

# THE SILESIAN UPRISINGS 1919-1921



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NARODOWEJ

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Photograph on the front panel: Insurgents from a unit formed in Katowice County during the Third Silesian Uprising, 1921 (Katowice Archdiocese Archives).



# POLISH NATIONAL THOUGHT IN UPPER SILESIA

In the 19th century, the inhabitants of Upper Silesia, which was then a part of the German Empire, started developing Polish national consciousness. They established many organisations that cherished national traditions, history and tongue. The Catholic Church also had a huge impact on the rebirth of Polishness. It was the Upper Silesian countryside that was of particularly Polish character. In the census taken in 1910, 53 per cent out of above 2,200,000 inhabitants of the Opole District considered Polish as their mother tongue, and the most Polish counties were the ones located in the eastern part of the region. The defeat of the Germans in the First World War and the gradual rebirth of the Polish State brought hope for the incorporation of the lands into Poland to many Upper Silesians.

***“I owe my national awareness to my Hakata professors at school in Katowice, who – with their hatred towards everything that was Polish and Catholic – made me curious about the Polish literature, from which I wanted to learn what exactly was that insulted and humiliated nation, whose language I did not even speak at home”.***

*Wojciech Korfanty, Appeal to the Silesian people, 1927.*

In his speech in the German Parliament given on 25 October 1918, Wojciech Korfanty, a member of the Reichstag and leader of the Polish nationalist movement in the Upper Silesia, demanded that a part of Upper Silesia be incorporated into the Polish state. The same message was communicated by Polish delegates at the Paris Peace Conference opened on 18 January 1919. The photograph shows Wojciech Korfanty in the autumn of 1919 (the National Library of France).



# VERSAILLES DECISIONS

It was decided under the Treaty of Versailles signed on 28 June 1919 that the future of Upper Silesia would be resolved by a plebiscite. Before the provisions of the Treaty came into effect, the whole area was under the sovereign German rule. The German 117th Infantry Division entered Upper Silesia in November 1918 and was soon joined by several voluntary units. Led by General Karl Höfer, the forces were commonly known as Grenzschutz (border guard). Together with the police, they were supposed to prevent a revolution outbreak and attempts at incorporating the lands into Poland. In the first half of 1919, Polish nationalist activists faced intensified persecution.

***“In the part of Upper Silesia [...] the inhabitants will be called upon to indicate by a vote whether they wish to be attached to Germany or to Poland.”***

***Article 88 of the Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany, signed in Versailles on 28 June 1919.***



**The Upper Silesian plebiscite area to a large extent coincided with the borders of the Opole District. In October 1919, the Prussian Parliament created an autonomous Province of Upper Silesia with the capital in Opole.**



**Created by the Supreme Council of the Peace Conference, the Commission for Polish Affairs initially decided to support Polish aspirations and grant Upper Silesia to Poland. When the information was revealed in the spring of 1919, the Germans began mass protests. The photograph shows a demonstration in support of keeping Upper Silesia a part of Germany at Moltke Square (today John III Sobieski Square) in Bytom (the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom).**





# THE UPPER SILESIAN POLISH MILITARY ORGANISATION



The economic crisis and political destabilisation made both Poles and Germans even more dissatisfied with the situation. Full of rage, workers were organising strikes. The coal mine in Mysłowice was witness to particularly tragic events on 16 August 1919. German soldiers opened fire on miners and their families waiting for their salaries. The photograph shows a Grenzschutz unit (Grzegorz Grześkowiak's collection).

The underground Upper Silesian Polish Military Organisation (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa, POW) was established in January 1919 in the Opole District. It was led by Józef Grzegorzek and was subordinate to the Supreme People's Council Committee in Poznań. Following the example of the Greater Poland insurgents, it started to prepare for the fight for Upper Silesia. Aware of the military weakness of the Polish forces and lack of possible help from the Polish authorities, who were obliged to honour international commitments, Korfanty (a member of the Supreme People's Council Committee in Poznań) was against the solution.

But the ranks of the Upper Silesian Polish Military Organisation were growing fast. In August, it consisted of more than 23,000 people. Its commanders, however, had no shared vision of its future activities. In the spring of 1919, Korfanty twice stopped POW members spoiling for a fight from starting an uprising. The photograph shows secret military training of the Upper Silesian POW (the Uprisings Museum in Góra Świętej Anny).



*"I swear that [...] when summoned,  
I will fight for incorporating Upper Silesia into Poland."*

A passage from the oath sworn by POW county commanding officers, 11 February 1919.



# THE FIRST SILESIAN UPRISING



Lack of weapons and poor training among the insurgents were two of the main reasons for the failure of the uprising. On the eve of its outbreak, only approximately one in five insurgents out of the total number of 230,000 had a weapon. The photograph shows insurgents and their mixed uniforms from different armies. Most of them fought in civilian clothes, 1919 (Katowice Archdiocese Archives).

The first uprising broke out on the night of 16 to 17 August 1919. The decision to begin the armed combat was made by POW members under Maksymilian Iksal's command, who were present in a refugee camp in Piotrowice near Karwiny in Cieszyn Silesia. It was only on 18 August that the command over the uprising was taken by POW Chief Commander Alfons Zgrzebnik. The uprising was condemned to failure from the very beginning. The battles took place in only several counties in the eastern part of the plebiscite area. Chaotic decision-making, lack

of plans and coordination, military advantage of the Germans and lack of help from the Polish Army forced the insurgents to retreat after their initial success owed to its enemy's astonishment. On 24 August, Zgrzebnik decided to stop the fight. The German authorities responded to the uprising with terror and repression. Around 22,000 people, including 9,000 insurgents, fled from the plebiscite area to Poland. They could come back home only towards the end of the year, after a Polish-German agreement on amnesty was signed in October 1919.



Composed of regular Grenzschutz and voluntary units (Freikorps), the German forces consisted of around 55,000 soldiers. They were supported by trains and armoured vehicles, cavalry and planes. The photograph shows Grenzschutz soldiers after the end of the battle in Myslowice, August 1919 (Grzegorz Grześkowiak's collection).



The Commission was headed by a French general, Henri Le Rond, with Colonel Henry Percival from Great Britain and General Alberto de Marinis from Italy serving as his deputies. The photograph shows Le Rond's arrival in Paris after the end of his service in Upper Silesia on 17 July 1922 (the National Library of France).

# THE ALLIES IN UPPER SILESIA

The Treaty of Versailles came into force on 10 January 1920, which is also when its regulations started to apply to Upper Silesia. German troops and authorities left the disputed territories, and paramilitary organisations were disbanded, thanks to which the local people were supposed to obtain freedom in deciding to which country they would like their region to belong. The Inter-allied Administrative and Plebiscite Commission in Upper Silesia based in Opole assumed authority in the region. The Commission was supported by the Allied forces, which kept order in the area and supervised the plebiscite campaign and the voting itself.



It is estimated that – depending on the moment in time – there were around 10,000 to 21,000 soldiers from the Allied forces stationed in Upper Silesia. The photograph shows an Italian patrol, 1920–1921 (the National Library of France).



The “peaceful occupation” of the region by the Allies lasted until July 1922, when the territories were officially incorporated into Poland and Germany. There were many signs of the pro-Polish sympathies of the French and the anti-Polish attitude of the Brits and the Italians during that time. The photograph shows Frenchmen in Katowice on the day of the plebiscite, 20 March 1921 (the National Library of France).





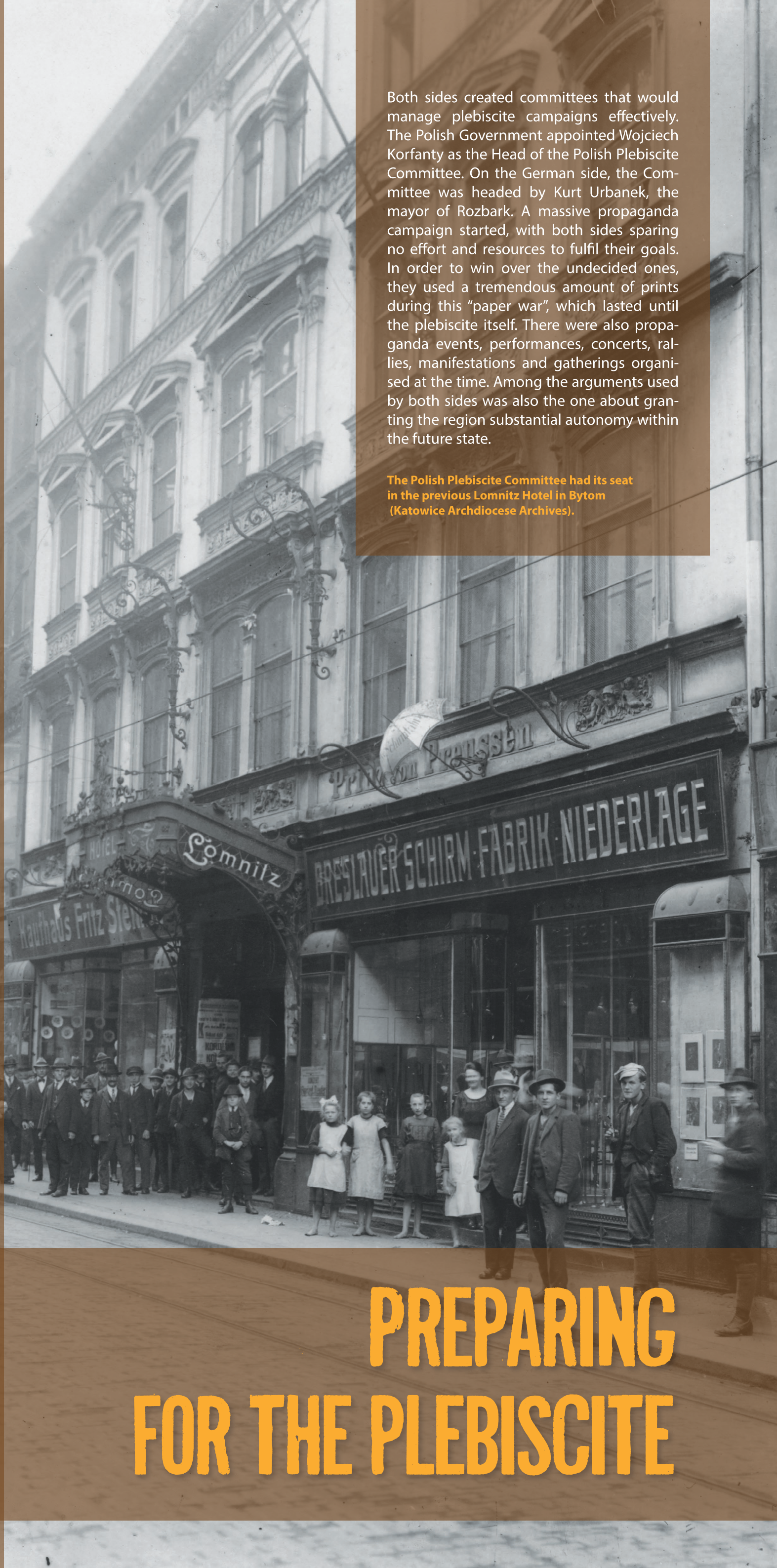
There were around 1,000 people hired in the Polish Plebiscite Committee in Bytom and another group of 1,000 people working in the field: in country, commune and municipal committees. The photograph shows Wojciech Korfanty (third from the left) among his colleagues in Bytom, 1920 (the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom).



Both sides made huge numbers of propaganda appeals, leaflets, posters, postcards, stamps, placards, satirical publications and many titles of high-circulation press in both languages. Illustrated by the best artists and featuring pithy slogans, they called their audiences to vote for a given side. The photograph shows a Polish propaganda poster (the Silesian Library).



A German propaganda poster (the Silesian Library).



Both sides created committees that would manage plebiscite campaigns effectively. The Polish Government appointed Wojciech Korfanty as the Head of the Polish Plebiscite Committee. On the German side, the Committee was headed by Kurt Urbanek, the mayor of Rozbark. A massive propaganda campaign started, with both sides sparing no effort and resources to fulfil their goals. In order to win over the undecided ones, they used a tremendous amount of prints during this "paper war", which lasted until the plebiscite itself. There were also propaganda events, performances, concerts, rallies, manifestations and gatherings organised at the time. Among the arguments used by both sides was also the one about granting the region substantial autonomy within the future state.

The Polish Plebiscite Committee had its seat in the previous Lomnitz Hotel in Bytom (Katowice Archdiocese Archives).

# PREPARING FOR THE PLEBISCITE



# THE SECOND SILESIAN UPRISING



During the riots in Katowice on 18 August 1920, the Germans, plundered, among others, the office of the Polish Plebiscite Committee located in Deutsches Haus Hotel and the editorial office of the socialist newspaper *Gazeta Robotnicza* [Workers' Newspaper]. Doctor Andrzej Mielęcki, a Polish nationalist activist and a well-known doctor who was helping the injured, was also murdered during the riots. The photograph shows the interior of the seat of the Committee after the riots (Katowice Archdiocese Archives).



SiPo was replaced by a combined Polish-German Upper Silesian Police, also known as the Plebiscite Police (Abstimmungspolizei, APO). The photograph shows its officers (the Uprisings Museum in Góra Świętej Anny).

***"You broke the German terror in Silesia with your brave and loyal conduct. Your most important demands have been satisfied. The green policemen are leaving Upper Silesia."***

*An appeal made by the Polish Plebiscite Committee that finished the uprising.*

In face of the false information on Warsaw being taken by the Red Army, the Germans organised demonstrations demanding that Upper Silesia stayed in Germany on 17 August 1920 in Katowice. The manifestations soon turned into riots aimed also against French soldiers. Shots were fired. It is exactly in those circumstances that the Second Silesian Uprising, preceded by a general workers' strike, broke out on 18 August. The fights spread across the whole Upper Silesian industrial district and led to the insurgents defeating many German self-defence and security police (Sicherheitspolizei, SiPo) units and taking over a number of towns. The uprising was a success. On 24 August, the Inter-allied Administrative and Plebiscite Commission ordered that SiPo be disbanded, which was what the Polish side demanded.



Despite the presence of the Allied forces in Upper Silesia, there were more and more riots started in the streets by both sides in the spring of 1920. The Germans accused the French of partiality. The Poles protested against the increasing terror from the anti-Polish SiPo, which was supposedly created to help the Inter-Allied Commission. The photograph shows a Polish nationalist manifestation in Lubliniec on 2 May 1920. It was disrupted by the Germans (the Uprisings Museum in Góra Świętej Anny).





# POLAND FOR SILESIA!

Poland, reviving itself, supported the demands of Upper Silesians. There were support committees established in many cities. During the whole plebiscite period, they organised gatherings and manifestations, published propaganda leaflets, led training sessions for Silesian activists and sent agitators, doctors and nurses to Upper Silesia to work on the plebiscite. Although it could not officially help the locals, the Polish government used the Polish Army intelligence to supply the insurgents with weapons and conducted diplomatic talks. Experienced officers were sent to Upper Silesia to create and support underground combat structures. Volunteers were spoiling for a fight.



A poster calling to make donations for Upper Silesia in Siedlce and stamps as donations (the National Library).

## Zamiast życzeń noworocznych

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Komitet plebiscytowy w Siedleach.

Druk. Artystyczny w Siedleach.



Volunteers from Warsaw, August 1919  
(the Museum of the Polish Second Corps in Józefów).



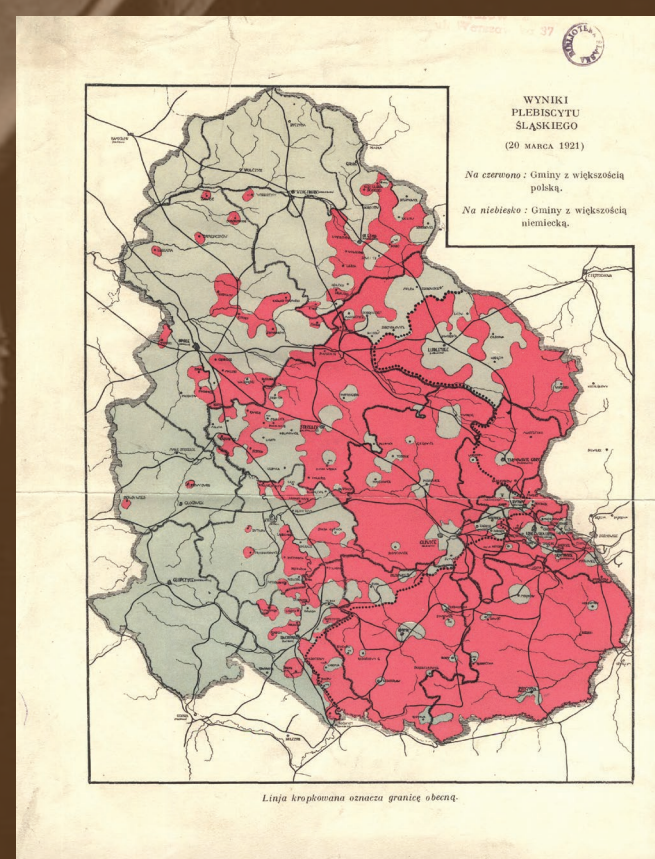
# PLEBISCITE

The plebiscite was held on Sunday, 20 March 1921. 59.6 per cent of the voters were in favour of Upper Silesia as a part of Germany, and 40.3 per cent voted for incorporating the region into Poland. The Germans won thanks to votes from large cities, while Poland was supported by rural people. After the plebiscite, both sides were nervously awaiting the decision of the Inter-Allied Committee on the partition of the disputed territories. In face of the threat that Poland could get only a small southern part of the area (which was what Italy and Great Britain advocated), Korfanty decided to start the Third Silesian Uprising.



A polling station in Katowice, 20 March 1921 (Katowice Archdiocese Archives).

The right to vote was granted to all inhabitants of the plebiscite area who were twenty years of age on 1 January 1921 and were born there or lived there since 1 January 1904, as well as "emigrants", that is, people born but not living in the disputed area. The regulation turned out to be problematic for Poland since the vast majority of the emigrants were in favour of Germany. The photograph shows a disabled emigrant from Germany carried by German Red Cross members out of a polling station in Katowice after he had cast his vote (the National Library of France).



The plebiscite results were interpreted as a success of both Germany (because of the majority of votes) and Poland (because Poland won in a bigger number of communes to the right of the Oder River, which was an argument in favour of giving the territories to Poland). As a result, Wojciech Korfanty proposed a line of demarcation (the Korfanty Line), which granted Poland around 60 per cent of the disputed area and 70 per cent of its inhabitants. The map shows the plebiscite results (the Silesian Library).



The Third Uprising began on 3 May 1921 after the successful Operation "Bridges". Leading the High Authority in Upper Silesia, Korfanty declared himself the dictator of the uprising. He believed that it would be a short revolt ending in taking over the area to which Poland had claimed right after the plebiscite. In the beginning, since the enemy was surprised with the attack, Poland was victorious. It was only on 21 May that the Germans launched a counteroffensive. The insurgents were confronted by the units of German Selbstschutz Oberschlesiens (Upper Silesia Self-Defence) under the command of General Karl Hoefler.

# THE THIRD SILESIAN UPRISING



Insurgents from Gołzyny in their position by the Oder, 1921 (the Silesian Library).

There were between 30,000 and 40,000 soldiers in the German forces. In the first days of the uprising, the insurgents defeated the German Upper Silesian Military Organisation, but the German forces were soon reinforced by well-equipped volunteer units from the Reich, the Freikorps. The photograph shows a Selbstschutz unit (the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom).





# THE BATTLE OF ANNABERG

The most important battle during the Third Uprising was that near the village of Góra Świętej Anny (Ger. Annaberg). It was the first target of the German counteroffensive, a crucial one for strategic and symbolic reasons (as a place of worship for Upper Silesians). The battle began on the night of 21 May and ended with Germans' victory. The insurgents from the First Division of the Insurgent Army led by Major Jan Ludyga-Laskowski had to retreat already in the afternoon. The counter-attack ordered two days later by Lieutenant Maciej Mielżyński, the Commander-in-Chief of the Insurgent Army, was not successful either. The next days brought fewer battles and negotiations on a ceasefire led under the pressure of the Allies. They ended in a fiasco, and the Germans again launched an attack at the central part of the front on 4 June. A particularly fierce battle was fought over the railway junction in Kędzierzyn. Still, the Germans did not manage to break the Polish line of defence and occupy the industrial district.

Today, Góra Świętej Anny is a symbol of the struggle for Upper Silesia for both Poles and Germans. After the designation of the borders in 1922, it found itself on the German side (the National Digital Archives).



Unlike the first two uprisings, the third one was fought by a regular insurgent army divided into three operational groups: "North", "East" (from which later the "Centre" group was isolated) and "South". Depending on the stage of the uprising, the army consisted of between 35,000 and 60,000 soldiers. Poland supplied them with firearms, artillery, trains and armoured vehicles.



The photograph shows independent assault troops under the command of Lieutenant Robert Oszek with the "Korfanty" armoured vehicle. After the Battle of Annaberg, Oszek's soldiers were considered "the bravest of the brave" (the Silesian Library).



First Insurgent Division artillery near Góra Świętej Anny (the Uprisings Museum in Góra Świętej Anny).





ROZSTRZYGNIĘCIE RADY NAJWYŻSZEJ W SPRAWIE  
GÓRNEGO ŚLĄSKA.



Przedruk wzbroniony

„ATLAS” Instytut Kartograficzny we Lwowie.

Obszar plebiscytowy liczy 10.950 km<sup>2</sup>, rewindykowany przez Kartanego 6450 km<sup>2</sup>.

Obszar przyznany Polsce liczy około 3068 km<sup>2</sup>, tj. 29% pow. obszaru plebiscytowego; zaludnienie jego 895.000 tj. 46% ogółu. Na obszarze przyznany oddano około 525.000 głosów tj. 44% ogółu, w tym polskich 291.000 tj. 61% og. pol., a niemieckich 234.000 tj. 32% og. niem.  
Obszar przyznany produkuje 33 Mld t. węgla (1913) tj. 78% ogółu; węgla koksującego 3 Mld t. tj. 44% ogółu, a mieści w sobie dużych 5 centrów produkcji surowca żelaznego (wysokie piece) na 9 w ogóle, a 10 koksowni na 16 w ogóle.  
W Polsce zostało 90% produkcji rudy i cała produkcja surowego cynku.

1920 k. 16/15

# DIVISION OF UPPER SILESIA

Under the pressure of the Allies, the Poles and the Germans called a truce on 25 June. Both committed themselves to retreating. Although there was still no agreement on the exact division of the disputed area, the uprising resulted in a demarcation line that was more favourable to Poland than initially planned. Eventually, it was the League of Nations that decided on the division of Upper Silesia. On 20 October 1921, the Conference of Ambassadors (consisting of Parisian ambassadors of the five victorious countries) agreed to grant Poland 29 per cent of the disputed area in the eastern part of the region, with – fortunately for Poland – the majority of the Upper Silesian industry.

A map of the division of Upper Silesia (the National Library).

The “North” group staff is leaving the battlefield after the truce, 1921 (the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom).





# TAKING OVER UPPER SILESIA

Poland and Germany signed the final agreement on the division of Upper Silesia in June 1922. On 20 June, there was a welcoming ceremony organised in Katowice for the Polish Army under the command of Lieutenant-General Stanisław Szeptycki, which officially took over the region granted to Poland. In the next days, the Polish forces ceremoniously entered subsequent towns, ending in Rybnik on 3 July 1922. They were welcomed by crowds of Upper Silesians in every place they took over. The Act on Taking over Upper Silesia by Poland was signed on 16 July 1922 in Katowice, with the participation of Polish government and Sejm representatives. This is how the Silesian Province was created. Based on the Organic Statute of the Silesian Province enacted by the Polish Sejm already on 15 July 1920, when the battles for Upper Silesia were still ongoing, the province was granted an autonomous status.

***"We are free! The chains that constrained us have been cast off! Praise be to God for this!"***

*Father Jan Kapica, welcoming Polish soldiers on the border of Upper Silesia.*

A chain that had previously constrained Upper Silesia was symbolically broken on a bridge in Szopienice (today a district of Katowice), which connects the plebiscite area with Poland. The photograph shows Lieutenant-General Stanisław Szeptycki (Katowice Archdiocese Archives).



# COMMEMORATION



The Germans built an amphitheatre and a mausoleum on the slopes of Góra Świętej Anny in the 1930s. In 1945, when the area was already a part of Poland, the mausoleum was blown up and replaced by the Uprisings Monument designed by Xawery Dunikowski (Ośrodek Karta).

The events of 1919–1921 have been permanently imprinted in the historical memory of Upper Silesians. They started celebrating their anniversaries and building monuments almost immediately after Poland took over the area it had obtained. The uprisings were soon used as an element of history politics, and the insurgents themselves split into hostile camps. The situation did not change even after the Second World War, when the communists seized power in Poland, and the whole area over which the Poles had fought with the Germans found itself in People's Poland. The commemoration of the insurgents was assigned a more ideological meaning especially after the thaw of 1956. For the next thirty years, the uprisings were presented as "an element of fight over the Polishness of the western borderlands and the freedom of the Silesian people from German oppression and the yoke of capitalism". Today, the memory of the events is being brought back by historians and history enthusiasts. It was cherished also during the hundredth anniversary of the events, celebrated in whole Upper Silesia.

Since the times of the Polish People's Republic, the most important location of the celebrations has been the Silesian Insurgents Monument in the centre of Katowice unveiled in 1967. The photograph shows the march of veterans during the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Silesian Uprisings in 1971 (Ośrodek Karta).



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# THE UPRISINGS IN NUMBERS

## PLEBISCITE

The Upper Silesian plebiscite area was **11,008** square kilometres in total. It was inhabited by more than **2,100,000** people.

More than **1,220,000** people had the right to vote in the plebiscite. **97.5** per cent of them cast their vote.

**59.6** per cent were in favour of Germany, **40.3** per cent of Poland.

Emigrants, most of whom voted for Germany, comprised **19.3** per cent of the voters.

Women constituted around **20** per cent of the plebiscite workers.

## UPRISINGS

It is estimated that around **500** insurgents died in the First Silesian Uprising.

From **150** to **180** insurgents died in the Second Silesian Uprising. The number of the wounded is unknown.

It is estimated that around **2000** insurgents died in the Third Silesian Uprising.

Around **9,000** volunteers from outside of Silesia, especially from Greater Poland, took part in the Third Uprising.

Women amounted to **2-3** per cent of the Silesian Uprisings participants.

Silesian Insurgents from one of the Katowice District divisions, 1921 (Katowice Archdiocese Archives).

## DIVISION OF UPPER SILESIA

Poland was eventually granted **3,214** square kilometres of the plebiscite area (**29** per cent), inhabited by **996,500** people (**47.2** per cent).

Poland obtained most of the Upper Silesian industry: **79** per cent of coal mines,

**67** per cent of zinc and lead mines, **70** per cent of steelworks and all iron mines as well as zinc, lead and silver works.