

Roman Empire 461

Chapter 461: In the Dead of Night

In the dead of night, the Austria International Hotel shines brilliantly on Vienna's Ringstrasse, bathed in the glow of streetlights.

In the heart of Vienna, where every inch of land was worth a fortune, the sprawling Austrian International Hotel, covering 2,888.88 mu (about 480 acres), was an undeniable spectacle.

This hotel wasn't just luxurious; it was the epitome of opulence for its time. It boasted every amenity imaginable, making it the priciest accommodation in the era. Staying here was a status symbol in itself. Even the most modest room costs hundreds of guilders.

Each room was a marker of one's status. The palace-like structures within the hotel were exclusively for nobility. No matter how wealthy a commoner was, they could only reside in the commoner areas.

Franz regarded this as his most unsuccessful investment. The social norms were rigid: capitalists wouldn't dare venture into the noble sections, and nobles wouldn't dream of staying in the commoner zones.

Even among the nobility, hierarchies were strictly observed. Guests chose rooms that matched their status and never crossed boundaries.

These days, ordinary accommodations are booming, yet the exclusive noble quarters attract few guests. Most notably, the ultra-luxurious Imperial Palace suite has yet to welcome its first occupant.

It wasn't that the hotel refused commoners; it was that no one dared to overstep their social class. This societal expectation meant that any behavior exceeding one's status was met with rejection.

Over time, this became the hotel's rule: every status received its corresponding treatment. If rooms were full, guests would simply find another hotel.

Originally priced at 8,888 guilders, the Imperial Palace quickly became an embarrassment. Commoners couldn't afford it, and if a king came to visit, Franz wouldn't dream of charging them.

In a fit of frustration, Franz added four more eights to the price, making it a staggering 88,888,888 guilders. The prestige skyrocketed instantly.

This made it the most expensive hotel in the world, bar none. The price alone could buy two Austrian International Hotels, ensuring that no one could afford to stay there.

It wasn't just the Imperial Palace that remained vacant; the ducal and marquis suites below it also saw little business. It wasn't a matter of affordability; high-ranking nobles already had homes in Vienna.

Local high nobles didn't stay there, so relying on visiting nobles meant that they might see one customer a year, if at all.

The vast number of ultra-luxurious rooms lay unused, yet they still incurred significant maintenance costs, driving up the hotel's operating expenses.

If not for the timely addition of the commoner areas next door, attracting numerous wealthy guests with brand appeal, and the opening of conference rooms with a commercial membership system, Franz would've been questioning his life choices.

Once again, reality proved that being too ahead of one's time could make one a martyr. In later eras, presidential suites were eagerly sought after by wealthy individuals, but in this period, the Imperial Palace was ignored.

Interestingly, the commercial membership system became a hit, with annual fees of 12,000 guilders and plenty of wealthy patrons eager to join.

Now, capitalists loved doing business at the Austrian International Hotel, not just to flaunt their wealth but also to demonstrate their own power and status.

People who can afford an annual membership fee of over ten thousand guilders aren't likely to be frauds. The hotel thoroughly vets members' credentials; without significant financial strength, one can't qualify for membership.

Despite incorporating all sorts of money-making schemes, the Austrian International Hotel's profits were still merely decent, highlighting how flawed Franz's initial planning was.

Lying in his hotel bed, Marquis Maclean had no interest in the hotel's opulence. After all, everything was arranged by the Austrian government, and he didn't have to spend a penny.

This was the benefit of a powerful nation. As the British Foreign Secretary, he was always well-accommodated wherever he went, unlike the Japanese delegation who had to find their own lodgings.

For Maclean, the more expensive, the better. He could later bill the expenses to the British government. It was a hidden perk, illustrating why this era was the best for British bureaucrats.

Why not stay at the embassy? Why insist on a luxury hotel?

These were minor issues. The British Empire had money to spare, especially for its bureaucrats. It was considered a travel allowance. After all, Britain's system wasn't fully refined, making it a golden age for profiting off one's position.

Pondering the day's negotiations, Maclean found it difficult to sleep. The French and Austrians were not very enthusiastic about their proposed alliance and even seemed somewhat resistant.

This indirectly confirmed that the Franco-Austrian alliance was real. Only if France and Austria were already allied would a three-nation alliance with Britain seem redundant.

This was very disadvantageous for his upcoming work. Without the cooperation of France and Austria, a three-nation alliance was simply unattainable.

How could he break up the Franco-Austrian alliance if he couldn't even join it? Maclean was now convinced of its existence. Unlike others, he believed that France and Austria might have reached an agreement on European matters.

This Vienna Conference provided evidence that France and Austria had aligned on the Italian issue, leaving only Central Europe as a point of contention.

However, the disputed Rhineland was currently under Prussian control, meaning France and Austria hadn't yet reached a direct confrontation.

If the two nations cooperated, Austria could annex the German Federal Empire while France annexed Italy.

Since the Rhineland wasn't their territory, neither would face significant political risk in abandoning it.

If compensation could be obtained from other regions, it was highly likely that France and Austria would compromise on this issue.

Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland could all become sacrificial lambs in a Franco-Austrian compromise. Nothing was off-limits in the face of interests.

This was not what the British government wanted. France and Austria were already powerful enough to threaten Britain's security. If they grew stronger, they would be unstoppable.

The plan was to incite a war between France and Austria, causing mutual destruction. The British government had no fewer than a hundred such plans, but executing them was another matter entirely.

Currently, France and Austria are counterbalancing each other, maintaining overall equilibrium on the European continent. If war broke out, that balance would be shattered.

If the conflict didn't result in mutual destruction and instead produced a swift victor, Europe would be dominated by a single power.

Another anti-French or anti-Austrian coalition? Only the idealistic dreamers believed in such possibilities.

The Russian Empire and the Prussia-Poland alliance were entrenched in their mutual hatred, making any alliance between them impossible. The remaining countries combined wouldn't be strong enough.

In such a scenario, Britain would have to intervene directly. Currently, anti-war sentiment was high within Britain. The recent wars of the past decade had made the British public very averse to conflict. Any decision to go to war would first require domestic approval.

Maclean was no idealist and didn't believe that European countries would follow Britain's script. Whether it was Napoleon III or Franz, their major achievements lay in politics.

Facing such opponents was far more challenging than dealing with Napoleon. If things went wrong, instead of turning against each other, France and Austria might instead unite against Britain. What then?

It was clear that the Franco-Austrian alliance hadn't disbanded. Who else could this alliance be directed against if not Britain?

Joining the alliance and then dividing France and Austria from within was the best strategy.

If that failed, the next best option would be for the three nations to rule the world together, with Britain maneuvering to become the leader of the alliance.

The British had considered all possibilities. The only remaining challenge was convincing France and Austria to agree to the alliance.

Maclean pondered this. The initial plan had failed. Now he had to figure out which territorial concessions could be offered to both countries while maximizing Britain's interests.

Giving up their own territory was out of the question. At most, Britain would sacrifice the interests of other countries, something they excelled at.

As the night deepened, Maclean fell asleep while mulling over these thoughts. In his dreams, he successfully navigated the diplomatic chessboard, securing Britain's dominance and becoming the greatest Prime Minister in British history.

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It wasn't just Maclean who was troubled by the potential three-nation alliance. In the brightly lit Palace of Versailles, Napoleon III was also grappling with this issue.

Don't think that being pro-British means one can't oppose Britain. In the face of interests, a politician's stance can change at any moment.

Napoleon III, who had lived in Britain, was well aware of how formidable the British could be. He even developed a fear of Britain for a time.

However, time has a way of easing all fears. Over his decade-long reign, Napoleon III's terror of the British gradually faded.

Today's France was far stronger than before, and the power gap with Britain was not as significant. Nonetheless, Napoleon III's wariness of the British never fully disappeared.

Despite Britain being a naval power, which posed a significant threat to France, it wasn't a fatal one. If it came down to it, France could achieve mutual destruction.

Oddly, though Austria, another land power, could pose a mortal threat to France. However, Napoleon III had full confidence in handling Austria and did not fear them as much.

Deep-seated perceptions significantly influence political direction.

This is similar to how Russia, despite its declining overall strength in later years, was still perceived as the world's second-strongest power. Conversely...

This issue was similar for Franz. He also feared the British but did not see the French as a lethal threat.

What does it matter if they're both land powers? The fact is, they don't feel intimidated. Geography dictates that it is difficult for France and Austria to reach each other's core regions.

The Alps are not suitable for large-scale military operations, which means attacking through Italy is not feasible. The other routes are even less promising.

Throughout both World Wars, Germany attacked France through Belgium, indicating the southern regions were not suitable for large-scale military actions.

Going through Belgium also means crossing Prussian territory before engaging each other.

Although European history lacks an allusion to the ancient Chinese strategy of "Obtaining safe passage to conquer the State of Guo", the Prussian government would not dare to allow passage. Even if they did, no one would dare to use it.

Unless Belgium and the Rhineland are occupied first, any army passing through would be cut off and face disaster.

Because they did not view each other as threats, France and Austria formed an alliance based on shared interests, both confident in eventually outmaneuvering the other.

But this approach doesn't work with the British. Neither the Austrian nor the French Navies had the strength to challenge the Royal Navy; the best outcome they could hope for was both sides suffering losses.

This is why, despite warming relations between France and Britain during the era of Napoleon III, the two nations never formed a formal alliance.

It is no different now. Both France and Austria view Britain as their greatest enemy, and the British hold the same view. Forming an alliance with one's enemy is naturally difficult.

Taking a sip of freshly brewed coffee, Napoleon III sighed. He did not want to confront the British, but John Bull continued to obstruct his plans to annex Italy.

Deep down, Napoleon III had already made up his mind. If the British were willing to accept French expansion, then they could form an alliance. Otherwise, there was no point in further discussions.

If an alliance did not bring benefits to France, there was no reason to entertain the idea.

Chapter 462: Bribery and Persuasion

The three-nation negotiations quickly reached a stalemate. The French demanded the annexation of Italy, while Austria proposed the incorporation of the German Federal Empire. These demands were unacceptable to the British.

This essentially meant unleashing two powerful empires at the same time. Even though France and Austria were already major empires, the British were unwilling to see them grow any stronger.

Britain's position as the world's leading power would be threatened if both France and Austria achieved their strategic goals.

It's important to note that France and Austria had never formally acknowledged Britain's supremacy. Voices within both nations continuously called for a challenge to British naval dominance.

The situation was no longer like twenty years ago, when British industrial output surpassed that of all of Europe combined, making Britain the undisputed leader.

However, this gap had been steadily narrowing with the completion of the industrial revolutions in other countries. Thanks to its vast human resources, Austria's annual industrial output was now nearly on par with Britain's.

France, too, was not far behind. If France were to annex Italy, it was estimated that within three to five years, its industrial output could surpass that of Britain.

This was the advantage of having a large landmass and a sizable population. While their per capita output might still lag behind, their sheer numbers made up for it.

Austria's population had already reached 69.76 million and was expected to surpass 70 million within the year. If France annexed Italy, its total population would exceed 54 million.

In contrast, the total population of the British Isles was only 32 million. Although their birth rate of 3.5% was significantly higher than that of France, it still lagged behind Austria's.

In the short term, these differences may not be apparent, but over time, the consequences could be disastrous.

There is never a shortage of smart people in this world, and the impact of population on national power is evident to some.

However, many in the British government were misled by Malthus' "An Essay on the Principle of Population," ignoring the advancements in productivity brought by the industrial age and the increased population capacity during the colonial era.

The Great Famine occurred under this theory, with government bureaucrats believing that the British Isles were already overpopulated, leading them to deliberately allow the famine to happen.

The theory wasn't entirely wrong; the land does have a limited capacity to support a population. However, Malthus' calculations were based on standards from the previous century and the feudal era.

The industrial age is different. According to Austrian population experts, Austria could support double its current population, and the colonies could sustain an additional 200 million people.

Franz didn't know if this estimate was scientifically accurate, but he used it as a basis to encourage population growth.

Of course, the main issue with the British wasn't the lack of people of British descent but the limited population in their homeland. There were plenty of English people overseas; otherwise, the colonial empire couldn't have been sustained.

The stalemate in the negotiations was expected. Alliances between major powers involve too many interests and cannot be sorted out quickly. It's normal for such negotiations to drag on for years.

The Franco-Austrian alliance itself took many years to form. Discussions on this topic have been ongoing since the French Revolution of 1848.

Midway through, due to changes in the French regime, the alliance was temporarily halted. However, by the late 1860s, the evolving international situation provided an opportunity for France and Austria to draw closer together.

Negotiations aside, underhanded tactics continued, though both sides tacitly toned them down.

Franz canceled the plan to occupy British South Africa, and the British abandoned their strategy of joining forces with Portugal to expel Austria from South Africa.

Yet, the struggle over the two Boer Republics persisted. It's no longer accurate to call them Boer Republics, as German had quietly become the dominant language there.

There was no need for promotion; the language became mainstream simply because so many people spoke it. The governments of the two Boer Republics were helpless in this matter. They didn't desire this outcome but had no means to change it.

The Boer people, from their inception, were steeped in a strong Germanic influence that was impossible to erase.

Even the Netherlands of this era was deeply influenced by Germanic culture, so it was even more so for this mixed-race nation.

Around 1830, approximately 12,000 Dutch settlers, unwilling to live under British rule, migrated and established the two Boer Republics.

To increase their population, they accepted European immigrants. Over a decade, about 8,000 immigrants from Germanic regions arrived, along with some French missionaries, leading to the birth of the Boer nation.

By the mid-19th century, the combined population of the two Boer Republics had exceeded 30,000.

Starting in 1856, the history of the Boer Republics changed dramatically as a large influx of German immigrants altered the demographic structure of these two countries.

Rejecting German immigrants was not an option, as half of the Boer population had German ancestry, and such a move could easily lead to internal conflict.

So, the plan shifted to assimilation. Despite the efforts of the two Boer Republic governments, they couldn't withstand the sheer number of immigrants from German-speaking regions.

In the end, assimilation was successful, but it went in the opposite direction of the original plan. With the increasing Anglo-Boer conflicts, the two Boer Republics had to align themselves with Austria for support.

This political shift led the governments of the two Boer Republics to abandon their initial plans, making German the dominant language.

As the situation developed, the two Boer Republics essentially became Germanic states, and aligning with Austria became inevitable.

Franz placed great importance on the South African region. Aside from its fertile land, the underground gold reserves were a crucial part of Austria's future strategic interests.

No one would give up monetary hegemony. The British were working on the "Pound-Gold System," the French on the "Franc System," and Austria was no exception, establishing the "Guilder-Gold System."

To become the ultimate victor in this race, it was not only necessary to have a strong industrial base but also to hold the largest gold reserves. Without enough gold, there was no contest for gold standard dominance.

This wasn't about ambition. Franz initially had no intention of competing with the British for monetary hegemony, but as Austria's power grew, the stakes and interests compelled Austria to move forward.

Even if the government remains inactive, capital will still move on its own. Although the struggle for international monetary hegemony hasn't reached its most desperate point, the financial capitalists of the three nations are already at each other's throats.

Unlike the overt struggle for global supremacy, the fight for monetary dominance is much more subtle. The battle has already begun without ordinary people noticing.

In the original timeline, the British took advantage of the Franco-Prussian War to severely weaken France and secure their ultimate victory.

Of course, even as the loser, France managed to gain a piece of the pie, with the franc becoming a major international hard currency second only to the pound. Other countries, however, were left struggling.

As a rising power, the German Empire found itself unable to gather enough gold when it attempted a gold standard reform, ultimately being forced to compromise with the British.

In the current contest for monetary supremacy among Britain, France, and Austria, the gold-poor French have already bowed out. Despite forming the Latin Monetary Union with Switzerland, Belgium, and the Italian states, they couldn't change their fortunes.

John Bull already possesses the gold of Australia and Canada, while Austria has secured most of the gold from West Africa, and the French, lacking sufficient gold, still cling to the bimetallic standard of gold and silver.

If it weren't for the fact that the French had nothing worth Franz's interest, he might have considered revealing Alaska's gold and striking a deal with Napoleon III.

After all, with control over South African gold, Austria's "Guilder-Gold System" would be secure. However, Austria alone didn't have the power to monopolize monetary hegemony.

No, it should be said that anything Franz coveted, the French wouldn't give, and anything the French could offer, Franz didn't want.

Thus, no deal could be made. If a time traveler were to look at the map, they would see that more than half of the world's top ten gold mines are in Austrian-controlled territories.

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After the fresh rain, the air was exceptionally crisp. However, the dark clouds above President Pretorius' head hadn't dispersed, and a few more wrinkles had appeared on his forehead.

He was also a prominent figure in Africa during this era. In 1857, he became president of the Transvaal Republic, and in 1859, he was elected president of the Orange Free State, simultaneously holding the presidency of two countries—a historical first.

Born in 1819, Pretorius became president before turning thirty, reaching the pinnacle of his career. This should have been his time to shine.

However, the reality was quite the opposite. Now in his third term, President Pretorius had long lost his initial vigor, left only with a face full of worry.

The movement he led to merge the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State had failed once again. Unlike before, this time it was a complete failure, with no chance for another attempt.

There was no way around it; the Austrian government opposed the establishment of a South African Republic. The Boer Republic elites, who had already aligned with Austria, didn't hesitate to sell out the government.

Now both sides were negotiating the price. As long as the benefits were right, the Transvaal Republic and Orange Free State would soon become history, and his presidential term would end prematurely.

Pretorius had planned to merge the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State to establish the South African Republic, then join the Holy Roman Empire as a single country.

Unfortunately, this plan was opposed by the Austrian government. The Emperor didn't want to see a republic emerge, a reason that left him speechless.

Barring any unexpected events, the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State would become part of Austrian Africa, and then become members of the empire through integration.

Everyone has their own interests, and the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State are small countries without any bargaining power.

As newly established countries, people's sense of identity wasn't strong to begin with, especially among the newly arrived German immigrants who identified more with the Holy Roman Empire than with the republics.

There were too many clever people who understood that fighting for the interests of a newborn country would yield less personal benefit than fighting for their own interests.

Opportunities to enter the nobility were rare and couldn't be missed. As for the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, how could these emerging countries compare to the Holy Roman Empire?

If they didn't agree? Then their agreement wouldn't be needed; someone below would take their place.

Public opinion wasn't an issue either. The crowds demonstrating outside proved that joining the Holy Roman Empire aligned with the public will.

The clever Pretorius wouldn't try to stop a moving train. With Austria's influence in the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, replacing a president would be far too easy.

It wasn't that he didn't try. After taking office, Pretorius worked hard to introduce Dutch immigrants to reduce Austrian influence, but the Dutch government opposed it.

The reason was simple: the Netherlands, being a small country with a limited population, was busy expanding in Southeast Asia. They didn't have enough people to send to Indonesia, let alone support them.

In this situation, Pretorius was powerless. Investing in them clearly wouldn't yield returns. Caught between Britain and Austria, the Boer republics' fate was sealed from the beginning.

President Pretorius asked with concern, "Caren, how are the negotiations with the Austrians going?"

As president, not even being qualified to join the negotiation table was truly a tragedy.

There was no choice. Who told President Pretorius to insist on merging the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State to establish the South African Republic before negotiating with the Austrians?

The Austrian government simply ignored him, bypassing the president to negotiate directly with the power players within the Boer republics.

There was nothing to be done. Even President Pretorius' confidants didn't reject Austria's solicitation.

In the face of benefits, everyone's integrity diminished. Those who actively cooperated had the chance to become nobles and maintain their ruling position in the new era.

If they chose the wrong side, they would be marginalized in the new round of power reshuffling.

In this age where the strong devoured the weak, once eliminated, they didn't need others to act; yesterday's companions would swallow up their interests.

Pretorius was, after all, the president. As a figurehead, as long as he didn't openly oppose, the Austrian government would arrange for him properly for the sake of appearances. This was why he could stay in his position.

It's worth noting that Pretorius became president not just because of his father's political legacy, but also due to his own political acumen.

He understood the principle that you can't swim against the tide. Since he couldn't stop it, he had to find a way to participate. Staying informed about the negotiation process was thus essential.

Chapter 463: Inverting Right and Wrong

Hearing the president's question, Caren was startled but quickly concealed her nervousness, replying, "We've reached a general consensus, but some details are yet to be settled."

Pretorius, maintaining his composure, said, "I see. You may go now."

His voice carried a hint of worry, clearly indicating his inner turmoil. Pretorius was no saint; he couldn't remain completely detached in the face of personal interests.

Caren's expression hadn't escaped his notice. If his suspicions were correct, this confidant of his had likely been in contact with the Austrians, possibly even betraying him.

Being intelligent enough to reach his current position, Pretorius naturally wouldn't try to verify whether Caren had betrayed him or not.

At this point, it didn't matter anymore. Even if she had remained loyal to him, refusing the Austrians' bribes and confessing everything to him, what difference would it make?

Pretorius couldn't do anything against the Austrians and he couldn't even protest to the Austrian government. He would lose even the last of his preferential treatment if they openly fell out.

If the negotiations between the domestic power players and the Austrians weren't going smoothly, he as president might still have a role to play. But now that everything was proceeding smoothly, he was no longer needed.

Initially, Pretorius had planned to negotiate with the Austrians in the name of the government, to secure more favorable political positions for everyone.

Reality was a harsh slap in the face. After the Austrian government began to divide and win people over, they changed their stance one by one. How could the benefits gained by the country compare to personal gains?

Merging the two Boer republics and joining the Holy Roman Empire as a state would indeed secure better political status.

However, this way, their personal gains would be minimal. Without making significant contributions, dreaming of becoming nobility was futile!

Although privileges were restricted, noble titles were still very tempting in this era. After Franz made his offer, many people's attitudes changed.

Since the Austrian government insisted on removing the republics, and resistance was futile, why not sell out the Boer republics in exchange for a noble title and become a lord in the Holy Roman Empire?

As for the future of the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, what did that matter to them?

They were either Dutch or German, once members of the Holy Roman Empire, and now they were simply returning to their ancestral country.

Even President Pretorius wasn't prepared to fight Austria to the bitter end, so how could he expect others to do so?

Not long ago, the British had contacted anti-Austrian forces, which were then seized upon by pro-Austrian factions as an opportunity to launch a political offensive, completely driving them out of the center of power.

If Pretorius hadn't been smart enough to decisively reject the British, the presidency would have changed hands by now.

At present, what Pretorius most hoped for was British intervention. Only if the situation spiraled out of control would there be room for him as president to play a role, and incidentally, to sell himself at a good price.

There was no choice; now anyone could sell out the country, except for him as the president. Otherwise, even if he became a noble, he wouldn't be able to fit into the aristocratic circle.

Nobles also needed a reputation, especially new nobles. The first step to integrate into the circle was to cleanse their image and establish legitimacy.

Pretorius didn't want to exit the political stage just yet, so naturally, he couldn't actively approach them. Apart from privately indicating his stance to the Austrian government, he couldn't do anything publicly.

Under normal circumstances, after joining Austria, he would become the Governor-General of Austrian South Africa. Once the power transition was complete, he could retire to the homeland with a noble title.

To become a governor with real power, the British would have to invade, and Austria would then need him to stabilize the situation.

For his own interests, Pretorius had made preparations. Since defeating the Zulus, he had intentionally neglected military readiness.

On one hand, this was to show the Austrian government his lack of ambition; on the other hand, it exposed a weakness to the British, attempting to lure them into action.

The South African strategy proposed by Governor Delf to the British government was based on this premise.

It's worth noting that due to Austria's influx of immigrants to the Boer republics, the current strength of the two Boer republics far exceeded their counterparts in the original timeline at this time.

If fully armed, combined with Austria's power in South Africa, the British, even allied with the Portuguese, wouldn't have much chance of victory.

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In an estate in Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal Republic, former president Schoeman was hosting Viscount Falkner, the Austrian representative.

No one would turn down more merits. Since the Austrian government decided to annex the two Boer republics, the nobles on the African continent had sprung into action.

Viscount Falkner, who had made his fortune by establishing colonies, naturally didn't want to be left behind. Although he had recently advanced from hereditary baron to hereditary viscount, further advancement seemed almost impossible.

Living off past accomplishments wasn't a problem, but he had too many sons!

The eldest would naturally inherit the title and most of the estate, while the two younger sons would only get a portion of the property, becoming branches of nobility dependent on their elder brother. Their next generation would then be commoners.

The doting former Baron naturally didn't want to see this happen. The great and merciful Emperor Franz had considered this problem for them in advance.

He allowed them to earn merits and acquire more noble titles, while also permitting them to apply for these titles to be inherited separately by multiple heirs.

Of course, the inheritors must be in a parent-child relationship. For other inheritance situations, they could only follow the original title inheritance laws.

The main purpose was to curb the buying and selling of titles. According to the new nobility law, nobles could only sell their titles to the Austrian government, and private transactions of titles were prohibited.

There was no choice; the world never lacks prodigal sons. If a title auction were to emerge, the impact on the noble system would be unimaginable.

To avoid this worst-case scenario, Franz directly cut off hereditary title transactions at the source. There was no need to worry about non-hereditary noble titles, as they couldn't be inherited anyway.

If a prodigal son really wanted to sell, the Austrian government was open to buying back, offering very high prices.

The lowest rank of hereditary knight was worth 50,000 guilders while the highest rank of kingship was priced at an astronomical 10 million guilders.

Of course, this only applied to titles bestowed by Franz, and they had to be reclaimed along with the fiefs. Empty titles would certainly be discounted.

For titles granted before this, pricing would be based on actual circumstances. Basically, Franz recognized all titles granted by the Habsburg dynasty, while those bestowed by others were bought back at bargain prices. Foreign titles were not included in the buyback scheme.

With the value established, everyone became even more enthusiastic about noble titles. The powers of great nobles were restricted, and the vassal nobles they appointed were no longer recognized by the state.

This included several state kings; they too could no longer arbitrarily grant nobility. The empire would not recognize those ennobled without sufficient merit.

From the initial quota restrictions to the current merit assessment, Franz successfully took away the right to grant titles from the state kings.

Selling a title wasn't a simple matter either. It required the agreement of all legal heirs, which was almost impossible.

Nobles had a large group of relatives. No matter how far down the line of succession, as long as they had inheritance rights, even indirect ones, they were heirs. It wasn't impossible for a single title to have over a thousand heirs.

This inheritance relationship was probably enough to drive people crazy. Expecting everyone to agree was as likely as expecting them all to drop dead at once.

Viscount Falkner said elegantly, "Mr. Schoeman, we must accelerate our pace. From what I know, our neighbors, the British, are training native troops and might cause trouble.

His Majesty doesn't want to see a chaotic South Africa, so we must act preemptively. Once the merger is complete, the British won't dare to make any small moves."

This was the hidden rule among the great powers; in colonial activities, everyone was intentionally controlling the scope of conflicts.

Before a colony was actually controlled, it was considered no man's land, and everyone could use their own methods. Once it came under another's actual control, any action would be considered an invasion.

Generally, this situation wouldn't occur, and if it did, it meant war.

If they didn't want to confront directly, even if they wanted to grab territory, they would usually only act covertly to squeeze the other party out.

If everyone hadn't been exercising restraint in colonial activities, with so many conflicts occurring between countries, the major colonial empires would have long been fighting a devastating war.

Schoeman had been the acting president of the Transvaal Republic for a while. Although his personal reputation wasn't great, he wielded considerable power.

Due to a business encounter, he had met Viscount Falkner by chance, with the two merely being acquaintances. Under normal circumstances, this level of relationship was barely different from being strangers.

However, as the situation changed, the two were brought together again.

Viscount Falkner needed to win over the power players in the Transvaal Republic to join the Austrian colonial system. Meanwhile, Schoeman needed to establish connections with Austria to protect his own interests in the new era.

The two hit it off immediately, instantly becoming "good" friends.

Having decided to side with Austria, Schoeman naturally didn't hesitate. After some thought, he replied, "Your Lordship, I will expedite the process. However, this still requires some time. Public opinion is just beginning to be shaped, and we need to accumulate momentum for a while before reaching its peak.

If we act prematurely, unexpected issues might arise. After all, there are still some 'flies' that haven't been cleaned up, and their existence poses a potential threat."

Political struggles rarely involve complete elimination, but this time was clearly an exception. To create the grand spectacle of the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State's people unanimously demanding to return to the Holy Roman Empire, it was necessary to remove all potential threats.

This concerned Emperor Franz's reputation. Directly annexing two independent countries would create a terrible impression. Using the pretext of the Holy Roman Empire's subjects requesting to return to their motherland would make the whole affair look much better.

After all, tracing back their ancestry, the Boers were originally from the Holy Roman Empire, and their cultural traditions were in line with it. There was no fear of anyone picking holes in this narrative. As long as they themselves insisted on returning to their motherland, the legal issues would be perfectly resolved.

If it weren't for concerns about appearances, the Austrian government wouldn't need to go to such lengths as a direct military takeover would have been more convenient.

Even if the current Boer republics wanted to resist militarily, they would first have to consider whether their German-descended soldiers might suddenly switch sides.

Viscount Falkner said sternly, "These flies must be swatted to death. Since they dare to collude with the British and betray the empire, they must pay a bloody price."

On the issue of protecting imperial interests, Viscount Falkner's stance was very firm. In his view, any traitor deserved death.

Although these people weren't actually Austrians and there was no so-called betrayal, standing in opposition to the empire meant they had to die.

Austria now needed to kill the chicken to scare the monkey. Otherwise, how could they intimidate these newly-allied fence-sitters?

Falkner didn't believe these people, who could sell out their own country, would have much loyalty to Austria. The best method, naturally, was to make them too afraid to betray.

Making them personally eliminate the anti-Austrian faction would both serve as a pledge of allegiance and make them understand the price of opposing Austria.

Smart people always make choices that benefit themselves most, and Schoeman was a smart person. Even knowing this was Viscount Falkner's scheme, he decided to play dumb.

He immediately guaranteed, "Your Lordship, please rest assured. We will root out all these spies lurking within the empire and bring them to justice!"

Heaven knows when the anti-Austrian faction within the Boer republics had suddenly become British spies, or how they had infiltrated the Holy Roman Empire.

If they were to discuss traitors, it seemed they themselves were more fitting of the description. They directly handed over the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State to Austria in exchange for personal benefits.

Viscount Falkner smiled slightly, raising his wine glass and saying, “Then I shall congratulate you in advance, future Baron Schoeman.”

After speaking, he clinked glasses with Schoeman and drank it all in one gulp, as if truly happy for his friend’s acquisition of a title.

The cunning Schoeman could no longer maintain his composure, instantly breaking into a smile. In this era, crossing from commoner to nobility was no easy feat, let alone becoming a hereditary noble.

Previously, both parties had agreed on terms: as long as a smooth transition was completed, Schoeman would become a Baron with a fief.

Schoeman replied with a slightly trembling voice, “Thank you, Your Lordship!”

There was no choice; they weren’t true friends before, so formality was necessary.

However, the future might be different. Viscount Falkner wouldn’t befriend a commoner, but he wouldn’t reject friendship with a noble.

Status determined their mode of interaction. Since Schoeman was willing to cooperate, he was now one of their own.

In high spirits, Falkner, considering their slight acquaintance, advised, “Old friend, you now need an etiquette teacher. After matters here are settled, you’ll need to go to Vienna to receive His Majesty’s investiture to become a true noble.

There can’t be the slightest mistake during the noble investiture ceremony, otherwise, you’ll become a laughingstock among the nobility, never able to hold your head high again.

Although the government will arrange an etiquette teacher, the learning time will be too short. To ensure everything goes smoothly, you’d better start learning in advance.”

This was true. Committing a faux pas during the noble investiture ceremony had severe consequences and would be seen as a sign of poor breeding.

At best, it would lead to public embarrassment and becoming the butt of jokes in noble circles; at worst, it could result in directly losing the title.

Schoeman’s face changed dramatically as he hurriedly thanked Viscount Falkner.

Chapter 464: Everyone Has Their Own Agenda

“Killing the chicken to scare the monkey” isn’t as easy to execute as it seems. First of all, the chicken chosen to be killed won’t agree. If the butcher’s technique isn’t skilled enough, the chicken might just fly away.

In politics, no one is a fool. Everyone in the circle has their own hidden cards.

The news of the Austrian delegation's arrival wasn't a secret at all. Since the Austrian government wants to annex the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, it's normal for them to try to win over these influential figures.

Don't assume that just because they're politically anti-Austrian, they truly harbor a deep hatred for Austria and will fight to the bitter end.

Except for a few naive youngsters, the old hands are only anti-Austrian out of political necessity. If joining Austrian Africa can benefit some, naturally others will suffer losses. It's impossible to satisfy everyone's interests.

Those whose interests are harmed will naturally oppose the merger. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, this applies both in the East and West. How can one gain benefits without crying or making a fuss?

To gain more benefits, the anti-Austrian faction was thus formed. There are intricate connections between the pro-Austrian and anti-Austrian factions, some even hedging their bets on both sides.

Not everyone could have predicted that Austria's expansion would be so rapid. Before they could react, Austria was already at their doorstep, discussing the merger issue.

Turning back immediately was clearly too late already. But the anti-Austrian faction also had its backers, such as the British and Portuguese who they were secretly colluding with.

The tragedy was that Austria now held great power on the African continent. The Portuguese didn't dare to make trouble, and the British likewise lacked sufficient strength to suppress Austria.

The tide of history isn't something an individual can reverse. Many people were prepared to switch sides, just waiting for Austria to make an offer.

But plans could never keep up as quickly as reality. Viscount Falkner, who was leading this operation, didn't play by the rules. After winning over the pro-Austrian faction, he ceased further action.

Some who couldn't contain their impatience even offered themselves up, but were turned away. Viscount Falkner had no intention of accepting them.

At this time, the situation in the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State also changed. The pro-Austrian faction suddenly launched a political offensive against them.

The clever ones knew a storm was coming. As those who had chosen the wrong side this time, danger was approaching them. The pro-Austrian faction wasn't monolithic either; it was normal for a few anti-Austrian elements to be hidden among them, and the news leaked out.

Looking at the intelligence reports in his hand, Willem, one of the anti-Austrian political leaders, was furious. Was it necessary to call for such violence just because of a few slogans?

Although they were "anti-Austrian," in reality, this stance was limited to propaganda. In their work, no one dared to truly provoke Austria.

Weak countries have no diplomacy—this international rule applied in South Africa as well. Being "anti-Austrian" was fine to say, but truly opposing Austria would only bring trouble to themselves.

This time was different. It wasn't about them opposing Austria, but Austria using their heads to establish authority.

Willem was now in a dilemma. It was too late to defect, and changing political stance also required time—time the enemy clearly wouldn't give him.

The Austrians wanted to make an example, and those who threw themselves into Austria's embrace needed to offer their heads as a pledge of loyalty. In this critical moment, Willem had to think of a way out.

At this point, he thought of the British. The British had contacted him not long ago, but at that time the situation wasn't nearly as dire as it was now, and Willem hadn't wanted to take the risk.

After some hesitation, Willem decided to probe once more, "Raúl, immediately notify our old friends Schoeman, Field, Lankes, and Tayron. We're having a banquet tonight."

The Transvaal Republic wasn't large, and as a new country, its upper circles were even smaller. The power struggle wasn't as intense as outsiders might imagine.

Despite their different political stances, Willem could still communicate with these pro-Austrian leaders. Now, if he wanted to escape unscathed, he needed their help.

If he could get away safely, Willem didn't mind giving up some interests as the price for choosing the wrong side.

The servant Raúl replied, "Yes, Mr. Willem!"

While probing, Willem was also preparing for the worst. After Raúl left, he secretly sent someone to contact the British.

As a world power, the Austrian government had a reputation to maintain. Even if they wanted to make an example, they couldn't act directly.

A plausible crime was necessary. The anti-Austrian faction led by Willem wasn't without power. Even if high-level government officials who had defected to Austria wanted to act, they would need time to gather evidence.

This gave the anti-Austrian faction an opportunity. In the face of a life-and-death crisis, people often unleash their greatest potential.

Viscount Falkner coldly observed the internal strife erupting in the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State. He didn't care whether the anti-Austrian faction would take desperate measures.

As one of Austria's earliest colonizers, Viscount Falkner wasn't afraid of war. Even if the anti-Austrian faction were to collude with the British to overthrow the rule of the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, he was not afraid.

The African continent wasn't peaceful these days, and Falkner, as Austria's representative, wasn't unprepared.

Recently, a large number of Austrian merchant caravans had entered the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, but not all were there for business.

If one paid attention, one would notice that the caravan members all had a murderous aura, and the goods they were escorting weren't ordinary merchandise. Some sealed boxes clearly contained cannons.

Some of these people were troops stationed in the Austrian Central and Southern African regions, but most were private armies of nobles. For a mining tycoon like Viscount Falkner, how could he face people without several hundred private soldiers?

Everyone was well-informed. While distant nobles might be beyond reach, the nearby ones were a different story. How could they miss out on such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

If things were resolved peacefully, it would be considered an armed military exercise. If the situation got out of control and required military intervention, it would be a chance for military merit delivered to their doorstep.

Many people hoped the British would attack, giving them a chance to score achievements. This wasn't arrogance; they truly had the capability.

Most of Austria's African colonies were conquered by these private armies. In the African jungle, the combat effectiveness of these armies was absolutely top-tier for this era.

If they relied solely on government troops, even if all of Austria's army was sent over, they wouldn't be able to control half of the African continent in a short time.

With the vast and sparsely populated African continent, Austria couldn't establish administrative agencies everywhere. Thus, enfeoffing nobles was the cheapest way to rule.

As long as they could suppress the high-ranking nobles, there was no need to fear these middle and lower-ranking nobles with several hundred private soldiers.

Besides these troops, there were also a large number of German immigrants in the area. If war broke out, the nobles could quickly recruit local young and able-bodied men.

With a few thousand veterans as the core, plus a group of young and able-bodied recruits, they could quickly organize an army of tens of thousands. At that point, the outcome of any conflict would be uncertain.

Franz had given up the plan to occupy British South Africa, but this didn't mean the colonial nobles had abandoned it. Many still coveted Cape Town.

The Emperor wouldn't allow war to start, and no one could afford the responsibility of initiating a conflict. Naturally, they couldn't launch an attack proactively, but this didn't mean they couldn't provoke the British into attacking.

If the British invaded first, then the responsibility for the war wouldn't lie with them. Instead, fighting to defend the empire's interests would only earn Franz's praise.

Viscount Falkner was one of these war hawks, advocating for the expulsion of all European countries and Austria's monopoly over the entire African continent.

Whether this could be achieved or not, having an ambitious goal was always good. Austria's strength on the African continent gave them this ambition.

Purely in terms of military force on the African continent, Austria had already surpassed the total of all other countries. Of course, this didn't mean Austria had an absolute advantage over all countries; in some local areas, Austria was still at a disadvantage.

For example, in South Africa, Austria wasn't afraid of facing either Britain or Portugal alone. But if Britain and Portugal joined forces, the situation would change.

Many people had a sense of shared fate; once Austria launched an attack on colonies owned by other countries, it was very likely that various countries would set aside their differences and unite.

The First World War in the original timeline was a classic example. After the rise of the German Empire, they failed to manage their diplomacy well. Their aggressive style turned the conflicting Britain, France, and Russia into allies.

Although Franz had suppressed domestic expansionism, he couldn't prevent his subordinates from deliberately setting traps to provoke the British into attacking.

This was like a version of their previous entrapment. If they openly revealed their strength, the British certainly wouldn't dare to come knocking.

Now it was different. Whether it was the Austrian nobles, the scheming Pretorius, or the anti-Austrian faction, they all needed the British to attack.

These people all intentionally concealed their intentions. The pro-Austrian faction was even less likely to inform the British. Moreover, many people only sensed something was amiss but didn't know this was a trap prepared for the British.

The idea of a "British-Austrian War" was unthinkable for many. Even Viscount Falkner wasn't prepared to provoke a full-scale war between the two countries. They were self-aware enough to know that their navy was no match for the Royal Navy.

From the beginning, they hadn't flown the Austrian flag. The main fighting force was the nobles' private armies, operating under the guise of the Boer Republics to confront the British.

Even if the truth was exposed, it would be the noble lords fighting the British, not necessarily meaning their country had to go to war with Britain. This was very reminiscent of the Holy Roman Empire.

In the past, when the Emperor fought the French, the nobles of the Holy Roman Empire could remain neutral. Now, when noble lords fought the British, the imperial government could naturally remain neutral as well.

If they won the war, the Boer Republics would occupy British South Africa, then create a reason for the empire to annex the Boer Republics, inheriting this part of the legacy.

Without ruining their face, the British could at most protest or seek revenge when an opportunity arose, but the situation would still be under control.

If they lost the war, it wouldn't matter. That would be the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State losing, what did it have to do with Austria?

At worst, the Austrian government would step in to mediate the conflict. If the British accepted, that would be fine. If they refused, the nobles' private armies could bring their own provisions and continue to fight the British.

Of course, Franz would have to recognize these military achievements. The rewards couldn't be reduced at all, and the Austrian government would ultimately have to compensate for the nobles' losses.

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In Cape Town, Governor Delf was very depressed. The British government had just announced the cancellation of the plan, and now the Boers were coming to cooperate.

As an ambitious governor, Delf didn't want to be a passive bystander. He still wanted to achieve some outstanding accomplishments to enter Britain's core of power.

"What do the Portuguese say? Are they interested in Transvaal?" Governor Delf asked with concern.

Austria hadn't yet completed the annexation of the Boer Republics, so everyone was still using their own methods.

To ensure success, he was planning to join forces with the Portuguese to act first, dividing up the Boer Republics and then creating a fait accompli.

Marco, in charge of foreign affairs, waved his hand and said helplessly, "I'm sorry, Governor. The Portuguese have clearly refused us. It might be related to their recent domestic situation. The Portuguese government has ordered all colonies not to provoke incidents on their own."

At this time, Portugal's domestic situation had become unstable. The power of the liberal and republican factions was growing, and King Luís was struggling to maintain control.

With internal troubles, they naturally dared not create external problems. If they encountered failure, it would lead to another political storm.

The Boer Republics seemed easy to deal with, but just thinking about the Austrians behind them made the Portuguese colonial government in Mozambique lose interest.

This answer greatly displeased Governor Delf. He had been thinking of giving the Portuguese a share of the benefits to win them over in containing Austrian expansion.

Now it wasn't necessary. Since the Portuguese didn't dare to act, he would do it himself. The British government had only canceled actions against Austria but hadn't said anything about not attacking the Boer Republics.

He didn't take these two small countries seriously. In the past two years, the Boers had relied on Austria and neglected their military.

While it wasn't to the point of "putting away weapons and releasing horses into the mountains," national military training indeed hadn't been conducted much. The largest armed force in the Boer Republics was just a group of police.

A standing army wasn't something a small country of one or two hundred thousand people could afford. In wartime, they would just temporarily recruit young men.

Governor Delf frowned and said, dissatisfied, "Forget it. Since the Portuguese don't know what's good for them, let them regret it in the future!"

We can do it ourselves now. Austria has only about a thousand troops stationed in Central and Southern Africa. Even if they conduct temporary recruitment, it would be at most three to five thousand men.

Even if the Austrians want to intervene, they have to wait for their reinforcements from Congo to arrive. Currently, there's no sign of troop movement in any of Austria's stationed forces.

From the time we take action, it will take at least two months for the Austrians to gather enough troops to intervene.

Two months is enough time for us to defeat the Boers. If something unexpected happens, we'll immediately withdraw and divide the Boer Republics with the Austrians."

Though he appeared confident, Governor Delf was actually quite anxious. The failed expedition from years ago was still fresh in his mind.

Major General Friedman of the colonial garrison immediately assured, "Governor, rest assured, we are one hundred percent confident that we can defeat this pack of beaten dogs."

The Boers had originally been driven by the British from the Cape Town area to the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State. Facing their former vanquished foes, Major General Friedman was naturally full of confidence.

Chapter 465: The Anglo-Boer War Erupts

On May 12, 1870, Governor Delf led an army of 30,000 to invade the Orange Free State, marking the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War.

When the news spread, the Boers were instantly thrown into a panic, and the estate where Viscount Falkner was temporarily residing quickly became crowded with guests.

The Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State were practically united, always joining forces against the British.

The disparity in strength was too great, and no one had confidence in defeating the British. Historically, the Boer Republics had always chosen to yield in the face of the British.

But that was before. Now the situation had changed. Since everyone was about to join Austria, they naturally wouldn't fear the British anymore.

At this time, people were visiting for two main reasons: first, to declare their stance and publicly align themselves with Viscount Falkner; second, to seek Austrian intervention in the war.

Viscount Falkner confidently said, "Don't worry, everyone. The British army looks impressive on the outside, but they're actually weak inside.

The British garrison in Cape Town won't exceed 3,000, and the British government hasn't made any major troop movements recently.

Even if the Cape Town colonial government had recruited civilian militias, the combat-effective troops wouldn't exceed 5,000. As for the rest of the British army, you can imagine what they're like."

No one knows themselves better than their enemies. The competition between Britain and Austria in South Africa had been ongoing for some time, with both sides constantly gathering intelligence on each other.

While it's impossible to monitor scattered civilian militias, the movements of military forces were closely watched.

Both Britain and Austria, being colonial powers, couldn't station large numbers of regular troops in one region since even a million soldiers wouldn't suffice if they did.

Thus, maintaining local stability fell to colonial armies and civilian militias. The British relied more on colonial companies, while Austria primarily depended on the private armies of nobles.

Of course, there was no essential difference between the two. The main fighting force of British colonization was still the children of nobles. The difference was that British capitalist power was stronger, while Austrian capitalists were in a subordinate position.

Each approach had its advantages and disadvantages, shaped by their respective national circumstances which no individual could change.

The Austrian model had the advantage of strengthening imperial authority. With new blood supplementing their ranks, the noble class' power was reinforced, naturally solidifying the emperor's position.

In external expansions, this model also demonstrated stronger combat effectiveness, as fighting for oneself was more motivating than fighting for others.

This was evident now: the British had to negotiate terms to mobilize civilian militias for battle, and insufficient incentives would lead to reluctance and half-hearted efforts.

In contrast, Austrian nobles actively sought battle, which was a matter of profit distribution. A significant portion of British colonial profits went into the pockets of capitalists, while in Austria, the nobles took the lion's share.

It wasn't that Austrian capitalists didn't participate in colonization, but in the process of achieving results, they had already completed the transformation into nobles.

With the change in class, their stance naturally changed as well. People always tend to gravitate towards their own interests and naturally choose the side most beneficial to them.

Now that war had broken out, despite not showing it outwardly, Viscount Falkner was inwardly overjoyed.

Even a temporary defeat in the war wouldn't matter much. It would still provide an opportunity to strike at local vested interests and prevent these upstarts from becoming too powerful.

Austria's ultimate victory was certain, a confidence stemming from their strength.

Viscount Falkner was in no hurry. He had already discussed with the nobles eager for military glory that they would not take action until they secured significant control locally.

Maxlin, a capitalist from the Orange Free State, anxiously said, "Lord Viscount, this British army may not be significant for your country, but for the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, it is a disaster. Without your country's intervention, we simply cannot match the British. We can't sustain this war with our forces alone."

Although he appeared panicked, in reality, he was expressing dissatisfaction.

However, to Viscount Falkner, these words took on a different meaning. He had already mentally marked Maxlin as unusable.

The term "your country" clearly indicated that Maxlin had not yet accepted Austria. The words "can't sustain this war" seemed like a threat to Viscount Falkner.

If Maxlin had known what Falkner was thinking, he would have been devastated. His business was primarily in the Orange Free State, and he would suffer heavy losses once war broke out.

In his anxiety, he had spoken without thinking and never imagined that Viscount Falkner would read so much into it.

Although Maxlin was involved in politics, how could the politics of the Boer Republics compare to those of Austria? They never paid much attention to such nuances in their statements.

Seeing everyone's expressions, Viscount Falkner mistakenly thought they were pressuring him. This wonderful misunderstanding would lead to many of those present suffering significant consequences in the ensuing war.

For now, these people were still useful, so Viscount Falkner wouldn't immediately turn against them. He immediately reassured, "Gentlemen, do not worry. If the situation turns unfavorable, Austria will not sit idly by.

The British dare to act because they do not take Austria seriously. We must retaliate and teach them a bloody lesson.

However, both Britain and Austria are great powers. Direct conflict could trigger a full-scale war in Europe, which I believe none of us want to see.

Therefore, we will fight the British under the banner of the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State. Do not hold back; use whatever means necessary.

Regardless of the outcome, Austria will bear the consequences. Do not fear British retaliation.

The Austrian government has authorized us to teach the British a lesson in South Africa. Reinforcements will arrive shortly. You only need to hold out for one to two months."

This assurance reassured many. As long as Austria had not abandoned the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, this war could still be fought.

The Boers did not lack the courage to fight. In the original timeline, they dared to fight the British. Now, with Austria backing them, they were even less afraid of war with the British.

At this moment, Schoeman suddenly asked, "Sir, if we are not to openly confront the British, what about reinforcements? If we use African native troops, they might not be a match for the British."

Out of the current thirty thousand British troops, more than twenty thousand were local natives. Without them, Cape Town would not be able to field thirty thousand troops.

These native troops had very limited combat effectiveness. While they might not lack bravery, their overall quality was far inferior.

The Boers had also trained native troops, but no matter how hard they tried, the trained troops never had much combat power.

Now hearing about reinforcements, Schoeman's first thought was native troops. After all, in a situation where they weren't openly facing the British, using native troops was the easiest way to hide their identity.

Even if the British captured prisoners, these people's words couldn't be used as evidence.

Viscount Falkner shook his head and calmly said, “Just because government troops can’t be deployed doesn’t mean we have no troops to use. The various civilian militias in Austrian Africa total over 300,000. You can give them citizenship and have them participate in the war as regular Transvaal troops.”

Viscount Falkner was still mindful of his reputation and never mentioned the matter of the nobles’ private armies. Otherwise, everyone would know he was there to rack up military achievements.

Although the British army had a lot of native troops, they still bore the banner of the British Empire. Defeating them counted as defeating a regular army, which carried much higher prestige than fighting African natives.

Military achievements were graded, and without this distinction, Austria would have long been full of renowned generals and nobles.

If you came across a battle report detailing a small unit of a few hundred men fighting dozens of battles, killing thousands, and capturing tens of thousands, it wouldn’t be surprising.

This was typical in Africa. A few hundred colonial troops could break through several native villages and rack up such impressive statistics.

With so many “heaven-defying” achievements, their value naturally decreased. Nowadays, if you didn’t have a record of defeating tens of thousands of enemies, you couldn’t even claim to be a colonial team.

Take Viscount Falkner, for example. With his years of colonial experience, he had been through countless battles, with a total of hundreds of thousands of enemies defeated.

If he had achieved such a record on the European continent, he would have been hailed as a war god. However, since his enemies were colonial natives, his achievements were significantly discounted.

This was also why everyone was eager to take advantage. Yes, these nobles who brought their own provisions saw the British as “easy pickings.”

The British navy might be formidable, but their army had a reputation for being less impressive. In recent wars, the British army’s performance had also been particularly poor.

In many people’s eyes, the British army’s combat effectiveness wasn’t great to begin with, and now with a bunch of native troops padding the numbers, many people saw them as soft targets, ready to use them as stepping stones.

If 30,000 regular British troops had shown up, the nobles looking to grab glory would have had to think twice about whether they could handle it.

...

In Vienna, the news of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War greatly surprised Franz. He couldn’t understand why the British would act now.

The nobles’ covert maneuvers weren’t reported to the emperor. Everyone wanted to rack up military achievements against the British. If the emperor ordered them to stop, their efforts would be in vain.

Nobles had many advantages but also many restrictions, one of which was that they couldn’t refuse the emperor’s orders. At least the minor nobles didn’t dare.

Times had changed. Even the few kings in the country didn't have the power to contend with the Emperor, let alone these direct imperial vassals.

Even though the emperor couldn't arbitrarily revoke their titles, he could reassign them, like sending them to a desert to eat sand or to an icy world to live amid snow and ice.

Even if the emperor wanted to save face and reassign them to a wealthy territory, they would have to start over, severely depleting their resources.

Unable to figure it out, Franz didn't bother. He had a good attitude about such matters. There were many unpredictable people in the world, and he had seen plenty of ridiculous things.

Such minor issues would be handled by colonial officials. Since no one had yet suggested involving the Foreign Ministry, it meant the situation was still under control.

Perhaps the colonial government was even involved. None of this mattered. Franz wasn't the kind of person to nitpick. As long as the result was good, the process didn't matter.

The gold in South Africa hadn't been exposed yet. If the emperor showed too much concern, it could easily attract attention from those with ulterior motives.

In his current position, Franz's every move would be interpreted as a political signal. If he showed unusual interest in South Africa, many would probably think it was aimed at the British.

Rather than that, it was better to hint to his subordinates to handle it, avoiding unnecessary complications.

Annexing the Boer Republics was Franz's idea. Two years ago, after enfeoffing African nobles, he casually mentioned at a banquet, "The Boers are part of the Empire."

As a result, someone went to make it happen. That's the benefit of being the boss. He'd give a signal, and subordinates would follow through.

If they did well, it was thanks to the emperor's leadership. If they messed up, it didn't matter; it was all done by the subordinates, with no blame falling on the great emperor.

Of course, Franz was a good leader. Those who followed his intentions, even if they messed up, wouldn't face severe consequences.

After hesitating for a moment, Franz ordered, "Send a message to Stephen, secretly teach the British a lesson, and let them learn their place."

Such an order that couldn't see the light of day was naturally only verbal. As for how to do it, the people below would think of it more thoroughly.

Chapter 466: The Fisherman Appears

The political concept of an Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance actually emerged several years ago, following the arms race between the three nations.

During this arms race, the Royal Navy failed to meet the standard of maintaining superiority over the next two strongest naval powers combined. Some astute individuals in the British government believed that continuing such competition might lead to a Franco-Austrian alliance, which would not be in Britain's best interest.

Thus, the idea of a tripartite alliance was proposed, aiming to curb Franco-Austrian military expansion through a treaty, thereby cementing Britain's position as the world's leading power and establishing an international order centered around Britain.

This plan was clearly too idealistic. Due to the conflicting interests of the three countries, the concept remained just that—a concept, never becoming reality.

To this day, neither France nor Austria acknowledges Britain as the world's leading power. No one wants to bow to another, and the citizens of France and Austria are equally proud, unable to accept such an arrangement even for the sake of appearances.

One only needs to look at European newspapers to see that the international consensus is that there is a tripartite balance of power among Britain, France, and Austria. Britain may have the upper hand in naval and economic power, but it falls significantly short in terms of land forces.

Originally, in the age of naval supremacy, the maritime hegemon was indeed the world hegemon. However, in this era, the world's center is on the European continent, where France and Austria have greater influence.

In an era where the top power cannot suppress the second and third powers, the status of the hegemon becomes nominal at best. In fact, even this "title" lacks international recognition.

Not long ago, the British government suddenly decided to push for a tripartite alliance, not only to dismantle the Franco-Austrian alliance but also to solidify the title of world hegemon.

In an Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance, the leader of the alliance would naturally be the world hegemon. This title is not just an empty honor; it carries a series of substantial benefits.

With this title, Britain could more easily gain benefits in overseas expansion, while France and Austria could also benefit, albeit not as much as Britain.

The greatest benefit would be monetary hegemony. The title of world hegemon would undoubtedly enhance the status of the pound, potentially crushing the guilder and the franc to become the world's currency.

The interests involved in the three-nation alliance were extensive, and negotiations quickly reached an impasse. The sudden outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War made this alliance even more distant.

Many were relieved, especially Prussia and Russia, as an Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance would leave no room for them.

Everyone knew that the Anglo-Boer War was essentially a struggle between Britain and Austria, with all eyes on Austria and Britain to see how they would react.

The result was quite disappointing. The Austrian government acted as if nothing had happened, and the British government also did not react.

This was just the outside view. In reality, the British government was far from calm. Conflict with Austria at this time had already affected their pre-existing plans.

Since the war had already broken out, there was no point in saying anything more. Britain also had its pride and would not retreat just because it was wary of Austria.

Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had already mentally deemed Governor Delf incapable. Of course, if the war were won, this evaluation would change.

It had nothing to do with right or wrong; the main issue was the timing. If they had won over the Portuguese and jointly driven the Austrians out of South Africa, it all would have been worthwhile.

But failing to achieve this goal, attacking merely for the sake of the two Boer republics seemed somewhat unprofitable.

The gold mines of Transvaal and the Orange Free State had not yet been discovered. Diamonds were just beginning to show their potential, but diamond prices were currently low, and this small profit was not enough to tempt Prime Minister Benjamin.

These were all secondary concerns. The main issue was that the British government was not confident of victory. Facing the Boers alone was no problem, but the involvement of Austria changed the situation.

Everyone in the circle knew each other's capabilities to some extent. The trick of showing up on the battlefield in a different uniform wasn't new to anyone.

Rather than Boer republics, it would be more accurate to call them German republics now. Even if tens of thousands of Austrian troops were mixed in, it wouldn't be out of place.

Fighting in inland areas, both sides faced significant logistical pressures, and neither could claim much advantage.

The problem was Austria's overwhelming advantage on the African continent, with a steady stream of reinforcements, leaving Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli unsure of victory.

Prime Minister Benjamin asked bluntly, "Sir Louis, what is your view on the war with the Boers?"

Undoubtedly, the Colonial Office was involved in this war. Governor Delf alone couldn't have organized an army of thirty thousand.

Colonial expansion meant wealth. Regardless of whether the government profited or not, the individuals or companies involved always made a substantial profit.

Behind this war, there were also interest groups at play. While the diamond mines of the Boer republics might not entice the British government, they were certainly enough to tempt the colonists in South Africa.

A few years ago, the South African Colonial Company had expanded too quickly, leading to a series of armed conflicts with Austrian colonial teams. Eventually, they couldn't hold out, and a truce was only achieved after the intervention of both governments.

This time, they were the main force pushing for the Anglo-Boer War. It had nothing to do with hatred. After all, the ones dying were the lower-level thugs, and there wasn't any deep-seated animosity at the top.

The main issue was that all avenues for expansion had been blocked. If they didn't go after the Boer republics, they would have to only eat sand in Namibia.

At this time, Namibia didn't have any marketable resources. European colonists had arrived there as early as the 15th century and then left.

There was no choice. With its semi-desert climate, even farming would yield little, and mining investments wouldn't be proportional to the output.

Apart from being suitable for fishing, it didn't seem to offer any other income opportunities. The South African Colonial Company had higher aspirations. If they wanted to fish, they could have stayed in their homeland as fishermen. Why would they travel all the way to South Africa?

The colonial bureaucrats knew very well that if they didn't act now, they would never have the chance. They were in the colonies to make money, not to while away their days.

So many people were eager to fight, and the idealistic and ambitious Governor Delf naturally went along with it.

The British Colonial Office certainly wouldn't discourage the enthusiasm of their subordinates. If they won, they would share in the glory. If they lost, they could simply blame Governor Delf.

Sir Louis, the Colonial Secretary, was not a member of the current cabinet and was not aligned with Prime Minister Benjamin. His position was the result of a compromise among various parties, so it's not surprising that there was a delay in reporting.

Sir Louis babbled, "Prime Minister, I just found out about this myself. The telegraph lines in South Africa are not very reliable, and the last report missed a lot of details.

From the current situation, the front line is progressing smoothly. The telegram says our forces have advanced over a hundred miles, and the Boers are collapsing at the first contact.

If the Austrians do not get involved, I think there will be no problem winning this war. We can start preparing a victory celebration for our lads."

Prime Minister Benjamin glared at him fiercely, having already made up his mind. If the war was won, so be it, but if they lost, he would make this annoying fellow resign.

As a close confidant, Foreign Secretary Maclean immediately retorted, "Sir Louis, your assumptions are based on possibilities, but the reality might be quite the opposite.

Up until now, our Foreign Office has not received any protests from the Austrians. Surely no one believes that the Austrian government wouldn't even dare to protest?"

No response was the worst possible outcome. If the Austrians were to strongly protest, it would mean that the situation was still under control and could be resolved through diplomatic means.

Now, with the Austrian government silent, they were surely planning something big. It wouldn't be surprising if the Anglo-Boer War escalated into an Anglo-Austrian confrontation or even a regional war.

Benjamin sarcastically remarked, "Since the Colonial Office is so well-prepared, this war will be your responsibility. Our cabinet will fully cooperate."

"The cabinet cooperating with the Colonial Office"—if this got out, it would definitely make the front page of the London newspapers. Such a reversal of roles was very rare in Britain.

Louis' face changed color. He understood the underlying meaning. However, this war had indeed not been approved by the cabinet, although in colonial expansion, such operations were normal and legal.

But under these circumstances, the cabinet would not be responsible for the war, and the Colonial Office and the Cape Town colonial government would bear all the responsibility.

This was not what Louis wanted. Sharing the glory was fine, but let the colonial officials bear the responsibility. He didn't want to be tied to them.

This was a politician's survival instinct—if you can't shirk responsibility, then don't do anything. The more you do, the more mistakes you make. This was an inevitable outcome.

Louis hurriedly deflected, "Prime Minister, this war was completely unexpected. We at the Colonial Office were also unaware beforehand. For specifics, we should wait for the detailed report from the Governor of Cape Town!

Since it's clear the Austrians intend to intervene, we must take more proactive measures. If the navy can blockade the enemy's coastline, we will have this war in the bag."

Seeing the responsibility shifted to him, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Robert, sarcastically responded, "Sir Louis, surely you know that both Boer republics are landlocked. Which port do you want the Royal Navy to blockade?"

The Royal Navy, despite being the world's most powerful navy, was not omnipotent. At the very least, they couldn't blockade the Boer republics.

Looking at the map, it was clear that the Boers were already bordering Austrian Africa. To blockade them, they would have to blockade Austrian Africa as well—a coastline of 'just' a few thousand kilometers.

If the Austrian Navy didn't exist and the entire Royal Navy mobilized, they might manage it. This would also require the cooperation of the French and Portuguese. Otherwise, capitalists wouldn't mind the distance.

For a continent, a blockade was a joke—at least in the 19th century. Except for naturally isolated Antarctica and Australia, the other continents couldn't be blockaded effectively.

Africa might lack industrialization, but that didn't mean it couldn't be established. With people, resources, and technology, if the Austrian government wanted, it could create a basic industrial system within 2-3 years.

Seeing the embarrassed Louis, Benjamin's anger dissipated. At this point, they needed to focus on damage control. If they lost the war, the cabinet would be in trouble too. No matter how they much shift the blame, they won't be able to escape the label of incompetence.

Often, absurd policies weren't due to ignorance but politicians prioritizing their interests, feeling they had no choice.

Benjamin sternly said, "Alright, Sir Louis. Your Colonial Office must quickly come up with a battle plan and win this war."

They had some confidence in fighting in South Africa. Austria's influence had only recently expanded there, while they had taken root there for decades.

The forces they could deploy locally far exceeded what Austria could. If they moved quickly, they might finish the war before Austrian reinforcements arrived.

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When the snipe and the clam fight, the fisherman benefits. Seeing Britain and Austria about to clash, Napoleon III couldn't remain idle. On one hand, he cheered on the Austrian government, while on the other, he accelerated France's expansion in the Italian region.

The game between Britain and Austria in South Africa tied up most of their energy, creating a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the French.

At this moment, no one had the power to intervene in their annexation of the Italian region. There was no need for discussion; if negotiations failed, they would use force.

From the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, the French had increased their troops in various Italian states, their threatening intentions already evident.

If not for considering the impact on international society, Napoleon III would have already sat on the Italian throne. Now he was just one step away from coronation.

Chapter 467: Trying to be the Fisherman but Failing

France wasn't the only one trying to be the fishermen after the Anglo-Boer War broke out. Prussia, too, was lurking in the shadows, ready to pounce.

William I, however, was not one to rush in blindly. He knew that despite the clandestine skirmishes in South Africa, Britain and Austria still maintained a facade of being "friendly nations."

This delicate balance meant that either side could still retreat to the negotiation table. William I didn't see the South African conflict as the final straw that would break their alliance.

But what he thought didn't necessarily align with the ambitions brewing in Berlin. The restless Junker aristocrats had already begun their scheming.

Prime Minister Moltke's eyes gleamed with excitement as he addressed William I, "Your Majesty, this is a golden opportunity. With Britain and Austria clashing and the French entangled in Italy, no one could hinder us from striking at the German Federal Empire. The chance to unify Northern Germany is here."

Unifying Northern Germany was a game-changer for Prussia. If they could swallow up the German Federal Empire, it wouldn't just be three titans ruling Europe, it would be four.

Even after their victory over Russia, the world still ranked Prussia below the Russian Empire.

Being acknowledged as a great power was one thing, but Prussia was seen as a second-tier power. It had some say, sure, but not the influence to dictate the course of Europe.

This wasn't just about prestige; it was a reflection of raw power. Economically and militarily, the Kingdom of Prussia still lagged behind Britain, France, and Austria.

After defeating the Russians, the Junker nobles' confidence was overflowing. If they hadn't suffered such heavy losses in the war and hadn't yet recovered their strength, they wouldn't have been so quiet.

To break free from this status, unifying Northern Germany was the perfect answer. And if they could grab Poland along the way, that would be even more perfect.

Prime Minister Moltke, still as sharp as ever, wasn't foolish enough to tackle two major goals simultaneously. Prussia's limited resources meant that trying to juggle both would result in achieving neither.

William I cut straight to the point, "My Prime Minister, which do you believe is more important to Austria: the South African region or the German region?"

The answer was clear without much thought. The German region was far more critical. Even with the discovery of gold mines in South Africa, it still didn't hold a candle to the significance of the German lands for Austria.

Politically, Franz would never abandon the German region. Even if he couldn't unify it, the call for unification had to be maintained.

This was related to the legitimacy of the Holy Roman Empire. The Austrian government couldn't just let go of it, or they wouldn't be able to justify themselves to their citizens.

Moltke responded, "Naturally, the German region is more important. However, based on Austria's behavior, they didn't seem overly eager to annex the German Federal Empire.

If they truly wanted to absorb the German Federal Empire, they wouldn't have waited until now. They could have acted years ago while we were bogged down in a grueling war with Russia."

This was true. At that time, Prussia was tying down the Russians, and if Austria had moved against the German Federal Empire, only the French would have been able to intervene.

With the French eyeing the Italian region, an exchange of interests between France and Austria would have made the success rate of annexing the German Federal Empire very high.

William I took up his pointer, gesturing to the map of Europe on the wall, and then said, "The Austrian government's inaction doesn't mean they will allow us to take action.

Marshal, you are a master of military strategy. You must be well aware of the strategic situation Austria would face if they attempted to annex the German Federal Empire.

From a purely defensive standpoint, the current situation is most advantageous for Austria. To the east, the Russians are licking their wounds. To the south, the Ottoman Empire is on its last legs. And we in the north pose no real threat.

With the Alps as a barrier, the French in the west would find it difficult to launch an attack. For France to invade Austria, they would have to come through Italy or take the longer route through Belgium and the Rhineland.

The French are still busy annexing Italy, meaning the region will remain unstable for the next 20 years. An invasion of Austria through Italy would force the French to consider the guerrilla fighters within their own borders.

As for borrowing passage, that's even less likely. We certainly wouldn't dare let the French through, and they wouldn't trust us anyway—they'd rather fight their way through.

The likelihood of a full-scale war between France and Austria is now at its lowest, even lower than the probability of us going to war with France.

If Austria were to occupy the German Federal Empire, this strategic advantage would vanish instantly. Not only would they face the threat from France, but also a maritime threat from Britain.

Putting aside the military threats, does Austria even need the German Federal Empire right now?

The German Federal Empire comprises over twenty states. If the Austrian government annexes them, won't the Imperial Parliament become overwhelmingly chaotic?"

The final reason is the real issue. With so many states joining the Holy Roman Empire, their combined votes in the Imperial Parliament would surpass Austria's, weakening the central government's control over the states.

It's not just that strategy doesn't allow it; even if there were no strategic issues, the political impact alone would make no one dare to make a move.

When Franz reorganized the Holy Roman Empire, he had no choice. Austria lacked sufficient strength, and the number of dominant ethnic groups was severely insufficient, forcing a compromise.

Over the years, through compulsory education, planned cross-immigration, and assimilation measures, internal ethnic conflicts have largely been resolved.

At this point, the Austrian government naturally doesn't want to add a bunch of states. Otherwise, they wouldn't need to use force; the German Federal Empire would come running over on its own.

According to the principle of at least one vote per state, the many small states of the German Federal Empire, with their numerical advantage in votes, could directly become the masters of the empire.

How could such a situation be allowed? Not only would Austria oppose it, but even the several states within the country wouldn't agree.

Everyone has contributed to the empire's development to this stage. It was already a significant concession to share these benefits. No one would willingly hand over their power!

The Austrian government is concerned about appearances and can't openly violate the promises made back then, so the matter has been dragged out. But while they won't make a move, they won't let others make a move either.

William I estimated that if they made a move, Austria would immediately step in to reap the benefits. Once Prussia had dealt with these state governments, Austria could directly annex these regions as provinces or cities.

The current Kingdom of Prussia doesn't have the strength for a decisive war. Even if they muster the courage to challenge Austria, they must first consider whether Russia would stab them in the back and worry if France to the west would take advantage of the situation.

In an era without Bismarck, these troublesome issues have given William I headaches, forcing him to take matters into his own hands.

Power struggles are brutal. Even as king, William I cannot have the final say because the military holds too much power.

Prussia is not without talent, but promoting these individuals is extremely difficult, leaving many as mere advisors to the king.

Recently, William I tried to appoint a commoner as the Minister of Foreign Affairs but faced opposition from the Junker aristocracy. Their reason was simple: the candidate had no merit for the country.

William I couldn't refute this argument. The system of appointing officials based on merit was copied by the Junker aristocracy from Austria and then modified.

Austria evaluates officials based on their administrative performance, while Prussia directly looks at merits. Administrative achievements count as merits, and military achievements count as merits too. Under these rules, many Junker nobles hold high positions.

Having just defeated the Russians, the Junker nobles have amassed military merits, and most of the government's power has fallen into their hands.

The Prime Minister and various ministers were all Junker nobles, which inevitably weakened William I's power.

If William I hadn't acted first to divide and weaken the Junker nobles, splitting them into several factions, he would now be a mere figurehead.

They were all elites of this era. Despite their political insensitivity, once the issue was laid out clearly, Marshal Moltke quickly grasped the situation.

Seeing Moltke's changing expression, William I felt very satisfied. It was precisely because Moltke's talent lay in military matters and his political abilities were limited that William I appointed him as Prime Minister.

Otherwise, how could the Junker aristocracy have been divided? Now Prussia is in a peculiar situation where many individuals with outstanding military capabilities hold government positions.

Of course, those with excellent political abilities have not entered the military. William I is not foolish enough to undermine his own strength.

After a moment of silence, William I added, "The current focus of the government is to develop the economy. Prussia has just emerged from war. The country needs rebuilding, and the people need to rest.

In recent years, the Russians have also undergone social reforms. To raise funds, Alexander II even resorted to defaulting on debts.

This enemy is very formidable, and we cannot afford to let our guard down for even a moment. Within twenty years, there will inevitably be another war between Prussia and Russia."

Changing the subject was very successful, as the Russians contributed significantly to the unity and stability of the Kingdom of Prussia. Only when facing this major enemy could Prussian society unite so strongly.

The Prusso-Russian conflict could not be resolved, and William I did not intend to reconcile with the Russians. If there were problems, he would just throw them at the Russians, and it would be fine.

This reason left no objections from the cabinet members. While being enemies with Russia, to provoke Austria and offend Britain would be simply suicidal.

Indeed, the British were also opposed to Prussia annexing the German Federal Empire. France and Austria were already enough to keep the British government busy; adding a more powerful Prussia would be too much for the British to handle.

Moreover, the British had significant interests in the German Federal Empire. With Austria not interested in taking action, they were happy to protect their smaller ally.

In fact, any consolidation on the European continent posed a threat to the British. Limited by the small size of their home territory, the British government had to prevent any potential European unification.

To ease the tension, Finance Minister Roon suggested, “His Majesty is right. Our finances are in a dire state, and we are on the brink of bankruptcy.

The Russians’ recent default not only damaged their international reputation but also cost them nearly all their international markets.

We cannot afford such a price. Now, developing the economy is crucial, and the government needs to implement more proactive economic policies.”

Don’t think that just because they all come from a military background and aren’t very familiar with political affairs, the situation in the Kingdom of Prussia isn’t very stable.

They directly applied the model of military management to governing the country. The long-term consequences are yet to be seen, but at least in the short term, this approach has yielded positive results.

Within three years after the war ended, the Kingdom of Prussia had emerged from its difficulties. Of course, the war spoils played a significant role in this recovery. Without them, the recovery would not have been nearly as swift.

By now, the Kingdom of Prussia has not only overcome the food crisis but has also transitioned from a food-importing country to a food-exporting one.

Significant progress has also been made in the industrial sector, particularly in the military industry. Stimulated by the war, Prussia’s military-industrial complex underwent a complete upgrade and now ranks among the world’s best.

Economically, during the post-war recovery period, the Kingdom of Prussia maintained high growth rates. However, over time, this growth has gradually slowed.

The huge debt has become an important factor restricting the continued development of the Kingdom of Prussia. More than half of the Prussian government’s annual financial revenue is used to repay foreign debt.

Although this percentage is gradually decreasing, it still leaves Prussian finances on the brink of bankruptcy. If they could afford the consequences of default, they would have followed Russia’s example long ago.

Additionally, the Polish people have made significant contributions. They selflessly provided raw materials for industry and a market for Prussian products.

Without these contributions, Prussia’s economic recovery would not have been so rapid.

Chapter 468: The Boer Republics

In South Africa, the rampaging British forces finally encountered trouble. After penetrating deep into the Transvaal Republic, they were met with a devastating counterattack by the well-prepared private army of Austrian nobles, resulting in heavy losses for the vanguard.

This was also due to British arrogance. Their continuous victories had made them proud, causing them to overlook that their earlier successes were achieved with the help of local collaborators. Otherwise, they wouldn't have recklessly divided their forces.

In fact, after the war broke out, someone had provided intelligence to the British, but they didn't take it seriously.

What was a mere caravan compared to their might? In Africa these days, which trader doesn't have a few lives on their hands? To the British, the noble private armies were just merchant escorts.

They had heard that these forces only numbered 2,000 to 3,000 men and were split among several groups, which made the British dismiss the threat entirely. To them, such a force would naturally scatter at the first sign of trouble.

This information was never reported up the chain of command. Although some Boers had defected and provided the intelligence, their low status meant they had no access to British high command.

Governor Delf never received this intelligence. Even if he had, he might not have taken it seriously given the vast numerical superiority of the British forces, which he believed negated any threat.

It was only after the defeat at the front lines that Governor Delf received the intelligence. By this time, the enemy force had grown well beyond 2,000 to 3,000 men.

Under the threat of the British, Viscount Falkner had successfully taken over the military and political control of the Boer republics, sending its leadership to the hinterlands of Central and Southern Africa (Zimbabwe).

After taking control, the first order of business was naturally to expand the army. The Boer republics had a system of universal conscription, and although training had been neglected in recent years, the framework of the militia system was still in place.

By the time the British had fought their way through, Viscount Falkner's army had grown to over 15,000. Although still vastly outnumbered, the balance of power had shifted.

The 5,000 British troops at the vanguard became the first victims of this information asymmetry. Governor Delf didn't care much about these losses, as most of the casualties were native cannon fodder.

What troubled him was how to proceed with the war. With the involvement of Austrian nobles, the enemy was no longer the rustic Boer republics but the formidable European military power of Austria.

Even the previously confident Major General Friedman now lowered his proud head. Despite still having nearly 26,000 troops under his command, in reality, less than 8,000 were white soldiers, with the rest being native troops.

The original purpose of training these native troops was to use them to harass the Austrians, in retaliation for their past expulsion of native tribes into South Africa.

It's worth noting that the lack of expansion in the South African colony over so many years was not only due to insufficient attention and investment from the British government but mainly because of the native tribes driven there by the Austrians.

By the mid-19th century, the white population in Cape Town had already exceeded 100,000, but now, the number remained stagnant, showing almost no growth.

This stagnation was due not only to the opening of the Suez Canal, which diminished the economic value of the Cape of Good Hope's ports but also to the disruption caused by the influx of native tribes.

To stabilize the situation, the Cape Town colonial government had been instigating internal conflicts among native tribes, occasionally intervening directly to suppress larger tribes, taking several years to resolve the issues.

This was also why the South African colonists resented Austria. Their earlier actions had caused heavy losses, forcing many colonial teams to change their development direction.

Madagascar fell into British hands under these circumstances, representing one of the few recent British achievements on the African continent.

However, this achievement had nothing to do with the Governor of Cape Town, as the British had established a separate colonial government on Madagascar, not incorporating it into the Cape Town Colony.

Governor Delf, with a dark expression, said, "Major General, I need to know if you can actually fight. If not, I can request the British government to replace you with someone capable."

His anger was justified, as the battle had been poorly managed. Attacking without knowing the enemy's situation and then losing was inexcusable. Winning would have been one thing, but losing under such circumstances was unacceptable.

Major General Friedman remained silent. After suffering a defeat, anything he said would be wrong. From a purely military standpoint, his actions were standard.

The defeat on the front lines was not solely due to his command. It was also due to the lack of combat effectiveness of his troops.

After all, most of Viscount Falkner's forces were also new recruits, still in the process of incorporation. If the British forces had been strong enough, it might have been a great victory instead.

Having vented his frustration, Governor Delf's tone softened, "Major General Friedman, what are your plans for the next steps?"

The enemy is unlike the natives we've encountered before. This war will be extremely difficult. It's arguably the toughest battle since the establishment of the Cape Colony, but you must win it!"

Governor Delf indeed wanted to replace Friedman. He had long been dissatisfied with the Major General, who talked big but failed to deliver on the battlefield.

However, to replace him, a suitable successor had to be found. The colonial forces were already weak, and colonial officers were often second-rate.

The idea of highly capable but rebellious officers being exiled to the colonies is a trope found only in novels.

In reality, those who offended their superiors were simply sent home, with no chance for a comeback.

Although conditions in the colonies were poor, they were good places to seek military merit. Many aristocratic scions sought to polish their credentials there, so how could opportunities be given to enemies?

In the original timeline, Napoleon IV had married into the British royal family and had gone to the colonies to gain experience before his wedding, but unfortunately lost his life due to bad luck.

Those capable of commanding tens of thousands of troops were high-level talents, treasured even in Britain. No matter how poorly they fared, they wouldn't stoop to serve in Cape Town as colonial troops.

South Africa had yet to shine. Before the gold mines were discovered, it was just an ordinary colony.

Although Major General Friedman was somewhat annoying, he was competent enough, certainly better than many others. Governor Delf couldn't replace him with an incompetent fool; that would be self-sabotage.

Regardless of their ability, getting someone sent from home might not even be feasible, not to mention the time it would take. This war was all about timing—dragging it out for three to five months would turn it into a war of attrition.

At that point, it would come down to manpower and resources. While Britain might not flinch at a financial battle, manpower was another story.

If tens of thousands died, there would be no way to explain it to the people back home. Attacking small nations like the Boer republics and incurring such heavy losses would surely lead to a military tribunal.

Major General Friedman quickly responded, "Governor, the situation was beyond our expectations. We never anticipated that the Austrians would be so shameless as to masquerade as Boer republic troops and engage us in combat.

No one knows the extent of their commitment. There are already 30,000 enemies before us; defeating them would already be challenging enough. If they continue to reinforce, the outcome could become unpredictable."

This attempt to shift blame displeased Governor Delf, but he remained silent. They were all in the same boat now.

Exaggerating the enemy's strength was always a safe bet—winning would make their achievements even more glorious, and losing could be blamed on the enemy's overwhelming power, absolving them of fault.

With an unwavering expression, Governor Delf said, "Indeed, the Austrians are despicable for pretending to be Boer republic troops. We must crush their plot. Cage, send a telegram to London

immediately, outlining our difficulties and requesting assistance. Also, have the Foreign Office lodge a protest with Austria.”

If it weren't for the fear of raising too much suspicion with an overly large number, Governor Delf wouldn't mind doubling the reported enemy strength.

As for having the Foreign Office lodge a protest, that was merely a joke. The Austrian government would never admit to such things. The Boer governments were already in Austrian hands, and they would take full responsibility.

No matter what, as long as the Boer republics insisted it was their own army, the matter couldn't be pursued.

Unless they caught a big fish, but the possibility of that was zero. The Austrian nobles commanding this war were not active-duty officers and had little international reputation.

From beginning to end, the Austrian government had no official involvement in this war. As for merchants supplying weapons and ammunition, those were purchased by the Boer republics.

Austria, being part of the free trade world, selling arms was perfectly normal.

Even the source of the Boer republics' military funds was clear. The Austrian government hadn't sponsored a single penny. The Boer republics had mortgaged land to take a loan of three hundred million guilders from the Imperial Bank.

Don't talk about risk—this was high-interest lending, with a monthly rate of 18%. Given such high interest, the risk naturally couldn't be small.

Franz handled all the aftermath meticulously, ensuring no one could find fault.

It was inevitable that the Boer republics wouldn't be able to repay the money after the war. Without this reason, how could Austria justify annexing the Boer republics after the war?

As an emperor, Franz didn't want a republic to exist within the empire. Not being able to repay the debt and seizing the collateral, then dissolving the Boer republics was a natural course of action.

It could be said that this Anglo-Boer War provided Austria with an excellent excuse, even greatly reducing the cost of buying off local elites.

If Franz were shameless enough, he could even consider defaulting on the loan. Since the conditions weren't met, the initial promises naturally became void.

It could be said that Viscount Falkner's move to send the Boer republics' high officials to the rear was a masterstroke, completely cutting off their leverage for negotiations.

Of course, those who initially chose to cooperate with Austria wouldn't face such a tragic fate. Franz, who was always magnanimous, wouldn't resort to such a shameless thing.

The unfortunate ones were those who hadn't negotiated good terms and now couldn't negotiate anymore. Now, they were left with only three options: follow Austria, defect to the British, or quickly flee.

Anyway, Viscount Falkner didn't force anyone. How could they accommodate their meritorious officials without eliminating some interest groups?

This war wasn't fought for nothing. The more they invested now, the greater the post-war gains. Without sufficient benefits, there wouldn't be so many nobles bringing their own resources to join the fight.

The land in South Africa is indeed very good, with fertile soil and a very habitable climate. These plantation owners had long wanted to come and stake their claims.

Fortunately, they didn't know about the gold mines underground. Otherwise, not just a dozen or so nearby nobles, even the homeland nobles wouldn't be able to resist joining.

Not just these people—thinking about the terrifying gold reserves of the Rand gold mines, even Franz was tempted, though he managed to restrain himself.

There were immense riches on paper, but gold mines were too high-profile and prone to inciting resentment. If gold mining is pursued, it should be done discreetly.

Buying gold is a good business. The profit might not be less than that of mine owners and wouldn't also attract attention.

On the surface, the profit from buying gold didn't seem very large, just slightly lower than the market price.

In reality, after a round of circulation in the financial market, then processing it into art pieces and flowing into the gold consumption market, the profit would be completely different.

More importantly, the capital cost for banks to purchase gold was negligible. Gold was also a type of currency, and keeping it as a reserve was more reliable than any currency.

Even in the event of a bank run, no one would refuse payment in gold.

Chapter 469: The Greater French Empire

As the power struggle between Britain and Austria in South Africa was just beginning, a significant change had already occurred on the European continent. This time, Napoleon III displayed his decisiveness by directly sending troops to control the governments of various Italian states.

Clearly, his patience had reached its limit, and he was no longer willing to continue negotiating with these parties.

After suppressing the feeble resistance of the states, the governments of each country were forced, under the threat of bayonets, to agree to unite with the Kingdom of Sardinia to form the Empire of Italy.

On August 24, 1870, the Italian Empire held its first parliamentary session, where Napoleon III was elected emperor by the parliament.

The next day, Napoleon III hastily crowned himself Emperor of Italy in Rome, taking the title of Napoleon I, Emperor of Italy.

Following this, Napoleon III announced the union of France and Italy, creating the Greater French Empire and once again crowning himself as emperor. The new empire was given two capitals to appease the Italians: Paris and Rome.

After Napoleon's earlier efforts, the House of Bonaparte once again established an empire, or rather two empires: the Bonaparte dynasty of the Italian Empire and the Greater French Empire.

Napoleon III disregarded all decorum and etiquette. Opportunities for Britain and Austria to confront each other were rare, and missing this chance would make future encounters even harder.

With the establishment of the Greater French Empire, the European landscape changed instantly. Having annexed Italy, France now seemed poised to dominate the European continent.

Due to the Russo-Prussian War, only Britain and Austria had the strength to intervene in France's annexation of Italy.

As all eyes turned to Vienna and London, a new round of diplomatic maneuvering began in secret. A raging current against France was surging across the European continent.

In Vienna, even though he was mentally prepared, Franz was still shocked by Napoleon III's audacity.

In his plans, the French should have proceeded step by step. For instance, first establishing the Italian Empire to unify the Italian region, and then promoting the merger of the two countries, a process that should have taken several years.

The Austrian government could no longer sit still. Prime Minister Felix immediately stated, "Your Majesty, we cannot allow the French to continue growing stronger, this threat is too great."

It wasn't difficult to disrupt France's expansion plans. By immediately allying with the British and rallying other European countries to exert pressure, the French would likely be forced to compromise.

Don't be fooled by Napoleon III's swift actions and his appearance of being willing to burn all bridges to annex Italy at any cost.

In reality, he was not prepared to confront all of Europe, and the French lacked the courage to challenge the European continent again. This was merely a show of force to the outside world.

What truly gave them confidence was the secret Franco-Austrian treaty. According to the agreement, Austria was also supposed to take action against the German Federal Empire at this time, so both nations would share the international pressure.

Indeed, the Austrian government was already taking steps. Most of the state governments within the German Federal Empire had already aligned with Austria. If Franz wanted, he could annex the German Federal Empire within a month.

This was the convenience brought by railways. Many states that Austria had won over had adopted the Austrian railway standards, and several had already integrated their railways with Austria's.

As of now, only the Kingdom of Hanover had not been fully infiltrated by Austria, while other states could not escape Austria's influence.

This plan's success was not only due to burgeoning nationalism but also due to economic interests.

The nobles and capitalists within the German Federal Empire had already taken concrete steps to align their interests with Austria.

Even in Hanover, a stronghold of opposition, this influence was becoming increasingly significant over time.

While the British supported them, British capitalists were not willing to share their markets with them or allow them to develop within their colonies.

During the development of its colonies, Austria actively encouraged immigration from the German states, including those in the German Federal Empire.

In addition to immigration, Austria also courted local power brokers, involving them in colonial development and creating mutual interests.

The German federal government was powerless against this infiltration. They couldn't possibly enact laws prohibiting cooperation between the two sides, could they?

Moreover, even if they did prohibit it, it would be useless. The subordinate states wouldn't listen to the central government. After all, everyone had long since determined that the central government wouldn't dare to use force to resolve the issue.

The French suddenly accelerated their pace, and Austria naturally didn't keep up. From beginning to end, Franz was only trying to deceive the French and had no intention of unifying Germany at this time.

Germany would be unified, but definitely not now. Before having the strength to dominate the European continent singlehandedly, Franz wasn't prepared to become the target of everyone's arrows.

Franz tapped his fingers on the table and said, "Let's wait a bit. The French forcibly annexing Italy won't be so easy. The internal issues won't be sorted out quickly.

For now, we'll just put on a show. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will issue a statement strongly condemning the shameless behavior of the French. Let's see how other countries react before deciding our next move."

Joking aside, it wasn't easy to lure the French in. How could they let them slip through the net?

If establishing a Greater France were so easy, why didn't Napoleon unify Italy directly back then instead of appointing kings to rule it?

If it were just about unifying Italy, Napoleon III assuming the title of Italian Emperor might still be acceptable to the Italian people. But directly merging into Greater France? Nationalist elements would never accept that.

Keep in mind that what they're merging with is France, the cradle of revolutionary thought. It probably won't be long before revolutionary ideas spread from France to Italy, and then ignite like wildfire.

Even establishing a dual monarchy would be better than directly annexing Italy. At least with the former, as long as there's no war and no external force to disrupt the situation, it can be stabilized by winning over local elites.

Frankly speaking, given France's strength, as long as they handle diplomacy well, the external threat is very small. As long as the government doesn't act recklessly, this dual monarchy could be maintained for many years.

If not to make the show more convincing, Franz would have held a grand banquet to celebrate this great victory. From now on, France will no longer be a threat for many years.

In the future, to bring down France, all one needs to do is support Italian revolutionaries. With constant revolts, France's strength will be drained in the Italian quagmire.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg proposed, "Your Majesty, now that the French have drawn attention, shouldn't we also accelerate our steps?"

At this moment, no one can hinder Austria from annexing the German Federal Empire. The French are caught in the eye of the storm and would welcome Austria stepping up to share the pressure.

Without France as a henchman, the British could at most flex their strength at sea. Meanwhile, the neighboring Prussia had the will but not the strength. If Austria really took action, the Prussian government's first reaction wouldn't be to stop them but to quickly annex Poland.

Franz sneered, "No need, proceed according to the original plan. We're not in a hurry. The German Federal Empire will always be there, and it will be ours sooner or later.

For now, let's continue to compete with the British for South Africa. There's no rush for matters on the European continent. As allies, we should at least share some of the pressure for the French."

Fulfilling allied obligations and sharing the pressure. No one would believe these words. When had France and Austria ever truly been friendly?

Even after forming an alliance, both sides frequently undermined each other. Franz's sudden willingness to help France must have a hidden agenda.

The emperor was unwilling to explain, and everyone had no choice but to accept it.

Franz also had reasons he couldn't express. They hadn't yet experienced the power of nationalism and naturally didn't know it was a huge pitfall.

He wanted to explain but he didn't know where to start. With no way to elucidate, Franz had to make an autocratic decision.

After all, with France's annexation of Italy, they have become the target of many. Whenever Austria decides to act, they will not lack allies. Everyone can only patiently wait.

...

Austria's passive objection has had a significant impact on the European continent. Many believe that the Austrian government is afraid and does not dare to confront the French directly.

Behind the scenes, Franz has been fanning the flames, and he is determined to not stop until France is crowned the world's leading empire.

In London, the British government, initially watching the spectacle and hoping to profit, could no longer sit idle. They never expected Austria to refuse to take the lead, shattering their hopes of sitting on the mountain and watching the tigers fight from a distance.

At 10 Downing Street, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli asked in frustration, "Can anyone tell me what the Austrians are thinking? Don't they understand the threat from the French? Or are the famed Emperor Franz and Iron Chancellor Felix just cowards who only know how to develop their economy at home?"

No one could answer this question, as everyone was equally puzzled. After all, no one believed Franz and Felix were cowards. Otherwise, how did Austria acquire its territories?

Foreign Secretary Maclean analyzed, “Prime Minister, I have the opposite view. The Austrian government’s reluctance to take the lead likely means they’ve seen through our plan.

After suffering in the Napoleonic Wars, Austria surely fears the French. By not stepping up now, they probably don’t want to face France alone.

Moreover, the primary threat from a stronger France isn’t to Austria. Italy is newly conquered, and the French cannot rely on the Italians to secure their rear.

If attacking from Central Europe, geography dictates that France must advance from the north. Austria remains safe until Belgium, the German Federal Empire, and the Kingdom of Prussia fall.

Since there’s no threat in the short term, the Austrian government can naturally afford to wait. When everyone can’t stand it anymore, they’ll form an anti-French alliance again and jointly cripple the French.”

Obviously, this wouldn’t be the result they wanted. If France were to fall, the European continent would be Austria’s domain. By then, with Germany unified, Britain would be powerless to stop it.

The desire to suppress France stems from the French becoming a threat to their interests. Not to mention, once the French annex Italy, the British would have no foothold in the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, having learned from past mistakes, the French this time will avoid following in Napoleon’s footsteps.

After annexing Italy, France will likely avoid conflicts on the European continent for many years, reducing other nations’ vigilance.

Unable to continue expanding on the European continent, their target would inevitably turn overseas. The British would be the first to bear the brunt, with the French challenge to their maritime hegemony almost inevitable.

Being the world’s leading colonial empire brings not just glory and wealth but also challenges from various nations.

In this respect, Austria was much more stable. Their core colonies were all on the African continent, and now that the situation was settled, they weren’t afraid of anyone coveting them.

The few overseas colonies they have don’t offer enough benefits to cause anyone to turn against Austria.

In contrast, the British are much more hated, having taken the largest slice of the pie. Even combined, the colonies of other European nations are less enticing than theirs.

It’s not just the colonies. The mere presence of the Strait of Gibraltar at their doorstep often keeps the French awake at night.

The longstanding enmity between Britain and France isn’t easy to forget. If they fail to secure this chokepoint to bisect the French naval forces, it would be the British who couldn’t sleep at night.

This dilemma makes it hard for the British government to make a firm decision. Now, they want to suppress the French but also fear crippling them too much, which is quite troubling.

Colonial Secretary Louis reminded, “Gentlemen, let’s not forget our ongoing conflict with Austria. It seems the Austrian government doesn’t intend to stop.

According to reports from the front, we're currently at a disadvantage on the battlefield. That idiot Delf has already sent three urgent requests for reinforcements, each more urgent than the last.

If we don't take measures, we might lose the Cape Colony before we even solve the French problem."

The French have been so conspicuous that everyone's attention has been diverted, even overlooking the calls for help from South Africa.

Robert, the First Lord of the Admiralty, said passionately, "We absolutely cannot abandon the Cape Colony. With the Suez Canal controlled by France and Austria, if the Cape of Good Hope falls to Austria, neither of our two sea routes to the Indian Ocean will be safe."

He had every reason to be agitated. Losing the Suez Canal to France and Austria had already put them in a difficult position. Losing the Cape of Good Hope would make the Royal Navy's situation even worse.

Not to mention, if relations with Austria soured one day, and all of Africa's coastline became enemy territory, the Royal Navy would struggle with logistics and supplies on their way to India.

The Suez Canal wasn't even worth considering. Military ships were already prohibited from passing through, except for French and Austrian warships. Ships from other countries had to take a detour.

The canal company's rules specifically targeted the British, mainly as revenge for the sabotage they committed during its construction.

In Benjamin's mind, he was cursing Louis for not just being incompetent but also for being a liability whose only contribution was to create more problems.

Embarking on colonial expansion without even identifying the enemy and hastily starting a war has now backfired, and Louis won't even admit his mistake. Despite his anger, Benjamin knew he had to clean up the mess.

Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli rubbed his forehead and said, "Alright, the strategic value of the Cape Colony is indeed too important to lose.

The Foreign Office should contact the Austrian government to see if a negotiation is possible. The Colonial Office must quickly come up with a plan to reinforce Cape Town.

With the situation in Europe out of control, we need to resolve the Cape Town issue as soon as possible. If necessary, we can consider abandoning the Boer republics."

Undoubtedly, Benjamin had already tied the fate of this war to Louis. If they lost the war, it would be time for a new Colonial Secretary.

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From then on, Napoleon III was no longer just the second-generation heir who rose to power due to his uncle's legacy but was now a great ruler of France in his own right.

However, this "great ruler" was not in a good mood. The reactions of European countries were even more intense than Napoleon III had imagined. The newly annexed Italy might not be easily digested.

The French Foreign Ministry had already worn out many of its people. Despite their vigorous efforts, the news coming back was still not promising.

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In terms of legal grounds, Napoleon III really had none. The House of Bonaparte, when they were in Italy, were just ordinary nobles who quickly rose to power because of his uncle, Napoleon.

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Moreover, such a banner would be pointless since most people had already forgotten about that empire. Those who knew history would question the legitimacy of the emperor, as Napoleon III had no claim to the throne.

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There was no help for it, different regions had different impacts. The Italian region was too well-known, and occupying it naturally caused a significant impact.

Look at the reaction of various countries to Austria’s expansion into the Balkans; it was much less significant. This is mainly because, in everyone’s impression, the Balkans are a rural backwater, whereas Italy is a prosperous metropolis.

This impression is not wrong. A few decades ago, the Balkans were indeed that, with local production levels stuck in the Middle Ages.

The wealthy areas were all concentrated around Constantinople. Since it was an economically backward area taken from infidels, it couldn’t be considered an invasion.

In this regard, the European public had a good sense of the bigger picture. Fighting the hated Ottoman Empire was politically correct.

However, when expanding into Germany, the result was completely different. If it weren’t for the Near East War raging fiercely, and Franz decisively stopping after taking the Southern Germany, Austria wouldn’t have gotten through so easily.

If he had the choice, Napoleon III would also have preferred to proceed gradually, reducing external pressure.

However, unlike Franz, who was young and could afford to wait, time was catching up with Napoleon III, born in 1808 and now 62 years old.

In later generations, this might be the golden age for politicians, but in an era when the average life expectancy in France hovered around forty, it was already considered a long life.

Seeing his health deteriorate day by day, Napoleon III had to consider paving the way for the next generation. He had many illegitimate children, but only one legitimate son, born in 1856 and now 14 years old.

At this age, he was clearly incapable of controlling such a large empire. The French war machine had already advanced too far and it couldn't be stopped easily.

Napoleon III believed he could still control it, but his young son wouldn't be able to.

Napoleon III was well aware of the hidden dangers of forcibly annexing Italy, but he did it anyway.

The French people's desire for greatness was driving the war machine forward. Continuing to expand into Italy was inevitable. From the moment the Kingdom of Sardinia was annexed, the war machine could not be stopped.

Especially with the successful examples of Austria and Prussia, French ambitions were further stimulated. Napoleon III could barely keep the war machine under control.

He was uncertain how much longer his body could hold out, and if something unexpected happened, his young son would clearly not be able to control the empire.

Rather than expanding passively later, it was better to act now. At least with him personally at the helm, the success rate would be higher.

Taking it slow was definitely not an option anymore. If he were to learn from Franz and seek stability wholeheartedly, it might not be possible to annex Italy even in twenty years. Napoleon III didn't have that much time.

Italy wasn't easy to digest, and now with forced annexation, it would be even harder to digest. In the future, France's main energy would have to be spent on digesting the Italian region.

During this period, they would certainly encounter many troubles, but with France's strength, they could still suppress them. After experiencing setbacks, even the radicals would gradually calm down and think, and wouldn't blindly provoke war.

As long as France didn't actively provoke war on the European continent, there would be no danger. Napoleon III was very confident about this point.

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Since Austria had given up on Italy, their strategic focus on the continent wouldn't be there.

As for Central Europe, Napoleon III had abandoned his original plans. After annexing Italy, if they were to turn their attention to regions like Belgium and the Rhineland, they would likely face another coalition against them.

In any case, Italians without a strong nation would be easier to govern than the Germans in Central Europe.

Moreover, occupying Italy would strengthen France's influence in the Mediterranean and consolidate its control over North Africa.

There were benefits and drawbacks. The price was earning the enmity of all European countries. For a long time, France would be the most disliked country in Europe.

If not handled well, a coalition against France could emerge. To prevent the worst-case scenario, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was working hard.

As Foreign Minister Montero approached, Napoleon III asked anxiously, "How about it, are the Austrians willing to help keep the British occupied?"

Winning Austria's support was the most crucial element of French diplomacy at the moment. Without Austria as a main ally, the remaining European countries were not a significant threat.

The troublesome steamroller was now busy farming. After experiencing a defeat, the Russian government seemed to have become invisible, hardly participating in European affairs.

Of course, the fact that they had too many creditors and didn't dare to face them was also a factor. The Russian government was not thick-skinned enough and was currently trying to lower its profile to avoid being chased for debts.

Spain's stance was originally also crucial, but they were fighting among themselves, their brains turning to mush, and they couldn't care about the Italian region at all.

The remaining European powers were Prussia, Poland, and the Nordic Federation. These countries had some strength, but without anyone taking the lead, they wouldn't dare to cause trouble.

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However, Austria needed to deal with the Ottoman Empire themselves. Only by winning the war would they be eligible to have a share of the spoils.

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Chapter 470: Napoleon III's Thoughts

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