



## The Origins of German Unification: 1815 - 1848

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The origins of the unification of Germany can be traced back to the Vienna Conference in 1815. Following the defeat of Napoleon the old Holy Roman Empire, which had been abolished in 1806, was replaced by a very loose German Confederation under permanent Habsburg/Austrian presidency. The confederation had a Diet – an assembly where representatives of the member states met together – but individual states retained control over such things as their own nationality, army and economy and could negotiate agreements with foreign powers. However, the Austrian presidency meant that Austria was able to exert considerable influence over the member states. The Austrian politician, Metternich, was vehemently opposed to nationalism of all sorts, but especially to German nationalism. He saw the German Confederation as a chance to keep Prussia in check and to oppose the growth of liberalism throughout the German states. He was to prove a significant barrier to German nationalism until his resignation in 1848.

However, Metternich was not the only barrier to German unification. The very concept of national unity suggests the need for a national consciousness, but the German states in 1815 didn't have that. While the 38 states shared a common language and customs, there were still significant regional differences between the states. For example, the north and west were generally more industrialised than the south and east; the north was also predominantly Protestant whereas the south was mostly Catholic. These differences were combined with widespread particularism – the situation whereby German people and princes were more loyal to their state than to the wider German Confederation.

While the princes who ruled the German states understandably favoured the situation in order to maintain their own authority, they were often supported by other sections of society. Aristocrats, such as the landowning Junker class in Prussia still had significant powers in many areas, often controlling local administration and justice. Junkers also occupied all important positions in the army and civil service. Nationalism was often closely aligned with liberalism, and the potential threat to their powers meant that few aristocrats in the early 1800s supported the idea of unification.

Consequently it may seem surprising that in the years before 1848 the 75% of the German population who were peasants were also a force that preserved the status quo. However, it makes sense when you consider that many peasants in the German states were ill-educated and poor which in turn meant that their primary focus was on survival rather than political change. In the east many peasants were in debt to landlords, and low wages meant it was difficult to pay them off. Even where peasants were less poor and owned their own farms such as in the West, bad harvests could have a catastrophic effect on them. For as long as the peasants remained at this level, Metternich believed that it would stop them from worrying about 'abstractions and ambitions' such as political power, liberalism and nationalism. In a way, poverty promoted conservatism and the conservative outlook was aided by the role of the Church. Both Catholics and Protestants were taught to respect and obey their rulers, and to believe in the



concept of the divine right to rule whereby kings were ordained by God to provide order in an evil world.

Despite this bedrock of conservatism, the years after 1815 did witness some progressive developments, particularly in terms of the economy. The introduction of the first railway in 1825 heralded a period of building that introduced over 2000km of track in just 11 years. The railways were a significant force for change for a range of reasons. In addition to improving communications between the different regions of Germany, the railways created greater sense of unity through the need for cross-border timekeeping. Furthermore, in addition to the new jobs working on the railways themselves, the demand for coal and iron led to an increase in production of these resources within the German states rather than relying on British imports.

Alongside the development of coal and iron mining, factory processes began to be introduced into cities throughout the German states from the 1820s onwards. The number of steam engines in Germany increased from around 400 in 1834 to 1200 in 1850, producing goods that could be transported far and wide on the new railway network.

The economic expansion sparked by this industrial revolution was aided by the establishment of the Zollverein by Prussia in 1818. This customs union was gradually extended to the other German states, meaning that by 1834 all the German states – except Austria – shared a single system of tariffs for the import and export of goods. Austria had originally chosen to exclude itself from the Zollverein as its own industry was inefficient and needed the protection of high tariffs. The Zollverein encouraged the different German states to work together for their common economic interests. However, as we will go on to see, it also strengthened Prussia's influence over the German states and began to push Austria out.

The economic development witnessed during the 1820s and 30s saw the growth of a new middle class. Despite their wealth, however, the middle class lacked political influence as that was still reserved for the aristocracy. It was frustrating to them that the new economic strength lay in industry, but the government's experience lay in agriculture. Furthermore, the German Confederation laid numerous obstacles in the way of industrial expansion due to the different laws, weights and measures between the German states. It's therefore unsurprising that the chambers of commerce where the middle class met witnessed some of the earliest demands for political change. Liberalism offered the middle class the chance of a say in government and, while nationalism was less appealing, the idea of a united German state was economically attractive.

With this conflict between progressive and conservative forces developing throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it should be of little surprise that the German States witnessed significant unrest during the European revolutions of 1848 and 49. The overthrow of the French King, Louis Philippe, in February 1848 sparked a wave of similar protests, demonstrations and uprisings across Europe. However, the revolutions had many other long and medium term causes.



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I've already spoken about the significant economic changes that had taken place in the German States during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. While industrialization presented major benefits for the middle class business owners, the men, women and children employed in areas such as the textile industry often worked for 13 or more hours a day for very little pay. However, the textile industry suffered a recession in the 1840s which led to wages being cut, or people being made unemployed.

The situation in the countryside was no better, as a massive population explosion led to higher demand for land which in turn led to very high rents for tenant farmers. In turn, the demand for food from the growing population put the food supplies close to breaking point both in towns and the countryside. This precarious situation was made worse by disastrous corn harvests in 1846 and 1847, which coincided with an outbreak of potato blight that wiped out the staple food for most German peasants and increased cereal prices by almost 50%. Consequently workers and peasants alike began demanding a better life with enough food, decent housing, a shorter working day and improved working conditions. In Berlin, the capital of Prussia, some workers organized themselves into Workers' Committees, demanding trades unions, free education and a guaranteed minimum wage. They held demonstrations and elected representative assemblies to discuss their problems.

The problem was that in 1848 power lay with the nobility. They owned land, and held senior positions in the government and army. Members of the middle class who were qualified as teachers, lawyers, doctors and civil servants found that there were not enough jobs to go round, especially in the civil service where all the senior posts were held by nobles. As a result, the new political ideas of liberalism and nationalism were very attractive to the discontented middle classes of Germany. The uprising in France merely provided the spark to a tinderbox of German discontent.

In the next podcast we'll look at the events and the aftermath of revolutions in the German states, but I'll leave you with an interesting quote from Prince Hohenlohe, a German noble who sympathized with the ideas of liberalism. "In the history of every nation there is an epoch in which it comes to full self consciousness and claims liberty to determine its own destiny... We Germans have reached this stage. The nation demands a share in public administration as never before..."