

# **“When Paramilitarism Became a Threat: Readings of Polish Nationalism and German Occupation Policy in WWI.”**

Mark T. Kettler

## **Abstract**

Recent historiography has portrayed the Imperial German Army as inclined to employ violence against civilians in pursuit of security. Some scholars have attributed the atrocities committed by German units in Belgium in 1914 to the army's institutional memories and the stresses of an overambitious operation. Others have contended that army practice sanctioned the economic pillage of occupied regions, prosecuted without regard for civilian welfare, and enforced through excessive violence. Generally this scholarship suggests that the brutal anti-partisan tactics later employed by Wehrmacht units in WWII were firmly rooted in the practices of the imperial German army.

My paper will complicate this view by examining the German army's measures against paramilitaries in occupied Russian Poland. First, I will demonstrate that in the early years of WWI, the military governors of occupied Poland were surprisingly reluctant to violently neutralize paramilitary groups. Military leaders' sociological understanding of Polish nationalism mitigated the perceived threat of paramilitaries, and convinced Germans that an aggressive response would be counterproductive. Second, I will argue that this disposition evolved over the course of the occupation. Officials perceived a growing threat from paramilitary organizations, and became more willing to suppress them, primarily due to a fundamental revision in their sociology of Polish nationalism. Only after Germans began to understand Polish national sentiment as firmly rooted in the *demos*, resistant to elite manipulation, and inflexible to compromise, did they regard paramilitaries as an urgent threat to German aims.

I will conclude by considering how these findings alter our understanding of the German army in WWI and the evolution of occupation tactics into WWII.