Prussian Amphibians: The Construction of German and Polish Nationalism in Posen

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the importance of the "Bambergers" to the development of German nationalist discourse during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the writings of Max Bär. The Bambergers, the ancestors of German-speaking migrants who had settled near Poznan in the early eighteenth century, were used as a warning of the potential for the assimilation of Germans to Polish nationality. For German nationalists, the mythologized tale of their assimilation became evidence for the necessity of a more aggressive Germanization policy in the Prussian East.

In 1719, a group of German-speaking settlers pulled up stakes from Bamberg, a German town in the region of Upper Franconia, and traveled some 400 miles to Ratai, one of the many villages dotting the countryside around Poznan, a major city in the Kingdom of Poland. In the decades that followed, they were joined by more settlers from Bamberg and other German lands. These German-speaking immigrants would come to be known as the Bambergers. On the surface, this journey does not appear to be a very important or particularly novel event. Many Germans migrated to Eastern Europe throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, in what German nationalists would retroactively call the "Drang nach Osten," or Drive to the East. However, the Bambergers gained prominence in nationalist literature in the late nineteenth century because they had allegedly assimilated into Polish culture, or been "Polonized" as the nationalist discourse termed it. The Bambergers played a unique role in the German national mythology, becoming a warning of how the German colonization project in the Polish lands could go awry. After German unification in 1871, the Polish areas of the Empire were transformed into colonial space, and German nationalists embarked on a policy of inner colonization and Germanization to populate the region with German settlers and transform Polish-speakers culturally and linguistically into Germans. In the German nationalist discourse, the Bambergers became a symbol of the high stakes of this mission: if Germanization did not succeed, more Germans might be assimilated by the Poles. This paper argues not that the Bambergers had been Polonized, but that German nationalist writers viewed them in this light, and time and again called up a mythologized version of their tale as a warning of the potential dangers of German assimilation of Polish culture, and as evidence for the need of a more active and repressive Germanization policy.

The multilingual Bambergers developed a complex identity that could be viewed as simultaneously German and Polish. Individuals and groups with this type of national hybridity—who Chad Bryant terms amphibians because of their ability to adapt easily to different national milieus—created immense anxieties among nationalists because they could not be neatly categorized.[1] This paper is ultimately not about Bamberger identity, but their importance in the development of German nationalist discourse. However, throughout I will emphasize various ways that the identity of the Bambergers was oversimplified by this discourse and postulate a much more complex and hybrid identity, stressing their position between the culture of their ancestors in Bamberg and their Polish neighbors.

Prussia occupies an important place in this history as the only German state with a large Polish-speaking population prior to Unification and the driving force behind German Imperial policy afterwards. In 1815, following the Napoleonic Wars, Prussia's Polish-speaking population increased when they received the territory that would become the Grand Duchy of Posen, including the city of Poznan and the Bamberger villages. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Prussian rule of its Polish-speaking citizens could hardly be termed oppressive, particularly in comparison to Russian rule. Polish-speakers had a clear place in Prussia as subjects of the king. However, their position slowly began to change with the rising tide of nationalism in Europe. Polish nationalists made calls for further autonomy, and the Polish nobility, who had supported uprisings in Russian Poland in 1830, began to be seen as loyally suspect by the Prussian government. Moreover, German nationalism was beginning to develop an exclusionary ideology towards Poles.

[1] Amphibian is a category coined by Chad Bryant to denote individuals of multinational, anational, or uncertain national character who can easily pass as members of multiple nationalities. See Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

The rift between the two nationalisms broadened during the continent-wide Revolutions of 1848, when both German and Polish nationalists revolted against the Prussian crown. Despite their similar goals for national unification, there was little solidarity between them.[2] While the Polish uprising, which centered on Poznan, was minor, it drove another wedge between the Prussian government and its Polish-speaking population.[3] Animosity between German and Polish nationalists grew rapidly after the unification of Germany in 1871. Following the Franco-Prussian war, King Wilhelm of Prussia was crowned German Emperor and the identity of the Prussian citizen began to shift from a traditional notion of fealty to the monarch and state to an identity based more upon German nationalism. This transformation was unavoidable, given that nationalism had been a driving force behind unification, but it created a problem. With citizenship and loyalty to state and monarch increasingly based upon national identity, the Polish-speaking subjects of the Empire were left in a state of limbo, more and more outside of the identity of the state. The German government began to view them not as sources of strength, but as a potential problem that needed to be solved before outright revolt occurred. Simultaneously, both German and Polish nationalisms were increasingly defining themselves by the exclusion of the other, further exacerbating the issue.

The German government quickly came up with a solution to its national problem: Germanization. The idea behind this policy was that the Polish-speaking peasantry could be transformed culturally and linguistically into Germans through education.[4] It was thought that while the Polish nobility and intelligentsia had become fervent nationalists, the peasants were still loyal to the Emperor. A language law was put into place in 1872 that heavily restricted and

[2] Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83-85.
[3] Lech Trzeciakowski, *The Kulturkampf in Prussian Poland*, trans. Katarzyna Kretkowska (New York: East European Monographs, 1990), 1.
[4] Trzeciakowski, 118-33.

eventually forbade the teaching of Polish in schools.[5] However, the education attempt was ineffective and, coupled with the continuing radicalization of exclusionary nationalism on both sides, contributed to the transformation of the Polish lands into colonial space. In 1886, the Prussian Settlement Commission was founded to promote the colonization of the eastern regions of the Empire through the purchase of Polish estates and the settlement of the land by German smallhold farmers.[6] Germany had embarked upon a project of inner colonization. The language law and the Settlement Commission, along with the expulsion of 30,000 Polish-speaking non-citizens from the Empire; the adoption of a law that made German the sole language of government, including the courts; and a campaign to Germanize Polish place names, only increased Polish national feeling.[7] Moreover, these policies fuelled increasingly virulent forms of nationalism and racism that divided Germans and Poles.

As the identity of the German Empire shifted to one based on German nationalism, the Polish lands were reconstructed as colonial space through Germanization policies and exclusionary nationalist discourse. Both popular and academic writings reinforced an "othering" of Poles through the creation of a dichotomy of superior German and inferior Pole and the repeated emphasis of the necessity of securing German domination of Polish-speaking areas. It is into this radicalized maelstrom of nationalism that the Bambergers reenter the picture. Their mythologized tale became a warning story to German nationalists and reinforced the stakes of inner colonization. If the Germanization efforts failed, it could lead to the Polonization of Germans in the east. "Die 'Bamberger' bei Posen" or "The Bambergers in Posen" by Max Bär, first published in 1882 in *The Journal for History and Applied Geography of the Province of*

[5] William Hagen, *Germans, Poles and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East, 1772-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 182-83.
[6] Liulevicius, 103.
[7] Ibid.

Posen, became the definitive German nationalist account of the migration of the Bambergers and their supposed Polonization.[8] Bär, a historian and official state archivist in Posen, stressed the need for an active Germanization policy, particularly through the creation of more German schools and churches, to restore the German identity of the Bambergers and stem the tide of future Polonization. Bär's article functions as an important text in the nationalist discourse of the period and is referred to widely in articles and histories about the Germanization policy and the Polish lands. In this discourse, the Bambergers represent the potential of Polonization and are cited often as an example of what could happen if Germanization failed.

In 1719, the first Bamberger settlers, 120 total, made the long journey from Bamberg to Poznan on foot and by cart.[9] They were soon followed by more German-speaking immigrants, from Bamberg and elsewhere, who settled in Ratai and neighboring villages near Poznan. The impetus for the migration was a call by the King of Poland for Catholic immigrants, as the region had been depopulated by the Great Northern War and a cholera epidemic. Bär recounts two stories, both of which are referred to as traditional accounts and lack solid grounding in historical evidence, but give explanations of why it was that villagers from Bamberg migrated. One of the stories tells that when the Bishop of Posen was visiting Bamberg he was struck by the "flourishing country and populous villages" that he encountered. Seeing firsthand the hardworking and successful villagers, he advertised the availability of land and the Bambergers soon took up the offer.[10] Both of the tales can be viewed in the broader context of the discourse on the German colonizing mission. They emphasize the industriousness, morality, and

[8] Trans: "Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Landeskunde der Provinz Posen."
[9] Max Bär, "Die 'Bamberger' bei Posen," *Zeitschrift für Landeskunde und Geschichte der Provinz Posen* 1, vol. 1 (1882), 303-05.
[10] Bär, 301; Trans: "arbeitsamer, felisiger und gut katholischer."

prosperity of the Germans and underline a perceived German superiority to Poles and a German duty to civilize the east.

Bär claims that early on there were many conflicts between the Poles and Bambergers, setting up a false continuity for the national struggle between Germans and Poles, which through nationalist eyes had been taking place since before historical time. He claims that there was significant violence between the two groups (which he refers to erroneously as nations) during the first half of the eighteenth century. Yet, his evidence for this is extremely thin. As evidence of prior violence, he points to two settlement charters, one of which states "that the Bambergers [must] live peacefully and without squabble with the Polish peasants."[11] This is certainly insufficient evidence of violence and such a stipulation does not seem odd, particularly given the requirement that all settlers be Catholic. Both of these conditions would appear to be an attempt to keep tranquility between the new settlers and current inhabitants, not as proof of previous violence. Bär's only other evidence is his claim that the traditional accounts speak of violence, although he gives no sources. This account contrasts with several modern Polish media sources that argue that integration was quick and peaceful.

Despite the alleged violence surrounding their first decades in Poland, relations slowly improved between the Bambergers and their Polish-speaking neighbors throughout the eighteenth century, according to Bär. He spends considerable time describing the speech and customs of the Bambergers, attempting to emphasize their separateness from the Poles. For Bär, it is clear that even after the alleged Polonization, they remained latent Germans. However, the language issue is a complicated one in this case. Bär writes that the Bambergers developed their own German dialect, "bambergsch," which was spoken very quickly and was difficult for Poles

[11] Bär, 327.

to understand.[12] Additionally, he writes that they spoke clear High German, once more stressing their German national character. Yet, they would eventually become fluent in Polish, which illustrates the ambiguity of their identity. Bär also spends time describing the Bamberger villages, characterizing them as clean, attractive, and orderly. Without providing details, he contrasts them to Polish villages, implying a stark difference from the order and cleanliness of the Bamberger settlements.

Bär continues to assert the Germanness of the Bambergers by pointing to their retention, into the late nineteenth century, of several customs of their Franconian ancestors. These include religious traditions, particularly German-style burials, and a Carnival tradition where young men dressed up and went from house to house playing music and begging for gifts. However, other aspects of his account are more ambiguous. Bär admits that there is some Polish influence in Bamberger wedding customs, yet does not attempt to untangle which traditions originate where, simply stating that to do so would be difficult. One particularly interesting wedding tradition was the clothing of the bride, who wore a tall, cylindrical turban adorned with tinsel, brightly colored ribbons, and flowers. [13] The formal dress of the Bambergers also points to their complex identity. While the men wore a long skirt with many folds, a coat with a large collar, and a tall, cylindrical hat, which separated them little from the Polish peasants, the women's garb was more unique. They wore brightly colored, striped clothing, with a skirt, a wide apron, and a headscarf.[14] This points both to tensions within Bär's narrative and the national dichotomy espoused by both German and Polish nationalists of the period. The complexities of Bamberger identity cannot be accounted for in such a binary. While many of the nationalist writers who cite Bär tried to pinpoint a specific moment of Bamberger Polonization, it is more likely that the

[12] Bär, 321-23.
[13] Bär, 325-26.
[14] Bär, 323.

Bambergers slowly developed a hybrid identity between the culture of their ancestors and that of their Polish-speaking neighbors in Poznan.

For Bär, the Revolutions of 1848 were the turning point of Bamberger identity and signified the beginning of their Polonization. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Polish nationalism was on the rise. During the 1850s and 1860s, Polish clergy and civil authorities began to stress the teaching of Polish in schools. Bär argues that it was during this period that the Bamberger youth were Polonized and that the remaining Bambergers eventually became acculturated Poles.[15] He provides a few Bamberger letters of protest about insufficient German instruction in school as evidence of their Germanness and resistance to Polish instruction. But the volume of protest was extremely small compared to Polish protests of the Germanization policy, which may be further evidence for a hybrid identity. At the very least, it emphasizes a far more complex Bamberger identity than Bär acknowledges.

While Bamberger identity remains ambiguous, the effect Bär's article had on the nationalist discourse is not. The tale of Bamberger Polonization became influential among nationalist academics critiquing the government's Germanization efforts.[16] For them, the Bambergers were a symbol of the potential dangers of German settlement in the east. Their recommendation was a more vigorous Germanization policy and the repression of Polish nationalism to counteract the supposed Polonization attempts of the Polish clergy and teachers. While there are many examples of Bär's influence on the academic discourse, the account given

[15] Bär, 336-41.

[16] Bär's account of the Bambergers is cited in a variety of nationalist writings from this era, including: Albert von Bouslawski, *Fünfundachtzig Jahre Preussischer Regierungspolitik in Posen und Westpreussen von 1815 bis 1900* (Berlin: Gole and Tetzlaff, 1901); Waldemar Hoffmann, *Wie die "Bamberger" bei Posen zu Polen wurden* (Schlawe: Moldenhauer and Sohn, 1906), 10; Trans: "Der Geistliche war ja nicht nur der Verkünder des göttlichen Wortes, der Seelsorger und Beichtvater, sondern er war auch der Vertrauensmann der Staates, insofern er die Schulaufsicht ausübte," Leo Wegener, *Der Wirtschaftliche Kampf der Deutschen mit den Polen um die Provinz Posen* (Posen: Jolowicz, 1903); Dietrich Schäfer, "Geschichtliche Einleitung," in *Die Deutsche Ostmark* (Lissa: Euliz, 1913); and, Moritz Jaffe, *Die Stadt Posen unter Preussischer Herrschaft* (Leipzig: Dunder and Humblot, 1909), 29, 195, 370.; Trans: "The City of Poznan under Prussian Rule."

of the Bambergers in *85 Years of Prussian Governmental Policy in Posen and West Prussia*, by Albert von Boguslawski, a German general and military writer, is particularly important.[17] Written in 1901, Boguslawski's account heavily cites Bär's article, but corroborates it with his own firsthand experience and shows the continued concern about Polonization in the twentieth century. Recounting his intermittent experiences in the Bamberger villages, Boguslawski claims that in 1855 the Bambergers all spoke clear German, but by 1866, the youth were frequently speaking Polish. When he returned in 1883, he noted a major change: almost everyone replied to him in Polish. He concludes that they were Polonized by the teaching of Polish in school and the failure of Germanization due to "idleness and inconsistency."[18] However, his conclusion seems spurious. By 1883, the law forbidding the teaching of Polish in schools, except for religious instruction, had been in effect for eleven years. German was being taught almost exclusively and by 1876, it was the language of all governmental business.[19] Moreover, the historiography agrees on the stringency of the Germanization effort: the Bambergers were learning German, so why did Boguslawski face a population that appeared to speak only Polish? The likely answer is that the Bambergers had begun to identify strongly with their Polish neighbors, partly from learning Polish in school and through the Catholic Church, but also simply from living and working amongst Poles for generations. Surely, most of the Bambergers still spoke German (why would they forget a language they had spoken all their lives?), but chose hostility towards a figure that represented the repression of the Germanization policy. Any answer to the identity of the Bambergers is impossible without delving into German and Polish archives and uncovering the views of the Bambergers themselves, but their supposed Polonization is certainly more complex than these accounts show. German nationalist discourse concluded from the lesson of the

[17] Trans: *85 Years of Prussian Governmental Policy in Posen and West Prussia, 1815-1900.*
[18] Boguslawski, 267-68.
[19] Liulevicius, 103.

Bambergers that increased repression of Polish nationalism was necessary, and by 1900, Polish was completely forbidden from being taught in school. Like the previous attempts at Germanization, the ban did not shift demographic trends in Germany's favor, and instead led to protests from the Polish population and increasing nationalism.[20]

By the late nineteenth century, a belief in Polish inferiority was ubiquitous among German academics, but the racism of the academic discourse was often contained under a thin veil of supposed objectivity. In contrast, much of the popular discourse blatantly portrayed the national conflicts as an eternal struggle of civilization over Slavic barbarism. Both of these discourses reinforced one another and transformed the Poles from subjects of the Prussian King to enemies of the Empire and the German nation. Of particular importance to the popular discourse were the pulp Ostmarkromane (or Eastern Marches novels), which stressed both the necessity and danger of the Germanization project. As Kristin Kopp has shown in her studies of this literature, the Polish lands became identified as Germany's disorderly, dirty, and dangerous "Wild East."[21] In these fictional portrayals, Poles were racially transformed into Amerindians and Gypsies, their dark skin and black hair continually emphasized. Not only did these German writers borrow from the discourse of Manifest Destiny, but some, such as Karl May, wrote both about German settlers in the American West and Polish East. In all of these accounts the eastern provinces are reconfigured as colonial space and the Poles as natives. These novels not only stress the significance of the colonizing mission, but the fears of Polonization through cultural and sexual miscegenation. Frequently these stories portray a young German settler who is entranced by the exotic beauty of a Polish woman and through his pursuit of her, becomes ensnared by Polish society. Having lost his position as bearer of German culture, he meets his

[20] Hagen, 182-83.
[21] Kristin Kopp, *Germany's Wild East* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2012).

ruin. Like the story of the Bambergers, these novels emphasize the potential for the derailing of the civilizing mission. While nationalist academics were less radical in their language, their arguments were the same: Polish lands and people had to be transformed and made orderly through Germanization and colonization, but this quest could be undone by Polonization if it was not pursued vigorously enough.

The Bambergers were simultaneously created as both Germans and Poles by the nationalist discourse. Their identity as Germans is applied retroactively. It is only after their alleged Polonization that they are viewed as having once been German. Furthermore, these nationalist accounts are not truly about the Bambergers themselves, but focus on the construction of the German self in contrast to Poles and the trope of Polonization. For a significant number of German nationalist writers, both academic and popular, the Bambergers function as a warning of the necessity and potential dangers of the colonizing mission. These writers utilize the trope of the Bambergers as a way to push for more stringent Germanization policies. The nationalist accounts leave no room for the agency of the Bambergers, which I hope to remedy by beginning research of local German and Polish sources. By doing so I hope to see how they viewed themselves, in relation to their Polish-speaking neighbors, German and Polish nationalist movements, and the Imperial German government. My tenuous theory is that they developed what Chad Bryant terms an amphibious identity, retaining linguistic and cultural ties to their ancestral home in Bamberg, but adopting Polish habits and becoming integrated into the Polish-speaking community around Poznan to a significant extent. However, this can only be illuminated by further research.

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