

“The Nightmare of Coalitions”: Bismarck on the Other Great Powers (1879/1898)

Abstract

After German unification in 1871, Bismarck believed that the greatest threat to Germany and international peace was likely to come from France. Therefore, he did his utmost to ensure that France would be as diplomatically isolated as possible and unable to launch a general war on the continent. The corollary to this goal was Bismarck’s quest to maintain a close and friendly relationship with other leading powers, in particular Russia and Austria. The following excerpt from Bismarck’s memoirs includes the famous reference to his “nightmare of coalitions” (“le cauchemar des coalitions”). The placement of this excerpt within his memoirs suggests that these reflections date to the late 1870s or early 1880s. They help explain Germany’s most important diplomatic agreements in these years.

Source

Count Shuvaloff^[1] was perfectly right when he said that the idea of coalitions gave me nightmares. We had waged victorious wars against two of the European Great Powers; everything depended on inducing at least one of the two mighty foes whom we had beaten in the field to renounce the anticipated design of uniting with the other in a war of revenge. To all who knew history and the character of the Gallic race, it was obvious that that Power could not be France, and if a secret treaty of Reichstadt was possible without our consent, without our knowledge, so also was a renewal of the old coalition—Kaunitz’s handiwork^[2]—of France, Austria, and Russia, whenever the elements which it represented, and which beneath the surface were still present in Austria, should gain the ascendancy there. They might find points of connection which might serve to infuse new life into the ancient rivalry, the ancient struggle for the hegemony of Germany, making it once more a factor in Austrian policy, whether by an alliance with France, which in the time of Count Beust and the Salzburg meeting with Louis Napoleon, August 1867, was in the air, or by a closer accord with Russia, the existence of which was attested by the secret convention of Reichstadt.

The question of what support Germany had in such a case to expect from England I will not answer without more in the way of historical retrospect of the Seven Years’ War and the congress of Vienna. I merely take note of the probability that, but for the victories of Frederick the Great, the cause of the king of Prussia would have been abandoned by England even earlier than it actually was.

This situation demanded an effort to limit the range of the possible anti-German coalition by means of treaty arrangements placing our relations with at least one of the Great Powers upon a firm footing. The choice could only lie between Austria and Russia, for the English constitution does not admit of alliances of assured permanence, and a union with Italy alone did not promise an adequate counterpoise to a coalition of the other three Great Powers, even supposing her future attitude and formation to be considered independently not only of French but also of Austrian influence. The area available for the formation of the coalition would therefore be narrowed till only the alternative remained which I have indicated.

In point of material force I held a union with Russia to have the advantage. I had also been used to regard it as safer, because I placed more reliance on traditional dynastic friendship, on community of conservative monarchical instincts, on the absence of indigenous political divisions, than on the fits and starts of public opinion among the Hungarian, Slav, and Catholic population of the monarchy of the

Habsburgs. Complete reliance could be placed upon the durability of neither union, whether one estimated the strength of the dynastic bond with Russia, or of the German sympathies of the Hungarian populace. If the balance of opinion in Hungary were always determined by sober political calculation, this brave and independent people, isolated in the broad ocean of Slav populations, and comparatively insignificant in numbers, would remain constant to the conviction that its position can only be secured by the support of the German element in Austria and Germany. But the Kossuth episode,^[3] and the suppression in Hungary itself of the German elements that remained loyal to the Empire, with other symptoms showed that among Hungarian hussars and lawyers self-confidence is apt in critical moments to get the better of political calculation and self-control. Even in quiet times many a Magyar will get the gypsies to play to him the song, “Der Deutsche ist ein Hundsfott” (“The German Is a Blackguard”).

In the forecast of the future relations of Austria and Germany an essential element was the imperfect appreciation of political possibilities displayed by the German element in Austria, which has caused it to lose touch with the dynasty and forfeit the guidance which it had inherited from its historical development. Misgivings as to the future of an Austro-German confederation were also suggested by the religious question, by the remembered influence of the father confessors of the imperial family, by the anticipated possibility of renewed relations with France, on the basis of a *rapprochement* by that country to the Catholic church, whenever such a change should have taken place in the character and principles of French statesmanship. How remote or how near such a change may be in France is quite beyond the scope of calculation.

Last of all came the Austrian policy in regard to Poland. We cannot demand of Austria that she should forgo the weapon which she possesses as against Russia in her fostering care of the Polish spirit in Galicia. The policy which in 1846 resulted in a price being set by Austrian officials on the heads of insurgent Polish patriots was possible because, by a conformable attitude in Polish and Eastern affairs, Austria paid (as by a contribution to a common insurance fund) for the advantages which she derived from the holy alliance,^[4] the league of the three Eastern Powers. So long as the triple alliance of the Eastern Powers held good, Austria could place her relations with the Ruthenes in the foreground of her policy; as soon as it was dissolved, it was more advisable to have the Polish nobility at her disposal in case of a war with Russia. Galicia is altogether more loosely connected with the Austrian monarchy than Poland and West Prussia with the Prussian monarchy. The Austrian trans-Carpathian eastern province lies open without natural boundary on that side, and Austria would be by no means weakened by its abandonment provided she could find compensation in the basin of the Danube for its five or six million Poles and Ruthenes. Plans of the sort, but taking the shape of the transference of Romanian and Southern-Slav populations to Austria in exchange for Galicia, and the resuscitation of Poland under the sway of an archduke, were considered officially and unofficially during the Crimean war and in 1863. The Old-Prussian provinces are, however, separated from Posen and West Prussia by no natural boundary, and their abandonment by Prussia would be impossible. Hence among the preconditions of an offensive alliance between Germany and Austria the settlement of the future of Poland presents a problem of unusual difficulty.

NOTES

[1] Count Pyotr Andreyevich Shuvalov (1827–1889), Russian ambassador to Britain (1874–79)—ed.

[2] Kaunitz Coalition: the coalition between Austria, Russia, and France in 1756—ed.

[3] “Kossuth episode”: Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894), Hungarian freedom fighter who tried unsuccessfully to establish an independent Hungarian republic in 1848/49—ed.

[4] “Holy Alliance”: Alliance between Russia, Austria, and Prussia (1815)—ed.

Harper & Row, 1899, vol. 2, pp. 255–58. Available online at:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015058413280&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021>.

Source of original German text: Otto von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, vol. 2. Stuttgart:

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Recommended Citation: “The Nightmare of Coalitions”: Bismarck on the Other Great Powers (1879/1898), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1855>> [May 03, 2024].