

National Segregation and Mass Mobilization. Polish Cooperatives in Poznanian before the First World War

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Abstract

In the second half of the 19th century the ethnic groups inhabiting Prussian Poznanian, Poles and Germans, increasingly defined themselves in national terms. At the same time, society underwent a bourgeois transformation, and the fragmented Polish society was supplemented by a petty bourgeoisie and a wealthier peasantry. The emergence of those strata was the indispensable prerequisite for the events of the 1890's, in which different developments culminated and brought about a new situation: The masses became politicized and nationally mobilized on a mass scale, and the national leadership was transferred into the hands of the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie. Polish society became increasingly democratic and developed into a modern national society, which was fought by Prussian authorities with different intensity.

Although the first cooperatives in Poznanian emerged among Germans, their purpose until the end of the 19th century was confined to the economic sphere. Only when the national conflict became mass based, they followed the Polish example and engaged in the nationality struggle. For Poles, the purpose of cooperatives was political almost from the outset, as for the non-dominant ethnic group they created a space almost free from foreign domination. The contribution argues that there were three stages of development of Polish cooperatives in Poznanian: A short first stage in the 1860's, when cooperatives started to emerge on a small scale recruiting their members among specific professional groups and being supra-national institutions. The transition to the second stage, which we call the phase of ethnic segregation, already began at the end of the 1860's, when Poles left those joint coops in order to found "own" cooperatives and in 1871 a first cooperative association, uniting all Polish cooperatives in Poznanian and West Prussia. Inspired by the idea of "organic work", the leaders of the Polish national movement succeeded in increasing the number of Polish cooperatives and transforming it into a social movement. Nevertheless, until the mid-1880's, coops did not become a mass movement. This was achieved when nationalism took hold of the Polish and German masses and when national conflict aggravated. In this stage of mass mobilization, cooperatives became a broadly based mass movement, actively engaging in the nationality struggle between Germans and Poles.

Polish cooperatives moved cautiously in the complex area of conflict between state, political parties and the public and underlined their economic purpose. This way they managed to

withstand efforts of the authorities to curtail their position and to keep neutrality in Polish society. Neutrality was the prerequisite for the rapid growth of the 1890's. Faced with mass mobilization, cooperatives were then increasingly compelled to take a national stance and began to engage in national struggle. So cooperatives became an integral part of the Polish national movement and pursued national goals.

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