

3-1-1951

Brief Studies

J. Theodore Mueller

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mueller, J. Theodore (1951) "Brief Studies," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 22, Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol22/iss1/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

BRIEF STUDIES

LUTHERANISM IN POLAND

Of the uncounted Christians who in Eastern Europe suffered persecution under the tyrannical rule of anti-Christian totalitarianism, Lutherans admittedly form a very large part. German, Polish, Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian, and other Lutheran believers were subjected to almost unspeakable torments by the forces of darkness which by God's permission were unloosed during the past decades.

In England the escaped Polish Lutherans, in 1940, founded the *Polish Research Center*, with headquarters in London, which so far has published about a dozen brochures on the various phases of the great tribulation which Polish evangelicals had to endure. One of these, which bears the title *The Protestant Churches in Poland* and includes an account of the vicissitudes of Lutheranism in Poland, was added to the list in 1944. A copy of this interesting study was submitted to the writer by the Rev. W. Fierla, senior pastor and spiritual leader of the Polish Lutherans in England. It is from this instructive narrative of how Lutheranism fared in Poland that the following historical facts are taken.

Before Lutheranism came to Poland, there had been introduced into the land Protestant influences stemming from Wiclif and Hus. Hence, when Luther began his work of Reformation in Germany, he soon had ardent followers also in Poland. In 1518 the Dominican James Knade adopted Luther's teachings in Danzig, which John Laski, the primate and archbishop of Gniezno, tried in vain to suppress. In 1523 King Sigismund opposed Lutheranism, but the movement by this time had become so potent that he was unable to enforce the order which he had published against the new religion. A chief defender of the new faith was Seklucian, who in 1540 published the Augsburg Confession, which was widely read by the people because it was written in a clear and simple style. Thus the Lutheran Church in Poland very soon lost its exclusively German character, especially when it was adopted and advocated by the Polish gentry. At the Diet of Cracow, 1536—1537, the gentry demanded equal regulations for clergy and gentry, especially in the matter of military service, the secularization of the ecclesiastical estates, the limitation of dues paid to the Holy See, the safeguarding of the higher ecclesiastical offices for the gentry, and others. This shows the strength of the evangelical movement.

However, since the wealthier Polish gentry sent their sons for the completion of their education not only to Germany, but also to Switzerland, there were infused into the Polish Lutheran movement also Zwinglian and Calvinistic elements; and owing to eminent Calvinistic teachers, the Polish gentry in many cases abandoned Lutheranism for Calvinism. In 1552 there appeared the New Testament in a Polish translation by Seklucian, who later published also his sermons that greatly stimulated the Lutheran Reformation movement. The complete Polish Bible appeared in 1563. Since it appeared in the city of Brest, it became known as the "Brest Bible." Thirty years later, in 1593, the Jesuit priest Wujek, in defense of the Romanist teachings, published his own translation under the auspices of the Roman Curia. By 1555 Protestantism had become so powerful in Poland that Pope Paul IV applied to King Ferdinand for protection of the Catholic religion in Poland against the new and false Lutheran teachings. By this time the Polish Protestants had become so active in spreading their faith that almost all Poland seemed ready to embrace the doctrines of the Reformers. In 1556 there began a movement to settle the doctrinal differences between the Lutherans and the Calvinists; but while the Protestants united to free themselves from the Roman ecclesiastical courts, the Lutherans in general were disinclined to give up their faith.

The Protestant movement in Poland was greatly threatened by the coming of Unitarian teachers who, forced out of Italy since 1542, sought new mission areas in Eastern Europe. At this time Poland enjoyed so much freedom of belief, speech, and press that it was known as the *asylum haereticorum*. The rapid spread of Unitarianism caused the Polish Protestants: Lutherans, Calvinists, and Bohemian Brethren, to publish in 1570 the so-called *Consensus of Sandomir*, an agreement that was political rather than religious. It was followed by *The Confession*, which was supplementary to the *Consensus* and was published by the same Synod of Sandomir. The rise and spread of Unitarianism also strengthened the Romanist Counterreformation, which directed itself with no less fury against the Protestants than against the Unitarians.

As a result of this Counterreformation the gentry largely became Calvinistic, while the masses remained Catholic. Among the gentry Unitarianism, however, found many protectors, while Lutheranism was engaged in a continuous struggle with Catholicism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism to defend and maintain its teachings. This fight for the Lutheran faith continued till the close of the eighteenth century. When in 1817 the Prussian Union was introduced in Germany, also the

Polish Lutherans were affected, for also in Poland the United Church Movement led to the founding of a United Evangelical Church.

In 1828 a *General Protestant Consistorium* for the Lutherans and the Calvinists was formed in Warsaw. But in 1849 the Czar of Russia, who then administered Polish affairs in large areas, renamed this the *Lutheran Consistorium*, while for the adjustment of Calvinistic affairs a separate body with synodical administration was set up. Since then the spiritual direction of the Lutheran Church was in the hands of a general superintendent. In 1874 the Lutheran parishes of Poland were divided into four dioceses, at the head of each of which was a superintendent. In 1901 there was added a fifth diocese, Piotrkow. In 1897 there were about 350,000 Lutherans in Central Poland, which number far exceeded that of the Calvinists.

The effect of the First World War, 1914—1918, weighed heavily on the Lutherans in Russian Poland. Before its outbreak the Russian government ordered a mass transfer of Lutherans from Polish lands to the depth of Russia on ground of "Germanophilism." The deportation was marked by extreme brutality. But such Protestants as escaped deportation to Russia were persecuted by the occupying German forces who strove to destroy the limited independence which had been assured to the Polish Lutherans by the Russian edict of 1849.

From 1919 to 1939 Lutheranism in Poland enjoyed a period of freedom and prosperity. In 1937 the Lutherans in Poland numbered more than 600,000, while the total number of Protestants at that time was estimated at no more than 830,000.

The sufferings of the Polish Lutherans during the Second World War, however, were far greater than those during the First World War. According to Nazi philosophy, a Lutheran could not be a Pole, and a Lutheran who was unwilling to be a German must be destroyed. In agreement with this principle a sixteen-year-old Protestant boy who told the German authorities that his name had been put on the list of *Volksdeutsche* without his knowledge and against his will was shot on the spot. More than 10,000 Polish Lutherans were imprisoned and brutally treated because they had not voluntarily declared themselves *Volksdeutsche*. In the diocese of Teschen not a single Lutheran Polish pastor was left, though almost 100,000 Poles had belonged to the Lutheran Church in that area. In Lodz Gustav Geyer, a well-known textile owner, was condemned to death for refusing to enroll his name on the list of *Volksdeutsche*, and his factories were confiscated. When the booklet was written, the Second World War was not yet over, nor had the tribulation of the Polish Lutherans come to an end. Nor are they

ended today. God only knows to what ceaseless and indescribable sufferings the Lutherans are subject who have fallen into the hands of their atheist Russian conquerors.

These few historical facts, gleaned from a monograph rich in details, show, however, how Lutheranism asserted and maintained itself in a land where Catholicism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism constantly waged war on it. The average student of history perhaps knows far too little of Lutheranism in Poland and the Baltic countries. It is only now when Lutheran refugees and displaced persons are telling the story of their Church and its remarkable survival in the midst of perpetual terror that Lutherans, far removed from such horrors, listen to their saga of fortitude and heroic faithfulness to their belief. The Lutheran World Federation is doing much to alleviate their hard lot in life. It also does much to instil into them a new Lutheran consciousness and a new conception of the glory of their being numbered among the thousands of followers of Dr. Martin Luther. Much of this could be sensed at the theological conference at Leicester, England, where we met some of these Lutherans who had come out of great tribulation.

J. T. MUELLER