

Journal Homepage: - [www.journalijar.com](http://www.journalijar.com)

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/21942

DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/21942>

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### HOW SIGNIFICANT WAS PRUSSIAN VICTORY IN THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR OF 1870-71 IN INFLUENCING THE TERMS OF THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES IN 1919

Anushka Vaswani

#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 11 August 2025

Final Accepted: 13 September 2025

Published: October 2025

#### Abstract

This paper examines the role of the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War 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.

"© 2025 by the Author(s). Published by IJAR under CC BY 4.0. Unrestricted use allowed with credit to the author."

#### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 13th, 1870 which was sent amid the disagreement surrounding Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen for the Spanish throne that caused France to declare war.<sup>2</sup> 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 are due to military factors that disturbed the balance of power that France held over Europe. In 1866, Prussia's swift victory over Austria in the Austro-Prussian War established Prussia as the dominant German Power.<sup>2</sup> 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 August 1866 Treaty of Prague also allowed Prussia to conquer a number of German states that had supported Austria, notably Frankfurt, Hanover, Hesse-Kassel, and Nassau. The treaty also enabled the formation of the North German Confederation in 1867— a Prussian-led federation of 22 German states north of the River Main, headed by 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 1815 Congress of Vienna. 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 ensuring 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 emerging technologies that were important in leading to France's swift defeat.

##### **Prussian Artillery:**

During the 1840's to 1870's, Prussia had undergone massive technological advances in metal and tool making industries, leading to industrialization in heavy industry and infrastructure. Introduced during the 1840s, the Dreyse Needle Gun<sup>5</sup> represented a revolutionary advancement in firearms technology through its bolt-action, breech-loading mechanism. The 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, the Prussian inventory contained around 1,150,00 of these needle guns. The Needle Gun provided many advantages to the Prussian Army including:

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

Furthermore, Alfred Krupp<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> These 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. The effectiveness of these guns 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 cannons<sup>9</sup> 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. Furthermore, the bronze construction was traditional and outdated compared to the steel the Prussians were using.<sup>6</sup> Compared to the steel breech-loaders, the bronze muzzle-loading rifle had a shorter range of about 3000 yards and a lower rate of fire.

Another rifle that the French used was the Chassepot<sup>10</sup> (known officially as the 1866 Fusil modèle). The Chassepot was a breech-loading rifle featuring bolt-action technology that surpassed contemporary military rifles, marking the

beginning of the modern bolt-action rifle age. 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 (0.47 kg lighter) and shorter (by 114 cm) than the Dreyse needle gun.
- The Chassepot had a higher muzzle velocity than the Dreyse needle gun, 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 declared war on Prussia by vote. However, Prussian troops mobilized much more quickly than the French had expected. This is seen when France invaded Germany on 2nd August while Prussian troops invaded Northeastern France on 4th August. French army organization followed a system that had been implemented in the aftermath of Napoleon I's defeat in 1815. Conscription was limited by ballot and generated approximately 288,000 troops by 1851. Furthermore, the illiteracy rate was around 20%-30% which caused problems with training.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Prussian troops under Helmuth von Moltke<sup>12</sup>, the Prussian general and military strategist, amassed around 730,000 men with lower illiteracy rates.<sup>11</sup> 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 scale.<sup>12</sup> In contrast 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. French railway lines ran from Paris to Sedan-Thionville, Paris to Metz-Forbach, Paris to Nancy-Hagenau, and Belfort to Strasbourg, though the Verdun-Metz line remained incomplete. Additionally, the French network relied more on single tracks, limiting directional movement. The German system featured more double-tracked routes, enabling significantly higher train traffic to the French border in 1870 — averaging fifty trains per day for Germany compared to only twelve for France.<sup>13</sup>

According to Prussian mobilization plans, three armies were to gather along the Rhine in order to encircle French forces in the event of an eastward invasion. Most of the Prussian regiments were based regionally, in contrast to the French troops, with each battalion being recruited by a parish. If mobilization of troops occurred, reservists needed to return to their regional depots in order to fill regiments to their required war establishment levels. This only took 18 days after mobilization for Prussia compared to the French taking up to a month to reach full mobilisation strength. Since French troops were not based regionally and given the gravity of the situation, plans were made to combine mobilization with concentration. This resulted in 2000 separate contingents travelling first to the regional depots and then onward to join their regiments, resulting in many arriving late to the battlefield.<sup>11</sup>

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

At the Battle of Sedan on September 1st, Prussian forces used the strategy of seizing the high ground, which allowed them to concentrate their artillery overlooking crucial points on the battlefield, as well as deploy infantry counter-attacks along the perimeter to encircle French troops.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the day, Napoleon III was captured along with 100,000 French troops, fundamentally altering the war's trajectory. With France facing a humiliating defeat in Sedan, Paris became the next major stronghold. Prussia's strategy in the Siege of Paris<sup>16</sup> involved surrounding the city with 240,000 troops, cutting off supplies, and waiting for Paris to starve until the city surrendered. Moltke was against storming Paris, arguing that the casualties would be catastrophic and unnecessary, hence rejecting Bismarck's plans for bombardment due to fearing international condemnation.

Following the declaration of the Third French Republic in response to Napoleon III's defeat, French strategy involved taking a defensive position.<sup>17</sup> The new government's decision to continue the war led to over four more months of fighting, marked by three unsuccessful attempts to break through enemy lines. In January 1871, the Germans carried out an ineffective artillery bombardment campaign. Following these poor results, the Germans

began employing Krupp heavy siege guns of large-caliber ammunition. With this attack, combined with the plight of the ill and starving Parisians, the Government of National Defence signed an armistice on 28th January 1871.

Hence, the most significant cause of Prussian victory over the French was the military strategy and organization over the use of artillery. The Prussian army had organized itself in accordance with the rise of the modern era. On the other hand, France still relied on an outdated system. Furthermore, Prussia used railways more strategically than the French. Technological supremacy alone was not the most decisive factor in winning the war as both the Prussians and the French possessed advantageous guns - the Chassepot in France, whereas the Krupp Gun in Prussia.

**Armistice:**

Preliminary peace was reached on 26th February 1871 at Versailles. It outlined the harsh terms<sup>18</sup>:

- France was to cede Alsace and most of Lorraine
- France was to pay an indemnity bill amounting to five billion francs
- Accept the German occupation of Eastern France until the indemnity bill 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 Frankfurt<sup>18</sup> on 10th May 1871 finalized these terms with additional details that further destroyed relationships for the next forty-three years. The entire Alsace province (except Belfort) and the northeastern half of Lorraine, including the Moselle department, were lost, costing France some 5,200 square miles and 1.6 million people. 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. This made France's frontier was pushed back to indefensible positions. Thus, any future Franco-German war would begin with German armies already deep in previous French territory.

Apart from territorial and monetary losses, the most symbolic element occurred prior to the signing of the Treaty in the Hall of Mirrors at 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. 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.<sup>2</sup>

**First World War:**

Apart from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, there are other factors such as First World War political and military strategies used by Germany that could have accounted for the harsh terms set by the Allies in the Treaty of Versailles.

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 died relatively soon 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. Contemporaries of Bismarck often could not match 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 1853-56. 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, led Germany to 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 Versailles<sup>19</sup> 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 conflict<sup>20</sup> and drew up the Schlieffen Plan. This plan involved the invasion of France and Belgium on 14th August, 1914. This plan focused mainly on surprise and speed and was done in order to defeat France rapidly before Russia could fully mobilize since the Russians had superior war materials. However, execution of the Schlieffen Plan by Moltke the Younger did not account for Belgian resistance or the British Expeditionary Force. Thus, the troops faced shortages due to simultaneous operations on multiple fronts causing forces to be stretched thin between the Eastern and Western fronts.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, since Germany was allied with Austria-Hungary during the war, compared to fighting independently 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 wars being fought against different powers.<sup>20</sup>

The Allies' mobilization plans involved Britain increasing infantry and cavalry dramatically: only 176,101 in the first quarter of 1918, rising to 318,746 in the second quarter, before declining to 244,948 in the third quarter.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, throughout the war, the Allies made several changes showing their flexibility in the situation. For example, the Allies reorganized their command structure — with the British strengthening the Western front instead of pursuing opportunities in the East. Additionally, American mobilization delivered 2 million troops with 70% combat engagement.

**Materials and Infrastructure:**

Another factor contributing to Germany's eventual defeat is the shortage of materials. Although Germany initially achieved success 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 while following the Schlieffen Plan, the failed Spring Offensive of 1918 marked the turning point. Launched in March, the offensive failed due to over-extended frontage that was held by the British Fifth Army.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the lack of supplies and fresh reserves meant that German forces were exhausted. America had recently entered the war and sent in new troops to Paris every month. This led to Germany being worn down, causing their eventual defeat in November of 1918.<sup>23</sup>

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

The Treaty of Versailles<sup>19</sup> was a peace treaty signed by the Allies and Germany on 28 June 1919 in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, marking the end of the First World War. The leaders of the Allied powers, known as 'The Big Three', consisted of the US President Woodrow Wilson, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and French Prime Minister George Clemenceau. 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.<sup>19</sup> Of 'The Big Three', George Clemenceau wanted to ensure that France would never be invaded by Germany again in the future after witnessing what happened during 1870-71 invasions and the First World War. These stipulations helped achieve this aim.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

**Conclusion:-**

In conclusion, the Franco-Prussian War stands 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 seven 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 instrumental in achieving victory. Most importantly, the war significantly influenced the punitive terms of the Treaty of Versailles as humiliation, combined with reparations and territorial revanchism made France exert severe punishment on Germany after the First World War. The harsh terms led to the Treaty being one of the main factors in triggering the Second World War as Hitler deliberately broke the Treaty by invading other countries such as Poland and militarizing Rhineland. Hence, the Franco-Prussian war directly influenced the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

**Citations:-**

1. Oxford Bibliographies. (2024, November 22). Franco-Prussian War (Franco-German War), 1870-1871. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199791279/obo-9780199791279-0266.xml>
2. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2025, September). Franco-German War. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Franco-German-War>
3. Bobyank, L. (2016, November 2). Bismarck and the unification of Germany. Writing and History. <https://writingandhistory.wordpress.com/2016/11/02/bismarck-and-the-unification-of-germany/>
4. Lambert, V. (n.d.). Independent Luxembourg. In Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved October 13, 2025, from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Luxembourg/Independent-Luxembourg>
5. American Rifleman. (2023, October). Dreyse needle rifle: The world's first military bolt-action. <https://www.americanrifleman.org/content/dreyse-needle-rifle-the-world-s-first-military-bolt-action/>
6. Stracmark. (2021, June 26). Thinking of things: Franco-Prussian. <https://stracmark.blogspot.com/2021/06/thinking-of-things-franco-prussian.html>
7. War History Online. (2024, December 13). Krupp. <https://warhistory.org/@msw/article/krupp>
8. Brownell, J., & Hewitson, M. (2023, August). Introduction: The Franco-Prussian War in French and German history. French History, 37(4), 409-416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09683445231193878>
9. Military History Online. (n.d.). French vs. German strategy 1871. <https://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/Century19th/FrenchVsGermanStrategy1871>
10. American Rifleman. (2021, February). This old gun: Model 1866 Chassepot. <https://www.americanrifleman.org/content/this-old-gun-model-1866-chassepot/>
11. History.com Editors. (2025, May). Treaty of Frankfurt-am-Main ends Franco-Prussian War. History. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/may-10/treaty-of-frankfurt-am-main-ends-franco-prussian-war>
12. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Helmuth von Moltke: Chief of the general staff. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Helmuth-von-Moltke/Chief-of-the-general-staff>
13. Wawro, G. (2003). The Franco-Prussian War: The German conquest of France in 1870-1871. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.reenactor.ru/ARH/PDF/Wawro.pdf>
14. EBSCO. (2023). Battle of Sedan. EBSCO Research Starters. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/battle-sedan>
15. Military History Now. (2024, November 10). Sedan 1870: Inside the decisive clash that reshaped Europe. <https://militaryhistorynow.com/2024/11/10/sedan-1870-inside-the-decisive-clash-that-reshaped-europe/>
16. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2025, September). Siege of Paris (1870-1871). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Siege-of-Paris-1870-1871>
17. Testbook. (n.d.). Battle of Sedan. <https://testbook.com/ias-preparation/battle-of-sedan>
18. History.com Editors. (2025, May). Treaty of Frankfurt-am-Main ends Franco-Prussian War. History. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/may-10/treaty-of-frankfurt-am-main-ends-franco-prussian-war>
19. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2025, September). Treaty of Versailles (1919). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919>
20. Seoudi, M. (2020, August 17). The German strategy during the World Wars. History Hub. <https://historyhub.info/the-german-strategy-during-the-world-wars/>
21. Garvey, R. J. (2021, August 30). The downfall of Germany in WWI. NCO Journal. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2021/August/The-Downfall-of-Germany-in-WWI/>
22. Taylor, G. (2021, June 7). How the allies won the war in 1918: Strategic alignment or complete U-turn. King's College London. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/how-the-allies-won-the-war-in-1918-strategic-alignment-or-complete-u-turn>
23. UK Essays. (2018, November). Why did Germany lose the First World War? <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/history/why-did-germany-lose-the-first-world-war-history-essay.php>
24. EBSCO. (2023). Georges Clemenceau. EBSCO Research Starters. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/georges-clemenceau>