

Bismarck and German Unification

Bennett Sherry

In the 1800's, nationalism enflamed passions all across Europe. The German-speaking kingdom of Prussia and its minister, Otto von Bismarck, used these passions to build a German nation-state.

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Too Many Germanies

What do Snow White, militarism, and juggling have in common? They're part of the unlikely story of how Germany became the unified nation that we know today.

For almost a thousand years, present-day Germany sat at the heart of a multi-ethnic political mess known as the Holy Roman Empire (HRE). For most of its history, the HRE wasn't much of an empire. It was a collection of hundreds of smaller states. They were ruled loosely by an emperor who was elected by a council of aristocrats.



Map of the Holy Roman Empire in 1789. By Robert Alfens, CC BY-SA 3.0.

By comparison, countries like England and France were much simpler. Both were large nation-states with a single government. Many people at the time wished that the HRE could be more like those nations. U.S. President James Monroe once called the HRE “a nerveless body.” After Napoleon I’s wars led to the destruction of the HRE in 1806, German-speaking people didn’t miss it one bit. In place of the disunified, toothless empire, they started to believe that there was really just one “German people.” If France and England could each be powerful and unified nation-states, they figured, so could Germany.

Snow White and the several Germanies

During the nineteenth century, there was growing cultural interest in the idea of a distinct German people with a common language and a homeland in Central Europe. Intellectuals produced art and scholarship that supported a German national identity. Two German-speaking academics known as the Brothers Grimm published a collection of German folk tales. These stories, now familiar throughout most of Western culture, included Cinderella, Rumpelstiltskin, and Snow White. They were written to create an imagined past that would give German-speakers a shared history and culture. These expressions of national culture and pride rejected Enlightenment ideas of universality and reason. The stories focused on what it meant to be German, rather than what it meant to be human. In this way, they hoped to generate a passion for a unified Germany.

Nationalism is usually accompanied by a powerful state and militarized violence. This was very much the case in Germany. The idea that Germans shared a historical culture and national identity helped to clear the way for a strong German government. Wars over territory, meanwhile, helped define the borders and character of Germany, as had happened in England and France.

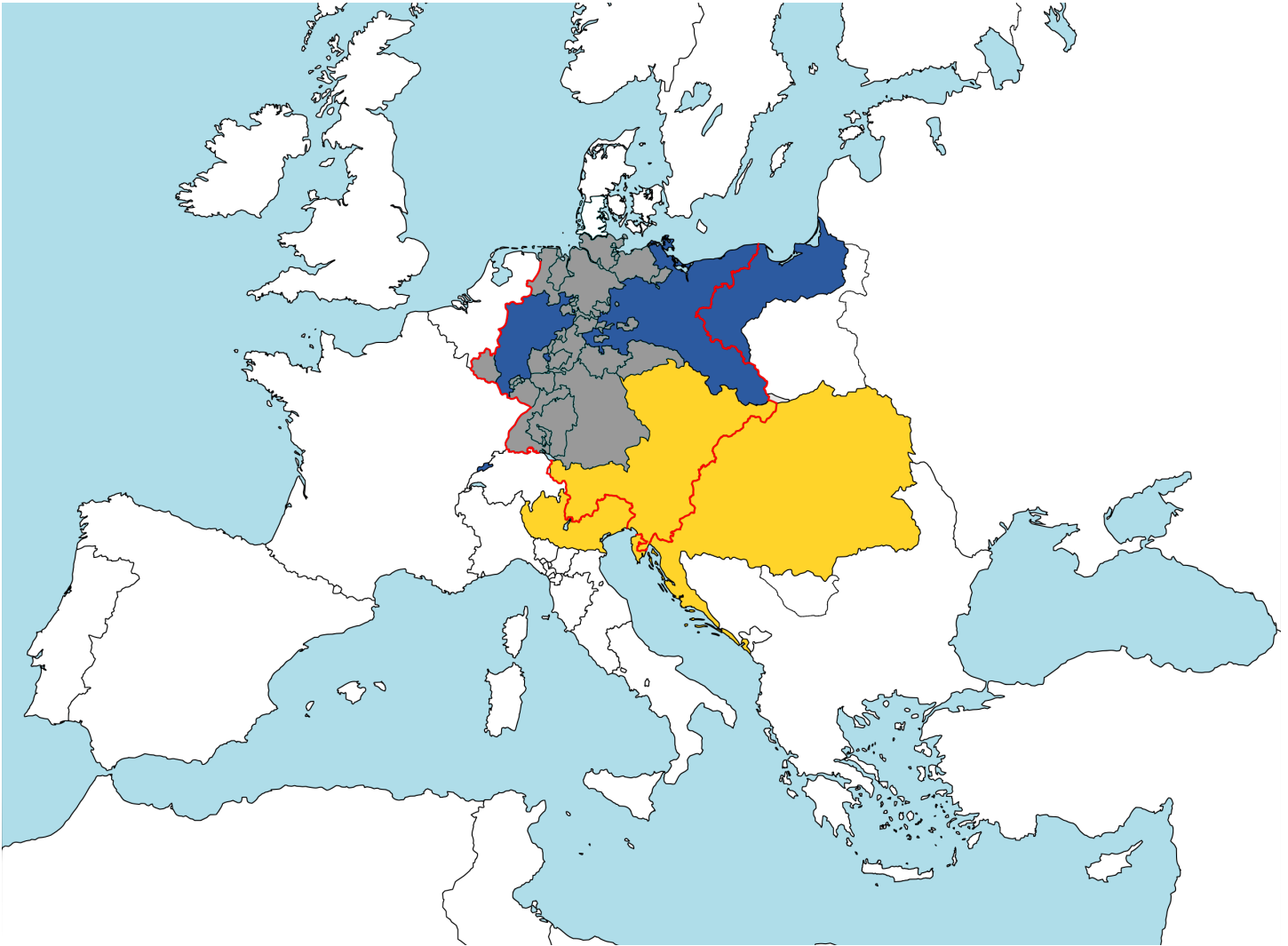
Growing German nationalism also expressed itself in the two world wars that would come later. Built into the idea of nationalism is the exclusion of people defined as “other.” In order to have a German nation, nationalists believed they had to define what was not German. In the coming years, racism spread and minorities like Jews and Roma were targeted. Nationalists portrayed these minorities as a danger to the nation.



German postal stamp showing Snow White eating a poisoned apple, 1967. The stories told by the Brothers Grimm are still a part of German national identity. By Vintageprintable1, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Half measures

In the mid-nineteenth century, the goal of a unified Germany was a long way off. In 1815, the Concert of Europe created the German Confederation after the allies defeated Napoleon I at Waterloo. The Confederation was supposed to help unite the many different German-speaking states. European diplomats also wanted to limit the power of the two strongest German states, Prussia and the Austrian Empire. They tried to do so by balancing the two against each other. Ironically, this rivalry eventually destroyed the Confederation.



[Map of the German Confederation](#). The border of the confederation is in red. Note that parts of Prussia (blue) and Austria (yellow) are outside the Confederation. By 52 Pickup, CC BY-SA 3.0.

After the Revolutions of 1848 erupted across Europe, conservatives came to power in Prussia and prepared to expand the state's influence.

Prussia's militarism creates Germany

Enter King Wilhelm I of Prussia. Italy challenged Austrian authority and achieved Italian unification in 1859-1860. Italy's independence encouraged Wilhelm, who craved a victory over Austria. He wanted to unify the German states under Prussian rule, but the liberals in Parliament opposed war. Then, Wilhelm revealed his secret weapon: Otto von Bismarck.

Bismarck, a Prussian count, was a fierce conservative. He was determined to increase the power of the Prussian state. When he was appointed Minister President in 1862, the liberal parliament stood between him and power. So he devised a strategy: ignore them. He paid no attention to liberal election victories. Instead, he expanded the military, passed whatever taxes he wanted, and brought the army closer under the king's control.

In the 1860s, both conservatives and liberals in Prussia were nationalists. They wanted a unified German nation-state. Many liberals wanted to achieve this through negotiations with Austria, though. In an 1862 speech before Parliament, Bismarck warned that Prussia's borders would not be secured through speeches and resolutions "but by blood and iron." Bismarck wanted Germany to be free of Austrian influence. To achieve this, he wanted war.

In 1866, Prussia attacked Austria, winning in only seven weeks. The war proved that Prussia's army was the strongest in Europe. It also ended the German Confederation. With Austria defeated, many northern German states then decided to join Prussia.

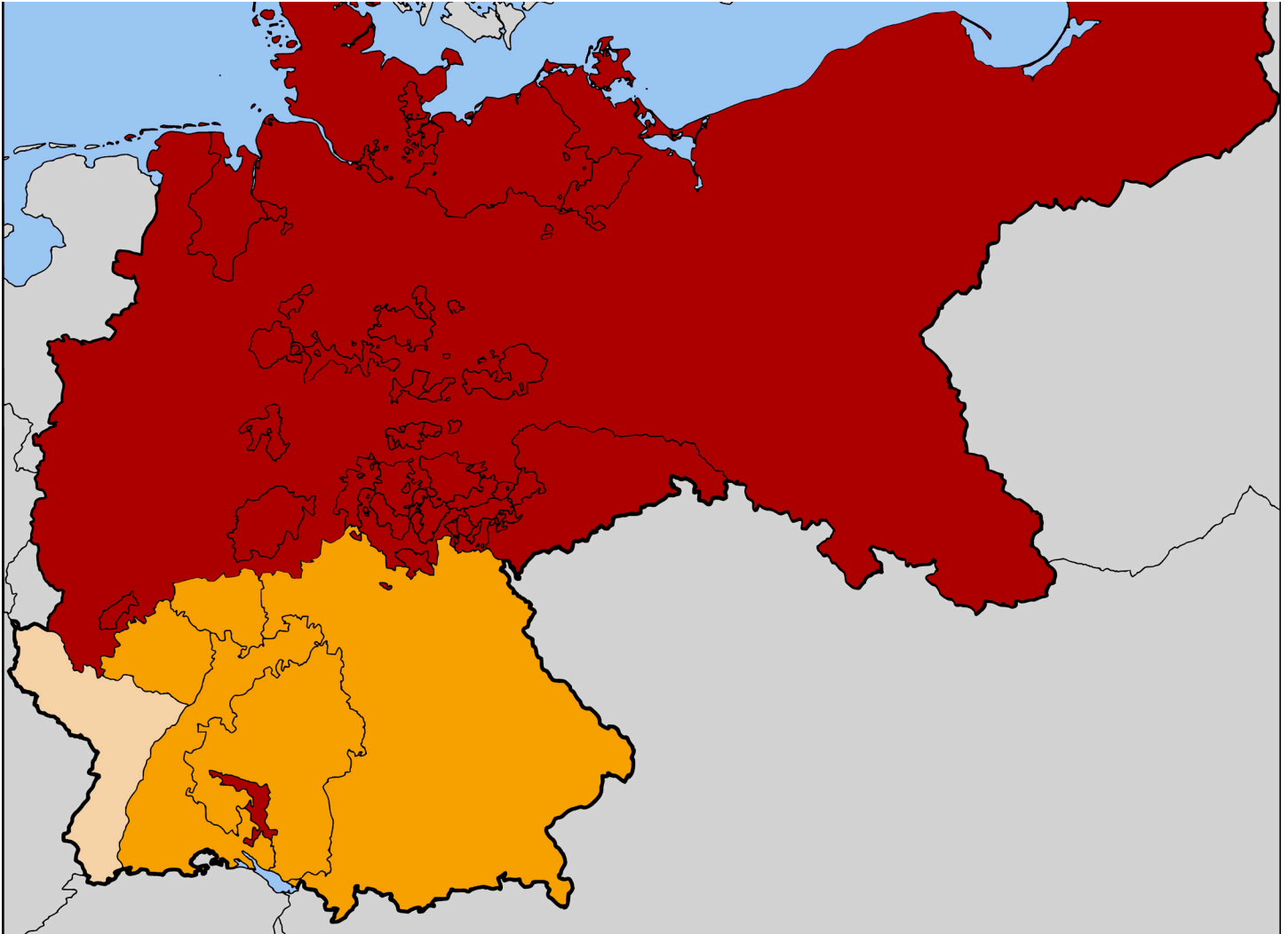
In order to complete the unification of Germany, though, Bismarck needed another war. The blood and iron strategy was not over. The next war would be against France.

In 1870, France declared war on Prussia. The French emperor, Napoleon III, took a gamble by taking on the Prussian army. He believed that other countries would join him to prevent Prussia from becoming too powerful.

However, Napoleon III had underestimated Bismarck's political talent. Bismarck tricked France into starting a war so he could claim that Prussia was merely defending the German states. The move turned the great powers of Europe against France. It also united the German states behind Prussia.



The always cheerful Otto von Bismarck. By Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R68588 / P. Loescher & Petsch, CC BY-SA 3.0 de.



Map of Germany. The north German states, which joined Prussia after its defeat of Austria are in red. The south states, which joined after victory against France are in orange. And Alsace-Lorraine is in beige. By 52 Pickup, CC BY-SA 2.5.

The French had no idea what they were up against; their army quickly ran into the teeth of a deadlier and more organized force. Prussian society had been built for war. They were able to send a million soldiers into action within a few weeks.

The culture of Bismarck's Prussia was militarized and masculine. Germany was known as "the Fatherland." Women had smaller roles in public life, and male soldiers were the heart of the patriotic state.

In only four weeks, the Prussian army destroyed the French. The Second French Empire collapsed and Napoleon III became a Prussian prisoner. The war dragged on for several more months. The Prussian army surrounded Paris. They blocked food from entering the city, and the starving citizens soon surrendered. In exchange for peace, France gave the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to the new German Empire.



Proclamation of the German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, France. Wilhelm I stand on the dais, and Bismarck wears white in the center of the painting. By Anton von Werner, public domain.

Juggling on horseback

After Bismarck had secured the borders of the nation of Germany, he told the other great powers that German expansion was over. He promised Britain not to challenge its large empire or control of the seas. Once again showing his skills as a diplomat, Bismarck negotiated treaties to maintain a balance of power in Europe. He held a conference in Berlin in 1884, to discuss the division of Africa between European empires in order to avoid war. He understood that the greatest advantage would come from balance. This was part of the reason he stopped short of destroying France and Austria during the wars of unification. He believed that Germany needed to establish its borders but not become so powerful that it upset the regional balance. Peace in Europe depended on a strong (but not too strong) France, Austria, and Germany.

King Wilhelm I called Bismarck's work in building and maintaining a complex system of alliances "juggling on horseback." It was extremely delicate. Without a diplomat of Bismarck's skill, the system seemed likely to collapse. When Wilhelm II fired Bismarck in 1890, and expanded Germany's empire, the balance of power crumbled. This led, eventually, to the First World War. Later, the nationalist, militarized state model of Bismarck, which had been so effective in unifying Germany, would influence the violent German totalitarianism of the mid-twentieth century. He understood that sometimes, the greatest advantage would come from balance. This was part of the reason he stopped short of destroying France and Austria during the wars of unification. Bismarck believed that Germany could not become so powerful that it upset the regional balance. Peace in Europe depended on each nation being strong but not too strong.

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Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in History from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a Research Associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

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