

Revenge of the Periphery: Regionalism and the German Minority in Łódź, 1918-1939

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“The German Question” represented a crisis of legitimacy for the new governments in Central Europe, since in many ways their authority and stability depended on the treatment of their ethnic minorities. Indeed, Nazi claims to protect the German minorities destroyed two states in East Central Europe. In 1938, Germany dismantled Czechoslovakia, upholding the right of the Sudeten Germans to national self-determination. In 1939, Germany likewise legitimated its attack on Poland by claiming Polish abuses against the German minority there.

During and after the war, historians from both countries tended to brand the German minorities as “traitors” and fifth columnists. But the role that minority leaders actually played, however, was very different in both cases. We know that in Czechoslovakia, Karl Henlein was able to build a political coalition that united most of the Sudeten Germans, thus giving him leverage against the Czechoslovakian government. The German minority in Poland, however, was never able to unify into one united organization. Rather, the minority remained splintered among several regional parties throughout the interwar period. Indeed, this disunity prohibited the German minority in Poland from playing an active role either politically or militarily. The problem was largely due to a crisis of legitimacy *within* the minority, a crisis that stemmed largely from irreconcilable regional differences.

In the wake of the First World War, Poland inherited over one million Germans from three empires with different historical-social paths prior to 1914. The Germans in western Poland, living on lands formerly of the German Empire, had enjoyed political and social domination prior to 1918; most of them could not come to terms with Polish rule. On the other hand, the Germans in central and eastern Poland, including Łódź, had always been a cultural minority and had never entertained the idea of belonging to a political elite reserved for Russians. Likewise, Germans in formerly Austrian Galicia had long been a largely impoverished minority accustomed to local rule by Poles.

Did these “three German minorities” (Prussian, Austrian, and Russian) overcome their differences and become one minority during the interwar period?¹

¹ Marian Wojciechowski, “Die Deutsche Minderheit in Polen (1920-1939),” in: Rudolf Jaworski, Mathias Niendorf, Przemyslaw Hauser, Mieczyslaw Wojciechowski, Deutsche und Polen zwischen den Kriegen. Minderheitenstatus und "Volkstumskampf" im

Despite their different implications for the political role of the minorities, the bulk of the historiography has suggested this result. The focus of German historians on the minority's struggle against national repression and the emphasis of Polish historians on National Socialist infiltration of the minority both agree on the *growing* homogeneity of the Germans in Poland.

By examining the German minority in Łódź and Central Poland, I will argue that regional differences did not wither away with time. Polish repression and Nazi ideology did not necessarily facilitate political unification or even solidarity. Rather, I will explain that regional cleavages were politicized, leading to a regional hierarchy within the minority. This did not happen because nobody was interested in uniting the minority, but because the very attempts to integrate the minority actually provoked regional reactions that deepened differences. That this reaction occurred was due largely to a serious imbalance of power within the minority, which I will describe here in terms of center and periphery.

The German minority in interwar Poland, itself on the margins of the German nation, had its own periphery and center. Region was one of the most important markers determining privileged or peripheral status within this minority. Although regional differences within the minority have been acknowledged by various historians, these differences have been reduced to anecdotal and folkloric characterizations. I am less interested in historical, linguistic, or religious differences per se, but how these regional differences were "discovered," "constructed," and articulated within the minority, as well as their resulting impact on the minority's political developments. I will call this process "regionalization," and as will be shown, regionalization went hand in hand with peripheralization. A similar process can be observed in today's unified Germany, where Germans living apart for forty years now share the same state. The initially high expectations of national brotherhood quickly gave way to the reality and perception of lower status, unequal treatment, and political marginalization of the "eastern" brothers. Indeed, one can argue that Eastern Germans today are more politically conscious as Eastern Germans than they were ten years ago.

In interwar Poland, Łódź was an important textile manufacturing center and was often called the Manchester of the East. The city had several hundred thousand inhabitants, with the total population rising from 341,829 in 1918 to 672,000 in 1939. Jews made up nearly half of the population in the city and were by far the largest ethnic "minority." Yet the Germans in the city were also statistically important: with 70,000 Germans in the city, Łódź represented the largest concentration of Germans anywhere in Poland. The 400,000 Germans in

Grenzgebiet. Amtliche Berichterstattung aus beiden Ländern 1920-1939 (München, 1997); here, p. 4.

Congress Poland represented roughly 40% of the German minority population, more than any other single “historical” region in Poland. Yet in their political influence upon the minority, the Germans in Łódź and Congress Poland belonged to the periphery of this minority. This peripheralization within the minority and among its leaders and of the Łódź Germans in particular occurred in two ways: political-financially and cultural-nationally.

First, Reich policies in the 1920s that furthered the possibilities for a border revision marginalized the Germans in Łódź. While the Reich funneled hundreds of millions of Marks to the lost Prussian areas, the Germans in Łódź remained “underfunded.” German Foreign Minister Stresemann’s plan to spend 30 million Reichsmarks to support German ownership of land and businesses gave 14 million Reichsmarks to Poznań and Pomerania, and tiny Upper Silesia received 6.5 million.² All other areas, including Łódź were allotted only 1 million Reichsmarks for Central Poland, Galicia, and Volhynia combined.

Keeping in mind that the non-Prussian Germans were about one half of all Germans in Poland, the distribution of funds was greatly unfair. And despite the secrecy surrounding much of the subsidies for the minorities, the existence of such lavish funds was generally well-known among Germans and Poles alike. Another aspect of Germany’s official favoritism for the Germans in the formerly Prussian areas was that all other Germans were given less say in the affairs within the minority, with most important pan-minority positions going to the Germans in Western Poland. To a large extent, Łódź Germans were only a means to help the Reich win back their lost territories by increasing the German minority representation in Poland, but they were supposed to keep silent when it came to their own political and financial demands.

Secondly, the Germans in Łódź were also peripheralized in national-cultural discourse within circles that “managed” the German minority. Indeed, the hierarchy of funding was complemented by a hierarchy of German-ness. While Germans in Western Poland, as former Reich citizens, were generally seen as supporters of Germany and the German cause, Germans in Central and Eastern Poland were often perceived as being less devoted to maintaining their nationality, let alone supporting Germany’s revisionist aims. The stereotype of the “Łodzer Mensch,” who represented a hybrid of the Polish, Jewish and German elements in the city, had long been in circulation, and it was even a symbol of pride among many inhabitants. At a time when being less assertively German was often conflated with being anti-German and anti-Germany, however, Reich officials and minority leaders in Western Poland often saw the Łodzer Mensch as a general affliction for the Łódź Germans. The common

² Norbert F. Krekeler, Revisionsanspruch und geheime Ostpolitik der Weimarer Republik. Die Subventionierung der deutschen Minderheit in Polen, 1919-1933 (Stuttgart, 1973), p. 93

perception in these circles responsible for the minority was that the city was filled with renegade, cosmopolitan, and jewified Germans.

This stereotype of the unreliable German was reinforced by specific political developments within the minority in Łódź. In contrast to the minority in Western Poland, which remained overwhelmingly conservative-nationalist, the German socialist party enjoyed considerable success in Łódź. In the city council elections on 9 October 1927, the German Socialists obtained 16,643 votes (7 seats in the city council), while the German conservative-nationalist party, the German Volk Union (Deutscher Volksverband), received 7,365 votes (3 seats). Of the overall increase of 7,000 German votes since the last election in 1923, the socialists accounted for 5,000 of these. Also, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a pacifist German party that was explicitly loyal to the Polish government appeared on the scene. The Deutscher Kultur- und Wirtschaftsbund (German Economic and Cultural Association) tended to reinforce the view among nationalist Germans that Łódź, by being a breeding ground for such parties, was a danger to the German body politic in general and to German interests in Western Poland in particular.

Thus, irredentist politics, minority political developments and stereotypes reinforced one another and ensured that Łódź remained peripheral within the larger minority community during the 1920s. This marginalization led to a certain passivity on the part of the small group of German nationalists in Łódź, who were willing to take the heed of the nationalist Germans in Western Poland, even though being ‘nationalist’ implied very different things in the two regions: While minority leaders in Łódź sought “unification nationalist” aims of uniting the minority, this desire clashed with the smoldering “irredentists nationalism” of the Germans in the western Polish borderlands, who wanted to leave the minority and rejoin Germany. Thus, there was enough consensus to want to work together on the immediate issues of German schools, churches and language, but the lack of consensus concerning long term political aims—despite their own claims to the contrary—meant that there could be no unity.

Rather, existing inequities and political differences naturally led to a smoldering, but growing resentment among the Germans in Łódź. Minority leaders in Central and Eastern Poland often claimed that they were treated as pariahs within the minority, while the Germans in Western Poland were treated as privileged aristocrats. Thus, the case of the German minority in Łódź illustrates a process of peripheralization and a growing sense of regional distinctiveness.

Hitler’s rise to power in Germany in 1933, however, could not change this process once it had started. Despite the appearance of a *Gleichschaltung*, or the full subordination of the main German groups in Poland, National Socialism actually deepened these regional conflicts within the minority by empowering the Łódź periphery against the minority’s center. The growing importance of Łódź

and the Łódź Germans thus allowed them to challenge the formerly Prussian Germans for dominance within the minority.

Two factors facilitated the destruction of the equilibrium between center and periphery. The first involved demographic changes within the German minority. While the Germans in former Prussian areas continued to shrink, the Germans in Central Poland, and especially in Łódź, continued to grow. By 1939, more than half the Germans in Poland lived outside of what had once been Prussia proper. Also, the number of Germans participating in the Łódź nationalist organization quickly grew, and the nationalist German Volk Union soon became the largest political grouping for Germans in Łódź, with over 2,000 members in 1937, topping even the main German organization in Western Poland. The quick turnaround of the supposedly non-nationalist Germans had several causes, including disillusionment with the German socialists, the disappointment with the increasingly authoritarian politics of the Pilsudski regime, and the general upsurge of approval for Hitler's Germany. Yet this support for the nationalist party reinforced the demographic trend favoring Central Poland, and German leaders in Łódź began to claim that they would soon become the center of the German minority in Poland.

The second important factor was the ideological empowerment of the Łódź Germans. The Nazification of the German question actually worked in changing the perception of the Łódź periphery. The egalitarian tenets of National Socialist ideology, such as "Volksgemeinschaft," actually deepened the schisms within the minority by legitimating the claims of the Germans in the peripheral regions, including Łódź, for more influence within the minority. Authorities in the National Socialist Germany were more appreciative of the previously mentioned demographic changes than Weimar authorities had been. Hitler's wide reaching geopolitical goals and the reprioritizing of ethnic matters (*völkisch*) over etatist (irredentist) matters after 1933 shifted attention away from questions of border revision. The new emphasis on the wider German community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) also meant a new appraisal for the Germans in Łódź and the eastern regions. Of course, the Łódźer Mensch was still despised, but the Germans in Łódź and elsewhere in Eastern Poland in general lost much of the previous stigma. Rather, many of the authorities who came to power with the Nazis saw the Germans in the eastern regions as the very model of how an embattled Germandom should fend off foreign influences –and importantly with little or no financial assistance from Germany.

This shift in emphasis was especially pertinent to the German minority in Western Poland, where over a decade of heavy subsidies had failed to bring out positive results. The Western Polish Germans had previously only grudgingly acknowledged their role as Germans abroad, often referring to themselves as "Borderland Germans" (*Grenzlanddeutschtum*) to distinguish themselves from their co-nationals further East. Now they were increasingly called

“Volksdeutsche” by Reich authorities and were asked to behave more like their cousins in the East. Indeed, among the more enthusiastic *völkisch*-oriented authorities, these eastern Germans were not only to be the model for all Germans living abroad, but also for Germans in Germany as well

The growing importance of the East had concrete effects on the unity of the Germans in Poland. By undermining the influence of the Germans in Western Poland, the center could no longer control the periphery. The growing assertiveness of especially the Łódź Germans disturbed some of the more conservative bodies that remained biased toward the Germans in Western Poland, but the growing recognition of this shift was apparent in 1938-9, when Reich authorities and minority leaders attempted to create a unified organization in Poland, the *Bund der Deutschen in Polen*. For the first time, a German from Central Poland, Ludwig Wolff, was chosen to lead a pan-minority organization. Quite tellingly, the plan failed—but not because of resistance from the weakened Germans in Western Poland. Rather, the Germans from the other periphery -- the formerly Austrian regions — objected to this plan because they had not been given the leadership position.

While the 1920s had seen Łódź and Central Poland become a distinctive and peripheral region within the minority, the tendency in the 1930s was for the Germans in Central Poland to increase their political influence and to improve their image. The gradual shift in power and authority within the minority from Western Poland to Łódź thus represented the victory of the periphery over the center. As I have tried to show, in many ways the periphery was even becoming the center. Yet this evening out of authority actually prevented any one regional group from dominating the rest, and the fractured nature of minority politics remained. In 1939, the Germans were further from unification than they had been 10 or 20 years before.

The revenge of the periphery continued after the conquest of Poland. The Germans in Western Poland, most of whom had longed to rejoin the Reich during the previous two decades, were now disappointed to find that the arriving Reich administrators treated them as lower-class Volk Germans. The Germans in Łódź, on the other hand, actually enjoyed an “upgrade” by being annexed to the Reich. It was the first time that Łódź was officially incorporated into a German state. Renamed Litzmannstadt, the city was supposed to be a model for the new German colonial mission in the East, with all the accompanying terror for its non-German inhabitants, most especially for the Jews. The process of integration between the Western and Eastern Polish Germans was only fully completed after the Second World War, when the Germans from Łódź and Western Poland ignored their previous differences and founded their first common political organization -- in the form of an expellee organization.