

Beseler, Hans von

By [Jesse Kauffman](#)



Hans Hartwig von Beseler (1850-1921)

German General Hans von Beseler was named German Military Governor of Congress Poland in 1915. He remained in this position until the end of the war.

Koch, Johannes: v. Beseler, drawing, n.p., 1915; source: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin,

<http://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN770486738>, via Europeana 1914-1918,

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Beseler, *Hans Hartwig von*

German general

Born 27 April 1850 in Greifswald, Germany

Died 20 December 1921 in Neubabelsberg, Germany

Summary

Hans Hartwig von Beseler was a German general and military engineer who oversaw the conquest of several fortresses early in the war. He was then named commander of German-occupied Poland, a post he held until the end of the war.

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Career before the War

Hans Hartwig von Beseler (1850-1921) was born in Greifswald, [Germany](#), to a well-known family of the educated middle class. Inspired by the northern German Protestant [nationalism](#) that swept through Prussia during his youth, he yearned for a military career and joined the army as a military engineer in 1868. Serving in a variety of command and staff positions over the next several decades, Beseler, who was ennobled in 1904, was considered as a possible successor to [Alfred von Schlieffen \(1833-1913\)](#) as chief of the general staff. He was ultimately not chosen and was forced to retire in 1910. Two years later, he took up a seat in the Prussian house of lords.

Victor of Antwerp and Governor-General

When the war broke out, Beseler was recalled to duty and placed in command of a reserve corps. Beseler subsequently directed the operations that resulted in the German capture of the fortresses of Antwerp and Modlin (Russian Novogeorgievsk). In mid-1915, German armies conquered vast stretches of Russian territory, including its pre-war Polish territories. [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) appointed Beseler as [governor-general](#) of the portion of this territory [occupied](#) by Germany ([Austria](#) also occupied a part of pre-war Russian [Poland](#)). In this capacity, Beseler enjoyed wide autonomy and answered only to the emperor. Beseler used his influence to consistently push Berlin to back the restoration of a Polish state in Central Europe under German control. He insisted that this state's foreign and military policy would be under strict German control (he harbored a lifelong distrust of Austria) but would be otherwise autonomous. Beseler worked to realize this vision during the war by supporting the creation of numerous cultural and administrative bodies, such as Warsaw University and Polish city councils, that were intended to serve as the foundations of the post-war Polish state. Beseler was also instrumental in convincing the Central Powers to issue their 5 November 1916 declaration of support for the restoration of Polish statehood. This put him at odds with [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#), who sought to repress Polish nationalism in the northern [occupation zone](#) known as [Ober Ost](#). In many respects, however, Beseler's policy was similar to that pursued by the German commander in [occupied Belgium](#), [Moritz von](#)

[Bissing \(1844-1917\)](#), who supported the aspirations of Flemish-speaking nationalists.

Post-war Controversy, Enduring Importance

When the war ended, armed Polish insurgents disarmed the German occupiers and expelled them from Polish territory. Beseler fled back to Germany, which aroused accusations of desertion. Beseler's reputation underwent a further assault when the [Treaty of Versailles](#) awarded parts of the erstwhile German borderlands to the new Polish state. Beseler was accused of causing this by being too accommodating and liberal in his dealings with the Poles. He died in December 1921. Though he failed in his attempt to create a new political order in central Europe, Beseler is significant because his conduct stands in stark contrast to his National Socialist successors in Poland, who ruled with murderous brutality barely a generation later.

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- [Kauffman, Jesse: **Elusive alliance. The German occupation of Poland in World War I**, Cambridge, 2015: Harvard University Press.](#)
- [Spät, Robert Michael: **Für eine gemeinsame deutsch-polnische Zukunft? Hans Hartwig von Beseler als Generalgouverneur in Polen 1915-1918**, in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 58, 2009, pp. 469-500.](#)
- [Stempin, Arkadiusz: **Próba 'moralnego podboju' Polski przez Cesarstwo Niemieckie w latach I wojny światowej \(Imperial Germany's attempt at a 'moral conquest' of Poland during the First World War\)**, Warsaw, 2013: Wydawnictwo Neriton.](#)

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External Links

- [Beseler, Hans von: Kameraden!, pamphlet, Warsaw, September 1918 \(Europeana 1914-1918\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Polens weißer Aar, in: Kladderadatsch, 19 November 1916, p. 683 \(Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Proclamation of the Act of 5 November 1916, newspaper article, The Times, 6 November 1916 \(Die Zentrale für Unterrichtsmedien im Internet e.V.\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Proclamation of the new Kingdom of Poland, Warsaw, 5 November 1916 \(Filmportal\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Spät, Robert Michael: Für eine gemeinsame deutsch-polnische Zukunft? Hans Hartwig von Beseler als Generalgouverneur in Polen 1915-1918, in: Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung 58, 2009, pp. 469-500 \(Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung\) \(Article\)](#)

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