

## 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.



## FOCUS

### 11.1 Bismarck – 'the mad Junker'

In the years after the creation of the German Empire, it became fashionable to erect huge monuments to celebrate the achievements of Otto von Bismarck. He had become a great national hero, winning the respect and admiration of large sections of German society. However, for the first 32 years of his life such a destiny would have seemed far from likely. Bismarck was born in 1815, the son of an unremarkable Junker (land-owning nobleman). He attended university where he developed a reputation as an accomplished duellist. (In one year alone at Göttingen University he fought 25 duels.) He left university with qualifications in law and entered the civil service. In 1839, unable to find any appeal in the State bureaucracy, he returned to manage the family estates. Here, his passion for practical jokes earned him the title 'the mad Junker'. He ate, drank and smoked to excess and suffered miserably with indigestion as a result.

Then, in 1847, the life of this 'mad Junker' assumed an altogether more serious purpose. He married and became a Deputy in the Prussian United Diet, thus launching a long and illustrious political career.

#### The development of Bismarck's political ideology

Bismarck was intensely proud of his Junker background and believed firmly in the traditional system of government of which his class was a fundamental part. New political forces such as liberalism and nationalism he regarded as dangerous and subversive. In the revolutions of 1848, therefore, he defended the old order against these forces. The triumph of conservatism in 1849 led to his appointment as the Prussian delegate at the revived Diet of

the Confederation in Frankfurt. Bismarck hoped for a return to close co-operation with Prussia's conservative neighbour, Austria; but a short time in the Diet convinced him that such a restoration was impossible. He came to realize that Austria meant to subdue Prussia along with all the other German states, and make them obedient to Vienna. As a result he became an outspoken critic of Austria. At the time of the Crimean War he commented:

I should be very uneasy if we sought refuge from a possible storm by hitching our trim and sea-worthy frigate to that worm-eaten old Austrian man-of-war.

Bismarck became an unlikely advocate of nationalist schemes for a united German State which would exclude Austria. He had not become a nationalist, he remained firmly a Prussian patriot. As late as 1865 he asserted: 'I am much less German than Prussian...' Instead, he believed he could make use of the nationalist movement as a means of ridding the North German states of Austrian influence.

In 1857 Frederick William IV was declared officially insane and a Regency was established under William I. Bismarck was sent as Prussian ambassador first to St Petersburg and then to Paris. However, in 1862, with the King struggling to get proposals for army reforms through the Prussian parliament, Bismarck was recalled and asked to serve as Prime Minister. It was from this high office that he embarked on his mission to promote the interests of Prussia at the expense of the Austrians.



WILLIAM I WITH HIS WIFE, MARIE LOUISE

#### QUESTIONS

- 1 Bismarck was more of a Prussian patriot than a German nationalist. Why, then, did he appear to back nationalist schemes for a united Germany?
- 2 Given Bismarck's background, why would German liberals have had cause to be suspicious of him on his appointment as Prussia's Prime Minister?

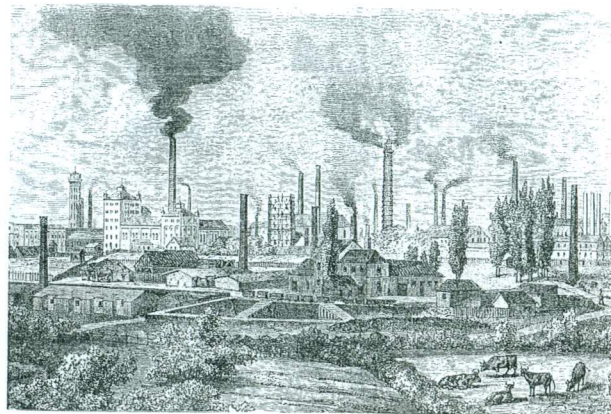


## The Prussian economy

The failure of the 1848 revolutions, the collapse of the Erfurt Union, the ascendancy of Austria; in 1851 the prospect of a national solution to the German problem seemed as remote as ever. It was true that the idea of a unified state persisted in the hearts and minds of German liberals and nationalists, but as the historian E.J. Feuchtwanger pointed out, '1848 demonstrated crushingly the impotence of ideas without power...' This was a lesson well learned by Bismarck who, in his 'blood and iron' speech of 1862, signposted the way to eventual unification: 'Germany doesn't look to Prussia's liberalism but to its power.'

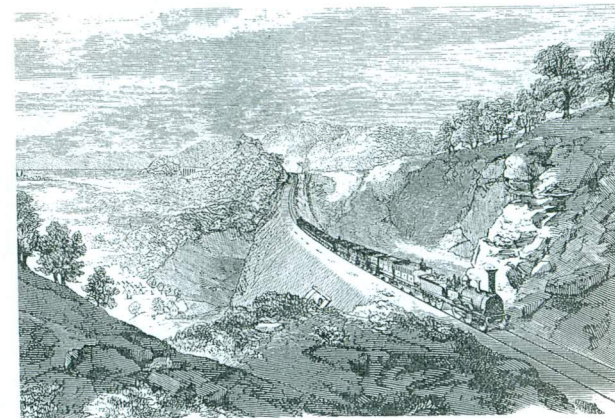
The basis of Prussian power was, to a large extent, economic. Domination of the Zollverein was important but perhaps equally significant was the period of rapid industrialization which occurred after 1850. As it came to be acknowledged by men like Bismarck that Prussia would probably have to fight Austria, the ability to do so became the responsibility not so much of the Prussian generals as of the captains of Prussian industry.

Prussia's industrial resources were unrivalled on the Continent. In the Ruhr, the Saar and Silesia, deposits of coal and iron were abundant. It was in these regions, with their mines, steel works and blast furnaces, that Prussian power was forged.



KRUPP'S FACTORIES AT ESSEN

It was certainly significant that at the Great Exhibition of 1851, one of the proudest exhibits of the industrialist Alfred Krupp was a superbly-made field-gun with a cast-steel barrel. During the coming decades, Krupp's foundries in the Ruhr displayed, with equal pride, an ever increasing capacity for the production of high-quality armaments. Financially, Prussia was in a very healthy condition. Money was raised from a wide selection of sources including trading revenues from the Zollverein and interest from railway investment.



RAILWAYS BEGIN TO BIND THE GERMAN STATES TOGETHER. THIS PICTURE SHOWS THE PADERBORN-MARBURG LINE IN 1855

The railways were also significant in their own right. In 1845 there had been some 3280 km of track in Germany. By 1860 11,633 km had been completed. The railways acted as a binding agent, bringing together the scattered territories of Germany. Prussian military chiefs were quick to see their potential for the rapid mobilization of troops and equipment. As a result, the railways were constructed to a strategic plan determined by the needs of the army.

Since Prussia's challenge to Austria would ultimately come on the battlefield, it was essential she should possess the financial and physical resources to deploy well-equipped troops quickly to the place of need. Prussia's industrial revolution provided this capacity.

## Unification by force (1864-71)

For half a century German liberals and nationalists had chased after an illusive prize: a united German state. For the greater part of that time the quarry had remained hidden from sight and in 1848, after a brief period of capture, was released by Europe's gamekeepers, the conservative ruling class. Unification was not to be the product of discussion and consensus and it could not be maintained by liberal principles and parliaments. Unification was the immediate result of war. Prussian soldiers on foot and on horseback, with rifles and with cannon, made Germany a reality by force. In three short wars against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and France (1870-71), Prussian power subdued the resistance of the minor German states and excluded Austria from a Prussian-dominated German Empire.

However, the apparent simplicity of the unification process during these seven years is enormously deceiving. The period has provided exceptionally fertile ground for discussion and debate amongst historians. The key issues centre around three important questions:



- Did Bismarck possess a blueprint for unification; an overall plan which he followed step by step to its inevitable and predicted outcome?
  - Did Bismarck owe his success to a coincidental gathering of favourable international and domestic circumstances?
  - Was Bismarck merely an opportunist, cleverly exploiting the mistakes of his adversaries and taking calculated risks which happened to be successful?
- The remainder of this chapter will consider these questions.

### The Polish Revolt (1863)

**Events** In 1863 disturbances occurred in Russian Poland. The great European Powers sympathized with the Poles but Bismarck did not. He dispatched an envoy to Russia where discussions produced an agreement known as the Alvensleben Convention. This allowed for co-operation in the suppression of the rising. Prussia was condemned by the other European Powers but succeeded in securing the gratitude of an otherwise isolated Russia.



POLISH REBELS ON THE MARCH

**The Bismarckian interpretation** According to the Bismarck blueprint, this event offered the opportunity to secure Russian neutrality in the forthcoming clash with Austria. Bismarck had to be certain that the Holy Alliance was truly dead since he could not risk engaging Russia as well as Austria on the battlefield. This, then, was the first stage in the process of unification.

**Commentary** In a letter to his sister in 1861, Bismarck revealed his feelings towards the Poles:

Strike the Poles so that they despair for their lives. I have every sympathy for their plight, but if we want to survive we cannot but exterminate them.

Bismarck disliked the Poles for their Catholic faith and feared them for their radical tradition. The Alvensleben Convention was in all probability an attempt to gain security against possible disturbances in Prussia's Polish territories. Bismarck was concerned that Tsar Alexander II might pursue a more liberal policy towards Poland and thus encourage demands for similar treatment amongst Prussian Poles. Above all, a more relaxed Russian policy might lead to the realization of Bismarck's greatest fear: a Franco-Russian friendship.

Bismarck's interpretation of the Polish Revolt (as the first stage of a calculated plan to wage war on Austria and unite the remaining German states under Prussian leadership) must be challenged. At the time of the revolt the Prussian accord with Russia led to international hostility as Britain and France unreservedly attacked Bismarck's actions. William I lost confidence in his chief minister and Bismarck was forced to belittle publicly the importance of Alvensleben. His elevated position in Prussian affairs was placed in considerable jeopardy by the Polish episode. The outcome of these events was favourable. Bismarck *did* manage to secure the friendship of Russia which was to be useful in the war of 1866. However, it seems most unlikely that he actually planned to arrive at this destination via such a potentially dangerous path.

### Schleswig-Holstein (1864)

**Events** The Duchies of Schleswig-Holstein had traditionally been ruled by Denmark. However, since Holstein was mainly German-speaking and Schleswig too had a German element, they had become the focus for German nationalist ambitions. In 1863 the King of Denmark, Frederick VII, died without an heir. By prior international arrangement, the vacant throne was to pass to Christian of Glücksburg. However, in the event his claim was challenged by the German Prince of Augustenburg, a move passionately supported by German nationalists. A war to settle the issue seemed imminent. Bismarck's attitude to Augustenburg's claim was clear:

...I cannot regard it as in the interest of Prussia to wage a war in order, as the most favourable result, to install in Schleswig-Holstein a new Grand Duke, who in fear of Prussian lust for annexation, will vote against us in the Diet and whose government, in spite of the gratitude due to Prussia for its installation, will be a ready object of Austrian machination...

1 What were Bismarck's reasons for not supporting the claim of Augustenburg?

2 Does Bismarck's conduct over this issue lend support to the criticism that he had no real interest in German nationalism?





Bismarck wanted the territories for Prussia and successfully enrolled Austrian assistance in achieving his goal. Austria, aware of the intense nationalist feeling aroused by the issue, was unable to resist Prussia's invitation to join it in settling the argument by force. Early in 1864, Prussian and Austrian troops moved into the Duchies. Denmark failed to obtain the support of any Great Power and was soon defeated. The Duchies were then placed in the joint custody of Prussia and Austria although the question of their long-term fate became a source of acute tension between the two Powers. The situation was resolved in August 1865 with the Convention of Gastein, which gave Austria responsibility for Holstein and Prussia the right to administer Schleswig.

**The Bismarckian interpretation** Having decided upon the necessity of fighting Austria, Bismarck required a pretext upon which to go to war. In later years he claimed to have deliberately provoked Austria over the Schleswig-Holstein affair in order to draw her onto the battlefield.

**Commentary** In one sense at least, Bismarck's interpretation of the Schleswig-Holstein issue, and its role in the process of unification, is accurate. When war between Austria and Prussia broke out in June 1866, it was the question of the future of the Duchies which provided the immediate cause. However, it must be considered doubtful whether this had been Bismarck's deliberate intention all along. Bismarck's only clear policy was his determination to prevent any attempt by the Austrians to reassert their leadership of the German states. Bismarck certainly entertained the idea of

a united 'Kleindeutschland' under Prussian domination, but he was not committed to fighting a war to make this possible; a diplomatic solution would have been quite acceptable. It seems likely that Bismarck was not following a set plan but pursuing a 'wait-and-see' policy:

'I think it more useful to continue for a while the present marriage despite small domestic quarrels, and if a divorce becomes necessary, to take the prospects as they then prevail rather than to cut the bond now...'

Bismarck in 1865 on the Austro-Prussian alliance

When Bismarck agreed to the Convention of Gastein he was keeping his options open. The Gastein proposals originated from Austria and were viewed by Bismarck as being something of a concession. By delaying the final decision over the future of the German states, he hoped to extract further concessions; perhaps Austria would even give up the states of the north without a fight. The historian AJP Taylor sums up Bismarck's 'policy':

'Bismarck was a diplomatic genius, inexperienced in war and disliking its risks. He may well have hoped to manoeuvre Austria out of the duchies, perhaps even out of the headship of Germany, by diplomatic strokes; marvels of this sort were not beyond him in later life. His diplomacy in this period seems rather calculated to frighten Austria than to prepare for war.'

AJP Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (1954)

It was not until 28 February 1866, at a meeting of the Prussian Crown Council, that war with Austria was acknowledged to be inevitable; but even as late as May 1866, Bismarck was prepared to consider a proposal to settle the issue diplomatically. The suggestion made by Anton von Gablenz to partition the German states foundered because Austria required Bismarck to guarantee the position of the Habsburgs in Venetia, something Bismarck felt unable to undertake.

### War with Austria (1866)

**Events** Bismarck was aware that if a war with Austria became necessary, then the attitude of the French would be important in deciding the outcome. In October 1865 he made an informal visit to Biarritz and met with the French leader, Napoleon III. No binding arrangements were made at Biarritz, but in sounding out the French Emperor, Bismarck was able to convince himself that if Venetia could be secured for Italy then Napoleon was unlikely to intervene on behalf of Austria. On 8 April 1866, Bismarck arranged an alliance with Italy to remain in force for three months. Italy was to support Prussia if war broke out during that time, and in return Italy would be allowed to absorb Venetia into her territories. Bismarck's actions alarmed the Habsburgs who were forced to begin mobilizing their troops. In this way Bismarck was able to claim that Austria had acted as the aggressor.

On 1 June 1866, Austria appealed to the Confederation to settle the question of the Duchies. This broke with the terms of the Convention of Gastein and Bismarck responded by occupying Holstein. Austria made an appeal to the Diet for assistance. This was granted and the states of the Confederation were ordered to begin mobilizing against Prussia. Bismarck



reacted by declaring the Confederation dissolved and sent troops to occupy the northern states of Hesse-Cassel, Saxony and Hanover. The major engagement between Prussian and Austrian troops came on 3 July at Königgrätz (Sadowa) and resulted in defeat for the Habsburgs. Bismarck insisted on bringing hostilities to an end at this point and concluded a moderate peace with Austria. By the Treaty of Prague (August 1866) Austria was forced to give up Venetia to Italy, to agree to the annexation of Schleswig-Holstein by Prussia, and to acknowledge the ending of the German Confederation. This was partially replaced by a North German Confederation which comprised all the German states north of the River Main in a union dominated by Prussia.



KING WILLIAM I (CENTRE) AT THE BATTLE OF KÖNIGGRÄTZ

**The Bismarckian interpretation** According to Bismarck's calculations, a successful war with Austria was only possible if the French could be persuaded not to intervene. This he claimed to have achieved at Biarritz. Then, as part of his pre-planned scheme, it would be essential to treat Austria moderately after she had been defeated:

'We had to avoid wounding Austria too severely; we had to avoid leaving behind in her unnecessary bitterness of feeling or desire for revenge; we ought rather to reserve the possibility of becoming friends again with our adversary of the moment, and in any case to regard the Austrian state as a piece on the European chessboard and the renewal of friendly relations with her as a move open to us. If Austria were severely injured, she would become the ally of France and of every opponent of ours...'

Bismarck, *Reflections and Reminiscences* (1898)

**1** What were Bismarck's reasons for arranging a non-punitive peace with Austria?

**2** If Bismarck could achieve a restoration of friendly relations with Austria, how might this help in the final war of unification which he claimed to have been planning against France?

**Commentary** When Bismarck went to war with Austria, he was taking advantage of an exceptionally favourable international situation. He was indeed fortunate that:

'Both Russia and Great Britain had virtually eliminated themselves from the European balance; this gave the years between 1864 and 1866 a character unique in recent history.'

AJP Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (1954)

In Bismarck's bid to advance Prussia's position in Germany, he was able to count on Russia remaining neutral. Alexander II was appreciative of the support given during the Polish Revolt of 1863, but more important, the old Austro-Russian partnership had been acrimoniously dissolved during the Crimean War; a development over which Bismarck had no control but which he was able to exploit skilfully. Russia never forgave the Habsburgs for their anti-Russian stance during the war, and welcomed any opportunity to see them humiliated.

British observers failed to detect any significant danger in the Prussian bid for power. The real threats to a stable Europe came, according to British opinion, from Russia and France; a strong Central European Power offered the prospect of a counterbalance to the ambitions of these traditional rivals.

Contrary to Bismarck's later version of events, the meeting at Biarritz did not guarantee the neutrality of the French in a forthcoming war with Austria. Bismarck believed that he had temporarily bought the neutrality of France with the promise of Venetia for Italy, but he could not be certain how long this would last. Indeed, on 12 June 1866 Napoleon signed a secret agreement with Austria in which he was offered territory in the Prussian Rhineland if Austria were victorious. In the war with Austria Bismarck was taking a considerable chance. He could not accurately predict a rapid victory and therefore ran the risk of the international situation changing. This was probably the real reason why he fought so hard to bring the war to an end after Königgrätz and insisted on a moderate peace. In a letter to his wife in July he wrote:

'If we are not excessive in our demands and do not believe that we have conquered the world, we will attain a peace that is worth our effort. But we are just as quickly intoxicated as we are plunged into dejection, and I have the thankless task of pouring water into the bubbling wine and making it clear that we do not live alone in Europe but with three other Powers that hate and envy us.'

Bismarck, quoted in Gordon Craig, *Germany 1866-1945* (1978)

Bismarck wanted to end the war before the other Powers intervened to reverse the victory of Königgrätz. It seems highly unlikely that he was looking ahead to a war with France to complete the unification of Germany.

### The final stage: war with France

The Peace of Prague brought considerable gains to Prussia and concluded the first major political unification of the German states north of the River Main. For the time being Bismarck was content to allow the states of the south to remain independent. Despite this there were strong forces in



existence which appeared to suggest that this arrangements would not last for long. Pressure was mounting on Bismarck from nationalists and liberals within Prussia to finish the job. Bismarck had certainly not given up all influence in the south; even before the Treaty of Prague was signed, he had arranged secret military alliances with the southern states which committed them to fight with Prussia if she were attacked. In 1867, the south was incorporated into the new Zollparlament, an extension of the Zollverein which, it was hoped, would encourage the idea of close co-operation between north and south.

For France, the outcome of the Prussian victory was disturbing. She gained nothing from the peace settlement and found that she now had a powerful and ambitious Protestant neighbour. French public opinion was humiliated and demanded territorial compensation. However, Napoleon's attempts to gain land (first in Belgium and later Luxembourg) were rejected by Bismarck. He understood that a war with France was a real possibility, and that its appeal to German nationalism could bring the south German states into a German Empire. However, there is little to suggest that he was planning to go to war with France in order to conclude the unification process.

**The Hohenzollern candidature** The episode which provoked the war between France and Prussia began in 1868 in Spain. Here, a revolution had deposed the monarch, Isabella II. A new king was sought to head a constitutional government, and a request was made to Prince Leopold, a member of the same Hohenzollern family as William I of Prussia. Bismarck was a keen supporter of the candidature:

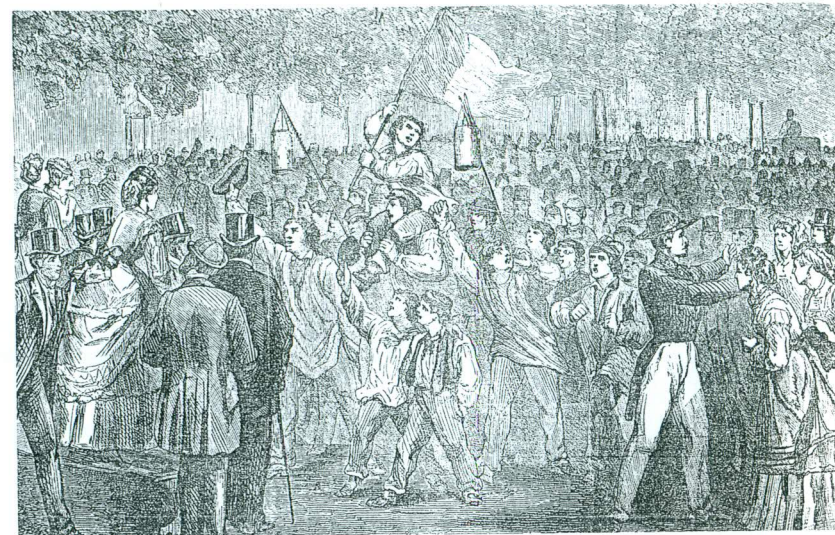
'Acceptance of the Spanish Royal Crown by a Prince of Your Majesty's illustrious House would strengthen existing sympathies between two nations...The Spaniards would have a feeling of gratitude towards Germany...For Germany it is desirable to have on the other side of France a country on whose sympathies we can rely...French peaceableness towards Germany will always wax or wane in proportion to the dangers of war with Germany. We have in the long run to look for the preservation of peace not to the goodwill of France but to the impression created by our position of strength...The prosperity of Spain and German trade with her would receive a powerful impetus under Hohenzollern rule...In the event of a rejection, the wishes of the Spaniards would probably turn to Bavaria...Spain would have a ruling house which looked for support to France and Rome, maintaining contact with anti-national elements in Germany and affording them a secure if remote rallying point...'

Bismarck to William I (9 March 1870)

The French found the candidature of Leopold completely unacceptable, fearing that it would place a Prussian puppet on the throne of their southern neighbour. War-fever gripped the popular imagination and Napoleon found himself compelled to demand assurances that Prussia would detach herself permanently from Spanish affairs. When Bismarck doctored the Ems Telegram which contained William I's reply (see *Examining the Evidence* opposite), Napoleon could only follow the outraged demands of his people and declare war on Prussia.



PRINCE LEOPOLD



PARISIANS CELEBRATE THE DECLARATION OF WAR AGAINST PRUSSIA

## EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

### Did Bismarck plan the Franco-Prussian War?

#### Source A

Do not believe that I love war. I have seen enough of war to abhor it profoundly. The terrible scenes I have witnessed, will never cease to haunt my mind. I shall never consent to a war that is avoidable, much less seek it. But this war with France will surely come. It will be clearly forced upon us by the French Emperor. I see that clearly.

Bismarck (1867)

#### Source B

That German unity could be promoted by actions involving force I think is self-evident. But there is a quite different question, and that has to do with the precipitation of a powerful catastrophe and the responsibility of choosing the time for it. A voluntary intervention in the evolution of history, which is determined by purely subjective factors, results only in the shaking down of unripe fruit, and that Germany unity is no ripe fruit at this time leaps, in my opinion, to the eye. If the time that lies ahead works in the interest of unity as much as the period since the accession of Frederick the Great has done...then we can look to the future calmly and leave the rest to our successors.

Bismarck to the Prussian envoy in Munich (February 1869)

1 What were Bismarck's reasons for supporting the Hohenzollern candidature?

2 Bismarck was concerned to show Prussia in a position of strength in order to dissuade France from contemplating war. Why did he believe a war with France might be likely?

3 What is your opinion of the suggestion that Bismarck supported Leopold in order to provoke a war with France by which he could complete the unification of Germany?



### Source C

His Majesty writes to me: 'Count Benedetti spoke to me on the promenade, in order to demand from me, finally in a very importunate manner, that I should authorise him to telegraph at once that I bound myself for all future time never again to give my consent if the Hohenzollerns should renew their candidature. I refused at last somewhat sternly, as it is neither right nor possible to undertake engagements of this kind *à tout jamais*. Naturally I told him that I had as yet received no news, and as he was earlier informed about Paris and Madrid than myself, he could clearly see that my government once more had no hand in the matter.' His Majesty has since received a letter from the Prince. His Majesty having told Count Benedetti that he was awaiting news from the Prince, has decided, with reference to the above demand, upon the representation of Count Eulenburg and myself, not to receive Count Benedetti again, but only to let him be informed through an aide-de-camp: That his Majesty had now received from the Prince confirmation of the news which Benedetti had already received from Paris, and had nothing further to say to the ambassador. His Majesty leaves it to your Excellency whether Benedetti's fresh demand and its rejection should not be at once communicated both to our ambassadors and to the press.

Original text of the Ems Telegraph, from Heinrich Abeken to Bismarck (13 July 1870)

### Source D

After the news of the renunciation of the hereditary Prince of Hohenzollern had been officially communicated to the Imperial government of France by the Royal government of Spain, the French ambassador further demanded of his Majesty, the King, at Ems, that he would authorise him to telegraph to Paris that his Majesty, the King, bound himself for all time never again to give his consent, should the Hohenzollerns renew their candidature. His Majesty, the King, thereupon decided not to receive the French ambassador again, and sent the aide-de-camp on duty to tell him that his Majesty had nothing further to communicate to the ambassador.

Bismarck's text of the Ems Telegram edited for publication

### Source E

I went on to explain: 'If in execution of His Majesty's order, I at once communicate this text...not only to the newspapers but by telegraph to all our embassies it will be known in Paris before midnight...and will have the effect of a red rag on the French bull...Success, however, depends essentially upon the impression which the origination of the war makes upon us and others: it is important that we should be the ones attacked.'

Bismarck, *Reflections and Reminiscences* (1898)

1 What evidence is contained in Source B to suggest that Bismarck was not planning a war to complete the process of German unification?

2 Examine Source C carefully, then arrange the following events in the correct chronological sequence.



WILLIAM I AND BENEDETTI AT EMS

## TALKING POINT

### Unification: Variations on a theme

For Bismarck and the German liberals the concept of unification had different meanings. Consider the chart below and decide which interpretation was most appropriate to the German state which emerged in 1871.

#### Bismarck

Exclusion of Austria from German affairs and the establishment of a *Kleindeutschland*.

Prussian absorption of lesser German states.

Universal adoption of Prussian system of government – authoritarian monarchy.

#### Liberals

Exclusion of Austria (but some supported a *Grossdeutsch* solution).

Voluntary surrender of regional sovereignty.

Adoption of constitutional parliamentary government – development of liberal institutions.

- William I informed of Hohenzollern decision not to accept the Spanish throne.
- Benedetti asks William I for permission to send a telegram to Paris containing an undertaking on behalf of William not to consent to any future Hohenzollern candidature.
- Benedetti informed by Paris of Hohenzollern decision not to accept the Spanish throne.
- William I communicates to Benedetti his intention to say nothing more about the Hohenzollern candidature.
- William I refuses to give permission for telegram to be sent by Benedetti to Paris in the absence of any direct information on the Hohenzollern decision.

3 (a) Attempt a similar sequencing exercise using the information in Source D.

(b) Which specific stages of the Ems negotiations does Bismarck omit from his version of events?

(c) What effect do these omissions have on the tone of the Ems Telegram?

(d) Suggest what effect this might have had on French public opinion?

4 Does the fact that Bismarck amended the Ems Telegram provide conclusive proof that he alone was responsible for causing the Franco-Prussian War?

5 Using your conclusions to questions 2 and 3 and the information in Source E, present a counter-argument to Bismarck's statements in Source A.

6 In Source E Bismarck appears to be keen to take responsibility for engineering the French declaration of war on Prussia. Given the source and date of this extract explain:

(a) why Bismarck assumes this responsibility;

(b) how reliable you believe this extract to be when determining Bismarck's role in provoking the Franco-Prussian War.

### The Franco-Prussian War (1870–71)

As Bismarck had hoped, nationalist feeling led the south German states to fight alongside Prussia against France. The French, facing a better organized and better equipped army, quickly sustained a number of defeats. The decisive Prussian victory was won at Sedan in September 1870. Paris fell in January 1871 and a preliminary peace was arranged. The terms of this settlement were ratified by the Treaty of Frankfurt in May. The French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were annexed by Prussia, and France was forced to pay an indemnity of 5000 million francs. An army of occupation was to remain for four years until the indemnity was paid.

Four months before the signing of the Frankfurt Treaty the German Empire was proclaimed at Versailles. The southern states, fuelled by nationalist passions and aware that their only chance of lasting security lay with Prussia, finally gave up their independence and joined with the states of the north to complete the process of German unification.