



*The Wars of German Unification* by Dennis Showalter.

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In this updated edition of *The Wars Of German Unification* (1st ed. 2004), noted military historian Dennis Showalter (Colorado College), the author of a couple dozen books, brings a dry wit to his shrewd and perceptive judgments of tactics, political and military leadership, strategy, logistics, and diplomacy to demonstrate the improvisational nature of Prussia's unification of Germany (1864-71); he stresses that the failure to build a strong sense of nationhood among the discrete German states later had negative effects in World War I. An introduction sketches the context of the wars of unification, with a look back at the revolutions of 1848 and the Franco-Austrian War of 1859. The book's epilogue considers the repercussions of Prussia's victories in wars against Denmark, Austria, and France.

The author's infectious enthusiasm for his subject and judicious use of irony are evident throughout. For example, assessing Austrian chances for winning the Seven Weeks War (1866), he writes that

Combined-arms tactics, general situational awareness, a sense of strategic purpose—these were not primary concerns of the Habsburg army's junior general officers, any more than in any other Western army of the period. The men who commanded [Gen. Ludwig von] Benedek's brigades were brave to a fault. They knew how to organize charges and lead them when it came to that. Most of them could inspire their men even if they could do no more than swear at them in their own languages. Most of them were sober most of the time. There have been worse matrices for victory. (151)

Showalter's discussion of German unification skillfully blends military and political analyses. He is a particularly astute judge of the political dissension within various European states that allowed Otto von Bismarck to conduct his feats of diplomatic legerdemain under the aegis of Prussian military superiority. For instance, he writes of the Prussian constitutional conflict in the period that

Lack of precedents meant in turn that from the beginning, no one on either side of Prussia's army-reform issue had any useful models of crisis management. At best that invited gridlock. With someone like [Gen. Edwin von] Manteuffel in the picture, it invited polarization. Moving to one extreme or the other was intellectually and emotionally easier than engaging adversaries convinced of their moral rectitude, while simultaneously developing rules and tools of engagement sufficiently sophisticated that the state did not collapse altogether. Participants, moreover, shared a conviction that postconflict circumstances must be sustainable in the long run, tenable, rather than merely offering a breathing space before the next mortal clash—a mind-set not conducive to easy compromise. (85)

These wise words are relevant to other political disputes in other times and places.

Showalter's chronological narrative clarifies military and political developments with apt references to the opinions of their participants and to a wider cultural context (including baguettes and operettas!). He highlights the differences between Prussia's easy victory against the French Empire of Napoleon III during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) and its much more difficult subsequent fight against the Third French Republic. His humorous psychoanalysis of the bickering spouse relationship between Bismarck and Wilhelm I wittily evokes the personal nature of the grand political drama of the age.

The thesis of the book is that Bismarck achieved German unification under Prussian leadership through canny improvisational methods. Lacking both a firm constitutional majority within Prussia and any consensus favoring unification under Prussia among the German populace at large, Prussian leaders used their considerable military advantage to win a series of victories resulting from foreign crises and in the process to establish the German Empire. Despite these stunning successes that increased German prestige in Europe and around the world, the absence of popular zeal for unification and Prussian-style militarism had tragic results when a later generation of German leaders similarly tried to exploit the crises of the twentieth century. By this time, Germany was no longer fighting its enemies *seriatim*—Denmark, Austria and its rather nonmilitary German allies, or France—but in powerful coalitions. Showalter traces the diplomatic and political maneuvering during his three target wars using primary documents to make a convincing case for his overall thesis.

Showalter makes a number of subsidiary points as well. He stresses (a) the technological superiority of Prussian guns to Austrian (if not French) guns, (b) Austria's backwardness, (c) the decisiveness of the Dreyse needle gun in the Seven Weeks' War, (d) the logistical weaknesses of the Austrian Empire, and (e) the neglect of their military forces by the German states opposing Prussia till it was too late to bring them up to speed in a brief campaign.

Though the book has no obvious flaws, some historians may prefer more emphasis on the supremacy of Germany's military staff than on its technology. And, too, the idea that Bismarck and his contemporaries were simply seeking to exploit European political crises rather than execute a well conceived plan agreed to by all important parties with a broad political consensus has been a matter of considerable debate in the historiography ever since the late 1800s. Finally, Showalter's light-opera tone concerning German politics and militarism will not please all his readers.

These quibbles apart, *The Wars of German Unification*, while not the last word on its subject, is a proficient, scholarly, and provocative study accessible to a broad readership, from undergraduates to professional historians, with any interest in nineteenth-century German political and military history.