

## Roman Empire 491

### Chapter 491: France and Russia Draw Closer

In the spring of 1871, the Roman uprising led by Garibaldi and Mazzini ultimately ended in failure, forcing the leaders of the insurgent forces into exile abroad.

Against the backdrop of the impending alliance between Britain, France, and Austria, the British government, to maintain relations with France, did not grant them political asylum this time.

However, true to their nature as troublemakers, John Bull still managed to send them to the United States of America. This has long been the favorite destination for European revolutionaries seeking political asylum, primarily for two reasons:

On one hand, the United States, being thousands of miles away, is less influenced by the politics of other countries, and the federal government is known for sheltering political refugees, ensuring their safety.

On the other hand, economically, the United States had a robust development and was a nation of European immigrants, providing a source of funding from compatriots.

Purely from a safety standpoint, hiding in the vast, sparsely populated colonies would be more discreet, where one could easily establish a farm in some remote countryside and live a secluded life without issues.

Few people chose to seek refuge in the colonies unless they had done something significant and were being hunted, forcing them to change their identities completely.

The end of the Italian revolutionary period marked the stabilization of French rule in the region. After the purges during the war, the anti-French forces in Italy suffered a devastating blow.

The threat from France had always been significant, not in terms of manpower, economy, or industry, but more due to the shadow left by the Napoleonic era.

The fact that France was called the world's strongest land power, without objection from other European countries, was enough to illustrate this point.

Otherwise, in terms of manpower, Russia and Austria were double that of France; in industry, Britain and Austria were ahead of France; and economically, John Bull far surpassed France.

If we apply the methodology of measuring comprehensive national power as used in later times, France would be significantly behind Britain and Austria, comparable to the Russian Empire, and even with some differences, it was not too substantial.

However, on the European continent, France posed the greatest sense of crisis to everyone.

Don't be fooled by Austria's larger territory and population. In everyone's impression, the Balkans was a barbaric land, and Hungary was just a rural backwater.

The Russian Empire was even less respected, with the concept of being barbarians deeply ingrained. Following their defeat in the Russo-Prussian War, people paid even less attention to them.

France, already perceived as immensely powerful, had now annexed the prosperous Italian region, causing widespread anxiety among European nations about French expansion.

There was nothing wrong with this perception. During this period, Italy was considered wealthy. Even Sicily, which would be poor and underdeveloped in later times, was then a prosperous country.

After annexing Italy, France's population, economy, and resources were significantly enhanced, making the Greater French Empire even more formidable.

In response, European countries sought to ensure their security through diplomatic means, aiming to avoid conflicts with France or other nations.

As a leader of power politics, Napoleon III's forced annexation of Italy was understandable. Besides paving the way for his son, it also aimed to stir nationalistic sentiments and strengthen national cohesion.

This was the price that historically strong countries had to pay. As Engels noted, forcibly annexing Italy was the best way to ensure the longevity of the French autocracy. Otherwise, if Napoleon III had just concurrently served as the Emperor of Italy, it would have been more convenient to rule, and the Italian people wouldn't have been so resistant.

In this respect, France and Austria were somewhat similar, except that Franz had the banner of the Holy Roman Empire to use, providing a strong legal basis, and the annexed German states were not resistant. However, Napoleon III did not have this advantage.

With the establishment of Greater France, Napoleon III had already completed the great undertaking of annexing Italy, even though Lombardy and Venetia were not included, which wasn't of much consequence.

Moreover, with two fewer regions, the difficulty of governance was also reduced.

The French were well aware of the cost of forcibly annexing Italy, but they were confident they could suppress the Italians through their own strength. Under such circumstances, a smaller Italian region was more manageable. It would be better to consolidate their gains before considering further expansion.

The previous annexation of the Kingdom of Sardinia had provided a reference for the French. They easily established control there due to their formidable strength. The current backlash was just from eating too much at once, without having time to digest.

To establish a stable international situation and digest their gains, Napoleon III repeatedly declared that France was a "satisfied" nation and would not continue expanding on the European continent. These assurances did little to alleviate the anxiety of other nations, but they had to accept this stance due to the reality of the situation.

Napoleon III's greatest fear was isolation, as had happened during the Napoleonic Wars where even a powerful France was worn down by enemies on all sides.

To avoid the worst-case scenario, Napoleon III accepted the treacherous British into the Franco-Austrian alliance. At the same time, while Britain, France, and Austria were forming an alliance, he sought to ease relations with the Russian Empire.

Times had changed, and the Russian Empire was no longer a threat to France. To further this goal, calls for a "Franco-Russian alliance" emerged within the French government.

Undoubtedly, Napoleon III ignored these calls, but that did not prevent him from using them as a scare tactic.

The idea of a Franco-Russian alliance was simple to talk about but difficult to achieve. The Austro-Russian alliance and the Anglo-French-Austrian alliance were two significant obstacles.

Unless the Austrian government went mad, they would never allow a Franco-Russian alliance to form. The British were equally unwilling to see such an alliance. After all, they had personally intervened to dismantle the Franco-Austrian alliance.

If there was another Franco-Russian alliance, wouldn't that be devastating? John Bull did not believe that the countries caught in the middle, like Austria and Prussia, could withstand a combined Franco-Russian force. This alliance was far more formidable than the Franco-Austrian one.

At least the Franco-Austrian alliance had significant internal conflicts of interest, making it relatively easy to disrupt. In contrast, a Franco-Russian alliance presented fewer direct territorial disputes, making it much harder to fracture.

Unlike in the original timeline, the current Greater French Empire was the leading power on the European continent, at least on the surface.

After annexing Italy, France's population soared to 55 million, its economy surpassed that of Britain, and its industrial output was second only to Britain and Austria, with a very narrow gap.

Militarily, France boasted the world's second-largest navy and the strongest army. This level of power was already alarming, and the prospect of them allying with Russia was unthinkable.

Even just France and Russia drawing closer caused a sensation internationally. European countries couldn't stand it, and the Austrian government couldn't sit still either.

In the Vienna Palace, Franz reassured the anxious crowd, "No need to worry. The British, in their attempt to dismantle the Franco-Austrian alliance, have chosen to join it. We are already allied with both France and Russia. If they form an alliance, we are inherently part of it.

Undermining an alliance from within is much faster than doing so from the outside. Moreover, the French are focused on consolidating their gains, and the Russians are busy with reforms.

Even if they wanted to form an alliance, now is not the time. Besides inciting the apprehension of all European countries, what other purpose would this alliance serve?

To truly form an alliance, they would need a common enemy. The Kingdom of Prussia doesn't qualify, and it seems we're not that hated right now, are we?"

Franz could conclude that France and Russia getting closer was a feint, purely based on an analysis of their interests. While the possibility of such an alliance existed, it lacked the motivation to be established.

Both France and Russia needed to address their internal issues. Even if they had formed an alliance, they wouldn't have been able to expand externally at this time, nor could they have gained more benefits from the European continent.

The fact that the Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance had already divided much of the world's influence was an established fact. Should France attempt to disrupt this status quo, it would certainly face resistance.

Alexander II was still carrying out internal reforms, leaving him unable to alleviate any pressure on France, and Napoleon III lacked the confidence to act independently.

It should be noted that Napoleon III had a severe case of anglophobia. Overcoming this fear was only possible because of the Franco-Austrian alliance, but deep down, he was still haunted by it.

Without Russian support, it was too much to ask Napoleon III to confront the combined pressures of Britain and Austria alone.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg shook his head and said, "Your Majesty, regardless of how small the possibility is, we must nip this crisis in the bud.

To avoid the worst-case scenario, we need to prepare contingency plans. Negotiations with the British must be expedited, and if necessary, we should also be ready to ally with the Prussians."

This answer startled Franz. From the map, doesn't it look like a repeat of the European power structure from the original timeline?

What comforted him was that Austria was much stronger than in the original timeline, and this potential alliance would be more powerful than the "German-Austrian Alliance."

The alliance would cover half the Mediterranean, and most of the Balkans, and include Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia, while missing three-quarters of Italy.

Overall, the balance of power would not tilt against them. Of course, this was contingent on Britain staying out of it, as an Anglo-Franco-Russian alliance would be deadly.

Franz quickly dismissed this notion due to its inherent dangers. He, a cautious man, was not willing to take such a risk.

Even if they could win on land, the sea would be a disaster. The Russo-Prussian War had already crushed Prussia's naval ambitions, and Austria's navy going up against Britain and France alone was unrealistic.

Hoping for naval dominance was less feasible than simply destroying the Ottoman Empire and building a railway to the Suez Canal, which had a higher success rate.

Franz made a swift decision, "We can strengthen relations with Prussia, but let's not go too far. France and Russia are only drawing closer, and overreacting could provoke them.

Given the current situation, within the next twenty years, France and Russia are unlikely to expand externally. As long as we instigate a Russo-Prussian War before they form an alliance, the worst-case scenario won't happen."

It was clear that Franz's stance had shifted, and he was preparing for Russia to lose again. Given the ambitions of the Junker nobility, if the Russian government lost again, they might even dare to occupy St. Petersburg.

If the Russian government collapsed, Austria could exploit the situation, ensuring that Russia wouldn't rise again for decades, or perhaps forever.

A glance at the map reveals why. After losing the war and forfeiting the fertile lands of Eastern Europe, they couldn't hope to thrive in Siberia.

Currently, the populations of Russia and Austria are roughly equal. If the Russian government failed again, losing vast territories and population, Russia would no longer be a threat.

Of course, this strategy had severe repercussions. Prussia would need to be significantly weakened as well, or Austria would be left with another dangerous neighbor.

There was no choice, given that Alexander II decided to provoke Franz at such a sensitive time.

The specter of a world war loomed in Franz's mind, making him highly wary of a Franco-Russian alliance. This justified his preemptive action, even if it was just a precautionary measure.

#### Chapter 492: Alexandrovich

The rapprochement between France and Russia was not just all talk. Although Napoleon III was merely testing the waters to gain more influence within the Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance, he took concrete actions.

On March 6, 1871, the Russian Empire's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Crown Prince Alexander Alexandrovich would visit the European continent, with France as his first stop.

The Russians' cooperation was unexpected. Normally, the Crown Prince's first stop would be Vienna, or Denmark at the very least.

The order of the Crown Prince's visits, seemingly trivial, actually carried significant political implications, sending political signals to the outside world.

Austria was Russia's most important ally and the only one with substantial influence, holding a significant position in Russian foreign policy. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Denmark was connected to the Russian royal family through marriage, as Crown Prince Alexander Alexandrovich had married Danish Princess Maria Feodorovna.

Geographically, both countries bordered Russia. According to what was customary, a sea route visit would start in Denmark and end in Austria, or a land route would begin in Vienna and finish in Denmark.

These were standard diplomatic visit procedures, reflecting diplomatic importance and maintaining etiquette.

Starting with France made this visit intriguing. This wasn't a business trip, and with so many countries to visit along the way, skipping directly to France made Alexandrovich's travel route obviously awkward.

When it came to politics, no matter how awkward, Crown Prince Alexandrovich had to go through with it, as it concerned the Russian government's foreign policy.

It was widely believed that this was the Russian government expressing dissatisfaction with the Austrian government. Recently, the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs disrupted the Russian government's "grain-for-debt" plan, so Russia's discontent was natural.

The emergence of issues between Russia and Austria was a welcome development for many European nations. Numerous onlookers were ready to watch the drama unfold, and international media were quick to voice their opinions.

Everyone was waiting for the Austrian government's reaction, but they were disappointed. There was no response as if nothing had happened.

This was the view of ordinary people, but for government officials in various countries, no reaction was the biggest reaction.

It either meant that the two sides had communicated in advance, in which case there was no problem, or the Austrian government simply didn't care.

The former was insignificant, but the latter was different. If the Austrian government truly didn't care about Russia's actions, there were only two reasons:

Either the relationship between the two countries was very good, and they didn't mind such a small issue. But this was clearly impossible, as although the Russo-Austrian relationship was good, it was far from being intimate.

Or the Austrian government had lost confidence in the Russo-Austrian alliance or no longer valued it. Undoubtedly, this was the truth.

The Russian government expressed its dissatisfaction in this way. Besides the French paying an appearance fee, the main reason was likely to test the Austrian government and seek benefits from Austria.

Without real financial gain, Alexander II wouldn't have given the French such face, cooperating in this performance. There was never any so-called traditional friendship between the two countries.

The appearance fee for Crown Prince Alexander Alexandrovich was that France agreed to provide a loan of 500 million francs to the Russian government.

This was not easy, as since the Russian government declared default, all international financial institutions had shut their doors to them. Whether it was bonds or loans, as long as it involved the Russian government, no one was willing to deal with them.

With gains come losses. The French promise had not yet been fulfilled, but the Russo-Austrian alliance was already in crisis. The less the Austrian government seemed to care, the more worried the Russian government became.

The Russo-Austrian alliance was nearing its expiration date, and if it couldn't be renewed, the Russian Empire would face unprecedented diplomatic isolation once the alliance expired.

Alexander II's pressure greatly increased, and there was also considerable criticism within the Russian government. Many believed it was the Tsar's willfulness that led the alliance towards breaking up.

This was a stain from Alexander II's youth when he was pro-Prussian and had a clear anti-Austrian stance regarding the German states.

In the original timeline, Alexander II's personal political inclinations played a role in Prussia's ability to establish the Second Reich.

Having political inclinations was normal. After ascending the throne, Alexander II didn't compromise with Prussia due to his pro-Prussian stance, nor did he distance himself from Austria due to his anti-Austrian views.

Even if his inadvertent actions had led to speculation among his subordinates and unintentionally cooled relations between the two countries, Alexander II later made efforts to repair the relationship.

However, great rulers all have pride. When Alexander II ascended to the throne, it was at the peak of the Russian Empire, so his arrogance was naturally more pronounced.

After the defeat in the Russo-Prussian War, as the Russian Empire declined, Alexander II didn't adjust his mindset in time, which made the subsequent efforts to repair Russo-Austrian relations unsuccessful.

This probe against Austria further exacerbated the strained relations between the two countries, giving the conservative anti-reform faction in Russia an opportunity to attack politically.

The internal pressure left Alexander II in a difficult position. To be honest, the diplomatic issues weren't entirely his fault. The cooling of Russo-Austrian relations was more due to conflicting interests.

The Russian government's diplomacy was always known for its "crudeness," which was also clearly not their strong suit. Most of the time, the Russian government's diplomacy was subpar.

Unfortunately, Alexander II was not a diplomatic powerhouse either. In the original timeline, his main achievements were internal reforms and external expansion, with little accomplishment in diplomacy.

This visit to Europe was actually requested by Alexandrovich himself. This famous Alexander III in the original timeline had a keener sense of diplomacy.

Alexandrovich's self-planned itinerary was as follows: Denmark - Nordic Federation - German Federal Empire - Netherlands - Belgium - Portugal - Spain - Britain - France - Greece - Montenegro - Austria.

He omitted Prussia and Poland because they had become enemies, and as the crown prince, he couldn't visit enemy countries. Switzerland was also excluded as it was unimportant and inland, making it inconvenient.

This itinerary, arranged according to geographical order, seemed trivial but was actually the best choice, taking into account everyone's face.

Starting with France meant that he would have to skip many countries along the way. As the crown prince representing the Russian Empire, Alexandrovich couldn't take a roundabout route and then double back.

If he did that, it would show his high regard for France but would also appear overly subservient, causing the Russian Empire to lose face.

Alexandrovich tore up the itinerary in his hand. He was very dissatisfied with the Foreign Ministry's approach, or rather, dissatisfied with his father Alexander II's approach.

Just for a 500 million franc loan, this European visit had to start from France. The original plan to use this opportunity to repair relations with various countries now had to be reconsidered.

Despite his dissatisfaction, Alexandrovich only vented his emotions privately. He was well aware of how poor the Russian government was now, and when people are poor, they become short-sighted, and the same goes for a country.

Alexander II's extensive land reclamation plan had indeed solved the peasants' land issues, but the cost was exorbitant.

The grain produced couldn't be sold, and it would take a long time to see returns.

Now, for industrial development, the government was vigorously undertaking infrastructure construction, simultaneously starting multiple railway lines.

All of these required money. The funds from earlier confiscations of property had already been exhausted, and now the Russian government wished they could split each coin into several parts to spend.

In the Winter Palace, Alexander II had to soothe his son's emotions due to the sudden change in plans. If his son decided to refuse to go out of spite, it would be disastrous.

European crown princes had considerable say, and many even opposed their emperors. Although Alexandrovich wasn't that extreme, there were still significant political differences between him and his father.

"I'm sorry, Alexandrovich. This situation is special, you know how desperately the government needs money. We can't refuse the conditions offered by the French."

Seeing the troubled look on his father's face, Alexandrovich's anger subsided. Nicholas I had taken Constantinople and brought the Russian Empire to its peak, but he also left a mess.

Unfortunately, this outwardly glorious empire had its facade shattered in the last war.

For the sake of reform, Alexander II had paid a great price, looking at least ten years older than his actual age.

Alexandrovich responded calmly, "You don't need to apologize. Although I don't agree with your actions, I understand your decision. It's normal for the crown prince to make some sacrifices for the sake of national interests.

However, I must remind you that this is playing with fire. Aligning with the French now is very dangerous. If not handled properly, it could bring disaster to Russia.

The Austrians have already shown their stance through their actions. We don't see it as them truly not caring about the Russo-Austrian alliance but as a warning to us not to align with the French.

If the Austrian government feels threatened, they might strike first. Their target could be the French, but more likely, it will be us.

When it comes to national strategic security, the Russo-Austrian alliance is insignificant. If this continues, I think the Austrian government will most likely not renew the alliance once it expires."

Listening to his son, Alexander II nodded. He had also considered these issues but had misjudged the Austrian government's reaction.



“Yes, I understand. During your visit to Europe, make sure to prepare well. While visiting, also conduct field observations of each country’s development and learn what can be useful for us.

Compared to European countries, Russia has fallen behind for many years. Especially compared to Britain, France, and Austria, whose strengths are formidable.

Don’t be misled by the fact that we defeated the Anglo-French forces in the Near East War and took Constantinople from them.

In reality, that war was a game between Russia, Austria, Britain, and France. Russia provided the manpower, Austria provided the materials and equipment, and only after paying a heavy price did we force Britain and France to back down.

Many years have passed, and Britain, France, and Austria have all made significant progress, while we have stagnated and fallen behind them.

In the last war, the Russian Empire didn’t lose to Prussia or the coalition of multiple countries; we lost to ourselves.”

#### Chapter 493: The Might of Tofu-Dreg Projects

The rapprochement between France and Russia also accelerated negotiations between Britain and Austria. To increase their influence, the British were even prepared to bring Prussia into the alliance.

Unsurprisingly, this faced strong opposition from both France and Austria. The pie was only so big, and dividing it among three was already challenging enough—how could they let in another competitor?

If Prussia joined the alliance, would Russia also have to join? And if the Russians joined, the Nordic Federation could also come in.

One would lead to another, and before long, all European countries would be in the alliance, rendering it useless.

The British have a knack for causing trouble, always looking to stir things up. Being their ally requires constant vigilance. One misstep and you could get caught in a trap, which isn’t much safer than being their enemy.

The shifting European situation also affected the Anglo-Boer War. Since the British reinforced their troops with an Indian regiment, Viscount Falkner’s second plan became unusable.

Even when they deliberately exposed a flaw, the British showed no intention of coming out to fight a decisive battle, adopting a stance of remaining unmovable regardless of changes.

As time went on, the population in the Cape Town area also plummeted. Most war refugees had been evacuated by John Bull, leaving mainly the army behind.

With the reduced logistical pressure, the British didn’t sit idly by. They were stockpiling supplies for the winter, apparently preparing for a prolonged war.

By now, the nature of the war had changed, with frequent skirmishes between Indian and African soldiers, while British and Boer forces acted as overseers.

It was cannon fodder against cannon fodder, and no one cared except the finance departments. The original strategy of using these troops to increase the defenders' casualties and force the British to withdraw had failed.

There was no way around it. Dragging it out like this, Austria would be the first to crumble. Recruiting was difficult, and there weren't enough cannon fodder.

The African continent, being vast and sparsely populated, coupled with previous immigration strategies, led to a decline in the native population within the Austrian colonies.

As the war progressed, the colonial government provided a million cannon fodder troops, almost every tribe that could be found had been conscripted once.

These troops either perished in early battles, fell in siege warfare, or were executed by their own overseers. The current rate of conscription could no longer keep up with the consumption rate on the front lines.

Of course, with such high casualties, the number of deserters among these cannon fodder troops was naturally significant. In the vast South African region, it was easy for deserters to hide in the forests.

Once they hid in the forests, the Boer Republic Army had no way to continue pursuing them. As long as they didn't flee in large groups, it was easy for them to stay hidden.

The impact of deserters goes without saying. The newly occupied British South Africa had not yet seen new settlers, so the local indigenous tribes naturally bore the brunt.

Deserters still needed to eat, and although the jungle was rich in food, it wasn't enough to sustain the growing number of deserters.

With insufficient food, they had no choice but to resort to robbery. Naturally, no one dared to target the Boer Republic Army—attempting to rob a modern army with just cold weapons was sheer madness.

Following the law of the jungle, the weak fell prey to the strong. Indigenous tribes without young warriors faced disaster as these deserters, who wouldn't dare to challenge the Boer Republic Army, showed no mercy to their fellow natives.

Actually, they couldn't even be considered "fellow natives." Only members of their own tribe were considered "their people," while others were enemies. They treated these enemies harshly, causing chaos around the Cape Town area and leading to the destruction of numerous tribes.

Viscount Falkner was unaware of these changes and didn't concern himself with internal conflicts among the indigenous tribes. The prolonged inability to conquer Cape Town had significantly increased the pressure he was shouldering.

Expecting the British to surrender was nearly impossible. With their naval superiority, unless Britain and Austria completely broke ties and the Austrian African colonial troops joined the fight, Viscount Falkner lacked the confidence to decisively crush the opposition with his current forces.

Governor Delf was under even greater pressure than Viscount Falkner. Despite his struggles, Viscount Falkner had at least won some battles, even if the results were modest. In contrast, Governor Delf had faced nothing but defeat.

The nearly six-month-long siege had not been without results. Cape Town was nearly destroyed by constant shelling and loss of life.

If satellite imagery were available, it would show that most of the original city of Cape Town had fallen into the hands of “Boers”, with the British holding only a small area.

However, this held little significance, as there was a series of reinforced concrete fortresses stretching from Cape Town to the Cape of Good Hope.

While the quality of these structures was poor, there were plenty of them. Governor Delf’s turtle tactics might not have been impressive, but they were undeniably effective.

Of course, such tactics were only feasible for the deep-pocketed British. Despite the poor quality of these makeshift fortresses, nearly all materials had to be imported.

For example, cement and steel were shipped from Britain, adding significantly to the costs due to the long transport distances.

The poor quality of the fortresses was a result of necessity. Local sand was of poor quality, and when it ran out, they used dirt. Due to a lack of fresh water, they used seawater in the construction.

All these compromises resulted in increasingly shoddy fortifications, often prioritizing quantity over quality.

However, the Boer republics’ attacking forces were unaware of these issues. Having already faced tough resistance, they were now engaged in urban combat and had yet to encounter the tofu-dreg projects.

If they knew these were shoddy constructions, why build them at all? The reasons were numerous, including using defensive works to intimidate the enemy and employing temporary fortresses for strategic deception.

These were the reasons Governor Delf reported to the British government, barely holding the situation together.

Such strategic deception might have been effective before the outbreak of hostilities, but once the war began and shells started flying, the reality would quickly be revealed.

However, the fortresses still needed to be built. Otherwise, how would the capitalists supplying the raw materials make money? These special businesses belonged to influential figures back home.

Governor Delf, being a man of goodwill, would never do anything to cut off someone’s source of income. This was also the reason for his current anxiety. Once the last area of Cape Town fell, the shoddy construction behind it would be exposed.

Costing millions of pounds, these defensive structures would be worthless on the battlefield. If that happened, it would be hard for Governor Delf to retire peacefully. He would undoubtedly take the blame.

“Will, how are the negotiations between the Foreign Office and the Austrians progressing?”

Harsh reality led Governor Delf to place his hopes on the Foreign Office. If they could resolve matters with Austria, the “Boer Republic Army” outside the city would disperse immediately.

Did they really think that putting on a disguise would make them unrecognizable? If the Boers were really this strong, they wouldn't have needed to migrate inland in the first place.

"Governor, the negotiations are progressing very smoothly, but they haven't touched on the South African issue. The Austrians insist that we are fighting against the Boers, and if we want to negotiate, we should do so with the governments of the Boer republics."

Will was very frustrated. No one wanted to lift the veil. Negotiations regarding the Anglo-Boer War were at a standstill and would continue to be so unless they were willing to swallow their pride and follow the Austrian suggestion to negotiate with this disguised "Boer Republic government".

The British government couldn't bring itself to do this, so the issue was shelved. This was just the official statement. Governor Delf knew very well that the real reason was that no one wanted to take the blame.

On the battlefield, they had already been defeated. How could they expect favorable terms at the negotiating table? Concessions from Britain on the South African issue had become inevitable. If they signed a disadvantageous treaty, it would be a permanent stain on one's diplomatic career.

Self-interest is instinctual for politicians. Governor Delf accepted this reality without complaint. With a deep sigh, he said, "Enough, there's nothing more we can do now! Will, send a telegram to the British government. To protect the empire's interests and mitigate the losses from the war, the Cape Town colonial government requests to enter into diplomatic negotiations with the Boer Republics."

This signaled the complete collapse of Britain's South African strategy. As the main instigator, Governor Delf was naturally going to be held responsible.

However, negotiating now was better than negotiating after a complete defeat. If they were pushed all the way back to the Cape of Good Hope by the enemy, Delf would have to die on the battlefield to give an explanation to the homeland or he would face a military tribunal.

Given this, it was better to take responsibility proactively. Considering that this war had fed many aristocrats, his fate wouldn't be too bad.

There were plenty of people who had suffered defeats, and not everyone was held accountable. Delf's only problem was that he had actively instigated the war and then failed to win it.

As long as he could secure a somewhat acceptable treaty, he could go home and lay low for a few years until the situation blew over. With his connections, he could resume his career later.

In times of crisis, the British were still efficient. On the same day, they proposed negotiations with the "Boer Republic government."

When Viscount Falkner received the British request for negotiations, he was stunned. He had exhausted all his efforts in this war and couldn't figure out how to take Cape Town. He hadn't expected the British to surrender.

Negotiations were inevitable. Without the means to take Cape Town by force, there was no point in continuing the fight.

The Austrian nobles participating in this war all had their own estates and couldn't be away for too long. They had achieved enough military merit and had accomplished their goals. Continuing to fight the British to the death would benefit no one.

Although the British fortifications were indeed shoddy, Viscount Falkner and his men had no knowledge of this and assumed they were genuine fortresses.

With this lack of information, Viscount Falkner didn't dare take risks. Otherwise, he might have gambled on launching a full-scale attack to drive the British out of South Africa at any cost.

#### Chapter 494: Unexpected Incident

When news of the British proposal for negotiations reached Vienna, Franz immediately approved it. Although the battlefield losses weren't significant, the financial toll was heavy!

Since Cape Town couldn't be taken, continuing the fight would be a waste of time. Looking at the intelligence from the front lines, Franz felt helpless.

In this era, the extravagance of the British Empire was beyond comprehension. Tens of millions of pounds were spent without hesitation, resulting in defense fortifications as far as the eye could see. How could the war be fought under such circumstances?

The original plan to capture Cape Town was rendered ineffective by the British's lavish tactics.

Although the British seemed to be at a disadvantage, in reality, they had flaunted their power to the world. The expenditure of the British for this war had likely exceeded a hundred million.

No other country in the world, apart from Britain, could afford it. If he were in the same position, Franz would have backed down early. A lack of money inherently limits one's ambitions.

Even with the upper hand on the battlefield, the Austrian government had paid a hefty price. So far, the war had cost them forty million guilders.

The failure to capture Cape Town was not due to a lack of fighting spirit among the soldiers or incompetence among the commanders but rather a lack of financial resources and extravagance.

Otherwise, they could have spared no expense to transport a thousand or so heavy cannons, fired hundreds of thousands of tons of shells, and flattened even the most extensive fortifications.

Oh, but roads would need to be built first. Otherwise, logistics on the battlefield couldn't be maintained, and having cannons without ammunition would be useless.

After roughly estimating these expenditures, it seemed that about 2,000,000 to 3,000,000 guilders would be sufficient.

This was beyond what the Austrian government could bear. Otherwise, the railway construction in Africa wouldn't have been so slow. If the railway had extended to the Transvaal Republic early on, the British wouldn't have dared to provoke a war.

The Anglo-Boer War wasn't without its benefits. Reality taught the world once again that war is a money pit, and without money, war shouldn't be waged.

The gold in South Africa hadn't been mined on a large scale yet, so the outside world generally believed there were no winners in this war. Austria, fighting under the guise of the Boers, defeated the British but failed to capture the Cape of Good Hope, so their strategic goals were unmet.

Economically, the undeveloped South Africa wasn't worth 50 million guilders. When the British bought Cape Town, it was because of the Cape of Good Hope. Without this strategic location, South Africa itself was worth barely a tenth of its value.

Compared to Austria's small loss, the British suffered a huge loss. They had initiated this war for Boer Republic colonies of mediocre value.

The British spent a large amount of war funds and suffered tens of thousands of casualties. Not only did they fail to achieve their goals, but they were also pushed back to Cape Town by their enemies.

Negotiations also came at a cost. Starting a war was easy but ending it was difficult. Not to mention, whether to reclaim the lost land was a headache-inducing problem.

Even if the colony wasn't valuable, the strategic security of the Cape of Good Hope had to be considered. If conflict arose, and the enemy was right at their doorstep, how could life go on?

Even without fighting, if daily necessities were in the hands of others, with prices rising every so often, who could stand it?

Therefore, while other areas could be forfeited, the water sources, coal, and farms outside the city, which are essential for the city, had to be reclaimed by the British.

Empty promises were clearly not an option. Wearing the guise of the Boer Republics did not mean that the enemy outside the city was the Boer Republics. To secure all these resources at the negotiation table, a price had to be paid.

Franz didn't care about the specifics of the outcome. As long as Austria didn't suffer losses, it was fine. If the British weren't in a hurry, maintaining the stalemate was also acceptable.

The Boer Republics could provide most of the supplies for Austria, so the food problem for the frontline troops could be solved locally.

In contrast, the British in the city were in a tragic situation, having to transport even fresh water from Madagascar or buy it from the Portuguese. Other supplies were no exception and had to be shipped from outside.

Despite the convenience of sea transport, the location had to be considered. The Cape of Good Hope was notorious for shipwrecks, and in one to two months, the monsoon would bring killer waves.

The British had two options: either stockpile enough supplies for winter now or end the war before winter arrived.

Plans can never keep up with changes. Just as the "Anglo-Boer negotiations" began, an unexpected plague broke out.

It first appeared among the Indian colonial troops. The British didn't pay much attention, thinking it was just a matter of not adapting to the local environment, and continued as usual.

During the battles, the plague spread to the cannon fodder units of the Boer Republics. In a battlefield where deaths were a daily occurrence, a few sick soldiers seemed normal, especially in the neglected cannon fodder units.

The terrible sanitary conditions in the military camps accelerated the spread of the epidemic. Soon, a large number of soldiers fell ill. The epidemic didn't discriminate; white soldiers were equally susceptible.

The British were the first to discover it. As the defending side, the British army was much more densely packed, and the lack of water in the city further exacerbated the poor sanitary conditions.

These factors facilitated the spread of the plague, and the large number of sick British soldiers caught the attention of military doctor Horace. Upon investigation, he discovered the outbreak of a plague.

Not daring to delay, Horace immediately reported the epidemic. The news was escalated up the chain of command and reached Governor Delf at the helm on May 18, 1871.

The exact time when the epidemic first appeared was now impossible to verify. The British medical system was not yet advanced enough to assign dedicated doctors to Indian soldiers.

This news was like a bolt from the blue for Governor Delf, the worst news possible. Without hesitation, he immediately convened a high-level meeting and issued epidemic prevention orders: "Immediately isolate all infected individuals and send a telegraph to request domestic specialists in plague prevention. Start the epidemic prevention work right away and consult the doctors on what needs to be done."

This was all he could do. The plague was uncontrollable, and with the limited medical technology of the era, they could only rely on fate.

Not long after the British discovered the epidemic, the Boer Republic forces outside the city also discovered it.

The first to be infected was Lieutenant Merckx, who was sent to command the cannon fodder units. During a casual conversation, while visiting the doctor, he complained about the number of sick men under his command, which piqued the curiosity of an intern doctor.

Curiosity doesn't always kill the cat. Dr. Luke rushed to the black soldiers' camp for an on-site inspection, and what he discovered was shocking.

It was clearly an epidemic, and it had already spread. The number of infected in a single unit wasn't scary, but when totaled up, it was terrifying.

After reporting the situation, Viscount Falkner immediately dispatched personnel for investigation. The results revealed that over two thousand confirmed cases of infection had been identified, including eighty-seven Boer soldiers.

This was only for those who had shown symptoms. The number of asymptomatic virus carriers was unknown. Looking at the data in his hand, Viscount Falkner was speechless for a long time.

Fortunately, the cannon fodder units were stationed separately from the main forces. Except for the officers managing these units, the main forces had little contact with them.

Without delay, epidemic prevention measures were initiated. The Austrian army had dedicated epidemic prevention departments, usually managed by military doctors, and this unit, disguised as the Boer Republic army, was no exception.

Various units orderly carried out epidemic prevention work according to the already published regulations.

Viscount Falkner asked with concern, "Have we identified the type of epidemic? What caused this plague?"

Plagues vary in severity, with the most deadly being the bubonic plague, including the Black Death, a type of plague that nearly wiped out Europe. Next in severity are smallpox, cholera, malaria, and influenza.

Each is a feared killer, indiscriminate of status or rank. They kill without exception.

Dr. Lesnar, in charge of epidemic prevention, pondered and said, "We haven't determined the transmission route of the plague yet, but there are two primary possibilities for its origin.

The most likely cause is the improper disposal of bodies on the battlefield, leading to a breeding ground for the virus and eventually causing this epidemic.

Another possibility is that it was brought in from outside. According to our collected data, there was a recent outbreak of plague in India, so it is very likely that the Indians brought it here.

If the virus originated from India, this epidemic should be easier to handle, as the plague in India has already proven to be not highly contagious.

However, given the current situation, the first possibility seems more likely. If the virus did come from India, it might mean the virus has mutated."

War often brings disease, and although this Anglo-Boer War might seem insignificant, the death toll ranks among the highest in human history.

People are not only dying on the battlefield but also outside of it, and the number of casualties off the battlefield is likely not much less. After the outbreak of this war, the total population of South Africa dropped to less than 30% of what it was before the war.

With so many deaths, dealing with the bodies has become a problem. On the surface, most of the bodies on the battlefield have been burned or buried in deep pits.

However, with flesh and blood scattered everywhere, there are always some remnants. This might seem minor, but over time, the accumulated impact can be significant.

At the beginning of the war, Franz had secretly ordered proper epidemic prevention measures. So, this Boer Republic army was not unprepared, but they hadn't expected the plague to break out just as the war was nearing its end.

The origin of the epidemic was only of concern to professionals. Viscount Falkner was more interested in prevention and control. Regardless of the source, as long as the epidemic could be controlled, that was enough.

After some thought, Viscount Falkner made a decision, "Order the main force to withdraw from the already occupied streets and have the 7th Division of the South African Special Expeditionary Force take over the defense."

In the face of a plague, all war achievements are meaningless. In these ruins, no one knows which corner might hide an undiscovered corpse.



It was too dangerous to station the main force in such a place. It would be safer to station them outside the city.

The 7th Division of the South African Special Expeditionary Force was the unit most affected by the epidemic, so assigning them to take over the defense was a way to make use of the situation.

If the British decided to attack, they could have it. Viscount Falkner had already decided to place the quarantine camp at the forefront, hoping to increase the number of British patients.

Even if this had no effect, it would at least disgust the British. Venting his frustration was important. At this point in the war, both sides deeply hated each other.

#### Chapter 495: Treaty of Cape Town

The sudden plague complicated the situation even more. If it was confined to the South African region, it would be manageable, but if it spread across the entire African continent, Franz would be devastated.

There was no way around it. A colony was still a colony. Despite Austria's efforts in Africa for over a decade, they still couldn't change the backward medical conditions.

Although the number of infected people wasn't high at the moment, the mortality rate was high. Many patients didn't even know what hit them before they were on their way to meet their maker.

Franz was too close to the situation to see clearly. If he reviewed the data, he would understand why the mortality rate was high.

The majority of the infections were in the cannon fodder units. Due to poor hygiene and lack of effective treatment, the mortality rate was naturally high.

Apart from ordering stricter epidemic prevention measures, there was nothing else Franz could do.

Since an epidemic had appeared in the "Boer Republic Army", neighboring native tribes were also unlikely to escape it. The cannon fodder units had a high rate of deserters, and it was only natural that some would leave carrying the virus.

Viscount Falkner had only about 30,000 to 40,000 troops under his command. He needed to maintain their combat effectiveness and couldn't leave the British an opening, so he could spare only a few thousand soldiers to monitor the cannon fodder units.

Using a few thousand to oversee tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands was challenging. If a hundred or so escaped, it was hardly noticeable. With the daily casualties from battles, supervision was even harder.

Officers usually wouldn't care if one or two people went missing unless they fled in large groups.

There were also patrols outside. If they encountered them, it was bad luck for the deserters. If they managed to escape, it was God's will, although they might not necessarily believe in God.

Franz's judgment was correct: an epidemic had indeed spread in South Africa, with consequences more severe than imagined.

The highest mortality rate wasn't among the local natives or the colonists but rather the Indian colonial troops in the city.

Poor sanitary conditions provided a perfect breeding ground for the virus. The small, densely populated areas, combined with a lack of medical resources, created a perfect situation for the virus to spread.

The real culprit behind the high mortality rate of Indian soldiers was their inability to adapt to the local environment. Of course, it was also directly related to diet. The bureaucrats in the British government hadn't considered the dietary habits of Indians and directly forced potatoes and bread on them.

This was unavoidable. The bureaucrats in the British government didn't even care about their own people, let alone these cannon fodder troops.

Compared to the Near East War, the British logistics system hadn't changed much and still operated by the book.

The situation was slightly better in Cape Town, as there was at least fresh fish and meat available, which was far better than eating dried beef every day.

Of course, most Indians didn't eat beef, but the British logistics supply standards weren't sufficient to provide them with beef anyway.

Even the worst dried beef was much more expensive than potatoes. The Indians wouldn't encounter this worry. The British bureaucrats had always provided them with the cheapest options possible, otherwise how could they make money?

With the worsening epidemic, Governor Delf was having a tough time. The negotiations had reached an impasse due to the vast differences in interests between the parties.

The plague continued to spread in the city, and watching the daily increase in the death toll, Governor Delf was in distress.

From the start until now, the death toll due to the plague reached 3,817, and this number was increasing by about 500 people per day. If this continued, they would be finished off by the plague before the enemy could.

The biggest obstacle to curbing the epidemic was the lack of water. Unfortunately, since the news of the plague in Cape Town spread, the number of supply ships arriving had decreased rather than increased.

People are afraid of death, and no one wants to approach a plague-ridden area. If he had a choice, even Governor Delf would have fled.

Even with a 50% increase in transport fees, few were willing to risk bringing supplies, worsening the situation in Cape Town.

Currently, there were 150,000 troops in Cape Town, half of whom were Indian colonial troops. It was with these cannon fodder units that both sides reached a stalemate.

Despite the shoddy fortifications in the rear, the buildings in the city were solid. The Indian colonial troops and the African expeditionary force were evenly matched.

Looking at the Red Cross flags hung outside the city, Governor Delf was disgusted and at one point wanted to order the troops to attack.

If they won, the situation would significantly improve. Breaking the siege would alleviate the water crisis, reduce the population density, and make epidemic prevention easier.

If they lost, it wouldn't be too bad either. The battle would eliminate some of the population, reducing population density and the demand for fresh water. This would have a positive impact on epidemic prevention.

But thinking was one thing, actually doing it was another. Governor Delf still didn't dare. The two sides were still negotiating, and rashly provoking a war would be risky. If they won, it would be fine, but if they lost, he would truly end up in a military court.

Could they win? Governor Delf already knew the answer to that question. With the current morale, the chances of mutiny were higher than the chances of victory if they went out to fight the Austrians.

In reality, from the start of the war until now, Governor Delf had already suppressed five mutinies and didn't dare to further strain the fragile nerves of his soldiers.

There was no way around it, a motley crew was just like that. Most of the white soldiers in the city were either temporarily recruited from the colonies or reinforcements drawn from various colonies by the British government, with regular troops being in the minority.

In the eyes of many in the British government, suppressing the army was more important than this war. In the original timeline, the poor performance in the Anglo-Boer War was actually a result of the British government suppressing the army.

If they were regular troops and had a twofold advantage in manpower, Governor Delf wouldn't have fought so miserably, being beaten down from start to finish.

From a military perspective, managing to preserve most of the forces despite continuous defeats showed that the commander was at least competent. But just being good at retreating wasn't good enough.

Despite the passive stance, the sudden plague accelerated the Anglo-Boer negotiations. The worsening situation continuously pushed the British to their limits.

The Cape Town colonial government was leading the negotiations this time. Fully aware of the situation, they didn't dare to delay any longer.

Due to the plague, the number of supply ships had decreased, and the reserves in Cape Town were not increasing but steadily declining. Especially fresh water, which was extremely scarce.

It was challenging to store large amounts of fresh water, which needed to be kept in reservoirs or storage tanks. During wartime, reservoirs were out of the question.

The artillery outside the city wasn't for show. With shells occasionally exploding in the reservoirs, even if they disregarded gunpowder and heavy metal poisoning, the reservoirs couldn't hold water!

With no other choice, the British had to build numerous storage tanks, which was no easy task. Solving the drinking water problem for so many people wasn't a small project.

This wasn't something that could be solved by just digging a hole. If they didn't address the leakage problem, the water would be gone before winter arrived.

To conserve water, the British forces in Cape Town had already started rationing. White soldiers received five liters of water per day, while Indian soldiers only received three liters per day.

This amount was just enough for drinking water. The remaining amount might be used for washing faces, and if British soldiers were frugal, they might be able to wipe down their bodies.

This was only theoretical. Daily life requires more than just drinking water. People can't go without washing clothes, hands, or bathing. Of course, in this era, Indians didn't bathe much anyway.

This amount could only ensure survival, and nothing more. Unless the British could magically desalinate seawater, they simply couldn't meet the demand.

While the internal situation in Cape Town couldn't be investigated, the number of ships entering the port each day couldn't be kept secret.

The daily reduction in the number of ships entering and leaving Cape Town was easy to calculate mathematically, and everyone knew this meant the supply of materials was decreasing.

Without sufficient supplies, Cape Town would inevitably fall sooner or later. This gave the "Boer Republic representatives" more confidence in negotiations.

This was the theory, but in reality, as long as the plague continued, the "Boer Republic Army" outside the city wouldn't dare to attack.

The Cape of Good Hope was important, but not so important to Austria that Franz would spare no expense to capture it.

There were ways to solve the supply shortage, such as reducing the number of troops. After all, the plague was the best barrier.

If they attacked the city during the plague, by the time they captured the Cape of Good Hope, the Boer Republics' forces would be nearly decimated. This "decimation" referred not only to casualties but also to morale.

When soldiers become war-weary and unwilling to fight for their country, even the most powerful army can become ineffective.

As winter approached, the British couldn't hold out any longer and had to make major concessions.

On June 18, 1871, the British and the Boers signed a ceasefire treaty in a military camp outside Cape Town, ending the year-long war.

Treaty terms:

One: The war between Britain and the Republic of Transvaal and the Orange Free State was an accident. For world peace, both sides would end the war from the date the treaty was signed (June 18, 1871).

Two: The British side will pay 3.6 million pounds as a buyback fee for the land within a 200-mile radius of Cape Town.

Three: Both sides will exchange prisoners of war. For numbers exceeding the agreed amount, a ransom will be paid according to international conventions. The agreed price was 180 pounds per soldier, and for officers, the price would vary and start from 300 pounds depending on rank and title.

There was no assignment of war guilt or mention of victory or defeat as if it were a trivial conflict not worth mentioning.

Reality was harsh. Britain still cared about face and wouldn't easily admit defeat. Even if the Cape Town colonial government accepted it, the officials in London wouldn't.

Ceding territory and paying reparations was out of the question. The British government couldn't bear the political impact of a war defeat. Land repurchase and prisoner ransom were more acceptable.

After all, the lost land mainly belonged to the South African Colonial Company, not the British government.

With a thicker skin, they could just say the colonial company's colonization activities had failed, and the British government was buying back a piece of the colony from the Boers.

The prisoner ransom was simpler as European society didn't reject this. If the number of prisoners this time was a bit high and the ransom amount paid was large, it could all be covered up with a sentence about exchanging prisoners.

If they were really shameless, they could even declare this a great victory. Strategically, they had crushed the enemy's plot for the Cape of Good Hope and forced the enemy to give up this unrealistic fantasy.

Politics had always been like this. Even this Anglo-Boer War could be blamed on the South African Colonial Company. The company had already gone bankrupt in the war, so no one would come out to defend it.

In fact, Governor Delf had already started doing this. As a qualified politician, even after losing the war and signing an unfavorable treaty, he minimized the war's responsibility.

In any case, the Cape Town colony was still preserved. Although it was a shrunken version, the British public wouldn't know and wouldn't care about the exact size of a colony thousands of miles away.

#### Chapter 496: Striving Hard to Not Become an African Emperor

The Anglo-Boer War had ended, but as one of the victors, the Austrian government couldn't feel the least bit happy. Once again, reality proved that in modern warfare, relying on war reparations could no longer cover the losses.

Through the armistice treaty, the Austrian government received 3 million pounds as a land buyback fee, and with the ransom for prisoners, the total came to 6.1268 million pounds, equivalent to 12.2536 million guilders.

This might seem like a huge sum, but compared to the costs of the war, it was just a drop in the bucket, not even covering a quarter of the expenses.

This was even with the French secretly helping out. Otherwise, the price paid would have been even higher.

The spoils of war amounted to nothing more than a barren land. Due to the war, the territory obtained from British South Africa barely contained any native tribes, let alone settlers.

If not for strategically opening up a South African sea route and compressing British power into a corner, thus ensuring the safety of the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, it would have been a complete loss.

Despite the losses, with the victory of the war, there had to be recognition and rewards.

However, since it was fought under the guise of the Boer Republics, the calculation of merits had to be circumvented and would be settled once Austria annexed these regions.

The original elites within the Boer Republics, except for a few clever ones who made the right choices, had faded into obscurity in this power reshuffling.

This was a matter of scale. In the former Boer Republics, having hundreds of workers made one a top capitalist, but in Austria, that was just a small-town enterprise.

With the British invasion, their bargaining power vanished. They had dug their own pit by neglecting military preparedness, forcing them to seek Austria's help against the British.

They initially thought Austria would have to rely on them as local intermediaries, but while they guessed the beginning, they did not predict the end.

The strength of the British was not as formidable as imagined, reducing Austria's dependence on them. Those wise enough to adjust their mindset and promptly align themselves suffered no losses.

However, those who reacted a bit too late faced unfortunate consequences. The economic losses were one thing, but their political influence was also weakened. Their connections within the Boer Republics' governments were now severely impacted.

Reality is cruel. Without a power reshuffling, how can those loyal to Austria be promoted?

The nobles who came to fight with their own resources also had interests to protect, and they obviously wanted a share in the redistribution of power.

Even if their roots were not here and they didn't plan to stay and develop, they could still send a family member to establish themselves here. Expanding branches is how old nobility sustains itself.

These new interest groups would form the foundation for Austria's future rule in South Africa. As for the original interest groups, unfortunately, their misjudgments led to their downfall.

With the signing of the Treaty of Cape Town, the biggest obstacle to the formation of an Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance was removed. On July 1, 1871, representatives from Britain, France, and Austria signed an alliance treaty at the Palace of Versailles, marking the beginning of a new era of dominance for the great powers.

Due to various reasons, the treaty was only set to last for five years. It was clear that all three countries lacked full confidence in the alliance, viewing it as merely an experiment.

Whether to renew the alliance after five years would depend on whether all parties could gain more benefits during that time. Relations between countries are based on practicality, and only mutual benefits can sustain such an alliance.

Even so, the European world was in an uproar. This alliance full of contradictions had frightened quite a few people.

For smaller nations that had relied on conflicts among the great powers to survive, life became increasingly difficult. Breaking up this alliance became a common goal for numerous European countries.

At the Vienna Palace, Franz was holding a cabinet meeting to discuss the African railway network plan.

Prime Minister Felix proposed, “Your Majesty, considering the issue of operating costs, the African railway network plan should be delayed. For now, we only need to complete the East-West and Southwest strategic railways.

Blindly proceeding with the construction of a railway network would place a heavy burden on our finances. Take our domestic railway network as an example. Despite the government’s many preferential policies, many railway companies still went bankrupt.

As a result, the capital market has become less enthusiastic about investing in railways. To this day, there are not many profitable railway companies in the country.

If we initiate the African railway network plan, relying on financing from the capital market is almost impossible, and this burden would fall entirely on the government.

This massive railway plan has already exceeded our financial capacity, and it might not even break even within a hundred years.”

The bankruptcy of the railway companies was Franz’s responsibility. To quickly establish a railway network in Austria, he applied methods from the future of internet development.

He introduced a concept and painted a grand picture to attract capital. Railway networks are inherently monopolistic enterprises. Once the initial investment phase is over, profitability is not hard to achieve.

This grand vision was much more conscientious than future virtual concepts, and achieving this goal wasn’t impossible. It just required significant upfront investment and a longer timeframe to become profitable.

With the power of capital, Austria was able to build its railway network in the shortest possible time. As for the railway companies that went bankrupt along the way, they all had a common problem: an issue with cash flow.

This was due to their mismanagement and not because Franz intentionally set them up for the government to take over.

Investments carry risks, and entering the market requires caution. In a capitalist market economy, failing to consider economic crises is the responsibility of the investors themselves.

Of course, Franz never publicly stated this. He never stepped to the forefront, as the ones promoting railway investments were experts, and those who managed railway companies into bankruptcy were capitalists. The Emperor had nothing to do with it.

The surviving railway companies proved that as long as one didn’t lose their mind and carefully chose high-quality railway routes, even if bundled with branch lines, it was possible to make a profit.

Of course, the prerequisite is that you need enough money to get through the long investment period, but the return on investment in the later stages is relatively considerable.

Don't compare profits with stock prices as those are all bubbles. No company's profits can match the growth rate of its stock price.

At its peak, the total market value of Austrian railway companies once reached the mythical figure of 20 billion guilders. Is the Austrian railway network really worth 20 billion guilders?

Undoubtedly, this is impossible. 20 billion guilders in this era is an astronomical number, and all the gold that has been mined worldwide wouldn't be enough to cover it.

If there were that much money, it would be enough not only for the domestic railway network but also to lay railway networks in every inhabited region worldwide.

It's important to note that when calculated together, the Austrian railway network's annual profit is less than 100 million guilders, or to be precise, less than 5 million guilders in net profit.

Of course, there's still significant room for growth. Railway companies that have stabilized and aren't continuing construction are generally maintaining a growth rate of over 30% in annual profits.

This isn't because their profit growth is fast, but because the base is so low that growth naturally seems rapid. A 1% increase in freight volume could potentially increase a railway company's profit by 4-5%.

It's not an issue of high or low freight rates, but rather insufficient business, causing many railway lines to operate at a loss. Increasing business volume allows many branch lines to turn profitable, which looks impressive given the overall low profits.

Take the Draco Railway Company as an example. In 1869, its profit was 12,000 guilders, and in 1870, its total profit was 1.386 million guilders. On the surface, it looks like more than a hundredfold increase, but in reality, its annual business volume only grew by 5%.

This seemingly explosive growth is actually still insignificant. It's worth noting that Draco Railway Company's net assets amount to 130 million guilders, with a market value of 530 million guilders, and at its peak, the market value even reached 1.68 billion guilders.

Otherwise, with such rapid growth, the price-to-earnings ratio would be unbearable. It's impossible to recover the investment cost through profits in less than ten to twenty years.

The same trick can only be played once, and capitalists aren't fools. Using the African railway network to fool people only works if people believe it, right?

Relying on small private investors is unfortunate as these small fry haven't grown up yet, and there's not much to harvest even if you want to. Unless financial management laws are relaxed to allow small capital investments into the market.

Clearly, this is not possible. If this were done and a stock market crash occurred, the impact would be widespread.

In this era, life is not easy, and ordinary people struggle daily for survival, having no risk tolerance. If they get trapped in a financial scheme, it would be like handing revolutionaries a group of cannon fodder.



Doing something that undermines one's own foundation is out of the question. As for the construction of the African railway network, delaying it a bit is fine.

Why develop the colonies so much? As long as they can provide industrial raw materials and a market, that's enough. Even if there's going to be significant development, it should wait until after integration.

Franz nodded and said, "The construction of the African railway network is indeed too costly. Even the current two railways need to be replanned.

We already have some railways in Africa, and these should not be wasted. The Southwest Railway could directly connect to the Congo region, and the East-West Railway could also connect midway through the Southwest Railway.

In this way, the strategic objectives can still be achieved. Though it might seem like a stretch for long-term development, it allows for reducing investments to the bare minimum in the short term."

This isn't shortsightedness on Franz's part. It was quite the opposite as this approach has deeper significance. Through this railway, resources from Africa's interior can be transported to the nearest port and shipped back home.

The strategic purpose has been achieved, and although the railway is not the shortest route, which increases the integration cost of resources across Africa, this is a means of controlling the colonies.

Haven't you seen how the British have built a mess of railways in India, and even by the 21st century, the Indians still haven't sorted them out? It's a method of controlling the colony.

Franz's approach is already very restrained. At least he hasn't standardized the rail gauge completely. Well, it's not entirely standardized as some railways dedicated to transporting ore might still be narrow gauge.

These railways transport directly to the port without needing to connect to the main railway line. At least for mines not far from the coast, these railways will be built.

Otherwise, leveraging local resources could inadvertently lead to a complete industrial system in Austro-African territories in ten or twenty years, and if integration hasn't been achieved by then, it would be a big problem.

As the homeland struggles to maintain control over its colonies, Franz is unwilling to relocate the seat of power to Africa and assume the role of an African emperor during his lifetime. This remains true even if such a move could lead to the unification of Africa and the creation of the world's largest empire.

#### Chapter 497: The French Who Want to Cut Their Losses

The scaled-down version of the African railway network plan was finally unveiled, adhering to the principle of saving wherever possible. The central government would cover half the costs of the essential main railway lines, but the colonial governments would have to find their own ways to fund the construction of the branch lines.

These main railway lines were not merely tracks laid on land. They were strategic arteries meant to weave the colonies into a resilient web. Even in the face of a world war, Austria would maintain its grip on the African continent.

And let's not forget the South African gold mines—these alone justified the railway's construction. Austria needed to show its strength, keeping other nations' greedy eyes at bay.

The Portuguese refrained from joining forces with the British, not because of loyalty, but because John Bull hadn't dangled a juicy enough carrot. But what if they caught wind of vast gold reserves in South Africa? Could they resist such temptation?

To put it bluntly, in this era, colonies are just another form of wealth. For the Portuguese, as long as the potential gains are large enough, even if they lose their other colonial territories under Austrian retaliation, it would still be worth it.

Otherwise, why would Franz need to fight a war with the British in South Africa? If the Austrian government had simply announced the annexation of the Boer Republics, Governor Delf wouldn't have been foolish enough to wage war on his own.

The greatest value of the Anglo-Boer War was making the British government soberly realize that they truly couldn't fight on land.

As for the Cape Town colonial government, it's estimated that it will take decades to emerge from the shadow of this war.

With the railways connected, even if the gold was exposed, the Cape Town government wouldn't dare to stir up trouble. Such was the lasting effect of war.

Even the British government found its appetite for conflict waning. An integrated Austro-African territory could muster hundreds of thousands of troops at a moment's notice. The price of wresting the gold mines from Austria's grasp was simply too steep, beyond what they could bear.

In the grand scheme of things, Franz's focus on the African continent had outstripped his attention to Europe. To him, Africa was the land of Austria's future.

There was no other choice as expanding further in Europe was a Herculean task. Without the African colonies, Europe would have seen far less peace over the years. Franz would have stirred the pot long ago, had he not set his sights on the untapped potential of Africa.

Leaving aside everything else, with the long-standing feud between the Habsburg dynasty and the Ottoman Empire, the Ottomans wouldn't have lasted this long.

In the original timeline, Austria didn't make a move against them because they lacked the strength. Diplomatic blunders and intense domestic political struggles led to consecutive military failures on the European continent, leaving them barely able to protect themselves.

Due to the establishment of the Austro-African colonies, the resources there were enough to keep Austria busy for many years, leading Franz to abandon any thoughts of stirring up war in Europe.

This was a matter of return on investment. In the original timeline, none of the parties involved in World War I emerged victorious, and in the end, all were severely weakened, ultimately benefiting others.

World War II was even worse, as the European countries involved were not just weakened but almost entirely annihilated, with only the French barely escaping complete ruin.

The risks were too high, and the potential gains too small. European territories were difficult to digest. If they choked on them, it would be disastrous.

Look at the French. To absorb the Italian territories, they had to focus all their efforts, even impacting their overseas colonial expansion activities.

The previously likely Franco-Austrian conflict on the African continent now showed no signs of occurring. Due to the shift in strategic focus, the French slowed their expansion in Africa, leaving plenty of buffer space between the two countries.

African territory was also limited, and as the French slowed down, Austria was quick to take advantage.

Even though the two countries had delineated their respective spheres of influence, without satellite maps in this era, the vastness of Africa meant that pushing forward 100-200 miles wouldn't be noticed by anyone.

A line on a map could translate to significant discrepancies on the actual border. Fortunately, much of the boundary between the two powers lay across vast deserts, or else the French territories would have shrunk considerably.

Austria wasn't the only one seizing territory. The British intensified their infiltration of the Sudan region. If not for the sudden Anglo-Boer War, diverting the attention of both Britain and Austria, the French might not be able to hold onto their interests in Sudan.

Of course, with the alliance between Britain, France, and Austria, these issues will gradually fade, and everyone will exercise restraint as much as possible.

In Paris, following France's political decision to strategically withdraw, the resources allocated here have been reduced. By now, France can no longer control the situation in Mexico.

Napoleon III is now in a quandary, hesitating over whether to abandon the Mexican Empire. It's a tough decision, as the French government has invested so many resources in Mexico in recent years, and it would be a pity to give it up.

If Austria had shown any interest in expanding its influence in Mexico, Napoleon III might have suspected that Maximilian I was a Habsburg spy specifically sent to create trouble for France.

Of course, this thought quickly passed. From the perspective of family interests, if the Habsburgs were interested in Mexico, they wouldn't have allowed Maximilian I to name an outsider as his heir.

When he first received this news, Napoleon III was stunned by this bizarre move. He even suspected for a while whether it was Maximilian I's illegitimate child.

In his view, even if the Habsburgs' direct line had no interest in the Mexican throne, it would have been better to send a distant relative to be named as heir rather than support an outsider.

If the House of Bonaparte had had more influence and could have gained recognition from the local constitutionalists, Napoleon III would have supported one of his own for the throne.

Napoleon III regretted it. Had he known earlier how incompetent Maximilian I would prove to be, he would never have supported that fool's rise to power.

A plump elderly man in his sixties saw through the emperor's predicament. After all, this political investment was led by Napoleon III, and it wouldn't do for the emperor to suggest abandoning Mexico himself.

“Your Majesty, the investment in Mexico has failed. Continuing to pour resources into it may never yield returns. What we need to do now is cut our losses.

With the opportunity presented by the alliance of the three nations, we can deter the Americans. We must quickly find someone to take over and try to sell it at a good price.”

Selling off the interests in Mexico was indeed a promising option, certainly better than losing everything.

To crush the Mexican rebels, France had already lost over ten thousand soldiers and sunk billions of francs into loans.

The losses were nearing the magnitude of the British casualties in the Anglo-Boer War. Yet, despite these sacrifices, the Mexican rebels only multiplied, and the situation continued to deteriorate.

After a moment of contemplation, Napoleon III asked with uncertainty, “Who would buy our interests in Mexico when it’s not even a formal colony and the situation keeps worsening?”

Spain is mired in a civil war over its throne and can’t possibly intervene in Mexico now. The British are too cunning to offer a fair price. The Austrians, with their focus on African colonies, have no interest in Mexico.

As for the remaining countries, they either lack the capability to take over, or they’re too poor and would find it expensive even if we gave it to them for free.”

This was the crux of the problem. If even they couldn’t stabilize the situation, who else would be foolish enough to take on such a mess?

Everyone’s not a fool. Anyone who understands the situation in Mexico knows it’s a mess and wouldn’t jump into this fire pit.

After pausing for a moment, as if something had just occurred to him, Napoleon III sternly reprimanded, “Marquis Fickel, don’t tell me, are you thinking of the Americans? That’s out of the question!

We can sell to any country except the United States and the Confederate States. This was agreed upon in the Four Nations Treaty.

If we violate the treaty, we’ll face sanctions from the other three countries, and the newly established Anglo-French-Austrian tripartite alliance would immediately crumble!”

When it came to containing the Americans, Britain, France, and Austria were in complete agreement. France was now a responsible great power and must not act recklessly.

Napoleon III wasn’t so short-sighted as to dismantle the Anglo-French-Austrian alliance just for some money.

He was acutely aware of the diplomatic challenges France faced. On the surface, reconciliation seemed to have occurred, but behind the scenes, European nations continued to marginalize France.

Especially after annexing Italy, things became more difficult. If the alliance with Britain and Austria were broken, there could be retaliation, potentially leading to another coalition against France.

Seeing Napoleon III's anger, the elderly man immediately fell silent. He had already done justice to the Americans' money, but if the emperor refused, there was nothing more he could do. He couldn't risk his own position.

Sensing Marquis Fickel's need for support, Finance Minister Allen stepped in to help, saying, "His Majesty is right. Mexico absolutely cannot fall into American hands. However, the Mexican issue must be resolved quickly. The longer we delay, the more we will lose.

My personal suggestion is that whoever takes over the Mexican Empire, as long as they can ensure the fulfillment of our loans with the Mexican government, should be able to acquire our interests there."

It was clear that Finance Minister Allen was clear-headed. He knew that given the chaotic situation in Mexico, it was impossible to sell at a good price. Simply ensuring the loans were fulfilled would be a blessing.

He didn't have much hope for even that since there were very few potential buyers willing to take over. Unless they wanted to risk breaking relations with Britain and Austria by involving the Americans, there was no one to bear the burden.

The debt owed by the Mexican government to France was not a small amount. Given Mexico's financial situation, it would take decades to repay even with no other expenses.

After pondering for a moment, Napoleon III said, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should quickly reach out to European countries to see if anyone is interested in taking over the Mexican Empire.

We can't afford to be too picky now. We're not looking to sell for a high price, just to get rid of it as soon as possible to avoid a total loss."

#### Chapter 498: Each Trying to Cheat the Other

After deciding to cut their losses, the French government immediately prepared a list of assets and sent it to European countries to find potential buyers.

The focus was naturally on Britain and Austria, as other countries simply did not have the capability to take over the Mexican Empire. While Prussia and Russia had the military strength, they lacked the financial resources to be good buyers.

In Vienna, as soon as the news of France's intention to sell its assets in Mexico arrived, the Austrian government conducted an in-depth analysis.

The result was obvious. They were undoubtedly poor-quality assets. Despite the fact that the French had secured a series of privileges, almost monopolizing Mexico's mineral resources, the issue was that these assets were difficult to liquidate.

To convert these immovable assets into real assets, they would first need to help stabilize the situation in Mexico. As long as the civil war continued, these minerals were worthless.

With the local population lacking purchasing power, commercial privileges were also useless. They couldn't exactly spend money and effort to help the Mexican people get rich and live prosperous lives.

This wasn't the 21st century. Resources weren't valuable at this time. In this era, the most valuable asset of the Mexican Empire was its silver mines. However, the extracted silver would primarily be used to repay French debts.

Yes, the French were selling it at a loss, but the required investment was too large, and the potential returns were unclear.

Simply put, only the money in hand counts as real money. No matter how rosy the future returns were painted, if they weren't realized, it was all just idle talk.

Everyone understood that the French bottom line was dropping lower and lower. From initially wanting to recover the loan and make a little extra, they now just wanted to get back their principal.

If that wasn't possible, they could still negotiate. Napoleon III would probably accept recovering even seventy or eighty percent of the investment.

This wasn't because Napoleon III had low standards but because he had lost confidence in Maximilian I. Continuously pouring money into a bottomless pit was something even wealthy France could not endure.

Once Maximilian's regime collapses, all of their investments will be for nothing. The Mexican Republicans were overthrown because they defaulted on debts, so expecting them to honor commitments is highly unlikely.

Unfortunately, perhaps due to the French reputation in Europe being too intimidating, nobody dared to touch what they couldn't even manage.

In spite of the French government repeatedly easing conditions, the party assuming control of these loans wouldn't need to make immediate payments. Their only obligation would be to guarantee the Mexican government fulfilled its obligations. The French even offered a financial incentive in the form of a commission.

Simply put, the French would recover most of the loan principal, while the remaining interest and benefits from various privileges would go to whoever took over.

Yet still, no one was willing to take the bait. If the Mexican government failed to fulfill its debt obligations, it would be the new buyer's responsibility to pay.

It turned out that every country had its limits and was unwilling to sacrifice its own credibility. No one was willing to give France such a guarantee.

In reality, many were interested in Mexico, but most only wanted to make a quick profit and were unwilling to make a large-scale investment.

Take the Spaniards, for example, who had always wanted to turn Mexico back into a colony. After the outbreak of the American Civil War, they took action, only to be pushed out by the French.

Now, due to the fight for the throne, Spain is embroiled in a civil war. France played a part in this. If Napoleon III hadn't used military threats to veto the military's nominated candidate forcefully, things wouldn't have escalated to this point.

With civil war raging, expansion into Mexico was naturally impossible. Now, Spain's overseas colonies were on edge, fearing they might be swallowed up by others.

Similarly, the British were also expanding into Mexico, but their investment was insufficient, and they couldn't compete with the French.

If they weren't willing to invest then, there was even less reason to do so now. The British had too many colonies, struggling to manage what they already had, so the Mexican Empire was unlikely to pique their interest.

Then there was the Kingdom of Prussia, which had also expressed interest in Mexico. Unfortunately, they lacked funds and couldn't even come up with the initial investment needed to suppress the Mexican rebellion.

Such paupers are not ideal customers. Even if Mexico were given to Prussia for free, they wouldn't have the money to send troops to intervene in the Mexican Civil War.

To cut their losses, the French government had secretly reached out to the Republicans. If Juárez would agree to continue honoring the treaties signed with Maximilian, they were open to negotiating his return to power.

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Late at night, the Mexican rebel command was brightly lit as Juárez convened a military meeting to discuss the next battle plans.

"Defeated but unbeaten" was a phrase that aptly described the Mexican rebels. From the moment Juárez launched the uprising until now, the rebel army had experienced hundreds of large and small battles, most of which ended in defeat.

Thanks to Maximilian I's reform policies, however, the rebel army did not disappear but instead gradually grew stronger through their defeats.

War was their best teacher. Initially, they fought the French head-on, but now they had matured into waging guerrilla warfare. The rebels had indeed grown significantly.

Though still unable to defeat the French, they were at least holding their own against the Mexican government forces. Without French support, Maximilian I would have been overthrown long ago.

Foreign Minister Padro said, "Mr. President, the Americans have informed us that the French government has changed its stance and is preparing to sell the privileges they obtained from that tyrant."

The Mexican rebels also had a government, refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of Maximilian I's government, instead establishing a republican government as a continuation of the previous one.

With financial backing, the rebels' situation improved, and their makeshift government gradually became more organized and functional.

The leaders were mostly former political prisoners pardoned by Maximilian I, which was somewhat awkward.

The provisional government was rife with internal conflicts, and to prove they were not collaborating with Maximilian I, they labeled him a tyrant.

Frankly, that label was unfair. Maximilian I was at most an inept ruler, but certainly not a tyrant.

This was the main point. Everyone was a Republican, and no one would defend him. Since he was the enemy, it was natural to paint him in the darkest light possible.

Juárez said joyfully, “It seems the French can’t hold on any longer. The day of our revolutionary victory is near.”

Hearing this good news, everyone smiled with relief. After all, they were up against France, and that was no small challenge.

France was at the height of its power at this time, and its influence in Mexico was significant. Many people would not have joined the revolution if it hadn’t been for the severe damage to their interests.

Even those who joined the rebel forces were skeptical about the possibility of victory. They had launched numerous decisive battles to drive out the French, and each had ended in defeat.

The shadow of defeat constantly loomed in everyone’s hearts. Everyone knew that the force France had invested in Mexico was less than a tenth, perhaps not even a twentieth, of its full strength.

With such a small force, the French still had them under immense pressure, so they were naturally wary of them. Hearing that the French were planning to withdraw brought great joy to everyone.

A middle-aged officer asked with concern, “Is anyone taking over?”

If the French withdrew, only for someone else to step in, they would have a new enemy. If they had just managed to drive away the wolf at the front door, only to find a tiger entering through the back door, it would be tragic.

The idea of “driving out the wolf and chasing away the tiger” sounded good in theory, but in practice, it would be a nightmare. The rebel forces had limited strength and couldn’t handle such a monumental task.

Everyone was most worried about Austria, as the emperor was from the House of Habsburg. If the intervention shifted from France to Austria, the cooperation between them would undoubtedly be even closer.

With the Austrian Central American colony right next door, the Austrian government would find it all too easy to meddle in Mexico’s internal affairs.

Foreign Minister Padro, brimming with confidence, replied, “If even the French have failed, how could anyone else take over?”

The tense expressions on everyone’s faces eased immediately. Without foreign interference, they were fully confident in overthrowing Maximilian I’s rule.

After a brief pause, Padro continued, “Mr. President, why don’t we first agree to the French terms, and once we’ve expelled Maximilian I, we can renege on our agreement?”

The contact with the French was conducted in secret, but since they were all high-level officials here, they naturally knew about the rebel forces’ covert communication with the French.

This wasn’t surprising, given that the French influence was so vast, and there was no guarantee of victory. While preparing for armed rebellion, they were also ready to compromise with the French.



The negotiations had stalled because the conditions were too far apart. But that line of communication remained open, serving as a backup plan.

“Deceiving the French,” Padro’s suggestion brought a drastic change in the crowd’s expressions.

After finally waiting for the French to lose their patience and prepare to withdraw, provoking them at this point might infuriate them. Who knew how the French would react?

Juárez shook his head and said, “No, France is a great power. Even if they fail here, it won’t affect their strength. If we were to infuriate them, we’d never have peace in the future.”

This wasn’t Juárez being overly cautious. He simply lacked the strength to speak and act with confidence. Even if the French abandoned Mexico, they could still cause them plenty of trouble.

Padro, unwilling to give up, argued, “Mr. President, our secret contact with the French is strictly confidential. Even if they do make a deal with us, the French government wouldn’t dare sign a formal agreement. If word got out that they betrayed Maximilian I, Napoleon III wouldn’t be able to withstand the political backlash.

With only a verbal agreement, even if we break it, the French can’t openly make an issue of it. As for the matter of retaliation, given our current situation, can our relationship with the French really improve? Unless we continue to uphold the treaties signed by Maximilian I, there’s no possibility of reconciliation.”

Juárez was caught in a dilemma. If they wanted to achieve revolutionary victory quickly, deceiving the French was the best option.

Whether there was a treaty or not, they could always refuse to pay. However, enduring French retaliation would be no easy feat, and Juárez knew better than to underestimate the strength of the French.

The debt default years ago was a profound lesson. Aside from the government’s financial collapse and inability to pay, the Mexican government also assumed European countries wouldn’t go to great lengths over such a small amount of money, yet Britain, France, and Spain all intervened, with the French refusing to leave.

After years of civil war, the economic damage to Mexico far exceeded the original debt many times over.

Even if no one blamed him for it, Juárez was well aware of his responsibility in the matter. Having learned from the past, he was naturally more cautious now.

Juárez asked, “What do others think?”

Finance Minister Anderson was the first to reply, “I think it’s worth a try. Recently, the French annexed Italy and are busy digesting their gains.

In the short term, they are likely to pursue a strategic withdrawal. This is a matter of national policy, and the French government isn’t going to change that for our sake.

This period might last for a decade or so. That’s our opportunity—if we can complete our internal reforms and strengthen the country during this time, we won’t have to fear French retaliation.”

Army Minister Grove echoed, “We’ve come this far, so why worry about the French? They’re our enemies anyway, so it doesn’t matter if we offend them a bit more.

Once we overthrow the decadent tyrant regime, we can establish a strong Mexican Republic, and we won’t have to worry about French retaliation.”

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Everyone was optimistic, believing that once Maximilian I’s rule was overthrown, Mexico could immediately become strong.

#### Chapter 499: Preparations for the Aftermath

Under the scorching sun, a luxurious train sped by. On both sides of the track, the mature crops seemed to be startled, bowing low and trembling occasionally.

Inside the luxurious carriage of the special train, a young man dressed in elegant attire was intently reading a newspaper, occasionally furrowing his brows.

The young man was none other than Alexander Alexandrovich (Alexander III), who was on a state visit abroad. He had high hopes for this trip to Paris and was busy gathering information even while on the move.

He had grown tired of the information provided by the Russian government. To Alexander, those materials were obviously biased or rather, politically correct.

In his view, to get a preliminary understanding of France, it was enough to read the French economic and political newspapers. Alexander Alexandrovich was no expert or scholar so these basic materials sufficed.

The more he learned, the more he was filled with emotion. From the news in the newspapers, he realized the enormous gap between Russia and France.

This gap was one of “quality,” not something the bureaucrats in St. Petersburg could claim would be bridged in three to five years.

What troubled him was that the French public had a poor impression of Russia, as evidenced by the adjectives used in the newspapers.

“Barbarians,” “liars,” “rogues,” “decadent”...

These words deeply wounded Alexander Alexandrovich. His discontent had no effect. The French newspapers were beyond his control and would continue to write as they pleased.

Although much of the content was exaggerated, it was not entirely unfounded. Russia indeed had a history of dark chapters.

In general, people wouldn’t bring up these old accounts. But with Alexander Alexandrovich coming for a visit, newspapers looking to capitalize on the buzz became active.

“Franco-Russian friendship” does not exist—at least, these newspapers do not believe there is a traditional friendship between the two countries, though there is plenty of animosity.

What is even more infuriating is that they were the losers. Everyone still clearly remembers that it was the Russians who buried the First French Empire.

The Near East War did not allow them to exact revenge, which left the French very dissatisfied. In the recent Russo-Prussian War, the French people donated the most to Prussia, even exceeding the total from the German Federal Empire and Austria.

Alexander Alexandrovich did not understand what there was to be proud of. In any case, he realized that many in France were not welcoming of his visit.

While at home, Alexander Alexandrovich had no idea that Russia was so unpopular in Europe.

Initially, he was resentful of the defeat in the Russo-Prussian War, but now he understood—how could they not lose when fighting against all of Europe?

After reading the newspapers, Alexander Alexandrovich fell into deep thought. A voice deep within him kept telling him that he must do something to change the perception of the Russian Empire in Europe.

Isolation means danger. Currently, the Russian Empire has many enemies and only one ally, and even now, that last ally is drifting away.

If this situation does not change, the Russian Empire will find it challenging to achieve victory in the next war.

Although the war had not yet broken out, Alexander Alexandrovich already knew that the next conflict would likely involve Poland, Prussia, the Ottoman Empire, and possibly several Central Asian khanates, and even the Far East might not be stable.

Modern warfare relies heavily on logistics. In the last war, the Russian Empire lost due to its transportation issues. Although some at home blamed their ally Austria for not pulling its weight, Alexander Alexandrovich knew very well that the cause of the Russian defeat lay within themselves.

They managed to purchase supplies from Austria but lacked the ability to transport them to the front lines in time. This led to insufficient forces at the front, giving the Prussians the opportunity to strike.

If there were no logistical constraints and a million Russian troops could be deployed to the front lines simultaneously, even with all of Europe providing logistics to Prussia, they couldn't have withstood it.

There is no fairness in war. If you have the troops and don't use them, trying to win with fewer forces is foolish, and such fools usually meet a terrible end.

In the history of warfare, the stronger side almost always wins. The reason why victories of the weak over the strong are celebrated is that they are rare.

In terms of military strength, the Russian Empire ranks at the bottom among the European powers when forces are roughly equal.

Alexander Alexandrovich is well aware of the reasons: the differences in weapons, equipment, and training, which ultimately come down to a lack of money.

Most of the soldiers in the Russian army are conscripts who do not need to receive a salary, so a symbolic amount is enough.

Cheapness had become the hallmark of the Russian army. Economically speaking, increasing the number of soldiers provides a greater increase in combat power than enhancing training or upgrading to the latest weapons.

This calculation has long been understood: the cost of one French soldier is enough for the Russian government to recruit two of these inexpensive soldiers and still have some extra left. On the battlefield, one French soldier definitely cannot defeat two Russian soldiers.

This is how the “gray livestock” concept came about. Because of their economic advantage, the Russians favored the human wave tactic.

As the train slowed down, Alexander Alexandrovich knew they had arrived in Paris. Looking at the buildings along the road, he showed a hint of admiration.

In the 19th century, Paris was definitely one of the most coveted cities in the world. Of course, Alexander Alexandrovich’s interest in Paris was not because it was the holy land of revolution.

As a crown prince, especially the heir to the Russian government, he was inherently a part of the reactionary faction and could never align with the revolutionaries.

His interest in Paris was solely because it was the capital of France and had the most advanced industry.

As one of the three most famous European cities of this era, although Paris was known worldwide as the holy land of revolution, it was no less impressive in other aspects.

After the reconstruction by Napoleon III, Paris had shed its reputation for being dirty and chaotic, and its urban environment was now far superior to that of smelly London.

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Franz had no interest in Alexander Alexandrovich’s European tour. Even though he would become famous in later generations, it did not move him.

History is the easiest thing to mislead people with, and exaggeration has always been a favorite of literary figures. For example, the highly praised three Italian heroes became ineffective due to changes in the international situation.

Franz admitted that they were indeed capable, but unfortunately, luck was not on their side this time. Just a slight change in circumstances altered their destinies.

Garibaldi and Mazzini led a failed revolution and were forced into exile. The renowned Prime Minister Cavour fared even worse. His strategy of alliances and coalitions failed right at the beginning.

Austria’s stance differed from historical events. It allowed France to expand in Italy, and Napoleon III found that annexing Italian territories was more beneficial than cooperating with the Kingdom of Sardinia.

One decision from those in power rendered all of Cavour’s efforts useless. In the original timeline, success was built on luck, and now they just lacked that bit of luck.

Countless real-world cases taught Franz that the abilities of the failures were not necessarily inferior, and they often lacked just a little bit of luck to succeed.

This slight difference often led to a stark contrast in outcomes, like the difference between heaven and hell.

Napoleon III was also an example. In the original timeline, he had already failed. However, due to Franz's butterfly effect, Napoleon III was now referred to as "Napoleon the Great" by the French.

Looking at the intelligence in his hand, Franz frowned. If nothing unexpected happened, his unfortunate brother would soon meet misfortune.

Unable to find a buyer internationally, the French government decided to withdraw troops from Mexico. Without the support of French soldiers, Franz did not believe Maximilian could stabilize the situation.

Without hesitation, a secret order flew from the Vienna Palace to the Austrian Central American colony. After all, it was still his brother, and he couldn't just sit by and do nothing.

Franz had even considered the resettlement issue. He decided to send him to a rural castle since the Habsburgs had no shortage of castles.

Idealists like Maximilian, after experiencing failure, wouldn't have the courage to come back and face people. Living out his days in the countryside would be just right for him.

In the original timeline, Maximilian refused to flee. Franz suspected he was afraid of losing face and being ridiculed, which made him reluctant to return to the European continent.

This mentality is not surprising, much like people who work but fail to earn money and are too embarrassed to return home for the New Year.

Franz was not a psychologist and couldn't solve Maximilian's mental issues. He knew about them, but how to treat them was beyond his capabilities.

Perhaps he could pass this problem to Archduchess Sophie, giving her something to do and relieving Franz of some nagging.

Mexico City was not far away, and with proper preparation, military intervention wouldn't be too difficult, especially since the new Mexican government could be made to foot the bill.

Unlike the French, the Austrian Central American Colonial Empire was right next door to Mexico. The landowners there had long wanted to annex the Yucatán Peninsula. Franz merely hesitated to act against Mexico because of appearances.

Once Maximilian I failed, that obstacle would no longer exist. It would be a matter of grabbing as much as possible.

The strength of the Austrian Central American colony was equivalent to 1-2 major states in the Americas. Even if the Germans were slightly better at fighting, it would still only be equivalent to 2-3 major states, which was not worth mentioning.

However, for the Mexican Empire, this force would be enough to wake them up. Of course, this assumed that the Mexican rebels would provoke a fight.

If they were smart and simply sent Maximilian I away without a military excuse, Franz, who was mindful of appearances, wouldn't take action against them.

In truth, the Americas were not a primary focus for Austrian expansion. The Austrian government had limited energy and couldn't concentrate on too many places at once.

Even strategic locations like Panama were left untouched by Franz, so why bother with Mexico?

Franz was already considering which of his sons to appoint as king in Central America. Managing such a distant colony directly was challenging due to the rise of nationalism. It would be easier to establish a federal state.

This was also in line with the Habsburg tradition. Their ancestors had split Spain and Austria, so Franz could naturally separate a colony.

Not just the Central American colony, but Southeast Asia might also become a federal state in the future. Better to keep it within the family than lose it altogether.

By affiliating these federal states with the Holy Roman Empire, they could all play within the same economic circle, which wouldn't count as a failure.

#### Chapter 500: A New Height in Making Empty Promises

After leaving the Palace of Versailles, Alexandrovich no longer had any interest in sightseeing. Clearly, his visit to Paris was not going well.

Napoleon III extended goodwill to Russia purely out of political necessity, as a show of strength to the other European nations, rather than a genuine intention to ally with Russia.

Without the humiliation of the Treaty of Frankfurt, the proud French had little regard for what they saw as the backward and barbaric Russians.

Especially after the alliance between Britain, France, and Austria, France no longer felt any diplomatic pressure and could find no adversary serious enough to concern them, at least on the surface.

Before Alexandrovich's visit to Paris, the Russian government had high hopes, attempting to use France's willingness to engage with Russia to secure financial aid.

The reality was harsh. Obtaining money from the empire of usury was not easy. Bankers, particularly wary of the creditworthiness of the Russian government, were shrewd.

Even the previously promised loan of five hundred million francs had encountered obstacles, with the French demanding gold and silver as collateral.

It's not surprising. Alexander II was also attempting currency reform, albeit in small steps, and now the French were eyeing their reserves.

Since Alexander II's reforms, developing industry, building railways, and agricultural reform have become the government's three main strategies.

The plans were sound, but they all required financial support. Due to the war, large amounts of gold and silver flowed out of the Russian Empire, causing a severe shortage of domestic capital.

The Russian government's solution was to attract foreign capital, but unfortunately, European banks refused to lend to them, and even investment was approached with great caution.

Alexander II's reforms were somewhat better than in history, as there was a nearby example to learn from. Other issues could be addressed, but raising funds was not one of them.

Austria has reached its current stage of development partly by issuing bonds several times, raising funds amounting to hundreds of millions of guilders. Even now, the Austrian government has to repay tens of millions of guilders in debt annually.

Due to a lack of credibility, the Russian government cannot borrow money at all. Even when offering collateral such as toll rights and tax revenues, it makes no difference because the Russian government has a reputation for defaulting on its debts.

Faced with a debt crisis years ago, Alexander II had no choice but to declare debt default. Now, the repercussions of that decision are surfacing.

This is not to say that Alexander II's decision was wrong. If they hadn't defaulted, the foreign debt would have crushed the country's finances, and the situation would have been even worse.

Simply put, even if they hadn't defaulted, they wouldn't have been able to borrow much. The bankers were too shrewd and wouldn't lend money to those without the ability to repay.

In the original timeline, the French lending money to the Russians was out of desperation. The pressure on national defense was too great, and they had to court allies to share the burden.

Entering the late 19th century, France's comprehensive national strength suddenly lagged behind partly for this reason. The government lent a lot of money, leaving less capital for domestic development.

Now, there's no need to consider it. The French certainly won't overextend themselves to support the Russians. Even in offering high-interest loans, they would only lend to parties with the ability to repay them.

For instance, Austria currently owes a significant debt to the French. Whether developing domestically or expanding colonies, the financial revenue of the Austrian government alone is certainly insufficient.

Austria's private capital accumulation is also not particularly rich, so naturally, Franz turned to foreign loans. Of course, these are not merely international loans. Most of the debt exists in the form of bonds.

Most of these bonds are issued in the name of specific projects, meaning the debt is not entirely the responsibility of the Austrian government.

It's similar to how Americans borrowed money to build railways, mortgaging the railway to British banks and using the borrowed money for construction.

If an economic crisis occurred and the railway company went bankrupt, the British banks would be trapped.

Many of Austria's projects operate similarly, with a large amount of debt owed to banks and a bunch of bonds issued to the public, while the government's contribution is merely the startup capital.

Since these projects follow a standard commercial operation model, if anything goes wrong, the worst-case scenario is just a business bankruptcy.

The economic alignment is also a key factor in the alliance between Britain, France, and Austria. From a globalization perspective, as long as Britain or France experiences an economic crisis, Austria would be affected, and vice versa.

Escaping this situation is actually quite simple, and it involves just one word: wait. Once domestic private capital has accumulated sufficiently, there will no longer be a need to borrow money from abroad.

It's a mutually beneficial relationship, with one side having excess capital needing to be invested, and the other side requiring funds for development, making cooperation a win-win situation.

In the original timeline, this is how the Americans developed. If it weren't for the World Wars, they wouldn't have quickly transformed from a debtor nation to a creditor nation.

Of course, being a debtor or creditor nation isn't absolute. Domestic companies borrow from foreign banks, while domestic banks also expand overseas, offering loans abroad.

Even the Russian Empire, with its lack of capital, still has banks exporting capital overseas. These are normal economic activities, primarily driven by profit.

Understanding the French stance, Alexandrovich did not pursue it further. After visiting France's industrial sites, he sailed directly to London.

This time, he was more relaxed, as the Russian government had no illusions about obtaining loans from the British. Unless British bankers had lost their minds, such a scenario was impossible.

They couldn't rely on the British government to guarantee loans, could they? The two sides were enemies. Even though the Russian Empire had fallen behind in the ranks of Britain's competitors, the accumulated animosity from before wasn't easy to dissolve.

Moreover, Prussia and Poland were under British influence, so even for the sake of not discouraging their allies, Britain wouldn't act against their interests.

...

The diplomatic actions of the Russians have drawn the attention of the Kingdom of Prussia. Even without Bismarck, William I still managed to maintain control over the country.

After a series of political struggles, the Junker nobles, who had temporarily united due to the war, were now fragmented.

For example, there are now industrial Junkers, financial Junkers, military Junkers, court Junkers, parliamentary Junkers, and rural Junkers.

With his subordinates no longer united, the king's power has naturally been consolidated. Prussia's politics are beginning to normalize, and while the military still holds significant influence, it no longer has a monopoly.

A new balance of power has been established internally, and William I has turned his attention to the European continent. As an adversary, he is keenly aware of the Russians' every move.

The Russians are trying to use diplomatic activities to break free from their isolation, and William I certainly cannot allow this.



In the Berlin Palace, Prussia's military and political leaders gathered to discuss how to disrupt the Russians' diplomatic efforts.

"The Russian crown prince's trip to Europe is at the invitation of the French, and there must be some exchange of interests between France and Russia. Although an alliance between the two countries is unlikely.

Britain, France, and Austria have already formed an alliance, so there is no basis for the French to ally with the Russians at this time. The French are probably trying to bolster their position and gain more influence within the Tripartite Alliance by cozying up to the Russians.

What the Russians lack most right now is money, and the French have plenty of capital. The main purpose of Alexandrovich's visit to France is likely to secure a loan.

From an economic perspective, the Russian government has completely lost credibility now. No banker would be foolish enough to lend them money. The Russians' only hope lies in the exchange of political interests..."

Listening to the Foreign Minister Mackeit's rambling, William I furrowed his brow. It wasn't just the Russians who were short on money, Prussia was also facing financial difficulties.

The financial situation of the Prussian government was even worse than that of the Russian government. At least the Russians had defaulted and were no longer paying off debts, whereas Prussia had to bear a heavy debt burden.

In recent years, more and more people from the Kingdom of Prussia have gone to Austria to make a living, largely due to the excessive tax burden.

To repay the debts, the Prussian government had no choice but to increase the burden on its citizens. Those who couldn't bear it simply ran away.

William I dared not stop them. Most of those leaving were destitute, having lost their livelihoods in the country, and staying behind would only pose a risk.

If it weren't for the nearby migration option, there would have been widespread unrest in Prussia. Winning against the Russian Empire brought only glory. The newly expanded territories couldn't be converted into wealth in the short term and were still in the investment phase.

The citizens had not received any tangible benefits, and a great power status alone couldn't fill their stomachs. Of course, the psychological boost was still useful. Even though people were struggling, public support for the government remained high.

Even if they couldn't make ends meet, people only migrated away rather than starting a revolution.

In this regard, it's somewhat similar to Japan, except that Japan doesn't have an outlet for it, such as migration. When hunger strikes, they still resort to unrest, such as rioting for rice.

William I interrupted, "What plans does the Foreign Ministry have? Whatever the Russians' intentions, our task now is simply to disrupt them."

No justification was needed. If the enemy wanted to do something, preventing them from succeeding was the right approach.

They couldn't interfere with the Russian government's internal reforms, but Prussia could disrupt their international diplomatic activities.

William I had no confidence in comparing diplomatic means with other countries, but when it came to dealing with the Russians, he still had some assurance.

After pausing for a few seconds, Foreign Minister Mackeith replied, "Your Majesty, the possibility of the Russians obtaining funds from external sources is unlikely. Their main political objective should be to improve diplomatic relations with various countries.

Now that France and Russia are drawing closer, it has also provoked the Austrian government. To this day, the Russo-Austrian alliance no longer brings political benefits to Austria. On the contrary, it is a diplomatic burden.

There are only a few years left before the end of the Russo-Austrian alliance. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs plans to magnify the rift between them and prevent Russia and Austria from renewing their alliance."

Disrupting the Russo-Austrian alliance is very significant for the Kingdom of Prussia, as it directly relates to the outcome of the next Russo-Prussian War.

Prime Minister Moltke shook his head and said, "This is not enough. The Russo-Austrian alliance is not only about political interests but also involves substantial economic significance.

The current Russian Empire is almost a dumping ground for Austrian goods. Austria alone occupies 63% of Russia's total import and export trade. Austria will not easily let go of such a large amount of interests."

Interests are always the best bond. In the face of interests, there is nothing that cannot be compromised. Even though there are considerable conflicts between Russia and Austria, they still maintain their alliance for the sake of benefits.

Foreign Minister Mackeith explained, "Yes, Prime Minister. However, we also need to look at some data. In recent years, the total trade volume between Russia and Austria has been continuously declining.

The Russian government is working hard to shake off its economic dependence on Austria. To develop domestic industry, the Russians have repeatedly raised tariffs.

If it weren't for the fact that Russian industry is too backward and its products lack market competitiveness, the Austrians wouldn't be able to maintain their current market share.

The land reclamation movement promoted by Alexander II has already borne fruit. This year, the surplus of Russian agricultural products has become a foregone conclusion.

After the Russian Crown Prince's tour of Europe, it is very likely that they will open up the domestic market to Britain and France in exchange for the ability to sell their agricultural products in the international market.

Once Austria loses its monopoly on the Russian market, it will also face the impact of Russian agricultural products in the international grain export market, and relations between the two countries will definitely be greatly affected.

The more agreements the Russians reach with Britain and France now, the greater Austria's loss of benefits. It may not be obvious in the short term, but in three to five years, this change will be very significant.

As long as we can make the Austrians see greater benefits, abandoning the Russo-Austrian alliance is not impossible.

For example: Let them believe that as long as we win the next Russo-Prussian War, they can gain Ukraine and the Russian-controlled Balkan Peninsula, cutting off the Russians' grain export routes."

Everyone's faces changed dramatically, and they were obviously shocked by Mackeith's astonishing remarks.

The room suddenly fell silent, with only the sound of breathing and faint heartbeats remaining.