

German unification

Checkpoint 1

What measures did Metternich take in the period 1815–1848 to suppress liberal nationalist activity?

Metternich, chief minister of Austria, a multi-racial empire, had a deep distrust of liberalism and nationalism. He used the German Confederation (set up in 1815) to clamp down on any attempt to create a united Germany. Prussia, the second-largest German state, was content to adhere to Austrian policy. The emergence of Prussia after 1848 as the dominant German state eventually led to the unification of all the German states (with the exception of Austria) under the Prussian King Wilhelm I in 1871.

Prussia and Austria

Links

Check out the '1848 Revolutions' site (see p.85) for related articles.

The emergence of Prussia as a leading economic and later military power is closely connected to the creation of the **Zollverein** (Prussian customs union). By 1836, 25 of the 39 German states were members of this free trade area. This was of great benefit to Prussia economically. By the middle of the 19th century Prussia was a major industrial power. Other reasons for this included:

- Rapidly increasing population.
- Good railway network.
- Efficient civil service.

The growth in Prussian strength came at the same time as a weakening of Austria. Crucially, Austria was never a member of the Zollverein, which undoubtedly held back economic growth. In addition, there remained many unresolved problems in Austria's large multi-ethnic empire. The Austrians were increasingly isolated diplomatically in Europe, especially after failing to support Russia in the Crimean War.

The creation of the Zollverein encouraged supporters of German nationalism, who now hoped to see economic union lead on to full political unification. Significantly however, the nationalists were divided along political lines as well as on whether a united Germany would include Austria or not (**Kleindeutschland** or **Grossdeutschland**). This was clearly demonstrated in the failure of the 1848–1849 revolutions in Germany.

Bismarck

Key points:

- Came from an aristocratic (Junkers) background.
- Very hostile to liberalism.
- Very hostile to Austria in the wake of the collapse of the **Erfurt union** (the Prussian union plan).
- Appointed chancellor of Prussia in 1862 by Wilhelm I in order to push through disputed army reforms.

Checkpoint 2

Summarize all the factors hindering unification up to 1848.

The jargon

Kleindeutschland means 'Little Germany'.
Grossdeutschland means 'Large Germany'.

The wars of unification

Bismarck was determined to make Prussia the dominant German state. He was able to take advantage of increasing Prussian strength, as well as using his diplomatic skills, in order to unify the German states under Prussia. There are three major incidents to consider:

- **War with Denmark 1864.** Bismarck induced Austria to sign an alliance with Prussia as the king of Denmark (Christian IX) had infringed an earlier agreement over the duchies of **Schleswig** and **Holstein** (part of the Danish kingdom but also members of the German Confederation). The Danes were quickly defeated. The duchies passed to Austria and Prussia, but there was no permanent agreement on their future.
- **War with Austria 1866.** Bismarck saw that a war with Austria was inevitable. In addition, he had negotiated a secret treaty with Italy. He then provoked war with his proposals to place the future of Germany in the hands of an elected parliament, thereby taking advantage of liberal nationalist sentiment. Austria perceived this as an attempt to exclude the Habsburg Empire from German affairs. In the **'Seven Weeks War'** the results of Prussia's economic and military reforms were clearly seen in Austria's catastrophic defeat. Partial unification was achieved with the creation of the **North German Confederation**.
- **War with France 1870–1871.** Bismarck had promised Napoleon III that France would not face a united Germany, which included the southern states. However, Bismarck did provoke war with France over the **Hohenzollern candidature**. The secret military alliances that Prussia had signed with the southern states were invoked following the French declaration of war. The French were quickly defeated and the German Empire, incorporating the southern states, was proclaimed in January 1871.

Summary

Germany was united in 1871 because of the interconnection of the following factors:

- Prussian economic and military strength.
- The desire of Prussia to assert its strength.
- The decline of Austrian power.
- German national feeling.
- A favourable international situation.
- The policy of Bismarck.

Exam questions

answers: page 103

- 1 Why did Austria lose its primacy in Germany between 1848 and 1866? (45 min)
- 2 How important was nationalism in German unification? (45 min)

Checkpoint 3

Did Bismarck intend to unify Germany?

Checkpoint 4

Why was Bismarck confident that Britain, France and Russia would remain neutral in the war with Austria?

Checkpoint 5

What was the background to Hohenzollern candidature? How did Bismarck use it to provoke war?

Test yourself

Write a paragraph on each of the factors listed.

Examiner's secrets

In Q1, discuss the role of Bismarck, including the importance of the Prussian army reforms.