



**Philipp Ther, Kai Struve.** *Die Grenzen der Nationen: Identitätenwandel in Oberschlesien in der Neuzeit.* Marburg: Herder-Institut Verlag, 2002. 324 S. EUR 38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-87969-298-9.

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## The Limits of Nations?

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What can be learned from the study of borderland nationalisms? According to the editors of this essay collection on national identity in Upper Silesia, such works challenge traditional understandings of nationalism. In the introduction, Kai Struve and Philipp Ther argue that most studies on nationalism explore nationalist ideologies and movements in the core areas of nation-states. These works assume, in Struve and Ther's words, "that nationalism was 'successful,' that it really did seize the masses and that this constituted the basis of the nation-state order" (p. 3). By contrast, Struve and Ther argue that the Upper Silesian case shows the fluidity of national identities and the persistence of non-national forms of loyalties. This volume thus shares many of the features of new studies on nationalisms. It questions the enduring nature of national identifications. It underscores the instrumental, rather than the ideological, underpinnings of national identity. It challenges apparent truisms, such as a positive correlation between spoken language and national identification. And the volume's authors are refreshingly impartial; they display little of the partisanship that once characterized the study of central European nationalisms.

Besides Ther and Struve's introduction, the volume includes twelve essays by Polish, German, and American historians, sociologists, and linguists. The book suffers from shortcomings common to essay collections based on academic conferences. The contributions are of uneven

quality and incorporate much unwieldy academic prose. Several of the Polish texts were very poorly translated. But the volume nonetheless offers a wealth of historical insight and information. Upper Silesia's past and present ethnic, religious, and political complexities have led to a fascinating range of responses to the nationalizing impulse.

As the essay collection narrates, nineteenth-century Upper Silesia, split between the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires, became the object of competing German, Polish, and Czech nationalist strivings. Much of the Upper Silesian population, however, remained indifferent to these nationalist movements. After World War I, a small area of Upper Silesia, primarily Teschen and its surroundings, went mostly to Czechoslovakia; three essays in the volume explore Austrian and/or Czech Silesia. The rest of Upper Silesia was divided between Germany and Poland. In 1939, however, Nazi Germany occupied all of Silesia. In turn, after World War II, Upper Silesia, with the exception of Czech Silesia, was wholly incorporated into Poland. As the authors of *Die Grenzen der Nationen* demonstrate, the various regimes that held sway over Upper Silesia profoundly shaped the loyalties of the region's population.

Contributions by James E. Bjork, Bernard Linek, Philipp Ther, and Danuta Berlinska are particularly informative. Bjork, in his piece on religious education and linguistic change in Upper Silesia before 1914, deftly outlines the Catholic church's pragmatic response to Ger-

man authorities' demand that religious instruction take place in German. After the harrowing experience of the *Kulturkampf*, the church was wary of openly challenging the government. Moreover, even many ardent Polish nationalists believed that Polish-speaking children should learn German so as to enhance their future social mobility. The church thus gradually came to give religious instruction in German, but continued to hold Polish-language church services and other religious activities. As Bjork argues, this church stance rather accurately portrayed the national ambivalence of the Upper Silesian population. Indeed, according to Bjork, the church's very bilingualism may have fostered both a strong loyalty to the church and to a particularist Upper Silesian regional identity. Several other authors, including linguists Tomasz Kamusella and Kevin Hannan, address the knotty issue of language and national identification. It was not uncommon, for example, for individuals to have German as a mother tongue, but to profess a Polish national identity or vice-versa. In such cases, the posited identity reflected a primary identification with religious or other values commonly associated with the claimed nationality.

Bernard Linek expertly explores German and Polish nationalizing policies in Upper Silesia from 1922 to 1989. As he shows, throughout these years, both German and Polish authorities were bent on forcing individuals to identify with one or the other nationality; those who claimed an Upper Silesian identity were always viewed with suspicion. Linek divides the century into two periods: one of great activity of the nation state (1922-50), and the other of passive national politics (1950-89). For the first period, Linek does a particularly good job of showing how German and Polish nationalizing measures frequently mirrored each other. During the inter-war period, for example, both German and Polish authorities carried out the germanization or polonization of place and family names, attempted to remove all vestiges of the other language and culture, and pursued schooling and other policies intended to nationalize individuals. Linek then shows how the personalities of local Nazi leaders made for less extreme nationalizing policies in Upper Silesia than in other areas occupied by Nazi Germany. This, in turn, made the subsequent persecution of Germans and those who viewed themselves as Upper Silesians in post-1945 Poland seem all the more shocking. During the "passive" period, the Polish government somewhat relaxed its draconian polonization policies. Paradoxically, though, it now created Germans out of Upper Silesians. As Linek demonstrates, the gov-

ernment insisted that one criteria for legal emigration to West Germany was the expression of "Germanness."

In an excellent essay covering the years 1921-56, Philipp Ther shows how state nationalizing policies often produced the very opposite of their anticipated results. The Nazis, for example, privileged those whom they perceived as Upper Silesians (as opposed to Poles). But their policies so dismayed some of the region's natives that these came to define themselves in opposition to Germans—and hence as Poles. Similarly, in post-1945 Poland, the communist government's polonization and other discriminatory practices led many Upper Silesians to define themselves in opposition to Poles—and hence as Germans. These Upper Silesians, in turn, helped spearhead a mass exodus of Polish citizens claiming German nationality from communist Poland to prosperous West Germany. As Ther effectively argues, depending on current political constellations, Upper Silesians activated a Polish, German, or regional identity. Franciszek Jonderko's contribution on antagonisms between native Upper Silesians and Poles, who immigrated to the area after 1945, supplements Linek and Ther's accounts. Jonderko describes the range of discriminatory practices that communist authorities deployed against the region's natives. Upper Silesians, for example, were not only removed from positions of local political power, but were also hindered in their educational and professional advancement.

Despite the intriguing insights of these various essays, none effectively describes the content of Upper Silesian identity. This is left to one of the last essays in the volume, a contribution by sociologist Danuta Berlinska. According to Berlinska, three basic features characterize Upper Silesian identity. The first is a deep loyalty to the Catholic church, expressed in part by the daily exercise of religious rituals. In the past, Berlinska argues, Silesians believed it more important to be a good Catholic or Christian than to be a member of a particular nation. Upper Silesians also share a deep tie to their region and to the dialect spoken there. Although closer to Polish than to German, the dialect is quite unintelligible to Polish-language speakers. Finally, Silesian identity rests on notions of "cleanliness" and "order." Most Silesians live in small villages in which they have invested considerable community effort and resources in the upkeep of their houses, churches, cemeteries, and schools. A Silesian village, Berlinska notes, is immediately recognizable: the large, whitewashed houses are awash in flowers; spruce and other trees grace carefully tended lawns; and garden dwarves, small wind mills, and inanimate deer and

storks dot the landscape. During the communist era, this close attention to home and community symbolized a retreat into a private world that was both practiced and perceived as “German.”

With the fall of communism, some 250,000 Silesians signed lists stating that they were “German.” According to Berlinska, this action illustrated Silesians’ desire to overcome the discrimination they had experienced in communist Poland. In democratic elections, many Silesians initially voted for a German party. Since the late 1990s, however, this party has had difficulty attracting voters. In part, it has been a victim of its own success; many of its demands have now been met. Demographic trends, however, also endanger the party’s future. Given their experiences in Nazi Germany and communist Poland, many older Silesians are likely to view themselves as “German,” or “German and Silesian.” But their children grew up in a Polish environment, speak only Polish, and do not share a nostalgia for supposedly better German times. In the absence of discrimination that helped to forge Upper Silesians into “Germans,” the potential political mobilization of a German minority has probably peaked. As Kazimiera Wodz and Jacek Wodz argue, Silesian identity may now become based on “the conviction that Silesians are ‘better,’ the feeling of being more civilised than the rest of Poland, originating from the relatively early industrialisation of the region, the feeling that their moral code is superior in regard to the work ethic and other values” (p. 317). While these same features characterized regional identity before 1989, they are no longer necessarily viewed as “German.” Once again, the meaning of Upper Silesian identity

appears to be in flux.

The essays in *Die Grenzen der Nationen* effectively question the all-embracing nature of national movements and ideologies in borderland areas. To bolster their claims, however, the volume’s authors might have included some comparisons with other borderland regions. Just how common were (and are) the developments that have characterized Upper Silesia? And to what extent do findings based on Upper Silesia reflect the region’s peculiarities as opposed to more general features of modern nationalisms? At the same time, as even the volume’s editors justly note, nationalist movements profoundly shaped the history of Upper Silesia. Although the region’s residents may have wished to avoid national identifications, this proved all but impossible. In the course of the past century, nationalisms fundamentally determined Upper Silesian lived experience; not least, they led to several waves of coerced population transfers that resulted in an almost wholesale turnover of the region’s population. This and much other presented material points to a conclusion at odds with the volume’s title. The recent history of Upper Silesia betrays not the limits, but the strengths of the nationalizing impulse. One can only hope that the future will prove otherwise.

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