

Great Britain and Bismarck's Realpolitik

This paperwork is a study in English foreign politics of the nineteenth century and another perspective in explaining the triumph of the Prussian prime-minister Otto von Bismarck, who managed to unite Germany in just seven years, after three major wars against Denmark, Austria and France. For more than two centuries after the 30 years war which ended in 1648, the European major powers thought that the continental peace and security was depending on a disunited Germany that remained split in more than 300 hundred small states until the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871, at Versailles.

Many historians tend to believe that the success of the German unification was the result of Bismarck's ability to exploit the frictions between the Great Powers of Europe. The continental politics changed after 1815, when France was in a similar situation with the Holy Roman Empire in 1648. England, Russia, Austria and Prussia inaugurated a new era in European politics by agreeing on a general international system based on the balance of power, which would prevent another possible revival of France. The perspective of English foreign policy was a little bit different from that of the other continental powers. In British view, Russia was a major threat to European peace as France so its main international political goal was the containment of both, by sustaining the increase of Austrian power and influence in Eastern and Western Europe, especially in Northern Italy. In 1848, Austria was saved from disintegration by a Russian intervention in Hungary and at the end of the Crimean War in 1856, the France of Napoleon III was emerging again as a great power, and it was eager to change the territorial arrangements of 1815.

The main idea of this study is that the German unification was more the result of English response towards a possible revival of French continental hegemonic ambitions, than the success of Bismarck's political schemes. The paperwork is comprised in 5 parts and the research method is the document analysis. The research is based on books, statistics and documents and it is mainly focused on the Anglo-French relations, between 1815 and 1871 and the three wars of unification: the Prussian-Danish war of 1864, the Austro-Prussian war of 1866 and the Prussian-French war of 1870-1871. The theoretical basis for explaining the main hypothesis is the political Realism with its two main principles, the balance of power and "raison d'état". According to the principle of equilibrium, any attempt of an actor to achieve political hegemony would be stopped by the alliance of the other actors of the international arena.

The second realist principle, “raison d’etat”, was first theorized by Machiavelli at the beginning of the XVI century and officially put into practice by the cardinal Richelieu, French prime-minister at the time of the 30 years war, who signed alliances with the protestant powers against the Catholic Spain and Holy Roman Empire, destroying the Catholic unity in the best interest of the French state.

By the time of Napoleon I, the Franco-English rivalry was already a matter of more than a century. Britain tried to stop the French hegemonic ambitions starting with the French-Dutch wars at the end of XVII century and continued throughout the XVIII century with the war for the Spanish succession, the wars for the Austrian succession and the seven years war, the first conflict fought by the European powers on three continents: North America, Europe and Asia. The Napoleonic period brought a new element in the Franco-English relations, the attempt of conquering Britain by the French emperor. Even though it failed after the battle of Trafalgar, this French action would have a great effect for bilateral relations on long terms.

In 1815, after the Crimean war, Napoleon III managed to reposition France among the great powers, seizing the opportunity occurred after both Russia and England, even though victorious, suffered a recoil in the continental affairs. There are elements in the revival of France that sustain the main idea of this study. Napoleon and the French army had a crucial role in the Italian unification by winning the battles of Solferino and Magenta, and gained territorial advantage after receiving from the Italians the duchies of Nisa and Savoy. The new emperor also tried to build a modern war fleet that was proudly shown to the English royal couple Victoria and Albert, raising the British suspicions about the imperial intentions. Even more, Napoleon asked for the modification of the treaties of 1815, hoping that France would take back the Rhineland.

At the same time, England never sought Prussia as a threat to the European equilibrium of power. At the beginning of the Prussian-Danish war, Britain could have changed the course of the conflict, if agreed to make concessions to both Russia and France. The tsar wanted English approval for the return of the Russian war fleet in the Black Sea while Napoleon was hoping to get support for his aggressive intentions in the Rhineland. The British refused and left the Danes alone, at the mercy of the Prussians and Austrians, even though, the prime-minister, Palmerston tried to get support for the deployment of an English expeditionary force in Denmark. The cost of his indecision was the loss of the elections to the conservatives. In September 1865, in a letter to his foreign office minister Lord Russell, Palmerstone clearly expressed the idea that a united Germany around Prussia could have been a solid counterpart to Russia and France.

In the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, the queen, with all her ties to the royal house of Prussia, wanted England to offer military aid for Austria but the British government kept strict neutrality. For the British army, a military intervention in Bohemia was logistically impossible in just three weeks but that was not the only reason for keeping the neutrality. An Austrian victory would lead to a French intervention and to the occupation of the Rhineland in the name of the preservation of peace in Europe. After the war of 1871, Gladstone declared that the German victory meant a relief for Britain, as long as France was the most formidable menace to country’s security.

But all these evidences are not enough to sustain completely the main idea of the research. Great Britain did not make any official statement and underwent no political action to support any of the Bismarck's and Prussian actions. The main reason for which the hypothesis is not totally valid does not rely on Bismarck's diplomatic abilities, but on the fact that the German unification was primarily the effect of the overwhelming Prussian victories on the battlefields.

The stunning military results were not necessary due to the Prussian superiority in weapons, strategy and better trained soldiers. They were more the effect of strategic errors made by the Austrian and French generals. Even though the Habsburgs were involved in a war on two fronts, and the army suffered from a lack of communication between non-speaking German troops and their field officers, the Austrians had a good chance to win the decisive battle of Sadowa. In the war against France, Prussia was on the brink of disaster at the battle of Gravelotte-St. Privat and it was saved only by the indecision of the French to counterattack and its superior Krupp artillery.

The military Prussian successes also determined the triumph of Bismarck's policies, home and abroad. Until the end of the Austro-Prussian war, his political position at home was very unsecure, the only real support for him, being offered by the king Wilhelm I. He was detested by the rest of the royal family, by the army officers who could not agree on the civilian control of the armed forces, by the conservative party and also by the liberals. Before the start of hostilities with Austria he had to fight for its own political survival and he was almost dismissed by the king at the request of some members of the royal family. After the war, his political position stabilised, and many of the former adversaries became his most ardent partisans.

In the international arena, after the war against France, Bismarck did not prove revolutionary and became a defender of the principle of balance of power. The chancellor is praised for his successes in international affairs but if we analyze the cases of the Luxemburg crisis and that of the Belgian railways, he was overcome by the English diplomacy. In the case of British foreign policy, a unified Germany around Prussia was not a decisive matter it was only an option, probably the most acceptable.

British politicians regardless of their political beliefs or prestige, subdued to the interest of the state no matter the consequences. Palmerston and the liberals lost the general elections after the German-Danish war for the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein, but they respected and finally approved the realist decision of the queen of non-intervention in the conflict. The queen Victoria also had to subdue to the government's decision of non-interventions in the 1866 war between Prussia and Austria. In the end, at least from 1815 to 1871, it seems that the monarchy, the governments and the parliaments, all followed the same political directions in international affairs, the containment of France in the West and that of Russia in the East, a fine example of a very successful long term policy.

