

# Assess the main reasons for the unification of germany in 1871

[Countries](#), [Germany](#)



In 1862, Bismarck said that ' the great questions of the day will be settled by blood and iron. ' Although there is undoubtedly some degree of accuracy in this statement, the most important reason for the unification of Germany, which ended ' the great questions of the day,' was ' coal and iron. ' This is a quote from British economist John Maynard Keynes, who argued that the industrial and economic preparation before the wars, which united Germany, were more important. This is because the economic strength created by the rapid industrialisation enabled the creation of a powerful Prussia.

It was under this powerful Prussia, with some skilful diplomacy and opportunism, that Germany was successfully united in the wars of German Unification. Without such economic development and prosperity, it is questionable whether Germany would have been united by 1871. On the other hand we must also consider the other factors and thus must address five key areas. The first of these is the growing strength of Prussia in relation to Austria and closely linked to this is the economic developments within Prussia.

On a much larger scale we must also take into account the strength of nationalism and the international situation of the 1860s. Lastly, we must consider whether the policies and strategies of Otto Von Bismarck, the Minister-President of Prussia from 1862 had a major impact on the Unification of Germany in 1871, nevertheless we are justified by saying that the main reason for the unification of Germany in 1871 was due to the economic prowess of Prussia in relation to other foreign nations such as Austria.

“ When the army has been brought into such a state as to command respect, then I shall take the first opportunity to declare war on Austria, burst asunder the German Confederation, bring the middle and smaller states into subjugation and give Germany a national union under Prussian leadership. ”

These views clearly voiced out the long-term ambitions that Bismarck had for Prussia. Bismarck believed that he was able to shape the country and steer it to a position where it would lead the other German states. Bismarck's exploits from the above statement shows that he greatly influenced the unification of Germany.

He realised that a “ man could not create the current of events” but “ only float and steer it”, it was here that his true potential as a charismatic politician could be seen. As the brilliant opportunist he was, he completely outplayed the Austrians. Bismarck managed to cultivate a close relationship with Russia against Austria in 1863. This was made possible due to the Austrian's error of not coming to the aid of the Russians during the Crimean War in 1852 thus an Austro- Russian alliance 10 years later would be unlikely to form as there was still great resentment between the two nations.

Also it meant that Prussia would have a greater force backing them up. The following year he weakens Austria further after allying with them, as they were forced to maintain an army in the Northern region of Schleswig-Holstein. It is clear to see from this that Bismarck had a tendency to pick a quarrel with the opposition and create tension beneath the surface. If Austria did not mobilise an army there Prussia would have been free to annex this

state and phenomenally increase the number of resources and territory gained.

On the other hand as this ultimately enabled victory at Koniggratz to be much more achievable as fewer Austrian troops were present to defend their homeland. In 1865 he again impeded Austria from making a potential ally with France by giving them rewards in terms of land and resources. This would also ensure that France would remain neutral if Prussia declared war on Austria. His next final stroke of strategic genius can be seen with the Italian alliance in 1866. By the alliance with Italy, Bismarck contrived to divert part of the Austrian forces to the south.

This advantage with addition with that of Prussia's modernised army discipline resulted in a Prussian victory on August 23rd 1866. Its victory enabled the North German Confederation to be formed. We can see that Bismarck held great political prowess and having considered the action he took, we are justified in saying that Bismarck's role in the unification of Germany was a very important factor but not the main reason for Germany's unification in 1871. Another factor which must be taken into account is the inevitability of Prussia's rise to power and her military's exponential growth in power.

In 1815 unbeknown to Prussia, the major powers after defeating Napoleon split the French Empire and gave the Kingdom of Westphalia to Prussia thinking that it was useless bit of land however in reality they were handing over the richest material deposits in Europe. The abundant reserves as soon as they were discovered were being extracted an alarming rate transforming

Prussia, currently a country short of territory and power into the most dominant and richest nation in the whole of Europe. Helmuth von Moltke based on this new found wealth gave him the means by which to modernise the army.

Bismarck greatly advocated the support as he believed that “ It is not by speeches and majority that the great questions of our time are decided, it is by blood and iron”. The newly reformed Prussian army revolutionised by Moltke “ attained a level of military efficiency that the other European armies could only dream of” This strength was pivotal during the three wars of unification as it allowed Bismarck to dictate the battle as well as the following treaties and agreements. Its highlight came however, at the Battle of Koniggratz where the Prussian army defeated Austrian forces inflicting many casualties.

Indeed it was Bismarck who led the army reforms and it also shows that he delayed going to war with Austria to make sure victory was ascertained however without the overpowering economy which Prussia had she would never have been able to modernise the army to such an extent as well manage the costs of three wars so we are justified saying that Prussian economy was more influential to the unification of Germany than the military however we must also remember that without a strong military force Prussia would not have been able to win the wars that ensured the unification of Germany to take place.

It was not only the rich mineral reserves that were economically benefitting Prussia. The creation of the Zollverein in 1834 was the first step towards a

united German customs union, fore fronted by Prussia. Although the smaller states greatly benefitted by being part of the Zollverein due to the abolishment of internal tariffs and they also became dependant on Prussia in maintaining the system.

As well as this it may have not impacted unification as its economic benefits focused countries on the internal benefits rather than leading them to merge into a single German state but certainly by giving Germany an identity, and a commonality with regards to businesses and the economy. It was seen as “binding together the limbs of Germany”. This concept was re-enforced with the development of railways throughout the Zollverein. This made transport and trade much easier but also brought the states together as people could easily travel across it visiting regions previously inaccessible.

Compared to the impact of Bismarck however the economic advantages of Prussia play a major role in the unification of Germany in 1871. The economic advantages were enhanced as “Austria had not only had many chronic financial problems, it also lagged well behind Prussia in economic developments. It clear to see that without the economic power Prussia had in the 1850s and later, many businesses and the military would not have been able to become modernized and much stronger. It was only because of this newly made fighting force that Prussia was capable of inflicting the crushing defeat at Koniggratz.

However it also helped Prussia to politically influence and dominate the other smaller German states as well as become a major authoritative nation within Europe. Thus it can be justified that “coal and iron” was the most important

reason for the unification of Germany in 1871. Synonymous with the economic developments were the international circumstances of the 1860s which played a role in the unification of Germany. Austria's decision to remain neutral during the Crimean War from 1853 to 1856 meant that that they lost the support of Russia in the future .

Because of this no one could no longer continue to dictate over Prussia. As well as this, the Austro-Franco war of 1859 to 1860 led to the Italian Unification. This had two major impacts on the unification of Germany. The first was that it cultivated and spurred nationalism in surrounding European countries. It even led to a pressure group being set up in Prussia the same year. More relevant to Prussia's dominance however was the Austrian loss of Lombardy. Due to this loss of a very rich state, the Austrian government was forced to make constitutional concessions to the liberals within the country.

Also the seeds of war between Prussia and Austria had been sown after Olmutz where Prussia were forced to say that the Erfurt Union will not be made and that the Diet under Austrian presidency will remain also Prussia had to firstly demobilise completely while Austria will secondly partially demobilise. This was a great humiliation for the Prussians and the resentment created by this caused the tensions between the two nations to rise. The final international factor is that of Napoleon III. In a bid to emulate his uncle he engaged himself with international politics as much as he could.

Napoleon met Bismarck at Barritz where he confirmed French neutrality, in return for land rewards. This had a great impact as it meant that Prussia could advance without the threat of invasion from France. Although the

Napoleon declared war on Prussia five years later in 1870 however by that time the Prussians had a strong enough army to repel these forces without much bloodshed. Bismarck calculated Napoleon's greed and ego accurately and used this to his advantage. If this was not done there is a great likelihood that France would have declared war on Prussia and as soon as they did that Austria would have joined as well.

Even though Prussia had the greatest military prowess of the three nations the sheer scale of the attack would have overwhelmed Prussia and it would lead to Austria being in such a position that unification of Germany would not have been possible. However we must also that their political position within Europe was promoted by their booming economy and the grouping of the lesser states under Prussian authority so it is fair to say that the international circumstances of the 1860s came about from political and military dominance within Europe which were influenced by the booming economic situation in Prussia at the time.

The final factor contributing to the unification of Germany is the strength of nationalism. This was enhanced by the 1848 revolutions and saw liberals rise up in Prussia. Their quest for a united Germany was stopped midway due to food shortages the following economic depression and the resulting lack of support. With the loss of their power base the revolutions failed horribly. We are therefore justified in saying that although support for nationalism did play a part in the unification of Germany it was not the deciding factor .

In order for nationalism as an ideology to be spread across the states a top down revolution was needed. Nationalistic individuals wanted the uniting



of all German states, all German folk coming together and the Zollverein, the customs trade union was the shadow of the Germany formed in 1871 and thus we are justified by saying that the economic policies of Prussia was pivotal in bring the people together under a single united state and were more important than the strength of nationalism.

Overall we are justified in saying that the main reason for the unification of Germany in 1871 was the booming Prussian economy. There is a strong case arguing that the skilful diplomacy and power politics of Otto Von Bismarck led directly towards German unification. However this said Bismarck was only able to the Army Reform Bill in 1861 because the economy had provided sufficient revenue for him to do so. If Bismarck had not pumped money into reforming the army then it would not have been able to achieve such a great force which helped Prussia win the three wars of unification.

Also the Zollverein plays a major role in the unification of Germany as helped all the states boost their economy under a Prussian leadership also the outline of the Zollverein is exactly the same outline Germany was when all the states finally united in 1871, it was at this point that the ideology of nationalism prevailed as it managed bring all German speaking people together. With these reasons I believe that the Prussian economy was the most important factor for the unification of Germany.