CHAPTER VII

The Chastened Fifties (1849-62)

The decade of the fifties is generally thought of as a melancholy era in which the German monarchs, re-established in their authority, once more applied the old policy of repression, in some cases more stringently than before 1848. This judgment is for the most part true. The idealistic liberalism of the Vormärz period was almost completely discredited by the triumph of force. However, nationalism was far from dead. The first successful steps toward the unification of Italy were taken in the fifties, while similar steps occurred soon thereafter in Germany. The difference was that now the steps were taken by the diplomats, the generals, and the men in high places rather than by the poets, the professors, and the champions of the "people." Nationalism and liberalism were no longer wedded; in both of the great unifying processes of the mid-century the initiative was taken by might, not by sweet reason.

In the earlier period much of the political activity was led by professors and scholars. After the failure of 1848 most of this class retired from active political life. They concerned themselves with their studies and became devoted almost completely to nonpolitical scholarship. When they were heard on public topics, it was with the harsh nationalism of a Treitschke, far different from the attitudes of the men of the thirties and forties.

The tendency seemed to be to leave politics to the professionals, especially to the diplomats. A wave of materialism swept over Germany, perhaps as a reaction from the defeat of idealism but also as a function of the ever-increasing industrial growth. Along with the professors the proletariat had been discredited, and the middle class had learned to fear the violence of the lower classes. Thus the way was cleared for the new upper middle class to pursue its goals without much opposition. In fact there appeared to be a tacit agreement between the political leadership and the economic leadership that each would not impinge on the other's area.
In Prussia the year of storms left a good deal of debris that needed to be cleared away. Frederick William was not completely satisfied with the constitution he had promulgated in late 1848 and spent a number of months tinkering with it. In its final form of 1850 it remained the basic law for Prussia until the end of the kingdom of Prussia in 1918. The document was an authoritarian one. It provided for a lower house of parliament elected by universal male suffrage but with an electoral law so framed that the great weight of political power lay with the possessory classes. The voting population was divided into three classes determined by the amount of taxes they paid. Each of these elected an equal number of electors, who in turn elected the members of the parliament. It has been estimated that 17 per cent of the voters controlled 67 per cent of the seats. The reasoning behind this, of course, was that those with the highest stakes in society would be the most conservative. This was sound to an extent, but it neglected two major social facts of the time: the most conservative element of the population after the noble landowners was the peasantry, who were almost disenfranchised; and much of the liberal thought emanated from the prosperous middle class, which was over-represented. It took only a few years for this to be made clear to the Prussian government.

In addition to the lower house there was an upper house (Herrenhaus) which consisted of distinguished men, some of them appointed for life by the king. There was no ministerial responsibility, and the parliament had to vote only new laws and taxes.

Another piece of unfinished Prussian business was the war with Denmark which had been suspended by the armistice of Malmö. In the spring of 1849 Denmark denounced the armistice, and fighting began again. The Prussian army invaded the Danish peninsula of Jutland, but as in the year before the warfare was inconclusive and another armistice was arranged in July. The Prussians and Danes undertook negotiations which dragged on for a year and ended in a peace signed in July 1850 which simply begged the question because both Denmark and Prussia "reserved their rights." The dispute was finally settled at the international level. A conference of the five great European powers, plus Denmark and Sweden, was held at London. On May 8, 1852, it agreed to the London Protocol which provided that the two duchies should be ruled separately from Denmark and that the succession in them should be the same as in Denmark in spite of the Salic law. In return the claims of the duke of Augustenborg were appeased by a money payment. There the matter rested until 1863 when the conflict arose in an even more urgent way and provided a crisis which was of prime importance for the unification of Germany.
Frederick William had drunk of the heady wine of a united Germany with himself at the head of it, although in an unsatisfactory form. He was not willing to relinquish his hopes of achieving such a position in a fitting manner. The king's close friend Radowitz worked out a scheme for German unity which became known as the Prussian Union. This plan provided for a close federation of all the German states except Austria, under Prussia, with a much stronger central government than that of the old Federal Diet at Frankfurt. The federation was to be bound closely to the Austrian Empire through alliances and economic co-operation. The aim was a great central European nation operating in most matters as one unit.

The proponents of the Prussian Union drew up a draft constitution for the federation and managed to receive the tentative agreement of the important states of Saxony and Hanover. These two assumed that Bavaria and Württemberg were also in favor of it, but the two south German kingdoms, especially Bavaria, whose king was stoutly anti-Prussian, wanted no part of it. In October 1849 an assembly met at Erfurt to promote the movement. Saxony and Hanover withdrew leaving only Prussia and most of the very small states, which were afraid of Prussian might. A parliament, also at Erfurt, in the spring of 1850 produced no better results. The Prussian Union entered a stage of suspended animation.

By this time, thanks to Russia, the Austrian government was free of its last internal revolt and ready again to assert itself on the international scene. Schwarzenberg had no notion of letting Prussia go ahead with a plan which would effectively drive Austrian influence out of the great bulk of Germany. His plan was to revive the Confederation of 1815 in which Austria enjoyed primacy. In May 1850 he called a meeting of the German states at Frankfurt. A number of the smaller ones accepted the invitation, and this assembly re-established the old Federal Diet. The two great German powers stood at loggerheads; fears arose of a war between them.

The situation reached critical proportions as the result of a conflict which broke out in Hesse-Kassel. The elector (the rulers of the territory chose to maintain this obsolete title even though there was nobody for them to elect), a tough old conservative, had reached a governmental stalemate with his more liberal local parliament, and there was danger of an armed uprising. He called on the Federal Diet at Frankfurt for help, while the Hessian parliament called on Prussia because Hesse-Kassel was a member of the Prussian Union. Both sides responded with troops and mobilized their armies. The danger of war increased greatly.
The decisive voice was raised not by a German but by the archconservative Emperor Nicholas of Russia. Nicholas was still in the mood to support Austria, whose policies coincided with his own. He was thoroughly disgusted with Frederick William, who, he thought, was conducting an absurd and sinister flirtation with liberalism. This was enough for the king of Prussia, since the idea of war always filled him with horror. Prussia backed down from her dangerous position.

The last scene in Prussia’s attempt at this time to assume primacy in Germany took place in November 1850 when Frederick William sent his principal minister, Otto von Manteuffel, to Olmütz to meet with Schwarzenberg. The two agreed on the re-establishment of the German Confederation with the Federal Diet at Frankfurt. A clause was inserted into the agreement to save face for Prussia stating that open conferences could be held to organize a possible future reorganization of Germany. However, there was no question who was the victor in this diplomatic war. Prussian historians usually refer to the meeting as the “humiliation of Olmütz.” Prussia entered into several years of a deep sleep of repression under the severe guidance of King Frederick William and Manteuffel.

In the Austrian Empire repression was at least as strict as in Prussia. The nationalities that had revolted in 1848 found themselves under almost martial law. Severe reprisal was constant. The Hungarians in particular suffered at the hands of their Austrian masters and embarked on a policy of passive resistance which lasted for almost twenty years until they were made equal partners with the German Austrians.

Prince Schwarzenberg died in 1852 while still young. He had been the mastermind of Austrian recovery from the revolutions. He was certainly one of the most competent statesmen of the century; it is interesting to conjecture what the history of central Europe might have been if he had lived for another twenty years. His policies continued even after his death. Now they were associated with the name of Alexander Bach, minister of the interior. At home the policy was one of strict centralization and Germanization. The government ignored the old historical national entities and simply divided up the empire into administrative units governed from Vienna. Every effort was made to oppose national instincts and to impose German ideas and ideology. The result was grumbling and dissatisfaction in all quarters. Austria had to weather the mounting crises of the fifties and the sixties with a disloyal population and a domestic situation far from stable.

In this condition Austria had to face the two international wars of the fifties. In one of them she was a diplomatic participant only, in the other an active belligerent; but both of them concerned issues close to her and
had important influences on her future. In 1852 Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, president of the French Republic, was proclaimed emperor of the French. This action seemed to many to overturn the settlement of the Congress of Vienna; it ushered in a period of warfare following the long period of relative peace after 1815. During the fifties and the sixties the unifications of both Italy and Germany were accomplished. In all these matters the Austrian government had an immediate interest.

The Crimean War (1854–56) took longer to get started than almost any war in modern history. The roots of the conflict arose from a dispute about who was to have control of the Holy Places in Palestine—the Orthodox or the Roman Catholics, with Russia and France as the respective protectors of these churches. In time the problem widened to include Great Britain, as Russia seemed to be demanding undue influence in the Ottoman Empire, something about which the British were sensitive. Austria became immediately affected when in July 1853 the Russians occupied the Danubian principalities as a device to force the Turkish sultan to accede to their demands. These principalities, Wallachia and Moldavia, the heart of modern Romania, were adjacent both to Russia and to the Austrian kingdom of Hungary. Eastern Hungary (Transylvania) contained thousands of Hapsburg subjects of Romanian nationality. Therefore the Austrians viewed with much alarm Russian encroachment in this area. Tsar Nicholas did not anticipate opposition from Austria; he expected gratitude in return for the good deeds he had done for the Austrians in recent years, but he was to be surprised.

Austria at first hoped to act as a mediator in the struggle and offered the so-called Vienna Note, an ambiguously worded memorandum which was supposed to regulate Russian influence in Turkey. The tsar accepted it but the sultan refused to, realizing rightly that the Russians could expand its application to almost a complete protectorate. Tsar Nicholas met with Francis Joseph at Olmütz, but as the year ended the dispute was still hanging fire.

In early 1854 the eastern dispute developed into a war. Great Britain and France joined Turkey in attacking Russia. The Russian army crossed the Danube, and Austria had to make up her mind. She decided first to take counsel with Prussia. In Prussia there was a decided difference of opinion on what attitude to take. The liberals supported the western side, while the conservatives were pro-Russian. Among their leaders was Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian representative at the Federal Diet. Frederick William as usual vacillated. In April 1854 he signed an agreement with Austria promising that neither would do anything to offend the other during this war, but agreeing with Austria to oppose Russia if
she attempted to incorporate the principalities into her empire. Thus on the whole the German powers, especially Austria, leaned to an anti-Russian position. In June Austria demanded that Russia not advance further south than the Balkan Mountains and state when she intended to evacuate the principalities. She also made a treaty with Turkey by which the sultan agreed that Austria might occupy the principalities as soon as the Russians could be dislodged. Tsar Nicholas was appalled by Austrian ingratitude.

In the meantime Russia was faced with an imminent attempt by the British and French to land troops on the Crimean Peninsula and bring the war into Russian territory. She had no wish to add Austria to the number of her enemies. So in August she withdrew her troops from the principalities, and Austrian forces, already mobilized on the eastern frontiers of the empire, took up positions in Wallachia and Moldavia, to remain there until the war was over. At this point the relations between Russia and Austria were completely embittered, never to be improved until the two empires were no more.

In the same month the Austrian government presented to Russia the Vienna Four Points already agreed to by Great Britain and France as a basis for a possible peace. These are not worth exploring in detail, but in general they called for a considerable lessening of Russian influence in Turkey. The Russian government rejected them out of hand, so at the end of the year Austria went the length of forming an offensive and defensive alliance with Great Britain and France. She mobilized her armies but did not ever actually declare war against Russia.

The year 1855 was filled with one of the most inept military campaigns in all history, waged by the British and French in the Crimea. It was lucky for the western powers that the Russian army was even less efficient. In March Tsar Nicholas died and was succeeded by his son Alexander II, who was anxious to get out of the war. In September the allies managed to enter the major Russian naval base of Sebastopol. In December the Austrians further increased the ire of Russia by sending her an ultimatum threatening war if she would not accept the Four Points, neutralize the Black Sea, and cede Bessarabia back to the Ottoman Empire. Russia had no choice but to accept the ultimatum and ask for peace. The peace conference was held at Paris in March 1856.

Austria gained absolutely nothing from the Crimean War and actually lost almost as much as Russia did. She permanently lost the friendship of Russia, which would have been immensely valuable in the decade ahead; her finances were grievously affected by keeping her army in a state of readiness for months; and at the peace table she had the pleasure
of hearing the astute Count Cavour, minister of Piedmont-Sardinia, who had brought his little country into the war, plead the case of Italian unity and make a violently anti-Austrian speech.

Prussia did little or nothing in the Crimean War after making her early arrangement with Austria. Frederick William pursued a policy of aimless neutrality typical of him. However, at least he did nothing overt against Russia. This paved the way in the years ahead to a Russo-Prussian rapprochement, which was to be extremely useful to Bismarck during the sixties. It was almost as an act of pure charity that Prussia was permitted a seat at the Paris Congress in 1856.

The next major crisis concerned Austria even more directly than the Crimean War. Napoleon III professed himself a nationalist, in particular in favor of Italian aspirations. In fact, as a young man he had served in an Italian patriot army in an attack on the possessions of the pope. In 1858 Count Cavour, premier of Piedmont-Sardinia under King Victor Emmanuel II, decided it was time to force Napoleon to take some definite action in behalf of Italy. He met secretly with Napoleon, and the two agreed that France would come to the aid of Piedmont in a war to drive the Austrians out of Italy if Cavour could so arrange matters that the war would look to the world like Austrian aggression.

Napoleon behaved very coldly to the Austrian ambassador in Paris at the diplomatic reception on New Year’s Day, 1859. This served notice to the world that trouble was in the offing. The details of Cavour’s diplomatic maneuvering are not important, but by March the Piedmontese army was on a war footing and welcoming into its ranks Italian nationalist refugees from Austrian Lombardy, who were evading conscription into the Austrian army. This was a direct provocation to Austria. The Austrian government fell into Cavour’s trap by mobilizing its own army and serving an ultimatum on Piedmont demanding that Piedmont withdraw from its warlike attitude. Piedmont refused, so Austria declared war, thus appearing the aggressor as Cavour hoped.

These events occurred in April. France immediately joined the Piedmontese, and Napoleon left Paris to command his army declaring that he would free Italy “from the Alps to the Adriatic,” whatever that meant. The war was a short one. The Piedmontese won some minor victories at first, but two major battles were fought between the French and the Austrians in June—the battles of Magenta and Solferino. Both were French victories, but neither was decisive. However, after Solferino the Austrians were planning to withdraw to the east, where they had a number of strongly fortified positions from which it would have been difficult to dislodge them. In fact, both sides were anxious to end the war. Napoleon had several reasons. Personally he was not a warlike man;
he was appalled by the carnage of the battles. Further, he was alarmed at the spread of nationalistic uprisings in Italy; they could easily endanger his close relationship with the pope and the Catholic church, which was so important to him at home. The government in Paris informed him with some panic that the Prussian army was mobilizing along the Rhine and the road to Paris was almost open since most of the French army was in Italy. Lastly, the prospect of forcing the Austrian strongholds was a distasteful one. On the other side, Francis Joseph was also interested in peace because the shaky Austrian financial structure, already endangered by the Crimean War, was giving signs of collapse. Furthermore, it was dangerous for the Austrians to keep their forces in Italy because of the constant threat of a Hungarian revolt at home.

Accordingly, the two emperors met after the battle of Solferino at the village of Villafranca and agreed on an armistice which eventually resulted in a peace treaty signed some months later at Zürich. The essential clause of this arrangement was that Austria was to cede Lombardy to Piedmont but retain her possession of Venetia. Napoleon had not carried out his boast; Cavour and Victor Emmanuel were disgusted with Napoleon’s double dealing; Francis Joseph had at least cut his losses, the first of a number of occasions in which he was fated to do the same thing.

A large part of Austrian history during the nineteenth century can be described as a series of unsuccessful wars followed by reorganizations of the empire. This was particularly true after the unsuccessful war with France. Reform was in the air throughout Germany; the revolution of 1848 was now a decade past and some of it had been forgotten. There was a new spirit in Prussia and some of the smaller German states. If Austria wanted to maintain her premier position in Germany, it seemed clear even to Francis Joseph that something would have to be done to establish some kind of constitutional order in Austria. The bureaucratic absolutism of the Bach system had proved a complete failure. The years of 1860 and 1861 were to be years of constitutional experiment in Austria.

Francis Joseph certainly had no desire to let the nationalities prescribe their own futures; he remembered 1848. He was determined that any changes to be made were to emanate from his own council in Vienna. Counsels in Vienna in 1860 were dominated by members of the old aristocracy who felt that the solution of the empire’s ills lay in a return to government through the old “historicopolitical” entities, the various component parts of the empire, with no particular reference to their coincidence with the various national groups. They envisaged a semimedieval series of local diets which would send members to a central body. This was extreme decentralization but in a direction which would favor not the
new spirit of nationalism but the old feudal areas which little by little had been accumulated by the Hapsburgs. This kind of thinking was embodied in the October Diploma issued by Francis Joseph in 1860 as a new pattern for the government of the empire.

The October Diploma, which never went into effect, outlined a system of government based on the local diets. In particular, the Hungarians were rebuffed by it because they received none of the special historical privileges that they considered their right. Francis Joseph picked as the man to carry out the new order, Anton Schmerling, somewhat of a liberal, a man who saw that the new project was a relic of the outworn past. He immediately began to press for a modification of the Diploma; the result was the February Patent of 1861, which was allegedly an interpretation of the Diploma but in fact shifted its whole basis.

Schmerling’s plan moved a good deal of power from the local diets to the central parliament. However, the parliament was to be elected by a curious electoral system which was to be based on social class rather than nationality, a much safer arrangement from the Hapsburg point of view. The idea was to throw the weight of power into the hands of the German Austrians who might be expected to favor the central government. Furthermore, important areas of government, such as foreign affairs and the military establishment, were to be left in the hands of the emperor.

The February Patent had no greater success than the October Diploma. Again the Hungarians led the opposition. They simply refused to take part in the elections under the Patent. The resulting parliament was called by the scornful Viennese “Schmerling’s theater.” The Austrian constitutional experiments of 1860 and 1861 did not lead to stability, and the empire continued to be ruled by bureaucratic administrative methods with the nationalities, led by the Hungarians, offering only sullen obedience under duress. In these unsatisfactory circumstances Austria entered the vitally important decade of the sixties, a decade that was to decide her future and Germany’s for years to come.

In Prussia too the late fifties were years of significant change. The vagaries of Frederick William IV became more and more intense until by 1857 it was clear that he was a victim of real mental disorder and at times too incompetent to carry out his royal functions. During that year and the next his periods of lucidity became rarer until in October 1858 he was removed from his duties and his younger brother William became regent. Frederick William lingered on until early 1861, when William was proclaimed king of Prussia as William I (1861–88).

William was over sixty years old when he became regent. He differed in almost all respects from his older brother. Tall, erect, austere,
military, he had none of Frederick William’s love of art and culture, a fact which caused regret to his wife Augusta, who had been reared at the cultivated court of her grandfather, Charles Augustus of Saxe-Weimar, the patron of Goethe and Schiller. William’s virtues were those of the Prussian officer—loyalty, courage, sober piety, and devotion to duty without outstanding intelligence. His one great love was the army, with which he had spent much of his life and which he knew thoroughly. In politics William had a reputation as a thoroughgoing conservative. He left Berlin in the stormy spring of 1848 and spent some months in exile in London. On his return he led the Prussian forces in quelling the last flickers of revolution in Saxony and Baden. During the fifties William came to disapprove of his brother’s repressive rule. He realized that the constitution was there to stay and that prudence dictated an effort by the king to rule according to its spirit. William separated himself from the reactionary entourage of Frederick William without committing himself to real liberalism; he tried to steer a sort of middle course. Thus when he became regent, people began to speak of his regime as the “new era.”

In fact during the early months of the regency there was considerable relaxation of the repressive enactments of recent years. Civil liberties, guaranteed by the constitution, were for the first time realities. The two elections to the Prussian parliament which had taken place during Frederick William’s time had returned to power a predominantly conservative body because of governmental pressure and the boycott of the elections by some of the liberal elements. This situation changed, and the house elected in 1859 contained a liberal majority. The term liberal is a misleading one. The Prussian liberals of this period were not radicals in any sense of the word but simply men who wanted to make Prussia into a constitutional monarchy and who realized that their best way of achieving this aim was to guard jealously their right to control financial appropriations. It was this parliamentary determination, added to William’s equally strong determination to make changes in the organization of the army, that caused the years after 1859 to be known to Prussian historians as the “time of conflict.”

William was primarily interested in the army. He had watched it in the war with Denmark and also when the Prussians mobilized on the Rhine during the Franco-Austrian War. He was deeply dissatisfied with what he saw and determined to make changes. The Prussian army was still organized on the lines laid down during the reform period before 1813. Though an admirable reform, it had had to take account of the problems of the moment; furthermore, Prussia had changed very markedly since that time.

In the first place the army was hampered by the lack of modern
equipment. New types of weapons had not yet been adopted in Prussia. A more difficult problem was that of conscription. According to the law all able-bodied young men were subject to conscription for three years. In fact, the population of Prussia had increased so considerably that the army was not able to take all the recruits to which it was entitled. Thus the weight of conscription fell inequitably. Furthermore, the army had adopted the policy of releasing the conscripts on leave after two years, so that the population had accepted a two-year period as normal although the three-year law was still on the books. When the army mobilized, as in 1859, the regular army was too small; thus it had to call upon the reserve militia (Landwehr) right away. The Landwehr was controlled more democratically than the army; its officers came from different social classes; it was more popular.

In late 1859 Prince William appointed a new minister of war, General Albert von Roon, a brilliant organizer but a political intriguer and deep conservative. Roon appointed General Helmuth von Moltke as chief of staff. Together these two, with the active collaboration of the regent, outlined plans for the new army. They immediately provided for the necessary technical improvements. They also proposed to place the Landwehr more closely under the regular army and to make the three-year period of conscription normal. These last two proposals had political overtones as well as purely military ones. They looked to the liberals like attempts on the part of the officer class to control the popular Landwehr and to do a more thorough job of indoctrinating the conscripts with their own attitudes in three years instead of two.

The liberal ministry had a difficult time with the army project in the lower house of the parliament. The house made no trouble about accepting the technical changes but refused to agree to the appropriations for the Landwehr and length-of-service proposals. The most they would do was to grant provisional appropriations for 1860 and 1861 with the understanding that these were not to be considered permanent. The army went ahead with its reforms, but Prussia continued without a regular budget, subsisting on the old taxes which were still collectible.

In 1861 some of the more advanced liberals broke away from the old Liberal party and formed the Progressive party (Deutsche Fortschrittpartei), which by its title emphasized its German rather than purely Prussian quality. In its program the new party insisted on the maintenance of popular control for the Landwehr and a two-year period of service. In the elections of 1861 the Progressives won a decisive victory, almost ousting the conservatives completely and taking many seats from the Liberals. The new chamber proved more intractable than the last, and in early 1862 the king dissolved it and called for new
elections. The results were even more distressing to the king than those of the year before.

The situation became crucial in September. By that time the ministers realized that the whole army program would never be accepted by the lower house. They further agreed that they were behaving unconstitutionally and illegally by administering the state without a budget; for a time even Roon accepted this point of view. It seemed as if the Progressives were willing to compromise; they indicated that they would accept the Landwehr project if the government would give up the three-year conscription. King William refused to give in one iota; he felt strongly that the control of the army was a royal prerogative and one with which the parliament had no right to meddle. To him the alternative was quite simple. He would abdicate the throne in favor of his much more liberal son, Crown Prince Frederick. He even had the document of abdication drawn up, but Frederick would have nothing to do with it.

At this point Roon offered a solution. It was to change the ministry and to call to Berlin the only man who might be able to save the day, Otto von Bismarck. The king viewed this suggestion with the utmost reluctance. He disliked and feared Bismarck. The two did not see eye to eye on foreign policy, and William feared Bismarck's violence. As late as September 19 he said he would not call Bismarck, but already the day before in Paris Bismarck received a prearranged telegram from Roon which was to shape the course of German and European history for decades to come.