CHAPTER XII

Bismarck’s Germany. IV, Foreign Affairs (1871-88)

There is a very real distinction between Bismarck’s foreign policy in the
decade of the sixties and in the years between 1871 and 1890. In the
everal years Bismarck traced a course which was often diplomatically
aggressive and several times risked the possibility of war. After 1871
the reverse was true. Bismarck was satisfied with his achievement of
German unity in the kleindeutsch form and felt strongly that Germany
and Europe should enjoy a period of tranquillity so that the new state
might consolidate her gains and organize herself into a modern nation.

Though the complexities of the elaborate alliance system which Bis-
marck constructed to keep the peace are very great, the principles
underlying his moves are not difficult to discern and are logical. Since
peace was the overriding consideration, it was essential to prevent any
alliance of powers even potentially unfriendly to Germany. His particular
horror was that an alliance might develop between France and Russia,
with the result that Germany might be forced to fight a war on two fronts
simultaneously. The logical consequence of this fear was that Germany
had to be closely aligned with either France or Russia. After the events
of 1870–71 friendship with France was out of the question; the alterna-
tive possibility had to be sought, namely to remain close to Russia. This
was in fact one of the key points of Bismarck’s policy. Toward each
nation he directed a slightly different policy, but these policies remained
remarkably constant during his whole ministry.

France was a special case. Since it was impossible for Germany to woo
her directly, at least as long as Alsace and Lorraine remained in German
hands, it became necessary to keep her isolated and weak so that she
would not seem attractive to any nation looking for an ally. In Bismarck’s
eyes a republic was a weaker form of government than a monarchy;
therefore, the archmonarchist became, where France was concerned, a
republican. In later years Bismarck became a willing helper in France's colonial enterprises because he believed that these activities would keep her attention away from continental European problems.

Germany's relationship with Russia was perhaps the most difficult problem which Bismarck had to face. Since the time of his embassy there, he had believed that St. Petersburg and Berlin should remain in close contact. In this effort he had the enthusiastic support of Emperor William. This general attitude was reinforced by the specific fear of a Franco-Russian alliance. The difficulty, however, consisted in trying to maintain the friendship of both Austria-Hungary, whose good will interested Bismarck, and Russia. These two were constantly at odds over Balkan problems. Bismarck had no immediate interest in the Balkans but was very anxious to keep his two eastern neighbors together. This situation was the source of endless difficulty.

The relationship with Austria-Hungary was the converse of that with Russia. Bismarck valued Austria, both because of her German background and also to keep her from any rapprochement with France or even Great Britain. As time went on, Austria, rather than Russia, became the basis of the Bismarckian system of alliances.

Great Britain was not a serious problem. She was unlikely to inject herself into continental affairs, unless her own direct interests were concerned. The running sore of Anglo-Russian relations, however, was dangerous; Bismarck exerted himself to prevent these two from open war.

Toward Italy Bismarck maintained an almost fatherly attitude. He had little interest in her warlike potential, but regarded her as a useful friend because of her nuisance value against France.

Bismarck's first important diplomatic step after unification was the creation of the League of the Three Emperors in 1872–73. This was a stage in the chancellor's continuing desire to harness Austria and Russia together. In the fall of 1872 the three emperors, Alexander II of Russia, Francis Joseph of Austria-Hungary, and William I of Germany, met in Berlin and agreed on some vague and abstract principles for common action. Most of these sentiments can be summarized in the phrase monarchical solidarity. The monarchs agreed to stand together against the threats of the modern world and to consult on affairs in the Near East. The following year the essence of these agreements was put on paper, and the League came into existence. It was not a military alliance but rather a gentlemen's agreement, which could last only as long as no important crisis developed. This is proved by the fact that it collapsed at the time of its first serious test, the Balkan crisis of the late seventies.

The quiet surface of the European international scene was disturbed
in 1875 by the so-called “war in sight” crisis. France enjoyed a spectacu-
lar recuperation from the war of 1870–71. In spite of the German
indemnity, now paid in full, she had made surprising advances econom-
ically. In the political sphere it looked as if, with the election to the
presidency of monarchist Marshal MacMahon, she were going to estab-
lish a strong clerical monarchy. The Kulturkampf was in full swing at
the time, and Bismarck was becoming alarmed at possible reaction to it
in clerical countries. There was evidence of such reaction in France. To
make matters worse, the French government passed a law to increase the
size of the French army. In view of all this, Bismarck decided to spank
his former enemy. It is not clear to what degree he actually envisaged
the possibility of war. He made angry remarks, and in early 1875 news-
papers close to the German government published inflammatory articles,
one even using as a headline the question “Is war in sight?” Moltke,
who would hardly have acted on his own volition, was heard to talk about
a preventive war. France stood up to the Germans and spread the alarm
of a German threat. Both Great Britain and Russia were worried by
Bismarck’s warlike remarks. The British complained diplomatically. The
Russians did more. Tsar Alexander II and his foreign minister, Gor-
chakov, visited Berlin in May 1875 and took the opportunity to assure
themselves both from the emperor and the chancellor that no serious
thought was given to war with France. In this they succeeded. Years
later Bismarck claimed that he never intended a war and that Gorchakov
took a great deal of unmerited credit to himself. Whatever the facts, the
war scare died down, and Germany found that she could not count un-
qualifiedly upon Russia’s support. The incident served to irritate personal
relations between Bismarck and Gorchakov, a factor which was to be-
come more serious in the next crisis.

Much more important than the war scare of 1875 was a series of
events in the Balkans. In the summer of that same year the populations
of Bosnia and Herzegovina arose against what they considered the in-
tolerable government of the Ottoman Empire. In this revolt they were
joined by their Slavic cousins in semi-independent Serbia and in the
Bulgarian provinces of Turkey. The Turks were able to crush these re-
volts but they aggravated the situation by inflicting on the Bulgars a
series of bloody reprisals and massacres which have become known as
the Bulgarian atrocities. The Pan-Slav sensibilities of the Russians were
aroused; further, the Russian government hoped in this crisis for an
opportunity to drive the Turks bag and baggage out of Europe and
achieve their historical aim of the control of the Bosporus. Disraeli,
the British prime minister, had a difficult time, in view of the actions of
the Turks, in restating Britain’s basic pro-Turkish position aimed at
preventing Russian control of the eastern Mediterranean. Yet he did
restate it in the face of ferocious opposition from Gladstone. The Aus-
trians, too, supported Turkey, for they feared Russian domination in the
Balkans, an area that interested them a great deal since they had been
driven from both Italy and Germany.

The situation worried Bismarck very much, not because he had any
interest in the Balkans, which indeed he scorned, but because this matter
might stir Europe into a general war, an idea that filled him with horror.
He tried in a variety of ways to keep Austria and Russia together and to
prevent the worst. He helped to form an international commission to in-
sist on reforms in Turkey; he rejoiced at a meeting between the Russian
and Austrian foreign ministers in July 1876. Nevertheless, by the fall
of that year the situation had become so tense that the tsar asked the
German emperor if he was not right in believing that in the event of a
war between Russia and Austria, Germany would be as friendly to
Russia as Russia had been to her in 1870. When Bismarck replied that
Germany would view very seriously any threat to the independence of
Austria-Hungary, the Russians felt that he was acting with shameful
 ingratitude and began to withdraw from the close Russo-German friend-
ship which had existed. In the meantime Russia bought Austrian
neutrality, and war broke out between Russia and Turkey in the spring
of 1877. By the following Christmas Turkey was overpowered; in
January 1878 she was forced to sign a treaty at San Stefano, just outside
Constantinople, which was very favorable to Russia. In addition to ceding
territory in Asia to Russia, Turkey had to permit the creation of a very
large Bulgaria, containing Greeks and Serbs as well as Bulgars, from the
Macedonian area. Russia planned this new state as a satellite through
which she could control the Balkans in general and dominate the coveted
Straits area.

It was at this point that Great Britain became Russia's most active
antagonist. Disraeli had no notion of letting Russia get away with such
prizes. For a time it looked as if war between the British and the Russians
were imminent. Disraeli took the legally justified position that by virtue
of earlier treaties all decisions affecting the Ottoman Empire were to be
taken by agreement of all the major powers and that Russia had violated
this condition ruthlessly. Bismarck gave his reaction to the situation in
the Reichstag when he offered himself and Germany as the "honest
broker" at an international congress to solve the Balkan problem. Russia,
deserted by all of Europe, was forced grudgingly to accept this proposal
and a congress was planned for the summer of 1878 to meet at Berlin.

The Congress of Berlin is one of the landmarks of nineteenth-century
diplomatic history. It displayed for the first time the German capital as a
European diplomatic center. It was attended by the leading diplomats of Europe. Disraeli and Lord Salisbury represented Britain; Gorchakov came from Russia; Count Andrássy, the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, attended; Bismarck presided; France, Italy, and Turkey were also represented. Much of the final treaty emanated from Bismarck himself, who was even vague about Balkan geography. His general idea was that the eastern half of the peninsula should be a Russian preserve, while Austria was to dominate in the west. This plan on the whole was adopted. Austria-Hungary received the administration and garrisoning, though not the legal possession, of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia’s dream of a great Bulgaria was much curtailed. Bulgaria was divided into three areas with varying degrees of autonomy. Russia received her Asiatic spoils. Turkey was to remain, as before, in control of the Straits. Great Britain received the island of Cyprus. France was assured privately by Bismarck that Germany had no objection to French designs on Tunisia (which he knew would infuriate the Italians). The Congress ended in mid-July, and the crisis was over.

In retrospect the Congress of Berlin was not such a triumph for Germany as it appeared at the time. In the short run, war was certainly avoided, and Bismarck’s Germany had glittered as the presiding genius of Europe. In the longer run, Bismarck alienated Russia, which nursed an anti-German grievance for some time to come. In the final view, the Congress, by ignoring Balkan nationalism and compromising, laid much of the groundwork for new problems which were to impede the path of Bismarck’s successors and to lead in time to the war which was to lay low the German Empire. The chancellor should not have been so ignorant and scornful of the Balkans.

After the delegates had gone home and the decorations were taken down, Bismarck looked about at a rather undesirable scene. Russian friendship, on which he had counted so much, was at least temporarily a thing of the past. These years, 1878 and 1879, marked a big shift in Bismarck’s domestic policies; the same is true in foreign affairs. No longer did the chancellor want to juggle with each new situation from scratch. The opportunist was changing into the conservative. Bismarck wanted agreements on paper, firm ones on which he could depend. Thus the decade of the eighties saw the construction of a network of “defensive” military alliances.

The first of this series of alliances was concluded in the fall of 1879 between Germany and Austria-Hungary. Three years later these two partners were joined by Italy in a new alliance, the Triple Alliance, which became the cornerstone of German foreign policy and endured through successive renewals down to World War I. At first blush it
would seem that this new system was the negation of Bismarck's basic idea of keeping both Russia and Austria yoked together, and it has been treated in this light by some scholars who feel that Bismarck was forced to choose between his two imperial neighbors. This view is not altogether sound because, in spite of several difficult moments, Bismarck never ceased to keep some control over affairs in St. Petersburg.

After the Congress of Berlin Russia was very disgruntled at the treatment she felt herself to have received, particularly from her old friend Germany. She made various technical difficulties about implementing the provisions of the congress. She grumbled when it was revealed that Austria had agreed to abrogate the clause of the Treaty of Prague of 1866 calling for a plebiscite in north Schleswig. Tsar Alexander even went so far as to write a sharp letter to his uncle, Emperor William, deploiring the bad relations between Russia and Germany and even speaking sluringly of Bismarck. The two emperors met shortly after this letter was sent and appeared to patch up their differences, but by that time Bismarck had already decided to make the connection with Austria, had had a conversation with Count Andrassy in Gastein, and was about to go to Vienna to sign the alliance.

The alliance concluded between Bismarck and Andrassy was defensive. It provided that if Russia should attack either of the contracting parties, the other would come to her ally's aid. On the other hand, Austria was specifically excused from participating in a possible future war between France and Germany. It appeared that Austria was reaping all the advantage of the arrangement and Germany was gaining nothing but responsibilities; this was the view taken on the whole by Emperor William. However, there is evidence to suggest that Bismarck was toying with the idea of integrating Great Britain into his new system, which would have been a real achievement, but that he was deflected from this plan by Russia's surprising lack of objection to the Austrian treaty.

Bismarck's principal problem during the weeks following his signature of the Austrian alliance was to get his own emperor to ratify it. William seemed at the outset irreconcilably opposed to the new course. He had a very strong sense of dynastic loyalty, and this loyalty reached in the first instance to his nephew, Tsar Alexander II, and to the Russian connection which had been bequeathed to him from the days of the struggle against Napoleon I. There followed a very interesting correspondence between William and Bismarck in which the chancellor rang every possible change of emotional and intellectual persuasion. The emperor talked of abdicating; Bismarck threatened to resign. In the end
the usual thing happened. The emperor, with a heavy heart and predictions of ill occurrences, finally approved the treaty in October 1879. The new European diplomatic course of permanent peacetime alliances came into existence.

Russia's reaction was surprising. Instead of the fury which might have been predicted, it was one of complacency. Russia was enduring a period of terroristic chaos in her domestic affairs, which was climax ed by the murder of Tsar Alexander in 1881. She could not easily face foreign disturbances at the same time. In any case, she started to make overtures to Germany soon after the Austrian treaty was concluded, an attitude which appears to have made Bismarck drop his intentions concerning London. The eventual result was a revival of the old League of the Three Emperors in 1881 and the continuance of it until 1887.

The next step in the new Bismarckian security policy involved Italy. Bismarck had on the whole preserved friendly relations with the Italians. He had helped them to acquire Venetia in 1866. In the following decade the Kulturkampf tended to bring him closer to antipapal Italy. Italy's anger was directed toward clerical France and also toward Austria-Hungary, which still possessed areas known to Italian nationalists as Italia irredenta (Trentino, Trieste, Istria, etc.), which Italy claimed were ethnically properly hers. Bismarck's secret assurance to the French delegate at the Congress of Berlin that Germany had no objection to French aspirations in Tunisia was one of the motives which led France in 1881 to declare a protectorate over that area. This action, as Bismarck anticipated, angered the Italians; their reaction was to start immediate friendly overtures to Berlin. Bismarck's reply to these overtures was to point out to the Italians that his principal foreign loyalty was to Austria. He advised them to settle their outstanding differences in Vienna before trying to achieve anything important with him. Accordingly, Austro-Italian relations were improved and anti-Austrian nationalistic campaigns in Italy were soft-pedaled; the result was the formation by Germany, Austria, and Italy of the Triple Alliance, which remained in force until Italy denounced it in 1915.

It looked by then as if Bismarck had pretty completely achieved his aim of security. Germany was closely allied to Austria-Hungary and Italy; she maintained some control over Russia in the League of the Three Emperors; she had a line to Great Britain through the latter's friendship with Austria and Italy; she had even brought Romania into her orbit by acceding in 1883 to a defensive alliance between Austria and Romania, which was transparently aimed at Russia. France still languished in exterior darkness. For several years, indeed, there was
relative quiet, but this quiet was broken in the mid-eighties by the periodic Balkan crisis and also by a wave of belligerent public opinion in France centering about the personality of General Boulanger.

In spite of the fact that much has been written about it, the Boulanger episode in French history remains obscure. General Boulanger was a dashing, handsome officer, whose colorful and theatrical appearance and statements served to remind the French people how colorless and tiresome was the government of the Third Republic. He represented the culmination of a release from the frustration caused by lack of glory and achievement that had inhibited France since 1815. However, he was a man of far too small stature to realize these longings. Temporarily he inflamed French patriotism and was seized upon by French nationalists of various hues to stir up opinion. He came at a moment convenient for Bismarck, who used him for the German equivalent of the "bloody shirt" in American history, namely the fatherland endangered by France. The question of the Septennate, or voting the military budget seven years in advance, was the crucial issue at home and Bismarck was waging a difficult electoral campaign. The arrest of a French border official named Schnaebele, on a trumped-up charge of espionage, served to focus German thought on an imaginary danger from France. Schnaebele was soon released and Boulanger dismissed from the war ministry, but Bismarck won his majority in the Reichstag.

The Balkan crisis of the mid-eighties concerned Alexander of Battenberg, prince of Bulgaria. This charming but restless young man had been named to the almost independent part of Bulgaria by Alexander II shortly after the Congress of Berlin. He soon made it clear that he had no intention of ruling Bulgaria as a Russian satellite and thereby incurred the furious enmity of the new Russian tsar, Alexander III. In 1885 Battenberg led a movement leading to the union of Bulgaria with its artificially constructed neighbor, Eastern Roumelia; he got involved in a victorious war with Serbia and the next year was kidnapped by a group of Bulgarian officers, possibly at the behest of the Russians. He returned triumphantly to Bulgaria only to be greeted by a severe and angry letter from the tsar, which led him to abdicate. A further complication was that he was engaged to be married to the granddaughter of the German emperor, Princess Victoria, only daughter of the German crown prince.

Pro-Battenberg feeling ran high in Germany, except in one quarter—namely Bismarck himself. He had no notion of endangering his relationship with Russia for the sake of a young Balkan adventurer. Furthermore, it was just those elements at court who supported Battenberg that Bismarck believed to be hostile to himself, the circle around the crown prince and princess. He therefore opposed the engagement with all his power.
The international implications of this crisis led Tsar Alexander to desire to break loose from the League of the Three Emperors, which was up for renewal in mid-1887. He had become very anti-Austrian and, although he had no great love for Germany either, was prepared to offer a treaty to her without any connection with Austria-Hungary. Accordingly he sent a representative to Berlin, whom Bismarck received warmly; out of the discussions between the two was formed the famous Reinsurance Treaty, Bismarck’s last major accomplishment on the diplomatic level.

This treaty, kept very secret, provided that in case of war against one of the signatories by another major power, the other would remain neutral. There were, however, two exceptions to this: if Russia attacked Austria, or if Germany attacked France. Russia also received assurances from Germany on Balkan problems. The treaty was to last for three years and could be renewed in 1890.

The question arises immediately to what degree the Reinsurance Treaty was in harmony with Germany’s prior and basic obligations to Austria stemming from the alliance of 1879. Technically and legally it would seem as if there were no collision between the two, although there is very serious doubt about this if the treaty with Romania is taken into account. In the event of an Austro-Russian war, it would be the German problem to decide which was the aggressor and to behave accordingly. It need not be emphasized how difficult this is when the event occurs. Morally speaking, it seems clear that the Reinsurance Treaty was far from the spirit of the arrangement arrived at with Austria. Critics of Bismarck see in this treaty a prime example of his cynicism and unscrupulousness; his admirers see in it an extraordinarily astute technique for preserving peace in any contingency.

The full complexity of Bismarck’s system appears at its height in a series of agreements collectively known as the First Mediterranean Agreement and signed in the early months of 1887. Germany adhered to only one of the agreements, that between Italy and Spain, but Bismarck may be described as the godfather of the whole plan, which consisted of arrangements among Great Britain, Austria, Italy, and Spain to preserve the status quo in the Mediterranean area. It was intended to act as a deterrent to any French ambitions in Egypt or Morocco and to any Russian ambitions in the Straits or the Balkans. It also aligned the British, at least psychologically, with the Triple Alliance. These arrangements in 1887 were the last achievements of the old master, who, with the exception of some abortive moves in the direction of Great Britain in 1889, seemed content with his system as he had developed it.

In the peaceful years before the Battenberg crisis Bismarck engaged
briefly in a new sort of policy, very much at variance with most of his background and at odds with many of his statements. He presided over the birth of a German colonial empire. Although for years he had been distinctly continental-minded and had spoken scornfully of German colonial aspirations, although indeed he had no interests even as far abroad as the Balkan Peninsula, it was during his period that Germany entered late the race for overseas colonies.

As early as the mid-seventies there had been some clamor for the acquisition of colonies. The clamor was mainly from the commercial and shipping interests in the north German ports, whose business would naturally benefit from overseas expansion. Yet it was not until the next decade that this agitation led to any tangible results. In 1882 the Deutsche Kolonial Gesellschaft ("German Colonial Society") was founded, and in the next year the merchant Adolf Lüderitz bought from the natives some territory north of the Orange River in southwest Africa. The year 1884 was the decisive one. During it a German protectorate was established over this area in the southwest, in the face of British protests. Farther north protectorates were also declared over Togoland on the Niger coast and over Cameroons on the Guinea coast. On the east coast of Africa Karl Peters, another merchant, was the leading spirit. Some trading posts had been established between British Kenya and Portuguese Mozambique as early as 1878 by the German Africa Society. By 1884 Peters had signed treaties with the natives, and in 1885 an official protectorate was declared over this area too. All these areas had indefinite boundaries, and negotiation with the European powers, especially Great Britain, followed to establish the frontiers. By the end of the decade a number of agreements were made and Germany had a respectable African empire, though one far smaller and less valuable than those of Britain and France.

In the southwest Pacific area the Germans were also at work. In the same year of 1884 Germany staked out her claim to the northeastern quarter of New Guinea and also to the Bismarck Archipelago. The next year the Marshall and Solomon Islands were declared German possessions, and by the end of the decade Germany had come to an agreement with Great Britain and the United States concerning a condominium in the Samoan Islands.

Opinions have varied as to why Bismarck reversed his decision and permitted this colonial activity. One plausible reason is that he wanted to give room for expansion to the north German merchants. Others say that he was trying to drive a wedge between the two wings of liberalism, one of which was decidedly anticolonial while the right wing favored colonies. It is even suggested that Bismarck was anxious to create a col-
ollision with Great Britain on colonial matters because he feared British influence over the crown prince, who was bound to succeed to the throne in the near future. It may be too that he became dimly aware of the degree to which his old-fashioned, continental, almost Metternichian outlook was becoming outdated by the technological modern world which had sprung up about him. If so, it was a very dim awareness indeed as far as colonies were concerned because his enthusiasm waned, and it seemed that Bismarck later almost regretted that he had permitted Lüderitz, Peters, and the others to go ahead with their plans.

The panorama of Bismarck’s diplomatic achievement is an impressive one. He succeeded in preserving peace; he made himself and Berlin pretty much the pivots of European international politics during the seventies and eighties. He has been lauded on all sides for his diplomatic shrewdness. One authority likes to describe him as the successful statesman of “limited liability,” as opposed to William II and Hitler whom he characterizes as the unsuccessful statesmen of “unlimited liability.” It would be foolish to underestimate Bismarck’s diplomatic astuteness or the massive sum of his achievement. Yet even in the field of international affairs his heritage was not without disadvantage. The tying of the destinies of Germany to those of Austria-Hungary was to prove a drag and eventually to be the direct means of leading the empire to its doom. The establishment of far-flung colonies in time called for the creation of a strong navy and Germany’s consequent immersion into Weltpolitik (“world politics”), which was to be so dangerously tempting to Emperor William II. Even in his own chosen field of diplomacy Bismarck’s achievement, though very considerable, is not to be admired without reservation.