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Consequences of the Termination of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia

Source: *Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914* [*The Great Power Politics of the European Governments, 1871-1914*.] From the diplomatic files of the German Foreign Ministry, edited by Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and Friedrich Thimme, vol. 7. Berlin, 1923, pp. 4-6

Memorandum by Count von Berchem, undersecretary at the Foreign Office

https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=778#:~:text=Bismarck's%20successors%20found%20the%20treaty's,%E2%80%9CNew%20Course%E2%80%9D%20in%201890.

The Reinsurance Treaty was a secret agreement made in 1887 between Russia and Germany. Spearheaded by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck who sought neutrality of both parties in the event that they both found themselves at war with a third country. This treaty completed a key step in the improvement of relations between Germany and Russia amid heightened tensions between the two nations. Bismarck considered this treaty to be a key aspect of his foreign policy as it ensured Germany would not have to prepare for a large conflict with a powerful nation on its eastern borders as well as helping him reach his goal of perpetual peace within Europe, a peace that would help solidify Germany's economic, diplomatic, and political dominance within the region. Bismarck also realized Tsar Alexander III of Russia's desire to gain control of Constantinople and used this to his advantage in order to influence an Anglo-Russo conflict.¹ Key aspects of this alliance were the provisions that the alliance would not stand in the event that Germany attacked France or if Russia attacked Austro-Hungary while Germany conceded that Bulgaria and the Black Sea was within the Russian sphere of influence.² As one can see, Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary held much more importance than that of its alliance with Russia: "we would be obliged to fight for Austria-Hungary, thus betraying our loyalty to

¹ Langer, William L. "Russia, the Straits Question, and the European Powers, 1904-8." *The English Historical Review* 44, no. 173 (1929): 59–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/552495>.

² "Secret Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (June 18, 1887)." German History in Document and Images. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1862.

Russia. This cannot lead to a permanent peace.”³ Furthermore, this alliance effectively isolated France from any significant alliance on the European continent.⁴ These terms display the fragility of such an “alliance” as Russia and Germany place more importance on their relations with other nations than they do with each other.

Termination of this treaty occurred in 1890 when Count von Berchem, undersecretary at the Foreign Office released his Memorandum describing why the treaty was unfavorable for Germany. This memorandum proved to hold significant influence as it pressured Chancellor von Caprivi to reject the renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty because the memorandum was filed by von Caprivi on March 28th after he received it on March 25th.⁵ The decision to terminate this treaty is quite significant and represents a change in the style with which German bureaucrats and leaders would govern. With the dismissal of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck as chancellor one can see a shift from the government with Bismarck’s foreign policy compared to that of the transformed Wilhelmine government, a leadership that would propel Germany into the first World War with the aims of establishing further dominance on the European continent. It is apparent that Chancellor von Caprivi did not hold as much political power as Bismarck did when it came to his undersecretaries due to him becoming convinced by this memorandum. The implications of this treaty are vast for the future of Germany as the breaking off of a treaty with Russia led to Russia solidifying a full alliance with France in the future, thus contributing to the complex web of alliances which had a profound effect on the start of World War I.

³ *Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914* [*The Great Power Politics of the European Governments, 1871-1914.*] From the diplomatic files of the German Foreign Ministry, edited by Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and Friedrich Thimme, vol. 7. Berlin, 1923, pp. 4-6. Translation: Adam Blauhut

⁴ Langer, William L. “Russia, the Straits Question, and the European Powers, 1904-8.” *The English Historical Review* 44, no. 173 (1929): 59–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/552495>.

⁵ *Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914* [*The Great Power Politics of the European Governments, 1871-1914.*] From the diplomatic files of the German Foreign Ministry, edited by Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and Friedrich Thimme, vol. 7. Berlin, 1923, pp. 4-6.

Chronologically Ordered Annotated Bibliography

1. "Relations between Germany and England." *The Cologne Post*, 4 Aug. 1920.
<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/newspaper/item/EGV5LU4QGY2OMTH7QKEZ6DRYEZQDVDA?issuepage=1>
 - In a collection of newspapers released in Germany throughout the 20th century, one is able to find an instance where the Reinsurance Treaty is referred to during an issue from August 1920. Due to the decision for Bismarck to create an alliance with Russia over Britain in the aftermath of the Crimean Wars of the 19th century. The alliance referred to in this paper is therefore the creation of this Reinsurance Treaty, however the newspaper utilizes the past tense displaying the now non-existence of this former treaty with Russia.
2. Langer, William L. "Russia, the Straits Question, and the European Powers, 1904-8." *The English Historical Review* 44, no. 173 (1929): 59–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/552495>.
 - In this article, William Langer discusses Bismarck's strategy when it came to alliance building during the late 19th century. While discussing the Reinsurance Treaty and later its termination, Langer discusses how the signing of the treaty effectively isolated France from the complex alliance system within Europe. Bismarck also played into the desires of Tsar Alexander III who wished to obtain control over Constantinople. The abandonment of such a treaty as Langer mentioned, also left Russia without a crucial alliance thus drawing it towards France which would later play a key role in the outbreak of World War I.
3. Eyck, Erich *Bismarck after 50 Years*. George, Philip & Son Ltd, London, 1948.
 - In this essay, distinguished Bismarckian scholar Erich Eyck discusses the Reinsurance Treaty and how it played in Bismarck's foreign policy plans. Eyck mentions how many scholars deemed this treaty to be one of the main accomplishments of Bismarck's foreign policy strategy. The author goes on to state how the treaty itself was ineffective at strengthening German-Russo relations and utilizes Lepsius⁶ as a source when discussing how Bismarck's successor as chancellor, Leo von Caprivi ultimately decided to not renew the treaty. Eyck goes on to state that Bismarck himself was unsure of the effectiveness of the treaty and later highlights how the conclusion of the treaty left Russia in need of capital which it found abundantly from its alliance with France.
4. Fiala, Robert Dennis, "The Anglo-German agreement over Portugal's African colonies, 1898" (1963) M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha
 - In his Master's theses, Robert Dennis Fiala describes the terms of the Reinsurance Treaty and later as to why it was not renewed. He describes how the treaty would ensure

⁶*Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914* [*The Great Power Politics of the European Governments, 1871-1914*.] From the diplomatic files of the German Foreign Ministry, edited by Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and Friedrich Thimme, vol. 7. Berlin, 1923, pp. 4-6.

neutrality on the part of Russia and Germany in the event war occurred with a third power except if Germany declared war on France or Russia entered war with Austria-Hungary.

5. Yokell, Marshall A. IV, "The treaty of Helgoland-Zanzibar : the beginning of the end for the Anglo-German friendship?" (2010). M.A Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha
 - Yokell utilizes the termination Reinsurance Treaty within his Master Theses to describe the souring of relations between Germany and Russia. The theses goes into detail about what led to Chancellor von Caprivi's decision to end the Reinsurance Treaty which ultimately led to a Russo-Franco alliance.
6. Stone, James. "Bismarck and the Great Game: Germany and Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia, 1871-1890." *Central European History*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2015, pp. 151–75. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43965144>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.
 - James Stone provides an excellent explanation of Bismarck's strategy and thought process when creating the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia as Stone describes how it was Bismarck's objective to push Russia to take control of Constantinople which would later anger England. Bismarck wished to see an Anglo-Russo conflict and took this action to ensure it happened.
7. The alliance that wasn't: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I. In: Mansoor PR, Murray W, eds. *Grand Strategy and Military Alliances*. Cambridge University Press; 2016:284-312.
 - This book documents instances of grand strategy and other military alliances throughout history. In chapter 11, the Reinsurance Treaty is introduced as the authors explain the strategy behind the creation of the treaty as Murray and Mansoor state that at no point did Bismarck ever wish to renounce an alliance with Russia due to its relations with Austria-Hungary. It is also stated in the text that one of the foreign policy milestones of Wilhelmine Germany was the non-renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty which displays the lackluster administration of the German government after Bismarck's departure.