



Germany after 1849

This is a transcript of the “Germany After 1849” podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In this series of podcasts, we’ve seen that Austria was the dominant power in the German Confederation during the first half of the 19th Century. However, we’ve also witnessed the growing power of Prussia, and it’s fair to say that the changing relationship between these two states had a significant effect on the unification of Germany. Whether Austria declined in power, or whether Prussia’s influence simply overtook it is a complex debate that I’m not going to address in this series of podcasts. Whichever interpretation you favour, the fact remains that in 1850 Austria demonstrated its dominance by resurrecting the German Confederation and forcing Prussia to abandon the Erfurt Union but, just 16 years later, the roles were reversed as Austria suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866.

The seeds of this increased rivalry were sown in the years immediately following the 1848 revolutions. The Erfurt Union was formed in May 1850 after the *Dreikönigsbundis* or League of Three Kings featuring Prussia, Saxony and Hannover bullied 17 other states into joining together to form a new German Confederation. The significance of this move was that Austria was actively excluded – the Union was effectively attempting to create a *Kleindeutschland* (or small Germany, one without Austria) as opposed to *Grossdeutschland* which would have included Austria. Austria’s attention was diverted due to ongoing uprisings in Hungary but, by the spring of 1850, was ready to reassert its dominance over the German States. This coincided with a dispute over the state of Hesse-Cassel, in which the Prussian King backed down from possible war against Austria and led to the humiliation of the Declaration of Olmutz in November 1850. The Declaration of Olmutz was Prussian acceptance of Austria’s dominance – they agreed to the restoration of the German Confederation and abandoned the Erfurt Union. But although Prussia ‘lost’ to Austria, it also signalled the start of an intense rivalry between the two.

Three key issues in the 1850s further demonstrated this rivalry. In 1854 the Crimean War saw Austria become isolated both within German confederation and in terms of international relations. Russia had assisted Austria during the revolutions in 1849, and expected Austrian support against the joint attack by Britain, France and Turkey. However, Austria was concerned about what Russia’s intentions in the Balkan region and so actually favoured joining the war *against* Russia. In the end, Austria didn’t join the war on either side. When the Prussian representative to the Diet of the German Confederation argued against joining the war, the other states agreed. They voted against Austria’s request to mobilise half the federal army to fight Russia as they believed the war was not vital for Germany’s interests. The outcome



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spelled bad news for Austria. Firstly, failure to support Russia isolated Austria from its long-standing conservative alliance with its fellow empire and the rivalry that emerged between Austria and Russia was to have a major effect on events throughout the remainder of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Secondly, the fact that Austria was outvoted in the German Confederation signalled a change in the balance of power within the German states, particularly since its main opponent had been Prussia and its outspoken representative. We'll get to know that representative – Otto von Bismarck – in much more detail in future podcasts. Make sure you subscribe to www.mrallsophistory.com or like my Facebook page in order to be notified when new episodes are released.

Austria was further outmanoeuvred in its attempts to deal with the Zollverein. You should remember that when the Zollverein was first created, Austria Empire chose not to join. However, by the 1850s the Austrian government had changed its policy and aimed to link the Zollverein with an Austrian customs union. The plan was that the Austrian economy required an increase in cross-border trade to stimulate growth, and joining the customs union would encourage this stimulation. However, Austria was acting too late. Prussia viewed Austria's plan as a threat to its own economic dominance of the German states, and so pressured the other members to decline Austria's proposal. The Zollverein continued under Prussia's lead and, without Austria as a member, further isolated the Habsburg Empire from the German States while building Prussian confidence. The Zollverein consequently had a major role in establishing Prussia's economic leadership within Germany.

Throughout the 1850s, therefore, Austria suffered a number of political defeats. In 1859, however, a political argument resulted in a *military* defeat for the Austrians. Austria controlled territory in Northern Italy, and became embroiled in a war against the Italian Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia who had allied with France. The German Confederation's basic allegiance lay with Austria – a fellow German state – against the threat of French expansionism. However, Prussia was not content to simply sign over its troops to assist Austria in war. Friedrich Wilhelm IV offered Prussian support, but on condition that Prussia would command the German Confederation's army if France launched a counter-attack on the Rhineland. This demand was too much for Austria, who refused to allow Prussia to exert its dominance over the north German states. Austria's refusal led to its defeat in the war, which resulted in a crisis of both prestige and finances.

One of the key factors that contributed to Prussia's growing confidence during this period was its level of economic development. We've already seen how the Prussian economy had developed in the period before 1848, but this foundation enabled it to improve at a quite startling rate in the 1850s and 1860s. Much of Prussia's industrial growth benefited from the

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natural resources available. The key industrial areas of the Ruhr, Silesia and Saarland (all which you may have come across before in your study of 20th Century European history) all lay within Prussia. The exploitation of these natural resources were at the root of Prussian economic expansion. Indeed, by 1871 Germany had become Europe's largest producer of coal and iron. The rise in production here fuelled the development of railways, ironworks, steel mills, chemicals, and electrical equipment. Household names such as the Siemens company – who we most know for mobile phones – actually began in Prussia. The founder, Werner Siemens, invented the electric dynamo. Similarly the Krupp family steelworks, which was to become of major importance in the production of weapons, was located in Prussia. It's no surprise that the state with the best steelworks went on to have the best equipped army in the Germany Confederation.

The strength of Prussia by 1859 undoubtedly had an influence on the *Nationalverein's* decision to promote Prussia as the future leader in a united Germany. Founded in 1859, the organisation was almost exclusively middle-class. It had a wide network of contacts among state organisations and officials, and so had significant lobbying influence. However, its relatively small membership (it had roughly 25,000 members at its height) meant that it never reached all areas of German society. In the words of Whitfield, the *Nationalverein* was a "vehicle for the articulate and educated middle class to express their clear preference for a united Germany on a *Kleindeutsch* basis [but] its influence over the course of events was undeniably limited."

The situation in the German states had therefore changed by the early 1860s. The balance of power between Prussia and Austria had begun to shift, as Austria experienced humiliating political and military defeats while Prussia's confidence grew alongside its economy. There is no doubt that Prussia was in a pivotal position in post-revolutionary Europe, but it needed a strong leader to turn that potential into action. That leader was Otto von Bismarck, a ruthless politician who was appointed to the role of Prussian Chancellor in 1862. In the next podcast we'll explore the character and actions of Bismarck in order to reach a judgement on the extent of his role in the history of German unification.