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### **English-language comparative studies of Silesia and Ulster, 1918 to 1922**

The problems of Silesian history have not been popular in the Anglophone literature, mainly because of their distant nature, which has discouraged serious analysis by western scholars, who have long perceived the region as a European periphery. Only when examined from the perspective of parallel European events does the history of Silesia become significant enough to arouse a wider academic interest among scholars who write in English. The comparative study of the Upper Silesian and Ulster frontier conflict between 1918 and 1922, published by Timothy Wilson in 2010<sup>1</sup> can definitely be perceived as part of the current increase of the interest in Silesia. Wilson, a lecturer in Modern Irish History at the University of Oxford, specializes in the comparative history of conflict in society, with a concentration on case studies from Europe and the Middle East, from the First World War to the present day. His study of Ulster and Upper Silesia can now be ranked with the recent publications by James Bjork<sup>2</sup> and T. Hunt Tooley<sup>3</sup> concerning the Polish-German national and sectarian issues in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The main purpose of T. Wilson's book is to examine the political and social processes underway simultaneously in two different boundary regions, Ulster and Upper Silesia, right after the First World War. The similarity of the postwar circumstances - a parallel decline of German and British political influence in Europe, and a parallel emergence of independent Poland and the Irish Free State - have inspired T. Wilson to compare the situation of Ulster with that of Upper Silesia. Regarding the former, it must be noted that the inconsistent British policy towards an Irish political settlement was largely to blame for the rapid escalation of the Ulster conflict. Although the radical course of Irish politics, and the deepening divisions among the Catholic and Protestant Ulster communities, could be traced as far back as the December 1918 elections, it was not until February 1920 when the British government introduced its Better Government of Ireland Bill (establishing separate legislative institutions for Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland) to parliament. Aiming to reach a compromise with the Sinn Fein, the British refused to give more power to the Ulster Unionist government, which resulted in clashes between the rivaling Catholic and Protestant communities. Subsequently, the final Anglo-Irish treaty, signed on 6 December 1921, established the Irish Free State, but left the crucial issue of its boundary with Northern Ireland to be "determined in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions". The result was an increase in unrest among the Ulster community, concerned about the fate of its

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence. Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia 1918-1922*, New York 2010.

<sup>2</sup> James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland*, Michigan 2008.

<sup>3</sup> T. Hunt Tooley, *National Identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the Eastern Border, 1918-1922*, Lincoln 1997.



province, which in addition sparked the civil war in the Irish Free State in June 1922. This outcome was similar to what the decision of the 1919 Paris peace conference on the plebiscite brought about in Upper Silesia.

Both Ulster and Upper Silesia became grounds of contestation involving local communities, which confronted one another on the basis of political affiliation and national identity. However, the political events affecting local conflicts are not the main issues of interest for T. Wilson. In his opinion, most of the previous studies on Ulster and Upper Silesia have ignored the “microprocesses of conflict”, while exaggerating the issues of the European international order and political conditions after 1918. Instead, he considers the Ulster and the Upper Silesian cases as two different models of the application of violence to the cause of national identity creation and political division. Therefore, his attention is primarily focused on local factors that presumably led to the much wider and brutal violence in Upper Silesia than in Northern Ireland. The logic of “street violence” is believed to be decisive in explaining the formation of national identity through organized aggression.

The time scales chosen by T. Wilson are quite clear. The starting point of 1918 seems to be an obvious common baseline, related to the end of hostilities in the First World War, the German defeat, and changes in the European political order. The study ends in 1922, when the partitions of both Ulster and Upper Silesia were effectively secured; by the start of the civil war in the Irish Free State; and by the signing of the Polish-German Geneva Convention. In the first case, the Irish Republican Army’s attention was diverted away from Northern Ireland, making political revisions there unlikely. At around the same time, in May 1922, Upper Silesia was finally divided between Poland and Germany, just as the Inter-Allied Governing Commission was about to withdraw.

The primary archival sources for Upper Silesia consist of German government files relating to the plebiscite period from the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin-Dahlem, and of witness statements collected by the German Foreign Office (Auswartiges Amt). It must be emphasized, however, that the one-sided and anonymous form of a substantial proportion of the diverse material used in the study casts serious doubt on the credibility of that material. On the other hand, 1. Wilson has taken the opportunity to use the valuable resources of the Katowice State Archive, the archive centers in Opole and Warsaw (including the files of the Polish Consulate in Opole). He has also extended his inquiry into the Archiwum Powstań Śląskich located in the Józef Piłsudski Institute in New York, and materials from the Imperial War Museum and the National Archives in London, notably including significant files of the Inter-Allied Commission. The quality of the study is definitely improved by the author’s use of the Upper Silesian newspapers and periodicals, including “Dziennik Gornosląski”, “Gornoslązak” and “Der Oberschlesische Wanderer”. The archival material for Ulster comes mainly from the University College Dublin Archives and the files of the British Ministry of Home Affairs. The use of interviews with, and unpublished memoirs of, witnesses to the Ulster conflict must also be appreciated.

The majority of the used secondary literature are studies by English, North American, and German scholars. Of the more important Polish publications, T. Wilson quotes the prewar sociological research by Jozef Chalasiński<sup>4</sup>, together with studies on

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<sup>4</sup> Józef Chałasiński, *Antagonizm polsko-niemiecki w osadzie fabrycznej “Kopalnia” na Górnym Śląsku*, Warszawa 1935.



the German military formations in Silesia by Franciszek Biaty<sup>5</sup>, on the Silesian Insurrections by Zbigniew Kapała and Wiesław Lesiuk<sup>6</sup>, and the work by Marian Anusiewicz and Mieczysław Wrzosek titled *Kronika powstań śląskich*<sup>7</sup>.

The quality of the book is much enhanced by maps of Ulster, Upper Silesia and Central Europe on the eve of First World War, including the shape of the political partitions in Silesia and in Ulster during the period 1918-1922. Biographical notes of politicians from Poland, Germany, Upper Silesia (e.g. Wojciech Korfanty, Otto Horsing), Britain, Ireland, Ulster (e.g. Michael Collins, James Craig), together with an appended glossary, further contribute to the value of the study. On the other hand, T. Wilson's consistent application of the term "nationalists" to Irish and Polish public figures, coupled with his references to "German Leaders" and "British Politicians", raises, from the outset of the work, a suspicion of partiality.

Because of T. Wilson's relatively limited interest in Polish studies concerning Upper Silesia, an unfortunate additional shortcoming of the book is the domination of the German perspective. This outcome affects the author's conclusions related to Upper Silesian pattern of violence, communal boundaries, and national identity. The terminology just noted, attributing "nationalism" to the Poles, while crediting the Germans as "loyalists" faithful to their homeland, appears obviously biased. By applying this scheme, T. Wilson misleadingly presents the Germans as the indigenous, self-evident hosts in Upper Silesia, and downplays their own nationalist motivation. It must be noted that before the partition, Upper Silesian Poles were legitimate German citizens, although the 1910 German census clearly confirmed the Polish nationality of more than half the population of Upper Silesia. Furthermore, referring to the Upper Silesian dialect as "Wasserpölnisch", or using German nomenclature for towns, such as "Kattowitz" for Katowice or "Deutsch Piekar" for Piekary Wielkie, remains highly debatable. It can be presumed that the comparison of the utterly different communities of Ulster and Upper Silesia has resulted in a simple transposition of the experience of the former to the latter and thus to a simplification in T. Wilson's analysis of the background of violence in Upper Silesia.

The book consists of four chapters, arranged thematically. Chapter One, titled *A Framework for Comparison*, gives a comparative historical overview of the developments in Ulster and Upper Silesia, with emphasis on the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The impact of the World War, class tensions, and international intervention, are considered in exploring the relatively greater brutality of violence in Upper Silesia. In the latter part of this chapter T. Wilson compares the political, religious and linguistic boundaries of Ulster and Upper Silesian communities. In Chapter Two, *Loyalism and Violence*, he observes that extreme cases of "loyalist" violence were more frequent in the Upper Silesian context. The relationship between the "loyalist" (pro-German and pro-British/Protestant) paramilitaries and the state they claimed to defend is explored. Special attention is given to the idea that a relative absence of German state control over paramilitaries may have been the reason for the more extreme nature of "loyalist" violence in Upper Silesia. The pattern of both conflicts is examined by showing the different definitions of the Ulster and the Upper Silesian "loyalist" communities, generated by their respective militant groups. Chapter Three, titled *Irish/Polish*

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<sup>5</sup> Franciszek Biały, *Niemieckie ochotnicze formacje zbrojne na Śląsku, 1918-1923* Katowice 1976.

<sup>6</sup> *Pamięć o powstaniach śląskich czy i komu potrzebna?*, red. Zbigniew Kapała, Wiesław Lesiuk, Bytom 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Marian Anusiewicz, Mieczysław Wrzosek, *Kronika powstań śląskich 1919-1921* Warszawa 1980.



*Nationalism and Violence*, follows the structure of the preceding chapter by comparing the “nationalist” Irish and Polish communities, presumably represented by their respective paramilitaries. A key area of interest here is the nature of communal/national boundaries in both conflicts as, in T. Wilson’s view, the degree to which “loyalists” were seen as either a separate community or a submerged enemy within the same community, had a significant impact on the form of the Irish and the Polish “nationalist” violence. The author argues that the absence of a clear national boundary in Upper Silesia was one of the primary reasons for the higher level of brutality of violence there than in the more distinctly divided Ulster. It might be striking here for a Polish reader to note T. Wilson’s association of the Polish and the Irish Catholics with “nationalism”, whereas the Protestants are claimed to be “loyalist” defenders of the status quo. The concluding Chapter Four, *Boundaries, Territory, Identity and Violence*, summarizes the previous discussions of “loyalist” and “nationalist” violence. It explores the dynamics of conflict in both Ulster and Upper Silesia as “interactive processes”, in which all the above factors came into play. Among the key issues are the types of violence practised in each conflict, their limitations, and their spatial patterning. The author asserts that the meaning and the impact of violent activity in Ulster and in Upper Silesia were determined by “the nature of the boundaries of national/communal identity” affecting the clarity of division in each case.

Recapitulating the main claim of T. Wilson’s book, we can infer that while the Irish Catholic and Protestant communities of Ulster maintained a clear separation after the First World War, the majority of Upper Silesians resisted adopting either a Polish or a German national identity. Contrary to many previous studies regarding violence and identity, T. Wilson indicates that national ambiguity in Upper Silesia had the most significant bearing on the escalation and higher brutality of the violence there, in comparison with the case of Ulster. T. Wilson concludes that in Upper Silesia the linguistic criterion of national identity was “highly unstable”, with a large proportion of local inhabitants speaking both Polish and German, among whom “even the Kattowitz street prostitutes were bilingual”. On the other hand, in Ulster the religious communal marker left no room for pluralism. To demonstrate the difference in the levels of violence, the author notes, between 11 November 1918 and June 1922, 2824 instances of violent death in Upper Silesia and 714 in Northern Ireland. However, the claim of a particularly high Upper Silesian brutality is difficult to uphold based on these numbers alone, without specifying the proportion of the casualties attributable to national or religious motivation.

The comparative analysis of the Ulster and the Upper Silesian conflicts deserves serious attention. However, the book refers more to a sociological evaluation and cultural anthropology than to a historical assessment. As a result, T. Wilson downplays the importance of international issues, such as the German defeat in 1918, the political position of Britain, and, thereafter, the emergence of independent Poland and the crucial role of the Inter-Al- lied Commission in Upper Silesia since February 1920, together with the presence of allied forces. There is even less attention to the Polish national movement since the nineteenth century, despite the acknowledgment that “Polish nationalism” provided a sense of communal identity in Upper Silesia which was crucial in the rejection of communist influence. Moreover, in his discussion of the plebiscite campaign, T. Wilson indicates that Wojciech Korfanty did not manage to overcome the difficulties in establishing a national boundary between Germans and Poles because of “the intrinsic similarity of German-voting Upper Silesians to their Polish





nationalist countrymen". Accordingly, T. Wilson attributes the Third Silesian Uprising in May 1921 to the Polish need for stabilizing a sense of local identity to which "even the plebiscite could not bring clarity".

The murder of Wendelin and Richard Dudek in Piekary Wielkie on 21 March 1921 is chosen as symptomatic of the distinctive pattern of the Upper Silesian conflict, in comparison with Ulster. T. Wilson emphasizes that the Dudek family's advantageous economic position, and its sympathies to the Center party (Deutsche Zentrumspartei), made them German followers in the eyes of local community, at a time when the need for national identity in this definitely Polish town had grown right after the plebiscite. Based on their sister's account, the story of the Dudek brothers is used to underscore the fluidity of the relationship between the two communities. As the Dudek brothers were preparing for departure from a hostile city, they were recognized by a local Polish activist, Ludwig Gasch, who had earlier been their school classmate. Next, they were identified as "German raiders", cornered in a nearby orphanage complex, and "battered to death by people who knew them well". According to T. Wilson's research (which questions the Polish press reports), the main source of aggression in this case was the fact that "Dudek brothers were recognized not as total outsiders but as insiders". In contrast to the sharply segregated communities of Belfast, the locations of violence in Upper Silesia at a neighborhood level were unpredictable and ill-defined. A relatively high degree of segregation in Ulster tended to impose a limit on hostilities, "delivering stability because it demanded perpetual vigilance", while the uncertainty about communal boundary and national loyalty in Upper Silesia tended to escalate violence, and precluded the formation of safe areas.

In explaining the Irish Republican Army's strategy in Ulster, T. Wilson underlines the Army's capacity to perform as a legitimate state, and to inflict violence in the guise of legal executions, thus preventing paramilitaries on both sides from committing brutal killings. In contrast, he argues, "'Polish' paramilitaries were killing 'Germans' who were practically undistinguishable from themselves" because violence in Upper Silesia was internalized within the community and not inflicted among communities, as in Ulster. In the latter case less violence was needed to maintain a division which was already clear. The uncertain boundaries between "Germans" and "Poles" demanded that violence itself become a boundary.

In the concluding part of his study T. Wilson denies the sole explanation for the conflicts in Ulster and Upper Silesia in terms of international policy and personal hatreds, and blames the conflicts primarily on the need for maintaining or creating communal boundaries. The common element to each case was the establishment and definition of a partition line among opposing communities in order to ensure their safety. The absence of a sufficient criterion for division in Upper Silesia (apart from the linguistic) was the main distinction in comparison with Ulster. However, the author claims that it is impossible to explain those differences with a presence of a so called "culture of tolerance" in Northern Ireland and a "violence culture" in Upper Silesia. In his view, ethno-religious indicators could be used in communal demarcation but "not all identity boundaries function the same way in national conflicts". Violence then is determined by "the nature of the identity differences between the protagonists even where these may appear nominal". Nevertheless, Wilson's assertion that a relative restraint in violence may derive from clearly maintained divisions between communities, whereas "more spectacular atrocity may derive from their convergence"



could inspire disturbing afterthoughts when we consider the blending of national identities in our contemporary multicultural Europe.

It may be surprising for a Polish reader to note T. Wilson's depiction of Upper Silesian conflict at a microprocess level, with its deemphasis on international issues. The impact of British and French foreign policy toward Germany, the restored Poland, and the European order after 1918, are all factors important beyond any doubt. In these circumstances, the political status of Upper Silesia, remaining as it did under full control of the German administration, was beyond the reach of the Polish state, constrained in its policy by European powers. Thus, the international conditions left the Polish people in Upper Silesia mostly alone in their struggle. Moreover, Wilson presumably deemphasizes the significance of the Upper Silesian question for the European political order after 1918, so as to enable the comparison with the case of Ulster. In fact the latter remained secondary in the European perspective, which allowed Britain to conduct a much less restricted policy in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, contrary to T. Wilson's assumptions, the conditions of Polish-German struggle in Upper Silesia were greatly disadvantageous to the Poles. For instance, the state of siege first imposed in January 1919 (repeatedly) by German authorities in Upper Silesia should be squarely identified as a measure preventing the Poles from pursuing legal political action. Despite the presence of the Inter-Allied Commission and the allied forces since February 1920, the Germans retained control over administration, mines, factories and schools in the Upper Silesian plebiscite area. The circumstances of the decisive stage in the Polish-Soviet war in August 1920 at the time of Second Silesian Uprising also deserve much more attention. Curiously, the fact that the limitations imposed on Polish national organizations had an enormous impact on their voluntary and spontaneous struggle during and after the plebiscite campaign is not adequately stressed. The systematic exclusion of these factors renders the phenomenon of "frontiers of violence" in Upper Silesia largely incomprehensible.

The international context is worth considering in order to understand the Polish government's position regarding the British and French responsibility for the decision to hold the plebiscite in Upper Silesia, which represented a reversal of an earlier partition plan favorable to Poland. Just before the plebiscite vote in March 1921, the Polish Prime Minister Wincenty Witos deplored the breach of the principle of self-determination by Britain and France, a breach that subjected vast areas [of Upper Silesia], comprising an unquestionable heritage of our Nation, and inhabited by Polish people, to the severe test of a plebiscite"<sup>8</sup>. He claimed that this solution was not only a violation of the Versailles Treaty, but that it also contributed to the escalation of conflict in this region, thus "creating another unbearable field of uncertainty for the [Polish] State while condemning the people of Upper Silesia to a difficult and bitter experience . Polish confidence in the European powers' design was further undermined by earlier reports on German-British negotiations in London regarding the possibility of handing the entire disputed part of Upper Silesia over to Germany, without holding a plebiscite"<sup>9</sup>. In return, Berlin was supposed to meet its postwar compensations commitment. But the greatest outrage in the Polish parliament was triggered by the speech of the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George on 13 May 1921, in which "he denied Polish rights to

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<sup>8</sup> Wincenty Witos, *Interpelacja nagła w sprawie plebiscytu na Górnym Śląsku*, sprawozdanie stenograficzne z posiedzenia Sejmu Ustawodawczego, nr 218 z 11 III 1921 r.

<sup>9</sup> *Interpelacja p. Dąbskiego w sprawie Górnego Śląska*, sprawozdanie stenograficzne z posiedzenia Sejmu Ustawodawczego, nr 204 z 28 I 1921 r.



Upper Silesia, claiming that the Polish population who had lived there for centuries was immigrant whereas the German population was indigenous”<sup>10</sup>. In response, the Polish Prime Minister, Witos, accused Britain of violating its treaty obligations - which had been implicitly recognized by Lloyd George himself, who had foreseen in June 1919 that “Upper Silesia would vote Polish”<sup>11</sup>. The essential matter for Witos was the fact that the British leader ‘unequivocally acknowledged [Britain’s] favorable disposition toward the prospect of German intervention, aimed to bring order to Upper Silesia”<sup>12</sup>. In effect, the “fear of a German assault grew” among the Poles. At the same time, the Polish representatives denounced London for the still unsettled Irish question. Although the Polish government repudiated any allegations of inspiring or supporting the Third Silesian Uprising, nonetheless Witos emphasized that the Versailles Treaty “prohibited the recognition of Upper Silesia as a German province”. Contrary to those principles, “Mr Lloyd George lamented over the poor, helpless Germans”. In these circumstances, Witos found Britain principally responsible for the Polish armed uprising in May 1921, since the fact that the “reports of the Inter-Allied Commission in Opole allegedly conceding only a small part of Upper Silesia to Poland” indicated a cancellation of the plebiscite results, and since as a result the “people of Upper Silesia lost their confidence in the Commission’s impartiality”<sup>13</sup>. The resolution proposed by the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission, Stanisław Grabski, to the Polish parliament on 20 May appears symptomatic in its call for the European allied powers to “strictly fulfill the Versailles Treaty in accordance with the outcome of the plebiscite”<sup>14</sup>, for the sake of maintaining peace on the European continent.

There was reason to expect that the French declaration regarding the implementation of the Treaty resolutions would calm down the political atmosphere in Upper Silesia, and help avert the destabilization of the foundations of peace in Europe. In contrast with the secondary position of Ireland and Ulster, the settlement of the Upper Silesian partition affected the postwar European political order. Therefore T. Wilson’s comparison of the Upper Silesian conflict with radically different conditions affecting the Ulster situation seems implausible, though admittedly it represents a fresh and interesting approach.

Despite its shortcomings, Timothy Wilson’s book deserves considerable attention, as it comprises significant evidence of Anglophone academic interest in twentieth-century Silesian history. The region of Silesia is recognized as part of parallel European developments, while retaining its own specificity and distinctness. Although some of Wilson’s arguments seem sufficiently controversial to require additional, thorough analysis, nevertheless this study is unquestionably an important contribution to the understanding of Silesia’s history from a European perspective. It also provides crucial knowledge concerning the views about this region current among English-

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<sup>10</sup> Wincenty Witos, *Odpowiedź Prezydenta Ministrów na mowę Lloyd George’a*, sprawozdanie stenograficzne z posiedzenia Sejmu Ustawodawczego, nr 227 z 18V 1921 r.

<sup>11</sup> United States Department of State, *The Paris Peace Conference, 1919*, Foreign Relations of the United States, UWDC: David Lloyd George, *Notes of a Meeting Held at President Wilson’s House in the Place des Etats Unis*, Paris, on Tuesday, June 3, 1919.

<sup>12</sup> Witos, *Odpowiedź Prezydenta Ministrow...*

<sup>13</sup> Wincenty Witos, *Sprawa powstania na Górnym Śląsku*, sprawozdanie stenograficzne z posiedzenia Sejmu Ustawodawczego, nr 225 z 10 V 1921 r.

<sup>14</sup> Stanisław Grabski, *Sprawozdanie Komisji Spraw Zagranicznych o oświadczeniu Prezydenta Ministrów w sprawie Górnego Śląska*, sprawozdanie stenograficzne z posiedzenia Sejmu Ustawodawczego, nr 228 z 20 V 1921 r.



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Krzysztof Siwek: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF SILESIA AND ULSTER, 1918 TO 1922

language scholars. A closer consideration of their studies is desirable in an effort to determine both the historical and the contemporary importance of Silesia in Europe.

translated by Katarzyna Hussar