

# History of the unification of germany

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



Numerous factors have led to the progressive creation of a unified Germany by 1871; such factors are fundamentally related to economic, political or military origins. To accurately understand the reasoning behind the unification, one must look at the history preceding it – The after-effects of the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire; The significance of the French revolutions and Napoleonic Wars on Germanic national identity; the degradation of Austria's national power; the introduction of the Zollverein in 1834 and the Prussian economic superiority that followed in addition to the industrialisation of the German states all contribute towards economic and political factors relating to the formation of a unified Germany under Prussia's direction.

Military factors contributing towards the unification of Germany include the defeat and exile of Napoleon Bonaparte; Otto Von Bismarck's foreign policy based strongly around 'realpolitik'; the significance of the 'New Model Army' on Prussia's military prominence in addition to the conclusive Franco-Prussian war. The Germanic region is immersed in a rich cultural heritage extending back, within the context of recorded history to a wild, untamed land coupled with the indomitable spirit of the indigenous people who populated it.

Numerous tribes took residence within Germania including but not limited to the Saxons, Franks and Chatti. Several centuries on, the Frankish territories within Germania had spread across the Central European landmass under the tactical prowess of Charlemagne to encompass large parts of Western Europe and Northern Italy, thus forming "Teutonicum" or "Germanic Realm". This newly formed empire was later consolidated by Otto the Great

to become the Holy Roman Empire and is considered by numerous historians as the formation of the First Reich.

The period from 936 C. E onwards saw the further expansion and consolidation of the Holy Roman Empire's territory; this territory was however still rather localized to the Central European landmass. The conglomeratic nature of the Holy Roman Empire's territory in addition to Otto the Great's ecclesiastical reforms and papal disputes provide a poignant appreciation to French philosopher Voltaire's phrase (1) "This agglomeration which was called and which still calls itself the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire".

Nevertheless, the Holy Roman Empire laid immeasurable foundations in the construction of a modern Germanic national identity; this national construct was further built on by the shared linguistic and cultural background of the denizens of Central Europe and as such, the importance of this rich heritage in the creation of a unified Germany must not be neglected. Analysis must be made in order to quantify the involvement economics played in the unification of the German states.

The main economic impact on the Germanic states pre-1834 was the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Wars, the French Revolution in particular stemmed partly from an economic crisis based in France; although providing unseen benefits that later amalgamated into the creation of a unified Germany, the wars were extremely taxing on the German states, such an economic drain arguably perpetuated the view that the German

states would be unquestionably stronger if they were unified economically with consideration to the possibility of a future surge of French imperialism.

After the creation of the German Confederation via the Congress of Vienna, inter-state trade began to increase but was severely limited by individual state tolls on goods passing through their respective territories, as such; Prussia introduced the Trade Reform Act 1818 which effectively removed intrinsic customs tariffs boosting internal trade massively. From this sphere of economic influence, neighbouring states began to adopt a similar tariff system in the interest of long-term economic growth. This indoctrination of sorts paved the way for the rapid economic development of the states that had adopted Prussia's tariff system.

Not only did this economic revolution increase the wealth of the states that adopted it, it also laid the foundations for an economic national identity which became synonymous with interstate politics. The increased political involvement between states can only be looked at positively when attributing its involvement in the creation of a unified Germany, with such involvement taking place, it is apparent that the German Confederation was already beginning to function as a single entity. With the boost in economic co-operation came a degree of cultural integration as a result of the increased inter-state involvement.

It can certainly be argued that the introduction of the Trade Reform Act and the resulting economic co-operation contributed to the formation of a unified Germany. The positive effects of the newfound increased economic co-operation were further exemplified by the introduction of the Zollverein in

1834. The Zollverein's influence furthered a national identity, both through the solid participation of the constituent states of the German Confederation and 'monuments' under which unification could prosper such as the customs-parliament and the formation of a governing body of the economic aspects of the German Confederation.

The synonymous nature of economics and politics meant that it was only a matter of time before the latter was formalized just as the economic union of states had been formalized by the Zollverein. With the Zollverein came a rapid increase in foreign trade which bolstered the confederation's economic armoury as a result of commercial treaties with Holland, Britain and Belgium.

Not only did this bolster the Prussian-dominated Zollverein's coffers, it paved the way for a diplomatic stability with the nations; the fact that it is arguable that the majority of the states within the German Confederation were interested in international relations is further indicative of the collective will of the Germanic states to be unified. A further benefit towards unification that the Zollverein brought was the industrialisation of the German states as a result of the increased trade and wealth that the Zollverein had provided; this industrialisation emerged primarily with the introduction of the railways.

Not only did the railways further bolster trade and strengthen the bond that the Zollverein had provided for the German states, it removed a large portion of pre-existing inter-state cultural segregation and local prejudice as a result of the increased social and cultural contact made available by the addition of the railways to the German Confederation's transport system. An

additional economic aspect that must not be neglected is the effect the Zollverein had on Prussia's main rival for unification – Austria.

Due to the fact that the Zollverein was fundamentally born from the Prussian womb as a result of previous success of the Tariff Reform Act, it allowed Prussia to refuse entrance of the Zollverein to Austria despite three arguably frantic attempts to join in 1852, 1853 and 1862. This further weakened Austria's hold over the German Confederation and as a result, it became more apparent that Prussia was to lead a unified Germany. The fact that one nation had clear dominance within the German Confederation provided a rallying point for German states under a Prussian banner and furthered the now Prussian-biased ideology of German dualism.

It is also possible to consider that the German states may have used the example of Prussian economic solidarity and political dominance as a justification for a Prussian-lead unified Germany. In contrast, Lombardy was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy during 1859 as a result of the Second Italian War of Independence, further weakening Austria's economic position due to the fact that Lombardy was a significant Austrian trade hub; in addition, this led to the defeat of the Hapsburg family. The war was a catalyst for liberalism/nationalism.

From a political point of view, it can be said that political activities both intrinsic to the German states and extrinsic such as political ideological revolutions across Europe contributed to the unification of Germany. The political effects Napoleon exercised on the Germanic states and their relevance to German unification almost a century later must be appreciated

in order to properly understand the political basis for unification. A principle factor was the continuation of the War of the Second Coalition and the subsequent Peace of Lunéville.

Although initially enforced to allow easier management of German territories, it can be argued that Napoleon had unknowingly paved the way for German nationalism. German nationalism was further exemplified by the martyr Friedrich Staps<sup>(2)</sup>; his attempt on Napoleon's life and subsequent refusal to denounce his will to assassinate Napoleon after being asked by Napoleon whether he would thank him if he was pardoned became a beacon of unification and furthered the German nationalist identity; he was quoted as saying " Long live freedom!

Long live Germany! " before being executed by firing squad. The fact that an attempt on Napoleon's life was made in the first place is strongly indicative of an inherent nationalist awareness and disagreement with French hegemony; collating to form a strong will for unification under a single identity. The Congress of Vienna was a further spoke in the wheel of unification.

Although initially intended to reconsolidate existing Germanic states and quash nationalist views, the German Confederation was formed which can be considered a major step towards unification; this further amalgamated German states and as a result of the denomination of the states under a single name, caused political arguments over who should rule the confederation.

Although political tensions were fierce between Prussia and Austria, it can be considered positive that there was a title of ' ruler' of the German Confederation to quarrel over at all; this is highly suggestive that most German states had unification to some degree planned or had at least considered it by 1820. What the Congress of Vienna did not take into account however was the growing economic power and ambition of Prussia.

The Zollverein further reinforced Prussia's political influence over the majority of states within the German Confederacy and continued to isolate Austria - Prussia's main contender for the crown of unification due to the lack of inclusion within the Zollverein. In addition to Austria's waning political influence as a result of the Zollverein, Prince von Metternich's resignation in 1848 brought an end to Austria's largely protectionist policy and allowed for a continued nationalist view with Prussia firmly secured to unify Germany.

This nationalist " will" to become a single nation is supported by Heinrich von Treitschke, a German nationalist historian's statement (3)" Every virile people has established colonial power. All great nations in the fullness of their strength have desired to set their mark upon barbarian lands and those who fail to participate in this great rivalry will play a pitiable role in time to come. " From a nationalist point of view, it is suggestive of the yearning that citizens of the German states had to be a part of the new world that was forming as a unified identity.

As a result of the degeneration Austria was experiencing, Frederick William IV of Prussia took control of German Confederacy affairs and called the Frankfurt National Assembly. Although the assembly was hugely biased



towards the middle class populace, boasting 325 middle class delegates and only 5 of a working class background, it was not the fact that it was unsuccessful, it was the fact that delegates from the Germanic peoples met at all.

Although Frederick William IV declined the crown mainly due to opposition from the other German princes in addition to strained relations with Austria and Russia, he quickly summoned the German princes to Erfurt to create a plan to unite Germany. The activities that transpired during the Frankfurt National Assembly indicated a step away from autocracy and a step towards a constitutional monarchy, suggestive that a unified Germany was imminent.

Perhaps the greatest political influence on the unification of Germany was Otto von Bismarck. He has been described by William Carr as (4) “ a giant among pigmies” due to his political and diplomatic influence. Bismarck was appointed as Minister President of the Kingdom of Prussia in 1862 and had a profound effect on nationalism and the foreign policy of the German Confederation. Bismarck’s progressive domestic policy can be considered a great stepping stone towards unification.

One such subjectively important measure Bismarck took was the secularization of the Klein Deutschland via the May Laws; these laws helped delegate power to the state therefore strengthening the Reich’s position within society. A principle factor of the May Laws relating to the continued unification of Germany was the state’s newfound governance of education over the Catholic Church; this helped promote modernist ideas to

the future German population, thus allowing Germany's continued survival in a progressive world post-industrial revolution.

Additionally, Bismarck's social welfare reforms further strengthened the fabric of the new society that was beginning to flourish. The introduction of sick pay in 1883 and pensions in 1889 helped quell the large socialist unrest which can be said to have helped towards the social stability of the nation. Bismarck's foreign policy also provided a basis for the unification of Germany. Bismarck took a strong political stance of diplomatic isolation and pacification.

Bismarck's primary aim diplomatically was to maintain good relations with Russia and Austria and prevent a Franco-Russian alliance through the League of the Three Emperors as Bismarck realised that if diplomatic relations broke down with Russia, there was a strong possibility that Germany could be hit from both the Eastern and Western fronts. Bismarck maintained a "three against two" diplomatic philosophy; he is quoted as saying (5) "you forget the importance of being a party of three on the European chessboard. The foreign policy Bismarck employed enabled the diplomatic isolation and subsequent defeat of both France and Austria, the two main barriers standing in the way of a unified Germany. Following the unification, Bismarck employed a clever aggressive diplomatic move in the shadow of the Congress of Berlin's negative effects on relations with Russia. A dual alliance was formed with Austria in 1879 in order to both coerce Russia into seeking a closer diplomatic relationship with Germany and to

secure Germany's southern border in the event of a diplomatic breakdown with Russia.

This was a very wise move on Bismarck's part as it further pacified a real threat to Germany's continuity. A further show of Bismarck's diplomatic engineering unveiled itself in light of the Spanish revolution; As a result of the uprisings, the throne of Spain became available. Tensions between France and Prussia had escalated beyond all measure as a result of an offer to a German Prince to take up the throne and war was declared between France and Prussia as a result.

The diplomatic supremacy portrayed by Bismarck aided greatly in the provocation of a Franco-Prussian war and as a result of the French defeat, aided greatly in the unification of Germany with one of its major enemies defeated. The Napoleonic wars and the resulting military encounters may be looked upon as a catalyst for the unification of Germany, a common "wartime enemy" gave the citizens of the German states a common goal which cumulated with the significant Prussian role within the Battle of Waterloo and the heroism shown by Gebhard von Blucher's troops.

The German revolutions of 1848 may be considered a military catalyst towards German unification. During the revolutions, Austria was mainly preoccupied with the First Italian War of Independence; this coupled with Prussia's newfound superiority within the German Confederation meant that the German states relied upon Prussia to assist with the uprisings, this reliance further strengthened the political role Prussia played within the

German Confederation and took the states one step closer to unification under a Prussian banner.

The first major military effect on the unification of Germany came with the realisation in 1859 that the Prussian army was ineffectively trained and archaic, Albert von Roon, war minister of Prussia proposed the Army Bill of 1860. It planned to substantially increase the size of the Prussian army and improve its equipment; furthermore, national service was to be extended. The bill was passed by Bismarck in 1862 contrary to liberal opposition and hence the "New Model Army" was created.

Despite continuous liberal opposition to Bismarck's policies, as a result of the success his policies had, liberal support for him did grow. This is supported by the American historian Peter Viereck: (6) "The liberal university professors, Metternich's fiercest foes and now so prominent in 1848, were often far from the cloudy idealists pictured in our textbooks. From his own viewpoint, Bismarck erred in mocking their lack of Realpolitik. The majority... as more Bismarckian than Bismarck ever realized. Many liberals... later became leading propagandists for Bismarck, along with the new National Liberal Party," Danish annexation of Schleswig brought the modernized German army to life and in February 1864, a combined Prussian and Austrian force crossed the Danish border into Schleswig. The Danish army consisted of around 40,000 troops and was swept away by a force superior in numbers, equipment and tactics.

The Second Schleswig War accumulated into a victory for Prussian and Austrian forces, resulting in the re-annexation of Schleswig and the

acquisition of the duchy of Holstein for both nations. This military move allowed Prussia to re-affirm its dominance and perpetuated to the German states that it was capable of defending its territories if provoked; this furthered nationalist views within the German states and contributed towards a unilateral notion that Prussia was able to lead a unified Germany.

A further military factor of unification displayed by Prussia was the Austrian-Prussian war in 1866; through Bismarck's diplomatic puppeteering, Austria declared war on Prussia. Austria was quickly isolated diplomatically and militarily. This isolation coupled with the Italian mobilization for the Third Italian War of Independence meant that Prussia had hit Austria at its weakest; Austria was quickly overwhelmed resulting in the loss of a thorn in Germany's side.

In addition to this, Austrian influence on German states waned due to both the defeat itself and that it became apparent that was unable to focus on the affairs relating to German states. This further solidified Prussia's hold over both the states themselves and the Zollverein. Austria's defeat also resulted in the further diplomatic isolation of France which would later aid Prussia in the Franco-Prussian war and make the path to unification more straightforward.

By 1870, Prussian dominance was prolific across the German states, primarily as a result of the Prussian show of military force in the Second Schleswig War and indeed the Austrian-Prussian War. The interstate alliances that were formed meant that any European aggression on a German state would result in action being taken from all German states allied with Prussia,

It was apparent from such diplomatic relations that the German states were at this point a pseudo-nation of sorts.

As a result of the diplomatic breakdown over the Spanish crown, war was declared by France on Prussia in the summer of 1870. Napoleon III decided to invoke a strategy similar to his uncle's strategy several decades ago; however, the war was soon lost as a result of the unified German states being able to co-ordinate in addition to the Prussian military might resulting from the earlier Army Bill of 1860 in addition to the experience it had gained from the Schleswig-Holstein conflict and the Austrian-Prussian War. The British historian A. J.

P Taylor summarized Napoleon III's failure to take into account a key factor of his strategy (7) " Like most of those who study history, he (Napoleon III) learned from the mistakes of the past how to make new ones. " The importance of the military must not be neglected when considering the factors relating to the unification of Germany. The seeds of nationalism were planted at the turn of the 19th century as a result of the Napoleonic Wars. Military action formed a cornerstone of Bismarck's foreign policy which subsequently can be considered a key piece of the unification.

As a result of the modernization of the Prussian army, it was able to exert its dominance over both Denmark and Austria – the main contender to unify Germany and a stark opponent of the militaristic manner in which Bismarck was conducting in order to do so. Prussia was also able to eliminate France as the main rival to the formation of a unified Germany and prosper from the

post-war reparations that France had been forced to pay both financially and in terms of territory thus aiding the continuity of the newly formed Germany.

To conclude, it may not be accurate to attribute the unification solely, or even primarily to one set of factors but to a broad spectrum, each with their own significance, relevance and effect on other factors, for example; the Franco-Prussian war may not have resulted in a victory for Prussia had the Army Bill of 1860 not have been passed, nor would Prussian economic dominance be exerted in the later 19th century if the Zollverein had not been introduced in 1834 and as a result, Prussia may not have had the funds to introduce the Army Bill in the first place, this is testament to the theory that the economic, political and military factors relating to the unification of Germany are linked and as such, a denomination cannot be made towards the prevalence of one but indeed the combined significance of all of these factors. These interwoven strands of fate may be recognised by the Borussian Myth, a theory perpetuated by 19th century nationalist German historians such as Heinrich von Treitschke and Theodor Mommsen. The Borussian Myth states that German unification was inevitable; it is based off a teleological argument which suggests that all factors of an event are directed toward a final outcome. This theory is contrasted by post World War II historians searching through the immediate German past in order to better understand the root causes of World War II.

It was progressively realised that Prussia was not the centre of German culture as suggested by the German nationalist historians of the 19th century and that 19th century German history wasn't entirely centred on

Prussian success attributed to accumulative fate but a time of great social, economic and cultural change for the German states. Although the Borussian Myth may be flawed by nationalist bias, the linked significance of the factors relating to the unification of Germany does suggest that Prussia was “destined” to unify Germany to some extent. Nevertheless, the unification of Germany cannot be attributed to one set of factors, but a precise combination of all factors executed with crucial timing whether intentional or not, sprinkled with a dash of luck.