

Nation States and International Tensions |

Sample answer

Did Bismarck show more competence in his handling of foreign or domestic affairs? Give reasons for your answer, referring to both. (2013)

As a political leader, Bismarck displayed a high level of competence in his handling of foreign affairs. Unlike many leaders at the time, Bismarck understood that a 'balance of power' was necessary to maintain peace and prosperity in Europe. His foreign policies were based around the concept of 'Realpolitik' which was a diplomatic approach to keeping Germany on good terms with her neighbouring countries. Bismarck did not seek to expand German political dominance within the rest of Europe, and said that "Politics is essentially about power and its limits." However, Bismarck's domestic policy was far more problematic, especially in his treatment of minorities, socialism, and Catholicism in Germany.

Bismarck showed his skill in foreign affairs when he managed to establish the Dreikaiserbund in 1872. The aim of the Dreikaiserbund was to protect Germany from war on two fronts, and to prevent a Franco-Russian alliance. The Dreikaiserbund was also known as 'The League of the Three Emperors' and consisted of Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, and Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany. These three leaders united together to discuss international matters, prevent the spread of socialism, and destroy revolutionary movements. They also agreed that if any one of the three was attacked by another country (such as France), the other two would remain neutral. This was the most important part of the alliance for Bismarck, as he was aware that the French might seek revenge for their humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. The only weakness in the Dreikaiserbund was the tension between Austria-Hungary and Russia about 'The Eastern Question,' as they were in competition with each other over influence in the Balkans.

When Austria-Hungary and Russia threatened to go to war over events in Bulgaria, Bismarck came up with a solution. He called the First Congress of Berlin in 1878 to try and preserve the Dreikaiserbund, and to prevent war in Europe. This resulted in the Treaty of Berlin, which reconstructed the map of the Balkan region, and reversed the terms in the treaty of San-Stefano which gave Russia claim to territory in Turkey. This territory was returned to Turkey, along with limited independence, and Austria-Hungary gained the region of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Britain also gained the Turkish island of Cyprus, as Russia had threatened their interests in the Balkans. Russia was highly offended and humiliated by the Treaty of Berlin, as they suffered heavy losses of territory and power. As a result, they withdrew their membership in the Dreikaiserbund after the First Congress of Berlin. However this was a better outcome than war between the two powers, as was Bismarck's aim from the beginning of the conflict.

Although Bismarck was occupied with the situation between Russia and Austria-Hungary, he was careful to remain on good terms with Britain. To maintain this strong relationship, Bismarck consciously avoided establishing colonies, as this would require building a large navy. Bismarck did not want to compete with the power of the British navy, and stated "My map lies here in Europe." He wanted to keep Britain happy to stay in 'splendid isolation' and believed that colonial competition would lead to conflict between Britain and Germany, which was anti-realpolitik. However European imperialism was at its height, Bismarck was under pressure from groups such as the Navy League, who were anxious to be part of the colonial race.

Eventually Germany gained her first territory in Africa in 1884. However Germany's colonial gain threatened Britain and France, and to avoid more conflict Bismarck called the Berlin Conference in 1884. This conference divided Africa into 'spheres of influence' between the 13 powers involved, with each country gaining their own economic and political privileges in designated territories. Bismarck's main priority was to keep the major powers satisfied, especially France, (as partial compensation for the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine).

With regard to domestic policies, Bismarck was far less competent and successful. This is especially true in his handling of socialism, which he failed to deal with appropriately. Working conditions were extremely poor for the majority of the people of the time. A combination of the growing population, poverty, and low standards of living created high levels of social tension. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) was founded in 1875, which was an anti-capitalist party. Bismarck was from a conservative, Prussian, 'Junker' family. As a result, he disagreed

with the SPD's policies, which included the aim to end private land owning, and did not believe members of the SPD could be true German patriots. This did not prevent the SPD from gaining popularity, and by 1875 it totaled 35,000 members. Bismarck would use the assassination attempt against Kaiser Wilhelm I to begin his campaign against the SDP.

In 1878, the Reichstag passed a series of Anti-Socialist Laws, which persecuted organisations aiding the SPD. Meetings were outlawed, and sharing publications from the SPD was illegal. However the leaders of the SPD fled to England, where they continued to hold meetings and discussions together. In 1883 the Sickness Insurance Bill became law for workers, closely followed by the 1884 Accident Bill. However these governmental actions were not enough to stop the growth of the SPD, whose membership increased from 763,000 in 1887 to nearly 1.5 million by 1890. It is clear that Bismarck was not successful in domestic affairs where socialism is concerned. His personal prejudice as a wealthy Prussian landowner made him reluctant to take workers' concerns into consideration, and was slow to introduce laws which supported the working classes.

Another area of domestic affairs where Bismarck was not successful was his policy of Kulturkampf. This was an effort to decrease the Catholic Church's power within Germany, in response to the Vatican's proclamation of papal infallibility in 1870. Bismarck was a Prussian Protestant, and worried that German Catholic population would be more influenced by papal supremacy than German patriotism. He saw papal infallibility as a threat to the Reich, so it could be said that Bismarck's policy of Kulturkampf was for more political reasons than religious. Bismarck was always trying to maintain Prussian control of Germany, and stated "What is at stake is the deference of state." The Prussian Minister of Culture, Adalbert Falk introduced a series of strict May Laws in 1873, which aimed to restrict religious teaching and place Germany entirely under state control to isolate Rome.

However the Roman Catholics of Germany strongly resisted the May Laws, which came under heavy criticism, and thus Bismarck began to retreat. This policy of Kulturkampf also created tension between Germany and her ally, the Catholic Austria-Hungary. As a result this policy ended very quickly. This was partially due to Bismarck needing the support of members in the Reichstag who disagreed with Kulturkampf, and the Catholic German Centre Party. As a domestic policy Kulturkampf resulted in unrest and political dissent, due to Bismarck's incompetence. His treatment of minorities also created a lot of tension within the Reich. As

discussed, Bismarck failed to display tolerance of different political opinions or religious beliefs, which resulted in division instead of unification and peace.

However, it cannot be denied that Bismarck was highly successful with regard to foreign affairs. He successfully maintained a 'balance of power' within Europe for nearly 20 years due to his foreign policies, which were influenced by his concept of 'Realpolitik.' By creating the Dreikaiserbund, he was able to keep France isolated, and Germany protected from a war on both fronts. Using a series of other intricate alliances, he was able to prevent war breaking out between the powers in Europe. Bismarck ensured a good relationship with Britain by not threatening her colonial interests or creating a large navy, and avoided colonial conflict between powers by hosting the Berlin Conference. By the time Bismarck resigned as Chancellor in 1890, Germany was one of the most wealthy, industrious, well-regarded countries in Europe due to his competence in foreign affairs. However this would all change when the young, ambitious Kaiser Wilhelm II came to power.