

# ***Napoleonic Wars and the Unification of Germany***

**Jie Hong<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Management, Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, Xi'an, 710000, China*

*a. 631501010932@mails.cqjtu.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The origins of German nationalism can be traced back to the late 18th century, influenced by a myriad of factors including political, cultural, social, and economic transformations. The Napoleonic Wars ignited the German people's spirit of resistance, uniting them against foreign adversaries. During the anti-French struggle, a shared sense of national identity gradually emerged among the German populace, fostering the belief that only through national unity could external aggression be repelled. The Napoleonic Wars also spurred the economic integration of Germany and propelled the development of German capitalism. Additionally, German nationalist thinkers during the Napoleonic era called for unity against foreign enemies, leading to the early formation of nationalist thought. These factors collectively advanced the formation and development of German national consciousness. This process was not only a response to external pressures but also a result of internal social transformations and intellectual progress, laying the foundation for the unification of Germany in the late 19th century.

**Keywords:** Napoleonic Wars, Unification, Cultural Nationalism, Germany.

## **1. Introduction**

The Napoleonic Wars, by altering the political landscape of the German territories, greatly accelerated the process of German national unification and had significant impacts on its politics, economy, and culture. The domestic academic community has conducted extensive research on the Napoleonic Wars and their effects, with a particular focus on their impact on the international landscape and nationalist ideologies [1-4]. The international academic community, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the Napoleonic Wars and their influence on nationalist ideologies [5-7].

However, a comprehensive overview of the impact of Napoleon's political reorganization and economic reforms on Germany has not yet been fully summarized. Therefore, building on previous research, this paper explores the impact of the Napoleonic Wars on German national unification from a holistic perspective, covering military and administrative reforms in political restructuring, economic policies and market integration during economic transformation, as well as cultural nationalism and the awakening of German national consciousness. These factors do not exist in isolation, but are interconnected and collectively shaped the process of unification in the German territories.

## 2. Napoleon's Administrative Reforms

Napoleon's military conquests and administrative reforms triggered profound political restructuring in the German territories, primarily manifested in three key aspects: the abolition of the feudal lordship system, the curtailment of church privileges, and the enactment of the Civil Code along with the establishment of government institutions with fixed salaries. These reforms greatly altered the local social, economic, and political structures.

Firstly, the abolition of the feudal lordship system released peasants from personal serfdom. Before the Napoleonic Wars, the feudal lordship system in Germany was a complex and stringent social structure rooted in the medieval feudal system. Serfs had almost no legal or economic autonomy. Feudal lords owned large tracts of land and economically exploited the peasants working on these lands. Lords derived economic benefits from the labor of peasants through the collection of various forms of taxes and rents. Lords were not only economic dominators but also local judicial and administrative heads. They had the authority to establish courts within their domains, adjudicate disputes and crimes among peasants, and enforce the law. The lord's estate was almost like an independent mini-kingdom, with the lord having absolute control. Peasants were required to provide various forms of obligations to the lord, including labor, tributes, and monetary taxes. The feudal system was based on a contractual relationship of land exchange and service, where lords granted lands to vassals who in return had to provide military service and other support.

However, Napoleon's reforms disrupted this system, initially targeting the core of the feudal system – the privileges of the feudal lords. Napoleon abolished serfdom in the German territories he occupied, liberating a large number of peasants who were subjugated under the lords. These peasants gained their freedom, enabling them to independently choose their places of residence and work [8]. At the same time, Napoleon encouraged peasants to acquire land ownership by purchasing land, motivating them to invest in their own land. Additionally, Napoleon abolished the judicial powers of the feudal lords; their previous judicial authority was stripped away, and judicial powers were centralized in the hands of the state. This reform led to a more unified and fair legal system. The series of reforms implemented by Napoleon in the German territories played a key role in abolishing the feudal lordship system. Through these measures, Napoleon successfully dismantled the feudal lordship system in the German regions, emancipated the serfs, and facilitated the free circulation of land and the development of the capitalist economy. These reforms not only changed the social and economic structure of Germany but also laid the foundation for later national unification.

Secondly, Napoleon implemented secular principles and curtailed church privileges. Before Napoleon, the Church was a significant force within the feudal system, possessing vast tracts of land and privileges. The Church controlled most educational resources, establishing and managing schools, universities, and monastic academies. It dominated the dissemination of knowledge and culture, profoundly influencing societal thoughts and values. A large portion of documents, books, and academic research was managed and disseminated by ecclesiastical institutions, and the monasteries and bishoprics of the Church had significant influence on local economies and judiciary systems.

However, Napoleon's measures weakened the Church's influence in various aspects. Firstly, he ordered the confiscation of Church lands and other properties, transferring them to the state or selling them to private individuals. This action undermined the Church's economic base, stripping it of significant sources of income and control over property. More importantly, Napoleon reformed the educational system by establishing a public school system controlled by the state. These schools emphasized scientific and secular knowledge, reducing the impact of religious education. Napoleon also reduced the role of Church officials in politics through legislative measures, particularly by preventing them from holding positions in local governments and legislative bodies. Additionally, Church leaders lost their traditional secular powers, including the rights to adjudicate and levy taxes

[9]. In summary, the implementation of Napoleon's secularization policies in the German territories marked a significant shift from traditional religious authority to modern state authority, which was conducive to the construction of the German nation-state.

Lastly, the enactment of the Civil Code was also a crucial part of Napoleon's administrative reforms in the German regions. The Civil Code stipulated equality before the law for all, prohibited ecclesiastical courts, and established the dominance of secular law in civil matters. In the early 18th century, the administrative structures in Germany were primarily based on the feudal system, characterized by a high degree of local autonomy and fragmentation. The Holy Roman Empire was the main political entity in the German territories, but it was not a centralized state. Instead, it consisted of numerous semi-independent principalities, electorates, free cities, and ecclesiastical lands, each with its own ruler and administrative bodies. Administrative and judicial powers in Germany were often mixed, with local nobility, the church, and cities all participating in governance. Judicial authority was typically concentrated in the hands of local lords or city councils, who were responsible for enforcing laws and adjudicating disputes. This decentralized administrative structure led to inefficient governance, with significant variations in laws and administrative regulations between regions. This situation also limited the effective implementation of central power, significantly restricting the emperor's authority in local affairs.

In this context, Napoleon established centralized administrative institutions in the various German states and forcibly implemented the "Napoleonic Code" [10]. This code replaced the existing feudal legal system in the German territories, establishing the foundation of a modern legal system. The main provisions of the code included equality before the law, protection of property rights, and the abolition of feudal privileges. In terms of administrative reforms, Napoleon set out to establish a civil service system paid fixed salaries by the state, a fundamental reform of the traditional system where officials funded their positions out of their own pockets.

Previously, many local officials and administrative personnel relied on fees collected from the public for their income, a system prone to corruption and inefficiency. The new system introduced by Napoleon ensured that civil servants had stable incomes that matched the quality of their duties and services, thus improving administrative efficiency and fairness. The establishment of fixed-salary government agencies reduced officials' dependence on additional income, allowing them to execute laws and policies more impartially while also lowering the cost of government services to the public. These civil servants were usually required to undergo specialized training and were hired and promoted based on ability and experience, helping to break away from the tradition of appointments based on nobility rather than capability. Thus, prior to Napoleon's reforms, the administrative structures in Germany were highly decentralized and complex, filled with local autonomy and feudal privileges. Although this structure maintained a degree of local independence to some extent, it also led to administrative inefficiency and a lack of uniformity in law. Napoleon's reforms, to a certain extent, modernized the German regions by centralizing and standardizing administrative management.

Therefore, Napoleon's administrative reforms in the German regions not only changed the administrative and legal structures but also inadvertently promoted the rise of German nationalism. By introducing a centralized administrative system and a unified legal system, Napoleon weakened local feudal powers and the independence of small states, thus providing a foundation for communication and cooperation among various German regions. This unification of administration and law, although initially intended to strengthen French control, unexpectedly provided a common political and administrative experience, enhancing the desire for a unified state and fostering the emergence of German nationalism.

### 3. Napoleon's Economic Reforms and Market Integration

Napoleon's economic reforms in the German regions broke the feudal constraints, promoted the development of capitalism, and facilitated market integration, laying the groundwork for the later unification of Germany and the rise of nationalism. The reforms primarily included the abolition of guild systems, promotion of market integration, and standardization of measurements.

Firstly, the abolition of guilds and internal customs barriers fostered the development of capitalism. Before Napoleon's reforms, the guild system in the German regions was an important component of the medieval European urban economy. Guilds were organizations and institutions through which craftsmen and merchants could control and regulate the production, trade, and business activities within their respective industries. Guilds held monopolistic power over their industries, meaning that only guild members could engage in specific crafts or commercial activities, thus leading to conservatism and exclusivity in industries. Guilds often resisted innovation and technological progress, limiting the free development of the economy and competition. After occupying the German regions, Napoleon gradually implemented a series of reforms consistent with the French Revolution. These policies, through legal and administrative measures, abolished the guild system and opened up the handicraft and commercial markets. Napoleon, through the "Confederation of the Rhine Treaty" and other laws, explicitly prohibited guild activities and abolished their monopoly over handicrafts and trade [11]. After occupying the German regions, Napoleon issued administrative orders in the occupied territories to dissolve guilds, abolish guild regulations, and allow free competition. After abolishing the guilds, the Napoleonic government introduced new commercial regulations to encourage technological innovation and market competition. For example, the provisions regarding property and contracts in the "Code Napoléon" provided legal protection for commercial activities.

Secondly, market integration. Before Napoleon promoted market integration in Germany, the market conditions were highly fragmented and closed. The German regions consisted of hundreds of independent states, including principalities of the Holy Roman Empire, ecclesiastical territories, free cities, etc. Due to the lack of unified political and economic management among these states, a unified market could not be formed. This led to tariff barriers, different currency systems, and strict guild systems in the German market. These factors severely hindered the free flow of goods and capital, limiting economic development and market unification. In 1806, Napoleon established the Confederation of the Rhine, a union of several German states, one of its main purposes being to reduce trade barriers between member states. The establishment of the Confederation of the Rhine marked a significant change in the political map of the western German regions. Under the framework of the Confederation of the Rhine, Napoleon promoted the establishment of a customs union, eliminating internal tariffs between member states, allowing goods to circulate freely within the region. With Napoleon's support, the Confederation of the Rhine region undertook improvements in infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, and measures such as tariff unification to promote market integration in the German regions. These policies were crucial for the transportation of goods and economic integration. Napoleon's economic policies encouraged the accumulation of capital and investment, particularly in the mining and manufacturing sectors, further advancing the process of industrialization.

Finally, the unification of measurements. Napoleon's implementation of the metric system in the German regions was part of his extensive reform plan aimed at unifying and modernizing the systems of measurement throughout the regions, thereby facilitating economic integration and efficiency. Before Napoleon's unification of the metric system, the systems of measurement in the German regions were extremely dispersed and inconsistent. With each state and city using its own independent standards of measurement, different regions utilized various units of measurement, making cross-regional trade extremely complicated. Merchants engaged in cross-regional transactions had to

continually convert and calibrate measurement units, increasing transaction costs and risks. The lack of uniformity in measurements not only affected goods trading but also impacted the execution of finance and contracts, as measurement units mentioned in contracts could be interpreted differently in different regions. Such a system led to complexities in trade and communication, hindering economic integration and development. In 1799, the French Revolutionary government officially passed a law defining the meter as the unit of length, based on a scientific definition: one ten-millionth of the distance from the equator to the North Pole [12]. After coming to power in 1801, Napoleon continued to promote this system. Napoleon enforced the metric system through law, including basic units such as the meter (for length), liter (for volume), and gram (for mass). This system was not only implemented within France but was also extended to the regions he conquered, to unify measurements. The widespread adoption of this system significantly enhanced trade efficiency, reducing the chaos and misunderstandings caused by inconsistent measurements. The promotion of the metric system by Napoleon was not just a technical improvement but also part of his broader policy, aimed at enhancing the administrative efficiency and economic competitiveness of the nation through standardization and modernization. This system eventually became the international standard accepted and used by most countries around the world. Napoleon's implementation of the metric system laid the foundation for unifying the German market, simplifying transaction processes, and promoting economic modernization.

#### 4. German Cultural Nationalism

Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schiller, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, three German thinkers and literary giants, offered profound insights into the Napoleonic Wars and their impact on German nationalism in their works, showcasing how this historical event could be interpreted from cultural and philosophical perspectives to shape German national identity. Their works displayed an understanding among German intellectuals of the significant role the Napoleonic Wars played in the awakening of German nationalism, and their ideas and literary contributions had a significant impact in inspiring a sense of national consciousness among the German people.

Johann Gottfried Herder, as one of the important founders of German nationalism, articulated many views on nationalism and introduced the concept of "Volksgeist" (spirit of the people), providing a theoretical foundation for the wave of nationalism in Germany. In his "Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity" (*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*), Herder criticized Napoleon's imperialism, arguing that this foreign oppression contradicted the principles of national independence and self-determination [13]. He believed that national independence is a fundamental right of every nation, and Napoleon's aggression violated this principle, instead prompting the German people to unite and resist foreign rule. Simultaneously, Herder also emphasized the importance of language, culture, and history in national identity. He argued that each nation possesses its unique "Volksgeist" (spirit of the people), which is transmitted through language, literature, and history. As he stated in "Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity": "Because language is the organ of thought, the thoughts of a nation are its language" [14]. Herder emphasized that language not only transmits information but also carries the history and culture of a nation. By protecting and developing their own language, nations can maintain their uniqueness and independence. Thus, when the Napoleonic Wars began to invade Germany, the foreign rule and oppression disrupted this spirit and hindered the natural development of the nation. He criticized Napoleon's imperialism because it attempted to unify different nations by force, thereby erasing their uniqueness and autonomy.

Goethe's views on the Napoleonic Wars are reflected in his writings and letters, showing his profound understanding of the changes of the era and the nascent trends in nationalism [15]. Goethe's reaction to the Napoleonic Wars was more complex and nuanced. On one hand, he expressed

admiration for Napoleon's personal charisma and administrative abilities, as he mentioned in "Conversations with Goethe": "Napoleon is a great figure of the era, who, with his exceptional talent and unparalleled determination, changed the face of all Europe" [16]. On the other hand, he was also acutely aware of the pain and division his war policies brought to Europe, and believed that Napoleon's dictatorship undermined the principles of freedom and democracy. As Goethe said in a conversation on April 18, 1828: "Although Napoleon made significant reforms in law and administration, his autocratic rule contravened the spirit of liberty" [16]. Goethe's critique conveyed dissatisfaction with despotism and war, inspiring the German people's desire for freedom and unity. Through these criticisms, Goethe not only reflected his complex feelings about Napoleon's rule but also provided a philosophical foundation for the rise of German nationalism.

Goethe's criticisms and reflections spurred the German people's aspirations for freedom, independence, and unity, becoming a significant cultural force towards the unification of Germany. Many German secret societies discussed and disseminated nationalist ideas through covert meetings, such as the Tugendbund (Virtue League), established in 1808. Comprised of Prussian officers and intellectuals, this secret society was dedicated to the revival of the German nation and resistance against Napoleon's rule [17]. The organization spread nationalist ideas through secret meetings, publications, and propaganda activities, calling for the German people to unite and collectively resist foreign oppression. These meetings often took place in private homes or hidden locations and involved intellectuals, officers, and students among others. During these gatherings, they discussed the importance of national unity, devised plans for resistance, and planned propaganda efforts. Although Goethe and Schiller themselves were not members of these secret societies, their literary works profoundly influenced the thoughts of the members. Goethe's works and ideas were widely disseminated, impacting many German intellectuals and the general populace. His assessments and reflections on Napoleon became a crucial part of the German nationalism movement, advancing the process of national unification. This intellectual enlightenment became a significant component of the nationalist movement.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Schiller deeply contemplated and commented on the events of the time. His works reflect his keen insight into the era's transformations and his early exploration of nationalism [18]. Schiller's ideas were adopted by many German nationalists as a theoretical basis for resisting French rule and pursuing political and cultural freedom. In multiple works, he expressed his distaste for violence and war, emphasizing the importance of peace and human freedom. In "Wilhelm Tell," Schiller conveyed his longing for national independence and freedom through the story of the Swiss people's resistance against tyranny and their struggle for liberty. "Wilhelm Tell," by celebrating freedom and resistance against tyranny, became a source of inspiration for secret societies to propagate nationalist ideas. Although the play directly tells a Swiss story, its themes strongly reflect the German people's calls for national self-determination under Napoleonic rule. Schiller's works stirred the German people's desire for freedom and national independence [19]. His critique of tyranny and despotism inspired the German people to resist foreign oppression and pursue national independence and unity. His thoughts had a profound impact on German intellectuals and the general public, driving the development of nationalist sentiments.

In summary, these three cultural giants, through their thoughts and works as well as their discussions on the Napoleonic Wars, expressed complex attitudes towards the conflict. They not only criticized Napoleon's personal ambitions and aggressive actions in their works but also, from various perspectives and viewpoints, inspired the German people's aspirations for freedom, independence, and unity. As key cultural forces driving the unification of Germany, they played a crucial role in the development of German nationalism.



## 5. Conclusion

Through the three aspects of reforms and transformations discussed above, the Napoleonic Wars left a profound impact on the German nation. First, under Napoleon's rule, the German territories he controlled saw extensive administrative reforms: the feudal lord system was abolished, peasants were freed from serfdom, and modern administrative and judicial institutions were introduced. These reform measures were established through legal documents such as the Confederation of the Rhine Treaty, aiming to unify and simplify the legal systems across various regions.

Second, through the Confederation of the Rhine Treaty and other laws, Napoleon abolished guild systems, ending their monopolies over crafts and trade. This reform liberated productive forces, fostering the development of craftsmanship and trade, and propelled the economic modernization of the German regions. Moreover, Napoleon eliminated tariffs and internal checkpoints among the German states, creating a unified economic area that enhanced free trade and economic integration within the region. This move increased the mobility of goods and capital, laying the groundwork for future economic integration and unification. The French government also introduced the metric system in the German areas, standardizing measurements, which greatly facilitated trade and commercial activities, promoting market integration.

Lastly, during the Napoleonic Wars, German literary figures and thinkers such as Herder, Goethe, and Schiller expressed their identification with national culture and criticism of foreign rule through their works, sparking the rise of cultural nationalism. Herder's "Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity," Goethe's "Conversations of Goethe," and Schiller's "William Tell" spread a sense of national pride and the desire for freedom and independence among the German people. Under Napoleon's rule, many German patriots spread nationalist ideas in secret societies, encouraging people to fight for their nation's freedom and unity. These activities accelerated the awakening of national consciousness and propelled the movement for unification.

The unification of administrative and legal systems, modernization of economic reforms and market integration, and the rise of cultural nationalism collectively laid the groundwork for the eventual unification of Germany. These reforms not only improved the social, economic, and political structures but also ignited the German people's strong aspirations for freedom, independence, and national unity. This paper argues that the Napoleonic Wars were one of the greatest catalysts for German unification; indeed, without the Napoleonic Wars, even if the ideas of the French Revolution had spread to the German regions, the awakening of German nationalism would not have occurred as swiftly.

## References

- [1] Zhang Shuxian (2004). *A Brief Discussion on the International Impact of the Napoleonic Wars*, *Journal of Changchun Normal University*, 008, 62-64.
- [2] Zheng Chunsheng, Zheng Xiaomin (2003). *The Napoleonic Wars and the Rise of the German Nation*, *Journal of Wenzhou Teachers College*, Vol. 4, No.3, 57-60.
- [3] Luo Qunfang (2005). *The Napoleonic Wars and the Rise of German Nationalism*, *Wuhan University*.
- [4] Liu Shulin (1981). *The Progressive Role of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe*, *Journal of Liaoning University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition*, 4, 5.
- [5] Breuilly J. (1806). *The response to Napoleon and German nationalism*, *The Bee and the Eagle: Napoleonic France and the End of the Holy Roman Empire*, 1806. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 256-283.
- [6] Langsam W C. (1930). *The Napoleonic wars and German nationalism in Austria*, *Columbia University Press*.
- [7] Kohn H. (1951). *The eve of German nationalism (1789-1812)*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12(2), 256-284.
- [8] Aaslestad, Katherine, and Karen Hagemann (2006). "1806 and Its Aftermath: Revisiting the Period of the Napoleonic Wars in German Central European Historiography." *Central European History*, vol. 39, no. 4, 547-79.
- [9] Schwartz, Bernard (1956). *The Code Napoléon and the Common-law World*. New York University Press.
- [10] Rowe, Michael (2003). *From Reich to State: The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age, 1780-1830*. Cambridge University Press.

- [11] Doyle, William (1989). *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*. Oxford University Press.
- [12] Alder, Ken (2002). *The Measure of All Things: The Seven-Year Odyssey and Hidden Error That Transformed the World*. Free Press.
- [13] Herder, Johann Gottfried (1841). *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. 1784-1791. [https://www.textlog.de/herder\\_menschheit.html](https://www.textlog.de/herder_menschheit.html).
- [14] Forster, Michael N. (1999). "Herder on Language and the Metaphysics of Thought." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 60, no. 3, 489-510.
- [15] Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von (1848). *Poetry and Truth: From My Own Life*. Translated by John Oxenford, Bohn's Standard Library.
- [16] Eckermann, Johann Peter (1998). *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann*. Translated by John Oxenford, Da Capo Press.
- [17] Blackbourn David (1997). *History of Germany 1780-1918: The Long Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [18] Pugh David (2000). *Schiller's Early Dramas: A Critical History*. Boydell & Brewer.
- [19] Sharpe, Lesley (2003). "Schiller's 'Wilhelm Tell' and the Drama of Freedom." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 98, no. 3, 641-655.