

# **THE HAND OF THE CHANCELLOR: OTTO VON BISMARCK AS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR**

**BY ROBERT SWANSON**

Lady Russell penned the following to Queen Victoria from Berlin, “the great Chancellor revels in the absolute power he has acquired and does as he pleases. He lives in the country and governs the German Empire without even taking the trouble to consult the Emperor about his plans...Never has a subject been granted so much irresponsible power from his Sovereign.”<sup>1</sup>

This essay examines the role of Otto von Bismarck in starting the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Though there were many other factors contributing to the initiation of the conflict, including nationalism and Great Power tensions, the primary cause of the Franco-Prussian war was Otto von Bismarck’s use of his diplomatic skills to lead the French into a war. He did this in order to unite the various German states and increase Prussian power in the Concert of Europe system. This essay examines various other theories, including individual, internal, and systemic arguments and why the individual level Bismarck Culpability Theory is the most plausible cause of the war in comparison to the others.<sup>2</sup>

## **Individual Theories**

This section highlights several individual-based theories that contradict the Bismarck Culpability Theory. These include the French Ministry Theory, the Napoleon III Theory, the Queen Theory, and the Italian Diplomat Theory. Each theory will be explained and analyzed to determine the strength of its argument and the supporting and contradicting evidence.

The French Ministry Theory states the cause of the war lay in the French Ministers' aggressiveness prior to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, as stated by Robert Howard Lord. This theory focuses on the French ministers’ desire to show French prominence in

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Russell, *Lady Emily Russell, Berlin, to Queen Victoria, London* (December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1880), accessed at: [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1835](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1835)

<sup>2</sup> This theory name is my own creation as are several others in this paper.

the European system. In this theory, French Ministers and not Bismarck, are responsible for the war because they ignored Prussia's attempts to make peace.<sup>3</sup> Evidence for this theory is that the French Ministers, such as Duc de Gramont and Ollivier, were extremely anti-Prussian, die-hard nationalists, and had an overconfident view of the French Army. They assumed that they could win a war against what they saw as an inferior army.<sup>4</sup> They rightfully were angry with the Hohenzollern Candidacy, however, Gramont's speeches further incited the French populace, the French Ministry's demands that Wilhelm promise never to support another such venture (which they knew to be blatantly aggressive), and their declaration of war demonstrates their full responsibility for the war.

However, this theory is only valid if they intentionally planned on using the Hohenzollern Candidacy to provoke a war. Evidence indicates the French merely reacted to the situation that Bismarck continually stoked. His tampering with the Ems telegram to further provoke the French shows that Bismarck was the true master of the situation. Bismarck's control of the events prior to the war allowed him to manipulate the French into doing exactly what he wanted. Furthermore, Bismarck orchestrated the Hohenzollern Candidacy knowing that this would destabilize an already tense diplomatic situation and possibly lead to war. Bismarck, in testing the resolve of the French, is the real culprit behind the war.

The Napoleon III theory centers on the idea that if Napoleon III had kept a tighter rein on his ministry, then the war could have been averted. This theory blames the Emperor for not taking the necessary steps to ensure that peace was preserved in Europe. It further states that he was attempting to make an example of Prussia to preserve French

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Howard Lord, *The Origins of the War of 1870: New Documents from the German Archives* (New York; Russell and Russell, 1924), 4; S. William Halperin, "Bismarck and the Italian Envoy in Berlin on the Eve of the Franco-Prussian War," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (March 1961), 34. Here the Russian diplomat, "vigorously criticized the conduct of the French government. He blamed its arrogance and precipitancy for the strain to which the peace of Europe was being subjected."

<sup>4</sup> *Scientific American*. "FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR," *Scientific American*, Vol 23, No. 12 (September 17 1870), 184. "The war was worse than a blunder; it was a crime against civilization. The French inaugurated it, and civilization now rejoices at the just punishment they have received."

dominance in the European system.<sup>5</sup> Evidence for this theory points to the fact that Napoleon III could have used his position as a populist emperor to sway the public opinion away from war. He also could have been more willing to hold back the ministry and be more cautious in how he approached diplomacy with the Prussians. However, this theory is rather weak given the fact that Napoleon III was physically sick and weak at the time of the crisis. His government had begun hiding his illness out of fear of the opposition. He had abdicated much of his authority to his ministers who were running the country. The Napoleon III theory also places undue power in Napoleon's hands. Napoleon III had ridden to the throne on a wave of populism and was dependent on the people's support for his continued reign.<sup>6</sup> He had become especially unpopular in the cities and was thus dependent on the mood of the people in order to make decisions. When the voice of the people was in favor of the French Ministry's decision to go to war, there was nothing that he could do to counteract this. This theory also excludes the manipulations of Bismarck in pushing the French into a situation where they felt trapped. His diplomatic skills effectively cornered them into losing face or going to war.

David Wetzel hypothesized that Empress Eugenie of France was the cause of the war due to her persistence in promoting anti-Prussian leaders and advocating for harsher measures in public that led the people of France to become incited and ready for war. Evidence for this theory rests on the harsh anti-Prussian rhetoric of the Empress and her determination to revive the French glory. But, like the previous theories, the Empress, in reality, had less power than her husband and would have been unable to promote the war by herself. Like her husband was responding to a crisis organized and orchestrated by Bismarck who used the vehemence of leaders like Empress Eugenie to bring the French into a war with the Prussians. In order for the Empress to be the cause of the war, she would have had to push the ministry to make the declaration of war, which there is no evidence for in the sources.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Roger D Price, *Napoleon III and the Second Empire* (New York; Routledge, 1997), 61.

<sup>7</sup> David Wetzel, *A Duel of Giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War* (Madison; University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

The final individual theory of war indicates that it was because of an Italian diplomat that the Bismarck pushed the French towards war. The Italian diplomat Count Edoardo de Launay left an account of his interaction with Otto von Bismarck the day that the Hohenzollern candidature was withdrawn on July 12, 1870. In that interaction, he recorded that the Chancellor pressed him to know if rumors were true that Italy would send 80,000 men to assist France in the case of war with Prussia. The diplomat responded that Italy would pursue only a course of neutrality, though that was not a policy that was set in stone.<sup>8</sup> The author of this theory, S. William Halperin, states that Bismarck, “used Italian neutralism to press the South Germans for an immediate commitment to join forces with Prussia.”<sup>9</sup> This theory does not take into account that Bismarck had already been looking for ways to bring about the inevitable war between France and Prussia on his own conditions. Though logically it seems that the efforts of the Italian diplomat assisted Bismarck in having confidence in moving his plot forward, the Italian diplomat was not the reason behind the war. Bismarck indicated that the war was likely to happen prior to July 12 and had already performed his maneuver with the Ems telegram which he did in an attempt to further goad the French into war.

### **Internal Systems**

In examining internal theories there are two dominant theories as to why the Franco-Prussian war began. The first is the Nationalism Theory and the second is the Diversionary War Theory. Both these theories, though powerful, are not as persuasive as the Bismarck Culpability Theory because they fail to account for Bismarck’s direct role in the conflict.

The Nationalism Theory centers on the idea that the Franco-Prussian war was the result of nationalism in both France and the German states. This was an early theory to explain the cause of war and uses as evidence statements made by politicians and the actions of lower classes. One evidence came from the French Minister Ollivier who stated it was the will of the country and not her emperor and

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<sup>8</sup> S. William Halperin, “Bismarck and the Italian Envoy in Berlin on the Eve of the Franco-Prussian War”, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (March 1961), 36-38.

<sup>9</sup> S. William Halperin, “Bismarck and the Italian Envoy in Berlin,” 39.

ministers that led to the French to declare war.<sup>10</sup> This was demonstrated in the street protests and riots that occurred as the French press expressed outrage at the Candidacy. This theory states that because of fears of popular revolt, the French leadership heeded the mob's outcries.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the proponents of this theory point to the nationalism that was growing in the German states, who in 1848 attempted to form a united German government. One striking evidence of this comes from the Hohenzollern family, who implied that they only accepted the Candidacy due to feelings of devotion to Prussia and the greater good of the state.<sup>12</sup> Other pieces of evidence for this theory include the calls for war among the various German states who previously been anti-Prussian, but at the start of the war with France provided some of the most zealous troops against a common enemy.<sup>13</sup> This theory provides much of the context for the background in which Bismarck worked, however, it should be noted that Bismarck used this nationalism and was not used by it. As one author noted, "Bismarck by his steps towards German unification in the 1860s and his treaties with the south German states after 1866 was able to tie German nationalism to Prussia's cause...it was to Bismarck's credit to have worked with and utilized this movement for his and Prussia's purposes."<sup>14</sup> Bismarck *used* nationalism and was not used by it. He took a popular movement

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<sup>10</sup> Emile Ollivier, trans. George Burnham, *The Franco-Prussian War and its Hidden Causes* (Freeport; Books for Libraries Press, 1912), 321.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24; Robert Howard Lord, *The Origins of the War of 1870: New Documents from the German Archives* (New York; Russell and Russell, 1924), 3.

See also Daniela L. Cagliot, "WAGING WAR ON CIVILIANS: THE EXPULSION OF ALIENS IN THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR," *Past & Present*, no. 221 (2013): 167.

<sup>12</sup> Josef Becker, "The Franco-Prussian Conflict of 1870 and Bismarck's Concept of a 'Provoked Defensive War': A Response to David Wetzel," *Central European History*, Vol 41, No 1 (January 2008), 93-109.

<sup>13</sup> Otto Von Bismarck, *My Dear Heart, Homburg* (August 8, 1870), ts. Armin Harder, "Bismarck's Letters to His Wife: From the Seat of War 1870-1871," (New York; D. Appleton & Company, 1903), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Stewart A. Stehlin, "Guelph Plans for the Franco-Prussian War," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (December 1970), 791-792.

and used it to further his designs as a Prussian nationalist.<sup>15</sup> His diplomatic skill in crafting a crisis with the French (who since the days of Napoleon I had been viewed by Germans as a common enemy) in order to bring the southern German states into the Prussian sphere of influence. Like so many other theories, Nationalism Theory was a key part of the crisis, but Bismarck pulled the right strings in his way, not because of nationalism, but because of his own designs.

The Diversionary War Theory is also an explanation for the Franco-Prussian war that has some merit, though does not have the logical strength of the Bismarck Culpability Theory. The Diversionary War Theory is a choice chosen by regimes that are facing challenges within their populace and need to divert the social unrest away from those seeking to displace the ruling regime.<sup>16</sup> In both the French and the Prussian cases there were local outcries against the ruling regime. The Second Empire had increasingly become unpopular and survived a vote of reform, though mostly from the rural districts of the country.<sup>17</sup> The French government in this theory used the war in order to shore up support for the regime. On the Prussian side, Bismarck was faced with regional opposition to the Prussians in the form of King George of Hanover, who sought to rally support to reclaim his kingdom. Evidence for Bismarck using the war to cut off the Guelph Plan (a plan to restore King George to his Kingdom) by recruiting among Hanover for the war against France is promising. Furthermore, the unification of the Southern German states following the war demonstrates that this war was able to divert attention away from the crises at home (the repression of formerly independent kingdoms) by focusing on a national enemy. However, this theory loses some of its force, when it appears that though the Hanoverians were a concern for Bismarck, they lost most of their power prior to the war when the Landtag sequestered

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<sup>15</sup> *Memories of Sedan Day Festivities in the 1870s (Retrospective Account, 1930)*, accessed at: [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=661](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=661).

This account demonstrates the levels of German nationalism that were seen following the victory over France.

<sup>16</sup> Amy Oakes, "Diversionary War and Argentina's Invasion of the Falkland Islands," *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Jul-Sep 2006), 431-463.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas March, *The History of the Paris Commune of 1871* (London; Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1896), 8.

George's fortunes, thus inhibiting George's ability to raise troops.<sup>18</sup> It appears that Bismarck was unconcerned about domestic politics as he was about international politics and promoting German expansion.

### **International Systems**

Among early scholars of the war, the third level theories based on international systems were almost non-existent. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, these theories have gained popularity in explaining the cause of war in society. These theories can be divided into two camps; the choices of the rising power in explaining decisions and a failure to balance among great powers. However, these theories fail to acknowledge the real ability that Bismarck had and his unique skills in manipulating the Concert of Europe in a way that precious few statesmen and women have ever been able to achieve.

Goddard in her analysis of Prussia's overturning the Concert of Europe states, "failures to balance might originate not within potential balancing coalitions, but in the choices of the rising state itself."<sup>19</sup> Goddard focused her analysis and evidence on the build-up in Prussian power between the years of 1848-1870 and how Prussia perfected its rhetoric in legitimizing their conquests by appealing "to shared rules and norms" of the Great Powers. According to Goddard the Great Powers, in turn, allowed for Prussia to undermine the balancing system of Europe, designed to prevent any one power from achieving hegemony.<sup>20</sup> If this theory is true, then we should evidence of other states agreeing with Prussia and allowing them in the 1870 war to destroy the system. One evidence of this is seen in the communications of the Russian diplomat at the time of the crisis who stated that "As for the powers that were not involved in the dispute over the Hohenzollern candidature, Gorchakov insisted that they must not behave like mere supernumeraries. After all, they were the peers of France. They should let France know that they could not approve the declarations which her foreign minister, the Duke of Gramont, had been making in the name of his government. It was quite clear from Gramont's language that he had

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<sup>18</sup> Stewart A. Stehlin, "Guelph Plans for the Franco-Prussian War," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (December 1970), 791-792.

<sup>19</sup> Stacie E. Goddard, "When Right Makes Might: How Prussia Overturned the European Balance of Power," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Winter 2008/2009), 112.

<sup>20</sup> Stacie E. Goddard, "When Right Makes Might," 112.

somehow forgotten that he might be wounding the legitimate pride of the head of a great nation.”<sup>21</sup> This illustrates that the other states did sympathize with the Prussians’ plight. However, this theory again fails to account for the individual power that Bismarck had. He was able through his force of personality to cut deals and secure treaties that other politicians failed to achieve. It was his force of character that allowed for the Prussian diplomacy to convince so many that Prussian ambitions were not a threat to their positions. This neglect of the unique characteristics of Bismarck is a serious critique of this theory.

The second theory is based on Mearsheimer’s theory of balance of power. He contends that in a multipolar system great powers are more willing to “buck-pass” the obligation of confronting a rising Great Power to other states. He specifically argues that buck-passing was the “preferred strategy” of the leadership of 1870 Europe.<sup>22</sup> Another noted, “the underlying cause of the war, however, was the growing power of Prussia, the declining position of France, and the inability of the two states to establish their relative diplomatic weight in Europe through any measure other than war...”<sup>23</sup> and is echoed by scholars who place the root cause of the war in the Austrian loss at Koniggratz.<sup>24</sup> Scholars also point to the efforts of European leaders, such as Russia and Italy, who viewed a defeat of France not as a major setback but an advantage to themselves.<sup>25</sup> These theories of power politics point to a failure to balance among the other Great Powers in Europe. This inherently draws from realist theories about the balance of power and systemic level analyses. Like in the previous great power theory, they neglect to see the dynamic personality that Bismarck had.<sup>26</sup> Though this theory is

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<sup>21</sup> S. William Halperin, “Bismarck and the Italian Envoy in Berlin,” 34.

<sup>22</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York; W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 157-162.

<sup>23</sup> Barry R. Posen, Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power, *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall, 1993)

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>25</sup> S. William Halperin, Bismarck and the Italian Envoy in Berlin on the Eve of the Franco-Prussian War, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Mar 1961), 33-39.

<sup>26</sup> Lord Odo Russell, *Private, Berlin* (11 Feb 1873), accessed at: [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1853](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1853).



useful, it ignores the power that was held by Bismarck who was able to not only incite a war but be able to negotiate peace with his former enemies to prevent their intervention in the conquest.

### **Bismarck Culpability Theory and Conclusion**

This theory states that Otto von Bismarck used his diplomatic skills to lead the French into a war in order to unite the various German states and increase Prussian power in the Concert of Europe system. This idea relies on the Great Man Theory which states that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men.”<sup>27</sup> However, this theory of Bismarck Culpability acknowledges that the causes of war were more nuanced and that multiple factors played into the cause of war. But, the main factor, according to this theory is that Bismarck was primarily responsible for the Franco-Prussian War.

Otto von Bismarck clearly was the cause of the war because he not only was the most influential man in all of Prussia, but he believed the war was inevitable between the two Great Powers of France and Prussia. He wanted to draw the southern German states into the Prussian alliance using nationalism, so he orchestrated the Hohenzollern Candidacy to provoke the French, edited the Ems dispatch to provoke the French press, and refused to use diplomatic skills to avert a war with the regions enemy France.<sup>28</sup> This was because Bismarck believed that the time was right for Prussia to be able to beat the French war machine and form a German Empire. However, the most powerful evidence that Bismarck intentionally orchestrated the war and used his influence to produce conflict is found in his memoirs:

I put a few questions to Moltke as to the extent of his confidence in the state of our preparations, especially as to the time they would still require in order to meet this sudden risk of war. He answered that if there was to be war he expected no advantage to us by deferring its outbreak . . . [Various]

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This letter from a British ambassador illustrates the way in which Bismarck was able to placate his rivals and was seen as completely trustworthy, something many diplomats could not boast.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Carlyle, as quoted in “Strong Personalities,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 158 (Jan-Feb 2007), 2.

<sup>28</sup> S. William Halperin, *The Origins of the Franco-Prussian War Revisited: Bismarck and the Hohenzollern Candidature for the Spanish Throne*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (March 1973), 83-91.

considerations, conscious and unconscious, strengthened my opinion that war could be avoided only at the cost of the honor of Prussia and of the national confidence in it...Under this conviction I made use of the royal authorization ...to publish the contents of the telegram; and in the presence of my two guests I reduced the telegram by striking out words, but without adding or altering...

After some discussion from his fellow officials Bismarck remarked:

It will be known in Paris before midnight, and not only on account of its contents but also on account of the manner of its distribution, will have the effect of a red rag upon the Gallic bull. Fight we must if we do not want to act the part of the vanquished without a battle. Success, however, essentially depends upon the impression which the origination of the war makes upon us and others; it is important that we should be the party attacked.<sup>29</sup>

This piece of evidence from Bismarck's own mouth illustrates how he intended to cause a conflict with the French. Bismarck used his influence and his power to bring out this conflict in order to allow Prussia to rise in power.

Despite the various arguments, the most powerful argument explaining the cause of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 is that Chancellor Otto von Bismarck used his diplomatic skills to produce and orchestrate a conflict between the French and Prussians in order to allow Prussia to increase in power and allow it to annex all the southern German states. This is best shown by the discussions on the Ems telegram and his subsequent editing of that document. It is also shown by his unwillingness to deescalate the tensions and continued to allow the French to proceed toward war. Furthermore, it was from Bismarck's unique skill set and techniques of diplomacy that allowed him to use the various influences such as nationalism and French hatred of Prussians to score a complete victory over his enemies that left many blaming the French as the culprits of the war. Truly the hand of the Chancellor had been instrumental in orchestrating the crisis, the war, and the victory of the Prussian forces that led to the rise of the German Reich.

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<sup>29</sup> Otto Von Bismarck, *Bismarck Remembers the Evening the Ems Dispatch was Edited* (July 13, 1870), accessed at: [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=2663](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=2663).