

Bismarck's Speech to the Prussian House of Deputies on the "Polish Question" (January 28, 1886)

Abstract

Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) saw the Polish minority in Prussia as a domestic and international problem that had the potential to upend the Congress of Vienna. In his speech to the Prussian House of Deputies, he portrays the Poles as incalculable revolutionaries who fought Germany's friends and helped Germany's mortal enemies.

Source

The motion with which we deal today relates to a passage from the Kaiser's speech expressing the government's conviction that the principles by which Polish-speaking areas of the state have been governed since 1840 are in absolute need of change. We have received this inheritance from history. You will forgive me if I examine the past when addressing a question whose roots reach into the past. We have inherited the custom of living, as best we can, with two million Polish-speaking subjects within the boundaries of the Prussian state. We have not created this situation. We can say of our policy what stands written on a (I can no longer remember which) forester's academy: "We reap what we do not sow; we sow what we will not reap."

Thus, we stand in relation to the past before 1815. In the year 1815, the Prussian state created a boundary which it can in no way retreat from. It needs this boundary to connect its provinces, to connect Breslau [i.e., Wrocław] to Königsberg, and for its commerce as well as its defense and security. [...]

In the year 1815 they did not initially realize the difficulty of the situation on which they were embarking, most probably because they gave less weight at that time to the attitude of the inhabitants than to that of the statesmen. The statesmen who stood at the rudder in 1815, at the forefront Prince [Karl August] von Hardenberg [1750–1822] and, I believe, the first president of the Posen [i.e., Poznań] district at that time, von Zerboni (who possessed significant holdings in south Prussia on the other side of the current border), were under the influence of recently concluded negotiations in which Prussia had striven for a larger Polish territory. Herr von Zerboni possessed great estates in those parts of south Prussia that were not to be returned to Prussia.^[1] Prince Hardenberg's advice to his master, the king [Friedrich Wilhelm III], regarding the newly acquired Polish subjects was more or less dictated by the contemporary prevailing wish for a later compromise that would move our eastern border closer to the Vistula river and propagandize this Prussian purpose among the Polish population of the defeated regions of the Kingdom of Poland. It was a policy which we would surely disapprove of today; it was clumsy. It could not have led to any sort of stipulated agreement. The proclamations by which King Friedrich Wilhelm III took possession of the south Prussian territories that fell to him contained the announcement of his intentions and of the principles according to which he thought to rule.^[2] [But] one obligation the king did not undertake was never to alter these principles, no matter how his Polish subjects behaved themselves. (*Interjection from the Polish deputies: "Aha!"*) These promises, given honorably by the king, and perhaps not understood in exactly the same way by his servants, have since that time become completely untenable, null and void, because of the behavior of the inhabitants of this province. (*Lively opposition from the Poles. "Quite right!" from the right side of the House.*) For my part, I don't give a hoot for any sort of appeal to the proclamations of those times. (*Great unrest among the Poles and in the Catholic*

Center Party.)

The belief that we could become accustomed to the Poles, and the desire to test the difficulties of the situation, gained credibility from the fact that in Silesia we lived with a million Polish-speaking subjects without any difficulty. [Also contributing to this belief was] the memory of the era before 1806 during which time the nationalistic passions were not so clearly in evidence. There was a socially bearable relationship between Germans and Poles, a complex social intercourse with Poles here in Berlin and in society.

This kind of naive trustfulness was suddenly disturbed by the Warsaw rising of 1830 and the emergence of a Polish question, in a European sense, in which other nations were involved and which has never since then wholly disappeared.

[...]

King Friedrich Wilhelm III was open to [von Flottwell's] ideas. The king and his finance minister budgeted rather small funds with which estates could be bought from Polish hands in order to increase the German population of the province. Even though these operations were not in every case carried out with skill or subsequently maintained with the original determination, they nonetheless created a sizable increase in the German population, as long as the system prevailed in the administration.

However, the system was abandoned in 1840 when the king, [Friedrich Wilhelm IV, 1840–58] of blessed memory, came to power. He was of the opinion that the well-meaning attitude which he had toward his Polish-speaking subjects, the confidence which he had in them, would be fully reciprocated by the other side. Shortly after his coronation, he was strengthened in this faith by the tour he undertook in the province accompanied by the leading noblemen of the Polish nation. He believed the old saying: Confidence breeds high-mindedness. We had insulted the Poles unjustly. They desired only to be the loyal subjects of their well-meaning king. If we met them with trust and when [they] compared the welfare measures of the Prussian government to the conditions that prevailed previously or—and I can say this without insulting our [Russian] neighbors—that are to be found among the Poles living on the other side of the border, then gradually their hearts would be won.

The king, of blessed memory, was disturbed in his trusting perceptions in certain unpleasant ways by the insurrections which took place in the most varied phases in the years 1846 to 1848. In 1848, he had to experience the alliance concluded between Prussian and foreign democrats and the Poles on the Berlin barricades. One of the immediate consequences of this was that thousands of Prussian subjects, German-speaking and Polish-speaking, were shot or wounded in battles with each other in the Grand Duchy of Posen. The outcome of those events was a legal condition. The Poles strove for the same legal and constitutional freedom of movement guaranteed to German subjects. The freedom of movement the Poles gained in the right of association, the press, and constitutional matters, however, in no way contributed to increasing good will toward Germany or cooperation with it. On the contrary, we see only a sharpening of national antagonisms, that is, a one-sided sharpening from the Polish side. The peculiarity of the German character contributed to this development in many ways. The Germans' good nature and admiration for all things foreign, a kind of envy with which our countrymen regard those who have lived abroad and who have adopted certain foreign allures, and then also the German tradition of battling their own government for which they were always certain to find willing allies among the Poles (*"hear, hear" on the right*). Finally, [there was] the peculiar capacity of Germans, not found among other nations, to not only get out of their own skin but to get into that of a foreigner (*laughter*) and completely to become, in a word, something like a Pole, Frenchman, or American. I remember from my childhood learning the most popular melodies in Berlin about the old Polish general:

Remember, my brave Lagienka; (laughter)

Ask no one of my destiny;

My fatherland . . .

But that was not the German fatherland, rather the Polish, that the Berlin organ grinders were lamenting. The appropriate twin of this was the interest in all things French. Who, of my age, has not heard with enthusiasm the recitation of, for example, “Bertrande’s Farewell”? Or the poetry of Baron von Gaudy or other glorifications of Napoleon I, who thoroughly mowed down the Germans, for which they demonstrated their gratitude in a way I may not describe with a zoological adjective. (*Great laughter*) [...] I recall my university days in the year 1832 at Göttingen which was a kind of depot for Polish refugees from the uprising of 1831. As a young man I got to know some of the outstanding people of the Polish parliament. They were interesting, charming people, but what interests me most is the memory of the enthusiasm with which these Poles were received in all the cities of central Germany. I have experienced the reception for the victorious and upright returning soldiers of our army, but it was scarcely warmer than the reception of these Polish refugees in every German city (Aha!) And yet—I heard them say it themselves—they in no way abandoned their strivings or changed their minds about Germans and Germany. I recall that I occasionally discussed with one of the gentlemen the Slavic echoes which appear in many of the place names of my home, dating from the earlier Wendish period. He said to me—the conversation was in French—“Just wait, we will soon give them back their original names.”

You find this [sentiment] also in the manifestoes of the [Polish] revolutions of 1846 and 1863. The manufacturers of Poland do not renounce a single dependency [of the historic Kingdom of Poland]. Pomerania belongs to it just as well as Pomerelia, and Pomerelia just as well as Warsaw itself. I have already mentioned how forthcoming the inhabitants of Berlin were toward the Poles in 1848. On the corner of Charlottenburg Strasse and [Unter den] Linden, I remember seeing the funeral cortege for the fallen March fighters. There, in contradiction to the funeral solemnities, stood [Ludwik] Mieroslawski, the actual hero of the moment, in a richly decorated wagon dressed in a picturesque Polish costume. His appearance—and he looked quite good, I can assure you—made almost a greater impression on the Berliners and engaged their hearts almost more than the king, who announced his intention that Prussia should merge into Germany. Thus, German nationality was eclipsed, even though it was represented by the highest bearer of Prussian nationality.

[...]

I cannot say that I was misunderstood at the time. I spoke clearly about these matters, perhaps more clearly than was good, in the now-famous but imperfectly understood “blood and iron” speech.^[3] It dealt with military questions, and I said then: Put the strongest possible military forces, in other words, as much “blood and iron” as possible, in the hands of the king of Prussia. Then he will be able to make the policy you want. Policy is not made with speeches and shooting-matches and songs. It is made solely with “blood and iron.” (*Bravo!*) I would perhaps have been understood if I had not had too many rivals in this area—the creation of Germany. (*Hilarity.*)

In this situation, I harbored a conscious intention that I could not yet speak aloud. Had I done so, I would have received support from neither Russia nor France, neither Austria nor England; the latter would have [supported my goal] with no more than words; the former, not even with words. The seed that I cultivated carefully would have been nipped in the bud by the combined pressure of all Europe, and our ambition would have been put to rest. None would have acted on behalf of the German cause out of love for us, and none even out of self-interest.

In respect to the [present subject of discussion], when I was ambassador to St. Petersburg [1859–1862], I was prepared to take a personal role, not only in foreign policy, but in Prussia’s policy with regard to Germany. While

there I could observe from close quarters Russian relations with to the Poles, due to the great personal trust bestowed upon me by the late Tsar Alexander II [1855–1881]. I gained the conviction that within the Russian cabinet there were two principles at work: the first, which I would call anti-German, wished to acquire the good will of the Poles and the French; it was represented in the main by the prime-minister Prince Gortchakov and by Marquis Wielopolski in Warsaw. The second, held mainly by the tsar and other of his servants, had its basis in maintaining friendly relations with Prussia at all costs. Thus, we can say: a pro-Prussian, anti-Polish policy warred with a Francophile Polish policy for precedence in the Russian cabinet. [...]

Because of this, my [later] position as foreign minister toward the Russian cabinet was somewhat prefigured. [Another result] was that we could expect from the other European cabinets—I won't say support, but toleration for our [Prussian] German policy. And for this I had special interest in cultivating relations with Petersburg. It was hard for me because I knew that despite striving for one and the same goal as the majority of my countrymen in this house of the people's representatives, I could not count on the support or cooperation of a single one of them. The contrary was the case. We were in an extraordinary position. They [deputies to the Prussian lower house] tried to extort from me the confidential secrets of the convention [with Russia] which would have delivered the means for the rest of the European cabinets to persecute us, to make known to them our weaknesses and errors. This would have enabled—I cannot put it otherwise—Paris and London to indict us because of the pro-Russian policy we were pursuing. [These attempts] were not without success.

By accident, in 1870, I received evidence through a number of French documents that fell into our hands that members of the opposition [liberal deputies in the Prussian lower house] had made contact with the French embassy here. (*"Hear, hear!" from the right.*) I shall continue to keep the secret because I do not regard publication of it as useful. Twenty-three years have passed, and many political conceptions have been altered. Everyone has learned something about politics since then. Political education is different today.

In any case, we were in a very serious, wholly isolated position when the debates about the Poles took place in these halls. At the beginning of the Polish insurrection [1863], I found in Paris a rather favorable judgment [toward the Poles]. They were more anti-Russian than anti-Prussian. However, the debates in the Prussian lower house acted as a sort of call to arms to foreigners. The tenor [of the debates] was something like the English motto: hit him, he has no friend. This led to our being denounced in Paris; then the Emperor Napoleon changed his views and he began to exert an unfriendly pressure on us. Because of the proceedings in this Prussian-German hall, we might well have fallen to the tightening pressure exerted by a united England, France, and Austria into either a shameful retreat or into acceptance of a war (which Russia was inclined to in 1863) as an ally of Russia. [That this did not happen] we owe ultimately to the pro-German tendencies of old Lord Russell in England. England rejected attaching itself to France's objectives. We found ourselves isolated and in danger. Prussia was not then as strong as now; we did not have the Germanic Confederation behind us.^[4] I stood on this exact same spot and was met in these halls by a flood of scorn and hatred from an almost unanimous assembly. I thought then: Well, now, the English and French ambassadors are less hateful and hostile toward me than my own countrymen in the Prussian parliament. (*"Hear, hear!" on the right; unrest on the left.*)

[...]

Since 1866 we have experienced no further support from abroad for the Poles' ambitions toward us. Perhaps, this is because we have become stronger. Perhaps, it is because France, which had the main interest in the restoration of Poland—a Polish army would always be worth a French corps on the Vistula—France, I say, has other political ideas than the Polish question. The object of its ideas lies much closer. Now it is thinking more directly about

Germany, not indirectly as formerly. Under the Emperor Napoleon, as under Louis Philippe (1830–1848), French efforts on behalf of Poland were rather harmless. There are no such efforts visible now. European policy is too preoccupied with the events of 1866 and 1870 to be concerned with Poland.

Nevertheless, the struggle for existence between the two nations, which are allotted the same hearth, goes on unabated, one could even say, continues with strengthened forces. The era of peace has not been an era of reconciliation and accommodation on the Polish side; and the peculiar thing is that in this struggle it is not, as is often believed abroad and as our optimists think, the German population that is the victor and Germanism that is advancing, but the other way around. The Polish population makes indubitable progress. And we ask ourselves how this can be so, given the allegedly great support which the German element has received from the government. Indeed, gentlemen, this perhaps instructs us that the support given the Poles by the opposition [German political forces] is stronger than that which the government can render according to the current constitution. But the fact is that the Poles can say of themselves: *Vexilla regis prodeunt* (the banners of the king go forward). This is beyond doubt.

When I think about the reasons for this, there comes to mind the Catholic department [of the Prussian government] which, until its abolition by my direct intervention as minister-president, possessed the character of a Polonizing organ inside the Prussian administration. (*Unrest in the Center Party and among the Poles*). Under the direction of Herr Krätzig—I hope he still lives—it had become an institute of a few great Polish families, in whose service these officials pushed Polonization in all the contested German-Polish districts. That is why it became necessary for me to agree to the abolition of this department. And this is actually the reason I generally concurred in the *Kulturkampf*.^[5] From my personal point of view, there would have been no *Kulturkampf*. (*Vigorous contradictions from the Center Party*.) Yes, gentlemen, say what you will. I leave you to your doubts. There will be a few who will believe me, but I am rather indifferent as to whether anyone believes me. Yet, for anyone who wants to be informed, it is necessary for me to give my personal opinion.

The person who drew me into the *Kulturkampf* was Herr Krätzig, the chairman of the Catholic department, which was formed in the Prussian bureaucracy to protect the rights of the king and the church. However, it developed under the king's authority and seal into an exclusive activity in the direction of protecting the rights of the Roman church as well as Polish machinations against the king. And for that reason, it had to be dissolved. (*"Aha!" from the Center Party and the Poles*.)

A second explanation for the progress of the Poles lies in the introduction of the national constitution and the laws regarding the press and the right of association which facilitated the agitation. The Polish gentlemen have not been shy about exploiting all the laws introduced in the German Empire and Prussia. On their side they do not recognize [these laws]. They recognize their membership in Prussia only conditionally, and to be sure [feel free to terminate their membership] on twenty-four-hour notice. Today, if they had the opportunity to proceed against us and were strong enough to do so, they would not even give us twenty-four-hour notice but simply let loose, without any notice. (*Great unrest among the Poles*.) Yes, gentlemen, if any of you can give his word of honor that this is not true (great merriment), that all the gentlemen will stay at home if the opportunity presents itself to march out with your guerrilla bands, then I shall take back my assertion. But I demand your word of honor. (*Hilarity*.) And giving it to me would be an error, gentlemen. We are not really so stupid; at least I am not. (*Hilarity*.)

[...]

The national constitution gave strong incentive to the various parties which are always ready to combat the

government under any circumstance. Among these negative types can be found a considerable number, in certain circumstances even a majority, in the Reichstag. This majority is quite incapable of constituting a positive government. Its leading principle in recent cases is to support bills put forward by the Polish and Social Democratic factions which are then supported by the rest which I can well call inimical and nihilist—and I am not employing an insulting designation here. I mean only those groups which under all circumstances not only combat the government but also negate the institutions of the Empire. [...] Those who do not want to cooperate in the defense of the state, do not belong to the state. They have no rights in the state. They should withdraw from the state. We are no longer so barbaric as to drive them out, but this would be the right answer to give against all those who negate the state and its institutions. All the protection accorded to them by the state, which they negate, should be withdrawn from them. In the old German Empire, this was called “the ban.” It is a hard judgment for which we have become too soft today. But there are no grounds to give rights in the state to those who recognize no obligations to it. These leanings in the other parties are just as dangerous, relatively, as those I ascribe to the Polish opposition. If the two million Poles stood completely alone, I would not fear them; this applies also to the million Upper Silesians, although their hostility against the Prussian state is not as well developed as the leaders of the agitation would wish. But in the leanings of other states and other parties, which negate the state and also combat it, there is forming a considerable power, a majority. I can see little future salvation for the further development of the German Empire in this.

[...]

NOTES

[1] 1815 can be regarded as the “fourth” partition of Poland. Prussia, with designs on the Kingdom of Saxony, was willing to cede part of its booty from the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795, retaining only the western provinces. Poland was redistributed, with Russia getting the lion’s share. (All footnotes are by Prof. Richard S. Levy, the author of this translation.)

[2] When the Province of Posen was annexed in 1815, Friedrich Wilhelm III averred that no one expected Poles to change their nationality. The official languages were German and Polish; the province was administered by German and Polish noblemen.

[3] Bismarck’s speech to the budget commission of the Prussian lower house in 1862, one of his first official acts after becoming Prussian minister-president, was a masterpiece of enticement and menace. The commission, dominated by liberal opponents of the king and his government, heard Bismarck remind them of their failure to create a united Germany in 1848. His speech ended with the taunt that history was made, not through majority decisions of parliamentarians, but through “blood and iron.” Bismarck here proposes a slightly different interpretation of his words of 1862.

[4] Rather than return to the chaotic pre-Napoleonic situation in German-speaking Europe, the Congress of Vienna created the German Confederation [*Deutscher Bund*] (1815–66), a confederation of 38 states under the presidency of Austria.

[5] The *Kulturkampf*, a legislative campaign carried out largely in the Prussian parliament, went far beyond the issue of separation of church and state, which most Catholics endorsed. The government sought to wean the Catholic masses away from the hierarchy and the Catholic political party, the Center [*Zentrum*]. The state intervened directly into church affairs, arrested resisting clergymen, and left many parishes without priests. Bismarck’s attempt to dismantle political Catholicism backfired and instead resulted in its strengthening. Until 1933, the Center, and later its Bavarian branch, sent approximately one hundred deputies to the Reichstag in every election. It was impossible for the government to govern for any length of time without

coming to terms with the *Zentrum*.

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