

Unification of Germany

[UPSC Notes]

What was the Unification of Germany?

The unification of Germany was achieved at a crucial point in history when many changes were taking place. The German unification was announced on 18 January 1871. The Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles in France saw the princes from most of the German states assembled to accept King Wilhelm I of Prussia as the German Emperor during the Franco-Prussian War.

There existed a confederated realm of German principdoms with some adjacent lands. It dates back to the Treaty of Verdun of 843. There never existed a German sense of national identity. This came towards the beginning of the 19th century. This event had a major effect on Europe's politics for decades. The German empire was officially unified and came to be dominated by the Prussian federalist structure.

Background of the Unification of Germany

The Unification of Germany follows a long history that dates back thousands of years. For us to fully understand the concept, let's revisit it briefly;

- Germany was more of a collection of small kingdoms than a country or an empire before the unification. These empires came to be because of the Treaty of Verdun in 843.
- These kingdoms would comprise to be the basis of the Holy Roman Empire. However, there still did not exist a homogenous German identity until the 19th century.
- This can be due to the autonomy of these princely states. They were not directly ruled by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. So there was a lot of heterogeneity in these states.
- This system that organised several smaller empires together under an emperor was called the practice of *Kleinstaaterei*. *Kleinstaaterei* is a German word and pejorative which translates to small states.
- The onset of the Industrial Revolution brought improvements and advancements in transportation and communication. This brought the far-flung regions in contact.
- The scenario truly changed during the Napoleonic Wars in 1806, when France defeated the Holy Roman Empire.
- In 1815, a German Confederation was re-established after being defeated by France. This gave rise to the beginning of German nationalism. A huge wave of it swept through the region at the beginning of the 19th century. The newfound feeling of belonging gave way to the need for centralisation of authority being felt by these princely states.

Rise of German nationalism

As stated earlier, the country of Germany did not exist but there existed smaller kingdoms under their regional princes, united under the Holy Roman Empire. There was a lack of a homogenous sense of nationality. This, however, changed over time;

- The Congress of Vienna (1815) introduced a new European political-diplomatic system that established a balance of power after the defeat in the Napoleonic Wars.

- A confederation of German states was set up under the leadership of the Austrian Empire.
- The rise of Prussia made the countries of Austria and Prussia rivals. The Prussian Empire was the single German state that could match the power of the Austrian Empire.
- The Zollverein was another important aspect that encouraged the unification of Germany by creating a larger sense of economic unification in 1834.
- This idea of German unification was obviously opposed by the Austrian Empire which saw it as a threat to its own power. However, Austria soon joined the Zollverein in 1853.

The Prussian Rise

The unification of Germany was under the Prussian-dominated federalist structure. Let's briefly explore the rise of Prussia in the German context.

- A confederation of German states was established by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 under the leadership of the Austrian Empire.
- The Austrians strived to maintain their domination and influence over the German states. This caused them to suppress German nationalism in any and all forms.
- To discourage the feeling of unity among them, they tried to pit the German states against one another. This practice of 'Divide and Rule' assured their subjugation. No single state could become powerful enough to dominate the others.
- The state of Prussia was one of the easternmost states of the German Confederation. Unification of the German states was attempted by the state of Prussia under its empire in the year 1848. However, this plan was foiled by other states that were supported by the Austrian Empire.
- It was the appointment of Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck in 1873 that truly changed the landscape of the unification of Germany. Bismarck was a fiery and passionate patriot who wanted to transform the state of Prussia into a formidable world power and subsequently avenge the loss of Prussian nationalism to the Austrian empire.
- To realise this dream, he introduced major reforms into the Prussian army which transformed it into one of the most disciplined and professional fighting forces in that specific part of the world.
- The Seven Weeks War was fought in the year 1866. It saw Prussia causing heavy losses to the Austrian Empire and its German allies. This particular was so profound that it diminished and eventually removed Austrian interference in the matters of German states.
- This allowed Prussia to set up the foundations of its own empire. However, Bismarck was a visionary who knew that this individual victory will not prove to be enough. He knew that defeating an old enemy France would unite the remaining German states under the Prussian empire.

The Berlin Revolution of 1848

The smallest States of Germany saw some persistent agitation going on from 1830 to 1848. The root causes of this agitation can be divided into two points; the Unification of Germany and the establishment of constitutional and liberal governments in the German states

- The date of 27th March 1849 saw the Parliament of Frankfurt pass the Constitution of St. Paul's Church. This offered the title of Kaiser (meaning Emperor) to the Prussian king Frederick William IV. The Frankfurt Parliament managed to draft a constitution and

reached an agreement on the Kleindeutsch (lesser Germany; German states without Austria).

- The liberals failed to achieve the unification they envisaged but they managed to gain some respite by having worked with the German princes over the constitutional issues that were present in abundance and collaborated with them regarding the reforms.
- It was the failure of the Frankfurt Parliament which convinced the Germans to adopt a different methodology to realise their dream of a unified country.

It was eventually the Seven Weeks War in 1866 when Prussia delivered a heavy blow to the Austrian Empire and its German allies.

Congress of Princes 1868 (German Bund)

After their awakening in the Seven Weeks War of 1866, Austria chartered a Congress of the German princes to go through the proposals for the reform of the German Confederation in 1868. Prussia was also invited to this Congress.

However, Bismarck won over the King of Prussia not to attend the conference. This caused Congress to end in failure. Had the Congress formed by Austria been successful then the Austrian influence in Germany would have prevailed.

Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871)

The Franco-Prussian war of 1870 was an important affair in the process of the unification of Germany. It has been concisely explained in the points below;

- Napoleon III, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, ruled over the country of France. However, Napoleon III lacked the political acumen and military skill that made France so powerful under Napoleon Bonaparte.
- Napoleon III served to be the perfect target for Otto von Bismarck's machinations to work toward a unified Germany.
- Bismarck undertook a series of clever diplomatic manoeuvres along with subtle provocations to poke at Napoleon III who officially declared war against Prussia.
- The announcement of war was a seemingly aggressive move by the French which resulted in the rise of anti-French sentiments among the German states. The German support that Napoleon III had vanished now.
- The Prussian Army marched towards the French border under the leadership of Bismarck in the July of 1870. The Prussians were joined by the armies of the other German states.
- This war proved to be devastating for France. Their most notable defeat was at Sedan in September 1870.
- This was the last blow to Napoleon III's military career and tendered his resignation as the emperor to the French parliament and lived out the rest of his years in England.

The Role of Bismarck in the Unification of Germany

Otto Von Bismarck was a force to be reckoned with. He was one of the most powerful figures from the state of Prussia who spearheaded the unification of Germany under the Prussian empire. His achievements and contributions have been listed below;

- Also called the Iron Chancellor, his primary objective was to strengthen the position of Prussia in Europe. Bismarck was a visionary who had several aims for the country;
 - Unification of the north German states under Prussian control
 - Weakening Prussia's main rival, Austria, by separating it from the German Federation
 - Making Berlin the centre of German affairs by taking the status away from Vienna
 - Strengthening the position of Wilhelm I, the King of Prussia
- Bismarck was an excellent leader and military commander. He, along with King Wilhelm I, brought several military advancements to the Prussian army.
- There was heavy taxation imposed on the population to meet this new military expense. While the Prussian Parliament was against the funds to be gathered through direct taxation, Bismarck collected money for military reforms through direct taxation.
- These reforms included:
 - an increase in army conscription from two to three years
 - the introduction of weapons such as the needle gun
 - the introduction of new battle tactics

Significance of Unification of Germany

The Unification of Germany was a watershed moment in European history. The significance of this has been discussed below;

- The political scenario of the region saw a major change with the arrival of a new unified German nation into European politics. Other powers became cautious.
- Unified Germany had a powerful army. This was reinstated by the fact that Prussia had successfully unified a group of quarrelling states in a short span of time.
- There was some new conflict with the other European colonising powers when the newly-formed German state began colonising regions in Africa and Asia.
- This conflict turned into animosity between the countries of Germany, Britain, France, and Russia, making them fight the First world war. Their defeat ended the German Empire through the Treaty of Versailles (1919).