

Chapter 3: Bismarckian Foreign Policy (1871-1890)

(A) Bismarck's Pax Europa

A New Balance of Power

We have seen that, in terms of domestic policy, Bismarck spent much of his time seeking out enemies of the Reich and neutralising their impact either by coercion, paternalism or brute force. But peace at all costs at home was never a game of compromise that interested Bismarck for very long. Yet after a decade of using the force of arms to assist the unification of Germany, Bismarck's foreign policy was coloured by the shades of peace. It is generally not an issue for debate that, after 1871, Bismarck sought peace in Europe. He knew that the rest of Europe would allow the 'Empire of Prussia' to grow not one more hectare without intervention. For three hundred years France had been the dominant European Power. The balance of power had been transformed. Disraeli called it the greatest upheaval since the French Revolution. The dangers of a Europe torn apart by war and counter war seemed possible. But Bismarck was determined to preserve his new Empire – and this required a Europe at peace to do so effectively. But here the unanimity between historians ends.

Bismarck's specific objectives and the mechanisms he employed to enhance Imperial security have been issues of great debate. W L Langer's book "European Alliances and Alignments" portrayed the Chancellor as the ultimate tactician who was desirous of peace at all costs. ".....for Germany's sake to avoid any conflict in Europe". To this end he devised a complex system of alliances that made peace mutually beneficial to all the great powers for most of the time. A J P Taylor, on the other hand, has argued that Bismarck was a realist who accepted that male nature required at times the escape of conflict. Thus his objective was to keep a "balance of tension" alive in Europe. War between separate states should be avoided if it directly threatened the peace of MittelEuropa and German security. If tension had to be played out then he preferred to direct it to overseas Empire and the furthestmost parts of Europe. Therefore, to see Bismarck as a German Gladstone, preaching by practice a sermon on international brotherly love and striving for permanent alternatives to the risk of international hostilities, would for the most part seem totally illusory. What then was Bismarck's policy in practice? For William Carr it was twofold, the permanent isolation of France and the maintenance of peaceful co-existence with the other two major conservative European powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia.

Pacifying and Isolating France

Contemporaries noted that Bismarck's peace treaty with France was far harsher than those with Denmark in 1864 or Austria in 1866. Bismarck felt that France had retarded German unification for centuries and thus his peace would be punitive and remind France that Europe had a new hierarchy of power. According to D Richards, Bismarck was willing to run the risk of alienating French feeling because,

“FirstlyFrance would take many years to recover from the Franco – Prussian war. Secondly.... he could use the bogey of a French war of revenge to make the Reichstag maintain a high level of German armaments. And...thirdly... his diplomatic genius could keep France isolated.”

D. Richards: An Illustrated History of Europe. London 1985.

Thus the Treaty of Frankfurt had taken Alsace and East Lorraine and the chief forts of Metz and Strasbourg, weakening the French state's defences on the Rhine. France had to pay five billion francs in war indemnity and maintain the German army on French soil until it was paid. The new Germany was proclaimed on 18 January 1871 at the palace of Versailles – Louis XIV's architectural symbol of French cultural superiority.

But the first of these assumptions was misplaced. The French recovery was quicker than Bismarck expected. The indemnity was paid off by 1873 and the German soldiers left on 16 September to the vocal anger of Parisian French women who scrubbed the streets clean as the soldiers departed the City. The Third Republic rebuilt its army and its popular press began to demand the return of Alsace and Lorraine. Bismarck was happy that the French were establishing an overtly democratic Republic because he assumed this would frighten off monarchical allies. But when between 1874 and 1875 the French increased regiment sizes from three to four and ordered an extension of the cavalry and armaments divisions he grew concerned. Egged on by Moltke he demanded increases in the army budget from the Reichstag and in April the Berlin press began commenting on a “war in sight” crisis. It may be that Bismarck wished merely to pressure France into returning to the status quo of 1874. But he overplayed his hand and Alexander II of Russia and Queen Victoria of Britain pledged their help to France if Germany declared war. Bismarck back peddled.

Instead after 1878 he preferred to promote a policy of diverting the French towards Colonialism. Between 1878 and 1886 Bismarck backed French claims in Romania, the Near East, North Africa and Asia. In 1884 he hosted the Congo Conference in Berlin and promoted a Franco-German entente to challenge the British Imperial Empire. The next Franco-German tension emerged in 1886 when General Boulanger was appointed French Minister of War. He was a militant nationalist who seemed at one stage to actually threaten the existence of the Republic itself. Although he failed, Bismarck used him to promote further army expenditure at home. When the Reichstag refused fiscal increases, he dissolved it and won a centre-right victory in February 1887. The French however were aware of his manipulation of republican internal politics yet again. The statue in Paris that represented the fallen city of Strasbourg was draped in black in April 1871. It remained so in 1890. Bismarck had totally failed to “pacify France”. However, knowing this he had spent much time promoting Austro-Russian friendship. He was not prepared to countenance a two front war with a potential French ally.

Austro-Russian Friendship and the Alliance System

The counterweight to French isolation was the promotion of Austro-Russian friendship. Bismarck knew this would secure his southern and eastern borders and thus provide him with less security insomnia. But the objective was harder to guarantee than one would imagine. For both states the Balkan region of the decaying Ottoman Empire was ripe for conquest. Again and again between 1871 and 1890 Bismarck would become an informal referee between the two empires. For Austria the rise of nationalist Balkan states threatened to destabilise her own multi-ethnic empire. In the case of Russia the region was dominated by subjugated “Orthodox Christians” for whom the Pan-Slavist movement deemed Mother Russia the sole protector. Both Emperors Alexander II and Alexander III did not forget that those who controlled the area would also control access to the Dardenelles, Black Sea access to the Mediterranean. Russia could at long last have a winter warm-water port.

The early 1870's seemed to suggest that peace could be easily maintained; all three states (Russia, Austria and Germany) were led by conservative Emperors eager to maintain their privileges and powers and determined to hold back the forces of liberalism, democracy and socialism. This desire was thus symbolised by the signing of the ‘Informal Dreikaiserabkommen’ between June – October 1873. This, in generalised terms, emphasised the Emperors’ desire to maintain European peace, challenge the revolutionary forces that could affect all of them and consult on their foreign policy developments. In a sense, Taylor was right in commenting that this agreement was a cementing of solidarity in the face of potential revolutionary forces that could disturb their mutual domestic fronts. It did not, however, prepare the way for binding any states to understanding on foreign affairs as the Eastern question perfectly reflected. Any such illusions for Bismarck were blown away in 1875.

The Eastern Question (1875-1878)

In 1875 Bosnia-Herzegovina rebelled against the Ottoman Empire. In the ensuing Balkan war, Russia gained huge success against Turkey and by January 1878 had reached Constantinople. The Russians imposed the Treaty of San Stefano in Turkey in order to create a pro Russian Bulgaria, which would help protect Russia’s access to the Mediterranean. When Britain and Austria threatened war, Bismarck stepped in and offered to renegotiate the peace. Thus was born the ‘Congress of Berlin’ in 1878 where Bismarck played the ‘honest broker’ – more interested in European peace than German Empire building. It was the high point of his diplomatic career. Germany was seen as the peacemaker rather than the warmonger. The new treaty allowed Austria to occupy Bosnia – Herzegovina and the creation of a smaller independent Habsburg friendly Bulgaria with ‘no access’ to the Straits. But try as he might, Bismarck knew that Russia held him responsible for a pro Austrian peace. Russia was disillusioned with the Chancellor. Bismarck responded by attaining closer links to Austria. On 7th October 1879 he signed the Dual Alliance. The alliance promised that both states would be neutral if attacked by a third – unless it was Russia, in which case they would aid the other party. Bismarck had an array of reasons for signing the treaty: it would please southern Germans infuriated by the Kulturkampf; it would totally secure the Empire’s southern borders; it supported his domestic economic

preference of increasing the Reich's Danubian trade while allowing him to please Junker Prussian wheat producers by placing huge tariffs on imported Russian wheat; and finally, it could be used by him as the stick with which to woo an isolated Russia back into the fold. If it had the bonus of removing his hated Russian rival Chancellor Gorchakov - all well and good. However, for William Carr,

"The truth is that he acted once again on the spur of the moment to deal with an emergency situation – largely of his own making. The alliance was a temporary expedient to preserve the precarious balance of power in the Balkans by warning Russia off Austria. In no sense was Bismarck making a final choice between them."

(W Carr. A History of Germany 1815 – 1985. Page 151).

Maintaining the Peace (1879-1890) – The Alliance System's Growth

By 1880 the Russians knew about the alliance and felt again isolated. Bismarck put pressure on his ally Austria to enter into a new tripartite agreement. A 'formal Dreikaiserbund' was signed in June 1881. This time Russia's interests in the East were supported by Bismarck. But the death of Tsar Alexander II by assassination and the succession of Alexander III meant that the Russians were only temporarily appeased. Indeed in February 1882 a Pan-Slavist Russian, General Skobelev attacked the Germans as the natural enemies of the Slavs. Moreover, Alexander's Ministry was dominated by Pan-Slavist ministers like Pobedonostov and Tolstoy. Fortunately for Bismarck, Alexander had left a pro German Minister, Giers, at the Russian Foreign Office. He used this contact to both deter Pan-Slavist sympathy at St. Petersburg while also reminding them of their vulnerability to potential isolation. To reinforce the latter Bismarck exploited Franco-Italian friction over Tunis to bring Italy into the Dual Alliance. The Triple Alliance was sealed in May 1882. With Italian forces ranged against France, Austrian troops could concentrate on a Russian attack with Germany. Bismarck extended the alliance to Romania in 1883 thus boxing in the Russian borders.

By 1885 Bismarck's system had reached its greatest complexity. But in 1885 the Bulgarian crisis re-erupted. Russia felt the unification of the country under the pro British/pro German Prince Alexander of Battenburg was denying her influence. Bismarck urged a Mediterranean alliance between Britain, Italy and Austria to police the Black Sea access and hem Russia in. He also put pressure on Russia's finances by withholding German investment. Russia signed the so-called 'Reinsurance Policy' that promised benevolent neutrality between the states if attacked by a third party. It was secret and renewable after three years. It kept Russia from a French alliance. Yet in supporting the "Lombard-Verbot" agreement on 10th November 1887 under which further Reichsbank loans to Russia were severely curtailed, Bismarck seemed to be contradicting his foreign policy. For economic historians like Stern, it was a gambit to steer Russia into continuing friendship. But really it reminded all of the importance of the Dual Alliance which, as Medlicott has pointed out, gave bonuses to Bismarck on both the domestic as well as the foreign policy front. Bismarck would certainly have signed the Reinsurance treaty, had he not been removed from the chancellorship in 1890. But most historians agree that even had he stayed on, he would have found it increasingly difficult to maintain Austro-Russian passivity in the light of their

differing aspirations. Moreover, with German industrialists appearing keen on retarding Russian economic development, the Tsar would have had little choice but to seek fiscal support elsewhere. The Bourgeois state of republican France would be the only alternative. Where economic aid begins, foreign alliances follow and sure enough Bismarck's fears since 1871 became a reality in 1892 and were formalised with a Franco–Russian alliance in 1894.

Bismarck's system had limitations. The juggler could not quite keep all the balls in the air in perpetuity.