Chapter 4

Prussia’s Rule-Bound Revolution

Europe and the Destruction of the Balance of Power, 1863–64

The old German adage “right before might” [Ehrlich warhrt am langsten] retains its validity in the last analysis.
—Bernhard von Rechberg, foreign minister of the Austrian Empire, 1859–64

I have beaten them all! All!
—Otto von Bismarck, minister-president, Prussia

In 1815, Europe had been at war with France for almost a quarter of a century. Assembling in Vienna in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, the four major allied states—England, Austria, Russia, and Prussia1—established the Concert of Europe, with the aim of an order more stable and peaceful than that of the eighteenth-century balance-of-power system.2 From 1815 to the 1860s, this European order proved relatively stable. Even after the end of the formal congress system, the European powers sought to manage conflicts and territorial boundaries through the treaties set down by the powers of the Concert of Europe.

Fundamental to this system was the management of German power. As Metternich instructed, “Germany forms the central point of the great ship that is called Europe and it is there that the ballast must rest.”3 Napoleon’s wars had left the Holy Roman Empire in shambles. In its place, the European powers constructed a new confederation, composed of small and mid-sized states, with the two great German powers, Austria and Prussia, at its head. Maintaining the balance of power meant keeping Germany peaceful, but divided. A divided Germany could act as a bulwark against France and Russia; at the same time, with neither Prussia nor Austria able to dominate Germany, it could not threaten the rest of the continent. For this reason, throughout the nineteenth century, the European powers took Metternich’s...
advice to heart. Any attempt to unify Germany—such as Prussia’s efforts in 1848—was met with containment and confrontation.

Yet from 1863 to 1871, Prussia successfully unified Germany and, in the process, revolutionized the foundations of European order. Over the course of three wars—the Danish-Prussian war of 1864, the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1871—Prussia systemically defeated its opponents and consolidated its position as the head of a unified, nationalist Germany. As Prussia expanded, the European powers accommodated Prussia’s revisionist aims. Rather than contain Prussian power, the great powers chose either to sit on the sidelines, or even aid Prussia’s expanse into new territory. In doing so, the European powers facilitated the growth of Prussian power, German unification, and the transformation of European politics.

The decision to accommodate Prussia’s expansion in 1863–64 is of particular historical and theoretical significance. While international politics has all but forgotten about the Danish-German wars over the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein, contemporaries considered the conflict central to the international relations of nineteenth century Europe. European states believed if Prussia were to expand into the duchies, this would have monumental consequences. Each of the major powers recognized that conquest of the duchies could serve as the first step toward German unification under Prussia’s rule. As a result, any successful war against Denmark signaled the birth of a continental powerhouse, one that would upset the balance of power in Europe. Prussia’s expansion, moreover, was normatively disruptive as well. By invading the duchies, Prussia threatened the treaties of 1815, the foundation of Europe’s ideological order.

While some have argued that German unification was the inevitable result of Prussian power and German nationalism, historians have rightly dismissed such explanations as overly determinative and teleological: Prussia’s expansion was far from determined and might have been thwarted through great power intervention. In 1848, a similar attempt to conquer the duchies had failed when Britain and Russia threatened to intervene, and in the 1860s, there were signs that Prussia’s expansion would once again be checked. In 1863, moreover, Prussia remained relatively weak. In order to expand, Prussia needed to ensure England, Russia, and France would not mobilize against its expansion: no small feat, given that each side seemed poised to align with Denmark if Prussia grew too ambitious. Any successful revision, moreover, would require an alliance with Austria, yet this state firmly opposed upsetting the status quo.

Why then did the powers accommodate Prussia, allowing the rising challenger to expand into Schleswig-Holstein and set the stage for German unification? Ultimately the great powers came to see Prussia’s ambitions in the duchies as limited. How the powers reached this conclusion, however, is a puzzle. Neither the politics of harm nor the politics of interest gave a clear view of Prussia’s intentions; indeed, both suggested that Prussia could very
well pursue an aggressive, revolutionary foreign policy, one that capitalized on nationalist movements to overturn the European order. Its actions in Schleswig-Holstein, taken by themselves, provided the powers with little information about whether Prussia would pursue a conservative or revolutionary path. It was Prussia’s legitimation strategies—the way it justified its expansion—that undermined mobilization against its rising might. By invoking reasons that appeared legitimate to the great powers, Prussia’s leaders staved off collective mobilization, advancing into the duchies and laying the foundations for German unification.

With a focus on politicians’ language, I adopt almost a traditional story of Prussia’s rise, placing Bismarck’s diplomacy at the center of Prussia’s triumph. But Bismarck’s success cannot be reduced to genius, charisma, or rhetorical skill. While Bismarck’s appeals were critical in mollifying a hostile Europe, the resonance of his rhetoric—the reasons why his language proved critical—is to be found as much in the positions of the actors, both Prussia and its audience, as they are in the silver tongue of the minister-president. On the one hand, as Prussia prepared to invade the duchies, its leaders adopted a multivocal strategy. To one audience, it framed its actions in the duchies as consistent with the shared rules and norms of the Concert, using the language of treaties purposively designed to resonate with each of the status quo powers. At the same time Prussia deftly used the language of German nationalism to mobilize revisionist coalitions, including both liberal-nationalist factions at home, and revisionist nationalists—such as Napoleon III—abroad. Bismarck and other Prussian leaders could use multivocal language because they were situated at the intersection of traditional dynastic and Concert institutions on the one hand and revolutionary nationalist coalitions on the other. It was this complex position that gave Bismarck and others the capacity to make multivocal claims.

Prussia’s audience, moreover, was institutionally vulnerable, and thus likely to listen to Prussia’s claims. Key status quo powers, Austria and Russia, were deeply embedded in the traditional networks of the Concert system. In 1863, the Concert system was under threat, and those powers most vulnerable to its demise eager to find a partner to support their vision of global politics. It was this combination of rhetoric and institutions that gave language its power and facilitated an almost costless expansion into the duchies. To Austria, Prussia’s language signaled constraint, that Prussia could be bound to international treaties. In Britain and France, Bismarck threatened hypocrisy costs, effectively coercing these governments into supporting Prussia’s rise. And in Russia, Bismarck appealed effectively to Russian identity and, in particular, its existential need to preserve conservative principles in Europe.

Table 4 summarizes Prussia’s legitimation strategies and its effects on each dyad during the Schleswig-Holstein crisis. While the focus of this chapter is on the events of 1863–64, the figure below also summarizes the
great powers’ response to the Schleswig-Holstein crisis of 1848. Throughout the chapter, I draw a comparison between the great powers’ reactions to Prussia’s incursions into Denmark in 1863–64, and its similar advances in the duchies in 1848, where the great powers contained Prussia’s expansion, even threatening confrontation, for fear that Prussia was on the verge of creating a revolutionary German national state.

The Prussian-Denmark War: An Overview of the Conflict

By 1863 Denmark and the German powers had shared power over Schleswig-Holstein for almost four centuries.9 The duchies were a site of persistent territorial disputes. The crisis that would spark Prussia’s war with Denmark, and the beginning of its unification of Germany, began in an argument over constitutional rule and dynastic succession. On March 30, 1863, the Danish king Frederick VII issued a royal ordinance, the “March Patent,” that attempted to prevent German interference in the duchies. The German states were outraged and claimed Denmark had breached the Treaty of London, the 1852 agreement that had ended the first Danish-Prussian war. In November, the crisis intensified when the Danish king promised to implement a liberal constitution, which would further revise its rule in the duchies. To make matters worse, that month the Danish king died. The accession of Christian IX prompted German nationalists to challenge his right to rule the duchies; the Germans argued that the Duke of Augustenburg was the rightful heir to the Schleswig-Holstein throne. As a German noble, if the duke were to take the throne of the duchies, this would secure Schleswig-Holstein’s membership in the German Confederation, and sever its ties with the Danish monarchy.

For all of its complexity, the conflict over the duchies was not simply some obscure dynastic feud. Throughout the nineteenth century the fate of the duchies was intertwined with the larger “German Question,” and the
future of the fragmented German nation. German nationalists hoped to use expansion in the duchies as a springboard for unification, bringing together all the German-speaking populations under a single state. In Denmark too the dispute had taken on nationalist tones, with the “Eiderdanes”—a coalition of Danish nationalists—refusing to rescind the constitution and calling for the expulsion of all German rule from the duchies. The issue had international significance as well. As Mosse argues, “The fate of the Duchies came to involve the sanctity of treaties and the European balance of power . . . part of a wider conflict between the upholders of public law embodied in international engagements and revolutionary nationalist movements.” The conflict over the duchies challenged the treaties of 1815, which established the Danish monarchy as an integral part of the European political equilibrium, as well as the Treaty of London of 1852, which had reaffirmed the status quo of shared sovereignty in the duchies.

For Prussia and its minister-president, Otto von Bismarck, however, the crisis presented an opportunity. If Prussia were to invade Schleswig-Holstein, it could revise the status quo in the German Confederation in its favor. If Schleswig-Holstein became a German state, it would fall in Prussia’s sphere of influence, and shift the balance of power in the confederation away from Austria. Moreover Prussia could use the crisis to mobilize the German states: acting on behalf of Schleswig-Holstein would harness the power of nationalism and secure Prussia’s place at the moral leader of the German Confederation. But Prussia’s leaders understood pursuing its interests would not be easy. Prussia’s attempt in 1848 to expand in the duchies had failed. In the wake of the revolutions, a provisional government in the duchies announced it intended to “join in the movement for German unity and freedom with all our might.” In the duchies’ declaration of unity Prussian leaders saw an opportunity to expand, and immediately proclaimed its support for the German government in the duchies. Within the month Prussia, along with forces from the German states of Hanover, Mecklenburg, Oldenburg, and Brunswick, had invaded the duchies.

In 1848 the European great powers quickly responded, moving to contain and roll back Prussian advances. Britain’s prime minister Benjamin Disraeli denounced Prussia and Germany’s actions and called for military intervention on behalf of Denmark. The Prussians and Germans, he maintained, were clearly “carried away by that dreamy and dangerous nonsense called ‘German nationality,’” and were making an illegitimate attempt to expand. Palmerston cautioned against escalation—he feared a general war on the continent—but agreed that the Prussians had “acted in this matter with unjustifiable violence” and that Britain was bound by treaty to assist Denmark against the advancing Prussian troops. Russia’s reaction was even more severe. The Russian diplomat, Baron Peter von Meyendorff, warned Prussia that any invasion of Denmark would “gravely affect the interests of all the Baltic Powers,” and Russia would have no choice to respond. By
1849, Russia was readying its fleet to assist the Danes. France too promised to protect the integrity of the Danish monarchy. Austria, once Schwarzenberg had quelled the revolutionary forces in Vienna, threatened Prussia and the German states with force if the states refused to accept the status quo, bringing the confederation to the brink of civil war.

Prussia’s revisionist claims in 1848, as Mosse argues, incurred a heavy price, sparking the “cooperation of the other powers and her own complete isolation.” And it seemed any expansion in 1863–64 would provoke the same outcome. As Lawrence Steefel argues, “During the summer of 1863, the international situation had been favorable to Denmark.” Austria and Prussia were not only deeply divided; Austria “was grouped with Denmark’s friends, France and Great Britain.” While Russia and Prussia had worked together on issues of conservative rule, Russia had made it clear to Prussia that it would continue its long-standing support of Denmark, and its preference for the status quo in the duchies. In other words, in late 1863 through early 1864 the European powers seemed poised to effectively contain Prussia. Prussia’s expansion looked almost impossible.

But ultimately, this balancing coalition collapsed, and as historians have argued it collapsed in a baffling way. Shortly after the outbreak of hostilities, the Danish government “appealed to England, France and Russia for aid in the defense of Schleswig in conformity with the treaties of guarantee made in the 18th century and confirmed in 1848.” Yet rather than confront or contain a revisionist Prussia, each of the European powers chose to accommodate Prussia’s demands in the duchies. Austria, which had for so long opposed Prussia’s rising power in Germany, now allied itself with the rising power. At the outset of the crisis, Bismarck approached Austria, arguing that the two German powers should work together to secure the integrity of the duchies against the Danish monarchy. Austria agreed, and by January Austria had committed twenty-three thousand soldiers to an invasion of Schleswig. France too sought cooperation with Prussia; in November 1863 and January 1864 Napoleon III offered, not containment, but an alliance to facilitate Prussia’s expansion into Denmark.

Russia and Britain were the two states that had the capacity to mobilize unilaterally and contain Prussian expansion. Both chose to stand aside as Prussia and Austria dismembered their traditional ally. While at first, the British initially seemed poised to intervene on Denmark’s behalf, ultimately the cabinet refused to sanction intervention. While the British did serve as the central mediator in the end to the conflict in 1864, Britain simply accepted Prussia’s demands for a new status quo in the duchies. Russia, which fifteen years before had mobilized military support for the Danish monarchy, now even seemed sympathetic to Prussia’s demands.

In contrast to 1848, then, the European powers failed to mobilize against Prussia’s expansion. Their decision not to contain or confront the rising
German power was a significant departure from Europe’s policy of keeping Germany divided on the continent, its avowed belief that if Prussia united the German states, the power would become an unmanageable behemoth, capable of overturning the European order. For some, Prussia’s uncontested rise demonstrates inherent structural obstacles to collective mobilization. Cooperation, after all, is difficult under anarchy, especially in multipolar systems. In multipolar systems, each state has incentives to free ride on the efforts of others, and as a result each “passes the buck” when it comes to balancing against an emerging power. The inability on the part of the European powers to engage in collective action thus is not at all surprising.

But anarchy was neither an inevitable nor constant obstacle to collective mobilization in 1864. The historical record does not provide strong evidence of buck-passing during the 1863–64 crisis. Indeed, many of the powers—Britain, Russia, and France—seriously contemplated unilateral action. Other states proved willing to take on military costs, but in surprising ways: Austria, for its part, might have prevented Prussian expansion by refusing to support an invasion of the duchies, yet ultimately the German power reluctantly joined forces with the Prussian state. And as noted above, in the 1848 Danish-Prussian war over Schleswig-Holstein, the powers forged a balancing coalition against Prussia, with England, Russia, and Austria intervening to force Prussia to agree to the Treaty of London and return Schleswig-Holstein to its status of shared sovereignty. When the powers saw Prussia as a threat, as they did in 1848, they proved willing and able to mobilize to check the German adversary.

Others suggest that there were domestic obstacles to collective mobilization, that ongoing internal battles about the nature and intensity of the Prussian threat prevented coherent policies of containment or confrontation. But again, such explanations are problematic. In France, Austria, and Russia domestic obstacles to were weak. The Austrian government—save one minister—agreed to support Prussia’s actions, even though public opinion was fervently anti-Prussian during the crisis. In Russia and France, the tsar and the emperor controlled foreign policy. In Britain, where divisions were most notable, there were strong voices for containment and confrontation: the British public and media were extremely pro-Danish, and probalancing forces could count on support from the Tories, then in opposition. In 1848, these voices had persuaded the British public that mobilizing against Prussia was necessary to protect British security. Why they failed to do so in 1864 remains a puzzle to be explained.

Overall, it is not that the great powers could not mobilize against Prussia’s expansion into the duchies; it is that they chose to stand aside as Prussia conquered the duchies and used its expansion as a springboard for German unification. They did so because they ultimately judged that Prussia held limited aims in the duchies, ambitions that could be contained within the
existing European order. And this raises the question: why did the great powers decide Prussia’s invasion of the duchies represented only a limited threat? Why did the great powers perceive Prussia’s actions in 1863–64 as less revolutionary than they were in 1848, and not worthy of collective mobilization against the adversary?

**PRUSSIA AND THE POLITICS OF HARM**

As argued in chapter 1, great powers often look to the politics of harm to judge the ambition of a potential adversary: states look to a rising power’s behavior for costly signals that a rising challenger can or cannot threaten their security. From this perspective, the answer to the Schleswig-Holstein puzzle might seem a simple one: in 1863 Prussia posed little threat to the European powers. At the onset of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, Prussia was a weak and fragmented state. On the continent, it was hemmed in on three sides. Austria was arguably still the reigning hegemon in the German Confederation, and more than a match for Prussia’s military. Napoleon III’s France, which had recently wrested territory from the Austrian Empire, seemed ready to contain Prussia’s expansion to the west. And Russia’s foreign policy had long constrained Prussia, so much so that some viewed the German power as practically a client state of the tsar. When one adds to this the fact that Prussia’s target was Denmark—hardly a great power of note—the reaction of the status quo powers needs no explanation. As Mearsheimer remarks, “It is not surprising that none of the European great powers balanced . . . in 1864 because the stakes were so small.”

But the great powers did see the invasion of Schleswig-Holstein as potential threat to their security, a sign that Prussia could become a powerful revolutionary force in European politics. As it became clear that Prussia was going to act in Schleswig-Holstein, the question of how to react to its aggression became the primary focus of all the European governments. Their concern was understandable. Prussia was already a rising power, both in terms of its industrial strength and its military might. During the 1850s and 1860s, Prussia was reaping the benefits of the world’s industrial boom. Prussia’s industrialization led to an explosion in its railway network, and its growth in critical industries “such as steel smelting and machine-building, was supported by a phenomenal expansion in the extraction of fossil fuels.” While the economy slowed briefly in the late 1850s, by 1860 it had not only recovered but grown more robust. In 1865, Bismarck was boasting “that the Danish war had largely been financed out of budget surpluses for the previous two years” and that Prussia “could wage the Danish War twice over” without needing outside financial support. The great powers were thus not sanguine about Prussia’s revisionism; they saw the invasion of Schleswig-Holstein as a potential sign of what the German power would do with its newfound might.
Even if Prussia’s rising power was concerning, it may be that the invasion of Schleswig-Holstein seemed defensive and limited in scope, prompting no need to mobilize against the potential adversary. Yet Prussia’s offensive actions in 1863–64 had the potential to pose a significant threat to the European powers. The invasion of the duchies put Prussia in a position to seize Denmark’s ports on the Baltic, and gain a strategic hold where it could threaten both British and Russian security. Those fears helped drive Britain and Russia toward confrontation with Prussia in 1848; their fears that incursions into Schleswig-Holstein would have profound strategic consequences for the European powers had not diminished.29

More important, the great powers also understood that Prussia could use the crisis over Schleswig-Holstein as the starting point to reorganize Germany.30 As Bismarck himself explained to an Austrian envoy, Prussia would “seize the first best pretext to declare war against Austria, dissolve the German diet, subdue the minor states and give national unity to Germany under Prussian leadership.” Upon hearing the conversation, Disraeli certainly had no difficulty interpreting Bismarck’s meaning. As he remarked, “Take care of that man; he means what he says.”31 Prussia would not remain on the defensive, or forego the use of force. Rather “Prussia must build up and preserve her strength for the advantageous moment. . . . The great questions of the day will not be settled by speeches and majority decisions . . . but by blood and iron”32

Schleswig-Holstein would serve nicely as Bismarck’s “best pretext” for expansion. If Prussia were to succeed in Schleswig-Holstein, it would become the leader of the German Confederation, and lay the grounds for national unity under its hegemony. Gone would be the multiple middle-states, such as Bavaria and Hanover, that served as a check on Prussian and Austrian power. In its place would be a German industrial behemoth. Indeed, invading Schleswig-Holstein would put Prussia in the position to overturn the very foundations of the European order. In 1815 the Concert treaties had established a unified Danish kingdom as an indispensable part of the European political equilibrium. If Denmark could be invaded with impunity, this might tear apart the last vestiges of the Concert order. Prussia could use the invasion to galvanize a powerful revolutionary coalition against the status quo powers, perhaps even working with France to challenge the existing order.

Given this, it is hard to see Schleswig-Holstein as inherently limited and defensive. This should not be surprising: it was precisely because Prussia’s invasion of Schleswig-Holstein was such a threat—because it could unleash revolutionary nationalism, increase Prussian strength, and destroy Denmark’s integrity—that drove the European powers to mobilize against Prussia in 1848. There was no reason for the great powers to view Prussia’s invasion of Schleswig-Holstein as any less revolutionary than they saw it in 1848.
The Politics of Interest

Another possibility is that the politics of interest drove Europe’s decision to accommodate Prussia’s expansion in the duchies. While Prussia’s actions in Schleswig-Holstein could have put the rising challenger in a position to threaten the great powers, Prussia’s interests indicated that it would not do so: it would be too costly for Prussia to adopt revolutionary aims in Schleswig-Holstein. Doing so would provoke a fierce balancing coalition and risk the costs of war. If Prussia provoked its European partners, it would incur economic and diplomatic costs as well. As a result, the great powers could remain confident that Prussia would continue on a limited course, both in the duchies and in the future. At most, Prussia would act as a limited-aims revisionist, interested in expanding and unifying Germany, but not at all interested in becoming a continental hegemon.33

Such limited aims, moreover, were consistent with the interests of the great powers. For Britain, a strong Germany, united under a Prussian government, could be a boon to its economy and security in Europe. A unified Germany could check France and Russia, and preserve Britain’s desired balance of power on the continent; as Castlereagh noted almost fifty years before the crisis, British policy should aim to ensure that “Germany might again be confederated in the same system, to render it an impregnable bulwark between the great States in the East and West of Europe.”34 Later British politicians would proclaim a similar harmony of interests, especially as it came to see a Germany as a potential economic and political ally on the continent. As Palmerston wrote in 1847, “There can be no doubt that it is greatly for the Interest of England to cultivate a close political Connection and alliance with Germany, as it is also the manifest interest of Germany to ally itself politically with England. The great Interests of the two are the same.”35 Russia too had reasons to want the “consolidation of Germany under the leadership of Prussia.”36 It was only Prussia, Russia believed, that could prevent France from wreaking revolutionary havoc in Poland and the German states. For this reason, Meyendorff extolled the virtues of unification under Prussian leadership: “If a chance remains of saving Germany, it is from here [Berlin] that the impulse must come. God grant that the effort be successful. . . . May the Germans, enlightened about their true interests, understand that Russia can wish only to see Germany powerful and united.”37

From this perspective, then, the Schleswig-Holstein crisis seems to epitomize a successful signaling process, with both Prussia and the great powers communicating their harmonious interests. Yet while there can be no doubt that interests guided the foreign policies of the great powers, they far from determined the response to Prussia’s expansion in the duchies. For one, the interests of the great powers were not all that clear. As Mosse argues, whatever attitude the powers had toward a unified Germany, it
“was modified by the appearance of the Schleswig-Holstein question.”

Whatever the benefits of unification, the great powers believed that they had an equal—if not greater—interest in maintaining the integrity of the Danish monarchy. If Prussia were to act to undermine the Danish monarchy, Russia warned, a “rupture between Russia and Prussia was inevitable.”

Likewise, British politicians feared that the dissolution of the monarchy would have catastrophic consequences and that they should defend Denmark, even if this stood in the way of German unification. There was no straightforward path for the powers based on interests.

More important, explanations that focus on the politics of interest cannot explain how it is that the European powers resolved their uncertainty about Prussia’s aims. For many of these powers, a strong Prussia at the head of Germany could be a valuable ally, but only under specific conditions: the powers’ perceptions of their interests turned on what type of power Prussia was, and what type Germany would become. For Russia and Austria, the primary concern was whether Prussia would use Schleswig-Holstein to unleash nationalist forces in European politics. It was not clear that Prussia would steer clear of this path—while its own government was conservative, taking the mantle of revolutionary nationalism would give it unchallenged power in the German Confederation. If Prussia turned to such forces to consolidate its power, then Russia would have to resist, as “a unitary national movement in Germany threatened to destroy alike the princely dynasties and the internal divisions which secured Russia’s influence . . . the Russian national interest appeared to demand the maintenance of the status quo in Germany.”

Likewise, Austria remained uncertain as to whether Prussia would toe the conservative line in the duchies. As Elrod writes, “A conservatively inclined Prussia was an invaluable ally for Austria: a Prussia of another persuasion was an uncontrollable rival.”

Likewise, for Britain, while a restrained Germany could be a powerful ally on the continent, a revolutionary German power would tip the balance against Britain. And Schleswig-Holstein offered very little clarification of what type of power Prussia was. Commenting on Prussia’s behavior, one official wrote, “It is not easy to understand the policy of Prussia,” which seemed to waver back and forth between nationalist revolutionary forces on the one hand and traditional conservatism on the other. Likewise, the Times complained that “the real difficulty lies in the uncertainty of the future conduct” of Prussia, which they thought might be “already acting under the dictates of revolutionary passion.”

In sum, the politics of interest did little in and of itself to answer the great power’s questions about their adversary’s intentions. As the crisis over Schleswig-Holstein erupted in 1863, the European states remained mired in uncertainty. What was the extent of Prussia’s aims? Would Bismarck and his master, Wilhelm, seek simply to guarantee the rights of Schleswig-Holstein,
or would they seek to destroy the Danish monarchy? Was Prussia pursuing its goals within the treaties of 1815, or was it seeking a revolution, a new European order to take the place of the old? The situation was particularly fraught, because Britain, Russia, and Austria already had one revolutionary on their hands: Napoleon III had proclaimed his ambition to transform the foundations of the European order. A second revolutionary, this one positioned in the heart of conservative Europe, would likely make that revolutionary future a reality. To understand how and why these powers resolved their uncertainty requires analyzing not only the politics of harm and interest but the politics of legitimacy.

**Prussia and the Politics of Legitimacy**

As the crisis unfolded, most of the powers—save France—decided that Prussia was no revolutionary, and that the rising power would pursue limited aims on the continent. Bismarck was intent on communicating Prussia’s “limited” aims: he realized, as historians argued, that the reaction of the great powers to his expansion depended on how they interpreted his ultimate intentions on the continent. And in retrospect it seems that European powers read Prussia’s ambitions correctly—by the 1880s, Bismarck was declaring Germany a satisfied power, with no interest in self-aggrandizement and promising to play the “honest broker” of Europe.46

Yet the way in which Prussia communicated its intentions should be puzzling for rationalist approaches. Very little of what Bismarck promised was credible, and Prussia’s costly signals were often unsettling at best. Certainly a liberal power looked with suspicion even on the appointment of Bismarck to the position of minister-president, which seemed to signal Prussia’s conservative commitments. During the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, moreover, British politicians and newspapers pointed to signs of an aggressive and revisionist Germany, ready to dismember the Danish monarchy. As one correspondent noted, the cry of Germany was “Schleswig-Holstein to the rescue,” and that the Germans are “to a man eager to see the banners and men-at-arms of Germany crossing their frontiers.”47 Austria was hardly assuaged by Bismarck’s desire to undercut its position in the confederation. Not even Russia found Prussia’s actions convincing. The Russian diplomat Count Paul Oubril expressed alarm at Bismarck’s appointment and believed Prussia had appointed a “dangerous man” to guide a revisionist foreign policy.48

When Prussia did promise restraint, as Bismarck did repeatedly during the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, much of what he said was cheap talk: commitments easily broken, private statements that could be denied. The signals were also ambiguous. Indeed, as discussed in detail below, part of Prussia’s success depended on the fact that different powers interpreted Prussia’s
statements differently throughout the crisis. Despite the seeming emptiness and ambiguity of these statements, Prussia’s politicians persuaded the great powers that accommodation—not containment or confrontation—was the answer to Prussia’s first forays into its revisionist aims.

What is missing in conventional accounts, I argue, is the politics of legitimacy. Prussia’s justification of its expansion provided, not a costly, but a resonant signal of Prussia’s intentions and ensured accommodation of its power in European politics. As argued in chapter 2, legitimation strategies resonate under two conditions: when the rising power is multivocal, able to appeal across broad coalitions, and when the great powers are institutionally vulnerable and susceptible to believing what an adversary says about its actions. It is these two conditions that allowed Prussia’s appeals to resonate with the great powers. As a result, these legitimation strategies had powerful effects on the European powers’ ability to mobilize against Prussia’s revisionism: they convinced the great powers that it had limited aims; they silenced hawks that hoped to confront Prussia in the duchies; and even persuaded some powers, notably Austria and Russia, that Prussia would work to uphold conservative norms in international politics. How this process unfolded is the subject to which we now turn.

**The Politics of Legitimacy: Prussia’s Justifies Its Invasion of the Duchies, 1863–64**

As the Schleswig-Holstein crisis unfolded, it seemed likely Prussia would face an insurmountable balancing coalition. Russia, Britain, and France all appeared poised to intervene, either unilaterally or as a coalition, and with force if necessary. All Austria had to do, moreover, was stand aside—without Austria’s assistance, Prussian elites believed any action against Denmark would fail. If successful action in the duchies was to be possible, Prussia needed to disrupt this collective mobilization and persuade each of the great powers that an invasion would be justified.49 Prussia’s leaders, especially Bismarck, believed that whether these powers would mobilize depended on the reasons the German power gave for intervention. As Bismarck explained to his foreign minister, Prussia had at its disposal “means of securing . . . essential objects and interests” if it used the “justification of our efforts to reach our object in a somewhat devious way.”50

At the outset of the crisis, there were three ways in which Prussia could legitimate its invasion of the duchies. First, it could justify its aggression as a means of upholding the Treaty of London, the 1852 treaty that had reestablished the status quo in the duchies after the revolutions of 1848. In this framing, it was Denmark that had violated the treaty by attempting to sever Holstein from the German Confederation. Prussia, for its part, was resorting to military force as a means to ensure the status quo, allowing the German powers and Denmark to continue to share
sovereignty over the duchies, with Holstein in particular remaining a part of the German Confederation. Second, Prussia could claim that it was acting to secure the dynastic rights of the Duke of Augustenburg in Schleswig-Holstein against an illegitimate Danish king and constitution. Doing so, in practice, would sever the two duchies from Danish rule, and undercut the integrity of the Danish monarchy. Finally, Prussia’s leaders could embrace the revolutionary rhetoric of German nationalism, arguing that its invasion of the duchies was justified as a measure to protect German minority rights. Here again it was Denmark, not Prussia, that had pushed the powers into this position, by violating the rights of German speakers in the duchies.

Prussia’s leaders recognized that only the first of these justifications—appeals to the Treaty of London—would legitimate Prussia’s invasion of the duchies to an international audience. As an editorial in the Times stated at the outset of the crisis, if Prussia were to invade the duchies to support the duke, it “would violate a solemn Treaty only eleven years old; it would seek to renew the practice of war from the assertion of dynastic rights, and it would do its best to destroy one of the most respectable and inoffensive States in Europe. By attempting this it is most certain that it would draw down on itself not only odium, but retribution.” Invading Holstein and Schleswig in the name of the treaty, Bismarck realized, was necessary if Prussia wanted to expand without resistance: only if Prussia appeared to uphold the treaties would Austria, Russia, and Britain stand down.

But legitimation was no straightforward task. Prussia faced a serious revisionist dilemma, where language that would resonate to some audiences would appear illegitimate to other powerful coalitions. Even among the “status quo” powers—Britain, Austria, and Russia—there was some disagreement as to what constituted a legitimate invasion of the duchies. For Austria and Russia, a legitimate foreign policy was one that not only reinforced international treaties, but also protected dynastic rights; in contrast, Britain saw dynastic rights as outdated and took a firm stand on the Treaty of London—only expansion that would reinforce this treaty would be accepted as legitimate. Despite these differences over the status of dynastic rights in international politics, appealing to the Treaty of London would satisfy both of these parties.

More problematic was appealing to revisionist and revolutionaries, both at home and abroad. France’s Napoleon III had proclaimed the treaties of Europe irrelevant, that only policies based on nationalism had any legitimacy. France might have been an historic enemy, but it could not be ignored: not only did it have the power to make Prussia’s expansion costly, Napoleon III was using nationalist appeals to woo German revolutionaries as well. If France outbid Prussia on German nationalism, Prussia could face a French-led “Confederation of the Rhine” on its border. At home, moreover, Prussia’s leaders were wrestling with an impossible
situation, with factions eager to undercut Prussia’s power in the German Confederation. In 1863, German liberals controlled the German Diet, and its ministers were eager to liberate Schleswig-Holstein in the name of national self-determination. These liberals distrusted Bismarck, who they saw as a conservative reactionary whose greatest ambition was to restore monarchical control. German liberals saw the looming battle over Schleswig-Holstein as opportunity to use nationalist public opinion to outflank Prussia and Austria, to portray the hegemons of Germany as no more than puppets of a status quo that kept the nation divided. And the nationalist Diet seemed unafraid to provoke international condemnation as well. As a Times correspondent reported, for example, German nationalists condemned Britain’s “brutal attempt at intimidation” and attempts to squelch German rights to self-determination.52

Herein then lay a seemingly impossible dilemma: to prevent the mobilization of the status quo powers, Prussia had to appear to uphold treaties that underpinned the European order. To mobilize the revisionist support it needed to pursue its expansion, it needed to appeal simultaneously to revolutionary actors at home and abroad. Legitimating Prussia’s actions to multiple coalitions required a multivocal legitimation strategy, the capacity to speak to nationalist and conservative principles simultaneously. On the one hand, Prussia’s leaders, especially Bismarck, “rested his case against the Western powers on strict adherence to the Treaties of London.”53 In this framing, Bismarck justified Prussia’s interest in the duchies as an attempt to uphold the Treaty of London, and the broader principles of a European equilibrium on which it was based. Prussia might be expanding, but its reasons were limited: the state would neither spread revolution nor revise the European order. As epitomized by his well-reported speech of December 1863:

Our position with respect to the Danish question is determined by a past from which we cannot at pleasure detach ourselves, and which imposes upon us duties towards the European powers... Prussia’s position in the affair is in the first place regulated by the London Treaty of 1852. It may be deplored that the treaty was ever signed; but since signed it was, honour and prudence alike command us to allow no doubt to be cast upon our fidelity to treaties.54

As Bismarck argued, any intervention in the duchies was only to secure “the essential objects and interests which prevailed in the negotiations of 1851 and 1852.”55 Indeed, throughout the crisis, there is no moment that Bismarck publicly justifies Prussia’s actions in Schleswig-Holstein without reference to the treaty.

At the same time, both nationalist and dynastic legitimations for Prussia’s actions pervaded the crisis. In this narrative of events, Prussia was justified in taking radical action, overturning the treaties in order to secure
German rights in the duchies. Prussia, as the National Zeitung proclaimed, had a right to intervene in Schleswig-Holstein to “vindicate [the duke’s] right of inheritance” and protect Schleswig-Holstein from “an unlawful pretender.” Protecting the “right of the Duchies to indivisibility and independence was not only justified as securing “hereditary right of the Augustenburg family.” It was also a nationalist action, fulfilling the “will of the whole nation.”

The multivocal content of Prussia’s legitimation strategies persisted throughout the crisis. To trace the content of Prussia’s legitimation strategies, I looked at Prussian justifications as reported by the Times during the heart of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, from November 1863 to February 1864. During the crisis, the Times reported on the Germany’s internal politics surrounding the crisis, communicating to the British public speeches by prominent leaders (including Wilhelm and Bismarck), debates in the German Diet, editorials in German newspapers about the duchies, and other intelligence about Prussia’s actions in the duchies. I looked at forty-four articles describing Prussia’s position on the duchies, coding legitimating phrases in these articles into three categories: appeals to international treaties and law, appeals to dynastic rights, and appeals to German nationalism. This qualitative content analysis supports the argument that the Prussians consistently used a mix of justifications to explain their actions in the duchies. Appeals to international law dominate discussion of the duchies, especially among Prussian officials: over half of the legitimating phrases references international law, especially the London Protocol, as the reason for Prussia’s invasion. But these appeals were mixed with justifications that invoked either dynastic rights or German nationalism, which accounted for the other combined 50 percent of legitimating claims.

There is ample evidence that Prussia’s Janus-faced rhetoric was chosen strategically: Prussian elites were careful in formulating their legitimation strategies. For example, fearful of appearing revolutionary at one point, Bismarck urged the German Confederation to drop its nationalist claims and legitimate their actions on grounds of the European equilibrium as set forth in the Treaty of London. Prussia asked that the confederation refer to any military action in Holstein as an “execution” (which would recognize the succession of Christian IX in the duchies as legitimate), not as an “occupation” (which would suggest that Christian IX had no standing in the German Confederation, and thus no legitimate sovereign title within the duchies). In other words, Prussia insisted that the Diet change not their actions, but their justifications. Likewise Bismarck would constrain other Prussian elites—even Wilhelm—from using the wrong language at the wrong time. Nationalist language might work for French diplomats and German nationalists, but he argued it was to be avoided when speaking to the Austrians or Russians.
At times Bismarck and the king relied on deception to create multivocality, shifting their rhetoric, depending on the audience. Private appeals to France and the German Confederation took on a decidedly nationalist tone, whereas confidential correspondence with Austria, Russia, and Britain emphasized conservative principles and European treaties. Different speakers would rely on different language as well. The German ministers and national parties were more likely to appeal either dynastic rights or German nationalism in justifying actions in the duchies. In contrast, Wilhelm often appealed to German “honor,” and Bismarck would consistently express Prussia’s role in Europe and obligations to treaties. But multivocality was not merely grounded in deception or inconsistency: individuals would also use multivocal legitimation strategies, even when they were speaking publicly. In the same speech where Bismarck pledged Prussia’s obligation to treaties, for example, he also used language that hinted at more aggressive, nationalist actions, noting that the government would reserve decision as to when it was appropriate to free itself from the treaty in the name of German interests. Prussia, Bismarck assured the Diet, would pursue its “highest political duty—care for the honour and security of our own country.”

A later speech by Wilhelm invoked treaty obligations and national aspirations simultaneously: it argued that Prussia would act in the name of the treaty, yet noted that “that no foot’s breadth of German land, that no fraction of German rights shall be sacrificed.” Likewise, Wilhelm promised to “conduct the matter of the Duchies in a manner worthy of the honour of Prussia and Germany, while at the same time preserving that respect for treaties required by the right of nations.”

As argued in chapter 2, multivocality depends not only on the content of speech but the speaker, and Prussia’s leaders were positioned to make multivocal claims: tied to multiple coalitions, ranging from conservative to revolutionary parties, Prussian leaders had the authority to invoke multiple principles to legitimate their actions in the duchies. The complexity of Prussia’s position can be seen at the international, domestic, and even individual levels. In the international system, for example, Prussia was nested within both traditional aristocratic coalitions and emerging economic and nationalist networks as well. The Hohenzollern dynasty was historically embedded in dynastic political networks, as well as a “great power” within the European system. As a result, its leaders had the authority to make appeals to conservative principles, to invoke the principles of European treaties in justifying their claims.

At the same time, by the onset of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, Prussia’s coalitions had grown diverse. Prussia’s leadership of the Zollverein, a German customs union formed in 1834 to manage tariffs among the German states, forged economic ties with liberal actors in the German states. As the liberal bourgeoisie became more nationalist in their ideology, so too did the Zollverein become a political as well as an economic resource.
Ideologically, both members of the Prussian monarchy and cabinet maintained strong ties with the transnational liberal-nationalist movement; the Crown Prince, Frederick III, and his wife had been particularly sympathetic to the national-liberals. Prussia maintained diplomatic and economic ties with Napoleon III as well, signing a far-reaching free trade agreement with France in 1862.

Domestically, moreover, Prussia was a fragmented state, and it wasn’t always clear whether conservative or revolutionary factions had the upper hand. In the wake of the 1848 revolutions, the Prussian monarch had reluctantly conceded to a constitution. Prussia was no democracy, but its elected national parliament made it a competitive, constitutional state. Electoral competition had shifted the balance-of-power away from aristocratic landowners and toward the emerging liberal bourgeoisie. When Bismarck came into office in 1862, liberal factions controlled 230 of the 325 deputies to parliament. So intense was the competition between liberals and conservatives that during a standoff over military reform between Bismarck and Wilhelm on one side and the German parliament on the other Wilhelm almost abdicated to his liberal son. Such fragmentation, often portrayed as a drain on a rising power’s grand strategy, gave Prussia an advantage. Unlike conservative powers such as Austria, who struggled to mobilize the German states behind programs of reform, Prussia’s government could credibly commit to speaking for both liberal-nationalist and conservative factions.

And then there was Bismarck himself. As Christopher Clark describes, by the time he took office, Bismarck’s wide-ranging ties to various parties made him a bit of a sphinx: “Bismarck appeared to stand outside the ideological prescriptions of any one interest. He was not an aristocratic corporatist; nor, on the other hand, was he, or could be, a liberal. . . . The result was a freedom from ideological constraints that made his behavior unpredictable.” Contemporary observers agreed with this assessment. As one remarked when Bismarck assumed power, “Bismarck is a chameleon to whom every party lays claim.” With a conservative aristocratic lineage, Bismarck was deeply embedded in traditional networks and was close friends with key conservative politicians like Ludwig von Gerlach and Otto Theo von Manteuffel. But Bismarck also cultivated ties with nationalists: as early as 1859, Bismarck was making discreet overtures to the National Verein, suggesting that Prussia might be willing to fulfill its program of a kleindeutsch German state.

It was this combination of content and position that gave Prussia’s leaders the power to speak multivocally, to portray their actions in Schleswig-Holstein as consistent with several different principles simultaneously. They could use nationalist legitimations to appeal to their revolutionary factions on the one hand, and use the talk of treaties to mobilize their conservative aristocratic coalitions on the other. They could claim to be a state embedded
in dynastic lineages, and yet position themselves at the vanguard of a liberal, economic national state on the other. It is not surprising, then, that so many have emphasized Bismarck’s remarkable diplomatic skill as the foundation of Germany unification, that is, his ability to persuade and coerce was key to Prussia’s expansion in the duchies and beyond. But while Bismarck’s rhetoric is central, a focus on the speaker is incomplete: Prussia’s justifications resonated, not only because of Bismarck’s skill, but because of his audience’s position in Europe’s governing institutions, positions that left these leaders vulnerable to Bismarck’s claims.

**BELIEVING THE LIE: GREAT POWERS AND INSTITUTIONAL VULNERABILITY**

That Prussia was speaking multivocally was no secret but, despite recognition that Prussia’s rhetoric was strategic and ambiguous, that it was as revolutionary as it was conservative, it still resonated with the great powers. Ironically it was in the weakness of the Concert that Prussia’s legitimations found their strength: leaders’ justifications resonated precisely because so many of the great powers perceived themselves as institutionally vulnerable, and thus eager to hear Prussia’s claims.

Not all the members of Prussia’s audience were similarly positioned in Concert institutions. On the one hand Austria and Russia occupied a position of extreme institutional vulnerability: both were firmly embedded in dynastic and Concert institutions, and both believed that the normative architecture of the system was becoming increasingly unsettled. Austria, by far, was the state that remained most invested in traditional European networks. As Crankshaw argues, Austria more than any other power had a strong interest in preserving the sanctity of treaties, as “the past development and continued existence of her remarkable empire was based on the strict observance of international agreement.”76 Austria had helped create the Concert institution, and in 1863 Austrian ministers—especially Rechberg—were determined to follow in the “Metternichian” tradition, committed to the “old German adage ‘right before might’ [Ehrlichwahrtam langsten] retains its validity in the last analysis.”77 As Elrod argues, Austria’s ideological commitment to treaties coincided with its imperial interests. As Rechberg insisted, any foreign policy “based on the different nationalities would be of incalculable disadvantage to the service of His Majesty the Emperor,” sowing discord among the Slavs, Poles, and Italians living in the Habsburg Empire.78

Russia’s position was more robust than Austria’s—it was not by any objective measure a “declining” empire and was not (yet) facing revolution in the core of its territory. Still, Russia’s leaders viewed the state as deeply invested in traditional European dynastic and diplomatic networks. Russia might not be able to rebuild the venerated “Holy Alliance” of the early Concert period, but it still hoped for a “moral coalition”
that would cement relations among the conservative powers as a bulwark against revisionism. Tsar Nicholas’s ministers, moreover, viewed nationalist movements as a serious threat to its position, both for practical and ideological reasons. For a century at least, Russia had struggled to put down nationalist movements in vanquished Poland, and in 1863 was facing renewed challenges to its rule. Nationalism, more broadly, was viewed as an ideological attack on legitimist rule, which Russia had placed at the center of the Concert since its inception. And now such institutions were clearly under threat. With the rise of Napoleon III’s nationalist revisionism, Russia’s government was actively seeking, as one diplomat reported to Russell, “the formation of a sort of moral coalition against revolutionary conspiracy, Ultra-Democracy, exaggerated nationalism, and Military Bonapartist France.” Russia, as Mosse remarks, “would not abandon as lightly as the rest of Europe the defence of the treaty and of the established order.”

Of the great powers, Britain and France were the least institutionally vulnerable. By the late nineteenth century, Britain was increasingly distant from the Concert, acting as “offshore balancer” unwilling to become enmeshed in European conflicts. In 1863 France was also disengaged from the Concert institutions, positioned not as a status quo actor, but as a revolutionary. This had not always been the case. Louis Napoleon came to rule by plebiscite in December of 1848; on December 2, 1851, a coup dissolved the Corps Législatif, placing him at the head of France. A year later, Napoleon proclaimed the Second Empire, giving himself the title of Napoleon III. As an “elected” emperor, he proclaimed both popular support and dynastic legitimate right. It was only in the 1860s that Napoleon III adopted the principles of revolutionary nationalism and launched a frontal attack against the foundations of the European order itself. And in 1863, Napoleon III believed France faced a critical moment: with nationalist movements fomenting across the continent, and Germany poised to unify under its revolutionary banner, Napoleon III saw an opportunity to take the lead in the nationalist movement. If the moment passed, so to would France face decline.

As chapter 2 predicts, this difference in position shaped how Prussia’s audience heard its legitimation strategies, and as a result, the intensity of the mechanisms that shaped collective mobilization. In Austria and Russia, evidence suggests legitimation strategies significantly shaped perceptions of Prussian threat, persuading the powers that Prussia’s aims were limited and undercutting mobilization against the power. Prussia persuaded an institutionally vulnerable Austria that it was, and would continue to be, limited in its aims, bound by the European treaty order. Austria was particularly susceptible to claims that a partnership with Prussia could shore up its identity as a conservative power. Likewise Russia saw in Prussian claims a bulwark against the existential threat of nationalist movements. Interestingly, rhetorical coercion appears less visible in these cases. This may indicate how
deeply vested Russia and Austria were in these institutions, that dissent from conservative legitimation principles was unimaginable.

In contrast, Britain was far less institutionally vulnerable. Given the British position, it is perhaps surprising that Bismarck’s rhetoric had as much of an effect on Britain as it did. As detailed in the case below, there is some evidence that Prussia convinced British leaders that its aims were limited. More powerful were the effects of rhetorical coercion, the ability of Bismarck to silence Prussia’s opponents. In this case, the overarching outcome in Britain was one of continued uncertainty: most observers advocated for a “wait and see” approach, and the key advocates of containment—Prime Minister Palmerston and Foreign Minister John Russell—were ineffective and largely silenced by Bismarck’s claims. In France, Bismarck’s appeals were also read through Napoleon III’s position: in Prussia’s nods to nationalism, France both saw a potential partner for revisionism, and at the same time recognized that Prussia’s rhetoric increased the costs of containment. By the end of the crisis, France believed that if they balanced against Prussia, this would delegitimate their policies elsewhere.

**Legitimation and the Politics of Collective Mobilization**

Throughout the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, Prussia’s legitimation strategy had profound effects on collective mobilization, one that takes us beyond the politics of harm and interest, and into the politics of legitimacy. In Austria and Russia, Prussia’s rhetoric effectively signaled that it would be bound by international norms, that it would act in the name of a conservative identity, and thus persuaded those powers to accept its expansion in the duchies. In both France and Britain, Prussia’s legitimation strategy set rhetorical traps and raised the costs of confronting Prussia’s rise.

**Austria’s Fateful Accommodation: The Decision to Ally with Prussia**

One of the most significant and yet befuddling effects of Bismarck’s legitimation strategies was the fact that Austria was persuaded, not only to refrain from confrontation, but to assist Prussia’s expansion in the duchies. This persuasion was critical to Prussia’s success: without Austria’s help, Prussia feared that it would be left alone to face a balancing coalition of France, Britain, and Russia—a coalition it was far too weak to overcome. For some, Austria’s choice is not much of a puzzle. While the state’s decision might not have been wise in retrospect, at the time it was a simple calculation of power and interests. These scholars argue that Prussia and Austria had long struggled for supremacy among the German-speaking principalities of central Europe. Each hoped to become the hegemonic...
power in a unified Germany, and both believed that expanding into Schleswig-Holstein was the first step toward achieving that goal. But the fact is that in 1863 Austria, far from a willing partner, was a formidable obstacle to Prussia’s rise. Austria had no interest in seeing the status quo overturned in the duchies. Indeed, Austria feared that any expansion would be fueled by German nationalism, a movement the state saw as inherently threatening its position in Europe. Austria perceived German nationalism as a threat to its own multiethnic empire, whose position had grown more tenuous in the mid-nineteenth century. If Austria were to appear overly devoted to Germany, then, as Rechberg argued, “the Hungarians, the south Slavs, the Poles, and the Italians would unite in the dictum that they would reject any policy that requires sacrifices of money and blood for Germany.”

Furthermore, Austria viewed both its international and domestic stability as dependent on the treaties of Vienna and conservative dynastic legitimacy. Austria believed any nationalist attempt to upset these treaties—even if it increased Austria’s material power—was a threat to the Habsburg’s dynastic legitimacy. As argued by one Austrian minister during the crisis, “The [Austrian] Empire . . . has always been governed upon the sole basis of the principle of legitimacy. It would be a very great blot on its history if this principle should ever be departed from. Supported by the traditions of his House, the Emperor has never abandoned it, and never will abandon it . . . for a departure from them would bring direct injury to members of the Imperial Family.”

If expansion into the duchies were justified on nationalist grounds, Austria would reject it. Indeed Austria had already refused one plea for assistance—when the German princes sought out a power to help them invade the duchies, it was initially Austria, and not Prussia, to which they turned. Despite the fact that the occupation would enhance Austria’s power, the state refused. For the German Confederation, an invasion of the duchies was a matter of nationalism: “Schleswig-Holstein . . . must not be allowed to suffer the fate of Alsace-Lorraine. Just as their ancestors reconquered East Prussia from Poland, Pomerania from Sweden, and the Rhineland from France, the Germans must reclaim the northern duchies from Denmark.” As Clark argues, “No sharper contrast to Austrian desires can be imagined than this program, for the smaller states violently attacked the London protocol, and invoked the principle of nationality, which Austria abhorred.”

As long as this was the justification for action in the duchies, Austria would refuse to cooperate. As the Austrian diplomat Rechberg argued to Prince Alexander of Hesse, “The demand for the conquest of Schleswig for Germany, which is now so prevalent that it seems even to be catching hold of governments otherwise prudent, differs in no way from the striving of the French people for the Rhine.”

Prussia’s diplomats recognized that without a legitimate basis for intervention, Austria would effectively block expansion in the duchies. In November
and December of 1863, therefore, Bismarck calibrated his language to legitimate an invasion of Schleswig-Holstein on conservative grounds, framing Prussia’s interest in the duchies as intricately bound with Treaty of London and the broader principles of a European equilibrium on which that treaty was based. As Bismarck argued, any intervention in the duchies was only to secure “the essential objects and interests which prevailed in the negotiations of 1851 and 1852.”

So important was this framing that Bismarck pled with Prussian elites—even Wilhelm—to avoid nationalist language when speaking to Austrian diplomats, for fear that “Austria would abandon her and leave her, single-handed, to face a conflict with the other signatory powers.”

Bismarck’s rhetoric never fully convinced Austria that Prussia was a sated power, one that would shy from attempts to upend the status quo. The Austrian diplomats had no illusions about Bismarck’s personal ambitions; they knew the minister-president was interested in using the Schleswig-Holstein dispute to revise the status quo in favor of Prussia. As one Austrian diplomat remarked of Bismarck in 1864, “The task of keeping this man in bounds, of dissuading him from his expansionistic policy of utility . . . surpasses human powers.” Likewise, another deputy questioned openly Prussia’s intentions, asking, “Is Prussia anywhere our friend? Does she not denounce Austria as the arch-enemy of Prussia . . . she is stretching out her claws to the duchies, while we are leading her into them to the music of our own good regimental bands.”

But the Prussian leaders’ legitimation strategies still resonated and, as a result, they had two effects: they signaled restraint and constraint, and they allowed Austria to identify with the Prussian government. Most of the Austrian government believed that as long as Bismarck and Wilhelm spoke as if they were interested in the sanctity of treaties, the treaties would constrain Prussia’s actions, just as it constrained Austria’s. Austria’s leaders understood that Prussia held an advantage in the German Confederation, that the Prussians could appeal to nationalist principles to mobilize the population and outflank Austria without bearing similar costs. If Prussia’s leaders were willing to forgo nationalist language in the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, if they committed to a “European” and not “German” settlement, then this signaled that the Prussians were willing to abandon a nationalist coalition and remain tied to their dynastic claims.

Though the Austrians did not believe that Bismarck would uphold the treaties “any longer than necessary to satisfy the foreign powers,” the fact that his rhetoric still used the language of legality encouraged the Austrians, as Rechberg put it, to bind Prussia and “set this down in black and white.” In a meeting to discuss the alliance in January 1864, only one minister raised the possibility that Prussia could defect from this rhetoric, that the state might not really be constrained by the treaties. Strange as it may seem, as Clark argues, “no one” in Austria believed Prussia would not be trapped by its own rhetoric, that Prussia might “refuse to place her head in
the noose.” Thus, as Pflantze argues, the Austrians saw in Bismarck’s rhetoric a way to bind Prussia to the status quo, and thus “with each successive step of the dual powers in the Danish affair Rechberg and his colleagues sought to put the Prussians into this restraining harness.”

So too did Bismarck’s language suggest a shared identity between Austria and Prussia. Bismarck and Wilhelm’s gestures to Austria as an equal great power, its promises to colead a conservative German Confederation, were particularly resonant at a time when Austria’s very identity as a national great power were under attack. Bismarck’s rhetoric appealed to Austria’s conservative identity: Austria often appealed to dynastic solidarity among German princes to maintain its position as hegemon in the confederation and create a united front against nationalist-liberal coalitions. Called to reform the Bund in 1863, for example, the German princes asked that Prussia support Austria in building unity; Wilhelm, as Bismarck writes in his memoirs, “favoured the Austrian proposal because it contained an element of royal solidarity in the struggle against parliamentary Liberalism.” Prussia’s appeals to a shared dynastic identity communicated that Prussia was a brother in counterrevolutionary arms, that it would work with Austria to suppress nationalist impulses in Germany and abroad.

Indeed, working with Prussia was the only way to protect Austria from an existential threat. If Denmark were allowed to claim Schleswig-Holstein, the national-liberals in Prussia might stoke enough outrage to overtake conservative coalitions. Franz Joseph was particularly fearful that the Prussian king “would have to call a liberal ministry if Bismarck fell.” Moreover Austria’s leaders believed that resisting Prussia’s actions, or even failing to actively support them, would come with existential costs to the empire. As Clark writes, Austria’s actions became a “crusade for the preservation of the sanctity of treaties and maintenance of the existing power, matters of life and death for the Habsburg power.” A victory for nationalist principles would have concrete effects on Austria’s position as a great power. It would undercut Austria’s attempt to dominate German dynastic princes. It would buoy the position of Napoleon III’s France. A triumph of nationalism over conservatism was unthinkable, an outcome that would threaten “her existence as a great power and the continuance of the system of 1815.”

In sum, Prussia’s legitimation strategies persuaded Austria that Prussia could and would be bound to the treaties, and thus only limited revision would emerge from the invasion. As Baron Ludwig von Biegeleben, then in charge of Austria’s German Affairs, argued, if Austria bound Prussia to its rhetoric then Bismarck could not give way to his “lust for the annexation of Schleswig and Holstein.” Prussia convinced Austria that it was a counterrevolutionary partner, and that joint action in the duchies, a strategy counter to Austria’s interest, was the only way to preserve a conservative identity. Austria’s choice would incur disastrous consequences. Ultimately the invasion allowed Prussia
to build support among German nationalists, persuading them that only Prussia could ensure unification. Disputes over Schleswig-Holstein, moreover, would provide Prussia with its pretext for war against Austria in 1866. But what Austria misjudged was not Prussia’s aims, but its flexibility in the face of its legitimation strategies. Prussia had no reason, ultimately, to keep its head in the noose: unlike Austria, Prussia was positioned to benefit from the nationalist sentiments it was poised to unleash.


In order to expand, Prussia had to prevent Russia from mobilizing against it in the duchies. In the summer of 1863, this seemed unlikely. Russia had strong interests in the conflict. In 1848 Russia had shown itself committed to confronting the rise of Prussian power: faced with Prussia’s invasion of the duchies, Russia pronounced the expansion would “gravely affect the interests of all of the Baltic Powers and tend in its effects to destroy throughout the north the equilibrium established by the treaties. That was an eventual-ity which Russia could not admit.” A Russian naval demonstration signaled the state’s commitment. Russia’s interests in 1863–64 looked very much the same. Strategically, Russia “had no more desire in 1863–1864 than before to see a German fleet in the Baltic based in Kiel nor to see Denmark so weakened by the loss of the duchies that it would join with Sweden-Norway in a Scandinavian union.”

Despite Russia’s interests, the state chose not to contain or confront Prussia’s expansion in the duchies. Some international relations theorists have attributed this to Russian weakness after the Crimean War, when, it was claimed, Russia was too weak externally and internally to balance against an expanding Prussia. While Russia was weaker in 1864 than it had been in 1848, it still believed it could, if necessary, contain the Prussian power. It is not that Russia failed to make a credible threat to balance Prussian expansion. It is that it made no threat at all: in the end, Russia declared that it would not “send one soldier or spend one ruble for or against Denmark.”

It was Bismarck’s framing of Prussia’s expansion as an attempt to uphold the European treaties that persuaded Russia to stand aside. On the one hand, Bismarck’s language signaled restraint to the conservative power. The Russian leaders held no illusions that Bismarck was a “true” conservative, that he was a principled actor that would embrace conservative principles out of sincere belief alone. But if Prussia would act in the name of dynastic and European principles, this might serve to bind Prussia, not only by strengthening Bismarck’s ties with conservative allies, but also through sev-ering its ties with revisionists at home and abroad. As Mosse writes, Russia feared a “revolutionary grouping” between Prussia and revisionist states, and believed that any understanding “between Bismarck and Napoleon
might destroy Russian influence in Europe.” Binding Bismarck to conservative ideals meant keeping him from allying with revisionist coalitions, both those at home, and the French, Italian, and Hungarian coalitions that were eager to form a nationalist movement abroad.104 Moreover, Prussia’s language affected Russia’s sense of its identity as well. Domestically, Russia held to dynastic principles that were inherently threatened by nationalistic and democratic claims. Internationally, Russia believed its legitimacy was integrally tied to the maintenance of the European treaties: without these treaties, revolutionary states—such as France—might feel free to remake the boundaries of the European states, upsetting Russian control in Poland and other volatile territories.105 Thus Russia would not abandon “the defence of the [European] treaty and of the established order.”106 Nationalism must be treated as a revolutionary force, and as a “constant source of anxiety and disturbance to the other Powers.” To protect the status quo, Russia’s foreign minister, Prince Gorchakov called for “the formation of a sort of moral coalition against revolutionary conspiracy, Ultra-Democracy, exaggerated nationalism” and any overt attempts to undermine the European equilibrium.107

Bismarck’s strategically chosen rhetoric resonated with this identity. Bismarck assured Oubril that he “intended to safeguard their interests and would faithfully observe the Treaty of London for the sake of the four-power agreement.”108 As a result Russia informed Prussia that its promise to occupy “Schleswig on ‘conservative principles,’ maintain the treaty of 1852 and preserve the Danish monarchy” was viewed as a legitimate aim by the Russian government.109 Strikingly Bismarck’s rhetoric also convinced that Russia that Denmark was pursuing an illegitimate nationalist strategy—that it was Denmark’s actions, not Prussia’s, that posed an existential threat. Prussia’s pretext for action in the duchies had been Denmark’s imposition of a new constitution, one designed to please Denmark’s nationalist “Eiderdane” population. Although Denmark realized Russia would not recognize the legitimacy of a liberal-nationalist constitution in the duchies, the government continued to hope that Russia, because of her strategic interests and adherence to the European order, would support Denmark as she had in 1848.

Instead, Russia informed the Danish government that it could not accept its actions as legitimate. Early in the crisis, in December 1863, the tsar told the Danish government that while “I admit that the movement against you in Germany has at present in part a revolutionary basis . . . on your part, too, there are also . . . symptoms of exaggerated tendencies.”110 As the crisis persisted, the British diplomats noted that Russia believed Denmark was “dangerously excited by democratic and national passions,” and as a result, it was increasingly likely that power would stand back from the conflict.111 As Russian officials noted to the British, while “it was the intention of the Powers to maintain the Treaty of London,” if nationalist sentiment was not contained, Russia could not support Denmark in a conflict with Germany.112
Prussia’s rhetoric, in the end, acted as a “wedge strategy,” driving apart the possibility of a Russian-Danish alliance. Indeed even as Austria and Prussia marched through the duchies, Russia refused to accept Denmark’s rationale for its actions. On February 11, Russia proclaimed that it would not oppose the occupation of the duchies, as they understood that Austria and Prussia were acting in defense of the treaties. To the Danes, the tsar maintained that while he would do everything to restore peace and order, it was up to the Danish government to act legitimately: if anything, it was the Danes, not the Germans, who were threatening the integrity of the European order. As a Russian diplomat explained to the Danes, “It is not for Denmark’s interest that Europe protects its integrity; it is for the European interests, for the treaties that are common to us.”

The British Stand Aside: Rhetoric, Hypocrisy, and the Silencing of the Hawks

At the onset of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, the British appeared likely to intervene on the side of Denmark and mobilize against Prussia, just as they had done in the first Schleswig-Holstein war of 1848. In 1863, Palmerston declared in a Parliamentary speech that “I am satisfied with all reasonable men in Europe, including those in France and Russia, in desiring that the independence, integrity, and the rights of Denmark may be maintained. We are convinced . . . that if any violent attempt were made to overthrow those rights and interfere with that independence, those who made the attempt would find in the result, that it would not be Denmark alone with which they would have to contend.”

Such threats were more than just cheap talk; as Austria and Prussia threatened to invade Schleswig, British pronouncements became even more severe. In late December, Palmerston wrote to Russell that he believed that any German intervention into Schleswig would be unacceptable, arguing that “Schleswig is not part of Germany, and its invasion by German troops would be an act of war against Denmark, which would in my clear opinion entitle Denmark to our active military and naval support.” On the January 8, Russell submitted to the queen telegrams he proposed to send to Paris, St. Petersburg, and Stockholm, inviting the governments to join England in denouncing an invasion of Schleswig as “an act of aggression on non-German territory” that should be met with resistance on the part of the great powers. Germany should be convinced to delay the occupation while England organized a conference to mediate the dispute. These were no idle threats; Russell was preparing to match his words with a significant naval demonstration against Prussia.

That the British appeared eager to support Denmark was not at all surprising. Britain had strategic interests in the region and hoped not only to prevent Prussian enlargement, but a possible catalyst for German unification.
Britain, moreover, saw itself as bound both by the Concert and the Treaty of London to ensure the integrity of the Danish monarchy. Despite these interests, however, in the end Britain made no attempt to confront or even contain Prussia’s expansion. Indeed, while lamenting that the conflict over the duchies had escalated to war, Britain ultimately pronounced that Prussian interests were legitimate, whereas the Danes had acted contrary to the dictates of international treaties.118

What explains Britain’s decision to accommodate Prussia’s expansion? Certainly some of this strategy can be explained by domestic confusion, as Schweller’s theory of societal divisions and “underbalancing” suggests. For example, while Palmerston, Foreign Secretary Russell, and conservatives such as Benjamin Disraeli were eager to confront Prussia, even at the cost of military action, Queen Victoria’s sympathies lay with Germany. She charged Palmerston and Russell’s threats were anti-German and overly aggressive, and worked through other ministers—notably Granville—to undermine the prime minister in Parliament.119 Moreover, the cabinet, although pro-Danish, was strongly pacifist, and ministers such as Granville and Lord Derby loudly criticized Russell’s language as the first step toward war.120

Although domestic opposition played an important role in stifling Britain’s balancing effort, the explanation itself is insufficient. On the one hand, similar disunity had plagued Britain in 1848, yet the British successfully confronted Prussia’s expansion into Denmark, joining with Russia to force Prussia to compromise over the duchies. Just as in 1864, in 1848 Palmerston and Russell opposed Prussian expansion, yet faced serious opposition from Queen Victoria, who denounced their efforts as a “direct attack upon Germany.”121 In 1848 radical members of Parliament also criticized Britain’s confrontation of Prussia: these members hoped that Prussia’s actions would help cement a liberal German unification, leading to a liberal-democratic government who would prove a firm ally on the continent. Palmerston and Russell, however, overcame this disunity to force a confrontation with Prussia.

Moreover, it is unclear why the domestic opposition, in and of itself, led to accommodation and not confrontation. Yes, the queen opposed Russell and Palmerston’s aggressive response, but she had limited influence on foreign affairs. Much of her interference, at first, provoked a backlash. The London Review, for example, charged that the queen’s interference was “despotic.”122 A member of the House of Lords likewise proclaimed that the queen was acting in German interest, and that he hoped the ministers would side with Denmark “as to show to Germany and to the whole world that the policy and feelings of George III—those truly English feelings . . . still animate the Government of this country.”123 Public opinion was also fervently pro-Denmark, and thus solidly behind stopping Prussia’s march into the Danish monarchy. The British public had long seen itself as the protector
of Denmark; the marriage of the Danish princess Alexandra with the Prince of Wales in March 1863 had further increased the number of popular demonstrations in sympathy of Denmark. Newspapers, such as the Times, echoed Palmerston and Russell’s policies. An editorial in March 1863, for example, argued that “the maintenance of the independence and constitutional liberty of the Danish empire demands the carrying out of the principle, regardless of possible sacrifice.”

Given these strategic interests and public support, then, why did Britain turn away from containment and confrontation, and allow Prussia’s expansion into the duchies? In Britain, Bismarck’s rhetoric had two significant effects: it signaled restraint and constraint, and it silenced opponents, especially Palmerston and Russell. Following Prussian pronouncements, for example, the Earl of Derby argued there was no reason to mobilize against Prussia in the duchies, noting that “the parties now proceeding against Denmark do not rest their claim on any opposition to the treaty. On the contrary, they proclaim they are proceeding in the spirit of the treaty.”

Papers such as the Times too changed their opinion. Where the paper had once promoted containment, even at the risk of war, they now noted that Prussia’s rhetoric—specifically referring to an address by Bismarck earlier that week—signaled “there was no reason to complain of the conduct” and that a force could enter the duchies as long as the Prussians continued to express “a proper feeling of its responsibility to Europe.” As the paper noted, “Strange to say, the Prussian ministers who had, it should seem, so obvious an interest in hiding their own delinquencies under the tumult and excitement of a war have shown a respect for Treaties, a good sense, and a moderation that was scarcely to be expected from them.” Confrontation was hardly necessary under these circumstances, and politicians who argued for an aggressive strategy were irresponsible at best.

There were those, most notably Palmerston and Russell, who remained convinced that Prussia was an aggressively revisionist state: there were no serious binding effects among those that saw Prussia’s interest in expansion. The prime minister maintained to the German powers that their conduct “was unjustifiable” and argued to the Danish government that Prussia’s treaty claims were made in “bad faith.” Diplomats, such as Sir Andrew Buchanan, warned that he would be shocked if “Bismarck did not seek to obtain more solid advantages for Prussia in return for the losses and sacrifices which the country will have to suffer in the event of war.” Throughout the crisis, Russell attempted to organize an alliance against Prussia’s actions, to rebuild the coalition that had stymied similar expansion in 1848. As late as February 1864, Russell hoped the Russian and French governments would join Britain in a collective naval demonstration against the Prussian invasion.

These efforts to mobilize support for confrontation fell on deaf ears. In Britain Prussia’s legitimation strategies effectively set a rhetorical trap,
weakening those who wanted to balance against Prussia, and strengthening the position of those that demanded isolation. Palmerston and those arguing for aggressive containment of Prussia had taken their stand “on the sanctity of the treaties”: it was because Prussia was violating the Treaty of London of 1852 that confrontation was necessary. As Palmerston consistently emphasized in conversations with cabinet ministers and the Parliament, the question of British intervention turned on this treaty. If Prussia threw off its obligations, and proclaimed its right to conquest based on might, it would be an “unprovoked and unjustified attack,” one that would be met with British resistance.

Having embraced the rhetoric of treaties, however, these politicians now looked like hypocrites for condemning Prussia’s policy. Those who wanted to avoid intervention now simply pointed out that Prussia was acting within the boundaries of the treaty Palmerston had promised to protect. The queen chastised Palmerston and Russell for threatening an “aggressive war on Germany.” Likewise, Palmerston and Russell were forced to admit that the legal restrictions imposed on Prussia applied to Denmark as well, and that if Denmark failed to meet her treaty obligations, Prussia had a right to intervene. The cabinet refused to support Russell’s attempts to build an alliance against Prussia and refused to sanction a naval demonstration. Russell was forced to retract messages to France and Russia and to rewrite drafts to dampen Britain’s threats of confrontation.

In other words, these domestic leaders could no longer justify confrontation of Prussia’s legal action. Both Palmerston and Russell considered resigning from the cabinet in protest of British inaction. Instead, the ministers folded. By February Palmerston was forced to retract his policy, in a move that Temperley calls Palmerston’s greatest diplomatic defeat. In acquiescing, he proclaimed that Prussia was acting legitimately, noting that the German powers “are prepared to declare that they abide by the Treaty of 1852, and will maintain the integrity of the Danish monarchy in accordance with the terms of that treaty.” Not all critics remained silent. Lord Salisbury raged that “the people whom she [Britain] affected to befriend are in danger of being swept away. One of the most wanton and unblushing spoliations which history records is on the point of being consummated. But as far as effective aid goes, England stands aloof.”

Bismarck’s language did not entirely stem Britain’s efforts to contain Prussia’s advances. Of all the European states, it was Britain’s leaders who remained most suspicious of Bismarck’s aims, even as they remained unable to mobilize support for military action. Throughout the spring of 1864, Russell worked to limit Prussia’s expansion diplomatically, forcing the parties to the bargaining table in March 1864. Even here, however, Russell was unable to mobilize a coalition for anything more than mediation.
a legitimate basis for intervention, Britain stood aside as Prussia expanded on the continent.

**FRANCE AND THE SEARCH FOR REVOLUTION IN SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN**

If any power had reason to contain Prussia’s expansion, it was France. Certainly this state had no strategic interest in allowing Prussia to expand into the duchies, to begin a process that could possibly secure a unified Germany on its eastern border. France, moreover, could not rationally want to encourage a national movement that demanded not only territorial revisions in the north, but along the Rhine as well.\textsuperscript{141} As one minister noted, “Today Germany, moving toward unity, needs supports: she invades Schleswig. Another day she will want to protect her southwest border: she will claim Alsace and part of Lorraine. The pretext will be the same: German nationality.”\textsuperscript{142} Public opinion in France during the crisis, moreover, was stridently pro-Denmark. And in terms of power, each of the European states—Prussia and Austria included—believed that France might be the only state who could unilaterally confront against Prussia’s expansion. As Russia and Britain both retreated from containment, an 1864 editorial remarked that “the only thing that might, and probably would, even at this point . . . make the great German powers to hesitate is a decided declaration on the part of France.”\textsuperscript{143}

From 1863 to early 1864, therefore, it looked likely that France would contain Prussia’s expansion and offer material assistance to Denmark. In 1863, France proposed a European conference, designed to revise the territorial borders of European states, Schleswig-Holstein included. To Denmark, France signaled that the conference would be conducted in their interest. In a message to the French minister at Copenhagen, Napoleon III instructed his diplomats to “say to King Christian that the best way of inaugurating his relations with the Emperor would be to accept without the delay the invitation of his Majesty. Before Germany, Denmark loses her case; before Europe, she may win it. Her interest, then is to refer it to a European congress.”\textsuperscript{144} More strikingly, at the beginning of the crisis France indicated it was likely to support a military demonstration against Prussia, to deter its advance into the duchies.\textsuperscript{145}

In early 1864, however, Prussia’s legitimation strategies set a rhetorical trap for France. From 1860 onward, Napoleon III had argued to the rest of Europe that legitimate rule rested not on the European treaties or on dynastic claims, but on national self-determination.\textsuperscript{146} In 1863 he had gone so far as to proclaim, “The Treaties of 1815 have ceased to exist. The force of things has overthrown them or tends to overthrow them almost everywhere.” As another French elite, Emile Ollivier, put it, “Balance is a fine word . . . but a conventional balance established against the will of the people is no more
balance than silence produced by despotism is order.”147 With the treaties now obsolete, Napoleon III called for a massive redistribution of territory along nationalist lines. France’s policy was not only one of words but of might. France pursued this policy of nationalities in 1859, backing Italy against Austria, and the state continued to seek territorial adjustments on Italy’s behalf.

Napoleon III believed that Schleswig-Holstein was central to this nationalist redistribution. Rather than address Schleswig-Holstein on the terms of treaties, the French government called on Europe to invoke a principle of nationalities in solving the conflict:

The cause and distinguishing characteristic of this conflict is clearly the rivalry of the populations that make up the Danish monarchy. There exists in each of them a national sentiment, the strength of which cannot be doubted. What is more natural, then, in default of a unanimously accepted principle, to take as a basis the wishes of the population? This way, in conformity with the true interests of the two parties, seems to us most suited for bringing about an equitable arrangement and to offer a guarantee of its stability.148

Here then Prussia had an opportunity: Napoleon III had long hoped that nationalist legitimacy would spread through the German states, and thus cement his own program of political transformation. Prussia’s diplomats thus appealed directly to this nationalist ideology. By invading the duchies, Bismarck assured Napoleon that Prussia would “loose the forces of nationalism.”149 If Napoleon III were to oppose Prussia, he would be party to placing Germans under Danish rule, a move that would reveal France as a hypocrite in international politics.

Like Britain and Austria, France was never convinced of Bismarck’s motives—Napoleon ultimately felt that a unified Germany would undermine France’s strength. Moreover, despite frequent negotiations and attempts to secure territory for France in exchange for the duchies, there was no material benefit to supporting Prussia; as Steefel argues, Napoleon “gained nothing definite from these negotiations.”150 What evidence does suggest, however, is that once Prussia framed its expansion in nationalist terms, Napoleon III deeply feared the cost of appearing to suppress the German people. He believe that, in doing so, he would lose his rationale for a European congress, his foothold in the Italian conflict, as well as domestic legitimacy at home.151 Indeed, Prussian diplomats even used the language of nationalism to avoid promises of territorial compensation to France. When French diplomats suggested they might keep quiet in exchange for territory on the Rhine, the Prussians simply noted that “it would be a most flagrant contradiction of the policy of nationalities to want to acquire German lands.”152

In the end, Napoleon refused to contain Prussia. In explaining his policy, he consistently referred to a nationalist rationale and noted his fear of
hypocrisy. In a message to the European states explaining his policy, for instance, Napoleon III argued that he had committed himself to the policy of nationalities, especially in his congress proposal and support for the unification of Italy. He “could not, therefore, be party to replacing the Holsteiners under the rule of Denmark which they detested.” Moreover, as French diplomats conveyed to Britain, Napoleon III worried that any appearance of inconsistency—of supporting nationalism in one policy and not the other—would undermine his goals. As noted in one diplomatic message, Napoleon III insisted that “as it is his great desire was to see Venetia wrested from Austria and restored to Italy, he could not lay himself open to the charge of pursuing one policy on the Eider and a totally different one on the Po [in Italy].”

In short, Prussia’s legitimation strategy shaped decisions for accommodation, confrontation, and containment in all four of the existing great powers. In Austria and Russia, mechanisms of restraint and identification loomed large, with each of these states persuaded that Prussia would operate within the boundaries of legitimist principles. In Britain and France, dynamics of coercion dominated, and strategies of containment and confrontation proved untenable.

Prussia’s power politics were thus the politics of legitimacy. This is not to say that power and interests do not matter. One cannot tell the story of Prussia’s rise without reference to its position in a multipolar system in which most of the European states faced multiple threats to their security. Under these conditions, all of the great powers had some incentive to accommodate Prussia’s demands. For Austria and Russia, Prussia could prove a bulwark against French revisionism; for Britain, a potential ally on the continent to ensure stability. As long as Prussia’s aims were limited, cooperation with the rising power made sense. And certainly for many of the powers, cooperation with Prussia served the politics of interest, creating an important strategic and economic partner on the continent. Yet these explanations do not explain why it was that the powers came to see Prussia as a state with limited ambition, especially given all of the costly signals that indicated otherwise.

But the politics of legitimacy explains why and how each of the great powers came to see the Prussian threat as limited, and even why some of the powers—Austria and France especially—made strategic decisions that ultimately undercut their own interests on the continent. Without a focus on the role of Bismarck’s rhetoric, it is difficult to understand how Prussian expansionism—how the invasion of Schleswig-Holstein—was seen as acceptable. It was not that the invasion of Schleswig-Holstein was inherently limited; it was that the great powers came to understand Prussia’s aggression as limited. And that decision cannot be decoupled from what Prussia’s leaders said about the conflict, the reasons they gave for their expansion.
But the story is not all one of triumph. Throughout this chapter, and indeed throughout the book, I have stressed the advantages of multivo
cal rhetoric for rising powers. It is true that merging nationalist and con
servative rhetoric strategically allowed Prussia’s leaders to mobilize broad
support for their expansion and undercut the balancing of their opponents.
But the story of Prussia’s rise also indicates the very real dangers of multi
vocality as well. In the decades that followed Prussia’s rise, Bismarck would
come to see his earlier success unleash forces beyond his control. His multi
vocal rhetoric had brought together a new coalition that joined conserva
tive forces with liberal-nationalist ones. These same factions that brought
the minister-president his glory would eventually unseat him. This raises
questions about the role of multivocal strategy in expansion, and whether
this language, once used, can unleash movements for expansion that wreak
havoc beyond their author’s intent. It is a subject to which we will return in
the concluding chapter of this book.