

# The Decline of French Power

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*For generations before the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), France had been the dominant nation on the western European mainland and was among the world's most powerful states. At different times, French military forces had occupied almost all of the major capitals of continental Europe.*

During this period of French hegemony, it seemed that France posed one of the biggest challenges to global stability. Great Britain, France's principal rival, had long sought to reduce French expansion and influence. It was repeatedly the efforts of the British military, particularly the Royal Navy, which prevented France from spreading its power as far as she would have liked.

While the French were frustrated by the Royal Navy's suffocating presence out to sea, they had more success in dictating matters to their liking on European soil. Various notable French leaders - Richelieu (1585-1642), Mazarin (1602-1661), Louis XIV (1638-1715) and Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) - had all succeeded in keeping the territories of the Germanies weak and divided.

Since the 15th century, the Germans had desired better things of their own and they dreamed of a national state. There was a romantic, mystical quality about these aspirations. The Germans awaited the arrival of their king or "Feldherr", a magician who would emerge from the public's ranks and unite the German peoples under one flag.

Image: Otto von Bismarck (Licensed under the Public Domain)



When the Prussian-born Otto von Bismarck began his rise to prominence in the mid-19th century, it looked as though the leader the Germans wanted had at last arrived. The Germans were helped further, however, by the fact that their nemesis France was by this point in decline. France never recovered from Napoleon's unprovoked invasion of the Russian Empire on 24 June 1812. The French-led forces were decisively defeated by the Russian Army, as they inflicted a shattering blow on the prestige of France.

By the time the Franco-Prussian War, or Franco-German War, started in the mid-summer of 1870 France had been in decline for over half a century. Just as the Russians had beaten the French, now it was the turn of the Germans. With the surrender of Napoleon III (Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew) at the town of Sedan in northern France, the tide irrevocably turned against the French and was flowing in Germany's favour.

The Germans incorporated the former French territory of Alsace-Lorraine to the Reich in 1871, as part of the Treaty of Frankfurt. Alsace-Lorraine in any case was a largely German-speaking region whose inhabitants, overall, had questionable loyalty to France.

The new German Empire was established on 18 January 1871 and two months later the 56-year-old Bismarck became its first chancellor (head of government). He would remain in this post for the next 19 years. Bismarck held conservative, anti-liberal views, distrusted democracy and was one of the most famous political leaders of the 19th century. Bismarck previously served as the Prussian ambassador to Russia from 1859 to 1862. He believed it was unwise and dangerous for Germany to ever wage war against Russia, a feeling not shared by everyone in Berlin.

Bismarck also feared Russia because the country had a large, powerful army, deep natural resources and contained a population that was more than twice bigger than Germany's. The Russian population in 1870 was estimated to be at just over 84 million, while the German population was 41 million that year. Russia was a far older and more established country than Germany, and the Russians were in the process of constructing advanced weapons like the formidable Mosin rifle.



Surrender of Napoleon III after the Battle of Sedan, 1 September 1870 (Licensed under the Public Domain)

With the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the balance of power shifted drastically in western and central Europe. Almost overnight, Germany had inherited what remained of France's greatness. This success imbued the Germans with pride and self-confidence, and many German citizens were firm advocates of pursuing military means in order to promote their country's aims.

The French leadership and its people, by and large, were also supporters of finding solutions through military action if required. The beating the French soldiers had taken, in the Franco-Prussian War, did not result in an increase in pacifist feelings across France. To the contrary, from the early 1870s onward army reforms were instead enacted in France, along with the introduction of universal compulsory military service. New infrastructure of a military nature was built on French soil, armaments were upgraded and production of weapons increased.

The French were bitter and depressed that Germany had gotten the better of them. Influential circles in France openly expressed their hatred of Germany, with what Bismarck described as "feminine vindictiveness".

In his analysis of the international arena, Bismarck recognised 5 great powers: Germany, Russia, Britain, France and Austria-Hungary. He excluded the United States because the latter had not sufficient strength, or motive, to project its influence over the Atlantic and threaten Europe's interests. It appeared to Bismarck too that America would continue with its policy of non-intervention in European affairs, which unfortunately has not remained the case to the present.



Bismarck hoped that France would get over its defeat in the recent war with Germany, as France had eventually become reconciled to its losses in the Napoleonic Wars. Regardless of French feeling, among the main goals of Bismarck's foreign policy was to keep France in a weakened and vulnerable position.

From the late 19th century on, France herself lacked the strength to threaten Germany. In 1880 the French population amounted to 37 million, whereas the German population that year was 45 million. By 1890 France's population was 38 million while Germany's had risen to 49 million. The gap was growing. Alarming also was that the French population was smaller than the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany's ally. German industry was outstripping that of France too.

For the majority of the period between 1870 and 1890, relations between Germany and Russia were positive. Matters were helped by the fact that Tsar Alexander II was the nephew of Kaiser Wilhelm I, and they got along very well together. Russia and Germany were overseen by conservative monarchies and the countries shared common interests.

Prussia's sympathetic attitude towards Russia during the Crimean War (1853-56) and the Polish revolt of 1863-64 had met the approval of the Russians, while in return the Germans appreciated Russia's stance of benevolent neutrality during the Franco-Prussian War.

Despite this, friendship between Germany and Russia was not always entirely easy to preserve. Western populations, including the Germans, were sometimes reluctant to admit that Russia was a part of Europe, even though many maps show that a sizeable part of western Russia lies within Europe's official frontiers.

The Russian hierarchy strongly disliked the liberalism and decadence which was becoming prevalent in parts of Germany and western Europe. The Russians were understandably suspicious of events that were changing the nature of European societies and altering traditional values, usually not for the better.

It might simply be true as well that the Russian and German peoples had a tendency to think they were slightly different from each other, that they had contrasting cultural and religious beliefs. There was bound to be an underlying tension between two such powerful states as the Russian and German empires.

Bismarck found it a bit easier to maintain smooth relations with another neighbour of Germany's, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One key reason behind this was that Austria-Hungary was weaker than Russia. Bismarck had not much respect for the Austrians, who he felt possessed worrying tendencies towards liberalism and modern art. As a northern German, Bismarck was a little contemptuous of southern Germans like the Bavarians who lacked the Prussian drive and work ethic. Bismarck had said, "A Bavarian is a cross between a man and an Austrian".

It seems more than likely that Austria has been in decline since at least 1848. During the widespread revolutions of 1848, the Hungarian half of the empire was prevented from gaining independence only by the successful intervention of Russian troops. France, allied to Italian forces, defeated Austrian armies in 1859 at Magenta and Solferino (both today in Lombardy, northern Italy). Due to these reverses, Austria lost control over the region of Lombardy. The Kingdom of Italy was then founded in 1861, a decade before the German Empire came into existence.

In 1866 Prussia, with critical support provided by Italy, defeated Austria in the Austro-Prussian War. Because of this outcome, Austria also lost its authority over the territory of Venetia which the Italians permanently gained control of, as with Lombardy in 1859. Consequently, Bismarck was perhaps unfair not to have included Italy in his list of major powers.

Some of the weakness within Austria-Hungary lay in the fact that, for an empire not so large, it contained an incredible variety of nationalities – Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Romanians, and also Germans, Italians and Poles. Vienna, the Austrian capital and Budapest, the Hungarian capital, had a parliament each and there were joint Austro-Hungarian ministries of war, foreign affairs and finance.

Austria-Hungary was not really a single state but was a feudal conglomerate, where the Habsburg monarch held his residence in Vienna. Austria-Hungary's internal issues should not be overemphasised, however. The emperor Franz Joseph I, who came to the throne in Vienna during the unrest of 1848, governed with a paternal authority over the coming decades. Separatist movements within the Austro-Hungarian Empire lacked mass support.

The Czechs desired a constitution similar to that which the Hungarians had gained, but the Czechs wanted such a constitution to be put into effect by Franz Joseph. Some Germans living in Austria-Hungary desired "Anschluss" (union) with Germany, but there was hardly any chance of it then unfolding.

The Austrian prime minister Eduard von Taaffe, who held office from 1868-70 and 1879-93, had significant influence in keeping the nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire "in a balanced state of mild dissatisfaction". With its internal distractions, Austria-Hungary had no inclination to conquer territory overseas, i.e. to obtain colonies. Franz Joseph's ally, Bismarck, had scant regard for these ventures as well. "Colonies for Germany are like the furs possessed by noble Polish families who have no shirts", Bismarck insisted.

Bismarck's primary focus was on the European mainland and in ensuring German supremacy, above all over France. He felt after the defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian War that Germany was a "satiated power". Later, Bismarck relented to political pressures by sanctioning the capture of parts of south-west and east Africa, along with Togoland and the Cameroon. Yet the chancellor found it difficult to get excited about Germany's colonial actions.

In early September 1872, the three conservative monarchs of Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany, Franz Joseph I, Tsar Alexander II and Kaiser Wilhelm I, met together in Berlin and they agreed to co-ordinate their foreign policies. The formal treaty agreed on in this meeting, which was signed the following year on 22 October 1873, was not groundbreaking; but it stressed the need for Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany to consolidate monarchic rule, conservative sentiment and to respond if necessary, including with military force, to unprovoked armed actions taken by countries such as France or Britain.

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