In the space of a single decade, three leaders liberated tens of millions of souls, remade their own vast countries, and altered forever the forms of national power: Abraham Lincoln freed a subjugated race and transformed the American Republic. Tsar Alexander II broke the chains of the serfs and brought the rule of law to Russia. Otto von Bismarck threw over the petty Teutonic princes, defeated the House of Austria and the last of the imperial Napoleons, and united the German nation. The three statesmen forged the empires that would dominate the twentieth century through two world wars, the Cold War, and beyond. Each of the three was a revolutionary, yet each consolidated a nation that differed profoundly from the others in its conceptions of liberty, power, and human destiny. Michael Knox Beran's *Forge of Empires* brilliantly entwines the stories of the three epochal transformations and their fateful legacies. Telling the stories from the point of view of those who participated in the momentous events -- among them Walt Whitman and Friedrich Nietzsche, Mary Chesnut and Leo Tolstoy, Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie -- Beran weaves a rich tapestry of high drama and human pathos. Great events often turned on the decisions of a few lone souls, and each of the three statesmen faced moments of painful doubt or denial as well as significant decisions that would redefine their nations. With its vivid narrative and memorable portraiture, *Forge of Empires* sheds new light on a question of perennial importance: How are free states made, and how are they unmade? In the same decade that saw freedoms victories, one of the trinity of liberators revealed himself as an enemy to the free state, and another lost heart. What Lincoln called the germ of freedom, which was to grow and expand into the universal liberty of mankind, came close to being annihilated in a world crisis that pitted the free state against new philosophies of terror and coercion. *Forge of Empires* is a masterly story of one of history's most significant decades.
My Personal Review:
The 1860s decade was tumultuous in many ways, though for many Americans the only thing that comes to mind is the Civil War. However, as Michael Knox Beran explores in his book Forge of Empires: Three Revolutionary Statesmen and the World They Made, much more was going on around the world than just that. The foundations of the 20th century in both Germany and Russia, as well as the rest of Europe, were also being forged at this time. In his excellent book, Beran gives readers a running narrative that often compares and contrasts the three main revolutions going on at this time, how they were different but also how they were similar.

Abraham Lincoln, of course, was forcing American society to change drastically, with the effect not only of freeing the slaves but also transforming Southern aristocracy from wealthy land-owning based on slavery to a much different class system. Otto von Bismarck, in turn, was in the process of accumulating power for his native Prussia (and for himself, of course) by uniting the various German states into one empirical power under one ruler, thus stamping his mark on the European balance of power for generations to come. Finally, Russian Tsar Alexander II was implementing policies to end serfdom, throwing Russian society into such upheaval that eventually that sniff of freedom turned into just another dictatorship.

Beran explores these three revolutions not only through the eyes of these great and powerful leaders, but also through those people caught up in these momentous events. Walt Whitman, Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, Mary Chesnut, Napoleon III and his empress Eugenie, all of them play a great role in illustrating the consequences of various actions. While Lincoln frees the slaves and goes to war to save the union, Mary Chesnut, the wife of a southern landowner, shows us how her society crumbles as the ravages of war reach the Confederacy and obliterate the society that she knew. The rise of Germany and Bismarck's thirst for power results in huge transformations in France as well, culminating in the Franco-Prussian war that finally solidifies the power of the new German state.

Beran uses a form of narrative history in Forge of Empires, with the book going from short section to short section, sometimes encompassing a month, sometimes a few months, and jumping from the US to Germany to Russia and back again. Beran sometimes leaves a section with a "cliffhanger" of sorts, which made the narrative even more gripping but wasn't truly necessary. Structuring the book this way allows Beran to highlight the similarities and differences between the various revolutions, mostly by illustration but occasionally Beran comes right out and compares/contrasts two or even all three.
As months and years progress, Beran shows us how Alexander was a man with big ideas yet without the inability to "sell" these ideas to the Russian people. Rebellion is widespread and there are many attempts on his life, which results in a crackdown and even less freedom. The mechanism of freeing the serfs results in many serfs suffering even greater than they did under serfdom, and the revolution that Alexander started swiftly spins out of his control. Meanwhile, we see the effects of Lincoln's revolution as it affects countries all over Europe. Will England and France recognize the Confederacy, or will Lincoln and the Union army be able to achieve a military victory that will keep them to the sidelines? And what's Bismarck doing during all this?

We see not only the revolutions as they unfold, but Beran ends the book wrapping up the lives of all his "characters," giving us a brief synopsis of what happened in the rest of their lives. He also gives an overview of the far-reaching effect each revolution had on society and world politics, such as how German extreme nationalism eventually ended up with World Wars I and II.

I encourage you to pick this book up. It's interesting, you'll find out a lot about things you may not have known (I'm a history buff, and I had no idea that Prussia and Austria fought a brief war in the mid-1860s). The best thing is that you will get a foundation for much of what happened in the world in the 20th century, told in a fashion that will keep you reading to the final page.

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Forge of Empires: Three Revolutionary Statesmen and the World They Made, 1861-1871
by Michael Knox Beran - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!