

“From Compromise to Coercion: Occupied Poland, the German Officer Corps, and the Transformation of German Imperialism in WWI”

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Abstract

The German army's officer corps in WWI, historians have long suggested, was united in its support for expanding the German Empire through the annexation and Germanization of Eastern European territory. Fritz Fischer and Immanuel Geiss identified the army as a staunch proponent of seizing a Polish “border-strip” and reengineering its population through policies of colonization and ethnic cleansing. More recently, scholars have argued that the German army's institutional emphasis on absolute control predisposed officers to support the nationalization of space as a strategy of imperial stabilization. The army's attempt to establish a “military utopia” in the occupied Baltics thus entailed the surveillance, exploitation, and gradual Germanization of the native population. General treatments of WWI typically affirm this portrait of the German officer corps as unapologetic supporters of aggressive Germanization.

This paper will reconsider the place of the nation and national identity in the imperial imagination of German army officers by examining how they proposed to secure Germany's permanent control over Russian Poland against the threat of Polish nationalist resistance or revolt. In reality, German officers fervently disagreed about the political significance of national identity. Some officers, including leading figures like Hans von Seeckt, promoted nationalizing policies of ethnic management. Reasoning that Poles would inevitably attempt to overthrow German rule, they called on Berlin to extirpate the influence of Polish nationalism from annexed territories, either by colonizing the region with reliable ethnic Germans or systematically expelling Polish residents.

Yet this position was far from hegemonic. Other officers believed that national identity, though important, did not determine political loyalty. They contended that Germany could only secure its strategic interests in Russian Poland by striking a grand bargain with Polish nationalists. They proposed carving an autonomous Kingdom of Poland from Russian territory and binding it in permanent military and political union with the German Empire. Poles, they reasoned, could be trusted to loyally defend this German-Polish union so long as they were permitted to govern their own domestic affairs. Officers of every rank and position endorsed this multinationalist paradigm of ethnic management. In the early years of the war, it proved significantly more influential among the army's leadership than nationalizing alternatives. Erich von Falkenhayn suggested establishing a Polish state under German suzerainty in the summer of 1915. The Deputy General Staff produced one of the first detailed proposals for a German-Polish union in autumn of that year. In part owing to broad support within the army's leadership, the German Empire established a Kingdom of Poland in November 1916, with the intention of forging a permanent multinational union.

The German officer corps as a whole only learned to conflate political loyalty with national identity, and ethnic diversity with imperial fragility, in the final years of WWI. After 1916, a series of political crises gradually eroded officers' confidence in the compatibility of Polish identity and loyalty to the German Empire. Political frictions and dramatic nationalist demonstrations convinced many officers that Poles would never accept German suzerainty, and that a Polish state would eventually betray the German Empire. Some officers responded by abandoning their support for multinational imperialism altogether, and urged Berlin to instead annex and Germanize a large strip of Polish territory along Germany's Eastern frontier. Even those military leaders who continued to support the framework of a German-Polish union began to modify their plans to include military safeguards to compel Polish obedience, or significant territorial concessions to reduce Poland's potential strength. This paper will conclude by considering how army officers constructed a memory of the occupation of Russian Poland after

WWI, and the long-term ramifications of the army's loss of confidence in multinational imperialism.