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THE PRUSSIANISATION OF THE POLES¹

Historical Retrospect

THE Present is the child of the Past. It is the heir to its good and evil deeds alike. In order to learn how the mistakes and misdeeds of former generations leave their mark upon, and influence the actions of, succeeding generations, it is only necessary to visit the former Prussian provinces of Poland. Nowhere else in the world can the process of historical retribution—the process that is described in the Biblical saying that the sins of the fathers shall be handed down to their children unto the third and fourth generation—be observed more plainly and strikingly in its destructive effect upon social and racial relations. The spiritual and material heritage of an unhappy past survives in German-Polish relations to thwart mutual understanding and appreciation. Hence it is imperatively necessary that any survey of present-day conditions in the provinces of Pomorze and Poznańia should begin with even the most summary account of the history of the struggle between the two races for the mastery over the Eastern Marches, that has now been in progress for nearly a thousand years. Any such account forms the indispensable historical background without which the present racial situation in Pomorze and Poznańia cannot be viewed in its proper perspective.

Of the earliest inhabitants of the lands between the Oder and the Niemen few records survive. There can nevertheless be no doubt that these were Slav or Lithuanian tribes dependent upon hunting, fishing and cattle-rearing for their livelihood. Wendish Slavs, Cashubes, and Lithuanian tribes formed the inhabitants of the westernmost lands bordering on the Baltic sea-coast. Farther eastwards, where the great plain begins that stretches across Russia to the Ural Mountains, the Poles were living on the lands still occupied by their descendants. Ethnographically Poznańia is Polish soil: a fact that is not contested by German ethnographers

¹ The following books are suggested as likely to prove useful to readers desirous of studying the present subject in greater detail:—

Encyclopédie Polonaise; Vol. 4, Fasc. 1; Régime Politique et Administratif dans la Pologne Prussienne; Fribourg, 1918. Bruns, Carl Georg, *Gesammelte Schriften zur Minderheitenfrage*; Berlin (Heymann), 1933. Hoetzsch, Otto, *Osteuropa und Deutscher Osten*; Königsberg (Osteuropa Verlag), 1934. Laubert, Manfred, *Die preussische Polenpolitik von 1772–1914*; Berlin, 1920. Massow, W. von, *Die Polennot im Deutschen Osten*; Berlin 1907. Seyda, Maryan, *Territoires Polonais sous la Domination Prussienne*; Paris, 1918. Tymieniecki, Kasimierz, *History of Polish Pomerania*; Poznań, 1929.

and historians. The early ethnographical character of Pomorez cannot be described with similar exactitude. Nevertheless it is possible to say without fear of contradiction that, whatever the racial character of its earliest inhabitants, they were certainly not Germans. The two provinces of Pomorze and Poznańia were inhabited throughout the first twelve centuries of the Christian Era by non-Germanic peoples.

The Teutonic Order and the Ordensstaat

A resumption of the *Drang nach Osten* in the German race in the 13th century witnessed the first appearance of the German sword in these borderlands. The Order of the Sword overran parts of Lithuania and the present Latvia, established its headquarters in Riga, stormed and destroyed the pagan Lithuanian fortress of Klaipeda, and in its place erected a castle to which the knights gave the name of Memel. But it was the successor of the Order of the Sword—the Order of the Teutonic Knights—that imprinted upon these lands the German character that they have retained in whole or in part for more than seven centuries. Under the greatest of their Grand Masters, Hermann von Salza, and armed with the Emperor Frederick II's *privilegium* to hold the lands they might conquer, the Teutonic Knights made their appearance in 1228 in Pomorze, where they established a base at Toruń (Thorn) from which they could sally forth to raid and eventually to conquer the surrounding lands. It is not necessary to narrate the history of the Teutonic Order here. Its outstanding achievement was the creation of the so-called *Ordensstaat*, which realised Hermann von Salza's ambitious plan of a German State in the Eastern Marches that should serve as a rampart against the onslaught of the Slavs. At the zenith of the Order's power in the 14th century the *Ordensstaat* included the territories at present comprised within the Polish province of Pomorze, the Free City of Danzig, the Memel Territory, and the Prussian provinces of East Prussia and Grenzmark Posen-West Prussia together with a portion of Eastern Pomerania. It is exceedingly important for the present-day problem of the German minority in Pomorze and Poznańia, subsequently to be studied in these pages, to note that Poznańia was never at any time included within the boundaries of the *Ordensstaat*, nor did it ever come under the Order's governance. The second important aspect of the Order's achievement in its bearing upon the modern problem is that the establishment and organisation of the *Ordensstaat* conferred upon the lands ruled over by the Grand Master, the tradition of German

civilisation and order that they have largely retained to the present day. Prior to the incorporation of Poznań within the Kingdom of Prussia in the 18th century no tradition of German civilisation was ever implanted in the soil of that purely Polish province. A third aspect of the Order's rule in these conquered lands deserves to be emphasised here. However cruel and bloody may have been the conquest of the Slav lands by the German sword (it hardly beseems an age when war is a matter of poison gas and the bombing of civilian populations from the air, to be too censorious of mediæval methods of warfare), there can be no question that the civilising work of the Knights was as efficient as was their conduct of a campaign. They made barren soil fertile and brought prosperity to a countryside that had hitherto only known poverty. They cut canals, built roads, and founded towns. Moreover, they colonised these lands with a race of men able and willing to bear arms in their defence, and to devote their whole energies to their cultivation and improvement. The coming of these colonies was nevertheless destined to be of fateful import, not merely for the future of German-Polish relations, but also for that of Germany and indeed the whole world. The colonists were composed for the most part of the younger sons of knightly or Junker, families.

The fact that Prussia was thus colonised by Junkers was destined to be of cardinal importance for the future development both of Prussia and Germany Their (the colonists') stern qualities were only deepened and strengthened by subsequent centuries of hard struggle with the unfruitful soil of their new home. Thus there arose in Prussia a race of men born to rule and fitted both by nature and experience of life to play the dominant rôle that has fallen to them in modern Germany. The conquest and colonisation of Prussia by the Teutonic Order was the indispensable preliminary to the Prussian domination of Germany.²

The downfall of the Teutonic Order in the 15th and 16th centuries was hastened by its defeat in the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410 at the hands of the Poles and their Lithuanian and Russian allies. Military defeat alone could not have sufficed to destroy the Order's power. Internal revolt against its autocratic rule in the form of the Prussian League, gave the Order its death-blow. But its downfall did not involve the destruction of its work. The impress given by the

² "The Teutonic Knights" in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 27 April, 1933.

Order to the lands and the people under its rule endured and still endures.

The long struggle between the Teutonic Order and the Kings of Poland came to an end in 1466 in the Second Peace of Thorn, by which Prussia was incorporated within the Polish State. For more than three centuries West Prussia enjoyed a semi-autonomous position under Polish rule. It possessed its own provincial Diet, sent representatives to the Polish Diet in Warsaw, and its sons were not obliged to serve in the Polish army outside the provincial frontier. Poznań continued to be what it had hitherto always been : an integral part of the Polish State. Although Germans had settled there in the towns and villages, Poznań never came beneath the iron hand of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order ; there was never any attempt at Germanisation on a large scale ; and such evidences of German civilisation as were discernable when Poznań passed under Prussian rule, were mainly confined to the towns. In the present Pomorze conditions were different. Although the Germans adopted Polish names and imitated Polish customs, they did not acquire Polish feelings, and their own racial sentiments lived on in them. An influx of Polish settlers took place after the incorporation of the province in the Polish State, that did not avail to submerge and destroy its German character and traditions. The memories of the law and order maintained by the stern rule of the Teutonic Knights were not wholly effaced in the population, and only acquired greater vividness in consequence of the disorder and lack of strong government that preceded Poland's downfall. If the chaotic conditions obtaining in Poland at the time of the First Partition in 1772 are recalled, there is little cause for wonder that the inhabitants of Pomorze should have welcomed the Prussian Grenadiers as symbolising the advent of ordered government.³

Pomorze and Poznań under Prussian rule

The work of the Teutonic Order was resumed and carried on in the Eastern Marches under Frederick the Great and his successors with increasing vigour. Nevertheless it is important to notice the difference between the methods employed by Frederick the Great and by Bismarck and still more by Bülow. Frederick made no secret of his contempt for his new subjects. His belief in the superiority of the Prussian over the Pole came to be generally shared by his compatriots and to form an almost insurmountable barrier

³ Laubert, *Die Preussische Polenpolitik von 1772-1914*, p. 7 ; cf. also Hoetzsch, *Osteuropa und Deutscher Osten*, p. 295.

between the two races that has not yet been wholly destroyed. Ever since Frederick's day his fellow-countrymen have believed that the best way of raising the—alleged—low cultural level of the Poles, and of "inculcating in these Slav peoples better customs and morals, will always be to mix them with Germans in the course of time."⁴ Actually the population of Pomorze in 1772 was already of mixed blood. The Polish aristocracy had frequently married into German noble families—a custom which they maintained until the coming of the World War—with the result that they, and still more their descendants, acquired a kind of dual nationality that was not lacking in its effect upon both German-Polish relations and provincial politics. The fact that Frederick the Great described his new Polish subjects as "this totally imbecile society with names ending in 'ki,'" did not, however, cause him to adopt an intolerant attitude towards them in regard to their native customs and language. He felt that the "disorderly Polish population" could never be made into Prussians after the model of his own countrymen. The most that could be hoped for was that the "unpleasant and intractable Polish element" in the population of Pomorze might be induced to become law-abiding Prussian citizens of Polish speech in the course of time.

The fundamental difference between the Frederician and the post-Frederician Polish policy is revealed here. Frederick did not attempt to make Prussian bricks out of Polish straw. Bismarck, and notably Bülow, were not content that the Prussian Poles should continue to be law-abiding citizens of Prussia distinguished from other Prussian citizens only by their Polish speech. They were firmly resolved to eradicate in the Prussian Poles all traces of Polish culture and Polish national sentiment. The Prussian Poles must become Prussians *pur et simple*. Frederick demanded of his officials in West Prussia that they should know and use the Polish language. Bismarck and Bülow would not permit that even the Poles should speak their own native tongue. It is just conceivable that Frederick's more tolerant policy in cultural matters, united to his endeavours to raise the economic prosperity of the province to the highest possible level, might have resulted—especially if it had been consistently pursued by his successors, with the introduction from time to time of necessary modifications to correspond to the changing demands of the age—in contenting the Polish population of Pomorze with its lot. Bismarck's and Bülow's policy, on the other hand, was

⁴ Preuss, *Urkundenbuch zu der Lebensgeschichte Friedrichs des Grossen*, vol. V., pp. 193-4.

nothing less than a resounding challenge to the latent spirit of Polish nationalism to arise and defend itself. In the event their challenge met with the only possible response. The Poles are indebted very largely to Bismarck and Bülow for having aroused and intensified the national spirit that has enabled them to re-occupy their place on the map of Europe as an independent nation.

At the same time it is only fair to remember that Bismarck and Bülow were confronted in Poznań with a problem of a very different kind to that which awaited solution at the hands of Frederick the Great in Pomorze. Attention has already been called to the mingling of German and Slav blood to be found in the population of Pomorze and also to the existence there of a German tradition of civilisation and government. These two factors favourable to a Prussian solution of the problem were conspicuous in Poznań by their absence. Until its incorporation into the Prussian State Poznań had never known German rule; its population was almost wholly Polish. It was therefore only natural that the reaction of the population in comparison with that of Pomorze to Prussian rule should be different and hostile. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries Poznań was the great stronghold of Polish nationalism, in its unending warfare against Prussia's ruthless policy of Prussianisation. It was from Poznań (Posen) that the Poles in the neighbouring Pomorze derived both the inspiration and the organisation that enabled them to maintain a united front with the Poznań Poles against oppression. The problem that Bismarck and Bülow failed to solve in Poznań was a minority problem in the modern sense of the term: the governance of a racial minority wholly alien alike in blood and sentiment to its rulers. It is necessary to bear in mind this fundamental distinction between the two provinces of Pomorze and Poznań in studying both their history under Prussian rule and the situation of their German population to-day.

Frederick the Great's activities in his new province call for mention here in order that a comparison may be made later between past and present conditions. The landed property of the Polish State was expropriated and very moderate compensation awarded to the tenants. The expropriated lands were in future only given to German farmers to cultivate. Ecclesiastical property was treated in similar fashion. Strategic considerations did not escape Frederick's vigilant attention. In order to protect the province against the neighbouring Poles Frederick embarked on a scheme of German colonisation along the valley of the Netze that should also link up

Silesia with East Prussia by a German wall. His treatment of the peasantry is specially noteworthy. Serfdom was abolished and the peasants given heritable possession of their farms. Their education was also provided for by the establishment of 750 schools in the country districts alone. The nobility, on the other hand, were the losers by their change of allegiance. Their numerous privileges were largely done away with and their estates made subject to taxation.

It would obviously be impossible within the limits placed upon the present essay to narrate in any detail the history of Prussian rule in the former Prussian Poland. It must suffice to indicate briefly its main features and more especially those that have a direct bearing upon the present situation of the German minority in Pomorze and Poznańia. Throughout the century that elapsed between the Congress of Vienna and the outbreak of the World War Prussia's Polish policy alternated between conciliation and oppression, only to come down finally on the side of oppression. At times the indicator in the balance remained almost stationary between the two extremes. In a very general sense it may be said that a policy of either conciliation or passivity was in operation during the years 1815-71, with the notable and fateful exception of the decade 1830-40, which saw the commencement of Prussianisation under von Flottwell and von Grolman. The periods of conciliation or passivity can be passed over here, simply because they unhappily exercised no lasting influence upon German-Polish relations. It was otherwise with Grolman's and Flottwell's Polish policy.

Grolman's memorandum of 25 March, 1832, on the subject of Prussia's policy in the Polish problem, influenced Bismarck in formulating his own Polish policy in his speech to the Reichstag on 28 January, 1886. As a soldier Grolman regarded the Polish problem primarily from its strategic aspect. The proximity of Posen to Berlin, and its position on the lines of communication between Silesia, Prussia and Pomerania, caused Grolman to declare that "this land (Posen) is so intimately a part of the Prussian State that every idea of separation from that State must be looked upon as high treason, and every loyal son of his Fatherland must devote the last ounce of his strength not merely to retain this land for Prussia, but also to make it loyal, that is to say German."⁵ In other words—the strategical position of Posen (Poznańia) in relation to Prussia was of such a nature that its Prussianisation was

⁵ Hoetzsch, *op. cit.* p. 326.

deemed essential by a Prussian Staff Officer in the vital interests of national defence. An aspect of the pre-War German-Polish Question is thus laid bare that undoubtedly played a predominant—if not always very obvious—part in the determination of Prussia's policy towards its Polish subjects. Nor has this aspect of the Question ceased to be of practical importance to-day. Grolman was indeed only giving expression in other words to Clausewitz's pregnant saying: "A Polish State means a fundamental rebuilding of the European system, of which Germany will have to bear the cost. Russia's face will thus be turned towards the East. France will become the master of the Continent."⁶

The means which Grolman and Flottwell advocated to turn the Poles into Prussians were those that Bismarck and Bülow subsequently put into force. Polish customs and sentiments which stood in the way of the attainment of this aim were to be abolished; German civilisation, material and intellectual, was to be implanted in Poznańia, and intensively cultivated in the hope that the result might be the fusion of the two races and the emergence of a common German civilisation. Polish was no longer to be taught in the schools. Polish conscripts were not to serve in local regiments and instead were to be distributed over the entire Prussian Army. The estates of the Polish aristocracy were to be acquired by compulsory purchase, and divided up among German peasants in order to strengthen the German population of the province. German peasants already settled in Poznańia were to be given assistance to purchase farms from Polish peasants and to break up uncultivated ground for new holdings for their own children. Finally Grolman desired to see the complete disappearance of the province of Posen (Poznańia) and its partition among the neighbouring Prussian provinces. He hoped thus to effect the extinction in the Polish population of national sentiments and historic memories. Grolman and Flottwell did not survive to see their ideas given the fullest expression in practice. It was left to Bismarck and to Bülow more than half a century later to carry them out.

Before briefly discussing Bismarck's and Bülow's policy of Prussianisation, it is first necessary to ask what motives inspired it. These were twofold: national and international. The fervent Prussianism of Bismarck that had welded the German peoples into a German nation under Prussian leadership, could not reconcile itself to the presence in the body politic of alien elements. There is no reason to suppose that either Bismarck or Bülow was animated by

⁶ Quoted in Brackmann, *Germany and Poland*, p. 219.

feelings of dislike for the Poles as a race. Bismarck indeed spoke highly of the manner in which the Polish peasants had displayed their loyalty to the King of Prussia in three wars with "their blood and with the bravery characteristic of their nation."⁷ Nevertheless Bismarck saw in the Prussian Poles potential—if not actual—enemies to the security and stability, not merely of Prussian governance in the Polish provinces, but also of the Prussian State itself. He was therefore resolved to banish that danger from the realm of practical politics by compelling the Poles to become Prussian by sentiment as well as by name. In doing so, Bismarck was acting contrary to the promise given by King Frederick William III in 1815 to his new Polish subjects when he said: "You will be incorporated in my realm without being obliged to deny your own nationality."⁸ Bismarck would doubtless have excused this breach of faith by the necessity of improving "the numerical proportions of the German to the Polish population to the advantage of the Germans, in order (as General Grolman said in 1832) to secure in each province citizens loyal to the Prussian State."⁹ Moreover, he held that the Poles looked upon their Prussian citizenship as "terminable by notice," and therefore did not deserve to be treated on an equality with their Prussian compatriots.

Foreign policy was always uppermost in Bismarck's mind. In this sphere the Polish Question became in his eyes a means to an end. His dread of a resurrection of the Polish State within the frontiers of 1772 was at least as real as his well-known *cauchemar des alliances*. "The creation of an independent Polish State between Silesia and East Prussia . . . (Bismarck wrote in 1863) . . . would constitute a permanent threat to Prussia."¹⁰ And again: "Polish independence is tantamount to a strong French army on the Vistula."¹¹ In words that have a prophetic ring when read in the light of all that has happened during the past two decades, Bismarck warned the Poles that they would only achieve independence "as the result of a war, disastrous to Germany, when Prussia has been smashed to pieces."¹² As a Prussian statesman Bismarck, therefore, envisaged his duty to be that of placing every possible hindrance in

⁷ Quoted in Laubert, *op. cit.* p. 122 from Bismarck's speech on 18 March, 1867.

⁸ Quoted by Hoetzsch, *op. cit.* p. 317.

⁹ Quoted by Hoetzsch, *op. cit.* p. 366–7 from Bismarck's speech on 28 Jan., 1886.

¹⁰ Smogorzewski, *Poland's Access to the Sea*, p. 71, note 45, quoting from "Die Gesammelten Werke, Politische Schriften," edited by F. Thimme, p. 60.

¹¹ Quoted in *Ibid.* p. 62 from *Bismarck-Jahrbuch*, vol. VI, p. 175.

¹² Grant Robertson, *Bismarck*, pp. 388–9.

the way of the achievement of independence by the Poles. In the larger sphere of Germany's international relations "Poland and the Poles were a conclusive reason, even if there had not been others equally exigent, why Berlin should have a control of the vassal state of Austria, and maintain a close understanding with Russia."¹³ It was therefore these dual considerations of domestic and foreign policy that inspired Bismarck to adopt, and Bülow to carry on, that policy of Prussianisation which sowed in the soil of Prussian Poland the tares of racial hatred amidst the good seed of material progress and prosperity.

Prussianisation developed its attack against the Poles simultaneously on two fronts—cultural and material. The attack on the cultural life of the Poles began in 1873 with an order forbidding instruction in Polish national schools to be given in any language other than German, except in religion and religious singing. Fourteen years later there came the still more oppressive enactment that prohibited the teaching of the Polish language. German became the sole language for official intercourse, and Polish gave place to German place names. A brief interlude of conciliation during Caprivi's Chancellorship (1890-94) was followed by a renewal of repressive legislation in 1900, when German was substituted for Polish as the language of instruction even for religious subjects. Polish newspapers were subjected to a rigid censorship; the sale of Polish literature on railway bookstalls was forbidden; the use of the Polish language was interdicted at public meetings in all places in which the Polish population did not attain to more than sixty per cent. of the total population; the private teaching of Polish was prohibited; and even Polish family names were compulsorily replaced by German names.

The material existence of the Poles was subjected during the same period to an equally severe onslaught. The Colonisation Law of 1886 authorised the Prussian Government to spend five million pounds in purchasing Polish estates for division among German peasants pledged to marry only German wives. In 1885 Poles who did not possess Prussian nationality were ordered to leave the country: an enactment that resulted in the dispossession and forced exile of 34,000 Poles. Under Bülow anti-Polish legislation received a fresh impetus. In 1901 Poles were forbidden to benefit by the law governing leasehold tenures. The Polish peasantry became an especial object of attack in 1904, with the passage of a law prohibiting the creation of any new peasant holdings or the

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 389.

building of new dwelling-houses. Four years later Bülow's notorious Expropriation Act empowered the Colonisation Commission established in 1886 to make compulsory purchases of Polish estates upon which to settle German colonists. On the eve of the World War the Prussian Parliament was discussing the draft of a law designed to confer a right of pre-emption upon the Prussian State in regard to all sales of land in the Polish provinces.

What measure of success attended this Prussianising policy? The attack on Polish cultural life provoked a revival of nationalist feelings in the Poles that caused them to close their ranks and present a united front to the enemy. Co-operation became their watchword. Everywhere co-operative societies sprang into life which slowly transformed the Polish peasantry into a highly organised and intensely nationalist modern democracy. The two provinces were gradually covered by a vast network of agrarian banks and associations, trade unions, athletic and political and literary clubs, and libraries that stimulated Polish national feeling and gave it an effective channel of expression.

Moreover, Prussia was the loser in the struggle for the possession of the land. A Prussian writer states that Prussia's colonisation policy resulted in an increase of 98,000 hectares in the total area of land in Polish ownership and in a diminution of the German population of the province of Posen (Poznań) from 52.20 per cent. to 38.70 per cent. between 1861 and 1910.¹⁴ Another German calculation proves that between 1896 and 1905 the Poles in West Prussia (Pomorze) alone increased the land in their possession by 29,079 hectares.¹⁵ Prussia's colonisation policy from 1886 to 1914 has been stated to have cost a sum of 1,300,000,000 gold Marks.¹⁶ The actual achievements of the Colonisation Commission during the entire period of its activity (1886-1915) must also be placed upon record. It increased the German population in the two provinces by 151,000 persons, transferred 126,310 hectares of land from Polish to German ownership, and secured German landowners in the permanent possession of a further 280,000 hectares. The net cost of the Commission to the Prussian State has been estimated at 621 million Marks.¹⁷ "Ces chiffres ne correspondent pas au but visé par Bismarck."¹⁸

¹⁴ Bruns, *Gesammelte Schriften zur Minderheitenfrage*, p. 256.

¹⁵ Tymieniecki, *History of Polish Pomerania*, p. 158, quoting from Bernhard's *Polnisches Gemeinwesen im Preussischen Staat*.

¹⁶ Smogorzewski, *op. cit.* p. 61. ¹⁷ *Encyclopédie Polonaise*, tome I, p. 324.

¹⁸ Seyda, *Territoires Polonais sous la Domination Prussienne*, p. 68. In reality M. Seyda's remark is intended to apply only to the figures for the Commission's purchases of land.

Thus the Poles emerged the victors from the struggle for the land. It was the least of their triumphs. The most precious lesson which the Western Poles learnt in the hard school of their Prussian taskmasters was the respect and desire, no less than the capacity, for ordered government and economic progress. Many among them today are willing to acknowledge their debt. Unfortunately their sense of obligation is too often accompanied by painful recollections of the methods of instruction for them to be wholly just or wholly grateful to their former rulers who are now their subjects. The memory of past injustice is a potent force in political and social life. The policy of Prussianisation failed of its desired effect. The present-day German minority in Pomorze and Poznańia has been called upon to pay the penalty of failure.

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