

## Roman Empire 401

### Chapter 401: Hard Times Create Strong Men

The British intervention tilted the situation, making this war once again murky like muddied water. No one knew the answer whether the Russian government's treasury would be emptied first or the Kingdom of Prussia would be unable to sustain support on the battlefield.

With the loss of maritime transport routes, the Russians' plan to concentrate forces and swiftly defeat the Prussians collapsed.

Since the Russians lost control of Poland, grain prices in St. Petersburg have been continuously rising, increasing by thirty percent compared to before the war.

This was already the result of Alexander II promptly taking measures to control the prices. Otherwise, grain prices could have easily doubled.

The Russians have many granaries, the only issue is transportation. Prices will inevitably rise when transporting grain from Ukraine and Moscow to St. Petersburg.

At the military conference at the Winter Palace, Minister of War Milyutin analyzed, "Based on current transportation capabilities, the number of troops we can deploy to the front lines will not exceed four hundred thousand.

With such a small force, it is almost impossible to win this war. The original battle plan is no longer viable, and the Ministry of War has decided to change it.

We will engage in strategic defense in the Baltic Sea and Belarus while deploying our main forces to Ukraine, advancing towards Poland along the Russo-Austrian border.

This way, our troops can directly receive supplies from Austria, reducing the distance of logistical transportation.

By reclaiming the Polish region first, our forces can rely on rivers within Poland to transport supplies from Austria, ensuring logistical support for the troops."

The operational plan looked good, solving the supply issue. However, Alexander II felt very uncomfortable in his heart, as this meant having to seek help from Austria.

There is no such thing as a free lunch. Relying on Austrian support for this war would inevitably come at a cost.

Alexander II was unwilling to see the Russian army fighting desperately at the front, only for the greatest benefits to fall into someone else's hands, even if it was an ally's.

Finance Minister Reutern opposed, saying, "This plan looks promising, but getting Austria to cooperate won't be easy. It's not just a matter of money; political considerations also come into play.

The Austrian government has been in a contradictory state throughout this war. On the one hand, they want to use us to weaken the Kingdom of Prussia and create favorable conditions for unification; on the other hand, they want to preserve the territorial integrity of the German region.

Unless we are willing to pay a hefty price, they won't fully cooperate. Without their support, even with Austria's backing, it will be difficult to obtain sufficient supplies."

The position of the Austrian government is no secret; they want to see both Prussia and Russia weakened. This serves Austria's interests best, as it creates conditions for national unification while ensuring the territorial integrity of Germany.

Only when Prussian separatism faces societal backlash will it diminish, paving the way for merging with Austria.

Currently, it's the Junker aristocracy advocating for a Greater Prussia. Once merged with Austria, the agricultural products of these landlords will inevitably suffer, making it difficult to safeguard their interests.

The more Prussia suffered in the war, the more support there would be for German unification, provided that Prussia wasn't swallowed up by Russia.

In this context, expecting Austria to fully support their victory in the war will not come easy.

Foreign Minister Ivanov continued, "Regarding this issue, we have already communicated with the Austrians. The Austrian government's stance is clear; they will abide by the Russo-Austrian alliance, but only within the limits specified in the treaty. To change their decision would require a significant cost, which is simply not worth it."

When it comes to interests, even alliances need to take a back seat. Everyone present understands this; they're not naive enough to believe that allies should unconditionally cooperate.

Speaking directly about interests is actually the best way to maintain alliances. Alliances built solely on friendship without considering interests do not last long.

Alexander II ordered, "Dispatch someone to lease warehouses along the Austrian border, storing a portion of the supplies as a transit point for trade between the two countries. The military will first recapture some bordering territories with Austria, then engage in trade nearby to save on transportation costs."

This was playing it close to the line, pre-stocking goods at the Austrian border so the Russian army could replenish supplies nearby upon arrival.

While there are still many procedures to go through, this also saves time. Time is life on the battlefield; with ample supplies, the Russian army can withstand Prussia's onslaught.

In this regard, they have an absolute advantage. By sacrificing a few hundred thousand more lives, Prussia will collapse. Unless Britain and France intervene personally, they will emerge victorious from this war.

Unfortunately, the Polish winter isn't cold enough to fully leverage the Russian army's winter combat capabilities.

.....

In Vienna, Franz set aside the intelligence in his hands and assumed the role of a bystander, quietly observing the impressive performances of Prussia and Russia.

The 19th century witnessed the last glory of monarchy, where circumstances molded heroes, making this period a veritable rise of heroes.

Figures like William I of Prussia, Alexander II of Russia, Napoleon III of France, Emperor Meiji of Japan, Queen Victoria of England, and the protagonist himself — all were luminaries who burned brightly in their respective domains.

While these figures gained considerable renown, there were also lesser-known entities, such as Rama IV and Rama V of Thailand, who managed to preserve themselves amidst the chaos.

Similarly, figures like Abdulmejid I of the Ottoman Empire, who spearheaded modernization reforms, breathed new life into his empire.

This list also includes Charles XV of Sweden, Leopold II of Belgium, Nicholas I of Montenegro, and Luxembourg...

If these people were born in a different time, they could have stirred up the winds and clouds of an era. Unfortunately, they all found themselves converging in the same era.

The kings of small nations naturally had little room to make an impact. Simply surviving in the cracks between the great powers showcased ability in itself.

This demanded exceptional political mastery, something that could not be achieved by mere bystanders. For small nations, every conflict was a test.

Now it was the turn for Alexander II and William I to compete, with the victor continuing on the path of dominance while the defeated faced elimination, fading into obscurity.

The King of Sardinia had already become a sacrifice of this era, the first to be eliminated and forced into exile in London, where he sought to pass his days.

However, the leisurely days were short-lived, and would soon be shattered.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg reported, “Your Majesty, Francis II has sent a telegram asking for help, stating that the rebels led by Garibaldi have crossed the Strait of Messina and are advancing northward. The royal forces of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies have suffered another defeat in quelling the rebellion.

Currently, the domestic situation is spiraling out of control, with insurgencies popping up incessantly. There are already thirteen rebel armed groups within the territory of the Two Sicilies.

Just three days ago, Garibaldi issued a call for all rebel forces to converge on Naples for an alliance. The capital of the Two Sicilies will likely fall soon.

The most troublesome aspect is Francis II’s folly; he has simultaneously sent a plea for assistance to Napoleon III, further complicating the situation.”

Rubbing his forehead, Franz also realized the thorny nature of the problem. If Francis II had only sought assistance from Austria, then there was nothing to be said; Franz would immediately dispatch troops to help quell the rebellion.

Regardless of how the Redshirts were touted in later years, Franz dismissed them. The combat effectiveness of the army relied on the support of national strength, and the Two Sicilies was primarily an agrarian state.

With naval blockades in the ports and no ammunition replenishment, the rebel forces would turn into guerrillas in a matter of three to five months at most.

Not every country could engage in guerrilla warfare. The Two Sicilies was limited in size, bisected by a strait, and its population numbered only 8.7 million, rendering it incapable of protracted warfare.

In reality, these measures were superfluous. Simply dispatching troops to crush the rebellion would suffice. If a single Italian rebel force couldn't be handled, then the Austrian army might as well disband.

Franz expressed his dissatisfaction, saying, "Francis II sought assistance from Napoleon III instead of the Spanish. It seems that the French have been making quite a few moves under our noses over the years.

The General Staff needs to come up with a battle plan as soon as possible. The Two Sicilies cannot fall into French hands again, or else the Mediterranean will become France's personal backyard."

Franz was aware of the French's maneuvers, but he never expected Francis II to be influenced. Seeking assistance from the French now is akin to inviting the wolf into the house.

It's easier to invite a god than to send one away. Given such a good opportunity, it would be strange if the French didn't establish a foothold there.

Even if they wanted to keep their enemy in check, choosing the ambitious France is out of the question! Even letting the British intervene would be better than letting the French intervene.

Without Francis II's plea for help, the French would never dare to extend their hand to Italy. Now, the situation has changed, and the Two Sicilies have delivered themselves to the French's doorstep.

A conflict between France and Austria over Italy is about to erupt, which may be just a minor inconvenience for Franz, but for the Two Sicilies, it means life or death.

Franz can sell off the Kingdom of Sardinia, so why couldn't he sell off the Two Sicilies? As for whether the French will expand their influence, it's just a matter of time.

As long as the interests are suitable, many issues can be negotiated. Conversely, the French might also be willing to sacrifice the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in exchange for concessions elsewhere in Austria.

Playing tit-for-tat isn't as enjoyable. Even if the two countries can't agree on exchanging interests, can't they just divide up the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies?

The integrity of the great powers is so high that they will rise to the occasion as long as their interests are sufficient. The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies is not a core interest for Austria, only considered a peripheral zone, and it's much the same for the French.

Of course, if Napoleon III truly desires to unify the Italian region, then it's an essential step.

At worst, dividing the Mediterranean interests between France and Austria, using Sicily as a boundary, and jointly pushing the British out.

Currently, the cooperation between the two countries is still pleasant, with the British being tightly suppressed in the Mediterranean. Their attempts to extend into Egypt have been firmly repelled by the two nations.

Chapter 402: The Great Powers Are Here to Eat Meat

In Paris, Napoleon III was left dizzy by an unexpected gift from the heavens.

The diplomatic situation in France has never been good. The various European countries have been subtly excluding them, and they are often left out of many activities.

Among the four great European powers, France has the least political influence. Any slightly bold move by them is seen as a great threat by their neighbors, who would immediately prepare for war.

After Napoleon III ascended to the throne, many efforts were made to improve the diplomatic environment; however, they yielded little effect.

Despite verbal assurances from various governments, they remained vigilant in their actions. Particularly after the annexation of the Kingdom of Sardinia, a joint defense alliance emerged.

At first, there were some concerns on the part of Napoleon III, fearing a repeat of the anti-French coalition. But over time, he grew accustomed to it.

So be it if they are on guard, these countries would not dare to overstep anyway. Such actions from neighboring countries indirectly affirmed the strength of France.

After being emperor for a while and praised for a long time, it was inevitable that he became a bit arrogant.

As time went on, Napoleon III's ambitions also grew day by day. It was fortunate that France did not win the Near East War, otherwise, he would have become even more arrogant.

In the face of the joint defense of various countries, Napoleon III dared not to act recklessly. He still possessed some sense of self-awareness in this regard.

To break the deadlock, Napoleon III made many efforts, such as maintaining a good relationship with England and Austria as much as possible.

Despite his strong desire for the Rhineland, Napoleon III restrained himself from taking action. Similarly, although he eyed Italy eagerly, he also held himself back.

The lessons left by his uncle informed him that an anti-French coalition could indeed be deadly. Without a reasonable excuse, any French expansion on the European continent would invite joint resistance from various countries.

The Kingdom of Sardinia dug its own grave, and no one could argue against that. Now, the Italian states were being watched closely by Austria, leaving no room for France to intervene.

If it weren't for the plea for help from Francis II and the pretext for interference, Napoleon III would have been compelled to remain passive.

Napoleon, in high spirits, exclaimed, "The opportunity has arrived! Dispatch whichever of our forces is available to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies as soon as possible. If we wait for Austria to send troops to suppress the rebellion, we'll have no room for intervention."

Undoubtedly, the rebel army led by Garibaldi was completely disregarded by him. In Napoleon III's perception, the combat capability of the Italian army was only rated at five, while the rebellious forces were even less than that.

In the face of an absolute disparity in strength, even if there was some underestimation, it was not a big problem.

The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was within arm's reach, and the French forces available were sufficient to crush any rebel forces.

In the original timeline, the Redshirts led by Garibaldi had covert support from the Kingdom of Sardinia, but at this moment, Sardinia was now a thing of the past and naturally could not support them.

If the United States federal government were to be considered, Garibaldi still had supporters. However, these supporters were currently licking their wounds, and it was time to keep a low profile. They now lack the ability to aid them, let alone dare to support them.

The Minister of War, Edmond Le Bœuf, replied, "Your Majesty, the Third, Fourth, Seventh, Ninth, Twelfth, and Fifteenth Infantry Divisions, as well as the Second Cavalry Division, can all be mobilized."

It was evident that Edmond Le Bœuf was highly familiar with France's military deployment, as he effortlessly listed all the mobile units' designations.

Currently, France was at its peak, maintaining a substantial reserve of mobile forces even in times of peace. In the event of war, they could easily mobilize millions of troops.

Interfering in the civil war in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies would require only the forces of the 1st and 2nd Divisions. At present, Garibaldi's rebel forces consist of only 30,000 to 40,000 rebels.

Napoleon III immediately ordered, "Form an intervention force with the Fourth, Seventh, Ninth, and Fifteenth Divisions, appoint Marshal Patrice de MacMahon as the commander, and dispatch them to the battlefield with utmost haste.

The navy shall send a fleet for escort, while simultaneously blockading the coastline of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, prohibiting any ship from docking in rebel-controlled areas."

The simultaneous mobilization of four infantry divisions was evidently not solely aimed at assisting in suppressing the rebellion. The rebels were not worthy of such attention from Napoleon III. Rather, it was more about preparing for the potential outbreak of a Franco-Austrian conflict.

This was tantamount to France sticking its hand into Austria's backyard, so it was normal for the Austrian government to have an extreme reaction.

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied the Minister of War, Edmond Le Bœuf.

This result upset the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abraham. Intervening in the civil war of the Two Sicilies would not only provoke Austria's discontent but also annoy the British and the Spanish.

Leaving Spain aside for now as they had no energy to care about this, the reactions of England and Austria could not be ignored. If it triggered a chain reaction, that would be troublesome.

Foreign Minister Abraham reminded, "Your Majesty, the issue of intervening in the civil war in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies may require further consideration. Hasty interference at this moment would subject us to immense international pressure."

This was inevitable. One could imagine that as soon as the French army entered the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, letters of protest from Britain, Austria, and Spain would appear at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The consequences it would trigger were still unknown, but it would certainly not be anything good.

Under the current international situation, at most France could extend some influence into the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, but the actual benefits it could obtain were very small.

Talks of annexation are out of the question. The plea for help from Francis II merely provides France with a pretext for intervening in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and potentially allows them the opportunity for annexation.

Attempting to annex a country on the European continent is extremely difficult, and opportunities like those with the Kingdom of Sardinia are not encountered every day.

Furthermore, the same pretext can only be used once; its repeated use would render it ineffective.

Napoleon III said confidently, "Don't worry, this time it is Francis II who asked us to come over. Even if the governments of other countries are unhappy, they will not dare to intervene forcibly.

All we'll face are the Austrians. The Austrian government surely won't go to war with us over just the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, would they?"

The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies is the largest state in Italy, yet also the poorest. While it appears to be a sizable market, its purchasing power is actually very low.

It is largely self-sufficient in food, with minimal demand for manufactured goods. Trade with its largest trade partner, Austria, never exceeds three million guilders annually.

Aside from its strategic value, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies offers little else. However, this strategic value is equally negligible for Austria.

Granted, Sicily was located in the center of the Mediterranean, but with the presence of various powers, Austria had no way to directly occupy it.

Even establishing a naval base would be futile; to the east lies the Royal Navy's Mediterranean base at Malta, while to the west is the French Navy's headquarters.

Placing the Austrian navy between these two naval powers seems ill-advised.

Ignoring these naval powers, what else could Austria do? Would it dare to blockade the Mediterranean, a feat even the British shy away from?

Therefore, the Austrian government made the most rational choice: to leave Sicily alone. Currently, Austria does not station troops on this tiny state's soil, only engaging in minimal economic interests.

And those interests could actually be ignored. The nation was already poor, could Austria expect to extract something of note from it?

Napoleon III, believing he had outmaneuvered them, swiftly dispatched an intervention force to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Meanwhile, Austria's intervention force also set out.

.....

On February 11, 1866, the Austrian intervention force arrived in Gaeta, while the French army, due to being closer, had already arrived a day earlier.

The war to suppress the rebellion had not even begun, but the gunpowder smell between the French and Austrian armies had already become strong. If both sides did not exercise restraint, these two forces might have started fighting first.

Having just fled from Naples and taken refuge here, Francis II fully experienced what a Shura Field was.

During the military conference, neither the French nor the Austrian officers displayed amicable expressions toward each other. Cooperation was out of the question.

Since mutual aversion prevailed, each side decided to go their separate ways. After all, neither side considered the rebel forces significant, as they both possessed the capability to crush them.

Francis II found himself in an awkward position, caught between France and Austria. It was like walking on a tightrope and one misstep could spell disaster.

In fact, when Francis II sought assistance from the French, some ministers had already warned him that being indecisive when choosing sides was a major political taboo.

For some reason, Francis II had a moment of folly, entertaining the notion that mutual restraint between France and Austria could maximize the interests of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Reality proved him wrong. Great powers were all after their own interests, regardless of where they were.

Austria had always been considerate in its dealings, engaging in fair trade without exploiting the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

However, the situation had changed with the involvement of France. The ultimate cost remained uncertain, but at least the expenses of both countries' military interventions fell upon the Kingdom of Two the Sicilies.

Starting with tens of millions of guilders, there was little to discuss; great powers were not in the business of charity.

For these major powers, it was just a matter of squeezing military expenditures. For the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, it equated to several years of financial revenue.

The exact duration depended on the combat effectiveness of the rebel forces. If the rebels proved formidable and prolonged the conflict, the bankruptcy of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was only a matter of time.

The likelihood of such an event was high. With both France and Austria intervening together, intentionally hindering each other, it was inevitable.

The timing of suppressing the rebellion would depend on the strength of their mutual sabotage.

#### Chapter 403: The Unfortunate Child

Amid France and Austria undermining each other, the Italian rebel forces momentarily enjoyed remarkable success. Ambushing the French troops one day and the Austrian troops the next day, the Redshirts began to gain renown worldwide.

This was merely the narrative in newspapers. In reality, the Redshirts had been beaten into oblivion. As a hastily recruited militia lacking sufficient arms and ammunition, they were simply no match for regular armies.

However, suffering defeat did not mean they lacked achievements. Even if they had no tangible accomplishments, there were still people forcibly attributing it to them!

Within a week of the arrival of the French and Austrian armies at the front lines, Naples was recaptured. Within two weeks, all cities on the Italian peninsula held by the rebel forces had fallen, and the majority of their main forces were annihilated.

It was precisely at this time that the Redshirts' achievements suddenly surged, as casualties in the French and Austrian armies soared into the thousands.

The fleeing Garibaldi was still unaware of his newfound fame. He suddenly became an Italian hero when he was already preparing to exile himself overseas once again.

It was not that they did not try hard enough, the enemy was simply too powerful. Even if Italy were truly unified, it would be impossible to simultaneously confront France and Austria. Winning such a war was impossible.

Francis II became afraid. Initially, the French and Austrian armies were only sabotaging each other and setting traps, but now it had escalated to large-scale clashes.

Of course, in consideration of the friendship between France and Austria, direct confrontation between the two armies was out of the question.

Soon, both sides found a solution: they would remove their uniforms and fight, attributing all casualties to the Italian rebel forces. Thus, the Redshirts' illustrious achievements emerged.

It's unclear if this could be considered a revision of history. Originally, the Redshirts gained fame by defeating Spanish forces, but now they were handed fame by France and Austria.

In reality, regardless of the original timeline or the present, this force was quite flawed. Their weaknesses were exposed during the Austro-Prussian War, where they were nearly wiped out despite outnumbering the Austrian forces by half.

Now, it goes without saying that the situation is even worse than in the original timeline. Garibaldi was not even given time to train his troops before being steamrolled.

Francis II was a gentle, kind, and weak-willed individual who received strict moral and religious education but lacked sufficient political and military education.

This was the fault of his family. His mother passed away when he was just half a month old, and Ferdinand II remarried Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria as his second wife.

In this background, there's no doubt that the education of the unfortunate child Francis II was neglected. Since his stepmother didn't resort to treachery to have him killed, this already counted as her having decent moral conduct.

It's worth noting that Ferdinand II and Archduchess Maria Theresa had eight sons and four daughters, so having many children made each of them less important. Under his father's neglect, Francis II was raised as an obedient child.

Even obedient children sometimes rebel too. Francis II didn't want to see Austria dominate the government of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies alone, so he was easily persuaded to send a telegram asking for help from the French.

After sending the telegram, Francis II began to regret his decision. As a member of the House of Bourbon, seeking help from the House of Bonaparte was tantamount to disregarding the honor of his own family.

Unfortunately, there is no medicine for regret in this world; he still had to tearfully carry on with what he had agreed to.

Francis II has now returned to the capital Naples. With the rebel forces almost eradicated, the tragedy has begun.

As France and Austria vie for power, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies has become the biggest victim. While the outbreak of war on their soil is already bad enough, the key issue is the casualties on both sides, for which they will ultimately foot the bill.

In the Royal Palace of Naples, Prime Minister Carlo Filangieri solemnly said, "Your Majesty, there is a possibility of the conflict between France and Austria escalating further. We must find a way to stop it, otherwise the consequences will be unimaginable."

Carlo Filangieri was initially against involving the French. As a seasoned politician, he was keenly aware of the true nature of great powers.

Even if Spain was unable to assist, Austria alone was sufficient to address the current issues. Introducing France would only add another exploiter.

Indeed, this has been proven in practice. France's intervention did counterbalance Austria, but the cost was exceedingly painful.

The military expenses for seeking assistance increased at least threefold, and perhaps even more in the end. Due to the military conflict between France and Austria, the economy of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies suffered greatly, and the rebels in Sicily have been left unattended to this day.

These are just the current troubles. Trapped between France and Austria, the future of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies is destined to be grim.

Though Francis II's political capabilities may be lacking, being of royal lineage, he still possesses some basic judgment.

The current situation is perilous. If the conflict between France and Austria escalates or even erupts into war, then the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies will be in serious trouble.

This is a precarious position to be in. Making the wrong choice could lead to abdication at best and the loss of the kingdom at worst.

The best course of action is to prevent the escalation of the conflict and avoid taking sides in this matter of life and death. As for involving other countries in intervention, Francis II has learned his lesson and will never dare to act recklessly again.

Francis II asked helplessly, "How can we stop it? I have already summoned the envoys of both countries. Neither France nor Austria acknowledges the ongoing military conflict. Even if we wanted to mediate between the two countries, we do not have the status for that."

The behind-the-scenes contest could naturally not be brought out into the open unless one side could no longer bear it and wanted to flip the table. Otherwise, these conflicts do not exist, and the casualties are attributed to the “suppression of rebels.”

To make both sides stop, either one side must win decisively, and the other side must admit defeat or the losses are so heavy that both sides cannot bear it and are forced to stop.

Undoubtedly, thousands of soldiers from both the French and Austrian armies have been casualties, but there are still no signs of a decisive victory, nor has it reached the point of being unbearable.

Prime Minister Carlo Filangieri replied, “Your Majesty, we can start by making them aware of their international reputation, reminding the commanders of both French and Austrian armies.

After such a long time and without resolving the rebel issue, their casualties are increasing day by day. If they continue like this, their reputations will be tarnished.

Secondly, evidence can be fabricated to suggest that someone intentionally provoked the conflict between France and Austria, giving them a way out.

I recall that Americans once supported the rebels. We can make them take the blame.”

This is the best solution. As long as France and Austria care about their reputation, they cannot allow casualties to continue to increase.

Otherwise, it won't be long before rumors spread across the European continent about the incompetence of the French and Austrian armies. If they can't even handle the Italian rebels, the frontline commanders won't be able to justify themselves to their countrymen.

In terms of fabricating a scapegoat, the British were actually the best choice as they had both the motive and capability to intervene. A little manipulation and neither France nor Austria would suspect.

However, Prime Minister Carlo Filangieri is timid and dares not provoke the British, fearing the consequences if things are exposed.

Blaming the Americans doesn't matter. After all, the current United States is just a paper tiger in Europe. They can only show off in the Americas. If they dare to show their heads in Europe, they'll experience what a social beatdown is.

Regarding the Lincoln administration's support for the revolutionaries, European countries haven't held them accountable for that yet. Do not think that just because the federal government paid a certain price, the matter was over. The countries would still take revenge if given the chance.

After a moment of reflection, Francis II made his decision, “Do it discreetly, so we don't get implicated.”

Society is the best teacher, and harsh reality is what makes people grow the most. If it were before this, Francis II would definitely not have done these things.

Now his moral bottom line had inevitably declined, taught not by anyone else but the revolutionaries themselves.

After inheriting the throne, Francis II also carried out social reforms, such as granting more autonomy to the localities, promoting the liberalization process, granting amnesty to political prisoners, and reducing taxes...

It is worth mentioning that shortly after the amnesty for political prisoners, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies erupted in turmoil. Some of those who had sworn allegiance to the king, once released from prison, rebelled as soon as they got out of prison.

The 1860 rebellion can be said to have been single-handedly orchestrated by Francis II. The revolutionaries, who were originally leaderless, saw the beginning of the revolution with the emergence of these individuals.

There were many reasons, but all were driven by interests. Any reform inevitably harms the interests of some people, and Francis II's leadership in social reforms was no exception. Some of the disgruntled individuals even became supporters of the revolution.

After promising to reform and start anew, the political prisoners, upon seeing an opportunity, once again became leaders of the revolution, igniting the first flames.

Without external intervention, and with the support of Austria, the revolution of 1860 in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was suppressed, with the current Prime Minister Carlo Filangieri leading the suppression of this uprising.

The matter did not end there; Francis II's habitual softness resurfaced, and he did not execute all the rebel elements.

Later, for reasons unknown, he impulsively resorted to legal means.

The ultimate outcome was that due to insufficient evidence, a large number of insurgents were acquitted, and these individuals once again went into hiding.

The development of this rebellion owed much to these people. Without their collaboration, the uprising would not have been as smooth.

With numerous lessons learned, Francis II's worldview was also shaken, and his moral boundaries continued to move ever closer to those of politicians.

#### Chapter 404: The Price of Betrayal

As the casualties continued to rise, Franz also began to feel a headache coming on. Just as Carlo Filangieri had anticipated, Austria also needed to save face.

If they could expose that they were fighting against France, then no matter how high the casualties, it would not matter. The problem was that Austria was currently unprepared for an all-out war with France.

Once the facade was broken, a full-scale war would inevitably break out. There was no such thing as a localized conflict. Neither side would concede, and once the fighting began, it would escalate to a matter of life and death.

The proud French would not surrender; Napoleon III would have to fight to the bitter end. Meanwhile, Austria had a population advantage and the upper hand in war potential, so Franz would be even less likely to admit defeat.

This meant that even if a victor emerged from a regional conflict, since neither side was willing to back down, the war would still continue.

Either they would fight for three to five years until one side could no longer persevere and admit defeat, or they would both be severely weakened, or they would go all-in for a fight that would determine their life or death.

None of this could be ended in the short term. In an era without airplanes, tanks, or automobiles, relying on marching on foot, blitzkrieg was yet to be a thing

It would all come down to comprehensive national strength. Looking at the map, the geographic locations of France and Austria had already determined that whichever side launched an offensive would be at a disadvantage.

Their conquest in Italy would be limited at best to portions of the Kingdom of Sardinia, a non-vital region for French interests inhabited by obstinately rebellious Italians, making any territorial gains there meaningless.

Instead, it would increase the burden of logistics and supply lines. Franz did not believe the Austrian army could cross the Alps and march all the way to Paris.

The more likely outcome was being constrained by logistics and then being driven back by the French, who could transport supplies by sea to wage a war of attrition there.

The German Federal Empire and Switzerland bisected Central Europe, and just thinking about “borrowing” passage was laughable. What difference was there between that and invasion?

Unless France was provoked into taking the offensive, Austria was unlikely to attack proactively. Franz did not want to experience being ostracized, which was definitely not a pleasant experience.

Even if these factors could be tolerated, what Franz could not accept was the cost of war. Even if they defeated France, at most, they would receive a sum of war reparations.

As for acquiring territory, Austria could not reach that far! Moreover, Franz had no interest in French lands.

They dared not even claim the neighboring Kingdom of Sardinia, otherwise, the number of Italians within Austria would explode, hindering ethnic integration and increasing the possibility of unrest.

Colonies? After a Franco-Austrian War, it would be unknown how much of the Austrian navy would even remain. Being able to keep their existing territories would require God’s blessing. Would they still have the capacity for expansion by then?

Even in terms of war reparations, it was uncertain whether they could obtain any. If John Bull intervened, it might all be for naught.

There was no relying on the Austro-Russian alliance either as that was unreliable. Austria can sit back during the Russo-Prussian War, and naturally, the Russians can sit back during a Franco-Austrian War, especially considering they’re already in a deadlock with Prussia.

Under the current circumstances where the facade had not been torn through, these casualty numbers alone were humiliating for the Austrian military. Continuing like this, casualties surpassing those of the Austro-Sardinian War are inevitable.

Currently, tensions are escalating on the Italian Peninsula, with both France and Austria steadily increasing their forces, just waiting for a spark to ignite.

The emotional states of Napoleon III and Franz were quite similar, or better put, their situation induced trepidation. If fighting broke out in Italy, Austria would likely achieve little success, while France would lose its grip on the Balkans.

The French navy was powerful but the Austrian navy was no pushover either. At least in the Adriatic Sea, the French navy could not overwhelm the Austrians. From the outset, French troops in the Balkans would be isolated.

If winning the war was possible, losing the French Balkans could be acceptable. However, constrained by geographical location, the most suitable point of engagement at present is Italy.

Napoleon III dared not touch Central Europe, otherwise, the enemy would not just be Austria, but an anti-French coalition.

Marching all the way from Italy to Vienna, that distance alone would cause the French army to collapse multiple times. While Austria's railways were well-constructed, everyone used different rail gauges preventing interconnection, so the railways could not be relied upon.

And that was the ideal scenario. Normally, the French would likely only make it as far as Lombardy, which had well-fortified defenses that were not easy to breach.

In the Austro-Sardinian War, the Kingdom of Sardinia relied on internal sabotage to tear through the defenses, now there were no such inside collaborators.

Against this background, even if the French occupied the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the two sides could at most be at a tie.

To achieve victory would require Franz to personally lead troops and blindly give orders, same as in the original timeline.

The present differed from the past. If Franz and Napoleon III both personally led troops in combat, no one truly knew what the outcome would be, as neither of them was a skilled military strategist.

In the original timeline, during the Austro-French War, Napoleon III did not have a chance to fully demonstrate his capabilities, so the French army emerged victorious. If he had exerted full effort, the outcome would have remained uncertain.

With examples such as the Near East War, the American Civil War, and the Prusso-Russian War, the French government has become much more cautious, without arrogantly assuming itself invincible.

Unlike the days of his rise to power, Napoleon III, with his large family and empire, is no longer the gambler he once was. His throne lacked full legitimacy and the French people would not tolerate failure; any defeat would shake the foundations of his rule.

This intervention in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies is merely to test Austria. Risking war for such a probe is simply not worthwhile.

Neither side desires war, yet the situation in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies leaves both countries unable to back down, as both are concerned with maintaining their reputations; whoever backed down first would be admitting defeat.

Although this "defeat" did not entail any substantive losses, their pride must be maintained. It was in this context that Prime Minister Carlo Filangieri took action.

Foreign Minister Urdinov looked at the evidence in his hands and questioned, “Prime Minister, with just these few documents, it is too unconvincing. I’m afraid the French and Austrian envoys will not believe it.”

He was inwardly troubled. If they were to frame someone, they had to be professional about it! Simply presenting a pile of documents as evidence, anyone could have them printed at any random street shop, so it lacked any persuasiveness.

Prime Minister Carlo Filangieri smiled and said, “It doesn’t matter. There’s no need for them to believe it. Looking at this, do you not think of something?”

Urdinov nodded, discerning the implication behind Prime Minister Carlo Filangieri’s words. Few would believe that Americans had incited the conflict between France and Austria.

The federal government lacked the capability and courage, and, more importantly, the vested interests, to do so.

If it was the British, it would be more plausible. John Bull already made multiple attempts to provoke conflict between the two nations which had been discovered by the two. As a habitual offender, he was naturally a prime suspect.

This excuse provided a plausible explanation both domestically and internationally. Denials from the British government would be futile as France and Austria would readily believe it.

The main reason the French-Austrian relationship had not progressed further was because of British interference; otherwise, they might have formed an alliance years ago.

The “joint partition of Europe” plan originally proposed by Franz was actually the source of Napoleon III’s current ambitions. After annexing the Kingdom of Sardinia, his ambition spun out of control.

The Franco-Austrian secret treaty included plans to drive the British out of the Mediterranean, which had also already begun implementation.

Whether in Greece, the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, or North Africa, British expansion in these areas had not been smooth in recent years.

With both parties conspiring against the British, the British government naturally became displeased. However, these were all covert maneuvers; outwardly, everyone feigned friendliness.

John Bull, feeling aggrieved, naturally adopted retaliatory measures, with provoking conflict between the two nations being one of them. Many of the British tactics were subtle, and even if they were exposed, they still affected Franco-Austrian relations.

Otherwise, how could France and Austria have progressed to this point from happily carving up the European continent together?

Soon, the evidence prepared by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was transmitted to Paris and Vienna, albeit with the main focus shifting to the British.

This can hardly be considered a wrongful accusation. The London newspapers have already exposed the truth behind the civil war in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, using a great deal of ink to describe how France and Austria were secretly pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Due to a lack of sufficient audiovisual evidence, these allegations naturally faced denials from the governments of France and Austria.

However, driven by the British, the news quickly began to spread across the European continent, providing ample entertainment for the bystanders.

Many wished to see the two countries go to war, such as the warring Prussia and Russia, as they wanted someone to share in their misfortune.

Only if France and Austria went to war and were embroiled in hostilities would everyone's strength be brought back to the same level. Whether they were willing to admit it or not, Prussia and Russia had fallen behind.

Alexander II holds the most authority to speak on this matter, having witnessed the decline of the Russian Empire firsthand. Now, they were only the nominal European hegemon, with actual power lagging behind that of France and Austria.

This was not just a matter of money, but a comprehensive disadvantage in national strength. An agricultural nation could never defeat an industrial nation — the gap of the times could not be made up for by numbers alone.

Vienna

Foreign Minister Wessenberg proposed, "Your Majesty, this conflict between France and Austria must be stopped now. Continuing will only let us play into the hands of the British. It's not yet time for an all-out war between France and Austria. We need time to prepare."

War is no trifling matter, especially between two great powers. The First World War in the original timeline is an example; both sides made ample preparations before engaging in conflict.

At present, Austria was completely unprepared. What do they have to fight an all-out war with?

Finance Minister Karl objected, "This situation was provoked by the French. Are we just going to let it slide? What about our dignity?"

This was also part of the problem. This conflict had to have someone take responsibility, and it absolutely could not be Austria. The Austrian government had to regain face.

Prime Minister Felix said fiercely, "Whoever ignited this dispute must take responsibility for this incident. Since Francis II has invited the wolf into the house, he is no longer qualified to continue as King of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Francis II has many brothers. We can completely replace him with a pro-Austrian king. His brother, the Count of Trani, is not a bad choice."

In Austria's view, Francis II's actions were already tantamount to betrayal. A traitor must naturally pay the price. However, as he is a king, Vienna cannot demand his life, but stripping him of the throne is still possible.

This was Francis II's own doing. Not only did he make a mess of things domestically, losing favor, but he also foolishly sought aid from Napoleon III, causing many within the House of Bourbon to become extremely dissatisfied with him.

In this context, the Austrian government demanded Francis II's abdication, as he had few supporters left.

As for the French? It's better for them to let it go. Napoleon III is not in the business of charity. The cost of keeping Francis II on the throne is too high, with little benefit in return.

The Count of Trani's full name is Louis Maria, Francis II's half-brother who was born on August 1, 1838. He was not even 18 years old at the time.

But that's not the point. The crucial aspect is that Louis Maria is the son of Archduchess Maria Theresia Isabella of Austria, making him the grandson of Archduke Karl, the Austrian military hero. He naturally inherited the bloodline of the Habsburgs.

Francis II was able to inherit the throne not because he had particularly strong supporters, but entirely because of European inheritance laws.

As members of the aristocracy, whether of the House of Bourbon or Habsburg, they were upholders of the rules, strictly adhering to them.

Thus, Francis II was able to grow up safely and inherit the throne peacefully, without any so-called bloody drama along the way.

Everything proceeded according to the standard treatment for a crown prince. Stories of a stepmother's abuse simply did not exist. Archduchess Isabella was a cultured person and would not engage in such distasteful behavior.

Because he lost his mother at a young age, everyone felt pity for Francis II, who was showered with love by his entire family as he grew up. Compared to his brothers who faced strict upbringings from childhood, he was raised in a more relaxed environment.

Never having experienced setbacks from childhood is not necessarily a good thing for a king, which is one reason behind Francis II's foolish decisions.

The world does not revolve around one person, and now Francis II faces a conundrum. The Franco-Austrian conflict requires a resolution, and Austria's reputation needs to be upheld.

As the main culprit, Francis II cannot escape blame, and abdication is the only choice.

This doesn't concern Franz, and he has no relationship with the Count of Trani. Archduke Karl also has sons of his own, so there's no reason for the inheritance to fall to his grandson. It's just a matter of convenience for the Austrian government to go along with it.

Franz scoffed and said, "Then let Francesco II abdicate, but we cannot let the French off the hook like this. Since they dared to meddle, they must pay the price.

Our strategy targeting the French can now begin to be implemented. Napoleon III has had too much leisure — he must be made busy."

#### Chapter 405: The Diplomatic Prowess of the British

Since neither side wanted to fight, negotiations were the only option. On May 2, 1866, representatives from Austria and France held secret talks in Naples.

The interests of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies were just the appetizer. The most important aspect was the grand strategy of dividing the European continent between the two countries.

In the face of interests, past grievances were set aside. The military conflict between France and Austria saw both sides tacitly shifting blame onto the British.

With the British absent and unable to defend themselves, letting them take the blame benefited everyone.

In fact, the rift between Britain and France was much deeper than the Franco-Austrian conflict. In Franz's view, the current Anglo-Austrian tensions were even deeper than those between Austria and France.

Britain's petty actions on the African continent seriously impacted Austria's African strategy. For Franz who aimed to integrate Africa, this affront was irreconcilable.

In comparison, the Franco-Austrian conflict is more manageable. Before carving up the European continent, there are still a series of interests that can be exchanged between the two countries.

Under common interests, the contradictions between the two sides can still be suppressed.

However, resolving the colonial conflict between Austria and Britain in Africa was difficult. With John Bull's meddlesome style, it would be strange if he simply allowed Franz to complete his strategic plans!

Clashing with two major nations simultaneously went against Austrian national policy, hence for their own security, they needed to lead France into a ditch.

This strategic negotiation to carve up the European continent was meant to lure Napoleon III. Once the French took the first step, they would end up isolated!

Not the kind of isolation at the current level; the vigilance of small countries is not even worth mentioning. Only when the great powers are hostile will the French truly feel uncomfortable.

To a certain extent, Franz did not mind if the French strategy succeeded. Only then could they truly sabotage the French Empire.

Just imagine — a behemoth like France controlling three-quarters of Italy, Belgium, and all territories west of the Rhine in Germany. Apart from an anti-French coalition, what other options are there?

Ironically, this pit was exactly the strategic plan of the French in the original timeline. No, in the original timeline, Napoleon III actually planned to swallow all of Italy, which has now been reduced due to the rise of Austria.

The Franco-Austrian War was part of their strategy to annex Italy, except when Napoleon III actually executed it, he screwed it up.

To annex Luxembourg and Belgium, they even triggered a European crisis, but were suppressed by the joint efforts of England, Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

When Franz proposed the strategy of dividing Europe years ago, it was almost a copy of the French strategy, which was used to deceive Napoleon III.

But over ten years ago, France's military strength was insufficient, and Napoleon III had just ascended the throne amidst the Near East War, so he dared not take the risk.

Now, France's military strength had grown, coupled with Russia being weakened and unable to intervene in European affairs for the short term, Napoleon III's ambitions naturally couldn't be restrained any longer.

Extending his hand towards the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was to probe Austria's reaction. Now that the result was out, it was naturally time for negotiations.

Even if it was meant to deceive him, unless Austria could gain adequate rewards, Napoleon III would not be emboldened to directly advance this bold strategy.

Only when there are common interests and both sides take action simultaneously can Napoleon III be reassured.

The exchange of interests involved was too extensive, spanning all aspects, so these negotiations were bound to be protracted. In comparison, making Francis II roll over isn't even worth mentioning.

While the negotiations between France and Austria were ongoing, the Russo-Prussian War broke out again. This time, the British were a big help. Although they didn't find allies to go against the Russians in Europe, they achieved results in Central Asia.

Under British orchestration, the people of Samarkand launched a large anti-Russian uprising in late April 1866, ushering in a wave of resistance against Russian rule in Central Asia.

The British not only sponsored the rebels with weapons but also formed a volunteer army — the 8,000-strong Gurkha mercenaries — to help the people of Central Asia overthrow the Russian government.

The Gurkha mercenaries rank among the top three mercenaries in the world. They once defeated 30,000 British troops with inferior weapons and equipment with only 12,000 men, gaining recognition from the British and thus entering the world stage.

If it weren't for their small population, they would be a military power. India wouldn't have much to worry about as they would be undefeated in South Asia.

The Central Asian Khanates, not yet conquered by the Russians, were also forced into the battlefield by the British, including Afghanistan. Within a short period, tens of thousands of anti-Russian armed forces emerged in Central Asia.

By mid-May, the largest city in Central Asia, Tashkent, had been captured, putting the Russian rule in Central Asia in jeopardy.

In response to the crisis in Central Asia, the Russian government was compelled to redeploy troops from the Caucasus to reinforce the Central Asian theater of war.

Looking at the map of the battlefield, it was clear to Franz that the Russians were in big trouble. Years of operations in Central Asia were about to go down the drain.

If it hadn't been for the previous Russian attacks on the three Khanates of Central Asia, the situation might have been better. Normally, these countries wouldn't dare provoke the Russians.

However, the current situation was anything but normal. Everyone knew about Russian ambitions, and compromise was not an option. For self-preservation, they had no choice but to side with the British.

Now that the top dog demanded they join the war, these Khanates had no choice but to reluctantly take to the battlefield. If they also offended the British, they would truly be finished.

Franz asked, “The Russians have redeployed forces from the Caucasus. This might be an opportunity for the Ottomans. Can the British persuade the Ottoman government to strike while the iron is hot?”

Prime Minister Felix responded, “It’s hard to say. Although there is a strong call from the war hawks within the Ottoman Empire for war, the Ottoman government is still reeling from the shadow of defeat in the recent Near East War and is hesitant to challenge the Russians.

They also cannot ignore the British’s stance either. For the survival of the Ottoman Empire, they rely heavily on the protection of European powers, with the British being a crucial component of their diplomacy.

We have already secretly made our stance clear. If the French also demanded Ottoman intervention, the Ottoman government would likely be forced onto the battlefield.

Currently, the French government is still wavering. However, if Napoleon III intends to execute his European strategy, continuing to weaken the Russians remains a necessary choice.”

In fact, it’s not just the French’s stance. If Austria were to openly request the Ottoman Empire to mobilize its forces, it would also impose immense pressure on the Ottoman government.

The Russian ambitions towards the Ottoman Empire have never waned; it can be said that the Ottoman government is the most eager to see the Russians suffer.

The only issue is that those who experienced the Near East War in the past are not yet gone, and the younger generation has not taken a dominant position in the government.

The older folks are fearful. The recent “Russo-Turkish Wars” have all ended in failure, leading to a loss of confidence in defeating the Russians.

However, what’s distressing is that if they don’t confront the Russians, the Russians won’t let them off anyway. Opening a history book would show that the cyclical “Russo-Turkish War” that happens every two decades had become a part of their lives.

At most, a decade remained until the next “Russo-Turkish War.” This was a tradition that had continued for two hundred years.

Without the support of European powers, the Ottoman government had no confidence in taking on Russia alone. Even if their social reforms had initially shown success, the power gap between the two sides remained enormous.

Against this backdrop, the positions of Britain, France, and Austria were important. Moreover, Britain and France were their creditor nations, controlling their domestic finances. A sneeze from the British government could cause turmoil in the Ottoman economy.

In history, the French were able to use economic means to pull the Russians onto the war chariot. Now, the influence of England and France on the Ottomans goes even further.

Franz smiled, “Then it seems the Prussians must pray to God for Napoleon III to make up his mind soon!”

The current situation pleased him greatly. The fact that the British could stir up such a big commotion in Central Asia completely exceeded his expectations.

But thinking about it, it was normal. Even a rabbit would bite when cornered. The Central Asian Khanates, in order to protect themselves, must cooperate with the British at this juncture.

Everyone chuckled. To Russia, Central Asia was but a minor nuisance. Even if they lost it all, the Russian Empire would still be the Russian Empire.

The internal conflicts within the Central Asian coalition formed by the British were significant. They could only barely cooperate under pressure from the Russians, and once the Russian threat disappeared, infighting would ensue.

As for pushing them all the way into the heartland of the Russian Empire, that was wishful thinking! If these people had that capability, Franz would not have overlooked it.

As for the Ottoman Empire, recovering the Caucasus region alone would take them many years. To pose a further threat to the Russians, they might have been able to do so a century ago but not anymore.

Something that could weaken Russian strength without threatening the Tsarist regime was always welcomed by the Austrian government.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg said, "Your Majesty, the British have not only made progress in Central Asia but also achieved some gains in the Far East.

Under their instigation, the Japanese expelled the Russian forces from the island of Tsushima. In the Far East, the ancient empire has also seen a conflict between the coastal defense faction and the frontier defense faction, with the former currently having the upper hand.

Perhaps they are also stirring up trouble. Unfortunately, the telegraph network has not been fully established, so we are not clear about the current situation."

Franz was taken aback, could it be that historical events were happening ahead of schedule? This was not entirely impossible. Now, the Russian Empire was at its weakest, and it was clearly an opportune time to reclaim lost territories. There might even be unexpected gains.

After pondering for a moment, Franz casually said, "The Far East is too far away to affect Europe. Even if the Russians lost the Far East, it would not have much impact.

What decides the outcome of the Russo-Prussian War still depends on the two countries themselves. At most, the British can only divert Russian forces and drain the Tsar's coffers a bit.

Unless they can persuade the Swedes to act, the Kingdom of Prussia still has to rely on itself. These potential allies, in reality, can't provide much assistance to them."

These actions would certainly tie down a large number of Russian forces. However, the Russian government had nothing but troops in abundance.

No matter how much they are tied up, the number of Russian troops on the Russo-Prussian front will not decrease. Unless the Swedes took action, the Russian government, constrained by supply lines, would be unable to sustain such a massive frontline force to face them.

This was determined by geographic location. Whether it was Central Asia or the Far East, the transportation of strategic materials was eastward. And for Sweden and the Russo-Prussian front, some routes for strategic materials overlap.

For the Prussian government, other allies were inconsequential. The only ones who could immediately make an impact were the Swedes.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg analyzed, "This is likely to be somewhat difficult. There are no signs of the Swedish government joining the war, and the British cannot offer more leverage.

The promised benefits all have to be seized from the Russians. This kind of trying to catch a wolf barehanded is something the British government has done too much, utterly unable to achieve the desired effect.

The Kingdom of Prussia is even worse off. They want to win over Sweden but can't even offer any bargaining chips.

Charles XV demanded that the Prussians withdraw from the Kingdom of Denmark. But the Prussian government only agreed to abandon the Jutland Peninsula, but they absolutely dare not let go of the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein."

The two duchies of Schleswig and Holstein are now crucially important to the Kingdom of Prussia. Only by upholding the banner of nationalism can they prevent Austria from siding with the Russians in this war.

With the recognition of the German cause, people are willing to donate money and goods, and volunteers with their own provisions come forward to serve.

Even Austria has volunteers going to support the Kingdom of Prussia, whether this has something to do with the Austrian government is not for outsiders to say.

In short, various social groups dedicated to the unification of Germany such as the German National Unity Committee and the German Civil Art Exchange Committee are vigorously supporting the Prussians in their fight against the Russians.

If the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein are abandoned, all this support will cease to exist, and there is a possibility that Austria's absolute neutrality in diplomacy could change.

#### Chapter 406: Short-term Gains vs Long-term Benefits

In St. Petersburg, the unceasing stream of bad news had become unbearable for Alexander II. The decadent trend of the Russian Empire was fully exposed, and the prestige built up in the Near East War was being eroded.

The international situation was only a minor issue; the biggest trouble lies within. From the start, Alexander II had been using the war to divert internal contradictions, attempting to plunder benefits through military expansion to quell domestic conflicts.

As the situation on the battlefield worsened, the domestic situation also deteriorated. This time, it was not a struggle between the conservatives and reformists, but rather the lower classes that could barely hang on.

With the blockade of maritime transport routes, St. Petersburg faced severe shortages in daily necessities, and prices continued to rise. If the capital was already in such a state, the surrounding cities were even worse off.

In the Winter Palace, Alexander II said angrily, “I don’t care what methods you use, you must quickly stabilize prices and ensure the supply of goods to St. Petersburg. If you cannot do it, I will replace you with those who can.

This is a critical period for the Russian Empire. Any individual or interest group that stands against the empire will be severely punished!”

Alexander II was not easy to fool. The shortage of supplies was a fact, but the constantly rising prices were absolutely abnormal.

At least food prices could not possibly be this outrageous. As the capital of the Russian Empire, how could St. Petersburg not have grain reserves?

The capitalists were shrewd. As early as the outbreak of the Polish Uprising, they all tacitly began hoarding grain.

The Russian government was also not completely unprepared. Between the Prusso-Danish War and the Russo-Prussian War, there was a gap of over two months, during which they also stockpiled some supplies.

Added to the original grain reserves of the capital, there was absolutely no way they could have run out so quickly. Moreover, St. Petersburg itself was also one of Russia’s grain-producing regions, with a high self-sufficiency rate for grain.

If no one was causing trouble, St. Petersburg would not lack grain. As long as the grain supply was guaranteed, other problems would be easier to solve.

For example, coal — the areas around St. Petersburg had coal deposits.

In this era, apart from having to import some machinery, the Russian Empire was basically self-sufficient, as evidenced by its trade surplus.

Interior Minister Mikhail said stubbornly, “Your Majesty, in many areas the ice and snow have melted, leaving the roads muddy and impassable, severely affecting transportation. There is a temporary shortage of supplies, but it will improve in 1-2 months.”

Mikhail was well aware of the reasons behind the soaring prices. But the interest groups involved were too powerful, and he did not want to bring this issue to the surface.

Alexander II smiled coldly and said, “Is that so? If that’s the case, then the government can take over the distribution of supplies. Surely any patriot would support that!”

Support? How could they? This was cutting off flesh from everyone. Who knows how many wanted to profit from it — if the government took over and centralized distribution, what would they gain from that?

Interior Minister Mikhail said anxiously, “Your Majesty, this matter involves too many parties. If the government centrally manages the supply, it could cause great chaos.”

To cut off someone’s income was like killing their parents.

If such an incident occurred, the Tsar might not face consequences, but those directly executing it were doomed.

Alexander II chuckled and said, “This is the last resort. If we cannot bring down the prices, we only have this option. If anyone dares to cause trouble, we’ll see if our swords are sharp enough.

The Fourth and Seventh Divisions will arrive in St. Petersburg in three days. If prices do not stabilize within three days, the military will take charge of coordinating the supply of goods.”

Clearly, Alexander II was clever enough not to rely on the city defense forces in St. Petersburg. Instead, he directly mobilized troops that had just been withdrawn from the battlefield to rest and reorganize.

These border troops were obviously beyond the influence of the capitalists and bureaucrats in St. Petersburg; they only obeyed the orders of the Tsar.

If the capitalists knew what was good for them, everyone would benefit. Alexander II also wouldn’t want to disrupt the established rules of the game.

However, if not, then too bad. If the Russian government couldn’t resolve the issue of skyrocketing prices, they would have to strike at the source and eliminate those responsible for price gouging.

Confiscation of property was almost a required course for every sovereign. The most renowned monarchs in history frequently confiscated property.

Typically, such emperors killed a lot of people. They usually eliminated those who caused problems, leading to a period of stability in the realm.

In Europe, the situation is unique, as generally, nobles are not killed. However, this does not mean that nobles cannot be killed.

Alexander II was no pushover. If reasoning did not work, he would use force. Once the line was crossed, he did not mind killing indiscriminately.

To some extent, this trend was set by Franz. Reforms never came without bloodshed; the same was true for the Austrian reforms, which were also achieved through a sea of blood and mountains of corpses.

However, with the cover of the revolutions, many stubborn factions were eradicated during the upheaval, allowing subsequent reforms to proceed smoothly.

Alexander II also realized this. The reforms he championed in Russia faced strong resistance from vested interests, progressing very sluggishly. Now, Alexander II needed to set an example to deter others, and it remained to be seen who would become the sacrificial lamb.

Mikhail’s face changed greatly. His political acumen was still very sharp, and he knew the Tsar was dissatisfied with his work. He hurriedly replied, “Yes, Your Majesty!”

Mikhail chose to swim with the current rather than against it and risk impoverishment. Given the rules of the game, the capitalists’ actions did not seem overly problematic, rendered even safer by the shielding of the noble bureaucrats.

However, when the Tsar intended to upset the balance, the situation would change. Would bureaucrats like Mikhail really go against the Tsar merely for a bribe?

Clearly, this was impossible. Their power stemmed from the Tsar, and as long as they remained in their positions, they could gradually amass wealth, so why would they risk it?

Perhaps many individuals simultaneously held the triple identities of noble, bureaucrat, and capitalist. However, for them, maintaining their positions was still the most important.

Wealth could be accumulated slowly, but life was precious. Provoking a Tsar who wielded the executioner's blade was absolutely out of the question. A single misstep could cost them dearly.

Foreign Minister Ivanov opened his mouth to defuse the situation, "Your Majesty, the Franco-Austrian conflict has ended, and currently, both countries are engaged in secret negotiations.

According to intercepted intelligence and preliminary analysis, these negotiations may involve the in-depth strategies of both nations, potentially even impacting our war with the Kingdom of Prussia.

Austrian Foreign Minister Wessenberg has already arrived in Milan, reportedly to strengthen communication with the Kingdom of Lombardy. This is likely a smokescreen.

Simultaneously, French Foreign Minister Abraham has also arrived in the Kingdom of Sardinia, officially claiming to be on vacation.

Yesterday, Wessenberg and Abraham met at the border area between Sardinia and Lombardy for a five-hour-long meeting.

The contents of their conversation are highly confidential. They dismissed all attendants, leaving only the two privy to the information."

This intelligence was obtained by Ivanov at great expense, primarily to prove that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not truly incompetent.

Recently, the Russian government has suffered frequent setbacks in diplomacy. Although there were extenuating circumstances that absolved them of blame, criticism within the Russian government against them was increasing.

Ivanov naturally needed to deliver results, and the Franco-Austrian conflict was an opportunity in his eyes. The fact that the two countries didn't actually engage in conflict left him both disappointed and pleasantly surprised.

This complex sentiment was not unique to Ivanov. It was the same with most members of the Russian government.

On the one hand, they desired a Franco-Austrian war to weaken each other and maintain the Russian Empire's dominance on the continent.

On the other hand, they didn't want to witness a conflict between France and Austria. Once Austria became embroiled in war, their logistical supply system would collapse.

If a Franco-Austrian war broke out, Austria would naturally lack the capacity to continue exporting strategic goods to them. This gap would need to be filled.

Unfortunately, this gap was impossible to fill. There are only a few industrial powerhouses in the world, and if France and Austria went to war, only the British would be capable of filling the void.

Such unrealistic fantasies were beyond the realm of possibility for the Russian government. Relying on the British to provide them with logistics was nonsense.

Alexander II pondered for a moment before saying, "Initiate contact with the Austrians first, probe to see if their stance has changed, and if necessary, make concessions appropriately.

We can promise not to covet territory in Germany and limit our partition of the Kingdom of Prussia to only the Polish territories.”

Although his heart was bleeding, Alexander II still gritted his teeth and made this decision. At this stage of the war, thinking about expanding into Central Europe was no longer appropriate.

This world was based on strength. The more of it you have, the larger the share of the cake you can get. But if you eat too much, you might just choke to death.

“Strength” refers to comprehensive national strength, not just military strength. Whether they admit it or not, the Russian Empire’s comprehensive strength was already lagging behind those of the four great powers.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivanov, replied, “Yes, Your Majesty!”

After a pause, he added, “Currently, both the Prussians and the British are courting Sweden. To prevent the worst-case scenario, the Foreign Ministry suggests making appropriate concessions to Sweden.

We can support Charles XV’s plan for the unification of the Nordic three countries. Once Denmark and Sweden, along with Norway, merge, they will be dragged into the Prusso-Danish War.”

This was a very clever strategy to break the deadlock. The Kingdom of Denmark could use its support for the unification of the Nordic three countries as a bargaining chip to enlist Swedish troops.

Even before the outbreak of the war, negotiations had been held for the formation of a united state among the three countries. Sweden and Norway are currently in a personal union, with the two countries largely in agreement, but the Kingdom of Denmark has not made up its mind.

This hesitation led to the outbreak of the Prusso-Danish War. It was not without reason that the Junker nobles launched this war last year.

If the Nordic three countries were to merge, it would be difficult to reclaim the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.

Alexander II hesitated; allowing the unification of the Nordic three countries would indeed be beneficial to the Russian Empire in the short term, but the emergence of a unified Northern Europe would also pose a threat to the Russian Empire in the future.

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden combined would constitute another Kingdom of Prussia. Perhaps due to limited population growth rates in the Nordic region, they may pale in comparison to the Kingdom of Prussia, but this gap would certainly not be too significant.

Ambitions are always stimulated by strength. After the unification of the Nordic three countries, would they remain docile? For instance, turning their attention towards Finland or the Baltic states.

Undoubtedly, such a scenario is highly likely. The Nordic barbarians have had their moments in history, and once they are stimulated by nationalism, the northern borders of the Russian Empire will become lively.

Chapter 407: Arms Race

With the chaotic situation in Europe, how could Britain be left out? The British government was very disappointed that the Franco-Austrian conflict did not escalate.

However, Prime Minister John Russell was not worried; where there's one, there's another. Regardless of the excuses the French may have, the fact remains that they have extended their reach into Austria's backyard.

The seeds of conflict between the two countries had been sown, which was enough for the British. Instigating opposition between France and Austria, making them counteract each other, was the option most aligned with British interests.

If they actually went to war, it would not be a good thing. Or rather, any war that broke the balance of power in Europe was not something the British government wanted to see.

Especially at a time when the Russian Empire was on the verge of decline, if war were to break out between France and Austria, whichever side emerged victorious would become the new hegemon of the European continent.

Any European hegemon would be Britain's greatest enemy. No reasons were needed — this had always been England's national policy.

At 10 Downing Street, Foreign Secretary Raistlin walked into the meeting room with a smile, clearly in a good mood.

John Russell said plainly, "Everyone is here, so let's begin the meeting. Sir Raistlin, what's the good news?"

Foreign Secretary Raistlin replied with a smile, "We've just received word that the Russian government intends to allow the unification of the Nordic three countries."

This is something the British government has been wanting to accomplish for the past few years but hasn't been able to. The unification of the Nordic three countries is definitely not a favorable development for the Russian Empire.

By promoting nationalism among them, the unified Nordic region would inevitably stand opposed to the Russians — who could blame them given their glorious history?

If one were to open history books, vast territories such as Finland and the Baltic Sea region were once theirs, but are now occupied by the Russians. Can the radicals tolerate this?

Of course, the Nordic three countries have a small population and are far from posing a threat to the Russian Empire, but it is still possible to divert some of their attention.

This is also why the British are willing to support them; regardless of how the Nordic region develops, it will not affect Britain's interests.

Under normal circumstances, the Russians would not allow the unification of the Nordic countries. By doing so now, it indicates that they are on the verge of collapse and are compelled to make compromises.

John Russell asked uncertainly, "Could it be that the Russians want to persuade Sweden and Norway to wage war against the Prussians, to alleviate some of the pressure on the battlefield?"

Foreign Secretary Raistlin replied, "That would be the ideal situation, but the Russian government should be well aware that this is almost impossible."

The Prussian government has already made concessions, pledging to withdraw from the Jutland Peninsula and limiting its territorial demands on Denmark to just two German duchies.

For Sweden, this should be sufficient. If the two German duchies were also incorporated, Denmark's influence would be too great, and Sweden would not be able to take the lead.

Currently, the Russian government simply wants to appease Sweden. Otherwise, if trouble flares up again in the north, they really won't be able to hold out. Preliminary assessments suggest that the Russians are currently stretched thin."

The Russians being stretched thin was the best news. After this wave, the Russians would be unable to cause them trouble for decades to come.

If subsequent plans went smoothly, they might be able to permanently resolve this threat once and for all.

Prime Minister John Russell did not hesitate, immediately making the decision, "Leverage our maximum influence and deliver another fatal blow to the Russians.

Increase support for Prussia, expedite the Ottoman Empire's entry into the war, and mobilize activity in the Far East as well. If we can get Sweden to stab the Russians too, the plan will be perfect."

Clearly, John Russell had low expectations for Sweden's participation in the war. If the Russians continued to oppose the unification of the Nordic three countries, then the likelihood of the Swedes stabbing the Russians while they were unawares was very high.

It was almost impossible now. The Swedish government must consider the feelings of the Danes. Currently, Denmark and the Russians are allies, and their enemy is the Kingdom of Prussia, which determines that Sweden is unlikely to ally with the Prussians.

...

"Since the implementation of the two-power standard, the Royal Navy has faced severe challenges. Currently, our naval budget is seriously insufficient, and we are unable to simultaneously suppress both France and Austria.

Not long ago, the French government allocated an additional 120 million francs for shipbuilding, and the specific shipbuilding plans are not yet clear. Obviously, this is aimed at our two-power standard.

The Austrians have not yet responded, but according to past practices, the Austrian government will allocate funding equivalent to 80-90% of the French shipbuilding budget.

Our shipbuilding budget for this year has already been depleted. To continue maintaining our current advantage, an additional ten million pounds must be allocated," said the First Lord of the Admiralty, Edward.

In this era, ten million pounds is not equivalent to ten million pounds in later times. There are no more than ten countries in the world whose annual financial revenue exceeds ten million pounds.

Apart from the Royal Navy of Britain, there should be no other entity daring to demand such a large sum of shipbuilding funds all at once.

Indeed, both France and Austria can afford this amount, but these two are also land-power nations, and while developing their navies, they must also consider their armies.

If it weren't for the British clamoring about the two-power standard, the French government wouldn't suddenly increase shipbuilding funds, igniting this arms race.

In this era, the total tonnage of the French and Austrian navies is almost equivalent to that of the Royal Navy, with even more ironclad ships than the latter.

Faced with the British clamor, Napoleon III felt insulted, and even Franz in Vienna couldn't tolerate such provocation.

Oh, this is not just their personal feelings, but rather the common sentiment of the two countries' populations.

Everyone wants to save face, and radical groups in both countries are clamoring to surpass the Royal Navy. So, be it, let the arms race begin!

Coincidentally, Napoleon III needed to divert the public's attention so they wouldn't keep focusing on the issues with the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Napoleon III had the confidence to initiate the arms race. In recent decades, the French economy has accelerated rapidly, with last year's financial revenue exceeding that of the British by 18 million pounds (including the Kingdom of Sardinia).

Of course, this was just the domestic financial revenue. If colonies were included, the British were still superior, as just the financial revenue from India alone reached 50 million pounds — a testament to British ambition.

However, Napoleon III was not one to back down. He did not intend to let the French Navy surpass the Royal Navy, as long as the combined French and Austrian navies could break the British two-power standard, it was enough.

Behind the provocation, there were also implications for international political status. Once the Royal Navy's two-power standard was realized, the British would gain absolute dominance in overseas affairs.

This was something France and Austria could not tolerate. As the world's number two navy, with the arrogant French populace constantly petitioning, Napoleon III had to take the lead.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer Agarwal glared fiercely at Edward, inwardly cursing his relatives.

From his perspective, the Navy Department is like a noble utterly disconnected from the basic living costs faced by ordinary people. The so-called "two-power standard" may sound appealing, but really it's just seeking thrills for lack of something better to do.

The British financial strength was indeed the world's strongest, but France and Austria were not weak either, and the gap in strength was not that huge.

Just like the original timeline where the British boasted about a two-power standard, it is now facing challenges, even more severe ones.

Any of the two countries, France or Austria, has the potential to challenge the hegemony of the Royal Navy. If not for the need to develop their armies, the Royal Navy's maritime dominance would have been unstable long ago.

Agarwal said gloomily, “No, this year’s financial budget has already been allocated. We don’t have this kind of money at the Treasury to suddenly increase the budget by ten million pounds. If you want funds, you’ll have to convince Parliament yourselves!”

Ten million pounds was indeed a large sum, but for the British government, it could actually be squeezed out. Clearly, Agarwal was not prepared to tighten the belt just to raise funds for the navy.

The First Lord of the Admiralty, Edward, said angrily, “The Royal Navy concerns Britain’s fate. If we can’t ensure absolute superiority and let France and Austria catch up, we’ll end up regretting it!”

There aren’t so many reasons. The main purpose behind the Navy’s pursuit of the “two-power standard” is primarily to raise funds. The threat posed by the French and Austrian navies is actually far from significant.

Being colonial empires, all of their naval forces are mostly dispersed across the globe, with the Royal Navy maintaining dominance in various regions. There’s hardly any substantial threat to speak of.

Even if the French and Austrian navies were to join forces, they would likely not pose a significant challenge to the Royal Navy. The issue of effective coordination between the two navies on the battlefield remains unresolved. In the scenario of each nation acting independently, they are simply not a match for the Royal Navy.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Agarwal was not convinced and said, “So you go ask Parliament for the money! The Treasury does not have this budget now. To temporarily increase such a huge budget, Parliament’s approval is required.”

Without the support of the Cabinet, convincing Parliament solely through the Navy Department isn’t as easily achieved. Even if they explain with reason and try to appeal to their emotions, by the time they manage to persuade the gentlemen in Parliament, the French-built warships would have already been in service.

Edward was about to defend the situation when Prime Minister John Russell intervened to stop him. Budget disputes are commonplace, with the Treasury typically having one with each department every year.

Agarwal’s actions weren’t incorrect; they were entirely in accordance with regulations. A temporary increase in the Navy Department’s budget certainly necessitates a visit to Parliament. The Treasury’s unwillingness to take the lead in requesting funds from Parliament was also in accordance with the rules.

“The issue of increasing shipbuilding funds will be submitted to Parliament by the Navy Department, with the deadline set for next Monday. We will support the proposal.

Sir Edward, the Navy Department must be adequately prepared to face the queries from members of Parliament. Any questions?” said John Russell.

This is a necessary process; as long as Parliament agrees to the budget increase, the Treasury can resolve funding issues through loans, issuing bonds, or increasing taxes.

The arms race has only just begun, and the British government hasn't felt the pressure yet. As it progresses, they won't be as relaxed.

Sir Edward, the First Lord of the Admiralty, replied, "None!"

#### Chapter 408: Treaty of June 6th

The European arms race has been initiated, and negotiations between France and Austria are also nearing conclusion. The aspirations of Napoleon III to establish Greater France and those of Franz to establish the Greater Holy Roman Empire each harbored their own calculations.

Undoubtedly, strategic conflicts between France and Austria are almost inevitable. However, the timing of the conflict is definitely not now.

Until the empires are established, France and Austria remain allies, necessitating joint efforts to share international pressure. This marks a collaboration akin to bargaining with a tiger for its skin.

On June 6, 1866, Wessenberg, the Foreign Minister of the new Holy Roman Empire, and Abraham, the French Foreign Minister, signed the alliance treaty known as the Treaty of June 6th.

The treaty provisions include:

One. France and the new Holy Roman Empire officially forms an alliance, with the treaty valid for a period of ten years;

Two. The two countries mutually recognize each others spheres of influence, mainly based on the areas currently under their actual control;

Three. Austria will sell the sovereignty of various Italian states, including the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the Papal States, and Tuscany, to France for the price of 20 million guilders (250 million francs);

Four. France will sell the Balkan territories under its control to Austria for the price of 200 million francs (A total of 16 million guilders) and will also sell the colonial territories overlapping with those of Austria in West Africa for the price of 50 million francs;

Five. Austria tacitly agrees to France annexing Belgium, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the Papal States, Tuscany, and other regions. In return, France refrains from interfering in Austrias unification of Germany (disputed territories are temporarily set aside);

Six. Both countries agree to divide their spheres of influence on the African continent in accordance below:

The French will acquire the majority of North Africa and parts of West Africa.

(Note: Mainly including parts of present-day Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Senegal, The Gambia, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan...)

The new Holy Roman Empire, in turn, obtains the majority of territories in West Africa and Central Africa, as well as portions of North Africa and South Africa.

(Mainly today's Libya, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Chad, and Sudan...)

Note: East Africa and most of South Africa, which have not yet been incorporated into the spheres of influence of either country, will belong to whoever claims them first. Both parties mutually acknowledge each others expansion of influence on the African continent.

...

Without a doubt, the Treaty of June 6th is filled with compromises and uncertainties, with the alliance lasting only ten years, and both sides mentally preparing for potential future conflicts.

The core conflict, the Rhineland region, is not explicitly addressed in the treaty, laying the groundwork for future disputes between the two countries.

Of course, there is no verbal agreement in the treaty on who gets what. In other words, its a matter of who has the bigger fist.

The specifics of how to determine this will be resolved either when the French Empire is established or when Germany is unified.

From Franz's perspective, aside from sharing diplomatic pressure with the French, the only other aspect of interest in this treaty is the division of benefits in the African continent, where both France and Austria have staked claims to one-third each.

Had their strength in East and South Africa not been lacking, they may have simply partitioned the whole African continent between the two of them.

However, both of them demarcating territories was merely an agreement the African continent is not small, with even one-third being one million square kilometers.

Franz has sent so many immigrants over, yet their actual control area in the African continent is less than five million square kilometers. The rest is merely a nominal rule.

As for the French, despite Napoleon III's vigorous immigration efforts from the Balkan Peninsula, the number of immigrants in French African colonies is only in the millions. They control the coastal areas, but any further expansion seems unlikely.

Austria's colonization efforts are relatively better. Even though there are various colonial outposts from other countries, they don't pose a serious threat, and clearing them out wouldn't be difficult.

The French, on the other hand, have their hands full. For instance, in the situation in Egypt, does the British agree? And in Morocco, do Spain and John Bull agree?

For now, it makes sense to leave East Africa and South Africa alone. The French simply can't digest them. It's easy to sign a treaty, but if they don't even have the strength to turn it into reality, it would be laughable.

The division of the African continent between France and Austria is merely a closed-door self-indulgence for the two countries. In reality, without first kicking out the British, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, this plan is impossible to achieve.

For Franz, the Dutch can be ignored, and the Spanish can also be disregarded; their influence in Africa is minimal, and they have nothing to do with the new Holy Roman Empire.

The treaty sometimes referred to Austria, sometimes the new Holy Roman Empire this was a European tradition, otherwise it would lack legal effect.

The sovereignty of the Italian states lies with Austria, albeit this is only tacitly acknowledged by all; since the French now recognize it, they can now only purchase it from Austria.

Similarly, since Franz planned to incorporate the French Balkan territories into Austria, Austria itself had to pay for it, or else other states would object.

As for the colonies, they belonged to the new Holy Roman Empire, so funding for their purchase naturally came from the central government. Though for Franz, this is a matter of robbing Peter to pay Paul, the proper legal procedures must still be followed.

The various states within the Empire benefited from the colonies, so naturally, the colonial costs must also be shared collectively.

With the integration of the African colonies, there will be even more problems to face, so it is imperative to clarify these systems now.

Franz is very satisfied with this treaty. Austria has long lost control over the Italian states, or rather, has never truly controlled them.

If Austria were to annex the Italian states, within ten years, it would become a duplicate of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, perhaps called the Austro-Italian Empire.

It should be noted that Italy has a population of 25 million and shares a unified cultural tradition. Franz understood well the difficulty of assimilating them.

After all these years, Lombardy-Venetia still retains a strong Italian identity, while other regions of Austria have undergone changes under the influence of Germanic culture.

Its easy to teach them German and have them learn German, just send the kids to school, but erasing local customs and cultures will take a lot of time.

Regardless, with each passing generation, the imprint of Italy will fade bit by bit, and at the current rate, it will take two to three generations for the Austro-Italian regions to complete ethnic integration.

As for other ethnicities within Austria, many have already become Germanized.

For example, the Czech people have long been assimilated. Apart from the difference in language and writing, influenced by the nobility, there was no difference in their local life, customs, and habits from the Germans. Now, with the unification of language and writing, the last issue no longer exists.

Franz was powerless against the twenty million Italians, so he could only send them to trouble the French. No matter how powerful the French Empire becomes in the short term, as long as France and Italy merge, they will eventually follow in the footsteps of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Dont just look at the current total population of France which is already 44 million, as this is the result of annexing the Kingdom of Sardinia which brought in 6 million people. The main ethnic groups in France now include the French, Corsicans, Bretons, and Italians.

The French, Corsicans, and Bretons have already completed ethnic integration, while the newly added Italians do not fit in with them.

If a few more Italian states are annexed, then the Italians will become the largest ethnic group in Napoleon III's Greater French Empire.

He probably wouldn't care about this issue; with the emperor himself being Italian, is it really a problem if the Italians become the largest ethnic group?

It's too early to discuss this issue; for Napoleon III now, the biggest problem is how to annex these Italian states, not the troubles that might arise afterward.

Directly swallowing them whole is impossible; European countries will not allow such a thing to happen. France is also not the Holy Roman Empire, where additional seats for states can just be added.

Legally, the Kingdom of Sardinia is still an independent country with a shared monarchy with France, but it is not truly part of France.

Despite the French government controlling the internal affairs and diplomacy of the Kingdom of Sardinia, this fact remains unchanged. France's desire to merge with the Kingdom of Sardinia is still a long and arduous task.

Franz doesn't yet know what Napoleon III is thinking, but he has already assisted in drafting plans to annex the Italian states.

When conditions are ripe, it will all fall into Napoleon III's hands. The method is quite simple: first, establish an Italian federation, let the Italian states join it, and then let the Italian federation and France form a new federal empire.

Doesn't it sound very familiar? That's right, Franz referenced the Austro-Hungarian Empire to design this specifically for Napoleon III.

Since no one has experienced it before, no one still knows how tricky a dual monarchy can be. Just like in the original timeline, the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was considered a great revival of the Habsburg dynasty.

Adding to that, Napoleon III has no legitimacy in Italy and has a tiny number of supporters among the people there. He can now only take power by force, making this hidden danger even greater.

Prime Minister Felix expressed his concerns, saying, Your Majesty, while we have acquired the French Balkan territories, there is a series of issues ahead that need to be addressed. One misstep could lead to even greater trouble.

There was a clear agreement in the Russo-Austrian Secret Treaty, stipulating that the current French Balkan territories were originally designated for the Russians. Although we acquired them from the French, the explicit provisions in the treaty pose a significant challenge.

Especially concerning the Dardanelles, the Russians have always had their eyes on it. Since they are currently preoccupied with the Russo-Prussian War, they may not raise objections now, but these issues could become potential hazards in the future for Russo-Austrian relations.

The annexation of the French Balkan territories is undoubtedly a boon for Austria. Not only has it removed a thorn in its side, but it has also extended its influence into the Aegean Sea.

However, it also brings considerable trouble. Austria now acts as the gatekeeper of Europe, blocking the Russians from the Black Sea, which will inevitably lead to the division of the Russo-Austrian alliance.

With the ambitious France and the troublemaker John Bull to the west, and now facing off against the Russians to the east, Austrias future days are not promising.

Franz shrugged indifferently, saying, It doesnt matter. This is our deal with the French. If the Russians are interested in these territories, they can pay to buy them; just multiply the price by ten.

We are also open to territorial swaps. If the Russian government is determined to enter the Mediterranean, they will have to pay an appropriate price!

The Foreign Ministry can contact the Russians. Apart from Poland which we dont want, we can accept any region adjacent to our homeland.

This is nonsense. If the Russian government were so wealthy, they would have conquered the entire Balkan Peninsula in one go. The Russo-Prussian War would have also ended last year.

At that time, the Polish territories were still intact, and most of the military provisions could be obtained locally. With waterways connecting Austria, logistics were not an issue. As long as they were willing to spend money, a million-strong army could easily advance, and the Prussians would have long surrendered.

If they lack funds, then territorial exchange is the only option. Despite the grand ambitions of the Russians, the only territory bordering Austria, aside from Russian Poland, is Western Ukraine. This is practically telling the Russians in broad daylight that they have their eyes on Western Ukraine.

How to exchange territories and whether the Russian government agrees is not the focus. In any case, in the next twenty years, it will be impossible for the Russians to make a comeback.

Twenty years is enough time to change many things. By then, Austrias African strategy will have been completed, and barring any surprises, the French will also have fallen into the pit.

If lucky, the French might self-destruct on their own. Napoleon III, who is nearly 60 years old, is not in the best health. In the original timeline, he passed away in 1873, so its uncertain how much longer he will live.

He has many illegitimate children, but only one legitimate son. Born in 1856, his son would not be able to control the empire if Napoleon III could not live much longer.

A dual monarchy is not something an ordinary person can handle. Without sufficient prestige and skill to suppress opposition, problems will arise at the slightest provocation.

Especially in revolutionary Paris, any slight issue could trigger a revolution in that region. With a young monarch, it would be a disaster.

Even if theres no disaster, one can be manufactured, such as supporting Italian independence or a sudden outbreak of a Franco-Austrian war.

As long as France is beaten down, eliminating the danger of a two-front war, Russia and Austria can truly befriend each other.

Chapter 409: Mutually Beneficial Cooperation

The “Treaty of June 6th” was clearly something that could not see the light of day. If news of France and Austria joining hands to partition the European continent got out, wouldn’t the British government go mad?

The European continent needs to maintain a balance, but this is not how such a balance is achieved. If a Greater French Empire and a Greater Holy Roman Empire were to truly emerge, then the European continent would become a three-legged stand. Because by then, it may be difficult to find a fourth country on the European continent.

Like Pandora's Box, once ambition has been unleashed, it becomes difficult to take it back in.

Napoleon left the French not only with glorious achievements in battle but also with a dream of being a great nation. With the emotional nature of the French people, once their expansionist fervor is stirred up, half of Italy and Belgium may not satisfy their desires.

And adding Spain and Portugal wouldn't be excessive, right? After all, Napoleon once occupied regions of Spain, so inheriting this fine tradition was a must!

With France uniting Western Europe and Austria uniting Germany, in this context, do small countries like Switzerland and the Netherlands sandwiched between these two behemoths really have a choice?

Either they voluntarily join one side, or they are forcibly annexed — this is the fate of small countries.

The Nordic three countries in the outer regions should not think they can remain aloof either. For strategic reasons, the Russians would not let them off easily.

With the three major powers all expanding outward, the British could only look on dumbfounded. Even if they wanted to intervene, they could not. Before everyone turns against each other, they might be cleared out first.

The three countries even have a basis for an alliance. After completing their expansions, they will certainly need time to digest them, meaning no wars can break out on the European continent in the short term.

In that case, the British, who control the most colonies worldwide, would be in danger. They can't go and ally with the Americans, and even if they did, it would be useless!

Of course, the probability of such a situation occurring is extremely low. After annexing Italy and Belgium, France's internal contradictions will have to be resolved, leaving no ability for further expansion.

As for Austria, Franz only raises the slogan of unifying Germany, and with regards to partitioning the entire European continent — has he not woken up yet?

Now that nationalism has awakened, the unification of Germany is more or less the endpoint of Austria's expansion on the European continent.

However, limited by the times, many still believe that after unifying Germany, Austria will continue to expand.

The reason is very simple: Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands all split from the Holy Roman Empire, sharing the same cultural circle, so radical Greater German nationalists count them in too.

To avoid causing panic and ensure the smooth implementation of the plan, France and Austria chose to maintain a high degree of confidentiality. Many know of the treaty's existence, but very few know its contents.

In Austria, the only three who know about the treaty in full are the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and Franz himself. It is more or less the same in France.

In recent years, France's economy has developed well, Napoleon III's throne has stabilized, and the people's calls for a Greater French Empire have gradually grown louder.

This was definitely the voice of the French people; at most, Franz only guided it a little. There was evidence of this: in the original timeline, Napoleon III did quite well as emperor. It was only because of his defeat that he was unable to satisfy the people's dream of becoming a great nation and was driven from the throne.

Compared to the original timeline's Franz who suffered two consecutive defeats but still retained the throne, the French people's desire to become a hegemon was evident.

The real driving force behind the Franco-Austrian alliance this time was not Napoleon III, but the vast majority of the French people. Their inadvertent shouts exerted pressure on the Emperor in an intangible way. Since the people elected the Emperor, Napoleon III naturally had to respect the people's choice.

On June 8, 1866, the foreign ministries of France and Austria once again signed a treaty entitled "Agreement between France and Austria on the Transfer of Suzerainty over Portions of Colonies in Italy, the Balkans, and Africa."

This is a disguise for the "Treaty of June 6th," involving only territorial suzerainty exchanges in Articles Three and Four. Anyway, this cannot be hidden. Once the handover between the two countries begins, it will all be exposed.

In Europe, anything can be used for trading, let alone suzerainty and colonies. A trade-off by mutual consent, at most, will just irk the British, boosting newspaper sales.

Konrad Hollmann, editor of an Austrian daily newspaper, occasionally doubles as a commentator to express official views on current affairs.

Of course, as a commercial paper, such opinions are usually very subtle, often attacking indirectly.

As news of the territorial exchange between France and Austria just came in, Konrad Hollmann's task was set. Undoubtedly, such news must be sung praises of!

Moving his pen, Konrad Hollmann fell into contemplation. The news had to catch people's attention; for the highly commercialized Vienna Daily, straightforward official articles were not popular.

If too many people write in the same vein, how can newspaper sales be guaranteed? The Vienna Daily is a major newspaper with a daily circulation of one hundred thousand; playing with it like this would risk losing readers.

Watching the globe on his desk spinning after being blown by the wind, Konrad had a sudden inspiration and began to write on paper with his pen.

## Title: Reflections on the Franco-Austrian Colonial and Suzerainty Exchange - A Win-Win Cooperation

This was no longer news but rather an opinion piece. For a commercial newspaper, as long as it complies with Austrian laws and ensures the news is true and reliable, there are no strict requirements on how to publish content.

Starting directly from international competition, Konrad mentioned several historical cases and then compared them with the solutions of France and Austria.

The conclusion reached was that cooperation leads to mutual benefit. Additionally, praise was given to the efforts made by the governments of France and Austria for world peace.

From the perspective of both France and Austria, this exchange was indeed mutually beneficial.

France relinquished a portion of its colonies in exchange for absolute dominance in the central and southern regions of Italy, laying the groundwork for its annexation of Italy.

Strategically, France took the initiative in the Mediterranean. By controlling Sicily and Tunisia, the French could potentially split the Mediterranean into two when necessary.

The strategic deployment of the British in Malta was rendered ineffective, significantly reducing the strategic value of this Mediterranean stronghold. Unless the age of aircraft arrives, it can no longer play the role the British hoped for.

Austria traded the suzerainty of the Italian principalities, which were considered dispensable, for some of France's Balkan and West African colonies, not only removing a thorn but also consolidating its colonial dominance in West Africa.

In addition, they acquired another bargaining chip for a deal with the Russians. The Dardanelles remained attractive to the Russian government, at least until they abandoned their ambitions in the Mediterranean.

After finishing the draft, proofreading it several times, and making corrections to a few writing errors, Konrad Hollmann handed the manuscript to the editor-in-chief for review.

Such major news usually does not result in just one news article. Typically, three to five people simultaneously write drafts, and the editor-in-chief then selects the most suitable one for publication.

Occasionally, there might be meetings to discuss it, but due to the timing of the news, such discussions are rare.

As expected, Konrad's news article passed. The concept of "Win-Win Cooperation" surpassed the others. News has always been inseparable from politics, and "Win-Win Cooperation" aligns very well with Austria's current diplomatic stance.

Although the government hasn't openly declared this slogan, they've been practicing it for a while. The alliance between Russia and Austria already set the stage for win-win cooperation.

For example, in the Near East War, Russia secured Bulgaria and the coveted Constantinople, while Austria unified Southern Germany and incidentally annexed parts of the Balkan Peninsula.

This exemplifies win-win cooperation, but this example cannot be cited as it could provoke animosity.

Not only would England and France go berserk, but even the Russian government would probably express their objections. Each party knows its own affairs; they are only the nominal winner, having paid a horrific price with only a political victory as the gain.

While this achievement can deceive the general public, the upper echelons of the Russian government are well aware that, strategically, they failed and lost the best opportunity to enter the Mediterranean.

Using this Franco-Austrian exchange as an example would be fine. After all, France and Austria each got what they wanted, and any excuse would satisfy their domestic populations.

Konrad shouted out the “Win-Win Cooperation” slogan, but its impact was not something he could have foreseen.

With the publication of the news, it quickly caused a sensation in Vienna. Over time, this slogan evolved into the official propaganda slogan of France and Austria.

As the treaty was signed, diplomatic relations between France and Austria also entered a period of secrecy. Many optimistically believed that the contradictions between France and Austria no longer existed.

No matter what others think, Franz was very clear that the Franco-Austrian contradictions were simply suppressed artificially under their common interests.

That’s not the main point though. The key is that Austria can now withdraw troops from Italy. The effect of military training has already been achieved. They’ve even had some exchanges with the French, which almost proves the combat effectiveness of the army.

As for the remaining Italian guerrillas, let the French handle them themselves! Suzerainty not only represents interests but also implies responsibilities.

In a sense, this unfriendly military exchange has also accelerated the pace of alliance between the two countries. On the battlefield, the armies of France and Austria did not exhibit a one-sided thrashing; both sides were almost evenly matched.

Of course, this was due to the small geographical area of conflict and limited deployment of forces, with both sides mainly relying on sheer force. The officers did not have much room to maneuver.

This situation caused trepidation in the upper echelons of both France and Austria. The Austrian government was wary of France’s reputation, while the French were wary of Austria’s numerical superiority.

This is determined by the population advantage. Even after annexing the Kingdom of Sardinia, there remains a significant population gap between France and Austria. If it devolves into a war of attrition, the French would undoubtedly be the first to be unable to hold on.

Franz is keenly aware that the French possess considerable strength. Just because Napoleon III messed up in the original timeline doesn’t mean one can assume the French military is weak.

One must know that during the Franco-Prussian War, the ratio of forces between the two sides was 47:22. Due to Napoleon III blindly commanding, in the first major battle — the Battle of Wissembourg, the French fought the Prussian army with the latter ten times their numbers.

Subsequently, in the Battle of Wörth two days later, the troop ratio between the Prussians and the French was 130,000 versus 40,000, with the outcome being self-evident.

This pattern continued in subsequent battles, with Prussia almost always having more than three times the troops compared to the French in every engagement.

Don't ask why this was the case; only Napoleon III could answer that question. Anyway, history was just like this. Who knows why he insisted on sending troops to their demise?

In Paris, the French people have already begun celebrating. Thanks to newspapers helping to popularize strategic knowledge, many French citizens believe that this marks the establishment of French Mediterranean hegemony.

Although this has not yet been recognized by England and Austria, it does not hinder the jubilation of the French people. The annexation of Italy has become the consensus of radical groups in France.

While there is a celebration among the citizens, the response from the French government is markedly different. Many are concerned that this agreement will provoke hostility from the British.

Pro-British officials believe this is Austria's attempt to sow discord between Britain and France, a speculation that is close to the truth, albeit not a conspiracy but a strategy.

The reaction of the French populace has already indicated to them that there is no way to stop this transaction.

“Anglo-French friendship,” has that ever existed?

Just opening any French history book is enough to prove the enmity between Britain and France — friendship is far too extravagant.

The centuries-old hatred between England and France cannot be eliminated overnight. In fact, the French government has never made efforts in this direction.

Anyone who dares to try should always be prepared to accept the honorable title of “traitor.” Although there are many pro-British people in the government, there are even more anti-British people among the public.

Napoleon III has been quite annoyed lately. He suddenly realized that having too many pro-British officials in the government is not a good thing, even though he himself is pro-British.

But in the face of interests, personal stance must take a backseat. Whether to conduct a major purge in the government was a question worth considering.

#### Chapter 410: British and Russian Reactions

Although the Treaty of June 6th only exposed the tip of the iceberg, the British government was already losing sleep over it. Now, looking at the map of the Mediterranean gave John Russell a headache. The French army had already landed in Sicily under the pretext of helping to suppress the rebellion.

With Austria suddenly letting go, who else could restrict French expansion in Italy?

The answer was brutally cruel: no one.

Italy had always been the focal point of the Franco-Austrian rivalry, but now they had chosen to compromise. Naturally, this contradiction disappeared.

“Win-win cooperation” may be useful in resolving international disputes, but for the British Empire’s policy of continental balance, it was outright poisonous.

In the Prime Minister’s residence on 10 Downing Street, John Russell said gravely, “In recent decades, the strength of France and Austria has grown rapidly, to the point of posing a threat to us.

Look at this latest map of Europe. Austria has annexed Southern Germany and is expanding vigorously in the Balkan Peninsula. After this recent transaction with the French, their territory has nearly doubled in size.

The French are no less ambitious. In just a few years, Napoleon III took advantage of our involvement in suppressing the Indian rebellion to annex the Kingdom of Sardinia. Now they have extended their reach into Southern Italy.

Since France and Austria joined forces to dig the Suez Canal, they have been squeezing us out of the Mediterranean. If we don’t find a way to prevent them from getting closer, soon there will be no place for us in the Mediterranean.”

John Russell’s words were somewhat exaggerated. The notion of being squeezed out was entirely baseless. Everyone’s expanding spheres of influence had clashed, so naturally, there would be competition over interests.

Unfortunately, in this new round of struggles, the British suffered losses.

To ensure the smooth progress of the Suez Canal project, British initiatives such as the Suez Railway project and the promotion of cotton cultivation in Egypt didn’t take off under joint intervention by France and Austria.

Apart from that, British interests in regions like the Ottoman Empire and Greece were unaffected. There was no intention from both countries to drive them out of the Mediterranean at all.

It’s not that Franz didn’t want to make a move, the key issue was that the French were too timid when facing the British. Unless the interests were significant enough, it would be difficult to convince Napoleon III.

However, there were only so many interests to be had, and Austria could not simply do it for free — there was not enough for two parties to share.

The First Lord of the Admiralty, Edward, pointed to the map on the wall and said, “The French have extended their reach to Sicily, and Tunisia has also been taken under their protection. Before long, our access to and from the Mediterranean will depend on the French.”

Undoubtedly, Edward was exerting pressure on the Foreign Office. The Royal Navy controlled the Strait of Gibraltar, which was the most important area in the Mediterranean until the Suez Canal was opened.

The Foreign Secretary, Raistlin, responded with a grim face, “The Foreign Office bears responsibility for the Franco-Austrian rapprochement, but isn’t it also because we exerted too much pressure on them?”

In recent years, our incessant actions to limit France and Austria have raised the vigilance of the two countries.

The ongoing Russo-Prussian War is also one of the reasons prompting the two countries to ease tensions.

For the sake of common interests, I have reason to believe that France and Austria are prepared to form an alliance, or may have already done so.

The compromise on the Italian issue is definitely not that simple. It's no secret that the French want to annex Italy, and it's also no secret that Austria wants to unify Germany.

In the current situation, with each country restraining the other, they cannot achieve their goals. However, if France and Austria form an alliance, it will be different. With both countries taking action simultaneously, we will be powerless even if we want to intervene."

Faces turned pale as they thought of more. In recent years, tensions between England and France, as well as between England and Austria, have been escalating, and to limit the expansion of both countries, the British government has been taking action constantly.

Prime Minister John Russell stated with certainty, "The Russo-Prussian War cannot continue any longer. Russia has already been weakened enough. If Russia and Prussia continue to bleed each other, there will be no force left on the European continent to counterbalance France and Austria."

Weakening the Russian Empire is a British national policy, and the British government has done quite well, it's just that they didn't expect that while focusing on defeating Russia, they neglected the rise of France and Austria.

Now, there has been a remarkable change in the strength of the three major empires on the European continent, with Russia, ranked first, dropping to the bottom directly. It will be difficult for them to recover for the next decade or two.

The rapid expansions of France and Austria mean that either of these two countries now has the potential to challenge British hegemony.

Foreign Minister Raistlin objected, "It's too late to try to stop it now. Russia and Prussia are really duking it out now.

With Russia suffering such heavy losses, the Russian government cannot easily let the Prussians off the hook. Likewise, the Kingdom of Prussia will not cease war with the Russians. If they miss this opportunity, their aim of becoming an empire will be shattered.

Since that's the case, we might as well cripple Russia once and for all, to prevent them from threatening India again after recovering their strength.

It's simple to disrupt the Franco-Austrian rapprochement. With Russia losing its position as European hegemon, the seed of contradiction will then arise between France and Austria."

Chancellor of the Exchequer Agarwal questioned, "What if they have already formed an alliance?"

Raistlin said arrogantly, "Then we'll join their alliance, and break it apart from within."

...

The outcome of this meeting left Raistlin feeling hurt. Perhaps due to considerations of strategic security, the Cabinet did not proceed according to his plan. Instead, they decided to strike first and seize control of Tunisia.

Purely from a military perspective, this was the best choice. The French army had already landed on Sicily, robbing the Royal Navy of the opportunity to control the largest island in the Mediterranean.

If that was the case, then the only option was to secure the Strait of Tunis. With Malta and Tunisia in the hands of the Royal Navy, they would still maintain control over the Mediterranean.

As for offending the French in the process, that was not a concern for the group. Ever since the French annexation of the Kingdom of Sardinia, Anglo-French relations had been strained.

Apart from a brief honeymoon period during the Near East War, most of the time, both sides were adversaries.

Raistlin didn't have time to dwell on this issue; his task now was to dismantle the Russo-Austrian alliance. As long as this alliance existed, it posed a threat to the hegemony of the British Empire.

Who knows, after failing to expand on the European continent, the Russian government might return to Central Asia to expand towards the Indian subcontinent.

Just because the Russians suffered heavy losses doesn't mean they lack the ability to expand. As long as the Austrians are willing to provide money and resources, this scenario could become a reality.

In the midst of escalating conflicts between Britain and Austria, Austria could even compromise with the French government, so there's no reason they couldn't support the Russians, right?

During this era, Canada, Australia, and South Africa haven't been fully developed yet. If India is lost, what kind of hegemon would the British Empire be?

If such a situation were to occur, within ten years, the maritime hegemony of the British Empire would be replaced by France and Austria.

The status of the world's factory is also built on the foundation of both raw materials and markets. Without cheap raw materials from India and its vast consumer market, the industrial dominance of the British would immediately be lost.

By this stage of the Industrial Revolution, the British have already lost their technological advantage, and the industrial capabilities of Britain, France, and Austria are gradually getting closer.

...

In St. Petersburg, Alexander II's mood was much more at ease. Whether France and Austria drew closer or not was no longer his concern.

The Russo-Prussian War continued, and due to logistical constraints limiting troop deployment, the Russian army was unable to make progress, causing Alexander II to worry.

In theory, such a drawn-out war would eventually see the Russian Empire as the final victor. However, a question mark hung over this victory.

While Sweden has been appeased, the situation in Central Asia has deteriorated, and new developments are unfolding in the Far East, leaving them overwhelmed and preoccupied.

Foreign Minister Ivanov reported, “Your Majesty, Austria has provided a response. They agree to relinquish most of the French Balkan territories, but they demand something in return.”

This doesn’t surprise Alexander II. Despite the provision in the Russo-Austrian secret treaty, it’s well-known that Austria paid for the acquisition of the French Balkans and wouldn’t give it up for nothing.

Even brothers settle accounts; what more mere allies?

“What do they want?” Alexander II asked.

Despite missing the opportune moment to access the Mediterranean, the strategic importance of the Dardanelles remains significant. If Austria’s terms are reasonable, he doesn’t mind obtaining it.

Foreign Minister Ivanov replied, “We have conducted preliminary negotiations. The Austrian government believes that in this land transaction, in addition to economic aspects, they have also paid a political price.

Their asking price is very high. If we purchase it outright, we must pay 200 million guilders at once. But they’re open to a land exchange, proposing a ratio of five to one based on area.

If we agree to this deal, even if the final negotiated result is halved, we would suffer a huge loss.”

It was clear that Foreign Minister Ivanov opposed such a transaction. In the short term, the Russian Empire simply lacked the strength to enter the Mediterranean.

Moreover, the coastal areas of the Mediterranean have been largely divided among other powers, leaving them with no foothold.

Their only option left is the Ottoman Empire, but that’s a tough nut to crack, one they’re not currently capable of swallowing.

After a moment of contemplation, Alexander II made his decision, “In that case, let’s continue bargaining with the Austrians on the price. We’re not in a hurry; we can drag it out for three or five years.”

He was aware that the Austrian government was trying to drive a hard bargain, or rather that the Austrians didn’t want to see them enter the Mediterranean and compete for territory. This was especially true since the Mediterranean had already been divided among Britain, France, and Austria.

Adding another competitor would surely upset the balance in the Mediterranean. Due to the Russo-Austrian alliance, the Austrians couldn’t act alone, which would put the Austrian government in a passive position diplomatically, especially with warming relations between France and Austria.