

# The Franco-Prussian War

The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2004

Printed in the United States of America

*Typeface* Stempel Garamond 10/12 pt.     *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Wawro, Geoffrey.

The Franco-Prussian War : the German conquest of France  
in 1870–1871 / Geoffrey Wawro.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-58436-1

1. Franco-Prussian War, 1870–1871.    2. France – History – Second Empire, 1852–1870.
3. Germany – History, Military – 19th century.    I. Title

DC293.W38 2003

943.08'2 – dc21                    2002041685

ISBN 0 521 58436 1 hardback

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## Causes of the Franco-Prussian War

On 3 July 1866, even as Emperor Napoleon III made plans to dispatch an envoy to Prussian royal headquarters to urge restraint, a quarter of a million Prussian troops under the command of General Helmuth von Moltke smashed the Austrian army at the battle of Königgrätz. In just three weeks of fighting, Moltke had invaded the Austrian province of Bohemia, encircled Prague, and punched the Habsburg army into a loop of the Elbe river between the Austrian fortress of Königgrätz and the little village of Sadova. There Moltke nearly annihilated the Austrians, killing, wounding, or capturing 44,000 of them and putting the rest – 196,000 largely disbanded stragglers – to panic-stricken flight.

Königgrätz was a turning-point in history. Prussia's fifty-one-year-old prime minister – Count Otto von Bismarck – watched the battle at Moltke's side and offered the Austrians terms, when the extent of their defeat was fully comprehended in Vienna and elsewhere. In exchange for an armistice, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria duly surrendered the authority his Habsburg dynasty had exercised in Germany since the sixteenth century, first through the Holy Roman Empire, then through the German Confederation, and gave the Prussians a free hand. Bismarck was quick to exploit it. In the weeks after Königgrätz, he abolished the thirty-nine-state German Confederation established in 1815 and annexed most of its northern members: Schleswig, Holstein, Hanover, Hessa-Kassel, Nassau, and Frankfurt-am-Main. He packed the rest of Germany's northern states – Saxony, Hessa-Darmstadt, Mecklenburg, the Thuringian duchies, and the free cities of Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen – into a North German Confederation that, with Berlin controlling its foreign and military affairs and most of its internal ones as well, was essentially Prussian territory. Königgrätz and its aftermath were proof that great battles can swing history one way or the other. In a matter of days, Prussia climbed from the

lower rungs of great power (“Prussia unaided would not keep the Rhine or the Vistula for a month,” *The Times* of London had scoffed just six years earlier) to the top, gaining 7 million subjects and 1,300 square miles of territory. Tired of sharing Germany with Austria, of “plowing the same disputed acre,” Bismarck now controlled most of it, and was poised to take the rest.<sup>1</sup>

France gaped in astonishment. Almost overnight a rather small and manageable neighbor had become an industrial and military colossus. “Germany,” an innocuous land of thinkers, artists, and poets, of dreamy landscapes and romantic oafs like Balzac’s *Schmucke*, stood on the brink of real unification under a tough, no-nonsense military regime. Napoleon III’s cabinet – stunned by the outcome at Königgrätz – demanded that the French emperor take immediate counter-measures. “Grandeur is relative,” the emperor’s privy counselor warned. “A country’s power can be diminished by the mere fact of *new* forces accumulating around it.”<sup>2</sup> Eugène Rouher, the French minister of state, was more direct: “Smash Prussia and take the Rhine,” he urged the emperor. By “the Rhine” Rouher meant Prussia’s western cities: Cologne, Düsseldorf, and the Westphalian *Ruhrgebiet* around Essen, Dortmund, and Bochum.<sup>3</sup> These were the industrial mainsprings of Prussia. Berlin could not exist as a great power without them. Even Napoleon III’s liberal opposition in the empire’s *Corps Législatif* or legislative body, always averse to military adventures, joined the clamor for war. As the war in Germany wound down, a usually moderate Adolphe Thiers insisted that “the way to save France is to declare war on Prussia *immediately*.”<sup>4</sup> And yet Napoleon III did not declare war; instead, he tried to bluff Bismarck. A month after Königgrätz, while the Prussian army was still tied down pacifying Austria, the French emperor demanded Prussian support for the “borders of 1814,” that is, the great square of German territory on the left bank of the Rhine annexed by France during the French Revolutionary Wars and returned to the German states after Waterloo. Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Koblenz, and Luxembourg were the corners of the square. Bismarck, who could not even consider the French demand without losing the support of millions of Germans, rejected it, running the risk of a two-front war with Austria and France. Luckily for Bismarck, Napoleon III did not press the demand.<sup>5</sup> *The surprise de Sadova* had caught him unprepared. Because he had expected the big Austrian and Prussian armies to trade

1 David Wetzel, *A Duel of Giants*, Madison, 2001, p. 15.

2 *Papiers et Correspondance de la Famille Impériale*, 10 vols., Paris, 1870, vols. 1, 3, and 4, *passim*. vol. 8, lxii, Paris, 20 July 1866, M. Magne to Napoleon III.

3 Vienna, Haus-Hof-und Staatsarchiv (HHSA), IB, Karton 364, BM 1866, 35, Vienna, 27 Aug. 1866, Belcredi to Mensdorff. Vienna, Kriegsarchiv (KA), AFA 1866, Karton 2267, 7–219, Paris, 4 July 1866, Belcredi to FZM Benedek.

4 KA, AFA 1866, Karton 2272, 13–13, 13 July and 15 August 1866, Belcredi to FZM Benedek.

5 London, Public Record Office (PRO), FO 64, 690, Berlin, 11 August 1870, Loftus to Granville. Lothar Gall, *Bismarck*, 2 vols., orig. 1980, London, 1986, vol. 1, p. 304.

blows through the summer, fall, and winter, and into 1867, he had procured no supplies for an 1866 campaign and had left his combat troops scattered across the globe: 63,000 in Algeria, 28,000 in Mexico, 8,000 in Rome, and 2,000 in Indochina. Infantry companies in France had been drawn down to less than half their usual strength, netting Louis-Napoleon scarcely 100,000 war-ready troops after Königgrätz.<sup>6</sup> Prussia's army, flush with victory, was three times larger.

Louis-Napoleon's frustration in 1866 was palpable, and oozed like an inkspot through the months and years after Königgrätz. Before the battle, the French emperor had boasted in a speech at Auxerre that he would use the Austro-Prussian War to enlarge France and wring concessions from the two German powers.<sup>7</sup> In the event, he was left with nothing under the severely critical gaze of his citizenry. Though Louis-Napoleon made the best of a bad situation, demanding and receiving Bismarck's assent to nominal independence for Saxony, Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden, and Hesse-Darmstadt, this was a small victory, and one without flavor for a French public that wanted territory and a French army that wanted revenge. To appease these powerful groups, Napoleon III tried to acquire the German fortress town of Luxembourg in 1867; it might have served as partial, face-saving payment for France's "benevolence" in 1866. Yet Bismarck refused even the partial payment. He interfered, involved the British, who feared that a French step into Luxembourg might carry them into Belgium, and finally agreed only to detach the duchy from Holland and neutralize it.<sup>8</sup> Napoleonic efforts to buy the place were rebuffed. Here was yet another humiliation. Adolphe Thiers, one of Louis-Napoleon's more persistent critics, rose again in the legislative body to twist the knife: "When a hunter is ashamed of returning from the chase with an empty bag, he goes to the butcher, buys a rabbit, and stuffs it into his bag, letting the ears hang out. *Voilà le Luxembourg!*"<sup>9</sup>

Partly to distract attention from these embarrassments, Napoleon III hosted the 1867 World's Fair, an occasion for the industrial powers to display their wares, and for France to shine. Unfortunately, the fair's French name – *Exposition* – provided yet more comic material for the fifty-nine-year-old emperor's detractors: "Who deserves the largest medal at the Exposition," went

6 *Papiers et Correspondance de la Famille Impériale*, vol. 1, pp. 6–8, Strasbourg, December 1866, General Ducrot to General Trochu. "Zur Heeres-Reorganisierung," *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift* (ÖMZ) 2 (1867), p. 132. "Aus dem Lager von Châlons," *ÖMZ* 3 (1868), pp. 75–6. General Jean-Baptiste Montaudon, *Souvenirs Militaires*, 2 vols., Paris, 1898–1900, vol. 2, p. 20.

7 Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 3 vols., Princeton, 1990, vol. 1, pp. 300–1.

8 W.E. Mosse, *The European Powers and the German Question, 1848–71*, Cambridge, UK, 1958, pp. 260–70.

9 Ferdinand Gregorovius, *The Roman Journals, 1852–74*, London, 1907, p. 275.

one joke. Answer: “*Napoléon, parce-qu’il a exposé la France.*”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in the late 1860s, it was almost impossible to overestimate the dangers to which France had been exposed by German unification under Prussia. Whereas Prussia had counted just one-third the inhabitants of France in 1820 and less than half in 1860, the Austro-Prussian War and the annexations nearly evened the score, giving the North German Confederation a population of 30 million to France’s 38 million and – thanks to the Prussian use of universal conscription – an army one-third larger than France’s. With the annexations and amalgamations of 1866, the Prussian army grew from 70 infantry regiments to 105, from ten corps to seventeen. The smaller German states delivered entire armies into Prussian hands: Hesse-Darmstadt’s three infantry regiments became the Prussian 81st, 82nd, and 83rd. The Hanoverians supplied four additional regiments; the Saxons supplied nine more. By 1867, most of these forces had been seamlessly integrated with Prussian uniforms, drill, armament, and even officers. Baden, although technically an independent country, took a Prussian general as its war minister, another as its general staff chief, and a third as its divisional commandant.<sup>11</sup> Germany’s galloping industries only compounded the threat; in 1867, Prussian and Saxon coal mines were outproducing French mines three-to-one, and German railway construction was easily keeping pace with an all-out French effort that had yielded 10,000 miles of track by 1866.<sup>12</sup> These were alarming indicators that threatened a total eclipse of French power.

Faced with these various threats, Louis-Napoleon dug in his heels in the months after Königgrätz. Unable to stop Bismarck’s spread across northern Germany, he vowed that the Prussians would not have the south as well: Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden. These states contained an additional 8 million Germans, 200,000 well-trained troops, and substantial resources; they would also give the Prussians a flanking position on the French frontier.<sup>13</sup> This was unthinkable, as the French empress made plain to the Prussian ambassador after Königgrätz: “The energy and speed of your movements have [made it clear] that with a nation like yours as a neighbor, we are in danger of finding you in Paris one day unannounced. I will go to sleep French and wake up Prussian.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed if based in the Prussian Rhineland *and* the German south, the Prussians would be able to invade France swiftly on a broad front

10 Gregorovius, p. 275.

11 “Die süddeutschen Heere,” *ÖM* 2 (1869), p. 161. C. Betz, *Aus den erlebnissen und Erinnerungen eines alten Offiziers*, Karlsruhe, 1894, pp. 134–5.

12 Wilhelm Deist, “Preconditions to Waging War,” in Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds., *On the Road to Total War*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 320. Roger Price, *Napoleon III and the Second Empire*, London, 1997, p. 26.

13 Vincennes, *Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre* (SHAT), Lb1, “Renseignements Militaires.”

14 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, orig. 2001, New York, 2003, p. 122.

from Alsace-Lorraine to Luxembourg. They had used just exactly this sort of broad, concentric invasion to encircle and rout the Austrians in Bohemia in 1866. Geography still limited their options in a war with the French, but not if they annexed Baden, the Bavarian Palatinate, and Württemberg. With these strategic considerations in mind, Louis-Napoleon warned the British foreign minister in 1868: "I can only guarantee the peace of Europe so long as Bismarck respects the present state of affairs. If he draws the South German states into the North German Confederation, our guns will go off of themselves."<sup>15</sup>

The image of France on a hair-trigger was certainly apt, for the emperor's finger lay heavy on the trigger by the late 1860s. Louis-Napoleon was a troubled man, who, as the popularly elected president of France in 1851, had overthrown the French Republic and crowned himself Napoleon III, Emperor of the French. At first the Napoleonic *coup* had been welcomed. President Bonaparte shrewdly exploiting his famous uncle's legacy: "The name Napoleon itself is a program: order, religion, popular welfare, and national dignity." And Louis-Napoleon had diligently implemented the program, curbing socialism, mending fences with the Catholic church, creating jobs through liberal economic policies, and restoring national dignity in the Crimean War (1854–56) and the Franco-Austrian War (1859), the former clearing the Balkans of Russian influence, the latter freeing northern Italy from Austrian control. Unfortunately, that Napoleonic *coup* of 1851, launched in the name of "order" and "popular welfare" when memories of the bloody revolution of 1848 were still fresh in people's minds, seemed ancient history to many Frenchmen by the late 1860s. They had known only peace and prosperity in the meantime, and although peasants who comprised 70 percent of the French population still revered the emperor, it was difficult to know whether this was for anything deeper than Bonaparte's subsidies to the villages and his determination to keep agricultural prices up through free trade with France's industrial neighbors. Where the real political battles were fought, in the French press, cities, and legislature, Louis-Napoleon's "authoritarian empire" was resented. The best indication of this was the eroding loyalty of even the French middle-class, who years earlier had applauded the imperial restoration of 1852 – a year after the *coup* – as a bulwark against the "red revolution." By the 1860s, a French *bourgeois* was as likely to be a republican or an Orléanist (the better-bred dynasty deposed in 1848) as a Bonapartist. Among French artisans and workers there were hardly any Bonapartists; to them, Louis-Napoleon would always be "the Man of 2 December" (the date of the *coup*), the usurper who had strangled the Second Republic in its infancy and exiled its fiercest advocates to Algeria and Devil's Island.<sup>16</sup>

15 Koppel Pinson, *Modern Germany*, 2nd edition, Prospect Heights, 1989, p. 142.

16 James F. McMillan, *Napoleon III*, London, 1991, pp. 46–8.



Against this stormy political backdrop, it was easy to see why the *surprise de Sadova* and Napoleon III's failure to extort real concessions from the Prussians caused such consternation in Paris. By 1866, the Second Empire had come to depend almost entirely on diplomatic and military victories – “national dignity” – for its popularity. Prussia's victory at Königgrätz and the subsequent annexations were treated as insults to France, which had long controlled German affairs: Richelieu dictating the borders of the Holy Roman Empire in 1648, Louis XIV annexing Alsace and other bits of western Germany in the 1690s, and Napoleon I liquidating the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and creating a French-run “Confederation of the Rhine.” The insult was all the more galling because Louis-Napoleon had long regarded Bismarck as a malleable protégé, naively recruiting Prussia for a French-run “United States of Europe” when Bismarck was Prussian ambassador to Paris in the late 1850s and again when he became Prussian foreign minister in 1862.<sup>17</sup>

Bismarck had cunningly played the part of protégé for a time – weighing French offers of German territory in exchange for Prussian participation in an anti-English alliance – but did this primarily to discourage French intervention in an Austro-Prussian conflict.<sup>18</sup> Once Austria was beaten in 1866, Bismarck joltingly reversed course, ignoring Napoleon III's wishes and even needling the French emperor in the hope that he too might be induced to declare war on Prussia. In Bismarck's view, the political and cultural obstacles separating Germany's Protestant north and Catholic south might take years, even decades, to overcome, but a French invasion, a *Napoleonic* invasion no less, would smash them down in an instant. Francophobia lingering from the Napoleonic Wars – when the French had taxed and looted the German states and forced 250,000 Germans into French military service – would set the machinery of the North German Confederation in motion and put the armies of the German south at Bismarck's disposal.

“Great crises provide the weather for Prussia's growth,” was a Bismarck maxim.<sup>19</sup> What he meant was that Prussia needed occasional European dust-ups to obscure the threat of German unification from the other powers and divert attention from Prussia's creeping borders. When Prussia had fought Austria in 1866, the contest had seemed so even that none of the other powers had bothered to take a side, permitting Prussia to isolate Austria, beat it to the ground, and dissolve the German Confederation. The same calculation might apply in a Franco-Prussian war. France *seemed* so powerful, and had foolishly publicized its desire for Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Rhineland

17 Dietrich Radewahn, “Französische Aussenpolitik vor dem Krieg von 1870,” in Kolb, ed., *Europa vor dem Krieg von 1870*, Munich, 1987, pp. 35, 38, 42. A. Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire 1852–71*, orig. 1979, Cambridge, 1985, p. 142.

18 PRO, FO 425, 96, #274 and #347, Berlin, 30 July and 9 Aug. 1870, Loftus to Granville.

19 Pflanze, vol. 1, p. 89.

after Königgrätz. In the crucial years after 1866, these territorial ambitions made France appear more threatening than Prussia. Bismarck understood this; indeed he discreetly stoked France's appetite for territory after Königgrätz to make Napoleon III seem menacing to the other powers. It was a clever move; rather than facilitate a French victory in a war with Prussia, the other powers would probably sit on the sidelines again, "providing the weather for Prussia's growth." As for the lesser German states, Bismarck bet that once allied with Berlin in a "patriotic war," they would not revert to their separate governments. It was a safe bet; most of the states taken in 1866 had willingly voted themselves out of existence. Such was the emotive power of German nationalism.

Therefore, the Franco-Prussian War arose from Napoleon III's need to teach the Prussians a lesson and Bismarck's overlapping need to foment a war with the French in order to complete the process of German unification. The Franco-German War that broke out in 1870 might as easily have come in 1867, 1868, or 1869, because France and Prussia went to the brink of war in each of those years and only reluctantly backed down. Bismarck wanted to buy more time for the spread of the German national idea and Louis-Napoleon wanted to complete vital army reforms. A French general, Louis Jarras, recalled the French war minister telling him repeatedly in the late 1860s that France and Prussia were not at peace; they were merely enjoying an armistice, a respite from war, that might abruptly be broken by either party.<sup>20</sup> The annual Franco-Prussian crises after 1866 revealed the fragility of that "armistice," but also Count Bismarck's extraordinary skill as a statesman.

In desperate need of a foreign policy success to salve national pride after Königgrätz, Napoleon III attempted in 1867 to purchase Luxembourg, an ancient duchy of the Holy Roman Empire that had been given to the Netherlands in 1815 on the condition that its defenses be looked after by Prussia and the now defunct German Confederation. When France first demanded Prussian support for the sale and annexation in the weeks after Königgrätz, Bismarck vaguely gave it, giving himself time to hammer together the North German Confederation and conclude mutual defense treaties with the south German states. When France pressed the demand for Luxembourg in March 1867, Bismarck roughly changed course, refusing to help the French at all and inciting German politicians and journalists to whip up national feeling and denounce this French grab at "an old German land." Bismarck displayed all of his legendary dexterity in the crisis. He stalled the French through the winter of 1866–67 – when he was busy allying with the south German states – and rebuffed them at the very moment that the alliances were signed and negotiations for the North German *Reichstag* or parliament were nearing a vote. Just as Bismarck had calculated, French bluster combined with the

20 General Louis Jarras, *Souvenirs*, Paris, 1892, pp. 30–2.

obvious importance of Luxembourg – it defended German territory on the left bank of the Rhine – served to drive even the most reluctant German states into Prussia’s arms.<sup>21</sup> The Bavarians promised 60,000 troops for a war with France in 1867, and one German deputy after another rose in the new Reichstag to salute Bismarck’s “strong policy” toward Napoleon III. Throughout the crisis, forlorn French agents stood around the main *Platz* in Luxembourg waving placards and shouting “*Vive la France! Vive Napoléon!*” By May, they had drifted away; Luxembourg became a neutral state by international agreement. Eleven mines were bored into its southern bastion and exploded, leaving the picturesque ruin that remains to this day. Paris was tense. Freshly returned from Mexico, Marshal Achille Bazaine was briefed on events in Europe by General Charles Frossard, who told Bazaine that war with the Prussians “would almost certainly come in 1867.”<sup>22</sup> Although careful not to push the French into a corner, Bismarck had nevertheless upheld “German honor” and successfully burned off much anti-Prussian feeling in Germany.<sup>23</sup>

Eighteen sixty-eight brought a second Franco-German crisis, this too partly concocted by Bismarck to goad the French and spur German unification. Bismarck had negotiated his defense treaties with the south German states secretly and unilaterally. He had never consulted the French, a condition that Louis-Napoleon had insisted upon in 1866. In 1868, Bismarck tightened Berlin’s ties to the German south by establishing an all-German *Zollparlament* or “customs parliament.” Because Napoleon III had forbidden a Prussian union with south Germany during the 1866 armistice negotiations, the Customs Parliament was interpreted in Paris as yet another challenge to French authority. The emperor responded to the provocation by prolonging the French army’s summer maneuvers a week and warning Bismarck that absorption of any of the three south German states – Bavaria, Württemberg, or Baden – would be treated in Paris as a *casus belli*. Dining with his officers at Châlons in September 1868, Napoleon III raised a glass of Rhine wine, pointed to the east, and said: “Gentlemen, I hope that you yourselves will shortly be harvesting this wine.”<sup>24</sup> As in the Luxembourg affair, this French saber-rattling was all that Bismarck could have hoped for. When a nervous Reichstag deputy compared the brooding French army to “an avalanche that the least disturbance can plunge into the chasm,” Bismarck theatrically replied that “an appeal to *fear* never finds an echo in German hearts.” His words were greeted with thunderous applause. Deputies from all over Germany rallied to Bismarck, as did international opinion. Writing in 1870, an English journalist

21 “Die militärische Bedeutung Luxemburgs,” *ÖMZ* 2 (1867), pp. 108–15. Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, orig. 1961, London, 1981, pp. 41–2.

22 F. A. Bazaine, *Episodes de la Guerre de 1870 et les Blocus de Metz*, Madrid, 1883, p. ii.

23 Dresden, Sächsisches Kriegsarchiv (SKA), Militärbevollmächtigter 4474, Berlin, 2 and 6 May 1867, Col. von Brandenstein to War Minister. Pflanze, vol. 1, pp. 375–81.

24 HNSA, IB, Karton 5, BM 1868, 831, Paris 9 Sept. 1868, Agent E.

expressed the bemusement of most Europeans at Louis-Napoleon's curious support for the south German states: "One is astonished at the infatuation of the Empire – the Empire that professed itself the champion of nationalities everywhere – in allying itself to effete courts and staking success on exploded hereditary traditions."<sup>25</sup>

War did not explode in the spring of 1869. This was partly because Napoleon III needed more time to prepare his army and partly because Bismarck, although advancing on the national question, still doubted the loyalty of the south German states.<sup>26</sup> Although Bavaria and Württemberg had joined the *Zollparlament* and signed military pacts with Prussia, their wary governments regarded these steps as the end of the matter, not the beginning. They would trade with Prussia and join in the defense of Germany, but insisted upon political independence. As the prime minister in Stuttgart put it: "Württemberg wants to remain Württemberg as long as it has the power."<sup>27</sup> If independent, the southern kingdoms would enjoy the option of joining a Prussian war with France, or not; they liked that degree of flexibility. General Moltke, who was trying to construct an all-German army that could be relied upon in *any* contingency, clearly did not. Visiting Baden in 1868, the Prussian general staff chief vented his frustration: "These people must be made to understand that their future is in *our* hands, and that we are in a position to do them much good, or much harm."<sup>28</sup> Bismarck was more diplomatic; rather than clash with the south Germans, he pinned his plans for German unification "on the direction and swiftness with which *public opinion* develops in southern Germany." He was not a democrat, but recognized that he must create popular pressure for unification that would push the foot-dragging southern governments into the grasp of Berlin. Over and over, he returned to a thought he had first expressed ten years earlier: "There is but one ally for Prussia: the German people."<sup>29</sup> Though the princes, soldiers, and bureaucrats of south Germany had a vested interest in remaining outside of Prussia, millions of south German citizens wanted a nation-state, which was something only Prussia could deliver.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas Bismarck sought ways to break the crust of south German politics and reach down to the German masses, Napoleon III found himself confronted with the opposite problem: a tumultuously democratic France that seemed intent on weakening his throne or voting it out of existence.

25 Alexander Innes Shand, *On the Trail of the War*, New York, 1871, p. 35. Pflanze, vol. 1, pp. 396–7.

26 HHSa, IB, Karton 15, BM 1869, 1503, Paris, 26 Nov. 1869, Eduard Simon to Beust.

27 Allan Mitchell, *Bismarck and the French Nation 1848–1890*, New York, 1971, pp. 47–9. Pflanze, vol. 1, p. 391.

28 *Papiers et Correspondance de la Famille Impériale*, vol. 8, pp. 225–6. Strasbourg, 28 October 1868, General Ducrot to General Frossard.

29 Pflanze, vol. 1, pp. 140, 392.

30 PRO, FO 425, 96, #258, Darmstadt, 22 July 1870, Morier to Granville.

Conservatives thought him too liberal; liberals thought him too conservative. Most agreed that he had done too little to arrest the Prussian threat. Widely read pundits like Hippolyte Taine and Lucien Prévost-Paradol warned of French decline, and eclipse by Prussia, Russia, and America. "France languishes in its ruins, with neither honor nor power."<sup>31</sup> Gradually this internal crisis in France became a chief cause of the Franco-Prussian War, for Napoleon III, under constant attack in the press, streets, and legislature by 1869–70, began consciously manipulating foreign policy – the hope of "a good war" (*une bonne guerre*) with the Prussians – to restore public faith in the Second Empire.

Faith was dwindling fast, for the Second Empire was sagging by the late 1860s. Now in his sixties, Napoleon III was stooped, fat, tired, and chronically ill. Once spry and full of ideas, he was now dull and listless, frequently drugged to alleviate the pain of his gout, gallstones, and hemorrhoids, or away from Paris altogether, taking the spa waters at Vichy, Plombières, or Biarritz. Urgent political problems were a constant annoyance to the flagging emperor. Most urgent of all was the very constitution of France; after twenty years of peace and prosperity, many of the French deplored Napoleon III's constitution of 1852, which concentrated all political and administrative power in the emperor's hands. Calls for reform were all the louder because of the emperor's physical deterioration and the lack of a responsible cabinet to govern in his place.

Like his uncle, Napoleon III had surrounded himself with dubious ministers over the years; the men were chosen far more for their loyalty to the Bonapartes than the national interest. Corruption and nepotism flourished. A few examples suggest the extent of it: Each year Louis-Napoleon paid his family 1 million francs (\$3 million today) from the national treasury; even a minor cousin or nephew could command 100,000 francs (\$300,000) annually. And those were just the official salaries. To augment them, the emperor kept a 27 million franc (\$65 million) civil list and reserved 2 million francs (\$6 million) annually for "secret funds" that were never audited. More secret funds were dredged up in the colonies; Marshal Patrice MacMahon – Governor-General of Algeria in the 1860s – took 45 million francs (\$135 million) a year out of the colony, five times the actual tax liability of the region. Little of this money was ever accounted for.<sup>32</sup> The emperor paid his English mistress, Miss Harriet Howard, a salary of 700,000 francs (\$2.1 million). Because history suggested that few French regimes lasted more than twenty years, the emperor kept a constant £1 million (\$75 million) on deposit in London at Baring Brothers. Even a devout Bonapartist would have had difficulty characterizing these transactions as anything other than embezzlement, and they paid for luxuries

31 Schivelbusch, pp. 119–20.

32 "Notizen: Frankreich," *ÖMZ* 3 (1868), pp. 77–8.

large and small. In 1856, the emperor spent 900,000 francs (\$2.7 million) to baptize his son. In 1858, he sent Pierre de Failly, a favorite general, chocolates valued at 1,300 francs (\$4,000).<sup>33</sup>

By the late 1860s, Louis-Napoleon's Second Empire was sinking into a morass of impropriety. The Prussian military attaché's account of the Carnival ball in February 1870 offered a glimpse of it: Napoleon III, "fat, affable, but fragile," moving ponderously among his guests, speaking slowly as if stricken, drunken officers reeling around the ballroom, prostitutes dancing the can-can, everyone collapsing in a wrack of champagne bottles at dawn.<sup>34</sup> Ministers and diplomats who approached the French Emperor found him languid, his left arm withered and useless, his eyes glazed over with pain and opiates.<sup>35</sup> The fatigue, drugs, and peccadillos were all the more alarming because they accompanied a string of foreign policy fiascos. In 1863, the emperor had tried and failed to reconstitute an independent Poland. In 1866, he had failed to wrest territory from the Prussians after Königgrätz. In 1867, he had failed to annex Belgium and Luxembourg, and military reverses half a world away had forced him to pull French troops out of Mexico, where he had squandered 360 million francs (\$1.1 billion) trying to establish a French satellite state in Central America.<sup>36</sup> Only the French peasants, who did not generally read, let alone read newspapers, would have retained much faith in Napoleon III's government. Nor was the forty-four-year-old French empress reassuring. Eugénie de Montijo, a Spanish-born ultra-conservative, was even more despised than her husband by the liberal élites and the working class, who, after 1866, impatiently demanded a free press, responsible ministers, the right of parliament to legislate, the removal of authoritarian prefects, and the direct election of mayors. They also wanted an end to "plebiscitary democracy," the emperor's constitutional power to put questions directly to the French people and then assert a mandate. Urban liberals loathed this system; they called it "ruralocracy," and scored the emperor for manipulating the *appel à la nation* to get landslide votes of confidence from the peasants that permitted him to defy the better-informed legislative body at will. French peasants genuinely liked *Pouléon*, as they called the emperor, but also shrewdly recognized that his grants to their villages often flowed in direct proportion to the enthusiasm that they registered in plebiscites.<sup>37</sup>

Although the French country was manageable, the same could not be said of the cities. Urbanization had created a rootless class of workers in industrial centers like Paris, Lyon, and St. Etienne. These were dangerous men; most

33 *Papiers et Correspondance de la Famille Impériale*, Paris, 1870, vols. 1, 3, and 4, *passim*.

34 Alfred von Waldersee, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 3 vols., Berlin, 1922, vol. 1, p. 55.

35 Wetzel, p. 22.

36 Montaudon, vol. 2, p. 27.

37 Price, p. 53. McMillan, p. 62.

were young, impressionable ex-peasants, who worked twelve-hour days in wretched conditions and passed their evenings listening to radical orators.<sup>38</sup> Such men demanded much more than reform; they wanted revolution and a “red republic.” This social crisis peaked in 1869, when Napoleon III, having failed to push important military and education bills through an increasingly sullen legislative body, called new elections. He expected these elections to follow the pattern of previous ones. Loyal mayors and prefects would screen out opposition candidates and arrange a Bonapartist majority before votes were even cast. Unfortunately, the emperor’s unpopularity by the late 1860s was such that the old tricks no longer served. One hundred and twenty opposition newspapers sprouted in the months before the May elections. Attempts to block republican candidates buckled and broke under local opposition. Although most candidates were still officially sanctioned, many mayors and prefects wondered if the regime were not doomed. Concerned about their futures, they looked the other way when moderate republicans put their names down. In the cities, angry crowds placed revolutionary socialists on the ballot. Thus, the voting in the spring of 1869 proved an overwhelming defeat for the Second Empire. Three out of four Parisian voters chose opposition candidates or abstained, which was a sign of revolutionary sentiment. Rioters set fires in the French capital for three days in June and danced around the flames singing the *Marseillaise* – the banned anthem of the republic – and shouting “*Vive la République!*” Results nationally were nearly as dismal. Government-sponsored candidates lost 1 million votes to opposition liberals and republicans, who increased their seats in the legislative body to 74 of 292. Without ballot-stuffing and gerrymandering, the balance of power would have tipped far more alarmingly to the left. More than half of the ballots cast indicated opposition to Louis-Napoleon’s government. These were stunning achievements given the manifold ways in which the emperor and his prefects could manipulate returns.<sup>39</sup>

The so-called Liberal Empire of 1869–70 flowed from those disastrous spring elections. At first, the French emperor pretended to ignore the results, but a strike wave, more embarrassing defeats in by-elections, and a scandal involving a Bonaparte forced his hand. In January 1870, Napoleon III’s cousin, Prince Pierre-Napoleon Bonaparte, shot and killed a republican journalist who had arrived on his doorstep for an impromptu interview. The slain reporter’s funeral became the focal point of violent anti-imperial demonstrations. In Paris, crowds smashed windows, overturned buses, lit bonfires, and began building barricades in traditional French revolutionary style. This time they were defeated by the city-planning of Napoleon III and his chief prefect,

38 PRO, FO 27, 1786, Paris 20 Dec. 1869, Edw. Malet to Lord Lyons, “Report on the industrial and artisan classes in France.”

39 Plessis, pp. 164–5. McMillan, pp. 125–7. Price, pp. 42–4.

Baron Georges Haussmann, who had rebuilt Paris in the 1860s to create open spaces and facilitate the work of a counter-revolution. Still, the level of violence was impressive, and on the worst night, when the bonfires approached the emperor's own Tuileries palace, Napoleon III astonished his guards by appearing fully uniformed and ringed by his adjutants at 2 A.M. He was preparing to ride out to crush the revolution.<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, drastic measures were not needed. Instead, Napoleon III tried conciliation; he relaxed police powers, softened the press law, sacked a dozen reactionary prefects, and chose an outspoken liberal reformer, forty-four-year-old Emile Ollivier, as his new chief minister. Although technically a republican, Ollivier was ambitious enough to put aside his principles in pursuit of power. Napoleon III liked that about him; the emperor felt certain that, once alienated from his base, Ollivier would be easily controlled. Ollivier, a vain man, was no less certain that he would control the emperor and his shady ministers. He formed a government in January 1870, announced his intention to "save the dynasty," and issued a revised constitution in April. In the new constitution, the legislative body was finally given the right to initiate and amend legislation and question the emperor's ministers.<sup>41</sup> These were important steps, and the emperor, determined to fortify his new position as "head of state," moved in May to secure public backing for the new constitution in a plebiscite, which was the first since 1852.

Ollivier – despised by conservatives and now isolated from his old republican colleagues – was no threat to Louis-Napoleon. Ollivier drew his legislative support entirely from official candidates elected in 1869; these men were more loyal to the emperor than the chief minister. If Napoleon III could convince the French people to vote massively for the Liberal Empire, he could then proceed ruthlessly against the republican left with the argument that they were subverting the people's will as expressed in the plebiscite. This was the beauty of "ruralocracy." Behind Ollivier lurked the emperor's reactionary inner circle: Empress Eugénie, Jean Persigny, Georges Haussmann, Eugène Rouher, Franceschini Pietri, and the marshals, who waited with varying degrees of impatience for the emperor to lead a "second coup," like the one that had inaugurated the Second Empire twenty years earlier. Though tired and indifferent to his own prospects, Napoleon III was desperate to put the empire on a solid footing for his fourteen-year-old son and heir, Prince Louis, affectionately known as *Low-Low*. To get the massive "yes" vote needed, the emperor worded the 1870 plebiscite cleverly; voters were asked not to endorse him, only his "liberal changes."<sup>42</sup> Few could disagree with that proposition,

40 HHS, PA IX, 95, Paris, 11 January 1870, Metternich to Beust. Waldersee, vol. 1, p. 56.

41 McMillan, pp. 128–34. Wetzel, pp. 27–9.

42 HHS, PA IX, 95, Paris, 24 April 1870, Metternich to Beust. IB, Karton 15, BM 1869, Paris, 8 Aug. 1869, Agent Bergeron to Metternich.



and the plebiscite passed with 7.3 million “yes” votes against 1.5 million *nons*. In his postplebiscite *discours*, the emperor showed his teeth: France was embarked on a “progressive march” into the future; “dissidents [would] be *forced* to respect the national will.” And yet for all of its apparent success, the plebiscite had revealed deep wells of discontent: 1.5 million had voted “no;” 2 million had abstained. The French army, given the vote for the first time to pad the emperor’s majority, had disappointed: 20 percent of the troops had voted “no.” Twenty-five of the emperor’s own palace guards had voted “no.” Reporting these results to Berlin, the Prussian military attaché in Paris confided that they had “ruined” the plebiscite for the emperor, and confirmed him in the view that the best way to “distract the army” from demoralizing political questions was to use it in battle.<sup>43</sup>

The relevance of these French internal convulsions to the Franco-Prussian War should be clear. By early 1870, Napoleon III had come to view war with the Prussians as a possible way out of his domestic-political embarrassments. In the first place, war with Prussia was the *only* issue on which all parties in France might agree. In March, Prince Richard Metternich, the Austrian ambassador in Paris and a close personal friend of the Bonapartes, noted this probability in a letter to his foreign minister. “All three parties – republicans (Gambetta), absolutists (Rouher), and moderates (Thiers) – now accept war as an all but accomplished fact.”<sup>44</sup> Republicans and moderates wanted to punish Bismarck, who seemed determined to humiliate France. French “absolutists,” worried by the pace of liberalization under Ollivier, thought a victory over Prussia would strengthen the monarchy and facilitate a restoration of the authoritarian institutions of the 1850s. They had already tensioned the cable for a backlash in the plebiscite; one of the “liberal changes” French voters had unwittingly endorsed was a Senate decree making the plebiscitary emperor, not the legislative body, the “true bearer of political responsibility” in France.<sup>45</sup>

Jean Persigny, one of the authors of that decree, told an Austrian agent in February 1870 that a second *coup d'état* was definitely in the cards. French politics were utterly gridlocked. Violent rallies, calls for female suffrage, and attacks in the press had forced Ollivier to ban public meetings as well as several opposition newspapers, just weeks after freeing them from government control. The emperor did not dare dissolve parliament and call new elections, his customary tactic, for fear that this time elections would backfire and “strengthen the agitators.” Ollivier did not dare hold a confidence vote because he would almost certainly lose it.<sup>46</sup> Rumors of a military coup to

43 Waldersee, vol. 1, p. 68.

44 HHSA, PA IX, 96, Paris, 20 March 1870, Metternich to Beust.

45 Gall, vol. 1, p. 353.

46 HHSA, IB, Karton 18, BM 1870, 38, Paris 4 and 18 Feb. 1870, “Vertrauerliches Schreiben des Eduard Simon über französisches Zustände.”

break the deadlock were confirmed by an Austrian agent in the Tuileries in February 1870: Napoleon III – “cold, plastic, imperturbable” – was merely awaiting the right moment to “shift from the defensive to the offensive.” He would dump Ollivier and clamp down; the justification would be the same as in 1851: “Popular sovereignty” would survive through the plebiscites. The “quarrelsome” legislative body would be shut until “social peace” had been restored. But what would be the “right moment” for such a daring act? Clearly there would be no better occasion than a military victory over Prussia. War with Prussia was the one cause shared by all of the French; indeed Major Alfred von Waldersee, the Prussian military attaché in Paris in 1870, marveled at the obsession. In March, Waldersee reported that “Sadova features in every parliamentary speech.”<sup>47</sup> Right, left, and center, peasant and bourgeois, man and woman, they all wanted a war with Prussia; people called it a *guerre faite*, an “inevitable war.” *This* was the exit Napoleon III had been seeking; victory in a “revenge war” might vindicate the emperor’s semi-absolutism and silence his republican opposition in a storm of national pride.<sup>48</sup>

Grim as the French situation was, Germany’s internal affairs were little better. Wrangles with the Prussian legislature and the various German governments absorbed most of Bismarck’s energy in 1869–70. By year’s end, the fifty-four-year-old chancellor was played out, retreating frequently to his Pomeranian estate for long leaves. “Trees mean more to me than humans,” he muttered in frustration.<sup>49</sup> Prussian conservatives blocked his efforts to subject Prussia – the heart of the North German Confederation – to new German laws and taxes. While Prussian liberals tried to reduce the size of the army, the Prussian army tried to exceed its budget; everywhere Bismarck, in his new role of *Bundeskanzler*, federal chancellor, stood in the middle, appeasing, vetoing, and fretting.<sup>50</sup> A new force, socialism, bloomed in the factory towns, where working-class organizers railed against the monarchy and the “wars of annexation.”<sup>51</sup> Rows over taxes split the member states of the North German Confederation. Hessa-Darmstadt went so far as to make inquires in Paris as to the possibility of French military protection against Prussia.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, south German politicians continued to put distance between themselves and Berlin. To the Bavarians, the Prussians were hardly Germans at all; they were a queer tribe of eastern martinets. *Lieber französisch als preussisch* – “better French than Prussian” – was a fairly common south German electoral slogan at the time.

47 Waldersee, vol. 1, pp. 57–8.

48 HHSA, PA IX, 96, Paris, 29 Jan. 1870, Metternich to Beust. IB, Karton 15, BM 1869, Paris, 8 Aug. 1869, Agent Bergeron to Metternich.

49 Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron*, New York, 1977, p. 101.

50 SKA, MBV, 4474, Berlin, 27 July 1867, Col. Brandenstein to General Fabrice.

51 Friedrich Freudenthal, *Von Stade bis Gravelotte*, Bremen, 1898, p. 53.

52 HHSA, IB, Karton 5, BM 1868, Berlin, 24 April 1868, Agent-Bericht. PRO, FO 425, 96, 258, Darmstadt, 22 July 1870, Morier to Granville.

In February 1870, Bavarian elections ousted the pro-Prussian government that had served (with the aid of covert Prussian pay-offs and subsidies) since 1867 and returned the devoutly Catholic, pro-independence, pro-French “Patriot Party” to power. For Berlin, maneuvering to complete German unification, searching, in Bismarck’s phrase, “after the talisman that will produce German unity in a trice,” the change of line in Munich was a disastrous development. The Wittelsbachs of Bavaria, Europe’s most ancient dynasty, suddenly looked more distant than ever.<sup>53</sup> The situation was further muddied by the restless activity of “national liberals” all over Germany; these erstwhile opponents of Bismarck, who had rallied to him after 1866 because of his progress on the national question, rejected the chancellor’s “cautious haste” formula for unification (*Eile mit Weile*), demanding immediate German union instead, a jarring step that would have broken the tenuous links forged between Prussia and the south German princes since Königgrätz.<sup>54</sup>

Overall, Bismarck’s predicament in 1870 was nearly as grave as Louis-Napoleon’s. To deceive the French and mollify the smaller German states, he had lumbered himself with three parliaments after 1866: the Prussian *Landtag*, the North German *Reichstag*, and the German *Zollparlament*. Each had its checks and balances, making it increasingly difficult for Bismarck to force his Great Prussian program on the smaller German states. As for the German people, they were bewildered by the overlapping parliaments and bored by the continual elections and by-elections. Although the fire of national feeling still flickered – fanned by Italy’s successful unification in the 1860s – Britain’s consul in Danzig observed discouragement and “stagnation” in Germany, and worried that Bismarck might try to shake things up through a war with “Louis,” the derisive German nickname for Napoleon III.<sup>55</sup> In Paris, an increasingly anxious “Louis” found rare solace in Bismarck’s troubles. In a meeting at St. Cloud in 1869, he told his impatient generals: “France has money and soldiers. Prussia will shortly have neither the one nor the other. Remain calm; everything comes to those who wait.” Apprised that Prussian liberals were advocating European disarmament, Louis-Napoleon scoffed at the idea: “France will not disarm; she is fully armed; her arsenals are full, her reserves trained.” In February 1869, Marshal Adolphe Niel advised the emperor’s Council of Ministers that “war with Prussia is inevitable and imminent. We are armed as never before.”<sup>56</sup> Napoleon III wanted a war to put his government back on course, but so did Bismarck. Confronted with so many

53 Wetzel, pp. 66–7, 70–1.

54 Anon., *Deutschland um Neujahr 1870*, Berlin, 1870, pp. 11–19. G. von Bismarck, *Kriegserlebnisse 1866 und 1870–71*, Dessau, 1907, pp. 4, 75–6.

55 PRO, FO 64, 651, Danzig, 21 Dec. 1868, W. White to E. Hammond.

56 “Stand der Rüstungen in Frankreich,” *ÖMZ* 3 (1869), p. 92. “Le Désarmement de la France,” *ÖMZ* 1 (1869), p. 379. HHSA, IB, Karton 5, BM 1868, 831, Paris 9 Sept. 1868, Agent E. IB, Karton 11, BM 1869, 75, Vienna, 14 Feb. 1869, Hoffman to Metternich.

obstacles to unification, the German chancellor viewed war as the battering ram that would put them aside.

Three successive crises in 1870 finally triggered the Franco-Prussian War that had been brewing since 1866. The first crisis concerned the *Kaiser-Titel*, the hope expressed by Bismarck and nationalists all across Germany that King Wilhelm I of Prussia would accept the title of German *Kaiser* or Emperor from the North German Confederation. The king seemed willing; opening the North German Reichstag in February 1870, Wilhelm I called for “national union” and a “common German fatherland.”<sup>57</sup> Such words were dynamite in the ears of Napoleon III. A united Germany would tower over France. Thus, the same French emperor who had staked his career on the “national principle” and the need for a “United States of Europe” now rather embarrassingly began to make statements of Metternichian conservatism. “No more violations,” Napoleon III warned Bismarck in February 1870. “If Prussia moves again, France will strike.”<sup>58</sup>

The second Franco-Prussian crisis centered on a railway through Switzerland, which Bismarck financed in the expectation that it would anger Napoleon III. When mere Prussian involvement in the project failed to excite the French, Bismarck gave a sensational speech in which he alluded to Prussia’s “strategic interest” in a railway and tunnel through Switzerland’s St. Gotthard Pass. Not wanting to appear the aggressor, Bismarck was deliberately vague as to the nature of the Prussian interest, but his meaning was quickly divined in Paris. In 1866, Bismarck had allied with Italy to beat the Austrians. Now, Italy having drifted out of the French orbit because of Napoleon III’s annexation of Nice and Savoy in 1860 and his stubborn defense of Papal Rome, Bismarck was hinting at the existence of a Prusso-Italian alliance aimed at France, one that would be greatly facilitated by a rail link through Switzerland. As intended, the speech ignited the French legislature where angry deputies insisted that the emperor draw the line with Bismarck.<sup>59</sup>

What struck an increasingly despondent Napoleon III about these crises was the lack of initiative exercised by France. Ever since the Luxembourg affair of 1867, Bismarck had confidently set the pace, concluding alliances with the south German states, convening a Reichstag and customs parliament, proffering the “Kaiser title,” and driving a wedge between Italy and France, which was particularly irksome since France had fought a costly war with Austria in 1859 to help create a united Italy. Louis-Napoleon had done nothing to arrest this steady Prussian advance; by 1870, the emperor’s official foreign policy – *paix au dehors*, “peace to the outside world” – seemed foolish and

57 HHSa, PA III, 101, Berlin, 12 and 14 Feb. and 28 April 1870, Wimpffen to Beust.

58 Pflanze, vol. 1, pp. 431–4. HHSa, PA IX, 96, Paris, 4 and 18 Feb. 1870, Metternich to Beust.

59 HHSa, IB, Karton 18, BM 1870, 38, Paris 10 June 1870, Eduard Simon to Beust. PA IX, 96, Paris, 18 Feb. 1870, Metternich to Beust.