



National Self-Determination: The Example of Upper Silesia

Author(s): Harry K. Rosenthal

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 7, No. 3/4 (Jul. - Oct., 1972), pp. 231-241

Published by: [Sage Publications, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259914>

Accessed: 25/08/2012 13:33

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Sage Publications, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Contemporary History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

National Self-Determination: The Example of Upper Silesia

Harry K. Rosenthal

The doctrine of national self-determination assumes that all human beings hold membership in one of a relatively small number of specific national groups which live in fairly compact areas. While the falsity of the last part of this assumption has long been apparent – from Hungarians living in post-Trianon Rumania to various non-state peoples living in countries recently made independent – the main assumption has been less frequently challenged. If the question has been raised at all, it has usually been directed at some newly independent African country where tribal identity is paramount and national consciousness virtually non-existent. Yet even in the heartland of Europe, this main assumption – that all human beings hold membership in national groups – can be challenged.

Upper Silesia can serve as an illustration. This area, which is the southern part of Silesia and includes the cities of Opole (Oppeln) and Katowice (Kattowitz), had experienced the coming of Germanic tribes, more permanent Slavic farmers, and medieval German colonists as well as the rule of the Polish crown, allegiance to Bohemia, Habsburg domination, and, in the 1740s, Prussian conquest. Given this history, is it surprising that its basically peasant population failed to develop a national sense even after the French Revolution had aroused all Europe?

In actual fact, the national question, in a Polish sense, arose only in the second half of the nineteenth century and, as usual in the dynamics of emerging nationalism in East Central Europe, the first stirrings of a Polish consciousness took a mainly literary form. It was Karol Miarka's pen which played the major role in 'awakening his people'. In his *Głos wolajacego na puszczy gornoslaskiej czyli o stosunkach ludu polskiego na pruskim Slasku* (A Voice Crying in the Upper Silesian Wilderness, or About Conditions of the Polish People in Prussian Silesia) he lamented the lack of opportunity for

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Poles to develop their culture, while in his newspaper *Katolik* (The Catholic) he tried to develop that culture by stressing the importance of Catholicism and nationality. Miarka thus became the leader of the Polish renaissance movement.

Yet in these endeavours he did not view the masses of Upper Silesia simply and solely as 'Poles'. In fact, as a result of his emphasis on Catholicism, no area in the German Empire was more fertile for the German Centre party. In Upper Silesia, which formed the *Regierungsbezirk* of Oppeln, the Centre party won 11 of the 12 Reichstag seats in 1893. Taking this election as typical, it can be shown that 11 per cent of the total Centre representation in the Reichstag came from Upper Silesia.

Paradoxically, only after Miarka's death (in 1882) did some Upper Silesian intellectuals begin to stress more intensely their Polish identity, and then only in reaction to Otto von Bismarck's heavy-handed repression. They even presumed to defy Germany – if merely in verse. For example, Konstanty Damrot, reacting to the 1886 Prussian colonization laws, wrote:

*A hundred million marks, that isn't a trifle
it's enough to buy an entire province
but it isn't a simple thing to exterminate the Polish spirit
and Germany is too small.*

But these first shoots of Polish consciousness made no impression on the apathetic labouring classes, and remained politically insignificant.

In the following decade, these literary activities began to yield to a more political formulation of the Polish position, but it was given to a *non-Upper Silesian* to do the formulating. In the summer of 1891, the Silesian Centre party leader Count Ballestrem started a debate by denying that the Polish-speaking, Catholic Upper Silesian could indeed be called a Pole. The leader of the Polish Reichstag delegation, Jozef Koscielski, objected, and so the debate developed. On 16 July 1891, the *Kuryer Poznanski* published an open letter from Koscielski:

The right honourable gentleman maintains that in Silesia there are no Poles, only Polish-speaking Prussians. . . . Are then Polish-speaking Prussians not Poles? Or are 'Prussian' and 'Pole' contradictory? Yes, only when 'German' and 'Prussian' are identical concepts, which,

NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION: UPPER SILESIA

thank God, they are not. . . . The [Upper Silesian] people probably need a greater amount of recognition of their national peculiarity than is offered or conceded by their present leaders.

In *Germania* (22 July 1891) Count Ballestrem replied:

Apart from the fact that the Upper Silesian calls himself 'Upper Silesian', never 'Pole', the expression 'Pole' conveys a certain legal claim [to special rights based on the Treaty of Vienna]; the Polish-speaking inhabitants of Posen and West Prussia support this claim; the Upper Silesian does not.

Over a year later, on 6 October 1892, the *Kuryer* in turn chided Ballestrem on this supposed difference between the 'Great Pole', an inhabitant of the province of Posen (Poznan), and the 'Upper Silesian'. It not only asserted that the 'Great Pole' differed from the 'Upper Silesian' only as the Saxon differed from the German, but also labelled the phrase 'Grosspolnische Agitation' – which implied that Posen Poles were responsible for Upper Silesian unrest – a dishonourable survival from Bismarckian times.

In the following year political activity *within* Upper Silesia began to assume importance. The Upper Silesian finally entered the political fray. Of course, Poles from outside the area, such as Adam Napieralski, the 'king of the Polish press', continued to exercise leadership in Upper Silesia, but Major Juliusz Szmula, a native, held the centre of the political stage. His activities raised the political struggle to a new, if still very low, level.

Szmula, a popular Centre party Reichstag deputy who regularly championed the Silesian workingman in the now more industrial Upper Silesia, and who persistently advocated the introduction of Polish language instruction in Silesia, disregarded the advice of local Silesian party leaders and opposed the government's army bill. Seeking revenge, these men decided to destroy him politically.¹ They decided to deprive him of the party's endorsement in the June elections and entered an official Centre party candidate in his district of Beuthen-Tarnowitz. Their action enraged Szmula who entered the general election and won by 22,000 votes to

¹ W. J. Rose, *The Drama of Upper Silesia* (Brattleboro 1935), 138, disagrees: 'Two things, however, got him into disfavor with his German environment: (1) because in June 1890 he had joined the Polish pilgrimage from Upper Silesia to Cracow – the first of a long series of yearly excursions arranged by Upper Silesian leaders; and (2) because a year later at a big social event in Ratibor he had led the company in a Polonaise.'

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

10,000; he remained a Centre party Reichstag deputy since, presumably, he still thought of himself as a Catholic, Polish-speaking Upper Silesian!

Nevertheless, Szmula's victory had produced a new situation in Upper Silesia. When asked by the German Chancellor, von Caprivi, if Szmula should be brought before a military court of inquiry to answer charges arising from the campaign, Archbishop Kopp of Breslau replied: 'For years, I have followed the behaviour of Major Szmula with apprehension. . . . The Polish-speaking Upper Silesians consider him to be their true friend and defender of their language. . . . If Szmula were now made a martyr, his authority and influence would only be increased and the anti-German movement in Upper Silesia intensified.'² Kopp thus recognized that it had become possible for a man, stressing his Polish heritage, to acquire such popularity among the masses that in his defence they were prepared to ignore the official Catholic party machine. That party, however, was not convinced; it preferred to blame its difficulties on 'Great Polish agitation'.

The Upper Silesians soon had the opportunity to give the Centre party another lesson by repeating their June exploits in the winter of 1893-94. First, Szmula repeated his earlier performance by running for local office after being denied the party's endorsement.³ *Germania*, its Berlin daily, retaliated by once more attacking 'Great Polish agitation'. Then in rapid succession it gave warning that a divided Catholic population would let the socialists in, denounced the *Gazeta Opolska*'s plan to run Polish candidates against the Centre even if there were only 100 separatist votes in the district, and expressed the hope that the split within Catholic Silesia had healed.⁴ It had not. Szmula won, and the *Kölnische Zeitung* (9 November 1893), a hostile National Liberal newspaper, wrote: 'no one can today maintain that Upper Silesia represents the impregnable possession of the Centre Party'. It neglected to mention that Szmula had once again retained his Centre identification.

Soon the party organization had further cause for complaint. On 12 December 1893, party leaders assembled in Zülü gave a local

² *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 16 December 1893; DZA Potsdam, Reichskanzlei, Die Polen (no. 666, vol. 10); Kopp to Caprivi, 16 December 1893.

³ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 2 October 1893, reported that Szmula had been naive enough to ask why he had not been selected by the Centre Party to contest the election.

⁴ *Germania*, 14, 15, 19 October 1893.

squire named Deloch the Centre party nomination in a Reichstag by-election. The party naturally worked hard for its candidate, who initially commanded the traditional Catholic vote in this safe Centre district. But it soon became apparent that Deloch's Polish was bad and he was not popular among the farmers. And so, at short notice, a man stressing his Polish identity once again challenged the Centre party. This man, Strzoda, lost the first round of the election by 3420 votes to 3900, but since the 620 socialist votes forced a second ballot, he was able to organize his forces and win the second time by 7570 to 2700. Like Szmula, Strzoda remained a Centre party deputy.

After the election, the *Regierungs-Präsident* surveyed the scene:

In the meanwhile, Strzoda has been unanimously accepted by the Centre faction and the *Neisser Zeitung* publishes its theories that the Centre party has never been more firmly rooted in the district of Neustadt than now . . . I fear that, if there is not a change in the mood of the masses, which as of now there is no reason to expect, the day will come when the inner disunion will come out into the open, and the Centre party will suffer not only moral but also actual losses . . . which in the present situation must benefit the radical parties.⁵

Personal rivalries, the army bill, resentment of the clergy and nobles shared by both German and Pole, and farmer dissatisfaction all help to explain this inner disunion. But two facts stand out: the Centre party organization had been threatened and, in its clashes with Szmula and Strzoda, beaten. And, for the first time, the area had produced its own political leaders who were, at the very least, aware of the Upper Silesian's Polish heritage as well as his Catholic religion.⁶ This was not rebellion nor evidence of a deeply-felt Polish nationalism but it was another indication of a developing, if still very limited, Polish consciousness.⁷

In the following decade, these initial stirrings of a Polish

⁵ See DZA Potsdam, Reichskanzlei, Die Polen (no. 666, vol. 10); *Regierungs-Präsident v. Bitter* to Eulenburg, 11 February 1894. Eulenburg forwarded the report to Chancellor Caprivi on the 16th.

⁶ In East Prussia as well, some Poles began to agitate for their nationality. The *Posener Zeitung*, 29 January 1891, even speculated on the possibility that the group of Protestant Poles known as the Masurians would succumb to the nationalist fever.

⁷ The German reaction was typical. In July 1894, a Silesian school-teacher received a decoration for his proposal that Polish be eliminated from Silesian religious classes. See *Germania*, 18, 20 July 1894.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

consciousness matured as more and more Upper Silesians felt themselves torn between Polish and Upper Silesian Catholic, and German identities. Finally, in 1903, Wojciech Korfanty, recently elected to the Reichstag, made a complete break with the German Catholic party: he announced that he would join the Polish Reichstag faction, hitherto consisting only of Poles from Posen and West Prussia. In doing so, he staked a claim which has been more than realized in Poland's present borders.

Korfanty's action, however, failed to do much more than register the dilemma of Upper Silesia, since a decade and a half later, after the first world war had ended, the question of Upper Silesia remained unsettled and troublesome. The victorious allies declared that the newly-enshrined principle of national self-determination should settle the fate of the province, but objections and complications arose. The objections were of a traditional nature, consisting mainly of German assertions that a Polish Upper Silesia would suffer mass starvation, since the newly resurrected Polish state lacked both the ability to absorb the industrial production of Upper Silesia and a transportation system which could carry these products to foreign markets; thus, a Polish Upper Silesia was doomed to economic collapse.⁸ The new complication demanded everyone's attention: even the Allies recognized that Upper Silesia was neither Polish nor German. It was both and neither.

While they considered this dilemma in conference rooms in Western Europe, the committed Pole and the committed German within the Upper Silesian population attempted to settle the issue locally: the Germans relying on government troops and the Poles using the strike. This led to an armed confrontation in August 1919, and although by the 26th of that month the troops of the sixth German army corps commanded by General Hörsing had ended both the Polish military resistance and the strike, the problem of what to do with Upper Silesia remained: neither census reports nor surveys of language ability could either award all of Upper Silesia to one state or the other, or provide a rational basis for the division of the province.

One year later, violence once more broke out. On 17 August, Germans gathered in Kattowitz and demonstrated for their cause.

⁸ Wilhelm Volz, *Die wirtschaftsgeographischen Grundlagen der oberschlesischen Frage* (Berlin 1921), 42, repeats these laments.

NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION: UPPER SILESIA

By the next day they had wrecked a number of Polish businesses as well as Polish printing shops. By the 20th, the Poles had begun to march on the city and, within three days, they controlled most of the countryside just as the Germans controlled most of the cities. By the 27th, both sides, the Poles represented by Korfanty, agreed to cease hostilities. They even organized an auxiliary police force consisting of both Poles and Germans. Unrepresented were only the men and women who considered themselves neither German nor Pole.

However, these people were given a chance by the Allies to settle the issue on 20 March 1921. Unfortunately, the result of the plebiscite was unclear. Certainly, no one doubted the honesty of the count: slightly more than 700,000 votes for Germany and a little over 475,000 votes for Poland. But many interpreted the result as anything but a complete victory for Germany. Some said that the difficulties in organizing a new Poland after more than a century of foreign rule had frightened many Poles into voting for Germany. Others questioned the impact of the Jewish vote. Still others demanded a partition of the province – which would prove to be difficult since the German vote total was high in towns near the pre-war Russian (Congress Poland) border, and the Polish vote dominated in rural areas many miles to the west of these towns.

The expected occurred some six weeks later: for the third time violence was employed in an attempt to resolve this most insoluble of problems. Throughout the month of May, the fighting continued as Poles once more controlled the countryside and Germans defended the towns. And, once more, violence failed to achieve a settlement. The League of Nations on the other hand did impose a settlement in October, when it decided on a partition of Upper Silesia which placed Katowice in Poland and Oppeln in Germany. But an imposed settlement does not settle the issue itself: neither the Weimar Republic nor the Third Reich accepted the League's decision.

Yet even Hitler's propaganda ministry recognized the ambiguities of the Upper Silesian situation. In March 1935 it circulated an account of a talk by Professor Oberländer, later to be accused of war crimes by the Poles, in which he emphasized that many people in the border areas had not decided if they belonged to the German or Polish people.⁹ Publicity was also given to the charge that cer-

⁹ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Sammlung Brammer (Z Sg. 101, no. 28), report of 7 March 1935; Sammlung Traub (Z Sg. 110, no. 1), report of 8 March 1935.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

tain of these families had used their situation and the eagerness of dedicated Germans and Poles to claim them as compatriots to reap material rewards: one family, for example, managed to extort 1000 marks from a German organization in exchange for sending its children to a German, rather than a Polish, school.

This theme of 'uncertain nationality' was not allowed to die. In November 1936, the propaganda ministry advised the press that in the Eastern borderlands there were a great many Germans with Polish names and a great many Poles with German names. In 1938 the press was told that in many instances a man's mother tongue failed to indicate his nationality: this was said to be especially true in Upper Silesia, where 'in the plebiscite of 1921 a notably large part of the Upper Silesian-speaking population [*sic*] voted for Germany'.¹⁰

With the German attack in 1939, the Reich gained possession of the whole of Upper Silesia, but possession failed to result in clear national divisions. In a report on 'the treatment of the population of the former Polish areas according to *rassenpolitischen* principles' submitted on 25 November 1939, two officials of the *Rassenpolitisches Amt* revealed the inability of a party and government which believed in race to determine to which race millions of people belonged.¹¹

The report began by numbering the Polish people (which was said to include people of Polish-Jewish origin) at 17 million, while placing the 'Kaschuben, Masuren, Wasserpölen (Upper Silesians), Goralen' outside the bounds of the Polish community.¹² It went on to say that in Upper Silesia there was a bloc of 1 to 1½ million men and women who were neither German nor Pole. Ironically enough, the report admitted the influence of environment on 'race' by stating that the 'racially Nordic' groups in Poland had developed and now maintained that Polish Catholic identity which had to be destroyed if these people were ever to return to the Germanic fold.

¹⁰ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Sammlung Traub (Z Sg. 110, no. 3) report of 8 November 1936, and (no. 7) report of 21 February 1938.

¹¹ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums (R 49/75), report of 25 November 1939.

¹² A German journalist returned from Upper Silesia to report that the mountain folk, though not knowing a word of German, were loyal to Germany and could not be called Poles. He also mentioned that some 200,000 to 300,000 men and women considered themselves to be neither German nor Pole, and that some Germans knew only Polish. Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Sammlung Brammer (Z Sg. 101, no. 34), report of 5 December 1939.

NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION: UPPER SILESIA

This was an implicit admission that political boundaries can make nationalities just as surely as nationalities can be the origin of political boundaries.

What was to be done with these people? As believers in race, the writers of the report gave a warning against trying to make 'genuine Germans' out of 'racial Poles' by teaching them the German language; the only result would be a cheapening of the German people. The question to be settled was how to determine which people in this area of uncertain nationality could undergo a 'genuine' transformation into 'true' Germans: in November 1939, the report had no answer.

It did advance the idea of a sifting process and introduce such concepts as 'citizenship on recall': if the person believed to have 'Germanic blood' failed to undergo a genuine transformation, he would lose his claim to German citizenship. It also suggested that people of this uncertain status should be allowed to join the Hitler-Jugend and the Deutsche Arbeitsfront, but only as rank-and-file members: they could neither occupy leading positions nor advance to membership in the Nazi party.

On 3 September 1940 a directive from Himmler's office stated that no decision on the nationality of these people in East Upper Silesia – the area given to Poland in 1921 – had been reached.¹³ On the 12th, in a decree issued from the same office, it was admitted that a quick decision was impossible even though the Nazis had controlled the areas where these men and women lived for over a year.¹⁴

What had been decided was to divide the population into four categories: the first two covering Germans of various degrees of national consciousness, the third those whose nationality was uncertain, and the fourth Poles. But the old question remained: who was a Pole? On 14 November 1940, it was decided that people of uncertain nationality in Upper Silesia were not to be classified as Poles unless they considered themselves to be Poles.¹⁵

Finally, in an attempt to settle the question, the government adopted the following programme: suitable elements from the third

¹³ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Reichssicherheitshauptamt (R 58/270a).

¹⁴ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Reichskanzlei (R 43 II/646), Himmler's decree of 12 September 1940.

¹⁵ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Reichskanzlei (R 43 II/646b), *Bescheinigungen über die Nichtzugehörigkeit zum polnischen Volk*, 14 November 1940.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

group – suitability to be judged on the basis of appearance and worldly success – were granted German citizenship on recall for a trial period of ten years: it was hoped that they could be brought to the *Altreich* to live and their behaviour observed during that decade. They could not join the Nazi party but they could join front organizations; they could not become officials, and they needed permission to attend institutions of higher education. But there were still difficulties, two in particular. First, some ‘polonized Germans’ refused to ‘reconvert’. Himmler’s only hope was that, if these people could not be won for the German cause, they could at least be prevented from continuing to act like good Poles.¹⁶ Second, it was reported that some of the inhabitants suddenly became German when they realized the material benefits flowing from this identity.¹⁷ Neither of these problems was solved before the collapse of the Reich.

When that happened, the problem was turned upside down. Since Poland now administered all of Upper Silesia, it paid – especially if one wished to avoid expulsion from the area – to be Polish. Those who earlier had suddenly discovered their German soul now experienced delight at the mere mention of Mickiewicz. But there were still many hundreds of thousands neither Polish nor German.

Even today this question remains alive and may prove troublesome. The draft treaty of December 1970 between the Federal Republic and Poland, for instance, includes a Polish pledge to allow Germans living in present-day Poland to move to West Germany. But who is a German? *Der Spiegel* (14 December 1970) reported that the black market in Silesia had already begun to engage in activities which would enable individuals to take advantage of the agreement. What will be the reaction of the Polish government to their attempted emigration? What will be the German reaction?

It is clear that in this area a large number of people cannot be classified by nationality, from which it follows that political slogans such as the right of national self-determination merit careful

¹⁶ A summary of German policy can be found in Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Reichskanzlei (R 43 II/136), Himmler’s *Allgemeine Anordnung* of 9 February 1942, and his letter to his subordinates of 16 February 1942.

¹⁷ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Kanzlei des Generalgouverneurs (R 52 II/235), comments of Dr Wächter, 18 March 1942.

NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION: UPPER SILESIA

scrutiny. Might it not be that the doctrine of national self-determination, rather than satisfying a real demand, has actually forced many people, as in the case of Upper Silesia, to acquire a nationality?