

To what extent was bismarck responsible for the unification of germany? essay sam...

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Under the guidance of Bismarck, the Prussian chancellor, the unification of a Kleindeutsch (small Germany) took place in 1871 after Prussia defeated France. There is often historical debate over who was responsible for the unification of Germany. Controversy is caused amongst those who believe that Bismarck was fully responsible for German unification and those who believe other factors played an equally or even more important part. The historian Pflanze is an example of someone who considers Bismarck to be solely responsible, as opposed to Bohme, who gives full credit to economic factors in unifying Germany. However, there is also a middle view, supported by historians such as Medlicott, who argue that Bismarck and other relevant factors caused unification. The aim of this essay is to firstly examine the importance of Bismarck in the unification of Germany and then to look at other factors which played a part, to eventually reach a balanced conclusion.

The strong and determined leadership displayed by Bismarck played a very important part in uniting the German states. An example of this is when Bismarck illegally raised money for army reforms, boldly ignoring the opposition of the Prussian parliament who refused to vote the sum of money needed. In a speech to the parliament in 1863, he claimed that: "Whoever has the power in hand goes ahead with his views". Despite the outrage of the Prussian parliament at his arrogance, Bismarck was able to collect enough money to enable him to build up the army, which was essential in helping Germany to become united. Bismarck's forceful approach was also essential in unifying Germany. After the failure of the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848, he believed that idealism and talking were not going to result in the unification of Germany and that force had to be used.

Bismarck stated that: “ The great questions of the day are not decided by speeches and resolutions of majorities – that was the mistake of 1848 and 1849 – but by iron and blood”. His “ iron and blood” speech was important, as it tried to encourage parliament to take firm action instead of discussing issues and getting nowhere. The historian Pflanze believed that Bismarck was responsible for uniting Germany as he turned the German people over to German nationalism. He claims that Germany was unified: “ only under the stimulation provided by Bismarck”. This proves that Bismarck’s effective and forceful leadership was important in the unification of Germany.

Bismarck’s previous political experience and knowledge of foreign and domestic affairs later helped him in his role of unifying Germany. He represented Prussia in the German parliament, which helped him to gain a better knowledge of German politics. Bismarck was then transferred to St. Petersburg in Russia, where he was very popular with the Russian court. A good relationship between Bismarck and the Russian Tsar was established here, which later ensured Russian neutrality in the Prussian war with Austria. He went to Paris, where he gained a better knowledge of European politics. He also measured up the strengths and weaknesses of the French Emperor, Louis Napoleon. Bismarck later played on these weaknesses to ensure French neutrality in the war with Austria – Napoleon’s guilt in abandoning Italy in a previous war against Austria and his desire for France to be the leading European power. Bismarck also played on Napoleon’s temperament during the lead up to the Franco-Prussian war by editing a telegram, which he knew would anger Napoleon into declaring war against Prussia. This

demonstrates the importance of Bismarck's previous political experience in the unification of Germany.

The political cleverness displayed by Bismarck and his sense of opportunism was valuable to him in his role of unifying Germany. He demonstrated this when he took the initiative in declaring war against Denmark and persuading Austria to follow on. Denmark was defeated and Prussia was given full credit by the German states for taking the lead. The settlement between Denmark, Austria and Prussia made Austria very unpopular amongst the German states. At the Convention of Gastein, Austria took over a German state. This bad feeling for Austria made Prussia more popular. Bismarck then isolated Austria by persuading Russia, France and Italy to remain neutral towards her. Prussia then defeated Austria in a war.

Afterwards, the Prussian king and generals wanted to finish Austria off, however, Bismarck showed strength and wouldn't let them. Instead he made peace with Austria to ensure her future support. Bismarck stated: " We shall need Austria's strength ourselves". A good example of opportunism is when Bismarck goaded France into declaring war by editing the EMS telegram. Bismarck edited the telegram to make it seem as if Prussia had insulted France. This angered Napoleon and he declared war. This made France seem like the aggressor, which ensured the neutrality of the other powers. Bismarck described it as: " a red rag to a Gallic bull". All of these points show that Bismarck undoubtedly played an important role in unifying Germany.

On the other hand, there were many factors outwith Bismarck's control which were very important in the unification of Germany, for example, the Zollverein. The Zollverein was a voluntary customs union, which encouraged trade between the German states by removing customs duties. It drew the German states closer together and supplied economic unity. Twenty-five of the thirty-nine states were members of the Zollverein – Austria was not a member. As Prussia started the Zollverein, their influence in German affairs and economic power increased and as Austria was not a member, her power and influence over the German states weakened. The German historian, Bohme, believes that whether Bismarck had been there or not, the Zollverein would have united Germany anyway. He stated that Germany was united by “coal and iron” and not by “blood and iron”. It can therefore be seen that the Zollverein was a very important factor in uniting Germany.

In addition, the strength of the Prussian army made the task of uniting Germany much easier. The Prussian army had previously been built up to be a very strong army. The leader, Commander Von Moltke, ran a very organised army where orders were efficiently passed through army units. When compared with the Austrian army, Prussia had better fighting methods and more advanced weapons. Their rifles were more modern than the old-fashioned Austrian ones and they fired four times as rapidly. Craig, a British historian believes that Bismarck was the catalyst for German unification, but he depended on the Prussian army to help him: “Had the Prussian army not been as good as Bismarck believed it to be, he would have been a dead man before the day of battle was over. But he had not been mistaken in his

fundamental judgement, and the victory of the army was therefore also his.” This shows the great importance of the Prussian army in unifying Germany.

Prussia's highly efficient railway system cannot be overlooked when considering factors which helped German unification. Prussia's advanced railway network helped the army greatly and allowed quick mobilisation, and the army was rapidly moved to the front line. An example of this is in the Franco-Prussian war. France had only managed to mobilise two hundred thousand men as opposed to Prussia who, with the help of the railway system, had managed to mobilise almost double that. It can clearly be seen that Prussia's efficient railway network helped greatly in the unification of Germany.

Moreover, the mistakes of Bismarck's opponents were an additional advantage, which should be considered when discussing what united Germany. When Prussia put forward a candidate for the Spanish throne, France put Prussia under pressure to withdraw their candidate. Prussia did so and they were humiliated. Bismarck was furious at this and wanted war. Napoleon then made the mistake of making a second demand; he told Prussia they should never put forward a candidate ever again. This was the perfect opportunity for Bismarck. He edited the EMS telegram, which provoked Napoleon to declare war by making it seem as if Prussia had insulted France. As France appeared as the aggressors, the southern German states were scared of France and therefore fought with Prussia to eventually defeat France.

Stiles, a British historian, believed that Bismarck was a first class opportunist but relied on these mistakes made by Napoleon: “ He was the supreme opportunist taking advantage of French blunders in 1870”. Also, Napoleon’s decision to remain neutral during the war between Prussia and Austria was a mistake. He didn’t intervene as he thought that it would be a long war and Prussia and Austria would weaken each other, making France the leading European power, however, he was mistaken and the war was short-lived. Britain also remained neutral during the Franco-Prussian war as she saw France as more of a threat than a smaller Germany. These mistakes made by Bismarck’s opponents clearly played an important part in the unification of Germany.

Furthermore, the decline of Austria from the 1850’s onwards cannot be overlooked in a balanced explanation of German unification. Austria suffered political decline as she lost Russia as an ally when she did not support Russia in the Crimean war. Austria was also weak after being defeated by France in northern Italy in 1859. Her economic growth was very slow, mainly due to her non-membership of the Zollverein. For example, Prussia produced one and a half times more pig iron than Austria; seven times more coal and two and a half times more railways. This decline in Austria’s economic and political affairs undoubtedly made a contribution in uniting Germany.

In conclusion, it can clearly be seen that Bismarck played a vital part in the unification of Germany. Examples of his determined, strong leadership, considerable political experience, great sense of opportunism and political cleverness demonstrate the importance of his role in German unification.

However, other factors such as the success of the Zollverein, the strength of the Prussian army and the railway network, the mistakes of Bismarck's opponents and the decline of Austria cannot be ignored. Overall, however, the evidence would serve to suggest that one cannot succeed without the other and that Bismarck, along with other important factors brought about German unification. This view supports the opinion of the British historian, Williamson, who believed that Bismarck was not solely responsible for uniting Germany: " Bismarck did not fashion German unity alone. He exploited powerful forces which already existed". Bismarck also later said: " Man cannot create the current of events. He can only float with it and steer."