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**Territorial Borders Between Street Demonstrations
and International Space**

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Territorial Borders between Street Demonstrations and International Space

In 1918-19, Danzig – the county capital of West Prussia – suddenly found itself in the position of being a contested German-Polish borderland. The Poles maintained that the city had been promised them by Wilson. This surprised and outraged German Danzigers, who maintained that Danzig was, and could be, nothing but German. To be sure, there had always been a sizeable Polish minority in West Prussia (of about 35%), but this had not been associated with state borders between Germany and Poland. *Those* (according to contemporary perceptions) went between Germany and far-off, Russia-dominated Congress Poland. Further, Danzig itself was, at the 1910 census, at least 90% German-speaking. Its politics, cultural and media life had been oriented towards Berlin; it was securely tucked into the Prussian and German state school, army, political and administrative system.

But now, after the loss of the War, all had changed. The city was torn loose from the secure embrace of the state; Berlin was no longer a power centre. The Emperor was gone, the army defeated, revolutionaries marched in the streets. Danzig, too, was (as one conservative newspaper put it) flung “down into an ocean of passions“, into poverty and disorder.¹ Editors lamented aloud. “Within every single person, there is chaos. /.../ How will this life be?”² “We still stand in the middle of the maelstrom of events, which like surging ocean waves have washed through the hours of the last days.” It was all “too new and sudden, too ponderous and powerful”, to allow of any sense of the future.³

Danzig was in a particularly insecure position. It was, while the Versailles victors decided its fate, a city up-for-grabs – one around whom national borders were melting. It had, it seemed, lost its political and social place. Would it sink beneath A flood of “alien greed”?

¹ *Danziger Neueste Nachrichten* 7 Nov. 1918.

² *Danziger Zeitung* 17 Nov. 1918, morning edition.

³ The last phrase, “Gang und Umfang unser Tuns und Lassens”, has no direct English equivalent. *Danziger Neueste Nachrichten* 11 Nov. 1918.

As one newspaper essayist put it, before, in 1914 - "Golden lay the sun's rays over the Danzig bay." Suddenly:

Foreign sounds force themselves on my ear. Noisily a group of showily dressed people settle down close to me. A youth stretches, while emitting a flow of words, with a lordly gesture, his arm over the sea and land, as if he wanted to take possession of it. Quietly smiling I thought, Danzig rests securely in the powerful protection of the German Empire. The fatherland will know how to protect its treasure between sea and green-crowned hills.⁴

(The reader will recognise the anti-Semitic overtones in this description of illicit, aggressive and vulgar bodies.)

And today. Under a grey winter sky the Polish flood is raging against the German *Ostmark* and is also seeking to embrace our dear Danzig with its greedy arms. /.../ And higher and higher spills the hostile flood. If we do not find salvation, Danzig also must sink under the Polish waves.⁵

Danzig Germans responded with outrage. "We are German and want to stay German!" Neither city nor inhabitants could be "given over" to the "rapacious Poles". Arguments were mobilized; maps, statistical tables and official histories sent off to Versailles. But arguments based on history, law and statistics had a tendency to become detailed and dry. Moreover, they could all be contested, and the whole referred to opposing experts. Something more direct was needed. But what?

⁴ *Danziger Zeitung* 20 Dec. 1918, evening edition.

⁵ Ibid.

There were, it seems, three issues at stake. First, how was a direct protest to be formulated – through what channels? Second, what was the intended audience – who would be listening? And third, given the form and forum of the protest, how did one go about making one's *own* protest the “truth” of the matter, in order effectively and irrevocably to *prove* one's case?

One can formulate these questions as a matter of place. German Danzigers had, when threatened during the war, turned to the German state for help. They were, after all, entitled to protection as part of the “imagined community” of national comrades, which also included an “imagined geography” of inviolable state borders. But this geography had become meaningless: the state was defeated, the borders fluid. Anchors in other, virtual spaces were also lost, including a place in the patriarchal German family. This familial map of belonging had been popular during the war, as the Kaiser had called on his “sons”, to rally “as brothers”, on behalf of the Fatherland. This had been powerful and emotional: in August 1914, Danzig's newspapers had given detailed accounts of public demonstrations of fervent patriotism. Thousands (the newspapers reported) had greeted the Kaiser's speech with “indescribable cheering”,⁶ as well as thunderous ovations, cheers and patriotic songs.⁷

Stories of this type of mass, emotional ritual, spread by newspapers throughout Germany, had been a powerful method of placing even provincial towns in the centre of the “German family's” emotional heart. Now, the patriarchal “family” was in disarray - and few non-workers responded to the newly proffered alternative, that of socialist brotherhood. Nonetheless, newspaper stories of mass, ritualized, highly emotional open-air meetings, spread nation-wide, had proven themselves effective propaganda in establishing images of communal essence. It was to such tools that Danzigers now turned: this was the *form* in which their essential “Germanness” would (it was hoped) be most effectively displayed. It would be

⁶ *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung* 3 August 1914.

⁷ *Danziger Neueste Nachrichten* 1 August 1914.

the business of Danzig voluntary and political associations, working in close collaboration with Danzig newspapers, to put on massive, highly emotional and highly ritualized mass, open-air meetings, to display (to quote a Danzig newspaper) “Danzig standing as one man: we will and must remain German”.

But for whose was this to be (so to speak) staged? Who was the intended audience? It was necessary to try to locate Danzig within a new power grid which would make evident how impossible it would be that this German city ever become part of Poland. Here, Danzig’s newspapers could turn, first, to the Allied victors, assembled in Versailles. The cease-fire conditions, however, quickly made it clear that the peace would be (as the Germans put it) “dictated” rather than negotiated. But Versailles might be influenced by other forces. One could appeal to them directly; and many were the telegrams that were sent to Wilson and Versailles from German protest meetings. These were often couched in very moral terms, as Danzig patriots (belatedly) started citing laws of international justice. They frequently reminded audiences that Wilson himself had advanced the principle of self-determination, something that “should” make it impossible, in the name of justice, to give Danzig over to Poland.

But if Wilson did not listen? Was there another court of justice, another audience to whom to appeal? Here, Danzig politicians and publicists found themselves openly turning to international public opinion. Surely the world would not passively acquiesce in an open violation of the basic tenets of self-determination, of historical justice? Surely the victors at Versailles would heed its verdict? It was a matter, here, of placing Danzig *not* in a German imagined geography, but in a virtual, transnational geography of international justice. The most effective speakers in this virtual geography – those who were to judge the case, and voice the verdict – were, in effect, the press.

This brought the newspapers into a central position. It was the job of Danzig newspapers to tell the truth, so as to influence international public opinion – *their* job to print stories about Danzig’s German essence. The means of demonstrating Danzig’s German essence was, it was agreed, mass public meetings; it was up to editors to make sure that these were noticed, and reproduced, by influential international newspapers. Danzig newspapers rose to the occasion. They helped prepare the rhetorical ground for, arrange, advertise, run, and then provide grandiose reports on, the protest meetings Danzigers now proceeded to hold. These were to tell (as meeting speakers put it) to “the world, and not least the decision-makers in Versailles, that Danzig is and must remain German” – for “surely the world would not look on, in silence, while Danzig is handed over to the most rapacious, the most dishonourable, of its foes”. These reports were then distributed off - as telegrams, as well as through the common practice of scissoring news items from other newspapers – to the newspapers of the world.

Newspapers’ task of placing “German Danzig” securely in the virtual world of international public opinion required still another skill. How were editors to establish the German protest as the “truth” of the matter – against the Poles’ counter-claims? For the Poles, likewise, were adept at using international public opinion as a forum for their demands. (Indeed, given that they had long had no state at all, their experience in working within this forum was necessarily greater than the Germans’). And they, also, used the medium of mass public protests. The result, I found, was the competitive evolution of sets of rhetorics that established *this* protest meeting was a *true* expression of national essence – while *that* one, held by one’s opponents, was obviously *not*. Let me give some examples of how this worked.

When giving sympathetic coverage to a mass protest meetings – or *Kundgebung* (“proclamation”), journalists assumed an awed, sacramental tone, to bear witness to that

which *had* to be shown to the world - a true *Kundgebung* of essential belonging. A legitimate *Kundgebung* was characterized, further, by high numbers of serious participants - enough to fill the space. Iconography was meticulously covered (flags, slogans, etc). The *Kundgebung* depended on elements culled from religious processions and military displays; this made it important that it be presented as manly and self-disciplined, relegated by ritual - well-organized, a perfect mass performance. Newspapers carefully reported on the sequences of songs, speeches, and cheers, all of which manifested the crowd's unified, sober, sacred and exalted mood.

The first Danzig *Kundgebung*, in December 1918, had backfired – a crowd had gone on to vandalize Danzig's Polish quarters. This put an end to Danzig *Kundgebungen* for a while. They were stung back into action, however, not only by the progress of the peace negotiations, but by Polish counter-demonstrations. *Messages from the Deutsche Volksräte* provided a translation of the Posen Polish newspaper *Praca*'s coverage of a mass rally demanding Danzig for Poland. It had been “ordained”, wrote *Praca*, that “the call” was to “go through the entire land /../ plainly and incontrovertibly to show the world what the entire Polish people hopes for concerning /../ Danzig.” Accordingly, “everywhere” Poles had met in “great meetings and demonstrations. Polish-dominated Posen, the seat of “the great Inter-Allied Mission“, was “all the more eager to seize the opportunity to acquaint the Entente with the feelings and wishes of the people.“ An “imposing meeting” had marched, “several thousand” strong, to the Allied Mission with placards, flags, and songs. Once there, “M.P. Nowicki and Father Ludwiczak called for cheers, which seemed never to want to end.” Now, *Praca* continued, the Mission knew the standpoint of the Polish people on Danzig. “The city

of Danzig was once ours, will be ours again!“, as “this splendid and imposing demonstration” – which was, moreover, extremely orderly – made its point in the Posen marketplace.⁸

Danzig patriots, worried both by this and by the rumours of an immanent Polish invasion, quickly organised a counter-demonstration. On March 22nd, the *Allgemeine Zeitung* told Danzigers to be on their watch. Within the next few days, the Entente would decide the fate of Danzig – whether “thoroughly-German Danzig will be retained by the fatherland” or “torn loose from the motherland”. All possible methods were to be used to protect the father city. “Again and ever again, we will let our voice, loud and German, ring out, and let the entire world know: ‘Danzig and West Prussia are German and will remain German in all eternity, therefore keep your hands off!’” It was, after all, unthinkable that the many protesting *Kundgebungen* that had been sounding, in the past days, from Danzig and from all of West Prussia, and which had been telegraphed to the entire world, would be without effect.⁹ “Tomorrow’s *Kundgebung* must be the most powerful that Danzig has yet seen, for the fate of us all is at stake.”¹⁰

The *Kundgebung* itself, as described by the *Allgemeine*, had been unlike any other in Danzig’s history. The entire German population of Danzig “had united in a single confession of *Deutschtum*.” The square had been completely full of people of every class and profession. Marching music had sounded as corporations and clubs arrived in closed formation and took up their assigned places. The masses stood side-by-side, several of the “more daring” had even climbed the statue of Kaiser Wilhelm to get a better view. The meeting started with the ringing of all of Danzig’s church bells. Punctually, nine different speakers, distributed across

⁸ *Praca* (Posen) Mar. 1919, translated and republished as “Über dem Zeichen Danzig” in “Die polnische Presse zur Danziger Frage“, *Mitteilungen der Deutsche Volksräte* 59:3, Mar. 1919, 106-7.

⁹ *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung* 2 Mar. 1919.

¹⁰ *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung* 22 Mar. 1919.

the Haymarket, began to “give powerful expression to the feelings that the hour called forth in them, and laid down a holy protest against the planned rape [*Vergewaltung*] of the German city.” The meeting’s final resolution was sent, as a telegram, to Wilson. This was the “the holy confession” that the Haymarket meeting had “placed before the entire world” – “a world which has been following the fate of our father city with strained interest.”¹¹

Danzig’s *Neueste Nachrichten* was still more effusive. The enormous Haymarket square had seemed to exert secret magnetic force. It had attracted, from the entire city, and even from further off, thick columns of Sunday-clad people, black-clad columns, calm and orderly. An unforgettable picture, this awe-inspiring and serious flood of people! Here a worker, there an officer, held up his son to show him the innumerable heads of the masses, children who would tell their own children “how all of Danzig stood as one, to show friend and enemy: We are German and want to remain so!” Outside observers were very impressed:

“I have”, an external press-colleague told me, “witnessed the great *Kundgebungen* in front of the Parliament in Berlin, I saw the proclamation of Poland in Warsaw, I was in Wilna when the Germans marched in, and several other great demonstrations – but none [could compare] with the greatness and depth of the impression made by this.”

Speeches were held, songs rung out, “over and over again the masses joined in the call: Danzig German!” Surely Danzig’s resident “commission of Americans”, which had witnessed the event, had gotten a proper impression of Danzig’s mood, “which needs no interpreter and cannot be coloured by the spectacles of any party”. Meanwhile, Danzig’s telegraph stations had been sending the news of the mass meeting “into the entire world”, as had a number of radio stations. “In this way the first news of the Danzig *Kundgebung* will reach foreign

¹¹ The *Allgemeine*’s coverage was, in fact, restrained. The paper, in accordance with its elitist and anti-democratic bent, gave much more space to the meeting of the Deutsche Volksrat of West Prussia – at which Danzig’s Lord Mayor and the Prussian Oberpräsident and Ministerpräsident presided. *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung* 24 Mar. 1919.

countries.”¹² The *Danziger Zeitung* enumerated additional ways in which the world was looking at Danzig. “The eyes of photographic apparatuses stared at the masses from all sides, a filming apparatus perched high on its tripod.” What had been seen and heard was powerful:

more powerful than anything Danzig has yet experienced. Several tens of thousands it must have been, moved by a single thought: to bear witness to the determined will of German tribal essence, never to bow to foreign rule. In holy anger we stand, all as one man!¹³

On this, however, opinions differed. Danzig’s Polish newspaper, *Gazeta Gdańska*, presented a divergent account. The previous Sunday’s “funeral of German Danzig”, according to this reporter, had been attended by “very numerous nationalist-loyalist Germans.” About two thousand people – those who felt themselves “core-German”, many curious Poles, a few locally stationed Americans, and forcibly mobilized social-democratic union members – had attended. “The unseasonable frost had coloured the noses red, and the unbearable wind was so unsuited to this funeral of all German hopes for Danzig” that the speeches “about belonging to Germany” were inaudible beyond twenty paces. Not that anyone, it seemed, showed much interest in the matter. “The mood was sorrowful, even oppressed, and, most importantly”, protesters had just stood there, indifferent and absent, looking as if they were there on command. It had been impossible to detect any enthusiasm; rather one had heard “The main thing is, that we get some grub!” A “German patriot” had, indeed, tried to crown the Kaiser Wilhelm statue, but had lacked energy to do more than wreath the horse’s hooves. After the song *Deutschland über alles* – in which, according to eye-witnesses, “only children and old women” joined - the patriot had decided to remove the wreath again. And so the meeting

¹² *Danziger Neueste Nachrichten* 24 Mar. 1919

¹³ *Danziger Zeitung* 24 Mar. 1919, evening edition.

ended. Most Germans had, in fact, chosen to stay away – in restaurants, where they indifferently discussed the Poles’ coming take-over of the city.¹⁴

Here, the Poles were dismissing the German *Kundgebung* as unworthy of attention. What was supposed to be a public display of united will, a spectacle to impress the world, was retold as a piece of bad theatre played whose by indifferent, grumbling actors. This, it seemed, was effective recasting, for Danzig’s “bourgeois” newspapers responded to the *Gazeta* with fury. They co-published a condemnation of its “unheard-of perversion of events, whose greatness and power was evidenced not only by the tremendous number of participants, but also the depth of the experience manifested from their hearts” – a sample of “dishonest /../ insulting ridicule” which “greatly wounded the duty and honour of the press”.¹⁵

Danzig’s German newspapers paid the Poles back in their own coin, however, in covering Danzig Poles’ counter-*Kundgebung* of April 22nd. Or, as the *Danziger Zeitung* chose to put it, “The seeming success of Danzig Germans’ powerful manifestation of 23rd March vis-à-vis the Entente will not, it seems, let the Poles rest.” Accordingly, Danzig Poles were “calling on their folk-comrades to protest” – that was, on West Prussian Caschubians. These were now transported, en masse, into Danzig in order “to proclaim that they felt Polish and were consumed by one wish only: to belong to Poland.” Their presence had allowed Danzig’s Poles to boast to the world “that the largest hall in Danzig could not hold” the total numbers of Danzig Poles. “That these masses filled the Sport Hall’s largest auditorium is not, to be wondered at”, the newspaper caustically remarked, “considering how violently and

¹⁴ *Gazeta Gdańska* 26 Mar. 1919, translated and republished in “Pressestimmen. 1. Polnische Presse”, in *Mitteilungen*, op. cit., pp. 62-63. It is frustrating that I have not been able to locate copies of the *Gazeta Gdańska* for 1918 and early 1919, as it would, of course, be highly interesting to compare the original account with the Deutsche Volksräte translation. Excerpts of the *Gazeta* article in both the *Allgemeine* and the *Neueste* correspond, word-for-word, with the version provided in the *Mitteilungen*, which proves either that both newspapers paid close attention to the *Mitteilungen*, or that the *Mitteilungen*’s translation was correct. See, e.g., *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung* Mar. 31 1919.

¹⁵ The righteousness of the protest was slightly alloyed by the protesters going on to point out that “a foreign language newspaper in a fundamentally German population circle, where it is protected by freedom-loving laws,” was not to “misuse its freedom” by ridiculing “the German cause.” See also *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung* Mar. 31 1919.

successfully the Poles had worked to gain the support of the agrarian population.” They had, it seemed, filled the auditorium with Caschubian farmers, and claimed these as Polish Danzigers. Indeed, Polish speakers went further still – they had claimed that *they* could have filled “the Haymarket with as imposing an assembly, as had the Germans!” But, the *Zeitung* continued, “all this, of course, is being done only so as to create press notices that will strew sand in the eyes” of the Entente - to whom, of course, Polish telegrams had proudly been sent from the “largest auditorium in Danzig, filled to over-flowing”. The meeting’s main topic had been Danzig; the speeches were all too familiar and not worth repeating. At the end, telegrams were sent out declaring that “Poland could not live without Danzig”, and “a collection was made to cover the hall rental, where the people almost climbed over each other in order to get rid of their money.”¹⁶

This was a description of a *Kundgebung* “typical” of Poles – hypocritical, aggressive, fanatic. Its one purpose had been to deceive the Entente, for the Poles had (supposedly) been badly worried by the Danzigers’ success in presenting the world and the Entente with the truth. The Poles had both tried to devalue the German’s *Kundgebung* and to manufacture a false spectacle of their own; but Danzig newspapers knew how to set the record (and the world) straight.

This type of ping-pong newspaper coverage of rival *Kundgebungen* was not exclusive to Danzig; it appeared in several other German borderland towns, each under the threat – or promise – of changed national status. Each sought, in default of the German state, to position itself in a virtual geography of justly treated peoples, as policed by public opinion. Throughout, newspapers were key. First, newspapers’ narratives – on participants’ numbers, orderliness, passion, as well as the attention given the manifestation by the world – established the *truth*, so to speak, of the statement about the town’s national essence.

¹⁶ *Danziger Zeitung* 22 Apr. 1919, evening edition.

Second, only newspapers (helped only somewhat by telegrams, radio and film) could inform the world of this truth. The art of reporting on manifestations depended, it seemed, on showing that one's own manifestation was *sincere*, as opposed to the opposition's mere *theatre*.¹⁷¹⁸ The world, and the Entente, had to be kept up-to-date as to which of its virtual subjects was *telling the truth*. Here, journalists could act as priests, mediating between the people, and heavenly justice – that is, international public opinion and the supposedly internationally acknowledged rights to self-determination. The rivalry with the Poles was the rivalry, almost, of two religious sects, engaging in rather similar rituals in order that *their* voice be heard by the powers above. The press was thus established as an international power, confirming essentialist territorial belonging – a new era, perhaps, in the long history of the relationship between mass media, and ethnic identity.

¹⁷ There is extensive scholarship on this type of meeting - referred to, in academic literature, as “festival” and “spectacle” - much of it inspired by fascist theatricality. See, e.g., Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement* (1980), Griffin, “Staging the Nation’s Rebirth”, (1996), Kaschuba, “Von der Rotte zum Block” (1991), Düding and Friedemann, eds., *Öffentliche Festkultur* (1988). Karlsson and Ruth, *Samhället som teater* (1984) also give a good summary of Norbert Elias’s important discussion of communal ritual and sacred time

¹⁸ For an exact discussion of the difference between festival and spectacle, see MacAloon, “Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies” (1984).