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HOW TO RUN A STATE

THE QUESTION OF KNOWHOW IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE FIRST YEARS AFTER POLAND'S REBIRTH IN 1918

1. Introduction and Theoretical Approach

Dealing with the topic of how to run and organize an entire state in the troublesome circumstances in which the young Polish democracy undoubtedly found itself right after World War I, my article confines itself to outlining some general questions rather than providing exhaustive answers to them. Therefore, I will proceed in two steps: First, I will give a short introduction addressing transformations in general and the transformation process in Poland during the first years after 1918 in particular. Second, I will pose the question, which role expertise and the recruitment of professional elites played in the development of Poland's civil administration. To illustrate this process, the former Province of Posen or the Wielkopolska region (*Województwo Poznańskie*), as it was called after 1918, shall serve as an example.

As it is commonly known, the Polish state was founded, or rather re-founded, in November 1918 as the Second Polish Republic – 123 years after the third partition of Poland in 1795, in which the country disappeared from the maps of Europe. The preceding development leading up to this re-foundation had begun at the latest already in 1916 with the creation of the Kingdom of Poland by Germany and Austria (in favour of recruiting Polish volunteer soldiers for the war against Russia) – although other, (much) earlier dates can be found in scholarly literature. With the surrender of the three partitioning powers and through the influence of President Woodrow Wilson on the European postwar order, an old dream of the Poles became true. To be more precise, one has to speak of a number of different dreams – including (although not limited to) nightmares among the national minorities – for the national Polish concepts before the war, which aspired to national independence, had been ridden with contradictions.

In terms of geography, and with regard to different social positions, the differences were significant. Moreover, in 1918 millions of people from different national minorities (Ukrainians, Germans and Jews) became Polish citizens, although this was not a long-nurtured dream for most of them (except for many Jews, who preferred to live under Polish than under Tsarist rule).¹ Together with the entire so-called ‘organic work’ (i.e. legal, non-revolutionary efforts directed towards Polish independence) after the brutally oppressed uprising in 1863, all these dreams of independence had in common that they did not focus on the real challenge, namely how and with whom to take over power and public organization from the partitioning powers in case the opportunity should arise.² It has not yet been made clear to what extent the politicization of Polish society before World War I contributed to the profound changes that unfolded after 1918. The real political development in Central Eastern Europe turned out to be quite different from the planning (and even more so from the dreams), and soon it became clear that elites and expertise were urgently needed in a much broader sense than the Poles themselves had anticipated in the ‘organic’ period prior to World War I.

Beyond doubt is the fact that the young Polish Republic had to cope with significant social and structural burdens, which were resolved only in part until 1939. The transformation was actually a twofold process: on the one hand, the breakdown of the political, social and economic systems of the partitioning powers during the war and on the other the (re)construction of the Polish state itself. Both processes took place simultaneously, which caused additional frictions – especially under the circumstances of the war and the postwar period.³

However, the main question is why and how Poland indeed succeeded in overcoming all these obstacles of knowhow and organization when it was confronted with three quite differently structured and developed territories,

¹ For the Jews in independent Poland, cf. KATRIN STEFFEN, *Jüdische Polonität. Ethnizität und Nation im Spiegel der polnischsprachigen jüdischen Presse 1918–1939*, Göttingen 2004.

² M. B. [sic], *O Polsce jaką ona jest, a jaką byśmy mieć chcieli*, Warszawa 1916; JANUSZ KARWAT, *Od idei do czynu. Myśl i organizacje niepodległości w Poznańskim w latach 1887–1919*, Poznań 2002. The title ‘From idea to action’ seems to be slightly inappropriate, for the question remains unresolved whether the political activism before 1918 was part of the Polish autonomy movement or a real political contribution to independence.

³ The need for *ad hoc* decisions during and right after the war was later reinterpreted as a powerful source of learning for the future development of Poland. With regard to the persistence of a whole set of structural problems, however, such an interpretation remains doubtful. PIOTR DRZEWIECKI, *Przez klęskę do naprawy*, Warszawa 1924; KLAUS VON BEYME, *Systemwechsel in Osteuropa*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 51–53.

with a high percentage of national minorities, militarily unsafe borders, mostly hostile neighbours and a largely devastated economy. What intellectual and political knowhow, then, what sorts of experts did the Polish state have at its disposal at the end of 1918 and which role did the question of the (national) legitimacy of expertise play?

In direct comparison with the significant number of scholarly works concerning the transformation process in Central Eastern Europe after 1989, it is rather astonishing to see that similar theories have only seldom been applied to comparable changes in history. This is true especially for Poland – as if right after the war the young republic could easily succeed and take over the public, social and economic structures of the partitioning powers, or even revert to the ‘good old’ Polish Republic of Nobles of the eighteenth century.⁴ Correspondingly scarce is the number of scholarly works dedicated not only to the history of the Wielkopolska Uprising, but also to the parallel process of transformation.⁵

The whole undertaking, of course, was not only a cold, unemotional administrative task, but deeply embedded in a mission of national pride and honour: The task was not only to build and unify a national state; the process rather gained additional motivation by the shared expectation of Poland’s neighbours that they just had to wait until the short-lived, so-called ‘seasonal’ Polish state (in German *Saisonstaat*⁶) would sooner or later automatically cease to exist.⁷

⁴ SZYMON HREBENDA, Transformacja systemowa w polskiej myśli politycznej XIX i XX wieku, in: Społeczno-polityczne aspekty transformacji ustrojowej, ed. by PIOTR DOBROWOLSKI/ JOACHIM LISZKA/ JANUSZ SZTUMSKI, Ustroń 2001, p. 59-72; JAN SZCZEPAŃSKI, Reformy, rewolucje, transformacje, Warszawa 1999; JANUSZ PAJEWSKI, Odbudowa państwa polskiego 1914–1918, Warszawa 1978; JERZY HOLZER/ JAN MOLEND, Polska w Pierwszej Wojnie Światowej, Warszawa 1973; RUDOLF JAWORSKI, Handel und Gewerbe im Nationalitätenkampf. Studien zur Wirtschaftsgesinnung der Polen in der Provinz Posen (1871–1914), Göttingen 1986; Droga do niepodległości czy program defensywny? Praca organiczna – programy i motywy, ed. by TOMASZ KIZWALTER, Warszawa 1988.

⁵ Besides the literature mentioned in footnote 4, the most comprehensive study from the interwar period is undoubtedly ZYGMUNT WIELICZKA, Wielkopolska a Prusy w dobie powstania 1918/19, Poznań 1919. The author already posed many of the questions raised here, but did not find any followers in Polish historiography.

⁶ NORBERT KREKELER, Revisionsanspruch und geheime Ostpolitik der Weimarer Republik. Die Subventionierung der deutschen Minderheit in Polen 1919–1933, Stuttgart 1973; CHRISTIAN HÖLTJE, Die Weimarer Republik und das Ostlocomo-Problem 1919–1934, Würzburg 1958; VOLKMAR KELLERMANN, Schwarzer Adler. Weißer Adler. Die Polenpolitik der Weimarer Republik, Köln 1970.

⁷ INGO LOOSE, Der Erste Weltkrieg als Eschatologie. Staatliche Einheit und Sinnstiftung in der Zweiten Polnischen Republik 1918–1939, in: Die Weltkriege als symbolische Bezugspunkte. Polen, die Tschechoslowakei und Deutschland nach dem Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg, ed. by NATALI STEGMANN, Prag 2009, p. 39-57.

With regard to the problems Poland faced at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919, the prognoses were indeed fairly bad, especially in the areas of administration and unification. The main obstacles were the differences and discrepancies between the formerly partitioned territories, which may have been effective for themselves (although clearly orientated towards Berlin, St Petersburg and Vienna), but not within a unified and centralized Polish state, with Warsaw as its capital. However, three, or rather four, different systems (the so-called *Kresy*, former *Kongresówka*, the Austrian partition, the Province of Posen and West Prussia, and finally Eastern Upper Silesia) of law and jurisdiction, of infrastructure and transport, education and economy had to be integrated into one entity.

In this context, the question concerning the interrelation between nationalism and the recruitment of Polish versus non-Polish experts is crucial. Which rules were adopted during the transition towards, and reconstruction of an effective independent Polish state? Which techniques were chosen in order to avoid, or at least minimize errors and frictional losses? Moreover, were these techniques a result of open debates and strategies or rather born out of everyday practice on a mid or micro level, including hopes for accelerated professional and social advancement?

To give just one example: Could the reconstruction and adaptation of such a complex system as the Prussian social insurance really be the result of a preceding master plan or strategy? And what about the topics modernization and rationalization? In any case, the rearrangement of administration, economy and social welfare towards an independent domestic policy was desperately in need of control mechanisms, whether the old structures (stemming from the German or Austrian *Kaiserreiche* or from Russian Tsarism) were still worth to be upheld or ready to be dismantled and replaced by new institutions and – even more importantly – new personnel. Finally, yet importantly, this tremendous work of evaluation was accompanied by, and intertwined with a translation of almost every aspect of public life and work into the Polish language.

Therefore, the main point I would like to make is that the rebirth of Poland in 1918 and the subsequent years can and should be understood as a process of political, social and economic transformation of *functional systems*. These functional systems were subject to a gradual, but *à la longue* complete exchange of elites and groups of experts.

However, these systems also had to avoid the loss of their functionality and self-organization, and this was nothing less than a dynamic, precarious balance and an interrelation between inclusion and exclusion. Both terms have a long tradition dating back to Talcott Parsons, David Easton and

Niklas Luhmann.⁸ Inclusion and exclusion are normal processes of a given system and its subsystems (in this case the Polish state), and particularly inclusions are regularly introduced not by the entire system, but always by the functional subsystems such as administration, the political system, the churches, economy etc. This also means that processes of inclusion and exclusion are not a matter of a friend-enemy-scheme, but rather constitutive elements of the entire system and its functional rationality.⁹

In which public functional system can continuities be observed that did not harm a 'Polish identity', i. e. that were not perceived as 'foreign'? Was this perception a result of economic necessities or rather a question of Polish personnel (meaning expertise), with whom the impending reconstruction could, and had to, be carried out?

2. Public Administration in the Wielkopolska Region

The question to what extent the import of external knowledge was necessary for the public administration apparatus in Poland after 1918 can be answered in at least two ways: First, for public administration there was no need to import foreign elites to run the municipal machinery. There was, however, a thorough evaluation of other public administrations abroad, mostly in the countries of the former partitioning powers. Moreover, the remnants of Prussian administration probably provided the best example and model, for the Poles themselves were well acquainted with its – at least imagined – efficiency. To reform existing structures seemed to be, and in fact was, much easier than to build them anew.¹⁰ Second, the participation of the Poles in expertise and knowledge was – if at all – a greater problem

⁸ NIKLAS LUHMANN, *Inklusion und Exklusion*, in: *Nationales Bewußtsein und kollektive Identität. Studien zur Entwicklung des kollektiven Bewußtseins in der Neuzeit*, vol. 2, ed. by HELMUT BERDING, 2nd edition, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 15-45. Although different in terminology, the models of Talcott Parsons and David Easton are in many aspects similar to that of Niklas Luhmann. Cf. TALCOTT PARSONS, *The Social System*, New York 1951; TALCOTT PARSONS, *Politics and Social Structure*, New York 1969; DAVID EASTON, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, New York 1965.

⁹ LUHMANN, *Inklusion und Exklusion*, p. 43; INGO LOOSE, *Feindbild Preußen-Deutschland? Inklusions- und Exklusionsprozesse in den Anfangsjahren der Zweiten Polnischen Republik am Beispiel der Region Wielkopolska, 1918–1925*, in: *Die Destruktion des Dialogs. Zur innenpolitischen Instrumentalisierung negativer Fremdbilder und Feindbilder. Polen, Tschechien, Deutschland und die Niederlande im Vergleich 1900 bis heute*, ed. by DIETER BINGEN/ PETER OLIVER LOEW/ KAZIMIERZ WÓYCICKI, Wiesbaden 2007, p. 49-65.

¹⁰ GEORG W. STROBEL, *Denken und Handeln in den polnischen Teilungsgebieten und in Polen nach 1918. Ein politisch-ethischer Vergleich*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung* 44 (1995), p. 191-270.

in the western parts of Poland than in the former Russian and Austrian partitions. Different forms of autonomy in public life and administration had been more prevalent there than in Prussia, so the western or Wielkopolska region had a strong need for experts in some branches of the administrative system, especially in the higher ranks of municipal authority.¹¹ Education, qualification and professional experience are different aspects and should not be intermingled. Among the Poles, education as such was not a problem, nor was qualification, but there was a severe lack of experience in those fields of higher education from which the Poles had been banned prior to 1918.¹² Focusing on human capital, we can identify three groups of experts:

First, there were the German or Prussian personnel, who had run the entire Province of Posen until the end of World War I, and who were still well established and not insignificant in number with the definite demarcation of Poland's western borders in 1919. The second group comprised the Poles from the region, who could now reasonably hope that being a member of the Polish national majority would be advantageous in climbing up the career ladder of public service. They constituted a powerful pressure group whose interests could not remain unnoticed by the political leadership in the region, as well as in the political centre in Warsaw. They promised at least loyalty, which was a crucial factor for the unstable young republic. From an exclusively professional standpoint, however, their national argument remained – at least immediately after the war – a rather weak one. This was especially true since according to the regulations of the Peace Treaty of Versailles, the ethnic Germans had the option to remain in the country and become Polish citizens. At first, it was quite unclear how many of them would make use of this option and stay in Poland.

A third group of attractive elites, finally, were the Poles who remigrated after 1918 from the Russian and Austrian partitions or other countries, including Germany itself, where they had often made professional careers

¹¹ Due to the limited space, I cannot detail the comparative potential of this aspect here. To speak of autonomy in the Russian partition is of course highly problematic. In the given context, only the participation of Poles in the civil service with regard to numbers and ranks is of interest.

¹² As for the system of higher education, the substitution of an existing, but empty German university infrastructure in Poznań in 1919 with the non-governmental Polish organization Towarzystwo Wykładów Naukowych w Poznaniu (founded in 1913), which pursued similar aims and served as the nucleus of a new university, as well as the questions surrounding its personnel and organization, must remain a chapter of future research. Cf. Uniwersytet Poznański w pierwszych latach swego istnienia (1919, 1919-20, 1920-21, 1921-22, 1922-23) za rektoratu Heljodora Świącickiego. Księga pamiątkowa, ed. by ADAM WRZOSEK, Poznań 1924, p. 42-84.

with or without discrimination because of their Polish origin.¹³ Their expertise was often higher than that of the local Poles, which is why they could better compete with the remaining German elites. In addition, they were (wittingly or not) part of a *divide-et-impera* policy, for they mostly did not speak German and therefore destroyed existing structures of German-Polish cooperation in the administrative system by forcing the nationalization of the entire system and a complete switch to the Polish language.

The competition of these three groups can be examined with the help of two terms of analysis: first, continuity, and second, the relationship between regional self-organization and the domestic policy pursued by the centralized state. Both of these aspects should moreover be placed in the context – or was it a corset? – of the young democracy, which limited the options and fields of action.

If we regard only the western territories of Poland, we may say that the transition from one (Prussian) to another (Polish) state, despite the uprising and other skirmishes, inevitably required intensive German-Polish communication concerning all questions of the transformation of nearly every aspect of public life. There were no brutal ‘cleansings’ within the higher ranks of German civil service, and even to the mostly Polish-dominated soldiers’ councils it was quite clear that such expulsions would only cause the collapse of the entire political, economic and social system.¹⁴ The Poles wanted to take over and maintain the administration; they did not want to destroy it. Only a few days after Germany’s military surrender, the workers’ and soldiers’ council of Posen, in which the Poles had already gained a majority, took the first steps towards the institutionalization of Polish independence. In most branches of municipal and local administration, Poles were nominated as men of confidence in order to safeguard continuity as well as to gain control over as many political, national and economic decisions as possible.¹⁵ Therefore, in most cases there were official negotiations concerning practical regulations for the future. Right at the beginning, the Polish politicians in the province tried to retain the German civil

¹³ For the Polish remigrants from Germany, cf. MIROSLAW PIOTROWSKI, *Reemigracja Polaków z Niemiec 1918–1939*, Lublin 2000, p. 155–221.

¹⁴ Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (APP), Akta miasta Poznania, no. 116, *passim*; cf. WITOLD ŁUKASZEWICZ, *Rada robotniczo-żołnierska w Poznaniu 1918–1919*, Toruń 1957; STANISŁAW KUBIAK/ FRANCISZEK ŁOZOWSKI, *Rady robotniczo-żołnierskie w Wielkopolsce 1918–1919*, Poznań 1959; DARIUSZ MATELSKI, *Mniejszość niemiecka w Wielkopolsce w latach 1919–1939*, Poznań 1997, p. 41–45.

¹⁵ APP, Akta miasta Poznania, no. 52, fol. 6: Protocol of the session of delegates of the City of Posen, 19 November 1918. An important German eyewitness was Hellmut von Gerlach, who visited the province just two weeks after the November Revolution. HELLMUT VON GERLACH, *Von Rechts nach Links*, Frankfurt am Main 1987, p. 230–232.

servants and to guarantee a certain degree of continuity via bilateral negotiations with Germany. In any case, the first interim solution was reached no earlier than November 1919, when a German-Polish treaty for resolving the question of civil service was signed.¹⁶ Prussian civil servants were ‘lent out’ to Poland, i.e. they worked for and were paid by Poland, but officially remained in the cadre of Prussian administration. This was an agreeable solution also for the latter, for it turned out to be quite complicated to find sufficient vacancies in Prussia for returning civil servants. The archival material is full of documents dealing with such cases in which Germans were ordered to remain in Poznań while the search for new positions continued.¹⁷ Functional systems like the municipal organization could not be changed in a revolutionary manner; otherwise, their efficiency would have been endangered. The Russian Revolution only one year before must have been a threatening example and illustration of the potential risks. At any rate, the case of Poland was much easier, for there was no need for ideological battles on a scale comparable to Soviet Russia after 1917.¹⁸

In this situation, only two options appeared reasonable: a systematic, though not overhasty, exchange of the municipal elites, via decrees, which guaranteed the maintenance and potential of self-organization and modified the administration only in part. In other words, the goals of transformation were somehow ‘serialized’ on a timescale. In some branches, it was entirely sufficient to nominate a state commissioner for the transition (*Staatskommissar für die Überleitung*), whose task it was to introduce the Polish state into the relevant areas of responsibility stemming from the former Prussian state – from the administration of fisheries to the entire life and social insurance as well as welfare system. This is true not only for those territories which were under Polish sovereignty practically since the beginning of 1919, i.e. right after the outbreak of the Wielkopolska Uprising in late December 1918, but also for those Prussian regions which were regularly transferred to Poland in January 1920 (the so-called ceded territo-

¹⁶ APP, Reichs- und Staatskommissar für die Überleitung an Polen in Schneidemühl, no. 24, fol. 48-49: Regierungspräsident in Bromberg an die Landräte, Kreiskommissare und Oberbürgermeister etc., 28 November 1919.

¹⁷ Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Ambasada RP w Berlinie, no. 752, fol. 4-5: Reichs- und Staatskommissar für die Überleitung im Regierungsbezirk Marienwerder an den Minister des Innern betr. Fürsorge für mittelbare Staatsbeamte der an Polen abgetretenen Gebiete, 1 April 1920; *ibid.*, fol. 144-157: Begründung zu einem Gesetz, betreffend die Unterbringung der mittelbaren Staatsbeamten und Lehrpersonen aus den an fremde Staaten abzutretenden oder von ihnen besetzten preußischen Gebietsteilen, March-April 1920; RALPH SCHATTKOWSKY, *Deutschland und Polen 1918/19 bis 1925. Deutsch-polnische Beziehungen zwischen Versailles und Locarno*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 12.

¹⁸ BEYME, *Systemwechsel*, p. 75.

ries or *Abtretungsgebiete* in German). ‘All resorts agree,’ wrote Friedrich von Bülow, the president of the province, resuming his talks in Berlin in July 1919, ‘that there must be a peaceful handing over of the official duties to the Poles; this will illustrate the good will of the Prussian administration to avoid unnecessary difficulties for the Poles.’¹⁹

This logic of cooperation had its precursor. In summer 1918, negotiations had taken place between the Polish Regency Council (*Regentschaftsrat*) and the German General Governor in Warsaw, Colonel General Hans Hartwig von Beseler, on how to transfer the public administration step by step to the Poles. A proposition made by the Austrian delegate in the military government in Lublin, Count Stefan Ugron, became the basis for further negotiations.²⁰ However, in September 1918 the German-Polish discussions ended in conflict concerning the extent and speed of this transition. But the basic agreements were quite similar to those reached in spring 1919. Among other things, they provided that at least some of the German municipal personnel should remain in the province and help train the future Polish elites, so that they would eventually become autonomous. Similar attention was paid to the continuation of trade structures, especially the supply of Poland with coal from still undivided, German-controlled Upper Silesia, and the delivery of foodstuffs from Poland to Germany/Prussia.²¹

The striking difference between the situation in summer 1918 and spring 1919 did not lie in the ‘if’ and ‘how’ (autonomous Polish ministries had already been established in summer 1918), but in the ‘where’. Still at the beginning of November 1918, von Beseler could never have imagined that

¹⁹ APP, Reichs- und Staatskommissar für die Überleitung an Polen in Schneidemühl, no. 24, fol. 18: Regierungspräsident Bromberg (gez. von Bülow) – Niederschrift aus meinen Besprechungen in Berlin am 9. und 10. Juli 1919 (author’s translation); cf. APP, Reichs- und Staatskommissar für die Überleitung an Polen in Schneidemühl, no. 1, fol. 8-17: Deutsch-polnischen Abkommen über die militärische Räumung der Abtretungsgebiete und die Übergabe der Zivilverwaltung (»Räumungsabkommen«), 25 November 1919; *ibid.*, no. 7, fol. 56-57: Vereinbarung zwischen der deutschen und polnischen Regierung über die Inkraftsetzung des Vertrages von Versailles, 9 January 1920.

²⁰ AAN, Gabinet Cywilny Rady Regencyjnej Królestwa Polskiego, no. 94, fol. 1-2: Der Delegierte des K. und K. Ministeriums des Äußeren in Warschau Seiner Durchlaucht Prinzen Janusz Radziwiłł, Direktor des kgl. polnischen Staatsdepartements, 15 October 1918.

²¹ *Ibid.* Prussian State Commissar Hellmut von Gerlach’s above-mentioned visit to Posen in November 1919 was primarily intended to negotiate the continuity of economic relations between Prussia and the Polish occupied territories. GERLACH, Von Rechts nach Links, p. 230-232. AAN, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, no. 9494, fol. 1-33: Denkschrift über die Grundlagen der zukünftigen Handelspolitik und den Handelsvertrag Deutschlands mit Polen; AAN, Delegacja Polska na Konferencję Pokojową w Paryżu, no. 37, fol. 28-59: Vorläufiges Deutsch-Polnisches Wirtschaftsabkommen, 22 October 1919.

his already restricted compromise with the Poles could come to apply not only to the German-occupied *Kongresówka*, but a mere six weeks later also to territories that he undoubtedly considered to be genuine Prussian lands.

The changes towards *Województwo Poznańskie*, however, entailed not only a process of exclusion of Prussia-Germany, but also a second one, i.e. a policy of inclusion intended to better integrate the formerly Prussian province into the new Polish state. This inclusion was also far from being an automatic, smoothly running process. Probably the best evidence towards this is the establishment of the Ministry for the Former Prussian Province (*Ministerstwo byłej Dzielnicy Pruskiej*) in Poznań, which existed until 1922. Like no other institution in postwar Poland, this ministry was part and centre of a multi-dimensional transformation process and testified not only to the technical, but also to the mental problems *and* achievements of these changes. As an instrument of exclusion, the ministry was mainly responsible for the evaluation of 'Prussian remnants' and the exchange of elites within the entire apparatus of public service. The Polish elites in the region generally tended to cooperate with the Germans, while the authorities in Warsaw and the experts who were 'imported' mainly from Galicia were rather mistrustful of them.

As far as inclusion is concerned, the area of conflict had a political as well as an economic dimension – political because in contrast to the central authorities in Warsaw, the National Democrats (the so-called *Endecja*) dominated the western territories and Poznań. The ministry and its far-reaching independence had an economic dimension in that Wielkopolska – 'Poland A', as the phrase was coined in those years – was far better situated than Central and Eastern Poland. Therefore, the Ministry for the Former Prussian Province was part of the German-Polish transformation process, but also of the inner-Polish changes in the first years after 1918.²²

No matter whether in a post office, in a police precinct or in the city hall: During the phase of transformation and transition, the situation is well described of Polish aspirants sitting behind Prussian, Austrian or Russian civil servants, i.e. experts, in order to learn first by observing and then by doing until they felt qualified enough to replace their former superiors. In the former Prussian province, this stage of 'learning by doing' turned out to be more complicated than in other regions because in the Prussian administration the Poles had been able to climb only to the middle ranks of public service. Therefore, the 'clash of nations' was rather a clash of two competing groups: Germans who remained in Poland and tried to maintain their accustomed style of living, and Poles, especially from the middle

²² ANDRZEJ GULCZYŃSKI, *Ministerstwo byłej Dzielnicy Pruskiej (1919–1922)*, Poznań 1995.

class, who had a strong hunger for professional advancement.²³ With regard to the socioeconomic stratification of the Polish population, however, even this clash was contained by the rather small number of Poles who were able to join the new Polish civil service. In 1921, 55 per cent of the population in Wielkopolska worked in the agrarian or forestry sector, 16 per cent in the industrial sector and only 4.8 per cent in trade business.²⁴ In autumn 1918, the administration of the city of Posen consisted of 900 civil servants, among them only 50 Poles. One year later, among more than 200 secretaries and assistants, there were still only 30 Poles. The change of elites became visible no earlier than in 1920, but in July of that year there were still more than 230 Germans among roughly 1,000 members of the city's administration staff.²⁵

There is another significant aspect that defined the extent of the exchange of expertise between Germans and Poles: language as a means of communication and as an obstacle for knowledge exchange. At the beginning, the Polish administration even used the old letterheads, correcting the German addresses by hand. As time went by, however, there was a growing conflict because Prussian civil servants continued to keep their correspondence in German, even with Polish addressees who complained to the administration and even more often to newspapers, which generally made a scandal out of these incidences.²⁶

In many fields of transformation, the problematic term 'Polonization' also covered the development of the Polish language. It had to be supplemented where a specific technical vocabulary had not been necessary before 1918, for instance in postal and telecommunications engineering. This change and supplementation most probably was a rather fast process: For the above mentioned sphere of telecommunications, it was no lesser

²³ Cf. the entire correspondence in APP, Akta miasta Poznania, no. 53, fol. 3-55; *ibid.*, fol. 56-57: Vorlage des Magistrats an die Stadtverordnetenversammlungen (Rada miejska w Poznaniu) betr. Bewilligung eines Kredits zur Polonisierung der Verwaltung, 12 July 1919.

²⁴ HENRYK LISIAK, *Narodowa Demokracja w Wielkopolsce w latach 1918-1939*, Poznań 2006, p. 7.

²⁵ APP, Akta miasta Poznania, no. 53, fol. 125: Wykaz ilości zatrudnionych obecnie urzędników przy Magistracie w Poznaniu, rodzaju ich czynności oraz narodowości [November 1919]; *ibid.*, fol. 159: Magistrat, Biuro I do Pana Wojewody w Poznaniu z dnia 24 lipca 1920 roku dot. liczby sił urzędniczych przy Magistracie w Poznaniu.

²⁶ APP, Akta miasta Poznania, no. 53, fol. 93-94: Verfügung von Oberbürgermeister Drwęski, No. I 543/19, an die Magistratsmitglieder und alle Dienststellen vom 10. Juli 1919 betr. »Polonisierung des Geschäftsverkehrs«; *ibid.*, no. 53, fol. 183: Komenda Wojewódzka Policji Państwowej do Pana Prezydenta Drwęskiego z dnia 21 czerwca 1920 r. w sprawie używania przez magistrat poznański na drukach swoich »Posen« i t. d.; cf. Niemieckie adresy na listach, in: *Kurjer Poznański* no. 139 (20 June 1920).

person than the famous *enfant terrible* of the Berlin and Munich Bohème, Stanisław Przybyszewski, who was in charge of writing the first Polish dictionary of telecommunications.²⁷ The coexistence or even cooperation in the initial phase, however, found its clear limits in the introduction of Polish as the exclusive official language in spring 1919. This undoubtedly constituted and initiated one of the most crucial processes of inclusion and exclusion, with severe consequences especially for the national minorities. While most of the well-educated Poles at least in the former Prussian Province of Posen knew or spoke German, a corresponding knowledge of Polish among Germans was rather exceptional.

There is no doubt that for the Germans and also for the Jews, who were mostly orientated towards German culture, the widespread ignorance of Polish turned into a fatal disadvantage in professional life practically overnight.²⁸ The German-speaking Jewish minority with its liberal political orientation had a double language handicap: They mostly spoke neither Polish nor those languages (Yiddish, Russian) which were necessary to get in contact with their coreligionists in the former Russian partition, who constituted the overwhelming majority of Poland's Jewish minority.²⁹

Another, equally important aspect of the language question was for how long expertise and knowhow from Germany and/or Prussia was advantageous or even an indispensable precondition for those Poles whose work was part of the transformation process after 1918. For how long did they have better professional and career perspectives in administration or the economy? Many Poles were now given opportunities of professional and social advancement they had never dreamt of before: At their disposal was more or less the entire system of state and municipal organization. Nevertheless, the Germans had always been a minority, and thus there was soon a lack of free positions, which accelerated competition among Poles and weakened the position of German experts still working in the administrative apparatus. It is no coincidence that the entire administration in postwar Poland was, if not overinflated, then at least bigger in terms of numbers of employees than the previous Prussian institutional structures.³⁰

²⁷ PRZEMYSŁAW MATUSIK, Początki poczty polskiej w Poznaniu 1918–1920, in: Naczelna Rada Ludowa 1918–1920, Poznań 1998, p. 178–199, p. 190–192.

²⁸ KARL KASSEL, Kampf gegen den Antisemitismus? in: Mitteilungs-Blatt des Jüdischen Volksrats 1, no. 10/11 (1919), p. 97–100, p. 98.

²⁹ MAX KOLLENSCHER, Jüdisches aus der deutsch-polnischen Übergangszeit. Posen 1918–1920, Berlin 1925, p. 188, 210.

³⁰ APP, Akta miasta Poznania, no. 53, fol. 56–57: Vorlage des Magistrats an die Stadtverordnetenversammlungen (Rada miejska w Poznaniu) vom 12. Juli 1919 betr. Bewilligung eines Kredits zur Polonisierung der Verwaltung.

A similar social mobility can be observed in the army, for most of the Poles serving in the troops of the partitioning powers had remained on lower ranks and now hoped for a faster ascent on the career ladder. The new Polish army not only helped overcome Poland's painful experience of World War I, being the battlefield of the partitioning powers, but also combined the national question with an individual social rationale of the soldiers.³¹ I would even go as far as to argue that in these military advancements lies a key to better understand why the Wielkopolska Uprising, despite its militarily quite limited significance, inhabited (and still inhabits) a prominent position in Polish national consciousness. This link becomes even more obvious when we consider the situation parallel to the uprising: An 'army', i. e. a considerable number of skilled German and Polish civil servants worked together to transform the administration from a Prussian to a Polish one; and this is also true for the territories of West Prussia and Silesia which had been ceded to the sovereignty of the Polish Republic.³²

From that point of view, the question surrounding experts and transnational knowledge transfer makes it possible to see from a different angle what is normally perceived as an example of allegedly eternal Polish-German hostility. In fact, these events had nothing, or at least not much, to do with national animosity. Which Polish postal worker, for instance, would have refused the opportunity of professional advancement when the rows of German superiors began to thin out – and this for reasons far beyond his responsibility? Thus, the factor of upward mobility seems to have been significant before it was overlapped by a national rationale.

3. Conclusion

The picture of the renaissance of Poland after World War I historians have sketched since 1919 mostly concentrates on the political macro level. It is far from convincing, however, that this macro-level perspective sufficiently explains micro-level developments in single regions, as well as specific social, economic or cultural topics.³³ The focus on experts, their knowhow and the mobility of this knowledge is therefore a promising approach to

³¹ LOOSE, *Der Erste Weltkrieg als Eschatologie*, p. 42-44.

³² To illustrate this admittedly unusual interpretation of the Wielkopolska Uprising, I refer in general to the entire archival material of the Reichs- und Staatskommissar für die Überleitung an Polen and of the Ministry for the former Prussian Province, both in the State Archive in Poznań.

³³ For German-Polish cooperation in culture, cf. BOGUSŁAW DREWNIĄK, *Polen und Deutschland 1919-1939. Wege und Irrwege kultureller Zusammenarbeit*, Düsseldorf 1999.

deconstruct established theories which are inaccurate or at least not sufficiently complex.

As I have attempted to show, Poland urgently had to rely on external expert knowledge and to maintain Prussian, Austrian and Russian structures which proved their effectiveness (although this was generally not openly admitted) even many years after 1918. On the other hand, the starting point for the Polish state was not as bad as those who were convinced of the short lifespan of the Central European postwar order thought.

The evaluation of the old structures and the eclectic choice of what had to be maintained, reformed or rearranged was a complex balancing act between the need for modernization and the risk of losing effectiveness. Moreover, all this had to be done with a quite unreliable and colourful structure of experts and staff.

At least for the western territories of Poland, the communication between German and Polish experts served as a central and pivotal point for the stability of the entire state. There is substantial evidence that the dividing line between inclusion and exclusion mechanisms ran along the border between inner, invisible and outer, visible administrative decisions. This means that the administration could allow stronger continuities from the time before 1918 and had greater possibilities of manoeuvre in those departments and areas which were not direct objects of constant national evaluation, legitimization and control by the (Polish) public. In other fields, it became more and more embarrassing and/or problematic to keep working with non-Polish experts, especially under politically radicalized circumstances. In these contexts, where there was a need to uphold Prussian structures, but also a need to hide this 'tradition' from the public, concepts of the enemy could serve as a camouflage.³⁴

There was also a strong element of modernity in these forced eclectic evaluation procedures – the newest and most apt strategy could always be chosen from a range of options – but it seems that in the context of tense relations between Poland and its neighbours, the growing intensity of national labelling only diminished this potential. Admittedly, the exchange of expertise between German and Polish civil servants was only a rather short chapter in the history of interwar Poland. Nevertheless, despite this framework of national categorization, regional knowhow and the functioning and effectiveness of the social, economic and political systems and subsystems remained, if not untouched, then at least more or less stable,

³⁴ CHRISTOPH SCHUTTE, *Deutsche und Polen in der Provinz Posen. Überlegungen zur Relevanz gegenseitiger Lernprozesse*, in: *Vom Gegner lernen. Feindschaften und Kulturtransfers im Europa des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by MARTIN AUST/ DANIEL SCHÖN-PFLUG, Frankfurt am Main 2007, p. 114-136.

notwithstanding the continuous emigration of ethnic Germans to the Reich. Polemically one could even argue that the Germans, who parted first, were a relatively small loss for Poland – at least in terms of loyalty, but perhaps also in terms of their expertise.

However, it is hardly possible to measure a phenomenon such as efficiency. It is also difficult to illustrate the translation of expert knowledge into real, visible administrative decisions with concrete examples. This has to be the next step of scholarly research. In any case, it will be no small task, as the historical discourse especially in Poland still sketches a uniform and standardized picture of Poland's rebirth. The ceremonies at the end of 2008 celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the Wielkopolska Uprising are a good illustration of this.³⁵

Weimar Germany could not admit that its experts had prepared Poland for independence, and Poland could not admit that Germany had a certain impact on the viability of the Second Polish Republic. Therefore, to accept that Poland's transformation was a complex, unforeseeable and nevertheless successful process, to accept that it was to a great extent the result of intensive communication and the readiness of elites to learn from each other beyond any national agenda, would introduce a genuinely new perspective to the alleged common sense of German-Polish historiography of the past ninety years.

³⁵ On the ninetieth anniversary of the Wielkopolska Uprising in 2008, there is *nihil novi* in the sense of significant new questions or perspectives on the role, meaning, and outcome of Poland's transformation in 1918/1919. Cf. Powstanie Wielkopolskie 1918–1919. Wybrane aspekty z perspektywy 90 lat, ed. by JANUSZ KARWAT, Poznań 2008; MAREK REZLER, Powstanie Wielkopolskie 1918–1919. Spojrzenie po 90 latach, Poznań 2008.