

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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The Greater Poland Uprising in the German politics of memory of the Eastern March (Ostmark) in 1919-1945

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The memory of the Greater Poland Uprising was, and still is, celebrated, mainly on a local basis. The cult-like status of the soldiers who sacrificed their lives, the veneration of veterans, the memorial statues and plaques, the names of

streets, the patrons of schools and military units, the professional historical research and portrayal of the uprising in plastic arts, literature and cinematography – all of these elements have shaped the regional awareness of the Greater Poland residents. This statement refers both to the Polish and the German memory of the uprising. The Polish one, however, is still alive and has been celebrated for a 100 years, while the German one started to fade after 1945. The main reason was the border changes after World War II. A fundamental area in which the battles with the Polish insurgents constituted an essential part of the regional politics of memory was the Eastern March, the territory was largely taken over in 1945 by the Poles by means of displacing the German population; the remaining fragment of the March became part of the German Democratic Republic, which also provided poor conditions for celebrating the memory of the uprising in the 20th century.

The Eastern March, or Ostmark, is a term referring to medieval German conquests and colonisation, used in reference to borderlands that had to be treated in a particular way due to the threat of external attack or the irredentism of the conquered population. It came into common use in the 2nd half of the 19th century when modern nationalism was evolving. The term covered all the eastern provinces of the Prussian Hohenzollern monarchy; the same term started to be used in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and in Bavaria as well. The main feature that allowed for the classification of a specific province as a part of the Eastern March was a high share of national

minorities. In the case of the Prussian monarchy, Poles formed the largest minority. Not only were they the most numerous group, but they were also in visible opposition to the German rule, which was a reason for permanent political confrontation. Thus, if we assume that the presence of the Poles was the most important feature of the Eastern March, then its scope may be limited to the areas of the Poznań province, the West Prussian province, the East Prussian province and Upper Silesia. Although the Eastern March was considered to occupy a broader territory including Western Pomerania, Lower Silesia, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg and Saxony, these areas were not where most of the Polish-German battles with a national background were fought. Given these circumstances, the capital city of the Eastern March could only be Poznań, the centre of the Polish national movement in the Prussian Partition. It is Poznań where the famous nationalistic German Eastern Marches Society (Deutscher Ostmarkenverein), which the Poles called the H-K-T, was founded.

Not all of the towns and villages of Greater Poland and Pomerania, however, were annexed to the reborn Poland in 1919-1920. The places that were left outside of the Second Polish Republic included Piła, Złotów, Wałcz, Trzcianka, Międzyrzecz, Babimost, Kargowa and Wschowa. They were annexed to a new Prussian province called the Frontier March of Posen-West Prussia (Grenzmark Posen-Westpreussen). The main task of the new administrative unit was to keep the heritage of the two lost provinces and to maintain the local Germans' identification with the

traditions of the lost territories of Greater Poland and Pomerania, and at the same time to show disapproval for the territorial provisions of the Treaty of Versailles and to establish the prerequisites necessary to revise the Polish-German border. The objectives of the Frontier March, formulated as above, contributed to the maintenance of an irrational territorial structure until 1938. The province was composed of three parts, separate from each other, but adjacent to the Polish province of Poznań from the north, the west and the south. Choosing the capital city of Grenzmark was also problematic, because the only bigger town in the march was Piła (Schneidemühl), populated by slightly more than 20000 people.

In the interwar period, the Frontier March faced numerous problems. With its artificially set borders, scarce population, economy dominated by agriculture, high forestation rate and absence of larger cities particularly an academic city, the Frontier March experienced a permanent outflow of inhabitants who had trouble finding work and who did not want to be identified with an artificially formed region deprived of any significant historical monuments or significant historical events. Another factor that threatened the Frontier March's position was a competitive vision of a frontier region, presented back in 1919 by the authorities of Frankfurt-on-Oder. Frankfurt was the capital of one of two administrative districts forming the province of Brandenburg (with the district of Potsdam as the second one). After the reconstruction of Poland and the determination of the new borders, the Frankfurt

district, which covered towns such as Landsberg-on-Warta (Gorzów Wielkopolski), Gubin, Forst, Cottbus, Kostrzyn and Sulechów, became a frontier area, unofficially called the Middle Eastern March (Mittlere Ostmark). It was the Frankfurt officials' ambition to make their town the main centre of the entire middle borderland area between Poland and Germany, the place that would fill the hole between Western Pomerania and Lower Silesia. Frankfurt-on-Oder did meet all of the conditions even though it was a large city with numerous representative buildings that could house offices, it was an important communication node (road, rail, river transport), it had secondary schools, a theatre, a library, monuments and a historical tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. A particularly important role was played by Viadrina university (1506-1811), portrayed as a bridge between the West and the East, attracting students from Slavic countries.

What made Piła and Frankfurt-on-Oder different were their experiences of the years 1918-1920. Piła was a town located in the hinterland of the front where battles against Polish insurgents were fought, and a place where many German Grenschutz soldiers were recruited. Although Bydgoszcz was the main centre of German resistance, it was Piła, handed to the Polish authorities in January 1920, where most German public officials who administrated the Grenzmark province were from. The main advocate of creating the Frontier March was Friedrich von Bülow, President of the Bydgoszcz administrative district, who also acted as President of the entire Poznań province after the occupation of Poznań

by the Polish insurgents (until January 1920).
Bülow was an experienced person who had previously worked in Schleswig, where the Germans were confronted with a Danish minority. In 1920, he moved from Bydgoszcz to Piła, where he organised the new province, Grenzmark Posen-Westpreussen, formally created in 1922. This is also when he occupied the highest position in the Frontier March - he became the Supreme President.

In July 1926, during a visit to Wschowa, which was the most distant poviat of his province, Bülow made a broadly commented speech, in which he set out the goals he assumed in his programme. He emphasized that the residents of the Frontier March had won their land, not with a voting card, but with "flintlock and machine gun", which made them full of "Eastern March spirit" (Ostmarkengeist), which is not to be found in other provinces, including East Brandenburg. The "frontier spirit" was, however, very different from the spirit present in North Schleswig, where the Germans competed with the Danish, said Bülow, referring to his experience as an official before World War I. He claimed that on the northern border, two Germanic nations fight against each other, while in the east, the Germans and the Poles are two separate worlds, divided by an unsurmountable gap. It should, however, be borne in mind that Piła, despite it being a capital city, was a rather small, remote town, which was rather unattractive for local Germans. On the other hand, the unnaturally extensive and fragmented province did not allow for reference to a coherent historical tradition as a basis for its

regional identity. Thus, Bülow with even greater pressure referred to the memories of the recent fights against the Poles, using them as a simple and convenient tool for the mobilisation of the Germans in the area he was responsible for.

The pursuit of regional politics of memory on the basis of recollections of defending the “small homeland” from the Poles was obviously not an artificial construction, but it referred to common stereotypes that had existed earlier, and after 1919 were confirmed in German literature on the Greater Poland Uprising. A famous example was the first extensive publication, a memoir, describing the battles fought by a German Grenschutz battalion from Bydgoszcz on the northern front by the Noteć river. Its author was Karl Stephan, who wrote his book in the summer of 1919 in Bydgoszcz and published it with the help of the Bydgoszcz town council; the next edition was released in the same year in Piła. The very title, “the Deadly Battle of the Eastern March” (“Der Todeskampf der Ostmark”) depicted the nature of the conflict with the Polish insurgents as a ruthless battle for maintaining the homeland won back through the long and arduous work of several generations of German settlers. According to Stephan, the rebellion of the Poles in 1918 was a surprise, because the Germans had not considered them a fully shaped nation, and, besides, several decades of peaceful cohabitation with Polish subjects “serving” the Prussian monarch and four years of their loyal military service in the Emperor’s army seemed to have stifled any forms of resistance. Thus, Stephan did not spare critical words against the Poles,

accusing them of killing off the injured Germans, mistreating the prisoners and, from mid-February 1919, permanently violating the terms of the cease-fire. The identity of the Germans from the northern part of the Poznań region was shaped in the context of fighting against such a brutal and malicious enemy. The publication was to be a source of knowledge for future generations, which had to be convinced that "being a German is being a warrior."

Memoir publications concerning battles on individual sections of the front were also issued in other, smaller towns of the Frontier March, located in the western and southern parts of the former Poznań province. Short, several-pages long memoirs from the years 1918-1920, describing different episodes of battles against the insurgents, were published throughout both decades of the inter-war period in a number of local magazines and regional journals of the Frontier March of Posen-West Prussia. However, the absence of a centre that would carry out any systematic historic research and confront the memories embellished with unverified facts and replace them with solid data based on historical sources was apparent. Piła, the capital of the province, lacked a university that could employ professional historians, although in 1925, a regional scientific society (Grenzmärkische Gesellschaft zur Erforschung und Pflege der Heimat) which cooperated with academic scientists from Berlin and Königsberg and issued a scientific magazine entitled "Grenzmärkische Heimatblätter", was founded. The society became a place of institutional support for professional

research on the fight against the Polish uprising. The leading person who organised studies on "fighting in defence of the borders" was Hans Jakob Schmitz, who had arrived from Rheinland, an ex-teacher in Poznań, Leszno and Rawicz and a participant of battles against the Polish insurgents in 1918-1919. In 1922, he was hired as a teacher in Piła and when the scientific society was founded in 1925, he became its Vice-President and Head of the History Division. In 1931, he also became the publisher of the "Grenzmärkische Heimatblätter" magazine. From that moment, an intensive, several years' long, period of research work commenced, which brought numerous publications.

Schmitz and his collaborators often emphasized that what inspired them to increase their activity were the Polish initiatives concerning the documentation and celebration of the battles of the uprising. They particularly meant the activity of the Society for Research on the History of the Greater Poland Uprising, founded in 1927. Thus, similarly to the Polish researchers from Poznań, the historians from Piła started by collecting and publishing accounts, documents and partial publications describing the course of events in particular sections of the front.

Despite the fact that the decision on commencing research in Piła was in fact made in 1930, it is not hard to notice that the German historians took advantage of the favourable political context that emerged when the Nazis took power in 1933. Although the Nazis made Bülow retire, they eagerly stressed the meaning of the Frontier March as a fortress in the borderlands and a base

for military expeditions to the East, by celebrating the memories of the battles against the Polish insurgents. Starting from 1934, the successive issues of "Grenzmärkische Heimatblätter" magazine included two or three texts which described different aspects of efforts made in the regions of Rawicz, Leszno, Kargowa, Babimost, Trzciel, Zbąszyń, Trzcianka, Piła, Wyrzysk and Inowrocław. Some of the more extensive texts were released as separate publications. This was particularly true of the texts written by Schmitz and by one of his closest collaborators from Piła, Richard Perdelwitz, a former pastor in Połajewo and Śmigiel. As well as source texts and publications, the "Grenzmärkische Heimatblätter" also included reviews and discussions on the Polish and German publications concerning the political and military aspects of the uprising, written and published by authors from outside of Piła. One of the most popular publications of that type was Georg Cleinow's book on the activities of the German People's Councils in the region of Bydgoszcz in 1918-1919, published in Berlin in 1934. The work that crowned the activity of the Piła-based researchers was Schmitz's concise publication on "the Polish uprising and the battles in defence of the border", published in 1938.

Written word, both in the form of scientific papers and popular publications for a mass reader, did not, however, have such strong impact as other tools used in the politics of memory, such as the cult of those who died fighting against the Polish insurgents. In the towns and villages of the Frontier March, there were, however, numerous monuments and cemeteries of soldiers, volunteers

and civilians who were killed during military action in 1918-1919, but these places celebrated the memory of the people who died in a specific town or in a specific section of the front. In the meantime, a central memorial site was established in Frankfurt-on-Oder, a city that was competing with Piła to become the capital of the entire Frontier March, the border region between Pomerania and Silesia. Although the authorities of Frankfurt tried to emphasize the functions of their city as a bridge transferring German economic and cultural achievements to their Polish neighbours, they still had to take a large group of people displaced from the Poznań province into consideration. In 1919, Frankfurt became the seat of the German Association for Posen Refugees (Deutscher Heimatbund Posener Flüchtlinge), which in 1920 was absorbed by the German Eastern Union (Deutscher Ostbund), this was a powerful federation of refugees' associations from the eastern part of Germany. The President of Ostbund was Alfred von Tilly, a former landrat of the Posen-West poviat. The Union's press organ was "Ostland" weekly, issued in Berlin. The weekly often published memoirs and anniversary articles on the Greater Poland Uprising, but the popular nature of the magazine could not affect the circles of professional historians. Things were similar with the "Heilige Ostmark" magazine, published since 1924 in Frankfurt-on-Oder, which was, however, free of any scientific ambitions.

Given these circumstances, the initiative was taken over by a local, Frankfurt-based society of Grenschutz veterans. From 1921, the society was

led by Friedrich Karl Kriebel, a former town council official in Chełmża near Toruń, born in 1884 in Kępno in the south of Greater Poland. In 1923, his activities led to the funding of a plaque commemorating all of the soldiers who died or went missing in the battles against the Poles. The plaque was mounted inside the Church of Mary (Marienkirche), a medieval temple taken over by the Lutherans in the 16th century and considered an informal cathedral of the Eastern March.

The commemorative plaque did not include any names. Besides, an exact number of victims was unknown. Thus, Kriebel devoted several years of work to draw up a list of the deceased and missing persons, analysing the course of all of the battles, and contacting the victims' relatives. As a result, the "Book of Honour of the Eastern March" was created. The book, published in December 1936, included 1211 names of those who had died (also in field hospitals and regular hospitals) and 317 names of those who had gone missing. The book provided the names of Grenzschutz volunteers, soldiers of regular military units, members of civil guards and civilians. One of the civilians was Johannes Blankertz, a teacher from Rheinland, who was sent to Poznań as a corporal conscripted to the army during the war. After the outbreak of the revolution in Germany, he got involved in the activities of the Worker and Soldier Council in Poznań, supervising the work of the Police Headquarters on its behalf. He was arrested by the insurgents several days after the outbreak of the uprising in Poznań and shot and killed, as officially announced, during an attempt to escape

in early January 1919. A separate group of victims included seven prisoners (including five aviators) shot and killed during a mutiny in a detention site in Cytadela on 12 January 1919. All of the names found by Kriebel were engraved on the new memorial plaques, mounted in the Church of Mary in Frankfurt. The plaque was decorated with sophisticated ornaments and, above all, mounted in a more honourable place than the previous one in 1923. The new plaques were located near the altar, in a well-lit place, next to the plaques commemorating the Frankfurt residents killed in the First World War. A ceremonious unveiling and consecration of the new statue was held on 4 July 1937. It was participated in by the Mayor of Frankfurt-on-Oder, Martin Albrecht.

The unveiling of the new memorial plaques in Frankfurt marked the start of considerable changes in the politics of memory in a city which was gradually trying to transform from an economic and cultural bridge to the East into a Germanic bulwark. This became more visible after a change in the administrative borders in 1938. Back then, the Frontier March, with Piła as its capital, lost its status as a province, and was degraded to one of three administrative districts forming the Pomeranian province. The border changes resulted in a new rationalisation of the administration, as the poviats of Skwierzyna, Międzyrzecz, Babimost and Wschowa were detached from the Piła administrative district. Two former poviats and a part of the poviat of Babimost were annexed to the Frankfurt administrative district, while the remaining part

of Babimost and the Wschowa powiat became part of the Legnica administrative district, which belonged to the Silesian province. As a result of these changes to the administrative borders, the area of East Brandenburg, adjacent to the Poznań province, grew, and the former lands of Greater Poland, where battles against the insurgents were fought in 1919, were annexed to the Frankfurt administrative district. This reinforced the status of Frankfurt district as a borderland area, which was favourable in the context of Frankfurt's pursuit of becoming the unofficial capital of the entire Eastern March. A symbolic expression of Frankfurt's new role as a bulwark was the fate of the memorial plaque commemorating the soldiers of Grenschutz, mounted in the wall in the Church of Mary in 1923. After the unveiling and consecration of the new plaques in 1937, the old plaque was, in July 1939, moved to the church in Nowe Kramsko, from 1937 called Kleistdorf. This large village near Babimost was inhabited by many Poles, and its new name was not a tribute to the famous poet from Frankfurt Heinrich von Kleist, but to Lieutenant Fedor von Kleist, an officer who died in 1919 in a battle against the Polish insurgents, and the local people who supported them.

Changes to the administrative borders and the moving of the accents in the politics of memory in eastern Brandenburg did not, however, end the rivalry between Frankfurt and Piła. Although the Frontier March lost the status of a province and was annexed to the Pomeranian province as an administrative district, it retained its name of Grenzmark Posen-Westpreussen. It allowed Piła

to continue its pursuits of becoming a depositary of the heritage of both of the lost Prussian provinces, and the unofficial capital of Ostmark. Piła was still the seat of the regional scientific society, the operations of which covered the area of the former Frontier March before its reorganisation in 1938, and the "Grenzmärkische Heimatblätter" magazine still kept publishing articles on the battles against the Polish insurgents. In 1939, Hans Jakob Schmitz published an article on the "Polish attack" on the village of Nowe Kramsko (which the author obviously called Kleistdorf), and in 1941 and 1942, memoir publications describing the battles fought near Leszno were released. Although the outbreak of war and the movement of the border far to the east brought the mission of the Prussian Eastern March to an end (in 1939, Austria officially received the name Ostmark), the tradition of the battles with the Polish uprising was still kept alive. In 1941, Schmitz published an extensive book entitled "The History of the Land on the Noteć and Warta Rivers", in which he presented a synthesis of the history of the northern part of the former Prussian province of Poznań on the river Noteć with the new Reich's District, Reichsgau Wartheland, established by the Nazis. It goes without saying that the history of the battles against the Polish insurgents in 1918-1919 was a fundamental part of the book.

After 1945, the battles between the German residents of the Eastern March and the Poles ceased to be a part of the German politics of memory. This was a consequence of the liquidation of the highest memorial institutions

and sites that organised, popularised and nurtured this part of historical awareness in the Germans, and the erasure of regional communities which considered this fragment of the past a part of their communicative memory, passed on directly by people who had participated in the events described. The territory of the Eastern March was almost entirely taken over by Polish authorities, and the part of the Frankfurt administrative district that was located on the western bank of the Oder became a part of the German Democratic Republic, which in 1952 underwent an entirely new administrative division, which erased all former regional traditions. The Church of Mary in Frankfurt was very badly damaged when the city was attacked by the Red Army in 1945 and has hardly been used ever since. Only in the 21st century has more comprehensive renovation work been undertaken. However, the plaques commemorating the German soldiers who were killed or went missing in the battles of 1918-1919 have not yet been reconstructed.

The historians from Piła, who settled in West Germany after 1945, were apparently unwilling to discuss the past – Hans Jakob Schmitz, who moved to Rheinland after the war, devoted the last years of his life (he died in 1954) to studying the regional history of his “small homeland”.

The last serious German publication on the subject of the Greater Poland Uprising was released in 1980. Its author, Dietrich Vogt, (who died in 1968), was not, however, a former resident of the borderland provinces of the Reich, but an ex-headmaster of the Schiller Gymnasium

in Poznań. Before the war, it was difficult for the Germans residing in the Second Polish Republic to publish texts concerning the uprising and to publicly celebrate the memory of the victims. This is probably why it took so long for them to publish their own version of events, edited and prepared for print twelve years after the death of the author, Gotthold Rhode, the son of a famous pastor from Poznań, Arthur Rhode. In December 1918, Vogt participated as a German officer in the famous, nearly legendary events that took place at the Police Headquarters. His publication is written in a pre-war style, combining the memory of personal experiences with the systematically gathered source knowledge. It seems that since 1980 the German memory of the Greater Poland Uprising has been gradually fading, as the subject was not even mentioned in an extensive publication on Polish and German memorial sites, released in the second decade of the 21st century. It is in fact hardly surprising: if the residents of Greater Poland have regrets over the fact that their uprising is poorly known and underestimated in other regions of Poland, it is even harder to expect for battles against the Polish insurgents to become a significant element of the German politics of cultural memory, especially given the fact that the Eastern March is not a region of Germany, directly adjacent to Greater Poland, any more.

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