Title: Zollverein and German Unification: To what extent did the Zollverein promote a sense of national unity within the German Confederation prior to German Unification in 1871?

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Introduction

The formation of a unified German state in January, 1871, out of a once divided agglomeration of various political entities, marked an end to the post-Napoleonic era by finally out-and-out abolishing the status-quo ante. This re-definition of the ‘Concert of Europe’ in 1871 had followed a phase in which its prior definition, drafted at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, had become blurred. And it was in the context of this disillusionment the European Great Powers now felt with the earlier system that certain aspirations which would significantly alter the European balance of power, such as aspirations for German nationhood, could realistically be materialized.

The achievement of creating a unified German state in 1871 was the outcome of numerous forces: social, economic and political; both domestic and foreign. Prussia’s economic strength, her formidable military, Bismarck’s Machiavellian leadership, Austria’s apparent weaknesses, German nationalism, and a general European retreat in diplomatic involvement were all causes leading to the outcome of unification. Yet, this paper chooses to analyze the economic factors behind German unification, seeing them as vital in understanding the developments of the period due to the undeniable effects industrialization was having on the relative global power structures over the course of the 19th century.

In particular, by disregarding the military factors attached to the economic question (as they open an entirely new debate), the focus will lie explicitly on the extent to which Prussia’s leadership of the Zollverein contributed to the political unification of Germany. In doing so, this paper will scrutinize the events imperative to answering the above mentioned question in chronological order, before coming to a conclusion tying together the main findings of the research. Thus, while Prussia’s leadership of the Zollverein did indeed create a situation in which the leaders of the member states (as well as their constituents) began to acknowledge the immense material benefits of aligning with their powerful

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1 The Zollverein was a German customs union founded in 1834 and headed by Prussia. Its boundaries were acutely similar to those the unified German nation would see in 1871.
northern neighbour, these material interests were not in themselves strong enough to allow for the economic union to gradually lead to a political one.

**Congress, Confederation, and the Zollverein**

Following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, many Germans believed that the spirit that had existed in the common struggle against Napoleon would result in greater political unity among the numerous German cities, principalities and states. Instead, the Congress restored the ‘old order’ by installing the German Confederation: a fragmented union of 39 independent political entities [Appendix 1]. The Confederation was created, among other reasons, with the intention of forestalling German unity on a national basis. The designers at the Congress of Vienna understood that by granting 39 German states autonomy and a voice in the Confederation, the vast multitude of voices would make consensual agreement a near impossibility. However, with the formation of a Prussian led customs union in 1834, the Zollverein, the inherent inevitability of German unification subsided. Clearly, disagreement persisted and Austria’s reactionary influence within the Confederation remained substantial; but what now changed was that the Zollverein effectively created a common economic interest collectively shared by the member states.

The development towards greater economic integration within the German Confederation worried propagators of the status quo. In 1834 the Zollverein consisted of 18 states and some 23 million people; but by 1848 it already included 28 of the 39 German states. Austria in particular was concerned, with Metternich suggesting as early as three years before its creation that this “state within a state” promoted the “highly dangerous idea of German unity”. The notion that a customs union could lead to political unification was not solely propagated by those forces that nostalgically clung to the existing state of affairs, but also by forces that were more inclined towards revisionism than the latter. Upon the formation of the Zollverein, a Prussian finance minister is recorded to have said that the “unification of these states

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5 Austria’s Chancellor from 1809 to 1848, central to European affairs in this period.
in a customs union leads to the establishment of a unified political system”. Tellingly, the end product of unification was remarkably similar to the boundaries of the Zollverein [see Appendix 2]. Thus, as the German Confederation moved towards revolution in 1848, the idea that economic integration may gradually lead to political unification was relatively widespread [Appendix 3].

**From Frankfurt to Olmütz**

Revolution in Paris in early 1848 triggered social unrest across the continent. The German Confederation experienced revolutionary activity until the summer of the succeeding year. The popular unrest grew predominantly out of grievances resulting from the economic downturn of the late 1840s; the trigger having little to do with “doctrine or principle”. Nonetheless, German liberal nationalists harnessed the opportunity the revolutionary spirit provided to call for the formation of a parliament in Frankfurt to discuss political issues, i.e. issues of reform and unification. Ultimately however, “revolutions are won by those who can decide the question of power in their favor, and the Frankfurt parliament was utterly powerless”. Although failing to achieve unification, the national liberals heading the Frankfurt Parliament did decide on the fundamental model unification was to take (at least in their eyes): marginally voting against the ‘Grossdeutsch’ solution, which would include Austria, and in favour of the ‘Kleindeutsch’ solution, excluding Austria [Appendix 4].

The ‘Kleindeutsch’ camp was naturally stronger from the start; the reason being that “in the area of economic policy, their goal was already a reality”. Partially as a result of which, the Frankfurt Parliament offered the imperial crown to Frederick Wilhelm IV of Prussia in April 1849. But the significance of these events was not that they illustrated a likely correlation between the boundaries of the Zollverein and the decision for a Kleindeutschland (a correlation which in itself has no strong footing).

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7 Cooper, 163.
10 Schulze, 129.
11 Frederick Wilhelm IV rejected because he would not accept a “crown from the gutter” [the people]. Pflanze, 43.
Instead, the significance lies more so in the fact that Prussia recognized that she could successfully use her economic position to shift the political balance of power in her favour; considering Prussia’s rivalry with Austria. Therefore, following her political defeats to Austria in 1849 and again at Olmütz in 1850, Prussia was nonetheless able to exert pressure on the members of the Zollverein to reject an Austrian bid to include the Habsburg Crown lands into the customs union. For as the Zollverein grew, so did the common economic interest to maintain the Zollverein [Appendix 5]. Consequently, Prussia could increasingly counter the two predominant forces opposing unification: Austria’s reactionary leadership, and particularist inclinations widespread among the rulers of the German states.

The Quiet Years

The 1848 climax of nationalist fever within the German Confederation was followed by a decade of political reaction: thus termed ‘the quiet years’. Economic activity, however, was far from quiet. The Fifties were a period of substantial economic growth, notably within Prussia and the Zollverein. Between 1850 and 1860 coal production in ‘Kleineutschland’ doubled from six to twelve million tons annually; pig iron production increased from 215,000 to 529,000 tons annually; and the length of railways open in 1860 amounted to 11,084km from just 5856km ten years earlier. For the business community, the growth of industry and commerce created “the desire for a greater economic unity than the Zollverein was able to provide”, and that only political unity could achieve. Furthermore, industrialization substantially transformed German society, i.e. agrarian society was largely replaced by a modern, urban one.

Urbanization meant that large sectors of society became “uncertain of its orientation and in the throes of an identity crisis”, which naturally created more sentiment in favour of the cause of German unification.

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14 Gorman, 6.
15 Gorman, 8.
16 Pflanze, 114.
18 Pflanze, 38.
19 Schulze, 134.
As a result, instead of political revolution eliminating the old order, it was in fact a revolution in the economy that managed to do so.  

Fundamentally, the large market for goods the Zollverein provided was the enabling factor for such remarkable growth in the 1850s. And the more powerful Prussia became economically, the more important trade agreements for the other Zollverein states with her became; seemingly aligning them with Prussia.  

Thus, these ‘quiet’ developments not only made business elites increasingly ask for unification around Prussia, as well as create a large urban class which would provide popular support for a nationalist revival, but most importantly, they boosted Prussia’s relative position in the Confederation. Wilhelm I, who succeeded Frederick Wilhelm IV of Prussia in 1857, recognized exactly this and argued that “wise legislation” and “elements of unification like the Zollverein” were the proper course to achieve unification and thereby Prussian aggrandizement. So ultimately, the economic growth of the 1850s enhanced Prussia’s blessing to a point at which she entered the 1860s confident enough to politically oppose particularist German forces and Austria’s headship of the Confederation. The subsequent crises of the 1860s would put to test this apparent new position of economic, and consequent political, power of Prussia and the Zollverein as unifying forces.

Revival of Liberal Nationalism and Appointment of Arch-Conservative Bismarck

In the late Fifties the political scene within the German Confederation saw a revival of liberal nationalism. This ‘second revolution’ may be attributed to a general exhaustion of political reactionism, the Italian wars of unification, and Frederick Wilhelm’s replacement with his less conservative brother, Wilhelm I. Two developments in particular illustrated this revival: first, the creation of the Nationalverein in 1859. This organization effectively propagated the Kleindeutsch camp, i.e. seeing the Zollverein as the

20 Schulze, 132.
21 The renewed rejection of Austria’s bid to join the Zollverein in 1859 is a telling example. Hamerov, 202.
22 Seen in the later period of the 1860s.
23 Pflanze, 121.
24 “Liberalism and nationalism represented two sides of the same coin.” Schulze, 138.
model for unification. And second, the election of a majority of liberals to the Prussian Diet after 1859.\textsuperscript{25} By 1862, the liberal majority within the Diet was so severe that conservative strength shrank to ten seats while the opposition grew to 223.\textsuperscript{26} But as 1848 revealed, solely liberal parliamentarian moves were unable to defeat particularist forces (strongest among the statesman of the southern states), let alone Austrian opposition.\textsuperscript{27} However, coupled with other unifying forces, liberal nationalism would prove to play a significant role in German unification.

Somewhat ironically, it was only when the arch-conservative Otto von Bismarck was appointed Prussian Chancellor in September 1862 that a coherent policy was drafted to use the liberal nationalism rampant within large sectors of German society to achieve unification. Bismarck argued that the confederation was incapable of satisfying the popular aspiration for national unity. Hence, Prussia should publicly announce her support of “a national assembly of the German people.” In such an organ Bismarck saw “the only unifying force which can supply an adequate counter weight to the tendency of the dynasties to adopt separate and divergent policies”.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, Bismarck understood that the other states would never consent to such a program. Prussia should therefore use the Zollverein treaties to enforce her policy and disguise it initially as a Zollverein parliament.\textsuperscript{29} But where did that leave Austria? Austria would never allow for such developments to proceed as they would undermine her position within the Confederation. Bismarck came to understand that military confrontation with Austria would be necessary to fulfill his plans of Prussian aggrandizement.\textsuperscript{30} Thereby, it becomes apparent that the Zollverein as a unifying force was limited, i.e. while during the early 1860s it could successfully counter particularist forces, in itself it was unable to counter Austria’s status-quo hegemony.

\textsuperscript{26} Pflanze, 165.
\textsuperscript{27} As Bismarck made quite clear when entering office: “Germany does not look to Prussia’s liberalism but to her strength... The great questions of the day will not be decided by speeches and the resolutions of majorities – that was the great mistake from 1848 to 1849 – but by iron and blood.” Friedrich, Otto. Blood & Iron: From Bismarck to Hitler the von Moltke Family's Impact on German History. New York: Harper Collin Publisher, 1995. 108.
\textsuperscript{28} Pflanze, 145.
\textsuperscript{29} Pflanze, 145.
\textsuperscript{30} Pflanze, 9.
The Austro-Prussian War and Zollparlament

Throughout the 1860s, Prussia pursued an ever more confident foreign policy. Like Frederick the Great, Bismarck insisted upon the supremacy of political over military strategy. Nevertheless, he understood that to politically undermine the particularist tendencies especially engrained within the statesmen of the southern states, Austria’s influence would first need to be removed from the Confederation militarily. The Schleswig-Holstein Affair beginning in 1863, and the consequent Convention of Gastein in 1865, gave rise to unignorable Austro-Prussian tensions. War erupted in June 1866. Although Prussia headed the prosperous customs union that brought such tangible economic benefits, Austria managed to mobilize the majority of the German states against Prussia! The ‘German-Prussian’ War thus starkly illustrated the two-folded nature of the Zollverein states’ relationship with Prussia. The expansive material benefits of economic union with the northern industrial powerhouse proved to be insufficient to counter particularist ideals within the Catholic southern German states. To be clear, politically, Prussia had the power to constitute favourable Zollverein treaties and economically exclude Austria, as was again done in 1865. Nevertheless, as soon as the political sovereignty of the independent states was jeopardized, through what southern statesman saw as Prussian attempts of encroachment, Prussia became the enemy.

The inherent limits of the Zollverein as a unifying force were blatantly reinforced during the Austro-Prussian War. But coupled by Bismarck’s unrelenting drive to undermine particularist forces, the Zollverein’s importance saw a revival. The swift military victory over Austria (as well as over her German allies) meant that Bismarck could now implement his political strategy to encourage the unification of the southern states with the North German Confederation. Bismarck proposed a

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31 Pflanze, 9.
32 In response to calls by the German Confederation, an Austro-Prussian alliance (with Prussia leading) defeated Denmark in a quick war, and annexed and dually administered the two duchies Schleswig and Holstein.
33 Kitchen, 196.
34 Tellingly, Confederate forces wore the colors black-red-gold (Germany’s national colors) on their uniforms when facing Prussian forces. Schulze, 142.
35 As an example of Southern disapproval of Prussia, a popular saying within Wurttemberg about Prussia went: ‘Pay your taxes, shut your trap, and become a soldier!’ Kitchen, 199.
36 The North German Confederation was a political union of the northern German states under Prussia, created in July 1867. Gorman 13.
Zollverein parliament which would embrace the whole of Germany. The ‘Zollparlament’ would have the power to legislate matters of customs and commerce. As noted earlier, Bismarck saw such an organ as a “unifying force”, i.e. a way in which to slowly integrate the southern states into the North German Confederation.\(^{37}\) Initially however, the proposal was rejected by the larger of the southern states, notably Bavaria, Wurttemberg, Baden and Saxony. In response, Bismarck threatened these states that further opposition to the Zollparlament would mean the dissolution of the Zollverein.\(^{38}\) This led to “angry editorials in the liberal-nationalist press and swarms of telegrams and petitions from the urban public and commercial interests warning them [the southern state leaders] that the Zollverein was indispensable.”\(^{39}\) When the Zollparlament was subsequently realized, the degree of opposition it had met was unfavourable to Bismarck’s further intentions. Quite frankly, this opposition underscores the argument that material interests in themselves were not strong enough to allow for the economic union to gradually lead to a political one.

**Franco-Prussian War and Unification**

“Everything depends,” Bismarck wrote in a letter to a colleague, “on the direction and swiftness with which public opinion develops in southern Germany, and a fairly secure judgement about that will first become possible through the customs parliament.”\(^{40}\) Yet, particularist notions among the leadership of the southern states continued to prevail. “We want to prove to Germany and Europe,” Varnbüler (a high-ranking southern statesman) declared in early 1869, “that… the German Confederation has no appeal whatever for us.”\(^{41}\) Judging from such declarations of continued self-rule, in February 1869 Bismarck called German unity an “unripe fruit”.\(^{42}\) Again, it would take military conflict to materialize further concessions towards German unification. The Franco-Prussian War erupted in July 1870. The subsequent

\(^{37}\) Pflanze, 145.  
^{38} Pflanze, 391.  
^{39} Pflanze, 393.  
^{40} Gorman, 56.  
^{41} Pflanze, 398.  
^{42} McKichan, 60.
upsurge of patriotism within the public and press created immense public pressure on the southern
German leaders to join the North German Confederation in war against France.\textsuperscript{43} The subsequent military
victory over France left public consent within the southern states overwhelmingly in favour of ‘union
with Prussia’\textsuperscript{44}. Ultimately, the statesmen of the South had no choice but to accept the inevitability of
unification. And while minor concessions still had to be made to the leaders of Bavaria and
Wurttemberg\textsuperscript{45}, the unified German nation was declared in January of 1871. All in all, the domestic
events within Germany from 1866 to 1871 illuminated the complexity of the issue at hand. While the
economic prosperity within the Zollverein’s borders undoubtedly encouraged increasing popular public
support towards unification under a powerful Prussia, Bismarck’s efforts to counter particularism using
the Zollverein failed. Twice war needed to be waged by Prussia: first, for Bismarck to rid
‘Kleineutschland’ of Austrian influence, and second, to eliminate the particularist sentiments strongest
among the leaders of the Catholic southern states.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Metternich’s fear that the Zollverein promoted the “highly dangerous idea of German unity”\textsuperscript{46} was
justified. The existence of a customs union did create a common economic interest collectively shared by
the member states. And whereas the Austrian-dominated German Confederation was an instrument of the
status-quo, designed to prevent advancements of any sort, the Prussian-led Zollverein represented a
forward looking economic community, one that was “experiencing continual growth and exercising a
magnetic attraction on neighboring states”.\textsuperscript{47} Liberal nationalist looked to the Zollverein as a model for
future unification; industrialists saw larger profits; and statesmen experienced economic prosperity. In
addition, following the revolutions of 1848 and Prussia’s political submission to Austria at Olmütz in
1850, Prussia itself recognized the full scale of the advantages that heading such a vital economic union

\textsuperscript{43} Schulze, 144.
\textsuperscript{44} Pflanze, 383.
\textsuperscript{45} Pflanze, 485.
\textsuperscript{46} Cooper, 162.
\textsuperscript{47} Schulze, 129.
brought, i.e. using economic interests to gradually push for concession towards unification. The substantial economic growth of the 1850s solidified the foundations of the Zollverein’s importance to its members, and thereby Prussia’s political influence.

However, there existed a two-folded nature within the Zollverein states’ relationship with Prussia (especially among the Catholic southern states): they supported the Zollverein and Prussia only as long as their political sovereignty was respected. This inherent limitation of the Zollverein as a unifying force was unveiled with the outbreak of the Austro-Prussian War in 1866. Therefore, although Austria was then eliminated from the equation, Bismarck’s efforts during the interwar period to undermine particularist tendencies by installing a Zollparlament nonetheless failed. It was only when “a common national war” erupted “against the traditionally aggressive neighbour” in 1870 that societal calls for unification overwhelmed the particularist state leaders into accepting political unification. Therefore, while it is undeniable that the Zollverein promoted a sense of national unity within the German Confederation before 1871, its unifying power was clearly limited. Accordingly, the movement from economic integration to political unification was checked by particularist forces even when Austria’s status-quo hegemony was removed. Therefore, judging from the apparent deep-rootedness of particularism within the southern German states, as well as the strong connection between economics and military strength, a possible research question for future investigation may include an analysis of the limitations of military factors leading to German Unification in 1871.
Bibliography


**Appendices**

**Appendix 1:** Map depicting the German Confederation in 1815.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{48}\) Kitchen, 163.
Appendix 2: Two maps illustrating the strong similarities between the Zollverein’s borders and those of the unified Germany in 1871.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{49} Cooper, 200.
Appendix 3: A verse written by August Hoffman von Fallersleben, author of Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, which glorifies the impacts of the Zollverein.\footnote{Hamerov, 16.}

Leather, salmon, eals and matches,
Cows and madder, paper, shears,
Ham and cheese and boats and vetches,
Wool and soap and yarns and beers;
Gingerbread and rags and fennels,
Nuts, tobacco, glasses, flax,
Leather, salt, lard, dolls and funnels,
Radish, rope, rep, whisky, wax;
Articles of home consumption,
All thanks are due to you!
You have wrought without presumption
What no intellect could do;
You have made the German Nation
Stand united, hand in hand,
More than the Confederation
Ever did for Fatherland.

Appendix 4: Decision by the Frankfurt Parliament in 1849 to exclude Austria from a unified Germany.  

Appendix 5: Gross National Product statistics illustrating how growth within the German states was more significant than within the Habsburg Empire, which was excluded from the Zollverein.  

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51 Gorman, 49.
52 Kennedy, 171.
Table 9. GNP of the European Great Powers, 1830–1890
(at market prices, in 1960 U.S. dollars and prices; in billions)

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But these figures were even more alarming when the per capita amount of GNP is studied (see Table 10).

Table 10. Per Capita GNP of the European Great Powers, 1830–1890
(in 1960 U.S. dollars and prices)

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