
HUGO SERVICE

I

The ethnic cleansing which engulfed Central and Eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century was often a matter of indiscriminate expulsion in which little or no time was taken to reflect on the cultural identity of the victims. Yet not all of it was carried out in this manner. The occupiers and governments which implemented ethnic cleansing policies in Poland and Czechoslovakia during and after the Second World War came to the conclusion that there were many inhabitants of the territories they wished to ‘cleanse’ who could not be instantly recognized as belonging to one national group or another. They decided to subject these people to rigorous ethnic screening to ensure that only genuine members of unwanted national groups were uprooted.

Ethnic cleansing was combined with ethnic screening, for example, in the territories which Germany annexed from Poland in autumn 1939, where it took the form of the Deutsche Völklisste (DVL). The DVL required people living in these territories to fill out special questionnaires which the Nazi German authorities attempted to use to determine whether they were Germans, ‘of German descent’ or Poles. It was targeted particularly at the linguistically mixed areas of the annexed territories — eastern Upper Silesia, part of the Danzig region and part of southern East Prussia — where the Nazi leadership assumed that a large proportion of local inhabitants were ethno-racially German and should therefore be culturally assimilated into the German Volk. The Nazi German authorities ultimately categorized the majority of people living in each of these areas either as Germans or ‘individuals of German descent’ by entering them into one of the four categories of the DVL. In the annexed territories as a whole the authorities entered around 2.8 million pre-war Polish citizens into the DVL. This shielded them from expulsion to the General Government or to other

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parts of the annexed territories — the fate of around one million people during the war, most of them residents of the so-called Wartheland region. Meanwhile, in occupied Czechoslovakia, the Nazi regional governor of the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Reinhard Heydrich, developed similar plans to culturally ‘Germanize’ half of the territory’s population and either to sterilize or to uproot the other half eastwards. As the first step towards fulfilling this plan, between 1941 and 1943 his authorities ethnically screened thousands of the inhabitants of this territory, categorizing each as either ‘Germanizable’ or ‘un-Germanizable’.2

The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 by no means put an end to large-scale ethnic screening in East-Central Europe. Indeed, in the aftermath of the war, as approximately three million ‘Germans’ were being expelled or forcibly transported to the US and Soviet Occupation Zones of Germany from Czechoslovakia, the country’s post-war government decided that — since it was not always clear who was a German and who a Czech among the inhabitants of their country — another round of ethnic screening would be necessary. Local courts were set up throughout the country in 1945 to judge people’s ethno-national identity based on whatever evidence was available. In subsequent years, they categorized thousands of people as ethnic Czechs, sparing them from displacement from the country.3 While this was going on in post-war Czechoslovakia, a similar process got under way in post-war Poland. This ethnic screening process, introduced throughout the new western and northern territories which Poland acquired from Germany at the end of the war, was known as the ethnic ‘verification action’ (akcja weryfikacyjna) and will be the primary focus of this article.


The role ethnic screening played in the ethnic cleansing of East-Central Europe during and after the Second World War is relatively under-studied. A number of recent books and articles have looked at this subject, including those by Richard Blanke, Chad Bryant, Andreas Hofmann, Jeremy King, Bernard Linek, Piotr Madajczyk, Grzegorz Strauchold, Philipp Ther and Tara Zahra. Each of these studies has demonstrated that it is not possible to fully understand the acts of ethnic cleansing carried out in this region during and after the Second World War without critically confronting the simplistic ethno-national categories lying behind these actions. But only Hofmann’s and Strauchold’s studies have subjected the interaction between ethnic screening and ethnic cleansing in this region at this time to detailed examination. Moreover, there has yet to be an in-depth, local-level analysis of the part ethnic screening played in the ethnic cleansing of East-Central Europe in the 1940s.

This article seeks to provide precisely that — by focusing on the locality of Oppeln/Opole District in western Upper Silesia. ‘Western Upper Silesia’ refers to the part of Upper Silesia which after the partition of Upper Silesia in 1922 remained in Germany and was not incorporated into Poland — the part of Upper Silesia which in Polish is referred to as Śląsk Opolski. Western Upper Silesia was one of the regions Poland acquired from defeated Germany in 1945. A western Upper Silesian locality has been chosen as the case study for this article because this region was where the post-war Communist-led Polish authorities first implemented ethnic screening in their new territories and where they did so on the largest scale. Opole/Oppeln District has been selected because it was one of the western Upper Silesian districts where ethnic screening played a particularly important role in the ethnic cleansing process.


5 By ‘district’ I mean both the *Stadt- und Landkreis* of Oppeln and the *powiat* and *miasto* of Opole. Oppeln was the name of the district before 1945. Opole has been its name since 1945. The size of the population of Opole District on 17 May 1939, according to a nationwide German census, was 198,100. Alfred Bohmann, *Menschen und Grenzen: Strukturwandel der deutschen Bevölkerung im polnischen Staats- und Verwaltungsbereich*, Cologne, 1969, p. 209.
This article contends that the ethnic screening carried out by Nazi German, Czechoslovakian and Polish authorities in East-Central Europe during and after the Second World War failed to achieve its primary goals since it was based on a crude nationalist outlook which sought to distil complex cultural identities and collective self-understandings into simplistic national categories.

This was something not well understood by the only other historians who have looked at western Upper Silesia’s ethno-national ‘verification’ in detail — Zbigniew Kowalski and Jan Misztal. Writing in Communist Poland in the early 1980s, both historians provided useful empirical information about the inner workings of ethnic screening in the region after the war. Yet both presented the same black-and-white understanding of cultural identity and self-understanding among Upper Silesians as the Polish officials who implemented the process. This meant that they presented all pre-war inhabitants of Upper Silesia as falling into two national categories: Germans and Poles. As will be argued in this article, it was this simplification which lay at the heart of the failure of ‘verification’.

II

The ethnic ‘verification’ of the pre-war population of Oppeln/Opole District was part of a broad process of ethnic cleansing implemented throughout Poland by the country’s Soviet-backed and Communist-led government between 1944 and 1949. It was partly a product of the strong anti-German feelings which were ubiquitous in Polish society following Germany’s brutal and humiliating occupation of the country after September 1939. But the ethnic cleansing carried out in Poland between 1944 and 1949 must also be understood as the product of an older tradition of Polish ethnic nationalism associated since the late nineteenth century primarily with the figure of Roman Dmowski and propounded in the early part of the twentieth century by his National Democratic Party, as well as such organizations as the Poznań-based Polish Western Association (Polski Związek Zachodni). The relatively weak support for Communism in Poland at the end of the war prompted Poland’s Moscow-backed Communist government to embrace key aspects of this ethno-nationalist ideology in order to gain popularity.

within Polish society. The government’s post-war policy of ethno-national homogenization was a clear manifestation of this. Crucially, this policy saw not only 3.6 million Germans expelled or forcibly transported to occupied Germany from the post-war territories of Poland between 1945 and 1949, but also around half a million ethnic Ukrainians and thousands of ethnic Belarusians and Lithuanians uprooted eastwards to the Soviet Union.7

As the Red Army forced its way into Germany in early 1945, it began to place vast swathes of pre-war eastern German territory under the control of Polish authorities. Poland had already lost massive territories in the east to the Soviet Union in 1944 and the Polish government was therefore anxious to ensure that all of the German territories the Red Army was putting under its control in the early months of 1945 would ultimately be incorporated into Poland by the Allied Powers when the war was over. The Polish government viewed the existence of what it believed to be ethnic Polish populations in eastern German territories — primarily in western Upper Silesia and southern East Prussia — as a crucial part of the argument which it intended to put forward to the Allied Powers at the end of war in order to convince them to grant Poland permanent possession of these territories.8 The government therefore planned both to ethnically cleanse the pre-war eastern German territories of Germans and, at the same time, to keep in place a large population which it would present to the Allied Powers as ‘autochthonous Poles’.

Ethnic screening came to be seen as the way to achieve this dual goal of removing ‘Germans’ from these territories and proving to the Allies that a large number of ‘native Poles’ already resided there. The post-war Polish authorities applied it throughout these territories in the half decade following the war. But ethnic screening was first introduced, as mentioned already, in western Upper Silesia, as an initiative not of Poland’s central government in Warsaw but of Upper Silesia’s new regional governor (Wojewoda), General Aleksander Zawadzki. Zawadzki was a Communist Party politburo member who was sent to the city of Katowice in early spring 1945 to set up a regional administration (Urząd Wojewódzki) for the reconstituted and expanded region of Upper Silesia (Województwo Śląskie). This administrative region, unlike its pre-war version, included both eastern Upper Silesia — which had been part of Poland before the war — and western

Upper Silesia, which had been part of Germany before 1939, Zawadzki had already begun to set up an ethnic screening process in western Upper Silesia in March 1945 — referring to it as ethnic ‘verification’. It was not until the second half of 1945 that similar ‘verification actions’ were also introduced in other parts of Poland’s new post-war territories — the other area where a large-scale ‘verification action’ was later implemented being southern East Prussia.

In the spring of 1945, Polish officials arriving in western Upper Silesia began to establish special ethnic ‘verification committees’ throughout the region to carry out the task of determining local people’s ethno-national identity. Locals were told to begin submitting applications to the committees providing evidence of their Polish ethno-national identity (narodowość polska). Based on the judgements of these committees, successful applicants were then issued with ‘temporary certificates of Polish nationality’ by their local district administration (Starostwo) or town administration (Zarząd Miejski).

In the newly renamed district of Opole, the ‘verification action’ was introduced by arriving Polish officials in late spring 1945. The officials created a large number of ‘verification committees’ to carry out the task of judging ethno-national identity in the district. A single ‘town verification committee’ dealt with all applications from residents of the town of Opole, while an entire three-tier system of ‘verification committees’ was set up to do the same in the surrounding rural part of the district.

At the bottom of these three tiers stood the ‘village verification committees’. There were around ninety of these operating in the district

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12 In Polish: ‘tymczasowe zaświadczenia o przynależności narodowej.’
14 Katowice, Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach (hereafter, APK), 185/4, sygn. 21, 208–99, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 20.8.45–20.9.45.
15 Opole, Archiwum Państwowe w Opolu (hereafter, APO, 185, sygn. 85, 3, Report by the Social-Political Department of Opole town administration, 24.8.45; APK, 185/4, sygn. 435, 51–52, Report on inspection of the ‘verification action’ in Opole District, written in the second half of December 1945; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 11, Report written by the head of the town administration’s Social-Political Department, 20.12.45; APK, 185, sygn. 85, 33, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.6.46; APO, 178, sygn. 41, 1–4, ‘Situation report’ on period 20.8.45–20.9.45; APK, 185/4, sygn. 435, 53–56, Report on an inspection of the ‘verification action’ in Opole District, dating from the second half of December 1945.
and they were the first committees to examine the ‘verification’ applications. Their job was to categorize each application as ‘indisputable’, ‘rejected’ or ‘contentious’ before sending them to one of the district’s twenty-one ‘commune verification committees’ for further inspection. The commune committees, which were each in charge of the screening process in several of the district’s villages, then re-categorized the applications as accepted, rejected or contentious. Only those placed in the last of these three categories were then sent to Opole District’s single ‘district verification committee’, at the top of the hierarchy, to make final decisions. A similar hierarchy of ‘verification committees’ was set up in each of western Upper Silesia’s districts in the course of 1945, although there was a good deal of variation in the number of committees operating in each district.

In terms of how these committees were composed, the village and commune ‘verification committees’ in Opole District were each said to contain at least three ‘local Polish people’ (miejscowa ludność polska) — and in many of the ‘village verification committees’ these ‘local Polish people’ may even have constituted a majority of the committee members. But it is not exactly clear what the authorities meant by ‘local Polish people’. They may often have meant pre-war residents of western Upper Silesia as a whole rather than of the particular villages and communes in which the committee actually operated. In any case, they are all likely to have been people who had demonstrated their Polish nationalist credentials to the authorities by proving they had been members of Polish organizations in the interwar period. The remaining members of the committees were all outsiders from the pre-war territories of Poland who had been given official administrative positions in the district after spring 1945. The ‘village verification committees’ were each headed by a village mayor (Sołtys) or local head teacher, the commune committees by a commune mayor (Wójt).

The district and town ‘verification committees’, which were headed respectively by Opole District’s chief official (Starosta) and Opole town’s president, were much larger and had broader memberships. Closely reflecting instructions issued by regional governor Zawadzki in summer 1945, Opole’s ‘town verification committee’, for example, contained representatives from the Polish Workers’ Party, the Polish Socialist Party, the Polish Peasants’ Party, the Democratic Party, the

17 Ibid., pp. 87–88.
Security Police (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego), the Citizens’ Militia (that is, the regular police), the Committee for Former Political Prisoners, the school inspectorate, the Association of Veterans of the Silesian Uprisings and the Polish Western Association. The ‘district verification committee’ was similarly composed. The involvement of the Polish Western Association in the ‘verification action’, in particular, highlights the ethnic nationalist goals lying behind this screening process. This staunchly nationalist association had been founded in Poznań in 1921 and, out of political necessity, had accepted close cooperation with the Communist-led Polish government after 1944. It had been given an important role in the ‘verification action’ throughout western Upper Silesia.20

Zawadzki demanded, moreover, that not just the village and commune ‘verification committees’ but also the district and town ‘verification committees’ contain representatives from the ‘local Polish population’. Opole’s nineteen-member ‘town verification committee’ apparently contained as many as nine pre-war residents of the town in August 1945. All of them were said to be either former members of the interwar Association of Poles in Germany (Związek Polaków w Niemczech) or ‘trusted individuals who are very knowledgeable about the local region’, meaning people who had proven to the authorities that in the past they had engaged in Polish nationalist activities.21 Opole District, in fact, was rather unusual in having ‘verification committees’ with significant representation of ‘autochthonous Poles’. Elsewhere in western Upper Silesia it was common for the committees to contain not a single pre-war resident of the region.22 Zawadzki criticized this in a circular sent out on 24 October 1945, invalidating all decisions reached by committees which did not contain pre-war residents of western Upper Silesia.23 Yet given how many seats in Opole District’s two most important ‘verification committees’ were assigned to officials, policemen and political activists — most, if not all, of whom were outsiders from central Poland — it is clear that the participation of pre-war residents in the ‘verification’ process had more to do with vesting the process with legitimacy than enhancing the accuracy of judgements made about the ethno-national identity of local people.24

19 APO, 185, sygn. 85, 11, Report by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 20.12.45; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 3, Report by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 24.8.45; Hofmann, Die Nachkriegszeit, pp. 284–85; Kowalski, Powrót, p. 299.
20 Kowalski, Powrót, pp. 305–06.
21 APO, 185, sygn. 85, 3, Report by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 24.8.45.
So how exactly did these committees reach decisions about whether a local resident was an ethnic Pole or not? In fact, they received surprisingly little guidance from Upper Silesia's regional administration in Katowice on what counted for Polish ethno-national identity. According to one individual, who had been a member of Opole’s ‘district verification committee’ at this time, they therefore devised their own criteria for determining Polish ethno-national identity. He claimed:

A good command of Polish was demanded as well as [...] facts attesting to an affiliation with the Polish nation — such as membership of the Association of Poles in Germany, subscription before the war to Polish newspapers and books, attendance of Polish minority schools, [experience of] persecution and repression at the hands of the Germans, participation of relatives in the plebiscite campaign or in the Silesian Uprisings, involvement in excursions to Poland including pilgrimages [...] Roman Catholic faith, and a loyal attitude towards Polish affairs and the Poles.

This suggested that ‘behavioural’ criteria for Polish ethnicity — such as what organizations an individual had chosen to join before 1945 and how an individual had acted during the plebiscite campaign and Silesian Uprisings of 1919–21 — were attributed by the committee an equal importance to the supposedly ‘objective’ criteria of language and religion. Opole’s committee was not doing anything unique in this respect. Despite offering little in the way of specific guidelines, Katowice did, from the outset, advise the region’s verification committees’ to base their decisions on Polish ethno-national identity just as much on ‘behavioural’ criteria as on ‘objective’ ones.

Nevertheless, the version of proceedings presented by this former member of Opole’s ‘district verification committee’ was clearly highly idealized. Because western Upper Silesia’s authorities wished to demonstrate that a large proportion of the region’s inhabitants were ethnic Poles — and thereby strengthen Poland’s territorial claim to the region — the verification committees’ simply could not afford to apply strict criteria when judging the applications. In practice, the committees were often, therefore, willing to ‘verify’ people as ethnic Poles based solely on the signatures of support they received from pre-war residents who had been designated as ‘trusted’ (that is, Polish nationalist) by the authorities. And in certain places, very small numbers of ‘trusted’ pre-war residents supplied signatures of support for very large numbers of applicants — people whom they rarely personally knew.

25 Ibid. pp. 286 and 300.
26 Cited in ibid., pp. 285–86; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 11, Report by the head of the town administration’s Social-Political Department, 20.12.45.
28 Misztal, Weryfikacja, pp. 94–99.
This practice was clearly in line with regional governor Zawadzki’s intentions. He made it absolutely plain to the region’s officials that he did not want the ‘verification committees’ to be too stringent when judging Polish ethno-national identity — complaining in an October 1945 circular, for example, that too many applications were being rejected. This circular may have been what prompted Opole District’s chief official, at the end of October, to inspect the camps in the local area where people whose ‘verification’ applications had been rejected, or who refused to submit applications, were being interned. He reportedly came across individuals in these camps who could speak Polish and immediately ordered their release so that they could undergo ‘verification’ as ethnic Poles.

In the first year or so of the ‘verification’ process Opole District’s ‘verification committees’ rejected very few applications. Of the approximately 59,000 locals who had already submitted applications for ‘verification’ by the end of 1945, around 57,000 were ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles and only 1595 applications — less than 3 per cent — were rejected. Twenty-nine per cent of Opole District’s entire pre-war population had therefore already been ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles by this time.

Everyone ‘verified’ as an ethnic Pole in Opole District was, of course, entitled to continue living there. The problem was that Polish settlers from both central Poland and the pre-war eastern territories of Poland, which the Soviet Union had effectively annexed from Poland in 1944, flooded into Opole District in 1945. The first cargo train carrying settlers from Poland’s ceded eastern territories had already arrived in Oppeln/Opole town in March 1945. Because Opole town happened to be one of the few places in western Upper Silesia where the Soviets’ recently-installed broad-gauge railway came to an end, huge numbers

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of eastern Polish settlers were unloaded there from spring 1945 onwards with the aim of transferring them onto narrow-gauge trains for onward transportation.\textsuperscript{33} Meanwhile, large numbers of settlers also arrived from central Poland — some of them unassisted, but most of them transported to the district on goods trains.\textsuperscript{34} By early summer 1945, 8,000 to 10,000 Polish settlers were said to be arriving in Opole town daily, many of whom could not be immediately transported onwards.\textsuperscript{35} To deal with this growing mass of homeless settlers, a makeshift camp was set up next to Opole’s railway station, where conditions quickly began to worsen. By mid-summer 1945, 27,000 Polish settlers were staying there and a serious epidemic had broken out among them.\textsuperscript{36} Their number rapidly grew, peaking in late September 1945, when 88,000 were living either at this camp or in barracks around the town of Opole.\textsuperscript{37}

Very few of these people could be given permanent homes in Opole District. By the end of 1945, only 15,000 to 20,000 Polish settlers had received permanent places to live in the Opole District. The primary reason for this was that only a minority of the pre-war residents had abandoned the district for good during the flight of local civilians from the Red Army in January 1945. Of the large number of local residents who had initially vacated the district as the Red Army invaded in late January 1945, many had already returned to the district before the war ended or within weeks of the war’s end. Only in the town of Oppeln/Opole itself, where most people had regarded themselves as Germans before the war, was the majority of the population permanently uprooted in the course of this mass flight. Correspondingly, the majority of Polish settlers who did manage to get permanent homes in Opole District after the war were allotted houses and flats in the town of Opole.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{34} Hofmann, \textit{Die Nachkriegszeit}, p. 108.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 109; APK 185/4, sygn. 436, 60–61, Report on an inspection of Opole District which took place 6–19.4.45; APK 185/4, sygn. 27/1, 43–47, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration, 9.4.45.

\textsuperscript{36} APK 185/4, sygn. 25, 12–14, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 20.6.45; Hofmann, \textit{Die Nachkriegszeit}, pp. 109–10; Eser, ‘Die Deutschen in Oberschlesiien’, p. 384.

\textsuperscript{37} APO 178, sygn. 41, 1–4, ‘Situation report’ by Opole District’s chief official on the period 20.8.45–20.9.45.

As indicated already, any pre-war resident of Opole District whose ‘verification’ application was rejected or who refused to submit an application was categorized as a German and, where possible, interned in one of several special camps for Germans situated in the local area, where they were subjected to very harsh conditions and forced labour.\textsuperscript{39} At the same time, the district’s authorities encouraged those locals who thought of themselves as Germans to migrate to Germany ‘voluntarily’ by introducing various anti-German measures and issuing so-called ‘passes for permanent emigration’. Officially, around 2,500 people had left the district voluntarily by the end of 1945 — though the actual figure was probably several thousand higher than this.\textsuperscript{40}

The ‘verification action’ continued into 1946, Opole District’s population by this point apparently exhibiting ‘utter indifference’ towards it.\textsuperscript{41} It was in the spring of 1946 that Poland’s central government in Warsaw finally decided to take control of the ‘verification’ process. The Ministry for Recovered Territories sent out an order at the start of April 1946 which had two principal consequences. First, it brought the


\textsuperscript{40} APK 185, sygn. 85, 13, Report by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 16.1.46; APK 185/4, sygn. 435, 51–52, Report on the ‘verification action’ in Opole District, written in the second half of December 1945; APK 185/4, sygn. 435, 53–56, Report on the ‘verification action’ in Opole District, written in the second half of December 1945; APK 185, sygn. 85, 41–42, ‘Special situation report’ by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 13.11.46; APK 185, sygn. 85, 47, Report by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 17.1.47; APK 185, sygn. 85, 32, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.6.46; APK 178, sygn. B15, 1–11, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 4.12.46; BOD 1, 243 and BOD 2, 229, numerous witness reports in these files, especially BOD 2, 229, 3–4 by Alfred von A. from Althammer (Paliwoda), 10.4.51 and BOD 2, 229, 58–62 by Oskar Tilgner from Carlsruhe (Pokój), 19.6.52; Madajczyk, \textit{Przyłączenie}, pp. 200–02 and 222–23; Eser, ‘Die Deutschen in Oberschlesien’, pp. 384, 387, 395 and 397.

\textsuperscript{41} APK, 178, sygn. 41, 13–15, ‘Situation report’ by Opole District’s chief official on the period 20.12.45–20.1.46.
other ‘verification actions’, introduced elsewhere in the new territories in the second half of 1945, procedurally into line with the ‘verification action’ being carried out in western Upper Silesia.\(^{42}\) Secondly, and more importantly for Opole District and the rest of western Upper Silesia, believing that almost everybody eligible for ‘verification’ in the new territories had by spring 1946 already been ‘verified’ as an ethnic Pole, the Polish government ordered the dissolution of all ‘verification committees’ be completed by the end of the summer of 1946.\(^{43}\)

The problem with this was that western Upper Silesia was still witnessing a steady stream of pre-war residents returning from Germany after fleeing from the Red Army in the early months of 1945 — and they invariably submitted applications for ‘verification’ on their return to the region. By the second half of 1946, Opole District’s ‘verification committees’ were, in fact, almost exclusively ‘verifying’ recent returnees from Germany.\(^{44}\) Yet, despite the fact that thousands of ‘verification’ applications were being submitted by these returning locals, Opole District’s officials were forced to dissolve their ‘verification committees’ in the autumn of 1946, requiring them simply to hand over the task of evaluating ‘verification’ applications to administrative departments. The committees operating in the rural part of Opole District transferred their functions to Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, while the ‘town verification committee’ (dissolved on 19 November 1946) transferred them to Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department.\(^{45}\) The same procedural change to the ‘verification’ process was witnessed in all of western Upper Silesia’s districts in the second half of 1946.\(^{46}\) Given that by this time the majority of the region’s administrative posts were filled by outsiders from central Poland rather than pre-war residents of western Upper Silesia,\(^{47}\)


\(^{43}\) Hofmann, \textit{Die Nachkriegszeit}, p. 301.

\(^{44}\) APO, 178, sygn. 41, 34–36, ‘Situation report’ on the period 20.6.46–20.7.46; APK, 185/4, sygn. 436, 62–64, Report on an inspection of the ‘verification action’ in Opole District carried out 10–23 June 1946; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 33, ‘Situation report’ by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.6.46; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 35, ‘Situation report’ by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.8.46; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 44, ‘Situation report’ by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.12.46; APK, 185/4, sygn. 39, 54–54a, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 31.12.46.

\(^{45}\) APK, 185/4, sygn. 39, 54–54a, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 31.12.46; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 43, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.11.46; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 41–42, ‘Exceptional situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 13.11.46; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 47, Report by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 17.1.47.

\(^{46}\) Kowalski, \textit{Powełi}, p. 375.
Silesia, local participation in the ‘verification’ process was now very limited.\footnote{APO, Political district ‘Current administration’s Social-Political Department was itself suddenly dissolved. Now in charge of the ‘verification’ in both Opole town and the rural part of the district, Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department was unable to process the large number of applications still flowing in from returning pre-war residents. A large backlog of ‘verification’ applications thus quickly formed.\footnote{APO, Political district ‘Situation 21.4.47.} The backlog was finally resolved in 1948, but applications continued to arrive from returnees; and it was not until 1949 that the return-migration finally petered out, causing the ‘verification’ applications at last to dry up. The ‘verification action’ was finally brought to an end in Opole District and in all other western Upper Silesian districts in the summer of 1949.\footnote{APO, in social-political district’s Social-Political Department, \textit{17.1.47}; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 47, Report by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, \textit{21.4.47}; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 48, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, \textit{21.3.47}; APO, 178, sygn. 62, 7–11, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, \textit{1.4.47}; APO, 178, sygn. 62, 12–14, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, \textit{2.5.47}; APO, 178, sygn. 62, 16–18, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, \textit{6.6.47}; APO, 178, sygn. 62, 21–23, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, \textit{12.8.47}. There are no more ‘situation reports’ by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department in file APO, 185, sygn. 85 after the one dated \textit{21.4.47}.}
In the course of this action, Opole District’s authorities had succeeded in ‘verifying’ a very large proportion of the district’s pre-war population as ethnic Poles. As one district official put it in November 1949, ‘[t]he native population has yielded to the verification process’.50 Altogether, Opole District’s ‘verification committees’ and Social-Political Departments had ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles, according to one source, 139,944 individuals (including children) between 1945 and 1949. This suggested that 72 per cent of the district’s entire pre-war population was ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles after the war.51 The figure for western Upper Silesia as a whole was also large: 56 per cent.52

This massive figure had been achieved, as we have seen, by avoiding a stringent approach to the ‘verification’ of pre-war residents. What is striking, however, is that this approach extended to considering former Nazi Party members for ‘verification’ as ethnic Poles. In fact, Opole District’s authorities allowed not only former Nazi Party members but even former Brown Shirts and SS men to submit ‘verification’ applications after the war.53 Thirty former Nazi Party members were actually ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles by Opole’s ‘district verification committee’ in the initial months of the action. This must have happened before October 1945 when Upper Silesia’s regional governor, Zawadzki, sent out an order to the region’s officials instructing them not to allow local ‘verification committees’ to ‘verify’ former Nazi Party members

49 Continued

4.9.48; APO, 178, sygn. 62, 50–52, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department on the first two quarters of 1948; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 25–26, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 1.6.48; APO, 178, sygn. 113, 64–65, Report on ‘the liquidation of the traces of German language and culture’ by the head of Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 31.7.48; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 54–55, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 4.8.48; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 7–8, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department on the period 1.1.48–31.12.48; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 36, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 5.8.49; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 43, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department on the period 25.11.49; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 14, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 8.3.49; Kowalski, Powrót, p. 377.

50 APO, 178, sygn. 64, 43, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 25.11.49.

51 This figure is from Upper Silesia’s regional administration, dated 1.7.49, cited in Kowalski, Powrót, p. 361 and Miszta, Weryfikacja, p. 158. Other figures suggest that the number was under 130,000. See APO, 178, sygn. 65, 17–21, Report on the ‘re-Polonization action’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 31.4.48; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 43, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 25.11.49.


53 APO, 178, sygn. 41, 1–4, ‘Situation report’ by Opole District’s chief official on period 20.8.45–29.9.45; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 56–57, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 4.9.48.
as ethnic Poles. He instructed local committees instead to send any applications from former party members, which they did not wish to reject, to Upper Silesia’s regional administration in Katowice for further consideration. Opole District’s authorities were apparently being told at this time by ‘trusted’ pre-residents that many of the former Nazi Party members living in the district ‘had never concealed their Polish ethnicity, always used the Polish language etc.’, and had only joined the party because they had been pressured into it by the German authorities. The famous sociologist Stanisław Ossowski was told the same by Polish nationalist locals when he visited this area in August 1945. The attitude of Poland’s central government in Warsaw towards this issue changed over time. In July 1945 it ruled that former members of the Nazi Party and other Nazi formations were ineligible for ‘temporary certificates of Polish nationality’. But by April 1946 it had decided that former Nazi Party membership should not be viewed as an absolute obstacle to ‘verification’ as an ethnic Pole since many had been ‘coerced’ into joining the party.

Several thousand ‘verification’ applications were probably submitted by former Nazi Party members in Opole District between 1945 and 1949 — a large proportion of which were sent to the regional administration in Katowice for further consideration. What number of these applicants were ultimately ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles cannot be said for certain — but some definitely were. Several thousand former Nazi Party members are estimated to have been ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles in western Upper Silesia as a whole.

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55 APK, 185/4, sygn. 22, 49–51, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 5.6.45; APK, 185/4, sygn. 25, 12–14, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 20.6.45.
58 APK, 185/4, sygn. 436, 60–61, Report on an inspection of the ‘verification action’ in Opole District carried out 6–19 February 1946; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 32, ‘Situation report’ by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.5.46; APK, 185/4, sygn. 436, 62–64, Report on an inspection of the ‘verification action’ in Opole District carried out 10–23 June 1946; APO, 178, sygn. 62, 12–14, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 2.5.47; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 56–57, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 4.9.48; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 63–65, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 5.11.48; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 7–8, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department report on the period 1.1.48–31.12.48; Kowalski, Powrót, pp. 330–31 and 350–52.
In practice, most of the former Nazi Party members who made successful applications were able to show that their jobs would have been at risk had they not joined the Nazi Party. One successful applicant from Opole District, for example, claimed that he had been a pro-Polish activist in the plebiscite period and had joined the Nazi Party only to avoid losing his position as the local mayor of his village. Another Opole District resident succeeded in convincing officials that he had only joined the Nazi Party (and Germanized his surname) to retain his job by including in his application a letter of support from the Special Committee for Former Concentration Camp Prisoners in Bamberg. This letter explained that he was a former political prisoner who had fought against Germany and helped many Poles to escape from camps during the war.59

Because so many of Opole District’s pre-war residents were ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles between 1945 and 1949, relatively few locals were forcibly removed from the district. This was in stark contrast to the massive forced transportation of Germans carried out in most other localities in Poland’s new territories in this period. Nevertheless, some ‘Germans’ were forcibly transported from Opole District at this time. This process got under way in August 1946 when two trains departed from Opole town. The local residents who had been categorized as Germans in the course of the ‘verification action’ were gathered together at a collection camp in Opole town, loaded into goods trains and transported to a large collection camp in Głubczyce in southern Upper Silesia. There they were unloaded, subjected to a luggage inspection, crammed back into goods wagons — up to thirty-six people per wagon — and transported to the British Occupation Zone of Germany. Another goods train left in December 1946; this time those transported were forced to spend several nights of extreme cold at the rudimentary camp in Głubczyce before being transported to the Soviet Zone. Only small contingents of residents were sent to Germany in subsequent years. Perhaps around 5,000 residents of Opole District, in total, were transported to Germany between 1946 and 1949. Significantly, many of them had registered voluntarily for transportation — very often after being ‘verified’ as ethnic Poles. The district’s authorities justified sending these ‘verified Poles’ to Germany by claiming that they were merely ‘correcting’ the ‘mistakes’ made during the ‘verification’ process.60

60 APO 185, sygn. 85, 35, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.8.46; APK 185/4, sygn. 39, 54–54a, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 31.12.46; APO 185, sygn. 85, 44, ‘Situation report’ by Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.12.46; APO 178, sygn. 62, 2–3, ‘Situation report’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 30.1.47; APO 185, sygn. 85, 47, Report by Opole town administration’s
Since so few pre-war residents were forcibly transported from Opole District between 1946 and 1949, the authorities struggled to provide Polish settlers with permanent homes there during these years. From spring 1946 onwards, the authorities concentrated their efforts on actually shifting Polish settlers out of the district, sending them to the under-populated districts of northern Lower Silesia. Nevertheless, around 40,000 settlers had been permanently settled in Opole District by the end of 1940s — the majority of them in the town of Opole.61

The ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Opole District between 1945 and 1949, therefore, did not involve uprooting the entire resident population and replacing it with Polish settlers from elsewhere — as it did in most other localities in Poland’s new territories. These processes of uprooting

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60 Continued

Social-Political Department, 17.1.47; APO 178, sygn. 62, 4–14 and 21–23, ‘Situation reports’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 3–3.47, 1.4.47, 2.5.47, 12.8.47; APO 178, sygn. 65, 63–65, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 5, 11.48; APO 178, sygn. 64, 12–13, ‘Current issues’ report by the department, 24.1.49; APO 178, sygn. 64, 7–8, Report on the year 1948 by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, undated; APO 178, sygn. 63, 6–10, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 7.1.49; APO 178, sygn. 64, 26, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 5.8.49; Document 324 in Włodzimierz Borodziej and Hans Lemberg (eds), Niemcy w Polsce 1945–1950, 4 vols, Warsaw, 2000–01, 2, pp. 465–66; BOD 1, 243, 335–37, Witness report by Karl B. from Schönhirch (Chrzaszczyce), 14.8.55; BOD 1, 243, 53–61, Witness report by Helmut R. from Carlsruhe (Pokój), 19.8.58; BOD 1, 243, 33–36, Witness report (guidelines) by Gustav R. from Blumenthal (Krzyszwa Góra), undated; BOD 2, 229, 9–10, Witness report by M. H. from Carlsruhe (Pokój), 23.6.52; BOD 1, 243, 379–80, Witness report (guidelines) by E. D. from Wolfsdorf (Wawelno), undated; BOD 1, 243, 289–93, Witness report (guidelines) by Julius T. from Pruszkow (Prószków), 14.4.56; BOD 1, 243, 25–27, Witness report (guidelines) by Franz G. from Bergdorf (Daniec), undated; BOD 1, 243, 49–51, Witness report (guidelines) by Dorothea S. from Burloso (Bierdzany), 22.11. 54; BOD 1, 243, 349–51, Witness report (guidelines) by Georg S. from Tauntzien (Okóly), undated; BOD 1, 243, 227–28, Witness report (guidelines) by Josef M. from Krapps (Krappitz), undated; BOD 1, 243, 271–74, Witness report (guidelines) by Emilie B. from Neuwedel (Swieczyń), 29.8.55; BOD 1, 243, 67–72, Witness report (guidelines) by Arthur M. from Derschn (Suchy Bór), 7.10.54; Eser, ‘Die Deutschen in Oberschlesien’, p. 395; Hofmann, Die Nachkriegszeit, pp. 222–24 and 229–31.

and repopulation played only relatively minor roles in the authorities’ drive to ethnically homogenize Opole District. Like elsewhere in western Upper Silesia and certain parts of southern East Prussia, a more important role was played in Opole District by the authorities’ ethno-national ‘verification action’, which purportedly enabled the Polish authorities to demonstrate that a very large proportion of the pre-war population of the district were ethnic Poles who, therefore, did not need to be uprooted and replaced. 77 per cent of the 168,000 permanent residents of Opole District at the end of the 1940s were thus people who had already been living in the district before the war.62

III

The central assumption underlying the ‘verification action’ was that the pre-war population of western Upper Silesia was composed of two national groups, Poles and Germans. Once the Poles had been identified, the Germans could be uprooted. Or, as Upper Silesia’s regional governor, Zawadzki, put it: ‘Nie chcemy ani jednego Niemca, nie oddamy ani jednej duszy polskiej’ (‘We don’t want a single German, nor will we give away a single Polish soul’).63

There were clear grounds for claiming that a large proportion of western Upper Silesia’s pre-war population was ethnically Polish. Firstly, there were the results of German censuses carried out before the 1922 partition of Upper Silesia. In the nationwide census of 1910, the majority of residents in most western Upper Silesian districts had put down Polish as their mother tongue. For example, in Oppeln/Opole District 63 per cent of the population were categorized as speakers of Polish, while in both Gross-Strehlitz/Strzelce Opolskie District and Rosenberg/Olesno District the figure was as high as 79 per cent. The proportion of Polish speakers was found to be even higher in a census of primary school children of 1911: 75 per cent in Oppeln/Opole District, 89 per cent in Gross-Strehlitz/Strzelce Opolskie District, 94 per cent in Rosenberg/Olesno District and clear majorities in most of the remaining districts of western Upper Silesia.64

62 APO, 178, sygn. 65, 17–21, Report on the ‘re-Polonization action’ by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.4.48; Misztal, Weryfikacja, p. 158; Bohmann, Menschen, p. 203; Blanke, Polish-Speaking Germans, pp. 291–98.


64 As well as people whose mother tongue was said to be Polish, these figures include the much smaller proportion of the region’s residents described as bilingual in both Polish and German. Sarah Wambaugh, Plebiscites Since the World War. With a Collection of Official Documents, 2 vols, Washington, D.C., 1933, 1, p. 250; T. Hunt Tooley, National Identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the Eastern Border, 1918–1922, Lincoln, NE and London, 1997, p. 240; Bohmann, Menschen, pp. 192, 211 and 238.
Secondly, although the number of people categorized as Polish speakers dropped dramatically in the censuses of the interwar period — so that, for example, less than one per cent of Oppeln/Opole District’s residents were found to speak Polish by the time of the 1939 census — many Catholic masses continued to be given in Polish in the region. This persisted even once the Nazis came to power and started to suppress Polish and Slavic culture. As late as the mid-1930s, over 70 per cent of masses in Oppeln/Opole District’s Catholic churches, for example, were still being delivered in Polish.

Thirdly, before the war, many residents of western Upper Silesia read Polish-language newspapers and many were also members of Polish organizations. The most important of these organizations was the Association of Poles in Germany which, like the Polish-Catholic Schools Society (Polsko-Katolickie Towarzystwo Szkolne), had its regional headquarters in Oppeln/Opole town before 1939. One of the region’s main Polish-language newspapers, Nowiny, was also published in Oppeln/Opole town in the interwar period.

But none of this meant that the post-war Polish authorities were right to regard the majority of western Upper Silesia’s pre-war population as Poles. Up to 200,000 people may have read Polish-language newspapers in the region in the late 1920s, but they still represented only a fraction of the region’s overall population — and an even smaller fraction was made up of members of the Association of Poles in Germany and other Polish organizations.

Moreover, the claim that the majority of the region’s inhabitants spoke Polish was not beyond dispute. As one former resident of the village of Eichberg/Debiniec in Oppeln/Opole District claimed:

Pure Polish was not spoken in the region from which I came. The local Wasserpolschisch dialect […] should never be regarded as Polish. [During the war] I myself was assigned the job of a guard in a camp for foreigners. There were Poles in this camp and they could not understand the Wasserpolschisch dialect whatsoever.

65 Again this figure also includes people said to be bilingual in Polish and German. But unlike in the 1910 census, the 1939 census also included the categories ‘Upper Silesian’ and ‘Upper Silesian and German’. Less than 5 per cent of Oppeln District’s population placed themselves in these categories in the 1939 census. Bohmann, Menschen, pp. 239–39.


There is little doubt that the Slavic vernacular spoken in western Upper Silesia was a dialect of Polish, but it was a very different type of Polish to the language spoken in central Poland. This dialect was the product of centuries of cultural and political separation from Poland and political and cultural affiliation with the Habsburg and Prussian empires. This dialect had strong links with both Czech and German, particularly in terms of its vocabulary, and was barely intelligible to the settlers from central and pre-war eastern Poland who arrived in the region after the war. It was speakers of this dialect rather than of conventional Polish whom the 1910 and 1911 censuses were generally referring to in western Upper Silesia when they categorized people as speakers of ‘Polish’.  

Yet it would be equally questionable to claim that most of western Upper Silesia’s pre-war inhabitants regarded themselves as Germans. To be sure, the majority of voters in western Upper Silesia had opted for Germany in the plebiscite of 1921 — including 69 per cent of the voters in the rural part of Oppeln/Opole District and 95 per cent in Oppeln/Opole town. But the 60 per cent which Germany had received in the overall Upper Silesian vote had not been achieved without the German authorities transporting many tens of thousands of Upper Silesian migrant workers into the region from western Germany to boost the German vote. Moreover, voting for Germany in the 1921 plebiscite and regarding oneself as a German were two quite different things. People had diverse, often very pragmatic reasons for voting for Germany — which usually had little to do with people perceiving themselves as having a German ethno-national identity. Before the Second World War, a large proportion of western Upper Silesia’s inhabitants clearly had viewed themselves as Germans, but they nevertheless constituted a minority of the overall population of the region — concentrated in the region’s larger towns. And the post-war Polish authorities were right to assume that most of the people who viewed themselves as Germans had fled the region as the Red Army invaded in January 1945.

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In fact, the majority of the pre-war population of western Upper Silesia, as the Polish sociologist Stanisław Ossowski found during his research trip to Opole District in August 1945, regarded themselves neither as Germans nor as Poles. Rather, they were 'nationally indifferent' and exhibited more of a regional collective consciousness than a German or Polish one. According to Ossowski, most people were much more likely to identify themselves as 'Silesians' (Ślązacy) or 'locals' (swojacy) than Germans or Poles. They tended to be bilingual in both the local Polish dialect and in German, but did not view this as contradicting their feelings of distinction from Germans. Equally, most pre-war residents of the region, according to Ossowski, regarded their attendance of Polish-language Catholic masses as part of the religious tradition of western Upper Silesia rather than a manifestation of Polish national identity.72

The fraction of the pre-war population who did actively regard themselves as Poles, Ossowski explained, were the sort of people who had supported the Polish insurgents during the Silesian Uprisings of 1919–21, led local branches of the Association of Poles in Germany and other Polish organizations during the interwar period, and sent their children to the small number of Polish schools which were set up in western Upper Silesia after the 1922 partition of the region — as part of the League of Nations' minority rights guarantees. These people, according to Ossowski, were very small in number. They tended to be the people who, after the Polish takeover of western Upper Silesia in 1945, were given local administrative posts by the authorities or were selected by them to sit on the 'verification committees' as 'trusted representatives' of the 'local Polish population'.73

But if only a fraction of the pre-war western Upper Silesian population regarded themselves as Poles, why did so many people allow themselves to be 'verified' as Poles after the Second World War? In Opole District, some of the pre-war residents who were uprooted to Germany after 1945 claimed that most local people were 'pressured', 'blackmailed' or 'forced' to 'opt for Poland'.74 Opole District's officials

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73 Ossowski, 'Zagadnienia', pp. 266–74 and 280; Watanowicz, Historia, pp. 147–51; Lis, 'Mniejszość polska', pp. 262–68; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 3, Report by Opole town administration's Social-Political Department, 24.8.45; Witness reports in files BOD 1, 243 and BOD 2 229.
74 BOD 2, 229, 3–4, Witness report by Alfred von A. from Althammer (Paliwoda), 10.4.51; BOD 1, 243, 49–51, Witness report (guidelines) by Dorothea S. from Burkardsdorf (Bierdzany), 22.11.54; BOD 1, 243, 67–72, Witness report (guidelines) by Arthur M. from Derschau (Suchy Bór), 7.10.54; BOD 1, 243, 81–82, Witness report (guidelines) by Wilhelm K. from Winaw (Winów), 25.3.56; BOD 1, 243, 25–27, Witness report (guidelines) by Franz G. from Bergdorf (Daniec), undated; BOD 1, 243, 13–16, Witness report (guidelines) by Josef J. from Eichberg (Dębieniec), 19.12.54; BOD 1, 243, 37–39, Witness report
also acknowledged that a certain amount of pressure was sometimes exerted to induce people to submit ‘verification’ applications. One official from Opole town administration, for example, mentioned in a document from January 1948 ‘people whose verification had not been achieved without a certain amount of difficulty’. But it is clear that nobody was physically forced to submit a ‘verification’ application. Instead, the authorities confronted local people with a stark choice: either submit a ‘verification’ application or face eviction from homes, internment in camps and forcible transportation to Germany. As one former resident of the village of Proskau/Prószków in Opole District put it: ‘Those who wished to retain their property had to opt. If you did not opt, you had no rights.’ There was, then, only a choice of sorts. Any local who wished to ‘opt for Germany’ was free to do so, as long as they were willing to accept the severe consequences of this.

Thus the ‘verification action’ did not filter Poles from Germans, as the post-war Polish authorities claimed it did. Rather it removed individuals who openly regarded themselves as Germans and individuals who were clearly hostile to ‘Polish culture’ and ‘Poles’ from a population which largely held no feelings of ‘national’ affiliation. As long as a person did not go out of his or her way to emphasize a German national identity or hostility to ‘Poles’, their application for ‘verification’ was generally successful. One extraordinary consequence of this was that close relatives were often placed into different ethno-national categories during the ‘verification’ process. For example, the brother of Gustav from the village of Blumenthal/Krzywa Góra in Opole District submitted an application and was therefore allowed to remain there as a ‘Pole’, whereas Gustav and the rest of his family refused and were transported to Germany as ‘Germans’ in August 1946.

74 Continued

(guidelines) by Günther M. from Bolko (Nowa Wieś Królewska), written mid-1950s; BOD 1, 243, 199–201, Witness report (guidelines) by Franz G. from Rogau (Rogów), 8.9.55; BOD 1, 243, 225–26, Witness report by Jakob P. from Kranst (Chrzastowice), September 1956; BOD 1, 243, 227–28, Witness report (guidelines) by Josef M. from Krappitz (Krapkowice), undated; BOD 1, 243, 13–16, Witness report (guidelines) by Josef J. from Eichberg (Debiniec), 75, 76, 77

75 APO, 185, sygn. 85, 48, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.1.48.


78 BOD 1, 243, 33–36, Witness report (guidelines) by Gustav R. from Blumenthal (Krzya Góra), undated; BOD 1, 243, 264–65, Letter to von Witzendorff Rehdiger from Josef J. Eichberg (Debiniec), 19.10.54; BOD 1, 243, 309–19, Witness report by Friedrich K. from Sacken (Lubienia), 24.7.55; BOD 1, 243, 49–51, Witness report (guidelines) by Dorothea S. from Burkardsdorf (Biernzany), 22.11.54; BOD 1, 243, 289–93, Witness report (guidelines) by Julius T. from Proskau (Prószków), 14.4.56; BOD 1, 243, 121–22, Letter from G. from Falkendorf (Fálockowice), 8.4.59; BOD 1, 243, 174–81, Witness report by Georg K. from Hinterwasser (Zawada), 24.10.57.
All of this might point to a conclusion that the authorities of Opole District and of western Upper Silesia as a whole prioritized the goal of strengthening Poland’s territorial claim to the region over the Polish central government’s goal of transforming post-war Poland into an ethnically pure Polish nation-state — and therefore ‘verified’ as Poles hundreds of thousands of people whom they did not actually regard as such. But this was not at all how Opole District’s and western Upper Silesia’s authorities viewed the ‘verification action’. As far as they — and, for that matter, the sociologist Stanisław Ossowski — were concerned, the people ‘verified’ as Poles actually were ethnic Poles, but ethnic Poles whose ‘national consciousness’ had not yet fully ‘crystallized’.

From the outset, they therefore accompanied their ‘verification action’ with measures aimed at culturally ‘re-Polonizing’ the pre-war population. In Opole District, these measures included such initiatives as expanding the district’s network of Polish-language libraries and resurrecting Opole’s interwar Polish-language newspaper — now under the name Nowiny Opolskie. But they centred on so-called ‘re-Polonization courses’ (kursy repolonizacyjne). These courses, which were established throughout western Upper Silesia from 1945 onwards, were primarily aimed at teaching local people standard Polish. Opole District’s authorities set up courses in localities across the district during 1945, increasing their number as each year passed. They were particularly keen for young people to attend, recognizing that, as children, they had been disproportionately affected by ‘Germanization’ during the Nazi period. Likewise, they believed that overcoming parental reluctance to sending local children to Polish schools — a widespread phenomenon in western Upper Silesia in the initial post-war years — was integral to the success of the ‘re-Polonization campaign’ (akcja repolonizacyjna).

The Polish officials in charge in western Upper Silesia, most of whom were from central Poland, struggled greatly, however, to comprehend the intricacies of cultural identity in western Upper Silesia. They were

79 APO, 178, sygn. 41, 34–36, ‘Situation report’ by Opole District’s chief official on the period 20.6.46–20.7.46; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 34, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.7.46; APO, 178, sygn. B15, pp. 1–11a, ‘Situation report’ by the district administration’s Social-Political Department, 4.12.46; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 50, ‘Situation report’ by the head of town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.2.47; APO, 185, sygn. 85, 52, ‘Situation report by the head of town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.4.47; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 17–21, Report on the ‘re-Polonization action’ by the district administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.4.48; APO, 178, sygn. 69, 9–10, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 7.1.49; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 12–13, ‘Current issues’ report by the district administration’s Social-Political Department, 24.1.49; APO, 178, sygn. 64, 43, Report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 25.11.49; Madajczyk, Przyłączenie, pp. 196–97; Linek, Polska antyniemiecka, p. 335.
particularly shocked by the amount of German which continued to be spoken in the region after the arrival of Polish authorities in 1945. Opole District’s chief official remarked in December 1945, for example, that ‘[i]t is a very strange phenomenon that the local population, which partially knows the Polish language, nevertheless uses German.’  

In the second half of 1946, officials across western Upper Silesia started to clamp down on the ‘German jabber’ still being spoken in the region’s streets and squares, introducing fines and other penalties for speaking German in public from the start of 1947. In August 1947 regional governor Zawadzki launched a campaign to combat what he termed the ‘resurgence of German language and culture’ in the region, instructing local officials to punish anyone caught speaking German in public with fines of up to 30,000 złoty or internment in a special labour camp in Gliwice.  

As Opole District’s authorities increasingly recognized, however, this penal approach, even when supplemented by ‘re-Polonization courses’, achieved little. Moreover, they came to see that it was actually the use of German at home rather than in public that was the real problem. An official from Opole district administration noted, for example, in March 1949: ‘There are very few families among the native population who do not teach their children German […] The German language and German radio can still be heard in homes. Fighting this phenomenon is simply not possible, not only because of the insufficient number of Security Police in the district but also because this is a mass phenomenon.’  

Far from culturally ‘re-Polonizing’ the pre-war population, these policies of ‘de-Germanization’ and ‘re-Polonization’ positively alienated the pre-war residents of western Upper Silesia. In some cases, this manifested itself in people who had already submitted ‘verification’ applications refusing to supply the separate ‘declarations of loyalty towards the Polish nation and state’ which were necessary to secure permanent Polish citizenship.  

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80 APO, 178, sygn. 41, 10–12, ‘Situation report’ by Opole District’s chief official, on the period 20.11.45–20.12.45. Interestingly, it is possible that at this point the district’s chief official was from Upper Silesia rather than from central Poland — this is implied by a statement in a witness report by Frau K. from Oderwinkel (Kąty Opolskie), 30.5.59, BÓD 1, 243, 277–80.  
81 APO, 185, sygn. 85, 35, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.8.46; Linek, Polityka antyniemiecka, pp. 220, 253–54, 261–64.  
82 APO, 178, sygn. 64, 16–17, ‘Special report’ by the head of Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 19.3.49.  
83 APO 185, sygn. 85, 39–43, ‘Situation reports’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.9.46, 21.10.46, 13.11.46 and 21.11.46; APO 185, sygn. 85, 48, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town authorities’ Social-Political Department, 21.11.46; Borodziej, ‘Einleitung’, p. 109; Hofmann, Die Nachkriegszeit, p. 300; Kowalski, Powrót, pp. 342 and 370–71.
were not the sole cause of this alienation. Rather, they exacerbated the feelings of estrangement towards ‘Poles’ which many pre-war residents had already felt since the wave of violence and robbery by Polish ‘marauders’ which accompanied the Polish takeover of the region in spring 1945. This alienation was also a product of hostile relations with ordinary Polish settlers — which resulted from conflicts over property, perceptions of cultural differences and difficulties understanding distinct dialects. Polish settlers often referred to the pre-war residents with their derogatory term for Germans — szwaby. Correspondingly, pre-war residents often claimed that the settlers from the ceded eastern territories were speaking not Polish but Ukrainian or Russian. The impact of this alienation, according to the sociologist Stanisław Ossowski, was to lessen the feelings of distance and separation which pre-war residents of the region felt towards ‘Germans’ and towards viewing themselves as Germans. More importantly, it clearly strengthened their feelings of regional distinctiveness.\textsuperscript{84} As one official from Opole district administration remarked in 1948, ‘[[]ocal people, without meaning to, often stress that they are not Poles but Silesians. They use the term “Pole” only to describe the immigrant population [...] So they feel and they emphasize their separate identity’.\textsuperscript{85}

The same was being witnessed across western Upper Silesia by the turn of the decade. The deputy regional governor of Upper Silesia, Arkadiusz Bożek, remarked in 1950: ‘The Germans must now be laughing at us, because what they failed to accomplish in seven centuries [...] we will achieve in just seven years: the eradication of Polishness in these territories right down to the roots.’\textsuperscript{86} In subsequent decades, when the opportunity arose, many chose to migrate to West Germany — influenced by the far better living conditions which they knew existed there. Forty-seven thousand people migrated from western Upper Silesia to the Federal Republic of Germany between 1956 and 1959, and many tens of thousands followed after 1963. Moreover, after the collapse of Communism in Poland in 1989 — although few residents

\textsuperscript{84} APO, 185, sygn. 85, 43, ‘Situation report’ by the head of Opole town administration’s Social-Political Department, 21.11.46; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 11–12, ‘Current Issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 7.4.48; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 25–24, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 6.5.48; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 50–52, Report on the first half of 1948, written in early July 1948; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 54–55, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 4.8.48; APO, 178, sygn. 65, 56–57, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 4.9.48; Ossowski, ‘Zagadnienie’, pp. 288–91 and 296–99

\textsuperscript{85} APO, 178, sygn. 65, 63–65, ‘Current issues’ report by Opole district administration’s Social-Political Department, 5.11.48.

of the region could speak German by this time — numerous German cultural organizations sprang up in western Upper Silesia, particularly in the countryside surrounding Opole town. Many ‘German minority’ representatives were also elected into the region’s local councils and — assisted by the lack of a minimum vote threshold for representatives of recognized ‘national minorities’ — some even gained seats in Poland’s Sejm (national parliament). Parallel to this, a Silesian national movement emerged in Upper Silesia with the aim of gaining formal government recognition for ‘Silesians’ as a ‘national minority’ and political autonomy for Upper Silesia.87

Much of these post-1989 identity issues and movements in western Upper Silesia can be traced back to the failure of ‘verification’ and ‘re-Polonization’ in 1945 to 1949. Of course, this is not to claim that many pre-war residents or their descendants were not ultimately culturally assimilated into Polish society. Decades of Polish mass media, Polish schooling and everyday interaction with settlers caused many of these people not only to become speakers of conventional Polish but also to regard themselves self-consciously as Poles. It also moved the regional Silesian dialect a great deal closer to conventional Polish. But this assimilation took decades and happened in spite of the ethnic screening and ethnic cleansing of the late 1940s rather than as a result of it.

The outcomes of the other major cases of ethnic screening implemented in East-Central Europe in the 1940s were just as problematic. The Deutsche Volksliste had been introduced by the Nazi German authorities in the Polish territories they had annexed to Germany at the start of the war because they wished to prevent ethnic Germans and ‘individuals of German descent’ from being expelled to the General Government along with Poles and Jews. But faced with the ambiguous realities of cultural identity, they resorted, in eastern Upper Silesia and the Danzig/Gdańsk region, to entering everyone but the most stubborn dissenters into the DVL — just as the Polish authorities would do after the war when ‘verifying’ the residents of western Upper Silesia and parts of southern East Prussia. In the case of eastern Upper Silesia, the Nazi German authorities’ decision to categorize a very large proportion of local residents as being ‘of German descent’ was partly motivated by their desire to protect skilled workers in this important industrial region from expulsion to the General Government — and the result was that 95 per cent of the population was entered into the DVL by 1944. In

fact, the wartime German authorities went still further than the post-
war Polish authorities would later do in that they made application for
the DVL compulsory and refusal to apply for it punishable by intern-
ment in a concentration camp. Yet ultimately the DVL had a similar
outcome to the ‘verification action’ in that it induced very few pre-war
Polish citizens in eastern Upper Silesia to begin viewing themselves
as Germans. Indeed, the majority of eastern Upper Silesia’s residents
voluntarily underwent re-categorization as ethnic Poles in the immedi-
ate post-war years through the post-war Polish authorities’ so-called
‘rehabilitation action’ (aksiój rehabilitacyjnaj).88

In occupied Czechoslovakia, the Nazis’ attempt to separate ‘German-
izables’ from ‘un-Germanizables’ was also characterized by German
officials arbitrarily ascribing German national identities to people who
clearly did not regard themselves as Germans. And this action, too,
was heavily influenced by the need to protect the skilled workers of
Bohemia and Moravia’s valuable industry from possible expulsion. It
is unlikely that the Nazis could ever have achieved their original aim
of persuading half the population of these regions to regard themselves
as Germans — but a surge in Czech nationalist activities, and the
related assassination of Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich in June
1942, anyway put a premature end to this ethnic screening process in
1943.89 In the aftermath of the war, the post-war Czechoslovakian gov-
ernment proved equally baffled by the apparent ‘national indifference’
of a sizeable section of Czechoslovakia’s population — at a time when
the government was seeking to ethnically cleanse the country of all
‘Germans’. The ethnic screening process which the government intro-
duced to resolve this confusion certainly spared a considerable num-
ber of people from forcible transportation to the US and Soviet Occu-
pation Zones after the war. But it did little to persuade many of them
that they were Czechs.90

In all of these cases, then, ethnic screening had poor results. Yet it
is clear from this that ethnic screening played an important role in the
ethnic cleansing which the German, Czechoslovakian and Polish
authorities attempted to carry out in East-Central Europe in the course
of the 1940s. Each regime introduced ethnic screening in the first place
because, although they were sure that they wanted to rid particular
territories of stigmatized national groups, they frequently found it very

88 Boda-Kreßel, Sprawa Wolklisty, pp. 22–26 and 33; Borodziej, ‘Einleitung’, pp. 42–43;
Kamusella, The Sczlonzks, p. 22; Kamusella, ‘Upper Silesia’, pp. 104–05; Wanatowicz,
89 Bryant, ‘Either German or Czech’, pp. 686–96; Zahra, ‘Reclaiming Children’,
pp. 527–33.
difficult to identify the members of these groups. None of these nationalist regimes was willing to contemplate the possibility that the cause of this problem was the conceptual frames through which they had chosen to view the inhabitants of these territories. Each failed to recognize that the national categories into which they sought to place these people were nothing more than crude simplifications. In all contexts, nationalism has required people to simplify how they understand themselves and the communities to which they belong. It has impelled people to identify themselves primarily or exclusively with a ‘nation’ and to downplay or ignore all other forms of community and collective consciousness. But in regions where many people have never thought of themselves in ‘national’ terms — regions which were not at all unusual in Central and Eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century — nationalism called for especially wrenching changes to traditional self-understandings.

This is precisely what was witnessed in Oppeln/Opole District in the five years following the Second World War. The post-war Polish authorities of this district presented locals with a crude nationalist choice through their ‘verification action’ and ‘re-Polonization campaign’. They ordered them either to start understanding themselves as ‘Poles’ or to leave. Largely for pragmatic reasons — in order to be allowed to remain in the district and to hold onto their homes — the majority chose at first to swallow the most important element of the authorities’ nationalist drive. They ‘yielded’ to ‘verification’ in the half-decade following the war, as the district official had put it. But few self-consciously ‘nationalized’ their identities in the way the authorities intended — not even for the sake of appearances. Few people came to understand themselves as ‘Poles’ in the five years following the war. The ‘verification action’ impacted profoundly on the lives of Oppeln/Opole District’s residents and on the way they understood themselves. What it did not do is sift Poles from Germans.