

# GERMAN UNIFICATION 1848-1871

**Development in Prussia 1848:** Three circumstances lead Prussia to take a prominent part in the liberal and nationalist cause among the German states;

1. The disappearance of Metternich from the Austrian government. This meant that Habsburg influence in Germany was temporarily suspended
2. The "transient" liberalism of the eccentric King Frederick William IV (became King of Prussia 1840). He held a conservative view of his position but wanted to be acknowledged as a liberal monarch. These contradictory qualities had an important effect of the revolution in Prussia 1848
3. There was an economic depression and unemployment. The situation was at its worst in the larger German towns, and Berlin, where a quarter of the population belonged to the working class, suffered hard.

**The March Days 1848:** The disorder in Berlin had led to troops being called out to restore order. News of the rising in Vienna stirred the discontent population of Berlin to riots which on 18 March developed into street-fighting. Troops pressed back the rioters, cleared the streets, blew up the barricades by cannon fire and began systematically to crush the revolt throughout the city. The military commander wished King Frederick William IV to go to his palace at Potsdam (about 30 kilometers from Berlin).

The King refused and instead capitulated the next day. He ordered the troops to withdraw from the streets. They were replaced by the patrols of Civic Guards. In a theatrical style the King rode through the streets of the city beneath the new black, red and gold flag of the German nationalists. The same day - the 21 March - he issued a royal proclamation in which he said he would summon a Constituent Assembly to create a new representative united Diet for all his territory. He proposed also that this Prussian Diet should meet with other German diets to consider the establishment of a national German parliament. This proclamation also represents the climax of the March Days.

The Prussian army had not been beaten; they had just withdrawn from the city of Berlin. The officers wanted revenge and already the King began to regret his surrender to the liberals. A group of conservatives, led by Count Otto von Bismarck, urged the King to put himself at the head of his troops and reassert his authority, but he could not bring himself to do this.

**Constituent Assembly 1848:** The Constituent Assembly, elected by indirect universal suffrage, met in Berlin from May to December 1848. It consisted of some 400 members, very few noblemen and landowners. There were many officials, lawyers and teachers and 68 peasants (mostly from East Prussia).

The situation in Berlin grew steadily more disorderly. Unemployment rose, and there were numerous demonstrations and processions. The middle-class liberals became hostile to the Assembly, which was estranging itself from the monarchy. The time had come for the King to act...

Early in November he replaced his liberal ministers by a conservative government. The new government adjourned the Assembly and ordered it to meet at the town of Brandenburg (60 km away from Berlin). They refused. Then the King ordered 13.000 troops into the city and put it under martial law. The Civic Guards were abolished. This was done without any bloodshed or opposition from the industrial workers of Berlin. In December the King dissolved the Assembly.

**The Frankfurt Assembly 1848-1849:** When the revolts in March 1848 broke out German nationalists invited all present and previous members of the Diets which existed in the German

States to meet on 31 March at Frankfurt-on-Main. The idea was to create a preliminary assembly (Vorparlament) to discuss the creation of a provisional executive and a central legislature for the whole country. Nearly 600 delegates accepted this invitation and they decided that elections should be held for a National Constituent Assembly by direct male suffrage throughout Germany and Austria. During April 1848 elections were held and in May a Constituent Assembly was put up in Frankfurt. It was based on one member per 50.000 voters. The Assembly consisted of;

- 586 members mainly from the professional middle-class. 106 were professors or schoolmasters, 95 lawyers, 157 magistrates and 124 government officials, but only 6 handicraft workers and only 1 peasant... A few people had been members of the Diet of the Confederation but most of them lacked political experience on a national all-German level
- A minority of radicals who wanted to overthrow the German princes and set up a democratic, centralized Republic
- A majority who were more moderate liberals. They wanted a federal constitution which would preserve the existing states and provide for a limited monarchy. The monarch would have to accept a written that clearly dictated the powers of a legislative assembly and the rights of the people.

In June the Archduke John of Austria (Emperor Ferdinand's older brother) was elected "Imperial Vicar", a temporarily monarch until the Assembly had appointed an Emperor. This confirmed the belief that the Assembly of German unity would be under the traditional leadership of the Hapsburgs would continue.

The Assemblies power was already from the beginning limited - Why?

- The Assembly did not have any big funds which made it impossible to create an armed force to defend them
- The rulers of the larger states like Austria, Prussia and Hanover refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the Imperial Vicar

More problems occurred for the new Assembly during 1848:

- The Assembly supported the war against Denmark about the Duchies of Schleswig-Holstein 1848-1850 (look for further information under "the Danish War: 1864"). The Prussian army was forced back by the international response. This weakened the authority of the Frankfurt Assembly since they had failed as the "champion of German nationalism"
- No foreign country recognized the new Assembly (except Hungary and USA)
- The Refusal to consider a social program. The demands of social reforms came particularly from the Socialists (one of the most influential criticizer was the editor of the New Rhenish Gazette - Karl Marx).
- In September the Assembly was barely saved from rioters protesting against the failure in Schleswig-Holstein and the lack of interest for social reforms. Two conservative members were murdered. The Assembly had failed to win popular support and the liberals were alarmed by the revolutionary disorder

In October 1848 a new Constitution was discussed which included fundamental rights of the German people, freedom of speech and press, religious toleration, trial by jury, equality under the law and the abolition of all manorial rights and aristocratic privileges. The problem that now occurred was the extent of the territory to which the new constitution should apply:

- Grossdeutschland (Greater Germany) included all of Germany and the Habsburg Empire (Hungary, Lombardy; Venetia as well as the Czechs...)
- Kleindeutschland (Little Germany) excluded the Austrian Empire altogether

As mentioned before the Assembly rejected a Republic in favor of a Federal Empire. The Empire should be ruled by a hereditary Emperor, but he had to accept a liberal constitution which thus would give him limited power. In March 1849 the assembly elected Frederick William IV of Prussia to the position of Emperor. He rejected the offer since it restricted his authority. This rejection marked the end of the Frankfurt Assembly. Other German rulers ordered the members from their states to leave Frankfurt. Several states now repealed the constitutions they accepted in 1848 which made the majority leave the Assembly. The remaining 130 radical members moved to Stuttgart, but in June the Assembly was shut down with military help. In December the Archduke John renounced his title.

**New Prussian Constitution 1850:** It was the King Frederick William IV that introduced a new constitution by royal edict. This provided for a diet with *an upper chamber*, The *Herrenhaus*, comprising the princes, heads of the nobility, some life peers and a few representatives of provinces, large towns and the universities, and *a lower chamber*, the *Landtag*, of 443 members, chosen by open voting by electors. The electors were divided into three classes according to the taxation they paid, so that the workers and peasants, although they together comprised the vast majority of the electorate, only received a third of the seats, and the property-owners had many more.

The Diet generally considered bills submitted to it by the King, who was empowered also to make laws himself and appoint his own ministers, and they were responsible to him alone and not the Diet. The King revealed his conservatism not only through the autocratic constitution but also through other measurements as curbing the freedom of the press, forbidding public meetings and imprisoning political opponents without a trial. During the last ten years of Frederick William IV:s reign (1848-1858) Prussia seemed to be under a government determined to preserve the old order and maintain its position as a separate German kingdom. An attempt was made though to bring the northern German States under Prussian influence through a union.

**Erfurt Union:** After the events of 1848-49 the prestige of the Prussian State became higher. Austria had at the same time been engaged with the Empire and seemed to lose ground towards Prussia. Baron Josef von Radowitz, adviser to King Frederick William IV of Prussia, presented a set of proposals in Erfurt March 1850. The proposal, the "**Erfurt Union**", included:

- A union of the North German states under the presidency of the King of Prussia
- A union of the North German states under the protection of the Prussian army
- Austria would be directly excluded from the Erfurt Union since it just concerned the North German states, but von Radowitz proposed a compromise by which Austria could be linked to the Union by a second, wider union, based upon free trade and perhaps upon a common foreign policy...
- The proposal was based on monarchical principles against any radical, liberal nationalistic ideas

This suggestion was met with protests.

- Several German states feared Prussian hegemony as much as a liberal revolt
- 11 states, including Hanover, Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg, refused to send representatives to Erfurt
- Austria had recovered from the revolts 1848-49 and declared that "*we shall not let ourselves be thrown out of Germany*"... Austria insisted on the reconstruction of the German Confederation

**Capitulation in Olmütz:** A constitutional conflict in the small duchy of Hesse-Cassel provided the test between the two German powers; the Erfurt Union under Prussian dominance and the German Confederation under Austrian dominance. When Russia expressed support for Austria the Prussian King Frederick William IV gave in. Prussia agreed to abandon the Erfurt Union at a meeting in Olmütz in December 1850. This "Capitulation in Olmütz" led to revival of the German Confederation under Austrian presidency.

Agatha Ramm has described the coming years as a period of "*sterile parliamentarism within the states and sterile diplomacy without*" (although foreign affairs as the Crimean War and the unification of Italy plus Prussian economic development would eventually change the balance in Germany). An Austrian attempt to expand the Confederation to include Austria's non-German territories was rejected and another Austrian attempt to control the German economy by the linking of the Zollverein to the Austrian and produce a vast central European economic union was also rejected. The states of the German Confederation wanted to keep their independence.

**German unification through Prussia:** In 1858 the situation changed in a way that led to the establishment of German unity by Prussia, but not through liberal nationalism that the revolvers of 1848 had hoped and expected. It started with the illness of King Frederick William IV (a stroke according to some historians, mental illness to others...). Prince William, brother to Frederick William, was appointed as regent.

In 1860 Frederick William IV died and William became King William I of Prussia. William I is portrayed as a more resolute man than his brother. He was "deeply attached to the principle of legitimate monarchy and to the traditions of the Prussian military glory, but he had been convinced of the need to adapt in the face of modern forces." He started out by undertake the reforms which Frederick William IV had neglected.

**Military reforms:** The Prussian Army still depended upon the measures taken after the defeat at Jena in 1806. This was a system of conscription by which men served three years in the army and two in the reserve and then they were passed into the Landwehr or militia. The country's population had doubled but the numbers of new recruits remained fixed; 40,000 a year. Some 23,000 men a year did no military service at all, and for the rest the three years' active service was in practice no more than two.

King William I now appointed Count von Roon as Minister of War and Field Marshal von Moltke as Chief of the General Staff. These anti-liberal and anti-Austrian officers proposed to create 53 new regiments so it was possible for every man to serve three years in the army. They also wanted to reduce the Landwehr drastically since it was considered to be of little or non military value. This would raise the size of the regular army from 500,000 to 750,000.

The King asked the Diet to sanction the necessary taxation, but the lower chamber opposed his demand. There was no general objection to an increased army, but they wished to assert their right to control the government. They also objected to the diminution of the Landwehr since it had middle-class officers while those of the regular army were almost exclusively Junkers. They voted the additional cost in 1861 for one year only, but refused to do this again the next year. The result was a serious constitutional crisis...

**Otto von Bismarck:** Historians describe Bismarck *to have the abilities to use the rivals/opponents weaknesses and mistakes. He had quite a temperament and he had "luck" (he had "good political fortune") which he was able to exploit to his advantage. He kept his political options open so he had several possible courses of action - one of which might be the best to undertake as events unfolded themselves.*

Bismarck had entered the Diet in Berlin 1847 as a "Junker" elected by the landowning voters. When he was sent to the German Confederation 1851, he noticed the industrial development of the Prussian Rhineland and he was convinced that Prussia must adopt an economic policy to assist this development. He therefore broke with the conservative Junkers for a while. Contradictory to the Junkers he also was convinced that the nationalist movement sooner or later would succeed with the Unification of Germany. If the Kingdom of Prussia didn't adjust to this it would be swept away...

William I's relation to Otto von Bismarck was not good in the beginning. William thought Bismarck was too "*extreme and violent*" and he would most likely cause disharmony in Prussia. "*He smells of blood and can only be employed when the bayonet rules*" King William I said once about Bismarck. Therefore he sent Bismarck to be Prussian Ambassador at St. Petersburg (1859-1862) and at Paris in 1862. Bismarck resented this exile, saying he was in "*Cold Storage*".

The constitutional crisis made William call him back to Prussia and he was appointed the head (Minister President) of the Prussian Government. Once in power Bismarck persuaded King William I to defy the Diet and levy the military taxes without its consent. At the same time, he strictly censored the Press and dismissed liberals from the civil service. Bismarck was able to do this due to the fact that the middle-class was small and weak, especially after the revolts of 1848. Nationalism and the idea of a Unified Germany now became a conservative cause! In 1862 Bismarck spoke to the Prussian Diet and said: "*Germany does not look to Prussia's liberalism, but to her strength*" \_ \_ \_ "*The great questions of the day will not be decided by speeches and resolutions of majorities - that was the great mistake from 1848 to 1849 - but by **blood and iron**.*" Bismarck's policy was backed up by the remodeled Prussian Army and Field Marshal von Moltke's strategic abilities...

### **The Danish War: 1864**

Schleswig-Holstein had been linked to Denmark since 1460. In 1481 the Danish King Christian I had decreed that the two duchies should remain forever undivided. Holstein was nearly all German while Schleswig was partly German, partly Danish. In the 1840's the German nationalism also reached this region. Nationalist demonstrations with the red, white and blue flag of Schleswig-Holstein and anti-Danish speeches occurred, especially in Holstein. In Schleswig, especially the northern part pro-Danish expressions occurred. During the revolts of 1848 Holstein rose against Danish rule and asked for Prussian assistance. This war lasted nearly three years. The Prussian King Frederick William IV intervened with an army supported by the Frankfurt Assembly. After protests from Britain and Russia he and the Prussian Army were forced to withdraw. In July 1850 the Danish Army defeated the Schleswig-Holstein forces and the war was thus over. By the terms of the Peace Treaty Schleswig and Holstein remained Danish.

During the coming years the German Confederation (of which Holstein was a member) interfered with Denmark and its relationship to the two Duchies in the south. The Danish Government was afraid that Schleswig would be forced to join the German Confederation. The Danish Government tried to solve this problem by a small change in the Danish Constitution and thus in 1863 Schleswig was incorporated with Denmark. The two German Duchies Holstein and Lauenburg, still connected to Denmark, were to remain within the German Confederation. This decision was against the peace treaty of 1850 and it separated Schleswig from Holstein. Still Denmark counted on some international support (the British Prime Minister Palmerston had earlier supported the idea). Denmark did not receive any such

support. Instead once again rose lots of protests both within the Duchies and in the German Confederation. Through this area runs the Kiel Canal. It links the Baltic with the North Sea and it was economically important to Prussia. Bismarck also wanted to avenge the Prussian humiliation of 1848...

The States within the German Confederation proposed that the Duchies should be occupied by an army of the German Confederation. Bismarck didn't agree with the idea and instead suggested a joint Prussian-Austrian operation to defeat an "*enemy of German unity...*"

The two powers sent an ultimatum to Denmark on January 16 1864, demanding a withdrawal of the Constitution of November 18<sup>th</sup> within 48 hours, or face military action. The Danes immediately withdrew from Holstein to demonstrate that the country had no desire to hold on to this member state of the German Confederation. The Danish army then took up positions along the southern border of Schleswig, along Danevirke (an old "Viking border" towards the south). After being able to ward off a couple of minor attacks the Danish army retreated (in February) to Dybbøl, a position easier to defend. After 8 weeks of defending themselves the Danes gave up Dybbøl.

In the beginning of May a truce was signed. A conference in London was held. Prussia and Austria would agree on a division of Schleswig which gave Denmark some minor parts in the north. Holstein, Lauenburg and the rest of Schleswig should go to the victorious powers. Denmark agreed on the loss of Holstein and Lauenburg. They could even see a minor part of Schleswig being lost but not above the old border at Danevirke. After some time the negotiations broke down and the war started all over. Prussian troops pressed up further north and by early summer the war was over. Denmark lost all of Schleswig together with Holstein and Lauenburg at the Peace Conference of Vienna.

Instead of granting the Duchies independence they were placed under joint Austro-Prussian occupation. Bismarck wanted to secure these new areas for Prussia but Austria did not agree. The only way she could agree was if Prussia gave up her part of Silesia (taken from Austria by Frederick the Great) and guaranteed Austria's possession of Venetia. Bismarck could not accept that. After several negotiations a Treaty was concluded in Gastein. Austria and Prussia now agreed to rule the two Duchies jointly, with Austria administrating Holstein and Prussia administrating Schleswig. Prussia was given certain military roads through Holstein and command of Kiel, which was to be a port of the German Confederation. Both Duchies were to join the Zollverein (which was controlled by Prussia). Prussia annexed Lauenburg but paid Denmark 2.5 million thaler for it.

Bismarck still wanted Holstein for Prussia and hoped to exclude Austria from northern Germany. He tried different approaches like exchange guarantees of Austria's position in the Balkans and Italy. At the same time he negotiated and tried to make diplomatic alliances with several countries like France, Russia, Italy and Britain. He wanted to be well prepared in case of a Prussian war against Austria.

### **The Prusso-Austrian War: 1866** (The Seven Weeks' War)

Bismarck's preparation for the possibility of war included a political isolation of Austria. Due to the conduct of Britain and Russia during the Danish War Bismarck was convinced that they would not intervene in a conflict between Prussia and Austria. Italy could become a Prussian ally but France position was unclear.

In October 1865 he met Napoleon III, the French Emperor, at Biarritz in southwestern France. Hinting at possible Prussian support for French ambitions in Belgium and Luxembourg and accept securing Venetia for Italy gave Bismarck what he wanted - French impartiality.

Bismarck's "friendship" with Napoleon III was not lost on the Austrians. They responded by permitting public demonstrations in Holstein supporting the Prince of Augustenburg as ruler of Schleswig-Holstein. Bismarck answered by calling for the creation of a parliament of the German Confederation elected by universal male suffrage. At the same time he opened negotiations with Italy. In the treaty signed (April 1866) Italy promised to follow Prussia in attacking Austria within three months of the signing of the agreement. Now he needed to provoke Austria into war.

Austria asked the Diet of the German Confederation to consider the Schleswig-Holstein question. This action was according to Bismarck a breach of the treaty of Gastein. Bismarck continued by sending troops into Holstein at the same time as the country mobilized. Austria appealed to the Diet of the Confederation who agreed to the mobilization of the German states against Prussia. Bismarck replied by declaring the Confederation dissolved and he ordered the northern states of Saxony, Hanover and Hesse-Cassel to side with Prussia. When they refused they were invaded by Prussian army and they soon gave up. The main Prussian forces met the armies of Austria and Saxony at battle in Sadowa (Bohemia). Prussia won, partly due to the double military innovation of directing troops by telegraph and using trains to achieve a strategic junction of separate armies. The way to Vienna now lay open to the Prussian forces. The Habsburg Emperor Francis Joseph asked for an armistice. The war was over in seven weeks!

At the Treaty of Prague Austria had to consent to the dissolution of the German Confederation and her exclusion from any future German organization. Austria also had to accept that Prussia absorbed Hanover, Hesse-Cassel, Nassau and the Free City of Frankfurt together with the annexation of Schleswig-Holstein. Prussian troops were to withdraw from Habsburg territory, but Venetia was to be ceded to Italy. William and his Generals wanted a triumphal march into Vienna, Austria's capital, but Bismarck insisted on generous terms of peace. He had achieved Prussian dominance of northern Germany. To humiliate Austria further meant creating a permanent, implacable rival. It also meant alarming the rest of Europe who was uncertain what Prussia would do with its newly acquired power. Humiliating Austria would also alienate some German states and people that Bismarck wanted to conciliate. Bismarck said "We need Austria's strength in future for ourselves". He counted on her being a future ally.

### **North German Confederation:**

The German Confederation was partly replaced by a new North German Confederation, consisting of a union of Prussia and all the German states north of the River Main. Its President was the King of Prussia, who controlled foreign policy, could declare war and make peace and had the power to appoint and dismiss the Federal Chancellor, the first (and only) holder of this office being Bismarck. The states kept their own rulers and governments, but their armies were placed under federal control. Legislation was shared by a Federal Council (Bundesrat) and a Reichstag, which was elected by universal male suffrage. The main features were preserved in the constitution of the German Empire a few years later. Now Prussia was one of the leading powers of Europe!

### **The Franco-Prussian War: 1870-1871**

The event directly precipitating the Franco-Prussian War was the candidacy of Leopold, prince of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, for the throne of Spain, rendered vacant by the Spanish revolution of 1868. Leopold had accepted the candidacy under persuasion from Bismarck. The French government, alarmed at the possibility of a Prusso-Spanish alliance resulting from the

occupancy of the Spanish throne by a member of the Hohenzollern dynastic family, threatened Prussia with war if Leopold's candidacy was not withdrawn.

The French ambassador to the Prussian court, Comte Vincente Benedetti, was dispatched to Ems, a spa in northwestern Germany being visited by Wilhelm I, king of Prussia. Benedetti had been instructed to demand that the Prussian monarch order Prince Leopold to withdraw his candidacy. Wilhelm, although angered, gave Benedetti permission to communicate directly with Leopold by telegraph. Leopold could not be reached, but his father, Prince Charles Anthony, wired a retraction of the candidacy in the name of his son.

The government of Napoleon III, still not content, was determined to humiliate Prussia, even at the cost of war. Antoine Agénor Alfred, duc de Gramont, the French foreign minister, demanded that Wilhelm submit a personal letter of apology to Napoleon III and a guarantee that the Hohenzollern candidacy would never be renewed. In an interview with Benedetti at Ems, the Prussian king rejected the French demands. The same day, Bismarck obtained Wilhelm's authorization to publish the French demands and the Prussian rejection contained in what was known as the Ems Dispatch. Bismarck edited the document in a manner calculated to aggravate the resentment of the French and the Germans. The Prussian statesman realized that this move would in all probability precipitate war, but he knew that Prussia was prepared, and he counted on the psychological effect of a French declaration of war to rally the south German states to Prussia's cause, thus accomplishing the final phase in the unification of Germany.

On July 19, 1870, France declared war on Prussia. The south German states, in fulfillment of their treaties with Prussia, immediately joined King Wilhelm in a common front against France. The French were only able to mobilize about 200,000 troops; the Germans, however, quickly marshaled an army of about 400,000 men. All German forces were under the supreme command of Wilhelm, with the great strategist Helmuth von Moltke, as his chief of staff.

The battle of Sedan (September 1870) was a catastrophe for the French forces and it ended the war. The French forces were encircled by the German army. Recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, Napoleon III ordered the white flag to be hoisted. Terms of surrender were negotiated during the night, and on the following day Napoleon III, together with 83,000 troops, surrendered to the Prussians.

Upon receiving intelligence of the capture of the French emperor, Paris rose in rebellion, the Legislative Assembly was dissolved, and France was proclaimed a republic (Third Republic). Before the close of September, Strasbourg, one of the last points at which the French had hoped to stem the German advance, capitulated, and Paris was completely surrounded. The Siege of Paris (19 September 1870–28 January 1871) brought about the final defeat of the French Army.

**On 18 January the new German Empire was proclaimed at the Palace of Versailles.**

On 28 January 1871 the Government of National Defense based in Paris negotiated an armistice with the Prussians. Bismarck agreed to end the siege and allow food convoys to immediately enter Paris (including trains carrying millions of German army rations), on condition that the Government of National Defense surrender several key fortresses outside Paris to the Prussians. Without the forts, the French Army would no longer be able to defend Paris. Although public opinion in Paris was strongly against any form of surrender or concession to the Prussians, the Government realized that it could not hold the city for much longer. President Jules Trochu resigned on 25 January and was replaced by Jules Favre, who

signed the surrender two days later at Versailles, with the armistice coming into effect at midnight. Several sources claim that in his carriage on the way back to Paris, Favre broke into tears, and collapsed into his daughter's arms as the guns around Paris fell silent at midnight.



The German Empire was officially proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles outside Paris...