

## **Bismarck's Peace**

5. "For two decades he (Bismarck) maneuvered Europe's commitments and interests in masterly fashion on the basis of *Realpolitik* and to the benefit of the peace of Europe."

(Kissinger, *Diplomacy* 133) Do you agree with Kissinger's verdict?

"There is no such thing as an inevitable war. If war comes it will be from a failure of human wisdom"

-Andrew Bonar Law

"If they want peace, nations should avoid the pin-pricks that precede cannonshots."

-Napoleon Bonaparte

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In 1871 Bismarck revolutionized the European state system by creating a new, united Germany. In the next twenty years Bismarck was the dominant statesman of Europe, controlling the policy of Germany, settling disputes between other countries, and entangling all of Europe into a complex web of alliances and understandings. In the twenty years that Bismarck was in power, there was not a single major war in Europe. Bismarck's diplomacy and system of alliances helped preserve the peace, despite the fact that there were many tensions within Europe. Bismarck set out to create a system which would support European peace. The resulting system, however, was not inherently stable. Both the biggest strength and the main weakness of the system was that throughout the period no single power could go to war in Europe against any other power without getting the support, or at least the neutrality of Germany. This was the system's main strength because Bismarck never provided such a guarantee to any power, at any time, and it is extremely unlikely that he would have in the future. This was a weakness because the peace was dependent on Germany, rather than on the European concert. If Germany made a single foolish decision, the whole system might crumble.

In order to understand how the system created by Bismarck was dependent on Germany, it is necessary to examine each power, and its interests during the time period. Perhaps best way to divide the powers is into two classes: the satiated powers, Germany and Britain, who were reasonably happy with the status quo, and would not want to change it unnecessarily; and the malcontent powers, France, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, which still had an interest in European expansion.

France, humiliated in 1871, was not the force it was one hundred years earlier. As the only republican power, she was the "odd man out" in the collection of European

monarchies. Although this did not necessarily eliminate her from being a valuable ally of another great power, her European interests did not have any support from other powers. None of the other powers were interested in returning Alsace and Lorraine to France. Thus, France's European aspirations had to be abandoned until it could create an alliance strong enough to defeat Germany. As a result, France in the years between 1870 and 1890 was much more involved in overseas, rather than in European affairs.

Russia was the mammoth occupying most of Europe's eastern flank. Its European interests lay in the expansion of its power in the Balkans, with the ultimate goal being the straits, and Constantinople, called Tsarograd by the Russians. Russia was technologically backward. The railroads, which were omnipresent in Germany of the time, were very sparse in Russia. Its armed forces were also not in the shape that they were in 1814 as was demonstrated by the Crimean War in 1854-6, and then in the difficulty it had in 1877 in the war against the Ottoman Empire. The main factor which was keeping Russia from annexing the bulk of the Balkans was Austrian opposition, and the fear of a possible recreation of the Crimean Alliance if she came too close to the straits.

Austria-Hungary was the other power also interested in the Balkans. It had been expanding in that direction after 1866, when it was locked out of its previous position of dominance in Germany. Its main enemy in the Balkans was Russia, since Britain would have had nothing against Austrian control of the straits. Russia was the more powerful state, and Austria would need Germany's diplomatic and military backing to defeat it.

Britain was one of the two satiated powers. At this time she had few interests connected with the continent, the main one being the preservation of Turkey in order to prevent Russian control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. Most of the British interests

lay in her numerous colonies, and an absence of a strong army kept Britain from actively participating in continental affairs. Her fleet, however, remained a threat to any power with maritime interests. Thus she was able to bully Russians into staying away from the straits, lest Britain recreate the Crimean alliance, or even attack Russia by itself.

Germany was the newest, and most powerful state in Europe after 1871. It was not interested in further expansion in Europe because it had nowhere to expand: Expansion against France was worthless because Germany already had the best natural frontier it could hope for on that border, while conquering all of France was a dangerous undertaking, and the “permanent German occupation of all of France was hardly a practicable proposition.”<sup>i</sup> Expansion at the expense of Russia was equally foolish, since the only thing accomplished by that would be the increase of the number of Poles in the new Reich, while the integration of the German part of Austria and creation of a gross-Deutschland would mean the handing over of Austria’s Slavic possessions to Russia, and necessary future diplomatic dependence on Russia. Thus Germany, like Britain, had nothing to gain from the destruction of the status quo.

From this it is possible to conclude that if a European conflict was to develop, it would develop in one of two places. The first possibility is a conflict between France and Germany on the Rhine, the second would be a conflict involving either Austria or Britain against Russia in the Balkans. Another possibility, though one which was much less dangerous than the other two was a war over colonial problems. Both during the time period in question and after it no armed conflict took place, despite numerous conflicts that arose between the Powers over their colonial possessions. Although Bismarck was not very interested in the creation of overseas possessions for Germany, he was still

dominant in setting down the rules for colonialization through the Congress of Berlin of 1885, and was involved as far as he encouraged other powers such as France and Italy in their quest for colonies. For the purposes of this essay, however, colonial affairs will not be mentioned, since the question at hand concerns Europe, and the great powers showed unwillingness to fight between themselves in Europe, or for that matter anywhere else over their colonial possessions. This essay will now go through some of the alliances which Bismarck either created or encouraged in the period between 1871 and 1890, and will show how each one of these was meant to prevent war, either in the Balkans or in the Rhineland. It will also mention some of the crises that shook Europe and describe Bismarck's response. It will not try to go through all of the alliances and crisis because that would mean an extremely shallow discussion of each topic.

The first alliance that Bismarck set out to create was in some ways like the Holy Alliance of 1815. In 1873 he created a set of treaties between Austria, Russia and Germany, which created the Three Emperors League, known as the Dreikaiserbund in German. The Dreikaiserbund was not an official treaty of alliance. It was a loose agreement by the three signatories to maintain a close association so that "the maintenance of the peace of Europe [night] be secured, and if necessary defended from every quarter."<sup>ii</sup> Despite the treaty's vagueness, Bismarck regarded it with satisfaction. The conclusion of binding alliances would be against Bismarck's theory of *Realpolitik*, the whole basis of which was dependent on the ability to keep relations with other countries malleable. The pact marked a step toward the preservation of peace not so much through any of its general points, but through the very fact that it was signed. The pact marked a rapprochement both between Germany and Austria, and Austria and Russia.

The rapprochement between Austria and Russia was very important to preserving the peace in the Balkans. As the two main powers interested in expansion in the area, they had to agree on compromises over spheres of influence and the maintenance of the balance of power in order to avoid war. Although the pact had no such provisions, the beginning of the dialogue between the two countries was a big step forward. The renewed friendship between Austria and Germany was a sign that the wounds of Koniggratz have been healed and forgiven. Although this was not a victory for peace in itself, since a war between Austria and Germany was extremely unlikely to occur to begin with, it sent a message to France that the conservative eastern block had been rebuilt, and that it would have difficulty finding allies for a war of revenge against Germany. Thus the Dreikaiserbund indirectly reduced the risk of war both on the Rhineland and in the Balkans.

The second instance where Bismarck can clearly be seen as one of the strongest proponents of peace is the Eastern Crisis of 1877. Even before the crisis, in October of 76, Bismarck proposed a permanent solution of the Balkan problem. He suggested that British take Egypt and the Suez, Austrians take Bosnia, while the Russians take Bulgaria, leaving a much weakened Turkey to control the straits. Although Bismarck himself admitted that this was a picture of his fancy, rather than an immediately practicable solution, it shows his interest in removing one of the sore spots of Europe off the map.<sup>iii</sup> In 1876 Bismarck saw that the Balkans were the most likely place for a major conflict to occur, and he was interested in reducing the chances of this.

The crisis started over Turkish attempts to quench an uprising in Bulgaria. Russia was quick to react to the plight of fellow Slavs, and was moved to war. Britain, the

standard enemy of the Russians when it came to expansion was not as antagonistic as usual. This was due to a surge of pro-Russian public opinion in Britain, partially caused by Gladstone's pamphlet, *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, which described Turkish atrocities in Bulgaria. In January of 1877, Russia signed a convention with Austria where Austria, in case of a Russo-Turkish war, was promised compensation in Bosnia and Herzegovina for any Russian advances elsewhere in the Balkans. In addition, Russia promised not to create any large new state in the Balkans. Thus, if after the declaration of war Russia was able to score a quick victory, she would have been able to increase her power in the Balkans significantly. This, however, did not happen. Russia declared war on April 24th. Although everyone expected a quick victory for the Russian forces, it was not to come. The tiny fortress of Plevna held out against Russian assaults for five months, finally falling in December of 1877. The next month Turkey asked for an armistice. In the eight months that came since the declaration of war many circumstances changed, the most important one being a change in the British attitude. In the five months that the fortress of Plevna held, the British public opinion moved to the Turkish side. Another problem, walked into by the Russians on their own, was the treaty signed in April of 1878. The treaty of San Stefano created an extremely large Bulgarian state with access to both the Black and Adriatic seas. This treaty lay counter to the January of 1877 accords that Russia signed with Austria, and was also highly offensive to Great Britain, since it gave Bulgaria, and through Bulgaria to Russia access to the Mediterranean. The decision of the powers was that the eastern question was to be decided at a congress, to be held at Berlin in June. The choice of Berlin as the place for the congress was significant. This recognized the prestige of the German chancellor who had offered to act as an

“honest broker” among the powers. Under the Congress, the newly created Bulgaria was split into three parts: Bulgaria, Rumelia and Macedonia. Macedonia stayed completely under Turkish control. Rumelia was to be administered by Turkey, but Turkish troops never reoccupied the province. Bulgaria was to be set up as an independent state, but in reality was to be a Russian puppet. Austria was allowed to occupy, though not to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bismarck was extremely important to a peaceful settlement of the crisis. Even before the crisis, Bismarck was approached by Russia, asking if Germany would remain neutral in case of an Austro-Russian war. Bismarck’s response was very similar to all his responses to this question throughout his rule: “we could endure that our friends should lose or win battles against each other, but not that one of the two should be so severely wounded and injured that its position as an independent Great Power ... would be endangered.”<sup>iv</sup> Bismarck was unwilling to choose between Russia and Austria, since he needed both countries to counterbalance each other. As discussed earlier, the weakening of either one meant greater German dependency on the other. The reasons that Bismarck wanted peace were completely in line with *Realpolitik*: he wanted peace because peace and the status quo were favorable to Germany. The Eastern crisis also clearly shows that if Germany was to promise the Russians neutrality in case of a war with Austria, a serious three power conflict could have erupted. Since Germany was the most powerful state in Europe, it would also be the deciding force in any European war. Going to war against it would be foolish unless the opposing coalition had one more great power than the coalition which was supported by Germany. As Taylor put it, “the days of European



upheaval were over; they would not come again until one of the powers felt itself strong enough to challenge the balance which had been established at the congress of Berlin.”<sup>v</sup>

The third instance where Bismarck wish for peace and reduction for the odds of conflict can be seen is in the Dual Alliance of 1879, the second Dreikaiserbund of 1881 and the Triple Alliance of 1882. These three alliances would form the basis of Bismarck’s system, and he was to build upon them in the late eighties.

The Dual Alliance of 1879 was a defensive alliance between Germany and Austria. Under the terms of the alliance either power would assist the other in case of an attack by Russia, and would at least stay neutral in case of an attack by any other power. The treaty was to be renewed every six years and the contents of the treaty were kept secret. Bismarck later warned his successors against taking this treaty too seriously. Perhaps its main impact was in that the Russians suddenly found themselves diplomatically isolated. Russia needed the diplomatic support for its expansion in the Balkans, and the only power which could provide this support was Germany. This caused the Russians to seek an alliance with Germany. Bismarck, however, was more interested in a three party agreement, since it was “the only system offering the maximum of stability for the peace of Europe.”<sup>vi</sup> Although Russia was not directly interested in an alliance with Austria, it had to conclude one in order to get some German support in the Balkans.

The second Dreikaiserbund was an agreement with clearly specified terms, the most important of which was that if any of the signatories found itself at war with a fourth power (except Turkey), the other two promised to remain neutral. Thus, this alliance destroyed any chance of the French finding coalition partners for a war of revenge. It

called for the closing of the straits in case of war, reducing the chance of a repeat of the Crimean war. Although it did not remove the tension between the Austria and Russia, it “provided a foothold for negotiations between [them] in the event of a crisis”<sup>vii</sup> Thus the second Dreikaiserbund considerably reduced the chances of a European conflict. It also made all of the parties more dependent on Germany, since Bismarck became the de facto final arbiter of all Balkan problems.

Bismarck’s third alliance of the time period was the Triple Alliance between Austria, Italy and Germany. The main purpose of this alliance was to reduce the likelihood of Italy going to war against Austria in a general conflict. As Bismarck put it, he would be happy if “one Italian corporal with the Italian flag and a drummer at his side should take the field on the western front, and not on the eastern front.”<sup>viii</sup> The bulk of the treaty lay in Articles II, III and IV, which provided for support of Italy or Germany in case of a French attack, support in case of an attack by two great powers on any of the signatories, and neutrality in case one of the powers was threatened and forced to make war, respectively. Thus the alliance created a situation where no power could attack any other power without having all of Europe against it. The chances of waging war successfully were much reduced, and therefore the chances of war in general fell.

The final stage in the creation of Bismarck’s system were the Mediterranean accords and Reinsurance treaty with Russia. The reason that these treaties became necessary is that Austria and Russia had a fall-out over problems in Bulgaria, and Russia was unwilling to renew the Dreikaiserbund. This brought back the risk of a war both in the Balkans and in the Rhineland. If Russia was now to make an alliance with France, it might have future disastrous effects on Germany, and the end of Russo-Austrian

understanding in the Balkans made the chance of conflict there also rise. Bismarck created new treaties in order to at least temporarily suppress these problems. The Reinsurance treaty on its face did not do much. Both Russia and Germany promised to remain neutral in case the other was involved in a war with a great power, except for a Russian attack on Austria, or a German one on France. Since these were the only two possible great power conflicts, it seems that the treaty might be completely useless. This, however, was not so. As Bismarck explained, "Our relations with Russia depend exclusively on the personal feeling of the Tsar Alexander III,"<sup>ix</sup> and such a treaty brought Germany up a notch in the Tsar's eyes. Thus, the treaty led to better Russo-German understanding, and at least temporarily lowered the chance of a Russo-French alliance, one of Bismarck's nightmares since 1871. The Dreikaiserbund limited the risk of war in the Balkans by providing Austria and Russia with a method of negotiation in case of a crisis. Now this method was no longer available, Russia was no longer as close to Germany as before, and Bismarck needed a new way of controlling Russian ambitions in the Balkans. He could not use German power directly because that would go against his policy of keeping good relations against Russia, so he had to resort to using other powers. The result, both the first and the second Mediterranean accords were a statement by powers with interest in the area, namely Britain, Austria, Italy and Spain, of their intent of keeping the status quo in the Mediterranean as to Egypt, the straits, and the Balkans. A blow to the accords was struck by Britain, which wanted the accords to be secret, while the other parties wanted them to be public, so Russia would know of their existence. Even secret, the accords did their job in reducing the likelihood of the Balkan war by diplomatically isolating Russia in the area.

The complicated web of alliances that Bismarck helped weave preserved peace in Europe while he was in power. It was not an extremely stable peace, since it was dependent on Balance of Power, rather than on the Concert of the Powers. Throughout the period, Bismarck showed his wish for peace. Germany, a satiated state, wanted the preservation of status quo abroad so it could better absorb her new Empire. Bismarck was not a pacifist, but a realist. He did not believe in peace as an ideology, but he believed in it as a convenience. Going to war when it was advantageous to do so, he stayed at peace when that was best for Germany. It was not a permanent peace he was after, but a more realistic, more in line with *Realpolitik* peace where every power was to be kept in line by having a coalition ready to respond to any attempt to increase its power without compensation to other interested powers.

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<sup>i</sup> Rich, *Great Power Diplomacy 1814-1914*, p. 219

<sup>ii</sup> Dreikaiserbund in Gordon Craig's *Germany 1866-1945* p. 104

<sup>iii</sup> William Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments 1871-1890* p. 101

<sup>iv</sup> Otto von Bismarck, *Bismarck, The Man and the Statesman II* p. 234

<sup>v</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918*, p. 324

<sup>vi</sup> Bismarck in William Langer, *ibid.*, p. 191

<sup>vii</sup> Rich, *ibid.* p. 229

<sup>viii</sup> Bismarck in William Langer, *ibid.*, p.244

<sup>ix</sup> Bismarck, in A. J. P. Taylor, *ibid.* p. 317