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A Landscape of Toleration: Central Europe in the Early Modern Era

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ABSTRACT

The question of religious toleration was crucial in the early modern era. Challenging simplistic views of toleration as mere peaceful coexistence, this essay explores its complexities from a historical perspective. It argues that toleration was a deliberate choice demanding effort and served as a flexible political tool in various contexts. Drawing on examples from Brandenburg-Prussia and Poland-Lithuania, it shows how toleration shaped political assets and public opinion. This essay introduces the concept of a “toleration landscape” to depict its multifaceted influence on society. Ultimately, it asserts Central Europe’s pivotal role in early modern toleration, bridging historical divides between Eastern and Western Europe.

1 | Introduction: Inconsistencies and Ambiguities of Toleration

Being tolerant was never easy, as it depended on one’s position within complex realities. Daniel Ernst Jablonski (1660–1741), a reformer theologian at the Brandenburg-Prussian court, knew this only too well. A grandson of the philosopher John Amos Comenius, educated at the universities of Frankfurt (Oder) and Oxford, and co-founder of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, Jablonski belonged to the enlightened Republic of Letters. As a contemporary of John Locke and Pierre Bayle, both seen as founding figures of early modern toleration, Jablonski was also well aware of the toleration debates in England and the Netherlands. Like Locke and Bayle, he devoted much of his life’s work to resolving the religious conflicts within Christianity, collaborating, among others, with the scholar Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz on confessional peace (Dalton 1903; Schunka 2019b).

Jablonski’s take on toleration was complicated. He grew up in Poland-Lithuania, where, during his lifetime, the Protestant

population felt increasing pressure from Catholic elites. As a court preacher to the neighboring Hohenzollerns in Berlin, however, he was part of the elite of another bi-confessional—albeit Protestant—state for half a century. The majority of Brandenburg-Prussia’s population did not share their ruler’s Reformed Calvinist faith but were Lutherans. Thus, when it came to Protestant minorities living in Catholic countries, he strongly supported their public rights, especially in his native Poland. In contrast, he was less convinced about applying a similar scheme to the divisions between the small Reformed minority and the much larger group of Lutheran Protestants in Brandenburg-Prussia, advocating a union between the two faiths rather than mutual toleration. Some of his contemporaries saw his approach as favoring only the Calvinists. From a broader European perspective, Jablonski argued that Protestants should unite to withstand the threat of Roman Catholicism. Catholics, on the other hand, as persecutors of Reformation churches, would not qualify for a confessional dialog on equal terms (Schunka 2019b). No wonder then that Jablonski’s opponents regarded the court preacher’s attitude towards toleration as opportunistic or even downright intolerant.

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2 | Creative Triangles, Losers' Creeds, Charitable Hatred: Understanding Toleration in Historiography

What do Jablonski's actions tell historians about toleration and its uses in early modern Central Europe? At first glance, the Polish-Prussian theologian could easily be described as inconsistent: he defended the rights of confessional minorities in Poland-Lithuania while privileging a Protestant elite over other Protestants in Brandenburg-Prussia and refusing to dialog with European Catholics. While it would be possible either to find similar inconsistencies in other contemporary thinkers, such as Locke and Bayle (Walmsley and Waldmann 2019; Hooks 2022), or to use Jablonski's biography as an explanation (Dalton 1903; Bahlcke 2009), the goal of the present article is to instead offer a fresh perspective on early modern toleration by taking, as a starting point, the Polish-Prussian court preacher's views on the topic. Jablonski was an important religious and cultural intermediary between Poland and Brandenburg. He could be described as a translator of toleration in Central Europe at the turn of the eighteenth century. His approach to religious difference illustrates how, in the Central European context, toleration appeared as a deliberate act that could serve as a political instrument. This approach offers links between early modern understandings of toleration and universal—yet often inherently ahistorical—concepts of tolerance today.

This essay explores toleration both as a historical category and a research perspective. Bringing the two into a dialog, we understand toleration as a conscious act of addressing religious differences, with the aim of avoiding bloodshed and violence. Historically, toleration did not signify full affirmation or unconditional acceptance of differences; rather, it represented an acceptance of the status quo, viewed as the lesser of two evils. Its principles were articulated by early modern thinkers and employed as arguments by politicians and theologians. In recent scholarship, historians have sought to identify toleration in different forms of coexistence—practiced more frequently than explicitly preached. The following pages delve into the historical development of toleration, tracing its journey from a description of religious deficiency to a collective virtue in political discourse. Inspired by a spatial perspective, we then inquire how the characterization of whole countries as “tolerant” relates to the emergence of a Central European landscape of toleration.

The essay thus presents toleration as the subject, product and sometimes unintended effect of “cultural translation” (Burke and Hsia 2007) between two neighboring territorial entities in Central Europe, namely Poland-Lithuania and Brandenburg-Prussia. We understand them as parts of a cultural and religious landscape where toleration was consciously and intentionally used as a tool to address specific problems of confessional plurality in a nonviolent fashion. To provide a basis for our spatial approach, we summarize what we see as current trends in the study of toleration. We then highlight how toleration figured in the historiographies of Brandenburg-Prussia and Poland-Lithuania. By characterizing the respective attitudes towards toleration as two sides of the same coin, we outline this Central European landscape of toleration in more detail. The final part of this essay returns to court preacher Jablonski and his attitude to the so-called “Blood-Bath” in the Polish city of Toruń in 1724, whose far-reaching effects on Prussian and European public opinion illustrate the significance of Central Europe in an eighteenth-century Age of Toleration.

While today's understanding of tolerance tends to be broader, early modern toleration was primarily linked to the realm of religion. In the post-Reformation period, a new religious plurality brought with it competing truths about the path to salvation. This required contemporaries to find an amicable settlement between religious majorities and minorities. Toleration was therefore one of several possible responses to the problem of religious diversity, which was seen as a serious issue during the Confessional Age. Toleration differs from other responses to multi-confessionalism, such as violent persecution, the expulsion of dissenters, missionary attempts, forced conversions, and, strictly speaking, debates about confessional unification and concord, as well as from a tacit acceptance of religious plurality. This specific early modern understanding of toleration needs emphasis here to retain its value as a historical and analytical category. Toleration implied more than simply a state of religious diversity or multi-confessionalism. Rather, it was an intentional and deliberate attitude towards plurality, often based on philosophical ideas and always requiring conscious and practical efforts to enforce or prevent it.

Anglo-American scholars often distinguish between a more theoretical tolerance and a practical or pragmatic toleration (i.e., Christman 2018, 8). However, this distinction poses a number of problems. First, many European languages (i.e., German and Polish) do not distinguish between the two, which already highlights the complicated contexts and translatabilities of the concept that need to be considered. Second, from a methodological point of view, there is no longer a clear dividing line between intellectual and social or cultural history, as it has become obvious that even the ideas of great thinkers need to be placed in broader contexts that include the actions, social constellations and cultural settings of the protagonists (Mulsow 2012, 400, 401). Finally, the distinction between theories and practices of tolerance/toleration is untenable from the perspective of significant contemporaneous actors, such as Daniel Ernst Jablonski and many others whose ideas were inextricably linked to their actions. While simply rejecting the distinction between practice and theory would just evade the problem, showing how practices and ideas relate to one another remains a challenge for the historiography. However, for the remainder of this essay, we will use the term “toleration” to encompass both concepts, and practices, as we believe that resolving this issue goes beyond mere semantics.

Writing at the end of the twentieth century, the late Heiko Oberman underscored the persistent links between toleration, and intellectual history. Within the framework shaped by nineteenth-century historians, he traced the genesis of modern toleration in early modern religious debates. And so, according to Oberman, in the old, historiography, the tone was set primarily by Protestant theologians, and thinkers operating within “the creative triangle of Basel—London—Amsterdam” (Oberman 1996, 13). This intellectual tradition, rooted in the writings of the Catholic Erasmus of Rotterdam and the Reformed Sebastian Castellio, culminated in the treatises of the late

seventeenth century that made religious toleration a moral imperative for the dawning Enlightenment. John Locke, a leading figure of Enlightenment thought, drew inspiration from radical Protestantism, including the anti-Trinitarian movement, to advocate for the separation of church and state as the most straightforward and rational means of ensuring freedom of conscience and worship (Mortimer 2010, 177–202, 233–242). Similar ideas can be discerned in the earlier works of Hobbes and Spinoza. All three figures are acknowledged as midwives of modern political philosophy, each contributing to the shaping of a presumably Western—i.e., liberal—tradition of toleration (Zagorin 2003, 289–331). To this day, some historians of ideas continue to add new facets to this tradition (Vollhardt 2015; Bejan 2017; Collins 2020; Mahlmann-Bauer 2023). According to this argument, toleration was coined by Western European Protestant thinkers, while the Catholic side was long portrayed as a stronghold of conservatism and intolerance (Butterfield 1977).

Assessing the “creative triangle,” Oberman referred to Joseph Lecler’s monumental *History of Toleration during the Reformation*, with its final chapter dedicated to Poland (Lecler 1955). In addition, he drew upon Henry Kamen, who had presented a history of tolerance in England, postulating the primacy of economic factors over moral or religious considerations in the development of religious toleration (Kamen 1967). However, according to Oberman, while both scholars sought to challenge the dominant narratives in the history of toleration, they inadvertently validated them. Both works were created in the aftermath of the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, and relied on a somewhat simplified model of secularization as a direct path to liberal democracy (Walsham 2009, 13; Collins 2009).

While Oberman was primarily interested in the origins of toleration as a distinctly positive value, current scholarship does not deny that the early modern meaning of toleration had negative connotations. As Benjamin J. Kaplan and Jaap Geraerts have recently put it, “‘toleration’ is the act of allowing or accepting things that one disapproves of or dislikes” (Kaplan and Geraerts 2024, 1). According to these authors, the term denotes the acceptance of a religious situation that is seen as negative but immutable and often articulated by the dominant majority or an influential minority. Furthermore, such acceptance was only temporary since the overall goal was not diversity but unity. The roots of this idea can be traced back to ancient philosophy (skepticism) and the Bible (Matthew 13:24) (Remer 1996; Angenendt 2018; Forst 2013, 160–265).

Some eighteenth-century contemporaries even perceived toleration as too modest a concession to minorities—thus, Johann Wolfgang Goethe asserted that “to tolerate [*Dulden*] means to offend” (Goethe 1984, 507; Forst 2011, 155–180; Forst 2013, 314–329). Expanding on this perspective, the authors of the 1996 volume *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation* highlighted the frequent links between toleration and intolerance. Alexandra Walsham, in her analysis of English debates on toleration, even concluded that religious persecution was not a contradiction of toleration but its “alter ego” as simply another way of persecution. Toleration essentially embodied a form of “charitable hatred” (Walsham 2009, 5; Walsham 2013).

Based on the possible negative connotations of toleration, Andrew Pettegree added another facet to its ambiguous nature when he referred to the concept as a “losers’ creed” (Pettegree 1996, 183). He underscored the instrumental nature of calls for toleration, emphasizing their contextual dependence on historical and social conditions. In this respect, toleration was predominantly invoked by marginalized groups seeking legal assurances or religious liberties, as Jablonski’s attitude towards the toleration of Protestants in Poland-Lithuania has already shown. However, according to Pettegree, toleration could even serve as a positive self-image for an entire country when, as in the Netherlands, it functioned as a “conscious effort to dress a young independent nation with a plausible historical heritage” (Pettegree 1996, 186). He also noted that adherence to the principles outlined in toleration manifestos waned with shifts in political power. Moreover, toleration as a state policy was limited to specific religious groups, behavioral norms, and spheres of influence. Thus, defenders of toleration could appear not only inconsistent but also cynical.

Pettegree’s depiction of the Netherlands is just one example of how certain states have been characterized as particularly tolerant. Others include England, the emerging United States and, as illustrated below, Brandenburg-Prussia (Jordan 1932–1940; Breidenbach 2021; Haefeli 2023). In the eyes of enlightened observers, however, these tolerant (i.e., Protestant) states were often contrasted with their intolerant counterparts, such as Catholic France (Voltaire 2000), the Habsburg territories before the Josephine Reforms and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the eighteenth century (Smoleński 1891; Butterwick 2008; Butterwick 2012). While this idea that toleration of dissent—or the opposite—could be a state’s quality was rooted in contemporary propaganda, and served as a political tool, later historians echoed such notions, reinforcing older stereotypes rather than critically analyzing, and deconstructing them.

Over the course of two decades, the revisionist approach to toleration outlined here has come to dominate its social and cultural history, one of its most significant results being Benjamin Kaplan’s work on the practices of religious coexistence (Kaplan 2007). These include phenomena such as the *schuilkerk* (or *huiskerk*), worship in private chapels, churches shared by different denominations (*simultanea*) and *Auslaufen*—regular travel to attend religious services in neighboring areas. These solutions, regulated by law, social custom, or tacit consent, were complemented by various forms of collective behavior that helped avoid open conflict, including dissimulation and occasional conformity. Here, toleration appears as “an ongoing practice involving patterns of peaceful activity and interaction that persisted as long as they continued to be reaffirmed and re-enacted” (Kaplan and Geraerts 2024, 4). While the merits of this perspective are undeniable, viewing toleration solely as an ensemble of multi-confessional practices may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Such an approach obscures the distinction between toleration and other forms of religious co-existence and may underestimate the motivations of the actors involved.

Kaplan’s research introduced a significant spatial component to the historiography of toleration, which has since been expanded

upon by several historians (i.e., Plummer and Christman 2018). Extending this spatial understanding of toleration raises the question of whether to focus on confessional landscapes, rather than confining ourselves to national boundaries when analyzing these confessional interactions facilitated by proximity.

The historiographical success of this new approach to toleration can be explained in part by the shift in the understanding of confessional landscapes in the early modern era. Earlier historians—in Germany and elsewhere—tended to assume mono-confessionalism as the norm, thereby at least tacitly expecting convergence with social practice (Schilling 1992). Now, researchers are much more aware of religious plurality, which they identify in different social, cultural, and regional contexts as perhaps even more common than mono-confessionalism (Safley 2011).

In order to retain a specific meaning of toleration, which we believe differs from “living with diversity” (Dixon, Freist, and Greengrass 2009), it may be fruitful to focus on its contemporaneous functions as an instrument, as well as its significance as a rhetorical device, and perhaps covert strategy expressing acceptance of other beliefs. In fact, this may not be too far removed from the current popular understanding of tolerance as a universal virtue that today often also appears in a strategic form. However, it is important to remember that tolerance today is usually seen as a positive achievement of secular modernity, whereas its early modern antecedent was perceived as a deviation from the goal of religious unity.

3 | Central Europe in the History of Tolerant States

How can we investigate the particularities of toleration as an attitude and political instrument in relation to early modern Central Europe? While in recent years the confessional dialog in the Habsburg (including the Bohemian) Lands and Transylvania has been the subject of extensive research (Murdock 2000; Péter 2018, 91–97; Louthan 1997; Louthan and Murdock 2015), the present article deliberately focuses on the relationship between the neighboring states of Poland-Lithuania and Brandenburg-Prussia. They provide an appropriate starting point, as they formed the largest land mass in the region. Both were confessionally mixed composite monarchies and, according to long-established scholarly traditions, both featured their own histories of toleration—leading to images of Brandenburg-Prussia as an emerging tolerant state, as opposed to Poland-Lithuania as increasingly intolerant. However, viewing both territories as part of a Central European landscape of toleration in the 17th and 18th centuries enables us to investigate commonalities rather than differences between the two. This may lead to the deconstruction of seemingly familiar myths and teleologies, such as the supposed birth of universal tolerance from Prussian virtues or the existence of a naturally tolerant Polish state ending as intolerant. It may also reveal that their histories of toleration (or perhaps intolerance) appear as two sides of the same coin, with intermediaries like Daniel Ernst Jablonski naturally navigating between them.

In retrospect, the creation of Brandenburg-Prussia’s image as an evolving tolerant state is a process of almost 400 years, beginning around 1600 and reflected in historical works and public opinion until the early 21st century. It is linked to the much-discussed idea of a Prussian *Sonderweg* into modernity (Clark 2007, XX–XXII). Many historical examples have served to illustrate that the thoughts and actions of Prussian rulers were allegedly conscious acts of toleration towards a confessional other. What might otherwise be described as indifferent or even intolerant was fashioned as toleration in the sense of a particularly “Prussian” virtue (Schlachta 2014, 59–82).

The historiography of the tolerant Hohenzollerns begins as early as the seventeenth century, when the Elector of Brandenburg, together with the Duke of Palatinate-Neuburg, guaranteed the free exercise of the Catholic and “other Christian” faiths in the estates of Cleves and Mark on the western periphery (Lehmann 1878, 30). Meanwhile, in the Brandenburg heartland, debates about toleration arose from bi-confessionalism. In the early seventeenth century, this area was predominantly Lutheran, while its ruler converted to the Reformed faith in 1613 (Throckmorton 2019). The fact that the majority of the country’s population was not forced into Calvinism has been interpreted by the eminent historian Otto Hintze as an act of toleration but, as he concedes, one that resulted from political necessity (Hintze 1906, 88). However, the events following Elector Johann Sigismund’s conversion rather illustrated how multi-confessionalism, even irenicism, was imposed by the authorities to the benefit of the Reformed (Schunka 2019b).

In line with Hintze, but some decades later, Gerhard Oestreich saw the powerful state of “Great Elector” Frederick William as the driving force behind toleration from above. Prussian toleration was intended to maintain the political order but was decreed on the Lutheran population by Reformed elites (Oestreich 1980, 282; see Miller 2002). Likewise, the sovereign’s duty of caring for his subjects “regardless of their religion”—as expressed in the elector’s Political Testament of 1667—was subsumed under a genealogy of Prussian toleration, as were the Toleration Edicts of 1662/1664. Intended to end confessional controversies, especially the defamation of the ruler’s Reformed faith by Lutherans, they led to the dismissal of numerous Lutheran pastors (Ruschke 2012). While Elector Frederick William called his dissenting Lutheran subjects to “toleration and modesty” (*Toleranz und Bescheidenheit*), he was convinced of his own Calvinist path to salvation. This is how “harmony” (*Einträchtigkeit*) and “moderation” must be interpreted (Gericke 1977, 41–43; cf., Taatz-Jacobi 2014). The Brandenburg-Prussian elites called for “*tolerantia*” (Gericke 1977, 173, 175), but this was meant only as a prerequisite for full union among Protestants on Reformed terms (and this is where the court preacher Jablonski came in). Therefore, references to toleration as a royal favor to dissenting believers are conspicuously absent from the sources. The Prussian monarchs of the eighteenth century openly rejected a “compulsion of conscience” (*Gewissenszwang*), but only for Protestants (excluding Catholics) (i.e., *ibid.*, 48–50). Calvinist prerogatives slowly gave way to a political pan-Protestantism (Schunka 2023) that increasingly shaped confessional politics within and beyond Prussia’s borders—as in the reactions to the Toruń riots of 1724 (Schulze Wessel 2002).

Prussian-style toleration mentioned above also affected the Hohenzollern policy towards minorities (and its respective scholarship). The reception of French Huguenots following the famous Edict of Potsdam in 1685 provided another landmark in the history of Brandenburg-Prussia as a tolerant state. While the Edict clearly limited Prussian support to wealthier people of the ruler's Calvinist faith, Huguenot authors almost immediately presented the benefits of a refuge in the Hohenzollern lands in panegyric publications (Niggemann 2011; Schunka 2019a). The image of the Hohenzollerns as protectors of persecuted minorities continued to thrive until the Salzburg Emigration of 1731/1732 and was kept alive well into the 19th and even 20th centuries (Walker 1992), while the problematic Prussian treatment of Mennonites, Socinians, Catholics and Jews was typically omitted from this narrative. This includes King Frederick II (the Great), whose toleration is often taken—out of context—from two famous marginalia that supposedly show his confessional indifference, while his de facto policies towards minorities are not seriously considered (Schenk 2010). Contrary to traditional research, which has constructed Brandenburg-Prussia as a particularly tolerant state, it would be just as easy to write a history of Prussian intolerance in which toleration served its rulers as an instrument for legitimizing their interests.

Turning to the Hohenzollern's eastern neighbor, historians have traditionally portrayed Poland (and, since 1569, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) as a “kingdom of tolerance,” a “state without stakes,” a “paradise of heretics” or simply a calm island in the stormy sea of Christianity's crisis (Tazbir 1972; Jobert 1974). These metaphors encapsulate the perception of Poland in the first half of the early modern era as a “tolerant state” where different faiths and cultures peacefully coexisted.

Current historiography sees the roots of Polish toleration in four main factors: the frontier location of its vast lands, its medieval legacy of multiethnicity, and multiculturalism, the administrative weakness of this composite state, and the power of its political culture. From the end of the fourteenth century, the Polish Kingdom, Christianized in the tenth century, formed a personal union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where Orthodoxy prevailed. Additionally, the eastern parts of Lithuania were largely inhabited by Muslims, Armenians, and Jews. Unlike these groups, however, Orthodox believers enjoyed full public and political rights, equal to those of Roman Catholics. They were part of the political elite, entitled to participate in political assemblies, make key political decisions, and hold the highest public office. Thus, they participated in a republican political tradition in which the state was seen as a community of virtuous citizens (Grześkowiak-Krwawicz 2021).

Significantly, state officials used these arguments in a strategic fashion. For instance, in 1525, when the Polish king accepted a tribute (*homagium*) from the Lutheran Duke Albrecht of Brandenburg on behalf of his Prussian lands, the royal chancellery justified this action by highlighting the intricate social and religious fabric of the border state, neighboring Orthodox Moscow and the Ottoman Empire (Ptaszyński 2019). Despite pressure from Catholic and Protestant hardliners, the subsequent rulers of Poland-Lithuania refrained from any form of religious persecution, publicly stating that they “ruled over sheep and goats” or “were not kings of conscience” (Jobert 1976,

18; Kriegseisen 2016, 354; Ptaszyński 2018, 208–225). Simultaneously, the king's chancery propagated an image of Poland-Lithuania as the bulwark of Christianity (*antemurale Christianitatis*), an image that also found favor in Renaissance and Baroque literature (Srodecki 2015).

The tradition of multi-confessionalism culminated in the adoption of the “Confederation of Warsaw.” This document, orchestrated by the nobility after the monarch's death in 1573, pledged to peacefully conduct the election of the next king. Its Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant signatories identified themselves as “dissidents” and swore to prevent any religious persecution. Up until the eighteenth century, future monarchs were obliged to endorse the Confederation by swearing royal oaths and electoral capitulations. It was thus the renunciation of persecution rather than an affirmative enumeration of rights for religious communities that served as the cornerstone of this multi-religious and multi-confessional mosaic (Kriegseisen 2016; Roşu 2017, 141–150; Friedrich 2023).

This political and religious environment began to change at the end of the sixteenth century. While the royal court and centers of power were already predominantly Catholic, Catholic reform was now gaining momentum in the countryside and was based on the existing and strengthened administrative structure of the Catholic Church and the emergence of new religious orders in which the Jesuits played a prominent role. One notable outcome was the surge in conversions to Catholicism. Protestants gradually assumed the status of a barely accepted minority and their rights were curtailed (Kempa 2007). The Parliament (*Sejm*) proscribed the establishment of new Protestant churches in major cities, prohibited conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism and stipulated that only Catholics could ascend the throne. Subsequently, Protestants were excluded from higher public office. A symbolic manifestation of these transformations was the guarantee of freedom from religious persecution on the condition that the rights of the Catholic Church were preserved (*salvis iuribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*) (Kriegseisen 2016, 523).

These transformations unfolded against the backdrop of sporadic outbreaks of religious violence in urban centers during the seventeenth century. In most cases, minorities, such as Protestants and occasionally Jews, were the targets. Recurrent riots in Kraków, Poznań, Warsaw, Vilnius, and Lublin serve as poignant examples (Kempa 2016). Catholic victims, as in the Protestant cities of Gdańsk and Toruń, were less frequent and fewer in number (Müller 1997). The riots subsided in the eighteenth century and Protestant communities were gradually marginalized beyond the city walls. A few noble towns, such as Leszno, became Protestant enclaves in a predominantly Catholic state. This explains the significance of the events in Toruń in 1724 (described below).

The changes in Poland's confessional landscape were not only evident domestically, but also reverberated throughout Europe, leading to a significant shift in the public perception of the kingdom. In 1656, following the example of Catholic and absolutist France, the King of Poland offered his kingdom to the Virgin Mary in a highly ceremonial act (Tricoire 2013). Subsequently, certain confessional minorities, notably the Socinians, directed their polemics in defense of Polish toleration to foreign

audiences (Quatrini 2023). Meanwhile, the rights of Protestants in Poland-Lithuania became a matter of dispute between the rulers of Protestant Sweden, Brandenburg-Prussia and Orthodox Russia. The defense of Poland's dissidents was a recurring theme during the period's international conflicts and peace negotiations, laying the groundwork for the evolving narrative of an intolerant Catholic monarchy in Poland.

4 | A Central European Landscape of Toleration

During his five decades as a court preacher to the Hohenzollerns, Daniel Ernst Jablonski witnessed Brandenburg-Prussia's development into an allegedly tolerant state. At the same time, and for almost as many years, he served as an expatriate Elder of a Protestant minority church (the *Unitas Fratrum/Bohemian Brethren*) in Leszno, where he witnessed Poland's alleged shift towards intolerance. Through his writing and political endeavors, he contributed significantly to the creation of both images, neither of which could have emerged without the other.

In Jablonski's lifetime, numerous individuals, and groups from Poland-Lithuania appealed to the Hohenzollern monarchs for political and religious protection (Kriegseisen 2011, 2016). Often, it was the court preacher who channeled these requests and published historical and juridical treatises to raise awareness of their situation among readers in Brandenburg-Prussia and beyond. At the same time, Jablonski was instrumental in arranging fundraising journeys for Polish minorities across Europe by using his contacts to the Prussian court and within an enlightened Republic of Letters (Schunka 2014). His extensive travels and negotiations between the two countries were frequent, as were those of many of his lesser-known contemporaries.

While it may be tempting to see Jablonski's efforts as empty gestures, they served his agenda of promoting minority rights in various ways. He was well aware of the European legacy of toleration, a concept that had been shaped in the creative triangle of Basel, Amsterdam and London. As a theologian, he recognized its shortcomings in restoring Christian unity, and as a Prussian officeholder, he was able to use toleration as a pragmatic tool when the situation demanded it. Moreover, as a descendant of Polish Protestants, he used the argument of respect for minority rights to defend his co-religionists in a Catholic state. Thus, in 1708, Jablonski published, in Berlin, his seminal treatise *Jura et Libertates*, which aimed to defend the rights of Protestants in Poland (Jablonski 1708). Remarkably, he avoided the usual arguments, such as freedom of conscience, natural law, or Christian charity, and instead based his reasoning exclusively on the historical laws and liberties of Protestants in Poland, citing in particular the Confederation of Warsaw. This publication took place against the backdrop of the complex political dynamics of the Great Northern War, in which Jablonski supported the interests of the King of Prussia.

This example illustrates how Jablonski's many roles intersected in his public activities. Based on his deep knowledge of the region's confessional and political situation, he navigated masterfully between Poland and Brandenburg, drawing on his

theological and philosophical erudition, language skills and personal contacts. All this made him an outstanding cultural translator. Together with other intermediaries, he helped create a political landscape in which toleration—in all its ambiguous manifestations—served for many decades as an essential instrument of political and religious discourse.

One particular event—the 300th anniversary of which came up in 2024—may well illustrate the significance of Central Europe as a landscape of toleration and of the court preacher Jablonski as its prime intermediary and cultural translator. A tumult in the city of Toruń reverberated through the European public concerned with any form of religious intolerance. These contemporary perceptions of the incident had strong implications for the historiographical images of Prussia and Poland as (in)tolerant states.

On July 16, 1724, a brawl instigated by a student at the Jesuit school in Toruń escalated into an anti-Catholic riot, leading to the demolition of the Jesuit college the following day. The king ordered an investigation in response to complaints from Catholics—mainly Jesuits—about the city authorities' negligence. The subsequent trial resulted in 14 people being sentenced to death, 10 of whom were executed, including the mayor. Toruń's Lutheran population was forced to accept compensation payments and a significant restriction on their rights (Dygdała 2023; Kordel 2021; Swobodziński 2011; Thomsen 2006).

These events had an immediate public impact. An enlightened European, mainly Protestant, public unequivocally denounced the trial as a judicial murder and “Blood-bath.” Daniel Ernst Jablonski's anti-Catholic narrative, titled *Das betrühte Thorn*, as one of the earliest accounts of the events, was commissioned by the Berlin court and translated into several languages. He used not only legal arguments (i.e., the guarantees of religious freedom granted to Toruń by the Polish king) but also a Christian concept of martyrdom, portraying the condemned as martyrs for their faith. The fact that Jablonski, together with the Hohenzollerns and the Dutch and British press, now explicitly extended his support to Lutherans as part of a pan-Protestant international illustrates the important link between Prussian discourses of toleration (aimed at Protestant unity) and their Polish counterparts (aimed at the rights of Protestant minorities). A widely read English treatise even urged “Protestants of all Denominations” to “lay aside their private trifling Disputes, and cordially to Unite and exert themselves against an Enemy, who aims at no less than the utter Extirpation of Protestantism” (*A faithful and exact narative [!] of the horrid tragedy*, 1725, p. 1. Cf., Thompson 2006, 111–115). Reports on the event and subsequent political reactions served to affirm and evoke a common Protestant interest.

The coverage of the Toruń event in enlightened politics and the public sphere underlines several aspects already touched upon in this essay. First, the landscape of toleration in Central Europe was quite visible outside Poland and Prussia. Second, it was predominantly Protestant in nature, with Catholics emerging as the intolerant other. Third, ideas of toleration were powerful enough to evoke public action: words became deeds. Finally, we can see that Jablonski's stance on toleration, as outlined at the beginning of this essay, was far from inconsistent. Rather, it was

adaptable according to his needs as a cultural translator within a Central European landscape of toleration.

5 | Summary

The aim of this essay was to elucidate some complexities of toleration in the early modern era, contesting the view of it merely as the peaceful coexistence of faiths or inter-confessional dialog. While acknowledging the diversity of responses to religious plurality, the essay emphasized that toleration was a deliberate choice, demanding effort and potentially even enduring resentment. In this light, early modern religious toleration bears notable similarities to contemporary phenomena.

Furthermore, we argued that toleration in the early modern period was not just an abstract concept but also functioned as a flexible instrument that could be applied in various regional and local contexts. As a result, the idea of toleration emerged as a powerful tool to achieve specific goals. Examples from Brandenburg-Prussia and Poland-Lithuania illustrate how this tool was used to advance political and economic interests. The recipients were not limited to rulers, their courts and diplomats but also included a burgeoning public opinion. The portrayal of a state or an entire nation as tolerant or intolerant became a formidable political asset.

The case of the court preacher Jablonski exemplifies this intricate dynamic. Not only did he serve as an instrument of Prussian policy but also acted as an intermediary between Prussia and Poland. His multifaceted approaches to the issue of toleration underscore the historical dynamics and contextual nature of toleration in different cultural, social and political spheres. As a member of the Enlightenment elite, Jablonski was acutely aware of the European legacy of toleration but recognized its limitations in achieving Christian unity. Simultaneously, he employed the concept of toleration strategically, using it to defend Protestant minority rights in Catholic Poland and as a political instrument in Prussia. Through his efforts, Jablonski played a significant role in shaping the contrasting perceptions of Brandenburg-Prussia as a tolerant state and Poland as increasingly intolerant. While his approach to toleration might be perceived as inconsistent or even cynical, we contend that it was both idealistic and pragmatic, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the political and religious landscape of his time.

Beyond individuals confined within borders, this essay introduces the concept of a toleration landscape. Landscape is understood here as a flexible and dynamic framework based on social relations rather than rigid geographic boundaries. It is further shaped by the prevailing ideas associated with political and religious culture. Within this landscape, toleration served as a cohesive, albeit ambiguous, intellectual force with far-reaching implications across various domains. Thus, the concept of a toleration landscape extends beyond a metaphorical expression to acknowledge the enduring practical significance of toleration as a deliberate act and political instrument in state formation, political culture, religious stratification, mobility, demography and other spheres.

Finally, this essay argued about the distinctive role of Central Europe (with a focus on the links between Poland-Lithuania and Brandenburg-Prussia) in the emergence of early modern toleration. This region was characterized by a multitude of needs and manifestations of confessional dialog, often expressed in diverse, pragmatic and instrumental ways. Investigating this space as a landscape of toleration, with attention given to intermediaries like Jablonski, offers an opportunity to bridge the longstanding historiographical divide between the “East” and the “West” of Europe.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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