

The Upper Silesian Committee and Father Tomasz Reginek: Upper Silesian Secession Following the First World War

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Introduction

This presentation concerns the history of the secession movement in Upper Silesia following the First World War and the leader of this organization, Father Tomasz Reginek.

Reginek was a Catholic priest and was part of the intelligentsia in Upper Silesia. He was born in 1887 in a suburb of Oppeln (Opole in Polish), the major city in Western Upper Silesia. His family spoke Polish, and he studied German in primary school. After graduating from the University of Breslau, he became a priest. He accepted Catholic social thoughts and took part in political movements for a short time following the First World War. Ownership of Upper Silesia was disputed between Germany and the new states of Poland and Czechoslovakia. The threat of secularization and communism from Berlin also loomed large for the religious population. In response, Reginek began an independence movement for Upper Silesia to defend regional interests and order.

Upper Silesia came under the Prussian monarchy in the 18th century. Reginek's intention was to show another political possibility for Upper Silesia beyond the simple alternatives of Germany, Poland, or Czechoslovakia, namely to demand an Upper Silesian free state based on the right of self-determination. After the war, Upper Silesian secessionists agitated for 3 years, employing direct negotiation and mass-directed propaganda. Out of 2,000,000 Upper Silesians, 300,000 were ultimately in favor of independence. However, the movement practically ceased all activities in 1922, when a plebiscite limiting inhabitants to the choice between Germany and Poland, was held, and the region was divided between the states. Nevertheless, this movement, forgotten by German and Polish

history, maintains its meaning in the context of Central European history after the interwar period: multiple successor movements to this secession movement appeared in the interwar period, and these days an Silesian autonomy movement (*Autonomia Śląska*) is active in the Polish voivodeship of Silesia, which regarded the secession movement as part of its origin.

The historiography of Upper Silesian modern history has long been biased by an orientation to a national or political ideology: many historians in communist Poland, in which western Poland, including Silesia, was regarded as regained territory, wrote to justify this perspective. In West Germany, which hosted millions of expellees from the old Prussian regions, many books were published with a right-wing perspective on the history of Upper Silesia in the interwar period.

This all drastically changed after the revolutions of 1989 and 1990. New historical studies began to emerge that focused on particular characteristics of Upper Silesia and eschewed ideological perspectives. The most important of these include a perspective that holds that Silesia is a concept of its own, not as an object that belongs either to Germany or Poland or is to be split between them. Rather, here were unique people, ignored by historians. However, this perspective confronts the problem that this might simply reproduce national history and exacerbate existing conflicts.

Leaving that challenge aside, national indifference must also be confronted. This concept is used in the historiography of the Habsburg Monarchy and refers to large numbers of people who belonged to no nation or fluidly changed their national identities in modern Central and Eastern Europe. This forms part of an argument against nationalism, used since Eugen Weber, that nationalization is irreversible or nationalization spread throughout Europe, but it also applies to historical study of Upper Silesia. Contemporary Silesian historians incorporate an assessment of the function of Catholicism in the concept of national indifference. They are working to clarify that Catholic inhabitants, who accounted for 90 percent of the entire population of Upper Silesia, considered the religious sense of belonging together to be the most important and national identities to be secondary.

This function of Catholicism, my main theme here, in the secession movement in Upper Silesia, should be prominent, if for no other reason than Reginek himself used Catholic-oriented to claim Upper Silesian independence. Therefore, the role of Catholicism in the secession movement must be analyzed.

Little historical work has been done on the secession movement in Upper Silesia. A pioneering study was published in Germany in 1931, but we had to wait for the full-scale study of Günther Doose until 1987. In Poland as well, Edmund Klein and Piotr Dobrowolski published important studies in the first half of the 1970s. This research, however, has problems with its orientation; for example, the movement was forced into the constrictive framework of a division between nations or of communist theory. Both works also ignored Reginek's ideas.

Today, I analyze Reginek's activities and discourse, a leader of the Upper Silesian Committee, which was founded in the autumn of 1918 and quickly became the Union of Upper Silesia, the largest secessionist organization in the region.

Here, as historical sources, I mainly make use of the brochures written by Reginek entitled "Upper Silesia – an Independent Free State?" and "The Upper Silesian Problem – An Article on its History and Solution." No other sources for the dawn of the movement have survived.

Historical Background

I note briefly the historical background for the Upper Silesian secession movement. An outline of population of Upper Silesia and its languages and economy follow, in addition to a synopsis of the presence of other national movements and Catholicism in the region.

(1)Population and languages

In 1910, about 2 million inhabitants were living in Upper Silesia. According to Prussian statistics, 60 percent of the population in Beuthen/Bytom, an Upper Silesian city, spoke German, and 33 percent were Polish speakers. Only 5 percent were bilingual. These data, however, were manipulated by the Prussian administration. Both Polish speakers and bilinguals were present in greater

proportions than seen in the statistics. Close attention should be paid to the type of Polish spoken in this region, called Wasserpolnisch. This was a Polish dialect but it had significant German borrowings and a pidgin version was used by both German and Polish speakers.

(2)Economy

During the 19th century, the economy of Upper Silesia changed greatly, transitioning from light industry like textile manufacture to heavy industry like mining and ironworking. Large landowners controlled most of this industry, in contrast with the Ruhr, another large industrial region. Local nobility like Henckel von Donnersmark, von Ballstrem, and Schaffgotsch owned their own industrial companies, and they had considerable influence with Silesian society through them.

(3)Catholic milieu and Polish national movement

The Center Party or the Zentrum, the Catholic-oriented political party, dominated Upper Silesia. This religious party won most of the 12 election districts in this region for most of the second half of the 19th century. It successfully built its own Catholic milieu, stimulating a sense of unity as Catholics. Polish nationalists were involved in the success of the Center Party: the regional Polish newspaper *Katolik*, for example, supported it. At the end of 1880s and the end of the Culture War, however, Polish nationalists, represented by *Katolik*, gradually turned against the Center Party, which was fundamentally a German-oriented party. At the turn of the century, Polish nationalism spread in earnest over Upper Silesia, with the well-known Polish activist, Wojciech Korfanty winning a seat in the German Reichstag three times.

(4)Identity and sense of belonging in Upper Silesia

A relationship between Catholicism and a sense of belonging of Silesians is evident in the secession movement. The American historian James Bjork indicates that Upper Silesians were indifferent national identity, and for that reason, he concludes that they might not have a “full-blown national identity.” The Polish sociologist Józef Chałasiński found how confusing this could be when he went to investigate German–Polish antagonism in a mining community in

interwar Polish Silesia: “On the one hand, the national question seemed to dominate public life in the community, and those who tried to move between national camps were called ‘scoundrels.’ On the other hand, residents admitted that probably half the population consisted of such ‘scoundrels.’ The true community outsiders, it seems, were the handful of ‘real’ Germans and ‘real’ Poles who had acted in a nationally consistent manner over the long term... Catholicism provided an important framework for bringing them into a consistent whole and to legitimate successive turns as patriot, provincial, or cosmopolitan.” These facts match with the thesis of national indifference.

(5) Catholic social thought

Catholic social thought, which can be dated to the religious activities of Adolf Kolping and Wilhelm E. Ketteler in the middle of the 19th century, was authorized by the Vatican in 1891. Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, in which the cooperation of states in civil society was recognized, acknowledged a change in the traditional understanding that Catholic society should be superior to the world’s. The Vatican recognized the existence of labor problems to be able to compete with socialism, and improvements in the working environment became a priority for Catholic clergymen. The *Rerum Novarum* expresses the idea that society should be like a family, meaning here ordered by patriarchal rights. The encyclical illustrated the idea that state intervention in patriarchal rights and the family was not acceptable, because the family precedes society and the state.

Tomasz Reginek and the Upper Silesian Committee

As I said, Reginek was born in Upper Silesia. After he graduated from the gymnasium, he studied theology at the University of Breslau. He was part of the first generation to study theology under the influence of the *Rerum Novarum*, and he developed a strong interest in labor problems. While studying at the university, he worked in Kraków as a private teacher for the Tyszkiewicz family, who were Polish aristocrats, and was friends with Polish intellectuals like Henryk Sienkiewicz and Włodzimierz Tetmajer. In 1914, he began his career as a priest in Breslau, eventually working in Oppeln and Pitschen/Byczyna as well. During the First World War, he worked as a deacon in prisoner-of-war camps, supporting

injured foreign soldiers and laborers. In April 1916, Reginek returned to Upper Silesia, finding a place to live in Hindenburg/Zabrze or Königshütte/Królewska Huta.

It is well known that the collapse of multi-ethnic monarchies like Austria-Hungary promoted caused the maps of Central and Eastern Europe to be redrawn. In this context, the Upper Silesian problem was one among several important subjects for the establishment of the post-war order. Namely, to what country Upper Silesia should belong.

The initial trigger that began the Upper Silesian secession movement was the establishment of the new Prussian government's liberal policy on religion. In November 1918, Adolf Hoffmann, the new Prussian minister for science, culture, and education, of the also-new Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany, issued orders for the separation of church and state. He also ended the mandatory attendance of non-Christian children to religion classes and abolished clerical supervision and religion classes in public schools. The Upper Silesians regarded these Prussian moves as expressing the shadow of a new culture war, and the Upper Silesian Catholic milieu became mobilized. Two Upper Silesian Catholics, namely, Reginek and Ewald Latacz, decided to take this new energy in a political direction: the independence of Upper Silesia.

Latacz (1885–1953) was already prominent in Upper Silesia. He was born in Kattowitz/Katowice and was a member of the Center Party. After the war, he became involved in various issues as the head of the worker's council in Loslau/Wodzisław, a in southern Upper Silesia. Latacz first advocated secession during the German revolution. He announced his plan to build an independent state, free from Hakatism, or the German nationalization of communities, and Communism at a meeting of Upper Silesian industrialists, held in the middle of November at the castle of Pleß/Pszczyna. Reginek, in attendance, voiced his support.

Financial support from Upper Silesian industrialists provided the opportunity to begin the secession movement in earnest. On November 27, the secessionists held a meeting with Upper Silesian business figures. This meeting, which could already be considered a revolt against the German state, was

organized because the two groups agreed Upper Silesian issues. On the one hand, that is, the secessionists needed financial support, and on the other hand, the local nobility and landowners had a sense of crisis about the German revolution and the possible foundation of a Soviet republic in that country, without having a clear plan in response.

The success of this meeting enabled Reginek and Latacz to finally launch their secession movement. The same day, the Upper Silesian Committee (das Oberschlesische Komitee) was established.

“Upper Silesia – an Independent Free State?”

Just after the establishment of this committee, its leaders began to publicize their vision of an Upper Silesian independent state. The brochure “Upper Silesia – an Independent Free State?” (Oberschlesien – ein selbständiger Freistaat?), by Tomasz Reginek, is evidence. This brochure, four pages long in a large upright format, written in German and Polish, was published on December 8 to announce the plan independence. The sense of pressing crisis prompted the committee to publish early, as the annexation of all of Upper Silesia to Poland was quickly becoming a real possibility, and the German government had little capacity to properly respond to or anticipate this problem.

The Upper Silesian Committee called their new state Upper Silesian Free State (Freistaat Oberschlesien/Wolne Państwo Górnośląskie). In the brochure, it was explained that the expression free state meant a state in which Upper Silesians could enjoy the “freedom that had been long desired and praised.” Reginek and the committee began by recognizing that the freedom of the Upper Silesians had been subordinated by others in different social spheres. That is to say, Upper Silesians had been forced into physical and spiritual slavery by Germans and Poles alike, and at the same time, they had been deprived of ‘sociopolitical and economic control of their homeland’. The Upper Silesian Free State could overcome this if political power was seized. What logic did Reginek use to support the idea of the independence of the Upper Silesian state?

(1) Independence based on nationalism and self-determination

Reginek first discussed the Upper Silesian nation and its right to self-determination as a premise of the Upper Silesian free state. In this pamphlet, he asserted that the Upper Silesian nation was constituted of those who lived in Catholic Upper Silesia (katholisches Oberschlesien). The word Catholic here means that Reginek and the Committee proposed that this sense of belonging together was grounded in the regional Catholic milieu around the Center Party. On the basis of this recognition, Reginek raises the right to self-determination as grounds for Upper Silesian independence: "Now, the time for determination that we have long desired is here, the time in which we will be free from all of hindering fetters, in accordance with the right of self-determination, which demands a political independence that is suitable for our own national and cultural development". This is both a political declaration that Upper Silesian people should enjoy a "perfect equality of both nationalities" and also rhetoric calculated to attract support from Upper Silesians, using the word self-determination, a common refrain in the politics of this time. Reginek calls for Upper Silesians to break free from slavery to larger powers and to found a literal free state.

(2) Legitimacy of the Upper Silesian nation-state

Many Upper Silesians were indifferent to nationality, and Catholicism played a more important role in mobilizing them. Reginek attempted to find a boundary between the we and the other in history, to establish the sense being Upper Silesian. This was an important point in the argument, meant to closely connect with the legitimacy of the Upper Silesian nation state.

The understanding was developed that the Upper Silesian nation is a group that was created by the natural environment at an early period, and its existence could be dated back to before its identity was awakened by the discrimination of its neighbors. He said that "this primitive Upper Silesia, which built an independent whole (region) that has preserved its own language, religion, and culture even today, is distinguished from the Silesian lowland geographically as well as culturally". This secessionist philosophy accommodated the perception that Upper Silesians possessed something that uniquely developed or acquired its own peculiarity at an early point in time.

Who are the others against whom Upper Silesians should be defined? First among these, according to Reginek, are the Germans who had been ruling the region since the middle of the 18th century: he criticizes the Germans for their exploitation of Upper Silesia and the requirement that German be used and German culture be dominant to exterminate the backward Upper Silesian language.

Another group of others was represented by Poles from Posen and Galicia. Reginek alleges that these Poles despised Upper Silesian Catholics, and they not only forced Upper Silesians to participate in Polish national movements but exploited the region economically.

Reginek gives a picture of Upper Silesian nation as having its roots in the premodern era and stated that “we” were to be distinguished from Germans and “Poles who came from outside.” He established the legitimacy of the nation-state by persisting in the existence of a historically consistent nation.

(3) Connecting the secessionism with Catholicism

The largest issue that Reginek raises in his brochure relates to the social problems caused by the industrialization of Upper Silesia, which began in the 19th century. These problems consist of the poverty of the homes (*Wohnungselend*), the condition of women, and the delinquency of young people (*Frauen- und Jugendfrage*). As an example, he examines homes. He brings up three problems that are entangled with each other: (a) speculation and rapid rise in price of real estate, (b) the narrow and unsanitary conditions of worker housing in industrial cities, and (c) the constant, nomadic relocations of workers' families. He warns that these problems had negative influence not only on the material but also the spiritual and moral aspects of life. Workers' families lost happiness in their homes and their love for other family members. A “most necessary cultural task”, he writes, is to work toward the protection of women and young people in poor conditions and to promote “healthy homes” for the “class that is burdened with the heavy load of industry” through the social reform. A considerable outlay would be necessary for such social reform, which would be covered by the economic benefits accruing from Upper Silesian industry that would become available as a source of income with the political independence of the region.

Here, a sense of crisis in the collapse of traditional Catholic society as a result of industrialization becomes clear. This traditional society also requires that the patriarchal family. Women and young people, who should be protected under patriarchy, were neglected, and they fell into spiritual depravity, because the old, moral form of the passed away. This suggests that Reginek's plan was based on Catholic social thought. The expression social reform (soziale Reform) is characteristic of the Catholic social thought, referring to the foundation of an alternative to capitalism, in which capital is separated from labor. The birth of Catholic social thought in the 19th century has already been noted; Reginek makes use of this religious norm to justify secessionism. His logic is that the independence of Upper Silesia could resolve many problems, and if it is not achieved, the industrialization of the region could lead it to lose its Catholic sense of values and be ruined.

Conclusion

In Upper Silesia of the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, the preconditions for secessionism were fulfilled in the formation of the Catholic milieu, industrialization and an oligopoly of conglomerates, the new Catholic norm put forward by the Vatican, and the Polish national movement. The trigger that launched the secession movement was the Prussian orders separating church and state, especially in education, which Reginek and Latacz resisted. Their movement began at the end of November 1918, as soon as they obtained support from local industrialists and nobility.

The brochure published by the Upper Silesian Committee is remarkable. Reginek, insisted that Upper Silesian Catholics form a nation and demanded an Upper Silesian Free State on the basis of the right to self-determination. In the brochure, the logic to legitimizing and justifying the establishment of the nation-state was given. First, Reginek emphasizes that Upper Silesians had shown a unique development beginning in an early period, and that this excluded Germans and Poles, who came to the region from outside. Second, although Reginek notes social problems in the region that had their foundation in industrialization, these

problems could be resolved by the independence of Upper Silesia. He justified his call for independence by connecting secessionism with Catholicism.

Finally, this movement existed in the fall and winter of 1918, with at least three overlapping goals: (1) protection of economic benefits for industrialists, the nobility, and large landowners; (2) The preservation of the Catholic milieu around the Center Party; and (3) Catholic clergymen like Reginek who intended to establish a state where the church would be connected with the state. The secession movement cannot simply be defined as a nationalist movement but rather one intended to protect old and regional vested interests. This fact, however, was disguised by the modern concept of the Upper Silesian nation, the use of which was necessary to capture the attractive idea of self-determination.

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