

# Contexts: The Siegessäule, Berlin

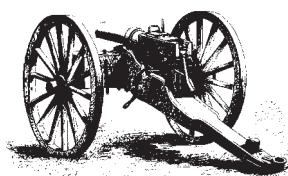
Xavier Edwards continues the series with the monument to victory in the Franco-Prussian War

Bismarck prepared for war with France as thoroughly, and as effectively, as he had for the Austro-Prussian war of 1866. Napoleon had been thwarted in his attempts to gain territorial reward for his neutrality during the 1866 war and these failures were humiliations for the government which, since the constitutional changes of 1852, was influenced by public opinion.

With the skill that would win the admiration of the best spin-doctor today, Bismarck edited the Ems telegram and provoked the French to declare war on 19 July 1870. French plans for

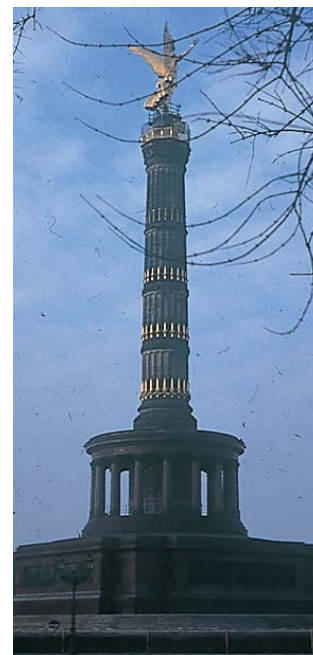
war were good, but only on paper. The aim was to invade the South German states with 250,000 troops and send a naval expedition to Schleswig. In reality, it had no chance of success because French mobilisation procedures were chaotic and, anyway, the French army lacked the quality of men and generalship of the Prussians. In weaponry the two sides were more evenly matched. Prussian artillery was superior but the French chassepot rifle was better than the Prussian needle gun. The French, applying technology to warfare, had an early form of machine gun, the mitrailleuse

(illustrated), but it was a 'secret weapon' and the troops did not know how to use it.

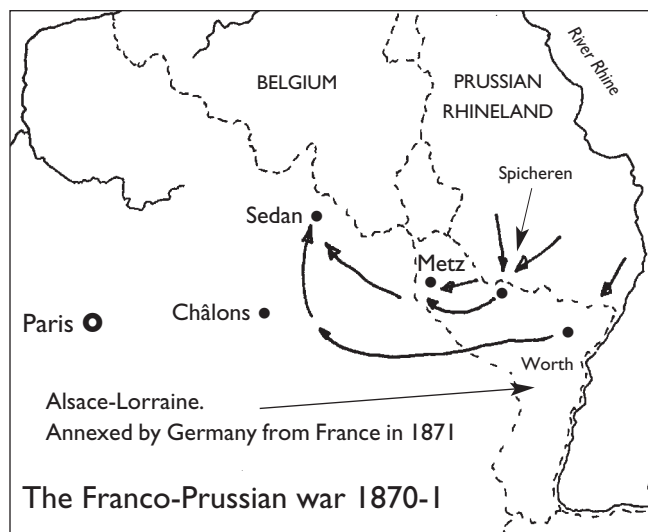


By skilful use of the railways Prussia soon had 384,000 troops at the frontier before the French forces were fully assembled. With Prussian victories in France at Worth and Spicheren, Napoleon ordered a retreat to defend Paris but the cabinet, fearful of revolution, strongly advised against retreat and troops from Lorraine moved to Metz, which was partially fortified, where they were soon surrounded by 175,000 Prussians.

The French army at Châlons, led by Macmahon, moved north with the intent of breaking the siege of Metz but it was trapped near the Belgium border at Sedan and, after a pounding by Krupp artillery, surrendered on 22 September: Bazaine abandoned resistance at Metz on 29 October. Meanwhile Paris



was surrounded, albeit thinly, by the Prussians and further French forces, raised in the provinces, were unable to relieve the capital. Paris fell on 28 January 1871. Before the surrender the Germans, with an eye to national humiliation, had proclaimed the Second (German) Empire in the Hall of Mirrors, in Versailles. Prussians, however, are reminded of the defeat of France by the victory column in Berlin, where it remains a little westwards of the Brandenburg Gate.



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