

GERMAN EASTERN POLICY, 1917–1918

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ABSTRACT This paper analyzes German eastern policy in the years 1917 and 1918. It shows the German concept for the future of Poland and Lithuania that only took shape after German armies had occupied these countries. The Polish question remained the main problem for the German leadership not being able to decide how to cope with Polish national aspirations without ceding part of territory of the German Empire. The collapse of Russia and the two revolutions in 1917 still widened the German aspiration in the East culminating in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that clearly revealed German ambitions.

German eastern policy in the period between the withdrawal of Russia from the war in the autumn of 1917 and the collapse of the German Empire in November 1918 was the ultimate culmination of a process which began in the summer of 1914. Therefore, I begin this brief presentation with a discussion of the events of 1914 since the underlying visions and plans of the German leadership remained more or less the same throughout the war: only the actual possibilities of their implementation, radicalisation of plans and political rhetoric altered. At the time when public discussions about the war aims of Germany¹ were not possible until the very end of 1916, due to censorship restrictions, heated arguments in the leadership of the empire began already at the end of the summer of 1914 and the so-called ‘September Programme’ of Bethmann Hollweg, the impe-

¹ The war aims of Germany were an object of a number of discussions and publications. The discussion was initiated by *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, a book by a Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer published in 1961. The author analyses the war aims of Germany and claims that Germany attempted to conquer the world. Fischer’s critics argued that he identified plans of various extremist groups with the policy of the imperial leadership. The important thing is that such claims of Fischer prompted detail research into the subject. Although Fischer’s interpretation was considered far-fetched, apparently his underlying claim that the empire had particular aims in the war was accurate: Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszieldpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* (Düsseldorf, 1984) (Reprint of the 1967 expanded edition).

rial chancellor, should be distinguished first. Its major thesis was ‘ensuring security of Germany in the east and west for the longest period possible. To attain this aim France should be weakened so that it could not be restored as a great power and Russia should be pushed as far from the borders of Germany as possible so that it would no longer rule non-Russian nations’.² Closer consideration of such reasoning clearly indicates that the chancellor of the empire had expressly annexation-linked plans for the west (among others Longwy-Brie, a part of Belgium was to be annexed) and Belgium was to become a vassal of Germany, etc.), whereas he talked about the east, e.g. in the episode cited above concerning pushing Russia, in a more delicate manner.³ Such an attitude might be explained by the fact that in the first years of the war the civil leadership of the empire still maintained the position that precipitous actions were unnecessary, since later they would prevent making a separate peace with Russia. However, at least in 1916 it became apparent that the German government abandoned such position.

Although the ‘September Programme’ seemed quite moderate from the perspective of discussions and planning of later years, its actual realization would have meant hegemony of the German Empire in Europe. And finally, it was no accident that discussions about the war aims initially focused on the popular in business circles ‘Idea of Central Europe’, i.e. the nucleus of Europe had to be established dependent on Germany both in military and economic terms and its dependence on Germany would have been ensured by a treaty of an economic union: ‘Such union even without common constitutional grounds, but with an external equality of its members and actual leadership of Germany, should stabilize the economic dominance of Germany in Central Europe’.⁴

Even when Poland was included within ‘Central Europe’, the eastern policy of Germany was primarily determined by military-strategic considerations. The key issue was security of the eastern border of Germany: the invasion of the Russian army into East Prussia was not to be repeated. To that end the bureaucracy of Berlin ministries obviously had to take notice of non-Russian residents in the western

² Cited as in Fischer, *Griff*, p. 93.

³ Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*. Bd. 1: *Deutsche Geschichte 1806–1933* (Munich, 2000), pp. 340 ff; Fischer, *Griff*, pp. 90 ff.

⁴ Cited as in Fischer, *Griff*, p. 94. This extract is from the ‘September Programme’.

peripheries of the tsar's Empire. The policy pursued in relation to peripheral states (as they were referred to in German documents) intended to isolate Russia from Central Europe by creating buffer states, which naturally had to be dependent on the German Empire. The congressional Poland was the first target.⁵ The less real the possibility of a separate peace with Russia was, the more important the policy [planned] regarding peripheral states became.

The progress of the war provided opportunities for a new German policy in the east. Since the Eastern Front had less armies and artillery in huge fields of combat, a mobile front was possible. In 1915 the Russian army, which at first sought grand victories against the Austro-Hungary, began retreating after Germany provided substantial military support to Austrians. Similarly, in the north of the Eastern Front Russia was forced only to defend itself and in 1915 a great part of the Polish Kingdom as well as Lithuania were occupied by the German army. The occupation changed the situation radically. Without entering into details of various projections announced in 1916–1917, it should be noted that the German leadership was facing a dilemma whether to indirectly annex those territories or settle with its indirect power and where Germany should concentrate its might – in the east or in the west? All such discussions about the war aims were based on an assumption that Germany would inevitably win the war, i.e. the hegemony of Germany in Europe was taken for granted. Thus, the problem was narrowed to the question of how the domination of Germany should be ensured in the future. France and Austro-Hungary were to be dependent on Germany. Moreover, the domination of Germany in a certain form was necessary in Belgium, the Baltic Region and Poland. It has been noted above that 'pushing Russia to its natural borders' (as meant by Germans) due to strategic consideration was *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of *pax Germanica* in the east. Therefore, already the military-strategic deliberations of 1914 generated the idea that the German Empire should annex the western peripheries of Poland so that in case of a new potential attack from Russia it could have good defensive positions. In this context the first plans projected a horrible future:

The throne of the Empire and the government of Prussia expect that after eviction of the Poles and Jews from the peripheries, Prussian Poles will be isolated and

⁵ Ibid., pp. 102 ff.

separated from congressional Poland. At the same time resettlement of German colonists from the entire Central and Eastern Europe should form a German barrier against Slavs.⁶

Thus, the German policy appeared in a certain *circulus vitiosus*. With permission to restore the Polish state, a question concerning the western border of that state had to arise almost automatically, as well as concerning the German minority in Prussia. Naturally a transfer of German territory to the future Poland was out of the question; on the contrary, the territory of the German Empire was to be expanded at the expense of the Polish peripheries. Irrespective of continuous internal arguments between the military and civil leadership, Berlin attempted to play the Polish card. However, the declaration about the Polish Kingdom in November 1916 did not provide the expected favourable reaction of the Poles. They should not have been surprised, considering the fact that the key aim was to receive as many Polish soldiers for the German army as possible and the kingdom borders were to be discussed only after a successful conclusion of the war.

The Polish Question was and remained one of the major debatable problems in Central Europe, since in the Polish territories the interests of both major states clashed: Austro-Hungary naturally supported the Austrian solution of the Polish question which would have guaranteed strong positions for the Hapsburg monarchy in Central and Eastern Europe (in that case the majority of Polish lands would be under the influence of Austro-Hungary). An increasingly obvious military weakening soon manifested itself in politics as well; the German leadership after the Brest-Litovsk treaty could retract their former support to the Polish-Austrian solution of the problem: now Poland unreservedly had to be included into the Prussian-German orbit and thereby contribute to German domination in Eastern Europe.⁷ Thus, in the opinion of the Germans the projects for solution of the Polish question which appeared in August 1918 were an 'agenda for reconciliation': Poland as a compensation for the territories lost in the west had to receive lands in the east and at the same time, as in case of Lithuania, a customs union and military convention was planned.⁸

⁶ Cited as in Fischer, *Griff*, p. 231.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 464 ff.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 473. This conception emerged in August 1918 but the subsequently apparent defeat of Germany made an end of such plans.

What did the plans of Germany concerning Lithuania seem to be? Initially Lithuania was treated as an object of negotiation and compensation for the future Polish state and in any case until 1916 a possibility of independent Lithuania was regarded as illusory. Only when it became clear that the German policy in Poland was unsuccessful, did interest in the statehood of Lithuania increase. Thus, in 1917 Lithuania's hard road to independence began, symbolized by formation of the Council of Lithuania and its complicated relationships with the German invaders. Discussing that process we must note the internal political situation in Germany as well: when Hindenburg and Ludendorff undertook leadership of the Third Army High Command a hard line was established in the German leadership. Their influence was becoming increasingly dominating and the civil leadership had little leverage over Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who constantly based their actions on arguments of military needs and necessity. The territory of Ober-Ost as a certain reservation where first of all Ludendorff could implement his vision of the hard occupation policy is a fitting example.⁹

At the close 1917 through early 1918 Germany could still have opportunities to achieve its military goals in the east. From the very beginning the leadership of the empire in addition to the policy regarding peripheral states contemplated a revolution in Russia. Although the February Revolution toppled the monarch, the Provisional Government did not intend to end the war. The German Empire attempted to make substantial influence on the internal policy of Russia when Lenin, the leader of Bolsheviks, who then lived in emigration in Switzerland was allowed to come to Russia by transit across Germany and Scandinavia. Berlin made an accurate forecast that it would lead to deepening of a political crisis in Russia. After the Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917, the negotiations between the German Empire and socialist Russia concerning a truce began in Brest-Litovsk.

However, the regressive influence of the truly massive war (along with mass deaths) in the history of Europe rendered the field of

⁹ A significant study on the subject: Vejas Gabriel Liulevičius, *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity and the German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, 2000). When the leadership of Ober-Ost failed to subdue the general government of Poland as well, Ludendorff was said to declare 'since Poland was taken from me, I must find myself another kingdom – in Lithuania and Courland': cited as in Fischer, *Griff*, p. 236.

acting old dynasty agreements (created by the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815) and post-Napoleonic Europe obsolete. In 1917 due to an increasingly popular concept of ‘self-determination of nations’ the direct annexations had catastrophic consequences in international relations. Therefore, the German aspirations were disguised and based on the alleged will of nations. The imperial leadership cynically used the national self-determination right so that along with independence of the Baltic [states] and Poland from Russia, Germany could establish its power in the region. Its new tactics with the ‘autonomy’ of countries in Central Europe appeared to be rewarding. Von Kühlmann, the head of German diplomacy in the negotiations, found the best option in that situation. A direct annexation for Germany due to international and internal policy motives did not suit, so in Brest-Litovsk Kühlmann proposed a slogan ‘to delete the section concerning peace without annexations based on the national self-determination right’.¹⁰ Thus, he changed Bethmann Hollweg’s famous instruction of 7 May 1917 which was to become the basis for the policy of Germany in the east: ‘in order to avoid the word ‘annexation’ in the negotiations with Russians, I believe <...> it is worthwhile considering the idea of imitating independent states which would have internal self-rule but in a military, political and economic sense would be subordinate to us and thus allow Russians to save face in renouncing Courland and Lithuania’.¹¹ Under such circumstances, the argument of the autonomy aim for nations of Central and Eastern Europe supposedly complying with the right of national self-determination served exclusively for strengthening of the German influence in Eastern Europe. Such disguise was a complete failure: in the broad circles of German public a popular opinion was that actually ‘peace without annexations and compensations’ was made in Brest.¹²

When in the spring of 1918 the treaty was signed finally in Brest-Litovsk, the world could clearly see the war aims of Ger-

¹⁰ Cited as in Fischer, *Griff*, p. 419.

¹¹ Cited as in Marianne Bienhold, ‘Die Entstehung des litauischen Staates in den Jahren 1918–1919 im Spiegel deutscher Akten’, *Bochum*, 2/1978, p. 34.

¹² The newspaper of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church reported: ‘Peace without annexations and compensations! Such was the decision of people. It was proposed by enemies of Germany when the German sword became too heavy for them <...> let this be with the liberated countries of peripheries, Russia will never regain them and Germany will be their protection and support’. Cited as in Fischer, *Griff*, p. 446f.

many. Russia lost 90 per cent of its coal mines, 54 per cent of its industry, 33 per cent of railroads, 32 per cent of farmland, 34 per cent of inhabitants, 85 per cent of sugar-beet crops and nearly all production of oil and wool.¹³ Brest-Litovsk was the best example of enforced peace¹⁴ and in terms of territories Russia had to renounce its Finnish, Polish, Lithuanian territories, the Baltic region and even Ukraine.

Nevertheless, Germans had to make concessions as well: when the Third Army High Command due to departure of Trotsky from the peace negotiations instructed the German army to march forward, it was demonstrated as the German support and ‘means of policing’.¹⁵ In such a manner the German influence once again expanded and in their plans it already covered the whole Baltic region. In the summer and autumn of 1918 the German units reached Ukraine and southern Russia and there the German eastern policy also gave priority to ‘autonomy’, though in fact to countries dependent on Berlin. Even disregarding its imminent defeat, the German leadership was ready to make concessions regarding its war aims in the west but not in the east where for the first time in its policy Germany used anti-Communist motives: ‘The aim of our eastern policy is not abuse of peripheral states, but rather ensuring the type of their internal government and freedom. Protection of subdued Eastern European states from the destructive powers of Bolshevism is the right and duty of Germany as a neighbour, to create here order and peace on behalf of Europe’.¹⁶

Then defeated Germany had to play the anti-Communist card for the peace conditions to be as bearable as possible.¹⁷ The stage of the German eastern policy discussed above ended together with a downfall of Germany. However, its consequences were far-reaching: recently Vėjas Liulevičius showed the continuity of German policy

¹³ Numbers from Gunther Mai, *Das Ende des Kaiserreiches. Politik und Kriegsführung im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 1987), p. 136.

¹⁴ Winkler, *Der lange Weg*, p. 358: ‘It was such a peace of conquest and coercion that has never been in the history of Germany’.

¹⁵ Fischer, *Griff*, p. 442.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 554. Later Gustav Stresemann, the most famous foreign minister of the Weimar Republic, said the same regarding the German policy in the Baltic region: ‘Our policy in the east seeks to maintain what has been achieved, because it is doubtful whether the war aims in the west can be implemented’, *ibid.*, p. 557.

¹⁷ Peter Krüger, *Die Außenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt, 1985), pp. 31 ff.

in the First and Second World Wars: without the experiences, understanding, planning and considerations of the German politicians and military leaders which they gained in 1915–1918, it would be difficult to imagine a number of events of June 1941 in Eastern Europe. To some extent it seems that the attack of the Soviet Union by national-socialist Germany continued German eastern policy from where it paused in the autumn, but that is already another story.

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VOKIETIJOS RYTŲ POLITIKA 1917–1918 M.

Santrauka

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Straipsnyje analizuojama Vokietijos Rytų politika 1917 ir 1918 m. Dar Pirmojo pasaulinio karo pradžioje Vokietijos vadovai daugiausia dėmesio skyrė Vakarų Europai. Tai aiškiai rodo „Rugsėjo programa“, mat joje Rytų Europa minima tik tarp kitko. Tačiau 1917 m. pradžioje padėtis gerokai pasikeitė: vokiečių daliniai jau buvo užėmę didelę dalį Lenkijos teritorijos ir visą Lietuvą, o Vakaruose nuo 1914 m. rudens pereita prie pozicinio karo.

Faktinė padėtis skatino perorientuoti Vokietijos politiką – ši šalis į savo įtakos sferą ketino įtraukti tik Lietuvą ir Lenkiją. Apie tiesioginę aneksiją nebuvo ko nė galvoti, tad buvo kuriami netiesioginės aneksijos planai, kad bent formaliai būtų galima remtis tuomet paplitusia formule „tautų apsisprendimo teisė“. Itin didelių problemų Vokietijos politikai kėlė lenkų klausimas, mat lenkų nacionalinio judėjimo aspiracijos siejosi su dalimi Prūsijos teritorijos.

Po Spalio revoliucijos Rusijai pasitraukus iš karo, Vokietijos Rytų politikos tikslai įgavo didesnių užmojų. Tai pirmiausia matyti iš Brest-Litovsko taikos nuostatų. Ekonomikos ir teritoriniu atžvilgiu Rusija prarado dideles teritorijas, kurios būtų patekusios didesnėn ar mažesnėn Vokietijos priklausomybėn. Tik 1918 m. lapkritį, Vokietijai pralaimėjus karą, tie dideli planai žlugo.