

The Age of Realism: 1850-1871

Italian Unification

Attempts at revolution had been made in the Italian states since the 1830s; all met with defeat. Italian nationalists under the leadership of Mazzini and his *risorgimento* had gained support but failed to overthrow the influence of Austria and France. The tide began to change with the appointment of Count Cavour as prime minister of Piedmont. Cavour was a wealthy nobleman who advocated a constitutional government. In 1859, he struck a deal with Napoleon III, gaining French military support in order to drive the Austrians out of Italy, in return for granting the French Nice and Savoy. The French fought two battles with the Austrians, then bowed out of the war. Although Cavour did not gain all the territory he sought, the fighting gave rise to nationalist movements throughout northern Italy. These eventually came together under the leadership of Piedmont and Count Cavour.

In southern Italy, Giuseppe Garibaldi led his Red Shirts against the Bourbon king of the Two Sicilies. Fighting against great odds, Garibaldi's bold leadership proved victorious. As the Red Shirts prepared to march up the Italian peninsula, Count Cavour intervened so as to prevent war with France, which had been protecting Rome since the failed revolution of 1848. The Piedmontese army invaded the Papal States and Naples, prompting a confrontation with Garibaldi and his Red Shirts. Garibaldi accepted the rule of the Piedmontese under the leadership of King Victor Emmanuel II, and the kingdom of Italy was declared in 1861. With help from Prussia, Italy was able to finalize its territorial conquest by gaining Venetia from Austria and Rome from France. Thus, in 1870, a new united Italian state was complete.

German Unification

After the failure of the Frankfort Assembly in 1848, Prussia used economic tactics to help establish German unity. By 1853, all of the German states other than Austria had joined a customs union called the Zollverein. Economic progress was achieved by eliminating tolls on trade routes between member states. A growing middle class was given more voice in the Prussian constitution, yet power remained firmly in the hands of the king. When middle-class liberals challenged the growing influence of the Prussian military, King William I appointed Otto von Bismarck chancellor in hopes of containing liberal dissent.

Bismarck's reign as chancellor proved vitally important to the fate of not only Germany but Europe as well. A dominating force, Bismarck practiced *Realpolitik*, in which political decisions are based on everyday realities—such as the growing

political power of the labor movement—rather than ethics or morality. In practice, this meant allowing his enemies certain victories as long as the overall political advantage remained on the side of Prussia. Bismarck chose to launch an aggressive foreign policy as a way to distract liberals upset with the military’s involvement in domestic affairs.

Under Bismarck’s leadership, Prussia was involved in three wars that eventually led to a unified Germany. Prussia’s victory over Denmark (1864) served as a precursor to the Austro-Prussian War (1866). Prussian military superiority brought victory to Bismarck, allowing him to negotiate Prussian dominance over German affairs. Bismarck’s military victories gained him liberal support and created a sense of nationalism that furthered his plans for a new German government controlled by Prussia.

The Franco-Prussian War

The growth of Prussia as a European power inevitably led to conflict with France. Napoleon III grew wary of Prussian maneuvering in Germany and saw a confrontation as a way to bolster his sagging popularity at home. Meanwhile, Bismarck cleverly edited a diplomatic telegram, the “Ems Dispatch,” to make it especially insulting to the French, thus goading Napoleon III into declaring war against Prussia in July 1870.

The French army proved no match for the very well trained Prussian armies. The French army, including Napoleon III, was captured at the Battle of Sedan. The Second French Empire subsequently fell, while the Prussian army laid siege to Paris. After four months, Paris surrendered, and a peace treaty was signed. France was forced to pay an indemnity and relinquish Alsace and Lorraine to the new German state.

By the end of the war, the southern German states agreed to join the North German Confederation. This was confirmed by the proclamation of William I as emperor of the Second German Empire. Military victory brought German unification under Prussian leaders, who espoused militarism alongside authoritarian rule. Nationalism had won out over liberalism.

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The Franco-Prussian War had long-term implications for Europe. Not only did the war give rise to a new German state, but France’s humiliation would prove a potent reason for the French people’s dislike of Germany and contribute to France’s overwhelming need for revenge. Also remember that the French removal of its troops from Rome during this war was the final step in Italian unification, making Rome the Italian capital.