Apart from the uprisings of 1848–9, for forty years after Waterloo Europe had been at peace. But in the sixteen years from 1854 to 1870 five short wars would change the face of the continent and prepare it for the great wars of the twentieth century. Nationalism was the cause, and no states would be more profoundly affected than the two weakest states in the Great Power system, Austria and the Ottoman Empire.

Russian foreign policy under Tsar Nicholas I, 1825–55, aimed to destroy the Turkish Empire, re-establish the Orthodox Christian religion at Constantinople, dominate the Balkans and control the Bosphorus with its access to the Black Sea. The means by which Russia hoped to achieve these aims was by getting the Turks to agree that Russia should be the protecting power for Christians in the Turkish Empire. In 1774 the Russians had obtained that right in regard to the two Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, while in 1852 France had forced the Turks to allow Latin Christians to share in the administration of the Holy Places in Palestine, leading to a conflict in Jerusalem between Catholic and Orthodox monks.

In 1853 Russia invaded the Danubian Principalities but in the so-called Crimean War Turkey was supported by France and Britain, neither of whom wanted a Turkish collapse and Russian aggrandisement. What shocked the Russians however, was the attitude of Austria. Russia had come to the aid of the Austrians in 1849 and snuffed out the Hungarian revolt, but the Austrians did not side with Russia. They were more concerned about what might happen in Italy and Germany and hoped for western European support there in return for urging Russian evacuation of the Principalities.

This policy was unsuccessful. When the showdown came in Italy and Germany the French were not bought off and Russia’s alienation meant Austria’s isolation. The Crimean war effectively meant the end of the Concert of Europe.¹

In Italy one thing was clear. Austria’s victories in 1848–9 had punctured boasts that Italians could achieve independence and unification alone. But there were other problems as well. Would

¹ A. Alcock, A Short History of Europe © Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited 1998
the new Italy be monarchist or republican? Liberal or clerical? Regional or central? In the 1848–9 revolution in Italy republicans such as Guiseppe Garibaldi and Guiseppe Mazzini had played a prominent part in the risings against the Austrians in Lombardy and Venice, the absolutist Habsburg or Bourbon rulers in Naples-Sicily and the northern duchies of Parma, Modena and Tuscany, and against the Pope in the Papal States of Umbria, the Marches and Romagna. In 1849 the Pope had even been obliged by the revolutionaries to flee Rome.

The process of Italian unification was begun by the Prime Minister of Piedmont-Sardinia, Count Camillo Cavour. His policy was to create a liberal Italian state under the leadership of the Kingdom of Piedmont. But first he had to get a strong ally, and that ally was Napoleon III, Emperor of the French.

Napoleon III was a complex character, burdened by the reputation of his illustrious uncle. As a youth, exiled from France, he had joined the Carbonari, an Italian secret society inspired by the French Revolution and Napoleonic achievements and dedicated to elimination of foreign and autocratic rule in Italy. His experiences made Napoleon III something of an inconstant adventurer or opportunist, and this was reflected in his foreign policies which sought the aggrandisement of France through what became known contemptuously as ‘une politique de pourboires’, trying to pick up compensation in return for French action (or inaction) in a given situation. Napoleon’s other problem was that he had to placate two powerful and mutually antagonistic forces in France itself, liberalism and catholicism.

In 1858 Cavour and Napoleon struck a bargain. In return for French help in a war against Austria a victorious Piedmont would cede Nice and Savoy to France but gain all northern Italy above the Apennines (Lombardy, Venice, Parma, Modena and the Romagna). Italy would become a federation of three kingdoms – the enlarged Piedmont-Sardinia, Naples-Sicily (perhaps under a new ruler) and a central Italian Kingdom made out of the rest under a sovereign to be chosen. The whole would be under the presidency of the Pope, whose territorial possessions would be restricted to Rome and the surrounding region.

For Napoleon the deal looked good. Acquisition of Nice and Savoy – the natural frontiers of France – and the gratitude of Italy would at least please national pride and the liberal-Bonapartist element in France.