

# Bismarck and Europe

## Author-s:

[Stéphanie BURGAUD](#) [1]

## Abstract

From Prussia to Germany, the diplomacy of Minister Otto von Bismarck was marked more by continuity than by change. Although the crises he strove to provoke did not degenerate into global war during his time, his politics nevertheless contributed to the deterioration of the Concert of Europe in its classical sense: rise of unilateralism, formation of permanent alliances that grew increasingly rigid, as states were prompted to seek their own security through belonging to opposing blocks.

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## Article

Bismarck is known for his provocations regarding Europe, from his “Who is Europe?” remark directed in January 1863 to British Ambassador Buchanan, to his note—“Who speaks of Europe is in error”—appearing in the margin of a letter from the Russian Chancellor Gorchakov in 1876. The historiography has long told us that he was successively the troublemaker and the peacemaker of this Europe, and has identified a major diplomatic shift in the years 1875-1876.

The question arises as to whether the opening of Central European and Mitteleuropean archives since the 1990s has cast doubt on this interpretation.

None would deny that during the 1860s Bismarck was waging war in Europe. We will nevertheless be wary of the usual phrase, “wars of German unification,” that is used for the three armed conflicts opposing Prussia with Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866, and France in 1870, for it reveals a somewhat teleological vision. Recent research shows that there was no great pre-established plan that Otto von Bismarck—called on in September 1862 by the King of Prussia William I to be Minister-President and Minister of Foreign Affairs—derived from his famous speech, that called for final victory “by iron and blood.”

One could even claim that Bismarck was waging war on Europe. From his first diplomatic mission to Frankfurt with the German Confederation (1851-1859), he indeed intended to destroy the European order established at Vienna in 1814-1815 and reaffirmed in 1850 during the Punctuation of Olmütz (city in Moravia where Berlin had to renounce its policy of Erfurt Union, which kept Prussia in an inferior position in the face of its Austrian rival). Since the European status quo was unfavourable to Prussian power within the Germanic sphere, it had to be overthrown. Yet he was also an enemy of the “Concert of Europe,” the system of order maintained through the cooperation of the major powers, who accepted to sacrifice some of their interests (notably in terms of increase in power, territorial expansion) in an attempt to preserve peace on the continent, or at least to limit deadly conflicts. For Bismarck, the very notion of an organic balance, one founded on a community of values in whose name a state should abandon a policy of power, was absolute nonsense. The only healthy policy was one based on self-interest, and the duty of a statesman or a sovereign was precisely to conduct this diplomacy of interests. The principle of this diplomacy was thus to seek out areas of support, and to build alliances. For instance, he clarified to Leopold von Gerlach in 1857 “all of the nuances expressing the possibility...of belonging to such and such a group, which is to say the basis of influence that a state can wield today in times of peace.” He added that alliances have nothing to do

with legitimacy, and that as such Napoléon III's France, for example, was a viable partner, for like others it was "a piece, an indispensable piece on the political chessboard, and in this game my sole duty is to serve my King and country." His questioning of the European balance defined in Vienna in 1815, his creation of the interplay of alliances in times of peace to the detriment of multilateral negotiations, along with his refusal of the existence of a community of values (whether inherited from Christianity or the Enlightenment) that were superior to national self-interest undoubtedly made Bismarck an enemy of Europe.

However, Bismarck thought in terms of Europe. The error of course consists in believing that Bismarck based his diplomacy on the seeking out and preservation of bilateral alliances. This is the famous Russian legend. Through his support for the Czar during his struggle with the Polish revolt in 1863, Bismarck seemingly won his neighbour's unswerving friendship, as well as his benevolent neutrality during the three wars to come. This orthodox position has been revised, and with it Bismarck's geostrategy. Bismarck did not conduct a Russian policy in 1863 or afterwards, but rather a European one. His thinking was on a European scale, and involved moving its lines of power, creating new ones, and recomposing them according to the circumstances. This included pragmatism and flexibility, the exact opposite of a fixed and permanent order.

The question remains as to whether Bismarckian policy changed in nature with the founding of the Reich in 1871. Most German historiography deemed it essential to demonstrate this. The archives, which are accessible today, nevertheless prompt one to be prudent regarding supposed "Bismarckian systems" destined to stabilize the Europe that his clumsy successors shattered, leading the continent directly to war. Or rather, there is widespread confusion between Bismarck's probable aim—maintaining a European order favourable to the new Germany by preserving it from the aggressive impulses of other powers—and the means he undertook to achieve it. These means have not changed. In a somewhat pithy formula, one could qualify Bismarckian policy as essentially aggressive and bellicose. As such, 1875 was not the turning point emphasized by the historiography, notably of the conservative variety.

The idea of the reorientation of Bismarckian diplomacy after this date is based on two justifying facts. The first is the failure of the "War Scare" (Krieg-in-Sicht-Krise), which apparently forced Bismarck to change policy in order to break out of isolation, while the second is his Russian policy's lack of success in 1875. The first is proven, although it surely requires nuancing, while the second is a myth. Yet it is analysis of the 1870s and 1880s in particular that prompts one to question the figure of the "honest broker," as well as the notion of a Bismarckian practice that would regenerate the Concert of Europe. The "Bismarckian concert" remains a genuine oxymoron diametrically opposed to diplomatic reality.

What was this reality? Bismarck convinced himself that Germany and Austria-Hungary were conservative powers, while France and Russia were revisionist ones. A third power had to be drawn into the German sphere of influence in order to maintain order, one that would keep the other two in line. This was the role assigned to the United Kingdom. Bismarck wanted confrontation and war between the Russians and the British. The fact that Britain is an island required imagining a front in Asia, where the two armies could confront one another, which would explain Bismarck's constant interest in the "Great Game" in Central Asia (the term Great Game designates the geostrategic rivalry between 1813 and 1907 opposing the two countries in this theatre), where he pushed the two powers to engage, for them to compete and enter into confrontation. This was also why, beginning in the autumn of 1874, he wanted to open the question of the East, a conflictual space if ever there were one. The Congress of Berlin that concluded the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 thus seemed to revive the concerted practice of the major powers, which had been abandoned since 1856; however, this was an affectation, as Bismarck was pursuing his own aims, which were to make the Eastern

question the permanent source of tensions that would degenerate into war.

If after 1871 Bismarck undoubtedly sought to ensure a European balance, it was not through the creation of a stabilizing system, a new concert, or a pacification of international relations, but rather in doing what he had always done, conducting a policy of manufacturing crises in Europe and elsewhere, with war as a choice instrument.

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