IMPERIAL DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES Mitteleuropa and the Crisis of German Politics, 1914–1919

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Abstract

During the 19th century there was a general trend among German intellectuals, whether liberal or conservative to write about Central European under German hegemonic rule, an idea that is generally called *Mitteleuropa*. Some authors like Friedrich List or Constantin Frantz would envision this hegemony as a federation of states with people from different languages and cultures, all however under a German economic control. Then there were those annexationalist authors like Paul de Lagarde who envisioned Central Europe as a massive ethnostate, all in the hands of the German aristocracy, where Slavs, Hungarians and Jews would be expelled. What became a debate between obscure intellectual figures would jump into the mainstream at the turn of the 20th century, with federalists like Friedrich Naumann and his book Mitteleuropa becoming a bestseller and the annexationalist organisation the Pan-German League that greatly influenced German politics. During the First World War these two visions would be put into practice in the newly occupied territories in the Baltic, Poland and Ukraine. However both these experiments failed, causing anger among those that did not want to be conquered and draining the resources of the Empire. At the same time this political fight would go on to the Reichstag, and drag the consensus that existed at the beginning of the war into a political fight between those who supported annexing the new territories and those who supported the creation of semi-independent puppet regimes. In the end the fight between these two camps would severely increase polarisation and leave space for a pacifist movement that would go on to lead Germany into Revolution.

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Introduction

The concept of eastern expansion has been a long-standing phenomenon in German history, going as far back as the Middle Ages, when German settlers from Saxony, Franconia, and Bavaria expanded into Bohemia, the Baltic lands, the Danube basin, and even the Volga area. Nevertheless, it was not until the nineteenth century, the era of nationalism and imperialism, that expansion towards the east became a central component of German national identity and a prevalent subject of debate among the German intelligentsia. It all started with debates in the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848, where the role of Germany in Central Europe would be discussed. Following the unification of Germany in 1871, significant portions of the political elite began openly demanding expansion into Eastern Europe as the path to establishing Germany as a great power. The period also witnessed seminal occurrences on the international stage that shaped German strategic thinking[1].

Meanwhile, despite its persistent economic and institutional woes, the Russian Empire continued to increase in population and power, representing a potential threat to German interests, particularly in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Ottoman Empire. In this context, several German policymakers and intellectuals started to view the integration of Central Europe and the projection of German influence to the east, not only as a wish but as a strategic necessity. German intellectuals reacted by formulating the concept of a new order within which the economies and populations of Middle Europe could be unified under German leadership. The idea reached its pinnacle in the concept of Mitteleuropa, a Middle European economic, political, and customs union of states with Germany as the paramount power and the most advanced industrial and military power in Middle Europe[2].

As a response to growing German interest in Central and Eastern Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two intellectual currents emerged regarding the destiny of the region under German domination. One was the annexationist school, which advocated the direct occupation and integration of countries such as Poland and the Baltic states into the German Empire. Its supporters called for aggressive policies of Germanisation that included the displacement or expulsion of the native ethnic population to be replaced by German colonists. This racist and expansionist creed had its most influential spokesmen in figures such as Paul de Lagarde, the nationalist All-German League (Alldeutscher Verband), and influential industrialist Alfred Hugenberg[3]. These movements and people supported the notion that the superiority of the German nation rendered it just

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[1] Jacques Rider, "Mitteleuropa as a Lieu De Mémoire," in *De Gruyter eBooks*, 2008, 37–46, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.1.37.

[2] Ingrao, Charles, and Franz A. J. Szabo, eds. *The Germans and the East*. Purdue University Press, 2008. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wq5f2.

[3] Jorg Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present* (Springer, 1996).

normal to expand by conquest and transform the East into a German colonial territory to be exploited economically. The second trend, or simply named the federalist school, also drew from German nationalist theory but foresaw a less repressive, aggressive type of regional dominance. Rather than advocating for annexation and ethnic cleansing, these authors introduced German leadership as a civilising mission in which Germany was the enlightened power that had a responsibility to liberate the oppressed masses of the Russian Empire, particularly the masses in Eastern Europe. One of the first proponents of this position was Constantin Frantz, who called for a Central European confederation in which Germany would play a leading role while respecting the rights and sovereignty of Slavic and Baltic nations. Although this vision remained hierarchical and paternalistic—expressed in imperialist conceptions of German superiority—it abandoned the more radical solutions of forced population exchanges and racial cleansing presented by the annexationist movement. One of the central figures of the liberal Mitteleuropa school was that renowned politician and thinker Friedrich Naumann, a member of the prewar German national-liberal movement. Naumann promoted democratic reform, including the expansion of Reichstag powers, abolition of the Prussian three-class franchise, and progressive taxation[4]. He envisioned Mitteleuropa as an economic and political federation in the federalist meaning of the word, but led by Germany, to provide the stability and development of its little neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe. Naumann expounded on this vision in his seminal 1915 work Mitteleuropa, one of the most complete accounts of future German activity in the region. The book was highly successful when published, selling more than 200,000 copies, and served as a major touchstone for recent discussions regarding the wartime aims of Germany in Central Europe.

It would also be important for the sake of this thesis to specify what we mean by Mittel Europa or "Central Europe", as Meyer notes, authors throughout the 19th and 20th century have been using the term so loosely that it has become something of a semantic confusion[5]. Overall, authors like List or Frantz tended to focus on the areas of the Danube towards the Black Sea[6]. Others like de Lagarde would talk more about the Baltic, since there was a higher presence of German settlers. War-time authors, such as Naumann and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, would even make allusions to countries in Northern and Western Europe, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and even Italy and France. However, as other geographical concepts are inspired by imperialist thinking, it is not surprising that, as time goes on, it goes to cover a larger portion of territory. This thesis

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[4] Zimmermann, Moshe. "A Road Not Taken - Friedrich Naumann's Attempt at a Modern German Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 4 (1982): 689–708. http://www.jstor.org/stable/260528.

[5] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), p5

[6] Ibid

would put the specific focus solely on three regions, the Baltic, Poland and Ukraine, as these were the main regions of action during the war.

One of the earliest and most long-standing interpretations of Mitteleuropa is that it is an economic and cooperative enterprise designed to bring regional stability and prosperity under German leadership. It is most associated with Friedrich Naumann, the author of the book Mitteleuropa in 1915, in which he conceived a political and voluntary customs union among Central European states aimed at modernisation and common development. Moshe Zimmermann reevaluates Naumann's work by noting that he sought to build a modern industrial nationalism which attempted to reconcile economic growth and social reform. Zimmermann argues that Naumann's concept was an attempt to synthesise national interests with progressive policies, counter to the presumption that German nationalism at this time was all reactionary or anti-modern.

On the other hand, most of the history has been concerned with how Mitteleuropa, if perhaps initially envisioned as collaborative, quickly became a tool of German imperialism and hegemony during wartime. Meyer[7] was among the first to emphasise this transformation, arguing that wartime exigency and the dominance of military leadership turned Mitteleuropa into a plan of German mastery, subordinating smaller states to Berlin's strategic and economic interests. Similarly, Brechtefeld[8] argues that Mitteleuropa never fully overcame its imperial goals and refers to the fact that even before the war, Central Europe was perceived by German thinkers as an area for German dominance and management with or without partner rhetoric. Mitteleuropa has also been studied by historians in the greater context of German foreign policy. Hildebrand[9] situates the concept of Mitteleuropa in Germany's unrelenting pursuit of a "special path" (Sonderweg) within Europe, emphasising that Mitteleuropa was less an extraordinary wartime expedient than a fulfilment of plans long drafted for maintaining political stability under German suzerainty. Hildebrand shows that the undertaking of a vision for preserving economic autarky and regional dominance is an alternative to gaining a place for Germany in an unsafe international order.

Newer scholarship has drawn attention to Mitteleuropa's ideological and discursive content. Kießling[10], for example, examines how public leaders in wartime used the term Mitteleuropa both as a geopolitical objective and, more importantly, as a civilising mission, presenting Germany as the one power that might bring order and modernisation into the "spontaneous" East after the Russian Revolution.

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[7] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945* (Springer, 1955).
[8] Jorg Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present* (Springer, 1996).
[9] Klaus Hilderbrand, *German Foreign Policy From Bismarck to Adenauer: The Limits of Statecraft* (Routledge, 2013).
[10] Kießling, Friedrich. *Europa im Zeitalter des Imperialismus 1890-1918*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023.

The historiography of party politics of Germany during the First World War has evolved significantly, moving beyond the traditional narrative of national consensus under the Burgfrieden (party truce). The earlier narratives, often developed during the interwar period, drew a picture of political consensus, with German parties described as obedient to the state's interests. This perception was, however, essentially undermined by Fritz Fischer in the 1960s. Fischer's research on Germany's war aims and internal politics argued that great parties, especially conservatives and right-wing liberals, used the war for imperialist and authoritarian purposes. His book shed light on how inner political tensions—namely, between annexationist elites and moderate forces—lay hidden behind the appearance of unity, which eventually invalidated the myth of national solidarity[11].

Even though Fischer's influence remains foundational, more contemporary scholarship has further developed and enhanced the field. Historians such as V.R. Berghahn[12], Hirschfeld[13], and Jens-Uwe[14] examined the internal crises of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), emphasising the growing chasm between its radical rank and file and moderate leadership, resulting in the formation of the USPD in 1917. These studies recontextualised the SPD not only as a passive recipient of circumstance but also as deeply split on war, peace, and social reform issues.

More recent scholarship has proceeded further in analysis. Ute Daniel and Alexander Watson[15], for instance, contend that political parties, instead of becoming outdated, adjusted to German society's militarisation. Their study demonstrates how economic stagnation, military defeats, and the erosion of civil rights since 1916 gave new life to parliamentary activism. The 1917 Reichstag Peace Resolution, supported by the SPD, Centre Party, and Progressive Liberals, is seen today as a high-tide moment when parliamentary powers tried to regain war aims from the military high command and oppose the latter's annexationist conception[16].

Also, scholars such as Mark Hewitson[17] and Ann Verhey[18] have explained how wartime rhetoric, such as concepts such as Volksgemeinschaft and Mitteleuropa, were

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[11] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, trans. Hajo Holborn and James Joll (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967),
[12] V. R. Berghahn, "War And Civil War, 1914–1923," in *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 1987, 38–81, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139163644.004.
[13] Gerhard Hirschfeld, "3. 'The Spirit of 1914': A Critical Examination of War Enthusiasm in German Society," in *Berghahn Books*, 2022, 29–40, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780857452238-004.
[14] Guettel, Jens-Uwe. "The Myth of the Pro-Colonialist SPD: German Social Democracy and Imperialism before World War I." *Central European History* 45, no. 3 (2012): 452–84. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938912000350.
[15] Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (Basic Books, 2014).
[16] Afflerbach, Holger. "'War Psychosis'? The Reichstag's Peace Offer and Bethmann Hollweg's Demission." Chapter. In *On a Knife Edge: How Germany Lost the First World War*, 283–95. Cambridge Military Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.
[17] Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 2004),
[18] Jeffrey Verhey The Spirit of 1914, (2000)

utilised by different political factions to redefine national identity and present political alternatives. These new analyses emphasise that wartime party politics were not merely responsive but actively participated in alternative visions of Germany's future. Instead of the strict wartime dictatorship, the Reichstag was transformed into a central site of political and ideological strife, planting the seeds for both the revolution of 1918 and the Weimar Republic's volatile party politics.

The history of Mitteleuropa's impact on German occupation and diplomatic policy has evolved significantly, particularly regarding German war administration in Eastern Europe. The German occupation zone during the First World War, although less researched historically compared to that of Belgium or Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, has garnered greater scholarly attention, particularly regarding the policies pursued in Ober Ost, Ukraine and Poland, as well as the impact that this would have on later ideas on Eastern expansion.

Firstly, historians, since the Second World War, have traditionally criticised the role of Paul von Hindenburg's and Erich Ludendorff's contribution to German occupation and war policies. At first, they were acclaimed for their victory in Tannenberg (1914), and early nationalist accounts avoided mentioning their administrative intentions for Ober Ost. With the progression of time, however, the negative narrative emerged. Max Hoffmann, one of the highest ranking Generals in the Eastern Front, and British historian Basil Liddell Hart questioned Hindenburg's supposed military genius, while post-World War II historians like Fritz Fischer[19] highlighted the German war aims' expansionist bent, speculating that Ober Ost policies foreshadowed Nazi policy. Fischer's thesis revolved around forced labour, economic exploitation, and authoritarianism as aspects of a broader German imperial vision. Other writers, such as Walter Görlitz[20], also analysed Ludendorff's militarism, portraying him as a doctrinaire commander who was unable to reconcile winning the war on the battlefield with the longer-term requirements of government, leading to further tension and conflict.

Later historiography has moved away from a purely military or political approach, instead viewing Ober Ost as an experimental model of German dominance in Eastern Europe. Vejas Liulevicius[21] has termed it a "proto-totalitarian state," where German domination attempted to introduce order and rationality by suppressing indigenous identities. Historians like Dennis Showalter[22] and Robert Gerwarth[23] have examined how German occupation policy fueled ethnic tensions and economic instability, making German

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[19] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, trans. Hajo Holborn and James Joll (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967),

[20] Walter Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff: 1657-1945* (Barnes & Noble, 1967).

[21] Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[22] Dennis E. Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires, 1914* (Potomac Books, Inc., 1990).

[23] Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (Penguin UK, 2016).

rule unsustainable. The German occupation of Poland under Hans Hartwig von Beseler has been the subject of surprisingly little scholarship. Early works, such as Werner Conze[24] and Imanuel Geiss's, described it as a product of Nazi expansionism, in which annexation plans and ethnically cleansing operations were pursued in the Grenzstreifen policy. More recent works, such as Jesse Kauffman's[25], have offered more balanced accounts and highlighted the challenge of German occupation. Kauffman argues that, whilst German policy had been exploitative, it also had incorporated efforts at state-building like the revitalisation of Polish institutions. It is a revisionist approach questioning direct continuity between Nazi and Wilhelmine policy and situating the occupation in the broader frame of debates surrounding wartime rule and post-war reconstruction.

With the loss of the war, Mitteleuropa as an idea did not evaporate but evolved and went on to influence economic planning as well as the foreign policy ambitions of Germany during both the inter-war and the Third Reich periods. While the early war vision of Mitteleuropa, as laid out in the Septemberprogramm and by men like Friedrich Naumann, envisioned a German-dominated economic and political bloc under direct domination, postwar circumstances forced Germany to channel its ambitions into new avenues of influence. Brechtefeld[26] and Meyer[27] noticed that the ideological basis of Mitteleuropa remained in German elite ideas as they continued to advocate a remodelled Central European system with German leadership. Despite the Treaty of Versailles and the restraint of the Weimar era, the concept of an economically integrated and leader Germany-ruled territory remained a foreign policy guiding principle. For instance, during the early years of Weimar, some like von der Goltz tried to use the still present German minority in the Baltic and the freikorps as a way maintaining influence and indirect power after the War, this efforts were however unsuccessful as the Freikorp were defeated by the newly created Latvian and Estonian Armies.

As Gross puts it, in the 1920s and 1930s, Germany shifted away from direct imperial ambitions to establishing an "informal empire" in Southeastern Europe, which rested on economic predominance, cultural penetration, and commercial networks rather than on military occupation[28]. By becoming the major trade partner of countries like Romania and Yugoslavia and by forging close connections through commercial fairs, development projects, and academic exchanges, Germany managed to reach out and rebuild some of the

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[24] Werner Conze. *Polnische Nation und deutsche Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Cologne: Böhlau. 1958.

[25] Jesse Kauffman, "German State-Building in Occupied Poland as an Episode in Postwar Reconstruction, 1915–1918," in *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 2017, p. 239–255, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316694091.013.

[26] Jorg Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present* (Springer, 1996).

[27] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955),

[28] Stephen G. Gross, *Export Empire*, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316282656.

elements of the Mitteleuropa project with soft power and economic dependence. Similarly, as Hinden[29] points out, similar actions were taken by the Weimar political class in the Baltic. Such an approach helped Germany acquire vital raw materials and markets that would later help its rearmament and expansionist plans under Hitler. On balance, Mitteleuropa was transformed from an interwar period war strategy of territorial conquest into a long-term economic and cultural project, preparing the ground for both the interwar period soft power diplomacy and the more assertive expansionism of the Second World War.

Overall, it can be said that most of the historiographical work that has been performed regarding Mitteleuropa and the German influence in the East, both during and after the war, has been, for the most part, intellectual. The aim of this is to see how many of the real political decisions of these military officers and diplomats were inspired or influenced by the writings of Naumann, as well as by the overall objective of creating a Central European confederation.

Overall, the research around the issue of Mitteleuropa has been wide and deep; however, this thesis intends to address a perspective that the previous literature has not approached. As seen before, authors such as Brechtefeld and Meyer have explored the issue of de Mitteleuropa debate, between those who supported a decentralised and federal Mitteleuropa and those who wanted a centralised and ethnocentric Mitteleuropa. However, their research put either too much focus on the politics regarding Austria-Hungary, like Meyer or avoided the issue altogether, like Brechtefeld. At the same time, authors who have analysed the occupation policy, such as Fischer, have tended to cover all the occupation zones of Germany, from Ukraine to Belgium and Serbia. While this research has been very detailed and nuanced, it has also meant that sometimes it has lacked precision in the territories of the former Russian Empire that were meant to be part of Mitteleuropa. While Fischer does mention Naumann and Mitteleuropa, it does address the impact that the debate that existed in the late 19th century had on the political discourse and the occupation policy during the First World War. At the same time, the research done regarding party politics in Germany and the growing polarisation tends to overlook the debate between Mitteleuropa supporters. While naturally the War is a central topic regarding the developments of party politics in Germany between 1914-1918, the issue of specifically the failures to materialise Mitteleuropa in areas like the Baltic or Ukraine and how that fostered the polarisation, especially in the last year of the war, tends to be overlooked.

To cover for this gap, this thesis asks the following question:

What was the impact of the debate within the Mitteleuropa project, in regards to the occupied territories, in the German political discourse during the First World War?

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[29] John Hiden, *The Baltic States and Weimar Ostpolitik*, 1987,.

This research question will be a connection between these three historiographical fields. One being that of the intellectual and political debate of Mitteleuropa, the other being the historiographical assessment of Germany's occupation policies during the First World War, and the final one being how these three issues contributed to the increase in polarisation, the end of the German Empire and the beginning of the Weimar Republic. The main idea is to explore how this debate between federalist and annexationist, that existed in the 19th century and gained political influence in the years leading up to the First World War, influenced the occupation policies of former territories of the Russian Empire and how both the debate and failed result of the occupations influenced the polarisation levels in German party politics.

To respond to the core research question and reveal the influence of the Mitteleuropa debate on German occupation policy and party politics, this thesis relies upon a wide array of primary sources. These sources can be summarised into four groups, each assigned to a particular field of the inquiry.

Firstly, there are the intellectual sources. They will primarily be used throughout the first chapter. These are the printed writings of political intellectuals and authors who influenced the developing idea of Mitteleuropa during the 19th and early 20th centuries. They include authors such as Friedrich List, Paul de Lagarde, Constantin Frantz, and most notably Friedrich Naumann, whose 1915 book Mitteleuropa is a central ideological point of reference. These intellectual sources are complemented by political essays, newspaper articles, manifestos, and personal letters that help to trace the development and spread of federalist and annexationist thinking in German political discourse.

The second group consists of occupation reports and diplomatic correspondence produced by German military and civilian officials during the war. These are vital for reconstructing the actual application of occupation policies in regions such as Poland, Ober Ost, Ukraine, and Finland. One such major source on this matter is the occupation report Das Land Ober Ost, submitted in 1917, that provides fascinating data on how the German authorities dealt with the occupied territories in administration, economics, and social engineering. This specific source is especially useful in illustrating the disconnect between the theoretical desire and the on-the-ground practice realities encountered. Most of these sources were not disclosed until years after the war, so even though they will count with personal biases, the fact that they were not written for the wider public means that their information would not be distributed for propagandistic purposes.

Thirdly, there are the political speeches and media articles given by German political figures during times of war. This will serve as the main source of information to make a diagnosis of the situation of German politics. This includes Reichstag debates, mass speeches

by party leadership, as well as government decrees, and to a lesser extent, even media and articles published by non-German newspapers in occupied territories. To capture the grasp of public opinion at the time, this Thesis would focus mostly on those Newspapers that had political allegiances, the growth of partisan messages and aggressive tone will serve as an indicator for the growth of polarisation. Compared to the internal memoranda or letters, these sources are the external-facing narrative offered by the German political class and are useful in tracking shifts in party positions, popular opinion, and responses to events such as the Russian Revolution or the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. However, since they are public, they must be read carefully, as they were often bound by propaganda interests and political calculation.

The fourth and final category is the personal accounts, primarily memoirs and autobiographies written by individuals directly involved in the war or political affairs. Examples include books by Matthias Erzberger, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, Richard von Kuhlmann, and Erich Ludendorff. Personal accounts offer hindsight perspectives on decision-making, interorganizational internal contradictions, and ideological motivations. Although these sources are necessarily tainted by personal bias or hindsight justification, they give more nuanced and humanised insight into the events being examined.

This thesis will explain how the concept of Mitteleuropa, from its intellectual genesis through to its attempted implementation, served to stoke the political polarisation and eventual crisis in Germany both during and after the First World War. Chapter one will cover the ideological origins of Mitteleuropa, tracing its evolution during the late nineteenth century and explaining arguments between conservative annexationists and liberal federalists. Thinkers such as Friedrich List, Constantin Frantz, and Paul de Lagarde will be considered alongside writings of the Pan-German League to map out rival visions of Germany's place on the continent. The chapter will also situate these debates within the broader framework of German imperial thought, teasing out the tensions between colonialism abroad and European hegemony.

Chapter two will discuss the application of Mitteleuropa in occupation policy and diplomacy, namely Germany's occupation of Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic. Treaties like Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest legitimised German hegemony, yet attempts to create a bloc of satellite states brought to the fore grave administrative, logistical, and ideological contradictions. In Ukraine, the promised foodstuffs of Brotfrieden collapsed under the strain of resistance and instability. In Ober Ost and the Baltic, German military occupation blended expansionist ambition with colonial-style governance. Drawing on military memoirs, diplomatic correspondence, and occupation records, this chapter will examine how Mitteleuropa was both a site of strategic planning and ideological projection and how its failure abroad eroded the legitimacy of the German state at home.

Chapter three will take up the political and rhetorical war Mitteleuropa stirred up in wartime Germany. As the concept moved from theory to policy, it was a point of contention in Reichstag debates, between parties, and across the press. By analysis of speeches, party declarations, and press coverage in newspapers like Vorwärts and Berliner Tageblatt, this chapter will show how Mitteleuropa was portrayed as cooperation, domination, or chimaera. Political leaders like Bethmann-Hollweg and Kühlmann were at the core of these debates. Lastly, the chapter will argue that the widening disparity between vision and reality fueled internal divisions, which resulted in Germany's political disintegration in 1918–19.

CHAPTER 1
The Debate About Mitteleuropa

The concept of a federation or confederation of states in Central Europe has its origins in post-Napoleonic Europe's intellectual debates. These debates would keep evolving even after German unification into those that supported a federative and multiethnic project with those that supported a centralised ethnostate, a debate which gained a lot of relevance after the 1848 Revolution. It was during this period that three views on Mitteleuropa would come forward. French historian Edmond Vermeil describes these three dominant schools of thought regarding Mitteleuropa in Germany. First, there were those realists who argued for an ethnically and culturally homogenous Germany. This section was guided mainly by the Prussian leadership and its main personality was German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, or as Vermeil called it "an Empire of Prussian inspiration, limited as yet in extent but militarized and strongly administered"[30]. Because of his objectives on maintaining a balance of power Bismarck was particularly cautious with entering into a conflict with Russia, over the territories in Central Europe, that's why he and his supporters would sidelined all the followers of the other two.

To analyse the intellectual progression and ideas of the different authors this chapter will go through the two main schools of thought regarding the concept of Mitteleuropa during the Bismarck years, when both of these currents were being sidelined in favour of realpolitik.. These being firstly the federalist school, characterised by a focus on economic objectives and expansion and by a certain level of tolerance of non-German groups although still under a cultural hierarchy. Establishing what Vermeil simply describes it as "a territory economically united"[31]. Here the two main intellectuals to analyse will be Friedrich List and Constantin Franz. The second school is that of the annexationalists, mainly represented by Paul de Lagarde, who argued for the establishment of a German ethnostate in Central Europe where Slavs, Jews or Baltic peoples would be evicted to be replaced with German settlers[32]. His ideas have their origin in the romantic and conservative ethnonationalism of authors such as Johan Gottfried Herder and Johan Gottlieb Fichte[33]. He would later serve as a main inspiration for the Nazi political thought.

Afterwards it will go through how these two lines of thought gained relevance during the Wilhelmine era, with the federalists gaining ground among the Progressive Liberals and

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[30] Edmond Vermeil, *Germany's Three Reichs: Their History and Culture*, (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969) p.184
[31] Ibid p.184
[32] Ibid p.184
[33] Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present*. p.14

the figure of Naumann and the annexationalists becoming key in the foundation of the pan-German league. The objective of this chapter is to go through the main debates surrounding Mitteleuropa in order to better understand the line of thought that was applied during the First World War.

Mitteleuropa *Federalists*

This section will present early federalist ideas of Mitteleuropa by 19th-century writers such as Friedrich List and Constantin Frantz. These authors created ideological bases for a vision of Central Europe other than the imperial one, but as an economically and politically based federation. List was adamant about economic unity and customs unification, while Frantz fantasized about a decentralised confederation of nations having respect for nationalities within one framework. Though often overshadowed by later annexationist ideology, their work influenced more pragmatic and inclusive visions of regional order that reappeared during the First World War.

Friedrich List's previous free-market liberal leanings under the influence of Adam Smith gave way subsequently to protectionism subsequent to his self-imposed exile to the United States, there being heavily influenced by the industrial model advocated by Alexander Hamilton. His growing scepticism regarding British economic hegemony led him to urge an independent European system. To this was central the suggestion for the extension of the Zollverein to a broader mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftszone (Central European economic zone)[34]. In his writing, he stated, "The extension of the Zollverein, which meant the removal of so many customs barriers, suggested that the time was tending in that direction."[35] He saw reviving "the old continental system of Napoleon will be revived but on a more favorable basis and with much greater efficiency."[36] These were his words in a letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Forsyth in 1834[37]. List's aspirations gained traction after the revolution in Austria, especially under Emperor Franz Joseph's Finance Minister, Karl Ludwig von Bruck. He attempted to reduce trade restrictions within the country and promote integration across the region, stating that commerce would be "from the Mediterranean to the Baltic and from the Rhine to the Lower Danube."[38] His success, such as the institution of a common currency in 1857, generated early hope for a Mitteleuropa in the future. But Austria's wars in 1859 and

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[34] Bo Stråth, "Mitteleuropa," *European Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 2 (May 1, 2008): 171–83,
[35] Friedrich List, "Letter to US Secretary of State John Forsyth, December 12, 1834," in *Life of Friedrich List and Selections from His Writings*, ed. Margaret Hirst (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1909) p.70
[36] Ibid p.67
[37] Ibid p.71
[38] Richard Charmatz, *Minister Freiherr von Bruck: Der Vorkämpfer Mitteleuropas; sein Lebensgang und seine Denkschriften* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1916), p.202-203; quoted in Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), p

1866 cut short its control of this initiative, and its mantle was passed to Prussia and eventually to the German Empire.

Constantin Frantz pursued List's intellectual legacy, propagating a customs union, economic integration, and free trade-led Central European federation. He saw this as the natural culmination of the Zollverein, announcing the need to "bring the Zollverein to an end" and to move on with "more reason to work towards it."[39] His theory of a "Central European Federation" posed regional economic self-determination within a greater context of European mercantilism. But despite his denunciation of warlike nationalism, his writings still had undertones of expansionism. He explained, "a grand and secure sales area would then be opened up by us,"[40] suggesting a departure from List's system to that which Brechtefeld would later refer to as "warmongering economists"[41] industrialists such as Alfred Krupp and Arthur von Gwinner, who embraced imperial growth for economic reasons.

The role of the peoples from Central and Eastern Europe, mostly slavs, baltics, finns, hungarians and Jews is a contentious one among federalist writers, ideas swinging from paternalism to even strong xenophobic stances. In his writings, Frantz tends to portray himself as someone sympathetic to peoples of the East, as he calls them, referring to Poles and as someone who believes that Germany and this Mitteleuropa could provide protection. He would support for instance the reconstruction of Poland as an entity, which by the late 19th century had completely been swallowed and integrated into Russia. Arguing that Poland was indeed one of the oldest states in Europe, with a right to exist using [42].

Frantz however, showed a general lack of trust in a hypothetical Polish independence. In his second volume of Weltpolitik, he argues that a fully independent Polish state would “strive for possession of the corresponding Baltic coastal region”[43] leading to a conflict with Germany over the possession of the Baltic, something that he also mentions would be accelerated in the case of a union of Lithuania. In this sense, Frantz showed that despite desiring a Mitteleuropa that would include Poland he seems to point, though indirectly, that Germany should hold control over this newly reinstated Poland.

However, Frantz would also make his work notable for a clear sign of antisemitism. In a pamphlet in 1844, titled, the Jewish Question[44], Frantz argued that even in the case of conversion Jews would remain Jews and their loyalty therefore could not be trusted. When talking about economic integration he also uses anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as an

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[39] Constantin Frantz, *Der Föderalismus als das leitende Prinzip für die soziale, staatliche und internationale Organisation* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1879) p.346
[40] Constantin Frantz, *Der Föderalismus* p.414
[41] Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present*. p.14
[42] Constantin Frantz, *Die Religion des Nationalliberalismus* (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag der Roßberg'schen Buchhandlung, 1872) p.40
[43] Weltpolitik, v2 p.62
[44] Constantin Frantz, *Ahasverus, oder, Die Judenfrage* (Berlin: W. Hermes, 1844), p.21

example of a trading class that does not contribute to local industry[45]. By the end of his life, he would push for massive expulsion of Jews to Palestine. These declarations made Siber, already 1947 considered him one of the precursors of National Socialism[46] and so would Levy[47].

During the time of Friedrich List, Russian expansionism was not a major concern among intellectuals. However, by the late 19th century, thinkers such as Frantz devoted significant attention to the potential threat posed by Russia. In his posthumously published book Die deutsche Politik der Zukunft "The German Politics of the Future", renamed by his colleague as Die Gefahr aus Osten "The Danger of the East", Frantz presents the thesis that a growing Russia threatens not only Germany but also the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. He advocates a defensive Mitteleuropa alliance to contrast this threat in[48].

Meanwhile, Russia exercised aggressive policies of Russification in imposing language and culture on non-Russian groups such as Poles, Estonians, Lithuanians, and Baltic Germans[49]. These policies bred deep resentment among liberal minds such as Frantz and reaffirmed his anti-Russian outlook. He uses clearly aggressive language when discussing "Russianess," a term which he sees not just in terms of politics and language but even in terms of a set of values which he detests so deeply. In other instances, he employs the racial designation "Mongolian" for Russians and contends that "what underlies Russianness is Asiatism,"[50] employing the bellicose role of Cossacks and Bashkirs in Europe during the Napoleonic Wars. Such chauvinist and racist assertions made him different from much modern liberalism and testified to a deeper current of exclusionist nationalism within German liberalism.

While there was bitter rhetoric, Frantz did not advocate pure military aggression. In Die Gefahr aus Osten, he warns that a Russian invasion of Prussia would be difficult to halt[51], and there is more evidence of concern about defense than aggression. Frantz was a staunch pacifist in his political philosophy. A vocal opponent of Bismarck's wars of unification against Denmark, Austria, and France, he presumed that regions such as Poland and Lithuania could be integrated into Germany peacefully, although he never explained how it

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[45] Richard S. Levy, ed., *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005),
[46] Eduard Sieber,. "Constantin Frantz, Ein Vorläufer Des Nationalsozialismus?" *Die Friedens-Warte* 47, no. 6 (1947): 352–59.
[47] Levy, ed., *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution* p.244
[48] Robert L. Nelson, "The Baltics As Colonial Playground: Germany In The East, 1914-1918." Journal of Baltic Studies 42, no. 1 (2011): 9–19.
[49] Frantz, *Die Weltpolitik*, Vol.1 p.79
[50] Constantin Frantz, "Die Gefahr aus Osten," in *Die deutsche Politik der Zukunft*, vol. 1, ed. Ottomar Schuchardt (Celle: Schulbuchhandlung, 1899) p.100
[51] Frantz, *Die Gefahr aus Osten*. p.135

would be possible[52]. His writings thus have an inconsistent tension between nationalist anxiety, racialized discourse, and theoretical commitment to non-aggression[53].

Overall, federalists had a supportive though nuanced view of the German settlements in the East. Authors such as List were generally supportive, more specifically in the Danube region. While not explicitly calling for military conquest, List was a precursor to economic expansionism, seeing German influence spreading through trade, investment, and infrastructure instead of annexation. His vision of Mitteleuropa was centred on German economic hegemony. For List the Slavic peoples living in these regions as "stateless people"[54] meaning that his proposals tended to dehumanise them and treat the lands adjacent to the Danube as empty areas, which they were not. This set a precedent for a hazardous debate about the role of German settlements in the politics towards Central and Eastern Europe,[55].

Frantz also identified the Danube area as most central to German colonisation and influence. Though he did not precisely recommend the expulsion of indigenous inhabitants, he clearly envisioned German settlement and control in the Balkans, the Black Sea, and Asia Minor as economically necessary expansion, holding that any policy preventing German access to them was "un-German, noxious and reprehensible." He insisted on the Danube being made "a German River."[56]

Mitteleuropa *Annexationists*

The second view of Mietteleuropa is one streaming from ideas based on ethnocentrism, and imperialism, based on the philosophical ideas of men such as Gottfried Herder or Gottliebt Fichte. In the debate that arose in the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848, and as Brechtefeld notes, is when the anti-slavism of many intellectuals would appear as well as the political and economic interests of the German landed aristocracy. The best example of this was the speech made by supposedly radical liberal poet and representative, Wilhelm Jordan, when speaking against the restoration of Poland suggested by personalities such as composers Robert Blum or lawyer Philipp Jakob Siebenpfeiffer. In his speech, he highlighted strong anti-Slavic sentiment expressing that "political independence can only be gained through force"[57]. With this speech a new current of ideas would start, about a Mitteleuropa based on power and conquest, which would have an important influence later.

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[52] J. Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present* (Springer, 1996). P.29
[53] Ibid. p.130
[54] J. Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present* (Springer, 1996). p.17
[55] Stråth, "Mitteleuropa." p.177
[56] Frantz, *Der Föderalismus* p.298
[57] Pascal, Roy. "The Frankfurt Parliament, 1848, and the Drang Nach Osten." *The Journal of Modern History* 18, no. 2 (1946): 108–22.

The most relevant Paul de Lagarde is identified by Brechtefeld as the other great intellectual about the issue of Mitteleuropa during the last decades of the 19th century, occupying the ethno-nationalist and colonialist version of the Mitteleuropa project, who would be interested in seeing the reign of the Hohenzollerns, extend towards Central and Eastern Europe while expelling all of those groups that lived on those precise lands. He has correctly been identified as one of the precursors of Lebensraum and the Nazi Imperial ambitions.

Contrary to Frantz and especially List, Paul de Lagarde did not have as much interest in the economic integration of Central Europe but rather in German territorial expansion as a strategic imperative, both as a way of gaining power and resources. His idea of Mitteleuropa was under the strong conviction of the imperative of German hegemony over Russian Poland, which he considered to be indispensable for the existence of East and West Prussia. Without this hinterland, these provinces would become economically unviable in the long term, he argued. [58] In his Deutsche Schriften, de Lagarde explains his vision and objectives in four points for Mitteleuropa, and among these only the fourth one deals with economic objectives, only one of which is related to economic affairs. In it he argued for a stronger economic integration of the region, stating that a customs union and trade association with Romania and Luxembourg could be achieved without hurting both countries' independence[59]. This is one of the few times that de Lagarde refers to ideas more associated with List. Nevertheless, his economic vision of Mitteleuropa was still based on economic exploitation and abuse of power imbalance.

Regarding non German groups, de Lagarde would press for a Mitteleuropa that enforces strict rules on ethnic homogeneity, meaning policies of either expulsion or Germanisation, meaning the forcing of German language and culture into the occupied peoples. Germanisation was already being carried out against the Polish citizens of East Prussia during the time of Bismarck and arguably since the period of the partitions[60]. These included the repression against Polish cultural associations and the Polish language. He stressed that the presence of these peoples was excessive in some Prussian areas "we have more Poles and Cassubians in our state than we would like"[61] and that "Germanisation was a necessity"[62]. Regarding the Jewish population, his policies included the expropriation and expulsion of all Jewish citizens of Mitteleuropa and their exile to Palestine. As he explained in the case of a German conquest of Poland one of the primary objectives "will have expelled to Palestine all Jews residing in Poland and Galicia"[63] specifically referring to them as "the

[58] Paul de Lagarde, *Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1878) p.70
[59] Ibid p.81
[60] Lagarde, *Deutsche Schriften* vol. 1 p.81
[61] Ibid p.410
[62] Ibid p. 81
[63] Ibid p.91

old cancer of the Polish nation"[64]. These aggressively antisemitic quotes and propositions would be one of the drivers for the ideological base of the Holocaust.

For de Lagarde the biggest threat to the long-term security of Germany was the Russian Empire and he explained so extensively in his writings. Unlike Frantz that talks about Russia or America as inherently threats not only to Germany but also to the whole of the European continent, whether militarily or economically, de Lagarde focuses on Russia and France as threats exclusively to Germany. While the idea of seeing the French as a threat was very common at the time Russia was less common[65]. De Lagarde uses strategic reasons to justify this supposed threat. Namely the expansionism that Russia had been carrying out in the Caucasus which had concluded in 1864 and the expansion in Central Asia, making Russia an even bigger empire and bringing them a larger pool of resources and manpower. De Lagarde gets to predict that in a quarter of a century, the interests of Russia would shift towards Central Europe[66]. De Lagarde also makes the case that sooner or later the case of Poland and the Baltic will bring Russia into a conflict with Germany. This is particularly revealing because up until that point, Germany's main security threat was to be the two French provinces that had been conquered in the war of 1871. He also stresses this conflict would be caused by disputes in the Eastern Prussian provinces, attempting to control the coast from Danzig to Memel. In order to secure this region he believed that Poland must be brought into the German sphere, in the framework of historical necessity. German annexation of Russian Poland, therefore, was thus not an option but a question of urgent necessity to prevent Polish or Russian domination of Central Europe. [67]

Similarly to Frantz, De Lagarde expressed the idea that while a war was going to occur in Central Europe, he stressed that this war should not be deliberately provoked by Germany. Instead, he insists that Germany should be prepared for it, as he put it "to the idea that it will come"[68]. This is quite revealing since these statements were said in 1878, a time when Bismarck was trying to maintain cordial relationships with the Russians. Unlike Frantz however, de Lagarde believes that such confrontation "will make Poland and Galicia independent under the House of Wettin, which will cede its five German territories to Prussia, naturally as an inseparable ally of Germany and Austria[69].

One of the key differences between Frantz and de Lagarde is the role that German settlers should play in this new Mitteleuropa. While both men argue in favour of an increase of settlements in Central and Eastern Europe, de Lagarde wanted this to represent a form of

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[64] Ibid p.91
[65] Felix Kersting and Nikolaus Wolf, "On The Origins of National Identity. German Nation-building After Napoleon," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 52, no. 2 (March 25, 2024): 463–77, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2024.02.004.
[66] Lagarde, *Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 1 p.70
[67] Ibid
[68] Ibid p.6
[69] Ibid p.91

ethnic replacement in which Poles, Lithuanians and Jews would be removed and replaced with German settlers, and those few that stayed would underscore a strict policy of Germanisation[70]. His vision was also shaped by a form of Protestant fundamentalism[71]. He points out that a potential victory over Russia could "free up land for German settlements east of Poland as far as the Black Sea, and would lay hands on Asia Minor for further German colonies"[72] Similarly to Frantz some of the statements made by de Lagarde can be considered contradictory, as he appears to be both beware of a war but also see its advantages for new German settlements. As correctly pointed out by Meyer, had it not been for his monarchical views Lagarde would have fit the profile of a writer of the Volkishce Beobachter[73].

EARLY 20TH CENTURY AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

It is during this period that the idea of Mitteleuropa goes from a political idea to a political issue for many in the Second German Empire. At the same time, this was a period in which political realists were gradually removed in favour of fervent nationalists. The rise to power of Wilhelm II also came with the dismissal of Bismarck as Chancellor. Bismarck was in many ways a contention force from those who advocated the creation of Mitteleuropa, whether from the confederation or annexation camp. For Bismarck the priority was to maintain the balance of power in Europe therefore he tended to avoid confrontations between the nations. In this context, Mitteleuropa was just a source of conflict. According to Brechtefeld, Bismarck had made many efforts to guarantee those groups and associations that advocated for Mitteleuropa did not gain too much influence or power in the German court or government, but with his dismissal things could not be stopped. It did not help the fact that Wilhelm II was known for his aggressive behaviour in foreign affairs[74].

It is in this context that two new protagonists would appear in the intellectual and now political fight of Mitteleuropa. One would be the German liberal intellectual Friedrich Naumann, who in 1896 would fund the Nations-Social Association[75]. The other would be represented by the organisation of the Alldeutscher Verband or Pan-German League, guided

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[70] Ibid p.91
[71] Vincent Viaene, "Paul de Lagarde: A Nineteenth-Century 'Radical' Conservative; and Precursor of National Socialism?" *European History Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1996): 527–557.
[72] Lagarde, *Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 1 p.91
[73] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), p.32
[74] J. Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present* (Springer, 1996)
[75] Nothing to do with post-WW1 National-Socialism

by people such Ernst Hasse and Heinrich Class with the overall support and presence of businessmen such as Alfred Hugenberg[76]

During these years, there was increasingly heightened diplomatic rivalry between Germany and Russia. There were radical shifts in the two empires from more reforming or diplomatically prudent leaders at the end of the 19th century. In Russia, modernizing Tsar Alexander II was succeeded by his son, Alexander III, who adopted a more national, reactionary line. Similarly, in Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II started a much more militaristic foreign policy. Not only did these transitions alter the domestic political landscape of both nations but also witnessed increasing disregard for traditional diplomatic channels, which consolidated burgeoning tensions between the two powers. Russia's support for Pan-Slavism and its alliance with France in 1892 would increase the tension between the two countries. Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, speaks of heightened belligerence in his memoirs. He recalls, for instance, the massive Russian test mobilizations in Poland in the summer of 1912, which were carried out without prior notification to Germany, violating diplomatic protocol. The manoeuvres upset the German government that diplomatic complaints were made at once. The event contributed to sustaining German suspicion that Russia was consolidating its connections to anti-German factions and deepened the diplomatic chasm between the two empires.[77]

The Pan-German League

Inspired by Paul de Lagarde, the Pan-German League, led by Ernst Hasse and Heinrich Class, placed Mitteleuropa at the heart of their expansionist vision. In Hasse's view, Germany's projection of power throughout the globe hinged initially on the consolidation of its position in Central Europe, that is to pursue "Weltpolitik", that is the aim of the Kaiser of obtaining a position of global dominance or hegemony, they first needed to achieve "Mitteleuropa". He emphasized that since Germany was not an island power such as Britain, it should thus concentrate on consolidating its control over Central Europe and forming strategic alliances, particularly with the Ottoman Empire[78]. One of the most important shifts in Lagarde's ideas was the League's increased inclination to advocate war. While Lagarde saw

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[76] John A. Leopold, *Alfred Hugenberg: The Radical Nationalist Campaign Against the Weimar Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977),

[77]Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, *Reflections on the World War*, trans. George Young (London: T. Butterworth, 1920) p.73

[78] Ernst Hasse, *Deutsche Politik, II, Deutsche Grenzpolitik* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1905), pp. 8; quoted in Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present*. p.35

war in Europe as necessary but not desirable, Hasse and Class saw it as necessary for German expansion[79].

Before the beginning of the First World War there had been some growing initiatives mostly formed by men in the world of German industry to expand their operations and interests in Central and Eastern Europe. These initiatives led to the creation of associations (Verein) or federations (bunds) to both collaborate on projects as well as lobby the government for new opportunities, in many cases outside of Germany.

Something quite remarkable about the annexationist school during the years leading to the First World War is that it would use some of the ideas of List and Frantz for their objectives, namely the usage of economics. De Lagarde for the most part, talks about economic matters only in those regards to the necessary raw materials and resources that Germany needs, it does not talk about economic domination as a prelude to political domination. List had established the predominance of economic interests when constructing Mitteleuropa and Frantz had defended the integration of Central and Eastern Europe as a way of opening markets. Many in the German industrial and business class started associating themselves with ideas related to Mitteleuropa as a way of opening new markets[80]. This was also happening in the Middle East with project such as the Berlin-Baghdad Railway[81] all of this with the support of the Kaiser who as Heinrich Vierbücher put it "Wilhelm II was the travelling salesman of the German imperialists"[82].

Friedrich Naumann and German Progressive Liberalism

Friedrich Naumann, born in Saxony in 1860, was a Protestant pastor and theologian. Even to this day, Naumann is considered one of the founding intellectuals of modern German liberalism. He was also one of the main intellectual voices about the construction of Mitteleuropa. Naumann can be considered in many ways a disciple of ideas of Frantz and List, when it comes to his vision of Mitteleuropa.

Friedrich Naumann's Mitteleuropa reflects the thoughts and views of a pastor and intellectual of the last generation of German liberal thinkers in the late German Imperial period, or Kaiserreich. Naumann was an influential figure in the progressive wing of national liberalism, one of the dominant political ideologies in the Reichstag at the time. National

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[79]Brian C. Rathbun "Barking Dogs and Beating Drums: Nationalism as Moral Revolution in German Foreign Policy." Chapter. In *Right and Wronged in International Relations: Evolutionary Ethics, Moral Revolutions, and the Nature of Power Politics*, 198–231. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

[80] Brechtefeld, *Mitteleuropa and German Politics: 1848 to the Present*. p.35-38

[81] Ediger, Volkan Ş., and John V. Bowlus. 2019. "Greasing the Wheels: The Berlin-Baghdad Railway and Ottoman Oil, 1888–1907." *Middle Eastern Studies* 56 (2): 193–206

[82] Heinrich Vierbücher, *Armenien 1915: Was die kaiserliche Regierung den deutschen Untertanen verschwieg. Die Abschlachtung eines Kulturvolkes durch die Türken* (Hamburg-Bergedorf: Fackelreiter-Verlag, 1930),

liberalism was a collection of various movements that aimed at the combination of liberal ideas and German nationalism; this included support for free trade, industrialisation, and, to a lesser degree, the Kulturkampf. Members of the urban professional class, the bourgeoisie, and liberal-minded Protestants were the main supporters of this movement[83].

According to Zimmerman[84] Naumann sought to bring together the liberals, nationalists, and even social democrats of Germany's divided political spectrum into one modernizing, progressive force to reform the Empire. His vision included reimagining nationalism, something to be disengaged from the romanticism and racial biases typical of other contemporary ideologies. His way of framing nationalism had the notable distinction of trying to include marginalized groups, especially Jews and women[85].

While not discussed in his 1915 book it is important to mention another intellectual close to Naumann since it would come later in the thesis, that being the Baltic German writer Paul Rohrbach. His pre-war research was mostly focused on Ukraine and the role that this large nation could play in a potential Mitteleuropa project. Meyer mentions that while Naumann talks about Mitteleuropa then Rohrbach is dedicated to Osteuropa. Already in 1897, Rohrbach was talking about a potential war with Russia and he stated in an article that "Without the Ukraine, Russia is just not Russia" and stated that a country of that size and with a vast array of resources would provide for Germany's industrial power and imperial ambitions. Together with Ernst Jackh they would write the Magazine Grossere Deutschland in which they argued already in 1913 that war with Russia was inevitable. Is important mention Rohrbach in the wider Mitteleuropa debate because it was the first one to discuss Ukraine, something that List, Frantz or Lagarde had not discussed[86].

In 1915, Friedrich Naumann published his book, simply titled Mitteleuropa. In it, he outlined his vision for Central Europe and the actions that the government should take regarding its relationship with Austro-Hungary, the construction of a Central-European customs union and trade agreements, as well as establishing more actors to join after the hostilities. The book would become an instant bestseller, selling over 200.000 copies and it would garner a lot of influence in Imperial Germany[87]. Naumann breaking away from the more peaceful traditions of Frantz and even de Lagarde, and instead argues that the Great War, might be the best opportunity to build Mitteleuropa, as it might lead to

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[83] Jan Palmowski, *Urban Liberalism in Imperial Germany*, 1999, p.38-99 https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198207504.001.0001.

[84] Zimmermann, Moshe. "A Road Not Taken - Friedrich Naumann's Attempt at a Modern German Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 4 (1982): 689–708. http://www.jstor.org/stable/260528.

[85] Ibid. p.690

[86] Meyer, Henry C. "Rohrbach and His Osteuropa." *The Russian Review* 2, no. 1 (1942): 60–69. https://doi.org/10.2307/125273.

[87] Florian Greiner, "Articulating Europe During the Great War: Friedrich Naumann's Idea of 'Mitteleuropa' and Its Public Reception in Germany, England and the USA," *Lingue Culture Mediazioni - Languages Cultures Mediation (LCM Journal)* 2, no. 2 (March 3, 2016),

Austria-Hungary increasing its dependence on Germany and the war hawks in Berlin would have the chance of attacking Russia.

Naumann expresses that in the same way, Bismarck was able to build the German Empire thanks to its wars with their neighbours then Mitteleuropa could be built through the conflict that by 1915 was still on course. He specifically says that Bismarck created the Empire "during and not after the war of 1870"[88], even calling war "creator of Mitteleuropean soul"[89] meaning that if Mitteleuropa ought to be created it should be done during the state of exceptionality granted by the hostility. This, together with the aggressive attitude of the Pan-German league that existed even before the war can be interpreted in two ways in the case of Nuamann, either he had adopted the militaristic views that existed in Germany during the years leading to the First World War or he did not want to alienate those Germans who were and since by 1915 the war was a reality there would be little he could do about it. Deviances from the more pacifist views of his party that existed during the latest years of the war, when most German liberals and socialists opposed the war show that it could be rather the first one[90]. With the perspectives of people such as List or Frantz Naumann, it was believed that the growth of the United States and Russia's growth would become in the long term a threat to European security and economic independence. It is due to the reasons mentioned above, whether because of the greater number of people or because of the less effort put in reaching resources, from minerals to wheat.

As Naumann portrays, the key mission of Mitteleuropa is to build a counterweight against the United States. Unified Europe, bound together with economic and political coordination, would be a required presence to prevent the American and Russian leadership from monopolizing the world without any rival. Naumann envisioned the formation of Mitteleuropa as an economic necessity as well as a geopolitical necessity in order to maintain the independence of the decision-making of European states. In his view, the coming "international economic struggle"[91] will be between Mitteleuropa and the United State. As the industrial and financial power of America continued to increase, Europe was threatened with falling into economic dependence. To prevent this, Mitteleuropa attempted to enhance intra-trade circuits, coordinate industrial policies, and develop a common political foundation that would be capable of withstanding external pressures. The aim was to create a free European community strong enough to compete on an equal footing with emerging superpowers.

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[88] Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* . p.1
[89] Ibid p.4
[90] Zimmermann, Moshe. "A Road Not Taken - Friedrich Naumann's Attempt at a Modern German Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 4 (1982): 689–708.
[91] Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* p.318

Naumann's Mitteleuropa prescribed an instant customs and economic union between Germany and Austria-Hungary. As opposed to precedents such as Frantz or Lagarde, Naumann presented firm economic proposals leaning towards Friedrich List's ideas. He insisted on the fact that tariff reductions will not be sufficient; full unification would also require a harmonised budget, unification of rail transport, and production apparatuses, as well as common monetary policy referring to the policies of Minister von Bruck. Competition concerns aside, Hungary would profit from belonging to grain trade and regional pacts. However, he also noted that Hungarian institutions and political environment would provide issues against the Union[92]. Naumann called the Zollverein precedent but warned that trade agreements alone would not create unity—there had to be a government. Though pragmatically phrased, the book did ignore national sovereignty and assumed acceptance of a German-led bloc[93].

Then there is the issue regarding those territories that fall outside the scope of the German-Austrian union, which at that time mostly referred to the countries that Germany intended to either annex or put under its influence in the case of winning the war. In that regard, Naumann is not as specific or in detail as he is with the issue of the union with Austria-Hungary but he nevertheless establishes some points. The main one being that the regions of Poland, the Baltics and Ukraine should serve as an area of economic expansion of this project.

Overall this paragraph of the book represents to the best of extents the core of the ideas of Mitteleuropa expressed by Naumann. For him this Mitteleuropa ought to be a defensive alliance based on economic unity and German guidance. “The German economic creed must become in future more and more the characteristic of Mitteleuropa. The military defensive alliance will thus grow into a genuine partnership. A united economic people will develop, cutting across all constitutional boundaries”[94].

For Naumann, military alliance and economic partnerships were the things that had united Germany in the first place and he hoped these factors were also able to unite Mitteleuropa. However, later events during the war especially as the conflict was coming to an end would prove the theories of Naumann inaccurate and as the provider of a cleaner face to German imperialism. Similarly to Frantz, Naumann calls for the restoration of Poland “the establishment of Poland will be the strongest impulse towards the creation of Mitteleuropa”[95], albeit that being done in agreement with the other Central Powers in what he calls “understandings between the sovereigns”, likely referring to the fact that both Austria and Germany . While not specific on the details of his insistence on economic

[92] Ibid p. 219
[93] Ibid p. 49
[94] Ibid p.123
[95] Ibid p.49

dominance he establishes the objective that these regions serve the needs of the German industries for resources as well as the supply of grain and food. For instance, regarding Ukraine, or more specifically the region of Galicia, Naumann explains the necessity of using this eastern frontier as a grainer that can provide food to this Mitteleuropa union[96]. However, while Naumann dedicated a significant part of the book to talk about the issue of the Polish statehood he does not talk about that of Ukraine. Which could be argued would later cause issues regarding the German operations in Ukraine and their objectives regarding food supplies It could be interpreted that Naumann also intended for this newly independent Poland to be a mere German puppet, he does . That is a country with its own institutions but connected to the German economy in a way that limits its own economic capabilities. It must be also cleared that in his vision of Mitteleuropa, the "equal partners" of the association would be Germany and Austria-Hungary and that all the other actors, Romania, Bulgaria, Balkan countries, Poland, Lithuania and even Belgium and the Netherlands were expected to act as second class members of this union[97]. The issue of economic dominance is very present throughout the book. That is, those territories that are not strictly part of the economic union between Germany and Austria ought to have their own economies become dependent on those of Germany.

One of the key elements that the book discusses is that of collaboration with the non-German peoples of Central Europe. Naumann draws a difference between the peoples of Eastern Europe, namely Poles, Czechs, Ukrainians and Baltics, with the Russians. He argues that Germany can provide a different kind of rule over this region, opposing the oppressive and autocratic rule of the Russian Empire. To do that, Germany should make the effort to empower these Slavic groups. As he expresses, "We must not fail to remember that our non-German partners too have a life's blood, and want to realise for what they are prepared to die. In exalting our nationality, we ought at the same time to exalt theirs"[98] meaning that in both the Austro-Hungarian Empire and those territories that Germany occupied, it was important to include those groups in public and political life. The tone that Naumann uses in this section is intended to be conciliatory and friendly. He espouses a very diplomatic tone while using many historical examples to justify his position. To avoid the Russian influence Naumann expressed that this required Germany to portray itself as a force of progress ready to help these groups improve their lives as opposed to the Russians. When it comes to the Czechs, who at the time were under Habsburg and not Russian dominance, Naumann also stresses that it is of relevance to combat Pan-Slavism since, according to them, it is an ideology fabricated and guided for the Russian interests[99]. There is, however, a certain

[96] Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* p.108
[97] Ibid p.3
[98] Ibid p.11
[99] Ibid p.62

naivety in some of the declarations of Naumann in this regard. For instance, he insists in the book that "only a few believe in a newly independent Poland"[100], instead arguing that a semi-independent Poland in his federal Mitteleuropa would be ideal, which as events later in the War would prove to be inaccurate[101]. This somewhat patronising view of Poles and other non-German groups does follow the lines of Frantz, although removed from the more suspicious claims that Frantz made. Naumann's inaccuracies might be in part, because as he points out this information has gotten to him after speaking with Polish representatives in the Reichstag, who would not realistically reveal support for an independent Poland amidst fearing reprisals[102].

Naumann also mentions, regarding the minority groups, that in his vision of Mitteleuropa, German language and culture should be as he puts it in the "nucleus" that "voluntarily" uses the German language as its lingua franca, arguing its already existing importance. However, he also specifies that there should be a "display toleration and flexibility regarding all the neighbouring languages that are associated with it"[103]. While this is certainly a softer approach than his predecessors it is still implied to be done in a context of force and coercion.

Naumann also breaks from Frantz in his approach to the Jewish population of Central Europe, saying that they should not be left out of the Mitteleuropa project. For him, their presence in "great newspapers, on economic life and politics"[104] was something that Germany should take advantage of. As Naumann puts it the presence of Jews among the Hungarian intellectual elites "safeguard the Hungarian kingdom from religious parties"[105]. This was overall, part of grander war strategies. During the First World War, liberal elements of the German leadership had attempted to soften the perception of antisemitism as a way to co-opt Jewish support for the war effort, more specifically in the conflict against Russia. The Tsars had become hugely unpopular among Jewish communities after decades of state-sanctioned pogroms and discrimination. There was a genuine thought that Germany could garner the support of Jews in the occupied territories if they were able to use their hatred towards the Russians. In fact many Zionist associations and Jewish German groups followed this narrative, blaming Russia for the war and joining. Such was the case of the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith who made a public call to arms in

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[100] Ibid . p107
[101] Jesse Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I* (Harvard University Press, 2015).
[102] Wojciech Mojski, "Between Independence and Political Subordination. A Brief Outline of the Constitutional History of the Judiciary in Poland in the Years 1918–2018," *Przegląd Prawa Konstytucyjnego* 46, no. 6 (December 31, 2018): 167–75,
[103] Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* p. 108
[104] Ibid p. 76
[105] Ibid p.74

the liberal newspaper, the Frankfurter Zeitung[106]. Unlike de Lagarde or Frantz, Naumann broke the antisemitism trend that had existed in the circles of Mitteleuropa up until that point.

[106] Timothy L. Grady, *A Deadly Legacy: German Jews and the Great War* (Yale University Press, 2017). p.25

CHAPTER 2
Mitteleuropa and The Military Occupation Of Central Europe

In 1914, the First World War erupted. Although initially Russian forces conquered Galicia and Austrian Poland, German generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff achieved a decisive victory at the Battle of Tannenberg, pushing the Russians back and starting advances into Russian Poland[107]. In matter of propaganda Russia's domestic character served to consolidate support for the German war effort both internally and externally. As an autocratic, repressive regime infamous for its persecution of minorities, including Jews, Protestants, and political dissidents such as constitutionalists and socialists, Russia was an easy target for German propaganda. The Tsarist Empire's long history of territorial expansion and its sponsorship of Pan-Slavic movements also fueled German apprehensions, as noted by writers like Paul de Lagarde. Russian ambitions were perceived by many as a direct threat not only to Eastern Europe but to Central Europe's stability itself[108].

By 1915, a sizable territorial gain was achieved by Germany. This was the time when the German army occupied substantial parts of the Baltic States and Congress Poland, establishing military administrations to govern these newly acquired regions. The takeover of these territories was both a practical method of weakening Russia as well as an opportunity to begin realising ancient Mitteleuropa ambitions. It was here, too, that German authorities also began experimenting with various models of domination of these lands. The newly occupied territories were a laboratory for rival visions of empire: some for direct annexation and Germanisation, others for looser federative structures along the lines of Mitteleuropa ambitions[109].

This chapter will therefore analyse the occupation policies in Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine during the First World War. It will review occupation reports, diplomatic memoranda, journal articles, and biographies of the period to calculate the extent to which German ambitions were realised, or ultimately frustrated, by the demands of war and resistance in the East.

ANNEXATIONIST OCCUPATION POLICIES In the Ober Ost and Poland

With the retreat of the Russians from their western borders in 1915, enormous tracts of land fell into German control, much of contemporary Lithuania and Latvia, specifically the regions of Vilnius and Curland. These would eventually form the Ober Ost—a German

[107] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, trans. Hajo Holborn and James Joll (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967),
[108] Timothy L. Grady, *A Deadly Legacy: German Jews and the Great War* (Yale University Press, 2017). p.25
[109] Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*,

military occupation government governed directly by Erich Ludendorff. The Ober Ost was governed without civilian supervision, forming a centralised regime of political, social, and economic control. It was an early prototype of postwar annexationist objectives in Germany, at first intended as a future border area of Prussia to be absorbed into the Reich. The regions of Lithuania and Curland had a long history of being ruled by culturally exclusive minorities. In Lithuania, this was a Polish-speaking Catholic nobility, while in Curland, political power was still held by the Protestant Baltic German aristocracy[110]. Both communities had been strongly impacted by late 19th-century Russification policies, which excluded non-Russian elites, established the Russian language in governance and schools, and favoured the settlement of ethnic Russians. These earlier tensions had created a multi-layered social dynamic when German soldiers entered[111]. Lithuanians and Latvians held suspicions towards Germans but also saw positive advances against Russification. German anticipation of easy continuity of administration with the presence of these elites often happened at the expense of forming local nationalist sentiments[112].

The condition in Poland was very different. The region around Warsaw, was placed under the Government-General of Warsaw an independent administration with both military and civilian government different from that of the Baltic and outside the direct hands of Ludendorff. Unlike Ober Ost, it allowed greater political manoeuvres and contact with Polish elites. However, internal German debates over Polish statehood remained unresolved. Firstly, the attitude of the German leadership towards Poles could be considered a mixture of colonial paternalism and active mistrust, so collaborations with Political groups in the occupied territories remained scarce. At the same time, Individuals such as General Max Hoffmann opposed Polish independence less ideologically, but because a break with Russia, which was irreconcilable, was yet considered diplomatically premature. For others within the German command, up to the Russian collapse in late 1917, Polish independence was an instrument of negotiation and not a serious consideration in politics[113].

Something that can be noted in the annexationist sources is that their declarations over what role these zones should play in the future of German imperial ambitions were inconsistent, and in many cases, the declarations of officials varied vastly depending on their rank, the date of the declaration and especially the confidentiality.

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[110] Ijabs, Ivars. “Another Baltic Postcolonialism: Young Latvians, Baltic Germans, and the Emergence of Latvian National Movement.” Nationalities Papers 42, no. 1 (2014): 88–107. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.823391.

[111] Perkins, John, and Felix Patrikeeff. 2001. “National Identity Formation in the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire: The Skerst Family in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.” *National Identities* 3 (1): 37–49.

[112] Dina Gusejnova, “Loyalty and Allegiance in Baltic German Political Thought after the First World War,” *The Historical Journal*, 2025, 1–23

[113] Jesse Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

These contradictions can be perfectly seen in the case of Poland. In November 1916 the German-Austro-Hungarian forces of occupation of Poland issued a manifesto declaring the creation of the Kingdom of Poland. While this did not end the administration of the German military and civilian government of the Government-General of Warsaw it did serve to show the supposed intentions of the Central Powers, at least towards the world, not so much internally. The manifesto declared the creation of the Kingdom of Poland, using phrases like "an independent State with a hereditary Monarchy and a Constitution" insists on the restoration, as an “independent” entity, therefore not as part of Germany, and the mention of “Russian power” seems to invoke a situation of liberation rather than conquest. The appeal to "a free and happy State rejoicing in its national life" seems to bring more from Naumann rather than de Lagarde or the Pan-German League. Even the military clause, recognising "the glorious traditions of the Polish Army", is in symbolic deference to Polish national identity, even as it maintains practical control through "mutual agreement" over command and organisation. Most notably, the declaration eschews defining "precise frontiers," reflecting both geopolitical flexibility as well as continued prioritisation of German and Austro-Hungarian strategic interests[114]. Overall, this declaration would give the impression that Germany and Austria had genuine intentions of creating a Polish state, albeit under a German control system, similar to the ideas espoused by Fritz and Naumann. However, later declarations would create doubt about the honest intentions of the Central Powers. A good example of this is the reports written by American officer and observer Frederic C. Walcott, who in 1917, a few months after the declaration, met with a top civil servant in Warsaw, Wolfgang von Kreis. In it, Walcott asked the German about their intentions regarding Poland and his answer was, "This country is meant for Germany", directly implying a form of annexation and citing its richness as a reason for the acquisition and finishing saying "Poland will appear automatically as a German province." meaning that while Poland might not be automatically annexed the long term objective is to become part of Germany[115].

When it comes to the regions of the Ober Ost, the situation was less clear. The region had become, by 1917, a German colony in all but name; however, he also stated that the official status of the region should be a question of study. In his memoirs, Lündendorff said that the idea was for these regions to become Duchies adherent to the German Empire, like other elements such as Bavaria. However, in February 1918, the Germans created the Kingdom of Lithuania with Prince Wilhelm von Urach as King Mindaugas II. The fact is that this was done in 1918, when the situation on the Eastern and home front had drastically changed means that this cannot be considered as the main objective in 1916. Besides, even

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[114] Germany and Austria-Hungary, *Proclamation of the Kingdom of Poland*, November 5, 1916

[115] Frederick C. Walcott on German Military Rule in Poland, September 1917 - Source Records of the Great War, Vol. IV, ed. Charles F. Horne, National Alumni 1923 p.429

with a declared Kingdom, these territories lacked any tangible independence. On top of this, after Brest-Litovsk, the German leadership decided to unite the Latvian and Estonian lands in the United Baltic Duchy. This state, while short-lived lived also resembled greatly the ideas of de Lagarde, as it was created in September 1918 by German Baltic nobility with no involvement of local Latvian or Estonian representatives, and therefore would also greatly fit in the ideas of de Lagarde[116].

Under German rule in Poland and Ober Ost in the First World War, the fortunes of minority groups varied by region and ethnicity. In Poland, they attempted to gain local support by loosening some Russian-imposed cultural restrictions on Polish culture. While many Polish intellectuals appreciated cultural liberalisation at first, economic hardship soon dissolved goodwill[117]. Things were worse in Ober Ost under firm military occupation. Natives were excluded from an administration that was entirely taken over by personnel from the Reichswehr. German authorities made some effort to approach the local populations by permitting limited cultural expression, e.g., the publication of newspapers, but such efforts lacked credibility. Lithuanians, for example, were provided with a German-operated newspaper that could not gain local credibility[118].

The war memoirs illustrate a calculated approach to ethnic groups. Hindenburg was conscious of the challenge posed by the region's ethnic diversity as well as by mistrust and "ingratitude" of the Poles, while Ludendorff concentrated on the use of Lithuanians, stating that at Lithuanians should be "won over by all means possible"[119] to secure German interests and antagonising Polish nationalism who had claims to Lithuanian territory[120]. Administrative documents like Das Land Ober Ost show an effort to impose German legal systems and control the population through registration and surveillance, and to promote German prestige through media and legal reforms[121].

One of the darkest episodes of the German occupation was the use of slavery. In 1916 and 1917, Germany's occupation authorities in the Ober Ost and Poland were shown to be carrying out mass deportations of what they called "able-bodied working men" to certain specific locations in both the occupying territories and Germany to be put in forced labour positions. In the Ober Ost, this was done through the forced conscription of labourers to work in agriculture and the extraction of natural resources. Meanwhile, despite his seemingly pro-Polish culture position, von Beseler signed in 1917 a decree that would force

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[116] Kasekamp, Andres. "Survival against the Odds: The Baltic States at 100." *Slavic Review* 78, no. 3 (2019): 640–47.
[117] Kauffman, Jesse. 2013. "Warsaw University under German Occupation: State Building and Nation *Bildung* in Poland during the Great War." *First World War Studies* 4 (1): 65–79. doi:10.1080/19475020.2012.761388.
[118] Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). p118
[119] Ludendorff, Erich, Meine Kriegserinnerungen, 1914-1918 (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1919). p.472
[120] Ibid
[121] Presseabteilung Ober Ost, *Das Land Ober Ost: deutsche Arbeit in den Verwaltungsgebieten Kurland, Litauen und Bialystok-Grodno* (Berlin: Selbstverlag Presseabteilung Ober Ost, 1917), p.108

Polish men into forced labour in Germany, due to the shortage in the workforce. This was explained in a report written by American officer and observer Frederic C. Walcott, who, in 1917, wrote a few months after the declaration. Firstly, Walcott asked von Beseler about this declaration, just for him to be dismissive and insist on speaking with his deputy, Wolfgang von Kreis. In that meeting, Walcott asked von Kreis about the directives of forced labour, and von Kreis admitted that this policy was being carried out [122]. While these leaders did not directly employ any anti-Polish language the simple policy of forced labour and German nationalism show that the state of the Polish population would always be of that of servitude.

Nevertheless, Lundendorff was still adamant of the possibility of establishing more German settlements however this became impossible. Because of the hostilities, the direct possibility of German settlement was rarely addressed or discussed by policymakers. After the war, Ludendorff stressed in his autobiography that he had always opposed the concept of Germanisation, stating in his memoirs that “The word "Germanise" has always been abhorrent to me” [123] while also appearing in favour of bringing settlers, "The German settlement, which we hoped would take place on a great scale"[124], which could be interpreted as being in favour of increasing the presence of German settlers without expulsion of locals. At the same time, occupation reports show that German legal codes, especially the civil law or "bürgerlichen Rechts", were being introduced in these territories[125], and while this does not imply a settlement policy, it was a way in which historically German settlements were first established[126].

There were also some stark indications that this was the government's policy. In his conversation with Wolfgang von Kries, Walcott explains that the program of forced labour that the Germans had been carrying out in Poland and the Ober Ost had much darker objectives. As stated before, thousands of “able-bodied men” had been deported for forced labour tasks. In that same conversation, however, von Kreis states that “It leaves it open for the inflow of German working people as fast as we can spare them. They will occupy it and work on it." and then stating that this new situation Poland would “appear automatically like a German province”. [127] These declarations, made under confidentiality by one of the highest ranking civil servants of occupied Poland gives the impression while the German leadership might express desires for an Independent Poland or Lithuania their true objectives follow

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[122] Frederick C. Walcott on German Military Rule in Poland, September 1917 - Source Records of the Great War, Vol. IV, ed. Charles F. Horne, National Alumni 1923 p.429

[123] Ludendorff p.472

[124] Ludendorff p.521

[125] Das Land der Ober Ost p.108

[126] Szende, Katalin. 2019. “ *Iure Theutonico*? German Settlers and Legal Frameworks for Immigration to Hungary in an East-Central European Perspective.” *Journal of Medieval History* 45 (3): 360–79.

[127] Frederick C. Walcott on German Military Rule in Poland, September 1917 - Source Records of the Great War, Vol. IV, ed. Charles F. Horne, National Alumni 1923 p.429

more the lines of Paul de Lagarde and the Pan-German League, and in the future would serve for plans like Lebensraum and Generalplan Ost[128].

The Baltic Germans played a major role in the administration and occupation of territories in the Ober Ost, such as Curland, and would play an even bigger role in the later occupations of Latvia and Estonia, where they were even more prominent as an elite.

Then there is the way the German authorities established a system of economic exploitation in the Ober Ost region. When it comes to economic matters, it can be said that the policies shown in Poland and the Ober Ost did signify a strong sense of colonial exploitation. As Ludendorff points out, they greatly secured the frontier with Russia to "exploit the whole of the country economically, which was urgently necessary"[129] The fact that he uses the word "exploit" signals a great sense of imperial ambition and not so much liberating objectives as other quotes would suggest. The sources report state that "What the homeland willingly gave, had to be taken from the occupied territories as well,"[130] indicating a policy of extracting resources regardless of local considerations. Considerations for the land, its population, or the resumption of local trade and industry initially held no decisive importance[131]. As time went by, however, forced labour also became a key aspect of the German economic exploitative operations in the region.

Another important actor in this regard was the expansion of German companies in the area. The newly occupied zones were seen as an opportunity for many German entrepreneurs, as a zone ready for resource exploitation and the opportunities of contracts with the Army. For instance, the Ober Ost Report mentions the expansion of German metal business operations in the area of Kovno and textile factories in Bialystok[132]. This signals the collaboration of the German business class in the occupation project of Lundendorff at least during the early years of the war. Both Kauffmann and Liulevicius agree that despite the fact that these were two separate administrations, their economic actions and modus operandi were identical, based on direct German control, resource extraction and forced labour. They also coincide that these activities had a devastating impact in the economic life of the region[133].

In the end, despite the tight control that Germany had over this region, it failed to materialise into a strictly German zone. As it has been seen before, this was the policy, but

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[128] Xingyu Yang, "The Role of Nationalism and Ethnic Conflicts Before and During WWI: The Case of Pan-Slavism, Pan-Germanism and French Revanchism," *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media* 46, no. 1 (April 18, 2024): 181–89,
[129] Ludendorff p.564
[130] Das Land der Ober Ost .356
[131] Ibid p.336
[132] Ibid p.330
[133] Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

the Ober Ost was not able to deliver the resources, nor was it able to become a zone in which Germanisation would be subtable.

In his research, Liulevicius puts the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik threat as the key aspect which led to the collapse of the Ober Ost region of what until then had been a "military utopia"[134]. However, some of the most precise accounts come from Alfred Vagt. He was a German officer stationed in the Ober Ost during the War. After the conflict he became a historian, collaborated greatly with American academia and during the rise of the Nazis he fled to the United Kingdom, making most of his career in Britain and the United States. His accounts give a more nuanced perspective, showing that even by 1917, the internal situation had become overly unstable. The reason why Vagt's accounts are important is that they allow us to see the reasons were of the ultimate failure of this annexationist project. His writing is not political like that of Lundendorff or Hindenburg and is dedicated to narrating the specific affairs of life in the Ober Ost as a German soldier. According to Vagt, the German occupation force was both authoritarian and, at the same time, grossly overextended. For instance, he insists that there were cases where "a company of infantry, hardly more than 100 men strong, at times governed a territory as large as Rhode Island"[135] this, together with the fact that soldiers lacked any legal knowledge, made local and everyday administrations a source of constant conflict[136].

On top of this, cultural barriers with the locals made administration impossible, since in most cases, none of these companies had anyone who spoke Russian or any other local language, for that matter. He notes in his writings that German authorities became over reliant on local leaders such as priests in a population that, as time went by, became growingly hostile to the occupiers[137].

Even though Ludendorff explains that the failure of the Ober Ost was due to a lack of political support from Berlin,[138] he also notes that as time progressed, the agitation in the region became an even bigger issue. This agitation came mostly from two sides, Lithuanians who were concerned about being included in a future Poland and and Poles who wished the Ober Ost to be included in the new Kingdom of Poland[139]. Lundendorff's account certifies that as time progressed, the situation in the region had become unsustainable. However, Vagt's account gives a more grounded reason for why it failed as opposed to o lack of support from Berlin or political radicalism from the Lithuanians.

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[134] Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front:* p.214
[135] Vagts, Alfred. "A Memoir of Military Occupation." *Military Affairs* 7, no. 1 (1943): 16–24. p.18
[136] Vagts, Alfred. "Military Command and Military Government." *Political Science Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (1944): 248–63.
[137] Vagts, Alfred. "A Memoir of Military Occupation." p
[138] Ludendorff p.533
[139] Ibid

One of the reasons for this was that despite the brutality of the military occupation Lithuanian political activists had not ceased their activities. Throughout the war they held a series of conferences in neutral countries in which declarations would be published. The aim of these conferences was to establish the status of a post-war Lithuania. In April 1916 the Lithuanian delegates in the Hague declared that while Lithuania would not return to Russian yoke it should never "exchange one yoke for another", as noted by German civil servant Matthias Erzberger. These declarations would find their way into the Lithuanian population and increase the dissatisfaction towards the German occupation forces. He also notes that religion was one of the main reasons for political tensions, as Lithuania being a majority Catholic land did not wish to be controlled by Protestant Prussia[140]. Considering the aforementioned lack of authority because of the overextention of the German army, Catholic priests became one of the sole sources of local authority making the issue of religion an even more relevant one.[141].

FEDERALIST OCCUPATION POLICIES

By mid-1917, because of growing instability in the occupied territories, the threat of the Russian Revolution, as well as a lack of Parliamentary support in the Reichstag, the German policy towards the occupied territories changed, in favour of a federalist position regarding Mitteleuropa, leaving aside potential annexations. Instead the new government named Richard von Kühlmann as Foreign Secretary. A close friend to Friedrich Naumann, with whom he maintained correspondence, his task would be to adapt the occupied territories, from the pre-1917 annexationalist hopes of the military into a more pragmatic policy of state building[142]. Kühlmann's policy was one of diplomatic realism that was in short supply among the military. He consistently opposed pure annexation, instead supporting economic and political dependence through treaties and a cooperative strategy. His policy was exemplified by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which was negotiated mainly under Kühlmann's leadership. It brought German domination over the former Russian space not in formal annexation but through the encouragement of new satellite states in Finland, Ukraine, and the Baltic, each organised to satisfy German economic and military requirements[143].

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[140] Erzberger, Matthias. *Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg*. Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1920. p.185
[141] Safronovas, Vasilijus. 2022. "The Great War Experiences of Lithuanians: An Overview." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 53 (2): 291–309.
[142] Peter Weber, "The Praxis of Civil Society: Associational Life, The Politics Of Civility, And Public Affairs In The Weimar Republic" (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 2014).
[143]Žaklina Spalević and Dušan Jerotijević, "The Peace of Brest-Litovsk: Causes, Agreement, and Consequences," *Zbornik Radova Filozofskog Fakulteta U Pristini* 53, no. 2 (January 1, 2023): 209–27, https://doi.org/10.5937/zrffp53-43402.

With a new diplomatic leadership a new approach was brought forward to the occupied territories regarding their current and future status. One of the biggest changes was that of the future status of Lithuania. As stated before, Lundendorff and the military had expected for the Ober Ost to eventually become part of Germany, more specifically to be annexed directly by the Kingdom of Prussia. In his memoirs, diplomat and Zentrum politician Matthias Erzberger notes that this position had caused a lot of uproar among the Lithuanian population[144]. It has already been established before by Vagt and also Ludendorff himself that the situation in the Ober Ost as time went on was becoming more unstable. Erzberger explains that this was because there was a general opposition by the Lithuanian population to being annexed by Prussia, related to a fear of Catholic Lithuanians becoming second class citizens in a new Protestant Kingdom. This had given way to a growth in republican sentiment among the Lithuanian population, which in turn increased instability[145]. Erzberger and Chancellor Hertling proceed to negotiate with the leadership of the National Council of Lithuania, exiled in Switzerland, the establishment of an independent kingdom that in no way would be united to the Kingdom of Prussia. Already since Summer 1917 the National Council of Lithuania had been formed by exiled leaders and demanded the creation of an independent Lithuania and the establishment of a civilian rule, Erzberger concurred. One of the key conditions of the Lithuanians was that there could not be any personal union and they demanded a Lithuanian King, that would solely be King of Lithuania and also of Catholic faith. The selected person would be Kar Wilhelm Duke of Urach, a Catholic nobleman who took the name of Mindaugas II. Despite the fact that Lithuania would declare its independence as a Kingdom in December 1917 it would not be recognised by Germany until March 1918. According to Erzberger this was because of a blocking from the military[146].

The new German policy would also attempt to change its relationship with Poland and the Poles. The establishment of the Regency Council in September 1917 was a turning point of German policy towards Poland. Established by Germany and Austria-Hungary jointly, it was intended as an interim government, formed by Cardinal Aleksander Kakowski, archbishop of Warsaw, Mayor of Warsaw Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski; and former Duma MP Józef Ostrowski, for an eventual Polish monarchy. By 1917, with mounting military pressures and the need to hold the Eastern Front, German leaders attempted to enlist the support of the Regency Council to marshal Polish manpower and legitimize existing German control behind a veneer of autonomy. This plan, however, revealed deep rifts with Austria-Hungary that hoped for the integration of Poland into their empire as oppose to a Poland in a German sphere of influence, something that both Ludendorff and Kuhlman aspired to. This

[144] Erzberger, *Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg* p.187
[145] Ibid p.195
[146] Erzberger, *Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg* p.195

divergence resulted in diplomatic strains, which in turn lead to further divisions between the Polish soldiers fighting for the Central Powers[147]. Erzberger notes that the fact that Germany did not wish to compromise with Austria Hungary and that it returned to ignoring the issue instead of addressing it explains the failures of the occupation policy[148].

Some of the most symbolic of these events was the arrest of Józef Piłsudski. As Head of Polish Legions, a unit fighting for the Central Powers, Piłsudski refused to pledge allegiance to the German Kaiser in July 1917 on grounds that true Polish independence could never be conceived under foreign domination. His subsequent arrest and detention in Magdeburg exposed the doublethink of German policy: while officially asserting the existence of a Polish state, Berlin was simultaneously stifling its most widely known and most prominent national figure. It not only called German credibility into question with the Poles but also weakened the Regency Council itself, which was nearly across the board considered illegitimate and functioning for the most part as a puppet government[149]. As a result of this the Polish Legions still fighting in the front became increasingly relentless and some under Jozef Heller would join the Polish Corp, a French endorsed independent army that would battle the Austrians and Germans, further increasing the instability in the region and making the establishment of a stable puppet regime in Poland a further impossibility[150].

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Occupation of Ukraine

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 is a realistic realisation of Friedrich Naumann's dream of Mitteleuropa, a German-controlled Central and Eastern Europe bound together not by direct annexation, but by a network of economic dependence and political subjection. Naumann had argued in his 1915 book Mitteleuropa for a German leadership confederation that would set the economic fate of Germany through access to raw materials, agricultural production, and markets for export in the East. Above all, this predominance was not to be achieved on overt colonial mastery, however, but on collaborative terms, client states, and customs unions connecting these regions structurally with Germany. Essentially, Brest-Litovsk was the kind of federated but hierarchical arrangement which Naumann had theorised, reserving the leadership function in shaping post-Tsarist Eastern Europe's political and economic order for Germany. Out of all of the territories taken in Brest-Litovsk the most important one for the long term survival of the war effort was Ukraine due to the importance of grain supplies.

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147 Jesse Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I*
148 Erzberger Elbenisse im Weltkrieg p.
149 Jesse Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I*
150 Ibid p.207

For Mitteleuropa theorists, especially Paul Rohrbach, a Baltic German and close friend of Friedrich Naumann, Ukraine played a strategic role in the formation of a German-led Eastern economic bloc. Historically, Ukraine had been since the 18th century part of the Russian Empire and had been Russified, and this caused resentment among its distinct Ukrainian-speaking population[151]. The one region where Ukrainian culture had been maintained was Austrian-ruled Galicia, and this created Austrian interest in Ukrainian nationalism as a tool against Russia[152]..

With the Russian Revolution of 1917, Ukraine declared limited autonomy in its Central Rada. Initially, the Rada envisioned autonomy within a Russian Republic, stating: "Let Ukraine be free without separating from all of Russia."[153] But after the Bolshevik takeover, and in response to growing centralisation and Soviet aggression, the Rada altered. The Third Universal announced a people's republic in Russia, and the Fourth Universal in January 1918 proclaimed total Ukrainian independence: "a Free, Sovereign State of the Ukrainian People."[154] Ukraine immediately sought help from the Central Powers, for Soviet troops took Kyiv not long afterwards. Under these circumstances, the Ukrainian government signed a peace deal with the Central Powers ers the 9th of February 1918, different from that of the Soviets, at Brest-Litovsk, which at the time became known as the Bread-Peace, as it was called by Austrian Foreign Minister Ottokar, Count of Czernin[155]. As it can be noted from Kuhlmann's correspondence during this period with both Chancellor Herltling and in recorded conversations with the Government and the military that the guarantee of food and resources from Ukraine had become vital for the survival of the German war effort, for which the occupation and statebuilding in Ukraine needed to be successful[156].

Germany recognised Ukraine's independence and all economic agreements were done independently from the Treaty. This does not mean that Germany would not act in an imperial way, as it would later be seen, but rather that this attitude was not codified in the treaty. In exchange for economic aid through the Foreign Trade Bank of Kyiv, in the hands of the Ukrainian Dobri Abram and the Reichsbank, the Ukrainian Republic would provivide

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[151] Paul Robert Magocsi,. *The Roots of Ukrainian Nationalism: Galicia as Ukraine's Piedmont*. University of Toronto Press, 2002.
[152] John Breuilly and Daphne Halikiopoulou, "N&Amp;N Themed Section: Reflections on Nationalism and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Introduction," *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 1 (September 26, 2022): 25–29, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12874.
[153] First Universal, Ukrainian Rada 10th June 1917
[154] Fourth Universal, Ukrainian Rada January 1918
[155] Addams, Jane. "I. At The Beginning of The Great War" In *Peace and Bread in Time of War*, 1-25. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1945.
[156] Markus Bussmann and Winfried Baumgart, eds., *Richard von Kühlmann: Memoiren und politische Korrespondenz 1904–1918*, Deutsche Geschichtsquellen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, vol. 81 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2024), p.695-710

Germany with 1 million tons of grain, 400 million eggs and 50,000 tons of cattle from Ukraine, as well as other agricultural products by July 31, 1918[157].

Just a couple of weeks after the signing of the Treaty between the Central Powers and Ukraine, the German and Austrian armies launched Operation Faustschlag, to advance as much as possible against the Bolsheviks in both the Baltic and in Ukraine. In two weeks, the German army had managed to advance over 240 km into Russian territory. By the 3rd of March, German and Ukrainian troops had taken Kyiv, and a month later, they had reached as far as Donetsk and Kharkiv. These defeats prompted Lenin and the Bolsheviks to accept their peace at Brest-Litovsk. With it, Germany had won the war in the East, but it was yet to be seen if they were able to win the peace in Ukraine, a territory whose success by that point had become an imperative[158]. The new independent state had become a hotspot of nationalism, wishing now to get rid of the newly established German occupation, while avoiding becoming just another colonial project. At the same time, the Bolsheviks were still expanding their influence and presence in the newly independent regions, hoping in the long term to force the Germans to withdraw[159].

Just two months after the successful taking of Kyiv, the Ukrainian republican government was overthrown in a coup organised by military officer Pavlo Skoropadskyi and the landowners of Ukraine with the support of the German military[160]. German and Austrian authorities welcomed the coup as they thought it could bring stability. Nevertheless, it can be noted through diplomatic correspondence of the time that German authorities did not orchestrate the coup and that while they supported the Hetman's movement they hoped to be as little involved as possible, which eventually happened anyway, as Consul General Thiel explained in a contemporary letter "should have gotten under way without our assistance"[161]. As a result, many Ukrainian peasants started to see the German occupiers in a much more negative light.

In the end, the Bread Peace that Kuhlmann and the General in the German government had hoped for failed. Despite taking over most of the Ukrainian territory and despite taking over thousands of acres of crop lands, not much of that food was able to reach Germany, and by the end of June 1918, it was becoming clear that this ambitious project had ended up floundering. This can be seen in the evolution of the coverage of the Bread peace from early 1918 to late June 1918. When the Peace Treaty was signed with the People's

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[157] Malynovsky, Boris, and Aleksandr Trygub. "Stocks of Commercial Bread in Ukraine in the Spring of 1918 in the Assessment of the Representatives of Germany and Austria-Hungary.".Muzeul de Istorie „Paul Păltănea" Galați, 2019.
[158] Fischer p.534
[159] Ibid
[160] Taras Hunczak and John T. Von der Heide, *The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).
[161] Meyer, Henry Cord. "Germans in the Ukraine, 1918. Excerpts from Unpublished Letters." *The American Slavic and East European Review* 9, no. 2 (1950): 105–115.

Republic of Ukraine, on the 9th of February 1918, it generated a sense of optimism among Germans, as a way of avoiding the famine. This was particularly true of liberal outlets that had been supporting the conflict while conservative ones showed a cautious optimism[162].

However, by June 1918, it was becoming apparent in the German public sphere that the Brotfrieden that the Germans had signed in Ukraine, which was meant to provide Germany with food and resources, was a failure. The food, most specifically grain that was meant to be extracted from Ukraine and sent to Germany, was proving to be insufficient, and the risk of famine in Germany was becoming higher. There was a phrase that was repeated several times by different German newspapers, such as the Süddeutsche Zeitung in Stuttgart on the last days of June 1918, which was "The Bread-Peace has brought us neither bread nor peace"[163] While during these dates, these articles tended to blame Austria saying that "Austria is most generously about the deterioration of Ukrainian bread grain"[164], something which was also said by Ludendorff and Hindenburg in their respective memoirs[165]. However, further primary data shows that this picture is greatly inaccurate.

Diplomatic documents of the time show that even at the time, German authorities were aware that they had misjudged the situation in Ukraine severely and that their policies, both regarding their collaboration with Ukrainian forces and the actions of the German army, were to blame for the instability in the region.

There were a variety of reasons for this instability. Among these was the fact that the Ukrainians themselves lacked a common political leadership and instead had to endure constant strife between different groups and factions. After the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917, Ukraine became divided into two governments, one in Kyiv under the Rada and another in Kharkiv supporting the Bolsheviks and after the Hatman's coup in April 1918 the new government would have to face supporters of the Rada and the Bolsheviks.

On top of that many of the conservative pro-Russian sections of the population were also antagonistic towards the German occupiers. For instance, the conservative newspaper, Kievlyanin, which by 1918 had been one of the most successful newspapers of the Russian Empire, said in its last publication, in an ironic tone, "So, congratulations to you, gentlemen revolutionaries! The Germans brought this order on their bayonets"[166]. Showing that not

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[162] *Kölnische Zeitung*, February 9, 1918, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal* (Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek),
Stuttgarter neues Tagblatt: südwestdeutsche Handels- und Wirtschafts-Zeitung (Stuttgart), February 9, 1918, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal* (Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek),
Süddeutsche Zeitung: für deutsche Politik und Volkswirtschaft (Stuttgart), February 5, 1918, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal* (Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek),
Norddeutsche allgemeine Zeitung, Morgen-Ausgabe (Berlin), February 28, 1918, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal* (Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek),

[163] Süddeutsche Zeitung : für deutsche Politik und Volkswirtschaft - Freitag, 21.06.1918 - Deutsches Zeitungsportal

[164] Ibid

[165] Ludendorff p.700

[166] V. Shulgin. Kievlyanin Kiev, 9 March , 1918

even in the conservative anti-Bolshevik camp was there a consensus on the presence of the Germans.

At the same time, German authorities were having trouble balancing the interests of the Polish and Ukrainian populations. Lviv was desired by Ukrainians and was surrounded by rural Ukrainian land, but the city was Polish. Similarly to what had happened in the Ober Ost, the German leadership held a more positive attitude to other ethnicities that disputed the rule and political intentions of Polish nationalists, who were considered a threat to German interests. Lithuanians in the Ober Ost, Ukrainians in Lviv. This created a sense of alienation among the Polish population. In early 1918, the Polish newspaper from Lviv, Gazeta Lwowska covered how supporters of the right-wing nationalist National Democracy party, whose leader was Roman Dmowski, started to organise protests across Polish cities, both inside and outside the kingdom, which included the city of Lviv. The following months would see a growing sense of instability and ethnic tension between Ukrainians and Poles, leading to violent clashes and chaos in the city[167]. This shows that German policies and incoherences were driving communities into conflict with each other.

Another important issue that is highlighted in the different diplomatic sources is the clear mistrust existing between the German occupation and the Ukrainian authorities. Despite the resentment that many Ukrainians had towards Russia and the Bolsheviks, this does not mean that the reception of German troops in 1918 was entirely positive. Local authorities had received the German army as long as it was to preserve their independence from the Soviet Union, but as their presence became longer, they started to look for other international support, mainly from Entente countries, which further alienated their former German allies. This was particularly true after the 1918 April coup, which was seen by many Ukrainians as a deliberate attempt by the Germans to put forward a puppet regime. This was the reason that Thiel gave to Rohrbach in a letter written in July 1918. His wording, however, tends to try to blame the Ukrainian leaders for failing to maintain order[168].

Political reasons were not the only cause of mistrust between the Ukrainian and German authorities; diplomats from both nations noted how the occupying forces alienated local populations due to cultural and social reasons. In a letter to General Hoffmann, Rohrbach explains that a Ukrainian Diplomat simply named Mr. Lukaschewski reported to be “extremely unhappy about the reserved, yes, even unfriendly and ironic, attitude assumed by German military and civilian representatives (especially in Kyiv)towards Ukrainians”[169]. This indicates that even apolitical Ukrainians had grown a lot of dissatisfaction regarding. This was also seen in several communication mistakes. The German Supreme Command had

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[167] *Gazeta Lwowska*, “Manifestacye i zebrania obywatelskie,” no. 41 (1918): 4, quoted in *The Triumph and Collapse of Ukrainian Hopes: The Peace of Brest in 1918*, *City as a Stage*, Center for Urban History,
[168] Meyer, Henry Cord. “Germans in the Ukraine, 1918. Excerpts from Unpublished Letters.” *The American Slavic and East European Review* 9, no. 2 (1950): 105–15. https://doi.org/10.2307/2491602. p.108
[169] Meyer “Unpublished Letters” id p.111

made a special effort in guaranteeing the support of the population and so they planed to sponsor magazines and newspapers in favour of the occupation[170]. Such was the case with the magazine Oko. It aimed to communicate pro-German ideas to the Ukrainian population, but in its publications, it tended to give priority to Russian over Ukrainian, alienating many of its potential readers[171]. This was due to general cultural misjudgments caused by the Germans. In his correspondence, Rohrbach makes it clear that German authorities, especially Ambassador Baron von Mumm simply did not understand the cultural differences of Ukrainians and Russians, or as he calls them, "Muscovites"[172]. For instance, their support of the Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky was supposed to bring "order" to a chaotic independent Ukraine, as is repeatedly mentioned in their letters, however, Rohrbach ends up concluding that most Ukrainians saw the Hetman was seen "more Russian than Ukrainian"[173].

Together with political divisions and everyday conflicts, the diplomatic correspondence also shows that violence and abuses had become a norm in occupied Ukraine. In a letter between Paul Rohrbach and Friedrich August Thiel, German Consul General in Kyiv and a close assistant to Baron Alfons von Mumm, he notes how the newly appointed Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Doroshenko, from the Socialist-Federative Party keeps sending "daily complaints" to the German diplomatic authorities in Kyiv regarding "concerning supposed violations of international law on the part of our troops"[174]. Rohrbach talks with a lot of contempt and a patronising tone about the complaints of Minister Doroshenko, calling his idea of a neutral and independent Ukraine "fictitious". However, it should be noted that the declarations of Doroshenko are quite revealing, since they note, similar to what had happened in the Ober Ost, that the abuses of the German soldiers were dramatically hurting the Germans' war effort. The actions of the German troops could be seen as a sign of desperation, as food shipments were not occurring at the speed they needed them to, however, it also signals a lack of organisation and public support from the Ukrainian people. This, in turn, led to a higher level of mistrust and confrontation, but also, as the accounts of Vagt in the Ober Ost demonstrate, high levels of mismanagement of resources, as a lot of it was looted. This was confirmed in a later letter of Thiel to Rohrbach in which the Consul expressed how their soldiers "frantically and clumsily scratched the terrain for food and raw materials to supply their armies"[175]. The fact that Thiel admitted that these tasks were done aggressively and clumsily signifies that even the German leadership were concerned about the damage that this violent attitude would bring, as it was said before with Vagts, violence and looting did not help the Germans gather more resources, it just

[170] Fischer p.138
[171] Meyer "Unpublished Letters" . p.111
[172] Ibid
[173] Ibid p.106
[174] Ibid p.108
[175] Ibid

made things worse. In the end, despite the fact that Germany had presented itself as a liberator and that the occupied peoples did not wish for a return of the Russian Tsars it is beyond any doubt that Germany's actions in Ukraine were exploitative and imperialistic. Not only that but also clearly opportunistic as it had been the Ukrainian Rada who had invited the German army to help them guarantee their independence and then the German leadership had violated that trust and forced them under a new dictatorship in a new imperial project.

Men like Naumann and Rohrbach, as well as statesmen like Kuhlmann might have drafted plans and wrote works in regards to what they wished to do with the lands of the East but their work had completely ignored the will and agency of the peoples they intended to occupy. It can be seen in the condescending way they address the worries and concerns of Ukrainians and their focus in a "Grand Imperial vision"As a result of this the instability in Ukraine ended up being not that different from that of the Ober Ost, and for very similar reasons despite Kuhlmann's attempt at policy change. The failure of the occupation policies throughout the war would eventually have its impact in German domestic politics.

CHAPTER 3
Mitteleuropa and War Time Party-Politics

Under the Imperial period, Germany possessed a multiparty politics with parties capturing a wide range of social cleavages, religious, regional, linguistic, and class. But this pluralism was not tantamount to an effective parliamentary democracy in the Western European style. Effective political power remained with the Kaiser, the military high command, and the conservative bureaucracy. The Reichstag was constitutionally empowered with legislative authority but was frequently sidestepped or overturned, particularly during times of crisis or war. Presented in the previous chapter, at the start of the First World War, the concept of Mitteleuropa had travelled far from an esoteric intellectual exercise to be a diffuse geopolitical fantasy shared by several groups in German society. Though little directly political in their day, 19th-century theorists such as Friedrich List, Constantin Frantz, and Paul de Lagarde's thoughts had gained currency across ideological divides by the early 20th century. Nationalist expansionists, liberal internationalists, and technocratic planners were all interested in designing a Germany-led Central and Eastern Europe according to their ideological template[176].

This chapter examines the political consequences of the failure of the Mitteleuropa project on the domestic front, that is, how this impacted the activities of the parties and created growing polarisation in the Reichstag. It divides the analysis into two phases: Phase One (1914–1917): This section of the chapter explores the original wartime consensus and early parliamentary discourse and policies on expansion to the east. Phase Two (Late 1917–November 1918): This period goes from the dimission of Bethmann-Hollweg all the way to the German revolution of November 1918, during this period politics would become highly polarised.

Through tracing these phases, the chapter aims to show how the collapse of Mitteleuropa schemes not only reflected strategic defeats overseas but also exacerbated structural fault lines in German political life, fault lines that would shape the fragile democracy of the Weimar period.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Imperial Germany in 1914 has been characterised as a maximally polarised political regime[177]. Actual political authority did not rest in the elected Reichstag, but with the Kaiser, his

[176] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945*
[177] Anderson, Margaret Lavinia. *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany*. Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chancellery, and a growing self-assertive military establishment. Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's memoirs bear this out, describing a perplexed[178] domestic situation when he took office as Imperial Chancellor in July 1909, marked by "embitterment of Parties and Ill-feeling in the Country"[179]. He noted a general accentuation of party lines[180] and routinely recorded the Kaiser's ultimate approval of policy and the significant influence of military leaders, whose views he was frequently compelled to accommodate.[181]

The Reichstag, elected by universal male suffrage, had limited control over central government attributes such as foreign and military policy. Its legislative and budgetary authority was habitually preempted by the Kaiser's prerogatives and the Prussian-dominated Bundesrat. The Kaiser and the military had the support in the Reichstag of parties that represented the interests of Prussian and Protestant conservative middle and upper classes, most importantly the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. Once opponents, by 1914 these parties were allies, a tendency Bethmann Hollweg refers to as the "increasing approximation of the point of view of the Conservative and National Liberals in a Pan-German direction"[182], noting the influence of the pan-German League in both parties even by 1909. The National Liberals represented the more conservative elements of the Protestant urban bourgeoisie, and the Conservatives the landowning Junker class of Prussia[183]. Bethmann Hollweg commented on their tendency to "embarrass the conduct of foreign policy"[184] and their constant actions of self-interest based on simple "class principles"[185]. Both of these parties were also politically aligned with the military staff. While the Kaiser appointed the Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg required the support of the Reichstag to pass a budget and to legislate. He described the challenge this posed: "No party wished to expose itself to the reproach of promoting Government policy. The only solution was to manufacture a majority as occasion arose". On top of that, the Reichstag also played a major role in maintaining legitimacy towards the German people, as the only institution subject to the will of the citizens, in a system that cannot be described as very parliamentary or democratic[186].

Against this supporting bloc were reformist opposition parties, including the Progressive Liberals, the Catholic Zentrum, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Polish Party. These represented different sections of society: the Protestant progressive bourgeois, conservative Catholics, the Polish minority and workers, respectively. Their common aim was to reform the Imperial system into a more parliamentary one. The Progressives were mainly led by Naumann

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[178] Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, *Reflections on the World War*, trans. George Young, Part I (London: T. Butterworth, 1920) p.23
[179] Ibid p.20
[180] Ibid p.21
[181] Ibid p.147
[182] Bethmann Hollweg, *Reflections on the World War* p.28
[183] Chickering, Roger. “State and Society in the Era of Bismarck.” Chapter. In *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, 269–304. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.
[184] Bethmann Hollweg, *Reflections on the World War* p.28
[185] Ibid p.21
[186] Ibid p.93

and had a limited parliamentary presence among the three. The Zentrum, although it had interests in common with the Right, was in opposition, a position it resented but had regained a strong place in by employing "prudent tactics". The Social Democrats, drawn largely from the working class and having "millions" of followers, characterised by internationalist tendencies, and "constant and most harmful attacks upon the Monarchy". These reforming forces were strengthened, particularly following the 1912 election, when the SPD had become a parliamentary force to be reckoned with, and their participation in budget discussions and issues of war bonds was increasingly unavoidable. Bethmann Hollweg took it as his article of faith that the incorporation of the Labour movement within the existing order was the essential challenge, arguing against the "not practical politics" of allowing Social Democracy to remain in "open hostility to the Realm"[187]. This division between conservatives and reformists would mirror that of annexationists and federalists.

PHASE 1 WAR ENTHUSIASM

The early part of the First World War was characterised by general optimism about an early triumph among the German leadership. It was in this environment that political players and decision-makers sat down to write ambitious plans for Germany's post-war order[188]. While there was no official plan that was published, memoranda such as the Septemberprogramm and the Hugenberg-Class Memorandum show that there was agreement in some circles on Germany's objectives of expansion.

One of the first examples of annexationalist policy intent was the policy paper “Septemberprogramm”. Authorised in September 1914 by Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, the “Septemberprogramm” was not a public declaration but an internal memorandum that stated German aspirations for a European order following the war. It demanded a reorganisation of the continent in which Germany would assume hegemonic leadership by economic means and not by conquest[189]. Clause four stipulated the creation of a "Central European economic association under German leadership,"[190] which would "stabilise Germany's economic predominance in central Europe."[191] This vision was reminiscent of Friedrich List's 19th-century call for a customs union to promote regional economic collaboration[192]. However, whereas List envisioned voluntary cooperation, Bethmann-Hollweg's model rested on hierarchy and economic compulsion, a framework within which peripheral members were subject to German markets and capital[193].

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[187] Ibid p.25
[188] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* p.93
[189] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* p.98
[190] Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, . *Septemberprogramm* (Artikel 4). Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin, Germany. (1914)
[191] Ibid
[192] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945*
[193] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* p.

The September program also hinted at larger ambitions outside Central Europe, while not being specific. To cite one example, article five left matters of colonial expansion and the German stance vis-à-vis Russia to be addressed at a later date[194]. Included in the colonial goals was the rumoured formation of an unbroken Central African empire, consolidating German colonial possessions into a more powerful imperial bloc. This imperial element demonstrated that Germany's ambitions lay far broader than the continent[195]. Notably absent from the program was any mention of Ukraine or the Baltic territories, which likely reflected their intended status not as equals but as buffer zones or economic satellites. Thus, although the document's tone was moderate, the Septemberprogramm was an ideological and strategic design for a Germany-centred post-war Europe[196].

Even more direct in its demands was the memorandum authored by Heinrich Class, head of the pan-German League and Alfred Hugenberg. Hugenberg, a distinguished businessman and future maker of Weimar politics, had been involved with conservative nationalist circles for decades. He financed and ideologically stimulated the Pan-German League and its founder, Heinrich Class, both of whom were under the influence of the ethno-nationalist thought of Paul de Lagarde. This memo constituted one of the most forthright articulations of annexationist sentiment in wartime Germany. It argued that Germany required "a colonial empire to supply her with raw materials, a market for surplus goods, and also a war indemnity to pay for a system of rural colonisation and urban development." It demanded, among other requests regarding the Western Front, that Russia must be "limited to the frontiers at the time of Peter the Great."[197]

Significantly, the memorandum declared that Germany must "unite Central Europe (including Scandinavia, Finland, Rumania, and Bulgaria) into a single economic unit."[198] This was a point of no return: the idea of Mitteleuropa had shifted from liberal economic thought to imperial conquest. It also marked a growing convergence of business interests and geopolitical ambitions. The idea of economic unity now became a pretext for racial hierarchies and territorial domination[199]. These demands also enjoyed the support of prominent representatives of German industry for the annexationist programme. Industrialists such as Albert Ballin (Hamburg-America Line), Robert Bosch, Hugo Stinnes, and banker Hjalmar Schacht campaigned in organisations such as the Arbeitsausschuss für Mitteleuropa and the Central European Economic Societies[200]. These organisations

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[194] Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, . *Septemberprogramm* (Artikel 5). Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin, Germany. (1914)

[195] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* p

[196] Ibid

[197] Hugenberg and Claß Memorandum, 7 November 1914." Quoted in John A. Leopold, *Alfred Hugenberg: The Radical Nationalist Campaign Against the Weimar Republic*, 6-7. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977. p.6

[198] Ibid

[199] Leopold, *Alfred Hugenberg: The Radical Nationalist Campaign Against the Weimar Republic* p.7

[200] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945*

advocated a German-led economic bloc to circumvent the Allied blockade and exploit the new lands occupied in the East[201]. These economic interests viewed Mitteleuropa as the key to obtaining privileged access to foreign markets and raw materials[202]. The military victories in 1915, most of all in Poland and the Baltic, were seen not just as tactical victories but also as potential gateways for German economic imperialism[203]. Hugenberg, a director of Krupp, Germany's largest armaments manufacturer at the time, embodied the overlap between militarist-expansionist ideology and military-industrial capitalism[204]. Through the Pan-German League, he ensured the confluence of conservative politics and economic imperialism. This was reflected in the actions of the National Liberal Party, which, under the leadership of Ernst Bassermann, altered its programme in 1915 along the lines of calling for annexation and opposing Polish independence[205].

Dissent within the National Liberals was suppressed. Bassermann sidelined party members such as Edmund Rebmann, who had spoken for compromise with the Allies[206]. But those such as Gustav Stresemann would, as the war continued and the cost of expansion became more obvious, begin to question this hardline approach[207]. These developments reflect a fundamental ideological transformation. Earlier visionaries such as Friedrich List and Constantin Frantz had projected Mitteleuropa as a customs federation in the interests of all. But, in wartime, the concept was remodelled by Hugenberg and Class into a tool of ethnic hegemony and territorial aggrandisement. Economic interests were merged with nationalist myths and militarist goals, reflecting the transition from cooperative economics to coercive imperialism. This annexationist impulse was also evident in the military occupation of territories such as Ober Ost and Poland, where German overlords imposed policies of forced labour and cultural suppression. These policies were reflective of not only a desire for strategic depth but a broader ideological goal of Germanisation and economic exploitation[208].

The Burgerfrieden

At the start of World War I, there was a wide political consensus supporting the war, a phenomenon later known as the Burgfrieden, literally, "civil peace." This unofficial peace among political parties amounted to putting domestic quarrels on hold for national unity.

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[201] Ritschl, Albrecht. "The Pity of Peace: Germany's Economy at War, 1914–1918 and Beyond." Chapter. In *The Economics of World War I,* edited by Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison, 41–76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
[202] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945* p.139
[203] Pierard, Richard V. 1968. "A Case Study in German Economic Imperialism: The Colonial Economic Committee, 1896–1914." *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 16 (2): 155–67.
[204] Leopold, *Alfred Hugenberg: The Radical Nationalist Campaign Against the Weimar Republic*
[205] *Von Bassermann zu Stresemann: Die Sitzungen des national-liberalen Zentralvorstandes 1912–1917.* In *Quellen zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien I: Von der konstitutionellen Monarchie zur parlamentarischen Republik*, vol. 5, edited by Klaus-Peter Reiß,. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1967.
[206] Ibid p.255
[207] Ibid p.179
[208] Ibid p.31

For the SPD and Zentrum, who were not bound to nationalist or militarist ideologies, it was necessary to ideologically justify support for the war. Perhaps the strongest justification for these parties was their staunch opposition to Tsarist Russia. Social Democrats, along with many German Jews and liberal intellectuals, viewed Russia as a reactionary autocracy and the international face of anti-socialist repression. Such a formulation allowed the SPD to justify supporting a war that, at least in theory, was also being waged against despotism.
In the Reichstag, Polish and Social Democratic deputies were among those calling Russia the primary enemy. This was also a political stance to stand back from more directly expansionist and nationalist war goals against Great Britain or France. Still, the SPD remained sceptical of war consequences and was critical of German imperialism.

The principal vehicle for the expression of this complex and frequently contradictory position was the Social Democratic newspaper Vorwärts. Perhaps one of the most explicit demonstrations of this is its negative criticism of Friedrich Naumann's popular Mitteleuropa book. In it, Vorwärts credits Naumann with vision while criticising the underlying assumptions in his appeal for a tightly integrated Central European economic and political confederation dominated by Germany, a vision that, though professing economic cooperation initially, actually caters to German imperialism. The article argues that Naumann's later embrace of a customs-free union is motivated not by egalitarian aspirations but by the needs of wartime politics and imperialism. In this sense, Vorwärts is making a sharp contrast between the PD wartime unity grudgingly achieved and the broader nationalist or expansionist designs of such writers as Naumann. While Naumann sees war as a step towards eventual unification, Vorwärts regards such plans with deep scepticism, reasserting the SPD's limited and ideologically delimited tolerance of the Burgfrieden. The article directly states that “Where Naumann stops, we want to continue”, arguing that while SPD was in favour of economic integration, they did not support the idea of a German-dominated Central Europe[209]

One of the most curious cases of this Burgerfrieden becoming something of a consensus position among the parties was the position taken by the Polish Representatives in the Reichstag. The Polish party had a relevant position in the Reichstag and normally found themselves in the middle of conflicts between the different factions of the Reichstag[210]. Similar to other reformist groups, the Polish minority had supported the German war efforts against Russia, as shown in a speech by Wladislaw Seyda, Member of the Reichstag and future Supreme Court Judge in the Republic of Poland[211]. In his speech, Seyda talks positively about the possibility of a “Central European customs union”, citing similar calls made by

[209] “Zukunftsbilder.” *Vorwärts* (Berlin), November 15, 1915. *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*.
[210] Sheehan, James J. “Political Leadership in the German Reichstag, 1871-1918.” *The American Historical Review* 74, no. 2 (1968): 511–28.
[211] *“Seyda, Władysław Kazimierz,”* Porta Polonica: Lexikon (German-Polish Heritage Foundation),

Friedrich List almost a century before, describing it as the "great goal of German trade policy". In his speech, he also shows himself as being very critical of Russia and insists that Germany should present itself as the "protector of the small Slavic peoples", arguing against the Russian influence in Eastern Europe, in that speech specifically referring to that existing in the Balkans. He argues that if successful, the Slavs would "pick their side" and Germany's economic interest would be able to expand into the Danube and Asia Minor, though not under a "Pan-German" through collaboration with other groups such as Poles, Czechs and Hungarians [212]. Seyda's speech highlights that Polish MPs in the Reichstag would be generally pragmatic and even dare to support the war actions supported by the other parties.

It is in this scene of a gradual consensus that Friedrich Naumann wrote Mitteleuropa. As explained in previous chapters, the book became a best seller in Germany, and it did influence the political discourse, with a variety of newspapers having a wide variety of reactions to it. The press helped to fuel interest in Mitteleuropa that followed the publication of Naumann's book in late 1915. While practically every large newspaper wrote about the topic, most did so sporadically.[213]. By the end of 1915, this widespread coverage had helped to transform Mitteleuropa from a speciality term into a dominant motif in public opinion.

Progressive Liberals around Naumann would present Mitteleuropa as their alternative plan to the annexationalist views that had been presented by conservatives and the pan-German League the previous year. MPs such as Conrad Haußmann would defend it with speeches in the Reichstag[214]. However, the reaction from political leaders was mixed. Even though the book became an unquestionable best-seller in the middle of the war, the support that it received from political parties was relatively small and reduced to the liberal camp[215]. Social Democrats were ambivalent regarding future expansionist plans, while Conservatives still maintained a desire for a clear policy of annexation and saw the book as overly compromising. National Liberals were conflicted, while some around its leader Erns Basserman were critical, others in the more liberal faction were supportive, such as Gustav Stresemann. In his intervention in January 1916, Gustav Stresemann provided high-level endorsement to Friedrich Naumann's Mitteleuropa, framing it as a significant contribution to the economic and strategic fate of Germany. Stresemann welcomed it as "a war book in the most pronounced measure," suggesting its relevance to the conflict at hand was not theoretical but practical and urgent. Stresemann emphasised that it asked significant questions about the post-war economic path of Germany. He argued that "we simply must know where we wish to go economically before this war comes to an end," and emphasised

[212]Speech by Władysław Seyda, December 12, 1913, in *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags. 13. Legislaturperiode, I. Session*, vol. 291 p.6413

[213] Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa: In German Thought and Action 1815–1945* (Springer, 1955) p.151-152

[214] Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland*, Edition Suhrkamp; Neue Historische Bibliothek, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988),

[215] Greiner, "Articulating Europe During the Great War: Friedrich Naumann's Idea of 'Mitteleuropa' and Its Public Reception in Germany, England and the USA,"

that the state should allow those "who have something to say about it" to engage freely in this debate. Stresemann implicitly criticised the suppression of frank discussion, warning against the "clumsiness" of censorship that might repress the development of a definite post-war policy. This is the National Liberal perspective: pledged to the strengthening of Germany's political and economic influence in Central Europe, but pledged also to free, unemotional public debate of Mitteleuropa as an earnest national objective.[216]

Already in 1917, throughout the first years of the war, political stability and a certain level of consensus were being maintained, especially in what concerned the fight on the Eastern Front. German propaganda made a great effort to portray the actions of the Reichswehr as a liberation effort, and declarations such as that of 1916 regarding the establishment of the Kingdom of Poland made it seem that Germany's attempts were not about colonisation. The previous chapter has shown how these intentions hide a much more sinister objective, and that policies of forced labour were being implemented[217]. These actions were also being noted by Polish politicians in Berlin, such as the case of the Representative at the Prussian House of Representatives, Trompczynski.

In a gripping address delivered in the Prussian parliament, he uncovered the brutality of policies of coercion inflicted on Polish labourers from Russian Poland during the occupation, highlighting the vast gulf between the mission purportedly espoused by the Central Powers in the East and that of its people. Early in the war, about 250,000 Polish workers were in Germany and were "not allowed to leave the territory of the German Empire."[218] Trompczynski criticised this as "wholly illegal and contrary to the principles of international law,"[219] particularly because the workers were many times civilians who did not have the obligation to fight. This population grew to about half a million over time, exposed to exploitative working conditions and systematic dishonesty. The Central German Labour Office, which had a monopoly on hiring, tricked workers into signing contracts "for six months or the course of the war,"[220] to have them unilaterally construed as permanent and unchangeable by the military. This evidence, and others like it, undercut the corrosive effect on left-wing Germans, Social Democrats and Progressive Liberals, who had supported the war on the assumption that it was emancipatory or defensive. Instead, such revelations exposed the war's imperial and coercive character at the cost of not directly challenging the annexationist policy in Ober Ost and Poland's moral justification[221]. As Trompczynski

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[216] Speech by Gustav Stresemann, January 16, 1916, in *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags. 13. Legislaturperiode, II. Session*, vol. 306, p. 737

[217] Frederick C. Walcott on German Military Rule in Poland, p.429

[218] Speech by a Polish Member of the Prussian Legislature, M. Trompczynski in 1917," in *Source Records of the Great War*, vol. 4, ed. Charles F. Horne (New York: National Alumni, 1923), p.431

[219] Ibid

[220] Speech by a Polish Member of the Prussian Legislature, M. Trompczynski in 1917, p.432

[221] Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I*

concluded, the treatment of Polish labourers had represented a policy that "has changed these workmen into slaves"[222], words strongly rebutting official rhetoric of "liberating" the East and which helped to turn public and political opinion, especially in the Reichstag, against the annexationist group.

By the middle of 1917, political tensions in the German leadership had reached breaking point, the gulf between the civilian administration and the war command growing wider. At the centre of the rift was Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, torn increasingly in two directions between a Reichstag majority drifting towards moderation and peace, and an annexationist-spurred General Staff. The failure to achieve a decisive military triumph, the further exacerbation of the economic crisis, and the declining morale on the home front generated growing pressure for a peace negotiated rather than won. Bethmann Hollweg, who initially had been a champion of limited expansionist goals, by 1916 had begun to question the feasibility of annexing extensive territories in the East. This moderation was taken to its height by the sponsorship of the 1917 Peace Resolution, a parliamentary resolution sponsored by the Centre Party's Matthias Erzberger, the Progressives, the Polish MPs and the Social Democrats, which demanded an armistice bringing the war to an end without annexations or indemnities[223]. Bethmann Hollweg's position became increasingly desperate when he tried to reconcile this peace policy with the High Command's expectations. His proposal for the future of Poland, granting nominal independence rather than outright annexation, was seen by General Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff as dangerously accommodating. The military establishment responded by rephrasing the offer to ensure that Poland would be in de facto German control, and they insisted on the outright annexation of the Baltic provinces of Lithuania and Courland. The Chancellor's reluctance to commit to these maximalist war objectives damaged his already bruised credibility with the military[224].

In July 1917, when pressure from both military and conservative nationalist circles mounted, Kaiser Wilhelm II deposed Bethmann Hollweg. His dismissal was an absolute transfer of power from civilian government to the Supreme Army Command (Oberste Heeresleitung). His successor was Georg Michaelis, a rather less-than-familiar bureaucrat with no extensive political following and appointed largely for his image as a malleable person willing to do the bidding of Hindenburg and Ludendorff. However, even this newly advantageous position of military power failed to prevent erosion of support for the annexationist policy. The Peace Resolution remained a symbolic counterbalance to expansionist policy legitimacy, and failure to secure food deliveries from Ukraine, along with

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222 Afflerbach, Holger. "'War Psychosis'? The Reichstag's Peace Offer and Bethmann Hollweg's Demission." Chapter. In *On a Knife Edge: How Germany Lost the First World War*, 283–95. Cambridge Military Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

223 Ibid

224 Erzberger Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg p.172-173

growing instability in Germany, continued to undercut the position of the military politically. In hindsight, the removal of Bethmann Hollweg was not only a failure of middle leadership but a turning point when the German war effort lost any remaining strategic direction, wavering between military maximalism and political realism[225].

PHASE 2 POLARISATION

With the dismissal of Bethmann-Hollweg, the Oberste Heeresleitung (Supreme Army Command) under Hindenburg and Ludendorff continued to dictate German policy and ignored the Reichstag's position. Nevertheless, the Peace Resolution marked a shift in parliamentary and popular opinion against militarism and foreshadowed the eventual collapse of the imperial government.

Despite this victory for those parties opposing annexations, their power in the Reichstag or influence over the Chancellor did not directly translate into political power. In fact, despite this political victory, Germany's policy towards the occupied territories had to go through a clear policy change, as the situation in the occupied territories and the Eastern front was growing more unstable. As a result of this, the new Chancellor Georg Michaelis named Richard von Kuhlman as Foreign Secretary, an independent but still close to Naumann, who was an open opponent of annexations, as stated in meeting he had with Ludendorff[226]. On top of that despite the lack of impact of the Peace Resolution the most significant victory of the Reichstag majority came the 1st of November 1917, when despite the military advancements in the East, his political situation had become unsustainable and the parties that had supported the Peace Resolution in the Reichstag were able to vote him out and force his resignation[227]. In his place, the Minister President of Bavaria, Georg von Hertling, from Zentrum would be placed, as both Chancellor and Minister President of Prussia. Despite his party affiliation, Hertling would serve more as a balance between the parties of the Reichstag and the military commanders. The biggest change, however, would be in the naming of several Naumann supporters to his cabinet, including Rudolf Schwander, Friedrich von Peyer and Wilhelm Solf, which proceeded to conduct a series of reforms regarding the occupied territories[228].

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[225] Afflerbach "'War Psychosis'? The Reichstag's Peace Offer and Bethmann Hollweg's Demission."
[226] Markus Bussmann and Winfried Baumgart, eds., *Richard von Kühlmann: Memoiren und politische Korrespondenz 1904–1918*, Deutsche Geschichtsquellen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, vol. 81 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2024), p.702
[227] Afflerbach. "'War Psychosis'? The Reichstag's Peace Offer and Bethmann Hollweg's Demission."
[228] Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland*, Edition Suhrkamp; Neue Historische Bibliothek, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988),

A good example of this change in attitude can be seen in how politicians outside the SPD, would openly start to speak up against the prospective annexation but instead argue in favour of a situation in which countries like Poland or Lithuania are outside a Russian sphere of influence but their status as full independent and sovereign nations is left in the balance. A good example of this is the article that Progressive Liberal MP Georg Gothain wrote in Berliner Tageblatt in August 1917. In his article titled “The fight against Peace”, Gothain expresses that the interest of Germany should not be to annexe Poland, Lithuania and Curland, but rather to make sure that they do not return to Russia but instead remain independent[229].

Matthias Erzberger, who, despite the dismissal of Bethmann Hollweg, remained an important diplomat, notes that one of the main sources of conflict between the political and army leaders in Germany during the process of change of policy at the end of 1917 was the status of Lithuania[230]. As it was established in the previous chapter, Lundendorff had used the Ober Ost region as his feud, and it had become a zone of experimentation for the annexationalist ideas of the Pan-German League and those of Lundendorff. By late 1917, however, Kuhlman and many in the leadership wanted to change this position and proceed to transform Lithuania into a nominally independent Kingdom. This was a difficulty because, as Erzberger notes, the Supreme Army Command demanded personal union with Prussia as a prerequisite for "any further concessions to Lithuania."[231]. Meaning that the Government should approve that the Ober Ost region be integrated into Germany as part of the Kingdom of Prussia.

As he notes in his memoirs, there were two main groups of opposition to this. The first was the fact that the Lithuanian population opposed this idea and gave a strong position to the supporters of the Republic, increasing the instability in the area. The second one was that of the German princes. Germany, still a federal state, despite the de facto military dictatorship, had to deal with the importance of regional governments. These regional governments, more specifically Bavaria and Saxony, were extremely concerned that Lithuania and Curland could be annexed by Prussia, therefore increasing the power of Prussia in the Empire and making what was already an uneven situation even more unfair for the smaller kingdoms of the Empire[232]. This shows another aspect of the growing concern for the annexationalist objectives, as many of them were to benefit Prussia to the detriment of other states, furthering the imbalance of the Empire.

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[229] Georg Gothain, “Kempf gegen Frieden,” *Berliner Tageblatt und Handels-Zeitung*, August 11, 1917, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*,
[230] Erzberger Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg p.238
[231] Ibid
[232] Ibid p.187

The issue of choosing a King or a Prince for Lithuania was something that also greatly affected Erzberger. As a member of the Catholic Zentrum Party himself, he notes that the notion that Kaiser Wilhelm could be appointed as King of Lithuania, a region with an overwhelmingly Catholic population, made many Catholics in Germany anxious. Therefore, for Zentrump, the party of both Erzberger and the Chancellor himself greatly depended on Catholic support. [233]

Rise of Nationalism

The connection between the failures in Poland and the Ober Ost and the growth of nationalism is not a direct one, since German politicians and the media tended to abstain from talking about specific failures or problems. However, by 1917, the situation had become highly insatiable, and many politicians and newspapers would start supporting a peace effort, as mentioned before. This in turn led to a counter reaction as the conservative action of society reacted against the new approach to Mitteleuropa.

One of the best examples of this growing tension and concerns regarding the future of annexed provinces was highlighted in a debate at the Prussian House of Representatives between MPs, Paul Fuhrmann from the National Liberals and Adolf Hoffman from the Social Democrats. In that heated debate, Fuhrmann insisted that Germany needed to annexe territory after the conflict, expressing that "the statesman who leaves us without Courland and Lithuania, would stand before history as the gravedigger of German power and greatness"[234]. In that same debate meanwhile Hoffmann accuses the annexationists of being in the pockets of German industrialists, a claim which Fuhrmann denied[235]. This debate in the Prussian House of Representatives highlighted the growing tensions that existed in early 1917 among the German political class, as the supporters of the annexations doubled down despite the change in government policy, while those on the left became more determined in their opposition for war and annexationalist demands.

One of the most aggressive opposition speeches to the idea of a federal form of Mitteleuropa was made by Ferdinand Werner in 1917. He was a member of the German Social Party, a minoritarian yet extremely extreme right and antisemitic, force in the Reichstag, after the war he would go on to become a prominent member of the DNVP and also of the Nazi Party. In his address, he summarily rejected the concept of Mitteleuropa as a distraction from what he saw as Germany's more important national interests. Challenging Haußmann's call for Germans to "learn to see European," Werner countered that Germans must "learn to see German,"[236] highlighting a nationalist agenda founded upon ethnic

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[233] Ibid p.240
[234]"Beleidigung für den Reichskanzler." *Vorwärts*, Februar 22, 1917. *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*.
[235] Ibid
[236] Speech by Ferdinand Werner, March 29, 1917, in Deutsche Reichstag. *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags. 13. Legislaturperiode, II. Session*, vol. 309, p. 2875

identity and historical continuity. He lamented what he saw as the undue reliance on "Greek, Latin, French, English, or Semitic spectacles,"[237] calling instead for a reassertion of quintessentially German values and cultural autonomy. His rejection of the search for a "Central European type," as federalists like Friedrich Naumann proposed, illustrates the increasing influence of ethnic nationalism and cultural exclusiveness within conservative ranks. Delivered amid the Fatherland Party's ascendance, Werner's speech encapsulates the broader political reconfiguration in 1917, when many on the right discarded the pan-European federalism of Mitteleuropa for a belligerent, ethnonationalist alternative[238]. Warner's tone is noticeably aggressive, as it could be expected from someone from his party, but his speech was noted with applause, from Conservatives and even some National Liberals, as noted in the Parliamentary registry[239].

The policy change made by the Chancellery and the Foreign Office was not ignored by the supporters of annexationalist ideas and those under the support and influence of the Pan-German League. By late 1917, it was becoming clear that the German foreign office was not interested in pursuing a purely annexationalist policy as it had been doing in the Ober Ost for the past three years. It was in September 1917 that the German Fatherland Party (DVLP) was created. Among its members there were some of the higher-ranking officials of the Pan-German League, such as Henirch Class. Its chairman would be the dismissed 1917 Admiral Alfred von Tippitz. The creation of the Fatherland Party would be the political culmination of the Pan-German League, which had gone from a radical nationalist and expansionist pressure group into an established political force. Its presence would further help the erosion of the traditional right-wing parties, as, unlike the Conservatives, whose main voting base was the Prussian Junkers, the Fatherland Party presented itself as a cross-class organisation[240].

The establishment of the Fatherland Party in autumn 1917 adversely affected the National Liberals, in the first place by causing internal conflict and fuelling debates regarding the party's stance and future development. The Central Board of the National Liberal Party indicated that opinions were "quite divided" as to how to treat the new organisation. To keep "abrasive disputes" away and maintain some appearance of solidarity, the Executive Committee eventually consented to allow individual National Liberal Party members to be admitted into the Fatherland Party. But this did not assuage the underlying tensions. However figures such as Stresemann, declined to "sacrifice" themselves for the

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[237] Ibid

[238] Rathbun "Barking Dogs and Beating Drums: Nationalism as Moral Revolution in German Foreign Policy." Chapter. In *Right and Wronged in International Relations: Evolutionary Ethics, Moral Revolutions, and the Nature of Power Politics*

[239] Speech by Ferdinand Werner, March 29, 1917,

[240] Heinz Hagenlücke, "German Fatherland Party(– DVLP)," Data set, *Brill's Digital Library of World War I*, December 13, 2015,.

Fatherland Party, as stated in his correspondence [241]. In the Central Board, the Fatherland Party was frequently referred to as a "disguised conservative foundation," which evoked "lively contradiction" from other members[242]. There was also an expressed opinion that the National Liberals themselves were able to achieve the national tasks required, questioning whether "any other association" was necessary[243].

Above all, the emergence of the Fatherland Party generated apprehension among the National Liberals regarding the threat of "voter march to the right" unless the party could adopt a sufficiently vigorous nationalist stance[244]. This presumes alarm at the possibility of losing thousands of voters who would become disillusioned or lose faith in the National Liberals. While the party officially opened up to individual membership, various provincial organisations, such as the Pomeranian provincial organisation, actively promoted membership of the Fatherland Party[245]. It got to the point where the Central Board approved in September 1917 a party resolution that favoured annexationist aims and rejected parliamentary governance "after foreign models,"[246] completing the shift of the once centre-right liberal party to the radical imperialism and authoritarian right.

This situation led to the de-facto partition of the National Liberals from early 1918 onwards. By late 1918, Gustav Streseman and the moderates had taken over the party and created the German People's Party[247] while those who had supported the Fatherland Party merged with it and the Conservatives to create the German National People's Party under Hugenberg[248].

A New of Pacifism

While the Social Democrat leadership had supported the war effort and did engage with the rest of the political forces of the Reichstag, this did not mean that there was a full consensus within the SPD, even if it existed in the wider German political scene. Already in 1915, a section of the SPD led by George Ledebour broke away from the main section of the party, as among other things, they were being critical of the tacit support that the main party was giving to the annexationalist policies that were being supported by the military. In 1917, this splinter group would create a new party, called the Independent Social Democrats or

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[241] *Von Bassermann zu Stresemann: Die Sitzungen des national-liberalen Zentralvorstandes 1912–1917.* p.337
[242] Ibid p.363
[243] Ibid p.430
[244] Ibid p.400
[245] Ibid P.299
[246] Ibid p.34
[247] Bruce B. Frye, "The German Democratic Party 1918-1930," *The Western Political Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 1963): 167–79,
[248] Walker, D. P. "The German Nationalist People's Party: The Conservative Dilemma in the Weimar Republic." *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 4 (1979): 627–47.

USPD, which supported an immediate end to all hostilities without any annexation, and in later years would serve as the basis for the German Communist Party[249].

It must be noted that the timeline of the rise of the Independence Social Democrats also greatly coincides with the beginning of the Russian Revolution. As stated before, the idea of Russia, an autocratic and expansionist absolutist monarchy, as a threat, was a core issue in the Burgerfrieden[250]. After the fall of the Tsar and the creation of the Republic, but especially after it was shown that the Russian socialists wanted an immediate peace, many in the left of the Reichstag as well as in the media, started to argue that the Tsarist threat was no longer present and the support of the war was no longer acceptable[251]

This was openly expressed by one of the Independent Social Democrats' Reichstag Members, Georg Ledebour[252]. During a speech to the Reichstag on 10th October 1917, he would not only criticise the current war with Russia but also the German occupations in the East. He spoke first to the fact that by October 1917, Russia was no longer a Tsarist regime but a Republic and that both the Constitutional Republicans, that is, the Kadets, followers of a Constitutional order, and the Russian Social Democrats had welcomed the abolition of the Tsar's rule. He noted that, "the Social-Democrats of the whole world agree on this, have welcomed with enthusiasm the news that the Russian Revolution has toppled the Tsar's regime.".

Aside from this, Ledebour was also very critical of the aims that the German leadership, both annexationalists and federalists, had for Eastern Europe. He warned that "either these provinces will be Russian once more and will perhaps lead an autonomous existence there as an Estonian, as a Latvian federal state, such as Lithuania as a Lithuanian in a Russian federal republic, or it is possible that they will become independent republics." He opposed the imposition of German dukes or princes to rule over these territories, describing such schemes as a "pan-German masquerade. So ridiculous that it cannot be applied at all."[253] Moreover, he noted the futility of German occupation, observing that the German government was only "temporary" in character and that its effect was to create hatred between the German minority and the native populations. This, he argued, was the outcome of the defective policy of the German Government in the East.

With this speech Ledebour is not only talking about the way Russia is no longer a threat to Germany, but that monarchies, however ancient, such as that of the Tsars of Russia,

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[249]Mckibben, David. “Who Were the German Independent Socialists? The Leipzig City Council Election of 6 December 1917.” *Central European History* 25, no. 4 (1992): 425–43. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938900021452.
[250] Kuldkepp, Mart. 2022. “German Propaganda and the Special Treatment of Estonian Prisoners of War in Germany in World War I.” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 53 (2): 227–47. p.229.
[251] Ralf Hoffrogge, “3 Opposition to the Burgfrieden: 1914–18,” in *BRILL eBooks*, 2014, 21–34, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004280069_004.
[252] Speech by Georg Ledebour, October 10, 1917, in *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags. 13. Legislaturperiode, II. Session*, vol. 310, p.3856
[253] Ibid

are not sacrosanct. To this, when he was speaking, Conservative MP Hermann Kreth rose in objection, to which Ledebour responded vehemently: "Yes, Mr Kreth, this is a European issue. Believe us! We, for our part, did not wait for the Russian Revolution to have made Russia a republic to express our republican sentiments and our republican desire. We have always been republicans."[254] This emphasised that Ledebour and USDP were not only being critical of the war aims, they were being directly attacking the system that had caused it, showing a clear sign that many in Germany saw that the end of the regime was the only way of ending the war.

This was also seen in January Strike of 1918. Initiated by metalworkers in Berlin and quickly spreading among major industrial centres, the general strike involved over a million workers. Though formally framed as a demonstration against the ongoing war and in favour of democratic reforms, the actual and practical raison d'être was sheer hunger[255]. After nearly four years of blockade by the British Royal Navy, Germany had come to be in acute dependence on obtaining foodstuffs through its conquests in Eastern Europe. As it was treated in the second chapter, the success in Ukraine and the so-called "Bread Peace" of Brest-Litovsk were seen as crucial stepping-stones on the way to alleviating the domestic shortage of food. But by June 1918, the failure of German soldiers to impose stability in the region and regulate grain supplies badly destroyed these hopes.

The decrease or disruption of food shipments from Ukraine was not a theoretical diplomatic setback for the workers but a tangible material crisis. Winter 1917–1918 was the worst shortage of the war, with per capita caloric intake dropping to subsistence levels, particularly in the cities. The USPD and militant shop stewards came to associate these shortages more and more with the continuance of imperial war objectives, such as the disastrous Mitteleuropa policy, which had promised riches but brought death[256]. Their failure to convert their territorial advances into actual economic benefit exposed the limitations of the Mitteleuropa vision and resonated demands for rapid peace and system change, demands that would be louder and better organised by 1918. An example of this were the declarations made by SPD Reichstag Representative Eduard David who express in the Hamburger Volks-Zeitung that the failure of the Bread-Peace was due to lack of local support which in turn was due lack of political representation and stating that “Only when the will of the people is present based on freely elected representatives should the decision between republic of anarchy be made”[257] This shows that the political left made the argument that the reason for a potential famine was based on a lack of legitimacy in the German presence in Ukraine.

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[254] Ibid
[255] Stephen Bailey,. “The Berlin Strike of January 1918.” *Central European History* 13, no. 2 (1980): 158–74.
[256] Blum, Matthias. “War, Food Rationing, and Socioeconomic Inequality in Germany during the First World War.” *The Economic History Review* 66, no. 4 (2013): 1063–83. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42921653.
[257] *Hamborner Volks-Zeitung*, “Dienstag, 25.06.1918,” *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*

This disillusionment can also be attested by how the press covered the idea of Mitteleuropa after. As can be noted in the press of the Summer of 1918, a growing sense of frustration had arisen regarding the Mitteleuropa project that, a few months before, was seen as being on the path to success. The objectives in the occupation zones were not being matched, the relationship between Germany and Austria-Hungary was ever more tense, and there was a clear growing sense of polarisation and mistrust. This issue was covered by Kölnische Zeitung at the end of May 1918. The Zentrum aligned newspaper it expressed that the ideas of Naumann were being met with "widespread rejection because, both politically and economically, they exceeded the bounds of what might initially seem attainable" and arguing that the relations between Germany and Austria Hungary not only in matters of policy makers but also among its economic actors was "no longer as strong as it was before".[258] Similar stances were taken by the Suddeutsche Zeitung, arguing that the instability in the region made the project of Naumann unfeasible.[259]

By October 1918, all of these factors were coming to a crushing conclusion. The War was leading Germany towards a famine that was going to be mainly felt by the working classes of Germany, who were seeing little advancement of their political rights in the Imperial system. The political elites had promised that these problems would be solved with military victories in the East, but the failure of the military and the government to stabilise the occupied territories, among other things, due to its imperialistic nature of these policies, was failing in delivering food. All of these factors made the Revolution of November 1918 inevitable, as at the core of the demands of the Revolutionaries was the end of the War and the end of any post-war Imperial aspirations in Central and Eastern Europe[260].

Post-Revolutionary Polarisation

The new government led by Friedrich Ebert, leader of the Social Democrats, was established, and it signed the Armistice. The new government showed a clear position against Mitteleuropa and the military expansionist positions, even as national defence motives. Despite this, the government allowed the continuation of some troops to fight the Bolsheviks in the Baltic under General Rüdiger von der Goltz. This alienated the left, who considered it a betrayal. The SPD's actual or perceived acceptance of these policies, and their later role in putting down left-wing uprisings via the Freikorps, cost them much of their left-wing support[261]. This polarisation on the left and growing opposition against the main

[258] "Eine bedeutsame wirtschaftliche Tagung," *Kölnische Zeitung*, May 30, 1918, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*,
[259] "Die Ernährungskrise in Österreich." *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), June 21, 1918. *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*
[260] N. P. Howard, The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany, 1918–19, *German History*, Volume 11, Issue 2, April 1993, Pages 161–188, https://doi.org/10.1093/gh/11.2.161
[261] Liulevicius, Vejas Gabriel. "Freikorps Madness." Chapter. In *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I*, 227–46. Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

SPD was motivation for an anti-territorial expansion stance, as it can be noted in the anti-Mitteleuropa and anti-militaristic positions of Communist newspapers of the time[262].

Concurrent with this, the conclusion of the war was followed by the rise of paramilitary formations known as the Freikorps, composed of disillusioned, nationalist German veterans. Despite being billed initially as a German-sponsored defence against Bolshevism, their de facto agenda quickly became focused on maintaining imperialist interests and racial hierarchies in the new Baltic republics. A good illustrative example was when General Rüdiger von der Goltz's Freikorps forces defied Berlin orders in May 1919 to suppress the newly established Latvian Republic, a mission condemned by the SPD publication, Vorwärts who instead defended Latvian independence in an article ironically titled "An eviction notice from Latvia"[263]. It reflected an "unbridgeable" chasm between nationalist militarism and the social-democratic left[264]. Ebert and SPD would refuse their call for further support amidst their military defeats against the new free republics, causing von der Goltz to call it a "betrayal"[265].

After their defeats in Estonia and Latvia, thousands of Baltic Germans and Freikorps soldiers returned to Germany. Their homecoming galvanised a radicalised nationalist right that believed it had been betrayed by the Weimar state. Baltic Germans were particularly prone to internalise and propagate the "stab-in-the-back" (Dolchstoßlegende) myth, asserting that military defeat had resulted from political betrayal by socialists, liberals, and Jews, to rationalise their defeat against Latvians and Estonians[266]. It had an additional grievance in their midst: the "Republic betrayal" that sacrificed German demands in the East, a legend that von der Goltz himself help expand with his memoirs in the Baltic. Nationalist resentments were compounded by the mass flight of hundreds of thousands of Germans from territories lost to the reconstituted Polish Republic, leading to a sense of "cultural shame."[267]. These tendencies directly contributed to the radicalisation of nationalist politics in the post-war years, as parties like the German National People's Party (DNVP) exploited this myth of betrayal and defeat. The DNVP provided a political haven to disillusioned groups, including former Freikorps fighters, Pan-German League veterans, and Germans who had been dislocated from the East, so that the collapse of Mitteleuropa was

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[262] *Hamburger Volkszeitung: kommunistische Tageszeitung für Hamburg und Umgebung* (Hamburg), May 31, 1919, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*
[263] "Eine Note zur Räumung Lettland," *Vorwärts* (Berlin), June 11, 1919, *Deutsches Zeitungsportal*, accessed June 23, 202
[264] Hiden, J. W. "The Baltic Germans and German Policy towards Latvia after 1918." *The Historical Journal* 13, no. 2 (1970): 295–317. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637940.
[265] Von der Goltz p.265
[266]Sammartino, Annemarie "'We Who Suffered Most': The Immigration of Germans from Poland." In *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914–1922*, 96–119. Cornell University Press, 2010.
[267] Sammartino, Annemarie H.. ""Now We Were the Border": The Freikorps Baltic Campaign" In *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914–1922*, 45-70. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801471193-005

rendered an ideological cornerstone for intensely polarised post-war politics and the resurrection of the radical right[268].

[268] John Hiden, *The Baltic States and Weimar Ostpolitik*, 1987, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511523670.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the project of Mitteleuropa, whether federalist or annexationalist, was doomed to fail, and its failure would eventually harm the dynamics of German party politics, further increasing the polarisation in the country. As this thesis has shown, a debate between two lines of thought, one arguing for a multicultural pseudo-federation and another arguing for an expansionist empire with the aspiration of ethnic cleansing, was in the end just different flavours of imperialism, both aiming for economic exploitation and dominance over other people. The dissonance between this and reality would contribute to the collapse of German politics.

This thesis has demonstrated that the underlying dissonance of the Mitteleuropa project, between annexationist and federalist visions, further destabilised German politics during the First World War period. Far from a coherent geopolitical strategy, Mitteleuropa became an ideologically contested space with competing readings controlling Germany's occupation policies and fueling internal fractures. While planners such as Friedrich Naumann envisioned Mitteleuropa as a benign union built on economic unification and enlightened German leadership, in the field, the military command and Pan-German League sought outright control, Germanisation, and racial recasting of Eastern Europe. However, while both of these lines of understanding further increased polarisation, the key issue at hand is that both projects failed in their own right.

The discrepancy between ideological hope and administrative fact was most nakedly revealed in Germany's occupation of provinces such as Ober Ost, Poland, and Ukraine. There, self-contradictory policies, alternating between promises of self-determination and utilitarian exploitation, exposed the ideological contradiction at the heart of Germany's Eastern policy. The occupation regimes, especially under Ludendorff and Hindenburg, increasingly became exercises in colonial enterprises, more akin to Paul de Lagarde's ethnonationalist fantasy than Naumann's federative ideal. At the same time, however, Naumann’s vision, seen in the policies made by his colleagues Kuhlmann and Rohrbach, proved to be equally fruitless. Despite his strong economic and legal research, the fact is that Naumann had completely failed in understanding the cultural and political agency that he wanted to liberate. In Ukraine, a series of mistakes by both military and civilian administrators, who claimed to want to

Domestically, Mitteleuropa became a polemical lightning rod of German political discourse. As the war dragged on and economic gain and control of the continent failed to materialise, the idea of Mitteleuropa polarised the Reichstag ideologically. Liberals and centrist socialists who initially had backed the concept as a vehicle for reform and international cooperation were disillusioned by the belligerent imperial designs of the

military. Conservatives and nationalist forces, on the other hand, increasingly embraced expansionist ideology and dismissed any yielding of sovereignty to the conquered peoples. This polarisation deepened in the latter years of the war, especially after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which turned Germany's eastern aspirations into a practical and ideological burden rather than an objective to unite them.

Ultimately, the failure of Mitteleuropa was not only strategic but symbolic. It symbolised the broader crisis of German political identity, divided between reactionary imperial ambition and novel challenges to democratisation. It led to a strife between those supporting extractionist imperialism and those supporting paternalistic imperialism, in the end, both failing to understand the agencies of those whom they conquered. The inability to reconcile these visions within the Mitteleuropa context replicated the breakdown of the German political landscape. As this thesis has argued, the conflict within the Mitteleuropa concept was not only symptomatic of political polarisation but actively fostered it. The internal conflicts of German war aims exposed the limits of the politics of consensus and helped destroy the imperial order in 1918. Ideological disputes over Mitteleuropa would echo through the Weimar period, shaping debate over Germany's position in Europe and leaving behind a fractured political culture.

The thesis's central historiographical contribution is its integrated analysis of how intellectual traditions, those of the concept of Mitteleuropa in particular, were in conversation with German foreign and military policy during the First World War, and how these interactions in turn impacted the internal dynamics of party politics back home. While previous studies have had a tendency to consider these areas in isolation from one another, this thesis offers a synthesised analytical framework that combines ideological production, wartime occupation policy, and political polarisation in the German Empire. This kind of synthesis is not available in the literature, where work on wartime strategy, intellectual history, and party development is generally treated independently of one another.

This thesis contributes to our overall understanding of German war aims by situating them within pre-war ideological debates and intra-war parliamentary discussions. In tracing the intellectual genesis of the Mitteleuropa project, from the economic plans of List and Frantz to the wartime pragmatism of Naumann, it demonstrates how 19th-century economic federalist ideas were adapted, and at times distorted, to serve expansionist or integrative agendas in the East. Moreover, it gives focused territorial priority to areas that have either been marginalised or dealt with in a piecemeal fashion. While historians such as Fischer, Kaufman, and Liulevicius have examined German occupation policies and ambitions in Eastern Europe, they do so either by focusing on high-level diplomatic history or by administrative aspects of occupation without specifically linking them to the competing ideological visions of Mitteleuropa. Conversely, authors like Meyer and Brechtefeld, who

have been prolific on the idea of Mitteleuropa, downplay the role of Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic provinces to debate German-Austrian relations. This thesis aims to bridge that gap, bringing Fischer's political realism into dialogue with Meyer's ideological emphasis, by exploring how these territorial theatres emerged as crucial testing grounds for the rival federalist and annexationist designs for German hegemony.

A second significant contribution is the thesis's discussion of domestic polarisation. Whereas the collapse of political consensus in 1918 has hitherto been explained mainly in terms of the military situation, the British blockade, and mass casualties, this dissertation shows that the Eastern campaigns, particularly the collapse of the Brotfrieden (Bread Peace) with Ukraine and the contradictions of German offers of self-determination, constituted a significant and hitherto underappreciated contributory factor. Occupation policies, forced labour schemes, and the failure to fulfil promises of sovereignty to native populations provoked both domestic moral unease and foreign political blowback, fueling the fissures in German parties. The arguments over the East's future, therefore, did not simply express ideological inclinations but exacerbated party fragmentation and helped to create the preconditions for the November Revolution.

This thesis has followed the intellectual and political development of Mitteleuropa throughout the First World War, connecting German ideological debates to occupation policy and party polarisation. But the end of the war and the fall of Mitteleuropa as a realised imperial enterprise marked not a conclusion, but a development of the ideas that had propelled the German war imagination. The immediate aftermath of the war—under the Weimar Republic and the Second Polish Republic's simultaneous founding—is a seminal if overlooked extension of these currents, fertile ground for future exploration.

On the one hand, Gustav Stresemann would try to continue the ideas of a federalist Mitteleuropa differently. Stresemann continued actively to seek a type of Mitteleuropa through diplomacy and economic measures in the newly independent states of Central Europe. His time as Foreign Minister (1923-1929) involved efforts at creating regional economic ties throughout Central and Eastern Europe, an indirect continuation of Naumann's schemes. Future research could look to identify how war and pre-war thought impelled these initiatives, especially via institutions like the Mitteleuropäischer Wirtschaftsta (Central European Economic Conference), and its role in reconfiguring a German hegemony through soft power could also build on this study[269].

On the other hand, Józef Piłsudski's leadership in Poland presented a rival vision: the Intermarium, a federation of newly independent Central and Eastern European states, aimed to counterbalance both German and Russian power, advocating regional cooperation based

[269] Stephen G. Gross, *Export Empire*, 2015,

on equality, not hierarchy, though still with an indirect Polish guidance[270]. The conceptual and geopolitical competition between Intermarium and Mitteleuropa deserves greater scholarship, particularly with regard to their impacts on postwar foreign policies and regional alignments. While both aimed at unifying Central Europe, they differed considerably in assumptions about leadership, sovereignty, and national identity. A comparative study of the two paradigms would offer a deeper understanding of how the postwar order in East-Central Europe was contested and reconstituted[271].

This dissertation also provides a template for examining how wartime expansionist policies reshaped the domestic political terrain, an approach equally useful comparatively. The interrelations among foreign policy ends, military occupation, and domestic party realignments remain relevant to explaining political change in other historical and geographical contexts.

By following the trajectory of Mitteleuropa from intellectual project to war aim to divide memory, this thesis opens the way for interdisciplinary research into how unsuccessful imperial ideas persist in economic policies, regional institutions, and nationalist mythologies. Further research will be required in tracing these mutations and their enduring implications for both Central Europe and the international system as a whole.

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[270] Ostap Kushnir, "The Intermarium as a Pivotal Geopolitical Buzzword," *East/West Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 8, no. 2 (October 18, 2021): 7–27, https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus448.

[271] Schmidt, Andrea. "From Intermarium To The Three Seas Initiative – Regional Integrations In Central And Eastern Europe And The Hungarian Foreign Policy." *Politeja*, no. 51/6 (2017): 165–90. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26564308.

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