

The Work of Bismarck in Unifying Germany

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Wealthy industrialists from the Rhineland dominated the Prussian parliament after 1850. They wanted the parliament to have control over government policies. These men did not like professional armies and considered the Prussian Junkers, or land-owning class, from which the officer corps was recruited, as rivals in the state. In 1862 Otto von Bismarck was appointed by the king as chief minister. He was a Junker who developed the gruff manner of an honest country squire, though he was in fact an accomplished man of the world. Intellectually he was far superior to the rather unsophisticated landlord class from which he came from. His pragmatic use of power and his successful campaign to create a unified German nation-state made him the most successful practitioner of *Realpolitik* in late nineteenth century Europe.

Bismarck's success can be attributed to several factors, the first of which was the political isolation of his opponents. In domestic politics he thwarted the liberals in the Prussian parliament. Bismarck waged a constitutional struggle for four years from 1862 to 1866. When parliament refused to vote for proposed taxes the government collected them anyway. The taxpayers paid them without protest because it was the orderly thing to do, and the collectors represented public authority. The army was enlarged, reorganized, retrained, and re-equipped while Bismarck fended off abuse from the liberal majority in parliament.

With regard to foreign policy, Bismarck perceived Austria, who had been Prussia's principal ally for over a generation, to be the main obstacle to Prussia's growth. In 1864 Prussia and Austria together went to war with Denmark, which they soon defeated. Bismarck arranged for the occupation of Schleswig by Prussia and for the occupation of Holstein by Austria. Disputes soon arose between the two and Bismarck allowed the disputes to continue. At the same time, he proceeded to discredit and isolate Austria. Bismarck lined up support from France, Russia and Italy. To weaken Austria within Germany, Bismarck presented himself as a democrat. Within five years of coming to power he eliminated the Austrian obstacle to German unity.

Another factor contributing to Bismarck's success was his ability to rally public support at home. He proposed a reform of the German confederation, recommending that it have a popular chamber elected by universal male suffrage. He sensed in the Prussian population an ally of strong government against private interests. He negotiated with the socialists and reached an understanding that in return for a democratic suffrage they agreed to support of the North German Confederation. By making use of democratic and socialist sentiment Bismarck won popular approval for his emerging empire.

The status of the south German states was not yet decided when a revolution in Spain had driven the reigning queen into exile and a Spanish provisional government invited Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern, the king of Prussia's cousin, to be constitutional king of Spain. This arrangement was distasteful to France. When the prince accepted the French demanded that he that his acceptance be withdrawn and that the King of Prussia agree that in no time in the future would any Hohenzollern ever become a candidate for the Spanish throne. The king politely declined any such commitment and telegraphed a report to Bismarck. Bismarck so condensed the telegram and had it published in the newspapers. It seemed to the public that their king had been insulted and it seemed to the French that their ambassador had been snubbed. On July 19, 1870, the French government declared war on Prussia. Bismarck had maneuvered his opponent to strike first and at the same time had taken care to isolate France in advance. The British generally felt France to be in the wrong and the Italians had

long been awaiting the chance to seize Rome back from the French. The Russians had been waiting for the chance to upset a clause of the Peace of 1856 that forbade them to keep naval vessels in the Black Sea.

The War of 1870 was a short war. Using military force for limited objectives the Prussian and German forces moved into France and laid siege to the capital. The principal French army surrendered at the battle of Sedan with Napoleon taken prisoner. Though the French armies dissolved, Paris refused to capitulate. For four months it was surrounded and besieged. On January 18, 1871, Bismarck arranged for the German Empire to be proclaimed and ten days later the people of Paris opened their gates. Offering a truce once the military objectives were attained, Bismarck insisted on the election of a Constituent Assembly by universal suffrage.

Bismarck's work represented a combination of diplomatic and military activities that transformed the face of Europe. The consolidation of Germany soon produced the strongest state in Europe. Bismarck skillfully isolated his political opponents while rallying support at home. He maneuvered his opponents to strike first, using the military for limited objectives and offered a truce once he obtained his objectives.

Bibliography

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