The immediate consequences of German unification

‘Blood and iron’ nationalism

The aggressive nationalism of Bismarck’s ‘blood and iron’ defeated France and unified Germany. The balance of power in Europe was now totally altered. Germany was strengthened at the expense of France while Austria was relegated to a secondary position in Europe.

Bismarck was appointed as the Imperial Chancellor of the new German Empire. Bismarck also retained his position of Prussian power, giving him complete control of both German foreign and domestic policy. Bismarck claimed that 30 years of peace would transform Germany into the most powerful nation on earth.

Victory in the Franco–Prussian War had profound consequences for Germany and Europe because it resulted in:

- benefits to German industry through the payment of the war debt. Bismarck built Germany into an industrial, economic and military giant with a standing army of up to 400,000 men and another 1,500,000 reservists.
- development of a system of European alliances as a consequence of Germany’s great military power in Europe. The alliances were unique in peacetime and built according to a nation’s preparedness to go to war in support of an ally.
- unification of the Italian states due to the withdrawal of French forces from Rome.
- war as an instrument of national policy being established as a feature of European international relations. Prussian victories also demonstrated how heavy artillery would dominate modern warfare.
- ‘state socialism’ in Germany, with Bismarck using the program of reform from the socialist movement as the model. Germany was established as a European pioneer in improving working-class conditions through the introduction of workers’ compensation, health insurance, state welfare housing and old-age pensions.

Source Questions

1. Examine the detail of the cartoon in source 1.14. In one paragraph, explain what comments the cartoonist is making about Bismarck’s unique position in European politics. To build your response you will need to analyse the meaning behind details such as the contents of the garbage bin and the images stuck to the wall.

2. From the information in the text and the evidence from the cartoon, explain how Bismarck attempted to maintain Germany’s position of supremacy in Europe.

In adopting a policy of diplomatically isolating France through building relations with Germany’s neighbours, Bismarck sought to ensure German security. The German alliance with Austria was signed in 1879 as a mutual defence agreement against any future threat from Russia. In 1882, Germany and Austria were joined by Italy in forming the Triple Alliance. Despite Bismarck’s efforts to establish a new balance of power in Europe, the bitterness left by the Franco–Prussian war set in place the rivalry that would culminate in World War I.
Bismarck’s departure

On 3 March 1888, Bismarck announced the death of Wilhelm I to the Reichstag. The conflict and quarrels between chancellor and emperor had been widely reported but Bismarck and Wilhelm I had worked closely together for nearly three decades, they understood one another and they shared a vision for Prussia and Germany. Upon the death of Wilhelm I, power went briefly to his son, Frederick III, who died from cancer three months later. In the same year, the brilliant architect of Prussian military strategy, Helmuth von Moltke, retired.

Wilhelm II was the son of Frederick III and Victoria, daughter of Queen Victoria of Britain. Wilhelm II was 29 years of age when he came to the throne and felt little loyalty to the 75-year-old ‘iron chancellor’ who ruled Germany in such an authoritarian manner.
Bismarck underestimated the political skill of Wilhelm II and regarded him as too inexperienced and irresponsible to be a serious political force in Germany. Wilhelm II was a nationalist who believed in his divine right to rule a mighty German empire. He advocated an aggressive foreign policy designed to rapidly expand German territory and protect Germany’s ‘place in the sun’.

During the reign of Wilhelm I, Bismarck’s power had never been threatened. Wilhelm II made no secret of his contempt for Bismarck, blocking Bismarck’s control at every opportunity and being determined in his opposition to the old chancellor. On the morning of the 20 March 1890, Wilhelm II challenged Bismarck and forced his resignation. Nine days later, with much pomp and ceremony, Bismarck boarded a train and left behind his life of politics and power in Berlin.

Bismarck retired to his country estate to write his memoirs, ever hopeful that the emperor would call him back to public office. Bismarck’s political advice was never sought again. Otto Eduard Leopold von Bismarck died on 31 July 1898. It is reported his final word was ‘Forward!’

Germany’s foreign policy was set in a new direction after Bismarck. Wilhelm II took personal control of foreign policy and turned away from the path Bismarck had established. Under Bismarck, Germany became the most powerful nation on the continent of Europe. Wilhelm’s goal was to establish German power across the globe by building up the German navy and encouraging warlike policies and competition with Great Britain.
Bismarck's power and peace

The nineteenth century produced revolution, pitched battles and peace. Events like the Franco-Prussian war brought bloodshed to the heart of the western European world, followed by a six-month siege, the bombardment of Paris and the deaths of thousands of civilians. There were, nevertheless, decades of peace. After Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat (see page 4), Europe avoided a nineteenth-century conflict involving all the great powers. Europeans had never before experienced a period of peace such as the era that came to such a terrifying end in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I.

The European peace of the Bismarck years was fragile because it was based on a belief that military preparedness would deter aggression. This was the era of diplomatic crises brought about by clashes over the territorial and economic interests of the great European powers. Decisions on whether to compromise or fight relied upon the diplomatic skills of a handful of European statesmen. The great European powers — Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Germany — acknowledged the power that each had to wage war. While not equal in political influence and military might, they were stronger than their neighbours. The 'Concert of Europe' continued to provide a forum for diplomacy to deal with European rivalry. The Concert had no written rules or permanent institutions but relied on the personal relationships and understanding built by politicians like Bismarck.

Bismarck's years of peace also brought immense technological and economic change. The railways, the telegraph and steamships ushered in a revolution in communication. European prosperity and social change came from the massive increases in the continent's manufacturing and agricultural output.

Under Bismarck, the new electrical and chemical industries were developed and mineral resources were exploited. Increased wealth gave the opportunity for farsighted social reforms that gave German workers industrial accident and health laws, insurance schemes and pensions. By 1890, Bismarck had developed the economic unity to reinforce German nationhood.

Bismarck's greatest legacy was the creation of a nation from the various kingdoms, principalities and free cities of Germany. Whether Bismarck planned German unification, or whether it was a product of his desire to assert Prussian power against Austria, remains a topic of historical debate. Whether历史 judges Bismarck as a political realist, opportunist or idealist, his influence in shaping the modern world is undeniable. Bismarck dominated Europe through the force of his personality and intellect. The 'iron chancellor' established a triumphant and sovereign German state that became the greatest power of nineteenth-century Europe.

Source 1.17

A cartoon from Punch magazine, 29 March 1890, entitled 'Dropping the pilot'

SOURCE QUESTIONS

1. Explain the comment the cartoon in source 1.17 makes about Bismarck's resignation and departure from European politics.
2. Discuss in groups the achievements of Bismarck's career then hold a class debate: 'That the ends justify the means'.