

## NATIONALISM ON THE MARGINS: SILESIA BETWEEN GERMANY AND POLAND, 1848-1945

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At first glance, Upper Silesia belongs in the dustbin of German, Polish, and European history. Once its own district and even for a brief time its own quasi-state, Upper Silesia is now split between two Polish provinces — *województwo opolskie* and *śląskie*. Once a region along the German-Russian and then German-Polish borders, its lands now lie much closer to the Czech Republic than to Germany. Upper Silesia and its sibling to the west, Lower Silesia, belong to those fated lands east of the Oder-Neisse line. As historical symbols of German superiority over Poles, and then as launching pads for murderous Nazi expansionism, they were eliminated — and their millions of German inhabitants expelled — with Poland's westward shift in 1945. Yet, dig just slightly below the surface, and it is easy to unearth Upper Silesia's historical roots even today. The Polish 2002 census reveals that, in an ethnically homogeneous Poland where 96 percent are Poles, the largest self-declared national minority belongs to a nation that has arguably never existed: Upper Silesia. These more than 173,000 Upper Silesians, along with nearly 153,000 others who declared themselves Germans, are the living artifacts of a region long presumed dead.<sup>1</sup>

Before 1945, Upper Silesia had existed for over a century within Prussian Central Europe as a distinct political unit and a powerful ordering force for regional identity. Its mixed-language, and often bilingual, Catholic population largely avoided violent ethnic cleansings in the twentieth century by crafting its national mutability. The fact that over 750,000 Upper Silesians remained in their homes after World War II, with up to 90 percent in some rural areas spared expulsion, forms both the chronological endpoint and the thematic departure point for my dissertation.<sup>2</sup> While my work addresses the development of Upper Silesian regional identity, its focus is on the attendant historical process that made this regionalism possible: the failure of German and Polish nationalists to divide Upper Silesians into stable and discrete national groups in the century after 1848. German and Polish activists escalated national strife in the region, ultimately using mass violence to advance their utopian goals of

1 Results of 2002 census in Małgorzata Kałaska et al., *Ludność: Stan i struktura demograficzno-społeczna 2002*, Narodowy spis powszechny 2002 (Warsaw: GUS, 2003), 220-221.

2 Statistics on the proportion of Upper Silesian autochthons (as of 1950) in Michał Lis, *Ludność rodzima na Śląsku Opolskim po II wojnie światowej, 1945-1993* (Opole: Państwowy Instytut Naukowy, 1993), 32.

ethnic homogeneity. Yet, throughout this strife, the majority of Upper Silesians proved resistant to activists who tried to nationalize them. Upper Silesians' self-fashioned national ambiguity was robust enough so that the Nazis could declare them loyal Germans, while a few years later Poland could declare them loyal Poles. My dissertation, "Nationalism on the Margins," is thus simultaneously a story of nationalism on the contested territorial margin of two states and a story of the marginality of national loyalties to the identity of most Upper Silesians.

These two stories, as I found in my research, are linked in a causal chain. National radicalism and indifference in Upper Silesia reinforced each other, particularly in the early to mid-twentieth century. Even as Polish nationalism made political inroads around 1900, many who spoke Polish avoided long-term commitment to the movement. The heavily Catholic population was also largely skeptical of often openly anti-Catholic German policies. Upper Silesians' wavering prompted frustrated activists to adopt increasingly harsh measures and rhetoric after World War I to convince locals of their supposedly innate national identity. With each turn toward more extreme nationalism from the 1920s to the 1940s, German and Polish loyalties became less attractive to Upper Silesians, who began hedging their bets against regime change by holding on to their bilingual, Catholic communal ties. This apathy toward the national cause only further convinced activists of the need for forcible racial separation. An ultimately disastrous feedback loop developed in which national activists, frustrated by popular apathy, advocated increasingly illiberal measures to achieve their visions. These measures only further distanced locals from national loyalties, prompting greater frustration and radicalism from activists. As I conclude, national indifference was thus not only an effect of radical nationalism, but also, simultaneously, a cause.

The setting for this study is the mid-sized city of Oppeln/Opole and the surrounding county that shared its name in western Upper Silesia. This geographic micro-scale allows for an intimate portrait of activists' efforts to divide a real, bilingual community into two "imagined" national ones. As a growing civil servant city, Oppeln/Opole's urban core increasingly became a local fortress of German language and culture, and municipal politics played out with almost no inkling of national diversity. But the surrounding suburbs and villages were heavily Polish speaking and served as the primary

recruiting grounds for Polish nationalists. As this local dynamic suggests, ethno-linguistic divides in Oppeln/Opole often mirrored socio-economic ones. This social hierarchy of German over Polish would make the two nationalist projects in the area highly asymmetrical. While German nationalists could rely on both the mechanisms of state power and the promise of social uplift to make loyal Germans, Polish nationalists were fighting against these tides and relied largely on transforming social grievances, and what one scholar has called a national “inferiority complex,” into support for the Polish cause.<sup>3</sup>

My dissertation seeks to analyze the relationship between these localized national projects and their intended targets of nationalization. In arguing that Upper Silesians were defined largely by an *absence* of durable national loyalties, the inevitable question of evidence arises. How does one prove a lack of something? In answering this, my research has relied heavily on the records of nationalists themselves. Rather than take their claims at face value, I seek a careful reading of nationalist activity against the grain, locating failures, contradictions, or disjunctions in their projects. Thankfully for the historian, Polish nationalists in particular complained nearly continuously about the failure of Upper Silesians to live up to their supposedly innate national loyalties. I also juxtapose the claims of nationalists with the few nationally ambiguous or non-national voices that emerge strongly in the historical record, such as those of priests. While the Polish nation-building project in Oppeln/Opole was subject to strict surveillance and countless worried reports from Prussian officials, these bureaucrats saw no need to track German nationalists with equal vigor. Thus local Polish activists receive the bulk of attention, although their project is arguably more relevant given the demographic preponderance of Polish speakers.

Evidence is also drawn from potential alternative allegiances. While indifference is fundamentally a reaction to nationalism that tells us what someone was “not,” the alternative regional, local, familial, religious, ideological, or class loyalties that could usurp nationalism’s role can tell us what someone “was.” If local citizens in Upper Silesia were neither Germans nor Poles, then what did they feel themselves to be? One compelling answer is “Catholic.” The imagined community of Upper Silesian Catholicism has been explored in detail as an alternate marker of loyalty in the region and a buffer against nationalization, from the 1890s through at least the 1930s. Yet another possibility lies in the powerful draw of regionalism: that

3 On the “inferiority complex,” see Stanisław Ossowski, “Zagadnienia więzi regionalnej i więzi narodowej na Śląsku Opolskim,” *Przegląd Socjologiczny* IX, no. 1-3 (1947): 119.

is to say, locals were simply “Upper Silesians” rather than Germans or Poles. Still other answers may be found, among diverse Upper Silesians, in labels such as communist, socialist, Prussian, peasant, or simply *tutejszy*, that is, local. My dissertation, however, avoids offering any one answer to the question of identity. Rather, it examines the outlets for local social and political organization at specific junctures in Upper Silesian history, of which ethnic nationalism proved one option in a vibrant and shifting field of other potential loyalties to community, parish, class, state, or abstract humanism. Widening suffrage and democratization substantially augmented both the political activity of Upper Silesians and the diversity of options for channeling their loyalties. It became increasingly possible for one person to be a Polish-speaking son, a German-speaking father, a Catholic union worker, a Socialist voter, a proud Prussian veteran, and a Polish nationalist sympathizer all at the same time. Yet most theories of modern ethnic nationalism actually posit the opposite result, whereby heterogeneous social practices and multiple loyalties became ironed out by national division. This dissertation seeks to complicate that narrative by contrasting the diverse loyalties of local communities with the efforts of nationalist activists to stamp out these practices.

### **I. From Catholic Regionalism to National Partition**

Before roughly 1890, modernization in Upper Silesia led not to national division but rather to the opposite: Polish and German speakers *united* across presumed ethnic boundaries in the name of regional, Catholic solidarity. In this prenational era, a set of religious and socio-economic battle lines were drawn between poor Catholic Upper Silesians and a richer Protestant German core outside the region. In the decades before 1890, Catholic ties expanded beyond the communal level amid a fervent, clerically-led religious revival. Upper Silesia had not always been so pious. In 1819, the Upper Silesian district president reported: “The appearance of godliness is there, but unfortunately only the appearance,” adding that drunkenness was ubiquitous and pilgrimages often served as an “inducement to debauchery.”<sup>4</sup> A wildly successful temperance movement led by the priest Jan Fiecek in the 1840s began to turn the tide. With the 1848 revolutions, Upper Silesian Catholics began organizing their own comprehensive civil society. The Silesian Catholic Association, a political-social umbrella organization founded by the Breslau Diocese in spring 1848, signed up 20,000 members across 140 subgroups within its

4 Karl von Reichenbach, “Betrachtung Oberschlesiens,” *Correspondenz der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für vaterländische Cultur* 1 (1820): 20.

first year. Affiliated groups sprang up to cover nearly every demographic, including women, children, workers, children, and even the dead. Most groups only increased in popularity in the decades after 1848. Just as importantly, the regional scope of such



social-religious groups also produced new connections. The faithful across the province shared in common causes that helped produce a regional Catholic solidarity. Upper Silesia formed a Catholic island in otherwise heavily Protestant eastern Prussia. Regional solidarity was thus born of isolation from other mainly Catholic regions of German-speaking Europe. Nowhere was this clearer than in pilgrimages, which were typically regional in scope. In March 1852 over 20,000 Catholics from across Silesia flooded Oppeln/Opole, which at the time had fewer than 10,000 residents. The pilgrimage, like many others, was really two in one: a German-language version and a Polish one. Language was but a natural form of difference; priests ensured in most cases that masses held in German and Polish were identical in content. Through new lay associations and pilgrimages, Upper Silesia was increasingly imagined as a singular but bilingual religious unit.

Internal unity came also through the crystallization of an external enemy in the form of secularizing Liberals. The Catholic press and clergy preached a *Kulturkampf* to their newly devout flock for at least a decade before the German anti-Church measures of the 1870s. The *kleindeutsch* nationalism and anti-Church policies associated with Liberals were deplored by the Church. In Manichean terms, the regional Catholic press organ declared in 1860: “As soon as one leaves the solid and sure foundation of rights [*Recht*], one comes to the system of nationalities, of natural borders, or in other words: despotism.”<sup>5</sup> The Seven Weeks’ War of 1866 sealed Upper Silesia’s fate as a Catholic borderland. Prussian defeat might have meant the return

**In this postcard view of Oppeln from the early twentieth century, the canal (Mühlgraben) foregrounds the town’s architectural centerpiece, the Holy Cross Catholic Church. Source: Herder Institut Bildarchiv. Reproduced by permission.**

<sup>5</sup> *Schlesisches Kirchenblatt*, 21 April 1860, no. 16, 188-189.

of Oppeln/Opole to the Catholic Habsburg crown; instead, Prussia's unexpected victory turned Upper Silesia into an eastern outpost in a Prussian-dominated, majority Protestant *Kleindeutschland*. The subsequent *Kulturkampf* in the 1870s backfired in Upper Silesia, as regional Catholic leaders used new universal male suffrage to take political hold of the region. The Catholic Center Party's dominance lasted for an entire generation: from 1884 until 1903 Upper Silesia was represented continuously by eleven Center Party members in the Reichstag, along with just one Conservative. Crucially, the Catholic defense of religious rights before and during the *Kulturkampf* was carried out with hardly an echo of German-Polish strife. On the contrary, bilingual religious solidarity stood in contrast to the enemy of German Protestant nationalism. At an 1877 regional meeting of Catholic leaders in Oppeln/Opole, Father Franciszek Przynicznyński, editor of a Polish-language Center-Party paper, claimed: "Upper Silesia's virtuous people must defend not only their religion, but also their language, so that they can pray to God in the language they think in and understand."<sup>6</sup> Policies in defense of bilingual schooling and catechism instruction reinforced these ideas.

Added to the religious solidarity was a regional unity born of economic hardship. With the creation of *Kleindeutschland*, Upper Silesia became hemmed in on three sides by foreign states. Distant from the political and industrial centers of Germany, its economy stagnated relative to the rest of Germany, despite abundant coal and mineral riches. Already by the 1850s, Upper Silesia was known as the "poor house of Prussia," and would decline into a German economic backwater in the next century. While Upper Silesia faced enormous geographic and geopolitical hurdles to becoming economically successful, its deficiencies were only exacerbated by the decisions of politically powerful classes within the province to protect their own interests and by rising tariff wars between Germany and Russia.

Religious conflict and economic impoverishment thus set the terms of social conflict in Upper Silesia before the arrival of national strife. Nationalist activists would subsequently be forced to confront this regional and religious unity as they hoped to divide the population into loyal Germans and Poles. The first such Polish effort came with the arrival of the 26-year-old newspaper man Bronisław Koraszewski in Oppeln/Opole in 1890. He wore his nationalism on his sleeve, declaring in the first issue of his new *Gazeta Opolska*: "I greet you, dear fellow combatants."<sup>7</sup> Koraszewski's local newspaper venture grew

6 *Schlesische Volkszeitung*, 12 July 1877.

7 Mieczysław Tobiasz, *Na froncie walki narodowej w Opolskiem: Bronisław Koraszewski, 1888-1922* (Katowice: Nasza Księgarnia, 1938), 40.

into the centerpiece of a fledging community of Polish activists. Mediating their message of Polish self-awareness through Catholic belief, these activists were able to convert a growing body of Polish speakers to their political cause. Yet, even amid the successful organizing of the 1890s, Koraszewski devoted much of his energy to combatting national indifference; he derided the “many irrational people who regard a Pole and a German as hardly different from each other.”<sup>8</sup> His friend and fellow newspaper publisher Adam Napieralski warned him: “You are deluding yourself if you think that our people have matured to their own fundamental national sensibility. You judge everything based on those few people that surround us.”<sup>9</sup> This was the dilemma that would plague Koraszewski and his successors for decades: they assumed that the wider population should imitate the small circle of committed nationalist activists in their passion and in the ordering of their social lives around national divisions.

By 1900 Koraszewski had reached a broad readership and pursued his nationalism through Polish-Catholic clubs. But the following decade saw two seemingly contradictory trends: electoral triumph and simultaneous organizational decline. In the 1903 and 1907 Reichstag elections Upper Silesian politics was remade. A Polish-speaking electorate suddenly voted on national and linguistic interests, prompting German nationalists to likewise solidify an alliance of nationally minded voters. Yet even as a Polish voting bloc coalesced, continued efforts to forge a vibrant national associational life floundered. Local citizens, concerned with the day-to-day struggles of economic Zinto clerically-led Workers Associations. In between the drama of elections, many Upper Silesians continued to exist in a social world where national divisions made little sense and where bilingualism and the enticement of upward mobility through learning German continued to be accepted norms. Much of the Polish electoral success proved temporary, coming on the heels of a spectacular downfall for the regional Catholic Center Party. But by 1912 a resurgent Center Party, along with newfound success for the Social Democrats, made Polish electoral success appear fleeting.

Had World War I not interrupted this arc of history and radicalized the terms of national belonging, Koraszewski’s national ideal would have likely continued to fade in Upper Silesia. As Polish nationalists’ electoral fortunes declined, their frustration showed. A breakaway group of Polish nationalist activists in Oppeln/Opole formed a rival

8 *Gazeta Opolska*, 2 October 1891, from German translation in Archiwum Państwowe w Opolu (National Archive in Opole hereafter: APO), Rejencja Opolska (Opole District Administration; hereafter: RO), Syg. 163.

9 Quoted in Maria Wanatowicz, *Spoleczeństwo polskie wobec Górnego Śląska, 1795-1914* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1992), 77.

paper, declaring themselves — unlike Koraszewski — authentic locals of peasant background. “We are children of one mother, children of the same Polish people, among which you — dear brother and sister — also count yourselves,” they wrote.<sup>10</sup> Yet rather than reassess the appeal of nationalism, the group also blamed apathetic, indifferent locals for failing to awaken to the national cause. In the very first issue of their *Nowiny* newspaper, they complained “that our people read so little, which is the cause of their lack of education and sense of honor.”<sup>11</sup> This group of activists had been nurtured by Koraszewski and other Polish nationalists, including Roman Dmowski. Growing up in a world of nationalist allegiances, they placed the same expectations on their readership to prove their primary loyalty to the Polish nation. The founding of the breakaway *Nowiny* marked a first step in the feedback loop between isolated nationalist activists and a broader population wary of national loyalties.

World War I offered a new political education, but not always one that heightened national division among Upper Silesians. For many convinced Polish nationalists, the experience of World War I retrospectively stood out as a climax of Prussian-German national chauvinism and authoritarianism. The German-Austrian war against a broad alliance of Slavic-speaking peoples, including Poles under Russian rule, led to an almost immediate outbreak of German official repression of Polish nationalists. Koraszewski had the unfortunate distinction of being the first Polish German citizen arrested in Prussia. The imprisonment radicalized Koraszewski and destroyed any remaining faith he held in the Prussian rule of law. A Polish-speaking soldier, Bernard Augustyn, wrote retrospectively of his experiences: “There, having finally gained solid life experience and a wise outlook on the world and social issues, I recognized precisely the German spirit of militarism and rapacity, this German mentality which is alien to the Polish nation.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet, the vast majority of Polish-speaking Upper Silesians served loyally in the Prussian army. In the industrial area in particular, about 25 percent of coal miners had been drafted by 1915, compared to just five to six percent from the Ruhr mines. Memoirs point to vast numbers of young men, Polish- and German-speaking, who were drawn from the villages and cities around Oppeln/Opole. Nor did efforts of the Entente powers to lure prisoners of war into supporting Polish nationalism find success. French efforts to recruit a Polish legion among Germany’s POWs had yielded only 31 Polish speakers by December 1915. Loyal service was expected and in all but a few cases delivered.

10 *Nowiny Codzienne*, 21 June 1911, official German translation in APO, Rejencja Opolska Biuro Prezydyjalne (Opole District Governor’s Office; hereafter: ROBP), Syg. 123.

11 *Ibid.*, 21 June 1911, official German translation in APO, ROBP, Syg. 123.

12 “Bernhard Augustyn” in *Wspomnienia Opolan* (Warsaw: Pax, 1960), 26–27.

Polish nationalism benefited above all from the combination of German defeat and new Polish statehood in 1918, yet the unleashing of post-war regional radicalism subsequently quashed any hope for a durable Polish national awakening. In

a scenario to be repeated a generation later, the aftermath of war proved more traumatic for Upper Silesia than the war itself. The Allies initially agreed to cede Upper Silesia to Poland in spring 1919, but amid German protest, reversed the decision in favor of a regional plebiscite. The non-binding plebiscite, intended to mark the preference of Upper Silesians for a future in Poland or Germany, achieved exactly the opposite of its intent: instead of clarifying national loyalties, it blew the lid off of long-simmering forces of national ambiguity.

The experience of the plebiscite years was one of overwhelming trauma, material deprivation, and loss of trust in government and fellow citizens, but these events did not always follow pre-scripted national dividing lines. The November Revolution, German defeat, new Polish statehood, and continued postwar material deprivation all combined to create a great overlap in the aims and methods of radical socialists and Polish activists. Arkadiusz Bożek, who would later become a regional leader in the Polish nationalist movement, described himself in his memoirs as “a conglomerate of a socialist, a Spartacist, and a conservative” during the Revolution.<sup>13</sup> The Polish cause benefited from widespread discontent with the continuities in governing between old and new Prussia. The police-state atmosphere of censorship and arrests did much to alienate the population from the party at the helm of the revolution, the Social Democrats. Yet



**This German propaganda poster from the plebiscite combines anti-Polish sentiment with appeals to the regional indivisibility of Silesia. The girl, dressed in a skirt of the official colors of the German Empire, guards the industrial province of Silesia in her basket from the Polish wolf. The German girl promises to keep Silesia whole in the face of the rapacious wolf seeking to tear it apart. The caption reads: “You have in mind my basket? / My dear Silesia is inside! / It will always remain indivisible with me / For it would look desolate and wild with you.” Source: Bundesarchiv Bildarchiv. Reproduced by permission.**

13 Quoted in James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 194-195.

many on the ground were unclear at the time whether these radical activists were Polish nationalists, Spartacists, or both.<sup>14</sup>

Further national confusion came with the pervasive violence during the plebiscite campaign. The Allied Powers exerted control over Upper Silesia from 1920-1921 through a French-led occupation force. Blatantly pro-Polish policies by the French, combined with poor planning and a lack of adequate policing, allowed violence to increasingly consume the plebiscite zone. This bloodshed was undeniably the direct result of national strife over the plebiscite, with roving bands of Polish and German partisans terrorizing villages in order to scare locals into one national camp or another. Yet at the local level, this violence was experienced most directly as a breakdown of community, aided by a flood of weapons and bandits, by material privation, and by radicalized young workers and decommissioned soldiers. Nationally-motivated attacks often grew into communal violence motivated by pure criminality or personal score-settling. As German officials complained to French commissioners, “[h]ardly a day passes without reports of a serious crime, a robbery or a murder.”<sup>15</sup> An estimated seven to eight violent deaths occurred each day during the 13-month occupation leading up to the plebiscite, and this figure excludes deaths during the second Polish uprising in August 1920.<sup>16</sup> While this violence hardened some Upper Silesians’ national loyalties, for many caught in the crossfire this breakdown of communal order arguably did more to disillusion them with nationalist politics than any other event in the region’s history.

Amid radical demands for revolution or partition and pervasive violence conditioned by Polish uprisings and German reprisals, one group of related movements stood out for its relative moderation: autonomists operating under the slogan “Upper Silesia for the Upper Silesians.” Mainly affiliated with less nationalist elements of the Catholic Center Party, these autonomy activists hoped to corral the forces of the German Revolution in a more conservative Catholic direction, and used the threat of regional secession to gain promises of cultural tolerance and political independence. Most favored remaining a part of Germany, either as an autonomous province within Prussia or as a free-standing German state outside Prussia. But the audience for the autonomy message extended beyond convinced Germans into the mass of nationally indifferent Upper Silesians. Many of the hundreds of thousands who read the main autonomist newspapers would have identified the arguments and tone as very

14 See article “Polnisch-Spartakistischer Putsch in Oberschlesien,” *Oberschlesische Grenzzeitung*, 18 August 1919.

15 Letter from Hatzfeld to Inter-Allied Commission, November 1920, APO, ROBP, Syg. 304.

16 Sigmund Karski, *Albert (Wojciech) Korfanty: Eine Biographie* (Dülmen: Laumann-Verlag, 1990), 308.

similar to prewar Polish nationalist protests against Prussian anti-Polish policies. Regional autonomy movements were able to open up a new space for political discontent which had been foreclosed with the postwar transformation of Polish nationalism. Before World War I, Polish nationalism was stateless, and as such could lodge its claims in the broadest and most malleable terms. But the resurrection of the Polish state in 1918 and the vociferous demands of Polish nationalists to cede Upper Silesia to the new nation-state vastly increased the stakes of Polish loyalty.

The popularity of Upper Silesian regionalism and non-national loyalties was reflected in the types of plebiscite propaganda deployed by both sides ahead of the vote. Negative stereotyping of the enemy was pervasive, but positive messages contained little in the way of direct appeals to national belonging. Economic arguments formed the plurality of appeals in posters, placards, and pamphlets. Polish nationalists quoted the calculation that German war reparations translated into a debt of over 60,000 marks for every person in Germany. The German “body” was often represented as a corpse: a dying economy and nation destined to a future of penury. German propaganda countered with appeals to the benefits of a robust welfare state buttressed by new socialist promises for worker equality. Regional appeals were also common, as both sides claimed the mantle of representing Upper Silesians. One pro-German pamphlet read, “Upper Silesia is not Polish, but rather *Silesian* land.”<sup>17</sup> For the German side in particular, the appeal to the concept of *Heimat* worked as an established idiom through which to temper nationalist claims by appealing to the locality or region as under national attack. Polish appeals to the *ojczyzna* (fatherland), while common, lacked a similar connotation of Upper Silesian autonomy and unity distinct from national identity. Yet Polish nationalists could counter by claiming that the Upper Silesians’ Catholic faith tied locals more closely to Poland. “The German faith is not your faith,” one Polish prayer book read.<sup>18</sup> Propaganda materials were often bilingual, an obvious admission that national loyalties could cross linguistic lines.

The Upper Silesian plebiscite reflects the contradictions and tensions in this great moment of Wilsonian national self-determination. The forces unleashed by defeat, socialist revolutions, and the breakdown of communal peace greatly complicate a narrative focused on binary national choice in Upper Silesia. If concepts of national belonging had previously implied a mandatory group identity that activists tied

17 Quoted in Waldemar Grosch, *Deutsche und polnische Propaganda während der Volksabstimmung in Oberschlesien, 1919-1921* (Dortmund: Forschungsstelle Ostmitteleuropa, 2002), 182. Emphasis in original.

18 Quoted in *ibid.*, 231.

to supposed natural duties to the nation, this rhetoric was no longer sufficient. Now, instead of asking what you can do for the nation, the plebiscite forced the question: What can the state do for you? This inversion of agency in nationalist thinking showed that, the closer one approached the actual *practice* of democratic self-determination, as in the plebiscite, the less clear the national *principle* underlying it became. The results of the plebiscite, meanwhile, with 60 percent voting for Germany, and 40 percent for Poland, did little to clarify national boundaries. While larger cities tended to vote heavily in favor of Germany, in the countryside voting patterns varied wildly from village to village, making a fair partition all but impossible. The final partition line — determined in late 1921 by a neutral League of Nations committee — pleased almost no one. Poland received the vast majority of eastern Upper Silesia's mineral deposits and industrial capacity, but was left with a partition where 44 percent of residents had voted for Germany. Meanwhile, 23 percent of those on the German side of the partition had voted for Poland. In the following decades both countries promoted their revisionist desire to rule over all of Upper Silesia, delving into radical nationalist tyranny, repression, or mass expulsions to achieve their aims. The plebiscite served as the catalyst for the following decades of radical nationalism, but also for growing skepticism among Upper Silesians about the dangers of national loyalty.

## **II. A Feedback Loop between Nationalism and Indifference**

In the Oppeln/Opole area, which fell on the German side of the regional partition, most communities sought a return to stability after the poisonous plebiscite years. Meanwhile, Polish activists became more insulated from the population they claimed to represent. Many of the leading figures, including Koraszewski, departed for Poland, leaving behind a small, tight-knit group of a few hundred activists. These remaining Polish nationalists had been radicalized by the plebiscite, and were more convinced than ever that the ethno-linguistic roots of Upper Silesians should predetermine their national loyalty. Yet, Weimar-era democracy and internationally guaranteed rights that gave Polish activists more freedoms in the Weimar period served ironically to weaken their movement. The new autonomy granted Upper Silesia as an independent province allowed for the dominance of the Catholic Center Party, which blended populist economics with a defense of Catholic, bilingual rights. The stability offered by the democratically elected Catholic regional government satisfied

many Upper Silesians who had previously flocked to the Polish party to protest prewar Prussian policies. In this democratic field, the regional Polish nationalist party faced increasing failures at the ballot box. The share of votes in the Oppeln/Opole area for the Polish party steadily declined from 25 percent in 1924 to a low of 4.6 percent in the November 1932 elections.

These failures came despite greater leeway and more robust protections for Polish activists, thanks to a German-Polish minority protections treaty enforced by the League of Nations. The 1922 Geneva Accord for Upper Silesia promised individual rights of legal equality and nondiscrimination as well as group rights to Polish-language schooling and access to Polish-speaking administration. Yet, aside from a brief flowering of youth sport and theater groups in 1927-1929, Polish efforts to reconstitute a robust associational life largely floundered. Polish minority schools proved a particular failure. Although they could be established with merely a few dozen signatures by local parents, the schools saw steady declines in enrollment. The minority school in the village of Königlich Neudorf / Nowa Wieś Królewska, for example, which was built after 96 signatures were gathered, opened to only 16 students in 1925, and was closed in 1929 with only six enrollees. Throughout German Upper Silesia, Polish minority school enrollments dropped from 1,227 students in 1923-24 to just 347 in 1930-31. While Polish nationalists at first blamed poorly trained teachers, they later directed their blame more squarely at indifferent parents. The Polish School Association scolded them in 1927: "Parents! You are Poles, your mother tongue is the Polish language, therefore your children also belong, according to legal decisions and from the standpoint of nature, in the Polish schools. Today there is still time, you can still make good on what has been neglected."<sup>19</sup> Yet parents (and children) seemed to prefer Polish language instruction, particularly for religion, *within* German schools. Throughout the 1920s, around four times the number of students signed up for Polish religious instruction as for a Polish minority school in German Upper Silesia.

By the early 1930s, Polish activists sensed overall failure and, with their movement in disarray, directed much of the blame towards the nationally apathetic. In a 1932 article, the *Nowiny Codzienne* in Oppeln/Opole bemoaned the "mass of cultural half-breeds" among indifferent Upper Silesians. Their solution was a strict separation of the races "in the interest of the purity of both cultures." It was

19 *Nowiny Codzienne* 19 March 1927, no. 64. Official German translation in APO, Nadprezydium Opole (Provincial President in Opole; hereafter: NO), Syg. 135.

this trend towards separation that they sensed taking root in Germany with the rise of Nazism. “Luckily, one sees ever more clearly that the German people will no longer tolerate the preponderance of these cultural hybrids,” the article concluded.<sup>20</sup> For the previous decade, Polish nationalists felt they had been fighting a battle in some ways similar to that of the Nazis, against racial mixing and for the acknowledgment of the distinct, innate qualities of the Polish national body. The Nazis, meanwhile, made inroads into Upper Silesia by largely *avoiding* attacks on Polish speakers. “Asians, Chinese, and Negroes as well as Galician Jews must be excluded from having German rights or public offices,” a Nazi deputy told locals at a 1929 rally; no mention of Poles was made.<sup>21</sup> Election patterns make clear that large numbers of Poles voted for Hitler in 1932, far more than for the Polish nationalists. The town of Malino/Malina, for example, which was over 95 percent Polish or bilingual speaking according to the 1925 census, recorded 47 percent of villagers voting for the Nazis in the July 1932 elections, compared to 15 percent for the Polish party. In this divergence of fortunes between Nazis and Polish nationalists, one can see a feedback loop between national ambiguity, with Polish speakers voting for Nazis, and national radicalism, with Polish activists embracing Nazi ideals of forced racial separation.

When the Nazis assumed power, local Polish activists believed they had reason for cautious optimism. A German regime embracing racial separation seemed initially superior to the Weimar-era promotion of integration and assimilation. “The present-day government cannot behave any worse than the previous government with respect to the Polish movement,” the Polish regional leader Arkadiusz Bożek told an Oppeln/Opole county official in 1933.<sup>22</sup> Bożek’s prediction proved mostly untrue. After 1933, the Nazis were far from friendly to Polish nationalists. They harassed, expelled, and eventually — during World War II — forced dozens of local leaders into the Buchenwald concentration camp. Yet, the broad mass of nationally indifferent Polish and bilingual speakers met a much more ambiguous fate. Until 1937, thanks to the Geneva Accord, Poles remained a protected group in Nazi Upper Silesia. As *Gleichschaltung* eroded Catholic and civil associations, Upper Silesians fled to protected Polish groups to reconstitute networks destroyed by the Nazis. One Nazi official bemoaned the ability of Polish groups to “pull all the fluctuating or indifferent among the population who were formerly members of earlier German Catholic

20 *Nowiny Codzienne*, 22 June 1932, no. 141.

21 Oppeln police report, 26 November 1929, APO, RO, Syg. 1800.

22 Report of Matuschka to Prussian Interior Ministry, 17 March 1933, APO, NO, Syg. 75.

competitor organizations into their group.”<sup>23</sup> The radical national revolution of the early Nazi regime only promoted heightened national ambiguity and opportunism among Upper Silesians. Committed Polish nationalists joined the Nazi Party or SA, and Polish was spoken among the Hitler Youth. Meanwhile, Polish associations served as a shield behind which German speakers with little loyalty to the Polish cause could organize themselves, including priests, and (at least according to paranoid Nazi reports) even communists. Still others joined Polish groups in hopes of avoiding service to the Nazi racial state, such as the *Landjahr*.

The Nazi solution to this *Zwischenschicht* (intermediate stratum), as administrators called them, was greater repression, but only up to a point. After the 1937 expiration of the League of Nations protections, Nazis terrorized Polish nationalist leaders and suppressed the Polish language in its last public forum, Catholic church services. After one Polish nationalist was expelled in May 1939, a local magistrate reported: “The effect is absolutely tremendous... one hears in Eisenau and its surroundings not a single word of Polish spoken anymore.” As the magistrate predicted, “[o]nly a few Poles will need to be expelled, and then not a single person will go to Polish-language religious services.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, the Nazis could not change linguistic patterns of hundreds of thousands overnight. By the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the Nazi government in Upper Silesia had achieved only the *appearance* of Germanization. During the war, Germany settled for this false victory. Needing Upper Silesians to provide coal, grain, and soldiers for the war effort, Berlin lived with the myth that the Oppeln/Opole area was full of loyal Germans. Upper Silesians from the interwar German partition, in turn, survived relatively free of the brutal repression which Nazis were unleashing against Poles in other areas. Unlike in Posen or even eastern Upper Silesia, around Oppeln/Opole no resettlement programs were initiated and no *Volkliste* established. After expansion during World War II, Upper Silesia included Auschwitz, and yet — in its western zones — it was arguably one of the safest places in Europe for Polish speakers.

Moreover, much of the apparent progress of Germanization in Upper Silesia actually unraveled during the war. An influx of Polish wartime laborers sparked Nazi fears of increased Polish usage and “racial mixing” in Upper Silesia. Polish laborers would break protocol to eat at the dinner table with Upper Silesians, sleep in their

23 Oppeln *Regierungspräsident* to Interior Ministry, 18 March 1935. Quoted in *Deutsche und Polen zwischen den Kriegen: Minderheitenstatus und “Volkstumskampf” im Grenzgebiet: Amtliche Berichterstattung aus beiden Ländern, 1920-1939* (Munich, 1997), 859.

24 Birkental town official to Oppeln *Landrat*, 23 May 1939, quoted *ibid.*, 923.

homes, and — in some cases — enter romantic relationships. After years under Hitler’s rule, Upper Silesians were arguably speaking as much Polish as at any time in the previous generation. Yet the *Landrat*, Friedrich Seifarth, advocated essentially Weimar-era solutions to these problems. “The lawful and therefore proper handling of the minority in all fundamental questions of life has an assimilationist effect that should not be underestimated,” Seifarth insisted in 1940, when Poles were being ethnically cleansed and Jews forced into ghettos in other parts of Germany.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, officials in Berlin still deemed the Oppeln area purely German. In fact, they even forcibly resettled *Poles* from other areas *into* Oppeln with the unrealistic hope of Germanizing them. By 1944, Seifarth warned Himmler that his corner of the Reich was a “nationally-politically endangered” zone.<sup>26</sup>

The distance that many Upper Silesians placed between themselves and the Nazi regime by cultivating their own national indifference and mutability helped them survive the Polish takeover of 1945 and escape the subsequent expulsion of millions of Germans. The very ambivalence toward nationalism of these Upper Silesians was in fact conditioned by the national radicalism that had grown around them. A negative feedback loop developed in which nationalist activists, frustrated by the failure of their appeals, increasingly embraced illiberal and racist measures to divide the population. These measures only further politicized national identification, driving Upper Silesians away from nationalist loyalties. It is a story that in fact continues well into the postwar period, when Polish efforts to repress the German language prompted some frustrated Upper Silesians to flee to East or West Germany under the guise of “family reunification” and declare German nationality. If the Nazis failed to make them into Germans, communist Poland in some cases succeeded. Although the number of German speakers have been greatly reduced, the Opole/Oppeln area remains today, as it was 150 years ago, dotted with linguistically diverse villages and populations. It remains that way primarily because Upper Silesians did not willingly participate in repeated efforts by Polish and German nationalists to draw national borders through local communities. At the same time, this indifference must be seen as a key catalyst for the radicalization of nationalist activists who, frustrated with the unwillingness of Upper Silesians to adhere to a logic of national division, used increasingly radical, illiberal measures to enforce this division. In

25 Report of Oppeln *Landrat*, 8 January 1940, APO, RO, Syg. 1939.

26 Report of Oppeln *Landrat*, 13 April 1944, APO, RO, Syg. 1940.

the case of Upper Silesia, these activists' efforts to forge nationalized societies ultimately failed over the long term, in the process revealing the instability of the categories "German" and "Pole" as markers of loyalty in this German-Polish borderland.

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