

History: Worsening Relations in the German Empire. In the Wake of the Franco-Prussian War (1871)

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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In the final years of Otto von Bismarck's near two decade reign (1871-90) as chancellor of the German Empire, he was keeping an especially watchful eye on France, Germany's neighbour and traditional foe.

This was because France was boiling over with talk of a revenge war against Germany, to rectify the defeat the French had suffered in opposition to the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871.

Ever since the military leader Napoleon Bonaparte led a succession of battles from the late 18th century, the French public had held particular affection for its prominent generals. Between 1886 and 1889 the idol of many French citizens was General Georges Boulanger, a former commander of French troops in the country's overseas possessions who had returned to France in 1885 to enter politics.

On the streets of Paris, Boulanger was considered the man who wanted to lead another war against the German enemy. Boulanger rode about the Parisien boulevards on his pristine horse, struck impressive postures, and he conducted speeches promoting a conflict with the Germans. "We remember that they are waiting for us in Alsace and Lorraine", was one of Boulanger's favourite remarks, referring to the mainly German-speaking former French region which Bismarck had integrated to Germany in May 1871.

In January 1886, General Boulanger became the Minister of War in the cabinet of Charles de Freycinet, the prime minister. While in this post Boulanger set to work in further enlarging and modernising the French Army. In the autumn of 1887, Boulanger went so far as to initiate a partial mobilisation of the French armed forces, all with Germany in mind. Boulanger continued to attract popular support across France, and the royalists and Bonapartists lined up behind him as did a large part of the nation's media.

Maurice Rouvier, the new French prime minister, excluded Boulanger from his cabinet in

1887 and the following year the military dismissed him for misconduct. However, in that same year, 1888, Boulanger was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, a legislative body of the French parliament; it was not long before the general resigned from his position there in protest of disagreements shown to his proposals.

After this, the adulation of the French masses for the anti-German Boulanger if anything increased. Dozens of constituencies in France chose to elect him as their deputy. By early 1889, the 51-year-old Boulanger held such influence that it was believed by his supporters he could establish himself as the country's military dictator in Paris.

General Boulanger was probably preparing such an action but government forces posed a formidable obstacle and the general, perhaps becoming aware of the unlawful nature of his intentions, abandoned the idea. The strong emotions brought on by Boulanger in France then began to decrease. On 30 September 1891, Boulanger ended his life on the gravestone of his mistress in the Ixelles Cemetery in Brussels, by putting a revolver to his head and pulling the trigger.

The Boulanger crisis had shown once more how deep in France the hatred of Germany went, and the manner in which many Frenchmen desired a war against the Germans. Little of this escaped the attention of the politicians in Berlin. They were not too worried, as long as France remained cut adrift in her hatred. By the 1880s and 1890s, Germany had become a considerably more powerful country than France. In 1890 the German population reached 49 million compared to 38 million in France, whereas in 1860 there were 37 million French people and just under 36 million Germans.

German industry was taking off relating to important commodities like pig iron, or crude iron, used in the creation of steel and in war production. While in 1870 the Germans produced 1.4 million tons of pig iron that year, by 1903 they increased the figure to 9.8 million tons, far ahead of France and second only to the United States.

Yet other less positive events were occurring in Germany which was out of their control. On 9 March 1888 Kaiser Wilhelm I, who had possessed a good deal of wisdom and humility, died at the age of 90. Upon hearing this the British, who tended not to interfere in mainland European affairs, were concerned to hear of the kaiser's death. Lord Salisbury, the British prime minister wrote, "This is the crossing of the bar. I see the sea covered with white horses".

Kaiser Wilhelm I had not much interest in or ability when it came to politics, but he wisely left such vital matters to his chancellor, Bismarck. Immediately after Wilhelm's death he was succeeded as kaiser by Frederick III, his only son; but the 56-year-old Frederick was in the final months of his life. He was dying of cancer of the larynx, an illness which he succumbed to on 15 June 1888. The position of kaiser now went to Wilhelm II, who was the son of Frederick III and grandson of Wilhelm I.

In Germany at this time, some influential circles were publicly expressing their belief in "the inevitable war" between the German and Russian empires. Among them no less was the Chief of the German General Staff, Alfred Graf von Waldersee. General Waldersee went about advocating an unprovoked military attack against Russia. Waldersee's rants would have been irrelevant in years gone by, but with Wilhelm II on the throne the new kaiser, who lacked his grandfather's common sense, was inclined to take seriously what Waldersee was

saying.

Bismarck was alarmed by this as he had no cause to quarrel with Russia, and in fact the last outcome he wanted was a war between Germany and Russia.

Bismarck had served as the Prussian ambassador in St. Petersburg for a three-year period from 1859, and he was aware the Russian state contained greater material strength than Germany. Even more serious for Germany was that if they invaded Russia, the French would almost certainly take advantage of the circumstances by attacking the Germans from the west. Germany would be faced with two separate wars on either side of her. These scenarios were apparently lost on General Waldersee.

Bismarck explained the realities at length to Kaiser Wilhelm II and eventually his arguments got through. Waldersee would no longer be listened to. In spite of this, relations between Bismarck and the kaiser were strained. The chancellor complained that Wilhelm II was “like a balloon. If you don’t keep fast hold of the string, you never know where he’ll be off to”. On becoming kaiser in June 1888, Wilhelm II said he intended to let Bismarck “shuffle on for six months, then I’ll rule myself”. That Wilhelm II failed to recognise Bismarck’s political capabilities, and the service he had given Germany as chancellor, says much about the direction in which the German nation was heading under the kaiser.

Born in 1815, Bismarck represented an older generation of Germans and a 19th century society which was fast disappearing. Kaiser Wilhelm II, aged 31 in 1890, represented the new, swaggering Germany which was taking on some of the dubious characteristics that can come with material success. Bismarck’s policies had contributed heavily to Germany’s growing wealth. On the other hand, he was often intent on making the clock stand still and preserving the military gains which Germany had secured in Europe by 1871, whereas Wilhelm II had different ambitions.

Time was moving on. In 1895 German steel production overtook Britain and Germany was winning fame in areas like electrics and combustion engines. The German Empire had come a long way since replacing the “little Spartan Prussia” at the end of the Franco-Prussian War.

While the kaiser insisted he would remove Bismarck after half a year, the departure did not come until 21 months after Wilhelm II became emperor. Bismarck’s dismissal occurred on 20 March 1890. Had he been allowed to, he could have remained as chancellor for further years because his health and energy levels were still good. There have been suggestions that Waldersee had something to do with Bismarck’s fall, though it seems unlikely.

By the latter end of Bismarck’s tenure, there was hardly anything on which he and Wilhelm II could agree on and this was part of the problem. The kaiser, who had no political experience, had said he was intent on ruling himself, of being master of his own ship, and there was no place for a figure like Bismarck in his plans.

Nine days after Bismarck’s ousting, on 29 March 1890 the former chancellor left Berlin for his country house in the district of Friedrichsruh in northern Germany. Bismarck took with him huge quantities of alcohol and three cases loaded down with official papers. The kaiser was jubilant to see Bismarck gone. He wrote to his personal adviser and ex-tutor Georg Hinzpeter, “It has fallen to me to be officer of the watch on the ship of state. The course remains the same and now full speed ahead!”

The course would not remain the same, not by any means, and the reaction from some of the other major powers to Bismarck's departure is telling. The Russian hierarchy, including Tsar Alexander III and diplomats like Nikolay Girs, were sorry to see Bismarck go because they knew that Russia had lost a reliable partner. The Russians felt that Bismarck's steady influence in central Europe would be missed. Tsar Alexander III, who had come to the throne in Russia in March 1881, disliked and distrusted Kaiser Wilhelm II and he believed, with good reason as it would turn out, that the impetuous German monarch lacked the qualities needed to rule Germany.

The reaction in France was different. The French held Bismarck as primarily responsible for their nation's decline and defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Bismarck's presence in Berlin was a constant, painful reminder to the French of their country having been overtaken by the Germans.

With the "Iron chancellor" sent into retirement, a dark cloud was lifted from the French conscience. The mood across France improved, people were more confident they would regain their supremacy over Germany one day, despite the widening gap in resources between the two states. French foreign policy suddenly became self-assured while German diplomacy deteriorated.

The French were heartened, furthermore, by the fact that Kaiser Wilhelm II picked a military commander, General Leo von Caprivi, to succeed Bismarck. Caprivi was intelligent and sincere, a respected professional soldier, but seldom is it the case that military men make a smooth transition to the political arena. He lacked the abilities required to be the chancellor of Germany.

Caprivi admitted he was not the man to "juggle five balls in the air" as he felt Bismarck did. He had no experience of politics and Bismarck was understandably careful not to share his knowledge with people outside of his circle. Now that Bismarck and Wilhelm I were no longer around, it is hardly surprising that Germany would become its own worst enemy in the decades ahead.

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree and he writes primarily on foreign affairs and historical subjects. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

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