

# Realism, Nationalism, and Imperialism, 1850-1914

Failure in the revolutions of 1848 vaulted Europe into a new era. Intellectually, the Romantic temperament faded, as artists, scientists, and politicians adopted a hard-headed mindset of realism and materialism. Military power, industry, organization, electricity, commodities—these products of modern life replaced the imaginary, spiritual, emotional, idealistic, and rhetorical of Romanticism. This chapter reviews the post-1848 realist and materialist ethos in the arts and ideas, its application in national unification projects, in the continuing progress of technological and industrial change, and, ultimately, how all these were deployed in Europe's domination of Asia and Africa through imperialism. The events in this chapter culminate centuries-long developments and represent the zenith of European power in world history.

## Nation-Building Efforts

Italy and Germany represent the most salient examples of nationalism's power to unify states. However, already territorially unified states, such as France and Russia, worked toward greater internal cohesion through reform. The following states demonstrate three different models of reform.

### France: Napoleon III and the Second Empire •

After being elected president of the Second Republic, Louis Napoleon quickly consolidated his power. Presenting himself as a man of the people, he dissolved the legislature over the issue of universal male suffrage. In a coup d'état in 1851, Napoleon rescinded the 1848 republican constitution. With popular approval through a plebiscite, Napoleon announced in 1852 the Second Empire with himself as Emperor Napoleon III. Though Napoleon's foreign adventures proved disastrous—loss of control over Italian and German unification, a failed effort to create an empire in Mexico—he did modernize France internally.

Working through a professional and centrally controlled bureaucracy, Napoleon focused on France's economic development. He founded a national bank, built railways, promoted French industry, and in his most celebrated reform, rebuilt the city of Paris. Napoleon hired the talents of the architect and engineer Baron von Haussmann (1809-1891), who tore down old city

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walls and housing, constructed a modern sanitary system, built grand boulevards, and adorned it all with a feast of opera houses, theaters, and shopping centers. As Napoleon said, "I found Paris stinking, and left it smelling sweet." Due to increasing criticism, Napoleon after 1860 allowed more legislative input, relaxed press censorship, and pursued a policy of free trade with Great Britain. But such reforms could not rescue Napoleon from his foreign policy failures, and in 1870, the emperor himself was captured by the Prussian army (see above) and the empire ended. Workers of the shiny new Paris refused to surrender, however, and established a revolutionary Paris Commune, which harkened back to the principles of 1793 with its socialist program. Eventually, a popularly elected Constituent Assembly crushed the Paris Commune and established the Third Republic. Another French republic started off with the taint of class violence and military failure.

### **The Crimean War, 1853-1856**

Revolutions in 1848 undermined the Concert of Europe, the agreement of the great powers to resolve issues collectively-and paved the way for the mid-century Crimean War. The Crimean War seemed avoidable and was poorly fought, but ultimately proved of great importance for subsequent diplomacy.

For centuries after its last foray into central Europe in 1683, the Ottoman Empire slowly receded in power. The empire found itself prey to continual attacks by a Russian nation intent on gaining a warm-weather seaport. Only the intervention of Britain, which opposed Russian expansionism into the Mediterranean, kept the "Sick Man of Europe" on life support. When Napoleon ill of France in 1853 wrung concessions from the Ottoman sultan to protect Christian minorities within the empire, the Russians demanded the same treatment. Fearing the further growth of Russian power, the French and British stiffened the sultan's resistance to Russian intrusion. When war ensued, the Russian navy shattered the archaic Ottoman fleet in the Black Sea and moved into two Turkish-held provinces (current-day Romania). France and Britain demanded that the Russians evacuate the provinces or face war. Even though Russia complied, the two western powers declared war anyway because of anti-Russian public opinion in their nations. Austria now used the situation to its own benefit. Russia had aided Austria in 1849 by crushing the Hungarian revolt. Instead of repaying the favor, Austria exploited Russia's predicament by moving into the recently evacuated provinces. Isolated, Russia

attempted to defend itself against the combined weight of France, Russia, and the Italian kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia.

The Crimean War represents the inaugural industrialized conflict, with the first use of trenches, telegraphs, and railways. Nonetheless, poor communication; strategic errors, and disease cost an inordinate number of lives. The only hero of the struggle was Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), who helped found the nursing profession and demonstrated the ability of women to take on productive public roles. By 1855, the new Russian tsar, Alexander II, realized that the war had underscored Russia's technological and economic backwardness. With the Treaty of Paris (1856), Russia agreed to demilitarize the Black Sea and halt its expansion into the Balkans.

Though the war was over, the issues raised by it were not. By forever destroying the Concert of Europe, the Crimean War encouraged states to pursue national interests with little regard for the effects on the international order. Napoleon III considered the war a great-victory and was falsely convinced of France's strength and prominence. British leaders felt disappointed at the cost and outcome of the war and fell into "splendid isolation" for half a century, standing aside while Italy and Germany unified. With its overly subtle diplomacy, Austria had isolated itself, a fatal error as it would face two wars in the next 10 years. Before the ink was dry on the treaty, Russia was determined to reform internally and continue its expansion at the first opportunity. Finally, by its involvement, little Piedmont-Sardinia won itself a great power patron in its drive for unification.