

# The Unification of Germany (1815–1871)

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## **Abstract:**

While Germany is perhaps known to us today as a distinct and historically rich nation, prior to 1871, its contours and geographical landscape were entirely different. Divided into 39 separate entities, this realm—then known as the German Confederation—was under the dominion of Austria. From the era of Kaiser Wilhelm I through to the time of Bismarck, Germany endured a period of immense hardship; various upheavals and a multitude of conflicting political mass movements stood as major impediments to its unification. Nevertheless, overcoming all these obstacles, the nation achieved success and emerged as a prominent entity in European history—this unified Germany.

**Keywords:** German Unification, Otto von Bismarck, Prussia, Nationalism, Franco-Prussian War, German Empire.

## **I. INTRODUCTION:**

The way neighboring states divided Germany for certain political interests, this epoch-making event of 1871 opened a new chapter in the history of Europe. Starting from the Congress of Hatred, that is, the first German Confederation established in Germany, the divided states made the first commitment to connect with each other. Despite the unity of language, culture and their different ways of life, this unification of Germany was not very easy. Although initially the various German groups were divided into small groups and their proposed various demands were not noticeable, as a result of which at that time some new liberal organizations, especially clubs, came forward and dreamed of a new German democratic state. Although there were several obstacles in the case because at that time some of the leaders of the organization wanted Germany to be governed under a monarchy forever. Otto von Bismarck's Realpolitik policy created a new ideal for unifying Germany. As a result, the various divided groups used diplomatic and political techniques

## II. BACKGROUND OF GERMAN DISUNITY

### 1. The Holy Roman Empire



Fig-1(Frankish Kingdom)

For many centuries, the German lands were part of the **Holy Roman Empire**, a political entity that included hundreds of semi-independent territories. The emperor had limited authority, and local princes exercised considerable power.

In 1806, during the Napoleonic Wars, the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved by **Napoleon Bonaparte**. This event ended the traditional political structure of the German world.

### 2. The Congress of Vienna and the German Confederation

The Zollverein and various other organizations played a pivotal role as the initial steps toward the formation of a German state. Following Napoleon's defeat in 1815, instead of a unified German nation emerging, the region fragmented into 39 small, independent states collectively known as the German Confederation. Consequently, Austria sought to ensure that Germany would never, under any circumstances, be able to achieve unification.

### **The Rise of German Nationalism**

Just as various nationalist and socialist ideologies influenced the concept of liberty during the French Revolution, they also significantly facilitated the process of German unification. During this period, numerous intellectuals and professors—often in collaboration with members of the business community—rallied the populace to come forward and support the cause of unification, placing the vision of a unified German constitution at the forefront of their efforts.

### **Cultural Nationalism**

German writers and philosophers—particularly figures such as Johann Herder and Johann Fichte—played a significant role by championing German culture and establishing student organizations across various universities and colleges to promote the cause of national unity.

### **The Zollverein**

The establishment of the Zollverein in 1834 marked the first concrete step toward German unification in European history. Known primarily as a customs union or trade association, its principal function was the collection of customs duties. Although the organization was eventually dissolved, it initially served as a vital mechanism for fostering connections among the various independent and fragmented German states. Austria was explicitly excluded from the organization, and the Zollverein exerted a profound influence on the course of German history, particularly in the economic sphere.

### **The Failure of Liberal Unification**

Much like the French Revolution, which sent waves of revolutionary movements across the globe, the events of 1848 paved the way for German unification. During this period, various liberal and nationalist groups took to the streets to articulate their demands. A German assembly was convened in Frankfurt; however, when they presented a proposal for unification to King Frederick William IV—whom they sought to appoint as their leader—he refused to accept the offer. The National Assembly emerged through the Frankfurt Parliament, where the signing of the constitution by all members commenced. Subsequently, however, the Frankfurt Parliament collapsed; thereafter, one after another, the possibilities for the unification of Germany began to take shape.

## **V. OTTO VON BISMARCK AND REALPOLITIK**

### **1. Rise of Bismarck**



**Fig-2(( Bismarck)**

In 1862, **Otto von Bismarck** became Prime Minister of Prussia. Bismarck believed that German unification could only be achieved through strong leadership and military strength.

He famously declared:

**“The great questions of the day will not be decided by speeches and majority decisions, but by blood and iron.”**

This statement reflected his belief that war and power politics would determine the future of Germany.

## 2. Strategy of Unification

Bismarck’s strategy involved:

1. Strengthening the Prussian army
2. Isolating rival powers diplomatically
3. Using limited wars to unite the German states under Prussian leadership

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## VI. THE WARS OF GERMAN UNIFICATION

### 1. The Danish War (1864)



**Fig:3 and 4 (1864 Danish War)**

The first step toward unification was the **war against Denmark in 1864**.

The conflict concerned the duchies of **Schleswig and Holstein**, which had large German populations. Prussia and Austria jointly defeated Denmark and gained control of the territories.

However, the administration of these territories later became a source of conflict between Austria and Prussia.

### 2. The Austro-Prussian War (1866)

The dispute over Schleswig and Holstein led to the **Austro-Prussian War of 1866**.

Prussia quickly defeated Austria in the **Battle of Königgrätz**. After the war:

- The **German Confederation was dissolved**
- Austria was excluded from German affairs
- Prussia formed the **North German Confederation**

This victory firmly established Prussia as the dominant power among the German states.

### 3. The Franco-Prussian War (1870–71)



**Fig:5 (1870 franco-Prussian War)**

The final step toward unification was the **Franco-Prussian War**.

Bismarck skillfully provoked a conflict with France through the **Ems Dispatch**, which angered the French government. France declared war on Prussia in 1870.

The southern German states joined Prussia in the war against France. The German forces achieved a decisive victory, capturing **Emperor Napoleon III** at the **Battle of Sedan**.

## VII. PROCLAMATION OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE (1871)



**Fig:6 (German Empire)**

On **18 January 1871**, the German Empire was officially proclaimed in the **Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles** in France.

King **Wilhelm I of Prussia** was declared **German Emperor (Kaiser)**.

This event symbolized the successful unification of Germany under Prussian leadership.

## VIII. CONSEQUENCES OF GERMAN UNIFICATION

- 1. Emergence of a Powerful Nation:** The new German Empire quickly became one of the strongest economic and military powers in Europe.
- 2. Balance of Power in Europe:** German unification dramatically altered the balance of power in Europe and contributed to future conflicts.
- 3. Decline of Austrian Influence:** Austria was excluded from German politics and focused instead on its empire in Central Europe.
- 4. Rise of Militarism and Nationalism:** The success of unification through war strengthened militarism and aggressive nationalism within Germany.

## IX. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The unification of Germany had far-reaching consequences:

- It transformed Germany into a major European power
- It changed the political structure of Central Europe
- It influenced the rise of nationalism across the continent
- It contributed to the tensions that eventually led to **World War I**

The leadership of Otto von Bismarck played a decisive role in shaping this transformation.

## X. CONCLUSION

The manner in which nationalism, economic forces, and military might—beginning in 1871—orchestrated the unification of Germany is truly remarkable. The manner in which Bismarck, through the display of his

political craftsmanship, successfully achieved the unification of Germany undoubtedly marked a new chapter in European history; indeed, the very ideology underpinning this feat is known as \*Realpolitik\*. It was through the various principles and core tenets of this \*Realpolitik\* that the German nation attained its new identity as a unified state—and, in doing so, secured its rightful stature within the annals of world history.

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