

# German unification

German-speaking states were being left behind during the Industrial Revolution. We chart the steps which, under Otto von Bismarck, brought those states to form a single political entity

## The German-speaking 'mosaic'

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Europe was in the midst of a technological revolution that was transforming economic production and transport. Steam power and iron construction expanded the size of machines and the pace of output. Above all, the development of steam railways was binding continents together and breaking down local and regional markets in favour of national and ultimately international ones. They were also bringing about a revolution in military capabilities.

Strong, united countries, notably France, the UK and the USA were in a good position to exploit the new potential. By comparison, Germany was not. It did not exist as a state. German-speaking central Europe was divided into three relatively sizeable states — Prussia, Austria and Bavaria — and a mosaic of smaller dukedoms and the like. Economically this meant goods were subject to a variety of laws, taxes and transport tolls on, for example, the Rhine. This made German goods less competitive.

The growing strength of Britain and France also meant that Prussia, the largest and most powerful of the German states, was in danger of falling behind in the race for arms, influence and empire which other great powers were pursuing.

## Stages towards unification

As early as 1834, a customs union (*zollverein*) was pioneered which, by the mid-1860s, included the majority of German states except for Austria. However, at this point there was no political federation between the German-speaking states.

The impetus to political unification came from Prussia and is associated with the career of Otto von Bismarck (1815–98). Historians dispute whether Bismarck had a master plan for unification or simply took advantage of situations enabling, essentially, Prussia to take over Germany, apart from Austria.

Unification came about by stages. Internally, the *zollverein* states formed a North German Confederation in 1867 and Bismarck used this as the key building block for the new Germany. The main southern German states, excluding Austria, were also incorporated. By 1870, Prussia had effectively taken over the smaller German states.

Externally there were wars against Denmark, Austria and France. In 1864 Prussia annexed the formerly Danish provinces of Schleswig and Holstein. A war with Austria in 1866 turned the Austrian-dominated German Confederation into the Prussian-oriented North German Confederation (the largely Catholic states of Bavaria, Baden and Wurtemberg remained outside). In 1870–1 a war with France ended French opposition to having an increasingly powerful neighbour on its border. The new German empire resulting from this sequence of manoeuvres was proclaimed in the French palace of Versailles.

1815 1820 1825 1830 1835 1840 1845 1850 1855 1860 1865 1870

**1815**  
Congress of Vienna sets up the German Confederation, a loose association of states under Austrian influence

**1834**  
Prussia establishes a customs union comprising most of the German Confederation, except Austria

**1864**  
Danish–Prussian war over the dynastic succession to Schleswig-Holstein  
**1 February**  
Prussia, with Austrian support, invades the province  
**30 October**  
Treaty of Vienna. Northern Schleswig is incorporated in Prussia, Holstein is assigned to Austria

**1871**  
**18 January**  
Bismarck proclaims Wilhelm emperor (Kaiser) of the German empire (Reich) in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles  
**28 January**  
Paris surrenders. War ends  
**10 May**  
Treaty of Frankfurt. Incorporation of Bavaria, Baden and Wurtemberg in the North German Confederation, effectively uniting Germany apart from Austria. Alsace and Lorraine also incorporated

**1862**  
Bismarck is appointed by King Wilhelm I to the posts of minister president and foreign minister of Prussia

**1866**  
Bismarck complains of Austrian interference in Schleswig and invades Holstein; Austria retaliates by declaring war on Prussia, provoking the Seven Weeks War and is rapidly defeated  
**23 August**  
Treaty of Prague. The German Confederation is replaced by a Prussian-dominated North German Confederation

**1868**  
Spanish Succession Dispute. The selection of a German candidate as new king is opposed by France

**1870**  
German candidacy of Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen is withdrawn  
**13 July**  
Ems Telegram from the Kaiser to Bismarck fans a war frenzy in France  
**19 July**  
France under Napoleon III declares war on Prussia  
**1–2 September**  
France defeated in Battle of Sedan. Napoleon III captured

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