At the root of the Franco-Prussian conflict was the desire of the ambitious statesman Prince Otto von Bismarck to unify the collection of German states under the control of the most powerful of them, his own Prussia. The event that immediately precipitated the war was engineered by Bismarck to deal with who would have control of the throne in Spain. Horrified by the idea of a Prussian-Spanish alliance, the French government of Louis Napoleon (or Napoleon III) blocked this idea and, determined to humiliate Prussia into subordination, insisted that the Prussian king, Wilhelm I, personally apologize to the French sovereign and promise that there be no further such attempts to expand control. Wilhelm refused, and subsequently authorized Bismarck to publish the French demands and his own rejection of them; the prince did so knowing such a move would precipitate a war, which he himself greatly desired in order to free Prussia completely from French influence.

Eager to regain prestige after numerous defeats abroad and reassert its military dominance on the European continent, France declared war on July 19, 1870. Unfortunately for the French, the states of southern Germany honored their treaties with mighty Prussia. Thus the Germans were able to marshal some 400,000 men, and cut a broad swath through France, gaining the upper hand.

During the War, Paris exploded into rebellion; the legislative assembly was dissolved, and France was declared a republic. Meanwhile, the Germans were closing in and completely surrounded France’s capital city, which they subjected to merciless siege and bombardment for the next several months. On January 19, 1871, the French government was forced to open negotiations for surrender. A day earlier, in an added humiliation for France, the Bismarckian dream of unification was fulfilled, as Wilhelm I of Prussia was crowned emperor, or kaiser, of the new German state, in a ceremony that took place in the sumptuous Hall of Mirrors, at Paris’s Versailles palace.

By the terms of the final treaty, signed in May 1871, Germany annexed the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine; the French were also ordered to pay an indemnity of five billion francs. German troops occupied France until September 1873, when the amount had been paid in full. The Franco-Prussian War and the nearly three years of German occupation that followed marked the beginning of a growing enmity between France, its influence and power in decline, and striving Germany, a technologically and industrially superior nation that by the first decade of the 20th century had built the most powerful land army on the European continent.