

# The German Empire – Foundation of the German Empire 1871

## Spoken Text

### Movie quote

00:14 *Kaiser Wilhelm, er lebe hoch!*

00:22 1871, Versailles: the German Empire is founded. The nobility and the military dominate the scene. The people are left out.

**Title: Foundation of the German Empire 1871**  
**A Film by Anne Roerkohl, Günter Fortak and Carola Halfmann**

### Chapter 1: Revolution 1848/49: Failure of National Unity

00:49 Germany. Where do its borders lie? To whom does it belong? “What is the German Fatherland”? asks writer Ernst Moritz Arndt in 1813. The Wars of Liberation against Napoleon arouse German nationalism.

### Michael Jeismann, Historian

01:07 *Und national heißt eben, dass da eine bestimmte radikale Selbstdefinition war, die alle anderen Definitionen, die es bisher gab, über den Haufen warf, man war eben kein Untertan mehr des bayrischen oder württembergischen Königs, sondern man war Deutscher, das war die wirkliche Revolution. Das war ungeheuerlich. Und die Könige haben das auch so empfunden.*

### Voice-over

*National, that was a radical self-definition that made all other definitions redundant. No longer was one the servant of the king of Bavaria or Württemberg – but a German. That was outrageous. And the kings thought so, too.*

01:29 The colours of this revolution are “black, red and gold”. 1848: the people revolt.

01:39 The cause is unification – but also an end to the autocracy of kings and princes. The revolution is initially successful: Liberal governments are established, the hated ensorship abolished.

01:55 Ludwig Bamberger experiences the uprisings in Southern Germany. He becomes a spokesman for the revolution.

02:03 The banker’s son writes inflammatory articles in the Mainz Newspaper and sees that the people have almost reached their goal:

### Quote: Ludwig Bamberger

02:10 *The sacred time, when the German people are adopted into the federation of responsible nations, the time to elect the national assembly lies ahead.*

02:22 1848, St. Paul’s Church in Frankfurt: The first freely-elected German parliament convenes. Ludwig Bamberger is there as a journalist. He observes the wrangling over the future constitution for the new national state.

- 02:40 There are various factions in the Frankfurt National Assembly: several plead for the Republic, others for the monarchy.
- 02:49 Of major importance is the issue of the new nation's state borders. The existing German Confederation becomes the model for what is called the "Greater German Solution", which includes the eastern provinces of Prussia.
- 03:04 Whereas part of Austria would remain outside – a solution that meets with violent opposition in Vienna.
- 03:14 The representatives in Frankfurt consequently decide on the "Smaller German solution" – without Austria. The Prussian King is to become the German Emperor. Yet he refuses to accept the crown from the hands of Parliament. May 1849: uprisings once again, as in Rastatt.
- 03:38 But the revolution founders – conclusively. Prussian troops bloodily defeat the last of the insurgents in Baden.
- 03:48 Revolutionaries like Ludwig Bamberger are now persecuted. With a visa, he manages to flee abroad just in time. In his absence, he is sentenced to death,
- 04:04 ... due largely to his articles in the Mainz Newspaper,
- Quote: Judgement
- 04:07 ... *which he transformed from a moderate paper into one of the most radical.*
- 04:14 Only after an amnesty years later, does Ludwig Bamberger return to his homeland. He soon sees a new chance for freedom and unity.

## Chapter 2: Bismarck and the Foundation of the German Empire "From Above"

- 04:27 Otto von Bismarck forges the Empire's unification. Seeing that national unity can no longer be delayed, the Prussian Minister-President seeks to keep the National Democratic movement in check, and is counting on a policy with the old authorities. He claims German leadership for Prussia.
- 04:50 But the powerful Austria is still standing in the way. 1866: the decision falls on the battlefield. Prussia wins.
- 05:01 From now on, the "German Michel" wears a spiked helmet. Austria steps out.
- 05:08 Prussia is thus sole leading power, the German Confederation is dissolved.
- 05:16 After its victory, Prussia can significantly extend its territory – it now rules the entire northern half of Germany. 1867: by means of the North German Confederation, Prussia binds such states it has not already annexed as allies.
- 05:35 Three years later, again there is war – this time, against France.
- 05:40 Bismarck's plan goes like clockwork: this time, the Southern German states also fight at Prussia's side. France is jointly defeated.
- 05:53 A wave of national jubilation grips the homeland.

Michael Jeismann, Historian

05:57 *Der Krieg gegen Frankreich war ein Krieg, der das deutsche Volk eigentlich erst schuf im Verständnis der Zeitgenossen. Dieser Krieg einte die deutsche Nation über die verschiedenen politischen Einheiten hinweg. Auf einmal war das deutsche Volk da.*

Voice-over

*The war against France actually created the German people. This war united the German nation beyond political parties. All at once, the German people were there.*

06:14 National emotions which Bismarck knows how to exploit. He now seeks to found an empire from above, under Prussian leadership – under his leadership. Bismarck's standing is at its peak. Now, even former revolutionaries as Ludwig Bamberger are his followers. Using his contacts to the press and financial world, he performs valuable lobbying, on Bismarck's behalf.

06:42 Even the Southern German states now finally accept Prussia's leadership. January 1871: the German princes proclaim King Wilhelm of Prussia as German Emperor.

06:56 The people rejoice, in Berlin as everywhere – even though the German Empire has been founded from above, by the authorities, without any real democratic legitimisation.

07:08 The national exultation of unity predominates. All liberal hopes are initially postponed.

### **Chapter 3: The Imperial Constitution and the Constitutional State**

07:19 The Central European borders have changed.

07:24 The new German Empire now consists of 25 individual states. Alsace-Lorraine is annexed. A heavy burden for the German-French future.

07:36 Berlin becomes the capital and centre of the new national state,

07:43 ... which also needs a new constitution. Liberal Germans hope for a more democratic orientation.

07:54 But Otto von Bismarck prevents this. He wants a strong monarch and limitations on the people's rights. The new constitution bears his trademark.

08:05 The Emperor, as head of state, is at the top. He is the supreme commander and represents the Empire outwardly. And he appoints and dismisses the Imperial Chancellor, who is head of the government.

08:20 The Empire consists of 25 individual states, for which the Federal Council is formed. Its members determined by the territorial princes, or their governments, respectively.

08:32 Prussia, the largest state, has the strongest influence and sends the most delegates. The King of Prussia is, at the same time, the German Emperor.

08:43 The Prussian Minister-President is, as a rule, also the Imperial Chancellor and Chairman of the Federal Council.

08:52 The Reichstag is the body representing the people. Initially elected every three years, and later, every five years.

- 09:00 Parliament may introduce legislation – just as the Federal Council. Both chambers must agree before a law can go into effect. This also applies to the very important state budget.
- 09:13 Thus, the Reichstag, representing the people, cannot introduce a law without the consent of the Federal Council, which represents the interests of the regional princes. A weakening of the parliament.
- 09:25 Nor has it any influence upon the appointment and dismissal of the Imperial Chancellor, which only the Emperor can decide.
- 09:34 Added to this, the Emperor and the Federal Council can dissolve the Reichstag at any time, forcing the need for new elections.
- 09:43 Thus, against all liberal hopes, the Empire does not become a modern parliamentary monarchy. Bismarck, who depends on the goodwill of the Emperor, thereby retains great powers.

Michael Jeismann, Historian

- 09:57 *Auf der anderen Seite war natürlich Bismarck zu einer Heldenfigur aufgestiegen und zwar zu einer nationalen Heldenfigur. Dieses nationale Einheitsgefühl, das hat natürlich viel dazu beigetragen, dass die verschiedenen politischen Brüche und Gegensätze und Unausgewogenheiten zunächst gar nicht so zur Sprache kamen.*

Voice-over

*On the other hand, Bismarck had surged to the status of national hero. This national feeling of unity contributed largely to the fact that the political schisms and differences were not even mentioned initially.*

- 10:22 Not even in an election appeal by Ludwig Bamberger. No further word of revolution. He is now a national liberal delegate. His motto: “peace, freedom, unity”.
- 10:35 Bamberger and his party vote for Bismarck’s constitution, hoping to later be able to expand the democratic elements.
- 10:45 The National Liberals emerge as the strongest party from the first Reichstag election. For some years, they are Bismarck’s major support in Parliament.
- 10:57 All men over 25 may vote. A progressive suffrage – but unjust:
- 11:05 A rural constituency sends just as many delegates to the Reichstag as those in heavily-populated industrial areas. This puts the Social Democrats at a distinct disadvantage.
- 11:18 Unjust is also Prussia’s three-class voting system. The vote of one rich man outweighs that of a hundred poor.
- 11:28 Nevertheless: the Empire is a constitutional state. There are defined citizens’ rights and broad freedom of opinion.
- 11:38 Citizens can defend themselves in court against state or government actions. Much is modernised. From 1879, new regulations apply to court proceedings, still basically in force to this day.
- 11:52 1900: the German Civil Code, the BGB, comes into effect, which regulates legal relations between private individuals. The BGB, too, with some amendments, is still in effect today.

- 12:08 Full steam ahead towards economic modernisation. The railway soon connects the entire country. Time, weights and measures are soon standardised. Germany grows closer together.
- 12:22 Ludwig Bamberger becomes the “father” of another major change: introduction of the Mark and Pfennig. Hitherto, there were various currencies in Germany. From 1876, the Mark is the only valid currency.
- 12:41 1894: the new Reichstag building is inaugurated. A symbolic place for the people’s representatives.
- 12:50 In daily political life, the balance shifts – slowly – in the people’s favour. Ever more frequently, public opinion succeeds in putting pressure on the government. Many progressive Germans hope that they can peacefully refine the constitution – towards more political co-determination, likewise for women. But the time left to them before the outbreak of WWI is insufficient.
- 13:16 The conviction that only a strong monarch can stabilise society is too powerful. And that Germany needs strong leaders at the top, men like Bismarck, who forged the Empire’s foundation.
- 13:30 In his final years, Ludwig Bamberger becomes Bismarck’s adversary. Suspecting that the time for more democracy has not yet come, he sums up:
- Quote: Ludwig Bamberger
- 13:42 *Imperial rule and the Reichstag arose equally from the victorious people’s war, but imperial rule retained the glory, while the representation of the people remained in the shadows of history.*
- 14:30 **END**

## Glossary

Von Birgit Frey

Wars of Liberation	Befreiungskriege	peak	Höhepunkt
to arouse	hervorrufen	to lobby	sich für jmd. einsetzen
redundant	überflüssig	to proclaim	ausrufen, öffentlich bekanntgeben
outrageous	empörend	exultation	Jubel
autocracy	Alleinherrschaft	to predominate	vorherrschen
initially	zu Beginn, anfänglich	to postpone	verschieben, hinauszögern
censorship	Zensur (überprüfen auf unerlaubte Inhalte)	trademark	Markenzeichen
to abolish	abschaffen	respectively	jeweilig
inflammatory	aufreuerisch	delegate	Abgesandter
federation	Staatenbund	legislation	Gesetzgebung
to convene	sich versammeln	to retain	(zurück-)behalten
to wrangle	streiten, zanken	to surge	plötzlich aufsteigen
faction	Fraktion	schism	Spaltung
to founder	fehlschlagen	suffrage	Wahlrecht
conclusively	endgültig	court proceeding	Gerichtsprozess
insurgent	Aufständischer	amendment	Änderung
to persecute	verfolgen	currency	Währung
absence	Abwesenheit	to inaugurate	einweihen
to claim	hier: beanspruchen	to refine	verfeinern, weiterentwickeln
spiked helmet	Pickelhaube	co-determination	Mitbestimmung
sole	einzig	insufficient	ungenügend
to annex	annektieren, sich aneignen	to forge	etw. formen
beyond	über etw. hinausgehend	adversary	Gegner
to exploit	ausbeuten		