

National Unification

It seems each century produces an event that completely transforms the diplomatic landscape. In the 19th century, the unifications of Italy and Germany altered the entire framework of European diplomacy. European political structures proved unable to incorporate successfully the emergence of these two new powers, leading to the most destructive wars in history in the 20th century. Italy and Germany had been divided for centuries. What allowed for their unifications in the middle of the 19th century? Once again, we must look to the failed outcomes of the revolutions of 1848.

The Unification of Italy

• SKILL SET

To ensure your understanding of the new politics of realism (*Realpolitik*), compare and contrast (COMP) the tactics used by Cavour and Bismarck, respectively, to unify Italy and Germany.

Background and Romantic Nationalism

The Italian peninsula was divided since the time of the Roman Empire. Though Italy pioneered the Renaissance, its diverse city-states lost their independence as a result of foreign invasion. Since the 16th century, foreign powers dominated politics in Italy. The nationalism of the French Revolution and the policies of Napoleon revived dreams of a united Italy. The Congress of Vienna's restoration of traditional rule frustrated these aspirations. Despite failure to expel foreign rule in the revolutionary period 1815-1848, Italian nationalists could now look to leadership from Piedmont-Sardinia and exploit the increasingly tenuous position of Austria, the foreign power blocking unification.

Many Italian nationalists preferred the creation of a united republic, which would require a takeover of the Papal States. Following the Congress of Vienna, the resurgence of Italian nationalism was fueled by two republican advocates: Giuseppe Mazzini (see Chapter 11) and Giuseppe Garibaldi, the charismatic leader of the Red Shirts. Both represented the spirit of romantic nationalism. Much of the practical work for Italian unity, however, was accomplished by a bookish and wily moderate, Camillo Benso di Cavour (1810-1861).

The Role of Piedmont-Sardinia and Cavour

Because of Piedmont-Sardinia's anti-Austrian role in the revolutions of 1848, many Italian nationalists looked to it for leadership. In 1848-1849, the

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king granted a constitution and attempted to unite the other Italian states in a war of liberation against Austria. Owing to his failure, the king abdicated in 1849, turning power to his son Victor Emmanuel II (r. 1849-1878). In 1852, the new king appointed Cavour as prime minister. Cavour supported Liberal ideas and had urged the unification of Italy in his newspaper, *Il Risorgimento*. Cavour understood practical affairs, having made a fortune in agriculture and business. As prime minister, Cavour looked to modernize the Piedmontese state—updating the tax and budget system, building railroads, pursuing free trade, limiting the power of the Catholic Church, and building a small but strong army. Though Cavour was willing to use Romantic ideals to his advantage, he favored a realistic (*Realpolitik*) approach to Italian unity. And this required a foreign ally.

With the Treaty of Plombières (1858), Cavour persuaded Napoleon III of France to join Piedmont-Sardinia in a joint attack on Austria. By the treaty, Piedmont would gain the Italian states of Lombardy and Venetia, while Napoleon would reconfirm French leadership of nationalism and exercise influence in Italy. In the ensuing war, Piedmont and France defeated the Austrian army, setting off revolutions in the northern Italian states. Fearing that the situation was spinning out of control, Napoleon III signed a separate agreement with Austria, leaving Cavour high and dry. However, the northern Italian states in 1860 voted via plebiscites (elections related to issues not candidates) to join the Piedmontese state, which Napoleon acknowledged in exchange for Nice and Savoy from Piedmont.

Cavour now urged Garibaldi to take advantage of the revolutionary situation brewing in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the backward Bourbon monarchy controlling the southern half of the peninsula. With just over a thousand of his Red Shirts, Garibaldi rallied the countryside to his cause and moved up the peninsula. Once again, concerns over the position of the papacy complicated matters. Cavour did not wish to involve French troops guarding Rome in the situation, so he and Victor Emmanuel met Garibaldi south of Rome and asked him to relinquish his conquest to Piedmont-Sardinia. Though a republican, Garibaldi consented, and plebiscites confirmed the unification of the northern and southern halves of the peninsula. In March 1861, the new Italian kingdom was proclaimed, with Victor Emmanuel as its first monarch. Two months later, Cavour died, one might say from complications of nation-birth. Thus, it has been said that the

new Italian kingdom represented the “passion of Mazzini, the audacity of Garibaldi, and the cunning of Cavour.

Italy completed its unification by gaining Venetia in 1866 and Rome (excluding the Vatican) in 1870 when Prussia, with whom Italy was allied, defeated Austria and then France in war. Though united, Italy experienced significant problems—opposition by the papacy to the new Italian state, economic underdevelopment, a corrupt political system known as *trasformismo* (the bribing of political opponents), and the wide cultural and economic differences between northern and southern Italy. Because it came so late to national unity, Italy often compensated by aggressively seeking colonies and attempting to regain “unredeemed” Italian-speaking territories.

The Unification of Germany

Background: German Dualism

Like Italy, Germany’s limbs had lain severed in central Europe for centuries. Conflicts between the Holy Roman Emperor and papacy in the Middle Ages stymied either from unifying Germany. Due to its elective nature, the emperor never became a strong absolutist ruler like the kings of France. Religious conflict in the 16th and 17th centuries splintered German politics, formalized with the Westphalia settlement in 1648. In the 19th century, the dualism of two German powers

Austria and Prussia—effectively checked either from consolidating the smaller German states into one nation unified around German language and ethnicity. When Liberals failed in 1848 at Frankfurt to unify Germany, it opened the door for a different path to the same objective. Prussia’s great military tradition had decayed since the time of Frederick the Great (d. 1786). The kingdom entered the French revolutionary wars late (1807) and then was defeated decisively by Napoleon. Moreover, Austria under Metternich dominated German politics after the Congress of Vienna, leaving Prussia to play second fiddle. When William I (r. 1861-1888) inherited the Prussian throne from his faltering brother, he set out to reestablish Prussia’s power.

With his first act, William introduced long-overdue reforms in the army. At the advice of his generals, William called for the expansion of the army, regular conscription (the draft), the creation of a General Staff (to devise war plans), and the introduction of modern rifled weapons, such as the breech-loading needle gun. According to the Prussian Constitution of 1850, representatives to the Reichstag (lower house of the parliament) were

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apportioned by a unique three-tiered voting system, designed to favor the wealthy Junker elite. However, as Germany industrialized, the power of the middle-class Liberal Party grew in Prussia. Liberals in the Reichstag resented the conservative influence of the army as well as the Junker class who dominated it and opposed the king's reforms. Neither king nor Reichstag would budge, plunging Prussia into a constitutional crisis.

The Work of Bismarck

To solve the crisis, William turned in 1862 to Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), appointing him Chancellor. Bismarck hailed from the Junker class, but surpassed that often provincial and mediocre group with his intelligence and ambitions. A romantic turned conservative, Bismarck gained wide diplomatic experience representing Prussia to France, Russia, and the German Confederation. In his political approach, Bismarck played the consummate game of *Realpolitik*. Bismarck possessed no predetermined plan for the unification of Germany; rather, he took advantage of opportunities presented to him. To deal with the political crisis in Prussia, Bismarck turned the tables on the Liberals in the Reichstag, claiming that they held no constitutional power to block needed reforms. He appealed to Prussian patriotism, arguing that the other German states did not look to Prussia's liberalism—that was the mistake of 1848—but to its “iron and blood.” When the Reichstag continued to refuse taxes to implement the army reforms, Bismarck simply instructed the bureaucracy to collect the taxes anyway.

• THEME MUSIC

Certainly the unification of Germany represents one of the turning points of the course (PER), and it may be useful for you to identify its effects. As the Prime Minister of Britain noted at the time: “There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope....The balance of power has been entirely destroyed.” Consider how subsequent political and diplomatic events were shaped by the creation of this new restless empire (SP).

To unify Germany, Bismarck waged three separate wars. His opponent in each war found itself diplomatically isolated and maneuvered into appearing as the aggressor. When the Poles revolted against Russian authority in 1863, almost every great power expressed support for their national aspirations, but without tangible assistance. Bismarck calculated that he needed the future friendship of great power Russia, so he supported their crushing of the Polish revolt. In 1864, Denmark formally incorporated the mainly German-speaking provinces of Schleswig and Holstein (which it had occupied since 1848) into the Danish kingdom, violating an international treaty. Nationalism flared in

Germany. Rather than working through the German Confederation as Austria preferred, Bismarck suggested a joint approach by the two leading powers. Austria relented, and the two powers easily defeated their enemy in the Danish War, occupying the two provinces of Schleswig and Holstein.

The joint occupation of the two provinces offered ample opportunity for conflict between the two German powers. The dispute festered, as Bismarck intended, and eventually Austria turned to the German Confederation for relief. Citing a violation of the occupation agreement, Prussia went to war against Austria. Before entering the conflict, Bismarck ensured Austria's isolation—Russia was favorable after Bismarck's support for the Polish revolt; Napoleon was bought off with vague promises of French expansion; Italy hoped to gain Venetia from Austria; and Britain maintained its splendid isolation. In the ensuing Austro-Prussian War (or Seven Weeks' War) of 1866, Prussia's superior railroads, staff organization, and needle gun overwhelmed the Austrians. Despite the designs of William, Bismarck treated Austria leniently; they lost only Venetia and, more importantly, were forced to bow out of German affairs. Prussia annexed the states of north Germany, and in 1867 Bismarck created the North German Confederation, insisting that its Reichstag be elected by universal male suffrage. What's more, the Reichstag hailed Bismarck's achievement by retroactively approving the illegally collected taxes with the Indemnity Bill of 1866.

The mostly Catholic German states stood outside this union. Anticipating future conflict with France, Bismarck convinced these states to join in an alliance with the North German Confederation should war break out with France. When the Spanish throne became vacant in 1870, Bismarck had his pretext. The Spanish nobles offered the throne to a Hohenzollern relative of William's, an offer that Bismarck pressed the candidate to accept. Not wishing to be surrounded by Hohenzollerns, the French vehemently objected. William relented and encouraged his cousin to drop the offer. Now Napoleon ill of France overplayed his hand and demanded an apology from William via the French ambassador. Bismarck edited an account of the meeting, known as the Ems Dispatch, to make it seem as if the king had insulted the French ambassador. Napoleon took the bait and declared war. Once again, Bismarck's opponent was isolated; the French were easily defeated in the Franco-Prussian War and embarrassingly, Napoleon himself was captured at Sedan. The resulting treaty imposed a 5-billion franc indemnity on the French, and, more importantly, they lost Alsace-Lorraine, which became a

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source of enmity between the two nations throughout the 20th century. In January 1871, Bismarck's work was complete with the proclamation of the German Empire with William I as Kaiser (emperor).

Though Bismarck helped engineer a federal constitution that respected the traditions of the other German states and allowed elements of democracy, power was still exercised in an authoritarian fashion. Government ministers reported to the Kaiser, not the Reichstag, and Bismarck effectively concentrated key positions in his own hands (Chancellor; Prussian Minister of State), which allowed him to exploit democratic mechanisms to ensure his domination of policy. This new German empire immediately upset the balance of power in Europe. Its economic and military potential threatened to dwarf its neighbors. Even though Bismarck worked to maintain peace in Europe after 1871, some historians believe that he laid the foundation for the militarism and state glorification that gave rise to the Nazis in the 20th century.