

German Unification

German unification took a different course from Italian unification even though—because of the time proximity of the movements—the two are generally considered similar. In Italy, although the most radical movements lost out in the struggle for unification and the country was not united as a republic, unification represented a victory for liberals. The Kingdom of Italy had a constitution based on the French Constitution of 1830 but it quickly evolved into a constitution in which the legislature had considerable powers with respect to the executive. The Italian parliamentary system had flaws but by the twentieth century was roughly comparable to the British or the French parliaments of the same period. The German Parliament, however, was inferior to the executive power (the Emperor) and in the twentieth century lost several battles to become stronger—a direct consequence of how Germany was unified. Another important contrast was that Germany was unified primarily by war. War played a part in Italian unification, but diplomacy had a greater role. Another major difference was that, although Italy had been unified by Piedmont, within 16 years that region ceased to dominate the country. In contrast, Prussia, the state that unified Germany, remained supreme in that country at least until 1918 but really until 1933, when Hitler came to power. Prussia's domination of the country, again, a consequence of how Germany was unified, played a crucial role in later European and world affairs.

The Lessons of 1848

Many German patriots drew two important lessons from the revolutions of 1848. The “Big German” solution of incorporating Austria into a united Germany was dropped as being impossible (this was shown by the failure of the Frankfurt Parliament). This left Prussia as the main candidate for leading the movement for German unification, because it was a major power, a homogenous state, and had demonstrated that it would be sympathetic to leading the movement, even if only because unification would increase its power in the area. The small German states feared for their sovereignty and therefore followed Austria in opposing unification.

The second conclusion that many Germans drew—consciously or unconsciously—was that only strong action could unify the country (or as Bismarck put it, “iron and blood”). They drew this lesson from the liberal Frankfurt Parliament, which had proved ineffective. The attraction of a strong personality who could lead the movement for unification would become irresistible.

Otto von Bismarck

It was in this situation that Otto von Bismarck became Prussian representative to the Diet of the German Confederation, his most important post before becoming Chancellor of Prussia. Bismarck was a shrewd and capable



statesman who utilized brutal frankness as a diplomatic weapon and moderation after victory as weapons. He generally had alternate plans to meet contingencies, and so stood ready to move in all circumstances.

For Bismarck, the Prussian state was paramount. Although he was a conservative, for example, in 1858 he presented a plan by which he proposed that Prussia use national unity as a means of striking at Austria, also a conservative state. In fact, Prussian conservatives hated Bismarck, at least for a time, because he adopted nationalism—a plank of the German liberals—as the moral basis for Prussian expansionism. This devotion would put him in charge of Prussia when a political crisis erupted there.

The Prussian Liberals

In October 1858, the “New Era” began in Prussia. King Frederick William IV lost his mental faculties and his brother Prince William became Prussian regent. He dismissed his brother’s ultra conservative cabinet and appointed a liberal one. New elections took place and a liberal majority was returned. William, however, was not a liberal. His primary reason for getting rid of his brother’s cabinet was that it opposed German unity. In addition, William believed that reforms were necessary, but he wished to preserve royal authority and wanted to strengthen the army through a controversial military program.

The Prussian liberals supported the cabinet appointed by William and kept trying to push it in a more liberal direction. Most of all, they wanted the reform of



the Lower House (the Landtag) and its transformation into an authentic parliament which could take action and legislate independently of the king. They wanted this parliament to be able to name the ministers and wanted the government to be accountable to the parliament instead of the king. In addition, they wanted a reform of the upper house and of local government, free trade, and abolition of Junker (large landholders) privileges.

William did not agree with these ideas and for two years the liberals pressed their demands only slowly. By 1860, the more progressive liberals had lost their patience and proposed a program that included constitutional government, tax reform, and Prussian leadership of German unification. William opposed this program, which the majority of the liberals defeated. The left wing liberals then broke off and formed a new organization, the Progressive Party, which quickly became the largest party in the Diet. The two parties, however, joined together in a coalition that demanded constitutional reform. Had this coalition won its battle against William, Prussia would have been transformed into a parliamentary democracy. However, several factors intervened to defeat them.

Bismarck and the Struggle with the Liberals

In 1859, the Prussian army had mobilized in connection with the war in Italy of that year. The mobilization had revealed glaring defects in army organization. The Minister for War, Albrecht von Roon



(<http://reference.allrefer.com/encyclopedia/R/Roon-Alb.html>), had proposed reforms that included an increase in the term of service for soldiers to three years and an expansion of the army. The liberals in parliament, thinking that a more efficient army could be used against them, opposing the inevitable tax increase, and wishing to make the point that they had control over the state's finances, refused to vote funds for the reforms. William then dissolved the Diet and held new elections, which were a disaster for the government. When the government also began to turn against William, he dismissed it. The result was a political stalemate.

William needed a strong Chancellor who would agree with him and take action against parliament. In this situation, Roon suggested Bismarck as a candidate, and his other military advisers agreed. In September 1862, William appointed Bismarck Chancellor. Bismarck then announced the “gap theory” that, according to him, gave the government legal authority to act. According to the “gap theory,” king and parliament ruled together, but in case of a stalemate it was the duty of the king [William had become king after his brother's death in 1861] to keep the state going; therefore, the government could continue collecting taxes as before while the military reforms were put into place. The people did not revolt even though the government lacked legislative authority to collect the taxes—and therefore was acting illegally—but kept paying them. In effect, the “gap theory” meant “might makes right.”



In January 1863, Bismarck instituted measures designed to pressure the liberals in parliament (many of them were civil servants and could be transferred) and the opposition press (banning or confiscating newspaper because of their “general attitude”). In September 1863, parliament was dissolved, but liberals still won a large majority despite heavy government pressure during the elections.

Despite their electoral victory, the Prussian liberals were uncertain of themselves and failed to strike back at the government by calling for resistance to taxes or by undertaking revolutionary action. They even rejected a bill against the army reorganization that was taking place. The liberals calculated, probably rightly, that they lacked mass popular support. This made them ready to compromise, but Bismarck, smelling victory, refused to do so.

Foreign Policy and the Liberal Defeat

At this point, foreign policy became predominant. Bismarck ably used the wars Prussia waged for unification not only to unify Germany but also to defeat the liberals within Prussia.

In 1864, the main foreign policy problem was a conflict with Denmark. The problem was complicated. Only three people had ever understood it, said the British Prime Minister Gladstone; one had died, one had gone insane, and he had forgotten. The Danish king ruled two duchies, Schleswig and Holstein, inhabited partly by Danes and partly by Germans; the duchies were part of the



German Confederation and not of Denmark, but the Danish king wished to incorporate them into Denmark, even if he had promised not to do so. At the same time, there was a German pretender who wished to rule the Duchies. There had been trouble over these Duchies before and it had resulted in a war in 1848 which had been unsuccessfully waged by the Frankfurt Parliament. In 1864, war broke out again over this issue. Prussia and Austria—supposedly fighting to help the pretender—defeated Denmark and took the Duchies away from it.

After the conflict, Bismarck refused to recognize the pretender's rights and Prussia and Austria divided the Duchies among them. However, Austria was far away from the Duchy of Holstein, which it acquired, and Prussia did everything possible to interrupt communications between the two. Tensions increased and resulted in a war between Prussia and Austria supported by the German Confederation. This war, the Seven Weeks' War, resulted in a surprisingly quick Prussian victory at the Battle of Sadowa

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_K%C3%B6niggratz) on July 3, 1866.

This battle replaced Austrian domination in Germany with Prussian. Bismarck treated Austria leniently in view of a future alliance. However, the smaller states and the German Confederation that had allied with Austria were completely reorganized. Prussia completely annexed the smaller states while leaving the larger German states intact. It set up two German federations, one north of the river Main, integrated with Prussia, and one south of that river, the



South German Confederation, independent, that included Bavaria as its largest state.

Why did Bismarck not annex all the German states and create a united Germany in 1866? There were two reasons: France wanted compensation for the changes already made in Germany. It had not expected a quick Prussian victory and had not acted before the war ended, but was requesting compensation; if Prussia had created a united Germany, it would have meant war with France and Bismarck was not ready for a war with France at this time. The other issue was that South Germany had too many Catholics who would contrast with the Protestant North. However, things would change in a few years.

Bismarck's foreign policy successes had an important effect on Prussian domestic affairs. The first signs that Bismarck's foreign policy was beginning to affect the internal situation in Prussia came during the Danish War, when the more moderate members of the Landtag declared that they would support a "national" war against Denmark. In return, they offered to end the internal conflict. The more radical deputies, however, refused to go along, feeling that such an arrangement would strengthen Bismarck's hand. They would have liked to have seen him defeated in the war so they could beat him domestically. Furthermore, parliament as a whole was not yet ready to give up the fight. It rejected a bill authorizing expenditures for the war and protested when the spent the money anyway.



Parliament, however, was fighting a losing battle. When news of Prussian victories in the field came in, Bismarck's popularity soared. In 1865, with the Danish War won, Landtag deputies offered to compromise with the government, but it refused. When the budget was presented, the money for military reorganization was again eliminated and again the government ignored parliament. At the same time, the government increased its usual pressures against the liberals. Among the Prussian people, apathy spread because most Prussians felt that the military reforms had already proven themselves.

Just before the Seven Weeks' War in 1866, the parliamentary battle heated up again, but this time the government took more repressive measures. It arrested opposition deputies and ensured their conviction by packing the appeal courts. During the war itself, the government dissolved parliament and held new elections.

These elections, held just before the Battle of Sadowa, resulted in a liberal defeat. Party lines were blurred, however, because some conservatives criticized Bismarck's refusal to do away with the constitution. A change had also come over some liberals who once opposed Bismarck—they were now convinced by his "national" policy and began supporting him. Bismarck changed his internal policies and attempted to gain the backing of the liberals. The reasons for his policy shift were that he did not believe in unconcealed absolutism and he realized that the areas which had been annexed as a result of the Seven Weeks' War would add to the voting strength of the liberals. He also



wanted to bring about internal peace. He therefore introduced several measures that pleased the liberals.

The most important of these was his request for an “indemnity bill,” that is, the retroactive approval of the expenditures Bismarck had made for four years without the parliament’s approval. Parliament approved the bill. It thus emasculated itself, approving what in effect had produced the defeat of the struggle to bring parliamentary democracy to Prussia.

Party Realignments

In this way, the moderate liberals made up with Bismarck, but those further to the left opposed the indemnity bill solution, arguing that it did not guarantee that a similar conflict would not break out again and lead to a similar solution. As a result, the moderates in the Progressive Party seceded from that organization and joined with other liberals, especially those from the annexed areas, to form the National Liberal Party. This organization supported and collaborated with Bismarck while the Progressives tried to carry on the traditions of 1862-1866.

At the same time, a similar split occurred among the conservatives. They split into the Free Conservatives and the Old Conservatives. The Free Conservatives supported Bismarck and made an effort to cooperate with the liberals. This group was composed mostly of officials, nobles, and professors, mainly from the Rhineland, and was later joined by industrialists. The Old



Conservatives continued to oppose Bismarck because he would not do away with the constitution, had made war on Austria, and refused to crush the liberals.

In February 1867, a constituent Reichstag (assembly) was elected to write a constitution for the North German Confederation (dominated by Prussia). The National Liberals were the largest party. Although they attempted to put through a liberal constitution, Bismarck got his way. The constitution made Prussia predominant in the Confederation, gave the Reichstag (the representative assembly of the Confederation) only incomplete budget rights, set the size of the army at a fixed percentage of the population, did not contain a bill of rights, and did not make the cabinet responsible to the Reichstag. Later, this constitution was essentially the one that became the constitution of united Germany.

German Unification

Despite these developments, German unity was not complete. It has been noted why unification did not occur in 1866. By 1870, things had changed. South Germany constituted a power vacuum that would be filled either by France (French cultural influence), a resurgent Austria (the Catholic connection), or by Prussia. Bismarck determined that he would have to resolve the problem.

This could be done only by a war with France, because that country would not condone German unification because unification threatened its interests. France already felt its interests threatened by the result of the Seven Weeks' War and demanded compensation. Bismarck skillfully used this demand to prepare



the basis for a war that would be perceived by all Germans as a national war against its old oppressor. France had been interfering in German affairs for centuries. The historical incident that rankled Germans the most was its dominance during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and thereafter. A historical debate raged in Germany in which French policy during that war and afterwards was condemned; the debate aroused old passions.

Bismarck fanned the passions by manipulating French demands for compensation after Sadowa. The first incident was the Luxembourg affair. France asked for Luxembourg as compensation, but that principality belonged to the King of the Netherlands. With Bismarck's blessing, the French negotiated to buy it. When the negotiations succeeded, Bismarck came out in opposition, making it seem that France was up to its old imperialistic tricks.

The spark that set off the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 was the so-called Hohenzollern Candidacy

(http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761578072/Franco-Prussian_War.html).

It will be remembered that at the time Spain was looking for a king. The Spaniards settled on a younger member of a branch of the Hohenzollern family, the dynasty that ruled Prussia. The candidate—Leopold, nephew of William I—was encouraged by Bismarck and accepted. However, the French, looking back to a historical precedent of their own, remembered the 16th century, when they had been caught between Germany and Spain both ruled by Emperor Charles V and had been in danger of being crushed. They sent their ambassador to the

Prussian king to explain their opposition and to ask him to withdraw his candidacy. William, vacationing at Ems and without the benefit of Bismarck's advice—agreed. This was a defeat for the Prussians, but the French remained unsatisfied. They sent their ambassador back to ask William never to do anything like that again. William politely refused. He then sent a telegram to Bismarck explaining the situation (the “Ems Dispatch,” <http://killeenroos.com/4/EMSDISPA.htm>). Bismarck skillfully edited the telegram, believing that it would precipitate a war with France that would rally all the Germans against the hereditary enemy.

The scheme worked, and Napoleon III's government declared war on Prussia on July 19, 1870; all the German states joined Prussia against France. Napoleon III was defeated in record time, but a revolution was precipitated and the French held out for another six months.

The German Empire

In January 1871, the German princes declared the German Empire at Versailles outside of Paris. The possible loss of their thrones by the existing German states, an issue that might have blocked creation of the Empire, was resolved as those monarchs retained their thrones within the Empire. The German Constitution was essentially that of the German Confederation of 1867. It did allow for universal male suffrage, a provision that later caused Bismarck much trouble, but did not allow for the government being named by the



Reichstag or for ministers being accountable to parliament. Furthermore, the upper house, which represented states, could block initiatives taken by the Reichstag elected by the people. In addition, Prussia dominated Germany, with the King of Prussia being also Emperor of Germany and Prussia, run by the illiberal constitution of 1849-50, having the major voice in German domestic and foreign policy.

Until 1890 when he was dismissed, Bismarck dominated Germany. His skill in foreign policy also determined the course of European diplomacy while he remained in office. As a result of its unification, Germany became the major player in Europe until 1945.