

LOCATING THE ROOTS OF GERMANY'S NATIONAL STRUGGLE

In 1815, Germany was not a unified state but rather a collection of numerous independent states. These states varied in size and power, ranging from the sprawling Austrian Empire to smaller kingdoms and duchies. The states were loosely associated under the nominal rule of the Holy Roman Emperor, who was typically also the ruler of Austria. However, the Holy Roman Empire had lost most of its power and political relevance by the nineteenth century.

The Holy Roman Empire was an ancient group of states that encompassed a significant part of Central Europe. It was founded in the Middle Ages and lasted until 1806 when Napoleon Bonaparte dissolved it. Throughout its history, the Holy Roman Empire played a crucial role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of Germany. It provided a loose framework for governance and maintained some degree of unity among the German states, although it was often characterized by decentralization and conflicts between its members.

Napoleon's actions had a significant impact on the sense of German unity. In 1806, he reorganized the patchwork of German states, reducing the total number of states and annexing territories. The left bank of the River Rhine was annexed by France, and smaller states were amalgamated. This reorganization led to the formation of the Confederation of the Rhine, consisting of Bavaria, Saxony, Baden, and other states, which were directly governed by Napoleonic France. The introduction of French enlightenment ideals, such as liberty and equality, influenced the political discourse in these states. It also brought about upward mobility for the middle class and a reduction in feudal restrictions. The imposition of a foreign empire stimulated a sense of collectivity among the German states and contributed to the emergence of a German identity or "nation."

Following Napoleon's defeat and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Germany's status was still fragmented. The German Confederation was established, consisting of 39 states, with Austria and Prussia being the dominant powers. The confederation aimed to maintain the security, independence, and integrity of its member states while preserving the status quo and curtailing liberal ideals, internal rebellion, external aggression, and nationalistic desires. Germany did not have clearly defined borders, and the concept of a collective German identity was still evolving. Different regions had distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics, and there was a power struggle between the northern states, which gravitated towards Prussia, and the southern states, which remained loyal to Austrian influence.

The Metternich system refers to the political approach and policies implemented by Austrian Foreign Minister Clemens von Metternich. Metternich aimed to maintain traditional authority over the German states and was not concerned with German political unity. He considered nationalist ideals and discourse dangerous. His main objective was to preserve Austria's influence, and he ensured that the Vienna settlement turned the German states into a loose confederation under Austrian dominance. The Metternich system sought to resist two main forces of change: liberal and nationalist ideals. Metternich aimed to suppress liberal movements and prevent the spread of revolutionary ideas that challenged the existing order. He believed in maintaining stability and the authority of monarchies. The system was partly successful in maintaining control and stability in the German states for some time. However, it faced increasing challenges as nationalist sentiments and demands for political reforms grew stronger, eventually leading to the revolutions of 1848 and the dismantling of the Metternich system.

During the Vormarx period, which lasted from 1815 to the revolutions of 1848, Germany experienced a combination of political excitement, reaction, and repression. The period was characterized by the clash between enlightenment and national ideals on one hand and the conservative vision of Austrian Foreign Minister Metternich on the other.

After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, absolute rule was restored in all German states. While the Federal Act did require the rulers to introduce a "Constitution of Regional Estates," many rulers ignored or minimized the power of these constitutions. In the northern states such as Bavaria, Baden, Wurtemberg, and Hesse-Darmstadt, attempts were made between 1818 and 1820 to give more power to assemblies to control laws and taxes. However, the monarchs still maintained real power and the right to appoint their own ministers.

In Austria, both King Francis I (1804-1835) and his successor Ferdinand I (1835-1849) maintained absolutist authority. The introduction of local Diets, or representative assemblies, had limited impact as they were dominated by the aristocracy and served mainly to maintain the existing social order.

Prussia, on the other hand, did not have a constitution until 1848. King Frederick William III (1797-1840) showed little interest in liberal reforms. Prussia was divided into various territories with cultural, economic, and religious differences. The presidents of the provinces were appointed by the central government in Berlin. The introduction of provincial estates in 1823 gave the people little power as they were completely dominated by the aristocracy.

The majority of monarchs in the German states remained committed to maintaining absolute authority and aristocratic power. However, the French occupation of the region during the Napoleonic period brought some administrative reforms in areas such as the economy, finance, law, and education. These reforms benefited the bureaucracies of the German states.

Overall, the Vormarx period was characterized by tension between conservative absolutist rule and the aspirations for liberal reforms and national unity. The stage was set for the eruption of the revolutions of 1848, which would challenge the established order and push for greater political rights and freedoms.

Metternich harboured a deep-rooted fear of nationalism and liberalism because he believed they posed a threat to the established

order and stability of the European monarchies. He saw nationalism as a dangerous force that could lead to the fragmentation of empires and the rise of independent nation-states, which could destabilize the balance of power. Liberalism, with its emphasis on individual rights, constitutionalism, and representative government, challenged the absolute authority of monarchs and the traditional hierarchical social order.

Metternich wanted to preserve the status quo because he believed it provided stability and prevented radical changes that could lead to social upheaval and revolution. He was a staunch defender of the monarchy and aristocracy and believed in maintaining their privileged positions and authority. He saw the existing political and social order as necessary for maintaining peace and preventing the spread of revolutionary ideas.

The "Metternich System" refers to the political approach and policies implemented by Clemens von Metternich to suppress revolutionary and liberal movements. It involved tight control over political dissent, censorship of the press, surveillance of universities, and the use of secret police to monitor and suppress subversive activities. Metternich sought to maintain the authority of monarchies, suppress liberal and nationalist aspirations, and prevent any challenges to the existing social and political order.

The Metternich system was partly successful in quashing the activities it was devised to oppose. The Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, which Metternich orchestrated, resulted in the disbanding of student societies, press censorship, and increased surveillance. Professors were dismissed, radical leaders were imprisoned, and dissenting voices were silenced. These measures helped to suppress revolutionary and liberal movements for a time and maintain the existing order. However, the system faced ongoing challenges and ultimately failed to contain the forces of change. The revolutions of 1848 marked a turning point and led to the dismantling of the Metternich system as widespread unrest and demands for political reforms could no longer be contained.

During the Vormarx period, Metternich used the system of European Congresses to assert Austria's reactionary interests. The Congress of Troppau in 1820 was one such congress where Metternich sought support from Russia and Prussia to suppress revolutionary movements in Spain, Portugal, Piedmont, and Naples. The resulting protocol stated that the three countries would not recognize the rights of a people to restrict the powers of their king. Metternich used various means of repression, including surveillance, censorship, and the use of secret police, to maintain the status quo and silence dissenting voices. While his efforts were partially successful in the 1820s, the surge of nationalism and liberalism in the 1830s posed new challenges.

In the 1830s, liberal and nationalist movements gained strength. The July Revolution in Paris in 1830 triggered demonstrations and riots in southern German states, leading to demands for constitutional rule and liberalization. Some states, such as Brunswick, Saxony, Hesse-Cassel, Bavaria, Baden, and Wurttemberg, made concessions to the liberal demands, granting greater parliamentary representation and press freedom. Hanover also conceded to a constitution in 1832. The liberal campaigns of the 1830s focused on constitutional government and material demands such as freedom of speech, press, worship, and the formation of political associations.

The strengthening of nationalism in the 1830s saw the emergence of German nationalist sentiments and the desire for a unified German state. Intellectual debates on German nationalism by philosophers such as Johann Herder, Johann Goethe, and Georg Hegel influenced the development of these sentiments. While the appeal of nationalism was limited to an intellectual elite, efforts were made to spread the message to workers in cities. Workers' movements had more democratic goals and were open to the use of violence for justice. However, these movements did not gain much traction beyond the cities, and farmers and peasants in the countryside remained largely depoliticized.

The establishment of customs unions, particularly the Zollverein, played a significant role in economic cooperation between German states from 1815 to 1848. The Zollverein, initiated by Prussia, aimed to promote free trade within the German states by eliminating customs barriers and internal tariffs. It started with Prussia enacting tariff reforms in 1818 and expanded to include other states over time. The Zollverein bolstered Prussia's economic power and influence, making it the economic leader of the German Confederation. However, Austria, being protectionist, refused to join the Zollverein, leading to its isolation and Prussia's ascendancy.

The Vormarx period saw a complex interplay between repression, liberal reforms, nationalism, and economic cooperation. Metternich's repressive measures aimed to maintain the status quo and suppress revolutionary and liberal movements, but they faced challenges from the growing liberal and nationalist sentiments. The establishment of customs unions, particularly the Zollverein, fostered economic cooperation but also contributed to the rise of Prussia's influence and the sense of a unified German identity. These developments set the stage for the revolutionary events of 1848, which marked a significant turning point in the Vormarx period and the subsequent pursuit of German unification.