

Roman Empire 481

Chapter 481: Crisis of Faith

The showdown between Britain and Austria in South Africa is a source of amusement for the European countries. To prolong the war, the French are actively supporting the “Boer republics” with tangible actions.

In this Anglo-Boer War, nearly one-fifth of the strategic supplies came from the French. They also facilitated the transport of supplies from Austria through Egypt to the South African front lines.

The Anglo-Boer War is less about British-Austrian competition and more about France and Austria jointly causing trouble for Britain. Although Austria will ultimately occupy South Africa, France’s investment isn’t in vain.

Distracting the British in South Africa is better than letting them focus their efforts on the European continent.

The reason why the anti-French alliance remained on paper and had yet to become a reality was partly due to the “Anglo-Boer War.”

Logically, with the current Anglo-Austrian conflict, the situation is highly favorable for the French. The establishment of the Greater French Empire seems unstoppable, and Napoleon III should be pleased. However, while external threats have diminished, internal troubles have emerged.

The first to challenge him is the Pope. Unsatisfied with their losses, various Italian states are trying to support the Pope in opposing him.

As a Catholic country, the influence of the Vatican is still significant. Now, with the Emperor and the Pope coexisting in the same country, determining who is superior is a headache-inducing problem.

Napoleon III is beginning to regret it. Had he known it would be so troublesome, he would have expelled the Papal States earlier.

Having the Pope turn into a political rival is no trivial matter. The Pope has a strong foundation, with churches across the nation serving as his supporters, at least nominally.

At a recent parliamentary session, the Pope took the main seat, infuriating Napoleon III so much that he skipped the session entirely.

This clash between divinity and imperial authority has thrown all of France into turmoil. If not handled correctly, this nascent empire could collapse.

But neither Napoleon III nor Pope Pius IX can back down now. They represent not just their own interests, but those of the interest groups behind them.

The bourgeoisie, who were already discontented with Napoleon III, are now openly supporting the Pope. Politically, Napoleon III no longer holds an overwhelming advantage.

These individuals support Pius IX not out of devout faith or a genuine desire to see the church regain power but to incite conflict and create an opportunity for seizing power.

The ongoing struggle between the Emperor and the Pope is bound to stir public discontent. When the public's anger reaches its peak, it will be the moment for Parliament to take over the reins of power.

It can be said that the establishment of Greater France has ignited internal contradictions. Everyone is eager to leverage this power struggle to gain more advantages.

At the Palace of Versailles, Napoleon III's trusted Minister of Police, Ansochi, suggested, "Your Majesty, since Pius IX doesn't know his place, why don't we just..."

He stopped mid-sentence and made a throat-slitting gesture, implying that eliminating Pius IX would resolve the issue once and for all.

Napoleon III glared at him fiercely and said sternly, "No, that absolutely cannot happen. If anything were to happen to Pius IX, we would be the prime suspects, and the situation would spiral out of control.

We must not only refrain from harming him but also ensure his safety and prevent others from doing so! Besides, even if we replace the Pope, the situation won't change. Whoever becomes the Pope will stand against us.

Those people will not relent. Without their behind-the-scenes meddling, Pius IX wouldn't be opposing us now."

Political struggles must avoid assassination at all costs. Now that Napoleon III had legitimized his rule, such methods were out of the question.

If word got out, it could lead to civil war in France, with the revolutionaries likely seizing the opportunity to rebel and possibly incite a coup within the government.

Italy was already unstable, merely suppressed by force. Even a spark could ignite the tensions, let alone the assassination of the Pope.

At this moment, Napoleon III's mind was clear. He knew his real enemy wasn't the Pope who was openly opposing him but the interest groups backing him.

Advisor Pélissier suggested, "Your Majesty, why not continue pushing for religious reform? Find an excuse to abolish the Papal States, establish provinces, and place them under the central government's direct control. Separate the church from the state."

This was a fundamental solution. Promoting religious reform and abolishing the Papal States would cut off the Pope's political influence. The Pope would then only be a religious leader.

Napoleon III's eyes lit up. If he could remove the Pope from the political arena, everything else would become much easier. Without this figurehead, the opposition would fragment.

"This is a good idea. It would be best if we could also limit the Pope's powers, so he doesn't cause us trouble later. Pélissier, I'll leave this to you. Find a way to discredit the Vatican so thoroughly that they won't have a chance to turn things around."

As he spoke, there was a trace of resentment in Napoleon III's eyes. The grudge between House Bonaparte and the Vatican goes back a long way. Their relationship has never been good.

Napoleon I initially did not receive recognition from the Holy See. He later invaded Italy by force and, during his coronation, snatched the crown from the Pope's hands.

By the time of Napoleon III, the situation hadn't improved much. The Catholic Church had always supported legitimacy, and Napoleon III was far from that.

After seizing power through a coup, he wanted to be crowned emperor, but the Vatican was uncooperative. When he invited Pius IX to officiate his coronation, the Pope simply ignored him.

Napoleon III was left with two choices: either go to Rome for his coronation or crown himself emperor and figure out a way to gain recognition later.

These were the options for European emperors who couldn't get the Church's endorsement. Going to Rome for a coronation usually meant invading with an army to force the Pope to comply.

With an unstable foundation, Napoleon III chose to endure. He did many thankless things to appease the Pope, earning himself the title of the "dutiful son" of Catholicism. This was in stark contrast to previous French monarchs, who often harmed the Church's interests.

Despite his efforts, he didn't get the results he wanted, which naturally left him resentful. Had he not annexed Italy, he doubted he would have ever gained the Pope's recognition and become a legitimate emperor in his lifetime.

Now, standing against each other again due to conflicting interests, Napoleon III wanted to emulate his predecessor's strategy as the "dutiful son" of Catholicism.

The term "dutiful son" was hardly flattering. The actions of the French had often been detrimental to the Church, such as the Avignon Papacy, the League of Cambrai, joining the Protestant alliance in the Thirty Years' War, and eliminating the Knights Templar.

In short, the French had made significant contributions to the decline of Catholicism, even more than the Protestants had.

Of course, Napoleon III was not as extreme. With his predecessors' significant achievements, he wasn't aiming to surpass them. However, delivering the final blow to the declining Vatican was inevitable.

The struggle between imperial and religious power could not end in compromise. Even as both sides headed towards decline, a winner had to be declared.

On this issue, Napoleon III did not lack supporters. Monarchs across Europe were his potential allies.

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With Napoleon III's command, the Vatican's dark history suddenly increased. Not only were past grievances unearthed, but current clergy members were frequently exposed and criticized in newspapers.

These were real incidents, happening right around everyone, with no exaggeration. Overnight, the Vatican's reputation became thoroughly tarnished.

Telegrams sped up the dissemination of news. Scandals involving the Vatican in France and Italy spread across the European continent in record time.

In this era, the Vatican no longer wielded the power to influence Europe. The continuous revelations of the Vatican's dark history in newspapers illustrated many issues.

In this age of intellectual explosion, doubts about the existence of God arose among the populace, and religious fervor dwindled.

In the wake of these shocks, anti-Vatican movements sprang up in many places, with some regions even seeing mobs assaulting churches.

It was then that Napoleon III realized he had gone too far, but the situation was already out of his control.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, he successfully eliminated political opponents but triggered a crisis of faith in Europe, plunging the country into ideological chaos.

The impact was not limited to France; Austria also could not escape unscathed. After the religious crisis erupted, Austrian clergy members couldn't avoid being implicated.

Many clergy members with questionable personal lives and lacking moral rectitude were exposed in newspapers.

These were real incidents with solid evidence. The intellectual shock these news reports brought to the public was immense. Even in conservative strongholds like Austria, a crisis of faith erupted.

Intense debates erupted among the populace, with atheistic ideas spreading rapidly. Various experts and scholars emerged on the newspaper battlefield, engaging in fierce intellectual battles, causing widespread confusion.

Watching the escalating chaos in the intellectual realm, Franz could no longer sit still. If this continues, who knows how many bizarre ideologies will be born?

“Prime Minister, how is the Cabinet preparing to quell this storm?”

As a successful leader, Franz always had full confidence in the abilities of his subordinates. When faced with issues, it was wise to consult the Cabinet first.

After a moment of contemplation, Prime Minister Felix replied, “Your Majesty, I'm afraid you'll need to personally step in to appease the public. The consequences of a collapse in faith are severe. If not handled promptly, allowing various absurd ideas to spread could lead to serious consequences.”

Well, this means standing up for Catholicism. This crisis of faith started off targeting the Roman Catholic Church, so naturally, Catholicism suffered the most.

After hesitating for a moment, Franz spoke up, “Hmm, the moral lapses of clergy members stem from their lack of devoutness, and also from inadequate oversight by the Vatican.

We can assist in this regard. The government can legislate to regulate the behavior of clergy members and help administer God's punishment to these sinners.”

There was no issue in calming the public, but suppressing the Church's authority was also necessary. Since the French took the lead, Franz didn't mind adding fuel to the fire.

If the Church couldn't regulate its own clergy members, then let the government handle it. Institutions like the Inquisition should cease to exist for the better.

Chapter 482: The Roman Uprising Erupts

The faith crisis poses significant challenges, but it also presents a golden opportunity. Currently, the Roman Catholic Church is too preoccupied with its own troubles, providing the government with a perfect chance to interfere in church affairs.

If the government gains the right to discipline clergy, the church will be forced to submit from now on.

Otherwise, they'll be investigated for violating church rules. It's not an exaggeration to say that seven or eight out of ten clergy members have broken the rules at some point, so finding infractions will be easy.

As for the remaining two or three? They shouldn't feel too secure. If they haven't broken any rules yet, it's either just a matter of time or a matter of what hasn't been discovered. The government will eventually find something.

Franz isn't the only one taking advantage of the church's misfortune. The faith crisis has drastically diminished the church's standing with the public, leading governments across Europe to collectively strip the church of its privileges.

As this storm subsides, the thousand-year struggle between royal and papal authority on the European continent is finally coming to an end. This time, royal authority has emerged victorious, and the church is left with no chance to turn the tables.

But these are matters for the future. Napoleon III hasn't had time to savor the fruits of victory yet, as chaotic ideas continue to challenge the people's worldviews in France.

Anti-church and pro-church factions are clashing violently on the streets of Paris, even resorting to firearms. In the end, Napoleon III had to order the garrison to step in and restore order.

Meanwhile, hidden revolutionaries saw this chaos as their moment and leaped into action, turning Paris into a scene of bedlam.

While Paris is in turmoil, the situation in Italy is even worse. The chaos there has given revolutionaries a glimmer of hope.

Giuseppe Mazzini, founder of the Young Italy movement, and Giuseppe Garibaldi, leader of the Italian National Liberation Army, have secretly returned to Italy, preparing to ignite an armed uprising to overthrow French rule.

However, before they can launch their rebellion, internal strife erupts within the insurgent forces. Ideological clashes flare up between Mazzini, the visionary leader, and Garibaldi, the military leader.

Garibaldi spoke passionately, "Napoleon III's actions have severed his ties with the Church, and the Roman Catholic Church would love nothing more than to see him dead. Now is the perfect opportunity. We can ally with the Church's forces and launch an uprising to overthrow the French rule in one decisive move."

The Italian revolutionary forces were quite limited and divided into more than ten organizations of varying sizes, temporarily united only through British mediation. In reality, they each acted independently.

To hasten the expulsion of the French, Garibaldi advocated allying with the Church, leveraging its strength to topple French rule.

Mazzini, however, was adamant, “No, allying with the corrupt Church is not a revolution. It merely replaces one ruler with another. Our revolutionary goal is to expel the French, overthrow feudal rule, and establish a unified, free Italy.”

In the Young Italy movement’s manifesto, feudal rule included the Church. From the start, they stood in opposition.

This ideology had already spread widely in Italy and garnered the support of most revolutionaries.

Initially, the goal was to expel the Austrians, but now it was the French, a shift due to practical necessity and various compromises.

To lower the difficulty, the revolutionaries decided to target their primary enemy, the French, first. Once the French were expelled, they would address the Austrian issue.

Ideological differences led to a split among the revolutionaries. This wasn’t just a clash between Garibaldi and Mazzini; it was a broader conflict within the movement. Both viewpoints had strong backing among the revolutionaries. It’s well known that the hardest thing in the world is to get someone to change their beliefs.

After the brutal French crackdown, the core members of the Italian revolutionary movement were now composed mainly of impassioned youths and staunch idealists. These individuals were unwavering in their revolutionary stances; once committed to a cause, nothing could dissuade them.

Before their planned uprising could even begin, internal strife had already fractured the revolutionary forces. In truth, they had never been entirely unified. There were over a dozen leaders within the movement, though Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini were the most influential.

Garibaldi, a seasoned military leader, had previously led armed uprisings and was seen as the revolution’s martial spearhead. Mazzini, the ideologue behind the dream of Italian unification, served as the revolution’s philosophical guide.

Despite their disagreements, the uprising proceeded because they couldn’t afford to turn down British money. Revolutionaries didn’t produce anything, and without funding from British patrons, they would eventually starve.

In fact, during this era, many European revolutionary parties were not what they claimed to be. They espoused lofty ideals publicly but engaged in unsavory activities behind the scenes.

Survival necessitated compromise; everyone needed to eat, and revolutionaries were no exception. They either had to secure a wealthy patron or fend for themselves.

“Fending for themselves” was no easy task. Revolutionaries, often possessing inflated egos and limited practical skills, found sustaining their large groups a formidable challenge.

Reliance on public donations essentially meant courting the wealthy. Revolutionaries were often wanted criminals, unable to appear openly in their homelands.

Ordinary people had little money to spare. Even if they were willing to donate generously, their contributions would amount to a drop in the bucket and would require reaching out to many, increasing the risk of exposure. With so many people involved, secrecy became impossible.

In the end, they could only count on wealthy capitalists for funding. These capitalists, with their substantial resources, could be contacted in limited numbers, thereby raising significant funds with a lower risk of exposure.

However, obtaining money from capitalists was no easy feat. Those willing to support the revolution at great personal risk expected substantial returns.

Promises of post-revolution returns were implausible. Few capitalists were naive enough to believe in the success of the revolutionaries. Even if the revolution succeeded, it didn't guarantee the capitalists would gain power. Most capitalists wouldn't invest without seeing potential returns.

Thus, revolutionaries often found themselves performing unsavory tasks for their financial backers. Revolutionary parties frequently acted as fronts, doing the dirty work for capitalists.

In many cases, they also served as convenient scapegoats. It was common for unsolved crimes to be blamed on revolutionary parties.

Principled revolutionaries did exist, but they were typically poorer and had to work regular jobs to earn money.

Most revolutionary organizations can't even raise enough funds for a single uprising. Out of desperation, they are forced to reach out to foreign powers for financial support.

Even knowing they were making deals with the devil, reality forced the Italian revolutionaries to compromise. Facing the French without allies, they lacked the confidence to win.

Franz was partly to blame for this. His brutal defeat of the Kingdom of Sardinia had crushed the Italians' self-confidence, leaving them with a deep fear of the great powers.

Later, when Garibaldi led the Neapolitan uprising, the French crushed them again, teaching them the harsh lesson of "power disparity."

This Italian uprising was the result of British manipulation and persuasion. The British government promised the revolutionaries that if the uprising succeeded, they would organize European intervention.

Without British backing, the revolutionaries wouldn't have dared to act. After all, they had just narrowly escaped French pursuit and fled to Britain from Italy.

Garibaldi didn't trust the British promises. If he had a choice, he wouldn't have launched the uprising at this time. To increase the chances of success, he chose to involve the Church.

"Respected Mr. Mazzini, the most important thing now is to drive out the French and establish an independent Italy. Other issues can be dealt with later. If we succeed, we'll have plenty of time to handle the Church. If we fail, Napoleon III will handle it for us. At this point, the uprising is inevitable. To achieve victory, we must compromise."

There was no flaw in this reasoning. Napoleon III was already suppressing the Church, and if a convenient excuse was provided, he would certainly seize it.

Mazzini reluctantly accepted this argument, having little choice. The British had invested heavily to secretly return them to Italy. They couldn't justify this without causing some disturbance.

However, convincing their followers wouldn't be easy. The current reasoning wasn't sufficient, and persuading idealists to compromise was incredibly difficult.

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After much internal conflict, the Italians still managed to launch their armed uprising just before Christmas of 1870. With covert support from the Church, the rebels successfully seized Rome.

The Italian region was in turmoil, and under the revolutionaries' influence, uprisings erupted everywhere, sparking a new wave of revolutionary fervor.

The sudden and massive uprising in Rome was like a slap in the face to Napoleon III, casting a shadow over the nascent French Empire.

At the Palace of Versailles, a furious Napoleon III roared, "The Ministry of War must immediately dispatch troops to suppress the rebellion. Spare no expense. Crush this insurrection as quickly as possible. Execute all revolutionary leaders. Yes, execute them all. Show no mercy."

Clearly, Napoleon III was livid. The recent series of troublesome events had pushed him beyond his breaking point.

The Minister of War, Patrice de MacMahon, promptly responded, "Yes, Your Majesty. We are ready. The suppression forces will march today."

The Emperor's anger demanded swift action. MacMahon understood the gravity of the situation. Mobilizing the troops immediately would at least show the Emperor that the government was taking decisive action.

Mobilizing the troops to suppress the insurrection on such short notice was challenging. But as long as the army moved out, it would pacify the Emperor.

This is the art of politics—doing things with finesse. MacMahon didn't consider the revolutionary forces a real threat. He believed that once the main army arrived, the rebellion could be easily quashed.

The real challenge was to capture the rebels completely and leave no future threats.

Chapter 483: When the Snipe and the Clam Fight, First Kill the Fisherman

The uprising in Rome gave many people an opportunity to kick the French while they were down. International opinion heavily criticized the French government, including the French media.

This was the aftermath of ideological chaos. Some supported religious reform, some opposed it, and many simply opposed for the sake of opposition.

Napoleon III might have been accustomed to this by now. Domestic public opinion didn't impact him much, and he continued to suppress the rebellion methodically.

This deeply disappointed the British. The Italian uprising couldn't shake the foundation of France. As long as Paris remained stable, the French Empire was hard to topple.

As expected, the major Roman uprising lasted less than a week before being crushed by the French. More accurately, the resistance was shattered in a single morning.

A disorganized mob remains a disorganized mob. Though the uprising seemed grand, the internal organization was a mess.

The revolutionaries never managed to control the situation. Although the Church participated in the uprising, they feared the French's strength and had no confidence in the revolution.

They stirred trouble to get attention, believing that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. By demonstrating some strength to the French, they aimed to secure more favorable conditions for themselves without intending to fight the French to the end.

When the French army swiftly arrived to quell the rebellion, these participants quickly switched sides and betrayed the revolutionaries.

Before the British could intervene, the Italian independence movement had already waned. Apart from some scattered guerrilla forces still resisting, the cities once controlled by the insurgents had fallen back into French hands.

In London, Prime Minister Benjamin was deeply troubled. The situation in South Africa was tense, with urgent requests for aid arriving punctually three times a day.

He had painstakingly orchestrated an Italian independence movement, only for it to falter as soon as it began. The Italians had a strong spirit of independence, but their combat capabilities were lacking.

There were many revolutionaries who were good at talking and great at shouting slogans. But on the battlefield, these people were usually the first to flee.

Still, there were some positive outcomes. After the failed uprising, Italy's cultural industry saw significant growth, with a surge of new artists.

However, the flourishing of Italian artistic creation was not Prime Minister Benjamin's concern. He was busy dealing with the aftermath.

With so many mishaps occurring during his tenure, it was almost certain he wouldn't participate in the next election, to avoid a humiliating defeat.

Not being able to run in the next election didn't bother him much anymore. However, the immediate issues had to be addressed. Otherwise, he might not last until the election and be forced out early.

Queen Victoria, who rarely intervened in politics, had already summoned him three times this week, demanding that he quickly come up with a plan to solve the current problems.

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Foreign Secretary Maclean analyzed the situation with a troubled expression, "Prime Minister, the current situation is very unfavorable for us. France and Austria are now standing together.

The Austrian government has tacitly allowed the French to annex Italy, refraining from any intervention. If they had intervened, the Italian independence movement would not have failed so quickly.

In the Mediterranean, they have joined forces to confine us to a corner. While in South Africa, they have also united, showing clear intentions of seizing the Cape of Good Hope.

From a strategic perspective, this Franco-Austrian alliance is not just about expanding their influence on the European continent. It's highly likely they aim to seize maritime supremacy.

We are currently losing our grip on the Mediterranean. If we also lose the Cape of Good Hope, the distance to the Indian Ocean will significantly increase.

This will affect our control over India and even our influence in the Far East. The Austrians have already extended their reach into the Arabian Peninsula, getting dangerously close to India.

For now, the Royal Navy can still suppress their ambitions, but under the broader context of the Franco-Austrian alliance, how long we can maintain this suppression is uncertain.

It's time to change our foreign policy. I propose that we recognize the Greater French Empire in exchange for France allowing us to join their alliance."

Joining the alliance is not as simple as it sounds. France has already annexed Italy, while Austria has yet to gain anything. If the French government compromises now, the Austrian government will surely be dissatisfied.

Although the specifics of the Franco-Austrian alliance are uncertain, Maclean is confident that Austria has not yet received the benefits promised by the treaty.

In his view, merely the gains from South Africa are insufficient to cover Austria's involvement costs. After all, Austria has invested heavily in the Anglo-Boer War, making it very challenging to recoup their expenses.

From a perspective of interests, when two partners join forces in a business venture, and one profits massively while the other barely breaks even, such a partnership is bound to fail.

Prime Minister Benjamin rubbed his forehead, caught in hesitation. Recognizing the Greater French Empire was easy, but the repercussions would be severe.

It would mean that their arch-enemy, France, would grow even stronger. On the surface, the annexation of Italy by the French Empire would directly boost its overall national strength by one-third.

If France successfully completes its internal consolidation, its power will continue to grow, causing Britain to lose many of its advantages over France.

Unlike Austria, which is separated from them by France and Spain, the British government doesn't feel much pressure from it. But France, separated only by a body of water, is different. Britain has to face this pressure directly, and the British government has always remained highly vigilant.

"Then let's give it a try. The Franco-Austrian alliance poses too great a threat to us, we must break them apart. Many within the Austrian government oppose the Greater French Empire. We can use these people."

Having made this decision, Prime Minister Benjamin sighed in relief. Despite the Royal Navy's constant assurances that it could safeguard Britain's territory, he still felt the pressure of facing two great powers simultaneously.

He was quite unlucky. Looking back at British diplomatic history, this should be considered their most isolated era.

After the tireless efforts of their predecessors and the expensive lessons learned by various European countries, they were no longer so easy to fool.

Seeing the trend of an alliance between France and Austria, everyone has chosen to protect themselves. While opposing the establishment of the Greater French Empire is correct, they are only voicing their opposition without taking any concrete actions, remaining in a wait-and-see state.

This situation deeply troubled Prime Minister Benjamin. The anti-French alliance had become nominal, not to mention the secret anti-Austrian alliance they were secretly plotting, which they couldn't dare to bring up at this time.

If they provoked them too much, France and Austria might drop their pretense altogether and openly carve up Europe, which would be like lifting a rock only to drop it on one's own foot.

It was widely believed that France and Austria would inevitably clash over European dominance—a concept proposed by his predecessor, Prime Minister John Russell. To sow discord between the two nations, they even propagated this idea.

Plans never keep pace with changes. Everyone agreed that France and Austria would eventually clash over European supremacy, but the timing of this conflict was uncertain.

For instance, currently, there's another widely circulated idea among France and Austria: clear the field first to prevent any fisherman from benefiting.

This put them in a difficult position. Both sides were intentionally restraining their conflicts, planning to eliminate the "fisherman" before their final showdown, which made things very awkward for Britain as the "fisherman".

After addressing one issue, another old problem resurfaced. The Colonial Secretary, Louis, said, "Gentlemen, the situation on the South African front is dire, as you have seen from the urgent requests for reinforcements.

If we don't want to lose the Cape of Good Hope, we need to send reinforcements quickly! The casualties on the front lines are very high, and if we respond too slowly, they might just surrender directly to the enemy."

Using the threat of surrender to force the government to send reinforcements is not a clever tactic. While the British government may indeed make concessions now, they will certainly hold people accountable later.

Undoubtedly, this was not the work of Governor Delf. As a politician, he would not jeopardize himself like this.

However, there are still those who aren't afraid of the British government—the private colonial companies. They are a crucial part of the armed forces in South Africa, aren't involved in politics, and have strong backing, so they don't care about offending the Cabinet.

It's not just the colonial companies; the middle and lower-level bureaucrats within the colonial government also don't care about the British government. They are not soldiers with a duty to defend the territory, so even if there is an investigation after the war, it won't reach these small fries.

So these threatening telegrams appeared in the British government. If reinforcements were delayed and there was no hope of victory, these people might indeed surrender to save their own lives.

The atmosphere became awkward. Recently, everyone has seen the casualty reports from the Cape Town Governor's office.

To ordinary people, it might just be a set of data: an average of 700-800 casualties per day, along with ten times as many enemy casualties, making the losses seem negligible.

Outsiders see the excitement; insiders see the essence. These officials understood enough about military matters to realize the consequences.

They knew the attackers were mostly cannon fodder units, which the enemy had in endless supply. No matter how heavy the losses, the enemy wouldn't mind.

In this situation, the impact on morale was evident. The best option would be to launch a counterattack and engage in a decisive battle with the enemy, otherwise, they would be at a disadvantage if this dragged on.

Once bitten by a snake, one is afraid of a rope for ten years. (TN: "Once bitten, twice shy" is the English equivalent of this idiom.)

Governor Delf had faced his opponent over a dozen times, each ending in defeat. All his ambitions had been worn down, and he no longer dared to venture out for a decisive battle.

The British government was also afraid to give the order, as everyone feared taking responsibility. Although there were quite a number of British troops in Cape Town, enough to put up a fight, sadly no one had the courage to fight.

Governor Delf hoped the British government would send more troops to crush the enemy with overwhelming force, but the British government had no troops to send.

The British Army had only so many soldiers. If they sent all their troops today, Ireland would erupt in rebellion tomorrow. The British government was well aware of the Irish people's desire for independence.

To expand the army, the navy would not agree. Expanding the army is easy, but reducing it is difficult.

Once the army's scale expanded, reducing its size again wouldn't be so simple. Even thinking with their fingers, everyone knew the army would have enough excuses to retain their expanded structure.

Everyone knew that although the situation in South Africa was critical, it had not yet reached the point of imminent loss. As long as there were still so many British troops around, and as long as there were no internal issues, the enemy wouldn't be able to conquer Cape Town anytime soon.

The role the army played in this critical situation was also a difficult question to answer.

Even though the Secretary of State for War remained silent, the War Office had actually made many efforts to push for an expansion plan.

This Anglo-Boer War provided them with a golden opportunity. If the British government wanted to continue sending reinforcements, they would first need to expand the army.

Secretary of State for War Fox waved his hand and said, “Don’t look at me, you all know the British army is small. The officers and soldiers are very busy right now, and there are no idle forces to reinforce the front line in Cape Town.

Didn’t Delf ask for a hundred thousand reinforcements? As long as the cabinet expands the army by a hundred thousand, I can send the reinforcements over within a month.”

To send reinforcements within a month, if there hadn’t been prior preparation, no one would believe it if said out loud.

Of course, it might be just boasting as this sort of thing had happened before. There would be various unexpected incidents as reasons for the delay in dispatching troops.

First Lord of the Admiralty Robert mocked, “I recall the South African Boer republics’ army is about thirty or forty thousand, less than half the size of the Cape Town garrison.

The war has come to this state, and you still have the nerve to ask for army expansion? Isn’t this a waste of British resources?”

Before Fox could retort, Robert quickly added, “Don’t rush to explain, I know you want to say the enemy has a bunch of auxiliary troops. But can a group of temporary recruits, wielding sticks and charging, be considered an army?

Our colonial troops may not all be elite, but the enemy forces are also a ragtag bunch. Since the outbreak of war, not a single Austrian regular army unit has appeared on the battlefield.

Everyone is clear about the composition of the army of the Boer republics. It’s just a group of private militias, locally recruiting able-bodied men, and they fought their way from Transvaal to Cape Town. You should reflect on why our army’s combat effectiveness is so poor.

Over the years, there have been enough jokes about the army. Instead of improving combat effectiveness, you only think about increasing numbers. On the battlefield, it will only add to the enemy’s achievements.”

Robert and Fox had no personal grudge, but their positions dictated their stance. When it came to the budget competition, Robert, as the Naval Secretary, directly exposed the army’s weaknesses.

Fox angrily slammed the table and retorted, “Nonsense, the army’s combat effectiveness isn’t on par with the Austrians because of insufficient funding.

Just compare the military budgets, and that explains everything. Since the war in South Africa broke out, we’ve been suppressed by enemy firepower, otherwise, we wouldn’t have suffered so many defeats!”

Who’s afraid of a little argument? There are thousands of excuses. To reach their current positions, they’ve all fought their way up through countless verbal battles.

The naval-army rivalry exists in almost every country. Prime Minister Benjamin had to step in to mediate but both sides had valid points, leaving him with no excuse.

“Enough! This isn’t the place for your quarrels. If you want to argue, do it outside.”

The two exchanged glances and fell silent. The issue of army expansion was also shelved. Robert didn’t feel victorious, nor was Fox dissatisfied with the failure.

Obviously, this kind of thing has happened many times. Almost every time, the government would support the navy, then make some concessions to the army, slightly improving their treatment or modestly expanding their structure.

The problem of reinforcing Cape Town was quickly resolved. When it came to cannon fodder troops, as long as there were still Indians, John Bull wouldn't back down.

The only issue was financial. The combat tasks that ten thousand British troops could accomplish might not be completed by fifty thousand Indian troops.

It seemed cheap on the surface, but in reality, anyone who used them knew the truth. If the quality wasn't up to par, they would have to make up for it with quantity.

In the original timeline's world wars, the British had to fight on the front lines themselves, which was enough to show that the cost-effectiveness of the Indian colonial army was still insufficient.

Otherwise, the British government would have used the Indian colonial army to overwhelm the enemy long ago.

The change in British foreign policy quickly triggered a chain reaction. The French ultimately couldn't resist the temptation and accepted the British into the alliance, shifting the pressure onto Austria.

This winter in Vienna was particularly cold. Christmas had not yet arrived, but Schönbrunn Palace was already covered in a layer of silver.

Walking on the snow, the crunching sound was still as pleasing as ever.

In high spirits, Franz was no longer troubled by the changes in diplomacy. Since the French dared to let the British join the alliance, he didn't mind having another troublesome ally.

The Franco-Austrian alliance was already unstable. Now, with the addition of the British with their own agenda, Franz could already see the future collapse of this alliance.

Of course, in the short term, there would still be benefits for everyone. The Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance could elevate everyone's prestige to its peak, making all the countries in the world tremble under this alliance.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg was already present when Franz entered the conference room. There was a cup of steaming coffee on the table, indicating he had been there for a while.

The purpose was obvious: to communicate with Franz in advance about whether to ally with the British.

Thanks to the British reputation, the Austrian government had never been enthusiastic about allying with them. Even the pro-British faction within the government didn't consider the British to be good allies.

After the customary greetings, Franz asked directly, "What do you think?"

Foreign Minister Wessenberg paused for a moment, seemingly organizing his thoughts, and then replied, "Your Majesty, the French have already compromised, so there's no need for us to continue being stubborn."

With the British joining the alliance, the lifespan of this alliance is destined to be short. However, the Franco-Austrian alliance had always been a union of interests, and it would have expired in a few years anyway.

We never had plans to maintain the alliance in the long term, so letting the British come in and stir things up, leading to an early dissolution of the alliance, might not be a bad thing.”

Franz nodded. The purpose of the alliance was to buy time for peaceful development. Now that the French had been led into a trap, they were incapable of causing trouble on the European continent in the short term, thus achieving the initial goal.

At this point, the alliance’s importance to Austria had become negligible. Therefore, there was no need to stubbornly hold on to it. Making the last use of the alliance to boost Austria’s prestige in the world was also a good choice.

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should continue negotiating with the British. If it doesn’t affect the outcome, try to delay the alliance formation until the second half of next year.

The Anglo-Boer War has dragged on for so long that it’s unlikely to end anytime soon. Since so many people have invested heavily, we need to create an opportunity for them.”

As a good leader, Franz was well aware of the contributions of the African nobles. Many nobles had gone all out for this war.

Although the Austrian government was covering the military expenses, the war still resulted in casualties, and the losses of their private troops couldn’t be recovered overnight.

Not to mention, some unfortunate nobles had fallen on the battlefield. Regardless of the circumstances, they had sacrificed for national interests, and now the Austrian government needed to give them an explanation.

If they failed to conquer Cape Town due to their own incompetence, then they would have to deal with the consequences of their own making, and no one would have any objections.

But if the Austrian government forcibly called off the war for diplomatic reasons, wouldn’t their efforts be in vain?

Without military achievements, there would be no rewards. If they couldn’t advance further, relying solely on the government’s military pay wouldn’t even allow them to recoup their costs.

Franz would never do something disheartening. Extending the time by a few months could significantly increase the loyalty of the African nobles, which was very worthwhile.

After all, these expenses could be recouped with South Africa’s mineral resources. The better the performance on the battlefield, the stronger the bargaining position in post-war negotiations.

As for the decline in the local population due to the war, that couldn’t be helped. Everything came with a price.

Wessenberg replied, “Yes, Your Majesty. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will do its best to buy time for the front lines, ensuring that their blood is not shed in vain.”

By now, the losses on the South African battlefield were astronomical. The Boer republics had lost a total of 341,500 soldiers, though the majority of this figure consisted of auxiliary troops, with only a small fraction being Austrian casualties.

Otherwise, the entire population of the Boer republics would have to die twice over to make up this number.

The British forces hadn't fared much better, with casualties in the tens of thousands, primarily from auxiliary units. The loss of white soldiers was over 20,000, a significant portion of whom were prisoners, while around 7,000 to 8,000 had been killed in action.

The main factor causing the disparity in casualties, aside from the British suffering initial defeats, was largely due to the siege of Cape Town.

On average, it now took over a dozen cannon fodder soldiers to take down a single British soldier, naturally widening the casualty gap between the two sides.

This situation was expected to continue until the Indian colonial corps arrived, setting the stage for a major cannon fodder showdown between the two colonial empires.

Viscount Falkner was aware of the high-level decisions of both countries. The ever-increasing casualty numbers were alarming even to him, as a colonial leader.

At this moment, he somewhat admired the Russians, who had managed to pile up enough human lives to force the French into abandoning Constantinople due to unsustainable losses.

It was important to note that the sacrifices in South Africa were mainly natives, while the Russians had used their own people as cannon fodder, which was an entirely different concept.

With Christmas approaching, Cape Town remained steadfast. After so many days of fighting, the Boer republics' forces had only managed to knock down the British's outer fortifications.

But this had cost them a hundred thousand cannon fodder troops. If they continued fighting like this, there wouldn't be enough able-bodied men in South Africa to fill the ranks.

Viscount Falkner said wearily, "Everyone is aware of the situation on the battlefield. I have already contacted the Governor of Congo, and they have promised to send 100,000 cannon fodder troops soon. The Governorate of East Africa has also agreed to send 50,000 troops.

As for the distant West Africa, we can't count on them. There aren't many natives there, to begin with, and the distance is too great, requiring too much time.

South Africa is even less promising. Apart from the native tribes deep in the mountains and forests, all the others have already been conscripted, leaving very few able-bodied men.

Continuing to drag this out isn't a solution. Even if we exhaust the 100,000 cannon fodder troops we have and those sent from various regions, we still might not be able to conquer Cape Town.

The plan to capture Cape Town before Christmas has now failed and British reinforcements will arrive soon.

At this point, we need new tactics, at least to reduce the casualties of our attacking forces. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to wear down the British."

Frontal assaults with the main force would result in too many casualties, which Viscount Falkner couldn't afford. That's why he chose the tactic of using cannon fodder troops for attrition warfare.

No matter how disproportionate the exchange rate, the besieged British would suffer. Once their losses exceeded their limit of endurance, they would concede.

Of course, this was the ideal scenario. Given the importance of the Cape of Good Hope, the British wouldn't give up easily. War is about resources, and if it dragged on too long, Austria would also be unable to bear it.

Chief of Staff Jacob thought for a moment and said, "There are ways, but if we use them now, they'll be less effective later. Ending the war before Christmas seems impossible."

Blindly assaulting was the dumbest approach. Initially, it was done because logistics hadn't caught up and there wasn't enough food in the army to sustain many cannon fodder troops, so they had to be sent to their deaths.

As time passed, the logistics problems had gradually been resolved, and the number of cannon fodder troops was declining sharply. Now, there was no need to continue sending them to their deaths.

After all, there would still be many places needing cannon fodder later. Even if the British defensive lines were breached, it would still take a lot of lives to press on.

Viscount Falkner shook his head and said, "Never mind all that. If there's a way, use it first. At worst, when British reinforcements arrive, we'll implement our second plan."

The British have sea transport channels for resupply. This kind of siege warfare incurs too many losses, and the chances of capturing Cape Town are slim to begin with.

With just these few days left, even if we bring in the main force, it's impossible to end the war before Christmas."

It wasn't that Viscount Falkner was unwilling to bear the casualties. The main issue was that the number of main troops was limited and couldn't afford heavy losses. If they suffered severe losses, even if they broke through the defenses, they could be pushed back by the British.

Without a firepower advantage to suppress the British forces, relying solely on cannon fodder troops likely wouldn't achieve anything against the British.

Jacob nodded and said, "Then we should dig trenches to get as close as possible, and then dig tunnels to blow up the enemy's fortifications."

The British never imagined there would be enemies inland, so these fortifications were mostly built hastily. If we can loosen the foundations, even ordinary artillery can take care of them."

In fact, direct artillery fire could also breach them, but it would require heavy artillery. However, the Boer republics' heavy artillery was limited, and they couldn't suppress enemy fire while attacking.

This was an oversight in the initial planning, assuming that the Cape Town area had limited cement and couldn't quickly construct many reinforced concrete fortifications, so they didn't prepare enough heavy artillery.

Viscount Falkner's plan to end the war before Christmas was based on the assumption that the British hadn't built modern fortifications. He didn't anticipate that Delf, that old fox, had prepared in advance.

As soon as they reached the gates of Cape Town, they were met with rows of hastily constructed bunkers and fortifications. Though not perfect, these dashed Viscount Falkner's hopes for a quick victory.

The operational objectives had now changed. Viscount Falkner no longer fantasized about ending the war before Christmas but aimed to deplete the British forces as much as possible before their reinforcements arrived.

This was to implement the second plan: lure the enemy deep and change the battlefield for a decisive battle.

The biggest problem with the second plan was that it required the British to dare to come out. Otherwise, no matter how much they prepared, it would be useless.

This required the British reinforcements to be numerous enough to give Governor Delf sufficient confidence for this frightened bird to possibly come out.

So the current strategy was to keep applying pressure, forcing the British inside the city to request reinforcements from the British government. The more reinforcements, the higher the chances of the British falling into the trap.

As for whether the enemy's numbers would be too overwhelming for them, that wasn't within Viscount Falkner's considerations.

If the British could increase their forces, so could Austria. On the African continent, the British had little chance of victory.

Without hesitation, Viscount Falkner decided, "Then let's try it and see the effect."

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Perhaps God dislikes war, for this summer in South Africa was extraordinarily hot. The sun blazed like a fireball, scorching the earth. The air was stifling, and the ground was so hot that people felt their feet burning as they walked on it.

The scorching summer heat brought significant troubles to the besieging army. If not for the occasional breeze bringing a bit of coolness, many would have likely succumbed to heatstroke under the blazing sun.

Major Hanks, while commanding his troops, wiped the sweat off his forehead and cursed helplessly, "Damn this weather."

The rumbling sound of artillery fire erupted again, signaling the attack. Without any hesitation, Major Hanks immediately urged, "Get up, you bastards, time to assemble."

As he spoke, he was also kicking people. Acting at the same time were not only Major Hanks but also some black officers.

After about a quarter of an hour, this ragtag group finally assembled. It took another quarter of an hour, with the help of the black officers, for Major Hanks to barely get this unit to the battlefield.

Major Hanks had given up hope on this cannon fodder unit. Anyone with even a bit of ambition had already become an officer. The officers' role was to assist in managing this cannon fodder unit, not to charge into battle themselves.

War is the best teacher. After experiencing the baptism of blood and fire, Major Hanks underwent a transformation.

Initially, he planned to train this cannon fodder unit to serve as an auxiliary force for the main troops.

After all, untrained cannon fodder had too poor combat capability and couldn't handle real combat tasks. The Boer Republic army needed an auxiliary force with some combat ability, perhaps a higher-grade cannon fodder unit.

Reality proved that Hanks was not a military genius and didn't have the power to turn the rotten into the miraculous. After two months of attempts, he was forced to abandon his initial fantasies.

Since they had no training value, they could only serve as low-grade cannon fodder. Each day, they launched routine attacks. If they died, so be it; if they lived, they repeated the same menial tasks.

If they managed to kill a British soldier, they could be promoted to an officer, provided they survived and brought back evidence of their accomplishment.

Such lucky ones were few and far between. Most fell on the charge, while some, after killing a British soldier, also perished on the battlefield.

After wasting half an hour, this futureless unit, under the threat of the supervising squad, launched their attack on the enemy.

The scene of flesh and blood flying no longer affected Major Hanks. Now, he cared only about one thing: estimating the battle results.

One general's success is built on the sacrifice of hundreds of soldiers. Amid blood and fire, countless young Austrian officers received their baptism and matured.

Chapter 485: Christmas

Adorned in silver and white, Vienna welcomed its annual Christmas celebration. The severe cold didn't dampen everyone's enthusiasm, as the holiday spirit permeated the city.

Shop windows displayed a dazzling array of Christmas gifts, and around the Gothic fountain at the center of the square, colorful Christmas market stalls had been set up.

Street performers began their shows, offering classical, pop, rock, rhythm and blues, hip-hop, jazz, dance, alternative, country, Latin, folk music, and more.

The charm of this international metropolis was on full display. Here, one could enjoy various European musical styles, along with diverse dances and magic shows.

Franz had yet to receive any good news from South Africa. It seemed this war wouldn't end before Christmas. Unsurprisingly, everything was as Franz had anticipated.

Encountering some minor setbacks was a good thing, as it could make people more rational. Austria's expansion had been too smooth in recent years, and many had become overconfident.

If it weren't for this arrogance, they wouldn't have claimed they could capture Cape Town before Christmas. Now that they had failed, it was time to tighten the reins on Austria's chariot.

The era of great colonial expansion had ended, leaving only some insignificant leftovers. Next, it was time to develop internally and convert the spoils of war into national strength.

There were no successful examples to follow in this regard. In the original timeline, the major colonial empires performed poorly. They couldn't convert their gains into national strength, and then World War I broke out.

And that was the end of it. Their strength was greatly diminished during the world war, and new competitors emerged, causing them to lose their last chance. The British Commonwealth plan and the French provincial strategy were both implemented too late and failed due to external interference from the US and the Soviet Union.

For the time being, Franz put aside his worries as Christmas still had to be celebrated. This day was World Peace Day, and no European country would cause trouble at this time.

The ongoing Anglo-Boer War also had a truce, allowing both sides to fully enjoy this special holiday without worrying about surprise attacks.

The Christmas gifts Franz had prepared were already distributed to each soldier. Although they were just simple candies, everyone was very happy.

Roughly made Santa Claus figures appeared in the barracks, adorned with cards. This was another benefit of compulsory education: the soldiers could write their own Christmas wishes. Temporary chapels also opened for the day, and the accompanying chaplain became busy.

Viscount Falkner sighed helplessly. While the soldiers celebrated the holiday, the officers frowned and worried.

The war had progressed to this point, but victory still seemed far away. The final word had come from the homeland: if Cape Town could not be captured by the deadline, the war would have to stop.

They had dug their own grave. The original plan was to end the war within six months, but even with the extended timeline of a year, the war could not be concluded, so there was no point in continuing.

If it weren't for the later siege battles being fought by cannon fodder units, the morale and discipline of the troops would have likely collapsed long ago.

Even so, the soldiers were showing signs of war weariness. Perhaps due to pride or cultural traditions, these feelings weren't openly expressed. However, the officers had already noticed. Watching scenes of blood and carnage every day without a mental breakdown was already a testament to their inner strength.

At this point, the officers had to act as mental health counselors, soothing the soldiers' unease. Christmas was a great way to relax their tense nerves and alleviate some of the mental stress.

Compared to the disheartened Viscount Falkner, Governor Delf in the city was truly living through a nightmare. After a series of defeats, morale in Cape Town had hit rock bottom.

While the military's supply of materials could still be guaranteed, the situation for the many war refugees was dire. Having lost their livelihoods, they could not afford the high food prices and had to rely on government aid.

The Cape Town colonial government was not wealthy either. The distributed materials were barely enough to stave off hunger after being siphoned off by corrupt officials at various levels. Even on Christmas, the only extra treat was a 300-gram portion of fish.

Caught by local fishermen from the sea, fish had become the primary source of meat in Cape Town. Beef and mutton shipped from afar were exorbitantly priced, far beyond the reach of ordinary people.

The "Boer Republic Army" did not intercept refugees from entering the city. In fact, they seemed to encourage the surrounding British to flock to Cape Town. Now, from Cape Town to the Cape of Good Hope, the area was teeming with refugees.

Including the military, the total population in this small area had already surpassed 400,000. If not for Governor Delf's decisive order to expel black and mixed-race people, the number would be even higher.

More people did not necessarily mean more strength, but it definitely meant greater consumption. To feed so many people, at least 1,500 tons of supplies were needed daily.

Including various strategic materials, the Cape Town colony needed at least 3,000 tons of supplies daily from external sources to meet basic needs.

In reality, the demand was much higher. The building materials for constructing defensive fortifications alone amounted to astronomical figures.

If the war continued, Cape Town would become the city with the most densely packed bunkers and fortifications in the world.

To make matters worse, Cape Town had a severe water shortage. It was already one of the most water-scarce cities in the world in later times, and the situation was no different now.

The external water supply had long been cut off by the enemy, leaving them to find solutions in the small area between Cape Town and the Cape of Good Hope.

The largest source of fresh water was rainwater. Groundwater was not reliable; otherwise, why would there be a need for seawater desalination?

Lacking anything else was manageable, but a water shortage was critical. The British had to buy water from the Portuguese. If thousands of tons of water were not delivered on any given day, a crisis would erupt immediately.

To conserve water, the defensive fortifications were being built with seawater. The long-term effects were of little concern to Governor Delf. As long as it worked for now, it was acceptable.

In Cape Town, everything was in short supply except for the population. Water, food, fuel, building materials—none of these could be locally sourced.

Even Britain found it challenging to supply such vast quantities of materials.

To alleviate the pressure on supplies, every ship that delivered supplies also took a load of refugees away. How to develop Cape Town in the future with a reduced population was not something they could worry about now.

By Christmas Eve, the local population had successfully decreased by 120,000, easing the supply pressure. Otherwise, even the small amount of fish would not have been available.

This was still summer, with relatively abundant rain, and there was no need for fuel for heating. In winter, the pressure on supplies would be even greater.

Considering the impact of the monsoon, with deadly waves as high as ten meters not uncommon in winter, the Cape of Good Hope route was almost impassable during July, August, and September every year.

Even now, the British were paying a high price to transport supplies, with nearly 2% of ships being lost en route.

There was no other way. The wooden ships of the sail era had limited wind resistance and could not easily withstand natural disasters, not to mention occasional man-made disasters.

Recently, the Royal Navy had launched several operations to eliminate pirates, but there were still some who dared to challenge them.

Governor Delf sometimes wondered what was in the pirates' heads, as they didn't even bother with reconnaissance and would directly attack ships carrying fresh water and building materials.

As a high-ranking official, Delf was unaware of the difficulties faced by pirates. Gathering intelligence was not as easy as it sounded, and apart from a few organized pirate groups, most pirates attacked any merchant ship they encountered.

Upon learning that the next batch of reinforcements was coming from the Indian colonial army, Governor Delf was already preparing to lay low. As for counterattacking the Boers to redeem himself, he wasn't so optimistic.

Like most Britons, Governor Delf also looked down on the Indian colonial army. In his eyes, their combat effectiveness was about the same as the black cannon fodder outside.

The only value they had was using cannon fodder against cannon fodder, which could reduce the casualties among the young and able-bodied men. The troops in the Cape Town area needed to rest and recover; otherwise, they would be rendered useless.

For reference, look at the Near East War. The British performed well at first, but due to the lack of timely reinforcements and effective rest and recovery, most British soldiers who participated in the battles were psychologically "ruined" by the end of the war.

This "ruin" wasn't physical but mental, manifesting as war-weariness, fear of battle, and anti-war sentiments. Especially those British soldiers who mixed with Italians, bringing back a host of bad habits.

The subsequent failures in the Persian War, the prolonged suppression of the Indian rebellion, and the strenuous efforts in the Ethiopian expedition all proved the decline in British military effectiveness.

The Anglo-Boer War was even worse; the results were so embarrassing that Governor Delf was reluctant to mention them.

On one hand, the colonial troops were too pampered, even failing to maintain basic training. On the other, the combat effectiveness of the main forces had declined, with many tactics still stuck in the muzzle-loading gun era.

With both the colonial troops and the regular army being ineffective, battlefield failures were no surprise. Otherwise, in the original timeline, it wouldn't have taken the British a laughable three years to defeat the Boer republics despite having hundreds of thousands of troops.

The more Governor Delf knew, the greater his pressure. The outwardly glorious British Empire had already begun to decay internally.

In this state, could Britain withstand the challenge from France and Austria? Deep down, Delf had his doubts. The failure of this war was a heavy blow to his body and mind, stripping away his former arrogance.

The night grew late, and the outside merriment had ended. Lost in thought, Governor Delf's mind wandered further. He was initially anxious over the Cape Town battle, then worried about his personal future, and finally became concerned about Britain's future.

This Christmas night, Delf remained sleepless.

Chapter 486: The Essence of the Industrial Revolution: Cost

After Christmas, both Britain and Austria recognized the Greater French Empire, tacitly accepting France's annexation of Italy.

As a result, in 1871, European countries began to recognize the legitimacy of Greater France and resumed diplomatic relations with France. Napoleon III finally escaped his predicament of diplomatic isolation.

The international tension caused by France's annexation of Italy thus came to an end. However, its impact was profound.

Undercurrents began to stir, and ambitious individuals became active. Expansion became the prevailing theme of the era, and many small European countries lost their sense of security.

The era of imperialism had fully arrived. The actions of the French once again pushed the boundaries for the great powers. From now on, strong nations no longer needed any justification to annex a sovereign country.

A facade was no longer needed. The law of the jungle had never been so blatant, and the unwritten rules of the game had become even more unfavorable for weak nations.

Someone spread rumors of an alliance between Britain, France, and Austria, causing the recently eased international situation to become tense again. At that moment, the remaining European countries were unsettled, and the foreign ministries of Britain, France, and Austria became busy.

Even Alexander II, who was focused on internal reforms, personally sent a telegram to inquire. Secrecy was out of the question, as both Britain and France had openly acknowledged the ongoing alliance negotiations.

Since the purpose was to use this alliance to increase Austria's influence in the world, Franz naturally did not see any point in denying it.

As for what Alexander II might think, it was no longer important. Never mind the current half-dead Russian Empire, even at its peak, the Russian Empire would have avoided confronting a tripartite alliance of Britain, France, and Austria.

The formal alliance treaty between the three countries had not yet been signed, but discussions on shaping a new international order had already begun.

In the face of benefits, everyone was tempted. Formulating a set of rules that favored oneself was indeed the greatest benefit.

Even Franz, who had little interest in the tripartite alliance, was very interested in establishing a new international order.

Austria had experience in this area, having led two Vienna Systems. A set of rules favorable to them could bring benefits no less than those from any colony.

Now, everyone needed a stable Europe: the British needed continental balance, the French wanted to consolidate their gains, and Austria needed time to continue developing.

Other countries were no exception. The Kingdom of Prussia needed to digest its gains, the Russians were busy with reforms, and the smaller countries, needless to say, all wanted a stable Europe.

With this common desire, a new international order was about to emerge. This time it was even more ruthless: the three great powers would set the rules, and the other countries would follow.

The secondary powers, like Prussia, Russia, and the Nordic Federation, still had some say, but the many small countries had completely become mere yes-men.

As one of the beneficiaries, Franz had no intention of speaking up for them.

He was currently busy with economic reforms. The second industrial revolution brought changes compared to the first industrial revolution, rendering some of the old economic policies obsolete.

The renowned "Austrian School of Economics" of later generations had begun to emerge, albeit still in its infancy. Perhaps due to the butterfly effect and the influence of the environment, some changes occurred.

Franz couldn't say exactly what those changes were. He wasn't an economist and wasn't very familiar with these issues.

In an era where free-market economics prevailed, Austria's economic policies were already considered proactive, though this proactiveness was quite limited.

The market was primarily allowed to develop freely, with the government only providing improved infrastructure and enacting some helpful policies when necessary.

As long as you had the money, you could enter any industry. Whether you could survive was up to you.

As a pragmatist, Franz always adhered to the principle that "the most suitable is the best." Within the larger framework, the economic measures in different parts of Austria were not entirely the same.

Different regions had different development directions and required different policies. If the central government had to worry about everything, it would be overwhelmed.

In the Vienna Palace, a meeting on the economic report deciding Austria's future for the next ten years was taking place. This economic reform was merely a fine-tuning.

Overall, the previous economic policies would continue to be used, with changes needed only in certain sectors, and the scope of these changes was not extensive.

Minister of Economy Andrew analyzed, "Over the past two years, the domestic economy has generally been in a good state, with the economic growth rate maintained at 7.8%.

Of particular note is the new energy industry, mainly the power industry, which has seen especially remarkable growth. From an industry scale of less than 10 million guilders in 1868, it has rapidly climbed to the current 200 million guilders.

The entire industrial chain involves multiple fields, driving upstream industries such as copper smelting, rubber, and power equipment manufacturing, as well as downstream industries such as hardware, electrical machinery, and transportation.

A total of 638,000 new jobs have been created, making a significant contribution to overcoming the economic crisis. The most typical examples are the copper smelting industries in the Saxony and Balkan regions, which have made significant breakthroughs in production capacity.

The Ministry of Economy believes that in the future, electric power will become the largest point of economic growth.

Currently, only Vienna has fully implemented electric lighting. Although cities like Frankfurt, Munich, Venice, and Milan have started projects, they still need some time to complete.

In Africa, we have discovered several copper mines, all of which are rich deposits with high-quality ore, with reserves exceeding the total amount of copper mines currently being mined in Europe.

Our domestic shipyards have no technical issues in building large ore carriers of 20,000-30,000 tons. Transportation costs can also be reduced, and the copper constraint on the spread of electric power can be resolved soon.

Once the raw material issue is addressed, copper prices in the market will quickly fall, and the cost of promoting electric lighting will be significantly reduced.

Additionally, electric machinery has great potential, and it may even replace the current steam engine in the future. Currently, electric machinery is already being used in some fields.

Besides this, another point of economic growth is the consistently high number of newborns, with sales of baby products continuously increasing.

This area involves so many products that compiling statistics is too cumbersome. We can only provide a rough estimate. There is currently a market of about 35 million guilders annually, but it is growing rapidly, and it is expected to grow by 12% this year.

In contrast, traditional economic fields are already showing signs of decline. The last economic crisis has proven that many areas of the domestic economy are saturated.

Currently, the fastest-growing traditional economic fields are steel, mining, shipbuilding, and construction, with growth rates of 13.2%, 9.6%, 10.1%, and 8.9%, respectively. Previously fast-growing industries like textiles only had a 3.1% growth rate last year.

Our most advantageous food processing industry is now encountering a bottleneck. Although it still maintains a growth rate of 5.8%, the downward trend is very evident.

From these data, it is clear that developing emerging industries has become the pillar of future economic development. The Ministry of Economy plans to promote electric lighting nationwide and encourage innovations in electric technology.”

This aligns well with the intentions of the Austrian government. The widespread adoption of electricity cannot happen without government policies. Without government support, it's unlikely that any electric company would altruistically provide an entire power grid.

In contrast, baby products are different. They don't require government intervention and capitalists will do an excellent job on their own. The government's role is just to regulate and standardize the market.

Prime Minister Felix, ever the prudent statesman, took up the topic, “Promoting electric technology is not an issue. Everyone has personally experienced the benefits this technology brings, like the electric lights above our heads.

However, when promoting it, we must consider the initial cost. Building a city power grid is not a small expense.

Not every city can afford it, and the government does not recommend promotion in cities with lower financial revenue. If someone turns this beneficial policy into a harmful one, we will have to hold them accountable.”

Is electric technology good? The answer is: very good. Unfortunately, it's still too early, and the costs have not yet come down.

For major cities with higher financial revenues, following Vienna's example of popularizing electric lighting is fine if they can afford it.

But for some cities that are dirt poor, it would be a heavy burden. For example, in Vienna, the city government spends 1.2 million guilders annually on electricity and lighting system maintenance.

For a bustling city like Vienna, this cost can be directly passed on to the city's merchants, who are the biggest beneficiaries of the city that never sleeps. The revenue generated from the night market is enough to cover this expense.

However, even maintaining government operations is difficult in some small cities with little commerce and annual financial revenues of only hundreds of thousands of guilders.

If cities blindly follow suit, the costs will ultimately fall on the ordinary people. For residents already struggling with low incomes, this would be a disaster.

The lower the population density in a city, the higher the per capita cost of electricity. The Austrian government had already calculated this.

To avoid the worst-case scenario, Prime Minister Felix preemptively poured cold water on the idea, preventing some bureaucrats from blindly following the trend for the sake of political achievements.

Hearing Felix's warning, many local officials attending the meeting broke out in a cold sweat, realizing their previous plans were flawed.

Sure enough, quick political gains are not easily achieved. If conditions are not met and they blindly follow the trend, their careers will likely end once the report is submitted.

Except for a few states with greater autonomy, most cities need the Austrian government's approval for such large-scale projects.

So far, only economically developed major cities or those located in coal-rich areas with incredibly low power generation costs have been approved.

For the vast majority of cities, it's best to wait for technological innovations to further reduce power supply costs before considering this issue.

In the original timeline, Europe's electricity revolution started in Germany, mainly because Germany had the highest copper production in Europe at the time, and coal production was also the highest in Europe. The cost of promoting electric technology was also lower than in Britain and France.

The U.S. had an even greater advantage, with an abundance of resources. They had ample supplies of copper and coal, enabling them to stay ahead of Europe in technological innovation from the Second Industrial Revolution onwards.

It's not that European countries lacked technology, but they lacked raw materials. Transporting these materials from overseas increased costs, making widespread adoption impractical. Without mature industrial technology, even Britain and France couldn't bear the high costs.

Franz's high-profile push for the electric technology revolution was not kept secret because Austria's raw material costs were lower than those of Britain and France.

Apart from Russia, Austria's copper reserves exceeded those of all other European countries combined, with production accounting for half of the world's total.

In rubber production, Austria also held a significant share. The colonies in Southeast Asia weren't acquired for nothing as nearly every island could grow rubber. Coupled with the rubber plantations in Africa, Austria was now the world's largest supplier of rubber products.

For Britain and France to promote electric technology, they first had to import copper and then rubber. France had it even worse, as they also had to import coal.

These cost factors meant that Britain and France were at a disadvantage in this industrial revolution.

Chapter 487: Energy Regulation

The electric revolution wasn't limited to lighting. Some small, low-tech electric appliances also began to emerge.

For example, the electric fan was one such byproduct, invented by a technical worker. It started as an effort to cool equipment more conveniently than using mechanical fans, which required manual operation.

In a flash of inspiration, the worker attached an iron blade to an electric motor and connected it to a power source. The blades spun rapidly, and thus, the first electric fan was born.

Franz initially thought a great scientist had emerged, but investigations revealed that the inventor was just an ordinary technical worker with no scientific research aptitude beyond this accidental invention of the electric fan.

This real-life example once again proved that technological inventions are often the result of coincidences. There are many similar cases where ordinary people created practical technological inventions.

This strengthened Franz's determination to include hands-on training in the education system. Starting in 1871, Austrian students gained an additional practical course.

It's like the modern joke: a true genius can build a nuclear reactor in their garage.

This type of talent is exactly what Austria needs most. Now at the forefront of the technological revolution, Austria has no one to copy. The former imitation empire must now innovate independently.

Franz rarely interferes in this area. For a country to become truly powerful, it must possess the ability to independently advance its research and development, rather than being led by the nose by its emperor.

The achievements from his previous life can certainly be used to avoid detours, but for a country, these can only serve as a supplement. Once they become a dependency, it becomes a disaster.

Franz typically just outlines the requirements, leaving the specifics of how to achieve them to the scientists. Success is, of course, welcome, but failure is also acceptable. Scientific research has never been smooth sailing, and it's impossible to succeed without enduring setbacks.

This is partly due to Franz's own history as an academic underachiever. As an ordinary person, he always enjoyed the convenience of technology without ever caring about how these technological products were manufactured.

With just a bit of knowledge from the internet, it's better not to bring it out. If he did, it might actually do more harm than good.

The economic conference continued, with everyone discussing how to promote the widespread adoption of electricity. The summary boiled down to two points:

First, reduce taxes for companies engaged in the electric power industry to lower their operating costs.

Second, lower the prices of raw materials, specifically copper and rubber, to reduce the costs associated with promoting electricity.

The approach was straightforward and lacked technical sophistication. Any new technology first faces the issue of cost. Only when costs are within a controllable range does it have economic value and only with economic value can it be promoted in the market.

Electricity has been known for many years. Why was it only now being widely adopted? It was because the advent of high-power generators had lowered the cost of electricity generation to a level the market could bear.

Currently, one kilowatt-hour of electricity requires only about 500 grams of coal. If high calorific value coal is used, this consumption is even lower, making the cost acceptable in the market.

Seeing the ongoing debates among the attendees, Franz couldn't resist wanting to speak up. However, he held back and instead summoned the Prime Minister during the intermission.

Austria doesn't lack coal. In terms of reserves, it's second only to the Russian Empire on the European continent, which is the advantage of having a large territory. However, the quality of this coal is questionable.

“Prime Minister, I suddenly realized a problem. Most of the coal mines in the country produce lignite. This coal is suitable for heating or power generation, but not for steelmaking.

Currently, domestic demand for steel is steadily increasing, and in the future, the demand for bituminous coal will also rise sharply. For the sake of long-term development, we now need to classify industrial coal types.”

(Author's Note: In nature, there is only a small amount of coking coal that can be directly used for steelmaking. Most of it is bituminous coal, which needs to be processed to produce coke.)

Prime Minister Felix thought for a moment, then shook his head and said, “Your Majesty, it shouldn't be necessary! The country's coal reserves are quite abundant. At the current consumption rate, it would last for five hundred years.

Although the reserves of bituminous coal for steelmaking are not very high, they are still sufficient. Even if the demand for steel increases tenfold, this coal would be enough for several hundred years. Considering such a long timeframe, it's too early to worry about these issues now.

Enforcing industrial coal classification now involves many problems. Many areas that produce bituminous coal would have to buy lignite from outside at high prices, increasing industrial production costs and hindering economic development.”

This is a practical issue. If coal classification is enforced, it will inevitably face this economic problem.

In this era, the demand for coal resources is not very high, and energy issues have not yet entered the public's awareness.

Moreover, although steel and iron are often mentioned together, the coal used for “steelmaking” and “iron smelting” is actually different.

Austria currently produces six million tons of iron annually, but only a few hundred thousand tons of this are converted into steel.

With such low steel production, the demand for bituminous coal is naturally low. Even if production increases tenfold, the total steel production would only be a few million tons, which still wouldn't consume much coal.

Franz began to hesitate. The actual situation seemed a bit different than expected. Austria's bituminous coal reserves were not very high, but industrial demand was even lower.

After some consideration, Franz decided to continue promoting the classification of industrial coal use, but the approach was less aggressive.

This decision was not made lightly, Franz carefully thought it through. He believed that Austria's future demand for steel would rapidly increase, potentially surpassing ten million tons by the end of the century.

This would also significantly increase the demand for bituminous coal. If Austria were to acquire the Rhineland region and its Ruhr coal resources beforehand, there would be no coal shortage.

But there are always uncertainties. If something went wrong and Austria couldn't quickly secure the Ruhr coal mines, would domestic bituminous coal production be sufficient to meet the demand?

No one could answer that question. Given this uncertainty, Franz preferred to be prepared. Even if the effort turned out to be unnecessary, it was better than finding out at a critical moment that the supply of high-quality bituminous coal was insufficient.

After considerable effort, Franz barely managed to persuade Prime Minister Felix. Felix might still think this was a waste of time, but he accepted it out of respect for the emperor.

This was all irrelevant to Franz, who only cared about results. As long as the goal was achieved, some twists and turns in the process didn't matter.

No one knew the content of their conversation. Due to this small interlude, the meeting's intermission was extended.

With both the emperor and prime minister absent, the meeting couldn't proceed. Like most meetings, it had to wait for key leaders to return before resuming.

The staff were very attentive, providing coffee, pastries, and today's newspapers during the break.

Perhaps feeling it was improper to keep everyone waiting, about twenty minutes later, the two returned to the meeting room, and the meeting continued.

As the meeting was nearing its end, Prime Minister Felix, looking rather frustrated, said, "Gentlemen, let's not forget that coal is needed for power generation. Although our domestic coal production is considerable, we must prioritize steelmaking.

The future domestic demand for steel will see a sharp increase. Yet, over 80% of our coal production consists of lignite, with bituminous coal suitable for steelmaking making up less than 20%, and high-quality coal less than 5%.

We need to enact an energy law to legally ensure the availability of steelmaking coal. This shouldn't be done through administrative measures but rather through economic means to regulate market supply.

In essence, we need to ensure that the most suitable coal for steelmaking is used exclusively for that purpose, producing the highest quality steel, while the remaining ordinary coal flows into the market."

It was evident that Prime Minister Felix wasn't entirely willing, although this was apparent only to Franz. Different people saw different things in his expression. Many officials interpreted it as "concern," believing he wore such an expression because he was worried about the issue.

This interpretation was somewhat forced but more acceptable than Franz's explanation. It was common knowledge that only the highest quality coal could produce the best steel.

Using economic means to regulate the market was straightforward and crude. The Austrian government had similar successful experiences, such as imposing taxes on high-quality coal.

If this high-quality coal was used in steel mills, the taxes would be refunded. If it was used elsewhere, the tax exemption wouldn't apply.

The benefits of this approach were clear: it raised the price of high-quality coal, reducing its market competitiveness. Power plants, for instance, wouldn't purchase this high-quality coal due to its higher price.

Driven by profit, capitalists would self-regulate the market. The only issue was supervision, ensuring they didn't evade taxes.

In comparison, these were minor issues. Having a law versus not having one were two different concepts. Even if tax evasion occurred, it would be on a small scale.

Only with a limited number of participants could secrecy be maintained. If the scale grew, evading the tax authorities would become difficult.

Moreover, even if sellers were willing to take risks, buyers might not be.

Even with tax evasion, the price of high-quality coal wouldn't be lower than that of ordinary coal. For many, the difference wasn't significant, but the risks were substantial.

If they weren't caught, then it's all good. But if caught, the consequences would be severe, with heavy fines potentially leading to bankruptcy and even imprisonment.

Prime Minister Felix's proposal faced considerable opposition but was barely passed at the meeting. Franz's subtle actions almost explicitly stated that the emperor supported this proposal.

Raising the issue at the economic conference was also a way to share the burden. By convention, all high-level meetings in Austria were confidential.

Officials attending the meeting couldn't publicly declare their opposition to the law. Once a law was enacted, no official had the right to oppose it; they could only comply.

The outside world wasn't aware of how much opposition existed within the government, which would cause many to misjudge. The grievances of those whose interests were harmed would be shared by everyone.

With so many officials involved, no one dared to act out. This policy had no impact on ordinary citizens, who were always loyal users of cheap coal.

Except for coal bosses, almost no one would be affected. After all, the government was only regulating the highest quality portion of bituminous coal, not affecting others' interests.

If there were any losses, Franz himself would suffer the most. Unbeknownst to many, he had become Austria's largest coal supplier. This was the benefit of his past buying spree.

When railways hadn't been built, mines in deep mountains weren't worth much. But with the completion of the large railway network project, railways now reached every Austrian city, making transportation issues a thing of the past.

With transportation resolved, mineral resources could be transported out, turning many previously inaccessible mines into economically viable assets, thereby creating mining tycoons.

Franz didn't mind this minor loss because the policy had beneficiaries—the steel companies. It was just moving money from one pocket to another.

Losses from coal mining would be recouped from investments in the steel industry, where he also secretly invested in heavy industry.

This exemplifies the power of consortiums, with their complete industrial chains and far greater risk resistance compared to ordinary companies.

By now, a vast royal consortium had quietly emerged in Austria. If all of its assets were exposed, it would outshine all the consortiums in the world.

Obviously, this was impossible to expose. Trump cards are naturally better hidden deeply. Although the royal consortium was vaguely connected, it actually existed in several parts, or rather, as several consortiums.

Franz only remotely controlled them. These separate consortiums also had a large group of allies, forming a community of interests.

On the surface, some consortiums were even in opposition, often fighting over interests. To say they were under the same umbrella, even if evidence were presented, probably few would believe it.

This was just the beginning. With the rise of emerging industries, these consortiums would continue to snowball in the future, increasing Franz's control over the country.

Chapter 488: Franz's Dilemma

As the economic conference concluded, the electric power industry was designated as a new pillar industry for Austria over the next decade, alongside heavy industry.

To date, the scale of Austria's heavy industry has reached astronomical figures, involving industries such as steel, metallurgy, coal, machinery, and chemicals.

From a classification standpoint, electricity can also be considered a type of heavy industry due to its close connection with these sectors. However, because it is just starting and has a very large scale of its own, it has been listed separately.

The number of pillar industries cannot be too many. Since electricity and heavy industry have become new pillar industries, naturally, some industries have been removed from the list of pillar industries.

Unquestionably, the one being replaced is "railroads." This does not mean that railroads are no longer important, but after more than twenty years of hard work, most of the railroads in Austria have been completed.

The railroad industry has begun to become saturated, and in this state, what is needed is steady development, without the need for the government to invest too many resources.

In addition to railroads, agricultural development has also reached its limit. Domestic agricultural growth rates have long since slowed down. The market for agricultural products is only so large, and growing more crops does not necessarily mean earning more.

Currently, the growth rate of agriculture is roughly the same as the population growth rate. Austria already occupies 70% of the international agricultural export market, and this share is almost impossible to increase further.

In fact, it will not be long before Austrian agriculture faces a resurgence of competition from Russian agricultural products, making it very difficult to maintain the current market share.

To ensure the healthy development of agriculture, Austria has made multiple adjustments to its agricultural sector, moving from the initial export of raw agricultural products to the export of processed agricultural products.

During this period, efforts included promoting silk production in Lombardy and Venetia and developing the silk industry, as well as promoting grape cultivation in the Balkan Peninsula to develop the wine industry.

These measures were deliberately aimed at reducing grain production to ensure stable grain prices. With the outbreak of the Russo-Prussian War, the absence of Russia as a competitor in the international market has made recent years more prosperous.

However, these good times are about to end. The Russian government is negotiating with various countries to offset previously defaulted debts with grain.

This is a form of coercion. If the creditors do not accept, the debts will never be repaid. Franz knows that Alexander II's plan will succeed.

Russian debts are notoriously difficult to collect. Even if creditors have to accept a discount, recovering part of the debt is better than losing all of it. Even if governments object, financial interests will force them to compromise.

The only issue at stake now is how to divide the profits, which will eventually be resolved through negotiation. Alexander II had now cleared the diplomatic obstacles that prevented Russian grain from entering the international market.

The market is only so large. If one country sells more, others will naturally sell less. Although there are many places lacking grain during this period, only Europe has the purchasing power.

If it weren't for the logistical constraints of the Russian Empire, which hindered their grain exports, international grain prices would have already collapsed.

Franz has never doubted Russia's grain production capacity, especially with Alexander II's aggressive land reclamation efforts, which have been highly disruptive.

The fact that Alexander II has faced over twenty assassination attempts in recent years demonstrates how much his reforms have provoked animosity.

Even the most dim-witted nobles have realized what's happening. Unfortunately, the momentum has already been set, and the land has already been cultivated. It's too late to turn back.

Franz has no interest in getting involved in the Russian government's internal conflicts. He is also skeptical about Alexander II's plan to use grain to offset debts.

No matter how good a policy is, it depends on execution. The grain within the country is not directly owned by the Tsar. To use it for debt repayment, it must first be collected and then transported.

Aside from the financial pressure this would bring, simply collecting the grain requires someone to execute the task. In the face of such interests, who can guarantee that these officials won't be tempted?

It's important to note that during the period of large-scale land reclamation, despite Alexander II's strict oversight, there were still instances of officials embezzling the farmers' rations, which even led to revolts on more than one occasion.

If the grain is collected in the form of taxes, there's a risk of officials collecting extra or coming up with a term like "fire loss (huǒ hào/火耗)" to legally siphon off some of it.

(TN: "火耗," also known as "火耗银" (silver fire loss), originally referred to the loss incurred when fragmented pieces of silver were melted down to cast into silver coins or yuanbao. Later, the term came to refer to an additional tax levied on top of regular taxes on grain or money in ancient China during the Qing Dynasty.)

If the government tries to buy grain directly from the populace, the officials might still manipulate the process. They could forcibly buy the grain from farmers at low prices, sell it to capitalists for a profit, and then leave a small amount to report back to the Tsar.

Unless the Russian government sets a high price, higher than the market price, providing greater benefits to the officials, it won't be able to collect much grain.

Although the Russian government's plan might not be realized, the impact of Russian grain on the market will still be significant. As long as there is profit to be made, capitalists will find a way to transport and sell the grain.

Franz strongly suspects that Alexander II is doing this on purpose. First, he uses the grain-for-debt strategy to coax various countries into opening their markets.

The Russian government symbolically allocates some grain each year to offset debts, then allows capitalists to transport the grain for sale.

Although it appears that the Russian government does not profit from this, in reality, selling off the domestic surplus grain is highly lucrative.

Even if other countries become aware of Russia's plan, they are likely to go along with it. For grain-importing countries, obtaining cheap grain is always a good thing.

The real losers are the current grain-exporting countries, with Austria being the biggest victim. While politically there is no direct opposition, economically, Russia and Austria are now in conflict.

Austria has few options left. Austria could leverage its advantages in transportation and agricultural technology to drive down grain prices, making Russian grain exports unprofitable.

However, this strategy would be pyrrhic, effectively harming Austria's own interests almost as much as Russia's. It should be noted that Austria now dominates the international agricultural export market, gaining huge benefits every year.

Even if they win the price war and occupy a larger market, it will still lead to a decrease in profits due to the decline in grain prices. In the end, not only will they not be able to gain greater benefits, but they will also pay a considerable price.

Russia, as the challenger with nothing to lose, stands to gain considerable benefits if successful, while failure simply returns them to the status quo.

In the original timeline, when Americans played the price war game, they knocked down all competitors and dominated grain exports, which was to achieve their strategic goals.

Austria can't emulate this now. Aside from consuming a lot of financial resources, the key is that it's now the era of colonial empires, and both Britain and France have a large number of colonies.

If there is insufficient domestic grain, it can be supplemented from the colonies. Others having control over international grain exports won't scare them at all.

Otherwise, Franz would have already created a grain export alliance, drawing in several grain-exporting countries to manipulate the international grain market for greater profit.

Unable to achieve strategic goals and facing challenges from many competitors, it can be said that after completing the basic accumulation of capital, the importance of agriculture diminished.

However, a decrease in importance does not mean it can be abandoned. In reality, agriculture remains one of Austria's most critical industries. The agricultural production chain accounts for 38.6% of Austria's gross national product.

Although this proportion is decreasing yearly, it does not detract from its importance. Faced with Russian competition, industrial adjustments are now imperative.

Austria's agricultural industry system is already well-established, from the primary production of agricultural products to the end sales of agricultural products, pushing product-added value to its limit.

For example: from wheat to flour and biscuits, from fruits and vegetables to canned goods, from grapes to wine and raisins, from potatoes to fries...

In this era, all agriculture is ecological, with no fertilizers or pesticide additives, so there is no concept of green food. The populace is too poor for branded agriculture to have much of a market.

A complete industrial chain increases risk resistance, but it also means that economic impact is more significant when faced with disruptions.

These industries have very low technical content. European countries are not devoid of agriculture, and they also have these industries, but they are limited by raw materials and therefore not on a large scale.

Once large quantities of cheap raw materials become available, capitalists will surely not hesitate to expand production. Austria is, in fact, the largest buyer of Russian grain as capitalists' integrity is always low in the face of profit.

The low tariff system between Russia and Austria indeed created opportunities for Austria's industrial and commercial product exports, but it also brought challenges.

Faced with cheap imported grain, these agricultural processing companies will certainly make choices that align with their own interests. The government cannot force them otherwise, as businesses need to survive too.

To this day, the profits of agricultural processing enterprises have significantly decreased, from the initial 30-40% down to the current ten-odd percent.

This is gross profit, and the net profit is even lower. Under harsh market competition, agricultural processing enterprises have entered an era of slim profits, relying on volume to make money.

The relatively higher profits are found in snack processing companies. However, competition among these companies is even fiercer, with almost every type of snack having dozens or even hundreds of similar products on the market.

While the profit per item is decent, the problem is the low sales volume. There are very few companies that can create a brand and make huge profits.

Currently, Austria's agricultural industry technology has reached the top level of the era, becoming a defender of the arena.

Fortunately, Russian agricultural products are relatively simple, mainly potatoes, wheat, and corn. Fruits and vegetables, unless processed into canned goods, will rot before they can be shipped out.

Clearly, Russia's industry has not kept up, and these industries are underdeveloped. The products they produce cannot even be sold domestically, let alone in the international market.

At this point, it is imperative for Austria to adjust its agricultural industry, such as reducing the production of agricultural products that will obviously be impacted and switching to other economically scarce crops on the market.

This is easier said than done. With so many farmers in Austria, it is not a task that can be accomplished with just a word to change their planting habits.

Due to the lack of market information transparency, even Franz cannot accurately predict which agricultural products will be scarce in the future.

Not knowing what the market will be short of makes it impossible for the government to guide agricultural planting effectively.

Unless it's a planned economy, there will be chaos in agricultural planting for a long time in the future.

This is an unsolvable problem. Agricultural products that are in short supply this year might rot in the fields next year, with no one interested.

Farmers are also adjusting their planting directions based on their own judgments. With so many people involved, it is simply impossible to coordinate.

Franz got a headache.

Chapter 489: Promoting Pork

The agricultural sector accounts for a significant portion of the economy, with the entire industry chain employing over ten million people. If it cannot withstand the impact, the Austrian economy will suffer a severe blow.

Although there are colonial areas to absorb some of the pressure, the core is still the homeland. It is far from the time to shift away from the primary sector. Austria's agricultural benefits will not end until the invention of chemical fertilizers.

Due to practical needs, Franz can only push forward the development of the livestock industry in advance, artificially increasing grain consumption.

The reason it is considered "in advance" is mainly because the income levels of the populace have not yet risen significantly, and the market demand for meat products is still relatively low.

According to the original plan, Franz intended to promote the livestock industry after 1875, based on the economic development trends of various European countries.

Economists tend to use 1870 as a benchmark year, primarily due to the outbreak of the Second Industrial Revolution. During this period, the economies of Europe and America were growing rapidly, and people's incomes were also increasing significantly.

As income levels rose, so did consumption levels. According to economic experts' analysis, five years later would be the golden period for promoting animal husbandry.

Given the limitations of the era, there was no need to worry about competition from Argentine, Canadian, or Australian beef and mutton, at least not in the fresh meat market.

Due to inadequate freezing technology, sending fresh meat to Europe meant having to transport live animals.

Transporting live cattle and sheep from thousands of miles away to the European continent was not an easy task. Any mishap at sea could lead to significant losses.

With these transportation costs added, even if the meat makes it to the European continent, the price will not be cheap. At most, they can sell beef jerky or salted meat.

In the short term, without these strong competitors, another agricultural product boom period will occur. However, this boom must coincide with a time of high market demand to be effective.

Starting to develop the livestock industry ahead of schedule poses certain challenges in creating an initial market.

In fact, developing animal husbandry was not Franz's own idea. The Ministry of Agriculture had long made plans, but they did not anticipate that the Russians would return to the agricultural export market so quickly.

After the Russian government announced they would default on debts, European countries took retaliatory measures. The more aggressive ones directly seized Russian export products to offset the debts, while the more moderate ones imposed a debt tax.

Well, this debt tax was Franz's creation, which involved extracting a certain percentage of tax from imported Russian goods to repay the debts owed.

Due to the Austro-Russian alliance, Austria only symbolically collected a small amount of this debt tax, but other European countries weren't as courteous.

The specific percentage varied, generally not less than 30%. As a result, in the past 2-3 years, the Russian Empire's export trade shrank by 80%.

Now, the Russian government's proposal to offset debts with grain is essentially an attempt to break these restrictions. Otherwise, no matter how cheap their grain is, it would struggle to be competitive in the market.

Identifying the problem is easy, but solving it is difficult. After noticing the Russians' actions, the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture became busy.

The nearly seventy-year-old Minister of Agriculture, Christian, had to retract his vacation request. Without resolving this issue, he could not enjoy a peaceful holiday.

This time is not far off. Perhaps from the second half of the year, Russian agricultural products will reappear in the international market.

In another 2-3 years, Austria's painstakingly maintained dominance in agricultural exports will cease to exist.

The international market is only so big. As soon as the Russians manage to transport grain from Ukraine and Moscow, they will capture a large market share.

In this era, the main grain-importing countries were few: Britain, Italy, and the German Federal Empire. The remaining countries, such as Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and Switzerland, do import grain, but their demand is not very high.

Overall, the European grain market comprises about 30 million people.

Of course, this refers only to staple grains. The demand for other agricultural by-products varies significantly and is difficult to quantify accurately.

This market is increasing by about 2 million people annually due to population growth in various countries. With no improvement in agricultural technology and grain production not keeping pace with population growth, a gap has emerged.

Currently, 24.6% of Austria's agricultural production is for export. This segment will be the most impacted.

Reviewing the data, Christian sighed. Being the Minister of Agriculture is challenging. Achieving results is hard, but encountering problems is all too easy.

The largest issue is that the high export percentage makes the market highly susceptible to international shocks. Shifting to domestic sales is not feasible either, as the local market cannot absorb the surplus.

Snow continued to fall, and Vienna's winter seemed to embrace the snowy landscape. Bracing against the cold wind, Christian shivered as he stepped out of the carriage.

Without pausing, Christian quickly entered the palace and transferred to another carriage.

Schönbrunn Palace covers a considerable area. After Franz's ascension, the abandoned construction projects were resumed, further expanding the palace's grounds.

Of course, the main reason was that an area was enclosed for a hunting ground. This was strongly requested by Archduke Karl, as Archduchess Sophie was worried about his health and didn't allow him to hunt outside. To make hunting more convenient for his elderly father, Franz naturally agreed.

Vienna is, after all, Habsburg territory, and most of the land belongs to the royal family. There were no land costs, and adding a wall didn't cost much.

Franz didn't like residing in the old palace much, so he took the opportunity to add several new buildings for his daily residence.

This made the palace gates even further from the emperor. For safety reasons, no outside carriages were allowed inside the palace. People either had to switch to palace carriages or walk. For Christian, the choice was easy—he didn't want to freeze.

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The telephone is a wonderful invention. As soon as Christian entered the palace, someone notified Franz.

Out of consideration for his old and loyal minister, Franz had already arranged for coffee to be prepared according to Christian's preferences.

Of course, if people knew that various beverages were always available in the palace and being changed every 15 minutes, the gesture might not seem as thoughtful.

Even if someone knew, they would likely pretend otherwise. Having something to drink is quite good so why even complain? If everyone always told the truth, life would be unbearable.

Franz couldn't possibly remember the personal preferences of all his ministers. It's always the subordinates who pay attention to the preferences of their superiors. Which emperor would bother remembering his ministers' personal tastes?

Taste preferences were meticulously recorded by some people. If there was a mistake, they could just replace the drink. The relationships between monarchs and ministers in Europe weren't that complicated. Daily trivialities weren't worth worrying about, and no one risked losing their head over them.

After drinking a sip of coffee to dispel the cold, Christian rested for more than ten minutes before reporting to Franz.

"Your Majesty, here is the data compiled by the Ministry of Agriculture. Currently, the domestic supply and demand for meat products are roughly balanced. To expand domestic demand, the best approach is to lower prices.

It's not that people don't like eating meat. It's just that meat prices are relatively high compared to their incomes.

The international market is even worse. Although the supply and demand for fresh meat are still balanced, there is an oversupply of beef jerky and cured meat products, mostly from the Confederate States of America.

Preliminary estimates suggest that the market can handle an annual increase of 600,000 tons of beef, 400,000 tons of mutton, and 350,000 tons of other meat products. Exceeding this supply could severely impact the market, likely causing prices to plummet."

Franz was obviously not willing to destabilize the market. As the largest agricultural export country, Austria would suffer the most if the market were disrupted.

After some thought, Franz asked, "What if we extend this timeline to one or two years?"

Animal husbandry takes time, especially in this era without widespread use of feed. It's mostly hay and grain, and the shortest time to market is over a year.

Minister of Agriculture Christian pondered for a moment before replying, "Your Majesty, although Europe's population is steadily increasing and the livestock industry is expanding its capacity, even in two years, the maximum increase would be about ten percent."

After pacing the room a few steps, Franz made a decision, “The Ministry of Agriculture should prepare to promote a livestock breeding plan, aiming for a two-million-ton increase in meat products.

Let’s start by lowering meat prices to stimulate the market. If the market can’t absorb it, we’ll increase our strategic reserves. It will only be for 2-3 years and won’t require much funding.”

The direct grain consumption of cattle and sheep is not significant, but planting fodder will inevitably take up land that would otherwise be used for growing food, thereby reducing grain production.

Unlike in later times, pork wasn’t very popular in this era due to dietary habits that would take a long time to change.

In fact, the per capita consumption of meat products in Europe at this time wasn’t particularly low, possibly because wealthy individuals skewed the average. For example, in Austria, the per capita consumption of meat products was 82 pounds (about 37 kilograms).

Franz paused before adding, “We can increase pork production. Compared to beef and mutton, pork is relatively cheaper and more acceptable to the public. If pork production increases, I plan to add 300 grams of pork per week to the meals of children receiving compulsory education.”

Regardless of preferences, those who had the luxury of being picky went to private schools. Austria’s compulsory education schools lacked the facilities of private schools and were attended by children from lower-class families.

Having meat at all was already good. Currently, schools only provide meat once a week. Beef and mutton were out of the question unless it was a holiday or Franz’s birthday.

On regular days, the only meat provided by schools was fish, for the simple reason that it was cheap. The same amount of money could buy more meat, so the frugal Ministry of Education could only afford this inexpensive option.

Promoting pork was a necessity due to the high prices of beef and mutton, which couldn’t be reduced easily. Pork was cheaper, so it became the focus of promotion.

Previously, the government had promoted fish, but only sea fish were popular in the market. This was a side effect of industrialization, which inevitably brought environmental pollution, causing fish and shrimp in many rivers to mutate.

Mutated fish and shrimp were problematic, and after instances of food poisoning, people no longer dared to eat them. The Austrian government even legislated against the sale and consumption of mutated fish and shrimp.

This affected the entire freshwater fish population, making them unpopular. Except in the inland mountainous regions, almost no one consumed freshwater fish.

Chapter 490: Hidden Schemes, Open Conspiracy

Franz, while restructuring the industry, did not neglect to create trouble for the Russians, aiming to disrupt Alexander II’s plans as much as possible.

In the realm of interests, there are no true allies, and notions of right or wrong become irrelevant. One's identity dictates one's position. Franz's decision to limit his efforts to merely disrupt Russian grain exports already showed considerable restraint on his part.

Completely blocking Russian grain exports was unrealistic, but setting up some obstacles was not difficult. For instance, Austria's foreign ministry, with a bit of diplomatic maneuvering, prompted neighboring Switzerland to impose high tariffs on the Russians.

Similarly, within the German Federal Empire, there was an ongoing debate over accepting Russia's grain as debt repayment. The reason was straightforward: the states that hadn't lent money to Russia opposed it.

Austria's diplomatic influence played a role here, but the primary reason was their general displeasure toward the Russians. Simply disliking the Russians was a significant factor, and it fueled their opposition.

The grievances involved were already too complex to untangle. In short, Russia's enemies were spread across the European continent, so targeting them was not difficult at all.

Subsequently, Belgium and the Netherlands were successfully lobbied by Austria and imposed high tariffs on Russia, and Spain and Portugal followed suit.

The reason was very practical: the Russians were down and out now.

Perhaps the Russians would rise again in the future, but with Austria and Prussia blocking them, there was no immediate concern.

In contrast, Austria's threat was immediate. Who knew what kind of retaliation might follow if they refused the Austrian government's goodwill?

France's annexation of Italian states had already alarmed neighboring countries. Although Austria was likely to be more discreet and less inclined to annex them outright, it could still find an excuse to assert dominance.

Since the announcement of the alliance between Britain, France, and Austria, European countries no longer believed they could ensure their safety by balancing the great powers.

Given this new reality, it was wiser for smaller nations to behave well and maintain good relations with their neighbors, making it difficult for larger powers to take hostile actions.

This strategy might seem cowardly, but it's how small countries survive. They can express grievances during stable times, but in critical moments, they must avoid standing on the wrong side.

As for Britain and France, Franz wasn't overly concerned with futile efforts. Despite ongoing alliance talks, taking them too seriously would be a mistake. This alliance was formed with each party harboring its own motives, barely held together by shared interests. When it comes to fundamental issues, there's no genuine discussion.

Convincing Britain and France wouldn't be difficult, but it would signal the end of the Austro-Russian alliance. Although Franz no longer valued this alliance, he wasn't willing to proactively break the treaty. National credibility was at stake. A country that disregards treaties loses international respect.

If Austria were to break the Austro-Russian alliance, it would be challenging to regain its current esteemed status and might even face exclusion from the soon-to-be-formed Tripartite Alliance.

The friendly relationship between France and Austria largely relied on Britain, primarily due to Britain's history of betraying allies, which made people instinctively wary.

Franz didn't plan to take such drastic measures. If Austria acted that way, it would no longer be seen as a reliable ally.

The Habsburg dynasty has carefully cultivated Austria's reputation over many years. Since the Congress of Vienna, Austria has held significant influence over European continental affairs, largely due to their reputation.

When forming alliances, there's an inherent sense of trust. Currently, Austria and Russia are merely engaging in fair competition. If their diplomacy isn't enough, that's their own fault. Franz has adhered to the rules without resorting to underhanded tactics.

Otherwise, pirates in the Aegean Sea could effectively block the Russians, given the Black Sea Fleet's few dilapidated sailboats. The Russian government had already set a precedent by having a naval fleet destroyed by pirates. If it happened again, one wonders if Alexander II could withstand it.

The cost of bribing Britain and France is too high and unnecessary, as the Russians are already struggling to achieve their goals.

Every shift in the status quo causes certain vested interests to suffer losses, and these people become the biggest opponents. In Britain and France, the nobility and farmers are the strongest opposition to cheap Russian grain.

A little manipulation of public opinion would suffice. Given Russia's "excellent" reputation, it wouldn't take much to spark protests and demonstrations.

These tactics shouldn't be deployed prematurely. The best time is when Russian grain ships arrive at port. Inciting a few hot-headed youths to set a fire would be more effective than any amount of talk.

These small tricks are of limited value though, at most delaying the Russians by 2-3 years and making them pay a bit more. In the long run, capitalists seeking profit will inevitably collaborate with the Russians. Once they start cooperating, these minor tactics will lose their effectiveness.

Franz doesn't favor using conspiracies primarily because, no matter how clever the schemes, they are insignificant in the face of profit.

Austria isn't the only one targeting the Russians; Prussia is even more proactive. Compared to the Austrian government, the Prussian government is more concerned about the potential resurgence of the Russian Empire.

Seeing Alexander II focus on internal reforms, economic development, and restoring national strength, the Prussian government remains uneasy. The two sides are mortal enemies with no possibility of reconciliation. Once the Russian Empire recovers, another Russo-Prussian War is inevitable.

The Junker nobility is prepared to strike first, having tasted the benefits and now seeking greater gains from the Russians. Their lack of action is due to insufficient strength and capability to attack the Russian Empire.

In the past two years, Austro-Prussian relations have improved significantly, with Austria quietly encouraging the Prussian government. Many pro-Austrian Junker nobles are also leading the anti-Russian sentiment.

Currently, being anti-Russian is the politically correct stance in the Kingdom of Prussia. When everyone around you is anti-Russian, failing to be anti-Russian would attract attention.

Franz was already considering whether to renew the alliance with Russia after its expiration. Due to geopolitical factors, the conflicts of interest between the two countries are likely to increase in the future.

Franz had no confidence in the Russian government's integrity. Alexander II was also an ambitious monarch, but his luck was bad, happening to be in power when the empire was transitioning from prosperity to decline, forcing him to carry out social reforms.

This is a common trait among all ambitious rulers: their ambitions are often too great. If the Russians were to resolve their issues with Poland and Prussia, a confrontation between Russia and Austria would be inevitable.

Meanwhile, France has been led into a trap. With Napoleon III now old and preoccupied with paving the way for his son, it is highly unlikely that he would engage in military expeditions at this time.

Once Napoleon IV ascends to the throne, internal conflicts will erupt, Italians will seek independence, and it would be a blessing if France avoids a civil war. France simply won't have the capacity to backstab Austria by then.

The conflict between Prussia and Russia is irreconcilable. Hoping for them to unite is a pipe dream. Conflicts over core interests will keep them at odds with each other.

The international situation has reached a point where Austria no longer needs to worry about fighting on multiple fronts. At this moment, the Russo-Austrian alliance, with its divergent interests, is becoming more of a burden than a benefit for Austria.

As long as Austria refrains from causing trouble on the European continent, there is no need to worry about being ganged up on. There's no love or hate without reason, and similarly, no one would attack without cause.

If in the next Russo-Prussian War, the Russians fail again, then this European steamroller will meet its end. Without the constraints of the alliance, it would be convenient for Austria to kick them while they are down.

Conversely, if Prussia is defeated, the Junker nobility, having lost their foundation, would have no choice but to compromise with Austria and join the Holy Roman Empire for self-preservation.

Both outcomes seem quite favorable. As long as the French remain entangled in the Italian quagmire, Franz has nothing to fear.

While entertaining these thoughts, Franz keeps his true intentions concealed. To the outside world, Russia and Austria still appear to be good allies, and the alliance between Britain, France, and Austria seems imminent.

European alliances typically have a time limit, with thirty years being considered long. The Russo-Austrian alliance was one such long-term agreement. This was only possible when relations between the two countries were quite good. However, even the best relationships can't withstand the erosion of time.

If Alexander II hadn't been such an ambitious ruler, the Russo-Austrian relationship could have been maintained for many more years. Unfortunately, reality does not entertain such what-ifs.

Faced with an ambitious tsar, Franz cannot afford to let his guard down. With such a large butterfly effect, who could guarantee that Alexander II would die from assassination as he did in the original timeline?

If he were to continue leading the Russian Empire, Russia and Austria would eventually clash over interests. In fact, the two sides were already at odds.

They hadn't openly fallen out because their conflicts of interest weren't significant enough yet. It was only for the sake of the Russian Empire's large market that Franz had been maintaining the alliance.

There were many points of conflict between the two sides, such as strategic conflicts. The Aegean Sea was now within Austria's sphere of influence, and whether they liked it or not, the task of guarding the Mediterranean gateway fell to Austria.

British influence in the Mediterranean had already been squeezed to insignificance. If Russia were to be let in, they would be sharing their own interests.

Needless to say, at this point, Franz wouldn't provide even a foothold for Russia to expand its influence in the Mediterranean.

It could be said that Napoleon III's schemes had succeeded. This was an open conspiracy. Whether they liked it or not, once France withdrew, Russia and Austria would directly clash over Mediterranean issues.

There hasn't been an outbreak of conflict because the Russian forces are weak. With the Black Sea Fleet's remaining outdated sailing ships, any attempt to assert their presence in the Mediterranean is likely to end with them being annihilated by pirates.

Conflicts of interest are brutally straightforward, with nothing off-limits. Napoleon III, realizing the strategic pressure of controlling the Balkans, decisively abandoned this area.

The Austrian government couldn't possibly refuse interests handed to them on a platter. By taking over the French Balkans, the task of containing Russia fell on Austria's shoulders.

Before the British were squeezed out, Austria could feign weakness. After all, Greece was John Bull's little brother, and it was up to them as the big brother to step up.

Now, the interests in this region are in Austria's hands. Any Russian attempt to enter would be an encroachment on Austrian interests, something the Austrian government would naturally oppose.

Considering the magnitude of these interests, Alexander II's silence is notable, reflecting a level of cunning and ambition that Franz cannot ignore.

Although aware that this was France's scheme, in the face of interests, the Austrian government was still willing to accept this kind of situation. This was the terrifying nature of open conspiracies.