escaping is not as simple as it sounds. With families to take care of, no money in their pockets, and Russians searching for them, how far could they really escape?

A young man questioned, But we cant really fight for the Russians against our own army, can we?

The old man scolded, What do you know, you foolish kid? All the young and able-bodied men in our town combined arent even five hundred.

The key issue is not whether they are willing or not, but that the task simply cannot be completed.

The towns population was not large to begin with, and after the outbreak of war, many young and able-bodied men were conscripted. Now, in the town, there arent even five hundred of them left.

Watching the crowd argue, Father Bragg felt very troubled. These are his devoted believers which he had nurtured, and if they are gone, he too will lose his livelihood.

My children, please remain calm before the Lord. I will go to Knigsberg and ask my friends to see if there is any other solution.

Knigsberg is the closest city to the town, and if the Russians are conscripting locals, they wont target just one small town.

Seeking help in the city is a faint hope for Father Bragg. Not all the nobles have fled; a significant portion of the nobility in East Prussia has stayed behind.

Some have chosen to organize guerrilla resistance against the Russian invasion, while others may have wanted to flee but didnt manage to escape and are now mostly gathered in the city.

Europe doesnt have a tradition of killing nobles, provided they dont wander off alone. If its just one person, they might be killed, but no one would know.

If everyone gathers and sticks together, its different. The Russian army wont harm them. This is an unwritten rule, and it applies to the Russians too.

To save time, Father Bragg rode his horse to Knigsberg. What greeted his eyes was desolation. The once bustling streets were now devoid of the usual hustle and bustle. The few pedestrians would quickly avoid Russian patrol teams whenever they encounter them.

As a man of the cloth, Father Bragg was not stopped and questioned by the Russians. Of course, he didnt approach the Russian soldiers either.

Normally, the Russians wouldnt harm religious figures, but that doesnt mean they wouldnt dare to. In these chaotic times, a few deaths were nothing to them.

Wasting no time, Father Bragg went straight into the citys cathedral. In this era, Europeans from all walks of life had connections with the church.

There was a saying that said, If you want to find someone, just wait at the church entrance.

He is greeted by a well-dressed middle-aged man, James, with whom the pastor is casually acquainted.

Father, what brings you here in such haste?

The words were spoken by a middle-aged man dressed in luxurious attire, who had met with Father Bragg a few times. The two could be considered acquaintances.

Meeting an acquaintance and eager to inquire about news, Father Braggs face showed a hint of surprise. He asked hesitantly, Mr. James, havent you left?

Given the current situation, the wealthy have fled to escape the war. Under normal circumstances, someone as well-informed as Mr. James, a businessman, would surely have known about it in advance.

James replied, I just finished a deal and returned. The Russians arrived just after. But I recently obtained citizenship of the Empire, so the Russians wont dare to cause trouble to me.

The Empire naturally referred to the Holy Roman Empire, which, even with the added word new, remained the only empire recognized in Germany.

The Russians werent stupid and naturally wouldnt invite trouble by targeting foreigners, especially merchants from allied countries.

Father Bragg exclaimed in surprise, God be praised, Mr. James, you are indeed fortunate to have avoided this calamity.

Now the Russians are plundering everywhere. In my town of Ficks, because they couldnt produce the money, they were threatened by the Russians to conscript five hundred laborers.

This information naturally couldnt elude James, as a successful businessman, being well-informed is crucial.

At this time, his return to Knigsberg was to make money. Austrias colonies lack labor, and transporting immigrants to the colonies is also a business opportunity.

James seized the opportunity presented by the war. He had already signed labor export contracts with several companies in the Austrian colonies and now returned to recruit people.

If one were to organize immigrants to go elsewhere, the Russians might interfere. But going to the Austrian colonies posed no problem at all. The loan from Austria wasnt provided for nothing.

On this trip back, James had also consulted with the colonial government. As long as he could persuade people to go to the colonies, the Austrian Foreign Ministry would be responsible for resolving issues if any arose.

James feigned surprise and exclaimed, Good heavens! Five hundred laborers, wont Ficks be in big trouble?

Father Bragg nodded with a bitter expression and said helplessly, Indeed, that is the case. Thats why I came seeking help.

Just then, Bishop Bernard walked over with seven or eight priests accompanying him. Judging by their expressions, it was clear that something unpleasant had occurred.

Father Bragg repeated what he had just said. Bishop Bernard responded with helplessness, Im afraid I cannot be of assistance. Everyone is facing this dilemma.

Ive visited the Russian military officers on behalf of the church. Regrettably, I didnt even get past the front gate before being driven away.

Unsurprising, really, the Russians, being Eastern Orthodox, have little tolerance for Protestants like the bishop.

Encountering heretics without persecuting them could already be considered a gesture of goodwill, so expecting a friendly reception was out of the question.

Seeing the downcast faces of the crowd, James knew an opportunity had arisen.

Bishop, if you wish to avoid the Russian labor conscription, I suggest organizing the people to leave Knigsberg and return after the war.

Bishop Bernard shook his head and said, Mr. James, your plan wont work. The Russians have set up roadblocks on key routes and wont let anyone leave.

James gave a slight smile and responded, Under normal circumstances, of course, passage would be impossible. But we can find alternative routes. Two years ago, Russia and Austria signed the Labor Employment Treaty.

We can sign short-term employment contracts with Austrian companies and then take a ship to the Austrian colonies for refuge. After the war, we can return to Knigsberg.

This is pure deception. Its easy to enter the Austrian colonies, but leaving is another matter.

The cost of immigration is not something ordinary people can afford. By the time they earn enough money to return, will there be a place for them to return to?

While Bishop Bernard was still deep in thought, Father Bragg couldnt help it anymore, Mr. James, can this truly work?

James responded confidently, Of course! Since weve signed the treaty, the Russian military officers will definitely abide by it. Otherwise, causing a diplomatic conflict between Russia and Austria is not something these middle and lower-ranking officers can bear.

Without hesitation, Father Bragg said, Alright, Ill go back and talk to the people, and let them decide freely whether to leave.

Bishop Bernard interjected, Father, this is a serious issue. We must consider it carefully.

He was acutely aware that if all the townspeople left and Knigsberg turned into a ghost town, what value would the church still have?

Come back? That can only fool those who are naive. Once they go to the Austrian colonies, if a third of them manage to return, it would already be considered lucky.

Father Bragg said nonchalantly, Bishop, things cant get any worse than they are now. I cant just stand by and watch the children kill each other.

The Russians are recruiting young men as cannon fodder. Can you tolerate them fighting against our own army?

#### Chapter 392: Each Takes What They Need

Bernard was speechless. No potential danger could be greater than survival itself. Future problems could be dealt with in the future. For now, they needed to get through this present crisis first before considering other issues.

The threat from the Russians was felt firsthand by everyone. The loss of property was a minor issue; the key concern was that even personal safety was not guaranteed.

Knigsberg was in a state of desolation because of the poor discipline of the Russian army. People were anxious even when walking down the street. Who would dare to do business anymore?

A priest suggested, Why dont we discuss this with the nobles in the city?

Bishop Bernard quickly responded, No! Father Rennes, you should know the situation of the nobles in the city now. The Russians have them under close watch. If we go to them now, do you think they can leave?

The Junker nobles remain loyal to the Kingdom of Prussia. Many passionate young men among them lead guerrilla forces behind enemy lines and naturally draw close attention from the Russians.

It wasnt that Bishop Bernard didnt support the guerrillas, but East Prussia was just too small. With only over 30,000 square kilometers of land, there were 380,000 Russian troops gathered. How could they possibly resist?

The outcome was self-evident. The resistance was completely wiped out, and civilians supporting the guerrillas suffered immensely. The Russians taught them a brutal lesson with tens of thousands of corpses: do not cause trouble.

This was also the reason for the local nobles to gather together. They were simply terrified, fearing that if the Russians lost their patience, they might target them as well.

By banding together, even if someone went mad and wanted to take action, the noble officers in the Russian army would stop it, as it went against their shared class interests.

The nobles could barely protect themselves, let alone approach and risk burning themselves further. Under normal circumstances, the Russian army would not take the initiative against these religious figures, but one could not be sure once the latter actively approached them.

James feigned concern and urged, Sirs, we should make a decision soon. The Russians wont give us too much time. With so many elderly, weak, women and children in Knigsberg now, its almost impossible to sign normal employment contracts. Convincing Austrian companies to hire them wont be easy either.

Hearing James words, the crowds expressions changed drastically. Normally, colonial companies only hired young and able-bodied workers, not the elderly, weak, women, and children who could hardly find jobs.

Now, leaving through labor recruitment channels was not so simple either.

Father Bragg asked expectantly. Mr. James, you surely have a solution to this problem, dont you?

James hesitated slightly before saying, If the number is small, I can still ask my friends for help. Right now, in all of Knigsberg, at least tens of thousands need to be moved, and most of them are elderly and weak. Normally, colonial companies wouldnt hire them.

The only solution is for us to cover the transportation costs ourselves. Im reaching out to friends for help. These companies, in consideration to their compatriots, should be willing to provide false employment contracts.

This was James cleverness in play. The hesitant crowd was now involuntarily changing their stance, considering how to organize everyones departure.

Bishop Bernard frowned and said, This is very troublesome. There are too many people in Knigsberg who need to leave, and most of the residents cant afford the travel expenses. Our church also cant come up with this money.

Moreover, once they reach the African continent, without work, everyones livelihood will become an issue.

The required travel and resettlement expenses for tens of thousands of people would not be a small amount of money.

If it were before the war, the church could still raise this sum of money. Now, however, all the banks have been looted by the Russians, and the church is left only with the properties inside them.

The most important thing in religion is faith. As long as there are believers, the money can be earned back eventually. With empty pockets, Bernard could only give up this opportunity to strengthen faith.

James thought for a moment and said, Well have to borrow the travel expenses for now. Once we arrive, we can seek help from the local church and also from the German Nation Revival Society.

Although there are many elderly, women, and children, it doesnt mean everyone is incapable of working. At the very least, they can do laundry, cooking, or help plantation owners pick cotton.

I still have many friends there who can provide some job opportunities. If there are special circumstances where they really cannot find work, we can apply for aid from the colonial government!

In times of crisis, ones true nature is revealed. While James certainly wants to make money, after returning to Knigsberg, he genuinely wants to help his compatriots.

Rather than living in constant uncertainty here, its better to start a new life in Austrian Africa.

Like most people, James has lost hope in the Prussian government. He doesnt believe that the Kingdom of Prussia can win this war.

In his eyes, this campaign to relocate people was a sacred rescue mission, helping his compatriots escape the clutches of the Russians.

The assimilation of East Prussia has long been completed. Many Poles and Lithuanians have become Germans, and according to official documents from the Prussian government, the local Germans already account for more than 70%.

The rest have long been accustomed to speaking and writing German and have lifestyles similar to the Germans. Passing as ethnic Germans to seek aid in Austrian Africa would not be an issue no one would bother checking anyway.

Franz places great importance on population, which naturally influences the officials below him. Perhaps in the eyes of capitalists, the elderly, weak, women, and children have little value, but in the eyes of government officials, they still contribute to the population.

Providing shelter to the elderly and weak can win hearts, and the Austrian government isn't short of food for this purpose. As for women, they are also a labor force, and children will grow up so they all have value.

Being young means they would be easier to control, and immigrants with families are the best immigrants. Once they settle down locally, these people won't be able to leave.

By lending money for travel expenses, a threshold for departure is set, extending their time working in the colony.

Three to five years later, whether it's the Russians occupying East Prussia or the Kingdom of Prussia reclaiming its lost territories, new residents will inhabit these areas, making it difficult for the immigrants to survive if they return.

The only way out cannot be refused. Not all church members are evil villains. The troublemakers are a minority, and most ordinary people are just a bit greedy and have questionable private lives.

Faced with the life and death of tens of thousands, everyone knows what choices to make.

This was the nature of European society. To organize the masses to leave, only two groups had such influence: the nobles and the church.

James doesn't believe he can persuade the local nobility to leave. The treatment that the Kingdom of Prussia can offer them is something Austria could never match.

So from the beginning, the local nobility were put under house arrest. The outside world believed it was the work of the Russians, but it actually happened after James bribed Russian officers.

The Russian government isn't short of population. Keeping a group that could easily turn into a guerrilla force is just asking for trouble. They might as well recycle the waste and sell it to Austria.

With the deliberate cooperation of the Russians, James' immigrant recruitment went very smoothly. The Russian army seemed to turn a blind eye, allowing them to organize and gather.

Colonel Nikolai, stationed in Knigsberg, glanced at the employment contracts submitted by James. He didn't even bother to read the densely packed names and casually tossed them aside.

Mr. James, according to the laws of the Russian Empire, you need to pay a hiring tax of five rubles for each laborer employed, totaling 448,000 rubles.

James was taken aback but maintained his smile, saying, Colonel, we've only hired 12,000 people. The rest are accompanying family members.

Colonel Nikolai replied with a cold smile, Unfortunately, we're in wartime now, and the situation is special. We still need to investigate spies, so these family members cannot leave for the time being.

Realizing the situation, James immediately handed over a check for 5,000 guilders. This check was issued by the Royal Bank and could be cashed in major European cities.

After verifying the amount and authenticity, Colonel Nikolai's expression softened slightly as he casually pocketed the check.

He tore up the original tax receipt and issued a new one for 60,000 rubles, which he handed to James.

This was the benefit of wartime. Most of what could be looted in Knigsberg had already been taken. There was hardly any tax to speak of, and the Russian government naturally wouldn't dispatch tax officials.

The only reason Colonel Nikolai made things difficult for James was clearly for personal gain. Even though James had organized so many immigrants, the actual number of young and able-bodied men was fewer than 6,000.

The hiring of 12,000 people was mainly to ensure that each household employed at least one person, allowing them to legally bring their families with them. To avoid future complications, James dared not skimp on this payment.

After obtaining the permit, James breathed a sigh of relief. The Austrian Foreign Ministry also had offices in East Prussia. With these legitimate documents, he could now involve the Foreign Ministry.

After seeing off James, a young officer asked with confusion, Uncle, didn't we agree to extort some money from him? Why did we let him go?

Collecting taxes, have you ever seen a military unit collecting taxes? Moreover, this is a newly occupied area, and there's simply no concept of taxes.

From start to finish, it was Colonel Nikolai and others wanting to extort some money, and they took the opportunity to set up a makeshift tax bureau.

Boris, you're still too green. If I really kept pushing to extort more from him, I probably wouldn't even get the last ruble and would have to retire early. Do you remember the telegram we received last night?

Boris caught on and said, Are you saying the Austrian Foreign Ministry has already intervened?

Colonel Nikolai nodded. The money from this trade in population had already been collected by the Russian government and included in the Austro-Russian loan.

Now, it was the civilian businessman James coming forward. They dared not extort more. If it were the Austrian Foreign Ministry involved, the situation would be different.

Most of the logistical supplies for the Russian army were provided by Austria. If a dispute were sparked between the two countries at this time, affecting the war, the perpetrators would definitely face severe consequences.



The Russian government was indeed corrupt, but that didn't mean Alexander II wanted to see corruption. If they were to come forward now, they might be made an example of to deter others.

Knigsberg was merely the tip of the iceberg. The entire region of East Prussia was teeming with immigrant businessmen. Everyone was working to evacuate people from East Prussia.

No, it should be said everyone was working to rescue their compatriots. Rescuing their fellow countrymen from the clutches of the Russians was the official response from Austria.

Whether others believe it or not, those involved did. The East Prussian populace choosing to leave also believed it.

The coordination by the Russian army was excellent. Their authentic performance completely terrified the local people.

Living in constant uncertainty and dread was something no one desired. Being conscripted as able-bodied soldiers to fight against their own country on the battlefield was even more difficult for them to accept emotionally.

### Chapter 393: Learning to Be a Fisherman

The suddenly bustling ports of East Prussia quickly caught the attention of the Prussian government. Such a high-profile migration could not be kept secret, and the news naturally leaked early.

Prussia's protests were not taken seriously by Franz. The Foreign Ministry replied directly: It has nothing to do with us, take it up with the Russians.

Indeed, if it weren't for the Russians' outrageous conduct, no matter how persuasive they were, such a large-scale exodus would not have occurred.

One million East Prussian citizens could attest that they left to escape danger, and Austria was merely conducting humanitarian relief.

An Austro-Russian deal was there any evidence? Making unsubstantiated claims carries a price.

From start to finish, the Austrian government did not make an appearance. Organizing the departure of the people were businessmen from East Prussia and local churches.

Since receiving the news from East Prussia, William's mood has not improved.

The Russians do not care about the population of East Prussia. For them, the people there are just a nuisance since they already have plenty of people anyway.

Sending away the local population also allows Alexander II to reward his generals with the lands of East Prussia, which is simply killing two birds with one stone.

Prussia, on the other hand, is different. Their population was not large, to begin with, and East Prussia was an important region they had painstakingly developed. Without the population of East Prussia, they would have no way to fill the void.

Apart from occupying the Duchies of Schleswig-Holstein and adding a portion of Germans, there are hardly any Germans in other regions.

Prime Minister Franck advised, Your Majesty, we should consider the issue of East Prussia later. Winning the war is the priority now. Currently, we cannot do anything about it.

Prime Minister Franck could see through the issue clearly. The consequences of losing the population in East Prussia were severe, but that was based on the premise of winning the war.

If they lost this war, it wouldn't be their territory anymore anyway, so those troubles would naturally not exist.

William I shook his head and said, No, we must take action to delay the migration to Austria. Otherwise, once our troops move in, the area will be left barren.

Fortunately, this war was provoked by the Junker nobility. Otherwise, if an important region of the Junkers was lost because of him, William I would really have no way to explain to them.

Now, his approach is merely to show his stance and a political show for the Junker nobles to see.

Trying to stop the migration to Austria efforts was a joke. The migration had already begun when the Russians occupied East Prussia.

Initially, hundreds or thousands left, but now tens of thousands, even over a hundred thousand people are leaving together. If they were really prepared to stop it, they wouldn't have waited until now.

William I was well aware that he couldn't stop it at all and could even trigger bigger troubles, so he chose to play dumb.

Now that the matter had blown up, he could no longer keep a lid on it and he had no choice but to bring the issue to light.

The ultimate outcome, of course, was it being useless. Apart from urging the local population to resist immigration, they couldn't actually do anything.

Even this might not reach the masses. The Russians wouldn't help them publicize it, and once officials from the Prussian government entered East Prussia, they would be hunted down by the Russians.

For the East Prussian populace, the Russian army had already decided for them. To accelerate the pace of immigration, the Russian army organized food requisition teams and began to visit households in the countryside.

Unlike before, where they only plundered goods, this time they aimed to cut off any chance of them staying. If they didn't leave soon, they would soon go hungry.

The mass migration continued until the end of September. Most of the population of East Prussia had already arrived in Austrian-controlled Africa, with a small portion being allocated to Southeast Asia and Central America.

Centralized resettlement was out of the question. Franz wasn't foolish. How could he possibly give them a chance to stay together? Of course, nominally, it was to help them find better jobs.

After all, most of these immigrants were elderly, weak, women, and children, making it challenging for them to find work. If they were all resettled together, where would there be so many suitable positions for them?

Scattering was easy, but gathering was hard. These immigrants were scattered all over, and after the war, many Prussian soldiers would likely have to embark on long journeys to find their relatives.

At the Schenbrunn Palace, looking at the compiled data, Franz was very satisfied. According to incomplete statistics, Austria managed to entice approximately 800,000 immigrants from the Kingdom of Prussia during this war, with 730,000 of them coming from East Prussia.

It was impossible to empty out the entire region as there would always be stubborn individuals who didn't want to leave. Franz never liked forcing people against their will.

If they chose to stay, that was their business. Whether these people could survive this war depended on whether they would be lucky.

The only regret was that the Danes were defeated too quickly. Otherwise, they could have also enticed a large number of immigrants from the Duchies of Schleswig-Holstein.

By now, what Austria lacked was no longer land or resources but a quality population, which was what Austria needed most.

Franz's desire to unify Germany was primarily for the population. Otherwise, those 400,000 square kilometers of land wouldn't be worth much attention.

The poor strategic position was particularly daunting. If Austria was squeezed between France and Russia, then Northern Germany found itself caught between Britain, France, Russia, and Austria.

It could be said that unifying Germany would at least double Austria's defense pressure, if not more.

At least in the Mediterranean region, Austria wouldn't have to directly face the British. Once the Suez Canal was opened, Austria's strategic environment could further improve.

As for concerns about a British blockade, it was purely groundless worry. To simultaneously block both the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal would require the Royal Navy to be fully deployed. Otherwise, it simply couldn't be done.

It's the 19th century, not the 21st century. It is simply a myth that deploying a fleet can easily blockade coastlines.

While Franz might not dare to boast, he was confident enough to raise a navy half the strength of the Royal Navy.

As a landlocked country, if Franz gambled on the navy to risk a mutually damaging war, would the British dare to take that risk?

If the Royal Navy were to be severely crippled, how would they defend their vast colonies? When interests are at stake, European countries would not be courteous.

This is also a factor driving Franz's aggressive immigration policy. He fears that one day, he might confront a naval power and find his navy incapable of protecting the colonies.

When the time comes, it will be up to the army. A decent force can be assembled at any major colony, deterring anyone from challenging it.

Strategically speaking, the stronger the power, the harder it is to initiate a war. Especially after making countries aware of the high costs of war, the likelihood of war breaking out will be further reduced.

These days, development is the priority, and bullying the weak can be tolerated. However, engaging in a bloody conflict with a major power, even if victorious, would be a strategic loss.

This was the experience Franz summarized, as seen in recent conflicts in the Near East War and the ongoing Russo-Prussian War, where the ultimate victors were the idle fishermen watching from the sidelines.

Franz admitted he had become addicted to being that fisherman, unwilling to personally take risks. This was no bad thing. An excellent statesman had to learn to be a fisherman.

TN: This is based on the Chinese proverb which means, In the fight between the snipe and the clam, the fisherman benefits the most.

#### Chapter 394: The War's Turning Point

After October, the Russo-Prussian War entered a new phase. Both sides fought fiercely, resulting in a situation where the sky and earth seemed to merge and rivers of blood flowed.

In East Prussia, the Prussian army gained the upper hand, while in Poland, the Russian army pressed down on the Prussian-Polish coalition.

Austria also dispatched military observers. Observing the intelligence gathered from the battlefield, Franz couldn't help but feel secretly grateful.

Truly, reputation is earned, not given. The title of continental hegemon for the Russian Empire was well-deserved. The combat capabilities of the Russian army in this era were undoubtedly among the world's best.

Even when the Russian Empire in the original timeline faced setbacks, it was still feared by various countries. It wasn't just because of the jokes about winter and its vast territory.

Geographical strategic advantages are only useful when defending. In war, it primarily depends on people, with geographical conditions playing a supporting role.

The Prussian army was already among those on the top of the world, yet their advantages on the battlefield were not evident.

Even with inferior weaponry, the Russian army managed to use their flesh and blood to block the Prussian forces. And after equipment upgrades, the ratio of casualties between the two sides gradually narrowed.

The Prussian army only maintained a slight edge due to their superior training. When facing certain elite Russian forces, they even found themselves at a disadvantage.

The Near East War was not fought in vain. Despite nearly a million military casualties, the Russian government still gained a highly capable fighting force.

At Schnbrunn Palace, during a high-level military meeting.

Have you all reviewed the data? Based on the intelligence we've gathered so far, who do you think will win this campaign?

Franz only asked about this campaign, not the overall victory of the war. The disparity in strength between Prussia and Russia is significant. As long as the Russian government is willing to go all out, the eventual winner is clear.

Not to mention Prussia, no country in the world dares to guarantee victory against a Russia fighting desperately.

Even if its Austria against Russia, Franz must use unconventional tactics to have a chance at victory. Otherwise, if both sides go all-out in a fight to the end, with millions of casualties, would there really be a victory?

People of this era cant imagine a war with millions of casualties in one go, but Franz understands it all too well.

Russia is so vast that it cant be toppled in one fell swoop. So it can only be a battle of attrition. Once such a situation arises, who could claim victory?

Chief of Staff Field Marshal Edmund responded, Your Majesty, based on the current situation, I am more optimistic about the Kingdom of Prussia.

They seem to be preparing for a major operation. From the deployment of forces, the Prussian army is preparing to engage the Russian army in East Prussia.

Once they execute their plan, at least half of the three hundred thousand Russian troops in East Prussia will likely be left behind.

The Russian commanders are too arrogant, solely focused on advancing without considering the risks. Even when at a disadvantage, they havent contracted their front lines.

Its understandable. The strength gap between the Prussian and Russian armies in combat isnt significant. Even when at a disadvantage, the casualties might be a bit higher, but the Russian commanders arent timid.

Human lives are expendable to them, and the Russian government doesnt mind engaging in a war of attrition with the Prussian army as long as they can secure victory.

With exchange ratios of 2:1 or 3:1 in the past, the Russian army dared to fight. Now that the casualty ratio has dropped to 1.3:1 and they occasionally have the upper hand, why wouldnt they keep fighting?

Minister of War Albrecht analyzed, Prussias recent actions are somewhat unusual. A large amount of strategic supplies have arrived at the front lines ahead of schedule, exceeding the needs of the front.

Stockpiling some extra food and ammunition might be justifiable, but the surplus tents and daily necessities are definitely suspicious.

Preliminary estimates suggest that even with a sudden increase of two hundred thousand troops, their supplies would still be ample. I suspect the Prussians are about to reinforce the Eastern Prussian front, and these are just initial preparations.

Currently, the chaotic Prussian forces amount to a staggering one million two hundred thousand troops.

Among them, the main force is about four hundred thousand strong, the second-line reserve forces number around one hundred fifty thousand, and the rest are newly recruited conscripts.

The main forces are locked in a bitter struggle with the Russians on the front lines, while the second-line forces are in Poland, joining forces with the Polish insurgents to resist the Russian advance.

The remaining conscripted forces lack combat capability. Currently, they are undergoing military training while guarding the coastal areas.

After being at war for so long, some of these new conscripted units have completed initial training and are ready for combat.

In a situation where both sides are evenly matched, deploying them onto the battlefield could indeed alter the course of the war.

This isn't something the Russians can match. Constrained by logistics and supply, they can only maintain their current strength.

In history, the Kingdom of Prussia's comebacks were not solely due to their military strength surpassing the enemy by a significant margin. The crucial factor was concentrating superior forces to engage the enemy.

Both the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War were won by leveraging overwhelming numerical superiority. If the forces were evenly matched, it would have been a grueling battle, and an overwhelming victory wouldn't be possible.

Despite the duration of the Russo-Prussian War, they haven't employed this tactic yet, primarily due to two reasons: firstly, the Russian Imperial Army is too large; secondly, the transportation within Russia is too poor, making logistics a major issue for offensive actions.

Now that Russian forces have entered Eastern Prussian territory, the situation has changed. Prussia's railway advantage can come into play in domestic combat.

This means the Prussians can reinforce a specific area in a short period, establishing regional force superiority and increasing the chances of success in the war.

Franz is no longer a military novice. He has acquired the ability to discuss military matters theoretically and is only lacking hands-on combat experience.

There's no way around it. Small-scale battles don't require the Emperor to command personally, and Franz dares not to direct a large-scale war, so this shortcoming remains unresolved.

After examining the simulated battlefield model, Franz quickly felt reassured. The simulation didn't go awry. Despite bolstering Russian combat capabilities, they did not enhance the command skills of the Russian military high command.

The Kingdom of Prussia hasn't reached a desperate situation. After all, it has a population of fifteen million which hasn't been fully utilized yet.

As a semi-industrialized nation, the mobilization capability of the Kingdom of Prussia has significantly increased. Now with financial backing, achieving maximum mobilization is no longer a distant dream.

The newly mobilized troops may lack significant combat strength. However, when deployed during decisive battles, these forces suddenly appearing on the battlefield can also be the final straw that changes the tide of the war.

As for the Russian ambush, at worst, they might lose a few coastal cities. Warships can't sail onto land, can the navy really venture deep into enemy territory alone?

Those in the midst are perplexed while onlookers see it clearly. As an onlooker, Franz had no intention to warn the Russian government despite being aware.

The Russian Empire has grand ambitions and can afford such losses. The Kingdom of Prussia has limited strength and can at most defeat this Russian army. Its impossible for them to completely swallow up hundreds of thousands of Russian troops.

While Franz was conducting military simulations, the Kingdom of Prussia, which was prepared and ready, also started to take action.

Railways across the country swiftly started operating, transporting soldiers stationed in various locations to the front lines. In just two days, they had deployed 150,000 troops to the front lines in East Prussia.

The decisive battle was officially in full swing, and the sudden appearance of fresh troops immediately bewildered the Russian commanders.

Under normal circumstances, such a large-scale troop movement, even if expedited, would take at least ten days to half a month, providing ample time for adjustments in troop deployments.

However, in just two days, reinforcements from Prussia arrived. The Russian army had no way to adjust their frontline positions over hundreds of kilometers within such a short time.

In certain areas, the Prussian forces even gained a numerical advantage of four to five times, launching attacks against the Russian army.

The outcome was predictable. Despite the Russian armys valiant resistance, they couldnt change their inevitable defeat.

East Prussia was the heartland of the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Prussian forces were very familiar with the local terrain. After breaking through the Russian defenses, they immediately infiltrated deep into enemy lines.

At the same time, the Prussians also organized a special forces unit composed of soldiers native to East Prussia. This unit was tasked with disrupting the Russian telegraph lines.

In a battle involving hundreds of thousands of troops, telegraph communication was their greatest technological advantage. Without telegraph messages, relying on couriers to deliver messages was far too inefficient.

Due to inadequate precautions, the Russian army suffered heavy losses quickly. Without timely telegraphic communication, the Russian troops on the front lines soon found themselves in awkward situations, each fighting independently without coordination.

Especially the units that suffered defeats turned into headless flies, wandering aimlessly on the battlefield. The efficiency of couriers was too low and couldnt keep up with the rapidly changing situation on the battlefield.

Many units lost contact with their regiment headquarters, regiment headquarters lost contact with division headquarters, and the entire Russian army in East Prussia descended into chaos.

This situation was naturally within Moltkes expectations. What had started as a hard-fought battle now turned one-sided, prompting him to promptly deploy the fresh troops from the rear into combat.

With the numerical advantage, the Prussian forces quickly gained the upper hand on the battlefield. The disordered Russian troops were routed, retreating all the way back to the Western Dvina River (now within Latvia, known as the Daugava River) before managing to hold their ground.

By this time, the Russian army had been reduced from 386,000 before the decisive battle to 112,000, and they had also lost a large amount of strategic supplies and nearly all of their artillery.

The Prussian forces dared not continue their advance as winter had set in at the Baltic Sea region. They needed to quickly eliminate the remaining Russian troops within their territory and consolidate their gains.

The situation on the battlefield was interconnected. With the fall of Lithuania, the situation in Belarus suddenly became serious.

After their flanks came under threat, the Russian forces that were still attacking the Prussian-Polish allied forces had to contract their lines. However, by the time they made this decision, it was already too late.

After the conclusion of the battle in East Prussia, reinforcements from the Prussian forces arrived at the fastest speed possible. They seized an opportunity to deal a heavy blow to the retreating Russian troops.

#### Chapter 395: The Helplessness of Pawns

The outcome of the Battle of East Prussia left Europe stunned. This result was difficult for everyone to accept, and no one had expected Prussia to launch a counteroffensive.

Many armchair experts, who had been confidently offering analyses, believed that the earlier loss of East Prussia was a deliberate strategy by the Prussians to lure the enemy deep into their territory.

Riding on the shoulders of the Russian defeat, the Kingdom of Prussia rose to fame in a single battle. Even their commander, Moltke, skyrocketed to fame overnight, becoming one of the most formidable generals of the time.

As the main person involved, Moltke did not want to take credit for this success. He could swear to God that he had never intended to abandon East Prussia.

Did they really think that reclaiming East Prussia was sufficient? Just look at how few people remained in the area to understand the severity of the situation.

After retaking East Prussia, the population counted was less than eighty thousand. Before the war, the population was over a million. Even counting those tens of thousands that were still in the military, the total would only be a bit over a hundred thousand.

The remaining 800,000-900,000 people were gone because of this war. Whether they perished in the flames of battle or migrated to Austrias colonies, for the Kingdom of Prussia, these people were lost.

Would the Kingdom of Prussia dare to demand people from Austria now? The Austrian government was probably still considering whether to come over and reclaim Silesia.

Coming forward at this time would be inviting trouble upon oneself, wouldnt it?

The Prussian government did not want to cede the Silesia region. Austrias support for the Russians during the war had already violated their initial agreement.



However, as everyone knew about the great powers, they often had thick skins. Unless the Kingdom of Prussia provided evidence, the Austrian government would never admit to having supported the Russians.

As for why there was so much Austrian equipment among the Russian troops?

The Russian and Austrian equipment came from the same source, a fact known worldwide. It was normal for Austrian equipment to appear; the problem would be if it didn't.

These were all produced by the Russians themselves. After all, the Russian Empire was a dominant force on the European continent. How could they possibly fail to produce their own weapons and equipment?

If strategic supplies bore the marks of Austrian companies, it was even less worth mentioning. They were all knock-offs made by the Russians. Of course, they would look the same.

Those who doubted could go check in the Russian Empire. The Russian government was quite accommodating. At most, they might send them to plant potatoes in Siberia.

Evidence? It would be best not to bring it forward. Revealing it would make everyone lose face, so it would be better for all to maintain a tacit silence.

The initial agreement wasn't even put down in writing. It was all verbal promises. Pretending as if nothing had happened would be the best course of action, wouldn't it?

But the soldiers from East Prussia were not satisfied.

Their families were missing, not knowing their life or death. They needed a clear answer: were they captured by the Russians or tricked into fleeing?

When news spread that East Prussia was voluntarily abandoned, everyone could not bear it anymore. A mutiny occurred, and tens of thousands of troops demanded an explanation from the Prussian government.

Moltke, the commander-in-chief, became a sinner in many people's eyes. If the military high command hadn't known that the loss of East Prussia was an accident, William I would have made Moltke the scapegoat.

Now, they definitely could not do that as it would demoralize the troops under his command.

Of course, until the situation was clarified, this suspicion couldn't be eliminated. The blame still fell on Moltke, the commander, though he would not be held responsible.

William I was a wise man. He would only burn the bridge after crossing the river, and discard the millstone after grinding the grain. They had to get across the river and finish grinding first before taking any action.

The pause in the Russo-Prussian War was only temporary. It was merely because winter was coming, and fighting couldn't continue. A new test awaited them next year, so this was not the time to offend the military.

Moreover, such obvious attempts to sow discord, if William I couldn't see through it, how could he rule as king?

The Prussian government promptly provided explanations, guaranteeing that East Prussia was not intentionally abandoned. They also disclosed the strategic plans deployed to defend East Prussia.

The officer originally responsible for guarding the coastal areas took all the blame for the loss of East Prussia and was brought to military court.

Subsequently, the news was released about the evacuation of the East Prussian population to the Austrian colonies for refuge. Religious figures were also invited to testify, confirming that most of the people were still alive.

William I pledged that after the war, the government would fund bringing them back from overseas.

Noble officers were also working on convincing the soldiers. Given the ongoing war, the East Prussian region could at any time become a battlefield again. For the safety of the civilians, it was better for them to seek refuge overseas.

The mutiny came quickly and dispersed even faster. While calming the soldiers, efforts were also made to direct their hatred towards the Russians.

Numerous religious figures and the civilians who didn't evacuate served as witnesses. It was entirely due to the Russians' wrongdoings and the inability to survive that everyone fled overseas.

William I felt weary. After comforting the soldiers, he also had to appease the nobility. The Junker nobility of East Prussia suffered greatly, having sacrificed for the nation, and they would certainly have to be compensated after the war.

That wasn't all. War results in casualties. Behind the glorious victories, a large number of Prussian soldiers closed their eyes forever.

In the Berlin Palace, watching the continually increasing death toll, William I's heart was bleeding.

Indeed, in the Battle of East Prussia, they achieved a great victory. They not only recaptured East Prussia and occupied the Lithuanian territory but also drove the Russian forces attacking Poland back and even occupied parts of Belarus.

However, this didn't mean the Prussian army was truly as formidable as it seemed, capable of effortlessly defeating the Russians.

In reality, these territories were all yielded by the Russians themselves. As the saying goes: the extent of territory one can occupy on the battlefield depends on how much the enemy is willing to concede.

The main force of the Russian army suffered heavy losses, morale collapsed, and they were defeated and in disarray. Naturally, the Prussian army followed behind, taking over the territories.

If they truly had to fight all the way, how could they have possibly advanced 200-300 kilometers within just half a month? This wasn't the era of blitzkrieg. Reliant on marching on foot, warfare couldn't be conducted quickly even if one wanted to.

The military achievements were brilliant, but the casualties were horrifying. Behind the victory, the Prussian army paid a painful price during the entire Battle of East Prussia, with losses reaching as high as 142,000.

Of these, 74,000 were killed in action, 38,000 were disabled due to injuries, 3,216 died from diseases or accidents, and 27,000 required long-term recuperation.

And thats not all. From the outbreak of the war until now, the total military losses of the Prussian army have exceeded 280,000.

Apart from military losses, civilian casualties were even greater. The Russian navy raided the coastal areas, causing considerable casualties among civilians. If one includes those exploited by Austria during these turbulent times, the total number approaches nearly a million.

Of course, when considering the newly occupied territories, the overall population has increased. However, these new inhabitants dont necessarily have a strong sense of belonging to the Kingdom of Prussia.

Nevertheless, William remains confident. If theres no comparison, then there wont be any harm. With the Russian government as a reference, he believes the people will make the right choice.

As long as these new inhabitants are assimilated over a decade or two, they will become the foundation of the Kingdom of Prussia. In this regard, their predecessors have set examples.

The most crucial issue now is to expand the gains and end the war; the Kingdom of Prussia is too small and needs to expand.

Since they had already offended the Russians, there was no need to hold back from offending them even further. The best choice was to carve out as much territory from the Russians as possible to strengthen the Kingdom of Prussia.

As long as they were strong enough, it did not matter if the Russians wanted revenge. The Kingdom of Prussia had never feared war, even against the Russians.

Your Majesty, winter has arrived, and we cant continue the war now. I suggest abandoning the territory of Lithuania and withdrawing our troops to defend East Prussia.

The words of Prime Minister Franck interrupted William Is daydreams, pulling him back to reality.

Whats the reason? You should know what abandoning the territory of Lithuania implies politically, shouldnt you?

From a military perspective, defending East Prussia was certainly the best option as they could directly use domestic railways to transport supplies.

Defending the territory of Lithuania was different. The supply lines would increase by over two hundred kilometers, and without railways connected to the homeland, the logistical pressure would significantly increase.

However, politically, occupying the territory of Lithuania signifies that the Kingdom of Prussia has gained the upper hand in this war. Not only can it boost morale and spirit among the troops, but it can also encourage their financial backers to increase their investment.

In William Is view, the winter in Lithuania wasnt too cold for the Prussian army to endure. There are also rivers within the territory to alleviate logistical pressures, so there should be no major issues in holding onto the territory of Lithuania.

Prime Minister Franck said cautiously, Now that the war has progressed to this stage, we also need to consider the aftermath. We should consider negotiating with the Russians to secure the fruits of our victory.

If we occupy the territory of Lithuania, the Russian government will not negotiate with us. Even if it was for the sake of face, they will not agree to a ceasefire at this time.

This was not just about face. It also concerned the personal prestige of Alexander II. Losing a war and then sitting at the negotiating table was not something he could tolerate.

If they really lost the war without a chance for a comeback, then regardless of prestige, they would have to accept defeat.

However, the Russians hadn't actually lost the war; they had only lost one battle.

Prime Minister Franck clearly didn't want to continue clashing with the Russians and planned to seize this opportunity to stop. Annexing Russian territory was never within his plans.

William I replied with a wry smile, Prime Minister, at this stage of the war, if we don't have sufficient gains, what can we tell the people in the country?

Moreover, aid from the British is not easily obtained. The British government's support for our annexation of the Baltic region is more than just support.

If we can't deliver on our end, without British backing in the future, how can we proceed in the future?

From the moment the military instigated this war, we have merely been a pawn, not the flag-bearer. A pawn cannot lose its value, otherwise it becomes a discarded piece.

Being at odds with the Russians to the end was not what William I wanted. Reality, however, told him that he must fight the Russians to the end.

The victory in the Battle of East Prussia strengthened the resolve of the war hawks, leading to a sharp increase in the power of radical groups. They wanted to seize benefits during the war.

A mere Kingdom of Denmark couldn't satisfy their appetites. Moreover, the Kingdom of Prussia dared not annex the entire Kingdom of Denmark. At most, they would only take a piece of land.

At this stage of the war, the Kingdom of Prussia had amassed substantial debts, and their backers would not allow them to stop.

Not only the British needed them to confront the Russians, but the French and Austrians also required them to continue weakening the Russians. If they couldn't achieve this, then the Kingdom of Prussia would lose its value.

Prime Minister Franck was kept in the dark because, from the beginning, he was anti-war, so foreign countries did not make contact with him.

After the outbreak of the war, the military took the lead, and the government merely played a supporting role, sidelining the prime minister.

He was not ousted because William I did not want to see the military dominate entirely even keeping Franck in his position. He was unwilling to hand over the position of prime minister to the military.

Upon hearing this news, Prime Minister Franck's face turned ashen as he left the palace in a daze.

Chapter 396: A Huge Conspiracy

The internal disputes within the Kingdom of Prussia were of no concern to anyone. Most European countries were celebrating this news, illustrating how unpopular the Russian Bear was.

Austria was no exception. If it weren't for the potential fallout, Franz was even prepared to host a banquet to celebrate this great victory.

Up to this point in the Russo-Prussian War, the total Russian military casualties had exceeded half a million. The specific numbers of those killed, captured, or retired due to injuries were unclear.

The Russian government hadn't figured out these issues, and Franz naturally wouldn't be bored enough to help the Russians count.

The victorious Prussian-Polish coalition was also in a difficult position. While the Kingdom of Prussia was in bad shape, having suffered heavy losses, they still had some strength left and a buffer which was winter. They should be able to replenish their forces by next year.

Of course, this replenishment referred only to military strength. Their war potential had inevitably decreased, even with the manpower they gained from the two duchies.

The situation was different for the Poles. Even with support from various European countries, their fundamental nature as a disorganized mob couldn't be changed.

To win over more people, the provisional government announced the abolition of serfdom and the free distribution of land to the public.

However, saying something was one thing while doing it was another. The provisional government was disorganized, and the revolutionaries lacked any governing experience, leading to awkward and frequent blunders in their actions.

First, they drove the nobles to opposition. The subsequent internal struggles then caused dissatisfaction among the middle class.

Without seeing tangible benefits and relying solely on slogans, the facade eventually fell apart. As time passed, the ordinary people gradually lost their enthusiasm for revolution.

If not for the victory at the Battle of East Prussia, it would have been a question whether the Polish provisional government could have lasted through this winter.

The merit of a policy does not lie in the policy itself but in its actual implementation. Clearly, the Polish provisional government was unaware of this, naively believing that once the government issued an order, it would be implemented below.

The free distribution of land was indeed announced, but how it was distributed was left to the discretion of bureaucrats — or rather, It would be more accurate to describe them as opportunists rather than bureaucrats.

Filled with idealism, the provisional government disregarded reality and blindly introduced a series of policies it considered good. The outcome was naturally predictable, causing domestic chaos.

For Austria, this was advantageous. A chaotic Poland would deter the Polish population within the country, further aiding in the advancement of ethnic integration.

Strategically, Austria successfully utilized the Prussian-Polish coalition to weaken the Russians without allowing Prussia and Poland to capitalize on the situation, achieving the first step of its strategic plan.

Whether to continue weakening the Russian Empire has become the most pressing issue for Franz.

On one hand, there's a desire to weaken this potential adversary, while on the other, there's a wish for the Russians to maintain a certain level of strength to counterbalance the British in Central Asia.

While the Russo-Prussian War was ongoing, the Russian government didn't forget its actions against the three Khanates in Central Asia. However, due to financial constraints that couldn't support a two-front war, Russian military operations in the region were lackluster.

Within the Austrian government, disagreements persisted. Russia isn't lacking in strength. Their major issue is their inability to fully utilize their capabilities.

In theory, if the Russian government could harness even half of its war potential, it could easily deal with the Kingdom of Prussia.

The level of support Austria provided to Russia during the Russo-Prussian War was far less compared to the Near East War. This was one of the factors preventing Russia from fully deploying its capabilities.

This was determined by interests. During the Near East War, Austria had significant interests at stake. Even if the lent money might not be recovered, losses were being compensated for in other ways.

The Russo-Prussian War was different. Austria found it challenging to gain substantial benefits. Discussing the partition of the Kingdom of Prussia was one thing, but if carried out, the costs would outweigh the gains.

For Franz to obtain the human resources in Northern Germany, he needed to win over the local population. If he were to ally with the Russians to partition the Kingdom of Prussia, he would never gain the local population's recognition.

Nationalism is a double-edged sword. Franz used nationalism to establish the new Holy Roman Empire and acquired abundant human resources in Germany. Naturally, he also had to bear the troubles it brought.

Minister of Finance Karl proposed, "Your Majesty, considering the progress of the Russo-Prussian War, we have achieved our objectives and can consider mediating this war.

The finances of the Russian government have collapsed. Up to now, they owe us 30 million guilders for goods, along with a staggering 65 million guilders in loans and 18 million guilders in private bonds.

If the war continues, I don't believe the Russians have the capability to repay us. Given their previous debts, there's a chance they may not even be able to repay the interest someday.

Even if the Russians were to win the war and we were to partition the Kingdom of Prussia together, the gains for us would be very limited."

This is a fact. Currently, Russia owes Austria a total debt of 237 million guilders, with monthly payments for principal and interest amounting to 2.154 million guilders.

At first glance, it doesn't seem like much, and the Russian government should be able to bear this with their annual revenue. However, the Russians have debts to other European countries as well.

Currently, Russia's debt repayments already account for one-third of its annual income. If the Russo-Prussian War continues, the bankruptcy of the Russian government is an inevitable outcome.

The Ministry of Finance has mentally prepared for the Russians to default on their debt, and Franz has similarly prepared for this eventuality.

Even though the funds were initially raised by Austria for the war effort, now that they had acquired them, they could not frivolously waste the money but needed to allocate it valuable.

Without a doubt, this value won't come from partitioning Prussia but must be compensated in other areas.

From Franz's perspective, they have already recouped their investment. At the same time, weakening both Prussia and Russia led the two to become mortal enemies, greatly reducing Austria's defense pressure in Eastern and Central Europe.

However, following the principle of maximizing benefits, efforts must be made to gain more advantages. How to proceed will test the diplomatic skills of Franz and his team.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg objected, "It's too early to stop the war now, and there's no guarantee both sides will accept our goodwill.

With financial support from Britain and France, the Kingdom of Prussia still has the strength for a war. The Junker-dominated Prussian government will surely not agree to stop the war. They still want to tear off a piece of flesh from the Russians to establish their status as a great power.

Russia still possesses considerable strength, and the Russian government won't capitulate easily. They've only recently established their hegemony on the continent after the Napoleonic Wars. Surely they won't give it up without a fight.

Both sides still have the capability to continue the war. Mediating now would please neither party.

With winter as a buffer, the Russian government will likely find ways to raise the necessary funds. If they fail to raise sufficient funds, we can see what conditions they offer and negotiate accordingly.

The primary benefit the victory in the Battle of East Prussia brought to Prussia was political, making it possible to entice Sweden into the conflict.

The enmity between Russia and Sweden goes back centuries. Over the past three hundred years, they've engaged in eight major wars until Sweden's decline in recent decades brought a halt to it.

In addition, the Ottoman Empire might mobilize to reclaim the Caucasus. They've just completed a social reform, which, though not thorough, has partially restored their strength.

The Three Khanates in Central Asia, recently oppressed by the Russians, along with Persia, which has had recent conflicts with Russia, and the Qing Empire in the Far East, could all become potential enemies of Russia.

According to our intelligence, British diplomats have been very active recently, indicating they might be coordinating alliances.

It's conceivable the coming year won't be easy for the Russian government. If they win the Russo-Prussian War, these nations will retreat; but if they continue to falter, they'll be in peril."

Looking at the map of Eurasia, Franz had to admit that the Russians had an impressive ability to attract hatred and make enemies. If John Bull's plan succeeded, then the hard-pressed Russian Empire might indeed not be able to hold on.

The "Russo-Austrian Alliance" was built on the premise of two countries with comparable strengths. If the Russian Empire were to fall, Austria might be the first to kick them while they were down.

Franz asked with concern, "Do the Russians have any inkling of the British plan?"

Deep down, he had already considered the Russian example as a lesson, reminding himself repeatedly not to be careless.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg replied, "It is not yet certain. The Russians haven't taken any action, so we can't determine whether they have seen through the British conspiracy."

The British plan was discovered by the Austrian Foreign Ministry not for any other reason but because they regarded the British as their main adversary.

Since they considered the British as their greatest adversary, every move and action of the British was closely monitored by the Austrian Foreign Ministry across various international agencies.

Prime Minister Felix suggested, "If the British have such a grand plan, we ought to alert the Russians. The Russian Empire must not fall. If it does, we'll have to dismantle them. Currently, we can't achieve the dismantling of the Russian Empire, so it's better not to let them fall."

Dismantling the Russian Empire was not a problem, the key was that there was no way to fragment them. Merely tearing off a few pieces from the periphery was not Austria's objective.

Especially at this critical juncture in their African strategy, if the Russian Empire now had problems, Austria would get mired in this quagmire and be unable to extricate itself in the short term.

Franz thought for a moment and said, "Then we'll find an opportunity to notify the Russians. But not now, wait until the British plan has progressed somewhat close to completion before acting.

Involving so many countries to challenge the Russians simultaneously is definitely not a simple matter. The British are probably overly optimistic."

Hatred is widespread, and so are interests. These factors constitute the prerequisites for countries seeking revenge against Russia. Unfortunately, governments of various countries are not so proactive.

Due to communication challenges, these countries cannot engage in sufficient dialogue. With everyone scattered across the globe, so-called joint actions remain wishful thinking and can easily be dealt with by the Russians one by one.

Moreover, the governments of many of those countries had become rotten, completely lacking the courage to recover lost territory. To make them determined would require the British to take the field themselves.

Since that was the case, Franz naturally was not in a rush. He would wait until the British had made sufficient preparations before notifying the Russians, while also adding a bit of difficulty for Alexander II.



If the issue is resolved by the Russian government through diplomatic means, wouldn't that be quite embarrassing for the British?

#### Chapter 397: When Money Runs Dry, the Pigs Can Only Be Butchered

In St. Petersburg, since the conclusion of the Battle of East Prussia, the beleaguered Russian government has had a hard time.

Although the frontline generals took the blame, Alexander II understood that the real reason for the Russian army's major defeat was not an issue of the commanders' leadership.

Had it not been for the order for a quick resolution to the war, the Battle of East Prussia might still be ongoing. According to the initial strategy, the Russian army only needed to hold its ground against the Prussians and rely on its naval advantage to win.

Offense and defense are entirely different concepts. Had the Russian army adopted a defensive strategy, they certainly wouldn't have been defeated so swiftly. With the sudden reinforcement by the Prussians, at most, they would have lost a few defensive lines.

"Money" became the main culprit for the defeat in this battle, followed by the poor transportation system of the Russian Empire, then the corrupt bureaucratic system of the Russian government, and lastly, the "decisive battle order."

The Minister of War, Milyutin, reported, "Your Majesty, mobilization has already been initiated. The troop losses on the frontline can be replenished to full strength within the next two months.

The lost weapons and equipment are being rushed into production day and night by domestic military industry enterprises. For the lacking parts, we have already placed orders with Austria to ensure they will be delivered to the troops before the beginning of next spring."

Milyutin wisely overlooked the matter of assigning blame. Though the main officers at the frontline were blamed, they were not removed or held accountable. Instead, they were ordered to redeem themselves.

Overall, their performance was satisfactory. These officers were the greatest assets Russia gained from the recent Nea East War and represented the elites of the Russian military.

With more fighting ahead, Alexander II naturally would not undertake actions that would harm his own interests.

"It's still a money problem, isn't it?"

Alexander II asked with resignation evident in his tone, indicating that the issue of "money" was not a recent occurrence.

Minister of War Milyutin confirmed, "Yes! We have fallen too far behind on many payments, and many cooperating enterprises are now facing financial difficulties as a result. They are now demanding payment of the overdue amounts before they will organize production."

It was common for the Russian government to owe companies money, but a situation like this where the debt was so severe was rare.

The capitalists were no fools. Knowing the Russian government's financial troubles, they naturally would not continue extending credit.

In this regard, the Russian officials were their allies. If companies didn't make money, what could they give as kickbacks?

Not only military-industrial enterprises but all companies cooperating with the Russian government now have accumulated significant debts.

Without resolving these issues, the Russian Empire need not consider next year's war and might as well surrender directly.

Alexander II asked with anticipation, "What plans does the Ministry of Finance have to resolve the current crisis?"

Looking weary, Finance Minister Michael von Reutern replied, "There are two solutions: first, to levy another war tax; second, to borrow foreign debt."

Not issuing bonds or borrowing domestically undoubtedly indicated that the Russian government's credit had collapsed and domestic finance was also problematic.

In fact, when the Russian army had just occupied East Prussia, many outsiders were optimistic about them. The Finance Ministry took this opportunity to sell a batch of bonds.

Then nothing followed. Now, these bonds are once again being ignored. Even the Finance Minister himself is unsure if these bonds can be redeemed.

War is a money-guzzling beast. Russia was a feudal empire transitioning to capitalism, with very limited funds to mobilize.

Of course, this did not mean they had no money at all. It's just that the shrewd financiers chose to feign poverty at this time, showing no intention of helping the Russian government.

With a sardonic smile, Alexander II said, "Can't the domestic financial sector think of a solution? As far as I know, don't they hold external debts from many European countries?"

There was no issue. The Russian government borrowing from foreign banks and Russian banks lending abroad are normal financial activities.

The only abnormality was that these banks were unwilling to lend to the Russian government.

Of course, this was not entirely the banks' fault, but more an issue of successive Tsars going too far. Incidents of borrowing without repayment happened far too often, so no one wanted to be fooled again.

The topic stalled, and with the government's financial collapse, it's understandable that domestic banks are hesitant to lend.

Seeing no response, Alexander II did not continue this topic. He knew that for bureaucrats, some things could be done but not said, lest they leave openings to their political opponents.

"How much funding can be raised?"

Finance Minister Reutern considered and said, "A preliminary estimate is that 86 million rubles in war taxes could be levied. As for seeking loans from foreign banks, the exact amount is uncertain. This depends on how much collateral we can provide, as well as political factors that also need to be taken into account."

“86 million rubles” may seem astronomical, but in reality, it’s insufficient to repay the debts owed to the enterprises. In the war effort, it’s merely a drop in the bucket.

It’s not that the ruble is worthless; the issue is the exorbitant costs of the war. Firing several hundred tons of shells in a day is just the basic operation.

In fact, this is already quite economical. With 500,000-600,000 troops fighting on the front lines, even if each soldier consumes five bullets a day, that’s three million bullets.

With so many troops, even if you’re as frugal as possible, you still need to fire thousands of artillery shells a day on average.

Just the basic ammunition consumption costs hundreds of thousands of rubles daily. Adding to that the consumption of various logistical supplies, and daily expenses of several million rubles are inevitable.

After all, the cost of materials on the battlefield isn’t the production cost. Many strategic materials, transported from the rear to the front lines and into the hands of the Russian army, have already doubled or even tripled in price.

Alexander II furrowed his brow and asked, “So, tell me, what are you planning to use as collateral? How much can we borrow?”

Alexander II was extremely displeased with this feeling of losing control. Unfortunately, reality left him with no choice. He couldn’t just hand over European dominance on a silver platter, could he?

If they couldn’t even handle the small Kingdom of Prussia, Russia’s international standing might fall from the top spot behind Britain, France, and Austria, down to even ranking behind Prussia.

Most of the political gains from the Near East War would be squandered in this defeat.

Finance Minister Reutern decisively passed the buck, “It depends on the negotiation results. It’s not about what we offer, but what the other side wants. We can contact several countries and try to secure the most favorable terms for us; the Foreign Ministry specializes in this.”

Foreign Minister Ivanov glared fiercely at Reutern. This was clearly setting him up.

International loans were never easy to secure. While there might be loans without conditions attached, the Russian government couldn’t obtain them.

Once they signed a treaty that harmed national interests, the Foreign Ministry would be left holding the bag. Ivanov’s mood instantly soured.

“Your Majesty, the funding gap is too large right now. There are only a handful of entities worldwide capable of offering such a loan, leaving us with virtually no choice.

If we rely on international loans to solve the financial crisis, we might have to pay a steep price just to borrow the money.

Perhaps we should explore domestic solutions. The vast Russian Empire should be able to raise several hundred million rubles.”

Ivanov’s stance was clear: borrowing money was not the best option. The current funding gap was too large, and even if they managed to borrow, they wouldn’t be able to repay it in the future.

Currently, there were not many bargaining chips they could put up as collateral. Apart from their vast territory, Ivanov did not think there was anything else that could serve as collateral for such a large loan.

Defaulting without repayment was easy, but collateralized loans were different. None of the financiers currently capable of providing them loans were soft targets. If they demanded the collateral later, it wasn't as if Russia could wage war against them, right?

This was clearly impossible. If they had money for war, they would have repaid the debt long ago. War was actually the most extravagant of pursuits, unsuitable for the poor.

Rather than ending up in a difficult situation, it was better to flip the table preemptively. If the government was broke, they could seek money from those who had it. It wasn't the first time, and the experience handed down from their ancestors was there to guide them.

If they took a bold step, not only could they resolve the debt crisis, but they might also line their pockets a bit. The pigs had been fattened. Now was the time to butcher them.

Alexander II nodded. This might not be the best choice, but it was the most suitable for the Russian government.

In a tacit agreement among the upper echelons of the Russian government, the Jews began to suffer misfortune. The primary targets were Jewish financiers, but the ordinary Jews suffered as well.

The nobles naturally wouldn't miss this chance to profit. Whether reformist or conservative, they were unusually united on this issue.

#### Chapter 398: Covert Actions

When Alexander II decided to flip the table, the depth of the Russian Empire was revealed. The anti-Jewish movement began, and the government's finances started to improve.

Initially targeting Jewish capitalists, the government's actions quickly spread to the entire Jewish community, igniting a nationwide anti-Jewish sentiment in Russia.

Laws were enacted by the government to restrict the residence of Jews, prohibit them from purchasing land or engaging in agriculture, and prevent them from serving in departments like postal services, railways, and the military...

The well-informed Jewish capitalists fled, leaving ordinary Jewish people as scapegoats, bearing the societal hostility on their behalf.

The actions of the Russian government sparked the flame of anti-Jewish movements across Europe. Anti-Semitism became a trending topic, with a momentum akin to a wildfire.

As a witness to history, Franz chose to observe coldly from the sidelines. The saying, "the pitiable often have their faults," might be overly simplistic, but it wasn't wrong when applied to the Jews.

"Greed" was their greatest sin. Jewish capitalists pursued profit unscrupulously, ultimately inviting trouble. For self-interest, these people unhesitatingly brought disaster upon their entire nation.

Indeed, the expansion of the anti-Jewish movement in Russia had the hand of Jewish capitalists behind it. Nothing is surprising about this. When it comes to self-interest, the integrity of capitalists is only this high.

If their fellow countrymen hadn't diverted attention from them, the Russian government would have focused on these several thousand individuals. Forget about transferring capital; even preserving their lives would have been a matter of divine providence.

Even fleeing abroad wouldn't guarantee safety, as there were too many predators eyeing these fat sheep. Only by muddying the waters could they ensure the safety of their interests.

Their plan proved successful; from the end of 1865 to the summer of 1866, a total of three hundred thousand Jews fled from the Russian Empire.

In the vast sea of people, identifying these fat sheep was no easy task. It was also much safer than fleeing alone.

All of this had nothing to do with Franz. After all, he wasn't planning to profit from it. Given Austria's immigration conditions, only a few of these people could stay, so why complicate matters?

For Austria, a multi-ethnic country, any extreme ethnic policy carries serious risks. Thus, Austria's anti-Jewish movement was merely a slogan chanted by the public, while the government strictly prohibited it.

Even if it came to butchering pigs, Franz wouldn't be as shameless as the Russian government. In this era, capitalists were involved in so many shady dealings that nearly every investigation hit its mark. Within the legal framework, they could be taken down without much effort.

Alright, he could admit that Alexander II was right. The Russian bureaucrats really couldn't handle such a challenging task so overturning the table seemed more practical.

Franz asked with concern, "Karl, can you estimate how much money the Russians can get this time?"

For the Russian Empire, the strength they could exert depended on how much money the Russian government had. So, to judge the Russians' capability, one could simply look at the Tsar's wallet.

Finance Minister Karl pondered for a moment and replied, "The Russian government can probably obtain around 600-800 million rubles in cash and about 1.5 to 1.8 billion rubles in stocks and bonds. There should be more if we count various other industries.

However, many of these industries will be hard to liquidate in the short term, and their actual value is difficult to estimate. Preliminary estimates suggest this portion of assets should not be less than 2 billion rubles."

Franz nodded. The Jewish community indeed had substantial assets, and having this much wasn't surprising. If one were to calculate per capita wealth, they would undoubtedly be the wealthiest ethnic group in the world.

With a sly smile, Franz said, "So you're saying the Russians' financial crisis is resolved, and they're even wealthy?"

Those familiar with Franz knew that when he wore this expression, he surely had something up his sleeve.

Finance Minister Karl pondered for a moment before responding, “Your Majesty, these are just guesses on our part. Considering the actual situation of the Russian bureaucratic group, how much money will actually make it into the treasury remains uncertain.

However, the Russian government will indeed experience a period of financial prosperity, which should sustain this war without issues.”

Getting hold of this money wasn’t easy. Fortunately, the Russian Empire was just a large feudal empire. Otherwise, economic turmoil would have started already, possibly leading to an economic crisis.

Franz paused and then said, “Have the Foreign Ministry assess the likelihood of the British plan succeeding. We’re not expecting them to defeat the Russians but consider the probability of getting the various countries to take action.”

No way around it. A wealthy Russian government was not to be provoked. Even if the Kingdom of Prussia managed to survive this year, it would likely perish in the next.

The Poles could no longer be relied upon. The Prussian army would inevitably shoulder more combat tasks, leading to a significant increase in soldier casualties.

Losing hundreds of thousands of troops annually would be debilitating for the Russians, and for the Prussians, it was simply unbearable.

To keep the Prussians going, they needed to find allies.

The Russians were adept at stirring up animosity, with enemies scattered across the Eurasian continent. If they all took action, the Russian government wouldn’t be able to commit to the Russo-Prussian War fully, giving the Kingdom of Prussia a window of opportunity.

This war was a high-stakes gamble. Initially, the Prussians gambled that the Russians wouldn’t join the war, and failed this gamble. Thus, resulting in the outbreak of the Russo-Prussian conflict.

Then, European nations began to place their bets, believing that the Prussians could deal a heavy blow to Russia. After the Battle of East Prussia, the British saw an opportunity to defeat Russia and decided to increase their stakes.

Now, Franz was also ready to place his bet, but he intended to play from the sidelines rather than sitting at the gambling table.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg replied, “Your Majesty, due to our strategic position and distance, we have better intelligence on Sweden and the Ottoman Empire. Information on Central Asia, Persia, and the Far East is scarce and hard to assess.

Currently, Sweden is divided into two factions. One advocates for joining the war to reclaim lost territories from years past, while the other believes that Russia remains formidable and that jumping into this war hastily would be disastrous.

Due to the outcome of the Battle of East Prussia, many now view the Russians as less formidable, and the pro-war faction in Sweden has gained the upper hand.

If the Kingdom of Prussia secured another major victory next year, the likelihood of Sweden joining the war could reach 80%.

The situation in the Ottoman Empire is similar. Initially, the peace faction was dominant, but with the conclusion of the Battle of East Prussia, the tide turned.

The pro-war faction has rapidly gained strength, with an increasing number of young Ottomans wanting to reclaim Constantinople from the Russians.

I believe that if the Russian army suffers another defeat, the likelihood of the Ottomans joining the war is very high. The radicals within the country will drag them onto the battlefield.”

These analyses are all backed by evidence. Recently, anti-Russian activities in Sweden and the Ottoman Empire have been escalating, with frequent protests and littering outside Russian embassies.

Clearly, the British have a hand in this. Otherwise, these anti-Russian movements wouldn't have erupted so conveniently.

The Russian government didn't pay attention to the reactions of these two declining neighboring countries and failed to take timely action, leading to the current situation.

Franz said cautiously, “Then let's fan the flames and boost the anti-Russian sentiment in the Ottoman Empire. Ideally, we can use this opportunity to drag the Ottomans into the war, borrowing Russia's knife to create an opportunity for us.

We've been laying the groundwork in the Arabian Peninsula for so long. It's time to close the net. It would be best if we could purchase the ownership of these regions from the Ottoman Empire at a low price.”

Franz never harbored any illusions about the Ottoman Empire. Provoking a war between them and the Russians wasn't about weakening Russia but about using the Russians' knife to weaken them.

Pursue aspirations, not violent action. As a civilized man, Franz would naturally try his best to avoid unnecessary war.

After the Near East War, Austria also signed a treaty where various countries explicitly recognized Ottoman sovereignty.

Without sufficient justification, rashly instigating a war would attract hostility from various European countries. Franz had no intention of being a disruptor of the established order and naturally wouldn't instigate a war with the Ottoman Empire over the Arabian Peninsula.

## Chapter 399: The Art of Politics

As the anti-Semitic movement began, the atmosphere on the European continent became increasingly oppressive, with anti-Semitic activities emerging one after another in various countries.

This was just among the common people. At the government's highest levels, the focus was not on anti-Semitism but on the Russian government taking advantage of the situation to escape from the financial crisis. With money, the Russian Empire could truly be called an empire.

In the Berlin Palace, William I expressed his anxiety. However, William I, who managed to become “William the Great” in the original timeline, naturally had great political acumen. Though anxious inside, he maintained an appearance of being completely in control.

The king's composure reassured the Prussian government. This time, they weren't fighting alone in this war. They had a large group of supporters behind them. As long as the backers behind the scenes were willing to increase their investment, victory was not impossible.

At William I's signal, Foreign Minister Mackeith said, "Through our diplomatic efforts, the Swedes are already showing signs of interest. As long as we achieve another major victory in next year's war, they are likely to stand on our side.

Currently, the Foreign Ministry is working hard on public relations with the Ottoman Empire. Both London and Paris have given clear responses that they will push for the Ottoman Empire to join the war.

The British have also promised that they would create trouble for the Russians in Central Asia and the Far East.

We are also lobbying the British Parliament to have the Royal Navy blockade the Baltic Sea, cutting off the Russians' maritime supply routes..."

It sounds good, but when you interpret it from a workplace jargon perspective, it's pretty much the truth.

The Swedes are indeed showing signs of interest, but it's only among ordinary Swedish citizens. King Charles XV has shown no inclination to join the war.

Of course, if the Kingdom of Prussia wins against the Russian Empire, then when it's time to kick someone when they're down, the Swedish government wouldn't mind joining in.

"Working hard on public relations with the Ottoman Empire," in other words, means that the Foreign Ministry has tried its best, but has not achieved any results.

Britain and France are indeed pushing for the Ottomans to join the war, but the Ottoman government remains unresponsive and continues to watch the situation.

"The promises of the British," have always been just empty words, so they can just let that go. They shouldn't hold too much hope, this war still relies on Prussia itself.

"Lobbying the British Parliament," is a monumental task, and it's unclear when the members will pass the proposal.

In summary: they have many allies, and as long as their military defeats the Russians on the battlefield, these allies will come to help divide the spoils of war.

Those present at the meeting are all elite members of the Kingdom of Prussia, naturally understanding the implications behind the scenes, but everyone tacitly chose to play dumb.

If even the higher-ups lack confidence in winning the war, then what are the lower ranks supposed to do? Whether it's for reassuring morale or for taking a gamble, morale cannot be allowed to falter.

Minister of the Army and the Navy Roon spoke up, "There's no rush in wooing Sweden and the Ottoman Empire. As long as we keep winning, they will eventually join us.

The only thing that must be done immediately is to have the Royal Navy blockade the Baltic Sea. Only by cutting off the Russian's maritime supply lines do we stand a chance."



Compared to rallying allies to share the pressure, cutting off the Russian maritime supply lines is the most likely to be accomplished. On the matter of dealing a blow to the Russians, the British stance has always been very firm.

By severing the maritime supply lines, even if the Russian government has money, it will be difficult to obtain enough strategic supplies.

Through land transport, Russia's transportation would become Prussia's best ally, constraining the number of troops the Russian government could deploy.

In this era, the total length of railways in the Russian Empire is just over three thousand kilometers, while Spain, the German Federal Empire, and Prussia have more.

In the original timeline of World War I, Russia's more than 70,000 kilometers of railways were still unable to support the logistical needs of the millions of troops at the front lines, not to mention the present situation.

The Junker nobles dared to challenge the Russians because they saw that Russia's deployment capabilities were limited. If the Russian government could deploy millions of troops on the front lines, apart from France and Austria, no country in the world could withstand it.

Foreign Minister Mackeith explained, "This will take time. The British are still hesitating. They are concerned that blocking the Baltic Sea will..."

Roon interrupted without hesitation, saying, "Regardless of what may happen, the sooner we cut off the Russian maritime supply lines, the better our chances in next year's war.

The British have been dragging their feet. Are those capitalists still itching for war profits? There's no need for further discussion. We'll just take all the orders placed by the Russians.

Let's be frank with the British government. If they want us to win the war, they should immediately blockade the Baltic Sea.

If they don't want us to win this war, well, we can't win against the Russians on our own anyway. It's better to compromise with the Russians and call it quits.

We can just sell out the Poles, restore the pre-war borders, and surrender to the Russians. Whatever the British want to do, let them do it."

Roon was confident because the Kingdom of Prussia already owed the British tens of millions of pounds. They could only afford to repay this debt if they won the war.

If they lost the war, the very existence of the Kingdom of Prussia would be an issue. Who would they turn to to collect money at that time?

If the British didn't want their investment to go down the drain, then cutting off the Russian maritime supply lines was the only option.

The European political system dictated that these people have to take a gamble. Win, and they would advance further. Lose, and they would still be wealthy aristocrats.

"Let's do it this way!"

William I decisively made the decision. Once at the gambling table, one must gamble. If you want to keep looking back, it's better to give up early. War was not a game, and every chance of winning was crucial.

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In London, Prime Minister John Russell awkwardly discovered that, inadvertently, they had become entangled with the Prussians.

Originally intending to wage a proxy war, as time went on, they found themselves increasingly committed to the conflict.

Especially after the conclusion of the Battle of East Prussia, they sold 30 million pounds of war bonds on behalf of the Prussian government. Now, the total amount of debt between Britain and Prussia exceeded 100 million pounds.

Most of the bondholders were ordinary citizens, and if they didn't want to lose the next election, it was better not to let this debt become a bad debt.

Despite Prussia using tariffs, railways, and mines as collateral, if the Kingdom of Prussia ceased to exist, would these assets still hold value?

John Russell doubted whether the Russians, French, or Austrians would recognize these debts. Even for their own interests, their Prussian pawn had to be preserved.

"Sir Edward, is there any difficulty in blockading the Baltic Sea?" asked John Russell.

Sir Edward, First Lord of the Admiralty, confidently replied, "No, the Royal Navy has ample capability to accomplish this task."

Blockading the Baltic Sea is one thing, it's not as if they're asking them to charge into the Baltic Sea and take out the Russian navy. For the Royal Navy, there is indeed no difficulty.

Foreign Secretary Raistlin said discontentedly, "Of course, you wouldn't have any problems. The Royal Navy could take on the Russians ten times over. But our problem is much larger.

As a neutral country, if we rashly involve ourselves in this war, we will inevitably face enormous diplomatic and public pressure."

Interests make the world go round, and once the Baltic Sea is blockaded, the trade of many countries will be affected. Diplomatically, they will inevitably face pressure from various European countries.

While the Prussians may be able to take on orders between England and Russia, it does not mean they still have the capacity to fulfill orders placed by the Russians in other countries.

Not all countries are easy to bully, and offending them now will surely invite retaliation in the future. This will bring significant trouble to their future diplomatic efforts, with the Foreign Office naturally becoming the scapegoat.

Prime Minister John Russell smiled reassuringly and said, "Sir Raistlin, this is just a minor issue. I believe you can handle it. As long as we accomplish the great strategy of weakening the Russians, the cost we're paying now is worth it. At least it's much lower compared to the recent Near East War."

Everyone exchanged smiles; no comparison, no harm done. In the recent Near East War, the British government not only spent over a hundred million pounds on military expenses but also suffered significant troop losses. Most crucially, they damn well lost the war.

A war that leaves both sides wounded is a failure for the British. The current situation is much better. It's the Prussians who are fighting desperately on the front lines, and the money lent out will eventually be repaid.

As long as a result of mutual destruction is achieved in the war, it is considered a great victory for the British. If Prussia wins the war, then they stand to profit even more.

Foreign Secretary Raistlin hesitated and said, "The envoy stationed in the Ottoman Empire has relayed a message. The Austrians are up to something over there again. They seem intent on provoking a war between the Ottomans and the Russians.

We've conducted a thorough analysis and haven't found any benefits Austria could gain from a war breaking out between the two countries.

If they aim to weaken the Russians, simply delaying the transportation of supplies would be enough to inflict heavy losses on the Russian army."

In this era, the Arabian Peninsula was just a desert, inhabited at most by a group of camels, hardly worth the attention of a major power.

Finance Secretary Agarwal speculated, "Perhaps it's related to the Suez Canal. The Austrians may want to take control of the Suez Canal and have started to lay the groundwork early."

First Lord of the Admiralty Edward questioned, "But that seems unreasonable. Many experts at home believe the Suez Canal is impassable. Even if it were dug through, it would only allow small boats to pass through in the end, with no strategic value whatsoever."

It's all the fault of the experts. The British had already organized experts to conduct surveys, and they concluded that the Suez Canal was impassable.

This erroneous conclusion directly affected the decisions of the British government. When France and Austria began digging the Suez Canal, the British threw themselves into the Suez Railway project.

Just like in history, until the Suez Canal became navigable, the British would not believe the Suez Canal had any value.

Finance Secretary Agarwal said indifferently, "Who knows what the Austrian government is thinking? They dare to invest heavily in the canal, yet they're worried it won't be navigable.

Of course, it might not necessarily be about the canal. Franz is the King of Jerusalem; perhaps they're aiming to reclaim the Holy Land."

The latter explanation is obviously more plausible than the former. Austria already holds the Sinai Peninsula, so half of the control over the Suez Canal is already in hand. Even if they control the Red Sea, it wouldn't significantly increase their influence.

In comparison, taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the war between the Ottomans and the Russians to reclaim Jerusalem seems more convincing.

Colonial Secretary Steve proposed, “In recent years, the expansion of France and Austria on the African continent has been very rapid. We need to contain their actions.

In the colonial office’s African strategy, there is also a plan to occupy Ethiopia, and conveniently, the gateway to the Red Sea, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, is right there.

We can take the initiative and occupy Ethiopia, while also disrupting the Austrian’s East African strategy.”

The “East African strategy” is just smoke and mirrors released by Austria. To cause trouble for Austria, the British have been selling weapons to the indigenous countries in East Africa in recent years.

However, plans can’t keep up with the rapid changes. Austria’s colonial progress slowed down, and they didn’t rashly enter East Africa but instead focused on consolidating their existing gains.

The world has been almost completely divided up, and naturally, the British Colonial Office doesn’t want to sit idle, so the African colonial plan has been unveiled.

Foreign Secretary Raistlin objected, “Blocking the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait may be easy, but if we really do it, be prepared to face an alliance between Austria and France!

They spared no expense to dig the Suez Canal just to break free from our control over the Strait of Gibraltar. Interfering rashly will inevitably provoke a strong backlash from France and Austria.

It’s not in our interest to confront France and Austria prematurely before we’re certain about the strategic value of the Suez Canal.”

The butterfly effect is powerful. In the original timeline, the Mediterranean Sea only had France as a naval power, and the Royal Navy didn’t gain control of the Suez Canal until after the Franco-Prussian War.

The situation is different now. The combined navies of France and Austria could challenge the Royal Navy, at least diminishing its dominance in the Mediterranean.

Moreover, straits and canals are two different concepts; the difficulty of control is on a different level. At the very least, it’s several tens of kilometers wide, making it a necessity for the navy to blockade it.

While the idea of trapping France and Austria in the big bathtub in the Mediterranean seems tempting, any misstep could jeopardize Britain’s maritime supremacy.

Colonial Secretary Steve countered, “Such a scenario is indeed possible, but if it is done well, it’s not necessarily a confrontation with France and Austria. We’re just laying the groundwork in advance, being proactive. When necessary, we can always compromise.”

Chapter 400: When False Is Taken for True, True Becomes False; If Non-Being Turn Into Being, Being Becomes Non-Being

After careful consideration, the British government decided to blockade the Baltic Sea. In fact, once the Prussian government agreed to take on orders the Russians placed in Britain, opposition within Parliament to the blockade of the Baltic Sea disappeared.

Being anti-Russian has always been British national policy. Naturally, no one would oppose taking the Russians down a peg or two as long as it didn’t harm everyone’s interests.

On January 11, 1866, under the pretext of suppressing piracy, the Royal Navy blockaded the entrance to the Baltic Sea.

There was no actual blockade of the Baltic Sea. Considering the safety of passing ships, the Royal Navy merely suggested that everyone temporarily suspend entering or leaving the Baltic Sea.

The advice was given, and whether or not to follow it was entirely voluntary. If one were to be robbed by pirates, there should be no regrets.

The threat of “pirates” was terrifying. After two Russian merchant ships encountered mishaps, everyone wisely chose to suspend this maritime trade route.

For a time, the British Foreign Office was inundated with protest letters from various countries. Foreign Secretary Sir Raistlin ordered that they be handled with coldness, and then there was no further action.

The war between Prussia and Russia continued, which was in line with the interests of France and Austria. Without major powers stepping in, all small countries could do was protest.

In Franz’s view, the strategy of spreading your forces thinly was the most draining on national strength. With the Russian Empire unable to bring its military superiority into play to directly crush Prussia, it had already failed strategically.

Politicians view problems differently from ordinary people. Winning a war does not necessarily mean victory, and losing a war does not necessarily mean failure.

History is replete with classic cases where, from the ordinary person’s perspective, it seems like a protagonist has gone astray or the horse tripped. However, upon careful analysis of the gains and losses behind the scenes, it results in the ultimate victory for the apparent loser.

It’s just that in modern times, with the awakening of the masses, the demands on the ruling class have gradually increased, and the cost of this approach has risen, eventually being abandoned.

The most direct benefit of the blockade by the British brought about an increase in the trade volume between Russia and Austria. Now, the Russian government has no choice but to conduct trade with just this one seller.

Franz doesn’t care how much prices have risen. Anyway, now the Russian government was directly placing orders with the capitalists, and whatever price they negotiated was the price they would pay.

Now that the Russian government has money, the bureaucrats will find ways to spend it. With the rise in commodity prices, the profits of the capitalists increase, and the kickbacks for the bureaucrats also increase, even contributing to the growth of tax revenue for the Austrian government.

It was a win-win-win situation — good for you, good for me, good for everyone.

“Your Majesty, this is the latest European strategy from the French,” said the head of intelligence, Tyron, as he handed over a document.

Having not achieved victory in the Near East War, Napoleon III remained open-minded. When formulating strategies, he always sought collective wisdom.

The benefit of collective wisdom is that it reduces the rate of errors but also increases the likelihood of exposure. Once more people know about something, it ceases to be a secret.

Although the French's strategic plan wasn't widely known, there were dozens of participants in its formulation, so leaks weren't surprising.

Of course, this could also be a smokescreen deliberately put out by the French. Almost every country has a dozen truthful and deceptive strategies.

Until events unfold, no one knows which strategy is genuine. Thus, it's essential to gather as much information as possible and then make judgments.

Even Napoleon III himself couldn't guarantee which plan would truly represent their future strategy.

Usually, there are several alternative plans, and the most suitable strategy for the current situation is generally chosen based on changes in the international situation.

This selection can change at any time. Unless it's a long-term national policy with minimal potential for change, any other strategy is merely one of the alternatives.

After carefully examining it, Franz had to admit that the French had ambitious plans.

They not only aimed to use the Russo-Prussian War to pull the Russians down from their position as world hegemon but also plotted to seize the Rhineland from the Prussians.

This was just the first step in their strategy. There were plans to annex Belgium, the western part of the Rhine River in the German Federal Empire, and even preparations to annex regions of Italy.

In his heart, Franz had already crossed out this ambitious strategic plan. Implementing such a strategy would be delusional, even in the Napoleonic era it would have been a stretch.

Apart from using the Russo-Prussian War to pull the Russians down from their position as the dominant power on the continent, none of the remaining strategies had any chance of being realized.

The idea of a "Russo-Franco-Austrian" three-way partitioning of Prussia was nonsensical from the beginning.

The Russian government invested so much in this war that the cost could not even be recovered by reclaiming Prussian Poland alone. If the French got the largest slice of the pie, could Alexander II's heart find peace?

Even if he were magnanimous, aiding the enemy is not something he can do! Dividing the spoils has never been a simple task, especially when sharing them with the enemy.

If the French were to gain control of the Rhineland region, their industrial development potential would increase by at least twofold, while the Russian Empire, gaining Prussian Poland, would only marginally improve its strength, if at all.

As for Austria, the benefits from partitioning Prussia would directly be negative. Given the choice, Franz would prefer to fight a war with France rather than accept such a losing deal in the partitioning.

In terms of benefits: a mere hundred thousand square kilometers of land would directly place Austria in a strategic deadlock. The value brought by this territory wouldn't even offset the increased defense expenditures.

Politically: Once involved in partitioning Prussia, it implies that Franz would relinquish his political status as co-monarch of Germany, and the legitimacy of the new Holy Roman Empire's throne would face serious challenges.

This is different from the original timeline's Second Reich, where they never held the title of co-monarch. That's why William I failed to become Emperor of Germany and settled for being dubbed German Emperor instead.

Legally, the Second Reich is a republic, while the emperor is merely a hereditary president. Even though William I obtained the title of Emperor through the Imperial Proclamation, his actual position remained that of federal president.

This was also the primary reason for William II losing the throne after World War I. Even the Habsburg dynasty struggled for a while. If it weren't for the last emperor, Charles, making consecutive blunders, they could have preserved several crowns.

Legality differs from other factors; once lost, it can't be regained. Franz's co-monarch status stems from the unification of Germany. Would the people still accept him as emperor if he were to participate in the partitioning of German territory with other countries?

Even for his own interests, Franz couldn't allow such a situation to occur.

"Transfer the intelligence to the Cabinet and have them arrange for people to analyze the French's previous strategies, to see what they're hiding," Franz ordered.

These messy strategies actually hold value. No one can guarantee that these strategies won't become a reality.

At least compared to Bismarck's German unification plan in the original timeline, the French strategy had a much higher chance of success, whereas Bismarck's ambitious plan in the original timeline even succeeded.

There's also the Italian strategy concocted by Cavour and the Japanese strategy devised by Ito Hirobumi, both of which had lower chances of success compared to the French plan.

With so many successful cases, Franz naturally couldn't afford to be complacent. After all, the French are powerful. As long as Napoleon III doesn't lose his mind and randomly commands on the frontlines, they are one of the most formidable empires in the world.

In theory, with so many plans, except for Austria's inability to compromise on the Rhineland, exchanges of interests are possible in other regions.

The mineral resources in the Rhineland are crucial for the French, but they are not irreplaceable. Belgium is one of the alternatives.

As long as coal supplies are ensured for several decades, with the development of maritime transportation, shipping costs will continue to decrease. Transporting mineral resources from overseas colonies back to the homeland will also be within the industry's acceptable range of costs.

The French might even seize an opportunity to strike first, catching Austria off guard and seizing the Rhineland from the battlefield.

Franz never doubted this possibility. The Austrian General Staff has hundreds of plans for attacking France, and they continue to increase. It wouldn't be surprising if the French harbored the same intentions.