

Roman Empire 501

Chapter 501: A New Page

William I didn't hesitate for long before agreeing to the plan. Prussia had limited resources and didn't have many bargaining chips to trade. The promises being made now were all empty checks, so why not fill in larger numbers?

The international situation was ever-changing. Just a few years ago, Britain and France were fully supporting Prussia against Russia. Now, in the blink of an eye, Britain and France were about to ease relations with the Russians.

It wasn't that William I didn't want to stop all this from happening, but in the face of interests, there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

The already declining Russian Empire was no longer a competitor to Britain and France, so they could naturally play together happily.

In the next Russo-Prussian War, even if Britain and France stood by their side again, the level of support would not be as great as before. Winning the war would depend on their own efforts.

The Russians were a cautionary tale. In the Russo-Prussian War, Austria no longer supported them unconditionally, and the Russian government, which didn't adjust its mentality, paid a heavy price for it.

The cooling relations between Russia and Austria were essentially due to the Russian government's dissatisfaction with Austria's restrained support during the Russo-Prussian War.

The Russian government was angry, and the Austrian government was also displeased. From the Austrian government's perspective, they had done more than enough, fully fulfilling their obligations as an ally, even exceeding the treaty's stipulations. And yet they still faced complaints from the Russians.

Both sides were thinking from their own perspectives, and the unresolvable knot became a stumbling block in the Russo-Austrian alliance. The post-war relationship between the two countries had never returned to its former state, proving this point.

As a bystander, William I could think calmly about the issue. But when it came to himself, it was different. Britain and France clearly treated them as mere pawns.

After dealing with the Russians, all support and assistance abruptly stopped. The British government once wanted to support Prussia to keep France and Austria in check, but after weighing the pros and cons, they ultimately did not implement it.

In the end, it was still because of interests. Continuing to support the Kingdom of Prussia would cost the British too much, offer too few benefits, and face fierce backlash from France and Austria.

Compared to the British, the French were even more hateful, as they were plotting to take over the Rhineland. If it weren't for the French suddenly annexing Italy and causing panic among the European countries, making the French government hesitant to act rashly, the Rhineland region might have changed hands by now.

Unable to annex the German Federal Empire, the Rhineland region became a constant worry for the Kingdom of Prussia. William I was always on edge, fearing the French might swallow it up in one gulp.

To escape this predicament, William I repeatedly proposed joining the German Federal Empire. Unsurprisingly, this was met with strong resistance from Hanover.

How could they not be vigilant against such a blatant attempt to usurp power?

The Kingdom of Prussia was much larger than the German Federal Empire. Saying it was joining sounded nice, but another way to put it was that it wanted to annex the German Federal Empire.

They couldn't do it through diplomacy, and they couldn't do it through force either. If the Prussian government made a move against the German Federal Empire, Austria would certainly not have agreed. If they forcibly acted, an Austro-Prussian War would break out.

That would be the worst-case scenario. If it came to that, the Kingdom of Prussia would indeed be enemies with the entire world.

Fighting Austria and the German Federal Empire simultaneously, they would also have to deal with the opportunistic Russians. The Nordic Federation might even intervene, and the French could join the fray as well.

When it comes to interests, there is no room for compromise, everyone is tempted. The geographical position of the Kingdom of Prussia was undoubtedly the worst among the European powers, determining that their expansion must be cautious.

The Russo-Prussian War was both a challenge and an opportunity for Prussia. To grow and strengthen, the best choice was to rise by stepping over the Russians, a fact established by the first Russo-Prussian War.

In recent years, the Prussian government has not been idle. Even with an empty treasury, they sought ways to develop the economy. For example, using British and French capital to build railways on newly occupied lands and even helping the Poles build railways.

To raise development funds, the Prussian government also increased resource exports. A large amount of mineral resources from the Rhineland region was exported to France and the German Federal Empire.

Relying on the export of industrial and commercial products and mineral resources, the Kingdom of Prussia achieved a trade surplus. Of course, a major reason for this was that the Kingdom of Poland provided a dumping market for Prussian industrial and commercial products.

Under normal circumstances, when a country has a trade surplus and a large influx of funds from abroad, it should not lack money.

Unfortunately, Prussia was an exception. All this wealth was used to repay debt, making the economy dependent on Britain and France.

To repay the debt, the Prussian government cut expenditures as much as possible. However, this did not include military spending. No matter how poor they were, they couldn't cut military spending. Even now, Prussia's military spending has never been less than 45% of its annual revenue.

In this context, it's no surprise that the Prussian government wanted to break up the Russo-Austrian alliance from the root.

Only by completely defeating the Russian Empire could the Kingdom of Prussia have a stable international environment for development, reduce military spending, focus on economic development, and overcome the debt crisis.

And breaking up the Russo-Austrian alliance was the first step to winning the war. William I was already prepared to start the war early. If they waited for the Russian government to complete its internal reforms, the balance of war would completely tip in favor of the Russians.

In the first Russo-Prussian War, Prussia won due to its advantage in transportation, an advantage they naturally wanted to maintain.

Even after the expansion, the combined territory of the Kingdom of Prussia and the Kingdom of Poland was far smaller than that of the Russians, which meant they could complete their railways first.

Currently, the plan is progressing very smoothly. The progress of Prussia's railway construction was far ahead of the Russians.

Although Alexander II had worked very hard, Russia was too vast, and a mere few thousand kilometers of railway were insignificant for this empire.

Strategically speaking, the Russians would need at least 300,000 kilometers of railway to overcome their transportation difficulties. Even if they ignored their Asian territories and only considered their European part, they would still need 150,000 kilometers to barely meet their needs.

In comparison, the Kingdom of Prussia was in a much better position. Even if they included the Kingdom of Poland, building an additional 10,000 to 20,000 kilometers of railway would be enough to meet their wartime needs.

Of course, achieving the level of the Second German Empire in the original timeline was still a long way off. Only the Germans managed to extend the railway to every town and village.

In a territory of just 540,000 square kilometers, they built over 60,000 kilometers of railway, meaning there was a railway within five kilometers almost everywhere. The railway coverage rate established by the Germans remained an unbroken world record well into the 21st century.

Of course, this special situation was created by the times. Once the automobile industry developed, many railways lost their economic value and exited the stage of history.

Alexander II was also well aware of the problems faced in transportation. The tragedy was that he wanted to attract foreign investment in railways, but no one was interested.

No matter how many preferential conditions were offered, it was useless. Austria's bundled railways had already bankrupted many capitalists, with many railway companies losing money for over a decade. Who would dare to jump into Russia's giant pit?

Currently, British and French capital investment in the railways of Prussia and Poland only targeted economically valuable main lines, avoiding branch lines entirely.

As for Russian railways, it was even worse. Even if the Saint Petersburg to Moscow railway were put up for bidding, no railway company would dare take the risk.

It wasn't just the economic risk. The main issue was that people doubted the Russian government's credibility. What if, after the railway was built, the Russian government nationalized it? Investors would suffer huge losses.

It is worth mentioning that Russian railways are currently state-owned, and the high operating costs deter private capital.

An Austrian railway company once conducted an inspection in Russia and concluded that the overall operating cost of Russian railways was three times that of Austrian railways.

Winter was to blame. Except for a few regions, the Russian Empire was a land of ice and snow. Given the limited technology of this era, the winter operation of railways was not only risky but also required significantly higher maintenance costs.

High costs were one thing, but the key issues were the vast, sparsely populated, and economically backward regions. Neither the freight volume nor the passenger flow was sufficient, and the revenue was far from meeting the railway company's operating costs.

Without additional incentives, who would risk building an unprofitable railway?

With no profitability and no willingness from private capital to invest, the responsibility for railway construction in Russia fell to the government, naturally slowing the construction progress.

Even in the 21st century, Russian transportation was far from convenient. The European part was passable, and the Asian part barely managed passenger transport, but large-scale freight transport remained a challenge.

In this era, it was even worse. The vast Russian Empire had less than 10,000 kilometers of operational railways, specifically 7,876 kilometers, less than half of the Kingdom of Prussia's.

It was even less than the same period in history, which was the aftermath of the war. With the Russian government lacking financial resources, railway construction progress was also delayed.

...

As William I was preparing to undermine Austria and Russia, Alexandrovich arrived in London. The strange smell and the gray sky made Alexandrovich furrow his brow.

The sight of London, reputedly the largest city in the world, was quite disappointing.

The only pleasing sight was probably the tall chimneys and the billowing smoke rising into the sky, dancing in the wind, resembling a fairyland.

Oh, but these views were only to be admired from afar. Getting too close could suffocate you to death, and no one would take responsibility for that.

London at this time epitomized industrial beauty, being one of the most heavily polluted cities in the world and a champion of smog.

Alexandrovich was lucky not to have arrived in winter. Otherwise, he could have experienced the most lethal biochemical weapon of the era.

It was autumn now, and London's weather was still bearable. The visibility was a few hundred meters, and there wouldn't be any large-scale poisoning incidents.

Alexandrovich was welcomed by the British Crown Prince Edward. This was not their first meeting. They were relatives after all, proving that the European royal families were indeed one big family.

They shared a common father-in-law, King Christian IX of Denmark, who was known as the “Father-in-law of Europe.”

Once again, it was evident that European royalty was not to be trifled with. Even if they belonged to small countries, their extensive network of relatives made them formidable.

There was a nice rule among European royalty: personal relationships were separate from wars. Even if they fought fiercely on the battlefield, they could still be friends—or rather, “relatives”—in private.

This little relationship between the two didn’t affect the diplomacy between Britain and Russia. Alexandrovich was slightly better off, having begun to participate in state affairs and having some say in politics.

Edward was less fortunate. Due to his informal lifestyle and occasional indiscretions, Queen Victoria never allowed him to handle any real state affairs.

In other words, he was a nominal crown prince with no real political influence, apart from his noble status.

After some formal pleasantries, the two left the bustling port in a carriage. It seemed that history was turning a new page at that moment.

Chapter 502: The Temptation of Benefits

Since the Anglo-Boer War, the Benjamin Cabinet had been caught in a political vortex. Not to mention considering re-election, they needed to work hard just to complete the current term.

The Colonial Office took responsibility, with Colonial Secretary Louis and Cape Town Governor Delf resigning in disgrace. Yet the opposition was relentless, seizing on the issue and refusing to let go.

If not for the distraction provided by the “Tripartite Alliance,” which diverted public attention, Downing Street might already have a new occupant.

But this was far from enough. To cover up this blemish, the cabinet needed to achieve greater success in politics and diplomacy.

Improving relations with Russia was part of this effort, as capitalists needed to open the doors to the Russian market to earn more profits.

In this context, Alexandrovich’s visit to London was naturally welcomed by the British government.

...

“Your Imperial Highness, in principle, we agree to your country’s request for a loan. As long as you can persuade the bankers, the amount won’t be an issue,” said Foreign Secretary Maclean with elegance. This was his genuine opinion. As long as the Russians could convince the bankers, the British government wouldn’t interfere no matter how much they borrowed.

Alexandrovich frowned. If he could persuade the bankers, he wouldn't need to deal with the British Foreign Office.

"Respected Minister, we are currently facing difficulties and need the help of your government," Alexandrovich said. As he spoke, he felt a deep sense of humiliation. To secure a loan, he, the crown prince, had to humble himself and plead.

There was no choice. When under another's roof, one must bow one's head. If he didn't step in personally, Alexandrovich was certain that the bureaucrats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wouldn't achieve any results.

It wasn't that they were incompetent. The main reason was that the British wanted to stage a political show to boost the government's reputation among the public.

Compared to dealing with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, negotiating with the crown prince added more sensationalism. Alexandrovich also needed this credit to enhance his prestige at home. Both sides had their needs.

Foreign Secretary Maclean smiled slightly and calmly said, "We are always happy to help our friends. However, there is a slight issue at the moment.

Your government's tariff barriers severely affect the normal operation of our bilateral relations. If your country could join the free trade system, then none of this would be a problem.

This is a win-win choice. Once you join the free trade system, your country's agricultural exports will not face any restrictions. This would be very helpful in addressing your financial issues."

The free trade system was proposed by the British to open up the markets of European countries. Along with expanding the market for British goods, it also involved the pound-gold system, or in other words, the implementation of monetary hegemony.

Currently, the Russians are still promoting a bimetallic system of gold and silver. Once they join this system, they must undergo a reform to adopt the gold standard.

The monetary system reform of the Russian government had begun a long time ago, but it was carried out with the help of Austria. As relations between the two countries cooled, the Russians' monetary reform also stalled.

This presented an opportunity for the British, who wanted to seize the chance to take over. They aimed to pull the Russians from the half-step they had taken into the guilder-gold system into the pound-gold system, thereby widening the gap with their competitors.

Currently, there are three major systems in the international monetary market: the pound-gold system, the guilder-gold system, and the franc-gold-silver system.

Without a doubt, the British, possessing two major gold-producing areas, Canada and Australia, along with the accumulation of colonial plunder, naturally have the upper hand in the pound-gold system.

Following closely is the guilder-gold system. Austria's domestic gold production is not low, and with the supplement of gold from the African continent, it also holds an important position in the international monetary market.

However, there is still a long way to go to catch up with the British. To bridge this gap, the Austrian government has been trying to persuade the Russians to join.

However, Alexander II was unwilling to play second fiddle, and this issue has never been settled. After the outbreak of the Russian government's financial crisis, the two sides resumed negotiations, but the gap in their bottom lines was too large, and it ended without results.

In contrast, the French bimetallic system is more tragic. France's gold production is too low to meet demand, forcing them to adopt the bimetallic system.

Although most countries during this era were on a mixed currency standard, the frequent fluctuations in the value of gold and silver caused significant difficulties in settlements.

The French have gone to great lengths to maintain the stability of the franc. However, this has not prevented the devaluation of silver.

Using the gold standard results in insufficient production capacity, while using the silver standard leads to overcapacity. During this era, the production of silver started to surge, with growth rates far exceeding that of social wealth.

Alexandrovich remained silent. Joining the British-led free trade system involves too many things and is not something he can decide on his own.

Despite Maclean's assurance that loans are not a problem, which sounds promising, the reality is that the issues involved are significant.

Without considering other factors, once tariff protection is lost, can Russia's fragile industry and commerce survive?

Why hadn't any industrially strong countries joined the British free trade system? It was because they were worried about the impact on their domestic industry and commerce. In this era, British manufacturing was a guarantee of quality.

Economic impacts would also lead to political repercussions. Joining the British-led free trade system would also require consideration of Austria's reaction.

Although the relationship between the two countries is cooling, that is only in the political realm. Commercial exchanges between the two countries remain very close.

The second Russo-Prussian War is already on the horizon, with both sides preparing for conflict. At this time, Austria's importance has become irreplaceable.

Even if Russia were to join the British-led free trade system, the British government would not support the Russian Empire in the Russo-Prussian War, as Prussia and Poland were their loyal followers.

Of course, if the Russian government was willing to let go of its hatred and not seek revenge against Prussia and Poland, the British might mediate the conflict between the parties.

This thought quickly flashed through Alexandrovich's mind. While he is indeed a pacifist, he is not so naive as to lose sight of his own position.

After thinking for a while, Alexandrovich asked, "Minister, I understand the benefits of free trade. Your country has the world's strongest industrial power. Without tariff barriers, our nascent national industry will likely be crushed in no time.

Currently, the industrial workforce in the Russian Empire exceeds six million. If issues arise, it will lead to a wave of unemployment and could seriously threaten national security. How would these problems be resolved?"

Marquis Maclean calmly explained, "Your Highness, you are overthinking this. While many industries might be impacted, your country also has many advantages.

For example, agriculture. Your country's agriculture is the most promising in Europe, and once integrated into the free trade system, surpassing Austria is only a matter of time.

No one understands the scale of Austria's agricultural processing industry better than you. If your country leverages its domestic grain production to develop a complementary processing industry, it will have nothing to fear from competition.

With agricultural exports alone, your country could generate over a hundred million pounds in exports. Wouldn't the profits from this be enough to compensate for losses in other industries?

In addition to agriculture, your country's rich resources are another innate advantage. Once integrated, there will be no fear of competition."

Alexandrovich did not show it on his face, but deep down, he was already very annoyed. Apart from sowing discord between Russia and Austria, the rest of what was said was nothing but empty talk.

The international grain market is already saturated, and if the Russian Empire joins in now, it would only get a small share at best. To achieve what Maclean described, they would first have to surpass Austria!

No one knows the situation better than those involved. There is a significant gap in agricultural production technology between Russia and Austria, which cannot be bridged overnight.

Poor natural conditions also limit Russia's agricultural exports. Not to mention, the high transportation costs alone increase expenses.

In addition to these issues, there is also a problem with agricultural processing technology. First, the machinery and equipment must be imported, as locally produced machinery is of poor quality.

Second, the lack of skilled workers results in a high rate of defective products. This is a common issue in Russian industry and commerce, where even with the same machinery, their defect rate is higher than that of other European countries.

With all these problems combined, costs had already increased significantly. How could they compete with opponents in agricultural product exports?

While the Russian Empire is rich in resources, it should also be noted that transportation is underdeveloped. No matter how abundant the resources are, if they can't be transported out, what's the point?

Joining the free trade system is possible, but the British need to offer tangible benefits. Alexandrovich is looking for real advantages, not an illusory promise.

"Minister, what you mentioned is only a direction for future development. In the short term, the Russian Empire would not gain any benefits from joining the free trade system.

But the price we have to pay is very high, not only affecting domestic industry and commerce but potentially leading to the breakdown of the Russian-Austrian alliance. This is not a fair trade, and it is not right to be so insincere with friends.”

Alexandrovich deliberately emphasized his tone to express his dissatisfaction with Maclean.

...

The first round of negotiations ended with both sides failing to probe each other’s intentions, and the talks were temporarily put on hold.

However, Alexandrovich was indeed tempted. Whether or not the British were making empty promises, the prospect of dominating the agricultural export market was indeed very enticing.

But just thinking about the competition made him feel hopeless. During this era, the Russian Empire only exported grain and not other agricultural products, mainly due to transportation issues.

Products like fruits and vegetables would be mostly rotten by the time they were transported from the Russian Empire to various European countries for sale.

Wheat, potatoes, beans, and corn are the flagship products of the Russian Empire. The area of cultivated cash crops is too small, and their export share is very limited.

Take cotton, for example. Due to factors such as production technology, geographical conditions, and transportation, Russian cotton has lost its competitiveness.

These problems couldn’t be solved overnight. It was extremely difficult to make up for inherent deficiencies.

Chapter 503: Smoke and Mirrors

The negotiations between Britain and Russia were anything but secret. Even Franz in far-off Vienna caught wind of them, with the details of the talks almost entirely revealed.

In the world of diplomacy, everyone knew the game: hold out for a better offer. The Russians had leaked the information on purpose, clearly waiting for Austria to make an offer.

The offer didn’t need to surpass the British one. It just needed to be close enough for the Russian government to choose Austria over Britain.

This was a matter of interests. The Russian-Austrian alliance held far more value than any potential Anglo-Russian deal, especially since the British weren’t offering a true alliance.

A quick glance at the map showed the long, vulnerable border between Russia and Austria, devoid of natural defenses. Without a treaty, the defense burden would be a nightmare for the already exhausted Russian government.

If relations with Austria soured, it would mean that all neighboring countries were enemies or potential enemies.

When the Russian Empire was strong, it conquered from east to west, establishing a formidable reputation. Now that it was showing signs of fatigue, it became a tiger being preyed upon by a pack of wolves.

The last Russo-Prussian War was a harsh reminder to the Russian government of just how many enemies lay in wait. If they lost again in a second Russo-Prussian War, even the Nordic Federation might seize the opportunity to join in.

The whispers of Finnish-Swedish collusion were no secret. When the Russian Empire was at its peak, the Swedes stayed in line. But after the failures in the Russo-Prussian War, even King Charles XV dared to openly meet with Finnish independence leaders.

Of course, this potential threat didn't frighten the Russians. Although it was difficult for the Russians to expand outward, it wasn't a big problem to defend their current territory.

Enemies were plenty, but few were ready to act. Apart from the Kingdom of Prussia, the Kingdom of Poland, and the Ottoman Empire—whose animosity was deep and irreconcilable—the other enemies were more likely to strike only when the moment was right.

Now, the Russian government was so poor that their coffers clinked empty. With nothing left to bargain with but their domestic market, they naturally wanted to sell for a good price.

Originally, they had hoped to have Britain, France, and Austria compete against each other with their bids. Unfortunately, the French were too busy and unwilling to participate in the competition.

...

Putting down his teacup, Franz asked with a sullen face, "The Russians have shown their hand. Do you think we should compete with the British?"

It was clear that he was in a foul mood. The Russian government's maneuver this time hit Austria's weak spot.

South Africa's gold had yet to be mined, and in the struggle for monetary supremacy, the guilder-gold system was already at a disadvantage. If the Russian government sided with the British now, it would almost certainly declare the victory of the pound-gold system.

Prime Minister Felix responded angrily, "Your Majesty, we cannot allow this extortion by the Russians. We must give them a harsh lesson."

Austria had paid a considerable price to entice the Russians to join the guilder-gold system. Now, with the benefits taken and the Russians pulling this stunt at a critical moment, it seemed like a betrayal to Prime Minister Felix.

Franz nodded and, without waiting for others to speak, decisively said, "The Foreign Ministry should remind the Russians that the Russo-Austrian alliance is about to expire, and their actions are deeply disappointing!"

Making an offer was out of the question. How could the same commodity be sold twice? The Russian government needed money, but that was not Franz's concern.

Regardless of any justification, breaking a commitment, even a verbal one, was still betrayal.

After a pause, Franz stopped himself and said, "Never mind, let's not be bothersome at this moment. Send an invitation to the Prussians. William I will know what to do."

How could verbal threats be as intimidating as actual actions? If the Russians dared to side with the British, he would support Prussia in the next Russo-Prussian War.

Although the Prussian government couldn't offer any bargaining chips, the prospects they painted were very enticing!

If Alexander II could crush the Prussians before the end of the Russo-Austrian alliance, Franz would have nothing to say—he wasn't one to renege on his word, and Austria would certainly remain neutral.

If they waited until the Russo-Austrian alliance dissolved and then the Russo-Prussian War broke out, they shouldn't blame him for kicking them when they were down. Not to mention, simply cutting off Russo-Austrian trade alone would be enough to cripple the Russians.

If that wasn't enough, allowing the Prussian navy into the Aegean Sea to join forces with the Ottoman Empire's navy, and blockading Russia's trade route to the Mediterranean would be another good option.

Many know how to kick someone when they're down. If the Nordic Federation didn't know to block the gateway to the Baltic Sea, Franz would lose respect for them.

With both lifelines cut, the Russian government couldn't possibly import strategic materials from the Far East for the war, right?

The Trans-Siberian Railway hadn't even started construction. Even if it began immediately, it would still take over a decade to complete.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg analyzed, "Your Majesty, we don't need to be so proactive. The Prussians are likely more anxious than we are and will come to us soon enough.

With Britain and Russia getting closer, it's uncertain if their ally will support them in the next war.

If the Prussians can't disrupt this Anglo-Russian deal, they'll have no choice but to turn to us. Relatively speaking, we hold the most influence in Eastern Europe."

...

Every politician is a skilled actor. When the Russians probed with the monetary system, Franz naturally played along.

The bigwigs of the Austrian government put on a grand performance for the Russians, showing them exactly what they wanted to see.

Before long, the content of this meeting would be transmitted through covert channels to Alexander II's desk, and then it would be his turn to have a headache.

The mix of truth and lies was so complex that even Franz wasn't sure if the meeting's content would become reality.

The only thing that could be certain was that Franz was pretending to be "angry". Having been emperor for so many years, he had long learned to keep his emotions in check. How could he possibly openly reveal them?

Moreover, everyone had their own positions. From the Russians' perspective, their actions weren't wrong.

Franz himself often deceived allies and was equally often deceived by them. If he got angry every time, Franz would probably have died from anger long ago.

If he were genuinely angry, he wouldn't have called a meeting but would have taken direct action in retaliation. For instance, he might have supported a pirate fleet in the Aegean Sea to block the Russians' routes. Or he might have funded the Russian revolutionaries to cause trouble for the Russian government.

In comparison, supporting the Kingdom of Prussia would be the last resort. Bringing down Russia only to see Prussia rise in its place would be a waste of effort.

The performance was a tactic namely "repairing the plank road by day while secretly crossing the Wei River." After so much preparation, Austria was finally ready to take action.

It wouldn't be long before the strategic value of the Persian Gulf would become apparent, and Franz naturally wanted to get involved. He couldn't allow the British to dominate the area entirely.

Had it not been so close to India, where the British kept a watchful eye, Franz would have taken action long ago.

Taking advantage of the Tripartite Alliance, when else would be a better time to move against Oman and extend their influence to the Strait of Hormuz?

Austria had dealt a heavy blow to the British in South Africa, prompting the British government to draw Russia into the free trade system to undermine Austria. Franz, in turn, extended his hand to the Persian Gulf, which the British coveted. Everyone was using their own methods.

The Russians probably never imagined that from the beginning, Franz had planned to sell them out to the British.

It was inevitable. Having already seized a large part of British South Africa, and now eyeing the Persian Gulf, which the British saw as their own, Franz needed to appease the British somehow.

Currency hegemony wasn't easy to establish, especially in the gold standard era. If the British didn't have enough gold, could the pound-gold system still function?

Since that was the case, it was better to let the British be happy for a few days. They could then use the halo of victory to cover up their failures in overseas colonial expansion.

As for the Russians, it was unfortunate, but as the conflicts of interest between the two countries grew, the alliance couldn't be sustained. This wasn't something that could be salvaged by individual efforts.

Unless the Russian Empire continued to decline, then everyone could become good friends again. Obviously, this was impossible. Alexander II's reforms had already made Franz feel threatened.

In this round of reforms, Alexander II was imitating Austria in many aspects. Compared to the original timeline, these social reforms were much more thorough.

It wasn't just the emancipation of the serfs. Alexander II also resolved land conflicts and accelerated industrial development.

Since the end of the civil war, the Russian Empire's commerce and industry had entered a period of rapid growth. Although their industrial products were still of poor quality, the growth rate of their production capacity was astonishing.

The industrial capacity lost during the Russo-Prussian War was restored within just a few years, and the total industrial output even surpassed pre-war levels.

If not for the limitations in transportation and lack of capital, the Russian Empire would have already been transformed. Solving either of these problems would catapult them into a period of rapid development.

They already had the basic elements for industrial development: abundant resources, low labor costs, and favorable development policies.

Due to the extensive land reclamation, Russian grain faced sluggish sales, causing domestic grain prices to drop repeatedly, which in turn significantly lowered labor costs.

Russian labor costs were only a quarter of Austria's and a fifth of Britain's. For labor-intensive industries, this was an unparalleled advantage.

Not only was labor cheap, but industrial raw materials were also very affordable. The only expensive aspect was transportation, but not all areas were affected, as the Russian Empire also had rivers.

Capitalists would eventually recognize these advantages. As long as the Russian government maintained its current level of governance, development was just a matter of time.

This was Alexander II's achievement. By making examples of a few, he successfully intimidated Russian bureaucrats. To date, he had exiled thousands of bureaucrats to Siberia to enjoy the northern scenery.

Corruption within the Russian government was still severe, but its execution capability had improved significantly, with no one daring to feign compliance anymore.

The more Franz learned, the more he realized the terrifying potential of the Russian Empire. Although Austria no longer feared Russia's rise, there was no need to cultivate a competitor.

Therefore, when the Russians started acting up, Franz stopped trying to appease them. The Russian government had misjudged and thought they could gain benefits this way.

Even regarding Alexander II's currency reform, Franz was no longer enthusiastic. Although there were significant profits to be made by getting involved, Russia would still benefit the most.

Since the Russian government intended to use this as a bargaining chip, it was best to drag it out. Even if the Russian government leaned towards the British, it didn't matter.

The British weren't charitable either. If London's bankers didn't squeeze them dry, could they still call themselves bankers?

To avoid being labeled as untrustworthy, Franz decided to forgo these benefits. Anyway, the Russian government's credibility was already in shambles, and adding the charge of breaking the alliance wouldn't make much difference.

Chapter 504: The Corrective Force of History

The September wind in Saint Petersburg already had a hint of chill. Inside the Winter Palace, Alexander II was still dealing with state affairs, the wrinkles on his forehead telling the tale of years gone by.

Having witnessed the rise and fall of the Russian Empire, Alexander II felt a strong sense of duty and would not allow himself any indulgence.

A man in his forties or fifties approached and whispered, “Your Majesty, this is top-secret information from Vienna.”

After receiving the sealed intelligence and confirming the seal, Alexander II pointed at the confidential document and said slowly, “Understood, Ferenc, you may leave now.”

Information worthy of being classified as top-secret certainly meant something significant had occurred. Alexander II had no habit of sharing such intelligence with those around him—not due to a lack of trust, but out of a monarch’s instinct.

Opening the confidential document, the contents were about events that had happened half a month ago. There was no helping it. In those days without wireless radio, if they used wired telegraphs to transmit news, how could they keep it secret from the Austrians?

Using codes was even worse, as it blatantly signaled that there was sensitive information to be found.

In this era, telegrams were charged by the word, so they were typically very brief. Transmitting intelligence couldn’t be done so carelessly. If the meaning wasn’t expressed clearly, it would be a problem.

Taking just half a month to get from Vienna to Saint Petersburg was already the best that could be hoped for given the times.

As time ticked by, the wrinkles on Alexander II’s forehead deepened. Finally, after finishing the document, he let out a long sigh.

At that moment, Alexander II felt lost. Things were not going according to his plan. The Austrian government’s emphasis on monetary hegemony wasn’t as high as he had anticipated.

Of course, it might have been a smokescreen, but he dared not take that gamble. A misjudgment here could have disastrous consequences.

But abandoning the plan was not an option. If sufficient capital could not be obtained from outside, the development of the Russian Empire would be hindered.

In normal times, it wouldn’t matter. Slower development would be fine, and they could even lay a more solid foundation.

But not now. The enemy wouldn’t leave them that much time. If the Russian Empire couldn’t increase its strength in the shortest possible time, it would suffer a catastrophe before it could even develop.

Despite still being a behemoth, the Russian Empire was surrounded by many enemies. While one alone might not be able to devour it, a coalition of many could.

Another failure would strip away the prestige the Russian Empire had built over centuries. And the best-case scenario would be to barely survive like the Ottoman Empire.

This created a deadlock. Aligning with the British could secure financial aid but at the risk of losing Austria, their most crucial ally. Continuing the Russo-Austrian alliance, however, wouldn’t solve the funding issue.

Austria's support was essential for Russia to win the next war, or at least ensure Austria didn't side with Prussia. This was determined by geopolitics, and in this matter, Britain and France were secondary.

As long as the Russo-Austrian alliance remained, Austria's unconditional support was assured without needing to offer anything in return. Without the alliance, it would all come down to interests.

Deep down, another voice warned him: be careful, things are not that simple.

To destroy the Russo-Austrian alliance and establish the British pound's monetary hegemony, the British would surely be willing to make an offer. But what if their goals were achieved? Who could guarantee the British wouldn't breach the agreement?

Treaties were often just pieces of paper. What if the British didn't fulfill their promises or did so with conditions attached?

There would be no turning back once the step was taken. Breaking the Russo-Austrian alliance was easy but re-establishing it would be much harder.

Alexander II had anti-Austrian tendencies, but that was based on the Russian Empire being strong. Now that the Russian Empire had declined, the Russo-Austrian alliance became all the more important.

Now he somewhat understood why Nicholas I insisted on establishing the Russo-Austrian alliance. The existence of this alliance was not just about capturing Constantinople. It was also about ensuring the strategic security of the Russian Empire.

As long as this alliance existed, they didn't have to worry about foreign invasion of European territory. Even now, before the alliance was dissolved, Prussia absolutely wouldn't dare to make a move against them first.

After the defeat in the Russo-Prussian War, the Russo-Austrian alliance played a crucial role in helping Russia navigate through the dangerous period.

Since the establishment of the Russo-Austrian alliance, both countries have reaped substantial benefits. Russia successfully expanded in the Balkans and captured the long-desired Constantinople. Meanwhile, Austria expanded in the Balkans and annexed Southern Germany to rebuild the Holy Roman Empire.

If desired, Alexander II could still obtain the Dardanelles through a territorial exchange, gaining control over the passage to the Mediterranean.

If it were at the beginning of his reign, he would definitely have tried every means to make this territorial deal with Austria, expanding Russia's influence to the Mediterranean.

But now, such unrealistic fantasies have been abandoned. Entering the Mediterranean was easy but establishing a foothold there was hard.

If not for the establishment of the Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance, which even squeezed the British out, how could Russia hope to gain a foothold in the Mediterranean?

...

The more he thought about it, the harder it became for Alexander II to make a decision. Having no money was not an option, but the Russo-Austrian alliance was equally important, making this a difficult choice.

In reality, Alexander II did not have much of a choice. The continuation of the Russo-Austrian alliance was not solely his decision. The stance of the Austrian government was equally important.

If the Austrians did not want to renew the alliance, then even if he did not cooperate with the British, the alliance would still collapse.

However, Franz cared about face. When the Russo-Austrian alliance was established, Austria was in a weakened state, and to some extent, it was the Russians who supported Austria.

Out of respect, the Austrian government had always maintained the impression of upholding the Russo-Austrian alliance, without showing any intention of taking advantage of Russia's difficulties.

This misconception led Alexander II to misjudge the situation. This time, he wanted to test the waters through Britain and France to increase his bargaining power and secure more loans from the Austrian government.

As a result, he found himself in an awkward position right after the first step. The Austrian government seemed to be infuriated and was not playing by the book.

Franz did not know about Alexander II's headache as he had his own troubles. The situation in Mexico had finally collapsed. Less than a week after the French troops withdrew, Maximilian I lost control of the country.

Now, Empress Carlota had returned to Europe to seek help. After failing to convince the French, she returned to Vienna.

Seeking help was one thing, but she had nothing to offer in return. Unfortunately, most of Mexico's industries had been mortgaged to the French, leaving Maximilian I with very few bargaining chips.

Not even having the money to recruit mercenaries, historical lessons had taught Franz that an emperor in such dire straits usually met a grim fate.

Franz had no intention of getting involved in the murky waters of Mexico. When he suggested to Empress Carlota that she persuade Maximilian I to abdicate, he was instead given a lecture, which infuriated Franz to the point of leaving the room.

There was no way to communicate with someone whose thinking was so detached from reality. "What the Mexican people need...?" From Franz's perspective, the Mexican people were probably eager to see Maximilian I sent to the guillotine.

To blatantly lie with such ease was astonishing. At the beginning of his reign, Maximilian I might have had a chance to turn things around, but now, no one could salvage the situation.

The people's patience had worn thin. Years of reforms had remained only on paper, and policies that were supposed to benefit the country and its people ended up harming them instead.

Becoming an emperor with no support and surrounded only by a bunch of empty talkers, Franz didn't know what to say.

Failing to gain Austria's support, Empress Carlota sought help from other European countries. Franz already knew this would be futile.

Who would be willing to get involved in the mess of Mexico without any benefits? With the French's previous experience as a warning, everyone would think twice.

Franz was now just waiting for the rebels to capture Mexico City and for Maximilian I to return to Austria, which would mark the end of the matter.

This wouldn't take long. With the French troops withdrawn, the rebels had already launched a major offensive. Expecting the Mexican government forces to suppress the rebellion was less likely than hoping the rebels would implode through infighting and self-destruct.

Now, the Mexican insurgent army was also plagued with internal conflicts, with a large number of conservatives and racists infiltrating their ranks. As soon as these contradictions explode, they would immediately fall apart.

However, before that happens, they still have one common goal: to get rid of Maximilian I. Once this goal was achieved, Mexico would enter a century-long period of internal strife.

It was worth mentioning that many of the leaders within the insurgent army were originally royalists and constitutionalists, some even the very people who helped Maximilian ascend to the throne.

The fact that they all turned into revolutionaries was something Franz had to admit was a testament to Maximilian I's "unique" ability. There weren't many emperors in the history of the world who could achieve this.

But these people wouldn't enjoy their success for long. Once the revolution succeeded, it would be their turn to suffer. If they were to thrive, where would that leave the face of the Habsburgs?

Maximilian's poor performance in Mexico could only be overshadowed if his successors did even worse. There had to be someone to set a negative example to somewhat restore the family's dignity.

In the original timeline, this group didn't amount to much, falling into internal strife soon after taking power. Franz was merely giving them a push, bringing forward the era of warlords and expanding his sphere of influence in the process.

No, it couldn't be said to be bringing it forward. It should be seen as the corrective force of history, restoring the timeline to its original path.

Due to Franz's butterfly effect, the French invested more heavily, allowing the Mexican Empire to last a few more years.

Chapter 505: Loyalty Through Struggles

Lightning couldn't tear through the heavy clouds, and after thunder rolled across the low sky, torrential rain poured down, as if the heavens were weeping for the misfortune of Mexico City.

Inside the palace, Emperor Maximilian I sat quietly, motionless, as if he had entered a state of sage-like detachment, indifferent to joy and sorrow, with the outside world seeming irrelevant to him.

"Your Majesty, we must leave! The enemy is about to surround the city. We won't be able to escape if we wait any longer!"

The anxious words of his guard brought Maximilian I back to reality. The sudden downpour had come at the right time, successfully delaying the rebels' advance.

Maximilian I shook his head and said, “No, Ferren, Mexico does not have a cowardly emperor. I will wait here for them. You all should leave.”

Seeing that the situation was hopeless, Maximilian I did not make a last stand but instead dismissed his followers, choosing to face defeat alone.

This decision was undoubtedly correct, allowing him to avoid the ugliness of human nature. Had he insisted on dragging everyone down with him, he would likely have experienced betrayal firsthand.

Aside from a few loyalists, most people fled. Of course, those who stayed were not necessarily his die-hard supporters. Many had ties too close to sever. Without the emperor’s protection, they could only face exile abroad.

If they had been following a different emperor, one who had allowed them to line their own pockets, going into exile might not have been so bad.

But with this emperor, the benefits were limited even in the best of times. Now, even those considering escape had to think about their finances. After being accustomed to a life of luxury, it was hard to accept a life of hardship.

In the eyes of many, Maximilian I, the deposed emperor, still held considerable value. Even though he was no longer in power, the House of Habsburg remained at its peak, and there was always the chance of a restoration in the future.

At worst, they could secure a long-term meal ticket. After all, how could loyal followers of the emperor be left to starve?

Unfortunately, Maximilian I was not an ordinary person, and he had no intention of fleeing. Despite his subordinates’ attempts to persuade him, he refused to seek refuge in the Austrian African colonies.

This decision put many people in a difficult position. The rebels might hesitate to kill the emperor, but they had no qualms about killing his supporters. To bolster their sense of justice, the revolutionaries were bound to conduct a massacre.

In the original timeline, they overstepped and caused Mexico to descend into chaos as a melee of warlords. The situation now was similar—revolutions always required bloodshed.

These failed reformists were naturally the best sacrifices. They weren’t wronged as their biggest problem was incompetence.

Birds of a feather flock together. Maximilian I was an idealist, and those who gathered around him were naturally like-minded idealists.

They were all impressive when it came to boasting, but when it came to actually getting things done, they fell short. If they had been a bit more capable, they wouldn’t have let the rebels turn the tables.

Not to mention, if they had carried out executions from the beginning, or if they hadn’t pardoned those political prisoners, the rebel army wouldn’t have grown so quickly.

Now, five or six out of ten in the rebel leadership were people Maximilian I himself had released. The remaining four or five were the result of their unrealistic reforms.

It's worth noting that at the best point of the situation, the rebels were left with just a few guerrilla groups of a hundred or so people. If they hadn't faltered at the critical moment, the rebels wouldn't have stood a chance.

"Your Majesty, please leave for now. We will have a chance to make a comeback later. Even Napoleon had his Hundred Days restoration, so why cling to this momentary gain or loss?"

The middle-aged captain of the guard was truly anxious. Others could run, but he couldn't. He had followed Maximilian I from Austria. As Maximilian's guard, if he abandoned the emperor and fled back home, even if the Habsburgs didn't trouble him, how could he hold his head high for the rest of his life?

After this failed venture, his ambitions had nearly been extinguished. He no longer sought to make a name for himself and just wanted to enjoy a peaceful retirement.

After all, he was only Maximilian I's guard captain and wasn't responsible for the collapse of the Mexican government. As long as he could safely escort the emperor back, it wouldn't be considered a failure.

Once back, he could continue to serve as the guard captain for Maximilian I, the abdicated emperor, playing the role of a loyal retainer. The Habsburgs would never mistreat a loyal servant.

Through coercion and inducement, Ferren managed to gather a small team of a hundred, ready to escort Maximilian I to safety.

Of course, this was all done in Maximilian I's name, and any promised benefits would still be on this deposed emperor to deliver.

There was no doubt that, no matter how down and out, Maximilian was still a significant figure. As long as he returned to Vienna, fulfilling these promises wouldn't be a problem.

He even prepared for failure, planning to take the emperor into the Austrian embassy. If the rebels dared to attack, it would provide the Austrian government with an excuse to intervene.

Maximilian was still immersed in his defeat, naturally unaware of his subordinates' actions. He shook his head again, remaining silent for a long time before saying, "Even Napoleon failed. Why would we succeed?"

Ferren was dumbfounded. This stubborn, idealistic middle-aged man was not to be trifled with. He was completely set in his ways. Success was naturally a distant possibility and Ferren was merely looking for an excuse to escape.

"Your Majesty, the rebels are only a day's journey from Mexico City. Once the rain stops, they will likely lay siege. If we miss this opportunity, it will be difficult for us to leave."

Maximilian I continued to shake his head, seemingly determined to stay and ask the rebels why they revolted.

...

The rebels didn't march in the rain. Was it really out of consideration for the soldiers? The answer is no. Many people, including President Juárez, didn't know how to deal with Maximilian I.

The obvious opening left open was a deliberate one, inviting him to leave quickly, with the hope that he might even die of illness on the way, sparing everyone further trouble.

There was no way around it as political struggles are complex. Don't think that just because Maximilian I pardoned many of the rebel leaders, they would be grateful to him. Even if some gratitude existed, no one dared to show it in the face of reality.

No matter what they truly felt, these individuals would publicly call for his execution with great fervor.

Additionally, some people who had once supported Maximilian I found themselves harmed by the reforms and joined the opposition.

These people, having suffered losses, harbored a deep hatred for Maximilian I. Not calling for his execution would be a disservice to the Mexican people.

In the original timeline, Maximilian I was sent to the guillotine this way. But now, things were different—Austria had become a neighbor to Mexico.

If Maximilian I were killed, who knew if the Habsburgs would let it go? What if they invaded Mexico under the guise of revenge?

While everyone shouted slogans, no one truly wanted to fight Austria. Despite the French having withdrawn in disgrace, they had effectively dominated the Mexicans in battle, leaving a deep-seated fear.

President Juárez didn't want to keep the troublesome Maximilian I around but also didn't want to provoke the Austrians over this issue.

Unlike the French, who left after their defeat, Austria had established a foothold. While the Austrian colonies in Central America couldn't swallow Mexico whole, it could still take a bite out of it.

Juárez was no fool. He was attentive to international politics, especially when it came to understanding his neighbors.

The United States wanted access to the Mexican market, the Confederate States had similar interests, and Britain, Austria, and Spain were all eyeing Mexico covetously.

Previously, with the French in the way, these powers had all been very restrained. Now, this pressure fell on their shoulders.

Juárez wasn't confident that the reputation for driving out the French would be enough to deter these enemies.

He would rather keep Maximilian I as a hidden danger than invite intervention from various countries over this issue.

As the rain gradually stopped, Maximilian I remained in the palace, unwilling to leave this place of sorrow.

The rebels were on their way to Mexico City, and the city was already in a state of panic. Ferren was struggling to keep his men in line.

One impatient guard asked, “General, is His Majesty still refusing to leave?”

Despite being merely the head of the guards, Ferren held a high military rank, as a lieutenant general in the Mexican Empire. Maximilian I had been quite generous in this regard.

“Calandi, keep your cool. Send someone to monitor the rebels. The situation has changed, and if His Majesty refuses to leave the palace, we may have to forcibly escort him to the Austrian embassy.

I’ve already arranged with the Austrian envoy that you and your families can obtain Austrian citizenship. The rebels won’t dare harm Austrian citizens.”

Upon hearing Ferren’s explanation, everyone calmed down. The Mexican Empire was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal state, and the great powers had many privileges there.

In dealing with foreign affairs, the Mexican government was always cautious. Comparatively, Maximilian I’s rule was the period when Mexico was most assertive internationally.

Due to his background, Maximilian I had a deep understanding of European countries and wasn’t as fearful of them.

Things that terrified government officials didn’t scare this emperor. In many cases, he could enforce the law, and even when foreign ministers intervened, he could handle it with composure.

This was useless as it wasn’t possible for the emperor to handle everything personally. The usual privileges remained unchanged, and officials still feared foreign powers.

With this protective charm, they could at least avoid retribution from the rebels. While they could wield the knife internally, the Juárez administration would never dare engage in massacres when dealing with foreign matters.

Those still following Ferren were staunch royalists. To them, the emperor was the state, and following him meant they were not committing treason, so they felt no guilt.

Many were betting on Maximilian I’s restoration, for one reason only: his lineage. The House of Habsburg had the power to restore him, and logically, there was no reason for them to abandon a crown already in their grasp.

The conflict between Maximilian I and his family wasn’t something ordinary people could know about. The Habsburgs were too embarrassed to announce it publicly, and Maximilian was even more afraid to speak about it.

As the rebels approached, chaos engulfed Mexico City, with looting, arson, and violence occurring at every moment, exposing the darkest sides of human nature.

In the evening, a young soldier rode into the palace, shouting, “The rebels have entered the city!”

With this news, the atmosphere in the palace grew tense. This time, Ferren didn’t seek Maximilian I’s permission and decisively ordered, “Let’s go, everyone, escort His Majesty to the Austrian embassy.”

Regardless of Maximilian I’s willingness, he was forcibly put into a carriage and taken to the Austrian embassy in Mexico.

The cramped Austrian embassy obviously couldn't accommodate so many people, but that didn't matter. They could just temporarily expand the embassy.

Several nearby buildings were draped with Austrian flags, effectively becoming part of the Austrian embassy in Mexico.

With the emperor present, the expansion of the embassy was entirely legal. The deed was done, and Maximilian I couldn't fault his subordinates for taking the initiative, as they were simply being loyal.

Austrian ambassador Kompten was almost grinning from ear to ear. After all, this was an achievement that had fallen into his lap, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Successfully sending Maximilian I back home would allow him to be in the good graces of the great emperor. Even if it failed, it would still create a pretext for Austria to intervene in Mexico.

Kompten wasn't afraid of the rebels, as no matter what, the Mexican rebels wouldn't dare harm an Austrian ambassador. If they did, it would be tantamount to declaring war on Austria.

This dire consequence was not something the new government could afford. After years of struggle, they had finally risen to power, and no one wanted to return to a life of hiding and running.

Once Maximilian I was settled, the elated Kompten immediately promised everyone, "Don't worry. From now on, you are the guards of the Austrian embassy in Mexico."

We have already prepared the uniforms. You can change into them shortly. If the rebels dare to act, they are challenging the great Austria!"

Clearly, Kompten had been well-prepared. As soon as he made contact with Ferren, he had a batch of uniforms sent from the Austrian Central American colonies.

Now, by simply changing their clothes, their status instantly changed—from the Emperor of Mexico's guards to the guards of the Austrian embassy.

As for whether Austria had the right to station troops in Mexico City, that wasn't something to worry about—it was a must! Even if they didn't, Maximilian I could issue a temporary order.

Regardless of whether the republican government led by Juárez acknowledged it, Austria had, at that moment, secured the right to station troops. Kompten skillfully demonstrated his competence as an ambassador of a large nation, quietly securing a privilege for Austria.

A cheer erupted, as they were finally safe. Becoming the guards of the Austrian embassy meant they had weathered this storm.

The only one who was despondent was Maximilian I, who lay alone on his bed, sighing.

Chapter 506: Turmoil at the Embassy

Seizing Mexico City without shedding a drop of blood and overthrowing Maximilian I's rule, the republican government led by Juárez finally shed its rebel status and became legitimate.

Before they could even celebrate, Juárez received the news that Maximilian I had taken refuge in the Austrian embassy, ruining his good mood instantly.

Without a doubt, having Maximilian I remain in Mexico City was like having a ticking time bomb, capable of triggering a political earthquake at any moment.

To be precise, they didn't even have to wait for the future—Maximilian I was already causing trouble for them, albeit unintentionally.

Maximilian I had not yet abdicated and was still recognized internationally as the legitimate ruler of Mexico. In contrast, the republican government led by Juárez had yet to gain recognition.

The uprising was launched under the banner of “punishing the tyrant,” and now that the emperor was in the Austrian embassy, the question was whether to seize him or not.

A young officer, eager for action, suggested, “Mr. President, there aren't many troops at the Austrian embassy. Should we send someone in to capture that bastard Maximilian?”

Juárez himself was inwardly cursing Maximilian I. He had a chance to escape but didn't take it—what was wrong with him?

“Bauer, have you lost your mind? That's the Austrian embassy! Sending troops in now would only give them an excuse to intervene. Firstly, surround the Austrian embassy and have our diplomats communicate with them to demand that they hand over Maximilian I.”

Juárez himself didn't believe what he was saying, but in politics, these steps are necessary. Rushing into an embassy, especially one belonging to a great power, is suicidal.

On this issue, the European powers were united in their stance. None would tolerate an assault on an embassy.

Even though the Austrian embassy's sheltering of the Mexican Emperor amounted to interference in Mexico's internal affairs, what could be done when Mexico was just a weak country?

In this harsh era, weak nations have no voice. As long as Austria insisted that they were dealing with rebels and that the republican government lacked legitimacy, the issue would simply be brushed aside.

There was no hope for international opinion to support them, as this was still the age of monarchies. Even in the most progressive nation, France, no one dared to promote the idea that rebellion was justified.

The Mexican republican government had already thoroughly offended the French, and now they wanted to provoke Austria as well—did they really think they could still have a good future?

Even though the Americans supported their revolution, if it came down to it, you could bet the Americans would play ostrich. The primary duty of the Anglo-Franco-Austrian alliance was to suppress American influence after all.

As long as they stayed out of the fray, they didn't have to worry about a social backlash. The wounds from the civil war had only just begun to heal, and the Americans were keeping a low profile—how could they possibly stick their necks out now?

From a geopolitical standpoint, a weak and backward Mexico better served American interests. On this issue, both the United States and the Confederate States were aligned.

Bauer, who had been scolded, wasn't angry—instead, he was relieved not to be made a scapegoat. As part of the first unit to enter the city, if there were an assault on the Austrian embassy, it would likely fall on them.

If it happened, they would definitely have to answer to the Austrians in the future, and the ones carrying out the orders would surely face the consequences. Bauer had rushed to consult with President Juárez mainly to avoid trouble.

Juárez understood these little tricks well—just as Bauer didn't want to take on the responsibility, Juárez as president didn't want to either.

Years ago, a default had provoked a French invasion, leading to the overthrow of their government. Juárez no longer had the courage to face such a situation again.

Both men tacitly ignored the reality that Austria wouldn't hand over Maximilian. When it came to foreign affairs, caution was always the best policy. As long as nothing happened, that was the best outcome.

...

In the Austrian embassy, Ambassador Kompten righteously declared, "The international community has not recognized you and you are not the legitimate government of Mexico. Therefore, you are not qualified to conduct diplomatic negotiations with Austria."

Before the negotiations had even begun, the Mexican representative, Felipe, was dumbfounded. Starting off with a challenge to legitimacy and a refusal to recognize the republican government left Felipe at a loss for how to respond.

There was no way around it—Mexico's foreign ministry was a makeshift operation that had never conducted formal diplomatic activities since its establishment, so they had no idea how to handle such matters.

Before Felipe could come up with a solution, he was thrown out. Kompten then invited ambassadors from various European countries for a meeting. Although they didn't reach any significant agreements, they did agree on one thing: refusing to recognize the Mexican republican government.

Monarchies refusing to recognize a republican government required no extra justification—it was political correctness.

Unless the Mexican government could offer some enticing benefits, they shouldn't expect to gain international recognition.

...

Leaves fell one by one to the ground, forming a "golden path." Stepping on it produced a crisp "crunch" that felt so comfortable, like walking on a cotton carpet. There wasn't a single different leaf. Each one was a golden leaf, leaving a lasting impression.

The corn had opened its mouth in a grin, the millet bent over with laughter, and the soybeans were rustling with joy in the wind...

Governor Hümmel, who was inspecting various regions, was still immersed in the joy of the harvest. He thought to himself, "Another bountiful year. It seems that the new railway project can be launched."

"Governor, here is a telegram from the embassy in Mexico for you to review."

An unexpected visitor interrupted Governor Hümmel's reverie. Without any hesitation, Hümmel quickly took the telegram and began reading it.

The smile that crept across his face betrayed his thoughts. This was obviously good news.

After reading the contents of the telegram, Governor Hümmel immediately issued orders, "Order the First, Second, and Third Divisions to cease field training and reach Puerto Barrios within a week!

Order the Caribbean Fleet to immediately cease all outings and standby in the port.

Order the logistics department to immediately allocate combat supplies for 50,000 men for three months and gather them at coastal cities along the Caribbean coast.

Order the foreign trade department to organize a fleet immediately..."

He issued over a dozen orders in rapid succession, all to be completed with haste. Clearly, they had made prior preparations. Otherwise, they couldn't have accomplished it so quickly.

Especially the colonial divisions, which were usually undermanned. Typically, they only maintained one-fifth to one-third of their personnel, keeping the structure of the army ready for rapid expansion in wartime.

Of course, regular conscription of reservists for training was essential. While other nations might not be accustomed to this regular training, for the Germans, it was routine.

This was how things were done back home, so naturally, the same could be applied in the Americas. After years of development, the population of the Austrian Central American colonies had surpassed 3.78 million, with white people making up two-fifths.

Of course, these numbers were somewhat inflated. Many newborn mixed-race children were also included. In this era, with less stringent oversight, as long as appearances didn't differ much, they could pass as such.

Of course, the desire of bureaucrats for achievements is also a major factor. If they weren't lenient, how else could the Austrian citizen birth rate in the Austrian Central American region be 7.8?

Globally, this birth rate is the highest, far exceeding the normal birth rate. Among Austria's many colonies, only Southeast Asia has a citizen birth rate that can match it.

This statistic is limited to those with Austrian nationality and other groups are not included. The Austrian government only cares about the birth rate of its own citizens.

Germans already make up 32% of the total population, and how this figure came to be is no longer important. The fact that Germans have become the largest ethnic group locally is undeniable.

Theoretically, the number of registered reservists in the Austrian Central American region is 210,000. This is the limit of mobilization, though it is only for imperial citizens.

Governor Hümmel does not believe that the local indigenous people will respond to the Empire's call, so they are naturally not included in the reserve forces.

Theory aside, the highest mobilization record of the Austrian Central American colonies was only 100,000. Any more would severely impact local production.

They couldn't afford to cripple their own economy with training, as they weren't going to war externally.

This figure far exceeds the mobilization level of normal agricultural countries, but it doesn't matter. The Austrian Central American region is an agricultural and mining economy, while the mother country, Austria, is an industrial nation.

The Austrian Central American colonies combined were essentially an agricultural province within an industrial country, so their mobilization capability would naturally be stronger than that of an agricultural country.

This military strength ranks among the top five on the American continent. Apart from the British, the United States, and the Confederate States of America, Governor Hümmel does not take other countries seriously.

This intervention in Mexico is an opportunity to showcase their capabilities. Perhaps Franz sees the safe return of his unfortunate brother Maximilian as the goal, but for the colonial officials eager to achieve something, not stirring things up would be unworthy of their identity as colonizers.

Governor Hümmel is no exception. In his view, this matter must be escalated. Otherwise, how could anyone achieve merit?

If not for this, he would have long ago sent troops to rescue Maximilian. After all, the Mexican Republican government doesn't want this troublemaker either.

Keeping Maximilian I in the Austrian embassy was intended to stir things up. Never underestimate the ability of revolutionaries to create trouble. There are always some overly clever hotheads.

As long as an armed conflict occurs, Governor Hümmel would have the excuse for military intervention. According to Austria's usual principles, it generally doesn't like to make enemies lightly, but once it does, it only aims to eliminate them.

However, Hümmel doesn't have the appetite to annex the Mexican Empire. Even if it could be swallowed, the strength of the Austrian Central American colonies alone couldn't digest it.

Moreover, other countries would intervene and wouldn't just watch Austria expand so recklessly.

How much can be bitten off now depends not only on strength but also on how big a fuss is caused. A reasonable excuse always yields the greatest benefits.

What Governor Hümmel most wants to see is the Mexican Republican government recklessly sending troops to besiege the Austrian embassy. At that point, if the two countries formally declare war, no one can accuse Austria of any wrongdoing.

Compared to achieving great deeds, Maximilian I's personal safety was of secondary importance. As long as he was still alive, Hümmel could still report back to His Majesty the Emperor. Enduring some hardship was entirely acceptable.

If anything unforeseen happens, as long as they do their best to rescue him, they can still manage. Others might not know the inside story, but as a senior government official, Governor Hümmel is well aware of the falling out between Maximilian I and his family.

Perhaps as his brother, the Emperor wants to help him, but there are undoubtedly many within the Habsburg family who would rather this unfortunate soul perish sooner rather than later.

Of course, this death must be natural, and he must not die at the hands of the Mexican rebels. Otherwise, for the sake of family honor, they would have to seek revenge on Mexico.

These are things that can only be understood, not openly discussed. As for Maximilian's safety, Hümmel was quite confident. In this era, those daring to commit regicide were still rare.

The lessons of the past were there as a warning. Those who chopped off the heads of Charles I and Louis XVI basically all met tragic ends, even dragging their families down with them. Anyone with a bit of political acumen knew the consequences.

While actively launching war preparations, Governor Hümmel reported the situation to the homeland and requested instructions from the Austrian government.

This was just a formality. Franz had no desire to control remotely, and it was naturally impossible for the Austrian government to do so. By convention, they authorized the colonial governor to act at his discretion.

Chapter 507: Sowing with Care, Yet No Flowers Bloom (Bonus Chapter)

After the storm, Mexico City faced a period of chaos and violence. The Republican government forces, upon entering the city, immediately began arresting people without rest.

That night, Mexico City wept as countless remnants of Maximilian's government were captured. The truth no longer mattered. Revolutions demand blood, and how can authority be established without shedding blood?

President Juárez quietly observed these events unfold. It wasn't that he didn't want to put a stop to it, but rather that he simply couldn't.

The Republican government was a product of alliances and compromises among various factions, and these groups weren't something he, as president, could easily control.

To many, the chaos within the city seemed a bigger issue than the trouble posed by Maximilian himself.

The rebel army had no regular salaries. The officers and soldiers relied on loot for income. Now that the battle was over, how could the army be disbanded without letting them profit from their victory?

The notion of Maximilian's supporters was laughable. If he truly had any significant support, the rebels wouldn't have been able to capture Mexico City without resistance.

That night, the citizens of Mexico City experienced heaven and hell. The long-awaited Republican army had arrived, but instead of bringing renewal, it brought turmoil and violence.

The purge continued for over a week, affecting one-third of Mexico City's population. As even the families of the Republican army began to suffer, President Juárez reluctantly intervened to stop the chaos.

The newly established Republican government lost public support almost immediately. This violence intensified internal conflicts within the government and planted the seeds for future civil war.

President Juárez couldn't dwell on these issues, as he faced two major challenges:

First, what to do with Maximilian, who was hiding in the Austrian embassy?

Second, how to appease the many factions within the Republican government now that the civil war was over?

The second issue was the most difficult to handle. During the struggle for power, everyone united with a common goal. But now, with victory in sight, factions began to compete for their share of power.

Most of the high-ranking positions in the Republican government were held by Juárez's rebel forces. During the civil war, when the future was uncertain, everyone focused on the military. Few paid attention to the vacant government departments.

Now, everyone is demanding positions, trying to gain more influence in the new government. No one is willing to compromise when it comes to their interests.

President Juárez was in a difficult position. On a personal level, he didn't want to give up these positions. If these positions went to other factions, his control over the government would be hard to maintain.

Of course, it was impossible to have everything to oneself. Even if you wanted to monopolize power, you still had to see if others with guns would agree. Mishandling this could lead to a new civil war.

Compromise wasn't easy either. The Mexican Republican government was already fragmented with various factions, and it was impossible to distribute power in a way that everyone would agree on.

These issues couldn't be resolved overnight. In the original timeline, President Juárez couldn't solve these problems, which eventually led to the Mexican Civil War.

The immediate challenge was still Maximilian I. As long as the emperor remained in Mexico City, he posed a significant threat to them.

As long as Maximilian I didn't abdicate, he remained the legitimate emperor of Mexico, and the Republican government couldn't achieve legitimacy.

President Juárez had already communicated with the envoys of various countries, and unsurprisingly, they still recognized Maximilian I's government as the legitimate government of Mexico.

Domestically, Juárez could use force to assert his position, but when it came to foreign affairs, he was at a loss.

The urgent task was to remove Maximilian I from the throne, gain recognition from other countries as the legitimate government, and then secure international loans to overcome the financial crisis.

Indeed, the newly-born Mexican Republican government was already facing a financial crisis. This was the huge pit left by Maximilian I.

Mexico's tariffs were still in the hands of foreign powers, and after Maximilian I's downfall, these revenues were withheld.

Furthermore, the debts incurred previously still had to be honored by the Mexican Republican government. President Juárez was prepared to default, but he couldn't act rashly until the situation stabilized.

All these issues are nothing compared to the main problem: the total strength of the insurgent army reached 200,000, and now that the war is over, they need to be disbanded.

They can't just be dismissed without any recognition. These soldiers shed blood for the revolution, and now that the revolution has succeeded, they can't be left empty-handed.

The troops who profited in Mexico City were better off since they had some money in their pockets. But what about the rebel armies scattered across the country who hadn't received their rewards yet?

There were many hands reaching out for money, but President Juárez was also penniless. Taxes couldn't be collected, and government revenue was almost zero.

They had originally hoped to seize funds from Maximilian's government, but unfortunately, the Maximilian administration had been surviving on loans. There was money, but it was all in the banks of the great powers.

Since the Republican government hadn't achieved legitimacy, these banks naturally wouldn't release the funds to them. Even with legitimacy, the chances of obtaining the money were slim.

Without cooperation from the previous government, they didn't even know how much money there was. If the banks didn't try to swindle them out of it, they wouldn't be bankers, would they?

Seeing the dejected foreign minister, President Juárez asked with concern, "Is the Austrian embassy still refusing to hand him over?"

The foreign minister replied with embarrassment, "Yes, Mr. President. The Austrians have taken a very harsh stance and even warned our people to withdraw immediately, or they would take extreme measures."

President Juárez wasn't surprised as this was what was normal. The great powers of this era were indeed aggressive, arguing even when they were in the wrong. If they were in the right, there was nothing more to say—they would just roll up their sleeves and fight!

"Order a halt to any business dealings with them, cut off their food and water supply, and see how long they can hold out!" President Juárez said fiercely. This was the toughest measure he could employ at the moment. More aggressive actions were possible, but the consequences would be too severe.

...

Cutting off the water supply was a joke. Most of Mexico City relied on groundwater, and even in the 21st century, there were more than 5,000 wells. The Austrian embassy itself had a well, so unless the Mexicans dared to break in and sabotage it, they couldn't cut off the water.

Cutting off food was also easily solved, as the embassy had reserves that could last one to two months.

Even though it wasn't very effective, Ambassador Kompten had gone early to protest. Water and staple food weren't a problem, but fruits, vegetables, and meat still needed to be replenished.

After all, Maximilian I was still the Emperor of Mexico, and he couldn't be deprived of the treatment he deserved. They couldn't let him gnaw on bread every day, could they?

Of course, food wasn't a significant problem. Maximilian I was an idealist, and enduring hardship with his subordinates wasn't too big of an issue for him.

Ambassador Kompten was so proactive mainly because he hadn't found a pretext for intervention, and the Austrian government cared about its image and had to mind its manners.

If the Mexican Republican government were to open the way and allow them to take Maximilian I away, then this intervention would end without incident.

Being an ambassador in a small country wasn't easy since there were few opportunities to make a name for oneself. Before Maximilian's ascension, Austria only had a liaison office in Mexico and did not have a prestigious position like that of an ambassador.

The upgrade in diplomatic relations wasn't because Franz valued relations with Mexico, but rather to provide political support to Maximilian I.

Kompten rose to his position thanks to this opportunity. If he missed this chance and couldn't achieve outstanding accomplishments, the position of ambassador to Mexico would be the peak of his political career.

His frequent visits now were to create incidents. In recent days, Kompten had conflicts with several military and political figures of the republican government.

Unfortunately, these individuals were too timid. No matter how much he provoked them verbally, they only responded with smiles, leaving him frustrated.

What he most hoped for was that a hot-headed official from the Republican government would suddenly emerge, get riled up by a few words, and foolishly declare war on Austria, giving him the perfect pretext to agree.

Such good fortune was unlikely to occur. With the intense infighting within the Mexican Republican government, a reckless official could never rise to the top. Those in high positions were all cunning foxes.

There were indeed plenty of impulsive individuals at the lower levels of the Republican government, but unfortunately, they lacked the status to represent the government. Moreover, they were not to be underestimated, as they might resort to underhanded tactics.

In that case, there would be a pretext for war, but he would also be dragged into it. Ambassador Kompten hadn't had enough of life yet and didn't want to sacrifice himself for the country so early.

Returning once again without success, Ambassador Kompten asked, "His Majesty hasn't complained, has he?"

Feeding the emperor bread, potatoes, and corn every day, without any vegetables, fruit, or meat was practically mistreatment, and Kompten was somewhat worried that Maximilian might not tolerate it.

The secretary replied, "Better than expected. His Majesty even requested the same meals as the soldiers, refusing any special treatment."

Ambassador Kompten nodded. In recent days, the embassy staff has been enduring hardships. As an ambassador, Kompten had it easier since he often attended banquets and events, allowing him to enjoy better meals.

No matter how chaotic Mexico City was, the various embassies and expatriate areas still maintained a life of luxury and pleasure. The Republican government troops didn't harm these places at all.

Although the Austrian embassy was surrounded, there wasn't a single visible weapon. President Juárez was afraid of accidental gunfire, so he ordered the soldiers assigned to the blockade to remain unarmed.

After all, the city was full of his supporters, and there was no fear of Maximilian I escaping. The primary purpose of the blockade was to exert pressure rather than to launch an actual attack.

Otherwise, Ambassador Kompten would have long since fired shots to provoke conflict. Once a firefight broke out, the responsibility would have to fall on the Mexican Republican government.

Now that they weren't even carrying guns, even if he wanted to cause trouble, Ambassador Kompten had no way to do it. Taking the initiative to provoke incidents and passively responding were two different concepts.

The embassies of various countries were nearby, and if anyone saw it, Austria's reputation would be at stake. Compared to national prestige, personal ambition had to take a back seat.

"In that case, there's no need to be so tense. If any guards want to go home, they can take turns doing so. If there are any issues, the embassy will try to help them resolve them."

Ambassador Kompten had confidence in saying this. Governor Hümmel's army was about to set off, and if there was no valid excuse, they would simply take Maximilian I away.

The Austrian government wasn't very interested in Mexico. If there was a reason to intervene, they might take advantage of the situation. If not, so be it, as this wasn't a strategic priority.

Power was the best backing. Merely cutting off water and food, if the Mexican government couldn't provide a reasonable explanation, they would have to face the consequences.

Of course, this was just a minor issue that could be resolved with an apology and some compensation.

If the Mexican government cooperated and didn't obstruct Austria from taking Maximilian I, none of this would be necessary, effectively offsetting the unauthorized entry of Austrian troops.

Among the great powers, Austria was known for being reasonable in foreign affairs. When in the wrong, they rarely acted aggressively. However, when they were in the right, that was a different story.

Chapter 508: Unintended Kindness Yields Unexpected Benefits

At the Vienna Palace, ever since the news of Mexico City's fall arrived, Franz has been dealing with troubles.

Although Maximilian I was not well-regarded within the Habsburg family, this did not include Archduchess Sophie and Archduke Karl.

Maximilian might not have been a good emperor, but he was a good son. During his time in Vienna, he behaved well and was much loved by the two of them.

Upon hearing about the troubles in Mexico, they came to inquire about the situation. Despite Franz's repeated assurances that Maximilian was safe and currently at the Austrian embassy, they remained uneasy.

Now, every telegram related to Austrian Central America had to be personally reviewed by Archduchess Sophie, and she even sent a telegram to Governor Hümmel in her name.

This made Franz quite annoyed, but given the circumstances, he couldn't say much. Parents' deep love for their children can sometimes lead them to do unreasonable things.

To have a few peaceful days, Franz unhesitatingly chose to tour the country. Of course, this was limited to mainland Europe, as Asia, Africa, and America were too far, and long-distance travel in this era still posed risks.

Just as Franz departed, Alexandrovich's European tour reached its final stop in Vienna.

The long-awaited opening of the Imperial Palace suite at the Austrian Grand Hotel had finally happened. It wasn't easy, considering that since its completion, it had hosted fewer than ten guests and sometimes didn't open even once a year.

In fact, whether it opened or not didn't make much difference, as room fees weren't collected anyway. Traditionally, when royals visit each other, the host is responsible for all arrangements.

Of course, Franz still hoped for more visitors to stay, as this was also a form of advertising. This is how the Austrian Grand Hotel's status was elevated, claiming to be the world's premier hotel.

Despite being far from recouping the investment, the hotel's performance growth rate remained impressive. From its opening until now, annual revenue has tripled and continues to grow at a rate of 30-40% each year.

The Imperial Palace suite was originally built to palace specifications, with luxury beyond description, and its garden landscapes were uniquely stunning.

However, the newly arrived Crown Prince Alexandrovich showed no interest in these beautiful sights, overwhelmed with deep sorrow.

Franz's reason for traveling naturally didn't need to be explained to the outside world, so Alexandrovich mistakenly assumed that Franz didn't want to meet him.

Every action of the emperor carries political significance. Franz's unwillingness to meet him signaled that the Austro-Russian alliance had reached its end. For Alexandrovich, this was terrible news.

It meant that his European tour was a failure. Although relations with various European countries had been eased, it couldn't offset the impact of the Austro-Russian alliance's collapse.

With the emperor absent, Crown Prince Alexandrovich also lost interest in upcoming diplomatic meetings. After tentatively proposing a loan, which was rejected by the Austrian government, negotiations ended.

A wonderful misunderstanding led to a wasted opportunity for high-level contact between Russia and Austria, which could have resolved their conflicts.

When Franz's daily records were declassified a century later, this misunderstanding was revealed and listed by historians as the 19th century's biggest "political blunder," sparking renewed debates in the academic world.

Franz, who was inspecting Württemberg, naturally didn't think much about it. He couldn't possibly turn back to Vienna just because of Alexandrovich's visit. That would be undignified. It would be a different story if Alexander II himself had come.

A crown prince meeting a crown prince is perfectly appropriate, and Franz left his son in Vienna. Even if he was a bit young, he was still the Austrian crown prince, of equal standing, fully capable of handling the reception.

For discussions, Austria's Foreign Ministry was available. With the advent of telegraphs, Franz didn't need to travel with government officials.

Purely in terms of distance, Württemberg wasn't far from Vienna. With Austria's developed transportation, it was possible to leave in the morning and arrive by evening.

Not only is Württemberg relatively close, but all of Austria's European territories are not far from each other. Even the most distant, Cyprus Island, is only a little over a thousand kilometers from Vienna.

With such a short distance, it is theoretically possible to reach within three days. Of course, this is only in theory. Under normal circumstances, using ordinary transportation would take about ten days.

Franz's national tour definitely does not include islands like Cyprus for a simple reason—seasickness.

Traveling by special train, it takes no more than three days to reach any major city in Austria from Vienna.

This is why Franz could embark on an impromptu journey, knowing he could return to Vienna promptly if needed.

As it turned out, the youthful Alexandrovich could not withstand the wait. After a week in Vienna without seeing Franz return, he decided to head back home.

No one could have predicted that this seemingly inconspicuous European visit by Alexandrovich would mark the beginning of the Austro-Russian alliance's collapse.

A simple misunderstanding led the Russians to believe that the Austrian government had decided to abandon the Austro-Russian alliance, prompting the Russian government to lean towards the British.

But that was all in the future. Franz's so-called inspection was actually more about sightseeing and leisure.

If it were a genuine inspection, he wouldn't start with these smaller states. Despite being the Holy Roman Emperor, he has limited say in the economic development of the individual states.

Such were the unspoken rules. Franz didn't interfere in matters that weren't his concern. As long as he was assured that the economic development of the various states was going well, that was enough for him.

As an emperor, ensuring national peace and prosperity was enough to secure his position. Ambitious individuals were always a minority, and in peacetime, these people were at most just all talk.

Compared to other European countries, the German region remains relatively conservative, with Austria being a stronghold of conservatism. Many new ideas originate here but fail to flourish.

The main reason Paris became the beacon of the free world and the holy land of revolution was that Parisians were more receptive to new ideas, with emotion often overriding reason.

If one were to study history, one would find that France had become the battleground for European thinkers, with Paris being the first testing ground for any theory or ideology.

...

In Mexico City, upon receiving the notice of leave from Ambassador Kompten, the soldiers who had been eating bread for days let out a cheer.

The Mexican government had the power to prevent its citizens from doing business with the Austrian embassy, but not the courage to obstruct the movement of Austrian embassy personnel.

Groups of two or three 'Austrian soldiers' appeared on the streets of Mexico, and these men knew the area well. Even if they weren't locals, they had lived there for many years.

When they were following Maximilian I, they had picked up quite a few bad habits. In the Austrian embassy, they naturally didn't dare to be unruly, but now that they were out, they had no reservations.

Of course, this doesn't mean they were entirely without morals. In fact, under Maximilian I's restraint, these guards were generally decent, albeit a bit hot-tempered.

As part of the first group to take leave, Captain Mikkell and a few colleagues immediately decided to improve their meals, having had enough of eating bread continuously.

...

With a loud "bang," a palm slammed heavily on the table. Captain Mikkell roared, "What do you mean, you won't sell to us? Why not? I'm not refusing to pay!"

The restaurant staff stammered through an explanation, but this only fueled Captain Mikkell and his companions' anger rather than easing it.

This anger wasn't directed at the waiter, but mainly at the Mexican Republican government. Unfortunately, he was in front of them and was caught in the crossfire.

Captain Mikkell had recommended this restaurant, and now it was making him lose face. He lifted his gun and sneered, "Cut the crap and get me my steak."

With a gun to his head, the server didn't dare refuse and quickly nodded in agreement.

This action clearly angered the other patrons, and a few young men in military uniforms came over to argue. They appeared to be about 17 or 18 years old, just the age when one fears nothing.

"You bunch of scoundrels, how can you force people to sell? If they don't want to do business with you, that's their right!"

The words “scoundrels” and “right” completely infuriated Captain Mikkel. They were staunch royalists, and the fact that they didn’t betray Maximilian I at the last moment was proof of their stance. They despised liberalism.

Compared to reasoning, they preferred using their fists. Without hesitation, Captain Mikkel and his companions immediately resorted to violence. Soon, the young men who had stood up to them were left on the ground groaning in pain.

With the fight over, no one bothered Captain Mikkel and his companions as they ate. As for the agents from the Mexican Republican government sent to follow them, they pretended to see nothing from start to finish.

As long as there’s no major trouble, it’s best not to bother the higher-ups with these minor issues. When it comes to foreign soldiers, even if they commit crimes, their superiors also don’t have the authority to deal with them.

Handling it well brings no credit, but mishandling it could make someone a scapegoat. As a country transitioning to a semi-colonial society, it’s hard for the Mexican Republican government not to be timid.

If it were just this, the matter would pass. Daily clashes in Mexico City with foreign powers are numerous, usually resulting in Mexicans getting the short end of the stick.

It’s just that the protagonists this time are different. Regardless of what these soldiers were before, now that they’re wearing Austrian uniforms, they are Austrian soldiers, and the Mexican government can’t do anything to them.

However, the young men who suffered didn’t agree to let it go. After leaving with injuries, they didn’t want to just let it slide. Instead, they thought about revenge.

“Koller, we can’t just let this go. If we don’t retaliate, these bastards will only become more arrogant!”

Koller responded, “Kend, what do you plan to do?”

Wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth, Kend sneered, “Of course, it’s...” He made a throat-cutting gesture, and their conversation came to an abrupt halt.

Despite their youth, they’ve been baptized through blood and fire and are members of the radical faction within the Mexican Republican government.

After a pause, Koller slowly said, “We must be cautious with this, not leaving any traces, and it would be best to frame...”

...

Captain Mikkel and his companions, still wandering outside, were unaware that they had been targeted. They were looking for entertainment everywhere.

There were many soldiers in the embassy, and they had to take turns resting. Leave was hard to come by, and if they missed this opportunity, they’d have to wait until next month.

Around midnight, already quite drunk, they were supporting each other as they headed back. It wasn’t that they didn’t want to stay out, but their wallets couldn’t handle it.

With such a small military salary, they couldn't afford to squander it. Occasional indulgence was fine, but they weren't in a position to live a life of debauchery.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

Gunshots rang out, and the group instantly sobered up, immediately dropping to the ground and returning fire in the darkness.

Thanks to the tense situation, the Mexican Republican government had increased its vigilance, and the gunfire attracted the attention of patrolling police.

Captain Mikkel escaped by the skin of his teeth, but his companions weren't so lucky. Of the eight men who had gone out, three were dead and two were wounded.

This was just the beginning of the conflict. Several other soldiers returning home suddenly found their residences occupied by new owners, leading to more fierce confrontations.

In just one day, these soldiers on leave caused over a dozen shootings in Mexico City, resulting in dozens of casualties.

Ambassador Kompten was pleased rather than angry upon receiving the news. He no longer had to worry about lacking a pretext for intervention. With so many shootings, the Mexican Republican government had to provide Austria with an explanation.

As for the deceased, Ambassador Kompten could only regretfully express the need to seek justice for them. After all, these people had been issued Austrian citizenship by him.

Especially concerning the matter of homes changing owners—these were “Austrian citizens” whose properties had been forcibly taken. This matter could not simply be brushed aside.

Ambassador Kompten was a clever man. Since the Austrian army had not yet arrived, it was not the right time to provoke the Mexican government. If they were pushed too far and decided to retaliate in a last-ditch effort, it could end disastrously.

In his view, finding an excuse to intervene and then politically blackmail the Mexican Republican government under the threat of military force was the best course of action.

If the army were to outright crush Mexico, what role would diplomats like him have?

To avoid excessively provoking the Mexican Republican government, Ambassador Kompten initially downplayed the situation, focusing solely on the shootings and demanding that the Mexican government hand over the perpetrators.

The matter of ordinary Austrian citizens' properties being seized and even the horrific massacres that wiped out entire families was temporarily not pursued. In fact, the Mexican government was entirely unaware that these people had become Austrian citizens.

Originally, Ambassador Kompten had hesitated about granting these soldiers' families Austrian citizenship, as many did not meet the standards.

Now, there was no need to hesitate—they must be Austrian citizens. Even their relatives who perished during the purges could become Austrian citizens.

The greater the number of casualties and the more significant the property loss, the stronger the justification for demanding compensation in the future.

Chapter 509: Pig Teammates That Can't Be Carried

After a long wait, finally, a pretext for intervention arrived. Without any hesitation, Governor Hümmel immediately ordered troops to march into Mexico, under the pretext of “investigating the deaths of Austrian soldiers.”

Deploying tens of thousands of troops to investigate a case predetermined the outcome from the start. The final answer would undoubtedly align with Austria’s desires, something Governor Hümmel was absolutely confident about.

When the news of “Austrian troops have been deployed” reached Mexico City, the Austrian army had already landed in Veracruz.

The Mexican Republican government was thrown into chaos—should they resist or not? This was a question worth pondering.

Radical leader Barsky, filled with righteous indignation, said, “Mr. President, Austria has gone too far, blatantly trampling on our sovereignty. We absolutely cannot let this slide.

I suggest we immediately disarm the Austrian embassy and take them hostage. Meanwhile, order the troops along the route to intercept the Austrian army, delay their advance, and gather our national forces to fight them to the death.”

Vice President Anakin immediately countered, “Barsky, you’re a reckless fool. If we do this, there will be no room for negotiation. Going to war with Austria at this time leaves us with no chance of winning. You’re leading Mexico to destruction!”

Conservative leader Kristaniel spoke up, “You can’t say that, Vice President Anakin. Barsky has a point. The Austrians have already come knocking. Do you really believe these tens of thousands of Austrian troops are here for a sightseeing tour? What kind of investigation requires such a large force?

It’s clear the Austrians have ulterior motives, and if we don’t send troops to intercept them, it won’t be long before they’re at Mexico City’s doorstep.

I understand that fighting the Austrians won’t be easy and will surely result in heavy losses. But we can’t ignore national interests just to preserve our strength, can we?”

Archbishop Luranka agreed, saying, “That’s right, we must show the Austrians some strength and let them know what we’re capable of. Mr. President, give the order! If we delay any longer, the enemy will soon be at the gates of Mexico City. We cannot abandon the capital again and allow Maximilian I to restore his rule!”

...

The rising calls for war have put President Juárez under increasing pressure.

Under normal circumstances, most would oppose going to war with Austria. But this time is different—Mexico’s Republican government is locked in an intense internal struggle.

Currently, President Juárez and his Republican faction hold the upper hand. Their armed forces are the strongest, and the areas around Mexico City are firmly under their control.

If war with Austria breaks out, the Republicans will bear the brunt of it. Other political forces, unwilling to lose out in the power struggle, naturally wouldn't miss this opportunity to use the Austrians as a weapon against their rivals.

To many, the threat from Austria is insignificant, incapable of affecting their core interests. On the contrary, it's the Republicans who pose a real threat to their survival.

When Emperor Maximilian I was overthrown, the Conservatives, Constitutionals, Catholics, Republicans, and Radicals all united for the cause. But when it came time to divide the spoils of power, they went their separate ways.

During President Juárez's previous term, the reform programs he implemented already alienated the Catholic Church and Conservatives. With their interests harmed, they backed the Constitutionals and even allied with the French, bringing Emperor Maximilian I from Europe.

But to their surprise, the emperor they supported turned out to be an idealist, enacting reforms even more radical than Juárez's. In the end, when they could no longer tolerate it, they revolted and toppled Maximilian's rule.

Now that the Republicans are in power, the Conservatives and the Catholic Church, to protect their own interests, are determined to oust President Juárez. This is a life-and-death struggle, with no room for compromise.

The Republicans' military advantage is not overwhelming. Their ability to keep other factions in check mainly stems from their early capture of Mexico City, giving Juárez the legitimacy of being the president.

In peacetime, this is an advantage, but now, with Austria at their doorstep, it has become a disadvantage.

If they don't resist, they'll be labeled as traitors, but if they do, they'll deplete their valuable forces. Winning the war would be fine as they could use the prestige to compensate for their lack of strength, and holding onto power wouldn't be too difficult.

But if they lose, the Republican faction is finished. A defeated government has no right to continue ruling. It's inevitable that a new political faction will take over.

Aside from the Radicals, who are genuinely patriotic, the rest have turned into warmongers solely to fulfill their political ambitions.

Seeing that the Republicans were outnumbered, Juárez slammed the table and shouted in anger, "Enough! This is not a marketplace. You all want war? Fine, I'll lead the troops myself, and we'll form a suicide squad together.

In this war, where the odds are heavily against us, if we're going to die, let us old folks do it. No need for the young men to sacrifice their lives in vain.

Anyone who wants to fight, sign up with me. Otherwise, shut up. We're here to discuss strategies, not to watch you put on a disgusting show!"

The faces of the crowd changed drastically. They were fine with sending others to die, but they weren't ready to go to the front lines themselves—they hadn't lived long enough for that!

No one doubted Juárez's words as he was known to be ruthless. Becoming the President of Mexico as an indigenous man wasn't achieved through mere words but through blood and steel.

Those who knew Juárez were well aware that his background wasn't privileged. He lost his parents at the age of three and was raised by his uncle.

In his early years, he even worked as a servant. From a servant to the president, he achieved a reversal of fortune, but only by stepping over countless corpses along the way.

Moreover, President Juárez was already in his sixties, which was considered old age in this era. He had been injured in his youth, and his health was already in poor condition.

Given that his days are numbered, it's not out of the question that President Juárez might drag everyone down with him.

The atmosphere in the room suddenly became awkward. After a long pause, the Foreign Minister broke the silence.

"The Austrians expanding in Mexico is not something everyone wants to see. We can invite Britain and France to intervene and mediate. The Austrian government's colonial focus is on Africa, not the Americas. They haven't made any moves toward Mexico for years.

Since Austria hasn't sent more troops to the Americas, we can preliminarily conclude that the Austrian government isn't planning to go to war with us. The Austrian deployment is likely at Franz's behest, intending to retrieve Maximilian I. Recently, the Austrian envoy even negotiated with us on this matter.

If Maximilian I hadn't refused to abdicate, we would have let him go long ago. This shooting incident was just an accident, providing the Austrians with an excuse. The Austrian Governor-General in Central America is likely acting on his own, seizing this opportunity to make political demands.

As long as we handle this properly and don't give the Austrians any leverage, and then invite Britain and France to mediate, this matter can still be resolved peacefully."

It must be said that the Mexican Foreign Ministry had done its homework. They had mostly guessed the truth—the Austrian government hadn't issued any expansion orders, though they hadn't prohibited the colonial government from expanding either.

The countries they selected for mediation were carefully chosen. The great powers don't engage in charity. If you want them to mediate, you need to offer them something in return. Otherwise, why would they support you?

In this situation, it's not a case of the more mediating countries, the better. Paying a high price to bring in small countries without any real influence would be a waste of resources, yielding no results.

There are five countries, besides Austria, with influence in Mexico. Apart from Britain and France, there's also Spain, the United States, and the Confederate States of America.

Spain is mired in internal strife and doesn't have the energy to get involved in these issues. While the United States and the Confederate States are close by, they pose a significant threat to Mexico, and there's a deep-seated enmity between them.

Inviting them to mediate would be like walking into a lion's den. The Mexican Republican government remains highly cautious of these two troublesome neighbors.

With all those options ruled out, only Britain and France remain. Even though their relationship with the French isn't great, they're still creditors, and if Austria expands its influence in Mexico, how will they get their money back?

Radical leader Barsky questioned, "Britain, France, and Austria are allies. If we let the British and French envoys intervene, will they really side with us?"

Foreign Minister Epte explained, "It's true that Britain, France, and Austria are allies, but their relationship isn't as harmonious as it seems.

The recent Anglo-Boer War was a power struggle between Britain and Austria over Africa. Before that, there were disputes over the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal.

In short, there are many points of conflict among Britain, France, and Austria. Even if they've formed an alliance, their international stances aren't always aligned.

When it comes to diplomacy, the Austrian Governor-General in Central America doesn't have the capacity to manage Anglo-French relations. Unless the Austrian government steps in and engages in high-level talks with Britain and France, the British and French envoys are likely to side with us."

After a brief pause, Epte added cautiously, "Of course, the prerequisite for British and French support is that we must be in the right. If the Austrians find any leverage against us, the two countries won't go against Austria on our behalf."

The rules of the great powers are simple: reason with the strong, and use force against the weak.

President Juárez nodded in agreement—this was the right way to handle the situation. Those who constantly call for war are clearly just causing trouble.

If they had a chance of winning, President Juárez would love to stand firm. But the reality is that the power gap between them and Austria is too vast—they simply can't win.

President Juárez sternly warned, "I believe you all understand the seriousness of the situation. Resolve the shooting incident quickly, and don't leave any leverage for the Austrians.

If anyone deliberately stirs up trouble over this issue, they are committing treason, and such traitors will be executed without mercy!"

With a bunch of pig teammates, President Juárez felt very tired. Deep in his heart, he had an ominous feeling that something big was about to happen. But his exhausted body prevented him from thinking further. Time takes its toll, and just this one meeting, where he had to suppress the various factions, left Juárez feeling drained.

Political struggles were too complex, offering him no peace even for a moment. The real culprit behind the shooting had yet to be caught, casting a shadow over the entire incident.

If a traditional Chinese doctor were to see Juárez, they would conclude that he was at the end of his rope. Now he was only supported by one last breath. Once that breath was gone, his life would come to an end.

Chapter 510: June's Debt

Human nature is complex. On the surface, President Juárez appeared to have subdued all opposing factions, but beneath that calm facade, the situation in Mexico City was turbulent.

After the shooting incident, the blockade around the Austrian embassy was lifted. Previously, supplies were prohibited from entering. Now, the Mexican government was actively delivering them to the embassy.

There was no other choice—President Juárez was genuinely frightened. Just a few Austrian soldiers roaming around had already caused so much trouble. If they were allowed to wander freely every day, who knows how much more chaos would ensue?

If a few more people died, even if the shooting had nothing to do with them, the Republican government wouldn't be able to escape blame. Juárez had already experienced the tyranny of the great powers.

Ten years ago, when the Mexican government was on the verge of bankruptcy, Juárez announced a two-year suspension of foreign debt payments, hoping to negotiate with the creditors.

The result was a brutal lesson—Mexico's Republican government was forced to go underground, and only ten years later did Juárez return to Mexico City.

How many decades does one have in life? If not for those lost ten years, perhaps Juárez's social reforms would have succeeded by now.

It's only after losing something that one learns to cherish it. It's only after firsthand experience that one gets to know fear.

Now, apart from the youthful idealists, everyone in the Republican government feared the great powers. Juárez might not publicly acknowledge the debt left by Maximilian I, but in reality, he was obediently paying it back.

To placate the Radicals, he kept saying that "once the situation stabilizes, we will stop repaying the debt," but in truth, it was just empty talk.

The French feared that with the fall of Maximilian I, these debts would go unpaid. In reality, President Juárez and the Republican government had already caved in—they didn't dare to truly default on the loans.

The so-called toughness was nothing more than political posturing. In practice, they were very honest, scrambling to pay off the foreign debt by any means necessary.

Without any military resistance, Governor Hümmel's march was swift, reaching Mexico City in less than a week.

President Juárez's measures weren't entirely ineffective. Austria still cared about its reputation. Since war hadn't broken out, Governor Hümmel's forces had no excuse to attack the city and set up camp outside instead.

The “shooting incident” was handled strictly within the judicial process, with all the foreign envoys as witnesses, waiting for the Mexican government to present evidence and close the case.

Everything seemed to be moving in a positive direction, but just then, Ambassador Kompten’s grand scheme unfolded. Hundreds of “Austrian citizens” came forward to protest, armed with evidence.

There was no doubt that these were the families or close friends of the soldiers. In the week before the Republican Army entered the city, their property had suffered significant damage, and some had even lost their lives.

Under normal circumstances, these ordinary people would have had no choice but to accept their fate. But this time was different. With Ambassador Kompten secretly orchestrating things, they suddenly found their courage.

With extraterritorial rights on their side, they became fearless. They started emulating the way foreign citizens had treated the Mexican government.

Moments earlier, Ambassador Kompten had been all smiles, but now his expression changed as he sternly rebuked, “Mr. President, your country’s army has disregarded international law and acted recklessly, endangering the lives and property of Austrian citizens. I am now delivering a formal diplomatic note on behalf of the Austrian government. Your government is ordered to hand over the individuals responsible within 24 hours to face legal consequences and to compensate our citizens for their losses!”

This pretext was somewhat flimsy, and everyone knew what was really going on. However, these people had indeed obtained Austrian citizenship.

Legally speaking, as long as these individuals became Austrian citizens before the Republican Army’s actions, they were under Austria’s protection.

There was no doubt that their citizenship had been granted before then. Ambassador Kompten wouldn’t make such a mistake—the documents would show they had become citizens before the Republican Army entered the city.

Whether or not the procedure was followed correctly was an internal Austrian matter, and outsiders had no say in it.

President Juárez’s face turned pale. Most issues could be negotiated, but “handing over the individuals responsible” was utterly impossible. If they handed people over, the army would surely revolt.

Moreover, even if these individuals were guilty, they should face Mexican justice—how could they allow Austrians to try them?

Hoping for British and French mediation was futile. When the British and French envoys saw the evidence provided by the Austrians, they began to mentally check out.

It wasn’t that they didn’t want to help, but the evidence was right there. The Austrians had written documents proving these were Austrian citizens, and there were photographs taken by photographers showing the atrocities committed by the Mexican Republican Army.

Even though Britain, France, and Austria were allies only in name, with Austria clearly in the right, they couldn't support the Mexican Republican government.

President Juárez knew that the Austrians were making trouble at this time, putting forward these conditions to deliberately make things difficult for them, and it was definitely not just to stand up for these "citizens."

Without understanding the Austrians' true intentions, it would be difficult to solve the problem. At this point, Austrian troops were already at the gates, and it was too late to resist.

The only small comfort was that the Austrians were still mindful of the international repercussions, refraining from outright aggression. This indicated that there might still be room for negotiation.

In this era, the great powers had a common characteristic: when reasoning couldn't achieve their goals, they would choose to speak with cannons.

The role of intermediary fell to the British Ambassador, Edward. The British were particularly skilled in such matters, having had a hand in over half of the world's international conflicts during this time.

...

That evening, British Ambassador Edward made his way to the Austrian embassy.

Setting down his coffee, Edward asked politely, "Sir Kompten, the British government is closely monitoring your country's actions in Mexico. We are allies, and if you need assistance, don't hesitate to ask. But what exactly do you want to achieve?"

The British offer of "assistance" was less of a helping hand and more of a warning. Austria hadn't planned on relying on British support for its overseas expansion, and Franz was wary of taking on a debt he couldn't repay.

Ambassador Kompten understood the underlying message perfectly. Emphasizing "allies" was just a reminder not to harm British interests. And offering "assistance" was a warning not to push too far.

Taking a small sip of his coffee, Ambassador Kompten replied calmly, "The spread of the wicked Republican ideology must be curbed. If we don't teach the Mexicans a lesson, wouldn't this ideology become more rampant? Should it spread to the European continent, it would be a problem for us all."

This explanation did not satisfy Edward. Since when had the Austrian government become so committed to internationalism?

Since Franz's reign, he initially let the Russian Empire do as it pleased, then stabbed France in the back. From any perspective, this doesn't align with what one would expect from a responsible European power.

Edward was convinced of Austria's campaign against republican ideals. The Austrian Emperor, as a linchpin of monarchical regimes, held sway equal to, if not greater than, the Tsar.

However, Austria had reformed early on, completing its social reforms, which led to a stable and well-developed society.

On the issue of combating Republican ideology, monarchist states shared a common stance—this was a battle for ideological dominance, and none of them were willing to give up easily.

Edward asked uncertainly, “Sir Kompten, does this mean that your country intends to restore Emperor Maximilian I to the throne?”

From the perspective of interests, such a move wouldn’t align with Austria’s interests—the cost of restoring Maximilian I would be too high.

However, in a country like Austria, where the power of the monarchy was strong, decisions weren’t always based solely on interests. The Emperor’s will could also shape the nation’s course.

Although Maximilian I was not particularly capable, he was Franz’s younger brother, and that alone might be enough for Franz to make a significant investment.

Similar situations have occurred multiple times in European history. Edward was unsure whether Austria would take such a step, as Franz had cultivated an image that was almost too perfect.

Ambassador Kompten shook his head and replied, “If we could restore His Majesty Maximilian I to the throne, that would indeed be ideal. However, due to certain special circumstances, none of the major factions within Mexico are particularly welcoming of His Majesty at this time.

Our conditions are simple. The Mexican government has three options: First, continue to recognize Maximilian I as Emperor, in which case these minor issues need not be discussed further, and a constitutional monarchy would be acceptable.

Second, compensate Austrian citizens for their losses and cover the costs of this military expedition—a total of 12 million guilders. If they don’t have the money, they can cede Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz, and the Yucatán Peninsula as payment.”

There was no need to mention the third option—Edward already knew it. The most common method: if negotiations fail, force will be used. If the Mexican government believed it could win, it could try to resolve the matter through military means.

Edward thought for a moment and then said, “Your country’s appetite is as great as ever. But can the Mexicans bear such conditions?”

Clearly, Edward did not want to see Austria expanding unchecked in Mexico. If left unrestrained, Austria might eventually swallow up the entire country.

Kompten smiled slightly and defended himself, saying, “You can’t put it that way. If the Mexican government allows Maximilian I to be restored, they won’t have to pay any price at all.

If they are truly patriotic, they should accept our goodwill. After all, His Majesty Maximilian I is merciful and won’t hold them accountable for their conspiracy and rebellion.”

Edward rolled his eyes. Accepting Maximilian I’s restoration? Things couldn’t possibly be that simple.

For the Constitutionals, Conservatives, and Catholics, having a figurehead emperor might be tolerable, but for the Republicans, it would be a complete disaster.

It would essentially invalidate their legitimacy from start to finish, and the political shock alone could spell the end for President Juárez.

What appeared to be the least costly option was, in reality, the most unacceptable for the Republican government. By putting forward this condition, regardless of whether the Mexicans accepted it, the Mexican government would face division.

The conditions proposed by Ambassador Kompten were clearly designed to exacerbate internal conflicts within the Mexican government.

Other political factions would seize on this as an opportunity to accuse the Republican government of betraying national interests for its own selfish gain.

No matter what choice President Juárez made, he would be met with a host of troubles. Such blatant targeting made it clear that the Habsburg family was involved.

Maximilian I was now a lone figure. Even if he were restored, he would be nothing more than a puppet emperor, with no one taking him seriously, nor would he bring any real benefit to Austria. This condition, which held no real value, was clearly aimed at undermining the Republican government.

Edward said nothing more. President Juárez had led the rebellion that overthrew Maximilian I's rule, humiliating the Habsburgs.

Now they wanted revenge, and Juárez was simply unlucky to be in the crosshairs. At this level of intrigue, Edward had no desire to get involved.

Deep down, he had already begun to mourn for President Juárez, whose misfortune was to face the Habsburg dynasty at the height of its power.