

The Age of Realism: 1850-1871

Nation Building and Reform

New conservative leaders including Otto von Bismarck and Count Camillo di Cavour came to power after 1850, marking the beginning of a period of authoritarian rule. Yet many of these leaders used liberalism to secure power. In addition, the balance of power across Europe was dramatically transformed as new nations emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century.

France and the Second Empire

The events of 1848 led to the election of Louis Napoleon as president of the Second French Republic. Louis Napoleon wanted to dominate the French government, so in 1851 he seized control of the National Assembly, and then asked the French people to allow him to serve in office for a ten-year term. His overwhelming victory in 1851 influenced his decision to create a new French empire. Again the French people approved, and in 1852 Louis Napoleon became Napoleon III. The Second Empire was born.

As emperor of France, Napoleon III served as a model for other authoritarian rulers at that time. Although he maintained control over the vital functions of the government, the French people acceded to that, because he also introduced many domestic policies that were beneficial to the economic and social welfare of the nation. During the early part of his rule, he helped industrialize France, bringing great prosperity to the nation. One of his major achievements was the redesign of Paris, and with the guidance of Baron Haussmann, he oversaw the creation of a modern infrastructure that advanced public health, thwarted insurrections, and improved aesthetics.

The End of the Concert of Europe

Napoleon III was eager to reestablish France as the dominant force in Europe. By mid-century it had become apparent that the Ottoman Empire was disintegrating. The question then became which European nation would benefit the most from the decline of the Ottomans. All of the European powers-but especially Russia and Austria-had interests in the territories. France and Britain were afraid of Russian advances in southeastern Europe, so they supported the Ottoman Empire after it declared war on Russia in 1853.

The ensuing Crimean War was a military disaster, with substantial losses for all sides. More than 250,000 soldiers died, with over 60 percent of the soldiers succumbing to disease; the only positive outcome of the conflict was the recognition of professional nurses under the leadership of Florence Nightingale.

Combined French and British forces laid siege to the Russian fortress at Sevastopol, which fell in 1855. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1856, served to bring an end to the Concert of Europe as Austria and Russia, former allies, now became enemies. Russia's defeat led to its retreat from European affairs and altered the balance of power.