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The Concept of National Unification

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Nation-states have been formed in the last couple of centuries, both in and beyond Europe, by processes of reform, separation and unification. Reform meant ‘nationalising’ the state with little territorial change, as in the cases of France, Spain and Britain. Separation entailed breaking away from a multi-national state, such as the Romanov, Ottoman and Habsburg empires. Unification is the rarest type of nation-state formation and involves bringing together a number of states into a single national state. The best-known European cases are Germany and Italy. However, Germany is unique in that this unification process has taken place not once, but twice. Having been unified through a series of wars between 1864 and 1871, expanded through war (1914-18, 1939-45), and contracted after defeat (1919, 1945), Germany was divided again after the Second World War, first into zones and then into separate states. Then in 1989-90 the two states of the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic were unified. Understandably, many of those involved in this second unification looked back to the first as a model to imitate or to avoid. That looking back was generally shaped by what had gone between, especially two lost wars and the Third Reich, a shared history which had culminated in division but which, if reflected on, might help the citizens of the reunited country to develop a shared responsibility for the future. The project of which this book is the first major outcome has set out systematically to analyse, compare and contrast the two unifications: their contexts; the processes involved; how they were anticipated, lived through, and reflected upon. The book is divided into three parts: the first unification, the second unification, comparisons between the two unifications. The purpose of this introduction is to outline the framework adopted for looking at each unification and making comparisons between them, relating this to the arguments of the various essays.

If one national unification is rare, a second is unique. However, many students of each of these unifications would also insist that the two unifications were utterly unlike one another, taking place in different
epochs, involving different processes, and being experienced in different ways. Even if those involved in the second unification constantly referred to what had happened first time around, this would only tell us something about that second unification and the perceptions of those involved in it. There may have been two unifications, this may be unique to Germany; but, it could be objected, this does not, in itself, justify the project of comparison.

However, comparison is not simply about registering similarities. It is as much concerned with differences, with understanding the historical developments that gave rise to them, and possibly with explaining what made for success or failure of the process in each case. These similarities and differences can only be properly compared within a common framework. Even if it were agreed that the differences were of greater significance than the similarities, that in itself would not be a fatal objection to the comparative project. Rather what has to be shown is that the two unifications really are comparable. To support such a view it must first be asked what is meant by the term 'national unification' and whether the fact that this term can be used for the events of 1864-71 and 1989-90 implies the comparability of the two sets of events.

Unification is a process whereby multiple sovereignties are reduced to a single one. Given the nature of state sovereignty in modern times, this is something which has to take place rapidly, involving the collapse of state power in one or more cases and the transfer of those powers to a single state. The most common historical form such change has taken is that of subjugation. In such cases, however, the word conquest and related terms such as annexation and expansion are used to describe what has happened. We do not normally use the term unification. It is the addition of the word 'national' that gives meaning to the idea of 'unification'. Arguably annexation is the right word to apply to the reduction of the sovereign state of Hanover to a province of Prussia in 1867 or of the sovereign state of the German Democratic Republic to a number of new Länder within the existing Federal Republic of Germany. However, appeals to the idea of the nation, coupled with mass franchise elections to national parliaments, transformed the idea of conquest and annexation into one of bringing together the divided, or as yet separate, parts of a nation. Unification, then, only makes sense with reference to the concept of the national.

National unification can thus be defined succinctly as a process by which a plurality of sovereign states is rapidly reduced to a single state, an outcome legitimated, either in advance or in retrospect, by the argument that this process brings together a divided nation. This definition permits the construction of a framework that makes possible the systematic