sciendo

The Emergence of New States in Eastern Europe after World War I: The German Impact

Klaus Ziemer

Department of Political Science
University of Trier
Universitätsring 15
D-54296 Trier, Germany
Email: ziemer@uni-trier.de

Abstract: After World War I, many borders in Europe were redrawn, especially in the northeast and southeast of Germany. Almost all political forces in Germany strived to restore the prewar German borders, especially towards Poland. Even Poland's very existence was denied by many German political forces. The Baltic States were less important for Germany in this respect. Here the relationship with the Baltic Germans and trade relations prevailed. The independence of these states was in the eyes of German elite subordinated to the relations with Russia. The article presents this pattern of German policy until the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922.

Keywords: *East Central Europe, "German impact", German policy in Latvia, German-Polish borders, Treaty of Rapallo, World War I*

1. Introduction

At the end of World War I, three multinational empires collapsed: the tsarist, then Bolshevist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Austria-Hungary. The political map of the Eastern part of Europe was redrawn, from the north to the south. Germany's existence was not called into question, but it had to suffer serious territorial losses in the west (Alsace, Lorraine, Eupen-Malmédy), the north (North Schleswig) and especially in the east (territories ceded to Poland and a small strip to Czechoslovakia). Moreover, after the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire, German Austrians wanted to join the Reich, which reserved a representation for them in the Reichstag, and

doi: 10.2478/bjes-2021-0007 TalTech Journal of European Studies
Tallinn University of Technology (ISSN 2674-4619), Vol. 11, No. 1 (33)

ethnic Germans especially in new Czechoslovakia wanted to join according to the principle of self-determination Austria or—where Austria was too far away as in Moravia—Germany. Both plans were foiled by the Entente, causing widespread disappointment among ethnic Germans in Central Europe.

The new political map of Europe remained, however, controversial in the region east and north of postwar Germany, even after Versailles. This article will have a look upon the complicated creation of new borders in this region and concentrate upon the importance which the "German impact" had upon this process during the years 1918 until the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922. Special attention will be given to the political aims and the policy of the German government, military, and the ethnic Germans in Poland and the Baltic States ("Baltic Germans"). Because the German approach towards restored Poland was different from that towards the Baltic States, these two problems will be dealt with in two separate chapters.

After the traumatic experience of Russian troops invading Eastern Prussia in August 1914, German military efforts concentrated first on successfully repulsing the invaders from the German territory. In the second half of 1915, they forced, together with Austrian-Hungarian troops, the Russian army to leave the territory of Poland. In the south of the conquered area, Vienna created a General Government of Lublin, Berlin west of it—the General Government of Warsaw. Northeast of it, the territory Ober Ost (from Courland in the north to Lithuania up to Białystok) was formed under German military administration. After the Russian February Revolution of 1917, German troops could expand the territories they controlled in the east and the north, for example, to Riga. There was no coherent concept of what to do with Ober Ost in the middle and long run. The third Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) exploited Ober Ost economically and for forced labour and wanted to control the territory in the long run, but even within the OHL there were differences about the concrete aims. Between these plans by Hindenburg and Ludendorff and the more moderate proposals of the civilian government, Kaiser Wilhelm II originally muddled through with an intermediate position. Only after the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty of 3 March 1918, the Kaiser, impressed by the almost unhindered offensive of German troops towards the east, gave up his mediating position and the OHL became dominating, especially when the moderate Secretary of Foreign Affairs (*de facto* Minister of Foreign Affairs) Richard von Kühlmann, who had negotiated the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, was dismissed in July 1918. For a short time, unrealistic plans of settling Germans in the former Russian

Baltic territories, which had existed since the beginning of the war, were seriously considered. The proposal for an armistice, made by Kühlmann's successor Paul von Hintze and enforced by Ludendorff, weakened the position of the OHL. In decision-making now the civilian leadership was dominating (Volkmann, 1970). In 1919, it became, however, evident that the German military still stationing in the Baltic region got out of civilian control again.

2. Quarrels relating to the future German eastern border

The collapse of imperial Germany drew the main attention of the German public to what was going on at the western front and in Berlin. In the east, however, German troops were still stationed from the eastern parts of Prussia up to Estonia. According to the armistice, the German troops stationing in the territories of former Austria-Hungary, Romania and Turkey had to retreat behind the German borders immediately as of 1 August 1914. The German troops stationing in former Russian territory had to go back to Germany, too, but only when the Entente powers thought the moment appropriate, "considering the interior situation of theses territories". In practice, this meant that German troops should station there in order to hinder the Bolshevist forces to occupy the territories at the Baltic Sea belonging until 1914 to Russia. Moreover, the treaties of Brest-Litovsk as well as the additional Treaty of Berlin of 27 August 1918 between Germany and Russia were annulled. Allied troops were to get access to Danzig and the Vistula River in order to deliver food to the population of these territories and to maintain order there.

Decision-making on the German side as to which policy should be conducted from the east of Germany up to the arising Baltic States was, in the unstable political situation after November 1918, divided between the government, the military, the Freikorps (in principle dependent from the military, but in practice with large spaces of autonomous action), and the German population in these territories, in the newly created states of Estonia and Latvia especially the so-called Baltic Germans. In the revolutionary and post-revolutionary situation after November 1918, the interior political development of the own country not only, but especially in Berlin was at the centre of interest of German society. Emotions were running high, however, also with the developments in the former eastern provinces of the Reich.

Concerning the postwar border of Germany, Ludendorff and others propagated during World War I the enlargement of German territory in the east by taking a “border strip” (*Grenzstreifen*) from a previous Russian partition. These plans became obsolete with the German defeat in autumn 1918. On the contrary, political and military pressure from the Polish side aimed at extending the border of the newly established state of Poland westwards, especially at the expense of the hitherto “province of Posen (Poznań)”, Silesia, West and East Prussia. In Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points program of 8 January 1918, one of the main targets was the restoration of an independent Polish state whose borders, however, were not defined exactly. Wilson’s program was referred to, among others, by the deputy from Upper Silesia, Wojciech Korfanty, during the discussion in the Reichstag on 25 October 1918. He demanded the restoration of Poland, including Danzig, and the integration of the ethnically Polish regions of Prussia to the new state (Korfanty, 1918). On the day of the armistice, 11 November 1918, Korfanty organized a “Supreme People’s Council” (*Naczelna Rada Ludowa*, NRL) which pretended to be the provisional government of the province of Poznań. Like in many towns in Germany, in Poznań, too, a Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council was formed, which was composed of Germans and Poles, favoured the Polish aspirations and recognized the NRL. However, the leader of the Poznań Germans, Alfred Herrmann, was an outspoken critic of the former German policy towards Poland—an exception among German politicians in the province of Poznań. Most of the others had conservative, nationalist views. Although the government in Berlin gradually lost control in several towns of the province of Poznań, it reacted only half-heartedly because other events in Germany had priority. When the famous pianist and politician in exile, Ignacy Paderewski, arrived on his journey from Danzig to Warsaw in Poznań on 27 December, an insurrection erupted all over the province of Poznań which cost the lives of some 1,700 members of Polish and 1,200 of German units. The Entente powers imposed a ceasefire on 7 February 1919 which was to last until the peace treaty regulated the border question. In spite of the continuing fights, on 19 January 1919 elections to the German National Assembly could be held in the Poznań province. The results reflected the nationalist attitudes of many Germans there: 51% voted for the rightist parties DNVP and DVP, which received only 14% in all of Germany. Whereas in Germany, the “Weimar Coalition” (SPD, the Catholic Zentrum and the left-liberal DDP) received 75% of the votes, in the Poznań Province these parties got only 48% (Blanke, 1993, p. 17). Among Germans, who were afraid that the Poznań Province could be handed over to Poland, the idea of creating a German “eastern state” (*Oststaat*), independent of Berlin, still before the signing of the Versailles treaty was discussed. This was to prevent these territories from becoming Polish. These plans, supported by the Social Democratic "Plenipotentiary for the East" August Winnig and other German representatives, were very heterogenous, rejected especially by the OHL and failed (Schulze, 1970).

The new Polish-German border, foreseen in the Versailles peace treaty, belonged to those regulations of this treaty which provoked the sharpest protest among all German parties. The border of 1772 was more or less restored, some 90% of the "province of Poznań" went to Poland, and Danzig became a "free city" under League of Nations protection. Some 66% of West Prussia was given to Poland as well as smaller bits of East Prussia and Silesia. In the West-Prussian Marienwerder district and in southern Masuria, a plebiscite was to be organized. The most acute conflict arose about Upper Silesia. Here, too, according to the Versailles treaty, a referendum was to be held. In mid-August 1919, a sharp socioeconomic and political conflict caused by lack of food supply and repressive measures taken by German police and military forces led to the death of ten Polish miners in Upper Silesia. The Polish Military Organization (POW) of Upper Silesia made use of this occasion to start the First Silesian Uprising, which within a couple of days was suppressed by (informal) troops of the Black Reichswehr.[1]

In February 1920, an Inter-Allied Commission of French, British and Italian forces took control over Upper Silesia in order to prepare the plebiscite. Among them, French troops under General Henri Le Rond were clearly dominating. In August 1920, Germans in Katowice who expected the Red Army to conquer Warsaw on its march through Poland, stormed the local Polish plebiscite office and plundered Polish shops. The military reaction of the Poles caused the Second Silesian Uprising, again led by the POW which occupied eastern Upper Silesia. On the German side, secret Upper Silesian military units were fighting. The military actions were finished after diplomatic intervention by the British members of the Inter-Allied Commission. The readiness of the Polish units to stop fighting was facilitated by the decision of this Commission to set up a plebiscite police with equal Polish and German participation. Among the Polish, this uprising cost the lives of 150 to 180 persons, the number of the wounded is not known. (Kaczmarek, 2019, p. 317)

The plebiscite took place on 20 March 1921, accompanied on both sides by terror and counterterror which cost the lives of about 3,000 people. Some

---

[1] See the detailed description of the First Silesian Uprising in Kaczmarek, 2019, pp. 143–215.

59.6% voted for Upper Silesia to stay with Germany, 40.4% with Poland. The Versailles treaty made it possible to divide the territory according to regional preferences. The urban centres voted in favour of Germany, the countryside rather for Poland. The British-Italian proposition to leave about 75% of the territory, among them most of the industrial centres, with Germany evoked sharp protests in Poland and was one of the reasons for the beginning of the Third Silesian Uprising at the beginning of May 1921. Polish units (again from the POW, but also volunteers from outside Upper Silesia) conquered the territory of eastern Upper Silesia, hindered only by Italian troops of the Inter-Allied Commission, whereas French forces did not hide their sympathy for the Poles.

German Freikorps organized counteroffensives and had their most important victory in the battle around the sanctuary of St. Anne's Mountain, which they conquered on 21 May 1921. On 5 July 1921, an armistice was concluded after pressure from the Inter-Allied Commission. On 21 October 1921, a conference of ambassadors decided in Paris to divide Upper Silesia. The larger, predominantly agricultural western part went to Germany. Poland received the most valuable industrial part with coal, iron ore and zinc mines. Neither Polish nor German politicians were glad about this decision, but had to accept it, given the pressure of the Entente states.

The Germans and other national minorities in the territories which were to be included in Poland were given minority rights in a treaty which was a precondition for the peace treaty between the Allied powers and Poland of 28 June 1919, signed the same day and therefore called the Little Treaty of Versailles in Poland. This treaty was a pattern for similar treaties with other newly created states from the northeast to the southeast of Europe. It guaranteed all inhabitants of the given country extensive civil rights and liberties and protection against discrimination because of nationality, language, race or religion, moreover equal rights for the admission to public offices. Members of national, religious or language minorities gained the right to found religious, social and welfare institutions and schools (at their own cost). If people felt discriminated in this respect they could appeal with the League of Nations. All newly founded states which had to accept these regulations considered them as a restriction on their sovereignty, especially because the Entente states which had also ethnic minorities, as for instance France, were not obliged to respect these rights.

As to Poland, all persons who before 1918 possessed German, Austrian, Hungarian or Russian citizenship automatically obtained Polish citizenship.

This, however, did not concern persons who had settled in the territories of postwar Poland after 1908 as a consequence of the German immigration policy. No one was obliged to acquire Polish citizenship. If people had the option to choose another citizenship they could do so, but in this case, they had to leave Poland within a year for the state for which they had opted, taking all their movables without restriction with them. These minority rights, however, concerned only the Germans who had lived in territories which had belonged to Germany until 1918, but not the Germans in central Poland or in Volhynia.

For the German government, who accepted the Versailles treaty only under protest, especially with regard to the new Polish-German border, it was a hard blow that hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans from the former Prussian territories left Poland in the first years after 1918. One of the main arguments from the German side to change the border established in Versailles was the existence of a numerically important ethnic German population in new Poland. Exact numbers are not available, but it is estimated that from these very territories a population amounting to more than half of the persons of German origin emigrated to Germany before the Polish census of 1926 (Blanke, 1993, pp. 49–51). On the other hand, the number of Germans living in Central Poland and Volhynia increased in the interwar time. But these Germans did not serve the German government as an argument for demands to revise the Polish-German border established in Versailles.

After the plebiscite of 1921 and the decision of the Entente powers to divide Upper Silesia, on 15 May 1922, Poland and Germany signed in Geneva an agreement for 15 years which was to alleviate the consequences for persons who were working on the other side of the new frontier. In cases of conflict, the Mixed Commission for Upper Silesia, which acted under the direction of the Swiss politician Felix Calonder, was to decide. In practice, however, some 200,000 persons made use of their right to opt out and settled on the other side of the frontier (Ther, 2014, p. 273).

As elsewhere in East Central Europe, especially in Poland, Germans felt pressure in two domains: the privileged position of German landowners and the situation of German schools. A political aim of the national-democratic *Endecja*, dominating especially in the Poznań region, was to weaken the Germans who remained in Poland politically and economically in order to reach a re-Polonization of these territories (Chojnowski, 1979, pp. 18–19). Legal measures in order to expropriate "Germanized" land were taken from

1920 on (Schattkowsky, 1994, pp. 175–176). The situation of German schools in interwar Poland was clearly worse than in Czechoslovakia, not to mention Estonia (Rexheuser, 1997, pp. 283–312). In order to stop further German emigration, especially from the Poznań region and Western Prussia, the German government provided substantial financial support to organizations of the German minority in these two voivodships from the middle of the 1920s (Wolf, 2006, pp. 45–55). However, in no other voivodship was the German school system in Poland treated as badly as in Upper Silesia. The *Deutsche Volksbund für Polnisch-Oberschlesien* (German Volksbund for Polish Upper Silesia), founded in 1921, directed many protests towards the Mixed Commission for Upper Silesia and the League of Nations (Elzer-Rosenbaum, 1990; 2010).

From the very beginning of the Weimar Republic, Poland was considered by German political elites from almost all political parties as the state which had taken away the greatest bulk of German territory after 1918. Regaining the "corridor" or at least big parts of it and Upper Silesia was one of the main aims of German foreign policy. The right of the Poles to have a state of their own was denied by many politicians. Commonly known was the remark of Hans von Seeckt, chief of the Reichswehr, that Poland was only a *Saisonstaat* ('Seasonal state'). On the other hand, there was no coherent German policy towards Poland. Among political and military elites there were different approaches, sometimes even changing among given persons over time.

A key question here was the future of Russia after the revolution of October 1917, the relation of Germany to this Russia and to the territories which until 1914 had constituted the border between Germany and Russia. The concrete policy of Germany towards this region—the new "Baltic States"—after 1918 was incoherent and depended on the changing political situation in the region, especially on the development of the Russian civil war.

3. Germany's policy towards the Baltic States after 1918

The approach which the German authorities had shown during World War I in Ober Ost towards the heterogeneous local population was characterized by a feeling of cultural superiority that led to—euphemistically speaking—a "paternalism" towards the indigenous population. They had to recognize the superiority of German culture and to be educated according to "proven"

German patterns. In the regime established under the German occupation they could not really participate in local self-government, but this was hardly possible even to the minority of the Baltic Germans. Tens of thousands of people were subjected to forced labour, especially in Lithuania (Westerhoff, 2012). Addressed to the indigenous population, to the German soldiers in the region, but also to the Germans in the Reich, the book *Das Land Ober Ost* (1917), edited in 1917 by the Press Department of Ober Ost, was to serve as a proof for a successful German policy in economic and cultural respect.

Given the evident, almost racist feeling of superiority of the German occupying power towards the local population and considering plans to settle here, thousands of Germans, after the war, in order to connect these territories with the Reich, it is not surprising that the policy of German military administration in Ober Ost is sometimes assessed as a precursor of the Nazi *Lebensraum* conception from which a direct line is leading to the *Generalplan Ost*. Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius concluded in his thoroughly written study about German occupation on the eastern front that the completely different experience of the war in the west and the east—in the west waging war against a technologically sophisticated enemy, in the east being in a region of backwardness with regard to civilization—confirmed the image of an “East” which until then had existed predominantly in German literature, but was now verified by the empirical experience of many thousand German soldiers. This image was to last for decades and shape the attitude towards this region for many Germans also during World War II (Liulevicius, 2000). Liulevicius (2000, p. 171) stated: “Nazis brought to fruition precisely the most destructive elements of the German myth of the East”.

Nevertheless, there were profound differences between the German occupation policy in this region during the World Wars I and II. This has been elaborated in a convincing way by Chu, Kauffman and Meng (2013). On the one hand, they refer, among others, to the “terms of exploitation of the area’s resources, forced labour, military brutality, conquest and the perception of the region as an area of German domination” (Chu *et al.*, 2013, p. 342). On the other hand, the authors emphasize that the practice of imperial Germany during World War I in how to deal with eastern Europe and the way Nazi Germany did it during World War II were fundamentally different, to mention only “the genocides of the Jews, the Roma, the Polish intelligentsia and the Soviet POWs” (Chu *et al.*, 2013, p. 342).

But although the “puppet states” were proclaimed in 1918 and in Lithuania even the establishment of a kingdom with a Catholic Prussian duke (Wilhelm von Urach) was envisaged, the future of this region in the conception of German politicians, military and economic leaders was controversial. The independence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia was for them not self-evident. It was a variable dependent, first of all, on the uncertain evolution in Russia. Germany interrupted diplomatic relations with the Bolshevist government at the beginning of November 1918, but kept unofficial channels of communication. In the long run, for most of the German elites the pre-1914 German-Russian border was to be reestablished—and this meant that the Baltic States, which were considered by a big part of German elites to be not "viable", were to disappear.

In Latvia and Estonia, German interest was concentrated, in the first place, on the so-called Baltic Germans who since centuries had formed a small, but politically, socially, and economically dominating group which had been a reliable support for the tsarist regime in this region. How unpopular these dominating Baltic Germans were for the awakening Latvian and Estonian nationalism became evident during the 1905 revolution in Russia, when in this region Baltic Germans were killed and their property destroyed.

Another factor which influenced the evolution in the Baltic region was the attitude of the Entente states. From the beginning, Great Britain rather supported the existence of independent Baltic States. This region was not to be under the influence of only one state. France originally was in favour of the White Russian forces and the restoration of Russian domination in the region, but after the defeat of the White Russians, France, too, was in favour of the independence of the three Baltic States.

The German government, after the fall of the emperor, was confronted with a revolutionary situation in its own country, which preoccupied all its concentration. The military situation in the Baltic region was rather unclear at that time. The Red Army was moving forward and occupied most of Estonia and northern Latvia. The exhausted 8th German Army was collapsing and dissolving itself. Newly elected German President Friedrich Ebert nominated August Winnig (SPD, but gradually moving towards national-conservative positions) Plenipotentiary of the Reich for the "Baltic lands" (Latvia and Estonia). After Germany had formally recognized Lithuania earlier in 1918, Winnig in the second half of November 1918 *de facto* recognized also the provisional governments of Estonia and Latvia in the name of the German government. On 7 December 1918, he signed an agreement with the Latvian government establishing a "Landeswehr" (national defence force) composed of German, Latvian and a small group of Russian volunteers. They were to be recruited by the German administration in the Baltic territories and receive German military equipment (Purkl, 1997, p. 70). Since January 1919, the Landeswehr was under the command of a German officer decorated during World War I, Major Alfred Fletcher (Sauer, 1995). On 29 December 1918, Winnig signed a treaty with the Latvian government that foreign soldiers who had fought at least four weeks for Latvia against the Bolsheviks could receive Latvian citizenship at their request. In the offices in Germany which in several towns recruited volunteers to fight in the "Baltikum"[2] it was at least orally communicated that those who had fought against the Bolsheviks would get landed property there. This caused among thousands of young Germans a "Baltic fever" (German Minister of Defence Gustav Noske) and later heated discussions. Winnig (1935, p. 89) stated in his memoirs that the treaty he had signed did not contain the promise of land property for volunteers. Baltic Germans were, however, said to have promised to give one third of their land property to such volunteers.

In January 1919, from the remnants of the 8th Army, a so-called Iron Division was formed under the command of Major Josef Bischoff. The Iron Division became the most important Freikorps in the Baltic States. It was enlarged by a big number of volunteers. When the Red Army continued to move forward, at the end of January 1919, General Rüdiger von der Goltz, who before had successfully fought against Communist units in Finland, received the order by the OHL to protect the northeastern border of the Reich against possibly attacking Bolshevist units. Von der Goltz declared that for the military protection of Eastern Prussia, an offensive approach was necessary. The permission he received for his plan implicated only a limited offensive near the border of East Prussia, but Goltz went well beyond that order. Having received the command of the First Guard Reserve Division, newly created near Berlin, he went to Latvia and took over the command of all German troops there. On 3 March 1919, Goltz began an offensive which was the very beginning of the "war in the Baltic region". In three subsequent attacks the Bolshevist troops were driven back by more than 100 km.

The front line reached this way went far beyond what had been the order from the OHL. At the latest at this point, the troops commanded by von der Goltz got out of control of the government and military institutions in Germany. Goltz later admitted that his real aim was to gather all German troops in the Baltic region and, jointly with White Russian troops, to march into Russia. Together with the then established pro-German Russian government one could have tried to challenge the Versailles order (Golz, 1936, p. 165, as quoted in Sauer, 1995, p. 877). Goltz and Major Josef Bischoff, both closely cooperating with each other, even envisaged to march with their troops towards Berlin in order to topple the government (Bischoff, 1935, p. 37, as quoted in Sauer, 1995, p. 877). In the meantime, German Minister of Defence Gustav Noske declared on 27 March 1919 in the Reichstag that German troops had in the last weeks taken part only in a little operation in the Baltic region which aimed at controlling a small piece of a railway connection. The OHL and the German government, he said, agreed that there will be no more offensive by German troops in the region (Noske, 1919).

---

[2] "Baltikum" is the German name for the region of the three Baltic States. The German soldiers who were fighting there in 1919 were called "Baltikumer".

The reality was completely different. Thousands of volunteers continued to pour from Germany to the Baltic region without being hindered by the German authorities. Defence minister Noske later admitted that the government had "only a cursory look" to that region (Sauer, 1995, p. 878). Quite a lot of the Freikorps soldiers, who were often simply criminals, robbed and killed Latvian civilians causing understandable hatred against the German occupiers. On 16 April 1919, parts of the Landeswehr and Freikorps toppled the government of Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis in Liepāja (Riga was still occupied by the Red Army), but Ulmanis could escape. The elderly pastor Niedra who had no political background was nominated in his place as a puppet. The arrogancy of General von der Goltz, without whose at least consent this coup could not have been possible, is expressed in his comment on this event: the matter did not concern him, he was responsible for law and order in the whole military territory. "To me as the German commander-in-chief it is indifferent what kind of Latvian government is governing there" (Goltz, 1920, p. 181).

The repercussions of the coup were, however, considerable. The German government did not recognize the new Latvian government formally, but cooperated with it. The British government argued that Goltz had been pulling the strings of the coup in Liepāja and that he was to return to Germany. The German government announced the official stop in recruiting volunteers for the "Baltikum". German troops were to return from Latvia as soon as possible, and German units there were forbidden to cross the existing front line (Koch, 1978, p. 154). Goltz remained in office.

On 22 May 1919, the Landeswehr attacked Riga, and against the order, Goltz supported this offensive with his troops.[3] Riga was quickly conquered

---

[3] Goltz later argued that, in talks he had had in the *Auswärtiges Amt* a couple of days earlier, he had the impression that officially they could not support him, but would be glad if Riga would be recovered, cf. Goltz, 1920, pp. 190–191.

(“miracle on the Daugava”), but hundreds of Latvians lost their lives. The recovery of Riga proved to be the turning point in the Baltic war. The Red Army withdrew, and the Soviet government acknowledged the independence of the Baltic States. Against the advice of some Freikorps leaders, Goltz continued following the Red Army, supported mainly by the Landeswehr. The Landeswehr met, however only with an army of north Latvian Ulmanis followers and Estonians who were united in the fear of Baltic German dominance. The Entente powers imposed a preliminary armistice on 10 June, but the fights continued, with German troops formally being under Latvian command. In the battle of Wenden from 20 to 22 June, this German-Latvian army was beaten by the north-Latvian-Estonian forces. For the Entente powers, this result was an incentive “to replace the German anti-Bolshevik fighting forces by native formations” that at the same time caused a “powerful boost to Baltic nationalism” (Hiden, 1987, p. 23).

According to the armistice agreement of Strasdenhof of 3 July 1919, Ulmanis was restored as prime minister of Latvia. The German troops had to retreat to the line from where they had begun to attack Riga in May. The Entente powers now demanded the retreat of all German troops from the Baltic region according to Article 112 of the armistice of 11 November 1918. The German government agreed, but Goltz closed alliance with the White Russian General Bermondt-Avalov, whose first units had arrived in the region at the end of May, beginning of June 1919. According to Goltz, the German government did not mind German soldiers staying “as private persons” in the Baltic region, i.e., joining the Bermondt forces. Continued supply from Germany for the tsarist troops in the Baltic region was to be tacitly continued. The government also agreed to take care of the September pay and food supply for the Russian troops (Goltz, 1920, pp. 242–243).

These plans ended in a fiasco. The German government, confronted with the threat of the Entente powers to renew the sea blockade of Germany (which would have meant hunger for millions of Germans), on 3 October ordered the immediate retreat of all German troops from the Baltic region. Joining White Russian units was to be punished. Parts of the Freikorps leaders openly rebelled against this order. Von der Goltz, coming back from consultations in Germany, tolerated this behaviour and handed over about 40,000 German volunteers to the Bermondt army which counted about 12,000 men. The attack of this army against Riga was stopped by strong Latvian forces. After a positional war of about one month with high losses on the side of the aggressors, German troops began to retreat. In the face of the ruthless behaviour of the German occupation forces, the Latvian government even declared war to Germany in November 1919. The last German soldiers from the "Baltic war" returned to Germany only in December 1919, brutalized in their personalities and radicalized politically.[4] Many of them took part in extreme right attempts to overthrow the Weimar system, as the Kapp-Lüttwitz-Putsch in 1920 or Hitler's failed coup d'état in 1923, or became prominent members in later Nazi organizations like SA or SS.[5]

***

With the retreat of the last German soldiers, civilians in the German government and especially in the *Auswärtiges Amt* (Federal Foreign Office) definitively regained the initiative concerning the policy towards the Baltic region. Already in August 1919, the government replaced August Winnig as Plenipotentiary for Latvia and Estonia by the diplomat Ago von Maltzan, who was well aware of the frustration and disorderly conduct of the German volunteers, especially in Latvia (Joeres, 2006, p. 107). On the other hand, like other German politicians and diplomats, he had doubts about the viability of the three Baltic States and opted for a flexible policy towards these states which in the future were to be transit territories towards Russia. "In a Latvia that will later be independent from Russia we are not interested," von Maltzan wrote in September 1919 to the *Auswärtiges Amt*.[6] For the time being, a paramount interest of German political and military elites concerning the three Baltic States was to avoid these states from becoming allies with Poland. In the case of Lithuania, this could be taken for granted, given the conflict between both states on the Vilnius region. The main controversy between Germany and Lithuania concerned Memel (Klaipėda), put under Allied sovereignty. The Memel problem was, however, of minor importance for the bilateral relations in the immediate postwar time. With Latvia and Estonia, Germany did not have any territorial conflict.

The starting point for German policy towards the Baltic States, especially to Latvia and Estonia, was the Baltic German minority, in 1920 some 58,000 (or 3.7% of the total population) in Latvia, some 26,000 (1.5%) in Estonia.

---

[4] The attitudes in Germany towards the returning "Baltikumer" were very different, cf. Sammartino, 2010, pp. 67–68.

[5] For details see, among others, Sauer, 1995, passim. Sauer even quotes on p. 895 Rudolf Höß, later commandant of the Auschwitz extermination camp, who in his autobiography wrote that when he saw in the Baltic region the burnt down huts and the bodies of women and children turned to charcoal, he could not imagine that an increase in human mania of extermination could be possible.

[6] "*An einem von Russland später unabhängigen Lettland haben wir kein Interess*e," cf. Joeres, 2006, p. 108.

Moreover, half of the about 20,000 Germans who had left the Baltic region during the war returned to Latvia and Estonia in 1920/1921. In 1918, this minority owned about 90% of the large landed estates and 58% of agricultural land in Estonia and 57% of agricultural land in Latvia. Given the social-revolutionary atmosphere after the war, it was understandable that 96.6% of all estates were taken over by the state in Estonia in 1919 (and redistributed to landless peasants), whereas in Latvia in 1920 Baltic Germans could keep about 50 (in some cases up to 100) hectares (Hiden, 1987, pp. 36–38). This meant, however, that many of the Baltic Germans lost their inherited wealth.

On the other hand, a key domain for safeguarding the identity of the Germans in Latvia and Estonia was the school system. The Latvian School Law of December 1919 respected the minority rights as fixed in the Versailles minority treaties. The Estonian Constitution of 1920 guaranteed cultural autonomy and the law of February 1925 on the cultural self-government of national minorities was even exemplary insofar as it separated cultural autonomy from territorial organization (Rexheuser, 1997).

In the plans of German government these Germans were to be a stronghold in securing trade between their countries of residence and Germany. Given stringent conditions concerning foreign trade in the Versailles peace treaty, trade with the east was of high importance for Germany. The industrialists Felix Deutsch and Walther Rathenau and the banker Erich Alexander from the German Orient Bank explained in a document addressed to the *Auswärtiges Amt* in 1920 that such trade could give more possibilities of initiative in foreign policy and in the long run provide access to Russian mineral resources. The Baltic States, especially Latvia with its important harbours, were considered to be a "springboard" for future trade with Russia. As before World War I, in this respect a competition between Germany and Great Britain was expected (Hiden, 1987, pp. 63–92).

The real target of German policy towards the Baltic States in this conception was Russia. Revisionist elites of the Reichswehr, such as von Seeckt, were able to make contact with Lenin and Trotsky and were sure that both supported the plans of the rearmament of the Reichswehr and of an alliance against Poland. Officials of the *Auswärtiges Amt* and the armament industry were informed about these contacts. Seeckt received from Minister of Finance Josef Wirth financial resources for the secret rearmament of the Reichswehr in cooperation with Bolshevist Russia. Wirth, from May 1921 chancellor, supported this project in order to "break the ring of Versailles" politically and then militarily. The only “way out” of this ring seemed to be Russia (Fleischhauer, 2006, pp. 372–376)[7].

Ago von Maltzan, who in the meantime had become director of the Russian department of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, was informed about these plans and looking how to safeguard them politically. After Great Britain had concluded a trade treaty with Soviet Russia in March 1921, which could be seen as a precedent, von Maltzan with great care and prudence prepared a treaty on the enlargement of the existing delegations in Moscow and Berlin which was signed on 6 May 1921 and created trade missions. Maltzan is also considered to be the architect on the German side of the Treaty of Rapallo of 16 April 1922, which was signed by the ministers of foreign affairs of Germany and Russia on the edge of the conference in Genoa on economic and financial relief for Germany and Russia. This treaty continues to cause controversial interpretations.

Niels Joeres in his monumental PhD thesis on Ago von Maltzan, defended in 2006 in Heidelberg, argues that on the German side there was no motivation of offensive power politics connected with this treaty. According to him, the ambivalence of German-Soviet relations was demonstrated by continued Communist propaganda and attempted coups d’état. In Rapallo, the German delegation could avoid reparation demands from the Russian side which before had been possible according to the Versailles treaty. In other controversial German-Russian questions, the treaty had only given a framework which was still to be filled. There had been no anti-Polish background. In Genoa, there had been separate negotiations of the Entente delegations with the Russians, from which Germans were excluded. The fact that the Treaty of Rapallo created distrust towards German foreign policy was according to Joeres due to bad German communication politics and an example of bad “PR politics” in the early Weimar Republic. (Joeres, 2006, pp. 611–617)

A different assessment of the intention of the Rapallo treaty is given by Eva Ingeborg Fleischhauer (2006), who for the first time takes under consideration several documents left by Chancellor Joseph Wirth, who belonged to the German delegation in Rapallo. According to Wirth, at the beginning of the military cooperation with Russia was the experience of the Third Silesian Uprising in May 1921. In 1934, he wrote that the Rapallo policy was understandable only in its military-political context. Without even mentioning the Baltic States and their right for self-determination,

---

[7] Part of the top secret procedure was extensive destruction of documents.

Wirth wrote in another text in 1942: "The Third Reich continued the Rapallo line, although only in tactical respect. It even led to the fourth partition of Poland and in 1940 offered the German army rear cover during the attack on France […] As a historical act the Rapallo treaty has fulfilled its strategic task."[8]

Other members of the German delegation in Rapallo had very different intentions connected with this treaty. Minister of Foreign Affairs Walther Rathenau, not always loyally informed by his own delegation, only very reluctantly agreed to negotiate with the Russian side. He made it clear that he rejected the military-political implications of the treaty or making use of it for revision politics. Fleischhauer argues that Rathenau would have implemented the treaty as an instrument for safeguarding peace and economic cooperation. His murder a couple of weeks after Rapallo "left it as a fragile and problematic agreement of international law" which accompanied the German-Soviet relations until June 1941 (Fleischhauer, 2006, p. 415).

4. Conclusive remarks

A "German impact" on the formation of states east and north of Germany after the end of World War I is undeniable. Almost all political forces in Germany strived to restore the German prewar borders. This concerned especially Poland. Even its very existence was denied by many. The Baltic States were in this respect less important. Here the relationship with the Baltic Germans and trade relations prevailed. The independence of these states was in the eyes of German elites subordinated to the relations with Russia. The possibilities implied in the Rapallo treaty were later brutally made use of in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. The Versailles treaty was extremely unpopular in Germany. After signing it, the parties of the "Weimar coalition" lost half of the votes in the Reichstag elections of 1920 as compared to the elections of January 1919. In the "winner states" of Versailles, right-wing parties had clear success in elections, too (Schwabe, 2019, pp. 224–225). The state system established in Versailles and the years after proved to be highly fragile.

---

[8] Ebert-Rathenau-Wirth, 1942, Bundesarchiv N 1342/136, p. 2, as quoted in Fleischhauer, 2006, p. 379: "*Das 3. Reich hat die Rapallo-Linie durchaus, wenn auch nur taktisch, weitergehalten. Sie führte sogar zur vierten Teilung Polens und bot 1940 dem deutschen Heere die Rückendeckung beim Angriff auf Frankreich.* […] *Als geschichtliche Tat hat der Rapallovertrag seine strategische Aufgabe erfüllt*."

Dr. **Klaus Ziemer** has studied history, political science, and Latin at the universities of Heidelberg, Munich and Paris. He got his PhD in 1977 and Habilitation in 1985 in political science at the University of Heidelberg. He was professor of political science at the University of Trier (1991–2011) and in 1998–2018 also at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. During 1998—2008, he was director of the German Historical Institute in Warsaw.

References

Bischoff, J. (1935), *Die letzte Front. Geschichte der Eisernen Division im Baltikum 1919*, Berlin: Schützen-Verlag.

Blanke, R. (1993), *Orphans of Versailles. The Germans in Western Poland 1918–1939*, Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky.

Chojnowski, A. (1979), *Koncepcje polityki narodowościowej rządów polskich w latach 1921–1939* [Conceptions of nationality policy of Polish governments 1921–1939], Wrocław, etc.: Ossolineum.

Chu, W.; Kauffman, J. & Meng, M. (2013), 'A *Sonderweg* through Eastern Europe? The varieties of German rule in Poland during the two world wars,' *German History*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 318–344. https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ght032

Das Land Ober Ost (1917), *Das Land Ober Ost. Deutsche Arbeit in den Verwaltungsgebieten Kurland, Litauen und Bialystok-Grodno*, Stuttgart & Berlin: Presseabteilung Ober Ost.

Elzer-Rosenbaum, M. (1990), 'Minderheitenschulen in Polnisch-Oberschlesien und in Deutsch-Oberschlesien 1922–1933,' *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 274–296.

Elzer-Rosenbaum, M. (2010), 'Der oberschlesische Schulstreit,' in I. Eser (ed.) *Volk, Staat, Gott! Die deutsche Minderheit in Polen und ihr Schulwesen*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 418–444.

Fleischhauer, E. I. (2006), 'Rathenau in Rapallo. Eine notwendige Korrektur des Forschungsstandes,' *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 365–415. https://doi.org/10.1524/vfzg.2006.54.3.365

Goltz, General Graf R. v. der (1920), *Meine Sendung in Finnland und im Baltikum*, Leipzig: K. F. Koehler.

Goltz, Graf R. v. der (1936), *Als politischer General im Osten*, Leipzig: Scholar Select.

Hiden, J. (1987), *The Baltic States and Weimar Ostpolitik*, Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511523670

Joeres, N. (2006), *Der Architekt von Rapallo. Der deutsche Diplomat Ago von Maltzan im Kaiserreich und in der frühen Weimarer Republik* [PhD thesis], University of Heidelberg. Retrieved from http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/6751 [accessed Mar 2021]

Kaczmarek, R. (2019), *Powstania Śląskie 1919–1920–1921. Nieznana wojna polsko-niemiecka* [The Silesian Uprisings 1919–1920–1921. An unknown Polish-German war], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Koch, H. (1978), *Der deutsche Bürgerkrieg. Eine Geschichte der deutschen und österreichischen Freikorps 1918–1923*, Berlin, etc.: Antaios.

Korfanty, W. (1918), *Speech in the Reichstag, 196. Sitzung, Freitag, den 25. Oktober 1918*, pp. 6253–6257. Retrieved from https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt_k13_bsb00003418_00111.html [accessed Mar 2021]

Liulevicius, V. G. (2000), *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I*, Cambridge: University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497186

Noske, G. (1919), *Speech in the Nationalversammlung, 30. Sitzung. Donnerstag, den 27. März 1919*, p. 834. Retrieved from https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt2_wv_bsb00000011_00105.html [accessed Mar 2021]

Purkl, A. (1997), *Die Lettlandpolitik der Weimarer Republik. Studien zu den deutsch-lettischen Beziehungen der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Münster: LIT.

Rexheuser, R. (1997), 'Das Schulwesen nationaler Minderheiten in Estland, Lettland, Polen und der Tschechoslowakei zwischen den Weltkriegen,' in H. Lemberg (ed.) *Ostmitteleuropa zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen (1918–1939). Stärke und Schwäche der neuen Staaten, nationale Minderheiten*, Marburg: Herder Institut, pp. 283–312.

Sammartino, A. H. (2010), *The Impossible Border. Germany and the East, 1914–1922*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Sauer, B. (1995), 'Vom "Mythos eines ewigen Soldatentums". Der Feldzug deutscher Freikorps im Baltikum im Jahre 1919,' *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. 43, no. 10, pp. 869–902.

Schattkowsky, R. (1994), *Deutschland und Polen von 1918/19 bis 1925. Deutsch-polnische Beziehungen zwischen Versailles und Locarno*, Frankfurt am Main, etc.: Peter Lang.

Schulze, H. (1970), 'Der Oststaat-Plan 1919,' *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 123–163.

Schwabe, K. (2019), *Versailles. Das Wagnis eines demokratischen Friedens 1919–1923*, Leiden, etc.: Ferdinand Schöningh. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657782390

Ther, Ph. (2014), 'Pre-negotiated violence: ethnic cleansing in the "long" First World War,' in J. Böhler, W. Borodziej & J. von Puttkamer (eds.) *Legacies of*

Violence. Eastern Europe's First World War, München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, pp. 259–284. https://doi.org/10.1524/9783486857566.259

Volkmann, H.-E. (1970), *Die deutsche Baltikumpolitik zwischen Brest-Litovsk und Compiègne*, Köln & Wien: Böhlau.

Westerhoff, Ch. (2012), *Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg. Deutsche Arbeitskräftepolitik im besetzten Polen und Litauen 1914–1918*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657773350

Winnig, A. (1935), *Heimkehr*, Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt.

Wolf, G. (2006), 'Die deutschen Minderheiten in Polen als Instrument der expansiven Außenpolitik Berlins,' in J. Kochanowski & M. Sach (eds.) *Die "Volksdeutschen" in Polen, Frankreich, Ungarn und der Tschechoslowakei*, Osnabrück: Fibre Verlag, pp. 41–75.