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In the shadow of nation-states. Silesia divided (1918-1945)

Abstract:

The book is the 4th volume from of the Cuius Regio series. It comprises articles devoted to the cohesion of Silesia as a region in the years 1918-1945. During this period Silesia was partitioned among three nation-states (Czechoslovakia, Germany and Poland). As in all volumes of the series, chapters in the book present research on administrative structures (Kruszewski), economy (Urbaniak), social groups (Przerwa), ethnic and national issues (Strauchold), and regional identity (Linek) as factors and forces both strengthening and weakening regional cohesion. A general outline of the relevant part of the region's history shows conditions under which deep changes occurred in a relatively short period of time affecting every field of Silesians' lives.

Keywords:

Cuius Regio project, Silesia, region, nation-states

This book is a collection of articles devoted to the cohesion of Silesia as a region in the years 1918-1945. Their role is to conclude the studies conducted as part of another stage of the European Science Foundation's programme entitled *Cuius regio. An analysis of the cohesive and disruptive forces determining the attachment and commitment of (groups of) persons to and the cohesion within regions*[1]. The studies of the Polish research team concerning Silesia were funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education[2]. Earlier volumes of the team's studies presented changes that affected the cohesion of the region of Silesia in the period from the Middle Ages to the year 1918[3]. As the historiography of the period under

[1] For more information on the project, see www.cuius-regio.eu and Lucyna Harc, Przemysław Wiszewski, Rościsław Żerelik, *Czyj to region, czyli słów kilka o pewnym projekcie badawczym*, 'Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka' (Silesian Historical Quarterly Sobótka), 67 (2012), issue 4, pp. 3-5.

[2] *Cuius Regio. Analiza sił spajających i destrukcyjnych w obrębie regionu określających przynależność osób (grup społecznych) oraz spójność społeczną jako zjawisko historyczne*, decision of the Minister of Science and Higher Education No. 832/N-ESF-CORECODE/2010/0.

[3] See *The Long Formation of the Region (c. 1000-1526)*, ed. Przemysław Wiszewski, Wrocław 2013 (=Cuius Regio? Ideological and territorial cohesion of Silesia, eds. Lucyna Harc, Przemysław Wiszewski, Rościsław Żerelik, vol. 1); *The Strenghtening of the Silesian regionalism* (1526-1740), eds. Lucyna Harc, Gabriela Wąs,, Wrocław 2014 (=Cuius Regio? Ideological and territorial cohesion of Silesia, eds. Lucyna Harc, Przemysław Wiszewski, Rościsław Żerelik, vol. 2); a volume devoted to the 19th century and edited by Lucyna Harc and Teresa Kulak is currently being prepared. The papers are available (in line with the Open Access policy) in printed form (libraries are prioritized) and in

study here was dominated by a national perspective, minor changes in the typesetting of the text in comparison with earlier volumes were introduced. The names of towns are presented here in their present day form; however, on their first appearance in the book their other national forms are also cited (Czech German, Polish). Additionally, a special concordance of names is added at the end of the book. Abridged and updated Polish versions of most of the articles contained in the volumes have been published in the leading Polish academic journal devoted to the history of Silesia entitled 'Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka'[4].

The authors of the studies presented below, all of whom are representatives of Wrocław or Opole academic centres for historical studies, have attempted to analyse the functioning of five basic factors which determined the region's coherence. In line with the themes of the project as a whole, these are: the administrative framework (Tomasz Kruszewski), the economy (Miron Urbaniak), social groups (Tomasz Przerwa), ethnic issues (Grzegorz Strauchold) and the cultural identity of the region's inhabitants (Bernard Linek). The researchers' work was complicated by the necessity of approaching each of these factors separately. In the examined period these factors were particularly closely interwoven with one another: for example, the administrative framework was closely connected with the political life of social groups within the contemporary countries, while particular forms of identity which were closely related to the issue of ethnic affiliation were imposed on the region's inhabitants by the administrative apparatus. The researchers decided to take the risk connected with such a research procedure in order to have the opportunity to compare the effects of the determined factors – which were crucial for the functioning of society – throughout the entire history of Silesia, independently of the period examined at each stage of the project.

An additional difficulty for the historians was posed by the necessity to trace the issues of their interest in the realities of three countries (Czechoslovakia, Germany and Poland), whose functioning was at that time founded on national ideologies which strongly opposed regionalisms (see below). Such an approach made it possible to identify phenomena on a scale much larger than those which were determined by the political activity of elites of a single country only. Above all, however, it made it possible for them to answer the question of whether the sense of being part of regional and local communities was transformed under the influence of political and ideological changes spreading through the whole of Central Eu-

electronic form on the website of the project (www.cuiusregio.uni.wroc.pl) and in the Digital Library of Wrocław University (collection of the Faculty of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences).

[4] See 'Silesian Historical Quarterly Sobótka', 67 (2012), issue 4; 68 (2013), issue 2 and 68 (2013), issue 4.

rope, as well as the extent to which they resulted in Silesia surviving as a region or disintegrating into three provinces of three nation-states.

The outline of the history of Silesia (1918-1945)

Three events marked the beginning of a new chapter of European history in 1918: the conclusion of military activities on the western front of the First World War, the capitulation (on 4th of November) of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the truce (11th of November) between Germany and the countries of the Triple Entente. These events had a crucial impact on shaping the future of the Odra region. Until then Silesia had been divided into two parts – the Prussian part, which included over 90 per cent of the region's historical lands, and the southern territories, whose capital city was Cieszyn, which were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The conclusion of the war and disintegration of the political structures of Central and Central-Eastern Europe created favourable conditions for the formation of new countries. Most important for Silesia was the proclamation of independence of Poland and Czechoslovakia. These two countries, together with Germany, became competitors in the battle for the division of the territory of Silesia.

The situation was particularly unclear in the formerly Austrian-Hungarian part of the region where three ethnic groups resided: Czechs, Germans and Poles. The Germans, who were the least numerous group in this territory, had no support from the German state and no prospect of their homeland being included in its territory. After all, they considered themselves citizens of the Empire of Austria-Hungary, not of the German Reich. It was quite different in the case of the two remaining ethnic groups, however. Pro-nationalist political organizations operating within these communities made efforts to include the greatest possible area of the disputed territory into 'their' state. Their activity was supported by regular but voluntary armed forces. At the same time, relevant efforts in the international arena, at the peace conference, were undertaken by politicians of the new states.

It was on 5th November 1918 that the first division of Cieszyn Silesia took place according to the criterion of the ethnic affiliation of its inhabitants. The course of the dividing line was established by Polish activists who belonged to the National Council of Cieszyn Silesia and their Czech counterparts from the National Council of the Land of Silesia (*Zemský národní výbor pro Slezsko*). The Prague government did not accept the new boundaries because the only strategic railway line which linked the lands of Bohemia and Slovakia with the industrial areas of Cieszyn Silesia was left outside the Czechoslovakian territory. While the Polish

government was focusing its full attention on the eastern border, the Czechs were making an effort to extend their influence in the north. In order to prevent the election of Polish representatives from the territory of Cieszyn Silesia to the Sejm (Polish parliament), on 23rd January 1919, on the order of the prime minister and president, regular Czechoslovakian army forces invaded territories considered Polish by force of the 1918 agreement.

The Polish government, engaged in battles with Soviet Russia in the east and with the Germans in Greater Poland, granted very modest support to the Polish volunteers who were unexpectedly called upon to defend their homeland. Between 23rd January and 3rd February 1919 Czechoslovakian military units annexed most of the disputed territory. The demarcation line that was then established following pressure from the countries of the Triple Entente was not satisfactory to the Prague government. They agreed neither to the plebiscite which was to determine the outline of the border, nor to the outline of the border proposed by the Council of Ambassadors. In the summer of 1920, when Poland was battling with the military units of Soviet Russia that were approaching the country's capital, the Czechs obtained the consent of the Triple Entente countries to the border that would be most beneficial to them. The authorities in Warsaw agreed to accept this on the condition that transports of weaponry by railway to Poland would continue to be allowed. Czechoslovakia annexed around 66 per cent of the disputed territory inhabited by almost 140,000 Poles, 113,000 Czechs and 34,000 Germans. In the lands of Cieszyn Silesia the so-called 'Czechisation' of the local inhabitants was initiated. The Polish government never accepted the fact of losing Cieszyn Silesia, which resulted in its decision to take part in the 1938 partition of Czechoslovakia, the consequences of which were dramatic.

Even more violent was the process of dividing Silesia between Germany and Poland. From October 1918, all over Germany the lower social classes were campaigning for the introduction of socialist and liberal rights. Following the abdication and escape of Emperor Wilhelm II, the government attempted to restore peace to the country; this meant suppressing the pro-revolutionary movements. Social and economic unrest in Upper Silesia also had an ethnic dimension to it. The representatives of the class of great landowners and industrialists, as well as the vast majority of the middle class, were of German origin. This explains why, in many local communities where most labourers were Polish, pro-national slogans were closely related to economic demands. Polish political and trade organisations comprised several hundred thousand members at the time. The government attempted to calm the situation in Upper Silesia with the help of additional military forces. At the same time, German

industrialists were financing the creation of paramilitary corps of volunteers (*Freiwillige Korps*) who were launching attacks on public gatherings of labourers and the headquarters of political organisations, while in the southern part of Silesia divisions of a Polish paramilitary organisation called the Polish Military Organisation of Upper Silesia (Polish: *Polska Organizacja Wojskowa*, POW) were created.

On 13th January 1919 a state of siege was proclaimed in Upper Silesia by the authorities there. This resulted in the suspension of most civil rights and the simultaneous strengthening of repressions towards the government's opponents. These repressions intensified following the announcement, as part of the Treaty of Versailles (signed on 28th June 1919), of the obligation to conduct a plebiscite in Upper Silesia. The inhabitants were to choose the country to which the territories they inhabited were to be incorporated. Prior to the Treaty's ratification (January 1920), the German administration attempted to suppress the activity of Polish political organisations. In response, the POW decided to take up arms on 18th August against the German administration. The actual battle started a day earlier and lasted until 24th August. The conflict ended with the defeat of the insurgents, most of whom were forced to escape to Poland. When the fighting was over, the efforts of the military forces to put down the Polish national movement intensified. The security police forces (SiPo) which replaced the German army expelled from the plebiscite territories continued their activities against the labour movement and Polish political activists. German activists attacked the seats of Polish Plebiscite Committees and broke up Polish gatherings. Taking advantage of the mass demonstrations of inhabitants outraged by the brutality of police interventions, POW called for another uprising. The Second Silesian Uprising was launched on 19th August 1920 and lasted until the 24th August. Its purpose was to force the German authorities to dissolve SiPo and to include representatives of Polish political organisations into the administrative structures of the plebiscite territories. Due to pressure from the Ally Governing and Plebiscite Commission (*Commission Interalliée de Gouvernment et de Plébiscite de Haute Silésie*), demands of the insurgents were met.

Meanwhile, in Upper Silesia a brutal propaganda campaign was carried out. Both sides did not hesitate to resort to violence which was inflicted by their own paramilitary organisations. Eventually, on 20th March 1921 a referendum took place. Over 700,000 voters supported the inclusion of Upper Silesia into Germany and ca. 480,000 chose Poland. The Ally Committee put forward two possible border proposals. The English and Italians, who supported the Germans, favoured the idea of awarding Poles with small farming territories only. In turn, the French, who wanted to weaken the Germans, proposed that Poland should receive the entire east-

ern part of Upper Silesia together with the industrial regions. Fearing that the English-Italian proposal would be executed, the representatives of the Polish national movement, under the leadership of Wojciech Korfanty, proclaimed the outbreak of the Third Silesian Uprising. Its purpose was to annex and include into Poland territories located to the east of the so-called Korfanty line. Its outline generally mirrored the French proposal regarding the division of Upper Silesia.

Battles were waged from 2nd May until 5th July 1921. Forces of both sides were composed of volunteers, but also of a considerable number of Polish and German regular army soldiers, whose formal participation in these battles were as demobilized soldiers or volunteers. Initially, Polish insurgents annexed territories they considered to be due to Poland. In the course of further battles, including that of Annaberg between 21th and 26th May, the bloodiest of all, some of the villages were re-conquered by the Germans. Their military advantage was constantly growing. This was also because the Polish government officially refused to support the uprising. Eventually, following pressure from the Ally Committee, conditions of truce were agreed. The official announcement on 20th October 1921 on the nature of the division of Silesia by the Council of Ambassadors was favourable to Poland. In spite of the fact that it only gained 1/3 of the disputed territories, they nonetheless included the most important industrial areas. Poland received 50 per cent of the coal mines and as much as 78 per cent of the metallurgical industry of Upper Silesia.

For Germany, the division of Silesia meant a number of economic and social difficulties. But Poland also had to face the difficult task of including an industrial region with a clearly defined regional identity and large German ethnic minority into its new nation-state. In the territory of German Silesia, from 1919 two separate provinces existed – Lower and Upper Silesia. The joining of both provinces into one, that of Silesia, took place as late as in 1938, but by 1941 both territories were again separated. The division of the province of Upper Silesia made the situation of its inhabitants worse, and Berlin tried to take advantage of this. The economic hardship and general ordeal of the Upper Silesians were used as a frequently repeated argument justifying the necessity to re-include Polish part of the province into Germany. In Lower Silesia the general situation was slightly better, yet even there the economy worsened following the announcement of the plebiscite results. The difficulties experienced by both provinces became more serious following the outbreak of a commercial war between Germany and Poland. Nonetheless, the Silesian economy adapted itself to the new conditions. Markets were to be found deep in Germany, and natural resources were obtained from the deposits of coalmines in

Wałbrzych (Waldenburg, Valdenburk, Valbřich), although they were much less rich than those in Upper Silesia.

The assumption of power by the National Socialist German Workers' Party under the leadership of Adolf Hitler only strengthened efforts to Germanize the whole of German Silesia. This was manifested not only in forcing its inhabitants to declare their affiliation to the German nation but also in the replacement of Slavonic geographical names with artificially created German ones. The historical coat of arms of Wrocław (Breslau, Vratislav) was transformed into one that was more in line with the 'German' spirit. As was the case throughout Germany, in the territories of Silesia mass persecutions of citizens of Jewish origin took place. Jews were deprived of both the right to work and their possessions, and their religious practices were hindered. During the Crystal Night (9th-10th November 1938) all over Silesia numerous acts of looting and destruction of Jewish property there took place as many Jewish homes and temples were burned down, including the largest 'New Synagogue' in Wrocław. Ethnic cleansing, which led to the slaughter of the majority of Jews residing in Silesia, continued until 1942.

The territories of Upper Silesia granted to Poland in 1921 were joined to form a separate voivodeship. It enjoyed a considerable autonomy within the country's administrative structure. The Silesian Voivodeship had its own parliament (Silesian Sejm) and treasury. In this territory Polish and German were to enjoy equal status as administrative languages. A fine illustration of the voivodeship's autonomy is the fact that in 1931 it was granted a loan from the U.S.A. without the agency of the central state authorities in Warsaw. Following the takeover of power in Poland by Marshal Józef Piłsudski in May 1926, the situation in the voivodeship started to change. The newly appointed voivode, Michał Grażyński, began a Polonisation programme and attempted to extend the influence of the central authorities. This was to lead to the development of the voivodeship being subservient to the interests of the entire country. The policy also focused on raising the status of migrants from central and eastern Poland at the expense of Upper Silesians, who were treated as a 'worse category' of Polish citizens, and their dialect was labelled an inferior variety of the Polish language. This resulted in a sense of disappointment and reluctance towards the Warsaw authorities on the part of the residents of Upper Silesia.

Taking advantage of the difficult situation of Czechoslovakia, on 1st October the Polish government annexed the Zaolzie, that is, the part of Cieszyn Silesia incorporated into the Czech state. This was motivated by the intention to secure the position of Poles; nonetheless, this does not change the fact that at that moment Czechoslovakia was divided by Poland and Germany. The outbreak of the Second

World War on 1st September 1939 had an especially major impact on the situation of Upper Silesians. 90 per cent of the population of the former Silesian Voivodeship was considered by Germans to be German and included in the so-called *Volkslist*. The remaining part of the population was forced to leave the territory of the Reich. Those who remained were subject to thorough verification with special attention to their political views. Those who favoured Poland, and, most of all, had taken part in the Silesian Uprisings, were in danger of serious reprisals, including capital punishment. Over 40,000 Upper Silesians were forced to join the German army. The former autonomy was revoked and the lands were included in the Upper Silesian province with the capital in Katowice (Kattowitz).

The military consequences of the war were fully felt by Silesians only at the turn of 1944 and 1945, when the province found itself under threat from the approaching Soviet army. The German authorities delayed issuing an order of evacuation for fear of the outbreak of panic. Eventually, the evacuation was launched in December 1944, right before the Soviets entered the territory of the Odra region. In the tragic conditions of a severely cold winter, the population of Silesia was evacuated to Czech, Austrian and Saxon territories. Due to the lack of railway carriages, columns of refugees, several dozen kilometres long, were forced to walk deep into Germany, devoid of support and provisions. During this dramatic migration tens of thousands Silesians died from exhaustion. As many as 90,000 Wrocław refugees were not to live through this ordeal.

For Silesia the Second World War ended on 6th May 1945 when, following the exhausting battles between the German and Soviet armies, the fortress of Wrocław finally surrendered. The formerly proud capital city of the province was utterly destroyed by both its defenders, whose tactics were to burn and pull down entire quarters, and by its invaders. The citizens gradually began to return to their homes, yet their future was uncertain, for the political affiliation of the territory was to be established by the Potsdam Peace Conference. Meanwhile, in the annexed lands a double administration was in operation: both Russian (military) and Polish (civil) governments. The German authorities east of the river Odra were dismissed. And, just as before the First World War, a heated dispute broke out over the southern border. However, this time no one intended to ask the inhabitants in what country they wanted to live. Their future was decided for them.