



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918  
Terminating the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (1890)

The Reinsurance Treaty, a secret treaty between Russia and Germany signed in 1887, was an integral part of Bismarck's later foreign policy. Its original purpose was to ensure both countries' neutrality in the event that either went to war with another power. Bismarck's successors found the treaty's implications too complex – and distrusted Russia. The Reinsurance Treaty was allowed to lapse as part of Chancellor Leo von Caprivi's (1831-1899) "New Course" in 1890. First discovered by the German media in 1896, public knowledge of the secret treaty caused a scandal in Wilhelmine Germany nine years after the fact.

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Memorandum by Count von Berchem, undersecretary at the Foreign Office.  
Clean copy given to Chancellor von Caprivi on March 25, filed by him on March 28

Berlin, March 25, 1890

The purpose of the treaty that is up for renewal is to prompt warlike events whose containment is extremely improbable; as a result, we might easily unleash a full-scale war that we can and should avoid today, even in the opinion of Prince Bismarck. Even if we were to remain neutral, we would ultimately find ourselves in the thankless situation of 1878.

The terms of this treaty mean that at least one of the powers in question would be subject to deception, but in all probability both Eastern neighbors would be misled, since we would initially deny the Austrians support in the decisive opening round of developments in the Bulgarian affair; and yet – according to the oft-stated opinion of the former chancellor – as soon as this matter escalated, we would be obliged to fight for Austria-Hungary, thus betraying our loyalty to Russia. This cannot lead to a permanent peace. Rather, it will produce permanent resentment between two great nations similar to the ill feeling resulting from Austria's stance toward Russia in the Crimean War.

Even in times of peace, the treaty places us at the mercy of the Russians; they are given a document with which they can, at any time, disrupt our relations with Austria, Italy, England and the Porte.

The treaty does not guarantee reciprocity. All its advantages go to Russia. France will not attack us without being sure of Russia's cooperation. If Russia, on the other hand, launches an Oriental War – which is the treaty's intention – and France attacks us at the same time, as anticipated, Russia's neutrality toward us will be guaranteed by the general state of affairs as it will serve Russia's interests, even without a treaty. So the treaty does not safeguard us from a French attack, but it does grant Russia the right to launch an offensive against Austria on the Lower Danube. It also prevents us from mounting an offensive against France – aside from the fact that, in the main, the treaty is extremely difficult to reconcile with the German-Austrian alliance.

The treaty allows the Russians to determine when a future European war will begin. Given the present signs, it appears somewhat likely that Russia, covered by Germany, will have an interest in striking soon. It remains to be seen whether this is compatible with our military interests and those of our allies.

The agreement stands in opposition to the Triple Alliance, if not in letter, then in spirit. If the Russians strike in the south, it will place us at odds with allied powers. But in practical terms, too, the treaty cannot be implemented.

Source: *Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914* [*The Great Power Politics of the European Governments, 1871-1914.*] From the diplomatic files of the German Foreign Ministry, edited by Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and Friedrich Thimme, vol. 7. Berlin, 1923, pp. 4-6.

Translation: Adam Blauhut