

## The birth of the Empire

On 18 January 1871 the final act in a long-running and complex European drama was played against the magnificent backdrop of the Versailles Palace near Paris. Before an audience of assorted German princes and State dignitaries the King of Prussia, William I, accepted the Crown of the new united German Empire. Otto Von Bismarck, William's Chief Minister and a prime mover in the unification process, delivered the proclamation:

We William, by the Grace of God, King of Prussia, and after the German Princes and free cities have unanimously appealed to us to renew the Imperial dignity, which has been in abeyance for more than sixty years, hereby inform you that we regard it as our duty to the whole Fatherland to respond to this summons of the allied German Princes and free cities to assume the German Imperial title.

The announcement of the new German Empire was unquestionably significant. With it disappeared a Central European map of bewildering complexity. The dozens of independent and semi-independent states, which had filled the space loosely termed 'Germany' since the Middle Ages, were finally replaced by a single nation with a common name and an Emperor whose authority applied to some 41 million people. After 1890 the impact of this creation was to be felt on a global scale, a fact which renders the emergence of Germany one of the most important developments of the Nineteenth Century.

## EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

### How was unity achieved?

The process by which Germany came to be unified has been an area of constant debate amongst historians of the period. The following sources will provide you with an introduction to some of the main issues surrounding the achievement of German unification.

#### Source A

Germany doesn't look to Prussia's liberalism, but to its power: Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden can indulge in liberalism, but no one will expect them to undertake Prussia's role; Prussia must gather and consolidate her strength in readiness for the favourable moment, which has already been missed several times; Prussia's boundaries according to the Vienna treaties are not favourable to a healthy political life; not by means of speeches and majority verdicts will the great decisions of the time be made – that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849 – but by iron and blood...

Otto Von Bismarck in a speech to the budget commission of the Prussian Landtag (September 1862)

#### Source B

The German Empire was created more by coal and iron than by blood and iron.

JM Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919)



OTTO VON BISMARCK

#### Source C

When the army has been brought to such a state as to command respect, then I shall take the first opportunity to declare war with Austria, burst asunder the German Confederation, bring the middle and smaller states into subjection and give Germany a national union under the leadership of Prussia.

Bismarck to Disraeli in 1862, quoted in *William Carr, Germany 1815-45* (1969)

#### Source D

In later life he [Bismarck] gave out that he had always intended to fight Austria and to unify Germany; and this version was generally accepted by his admirers and by most historians. In reality, Bismarck's greatness lay not in mastering events, but in going with events so as to seem to master them.

AJP Taylor, *The Course of German History* (1945)

#### Source E

Bismarck owed his success to the disunion and lack of will of his opponents. A coalition, or even a prolonged war, would have ruined him.

AJP Taylor, as above

- 1 What does Bismarck's phrase 'iron and blood' (Source A) suggest about the method by which he expected Germany's future to be settled?
- 2 How do Sources B and E account for the establishment of a united German Empire?
- 3 Bismarck's ideas about unity had little to do with German nationalism; he was more interested in the Prussian conquest of the other German states. How do Sources A and C support this view?
- 4 The role of Bismarck in the unification process is an area of intense debate. Some regard him as a master-planner, others as an opportunist. Which of these descriptions best fits the content of Sources C, D and E?
- 5 '...Bismarck was an expert at the well-chosen phrase that was intended not only for his audience but also, in part at least, for posterity.' (Cowie and Wolfson, *Years of Nationalism* (1985)) Assess the value of Source C in the light of this information.
- 6 In isolation, are any of these sources likely to provide the definitive explanation of German unification? How useful are such sources to the historian?

## The barriers to unity

Bismarck's claim that it had always been his intention to fight Austria and to unite the German states under Prussian leadership carried the suggestion that unification was merely the inevitable consequence of strong leadership and war. However, there was almost certainly nothing inevitable about the emergence of a united German Empire. For the first half of the Nineteenth Century at least, nothing could have been further from the minds of those who determined the fortunes of Germany's leading states.

