

**Marek Czaplinski**

Institute of History, University of Wrocław

## **Silesia in the years 1918-1945. Short conclusions**

**Abstract:**

Summarizing conclusions from previous chapters, the author stresses the dynamic character of relations between nation-states and the region of Silesia. During the period under consideration, Silesia as it was built during the Middle Ages and early modern period disappeared. Traditional regional bonds weakened. The governments of all three states (Czechoslovakia, Germany and Poland) focused on the incorporation of Silesians into their respective nations. As each pursued a different strategy, three – or even four – separate regions slowly started to emerge. Yet they never matured. The outbreak of the Second World War and the geopolitical upheaval after its conclusion demolished these new social structures. The future of the region after 1945 was unpredictable.

**keywords:**

Silesia, interwar period, nation-states, regiogenesis

The years 1918-1945 are unique for the fact that they mark a very brief period in history when the inhabitants of Silesia witnessed considerable changes in virtually every aspect of their lives. The Silesian Wars of the 18<sup>th</sup> century divided Silesia into two parts – a large Prussian area and a much smaller Austrian one. The entire province was downgraded to the status of a borderland between the two countries, both of which had aspirations to become superpowers. What is more, Prussia began to regard the conquered, formerly Austrian territories (and especially their eastern, Upper Silesian part) as culturally backward and in need of modernization. In the eyes of Prussian authorities, the multi-ethnic character of the Silesian people constituted an obstacle to this objective. One of the main objectives of the Polish national movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to raise the status of Polish to that of a language of communication in the spheres of both culture and provincial administration, was considered by the German authorities to be an obstruction to the process of developing the province. Since this national movement treated Upper Silesia as a part of the territory of Poland, it was considered a threat to Prussia. The Prussian elites reacted to the emergence of the movement with fear – they were convinced of the necessity of Germanizing all of Silesia. The Polish national movement in Prussian Silesia, like its Czech counterpart in Austrian Silesia, often emphasized the achievements of non-German inhabitants of the region, their exemplary morality and religiosity and their

respect for the traditions of their ancestors. These were said to contrast with the immoral behaviour of German-speaking immigrants from outside of the region. The Germans were treated as enemies exploiting the Slavonic majority.

National political movements in the period of our interest led to the fragmentation of the region. As a result of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles and the Silesian plebiscite and uprisings, the formerly uniform Prussian province of Silesia was divided into not only the Polish part including part of former Austrian Silesia (Silesian Voivodeship), but also two German provinces (*Provinz Niederschlesien* and *Provinz Oberschlesien*), not to mention the small areas incorporated into Czechoslovakia (*Hlučinsko*). Upper Silesia had clearly already begun to differentiate itself from Lower Silesia in terms of its ethnic composition (a Slavonic majority speaking the Polish dialect). Now the introduction of new administrative units with different levels of autonomy – somewhat greater on the Polish side, but lower on the German side – accelerated the development of a separate, Upper Silesian identity. All this was accompanied by German, Polish and Czech (in Cieszyn Silesia) nationalist movements that aimed at the complete integration of acquired territories into the nation-state. We may add that the authorities of the Wrocław Bishopric (dominated by the Germans) supported the idea of a uniform, German Silesia, in spite of the fact that the clergy's views on the subject were divided. Although the majority of clergy shared the views of their superior, Adolf Bertram, there were also those who were ready to support the introduction of separate *Land* of Upper Silesia within the German Reich. There were also those who envisaged the division of Upper Silesia and the return of part of it to Poland. The decision of the superpowers to divide Silesia also led to the ecclesiastical separation of its Polish part (an apostolic administration, later the diocese of Katowice/Kattowitz).

As a result of the struggle with nationalist circles, separatist programmes (the idea of *Freistaat Oberschlesien* – Free State Upper Silesia) arose both in Upper Silesia and in Cieszyn Silesia (newly incorporated into Czechoslovakia), whose foundations lay in a regional identity that was particularly strong in the borderland areas. Separatist tendencies failed to prevail in contemporary international conditions, but one should also note the simultaneous consolidation of local or regional identity, an identity strongly opposed by the authorities of each of the three countries. Yet the German side gradually started to notice that regional identity and local culture may constitute an important factor strengthening the attachment of local people to the country. This observation was not made on the Polish side; what continued to be emphasized there was the way Silesians viewed their everyday lives in nationalist terms. For the cultural activists of the Silesian Voivodeship,

the Germans were treated as enemies and exploiters, and the representatives of Upper Silesian/Polish people were treated as *fellow countrymen*.

In turn, representatives of the German Silesian intelligentsia attempted to highlight in their publications the culture-building role of German *etnicum*, which – in their opinion – over the centuries would eventually lead to the development of a German-Silesian national community which could not be divided by national frontiers. One might wonder whether the reaction to the ever-greater fragmentation of Silesia became indeed the idea of Great Silesia (German: *gesamtschlesisches Raum*), so promoted by the editors of the ‘Schlesisches Jahrbuch’ magazine. The borders of Silesia were to stretch from the river Warta in the north almost to the borders of Austria. Naturally, one needs to be aware of the fact that the idea had in fact little in common with the sense of identity of the average Silesian.

What constitutes an interesting issue is the examination of the role of individual social groups and their meaning for the development of regional or national identity. The Silesian aristocracy, just as in previous years, attempted to highlight its connection with the *Heimat*, but this group was mostly in favour of Silesia being part of the German Reich. Business owners in German Silesia clearly began to adjust to the new administrative divisions by joining the Commercial-Industrial Chambers of individual provinces and by criticizing Berlin’s economic policy towards the region. Still, many companies were conducting business – just as formerly – in both new Prussian provinces. What was most important for ordinary workers, however, was the standard of living in and a feeling of attachment towards local communities.

New political divisions and the emergence of new nation-states in Eastern Europe constituted a major setback for the economic life of the German part of Silesia by depriving it of its markets; the effect was even more pronounced given that the industry that developed there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was technologically backward. Numerous industrial facilities (not to mention related technical and communication infrastructure) in Upper Silesia were separated by the Polish-German border. Having lost its target market, the coal mining industry of Upper Silesia was forced to compete with its Lower Silesian counterpart. A solution was sought in the consolidation of individual companies, initially only in Silesia, but quickly on a larger, state) scale. This facilitated the rationalization of production and its modernization. Simultaneously, however, in the latter case, the bonds between industrial facilities and the entire region were growing weaker. Nevertheless, regional cooperation in the other areas of economic life turned out to be still important. This was, for example, illustrated by the emergence of supra-local initiatives aiming at

providing Silesia with water, gas and electricity. Particularly interesting was the extension of pipelines transporting gas from Wałbrzych to many cities of Lower Silesia, including Goerlitz/Zgorzelec, Jelenia Góra, Legnica and Wrocław. Analogous tendencies are also observable in the Polish part of Silesia. Largely similar actions were undertaken in the sphere of the power industry, including the introduction of district power plants to supply electricity to a number of cities and villages, thereby extending the number of users. Investments in new railway lines and shipping canals (including the Adolf-Hitler Kanal) also constituted factors that clearly integrated the region. In general, efforts were centred mostly on achieving economic self-sufficiency within the new political borders, or even within the borders of individual provinces.

The behaviour of representatives of the intelligentsia who migrated to Silesian Voivodeship from other Polish territories consolidated the sense of identity of local Upper Silesians. Since Silesians were banned from having any actual influence on the governance of the voivodeship under the pretext of lack of qualifications, they had a sense of being sidelined. This did not favour the development of their Polish patriotism, in spite of the Polonization activity undertaken during the stewardship of voivode Michał Grażyński, which was treated as foreign interference in Silesian affairs. Undoubtedly, such phenomena hindered the development of all-Silesian consciousness. For the deeply settled rural or working class and peasant communities, their closest local circles were of primary importance.

The government of the Weimar Republic noticed that supporting Silesian regionalism may be beneficial to Germany. This gave rise to the emergence of periodicals written in regional dialect and the foundation of local museums. It was the spirit of these inhabitants of the land of Silesia who felt mostly connected to their *Heimat* that was the object of the battle between national activists, since a considerable proportion of them had no clearly defined national identity whatsoever.

Not only political but also economic conditions had disastrous consequences for traditional shape of identities of Silesians. Due to the worsening of economic conditions following the First World War and especially following the great crisis of 1929–1932, a large number of workers, peasants and even members of lower middle class, unable to support themselves in German Silesia, were forced to migrate to the west. They gradually lost contact with their native region, despite an ongoing sentimental attachment to it. Sooner or later they were more attached to their new local communities but above all – to the Germany seen as common country for all Germans. A separate issue is the role of the Jews. Actually, most of the representatives of this group who were members of upper classes of society of Silesia clearly

felt connected to both German culture and to the land of Silesia. Nonetheless, owing to numerous extra-Silesian connections it was much easier for them to express, when there was a need to do so, their loyalty to the nation (German) over the region.

Hitler's ascent to power brought a clear consolidation of unitarist tendencies, which were evident for instance in the reunification (1938) of Lower and Upper Silesian provinces into one organism of *Provinz Schlesien*. At the time the action of replacing geographical names which evoked the Slavonic or Polish past of Silesia with typically German ones was undertaken on a large scale. There was also pressure to change Polish-sounding surnames and first names. We may easily imagine the consequences this policy had on the consciousness of local inhabitants, whose names often stretched back many centuries.

Following the conquest of both Czech and Polish territories at the outset of the Second World War, the government of the Third Reich decided in 1940 to form a new, large industrial region. Historical Upper Silesia was extended by the territory of the Czech Ostrava-Karvina and Polish Dąbrowa regions, as well as by the neighbouring industrialized areas of the Voivodeship of Kraków, all united under the name of *Provinz Oberschlesien* with its capital in Katowice. At the same time, numerous Silesian companies, especially from the heavy and chemical industry sectors, were incorporated into German concerns, thereby being deprived of their former regional character. At the same time the policy of the German People's List (*Volkslist*) entered by Nazi government was to lead to the complete Germanization of the Upper Silesian population. An identical purpose was pursued by involving young Upper Silesians in various Nazi organizations, and the eradication of both the Polish language and the Silesian dialect from everyday life. The results of these actions are difficult to evaluate. What is certain is that in connection with military service in the German army (*Wehrmacht*), they led to the growing identification of the inhabitants with the German Reich. However, the continued use of the Upper Silesian dialect in spite of the authorities was a sign of resistance. The same could be applied to numerous desertions of Upper Silesians from the *Wehrmacht*. Generally, we could say that the (Lower) Silesian identity – and, on some scale, an Upper Silesian one – survived through the period of intensive wartime Germanization, despite all the adverse circumstances.

What needs to be said when evaluating the entire period under consideration is that the political division of Silesia into smaller units was a clearly disintegrating factor for a region that had been formed between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries on basis of the medieval and modern history of the Odra region. This resulted primarily from the ambition of the governments of all the interested countries to build centralized,

unitarist nation-states. Yet, on the other hand, the Czech, German and Polish policy towards the land of Silesia favoured the development of sub-regional integration on the scale of new, smaller units and often also local integration. As a result, new regional identities emerged from the ruins of the old, all-Silesian identity. Throughout this short period they did not evolve into any definitive shape, but only roughly overlapped with the historical division into Lower, Upper and Cieszyn Silesia. It was much less important than the division into its Czech, German and Polish part. Only these parts could give rise to three separate regions. However, there was not enough time to complete this process.