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THE SITUATION OF THE GERMAN MINORITY IN POLAND IN 1918—1938

Summary

The necessity for a work on this very subject is due to the fact that the problem of the German minority (meaning Germans as Polish citizens) in Poland between the two World Wars grew to utterly disproportionate dimensions as it did not at all concern the largest minority group in Poland, but one of the less numerous (about 3% of the general population in 1921 and 2.3% in 1931). This minority however, possessed a strongly organized character, financial resources, the continual help and leadership of its mother country. These factors played a decisive role and were the reason that the problem of the German minority affected the whole of the political relations and the fate of the Polish nation.

I. The Germans in Poland constituted an element of influx mostly in the western voivodeships: Pomerania, Great Poland and Silesia, i.e. on territories formerly under Prussian domination. They arrived either during the period of medieval settlements (XIII—XV centuries) or that of the so-called second wave (XVI—XVIII c.) and again after the partitioning of Poland. The medieval newcomers became almost completely Polonized and had there been no further waves of settlers, the German language and customs would have declined, the more so as on Polish territories where the Germans settled the native Poles still constituted a majority everywhere.

The partitions of Poland found a nation with a Polish majority everywhere so they were ethnically unjustified. In Bydgoszcz e.g. in 1798 there were only two German families. The strong position of Germans in the part of Poland under Prussian rule was the result of the policy of Germanization, based on

force, the policy of the drive eastward (Drang nach Osten). The deliberate settlement of Germans on Polish territory had a political purpose: Prussia thus desired to create an ostensible "legal right" which would serve as an excuse for the seizure of Polish territories and would consolidate the partitions. But the struggle for Polish nationality was won by the Polish peasant.

Toward the end of World War I a rapid and voluntary reflux of Germans from Poland began, especially of clerks and the military. In Pomerania e.g. the number of inhabitants using the German language decreased from 43.4% in 1910 to 19.6% in 1921, in Great Poland from 34.7% to 17.5%. Most of the Germans left these places before the restitution of the Polish State in spite of that fact that the German government attempted to hinder this reflux for political reasons.

The census of 1921 in Poland listed about 1,051,194 Germans (3.9% of the population in general), the census of 1931 741,000 (2.3%). In Pomerania the Germans comprised about 10% of the population in general, which was confirmed by the statistics of the Main Board of Safety of the Reich (Reichssicherheits-hauptamt) of March 15th 1941. As a rule German authors give a much higher figure for the number of Germans living in Poland. Assuming that the Polish data to a certain extent tended to decrease the real numbers of this population, it must be stated that the German data were purposely exaggerated.

However, the point of contention was not the actual number of German inhabitants in Poland. What is of basic significance is the fact that the Germans in Poland were an element of influx and that their distribution and number on Polish territory during the Prussian rule, and the voluntary reflux of many of them at the end of World War I proves the artificial nature of the modern German settlements in Poland undertaken mainly for political reasons.

II. The legal protection of religious and national minorities dates back to the XVI century. The relative treaties were based on the principle of limiting the sovereignty of those states which the treaties concerned. After World War I there was a change in the matter of minority protection with a distinct shift from an internal to an international problem.

The Versailles system of minority protection excluded both the Great Powers and defeated Germany, imposing however, on the newly created European States and on the rest of the defeated Nations treaties pertaining to the protection of minorities closely connected with the Treaty of Versailles. The sovereignty of these countries was limited by their having to accept international obligations towards their own citizens while

the guarantee of these obligations by the League of Nations created the possibility of foreign intervention in the internal affairs of these States, in spite of the fact that minority protection was assured by State constitutions.

Despite the fact that Germany's intolerance towards other nationals was historically known, nothing was done to protect about 1,500,000 Poles living in Germany. But, for the German minorities in Europe the government of Reich — beginning with Stresemann demanded so-called cultural autonomy based on national cadastres. This demand led to the formation of "a nation within a nation" and at the same time aimed to exploit the German minority as one of the tools in the realization of the German policy of expansion. A flagrant example of this was the matter of the German minority in Czechoslovakia where it became the pretext for the breaking up of that State.

The situation of Poland compelled to sign the treaty pertaining to the protection of minorities was thus detrimental because even the most trivial disagreement relating to a member of the minority, in a more or less artificial manner, could become an international problem.

The defect of the Versailles minority protection system lay in the fact that by taking into consideration only a certain number of States it lacked universality and thus was contrary to the postulate of legal equality of nations. All attempts to generalize the obligations relating to minorities were resisted by the Great Powers. In these conditions the practical formation of international petitional procedure (not regulated by treaty) pertaining to minority matters was drawn-out and the cause of many disputes. The petitional procedure in relation to Upper Silesia was different, based on the Polish-German Convention of May 15th, 1922. The final resort of intercession for matters in dispute was the Permanent Tribunal of International Justice at the Hague. It must be stressed that the representatives of the system of minority protection demanded that the members of the minority be loyal to the nations they were citizens of.

The nationalist authors of Germany criticized the Versailles system of legal protection for the minorities, because it did not assure them autonomic rights and legal identity. On the other hand, in Poland, for instance, the German nationals were the only minority group capable of taking full advantage of their treaty and constitutional rights at the same time, bringing before the League of Nations the greatest number of charges against Poland, which was not done by the other minority groups, often more numerous and in a worse situation. Thus the point of gravity of the problem of minority protection in Europe was

shifted in theory and practice above all to the German minority which was the result of the Reich's policy, aiming at a revision of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. In reality the German government was interested not so much in the German minority group as in keeping the disputes on the subject on the agenda of international organs. The persistent efforts of the German government to exploit the problem of minority groups for the realization of a policy of annexation, the main purpose of which was Pomerania and the Sudety were the reason that Poland, on the 13th of September 1934, refused to take part in the international procedure of minority protection until the time when all countries should participate in such obligations.

III. German ownership of the greater part of the land in the western parts of Poland began only during the period of Prussian rule. In the XVIII century, still, the landowners e.g. in Pomerania were almost all Poles. Prussian rule left a situation changed to the disadvantage of the Polish population not only agriculturally but also in other economic fields. For example, in the period between the two World Wars the sugar industry in Pomerania was 65% based on German capital, bacon 75%, heavy industry in Upper Silesia remained the domain of German capital in spite of the fact that Silesia was joined to Poland. The relation of the Polish government towards German capitalists was, on the whole, extremely circumspect.

The German co-operatives, above all, loan, agricultural-commercial and dairy co-ops were a very great economic force. Despite the fact that their suppliers and customers were the Polish farmers, the co-ops were under German management. Paradoxically in spite of their fewer members the number and turnover of the German commercial co-operatives in the western voivodeships before the outbreak of World War II was higher than in the Polish co-ops. The losses of the German co-ops, incurred during the depression of the '30's, were made up by secret subsidies of the German government. The plague of unemployment in Poland did not affect the German minority group which possessed its own unions of farmers, traders, craftsmen and businessmen. Their own financial status and the subsidies granted by the German government provided a strong economic base enabling the widespread activity of German organizations, especially political ones, pressing towards the formation of a uniform organization for the whole German minority group in Poland.

The Deutschtumsbund represented such tendencies. Accused of activities inimical to Poland, it was forced to disband in 1923. These were continued in Pomerania and Great Poland by the

Deutsche Vereinigung im Sejm und Senat, in the central voivodeships by the Deutscher Volksverband and in Upper Silesia by the Deutscher Volksbund. The main postulate of these organizations was cultural autonomy, but in Polish-German affairs and in foreign policy they represented the interests of Germany and not of Poland. The right-wing political groups of the German minority had a decidedly predominant influence; German socialist parties were of no great significance in Poland. In the elections to the Polish Sejm and Senate, the German minority group gained 17 seats in the lower house and 5 in the upper in 1922 and in 1928 again 21 and 5 respectively.

The German political parties were relatively free to carry on activities towards maintaining at any price the status of German possession demographically and financially. In respect to the German nationals there was milder legislation in force as to language and education than for the Ukrainians and White Russians. In spite of this the German representatives in Parliament represented the interests solely of their group and not those of Poland, opposing e.g. even very slight agricultural reforms. Their attitude as a rule expressed their indifference to problems of a general national character and also to social progress.

Nationalistic political parties of the German minority group, subsidized by the German Reich clearly evinced a negative attitude towards Poland — and especially during the period of the Weimar Republic — propagated a change of borders and another annexation of Poland's western voivodeships by Germany.

Following Hitler's rise to power, the task of shaping an ideologically uniform German minority group was undertaken by the Jungdeutsche Partei, competing for influence with the political groups of the "old" Germans. An important role in the process of uniformity was played by the groups of Auslands-Organisation NSDAP (theoretically comprising only citizens of the Reich) which from 1934 could exist openly and foster Hitler's propaganda on the territory of Poland.

In general, the German nationals in Poland supported the revisionist campaign of the Reich, which tried to attract the Polish population, especially the Kashubians, Mazovians and Silesians. The Pacts signed in Locarno in 1925 were, in the eyes of the German minority an acknowledgment of the Reich's claims to the western territories of Poland. Many Polish citizens of German origin took part in spying and acts of sabotage against Poland carried on from the Free City of Gdańsk. The erroneous policy of rapprochement with Hitler's Reich followed

by the Polish government facilitated the penetration of Nazi ideology into Poland, and weakened the country on the eve of its mortal conflict with the Third Reich.

It is not the purpose here to formulate a general accusation against the whole German minority group in Poland, but to affirm that most of its members with distinct nationalist tendencies only maintained an appearance of loyalty in relation to Poland while in reality their personal feelings were drawn to the Reich.

In addition to economic and political matters the third fundamental problem connected with the existence of the German nationals in Poland was the problem of schools. The voluntary exodus of many of the German nationals caused a decrease in the number of schools. In the school year 1936/37 they had 428 public schools with German as the language of instruction and 159 public schools with both Polish and German, these schools were attended by 74,600 pupils. Besides, there were about 40 German secondary schools despite the fact that the treaty did not oblige Poland to support minority public schools at all. At that time the four times more numerous Ukrainian population had 496 schools with their own language and 989,000 White Russians had only 8 schools.

These figures prove the distinctly privileged situation of the German nationals also in the field of education in comparison to the other minority groups in Poland. The German teachers had their own professional organizations. The German schools were secretly subsidized by the Reich. German employers, especially in Upper Silesia often made their Polish employees enroll their children in German schools.

Besides the schools, their press played an important role in education and culture. In 1932 the general number of German periodicals amounted to about 106 with a circulation of about 300,000, which included 20 dailies and about 30 weeklies and monthlies. German calendars were also published. Frequently all these publications caustically criticized and derided all rulings of the Polish authorities which were not in line with the interests of the German minority, thus undermining the authority of Poland at home and abroad. The number of confiscations and fines imposed by the courts on editors shows the great liberalism of the Polish authorities in this respect. It must be added that the press of the German minority endeavoured to maintain among its members and to arouse in the Polish population, especially in Pomerania a feeling of temporariness as to the existing political situation and the Polish-German borders fixed by the Treaty of Versailles.

The numerous cultural, educational, scientific and sport organizations of the German nationals in Poland were very active continually fostering the German spirit and culture. Scientific circles represented nationalistic views in the field of history, spreading the idea of the necessity for revising the border with Poland to the advantage of Germany. Strengthening this position and isolating the German groups from the influence of Polish culture was facilitated by the network of German libraries. Numerous theaters and cinemas, various entertainments and social gatherings of German organizations aimed at keeping up a cultural contact with the Reich, the more so as artists and speakers from Germany took part.

The anti-Polish attitude of the German nationals was upheld by the policy of the Protestant-Unitarian and Old-Lutheran churches, which contrary to their own rules did not want to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Polish lay authorities recognizing as their immediate superiors those beyond the borders of Poland (in Berlin and Wrocław). The Polish government tolerated this attitude of the Protestant churches, however. The Augsburg Protestant church with its superintendent J. Burch at the head, tended to an understanding with Poland, for which it was bitterly denounced by the nationalist Germans. J. Burch died in 1942 after being kept at a Hitler concentration camp in Oranienburg.

In general we observe in the period between the two World Wars a flourishing time for German organizations in Poland. They were skillfully run and all the economic, political, cultural and educational life was under energetic control. Thus the German nationals enjoyed great freedom and in certain respects were in a privileged situation not only in comparison to the other minority groups but also in comparison to the Polish population. Acts of oppression were much weaker against the Germans than against other minorities especially the Ukrainians and White Russians who were not even acknowledged as separate nations. The hypothesis as to the oppression of minorities in pre-September Poland cannot be generalized because of exceptionally liberal treatment by the Polish authorities of the German nationals whose situation was for this reason favourable. This differentiation is of basic significance if the nationalistic relations in pre-war Poland are to be properly illuminated.

IV. In spite of the favourable situation of the Germans in Poland, their complaints pertaining to matters of religion, settlements, agricultural reform, citizenship, schools, withdrawal of licences for the sale of alcoholic beverages, etc., were constantly being put before the League of Nations. Over four-fifths of

these complaints were dismissed as groundless by the Council of the League. The German nationals in Upper Silesia presented their complaints according to the routine foreseen by the Geneva Convention of May 15th, 1922. There, to, many complaints were judged unfounded, most of them concerned school matters. Among others, the dispute over the children in Silesia created a stir. These children did not know the German language but their parents for various reasons tried to send them to the schools for the German minority and the Polish authorities were opposed to this.

V. In this same period of time the Polish nationals living in the Reich, deprived of all legal protection against the ruthless policy of Germanization and as a result of artificially concocted censuses violently decreased "statistically". The census of 1910 listed 1,525,000 Poles on Reich territory (taking into account the borders of 1919), the census of 1925 928,800, that of 1933 only 440,000 and that of 1939 about 100,000 Poles. In 1931 of about 150,000 Polish children of school age only 6,620 could receive schooling in their mother tongue, added to which two-thirds of the Polish schools were private schools. The German authorities permitted the existence of only two private Polish secondary schools. The parents of children attending Polish schools were most often persecuted by German employers. The administrative authorities of the Reich hindered the religious and cultural life of the Polish nationals and the distribution of the Polish press. Boycotts of Polish economic institutions were organized. The expropriation of Polish farmers was made possible by the law of 29 IX 1933 relating to hereditary farms. Any unemployed Pole in Germany who admitted his nationality was unable to get a job. The use of the Polish language was forbidden even on tombstones, as was the singing of Polish songs. Persecution and denationalization were the principles of German policy in regard to the Poles living in Germany during the whole period between the two World Wars.

VI. All this was bound up with the revisionist aims of the Reich's foreign policy in regard to Poland. G. Stresemann represented the peaceful methods of coercion and by imposing economical pressure tried to force Poland to agree to a change of borders in Germany's favour, above all, to give up Pomerania. In the Reich several social organizations and camouflaged government institutions arose with Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland and Deutsche Stiftung at the head, the aim of which was to provide all-round support for German minority groups in Europe and give them proper political orientation. In the Third Reich these organizations were under the control of the

Auslands-Organisation der NSDAP and Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle which was officially under the Board of Foreign Affairs. The task of these organizations was to unify the viewpoints of Germans beyond the borders of the Reich and to get them involved in realizing a policy of conquests. One of the outcomes of this was the German irredentism in Czechoslovakia and in Poland the anti-government attitude of the German nationals with acts of sabotage carried out by some of them.

VII. In Polish-German relations nationalism was dominant on both sides, but whereas on the part of the Germans it had an aggressive character bent on conquest, on the part of the Poles it was a defensive action as a result of the visibly greater strength of the Germans. The attention of the Poles — inhabitants and government — was concentrated on defending the existing western frontier against attacks by the Reich.

There is another important aspect. For Germany the question of a change of frontier was simply one of increasing its area and power, for Poland, however, it was a vital question of existence. In this way the problem of the German minority was linked with the question of the existence of the Polish nation, at least of its relative independence of Germany. So the fact that some of the German nationals consciously allowed themselves to be used as a tool in this struggle for existence is a much graver charge than ascertaining the bare fact that the Germans in Poland were responsible for acts of spying and carrying on propaganda in favour of Germany.

The belief of the Germans in the power of the Reich and their endorsement of its aspirations to another annexation of Pomerania, Great Poland and Upper Silesia was regarded by the Poles as a direct threat to their nation. Taking this into consideration the German nationals in Poland represented centrifugal tendencies and were an element of at least moral irredency in relation to Poland from which they desired to break away.

It is certain that in this way the political line of the German minority in Poland was always closer to Germany's policy and reason of state than to those of Poland. In other words, the German nationals were more loyal to Germany in the political sense than to Poland. It is impossible to reconcile the idea of loyalty with the contempt and unwillingness shown by the Germans in Poland in their attitude towards the vital interests of the Polish nation.

Our final conclusion is that it was not so much the oppression of the German minority on the part of the Polish nation which was responsible for the unfriendly attitude of the Germans toward Poland, as the fact of their aspirations to once again

annex the western lands of Poland and that the German nationals living in Poland were the torch-bearers of the revisionist policy connected with these aspirations. The fact that the situation of this minority developed into an international problem was due also to the propagandistic-political assumptions of Germany as well as to the geographical position — the German nationals living on Polish territory bordering directly with Germany. In these conditions the leaders of the minority had one ambition: to be joined to the Reich.

There is a justified fear that the present policy, leading to the destruction of the Polish nation by means of a "peaceful revision of the borders" is represented by the German Federal Republic. An emotional change in Polish-German relations thus depends on the acceptance throughout Germany of a historiography and policy renouncing all thought of annexing Polish territories, as the German Democratic Republic has done. This is an indispensable condition for the ending of the "psychological war" and the establishing of a lasting peace between the two nations. The realization of this postulate will be a valuable contribution to the laborious struggle to build a new world, in which politics will cease to be the function of national egoism and overbearance.