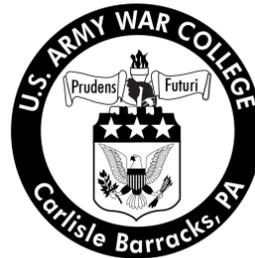


Coercive Diplomacy: Otto von  
Bismarck and the  
Unification of Germany

by

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United States Army War College  
Class of 2012

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OTTO VON BISMARCK AND THE UNIFICATION OF GERMANY**

by

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## ABSTRACT

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## COERCIVE DIPLOMACY: OTTO VON BISMARCK AND THE UNIFICATION OF GERMANY

Bismarck is a colossal figure in modern history. He is the incarnation of German unity.

—Emilio Castelar<sup>1</sup>

Otto von Bismarck, Prussia's "Iron Chancellor," exercised extraordinary diplomatic power as the champion of German unity. Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, he politically maneuvered Prussia's rise to the rank of a first-rate power. Exercising extraordinary skill as a diplomat and politician, he forged a German empire under Prussian leadership that was ultimately realized on January 18, 1871, when King William I was crowned Emperor (Kaiser) of Germany in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. This creation of Germany's Second Reich and the empire's subsequent elevation to the rank of a world power is directly attributable to the cunning diplomacy of Bismarck. Arguably, Bismarck was the dominant political figure in Europe during the nineteenth century. With acute political moves, he adroitly manipulated opportunities to achieve European hegemony for Germany and, thus, considerably altered Europe's political scene and balance of power. As the principal architect of German unification, he utilized subtle diplomacy, the formation of alliances, and a series of calculated wars against his European neighbors and German states to create Germany's second empire. Remarkably, Bismarck revised the continent's geopolitical landscape and achieved his political aim to increase Prussian power by consolidating Europe's German states without triggering a Europe-wide war—a feat few other statesmen can claim.

The purpose of this paper is to assess Bismarck's statesmanship by examining how he maneuvered diplomatically to unify Germany. It begins with a brief overview of

the European state system in the nineteenth century, particularly as it relates to the formation of the German Confederation in 1815, and continues with a short summary of the revolutionary movement that shaped German politics following the Napoleonic wars. The focus then narrows to analyze Bismarck's use of power and persuasion during the wars of German unification to fulfill his political aim to elevate Prussia as the dominant force of Germany and as Europe's leading power. Finally, the paper concludes with an emphasis on Bismarck's diplomatic prowess, which is credited with uniting Germany under Prussia's crown and sealing his place in history as one of the most preeminent figures of nineteenth century European politics.

### German Confederation and the Rebirth of Nationalism

The new European order that emerged following the rise of Germany's Second Reich began to take shape at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, when the statesmen there established the German Confederation—an international system of consolidated, but not united, German states under the leadership of the dual powers of Austria and Prussia. The purpose of the Confederation was to bring some semblance of order to the more than thirty German states that occupied the geopolitically fragmented territories of central Europe. It also served to deter future French expansionism, as well as to forestall German national unity. Essentially, then, the German Confederation was intended to “provide security against the dangers of external attack and internal revolution.”<sup>2</sup> As a mechanism to balance power across the region, the German Confederation proved too strong to invite attack, yet too weak to alarm neighboring European states. In this respect, the victors at the Congress of Vienna fused together a political alliance that brought peace and stability to Europe for more than a generation during the post-Napoleonic era. Indeed, international tensions remained relatively low

across the European continent following the Confederation's establishment, as no major war took place among the Great Powers—France, Great Britain, Prussia, Austria, and Russia—for nearly forty years until the Crimean War of 1854, which shattered the alliance of Russia, Prussia, and Austria and began to realign the concert of powers across Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the effective role that the German Confederation played in maintaining peace and stability in Europe, competition between Austria and Prussia for overall leadership of the German states remained a significant international issue in European politics. Although the two countries were the leading and most powerful states in the German Confederation, Austria, by tradition, was the ranking power. The Hapsburg monarchy had no intention of surrendering the paramount position it had enjoyed for centuries over the fabric of German and non-German duchies across central Europe. It is worth noting that the Germanic population of the Hapsburg monarchy, while politically dominant, was a distinct minority. Nonetheless, friction between the dual powers steadily gained momentum following the formation of the Confederation, as both states asserted their respective authority over all of Germany and as each began to pursue its own self-interests.

As Bismarck recognized, self-interest is the state's primary motive in conducting foreign policy. In this respect, he was a true practitioner of Realpolitik—a term used to describe a foreign policy based on calculations of power and national interest. Adherents to the tenets of Realpolitik “evaluate ideas as forces in relation to all the other forces relevant to making a decision; and the various elements needed to be judged by how well they could serve the national interest, not by preconceived ideologies.”<sup>4</sup> In this

tradition of Realpolitik, Bismarck's correct calculus of Prussian power enabled him to pursue foreign policy objectives that enhanced the state's influence vis-à-vis its European and Russian neighbors. Characteristically, Bismarck viewed political parity or alliance with Austria as an inhibitor to Prussian aims to unify Germany under its leadership. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a clash between these dual Germanic powers was mounting as both states also wrestled with their own unique domestic concerns.

In addition to the growing international tensions between Austria and Prussia, post-Napoleonic Germany was also characterized by heightened domestic issues, particularly demands for liberal reforms and increased national sentiment. Reinforced by the establishment of the German Confederation in 1815, the idea of German nationalism began to gain momentum throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. By the time Bismarck was appointed to the chancellorship of Prussia in 1862, a German national sentiment was already present throughout the geographically dispersed duchies. This growing national consciousness was accentuated by the call for a closer political union among the German states. For the first time "words such as 'German' and 'Fatherland' entered the common lexicon. While the idea of a unified German nation was still embryonic, German culture flourished."<sup>5</sup> It became increasingly evident that the forces of nationalism and liberalism were uniting against monarchical rule, dynastic allegiance, and the militaristic traditions of the Prussian state. The early nineteenth century was the heyday of European romanticism, of which nationalism was a distinctive part. It was an essential motive in 1848 during the German Revolution.

## The 1848 Revolution

The revolutionary fervor that gripped Europe in 1848 gave birth to a new sense of German nationalism. In January 1848, popular uprisings stirred in Italy. Within a month, the French monarchy was overthrown and a new republic was established in Paris. The revolution soon spread to Germany, and by March the liberal movement forced the resignation of Austria's Prince Metternich. The effects of the revolution caused German sovereigns to compromise their monarchical authority and give their respective countries constitutions and popular representatives. Although Prussia was more stable than its European neighbors, maintaining a strong army and an efficient administration, it yielded to the same pressures. King Frederick William cowered in the face of conflict, ordered his military to cease fighting the revolutionaries, and agreed to the organization of a German national assembly and a Prussian parliament.

As the staunchest defender of Prussia's old regime, Bismarck was incensed by the revolution's initial triumph. He first attempted to persuade the military's leadership to wage a counter-revolution. However, the Prussian generals refused to act without explicit orders from their civilian masters. Next, he proposed that Frederick William relinquish his crown so that his [William's] son could ascend the throne as a political figurehead.<sup>6</sup> This maneuver also failed. Liberalism had thus taken root, and the people of Germany celebrated the overthrow of authority and attainment of popular sovereignty. Bismarck, however, did not share these feelings, upholding his intense personal convictions of duty to crown and country. He saw only the threat to the Prussian monarchy, the subjection of the king to parliamentary rule, and the dissolution of the Prussian state into Germany. "Bismarck made himself noteworthy by his

championship of Prussian superiority, and his lack of faith in the constitutional movement.”<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the German revolution failed because the National Assembly that organized in Frankfurt lacked executive leadership under the crowns of either Austria or Prussia and failed to unite the disparate German states or draft an acceptable constitution. The Assembly also suffered from a lack of political will to lead fundamental change. Nonetheless, the importance of the events of 1848 cannot be undervalued because of this perceived failure of the revolution, as the German popular movement had gained legitimacy. Equally significant, the idea of German nationhood and Germany as a future powerful state actor on the international stage began to take practical shape at this time.

Although it is not my purpose here to examine in detail the German liberal movement of the nineteenth century and the revolution it inspired in 1848, several points are worth emphasizing. First, the emergent national sentiment was widespread—albeit loosely organized—across the German-speaking states of Europe, as the ideal of German national unity began growing in appeal for most Germans. The popular movement, which was manifested in the revolutionary parliament of the Frankfurt Assembly of the German Confederation, petitioned for increased political freedoms and liberal state policies. Additionally, demands for constitutional reforms, such as parliamentary representation of all German citizens within the Confederation instead of council representation for only the monarchs of the various sovereign German states, were also made. To this end, the Frankfurt Assembly called for a restructured government under the monarchy, and for German unity. Second, the national uprisings

throughout Germany, although short-lived (1848-1849), brought to the political stage a more vocal middle class that challenged the German nobility and aristocratic bureaucracy. German liberalism was beginning to emerge as a political force. As Otto Pflanze, an internationally recognized historian of 19th-century Germany, reveals in his monumental work on Bismarck:

Liberalism had become the conventional language of protest, and through its terminology...the dissatisfied gave voice to their resentments. The spontaneous violence of the masses elevated to power the moderate liberals who had never approved of revolution but were now called upon to lead one.<sup>8</sup>

This latter point is particularly relevant, as it leads to a third, important lesson that emerges from the German liberal movement specifically concerning Otto von Bismarck. As a Prussian aristocrat and loyal servant of the Prussian crown, Bismarck believed that liberalism was the enemy of the state and that the Prussian monarchy should always retain the basis of power. For the future “Iron Chancellor,” liberalism ultimately weakened the political authority of the state and challenged the divine rights of the monarchy and its noble class. “Prussian monarchs owe their position to God’s grace and not to the gift of the people; it is a crown not hampered by any conditions.”<sup>9</sup> Bismarck’s disdain for liberalism was obvious. Nonetheless, despite his contemptuous attitude, he realized the usefulness of German nationalism to promote Prussia’s domestic and foreign policies—a realization witnessed during the series of limited wars he provoked from 1864 to 1871 in order to unite Germany. Bismarck also recognized that an aristocratic bureaucracy like Prussia was not impervious to liberal ideas. To a certain extent, “they could also be made compatible with the essential structure of the Prussian state and society.”<sup>10</sup> As evidenced by history, Bismarck eventually capitalized on this mounting awareness of German identity and liberalism to create the German

nation-state, as he combined the forces of nationalism and Prussian expansionism to achieve German unification in 1871.

### The Rising Statesman

Against this backdrop of domestic upheaval and international posturing between Prussia and Austria for leadership over the German Confederation, Bismarck rose to become Prussia's leading statesman, assuming the office of Minister-Präsident, or Prime Minister, in September 1862. As previously noted, Bismarck opposed the revolution of 1848 because it threatened the integrity of the Prussian nation and its traditional class structure. Although he believed in a union of German speaking states—less, of course, Austria and Switzerland, the latter state not being one of his political objectives—Bismarck vehemently argued against unification at the expense of Prussian independence. Although he sought German unification, his political aims were to preserve Prussia's monarchy. Still, it is worth commenting that Bismarck was no dogmatic ideologue. “[His] nationalism was of the type formed by the state rather than by a common culture.”<sup>11</sup> As Prime Minister of Prussia's monarchical system, his rule was characterized by “a high degree of ideological flexibility that allowed him swiftly to change alliances in order to play off his political adversaries against each other.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Bismarck's political genius was most evident in his ability to manipulate alliances—domestically and internationally.

Not long after assuming his new post, Bismarck refocused Prussia's policy from domestic issues to foreign affairs. In one of his first parliamentary appearances, Bismarck announced that it was time to use the Prussian army to solve the question of German national unity “by blood and iron”—the signature phrase of his political career. He declared that:

The position of Prussia in Germany will not be determined by its liberalism but by its power...Prussia must concentrate its strength and hold it for the favorable moment, that has already several times been passed. The great questions of our time will not be decided by speeches and majority decisions...but by blood and iron.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the fiery rhetoric, Bismarck's foreign policy was based on a limited objective to unify Germany under Prussian leadership. He, like other German conservatives as well as liberals, was concerned about French revanchism and believed that the best way to defend against a future attack was by uniting Germany. Bismarck was also quite cognizant of the limits of Prussia's alliance with Austria and Russia to defend central Europe against French aggression, and he knew the potential always existed for coalitions to form against him. To be sure, as Bismarck politically maneuvered to unify Germany, he remained ever mindful of Prussian actions within the concert of European states.

A key note worth highlighting here is that Bismarck did not intend to unite all of Germany. Keenly aware of the dynamics of the balance of power in Europe during the post-Napoleonic era, he recognized that a united Germany that also included Austria could threaten Russia and his European neighbors who could organize to intervene in Prussian affairs. This, Bismarck wanted to avoid. His initial actions attempted to convince the region's other political powers that he did not intend to jeopardize the equilibrium in Europe. Bismarck's astute understanding of the dynamics of international relations also cautioned him to not simply rely on military power to achieve his country's national objectives. Instead, his political leadership succeeded because he understood that the use of force was a complement, and not alternative, to diplomacy. "Diplomacy is not simply the art of persuading others to accept a set of demands. It is the art of discerning objectives the world will accept—and the restraints on one's own power that

one must accept in turn.”<sup>14</sup> Quite simply, Bismarck viewed war and diplomacy as inextricably linked together. He thus directed Prussia’s strategic initiatives and formed political alliances through a combination of power and persuasion that was virtually unequalled in history. The statesman thus reassured the other European powers that his foreign policy focused exclusively on limited objectives and a desire to simply increase Prussia’s leadership within the German Confederation with no intention of altering the geopolitical structure of the international system.

Bismarck’s sense of limits was one of his most distinguishing features as a statesman of the higher order. As Prussia’s minister of foreign affairs, he politically incited three successive wars to advance Prussian hegemony and ultimately unite Germany. Because of his limited objectives during each conflict, Bismarck effectively maintained his country’s alliances and assured that no coalition of hostile forces organized against his country. During the Danish War of 1864, Austria joined forces with Prussia to fight for political control of the two duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, and no other European power intervened. Two years later in the war against its former ally, Austria, in 1866, Prussia retained the support of several small German states and secured an allegiance with Italy. Equally critical, Russia maintained its neutrality. Lastly, in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, Austria remained neutral, largely due to the lenient peace terms that Bismarck negotiated at the close of the Austro-Prussian War. Prussia also enjoyed the support of the newly united North German Confederation.

Further showcasing his diplomatic skill, Bismarck not only persuaded the major powers of the limits of his wars’ political objectives, but he also convinced them that he had just cause for waging war. His arguments: Denmark and Austria both violated

established treaties—so claimed Bismarck—and France declared war against the Hohenzollern crown, thereby reinforcing the appearance that Prussia was merely waging a defensive campaign. “In each of these wars [of German unification] Prussia’s adversary either had broken a fairly recent treaty or was chargeable with the first overt act of aggression. In each case, accordingly, Prussia’s position was correct, on the face of the record.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Bismarck diplomatically maneuvered to ensure that his country never appeared responsible for the outbreak of war. To this end, he provoked war for the defense or realization of Prussian interests, and he effectively manipulated the situation so that the international community recognized the legal justification for his actions. In this endeavor, he was wholly successful. Bismarck’s answer to the question of Schleswig and Holstein—considered the first war of German unification—revealed his diplomatic guile.

#### The Danish War of 1864

Bismarck’s first use of coercive power on the international front began with his provocation of war in 1864 with Denmark over the northern province of Schleswig-Holstein. The duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were populated by Germans but were dynastically linked to Denmark’s crown, although both polities were members of the German Confederation. In 1863, the Danes created a new constitution that attempted to incorporate Schleswig into the Danish monarch. This not only threatened to split the traditional ties of the two duchies, but also clearly violated previous treaty arrangements to which Prussia and Austria were parties. National sentiments erupted across the German Confederation, and Bismarck clearly exploited this popular emotion. The crisis in Denmark thus proved to be an opportunity not only to increase Prussia’s power, but also to gain support from the national-liberal movement in Germany for Bismarck’s

domestic and foreign policies. His ultimate—albeit unstated—intention was to incorporate Schleswig and Holstein into Prussia. “There was no Prussian historical claim to the land, but the fact that Germans resided there fostered Bismarck’s aim at annexation.”<sup>16</sup> Highlighting the legal ramifications of Denmark’s treaty violation, Bismarck gained passive support from the other major European powers, which virtually abstained—at least militarily—from intervening in the crisis.

As a shrewd and calculating statesman, Bismarck understood that

[T]he most obvious justification of aggressive war is to be found in the adversary’s breach of a treaty. No nation can be bound perpetually by a treaty that contravenes its interests; but if the treaty secures important interests of the other contracting party, its repudiation gives the latter a formal right to declare war.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Austria and Prussia were free to act without significant concern of military intervention by the other great powers. Bismarck then politically maneuvered his diplomatic and military forces to achieve his objective. When Denmark rejected an ultimatum from Prussia and Austria, a brief war ensued between the states, resulting in the eventual defeat of Denmark.

While it may have been easy for the joint powers of Austria and Prussia to defeat Denmark militarily, it was quite difficult to decide the future of Schleswig and Holstein politically. Prussia preferred annexation; Austria favored a union of the two duchies under a new duke. More specifically, Austria did not want the duchies annexed by Prussia. By subsequent treaties, it was decided that Schleswig would be governed by Prussia and Holstein administered by Austria. Austria, however, argued that this solution was merely temporary, and German nationalists, who believed that the two duchies were inseparable, further inflamed the situation with public demonstrations. The acquisition of Schleswig-Holstein had not only given to Prussia a well-consolidated

territory, it had also advanced the movement toward German unity. Now Bismarck—Prussia’s “Realpolitiker”—viewed the situation as another opportunity to further Prussian leadership. Although it is unlikely that Bismarck purposely manipulated the political situation following the conflict in Denmark in order to wage war against Austria, he nonetheless recognized that the diplomatic ground was well prepared for the advancement of Prussian hegemony.

There came a point when [Bismarck] saw that the tussle over the Duchies [in Denmark] could be turned to his own advantage. This was certainly so in October 1865, when he met Emperor Napoleon III and secured French neutrality in [an eventual] war between Prussia and Austria.<sup>18</sup>

Less than a year later, the former allies were at war with one another, as Russia and the other European powers remained on the political margins.

#### The Austro-Prussian War of 1866

Similar to his political calculus at the dawn of the Danish War, Bismarck recognized that the other major powers would not intervene in this strictly “German” affair, viewing any war between Austria and Prussia as a limited endeavor. With French neutrality firmly negotiated, he also concluded a treaty with Italy, which stipulated that it would attack Austria in the event of a conflict between Prussia and the Hapsburg Empire. Bismarck also knew that Russia would not intercede in the ensuing conflict, especially since Austria had aligned against the Russian Empire during the Crimean War in 1854. He similarly reasoned that Great Britain would be unlikely to mobilize to intervene in German affairs across the European continent. When Austria formally broke off negotiations with Prussia in June 1866 over the future of the Danish duchies, Bismarck immediately claimed that the dynastic Hapsburgs had violated previous treaty negotiations. The Austro-Prussian War—also called the Seven Weeks’ War—and the

resulting shift toward Prussian dominance over the other German states had begun.

“[Bismarck] prepared the diplomatic ground brilliantly, engineering a plausible excuse to start a war, so that Prussia did not seem the aggressor—and hence he did not attract a coalition of hostile powers.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, competition between the dual powers for control of the two German duchies eventually culminated in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. Ironically, after inducing Austria to join forces with Prussia against the Danish duchies, Bismarck turned on his former ally with calculating intensity once his political designs against Denmark had been achieved. The war between the two great dominions of the German people lasted a mere seven weeks due largely to the professional competency of the Prussian army and major errors on the Austrian side. A single battle at Sadowa—known by the Prussians as Königgrätz—sufficed to decide the contest between the warring German empires. The war’s outcome proved decisive for Prussia, whose territorial and political strengths were greatly advanced with the formation of the newly organized North German Confederation—a constitutional union of nearly two dozen independent German states that formed the foundation of the future German Empire in 1871.

So brilliant and startling was the victory which crowned Bismarck’s work—the expulsion from the Germanic confederation of the ancient and imperial protector of the Teutonic peoples, a work undertaken in opposition to everybody’s advice and carried to a successful conclusion in spite of every obstacle—that the achievement will ever live in human annals as an example of what can be accomplished by a tenacious will.<sup>20</sup>

Aware of the likely need for future Austrian support, Bismarck again showcased his diplomatic skills and strategic brilliance by imposing lenient terms on the Hapsburg monarch following Austria’s defeat in the war. Despite the overwhelming Prussian victory, Bismarck made no attempts at dethroning the former Germanic dynasty or

making claims against the state's sovereign territory. He only took control of the German states that formed the northern Confederation. He also compelled any German state that had allied with Austria during the war to become part of the Kingdom of Prussia, or at least support the Prussian crown militarily when called upon. The maintenance of respectable relations with Austria is an enduring tribute to Bismarck's diplomatic ability, as the terms he successfully negotiated following the war proved essential afterwards as a factor in the upcoming Prussian confrontation with France.

### The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71

For years Bismarck had worked toward German unification under Prussian leadership. His consolidation of power was nearly complete. Following the War of 1866, Prussia's neighbors had now to reckon with a confederacy embracing all of northern Germany. "The war of 1866 marked a turning point for Bismarck: he was no longer just a Prussian, but also a German nationalist. Bismarck now linked the Prussian state with German nationalism."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the conclusion of the War of 1866 also marked the end of the long-standing conflict of the dual powers over control of the German states. In many respects, Bismarck's limited wars of 1864 and 1866 can be labeled as wars to consolidate Prussian power. However, to complete German unification, Bismarck had to deal with France.

Prussia's victory over Austria increased tensions with France. Napoleon III, the French Emperor, feared that a unified Germany would change the balance of power in Europe to the detriment of his state. For his part, Bismarck recognized that France served as the obvious opponent to Prussian influence in southern Germany. Geostrategically, Bismarck also realized that by not uniting the southern German states into the German Confederation, France would have a possible foothold into Germany,

thus threatening Prussia's foreign policy intentions in the region. Based on this calculus, Bismarck eventually provoked a war with France, not simply as a preventive measure to counter a French threat, but because he thought it necessary for the completion of German unity.

However, to help ensure that a crisis with France would not develop into a major European war Bismarck utilized diplomatic tactics to isolate Napoleon III and the French state. First, Bismarck ensured the reconciliation of tensions between Prussia and Austria by enforcing and maintaining lenient treaty agreements following the War of 1866. Next, while maneuvering political and military forces for possible war with France, Bismarck regularly and openly expressed his desire to avoid war, thereby appearing as the non-confrontational antagonist in the mounting conflict. From the international community's perspective, by noting Prussia's limited aims in its two previous conflicts with Denmark and Austria, the other great powers recognized the consistency of Prussian foreign policy and its nationalist pursuits. Moreover, in as much as it was understood that Prussia pursued efforts to solve the problem of German unification, "the public opinion of the world, fully convinced of the legitimacy of the principle of nationality, became increasingly favorable to the Prussian policy."<sup>22</sup> Thus, Europe's other leading states adopted neutral roles in the growing tensions between France and Prussia. Bismarck also negotiated military alliances with the southern German states to further isolate France. With Europe's equilibrium of power increasingly tilting against France, and given Napoleon III's growing frustrations with his obvious foreign policy miscalculations, war between Prussia and France was becoming more likely. The issue of the candidature of the vacant Spanish throne sounded the guns of August in 1870.

Although several crises emerged between France and Prussia following the Austro-Prussian War, the fundamental origin of the Franco-Prussian War arose when a Hohenzollern prince was offered the Spanish throne. Because a Hohenzollern as the King of Spain directly threatened the southern border of France, Napoleon blocked the candidacy and demanded assurances from the Prussian crown that no member of the Hohenzollern family would ever assume the Spanish throne. The disputed candidacy was withdrawn, but Napoleon demanded a formal apology by the King of Prussia. Incensed, William I refused to meet with the French ambassador who was sent to secure Prussia's assurances of the Hohenzollern candidate's withdrawal. The King then sent by telegram his account of the entire incident to Bismarck who, recognizing that the moment for action had arrived, craftily edited the letter so as to transform the message into an unpardonable insult to the French. "Bismarck well ahead of his time, then resorted to a technique which subsequent statesmen developed into an art form: he leaked the so-called Ems Dispatch to the press."<sup>23</sup> Inflamed French popular sentiment demanded war, and Napoleon accommodated. Political hubris and overconfidence in the country's strength and power of its alliances were in great supply among France's diplomatic leadership, and Bismarck recognized these miscalculations and capitalized on them.

It is the business of the diplomatist to make sure that his country shall not be brought into conflict with a coalition of superior power...If he is not reasonably assured that the superior or at least equal force will be on his side, it is his clear duty to avert the war or at least to postpone it as long as possible.<sup>24</sup>

Napoleon III and the French ministry not only failed to accurately consider France's national interests and military strength, they also misjudged a balance of power long since vanished on the European continent.

France was thus seen as the aggressor in its call to arms against Prussia. Bismarck's diplomatic gamble in provoking a war with France had succeeded, and Prussia won the war quickly and decisively. The diplomatic groundwork that Bismarck had prepared prior to the war effectively isolated France and rallied the southern German states to Prussia's side. "To Napoleon, who had counted at least upon the neutrality of the south, it was a great surprise to find that no sooner were hostilities begun than all parts of the Fatherland instinctively drew together."<sup>25</sup> The Franco-Prussian War effectively shattered the political structure of France and resulted in a significant shift in the European balance of power with the formation of the new Germany.

### The Prussian Army

Bismarck had thus given unity to the German nation, and he became a national hero. However, accomplishing one of the foremost capital achievements of history—the unification of Germany—required more than diplomacy. Such a fundamental triumph also necessitated military might. Before concluding this examination of the remarkable political career of Otto von Bismarck, some attention should be given to the Prussian army. Indeed, it is impossible to consider the sum of Bismarck's diplomatic acuity without briefly discussing the role of the army and its generalship. Undeniably, the Prussian military was the instrument of national power that completes the story of the Iron Chancellor, and this section will provide a brief synopsis of Prussia's army and the contributions of its ranking officer and Chief of Staff, Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke.

In 1862 a constitutional crisis arose between the Prussian parliament and King Frederick William I over reforms to the Prussian army, which he, Moltke, and Albrecht von Roon, Prussia's Minister of War, believed had significantly degraded throughout the

post-Napoleonic era. The reform plans were aimed primarily at increasing the size of the army, modernizing the force, and advancing its training. They also included longer conscription terms, a strengthened militia, a reorganized general staff, and an emphasis on military education, operational planning, and war-gaming. "If Prussia was to maintain and improve her European position, she would do so only with sword in hand. The basic prerequisite of success was a large, well-trained and well-disciplined army, and one led by professional soldiers."<sup>26</sup> However, the liberals in parliament who controlled the budget refused to raise the necessary taxes to finance the desired reforms. King William then turned to Bismarck for help, appointing him as Prime Minister. "This was the opportunity Bismarck had been waiting for, and he acted quickly...He drove liberals from office, gagged the press, and encouraged William to create the new [army] units by collecting existing taxes."<sup>27</sup> With an expanded and more efficient army made possible by Roon's and Moltke's reforms, Bismarck resolved to achieve his political goal of advancing Prussian leadership in Europe and eventually uniting Germany. He recognized the unique strengths of the Prussian army of the 1860s, and he maintained a secure understanding that the military was the instrument of national power that would accomplish his momentous political changes.

In addition to the aforementioned reforms, another defining characteristic of the Prussian army was its exploitation of modern technology and weapons. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Prussian army's general staff focused greater attention on technology as a force multiplier, particularly the use of railroads and the fielding of breech-loading rifles. These technological advancements convinced Bismarck, Moltke, and the Prussian leadership that trained forces, well-armed and professionally led,

could win campaigns rapidly and at an acceptable political cost. When compared to previous conflicts, the wars of German unification were remarkably short in duration. The Danish War was determined by a quick invasion and month-long siege. The entire campaign lasted less than six months. Prussia's attack on Austria two years later was decided in a single battle at Sadowa near the fortress of Königgrätz following several preliminary encounters. Under the skilled leadership of Field Marshall von Moltke, who initially controlled operations by telegraph from Berlin, the Prussians routed the Austrians to end the Austro-Prussian War in seven weeks. Finally, although the Franco-Prussian War lasted for several months, its outcome was actually determined early in the campaign at the battle of Sedan, where Napoleon III and many of his troops were captured. Indeed, Moltke's victory at Sedan was his crowning triumph of the war, which ultimately resulted in the formal uniting of all the German states into a single nation under Prussian leadership.

The reasons for these rapid and decisive victories included the speed of Prussian mobilization, which the railways enabled, the adoption of the breech-loading "needle gun"<sup>28</sup> that replaced aging muzzle-loading rifles, and the superiority of the Prussian General Staff, which skillfully maneuvered forces and capitalized on the technological advances of the times. Prussia demonstrated that victory on the battlefield often went to the power which best harnessed the current technologies. The German wars of unification certainly illustrated the frightening new dimensions that technological innovations added to warfare. Consequently, Bismarck's limited wars were epoch-making. Their results created the German Empire and established the new state as the strategic hub of Europe. Clearly, the completeness of Prussia's military campaigns and

successes from 1864 to 1871 astounded the world. There was little precedent in the history of Europe for so dramatic a reversal of a state whose military might prior to 1860 was considered unreliable. Before Moltke's reforms, the Prussian army did not possess a military advantage over its neighbors, nor did it give Prussia an effective voice within the concert of European powers. Bismarck, however, may well have been encouraged to pursue a campaign of limited wars due to the military reforms enacted by Roon and Moltke.

As previously noted, Bismarck believed that skillful diplomacy aided by force was the higher form of statecraft, and he recognized that the future of a united Germany depended on the integration of the complementary forces of diplomacy and military power. "The future Prussia and the future Germany could not be brought into existence by force alone, nor could they live and develop on force alone."<sup>29</sup> Diplomacy was the corresponding factor. Bismarck accurately recognized that military power, like diplomatic cunning, was a legitimate tool to the statesman, especially for the realization and promotion of state interests. Nonetheless, as Prussia's statesman par excellence, he still believed in the supremacy of the political carrot over the military stick. Ironically, though, it was Bismarck's firm conviction of the utility of military force in diplomacy that brought him to the forefront of Prussia politics. Indeed, Germany never could have attained either its unity or independence without the complementary forces of diplomacy and military might. The combination of Bismarck's iron will and Moltke's iron hammer ultimately fused together the new empire of Germany, which became the most powerful state in continental Europe throughout the late nineteenth century.

## Conclusion

The realization of German unification under the banner of a single empire was the crowning political achievement of Otto von Bismarck, whose career as a warrior effectively ended following the defeat of France. For the remainder of his diplomatic career, his foreign policy initiatives focused on the preservation of peace. However, it was Bismarck's diplomatic cunning, alliance formation, and his use of limited wars that earned him the distinction of being Prussia's Iron Chancellor and lifted him to international prominence. "[His] success in establishing alliances and in averting the formation of any hostile coalition against Germany was due, in no small degree, to the spirit and temper in which he conducted Germany's diplomacy."<sup>30</sup> German unification seemed like a natural process for Bismarck, as he devised a stratagem of diplomatic maneuvers and limited wars—made possible by Prussia's military and industrial might—as a mechanism of foreign policy to achieve his national objectives.

The Prussian minister thus stands as the head of statesmanship, and he will always be remembered as the founder of German national unity. Bismarck's skill as a diplomat was simply unrivaled during his tenure as chancellor, and his mastery of foreign policy ensured his place among the world's leading statesmen. The brilliance of his political achievements in international relations was exemplified by his shrewd combination of diplomacy and power. Moreover, he possessed an acute sense of timing, and his political moves were always determined by *raison d'état*. Under his leadership, a united German state, once delivered from the political chaos and revolutionary change that characterized European politics following the Vienna settlement of 1815, emerged as Europe's new leading power. There is no doubt that the German hegemony he achieved in Europe and the new balance of power he

engineered were truly worthy accomplishments. Bismarckian diplomacy stabilized the international system in the late nineteenth century and promoted peace across Europe for another generation.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Emilio Castelar, "Prince von Bismarck," *The North American Review* 167, no. 500 (July 1898): 106.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Kissinger makes the point that "after the Congress of Vienna, Europe experienced the longest period of peace it had ever known. No war at all took place among the Great Powers for forty years, and after the Crimean War of 1854, no general war for another sixty." *Diplomacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Kristen P. Williams, *Despite Nationalist Conflicts: Theory and Practice of Maintaining World Peace* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 53.

<sup>6</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Louis James Block, "Bismarck and Gladstone," *The Sewanee Review* 20, no. 4 (October 1912): 410.

<sup>8</sup> Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> William M. Sloane, "Bismarck's Apprenticeship," *Political Science Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (September 1899): 422.

<sup>10</sup> Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Gerwarth, "Inventing the Iron Chancellor," *History Today* 57, no. 6 (June 2007): 43.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Despite Nationalist Conflicts*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, "Power and Persuasion," *The Wilson Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 59.

<sup>15</sup> Munroe Smith, "Military Strategy Versus Diplomacy," *Political Science Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (March 1915): 43.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Despite Nationalist Conflicts*, 63.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, "Military Strategy Versus Diplomacy," 40.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Pearce, "The Austro-Prussian War," *History Review* 66, (March 2010): 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Emilio Castelar, "Prince Von Bismarck II," *The North American Review* 167, no. 502 (September 1898), 352.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, *Despite Nationalist Conflicts*, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, "Military Strategy Versus Diplomacy," 45.

<sup>23</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 118.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, "Military Strategy Versus Diplomacy," 39.

<sup>25</sup> B.J. Ramage, "Prince Bismarck and German Unity," *The Sewanee Review* 7, no. 4 (October 1899): 460.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640-1945*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 141.

<sup>27</sup> James Graham, "Was Bismarck the Key Factor in the Unification of Germany?" <http://www.historyorb.com/europe/bismarck.shtml> (accessed January 30, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> One of the reasons the Prussian army was so successful in combating its enemies was due to its fielding of a rifled breech-loader as its fundamental infantry weapon. During the years of military reform, the Prussians equipped most of their army's divisions with the famous "Needle Gun," so called because of its thin firing pin. This rifle was considered the best infantry weapon of the times, and it contributed overwhelmingly to the Prussian victories during the wars of German unification.

<sup>29</sup> Munroe Smith, "Bismarck Reconsidered," *Political Science Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (September 1919): 477.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, "Military Strategy Versus Diplomacy," 48.