A DIVIDED CITY?

The pleasure culture in Posen around 1900

by Vincent Hoyer

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Teatr Apollo
W piątek, dnia 19 b. m.
Benefis
pierwszego reżysera i drastycznego komika, pana
Józefa Josephy'ego
po raz pierwszy:
Pani Sherry
Operetka w 3 akt. przez M. Ordonneau'a. Muzyka Hugona Felixa.
Otwarcie kasy o godzinie 7½.
Początek o godzinie 8½.
W sobotę, dnia 26 b. m.
po raz dziewiąty:
Théodore i Co.
Po przedstawieniu
wielki bal teatralny.
W niedzielę: 6812
2 przedstawienia.

Apollo-Theater
Freitag, den 19. August:
Benefiz für den Regisseur und 1. draftischen Komiker
Herrn Josef Josephy:
Zum 1. Male!
Madame Sherry.
Operette in 3 Akten von M. Ordonneau, deutsch von Benno Jacobson. Musik von Hugo Felix.
Kassenöffn. 7½ Uhr, Beg. 8½ Uhr.
Sonnabend, den 20. August:
Zum letzten Male:
Théodore & Cie.
Französ. Schwank in 3 Akten von Nancey u. Armont. Deutsch von Erich Motz.
Nach der Vorstellung:
Großer Theaterball.
Sonntag, den 21. August
2 Vorstellungen
Nachm. 4 Uhr und abends 8 Uhr.

Photo credit: Fig. 1: The Apollo Theater regularly advertised in both Polish and German-language daily newspapers. Here "Dziennik Poznański" and "Posener Tageblatt", both issues from 19.08.1910. Wielkopolska Digital Library / Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, Free access - no reuse

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To the german language version: https://www.copernico.eu/de/link/6426e916bff151.93162061

Around 1900, the city of Posen (now Poznań) was divided into a German Posen and a Polish Poznań. This is at least the impression given by the sources on population and spatial politics in the city. A look at everyday life and especially urban pleasure culture, however, gives us a more differentiated perspective.

Variety theaters, music cafés, cinemas, air shows, racing events, folkloristic spectacles and circuses were all flourishing at the turn of the century. In 1909, the chief of police in Posen (now Poznań) noted in a letter to his Berlin counterpart that “concerts in cafés and restaurants here” had “undergone such an expansion” that, “in the interests of peace and law and order at night,” it would appear “necessary to impose some restrictions.”[1]

The owners of venues such as the "Apollo" Variety Theater advertised in both German and Polish-language newspapers and printed bilingual posters (Fig. 1). As is often the case with entertainment-based cultural events, the stage program functioned beyond language barriers. Pleasure culture was seen as the "sum of all offers," the aim of which was "to distract, charm and offer the audience a reprieve from work and everyday life.”[2]

The example of the Apollo Theater raises some interesting questions: How did the "expansion" of the pleasure culture affect urban space? Until now, the image of the city has been predominantly shaped by ideas of a city divided into either "German" or "Polish" spaces. Thus, in the case of Posen, what does this new “expansive” lens mean for established narratives, which primarily emphasize conflicts in urban space?

Polish Poznań, German Posen?

At the end of the 19th century, the provincial capital of Posen in the eastern part of the German Empire became the focus of debates on population and spatial policy. Prussia had annexed the province in the course of the so-called Second Polish Partition in 1793. During the 19th century, various disputes were fought out there under national auspices. At times, there were tensions between the predominantly Protestant Prussian administration and representatives of the nobility, the Catholic clergy and the “Inteligencja”, the intellectual social elite. Beginning in the 1870s, the Germanization policies of the German Empire regularly sparked conflicts. Between the turn of the century and World War I, nationalist rhetoric intensified: Polish and German nationalist actors claimed the city as the "capital of Polishness" and the "capital of the German East," respectively.[3]

These conflicting interpretations also had an impact on the cityscape, culminating in the construction of the so-called “Kaiserviertel” (Kaiser district) to the west. Contemporaries

commented that the city was divided into a modern German Posen in the west and a traditional Polish Poznań in the east.[4]

This division was also reflected in population statistics: According to a 1910 census, 57 percent of the city's 156,000 residents reported that Polish was their mother tongue, while 41 percent registered German as their first language. At that time – and to some extent still today – language was largely equated with nationality.[5]

Historiography of a history of conflict

This conflict narrative dominates historical research. One reason for this is the heavy focus on national history after the First World War. The city and large parts of the former province of Posen were granted to the newly founded Polish state. Historians from the Second Polish Republic legitimized the city as part of Poland in their studies.

Studies from the Weimar Republic, on the other hand, were influenced by so-called Ostforschung and can be considered predominantly revisionist: The goal was to emphasize the "German" character of the city and its affiliation with the German Reich. It was not until the 1960s that historiography in the Federal Republic slowly broke away from revisionist tendencies. However, the so-called "nationality conflict" remained as a common thread in the Federal Republic as well as in the People's Republic and, after 1989, the Republic of Poland.

Because of this emphasis, (party-)political actors and the exercise of power by the state were the main focus of the research. The sources that were used tell the history predominantly from the perspective of urban elites. As a rule, these sources confirm the image of a city divided into two parts according to space and population.

The "expansion of pleasure" and urban space

However, in these studies, central elements of everyday urban life tended to be pushed into the background. In Posen, for example, pleasure culture played a major role. In 1909, the historian Moritz Jaffé described how the city had "always been a place of cheap concerts and lectures."[6] During the height of the so-called nationality struggle between the turn of the century and World War I, an "Expansion des Vergnügens" (an expansion of the amusement and pleasure culture)[7] can be observed in the city.

If we look at Posen's pleasure culture, the idea of a divided city begins to falter, as many of the venues simply sought to attract large audiences, giving little or no heed to ideas of national division. Unlike the national theaters, they were not financed by city subsidies or donations from wealthy residents. Their survival depended solely on attracting as many

visitors as possible.

The Apollo Theater mentioned at the beginning of this article served as a venue for a wide variety of organizations (Fig. 2). Socialist groups held lectures there, the Jewish community organized the Light Festival in the theater, the ornithological association exhibited birds, and Polish-nationalist groups held protest meetings. On one occasion, the theater even became the venue of a butchers' congress and, on another, hosted the "Polish Association Gymnastics Day".

Fig. 2: A wide variety of events took place at the Apollo Theater in Poznan. From the Apollo Theater. Breslau: M. Wenzel, 1899, in: Karolczak, Waldemar: Niezwykłe atrakcje poznańskich teatrów variétés na przełomie XIX i XX wieku, in: Kronika Miasta Poznania (3), 2000, S. 172–183, here p. 178. Wielkopolska Digital Library / Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, Free access - no reuse

Clearly, the Apollo Theater would open its doors to anyone who could afford the (often small) entrance fee or the rent for the hall. When German-language plays were staged at the theater, local booksellers even offered Polish-language translations. In this way, its rooms and auditorium became a shared space where people with diverse social backgrounds and political beliefs gathered. Entertainment venues such as the Apollo Theater thus escaped the spatial division of the city into German or Polish.

Nationalistic Actors and Urban Disorder

It was not only the chief of police who at times had trouble maintaining "peace and order" at night. Nationalist actors were also irked by the attractiveness of cultural events. Some expressed their displeasure in the newspapers. In the Polish nationalist daily "Dziennik Poznanski," one writer in 1903 lamented rows of empty seats at the city's Polish Theater. He blamed this on a popular German-language operetta at the Apollo Theater.

In 1911, the attractions of the so-called “East German Exhibition” caused a sensation. The exhibition was intended to demonstrate the economic power of the eastern provinces of the empire and had German nationalistic overtones. The exhibition grounds included an amusement park (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: An amusement park formed part of the 1911 East German Exhibition in Poznan. East German Exhibition Poznan 1911. The "Tip of the Tips" slide at the amusement park. Posen: Michaelis & Kantorowicz, 1911, in: Herder-Institut, Image Archive 139841. Herder-Institut Marburg, CC BY-SA 4.0

The Polish national daily newspaper "Orędownik" warned against a visit. It said it could not understand "those members of our society" who "considered the German exhibition as a place of entertainment and leisure" and "who want to visit its various attractions, whether concerts, theaters, panoramas, etc." "Such participation on the part of our society," the newspaper continued, "would be a blatant betrayal of our national dignity."[8] The pleasure-based cultural experiences on offer at the exhibition posed problems for nationalists as these muddied the image of a divided city that they were trying to maintain.

National categories in times of conflict

National categories were therefore not always the guiding principle in city life. This is suggested by numerous complaints voiced in the newspapers and continued to be the case even during years that are described in research as phases of intensified national conflict.

In 1901, for example, the so-called “Wreschen school strike” took place. In 1900, the Prussian Ministry of Culture had forbidden religious instruction in Polish in the upper and middle schools. In protest, in May 1901, a group of schoolchildren in Wreschen (now Września) in the province of Posen, with the support of a Catholic priest, began refusing to answer in German in class. The teachers reacted by physically punishing the pupils, which provoked demonstrations and further protests. Accompanied by a flurry of media coverage, the state subsequently brought criminal charges against 25 of the strikers and demonstrators.

That same year, the celebrated Polish-nationalist pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski performed at the Apollo Theater in Posen. In the run-up to the performance, German nationalists had explicitly called for people to boycott the concert. The German nationalist "Posener Tageblatt" nevertheless had to run a report on the German attendees at the concert. Despite the conflict-laden atmosphere in the media, the audience thus contradicted the idea of a nationally divided city.

The pleasure culture and national mobilization

However, the pleasure culture also served in the interests of nationalist mobilization, as the example of the so-called East German Exhibition shows. Faced with low visitor numbers, the organizers decided to make the exhibition's amusement park separately accessible with its own entrance.

They realized that many people from the city and surrounding region would be attracted by the park, so they would not have to rely solely on the appeal of the trade and industry exhibitions. By including the number of visitors to the park in the number of visitors to the exhibition, they improved the official attendance statistics of the exhibition as a whole.

This number, in turn, legitimized the nationalist-oriented exhibition. When it finished, the organizers suggested that many visitors were interested in the German nationalist content. The entertainment attractions thus served the interests of nationalist actors.

The pleasure culture as an approach to urban history

The lens of pleasure culture opens up new perspectives on the urban history of Posen.

Hierarchies that ran along the categories of German and Polish were also perpetuated in the field of entertainment culture. However, this approach shows that, in the case of Posen, there were limits to the established narratives of conflict in everyday life, where both state and nationalist actors had difficulty establishing and maintaining patterns and notions of order. This, in turn, raises new and compelling questions about order and disorder in the multi-ethnic cities around 1900.

English translation: William Connor ↗

Footnotes

1. To the Chief of Police in Berlin, February 8, 1909, in: Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu, Prezydium Policji w Poznaniu 5036. ↥
2. Becker, Tobias; Niedbalski, Johanna: Die Metropole der tausend Freuden. Stadt und Vergnügungskultur um 1900, in: Becker, Tobias; Littmann, Anna; Niedbalski, Johanna (Hg.): Die tausend Freuden der Metropole. Vergnügungskultur um 1900, Bielefeld, Berlin 2011, S. 7–20, S. 7. ↥
3. For the history of the origin of these terms, see, Witold: Posen als „Hauptstadt des deutschen Ostens“ und als „Haupstadt des Polentums“ in den von Preußen beherrschten Gebieten, in: Kemlein, Sophia (Hg.): Postkarten erzählen Geschichte. Die Stadt Posen 1896-1918, Lüneburg 1998. ↥
4. Cf. Serrier, Thomas: Provinz Posen, Ostmark, Wielkopolska. Eine Grenzregion zwischen Deutschen und Polen 1848–1914, Marburg 2005, S. 255-256. ↥
5. Trzeciakowska, Maria; Trzeciakowski, Lech: W dziewiętnastowiecznym Poznaniu. Życie codzienne miasta 1815–1914, Poznań 1982, S. 68. ↥
6. Jaffé, Moritz: Die Stadt Posen unter preussischer Herrschaft. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Ostens, Leipzig 1909, S. 365–366. ↥
7. A term coined by Becker, Tobias; Niedbalski, Johanna: Die Metropole der tausend Freuden. Stadt und Vergnügunsgkultur um 1900, in: Becker, Tobias; Littmann, Anna; Niedbalski, Johanna (Hg.): Die tausend Freuden der Metropole. Vergnügungskultur um 1900, Bielefeld, Berlin 2011, S. 7–20, hier S. 7. ↥
8. Na otwarcie wystawy, in: Orędownik, 17.05.1911, S. ↥

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Molik, Witold: Posen als „Hauptstadt des deutschen Ostens“ und als „Haupstadt des Polentums“ in den von Preußen beherrschten Gebieten. In: Kemlein, Sophia (ed.): Postkarten erzählen Geschichte. Die Stadt Posen 1896-1918. Lüneburg 1998
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