

Roman Empire 411

Chapter 411: Integration of the Colonies For the Sake of the Country

Vienna, after a long period of political maneuvering, on August 21, 1866, the strategy of colonial integration of Africa was finally submitted as an official proposal to the Imperial Diet of the new Holy Roman Empire for discussion, marking a decisive moment in the fate of the empire.

Suppose the proposal is passed in the Imperial Diet. In that case, Africa will become a century-long strategic focus of the Holy Roman Empire, and even the country's center of power may shift.

The absurdity of a European emperor turning into an African chieftain is about to unfold in the 19th century.

Franz was not insane. He had already done enough. Once the strategy of colonial integration of Africa is approved, the impact on the future will be enormous, both positive and negative, and there is even a possibility of failure.

Under such circumstances, Franz naturally would not force the proposal through. An issue like this was best left for the Imperial Diet to take the blame. The lengthy delay was to allow the colonial interest groups to work their magic and persuade the governments of the major principalities.

According to the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, such major national policies must receive the support of eighty percent of the members of the Diet before the proposal can be passed.

There is no doubt that Württemberg, Bavaria, and Lombardy are definitely in support. As long as they still want cotton from the African continent, it will be impossible to stop the process of integrating Africa.

The main resistance comes from within Austria. The regions of Hungary and Romania are most likely to be impacted by the integration of Africa as these are Austria's two major granaries.

Inside Pachner Manor, representatives from various factions pushing for the integration of the African colonies gathered together to discuss their commercial strategies. To gain the support of the opposition, Baron Falkner proposed:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the biggest opposition at the moment comes from the domestic farmers, a large group whose opinions the Empire must consider.

I propose making a commitment in the Imperial Diet to relinquish the right of the Austrian African territories to export food to Europe in exchange for the support of the domestic farming class."

Baron Falkner came up with the strategy of not impacting local agriculture. Currently, the food production in Austrian African territories is not high, basically just at the level of being self-sufficient, with annual exports of less than five hundred thousand guilders.

This is not due to government restrictions but mainly determined by economic benefits. It is clear to everyone that planting cash crops is more profitable, and when it comes to money, everyone knows how to choose.

"Baron, currently there is a shortage of labor in Austrian African territories, and there are few people cultivating food crops. We can indeed make this commitment.

However, with the increase in immigration, the developed land is also gradually increasing. If we abandon the food industry, competition in the future will be very intense for everyone.”

The one raising objections is Count Daniel, one of the few large-scale grain producers on the African continent. Despite the lower profit margins of grains compared to cash crops, they have the advantage of being safe investments.

The prices of cash crops fluctuate greatly, and while the profits may be higher, a single downturn could result in unsold produce. On the contrary, the prices of grains tend to be more stable.

With Poland becoming a battlefield and Russia losing one of its grain-producing regions, international grain prices have increased by 8% over the past two years.

Following this price hike, the profit margins for grains have caught up with those of cash crops. Count Daniel was in the process of expanding production capacity and naturally did not want to lose the European market.

Baron Falkner patiently explained, “That’s a problem for the future. What matters most now is to change the status of the colonies and get the Africa Integration Bill passed.

The domestic population is growing rapidly, and to develop the African continent, the Austrian government is also preparing to introduce legislation to stimulate population growth.

With continuous population growth, the demand for grains will also increase. If the local population doubles, then without any effort on our part, the imperial government will take the initiative to let us supply grains.”

If chemical fertilizers had not been invented, Baron Falkner’s prediction would soon become a reality. Given the current rate of population growth domestically, the population of the empire would double in just over thirty years.

The direct consequence would be that Austria would change from a grain exporter to a grain importer, at which point all of Europe except Russia would face grain shortages.

This promising prospect was the motivation for them to invest in farms and plantations. Perhaps not as profitable as industry, but this was a long-term investment, while a factory’s life cycle was only less than ten years.

In Germany, it had always been a case of land being scarce and population being dense. Against this background, everyone placed great importance on land, with many believing that land would never depreciate in value.

After the colonies were opened up, this view was somewhat shaken, but most still believed land was the most valuable industry.

This is also why in the Austrian African territories, farms and plantations were everywhere, while in the African colonies of other European countries, it was mostly wilderness.

It was not for lack of effort by those governments, the problem was that immigrants were unwilling to go farming, so what could they do?

After hesitating for a moment, Count Daniel nodded in agreement. If necessary, they could reduce food production and switch to cash crops; the losses wouldn’t be significant.

For the sake of having the African colonies become integrated into the homeland, this was a price he was willing to pay. He had already invested too much to turn the non-hereditary nobility into landed nobility. He absolutely could not let any chaos happen now.

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On September 1, 1866, amid the ongoing debate in the Imperial Diet, representatives of Austrian African territories made a commitment: after the integration of the African colonies, they would refrain from exporting grain to the European continent to avoid impacting international grain prices.

A turning point emerged. Even the most opposed to integrating Africa had no objections at this point.

As long as they could avoid domestic grain prices from being impacted, everything was open for negotiation. As for other industries, the African colonies could not yet make an impact in Austria.

Under Austria's large-scale immigration strategy, Austrian African territories didn't have as much cheap labor as one might think. Labor costs were even higher than in the homeland, and infrastructure was still in its infancy, with no significant industrial development.

In the future, there would be even less cause for concern. Bringing the African continent to par with the homeland in terms of development would likely have Emperor Franz dreaming with a smile.

Even if the European Emperor was reduced to an African chieftain, possessing such a vast domain would suffice to sustain the empire's dominance for a hundred years, anything beyond that was already outside his consideration.

In a fast-changing world, who knows if one day humans might venture out of the solar system, or alternatively have the misfortune of civilization prematurely collapsing?

With the biggest obstacle gone, on September 1, 1866, the bill for the integration of the Austrian African colonies passed the imperial diet unanimously.

The commitments made by the delegations were also written into law, becoming one of the preconditions for the integration.

From then on, the legal obstacles to the integration of Austria's overseas colonies were cleared, but this was just the first step. There was still a long way to go for colonial integration.

Not every remote corner could qualify for integration. Specific eligibility criteria required careful consideration by the government.

The decision of the Imperial Diet spread through newspapers, disseminating from Vienna to Europe and even worldwide. In high spirits, Franz penned an article titled "For the Sake of the Country," praising the actions of the Austrian African delegation.

These were his genuine thoughts. It wasn't Franz pulling strings behind the scenes but rather their own decision.

This concession may not have been a major cost, but the effect was very obvious, dispelling the concerns of the domestic farming class. Though this group may not have had a strong political voice, they were numerous.

Currently, Austria's agricultural population still amounts to nearly thirty million people, and only when this group is stable can the empire be stable.

Now that the issues have been resolved, as long as the grain prices aren't impacted, the vast majority of peasants naturally won't oppose further expansion of the empire's territory.

The emergence of "For the Sake of the Country" quickly garnered praise from various circles and became all the rage across the European continent, serving as a propaganda slogan for many countries.

This wasn't so much about Franz's skill as a writer or about flattery. Primarily, it was because it was politically correct and helped to eliminate regional conflicts.

Of course, this was built on the premise of it being proposed by Franz. If an ordinary person had proposed it, it probably wouldn't have caused a single ripple.

This is the privilege of success. Just look at the map of Austria and you'll know, he has already become one of the greatest monarchs of the current era.

Chapter 412: Radical Suicidal

The integration of the colonies is a long-term national policy that may last for hundreds of years. However, the Austrian government could not directly incorporate the Austrian African territories into the homeland, as that would mean disaster.

Various factors such as governance costs, long-term stability, culture, and strategic deployment are all things that must be considered.

In terms of costs, firstly, the local economy must develop to a certain level, at least not requiring subsidies from the central government.

After all, administrative costs will increase after integration and social welfare expenditures will also increase significantly, including healthcare, education, transportation, and so on.

All of these require money, and if the central government collects enough taxes from the local region, then everything is not a problem. It is one of the government's functions to take it from the people and use it for the people.

Conversely, if the local economy does not develop, and the central government cannot collect taxes, then there will be problems in allocating construction funds.

Once economic conditions are met, the next is to look at the population composition. To ensure lasting stability, those with Holy Roman Empire nationality must not be less than 80% of the total population.

This restriction, in the context of Austria's African colonial territories, presents a manageable criterion. The local populace predominantly comprises domestic immigrants, followed by immigrants from the northern regions of Germany, with comparatively fewer arrivals from other European locales.

For these people to obtain nationality is simple, as backdoors were opened. As long as they have no criminal record and their moral and ideological standards are sufficient, it's not an issue.

With the population structure met, the next is to look at the numbers. The requirement is not high, the population density only need not be lower than ten people per square kilometer.

Population size is not a mandatory requirement and it can be made up for by other conditions. The main purpose is to limit the area of administrative regions after colonial integration.

Otherwise, with the integration of millions of square kilometers of colonies all at once, when these places develop in the future, there will be a situation where regions expand.

With this threshold in place, there's no need to worry. The entire Austrian Africa has less than six million people. Even if nobles and bureaucrats want to expand their jurisdictions, it's now impossible to do so.

Allowing the colonies to join the homeland in a fragmented manner is the best choice. This fragmentation is relative, with provinces of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of square kilometers already being large enough.

Culturally, the requirement is not for academic qualifications but simply for proficiency in the German language.

Most Austrian colonies do not have an issue, the nationwide use of German is a basic national policy. And without knowing German, one cannot even obtain local household registration or be considered a citizen.

Even for the sake of colonial integration, local nobles will still try to get rid of these. Don't talk about cheap labor. These people lack money, don't they?

If they want to make money, the best way is to always maintain colonial rule. Only under colonial rule can one act wantonly. Once integrated, they have to consider what the law permits.

Colonial integration is mainly driven by old nobles wanting to advance further, emerging nobles wanting to establish family fortunes, capitalists seeing it as a shortcut to enter the nobility circle, colonial bureaucrats wanting to...

This is in the common interest of the ruling class. These conditions ultimately need to be scored. The higher the final rating, the greater the chance of gaining the Imperial Diet's approval for colonial integration.

The prerequisites are essential conditions, while natural conditions, resources, and strategic positions in the latter part are like bonus points. If the initial score isn't sufficient, these bonus points can make up for it.

This is a practical necessity. Otherwise, a desert nation like Libya will never be able to be integrated, as they cannot meet the population requirement.

This is just the beginning. Even if the conditions are met, it only allows entry into parliamentary discussions. Whether it passes or not still needs consideration.

After all, no one has any experience with this so nobody could ascertain the extent of loopholes inherent in the process. Thus, Franz pragmatically retained the final stage as an open clause, staying primed to plug holes as needed, denying any prospect of exploitation by others.

Many things can be falsified, such as population and economy. As long as there's a willingness to spend money, it's entirely possible to fabricate false prosperity in a region.

No need to doubt, the tycoons are capable of this. For political gain, what is a little investment?

Just imagine, if you pour a huge sum of money, you can turn tens of thousands of square kilometers of fertile land into your family's domain, joining the empire as a landed noble, and instantly

becoming a high-ranking noble. There would probably be few tycoons who would refuse such an opportunity.

Obviously, Franz cannot allow such behavior that violates the established rules.

Come on, can kings just hand out fiefs left and right? Having fiefs of tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of square kilometers, how is that different from a king?

Having such large tracts of land circled off is fine, as long as they have the money to develop it. Franz doesn't mind agricultural corporate giants. To turn these lands into estates, where would they obtain such a large amount of merit necessary for it?

Unless a world war suddenly breaks out and one transforms into Long Aotian slaying all gods and buddhas along his path, building unsurpassable merit; or one is reincarnated directly into a high-ranking noble clan to achieve the goal through the family's strength.

Otherwise, it's better to diligently advance step-by-step! Attempting to soar directly to the heavens is not good for anyone, "virtue not matching position" always ends in tragedy.

The "virtue" in question extends beyond mere morality or capability. It predominantly concerns possessing a compatible worldview, life philosophy, and societal outlook.

Apart from that, there are social relationships to consider. In this age where "the taller the tree, the stronger the wind," it's better not to stick your neck out too much without sufficient resilience against the winds of adversity.

Troubled times produce heroes, but it's not that heroes only exist in troubled times, the main point is that only troubled times can accommodate these "heroes".

The integration of the colonies did not shock the whole world as Franz imagined, with many countries skeptical of this policy.

In the eyes of many, the purpose of opening colonies was purely to make money. Once integrated, one could no longer wantonly plunder wealth, completely negating the purpose.

This was a difference in operating philosophy. Austria's opening of overseas colonies was first for agriculture, following a path of sustainable development. While other colonial empires opened overseas colonies solely for plundering wealth.

The French were an exception, as Napoleon III also intended to pursue colonial integration, albeit with smaller steps.

Franz's approach is something the French can't emulate. Without a sufficient population and an assimilation system like compulsory education, their immigration and assimilation speed are limited.

This became evident when the French government migrated people from the Balkan Peninsula. These immigrants retained their cultural traditions upon entering French African colonies.

Due to a lack of sufficient language teachers and supporting systems, the spread of French was always slow, and coupled with too few domestic immigrants, it greatly increased the difficulty of assimilation.

This is an unsolvable problem. Assimilating ten thousand people with a hundred thousand is easy, but having ten thousand assimilate a hundred thousand raises a concerning question of who assimilates whom in the end.

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Berlin, ever since France and Austria compromised on the Italian issue, William I developed a strong sense of crisis. He did not believe it was as simple as a mere exchange of surface interests.

France and Austria have always been competitors, and they've been at each other's throats over Italy for hundreds of years. How could they easily give it up?

The only thing that could make the Austrian government abandon Italy is if there were greater interests at stake. Undoubtedly, this interest lies in the yet-to-be-unified Northern Germany.

Based on the simple information at hand, William I had already roughly deduced the truth of the matter. This was unsurprising, as both France and Austria considered the Kingdom of Prussia an enemy.

Of course, this was only the Prussian government's perception, in reality, they did not qualify as a mortal enemy to France and Austria.

Understanding the enemy was an instinct, and the Prussian government had never relaxed its attention to the movements of France and Austria.

When news of the Imperial Diet's approval of "colonial integration" came, William I immediately drew a new conclusion: "Austria's national policy has changed."

This conclusion contradicted his previous one — unifying Germany and colonial integration were not on the same path, it was almost impossible to pursue both strategies simultaneously.

William I asked expectantly, "What do you think the Austrian government is up to?"

Based on the premise of the French-Austrian compromise, if Austria wanted to unify Northern Germany, the Kingdom of Prussia would be in trouble.

Unlike the other principalities, the Kingdom of Prussia was a bit too powerful. Although the gap with Austria was too large to pose a threat, their previous actions had already provoked dissatisfaction from the Austrian government.

This meant the Kingdom of Prussia would face suppression, severe suppression. The Junker nobility being unwilling to merge with Austria was also one of the factors.

Prime Minister Franck said expressionlessly, "What the Austrian government intends to do is not important, what's important is what we intend to do. It seems like an opportunity now, but it could also be a trap.

In the context of the French-Austrian compromise, proposing a merger with the Comedy Empire shouldn't be opposed by the British, the French might wait and see, and the Austrians..."

Towards the end, Prime Minister Franck did not know how to articulate his thoughts anymore.

He felt the possibility of a trap was very high. The Russo-Prussian War was still ongoing, and if Austria stabbed them in the back now, they would be finished.

Who could guarantee that Austria, after embarking on its “African strategy,” would abandon the unification of the Germanic territories?

If they made the wrong bet, they would be delivering the pretext for war right to their doorstep. Conveniently, they would also be helping the Austrian government solve the “Comedy Empire” problem.

Chief of Staff Moltke sneered, “Austria’s change in national policy isn’t wrong, but they haven’t announced they’re giving up on the unification of Germany.

Their lack of action primarily stems from concerns about international repercussions, fearing intervention from other countries.

The current situation is different as we’re still at war with the Russians. They can cede Prussian-controlled Poland to the Russian government and get Russia’s tacit approval.

The French could also be bought, or rather, are in the process of being bought. The Austrians only lack a pretext to act against us now.”

The atmosphere suddenly grew colder. The annexation of the “Comedy Empire” is a long-term plan of the Kingdom of Prussia. They haven’t taken action yet because it would face opposition from the major European powers.

Now, with a chance to settle things with England and France, it’s still futile, as Russia and Austria would never agree.

With Russia, a solution could still be found. Once the Russo-Prussian War ended, the position of the Russian government might change, and Alexander II wouldn’t mind betraying his ally either.

The ultimate obstacle was only Austria. On this issue, the Austrian government would not budge.

Attempting to take advantage of Austria’s handling of the French Balkans and the timing of colonial integration to take action, in Moltke’s view, was merely wishful thinking.

He may be a radical, but he’s not suicidal. With the Russo-Prussian War ongoing, splitting the “Comedy Empire” now would just hand Austria an opportunity, wouldn’t it?

Although there was a chance of triggering a European war that could lead to Austria’s defeat and downfall, before that, Prussia would absolutely go down first.

Moreover, the Comedy Empire is not easy to bully. In terms of overall national strength, they rank sixth in Europe, just below Britain, France, Austria, Italy, and Russia.

While their strength may not match that of the Kingdom of Prussia at its peak, they certainly won’t back down when faced with a Prussia drained by the Russo-Prussian War.

Diplomatic means? Sorry, that’s not within the realm of military consideration, and Prussia is not exactly a diplomatic powerhouse either.

The Army and Navy Minister Roon tried to smooth things over by saying, “It would be more suitable for us to discuss these issues after the war. Right now, the most important thing is to find a way to send the revolutionaries back to the Russian Empire.”

It's not that they were slow to react. It's mainly because the British were the ones who sent the revolutionaries over. Without their influence, the Russian revolutionary groups wouldn't have paid much attention to them.

In this Russo-Prussian War, the battlefield was between Prussia and Russia, but diplomatically, it was a battle between Britain and Russia. If it weren't for John Bull's strong support, they wouldn't even have had a chance to hold a meeting here.

Foreign Minister Mackeith chimed in, "Exactly, the immediate priority is still to end this war as soon as possible. The European situation is changing rapidly, with France and Austria drawing closer, and the British government's foreign policy is also changing.

With the unification of the Nordic three countries looming, if the war drags on, the British might consider withdrawing their support for us."

This was not a baseless guess. The British did have far too many instances of selling out their allies. After the unification of the Nordic three countries, they would gain another chess piece, and Prussia would no longer be their only choice.

Deep down, William I sighed. Even if Austria's national policy had truly changed, Prussia lacked the strength to take action.

It was not that British support was lacking, it was just that the gap in comprehensive national strength could not be made up through support alone.

Europe is too small, and there are too many great powers. There are simply not enough resources left for Prussia to rise, nor enough space for development and expansion.

William I made a decision, "Let's go with that. After sending the revolutionaries back to Russia, it will be time for us to fight the Russians in an all-out battle.

With consecutive major defeats, we should be able to create a basis for rebellion among them. Once the flames of rebellion ignite in Russia, we will negotiate with the Russian government."

Defeating the Russians might be easy, but defeating the Russian Empire is hard. This war has already awakened the Prussian government, making them understand the gap in national strength.

Chapter 413: The Second Industrial Revolution Begins

Franz is very busy. After the colonial integration of African colonies was approved, more than a dozen colonial cities have already submitted applications.

There is no doubt that this is a roundabout route. First, allow eligible regions to be integrated, and then deal with the remaining areas once they meet the criteria.

After all, these cities are the core of the colonies, and the surrounding areas still need to be handed over to them for administration. They can then be split from them when they develop in the future.

This is the consensus reached between the Austrian government and the influential forces in the colonies. Now that no one wants to cause unrest for independence, they naturally don't care about administrative divisions.

To show his appreciation, Franz personally met with representatives from the colonies. These nobles are his supporters and will be the cornerstone of future rule over the African continent.

In terms of interests, everyone belongs to a larger interest group. Franz is the major shareholder in this group, while they are the minor shareholders. When one suffers, they all suffer; when one prospers, they all prosper.

Internationally, Britain seems to be getting restless again, likely stimulated by the rapprochement between France and Austria.

On September 2, 1866, the British Foreign Secretary visited St. Petersburg, publicly stating that they aimed to improve relations between Britain and Russia. On September 28, the British government issued a diplomatic note, seeking to mediate the Russo-Prussian War.

If it weren't for intelligence reports indicating that the Russian revolutionaries had been secretly sent back to their homeland by the Prussians, Franz would have almost believed it.

The Franco-Austrian alliance versus the Anglo-Russian alliance, just thinking about it seems exciting.

However, this can only be imagined. Given the deep-seated conflicts between Britain and Russia, a real alliance is unattainable.

Moreover, the Russian Empire is simply too powerful. Once they complete their internal reforms, they'll become the undisputed hegemon of the continent. Unless the British government has collectively gone crazy, they won't support such a behemoth.

So, this is aimed at the Russo-Austrian alliance. To dismantle this alliance, the British have spared no effort.

This is a conspiracy. If Russia accepts the goodwill of the British, it will inevitably arouse suspicion from Austria.

Such suspicions during peacetime might not matter much, but during the Russo-Prussian War, they can be quite detrimental. If the Austrian government hesitates even slightly, the Russians will suffer greatly.

Once such a situation arises, it won't be long before the Russo-Austrian alliance exists in name only.

Knowing all this, will Franz prevent this from happening?

The answer is: No!

The reason is very pragmatic: the strategic value of the Russo-Austrian alliance has already been fulfilled. Over the next decade or two, the Russians will have to address its internal conflicts, and the eastern front is already secure.

The security brought by that is more reliable than the security provided by the alliance itself. Regardless of what the Russian government may think, they don't pose an immediate threat to Austria's strength.

Given this situation, is it still necessary to remain tied to the Russians?

The world is just that pragmatic. All Franz can do is not dissolve the alliance and continue to maintain a good relationship between the two countries.

Even Alexander II might make the same choice. The Russo-Austrian alliance still holds value for them, allowing them to safely navigate through periods of weakness.

For the sake of strategic security, the Russian government won't dissolve the alliance either. This time limit only applies when the Russian Empire is in a vulnerable state.

In the future, as long as the Russian government aims to expand on the European continent, the Russo-Austrian alliance will be more or less at its end. Similarly, when Austria unifies Germany, it will also mark the end of the alliance between the two countries.

Is there a solution? Of course, there is. For example, inciting the Russian government to engage in conflict over India could prolong the alliance for many more years.

Achieving this is not easy or difficult, as long as one is willing to spend money, it can be done.

For the Russians to invade British-occupied India is not an easy path. The cost of war will absolutely be extremely high. As long as there is a financial backer willing to pay, the Russian government will have no objection.

As for the future, who knows? But for now, Franz cannot afford such expenses. If he had such a large sum of money, he would rather invest it in the industrial revolution.

The Second Industrial Revolution has already begun, and Austria is one of its birthplaces. The year 1866 marked a significant milestone in this regard.

In May, the engineer Siemens, from the new Holy Roman Empire, invented the world's first high-power generator. This marked the arrival of the electric age. Prior to this, due to the low power output of generators, they couldn't be used in industrial production.

With the advent of the electric age, as the center of the empire, Vienna naturally gets to enjoy the results first. Franz immediately decided to install streetlights in Vienna.

Electric light bulbs had already appeared in the previous century. In 1854, German watchmaker Henry Goebel invented the carbonized bamboo filament light bulb, which could stay lit for 400 hours.

As soon as this was reported in the newspapers, Franz took notice. He bought the patent directly, even if Goebel hadn't registered it yet.

Franz still had principles. He would not stoop so low as to steal someone's patent. Then, of course, the carbon filament was switched to a tungsten filament, with a vacuum environment added as well.

Improving existing technology is much faster than developing it from scratch. In a little over a year, Franz managed to accomplish it. Then Franz led the way into the electric age, initiating a lighting revolution in the palace.

Because of the low power of generators, electricity was an expensive luxury, accessible only to the wealthy.

With the appearance of high-power generators, not only did the cost of electricity decrease, but it also became feasible for industrial use, prompting Franz to promote its use. What better advertisement than Vienna being illuminated?

There will be no need to pay for advertising. Newspapers would spread the news worldwide. Then, London and Paris would surely follow suit, and if the Russian government had the money, they'd probably do the same.

Making money and such are trivial matters. The most important thing is to make a name for oneself and attract more people to get into the electricity industry. Otherwise, with just Franz's efforts, it would take ages before electricity could be popularized in industry.

In August, the transatlantic telegraph was completed, enabling direct communication between Europe and America for the very first time.

This is different from the previous telegraph. Before this, the telegraph lines between Europe and America weren't directly connected. They were relayed through islands in the middle of the Atlantic, with ships needed to transmit the messages in between.

This was a technological limitation. Constrained by the era, no one knew much about the seabed conditions, and laying cables depended on luck.

If luck wasn't on their side, the cables could be damaged by marine life, requiring them to be laid again. Special underwater terrain could also affect the laying process.

One section of the underwater cable kept experiencing problems until now. Before this, that section had to rely on ships to relay messages. Apart from the delay in messages, the operating costs were also high, making commercialization impossible.

Now things are different. It's now possible to directly connect two continents, greatly increasing the commercial value.

As a result, the British have already announced plans to lay underwater cables from London to Canada and London to South Africa, and India.

The French are also preparing to lay underwater cables: from Paris to French-controlled American territories and from Paris to French-controlled Asian territories.

Franz has also ordered the laying of two underwater cables: one from Africa to Central America and another from Africa to New Bavaria (New Guinea).

Telegraph lines from France and Austria to Africa have long been connected, so there's no need to repeat that. The issue of duplication of telegraph lines in various countries will be unavoidable as no one wants to be at the mercy of others.

Moreover, this isn't a loss-making venture. Most telegraph lines in these regions can be profitable. Lines that would incur losses are simply not laid.

For example, Franz has no plans to lay underwater cables to connect Alaska. Since acquiring this territory from the Russians, apart from establishing a fur company, no development has taken place.

If it weren't for asserting sovereignty, the Austrian government wouldn't even bother sending tax officials there. It's a land that loses more than it earns, costing tens of thousands of guilders in expenditures every year.

Establishing telegraph lines naturally isn't necessary. No one was afraid of it being taken over. No country would wage a bloody war with Austria just for a land of ice and snow.

This is just the beginning. Soon, all the major colonial empires took action, everyone knowing the strategic importance of the telegraph. To strengthen control over the colonies, this is indispensable.

In September, Alfred Nobel invented nitroglycerin. Of course, this was still highly classified, and would not be announced publicly until after the Russo-Prussian War.

After all, this was also a game-changing weapon of war. If announced prematurely, and the Russians wanted to buy it, whether to sell or not would be a headache-inducing problem.

Not selling would impact relations, but selling could very likely influence the outcome of the war. Against the fortresses and fortifications of this era, explosives were utterly devastating weapons. Many previously impregnable defense lines were now no longer enough.

On the surface, Austria certainly would not sell military weapons to Prussia. And this exclusive new invention was destined not to be sold to both parties.

The Russians winning the war isn't what Franz wanted to see. If the Russian government lost the war, it might need twenty years to recover. But if they won, they might stir up trouble again in just a decade or so.

The tenacity of the Russian Bear did not need to be doubted, not to mention their capacity for recklessness. To avoid such troubles, Franz decisively chose to postpone.

Alfred Nobel's story is also legendary. In 1860, he began research on nitroglycerin explosives.

In 1863, Nobel returned to Sweden and worked with his father and brother to manufacture explosives. Due to an accidental explosion that destroyed the factory and killed his brother, the government prohibited them from continuing experiments.

As a result of the explosion at the nitroglycerin factory, his brother Emil tragically died, forcing the closure of the Swedish factory.

At this point, the Austrian Arsenal extended an olive branch. The two sides quickly reached an agreement to jointly develop explosives.

In reality, most arms manufacturers are government-operated. Otherwise, who would they sell the weapons they produce to?

The butterfly effect played a role, and at this juncture, Nobel did not burn bridges but instead chose the safer option of cooperation.

This was not surprising, as Nobel was a scientist but also a businessman.

Avoiding risk is an instinct. There was more than just him conducting explosives research at that time. Before results emerged, no one knew if there would be a market for the product.

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These are just some of the more impactful technological advancements. There were many minor inventions as well. The Second Industrial Revolution had already begun, and 1866 merely marked the beginning of a new era.

Chapter 414: Expanding War

The Industrial Revolution has not impacted the global situation, and the application of electricity has only just begun. In the eyes of many at that time, the main use was illumination.

High-power generators had only just emerged, and the industrial application of electricity had not yet started. Influenced by Franz's butterfly effect, this industrial revolution began its prelude from Austria.

The protagonists of the original timeline have now become dim and lackluster. Prussia, which established the Second Reich, was still locked in a struggle with Russia, while the formidable United States was still licking its wounds from the civil war.

After the division, the internal market in the United States was no longer able to support an industrial revolution. The heavy casualties of war, accompanied by exorbitant pensions and internal contradictions between states, all constrained the development of the federation.

The economic prosperity after the Civil War in the original timeline is now nowhere to be seen. The great powers do not work for free. The intervention of the four nations was done for their own benefit.

After the war, goods from Britain, France, and Austria flooded the entire American continent, serving as everyone's reward for their participation in the conflict.

Due to internal contradictions, Spain fell behind in the Industrial Revolution and did not enjoy these benefits.

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Since the abolition of serfdom by Alexander II, Moscow, the second-largest city in Russia, has entered a period of rapid development.

As the second largest industrial region in the Russian Empire, Moscow's workforce has already exceeded half a million, with a total population of over a million, making it the fourth-largest city in Europe by population.

With a large population comes numerous social conflicts, providing fertile ground for revolutionaries. Since the reforms of the Russian government have only been halfway implemented, there was no time to establish a complete system.

While the emerging bourgeoisie has benefited from the reforms, they still seek greater rights and influence. Waiting for Alexander II to continue the reforms? Unfortunately, they cannot wait any longer.

Moreover, while Alexander II's reforms have protected their interests they have not granted them access to the inner circle of power.

To exert pressure on the government, these individuals have not hesitated to collaborate with revolutionary parties. However, this collaboration is limited to providing support in secret; they dare not openly rebel.

Under the coordination of the British, the revolutionary leader Matvei Trotsky returned to the country. This time, they planned to launch an uprising in Moscow, not St. Petersburg, because the Tsar had troops there at his disposal.

A change in the Tsar's military deployment has temporarily pacified internal factions. Unlike France, the relationship between the military and civilians in Russia is not as close.

Therefore, they naturally chose a place with a weak military presence but significant influence. Moscow was the best option. Its strategic location means that a successful uprising could split Russia into two.

Matvei Trotsky felt a heavy burden on his shoulders. Even though they seemed to have many supporters now, the chances of a successful uprising remained very low.

In the past two years, the revolutionaries have attempted five or six uprisings, all ending in failure. Their best achievement was occupying a small town before being suppressed by the Russian army.

Now, there are many people supporting their uprising: the British, the French, the Prussians, the Swedes...

In addition to international support, there are domestic revolutionary groups composed of various factions dissatisfied with the reforms including radical reformists, conservative groups with vested interests, and landless peasants...

These people hope for the revolutionaries to launch an uprising but do not necessarily want them to overthrow the Russian government. Their so-called support is limited to causing trouble for the Russian government.

Matvei Trotsky inquired with concern, "August, have we obtained the weapons?"

August replied joyfully, "Don't worry, sir, we've got them. I personally inspected them, and all 180 rifles are imported from Austria."

Trotsky nodded. Since the last Russo-Turkish War (Near East War), Russians have grown accustomed to using Austrian equipment.

Using Austrian imported weapons for this uprising, apart from their good quality, also carried the intention of shifting blame.

This is a tactic commonly employed by the British, where success means great profit, and failure is not a concern. They have had conflicts with the Russians for the longest time, so they have nothing to lose.

As the executor, Matvei Trotsky naturally has no objections. Despite not being personally anti-Austrian and even being a supporter of the Austro-Russian alliance, it doesn't hinder him from accepting British assistance.

Compared to before, the British government is now starting to pay attention to appearances. They no longer openly gave support and have instead channeled aid through the Kingdom of Prussia.

This isn't necessarily a change of heart for the British but rather a shift in strategy due to changing circumstances. Previously, with both Britain and Russia vying for world dominance, both sides naturally employed all means at their disposal.

Now that the Russian Empire has temporarily withdrawn from the race for global supremacy, the victorious British must restrain their actions and maintain a good international reputation.

A superpower cannot rely solely on force but needs to make more use of diplomatic means to solve problems. During this period, the British government naturally needs to maintain discretion.

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Undercurrents were swirling within the Russian Empire, as the British also proposed negotiations in London.

The negotiations were very unsuccessful. The Russian representatives demanded the lifting of the blockade on the Baltic Sea by the British, which was met with refusal, leading to a deadlock in the negotiations.

However, the negotiations did not affect the situation on the battlefield; the war continued unabated. Under Moltke's command, the Prussian army fought as they retreated, while the Polish uprising forces were sacrificed as cannon fodder to the Russians.

The consecutive victories boosted the morale of the Russian troops, and it seemed like the war was about to come to an end.

Looking at the military map, Franz sighed. Despite appearing to have the upper hand, the Russian army was actually in danger.

While contracting their defensive lines, the forces of the Kingdom of Prussia were also concentrating. Meanwhile, as the Russian army continuously advanced forward, their forces were inevitably becoming dispersed.

The battlefield has shifted from Belarus to Poland, and the Russians no longer enjoy the advantage of fighting on their own soil.

Although Poland is still technically their territory, the Poles stand opposed to them, making it no different from fighting in enemy territory.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg reported, "Your Majesty, we have just received news that the Far East War broke out two months ago, adding another front for the Russians."

Franz was initially startled but quickly regained his composure. It was earlier than expected, but not entirely surprising.

On the one hand, it resulted from British diplomatic maneuvers. On the other hand, the Russians were currently at their weakest, making them vulnerable to such opportunistic actions.

Compared to Europe and Central Asia, the Far East held the least significance for the Russians and was also their weakest point in terms of strength.

Currently, the two battlefields in Europe and Central Asia have tied up a significant portion of Russian forces. Even if the Russian government wanted to reinforce the Far East, they were already stretched thin.

It's not that Alexander II lacked troops or funds. The key issue is that Central Asia has become a war zone, and any reinforcements to the Far East would have to detour through Siberia.

Sending troops from Europe would take about a year, and even then, their numbers would have to be limited to ensure logistical support. These constraints almost certainly indicate that Russian failure in the Far East is inevitable.

Franz didn't dwell on this topic and instead asked, "Are the Ottomans planning to take action?"

To encourage the Ottoman Empire to join the war, Britain, France, and Austria were all exerting pressure on them. The Ottoman government feared the Russians but they were also afraid of these three watchful hooligans.

The British and French navies frequently appeared in Ottoman ports under the pretext of demanding debt repayment. Austria was also sharpening its swords menacingly in the Sinai Peninsula, looking to reclaim the Holy Land.

Of course, officially, the Austrian government has never demanded the Ottoman Empire declare war on Russia. They've only conducted military exercises.

After these exercises, didn't they withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula? They only left a regiment stationed on the peninsula, enough to prove that Austria had no intention of provoking war.

As for what the Ottoman government thinks, nobody knows for sure. But Britain and France have issued ultimatums to them. Either they fight against Russia or they face off against Britain, France, and Austria.

There's certainly an element of coercion in all of this, but the Ottoman government dares not take risks. The Ottoman Empire owes debts to Britain and France that it cannot repay, and Austria is eyeing Jerusalem hungrily.

Everyone kept the Ottoman Empire around to tie down the Russians. If they can't fulfill that role, their existence loses its purpose.

Despite Russia often defaulting on debts, they have the confidence to do so. Aside from this one exception, which among the other countries that dared to default on debts fared well?

For example, Mexico, whose previous government collapsed due to defaulting on debts. To collect the debt, the French sent troops to Mexico and placed Maximilian I on the throne.

Even distant Mexico couldn't escape unscathed. Needless to say, the Ottoman Empire, which was much closer, was in an even more precarious situation. The use of military force to collect debts is an instinct of the great powers of this era.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg replied, "With the support of Britain and France, the Ottoman government has issued a nationwide mobilization order.

Currently, the Ottoman Empire has assembled a force of three hundred thousand troops, but they do not intend to attack the Caucasus. Instead, they aim to attack Constantinople."

To be blinded by the lust for gains!

This idiom could not help but pop into Franz's mind.

If they were to attack the Caucasus region, there was at least a possibility of seizing some advantage. Even if the Russians wanted revenge in the future, geographic advantages would still give the Ottomans a chance to hold their ground.

But Constantinople was different. The political stakes there were too great. The Russian government would sooner give up Poland than relinquish this place.

Once this city is captured, Alexander II would have no choice but to fight to the bitter end. Despite the internal turmoil and exhaustion of the Russian forces, the situation would change when it came to defending Constantinople.

Franz sneered coldly, "Since the Ottoman government wants to court death, then let them! It's a good opportunity to test the results of their reforms. If they fail, then the Ottoman Empire deserves to perish."

The Habsburgs and the Ottoman Empire have been longstanding enemies, so Franz naturally wants to carry on the noble tradition of his ancestors by eliminating this hidden danger from the East once and for all.

Chapter 415: Russo-Austrian Relations Cool Down

On October 7, 1866, the Ottoman government sent an ultimatum to the Russian ambassador, demanding that the Russians hand over Constantinople within 48 hours, or it would be war.

The ultimatum did not even last for 48 hours. Upon receiving it, the Russian ambassador directly replied, "Then war it shall be!"

How could the Russians have missed the Ottoman Empire's preparations for war when they were so obvious? As old foes, the Russian government had never relaxed its surveillance of the Ottoman Empire.

The Russian Foreign Ministry also tried to appease the Ottomans, but since they could not offer any benefits, their efforts were naturally in vain.

Seeing the mobilization of the Ottoman government, Alexander II knew that war was inevitable.

A quick glance at the map confirmed this. The Ottoman Empire had few choices; it had only three neighbors.

Geography dictated that Persia was not a good target, and even if it were defeated, there would be little to gain. The Ottoman government had no need to fight over this barren region.

Austria was not an option to attack, or rather, unreachable — the only adjoining territory was the Sinai Peninsula which they were separated by its vast deserts. Attempting an invasion of the Balkans by sea was beyond their capabilities, not even having an opportunity to land troops.

That left only Russia. Its Black Sea Fleet had been wiped out in the Near East War, and its finances were still strained after all these years, preventing it from fully recovering.

With British and French support, they could attack either the Caucasus or Constantinople. Blockading the Bosphorus Strait, which was only a few hundred meters wide, would be easy, and onshore artillery could do the rest.

The pretext for war that the Ottoman government had painstakingly prepared had turned directly into a farce.

Eighty thousand Russian troops had already been assembled in Constantinople, and the total Russian troop strength in the Russian-occupied Balkans was as high as 150,000. In comparison, the Caucasus was the weak point.

Both sides had already declared war, so the fighting had to go on. This time, the Ottomans finally had a decisive numerical advantage, so they were naturally going to go for broke.

In St. Petersburg, upon receiving news of the Ottoman declaration of war, Alexander II's brow furrowed even deeper. There were more and more enemies, and this was not a good thing.

In reality, the Russian Empire had already mobilized almost its entire war potential. Limited by transportation and production capacity, this was the maximum force they could deploy.

500,000-600,000 troops in Eastern Europe were fighting to the death with the Prussian-Polish coalition, and there was still no sign of winning the war. 50,000 troops were also deployed in the Nordic region to guard against Sweden taking advantage of the situation.

Another 70,000-80,000 troops were deployed in the Far East, but because the area they ruled was so vast, not many troops could be deployed to the battlefield.

In Central Asia, 300,000 Russian troops were fighting hard against the enemy, or rather, being beaten up. Most of these troops were hastily recruited, and it was good enough if they could hold the line.

The Balkans seemed to have plenty of troops, but in fact, the 150,000 Russian troops could at most defend Constantinople. Fortunately, the French sold their Balkan colonies to Austria, otherwise, they would have had one more potential enemy.

More troops were also needed in the Caucasus now, and no one could guarantee that the Ottoman government's attack was not a feint. If the Caucasus was lost, the enemy could kill all the way to the Volga River Basin.

Alexander II really felt that there were not enough troops. Millions of Russian troops were fighting hard on the battlefield, and the domestic economy had been severely affected to support this war.

A war of attrition was the most painful. Unable to put in more troops, the human wave tactics could not be played out, which was a serious challenge for the Russian army.

Even worse, the European powers had already clearly seen the true state of the Russian Empire. The so-called "one million Russian troops" was just a joke, as on any battlefield the Russian government could not actually deploy forces of that size.

These changes also affected Russo-Austrian relations. The Austrians felt that the alliance was dispensable, while the Russians felt that their Austrian allies were not pulling their weight.

"With the outbreak of war with the Ottomans, our only trading partner left is Austria," Finance Minister Reutern said in a low voice. "This year's fiscal revenue is expected to be the lowest in 30 years, and it is possible to continue to decline next year."

Such misfortune left the Finance Minister lacking confidence in his words. Although the responsibility was not theirs, when there was no money, the problem still fell on them.

It was fortunate that they had extracted funds from the Jews previously, otherwise the Russian government would have gone bankrupt already. Even so, Reutern still did not dare relax his vigilance.

Such windfalls cannot happen every day. According to the current situation, it won't be long before they face a financial crisis again.

Alexander II asked indifferently, "How low will it be?"

"This year's financial revenue is expected to fall to about 150 million rubles. If the war continues, it may fall to 120 million rubles next year."

Finance Minister Reutern's voice grew smaller and smaller. It should be noted that before the outbreak of the war, the Russian government's annual revenue had exceeded 300 million rubles, and now it has been directly halved.

Reality is so cruel. The Russian Empire is now surrounded by enemies on all sides. Except for the Arctic Ocean, there is war all the way from Eastern Europe to the Far East.

Overseas trade has shrunk sharply, and the huge profits once brought by grain exports are now gone.

Compared with the relatively small amount of export trade, the import trade volume is growing rapidly. Russia's foreign trade is settled in gold and silver, and this change has led to a large outflow of gold and silver from the country.

The consequences of the loss of wealth have quickly been reflected in the economy, and deflation has become a social problem that the Russian government cannot avoid.

"It seems that the Austrians have made a lot of money again."

Alexander II's seemingly casual remark revealed the change in the relationship between Russia and Austria. If your misfortune was their gain, even the best friendship will become estranged, and the same is true for state relations.

No one responded to this remark as the friendship between Russia and Austria was still politically correct. Whether it was envy or jealousy, these could not change the fact that the Tsar could not do without Austria.

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Alexander II was right. Austria has indeed made a lot of money recently. Due to the war, the Bosphorus Strait is blockaded, and Austria has naturally monopolized trade with Russia.

Sweden in Northern Europe also made a small fortune, but their national strength is limited and there are not many commodities they can export.

In addition to trade with Russia, another benefit is that Austria's share of the agricultural products market has increased. Russian grain exports can now only be sold to Austria first and then sold to the international market after processing.

This dealt another blow to competitors. Enterprises that originally purchased Russian grain for processing now have to scramble for raw materials in the international market due to the lack of raw materials.

After Russia and the Ottomans went to war, the transaction prices in the international grain market rose by another 10% in a short period of time. This is just the beginning. As long as the supply and demand relationship is not resolved, grain prices may continue to rise.

In the middle of the 19th century, half of the world's population was starving, and hundreds of thousands or even millions of people died of starvation each year.

Against this background, the food shortage in Europe is obviously not something that can be solved in a short time. It is easy to say that food production should be increased, but it is difficult to do so in practice.

The major colonial empires do not lack land, but the problem is that the initial investment in reclaiming land for food cultivation is not small, and the market return rate is not high enough.

If there is a surplus of grains, there is a great chance that it will rot in the fields. It's not that people don't need food anymore, the bigger problem is that many people can't afford food.

In this era, only European countries have market purchasing power, other regions are self-sufficient, and those who cannot be self-sufficient can only go hungry.

Purchasing power limits production capacity. In the event of emergencies, grain prices will naturally rise in the short term. Perhaps everyone has reserves, but capitalists want to make money, and absurdly high grain prices are also one of the means.

This has little to do with Austria. No matter how international grain prices change, as the world's largest grain exporter, domestic grain prices are very stable.

As one of the beneficiaries, Franz's wallet has become heavier again. But this no longer aroused Franz's interest. At the critical moment of the Industrial Revolution, it is obvious that new industries have more "prospects".

Foreign Minister Wessenberg frowned and said, "Your Majesty, the Russian ambassador informed us that they will raise tariffs due to the war."

Franz frowned. Raising tariffs will inevitably affect the trade volume between the two countries. But does the current Russian Empire really have the capital to raise tariffs?

Confused about the intentions of the Russian government, Franz didn't bother to figure it out.

"Perhaps it's time we should raise the prices of our exports too!"

The wool comes from the sheep, and the rise in tariffs leads to the rise in commodity prices. This is a normal business concept.

Perhaps the increase in tariffs can protect some Russian industries. However, now it is wartime, and the largest trade commodities between the two countries are strategic materials.

These are necessities, and the Russian government must also accept the price increase. Raising tariffs now, isn't this just giving capitalists an excuse to raise prices?

This price increase will definitely exceed the tariff increase, and the Russian government itself will be the one who will suffer in the end.

Franz was sure that this decision was not made by Alexander II. It was like lifting a rock and hitting your own foot, and Alexander II was not such a fool.

Either it was that the Russian government was facing financial problems, prompting the bureaucrats to hastily prescribe foolish policies like quack doctors; or it was domestic capitalists pushing for it, scheming to gain greater profits.

The truth was obscured, as no one could have imagined that Alexander II's casual remark would spark ideas among his subordinate officials, leading them to make a stupid decision that effectively ended the honeymoon period between Russia and Austria.

If Alexander II had known, he would have absolutely regretted it.

This decision did indeed protect many domestic industries. On the surface, it appeared to be a good policy. In the early stages of industrial development, protecting national industries would benefit domestic industrial growth.

However, the benefits never materialized, and the negative consequences occurred first. The Russian government would soon pay a painful price for this.

Because the increased tariffs caused prices of imported Austrian goods to rise, to save money, the Tsarist bureaucrats chose to procure supplies from domestic enterprises instead — a pitfall was about to be formed.

Chapter 416: Self-Destructive Actions Meets Pig Teammates

St. Petersburg, Randle Garment Factory. Inside the workshop, the workers were bustling with activity, rushing to complete a batch of military uniforms. Winter was approaching, and cotton coats were essential supplies.

However, upon closer inspection, one would notice that this batch of cotton coats was defective. The fluffy material was clearly not cotton, and pieces of scrap fabric were visible among it.

Nikolas Keïdzh, the owner of Randle Garment Factory, had been troubled for quite some time after receiving a report about the shortage of raw materials.

Initially, Randle Garment Factory's products were made of cotton, and their primary market was the civilian population. While they used the lowest quality cotton, their coats were still genuine cotton coats.

However, the situation changed with the outbreak of the war. After the sea routes were cut off, the supply of raw materials became their biggest problem.

The situation became even more dire after they received military orders. To make up for the shortage of raw materials, Randle Garment Factory resorted to using substitutes.

For instance, they shredded old clothes, repurchased and recycled used cotton coats, and even used gauze discarded by hospitals.

However, these efforts were like a drop in the bucket. But Nikolas Keïdzh was not one to turn down a profit, no matter how meager.

“Yadir, send word down to increase the straw content. We must complete the order with the raw materials we have now.”

Yadir said fearfully, “Mr. Keïdzh, we’ve already added a lot of straw. If we keep adding more, I’m afraid there will be problems!”

Adding straw to cotton coats is nothing strange, but with the current method, it’s not a cotton coat anymore, it’s a straw jacket.

Except for the outer layer of cloth, the inside is all shredded straw. It’s almost inevitable that it will be discovered.

Yadir can’t help but worry. This is a military uniform, and the winters in Russia are so cold. There will be big trouble if it’s found out.

Nikolas Keïdzh nonchalantly replied, “Don’t worry, the battlefield is in Poland. It’s a mild winter there, and the soldiers’ bodies are strong enough to withstand the cold!”

Despite a tinge of uneasiness, he felt reassured when he thought about his connections. Producing substandard military uniforms? When had his military uniforms ever been up to par?

Fading, shrinking, and being easily damaged were all considered normal by Nikolas Keïdzh. He was used to it. As long as he could deliver the goods, it didn’t matter if they were substandard or not.

This time, they were going too far. Nikolas said, pausing for a moment, “Make them thicker!”

There was no issue with this, straw can also keep you warm. After all, cannon fodders aren’t valued, so they should just make do with it!

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Nikolas was not the only one making such decisions. Many suppliers opted to use inferior materials in their products.

High-quality goods? Don’t dream of it! Everyone needs to make a profit, right?

Russia’s industrial production costs were already high, and the bureaucrats were taking such a big cut. How could they make a profit without lowering production costs?

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The change in suppliers had a direct impact on the battlefield. The first victims were the Russian army in the Baltic Sea, whose supplies were mainly provided by the St. Petersburg industrial zone.

Colonel Gerald was the quartermaster of the 8th Division of the Russian Baltic Navy Regiment, a lucrative position. He had also made a lot of money by taking advantage of his position.

However, Colonel Gerald was now scared. Before this, more than 70% of the supplies had come from Austria. There might have been some quality problems with these products, but they were still usable.

Now the situation had changed. In the past month, there had been a sharp increase in Russian-made goods received, accounting for more than half of the entire logistics supply.

It could be said that as long as it could be bought domestically, the Russian bureaucrats were prioritizing domestic products, which was giving the officers in the logistics department a headache.

If it’s only 20-30% of the materials that are substandard, they can still try to find a way. For example: they could directly report it as war losses, or blend it together and make do, after all the Russian troops are normally not getting proper supplies anyway.

They already took bribes so they should settle the matter, but now all they can see are junk products. What can they do?

Distribute them? The soldiers at the front line are already making a fuss. Who can take the responsibility? If something goes wrong, these quartermasters will be held accountable.

The Russian army also has rules against accepting substandard products. However, they can’t refuse them either. At this point, if they send them back, won’t it embarrass the bigwigs behind them?

Gerald barked orders, "Inspect everything thoroughly and report back on how much of it is still usable!"

For now, he could only hope that the bureaucrats back home had some sense of decency and that there would at least be some usable supplies.

As the minutes ticked by, the inspection results left Colonel Gerald horrified. The cotton coats and blankets filled with straw were bad enough, but at least they could provide some warmth.

Substandard weapons and ammunition were easier to deal with; they could simply be reported as battle losses. After all, there was no standard for the consumption of such items on the battlefield.

The most troubling issue was the food. The canned goods supplied to the lower-ranking officers were all moldy. Colonel Gerald opened one and was shocked to discover small animals moving around inside.

The food for the ordinary soldiers was even worse: rotten potatoes, discolored corn, and black bread that could be used to repair fortifications...

It seemed that nothing was too outrageous for these suppliers. The only thing that comforted Colonel Gerald was that three months' worth of supplies had been delivered at once.

Apart from the substandard items, there were also some usable ones. The current supply calculations were based on full strength, but after prolonged battles, the actual number of men in the 8th Division was less than seven-tenths of that.

If more men were to die in battle, or if some supplies could be looted from the enemy and more battle losses were reported, then maybe they could just barely get through the winter.

...

For the Russians, the only thing that could bring them down was themselves. Even if they were surrounded by enemies, the Russian government had the strength to deal with it.

Unfortunately, Alexander II ignored the dangers of sending the wrong political signals. The deterioration of relations between Russia and Austria led to an increase in tariffs, partly due to the bureaucrats' desire to curry favor with their superiors and partly due to their own self-interest.

Although there were also kickbacks to be had in the Russo-Austrian trade, the kickbacks offered by Russian capitalists were simply too high to resist!

For the same goods, Austrian capitalists would offer a maximum of 20-30% in kickbacks, but with Russian capitalists, the numbers could be reversed, with the bureaucrats taking the lion's share.

As for the increased costs, they could simply be offset by cutting production costs. As long as they were willing to sacrifice product quality, wasn't cost control a breeze?

Alexander II never dreamed that the reformist officials he had promoted would become so corrupt in such a short time.

The previous decision to purchase goods from Austria was partly due to the fact that the bureaucrats still had some sense of decency and understood the importance of logistical supplies for war. However, people are never satisfied. The more kickbacks they received, the greedier they became.

On the other hand, it was also because Russia's domestic production capacity was insufficient. Even if the bureaucrats didn't care about the lives of the soldiers at the front, they couldn't reduce the quantity, so they could only buy from abroad.

As time went by, Russian capitalists also improved their production capacity. The current political changes presented an opportunity for bureaucrats and capitalists alike.

Previously, there were still a few principled officials who kept them in check, so they dared not act recklessly. However, the misinterpretation of Alexander II's political signals led these officials to remain silent.

The consequences were naturally not as simple as the bureaucrats had imagined. Graft at all levels had become the norm in the Russian army, and those who could remain rational in the face of profit were always in the minority.

When the upper echelons were corrupt, could one still expect the lower-ranking officials to be honest and incorruptible?

This time, Franz did not remain a silent spectator but instead pushed the issue. He provided ample space for the bureaucrats of the Russian government to fully exploit the situation.

In his view, the Prussians sending out a trade caravan would be the most effective way to deal a blow to the Russian army. Simply waving around banknotes and telling the quartermasters to "Buy, buy, buy" would yield far greater benefits than engaging in a bloody battle on the battlefield.

With enough money, even enemies could become Russia's honored guests. There are no enemies in the face of profit.

Franz acknowledged that the corruption of the Russian logistics system was also greatly facilitated by Austrian capitalists. In their pursuit of more orders, they employed all sorts of tricks.

However, this was merely the trigger; the fundamental problem was the long-standing decay of the Russian bureaucracy. Due to the lack of effective supervision, Russian bureaucrats had always led comfortable lives.

Initially, the Austrian government sent people to supervise the export of goods, concerned that their reputation would be tarnished and they would lose this large market.

Now it was no longer necessary; Franz chose to ignore the situation in order to retaliate against the Russians for raising tariffs.

His indifference went beyond simply relaxing controls on the export of his own country's goods. He also allowed substandard products to enter the Russian military supply system.

In simpler terms, this meant that low-quality goods produced in Russia were labeled with trademarks and passed off as Austrian military products.

Prior to this, the Austrian government had cracked down severely on this practice, even sending special inspectors to oversee it. Whenever such cases were discovered, the Austrian government would take them up with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Fearing diplomatic repercussions, the Russian bureaucrats dared not engage in such practices. After a few scapegoats were dealt with, the rest of them fell in line.

According to common practice, Austrian-made goods did not require inspection at all, as their defect rate was within the controllable range. However, locally produced military supplies needed to be screened to pick out qualified products from the defective ones.

It goes without saying that Austrian-exported military supplies were more expensive. Now that there were no constraints, the capitalists naturally didn't mind passing their goods off as the original.

As long as they provided some qualified samples and a thick red envelope to the inspection officials, everything was settled.

This was definitely not Austria betraying its allies, but entirely the result of the Russian bureaucracy's self-destruction. Franz had already sent people to gather evidence, just waiting for the incident to happen and expose it.

Chapter 418: Misfortune Never Comes Singly

The success of the December 12th Uprising marked the beginning of a true crisis for the Russian government. Internal enemies posed a far greater threat than external ones, as the "Purging the corrupt officials" slogan adopted by the revolutionaries had caused many people to remain neutral.

This was not a betrayal of the tsar but rather a reflection of widespread dissatisfaction with the current situation. Radical reformers were unhappy with the tsar's decision to halt reforms, while conservatives wanted to remove provisions in the reforms that were detrimental to their interests.

These individuals, mostly with families and businesses to support, could not afford to participate in the high-risk activity of rebellion.

In St. Petersburg, the sudden bad news plunged the Russian government into chaos. The Russian Empire, facing both internal and external threats, found itself teetering on the brink.

Interior Minister Mikhail proposed, "Your Majesty, we cannot continue like this! We must first suppress the domestic rebellion!"

His suggestion was sound. External enemies could at most tear off a piece of the Russian Empire, but they did not pose a threat to their existence. The real threat came from within.

As the slogan "Purging the corrupt officials" indicated, this was bound to be a bloody affair. If the rebels prevailed, those who benefited from the current system would be the first to be purged.

How could they explain themselves to the people without executing a few corrupt officials? At this point, the top echelons of the Russian government were all considered "corrupt officials" and deserved to be purged.

Alexander II remained expressionless as if he didn't care at all. In truth, he was fuming inside. He had never imagined that the revolutionaries would dare to rebel at this time.

Alexander II strongly agreed with the Interior Minister's proposal to prioritize suppressing the internal rebellion. However, he could not be the one to initiate peace talks.

If they were to cease hostilities now, the Russian Empire would have to pay a heavy price. The tsar could not shoulder the blame for this.

Minister of War Milyutin chimed in, "The rebels' occupation of Moscow poses a significant threat to us. Both the Polish and Central Asian battlefields depend on Moscow for material support.

Under current circumstances, these two battlefields can last for a maximum of six months. If we cannot suppress the rebellion and restore material supply within half a year, the situation will completely spiral out of control.”

Suppressing the rebellion and restoring the material supply within half a year seemed like a joke. Destruction always happened faster than construction. Could local production recover immediately after being ravaged by the rebels?

Moreover, it was still winter. Fighting in this season placed even higher demands on logistics.

The Russian government did not have an abundance of troops and supplies for suppressing the rebellion. Aside from withdrawing forces from the frontlines, there were no other options in the short term.

This would inevitably affect the situation on the frontlines. If too many troops were withdrawn, giving the enemy an opportunity and leading to a major defeat on the frontlines, the consequences would be even more severe.

“The recent price hikes have been severe,” Finance Minister Reutern remarked. “The cost of the war is escalating. If we don’t end this conflict soon, we’ll be bankrupt within a year at most.”

Alexander II, incredulous, asked, “How is that possible? Didn’t we just obtain a lot of money?”

The Russian government had indeed profited greatly from the anti-Jewish campaign, but how could they have spent the money so quickly? Alexander II couldn’t believe it.

Finance Minister Reutern hastily explained, “Your Majesty, we do have many assets remaining, but these cannot be easily converted into cash.

With the outbreak of the internal rebellion, the value of many of these properties has plummeted, and even if we were to sell them, we would suffer significant losses.

The only liquid funds available to the government are the confiscated cash and some valuable bonds. This money is needed to repay existing debts and sustain the war effort.

The prices of strategic materials have nearly doubled, and with the chaos in Moscow, we are forced to increase overseas procurement, which has further driven up expenses.”

The real estate confiscated by the Russian government could, in fact, be converted into cash. However, too many domestic dignitaries were eyeing it, and once they intervened, the prices would plummet.

The Ministry of Finance could not afford to sell off so many assets at such low prices. Even if they were embezzling state assets, they would at least have to balance the books! For safety’s sake, they could only proceed slowly.

Otherwise, even if they used these assets as collateral for loans, they could still secure hundreds of millions of rubles. It was absurd to be sitting on a goldmine and starving.

Alexander II frowned and said hesitantly, “Have the Ministry of Foreign Affairs negotiate with the Austrians to find a way to bring down the prices.”

There's nothing they can do about domestic prices. The changes in supply and demand are driving up prices. They can only place their hopes on overseas trade.

Foreign Minister Ivanov said with a bitter smile, "Your Majesty, I'm afraid this will be very difficult. The trade tariffs between Russia and Austria have already increased by 80%. The Austrians are using the tariff hike as an excuse to raise prices.

We are raising our tariffs on the one hand and asking them not to raise their prices on the other. This is too much to ask, I'm afraid."

Ivanov is just trying to make himself look good here. Blindly raising tariffs has led to a deterioration in relations between the two countries and has caused a lot of trouble for the Foreign Ministry.

Don't think that just because Russo-Austrian relations are cold now, they are not still the top priority for the Russian government's diplomacy. Other departments shouldn't create trouble and then leave it to the Foreign Ministry to clean up!

The Russian government was not immune to factional power struggles, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was second only to the Ministry of Finance in terms of influence. The two ministries had a long history of rivalry.

Alexander II's face darkened. He was no fool, and he could immediately grasp the situation.

Finance Minister Reutern hastily explained, "The increase in tariffs was primarily intended to boost revenue and protect domestic industries. It's important to note that our tariffs with Austria were already quite low, and even after the 80% increase, they are still in line with those of other countries."

Reutern was no fool either; he had done his homework before proposing the rise in tariffs.

The Russo-Austrian alliance had not yet been broken. If the tariffs were raised above those of other countries, then the Finance Minister would be blamed for breaking the alliance.

Choosing to align with other countries would show that this was a normal tax adjustment, not one specifically targeting Austria.

Alexander II glared at him fiercely, his anger rising. He silently cursed the Ministry of Finance for being incompetent. Even if they needed to adjust tariffs, there was a time and place for it!

Currently, Russo-Austrian trade accounted for almost all of the Russian Empire's foreign trade, and the Russian government was one of its major customers. Wouldn't raising tariffs be shooting themselves in the foot?

Now the Austrians were retaliating, and the wool was coming out of the sheep's own back. The tariff hike had also caused prices to rise, and even more unreasonably.

Monopolies can do whatever they want; people can choose to buy or not. Now they have to spend more money, and the increased spending is far from what the increased tariffs can compensate for.

Protecting domestic industries? They dare to use such a ridiculous excuse. Everyone knows that Russian industry is still in its infancy, and whoever uses those shoddy products will be unlucky.

Civilian goods are fine, but involving military supplies is simply murder.

Alexander II had already made up his mind to strip the Ministry of Finance of its tax-setting power and take the opportunity to replace the fool in front of him.

Alexander II resolutely suppressed his dissatisfaction with Austria. When you need someone's help, no matter how much you are dissatisfied, you have to endure it.

“Negotiate with Austria. The tariff issue is up for discussion. Based on the commercial trade treaty previously signed between the two countries, no one may arbitrarily change the tariff rates.”

As he spoke these words, Alexander II's heart was bleeding. This meant that the Russian government would make significant concessions on the tariff issue in exchange for Austria's support.

This support would not be limited to the economic sphere; it would be even more significant politically. Once the decision was made to end the war, Austria's support would be essential.

Without the support of a great power, even at the negotiating table, they would suffer greatly.

The Russian Empire of today had lost its former glory. One misstep could spell disaster.

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Just as Alexander II was wavering on whether to end the war, events on the front lines made the decision for him.

On January 2, 1867, the Prussian army launched a surprise winter offensive. This battle, initially intended as a reconnaissance mission, turned into a stunning victory.

The Russian army, once renowned for its prowess in winter warfare, had suddenly become a pushover. It was only after the Prussian victory that the cause of this unexpected defeat was discovered.

The consequences of the shoddy cotton uniforms and blankets had become apparent. Russian soldiers, frozen to the bone, could only rely on campfires for warmth.

Post-war statistics revealed that, on average, only less than a third of Russian soldiers on the eastern front received standard winter uniforms. Many units were forced to have their on-duty soldiers wear standard uniforms, while the rest huddled around fires for warmth.

In addition to clothing, substandard food was another major factor in non-combat casualties among Russian troops. Food poisoning became a common occurrence.

Russian commanders were not unaware of these problems, but the issues were too widespread and everyone chose to turn a blind eye to protect themselves. After receiving bribes, one after another chose to pretend to be deaf and dumb.

Originally, Russian commanders believed that with the arrival of winter, the Prussian army, not known for its winter warfare capabilities, would call a truce and both sides would rest. These problems would not be exposed, and they could just endure them.

However, plans often don't keep up with change. A single reconnaissance offensive tore through the Russian defenses, tens of thousands of Russian soldiers were taken prisoner, and the battlefield situation was completely out of control.

With the truth exposed, the Prussians seized the opportunity to exploit their victories. Meanwhile, the Russian soldiers hampered by their inferior cotton garments stand little chance of mustering an effective defense.

Quite a few soldiers surrendered directly to the Prussian army, simply to get a bite to eat. From the point of view of food, the standards of the two sides are very different.

The Prussian army's food standards fully reflect their status in the country. It can be said that they are among the top in Europe at the same time.

Not to mention bread, potatoes, and soybeans, there is also a certain amount of butter, cheese, meat, or canned food every day, and occasionally some vegetables.

On the other hand, it is already not bad for Russian soldiers to have enough potatoes. If the canned food is domestic, they may not even dare to eat it. Cheese and biscuits are included and they are occasionally distributed, but it cannot be guaranteed that they can be eaten.

The bread can be used as bricks to build fortifications, and there is no problem using it to block enemy bullets.

It is not easy to finally eat meat, but it is also jerky from an unknown era. It is almost impossible to chew with teeth, so it is best to cook it.

In this context, the Russian army usually has to find ways to get some food on the battlefield to improve their diet because their food standards are simply unbearable.

In the sudden winter battle, the Russians did not lose to the Prussian army, but to logistics, or to the bureaucrats at home.

Chapter 419: Prussian Ambitions

The failure of the winter campaign convinced Alexander II. If the war did not end, the Russian Empire would be doomed.

Plagued by rebels within and enemies without, Alexander II did not forget that the mastermind behind this war was the true enemy of the Russian Empire.

Without a swift end to this war, the only hope for victory lies in the battlefield of Constantinople, where Austria could be relied upon for nearby procurement of strategic supplies. Other regions offer no prospects.

Without logistical support from Moscow, the complete fall of Central Asia is inevitable. Without rear support, there is no hope for the Far Eastern battlefield.

Not to mention Poland, after this defeat, Belarus and the Baltic region will all become battlefields, and it is only a matter of time before they fall too.

If Sweden stabs them in the back, they may not even be able to hold on to St. Petersburg.

Mobilizing troops also takes time. If the Russian Empire is on its last legs, who knows if the British will continue to kick them when they're down?

Without much effort, if the Royal Navy sails into the Baltic Sea, the Russian Empire will be truly finished.

In this era, the Siberian Plain has not been developed, and the core of the Russian Empire is St. Petersburg and Moscow. Now Moscow is in the hands of the rebels, and if St. Petersburg is lost too, the Tsar will be finished.

The slogan was “To clear the evil ministers around the ruling monarch” yet the focus is really on purging the corrupt officials. But if you get rid of all the Tsar’s close confidants, is he still the Tsar?

If it’s too dangerous to take action against the Tsar openly, is it difficult to do so in secret? For example, by arranging an accidental drowning or a sudden death.

Throughout history, there have been so many emperors who died “accidentally”. Could it really be all accidents?

Then this probability is a bit too high. It is simply a high-risk profession, one of the top few even.

Alexander II would not put himself in danger. As long as he survives this, he can regain everything he has lost in the future.

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has sent a diplomatic note to Austria, inviting them to mediate this war.”

After making this decision, Alexander II sighed. Now is not the best time for negotiations, but it is the time when negotiations are most needed.

Winter is the last line of defense for the Russian Empire. If the war breaks out again next year, they will only pay a greater price.

Foreign Minister Ivanov asked hesitantly, “Your Majesty, should we invite Britain and France to participate?”

There is no way to get away from Britain and France in European affairs. Even if the Russian government does not invite them, they will still appear at the negotiating table.

Alexander II replied helplessly, “Send them an invitation. At this point, we don’t have much choice.”

This is a sign of bowing to Britain and France. After this war, the weakness of the Russian Empire was exposed, and it no longer had the strength to compete with the British for world hegemony.

Next, they need to keep a low profile and reduce their sense of existence as much as possible to avoid suppression from other countries.

Whether it works or not is another matter, but it is better to do it than not to do it. In times of weakness, it is a good thing to be able to reduce some hatred.

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Franz was stunned when he received the battle report from the winter war between Prussia and Russia. He simply could not believe that the Russian bureaucrats had made such a suicidal move.

Exaggerating losses, embezzling military funds, and raising procurement prices are all minor issues. They are nothing more than fleecing the Russian government for some money.

Even if they were to be a bit more greedy and replace the good products with inferior ones, they should at least make sure that they can meet basic needs, right? This is war, and any slip-up can cost lives.

Now, look at what's happened. They have directly screwed over the Russian troops on the front lines. Now, Alexander II doesn't have time to deal with them, but once the situation stabilizes, there's bound to be a big purge.

Franz asked with concern, "How heavy are the Russians' losses?"

Austria had sent military observers to both sides at the same time, and they had first-hand information from the battlefield. This was why it was still possible to make a preliminary assessment of the losses.

Minister of War Albrecht replied, "The initial estimate is that the troop losses exceed 300,000. There are nearly 200,000 prisoners captured by the Prussians, and about 40,000-50,000 killed in action. The non-combat casualties are very serious.

Now the Russian lines are wide open. If not for logistical constraints, the Prussians would have already occupied Belarus."

Franz nodded. The Prussians got a big bargain this time, otherwise, the war would have dragged on.

It can be said that William I won the jackpot. No one in the world expected them to make a comeback in winter. The same with Franz, he also thought that the Kingdom of Prussia would win the battle the next year.

The ability of the Russian bureaucrats to court death has directly refreshed everyone's worldview. It is estimated that European countries are still in shock and have not reacted yet.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has sent notes to all parties to mediate this war. Warn the Prussians not to go too far, and remind them to fulfill their promises."

Allies should naturally act like allies, and Franz has always done a very good job in this regard. He has strictly adhered to the alliance, and even the anti-Austrian faction in the Russian government has never blamed Austria for this.

Small conflicts are nothing, but on the big issues, it is absolutely necessary to take a clear stand and stand firmly on the side of their allies. The Russians lost this war, but they saved the Russo-Austrian alliance and allowed the alliance between the two countries to continue.

For example: warning the Kingdom of Prussia now will actually have very little effect. Whether Austria intervenes or not, they will not be able to fight anymore.

This attitude is exactly what the Russian government needs most now. Austria's position can help them stabilize the people's hearts and ensure that they do not have to pay too much in the negotiations.

Due to geopolitical reasons, the Austrian government's position can play a decisive role in the two battlefields of Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Just because the Kingdom of Prussia won the war does not mean that they are a world power. On the contrary, their own strength has not increased but decreased instead.

If you want to become strong, you must first get your hands on the spoils of war and digest them before talking about anything else.

As for the Ottoman Empire, needless to say, their capabilities were limited. Carrying out reforms did not automatically make the country powerful. They still need time to develop.

In this war, they were basically forced into the battlefield by everyone and didn't perform too proactively during the conflict. You could say they just went through the motions without any remarkable achievements.

In Berlin, William I's face has been full of smiles lately. The pie that suddenly fell down from the sky because of the breakthrough made him dizzy, and he hasn't woken up from the joy yet.

Because of the victory on the battlefield, the originally whimsical plan has become feasible. The Kingdom of Prussia's road to becoming an empire is about to set sail.

The Austrian government's sudden warning shattered his good mood, pulling William I back to reality. Those close to home know the home situation best — even winning a war does not come without a cost.

As the war progressed, the Prussian army lost a total of 460,000 troops, of which 176,000 had been killed in action and 120,000 had died from other causes.

Strategically, these losses are worth it. It not only resolves the eastern threat to the Kingdom of Prussia but also shows its power and makes countries around the world dare not underestimate Prussia.

In addition to the loss of troops, the loss of population and economy is even more of a headache for William I.

The population loss has exceeded one million, of which East Prussia is the most serious, with only one or two out of ten locals left.

Economically, except for the Rhineland which can barely support itself, the rest of the region is considered to be finished.

This is the credit of the Russian navy, which has been sabotaging the coastal areas every day, causing a large number of refugees to flood into the rear, severely crippling the economy.

If it weren't for their financial backers, the Kingdom of Prussia would have collapsed long ago. Now it's not much better. The domestic economy is devastated, and it will take a long time to recover.

William I asked, "What do you think of the diplomatic note from the Austrian government?"

Moltke said without hesitation, "We are also at our limit now, and it is not worth it to continue fighting. It is better to finalize the interests we have achieved on the negotiating table."

After winning the war, the military's political influence has further increased. As the commander of the war, Moltke is also in the limelight.

In the past, he would never have been so clear about his position, but now it's different. Having succeeded, Moltke's right to speak has surpassed that of the prime minister.

William I breathed a sigh of relief. It would be best if the military would stop. Otherwise, he could only use the pressure of the powers to force the military to agree to a cease-fire.

As for Moltke's attitude, that's a small matter. William I is not short of tolerance. In the original timeline, there was Bismarck whom he could tolerate, not to mention Moltke.

Apart from Roon, among the three outstanding figures of Prussia, Moltke and Bismarck both had flawed personalities that ordinary people could hardly tolerate.

Prime Minister Franck frowned and said, "It's not that easy. It's not a big problem to acquire the two duchies and some parts of the Baltic region, but it may be difficult to obtain Poland.

In addition, there is another problem before us and that is 'Silesia'. We promised it to the Austrians before, and we must also consider carefully whether to fulfill this promise."

The Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were the least controversial, the Russian government would not linger on this issue, while the Kingdom of Denmark lacked the resolve to dispute it.

Meanwhile, it is relatively easy to obtain the Baltic region. The locals are all staunchly anti-Russian. As long as they can break away from the rule of the Russian government, many problems can be discussed.

(Present day: The three Baltic states, their territorial area extends partially inland)

Most importantly, the British supported Prussia's acquisition of the Baltic region, and France and Austria also acquiesced in this matter.

Meanwhile, it would be very difficult to annex Poland. First of all, the current Polish provisional government is the first obstacle.

Although Moltke has been using the opportunity to fight the Russians to wear down the Poles, and even if the provisional government has suffered heavy losses in military strength, they still want independence!

It's not as easy as it sounds to swallow them in one go. If the Polish provisional government does not agree to be absorbed, Prussia cannot directly attack its allies, right?

Even if these factors could be overcome by force, the reaction of the great powers would be despairing. After annexing Poland, the Kingdom of Prussia would be the second largest in terms of land area, only second to Russia and Austria, and its population would catch up with France.

France and Austria would never allow such a behemoth to emerge, and the newly defeated Russians would not agree either.

As long as the great powers intervene, the Kingdom of Prussia is doomed to fail to annex Poland. If they dare to force it, they must be prepared to be beaten to death.

Minister of the Army and the Navy Roon said, "Annexing Poland is not an overnight matter. We can first let Poland become independent and then look for opportunities later.

Silesia must not be ceded just like that. Austria has not maintained absolute neutrality in this war. If it were not for their support of the Russians, the war would have ended last year."

Silesia is a mess. The two sides only made verbal agreements and did not put them on paper. It is not impossible for the Prussian government to simply default on its debts.

But Austria is not easy to mess with on major issues. If they default on their debts now, they will suffer retaliation later on.

Perhaps this is not enough to trigger a war between the two countries, but even diplomatic difficulties are enough to make the Kingdom of Prussia uncomfortable.

The atmosphere in the meeting room became tense. This was a dilemma. No one wanted to cede land, and no one wanted to face Austria at this time.

Especially with the Prusso-Russian negotiations approaching, what if the Austrian government fully supports the Russians? Will they be able to get everything they want?

No one can answer this question as no one knows where the bottom line of the Austrian government is!

After pondering for a while, William I said cautiously, "The issue of Silesia should be dragged on first. We cannot give up every inch of our territory unless it is absolutely necessary!"

Procrastination is not the best solution, but it is actually the most effective.

Chapter 420: Carefully Planning Out the Future

On the battlefield, Prussia now held the upper hand, and at the strong urging of the Prussian government, the negotiation venue was set in London.

Initially, they wanted to hold it in Berlin, but the Russians did not agree. The Russian government still wanted to save some face.

The Russians were still unconvinced, they insisted on holding the negotiation venue in a neutral country to prove that they had not lost the war.

This was self-deception, but it also involved political maneuvering. The alternative negotiation venues were Vienna and London. Now that the negotiation venue was set in London, it meant that the Russian government was at a disadvantage in this round of political machinations.

With a loud "bang," Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov threw a cup of coffee on the floor, splattering it all over the floor.

Since the defeat on the front lines, he has been visiting European countries to seek diplomatic support, but the results have been very disappointing. The "good" reputation of the Russian Empire has directly put most European countries on the opposite side.

Originally, they were prepared to negotiate separately with each of the warring countries, using diplomacy to defeat them one by one. Now, with the British intervening and bringing everyone together in London, an anti-Russian alliance has emerged.

The Prussians acted as the leader of the alliance, while the British coordinated the interests of all parties and formed a joint delegation to negotiate with the Russians.

"Send a telegram to the country to explain the situation and ask the government to make a decision as soon as possible."

Ivanov is still politically astute and did not say to ask for Alexander II's instructions, but instead asked the government to make a decision.

This means that the top officials of the Russian government will have to take the blame for this defeat and be responsible for the failure of the war, while Alexander II will be cleared of any responsibility.

There is no such thing as making them scapegoats. The failure of this war is actually the fault of the bureaucracy, especially the logistics part, and there will be a reckoning after the war.

The top government officials are also to blame for the defeat, and many will be implicated and dismissed from their positions. This includes Ivanov himself, who will have to retire after the war.

To be able to retire in peace, the Russian government must first be preserved. The rebels' slogan is "Clear the Emperor's Side, Purge the Corrupt Officials," and they are all the so-called corrupt officials. If the rebels take power, they are doomed.

Everyone is from a noble background, so a temporary setback in politics is nothing. They can still be reinstated in a few years. If that doesn't work, there is always the next generation. Preserving the Tsar was preserving their own interests.

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Schönbrunn Palace, Franz asked with concern, "Have we figured out the purpose of the British?"

With the major warring countries gathered in London, the diplomatic leverage was also gradually tilting towards the British. The position of the British government became crucial to this negotiation.

To some extent, the British are also robbing Austria of its interests. If they negotiate separately, the negotiations on the Prusso-Russian War and the Russo-Turkish War must first be approved by Vienna.

Now that the negotiations are bundled together, and given that Austria's influence in Central Asia and the Far East is limited, its diplomatic discourse power has also been reduced.

Franz was not worried about missing this opportunity to expand his diplomatic influence. Now was not the time to take the lead, and increasing his international influence prematurely might not be a good thing.

However, it was still very important to figure out the British plan. Franz was not willing to be led by the nose.

He had already planned the paths for the Russians, Prussians, and Ottomans, but now that the British had intervened and interrupted, the future direction had become unclear again.

His political foresight advantage was now gone, and Franz could only rely on his own strength to make political maneuvers.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg replied, "The British government wants to eliminate the threat posed by the Russians to them completely. Our preliminary judgment is that they should do four things:

First, let Central Asia become independent to eliminate the threat to India;

Second, support the Kingdom of Prussia to annex the Baltic region, enhance the strength of this chess piece, and enable them to have the ability to defend themselves;

Third, let Poland become an independent country and cause us trouble;

Fourth, interrupt the expansion of Russia in the Far East, and ensure that the British are the only dominant force in the East.”

Of the four points, only Polish independence made Austria uncomfortable. The others were within Franz’s acceptable range. Austria had been working on assimilation for many years, and Polish independence would have some impact, but it was also within control.

Even if some cause trouble, they could be exiled collectively. It’s not like this was something Franz had never done before. If the people were gone, the problem would be gone too.

The trouble was Poland’s self-destructive tendencies. It likely wouldn’t be long before they make territorial demands on Austria.

There were already such calls during the provisional government period, but they were temporarily suppressed because they were busy fighting the Russians.

After pondering for a moment, Franz made a decision. Polish independence was unstoppable and there was no need to interfere.

Shouting slogans didn’t matter. Anyway, Franz wouldn’t pay attention to them. If they got impatient, he would just use force to resolve the conflict.

The possibility of a military conflict in the short term was not high as the gap in strength between the two sides was serious. The Polish provisional government took over a mess and did not have the guts to challenge Austria.

But who knows about the future? Once they have solved their internal problems and someone encourages them from behind, they might just do something stupid.

“If it’s just this, we can acquiesce. Prussia and Poland can have a larger territory. The more they take now, the stronger the Russian government’s desire for revenge in the future.

As the war ended, the Prussian-Polish contradictions should also arise. Add fuel to the fire. Lithuania was once part of Greater Poland, let the Polish nationalists fight for it with Prussia.”

This is how international contradictions arise. You bury a nail of conflict, I bury a nail of conflict, and in the end, there are nails everywhere, and international disputes arise.

Now that conflicts are latent in Russia, Prussia, and Poland, in the future, instigating these three countries will turn them into mortal enemies.

As the three countries fight each other, Austria’s northern frontier will be stabilized. No matter how the international situation changes, Franz can find at least one ally.

The only regret is that the Ottoman Empire did not perform well this time and did not complete the script designed for them, otherwise, Franz could have gone to the Holy Land to be crowned.

Franz didn’t lack crowns, but the religious significance of Jerusalem was different! If he recovered it, Franz would be a saint of the Christian world, which would bring him great prestige.

Now that the Ottoman Empire is still strong, Franz will naturally not make a move. Jerusalem cannot bring about an increase in national strength. Spending hundreds of millions of military expenses for vanity is still too much of a price to pay.

The global repercussions have to be weighed too. Mishandling it could allow others to exploit the circumstances for their own gain, rendering it an utterly fruitless endeavor.

For example, the biggest winner of the Russo-Prussian War was the British. They not only suppressed their competitor, the Russian Empire, and solved the land threat to India, but also supported several new chess pieces.

The soon-to-be-established Nordic Federation, Poland, and several khanates in Central Asia are all chess pieces created by the British.

And the price they paid was just loans that will still be repaid. In simple terms, the Prussians fought a war for the British but still had to pay for their own military expenses.

Because of the debt, the finances of the Kingdom of Prussia will inevitably fall into the hands of the British in the future. If properly handled, it will be difficult for the Kingdom of Prussia to shake off British influence.

The gains of the war have superficially given the Kingdom of Prussia a path to become a strong country. Nonetheless, that path remains rife with obstacles, compelling them to forge alliances with Poland and the German Federal Empire.

This is comparable in difficulty to the unification of the smaller German states by Prussia in the original timeline.

It's not that there's no chance at all. At least the Russians are crippled and will be unable to interfere in their actions for a decade or two, so there is no need to find ways to appease the Russians.

As for France and Austria, it's the same as the original timeline. The problem cannot be solved without a fight. Neither of the two will just watch as a powerful Prussia rises.

Prime Minister Felix said, "Your Majesty, it is necessary for us to forcefully reclaim Silesia. After this war, the strength of the Kingdom of Prussia will inevitably increase. To avoid the emergence of a powerful Prussia, we must intervene."

If possible, it would be best to reclaim the Prussian-occupied Saxon territories as well to weaken the strength of the Kingdom of Prussia."

This is indeed a way. As long as Silesia and Prussian Saxony are taken from Prussia, then the two duchies of Schleswig-Holstein that the Prussians have gained this time will be equivalent to nothing.

This is just on the surface. In terms of resources and industrial development potential, the value of these regions far exceeds that of the two duchies of Schleswig-Holstein.

Then the only gain of the Kingdom of Prussia this time would be the Baltic region. After subtracting the losses in the war, their actual gains are very little.

The Baltic region is not small, and the resources are not bad, but there is no main ethnic population. Unless the Prussian government adopts a diversified approach, assimilation will be a problem.

Without solving this problem, the increase in strength of the Kingdom of Prussia will merely be superficial. Austria's move now is akin to pulling out their roots.

Franz thought for a while and said, “It is not easy to achieve this step, and the Prussian government will not compromise easily. In the current international situation, it is not convenient for us to use military force directly.

Relying on diplomatic means alone to make the Kingdom of Prussia make concessions, this possibility is almost zero.”

This is a fact, the Prussian government is not so weak that it will cede land when asked.

Using military means to coerce would damage Austria’s international image, arouse the jealousy of European countries, and isolate Austria diplomatically.

Therefore, from the very beginning, Franz did not plan to reclaim Silesia, let alone Prussian Saxony.

Others are afraid of the rise of the Kingdom of Prussia, but Franz is not afraid. It takes time to consolidate power, and there is no doubt that he will not give the Kingdom of Prussia that much time.

Franz has always believed that the best way to defeat an enemy is not to go to war directly; rather, it is to put constant pressure on the opponent and let them make mistakes under pressure.

The Kingdom of Prussia’s reckless provocation of this war is a manifestation of its inability to withstand pressure. Having chosen to rupture trade relations, the first step has been taken, is the second step far away then?

After the enemy has made a mistake, the price to pay for making a move will be much smaller. Without the Kingdom of Prussia, what excuse would Franz find to attack the German Federal Empire?

It should be known that the German Federal is very well-behaved, and the vast majority of federal states have a good relationship with Austria, so there is no opportunity for Franz to solve the problem by force.

Internal problems are far more difficult to solve than external problems, and the emperor should still have the support of the people. The same applies to the Kingdom of Prussia. If it cannot win the hearts of the people, then it is better not to even try.

Franz did not want to create a band of radicals constantly causing destruction. The lessons of history told him that any emperor who ignored the hearts of the people would pay a heavy price in the end.

Prime Minister Felix replied, “It is indeed not easy, but we still need to try it. Even if we can’t get it back in the end, we must let the people see the government’s determination to reclaim its former lands.”

The “people” he mentioned obviously refer not only to their countrymen but also to the Saxon government. Since the outbreak of the Russo-Prussian War, the Saxon government has been working hard to reclaim the Prussian Saxon territories. The Austrian government must also consider the wishes of the Saxon people.

In addition to Saxony, there are many Austrians who still think about Silesia, including many people in the Vienna court who advocate its recovery.

Originally, their approach was to secretly support the Russians and use them to reclaim these lands. Now that the Russian government has been defeated, this plan fell through.

These people have started lobbying the Austrian government again, and it is obvious that Prime Minister Felix has also been influenced, or he himself is also a supporter of reclaiming Silesia.

Although there is not much hope, he still wants to try it. If it fails, it will be nothing more than a waste of time for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but it will not be a total loss. If it succeeds, they will benefit greatly from it.

After sorting out the ins and outs, Franz nodded to indicate his acquiescence.