

Bismarck and the European Alliance System:  
*Ferro Ignique* (By Fire and Iron)

From the beginning of his political involvement in 1847, to his appointment as Imperial Chancellor in 1871, until his dismissal by Kaiser William II in 1890, Otto von Bismarck embodied the epitome of European statesmanship that enlarged the Prussian monarchy through skillful diplomacy and limited war. The ability to recognize and blend the relationship between policy and strategy resulted in the unification of various smaller sovereigns, and the creation of a single German state under the auspices of the Prussian monarchy.

According to Carl von Clausewitz, limited war can take on two forms: offensive war with a limited aim and defensive war.<sup>1</sup> Both are applicable in relation to Bismarck's career that saw an application of the former up to 1871, and the latter during his period of consolidation. In his book, *On War*, Clausewitz points out that offensive war with a limited aim culminates in the occupation of enemy territory that will reduce his national resources. Furthermore, once this means to an end is accomplished, an asset is thus made available at the negotiating table for trading or bargaining.<sup>2</sup> In distinguishing between unlimited and limited war, it will suffice to refer back to Clausewitz who states that absolute (unlimited) war is the mobilization of all resources. The opposite (limited war) embodies the limited mobilization of limited resources. Clausewitz goes on to explain that limited war is dictated by political motives. More simply put, war is a continuation of policy.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Bismarck's political goals never over-extended beyond Prussian rule over a greater Germany. While exhibiting a reckless ambition in the confines of his own designs for Prussia, he never became over zealous or attempted to pursue political objectives that were beyond Prussia's capabilities. Historically, Bismarck stands more apart from any other European statesman or military dictator for the simple reason that he never lost what he had gained.

Bismarck's political goal to expand Prussian rule over German territories that resulted in the limited wars of 1864, 1866, and 1870, was a meticulously planned calculation of diplomacy that was followed by limited military action. His political genius that was characterized by tremendous vision operated to such an extent that only limited military action was necessary for the final *coup de grace*. In fulfilling his political objectives, to further the influence, rule, and

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<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, Princeton Original Paperback, 1989), p. 602.

<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 611-12. Also consulted was B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed., (New York, Penguin Group, 1991), p. 320 and 340, refers to the same concept as limitation of aim. While his reasons for pursuing such an aim have a paraphrased ring to Clausewitz, he fails to make a precise connection between the political policy and limited aims. Furthermore, Hart fails to grasp the real value of Clausewitz that nails warfare onto policy, but rather emphasizes the psychological factors as his greatest contribution to the theory of war.

<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 20-22; 642. The mobilization of all available resources can be compared to the example of the French Revolution, where Napoleon Bonaparte harnessed the *levee en masse* and almost conquered Europe.

sphere of the Prussian monarchy, he knew exactly how, when, and where to defeat his enemy. This formula was a true rendition of Clausewitz's trinity of war that considered government, military, and the people.<sup>4</sup> Bismarck averted general war by isolating his enemy through diplomacy, controlling his military counterparts in delivering decisive victories, and by appealing to the public for domestic support. As will we shall see, his hardened skill in knowing when to make and break alliances, sue for peace, and resist articulating his political views to the military, allowed Bismarck to avert general war, and through various treaties he was later able to retain the spoils of war.<sup>5</sup>

*Without me three wars would not have happened and 80,000 men would not have perished.*  
-Bismarck

The War of 1864, waged by the Austro-Prussian alliance against Denmark for the Duchies of Sleswig and Holstein, was fought to force the Danish government to revalidate the Treaty of 1852 that governed Denmark's relationship with the Duchies.<sup>6</sup> Bismarck's goal, in the end, was to persuade the Prussian Kaiser to demand the Duchies by right of conquest, and in the case that Austria refused to consent, Bismarck would accomplish his goal through a force of arms. Aiding in his plan was the postulated division of the other greater powers, that he knew would make it impossible to return to the Treaty of 1852. Everything worked out just as Bismarck had planned, and after armed intervention against the Danes had succeeded, the two Duchies were under the control of Austria and Prussia. The two German powers, however, could not agree on the disposition of the newly acquired territory. At the conclusion of the Convention of Gastein in 1865, the two Duchies were temporarily divided as Holstein fell under control of Austria and Sleswig by way of Prussia. In a masterful ploy to the Prussian King, Bismarck convinced the him that Austria had self-aggrandizing intentions whose aim it was, among other things, to deprive Prussia of its rightful aspirations.

In the war against Denmark, Bismarck applied the first element in the trinity of war through diplomacy to isolate Denmark. He accomplishes this by making Denmark look as the aggressor, after refusing to recognize the rights of the Duchies of 1852. Another aspect in the isolation of Denmark was to strengthen the ties between Prussia and those countries that could

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<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

<sup>5</sup> Consulted was Paul Kennedy, ed. *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, (New York, 1991), p. 5, and Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussia Army 1640-1945*, (New York, 1955), p. 167. After a meeting with the King in 1862, when Bismarck gave him an abbreviated plan that, among other things, excluded Austria from Germany, the King reacted completely adverse to such an idea and Bismarck was forbidden to pursue a anti-Austrian policy. By keeping information that had such vast scope about his real intentions to himself, he was able to play one diplomat, military general, or Kaiser against the other for the purpose of gaining the upper hand.

<sup>6</sup> The Treaty and Protocol of London in 1852 prescribed that Prince Christian of Glücksburg was the heir to the Danish Crown that incorporated the two Duchies. This treaty was signed by Austria and Prussia. See Erich Eyck, *Bismarck and the German Empire*, (New York, 1958), p. 79-80.

become potential adversaries as allies of Denmark. The secret Alvensleben Convention of 1863 gained Russian support during the Polish uprising. At the same time however, Bismarck rejected certain treaties from France and Russia that may have restricted his flexibility.<sup>7</sup>

The second element in the trinity of war for Bismarck was controlling the military to limited and decisive actions. With the possibility of a protracted war if the Danish Army decided to avoid battle and fall back to the fortified position at D y p pel, the military faction, under the leadership of General Feldmarshal Count Helmuth von Moltke, planned to bypass D y p pel and seize all of Jutland to force capitulation. During the actual advance into the Duchies, the anticipated became reality, and rather than launch a frontal assault against D y p pel, the military followed the plans for Jutland. Bismarck, who recognized the danger of losing Austria as a coalition partner by occupying Jutland, threatened with his resignation if storming D y p pel for a decisive victory was not carried out.<sup>8</sup> This tactic succeeded and Bismarck prevailed with the added alignment for the third element in the trinity of war that concerned the people.

Once the Prussian forces overran the positions, popular sentiments were nationalistic and higher than ever before. This patriotic feeling also affected Bismarck's political opposition that, for the moment, jettisoned their constitutional principles for the glory of Prussian military dexterity.<sup>9</sup> As an extension of the War of 1864, the matter was finally settled through a clash of arms in the War of 1866, with the result that both Duchies came under Prussian control.<sup>10</sup>

The War of 1866 was nothing more than a continuation of the former conflict that arose between Austria and Prussia after the defeat of the Danes in the War of 1864. Austria wanted the complete separation of Sleswig and Holstein from Denmark and to be formed as a single state under the rule of Prince of Augustenburg. Bismarck considered Augustenburg a liberal and, more importantly, a threat to Prussian interests.<sup>11</sup> Tensions peaked when Bismarck ordered Prussian

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<sup>7</sup> Eyck, *Bismarck*, 68-73.

<sup>8</sup> Consulted was Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussia Army 1640-1945*, (New York, 1955), pp. 182-185.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>10</sup> Craig, *Politics of the Prussia Army*, pp. 168-170, and Eyck, *Bismarck*, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Eyck, *Bismarck*, 95-98. Differences between Austria and Prussia were complex. The German Confederation that reemerged as a product of the revolution, of which the German Diet was the governing body, was led by Austria. While the Confederation's greater powers were made up of Austria and Prussia, the Frankfurter parliament proclaimed Prussia as the leader of future Germany in 1850. He became utterly opposed to Austria and his policy becomes clear during the political aspects of the Crimean War of 1854-56. During this time, Bismarck set about to disrupt all the efforts of Austria, while at the same time concluding a treaty with them. Part of the Austrian policy was the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Danube, but Bismarck did everything possible to embarrass Austria and their political leaders, such as the envoy Prokesch-Osten. While Bismarck proclaimed no interest in the region of a potential strategic industrial base, Prokesch correctly assessed Bismarck's ulterior motives as the most energetic but by no means the only representative of that Prussian policy whose aim it is to rob Austria of all her success for her enormous efforts, to ruin her finances and her prestige, and to acquire for Prussia the *de facto*, and soon the *de jure*, hegemony over Germany.

troops into Holstein. The Austrians replied with full mobilization, and shortly after thereafter on 15 June 1866, Austria received a Prussian ultimatum for unconditional acceptance of the Prussian plan for reform and the demobilization of troops.<sup>12</sup> Not having received an answer to the ultimatum by midnight of that same day, Prussian troops attacked and won a decisive victory three weeks later at K niggr tz. The peace concluded at Prague in August 1866 saw Prussia gain overall control of Germany and excluded Austria altogether. Prussia controlled all those territories north of the River Main, which included Hanover, Hesse-Cassel, Nassau, and the Free City of Frankfurt. Those areas south of the river that included Bavaria, Wurtemberg, and Baden, were all bound to *Schutz - und Trutzb ndni * (alliances) which Bismarck forced them to accept with threats of annexation to Prussia if they did not comply.<sup>13</sup> These measures were designed to safeguard Prussia against the next opponent, France.

In examining the war against Austria through the lens of the trinity, Bismarck himself stated every element to the French Ambassador, Count Vincent Benedetti,

I have induced a King of Prussia to break off the intimate relations of his House with the House of the Hapsburg, to conclude an alliance with revolutionary Italy, possibly accept arrangements with Imperial France, and to propose in Frankfurt the reform of the Confederation and a popular parliament.<sup>14</sup>

Bismarck isolated Austria through skillful diplomacy. The sheer fact that Austria declared war on Prussia validated the notion that Austria was the aggressor, even though they acted in self defense. More skillful diplomacy that isolated Austria came by concluding a treaty with Italy under French succor that destroyed the alliance of the Confederation.<sup>15</sup> Controlling the military to limited action during the war of 1866 was crucial after the battle of K niggr tz.

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<sup>12</sup> Eyck, *Bismarck*, 127. Additionally, see Hajo Holborn, *The Prusso-German School: Moltke and the Rise of the General Staff*, in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, (Princeton, NJ, 1986), p. 292-93. The Prussian war against Austria was decided by one important factor other than the new needle gun. The Austrians were simply of antiquity. Even though their officers and men were better trained than the Prussians, they were still using strategies and tactics of the 18th Century.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> For information regarding the Treaty with Italy see Eyck, *Bismarck*, 112-15. All general matters concerning the declaration of war are found between 123-25. Also consulted was Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York, 1994), p. 108, who discusses the effects of the Crimean War, as it relates to the isolation of Austria, where it is resolved during the European Congress that Russia is no longer regarded as the Protector of the Ottoman Christians. Another example of his diplomatic ability was displayed in 1862, when Napoleon III concluded a commercial trade treaty with Prussia. Prussia, as the leading member of the German *Zollverein*, effectively breached the Central-European Customs Union, concluded with Austria. Here, Bismarck's intentions were to maintain good relations with Napoleon III.

The total destruction and occupation of Austria was not a necessity. The limits of the war are easily recognized by the fact that Prussian victory was primarily based on the Battle of K niggratz alone. Again, more decisive fighting, in this case dealing with the plans of Moltke to march on Vienna, was not a necessity, but altogether out of the question. The possibility of a French attack into Germany while the Prussians were operating in Bohemia was a great concern that Bismarck could not ignore.<sup>16</sup> Equally so, Prussian rule over Austria by way of annexation (occupation) was simply not an option for Bismarck. To do so would mean more a strain than gain. Bismarck's profound vision is further validated by the value he places on reestablishing relations with the Hapsburg Monarchy. Bismarck truly limited war is distinguished by his comment to a military advisor of the Crown Prince, "We shall need Austria's strength in the future for ourselves." Bismarck was not resolute on waging total war against Austria. In a letter to his wife, Bismarck wrote,

If we do not exaggerate our demands and do not believe that we have conquered the world, we shall get a peace worth the efforts we have made. But we- that means, of course, the King- are easily intoxicated as we are depressed, and I have the thankless task of pouring water into his wine and bringing home the truth that we do not live alone in Europe but with three neighbours (sic).<sup>17</sup>

Erich Eyck, author of *Bismarck and the German Empire*, wrote "these are the thoughts and the words of a real statesman."<sup>18</sup> Henry Kissinger, author of *Diplomacy* wrote, "The statesman who extolled *Realpolitik* possessed an extraordinary sense of proportion which turned power into an instrument of self-restraint."<sup>19</sup> Real statesmanship is gained by the ability to manipulate the general public and political opponents. Capitalizing on the nationalistic frenzy that gripped Prussia, Bismarck reinforced his popular support by calling for a new election for a German parliament through universal suffrage.<sup>20</sup> Success in implementing the trinity of war helped Bismarck avert general war with Austria and expose his next opponent, Imperial France.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 was the third and last war that Bismarck was

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<sup>16</sup> Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army, 196-201*, and Kennedy, *Grand Strategies*, 32. Kennedy gives a rather misleading analogy of the strategy of destruction as it would pertain to Bismarck. He argues that Prussia defeated the armies of Austria outright after the peace terms which was not the case. The plans to march on Vienna were, after all, never implemented.

<sup>17</sup> Eyck, *Bismarck*, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>19</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 121.

<sup>20</sup> Eyck, *Bismarck*, 115-17. Bismarck knew that the issue surrounding universal suffrage was a wild card, even though he was against it by heart. Unfortunately, it really did not produce the effect that he hoped it would.

responsible for in the context of this study. The developments surrounding the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg are considered to have spurred the war. Napoleon III wanted to acquire the Duchy through a cash settlement with the King of Holland, albeit the Confederation Fortress of Luxembourg was garrisoned by Prussian troops. The incident had a long and lasting effect on Franco-Prussian relations. While there was no legal authority for the garrisoning of Prussian troops within the fortress, they did so for good *yet* all risks.<sup>21</sup> The result of the Luxembourg incident was that both France and Prussia set about looking for new allies as war became imminent. France allied with Austria with the goal of containing the Prussian expansionism south across the River Main. This state of affairs is important when considering Bismarck's goals: the unification of Germany under the Prussian government. *Germany*, hypothetically speaking, would include the southern states below the Main. Bismarck looked to this region as the last step in achieving his goals. But what would that mean now that Austria and France were allied, especially since popular opinion in Bavaria, Wurtemberg, and Baden was anti-Prussian?<sup>22</sup> Would they appeal to Austria and France for help if the Main were crossed by Prussian troops? Given the circumstances, a military campaign into the southern territories was not feasible for Bismarck. Diplomacy and political intrigue was the only option that Bismarck worked with unequivocal success.

The convoluted issue surrounding the Hohenzollern candidature to the throne of Spain was conceived by Bismarck and, once again, addresses the trinity of war. Stripping off the complexities that surrounded the future of Spanish rule, the issue boiled down to a potential two-front war against France under Prussian influence. Bismarck fabricated a trap for Napoleon that either meant a political defeat at the cost of his French crown or to wage war, and Bismarck knew that Napoleon would prefer the latter. Isolating France was accomplished over the very fact that it had interests in acquiring Luxembourg and Belgium, and Bismarck used this to unite Germany for the German cause, as opposed to a Prussian cause.<sup>23</sup>

Bismarck's ability to control and limit military operations was displayed after Sedan at Metz, and during the bombardment of Paris. Bismarck's first effort to limit army operations in France was to attempt to negotiate a definitive peace, based on preserving the last remnant of the French Army through capitulation that had been consolidated at Metz. Bismarck needed this

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<sup>21</sup> Eyck, *Bismarck*, 155.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>23</sup> Eyck, *Bismarck*, 156-57, 168, and 174. Concerning the German cause, this marks a distinct point in Bismarck's career where he no longer fights for the interests of Prussia, but rather for those of Germany. Also consulted was J.F.C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War: 1789-1961*, (New York, 1992), 116, who makes the argument that France declared war on Prussia to contain their expansionism, as opposed to the ascendancy issue to the Spanish throne.

force intact to preserve the Bonaparte rule from which he could gain the most. However, the negotiations came to nothing and Metz fell in October. Once Paris was surrounded by the middle of September, with no military plans to assault or bombard the city, Bismarck took the next step in trying to bring about peace. He was alarmed by the fact that the Russians were no longer observing the Black Sea clauses of 1856, and he felt uneasy about the general possibility of a larger war developing in Europe. Bismarck finally convinced the King and by December the bombardment began. By the middle of January, the French expressed a desire to settle the war.<sup>24</sup>

Bismarck was able to convince the King through the added support of the voice of the people by manipulating the press to mobilize popular support that evoked the third element in the trinity of war. This way Bismarck surmounted any resistance he encountered from the military in limiting their operations. During the dispute with the military that came to a head during the Franco-Prussian War, in particular over the bombardment of Paris, many officers were opposed to it outright. General Blumenthal, the Crown Prince's chief of staff, was ready to resign. Never the less, Bismarck had his way once the newspapers demanded an attack be launched, helped by songs that were composed to convince Moltke to begin the bombardment of Paris.<sup>25</sup> The civil-military issue that was played out between Bismarck and the Prussian General Staff, full of volatile friction, was bound to ignite at some point. Had Bismarck articulated his political objectives precisely to the military under the conditions of limited war, he may not have succeeded in winning the three wars and the creation of a greater Germany.

As mentioned earlier, when considering the second aspect of limited war, the defense, it must be said that it works, to some degree, in concert with the former concept of the limited offense. Clausewitz maintains that an element of the limited offense is to gain territory that can be used later at the negotiating table for trading or bargaining.<sup>26</sup> While this concept undergoes a metamorphosis to a strategic passivity, it is for nothing else than to improve alliances in favor of the defender.<sup>27</sup> While Clausewitz does not discuss any aspect of consolidation or what should be done once the political goal has been met, Bismarck trail blazes the concept of amalgamating his spoils of war.

Basing his foreign policy on the assessment of power, Bismarck set about to orchestrate

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<sup>24</sup> Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 206-14. The Black Sea clauses of the Treaty of 1856 forbade the Russian fleet to enter the Bay of

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 211-212. The song was as follows, Dear Moltke, you walk so silent always around the mess. Good Moltke, do not take it wrong, do it finally Boom, Boom, Boom!

<sup>26</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 611-12. Bargaining and trading must now be considered as those tools used to create alliances for the preservation of peace.

<sup>27</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *War, Politics, and Power*, translated and edited by Edward M. Collins, (Washington, D.C., 1962), pp. 276-77.

European commitments that kept the peace for almost twenty years by forging alliances in every direction. In 1873, the 3 Emperor s League was formed in to safeguard the balance of power between Austria, Russia, and Prussia. Great Britain was kept at bay through Bismarck s adversity toward colonization, and the Balkans issue that involved differences between Austria-Hungary and Russia, led to Bismarck strengthening the 3 Emperor s League. In 1850, Bismarck relied more and more on splendid isolation, and by 1879 he concluded a secret alliance with Austria to check Russian expansionism. A second 3 Emperor s League was formed to protect against a two-front war, and in 1882, the Triple Alliance that included Italy, Austria, and Germany, gave added security for the balance of power. By 1887, after the secret Reassurance Treaty with Russia was concluded that promised to remain neutral, the treaties and alliances canceled themselves out as the prelude to World War I began to develop.<sup>28</sup> Given the genius of Bismarck, where there other options in the realm of unlimited war that he could have pursued with more success for an even greater Germany?

It is mere speculation that the flip side of Bismarck s policy (that of unlimited war) could have incurred more territorial gains. By allowing the military to carry out their plans for the total destruction of the armies of Denmark, Austria, and France, it is doubtful whether this would have had any practical advantage of ruling over a country. Preserving the armies to fight under the Prussian colors, however, in the same fashion as Napoleon I, may have allowed Germany to annex Austria into the greater sphere of Prussian influence. Being German by origin, this additional step to enlarge Germany may have come at a minimal price, especially since Great Britain was rooted in splendid isolation (as we see when Hitler annexed Austria), and Russia was more interested in the Balkans. France would then be the only significant contender to Prussian hegemony in Western Europe which after 1871 was no match for Prussia.

Bismarck s political goal to expand Prussian rule over German territories that resulted in the limited wars of 1864, 1866, and 1870, was a meticulously planned calculation of diplomacy and limited war. To further the influence, rule, and sphere of the Prussian monarchy, Bismarck knew exactly what to do. His formula was a shadow of Clausewitz s trinity of war that considered the elements of politics, military, and the people. Bismarck averted general war by isolating his enemy through diplomacy, controlling his military counterparts in delivering decisive victories, and by appealing to the public for domestic support. His hardened prowess in knowing when to make and break alliances, sue for peace, and resist articulating his political views to the military, allowed Bismarck to avert general war, and through various treaties retain the spoils of war.

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<sup>28</sup> For a good summation of Bismarck s genius in the consolidation and preservation of Germany, see Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 120-65.

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