THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR 1870-71

When traveling anywhere in the United Kingdom it is impossible, I would suggest ,not to notice War Memorials that commemorate men who were killed in World War One and World War Two. All towns and villages of any size have them. The sections of these memorials devoted to the First World War will invariably have more names than those devoted to the Second World War. This is testimony to the very high numbers of deaths due to Trench Warfare that was a characteristic of the World War One. This article hopes to be able to explain why such a catastrophe occurred. There were clearly many reasons for the outbreak of World War One, but in an article like this, one has to focus on a particular area. I have chosen to focus specifically on the Franco- Prussian war of 1870-71.

It is important to note that up to this time Germany had not been a united country but a collection of states. Austria had hitherto been the leading German- speaking nation. Germany at this time was expanding very rapidly both industrially and financially. Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian Chancellor, was a member of the land- owning Junker class. The Junkers were very powerful and they held much of the land to the east of the River Elbe, often being owners of large estates. They controlled the Prussian Army. He was very clever academically and he spoke a number of European languages fluently, namely, English, French, Italian, Russian and Polish. The languages he spoke, I feel, must have given him an advantage in diplomatic relations. In this context, he spoke both Eastern and Western European languages, and with Germany having a centralised location in Europe with potentially powerful nations on both its Western and Eastern borders he was well equipped to cope in his role as Prussian Chancellor. He attended the University of Gottingen where he had studied Law. He also attended the University of Berlin. He studied Agriculture at the University of Greifswald. He was nearly 6ft.3ins in height so he must have been a very imposing figure.

He was appointed to this role by the King of Prussia in 1862. It was on September 30th. of this year that he gave a speech in Munich, he stated that, “It is not by speeches and votes of the majority that the great questions of our period will be settled, as we believed in 1848 but by iron and blood”.

Bismarck wanted to unite Germany and for it to replace Austria as the dominant German nation. Bismarck was very careful to take on his opponents one by one. Napoleon, the Emperor of France, had been defeated in 1815 and four large nations, namely, Russia, France, Prussia and Austria which were of roughly equal power on the Continent of Europe existed. In this way a sort of balance of power could be maintained.

When he took power in Prussia he gave Helmuth von Moltke the task of reorganising the Army. To achieve his aims Bismarck was prepared to use war as a method but he was also able ensure that he did not overreach himself. He faced two very powerful enemies in France and Austria. The Habsburgs, the Austrian Royal family, had always viewed themselves as the natural leaders of the various German states. France had always felt that a fairly disunited Germany was essential for its safety.

Events were to proceed rapidly. In 1864 the new Prussian Army fought Denmark. The basis of the disagreement was who would control Schleswig and Holstein. Austria joined Prussia in this enterprise. Denmark would clearly not be able to stand up to two such powerful enemies. Its defeat was inevitable and Prussia took over Schleswig and Austria gained control of Holstein. Austria would not be able to hold on to its new possession and in June 1866 Prussian troops occupied Holstein. War inevitably followed. The work that Bismarck had done would now pay off. German industry and technology were to be very important in this conflict. The Prussians defeated the Austrians at the Battle of Sadowa (Konnigratz). The so-called Seven Weeks War had been brought to a very rapid conclusion!

The consequences of this were immense. Austria was no longer the predominant German power. The German states to the north of the River Main now joined Prussia in a North German Confederation. Equally, those states to the south were now to be free of Austrian influence. In

Prussia, Bismarck's reputation soared. Prussia had gained hugely in power. France, of course, watched these developments with great anxiety!

Conflict with France sooner or later was now becoming inevitable. Developments in Spain would make this all the more likely. In 1869 the Queen of Spain had been deposed and had to leave her country. Spain would now need a new Monarch and the Prussian royal family had one candidate namely Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern. Bismarck was delighted by this. The French on the other hand were greatly angered by these developments and their feelings of insecurity grew. On 6th. July 1870 the French Ambassador told the Prussian King Wilhelm that if Leopold became King of Spain then France would declare war on Prussia. Six days later Leopold decided not to seek the throne of Spain.

Events were to continue in a frightening direction, the French decided, I presume, to press home what they perceived to be their advantage and asked the King of Prussia to ensure that Leopold would never again seek to be King of Spain. Wilhelm refused.

Bismarck was in Berlin when he received a telegram from the King of Prussia relating the details of the discussions that he had had with the French. This was the so-called "Ems Telegram"; it was to be of great importance. Bismarck was having dinner with von Moltke when he wrote an amended, shortened version of the telegram. The King of Prussia's original version suggested that diplomacy would be used to solve this potential crisis. Bismarck's amended version suggested that a quarrel was ongoing and was more abrupt in tone.

This was an age, like now, where news spread very rapidly. The contents of the telegram caused outrage in both France and Germany. The Germans felt that their King had been insulted. The French on their part felt that their Ambassador had been insulted. There seems to have been a feeling amongst the French that they were being pushed into war. Moltke had assured Bismarck that the Prussian Army was ready to fight. On 19th. July 1870 war was declared!

The French troops at this time were thought to be the best in the World. However, the nature of warfare had changed greatly since the time of Napoleon 64 years before, when his armies had defeated the forces of the First German Empire. Moltke had a very good understanding of how modern war should be fought. He understood the logistics of moving a large number of troops to fight. He equally had a very good understanding of how to use the Railways to transport troops.

The call-up of troops was much more efficient in Prussia than in France. Mention needs to be made here of Albrecht von Roon, he was the Prussian Minister of War from 1859 to 1873. He had reorganised the Army along with Moltke. He introduced conscription for all Prussian males of military age in the event of mobilisation. What this would mean in practical terms was that although France had a larger population than Prussia and the other combatant German states, Prussia was able to deploy more troops.

In the very early stages of war the French Army had problems in getting mobilised. The Germans on the other hand under the leadership of von Moltke has already crossed the French border! With supplies and logistics already well-established they were able to move at speed. The Prussians caused disruption by sending in cavalry who cut telegraph wires and damaged railway lines. This greatly hampered the French effort and made it very difficult for them to communicate.

The French were soon to suffer very heavy losses, firstly at Sedan where large Krupps guns were used to pound the French troops. At Metz further catastrophe occurred, Bazaine the French commander there, surrendered his Army of 200,000 men! These two Battles inflicted great shame on a proud French Army. By September 20th the Prussians had encircled Paris. They dredged up a telegraph cable from the bed of the River Seine; this would mean that Paris now had very little contact with the outside World.

It might be worth at this juncture considering what Paris was like at this time and why its destruction might hopefully be averted. It was then, as now, a very beautiful city with a wealth of attractive buildings. There was the cathedral of Notre Dame, the Louvre, the Palace of Versailles and the Arc de Triomphe, to name just a few of Paris' main attractions.

It was becoming, I suppose, a very cosmopolitan capital city. It was a leading capital in terms of high cuisine. There were a number of very high quality restaurants. They were concentrated in the Boulevard des Italiens. One restaurant, the Café Anglais had as its famous chef, Adolphe Duglere. The composer Gioachino Rossini described him as "the Mozart of French cooking". A steak dish was created perhaps for Rossini called "Tournados Rossini". It was created by French master chefs, Marie-Antoine Careme, Adolphe Duglere and by Savoy Hotel chef Auguste Escoffier. I am grateful to a friend in the community for helping me with this aspect of my research. The Three Emperors' Dinner took place at the Café Anglais on 7th June 1867. It was attended by Kaiser Wilhelm I, Tsar Alexander I and the Tsarevitch, the future Tsar Alexander II, Bismarck was also in attendance. There were 16 courses with 8 wines. It lasted 8 hours and it cost 400 francs per person, in today's figures this would, it seems, cost 9,000 Euros!

Napoleon III had considerably improved Paris. He had appointed Baron Haussmann to carry out very large scale improvements. There had been a vast programme of public works. New sewers, fountains and aqueducts had been constructed. There was opposition to this by many people but the improvements were very much needed. Public health needed to be improved. In 1832 and 1848 there had been serious cholera outbreaks. Wide streets had been built that would help facilitate the flow of traffic. The Boulevard Saint Michel was one of two major streets in the Latin Quarter of Paris. It is referred to in the hit record of 1969 by Peter Sarstedt, entitled, "Where Do You Go to My Lovely". The fictitious lady who is the subject of his song is beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated; she has an apartment on this street. I would suggest that when most of us think about Paris, the images that come to mind are the result of the work of Haussmann.

On September 20th. Napoleon III sent a message to the Prussian King saying that he wanted to surrender. France would now have a new leader Gambetta and he proclaimed a Republic. Napoleon would spend the rest of his life in exile in England!

Gambetta decided to try to continue to fight the Prussians but warfare had now become too complex and technical particularly when faced by skilful and knowledgeable opponents. The Prussians continued to invade large sections of France!

The siege of Paris was soon to begin. On 5th. January Bismarck agreed to the bombardment of Paris. The hope was that the deployment of large Krupps guns firing 300 to 400 shells a day would force the people of Paris to surrender! Many people watching from abroad were horrified by the firing of shells on civilians. The situation reached a point where Bismarck started to worry that if the bombardment continued Britain or Austria might decide to intervene on behalf of France.

The situation was saved for Germany by what was happening in Paris at this time. There was very great hardship. Rich people were able to obtain food but the poor were desperate and hungry. A revolutionary situation developed in Paris. This caused much concern amongst France's ruling elite and so to avert a revolution they surrendered on 28th. January 1871. It was at this time that the Paris Commune was formed. This Socialist Government ruled Paris from 18th. March 1871 to 28th. May 1871. Karl Marx whose book Das Kapital formulated the ideas behind Communism called the Paris Commune an example of the "dictatorship of the proletariat". French troops were called on to end this situation in Paris. They did so with great brutality and some
20,000 people were killed in matter of weeks.

The Treaty of Frankfurt ended the War and was signed between France and Germany on 10th. May 1871. France's humiliation was complete. Under the terms of this Treaty they were forced to give two provinces Alsace and Lorraine to the Germans. They also had to pay 200,000,000 Francs in compensation to the victorious Germans!

The casualties from this War were huge. The French Army strength was 909,951 of these 138,871 were killed. 143,000 were wounded and 474,414 were captured. This made a total of casualties and losses 756,285. The number of men taken prisoner was clearly a great humiliation for the French. The Prussian Army had a strength of 1,200,000 men. 28,208 men were killed and 88, 488 were wounded. The German Army had a total of 116, 696 losses and casualties. The disparity in the

figures of both Armies must clearly be explained by the Prussians' better battlefield tactics and their deployment of heavy artillery.

The results of this short War were to have serious long term consequences. Germany was now the strongest military power on the Continent of Europe not France. Equally it continued its rise as the most significant industrial and economic power on the Continent. A powerful, united Germany was now more capable than ever of standing up to France and Austria. The German people now developed a huge regard for the Army.

Bismarck had clearly acted very ruthlessly to achieve his aims. The idea that deeds were justified if they satisfied the aims and interests of Germany gave rise to the concept of Realpolitik. The very quick victory also gave rise to the belief that other victories would be as easy and quick. The lesson of the slaughter in the American Civil War where two strong armies inflicted huge damage on one another with very powerful modern weaponry perhaps should have acted as more of a warning to the Governments of Europe.

The Treaty of Frankfurt was, as stated, a great humiliation to France. The loss of Alsace and Lorraine gave many French people a huge desire for revenge. The fate of these two provinces in the long term is very interesting. Germany was ultimately defeated in the First World War and in the Treaty of Versailles, signed in 1919, that settled this conflict Alsace and Lorraine reverted to French control. 1939-1945 marked the years of the Second World War and again Germany invaded France! In 1942 the people of these two provinces were made German citizens by decree. When Germany was defeated these Provinces once again returned to France!

Bismarck had clearly had much success but the situation that had been created by the Franco -Prussian War was very complex and would need skilled diplomacy to maintain. He was dismissed on 18th. March 1890 by Kaiser Wilhelm II who was a very determined but inconsistent Monarch. He disagreed with Bismarck over what he saw as his cautious foreign policy. The Kaiser wanted to rapidly expand Germany and enlarge its "place in the sun", this means gaining territories overseas as Britain and France had done. It was he who presided over Germany in World War 1. They also disagreed over workers' rights, with the Kaiser overall being favourable to these and Bismarck not. The Kaiser was very interested in social problems especially the treatment of mine workers who went on strike in 1889. At the end of World War One the Kaiser fled in exile to Holland, where he would spend the rest of his life.

France had been left unsurprisingly feeling very insecure and in April 1904 the Entente Cordiale was signed by Britain and France. King Edward VII had made a very good impression on the French during his visits to France prior to the signing of this Agreement. By 1914 two powerful armed camps would exist in Europe; the Triple Entente comprising Britain, France and Russia. There was also the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. World War I ended in catastrophe for the Triple Alliance and great hardship ensued that helped lay the foundations of World War Two.

Germany and her Allies faced another catastrophic defeat in 1945. There was feeling in Europe that closer ties were needed. In 1944 the Governments of Belgium, Netherlands and Luxemburg were meeting in exile in London because their countries were occupied by the Germans. They began to make plans for when the War was over. They agreed to set up the Benelux Customs Union to facilitate the flow of trade. Here the hard work of the German Chancellor Konrad Ardenauer has to be mentioned. By 1948 people were talking about the West German "Economic Miracle". Germany was divided into East and West. Such progress would not be squandered and in 1952 France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands decided to share and develop their Steel resources in the European Coal and Steel Community (E.C.S.C.). In 1957 by the Treaty of Rome the European Economic Community (E.E.C.) was formed, this became known as the Common Market. It is now known, of course, as the European Union (E.U.)

The United Kingdom finally joined the European Union in 1973 under the Conservative Government of Edward Heath. It is interesting to note how that EU membership continues to be a

troublesome issue for the Conservative Party and has taken a considerable amount of time and attention of behalf of the current Prime Minister David Cameron!

To conclude there is no doubt that the Franco-Prussian War greatly affected a number of events that followed. The French were left with a legacy of bitterness over the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. It would equally be a mistake to assume that Germany would feel totally secure. Germany has, as stated earlier, both Western and Eastern borders. A sign of this feeling of insecurity can be seen in the comments of Bethmann- Hollweg; he was Chancellor of the German Empire from 1909 to 1917. He pondered in relation to his country estate that was just outside of Berlin, “if there is any purpose in planting new trees in a few years the Russians would be here anyway”. This would prove to be a remarkably prescient statement; following the Second World War Germany became divided into East and West and Berlin itself was a city divided by the victorious powers. The Berlin Wall did not come down until 1989! A War then that had far-reaching consequences and further proof, if any were needed, that discussion and compromise are always better than conflict!

John Hodson