

during that period. Prussia also did a considerable amount of buck-passing, but that behavior cannot be explained by geography, because Prussia was located in the heart of Europe, not far away from France. Prussia's success as a buck-passer was largely due to the fact that neighboring Austria was an ideal buck-catcher.

In sum, the pattern of balancing and buck-passing displayed by France's rivals between 1789 and 1815 can be explained in good part by my theory, which emphasizes the distribution of power and the luck of geography.

Europe was relatively peaceful for almost forty years after the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815. In fact, no war was fought between any of the great powers until the Crimean War started in 1853. Then the War of Italian Unification, which had Austria and France on opposing sides, broke out in 1859. But neither one of these wars altered the European balance of power in any meaningful way. In contrast, Bismarck initiated a series of wars in the 1860s that transformed Prussia into Germany and fundamentally altered the balance of power in Europe. The next section looks at how the other great powers reacted to this Prussian expansion.

## **BISMARCKIAN PRUSSIA (1862–70)**

### **Background**

Prussia did not become a great power until the mid-eighteenth century, but even then it was probably the weakest European great power until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The main reason for its weakness was its small population compared to the other great powers. Consider that Prussia's population in 1800 was about 9.5 million, while Austria and France each had roughly 28 million people, and Russia had about 37 million people (see Table 8.1). Prussia's strategic situation changed dramatically between 1864 and 1870, when Bismarck led it to victory in three wars. Prussia actually ceased to exist as a sovereign state after 1870 and instead became the core of a unified Germany that was substantially more powerful than its Prussian predecessor had been.

There was no state called "Germany" when Bismarck was appointed Prussia's minister-president in September 1862. Instead, an assortment of German-speaking political entities were scattered about the center of Europe, loosely tied together in the German Confederation, an ineffectual political organization set up after Napoleon's defeat in 1815. There were two great powers in the confederation: Austria and Prussia. But it also included medium-sized kingdoms such as Bavaria and Saxony, as well as numerous small states and free cities—all of which I refer to as the "Third Germany." It was apparent after the revolutions of 1848 that German nationalism was a potent force that was likely to cause some combination of those German political entities to come together to form a unified German state. The question of the day was whether Austria or Prussia would be the core of that new state—essentially, which great power would absorb the Third Germany? The wars of 1864, 1866, and 1870–71 resolved that issue in Prussia's favor.

Besides Austria and Prussia, there were four other great powers in Europe in the 1860s: the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Russia (see Map 8.2). But Italy did not have significant influence on the events surrounding German unification, although it did fight with Prussia against Austria in 1866. Italy was a spanking new state that was especially weak relative to the other great powers. Therefore, the key issue is how Austria, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia reacted to Bismarck's efforts to transform Prussia into Germany. As will become apparent, buck-passing was their preferred strategy, and although Austria and France balanced against Prussia at different times, they did so only when they had no alternative.

### **The Strategic Behavior of the Great Powers**

Prussia's first war under Bismarck (1864) was a straightforward case of two great powers, Austria and Prussia, ganging up to attack a minor power, Denmark.<sup>43</sup> Their aim was to take the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein away from Denmark. There was widespread sentiment within the German Confederation that those areas should be part of some