

Otto Von Bismarck: The Master Diplomat of Germany

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ABSTRACT

Otto Von Bismarck is regarded as an outstanding statesman and diplomat for his accomplishments, successfully unifying the German-speaking states. He led the Prussian military into victory in three short and decisive wars, isolating Austria and France, and making them unable to oppose unification. However, the actions of his life are critical to remember in our modern age. Von Bismarck was ruthless in ensuring he met his goals. He would use any means necessary to ensure Prussian dominance in their sphere of influence. Through his manipulative debates and underhanded tactics, he began wars that led to much suffering in Europe. The world must be aware that great leaders often have ulterior motives and that war should always be a last resort.

Keywords: Alliance, unification, Germany, German Empire, Prussia, peace, diplomacy

1. Introduction

Otto Von Bismarck was a master statesman who played a significant role in the construction of Europe as we know it today. He was born into a wealthy family in 1815 in Schönhausen, which was a part of the Kingdom of Prussia, and is now a small village in modern-day Germany [1]. He served as the Prussian ambassador to Russia and France from 1851 to 1862 [2] and was a fierce loyalist whose ultimate goal became the unification of the German states. He eventually became one of the strongest politicians and diplomats in Europe when he was made Prussia's president and the minister of foreign affairs in 1862. He was instrumental in the formation of the North German Confederation in 1867 which then became the German Empire in 1871, which gained even more political powers as he was

appointed as Chancellor [3]. He used ingenious and ruthless tactics in his quest for a secure German state, and on numerous occasions threatened or instigated wars to ensure his goals were met. He was involved in, or indeed, forced, many of the most important debates in European history and expanded the definition of diplomacy to guarantee the security and survival of the Prussian Kingdom. Bismarck's diplomacy, often understood as a pragmatism called *realpolitik* free of emotion and ideology, involved a careful understanding of motives and a calculation of probabilities. He used this political philosophy to become a master diplomat who understood the world of politics, aiming to preserve Prussian dominance.

2. Pre-Franco-Prussian War

While today we know Germany as one of the most powerful European countries, in the early 19th century, there was no true German national identity in Europe. Rather, over 23 million German-speaking people lived in more than 300 states ruled by the Holy Roman Empire [4].

In 1806, due to the War of the Third Coalition, the Holy Roman Empire collapsed. Prussia and Austria were lumped together into a French satellite state known as the Confederation of the Rhine, of which Napoleon was its "Protector." However, Prussia, Russia, Britain, and Austria formed an alliance in 1813, and Napoleon was defeated and fled back to France [5]. This marked the first time German-speaking people had worked as a unified group.

In 1815, as a result of the Congress of Vienna, the German Confederation was established. The German Confederation aimed to protect and maintain the independence of the individual states while assisting each other during times of danger

internally and externally. It had a strong alliance between its member states; however, this uneasy German national identity existed for decades to come and was something that von Bismarck wished to change.

3. Unifying Germany: The Creation of the German Empire

Otto von Bismarck's first loyalty was to Prussia and even his great accomplishment of unifying Germany was motivated by his desire to protect Prussia. He wanted to strengthen Prussia's power in Europe and have the German states all under Prussia's political control. Bismarck did not just rely on diplomatic relationships with other countries. Instead, he believed that having a strong military was critical to a successful unification. He also believed that Germany needed a common enemy. He tried to ensure a balance of powers in Europe and focused on creating alliances to guarantee Prussia's safety and started wars if necessary [6]. By provoking neighboring non-Germanic countries, he created a sense of solidarity with fellow German speakers in nearby independent states.

Bismarck's religious and nationalistic beliefs also influenced his diplomacy. Austria, at this time, was a predominantly Catholic country. Bismarck had a long history of hatred for Austria because he felt that the Pope and the Bishops of Europe held too much power over European Catholics. In addition, Austria was a multiethnic country where only a minority spoke German. As he felt he could not fully control Austria, and many of its citizens answered to the Vatican, he sought to exclude Austria from a unified Germany.

Early in his career, Bismarck was not necessarily militaristic. Instead, he used the military and the threat of war to achieve political goals. To protect those he saw as Germans, Bismarck's diplomacy focused more on frightening Austria than preparing for war [7]. Prussia and Austria had been in an internal battle with one another for the supremacy of the German Confederation. To isolate Austria from other countries in Europe, Bismarck made alliances with powerful nations. For example, in 1863, Prussia refused to help Poland when Poland rebelled against Russia, thus strengthening diplomatic ties with Russia [8]. At the same time, Italy promised to help Prussia in the event of a war with Austria. In

return for this agreement, Prussia gave Italy the territory of Venetia.

Despite his hatred of Austria, Von Bismarck was a very pragmatic politician. He even toyed with the idea of strengthening the Prussian-Austrian relationship. On March 6, 1864, Prussia allied with Austria in response to the German-Danish War, a multifaceted dispute over succession rights in a region of Denmark. This was when Bismarck saw an opportunity to invade Schleswig and Holstein in Denmark as it would shift the balance of power of the German Confederation away from Austria and to Prussia's favor and strengthen its influence [9]. However, Prussia and Austria's relationship deteriorated after the Prussia-Denmark War over a territorial dispute. Austria's occupation of Schleswig and Holstein prevented Prussia from gaining influence over the Southern German countries. However, Prussia had other plans. Bismarck tried to make it seem like Austria was the aggressor. He did this by making it seem Austria attempted to use the German Bund to pressure Prussia to address the Schleswig-Holstein issue and later accused Austria of aggression toward Prussia.

Bismarck used the advantageous diplomatic situation he created to declare war on Austria. He secretly allied with Italy, where Italy agreed to follow Prussia if it declared war on Austria within three months [10]. To exacerbate the situation and start a war, Bismarck presented to the Diet an extended version of his proposals for a reform of the Federal Constitution. Austria was to be excluded from the Confederation. Bismarck suggested a national parliament elected by universal suffrage, and all troops in north Germany should be under Prussian command. The next day Austria asked the Diet to reject Prussia's proposals and mobilize for war. This was known as The Seven Weeks War, which led to Austria's surrender. This key victory for Prussia allowed them to establish the North German Confederation.

After the surrender, there was an armistice signed between Prussia and Austria. In the following weeks, they signed the Treaty of Prague. Prussia later signed secret alliances with the four Catholic states south of the River Main – Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden, and Hesse-Darmstadt. All four states agreed to sign a secret military alliance

with Prussia, whereby, in the event of war, they would fight alongside Prussia and put their armies under the command of the King of Prussia. This step was a critical step that would lead to German unity [11].

To add momentum to the unification of Germany, Bismarck even resorted to underhanded means to achieve his goals. Bismarck edited a telegram [12] about a meeting between King William I of Prussia and the French ambassador, which made it appear that each had insulted the other. The French government was furious, so much so that on July 19, 1870, France's Napoleon III declared war on Prussia with great confidence in victory. Bismarck thought of this war as a chance to bring the North German Confederation and South German states together to fight a common enemy. The French believed that the reorganization of their army was stronger and superior to the German armies and was confident they would be victorious. However, Bismarck had set up his troops in anticipation of a declaration of war from France and easily won the conflict. The French surrendered on January 28, 1871, and an armistice was signed.

Bismarck took advantage of public sentiment to build a larger concept of Germany and consolidate his power. The North German Confederation unified the remaining independent German states and became the German Empire, with von Bismarck as Prince, Imperial Chancellor, Foreign Minister, and Minister-President.

This series of complicated events culminated in one of Bismarck's greatest accomplishments, the unification of Germany. He played intricate political games and was ruthlessly successful. He created alliances while also using the threat of war to meet his goals. In addition, Bismarck could understand the public sentiment, the growing tendency towards nationalism, and the progression of secularism. He continued to use these abilities throughout his career as a politician.

3.1 4. Domestic Diplomacy of the German Empire

As Bismarck's political career advanced, his diplomatic skills evolved to become more practical, and his goals became more complex and more extensive than Prussia itself. After creating the

German Empire, Bismarck had to pay more particular attention to the domestic issues of the new empire. He had become very powerful, controlling both domestic and foreign policy. Not only did he have to pay attention to new external threats, but he needed to be conscious of diverse groups, divided along religious, political, and ethnic lines within the German Empire itself. He was still loyal to Prussia, and he protected Prussia through his governing of the German Empire. Prussia dominated the German Empire, and Bismarck worked hard to maintain this new balance. He led a social movement called Kulturkampf, manufacturing a struggle between the Catholic church and the German state over issues of education and the church's involvement in government. He had used this tactic before, as the Kulturkampf created a common enemy for the German people.

Kulturkampf achieved a variety of political goals, including appealing to liberals and strengthening the advantageous position of Prussia. Bismarck's Kulturkampf also successfully added to his power by implementing policies beneficial to Prussian interests. Even though Bismarck was famously conservative, his policies were in line with more liberal ideas of secularism and educational progressivism. However, Kulturkampf failed, as while Bismarck tried to take out the influence away from the Catholic Church, [13] secularists and socialists attacked all religions and made Catholics more resolute.

3.2 5. Foreign Diplomacy of the German Empire

Once the German Empire was established, Bismarck worked to maintain peace rather than start wars. He believed in the concept of "balance of power." He used a complex web of alliances and diplomatic exclusions built from an understanding of national interests. For example, he understood Russia's desire to control Central Asia and forced Russia to commit soldiers to Central Asia, which kept them far away from Germany. Even though he disliked Italians, Bismarck worked to help them establish statehood and maintain good relations through the Triple Alliance in 1882 [14]. With Austria-Hungary, Bismarck negotiated the Dual Alliance in 1879 [15].

The successful way in which Bismarck created these alliances and managed to establish peace in Europe is generally considered to be emblematic of the

realpolitik approach. His desire to maintain peace in Europe was the same as his desire to protect the German Empire.

The most significant danger to Bismarck's Germany was France. France was offended by Germany's annexation of Alsace and Lorraine, which Bismarck had been pressured into taking by public opinion after the Franco-Prussian war. He had made a mistake in annexing French territories[16], which resulted in a festering resentment from the French, leading to instability in Bismarck's rule. He constantly worried about France. As France and Russia became closer allies, Bismarck negotiated the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1887. His quick and secret work made it so that Russia and Germany would remain unallied[17]. The treaty was so important that Germany was put in a precarious position concerning Russia when it was not renewed after Bismarck left office.

Part of Bismarck's foreign diplomacy also involved taking part in the Scramble for Africa and establishing the German colonial empire. Even the decision to participate in colonial activities was motivated by a desire to unify Germany under Prussian rule. A European nation with colonies was considered to have reached full nationhood.

3.3 6. Successes, Failures, and Consequences of Von Bismarck's Career

During his time in power, Bismarck managed to achieve his ultimate goal of maintaining Prussian power. The balance between the various European powers was challenging, but through constant vigilance and active management that utilized military power, alliances, and an insightful understanding of the political atmosphere and people's motivations and desires, Bismarck carefully protected Prussia and unified Germany.

However, Bismarck engaged in military action and colonial conquest to preserve Prussian dominance, leading directly to hundreds of thousands of deaths[18]. In addition, Bismarck singled out Catholics in a series of oppressive policies. Bismarck made several miscalculations, including

4. 8. References

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his insistence on conducting Kulturkampf, which alienated Catholics and voters, contributing to the eventual fall of Bismarck. He failed to get votes from the Radicals, Center, and Social Democrats as they opposed his conservatism and ideologies.

The consequences of Bismarck's Germany were long-lasting. Bismarck employed nationalistic fervor to build unity, which arguably led to the kind of sentiment that made Germany vulnerable to Nazism in the early twentieth century[19]. Bismarck's diplomacy also resulted in the changing map of Europe and political alignments that are still relevant today. Germany's dominance of the EU and European secularism are arguably the result of Bismarck's influence.

3.4 7. Conclusion

Bismarck is considered by many to be the greatest diplomat in history. Whether his actions were morally sound for his time, or not, is debatable. However, what is not debatable is the massive successes his statecraft led to for his country. He made very calculated decisions that were risky, but always the ends justify the means. He started numerous wars and led a massive industrial expansion campaign. Skillful fear-mongering meant he began and won wars, ultimately unified the German peoples, and created the German Empire, which was and remains one of the strongest countries in the world. His ruthless nature was not absolute, and he would make pragmatic decisions that were against his own personal beliefs if he felt it was the right thing to do for his country. He also had his failures, as he misjudged the long-term reaction to the annexation of French territories and his Kulturkampf campaign had very mixed results. His political decisions led to a relatively peaceful 20-year period in European history, as he balanced his power well with other strong European nations. Bismarck should not be considered a model statesman for our modern world, but students of history and politics should study his career carefully to know the incredible tactics of diplomacy he used throughout his life and be aware of the ruthless tactics that many would use to further their own goals.

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