

GERMAN POLICIES WITH RESPECT TO LANDS OF FORMER POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH IN WORLD WAR I ERA. PRO-LITHUANIAN AND PRO-BELARUSIAN, OR DIRECTED AGAINST POLISH ASPIRATIONS?¹

The Germans did not fight the Great War to liberate anyone. Their goal was to expand Germany's borders. This paper seeks to develop an old thesis of Franz Fischer about the expansionist nature of the German war objectives through the examination of yet unknown primary sources found, for the most part, in archives in Vilnius. As Fischer demonstrated, Bethmann-Hollweg planned to push away Russia as far as possible from the German borders, and to abolish Petrograd's hold over non-Russian vassal peoples already in September 1914. Berlin intended to establish a Central European economic union operating de facto under German leadership, although with preservation of the external equality of its members. It seems that this plan was maintained through the war. The Bethmann-Hollweg peace terms, transmitted to Wilson in January 1918, stipulated, among other things, that the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth should be included in the German economic and military sphere of influence.

Keywords: Germans, Poles, Lithuanian, Belarusian; WWI era; former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; former Grand Duchy; Bethmann Hollweg; Gustav Krupp; Silvio Alois Max Broederich-Kurmahlen.

In 1959, Fritz Fischer found that the German war objectives had already been formulated by the Prussian Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg on 9 September 1914. In terms of Eastern policies, he planned as follows: Russia ought to be pushed away – as far as possible – from the German borders, and its hold over its non-Russian vassal peoples abolished. Germany intended to establish a Central European economic union operating *de facto* under German leadership, although with preservation of the external equality of its members².

Among the numerous memoranda of the WWI era, one draws special attention, namely the "Memorandum of Dr. Krupp" from 1915, entitled "On the necessity of acquiring new colonisation areas" [1; 16, pp. 64-67]. Dr. Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, a reputable industrialist of that period, believed that Courland, as well as the Kovno and Suwałki governorates, should be colonised in the first place. Krupp also expected colonisation to some extent in other parts of Lithuania and Congress Poland.

In the late summer of 1915, the Russian army was leaving the Lithuanian lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the German army would soon take its place. Eventually, Vilnius would also fall to the Germans on 5 September 1915. In the conquered areas, the Germans introduced their own administration called *Ober-Ost*. The official name of the occupied region – *Ober Ost* – stemmed from the abbreviation of the German military title of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Chief Commander in the East: *Oberbefehlshaber Ost*. The extent of the territories occupied by Germany grew in February 1918 (between the first and second round of negotiations in Brest), and now involved the majority of the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

On 5 November 1916, the Governors-General of Warsaw and Lublin issued a manifesto on behalf of both emperors (Franz Joseph I of Austro-Hungary, and Wilhelm II of Germany), which contained a declaration on

the creation of an independent Polish Kingdom on the territories of the Russian Sector of partitioned Poland. It is difficult to assess this decision unequivocally. Undoubtedly, the manifesto allowed for the inception of Polish statehood and brought the Polish issue onto the international scene. However, given that it involved solely territories of Congress Poland, it is impossible to ignore the fact that this constituted a step towards the fragmentation of the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – erased from the map of Europe by the three partitioning states at the end of the 18th century.

The most ardent and proactive Lithuanian Poles left Vilnius for Warsaw in order to join the creation of the Polish state. Ludwik Abramowicz, a journalist and activist of the *krajowcy* movement in Vilnius who had been living in Warsaw since 1916, remained in close contact with the Political Department of the Provisional Council of State in 1918. It is precisely among Abramowicz's works that I have found a translated transcription of a speech pronounced at a secret meeting of the budget committee by German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, merely four days after the act of November 5th. On November 9th, he would declare: "For the sake of the Eastern Campaign, we have to employ a certain diplomatic stratagem. The proclamation of a Polish state will ensure the submissiveness of the Poles, fill the notches in our regiments, allow us to introduce new taxes, and, ultimately, it will empower us in our dominance over that country. We alone will rule in newly-founded Poland; no other solution is acceptable. The territories located further to the east are perfect for future colonisation, at which, with God's help, we shall succeed" [2; 3].

This approach was ultimately confirmed by Gen. Silvio Alois Max Broederich-Kurmahlen in his 1916 work "Das Neue Ostland". The plans of Poles, which conflicted with the interests of the German state, would never be taken into account: "As much as it is important to ensure that Poles are freed from the Russian yoke for all times, it is also necessary that Poles understand that they will obtain self-government in Congress Poland only if this does not interfere with the interests of the German State in any way" [12; 15].

On 1 August 1917, the pope Benedict XV³ issued a peace note addressed to the warring states, in which he called for peace with neither victor nor vanquished. The

¹ The paper was presented at the panel "The Great War End on the Eastern Front. The Brest Peace Conference and the international relations in Central Europe, 1917–1918", organized by Aliaksandr Piahanaŭ, at the 7th International Congress of Belarusian Studies on 17 September 2017, Collegium Civitas, Warsaw, Poland.

² "A Central European economic union ought to be established through common customs agreements, involving France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland and possibly also Italy, Sweden and Norway. This union, though lacking a common constitutional superstructure and preserving the external equality of its members, yet remaining under German leadership, will have to consolidate Germany's economic domination (wirtschaftliche Vorherrschaft) over Central Europe". See: [13].

³ On 3 September 1914, i.e. already during World War I, Giacomo Paolo Battista della Chiesa was elected Pope under the name Benedict XV. From the very beginning, the newly-elected Pope organised assistance for victims of war. He established an office for support to POWs and an information centre about POWs and missing persons. See: 17, pp. 441–443.

papal note coincided with Germany's special policies in the East. If, in a situation of military superiority, they were to bring about peace on "their own terms" – just seemingly taking into account the expectations of the newly-created states, yet retaining full control over the economy and foreign policies of the latter—they would achieve the German war objectives in an extremely modern manner, and formally in accordance with the Pope's words.

In September 1917, Leopold of Bavaria⁴ issued the so-called September Acts, which would determine the fate of those of the Eastern lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that remained under German occupation, but had not been covered by the act of November 5th. From the standpoint of German policies, it was a step aimed at separating Congress Poland from the lands which used to constitute – back in the times of the Commonwealth—an equal and integral part of a common state structure with Poland [4].

Until the conclusion of the Brest Treaty, Germany exercised military and civilian power in the territories under *Ober-Ost* administration, which included the Baltic coast and the regions around Vilnius, Grodno and Suwałki. The lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which fell under German occupation, were ethnically and religiously heterogeneous. However, even before the Germans entered Vilnius, almost all Orthodox Christians had left those of the territories of the former Grand Duchy, which later came under the *Ober-Ost* administration. Essentially only Jews and Catholics remained in Vilnius (in equal proportions), and Poles were decidedly a majority among the latter⁵. In the early autumn of 1917, the Germans allowed for the organisation of several conventions: Belarusian, Zionist, international, and Lithuanian ones; basically all those, for which requests had been filed... save for a Polish one. For the German authorities, recognising the Lithuanian Poles as co-hosts of this land was out of the question⁶.

The reluctance towards the creation of an independent Polish state in the territories of the former Commonwealth was common for – *toutes les proportions gardées* – both the Germans⁷ and the Lithuanian politicians alike. The latter began to take advantage of the German policies for those of their own goals that had been unachievable so far.

The Lithuanian Congress, organised in September 1917 in Vilnius to the delight of the German authorities, resulted in the establishment of the Taryba. The Taryba constituted the core of Lithuanian statehood with Vilnius as its capital; a city, which the German historian and politician Hans Delbrück, a supporter of moderate objectives in the ongoing war, had described publicly in the autumn of 1917 in the following words: "Vilnius is the most exceptional city in the world. It is the capital of Lithuania, it is located on

Belarusian land and inhabited by Poles and Jews; on the other hand, it has almost no Lithuanian residents, maybe three in a hundred. How do you imagine Lithuanian culture in a situation where Lithuania's capital does not belong ethnically to that country? [...] and for Poles, Vilnius is, next to Kraków, their most important cultural centre, even more so than Warsaw" [6].

The first proclamation of Lithuania's "independence", one very problematic in its attitude towards Germany, occurred on 11 December 1917. Then, after some internal perturbations, the Lithuanians declared independence for a second time on 16 February 1918, i.e. during a break in the talks in Brest. This time, the new declaration contained no paragraphs that would strip Lithuania of sovereignty, as it was the case before.

The developments in the war were favourable to Lithuanians and allowed them to achieve their state goals. Politicians such as Smetana or Kirys would systematically misinform the international public opinion about the ethnic composition of the population in Vilnius, claiming that 33 thousand Lithuanians lived there, as opposed to merely 3 or 4 thousand Poles). This lie would divide the Polish and Lithuanian inheritors of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania for many years. A policy of perpetuating antagonisms within the community of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was therefore implemented throughout the entire interwar period, to the benefit of the common enemies of the inheritors of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (an integral component of the Commonwealth). This plan coincided with the intentions of Lithuanian politicians, laboriously erecting the Lithuanian nation state.

If it had not been for the unfavourable development of the situation on the war front in the summer of 1918, German politicians would have instrumentally and unscrupulously exploited the Lithuanian aspirations, and the young and weak Lithuanian state would have fallen under German political and economic influence in a way unpredicted by Lithuanian politicians. The reliable, clever and well-informed chronicler Aleksander Szklennik made the following remark on 5 October 1917 in his diary: "Having emphasised the official nature of his statements, Oberleutnant Kugler, in his conversation with Stanisław Kognowicki, director of Vilnius Bank and representative of Vilnian Poles, asserted among others: 'Whoever reckons with the Lithuanians? They are as children.' We, the Germans," he continued, "are determined to keep Lithuania for themselves in order to protect it from Russia and Poland; therefore, we must arrange the entire country according to our needs" [10].

As is known, the foreign policies of Vienna and Berlin differed significantly during WW1. Aleksander Szklennik believed that the difference lay in that Vienna showed more flexibility, while Berlin – more confidence [11]. Historians now already know that Vienna had indeed been seeking to end the war in a way that would meet the expectations of dependent peoples to the most extent possible. Berlin, on the other hand, hoped to end the war on its own terms, which formally meant "with no vanquished", and in practice "with some conquered nations". One of the first goals to achieve in this matter was to exclude a future revival – in any form – of an Eastern European federation (i.e. a new instalment of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). It constituted a *sine qua non* for the success of the German plans.

Contrary to the general understanding of the importance of the provisions of the Brest treaties for Ukraine or the Chełm Land, their influence on Lithuanian matters remains underestimated. Marian Świechowski, journalist and politician greatly involved in Lithuanian

⁴ Leopold of Bavaria was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the joint armies of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires on the Eastern Front (*Oberbefehlshaber Ost*) on 29 August 1916.

⁵ All the censuses carried out in Vilnius showed a minimal percentage of Lithuanians in the city, i.e. below 3%. The number of Poles was estimated at about 50%.

⁶ Unfortunately, the leaders of Vilnian Poles failed to draw appropriate conclusions from this. What was even worse for the Polish inhabitants of the former Grand Duchy was that, in June 1918, "certain governmental circles in Warsaw deluded the Polish Clubs in Lithuania with the prospect of merging Vilnius with Poland". According to the correspondence of Marian Świechowski with Ludwik Abramowicz, the prime responsibility for this should lie with, among others, Kucharczyński. See: 5.

⁷ As is known, the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania were ethnically and religiously heterogeneous. The Germans' strategy obliged them to maintain tighter control over the eastern part, which did not tantamount, of course, to losing control of the western part, i.e. former Congress Poland. Whoever dominated the western part of the former Commonwealth could act as a driving force in its eastern part. Such a policy would allow the Germans to take advantage of Lithuanian demands presented back in 1905 in a memorandum addressed to Russian Prime Minister Sergei Witte.

affairs, drew attention to the essence of this problem already in 1918 in his memorandum entitled "The Polish issue and the partition of the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania under the Brest treaties" [7; 8].

He stated: "By force of the first treaty concluded with Ukraine, the whole of Polesie with the Pripyat river basin was torn away from the Grand Duchy; the second one, concluded with Russia, tore the remaining area into two parts [...] The Brest treaties have, in effect, destroyed the grounds for development of the Polish element in Lithuania, subjecting it to the hegemony of other peoples – thus creating a source of eternal frictions and animosities" [8].

Based on the ideas expressed in Benedict XV's peace note calling for peace with no victor nor vanquished, Germany "supported" the establishment of Congress Poland, Ukraine, Finland, Baltic provinces, and Lithuania – all independent of Russia. These countries were attractive to Germany, by virtue either of their access to the seas, or their natural resources. The question whether they would also remain independent from Germany in the future was, of course, not discussed. In the case of Poland, one additional goal was to neutralise any possible actions, which could lead to the restoration of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in a new, 20th-century form. The terms provided in confidence to Wilson in January 1918 (by Bethmann-Hollweg) stipulated, among other things, that the lands of the former Commonwealth be included in the sphere of German economic and military influence [18, p. 205].

Until 1916, the German authorities assumed that the Belarusian lands that were not under *Ober-Ost* administration, were undoubtedly part of Russia. Within the *Ober-Ost* area, on the other hand, the Germans disbanded all possible organisations (including the Belarusian Teachers' Association), pursued exploitative policies, and looted everything that could actually be looted. At the same time, in addition to supporting the Lithuanians in Vilnius, they pursued an intensive de-Russification policy throughout the *Ober-Ost* area.

In line with the German policy of supporting separatism in Russia, von Kühlmann (German politician, diplomat and businessman, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1917-1918) demanded on 27 December 1917 in Brest that Russia recognise the independence of Poland, Lithuania, Courland, and parts of Estonia and Livland, in accordance with the Soviet declaration on the right of nations to self-determination. Just like the Polish leaders in Warsaw and the Lithuanian ones in Vilnius, the Belarusian leaders in Minsk placed great hopes in Germany since the latter further broadened the extent of their occupied territories (February 1918)⁸. However, the representatives of Belarusians, through no fault of their own⁹, "did not make it" to the talks in Brest.

The Treaty of Brest divided the Belarusian lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania without taking into account not just Polish, but also Belarusian national aspirations. Germany, having forced the Russian side to recognise a number of states established on the ruins of the Russian Empire (and already acknowledged on the international scene), committed itself not to approve any "newer entities".

Surprising news would reach Vilnius, claiming that the German troops entering Minsk distributed leaflets with

portraits of Józef Piłsudski (who was actually imprisoned at that time in Magdeburg) and Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki. The new occupiers were allegedly announcing that Polish legions were following in their steps. What could be the aim of this, if not to arouse a sense of threat to Belarusian interests among the Belarusian activists that were in the city at that time?

In Minsk, Poles made up about 30% of the population. Their social influence was even greater. Polish volunteer units – already existing, and not just "planned" ones – took control of all strategic spots in the city. The Belarusian military disregarded the presence of Polish troops in Minsk and attributed authority in Minsk to the Executive Committee of the First All-Belarusian Congress; however, they even lacked sufficient manpower to supervise the strategic areas of the city. A Belarusian-Polish agreement was eventually reached. During the night of February 19/20th, the Polish representative, Chmyzowski, and his Belarusian counterpart, Jazep Varonka, issued a joint statement on the Polish-Belarusian rule in the city. But already on 21 February 1918, in that very same Minsk, the Executive Committee of the First All-Belarusian Congress would issue the first Constitutional Charter (*hramota*) entitled "To the nations of Belarus...", through which, following the principle of self-determination, it declared itself the sole provisional authority in Belarus.

The assessment of the military and political potential of both entities by the Germans was evidenced by their proclamation, stating that ethnic Belarusians could stay in Minsk, while the Poles – soon to be subordinated (in May 1918) to the Regency Council set up by the Germans in Warsaw – were obliged to leave the city.

The commander of the 10th Army, Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn issued an order on 27 March 1918, effectively placing all state institutions responsible for trade, industry, education, social welfare, propaganda, and refugee-related issues under the jurisdiction of the BNR Council [*Byelaruskaya Narodnaya Respublika* = Belarusian People's Republic], and authorising the organisation of a local government. At the same time, the decision of depriving the BNR Council of its seat, banners and treasury was maintained. The Germans did tolerate the activity of the BNR Secretariat, but they would not recognise it officially, thus treating its activists as volunteers. In principle, Varonka's cabinet controlled only socio-cultural and educational institutions.

The co-option of activists from centrist and right-wing organisations and parties by the Council on 12 April changed the BNR's stance from socialist to centrist, but it could not have influenced the German policies after the conclusion of the Brest Treaty. The memorandum dated 5 April 1918, issued by the BNR Government and addressed to the German Chancellor, demanding the recognition of Belarusian independence, has been rejected – just as every other subsequent request. They had to be rejected, as the Germans would not want to breach the terms set out in Brest.

The suspicions of Edmund Iwaszkiewicz (Vice-President of the Polish Council of the Minsk Land) regarding the German plans in relation to Belarus, found their confirmation in a conversation with a certain "very intelligent and knowledgeable" German national employed in the superior administrative apparatus of the occupying authorities of Minsk¹⁰. The official willingly detailed the plans of the German colonisation of Belarus as imagined in Berlin [9]. The "local population was to obtain the option of joining Poland or Lithuania", and since this German

⁸ The Germans took advantage of this situation by seizing Dvinsk, Minsk, Polotsk, Borisov, Zhlobin, Rechytsa, Kalyenkovichy, Rogachov, Gomel', Orsha, Mogil'ev; they occupied almost the entire territory of Belarus. Russia was left with the Smolensk Governorate, and just fragments of Mogil'ev and Vitebsk governorates. The Bolsheviks fled from Minsk.

⁹ This situation was caused on purpose by the Soviets; they couldn't pass through Baranavichy, and had to take a detour via Kiev and Zhytomir.

¹⁰ It is worth recalling here the talks conducted at the same time in Vilnius by Stanisław Kognowicki and oberleutnant Kügler. See: 14, pp. 24–27.

functionary had no doubts that the "locals" would choose Lithuania, this would supposedly bring Belarus under the authority of the German state. The borders of this German colony were to stretch as far as the Dnieper and Dvina (Daugava) rivers.

The ostensibly pro-Belarusian actions undertaken by the Germans – in accordance with the provisions of the Brest Treaty – were not aimed at satisfying the state ambitions of Belarusian political leaders. It appears that their objective was to paralyse the so-far reasonably acting Polish community of the Minsk region, and to turn the Belarusian leaders against them.

As a reminder: at that time, the Poles still constituted an important military and political force in this area, while the BNR had no army nor administrative structures, and the Belarusian leaders had failed to obtain recognition of their independence by either Berlin, Vienna or the Bolsheviks.

In this situation, it seems logical that the BNR would focus on diplomatic measures¹¹. On 7 May 1918, the decision was made to set up, under the People's Secretariat, a commission for the drawing of a strategic map of Belarus, which was *de facto* carried out by colonels of the German staff¹². In March 1918, under the benevolent eye of the German authorities, BNR politicians began to address various notes, letters and memoranda criticising Polish imperialist ambitions, to various members of the Entente. Of course, the Germans discreetly supported, and maybe even instigated, the actions of Belarus – especially anti-Polish ones, which they found especially convenient. But they had nothing to offer to the Belarusians. The speeches pronounced by Belarusian leaders therefore brought no political benefit for their country on the part of the Germans.

In conclusion. The objectives of German policies were definitely in conflict with the interests of Polish political leaders, who identified with the heritage of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. According to German plans, this historic Eastern European Union could by no means be revived in any form. The collapse of the multinational and multicultural community of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was increasingly intensive for a number of reasons, and the German policies have not only consistently exploited these trends, but sometimes even exacerbated them, notably in the territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Following Benedict XV's peace note and the Brest Treaty, the Germans modified their strategy, now assuming the role of the tutor of the newly-emerging "modern peoples" of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania seeking independence. The Germans consistently pursued their policies, focused on achieving political and economic expansion towards the east, throughout the entire war – regardless of their military situation.

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¹¹ A committee for international affairs was set up on 29 March 1918.

¹² On 5 June a group of cartographers – colonels of the German staff – was co-opted: Dmitriy Betcher, Alexander Brandt, Alexander Goherz, Col. of Engineer Forces Ivan Beniksen, Ryhor Yanushkowski.

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Received by the editorial board 08.07.19