

## 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 reasons: Prussia was geographically not contiguous, had long borders, and had a smaller total population than other European powers. This left Prussia insecure, and left Germany ripe for a rerun of the epic ruin it suffered at the hands of other powers during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). 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 three prerequisites for this campaign. (1) France, Britain and Russia had to be induced to stay neutral while Prussia beat Austria. A very tall order! Major states almost never allow other major states to increase their power by war. (2) The Prussian king had to be induced, against his sentiments, to declare war on his brother-German Austrians. (3) Prussian war aims had to remain limited. If Prussia pursued large aims it would likely provoke other powers to intervene to reverse its gains. It could reduce this risk by pursuing strictly limited aims. This required tight civilian control of Prussia's expansion-minded military.

Bismarck's three solutions: (1) Prussia would **sweet-talk the other European powers into not fearing Prussia**, by talking down Prussian power and persuading others that Prussian aims were limited, even benign. He thought: "If other powers don't fear Prussia they will more readily allow it to grow, expanding its power." (2) Bismarck would **bait Austria into starting the war**. He thought: "If Austria acts aggressively it will alienate the other powers and thus be without allies; and the Prussian king will be outraged at Austria and declare war on it." (3) Bismarck would persuade the Prussian king to **tightly control Prussia's tactically brilliant but expansion-minded Chief of Staff Helmut von Moltke the Elder**. Bismarck then could **keep Prussian war aims tightly limited, and could promptly end the war when these aims were achieved**. This would avert intervention against Prussia by Russia, France and Britain.

### II. BACKGROUND TO WAR: EVENTS AND CONDITIONS

#### A. Bismarck's deceptions.

1. Deceptions regarding Prussian capability: "We're weak!" These deceptions were aimed chiefly at Britain, France, and Russia, but also fooled Austria

- into false optimism.
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 Bismarck left office in 1890 Germany's appetite grew vastly. Bismarck could not speak for his successors.
- B. Britain, France, and Russia 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 failed to foresee that Prussia would win a quick, decisive victory, instead expecting a long fratricidal Prussian-Austrian war. It saw advantage in such a war, thinking: "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. This was a provocation and threat to Austria.
  - D. Austria mobilized its army against Italy and Prussia, 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 did modestly widen. Prussia excluded Austria from Germany instead of dividing it with Austria at the Main river.

#### 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 get Austria to concede peacefully 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 goal: to provoke France into serving as a bogey that Bismarck could use to tighten Prussia's grip on the lesser German states. Baiting!
- B. Bismarck continued/repeated his deceptions: "We're weak and we're benign!"
- C. Bismarck's provocations to France:
  - 1. He authored a Hohenzollern candidacy for the Spanish throne, to spark French fears of Prussian encirclement of France.
  - 2. He edited a telegram to the French--the Ems telegram--to make it seem insulting to France. This telegram summarized an informal conversation between Prussian King William I and French ambassador Vincent Benedetti in July 13. It was drafted by Prussian royal secretary Abeken, then edited by Bismarck and released to the press also on July 13. Bismarck happily assured friends that the telegram, after his rewriting, "would have the effect of a red flag on the Gallic bull." It was the trigger for French mobilization on July 14, triggering war.
- D. Serendipity: the Salazar telegram of June 21 1870 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.

- E. Due mainly to Bismarck's deceptions and France's idiotic belligerence, Russia, Britain, and Austria all decided to be unconcerned about the possibility of German victory, and so stayed out of the war.
- F. First-move advantage? Michael Howard offers hints that France perceived such an advantage and mobilized to gain it.
- G. France launched military mobilization first on July 14, 1870, then Prussia on July 15. France declared war on Prussia on July 16. Fighting began July 19.

## 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.
- C. The French then mounted a long war of guerilla resistance against Prussian occupying forces. Subduing France proved very difficult.
- D. During the war German aims widened to include keeping 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!
- E. 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 keeping civilians in the dark. Bismarck complained that he learned about events on the battlefield only "five days later in the newspaper."

## III. MORE CAUSES OF THE WAR

- A. The Prussian and French militaries both (!) saw windows of opportunity.
- B. Prussia's search for security; and Prussia's offensive opportunity. Prussia saw an offensive opportunity arising from Britain, Russia and Austria's unusual failure to counterbalance Prussia. And Prussia, as always, feared for its safety if it failed to achieve German national union.
- 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 two things: to be at peace, and to avert the appearance of a overwhelmingly strong neighbor that could overmatch German power. Toward these goals Bismarck sought to prevent aggression among Germany's neighborhood. This would avoid Germany being sucked into wars among its neighbors, and would ensure that no neighbor won a decisive war that left it overwhelmingly powerful. To achieve these two goals Bismarck wove a web of defensive alliances with other European states. His web of defensive alliances included Russia and Austria-Hungary, which were hostile to each other. 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, the continental aggressors 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 of contempt v. respect? Dangers of being baited. E.g, some say al-Qaeda sought to bait the U.S. into an imperial lunge into the Mideast in 2001, and Bush 43 took the bait. 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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17.42 Causes and Prevention of War  
Spring 2018

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