In the political landscape of the German–Polish provinces, the formation of specifically transnational forms of consciousness and behaviour found a second source in the Social Democratic movement. The first weak flickers of socialism had appeared in Posen and West Prussia during the 1870s. Its most important representatives were the German Social Democrats (SPD) and, after 1892, the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). This chapter examines the juncture between nationalism and transnationalism within the local context. It is to be argued that at grass-roots level, transnational organizational structures and behaviours came into existence in the Eastern Marches which were, above all, the consequence of an ‘internationalist’ ideology. It is therefore necessary first to examine the ideological discourses within the Social Democratic movement that had a bearing upon the national question in the Prussian East.1

Ideology

The development of Social Democracy in Posen and West Prussia, as elsewhere in the German Empire, had been boosted by the repeal of the Anti-Socialist Laws in 1890. Until then, socialist organization and agitation had been slow to develop in the Prussian East, partly as a consequence of these laws.2 The Erfurt Programme, promulgated at the SPD party conference during the following year, established a doctrinal basis for political activity. This programme was essentially Marxist, but marked by elements of political opportunism; challenges to the Gotha programme, the ideological consequences of imperialism within the working class, and the influx of members of the petite bourgeoisie into the SPD had each had important effects upon the course of Social
Democratic ideology. In addition to the Erfurt Programme, critical ideological developments began to take shape during the early 1890s in respect of the Polish question.

The Polish question came to prominence within the SPD in the ideological debates that preceded the Polish secession marked by the founding of the PPS in 1893. The principal demand of the PPS was, from the outset, the reconstitution of Poland according to the pre-1772 boundaries. Polish national independence was regarded as a prerequisite for achieving the social emancipation of the Polish working class. A separatist current in the Polish socialist tradition had long predated the formation of the PPS. But from 1892, ‘patriotic socialism’ won the upper hand, led by the PPS, over earlier, though still existing, internationalism. At this time, articles appeared in the Social Democratic press that attempted to justify this course of action. Georg Ledebour had argued that the main justification for the establishment of a Polish sister organization (still under the auspices of the SPD), was the need to fight the Prussian government’s oppressive Germanization policies, like those concerning elementary school education. It was argued that to advance most effectively the struggle against national oppression and at the same time to further the socio-economic agenda of Social Democracy, it was necessary for Poles to organize and agitate in their own language; only then could socialist politics be disseminated effectively. This argument was not uncontested within the party ranks.

An enduring rift opened up within the Social Democratic movement over the Polish question. One feature of this was the secession of Rosa Luxemburg and other Polish exiles in Zurich from the PPS in 1893 to form a new party, the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP), led by Luxemburg and another Polish socialist, Leo Jogiches. This party operated only within the Russian Empire, and so officially only within the Russian partition. The party incorporated a Lithuanian faction, consisting of workers in the regions of Grodno and Vilnius, in 1899, following which it became known as the ‘Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania’ (SDKPiL). Moreover, in the autumn of 1893, the left wing of the German socialist press launched a campaign against the PPS leadership over the issue of nationality and the restoration of Poland. This campaign, led by the leadership of the SDKP, particularly Rosa Luxemburg, criticized the PPS for being unnecessary and harmful to the workers’ struggle. It was also argued that the PPS was a financial liability to the SPD and that it had not been able to make any great headway politically, either in Posen, Upper Silesia or West Prussia.