

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck
“The Polish Question”
Speech to the Lower House of the Prussian Parliament
28 January 1886

[*Introductory note:* The immediate background for this long speech was the brutal expulsions from Prussian territory of Poles and Polish Jews carried out in 1885. Many of these people had been resident in Prussia for years but had not become citizens, no easy matter in Germany. Polish deputies in the Reichstag formally questioned the government on these policies. Bismarck responded by denying the competence of the Reichstag in Prussian state matters. Shortly thereafter a majority of the lower house of the Prussian parliament moved a declaration for the protection of German interests in the eastern provinces. With this friendlier stimulus, Bismarck laid out the principles of the government's Polish policies. A typical Bismarck speech, it was delivered extempore (as were all speeches in the Reichstag and German state parliaments), filled with innuendo and threats and short on specific details. The intention here is to stifle criticism of an increasingly rigorous anti-Polish government policy, justifying it as an entirely reasonable response to Polish provocation. All the good will comes from the German side; all the bad faith belongs to the Poles. Source: Eugen Kalkschmidt (ed.), *Bismarck's Reden* (Berlin, n.d.), pp. 173-86]

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

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

In the year 1815 they did not initially realize the difficulty of the situation on which they were embarking, most probably because they gave less weight at that time to the attitude of the inhabitants than to that of the statesmen. The statesmen who stood at the rudder in 1815, at the forefront Prince [Karl August]

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

The belief that we could become accustomed to the Poles, and the desire to test the difficulties of the situation, gained credibility from the fact that in Silesia we lived with a million Polish-speaking subjects without any difficulty. [Also

¹ 1815 can be regarded as the “fourth” partition of Poland. Prussia, with designs on the Kingdom of Saxony, was willing to cede part of its booty from the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795, retaining only the western provinces. Poland was redistributed, with Russia getting the lion's share

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

contributing to this belief was] the memory of the era before 1806 during which time the nationalistic passions were not so clearly in evidence. There was a socially bearable relationship between Germans and Poles, a complex social intercourse with Poles here in Berlin and in society.

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

[Bismarck notes the changes in official attitude after the Polish uprising of 1830-31, which took place mostly in Russian Poland but also affected Posen. He does not mention the specific changes, however. Polish was discarded as an official language, and Germans replaced Polish district administrators. The new chief administrator of the Province of Posen, von Flottwell, made several other policy recommendations to Friedrich Wilhelm III.]

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

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

The king, of blessed memory, was disturbed in his trusting perceptions in certain unpleasant ways by the insurrections which took place in the most varied phases in the years 1846 to 1848. In 1848, he had to experience the alliance concluded between Prussian and foreign democrats and the Poles on the Berlin barricades. One of the immediate consequences of this was that thousands of Prussian subjects, German-speaking and Polish-speaking, were shot or wounded in battles with each other in the Grand Duchy of Posen. The outcome of those

events was a legal condition. The Poles strove for the same legal and constitutional freedom of movement guaranteed to German subjects. The freedom of movement the Poles gained in the right of association, the press, and constitutional matters, however, in no way contributed to increasing good will toward Germany or cooperation with it. On the contrary, we see only a sharpening of national antagonisms, that is, a one-sided sharpening from the Polish side. The peculiarity of the German character contributed to this development in many ways. The Germans' good nature and admiration for all things foreign, a kind of envy with which our countrymen regard those who have lived abroad and who have adopted certain foreign allures, and then also the German tradition of battling their own government for which they were always certain to find willing allies among the Poles ("hear, hear" on the right). Finally, [there was] the peculiar capacity of Germans, not found among other nations, to not only get out of their own skin but to get into that of a foreigner (laughter) and completely to become, in a word, something like a Pole, Frenchman, or American. I remember from my childhood learning the most popular melodies in Berlin about the old Polish general:

[Sings] Remember, my brave Lagienka; (laughter)
Ask no one of my destiny;
My Fatherland [...]

But that was not the German Fatherland, rather the Polish, that the Berlin organ grinders were lamenting. The appropriate twin of this was the interest in all things French. Who, of my age, has not heard with enthusiasm the recitation of, for example, "Bertrande's Farewell"? Or the poetry of Baron von Gaudy or other glorifications of Napoleon I, who thoroughly mowed down the Germans, for which they demonstrated their gratitude in a way I may not describe with a zoological adjective. (Great laughter) [...]

I recall my university days in the year 1832 at Göttingen, which was a kind of depot for Polish refugees from the uprising of 1831. As a young man I got to know some of the outstanding people of the Polish parliament. They were interesting, charming people, but what interests me most is the memory of the enthusiasm with which these Poles were received in all the cities of central Germany. I have experienced the reception for the victorious and upright returning soldiers of our army, but it was scarcely warmer than the reception of these Polish refugees in every German city (Aha!) And yet—I heard them say it themselves — they in no way left off their strivings or changed their minds about Germans and Germany. I recall that I occasionally discussed with one of the gentlemen the Slavic echoes which appear in many of the place names of my

home, dating from the earlier Wendish period. He said to me —the conversation was in French—“Just wait, we will soon give them back their original names.”

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

[Bismarck details the high-point of pro-Polish sympathies in Germany during the Prussian constitutional crisis of the early 1860s; the “problem” posed by Polish national “ambitions” during the period of German unification in Prussia’s relations with France, Great Britain, and Russia; and the fickleness of German left-wing politicians on the matter].

Since 1866 we have experienced no further support from abroad for the Poles’ ambitions toward us. Perhaps, this is because we have become stronger. Perhaps, it is because France, which had the main interest in the restoration of Poland—a Polish army would always be worth a French corps on the Vistula—France, I say, has other political ideas than the Polish question. The object of its ideas lies much closer. Now it is thinking more directly about Germany, not indirectly as formerly. Under the Emperor Napoleon, as under Louis Philippe (1830-48), French efforts on behalf of Poland were rather harmless. There are no such efforts visible now. European policy is too preoccupied with the events of 1866 and 1870 to be concerned with Poland.

Nevertheless, the struggle for existence between the two nations, which are allotted the same hearth, goes on unabated, one could even say, continues with strengthened forces. The era of peace has not been an era of reconciliation and accommodation on the Polish side. Strange to say, it is not as many foreigners and our own optimists believe that the German population has been the victor in the struggle and that Germanism advances. Rather, the opposite is the case. The Polish population makes indubitable progress. And we ask ourselves how this can be so, given the allegedly great support which the German element has received from the government. Indeed, gentlemen, this perhaps instructs us that

the support given the Poles by the opposition [German political forces] is stronger than that which the government can render according to the current constitution. But the fact is that the Poles can say of themselves: *Vexilla regis prodeunt* (the banners of the king go forward). This is beyond doubt.

When I think about the reasons for this, there comes to mind the Catholic department [of the Prussian government] which, until its abolition by my direct intervention as minister-president, possessed the character of a Polarizing organ inside the Prussian administration. (Unrest in the Center Party and among the Poles). Under the direction of Herr Krätzig—I hope he lives still—it had become an institute of a few great Polish families, in whose service these officials pushed Polonization in all the contested German-Polish districts. That is why it became necessary for me to agree to the abolition of this department. And this is actually the reason I generally concurred in the *Kulturkampf*.³ From my personal point of view, there would have been no *Kulturkampf*. (Vigorous contradictions from the Center Party.) Yes, gentlemen, say what you will. I leave you to your doubts. There will be a few who will believe me, but I am rather indifferent as to whether anyone believes me. Yet, for anyone who wants to be informed, it is necessary for me to give my personal opinion.

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

A second explanation for the progress of the Poles lies in the introduction of the national constitution and the laws regarding the press and the right of association, which facilitated their agitation. The Polish gentlemen have not been shy about exploiting all the laws introduced in the German Empire and Prussia. On their side they do not recognize [these laws]. They recognize their membership in Prussia only conditionally, and to be sure [feel free to terminate membership] on twenty-four hour notice. Today, if they had the opportunity to proceed against us and were strong enough to do so, they would not even give

³ The *Kulturkampf*, a legislative campaign carried out largely in the Prussian parliament, went far beyond the issue of separation of church and state, which most Catholics endorsed. The government sought to wean the Catholic masses away from the hierarchy and the Catholic political party, the Zentrum. The state intervened directly into church affairs, arrested resisting clergymen, and left many parishes without priests. Bismarck’s attempt to dismantle political Catholicism backfired and instead resulted in its strengthening. Until 1933, the Center, and later its Bavarian branch, sent approximately one hundred deputies to the Reichstag in every election. It was impossible for the government to govern for any length of time without coming to terms with the Zentrum.

us twenty-four hour notice but simply let loose, without any notice. (Great unrest among the Poles.) Yes, gentlemen, if any of you can give his word of honor that this is not true (great merriment), that all the gentlemen will stay at home if the opportunity presents itself to march out with your guerilla bands, then I shall take back my assertion...But I demand your word of honor. (Hilarity.) And giving it to me would be an error, gentlemen. We are not really so stupid; at least I am not. (Hilarity.)

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

Source: "Bismarck and the 'Polish Question': Speech to the Lower House of the Prussian Parliament, January 28, 1886," <http://h-net2.msu.edu/~german/gtext/kaiserreich/speech.html>.