German Unification: The Age of Bismarck

"By blood and iron."

**OTTO VON BISMARCK** used this phrase to describe the method by which a unified German state would be created. The **FRANKFURT ASSEMBLY OF 1848**, which attempted to unify Germany through constitutional means, had been crushed. Bismarck knew that the chances of peaceful revolution were nonexistent: Germany could be created only through war.

Two great powers lay claim to German leadership: Austria and Prussia. Both peoples spoke the German language and followed many traditional German folk customs. The two rivals struggled with each other to lead the smaller German states.

In 1851, Bismarck began to represent Prussia in the diet of the **GERMAN CONFEDERATION**, an organization dominated by Austria. Bismarck served as ambassador to Russia and France in the late 1850s, and in September 1862, he was named Prussia's chief minister. He was less concerned with German nationalism than he was with expanding the power of Prussia.

The path to such power lay in eliminating Austria's influence over German affairs. Prussia had already created the **ZOLLVEREIN**, a customs union of German states that did not include Austria.

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**More about the Zollverein**

The Zollverein was a free-trade zone among the smaller German states in which tariff barriers were reduced to promote trade. As a result, these states moved close to economic unification prior to any political movement. Because Austria was excluded from the zone, Prussia benefited from its inside advantage.

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**Realpolitik**

Bismarck was the architect of a policy that came to be known as **REALPOLITIK**, which means "practical politics." He was determined to strengthen Prussia by any means necessary. Alliances were merely convenient and could be dissolved to exploit an opportunity. Bismarck supported democracy to gain internal support, but had no true interest in liberal reform. He watched international events closely, waiting for the proper moments to advance his agenda.

The Danish king’s attempts to annex the **DUCHIES OF SCHLESWIG AND HOLSTEIN** provided an opportunity for Bismarck to act. He enticed Austria to declare war on Denmark to acquire these two territories. Following a brief war, Prussia assumed control of Schleswig while Austria occupied Holstein. Denmark was too weak militarily to stop either larger power. Bismarck never intended to make the joint occupation permanent. He immediately made plans to stab the Austrians in the back.

**Otto-Suggestion**
Bismarck then crafted an alliance with Napoleon III of France, receiving assurances that the French emperor would remain neutral in the event of military conflict between Austria and Prussia. Bismarck promised Venetia to the Italians in exchange for their support of Prussia.

Tensions mounted, and in June 1866 Austria declared war on Prussia. Austria was no match for Prussian armed forces, which used the telegraph and rail links in its mobilization. Prussia crushed Austria in only seven weeks of fighting. The Treaty of Prague of August 1866 officially ended the Seven Weeks' War, resulting in Prussia's control of both Schleswig and Holstein.

Bismarck then annexed the recalcitrant pro-Austrian German states to form a new North German Confederation, marking the end of Austrian influence in Germany.

Only several small German kingdoms in the south, such as Bavaria, remained independent of Prussian control. These territories might have fallen into the Prussian, Austrian, or French spheres of influence. Although aligned with the new North German Confederation in the face of French imperialism, south German states feared further "Prussianization" of Germany. Bismarck soon conspired to annex those lands.

The Iron Chancellor

Bismarck first used the pen rather than the sword. He seized the opportunity to provoke France when Queen Isabella of Spain abdicated her throne in 1868. Fearing an encirclement by Prussian leaders, France opposed the choice of a Prussian Hohenzollern prince to replace Isabella. Napoleon III demanded in July 1870 that King Wilhelm of Prussia also oppose it. Wilhelm was reluctant to start trouble with France, so he crafted a polite, diplomatic response, which one of his officials conveyed to Bismarck.

Bismarck, in the famous EMS Telegram, carefully edited the king's words to create the impression that the French ambassador and King Wilhelm had traded diplomatic insults. France thus declared war on Prussia on July 19, 1870.

Fearing a French attack, the south German states joined the North German Confederation, satisfying Bismarck's dreams. Although the Franco-Prussian War officially ended in May 1871, France was soundly defeated by Prussian forces within two months. In January 1871, in the Palace of Versailles, Wilhelm I was crowned kaiser of the new German Empire, which now contained 39 million Germans. The peace settlement humiliated France, laying ground for future conflict. Germany received an indemnity payment of five billion francs and the territories of Alsace and Lorraine.
Germany was now satiated and ready for peace, Bismarck said after the war. But the balance of power in Europe was completely changed. In five short years, Bismarck's Germany had become the most powerful country in continental Europe, soon rivaling Britain in industrial output and military power.

**The Two Versions of the Ems Telegram**

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<tr>
<th>Wilhelm's Version</th>
<th>Bismarck's Version</th>
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| His Majesty the King has written to me (namely, Heinrich Abeken, of the Foreign office)  
"Count Benedetti intercepted me on the promenade and ended by demanding of me in a very importunate manner that I should authorize him to telegraph at once that I bound myself in perpetuity never again to give my consent if the Hohenzollerns renewed their candidature. I rejected this demand somewhat sternly as it is neither right nor possible to undertake engagements of this kind [for ever and ever]. Naturally I told him that I had not yet received any news and since he had been better informed via Paris and Madrid than I was, he must surely see that my government was not concerned in the matter."  
[The King, on the advice of one of his ministers]  
"decided in view of the above-mentioned demands not to receive Count Benedetti any more, but to have him informed by an adjutant that His Majesty had now received from [Leopold] confirmation of the news which Benedetti had already had from Paris and had nothing further to say to the ambassador. His Majesty suggests to Your Excellency that Benedetti’s new demand and its rejection might well be communicated both to our ambassadors and to the Press."  
Kaiser Wilhelm, "The Ems Telegram" (July 13, 1870) | After the news of the renunciation of the Prince von Hohenzollern had been communicated to the Imperial French government by the Royal Spanish government, the French Ambassador in Ems made a further demand on His Majesty the King that he should authorize him to telegraph to Paris that His Majesty the King undertook for all time never again to give his assent should the Hohenzollerns once more take up their candidature. His Majesty the King thereupon refused to receive the Ambassador again and had the latter informed by the adjutant of the day that His Majesty had no further communication to make to the Ambassador.  
Otto von Bismarck, "The Ems Telegram" (July 13, 1870) |
GERMAN UNIFICATION: THE AGE OF BISMARCK

Directions: Read the German Unification text and answer the following questions. You may also use the textbook.

1. Who was Otto von Bismarck?

2. Which two great European powers could lead a unified German state?

3. What did Bismarck mean when he said “by blood and iron”?

4. What is “Realpolitik”?

5. What is “Zollverein”?

6. What is the Ems Telegram?

7. Regarding the Ems telegram, why would Bismarck have wanted to provoke a war with France? Discuss this topic in conjunction with propaganda.

8. What was the result of the telegram?

9. Did the war have the consequence that Bismarck intended?

10. How did Bismarck manipulate public opinion to create a German state?