Module 6: Revolutions and Unity
Topic 4 Content: German Unification

German Unification

Otto von Bismarck and the Unification of Germany

Roots

The steps toward German unification started with the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The group that met there established the German Confederation of States, which was a loose grouping of 39 German kingdoms. Like Italy, the confederation was dominated by two powers, the larger empires of Austria and Prussia. Each of these empires had territory that was inside and outside of the confederation, and throughout the 1800s, they would compete for control of the German Confederation.

The Austrian Empire

The Austrian Empire

- The traditional leader of the German territories

- Ruled some territories with non -Germanic peoples

- Economy was not as powerful or industrialized as some other European countries

Many of the leaders at the Congress of Vienna viewed Austria as the traditional leader of the German territories; however, Austria also ruled some territories with non-Germanic peoples. Also, Austria's economy was not as powerful or industrialized as some of the other European countries.

The Prussian Empire

The Prussian Empire

- Powerful military
- Highly industrialized economy
- Population mainly German
- Strong economic ties to many of the states in the confederation

Prussia was a conservative state with a powerful military and a highly industrialized economy. Its population was mainly German and the country had strong economic ties to many of the states in the German confederation.

Otto von Bismarck

German Unification

Otto von Bismarck

- The "Iron Chancellor"

- Main goal was a strong, unified Germany led by Prussia

- Believed in *Realpolitik* - countries must make tough, calculated moves to achieve power and that morality and idealism are secondary

Image: Otto von Bismarck (German Federal Archive)

Under Prussian King William I, Prussia's prime minister was Otto von Bismarck, known as the "Iron Chancellor." In office for 28 years, his main goal was to create a strong, unified Germany led by Prussia. He believed that a country should have both a strong economy and military.

Bismarck was a firm believer in a political theory known as Realpolitik. Followers of this doctrine believe that a country must make tough, calculated moves to achieve power and should sacrifice morality and idealism, if necessary.

Bismarck's Unification Plan

Bismarck developed a three-phase plan to unite all of the German Confederation of States under one ruler. In 1864, Bismarck led Prussia into a war with Denmark to gain more land for the empire and to gain the respect and admiration of the German states. His success inspired a sense of nationalism and loyalty from the northern German states.

In 1866, he instituted phase two – reducing Austria's influence in the German Confederation. Bismarck provoked Austria into a war with Prussia and used his powerful army and efficient railroad system to dominate the conflict. The Austro-Prussian War took only seven weeks. After Prussia won, it dominated the north German States.

The final phase of Bismarck's plan was to unite the kingdoms in southern Germany. The southern German States were mainly Catholic and somewhat reluctant to join with Protestant Prussia. Bismarck thought they would join if they were faced by a foreign threat. He decided that provoking France into a war would be the best solution. In 1870, Bismarck published an inaccurate and misleading account of a meeting between a French ambassador and the Prussian King. He made it appear that the two had insulted each other. Both the French and Prussian people were upset at the news, and France decided to invade Prussia.

Unification

The war between France and Prussia was known as the Franco-Prussian war, and it went very poorly for France. Prussia totally dominated France and took its emperor, Napoleon III, as a prisoner. France was forced to pay Prussia a huge sum of money and to give up the valuable border territories of Alsace and Lorraine.

Most importantly, southern Germany was so caught up with nationalistic feelings and the drive for unification that it accepted Prussian leadership under William I. William was crowned Emperor of Germany in 1871 and given the title "Kaiser." The word "Kaiser" is derived from Caesar. Otto von Bismarck became Germany's first Prime Minister.

After unification, German industries continued to grow very quickly, and soon the German economy became one of the largest in the world. The growing power of a united Germany soon made it one of Europe's major powers, which eventually created the conditions for World War I.