

## ' THE ORIGINS OF THE FRANCO-GERMAN WAR '

A war between Prussia and France would succeed that with Austria in the logic of history.

I did not doubt that a Franco-German war must take place before the creation of a united Germany.

At the root of it (*i.e.*, the war) was a clerical conspiracy.

PRINCE BISMARCK.

If a united Germany and France can fight in a ring fence victory is virtually assured to us.

VON MOLTKE.

Better the Prussians in Paris than the Sardinian troops in Rome.

But this is my war.

EMPRESS EUGENIE.

A war provoked by Prussia would be hailed by many as a welcome relief from internal troubles. So far as I can judge, Ollivier is not a man to shrink from it.

LORD LYONS (May 6th).

Peace has never been better assured.

OLLIVIER to the Chamber (June 30th).

Never has the political sky been so clear of clouds.

MR. HAMMOND (Permanent Under-Secretary to Lord Granville) when he succeeded the Earl of Clarendon (July 5th).

If the King will not advise the Prince of Hohenzollern to withdraw, it is war forthwith, and in a few days we are over the Rhine.

DE GRAMONT (July 12th).

This is the most national war in which France has been involved. I can only rule if I lead, and I am borne away on a torrent which I am powerless to stem or control.

NAPOLEON III (July 15th).

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THESE will serve as texts for this paper. Some of them are contradictory and some apparently irrelevant, yet their effect is cumulative, and they reveal a state of things which rendered war almost inevitable.

From 1867 the European Chancelleries, and our most vitally interested Foreign Office, were in constant agitation over Napoleon's efforts to secure compensation for the events of 1866, to which we shall return.

We must be lenient to Napoleon III. He was a man of good intentions (and in spite of the tag these are very preferable to evil) who could not make up his mind whether he was an autocrat or a revolutionary. He was a parvenu amongst sovereigns, and could never hold the assured position of a monarch of Great Britain, a Habsburg, or a Bourbon. This he realised, hence his regard for Queen Victoria's friendship and, to some extent, for her subjects. He was a good friend of England when all is said. He was inclined to champion the cause of divided and oppressed peoples: so were his subjects provided that the objects of their sympathy were indefinitely remote. They could shed tears over the wrongs, real or imaginary, of Poles and Hungarians, but the claims of divided Germans and Italians, equally sound or equally false, created rather a feeling of hatred and jealousy. Napoleon seemed to think otherwise. He was indifferent about Poles and Hungarians, but certainly favoured Italian sentiment up to a point, and did not feel morally justified even in opposing the Unitarian movement in Germany. Much fault, and probably rightly from the French point, has been found with these latter tendencies by Prince Sixte de Bourbon, MM. Maurice Paléologue, J. Bainville, and other writers of to-day. Finally, the Emperor was suffering from a painful and incurable malady, and if

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we compare his attitude after the humiliation of Sedan with that of the Paris mob the balance of dignity is wholly on the Emperor's side.

Napoleon by his mistaken patronage of the theory of nationality worked literally but unwittingly for the King of Prussia. M. Thiers, with true insight, even before Königgratz, spoke to the *Corps Législatif* of the certain result of this theory of nationality. A unified Italy must lead to a unified Germany. Common hostility to Austria would cause hand-shakes across the Alps. Prince Jerome Napoleon was openly pro-Prussian. Austria is the stronghold of Catholicism and Feudalism. France must be the supporter of Prussia, whose mission it is to destroy Catholicism in Vienna, as it is that of Italy to do the same in Rome. Was there ever so muddle-headed and doctrinaire a sentiment? It was indeed remote from the Emperor's.

After the crushing of Austria Napoleon was nervous. By vague offers of compensation Bismarck had obtained Napoleon's neutrality in 1865. He now went further in the matter of compensations. In 1867 he made a draft compact with France in regard to Belgium to the effect that Prussia would not oppose its occupation. This Count Bismarck published in *The Times* in July, 1870, and English suspicions already aroused by the Emperor's attempts to buy Luxembourg from Holland became acute. It was a master stroke, and went far to insure the rather favourable neutrality of our country during the war. Prussia immediately declared her intention of observing Belgian neutrality when asked by the English Government, and Napoleon was not behind. The effect was so disagreeable, though, that we entered into a bilateral treaty to enforce the inviolability of Belgian soil. This expired in 1872. There was no

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treaty of obligation for us to intervene in 1914 under the Guarantee of 1839. Our *interests* could never, of course, admit of a powerful country established in Belgium : that is a different matter.

France scored a diplomatic victory over Prussia in the matter of Luxembourg. Prussia had rights of garrison there, but the Powers in London assembled decided to make it neutral under their guarantee, and set about the demolition of its fortifications. It had been immensely strong, as the visitor of to-day can see, and the base of Spanish and Austrian power in the Low Countries.

This success was repeated in Italy when Garibaldi's red shirts were scattered at Mentana by the *Chasse-pôts*. French prestige was high, but the antipathy of Italians to all things French which had only smouldered after Napoleon's annexation of Savoy burst into flame. The secular and mutual antipathy of these peoples is one of the more important factors in European politics.

Still, Europe was uneasy. There hung a mist of mistrust over the second Empire ever since the *coup d'état*, unjustified I think. In spite of all this, it is certain that up to the very outbreak of war Napoleon looked for help from Austria and Italy, strange combination ! True, each may be supposed to have had reasons for helping the French Emperor, but surely not both together. Francis Joseph had every reason to feel resentment towards Prussia for Königgratz, but on the other hand Solferino was an equal though less recent grievance against France.

Count Beust, the Director of Foreign Affairs, was a determined foe of Prussia, and, it may be, went further in his offers to Napoleon than Francis Joseph either knew or approved. His will to injure Prussia was greater than his power. Beust subsequently

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asserted that only conversations took place, and they never materialised into written agreements. Such, also, is the sense of the statements of Duc de Gramont, who was Ambassador in Vienna and subsequently Minister of Foreign Affairs. All the same, as Mr. Holland Rose says, these statements are not very convincing, and in any case matters went much further early in 1870, when the Archduke Albrecht visited Paris. The civilians were then in the dark, for that was the time (June) when Ollivier made his remark, but General Lebrun drew up a confidential report of a mission with which he had been entrusted to the Austrian military authorities. He advised war in the autumn, but the Archduke thought that Austria and Italy could not be fully armed before early 1871. Lebrun had an interview with the Emperor, who said that if Napoleon appeared in South Germany as a liberator he would be compelled to make common cause with him. Where did Victor Emmanuel come in? He was not in the least likely to work with Austria, and he and all Italians were grateful for the Prussian victory at Königgratz, without which Venetia would have remained Austrian. All the same, the King of Sardinia realised that without Napoleon the freeing of Lombardy and the beginning of unity would have been impossible, and he was far more favourable than his ministers to France. The cause of Italian nationality from 1859 to 1918 was only made possible by foreign help given from whatever motive.

Napoleon had interviews with Francis Joseph at Salzburg, 1867-68, and in the latter year Victor Emmanuel made proposals to the French Emperor with a view to an alliance. In 1867 Bismarck's plans were maturing, and he was no longer in the necessity of placating France. That his offers about Belgium were a trap is almost certain; but the Chancellor did

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give one warning. When M. Thiers in that year was in favour of recognising the *fait accompli*, but not of allowing further Prussian aggression, Count Bismarck instantly revealed the secret military conventions between Prussia and the South German States. It is so often stated that France was ready for war only with Prussia, and that the whole of Germany being hurled at her was a surprise, that this fact must be insisted on. Why France was still expecting help from Bavaria<sup>1</sup> and perhaps Württemberg, even in July, 1870, is one of the mysteries so far unexplained. The talks with Victor Emmanuel went on far into 1869, and what the King required as the price of his help was the withdrawal of the French garrison in Rome. Francis Joseph went so far as to advise Napoleon to agree, and thus form a triple pact against Prussia.

It seems as if all these monarchs negotiated on their own account and without the participation of their Foreign Ministers. Records may exist in the private collections of the Bismarck family, or in that of Eugénie, or elsewhere; we do not know, probably not. There is nothing in the public archives of Berlin, Vienna, or Turin. The Paris archives are not yet available.

We are probably safe in asserting that Francis Joseph's recommendations were foiled by Eugénie herself with the approval of the Duke of Gramont, who has been described as a perfect *Ultramontane*. Clerical influence was very potent at the Tuileries, and Prince Jerome's known pro-Prussianism and anti-

<sup>1</sup> Lord Acton, in a letter to Lady Blennerhassett, 1897, records the fact that something induced the Bavarian House on the night of July 19th to vote for war, whereas in the morning the majority had been against the *Casus Foederis*. Something there was which President Stauffenberg would not commit to paper. Prince Hohenlohe also touches on this (Vol. ii, pp. 12-15).

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clericalism were generally disliked in the country.<sup>2</sup> Probabilities certainly pointed to Austrian help in 1871; but in the meantime his ministers, who by now seem to have winded the scheme, prevented Victor Emmanuel from entering into any positive engagement, so great was the popular dislike of an *entente* with Austria. They would doubtless have swallowed the Franco-Austrian military convention if Napoleon would have made a definite promise of withdrawal from Rome. That he could not do, apart from Eugénie. In the midst of the sitting of an Œcumenical Council he could not leave the Eternal City to the tender mercies of the Sardinian army; not by any means merely the highly disciplined Piedmontese troops, but strengthened by Garibaldians, Carbonari, and all the sacrilegious scum which did, as a matter of fact, enter Rome in September mixed up with the royal troops. To go to war with Prussia under such conditions was to invite repudiation by all Catholic minded Frenchmen, then a great majority in the country.

Something of all this leaked out, and Bismarck realised that this *triplice*, less improbable than he thought, must be anticipated at any price. It only remained to find an occasion. Great was Bismarck's good fortune, indeed marvellous. A revolution drove out Queen Isabella, and the Spaniards began to cast about for an imported monarch.

When we speak of Bismarck having arranged the Franco-German war, or of Cavour as having organ-

<sup>2</sup> Lord Acton in the same correspondence has no doubt about the attitude of the Empress towards war. Parieu, the President of the Council, denied it publicly, and asserted it in his private correspondence. Acton's sympathies were, of course, *anti-ultramontane*. A very different person, Lord Shaftesbury, wrote that it was a *Popish and unholy war* (Bernstorff Papers, in which is much that is of interest for 1870; see also Hohenlohe, Vol. ii).

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ised the Garibaldian movement, we speak correctly, but must be careful not to think that either had worked out a complete plan, and then waited for an opportunity to use it, but that both rather seized upon a favourable combination of events and extemporised a plan suitable generally for their ultimate object, Unity. Hence the conspicuous success of these two men, the greatest statesmen of living memory, for the reverse plan very rarely succeeds from lack of elasticity. The classical example of this in modern history is the case of Philip II, and of our own days General Trochu, the defender of Paris. There was nothing inherently foolish in the *plan de Trochu* which has become a byword; indeed, an English contemporary said that it possessed the merits of prudence and probability, but the requisite confluence of circumstances never came to pass.

The vacancy in Madrid gave the opportunity, but the Spanish succession was clearly not the real cause.

The candidate for the vacant throne was Prince Luitpold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. It was not altogether a new move, but it had received no encouragement from the King of Prussia, nor even Luitpold himself. Bismarck overcame their reluctance, and hoped to arrange with the Cortes so as to confront France with the *fait accompli* (June). This caused an explosion in court circles. Napoleon, if not France, had a grievance: for these machinations consorted badly with Bismarck's earlier offers, and there was something menacing at the prospect of a Hohenzollern in Berlin and Madrid which recalled the old French bogey of a Habsburg in Vienna and Madrid. Still, the danger was not very real. A Hohenzollern of the Swabian branch was no more likely to be wholly pan-Germanic in Madrid than his brother's family have proved to be at Buckarest; but passions rose on both sides of the Rhine.



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In this state of things Count Benedetti met William II at Ems, where he asked the King to urge on Luitpold the withdrawal of his candidature. The King refused, for he regarded it as a private concern of his family. Luitpold himself, realising the danger to peace, resolved to reject the proffered crown, and William thought it a wholly wise move, and told Benedetti so (July 12th). This was a clear and satisfactory 'peace with honour' to all concerned, and the incident seemed closed.

If so far the provocation had come from Prussia, we must admit that now the French court was not whole-heartedly for peace. The Duke of Gramont made a fresh demand: that William would never again authorise the candidature, while warlike sentiment rose to frenzy in the capital, not, let us remember, in France at large. Lord Lyons remonstrated at this new demand and said that it must inevitably lead to war. Benedetti, in compliance with his instructions from the Quai d'Orsay, not that he interiorly agreed, pressed the King of Prussia. The latter said, reasonably enough, that he entirely approved of the withdrawal, but could give no promises *à tout jamais*. When Mr. Gladstone heard of the second demand he at once pointed out the immense responsibility of France in the case of war.

On July 13th Bismarck and others were at dinner, when a telegram came from Ems bidding him explain the situation to the Ambassadors and the Press. This is the famous myth of the telegram of Ems. In his declining years and from a vanity which was unworthy of him, the Prince himself favoured the version that his editing of the telegram precipitated the war. It was not so. The original telegram of Secretary Abeken to Bismarck was very long-winded, and the Prince cut it down to half for publication; but the whole point was that the King had said his say and

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had no more to communicate to Benedetti. Negotiations were *not* still pending. As a matter of fact, Bismarck left out, and very properly, a sentence that *the King refused at last rather sternly*. There was less ground for war in the edited version than in Abeken's verbose despatch. The two versions can be compared word for word, and the myth becomes plain.

Ollivier and Gramont in the Chamber (July 15th) made the King's refusal to see the Ambassador again on that subject a ground for war.

During the previous evening the Imperial Council sat, and Ollivier was not present, nor do we know what happened, except so far as the Duke of Gramont, in his account to the Earl of Malmesbury, much later on, declared that the Empress, impulsively, and Marshal Leboeuf, violently, urged war on Napoleon.<sup>3</sup> This seems probable, and we may readily concede that Eugénie was impulsive and Leboeuf objectionable; but on de Gramont more than on anyone else on the French side must the chief burden of responsibility lie.

To Ollivier 'of the light heart'<sup>4</sup> there is also a heavy burden: no one should contemplate a European war with a light heart, and Count Persigny, too, cannot be absolved. Napoleon, of all the actors in the most pregnant drama of our time, was morally the

<sup>3</sup> The episode of Marshal Leboeuf declaring that the French Army was *prête, archiprête jusqu' au dernier bouton des guêtres* has contemporary authority. There is obviously no actual proof possible, and it is well to remember that some of these stories come from extreme anti-Imperialistic sources, and may even have a German origin.

<sup>4</sup> This is wholly different, and the fact undeniable. The ex-Minister, in his *Empire Libéral*, gives it a gloss to the effect that he meant the war was just. I see no reason to suppose that he intended anything but the obvious meaning. He was sure of victory, and therein was no more at fault than the rest of his nation and three-quarters of Europe.

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least to blame. He was swept on a wave of warlike delirium. True, a man ought to be able to control his wife's impulsiveness, and the all-powerful Emperor could, in theory, have refused to set the military machine running, and he might have imposed silence if not sense on de Gramont and Leboeuf; but since the formation of the Ollivier ministry Napoleon's personal grasp on the machinery of government had much slackened. On the Prussian side Bismarck is responsible for having founded German unity on the premeditated overthrow of three states in turn, and he worked so cleverly as to leave the apparent responsibility for the declaration of war on his enemies. Von Moltke and Roon have a different responsibility. They were equally convinced of the necessity of the overthrow of France, and they perfected the military machine, as they were bound to do in view of a war with what every other country regarded as the first military power. That no Prussian in high position believed to be true; but, nevertheless, they recognised that war with France would be no military promenade, as were the Danish and Austrian campaigns. William II himself was led along in semi-darkness. When the war broke out he had, of course, a personal and real souvenir of the Great Napoleon's insolence, and probably thought that the ruin of the Imperial tradition might very likely be in the interests of peace; but he cannot be said to have encouraged it; rather, as we have seen, he was content at Luitpold's retirement.

Deeper far than all this, and it is still a warning, lay the mutual jealousy, suspicion, and hostility of two powerful and warlike neighbours. The whole atmosphere was charged with thunder. It was as when we watch a sky black with storm clouds, here thickening, there dispersing, in appearance, but in reality their force is ever gathering until the blinding flash

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and bellowing crash are inevitable. Satan, too, was very active in July, 1870, as he always is during international complications, and stirred up his emissaries in both countries, who were and are chiefly the writers of a corrupt, vulgar, and jingo press. The war of 1870 has haunted all those who have lived since that date, and the seed then sown lay in its furrow to come to its fatal harvest. Europe then first saw the consecration of the policy of blood and iron, and set her face sternly towards the future which she had every reason to dread.

MAURICE WILKINSON.