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NATIONAL POLICY PURSUED BY THE GERMAN HIGH COMMAND ON BELARUSIAN TERRITORY DURING THE WORLD WAR I

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In September 1915, the Russian troops retreated from western Belarusian territory, including Brest, Vilno, Grodno, Lida, Minsk. The front line was established in the direction Dvinsk–Braslav–Smorgon–Baranovichy–Pinsk–Lutsk. In October 1915, the Germans defeated the following territories: Vilno and Grodno provinces, part of Minsk province with such cities and towns as Grodno, Oshmyany, Smorgon, Lida, Slonim, Novogrudok, Baranovichy, Volkovysk, Pruzhany, Brest-Litovsk, Kobrin, Pinsk. From February to March 1918, the German troops reached the Zapadnaya Dvina and Dnepr, and occupied Minsk, Polotsk, Borisov, Zhlobin, Rechitsa, Kalinkovichy, Rogachyev, Gomel, Orsha, Mogilev [1, p. 8; 2, p. 51, 3, p. 36–38; 4; 5, p. 454–455].

The defeated Belarusian territory became part of the administrative and military division ‘Litva’ and ‘Belostok-Grodno’, controlled by the High Command of the Western front – the Ober Ost. Besides Grodno and Vilno provinces, the Ober Ost invaded part of the present-day Poland, part of Latvia and the whole Lithuania. The total area of the Ober Ost was 108.8 sq km. Paul von Hindenburg acted as the Ober Ost’s Commander-in-Chief while the general-mayor Erich von Ludendorff was serving as the Chief of Staff [6, p. 44; 7, p. 48].

Top priority for the German authorities was to export raw materials and labour force to boost the German domestic market. The occupants expropriated Belarusian lands and forced locals out of the war zones to special camps. They introduced the German-like money system, formed line-of-communication organizations to fight against espionage. As a result of all those actions, the locals were deprived of any possibility to become independent [8, p. 307–309].

What concerns the national policy of the High Command on the Belarusian territory, it was mainly determined by region’s multi-ethnicity. The ethnic minorities such as Russians, Jews, Polish, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Germans, Tartars had been living there for a long time. Multi-ethnic and religious Ober Ost challenged the stereotype of Russia as a single-ethnicity empire inhabited only by Russians. The German authorities knew a little about the ethnography and culture of the occupied land. Thus Y. Dubejkova, a daughter of a well-known Belarusian public and political leader, said, ‘The Germans were not acquainted with the ethnicities in our country. They distinguished Russians, Polish and Jews, but Belarusians were not familiar to them’ [9, p. 54; 10, p. 60].

When paying a visit to western Belarus, the Ober-Ost’s Chief of Staff E. Ludendorff said, ‘In autumn 1915, I wanted to find out how the Belarusian population had been distributed across the territory. At first, it was difficult to find their settlements. But later I discovered that they could be found in many parts of the region. They had been greatly influenced by the Polish, that is why they were difficult to be identified. Their national culture was so poorly-developed that only sweeping changes would be effective. German books mentioned little about the people and their traditions. So it seemed we had been discovering the new ethnicity’ [11, p. 185].

The German High Command was fully aware that the occupied land was multi-ethnic and followed the all-nationalities-equal principle. E. Ludendorff wrote, 'Under my command, we were pursuing the policy of ethnic equality' [1, p. 33]. However, it should be mentioned that such a policy was only for those who succumbed to German pressure. Nevertheless, the Germans allowed the local ethnicities to develop and preserve their traditions, languages and cultures.

We can not but mention that the sphere of national culture was allowed to thrive under the Germans. The Belarusian culture as well as education enjoyed flourishing. All the ethnic communities were allowed to issue newspapers in their native languages. E. Ludendorff said, 'Each ethnicity published their own newspaper. It was obligatory to cover the news about Germany in compliance with the Chancellor's policy. Before the publication all the newspapers had been censored [11, p. 203].

According to archive records, publishing houses needed the commander-in-chief's permission to publish, sell and circulate newspapers across the territory of the Ober Ost. Moreover, newspapers had to be sold in field shops and station newsstands. Text- and church-books were not subjects to such restrictions [12, p. 214–215].

It is obvious that all those actions were aimed at deflecting criticism over the German policy. Among their goals was to impose peacekeeping role of Germany on locals which had been under Russia for a long period of time. Despite those restraints, from mid 1915 to late 1918, 21 newspapers and magazines were issued; among them 15 were in German. Some periodicals were issued in several languages. From February 15, 1916 in Vilno, the newspaper 'Goman' was put into circulation. It used the Belarusian and Polish languages, and informed about the German instructions, the history of Belarus and Lithuania. The newspaper was promoting the idea of forming the New Great Duchy of Lithuania, which would unite Belarus and Lithuania under one country. Another multi-language newspaper was the 'Grodno newspaper'. Its main languages were German, Polish, Jewish [1, p. 13–15; 13, p. 94–98].

The mentioned newspapers were mainly read by civilians, whereas there were as well the newspapers issued for German soldiers. From 1915 to 1916, 'The 10th German Army', published in Vilno, covered the news about the war; in particular, about major battles. But sometimes it published articles about the national communities in Belarus (Polish, Lithuanians, Jewish, Russians), informing about their traditions, holidays, superstitions, about their history, and life under Russia [1, p. 14].

The above mentioned facts show that such freedom of mass media recognized the Belarusians as the separate ethnicity, that had been dependent on Russia for so long, and as a result deprived of any possibility to form a sovereign country. The '10th German Army' covered widely the Russian Empire's politics, but it said nothing about political events on the Belarusian land. In the articles about the local national communities the term 'Belarus' was not mentioned. They informed about Lithuania only.

As has been said before the occupied territory was multi-ethnic. The German authorities were familiar with Polish, Lithuanians, and Russians. But they knew little about Belarusians. So the German High Command was trying to inform soldiers about Belarusian traditions, roots and history.

Under Germany, the education reform had been introduced. From late 1915 to early 1916, P. von Hindenburg ordered to adopt the key directives and instructions telling a native language to become a language of teaching. So the Belarusians were allowed to teach and learn in their language, permitted to be used without any restrictions. Russian as a language of learning was forbidden, but could be chosen as an optional subject in secondary and high schools. German had to be a proliferating language. The curriculum was ordered to include a lot of German classes to prepare competent graduates in speech and written German. Teachers had to learn the language as soon as possible to use and teach it at schools. Religious classes were in native languages. It is an interesting fact that the directive allowed the Jewish to conduct services in their language [15, p. 51–52; 16, p. 11].

To establish the German education system on the occupied land, the High Command ordered to eradicate local schools. But the Belarusians were not greatly affected by the policy. For example, the first primary school was opened in Vilno in November 1915. By 1916 the number of such schools had increased to 5, by 1917 in Minsk and Grodno provinces – to 126 [17, p. 3–27]. The German authorities as well initiated the language training courses for teachers [18].

But such a policy of developing education and culture of the ethnic minorities was not only aimed at boosting their sovereignty. The main goal pursued by the High Command was to maintain peace

and stability on the occupied territory for controlling and manipulating locals. That is why it seemed reasonable to allow the peoples to develop their cultures.

Thus Vilno was the major national centre for culture and education. In summer 1916, the Germans allowed the craft fairs by the Vilno craftsmen. Those exhibits made collectively by Lithuanians, Poles, Belarusians, Jews arose considerable interest [19, p. 238–242]. Vilno had as well become the centre for the national Belarusian movement, where in June 1916 the Belarusian club opened. The amateur theatre was part of the club. It staged ‘The Kham’ by E. Ozheshko, ‘On Antokali’, ‘Kalis’, ‘Butrym Niamira’ by P. Alekhnovich; ‘Paulinka’ by Y. Kupala. The orphans played in children performances. The culture society ‘Ranitsa’, and the orphanage ‘Zolak’ were opened. In Vilenskaya Street the Belarusian library was established. It held books in Belarusian, Russian, German and French. Tickets for Belarusian performances were sold there. In the bookshop in Zavalnaya Street, books and textbooks in Belarusian were available. It as well contained books about the Belarusian history in foreign languages [1, p. 13; 20–21].

When describing a long path to the Belarusian sovereignty, we can not but mention the remarkable historic event – the revolution of 1917 – that triggered the Belarusian national movement. As a result, the nationality attracted the German attention. The article ‘Discovering Belarus’, published in the newspaper ‘Dziannitsa’ on July 12, 1918, informed that the German authorities took keen interest in the Belarusian culture. Brochures about the Belarusian history and traditions were available in book markets. The author of the article wanted to point out that the Germans had been trying to establish good relationships with the nationality’ [22, p. 66].

The ‘Volnaya Belarus’ in the section ‘In the occupied part of Belarus’ wrote that the German authorities had made an important step to facilitate Belarusian identity. So, instead of referring to Belarus and the Belarusians as ‘Weissrussland’ and ‘Weissrussen’ respectively, they introduced ‘Weisruthenen’ and ‘Weisruthenien’. The name ‘Weissrussland’ consists of the two German words ‘weiss’ (white) and ‘Russland’ (Russia), so the name ‘Weissrussand’ literally meant that Belarus was only the white part of Russia. While the name ‘Weissruthenen’ recognized the country as independent. The Ukrainian politician E. Levitsky supported the Ober Ost’s decision to introduce the independent name for Belarus [18]. The information mentioned suggests that the German authorities recognized Belarus as a separate nation. But they did not support the creation of the Belarus National Republic.

The Germans encouraged the formation of the Belarusian science clubs. On January 26, 1918, at the Belarusian conference, the Germans allowed to adopt the framework of the Belarusian Science Community. The organization was aimed at creating and backing museums, libraries, science communities, holding exhibitions, excursions, lectures, training courses, meetings. It could publish books and newspapers. The Community was allowed to function only in Vilno. Its head was K. Schafangel, a German official. His deputy was I. Lutskevich, a well-known Belarusian political leader and archeologist [23, p. 35].

The first Community’s event was the exhibition of the Belarusian ancient decorative art. It was held in May 1918 in Vilno, and was backed by the headquarters of the ‘10th German Army’. In September 1918, Minsk citizens could visit the exhibition. The Belarusian Science Community worked in close cooperation with German scientists such as A. Ipel, P. Weber, K. Meinhoff, G. Pick. In May 1918, a special commission was set up to approve German grammar books before publication. But at the end of 1918 the German army retreated from Vilno, which was under the Polish occupation. All those events slowed down culture and science activity. And its members became mainly involved in political life of the country [23, p. 36].

As has been already said, the German authorities encouraged the cultural development of the Belarusians, but they were opposed to their sovereignty. When writing to the commander-in-chief of the Western Front, the head of Vilno district, Beckert, said, ‘The Belarusians are not determined enough to gain sovereignty. There are some separatist movements started by several archeologists and writers in Vilno. But they are of small political significance’ [24, p. 95]. So Beckert was not likely to admit that Belarus would become the independent country in the near future.

Nevertheless, the local national organizations were trying to achieve their political goals even being under the German occupation. On February 20, 1918, the executive committee of the Belarus Rada Meeting, adopted the First Charter (Pervoja Ustovnaya Gramota) which called for asserting the right to national sovereignty. It as well urged the ethnic minorities to struggle for independence.

On March 9, 1918, in the Second Charter (Vtoraja Ustovnaya Gramota), the representatives of the Belarusian movement for independence proclaimed the Belarus People's Republic. According to the Charter, all the ethnic minorities on the Belarusian territory gained sovereignty and they were eligible to use their native language. After long discussions on March 25, 1918 the BPR government together with the representatives of the self-proclaimed Belarusian government of Vilno district adopted the Third Charter (Tretja Ustovnaya Gramota). It proclaimed BPR's state sovereignty. The territory of the country included Minsk and Mogilev provinces, the Belarusian parts of Vitebsk, Vilno, Grodno, Smolensk, Chernigov provinces, and the adjacent territories inhabited by the Belarusians. BPR claimed its right to have negotiations with Germany and revise the chapter of the Brest Treaty concerning Belarus. The BPR government required the conclusion of treaties with Entente and the Fourth Union countries. Such actions seemed reasonable for its leaders, since the BPR was a newly-formed country, and it had not been the WW1 participant [26–28].

The next step taken by the BPR was the adoption of the registration instruction, aimed at censusing its population. According to the estimates, more than 1,000 such certificates have been issued up to now. Besides in Berlin in the publishing house of Yazep Galevsky, the passport sample was issued, which was common to all BPR citizens and contained 12 pages. To establish the BPR power local executive committees were initiated by the Belarusian authorities. However, the Germans closely supervised and controlled their activity [29, p. 191–193].

Since the Belarusian territory had been occupied by the Germans, the BPR was not a fully independent country. But all the attempts to create the country made Germany and Russia regard the Belarusians not as an ethnic minority with the native language, but as the nation which one day could become sovereign. The BPR did not have its national army, police, financial and tax systems, that is why it could not function independently. The German central and local authorities were not aimed at creating the BPR as a new sovereign state. They saw it as a representative body of Belarus under the German occupation. And the BPR actually was a representative body, which was supervised by the '10th German Army'. But Wilhelm II refused to recognize the BPR however hard its government was trying to convince its loyalty to Germany [30, p. 41].

We should as well mention Lithuanians who were the second largest ethnic minority on the occupied Belarusian territory. M. Markovsky in his book 'Lithuanians: the past and the future' wrote, 'We can't deny the fact that the German pressure was considerable, but we should admit that the Germans gave more freedom than the Russian authorities. Lithuanians were allowed to develop their culture and language. For example, 2,000 primary schools and several gymnasiums were opened in Lithuania, where teaching was in Lithuanian [31, p. 28].

On September 18, 1915, in Vilno on the occupation day, Pfyle addressed the citizens on behalf of the German High Command and expressed sympathy for them since they had been humiliated by the Russian authorities for so long. The following day Lithuanians sent three activists to the German authorities to remind about other peoples who lived in Vilno. The German officials apologized saying that Pfyle did not announce the opinion of the High Command, but rather his own point of view. The Germans had been encouraging Lithuanians' attempts to create a sovereign nationality, and they did not create any hurdles regarding the reunification of the Great Duchy of Lithuania under the power of the German Empire [3, p. 471; 32, p. 33–34].

In December 1915, the provisional government of the Confederation of the GDL was formed. The 'Universal' in Lithuanian, Belarusian, Polish and Jewish informed about the plans to unite the occupied territories under the GDL. The representatives of the Belarusian, Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish organizations supported the move [33, p. 83; 34, p. 18; 35, p. 227].

The Confederation of the GDL envisaged to include Vilno and Kovensk provinces, Belarusian and Lithuanian territories of Suvalki and Grodno provinces, Lithuanian part of Kurland, part of Minsk province attached to Vilno. On May 21, 1916, the Rada of the Confederation of the GDL was turned into the Constant Lithuania and Belarus Commission [17, p. 3–27].

But the German High Command was opposed to Lithuanian full national sovereignty, and that soured the relationships between the countries. Describing the nationalities under the German occupation, E. von Ludendorff wrote, 'Lithuanians were deeply convinced the critical moment for their sovereignty

had arrived. But when they did not gain complete independence, they became wary of the Germans' [11, p. 183].

In 1917 the German High Command revived the policy of the Lithuanian independence. In early September 1917, the German approved the Lithuania National Confederation and appointed the Tariba made up of 20 members. In late September 1917, the German High Command recognized the Tariba as a Lithuanian representative body. On December 11, 1917, the Tariba issued the declaration which broke off the relations with other countries and announced close and sustainable cooperation with the German Empire on the basis of the Military Convention, the Cooperation Convention, the single currency and customs union directives [17, p. 3–27].

Soon after the events, Lithuanians broke off the relations with Belarus, however, they insisted on parts of Grodno and Minsk provinces to be annexed to the GDL. To respond to the move V. Lastovsky formed in Vilno the organization 'Independent and Inseparable Belarus' which was aimed at preserving the Belarusian territory within the ethnic boundaries (Vilno, Vitebsk, Grodno, Minsk, Mogilev provinces), and at making all the nationalities equal and granting their languages the status of national [1, p. 32; 17, p. 3–27]. The supporters of the Belarusian national movement were not opposed to the idea of the Belarus and Lithuania Confederation.

On February 16, 1918, the Tariba representatives requested permission to recognize Lithuania as a sovereign country. Following the Brest Peace treaty on March 23, 1918, Wilhelm II recognized Lithuanian independence by approving the Declaration of December 11, 1917. In summer 1918, the Tariba was turned into the Lithuania State Council. On November 9, 1918 the Lithuanians summoned their first government headed by A. Valdemaras [36–37]. The above mentioned events show that the German High Command gave Lithuanians freedom and authority to form a country. But they did not support the Belarusian activists to form the BPR.

We should as well mention the Polish nationality. The German High Command described them as 'vigilant about the Germans, since they were wary of the Lithuania-centred policy' [11, p. 183]. A. Smolenchuk, a researcher of the Belarusian national movement in the late XIX-early XX centuries, said that in September 1915, the Polish national movement started. The independent Lithuania was associated with the independent Poland. The Polish were opposed to the Belarusian national and cultural Renaissance. They were against the renewal of the GDL. The Belarusian and Lithuanian activists in turn were against the domination of the Polish culture in the region [38, p. 24–26].

Meanwhile, the German authorities were trying to benefit from the disagreement between the leaders of three nationalities. Writing to E. von Hindenburg the German Chancellor expressed his intention to support Poland and its people since it was the only nation under Russia which Germany saw as a potential ally against the Russian Empire. The German support triggered active polonisation of the Belarusians [32, p. 33–34]. As a result, the following Polish culture and education organizations were established: the Education Committee, the community 'Prosvrshchenije', the Catholic brotherhood of the Polish national school. All of them contributed to the opening of 50 Polish schools (4 of them were gymnasiums with 800 learners) in Vilno and its suburbs. The Polish were struggling to influence the Belarusian and Lithuanian cultures and languages as part of their plan to join western Belarus to the Kingdom of Poland [39, p. 232–233, 239–240; 40, s. 393].

In the archive there are some personal recollections by a refugee department officer of the Belarus National Committee. He recollected that the Polish exerted considerable influence within the occupied Minsk and Minsk province. A lot of Polish schools had been opened. The signs were either in German or Polish. In such a situation of the multinational dominance he could not but mention an embarrassing fact: a Polish woman was a German representative in the education department of the local executive committee [41, p. 4–4 par.].

As the Polish dominance started to expand rapidly, the German High Command changed their policy towards the nationality. E. von Ludendorff said that the Polish had been very determined to exert their influence on education. They even made an attempt to open university in Vilno [11, p. 183]. But the Germans did not support the idea. From the information above, it is possible to make a conclusion that the German High Command encouraged the development of the Belarusian, Lithuanian and Jewish cultures in order to lessen the Polish influence.

However, the manifesto published on November 15, 1916 proclaimed Poland a sovereign country with its monarch and constitution [42]. As can be seen, the German High Command pursued such an ambiguous policy in order to ensure the support of a particular nationality to succeed in the war.

The Jews were among the major nationalities on the western territory. During the WW1 the significant chunk of the Jews nationality was under the German occupation. E. Ludendorff said that the Jews were easy to communicate with. He admitted, 'We faced no difficulties in communicating with them. We understood each other's languages. Whereas the Polish, Lithuanians, Latvians were difficult to understand' [11, p. 183].

Jews showed no eagerness for assimilation into the local population. The German High Command encouraged them to preserve national traditions and recognized them as an independent nationality. The High Command regarded the gahal – the Jewish self-governing body – as a religious and charity body. E. Ludendorff noted that the well-funded charities functioned successfully and they could expand their activity [11, p. 195; 43, p. 102].

Those Jews who lived on the Belarusian territory were traders and played an important role in the economic life of the region. The drastic and painful changes took place under the German occupation. But the Jewish trade activity was not affected. Kurt Klamroth, a German military department official of the Grodno executive committee recollected, 'Some officials in the committee supported the eradication of the Jewish trade. The head of Grodno province ordered to eliminate that activity, but the act damaged everyday life of the region. The people did not move across the country and they could not buy things they needed for everyday life. The Jewish traders went from one village to another and sold necessary items. They didn't charge extra money for products. The Jewish shops were similar to caravans. And the cooperation between locals and Jews was mutually beneficial. Farmers could buy necessary things while traders in turn could buy agricultural products, meat, and poultry. To eradicate such a type of trade literally meant to stop economic activity of the region. K. Klamroth noted that the Jews contributed to the selling of the skin, butter, tannin, metal. But in large cities only German products were allowed to be sold, so it forced rich Jews to close their shops [6, p. 52–53].

Undoubtedly, the Germans favoured the Jews, because they expanded trade across the region, provided locals and German soldiers with products. Compared with other nationalities, they were deeply involved in charity, which was very important in the war period.

It seems reasonable to mention a group of people of the German origin on the occupied territory. Before the war broke off, the people with German roots had been living for long on the occupied Belarusian territory. Their relatives had once moved from Germany to Russia. The German High Command treated the community with respect, explaining that 'the war made them poor. The Russian authorities had forced many of them to leave the region. The German authorities considered it as duty and honour to protect the group. And each German soldier had to help them' [44, p. 88].

A set of special instructions had been issued to keep record of the German population. There were the main requirements to claim for German nationality. A person and their parents had to use German as a native language. If a person did not have a good command of German, they had to provide certificates which proved their German origin. The Polish, Lithuanians and Latvians who spoke German were not admitted Germans. The Jewish were allowed to claim for German nationality if they provided documents which proved that they or their parents had been born in Germany. The High Command urged that they need not be afraid of the Russian come back. But they as well stressed that Germans were not allowed to reveal war-related information [44, p. 88]. It appears obvious that the relation to the German-born citizens illustrates the violation of the all-nations-are-equal principle.

Thus from the autumn 1915 to December 1918, the nationalities on the Belarusian territory had been under the Ober Ost's command, which was a military body formed to present a long-term control over the particular territory during the WW1. The German High Command did not support national sovereignty of the local ethnic communities. Nevertheless, the nationalities had made attempts to develop their cultures and education, which lead to opening of national schools, libraries, cultural and education organizations, publishing of newspapers.

Having analyzed the archive records, it is possible to say that at various periods of the World War I the Germans pursued different policies towards the local nationalities in order to strengthen their influence

and authority in the region. For example, the German High Command had been supporting the Lithuanians and Belarusians first, then the Polish, in their attempts to achieve independence. We may draw the conclusion that Germans allowed some freedom in the culture sphere, but restricted political activity to establish their dominance in the region.

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О. П. ДМИТРИЕВА

НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ ПОЛИТИКА ГЕРМАНСКИХ ОККУПАЦИОННЫХ ВЛАСТЕЙ НА ТЕРРИТОРИИ БЕЛАРУСИ В ГОДЫ ПЕРВОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ

Резюме

Анализируется национальная политика германских оккупационных властей на территории Беларуси в 1915–1918 гг. Особое внимание уделяется развитию белорусского, литовского и польского национального движения.