



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
A German Voice of Opposition to Germanization (1914)

The founding of the German Empire under Prussian leadership in 1871 created the need for policies that would unite Germans culturally, politically, and symbolically. Separate ethnic and linguistic groups such as Sorbs, Lithuanians, Danes, and Poles were not given minority status, nor were their languages or cultural traditions protected. While Sorbs and Lithuanians were mostly assimilated, 500,000 Danes in Schleswig and three and a half million Poles in the eastern Prussian territories were subject to an aggressive acculturation policy which denied them access to education in their own language, forbade the speaking of languages other than German, and sometimes led to their expulsion. Hans Delbrück (1848-1929), a professor of history in Berlin, here criticizes German policy toward ethnic minorities.

[. . .] The modern nation faces an especially difficult task if substantial elements of a foreign nationality are incorporated into it. How shall a nation of Germans, which is, after all, built up completely on the vivid consciousness of the German people, come to terms with the fact that it has within the body of its Reich and state no fewer than 4 million Poles, in addition to Danes in the North and Frenchmen in the West? There can probably never be a good solution to this problem. It is said, and will always be said with a certain justification: the Poles are, after all, merely Prussians until further notice. They swear allegiance to the constitution, perform their duty, work on what are currently the positive tasks of the state – we owe to the Polish votes in the Reichstag the German navy and the military reform of 1893 – and yet, if one imagines that world history (or, as the Poles would say, “if it is God’s will”) ever offers the possibility of creating a Polish nation-state, they will see this as a higher law and turn towards this state. How shall one come to terms with such a segment of the nation? Resolute individuals believe that one must Germanize them. And this was, in fact, begun 25 years ago. After all, we have the *Volksschule*, the German schoolmaster. Beginning at age six, Polish children learn German, and what they have learned in school is completed in the army; the Polish recruits are disbursed among the German regiments. The entire administration is German, the official language is German, and all higher officials are Germans. Moreover, immense sums have been spent to purchase Polish landed property and to settle German farmers instead. Hearing this, one might be tempted to say: Well, that must help in the long run, all the more so since the Poles are, after all, distributed between four different provinces; there are 1.2 million in Upper Silesia, about 1 1/2 million in Posen, 1/2 million in West Prussia, and 1/2 million in East Prussia, always mixed with Germans; nowhere do we have a large, coherent Polish territory, not even a single purely Polish district. [. . .]

To be sure, official statistics try to come up with a few thousand more Germans here and there; the number is by no means as great as that of the German farmers who have been brought there. But the established residents are skeptical with respect to these statistics, and it is likely that Germanness is actually in decline in the four provinces. [. . .]

Thus, the policy of Germanization, as is now recognized almost everywhere – except among the fanatical Hakatists, is bankrupt. It has not weakened Poland numerically and has vastly strengthened it morally. [. . .]

The Germanization of the *Volksschule* was paralleled by the gradual Germanization of the entire class of higher civil servants. While there used to be numerous Poles among the higher civil servants, as well as in the officer corps, they have slowly all but disappeared. [. . .]

And now, to the chief means of Germanizing the East March: the settlement of German farmers. All told we have settled more than 120,000 German farmers (number of souls) and have thereby truly created an important piece of Germanism. Indeed, through a separate law, it has even been made difficult for the Poles to settle in their own homeland. If a Pole buys a piece of land and wants to build a house, he can be forbidden from doing so. This exceptional law, which interferes too profoundly in private property, has in fact been applied often in its full severity. [. . .]

All the unintended consequences of the poorly thought-through Germanization measures, the German *Volksschule*, the German class of civil servants, German colonization, they coalesce in a *single* focal point: the incitement of the Polish sense of nationalism. [. . .]

Source: Hans Delbrück, *Regierung und Volkswille. Eine akademische Vorlesung* [Government and the Will of the People. An Academic Lecture]. Berlin: Stilke, 1914, pp. 157-60, 164 f., 167.

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