

Secret Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (June 18, 1887)

Abstract

Bismarck's system of alliances had bound Austria close to Germany, principally through the Dual Alliance of 1879. To prevent a two-front war, Bismarck also tried to bind Russia to Germany. When the Three Emperors' League between Austria, Germany, and Russia expired in 1887, a new agreement with Russia was considered necessary. The result was the Secret Reinsurance Treaty between Germany and Russia—perhaps the most controversial of Bismarck's complicated alliances. The text of this treaty bears similarities to the 1881 Treaty of the Three Emperors. The two powers assure each other that they will remain benevolently neutral in a future conflict, *except* in the case of an unprovoked attack by Germany on France or by Russia on Austria-Hungary. Otherwise, Bismarck sought to avoid any contradiction to his obligations toward his ally Austria-Hungary. The treaty, however, included a strictly secret protocol, which was not revealed until the First World War. The protocol was less easy to reconcile with Germany's adherence to the Dual and Triple Alliances. This incompatibility—taken as a sign of Bismarck's desperation to keep his alliance system intact late in his career—resulted in the non-renewal of the Secret Reinsurance Treaty in 1890.

Source

Secret Reinsurance Treaty between Germany and Russia from June 18, 1887

The imperial courts of Germany and of Russia, animated by an equal desire to strengthen the general peace by an understanding destined to assure the defensive position of their respective states, have resolved to confirm the agreement established between them by a special arrangement, in view of the expiration on June 15–27, 1887,^[1] of the validity of the secret treaty [...] signed in 1881 and renewed in 1884 by the three courts of Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary.

To this end the two Courts have named as plenipotentiaries: [...]^[2]

Article I

In case one of the high contracting parties should find itself at war with a third Great Power, the other would maintain a benevolent neutrality towards it, and would devote its efforts to the localization of the conflict. This provision would not apply to a war against Austria or France in case this war should result from an attack directed against one of these two latter Powers by one of the high contracting parties.

Article II

Germany recognizes the rights historically acquired by Russia in the Balkan Peninsula, and particularly the legitimacy of her preponderant and decisive influence in Bulgaria and in eastern Rumelia.^[3] The two courts engage to admit no modification of the territorial *status quo* of the said peninsula without a previous agreement between them, and to oppose, as occasion arises, every attempt to disturb this *status quo* or to modify it without their consent.

Article III

The two courts recognize the European and mutually obligatory character of the principle of the closing of the Straits of the Bosphorus and of the Dardanelles, founded on international law, confirmed by treaties, and summed up in the declaration of the second plenipotentiary of Russia at the session of July 12 of the Congress of Berlin (Protocol 19).

They will take care in common that Turkey shall make no exception to this rule in favor of the interests of any government whatsoever, by lending to warlike operations of a belligerent power the portion of its empire constituted by the straits. In case of infringement, or to prevent it if such infringement should be in prospect, the two courts will inform Turkey that they would regard her, in that event, as putting herself in a state of war towards the injured party, and as depriving herself thenceforth of the benefits of the security assured to her territorial *status quo* by the Treaty of Berlin.

Article IV

The present treaty shall remain in force for the space of three years, dating from the day of the exchange of ratifications.^[4]

Article V

The high contracting parties mutually promise secrecy as to the contents and the existence of the present treaty.

Article VI

The present Treaty shall be ratified and ratifications shall be exchanged at Berlin within a period of a fortnight, or sooner if may be. [...]

Secret Protocol

In order to complete the stipulations of Articles 2 and 3 of the secret Treaty concluded on this same date, the two Courts have come to an agreement upon the following points:

1. Germany, as in the past, will lend her assistance to Russia in order to re-establish a regular and legal government in Bulgaria. She promises in no case to give her consent to the restoration of the Prince of Battenberg.
2. In case His Majesty the Emperor of Russia should find himself under the necessity of assuming the task of defending the entrance of the Black Sea in order to safeguard the interests of Russia, Germany engages to accord her benevolent neutrality and her moral and diplomatic support to the measures which His Majesty may deem it necessary to take to guard the key of His Empire.
3. The present Protocol forms an integral part of the secret Treaty signed on this day at Berlin, and shall have the same force and validity.

NOTES

[1] That is, the Three Emperors' Treaty. [All footnotes adapted from Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur Deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, 3rd rev. ed., vol. 2, 1851–1900. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986, p. 495–96.]

[2] What follows is the naming of the plenipotentiaries on both sides: Count Herbert von Bismarck, the State Secretary of the German Foreign Ministry, and Count Paul Shuvalov, Russian Ambassador in Berlin (1885–1894).

[3] The province of eastern Rumelia had been created by the "Treaty of Berlin." Nominally, it remained under the sovereignty of the Turkish Empire, but it had been de facto incorporated into the Kingdom of Bulgaria after a coup d'état in the province of southern Bulgaria in 1885.

[4] The Reinsurance Treaty was not renewed after the expiry of its three-year period of validity (end of June 1890). Bismarck's fall and the changes in German foreign policy that took place in conjunction with the chancellor changeover led Germany to reject Russia's renewal offer.

Source of English translation: *The Secret Treaties of Austria-Hungary, 1879–1914*, vol. 1, *Text of the Treaties and Agreements*, edited by Alfred Franzis Pribram and Archibald Cary Coolidge, translated by Denys P. Myers and J. G. D'Arcy Paul. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920, pp. 274–81. Available online at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3648608&view=1up&seq=1>. Reprinted in Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 287–89.

Source of original German text: Bernhard Schwertfeger, *Die Diplomatische Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes 1871–1914. Ein Wegweiser durch das große Aktenwerk der deutschen Regierung*, vol. 1, *Die Bismarck-Epoche 1871–1890*. Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1923, pp. 315ff.; reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur Deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, 3rd rev. ed., vol. 2, *1851–1900*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986, pp. 498–500.

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