

Polnische Frage im Kaiserreich

Beitrag vom: 09.10.2015

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Robert Spät's book, published in "Studien zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung", a series of works devoted to Eastern European studies, deals with the public discourse in the German Empire on the "Polish question" from the end of Caprivi's era (1894) until the fall of the *Kaiserreich* (1918).

Starting with a broad introduction of the situation of the Polish minority in Eastern Prussia, and the Posen region in particular, the author chronologically presents the key developments in the first part of his book: the Września school strike [Wreschener Schulstreik] in 1901, the expropriation law and the language laws (both 1908). In the second part, he focuses on the conquest of the Congress Poland by the *Kaiserreich* during the First World War, the establishment of the Kingdom of Poland by the Central Powers in 1916, the Brest Treaty (1918) as well as on the impact that those issues had on internal discourse in Prussia. In his conclusions, the author briefly sketches how these developments influenced the German-Polish relations in the following years until the present.

In contrast to many other works dealing with the same topic, the author shows how and why the 'Polish issue' was in many ways at the centre of the political agenda in the Kingdom of Prussia and the German Empire. Spät highlights that the reason, why the treatment of this national minority was of such great importance, constituted the fact that it presented a useful tool for the political opposition to attack the consecutive Prussian governments. At the same time, it was a 'screen' onto which various parties could project their ideas about the *Kaiserreich* (pp. 97-99). In other words: Poles stood in for much bigger issues such as control of government by the parliament, equality of citizens or freedom of speech.

For various reasons, it was convenient for the Social Democrats, the left liberals or the supporters of the Centre Party to channel those concerns through the 'Polish question'. For the political right the very same issue was instrumental in gathering support for its own political agenda clothed in a rhetorical figure of the 'Polish threat'. And precisely this is, in my opinion, the most important contribution of Spät's study, i.e. tying the issue of the Polish minority to the political life of the German Empire, treating it as an integral part of political life of the Hohenzollern monarchy and not something external to it.

Because the author focuses on the multipolarity of the public debates, he is in the position to question the fundamental assumption of the existence of a national conflict as such. Many previous works presupposed monolithic and clearly defined German and Polish sides. Robert Spät demonstrates, however, that there was no such thing as 'the German side' of the conflict. For instance, the expropriation law was opposed by the German landowners or Posen's mayor Wilms for dissimilar reasons. Whereas the latter was primarily motivated by the protests of the public (i.e. voters), the former were more concerned about the violation of private property (pp. 132–136). By locating the 'Polish question' within the internal discourse of the *Kaiserreich*, Spät is able to show, how the multi-layered debate was tied to different aspects of political life each time it came up. In a way, it allows the author also to challenge a polonocentric point of view and put the issue in perspective. The debate on the expropriation law of 1908 in the Prussian House of Lords was in fact a discussion of the understanding of the state of law (*Rechtsstaat*) and the definition of national community (p. 135). What is more, the author clearly shows that German critics of the Germanisation politics were not necessarily pro-Polish and indeed could favour unequal treatment of different national groups in other contexts (p. 50).

It is hard to underestimate the importance of Spät's contribution to historical writing, as for too long academic literature dealt with the issue by using narrow national categories and forgot the bigger picture. Last but not least, such framing puts this work safely within the current historiographical debate as it substantially contributes to the discussion on national identity, the position of the civil society or the nature of political system of the German Empire [1].

Having said that, one should point out that Spät's analysis would have benefitted enormously, had the author contextualised his work much more. Considering that it is already a big piece of scholarly work, it might have been better just to focus on the first part, that is the period until 1914. Without substantial knowledge of the political life of the German Empire, it might be difficult to follow Spät's arguments, for instance, he never even briefly describes the political system of the *Kaiserreich*. At first the author seems to be somewhat dismissive of the importance of debates in the Reichstag, but later stresses the importance of the 1907 elections (p. 115). The parliamentary vote on the expropriation law is also left without the contextualisation it deserves (p. 102). One may want to know if all members of the opposition were against it or if some supported the government in this vote and simply how big the majority in favour was. Unfortunately – as in several other cases – one will not find this information in this book. Spät never mentions that the support for the government in the consecutive elections steadily diminished throughout the period, but it might indeed be important to explain why after the turn of the century the politics towards the Polish minority became much harsher. [2] Extensive remarks concerning the German Eastern Marches Society [Deutscher Ostmarkenverein] contrast sharply with the lack of detailed information on this organisation, e.g. number of its members, their social and geographical distribution or background of its relative success.

There is, however, more general lack of contextualisation of Spät's narration. It would have been much more effective, if he had included other national minorities less marginally (e.g. p. 134). The reader can conclude that the 'Polish question' was unique and totally isolated from the situation of the Danish, Alsatian or even Lithuanian groups living within the Empire. However, it is possible to assume that if the author included the press and pamphlets published outside Berlin, Posen and Cologne more of such comparisons would have come

to light.

Furthermore, as mentioned, one of the big contributions of Spät's work is how the author ties the 'Polish question' to the broader discourse in the *Kaiserreich*. He stops short, however, of giving the general context of issues he deals with. The public opinion found it difficult to swallow the violence experienced by children during the 1901 turmoil in Wreschen (p. 64). The author points out that it fuelled discussions about proper schooling methods within pedagogical circles (p. 89). What is missing here is the general information about violence in public life in Prussia: corporal punishment was practiced in the 19th century schools. So was the outrage simply caused by the excess in this particular case, or was it a more complicated issue? Similarly, it might be true that there was almost no reception of the legal discourse among the wider public (p. 141), nor were the parliamentary discussions representative of the general population. That's why one might wonder what jurists' thought about the inviolability of property rights or citizens' equality. Last but not least, one would appreciate a clearer conceptualisation of 'nationhood' in this book, as the author sometimes seems to follow his sources too closely. As a result his working definition of a nation looks somewhat static: '[t]he Prussian Poland defined themselves first and foremost through the Polish language, nationality and the Catholic religion, which accounted for the Polish identity, together with rich historical, cultural and literary tradition' (pp. 24–26; 60– 62).

The impressive scope of Robert Spät's book proves that the topic of the 'Polish question' in the German Empire is complicated and worth of further extensive studies. Despite his painstaking studies the book could not answer many questions which are critical for a complete understanding of the topic (e.g. detailed examination of the Eastern Marches Society). Nonetheless, the result of the author's diligent work on the primary sources is a substantial contribution to the historiography of the German Empire and an extensive study of the German-Polish relationship. It is surely not a work to be recommended to those who are interested in a general introduction, but rather meant for readers who want to substantially deepen their understanding of the topic. The great achievement of this book is not only that it provides a sound challenge to the existing narrative of national conflict in Eastern Prussia, but also that it opens new perspectives, such as the relation between local (municipal) and state politics during the reign of Wilhelm II.

[1] S. Müller, & C. Torp, "Introduction," S. Müller, & C. Torp (eds.), *Imperial Germany revisited: continuing debates and new perspectives* (New York, 2011), pp. 1-17.

[2] M. Anderson, "Voter, Junker, Landrat, Priest: The Old Authorities and the New Franchise in Imperial Germany," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 98 (1993), p. 1458.



Zitierweise:

Piotr Kisiel: Rezension zu: Robert Spät: Die „polnische Frage“ in der öffentlichen Diskussion im Deutschen Kaiserreich, 1894-1918, 2014, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/publikationen/die-polnische-frage-der-oeffentlichen-diskussion-im#r3253>.

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