Introduction

There were two Prussias in 1870. One was described by Theodor Fontane in *Rambles through the Brandenburg March*, a rambling four-volume travel book that depicted a savage Prussia still emerging from its swamps and forests. "Do not expect the comforts of the Grand Tour," Fontane chuckled in the first volume, but "poverty, squalor and . . . no modern culture." Trains were still a luxury in this industrializing kingdom of coal and iron; they plied only between the big cities and towns. For travel between Prussian villages, hired traps were needed, but they were invariably driven by resentful provincials, who would drive you round in circles, in and out of woods and streams, and end up charging you more for a short ride between neighboring hamlets than you would pay on the railway for the five-hour trip from Berlin to Dresden.[1] Prussia in 1870 was still a "virginal wilderness," a land of bogs and pines that ran right up to the gates of Berlin itself. It was a rough country with rough manners. The Viennese – always condescending where the Prussians were concerned – derided their northern cousins as having "two legs rooted in the Bible, two in the soil." The Prussians could be knuckle-dragging, evangelical philistines, a conclusion that even a great patriot like Theodor Fontane was at pains to avoid.

The other Prussia was described by Karl Marx in the 1860s. Berlin, with its splendid Baroque palaces and Le Nôtre gardens, was a graceful, expanding city. On its edges blazed *Feuerland* – "fire land" – the busy forges and machine works of Oranienburg and Moabit. Marx gaped at the economic growth, pronounced Prussia "a mighty center of German engineering," and was stunned by the changes wrought in his birthplace: the western provinces of Rhineland and Westphalia. Sleepy and bucolic in Marx's youth, the Prussian Rhineland

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1 Theodor Fontane, *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*, 4 vols., orig. 1859–82, Berlin, 1998, vol. 1, pp. 12–13.

now belched smoke and fumes from coal-fired factories. Marx compared the region favorably with Lancashire and Yorkshire, the rich, smoggy heart of the English industrial revolution. Prussia now had great cities – Berlin, Königsberg, Breslau, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, and Cologne – and was producing more coal and steel in a year than France, Russia, or Austria. Moreover, with 5,000 miles of track, it had a more extensive railway network than any of its three great neighbors, an advantage that would only increase in the next decade.[2] The Prussian population was also determinedly growing, in absolute and relative terms. In 1866, Prussia had 19 million inhabitants; this was more than half the French population of 35 million and the Austrian population of 33 million. With its young, productive population and its galloping industries and railways, Berlin naturally assumed leadership of the German *Zollverein* or customs union, which, from its inception in 1834, tore down tariff barriers between the thirty-nine states of the German Confederation, stimulated trade and consumption, and magnified Prussia's leading role. Berlin's involvement with the other German states was cause for concern. Excluding the Germans of Austria, the combined population of the small and medium states of the German Confederation – countries like Bavaria, Saxony, Hanover, and Hamburg – was 20 million. If Prussia ever unified them, the new state would be the most powerful in Europe.

Yet wealth and power always sat uneasily with Prussia. On the verge of real greatness in the 1860s, Prussia was held back by its ancient élites. Ever since the Teutonic Knights had driven the Slavs from the eastern edge of the Holy Roman Empire – the borderland that eventually became Prussia – the kingdom had been dominated by descendants of the knights, semi-feudal noble landowners called *Junkers*. Although the Hohenzollern kings had shorn the Junkers of most of their political power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they had compensated them in a number of troublesome ways. Junkers acquired vast landed estates at good prices, retained local administrative authority, and also dominated the Prussian court, army, and civil service, holding most of the key ministries and offices. In return, they swore loyalty to Prussia's Hohenzollern kings, who never tested the veiled threat of a Junker in 1808: "If Your Royal Highness robs me and my children of our rights, on what, pray tell, do your own rights rely?" Attempts by Prussia's "new men" of the industrial age – manufacturers, merchants, and professionals – to force their way into this cozy marriage of throne and aristocracy were consistently rebuffed.[3] The Prussian king could keep his own counsel, veto parliamentary initiatives whenever he liked, and apportion voting rights according to wealth and social class, assuring the reactionary Junkers a prominent role until 1918.

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2   John Breuilly, "Revolution to Unification," in Mary Fulbrook, ed. *German History since 1800*, London, 1997, p. 126. H. W. Koch, *A History of Prussia*, New York, 1978, pp. 241–2.
3   James J. Sheehan, *German History 1770–1866*, Oxford, 1989, pp. 302–3, 440.

Nor was the Prussian kingdom in one piece, territorially or spiritually. Physically it was broken into two halves, the eastern heartland of Branden-burg-Prussia and the western provinces of Westphalia and the Rhineland. Foreign states – Hanover, Hessia, Baden, and several smaller ones – nested in the gap between the two halves as did a great deal of cultural misunderstanding. In 1863, a Prussian infantry officer from the east joined his regiment in Aachen in the west for the first time. Although Aachen and the surrounding *Rheingau* had been a part of Prussia since 1815, the young man was astonished by the depth of anti-Prussian feeling there. Locals considered Prussia a foreign country, and called it *Stinkpreusse* – "Putrid Prussia." Fathers with sons in military service lamented that their boys were "serving with the Prussians," as if they had been abducted by a foreign power. Prussian officials were called *Polakien* ("Polacks") or *Hinterpommern* ("Pomeranian hicks"). They were taken for savages, not educated men from the schools and universities of Bonn, Göttingen, Berlin, or Rostock.[4] The resentment felt by these Rhenish townsmen and peasants was itself a reflection of Prussian weakness. In 1860, *The Times* of London had written: "How [Prussia] became a great power history tells us, why she remains so, nobody can tell."[5] It was an ungainly state riven by geography, culture, class, and history.

France in the 1860s formed a glittering contrast to Prussia. The so-called capital of Europe, Paris was the stately *métropole* of a united, fiercely national-istic nation with colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Indochina. With twice the inhabitants of Berlin, Paris had a population of 1.8 million and shimmered with architectural treasures and a rich history that reached back a thousand years. Whereas Prussia appeared rough and haphazardly formed – Voltaire had snidely called it a "kingdom of border strips" – everything about France bespoke elegance and solidity. With its natural frontiers on the sea, Vosges, Alps, and Pyrenées and its 800 years as a unified state, France had cultivated a uniquely rich culture founded on food, wine, temperate weather, fashion, mu-sic, and language. But this cultural supremacy – now anchored in the 20,000 cafés of Paris and the trend-setting *grands magasins* – had always been the case, hence the ambition of every German tourist (and soldier) to "live like a god in France." What gave France the appearance of *strategic* mastery in the 1860s, what made France "the umpire of Europe," was the ambitious regime of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor Napoleon III.

Born in 1808, Louis-Napoleon had suffered the fate of every Bonaparte af-ter Waterloo. Forbidden by the restored Bourbons to live in France, where he or his siblings might attempt a Napoleonic restoration, he had wandered from Switzerland to Germany to Italy and finally to England. He was a romantic, excitable young man, and finally discovered his true calling as a conspirator in Italy.

4   G. von Bismarck, *Kriegserlebnisse 1866 und 1870–71*, Dessau, 1907, p. 4.
5   Koch, p. 250.

The Italian peninsula in the 1820s had been divided between a half dozen small states, from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the south to Piedmont in the north. The social and political atmosphere was precisely that described by Stendhal – a contemporary of Louis-Napoleon's – in the *Charterhouse of Parma*: rigid, humorless, and reactionary. Weak branches of ancient dynasties like the Bourbons (in Naples) and the Habsburgs (in Florence, Modena, and Parma) defended their thrones with great cruelty, flinging anyone suspected of liberal agitation into jails or galley slavery. The situation was aggravated by the presence in Italy of the Austrian Empire, whose territorial reward for helping quash the French Revolution (and Louis-Napoleon's famous uncle) had been the Italian provinces of Lombardy and Venetia. For Louis-Napoleon, the opportunity to revenge himself upon the very states and dynasties that had crushed France and dictated peace in 1815 was irresistible. He joined the *Carbonari*, a secret society dedicated to the national unification of Italy, and distinguished himself as an intriguer. Nearly arrested in 1830, he fled to England, posting through Paris on the tenth anniversary of his uncle's death on St. Helena. Although Louis-Napoleon still had no legal right to reside in France, he paused in Paris to admire the strength of the Napoleonic legend. Fifteen years after Napoleon I's exile and ten years after his death, ordinary people still laid wreaths at his monuments and cried "*Vive l'Empereur!*"

With sentiments like these alive in France, the government arrested Louis-Napoleon and hustled him out of the country. He lived in London until 1836, when he returned to France in an ill-advised imitation of his uncle's "Hundred Days," the return from Elba in 1815. Louis-Napoleon marched up to the gates of Strasbourg with a small entourage and demanded that the garrison there join him to "restore the Empire" and oust the "illegitimate" government of King Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, who had become king in 1830 and earned the eternal hatred of the Bonapartes by confiscating all of their assets in France. Military discipline prevailed at Strasbourg; Bonaparte was arrested, and sent back into exile, this time to the United States. In 1840, he hazarded another *coup* with fifty men. Debarking at Boulogne, they took the train to Lille and (in a reprise of Strasbourg) demanded that local troops join them in a march on Paris to depose Louis-Philippe and restore the Empire; again Bonaparte was arrested, this time sentenced to "perpetual confinement" in the fortress of Ham. On hearing the verdict, Louis-Napoleon presciently joked that "in France, nothing is perpetual."[6]

He was right; in 1846, Louis-Napoleon disguised himself in the blue overalls of a construction worker named Badinguet and strolled out the gates of Ham to freedom. Karl Marx, for one, never forgave the lapse of vigilance, and referred to Louis-Napoleon ever after as "Little Badinguet." On the lam, a

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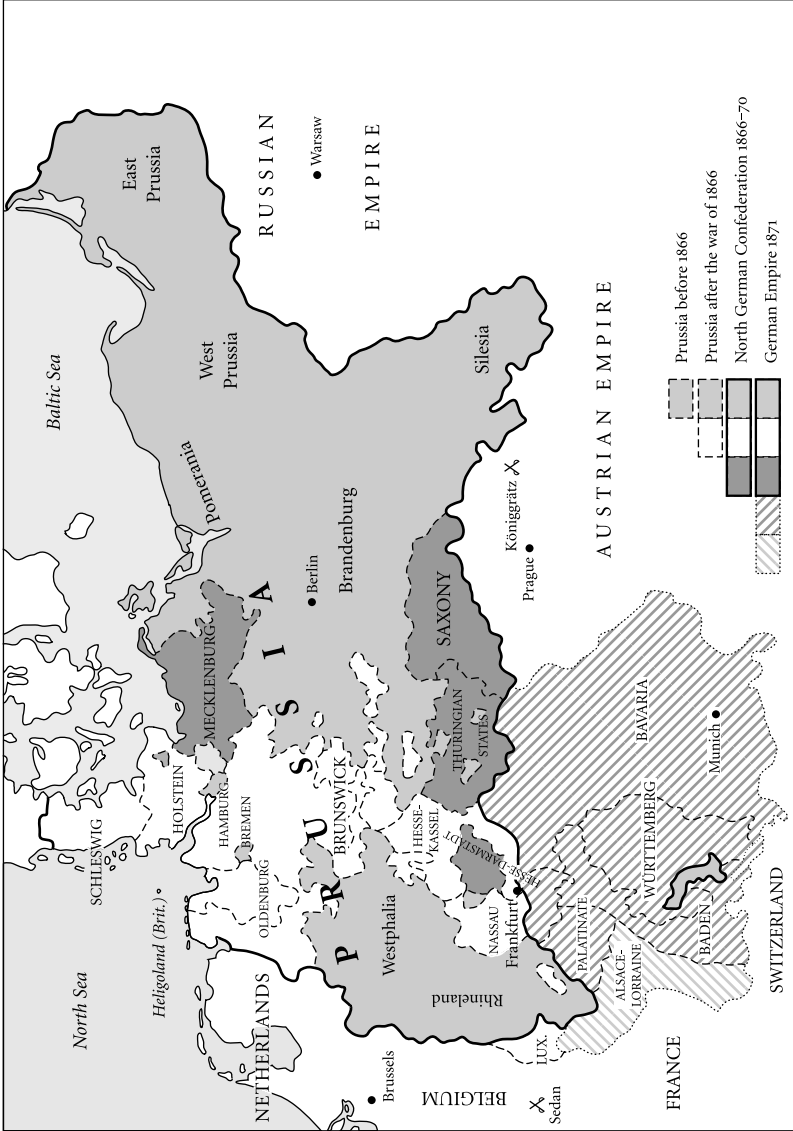6   D. W. Brogan, *The French Nation*, London, 1957, p. 62.

Map 1. Germany in the 1860s

failure at everything he turned his hand to, Louis-Napoleon seemed a failure. Still, he remained the Bonaparte family's "pretender," the ranking heir to the imperial throne abdicated by his uncle in 1815, and he nursed a powerful ambition that finally found an outlet in 1848 when France was rocked by revolution.

The French revolution of 1848, a radical attempt to bury monarchy and create a "social and democratic republic," shattered on the essential conservatism of France. Although urban workers – like the destitutes sketched in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* – wanted a socialist state, the French bourgeoisie and peasantry supported capitalism and private property, which afforded the bourgeois a high standard of living and the peasant dignity and land ownership. Observing that peasants comprised nearly 80 percent of the French population, Louis-Napoleon – free to return to France at last thanks to the first reforms of the revolutionary year – immediately made himself the candidate of the peasant voter, was elected to the new parliament, and backed the French army's strike against the radical cities in June 1848. The bloody "June Days" – 3,000 working-class insurgents were killed or wounded – left a conservative, middle-class republic in place of the radical one proclaimed in February.

One radical reform retained by the more conservative republic was manhood suffrage; realizing that few peasants recognized the names of any of the candidates running for the presidency of the new French Republic, Louis-Napoleon put himself forward and ran an American-style campaign, whistle-stopping across France and pitching himself as a reliable strongman, the true heir of his famous uncle, who had made the name Bonaparte synonomous with order, fiscal conservatism, and national pride. These were popular prescriptions in rural France, and Bonaparte won by a landslide in December 1848, receiving 74 percent of the votes cast.[7]

For Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, this rapid, unexpected ascent to the presidency must have been stunning. Written off in his thirties, he was President of France in his forties. As chief executive, he displayed remarkable political skill. He attracted conservatives with prudent fiscal, monetary, and trade policies, and strong support for the army and the Roman Catholic church. The erstwhile *Carbonaro*, who had spent his youth plotting against the pope, now warmly embraced the Vicar of Christ. When Mazzini and Garibaldi, the most famous *Carbonari* of all, drove Pope Pius IX from Rome in 1848 and established a Roman Republic – the dream of the French president's youth – Louis-Napoleon reversed himself and dispatched French troops to crush the republic and restore the pontiff. This was less an act of piety than a bid for conservative support, and it succeeded. Priests all over France endorsed *Pouléon*

7   Roger Price, *Napoleon III and the Second Empire*, London, 1997, p. 15.

in church and in the cafés. (French peasant males were far more likely to be in the second place than the first.) Catholic support deepened when President Bonaparte gave back the parochial schools and universities that the church had lost in the revolution.[8] Conservatives were also pleased with the president's choice of wife, Countess Eugénie de Montijo, a beautiful, deeply religious Spanish reactionary, who would have been more at home in the sixteenth than the nineteenth century.

But what distinguished Louis-Napoleon from other nineteenth-century conservatives, what made him quintessentially a Bonaparte – supple, obliging, and almost breathtakingly unprincipled – was his simultaneous approach to the radical left. Although he reeled in the right with solid economic policies, patriotism, and "moral education," he reached out to the left with progressive social policies: investing heavily in road and railway construction and other public works to soak up France's pool of unemployed. Indeed the president had polled thousands of working class votes in the 1848 elections because of his book *L'extinction du pauperisme* – written in the Ham prison – that had promised just the sort of Bonapartist "war on poverty" that Louis-Napoleon ultimately delivered. In 1851, Bonaparte approached the end of his presidential term with strong popularity. The middle-class and peasants revered him, and even the urban poor had come to appreciate his public works. Unfortunately, the constitution of the Second Republic forbade a second term and many in France feared chaos in the 1852 elections.

The most likely candidate of the right was General Louis Cavaignac, who had killed, wounded, arrested, or exiled 20,000 workers in June 1848. The man of the left was Louis Blanc, a communist. Thus, assuring themselves that they were conspiring against the republic only to save it from itself, Louis-Napoleon and his advisors prepared a *coup d'état*. Generals loyal to the republic were transferred to Algeria; generals loyal to Louis-Napoleon were brought to Paris. Unreliable prefects and police chiefs were replaced with reliable ones. By December 1851, all was in place, including large garrisons of dependable troops in Paris, Lyon, and the other big cities. Louis-Napoleon struck in the night of 2 December, a date carefully chosen to evoke memories of his uncle's glorious victory at Austerlitz forty-six years earlier. After all the preparations, the coup provoked only sporadic acts of resistance, which Bonaparte dramatically flourished as sure "evidence of the social war which would have broken out in 1852" had he not intervened.[9] Louis-Napoleon reseated himself in power as "prince-president," minted new coins and banknotes bearing his image, and, one year later, went all the way, dissolving the republic and proclaiming himself Napoleon III, Emperor of the French.

8   Price, p. 16.
9   Price, p. 22. James F. McMillan, *Napoleon III*, London, 1991, pp. 45–51.

There were many similiarites between the Second Empire of Napoleon III and the First Empire of his uncle, which had lasted from 1804–14 and for 100 days in 1815. Both empires sprang from military coups in peacetime and solved grave internal political problems. Napoleon I had struck to preempt radicals at either end of the political spectrum: "white terrorists" on the right (the unapologetic adherents of the fallen Bourbons) and "red terrorists" on the left (the "neo-Jacobin" admirers of Robespierre, Marat, and St. Just). In his time, Napoleon III struck to preempt similar threats, from Legitimists (diehard Bourbonists) and Orleanists (partisans of the exiled Louis-Philippe) on the right, who wanted further to constrict voting rights that Louis-Napoleon had already constricted in 1850, and from *démoc-socs* (democratic socialists) on the left, who wanted to sweep away the "prince-president" and his wealthy backers and create a worker's state. Historically, the Bonapartes rejected extremists of any persuasion. They were free agents, bound neither to right nor left. Descended from a minor Corsican family, the Bonapartes were the consummate new men, who took their support where they could find it. They "stood above the parties" in France because they had to, hence their innate suppleness and willingness to please, which was generally interpreted as a lack of principle.

As Emperor of the French in the 1850s and 1860s, Napoleon III presided over a great economic expansion. Consumption of agricultural and industrial products increased across the board as Europe shrugged off a long recession. Louis-Napoleon primed the pump, scrapping tariffs and other taxes and founding new savings banks to soak up rural savings and channel the deposits into the French economy. Under Napoleon III, the French railway network quintupled from 2,000 miles of track in 1851 to 10,600 miles in 1870.[10] The emperor's most lasting act, and the one that aesthetically made Paris the "capital of Europe," was Louis-Napoleon's decision to demolish whole quarters of Paris and rebuild them in the grand neo-Renaissance style that came to be identified with the Second Empire. Medieval warrens were split open with broad new boulevards flanked by palatial mansions, office buildings, and department stores. This reconstruction of Paris and the other cities and towns of France cost 5 billion francs, which was an astonishing sum equal to $15 billion today.

The renovated capital fit the new emperor's grand vision of France. The nation had never really recovered from the defeat and humiliation of 1815. Territory had been lost to the Dutch, Germans, and Piedmontese. France had been relegated to a subordinate political position in Europe, beneath the world's richest power, Great Britain, and the so-called gendarmes of the Continent: Russia and Austria. Though the intervening governments of the Bourbon

10   Price, pp. 26–7.

Restoration (1815–30) and the July Monarchy (1830–48) had attempted to restore France's prestige and influence, they had largely failed; the Bourbons had acquired Algiers, but nothing more. In 1830, Louis-Philippe had actually besieged Antwerp to drive out the Dutch but then balked when offered the former French-speaking borderland lost in 1815. Faced with British opposition, he had characteristically backed down. The new state of Belgium was the result, a permanent, rather embarrassing reminder of France's waning power. Louis-Napoleon was determined to change all of this. Indeed, one reason people had voted for him in the elections of 1848 and the plebiscites of 1851 and 1852 affirming the "authoritarian presidency" and the empire was his commitment to *la grande France*, that is a France that would again dictate to the rest of Europe.

No doubt many voters had deluded themselves that the name Napoleon alone would accomplish this, but not Louis-Napoleon. The position of France had radically changed since the time of his uncle. Whereas the France of Napoleon I had easily overshadowed the rest of Europe in population, military might, and pre-industrial economic resources, the balance had shifted to the detriment of Napoleon III's France. Now France, with its population of 35 million, was a thoroughly average great power. Still more worrisome was the slow industrialization of France, a nation of artisans and small shopkeepers, who jealously defended their incomes against the encroachments of the machine age and the department store. Although this latter quality preserved the charming atmosphere of the French town and village, with cobblers hammering away at their benches and blacksmiths stoking their fires, it retarded France's economic growth, and put fewer resources in the hands of the new emperor. What, then, could the emperor possibly do to restore French prestige and leadership? That which he had always done well: plotting and intrigue. Rather than confront Britain and the gendarmes directly, he would reduce their power by indirect means: limited wars, conspiracies, and diplomacy.

For this, Louis-Napoleon had a strategy. He had spent his many years of exile and prison extracting what he called *idées napoléoniennes* – Napoleonic ideas – from the wreckage of his uncle's failed empire. The essence of the ideas was this: to restore French power, a new Napoleon needed to finish the work begun by the first Napoleon, namely destroy or weaken the repressive, multinational empires of Austria and Russia and encourage the formation of liberal new nation-states in their place that would rally around France. Healthy Polish, German, Czech, and Italian nation-states would be cut from the "corpses" of Austria and Russia, and would place themselves at the side of France from a combination of gratitude and admiration. The emperor's ultimate aim was nothing less than a "United States of Europe," whose capital would be the grandly rebuilt Paris. The strategy was audacious, but not as far-fetched as it seemed at first blush. It was based on Louis-Napoleon's penetrating critique of his uncle, who, in the new emperor's eyes, had *betrayed*

the Napoleonic promise by first liberating and then enslaving the peoples of
Europe. Promises of a liberalizing "Napoleonic project" for Europe had been
dropped after the great victories at Austerlitz (1805), Jena (1806), and Fried-
land (1807), which had left Napoleon I master of the Continent. Thereafter
the First Empire had slipped into corruption and war-mongering, earning
the hatred of almost everyone in Europe by the end. Napoleon III vowed to
improve on that record; he would free the peoples of Europe and leave them
free, so long as they accepted French leadership.

The chief barrier to this daring "Napoleonic idea" – besides its paradoxi-
cal premise – was the "Congress system" of 1815, which committed the five
great powers (Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and France) to confer and put
down any attempted changes to the borders or governments established at
the Congress of Vienna. Thus, when liberal Italian nationalists attempted to
overthrow the governments of Piedmont and the Two Sicilies in 1821, the
powers met and authorized the Austrians to send troops to Turin and Naples
to crush the revolts. Similarly, when liberal Spanish officers imprisoned their
king and demanded a constitution in 1822, the powers invited the French to
invade Spain with 100,000 troops to restore the Bourbons and root out the
"liberal plot." The last gasp of the Congress system was in 1848–49, when the
Russian, Austrian, and Prussian armies had joined to crush the liberal revolu-
tions, the Russians marching an entire army into Austria to topple a short-lived
Hungarian republic. Needless to say, a conventional statesman would have
quailed before this conservative phalanx, but not Louis-Napoleon. He was
notoriously unconventional – "his mind is as full of schemes as a warren is full
of rabbits," Britain's Lord Palmerston once complained – and seized every
opportunity to undermine the conservative powers.

The first opportunity presented itself in 1853, when Tsar Nicholas I de-
clared war on the Ottoman Empire, which was an ill-advised declaration that
provoked counter-mobilizations by the British and the Austrians who both
announced their opposition to Russian control of the Balkans and the eastern
Mediterranean. To Louis-Napoleon, the conflict was a godsend; it split the
gendarmes and drove Britain into his arms. An Austro-Franco-British alliance
was swiftly concluded and an expeditionary force dispatched to the Crimean
peninsula, which was the easiest part of Russia to attack from the sea. (No one
in London, Paris, or Vienna wanted to *march* to Moscow as Napoleon I had
unwisely attempted in 1812.) The resulting Crimean War sputtered inconclu-
sively for three years. The political acrimony between the allies and Russia
increased in inverse proportion to the results on the battlefield, where the two
sides wallowed in muddy trench lines around the great fortress and naval base
of Sebastopol. In 1856, the coalition finally defeated the Russians – Nicholas
I having fortuitously died, making way for a more flexible successor – and
wrestled them back to their pre-war frontiers. This was a satisfactory result
for the Austrians and British. For the French, it was marvelous. It exhausted