

ETHNIC SPECIFICITY OF UPPER SILESIA IN THE POLISH AND EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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POVZETEK

ETNIČNE POSEBNOSTI ZGORNJE ŠLEZIJE OBRAVNAVANE IZ VIDIKA POLJSKIH IN EVROPSKIH RAZMER

Območje Šlezije, predvsem Zgornja Šlezija je del Poljske z več kot 1000 letno kulturno tradicijo. V preteklosti je spadala v upravni okvir mnogih držav: med njimi gre omeniti predvsem Češko, Avstrijo oziroma Habsburško monarhijo, Prusijo, Nemčijo in Poljsko. Šlezija je območje poljsko-nemško-češkega sosedstva. Prav obmejnost je imela izrazit vpliv na socialne, etnične in ekonomske razmere v Šleziji.

Prispevek postavlja obravnavano regijo oziroma Zgornjo Šlezijo in Šlezijo v evropski kontekst. Avtor se zavzema za ločevanje obeh regij tako glede zgodovinskih prilik kot tudi razvojnih značilnosti. Opole-Šlezija (Zg. Šlezija) je administrativno-teritorialna enota Poljske s specifičnimi geografskimi značilnostmi in regionalnimi posebnostmi. V mestu Opole, kot tudi v regiji, se srečujeta dve etnični skupini – Nemci in Poljaki. Iz evropskih izkušenj vemo, da so območja s takimi značilnostmi pogosto območja številnih konfliktov, ki občasno prerastejo v spopade. Za Opole-Šlezijo pa velja, da je bila v vsem povojnem obdobju med najmirnejšimi evropskimi regijami.

Sestavek obravnava območna etnična in demografska razmerja in jih navezuje na nemško narodnostno skupnost. Obravnava družbene probleme v regiji in jih primerja z drugimi na Poljskem. Avtor predlaga trisektorialno delitev Opole-Šlezije preko katere bi uvedli različne stopnje kulturne in etnične integracije. Mesto Opole bi naj postalo multi-kulturno središče Zgornje Šlezije in tega obmejnega območja.

Historical Aspects of Regional Relations in Upper Silesia

The problem of spatial dimension of a region, and consequently of what constitutes the essence of its internal and external relationships has played for a long time a fundamental social, economic and cultural role (Drobek 1992).

From the historical point of view there is no essential difference between Opole Silesia and Upper Silesia. Opole Silesia constitutes simply a western part of the former Upper-Silesian territories. Administrative changes of the country which took place during several hundred years were significant and contained an area going much beyond the present boundaries of the regions and the borders of Poland.

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Division of historic Silesia into Lower and Upper is deeply rooted in the past and it was current as early as the 12th and 13th centuries. Those were more geographic regions rather than administrative or formal units.

The turn of the 18th century is a term of fast industrialization of Upper Silesia (Heines 1977). The initial phase of this process was connected with an increase in the population evoked by emergence of numerous small industrial enterprises established to the east of the Odra river. Changes of the network of urban centres, however, were small at first. And it was only the middle of 19th century that, together with the development of coal mining and metallurgy in the eastern part of Upper Silesia, some towns and villages, small up till then, suddenly started to develop. The industry caused a fast and rather chaotic spatial development of towns and settlements, numerous infrastructural installations which in the course of ages became a distinctive element both in respect to economy and to the population in the territories situated close to the crossing of three States' borders (Prussia, Austria and Russia). Before the first World War one can already speak of the Upper-Silesian conurbation with few centres, among which the most important were Gliwice, Bytom, Chorzów and Katowice.

Division of Upper Silesia into the Polish and German part, the line which is running across the centre of the Upper-Silesian agglomeration, and formation of a Silesian province (voivodeship) of the formal autonomic status from the former Prussian and Austrian sectors of partitioned Poland strengthened the role of Katowice. It became the seat of administrative authorities of the Silesian voivodeship. After the division of Upper-Silesian agglomeration the economic importance of that industrial region, peripheral to the whole of Germany, suddenly decreased. But in the province and a little later in the Opole regency, the role of Opole relatively increased. The period between the two World Wars brought a lot of investments and enterprises of the German centre which contained the central and eastern part of the Upper-Silesian territories. They aimed at strengthening that peripheral region, quite underdeveloped in comparison with other regions of Germany. For several dozen years that entire region was characterized by a completely negative balance of migration, conforming those negative differences. In turn, the eastern part of those territories, allocated to Poland, found itself in a completely different geographic situation – since it was a region much better developed, both economically and socially, than the rest of Poland. It became a goal of migration from the whole country, being an attractive place of work and living both for the intellectuals who were obviously rather rare here and for the many workmen seeking employment. Thus, in the inter-war period both Polish and German Upper Silesia grew more and more distant from each other in economical, social and ethnic respect.

During World War II the Germans undertook a task of uniting practically the whole of Upper Silesia, creating the Upper-Silesian province which comprised

Opole Silesia and Silesian Voivodeship together with the region of Zaolzie (situated on the Olza river) as well as the annexed Polish territories of Kielce and Kraków provinces. The present paper, however, does not aim at analysis of a tragic and complicated fate of the Silesian people during the Nazi period, since it would exceed the main goal of the paper. The German politics in this area did not intend to integrate the whole population residing here, on the contrary, it aimed at selecting of people so that in future some would join in full the German society. These endeavours undertaken by German administrators in Silesia to set the inhabitants at variance succeeded perfectly.

The picture of Upper Silesia changed together with the end of war. New administrative organization introduced into practice in 1950, in spite of numerous controversial spatial decisions. The historic Upper Silesia administratively divided into two regional structures (Opole and Katowice) strengthened an essential element of socialist power – both its administration and management through distribution of the goods being centrally allocated. The decisive centres created at that time concentrated on their own socioeconomic problems, creating for both of them some leading determinants of their individual character and regional peculiarity (the Opole region – highly developed agriculture; Upper Silesia – the working class of manufacturing industry and coal-mining). In fact, this process started much earlier, as early as before the war or even in the 19th century, but its full results did not appear earlier than in the fifties. Undoubtedly, activity of the decisive centres of that time achieved in the consciousness of the population the expected effect, and around the historic capital of Upper Silesia, i.e. Opole, there appeared a region, spatially and socioeconomically coherent but possessing its own individual features which single it out among the agglomeration of Katowice and Wrocław.

Increasing influence of the regional centres (here Katowice took the lead in the seventies) on the State's policy in Warsaw was radically suppressed by means of the administrative reform of 1975 in which practically all outstanding regional centres of the country suffered heavy losses. Only some minor and peripheral regional centres managed to get off lightly, but they did not play any important role in the central policy. In case of Opole region, it enabled to consolidate the town and strengthen internal connections. The main regional characteristics of Opole Silesia such as: highly developed agriculture, the public peace, the problem of constant emigration of the native population abroad, German minority, integration of different nationalities, became more and more visible.

If we attempted to generalize these considerations on regional structures in historic Silesia, we could agree to the following conclusions:

- in the past the Upper-Silesian region was a homogenous area whose administrative and controlling centre was Opole;

- the origin (beginning from the latter part of 19th century and a spontaneous development of the Upper-Silesian coal basin caused a real functional division of Upper Silesia into two different socioeconomic zones: Upper-Silesian conurbation and Opole Silesia);
- this functional division has been for several dozen years formally consolidated through the administrative structures sanctioning a general separateness of Opole Silesia.

National problems of Upper Silesia

As whole Upper Silesia region is inhabited by nearly 6 million people. This region was divided among three states (Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia) after World War I. Before this period ethnical structure of Upper Silesia was rather clear:

- Polish speaking Silesians – mainly in rural and suburban zones;
- German speaking Silesians – mainly in towns and farmer type rural communes (especially in western part of Upper Silesia).

With the partition of Upper Silesia a process of forming modern nationalities in this area began. It was a period when streams of migrants with different national feelings exchanged both parts of former Upper Silesia territory. In this period lot of Silesians noticed that they not belong to Polish national group yet. They were different mainly from cultural and social point of view (Szramek 1934).

In that period Silesians, who still lived in main part of Upper Silesia slowly moved officially towards German nationality. In the last census before World War II in western Upper Silesia lived more than 700 thousands bilingual Silesians (both Polish and German), who declared German nationality.

All people know, what happened during World War II in Central Europe. In Upper Silesian terms Silesians two times, in very short period, had declare their nationality. First, as Germans, second as Poles (in 1945–1948). Many of them had to emigrate. First to the eastern territories (as Poles), second to Germany (as Germans). Those who stayed in Upper Silesia territory had to declare that they are of Polish origin.

The Problem of national identification was not difficult for Silesians from the industrial part of region, but this people even as Poles still felt their dissimilarity towards the nation. This group contains now more than two million people living mainly in the industrial core of Upper Silesia (Górny 1990).

Problem of the national identification of Silesians in the western part of Upper Silesia (mainly in Opole Silesia) was much more complicated (Kwaśniewski 1987). In the beginning, this group contained more than one million people. Nearly all of them declared Polish nationality and an eagerness to stay and preserve their possessions. In Opole Silesia this group numbered more than a half of million people in

the late forties. Many of this people were, and still are, very closely connected to relatives in Germany. After the war period more than a half million emigrants went out from Silesia to Germany, but they did not cut their connections with the group which still lives there (Ritter 1992).

In general, the Silesian autochthonous population changed their national mind in the last eighty years more than two times and still remained an ethnical group (rather large from demographical point of view) with an unstable national identification.

Now, that autochthonous group of the Silesian population is estimated to have not more than 320 thousand members. Number of people who identify themselves with a German nationality is not bigger than 85%. So, German minority in Opole Silesia contains 270–275 thousand members (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Estimation of autochthonic population and German minority in Opole voivodeship (1977–1992)

	Number of inhabitants (in thousands)		Estimation of autochthonous inhabitants (in%)		Estimation of the German minority (in%)	Share of the German minority in the autochthonous population (in%)
	1977	1992	1977	1992	1992	1992
In all	970	1019	37.6	31.2	26.8	85.8
Cities	470	537	23.3	15.9	10.9	68.7
Villages	500	482	51.1	47.4	43.6	91.8

Source: By authors, on the base of Heffner K., 1991; Berlińska D., 1992.

There were undoubtful achievements in the Opole region (in spite of many faulty and destabilizing decisions and facts) in the sphere of integrating ethnically differentiated nationalities of the region. The regional system of Opole Silesia is practically complete in respect to resources and labour market, commuting, etc. Similarly established are the regional connections of economical structures activity in its area (Heffner 1992).

Recent Ethnic Characteristics of Upper Silesia

The territory of Silesia, Upper Silesia above all, is part of Poland which was in its 1000 years long history within reach many states: among others Czechia, Austria (Habsburg's Monarchy), Prussia, Germany and Poland. Silesia is a zone of Polish-German-Czechian neighbourhood. This neighbourhood had and has very big influence on social, ethnic and economic relations on Silesian lands.

Upper Silesia is the place where two quite different ethnical groups meet. Such place of contact becomes a point of numerous conflicts, very often extraordinary fierce. However, Opole Silesia is among the most peaceful and conflictless polish and european regions.

This article presents relations in the demographic-ethnical structure of Opole Silesia and its relation towards the German society. The discussed social problems distinguish Opole Silesia from other polish regions. The transformation of the socio-demographic structure of Opole Silesia leads to the creation of an influential German minority there, again.

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