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Unification of Germany & its emergence as a great power (1864-1918)

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Abstract

This work focuses on the first unification of Germany under Otto von Bismarck, i.e. the German wars of unification (1864-71), and its subsequent rise as a great power militarily, economically and culturally in the world politics from 1871 to 1918.

The unification of many German states into the German Empire (1871-1918) followed Prussia's victories in the wars against Denmark in the year 1864, Austria in the year 1866, and France in 1870-71. Prussia's aggressive foreign and domestic policies were formulated by Bismarck, who became the first chancellor of united Germany and remained in power till 1890. And by 1900 Germany also emerged as the largest economy of Europe.

Therefore, this work addresses the factors behind Germany's rise to power and thus it seeks to bring out the military, economic and cultural aspects of German Empire with which it rose to great power from 1864 to 1918.

Keywords: Unification, Germany, Bismarck, subsequent, Empire

1. Introduction

The first unification of Germany refers to the political and administrative integration of Germany into a strong nation state which officially occurred on 18 January 1871. Otto von Bismarck was the architect of a unified Germany. He was the first chancellor of united Germany and caused Germany to transform from a loose net of 39 states into the strongest industrial nation of Europe. The unification of Germany had a great impact on the balance of power politics in Europe for the rest of history. For nearly 30 years (till 1890) Bismarck dominated Germany and European politics.

Prussia was a German kingdom from 1701 to 1918. It covered almost two-thirds of the German Empire's territory and constituted three-fifths of its population from 1871 to 1918. The unification of many German states into the German Empire (1871-1918) followed Prussia's victories over Denmark in the year 1864, Austria in the year 1866, and France in 1870-71. Prussia's aggressive foreign and domestic policies were formulated by Bismarck and by 1900 Germany also became the largest economy of Europe.

In essence, the Congress of Vienna (1815) caused Prussia to desire expansion into Germany. There was a great difference between the desire of the expansion of Prussia and the desire for the unification of the German people. Unification was also a cultural phenomenon but the expansion of Prussia to include the whole Germany was a militaristic one.

Before 1871, Germany was fragmented into a large number of small states and did not pose a challenge to Europe. It, rather, served as a buffer between France on one side and Russia and Austria on the other. Germany comprised 39 loose German speaking independent states. There existed the German Confederation which was formed by the Congress of Vienna. It was really a collection of small states ruled by minor dukes, princes and kings. By the mid 19th century, revolutions in nearly every German State had already occurred. Rebels forced rulers to accept Constitutions and allow elections to the German National Assembly in Frankfurt. In May 1848, delegates from all of the German states met at the Frankfurt Assembly with the purpose of preparing for the formation of a united and constitutional German nation-state. The Frankfurt constitution recognized Germany as a federal union which was to be headed by a monarch with a title. After the failure of the Frankfurt Assembly, there occurred a disagreement between moderate and radical liberals.

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The German Confederation was renewed in 1851. After the death of Fredric Wilhelm IV in 1861, King Wilhelm I of Prussia came to the throne. In 1862, Otto von Bismarck was appointed Prime minister of Prussia. Bismarck was a ruthless politician and a believer in “Realpolitik” who pursued aggressive policies and unified all these 39 German states into one nation state known as “German Empire or Deutsches Reich”.

Bismarck’s ultimate goal was to unite the German states into a strong German Empire or Deutsches Reich with Prussia as its core. On 30 September 1862, Bismarck made his famous blood and iron speech in which he stressed that if Germany had to unify it would be done only with the use of military force. After his speech, he dismissed the budget proposal and ordered the bureaucracy to collect more taxes. This money was used to expand and strengthen the Prussian armies on a very large scale. These armies were then used in the three wars which are popularly known as the “German wars of unification”.

The German wars of unification:

1. **Prussian-Danish War (1864-1865):** Schleswig and Holstein were primarily populated by Germans and had been under the rule of the Danish King for centuries. In 1863, Denmark formed a new constitution aiming to incorporate Schleswig and Holstein into Denmark. By that time, nationalist sentiment had already erupted all over Germany and Bismarck saw a great opportunity for intervention in Schleswig and Holstein. Liberals in Germany had always been in favour of separating Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark. Prussia together with Austria sent an ultimatum to Denmark on 16 January 1864 demanding a withdrawal of the constitution which had included Schleswig into Denmark within 48 hours or face military action but Denmark refused. Denmark was defeated by Prussian and Austrian forces. In the backdrop of their victory, the treaty of Gastein was signed to take control of the annexed territories. The treaty stated Prussia controlled Schleswig and Austria controlled Holstein.
2. **Austro-Prussian war (1866)** ^[9]: In 1866 the conflict between Prussia and Austria erupted over the control of Schleswig and Holstein, the German speaking territories that was occupied by the two powers after the war in 1864 against Denmark. Bismarck who enforced the conflict already knew that Russia, France and Italy would stand aside. The conflict led to the war between Austria and Prussia in 1866. In the war, South German states and some Central German states stood with Austria, while Italy, most North German states and some smaller German states stood with Prussia. Since, the Austrian army was believed to be the strongest army in Europe. But its maximum strength of 850,000 soldiers couldn’t be mobilized in the intervening weeks of its war with Prussia. At the beginning of the war, Austria had 320,000 men at its disposal while Prussia had 350,000 men. The Prussian general staff was also better organized than the Austrians. Prussia crushed Austria in the war and retained the control of Schleswig and Holstein. After Prussia’s victory, Bismarck set up peaceful treaties with Austria to remain as future allies. Prussia was joined by

Northern German states to form the North German Confederation. It was formed in 1867 and gave rise to a new powerful German state. Although the German states were allowed to govern themselves, but they were still under the influence of the German Emperor.

3. **Franco-Prussian war (1870-71):** Bismarck wanted to unite all German speaking states into one nation state. By 1870, all the German states which fought against Prussia in 1866 Austro-Prussia war were coerced and coaxed into mutually protective alliance, with Prussia. This new power, North German Confederation, destabilized the European balance of power established by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 after the Napoleonic Wars. France demanded compensation in the form of territorial gains both in Belgium and also on the left bank of the Rhine with the purpose of securing France’s strategic position. But Bismarck flatly refused these demands. Prussia then turned towards the south of Germany with coveted interests where it sought to incorporate the southern German kingdoms, viz. Bavaria, Wurttemberg, Baden and Hesse-Darmstadt, into a unified Germany. France was strongly opposed to the moves of Prussia to annex the southern German states. This led to a war between France and Prussia in 1870 in which France suffered defeat at the hands of the strong Prussian army assisted by almost all German states. The French territories, viz. Alsace-Lorraine, were annexed by Prussia by the end of the war. On 18 January 1871, the formal unification of Germany into a politically and administratively integrated nation state occurred officially at the Versailles Palace’s Hall of Mirrors in France. On 10 May 1871, during the Treaty of Frankfurt signed between France and Germany at the end of the Franco-Prussian war, Prussia retained the control of all the territories annexed from France. After the unification, Prussia emerged as a strong German Empire both militarily and economically.



German Empire 1871-1918

Prussia’s emergence as a Military Power (until 1918)

Since 1871, Germany emerged as the strongest military power in the continent until 1918. Geographically, Germany was situated between large military powers, viz. France, Russia and Austria, and before the unification of 1871, it served as a buffer between France on one side and Russia

and Austria on the other. In order to ensure security of Germany from other country's aggression, Bismarck created a secret alliance with Austria-Hungary and a triple treaty including Russia, Austria and Germany: known as the Alliance of three Emperors. Eventually it did get into the imperialistic race but under Bismarck's rule Germany maintained a solid foreign policy.

A brief history

The Kingdom of Prussia emerged as the dominant power in central Europe after the decline of the Holy Roman Empire. During the 13th and 14th centuries, Prussia had been colonized and Germanized by the Knights of the Teutonic Order which implied a military order of German monks that had pushed back the Slavs in the area. In 1410, the Poles and Lithuanians crushed the knights in the Battle of Tannenberg, but by 16th century the Hohenzollern Dynasty that had ruled Brandenburg and made Berlin its residence was able to gain control over West Prussia, Silesia, Pomerania, and much of the Rhineland and Westphalia.

The German military heritage contained a succession of Prussian rulers in the 17th and 18th centuries. The first of these rulers was the Great Elector, Frederick William (1640-88), who understood that a strong standing army with an elite officer corps was the key to the development of a powerful state. His grandson, Frederick William I (1713-40), had doubled the size of the professional army to 90,000 and also provided the provision for the conscription of the peasants. In this way, he formed one of the most modern and efficient fighting units in 18th century Europe. Heavy taxes were imposed to strengthen and support the army and almost 80 percent of state revenues went to army even in peacetime. The next Prussian king, Frederick II (1740-86), known as Frederick the Great, also raised the strength of the army from 90,000 to 150,000 and launched a series of wars between 1740 and 1763 and retained the control of the province of Silesia from Habsburg Austria. Prussia had emerged as one of the most powerful nation states and a great contender with the Habsburgs for the domination of the myriad German political entities.

In the 19th century, Prussian kings tried to gain the support of wealthy landed aristocrats (known as Junkers) by granting them the monopoly over the selection of officers. This made the empire assume an aristocratic character of the officer corps. The cadet school was established in Berlin in 1733 to train sons of Junkers to be officers. The officer corps had then become the most privileged social class in Prussia.

The chauvinistic militarism of Prussia developed fear and hatred among other European states. Under the strong leadership of a self-perpetuating general staff, the army exercised little interference in its affairs by the civil government. However, after the death of Frederick the Great in 1786, the failure to reform and the lack of preparedness led to the army's decisive defeat in the hands of Napoleon's forces at Jena in October 1806.

General Gerhard von Scharnhorst brought about the modernization of the army for the next few years. Reforms were introduced which included the beginning of universal military service and an end to the dependence on the mercenaries. The officer corps was expanded to incorporate commoners and the officers were encouraged to give greater contribution in the battle. The new Prussian army emerged victorious at the Battle of Leipzig in 1813 and again at

Waterloo in 1815. The army, under the command of Field Marshal Gebhard von Blücher, was instrumental in the ultimate defeat of Napoleon.

With the Prussian army's final victory over Napoleon, its reputation as a strong military force was again restored. The Prussian War College, *Kriegsakademie*, became very popular among the military staff colleges around the world in the early 19th century. The book "On War" of that era which was written by Karl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general, became very popular and its theories of land warfare were still studied by many army officers for even more than 160 years after the author's death.

The three wars that were fought between 1864 and 1870 by Prussia under Bismarck led to the unification of Germany into a very powerful nation-state. From 1871 to 1918 Germany emerged as a great military power in Europe till it was capitulated by the end of the First World War in 1918.

Prussia's emergence as an Economic Power (by 1900)

Before 1800, Germany was heavily rural and there were a few urban trade centers. In the 19th century, special emphasis was laid on heavy industries which resulted in a stage of rapid economic growth and modernization. By 1900, Germany emerged as the largest economy in Europe which was also a factor that played a major role in its entry into the World War I.

The economic development occurred during the years between 1815 and 1850. A Customs Union or *Zollverein* was established in 1818 with the objective of removing the oppressive tariff barriers which had divided the German provinces. By 1834, the whole of Germany except Austria and some smaller states had joined the customs union.

The Customs Union along with rapid industrialization based on Germany's natural resources of coal and iron gave a strong boost to the Prussian economy laying the foundations for the German unification. Furthermore, the Prussian domination over the Customs Union laid the foundation for the political hegemony of Prussia. It had also weakened Austria's hold on Germany to a greater extent.

By 1852, there were abundant economic resources in most of the German states. There also good industrial development in these states and thus their financial positions were strong. With the help of extensive railways, Germany became capable of using its mineral resources and proceeded with rapid industrialization. The Prussian advanced industrial strength based on coal and iron reserves in West Prussia (especially the Saar Basin) had made Prussia capable of developing its railway system and manufacturing superior instruments of war as well.

It was the Customs union that had given Germany an economic unity which became the foundation for a political unity. There were strong demands for more free trade and a unified system of both coinage and legal system were supported by the powerful Prussian economic structure making Prussian nationalism a potent force by the 1860s.

The powerful Prussian economy had helped achieve the goal of German unification otherwise, the achievement could never have been so rapid. However, it is also true that the eventual unification was brought about by a combination of diplomacy and warfare. According to a British economist, Keynes, German unification was not built on Bismarck's dictum of "blood and iron" but rather on Prussia's coal and iron.

In 1840, Frederick William IV came to the throne of Prussia. This encouraged the liberal minded people to press for liberal reforms. But they had failed to realize that the king was not in a condition to initiate a constitutional monarchy despite his willingness to make some liberal reforms. He sought rather the recreation of the German or Holy Roman Empire but one centered on Berlin rather than Vienna.

Since 1871, there was a huge growth in heavy industry and in new industries such as chemicals and optics as well. This growth made Germany become the greatest industrial power in Europe. By 1900 Germany had outstripped Britain as an industrial power and was at second position only after the US. Prussia's military victory in the Franco-Prussian war is also attributed to its growing economic strength which still continued to grow after 1870. As for example, by 1913, Germany was producing 219 million tons of coal. By this time German output of coal exceeded that of France and Belgium taken together. It had also risen to become the second iron producing country in the world.

The introduction of electricity after Siemen's invention of dynamo was followed by the second industrial revolution. The German chemical industry also witnessed a tremendous growth. The growth of Germany's population also surpassed that of France and emigration from Germany went down to zero. Germany was a heavily militarized state. France and Britain lagged much behind Germany in terms of military capability and conscription. Krupp's armaments factory of Essen had developed the breech-loading steel canon. There was the development of the German railway and effective military planning to use the railway in the event of war.

However, there arose the social tension within Germany emanating from the political domination by the Junkers, the Prussian land-owning aristocracy. Wehler, a historian, claims that German foreign policy was a deliberate attempt to divert attention away from domestic issues in order to retain the power of this class. In foreign policy, Germany had options either to team up with Austria-Hungary or Russia or Britain.

Cultural dominance of German Empire

In 1871, the German Empire was founded with Prussia being the leading and dominant state. Prussia started the "Kulturkampf" (meaning: cultural campaign) which marked a period when the Prussian government attempted to Germanize the Poles through language, schooling, and religious restrictions. The increase in the population of Poles prompted the government to launch a direct anti-Polish demographic policy. The Polish population in the province of Posen constituted nearly 60% of the total population (1,049,000 Poles and 702,000 Germans in 1890). In West Prussia, they constituted one third of the population (484,000 Poles and 949,000 Germans in 1890).

By 1885, Prussia was still facing the difficulties in absorbing its Polish provinces and the "Polish Question" was one of the empire's most serious problems. The German nationalism was on rise and Bismarck viewed Poles as one of the chief threats to German power. Therefore, he declared the Polish question as a question of life and death and wanted Polish nation to disappear and aimed to exterminate Poles. As a result, the Polish population faced economic, religious and political discrimination due to the Germanisation of their territories. A virtual apartheid existed in many places where Poles and Germans lived together. In

the late 19th century, an east-to west migration (Ostflucht) took place, in which greater parts of the population of the eastern provinces migrated to western provinces which were more prosperous territories. The German government was very much concerned, that the westward migration would lower the percentage of Germans in the eastern regions.

During the partitions of Poland, the Kingdom of Prussia had acquired West Prussia and later the Province of Posen. Polish language was abolished as official language and German was introduced. It was decided by Frederick the Great to replace the Poles with Germans. Most of the administration was transformed into German. Poles were portrayed as "backward Slavs" by Prussian officials who spread German language and culture. The lands of Polish nobility were confiscated and given to German nobles.

However, after 1807, the Prussian hold on Polish areas was getting weakened and the parts of its partition were restored to Duchy of Warsaw. The Prussian supremacy and dominance was dependent on acquiring Polish regions and thus Prussia started hindering any form of Polish claim of statehood and it also thwarted all Polish attempts for the restoration of Poland during the Congress of Vienna. Here too, Prussia tried to gain Duchy of Warsaw or at least its western provinces. In 1815, the Prussian king had promised to the Poles through his speech in the newly formed Grand Duchy of Posen (created out of territories of Duchy of Warsaw) of restoring the rights of Polish language and cultural institutions. However, in practice the right to use Polish in courts and institutions was respected only till 1830. Although the Poles constituted a majority of the population in the area but they held only 4 out of 21 official posts of higher level. Despite the germanisation and German colonization actions being carried out during the period 1793-1806 there were still hardly 11.1 per cent of Germans in Posen in 1815. After 1830, Poles had lost all official posts of higher level and as in the year 1832, they were no longer in the possession of higher posts at local administrative level (Landrat). This was because of the fact that, the Prussian government and Prussian King pursued germanisation of administration and judicial system. The local officials too enforced germanisation of educational system and tried to undermine the economic position of Polish nobility.

Despite calls by the provincial Parliament to ensure the right of use of Polish language as well as for the creation of Polish educational institutions and autonomy, the Prussian state never bothered to implement those decisions and rejected all Parliament calls. In 1847, about 257 Polish activists were imprisoned on the charges of conspiracy out of which 8 of them were sentenced to death. The Frankfurt Parliament and German delegates refused to accept the rights of non-German people which culminated in the Prussian government's highhandedness against the Polish activists in which it militarily suppressed the movement of Polish activists and peasants demanding freedom. The dominant and victorious Prussian government then backtracked from its earlier declarations of autonomy in Wielkopolska region.

The "Prussian Settlement Commission" was set up in 1886 and it operated actively only until 1918. It was a Prussian government commission set up by Otto von Bismarck to increase Germans' land ownership by grabbing land belonging to Poles either by economic or political means in the German Empire's eastern provinces of West Prussia and the Posen. The commission was meant to eradicate the

Polish nation. The Commission was guided by anti-Polish sentiments and racism.

The Commission was a political apparatus of Prussia meant for the official Germanisation of the historically Polish lands of West Prussia (the former Royal Prussia) and the dissolved Grand Duchy of Posen. The Commission had purchased 613 estates from German owners and 214 from Poles for the purpose of bailing out German debtors. A total of 21,886 German families (154,704 persons) out of a planned 40,000 had been settled by 1918. The Commission's measures ultimately had a counter effect in Poles as it led to the rise of "defensive nationalism" unifying "Polish nationalism, Catholicism and cultural resistance" and triggered Polish countermeasures which climaxed after World War I when the Second Polish Republic was established. Polish countermeasures resulted in the reversing of Germanisation and expropriation of Commission-owned lands.

Conclusion

The unification of Germany which became possible after the three wars of unification fought between 1864 and 1870 had ultimately given rise to a powerful German Empire with its core as Prussia. From 1871 to 1918 Germany emerged as a great military and economic power in Europe till it was capitulated by the end of the World War I in 1918. The formation of Customs union (or Zollverein) and rapid industrialization in Prussia boosted its economy greatly and paved the way for economic development and further modernization and strengthening of Prussian army.

Germany's cultural dominance was also evident from its Germanisation plan which eliminated all non-German languages, cultures and ethnic groups and promoted German cultures in the German Empire. Prussian Settlement Commission (1886-1918) was one such policy of Prussia that aimed at promoting Germanisation and eliminating all non-German elements from German Empire. Poles were the worst victims of Prussia's Kulturkampf (cultural campaign). As a result of the Germanisation plan, the Poles not only lost their lands and homes but also the official posts in administrative services.

Germany under Bismarck performed tremendously well and by the end of 19th century, it emerged as a great power militarily, economically and culturally. Germany's emergence as a great power changed the equation of the balance of power in Europe. It was also a factor behind the outbreak of World War I.

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