

# Otto von Bismarck



Germany became a modern, unified nation under the leadership of the “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), who between 1862 and 1890 effectively ruled first Prussia and then all of Germany. A master strategist, Bismarck initiated decisive wars with Denmark, Austria and France to unite 39 independent German states under Prussian leadership. Although an arch-conservative, Bismarck introduced progressive reforms—including universal male suffrage and the establishment of the first welfare state—in order to achieve his goals. He manipulated European rivalries to make Germany a world power, but in doing so laid the groundwork for both World Wars.

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### **Where & when born**

Otto Eduard Leopold von Bismarck was born April 1, 1815, at his family's estate in the Prussian heartland west of Berlin.

### **Brief history of the Otto Von Bismarck**

His father was a fifth-generation Junker (a Prussian landowning noble), and his mother came from a family of successful academics and government ministers. Throughout his life Bismarck would emphasize his rural Junker roots, underplaying his considerable intellect and cosmopolitan outlook.

Bismarck was educated at Johann Ernst Plamann's elementary school and the Friedrich-Wilhelm and Graues Kloster secondary schools. From 1832 to 1833 he studied law at the University of Göttingen, where he was a member of the Corps Hannovera, and then enrolled at the University of Berlin (1833–35). In 1838, while stationed as an army reservist in Greifswald, he studied agriculture at the University of Greifswald. At Göttingen, Bismarck became friends with the American student John Lothrop Motley. Motley, who later became an eminent historian and diplomat while remaining close to Bismarck, wrote a novel in 1839, *Morton's Hope, or the Memoirs of a Provincial*, about life in a German university. In it he described Bismarck as a reckless and dashing eccentric, but also as an extremely gifted and charming young man.

Although Bismarck hoped to become a diplomat, he started his practical training as a lawyer in Aachen and Potsdam, and soon resigned and also served in the army for a year and became an officer in the Landwehr (reserve), before returning to run the family estates at Schönhausen on his mother's death in his mid-twenties.

Bismarck married Marie's cousin, the noblewoman Johanna von Puttkamer (1824–94) at Alt-Kolziglow (modern Kołczygłowy) on 28 July 1847. Their long and happy marriage produced three children. Bismarck soon adopted his wife's pietism, and he remained a devout Pietist Lutheran for the rest of his life.

From 1851 to 1862 Bismarck served a series of ambassadorships—at the German Confederation in Frankfurt, in St. Petersburg and in Paris—that gave him valuable insight into the vulnerabilities of Europe's great powers.



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William I became Prussia's king in 1861 and a year later appointed Bismarck as his chief minister. Though technically deferring to William, in reality Bismarck was in charge, manipulating the king with his intellect and the occasional tantrum while using royal decrees to circumvent the power of elected officials.

In 1888, the German Emperor, Wilhelm I, died leaving the throne to his son, Friedrich III. The new monarch was already suffering from an incurable throat cancer and died after reigning for only 99 days. He was succeeded by his son, Wilhelm II, who opposed Bismarck's careful foreign policy, preferring vigorous and rapid expansion to enlarge Germany's "place in the sun"

Bismarck did not expect he would live to see Wilhelm ascend to the throne, and thus had no strategy to deal with him. Conflicts between Wilhelm II and his chancellor soon poisoned their relationship. Their final split occurred after Bismarck tried to implement far-reaching anti-Socialist laws in early 1890.

Bismarck resigned at Wilhelm II's insistence on 18 March 1890, nearly at age 75, to be succeeded as Chancellor of Germany and Minister-President of Prussia by Leo von Caprivi. Bismarck was discarded ("dropping the pilot", in the words of the famous Punchcartoon), promoted to the rank of "Colonel-General with the Dignity of Field Marshal" (so-called because the German Army did not appoint full Field Marshals in peacetime) and given a new title, Duke of Lauenburg, which he joked would be useful when travelling incognito. He was soon elected to the Reichstag as a National Liberal in Bennigsen's old and supposedly safe Hamburg seat, but he was embarrassed by being taken to a second ballot by a Social Democrat opponent, and never actually took up his seat. He entered into resentful retirement, lived in Friedrichsruh near Hamburg and sometimes on his estates at Varzin, waiting in vain to be called for advice and counsel. After his wife's death on 27 November 1894 his health worsened and one year later he finally confined to a wheelchair.

Bismarck spent his final years composing his memoirs (Gedanken und Erinnerungen, or Thoughts and Memories), a work of literary genius, in which he increased the drama around every event and always presented himself favorably. He died in July 1898 at the age of 83 in Friedrichsruh, where he is entombed in the Bismarck Mausoleum.

### **Career in Political**

In 1847 Bismarck, aged 32, was chosen as a representative to the newly created Prussian legislature, the Vereinigter Landtag (de). There, he gained a reputation as a royalist and reactionary politician with a gift for stinging rhetoric; he openly advocated the idea that the monarch had a divine right to rule.

In March 1848, Prussia faced a revolution (one of the revolutions of 1848 across Europe), which completely overwhelmed King Frederick William IV. The monarch, though initially inclined to use armed forces to suppress the rebellion, ultimately declined to leave Berlin for the safety of military headquarters at



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Potsdam

Bismarck had at first tried to rouse the peasants of his estate into an army to march on Berlin in the King's name. The King's brother, Prince Wilhelm had fled to England. The liberal movement perished by the end of 1848 amid internal fighting. Meanwhile, the conservatives regrouped, formed an inner group of advisers—including the Gerlach brothers—known as the "Camarilla"—around the King, and retook control of Berlin. Although a constitution was granted, its provisions fell far short of the demands of the revolutionaries. In 1849, Bismarck was elected to the Landtag. At this stage in his career, he opposed the unification of Germany, arguing that Prussia would lose its independence in the process. He accepted his appointment as one of Prussia's representatives at the Erfurt Parliament, an assembly of German states that met to discuss plans for union, but he only did so to oppose that body's proposals more effectively. The parliament failed to bring about unification, for it lacked the support of the two most important German states, Prussia and Austria. In September 1850, after a dispute over Hesse, (the Hesse Crisis of 1850) Prussia was humiliated and forced to back down by Austria (supported by Russia) in the so-called Punctation of Olmütz; a plan for the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership, proposed by Prussia's Minister President Radowitz, was also abandoned.

In 1851, Frederick William IV appointed Bismarck as Prussia's envoy to the Diet of the German Confederation in Frankfurt. Bismarck gave up his elected seat in the Landtag, but was appointed to the Prussian House of Lords a few years later. Bismarck's eight years in Frankfurt were marked by changes in his political opinions, detailed in the numerous lengthy memoranda which he sent to his ministerial superiors in Berlin. No longer under the influence of his ultraconservative Prussian friends, Bismarck became less reactionary and more pragmatic. He gradually came to believe that he and his fellow conservatives had to take the lead in the drive toward creating a unified nation in order to keep from being eclipsed. He also believed that the middle-class liberals wanted a unified Germany more than they wanted to break the grip of the traditional forces over society.

Bismarck also worked to maintain the friendship of Russia and a working relationship with Napoleon III's France—the latter being anathema to his conservative friends the Gerlachs, but necessary both to threaten Austria and to prevent France allying herself to Russia. In a famous letter to Leopold von Gerlach, Bismarck wrote that it was foolish to play chess having first put 16 of the 64 squares out of bounds. This observation was ironic as after 1871, France indeed became Germany's permanent enemy, and eventually allied with Russia against Germany in the 1890s.

Wilhelm I became Prussia's king in 1861 and a year later appointed Bismarck as his chief minister. On 23 September 1862, Wilhelm appointed Bismarck Minister President and Foreign Minister. Bismarck, Roon and Moltke took charge at a time when relations among the Great Powers—Great Britain, France, Austria and Russia—had been shattered by the Crimean War and the Italian War. In the midst of this disarray, the European balance of power was restructured with the creation of the German Empire as the dominant power in Europe. This was achieved by Bismarck's diplomacy, Roon's reorganization of the army, and

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Moltke's military strategy.

Despite the initial distrust of the King and Crown Prince, and the loathing of Queen Augusta, Bismarck soon acquired a powerful hold over the King by force of personality and powers of persuasion. Bismarck used both diplomacy and the Prussian military to achieve unification, excluding Austria from a unified Germany. Not only did this make Prussia the most powerful and dominant component of the new Germany, but also ensured that it remained authoritarian, rather than a liberal parliamentary regime

In 1864 Bismarck began the series of wars that would establish Prussian power in Europe. He attacked Denmark to gain the German-speaking territories of Schleswig-Holstein and two years later provoked Emperor Franz-Josef I into starting the Austro-Prussian War (1866), which ended in a swift defeat for the aging Austrian empire. At the time, Bismarck wisely declined to levy a war indemnity against the Austrians.

Bismarck was less circumspect in his conduct of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). Seeing the opportunity to unify Germany's loose confederations against an outside enemy, Bismarck stirred political tensions between France and Prussia, famously editing a telegram from William I to make both countries feel insulted by the other. The French declared war, but the Prussians and their German allies won handily. Prussia levied an indemnity, annexed the French border provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and crowned William emperor of a unified Germany (the Second Reich) in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles—a tremendous insult to the French.

In 1871, Otto von Bismarck was raised to the rank of Fürst (Prince). He was also appointed as the first Imperial Chancellor (Reichskanzler) of the German Empire, but retained his Prussian offices (including those of Minister-President and Foreign Minister). He was also promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general, and bought a former hotel in Friedrichsruh near Hamburg. He also continued to serve as his own foreign minister. Because of both the imperial and the Prussian offices that he held, Bismarck had near complete control over domestic and foreign policy. The office of Minister President of Prussia was temporarily separated from that of Chancellor in 1873, when Albrecht von Roon was appointed to the former office. But by the end of the year, Roon resigned due to ill health, and Bismarck again became Minister-President.

With Germany unified, William I and Bismarck turned to entrenching their domestic power. For much of the 1870s Bismarck pursued a Kulturkampf (cultural struggle) against Catholics, who made up 36 percent of Germany's population, by placing parochial schools under state control and expelling the Jesuits. However in 1878 Bismarck relented, allying with the Catholics against the growing socialist threat.

In 1873, Germany and much of Europe and America entered the Long Depression, the Gründerkrise. A downturn hit the German economy for the first time since industrial development began to surge in the 1850s. To aid faltering industries, the Chancellor abandoned free trade and established protectionist



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import-tariffs, which alienated the National Liberals who demanded free trade. The Kulturkampf and its effects also stirred up public opinion against the party that supported it, and Bismarck used this opportunity to distance himself from the National Liberals. This marked a rapid decline in the support of the National Liberals, and by 1879 their close ties with Bismarck had all but ended. Bismarck instead returned to conservative factions—including the Centre Party—for support. He helped foster support from the conservatives by enacting several tariffs protecting German agriculture and industry from foreign competitors in 1879

In the 1880s Bismarck set aside his conservative impulses to counter the socialists by creating Europe's first modern welfare state, establishing national healthcare (1883), accident insurance (1884) and old age pensions (1889). Bismarck also hosted the 1885 Berlin Conference that ended the "Scramble for Africa," dividing the continent between the European powers and establishing German colonies in Cameroon, Togoland and East and Southwest Africa.

William I died in 1888 and was succeeded by his son Frederick III and then his grandson William II, both of whom Bismarck found difficult to control. In 1890 the new king forced Bismarck out. William II was left in control of a flourishing unified state but was ill-equipped to maintain Bismarck's carefully manipulated balance of international rivalries. He died in July 1898 at the age of 83 in Friedrichsruh. Respected and honored by the time of his death eight years later, Bismarck quickly became a quasi-mythic figure invoked by political leaders calling for strong German leadership—or for war.

### **Leadership qualities / Principles and Practices**

- Bismarck's strategy was to weaken his opponents through authoritarian suppression while building temporary political coalitions in order to enact his preferred legislation. The skillful execution of this strategy allowed him to keep control over the legislative agenda for 20 years, despite his lack of a natural parliamentary majority and the growing power of the middle and working classes
- Although an ardent conservative and monarchist, Bismarck was the first European leader to promote a system of social security for workers. He rebuilt the German monetary system, introducing for the first time a single currency. He also helped fabricate the new country's code of civil and commercial law
- While German industry developed rapidly during his decades in power, he would allow no evolution in the political system toward greater participation. In this sense, Bismarck was a last representative of the world of the ancient regime and cabinet diplomacy
- The European center, characterized by a weak conglomeration of small and medium-sized states for centuries, was now home to the foremost military and industrial power on the Continent.
- Historians stress that Bismarck's peace-oriented, "saturated continental diplomacy" was



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increasingly unpopular, because it consciously reined in any expansionist drives

### **Critical moments of struggle, Civil War etc.**

During Austria-Prussian war, a German radical named Ferdinand Cohen-Blind attempted to assassinate Bismarck in Berlin, shooting him five times at close range. Bismarck had only minor injuries; Cohen-Blind committed suicide while in custody.

In foreign affairs his skill had led to 20 years of peace in Europe, which had gained him a deserved reputation for moderation and a sense of limits.

### **Awards and achievements**

- Bismarck was a great leader, perhaps the greatest European leader of the 19th century. His triumphs outweighed his defeats, and he almost single-handedly turned a group of bickering kingdoms into a mighty state. Although his policies did contribute to the disasters in Germany's future, those were more so a result of his successors' inability to adjust to the changing geopolitical climate in Europe
- According to Steinberg, his achievements in 1862–71 were "the greatest diplomatic and political achievement by any leader in the last two centuries.
- Bismarck's most important legacy is the unification of Germany. Following unification, Germany became one of the most powerful nations in Europe. Bismarck's astute, cautious, and pragmatic foreign policies allowed Germany to peacefully retain the powerful position into which he had brought it; maintaining amiable diplomacy with almost all European nations except France.
- Numerous statues and memorials dot the cities, towns, and countryside of Germany, including the famous Bismarck Memorial in Berlin and numerous Bismarck towers on four continents

### **Literary Works**

- Observers at the time and ever since have commented on Bismarck's skill as a writer.
- As Henry Kissinger has noted, "The man of 'blood and iron' wrote prose of extraordinary directness and lucidity, comparable in distinctiveness to Churchill's use of the English language

### **Sources**

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