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Designing Empire for the Civilized East: Colonialism, Polish Nationhood, and German War Aims in the First World War

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Abstract

This article critically reexamines how Germans understood Polish national identity during World War I, and how their perceptions affected German proposals for ruling Polish territory. Recent historiography has emphasized the impact of colonial ideologies and experiences on Germans' imperial ambitions in Poland. It has portrayed Germans as viewing Poland through a colonial lens, or favoring colonial methods to rule over Polish space. Using the wartime publications of prominent left liberal, Catholic, and conservative thinkers, this article demonstrates that many influential Germans, even those who supported colonialism in Africa, considered Poland to be a civilized nation for which colonial strategies of rule would be wholly inappropriate. These thinkers instead proposed multinational strategies of imperialism in Poland, which relied on collaboration with Polish nationalists. Specifically, they argued that Berlin should establish an autonomous Polish state, and bind it in permanent military and political union with the German Empire. The perception of Poland as a civilized nation ultimately structured Germany's occupation policy and objectives in Poland throughout the war, much more than stereotypes of Polish primitivity.

Keywords: colonialism; Germany; Poland; World War I; Mitteleuropa; imperialism

Introduction

The outbreak of war in 1914 confronted the German Empire with both danger and opportunity on the Eastern Front. Russia's brief invasion of East Prussia in August 1914 galvanized concerns that Germany's eastern border was too long and topographically exposed to defend. Military commanders, civilian leaders, and political commentators generally agreed that seizing control of Russian Poland would be necessary to shorten and fortify the frontier, yet many worried that annexing the region would inspire resistance from Polish nationalists, or even their treacherous collaboration with Berlin's European rivals (Thum 2013, 142). Decades of failed Prussian policy had already convinced most Germans of the futility of linguistic Germanization (Rohrbach 1915, 916; Naumann 1915a, 74). From the beginning of the war, therefore, Germans in both government offices and public forums wrestled with how to achieve Germany's strategic objectives in Poland without creating a large and potentially subversive minority population. That is, they debated how to most effectively stabilize German imperial control over an ethnically diverse space.

Recently, a chorus of scholars has argued that colonial precedents and ideologies primarily determined how Germans conceived of ruling Eastern European space in World War I. Two related narratives have emerged. The first emphasizes how Germans' experiences with governing overseas colonies inspired novel fantasies of mastery in Eastern Europe, and furnished imperialists with new tools for subjugating native populations (Zimmerer 2005, 211–212, 217). Dennis

Sweeney, for instance, has demonstrated that leaders of the Pan-German League reacted to the 1903 Herero and Nama rebellions in Southwest Africa by endorsing extreme violence to secure Germany's absolute control over territory. They pressed Berlin to restore German authority in Africa through the massacre, surveillance, and dispossession of indigenes. Unrest in Southwest Africa simultaneously convinced Pan-German thinkers to revise their fantasies of future German hegemony in Eastern Europe. They abandoned previously flexible models of influence and instead proposed permanently securing Polish territory through annexation and the wholesale expulsion of resident Poles (Sweeney 2014, 306, 311–317).

Other historians maintain that a “colonial” discourse of Eastern Europe structured German imperialism in World War I. In the late 19th century, these historians argue, pressure groups like the German Eastern Marches Society [*Ostmarkenverein*] justified the possession and Germanization of formerly Polish territory through a project of “discursive colonization” (Kopp 2012, 7–8, 16–17). Nationalists cast Poles as uncultured indigenes, incapable self-governance, and therefore in need of German tutelage (Kopp 2012, 6, 19; Conrad 2014, 283–284; Nelson 2009b, 65, 74–80; Orłowski 1996). Scholars have argued that between 1880 and 1914 most Germans came to understand Poles as irredeemably primitive (Kopp 2012, 23, 57–59; Nelson 2009b, 74). They therefore readily accepted radical proposals for ruling Poland, including both colonization and mass resettlement, as necessary to fulfill Germany's “colonial mission” and “civilize” Eastern Europe (Liulevicius 2009, 343; Conrad 2014, 287–288).

Both narratives agree that colonial precedents and ideologies essentially defined German imperialism in Poland in World War I (Liulevicius 2009, 2–7). Historians have emphasized wartime proposals by National Liberals, Conservatives, and groups like the Pan-German League and *Ostmarkenverein*, which called upon Berlin to annex Polish territory and rule Poles as a legally subjugated colonial population. Many of these schemes recommended stabilizing German rule by swamping annexed territory with German colonists. Scholars point especially to Pan-Germans like Heinrich Claß, who petitioned the government to permanently secure a “border-strip” of territory by expelling its Polish inhabitants eastward (Nelson 2009b, 65, 81, 85–86; Kopp 2012, 125). According to this historiography, colonial models of ethnic management dominated Germany's public and official discussion of war aims for Congress Poland (Liulevicius 2009, 98–129). Alternative models of imperial expansion are routinely dismissed as fleeting and moribund deviations from a centuries long German “myth” of a colonial East (Liulevicius 2009, 143; Nelson 2009a, 4; Geiss 1960, 24–27, 70). Consequently, colonial historiography has vocally reasserted the argument that Wilhelmine Germany's political culture and imperial ambitions in Eastern Europe already closely resembled National Socialism's racialized imaginary of the East (Mazower 2008, 1–14; Conrad 2014, 207–208). Nazi imperialism, they argue, drew upon the same rhetoric of Slavic inferiority, and the same precedents of colonial governance, as Pan-German designs to rule Polish space during World War I (Zimmerer 2005, 211–212, 217; Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 3–6; Ther 2006, 146–148; Kopp 2012, 206–210; Liulevicius 2009, 201; Mazower 2008, 15–30).

Some scholars have challenged this narrative of continuity, in particular the degree to which German imperial policy toward Russian Poland in World War I actually resembled either colonial antecedents or the later Nazi occupation regime (Lehnstaedt 2014, 99, 105, 112). Jesse Kauffman has argued that the German occupation government's sustained efforts to transform Russian Poland into an autonomous state under Berlin's influence hardly resembled German colonial regimes in either methods or aims (Kauffman 2015, 4–5, 10–11). While this literature has contested the purported influence of colonial precedents on German occupation policy in World War I, challenges to the “discursive colonization” thesis have been sparser. Most scholarly treatments continue to describe a pathological anti-Slavism premised on Poles' cultural or racial inferiority as pervasive in Wilhelmine political culture.

This article will critically reexamine German portrayals of Polish national culture and proposals for ruling Russian Poland during World War I. It will offer two arguments. First, approval

of colonialism in Africa did not necessarily translate into German support for colonial methods of ethnic management in Poland. Many of the imperialists considered below supported overseas colonialism, and some ardently defended the most brutal policies it entailed. Yet, and this leads to my second intervention, their wartime writings reveal that sizeable and influential circles of German imperialists rejected depictions of Poles as a primitive or “colonial people” and insisted that Poland was a civilized nation with a robust culture and a proven record of self-governance. Consequently, they believed annexation and Germanization of Polish territory to be either unconscionable or implausible. Instead, they proposed a *multinational* strategy for achieving German objectives, wherein Germany would carve an autonomous Kingdom of Poland from Russian territory, and bring it into political and military union with Berlin. Their plans imagined the continued development, indeed the political institutionalization, of the Polish nation as a constituent part of the German imperial structure.¹ Ultimately, the perception of Poland as a civilized nation strongly influenced the German government’s war aims, and continued to frame Germany’s relationship with Poland in the later years of the war.

Three main political demographics promoted a multinational framework for understanding German-Polish relations: left liberals, moderate conservatives, and Roman Catholics. German left liberals, organized around the Progressive People’s Party (*Fortschrittliche Volkspartei* or FVP) furnished the most vehement defenses of Poland’s civilized status, and the most influential proposals for achieving strategic objectives in Poland through multinational imperialism. The FVP had integrated a series of late 19th century progressive movements attempting to redress the social iniquities produced by industrialization, while still preserving Germany’s constitutional order and capitalist economic framework (Meyer 1955, 87–88). In 1914, left liberals generally considered imperial expansion necessary for the continued security of the German Empire. Expanding Germany’s strategic influence on the continent, they argued, would fortify its military position against potential rivals. Colonial exploitation in Africa, they hoped, would support a higher domestic standard of living, mollifying the working class and reinforcing their loyalty to the state (Kedar 2010, 38; Meyer 1955, 88, 93).

Left liberal publicists and intellectuals wielded significant influence on German political discourse during the war. Contemporaries considered Paul Rohrbach, Friedrich Naumann, and Hans Delbrück, among the most influential political commentators in Wilhelmine Germany. They edited the periodicals *Das Größere Deutschland*, *Die Hilfe*, and *Preußische Jahrbücher* respectively. Before 1914, Rohrbach had established himself as the “most widely read commentator on foreign- and colonial-policy” in Germany (Mogk 1972, 5). His book *Deutsche Gedanke in der Welt* became the “undisputed political best-seller” in the German book market of 1912 (Mogk 1972, 170). It was only unseated from this position in 1915, when Friedrich Naumann, his close associate, published his multinationalist magnum opus, *Mitteleuropa*. Naumann’s book sold hundreds of thousands of copies and practically defined the public discussion of war aims for months (Meyer 1955, 151, 206). Left liberal journals enjoyed brisk circulation. Between 30,000 and 40,000 Germans subscribed to *Die Hilfe* during World War I, and the journal sold an additional 60,000 copies on newsstands (Meyer 1955, 148). Germans regarded *Preußische Jahrbücher* as one of the most important historical and political periodicals of the era (Mogk 1972, 164). Although *Das Größere Deutschland* had only been founded in April 1914, it already attracted contributions from prominent intellectuals like Friedrich Meinecke and Theodor Schiemann.

German Catholics and moderate conservatives were similarly inclined to both portray Poland as a civilized nation, and support multinational imperialism in Poland. Since the 1870s, the Catholic Center Party had collaborated with Polish politicians to combat anti-ultramontane initiatives. The Center Party had consistently worked to obstruct Prussia’s efforts to Germanize Poles, in part because they feared any exceptional legislation might serve as a precedent for anti-Catholic policies (Bennette 2012, 85, 87). During World War I, Catholic publicists like Julius Bachem, editor of the influential *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, insisted that Poland was a civilized

nation, and argued that any attempt to project German influence into Russian Poland must account for this (Bachem 1916b, 173–176, 1916a). Several conservative intellectuals, including Adolf Grabowsky, Georg Cleinow, and Theodor Schiemann, shared these views. With the backing of German left liberalism, political Catholicism, and a segment of moderate conservatism, multinational imperialism represented a substantial force in the early wartime debate over Germany's Polish objectives. During the war, both left liberal intellectuals and leaders of the Center Party pressed policy-makers in Berlin to pursue multinational strategies of rule in Poland.

Distinguishing African and Polish Space

Colonialism enjoyed broad support in Wilhelmine Germany. Multinationals frequently endorsed the colonial exploitation of Africa and generally condoned severe violence to manage local populations. Indeed, historians have routinely cited Paul Rohrbach's racist vision of German rule in Africa to link Germany's colonial experiences and ideologies with the emergence of violent "völkisch fantasies" of mastery over Poland and Eastern Europe (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 111–113, 237; Madley 2005, 434–436; Eley 2014, 33–37). Given Rohrbach's influence as a publicist, scholars have interpreted him as principal evidence of the colonial continuity thesis (Zimmerer 2005, 212, 217).

Rohrbach tirelessly supported Germany's brutal colonization of African territory, and worked closely with the Colonial Department to achieve it. In 1890 Paul Rohrbach relocated from the Russian Baltics to Berlin, where he studied geography, theology, and history and eventually naturalized as a Prussian citizen. Rohrbach developed a close relationship with the liberal politician Friedrich Naumann, and began writing articles on colonial and foreign policy for Naumann's periodical, *Die Hilfe* (Rohrbach 1953, 12–19). In June 1903, the Colonial Department recruited Rohrbach, at the time an aspiring geographer, as settlement commissioner for German Southwest Africa and furnished him with a budget of 300,000 Marks (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 12). Until 1906, he reported directly to the Colonial Department in Berlin, and to Governor Leutwein in Windhuk, the capitol of Southwest Africa.

Rohrbach was tasked with resolving the central obstacle to Germany's plans for Southwest Africa: actually enticing German migrants to settle there (Rohrbach 1953, 59). The Colonial Department aimed to transform Southwest Africa into a settler colony, and had been encouraging migration since its takeover of the colony in 1890. By 1903, however, only 4,674 Germans had settled in the region (Madley 2005, 430; Gann and Duignan 1977, X). Local conditions made Southwest Africa unattractive for prospective farmers. Dry steppe and desert covered most of the territory, and the 30% of the country that was arable received only irregular rainfall (Gann and Duignan 1977, 17). The Herero, successful native pastoralists, owned much of this arable land, and most refused to sell their assets (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 115). Indeed the Herero practice of leasing land to colonists suggested an embarrassing inversion of colonial hierarchies. As the Herero resisted authorities' efforts to transplant them to reservations, frustration among settlers and in Windhuk sharpened. The Colonial Department now charged Rohrbach with finding expedient means for taking possession of Herero land. In particular, Rohrbach intended to evaluate recent British methods of expropriation in neighboring South Africa for use in the German colony (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 111, 117).

German-Herero relations were unraveling as Rohrbach arrived in August 1903. Years of brutality and judicial iniquity by the colonial administration had embittered the Herero (Hull 2005, 8). Windhuk's intention to open up Herero land for German settlement brought relations to a boiling point. On January 12, 1904, Paramount Chief Samuel Maherero, the foremost leader of the Herero, enjoined his people to resist German rule, its arbitrary tyranny, and the dis-possession of Herero land (Madley 2005, 430). The Herero revolt opened with raids on 267 farmsteads in the vicinity of Windhuk, killing 123 European settlers (Madley 2005, 440; Hull 2005, 8).

The German Empire responded with a brutal campaign to restore order. The Herero rebellion had caught Windhuk flat-footed. Possessing only a miniscule garrison of the colonial army [*Schutztruppe*], and tasked with securing a vast territory against an irregular enemy, Governor Leutwein compensated by deputizing settlers into paramilitary units and adopting a violent policy of punishment and deterrence (Hull 2005, 18). Though militarily inexperienced, Rohrbach set aside his survey work and volunteered for service in a local unit of the *Schutztruppe*. Rohrbach served for three months, during which his unit led several punitive expeditions in the bush (Hull 2005, 19; Rohrbach 1953, 63). These amounted to more or less arbitrary murder sprees designed to terrorize locals into submission to German authority. By his own admission, Rohrbach's patrols indiscriminately targeted black Africans. He later estimated that within a few months they had killed at least 20 men, most of them Bergdemara or Bushmen, not armed Herero (Rohrbach 1909a, 79, 113, 127, 132; Hull 2005, 19).

German operations to restore order infamously devolved into a systematic project of extermination, in which *Schutztruppe* units and prison camps killed between 40,000 and 70,000 Herero through execution, starvation, overwork, or water deprivation (Schaller 2008, 296; Madley 2005, 431, 446–449). Rohrbach's participation in this genocidal campaign did not dampen his enthusiasm for colonialism. In 1909, he purchased 10,000 hectares of land in Southwest Africa, and would proudly recall his time as an "African estate owner" until the end of his days (Rohrbach 1953, 117). After returning to Berlin, Rohrbach took a job as a lecturer for colonial economy and wrote *Deutsche Kolonialwirtschaft*, a blueprint for settler colonialism informed by his own experiences in Southwest Africa (Rohrbach 1953, 91; Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 237). In 1912, he wrote *Deutsche Gedanke in der Welt*, a longer manifesto for German imperialism. Together, these works offer a clear picture of Rohrbach's agenda and preferred methods for ruling Africa.

Rohrbach considered a colonial empire necessary for securing Germany's access to food, industrial raw materials, export markets, and vacant lands to settle Germany's growing population (Rohrbach 1909b, 27). He based his proposals for colonial governance on the premise that black Africans were a "lower race," incapable of being civilized (Rohrbach 1909b, 3–5; Rohrbach 1912, 135). African societies had, in Rohrbach's appraisal, failed to contribute to the cultural or technological progress of humanity, and he therefore believed that German settlers could justifiably expropriate African land for their own, more productive, ends (Rohrbach 1909b, 20–21). Rohrbach insisted that colonial policy should open space for German settlement in Africa, or otherwise exploit local resources for metropolitan economic development (Rohrbach 1909b, 12, 52). He encouraged Berlin to accelerate the pace of white settlement in all colonies, to reserve the best farmlands for white cultivation, and to expand plantation agriculture in Cameroon and East Africa (Rohrbach 1909b, 27; Koponen 1994, 248). To more efficiently extract black labor, Rohrbach advocated the subordination of African subjects as a segregated class of laborers, forced to serve a caste of white settlers and officials through a system of "compulsory-labor" (Rohrbach 1909b, 20–21, 45–46, 52–53).

To defend this exploitative racial order, Rohrbach endorsed the application of extreme violence (Rohrbach 1909b, 52). Governing African subjects, he believed, required constant assertions of authority through "unrelenting and severe punishment" (Rohrbach 1909b, 96). Given their value as laborers, Rohrbach considered the outright "extermination of Africans" practically impossible (Rohrbach 1912, 141). However, he believed that challenges to colonial authority should be met with disproportionate violence. "In order to secure the peaceful white settlement against the bad, culturally inept, and predatory native tribe, it is possible that actual eradication may become necessary under certain conditions" (Rohrbach 1907, 350). Rohrbach also regarded Germany's brutal campaign to exterminate the Herero as an unanticipated triumph. In 1907, he reflected that, in order to transform Southwest Africa into a settler colony, it had always been clear that Germans would need to expropriate and parcel Herero land (Rohrbach 1909b, 18–19). In Rohrbach's eyes, the suppression of the Herero revolt had incidentally achieved Germany's

colonial objectives: native disarmament, opening land for white settlement, the dissolution of tribal organization, and the reorganization of natives into an inert “serving class” (Rohrbach 1909b, 18–20).

Rohrbach therefore understood black Africans as an irredeemably primitive race, whose backwardness justified a form of rule extreme in both its exploitation and brutality. He was perhaps unique in his frankness of expression. Yet support for colonialism was the norm among multinational imperialists, especially left liberals (Meinecke 1915, 1001). Naumann, for instance, wrote to defend the legacy of Carl Peters, the adventurer known for both staking Germany’s claim to East Africa and his despicable treatment of local populations (Mogk 1972, 167). Before World War I, political writers like Ernst Jäckh had dreamed of expanding German holdings in Central Africa to form a transcontinental *Mittelafrika* (Jäckh 1914, 65). With the outbreak of war in 1914, observers like Naumann and Meinecke petitioned Berlin to pursue *Mittelafrika* as a war aim, and thereby secure Germany’s access to raw materials and cheap manual labor (Kolbe 1916, 2228; Meinecke 2012, 197; “Notizen” 1916, 1141–1142).

Despite their appreciation of colonial rule in Africa, and their comfort with the racial hierarchy and violence used to maintain it, multinational imperialists like Paul Rohrbach and Friedrich Naumann neither engaged in the discursive colonization of Russian Poland nor recommended colonial strategies to rule its territory. Rather they explicitly described Poland as a civilized and culturally productive nation, and therefore insisted that Poland could not be considered colonial space.

Nationalist groups like the *Ostmarkenverein* employed several tropes when portraying Poland as a colonial space. They depicted Poland as *res nullius*, an empty or uncivilized frontier awaiting cultivation by intrepid pioneers (Nelson 2009a, 4). Colonialists amputated Poland from the occident, insisting that Poles were culturally or racially more Asiatic than European. They imagined Poles as culturally stagnant, incapable of developing their own arts and technology without rigorous German intervention. Subscribers often worried that, without German mastery to impede it, Polish barbarism might seep westward, corrupting German culture or subverting Teutonic racial strength through intermarriage (Kopp 2012, 8–12, 96). Most importantly, participants in this “discursive colonization” argued that Poles were incapable of governing their own state (Kopp 2012, 6, 19).

German multinationalists explicitly rejected each of these postulates. Russian Poland, they argued, fundamentally differed from Africa demographically and economically, offering no *res nullius*, no fallow fields waiting for industrious German colonists. The population density of Western Poland averaged 128 residents per square kilometer, much higher than Germany’s own average (Geiss 1960, 45). Though an ardent supporter of German settlement in Africa, Rohrbach explicitly described Russian Poland as occupied and cultivated, too populated to contemplate the mass settlement of German colonists eastward (Rohrbach 1915, 908–910). Poland, Naumann agreed, lacked the characteristics of a settler or extractive colony. It had no uncultivated territories waiting for German plows, nor did it possess abundant raw materials (Naumann 1917, 25). Even conservative multinationalists like Adolf Grabowsky and Georg Cleinow insisted that Congress Poland was simply too densely populated to invite colonization (Grabowsky 1916, 78; Cleinow 1916, 78).

Multinationalist authors also asserted the civilized status of Polish nationhood throughout the war. Rather than portraying Poles as an Asiatic invader or part of a ‘Slavic flood,’ German multinationalists wrote Poland into a European cultural community, insisting that Poland belonged to “occidental Europe” (Rohrbach 1916b, 2014). Axel Schmidt included Poland in a litany of civilized nations alongside Germany, France, Austria, England, and Italy (Schmidt 1914, 717). Others deliberately drew the cultural border of the occident to the East of Poland, and cautioned their readers not to group “Eastern-European Slavs” (Poles) with the Russian Empire, for “... their church, their script as well as their social life and art are most strongly influenced or adopted from Italy, Germany, and France” (Lampe 1916, 172; Grabowsky 1916, 12). As a

member of the occidental community, authors like Naumann noted that the Polish nation possessed the same rights to cultural preservation and development as Germany (Naumann 1915b, 466).

Multinationalists represented Poland as a culturally productive nation. Wilhelm von Massow complained that many German readings of history had understated Poland's contributions to Eastern Europe's cultural development (von Massow 1915, 1486). The left liberal Reichstag representative Georg Gothein denounced stereotypes of Polish commercial incompetence or disorganization, commonly distilled into the pejorative phrase "Polish economy." Poles, he insisted, possessed an admirable "economic initiative and organizational talent" (Gothein 1917, 21). Multinationalists were especially inclined to praise Polish literature. After fondly recalling reading Mickiewicz in the original Polish, one author concluded that Poland possessed "all of the markings of a cultural nation [*Kulturvolk*]" (Hildebrandt 1916, 110). Naumann contended that the upper strata of Polish society were actually culturally superior to the average German, possessing strong literary and philosophical talents and greater skill in fantasy and interior art, than their German counterparts (Naumann 1917, 28). If anything, Naumann believed that Poles were too romantic and thus uncomfortable with "the rational culture of the sons of Kant" (Naumann 1917, 29). Most Poles, Naumann clarified, could grasp Schiller better than his own countrymen, but Poland had developed a less technically oriented culture than Germany. However, Naumann argued that this romantic tendency had derived from St. Petersburg's long autocratic rule and Poles' consequent exclusion from government. Though still critical of some aspects, Naumann and other multinationalists adamantly held that Polish national culture was civilized and vibrant. They considered deficiencies in Polish culture to be temporary deformities produced by Russian administration, not crippling racial flaws (Naumann 1917, 29).

Recognizing Poland as a civilized nation, multinationalists did not fear the diffusion of Polish culture westward, or the corruption of German culture through contact with Poles. One author rebuffed the concern directly, arguing that East Prussia, a region "strongly" influenced by Slavic culture, was certainly "not degenerate" (von Mackay 1916, 213). To the contrary, several multinationalists lauded historical exchanges between Germans and Slavs. Concerned about the integrity of the German race and colonial rule, Rohrbach had lobbied Berlin in 1907 for strict racial segregation and the prohibition of interracial marriages in the colonies (Rohrbach 1909b, 22–24). Rohrbach harbored no such fears about German-Polish relations. In 1912 he criticized historical narratives which cast Germans and Slavs as locked in violent racial struggle.

It is wrong to assume, as people used to do, that the gradual re-Germanization of the people east of the Elbe and the Saale was due to the extermination of the Slavic tribes, who had settled there. On the contrary, it was the result of a comprehensive blood mixture of the conquered with the conquerors (Rohrbach 1912, 67).

Rohrbach considered this historic confluence fortuitous. Like many Germans, Rohrbach worried that German culture suffered from an exaggerated particularism that had produced chronic political instability in Central Europe (Confino 1997, 47–61). He argued that the intermarriage of Slavic and German culture had tempered German particularism and made Prussians more inclined to accept a centralized Hohenzollern monarchy, the eventual engine of German unification (Rohrbach 1912, 68). The left liberal politician Willy Hellpach joined in Rohrbach's praise of cultural interchange between Germans and "West-Slavs" (Poles) (Hellpach 1915, 624). Like Rohrbach, this carried condescending overtones, suggesting that the national character of Slavs expressed a developed sense of "subservience" to authority. But, like Rohrbach, Hellpach agreed that the merger of German and Polish culture had produced the "Prussian" character, Germany's salvation from its own tragic particularism (Hellpach 1915, 625). The point for Rohrbach and Hellpach was not that German culture had prevailed over, or assimilated, Slavic populations. Both insisted that Slavic culture had meaningfully improved the Prussian character.

For them, German progress had been founded on the redemptive cultural mixture of Germans and Slavs, not on the displacement or elimination of Eastern peoples.

Multinationals also marveled at the capacity of Polish national culture to flourish despite a century of Polish statelessness and decades of Germanization and Russification policies. In 1916, Paul Rohrbach wrote of the failure of Germanization in the face of Polish cultural activists.

It is well known how our Prussian-German cultural policy and how our Polish policy in Posen and West Prussia worked... there a middle class, efficient, active, and educated in economic and every other competence, emerged to perform the actual work in efforts of the Prussian Poles to preserve their exterior and interior national rights (Rohrbach 1916b, 2013).

Naumann agreed. Even if Berlin wanted to commit more resources to the endeavor, Naumann believed Germany would fail to repress Polish national politics (Naumann 1917, 33). He further praised Poles for developing a strong sense of national culture despite the partition of Poland (Naumann 1915c, 481). The apparent durability of Polish national culture both elicited a grudging admiration among multinationals and resigned them to the implausibility of Germanization.

Multinationals scoffed at stereotypes of Polish political incompetence (Meinecke 1958, 90; Gothein 1917, 21). They considered Poland a *Staatsnation*, a national community capable of political self-assertion. Massow denounced the “dogma of [the] permanent incapacity of Poles to form their own state,” as demonstrably false (von Massow 1916, 1461). Poles in Prussia and Austria-Hungary, he argued, had repeatedly proven the “viability and developmental capacity” of the Polish nation (von Massow 1916, 1463). What economic backwardness existed in Russian Poland, Massow continued, resulted from the mismanagement of St. Petersburg, not Polish inadequacy (von Massow 1916, 1463–1464). Naumann predicted that Poles, who had already proven their ability to govern the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the past, would capably manage their own affairs again if given the opportunity (Naumann 1916a, 892). He argued that Poland had already developed a complex social structure which supported several influential political parties, and was therefore ready to meet the challenge of bourgeois democracy (Naumann 1917, 33).

Rohrbach offered one of the fiercest defenses of Polish *Staatsfähigkeit*. In his efforts to justify colonialism in Africa, Rohrbach had mocked black-governed states like Haiti or the Kingdom of Rwanda as “laughable distortions of European-American” governments (Rohrbach 1909b, 6, 96). In World War I, however, Rohrbach repeatedly emphasized that Poland had already been a major European power, and therefore proven its capacity for self-governance. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, he believed, had not succumbed to a lack of Polish governing competence. Rather, Rohrbach blamed the powerful Polish nobility for obstructing the centralization of the Commonwealth in the 17th and 18th centuries, and thereby fatally weakening the state (Rohrbach 1916b, 2012). The nobility, he argued, had managed to prevent the formation of a strong middle class that could support the Polish crown (Rohrbach 1916c, 2199). However, Rohrbach believed that Poles had long since resolved this deficit and developed a middle class prepared to assume an active role in statebuilding (Rohrbach 1916b, 2012). A restored Polish state, would not, according to Rohrbach, suffer from the same weaknesses of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It would be “modern,” with “healthy and viable” economic and social foundations (Rohrbach 1916b, 2013). The Polish nation, he concluded, was *Staatsfähig* (Rohrbach 1916b, 2013).

Multinationals therefore rejected the colonial interpretation of German-Polish relations espoused by their nationalist contemporaries. Poland, for them, was not an irredeemably primitive nation in need of German rule. Rather, they considered Poland to have an advanced and resilient national culture, one that had already produced an influential state.

Rejecting Colonial Methods of Rule Over Congress Poland

Multinationalists agreed with many of their countrymen that Germany needed to seize control of Russian Poland, but renounced significant annexations. Because Poland had demonstrated its status as a civilized nation, German multinationalists believed that any attempt to Germanize large populations of Poles would only inspire dogged resistance (Rohrbach 1915, 916; Schmidt 1915b, 1145–1146). Polish political sophistication likewise convinced German multinationalists that ruling Poland through raw force would simply be impossible in the long run. Finally, multinationalists believed that Germany was morally prohibited from undercutting Poland's national development through colonization or violence. Already in 1914, Rohrbach rejected establishing German control in Poland through demographic manipulation or forced population transfers as “outrageous” (Rohrbach 1914b, 759). Naumann argued that Germans lacked the moral “coarseness” to expand via “lordly repression” (Naumann 1915a, 84–85).

German multinationalists thus prescribed means of ethnic management in Poland entirely different from those they considered appropriate for Africa. Multinationalists believed that the German Empire and the Polish nation shared a mutual interest defending against Russian expansionism in Eastern Europe (Naumann 1915b, 465–467; von Massow 1915, 1490). They therefore proposed a grand bargain between Germany and Poland. Germany would satisfy the aspirations of Polish nationalists by forging an autonomous kingdom out of Russian Poland, furnished with its own government, parliament, and even military. In return, Poland would enter into a political and military union with the German Empire, wherein Berlin would control Poland's foreign policy and command the united German and Polish armies in the event of war. The Kingdom of Poland and the German Empire would defend a common eastern frontier as permanent allies, presenting a phalanx against Russian expansionism. Germany would thereby achieve its strategic objectives in the region through collaboration with the Polish nation (Naumann 1916b, 894; Rohrbach 1915, 914, 1916b, 2014).

Multinationalist thinkers debated whether Berlin should construct a narrow German-Polish union, or attempt to integrate Poland into a broader German-led Central European confederation [*Mitteleuropa*] (von Massow 1916, 1460–1470; von Mackay 1915, 1268; Rohrbach 1916a, 665; Schmidt 1916, 688; Jäckh 1916, 1068; Hellpach 1915, 624; Naumann 1915c, 482; Meinecke 1916, 558–572; Jastrow 1915; Theodor Schiemann 1916, 2137–2139; Bachem 1916a). However, their proposals all agreed on the necessity of institutionalizing Polish nationhood. Assuming that Poland was a civilized and capable nation, multinationalists believed Poles would ardently resist anything less than autonomy. Multinationalists therefore insisted that Germany take Polish autonomy seriously, and warned Berlin not to threaten Polish national integrity, lest they inspire future revolt (Jäckh 1916, 1070; Naumann 1915a, 231–236). German multinationalists wanted Poland to control its own domestic governance, education and cultural policies, judiciary, and police. To safeguard Polish autonomy, multinationalists further emphasized the importance of a Polish army under the peacetime control of Warsaw (Naumann 1915a, 69, 234–236, 249).

In their economic objectives, attitudes toward native governance, and military policy, multinationalist plans for a Kingdom of Poland under German suzerainty thoroughly controverted German colonial precedents. Berlin had pursued two basic economic objectives in Africa: efficient extraction and German settlement. “Trade colonies” like Cameroon and East Africa, exploited natural wealth and native labor, often through labor-conscription or the forced cultivation of cash crops (Gann and Duignan 1977, 121, 167; Koponen 1994, 216, 339–345). German administrators in Duala regularly dragooned Cameroonians to work on German-owned plantations, where they received poor wages and suffered high mortality rates (Gann and Duignan 1977, 168). In East Africa, colonial officials flogged indigenes who resisted compulsory labor or defaulted on their taxes (Koponen 1994, 647). Despite central reforms in 1907, compulsory labor persisted regionally (Gann and Duignan 1977, 184). In sub-tropical “settler

colonies,” German colonialists imagined eventually dispossessing indigenes of their land, and transferring it to settlers. After the suppression of the Herero and Nama revolts in Southwest Africa, Windhuk had made a concerted effort to convert Africans into a “landless proletariat” to labor for white settlers (Gann and Duignan 1977, 75). Whether focused on extraction or settlement, German colonial administrations designed their economies to exploit the labor of Africans. Likewise, the expropriation of native land, whether coordinated by the colonial government, or simply stolen by German settlers, was common throughout the colonies (Gann and Duignan 1977, 147; Koponen 1994, 253).

Multinationalist proposals for a German-Polish union envisioned a far less plunderous economic relationship. Multinationalists explicitly differentiated their proposals for a German-Polish union from colonial economies. Naumann denied the accusation that “Germany wants to make a sort of colony out of Poland as a substitute for the lost African territories” (Naumann 1917, 25). Poland, he continued, had already begun to industrialize, with a booming manufacturing sector in Łódź (Naumann 1917, 18). Naumann foresaw an industrialized future for Poland within *Mitteleuropa*, and insisted that Poles were quite capable of thriving in such an economy (Naumann 1917, 22–25). Multinationalists imagined the creation of a tariff union to meld the economies of Germany and Poland. Although Germans certainly foresaw benefits for German manufacturers accessing Polish markets, the relationship envisioned was a far cry from the systematic expropriation of land and labor prosecuted by Germans in Africa. Indeed, Adolf Grabowsky argued that the German Empire should bolster Poland’s heavy industry after the war, in order to fortify Warsaw’s military strength. He therefore encouraged Berlin to privilege Polish imports into Germany’s own domestic market (Grabowsky 1916, 79).

Proposals for a satellite Kingdom of Poland departed substantially from the political strategies of German colonial governments. Since the early 1890s, German colonial administration had tended to dismantle native self-governance. Both de facto and recognized self-governance existed in each of Germany’s African colonies, but German administrators had established and tolerated such relationships to cope with a dearth of resources. Berlin parsimoniously financed an empire in Africa four times the size of the German metropole (Gann and Duignan 1977, ix). In East Africa, the entire budget for administration in 1913 maintained only 70 German bureaucrats of all ranks. Authorities regularly compensated for their shoestring budget by coopting local political structures. In East Africa, Germans initially took over the network of suzerainties and trade relationships by which the Sultanate of Zanzibar had extended its influence (Gann and Duignan 1977, 13, 59, 74; Koponen 1994, 131). As growing appetites for revenue and ambitious development projects required more administrative personnel, colonial states like East Africa began directly coopting native elites, *jumbas*, or recruiting *akidas*, Swahili auxiliaries trained as tax collectors and local officials. Even in Southwest Africa, where ambitions to settle the region produced more invasive strategies of rule, Windhuk opted to leave the Ovambo people, isolated in the far north of the colony, largely to their own devices (Gann and Duignan 1977, 74).

Though German rule in Africa relied on local collaborators, and even tolerated the autonomy of some African polities, colonial administrations never sought to fortify African authority or support the cultural or economic development of these entities. Rather, colonial governments tended to consolidate direct administrative control wherever they could (Gann and Duignan 1977, 78). In East Africa, Dar es Salaam progressively stripped nominally autonomous *jumbas* of their authority and responsibility, partnering them with an *akida* to assert German interests, or replaced *jumbas* altogether (Koponen 1994, 117–118, 282–285). Though utterly reliant on *akidas*, Dar es Salaam was careful to provide them with only remedial training, lest they become an educated elite that might challenge German rule (Koponen 1994, 507, 526). German authorities in Southwest Africa also deliberately undermined and dissolved tribal cohesion (Gann and Duignan 1977, 20, 27, 75; Schaller 2008, 298, 314).

By contrast, multinationalists proposed to fashion an autonomous Polish government, replete with its own monarchy, judiciary, domestic administration, and system of higher education,

where no such organization presently existed. These plans were premised on the tolerance, and indeed fortification, of Polish national identity and self-governance.

Multinationalist military policy for Poland also flouted colonial norms. Ideally, German colonial administrations had prioritized disarming African populations and dismantling independent African armies and militias in order to cripple potential resistance (Gann and Duignan 1977, 27, 120). Germany did recruit substantial numbers of African auxiliaries, *Askaris*, for the *Schutztruppe*. However, Berlin organized the *Schutztruppe* as a gendarmerie to enforce Germany's will in the colonies. Though adequate for keeping a modicum of order, it was a remarkably small force, and certainly unequal to the challenge of fighting European armies (Gann and Duignan 1977, 116–117). The *Schutztruppe*'s command structure reflected its aim of maintaining German dominance over subject populations: white officers commanded *Askaris* (Gann and Duignan 1977, 66). In order to ensure that native *Askaris* would never turn on Germany and lead resistance against the established colonial order, officials recruited or purchased soldiers from outside of Germany's African territories, or tried to deploy *Askaris* far from their homes, where ties to the local population might split their loyalties. Though sufficiently drilled to repress native revolts, *Askaris* were only trained as light infantry, and were equipped with antiquated rifles. Their white German colleagues in the *Schutztruppe*, on the other hand, received modern weapons, including machine-guns and light mountain artillery (Gann and Duignan 1977, 116–119).

By contrast, German multinationalists envisioned the Polish army as a large and robust fighting force with modern equipment and fully developed technical wings. They imagined it as a strong national army capable of trading body blows with Russia. By handing over peacetime military command to the King of Poland, multinationalists hoped to ensure Poles that their army would not be used as an instrument of repression by Berlin. Implicitly, it would deter Berlin from overstepping its bounds and interfering in Polish domestic politics.

Therefore, while many of these thinkers supported German colonialism in Africa, they publically defended Poland's status as a civilized nation, and proposed a strategy for achieving German objectives that comprehensively departed from German norms of colonial governance. Two patterns confirm that perceptions of Poland as a civilized nation meaningfully shaped multinationalist policies. That is, multinationalists did not merely tailor their depictions of Poland to advance their preferred strategic agenda. First, many multinationalist thinkers had contested depictions of Poles as primitive before August 1914, when conflict between Germany and Russia reopened the Polish question (Rohrbach 1914a, 184). This suggests some degree of authenticity, rather than opportunism.

Secondly, the contrast between multinationalists' aims in Poland and the Baltics clearly demonstrates how perceptions of culture impacted their war aims. Like Poland, German imperialists considered the Baltic region, encompassing modern Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, too small and economically underdeveloped to sustain independent states capable of defending themselves from Russian expansionism. Similarly, the Baltics offered a tempting prize for imperialists, promising to secure a stable food supply for the German Empire's growing population (Rohrbach 1915, 914). Despite these similarities, several authors who supported multinationalist imperialism in Poland, simultaneously endorsed policies of annexation and Germanization in the Russian Baltics because they believed resident ethnicities had not developed the cultural sophistication to justify preservation or the political coherence to resist integration.

Paul Rohrbach explicitly contrasted Poland, which possessed an attractive national culture that Poles would fight to retain, with less advanced Baltic cultures, which he believed natives would willingly abandon in favor of the superior German alternative (Rohrbach 1915, 909, 916). Even if they disliked German culture, Rohrbach argued that Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, and White Ruthenians had not developed sufficiently strong national identities to organize resistance to annexation and "gradual Germanization" (Rohrbach 1915, 910). Through schooling

and colonization, he estimated that Berlin could completely Germanize Courland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Livonia within a few generations (Rohrbach 1915, 911). Theodor Schiemann likewise contrasted Latvia's absence of independent culture with Poland's cultural achievements, and agreed with Rohrbach that Baltic populations would not likely resist German annexation (Schiemann 1916, 1759–1760). Schiemann believed that Latvian peasants were already essentially German in culture, and would readily learn German under Berlin's governance (Schiemann 1916, 1760). Schiemann concluded that Baltic universities and higher education should instruct only in German, forcing Latvians to adopt the language for the sake of social mobility (Schiemann 1916, 1761). Convinced that they could easily Germanize local populations, multinationalists like Paul Rohrbach and Theodore Schiemann therefore argued that the German Empire should claim sweeping annexations along Russia's Baltic coast (Rohrbach 1912, 10; Rohrbach 1915, 910).

Conversely, those multinationalists who renounced annexations in the Baltics did so because they felt that Baltic cultures had already achieved a level of cultural sophistication and political organization that rendered them immune to Germanization. Axel Schmidt, for instance, insisted that Latvians and Estonians had developed sophisticated national cultures, citing their mobilization of strong national political movements, codified written languages, and growing ranks of educated elites. Annexation and nationalization, he concluded, would be impractical and ethically dubious (Schmidt 1915a, 25). Meinecke similarly disapproved of annexing the Baltics, preferring to incorporate the region into a multinational imperial structure as a collection of "confederated small states" (Meinecke 2012, 197).

German supporters of colonialism, therefore, did not reflexively apply colonial models to Eastern Europe. The perceived sophistication and political awareness of Eastern European cultures structured what goals and forms of ethnic management German multinationalists considered appropriate. These thinkers challenged "colonial" interpretations of Polish nationhood, articulating a competing framework for understanding German-Polish relations which both recognized Poland as a civilized nation and recommended appropriate strategies for achieving German objectives in this context. The Polish nation, they believed, offered a sufficiently attractive alternative to German *Kultur* to make Germanization a hopeless prospect. Moreover, it possessed a vernacular elite both influential and competent enough to organize effective resistance to foreign rule. Germany, they believed, could only achieve its strategic goals in Russian Poland by bargaining with Polish nationalists, creating a mutually advantageous union that would fortify Germany's borders and secure Polish national autonomy.

These were not isolated or abstract thought experiments. Multinationalist intellectuals exercised significant influence on government and military circles in Berlin. During the war, Paul Rohrbach served on the board of directors for the *Zentralstelle für Auslandsdienst*, the bureau established to coordinate Germany's wartime propaganda activities. He also organized and led the agency's working group on Eastern Europe. This work brought Rohrbach into regular contact with officials in the Foreign Office. Indeed Rohrbach circulated several memoranda concerning Germany's objectives in Eastern Europe within the Foreign Office. He also managed to personally present his ideas to both Germany's top military leadership and Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (Rohrbach 1953, 200–202). The multinational imperialist and Munich historian Ignaz Jastrow submitted frequent memoranda to the German occupation government in Congress Poland (Jastrow 1915, 119; Jastrow 1916, 1–8). Leaders of the Center Party like Matthias Erzberger and Julius Bachem likewise pressured Berlin to pursue a multinational German-Polish union (Erzberger 1914, 25). The Center's position as the second largest party in the Reichstag made its support virtually indispensable to Berlin's legislative agenda, and its pressure difficult for the Chancellery to ignore.

German military and political elites responsible for crafting policy in occupied Poland ultimately arrived at similar conclusions about the sophisticated nature of Polish nationalism, and accordingly adopted a multinationalist model of empire in Poland. From the autumn of 1914,

both the Chancellery and the Foreign Office entertained proposals for creating a Polish state in military and political union with the German Empire (“Deutschlands Ostgrenze jetzt und in Zukunft”, Memorandum circulated in the Foreign Office” 1915, 60). After seizing Russian Poland in a series of offensives in 1915, Berlin established a joint occupation of the region with Austria-Hungary, and installed Hans Hartwig von Beseler to head Germany’s new Government General of Warsaw. The occupation government appointed the conservative multinationalist, and expert on Poland, Georg Cleinow, as chief of its press administration. While serving in this capacity, Cleinow submitted several memoranda to Governor General von Beseler, calling for a multinational imperial policy in Poland (Cleinow 1916). Based upon his readings of multinationalist proposals and his own experiences in the region, Governor General von Beseler quickly concluded that Polish nationalism was too firmly established, and too politically organized, to ignore or oppose (Kauffman 2013, 68). In July of 1916, Beseler petitioned his superiors in Berlin to commit to the creation of an autonomous Polish state under German suzerainty (Kauffman 2015, 41–46, 64–66, 74). Beseler not only called for the creation of a self-governing and militarily capable Polish state, he also argued that this new satellite Kingdom of Poland should actually annex and *colonize* the less developed regions of Russia to its east (Kauffman 2015, 46). Beseler managed to build momentum for his policy in Berlin. Generals Falkenhayn and Ludendorff, and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg ultimately supported the project as the German Empire’s primary aim for Russian Poland. The Chancellor and Beseler, in turn, convinced the leadership of Germany’s Center, Progressive, Social Democratic, National Liberal, and even Free Conservative parties to support or condone the project (Kauffman 2015, 74–77). On November 5, 1916, the German Empire, along with its Austrian ally, proclaimed a new, autonomous, Kingdom of Poland.

Adjusting Policy to Contain a Rival Nation

The perception of Poland as a civilized nation continued to affect German policy even after circumstances had changed. As German-Polish relations deteriorated in the final years of the war, policy-makers in Berlin began to regard Poland as a potential adversary. In the months following the proclamation of the Kingdom of Poland, dissatisfaction with the pace of state-building instigated a protracted student strike at Warsaw’s University (Kauffman 2015, 185–189). In July 1917, most of the nascent Polish army dramatically refused to take an oath of loyalty they considered insufficient to guarantee Polish independence (Kauffman 2015, 95–98, 102–104). Though not fatal to German policy, these incidents and other frictions battered the confidence of multinational imperialists in Berlin. As Berlin began to doubt that the Kingdom of Poland would function as a reliable satellite in the future, policy-makers increasingly feared Poland as a potential rival for regional hegemony. Military and civilian leaders accordingly adjusted their policies in Eastern Europe to contain the Kingdom of Poland and neutralize any diplomatic or military threat that it could possibly offer.

Over the course of 1917, support in Berlin for large annexations along the German-Polish border grew stronger and less compromising. In 1916, internal discussions by military and civilian leaders over the adoption of Beseler’s policy had linked the scale and nature of potential German annexations along the frontier to the “future relationship of Poland to the German Empire” and the perceived reliability of Poland as a satellite state (Reichskanzlei 1917a, 11). Following the oath crisis and other incidents of unrest, however, German leaders considered the possibility that the new Kingdom of Poland might eventually pose a military threat to Germany’s eastern border. An August 9, 1917 meeting between Chancellor Michaelis and military leadership therefore concluded that, if Polish intransigence continued, Germany would need to prosecute a “fourth partition of Poland,” with Berlin seizing substantial territories (Reichskanzlei 1917b, 26). When representatives of the Chancellery, military, and the Government General of Warsaw gathered in Berlin to discuss Germany’s Polish policy in November 1917, Germany’s leadership

abandoned this ambiguity. Whether or not they managed to formally integrate Poland under German suzerainty, they concluded, the German Empire could not trust Warsaw and needed to worry about the threat posed by the Polish army. The conference concluded that Germany would necessarily annex substantial territories along the German-Polish frontier to secure Berlin from this potential military threat (Reichskanzlei 1917c, 40).

Just as revealing, Berlin began to perceive Polish national culture as a rival for influence in the Baltics. Polish-speakers were prominently represented in the social and intellectual elite of Lithuania in 1914, especially in Vilnius. Poles owned considerable tracts of land in the area, and in the city itself, the Polish language was still used as a mark of social distinction (Snyder 2003, 54). This became an acute problem for Berlin when, in 1917, Germany shifted policy goals and attempted to organize a Lithuanian state under German influence (Liulevicius 2001). Policy-makers in Berlin now worried that local Polish elites would offer Warsaw an avenue to influence Lithuanian politics. Meetings in Berlin in the autumn and winter of 1917 constantly expressed concern that the future Polish state might eventually pry the region from German control and challenge Berlin for influence in Eastern Europe (Reichskanzlei 1917d, 64–65). In a February 1918 meeting in Berlin, military and civilian leaders therefore pondered how to insulate the Lithuanian government from “Polish influence” and ensure its attachment to Germany. The meeting almost unanimously agreed on the need to unite the Lithuanian state in personal-union with the Hohenzollern dynasty (Reichskanzlei 1918a, 91). Only if the Hohenzollern Kaiser were simultaneously the executive of the new Lithuanian state, they concluded, could Berlin be assured against the “danger of the Poles in Lithuania” (Reichskanzlei 1918a, 92–95). Still worried that Polish elites would spread Warsaw’s influence, military and civilian planners also began to contemplate implementing anti-Polish land policies in Lithuania (Reichskanzlei 1918b, 104). As German-Polish relations deteriorated, therefore, Berlin became increasingly worried that Poland would become a serious political, military, and cultural threat to its influence in Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that influential circles of German intellectuals refused to depict Poland as a primitive culture or a colonial object during World War I. Multinationals like Paul Rohrbach and Friedrich Naumann rejected any colonizer-colonized dichotomy and insisted on Poland’s status as a politically capable nation. Although unflinching support for colonialism in Africa was typical within this circle, the authors’ regard for Polish national culture, and the loyalty it inspired, led them to break with colonial precedents and oppose annexations and coercive methods of extending German rule into Russian Poland. Instead, they recommended achieving Germany’s objectives in Poland through multinational collaboration. Finally, this article has suggested that the perception of Poland as a civilized nation influenced policy-making in Berlin throughout the war, apparently more than competing stereotypes of Polish primitivity.

Although some German thinkers certainly borrowed from European colonialism, or drew inspiration from its vision to inform imperial projects in Eastern Europe, they did not do so automatically. Comfort with colonialism in Africa did not necessarily translate into hostile attitudes toward Poles, or support for violent projects in Eastern Europe. German imperialists often curated their strategies of ethnic management according to specific cultural contexts.

Significantly, this paper has demonstrated that the framework of “discursive colonization” did not monopolize German views of Poland. Throughout World War I, the conceptualization of Poland as a colonial object competed with portrayals of Poland as an occidental *Staatsnation*. We should abandon the notion that Imperial Germans uniformly thought about Eastern Europe as a quasi-colonial “dreamland” and instead recognize that this view both conflicted and coexisted in tension with recognition of Poland as a sophisticated nation. This latter view promised potentially greater opportunities for imperial success, but also more dire consequences for failure. Intellectuals and policy-makers could dream that multinational union with Poland would secure

Germany's position in Eastern Europe, but also dread the possibility of a capable military and cultural rival on its border. Some bombastic assertions of Polish inferiority certainly masked deeper anxieties of Polish capability.

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Notes

1 I have employed the term “multinational imperialism” primarily because other formulations were inadequate or misleading. While the plans discussed below did seek “indirect” influence in Eastern Europe, this term is vague, and can denote anything from obtaining discrete economic privileges to the creation of impotent puppet regimes. I also eschewed the term “liberal imperialism.” Many self-identified liberals supported the Germanization of Polish space. Conversely, many proponents of multinational imperialism either did not consider themselves liberal or even opposed liberalism as a political ideology.

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