

How significant was Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 in influencing the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919?

by Jana Publication & Research

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Abstract:-

This paper examines the role of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 in reshaping European politics and how it sets the stage for twentieth century warfare. The study analyses the war's origin, pre-war diplomatic tensions such as failed attempts at gaining territory, as well as military operations and technological advancements in relation to artillery that aided in strategic planning and execution. Most significantly, this paper examines the war's long lasting political consequences as a result of German Unification, the annexing of territories such as Alsace-Lorraine, and deep rooted revanchism that directly resulted in the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War.

Introduction:-

Historical Context:

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 was one of the most important conflicts in modern European history, reshaping the continent's political landscape.¹ This brief but decisive war erupted between Prussia under chancellor Otto von Bismarck, aiming to achieve German Unification, and French Emperor Napoleon III, who feared a unified Germany would threaten to overthrow French dominance in Europe. The immediate trigger was the Ems Telegram incident on July 19th, 1870 that was sent amid the disagreement surrounding Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern for the Spanish throne that caused France to declare war.² When Spain offered its throne after Queen Isabella's abdication to the Prussian Prince, France objected which caused Bismarck to edit a telegram about a diplomatic encounter between the nations, making it seem like both sides had insulted each other, provoking French outrage. Finally, in May of 1871, the Treaty of Frankfurt officially ended the war and imposed harsh terms on France, marking the end of the Second Empire under Napoleon III and the beginning of the German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm I of Prussia.

Pre War tensions:

Tensions between Prussia and France arose due to military factors that upset the balance of power France had over Europe. In 1866, Prussia's swift victory over Austria in the Austro-Prussian War established Prussia as the dominant German Province.² The conflict, which lasted from June to August 1866, demonstrated Prussia's military superiority and resulted in Austria's complete exclusion from German affairs. The Treaty of Prague, signed in August 1866, also permitted Prussia to annex several German states that had sided with Austria—including Hanover, Hesse-Kassel, Nassau, and the city of Frankfurt. Furthermore, the treaty authorized the creation of the North German Confederation in 1867, a federal state of 22 German states north of the Main River under Prussian leadership, with King Wilhelm I as President and Bismarck as Chancellor. This confederation represented a consolidation of German power under Prussian hegemony and fundamentally upset the balance of power that had existed in

Europe since the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Napoleon III had remained neutral during the Austro-Prussian War, expecting a long, costly conflict that would weaken both German powers and allow France to act as mediator, gaining territorial compensation in the process. Instead, Prussia's swift seven-week victory left France diplomatically isolated and strategically vulnerable. The French government, feeling it had been outmaneuvered and deserved compensation for its neutrality, demanded territorial concessions from Prussia as the price for accepting this new German configuration. France, therefore sought territorial concessions from Prussia such as the French speaking territories along the Rhine River, including the Bavarian Palatine and parts of Hesse-Darmstadt. These demands failed when Bismarck revealed secure secret military alliances with South German States Bavaria, Baden, and Wurttemberg.³ These defensive treaties stipulated that if France attacked any of these states or if Prussia became involved in a defensive war, all parties would unite their armies under Prussian command.

Another diplomatic and political factor that contributed to pre-war tensions was the Luxembourg crisis in March of 1867 that further poisoned relationships between the two countries.⁴ When Napoleon III attempted to purchase the Duchy of Luxemburg for 5 million guilders from the Netherlands, Prussia strongly objected, causing a major diplomatic crisis. The issue was resolved by Britain holding a conference in London which secured Luxemburg's independence, while making sure France gained nothing. The Luxembourg crisis threatened to spark the Franco-Prussian War three years early as it caused both nations to mobilize forces.

Franco-Prussian War:-

Reasons for Prussian Victory:

In order to understand the significance of Prussia's victory in the Franco-Prussian War, it is essential to understand Prussia's military strategies and organization as well as the new and upcoming technologies that were important in leading to France's swift defeat.

Prussian Artillery:

Prussia had undergone massive technological advances in metal and toolmaking industries during the mid 19th century around the 1840s to 1870s, leading to industrialization in heavy industry and infrastructure. The Dreyse Needle Gun (Zündnadelgewehr)⁵, was a bolt action, breech-loading rifle that was revolutionary when it was introduced in the 1840s. The Dreyse needle gun contributed significantly to Prussia and Austria's success in the 1864 Second Schleswig War against Denmark. In the early 1860s, the development of cast steel barrels enabled large-scale industrial manufacturing of the rifle. The updated 1862 model accelerated both the weapon's deployment and its widespread acceptance. Hence, by the time of the Franco-Prussian War, there were around 1,150,000 needle guns in its inventory. The Needle Gun provided many advantages to the Prussian Army:

- Prussian soldiers could fire while laying down unlike French soldiers who used the Chassepot, which required a more upright position for reloading.⁶
- Prussian soldiers used the 'advancing by rushes' tactics which used terrain for cover. The needle gun's loading mechanism allowed rapid fire even from cover which was crucial in mobile warfare.

Furthermore, Alfred Krupp⁷ had developed the Krupp Gun - a breech-loading system with a steel wedge that slid transversely on a short groove at the rear end of the gun allowing for considerably higher gas tightness.⁸ The guns could fire more powerful charges. This provided significant advantages such as having a range of 4000-5000 yards, outranging French guns by 1000 yards. This effectiveness can be seen in Sedan during the war, for example, when Prussian artillery, positioned on the heights surrounding the town, rained shells down on French troops, creating a devastating crossfire that the French could not match.

French Artillery:

The French artillery was composed of bronze muzzle-loading cannons⁹ which were used in the Franco-Austrian War of 1859 that secured France's victory and later the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The muzzle-loading system was slower than the Prussian breech-loaders and the bronze construction was traditional and outdated compared to the steel the Prussians were using.⁶ Compared to the steel breech-loaders, the bronze muzzle-loading rifle had a shorter range of about 3000 yards and a low¹ rate of fire. Another rifle that the French used was the Chassepot¹⁰ (known officially as the Fusil modèle 1866). The Chassepot was a bolt-action breechloading rifle that was an improvement² to existing military rifles, marking the introduction of the modern bolt-action rifle era. In the Franco-Prussian war, this rifle was considered to be the Dreyse needle gun's counterpart, having advantages such as:

- The Chassepot was lighter and shorter than the needle gun (4.1 kg versus 4.57 kg and 1310 mm vs. 1424 mm)
- The Chassepot had a much higher muzzle velocity than the needle gun (436 meters per second, 33% over the Dreyse) while also having a longer range.

Mobilization and strategies during Wartime:

France mobilized its army on 15th July 1870 which led the North German Confederation to mobilize later the same day. The next day, 16th July 1870, the French Parliament voted to declare war on Prussia. However, Prussian troops mobilized much more quickly than the French had expected as seen when France invaded German territory on 2nd August while Prussian troops invaded northeastern France on 4th August. The organisation of the French army was based on a system that was introduced after the defeat of Napoleon I in 1818. Conscription was limited by ballot and produced about 288,000 long service troops by 1851.¹¹ Furthermore, the illiteracy rate was around 20%-30% which caused problems with training.¹¹ On the other hand, Prussian troops under Helmuth von Moltke¹², the Prussian general and military strategist, amassed around 730,000 men with lower illiteracy rates.¹¹ The number of troops along with Moltke's reliance on the railways in Germany allowed for the supply, deployment, and movement of troops on a greater scale¹². In comparison to Prussia, France lacked sufficient strategic railways, having only four main lines connecting to the Rhine, whereas Prussia had six well-established double-tracked lines. The French lines included Paris-Sedan-Thionville, Paris-Metz-Forbach, Paris-Nancy-Hagenau, and Belfort-Strasbourg, with a line from Verdun-Metz left unfinished. Additionally, the French network relied more on single tracks, limiting directional movement, while the German system featured more double-tracked routes, enabling significantly higher train traffic to the French border in 1870 — averaging fifty trains for Germany compared to only twelve for France.¹³

133
134 According to Prussian mobilization plans, three armies were to gather along the Rhine in order
135 to encircle French forces in the event of an eastward invasion. The majority of Prussian
136 regiments were based regionally, in contrast to the French troops, with each battalion being
137 recruited by a parish. If mobilization of troops occurred, any reserves had to return to local
138 depots in order to bring up regiments for war establishment. This only took 18 days after
139 mobilization for Prussia compared to the French taking up to a month to reach full strength of
140 mobilisation. Since French troops were not based regionally, and given the urgency of the
141 situation, plans were made to combine mobilization with concentration. This resulted in 2000
142 separate contingents travelling first to the regional depots and then onward to join their
143 regiments, resulting in many of them arriving late to the battlefield.¹¹

144
145 In July of 1870, France invaded German territory through Alsace-Lorraine, taking the offensive.
146 However due to lack of preparation, the French soon lost four battles in 13 days: the Battle of
147 Wörth and the Battle of Spicheren (both 6 August 1870), Mars-la-Tour (16 August 1870) and
148 Gravelotte–St Privat (18 August 1870)¹¹. After the initial defeats in early August, French strategy
149 collapsed. Bazaine fell back toward Metz with approximately 175,000 men — France's largest
150 force — but then became trapped in the fortress. Napoleon III met with a second French force,
151 The Army of Châlons led by Marshal MacMahon, and advanced towards Metz to relieve
152 Bazaine of the Prussian siege.¹⁴ However, the French encountered setbacks such as bad
153 weather and poor roads that allowed German forces to intercept the slow moving French troops.
154 After a heavy defeat at the Battle of Beaumont, MacMahon and Napoleon III retreated forces
155 into the fortified town in Sedan.¹⁵

156
157 At the Battle of Sedan on September 1st, Prussian forces used the strategy of seizing high
158 ground, which allowed them to concentrate their artillery overlooking crucial points on the
159 battlefield, as well as infantry counter-attacks that were deployed along the French perimeter to
160 encircle French troops.¹⁴ By the end of the day, Napoleon III surrendered and was captured
161 along with 100,000 French soldiers. With the French facing a humiliating defeat in Sedan, Paris
162 became the next major stronghold. Prussia's strategy in the Siege of Paris¹⁶ involved
163 surrounding the city with 240,000 troops, cutting off supplies, and waiting for Paris to starve until
164 the city surrendered. Moltke was against storming Paris, arguing that the casualties would be
165 catastrophic and unnecessary hence rejecting Bismarck's plans for bombardment due to fearing
166 international condemnation.

167
168 French strategy involved taking a defensive position following the declaration of the Third
169 French Republic in response to Napoleon III's defeat.¹⁷ The new government ordered the war to
170 continue, leading to over four more months of fighting in which there were three unsuccessful
171 break-out attempts. In January of 1871, the Germans carried out an ineffectual artillery
172 bombardment campaign. Following the poor results of the bombardment, the Germans took to
173 using large-caliber Krupp heavy siege artillery. With this attack, as well as the ill and starving
174 Parisians, the Government of National Defence created an armistice on 28th January 1870.

175
176 **Armistice:**

Preliminary peace was made on 26th February 1871 at Versailles. It outlined the harsh terms:¹⁸

- France cede Alsace and most of Lorraine
- Pay an indemnity of five billion francs
- Accept German occupation of eastern France until the indemnity was paid in full
- Bismarck insisted on Metz both for its military value as a frontier fortress and because German nationalists demanded it

The Treaty of Frankfurt¹⁸ on 10th May 1871 finalized the preliminary terms with additional details that further destroyed relationships for the next 43 years. France lost approximately 5,200 square miles of territory containing 1.6 million inhabitants — the entire province of Alsace (except Belfort) and the northeastern portion of Lorraine, including the Moselle department. Alsace and Lorraine possessed immense strategic and economic value that Bismarck understood would cripple French power while strengthening Germany. Strategically, these provinces provided Germany with a strong defensive frontier along the Vosges Mountains and control of key fortresses including Metz, Strasbourg, and Thionville. France's frontier was pushed back to indefensible positions. Any future Franco-German war would begin with German armies already positioned deep in previously known French territory.

Apart from territorial and monetary losses, the most symbolic element occurred before the signing of the Treaty in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles on 18th January 1871 — the 170th anniversary of the Kingdom of Prussia's Founding — where Kaiser Wilhelm I was proclaimed the German Emperor on French soil. Versailles was chosen due to its symbol of French power and glory and the ceremony was seen as German power eclipsing French glory and magnificence which was a decisive factor in contributing to France's humiliation and deep rooted revanchism in setting harsh terms for Germany in the future.²

First World War Strategies:-

One may wonder whether Germany had any similar military or political advantages in the First World War over France, as was the case in 1870-71. Bismarck did not survive for long after the end of the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent unification of Germany as a nation. Kaiser Wilhelm II was the leader of Germany when the country entered the First World War. It is a widely known fact that even contemporaries of Bismarck often could not match with his strategic and diplomatic prowess. Bismarck's belief in Realpolitik, where a country focuses on its national interests, was evident in his numerous policies such as that of the German involvement in the Crimean war of 1859. However, this level of strategic decision making, with considerations for Realpolitik, was largely missing among the German leadership at the start of the First World War. The crisis of Sarajevo, in which Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, made Germany enter the war due to popular demand from German citizens and securing a place as a leading power. The decision of Germany to declare war by siding with Austria, therefore, can be questioned as to how relevant it was for German interest.

Hence, there might have been other factors that might have contributed to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles¹⁹ such as the military strategies used by Germany and the Allies that led to Germany's defeat.

Mobilization and Strategy:

The Germans assumed the war would be a short conflict²⁰ and drew up the Schlieffen Plan which referred to the invasion of France and Belgium on 14th August, 1914. This plan focused mainly on speed and surprise and was followed in order to defeat France rapidly before Russia could fully mobilize as the Russians had superior war materials. The main idea of the plan was solely focused on the defeat of French and Russian troops. Due to this, execution of the Schlieffen Plan by Moltke the Younger did not account for Belgium resistance or England's British Expeditionary Force and hence the troops faced shortages due to simultaneous operations on multiple fronts which caused most forces to be stretched thin between the Western and Eastern fronts.²¹ Furthermore, since Germany was allied with Austria during the war, compared to fighting alone in the Franco-Prussian War, there were failed attempts to combine command systems. Germany also did not have the same strategic viewpoints with her allies resulting in some wars being fought against different powers.²⁰

The Allies mobilization plans involved Britain increasing infantry and cavalry dramatically: only 176,101 in the first quarter of 1918, but 318,746 in the second quarter and 244,948 in the third quarter.²² Furthermore, throughout the war, the Allies made several changes showing their flexibility in the situation. This can be seen when the Allies revised their command structure - the British had been forced to reinforce the Western front rather than pursue Eastern gains and manpower restrictions. Additionally, American mobilization delivered 2 million troops with 70% combat engagement.

Materials and Infrastructure:

Another factor contributing to Germany eventually losing the war is the shortage of materials. Although initially Germany was able to do well in several battles such as the Battle of Tannenberg in August 1914, in which German forces defeated two large Russian armies, and the initial invasions of France and Belgium when following the Schlieffen Plan, the failed Spring offensive of 1918 marked the turning point. The offensive was launched in March and fell due to extended frontage held by the British Fifth Army.²² The lack of fresh reserves and supplies meant that German forces were exhausted. America had entered the war and sent in new troops to Paris every month leading to Germany being worn out and hence causing their eventual defeat in November of 1918.²³

Impact of Armistice in contributing to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles:-

The Treaty of Versailles¹⁹ was a peace treaty signed at the end of the First World War by the Allies and Germany in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles on 28th June, 1919. The leaders of the allied powers, also known as 'The Big Three', included Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States; David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom; and George Clemenceau, the Prime Minister of France. The terms of the treaty were harshly imposed on Germany and included points such as Alsace and Lorraine being returned to France, Germany's army being reduced to only 100,000 men, Rhineland to be demilitarized and under allied troops (predominantly France), and reparation payments of around \$33 billion in 1921.¹⁹ Out of the 'Big Three', George Clemenceau wanted to make sure that France would

never be invaded by Germany again in the future after witnessing what happened during 1870-71 and during the World War and these stipulations achieved this aim.²⁴ This was due to his political career arising during the height of the Franco-Prussian war. Evidence to this can be seen when Clemenceau voted against a peace that would have given Alsace-Lorraine to the Prussians in February of 1871.²⁴

Conclusion:-

In conclusion, the Franco-Prussian War served as one of the most significant conflicts in modern history because the forces it set in motion would shape the next seventy-five years of European history. In the span of six months, the war redrew the European map, ended French dominance that had existed since Louis XIV's reign, and created a unified German Empire that would dominate the Continent until 1945. The Franco-Prussian War also demonstrated how essential offensive action, organization and rapid mobilization were key to achieving victory. The war played a key role in setting the terms of the Treaty of Versailles - humiliation, reparations, and territorial revanchism made France exert severe punishment on Germany after the First World War. This led to the Treaty being one of the main factors in triggering World War 2.

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