

The Unification of Germany

In 1815, thirty-nine German states had formed a loose grouping that was called the German Confederation. The two largest states, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Prussia, dominated the confederation. Of the two, Prussia was more open to nationalism for three reasons:-

1. Prussia had a mainly German speaking population, Austria-Hungary consisted of many different ethnic groups who spoke several languages
2. Prussia had a very strong military, the most powerful in Central Europe
3. Prussia industrialized faster than any of the other German states

In **1848 there was a major riot in Berlin**. The outcome was that a terrified and unstable Prussian king, **Frederick William IV** was forced to call a **constitutional convention**. The outcome was that a liberal constitution was written for the kingdom.

In 1861 **Wilhelm I** succeeded Frederick William to the throne. He wanted several reforms, especially one to double the size of the Prussian army. However, the liberal parliament refused to grant him any money for his reforms. Wilhelm saw this as a major challenge to his authority. He was supported by the **Junkers, the wealthy, landowning class**. In return for their support, Wilhelm enlisted all of his cabinet ministers and military leaders from the Junkers class.



Wilhelm I

In 1862, to overcome his difficulties with the parliament, Wilhelm elected a conservative Junker, **Otto von Bismarck**, to become his new prime minister. Bismarck was a master of **realpolitik**, the German word for **“the politics of reality.”** Bismarck’s stance was tough and contained no room for idealism. Bismarck’s action was to declare that he would rule without the consent of parliament and without a legal budget. His actions would be final, even though they were in direct violation of the constitution. Bismarck would become one of the most commanding figures in German political history.



Otto von Bismarck

In his first speech as prime minister, he told the parliament of his intentions and then added the following phrase:-

“The great questions of the day will not be settled by speeches or by majority decisions – that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849 – but by blood and iron.”

The words **“Blood and Iron”** will become the trademark of Otto von Bismarck.

Bismarck always claimed that he was loyal to both king and country yet his thirst for power was seen in his expanding of the Prussian empire. In 1864 he formed an **alliance with Austria**. The two countries then went to **war against Denmark**. Bismarck wanted to take back the border provinces of **Schleswig and Holstein**. The quick victory increased national pride among the Prussians and other German states now supported Prussia into becoming the head of a unified German nation. Parts of the terms between Austria and Prussia, Austria would control Holstein, Prussia would control Schleswig. Bismarck suspected this would lead to tensions, and such disagreements would suit his plans perfectly.

Bismarck deliberately created border conflicts with Austria over Schleswig and Holstein. Finally, **in 1866, Austria declared war on Prussia** The conflict was over very quickly, so quickly that it became known as the **Seven Weeks’ War**. The Prussians humiliated Austria. In addition, Austria lost the region of Venetia in Italy and was forced to hand it over to Italy.

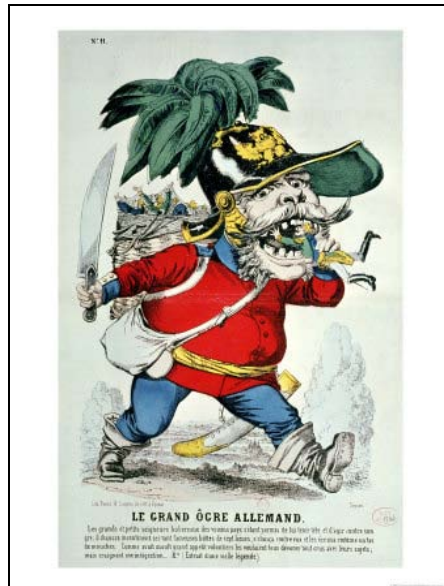
Prussia’s victory meant that it now united eastern and western parts of the Prussian kingdoms. In 1867, the remaining states of the north joined a **North German Confederation** and as soon as it was in place, it became dominated by Otto von Bismarck and Prussia.

By 1867, only a few southern German states remained independent from Prussia. The majority of these people were **Roman Catholics** which meant that they did not want to become part of a nation that was dominated by **German Protestants**. However, Bismarck felt he could win the support of these southerners as they faced a threat from outside of the region. Bismarck saw that if he started a war with France then the people in the south would rally to his side.

Otto von Bismarck was a very cunning man. He could create **“incidents”** that never existed, just to achieve his goals. To start a war against France, he published an altered version of a diplomatic telegram . The altered message gave a false description of a meeting that took place between Wilhelm I and the French ambassador to Germany. Bismarck changed the words so that they read that Wilhelm I insulted the French and this provoked them to declare war on Prussia on July 19, 1870. The **Franco-Prussian War** had now started.

Immediately the Prussian army, already on full alert per Bismarck, invaded northern France. By September, the Prussians had surrounded the main French force and then took over 80,000 prisoners, including the Emperor Napoleon III. The Prussians then laid siege on Paris and finally, after a four-month blockade, a starving Paris surrendered.

On January 18, 1871, at the captured palace of Versailles, King Wilhelm I of Prussia was crowned **Kaiser** (emperor). The Germans called their empire the **Second Reich**, the first being the Holy Roman Empire. Bismarck had achieved his goal of dominating Germany and Europe by the use of **“blood and iron.”**



Otto von Bismarck – “The Grand Ogre of Germany”

In 1815, the Congress of Vienna agreed that there were five Great Powers in Europe:

Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Russia

The wars of the 1800s greatly strengthened one of the Great Powers, as Prussia became Germany. In 1815 these five Great Powers were nearly equal in strength.

By 1871, however, Britain and Germany were clearly the most powerful, both militarily and economically. Austria, Russia and Italy would now stand far behind these two nations. France stood somewhere in the middle, still struggling politically and economically.

At the end of the century, there was no longer an equal balance of power in Europe.
