



The Alliance System in Europe 1871-1890

This is a transcript of the [Alliance System in Europe 1871-1890](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

1871 is a significant date, as it saw the creation of Germany after the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War. Any question on the period from 1871 to 1890 will require significant consideration of the new German state under the Chancellorship of Otto von Bismarck. Germany redefined the balance-of-power in Europe and so in this podcast I'll use Bismarck's foreign policy as a running narrative theme.

The threat that Germany posed to the peace of Europe in 1871 cannot be underestimated – it was a country of significant military and industrial strength, had fought a series of wars of conquest in the 1860s, and nobody knew whether it would continue to attempt to expand its borders. However, Chancellor Bismarck regarded Germany as a satiated power, meaning that it did not seek to expand its territory any further. He wanted the chance to consolidate his recent gains, and in order to do that he needed peace in Europe. From a man who had engineered wars in the 1860s in order to create Germany, Bismarck became a man who engineered peace from the 1870s onward to safeguard its survival. In order to ensure Germany's dominance of Europe, he needed to befriend Britain and Russia, subordinate Austria-Hungary, and isolate France to ensure they did not have allies needed to act on desire for *revanche*. Bismarck considered Germany, Austria, Russia, France and Italy to be the powerful countries of mainland Europe (he always regarded Britain to be a separate entity in the European politics) and so planned for Germany to be part of the biggest mainland grouping in terms of alliances. In 1880 he remarked to a Russian diplomat that "All politics reduce themselves to this formula: to try to be one of three, as long as the world is governed by an unstable equilibrium of 5 powers."

Despite its precarious situation, the fact remains that the new Germany was a country of significant power. Nobody was more concerned about the new Germany than its neighbor, France. Defeated in the Franco-Prussian War, France was forced to pay heavy reparations and surrender the border regions of Alsace and Lorraine to the German Empire. Bitter in defeat, and seeking *revanche* on Germany, France was a series threat to Germany's lasting survival. In order to ensure France's hostility towards Germany did not result in a declaration of war, he needed to ensure that France was diplomatically and militarily isolated. Part of this was achieved through an effective attempt to stir up hostility towards France from any of its potential allies. He firstly encouraged the creation of a republican France – which did emerge as the Third Republic – rather than a return to monarchy. Tsarist Russia would detest a French republic, and thus France would be unlikely to ally with Russia. Secondly, Bismarck encouraged French colonial policy. If France directed its energy towards gaining an African or Asian empire, it would likely come into conflict with the existing Empires of Britain and Italy – who in turn would be unlikely to ally with a French colonial threat. Bismarck himself said that



he was delighted to see France “scattering energies in new areas while picking up new enemies along the way”.

In order to further secure French isolation, Bismarck pursued cooperation with Great Britain. Although Germany had Europe’s most effective army, it possessed virtually no navy. Conversely, Britain had the world’s most powerful navy but only a small army. Germany was not a threat to Britain, and Bismarck tried to keep it that way: Germany had no intention to threaten Britain’s navy nor pursue colonial expansion. In fact, Bismarck actually encouraged British imperialism – he hoped that by encouraging both Britain *and* France to develop their empires he could further drive a wedge between them.

Meanwhile, Bismarck sought to reduce tensions between Austria-Hungary and Russia. Most importantly, he wished to restrain each countries’ ambitions in the Balkans, where the collapse of the Ottoman Empire could easily result in serious tensions between the two of them. Remember that one of Bismarck’s key ambitions was to ensure the balance of power in Europe did not become unbalanced and result in a war that would draw in the European powers. Reducing tension between Austria-Hungary and Russia was not going to be easy, but Bismarck sought to do it through a series of agreements.

In 1873 Bismarck made his first attempt, through the Dreikaiserbund. This loose alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia saw the three countries agree to consult each other before any action which could lead to war, and to jointly oppose the forces of socialism and republicanism. For Bismarck it was a tool to avoid having to choose between France and Russia in the event of conflict over the Balkans, thus risking the other power allying with France. However, the alliance began to break up from 1875 over territorial disputes in the Balkans where Austria-Hungary feared that Russian support for Serbia might ultimately fire up nationalist passions in the area. A power struggle from 1875-78 led to Bismarck playing the role of ‘the honest broker’ at the Congress of Berlin to resolve tensions between them, although the congress was a diplomatic defeat for Russia. I’ll be going into more detail about the Balkans in another podcast, so check out www.mrallsophistory.com or like my page on Facebook to stay up to date.

With the Dreikaiserbund in tatters, Bismarck needed to find another way to stabilize the desires of Austria-Hungary and Russia in the Balkans. He began by signing the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1879. This alliance called for both countries to remain neutral unless either of them was attacked by Russia, although the details were kept secret until 1888. In 1882 Italy joined this agreement to form the Triple Alliance, and this defensive alliance agreed to aid each other in the event of any member being attacked by France. Once again we see that these agreements all kept Bismarck’s ultimate aims in sight – maintaining the balance of power in Europe, keeping France isolated and ultimately securing Germany.



Feeling pressure from the Dual-Alliance, Russia joined Germany and Austria-Hungary in the 'Three Emperor's League' of 1881. The idea was for the three nations to work together to preserve conservative monarchy. The League was renewed again in 1884, but when renewal came up again in 1887 Russia chose not to sign. Desperate to keep Russia as an ally, and avoid the possibility of them instead going off and signing an alliance with France, Bismarck signed a secret agreement with Russia, known as the Reinsurance Treaty. Under the terms of the agreement, both countries agreed to stay neutral if the other was involved in a war with a third country unless Russia attacked Austria or unless Germany attacked France. In effect, Bismarck pledged to help Russia if it was attacked by Austria, but would not help if Russia attacked Austria. The treaty also gave German support to Russia's claims in Bulgaria which was in breach of spirit of Dual Alliance). However, the Reinsurance Treaty ensured that Russia was still in a formal agreement with Germany and so less likely to ally with France.

So, with the two agreements in place by the end of the 1880s – the Triple Alliance containing Austria-Hungary, and the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia – Bismarck believed that he had positioned Germany between them. He thought that he had now made German support essential for both countries, and that this would restrain them and maintain the balance of power in Europe. It's important to remember that Bismarck had achieved some major success between 1871 and 1890. He'd succeeded in preventing a large European war, kept France isolated, and maintained diplomatic relations with AH and Russia.

The problem – as we have seen – was that all this was done through a series of short-term measures which could easily unravel in the hands of a less skilful diplomat. Indeed, the alliances with both Austria-Hungary and Russia were secret and did not resolve long-term tensions. Furthermore, with Bismarck forced into retirement by the new Kaiser – Wilhelm II – in 1890 Germany lost the architect of what had become a complicated web of alliances that risked unraveling.

Historians, as you can imagine, have a variety of opinions on the situation. In 1931 Langer said that, Bismarck was unlike any previous politician in the way he combined 'great moderation and sound political sense of the possible and the desirable'. On the other hand, Waller wrote in 1974 that peace was preserved mainly through the 'good sense and moderation of others'. Craig, in 1981, saw that complexities of the alliances and links between Germany and other European countries was only fully understood by Bismarck. This, according to Whitfield writing in the 2000, meant that Bismarck's successors were "unable to manage the alliance system he left behind – partly because it was unsustainable, partly because they lacked Bismarck's insight."