

Bismarck and the Unification of Germany

A study of World War I

Today's Learning Goals

Identify Otto von Bismarck (What did he do? For which country?)

What occurred during the Franco-Prussian War? (Who won? Lost?
What did they gain/lose?)

Who was Otto von Bismarck?

Quick Summary:

Germany became a modern, unified nation under the leadership of the “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), who between 1862 and 1890 effectively ruled first Prussia and then all of Germany. A master strategist, Bismarck initiated decisive wars with Denmark, Austria and France to unite 39 independent German states under Prussian leadership. Although an arch-conservative, Bismarck introduced progressive reforms—including universal male suffrage and the establishment of the first welfare state—in order to achieve his goals. He manipulated European rivalries to make Germany a world power, but in doing so laid the groundwork for both World Wars.



Before becoming chancellor

Otto Eduard Leopold von Bismarck was born April 1, 1815, at his family's estate in the Prussian heartland west of Berlin. His father was a fifth-generation Junker (a Prussian landowning noble), and his mother came from a family of successful academics and government ministers. Throughout his life Bismarck would emphasize his rural Junker roots, underplaying his considerable intellect and cosmopolitan outlook.

Bismarck was educated in Berlin and after university took a series of minor diplomatic posts before retiring, at age 24, to run his family's estate at Kneiphof. In 1847 he married and was sent to Berlin as a delegate to the new Prussian parliament, where he emerged as a reactionary voice against the liberal, anti-autocratic Revolutions of 1848.

From 1851 to 1862 Bismarck served a series of ambassadorships—at the German Confederation in Frankfurt, in St. Petersburg and in Paris—that gave him valuable insight into the vulnerabilities of Europe's great powers.



As Chancellor of Germany

William I became Prussia's king in 1861 and a year later appointed Bismarck as his chief minister. Though technically deferring to William, in reality Bismarck was in charge, manipulating the king with his intellect and the occasional tantrum while using royal decrees to circumvent the power of elected officials.

In 1864 Bismarck began the series of wars that would establish Prussian power in Europe. He attacked Denmark to gain the German-speaking territories of Schleswig-Holstein and two years later provoked Emperor Franz-Josef I into starting the Austro-Prussian War (1866), which ended in a swift defeat for the aging Austrian empire. At the time, Bismarck wisely declined to levy a war indemnity against the Austrians.

Bismarck was less circumspect in his conduct of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). Seeing the opportunity to unify Germany's loose confederations against an outside enemy, Bismarck stirred political tensions between France and Prussia, famously editing a telegram from William I to make both countries feel insulted by the other. The French declared war, but the Prussians and their German allies won handily. Prussia levied an indemnity, annexed the French border provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and crowned William emperor of a unified Germany (the Second Reich) in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles—a tremendous insult to the French.

Within the new united Germany

With Germany unified, William I and Bismarck turned to entrenching their domestic power. For much of the 1870s Bismarck pursued a Kulturkampf (cultural struggle) against Catholics, who made up 36 percent of Germany's population, by placing parochial schools under state control and expelling the Jesuits. In 1878 Bismarck relented, allying with the Catholics against the growing socialist threat.

In the 1880s Bismarck set aside his conservative impulses to counter the socialists by creating Europe's first modern welfare state, establishing national healthcare (1883), accident insurance (1884) and old age pensions (1889). Bismarck also hosted the 1885 Berlin Conference that ended the "Scramble for Africa," dividing the continent between the European powers and establishing German colonies in Cameroon, Togoland and East and Southwest Africa.

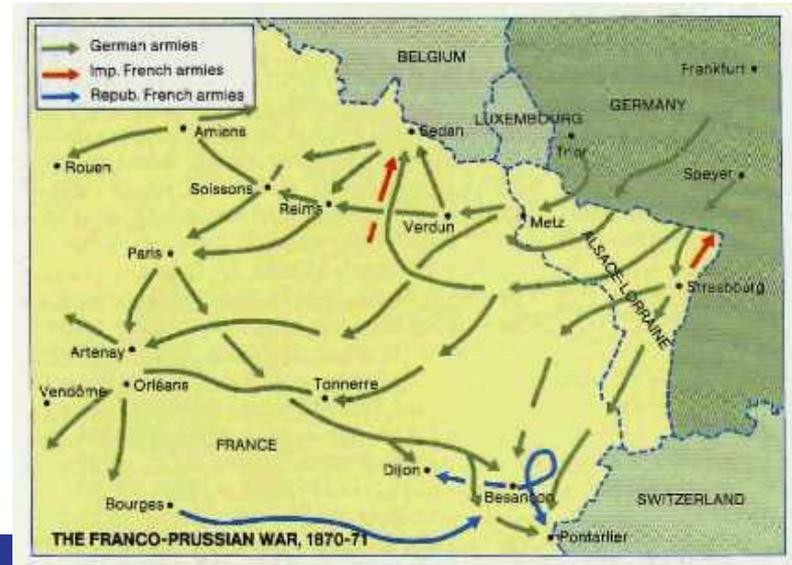


Final Years and Legacy

William I died in 1888 and was succeeded by his son Frederick III and then his grandson William II, both of whom Bismarck found difficult to control. In 1890 the new king forced Bismarck out. William II was left in control of a flourishing unified state but was ill-equipped to maintain Bismarck's carefully manipulated balance of international rivalries. Respected and honored by the time of his death eight years later, Bismarck quickly became a quasi-mythic figure invoked by political leaders calling for strong German leadership—or for war.

The Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871)

Also called the Franco-Prussian War, it was a war in which a group of German states led by Prussia defeated France. The war marked the end of French dominance in continental Europe and resulted in the creation of a unified Germany.



What happened?

Prussia's defeat of [Austria](#) in the [Seven Weeks' War](#) in 1866 had confirmed Prussian leadership of the German states and threatened France's position as the dominant power in Europe. The immediate cause of the Franco-German War, however, was the candidacy of Prince [Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen](#) (who was related to the [Prussian royal house](#)) for the [Spanish](#) throne, which had been left vacant when Queen [Isabella II](#) had been deposed in 1868. The Prussian chancellor, [Otto von Bismarck](#), and Spain's de facto leader, [Juan Prim](#), persuaded the reluctant Leopold to accept the Spanish throne in June 1870. This move greatly alarmed [France](#), who felt threatened by a possible combination of [Prussia](#) and [Spain](#) directed against it. Leopold's candidacy was withdrawn under French diplomatic pressure, but the [Prussian king William I was unwilling to bow to the French ambassador's demands](#) that he promise to never again allow Leopold to be a candidate for the Spanish throne. [Bismarck edited William's telegraphed description of this interview](#), and on July 14 he published this provocative message (the [Ems telegram](#)), which accomplished his purposes of infuriating the French government and provoking it into a declaration of war.



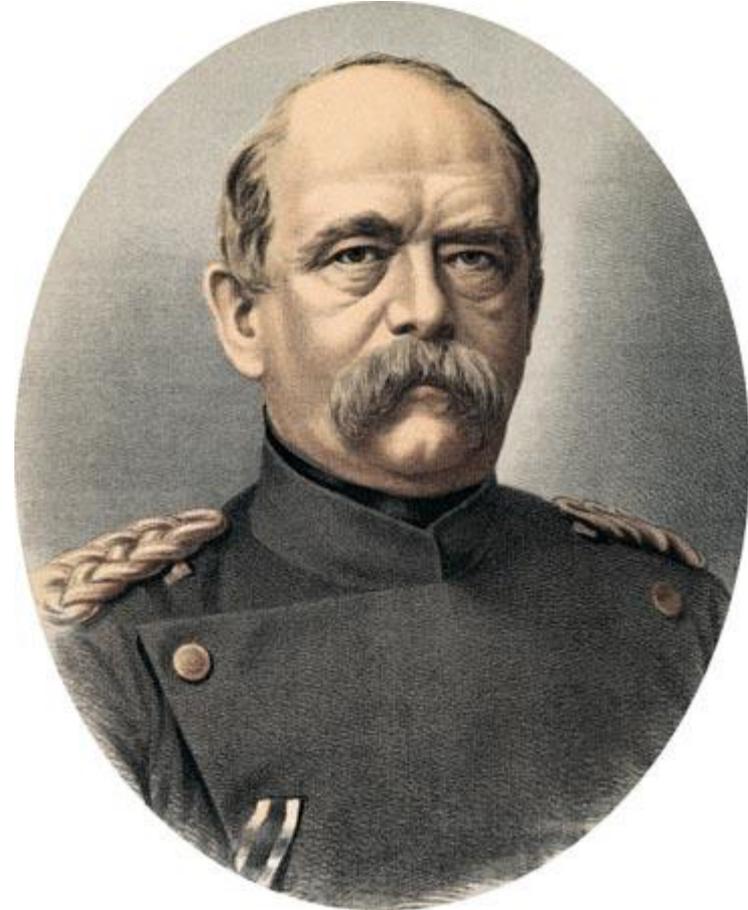
War declared

The French emperor, [Napoleon III](#), declared war on Prussia on July 19, 1870, because his military advisers told him that the French army could defeat Prussia and that such a victory would restore his declining popularity in France. The French were convinced that the reorganization of their army in 1866 had made it superior to the German armies. They also had great faith in two recently introduced technical innovations: the breech-loading *chassepot* rifle, with which the entire army was now equipped; and the newly invented *mitrailleuse*, an early [machine gun](#). The French generals, blinded by national pride, were confident of victory.



Bismarck's Plan

Bismarck, for his part, saw war with France as an opportunity to bring the South German states into unity with the Prussian-led North German Confederation and build a strong German Empire. The Germans had superiority of numbers, since, true to Bismarck's hopes, the South German states (Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden) regarded France as the aggressor in the conflict and had thus sided with Prussia. An equally important asset was the Prussian army's general staff, which planned the rapid, orderly movement of large numbers of troops to the battle zones. This superior organization and mobility enabled the chief of the general staff, General Helmuth von Moltke, to exploit German superiority in numbers in most of the war's battles.



Timeline of the Conflict

1870

July 2 the Spanish informed the French ambassador They accept Prince Leopold for the Spanish throne

July 12 Gramont demands Prussia must renounce the offer

July 13 Bismark sends out edited Ems dispatch

July 15 German crown Prince read the mobilization order

July 19 France Declares War / July 20 Austria declares neutrality

July 28 Napoleon III leaves Paris for Metz and assumed command of the newly titled Army of the Rhine

August 2 August 3, some 320,000 German soldiers were now massed near the French border

August 2 General Frossard's II Corps and Marshal Bazaine's III Corps crossed the German border

August 4 Battle of Wissembourg / August 5 Battle of Spicheren

German victory, French to withdraw to the defenses of Metz

August 6 Battle of Wörth French army broke off the battle and retreated in a western direction, first major battle

August 16 Battle of Mars-la-Tour / August 18 Battle of Gravelotte

September 1 Battle of Sedan

September 2 Napoleon III surrenders self and 104,000 soldiers of the Army of Châlons

September 3 – October 23 Siege of Metz

September 4 coup d'état against Napoleon III, Third Republic proclaimed

September 6 Jules Favre declares France would not *"yield an inch of its territory nor a stone of its fortresses"* The republic then renewed the declaration of war, called for recruits in all parts of the country, and pledges to drive the enemy troops out of France.

Sept 19 - Jan 1871 Siege of Paris

Oct 7 Léon Gambetta escapes Paris in a hot air balloon
five new French armies totaling more than 500,000 troops are recruited
Oct 23 End of the Siege of Metz

Nov 9 French victory at Coulmiers

Dec 4 French defeat at Le Mans

1871

Jan 6 bombardment of Paris begins

Jan 18 German Empire declared

Jan 19 Battle of Buzenval

Jan 24 Jules Favre goes to Versailles to discuss peace terms with Bismarck

Jan 25 President Jules Trochu resigns

Jan 28 New president Jules Favre signs armistice with the Prussians

Feb 6 Gambetta stepped down and surrendered control of the provincial armies to the Government of National Defence, which promptly ordered a ceasefire across France

Feb 17 German victory parade in Paris

March 18- May 28 Paris Commune

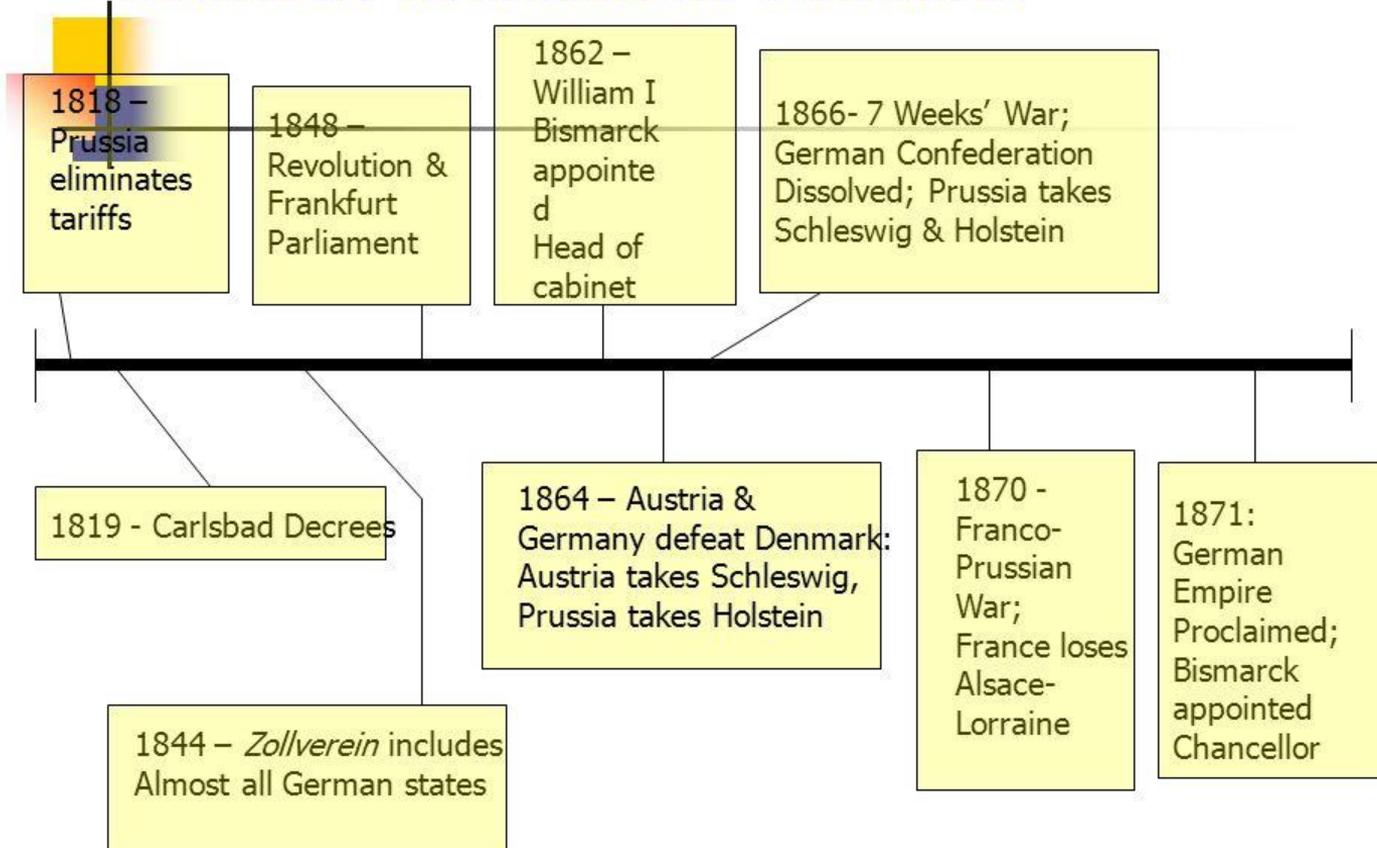


France loses Alsace-Lorraine

Alsace-Lorraine was the name given to the 5,067 square miles (13,123 square km) of territory that was ceded by [France](#) to [Germany](#) in 1871 after the [Franco-German War](#). This territory was retroceded to France in 1919 after [World War I](#), was ceded again to [Germany](#) in 1940 during [World War II](#), and was again retroceded to France in 1945.



German Unification Timeline



Sources

Bismarck and Germany

Bismarck unifies Germany

<http://www.history.com/topics/otto-von-bismarck>

War against France

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Franco-German-War>

France cedes Alsace-Lorraine

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Alsace-Lorraine>

Rise and Fall of Prussia

<https://youtu.be/HFrv1rCLC7E>

Political borders of Germany

<https://youtu.be/LwsmzHxMktA>