

# Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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19.04.2024, 23:25

## The social and national structure of Greater Poland on the eve of the Great War

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The Greater Poland society “on the eve of the Great War” had an expanded and hierarchical structure both in social terms and nationality-wise. At its top there were the landed-gentry and a small, usually German or Jewish bourgeoisie. The next places in the social hierarchy were occupied by the intelligentsia, the petite bourgeoisie and wealthy peasants, and at the bottom of the social pyramid, there were the

small farmers and the particularly numerous groups of farm and industrial workers.

The above-mentioned structure was a result of the feudal past, the progressing industrialisation and the modernisation processes related to the development of education and mass culture. Also the natural movements and migration of the population as well as the Germanisation policy of the Prussian occupant and defensive actions taken by Poles exerted some influence on it.

Despite the constantly changing modernisation processes, birth still largely determined the membership of a given social group and social position. The phenomenon of social mobility during the two last decades before the outbreak of the war was more and more clear, but concerned the middle and lower positions of the social ladder. As a result of this, at the beginning of the 20th century in Greater Poland, there were still deep social divisions and the respective groups differed from each other owing to legal positions, wealth, functions, lifestyle and even clothing.

One of few factors which was common for all the social groups was religion: Catholic in the case of the Poles, Evangelical in the case of the Germans and Mosaic in reference to the Jews. Despite the rampant urbanisation, most of the Greater Poland inhabitants lived in the countryside or in small towns.

Population - natural and migration flows

Throughout the long 19th century, the number of

inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Poznań increased systematically. In the years 1890-1910, the population growth rate reached its highest level and ranged between 35000 and 40000 people per year. This resulted from the maintenance of a high birth rate, which until the year 1910 exceeded 40% per year, and a systematic decrease in the death rate, which amounted to 31% in the year 1875 and just 19.9% in the year 1911. The significant decrease in the death rate was a consequence of economic and civilisational changes which led to a better supply of food to the population and significant progress in education, hygiene and medical awareness. As a result of this, average life expectancy was also increasing systematically in Greater Poland.

In addition to the population growth rate, the population of Greater Poland depended on the balance of external migration flows, which at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (just like throughout the 19th century) was negative. Among the people who arrived in Greater Poland, Germans were dominant, especially soldiers, officials, merchants, bankers, craftsmen, farmers and, only to a small extent, workers. The number of other ethnic groups coming to Greater Poland in the second half of the 19th century, particularly Jews and Poles from other partitions, was relatively small.

The second phenomenon which determined the actual balance of external migration flows was the emigration from Greater Poland which intensified in the last decades of the 19th century.

This pertained to all ethnic groups living in Greater Poland, however, because of the ethnic structure of this region, the largest group among those who left were Poles. The primary causes of emigration were economic and social factors, especially overpopulation of the rural areas, poverty and the lack of prospects for finding a job locally or the achievement of any economic independence. Meanwhile, emigration and work outside agriculture brought higher incomes and allowed for the achievement of a higher social status. In their search for a job and a better tomorrow the Greater Poland inhabitants left for the German Reich (especially to Rhineland and Westphalia which underwent fast industrialisation) or decided to emigrate overseas whereby here, the main goal was North America.

The economic and social phenomena were related to migration flows. On the one hand, the economic migration deprived Polish society of young dynamic people with the spirit of entrepreneurship, who, in the search for a better life, left Greater Poland, often contrary to the anti-emigration propaganda of the Polish press. On the other hand, the money earned in western Germany and America was spent and invested in Greater Poland, which contributed to an enlivening of its economy. Furthermore, while living and working in the West, the Polish emigrants became familiar with economic and social relations which differed from those present in Greater Poland, and by participating in the life of trade unions and strikes, they formed their own class awareness. Many of them, after some time, returned to Greater Poland and, owing to the

newly acquired knowledge and awareness. became an important factor in the emancipation of small holder peasants and agricultural workers and also the democratisation of social relations in the countryside and in the city.

In the years 1871-1913 about 440000 Poles left Greater Poland on a permanent basis. They settled mainly in Rhineland and Westphalia. In the year 1913, about 105000 Poles stayed in the above-mentioned regions and 80000 in the capital city of Germany. In the same period, Jews and Germans also left Greater Poland even though the Prussian authorities tried to stop the outflow of the latter, as this contradicted the objectives of their ethnic policy in the Poznań province.

The negative balance of external migration flows in the years 1871-1913 was, however, significantly lower than the above-mentioned population growth rate. As a result of this, the population of Greater Poland increased from 1600000 people in the year 1875 to 2100000 people in the year 1910.

### Territorial structure

At the beginning of the 20th century, the vast majority of Greater Poland inhabitants lived in the countryside. Although, as a result of external and internal migration, the percentage of inhabitants of rural areas fell from 71% in the year 1890 to 65.6% in the year 1910, however, they were still dominant in the structure because of the place of residence. The urbanisation processes in Greater Poland, characteristic for many areas of the German Reich, occurred to a very limited extent

because of the poor development of industry. It is true that in the years 1890-1910, the speed of the population growth rate increased systematically, however, this did not lead to the establishment of big cities. The only city with more than 100000 inhabitants was Poznań where the civil population increased from 73000 in the year 1898 to 110000 in the year 1901 and 157000 in the year 1910, which, to a great extent was related to the liquidation of the Poznań Fortress and significant enlargement of the area of the city. The second largest city in terms of the number of inhabitants - Bydgoszcz - had only 58000 people living there in the year 1910. The number of inhabitants in other cities ranged between a few and several thousand inhabitants, whereby, cities with more than 10000 inhabitants included Inowrocław, Krotoszyn, Ostrów Wlkp. and Rawicz. At the same time, in the years 1895-1910 as many as 31 cities in Greater Poland suffered a decrease in the number of inhabitants.

### Occupational structure

The industrial revolution from the XIX century triggered a number of changes in the social structure and led to the formation of a new type of society defined as the industrial society. It was characterised by a decrease in the number of people employed in agriculture and an increase in the employment in industry, the appearance of the working class (proletariat) and the urbanisation of and high increase in spatial and social mobility. However, the industrialisation processes characteristic for the western regions of the German Reich occurred only to a small extent in Greater Poland. People employed in

agriculture, whose number increased, were still dominant in the occupational structure of the region, though their percentage in proportion to the entirety of the employed decreased systematically from 64.1% in 1882 to 57.7% in 1895 and 56.61% in 1907.

The domination of agriculture in the economy of Greater Poland resulted from the lack of basic raw materials of the industrial age in the area, especially hard coal, the peripheral location of the Poznań province, the poorly developed transportation infrastructure and the slow development of the city.

Among the remaining occupationally active population in the year 1907, 8.5% worked in industry, crafts and civil engineering, 7.1% in trade, transport and catering services, 5.8% in public administration, healthcare and freelance professions, 1.4% as domestic servants and 10.6% belonged to the "no profession" or "unidentified profession" categories.

### Social structure

At the top of the Greater Poland's social structure, there were the aristocracy and noblemen, which under the influence of agrarian reforms and the popularisation of capitalist methods of manufacturing in agriculture gradually transformed into the landed-gentry. Unfortunately, the debts from the times of the First Republic of Poland and the Duchy of Warsaw, periodically recurring economic crises, lack of management skills in new conditions and the frequent living beyond means led to the loss

of land estates and social degradation. As a result of this, the number of landed-gentry continued to decline. The above-mentioned trend could not be changed by the small inflow of people coming from other social groups, which came into possession of the landed estates during the discussed period. In 1907 the number of professionally active owners, lease-holders and administrators of land estates whose area exceeded 100ha, including helping family members, amounted to 4108 people. Together with the professionally passive family members, the number of land-owners in that period is estimated at a level of about 10000 people. Until the 1870s the Polish land-owners outnumbered the German land-owners. However, as a result of incompetent management and the activities of the Settlement Commission, the above-mentioned relation was reversed and in 1885 1010 (60.9%) out of 1659 land estate owners in Greater Poland were Germans and only 649 (39.1%) were Poles.

Despite their small number, the Polish land-owners were the elite of the Greater Poland society for historic, economic and cultural reasons. The unfavourable market situation for agriculture from the first half of the 19 century and the policies of the occupant authorities led to the occurrence of a need for modernisation and this, literally, was a condition for the survival of the Polish land estates. Following the example set by Dezydery Chłapowski, the number of land-owners who, striving to maintain their land estates managed them according to modern standards, upgraded them and raised their profitability increased steadily. On the other hand



any financial surpluses were invested by them in industry and banking institutions.

In the second half of the 19th century, in order to defend Polish possessions and culture and to maintain the status of the elite leading Polish society, the land-owners initiated and financed the establishment of various cultural, scientific, economic and social institutions and held leading positions in the Polish national movement. As part of the fight for the spirits of the Polish peasants, some land-owners conducted educational activity among the rural people, promoted the use of modern methods of management and, from the end of 1860s, supported the establishment of agricultural circles where they often held the functions of presidents. By cooperating with the peasants, not only did the land-owners contribute to the economic modernisation of the rural areas and development of national awareness, but also, in practice, they implemented the ideas of social solidarity, which became a social phenomenon unique for Greater Poland.

As a result, the land-owners enjoyed great social authority and together with a certain part of the intelligentsia, clergy and enlightened peasantry, they worked for the defence of Polish possessions and the development of Polish culture in the Prussian partition.

## Bourgeoisie

Because of the agricultural nature of the province and poor progress in industrialisation and urbanisation, the bourgeoisie which included both the group of capital owners and independent

entrepreneurs who ran capitalist factories, was small in Greater Poland and characterised by strong internal diversification. As the major source of capital in the Poznań province was land, land-owners often went beyond the traditional approach to management, and by investing in industrial and banking sectors they took over the role of the bourgeoisie. However, even when the profits from non-agricultural activity exceeded the profits from agriculture, in social terms, they still identified themselves with the landed gentry.

As well as land-owners, the small group of larger entrepreneurs was dominated by Germans and Jews, who often came from outside Greater Poland. However, at the turn of the century, the more dynamic craftsmen and merchants of Polish nationality who succeeded economically and managed to expand their companies were promoted more and more frequently.

In that period, as a result of the improving business environment, demographic development and urbanisation, the number of owners and managers of plants which employed more than 5 people, increased from 1346 in 1882 to 3944 in 1907. The owners of plants employing a maximum of 200 people were the largest majority of the members of this group and the owners of the largest plants less than 1% of the entire group. Despite the overall weakness of this social group in Greater Poland, a part of the Polish bourgeoisie deserves some credit as, owing to its spirit of entrepreneurship and support from the land-owners and cooperatives' capital, they were able to win the competition and increase their assets, taking over, among other things, the factories left

by the Germans and the Jews. However, they still remained a minority as, e.g. in 1911, among the 423 largest industrial enterprises in Poznań, as many as 270 (63.8%) belonged to Germans, and only 133 (31.4%) to Poles.

### Petite bourgeoisie

Another group in the social hierarchy of Greater Poland was the petite bourgeoisie, which mainly consisted of craftsmen and merchants whose attention was focused on the local agriculture, and a relatively small municipal population. In the first half of the 19th century, Germans and Jews definitely prevailed in the above-mentioned group in terms of their number and property, and Poles were its poorer and much smaller part. Therefore, one of the objectives of the organic work initiated by Karol Marcinkowski was to create a Polish bourgeoisie.

Because of the processes of industrialisation and the methods of mass-manufacturing and the distribution of goods characteristic of it, the economic position of the crafts weakened and the number of professionally active craftsmen decreased in Greater Poland from 42000 in 1882 to 38000 in 1907. On top of this, many of them had to change their qualifications or concentrate on service activities. On the other hand, the general economic development, the gradual increase in the purchasing power of society and the deepening social division of work had a positive effect on the development of trade and the catering and hotel sectors as well as financial institutions and transportation services. In these areas, the number of professionally active small

entrepreneurs increased from 16500 in 1882 to 18000 in 1907.

As a result of this, in the years 1895-1907, the overall number of petite bourgeoisie in Greater Poland changed very insignificantly and amounted to about 56000. However, compared to the groups of physical workers and clerical workers whose numbers were growing rapidly, the percentage of merchants and craftsmen among all the employed people clearly declined.

At the same time, at the turn of the century, changes regarding the ethnic structure which were favourable to Poles occurred in this social group. The development of cities, the growth of social wealth and the activities initiated by the creators of organic work to support the Polish crafts, trade and cooperatives all brought positive effects and led to an increase in the number of Polish craft workshops and commercial establishments, which competed effectively with the German and Jewish petite bourgeoisie at the beginning of the 20th century. In comparison with other partitions, its condition may be evaluated positively, however, it did not equal the cooperatives in terms of economic strength and degree of organisation, yet still achieving an exceptional position in Greater Poland. In 1910, 248 cooperatives which consisted of 116000 members in total, were part of the Union of Earning and Economic Associations in the Grand Duchy of Poznań and West Prussia

## Peasants

Rich peasants as owners of workshops, where

permanent and temporary workers were employed, and at the same time as persons who were engaged in gainful employment, fulfilled the role similar to that of the petite bourgeoisie in the cities. In 1907, the number of owners of farms with an area ranging between 10 and 100ha was 37200 people, which gave 40% of their overall number. In the years 1895-1907, as a result of land purchases and family lots, the number of owners of farms with an area of 10-20 ha increased by 26.2%, and the number of owners of farms with an area of 20-50ha by only 2.2%. At the same time the number of owners of the largest farms with an area of 50-100ha decreased by 143 people. The rich peasants were dominant in rural communities both in economic and social terms.

In addition to the rich peasants, there were also small-holder peasants and yeomen in the rural structure, with farms whose areas ranged between less than 1ha to 10ha. In 1907 there were about 164000 farms of this type in Greater Poland. The owners of the above-mentioned farms did not employ any hired labour force, but on many occasions they themselves looked for additional sources of income, often working as agricultural workers on land estates. At the turn of the century, as a result of spending money coming from non-farming activity (often from work as a result of emigration) on the purchase of land, the number of small farms increased quickly, especially in the group of farms with an area between 3 and 5ha, whose number in the years 1895-1907 went up from 8800 to 15000, and in the group with an area between 5-10ha

where the number of farms in the same period increased by 4600. As a consequence of this, the number of small-holder peasants and yeomen who owned farms increased. In order to maintain their family they were often forced to look for an additional income.

## Intelligentsia

A particular role in the social structure was occupied by the relatively small group of intelligentsia in Greater Poland. Their influence resulted not so much from the owned property but rather the economic, social, cultural and political functions which they fulfilled. For formal-legal reasons, the members of the above-mentioned group were referred to as clerical employees in statistical statements. This was an exceptionally broad category which covered, on the one hand, ordinary clerks and secretaries, and on the other hand, managers, journalists, artists and clergymen. In consideration of the above, the respective categories of people regarded as intelligentsia, were separated from each other by great economic distance and practically impassable social barriers. In terms of its number, at the turn of the century, the intelligentsia in Greater Poland experienced a dynamic development from 34000 in 1895 to 45000 in 1907. In terms of its number the group of intelligentsia was dominated by lower-ranking officials, and the representatives of the intelligentsia who had a minimum secondary education as well as creative intelligence belonged to a small group. A specific role was played by a relatively large number of teachers, who, however, remained in the service of the

Prussian state and were involved in the accomplishment of its Germanisation objectives, which were, in principle, contradictory to the interests of Poles.

However, in some historic studies, the formal-legal criterion is questioned and only persons earning their living on intellectual activity which requires at least secondary education are considered representatives of intelligentsia. After the application of the above-mentioned definition, the number of persons who belonged to this social group in Greater Poland would fall to a few thousand people, of whom the Polish intelligentsia before the outbreak of the war included only about 1400 people, i.e. 750 priests, 200 physicians, 70 lawyers, 50 pharmacists, 40 journalists, 30 artists and 50 architects and engineers.

By applying the formal-legal criterion, it can be concluded that in parallel to an increase in the number of clerical workers, also the percentage of women belonging to the intelligentsia increased, and in the year 1907, it reached a level of about 14%. An increase in the employment of women in clerical work was a product of the emancipation processes which covered this group, as still even around the year 1870, women had access only to physical work while any posts requiring intellectual work were reserved for men. However, they did not have secondary education and furthermore university education, therefore, they did not belong to the intelligentsia according to the definition which emphasises the education criterion.

As a result of this, the intelligentsia in Greater Poland was small, but together with the landed gentry, it was a major force that initiated civilisational and social changes and created cultural values.

## Workers

The lowest level in the social hierarchy of Greater Poland was assigned to workers, who, at the same time belonged to the most numerous social group. In Prussian statistics the term “worker” covered hired employees as well as the separate category of helping family members.

In Greater Poland, throughout the XIX century, the most dominant people were agricultural workers whose number, including those helping family members, amounted to 392000 people in 1907 (including 225000 hired labour force). Such a great number of agricultural workers resulted from the capitalist nature of the agricultural production in Greater Poland and was much higher than in other partitions. From the 1880s, their number systematically declined under the influence of the appearance of alternative and more cost-effective and prestigious opportunities to earn money outside of agriculture. At the same time, at the beginning of the 20th century, the trend in agriculture trended more and more towards the employment of seasonal hired workers including their families, often brought from abroad, in lieu of permanent employees.

At the turn of the century, the slow, but systematic development of industrialisation and urbanisation led to the creation of new



workplaces in non-agricultural departments of the economy, often occupied by people migrating for work to larger municipal centres from land estates, villages and small towns. As a consequence of this, the number of agricultural workers in Greater Poland systematically decreased (from 246000 in 1895 to 225000 in 1907), and the number of workers in non-agricultural branches of the economy increased from 149000 in 1895 to 187000 in 1907, and, directly before the outbreak of war achieved a level of 225000 according to estimates. Employment in the food, wood, mineral and construction sectors as well as in various types of craft workshops increased particularly fast - from 22000 in 1895 to 26000 in 1904 and 43000 in 1913.

A characteristic feature of Greater Poland, because of the structure of the agricultural economy in which the land estates and small industrial plants dispersed throughout the entire territory of this province were dominant, was the fact that the majority of workers lived in the countryside. It was only at the turn of the centuries that a fast increase in the number of workers in the largest cities became noticeable. This referred to Poznań in particular, where their number increased from about 10000 in 1882 to 26600 in 1907.

Internally, because of the qualifications possessed, the form of employment and the amount of earnings, agricultural and industrial workers were a group which was strongly diversified. Placement in the respective groups was reflected by the amount of wages, the place

occupied in the societal sharing of duties and thus in the social hierarchy. A particularly high percentage of qualified workers worked in the metal, machine and clothing industries and also in trade. On the other hand, the largest number of unqualified workers was employed in agriculture, as well as the mineral and construction sectors.

Domestic servants formed another significant group of hired workers in Greater Poland. They usually lived in the houses of their employers. At the beginning of the 20th century, domestic servants working in the countryside prevailed, however, as alternative and more attractive ways to earn a living appeared and the partial mechanisation of agricultural work became a fact, their number was rapidly reduced from 62000 in 1882 to 27000 in 1907. At the same time the number of domestic servants working in the cities was maintained practically at the same level and in the year 1907 it amounted to 37000 people. Meanwhile, the number of domestic and private servants, who did not live in the house of their employer slightly increased from 12500 in 1882 to 15000 in 1907.

### Ethnic structure

In the ethnic structure of Greater Poland, Poles and Germans were dominant. All in all, they constituted over 98% of all inhabitants of this province in the year 1910. The third largest ethnic group were Jews (1.3% in 1907), and the number of representatives of other nationalities (including Russian, Austrian, Swiss, Italian, British, French and Swedish citizens) in the year 1910 was estimated at a level of 11000 (i.e.

slightly more than 0.5%)

In the years 1890-1910, as a result of the high population growth rate, the number of Poles increased from 1 050 000 to 1 270 000, and their percentage increased from 59.9% to 61.4%. At the same time, the number of Germans also increased significantly from 692 000 to 807 000, but their percentage fell from 39.5% to 38.4%.

The above-mentioned changes in the ethnic structure caused dissatisfaction among the German authorities which tried to counteract them by the settlement of Germans, the displacement of Poles and a struggle for the Germanisation of at least a certain part of the Polish population. Starting from the middle of the 19th century, the number of Jews living in Greater Poland was also gradually decreasing and this was related to their emigration to Germany or overseas.

Geographically most Poles and Germans lived in rural and manorial districts at the beginning of the 20th century, however, at the same time, representatives of both ethnic groups migrated in great numbers to the cities. As a result of this, their ethnic structure changed and the percentage of the German population so far dominant in the cities decreased from 57.2% in 1890 to 50.7% in the year 1910. In 1910, under the influence of the rapid population growth and high immigration of Polish workers, 89 500 Poles lived in Poznań alone, which made up 57.1% of the city's population. Also, the great majority of Jews from Greater Poland, that is, as many as 95.4% from among 26 500 people lived in the

cities in 1910.

Out of two administrative districts, Poles clearly outnumbered other ethnic groups only in the Poznań district, where they accounted for 67.5% of the overall population in 1910. At the same time, the number of Poles and Germans in the Bydgoszcz district was practically equal and remained within a range of approximately 50%. Poles were dominant at the lowest administrative levels in the following poviats: Środa, Kościan, Ostrzeszów, Pleszew and Śrem, while in such poviats as Wyrzysk, rural and municipal Bydgoszcz, Leszno, Wschowa, Wieleń, Czarnków, Międzyrzecz, Chodzież and Skwierzyn, they were outnumbered by Germans.

From the point of view of the occupational structure, most Poles and Germans worked in agriculture and industry. The great majority of Jews from Greater Poland, in turn, worked in trade and transport. As a result of the ethnic policy of the Prussian state, Germans were dominant among the managerial staff and roles in public service, to which access was facilitated for them. The blocking of social promotion for Poles and the privileged positions of the Germans and a section of the Jews who identified themselves with the German state increased the wealth disparities between these ethnic groups and facilitated the acquisition of education necessary for the performance of freelance professions by the two latter ones,.

## Conclusion

Society in Greater Poland on the eve of the Great

War was characterised by the presence of clear class and ethnic divisions and low social mobility, especially at higher levels of the social pyramid.

It was strongly attached to tradition and religion and reluctant to accept activities and attitudes which went beyond a certain framework created by it. It accepted the economic and civilisational changes without too much resistance, however any social, political and cultural novelties met with resistance. In spite of this, the slow process of social modernisation was taking place and its most important effects were as follows: the formation of the Greater Poland intelligentsia which was recruited from among various social groups, the development of mass culture, the emancipation of women, the social and political activation of lower social classes and examples of social solidarity going beyond class limitations.

A true phenomenon which distinguished society in Greater Poland from that in other partitions was the cooperation of the landed gentry, the bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie as well as the peasants and workers across class divides in the public sphere, despite the existence of strong divisions and social hierarchy in the sphere of private life.

As a result of this, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the most important factors which shaped the social and political mentality of many Greater Poland inhabitants included organic work and legalism (with a simultaneous lack of loyalism), self-organisation and self-determination as well as solidarity and cooperation between all social

classes.

This was the consequence of the implementation of the organic work programme formulated as early as the middle of the 19th century by a portion of enlightened and nationally aware land-owners and the forming intelligentsia (also called the social self-modernisation programme by contemporary historians), which was aimed at the defence of Polish assets and culture under the Prussian rule.

Based on the above-mentioned ideas, hundreds of institutions were established in Greater Poland in the second half of the 19th century (agricultural circles, public libraries and choirs), which, under the supervision or patronage of land-owners, clergy, intelligentsia and nationally aware peasants, consequently strived for the building of a modern economy and society able to counteract the economic and cultural expansion of the Germans. Kulturkampf and the activity of the Settlement Commission additionally affected a deepening of that cooperation and consolidation of the Polish society. Especially when it turned out that the seizure of the Polish land by Germans usually meant a loss of work and thus undermined the livelihood of Polish hired workers (especially economic administration employees), and also the loss of orders for Polish merchants and craftsmen, which clearly showed how strictly the social and national interests were bound with the individual interest.

The combination of slogans related to the defence of national and religious interests through economic modernisation (and to a lesser extent

the social and cultural modernisation) implemented by grass-roots organisations that encompassed all social classes, propagated and fostered internal democratism and contributed to the establishment of a firm conviction in the political mentality of the region regarding the benefits of solidarity and cooperation (unification of social classes) as well as showing the positive impact of representatives of the Catholic Church on social and economic life.

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