

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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Germany and the problem of Poland

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During the last weeks of the war lost by the central superpowers, there was a sudden and violent turn in German policy regarding the Polish issue. The concept of the Polish state as a fragment of "Mitteleuropa", subordinated to the Reich, finally collapsed. Unexpectedly, Germany found itself on the defensive with regards to its eastern borders from the year 1913, threatened by Polish demands. This defence was conducted on a very wide section of the front-lines, and attempts were made to influence the entire changing system of the political forces in the east of Europe. Particular importance was attached to the issue of blocking the road to power in the future Poland for politicians strictly associated with Entente states (according to their programme, their orientation was anti-German), by supporting the Regency Council, and later on facilitating the return of Piłsudski from Magdeburg to Warsaw. A similar policy was pursued east of the Bug River on other territories

of the Russian empire, controlled by the central states during the war. Efforts were made to strengthen the position of Germany in the long term, above all in the Baltic states, and to maintain for as long as possible the Ukrainian and Belarusian territories. The German military and political presence in these areas, regardless of the matters related to the whole German policy in the East, could indirectly fulfil the tasks of keeping the Polish state in check, and limiting its possible anti-German political and military activities aimed at regaining the territories of the Prussian partition. The same concept can be noticed in the German response to the proclamation of independence by Czechoslovakia; the German General Staff thought that conflicts with the newly established state must be avoided, pointing out the threat which the possible Polish-Czech alliance might cause for Upper Silesia.

The above-mentioned activities were only of auxiliary importance in the struggle for keeping the territories of the Prussian partition within the borders of the Reich. The threat of their loss resulted directly from the 14 points of Wilson, which the German government was forced to accept at the beginning of October 1918 as the basis for negotiations regarding the armistice. Taking advantage of this situation, based on an interpretation of the 13th Point of the Wilson's address, the organisations and representatives of the Polish population in Germany put forward the concept of annexing the entirety of territories of the Prussian partition to the independent Polish state which was to be established. In principle, it was assumed that a positive decision of the future

peace congress could be expected in this matter. Also, the Germans awaited the pending decisions of the congress, hoping that they would not incur any, or possibly only a few, territorial losses in the East.

Wishing to limit the momentum of the action aimed at breaking the territories of the Prussian partition away from Germany, two options for the current policy related to the Polish population in Germany were considered. Many German politicians, supported by the particularly nationalist-oriented part of the general public, thought that the best method to defend the eastern territories of the Wilhelminian Reich would be the continuation of the former “tough” political line towards the Poles and the integration of the German population against the “Polish threat”. Some differently thinking politicians and German inhabitants of the Polish provinces of Prussia thought that concessions to Poles by abolishing emergency laws and achieving equal rights for both nationalities increased the chance of keeping the eastern provinces within Germany. Such a policy – as they thought – would not only weaken the irredentist aspirations of the Polish population, but would also allow this to be a winning card at the future peace conference. The followers of this line were recruited not only from left-wing circles and pacifists, but also from more realistically thinking German politicians who, being far from polonophilism, understood the necessity of changes in the policy towards the Polish cause and Poles in the international situation which arose in October 1918.

This was a dispute over the method of fighting and not the substance. Formally, all political parties from the extreme right wing to the SPD, being supported by the German general public, loudly defended the integrity of the eastern borders of the Reich. The postulates which were openly pronounced only by the leaders of the USPD, allowing for the possibility of loss of a certain part of Greater Poland including Poznań to the Polish state, differed from the apparently consistent line of the authorities and the population in this issue. However, in reality, some realistically thinking politicians in the government led by Max von Baden, as well as outside of it, being aware of the fact that the German population censuses confirmed the large representation of the Polish population, did consider the loss of at least a part of these territories to Poland.

It is understandable that such views were not expressed openly. In internal policy, this would actually mean being pilloried by the German general public, among which the dominant slogan was defence of the integrity of borders of the year 1913. In foreign policy, this would mean the loss of bargaining territories for future peace negotiations. Defending the concept of leaving the entire Prussian partition in Germany, it was possible to make a concession in future peace negotiations with regards to the status of the Poznań region, thus, in turn, saving other territories threatened by Polish aspirations. The threat of the loss of other eastern provinces of Prussia by Germany (except the Poznań region) seemed to be very varied at that time. The future

status of East Prussia was a very small concern for Germans - Upper Silesia was a bigger one. For realistically thinking German politicians and activists, the key point in which the Polish aspirations crossed at that time with the German ones was the future fate of West Prussia and not Greater Poland, as the loss of the "core" of the Poznań province by virtue of future resolutions of the peace treaty was something that could be expected. Keeping West Prussia within the borders of Germany, even in the event of the loss of a larger part of the Poznań region would mean the continuation of the existing concept of the Eastern March (though in a slightly depleted form). The possible annexation of West Prussia to Poland, tearing apart the continuity of the German territory would result in abandonment of this concept.

