

The Unification of Germany

The Unification of Germany (1864-1871)

A concise, structured overview for study or quick reference

1. Historical Background

Period	Key Features
Holy Roman Empire (962-1806)	Loose confederation of German-language states; no central authority.
German Confederation (1815-1866)	39 sovereign states created by the Congress of Vienna; dominated by Austria and Prussia.
Rise of Nationalism	Romantic ideas, economic integration (Zollverein), and liberal movements demanded a unified German nation.

2. Main Actors

Person	Position	Vision for Germany
Otto von Bismarck	Prussian Prime Minister (later Chancellor)	“Blood and Iron” – unification through realpolitik, war, and diplomatic isolation of opponents.
King Wilhelm I	King of Prussia (later German Emperor)	Backed Bismarck’s policies; became the first Kaiser (1871).
Ludwig II of Bavaria	King of Bavaria	Initially skeptical of Prussian dominance; joined the empire after negotiations.
Austrian Empire	Multi-ethnic empire, rival to Prussia	Opposed a Prussian-led Germany; later excluded from the unified state.

3. The Three Wars of Unification

Conflict	Dates	Parties	Outcome & Significance

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Danish War (Second Schleswig War)	1864	Prussia + Austria vs. Denmark	Annexed the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein, and Lauenburg. Demonstrated Prussian? Austrian cooperation and gave Bismarck a foothold in German politics.
Austro? Prussian War (Seven Weeks' War)	1866	Prussia (led by Bismarck) vs. Austria + German Confederation	Decisive Prussian victory at Königgrätz (Sadowa). Result: dissolution of the German Confederation; creation of the North German Confederation (Prussia?led) excluding Austria.
Franco? Prussian War	1870? 1871	Prussia (North German Confederation) + southern German states vs. France	French defeat; capture of Napoleon III; proclamation of the German Empire (Second Reich) at Versailles on 18 January 1871. Unified northern and southern German states under a single monarch.

4. Political Structure of the New German Empire

Element	Description
Emperor (Kaiser)	Wilhelm I (King of Prussia) – hereditary head of state.
Bundesrat	Federal council representing the 25 constituent states; Prussia held 17 votes (majority).
Reichstag	Lower house elected by universal male suffrage; limited legislative power, subject to the Kaiser and Bundesrat.
Chancellor	Head of government (Bismarck retained the post). Accountable to the Kaiser, not the Reichstag.
Constitution	Adopted 1871; combined federalism with strong central authority, heavily weighted toward Prussia.

5. Key Domestic Policies (Bismarck's "Innerpolitik")

1. Kulturkampf (1871?1878)

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- Conflict with the Catholic Church over state control of education and appointments.
- Result: Partial reconciliation; the policy weakened Catholic political influence (Centre Party).

2. Social Welfare Legislation