

Between Cieszyn/Teschen and Bielsko/Bielitz

Polish Cieszyn Silesians and the Silesian Autonomy

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I. What was a Region?

As is well known, on the 15th July 1920, a law was passed in Poland creating the autonomous Silesian Voivodeship, which by 1938 turned out to be the only one real territorial autonomy in Europe.¹ One of its parts was Cieszyn Silesia, part of the former Austrian Silesia, a subregion of Upper Silesia, with the cities of Cieszyn/Teschen, Bielsko/Bielitz, Skoczów/Skotschau, Strumień/Schwartzwasser, which in many respects differed and still differs from “traditional” Upper Silesia with Katowice/Kattowitz, Pszczyna/Pless, Rybnik, or Opole/Oppeln. Therefore, the question can be posed – how did the Poles of Cieszyn Silesia, living between Cieszyn and Bielsko, who until 1918 were not citizens of Germany, but of Austria, and in whose autonomous area the so-called Geneva Convention of 1922 did not apply, perceive Silesian autonomy?

Cieszyn Silesia is a geographical part of Upper Silesia, but beyond that there are more differences between what we call Prussian and then German Upper Silesia and what we call Cieszyn Austrian Silesia. It is an area of just under 2,300 square kilometers, located between the Ostrawica/Ostravica River in the west-which separates it from Moravia – and the Biała/Biala River in the east, which separate it from Małopolska/Little Poland (from 1772 Galicia), and between the Wisła/Vistula River in the north, and the Silesian Beskid in the south, which separates it from Slovakia (until 1918 Hungary). The breakthrough moment for the region’s further fate was in 1742, when, following Austria’s defeat of Prussia in the so-called First Silesian War, Cieszyn Silesia together with Opava/Troppau Silesia (German: Troppauer Schlesien, Cz: Opavské Slezsko) formed Austrian Silesia (German: Österreichisches Schlesien, Cz: Rakouské Slezsko) with its capital in Opava. In Austria also operated with the terms East Silesia (Ost-Schlesien), with Cieszyn, and West Silesia (West-Schlesien), with Opava. The last Austrian census of 1910 showed in the region: 54.8 % Polish-speaking population (language was asked, not nationality), 27.1 % Czech, 18.1 % German. The Polish population outnumbered the Czechs in the Bielsko, Cieszyn and Frysztat districts, being in the minority only in the Frydek/Friedeck district. Germans predominated mainly in the cities, especially in Bielsko and the vil-

¹ Territorial autonomy was also granted to Subcarpathian Ruthenia in the Czechoslovakian Constitution of 1920, but it did not come into effect until October 1938. In contrast, only Estonian Germans had cultural autonomy.