

10-2021

## Prussian Militarism and the German Wars of Unification

Hamza Elshakankiri

University of Regina, HamzaElshakankiri@uregina.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>

Digital Commons  
Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Network Recommended Citation

Elshakankiri, Hamza (2021) "Prussian Militarism and the German Wars of Unification," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2021.110203

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol11/iss2/3>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

## Prussian Militarism and the German Wars of Unification

Hamza Elshakankiri

University of Regina

(Regina, Canada)

Prussia was always seen as the embodiment of military prowess and power. It was, in many ways, a state that was built by an army. Its sense of militarism spread dramatically to its soldiers and civilians, affecting their societies, politics, and culture. This popular militarism was first experienced by the German people in the Liberation War in 1813-14, as the Prussian and German armies drove the French invaders out of German territory. Yet after this glorious victory, Prussian militarism went into hibernation, as the Congress of Vienna put Europe back together. Thus, the torch of nationalism was in the hands of liberals and romantics, who would prove themselves too dreamy to achieve their goals. It was only under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) that Prussia defeated Austria, and Bismarck was able to unite the people and the military in his Crusade for Germany. Bismarck's total victory over France not only opened the door for German Unification, but it ensured a long-lasting glory for Prussian militarism, as it secured its reputation of superiority, even invincibility.

After Napoleon's (1769-1821) successful campaigns in German territory in 1805 and 1806, the German states were in a predicament. Their armies were shattered, and their sovereignty at risk. The once mighty Prussian military, with its leaders lacking the enthusiasm

and genius of Frederick the Great (1712-1786), was now humiliated and defeated, and the foreign invaders occupied Berlin. The real danger though, lurked in the effects that these defeats had on the subjects: “The most loyal subjects once pertaining to the Emperor and Empire, the Imperial towns, Imperial nobility, and Imperial churches were almost all mediatised - their possessions were transferred to the middle and larger sized German states, who for their part thought that their future lay in a close association with France.”<sup>1</sup> Subjects no longer believed in their leaders’ genius since they were powerless to protect their states from total invasion. Even the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, which would have shaken all of Europe in earlier years, had barely any backlash as “the rest of the world merely shrugged its shoulders over the demise of the almost thousand-year-old Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation on a point of order.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, German states in the Confederation of the Rhine sent soldiers in their thousands to fight in Napoleon’s Campaigns. Ironically, if successful, these campaigns would only ensure the prolonged subjection of Germans to French rule. The German Nation needed liberation, not only from invading armies but one that would also lead to a Germany that is more German than French.

Many German intellectuals appealed to the people to restore their Germanness and fight against the French invaders and their ideals. This new movement came to take on a new religious fervor. Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860), a German poet, preached to his people: “Let the unanimity of your hearts be your church, let hatred of the French be your religion, let Freedom and Fatherland be your saints, to whom you pray!”<sup>3</sup> The new enthusiasm of German people took

---

<sup>1</sup> Hagen Schulze, *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismarck: 1763-1867*, trans. Sarah Hanbury. Tenison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Schulze, *The Course of German Nationalism*, 48-49.

<sup>3</sup> Schulze, 50.

on the nature of a Crusade; the goal was Germany, and the antichrist was Napoleon. It is at this critical point of German nationalism that militarism also has its place in the sun. Militarism was no longer limited to encouraging soldiers but greatly grew with civilians as well, many of whom would gladly enlist and fight for their Fatherland. Some of the German youth “undertook night marches and military maneuvers and practiced fencing and crossbow-shooting so as to be ready for the uprising against the forces of occupation.”<sup>4</sup> The fight was no longer restricted to soldiers; it was a chance for the entire Nation to unite for liberation. The one who took the great responsibility of leading the Crusade was Frederick William III of Prussia (1770-1840). Though he was always seen as a weak character, his call to Germans and Prussians placed him at the forefront of the German War of Liberation. “‘The king called and everyone, everyone came,’ was how the War of Liberation later came to be viewed from the perspective of Wilhelmine Germany.”<sup>5</sup> Prussia, being a leading German state in the fight against Napoleon, was seen as the savior of Germany, and Prussian soldiers were the liberators. Prussia’s role in defeating Napoleon in 1814, and again at the battle of Waterloo, ensured that any shame that Prussia had suffered was removed, and instead, gained glory for their victories over Napoleon. These victories ensured that Prussia’s cooperation was vital in post-Napoleon Europe.

However, after such a glorious victory and the rising theories and plans about a united German nation, the German states in many ways went back to their old ways. Prussia, which led the forces of liberation, “stood on the sidelines of European power politics, steering in the lee of the great powers, avoiding commitments and shying away from conflict.”<sup>6</sup> The Congress of

---

<sup>4</sup> Schulze, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Schulze, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600-1947* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2006), 510.

Vienna came to be based on the belief, the more it fell under the influence of Klemens von Metternich (1773-1859), that the wave of nationalism that ultimately defeated Napoleon could one day drown the rulers of Europe as well. Those militaristic youth groups can one day march against their monarchs. Thus, the hopes of a united German Empire were for now silenced, and the monarchs tried to put Europe back together. “[The congress] now conferring in Vienna about how to restore Europe’s ancient order, how to talk away the young Germans’ dream of unity and freedom of their Fatherland, and, in the eyes of many, how to betray it.”<sup>7</sup> Congress’ betrayal of the German dream was the signal for nationalists and liberals that the torch of freedom was their responsibility and a united Germany was their prize, a prize that was prohibited by the conservative monarchs of Europe.

Romantics and liberals took on the significant burden of trying to achieve a united Germany. In many ways, they would prove impractical and unrealistic. “All sorts of heterogeneous ideologies, interests and classes came together under the banner of the Nation, and consequently the German nationalist movement as a whole was quite incapable of coming to a clear-cut revolutionary decision—one reason why the revolution of 1848 failed.”<sup>8</sup> In 1848, there was an unlimited number of plans for a united Germany. The revolutionists and romantics of 1848 proved themselves unrealistic as they were not united in their cause and were unable to match the monarch’s military power. However, with this significant failure, the revolutionary fervor of 1848 brought change. Politicians finally had a voice in the government as they formed parliaments and houses of representatives such as the Landtag of Prussia. It also became apparent that a united Germany became inevitable; it was only a question of who would control

---

<sup>7</sup> Schulze, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Schulze, 98.

the forces in Germany and lead it to unification. The one who would take on this great task would have to appeal to German militarism and liberalism.

Bismarck, the new Minister-President of Prussia, had an aristocratic and conservative military background, but most importantly understood that he must work with liberals to reach a united Germany under Prussia.

His ultimate objective was to annex the duchies to Prussia. The Prussian Chief of Staff Helmut von Moltke may well have been the key influence here. Moltke was strongly opposed to the transformation of the duchies into an independent principality, on the grounds that the new entity might become a satellite of the Habsburgs and open up a hole in Prussia's northern seaward flank.<sup>9</sup>

As the military aristocracy shared Bismarck's view, he needed a war that would unite Germany under the Prussian banner. He also needed to raise militarism, to motivate the German people to join him on this great mission. In 1866, as the Prussian Kingdom withdrew from the German Confederation, both sides prepared for war. Under Bismarck, the Prussian army was able to resoundingly defeat the Austrian armies and those of its sister states in the confederation. "The victory of the Prussian armies cannot, of course, be ascribed solely to the needle-gun. Although it is difficult to gauge exactly the impact of such factors, there is evidence that the Austrians suffered from lower morale by comparison with their Prussian adversaries."<sup>10</sup> The victory was not only due to Prussia's superior military technology; it was also due to Prussia's militarism, which inherently ensured high morale for its armies.

The victory over Austria brought significant change to the German Nation militarily and politically.

The news of Prussia's mobilization and victory transformed the situation utterly. The Prussian occupation of Hanover, Dresden and Kassel was greeted with a wave of

---

<sup>9</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 526.

<sup>10</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 540-541.

jubilant. Cheering crowds mobbed Bismarck whenever he appeared in public...Bismarck had foreseen this: "At the moment of decision," he told Count von der Goltz, the Prussian ambassador in Paris, "the masses will stand by the monarchy."<sup>11</sup>

Bismarck's victory over Austria was the spark that lit the spirit of nationalism and militarism back in the hearts of Prussian and German citizens. Austria was seen as the ancient ruler who was satisfied with keeping his people weak as long as they cannot disobey his commands. In addition, Austria's diverse court did not in the slightest foster any feeling of German nationalism. In contrast, the homogeneous Prussian court was much fertile for the idea of a united Germany. Under the banner of the Prussian monarchy, all the forces of Germany united for the Crusade under the command of Bismarck.

The formation of the North German Confederation in 1867 was one step closer to the united German Empire. In reference to the First Crusade, the crusaders were now at Antioch and only had to march through the Levant to reach their goal. In terms of the German Wars of Unification, the unification seemed more achievable than ever before. However, the biggest opponent to this unification was France. Even before the French Revolution, it was French policy that a weak and disunited Germany was essential to French defense and the security of its eastern borders. French Foreign Minister Charles Gravier Count Vergennes (1719-1787) wrote in 1779, "what advantage [Germany] would have over us if this formidable power were limited by the form of its constitution...We thus owe our superiority and our security to the forces of [German] disunity."<sup>12</sup> It was thus essential that France be defeated.

Two factors were essential to Bismarck to be able to defeat France and have the legitimacy to do so. The first was that all of the German states, namely the ones in the Southern

---

<sup>11</sup> Clark, 543.

<sup>12</sup> Dennis E. Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 310.

German States, would be willing to enter a total war under Prussia's leadership. Again, the spirit of Prussian militarism would play a significant role. In the new army of the united North German Confederation,

[S]enior officers were appointed by the King of Prussia and swore allegiance to him. Its soldiers as well swore oaths of obedience. Prussian military law and Prussian drill regulations were adopted for the whole army. Formations might bear local titles or honorific designations but were numbered sequentially—with the “old Prussian” regiments taking pride of place.<sup>13</sup>

Prussian militarism expanded its influence into all forces of the North German Confederation. The united German army would enjoy the morale, pride, and the military spirit of Prussia. The second major factor to the legitimacy of the German Empire would require that France declares war on Germany; this would aid the narrative that France always conspired to keep Germany weak and always worked against German interest. France’s aggression would also ensure Austrian neutrality in case of a war with France.

When France declared war on the North German Confederation in 1870, all of Germany's forces stood behind Prussia. Even the reluctant King of Bavaria, Ludwig II (1845-1886), who had maintained a friendly relationship with Napoleon III (1808-1873), was forced to ally with Prussia and join the war against France. The German Crusade was finally within the grasp of its goal of a united Germany. The total German victory over France in its forms of Empire and then Republic was a testament to Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke's (1800-1891) success and the superiority of the Prussian military. The proclamation of the German Empire on 18 January 1871 was so iconic, as victorious Germans proclaimed their unity and crowned their new leader in the headquarters of their most vicious enemy. It was as if the crusaders finally proclaimed their victory in Jerusalem. The Prussian military also had its place in the sun. The glorious parade it

---

<sup>13</sup> Showalter, 202.



had in Paris after a furious siege, ensured a sense of glory and superiority into Prussian soldiers; it also ensured lasting military spirit in the hearts of citizens of the German Empire.

'Militarism' became one of the foremost 'semantic rallying points' in modern German political culture.' In whatever sense it was used, it drew attention to the structural connections between the military and the wider social and political system in which it was embedded. The army was without a doubt one of the central institutions of Prussian life after 1871.<sup>14</sup>

Militarism was so effective in the unification of Germany that it would play a major role in German society. Many aristocratic families would be honoured to have their sons serve in the Prussian military. Even with the German defeat in World War One, the Prussian military was still a proud one, retaining much of the glory it gained in the grand conquests of the Wars of Unification. Prussian military figures like Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934), who became President of the Republic in 1925, played a significant role in German society and politics. Thus, the victorious allies in 1945 concluded that the only way to stop Prussian militarism was to destroy the state of Prussia, which ceased to exist in 1947.

The Wars of German Unification were a significant contributor in Prussia's sense of superiority and glory. These wars, which are a series of episodes in a crusade for German sovereignty and unification, fostered Prussian militarism into its subjects even though they might not have fired a bullet for Germany's glory. In a sense, everyone was a part of the Crusade by merely being German. The Prussian victory in the Wars of Unification was so great that Prussian pride was not totally destroyed even by a defeat as severe as the First World War. Only after the ultimate and crushing defeat in the Second World War, that Prussian militarism lost its superiority. A total defeat was the only way Prussian militarism would finally lose its great pride, which it got from its leading role in the Crusade for German unification.

---

<sup>14</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 600.

*About the author*

Hamza Elshakankiri is currently an undergraduate student at the University of Regina. He is also pursuing a certificate in the German language and culture. He hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in History. In his free time, Hamza enjoys creating short documentaries about important historical battles. He also enjoys collecting vintage coins and collecting WWI and WWII medals.

Bibliography

- Carr, William and Harry Hearder. *Wars of German Unification*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Clark, Christopher. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600-1947*. Harvard: Belknap Press, 2006.
- Craig, Gordon A. *The Politics of the Prussian Army: 1640-1945*. Oxford: University Press, 1964.
- Förster, Stig, and Jörg Nagler. *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997.
- Gall, Lothar and J. A. Underwood. *Bismarck: The White Revolutionary, 1815-1871*. New York: Unwin Hyman, 1990.
- Huges, Daniel J. ed. *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*. California: Presidio Press, 2009.
- Palmer, Alan. *Bismarck*. California: Lume Books, 2015.
- Pflanze, Otto. *Bismarck and the Development of Germany, 1815-1871*. Princeton: University Press, 1971.
- Schulze, Hagen. *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismarck:*

1763-1867. Translated by Sarah Hanbury. Tenison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Showalter, Dennis E. *The Wars of German Unification*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Steinberg, Johnathan. *Bismarck: A Life*. Oxford: University Press, 2013.

Stern, Fritz. *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder and the Building of the German Empire*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Taylor, A. J. P. *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe: 1848-1918*. Oxford: University Press, 1955.