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“Incurable Megalomania” and “Fantasies of Expansion”: The German Army Reimagines Empire in Occupied Poland, 1915–1918

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Abstract

Plans for a Polish “border strip” are frequently cited to argue that the German army entered the First World War committed to pacifying conquered space through Germanization. This article contends that, in 1914, the German officer corps did not understand national homogeneity as essential for imperial security. Many influential officers insisted that Polish identity was compatible with German imperial loyalty. They supported a multinational imperial model, proposing to trade Poland its cultural and political autonomy for the acceptance of German suzerainty in foreign policy and military command. The army’s preference for Germanizing space developed during the occupation of Russian Poland, as officers learned to conflate diversity with imperial fragility. Only a series of political crises after 1916 shifted military opinion against multinational imperialism. Increasingly convinced that Poland would betray the German Empire, some officers abandoned multinationalism. Others revised their plans to contain Poland and fortify Germany by annexing and Germanizing Polish space.

As Germany marched to war in August 1914, the commander of the 3rd Prussian Reserve Division, General Curt von Morgen, called upon Polish subjects of the Russian Empire to rise up against their tsar, promising “political and religious freedom” for Poland in return. He did so on his own initiative, untethered from any official policy.¹ The son of a decorated officer, Morgen had been educated in the Prussian military tradition. He built his reputation in Cameroon, organizing its colonial infantry and commanding expeditions to pacify the colony’s vast interior.² In 1912, he was promoted to major general.

Morgen’s actions sit uncomfortably with our portrait of the German army in 1914, which typically casts the officer corps as embracing a nationalizing model of imperial expansion, preferring to secure conquered space through the repression, Germanization, or elimination of ethnic diversity. Historians have long associated the army with wartime proposals to pacify a “border strip” of annexed Polish territory through aggressive Germanization. Immanuel Geiss portrayed the army as Germany’s most resolute supporter of nationalization, arguing that plans for the annexation and ethnic cleansing of a border strip “dominated” its agenda throughout the war.³ Relying heavily on Geiss’s conclusions, subsequent historians have accepted the army’s preference for Germanization as axiomatic.⁴

¹ Martin Broszat, *Zweihundert Jahre Deutsche Polenpolitik* (Munich: Ehrenwirth, 1963), 134.

² Harry R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884–1914: A Case Study in Modern Imperialism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1938), 83.

³ Immanuel Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Kriegszielpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, *Historische Studien* 378 (Hamburg: Matthiesen Verlag, 1960), 5, 46, 71, 116, 136–37. Martin Broszat arrived at similar conclusions. Broszat, *Zweihundert Jahre Deutsche Polenpolitik*, 149–50.

⁴ Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), 241.

Vejas Liulevicius has reinforced this portrait, arguing that the First World War radicalized a German army already determined to construct a “continental colonial empire” in Russia’s Baltic provinces.⁵ From the beginning of the occupation, he contends, officers of the Supreme Command of German Forces in the East (*OberOst*) perceived the populations of these territories as primitive, disordered, and diseased. “Parasitic” peoples “incapable of producing *Kultur* or work,” they required German governance and civilization.⁶ Gestures toward preserving “client nationalities” served larger plans to dominate, civilize, and transform these lands and peoples into extensions of the German Empire.⁷ Primary schools would provide extensive German language instruction, while vernacular higher education would be strictly curtailed.⁸ A caste of German administrators would govern the conquered provinces, limiting indigenous political activity and systematically excluding non-German residents from positions of authority.⁹ *OberOst* personnel imagined that these policies would serve the gradual colonization of this “ideal settlement land,” the Germanization of resident populations, and the eventual transformation of the Baltic littoral into “truly German land.”¹⁰ The experience and commemoration of defeat, Liulevicius argues, merely radicalized the German army’s nationalizing and colonial model of empire, as frustrated veterans, officers, and paramilitaries reimagined the “lands” and “peoples” of eastern Europe as irredeemable lower “races” to be cleared away prior to colonization.¹¹ His work thus sits comfortably with literature that understands Nazism’s apocalyptic violence in eastern Europe as a manifestation of pathologies already deeply embedded in the political and imperial culture of the German Empire.¹²

Subsequent historians have sought to explain *why* the German army embraced nationalizing imperialism. Some have attributed this “preference” to a pathological military culture, which encouraged officers to obsessively seek absolute control or prioritize military necessity over civilian welfare.¹³ Others have linked officers’ exaggerated reliance on coercion to social insecurities of the Prussian aristocracy.¹⁴ Recent literature has suggested that colonial precedents normalized violent models of ethnic management. Some have speculated that “deportation methods” employed by European powers to pacify colonial territory inspired German military elites to draft similar programs of forcible resettlement in Poland and

⁵ Vejas Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East, 1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

⁶ Vejas Liulevicius, “German Military Occupation and Culture on the Eastern Front in World War I,” in *The Germans and the East*, ed. Charles W. Ingrao and Franz A. J. Szabo (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 201; Vejas Liulevicius, “Der Osten als apokalyptischer Raum. Deutsche Frontwahrnehmungen im und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Traumland Osten. Deutsche Bilder vom östlichen Europa im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Gregor Thum (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Rupprecht GmbH & Co., 2006), 55–57; Vejas Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17, 22, 25–29, 70, 113.

⁷ Liulevicius, “German Military Occupation and Culture on the Eastern Front in World War I,” 206; Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East, 1800 to the Present*, 139–42; Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 7–8, 71; Liulevicius, “Der Osten als apokalyptischer Raum,” 58–59.

⁸ Liulevicius, “German Military Occupation and Culture on the Eastern Front in World War I,” 206–7; Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 29–31, 126–27, 206.

⁹ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 30, 45–46, 54, 58, 114; Liulevicius, “German Military Occupation and Culture on the Eastern Front in World War I,” 204.

¹⁰ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 70–71, 89–96, 160, 165.

¹¹ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 8–9, 107, 249–52; Liulevicius, “German Military Occupation and Culture on the Eastern Front in World War I,” 207; Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East, 1800 to the Present*, 149.

¹² Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East, 1800 to the Present*, 2, 5; Liulevicius, “German Military Occupation and Culture on the Eastern Front in World War I,” 201, 207.

¹³ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 201; MacGregor Knox, “The First World War and Military Culture: Continuity and Change in Germany and Italy,” in *Imperial Germany Revisited: Continuing Debates and New Perspectives*, ed. Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 214–15.

¹⁴ George Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qindao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), xiv, 45–50, 64, 165.

eastern Europe.¹⁵ Other scholars understand the German army as paradigmatic of a larger transformation of *European* war culture during the First World War, characterized by a growing perception of foreign civilians and cultures as legitimate targets of war.¹⁶ In almost every case, proposals for the Germanization of a Polish border strip are cited to demonstrate the army's perception of foreign civilians as *de facto* enemies to be uprooted for the sake of imperial stability.

Some have challenged this portrait. Recent research has identified General Hans Hartwig von Beseler, Germany's governor-general for occupied Russian Poland, as receptive to models of imperial rule based on collaboration with Polish nationalism. But Beseler is portrayed as a promethean figure, championing this policy against the skepticism of his colleagues.¹⁷ Germany's military leadership is still framed as reluctant, willing only to briefly defer their annexationist agenda in Poland in a desperate gamble to recruit Polish soldiers.¹⁸

This article argues that the imperial German army's attitudes toward ethnic management have been fundamentally mischaracterized. The German army did not march to war in 1914 saddled with the conviction that national homogeneity was indispensable for imperial stability. This preference for nationalizing models of ethnic management was *learned* during the First World War.¹⁹ Specifically, the occupation of Congress Poland transformed the German army's assumptions about the relationship between ethnic diversity and empire.

In the first years of the war, influential officers throughout the army understood Polish identity as compatible with loyalty to the German Empire. They concluded that a *multinational* model of empire, one premised on a bargain between the Polish nation and German Empire, represented the most strategically advantageous method for securing control over Congress Poland. They proposed to establish an autonomous Kingdom of Poland and to bind this state in permanent military and political union with the German Empire. This plan for multinational union became the predominant imperial model espoused by officers involved in wartime Polish policy. Their vocal support of multinationalism contributed to Berlin's decision to establish a Kingdom of Poland in November 1916.

In the final two years of the war, however, repeated crises in occupied Poland eroded the army's confidence in the future stability of a German-Polish union. Officers increasingly feared that Poles would resist German leadership and that a Polish state would betray the German Empire. Some officers urged Berlin to abandon plans for a Polish state and revert to nationalizing models of imperial management. Those who continued to support multinational union sought to fortify Germany against potential treachery by limiting Poland's economic and military resources or by annexing and Germanizing Polish territory.

The Limited Appeal of Nationalizing Imperialism

The army considered Germany's eastern frontier indefensible in 1914. Congress Poland bulged westward from Russia, a salient reaching to within 250 kilometers of Berlin. The

¹⁵ Robert L. Nelson, "Utopias of Open Space: Forced Population Transfer Fantasies during the First World War," in *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War*, ed. Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer (Oldenbourg: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014), 113, 119; Michael Schwartz, "Entleerte Räume. 'Ethnische Säuberungen' in Grenz- und Großregionen," in *Umkämpfte Räume. Raumbilder, Ordnungswille und Gewaltsmobilisierung*, ed. Ulrike Jureit (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016), 102.

¹⁶ Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2–4, 6–16, 32, 41, 331, 340–41; Schwartz, "Entleerte Räume," 92–95.

¹⁷ Jesse Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3–4.

¹⁸ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 65, 73–74; Broszat, *Zweihundert Jahre Deutsche Polenpolitik*, 145; Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 313–16; Dennis Showalter and William J. Astore, *Hindenburg: Icon of German Militarism* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 44.

¹⁹ Congress Poland refers to territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth organized as a kingdom in personal union with the tsar at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

long concave frontier stretched German lines of communication but presented few obstacles to invaders. “Our open eastern frontier offers no opportunity for continued defense,” complained General Friedrich von Bernhardt in 1912, “and Berlin, the center of the government and administration, lies in dangerous proximity to it.”²⁰ In wartime officers described Poland as a “wedge” that “facilitated” Russian strikes deep into Germany.²¹ The empire’s future security, military elites concluded, depended upon seizing enough territory in Congress Poland to establish a defensible border along a shorter north-south line. Military opinion thus played a central role in shaping imperial policy toward Congress Poland from the first days of the war. On 20 August 1914, Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke telegraphed Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, insisting that Congress Poland must not be occupied primarily by Austro-Hungarian troops, lest this prejudice a final settlement of the critical Polish question in Vienna’s favor.²² In November the War Ministry convinced Berlin to prohibit recruitment for the Polish Legions in German-occupied territory for the same reasons.²³ Bethmann Hollweg indeed prioritized military considerations and routinely consulted with generals to determine war aims that would effectively fortify the eastern border.²⁴

Officers, however, wrestled with how to govern Polish territory. Education and settlement policies had manifestly failed to Germanize Prussia’s Polish-speaking minority, and officers feared that merely annexing Polish territory would create a large and rebellious minority in eastern Germany.²⁵ Polish nationalists, frustrated by their political and cultural marginalization, might even collaborate with foreign powers to overthrow German rule. “The subjugation of Poland under German rule,” read one intelligence summary, threatened to “permanently maintain political ferment in the country, feed an *irredenta*, and open the door and gate to secret infiltration on the part of Russia and the Western Powers.”²⁶ Military elites therefore understood that any expansion into Congress Poland also required a new strategy for managing the political claims of the resident population.

Some in the army proposed draconian policies of cultural repression or homogenization to pacify Polish territory. Believing that nationality reliably predicted political loyalty, these officers perceived national diversity as an inherent threat to imperial stability. Polish subjects, they believed, would invariably subvert the German Empire for their own national objectives. Imperial security therefore required aggressive Germanization.²⁷ Milder proposals imagined intensifying ethnic German settlement or establishing a semipermanent

²⁰ Friedrich von Bernhardt, *Germany and the Next War*, trans. Allen H. Powles (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1912), 154.

²¹ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “Ansprache des Generalgouverneurs Hans von Beseler in Warschau, 15 Dezember 1916,” December 15, 1916, 15, PH30-II/55, BArch.

²² Helmuth von Moltke, “Telegram, Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army, Helmuth von Moltke, to Imperial Chancellor, 20 August 1914,” August 20, 1914, R22240, PA AA.

²³ Wandel, “Kriegsministerium Memorandum on the Polish Legion for Ober Ost,” n.d., 3–4, R1501/119831, BArch; Paul von Hindenburg, “Request to War Ministry for Opinion on Wandel Report, 8 December 1914,” December 8, 1914, R1501/119831, BArch.

²⁴ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, “Letter, Reichskanzler von Bethmann Hollweg to Chief of the General Staff, von Falkenhayn, 11 September 1915,” September 11, 1915, R22243, PA AA; Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, 190, 198; Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 73. The army would exercise considerable and consistent influence on imperial policy in Congress Poland until the end of the war, far more so than, for instance, the Prussian Interior Ministry, which remained internally divided over objectives, conservative in its methods, and was increasingly marginalized from mid-1915 through 1916. Mark T. Kettler, “Losing Faith in Civilization: The German Occupation of Congress Poland and the Crisis of Multinational Imperialism,” eScholarship.org (University of California, Berkeley, 2018), 153–54, 164–65, 223–32.

²⁵ Oberstleutnant Hans Zweiger, “Die polnische Frage beim Friedensschluss,” June 23, 1916, 353–55, 21577, PA AA.

²⁶ Hans Wolfgang Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen. Ergebnisse der Pressebeobachtung und Schlussfolgerungen (abgeschlossen am 30. 9.15)” (Stellvertretender Generalstab, Zeitungstelle, September 30, 1915), 105, N30/34, BArch.

²⁷ von Bernhardt, *Germany and the Next War*, 145–56.

occupation to suppress Polish agitation. More radical officers proposed to dragoon the Polish inhabitants of annexed territories eastward into Russia.²⁸

Officers involved in Polish policymaking, however, generally balked at the political costs of nationalizing territory. Concerns about Polish hostility toward the German Empire were balanced by optimism that Germany might find common cause with Polish nationalists in its war with Russia. In January 1915, Colonel General Helmuth von Moltke, demoted to chief of the Deputy General Staff after his nervous breakdown, thus encouraged Berlin to cooperate with Polish nationalists in occupied Congress Poland.²⁹ Conversely, influential commanders denounced imperial models based on repression or Germanization as counter-productive, predicting that Poles would offer dogged and sophisticated resistance to any authority they perceived as hostile to Polish culture.³⁰ Annexation and colonization, officers warned, would likely encourage Polish collaboration with Russia to overthrow German rule.³¹ Any partition of Poland, one general cautioned, could only “sharpen” Polish resistance and destabilize the German Empire.³² Though ethnic cleansing promised absolute pacification, proposals to “resettle” or expel Polish residents from annexations were rejected by military elites as “utopian” or ill-conceived.³³ One memorandum circulated by the War Ministry argued that the German public’s “renowned good nature and love of justice” prohibited driving Polish-speakers from their homes.³⁴

Military proposals for the demographic reorganization of Polish space were thus rare or muted. Even proponents of annexation often abandoned nationalizing imperialism in the first year of the war. Erich Ludendorff, chief of staff for the supreme commander of the Eastern Front, quickly discarded the idea of Germanizing proposed annexations in Congress Poland.³⁵ In a 1915 memorandum, Hans von Seeckt, chief of staff for the 11th Army, dismissed the idea of “deporting all [Polish] residents over the border and opening the entire land to new German settlement” as too impractical and politically costly to contemplate seriously.³⁶ He recommended annexing Polish territory into a new province of “South Prussia.”³⁷ Under Prussian administration, Polish nationalist organizations could be monitored. Rather than Germanizing South Prussia, Seeckt suggested cultivating Polish residents’ loyalty to the German *state*. Berlin might even extend “a certain provincial autonomy and self-governance” to “South Prussia,” assuring Poles that their national culture “will not be extirpated.”³⁸ Seeckt hoped to reconcile Polish identity with loyalty to the German Empire.

Though proposals for nationalizing Polish space circulated in the army, influential officers proved reluctant to embrace them. Few voices embraced nationalization. Responsible military elites generally balked at the political costs of ethnic cleansing or Germanization. Lacking military support, plans for a homogenized “border strip” were never adopted as official imperial policy.³⁹

²⁸ Generalleutnant von Heuduck, “Memo by Etappen-Inspekteur,” May 9, 1915, 3–5, 87, R21574, PA AA.

²⁹ Helmuth von Moltke, “Letter to Ministerialdirektor of the Imperial Office of the Interior, 25 January 1915,” January 25, 1915, 5, R1501/119790, BArch.

³⁰ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 96–97, 105.

³¹ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” January 23, 1916, 56, N30/9, BArch; Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 92, 99.

³² von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 57.

³³ von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 56.

³⁴ Ehlers, “Neue Siedlungsgebiete,” October 1915, 321–22, R21574, PA AA.

³⁵ Erich Ludendorff, “Letter to Undersecretary Arthur Zimmermann, 27 August 1915,” August 27, 1915, 201, R21655, PA AA.

³⁶ Hans von Seeckt, “Denkschrift ‘Die Teilung Polens,’” 1915, 5, N247/52, BArch.

³⁷ von Seeckt, “Denkschrift ‘Die Teilung Polens,’” 2.

³⁸ von Seeckt, “Denkschrift ‘Die Teilung Polens,’” 5.

³⁹ Geiss has claimed that a July 13, 1915, assembly of the Prussian *Staatsministerium* adopted plans to seize a “border strip” of territory and purge its Polish population. Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 91–94. No record of

Multinational Imperialism as the “Best Guarantee” of German Security

The Gorlice-Tarnów offensive (May–October 1915) brought Congress Poland under the control of the Central Powers for the duration of the war. This meaningfully altered Berlin’s strategic calculations. Germany and Austria-Hungary split the region into two occupation zones. Vienna assumed control of the smaller Government General of Lublin and Berlin established the Government General of Warsaw (GGW) over the northern and western thirds of the country. The GGW was further divided into eleven military governments, overseeing security for thirty-one civilian districts. With Petrograd reluctant to negotiate a separate peace and the Central Powers occupying much of western Russia, Berlin began to contemplate bringing the entirety of Congress Poland under German imperial control. Bethmann Hollweg reopened discussion of Germany’s objectives in an August 4, 1915, telegram to Falkenhayn, listing a variety of solutions to the Polish question.⁴⁰ From this point forward, the upper echelons of the army, including the OHL, *OberOst*, and the GGW, became central participants in discussions over the fate of Congress Poland.

The army ultimately embraced a multinational model of imperial management in Poland. Multinationalist officers did not equate nationality with political loyalty, nor did they regard Poles as irreconcilable enemies. They affirmed the compatibility of Polish identity with fidelity to a German imperial state. Multinationalists therefore proposed to strike a grand bargain with Polish nationalists, offering Poland domestic autonomy and security in exchange for accepting the German Empire’s leadership in foreign policy and wartime military command. Multinationalist officers articulated remarkably consistent plans, proposing to establish an autonomous Kingdom of Poland in permanent military and political union with the German Empire. They reasoned that an autonomous state with authority over culture, education, and domestic affairs would satisfy Polish nationalists’ most important objectives. A national army trained and equipped to Prussian standards, but commanded by the Polish monarchy, would guarantee this autonomy.⁴¹ In return, multinationalist officers proposed that the German Empire exercise “suzerainty” (*Oberhoheit*) over Poland.⁴² Specifically, they insisted that the Kaiser assume joint command over the German and Polish armies in the event of war. Polish foreign affairs would likewise be “subordinated” to a common German-Polish foreign policy, managed by the Foreign Office in Berlin.⁴³ This arrangement, proponents argued, would secure both states from Russian expansionism.

Support for multinational imperialism grew steadily within the army from July 1915 through November 1916. Indeed, critics like Seeckt complained that proposals for a “Polish-German federal state” were becoming increasingly popular and influential among his colleagues.⁴⁴ Falkenhayn seriously discussed creating a Polish state with “limited

the meeting exists. Geiss relies on the recollections of Interior Minister Friedrich Wilhelm von Loebell, who committed them to paper almost a year later, while trying to persuade the chancellery to adopt the program described. Friedrich Wilhelm von Loebell, “Letter to Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg, 1 February 1916,” February 1, 1916, 113, R1501/119670, BArch. If Loebell’s testimony is reliable, his references to encouraging Polish emigration “without appreciable coercion” do not quite sustain Geiss’s interpretation of a policy of ethnic cleansing. If any participants of the 1915 meeting considered ethnic cleansing to be the policy of the German government, this program was quickly contested, revised, and scrapped by civilian policymakers. Wilhelm von Born-Fallos, “Letter to Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg, 19 July 1915,” July 19, 1915, 4, R1501/119670, BArch; Wolfgang von Kries, “Denkschrift über den dauernden Erwerb der jetzt in deutscher Verwaltung stehenden russisch-polnischen Gebiete links der Weichsel für Deutschland-Preußen,” July 19, 1915, 6–20, R1501/119670, BArch.

⁴⁰ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, “Telegram to Erich von Falkenhayn Regarding Plans for Poland,” August 4, 1915, 13, N30/19, BArch.

⁴¹ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916,” July 23, 1916, 124, N30/9, BArch; Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 74.

⁴² Erich Ludendorff, “Letter to Undersecretary Arthur Zimmermann, 20 October 1915,” October 20, 1915, 346, R21655, PA AA.

⁴³ von Beseler, “Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916,” 124.

⁴⁴ von Seeckt, “Denkschrift ‘Die Teilung Polens,’” 3–4.

autonomy under the control of us and Austria” with the kaiser in August 1915.⁴⁵ In subsequent communications with Bethmann Hollweg, he insisted that military and political union with an autonomous Kingdom of Poland represented “without a doubt” the “best guarantee” for German security.⁴⁶

The Deputy General Staff drafted the government’s first detailed proposal for a German-Polish union. The Deputy General Staff was created in August 1914 to coordinate the army’s logistics, provide usable military intelligence, and thereby free the Greater General Staff to focus on combat operations. Forty-three-year-old Major Hans Wolfgang Herwarth von Bittenfeld, a former General Staff officer, military attaché, and an experienced intelligence officer, was selected to oversee Department IIIB, responsible for intelligence and counter-intelligence.⁴⁷ Under his leadership, Department IIIB developed a substantial role in monitoring military, political, and economic conditions in wartime Russia and organizing intelligence summaries for use by the OHL and Supreme Army Commands (*Armeeoberkommando*).⁴⁸ To inform the intensifying discussions among the OHL and Germany’s civilian leadership, on October 6, 1915, Herwarth von Bittenfeld contributed a memorandum detailing the Deputy General Staff’s assessments of the political climate in Congress Poland and its conclusions about a variety of models for achieving German objectives in the region.⁴⁹ His proposal paralleled Falkenhayn’s preferences. To reinforce Germany’s “future position of power in the East,” Herwarth von Bittenfeld recommended a comprehensive “settlement (*Ausgleich*) of German and Polish interests” institutionalized through a “stately German-Polish subunit.”⁵⁰ He envisioned an autonomous Polish state, complete with its own administration, army, and monarchy, in military and political union with the German Empire. Germany’s strategic interests, he wrote, demanded only that Berlin “assume leadership of the foreign affairs and military command” for the union.⁵¹

General von Beseler emerged as the most stalwart champion of a German-Polish union. Appointed governor-general for the GGW in August 1915, Beseler was quickly persuaded by multinationalist arguments. Herwarth von Bittenfeld’s memorandum likely influenced his thinking. Beseler read and annotated his junior colleague’s paper, and his subsequent proposals closely followed its recommendations.⁵² Beseler first endorsed the creation of a dependent Polish state on October 15, 1915.⁵³ In January 1916, he outlined his proposal for a Polish state under German suzerainty to the chancellor.⁵⁴ He repeatedly advocated this project throughout the spring and summer, echoing and building on Herwarth von Bittenfeld’s recommendations for a German-Polish union.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ Karl Georg von Treutler, “Letter to the Foreign Office, 31 August 1915,” August 31, 1915, 205, R21655, PA AA.

⁴⁶ Erich von Falkenhayn, “Letter to Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg, 8 September 1915,” September 8, 1915, 207, R21655, PA AA; Karl Georg von Treutler, “Report to the Foreign Office, 23 January 1916,” January 23, 1916, 55, R21656, PA AA; Karl Georg von Treutler, “Letter to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 12 April 1916,” April 12, 1916, 235, R21656, PA AA.

⁴⁷ Jürgen Schmidt, “Against Russia: Department IIIB of the Deputy General Staff, Berlin, and Intelligence, Counterintelligence and Newspaper Research, 1914–1918,” trans. Anja Becker, *Journal of Intelligence History* 5, no. 2 (October 2012): 73–74, 78–79.

⁴⁸ Schmidt, “Against Russia,” 79. In 1916, Herwarth von Bittenfeld would take over the military office of the foreign service.

⁴⁹ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 87.

⁵⁰ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 105–8.

⁵¹ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 106.

⁵² Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 87–108.

⁵³ Jesse Kauffman, “Sovereignty and the Search for Order in German-Occupied Poland, 1915–1918” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2008), 40–41.

⁵⁴ von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 52.

⁵⁵ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “‘Reinkonzept’ Sent to the Chancellor, 2 March 1916,” March 2, 1916, N30/12, BArch; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “Letter to the Chancellor, 22 April 1916,” April 22, 1916, 49, N30/12, BArch; von Beseler, “Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916,” 124.

Erich Ludendorff also endorsed an autonomous Kingdom of Poland under German suzerainty. In a September 1915 letter to the publicist Alexander Wyneken, Ludendorff opined that the Foreign Office should seek “union” with Congress Poland.⁵⁶ On October 20, 1915, he scribbled a letter to the Foreign Office, arguing that a “more-or-less” autonomous Polish state under German “suzerainty” (*Oberhoheit*) represented the most promising model for securing Germany’s eastern border.⁵⁷ In 1916, Ludendorff even conscripted a reluctant Seeckt to promote the creation of a German-Polish union.⁵⁸ Poland, he wrote Seeckt, must “be brought unified into military and political dependence on Germany.”⁵⁹

Some quarters of the army were harder to convince. The War Ministry showed tentative interest in constructing a “more or less dependent Kingdom of Poland” in October 1915.⁶⁰ The Prussian war minister, Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, eventually accepted multinational union as the “least terrible” solution to Germany’s strategic bind.⁶¹ Paul von Hindenburg, supreme commander of German forces in the East, remained skeptical.⁶² But with mounting enthusiasm for multinational union among military and civilian elites, Hindenburg dutifully advanced the project. After his appointment as chief of the General Staff, he pressured Austria-Hungary to renounce its claims to Congress Poland. Given Germany’s interests in the region, Hindenburg explained to his Austro-Hungarian counterpart, Berlin would insist upon Poland’s incorporation “under the military influence of Germany alone,” in permanent union with the empire.⁶³

Military support cemented an emerging official consensus in favor of a German-Polish union. By mid-February, Bethmann Hollweg had resolved to build a Polish “state which is itself militarily and economically incorporated into the German confederation, but otherwise self-governing.”⁶⁴ The Imperial Office of the Interior, Foreign Office, and army all agreed on the necessity of establishing an autonomous Kingdom of Poland under German suzerainty by the spring of 1916. Over the following months, the imperial government secured agreement from Austria-Hungary, the *Bundesrat*, and the Prussian *Staatsministerium*.⁶⁵ On November 5, 1916, the German and Austro-Hungarian kaisers proclaimed a Kingdom of Poland.

Liulevicius and others have suggested that Beseler’s attitudes toward Poland were largely shaped by the GGW’s civilian administration, in contrast to *OberOst*’s purely military administration. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 7. Though Beseler indeed consulted frequently with civilian personnel and publications, the evidence does not suggest that civilian influence alone determined German imperial plans in Poland. Beseler’s Chief of Civilian Administration, Wolfgang von Kries, had indeed stated significant reservations about Polish statehood in July 1915. See also von Kries, “Denkschrift über den dauernden Erwerb der jetzt in deutscher Verwaltung stehenden russisch-polnischen Gebiete links der Weichsel für Deutschland-Preußen,” 5.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 282.

⁵⁷ Ludendorff, “Letter to Undersecretary Arthur Zimmermann, 20 October 1915,” 346.

⁵⁸ Erich Ludendorff, “Letter to Hans von Seeckt, 27 September 1916,” September 27, 1916, 4, N247/57, BArch.

⁵⁹ Ludendorff, “Letter to Hans von Seeckt, 27 September 1916,” 4.

⁶⁰ Kriegsministerium (Schleüch), “Letter to State Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, 25 October 1915,” October 25, 1915, 320, R21574, PA AA; Kohnke, “Memorandum on War Aims in Russian Poland and the Baltic Provinces,” September 1915, 334, R21574, PA AA.

⁶¹ Prussian Staatsministerium, “Minutes of Staatsministerium Meeting Regarding the Polish Question, 8 October 1916,” October 8, 1916, 139, N30/13, BArch.

⁶² Paul von Hindenburg, “Hindenburg an Reichskanzler” in ‘Polen:Zusammenstellung aus der Akten der Reichskanzlei,’ August 23, 1916, 29, NL Jagow 3, PA AA.

⁶³ Paul von Hindenburg, “Letter to Conrad von Hötzendorff, 30 September 1916,” September 30, 1916, 53–55, N30/10, BArch.

⁶⁴ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, “Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 21 February 1916,” February 21, 1916, 28, N30/12, BArch.

⁶⁵ Gottlieb von Jagow, “Letter to Gerhard von Mutius, 26 April 1916,” April 26, 1916, 175, R1501/119782a, BArch; Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 107–9; Prussian Staatsministerium, “Staatsministerium Minutes, 8 October 1916,” 130–46.

German officers embraced this strategy because they calculated that multinational union offered substantial advantages, from a “military standpoint,” over annexation.⁶⁶ Suzerainty promised to transform Poland’s eastern border into the *de facto* frontier of the German Empire, allowing the army to fortify a straighter and more defensible border along, or even beyond, the Bug River. Union would achieve “the extension of German power” into eastern Europe and establish a “defensive wall” against Russia.⁶⁷ The “incorporation” of Poland “into our military system through an inviolable military convention” also promised to augment the German army.⁶⁸ With the kaiser as its supreme commander, the Polish army would fight “shoulder to shoulder” with German units to defend a common eastern frontier.⁶⁹ Only a German-Polish union, wrote Beseler, would enable Berlin to marshal Poland’s “very considerable military powers.”⁷⁰

The behavior of Germany’s Polish-speaking minority during the war assured officers that Polish identity could be compatible with loyalty to the German Empire. Problematic stereotypes of Polish recruits as stupid, lazy, or ill disciplined had festered in the Prussian army before 1914, undermining unit cohesion and contributing to disproportionately high suicide rates among units from Posen and Silesia. Few, however, had depicted Polish recruits as treacherous or dangerous, especially in comparison to widespread suspicions of Alsatian recruits.⁷¹ In August 1914, mobilization proceeded without significant resistance from Prussia’s 3.5 million Polish-speaking subjects. High-ranking Prussian officials reported that Polish subjects had shown a “completely patriotic and loyal attitude during mobilization.”⁷² Many officers expressed satisfaction with Polish soldiers and some even encouraged their men to sing both Polish and German songs.⁷³ In a January 1915 conversation, Hindenburg was reported to have “repeatedly stressed” that “Poles in the field did their duty in an outstanding manner.”⁷⁴ Beseler agreed. When one memorandum asserted that “many” Polish Germans had hoped for a Russian victory in 1914, Beseler dismissively scribbled “?-evidence” in the margin.⁷⁵

Multinationalist officers expected that most Polish nationalists would eventually accept an autonomous Poland as legitimate. Guarantees of “national and cultural independence” and political autonomy, Beseler argued, were essential for stabilizing Congress Poland.⁷⁶ Polish nationalists, he wrote, had three primary goals: “independence, no partition, and their own army.”⁷⁷ Beseler warned that Poles would tenaciously resist any authority that threatened Polish culture. But he reasoned that most elites would welcome autonomous statehood, and the control of educational and cultural policies it afforded, as the realization

⁶⁶ von Falkenhayn, “Letter to Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg, 8 September 1915,” 54–55.

⁶⁷ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 106; von Beseler, “Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916,” 127; Prussian Staatsministerium, “Staatsministerium Minutes, 8 October 1916,” 131; von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 54–55.

⁶⁸ von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 55–56.

⁶⁹ Prussian Staatsministerium, “Staatsministerium Minutes, 8 October 1916,” 133.

⁷⁰ von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 55.

⁷¹ Dennis Showalter, “Comrades, Enemies, Victims: The Prussian/German Army and the Ostvölker,” in *The Germans and the East*, ed. Charles W. Ingrao and Franz A. J. Szabo (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 212–15.

⁷² Alexander Watson, “Fighting for Another Fatherland: The Polish Minority in the German Army, 1914–1918,” *English Historical Review* CXXVI, no. 522 (2011): 1142–43.

⁷³ Watson, “Fighting for Another Fatherland,” 1146–47.

⁷⁴ Watson, “Fighting for Another Fatherland,” 1147.

⁷⁵ Leo Wegener, “Die Ostgrenze,” August 18, 1914, 2, N30/34, BArch.

⁷⁶ von Beseler, “Letter to the Chancellor, 22 April 1916,” 50.

⁷⁷ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “‘Konzept’ on Polish Question Sent to Chancellor,” August 2, 1916, 84, N30/12, BArch.

of their most important goals.⁷⁸ A Polish army under Warsaw's peacetime command would guarantee this autonomy, implicitly deterring German interference in Polish affairs.⁷⁹ The creation of an autonomous Polish state, Herwarth von Bittenfeld agreed, would "satisfy the mass of the reasonable Polish population."⁸⁰ *OberOst* and the OHL relied on intelligence reports from the GGW, indicating that Poles generally dismissed the "fantasies of political enthusiasts" for a fully sovereign Polish state and that Polish elites "would be happy with an autonomous Congress Poland dependent upon Germany."⁸¹ Raising no factual or interpretive objections, Colonel Max Hoffmann concluded that, on the basis of these reports, the German Empire would be advised to initiate plans to establish an autonomous Polish state.⁸²

Proponents in the army wagered that Polish elites would accept German suzerainty as necessary to secure their newfound autonomy from Russia. Since the late nineteenth century, Russian policies to suppress Polish nationalism had purged Polish bureaucrats from the imperial administration, discouraged Polish landownership via discriminatory taxes and restrictions, and begun to Russify the education system in Congress Poland.⁸³ During its "Great Retreat" in the summer of 1915, the Russian army desolated vast swaths of Congress Poland, torching fields, wrecking industrial machinery, and deporting entire communities eastward, killing scores of civilians in the process.⁸⁴ Surveying the destruction, Beseler commented that Russia had "laid the whole country to waste without sense or purpose, and driven out hundreds of thousands into the most mournful misery."⁸⁵ Despite Prussia's longstanding Germanization policies, German officers calculated that Polish elites would regard the Russian Empire as the most urgent threat to their national interests.⁸⁶ Insisting that a small landlocked Polish state could never hope to defend its own borders independently, multinationalist officers argued that military and political "dependence" on the German Empire would become "acceptable" to Poland's elites as a necessary shield of their autonomy against resurgent Russian imperialism.⁸⁷ Polish elites, Herwarth von Bittenfeld concluded, would prefer German suzerainty to the inevitable alternative: a "dominating" and "arbitrary" Russian dominion that crippled the "best powers" of the Polish nation.⁸⁸

Political conditions in Congress Poland indeed seemed favorable for multinational union. Occupation personnel often noted a striking lack of resistance and remarked on the civilian population's deference, even "deep respect."⁸⁹ Beseler concluded that, although nationalist sentiment remained *potentially* influential, the majority of the Polish population was

⁷⁸ von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 54; von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916," 123–25.

⁷⁹ von Beseler, "'Konzept' on Polish Question Sent to Chancellor," 84.

⁸⁰ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 104.

⁸¹ Max Hoffmann, "Letter, Chief of Staff by Oberbefehlshaber Ost, Colonel Hoffmann, to General Ludendorff, 3 October 1916," October 3, 1916, 355, R21660, PA AA.

⁸² Hoffmann, "Letter, Chief of Staff by Oberbefehlshaber Ost, Colonel Hoffmann, to General Ludendorff, 3 October 1916," 356.

⁸³ Theodore Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 8, 45, 71, 77, 93, 98.

⁸⁴ Daniel Graf, "The Reign of the Generals: Military Government in Western Russian, 1914–1915" (Phd diss., University of Nebraska, 1972), 141, 153.

⁸⁵ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Letter to Clara von Beseler, 13 December 1915," December 13, 1915, 44, N30/53, BArch.

⁸⁶ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 101.

⁸⁷ von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 55; Prussian Staatsministerium, "Staatsministerium Minutes, 8 October 1916," 132–35.

⁸⁸ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 96.

⁸⁹ GGW, "Minutes of the Joint Meeting of Military Governors of the GGW, 22 August 1916," August 22, 1916, 24, N30/20, BArch; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Die Entwicklung der Verwaltung des Generalgouvernements Warschau (Bericht des Generalgouverneurs Hans von Beseler)," October 23, 1915, 3, PH30-II/5, BArch; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Letter to Clara von Beseler, 29 January 1916," January 29, 1916, 8, N30/54, BArch.

“politically indifferent.”⁹⁰ The “urge to participate in political life,” Herwarth von Bittenfeld insisted, was normally restricted to a small circle of urban elites.⁹¹ Occupation personnel believed that divisions over Russian loyalism, independence, and social policy split this elite into a hodgepodge of incompatible factions. The peasantry seemed “in general Russian-friendly” and “distrustful” of independence movements. Landowners worried that independence would endanger their privileges and property. Urban populations appeared divided: middle-class merchants, artisans, intellectuals, and professionals tended to support the loyalist National Democrats (*Endecja* or *Endeks*), whereas industrial workers split their loyalties among Poland’s socialist parties. Only bitterness toward Russia’s anti-Polish policies seemed to unite these constituencies.⁹² Beseler described the political landscape as “equivocal” and “torn.”⁹³ In a 1915 report, he assured the kaiser that Poles’ “disunity” and “lack of clarity” over their national goals effectively precluded coordinated resistance against German authority.⁹⁴ So long as German imperial policy did not threaten Polish national culture, the GGW believed that Polish elites would either decline or fail to mobilize popular resistance against German authority.

These perceptions explain the army’s strategy for confronting paramilitaries like the Polish Army Organization (*Polska Organizacja Wojskowa*, or POW). The POW developed from Józef Piłsudski’s strategy of pursuing Polish independence through armed revolution; an irregular force originally meant to commit acts of sabotage and organize popular insurrection against Russian rule.⁹⁵ In the first year of the war, POW cells had been established throughout Russian Poland.⁹⁶ After the Central Powers had occupied Congress Poland, however, Piłsudski continued to recruit new members for the POW.⁹⁷ The GGW’s police and intelligence apparatus were aware of the POW and understood that its leadership aspired to secure the “unqualified independence of Poland.”⁹⁸ They concluded that Piłsudski wanted to “reserve” the POW to act as the vanguard of a popular insurgency in a future struggle for Polish independence.⁹⁹ GGW intelligence assumed that the POW had cached military-grade firearms abandoned by the Russian army during its retreat.¹⁰⁰

The existence of a paramilitary preparing for a national insurrection should have disturbed German officers. The GGW, however, barely registered the POW as a threat. Convinced of widespread political apathy and factionalism in Poland, army intelligence tended to view the POW as an isolated group with unstable supplies and dwindling recruits.¹⁰¹ Through 1916, banditry and robbery were considered more urgent problems.¹⁰² Alarmed by prostitution, the GGW pleaded for more vice police in 1915. It made no

⁹⁰ von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 53–55.

⁹¹ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 91, 99.

⁹² Generalgouvernement Warschau, “Das Parteiwesen in Kongresspolen,” n.d., 2–5, N30/17, BArch.

⁹³ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “Letter to General von Kleist, 3 October 1915,” October 3, 1915, 23, N30/53, BArch.

⁹⁴ von Beseler, von Beseler, “Die Entwicklung der Verwaltung des Generalgouvernements Warschau (Bericht des Generalgouverneurs Hans von Beseler),” 3.

⁹⁵ Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland, 1795 to the Present*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 381.

⁹⁶ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 28.

⁹⁷ Broszat, *Zweihundert Jahre Deutsche Polenpolitik*, 138.

⁹⁸ Captain Elitze, “Intelligence Report, ‘Die POW,’ 30 July 1916,” July 30, 1916, 91–92, N30/20, BArch; Leutnant Pokrzywnitzki, “Report from the Warsaw Polizeistelle on the POW, 17 April 1916,” April 17, 1916, 99, N30/20, BArch.

⁹⁹ Leutnant Pokrzywnitzki, “Report from the Warsaw Polizeistelle on the POW, 17 April 1916,” 98; Feldpolizeikommissar Schulze, “Report from the Warsaw Polizeistelle on the POW, 29 April 1916,” April 29, 1916, 96–97, N30/20, BArch; Captain Elitze, “Intelligence Report, ‘Die POW,’ 30 July 1916,” 91–92.

¹⁰⁰ Captain Elitze, “Intelligence Report, ‘Die POW,’ 30 July 1916,” 91.

¹⁰¹ Captain Elitze, “Intelligence Report, ‘Die POW,’ 30 July 1916,” 91–92; Leutnant Pokrzywnitzki, “Report from the Warsaw Polizeistelle on the POW, 17 April 1916,” 98.

¹⁰² Wolfgang von Kries, “Vierteljahresbericht bei dem General-Gouvernement Warschau, 31 March 1916,” March 31, 1916, 6, PH30-II/11, BArch.

comparable requests for reinforcements to combat paramilitary cells.¹⁰³ POW cells were quietly surveilled. Captured members received mild punishments. In one instance, authorities released all of the suspects they had captured, opting to place only the organizers of the cell *on probation*.¹⁰⁴ Deliberate and quiet countermeasures against the POW, Beseler insisted, would best serve Germany's interests.¹⁰⁵

Military intelligence suspected that POW members were more often motivated by unemployment or frustrations with wartime deprivation than by principled commitment to national independence.¹⁰⁶ They concluded that most POW members could be reconciled to German suzerainty eventually.¹⁰⁷ Officers charged with combating the POW therefore emphasized social programs over coercion. In an August 1916 conference on security policy, the GGW's eleven military governors urged Beseler's administration to combat paramilitarism through employment programs, specifically by facilitating migrant labor in Germany and creating local jobs in municipal sanitation, farming, and public works.¹⁰⁸ "To show that we do not only know how to forbid and requisition but rather also how to help," the military governors argued, represented the most effective strategy for reducing POW recruitment and cultivating Polish sympathy for the German Empire.¹⁰⁹

Overt Polish support for a German-Polish union further encouraged multinationalists. A handful of sympathetic Polish politicians communicated directly with Beseler, conceding that Poland lacked the resources to defend itself independently and suggesting that Germany and Poland shared an interest in military and political union.¹¹⁰ Władysław Studnicki introduced himself to Beseler in 1915 as an "anti-Russian" writer who favored Poland's "future cooperation" with Germany.¹¹¹ He eventually became the spokesman for the "Club of the Supporters of Polish Statehood," or the "Polish Political Club," a faction that favored the "closest union" with Germany as a safeguard for Poland's "inner development."¹¹² In 1916, the club publicly supported binding a Kingdom of Poland in a "lasting and constitutionally inscribed" union with the German Empire.¹¹³ "The German kaiser" they agreed should "be entitled to [Poland's] international representation and the supreme command of the Polish army in the event of war."¹¹⁴ Though small, the club reported success in winning over magnates, notables, and even modest popular support, which Beseler interpreted as evidence for the "day to day" growth in Polish support for German suzerainty.¹¹⁵

¹⁰³ von Beseler, von Beseler, "Die Entwicklung der Verwaltung des Generalgouvernements Warschau (Bericht des Generalgouverneurs Hans von Beseler)," 3.

¹⁰⁴ Feldpolizeikommissar Schulze, "Report from the Warsaw Polizeistelle on the POW, 29 April 1916," 96–97.

¹⁰⁵ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Report to Falkenhayn and Bethmann Hollweg, 2 August 1916," August 2, 1916, 13, N30/10, BArch.

¹⁰⁶ GGW, "Minutes of the Joint Meeting of Military Governors of the GGW, 22 August 1916," 24.

¹⁰⁷ von Pokrzywnitzki, "Warsaw Police Station Report on Political Activity in Warsaw in July 1916," August 7, 1916, 135, N30/20, BArch.

¹⁰⁸ GGW, "Minutes of the Joint Meeting of Military Governors of the GGW, 22 August 1916," 25–26.

¹⁰⁹ GGW, "Minutes of the Joint Meeting of Military Governors of the GGW, 22 August 1916," 25–27.

¹¹⁰ Felix von Beczkowicz, "Die polnische Frage vom Gesichtspunkte der deutschen Interessen im Zusammenhang mit der russischen Gefahr," July 28, 1916, 109–14, N30/35, BArch.

¹¹¹ Władysław Studnicki, "Letter of Introduction to Governor General von Beseler, 10 August 1915," August 10, 1915, 23–24, N30/19, BArch.

¹¹² von der Ropp, "Letter to Governor General von Beseler, 9 October 1916," October 9, 1916, 9, N30/21, BArch.

¹¹³ Władysław Studnicki, "Open Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler and the German Imperial Government from Polish Representatives, 5 August 1916," August 5, 1916, 120–21, N30/20, BArch.

¹¹⁴ Studnicki, Open Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler and the German Imperial Government from Polish Representatives, 5 August 1916," 121.

¹¹⁵ GGW, "Report on Public Assembly of the 'Klub Der Anhänger Des Polnischen Staatswesens,'" September 1916, 5, N30/13, BArch; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Report to the Chancellor, 5 September 1916," September 5, 1916, 6, N30/13, BArch; von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916," 123–25.

German authorities never deceived themselves that the majority of Poles preferred German suzerainty.¹¹⁶ Beseler acknowledged that Polish distrust of Germany ran deep and that the two most influential political movements in Congress Poland, the *Endecja* and Piłsudski's Polish Socialist Party (PPS), favored either Russian loyalism or independence.¹¹⁷ His subordinates never believed that the Polish Political Club represented a substantial segment of popular opinion.¹¹⁸ But Germans drew confidence from the apparent disunity, apathy, and tenuous commitment of Polish nationalists, concluding that suzerainty would not inspire significant Polish resistance, so long as Berlin respected Poland's domestic autonomy.¹¹⁹

Indeed, many officers were convinced that Germany could reshape Polish national sentiment by enlisting the support of Polish elites. They believed that social, political, and intellectual elites wielded disproportionate influence over national political discourses and that this influence could be channeled by German authorities to gradually, but effectively, shape attitudes and reinforce the legitimacy of German suzerainty.¹²⁰ In particular, German officers recommended seeking the support of the Polish nobility, distrustful of Russia after its crackdown and expropriation of Polish property following the rebellion of 1863.¹²¹ They focused on winning the support of the Roman Catholic Church, seeing it as a lever for securing the German-Polish union's legitimacy among the peasantry.¹²² Popular anger toward Russia's past harassment of the church, Herwarth von Bittenfeld noted, could prove "stronger than the political or national" sentiments in Poland.¹²³ Finally, German observers hoped that the promise of self-governance and security would lure Poland's middle class from the *Endecja*.¹²⁴ Herwarth von Bittenfeld claimed that "discerning men of all classes of society" who treasured prosperity or "spiritual culture" often conceded "that the Germans want to bring them salvation" from Russia's stultifying rule.¹²⁵ Beseler agreed that bitter grievances against Petrograd were already convincing the Polish intelligentsia of the virtues of union with the German Empire.¹²⁶ To reinforce Germany's credibility as a guardian of Polish culture and national autonomy, both he and Beseler recommended the immediate abolition of Prussia's Germanization policies.¹²⁷ By positioning Germany as the defender of property, the shield of Roman Catholicism, and the guardian of national autonomy, occupation officials hoped to win the support of the Polish nobility, the Roman Catholic clergy, and moderate nationalist intellectuals. These groups would then persuade the masses to accept German leadership.

Multinationalist officers generally opposed the annexation and Germanization of territory, viewing it as redundant and offensive to Polish nationalists. From the autumn of 1915 through November 1916, many recommended limiting annexations to thinly populated

¹¹⁶ OHL Political Section, "Report: Intelligence Officer of the Obersten Heeresleitung, Political Section, Berlin, 18 April 1916," April 18, 1916, 256, R21576, PA AA.

¹¹⁷ von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 52–55.

¹¹⁸ von Pokrzywnitzki, "Warsaw Police Station Report on Political Activity in Warsaw in July 1916," 134.

¹¹⁹ von Beseler, "Letter to Clara von Beseler, 29 January 1916," 8.

¹²⁰ von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 52.

¹²¹ Generalgouvernement Warschau, "Das Parteiwesen in Kongresspolen," 2; von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 53.

¹²² Generalgouvernement Warschau, "Das Parteiwesen in Kongresspolen," 3; von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916," 122.

¹²³ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 92, 101.

¹²⁴ Generalgouvernement Warschau, "Das Parteiwesen in Kongresspolen," 3.

¹²⁵ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 96.

¹²⁶ von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 53; von Beseler, "'Konzept' on Polish Question Sent to Chancellor," 83.

¹²⁷ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 96; von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 52, 56.

territories in the northeast of Congress Poland, primarily intended to support a parallel program of German expansion along the Russian Baltic coast. Beseler recommended claiming up to the “Narew-Bohr Line,” including Suwałki and part of the Łomża province.¹²⁸ Hindenburg and Ludendorff accepted these limitations.¹²⁹ Ludendorff appears to have abandoned plans for annexations in western Congress Poland by August 1915.¹³⁰ In talks with Austria-Hungary over the Polish question, German negotiators claimed only the northern governorate of Suwałki.¹³¹ When seeking the *Bundesrat*’s approval for a German-Polish union in August 1916, Berlin similarly proposed to annex only Suwałki and explained that it would not attempt to Germanize this territory through population exchanges or forcible expulsions.¹³²

Disagreement persisted over Poland’s eastern borders. Optimists like Herwarth von Bittenfeld favored annexing White Ruthenia to Poland and even proposed incorporating Russia’s Baltic governorates in federal union with Warsaw.¹³³ Combining a newly formed “Baltic state with the Polish [state]” as a “subunit in federation with Germany” would fortify Germany’s “position of power in the East.”¹³⁴ Beseler similarly supported elevating the “military capacity of Poland” through expansion into White Ruthenia.¹³⁵ A large and “capable” Polish dependency, he predicted, would compound Germany’s power in eastern Europe.¹³⁶ Hindenburg and Ludendorff were reluctant to enlarge Poland. They proposed Germany annex the governorates of Courland, Kovno, and Grodno (lands to the east of Congress Poland), reasoning that absolutely reliable units must guard Germany’s first line of defense against Russia.¹³⁷ The optimists initially won this debate and Berlin began preparing to expand Poland eastward. During negotiations with Vienna, German representatives declared their intention to extend Poland’s borders as far to the east as possible, up to and including the governorate of Vilna.¹³⁸ Similar plans were presented to the Prussian *Staatsministerium* in October 1916. The new Polish state, Beseler and Bethmann Hollweg explained, would encompass Congress Poland and parts of Lithuania and White Ruthenia.¹³⁹

This was the optimistic program of the German-Polish union that Berlin pursued when the Kingdom of Poland was proclaimed on November 5, 1916. An autonomous Kingdom of Poland, equipped with its own national army, would accept permanent military and political union with the German Empire to secure their collective defense. Germany would arrogate Suwałki in the north of Congress Poland but planned to extend the borders of the new Polish state deep into White Ruthenia and Lithuania. This multinational imperial model had been developed with the support of the most influential ranks of the army, ranging from the OHL to the military governors and staff officers of Beseler’s GGW. Military elites acted to build a new multinational empire on the assumption that ethnic diversity did not inherently

¹²⁸ von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 56; von Beseler, “Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916,” 124.

¹²⁹ von Hindenburg, “Hindenburg an Reichskanzler,” 29.

¹³⁰ Ludendorff, “Letter to Undersecretary Arthur Zimmermann, 27 August 1915,” 201.

¹³¹ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, “Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 13 August 1916,” August 13, 1916, 119, N30/12, BArch.

¹³² Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 107–9.

¹³³ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 106, 113.

¹³⁴ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, “Polen,” 107.

¹³⁵ von Beseler, “Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916,” 54–55.

¹³⁶ von Beseler, “Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916,” 123–24.

¹³⁷ Werner Conze, “Nationalstaat oder Mitteleuropa. Die Deutschen des Reiches und die Nationalitätenfragen Ostmitteleuropas im ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Deutschland und Europa. Historische Studien zur Völker- und Staatenordnung des Abendlandes* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1951), 219; Paul von Hindenburg, “Telegram to Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg,” October 13, 1916, 75, N30/10, BArch.

¹³⁸ von Bethmann Hollweg, “Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 13 August 1916,” 119.

¹³⁹ Prussian *Staatsministerium*, “Staatsministerium Minutes, 8 October 1916,” 131.

threaten imperial security and that an autonomous Polish state could be trusted to defend a German-Polish union.

Crisis and the Erosion of Multinational Imperialism

These assumptions proved fragile. Soon after the declaration of Polish statehood, three major crises in Congress Poland tested German officers' faith in multinational imperialism: the recruitment crisis of November 1916, the Oath crisis of July 1917, and the regency crisis of autumn 1917. These crises subverted expectations that sympathetic elites could redirect popular sentiment toward German ends. They amplified fears that Poles would never regard a German-Polish union as legitimate and that a Polish state would eventually betray the German Empire. Though Berlin pursued multinational union until the final weeks of the war, many in the army came to doubt Poland's future fidelity to the German Empire. Accordingly, they began to recommend modifying imperial plans to safeguard Germany, either by annexing larger territories along the German border, isolating and disabling the Kingdom of Poland, or Germanizing conquered Polish lands.

Officers embraced plans for a German-Polish union as a permanent imperial edifice in eastern Europe. They did not, as some have suggested, reluctantly tolerate Polish statehood as an expedient to recruit Polish soldiers into the war effort. Such a narrow objective could have been more easily achieved by supporting Polish independence or incorporating Congress Poland into the Austro-Hungarian Empire, options that the army broadly rejected as portending long-term strategic disaster.¹⁴⁰ Herwarth von Bittenfeld's long 1915 memorandum had neglected to mention raising Polish units for use in the present war.¹⁴¹ Nor had Ludendorff's original endorsements in 1915 mentioned wartime Polish recruitment.¹⁴² Falkenhayn's January 1916 endorsement of a German-Polish union had likewise emphasized only its permanent strategic advantages.¹⁴³ Beseler indeed vocally opposed recruitment and deployment of a Polish army during the ongoing conflict.¹⁴⁴

However, heavy frontline losses in 1916 convinced military leaders to pursue wartime Polish recruitment. Beginning in July, Falkenhayn and Ludendorff lobbied Berlin to reinforce Germany's depleted lines with Polish units, overruling Beseler's warnings that this would tar the Polish kingdom as a cynical ploy for cannon-fodder.¹⁴⁵ Germany's November 9 call for recruits to the new Polish army met with disaster, initially yielding only 370 volunteers.¹⁴⁶ Myriad factors explain the shortfall. Many Poles were certainly reluctant to take up arms against their family and friends already serving in the Russian army, especially for a state that still had no institutions of national self-government. Fence-sitting was logical; anyone who enlisted could be accused of treason if Russia regained possession of Poland.¹⁴⁷ Nationalist groups also organized poster campaigns and demonstrations against enlistment, some chanting "We don't want to be German soldiers."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁰ von Treutler, "Report to the Foreign Office, 23 January 1916," 54; Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 105–6; von Beseler, "Immediatbericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Januar 1916," 52; von Seeckt, "Denkschrift 'Die Teilung Polens,'" 2–4.

¹⁴¹ Herwarth von Bittenfeld, "Polen," 105–06.

¹⁴² Ludendorff, "Letter to Undersecretary Arthur Zimmermann, 20 October 1915," 346.

¹⁴³ von Treutler, "Report to the Foreign Office, 23 January 1916," 55.

¹⁴⁴ von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 23 Juli 1916," 125.

¹⁴⁵ Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 35; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Letter to Erich von Falkenhayn, 23 August 1916," August 23, 1916, 30, N30/10, BArch; Erich von Falkenhayn, "Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, August 1916," August 1916, 24, N30/10, BArch.

¹⁴⁶ Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 245.

¹⁴⁷ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 82.

¹⁴⁸ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 82–83.

Only a few German officers grasped this nuance. More than simply disappointed that Polish divisions would not reinforce Germany's overstretched lines, many interpreted the recruitment shortfall as a repudiation and evidence that Polish nationalism was more popular, rigid, hostile, and dangerous than anticipated. Far from politically ambivalent, critics in the army began to suspect that the Polish population broadly rejected German suzerainty and that Polish nationalists would never renounce their territorial claims in eastern Prussia.¹⁴⁹ In policy meetings, Hindenburg and Ludendorff began to question the plausibility of bargaining with Polish nationalism and the advisability of a German-Polish union.¹⁵⁰ Even Beseler conceded that he had "completely misunderstood the national pride of the Poles."¹⁵¹ For the first time, his reports noted scattered "violent resistance" in occupied Poland.¹⁵² Beseler reimagined the POW as a "wicked" and existential threat to German authority. It suddenly appeared to enjoy dangerous support among "youth associations, students, and schools" and the "nationally conscious proletariat." Indeed, Beseler feared that attempting to abolish the POW would constitute a "signal for a revolt, and we are not strong enough to repress one without further [reinforcements]."¹⁵³ An "uncomfortable, even dangerous" situation could develop if the political atmosphere did not improve.¹⁵⁴

The crisis also eroded confidence in Berlin's ability to mold Polish sentiment through elite intermediaries. On November 21, the military government of Łomża noted a recruitment shortfall but assumed that local Catholic clergy could be persuaded to encourage enlistment.¹⁵⁵ In December, however, the *Kreischef* of Łomża sent a panicked report to Warsaw. Elite pressure had failed to bolster recruitment. Moreover, the local peasantry now accused landowners and clergy of betraying Poland for their own gain.¹⁵⁶ The *Kreischef* feared that unrest might soon tip into violence.¹⁵⁷ Germany, critics echoed, had "overestimated" the influence of Poland's Russophobic intelligentsia.¹⁵⁸ The Russian threat had not persuaded alternative political, social, and intellectual elites to embrace German leadership as readily as Beseler had expected.¹⁵⁹ Those elites sympathetic to multinational union, Beseler lamented, had exaggerated their influence or misrepresented the political climate in Poland.¹⁶⁰ Influential elites, like Piłsudski, discouraged their followers from collaborating with the German Empire.¹⁶¹

Because German military and civilian elites had imagined deriving long-term strategic advantages from an autonomous Polish state, the recruitment crisis did not derail plans

¹⁴⁹ Strantz, "Die Deutsche Politik gegenüber den Polen. Gutachten aus Lodz," November 29, 1916, 135–36, R1501/119795, BArch; Deputy General Command of the V. Army Corps, "Report on the Polish-Speaking Population of Prussia, Relayed to the Chancellery by the War Ministry 20 February 1917," February 2, 1917, 135, R1501/119790, BArch.

¹⁵⁰ Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 38; Reichskanzlei, "Sitzung im Reichskanzler-Palais, Dienstag den 13. Febr. 17, 5 Uhr Nachmittag," February 13, 1917, 91–93, N30/14, BArch.

¹⁵¹ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 April 1917," April 13, 1917, 138–39, N30/9, BArch.)

¹⁵² Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 20 Dezember 1916," December 20, 1916, 19, R1501/119710, BArch.

¹⁵³ von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 20 Dezember 1916," 20–22.

¹⁵⁴ von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 20 Dezember 1916," 22.

¹⁵⁵ Military Government of Łomża, "Report to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 21 November 1916," November 21, 1916, 109–11, N30/21, BArch.

¹⁵⁶ Kreischef of Łomża, "Report to the Civil Administration of the GGW, December 1916," December 1916, 93, R1501/119718, BArch.

¹⁵⁷ Kreischef of Łomża, "Report to the Civil Administration of the GGW, December 1916," 93.

¹⁵⁸ Strantz, "Die Deutsche Politik Gegenüber Den Polen," 136.

¹⁵⁹ von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau, 20 Dezember 1916," 16–17.

¹⁶⁰ von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 April 1917," 138.

¹⁶¹ von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau, 20 Dezember 1916," 20–22.

for a German-Polish union. Beseler still saw no better strategy for securing Berlin's interests than establishing a "powerful, capable, and defensible" Kingdom of Poland under German suzerainty.¹⁶² On November 12, he announced the creation of a Provisional Council of State (*Tymczasowa Rada Stanu*, or TRS), tasked with organizing Poland's government.¹⁶³ A training command for new Polish officers soon followed.¹⁶⁴ Fleshing-out institutions of Polish statehood, Beseler hoped, would build legitimacy for the state and produce a "volte-face" in public opinion.¹⁶⁵ Beseler also addressed Polish notables in Warsaw in December 1916, requesting their cooperation in convincing the apathetic and "denationalized" peasantry of the virtues of "Anschluß" with Germany.¹⁶⁶ Bethmann Hollweg trusted Beseler's assessment and reassured him that the chancellery still "emphatically" supported Germany's "military and political leadership" over Poland.¹⁶⁷ A chancellery conference in February 1917 confirmed that a German-Polish union remained the centerpiece of Berlin's imperial agenda in eastern Europe.¹⁶⁸ The OHL confirmed its willingness to "adhere" to this program.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, in May Ludendorff professed renewed faith in cultivating Polish imperial loyalty by building credible institutions of Polish statehood.¹⁷⁰

But multinationalists also became more cautious and readier to employ coercion. Beseler warned that the Polish intransigence might doom multinational union.¹⁷¹

It would not be surprising if, instead of the more fortified border we desire and are pursuing, we were to receive one even less secure than existed in 1914. Because beyond this border, instead of a liberated and satisfied nation, as we hoped for, a fanatical enemy [would] stand between us and Russia.¹⁷²

He now advised against fielding a Polish army during the present war, citing the danger of equipping a large and unpredictable formation behind German lines.¹⁷³ Indeed, he requested several battalions to reinforce the occupation. Beseler further proposed the unification of the Austro-Hungarian and German occupation zones to consolidate "the most complete governing authority," even "dictatorial power," of a single German "regent," "Statthalter," or "governor-general" over Poland until the end of the war.¹⁷⁴ Ludendorff similarly urged Berlin to demonstrate its authority. "They must now finally be shown that we command, and not they."¹⁷⁵

¹⁶² Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Report to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 5 January 1917," January 5, 1917, 15, N30/14, BArch; von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau, 20 Dezember 1916," 22–23.

¹⁶³ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, "Telegram to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 17 November 1916," November 17, 1916, 170, N30/13, BArch.

¹⁶⁴ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 91.

¹⁶⁵ von Beseler, "Report to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 5 January 1917," 9–10.

¹⁶⁶ von Beseler, "Ansprache des Generalgouverneurs Hans von Beseler in Warschau, 15 Dezember 1916," 2–5, 10–16.

¹⁶⁷ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, "Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 17 January 1917," January 17, 1917, 23, N30/14, BArch.

¹⁶⁸ Reichskanzlei, "Sitzung im Reichskanzler-Palais, Dienstag den 13. Febr. 17, 5 Uhr Nachmittag," 86–91.

¹⁶⁹ Reichskanzlei, "Sitzung im Reichskanzler-Palais, Dienstag den 13. Febr. 17, 5 Uhr Nachmittag," 91.

¹⁷⁰ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, "Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 9 May 1917," May 9, 1917, 163, N30/14, BArch.

¹⁷¹ von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau, 20 Dezember 1916," 21.

¹⁷² Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Letter to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 24 January 1917," January 24, 1917, 37, N30/14, BArch.

¹⁷³ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Note to Paul von Hindenburg, 6 June 1917," June 6, 1917, 44, N30/11, BArch; von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 April 1917," 140.

¹⁷⁴ von Beseler, "Bericht des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau, 20 Dezember 1916," 17–18, 22; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Letter to Ober Ost Explaining the Political Situation in Poland, 24 November 1916," November 24, 1916, 126, N30/10, BArch.

¹⁷⁵ Reichskanzlei, "Sitzung im Reichskanzler-Palais, Dienstag den 13. Febr. 17, 5 Uhr Nachmittag," 93.

The Oath crisis of July 1917 represented a direct challenge to multinational imperialism. German officers began training the first units of the Polish army in January 1917.¹⁷⁶ The new army's service oath was critically important. The GGW required a Polish officer corps that was both accustomed to cooperation with the German army and convinced of the virtues of union with Germany.¹⁷⁷ If Polish troops would not swear a pro-imperial oath, Beseler faced the unsavory choice of training an army of unpredictable loyalty or scrapping the formation and raising doubts about Germany's commitment to Polish autonomy.¹⁷⁸ Signs of unrest were already showing in early 1917. Austria-Hungary's Polish Legions had been integrated into the national army to flesh out its ranks. Beseler had reluctantly admitted Piłsudski and his followers in the Legions into the army, hoping that his participation would validate the formation.¹⁷⁹ Throughout the spring, small pro-independence cells began to organize around Piłsudski's followers in Polish training camps.¹⁸⁰

Tension boiled over in July when Beseler asked the TRS to approve an oath that pledged the Polish army's loyalty to both Warsaw and the German and Austro-Hungarian kaisers. Piłsudski and the left wing of the TRS resigned in protest.¹⁸¹ The rump TRS approved the controversial text. But on July 9, roughly two-thirds of Polish officers refused to swear the oath.¹⁸² Mutineers reportedly shouted, "Shame on the hirelings, who have sold their honor, against the will of the people ... Long live independent Poland!"¹⁸³ The mutiny triggered a longer political crisis leading to the mass resignation of the TRS in August.¹⁸⁴

After this crisis, officers worried that even carefully trained Polish soldiers could not be relied upon to serve German imperial interests. Lieutenant Colonel Nethe, Beseler's chief of staff, feared the outbreak of armed rebellion in the days after the mutiny. "The danger could not be dismissed out of hand that these well-trained soldiers ... could instigate unrest and threaten the [supply] lines of the eastern army leading through Poland."¹⁸⁵ Beseler denounced the "politically compromised troops" inspired by "revolutionary" strands of Polish nationalism, who had conspired to derail "any army formation according to the German model."¹⁸⁶ Departing from his previous assessments, he warned that hostility toward the German Empire constituted a dominant current in Polish nationalist discourse.¹⁸⁷ Ludendorff continued to support multinational union, hoping that Polish nationalism could still be gradually channeled to serve German imperial interests.¹⁸⁸ But he simultaneously emphasized his growing doubts about Poland's loyalty and his grave concerns about Polish irredentist claims in Prussia.¹⁸⁹

Military personnel thus advocated more coercive measures to assert German authority in the GGW. Nethe supported the temporary internment of mutineers and oversaw a crack-down on the POW and nationalist organizations in the wake of the mutiny, insisting on

¹⁷⁶ von Beseler, "Letter to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 24 January 1917," 38.

¹⁷⁷ von Beseler, "Letter to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 24 January 1917," 38.

¹⁷⁸ von Beseler, "Letter to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 24 January 1917," 38.

¹⁷⁹ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 91.

¹⁸⁰ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 71, 99.

¹⁸¹ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 102.

¹⁸² Broszat, *Zweihundert Jahre Deutsche Polenpolitik*, 146; Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 103.

¹⁸³ Press Department of the GGW, "Report on Underground Press Activity Following the July Mutiny," July 17, 1917, 98, R1501/119831, BArch.

¹⁸⁴ Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, 103.

¹⁸⁵ Nethe, "Letter to Chancellor Hertling, 29 December 1917," December 29, 1917, 214, R1501/119831, BArch.

¹⁸⁶ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 October 1917," October 13, 1917, 182, N30/9, BArch.

¹⁸⁷ von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 October 1917," 183.

¹⁸⁸ Erich Ludendorff, "Memorandum Regarding the Continued Formation of the Polish Army, 16 September 1917," September 16, 1917, 165, R1501/119831, BArch.

¹⁸⁹ Jan Vermeiren, *The First World War and German National Identity: The Dual Alliance at War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 253.

“sharp measures” to suppress Polish “insubordination.”¹⁹⁰ Piłsudski and leaders of the POW were imprisoned.¹⁹¹ Ludendorff called for demonstrative force and more stringent censorship to deter Polish resistance.¹⁹² “The Pole,” he wrote, “must be controlled, day and night, or else he attacks us.”¹⁹³

The Oath crisis finally convinced officers to abandon efforts to build a large Polish army during the war. After July, Beseler insisted on training only a small core of dependable Polish officers.¹⁹⁴ In light of “incidents” related to the “swearing in” of Polish troops, he concluded that Germany could no longer reasonably trust the Polish state with any “large army” until it had secured victory.¹⁹⁵ “In view of the unreliable attitude of the Poles and the lack of clarity regarding further political development in the country,” Ludendorff likewise argued that “absolute security” demanded training only the “minimum” force necessary “to demonstrate to the Poles our willingness to assist them, in time, towards a useful army.”¹⁹⁶ The GGW accordingly narrowed its efforts to training the “smallest possible” army, comprising one or two infantry regiments with no technical services or heavy weapons.¹⁹⁷

The regency crisis cemented the officer corps’ disillusionment with multinationalism. In late July, the GGW announced the organization of a three-person Regency Council to serve as an interim executive for Poland. Beseler nominated the aristocratic clerical trio of Archbishop Aleksander Kakowski, Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski, and Józef Ostrowski to the Regency Council. Occupation officials were initially optimistic, believing that Kakowski in particular supported Poland’s “unbreakable alliance with the Central Powers.”¹⁹⁸ After the council selected a regent for Poland, Beseler planned to condition his “accession to the throne” on Warsaw’s formal acceptance of military and political union with the German Empire.¹⁹⁹

German officials were soon disappointed. Before confirming the councilors, Beseler asked each to promise that they would elect the pro-German Józef Mikułowski-Pomorski as minister-president and that they would accept German suzerainty over the Kingdom of Poland. Lubomirski initially agreed to both conditions on September 19.²⁰⁰ On September 22, however, Lubomirski and his colleagues rejected Beseler’s conditions, arguing that the Regency Council should not “anticipate the results of the international peace negotiations in the Polish question.”²⁰¹ They further insisted that Adam Tarnowski, an Austro-Hungarian civil servant, represented the only viable candidate for the minister-presidency.²⁰² This triggered protracted negotiations between the Regency Council and Beseler, who feared that Tarnowski would maneuver Poland into Vienna’s orbit.²⁰³ The

¹⁹⁰ Nethe, “Bericht an die Nachrichtenabteilung des Auswärtigen Amts,” August 4, 1917, 140, R1501/119831, BArch.

¹⁹¹ Nethe, “Letter to the Imperial Chancellor, 18 August 1917,” August 18, 1917, 139, R1501/119831, BArch.

¹⁹² Erich Ludendorff, “Report to Chancellor Michaelis, 21 August 1917,” August 21, 1917, 194, R1501/119791, BArch.

¹⁹³ Quoted in Vermeiren, *The First World War and German National Identity*, 254.

¹⁹⁴ von Beseler, “Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 October 1917,” 183.

¹⁹⁵ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, “Letter to the Chancellery, 5 August 1917,” August 5, 1917, 152, N30/23, BArch.

¹⁹⁶ Ludendorff, “Memorandum Regarding the Continued Formation of the Polish Army, 16 September 1917,” 165.

¹⁹⁷ Ludendorff, “Memorandum Regarding the Continued Formation of the Polish Army, 16 September 1917,” 166.

¹⁹⁸ Ernst von Glasenapp, “Report on the Assembly of the KPP, 19 September 1917,” September 19, 1917, 247, R1501/119791, BArch.

¹⁹⁹ von Beseler, “Letter to the Chancellery, 5 August 1917,” 153.

²⁰⁰ Hugo v.u.z. Lerchenfeld-Köfering, “Report on the Formation of the Regency Council, 22 September 1917,” September 22, 1917, 256, R1501/119712, BArch.

²⁰¹ v.u.z. Lerchenfeld-Köfering, “Report on the Formation of the Regency Council, 22 September 1917,” 259.

²⁰² v.u.z. Lerchenfeld-Köfering, “Report on the Formation of the Regency Council, 22 September 1917,” 260.

²⁰³ Wolfgang von Kries, “Minutes of Telephone Call with Theodor Lewald, 19 September 1917,” September 19, 1917, 210, R1501/119712, BArch.

impasse lasted until November 1917, when a compromise candidate for the minister-presidency was selected.

The Regency Council debacle underscored German officers' already severe doubts about the plausibility of a German-Polish union. Germany's preferred allies, aristocratic and clerical elites, had rebuffed efforts to formalize German suzerainty, attempted to install an Austrophile at the helm of the Polish state, and sought to internationalize the Polish question. Beseler's report to the kaiser in October 1917 wallowed in pessimism. He now believed that the majority of Poles desired a completely sovereign Polish state. Indeed, he feared that most Poles dreamed of claiming vast stretches of Prussia for Poland.²⁰⁴ Moderate nationalists, those who understood the "limitations of Polish independence" and sought Poland's "own security and a fruitful economic development" in cooperation with Germany, now seemed uninfluential.²⁰⁵ Germany, Nethe reported to Berlin, could never expect to build a friendly relationship with Polish nationalists because "the Poles will hate us, so long as we hold Silesia, Posen, and West Prussia."²⁰⁶

Through this period, the army's commitment to plans for a German-Polish union remained remarkably durable. Until the end of the war, Beseler insisted that Polish nationalism could be managed and that a German-Polish union represented the most effective structure for realizing German interests.²⁰⁷ In a November 1917 conference on Polish policy in Berlin, Beseler insisted that the Regency Council would eventually accept German suzerainty as legitimate and persuade the Polish population to do the same. Fear of the Russian Empire, he argued, already generated growing support for "*Anschluß* to Germany" among Polish elites.²⁰⁸ Ludendorff joined Beseler in supporting the continued construction of a German-Polish union. Although he now considered the Kingdom of Poland unreliable, potentially even dangerous, Ludendorff hoped that deliberate state-building might yet achieve a stable union.²⁰⁹ Suzerainty, he argued, would at least enable Germany to restrict foreign influence in Congress Poland and suppress nationalist threats before they matured.²¹⁰

Hindenburg proved more willing to abandon plans for multinational union. Germany's "enmity with Poland," he explained at a policy conference in November 1917, "has always existed in history" and would persist in the future.²¹¹ He indeed attempted to wash his hands of multinational policy, mendaciously denying the "legend, widespread in Berlin, that the Supreme Army Command had created the Kingdom of Poland." He and Ludendorff, Hindenburg claimed, had been misled by fantasies of Polish divisions. He recommended abandoning the German-Polish union, citing the recent political crises in Warsaw.²¹² Ludendorff apparently persuaded him to reconsider. The following day Hindenburg reluctantly endorsed multinational union, echoing Ludendorff's arguments that foreign influence

²⁰⁴ von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 October 1917," 178–79.

²⁰⁵ von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 October 1917," 179.

²⁰⁶ Reichskanzlei, "Protokoll. Konferenz im Reichsamt des Innern vom 22 Januar 1918 über die Frage der Besiedlung eines Grenzstreifens von Polen," January 22, 1918, 115–18, R43/5124, BArch.

²⁰⁷ Chancellery, "Minutes of Conference in Bellevue Palace, 13 March 1918," March 13, 1918, 119, R43/2477, BArch; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Confidential Report to Chancellor Hertling, 25 March 1918," March 25, 1918, 6–7, N30/16, BArch.

²⁰⁸ Chancellery, "Minutes of the Foreign Office Conference, 3 November 1917," November 3, 1917, 35–36, N30/15, BArch.

²⁰⁹ Chancellery, "Minutes of the Foreign Office Conference, 3 November 1917," 38.

²¹⁰ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Minutes of the Crown Council Meeting in Bellevue Palace, 5 November 1917," November 5, 1917, 81–82, N30/24, BArch; Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Further Minutes of the Crown Council Meeting in Bellevue Palace, 5 November 1917," November 5, 1917, 84–85, N30/24, BArch.

²¹¹ Schulze, "Minutes of Conference at the Foreign Office, 4 November 1917," November 4, 1917, 51, R43/2477, BArch.

²¹² Chancellery, "Minutes of the Foreign Office Conference, 3 November 1917," 37.

over Congress Poland represented a greater threat to German security than an unreliable Polish state.²¹³

Though Berlin continued its efforts to build a German-Polish union, many officers recommended fortifying the German Empire against the possibility of Polish betrayal. Demands for annexations in Poland grew more expansive and insistent. Officers augmented existing demands for annexation in the north-east of Congress Poland with new claims along Poland's western border. Hindenburg and Ludendorff began to press for larger annexations soon after the recruitment crisis. On December 23, 1916, they insisted that Germany's border must extend to the Warta-Bzura-Vistula-Narew-Bohr line, incorporating swaths of territory in western Congress Poland.²¹⁴ They had moderated this program by April, but still urged Berlin to annex territory near Thorn, Kalisz, and Upper Silesia.²¹⁵ Civilian leaders offered a compromise, agreeing to annex the prescribed territories if Poland refused to accept German suzerainty. If Germany succeeded "in securing our predominance in Poland," the OHL would "partially desist in its hitherto demanded border-line."²¹⁶

Following the Oath crisis, Ludendorff and Hindenburg could no longer accept this conditionality. The OHL thereafter argued that Poland's questionable loyalty mandated sweeping annexations, regardless of the constitutional relationship between Germany and Poland.²¹⁷ "The development of Poland has shown," Ludendorff asserted, that "we must never expect that" an "autonomous Kingdom of Poland" would guarantee Germany's critical security interests.²¹⁸ The vital industries of Upper Silesia required an expanded hinterland defended by reliable German units.²¹⁹ The OHL would insist upon massive annexations in both the north and west of Poland through July 1918.²²⁰ Beseler opposed this "fourth partition" as certain to undermine the legitimacy of a German-Polish union.²²¹ But he found himself increasingly isolated. After the Oath crisis, the Prussian War Ministry also demanded a large border strip as essential for the "sufficient military security of the Upper Silesian industrial region."²²²

Military policymakers gradually abandoned plans to expand the Kingdom of Poland into Lithuania or White Ruthenia, fearing that this would only make Warsaw a more powerful adversary in the future. Indeed, leaders in the army increasingly urged Berlin to annex a second "border strip" of territory to the east of Congress Poland, placing the vital north-south defensive line with Russia directly under German control and isolating the Kingdom of Poland from sources of foreign support. In December 1916, Hindenburg renewed calls to annex territory around Brest.²²³ "The [recent] experiences with Poland," Hindenburg wrote Bethmann Hollweg, "make it indispensable that Germany contains Poland and not the other way around, and that the border between Poland and Russia be as narrow as possible."²²⁴ In April, he petitioned Berlin to deny the governorates of Vilna, Kovno, and

²¹³ von Beseler, "Minutes of the Crown Council Meeting in Bellevue Palace, 5 November 1917," 81.

²¹⁴ Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914-1918*, 119.

²¹⁵ Chancellery, "Record of Cabinet Conference on War Aims, 23 April 1917," April 23, 1917, 11, R43/2477, BArch.

²¹⁶ Chancellery, "Record of Cabinet Conference on War Aims, 23 April 1917," 11.

²¹⁷ Reichskanzlei, "Record of the Results of the Discussion on the Polish Question, Held on 3 and 4 November 1917," November 3, 1917, 40, R43/2477, BArch.

²¹⁸ Erich Ludendorff, "Letter to War Minister von Stein, 7 September 1917," September 7, 1917, 120, R1501/119823, BArch.

²¹⁹ Ludendorff, "Letter to War Minister von Stein, 7 September 1917," 120.

²²⁰ Chancellery, "Minutes of Conference in the RAI, Regarding the Polish Border-Strip, 23 January 1918," January 23, 1918, 120, R43/5124, BArch; Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914-1918*, 142.

²²¹ Chancellery, "Minutes of the Foreign Office Conference, 3 November 1917," 44-45.

²²² Hermann von Stein, "Letter to Chancellor Michaelis, 1 October 1917," October 1, 1917, 118, R1501/119823, BArch.

²²³ Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 317.

²²⁴ Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914-1918*, 119.

Grodno, to Poland.²²⁵ Beseler resisted, arguing through the spring and early summer of 1917 that annexing parts of White Ruthenia and Vilna to Poland would reinforce Germany's position in eastern Europe.²²⁶ Civilian policymakers initially sided with Beseler. A cabinet conference at Kreuznach in May affirmed plans to transfer White Ruthenia to Poland.²²⁷ The kaiser approved the eastward expansion of Poland in June.²²⁸

The Oath crisis finally scuttled plans for a greater Kingdom of Poland. At August 9 conference at Kreuznach, the OHL asserted that transferring Vilna to the emerging Polish state would be "militarily impermissible."²²⁹ "Poland, so again teaches the present arrogant attitude of the Poles," Ludendorff wrote the chancellor in September, "will only give [us] peace, if we keep it in check through extensive restrictions." Neither Grodno nor Vilna could be awarded to the Polish state.²³⁰ The OHL repeated this demand at a November policy conference in Berlin.²³¹ Following the regency crisis, Beseler also found it increasingly difficult to support Poland's expansion. He counseled restraint in only a few particular territorial questions.²³² By March 1918, Beseler had abandoned plans for the expansion of Poland altogether. At a Berlin conference, he conceded that the Polish nation suffered from an "incurable megalomania" and insatiable "fantasies of expansion." "As the Poles do not themselves limit their yearning for territorial expansion," Beseler conceded, "this must be done by us. The new state formation can only encompass the actual core of Poland."²³³ The possibility of expanding the Polish state deep into White Ruthenia or Lithuania "now no longer exists."²³⁴ Even the army's most optimistic supporters of multinational imperialism now aimed to contain Poland.

Military leaders also increasingly sought to ensure the absolute reliability of annexed territories through Germanization. Beseler and most civilian authorities resisted proposals for ethnic cleansing and colonization until the end of the war.²³⁵ But in April 1917 the OHL began to champion German settlement in annexed border territories.²³⁶ After the Oath crisis, Ludendorff more aggressively promoted national homogenization, demanding the "Germanization of the border strip" as essential for German security.²³⁷ By November, Ludendorff's position had hardened, and he petitioned Chancellor Georg von Hertling to approve the "expulsion of Poles" from the border strip and the "resettlement of Germans" into the annexations.²³⁸ Though politically costly, Ludendorff insisted that only

²²⁵ Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 347; Paul von Hindenburg, "Letter to Hans Hartwig von Beseler, 16 April 1917," April 16, 1917, 22, N30/11, BArch.

²²⁶ von Beseler, "Immediatberichte des Generalgouverneurs in Warschau über die politische Lage in Polen, 13 April 1917," 141; von Beseler, "Note to Paul von Hindenburg, 6 June 1917," 42–43.

²²⁷ Chancellery, "Results of the Kreuznach Conference, 17–18 May 1917," May 18, 1917, 9, R43/2477, BArch.

²²⁸ Hans Hartwig von Beseler, "Letter to the Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, 23 June 1917," June 23, 1917, 95, R1501/119672, BArch.

²²⁹ Reichskanzlei, "Protocol of Conference between the Imperial Chancellor and OHL, Kreuznach," August 9, 1917, 25, R43/2477, BArch.

²³⁰ Erich Ludendorff, "Letter to Chancellor Michaelis, 4 September 1917," September 4, 1917, 292, R1501/119712, BArch.

²³¹ Reichskanzlei, "Record of the Results of the Discussion on the Polish Question, Held on 3 and 4 November 1917," 40.

²³² Schulze, "Minutes of Conference at the Foreign Office, 4 November 1917," 49.

²³³ Reichskanzlei Presseabteilung, "Verhandlungsbericht über die Beratung vom 13. März 1918 vorm. Über die polnische Frage," March 1918, 121, R43/2477, BArch.

²³⁴ Reichskanzlei Presseabteilung, "Verhandlungsbericht über die Beratung vom 13. März 1918 vorm. Über die polnische Frage," 121–23.

²³⁵ Reichskanzlei, "Record of the Results of the Discussion on the Polish Question, Held on 3 and 4 November 1917," 40; Max Wallraf, "Letter to State Secretary Kühlmann, 14 December 1917," December 14, 1917, 160–61, R1501/119823, BArch.

²³⁶ Chancellery, "Record of Cabinet Conference on War Aims, 23 April 1917," 11.

²³⁷ Erich Ludendorff, "Letter to Chancellor Michaelis, 15 August 1917," August 15, 1917, 113, R1501/119823, BArch.

²³⁸ Erich Ludendorff, "Letter to Chancellor Hertling, 15 November 1917," November 15, 1917, 122, R1501/119823, BArch; Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 128.

a “reliable German population” could secure this “foreland” against Polish or Russian designs.²³⁹

In 1918 Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and their sympathizers in the army began to invent legal covers for expelling Poles from the border strip. In a January 1918 policy conference, Major General von Bartenwerffer argued on behalf of the OHL that Germanizing a border strip through “settlement” or even “coercive” expulsions would be necessary to secure Germany’s “military interests.”²⁴⁰ “We need the border strip,” he stated curtly, “and it must be German....”²⁴¹ He proposed to construct massive fortifications, artillery ranges, and other military installations as a pretext for expropriating thousands of square kilometers of land in the border strip and expelling Polish residents eastward.²⁴² In March, Nethe broke with Beseler, praising the OHL’s proposal to remove large populations of Polish civilians from “security zones” around new military installations in annexed territories.²⁴³ The OHL’s final memorandum on the border strip, submitted on July 5, 1918, claimed 8,000 square kilometers of territory to insulate military stations and railways from Polish sabotage.²⁴⁴ “For reasons of security,” the memo clarified, “only a reliable, German population” could be “tolerated” in these areas.²⁴⁵ Since their “liberation,” wrote the OHL in defense of ethnic cleansing, Poles had done nothing that “could offer us some sort of guarantee for loyal conduct in the future.”²⁴⁶ Suzerainty could provide no “secure protection” for Germany because Poland would “tolerate no such fetters on its independence in the long run.”²⁴⁷ Experience had convinced the OHL that Poland would plot to betray Germany, “so long as the dream of a greater Poland is unfulfilled.”²⁴⁸

Conclusion

The German army that marched to war in 1914 did not inherit the conviction that Germanization was necessary for the control of imperial space. Officers did not automatically understand foreign civilians as implacable enemies to be uprooted. Many regarded them as potential confederates in a German multinational empire. Multinationalist officers believed that Polish nationalists would accept union with the German Empire as necessary to preserve their national autonomy against Russian expansionism. Successive chiefs of the General Staff, intelligence officers in the Deputy General Staff, the governor-general of German-occupied Poland, and subordinate military governors wagered that the German Empire would be able to reshape Polish nationalism through alliances with influential social, intellectual, and political elites.

The army’s preference for homogenization was learned during the war, as repeated crises in occupied Poland undermined faith in multinational union as a model of imperial organization. Officers began to worry that most of the Polish population desired national independence and that Polish elites were either unable or unwilling to reshape national discourse to legitimize German suzerainty. They began to reimagine national diversity as an obstacle to territorial consolidation and a threat to imperial stability. Berlin planned to build an autonomous Polish state in military and political union with the German Empire until the final

²³⁹ Ludendorff, “Letter to Chancellor Hertling, 15 November 1917,” 123.

²⁴⁰ Reichskanzlei, “Konferenz vom 22 Januar 1918 über die Frage der Besiedlung eines Grenzstreifens,” 115.

²⁴¹ Reichskanzlei, “Konferenz vom 22 Januar 1918 über die Frage der Besiedlung eines Grenzstreifens,” 115.

²⁴² Reichskanzlei, “Konferenz vom 22 Januar 1918 über die Frage der Besiedlung eines Grenzstreifens,” 118.

²⁴³ Chancellery, “Minutes of Conference in the RAI to Discuss the Border-Strip, 12 March 1918,” March 12, 1918, 128, R43/5124, BArch.

²⁴⁴ Paul von Hindenburg, “Denkschrift über den polnischen Grenzstreifen,” July 5, 1918, 100, R1501/119824, BArch.

²⁴⁵ Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914–1918*, 142.

²⁴⁶ von Hindenburg, “Denkschrift über den polnischen Grenzstreifen,” 102.

²⁴⁷ von Hindenburg, “Denkschrift über den polnischen Grenzstreifen,” 97–98.

²⁴⁸ von Hindenburg, “Denkschrift über den polnischen Grenzstreifen,” 98.

weeks of the war.²⁴⁹ However, concerned that Poland would eventually betray the German Empire, officers increasingly recommended fortifying Germany's border, reducing Poland's size, and aggressively Germanizing frontier territories to assure their reliability. The civilian government, with Beseler's support, managed to resist the most radical demands proposed by the OHL, decisively rejecting policies of expropriation and expulsion in July 1918.²⁵⁰ But by the end of the war, many in the army doubted that national diversity could be reconciled with imperial stability.

How do we reconcile the military's initial interest in multinational models of rule for Congress Poland with *OberOst's* fantasies of Germanizing and colonizing the Baltics?²⁵¹ Military elites perceived Polish nationality as qualitatively different from the various cultural communities of the Baltic littoral. From early in the war, the German army dismissed Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, and White Ruthenian communities as primitive, incapable of marshaling significant resistance to German rule, and thus plausible candidates for eventual Germanization. Conversely, officers and even key *OberOst* advisers consistently and explicitly distinguished Poland as a politically sophisticated nation, whose elites could mobilize effective mass resistance to any form of rule deemed illegitimate.²⁵² German military elites calibrated their plans for Congress Poland accordingly. While multinationalists attempted to harness and channel Polish nationalism to support imperial expansion, skeptics contemplated more radical instruments for fortifying German security from Polish nationalist threats. In 1918, *OberOst* thus prescribed special, uniquely coercive methods of rule for suppressing potential nationalist challenges from the Polish-speaking populations of the Baltic littoral.²⁵³ Military planners drew distinct, but terrifyingly complimentary, lessons from the occupations of the Baltic and Congress Poland because they had long imagined these regions, not as a single quasi-colonial "mindscape of the east," but as distinct ethnographic spaces.²⁵⁴ Efforts in *OberOst* laid bare the difficulty of Germanizing even politically disorganized communities composed primarily of peasants. The German occupation of Congress Poland, by contrast, shook officers' confidence in Berlin's ability to incorporate politically "conscious" nations as reliably loyal components of a stable multinational empire.

Had Berlin managed to win the war and construct a stable German-Polish union, it might have restored the credibility of multinational imperialism in the army. Although expectations of Polish collaboration declined considerably, the GGW encountered little actual violent resistance until the end of the war. More assiduous observers declined to interpret wartime crises as proof of Poles' incorrigible and inevitable hostility to German rule, instead blaming material grievances and Berlin's political errors for exacerbating friction with the Polish population. In 1918, many still argued that a period of economic stability and conscientious state-building could cultivate Polish loyalty to multinational union.²⁵⁵

Germany, however, lost the war, and with it Posen, West Prussia, and parts of Silesia. The overthrow of the German occupation in Congress Poland and the loss of territory in the *Ostmark* fed anti-Polish sentiment in the army. Skeptical officers could look to the collapse of the GGW and claim that Poles had always plotted Germany's downfall. Ludendorff

²⁴⁹ Chancellery, "Minutes of Conference on the Polish Question at Spa, 2–3 July 1918," July 3, 1918, 195–96, R43/2477, BArch; RAI, "Zur Grenzstreifenfrage," July 31, 1918, 114, R1501/119824, BArch.

²⁵⁰ Theodor Lewald, "Note on the 9 August Discussions over the Border-Strip," August 1918, 158, R1501/119824, BArch; RAI, "Zur Grenzstreifenfrage," 112–13; Chancellery, "Minutes of Conference on the Polish Question at Spa, 2–3 July 1918," 196; Chancellery, "Minutes of Conference in the RAI to Discuss the Border-Strip, 12 March 1918," 125–29.

²⁵¹ Considerations of space permit only a cursory treatment of this question. For a more detailed consideration, please see Kettler, "Losing Faith in Civilization," 240–41.

²⁵² Robert von Keyserlingk, "Das Schicksal der Russischen Ostseeprovinzen im Interesse des Deutschen Reiches," October 1914, 172, R43/2476, BArch.

²⁵³ Chancellery, "Minutes of Conference with Ober Ost on Baltic Policy, 10–11 March 1918," March 11, 1918, 98, R43/2477, BArch.

²⁵⁴ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 145.

²⁵⁵ Kettler, "Losing Faith in Civilization," 371–74.

excoriated multinational imperialism as a catastrophic imperial policy in his memoirs, penned in exile between November 1918 and February 1919. He insisted that Poles' intrinsic "hostility" to the German Empire had doomed multinationalism to failure.²⁵⁶ The creation of an autonomous Polish state, he argued, could never alleviate this hostility, or divert Polish ambitions from Prussian territory.²⁵⁷ Creating the Kingdom of Poland had only empowered an enemy nation to more effectively challenge German interests. "In view of the ambiguous attitude of Poland" Ludendorff wrote, "any arming of that country presented dangers which it was our duty to avoid..."²⁵⁸ A Polish army had always threatened the German Empire because Poland had preferred "to achieve her ends against Germany" and "with the aid of the Entente."²⁵⁹ Berlin, Ludendorff concluded, should have pursued a "protective belt of annexations" along the German frontier, one purged of its "undesirable" Polish residents.²⁶⁰

Ludendorff retained considerable prestige after the war. His distorted assessments of the war and German occupation policy and his endorsement of Germanization, even ethnic cleansing, carried real weight. His memoirs became tremendously influential and were included on lists of recommended reading for officer trainees in the Reichswehr.²⁶¹ They helped to cement, within the army, a firm association between ethnic diversity and imperial insecurity.

²⁵⁶ Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story: August 1914–November 1918*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1919), 475.

²⁵⁷ Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 1:475.

²⁵⁸ Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 1:474–75.

²⁵⁹ Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 1:475.

²⁶⁰ Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story: August 1914–November 1918*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1919), 139–40.

²⁶¹ Stab des GGWs, "Kurzer historischer Überblick über das Generalgouvernement Warschau (mit Organisationsplan und Aktenverzeichnis) vom Dez. 1914 bis Nov. 1918," 1923, 45, PH30-II/62, BArch.

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