

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

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Unit: II: Unification of Germany: Bismarck

Module Name: Unification of Germany: Bismarck

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Notes

Unification of Germany

It was only in the beginning of the 19th century that efforts towards German unification were made which ultimately succeeded in 1870.

Congress of Vienna (1815)

The dawn of sense of nationality in Germany is to be traced to the struggle with Napoleon Bonaparte and after the Battle of Waterloo, the German liberals looked forward for the reorganization of Germany on a national basis.

However their hopes of a free, unified, united and strong Germany dashed against ground when the reactionary Congress of Vienna continued the Napoleonic Confederation of the Rhine consisting of 38 states now under Austrian presidency with a parliament at Frankfurt.

The Carlsbad Decrees (1819)

When such was the state of affairs in Germany, the students helped by professors in universities formed associations to keep alive national and democratic ideas.

In 1817, Kotzebue, a journalist suspected to be a Russian spy was murdered. Metternich seized this opportunity and calling a meeting of the ministers of most important states of Germany at Carlsbad, passed a number of decrees by which: Universities were brought under direct Government control, the press was muzzled and censored and student associations were suppressed.

The Zollverein (1834)

The July Revolution of 1830 in France profoundly affected the fortunes of Germany. It was during this revolutionary epoch that the first step, in the real sense of the term, was taken towards German unity by and through creation of **Zollverein**, i.e., the Customs Union.

These were in the form of commercial treaties by which various states of German Confederation agreed to adopt a policy of free trade among them by abolishing the custom duties. The Zollverein came into operation on 1st January, unifying Germany economically long before political unity was achieved.

Role of Frederick William IV.

In Prussia, the accession of Frederick William IV to the throne inaugurated a limited era of liberalism with the release of political offenders and restoration of professors in universities, besides granting of a constitution which provided for a parliament or Estates-General.

But this spell of liberalism ended suddenly with the king reversing his original stand. He dissolved the parliament because it provoked him with more demands for political reforms.

The Frankfurt Parliament (1848)

After the February Revolution of 1848 in France and the fall of Metternich in Austria, the liberal elements in Germany made an earnest effort to achieve national unity by calling the national parliament at Frankfurt. The Parliament was attended by 600 members representing different state legislatures in Germany. It framed a new constitution which provided for a hereditary Emperor and the king of Prussia was to grace the exalted office. But the king refused to accept the crown from the hands of a revolutionary assembly. In 1861, William I, came to the throne. The entire life of the new king had been spent in the army which he loved passionately. He was fully convinced that Prussia's destinies were very much dependent upon her army; hence in 1846, he wrote "whoever wishes to rule Germany must conquer it and that cannot be done by phrases". Like Frederick the Great, he believed that "diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments".

Bismarck's Policy of Blood and Iron

The king decided to increase the strength of the Prussian army and impart training on modern lines. But the parliament refused to accept his new military bills and the king was left with no alternative but to abdicate. At this critical juncture Otto Von Bismarck, a Prussian diplomat known to be a staunch conservative and devout royalist was recalled to Berlin and appointed as the chancellor of Prussia. Bismarck was a strong supporter of German unification and considered Austria as its greatest enemy. Bismarck appeared before the parliament and delivered his blood and iron speech. He said all German states look to Prussia with great respect not because of her democratic set-up but for her strength. The great issues of the today will not be decided by speeches and majority votes, that was the mistake of 1848, but by blood and iron, by which he meant swift decision and effective use of force. In order to create unified and united Germany Bismarck waged three wars in the course of six years, viz, against Denmark, Austria and France.

The War Against Denmark (1864)

The war between Prussia and Denmark in 1864 grew out of the Schleswig-Holstein question, the two duchies (provinces) between Germany and Denmark. The king of Denmark since the 10th century was also the Duke of these duchies but never interfered in their internal affairs. The population of Schleswig was half German and half Danish whereas Holstein was wholly German. In 1863, Christian IX, the new king of Denmark promulgated a constitution which incorporated Schleswig into Denmark and held Holstein with closer ties, thereby violating the international Treaty of London signed in 1852, which had forbidden Denmark from changing

the status of the two duchies. The people of the duchies revolted against the change and to make matters worse, the Duke of Augustenburg also revived his claim to the two duchies. Bismarck decided to exploit the situation in favour of Prussia. With the intention of finding an excuse to fight with Austria later, Bismarck sought cooperation of Austria by signing a treaty of friendship. He then issued an ultimatum to Denmark calling upon her to withdraw the new Danish Constitution within 48 hours. The Danish king refused to comply with it. This was followed by Austro-Prussian attack upon Denmark. The Danes fought bravely and desperately but unable to withstand the two big powers, Denmark surrendered both the duchies to Austria and Prussia jointly.

Convention of Gastein 1865

Within a year serious differences arose between the two powers over division of the duchies. Hence under the Convention of Gastein, it was agreed that Austria was to occupy and administer Holstein and Prussia was to occupy and administer Schleswig. It was also agreed that the question of the two duchies was never to be brought before the German Diet.

The Austro-Prussian War (1866)

The Convention of Gastein was mainly intended to “paper over cracks”. It gave Bismarck enough time to prepare his country diplomatically and militarily to wage another war in order to end Austria’s hegemony over German states. By brilliant strokes of diplomacy he secured the neutrality of French king Napoleon III by talk of future compensation and concluded an alliance with the new kingdom of Italy to attack Austria in the south, with the promise of Venetia. He relied on Russia’s friendship and Britain’s disinterest in European war. His next move was to provoke Austria into a war and make Prussia appear as defending herself. With this plan in mind he picked up a quarrel with Austria by proposing a scheme of reforms for the German Confederation in which Austria would be completely omitted. Austria objected to the scheme and brought the question of the duchies before the German diet. Bismarck accused Austria of violating the Convention of Gastein and drove away Austrians from Holstein. Austria with the help of nine big German states, attacked Prussia to teach her a lesson. The Austro-Prussian war ended in seven weeks with Prussians winning a brilliant victory in the great battle of Sadowa in July 1866. By the Treaty of Prague, Austria ceded Venetia to Italy, Schleswig-Holstein to Prussia, withdrew from the German confederation allowing Prussia to control the German states in the north. However Bismarck did not humiliate Austria by capturing Vienna because he needed her neutrality during Franco-Prussian war.

The Franco-Prussian War (1870)

“A war with France lay in the logic of history”, wrote Bismarck characteristically in his Memories referring to the deep-rooted rivalry of Germany and France. It was therefore clear that France would not allow German unification without a fight. The immediate cause of the Franco-Prussian war was the Hohenzollern candidature to the throne of Spain. In 1869, the Spaniards overthrew and exiled their ruling Bourbon Queen Isabella and offered the crown to Prince Leopold, a very distant cousin of the Prussian King. But Leopold declined to accept because of the French objections. However, when they renewed their offer in 1870, he accepted with the consent of the Prussian king upon which the French sent a stern warning of dire consequences, forcing him to resign. Napoleon III, king of France was not satisfied with Leopold’s resignation, he directed the French ambassador to meet the Prussian king at Emms and demand an assurance that his candidature would never be revived in future. The Prussian king refused to accept the demand and sent a telegram containing an account of his interview with the French ambassador. Bismarck abridged the telegram and published the same in German news papers in a form and tone such as would make the Prussians think that their king was insulted and the French that their ambassador was humiliated. When the news

reached France everybody demanded an immediate declaration of war which they did on July 19th 1870. Convinced that a war with France was inevitable Bismarck took utmost care to diplomatically isolate France so that she would not get aid from any quarter. He sought the neutrality of Russia, who had not forgotten the Crimean war in which France defeated Russia. Austrian goodwill was already won by treating her leniently after her defeat at Sadowa. Italy was annoyed with Napoleon III for his betrayal in the Austro-Sardinian war and obliged to Prussia over Venetia. Bismarck made European view France as an aggressor. Finally the south German states, hostile to Prussia now considered France as an aggressive enemy and made common cause with her. The French were beaten decisively at the Battle of Sedan, where their army surrendered and the king was taken prisoner. Then began the famous siege of Paris lasting for four months, the Parisians capitulating after the bombardment for three days. The Treaty of Frankfurt was extraordinarily harsh and forced France to cede Alsace and Lorraine and pay a unprecedented war indemnity besides supporting an army of occupation till it was done. This completed the German unification. The Prussian king was crowned the king of unified Germany at Versailles in the famous Hall of Mirrors.