

**IMPERIAL GERMANY  
(1871-1918): OTTO  
VON BISMARCK & THE  
TRIPLE ALLIANCE:  
MAINTAINING THE  
BALANCE OF POWER**



# IMPERIAL GERMANY (1871-1918): OTTO VON BISMARCK & THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE: MAINTAINING THE BALANCE OF POWER

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Bismarck's foreign policy from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the Iron Chancellor's dismissal by Kaiser William II in 1890, and in particular how the Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria and Italy was forged by Bismarck by 1882, inevitably laying the groundwork for the Great War.

## Subjects

European History  
World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Bismarck Memorial, Berlin
- Bismarck statues around Germany

## Essential Questions

- Who was Otto von Bismarck?
- What were his ideas behind maintaining the balance of power in Europe after the Franco-Prussian War ended in 1871?
- What was the "Triple Alliance"? How did each member state join the alliance? What were their goals for the alliance? Did those aims sometimes run counter to each other?

# Academic Summary

## **First Treaty of Alliance between Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Italy. Vienna, May 20, 1882.**

Their Majesties the Emperor of Austria, King of Bohemia, etc., and Apostolic King of Hungary, the Emperor of Germany, King of Prussia, and the King of Italy, animated by the desire to increase the guaranties of the general peace, to fortify the monarchical principle and thereby to assure the unimpaired maintenance of the social and political order in Their respective States, have agreed to conclude a Treaty which, by its essentially conservative and defensive nature, pursues only the aim of forestalling the dangers which might threaten the security of Their States and the peace of Europe.

... have agreed upon the following Articles:

### ARTICLE I.

The High Contracting Parties mutually promise peace and friendship, and will enter into no alliance or engagement directed against any one of their States.

They engage to proceed to an exchange of ideas on political and economic questions of a general nature which may arise, and they further promise one another mutual support within the limits of their own interests.

### ARTICLE II.

In case Italy, without direct provocation on her part, should be attacked by France for any reason whatsoever, the two other Contracting Parties shall be bound to lend help and assistance with all their forces to the Party attacked.

This same obligation shall devolve upon Italy in case of any aggression without direct provocation by France against Germany.

### ARTICLE III.

If one, or two, of the High Contracting Parties, without direct provocation on their part, should chance to be attacked and to be engaged in a war with two or more Great Powers nonsignatory to the present Treaty, the *casus foederis* will arise simultaneously for all the High Contracting Parties.

### ARTICLE IV.

In case a Great Power nonsignatory to the present Treaty should threaten the security of the states of one of the High Contracting Parties, and the threatened Party should find itself forced on that account to make war against it, the two others bind themselves to observe towards their Ally a benevolent neutrality. Each of them reserves to itself, in this case, the right to take part in the war, if it should see fit, to make common cause with its Ally.

### ARTICLE V.

If the peace of any of the High Contracting Parties should chance to be threatened under the circumstances foreseen by the preceding Articles, the High Contracting Parties shall take counsel together in ample time as to the military measures to be taken with a view of eventual cooperation.

They engage henceforward, in all cases of common participation in a war, to conclude neither armistice, nor peace, nor treaty, except by common agreement among themselves.

### ARTICLE VI.

The High Contracting Parties mutually promise secrecy as to the contents

and existence of the present Treaty.

ARTICLE VII.

The present Treaty shall remain in force during the space of five years, dating from the day of the exchange of ratifications.

ARTICLE VIII.

The ratifications of the present Treaty shall be exchanged at Vienna within three weeks, or sooner if may be.

In witness whereof the respective Plenipotentiaries have signed the present Treaty and have affixed thereto the seal of their arms.

Done at Vienna, the twentieth day of the month of May of the year one thousand eight hundred and eighty-two.

In 1871, after over one thousand years of political bickering and jostling, the Germanic states finally unified behind one flag. Led by the will of Prussia's "Iron Chancellor", Otto Von Bismarck, the German Reich accomplished in a less than a decade what had taken the rest of the major European powers hundreds of years: world notice. It was the fastest rise of a true world power in modern history. In southern Europe, Italy unified during the same period. While not the economic or militaristic power of the new Germany, the Italians still held an important position in the balance of power. That balance was precarious and constantly shifting. The alliance system grew out of the need for nations to preserve the balance. It can be looked at in two distinct periods: during and after Bismarck.

According to Dr. Henry Kissinger, the unification of Germany created a dilemma... the powers at the edge of Europe - Great Britain, France, and Russia - had been exerting pressure on the center for hundreds of years. In 1871, for the first time, the center of Europe was becoming sufficiently powerful to press on the periphery.

Bismarck realized this shift, and its consequences. Almost immediately, he set about creating a system of alliances. They were designed primarily to prevent war and maintain the status quo. In the process, they would also isolate France, which since the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian war, was hell-bent on revenge. In order to ensure that any balance would be in Germany's favor, Bismarck had to ally with at least two of the four other great powers of Europe. Austria – Hungary and Russia were the most logical choices, allowing Bismarck to eliminate the possibility of a two-front war. Although German unification had partially come at her expense, the Hapsburg Empire had a large contingent of Germans. She had been a European power since the Middle Ages, and even though she had suffered a slip, the empire still held sway over a large section of Southeast Europe. The problem was that the Austrians and Russians didn't get along. Russia saw itself as the protector of the "South Slavs" of the Balkans, an area that Austria had ruled for centuries. Bismarck, though, believed in himself. Improbable as it seemed at the time, he was able to bring the two camps into an alliance in 1873 called the Three Emperors League. It emphasized their commonality and conservative views. The challenge of how to deal with two partners who were at each other's throats was too much, however, and although the league was not renewed in 1878, the three empires did sign a non-aggression pact in 1881.

The following year (1882), Bismarck reached out towards another thorn in Austria's side, and the Kingdom of Italy joined the Dual Alliance to create the Triple Alliance.

Austria - Hungary was now assured that if relations with Russia once again became strained, the Italians would not box them in from the south. Italy was given the opportunity to participate in great power diplomacy for the first time, giving its government legitimacy both at home and abroad.

Unfortunately, the great balancing act was too much even for Bismarck to handle.

Tensions between Russia and Austria over the Balkans continued throughout the decade. After Kaiser William II came to the throne in 1888, Bismarck's days in government were numbered, and the 75-year-old chancellor was dismissed less than 2 years later. Within days of the dismissal, Kaiser William decided not to renew a reinsurance treaty with Russia, driving Czar Alexander III into the waiting arms of the French, a decision that ultimately made Bismarck's greatest military fear, that of a two-front war, an absolute certainty.

On June 28, 1914, sixteen years after the Iron Chancellor had been laid to rest, his greatest fears came true. A young Bosnian Serb revolutionary shot and killed Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austro – Hungarian throne, as he and his wife visited Sarajevo. Austria suspected Serbia, long an enemy, of being behind the assassination, and decided that the empire had had enough. The British proposed an international conference to settle the dispute, but Austria would have none of it, and on July 28, after receiving assurances from Kaiser William in Berlin, declared war on Serbia. Russian troops mobilized in support of Serbia, which in turn brought the mobilization of the German army. By the end of the week, all the Great Powers were involved (with the exception of Italy, which decided that it wanted out of the Triple Alliance when it came down to it). The alliance system, which had kept Europe out of war for so long, had ultimately forced it into one. Millions of graves would be dug before it was over. Trench warfare and technological improvements such as mustard gas, the machine gun, airplanes and tanks would give new meaning to the horrors of war. In the end, the alliance system was simply too much for anyone to handle. The question for students and historians today is whether or not it could have been stopped.

Did Bismarck's decision to isolate France after the Franco-Prussian War lead to a 40 year hatred that could only be quenched by the blood of millions? Was Bismarck's alliance system, a system specifically designed to prevent war, where he alone stood between mortal enemies like Russia and Austria, doomed to fail after he was gone? Did William II's decision to dismiss Bismarck lead Europe down an inevitable path towards war? Or did the Iron Chancellor's alliance system arm Europe to the point of preventing war for forty years? Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Bismarck's foreign policy from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the Iron Chancellor's dismissal by Kaiser William II in 1890, and in particular how the Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria and Italy was forged by Bismarck by 1882, inevitably laying the groundwork for the Great War.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the details of Bismarck's Alliance System from its creation after the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 to its dismissal by Kaiser William II in 1890.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Triple Alliance solidified one camp in Europe's balance of power struggle in the days before the Great War.
3. Students will theorize as to whether the concept of armed militarism is effective at preventing war, using the backdrop of Bismarck's alliance system to illustrate their points.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Do military alliances prevent wars or help start them? Give examples. (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Bismarck's Alliance System. (20 min)
- Video – Causes of WW1 / Alliances (5 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Bismarck's Alliance System, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Group Activity – Discussion: Bismarck's Alliance System (15 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Bismarck's foreign policy from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the Iron Chancellor's dismissal by Kaiser William II in 1890, and in particular how the Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria and Italy was forged by Bismarck by 1882, inevitably laying the groundwork for the Great War.

# Extension

## On tour: Bismarck monument in Berlin

While on tour, students in Berlin can visit the Tiergarten, where they can see sights such as the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz. The park also contains the Bismarck Memorial, a prominent statue to the Iron Chancellor and architect of modern Germany. The statue was originally located in front of the Reichstag before the Second World War, but was moved in 1938 under Hitler's project to recast Berlin as "Welthauptstadt Germania" (World Capital Germany). Ironically, moving the memorial to its present location probably saved it, as its former home was completely destroyed during the war. Students looking closely, however, can see some damage from shrapnel caused by Allied bombing and Soviet Red Army shelling of the city.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [users.dickinson.edu/~rhyne/232/Six/Triple\\_Alliance\\_1882.html](http://users.dickinson.edu/~rhyne/232/Six/Triple_Alliance_1882.html)  
The Triple Alliance of 1882 (primary source) – from George N Rhyne, Professor of History at Dickinson College (PA)
- [ibatpv.org/projects/germany/2ndreich/bismarckian\\_alliance\\_system.htm](http://ibatpv.org/projects/germany/2ndreich/bismarckian_alliance_system.htm)  
The Bismarckian Alliance System, 1871-1894 (website) – from Brett Silva, IB History teacher from Pleasant valley High School in Chico, CA
- [www.oocities.org/athens/troy/1344/alliance.html](http://www.oocities.org/athens/troy/1344/alliance.html)  
A Life of Its Own: The Alliance System (secondary source – academic paper)
- [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWtriple.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWtriple.htm)  
Triple Alliance (website) – from Spartacus Educational (UK)
- [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/hq/causes1\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/hq/causes1_01.shtml)  
The Road to War: the Triple Alliance (website) – from the BBC. Short, but informative, website that outlines the basics of the Triple Alliance. Highly recommended for students and teachers.
- [history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111bis.html](http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111bis.html)  
Excerpts from Memoirs by Otto von Bismarck (primary source) – excellent primary source. Details how Bismarck saw Austria as a possible future ally, even as he was fighting against them to secure Prussia's position as the leader of German unification.
- [www.geocities.ws/charlotte\\_susan\\_wood/cs01002.htm](http://www.geocities.ws/charlotte_susan_wood/cs01002.htm)  
Otto von Bismarck and the Triple Alliance (website)
- [www.oocities.org/athens/troy/1344/austria.html](http://www.oocities.org/athens/troy/1344/austria.html)  
Changes in Osterreich: Joseph II of the Hapsburg Empire and his Reforms during the Enlightenment (secondary source)
- [www.nndb.com/people/636/000101333/](http://www.nndb.com/people/636/000101333/)  
Joseph II (website)
- [www.johndclare.net/Causes\\_WWI\\_alliances.ppt](http://www.johndclare.net/Causes_WWI_alliances.ppt)  
Alliances and WWI (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBrD\\_u20UF0&list=PLwclU4z-ub6DssmACAnj1PN0TFQGQpIT](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBrD_u20UF0&list=PLwclU4z-ub6DssmACAnj1PN0TFQGQpIT)  
World War I: Web of Alliances ¼ (video) – first of 4 parts (10 min per episode / 40 min total) from the BBC on World War I. Highly recommended for students and teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAeMeuspmk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAeMeuspmk)  
Causes of WW1 – Alliances (video) – 5 minute video. Uses primary source film footage to explain the alliance system.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto\\_von\\_Bismarck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_von_Bismarck)  
Otto von Bismarck – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple\\_Alliance\\_\(1882\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple_Alliance_(1882))  
Triple Alliance (1882) – Wikipedia article

- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/germany/country\\_profile](https://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/germany/country_profile)  
On the Road: Germany (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/austria/country\\_profile](https://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/austria/country_profile)  
On the Road: Austria (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/country\\_profile](https://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/country_profile)  
On the Road: Italy (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/german-unification-under-bismarck](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/german-unification-under-bismarck)  
German Unification in 1871
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-berlin-conference-1884](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-berlin-conference-1884)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Berlin Conference of 1884
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-paternalistic-state-socialism](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-paternalistic-state-socialism)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Paternalistic State Socialism
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-triple-alliance](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-triple-alliance)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Triple Alliance
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia)  
Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914)  
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles)  
Great War – France: Clemenceau
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan)  
Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918)  
Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/imperial-russia-panslavism](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/imperial-russia-panslavism)  
Imperial Russia (1921-1917) – Panlavism: Mama Bear and her Cubs

## **Key Terms**

- Alliance
- Austrian empire
- German Empire
- Kingdom of Italy
- Militarism
- Otto von Bismarck
- Triple Alliance
- Kaiser William I
- Kaiser William II



