

Roman Empire 421

Chapter 421: Junkers VS Officials + Capitalists

In March 1867, Austria conducted a large-scale military exercise on the Austro-Prussian border, frightening the Prussians.

Having just finished the Russo-Prussian War, they were busy licking their wounds and had no courage for another Prusso-Austrian War.

If war broke out at this point, not only would they have to give up all the gains from the previous war, but even self-preservation would be difficult.

In the Berlin Palace, Foreign Minister Mackeith said, "The Austrians are just flexing their muscles. They won't start a war at this time.

Once a war breaks out, the Russians will certainly continue the fight. The Russian government can just follow behind and reap the benefits, regaining Poland and the Baltic region.

This is not what the Austrian government wants to see. A strong Russian Empire is not in their interests. The Austro-Russian alliance is just a temporary union of interests. Sooner or later, they will clash over European supremacy.

And then there is the current international situation, which the Austrian government cannot ignore. No European country wants to see a domineering Austria. If they start a war now, they will be isolated.

If the French attack the Rhineland after the war breaks out, will the Austrian government intervene or not?

If they intervene, it could very well lead to a full-scale war between France and Austria. If they don't intervene, how can they claim to be the leader of the German states?"

Mackeith didn't say the real reason why he was not afraid. Prussia was already exhausted and would definitely lose a war.

However, as long as the Prussian government was shameless enough, there was still a chance to pit Austria against France and reverse the current passive situation.

Once the French invaded the Rhineland, the Prussian government could directly admit defeat and join the new Holy Roman Empire, demanding that Austria defend the territorial integrity of Germany.

This would ignite a Franco-Austrian War, and the situation would change. If the French gained the upper hand or the war dragged on, Prussia could switch sides again.

Don't doubt the bottom line of politicians. As long as the interests are big enough, there is nothing they cannot do.

The backbone of the Kingdom of Prussia is the Junker aristocracy. Even if the Austrian government wanted to buy them off, it couldn't afford the price.

Behind the scenes, the two sides have already been in contact. If Franz is willing to compromise, the German territories can be unified at any time.

The Junker aristocrats oppose joining the new Holy Roman Empire only for the sake of their own interests. If Prussia can achieve the same status as Austria and guarantee their interests, then the two can merge at any time.

Obviously, this is impossible. If a compromise is reached, the new Holy Roman Empire will be divided again.

A mountain cannot have two tigers. If there are two of them, then it will become Prussia leading a group of small principalities to fight against Austria within the empire.

From the very beginning, Franz had made a decision — the rights of the principalities had to be restricted.

After so many years of hard work, he had only just regained control of diplomacy, coinage, command of the army, and some financial power. How could he hand it over again?

Minister of the Army and the Navy Roon questioned, “This is just your wishful thinking and does not represent the position of the Austrian government.

Moreover, Austria became the leader of Germany based on strength, not so-called public opinion. They gained strength first and then gained popular support.

The influence of nationalism is indeed great, but it is not enough to sway the decisions of the Austrian government. Exchanging the Rhineland for the unification of Germany, is that really a loss for the Austrians?

Remember, Austria has always been wary of us. Among the many states of Germany, only we pose a threat to their strength.”

As the representative of the military, Roon was an advocate of the supremacy of the military. This was determined by the national conditions of the Kingdom of Prussia, and everyone became a supporter of it.

Roon did not value Austria’s influence. In his view, strength was paramount. Since Austria has sufficient strength, other problems do not matter.

As long as Germany can be unified, losing the Rhineland is no big deal. At most, the people will curse them for a while. In the future, as long as it is recovered, these problems can all be washed away.

This was not just his personal opinion. Many people shared the same view. Some civil groups are even advocating the theory of “unification at a cost”, that is: paying a certain price in exchange for national unification.

Specifically, this included ceding the territory west of the Rhine River to the French and the Prussian Poland to the Russians.

Some people have also carried out in-depth analysis, believing that this would shrink the Kingdom of Prussia by more than half, which would make the unified empire more stable.

This is the biggest concern of the Junker aristocrats. If Austria only annexes a shrunken version of the Kingdom of Prussia, they will really suffer heavy losses.

The Kingdom of Prussia is larger than all the other principalities combined excluding Austria. The existence of such a large principality will obviously weaken the authority of the central government.

If Austria wants to dominate the new Holy Roman Empire, it must suppress the Kingdom of Prussia and keep it within a controllable range. The two sides are naturally opposed, and there is no possibility of compromise.

This view does not include shrewd politicians. Only they can clearly see how dire the situation would become after Austria unified Germany.

Politically, isolation would be inevitable, as a major Central European empire would naturally be viewed with hostility in Europe. Militarily, it would face enemies from all sides.

These enemies would come from both land and sea. Needless to say on land, by just looking at the map, they would know that they would have to simultaneously confront France and Russia.

The situation at sea is even worse. In the Mediterranean, the Austrian navy must fight against Britain and France; in the Baltic Sea, it must fight against the Russians; and in the Atlantic, it must fight against Britain and France at the same time.

This is without even considering smaller countries. In fact, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the Nordic Federation will all be Austria's enemies. This is determined by geopolitics.

Except for Switzerland and Belgium, which are very likely to remain neutral, all that can be seen on the European continent are enemies, even the insignificant Montenegro and Greece are no exception.

No, Greece and Montenegro have already stood against Austria. Their dreams of becoming powerful nations have been blocked by Austria.

If it were not for having too many external enemies, why would Franz bother suppressing Russia only to let a Greater France emerge? Isn't it to reduce pressure and divert everyone's attention?

Only when Russia declined could Austria escape the predicament of fighting on two fronts. Even in the event of a blunder that triggers a full-scale European war, the eastern front could be resolved in the shortest possible time.

Provoking French ambitions and deliberately allowing the emergence of Greater France needs no further explanation.

They too are a common enemy of Europe. With two behemoths appearing simultaneously, European governments would instantly be dumbfounded, unable to devise a response strategy in the short term.

In this stalemate between two powers, no matter which one falls, the other will become the superpower of Europe. Who knows what to do then?

During this hesitation, the situation will change.

To put it bluntly, this is a gamble. Franz is betting that after the unification of Germany, he can first complete the internal integration. Then, through diplomatic means, he can provoke internal contradictions in Greater France, and eventually subjugate France with national strength.

The French, on the other hand, are betting that the French military is stronger and can directly defeat the unified Germany on the battlefield after establishing Greater France.

The existence of the Austro-French alliance, apart from mutual needs, also implies an intention to jointly eliminate other competitors. Neither side will be at ease to fight a decisive battle without first dealing with other competitors.

Although there is no idiom in Europe that says “while the snipe and the clam are fighting, the fisherman benefits,” everyone understands this principle.

Obviously, this is not known by the Prussian government. If they had known that France and Austria had formed an alliance, they would probably have no intention of stirring up any “Greater Prussia” plan, but would instead quickly find others to huddle together for warmth.

Foreign Minister Mackeith sneered, “By your reasoning, we should just hand over Silesia? Don’t forget, the Austrians have also proposed to purchase Prussian Saxony.

This kind of compromise and concession will only embolden them. At what point do we draw the line? If we do compromise, how will the government explain it to the people?”

Chief of General Staff Moltke refuted, “Of course, it’s not a unilateral cession. We can conduct an exchange of interests with Austria. Right now, we need Austria’s support or at least tacit permission...”

...

Looking at the crowd arguing endlessly, the atmosphere was very disharmonious. The military advocated compromise, and the government advocated toughness. It seemed that the order was reversed.

This was indeed reversed. At first, it was the government officials who advocated compromise, and the military advocated a tough response. However, with the change in the situation, this situation has reversed.

In fact, this is just a continuation of the power struggle in the Prussian government. The civilian officials are now at an absolute disadvantage in the power struggle within the government, with decision-making power falling into the hands of the military. Naturally, they were unwilling to accept defeat and sought to cause trouble.

In the face of power, many bottom lines ceased to exist. The civilian officials had reached a critical juncture of life and death. Once the London negotiations concluded, with the military bolstered by their great victory over Russia, their voice in the government would further strengthen.

With victory in hand, the military naturally advocated for stability. As for the aftereffects of ceding territory, they were not actually that severe.

Conceding territory also depends on how it is conceded. As long as it is done properly, the losses can be controlled within a certain range. What the Kingdom of Prussia lacks now is not land, but population, especially Germans.

With East Prussia depopulated, there is an urgent need for people to fill the void. The newly occupied areas also require immigrants to stabilize the localities. By relocating the population and finances from the ceded lands, Austria could simply take over an empty territory.

This would still fulfill the agreement, leaving the Austrian government with no recourse. The initial agreement was only to cede Silesia, with no stipulation about including the population and property therein.

If they wanted to cause trouble, they could even leave behind a portion of the population, transferring all local industries under their names, and then engage in non-violent non-cooperation.

In this society where private property is sacred and inviolable, what law states that people cannot legally choose non-cooperation? The Austrian government would be powerless.

Of course, this powerlessness would only be temporary. People always find solutions, especially once they discard scruples. Many methods could then resolve the issue.

There was another unspoken reason behind the military's shift in stance — the Junker nobility needed labor to cultivate their lands. In this era, the degree of mechanization was still low, and agriculture's demand for labor was far from trivial.

East Prussia was the Junker nobility's stronghold, but now it lacked people, leaving them unable to find sufficient labor to resume production.

There were also the newly occupied areas, where a lot of the land would fall into the hands of the Junker nobles through post-war rewards, also requiring labor for cultivation.

Without locals, relying entirely on the indigenous population for farming would pose a major language barrier issue.

Furthermore, noble governance over regional domains necessitates having an established foundation. Should the indigenous populace rise up in defiance, they would require individuals from their own ranks to quell such insurrection.

Silesia, wrested from Austrian control, was an industrialized region dominated by capitalist interests superseding those of the landed aristocracy. Thus, its potential cession posed no threat of losses to the Junker nobility.

The Prussian Saxon region was also more or less the same, its economy developed quite well, however, their incorporation into the Kingdom of Prussia was too recent for the Junker aristocrats to establish a firm grip over the region.

The civilian officials are different. To compete with the military, they formed an alliance with the domestic capitalists. As the spokesperson for the interests of the bourgeoisie in the government, they naturally have to protect the interests of the bourgeoisie now.

In theory, if the population and property are transferred, the losses of the Kingdom of Prussia can be minimized. Ordinary people can also receive compensation from the government, which seems to be a good idea.

However, the interests of the capitalists cannot be guaranteed. Factories cannot just be built anywhere. Even if all conditions are met, they will have to rebuild their network of contacts and sales networks after changing regions.

This is not something that the government's compensation can make up for. In the process of this change, they are very likely to be replaced by others.

Chapter 422: Good Fortune and Misfortune Go Hand in Hand

You cheat me, I cheat you. Struggle was the theme of the era of the great powers.

In the harsh realities of global politics, nations are bound not by choice but by the dynamics of interests. Friendships and animosities are forged and broken as interests align or clash, with role reversals being a common occurrence.

The British were the best at this. They could go from being allies to enemies in a blink, and then friends again shortly after.

European diplomacy in the modern era has, to some extent, taken a page from Britain's playbook, with nations progressively abandoning their moral boundaries and ethical standards. Genuine, close-knit alliances are now remnants of a time before the Middle Ages.

In this context, the relationships between European nations were a tangled mess that could not be simply categorized as enemies or friends.

To gain more support in the negotiations, both Prussia and Russia are conducting diplomatic offensives. The Ottoman Empire, which has been slow to react, has also launched diplomatic activities. Only the khanates of Central Asia and the Eastern Empire are still in a "salted fish" state.

TN: lazy and unmotivated; no purpose in life; someone who just lies there and does nothing

Being a "salted fish" is a tragedy. Under the European ruling system, international support is still very useful. Even the diplomatic support of small countries has value.

Since the little brother doesn't have the diplomatic ability, John Bull himself has to step up. Perhaps this is also what the British government wants to see most so that they can increase their influence in these countries and gain greater benefits.

Franz originally wanted to be a bystander, but the world will change whether he wants it or not. Because of the Austro-Russian alliance, Austria was inevitably involved.

"The Russians want to go back to the pre-war status quo and obtain our support?"

Franz couldn't help but be surprised. This was simply a fantasy. Whether they admit it or not, the Russians are the losers this time. How can losers not pay the price?

Not to cede an inch of land, not to pay a single ruble.

Such an armistice condition is unlikely to be agreed to by everyone. Unless they can persuade all European countries to endorse it, paying the price is inevitable.

Foreign Minister Wessenberg replied, "Yes, Your Majesty. That's what the Russian ambassador said. They don't want to take responsibility for this war."

No doubt, this involved political struggles within the Russian government. No one in the higher ranks wanted to bear responsibility, so they acted shamelessly.

Franz was amused. He couldn't be bothered to deal with the Russians' mess, so he said without hesitation, "Reply to the Russian government that if they think they have the ability to persuade all parties to agree, we have no objection.

But if they cannot do so, then they should not entertain such whimsical ideas lest they become an international laughingstock."

Becoming an “international laughingstock” was Russia’s Achilles’ heel. Their diplomatic blunders were never-ending, occurring every few years, as if they could not grow without creating controversies.

Franz naturally didn’t want to accompany the Russian government to have fun and treat everyone else like fools, only to find out in the end that they were the fools.

Diplomacy is based on strength, and the Russian Empire in its heyday had the confidence to do so. If they had stopped the war a year ago, they would still have had the strength to make no territorial concessions and pay no reparations.

It’s a pity that the sound of gunshots in Moscow put an end to all of this as the Russian government grappled primarily with internal threats, rendering external adversaries a mere secondary concern.

Even the most radical Polish nationalists dare not dream of swallowing the Russian Empire in one bite. When it came to military prowess, the exception of the Kingdom of Prussia notwithstanding, the rest were merely opportunists, exploiting situations rigged in their favor.

The main forces of the Russian army were preoccupied by the Prussians. Meanwhile, the enemies the others faced were all second-rate troops of the Russians. Their combat effectiveness was not in the same league.

The tragedy now is that the main forces of the Russian army are depleted, and the combat capabilities of the new recruits are at best second-rate. This is also proven by the fact that all fronts are at a disadvantage.

Prime Minister Felix analyzed, “Your Majesty, I think the Russians are probing our stance. At this point in the war, the Russian government must know they cannot continue.

The Russian Empire’s economy is on the verge of collapse, and social contradictions have long reached the tipping point. If the war is not ended, the Russian government will be finished.”

“Economic collapse, internal and external troubles,” Franz thought about it from Alexander II’s perspective. What would he do if he were in his shoes?

Franz quickly came to a conclusion — stabilize first, then reform. Never mind the rest, first, save the regime, and then use external pressure to push for social reform.

Nicholas I won the Near East War, not only covering up the social crisis but also increasing the difficulty of reform. The ruling group did not feel a threat to their survival.

Now that the situation has deteriorated, isn’t this an opportunity?

After this failure, the strength of the reformists after the war will inevitably skyrocket. Alexander II can also investigate the ones responsible for the failure of the war and take the opportunity to clean up some of the “parasites”.

If he is ruthless enough, he can also take advantage of the opportunity to suppress the rebellion to severely cripple the conservatives in the country.

This already had a precedent. More than ten years ago, it was only because of the revolutions that Austria reshuffled the cards and completed social reforms.

Franz did not doubt Alexander II's ability at all. In the original timeline, this person completed the social reforms. Of course, there was no shortage of bloodshed and violence during this period, otherwise, he would not have been assassinated by the revolutionaries.

As an emperor, Franz knew very well how difficult it was to assassinate an emperor. Without the cooperation of internal traitors, the revolutionaries would not have been able to get close.

How else could the bombs be thrown? Especially after throwing the first one, when Alexander II checked on the injured coachman, a second bomb was thrown which killed him.

Were the guards made of wood? To allow an assassin to attack at close range and get a second chance?

There was a time gap between the bombs, meaning the thrower was only a few dozen meters away. Under normal circumstances, the assassin would either be riddled with bullets or captured alive, and there would be no chance for a second attack.

The surrounding crowd would also be immediately cleared and controlled. The assassination attempt is obviously covering up something, and it is very unreasonable to analyze it simply from the surface.

Based on the state of his own security, Franz can conclude that there is no traitor and that the assassin would not have been able to approach him with a gun or bomb.

His security retinue would prohibit strangers from drawing near. Even in choreographed political displays, those permitted to approach the emperor would have undergone comprehensive ancestral investigations across several generations, verifying the absence of potential perils.

In Russia, a country with a strict class hierarchy, it was difficult for commoners to even approach nobles, let alone get in close proximity to the emperor.

Not to mention one or two assassins, even a group of assassins might not be able to get within a few dozen meters.

Franz was too lazy to dwell on these questions any further. Anyway, he just had to be careful himself. Even when he was active in Vienna, he was accompanied by hundreds of guards and thousands of police officers securing the perimeter.

The security was absolutely top-notch. Even if there were assassins, they could only retreat obediently when they saw this lineup.

There was no such thing as traveling incognito. Monarchs who traveled in a carriage with a few guards only existed in small countries. They couldn't afford luxury, so they could only make do.

Franz said with a grin, "It seems that Alexander II is about to make a big move. I'm afraid he is deliberately indulging the bureaucracy to lull these people into a sense of complacency.

A major purge of the Russian government is imminent. My guess is Alexander II will launch a coup to clear out the government of its parasites, then pin the blame for the war's failure on them.

This will kill many birds with one stone. Not only can it clean up the 'parasites', but he can also take the opportunity to suppress the conservatives and give the people an explanation.

Once the corrupt officials are cleaned up, the rebels will have no excuse to rebel. It won't be long before the rebels are embroiled in internal strife. If the revolutionaries don't run away quickly, they might even be captured and presented for merit."

The revolutionaries had shallow foundations. Although they made quite a ruckus, in this era, any revolutionary party in Russia had only about a hundred or so people.

They only united temporarily to seize power. If they were not too weak, they would not have accepted the banner of "clear the emperor's side and purge the corrupt officials."

While this banner has united many people, it has also brought about a problem. As the uprising army grew in size, the revolutionaries lost control of the army.

With the "corrupt officials" punished, the public's grievances would be addressed and many would want to withdraw. Put simply, many joined the uprising solely due to heavy taxation.

Alexander II could solve the problem with a few decrees. By pushing the blame onto the bureaucracy, the people's grievances would be vented, and the Tsar would still be a good Tsar.

The people's hearts are still with the Tsar, and the army supports the Tsar. Neither the reformists nor the conservatives of the nobility have any intention of overthrowing the Tsar.

Including the newly rising capitalists, these people also believe that it is better to keep the Tsar than not to have him. They support the revolution only to seize power, not to carry out a real social revolution.

In a country where more than 99% of the people support the Tsar, is it not nonsense to try to overthrow the Russian government?

In this respect, Alexander II was born in a good time and place. The Russian revolutionary leaders have not yet been born, the proletarian revolutionary party is nowhere to be seen, and the current bourgeois revolutionary groups are not anti-imperialist.

If the time were pushed back fifty years, or if the background were changed to France, the country would have been a republic by now.

Prime Minister Felix disagreed, saying: "Reform is not that easy. The conservative forces in the Russian Empire are very strong. Even Nicholas I failed to complete the social reforms, and it will be even more difficult for Alexander II to do so.

All he can do now is probably to carry out limited reforms, transform the feudal system of the Russian Empire, and improve its strength in the short term."

He has the right to speak. During the Austrian reforms, the Hungarian nobility completely lost their voice, the conservatives in Vienna were swept into the trash heap by the rebels, and the rebels scattered the conservatives in Bohemia.

By the time the Austrian government announced the reforms, the conservatives' power was less than one-tenth of what it had been, and most of them had lost their foundations.

Even so, there has been no shortage of struggles between the two sides in the past ten years.

Now, the Russian government cannot rely on rebels to clean up the conservatives. The Tsar himself needs to take the lead. This wave of hatred alone is enough to give Alexander II a headache.

This was an indication of a prolonged clash between reformist and conservative ideologies, exacerbated by the deeply entrenched currents of hatred. Even with the tsar's backing, the reformists' influence would be hard-pressed to eclipse that of the conservatives in the immediate future.

Beholden to the customs of Europe, Alexander II confronted an inescapable reality: the purging of the nobility, while permissible, did not grant him the authority to eliminate them in their entirety.

The crime of corruption and bribery is too light. For nobles, it can only be considered a minor offense. Even if it involves military supplies, at most a few people in charge can be killed.

Most people will only be sent home or exiled to Siberia. These people might lose their power but they would still be alive, which was a hidden danger.

Meanwhile, the rebels in Moscow were very disappointing and didn't make any waves. No major nobles or capitalists were involved at all, and it was impossible to implicate them.

"Clear the emperor's side and purge the corrupt officials" is inherently lower than rebellion. Even if it is just a show to prove the emperor's benevolence, Alexander II must issue an amnesty order.

The revolutionaries are the scapegoats. As long as the rest of the people are smart enough, they can decisively choose to defect after Alexander II issues an amnesty order. At most, they will be marginalized after the war, and they will not be purged.

This means that the conservatives have only lost in the political struggle, and their strength has not been greatly damaged.

After all, just like Austria, the Russian Imperial Army is also dominated by nobles, and the Tsar cannot violate the established rules.

Franz nodded and said, "For the Russian Empire, limited social reforms are enough to create a world power.

They have a vast territory, rich resources, and a large population. As long as they complete industrialization, they will be a European superpower.

If they really carry out thorough social reforms, it will not be a good thing for us. You know, on the European continent, the only country with greater development potential than us is the Russian Empire."

Chapter 423: Kind Reminder

On April 22, 1867, the London Conference was convened. Representatives from over twenty countries around the world gathered in London to discuss this extraordinary war.

This was the largest war in terms of the number of countries involved, the area of combat, and the overall scale since the Napoleonic Wars.

Without a doubt, it was also the war with the most casualties and the greatest economic losses. The total troop losses of the two sides exceeded two million, and the total economic losses of the countries involved exceeded 2 billion guilders.

(Equivalent to approximately 1 billion pounds, or 7322.38 tons of gold)

To say nothing of the other factors, just looking at the casualties and economic losses is enough to silence all the countries in the world. You have to remember that many countries have populations of less than two million, and their entire countries are not even worth 2 billion guilders.

The Russians, of course, suffered the most losses. Not only did their army suffer heavy casualties, but their domestic economy was also severely damaged. They also lost territory and squandered their hard-won position as a world power.

If they had to do it all over again, the Russians would certainly not be as reckless.

At the Paris Conference, the two duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were awarded to Denmark. Prussia's invasion of Denmark was opposed by European countries, and they could have solved the problem in a more indirect way.

Of course, the Russians were not adept at such indirect diplomatic means, as these were methods that weren't forceful enough to showcase their prowess as the hegemon of Europe.

Who would have thought that a war that was supposed to establish their prestige would end up burying the hegemony of the Russian Empire? A great empire was brought to its knees.

The negotiations fell into a farce from the very beginning. The Russian delegation argued with everyone, and except for the Danish representative who helped them, they were directly besieged.

This is the disadvantage of having too many enemies. If Poland is considered a country, then the Russians would be facing an eight-nation alliance. (Kingdom of Prussia, Ottoman Empire, four Central Asian countries, Poland, and the British Empire)

The representatives of other countries naturally watched the bickering between the warring nations with amusement. If everyone had participated, the Russians would face an even more tragic situation.

The Prussians' diplomatic efforts had paid off, and they had gained the understanding of most European countries. They provided a lot of evidence that was unfavorable to the Russians, demonstrating their well-preparedness.

After the first day of the conference, Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov knew things were bad, and he met secretly with Austrian representative Wessenberg that very night.

Ivanov cut to the chase and said directly, "Count, we need your country's help now!"

After a moment of silence, Austrian Foreign Minister Wessenberg replied, "We are allies, and it is natural to help each other. What kind of help do you need, Marquis?"

The Russian's intentions were clear to him, but he had to pretend to be confused to gain a more advantageous position and re-establish Austria's dominance in the Austro-Russian alliance.

Ivanov didn't think too much about it; the shift in continental hegemony was a foregone conclusion. Whether it fell into the hands of the French or the Austrians, it had nothing to do with them.

The dominance in the Austro-Russian alliance was no longer that important to the Russians, who had lost their continental hegemony.

"The current diplomatic situation is very unfavorable to us. I hope your country can exert its influence to reverse this situation!"

The one-sided situation completely caught the Russian government off guard. In their plan, most European countries should have adopted a neutral attitude instead of directly standing on the opposite side of Russia.

This is because the Russians have not had time to adjust their mentality and still see themselves as the hegemon of Europe.

During the era of Russian hegemony over the continent, while other countries might have been dissatisfied, few dared to express it openly, with neutrality being the stance of smaller nations.

Now, things were different. Not only had the Russian Empire suffered a severe blow in the war and descended into civil strife, but its global standing had also diminished significantly, no longer intimidating European countries.

Those who had previously been aggrieved seized this opportunity to vent their grievances. Prior to this, the Russian government had also engaged in diplomatic public relations, but the results showed their efforts were counterproductive. Not only did they fail to secure allies, but they also pushed some countries into the opposing camp.

In this situation, they had no choice but to seek Austria's support. Since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Austria has played an important role in European politics and diplomacy.

The establishment of the Vienna System on two occasions marked the pinnacle of Metternich's diplomacy. Austria's influence in European politics and diplomacy has remained one of the most significant to this day.

This political and diplomatic influence was one of the reasons why Franz had always been mindful of his conduct.

To ordinary people, such political and diplomatic influence might seem insignificant, but it ensured that Austria would not become isolated and avoided the crisis of being opposed by the entire world.

Now the Russians know the consequences of being isolated. Being targeted by all countries means that they will be in a passive position in the negotiations and will have to pay a greater price to end this war.

Wessenberg shook his head and said, "Marquis, you overestimate our influence. The current situation was undoubtedly instigated by Britain and France. Surely you don't believe that Austria can counter the combined influence of these two powers?"

Offering assistance in this matter would only lead to endless trouble. Persuading other countries to change their diplomatic stance would also require a price to pay. Without sufficient benefits, why would Austria pay such a price?

Ivanov's face darkened, realizing the situation was not so simple. If Austria were willing to intervene, these smaller nations would likely revert to neutrality.

Claims of being unable to match the combined influence of Britain and France were nonsense. In reality, when their own interests were not involved, these smaller nations would be mere bystanders.

In the era of the Vienna System, Austria could expel the British from Europe, suppress France in a corner, and restrict the Russians to Eastern Europe, all by means of diplomatic alliances.

Didn't the annexation of Southern Germany cause panic among European countries at first, but didn't they quickly overcome the difficulties?

“Count, we won't let you help us for nothing.”

With that, Ivanov handed Wessenberg a blank check from the Royal Bank, allowing him to fill in the amount himself.

Upon receiving the check, Wessenberg could not help but laugh bitterly. Was he that kind of person? Austria did not condone bribery; if he accepted this today, he would be sent home to retire tomorrow.

In this day and age, Austrian officials were not paupers. Franz was quite generous, with each of them owning estates in the colonies, at least a few thousand hectares of land to start.

These lands required appointing people to manage and oversee them. Many wealthy individuals might have scoffed at the prospect, but these lands came with noble titles attached to the land, instantly increasing their value manifold.

No one would turn down noble titles, especially those with fiefs. It doesn't matter if they are far away in the colonies. After all, they will eventually become integrated.

To leave more property for his descendants, Wessenberg pushed the check back and said, “Sorry, Marquis, I dare not accept this money. It is necessary to pay a price to change the positions of countries, and it is definitely not something that can be solved with a few words.

If you wish to escape your current predicament, you could start with Sweden-Norway. The Nordic Federation is in the process of being formed, and at this time, they must consider the sentiments of the Danes.

Then, you could rally the German Confederation by exaggerating the Prussian threat. The Kingdom of Prussia aspires to become a true great power, and annexing the former is the latter's only choice for that to come to fruition.

Convincing Belgium would also not be difficult. The French threat to them is too great, and they will need your assistance; at the very least, you could persuade them to remain neutral.

Spain, Portugal, and your country have no conflict of interest. I believe that you have the ability to persuade them to remain neutral.”

Wessenberg offered a solution, but whether it could be accomplished depended on the abilities of the Russian government. If they could not even persuade countries with no conflicting interests to remain neutral, what was the point of diplomacy?

This was the confidence of a great power. No matter how much Russia declined, they are still one of the four great powers in Europe, with far greater comprehensive national strength than Prussia and Spain.

Upon hearing these suggestions, Ivanov felt somewhat embarrassed. These should be considered routine operations, but they messed them up before, and now they have to make up for it.

Undoubtedly, in addition to the “mentality” of the diplomats causing trouble, the wrong choice of the starting point of the lobbying is also an important factor.

This is not the responsibility of a single person. It wasn't until the reign of Alexander III that the Russians could solve problems through diplomacy. Before that, they were used to using force to get things done.

In this context, it is normal for diplomats to be incompetent. Even those who can reach a passable level can already be considered elite diplomats there.

After a pause, Ivanov handed over the check and said politely, "Thank you, Count! You have won the friendship of the Russian Empire."

Even if nothing was done, since the other party had offered a suggestion, the money still had to be given.

This hidden rule of money bureaucracy was practiced within the bureaucratic circles of the Russian government, and Ivanov was already accustomed to it.

During this period, the foreign ministries across nations were mired in corruption, where amassing wealth through foreign postings proved to be an effortless endeavor.

Wessenberg also accepted gifts when he was in office, but as his position rose, he gradually became more concerned about his reputation and was afraid of being caught by his competitors.

Now that no task was required, this money did not feel as hot to handle.

In light of the money, Wessenberg added, "Marquis, the crux of this negotiation lies in Eastern Europe, which is the foundation of your country. I personally advise that you first resolve the troubles in the Far East, Near East, and Central Asia.

In the Near East, the Ottoman Empire has not achieved results on the battlefield, and it will not cost much to deal with them. I don't know much about the Far East, but it is too far away and should not be of much value.

In Central Asia, almost everything has already been lost. You might as well abandon it. As long as your core interests are protected, these peripheral areas are not worth mentioning.

From a long-term development perspective, I believe that the Eastern European issue is not a big deal. With your country's strength, what you have lost now can be regained sooner or later.

Britain and France are constantly making small moves. If the negotiations drag on for too long, it is easy for unexpected troubles to arise. As far as I know, the Kingdom of Prussia is still expanding its military and preparing for war, making it highly likely that the flames of war will reignite once more."

Reminding the Russians to swiftly complete the negotiations and end this war was truly well-intentioned, for if it dragged on further, a resumption of the war would not be surprising.

According to European tradition, if benefits cannot be gained at the negotiating table, then they must be seized on the battlefield. Given the present circumstances, should the Russian Empire choose to fight, its frontline forces would suffer defeat.

At least on the Eastern European front, there was not a shred of hope. Logistics and supplies could not be guaranteed, making the war impossible to fight.

Digging a pit in passing by encouraging the Russians to fight back in the future was simply fulfilling the duties of being the Austrian Foreign Minister.

After listening to Wessenberg's explanation, Ivanov's mood became much heavier.

It doesn't matter if other regions are lost. The Russians can afford the loss. Meanwhile, Eastern Europe is the foundation of the Russian Empire.

The lost land will definitely be retaken in the future. The Russian Bear is very vengeful, and the Kingdom of Prussia has replaced the Ottoman Empire as their number one enemy.

Once the Russian government regained its strength, it would seek its revenge. Where they had stumbled, that was where they would rise again. The Russians never lacked resilience.

Wessenberg's kind reminder was merely to deepen the impression, ensuring the Russians would always remember this resentment.

Chapter 424: Ethiopia

During the London Conference, the British did not stop their global strategic deployment. In order to strengthen their control over North America, the British Parliament approved a bill to establish a Canadian dominion in May.

This sparked protests from the United States federal government, but the result was naturally ignored, as this was a measure aimed at them in the first place.

After the American Civil War, capitalists had an increased demand for markets, as the Southern market had bid farewell to them due to the North-South divide.

Mexico was also under the sphere of influence of the three powers of Britain, France, and Spain, leaving no room for American involvement. Central America was regarded as Austria's private territory. Meanwhile, the Caribbean islands were also the gathering place for the great powers.

The Americas had become a joke for the Americans. The European powers were making a comeback, and the post-split Northern government was simply unable to compete with them.

To change this situation, both American governments were restless. The Confederate government was still doing well, as they exported industrial raw materials and did not need to compete with the powers.

The Federal government was not so lucky. To break the deadlock, they supported the revolutionary party in Mexico and backed the Indian tribes in Central America.

That was not all. As the number of Irish immigrants increased, anti-British sentiment became an important political force in the federal government. In 1866, Irish members of Congress proposed a bill to annex Canada.

Needless to say, such a suicidal bill was naturally not passed. However, this situation still provoked the British, and the British government decided to strengthen its forces in the Americas.

The establishment of the Canadian Dominion was one of these measures. The British government was prepared to relax its suppression of Canada and allow it to develop on its own to increase its influence in North America.

The British were not the only ones taking action. In fact, the French had already sent additional troops to Mexico before this. Maximilian I had listened to Franz's advice to some extent, and Mexico's debt had increased by a third compared to the same period in original history.

As the largest creditor, France was naturally held hostage. The more they invested, the less the French government was willing to let go.

Mexico was not without the ability to repay its debts. As long as the rebellion was suppressed, the Silver Empire would soon be able to overcome the crisis.

The actions of Britain and France also affected Austria. The Austrian government was also very annoyed by the restless Americans.

Looking at the information provided by the Governor of Central America, Count Hümmel, Franz felt that it was necessary to give the Americans a lesson and let them know the limits of their own strength.

“How much investment do the Americans have in Central America?” Franz asked.

“About three million guilders,” Colonial Minister Josip Jelačić replied.

Josip Jelačić had all of this basic information at his fingertips. If it weren't for the Civil War, Central America would be the backyard of the Americans.

As early as more than a decade ago, the Americans had been infiltrating Central America. Only when the Civil War broke out and Austria occupied the region did the Americans' activities quiet down.

Franz casually said, “Then keep an eye on them, and if there are any problems, confiscate their assets.”

Austria's colonies were not welcoming to foreign investment. To the great disappointment of many, the Austrian government was not interested in promoting economic development in its colonies.

Stability was paramount, and Franz would rather keep the colonies in his own hands and develop them slowly than allow foreign powers to get involved.

On the surface, it seemed that foreign capital would promote economic development in the colonies. However, in this era, overseas investment was often the vanguard of colonial expansion.

The introduction of all sorts of chaotic ideas was also one of the ways in which countries stabbed each other in the back. If not careful, the colonies would rebel before the economy had even developed.

In the late 19th century, all large-scale colonial rebellions were manipulated by international powers. This was also the main reason why countries closed the doors of their colonial markets.

The Americas were too far from Vienna, making it inevitable that control over the colonies would weaken. This gave the Americans an opportunity, prompting them to cause trouble.

Finding an excuse to confiscate these American investments was a warning to the federal government. Of course, it would not be so simple. Austria was merely taking the lead, with other countries expected to follow suit.

Before the American Civil War, their capital had penetrated many parts of North America, such as Mexico, Cuba, and other regions.

When the United States was strong, other countries were wary of its power, and naturally no one would touch these investments. Now, the situation has changed, and the post-split federal government does not have the strength to protect these overseas investments.

If they had behaved themselves, the other countries might not have taken drastic action. But how could capitalists behave themselves?

Without sufficient markets and a large enough domestic economic circulation, capitalists had no choice but to stir up trouble to survive.

Based on the intelligence he had, Franz could confirm that the internal struggle within the federal government was intense, and the forces pushing for outward expansion were acting out of necessity.

Unless there is a major upheaval in Europe, they will not have a chance to develop under the suppression of various countries.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Colonial Minister Josip Jelačić replied.

This was just a small interlude. Franz’s main focus was still on the African continent. Since the Austrian government passed the Colonial Integration Act, the importance of the African continent to European countries has risen to a whole new level.

Among them, Britain and France reacted most strongly with the French being the first to respond. Napoleon III was ready to follow suit, and the French government formulated a North African province plan, preparing to incorporate this region into its mainland.

However, due to Europe’s strategic priorities and a shortage of immigrants, this plan remained on paper and could not be fully implemented.

The British reaction was much more intense. It was impossible for them to follow suit. Colonial integration was not suitable for a maritime nation, and even if it was forcefully implemented, Africa would not be their primary choice!

Just open a map and you can see that France and Austria are already very powerful on the African continent. To curb the expansion of the two countries, the British government is preparing to take control of Ethiopia and Somalia first, connecting East Africa and South Africa.

Compared to the original timeline, the British African plan has been greatly reduced. It only occupies the southeast corners and does not run across Egypt.

Ethiopia and Somalia were the final links in Austria’s African strategy. Once the plan was completed, half of the African continent would be Austrian territory.

The British, of course, could not sit idly by, especially since they had already set their sights on Ethiopia. As early as 1839 after occupying Aden, they had been infiltrating the region.

Multiple feudal lords of vassal states have now colluded with the British and after the recent visit of British Consul Fernie Cameron to the Turkish Sultan, the supply of arms to Ethiopia was cut off.

At this time, the Ethiopian monarch Tewodros II committed a foolish act by directly detaining the British Consul.

There is no doubt that Ethiopia has handed over an excuse to the British. If they are not allowed to experience the iron fist of the empire, how can John Bull maintain face in the world?

Originally, Franz had planned to intervene, but in recent years, Austria's reputation in Africa had not been good. With such an unsavory image, others were trying to avoid them, let alone seek their involvement.

This was an unavoidable situation. Austria's many colonies were not obtained by paying fees but through bloody battles.

If Franz encountered problems on the European continent, he would proceed with caution. But on the African continent, he tended to go to the other extreme, usually acting recklessly without regard.

Diplomacy? Unfortunately, the colonial government did not even have such a department. Any problem that could be solved with bayonets and cannons would never be resolved through other means.

There are few problems on the African continent that cannot be solved with bayonets and cannons, and as a result, Austria has no friends. Even if they take the initiative to offer military aid, others may not dare to accept it.

There is naturally no need to change their style of doing things. European countries are like this these days. No one cares about playing around in the colonies, and shameless colonizers still claim to be the spreaders of human civilization.

Franz asked, "It's only a matter of time before Britain invades Ethiopia. What plans does the Colonial Department have?"

Colonial Minister Josip Jelačić replied, "Your Majesty, the gap in strength between the two sides is huge, and there is no suspense in this war.

Our sphere of influence is already adjacent to Ethiopia. This African country has a large territory, and the British cannot swallow it in one bite. The Colonial Department plans to claim a share of the pie."

This "share" would likely be more than just a small portion. Even if the British swallowed most of Ethiopia, Franz would not be the least bit surprised.

The reason the British wanted to curb Austria's expansion on the African continent was that Austria's presence there was already too strong.

If left unchecked, they fear they will eventually be driven out. As anyone who follows the situation knows, British colonial companies have been struggling in Africa lately.

It was not for lack of effort, but rather that survival was truly difficult. As soon as they established a colonial outpost, they would immediately be attacked by modernized African armies.

The attackers were all African natives, naturally having nothing to do with Austria. Without evidence, the British government was powerless.

Dispatching troops to suppress them would be nonsense. On the vast African continent, how could they identify the attackers?

To retaliate, the British also organized Black troops, and the two sides fought bloody battles.

In the end, it was the British who couldn't hold on, not because they were not good at fighting, but mainly because there were too few of them.

At their peak, there were thousands of casualties each year, and many British colonial companies went bankrupt because they could not afford the pensions.

Under such circumstances, the British colonies on the African continent inevitably shrank. It was not until the two countries reached an agreement that the situation improved.

The British were good at learning from experience, and they soon realized that it was only when they ventured deep into the inland jungles that they would suffer losses. It was still quite safe to establish strongholds in coastal areas and rely on fortifications for defense.

Now, the British expansion was all about building forts. With fortifications in place, they were not afraid of surprise attacks by black troops.

This was all a clandestine struggle, and the Austrian army could not possibly take to the field itself. The two sides settled into a stalemate.

Due to cost considerations, British expansion on the African continent was slowed down, and they were often forced to abandon their spheres of influence. After all, Austria was not the only one playing dirty tricks; the French were no less guilty of this kind of thing.

With multiple enemies, after being ambushed, the British often could not even discern who was responsible. Framing others and shifting blame were common tactics, and in the struggle for colonization, no one had any scruples.

This is also the reason why the British are eager to occupy Ethiopia. Only by controlling this region can they have a large number of cannon fodder to fight an underground black war with Austria.

Franz said with an unchanged expression, "Send people secretly to sell arms to Ethiopia. Let them resist more fiercely."

Chapter 425: A Creditor's Woes

Relying on the African people to resist British invaders is highly unrealistic. If they had such strong combat capabilities, the colonial era would have ended long ago.

However, the pitfalls must still be dug. No matter how effective they may be, at the very least, they can delay the British expansion.

Every country's expansion has its limits, and the British Empire, the world's foremost colonial empire, is no exception.

Population is a fatal weakness. The British Isles combined have only 30 million people. Among the four major European powers, they rank dead last. With the completion of industrialization in France and Austria, there is an astonishing change happening in the balance of power among nations.

There is no need to wait until the twentieth century; even now, in terms of the total domestic economy, the British are becoming the third in Europe and the fifth in the world.

Of course, they are still the world's leading industrial power. During this era, agriculture still held a very significant proportion of the total economy, so much so that Britain even ranked behind India.

It's not surprising; having a large population doesn't necessarily mean great strength, at least in terms of total economic output.

Unfortunately, total economic output does not equate to national power. What determines the strength of a country is industry, and the British Empire remains the world's most powerful nation.

However, in terms of expansion, they are at a disadvantage. The population of Britain is less than two-thirds that of France (including Sardinia) and less than half that of Austria (including the Balkans). Among this population are several million disaffected Irish people, who constantly seek independence.

Despite the small population, the British colonies cover a vast area, averaging more than one square kilometer of colonial territory per British person.

After the Near East War, the British government began to avoid European wars, which was quite understandable.

Maintaining this colonial empire is not easy, with thousands of colonists dying each year. If they were to engage in a few more large-scale wars, the British would be unable to sustain it.

This is the opportunity Franz sees: to create trouble for the British in the colonies. On the surface, it may seem insignificant, but in reality, small efforts add up, gradually depleting their manpower.

This Ethiopian War is a good opportunity. If it can inflict casualties of over ten thousand on the British, Franz will be more than satisfied.

Defeating the British is out of the question. The British Army is not the Italian Army; such a joke of the century cannot happen.

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While the British troops were on the way to Ethiopia, the situation at the London Conference changed. The Russians' diplomatic skills were really quite unimpressive.

Sweden did indeed support them, but it wasn't due to the Russians' efforts. The Kingdom of Denmark played a significant role.

Favoring kin over reason, the Kingdom of Denmark was about to become a member of the Nordic Federation, so naturally, Sweden, as the leader, needed to consider their sentiments.

From now on, the Kingdom of Prussia gained another enemy, the soon-to-be-established Nordic Federation.

Of course, this enemy posed a minimal threat. The Danes wouldn't dominate the new government; at most, it would result in hostility but not to the point of triggering a war.

The German Federal Empire indeed felt threatened by Prussia, but it was of no use. The Russians failed to secure their support, and in the end, they chose neutrality.

As for the remaining nations, it goes without saying that Switzerland maintained its renowned 'perpetual neutrality' and did not need to be appeased, while all the other countries supported Prussia.

The Principality of Montenegro and Greece were among Russia's few supporters too, the former having depended on Russian patronage for years, and the latter opportunistically aligning with the perceived greater force.

Prussia is thousands of miles away, so offending them doesn't matter. But the Russians are close by, so the Greeks dare not offend them.

Looking at the supporting countries, the Russians were not only outnumbered but also outmatched in terms of influence.

To prevent the Russians from losing too badly, Wessenberg had to grudgingly propose reducing the number of negotiating representatives.

Besides the three mediating countries — Britain, France, and Austria — only the belligerents attended, while the rest were mere spectators.

Fortunately, the Russian representative, Ivanov, was clever enough to first send away the four Central Asian countries and the Eastern Empire by signing armistice agreements.

Russia's might was still apparent; after satisfying their own interests, these countries decisively chose silence. As for Prussia's allies, sorry, they never truly formed alliances, so no obligations existed.

Seeing the situation was not favorable, the Ottoman Empire also backed down. The Russians abandoned the territory they had claimed in the Caucasus during the last war and retreated slightly, ending the war between the two nations. (Note: this refers to present-day Georgia.)

By July, only Prussia and Poland were left. Compared to the concessions in other regions, the Russian government took a completely different attitude in Eastern Europe.

To begin with, the Russian government refused to accept the proposed delineation of Polish territories, considering the cession of Lithuania and portions of Belarus as the absolute maximum it could concede.

Yet Prussian ambitions extended to claiming Latvia too, carefully avoiding any demands on Estonia given its precarious proximity to St. Petersburg, with the Prussian authorities avoiding riling up the Russians even more.

Prussian and Polish representatives also demanded the entire Belarus, clearly having reached an agreement to carve it up.

Polish demands also encompassed Ukraine, principally as Volyn had traditionally stretched into Kyiv's bounds. But this excludes Lviv and its surroundings as western Ukraine remained an Austrian sphere of influence at this time.

Agreeing to these conditions would mean the Russian Empire losing 860,000 square kilometers of land, 21 million people, and 30% of its industry.

Additionally, the Russian Empire would lose its population advantage over Austria. After all, Central Asia had already gained independence, and they had also ceded significant territory in the Far East and the Caucasus.

With less land, the population would naturally decrease as well. Fortunately, these regions were sparsely populated; apart from Central Asia's 5-6 million people, the other two areas had only around 1-2 million each.

Eastern Europe was different; it was the foundation of the Russian Empire. Every piece of land was precious, so the Russian government would not give it up easily.

The conference reached another deadlock, prompting the British, French, and Austrian representatives to hold a private meeting. There was no shame in it; weakening Russia was in all three countries' interests.

After all, the Russian Empire was too vast. Once it became industrialized, everyone's interests would suffer.

At the same time, France and Austria did not want to see the Kingdom of Prussia grow stronger. On this point, the attitudes of Britain and France were quite the opposite; Britain wanted Prussia to cause trouble for France and Austria.

Meanwhile, the French wanted to support Poland, while Austria held an opposing view.

They would not allow others to meddle in their backyard.

To prevent Poland from rising, Austria didn't hesitate to support Prussia in obtaining Lithuania, blocking Poland's access to the sea.

This was also them sowing discord. With the issue of access to the sea unresolved, relations between Prussia and Poland would inevitably break down.

Of course, they could exchange territories, but this was highly unlikely. The Poles wouldn't give up Warsaw just to have access to the sea.

Prussia wouldn't fight hard only to gain nothing in the end. Their geographic location made expansion into Lithuania their only option.

The conflicts between the three countries of Britain, France, and Austria made the negotiations even more complicated.

By summer, the smell of gunpowder in Eastern Europe had become thick again. If they still could not reach an agreement, war would break out again.

Don't look at the fact that the Prussians had the upper hand on the battlefield — they now have no money! Once war broke out again, it would still be the British who would shoulder the bill in the end.

The British government was no fool, they were constantly calculating the costs. Now that their goal of suppressing Russia had been achieved, continuing further would bring them little benefit even if Russia was crushed.

Don't just look at how Russia and Austria are allies. When in decline, allies can also be dangerous. What if the Prussians get lucky and win another major battle, causing the Russian government to collapse directly? Who knows if Austria would take the opportunity to kick them while they were down?

The shrewd British would not spend money and effort only for their competitors to reap the benefits.

Moreover, they have already lent a lot of money to Prussia and Poland, and their debts are constantly increasing. The possibility of them becoming bad debts in the future is also increasing.

To end this war, the three powers of Britain, France, and Austria must first reach an agreement. Otherwise, if everyone kept stabbing each other in the back and fanning the flames from within, the war could reignite at any moment.

For the sake of the pound, Raistlin must also persuade France and Austria to join forces and put pressure on the others to end this war.

It's not just the British who are worried about this; France and Austria are also concerned. They are all creditors, but Britain and France have mainly lent money to Prussia and Poland, while Austria has lent money to Russia.

Currently, the British have lent out the most, with a total amount of 320 million pounds; Austria is close behind, with a total of 240 million pounds; the French have the least, but it is still 120 million pounds.

Whether or not they admit it, this war is actually a game of capital. There is no doubt that the masterminds behind the scenes are all winners. Everyone was working together to manipulate the market.

Even if all these debts turn to bad debts, they can still recoup their costs elsewhere. Of course, no one wants to do that. Why should loans that can be recovered turn into bad debts?

Don't look at the abundant collateral of the debtor countries. If something goes wrong, these collaterals may not be able to be cashed out.

Take Poland for example. If the Polish government collapses, who will Britain and France ask for money?

In comparison, Austria still has an advantage. Russia is close by, and if necessary, they can still cut off a piece of land to make up for their losses.

The French can also set their sights on the Rhineland. After all, taking it over as payment for the loans they lent is a reasonable excuse.

Meanwhile, the British are miserable. Even if others dare to cede land, the question is, do they dare to take it?

The prerequisite for cashing out various taxes, minerals, and road rights is to ensure the stability of the debtor's government.

This means that after the war, they will continue to lend money to Prussia and Poland. Otherwise, these two impoverished governments will either declare bankruptcy and default on their debts or collapse due to financial crises.

Of course, high risk comes with high rewards. The British have already made a fortune in this war.

Not only have they gained world hegemony, but they have also gained a few underlings, ensured the security of India, and completed their strategic layout of Eurasia.

Chapter 426: Ripped Off

As a good neighbor, Franz has been closely following the civil war in Russia from Vienna. Looking at the intelligence he has gathered, he knows that the Russian government is about to make concessions.

To maintain domestic stability, Alexander II held back from launching an offensive. As a result, the rebels have snowballed and are now threatening the Russian government's rule.

At this point, any shrewd monarch would choose to maintain their own rule first. Alexander II must end the war first before he could carry out internal purges and use political means to dismantle the rebels.

Even cornered dogs will bite. Launching an offensive before the war is over, these parasites will probably collude with the Kingdom of Prussia and they might even lose St. Petersburg as a result.

To confuse these people, Alexander II has already executed a few scapegoats, making it look like things are over.

This muddling approach, apart from delaying time, actually does nothing. For a country, such a compromise is slow suicide.

Franz had interacted with Alexander II and knew very well that he was no mediocre monarch. As early as Nicholas I's time, Alexander II proposed social reforms.

Unfortunately, Nicholas I had already pushed through a round of reforms, which ultimately failed. In his later years, Nicholas I lacked the courage to take drastic action and was afraid to break ties with domestic interest groups.

By the time Alexander II ascended to the throne, the difficulty of reform had increased significantly. He lacked the prestige of Nicholas I and was unable to subdue the various domestic factions.

The comprehensive social reforms were scaled back to limited social reforms, and Alexander II adopted a gradual approach to pushing social changes, following the same path as in the original timeline.

At a critical moment, the Polish uprising broke out, followed by the Prusso-Danish War, challenging the hegemony of the Russian Empire.

To maintain the empire's hegemony, Alexander II was forced to wage war. The war resulted in defeat, exacerbating domestic social contradictions and leading to the current situation.

Franz made a quick decision, "Prime Minister, urge the Prussian government to fulfill the conditions, otherwise, we will not let them have anything!"

This was political blackmail, and the negotiations reached a deadlock. The Prussian government was also in a panic. In these few months, the Russian government had armed hundreds of thousands more troops.

Another war? The Prussians were very worried. The war had caused them great losses thus far, and if they had another head-on clash with the Russians, even if they won, they would still lose.

If they don't have the strength, even if they annex large swathes of land from the Russians, they won't be able to digest it!

The Junker nobles are also discerning people and know that the current Kingdom of Prussia cannot afford any more failures. France and Austria are still watching closely, and the reason they haven't made a move is that they still have the strength to fight back.

No matter who strikes first, it will benefit the other side. In addition to the severity of the international situation, both France and Austria are worried that if they enter the game first, they will be ambushed.

In the face of interests, alliances are not much more effective than wastepaper. If you get tricked, where can you go to cry?

This created an opportunity for Austria to blackmail Prussia. Prussia only knew Russia's stance remained tough, unaware the Russian government was preparing to compromise. Yet the Prussian government dared not let the war continue.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Prime Minister Felix replied.

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Plans can never keep up with changes. Upon receiving the diplomatic note from the Austrian government, the Prussian government was not at all flustered.

The two sides immediately began discussing the terms. Prussian Foreign Minister Mackeit questioned, "Sir Robson, you are well aware of the situation in Silesia and Prussian Saxony. How can you possibly expect to acquire them for fifty million guilders?"

As far as I know, the treaty you signed with the Russians stipulated a price of fifty million guilders for Prussian Saxony alone. And that was for a high-risk loan! Surely it cannot be lower than that now!

Our price for Prussian Saxony and Silesia is 120 million guilders and it's non-negotiable. It's a fair price for what you're getting."

"Austrian envoy to Berlin, Robson, explained calmly, "Foreign Minister, the calculation cannot be done in this way. First of all, Silesia was agreed upon before the war, so no further payment is required.

This transaction is only for Prussian Saxony. You must understand that in addition to money, our political concessions should also be included in the transaction.

Your country wants to acquire the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, Lithuania, Latvia, and most of Belarus. With so many places added together, your country's territory has increased by three-quarters.

Achieving these goals is a challenging feat. For one, the French support the Poles' access to the sea in Lithuania, while the British stance is also ambiguous. If you don't want to end up with another isolated territory.."

Having an isolated territory is a troubling issue. Just having one in the Rhineland, under the watchful eyes of the French, is enough to keep the Prussian government up at night. Adding another one under the eyes of the Russians would make life unbearable.

Once the Poles gain access to the sea in Lithuania, the Belarusian and Latvian regions that Prussia desired would become isolated. The defense pressure this would create is enough to make them collapse.

Not only are they threatened by the Russians, but even the Poles pose a threat to their power. With their strength scattered, how could they annex Poland and create a Greater Prussian Empire?

Weakening Prussia and strengthening Poland is in the best interests of the French. It not only creates conditions for them to annex the Rhineland but also supports a pawn to contain Austria.

For the British, both are underlings, and it is not good to favor either one. The adept John Bull, skilled at diplomatic maneuvering, naturally would not rashly take a stand.

Prussian Foreign Minister Mackeith retorted, "Sir Robson, a strong Poland is not a good thing for your country either. Polish nationalists are always thinking about Austrian Poland!"

Envoy Robson said, "Sir Mackeith, you overestimate the Poles. There has never been an Austrian Poland, and the local people do not consider themselves Poles.

A newly formed Poland would not dare to challenge Austria. If they do, they will soon become history again. A few slogans cannot bridge the gap in strength."

In this regard, the Austrian government is confident. Twenty years ago, when the Polish nobles in Galicia attempted to declare independence, they were suppressed by the local populace.

After so many years of assimilation, all traces of Poland have long been erased. The locals all consider themselves Austrians now.

Those who still retain Polish traditions have become a very small minority. Just look at the Austrian government's ethnic census data, and you can see that the number of Poles in the country has dropped to less than a million.

The decline in the Polish population is not due to their disappearance, but mainly to assimilation. The younger generation does not identify as Polish, so the number of Poles has naturally decreased sharply.

Austrian nationality is not defined by bloodline. After so many years of development, there are a lot of mixed-race people, and it is impossible to tell them apart.

Instead, it is based on a combination of factors such as language, customs, and the people's self-identification with a particular nation.

In this regard, Prussia and Austria have similar policies, both promoting Germanization. Both sides have achieved good results, but Austria has gone a step further: those who do not learn the common language cannot find work.

Of course, Poland's regaining of independence would still have an impact on Austria's assimilation efforts, but the Austrian government was also prepared.

Franz was also a believer in freedom, so if they wanted to be Polish, they could just go back to Poland. Austria was not short of a few hundred thousand people.

Expelling millions was difficult for other nations but no issue for Austria. Any protests or unrest would simply get the troublemakers expelled too.

Poland's threat lies within, not without. The military balance of power clearly indicates that Poland poses no military threat to Austria. Internal issues, if dealt with decisively, are not that much of a threat.

Austria can afford to ignore these issues, but not Mackeith. Prussia is still very much interested in Poland, and Polish nationalism cannot scare the Prussian government.

In a way, the Junker nobility is their nemesis. East Prussia and West Prussia are examples of this, where a group of Junker nobles suppressed the local population and did an excellent job of ethnic integration.

This success has boosted the confidence of the Prussian government. No matter how much the outside world criticizes the backwardness of the feudal nobility system, this system is indeed very effective in maintaining local stability.

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After a round of bargaining, the Austrian envoy to Berlin, Robson, and Prussian Foreign Minister Mackheit signed the Austro-Prussian Land Transaction Agreement on August 11, 1867.

The treaty consisted of a single clause: the Kingdom of Prussia would sell Silesia and Prussian Saxony to Austria for 38 million guilders.

Note: After the signing of the treaty, the Kingdom of Prussia would complete the handover to Austria within two years of receiving the payment. Austria would also need to pay an additional 10 million guilders in relocation costs.

Undoubtedly, other additional conditions were kept hidden, and both parties tacitly avoided mentioning them.

In Vienna, upon seeing the signed treaty, Franz found it hard to believe. He had the impression that Prussia was eager to finalize the agreement and showed no signs of resistance.

The only issue was the lengthy handover period demanded by the Prussians. However, this was not a major concern either. The Kingdom of Prussia would not be able to fully recover within a mere two years, and it lacked the strength to renege on its debt.

Moreover, the Prussian government provided a reasonable explanation, stating that they needed time to withdraw their investments. Unless Austria was willing to pay additionally to acquire those assets, they had to be given time to buffer the impact.

Purchasing the assets was out of the question; the Austrian government was not a fool. If they were to buy at market value, Austria could not afford it!

Economic bubbles have existed in every era. Silesia and Prussian Saxony combined cover over 30,000 square kilometers. The mines, land, factories, and real estate there would be worth several hundred million even at a conservative estimate, and their market value would be several times higher.

Since the Prussians were willing to relocate, the Austrian government naturally had no objections. Not all factories were valuable, and Austria already had similar industries. Keeping them would only intensify market competition without serving any real purpose.

Precisely because they were not needed, the Austrian government decisively signed the treaty with the Prussians. However, it soon became apparent to them that the Prussians' relocation was far too thorough.

The factories were dismantled and moved, and the workers were taken along with them. The nobles and landowners also relocated with their families and even the farmers who tilled their land were packed up and taken away.

Of course, it wasn't until half a year later that the problem was discovered. By then, it was too late to do anything about it, and Franz could only accept it begrudgingly.

The treaty had been signed, so there was no going back. Besides, not everyone had left. The people who supported Austria had stayed, which could be considered a consolation prize.

Now, the Austrian government is celebrating this great diplomatic victory. Austria has regained Silesia which everyone has been longing for, and the Kingdom of Saxony has regained Prussian Saxony.

The public reaction was even more enthusiastic, with many seeing it as another step towards German unification. The notion of a unified Germany gained deeper traction among the populace.

Having gained benefits, the Austrian position also shifted at the London Conference. They adopted a more accommodating attitude towards many of the demands put forth by the Kingdom of Prussia, abandoning their initial staunch opposition.

Without Austria creating obstacles, the London Conference began to develop in a manner favorable to the Kingdom of Prussia. On September 1, 1867, Prussia and Denmark signed a ceasefire agreement.

Ceding territory was unavoidable; Prussia had completely absorbed the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein and was certainly not going to give them up.

As for indemnities, they were out of the question since the Kingdom of Denmark had found a new backer — the Nordic Federation. Although this newly forming state wasn't as powerful as the Kingdom of Prussia, it was still capable of defending itself.

The Swedes did not contest the control over the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein primarily because they were concerned that Denmark's strength would become too great, which would be detrimental to their own national control.

Additionally, King Charles XV of Sweden wanted to annex Finland, which would put him in opposition to the Russians. Engaging in conflict with Prussia as well would place too much strain on national defense.

Despite this, Sweden still managed to secure a symbolic compensation for Denmark, amounting to approximately 2 million guilders, to appease the Danes.

This was a small amount of money, and even a financially strained Kingdom of Prussia could easily afford it. To quickly settle the matter, the Prussian government readily agreed.

With a common enemy in the Russians, there would be many shared interests between Prussia and the soon-to-be-established Nordic Federation. If it weren't for the desire to bring Denmark into the fold, the Swedish government would have long since taken advantage of the Russians' difficulties.

From this perspective, Prussia giving up the Jutland Peninsula in exchange for an ally was a very worthwhile deal.

The Russian Empire had a strong foundation; even if weakened, no one dared to underestimate them.

If they continued to decline, that would be one thing, but if the Russians became powerful again, the Kingdom of Prussia would be the first to bear the brunt.

It was necessary to be prepared for such a scenario. With an additional Nordic Federation in the north to keep the Russians in check, Prussia's pressure would be significantly reduced.

For this reason, the Kingdom of Prussia did not make any claims regarding the Skagerrak Strait (Jutland Strait).

Of course, Prussia's miniature navy was one of the reasons that prompted the Prussian government to give up on this. With their current naval strength, occupying it would be of no use.

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After the Prussia-Denmark ceasefire agreement was signed, the Russian government also made concessions. On September 26, 1867, Prussia, Poland, and Russia signed a ceasefire agreement.

This time, the Russians suffered significant losses. Recognizing Poland's independence was inevitable, and the Russian government was also forced to accept nearly all territorial demands from Prussia and Poland.

Poland became independent, Lithuania was lost, Latvia was abandoned, Belarus was not retained, and a portion of Ukraine had been taken away.

This went beyond the scope of Russian Poland, with a total territorial loss of nearly 790,000 square kilometers, a population loss of up to 20 million, and a reduction in industrial capacity by almost 30%.

In the late 18th century, Prussia, Russia, and Austria partitioned Poland, with the Russians taking the largest share of about 460,000 square kilometers. At the 1815 Congress of Vienna, they also received part of Prussian Poland as territorial compensation (Warsaw).

Altogether, these territories amounted to less than 600,000 square kilometers. Now, with both principal and interest paid back, it was enough to cause Alexander II considerable pain for a long time.

Having made territorial concessions, the Russian government naturally refused to pay indemnities. Prussia and Poland, hoping to resolve their financial crisis through war reparations, miscalculated this time.

The Russian government's money was needed to suppress rebellions, and in this regard, Alexander II could not afford to relax his vigilance.

The threat posed by Prussia and Poland was a minor issue, comparable to a cold; whereas the threat from the rebels was like cancer — though still in its early stages, it would be fatal if not treated promptly.

When faced with two evils, it was natural to choose the lesser one, so the Russian government had to compromise with Prussia and Poland. Land cannot run away; even if it was ceded, it could be reclaimed once the internal issues were resolved.

Money, however, was different. Without money, there was no way to suppress the rebellion. If the rebels were not eliminated, the Russian government's rule would be threatened.

According to the treaty: the Kingdom of Prussia would acquire the regions of Lithuania, Latvia, and most of Belarus, totaling up to 286,000 square kilometers with a population of approximately 4.7 million.

Poland, on the other hand, gained the remaining territories, totaling about 504,000 square kilometers. This included Poland's core region Warsaw, parts of Belarus, and most of Western Ukraine, with the border extending to Kyiv.

Clearly, the Russians suffered a significant loss this time, even losing Smolensk, which is only 360 kilometers from Moscow.

In 1611, this area was occupied by the Poles, and during the negotiations, it was considered Polish territory and included in Belarus.

This did not signify the Russian government's weakness, but rather that the area was under the actual control of the enemy, creating a *fait accompli*. Unless military force was used, it could not be reclaimed.

Most of the ceded land was actually under enemy control, and through negotiations, they managed to recover a significant amount of territory. During the winter campaign, the Russian army lost too much ground to the enemy, which left them without leverage in the negotiations.

The newly independent Kingdom of Poland inherited the legacy left by Russia, suddenly emerging as a rising European power with a total population of fifteen million, comparable to the pre-war Kingdom of Prussia.

Although its industrial base was not impressive, its agricultural foundation was solid. The land was mostly flat plains, so achieving a moderately prosperous life through farming was not an issue.

However, this did not satisfy the provisional government. In the age of maritime power, how could they call themselves a great power without access to the sea?

Having just gained independence, the Polish were already beginning to dream of becoming a great power.

Theoretically, Poland did have the potential to rise. Although the total population was not high, their birth rate was.

The industrial scale was not large, but Russia had left behind a significant amount of important industrial infrastructure, which, if integrated, could save a lot of development time.

The country was rich in resources, sufficient to meet the early needs of an industrial revolution. Some minerals were even abundant, such as silver, which was plentiful enough to alleviate concerns about currency issues.

Grain production was ample, allowing for exports in exchange for foreign currency to develop the domestic economy.

This was all theoretical, though. In reality, the biggest weakness was the lack of "talent." One could not expect the Russian government to have left them with intellectuals, as most of these people had joined the revolutionary cause, preparing to make a mark in politics.

Many intellectuals are good at criticizing everything under the sun and beyond, but unfortunately, they lack practical skills.

Of course, there are occasional exceptions, but they are too few. The Second Industrial Revolution has already begun, and what the country needs is a large number of knowledgeable and skilled engineers.

In terms of population quality, Germany currently has the advantage. The countries that have implemented compulsory education are concentrated in the German region.

Neither England nor France have popularized compulsory education, and the situation in other countries is even worse. Education is a privilege for the wealthy, and while church schools occasionally provide some education to the common people, it is far from sufficient.

Having just gained national independence, the Polish have not yet become overly proud. Despite their dissatisfaction with Prussia over the issue of access to the sea, the two sides have not broken off relations completely.

The Kingdom of Poland still lacks a king, and this is causing considerable concern.

According to Polish tradition, they would definitely seek a king from abroad, and the prominent royal families in Germany are all potential candidates.

There are many issues to consider, including the diplomatic maneuvers of various countries, and the Polish parliament is currently in intense debate. The selection of a Polish king might encounter difficulties.

One clear contender for the throne is King William I of Prussia. If Poland and Prussia were to share a monarch, a union between Poland and Prussia could become a possibility.

Theoretically, forming a federal empire would be in the interests of both Poland and Prussia. They face common threats: Russia and Austria.

These two enemies are too powerful. Neither Poland nor Prussia can face them alone; only by uniting can they have the strength to resist.

Clearly, this is only theoretical. Deciding who would be the leader is a major headache, and Poland's glorious history has become the biggest obstacle to this union.

Before the Russian threat disappeared, the Polish provisional government needed the help of the Prussians and almost compromised with the Prussian government. However, the international environment at the time did not allow it.

France and Austria did not want to see Poland and Prussia united and issued stern warnings. At a critical moment in the war, the Prussian government also dared not offend France and Austria, so this plan fell through.

Back then, they were already reluctant. Now that the immediate threat has disappeared, the Polish are even less willing to play second fiddle.

Of course, there have always been strong calls for the two countries to unite, and supporting William I as King of Poland has considerable support in the Polish parliament.

However, this most popular candidate was dismissed from the beginning.

He faced strong opposition from France, Austria, and Russia. Even if the Polish parliament supported him unanimously, William I would not dare to take the throne.

If it were a matter of merging the two countries, William I might take the risk. But facing joint opposition from the three great powers just for a shared monarchy, William I remained very hesitant.

It wasn't just his problem; the key was that the Polish parliament was even more hesitant. Facing intervention from the great powers, they dared not proceed with a vote.

Of course, the Prussian government has not completely given up, and much of the ongoing dispute in the Polish parliament is due to their influence.

During this joint Prussian-Polish anti-Russian war, the Kingdom of Prussia also took the opportunity to infiltrate Poland. Now, more than 80% of the officers and soldiers in the Polish army have been trained by Prussian instructors.

The pro-Prussian forces within Poland are also very strong. Although people are reluctant to be subordinate to Prussia, it doesn't mean they reject William I becoming King of Poland.

With such a significant advantage, the Prussians naturally want to seize the opportunity. They wouldn't simply give up without trying — that's not their style.

The international opposition is strong, mainly from France and Austria. The Russian Empire's stance can almost be ignored for now, as they are too preoccupied with their own civil war to interfere with the Polish throne issue.

The British have not explicitly supported or opposed the idea, remaining neutral. There are many small countries in Europe, most of which are opposed, but their opinions are not significant.

Securing the Polish throne is crucial for Prussia's eventual annexation of Poland. If they cannot secure it, they would prefer to leave the Polish throne vacant for the time being.

Chapter 428: Instructing the Heir

With the conclusion of the London Conference, the European continent finally welcomed a brief period of peace. Those who have never experienced war will never know its horrors.

As the victor of this war, William I did not show much joy. In terms of territory, the Kingdom of Prussia now is almost the same as the German Empire in the original timeline, and its total population has surpassed the 20 million mark.

These gains cannot hide the fact that the military has grown too powerful. Without Bismarck, the government can no longer keep the military in check.

The balance of power has been broken, which is not good for the emperor. William I, being politically astute, did not play any tricks like "removing the ladder after climbing up" or "cooking the hound once the hares are bagged."

In the Berlin Palace, William I announced a new appointment, "Prime Minister Franck has resigned due to health reasons, and now Marshal Moltke will take over."

If suppression doesn't work, then divide and conquer. Moltke is great at military strategy but far less skilled in politics. Putting him in the position of prime minister is essentially setting him up for failure.

No matter how high his current prestige, if he makes mistakes later, he will still be brought down, and the prestige gained from the war will be lost.

In most countries, it is impossible for a military marshal to become prime minister. The line between civil and military roles would prevent this. However, in the Kingdom of Prussia, it is entirely normal for military leaders to serve as prime ministers.

William I's strategy is open and transparent; with a change in position comes a change in perspective. Unless Moltke is willing to be a mere figurehead, he will eventually act to restrain the military.

Power struggles are brutal, and often one has no choice. As a military leader, they could comfortably sideline the government; but as the head of the government, the situation is different.

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Compared to the relatively harmonious power struggles in the Kingdom of Prussia, the situation in the neighboring Russian Empire is completely different. After the treaty was signed, the Tsar's army began rounding up people everywhere.

The reckoning had finally come. During these days, Alexander II had not been idle and had thoroughly investigated the situation. He had been holding back from taking action, waiting for the right moment to settle accounts.

For a time, the prisons in St. Petersburg were overcrowded. A large number of corrupt officials were caught, causing widespread panic among the bureaucrats.

If the investigation were strictly followed, every single bureaucrat in the Russian government could be arrested.

Even those who haven't committed crimes yet are on the path to committing them. The word "wronged" is unneeded as the Russian government's bureaucratic system is thoroughly rotten.

Alexander II is not a naive idealist and knows that it is unrealistic to eliminate all the bureaucrats.

Those being arrested now are the main culprits responsible for the defeat in the war. Someone has to be held accountable for the loss, and since Alexander II did not intend to find scapegoats, it fell to these officials to take the blame.

In the Winter Palace, watching the continuous capture of criminals, Alexander II was troubled. Most of these people were nobles, and according to tradition, they could not be executed.

Often, the problems were not entirely the fault of the senior officials. If they took a portion, their subordinates took three portions, with these layers of embezzlement leading to the great defeat.

Some inconspicuous lower-level government employees embezzled more than the senior officials. The lower the level, the more corrupt they were, while those at the top had to consider the consequences.

Executing all of them was unrealistic. These minor corrupt officials were not ordinary people; they were at least middle class. Executing them all would have a terrible social impact.

Moreover, killing these people wouldn't solve much; it wouldn't change the deeply corrupt bureaucracy of the Russian Empire.

Finance Minister Reutern suggested, "Your Majesty, let's exile them! We need to use political means to dismantle the rebel forces, and now is not the time for a massacre."

This was the most helpless yet effective solution for the Russian government. However, due to poor oversight later on, these exiled individuals came back and overthrew the Russian government.

The existence of the rebel forces saved these scoundrels. To ensure the rebels would surrender confidently, Alexander II had to pretend to be merciful.

Rebellion is different from embezzlement; it endangers the nobles' lives. No matter how high their status, if they participated in rebellion, they could be executed.

After some hesitation, Alexander II decided, "First, recover all the embezzled funds, then exile these bastards to the most inhospitable regions of Siberia."

Exile required some finesse. Most of Siberia had a harsh icy climate, but that didn't mean there were no decent places.

For example, the conditions in Novosibirsk were relatively better, although it was still just a small town at the time.

On the other hand, Oymyakon was an extreme case, with winter temperatures typically reaching -71 degrees Celsius and even having recorded a low of -96.2 degrees Celsius, effectively turning people into icicles.

Clearly, Alexander II was deeply resentful of these people and planned to freeze them to death.

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While Alexander II was cleaning out the corrupt officials, the struggle for the Polish throne was intensifying, spreading across the entire European continent and even affecting the Austrian court.

Poland is a major country with a glorious past. Many people are interested in this crown, including several members of House Habsburg, notably two of Franz's brothers.

Franz quickly suppressed such undesirable ambitions. He provided a simple reason: "Do you want to become the king of a doomed nation?"

This immediately brought everyone to their senses, reminding them of the dire situation of the Kingdom of Poland. There had been three partitions of Poland in the last century; would it not happen again?

The idea of a Polish-Prussian alliance was also a joke. Once the Russian Empire recovers, there will inevitably be a conflict between them.

Few people believe that the Polish-Prussian alliance can win, as it's not possible to find so many allies for every war.

In this recent Eastern European war, if it weren't for the British pulling the strings from behind, not only would Poland not have gained independence, but the Kingdom of Prussia might also have become history.

Will they be so lucky in the next war? If they lose, Poland will be doomed.

Everyone's enthusiasm was immediately dampened. Maximilian's negative example was still fresh. He did not listen to advice and went on to become the Emperor of Mexico, and everyone knew the kind of life he was leading now.

If one day Maximilian were suddenly overthrown, no one would be surprised. Being a negative example, a good outcome was naturally not expected.

After calming the internal situation, Franz ignored the external disputes. No matter who becomes the King of Poland, they will inherit a mess and won't be able to lead Poland to rise.

Just look at the map: to the east is the Russian Empire, to the southwest is Austria, and to the north is the Kingdom of Prussia. The three countries effectively encircle Poland.

Merging with the Kingdom of Prussia to form a federal empire is actually their best option. However, the proud Poles cannot accept this, and besides, this path is not easy.

Secondly, they could stubbornly resist the Russian Empire, pushing through the Ukrainian region to occupy the fertile black soil and establish a strong foundation.

This is almost like a dream. Franz does not believe the Poles can achieve this. It would require not only military victory but also superior political and diplomatic skills.

The last resort is to seek a powerful ally. The Russian Empire is destined to be their enemy, so there is nothing to discuss there. For Poland to protect itself, it must maintain good relations with other European countries.

The relationships with their two neighbors, Prussia and Austria, are particularly crucial. Only by handling these relationships well can Poland have a chance of survival.

Following the principle that political education should start from a young age, the Polish question became a real-life case study for Franz's children. The main focus was on teaching his eldest son, Frederick, since the other three were still too young.

The youngest, George, was born in 1865 and is only two years old, so politics is still far from his concern.

In fact, Frederick is also quite young, only 11 years old now. If he were from an ordinary family, he would still just be a primary school student.

Franz wasn't sure whether Frederick could handle learning politics at such a young age. But he had no choice but to teach him, fearing that someone might lead him astray, like his second brother Maximilian, who became an idealist and ended up in a mess.

"Frederick, let me test you. If you were the King of Poland, what would you do now?"

Facing this tricky question, Frederick gave an answer that Franz did not expect.

"Can I just not do it?"

Seeing Franz's lack of reaction, Frederick added, "I mean, abdicate!"

Franz neither opposed nor agreed, but asked, "What's your reason?"

Frederick shook his little head and said, "I don't know what a Polish king is supposed to do or what he can do! Given that, it's better to just let go."

This was also an answer, at least one that preserved himself. Franz smiled slightly and said nothing.

To take action, one must first preserve oneself. This was a principle Franz had instilled in them from a young age. How effective it would be, he wasn't sure, but for now, they could resist temptation because they had not yet touched power.

Many people pursue the impossible out of idealism, which can be commendable. But in a royal family, it is a disaster.

Franz continued to ask, “What if you were the King of Prussia instead? Would you continue to let go?”

The situation in the Kingdom of Prussia is much better than in Poland. After defeating the Russians, William I is at the height of his power, with a public support rating of at least 90 out of 100.

Frederick thought for a moment and said, “Instead of seeking expansion, we should develop the domestic economy. Prussia gained too much from this war, and it needed to digest these gains.

It must be done quickly before the Russian Empire recovers, to have a chance of winning a second Prusso-Russian war.”

Franz smiled and said, “Not bad, at least you understand the need to strive and not retreat at the first sign of trouble. But that’s not enough.

While developing yourself is important, striking at your enemies is equally crucial. Keep an eye on William I’s actions. He definitely won’t sit by and watch the Russians regain their strength.

You might even get to see a Prussia-Poland union. Of course, this will depend on William I’s political maneuvers.”

Frederick shook his little head, full of confusion. A Prussia-Poland union? What kind of operation is that?

Isn’t everyone against the merging of Prussia and Poland? Why does the Kingdom of Prussia have to merge with Poland? Not only did all the European countries oppose it, but even the Polish people opposed it. Would such a union be useful?

Franz did not continue to explain. He believed that observing and figuring things out on one’s own was far more effective than being directly told.

Using international situations as textbooks and the monarchs of various countries as case studies was Franz’s method of teaching his son.

Whether as positive examples or negative ones, personally experiencing these situations leaves the deepest impression.

Learn from their strengths, summarize their weaknesses, and draw lessons from them. This was not only a way to teach his son but also a form of self-learning for Franz.

Chapter 429: The Tsar's Devious Scheme

There are still many smart people in this world. After the Habsburgs abandoned their bid for the Polish throne, several other European royal families also withdrew.

This includes House Bonaparte. Napoleon III wisely gave up on the Polish quagmire. Although he wanted to support Poland to keep Austria in check, Napoleon III did not believe Poland could succeed.

Whether this had anything to do with the Poles looking down on them is unknown. In any case, in this era, House Bonaparte was still an upstart and would normally not have the qualifications to be a candidate.

Wouldn't it be embarrassing if they were somehow included in Poland's shortlist? Given the Poles' ability to court disaster, it wouldn't be surprising if this happened.

Another strong contender, the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, also withdrew. Poland's poor strategic position deterred them.

The so-called elective monarchy system in Europe was always a game of power struggles involving political and diplomatic maneuvers. It also depended on whether the candidates themselves were willing; there were plenty of people who did not wish to become kings.

Now, all the major European powers had their own favored candidates, making the situation even more chaotic.

Prussia supported William I as the King of Poland, but after facing opposition from France and Austria, they then backed Karl of House Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, only to face the same opposition.

Spain and Austria supported the House of Bourbon for the Polish throne, but this met strong resistance from France and Prussia.

Russia supported George, the son of Denmark's Christian IX, for the Polish throne, but this was strongly opposed by the Kingdom of Prussia...

It's worth mentioning that Austria also supported George for the Polish throne. There's no contradiction here; no one said you could only support one candidate.

In any case, the goal was to create trouble for Prussia. As long as it wasn't William I, Franz didn't care who became the King of Poland.

Prussia and Poland together would be more than just the sum of their parts. If they integrated their resources, they would become a major European power.

For the security of their northern borders, Franz naturally wouldn't let them merge easily. For Austria, having Prussia and Poland join forces against the Russian Empire was enough. Letting them merge would be asking for trouble.

Just as in the original timeline where Germany didn't dare to annex Austria-Hungary, Franz wouldn't dare to annex the Prussian-Polish federation, for it was practically a ticking time bomb.

The great powers had different positions, leaving the Polish parliament in a dilemma, completely unsure of whom to choose.

The Polish people couldn't empathize with the parliament's troubles. They were exercising their freedom, holding up signs, chanting slogans, and marching in the streets, surrounding the parliament building.

If you listened carefully, you could hear shouts of "George," "William," "Karl"...

Indeed, the citizens concerned about the fate of the Polish crown were making their voices heard.

How many were sincere and how many were just brought in to make up numbers was up for interpretation.

The newly established Polish parliament had never seen such a spectacle. In the past, they had organized people to shout outside. Now, the tables had turned, and they were the ones being shouted at.

The Tsar was not to be trifled with. In the past when they chanted slogans, they did so with trepidation, unlike the arrogance of those outside now, directly surrounding the parliament and forcing them to make a decision.

“Send someone out to ask what they actually want. Damn it, did I just hear ‘Napoleon’? Do they want a dead man to be the King of Poland?” Speaker Alex shouted in rage, nearly driven mad. If choosing a king were so easy, why would they be agonizing over it?

It is easy to share hardship, but difficult to share prosperity.

When they were fighting to establish the country, they had a common enemy, the Russians, and everyone could cooperate closely. Now that Poland had become independent, the various factions began to vie for power and profit.

The protesting crowd outside was organized by the losers in this power struggle. Their purpose was obvious: to use political maneuvering by supporting a king to make a comeback.

In reality, the republican faction within the government was also significant. They were just afraid of intervention from other European countries and didn’t dare to adopt a republican system.

The Polish parliament’s prolonged inability to make a decision was largely due to the republicans. They disrupted votes and delayed decision-making, preparing to establish a de facto republic.

Once the government institutions stabilized, creating a fait accompli, even if a king were chosen later, he would be merely a figurehead.

No one wanted an additional shackle on themselves, so the leaders of the provisional government were all working to sideline the king. However, the protests outside had disrupted many of their plans.

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On November 11, 1867, the shocking “11/11” massacre occurred in Poland. The situation of the protest march quickly spiraled out of control under insidious guidance, leading to an assault on the parliament building.

By the time the police belatedly arrived to disperse the crowd, 17 members of parliament had already been killed on the spot in the chaos, and dozens more, including Speaker Alex, were injured.

With such a major incident, the Polish government naturally couldn’t let it go. White terror enveloped the streets of Warsaw.

The black hand behind the scenes was never found, but those who participated in the protests filled the prisons. No matter how they tried to make amends, the Polish parliament had lost its authority because of this.

When the news reached Vienna, Franz merely smiled. Such an obvious situation needed no discussion. Suppressing protests was common; having the parliament building stormed by a crowd was nothing new, but killing so many parliamentarians was a first.

In a place like parliament, if it was attacked by protesters, how could the police be late? Such a simple issue didn't require much discussion.

Under normal circumstances, as soon as it was discovered that the protesters were heading towards the parliament building, even if the police didn't intercept them, they should have deployed a large number of officers to protect the parliament.

Undoubtedly, this was the result of internal power struggles. The parliament's dignity was swept away, and the government's power was naturally strengthened.

It also provided an opportunity to strike at competitors. Any revolutionary group involved in organizing the protest would be in deep trouble.

While protests and demonstrations could be seen as exercising citizens' rights, storming the parliament and killing members of parliament was an act of terrorism.

The only winner seemed to be the current Polish government. But then again, they might not be the winners either; they could very well be pawns being used by others.

In Franz's view, the Prussians were likely behind this conspiracy. The Polish government appeared to have gained significant power, but in reality, they were in a precarious position.

The rules of internal power struggles in the country had been broken, which was not good for the Polish government. The government was both the rule maker and the rule enforcer.

Now that someone had broken the unwritten rules, others were clearly not going to continue following them. The political struggle had crossed the line into physical violence, meaning everyone had to be prepared for assassination in the future.

The foundation of the Polish government's rule was shaken. To stabilize the domestic situation, they would inevitably rely on Prussian support. Consequently, the Kingdom of Prussia's influence in Poland was sure to increase.

If Franz didn't want to get involved in this mess, Austria could step in now and potentially outmaneuver Prussia.

However, this kind of infiltration was useless for Austria. No matter how tempting the Kingdom of Poland might be, Franz had no appetite for it now. A delicacy that could only be looked at but not eaten was better abandoned altogether.

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In the Berlin Palace, William I was also pondering the true culprit behind the incident. He didn't believe that the high-level officials of the Polish government would be so foolish as to break the unwritten rules for a temporary advantage.

William I asked, "Prime Minister, who do you think is most likely to have orchestrated this?"

The art of war is deception, so asking Moltke to answer this question was quite fitting. It wasn't an intentional challenge; William I was not that petty.

Moltke analyzed, “Your Majesty, I believe the Polish government is likely innocent. Based on the current international situation, I think the Austrians are the most suspicious. Looking at the last two European wars, they have been the victors.

Creating incidents, provoking international relations, and creating international conflicts are specialties of the British and the Austrians. The British need us and the Poles to join forces against Russia and Austria, so they have no reason to act at this time.

Austria, on the other hand, only needs us and Poland to unite against Russia; they do not want to see our two countries merge. Creating a bit of discord between us and Poland is quite necessary for them.

Of course, the French and the Russians are also suspects. However, they are too far from Poland and their influence is limited, making it difficult for them to plan this.

As for the Russians, given the deep-seated conflict between Russia and Poland, even if the Russian government wanted to cause trouble, the Poles might not be willing to cooperate with them.”

This answer sounded reasonable, but William I still felt something was off; it didn’t quite seem like the modus operandi of the Austrian government.

Austria also had a significant influence on Poland. Among the volunteers who had initially joined the Polish independence movement, there were numerous Austrian spies.

These seemingly inconspicuous individuals actually held quite a few important positions within the Polish government. There were many ways to sow discord between the two countries without resorting to such extreme measures.

If things were exposed, the international repercussions would be significant. While William I had his suspicions, he didn’t voice them. Letting Austria take the blame was fine by him.

Without evidence, it didn’t really matter whether Austria was behind it or not; after all, the Poles didn’t have the capability to retaliate.

Franz had no idea that a hefty accusation had just suddenly fallen from the sky right toward him. Franz believed it was a Prussian conspiracy, while the Prussians thought Austria was trying to drive a wedge between them and Poland.

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In St. Petersburg, Alexander II was listening to his subordinates’ reports. If the contents were leaked, they would undoubtedly shock the entire European continent.

Based on the principle of who benefits the most, the Polish government and Prussia became the prime suspects. Who would think that the seemingly unrelated Russia was behind it?

By now, the Polish government had probably blamed Prussia for the incident. Even if they couldn’t do without Prussian support in the short term, their relationship would still be shadowed by suspicion.

No one likes an ally who interferes in their domestic affairs. Once the issue of the Polish king is stabilized, the relationship between Prussia and Poland is bound to change.

This was not just a conspiracy but also an open plot. Without evidence, the Prussians couldn’t clear their name.

Even if they managed to prove their innocence, could the Prussian-Polish relationship return to its original state? Obviously not, unless the Prussian government gave up the opportunity to infiltrate Poland.

Alexander II had merely provided an excuse for conflict between the two countries. There were too many potential conflicts of interest between Prussia and Poland. As long as they could not become a unified whole, contradictions were bound to arise.

If Austria took the blame, Alexander II's scheme would be even more perfect. If both Prussia and Poland had deteriorating relations with Austria, it meant that in future wars, Russia would have an additional ally.

The experience of fighting alone was not pleasant, and Alexander II didn't want to do it all over again.

It was a lesson he learned the hard way.

After this lesson, Alexander II understood the importance of allies. His earlier policy of "favoring Prussia and alienating Austria" now seemed like a joke.

Making foreign policy decisions based solely on personal preferences is utterly foolish.

Unlike established empires, the Kingdom of Prussia needed to expand to become strong. At the time, they couldn't defeat the three surrounding large empires and ultimately chose to target the Russian Empire.

This wasn't because Russia was weak, but because Russia had no allies. Additionally, attacking Russia could gain them the friendship of Britain and France, alleviating concerns about financial and logistical support.

Transportation was also a crucial factor. Both France and Austria had complete railway networks. As Prussia was the first to recognize the importance of railways in warfare, they had assessed the situation before starting the conflict.

France and Austria could deploy too many troops, potentially overwhelming Prussia in one go. Thus, they chose to fight the Russian Empire, which could only deploy a limited amount of troops.

Regardless of the reasons, the primary factor was Russia's isolation. No matter the justification, attacking Russia was seen as righteous by other European countries.

Attacking other countries would easily draw hostility. Before Russia joined the war, Prussia's invasion of Denmark was condemned by various European nations, with many calling for international sanctions.

However, once the Russian government entered the war, the situation changed instantly. While condemning Prussia's invasion of Poland, they simultaneously supported Prussia's conflict with Russia.

Russia's only significant ally, Austria, had distanced itself since Alexander II's ascension. Diplomatic changes directly impacted the war, with Austria's support diminishing significantly compared to the Near East War.

After summarizing the lessons learned, Alexander II also began to prioritize diplomacy, with the effort to divide Prussian-Polish relations being just one aspect.

Chapter 430: The Opening of the Suez Canal

In Egypt, the Suez Canal has reached a critical moment. After nine long years of construction, the project is finally nearing completion.

This time, there were no halts in construction, nor was there a shortage of labor. This large canal was jointly built by France and Austria. The British attempts to interfere not only failed but also caused their Egyptian cotton cultivation plans to fall through.

The reason for the lengthy construction period was nothing other than the canal being designed to be four meters deeper than the Suez Canal in the original timeline.

Later, during actual construction, the engineers sent by Austria insisted on ensuring absolute reliability, adding another two meters of depth.

With the increase in depth, the width naturally had to be increased as well, which significantly added to the volume of work. In an era lacking machinery, the additional amount of earthwork was no small task.

The increased workload also made the construction costs rise. In the original timeline, the Suez Canal faced many hurdles before finally opening, costing a total of 18.6 million pounds. Now, even before opening, the costs have already soared to 37.7 million pounds.

The ever-increasing costs have caused the Suez Canal's stock to plummet, leading many to doubt whether the canal could ever be profitable.

This situation turned out to be advantageous for Franz. Whenever someone sold off their stocks, he would buy them up. After all, there was no way he could incur losses; profitability was just a matter of time.

It was thanks to him playing the role of the buyer that the Suez Canal stock didn't crash completely. Of course, dropping below the initial offering price was inevitable.

After two rounds of additional stock issuance, when the stock appeared to be sluggish and unsellable, the canal company directly used the canal's property rights as collateral to secure a loan from the bank.

Though met with a cold reception in the financial markets, this is a strategic project seen by the French and Austrian governments as an opportunity to break the British monopoly over the Strait of Gibraltar.

It was only under the guarantee of the two governments that banks were willing to provide loans. Franz initially planned to take on this business himself, but it was opposed by bank staff.

After all, the outside world did not have a favorable view of the canal company. Issuing such a large loan could easily trigger a chain reaction, which would be problematic if it affected the Royal Bank's ability to attract deposits.

It's important to note that most of Franz's investments were actually made using loans. In this context, maintaining the Royal Bank's ability to attract deposits was crucial.

By borrowing from his own bank, transferring money from one hand to the other, the cost of funds he needed to pay was merely the deposit interest rate, if not lower.

The funds were utilized in a rolling manner. Even if money was spent, it often just moved from one account to another without actually being withdrawn from the bank.

In this era, there was no interbank network like UnionPay, so transferring funds between banks required individuals to handle it themselves. Generally speaking, not many people did this.

This presented an opportunity: the bank could recycle the same funds multiple times. As long as there was no financial crisis or bank run, this could be done dozens of times without issue.

Even in the event of a financial crisis, the impact on the Royal Bank would be minimal as reputation is a valuable asset.

Over the years, the Royal Bank had collected a substantial amount of gold. While some of it had been sold, most had been stored. There were still a hundred tons of gold reserves at the Vienna headquarters.

This was the basis of the Royal Bank's credibility. While a hundred tons of gold may sound like a lot, its actual value is only about 27.3224 million guilders. Nonetheless, it sounds imposing and provides a sense of security.

Of course, the most reassuring factor is the "Royal" brand. As long as the royal family stands, the Royal Bank will not fail. This is akin to Franz's reputation, so he would not allow it to go bankrupt.

Most of the funds were used for his own investments, leaving fewer funds available for external loans. In fact, the Royal Bank has not engaged in small-scale business to date.

Simply put, loans under 100,000 guilders are not entertained here, even with collateral. However, the deposit limit is much lower; one can even open an account with just five guilders.

Due to the technological limitations of the era, all business had to be conducted manually. Deposits were manageable, but loan reviews were troublesome because of the need for extensive background checks.

The Royal Bank only made exceptions for small loans in the case of government-commissioned policy loans. With the government guaranteeing the repayment ability of clients, these issues naturally disappear.

In reality, small loans were only handled by small and medium-sized banks at the time, and the interest rates were much higher than ordinary commercial loans. Not much profit was made, but the stigma of high-interest loans was there.

From the start, the Royal Bank was positioned to serve Franz himself. It was not enthusiastic about lending and mostly engaged in conservative business practices.

In this way, the Royal Bank's development in the personal loan business was quite average. However, there were not many bad debts, and overall, it made a small profit.

Most of the profits came from corporate loans, government loans, and international loans. These large loans were beyond the capabilities of small banks, so there was much less market competition.

Although the interest rates might be lower, the required management costs were also lower, resulting in more substantial profits.

International loans, in particular, appeared to have low interest rates but actually yielded very high returns.

For example, fees like processing fees and exchange fees usually accounted for three to four percent. When issuing loans, the bank would typically deduct the principal and interest due for the first year upfront, and for some loans, they would even deduct three to five years' worth at once.

Banks often also engaged in product sales, especially for restricted-use loans. They could bundle a certain amount of goods with the loan, earning profits from the price difference.

Generally speaking, for an external loan of 1 million guilders, if the debtor received 900,000 guilders, it would already be considered a fair loan. In more stringent cases, loans that only resulted in the debtor receiving half the amount were not unheard of.

The worst were installment loans, where the debtor had to bear interest on the full amount but received the funds in stages. With such loans, the actual funds received might be less than 40% of the total loan amount.

Without these exploitative terms, international loans would not be so deeply resented. Merely a few percent in interest would be underestimating the appetite of capitalists.

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“Mr. Lesseps, the canal project has passed inspection and is ready to be flooded.”

Lesseps was the chief engineer of the Suez Canal, and his main achievement was persuading the Egyptians to participate in the excavation of this large canal.

It's worth noting that this time around, it was even more exploitative than in the original timeline. The Egyptians did not receive any shares in the canal company; they only got a share of the profits.

In reality, it was the same either way. Even if they had been given shares, the Egyptian government wouldn't have seen any money.

In the original timeline, the Egyptian government only managed to secure an annual payment of 300,000 pounds by 1937. As for their original 44% share, who would acknowledge that?

Receiving dividends now was the same; they wouldn't get any money on the shares in the end anyway. Lesseps was able to persuade the Egyptian government to cooperate voluntarily, which naturally earned the canal company's approval.

Although the canal company had to pay a sum to the Egyptian government annually, it was negligible compared to labor costs.

One could say the Suez Canal was not so much dug as filled with human lives. However, since the Egyptian government didn't care about casualties, the canal company cared even less.

Without any hesitation, Lesseps ordered, “Then let the water in!”

At his command, the dam was blown open with a “roar” of explosions. Torrents of seawater rushed in, and the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea were finally connected.

With a loud bang, news of the Suez Canal's opening quickly spread across the European continent, eliciting various reactions.

Joy, surprise, worry, disbelief... a full spectrum of emotions was on display.

In the bustling commercial port of Venice, Austria's busiest harbor, the public was far more interested in the Suez Canal than other regions.

In a small tavern, heated discussions had already begun.

A young man, proudly showing off, said, "The Suez Canal has opened. Have you heard? They say it can accommodate fifty-thousand-ton ships. That's a joke, right? There aren't even ships that big in the world. It's a complete waste!"

A middle-aged man next to him retorted, "What do you know? That's the maximum capacity. The Suez Canal is located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and there will definitely be a lot of ships passing through. Of course, there need to be multiple parallel channels.

Besides, shipbuilding technology is so advanced now. People are already developing twenty-thousand-ton ships. If such large ships appear, wouldn't it be perfect for them to pass through?"

The young man, unconvinced, said, "Oh, come on. The Suez Canal charges fees. There won't be that many ships willing to pay. They might as well take the longer route around the Strait of Gibraltar and avoid the unnecessary expense.

The real use of the canal is military. It was dug by us and the French. It's obvious that it's meant to bypass British control of the Strait of Gibraltar.

As for the Suez Canal Company, it's probably going to lose a lot of money. Building such a large canal just for a few warships to pass through."

Another young man walked in and sat down, saying, "Filver, it looks like you need to buy a map and take a good look. Don't pretend to know things you don't and show off your knowledge here.

With the opening of the Suez Canal, the journey to the Indian Ocean is significantly shortened. How can you say there's no commercial value? Take Venice, for example; every year, we have no less than a thousand ships traveling to and from the Indian Ocean.

After the Suez Canal opens, this number will increase. Perhaps Austria alone will have tens of thousands of ships traveling to and from the Indian Ocean every year. If you add up all the Mediterranean countries, there might be another tens of thousands of ships.

Even if each ship is charged three to five hundred guilders, the canal company's annual revenue from transit fees would be in the millions. This figure will only increase with the growth of international trade. In the future, annual revenue from transit fees could reach hundreds of millions of guilders.

As long as the transit fee doesn't exceed the cost of taking the longer route around the Strait of Gibraltar, everyone will likely be happy to shorten their sea journey."

In this era, making a living at sea is risky, with thousands of ships lost each year. Sailing is inherently dangerous.

Being able to shorten the sailing distance is good news for every shipping capitalist, as it means their risk of loss from shipwrecks decreases.

Compared to the military value of the Suez Canal, ordinary people are more concerned with its economic value. Looking at the map, this canal is most beneficial to Austria. Whether heading to the Indian Ocean or the Western Pacific, it is the optimal route.

This has already impacted Austria's economy, especially for port cities like Venice. Shortening the voyage significantly boosts trade.

For those making a living here, this is undoubtedly good news. Increased overseas trade means more ships coming and going, which in turn means a more prosperous local economy and higher incomes for everyone.

Different people care about different things. At the Vienna Palace, Franz was less concerned about the economic impact of the Suez Canal and more about its strategic value.

Looking at the basic parameters of the canal: a surface width of 138 meters, a bottom width of 48 meters, and a depth of 15.4 meters, it was estimated to accommodate ships of up to 50,000 tons.

This meant that even in the era of dreadnoughts, the Suez Canal could still allow free passage, significantly enhancing its strategic value compared to the Suez Canal of the same period in the original timeline.

This brought Franz a sense of relief; his efforts had not been in vain. These dimensions would be sufficient even in the dreadnought era. As for the aircraft carrier era, it wouldn't matter; by then, the British would be in decline.

Looking at the canal's costs, Franz couldn't help but sigh. It exceeded the original timeline's cost by more than double; indeed, it was a high-investment project. Without his foresight, Franz might not have dared to invest so heavily.

This massive investment meant that the canal company would find it difficult to recoup its investment over the next decade. However, this was of little consequence; the canal company was still a golden goose.

With the development of maritime trade, the canal company's financial prospects were promising. The short-term investment was entirely worth it; perhaps in 20 to 30 years, the annual transit fees alone could cover the construction costs.

In this regard, Napoleon III's boldness was also admirable. Without the advantage of foresight, he too dared to invest heavily.

On the issue of the Suez Canal, Napoleon III's strategic vision was impeccable.

The butterfly effect is indeed powerful. Without the glory of winning the Crimean War, it should be considered a good thing for the French that their emperor remained grounded.