

After observing Prussia's success with its mobilized reserves in the war of 1866, France shrank the size of its standing army and began building a reserve system of its own. Four years later, the French army had a formidable reserve structure on paper. It was inefficient in practice, however, especially compared to the Prussian system, and this difference mattered greatly when France declared war on July 19, 1870.⁶¹ By that point, France's standing army was still more powerful than Prussia's, but whereas Prussia was able to mobilize 1,183,000 soldiers at the start of the war, France could only muster 530,870 soldiers. France eventually managed to mobilize all of its reserves, and over the course of the war, it mobilized more than half a million more men than Prussia. Prussia had a small advantage in army quality by 1870, mainly because it had a superior general staff system and its reserves were better trained than were the French reserves.⁶² However, French infantrymen were better armed than their Prussian counterparts, although that advantage was offset by Prussia's breech-loading artillery.

On balance, the Prussian army was markedly more powerful than the French army in 1870, mainly because of the sharp asymmetry between them in short-term mobilization capability. Given this imbalance, Austria should have allied with France against Prussia. But that did not happen, because Austrian and French policymakers miscalculated the balance of power. Both of Prussia's rivals mistakenly believed that the French army could mobilize reserves as rapidly and effectively as the Prussian army.⁶³ Indeed, France's leaders thought that Prussia would have difficulty mobilizing its reserves, thus providing France with an important military advantage. However, Prussia correctly recognized that France's mobilization would be ragged at best, and that the Prussian army would therefore have a significant advantage on the battlefield.⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, Bismarck did not hesitate to go to war against France when the opportunity came in the summer of 1870.

Finally, buck-passing in this case was not heavily influenced by geographical considerations. The United Kingdom was separated from Prussia by the English Channel, but that geographical fact appears to have had little effect on British policy toward Prussia, which was driven mainly by

British fear of France. Austria, France, and Russia all shared a common border with Prussia, so geography cannot help account for their different responses to Bismarck's efforts to create a unified Germany. Prussia's four potential rivals were certainly well-positioned to strike into Prussian territory, had they seen fit to form a balancing coalition. But they did not, mainly because the distribution of power in Europe between 1862 and 1870 encouraged buck-passing.

WILHELMINE GERMANY (1890–1914)

Background

When Bismarck stepped down as chancellor in March 1890, Germany was not yet a potential hegemon, although it had a large and growing population, a dynamic economy, and a formidable army. Those combined assets caused much anxiety among Europe's other great powers in the last decade of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, however, Germany was a full-fledged potential hegemon that was gaining more relative power every year. Not surprisingly, fear of Germany pervaded European politics between 1900 and the outbreak of World War I in August 1914.

Besides Germany, there were five other great powers in Europe during this period: Austria-Hungary, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Russia (see Map 6.2).

Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Germany were all members of the Triple Alliance. Austria-Hungary was an especially weak great power with a dim future.⁶⁵ In fact, it disintegrated forever at the end of World War I. Nationalism was the principal source of Austria-Hungary's weakness. It was a multinational state, and most of its composite ethnic groups wanted independent states of their own. Austria-Hungary and Germany were closely allied before World War I. Austria-Hungary had serious territorial disputes with Russia in eastern Europe and the Balkans, and needed Germany to help protect it from the tsar's armies. Germany, on the other hand, had a vested interest in keeping Austria-Hungary intact so that it could help block Russian expansion.