The Franco-Prussian War and the Unification of Germany

This is a transcript of the "Franco-Prussian War and the Unification of Germany" podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In order to understand how Germany was finally unified, we need to return to the end of the Austro-Prussian War and remind ourselves of its consequences. The Prussian defeat of Austria in 1866 laid the groundwork for a number of changes within Prussia. First and foremost was the fact that the Prussian army had proved its worth. However, it was clear that the improvements had only been possible due to Bismarck pushing through the illegal collection of taxes to fund the Army Reforms. As much as the liberals quarrelled with Bismarck's actions, they had to accept that the reforms had led to achieving the liberal ambition of uniting large parts of Germany. The liberals were put further into a corner when, in the glow of victory over Austria, conservative politicians aligned with Bismarck made large gains in the elections for the Landtag.

Bismarck used this opportunity to put an Indemnity Bill to the Landtag that backdated the approval of tax collection to 1862. Carried by large majority, the Indemnity Bill effectively meant that the previously illegal taxes were now completely legitimate. Even this bill split the liberals. While the progressives voted against it, moderates voted in favour. Furthermore, the moderates joined together with similar groups across Germany to form the National Liberal party which was to prove useful to Bismarck as they were prepared to tolerate a monarchy if it meant a united Germany. Looking to Bismarck to finish the job, they formed biggest party in the Reichstag elections of 1867 and consequently lent massive legitimacy to Bismarck's actions.

The Peace of Prague also brought about the creation of the North German Confederation, and it is worth us taking a moment to consider how it operated. First and foremost, the King of Prussia was the President of the Confederation and had control over the army, declarations of war, foreign policy and making peace. He also had the right to appoint Ministers who answered only to him, thus giving him almost complete control of the governance of the Confederation. Bismarck, meanwhile, not only remained Minister-President of Prussia but also became Chancellor of Confederation. Therefore Prussia held the most authority within the Confederation although, in order to maintain good relations with the other states, a *Bundesrat* was created – a form of executive council made of the other Princes.

Meanwhile, a Reichstag was created which was elected by universal suffrage. Although this sounds like an enormously progressive development, it isn't quite as radical as it sounds. Firstly, the *Bundesrat* had to approve any of the Reichstag's decisions which effectively gave the Princes a veto. Bismarck also knew that the peasants who made up majority of population were quite conservative, and so were unlikely to vote for parties who were too liberal or progressive in the first place. Other limits were placed on the Reichstag's financial powers to ensure they did not become too powerful or hold the government to ransom as had happened in 1862 with the Army Reforms Law. In terms of federal taxes – those which applied to the entire Confederation – only indirect taxes could be set by the Reichstag. Also, while they could vote annually on the Confederation's budget, military spending was decided by a separate budget –the Iron Budget – which was outside parliamentary control. This consequently ensured that the Confederation's army could continue to build up its strength which, in the end, secured defeat of France and the unification of Germany.

It's really Prussia's relationship with France that shaped the period from 1866, and is characterised by increasing French frustration. Due to the defeat of Austria in 1866, Napoleon sought additional territory for France in the Saarland, in order to redress the shifting balance of power. Presenting this as a threat to the Southern German states as a whole, Bismarck persuaded them to negotiate a military alliance with the North German Confederation. In return for Prussian assistance in case of a French invasion, the terms of the agreement dictated that the Southern States needed to reform their armies along Prussian lines and agree to come to Prussia's aid if she was attacked. Against this power bloc a frustrated Napoleon was forced to withdraw his demands for land, which had the result of increasing tensions between France and Prussia.

In his next attempt to increase French territory, Napoleon III turned his attention to Luxembourg. The small country bordered France, and came under Dutch sovereignty. However, Luxembourg was a part of the German Confederation and Prussia had a garrison of troops stationed there. Napoleon negotiated with Holland to buy Luxembourg from them, but this was met with massive opposition from the German nationalists. Bismarck used the threat of his military alliances with the Southern States to get Napoleon to the discussion table. This led to the Treaty of London being signed 1867, which guaranteed Luxembourg's independence and led to Prussia withdrawing its forces. Although this at first sounds like a bit of a defeat for Bismarck, his success lay in yet again managed to block France's attempts to expand its territory.

Napoleon became increasingly humiliated by these diplomatic embarrassments, and felt isolated. Although Napoleon wanted to make alliances it simply wasn't possible. Britain wanted to remain neutral while Russia was still bitter over its defeat in the Crimea and French support for the Polish rebels in 1863. Italy said it would only agree to an alliance if French troops withdrew from Rome, which was unacceptable to French public opinion. Although interested in the idea of an alliance, Austria said that it would only join if Italy did. It's no surprise that France felt isolated.

The unification of Germany was completed in 1871 after Prussia defeated France in war. It's important that you have a clear understanding of the sequence of events that led to the outbreak of the Austro-Prussian war. Bismarck was a tactician, and successfully took steered events to ensure he avoided looking too aggressive.

The event that kick-started the chain of events things is known as the Hohenzollern Candidature. After the overthrow of the Spanish Queen Isabella II, Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (a relative of King Wilhelm I of Prussia) was offered the crown by the new government.   Leopold accepted the offer with support from Bismarck and Wilhelm I, but France found out before the arrangement was finalised. Unsurprisingly, Napoleon III complained that the appointment would mean France was surrounded by Prussian influence. In the face of France's hostility, Wilhelm I persuaded Leopold to withdraw his acceptance.

Count Benedetti, the French Ambassador to Prussia, met Wilhelm shortly afterwards to demand a promise that the candidature would not be renewed. Wilhelm saw this as questioning his honour as a King, and refused to give the promise. He sent Bismarck a message via telegraph to let him know what had happened, and Bismarck seized the opportunity to stir up even more animosity between France and Prussia. He released an edited version of the telegram – known as the Ems Telegram – which changed the tone of the meeting to give the impression that Wilhelm had offended the

French Ambassador. This pushed Napoleon, persuaded by media and his wife, to declare war on Prussia on 19 July 1871. As with the war against Austria in 1866, Bismarck had once again managed to strain relations so far that the other country was forced to act first.

Aided by its superior military planning and rail links, Prussia mobilised quickly. France was defeated decisively within 4 weeks, and the Prussians captured more than 100,000 prisoners of war including Emperor Napoleon III himself. Although the war dragged on another 5 months due to the siege of Paris, the republican government eventually agreed to an armistice and signed the Peace of Frankfurt in 1871. The regions of Alsace and Lorraine went to Germany and France was forced to pay indemnity of 5000 million francs, laying the foundations for resentment that lasted until way into the Twentieth Century.

For the time being, however, France was in no position to respond. In Germany, a wave of popular support swept across the southern states who called to unite with the North German Confederation. After some complex negotiation they did – and Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany was crowned.

The three wars – against Denmark, Austria and France – characterise the years immediately prior to the unification while Bismarck is often seen as the architect of unification as he was the politician who steered Prussia through the 1860s. However, when explaining the reasons for German Unification it's important to remember that its origins lay way before the 1860s. If it wasn't for the strength of the Prussian Army, the military successes could never have been achieved. This military strength was partly due to the heavy industry that developed in Prussia during the 1850s and which enabled the army to equip itself with some of the finest weapons of the age. The long-term impact of the Prussian economy – exercised through the Zollverein customs union – also had a role to play since this had established Prussia as a major player within the German states from much earlier in the 19th Century. Meanwhile, the diplomatic effect of Austria's failures over the Crimea, and its military defeat to Italy, meant that its power had declined relative to that of Prussia.

Any question on the unification of Germany would need at least some consideration of such a range of factors. Looking only at the events of the 1860s does not fully explain why it was *Prussia* who was able to unify the German states in 1871. You need to make sure that any answer on this topic shows an awareness of the complex set of multiple causes explored in this series of podcasts. Thanks for listening to these downloads from www.mrallsophistory.com, and good luck.