

THE AUSTRO-PRUSSIAN WAR OF 1866

I. BISMARCK'S PLAN TO UNIFY GERMANY: "LET'S BAIT AUSTRIA INTO STARTING A WAR!"

In 1866 Germany was divided into several dozen mini-states, of which Prussia was the largest. Prussia's Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1862-1890) sought to unify Germany under Prussian leadership. Main reason: Prussia was geographically not contiguous and had long borders. This left it insecure. A united Germany would have better borders and more resources, and so be more secure. Toward the goal of dominating Germany Bismarck sought to remove Austrian influence in southern Germany by war. He saw two prerequisites for this campaign: (1) France, Britain and Russia had to be induced to stay neutral while Prussia beat Austria; and (2) the Prussian king had to be induced, against his sentiments, to declare war on his brother-German Austrians. Bismarck's solution: Prussia would **sweet-talk the other European powers into not fearing Prussia**, and would **bait Austria into starting the war**. If Austria starts war it will alienate the other powers and thus be easy pickings; and the Prussian king will be outraged at Austria and declare war on it.

II. BACKGROUND TO WAR: EVENTS AND CONDITIONS

- A. Bismarck's deceptions.
1. Deceptions regarding Prussian capability: "We're weak!"
 2. Spin regarding Prussian intentions: "We're benign!" Bismarck sent the Schweinitz mission to Russia to proclaim that Prussia had limited aims.
 - > Note: Prussian intentions were in fact limited. After defeating France in 1871 Bismarck proclaimed Germany "sated." But after 1890 Germany's appetite grew vastly. It turned out Bismarck could not speak for his successors.
- B. British, French, and Russian were indifferent to containing Prussia, in part due to Bismarck's deceptions.
1. Britain feared France more than Prussia, and was generally isolationist.
 2. France saw advantage in what it thought would be a long fratricidal Prussian-Austrian war. It thought: "We can demand the Rhineland as our fee for breaking the stalemate for the victor."
 3. Russia felt solidarity with Prussia against the Poles, whom they both cruelly oppressed and who hated them both. Russia also was distracted from central European affairs by its focus on undoing the demilitarization of the Black Sea, imposed by Britain on Russia in the peace that ended the Crimean War in 1856.
- C. Prussia signed a 3-month offensive alliance with Italy, April 8, 1866. Terms include giving Italy parts of southern Austria.
- D. Austria mobilized its army, April 21, 1866--a fateful step. Why did Austria take it?
1. Austria received false reports that Italy was mobilizing, and mobilized very quickly in response. Where did these false reports come from? Maybe the Austrian military deceived its civilians; or **perhaps Bismarck deceived Austria**. Alois Karoly, Austrian minister in Berlin, believed Bismarck was the source of the falsehood.
 2. Why did Austria mobilize against Prussia as well as Italy?
 - a. Austrian leaders assumed Prussia had already decided for war. They didn't realize that Prussia couldn't start a war if Austria didn't move first.
 - b. Austria had only one mobilization plan. It posited a 2-front mobilization.
 3. Results: Prussia's king was outraged, opted for war against Austria; and Britain, France and Russia stood aside indifferently. The table is set for Prussian victory.

III. WARTIME EVENTS:

- A. In Prussia there was bitter civil-military conflict over war aims. The Prussian army said: "Let's smash Austria completely! And perhaps France!" Bismarck sarcastically responded: "Why not go all the way to Constantinople?" The army didn't get its way--fortunately for Prussia.
- B. Prussian war aims nevertheless do modestly widen. Prussia excludes Austria from Germany instead of dividing it with Austria at the Main.

IV. CAUSES OF THE WAR? PERHAPS AMONG THEM:

- A. Austria's false optimism.
- B. Prussia's search for security; and Prussia's offensive opportunity.
- C. Bismarck's baiting, and Austria's unwise decision to take the bait.

V. WHAT CAUSED THE PEACE? AN EMERGING DEFENSIVE ALLIANCE AGAINST PRUSSIA.

VI. WAS A NEGOTIATED SOLUTION TO THE CRISIS POSSIBLE? PROBABLY NO--SCARY THOUGHT. To gain Austrian concessions Bismarck would have had to scare Austria by showing muscle and a will to fight. But that would have mobilized the other powers against Prussia, tipping the overall balance of power against Prussia. So Bismarck could not use coercive diplomacy.

THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR OF 1870

I. BACKGROUND

- A. Bismarck's continuing deceptions: "We're weak and we're benign!"
- B. Bismarck's provocations to France:
 - 1. He authored the Hohenzollern candidacy for the Spanish throne, to spark French fears of Prussian encirclement of France.
 - 2. He edited the Ems telegram to inject disrespect and insult France. This provoked France to mobilize in July 14, triggering war.
- C. Serendipity: the Salazar telegram of June 21 was mis-translated as "Salazar will return July 9" not "June 25," hence the Spanish adjourned the Cortes to escape the summer heat, hence the election of the new king was deferred, hence the Hohenzollern candidature remained alive into July. Accidents matter.
- D. Due mainly to Bismarck's deceptions and France's idiot belligerence, Russia, Britain, and Austria all decided to be unconcerned about the possibility of German victory, and so stayed out of the war.
- E. First-move advantage? Michael Howard offers hints that France perceived such an advantage and mobilized to gain it.

II. THE WAR: EVENTS

- A. France thought Prussia would take 6 weeks to mobilize its army. In fact it took Prussia 3 weeks to mobilize; and Prussia's mobilized army was twice the size of France's mobilized army.
- B. The Prussians crushed the French army in 6 weeks, largely by inducing the French to unwisely take the offensive. But then Prussia faced a long guerilla war of resistance by the French. Subduing France proved very difficult.
- C. During the war German aims widened to include Alsace-Lorraine. In 1867 Prussia's chief of staff, Helmut von Moltke the Elder, declared: "We desire nothing from France." But Prussia then demanded Alsace-Lorraine. Why? Pressure from the Prussian military; and Bismarck saw advantage in keeping France hostile to Prussia!
- D. There was bitter civil-military conflict in Prussia over war aims and military operations. Moltke sought to smash France utterly, and (wrongly) dismissed Bismarck's fears of British or other intervention. Moltke also resisted civilian control over his military operations by leaving civilians in the dark. Bismarck complained that he learned about events on the battlefield only "five days later in the newspaper."

III. RELEVANT HYPOTHESES

- A. The Prussian and French militaries both (!) saw windows of opportunity.
- B. Prussia saw an offensive opportunity arising from Britain, Russia and Austria's unusual failure to counterbalance Prussia.
- C. France was falsely optimistic about the military outcome of the war.

IV. THE FALSE LESSONS GERMANS LEARNED FROM THE WAR OF 1870: "BISMARCK USED BLOOD AND IRON TO MAKE FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE. YOU CAN TOO!"
QUESTION: WHY WAS THIS FALSE LESSON LEARNED?

V. BISMARCK PURSUES PEACE, 1871-1890.

After the Franco-Prussian war Bismarck deemed that German national aims were achieved and that Germany now needed only peace. Toward this goal Bismarck sought to Germany's neighborhood at peace. To achieve this Bismarck wove a web of defensive alliances with other European states. His web of defensive alliances included states hostile to each other, such as Russia and Austria-Hungary. Germany assured each that it would defend them if they were attacked but warned that they would fight alone if they launched aggression. Result: Europe enjoyed 20 years of peace.

VI. KEY CHANGES IN GERMAN POLICY AFTER 1890

- A. Germany was sated, 1871-1890; after 1890 it becomes expansionist.
- B. Germany pursues expansion by stealth and deception, 1864-71; after 1890 it pursues expansion by belligerence and intimidation.

VII. LESSONS OF BOTH WARS AND THEIR AFTERMATH FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

- A. These wars suggest that when offshore balancers don't balance against Europe's continental aggressors, they get frisky and start wars. Does this lesson still apply?
- B. The aftermath of these wars suggests that the U.S. can maintain peace elsewhere by weaving a web of defensive alliances.
- C. Other lessons re: effects contempt v. respect? Dangers of being baited (some say Bin Laden seeks to bait the U.S. today)? Belligerence v. assurance as diplomatic strategies?

VIII. PRELUDE TO WORLD WAR I. IMPORTANT CAUSES OF WAR DISAPPEARED DURING 1870-1914. SO WHY WAR IN 1914??

- > The partition of Africa was finally resolved in 1911, removing a major source of international conflict.
- > The German question was finally resolved on terms very favorable to Germany, with Germany's unification in 1870-71.
- > German power rose sharply relative to other European powers, 1870-1914, and seemed likely to keep rising. Germany was on a roll! So why didn't Germany sit tight and enjoy the ride?

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