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Governments, Parliaments and Parties; Political Movements and Protostate Formation (East Central Europe)

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Political movements in Poland and the Baltics were heavily influenced by the German occupation, the Russian Revolution, and the political agency of their diasporas. While the establishment of an independent Polish State became a war aim of the Entente over the course of the war, the independence of the Baltic States remained contentious. As a result of the political turmoil caused by the collapse of empires in East Central Europe, political developments in Poland and the Baltic States were ridden by internal political divisions, overlapping claims, and increasing territorial revisionism. Federalist concepts lost significance as compared to ethnocentric concepts of statehood.

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Introduction

Different levels of national self-identification and political aspirations existed among the different ethnic groups living in the East Central European peripheries of the multinational empires. National activists (among them teachers, clergymen, and journalists) attempted to instil a sense of national

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identity among those segments of the population they considered part of their nation. But many members of the lower classes – especially the peasantry – remained indifferent to these efforts and continued to identify themselves in religious and regional terms. The problem of national identity and aspirations was particularly troublesome for the numerous Jewish populations of the region. German and Russian authorities conducted a policy of unification of their borderlands with the rest of their territories. The existing political regime, even in [Russia](#), was allowed after 1906 to form political parties and participate in parliamentary activity.

The end of World War I saw the emergence of independent states in the former imperial peripheries of East Central Europe. The process of establishing, organizing, and consolidating these states started in 1916 with the Act of 5 November, which envisioned the creation of a semi-independent Polish State, continued under German tutelage with the signing of the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) in early 1918. This process changed course significantly with the German defeat as the consolidation of the new states now depended on the course of the [Polish-Soviet War](#) and the support of the Western Entente. The [Riga Peace Treaty](#), signed in March 1921, consolidated the territories of the new states.

Poland

Despite the fact that [Poland](#) had vanished from the political map of Europe at the end of the 18th century, Poles remained politically active in the frameworks given by multinational empires in East Central Europe. Before 1914, almost all Polish parties, with the exception of radical social democrats in Russian Poland (SDKPiL), stressed the necessity of national solidarity, demanded an improvement in the position of Poles within existing states, and more or less openly declared themselves in favour of re-establishing an independent Poland.

The National Democrats, popular especially among the middle class, endeavoured to mobilise the lower classes of Polish society (peasants, workers) under a national solidarity principle and to strengthen their national identity. The Polish Socialist Party (PPS) combined social postulates with the idea of regaining their own statehood. Peasants, who gradually emancipated themselves from the traditional patronage of landowners and the Catholic clergy, apart from demanding land reform and a more even distribution of public burdens, acknowledged the necessity of the national cause. Conservatives and liberals lost momentum and influence in favour of these more radical and democratic trends in the political scene.

Polish politicians took an active part in the political life of their states by trying to defend their national rights in the central and regional parliaments (the Prussian *Landtag* and the *Sejm Krajowy* in [Lwów/Lemberg](#)). Due to the small number of Polish deputies (a dozen or more in the German *Reichstag* and the Russian [Duma](#)), their influence on the state politics remained very limited.^[1] The strength the Polish deputies enjoyed in the Austrian *Reichsrat* was due to their attachment to the pro-government fractions. Many Polish conservatives attained the highest state positions, such as prime

minister, minister of finance, and minister of foreign affairs.^[2] Nevertheless, Poles' parliamentary activity prior to 1914, with the cooperation of the Polish [press](#) and different social organisations, was more effective in mobilising Polish society and maintaining a national identity than in gaining real national concession from the central governments.

From the very beginning of the war, Polish public opinion and parties were divided between pro-Central Powers and pro-Entente options. The roles of coordination centres were assumed by the Supreme National Committee (*Naczelny Komitet Narodowy*) in Cracow and the Polish National Committee (*Polski Komitet Narodowy*) in Warsaw, which, after 1915, was relocated to Petrograd. In particular, during the second phase of the war, the role of the unofficial, exiled government in Paris, the Polish National Committee (*Polski Komitet Narodowy*), became crucial for the Polish cause.^[3]

The [occupation](#) of the whole of Russian Poland in late summer 1915, and the declaration of the rebuilding of the Polish Kingdom announced by both of the Central Powers' emperors in November 1916, dramatically changed this situation. Polish society in former Russian Poland was divided into the so-called "activists" (*aktywiści*), who were ready to cooperate with occupants under the condition of concessions to the Polish cause, and the so-called "passivists" (*pasywiści*), who distanced themselves from the new rulers. In December 1915, [Józef Piłsudski \(1867-1935\)](#) decided to establish his political agenda, named the Central National Committee (*Centralny Komitet Narodowy*), in occupied Russian Poland. But only a few leftist parties were represented there.^[4] Conservatives and national democrats bided their time and observed the developments on the fronts, establishing the Inter-Party Political Circle (*Międzypartyjne Koło Polityczne*) in October 1915.^[5] Gradually, after the Act of 5 November and, later, the fall of tsarism in Russia, conservatives became more willing to cooperate with the Central Powers. These politicians were nominated to the Provisional State Council (*Tymczasowa Rada Stanu*) in January 1917 and the Regency Council (*Rada Regencyjna*) in September 1917. Both bodies remained almost powerless.

At the beginning of the First World War, no Poles could even imagine that war would take a course so favorable to Polish national aspirations. As a result of this conflict, the three regimes which had partitioned Poland at the very end of 18th century [collapsed](#), dissolved, and ceased to exist. This paved the way for a totally independent and united Poland. In the summer of 1914, one could only dream of an autonomous and united Poland within Russia or [Austria-Hungary](#). In the first two years of the war, Poles tried to unite all Polish territories under Austro-Hungarian or Russian authority.

The political situation in Poland stabilised in January 1919. The Regency Council dissolved in November 1918, leading Piłsudski to become the provisional head of the new state. As a former collaborator of the Central Powers, Piłsudski was treated with distrust in London and Paris, and so [Ignacy Paderewski \(1860-1941\)](#) was nominated, who was well-known by the Western allies, to be the new Polish prime minister. This decision helped secure the international recognition of the authorities in Warsaw, a crucial step before the beginning of the [Paris Peace Conference](#). At the end of January 1919, a first parliamentary election took place in the areas controlled by the Polish political

institution. Territories which remained outside the control of Polish authority (Wielkopolska/Great Poland region, Pomerania, East Galicia), but were regarded as Polish, were represented in the new parliament by deputies elected to the Austrian and German parliament bodies before 1914. The main task of this constituent assembly (*Sejm Ustawodawczy*) was to work out a constitution, which would take effect in March 1921. The outcome of this election confirmed the radicalization of the Polish public opinion: the parliament was dominated by National Democrats, socialists, and peasant politicians.

The gradually changing political atmosphere, favourable to the idea of the rebuilding of the Polish state, opened a discussion regarding the borders of the future state. For many Poles, the only acceptable border was the one prior to 1772, before the first partition of the First Republic. This standpoint did not, however, take into account the fact of national emancipation and the political aspiration of the nations located between the Polish and Russian ethnic territories. Nor did it take into account the fact that many areas of the First Polish Republic had lost their Polish character.

Two conceptions of international order in East Central Europe were under discussion: the first one, called “federalist”, was promoted by Piłsudski. It assumed the building of a federation of nations living between the Baltic and Black seas (so-called *Międzymorze*, “inter-seas region”). This referred to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before 1772 and, more broadly, to the period in the 16th century when many countries of that region had been ruled by the Jagiellonian dynasty. The realization of this project would grant the nations of the region freedom from Russian and/or German claims of domination. Piłsudski was willing to accept smaller territorial acquisitions in the east, which would establish a chain of national states politically and militarily linked to (and to some extent dependent upon) Poland and separate from Bolshevik Russia. For that reason, Poland supported – in vain – the establishment of a [Ukrainian state](#) on the terrain east of the Zbrucz River.^[6]

The competing conception of [Roman Dmowski \(1864-1939\)](#), labeled as “incorporational”, finally won out. Dmowski advocated the incorporation of as many territories in the east as possible and the Polonization of national minorities. Additionally, on the basis of the right to self-determination, he demanded the incorporation of ethnic Polish territories in Prussian Poland, where Poles represented – in the contrast to the *kresy wschodnie* (eastern borderland) – the lower social strata. Dmowski furthermore intended to incorporate a part of Silesia, which the Polish state had lost in the 14th century, and the Masuria region, which had never belonged to Poland.^[7]

One reason for the failure of the federalist conception was, clearly and inarguably, the lack of interest of the neighbouring nations. These were striving to build their own nation states in order to emancipate themselves from – among other things – Polish hegemony, which could endanger their new identity and sovereignty. As a result of Peace of Riga, which ended the Polish-Soviet War in March 1921, Ukrainian and [Belarusian](#) terrains were finally divided between Poland and the Soviet Union, and the Vilnius (Wilno) region was incorporated into Poland in 1922.^[8]

The Baltics

The emergence of statehood in the Baltics started out very differently for [Lithuania](#), [Latvia](#), and [Estonia](#), but eventually all three states had to defend and consolidate their territories and political organizations within the same context: the [Russian Civil War](#) and the Polish-Soviet War.

The political parties in the Baltics had their roots mainly in the [Russian Revolution of 1905](#) and the years immediately preceding it. The oldest political parties with a clear regional roots were social democrats, with the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (*Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija*) having been founded in 1896, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Latvijas Sociāldemokrātiskā Strādnieku Partija*) in 1904 (although it was a merger of two regional parties established in 1901 and 1902), and the Estonian Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Eesti Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Tööliste Partei*) in 1905.^[9]

Only slightly later did bourgeois parties with national agendas emerge, containing mostly members of the intelligentsia, many of whom were from peasant families. The Latvian Democratic Party (*Latviešu Demokrātiskā partija*) and the Estonian Progressive People's Party (*Eesti Rahvameelne Educerakond*) were founded in 1905, the Lithuanian Democratic Party (*Lietuvių demokratų partija*) in 1906.^[10]

In general, the reach of political parties in the Russian Empire's northwest was rather limited, with the social democrats being the only parties that exerted a certain political attraction. Parties served more as interest groups around political newspapers than as real political parties.^[11] However, although only few of their representatives were voted into the Imperial Duma, the new parliament served as an important testing ground for politicians and was thus crucial for the formation of the national political elites.^[12]

When the Germans occupied Lithuania in 1915, the majority of the intelligentsia left with the retreating Russian army. The Russian city of Voronež became a centre for Lithuanian [refugees](#), where they developed ideas of Lithuanian [nationalism](#) and statehood. By 1917, the political lines there were divided between supporters of Bolshevism and those of the Lithuanian War Relief Committee, the latter of which demanded autonomy, and was increasingly recognised as a unified political Lithuanian voice by Russian intellectuals.^[13]

When the German army invaded Courland, Latvian intellectuals and political activists partly went to Riga and partly retreated into Russia, with members across the whole political spectrum increasingly demanding a model of an autonomous Latvia within a Russian state. A large number of Latvian intellectuals gathered around the Latvian Central Welfare Committee in Petrograd. Particularly influential was a group of Latvians who had fled to Moscow, founding there the Latvian National Democratic Party (*Latviešu Nacionāldemokrātu partija*) in 1917.^[14]

Lithuania and Courland remained occupied for the whole remaining period of the war, forming,

together with the region around Białystok and Grodno, the [Ober Ost](#) military state. The military administration did not allow any political participation by the local intelligentsia and forbade any political activity, under which it also subsumed cultural and educational activities such as the founding of new schools. In general, Ober Ost officials regarded the Lithuanian population as unfit for political self-rule and expected them to be grateful for a German elite that would save them from absorption into Polish culture and at the same time furnish them with an elaborate and refined German political culture.^[15] Courland was to be prepared for annexation into the German Empire.^[16]

In Estonia and the unoccupied part of Latvia, demands for autonomy or even independence intensified with the Russian Revolutions of February and October 1917. When the [Provisional Government](#) restored the Finnish constitution on 6 March 1917, Estonian politicians started pushing for extensive reforms, including the unification of Estonia governorate with the northern part of Livonia governorate to include one administrative territorial unit of mostly ethnic Estonians, the introduction of local self-government, and the abolishment of Baltic-German diets. These demands were met on 30 March. In Riga, a convention of Latvian political parties on 22 July 1917 showed that all political forces – including socialists – favoured an autonomous Latvia within a democratic Russia. By this point, however, the Latvian National Democratic Party in Moscow was already advocating an independent Latvian State.^[17]

By this time, the German occupants had begun seeing a Lithuanian state, which was tied closely to the [German Empire](#), as a useful counterweight to a future Polish state, and thus allowed Lithuanian activists to form a state council (*Taryba*) in September 1917, the aim of which was the creation of a Lithuanian state. Acting on its own authority, the Council declared independence on 16 February 1918. In the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on 3 March, Soviet Russia ceded substantial parts of the imperial western periphery to Germany, among them the territories covering today's Ukraine and the later Baltic States. According to German plans, Lithuania was to be a semi-independent state with a sovereign of German descent (as were the other new states to be created in the region). On 23 March, Germany recognised Lithuanian statehood, ignoring, however, the council's declaration of independence. On 11 July 1918, [Wilhelm Karl von Urach \(1864–1918\)](#) was proclaimed King Mindaugas II of Lithuania, but the further developments of the war prevented him from ever commencing his reign.^[18]

After the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia, a Provincial Assembly (*Maapäev*) was formed in Estonia on 28 November 1917, which seized the opportunity of the retreat of the Bolshevik army to proclaim an independent Estonian state on 24 February 1918. This declaration became an important point of reference for future claims to the recognition of Estonian statehood. The next day, Tallinn was occupied by German troops. With the occupation, Latvian and Estonian local political activities ground to a halt, as the military administration cooperated exclusively with the Baltic German nobility.^[19]

The German defeat in November 1918, the ensuing annulment of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, and the

ongoing Civil War in Russia offered political activists in the region the historic opportunity to establish independent states based on the formerly marginalised, mostly peasant, majority ethnic groups. The Latvian People's Council (*Tautas padome*) declared independence on 18 November 1918. While a multitude of state and territorial orders had been discussed over the course of the war, including a Lithuanian-Latvian federation, a new federal state in the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, or a Polish-Lithuanian federation,^[20] all three states were proclaimed as democratic republics within – at least theoretically – ethnically defined borders and with relatively pronounced laws of minority protection – political features necessary not least because support was needed from the Western Entente against Bolsheviks, the White Armies, and the *Freikorps*.^[21] In Lithuania, Christian democrats and agrarianists emerged strongest from the elections for a constituent assembly (14-15 April 1920), while in Latvia (17-18 April 1920) and Estonia (5-7 April 1920), social democrats were the strongest parties, with agrarianists second.

The territories of the new states were officially consolidated in peace treaties with Bolshevik Russia, signed on 2 February (Estonia) in Tartu, 12 July (Lithuania) in Moscow, and 11 August 1920 (Latvia) in Riga, although it remains disputable whether these would have remained in effect had the Polish-Soviet War not been decided in Poland's favour. The territory of Lithuania, however, delineated at its southern border by the Suwałki Agreement with Poland (7 October 1920) remained disputed for the whole interwar period, as a professedly renegade Polish army occupied Vilnius, claimed by Lithuania as capital city, on 9 October, while Lithuania annexed the East Prussian Klaipėda region in 1923, thus poisoning Lithuanian-German relations.^[22]

The Western Entente, having become the main ally for the emerging states after the German defeat, hesitated to support Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian statehood. As opposed to Poland, this had never been discussed during the war, as the diaspora of these nations was smaller than the Polish and also less politicised and less well-connected with the centres of power in Western Europe and the USA. Moreover, against the backdrop of territorial claims made by an increasing number of seemingly obscure groups, and soaring ethnic violence against minority groups (especially Jews), politicians in France, Great Britain and the USA grew ever more critical of the concept of the self-determination of nations.^[23] At the same time, anti-Bolshevism grew, and the Western Entente's politicians strengthened their support of the White Armies and Russian territorial integrity. Only in 1922, after accepting the White defeat and the Bolsheviks' consolidation of power, did the Entente recognise the Baltic states *de jure* as independent republics.^[24]

Conclusion

The war plans of the victorious powers included reshaping the political map of Europe according to republicanism and democracy, regarding national self-determination and sovereignty as fundamental to a new, post-war order. The shaping of a new post-war territorial order in East Central Europe took place amidst the different, mutually exclusive territorial claims, military operations, and paramilitary

[violence](#) in which conflicting sides used sets of historical, legal, religious, economic, and strategic arguments. It was established finally in the early 1920s as a result of many factors: the military outcome of the First World War, the break-up of multinational empires, the Russian revolutions, decisions made by victors during and after the Paris Peace Conference,^[25] military clashes,^[26] the fiasco of building independent Ukrainian and Belorussian states, political negotiations and, last but not least, plebiscites (Masuria, Silesia).

Almost no party was fully satisfied with this outcome, and the new territorial order remained very fragile and questioned by many states, which regarded them as temporary. As a result, common expectations of land reform and more socially-oriented policies could not be easily realised in these politically unstable countries.

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