

NIKLAS KNIEBÜHLER  
Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg  
ORCID: 0009-0004-9482-4859

DOMINIKA MARCINIAK  
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu  
ORCID: 0009-0000-1009-9129

## **BETWEEN A “BLEEDING” FRONTIER AND A “GREENING” BORDER. RECURRING NATURE AROUND THE POLISH-GERMAN INTERWAR BORDER IN UPPER SILESIA (1921–1939)**

### Abstract

The following paper poses the question of whether the interwar period border between Germany and Poland in Upper Silesia that was established during the 1920s and lasted until 1939 had a notable effect on the highly industrialised and economically exploited environment surrounding it. This idea was inspired by previous works by Peter Coates and Astrid Eckert, that showed contested border regions with reduced human activity to be beneficial for other species. On examination, however, the border situation in Upper Silesia differed greatly from those examples by promoting cross-border mobility rather than limiting it. The paper looks at a wide array of contemporary Polish and German speaking publications concerned with the border region for clues about changes in the environment.

**Key words:** Environmental history, Upper Silesia, Interwar period, Border, Green border



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## INTRODUCTION

The Silesia Region does not comply with European space standards. It is becoming an industrial architectural museum with coal mines, steelworks, factories, waste hips, excavations, mining subsidence, workers dwelling districts, and an untidy and not organized technical infrastructure – landscape that cannot be seen in the western part of Europe. All this is located in an extremely polluted environment (soil, water, air). Therefore, it has become the most troublesome region not only in Poland, but also in the whole European Community<sup>1</sup>.

These words were used to describe the Polish region of Silesia in a geographical journal in 2006<sup>2</sup>. The dire consequences, which resulted from the history of the long and intense economic usage of this region, nowadays situated in the south-west of Poland, with its southern part being specified as Upper Silesia, were noted by Adolf Kühnemann in 1993. He described it as “one of the crisis regions of Europe”<sup>3</sup>, being exploited in what could be called a colonial robber economy for centuries. In 1993, half of the entirety of Polish industrial waste and two thirds of Polish carbon dioxide emissions were produced there<sup>4</sup>. Over the years, the situation has changed and now (data for 2019) the Śląskie Voivodeship ranks second in the carbon dioxide emissions report with 14% of the national emissions.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Kühnemann’s observations remain valid.

According to Kühnemann, the severe condition of the region can be attributed to two primary factors: the rich mineral resources of Upper Silesia, especially coal, and its strategic geographical location between the historically competing nations of Germany and Poland.<sup>6</sup> Upper Silesia is situated on a coalfield that spans approximately 4,500 square kilometres, making it larger than the Ruhr area, although a significant portion of the coal is located at uneconomic depths.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, this abundance of resources made the region economically attractive from an early period. Hard coal mining in Upper Silesia began in the mid-17th

<sup>1</sup> Alicja Szajnowska-Wysocka, „Europeanisation of the cultural space of Upper Silesia”, *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series* 6 (2006): 145–163, 151.

<sup>2</sup> The following paper was originally written early in 2023 during an EPICUR seminar on environmental history, held between the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg and Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu. The aim of the project was to task students from different countries with research connected to the topic of border, migration and environmental history which they developed based on their different perspectives.

<sup>3</sup> Adolf Kühnemann, „Upper Silesia, a Forgotten Region in Central Europe”, *GeoJournal* 30 (1993): 259–264, 259.

<sup>4</sup> Kühnemann, „Upper Silesia”, 260.

<sup>5</sup> *Ochrona środowiska 2021*, content-related works supervised by Wiesława Domańska (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2021), 90–91, [https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/porta-linformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5484/1/22/1/ochrona\\_srodowiska\\_2021.pdf](https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/porta-linformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5484/1/22/1/ochrona_srodowiska_2021.pdf) (access: 16.02.2023).

<sup>6</sup> Kühnemann, „Upper Silesia”, 259.

<sup>7</sup> Riley Ray, Maria Tkocz, „Coal Mining in Upper Silesia under Communism and Capitalism”, *European Urban and Regional Studies* 5 (1998): 217–235, 218.

century, at a time when charcoal was still the dominant raw material for processes such as iron smelting. The situation gradually changed as Upper Silesia's forests began to disappear due to man-made changes in the environment.<sup>8</sup> By the late 18th century, the price of wood had increased by up to 700%, prompting a shift towards coal as a new raw material. During the 19th century, while still under Prussian control, Upper Silesia became the most important industrial region in Germany.<sup>9</sup> The region maintained its significant industrial status despite changes in national sovereignty and political systems. The economic exploitation (if not to say abuse) of the region intensified during the times of the Polish People's Republic.<sup>10</sup> Upper Silesia experienced extensive environmental damage and exploitation from at least the mid-19th century through the 20th century, both during periods of German and Polish control.

However, after World War One, Upper Silesia was briefly neither entirely German nor entirely Polish. Due to its economic significance and yet rather undefined national character, it became a highly contested area between Germany and the newly established Polish state ultimately resulting in its division in 1921.<sup>11</sup> The new border, which lasted only until the beginning of World War Two, was extremely unpopular in Germany, where it was referred to as the *bleeding frontier*, indicating strong desires for its revision.<sup>12</sup> In Poland, the border was similarly viewed as artificial, weak and unjust, and these characteristics were frequently exploited in propaganda to criticize the division of Silesia.

Research on Upper Silesia in the interwar period has mostly focused on social aspects, leaving the environmental aspects of the instalment of the new border notably underexplored.<sup>13</sup> And this despite the undoubtedly massive and multifaceted environmental consequences, resulting from the establishment of the new border, which frequently extended beyond the region. The partition of Upper Silesia and Germany's subsequent loss of coal resources after World War One should be kept in mind as one of the main reasons for the search for alternative

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<sup>8</sup> Part of the forests were destroyed during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Then, after the war, huge quantities of wood were used to rebuild desolate cities and villages. Forests were also felled for the needs of small industrial plants (breweries, forges, brickyards, steelworks etc.) Adam Frużyński, *Zarys dziejów górnictwa węgla kamiennego w Polsce* (Zabrze: Muzeum Górnictwa Węglowego w Zabrzu, 2012), 32–33.

<sup>9</sup> Ray and Tkocz, „Coal Mining”, 218.

<sup>10</sup> Kühnemann, „Upper Silesia”, 260.

<sup>11</sup> T. Hunt Tooley, „German Political Violence and the Border Plebiscite in Upper Silesia, 1919–1921”, *Central European History* 21 (1988): 56–98, 56. It should also be noted that a smaller part of the province got assigned to Czechoslovakia, which is less important for this study.

<sup>12</sup> Agnes Laba, „Rev. to: Karoline Gil, Christian Pletzing eds.: Granica. Die deutsch-polnische Grenze vom 19. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert. (*Colloquia Baltica*, 19) München 2010”, *Zeitschrift für Osmittleuropa-Forschung* 61, 2 (2012): 286–288, 286.

<sup>13</sup> Apart from maybe the short contribution looking at the fortified eastern wall erected in Nazi Germany west from the border, turning into a safe space for bats: Natalia Sikora, „Der Ostwall oder Ein Refugium für Fledermäuse”, in *Die vergessene Grenze. Eine deutsch-polnische Spurensuche von Oberschlesien bis zur Ostsee*, ed. Dagmara Jajnesniak-Quast, Uwe Rada (Berlin: Be-bra Verlag, 2018), 191–197.

energy supply by the German state. Marc Landry highlights this in his examination of the environmental impact of new hydroelectric energy production in the Bavarian Alps, which emerged as a method of coping with the loss of a great part of the mining industry.<sup>14</sup>

However, a combined outlook on all the possible environmental impacts and consequences of the interwar period Polish-German border would have by far exceeded the scope of this paper.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it is unlikely that, by looking at Upper Silesia as a whole, the interwar period would change the narrative of ongoing exploitation and environmental pollution. Both Germany and Poland aimed to maximize the benefits from their respective parts of the region, leading to increased coal production throughout the interwar period.<sup>16</sup>

A more interesting question seemed to be whether the new border, which was located right through some of the most densely populated and highly industrialized districts of Upper Silesia, acted as an environmental *shelter zone* in its ultimate vicinity. This idea was supported by earlier works on disputed borders that created safe spaces for non-human species, by limiting human activity around them. By looking at the existing literature on Upper Silesia in the interwar period and the instalment of the border, we realized that the border situation differed greatly from those previous examples. Nevertheless, in the process of looking for notions of *shelter zones* in contemporary German and Polish accounts from the interwar period, a pattern of using images of recurring nature around the border for propagandistic purposes could be identified, which shall be highlighted in this article. Apart from newspaper articles, travel guides, regional literature, memoirs, and other publications with references to the border region were taken into consideration.

Firstly, we will examine the works of Peter Coates<sup>17</sup> and Astrid Eckert, which provided the inspiration for our research.<sup>18</sup> Thereafter, we will investigate the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the interwar border in Upper Silesia, emphasizing its distinctive characteristics compared to other borders that have previously been studied in terms of their environmental impact. Finally, we will examine and compare contemporary Polish and German sources in order to gain insights into the environmental impact of the border in question.

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<sup>14</sup> Marc Landry, „Environmental Consequences of the Peace: The Great War, Dammed Lakes, and Hydraulic History in the Eastern Alps”, *Environmental History* 20, (2015): 422–448, 437–440.

<sup>15</sup> It was originally conceptualized as a final essay to a EPICUR seminar on environmental history, held between the Adam-Mickiewicz University of Poznań and the Albert-Ludwigs-University of Freiburg. Therefor it did not allow for extensive archival research, neither for field trips to the region of Upper Silesia.

<sup>16</sup> Ray and Tkocz, „Coal Mining”, 218.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Coates, „Borderland, No-Man’s Land, Nature’s Wonderland. Troubled Humanity and Untroubled Earth”, *Environment and History* 20 (2014): 499–516.

<sup>18</sup> Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).



BORDERS AS ENVIRONMENTAL *SHELTER ZONES*

Borderlines often emphasize the homogeneity of natural, historical, socio-economic, cultural, and national features. In such cases, they represent integrative boundaries. Examples include island nations like Iceland and Australia, or countries with relatively stable territories characterized by historically shaped socio-economic and national structures (e.g., Switzerland, Spain). However, borders can also be delineated without regard for spatial differentiation or historical context, and may not align with resulting territorial, economic, socio-cultural, or ethnic realities. Under such conditions, dividing borders emerge, driven primarily by political and military interests, which result in the separation of ethnic, cultural, or economic territories. The Polish-German border in Upper Silesia after World War One was an example of such a dividing border.<sup>19</sup> Due to human-made restrictions, these dividing borders sometimes transform into convenient places for the growth of nature, referred to as *shelter zones*. In this study, we examined whether the borderland under discussion could be classified as such.

The concept of *shelter zones* is linked to the idea of *shatter zones* introduced by Peter Coates. He uses this term to describe areas where human activity and human presence have been drastically reduced to an absolute minimum<sup>20</sup>. Conversely to that, he discusses the popular narrative of 'nature' filling the void created by human absence. According to this perspective, human *shatter zones* can transform to environmental *shelter zones*. However, Coates acknowledges that reduced human activity does not necessarily lead to increased biodiversity. He illustrates this concept by referring to the so-called No-Man's land during World War One, which he describes actually as a "no-other species land".<sup>21</sup> He also points out the problematic underlying principle of diverging interests between humanity and the rest of nature, which in turn makes it difficult to categorize events such as Chernobyl as environmental disasters.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the borderlands outlined in his article seem to be zones where, due to the contested nature of the established border, no human activity occurs, providing a refuge for other species. Apart from the Demilitarized Zone in Korea, a notable example is the former inner German border.<sup>23</sup>

Astrid Eckert has conducted research on the Iron Curtain and its impact on the landscape. Her findings provide insight that helps evaluate whether the Polish-German interwar period border meets the requirements to be labelled a *shelter zone*. She emphasizes the necessity of avoiding oversimplified, ahistorical perspectives that depict the border as static and draw a clear line between nature and human activities. Instead, she underscores the diverse ways in which the border

<sup>19</sup> *Granice Śląska w interdyscyplinarnej perspektywie*, ed. Ryszard Gładkiewicz, Teresa Sółdra-Gwiżdż, Marek Szczepański (Opole: Instytut Śląski w Opolu, 2012), 129–130.

<sup>20</sup> Coates, „Borderland”, 506. The term *shatter zone* was first used in geological science, and then was adapted by historians. Coates significantly expanded this concept.

<sup>21</sup> Coates, „Borderland”, 500.

<sup>22</sup> Coates, „Borderland”, 506–509.

<sup>23</sup> Coates, „Borderland”, 502–505.

can impact the surrounding landscape. Similarly, she warns against extrapolating local influences across the entire length of a border, noting that borders traverse varied landscapes and can be constituted differently in different areas. As a result, the environmental impact of a border can vary from one location to another.<sup>24</sup> In taking a balanced approach to borders, rather than solely viewing them as a *shelter zone*, Eckert argues for a nuanced understanding of how border regimes, such as those of the Iron Curtain, have both positive and negative impacts on nature and wildlife. She also emphasizes the importance of differentiating between public perception and actual changes in the environment caused by the border. In the context of the Iron Curtain and other *shelter zones* like those described by Coates, this distinction addresses the perception of positive outcomes amid an otherwise predominantly negative view of border effects.<sup>25</sup>

The subsequent chapters will demonstrate that the Upper Silesian interwar period border differed significantly from the heavily fortified and difficult-to-cross borders outlined by the works of Coates and Eckert. Nevertheless, this border had a notable impact on both the environment and public perception. Furthermore, contemporary observers' beliefs about nature reclaiming areas with reduced human activity were not seen as positive, at least not in Upper Silesia, but rather the opposite. One of the reasons was the circumstances in which this boundary was established.

#### THE CREATION AND CHARACTER OF THE POLISH-GERMAN INTERWAR PERIOD BORDER IN UPPER SILESIA

The establishment of the Polish-German interwar period border in Upper Silesia was a highly complex and protracted process that extended beyond initial expectations. It commenced with the end of World War One and, in simplified terms, concluded after the plebiscite in 1921. Nevertheless, disputes over the border persisted beyond this, with modifications of the border occurring as late as 1923. Although the border in Upper Silesia existed briefly and was erased after the invasion of Poland by German troops in 1939, its impact on the region was profound and its material relics can still be found.

As noted at the beginning, Upper Silesia in the first half of the 18th century found itself within the borders of Prussia and evolved into one of Germany's most important industrial regions in the 19th century. Therefore, after Germany's defeat in World War I, the future of this region became an international issue concerning not only Germany and the newly established Polish state, which claimed rights to this territory, but also attracting the attention of Great Britain and France, who saw it as a tool to implement their respective policies towards Germany and this region of Europe.

<sup>24</sup> Eckert, *West Germany*, 160.

<sup>25</sup> Eckert, *West Germany*, 197–199.

Article 88 of the Treaty of Versailles sanctioned a plebiscite to determine the national belonging of Upper Silesia<sup>26</sup>. The plebiscite area encompassed 11,000 square kilometres, which was inhabited by approximately 2 million people based on 1910 data<sup>27</sup>. It comprised 21 regular counties: 6 towns, 15 districts,<sup>28</sup> and two territories whose status was changed during the plebiscite. The voting process was overseen by an International Commission consisting of members appointed by the United States of America, France, the British Empire, and Italy<sup>29</sup>. The Inter-Allied Commission for Upper Silesia (in which France and Great Britain were most influential) was responsible for deploying troops, officers, and administrators for the entire enterprise<sup>30</sup>. The outcome of the plebiscite was supposed to "be determined by communes according to the majority of votes in each commune"<sup>31</sup>.

Reaching a consensus on the terms of the plebiscite proved to be a formidable challenge. The Inter-Allied Commission announced these terms in three rounds between January and March 1921, with voting ultimately scheduled for March 20, 1921. It was a turbulent and uncertain period, marked by violence on both sides. The fights were referred to as Silesian Uprisings<sup>32</sup>. Another widely discussed aspect was the extensive Polish and German propaganda campaigns aimed at dissuading Silesians from supporting the opposite side<sup>33</sup>. Themes such as patriotism, religiosity, an uncertain future, and embellishing or exaggerating stories about the first Silesian Uprising in 1919 were frequently used.

On the day of the plebiscite, proceedings unfolded without major disturbances, with a turnout of 97.5% of eligible voters. Out of 1,510 polling wards, 836 (55.3%) were dominated by Germans and 672 (44.7%) by Poles<sup>34</sup>. However,

<sup>26</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the initial drafts of the peace treaty with the Reich of 7 May 1919 did not take into account the plebiscite as a way of dividing Upper Silesia. Renata Pysiewicz-Jędrusiak, *Granice Śląska: zmiany granic Śląska w czasie i przestrzeni, Śląsk na dawnej mapie, obraz Sudetów w dawnej kartografii* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo „Rzeka”, 1998), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Maciej Fic: „«Jeden z najspokojniejszych dni na Górnym Śląsku». Plebiscyt z 20 marca 1921”, in *Powstania śląskie. Polityka – historia – pamięć*, ed. Michał Kopczyński, Bartosz Kuświk (Opole–Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Polski, 2021), 52.

<sup>28</sup> A detailed list of towns and districts (in Polish and German) can be found e.g. in: Dawid Smolorz, *Na granicy. Rzecz o czasach, ludziach i miejscach* (Gliwice: Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, 2008), 16. It is also important to note that the southern part of the Ratibor district was ceded to Czechoslovakia in 1919 and hence was not included in the plebiscite area.

<sup>29</sup> The Versailles Treaty June 28, 1919, Article 88, [www.avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partiii.asp](http://www.avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partiii.asp) (access: 08.02.2023).

<sup>30</sup> More information on this subject see: Alun Thomas, „The British Upper Silesia Force «'Upsi' Force»: May 1921–July 1922”, *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 95 (2017): 338–364.

<sup>31</sup> The Versailles Treaty June 28, 1919, Article 88, [www.avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partiii.asp](http://www.avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partiii.asp) (access: 08.02.2023).

<sup>32</sup> As important as this topic is when it comes to the social moods of a region it is only indirectly connected to the subject of this work. Check: Timothy Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia 1918–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) or Tooley, „German Political Violence”, 56–98.

<sup>33</sup> For more check: Władysław Zieliński, *Polska i niemiecka propaganda plebiscytowa na Górnym Śląsku* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1972).

<sup>34</sup> Fic, „Jeden”, 64. See fig. 1.

the overall outcome remained ambiguous. Interestingly, even within the pro-German western counties there were rural communities where Poland garnered more votes, resulting in occasional enclaves of pro-Polish sentiment amidst pro-German areas, and vice versa<sup>35</sup>.

The belonging of the so-called “industrial-triangle” (Bytom-Katowice-Gliwice / Beuthen-Gleiwitz-Kattowitz) where the best-developed industrial sector was located, also caused considerable concern and controversy among the members of the Inter-Allied Commission. France was striving to weaken Germany economically as much as possible and favoured allocating this area to Poland. However, Great Britain, supported by Italy, sought to maintain a balance of power by recommending that the “industrial triangle” remain under German control. Due to the lack of agreement, both proposals were submitted to the League of Nations, which left many Silesians dissatisfied. Benefiting from the favour of France, the insurgents initiated the Third Silesian Uprising, lasting from May 3rd to July 4th, 1921<sup>36</sup>. Recognizing the limited strength of the Inter-Allied forces, the decision was made to concentrate the Allied troops in predominantly German towns to protect the German population. In response to the Polish Uprising, the German side established a military organization known as the Self-Defence of Upper Silesia (Selbstschutz-Oberschlesien) and utilized volunteer corps (commonly referred to as Freikorps). Once again, bloodshed ensued.

As previously noted, the plebiscite results were submitted to the arbitration of the League of Nations. Its recommendation, approved by the ambassadors of the Allied Powers on October 20, 1921, outlined the following divisions: Germany received 7,794 square kilometres (71% of the plebiscite area) inhabited by 1,116,5000 people (54% of the population), while Poland received 3,214 square kilometres (29%) and 996,500 people (46%). Consequently, the Republic of Poland gained the more densely populated areas. The “industrial triangle” was allocated to Poland, which thereby acquired a significant part of the local industry<sup>37</sup>. Before the division, approximately 280 thousand industrial workers were employed in Upper Silesia, while after the division only 78 thousand (28%) found themselves within Germany's borders<sup>38</sup>. Although Germany received two-thirds of the plebiscite area, the economically more valuable regions, rich in raw materials and heavy industry, were allocated to Poland.

The newly established border crossed seven counties, with territories to the west assigned to Germany and those to the east allocated to Poland. Initially, this demarcation was merely a symbolic line depicted on a map. Therefore, a special

<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that the analysis of the voting shows us that up to 42% of Polish-speaking Upper Silesians voted for Germans. The level of support for Germany also depended on industrialization of the region and education. Smolorz, *Na granicy*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, „The British Upper Silesia Force”, 346–347.

<sup>37</sup> Out of 67 coal mines Poland received 53, further all 9 iron ore mines, 10 out of 15 galvanizing and lead factories, 11 out of 18 coking plants, almost all briquette plants, and all zinc, lead and silver smelters. Smolorz, *Na granicy*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> *Historia Górnego Śląska: polityka, gospodarka i kultura europejskiego regionu*, ed. Joachim Bahlcke, Dan Gawrecki, Ryszard Kaczmarek (Gliwice: Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, 2011), 229.

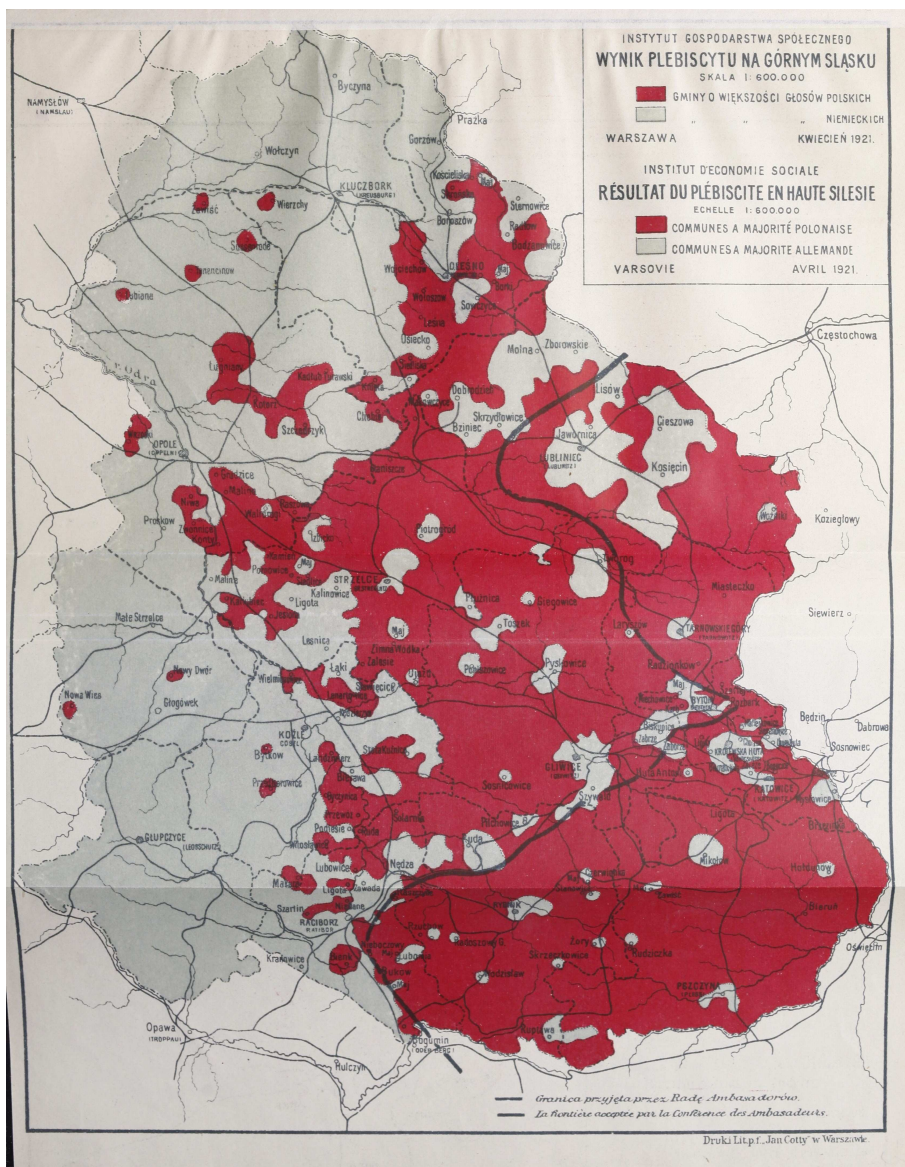


Fig. 1. The overall result of the vote – plebiscite in Upper Silesia. Stefan Dziewulski, *Wyniki plebiscytu na Górnym Śląsku* (Warszawa: Druk. i Litogr. p. f. „J. Cotty”, 1921). Biblioteka Narodowa, Public domain.

commission was established in August 1922 to delimit the border on the ground. The main work, including erecting boundary stones, barriers, and customs houses, lasted until the spring of 1923. However, the commission's actions caused further disagreements.





Fig. 2. Polish border in Upper Silesia: according to the decision of the Supreme Council of the League of Nations. *Granica Polski na Śląsku Górnym: według postanowienia Rady Najwyższej*, “Atlas” Instytut Kartograficzny (Lwów: Instytut Kartograficzny im. Eugeniusza Romera, 1921). Biblioteka Narodowa, Public domain.

Meanwhile, the border altered the national affiliation of many Upper Silesians and created large groups of national minorities on both sides. Their rights were addressed in the Geneva Convention of May 15, 1922 (also known as the German–Polish Convention on Upper Silesia), developed by the League of Nations. The agreement, concluded for 15 years, granted Silesians the right to choose their citizenship and place of residence, leading to significant migration in the region. Between 1922 and 1924, about 200,000 Silesians moved to the other side of the border<sup>39</sup>, creating refugee issues. By early July 1922, nearly 35,000 refugees were counted in the Polish Silesian Voivodeship, and 60,000 a month later<sup>40</sup>.

The Geneva Convention also regulated the transitional periods – the time and rules for states to gradually manage the plebiscite areas allocated to them. It established a borderland up to five kilometres inland on both sides of the border, with special regulations for cross-border movement<sup>41</sup>. It ensured easier border crossing for residents, mainly labourers and farmers (but also professionals and the fire brigade, for example)<sup>42</sup>, whose workplaces or fields were on the other side due to the division. This was not uncommon, making border permeability one of its key characteristics<sup>43</sup>.

The border in Upper Silesia divided a total of 15 railway lines, 9 narrow-gauge railway lines, 7 tram lines, 49 roads, and 12 high-voltage lines<sup>44</sup>. The meandering boundary frequently resulted in train travellers traversing it on multiple occasions within one trip, leading to operational challenges that required attention and resolution by the architects of the agreement<sup>45</sup>. Many corporations and companies were divided, furnaces were cut off from processing plants and mining shafts from exploitation fields<sup>46</sup>. Additionally, underground boundary markings were also required. Some mine galleries were separated with metal bars.

<sup>39</sup> *Historia Górnego Śląska*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> „Wiadomości lokalne”, *Śląski Głos Poranny* 1, 102 (3.08.1922), <https://sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/35181/edition/31823/content> (access: 16.02.2023). On the situation of refugees in Königshütte/Królewska Huta (nowdays Chorzów) check Renata Skoczek, „Przejęcie Królewskiej Huty (Chorzowa) przez władze polskie. Problemy społeczne i polityczne miasta w latach 1922–1926”, in *Rok 1922 na Górnym Śląsku. Granice – administracja – społeczeństwo*, ed. Sebastian Rosenbaum, Mirosław Węcki (Katowice-Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2019), 115–118.

<sup>41</sup> Polsko-niemiecka konwencja Górno-Śląska zawarta w Genewie dnia 15-go maja 1922 r., Article 238, Genewa 1922, <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/show-content/publication/edition/138866?id=138866> (access: 08.02.2023).

<sup>42</sup> Skoczek, „Przejęcie”, 111–112.

<sup>43</sup> Aleksandra Wągrodzka and Alla Gavrylenko, „Zickzack der Grenze. Eine Spurensuche in Oberschlesien”, in *Die vergessene Grenze. Eine deutsch-polnische Spurensuche von Oberschlesien bis zur Ostsee*, ed. Dagmara Jajesiak-Quast, Uwe Rada (Berlin: Bebra Verlag, 2018), 70.

<sup>44</sup> Zbigniew Gołasz, „Przejęcie Zabrze przez administrację niemiecką w 1922 roku oraz problemy z wytyczeniem granicy państwowej na terenie gminy”, in *Rok 1922 na Górnym Śląsku. Granice – administracja – społeczeństwo*, ed. Sebastian Rosenbaum, Mirosław Węcki (Katowice-Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2019), 140.

<sup>45</sup> Polsko-niemiecka konwencja Górno-Śląska [...], Article 468.

<sup>46</sup> Pysiewicz-Jędrusik, *Granice Śląska*, 34.

The acquisition of the former plebiscite territories was planned in 6 rounds from June 17 to July 10, 1923. However, one of the last border adjustments such as that at the Delbrück mine near Hindenburg / Zabrze, occurred after long disputes in early June, preceded by demonstrations and attempts to take over the mine – once again – by force<sup>47</sup>.

Further modifications in the border region occurred in 1933 when the Republic of Poland undertook to strengthen it. By 1937, an approximately 60-kilometre line of permanent fortifications, named the “Silesia” Fortified Area (Obszar Warowny „Śląsk”), was created. The line consisted of around 180 constructions, including shelters, barbed wire fences, anti-tank barriers, minefields and water gates on the Klodnitz / Kłodnica and Gostine / Gostynia, enabled strategic flooding of areas<sup>48</sup>. Additionally, a series of hydrological facilities were constructed in 1935 at the “Bobrowniki” resistance point on the River Brynica for the same purpose<sup>49</sup>. Deforestation of border areas was also conducted. The Polish-German Convention on the Regulation of Border Relations, signed in Poznań on January 26, 1926, required, among other things, that a one-metre strip of land on both sides of the border where it passed through forests or thickets must be kept clear<sup>50</sup>. In the winter of 1938, Germany also began building fortifications on its side, known as Oberschlesien-Stellung, which included 26 heavy shelters (not all completed).

None of these fortifications had a significant impact in September 1939, when the Third Reich breached the border and entered Poland<sup>51</sup>. Following this event, the border disappeared as Polish Upper Silesia was incorporated into the Reich during World War Two. In 1945, the new Polish-German border was established about 300 kilometres further west, on the Oder River, where it remains to the present day.

The interwar Upper Silesian border was remembered primarily as artificial, imposed, unfair and generally perceived negatively. This sentiment is reflected in current studies:

This political border, representing a diplomatic compromise, did not coincide with any geographical border, had no traditions or equivalents in history, crossed types of cultural landscapes and caused numerous Polish-German misunderstandings<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Gołasz, „Przejęcie”, 144.

<sup>48</sup> *Fortyfikacje Obszaru Warownego „Śląsk”: historia, przewodnik*, ed. Dariusz Pietrucha (Piekary Śląskie: „Pro Fortalicium”, 2006), 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Fortyfikacje Obszaru Warownego „Śląsk”*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Konwencja polsko-niemiecka w sprawie uregulowania stosunków granicznych, podpisana w Poznaniu dnia 27 stycznia 1926 r., Article 7 (Dz.U. 1927 nr 54 poz. 470), <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19270540470/O/D19270470.pdf> (access: 16.02.2023).

<sup>51</sup> *Fortyfikacje Obszaru Warownego „Śląsk”* and Smolorz, *Na granicy*, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Pysiewicz-Jędrusik, *Granice Śląska*, 34.



THE UPPER SILESIA INTERWAR PERIOD BORDER  
IN POLISH AND GERMAN SOURCES

When examining contemporary German sources concerning Upper Silesia, the presence of the border issue is immediately apparent. References to the border are not only frequent but often central to the topics discussed across various types of written media. For instance, travel guides of the time recommended, among other things, visiting the region to see the "various border-curiosa"<sup>53</sup> created there. However, no significant evidence was found in Polish sources during this research that promoted the border region as a destination for tourism. In terms of nature-related tourism, the Western Beskids in Silesia, with their developing ski resorts and health resorts such as Wisła, were far more popular than the border region<sup>54</sup>. On the other hand, travellers who were interested in admiring the extensive industrial landscape typically preferred destinations like Katowice, rather than plants located precisely on the Upper Silesian border<sup>55</sup>.

The aforementioned German accounts tended to view the border primarily from an economic perspective, criticizing its negative impact on the industry and economy in Upper Silesia, without mentioning the surrounding environment. For example, the editors of a 1926 anthology on various aspects of everyday life in the province highlighted the detrimental effects of the "unnatural border drawing"<sup>56</sup> on traffic and the economy in Silesia. Even though, shortly after that part natural beauty of the region is mentioned, no connections to the border were made<sup>57</sup>. This reflects the general trend of contemporary accounts.

Polish sources, memoirs from that period, as well as historical studies, predominantly focused on the plebiscite and the Silesian Uprisings. These sources often provided information on trade and the economic situation of the Polish state, particularly with regard to coal, or commemorations of the Silesian Uprisings<sup>58</sup>. The border itself, apart from its exact course, did not arouse major interest.

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<sup>53</sup> Citation in translation by the authors of the paper, originally: „mancherlei Grenz-Kuriosa”. Oberschlesischer Verkehrsverband e.V. Ratibor, *Reiseführer durch Oberschlesien* (Gleitwitz: Oberschles. Volksstimme, 1929), 4.

<sup>54</sup> „Zalety klimatyczne Śląskich Beskidów podstawą rozwoju Wisły jako uzdrowiska”, *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 30, 151 (03.06.1939): 7, <http://mbc.malopolska.pl/publication/33326> (access: 18.02.2023).

<sup>55</sup> „Polacy z całego świata zwiedzają G. Śląsk”, *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 30, 133 (15.05.1939): 17, <http://mbc.malopolska.pl/publication/33326> (access: 18.02.2023).

<sup>56</sup> Citation in translation by the authors of the paper, originally: „die widernatürliche Grenzziehung”. Bruno Salomon, Erwin Stein, „Vorwort”, in *Schlesien. Kultur und Arbeit einer deutschen Grenzmark*, ed. Bruno Salomon, Erwin Stein (Berlin-Friedenau: Deutscher Kommunal – Verlag, 1926), 1.

<sup>57</sup> Otto Wagner, „Zum Geleit”, in *Schlesien. Kultur und Arbeit einer deutschen Grenzmark*, ed. Bruno Salomon, Erwin Stein (Berlin-Friedenau: Deutscher Kommunal – Verlag, 1926), 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Obraz medialny Górnego Śląska w okresie międzywojennym*, ed. Dawid Keller, Krystian Węgrzynek (Katowice-Chorzów: Muzeum Śląskie Katowice, 2021).

Given the disparity discussed above, the primary (yet not sole) basis for answering the research question was the analysis of German sources, where interest in the natural environment along the border was more prevalent.

## THE "GREENING" BORDER

German sources make limited mention of the nature of the border region. An article published in 1935 in "Wochenpost", a German-language newspaper in the Polish part of Upper Silesia, can serve as an example. The article focused on smuggling activities and referred to the specific region as the *green border*<sup>59</sup> in the headline. The visual content accompanying the article further reinforces this portrayal, depicting smugglers navigating narrow pathways amidst dense forests and crossing a railroad dam within a heavily wooded area (fig. 3). Noteworthy is the striking similarity between the language used in the article and the academic terminology proposed by Coates and Eckert. The introductory segment of the article combines "borderland...no-man's land"<sup>60</sup> and compares the border at this specific point close to Hubertushütte / Huta Hubertus (nowadays Huta Zygmunt) to the frontlines in the Great War. The subsequent narrative of the smuggling scene, culminating in border guards shooting the smugglers, aligns with the idea of a zone with limited human activity. The depiction of the harsh human fate contrasts the rather romanticizing glimpses of nature around the border. The article mentions the splattering of the river and vast meadows behind the border. At the very end, reference is also made to the "deep peace lingering over the meadows, that have already drunk so much blood"<sup>61</sup> and once again draws a comparison to World War One.<sup>62</sup>

The similarity of the descriptions used in "Wochenpost" with the terminology applied to so-called *shatter zones* and environmental *shelter zones* is striking. However, in this case the idealized description of the border may have served more as a stylistic device to emphasize the brutality of the border controls and the dire situation of the smugglers. Nonetheless, passages where cross-border movement was severely restricted likely experienced a decline in human activity and possibly an increase in non-human activity.

In their short article about the border in Upper Silesia, Aleksandra Wągrodzka and Alla Gavrylenko also mention border passages that were much more strictly controlled than the overall rather permeable character of the border would suggest. As one such exception, they named the Scharnafka / Czarniawka river which separated the German Hindenburg / Zabrze from the Polish Paulsdorf / Pawłów. Similar to the section described in "Wochenpost", this area was also heavily

<sup>59</sup> „Interview mit einem Berufsschmuggler”, *Wochen-Post* 7, 27 (06.07.1935): 1. The headline reads: „Beim Überschreiten der grünen Grenze wurde erschossen...”.

<sup>60</sup> „Interview mit einem Berufsschmuggler”.

<sup>61</sup> „Interview mit einem Berufsschmuggler”, 1. Citation in translation by the authors of the paper.

<sup>62</sup> „Interview mit einem Berufsschmuggler”, 2.



Fig. 3. Pictures printed in the article about crossing the green border. Georg Niffka, „Wochen-Post, 1935, Jg. 7, Nr. 27.

controlled to counteract the prevalent smuggling<sup>63</sup>. It would therefore not be unreasonable to assume that in some limited areas along the border, large-scale human activity was restricted by strict border controls. Particularly given the circumstances under which the border was drawn there.

In the vicinity of the Scharnafka / Czarniawka river, border controls were carried out from 1930 at the factory gate of the Delbrück-Schächte / Makoszowy colliery. Before that, the boundary line was very vague. The issue of the mine's state status remained unresolved for a long time even after the Geneva Convention. Polish activists believed that the mine should belong to the Polish Republic, as it was located on the eastern side of the border river, while Germany sought to keep it within its borders. This was one of the places where the delimitation commission became active in August 1922<sup>64</sup>. On November 23, 1923, the Poles also attempted to take over the mine by force. In the memoirs of the operation commander, we find a description of the frontier's appearance during this period:

The "water border" was marked out on the Czarniawka River, with wooden stakes with a bundle of straw on top. Beyond the Czarniawka River, the "dry border" was set into the forest in an arc as a horseshoe sign, between the villages [...] <sup>65</sup>.

The operation's commander also mentioned that these temporary boundary markers were torn out during an attempt to seize the mine. The matter of the Delbrück mine was referred to the League of Nations, which decided on June 9, 1923, to keep the mine within Germany<sup>66</sup>. The border was drawn from the Scharnafka / Czarniawka river, crossed the railway line, left the station on the Polish side and ran along the mine fence. As already mentioned, border controls were carried out at the factory gate in the 1930s (Fig. 4)<sup>67</sup>. In addition, the border ran across the mining area, leaving the mine on the German side, but two shafts as well as some residential buildings and sand pits on the Polish side. This situation probably contributed to an increased movement of people at the border and thus to an intensification of controls in this area. We therefore should not overestimate the indications of the border controls creating human *shatter* and environmental *shelter zones*, especially since other sources besides the "Wochenpost" article barely took note of such.

The author of the abovementioned article from "Wochenpost" also describes his impressions of the former Hubertushütte industrial site, located near the new border river Iserbach / Bytomka. He claims the industrial site once employed over

<sup>63</sup> Wągradzka, „Zickzack”, 70.

<sup>64</sup> „Z konwencji polsko-niemieckiej w sprawie Górnego Śląska”, *Katolik* 55, 89 (27.07.1922), „Wiadomości z bliższych i dalszych stron”, *Katolik* 55, 101 (24.08.1922), „Odezwa!”, *Katolik* 55, 104 (31.08.1922), <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/32149/edition/28996/content> (access: 18.02.2023).

<sup>65</sup> Gołasz, „Przejęcie”, 143, citation in translation by the authors of the paper.

<sup>66</sup> Gołasz, „Przejęcie”, 144.

<sup>67</sup> „Wiadomości z bliższych i dalszych stron”, *Katolik Niedzielnny* 1, 18 (3.05.1923), <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/488979/edition/458144/content> (access: 18.02.2023).





Fig. 4. Border crossing in Upper Silesia, on the Polish-German border [1933]. Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, Zespół: Koncern Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny – Archiwum Ilustracji, CN 3/1/0/8/6448. „Przejście graniczne na Górnym Śląsku, na granicy polsko-niemieckiej [1933]”. Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, Public domain.

2,000 workers and produced more than 400 tonnes of steel per month, but was now abandoned. The author refers to it as “one of the many victims in the Upper Silesian industrial cemetery”<sup>68</sup>. The depictions of nature were used to contrast the apparent decay of the industrial site. For example, the author notices the “juicy green”<sup>69</sup> in which the entrance to the former mine is now located, and also the clear sky, as the large winding tower no longer produces smoke. However, the clear sky is also viewed negatively because the tower is depicted as a symbol of German engineering. These industrial aspects of the site were clearly valued more highly than the recurring natural aspects, although their environmental detriment was noted through the description of an “unfriendly”<sup>70</sup> black slack heap at the site. Similar to later accounts of areas with reduced human activity, nature in this account seems to be regaining or reconquering a vacuum created by the new border in its ultimate vicinity. However, in contrast to those narratives, it is seen in a melancholic way and as a negative consequence rather than a positive side effect of a border otherwise negatively perceived.

<sup>68</sup> „Interview mit einem Berufsschmuggler”, 1.

<sup>69</sup> „Interview mit einem Berufsschmuggler”, 1.

<sup>70</sup> „Interview mit einem Berufsschmuggler”, 1.

Such depictions are to be expected when considering the location of the border right through some of the region's most industrialized areas, as discussed in previous chapters. In his nationalistic and aggressively revisionist work on the situation in Upper Silesia, Rudolf Schricker also criticized the drawing of boundaries between industrial sites. However, the pictures he shows to illustrate these claims do not resemble the abandonment of industrial sites and the recurring nature suggested in the "Wochenpost" article. Human activity around them does not appear to have been restricted in any way by the border<sup>71</sup>. The same applies to the quite prominent picture of borders that cut through underground mine galleries, which were also featured in the travel guides mentioned earlier<sup>72</sup>.

Regarding these underground borders, Wągorzka and Gavrylenko emphasize that they were purely symbolic and could not constitute a restriction on movement and border crossing for security reasons alone<sup>73</sup>. Similar narratives to those in the "Wochenpost" article can also be found in Schricker's book, which, among other things, describes another infrastructure topic: traffic routes and railways<sup>74</sup>.

The tram lines were an interesting case of cross-border problems, as the following example from Rudahammer / Ruda Kuźnicka shows. In 1922, the city was annexed by Poland along with a 1.5 kilometre long tram line that ran through it. This line connected two large cities on the German side: Hindenburg / Zabrze and Beuthen / Bytom<sup>75</sup>. According to Articles 468-474 of the Geneva Convention, trains with origin and destination stations in the same country that passed through the territory of another country were not subject to customs controls and passengers were not required to show circulation cards. However, the journey took place in closed carriages, with no possibility of getting on and off at transit stations<sup>76</sup>. In order to become independent from the Polish section of the line, a road and a tram were built on the German side of the border parallel to the original route, which also had an impact on the border environment.

As already mentioned, the demarcation of the border triggered migration. These cross-border movements led to significant changes in the border area, an example of which can still be seen today in Beuthen / Bytom. The city itself was something of an oddity because, although it was still one of the most important cities in German Upper Silesia, it cut into Polish territory like a wedge. The connection with the rest of Germany was maintained by a narrow strip of land with two roads and a railway line<sup>77</sup>. Due to its location and importance, thousands

<sup>71</sup> Rudolf Schricker, *Blut Erz Kohle. Der Kampf um Oberschlesien* (Berlin: „Zeitgeschichte“, 1935), 212, e.g. picture no. 79 after p. 212, showing railroads at mines close to Hindenburg / Zabrze.

<sup>72</sup> Schricker, *Blut*, picture no. 75 after p. 208. Curt Kretschmar, *Im deutschen Südosten. Fahrten durch das Grenzland Oberschlesien* (= Mit Rucksack und Nagelschuh, 6) (Berlin: Triasdruck, 1932), 29.

<sup>73</sup> Wągorzka, „Zickzack“, 74.

<sup>74</sup> Schricker, *Blut*, picture no. 74 after p. 208.

<sup>75</sup> Smolorz, *Na granicy*, 69.

<sup>76</sup> Article 465 of the Geneva Convention governed the application of the train regulations for this tram line.

<sup>77</sup> Smolorz, *Na granicy*, 59.

of migrants from the Polish side of Silesia moved to Beuthen/Bytom in the 1920s and 1930s. In order to counteract the housing shortage, the city authorities decided in the early 1930s to build two new housing estates, Helenenhof and Kreuzberg, with a total of around 550 apartments<sup>78</sup>.

The so-called "Polish Corridor" near Hindenburg / Zabrze and Beuthen / Bytom (surrounded on three sides by a border) was highlighted in detail in German written accounts<sup>79</sup>. However, it was not only this road, where the old street was left "dead"<sup>80</sup>, that appeared as a zone of reduced human activity. In a 1936 issue of the national socialist "Der Heimattreue Schlesier" a two-page article focuses on the implications of the "Diktat von Versailles"<sup>81</sup> in the districts of Wartenberg / Scytów and Namslau / Namysłów. In addition to mentioning that some fields



Fig. 5 One of the pictures printed in the article, criticizing the influence of the border on traffic connections. Georg Aurel Machura, *Der Heimattreue Schlesier* 1936, Jg. 1 (11), Folge 9, 184. Biblioteka Śląska, Katowice, Public domain

<sup>78</sup> Smolorz, *Na granicy*, 72–73. These estates are currently districts of the cities of Zabrze and Bytom, respectively.

<sup>79</sup> Schricker, *Blut*, picture no. 80 after p. 220.

<sup>80</sup> Kretschmar, *Im deutschen*, 30, „Auf deutscher Seite mußte man deshalb eine Umgehungsstraße bauen, die am Korridor vorbeiführt. Auch die Straßenbahn mußte umgelegt werden. Das alte, polnisch gewordene Straßenstück ist tot“.

<sup>81</sup> „Schlesiens Gebietsverluste in den Kreisen Guhrau, Groß-Wartenberg und Namslau“, *Der Heimattreue Schlesier* 1 (11), 9 (01.09.1936): 183.

could no longer be cultivated because they ended up on the wrong side of the border, a mill was separated from the pond and other topics already discussed, great emphasis was once again placed on the cutting of nine railway lines, twenty roads and 128 bigger agricultural roads. This article is also accompanied by photos indicating reduced human activity and the resurgence of nature. One of them depicts the Namslau-Reichtal-Kempen railway line, which was no longer used and was barely visible in a meadow (fig. 5), with a caption stating that the rails on the Polish side had been removed. Another picture shows the Saborwitz-Tribusch road that was “overgrown”<sup>82</sup> by grass.

The publication “Schlesiens Ostgrenze im Bild” by Heinz Rogmann, created for the national socialist organization “Bund Deutscher Osten”, demonstrates that this portrayal of the interwar border in Upper Silesia was not unique<sup>83</sup>. It provides numerous examples of the border cutting through densely populated areas<sup>84</sup>, thereby emphasizing its irrationality, which calls into question the argument of decreased human activity through the border. However, “Schlesiens Ostgrenze im Bild” also contains contrary evidence. For example, the author described the promenade near Ratibor/Racibórz as a once beloved weekend destination for local residents, and then depicted it as an area overgrown with grass on the Polish side of the border<sup>85</sup>. Likewise, a dam, depicted as the only relic of the railway that once connected Beuthen-Redensblick and Hubertushütte, was shown overgrown with grass and dense bushes<sup>86</sup> (fig. 6). Rogmann later emphasized that these were not isolated cases in the border region. Next to an image of a barrier on an overgrown road in the Lubnitz-Guttentag district, he described a recounted conversation with his companion in which he explained that it was “always the same”<sup>87</sup> at the border. He also asked a question about the financial losses suffered by the Prussian state as a result of the division of Upper Silesia and the Polish state's neglect of the former German infrastructure. In all these cases, the reconquering of nature in areas previously bustling with human activity, now partly abandoned or restricted, was depicted negatively. Only once, when discussing a similar scene with an overgrown road in a forest in Lower Silesia, did the author suggest visiting these “silent border areas” for their “natural beauty”<sup>88</sup>.

This brief mention is the only instance in one of the national socialist sources that indicates not only decreased human activity but also suggests increased biodiversity. Another interesting aspect mentioned in the introduction of the book is the claim that the border had destroyed centuries of river melioration works and

<sup>82</sup> „Schlesiens Gebietsverluste”, 184. „Die Landstraße von Saborwitz nach Triebusch ist heute von Graß überwuchert”.

<sup>83</sup> The BDO wasn't part of the NSDAP but can be regarded as a semi-official organisation, Frank Förster, „Die Wendensicht des Bundes Deutscher Osten”, in *Neues Archiv für Sächsische Geschichte*, ed. Karlheinz Blaschke (Stuttgart: Springer-Verlag GmbH, 1998), 243.

<sup>84</sup> Heinz Rogmann, *Schlesiens Ostgrenze im Bild* (Breslau: Selbstverl. der Landesgruppe Schlesien des Bundes Deutscher Osten, 1936), 53f, 57f.

<sup>85</sup> Rogmann, *Schlesiens*, 47.

<sup>86</sup> Rogmann, *Schlesiens*, 69.

<sup>87</sup> Rogmann, *Schlesiens*, 77.

<sup>88</sup> Rogmann, *Schlesiens*, 111.





Fig. 6. One of multiple images in Rogmann’s work, illustrating the decay of traffic connections, the course of the border is marked in the picture. Heinz Rogmann, “Schlesiens Ostgrenze im Bild”. Selbstverl. der Landesgruppe Schlesien des Bundes Deutscher Osten 1936, 69. Biblioteka Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice, Public domain.

was therefore responsible for the annual long-lasting floods and the creation of swamps that hindered the existence of the local population<sup>89</sup>. Although once again portrayed negatively, if true, the accidental creation of floodplains could have been hugely beneficial for biodiversity around the border, especially in a region like Upper Silesia<sup>90</sup>. However, unlike the more frequently elaborated impact on traffic routes, this remains a singular mention with no photographic evidence to support it, making it less likely. Additionally, a contribution to the anthology from 1926 also addresses flood protection in Silesia. Apart from noting some unfinished (due to financial issues) embankments and overflow polders, it does not mention any hindrance to flood protection caused by the new border<sup>91</sup>. Its influence in this regard seems to have been negligible.

<sup>89</sup> Rogmann, *Schlesiens*, 25.

<sup>90</sup> For the benefits of floodplains for biodiversity and the environment and the negative impact of common melioration work on rivers see for example Marc Cioc, „The Political Ecology of the Rhine”, in *Nature in German History*, ed. Christof Mauch (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), 42 and Marc Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815–2000* (Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2002), 169.

<sup>91</sup> Regierung, Baurat Wechmann, „Hochwasserschutz”, in *Schlesien. Kultur und Arbeit einer deutschen Grenzmark*, ed. Bruno Salomon, Erwin Stein (Berlin-Friedenau: Deutscher Kommunal-Verlag, 1926), 82f.

How shall the hints at decreased human activity and images of territories “reconquered” by nature, mainly highlighted in national socialist sources, be interpreted? Examining contemporary media specifically concerned with the environment in Upper Silesia could provide a more balanced perspective.

## THE “BLEEDING” BORDER

As mentioned at the beginning, the interwar period border was sometimes referred to as the *bloody border* for propaganda purposes. An explanation of how this term was understood can be found in the memoirs of Paweł Dubiel (1902–1980), a Silesian activist and journalist from Upper Silesia:

The Polish-German border in Silesia from 1922 was an artificial border, very jagged and in some sections even caricatured, it was claimed that in some cases, it divided peasant homesteads into two parts [...]. The Germans called this border in the interwar period “the bloody border”. Of course, not because of its unnatural shape, but because they wanted to abolish and erase all Polish-German borders, because they could not accept the existence of an independent state<sup>92</sup>.

Dubiel's memoirs suggest a German revisionist tendency regarding the Polish-German border, a factor that should be considered when analysing sources depicting the nature along the border.

The magazine “Der Oberschlesier”, edited by Karl Schodrok<sup>93</sup> (an activist during the Upper Silesia plebiscite), can be analysed to balance these findings. From 1927 to 1937, the magazine published six special issues that were exclusively dedicated to nature, nature conservation and the environment in Upper Silesia<sup>94</sup>. Despite some specific contributions focusing on regions situated near the border<sup>95</sup> and articles on niche topics such as the flora of railroad dams<sup>96</sup>, none of these issues suggest a noteworthy influence of the border on the environment. Thus, it can be inferred that there was no substantial environmental interest in the “safe spaces” created by the border during the interwar period.

The frequent references to nature reclaiming parts of the border in right-wing sources probably served as a tool to depict the German side as capable of “culture”, represented for example by infrastructure, and the Polish side as incapable,

<sup>92</sup> Paweł Dubiel, *Spojrzenie w przeszłość (wspomnienia działacza śląskiego)* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Śląsk w Katowicach, 1973), 148, citation in translation by the authors of the paper.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Chmiel, „Schodrok, Karl”, *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 23 (2007): 354–355 (Online-Version), [www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd116852739.html#ndbcontent](http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd116852739.html#ndbcontent) (access: 16.02.2023).

<sup>94</sup> *Der Oberschlesier* 6 (1927); *Der Oberschlesier* 8 (1928); *Der Oberschlesier* 8 (1929); *Der Oberschlesier* 6 (1930); *Der Oberschlesier* 4 (1935); *Der Oberschlesier* 4 (1937).

<sup>95</sup> *Der Oberschlesier* 8 (1928): 453–456; *Der Oberschlesier* 8 (1928): 467–470; *Der Oberschlesier* 6 (1930): 468f and especially the picture of forest on the new Polish border p. 483.

<sup>96</sup> *Der Oberschlesier* 8 (1928): 460–464.

represented by the disintegration of this infrastructure through “nature”. This assumption is further supported by a study of Heinz Rogmann's publication, in which the old German border with the Russian-influenced part of Poland is described as a cultural border. By comparing the German and Polish sides, Rogmann attempted to portray the German side as superior and interpreted unmaintained, overgrown by grass roads and the lack of bridges as signs of cultural inferiority<sup>97</sup>. The reference to new natural spaces along the border should therefore be understood more as *Kulturträgerismus*<sup>98</sup> — nationalist and centralist revisionist efforts to justify redrawing the border, as termed by Peter Polak-Springer — rather than as evidence of actual environmental *shelter zones*. However, isolated instances of such zones might have existed. For example, a conceptual article about the future of the recreational parks and green spaces in Beuthen / Bytom from 1929 mentions the idea of using areas rendered useless by the border to develop a “green belt”<sup>99</sup> around the city that would connect various existing gardens and parks with each other. This project, also known as a *nature protection belt*<sup>100</sup>, aimed to bring something positive out of a soon-to-be abandoned railway line, and was presented as such.

## CONCLUSION

What conclusions can we draw from looking at the border situation in Upper Silesia in the period between the two world wars? Can it be said that the border created a *shelter zone* in the otherwise severely degraded environment of the province? First, we must acknowledge that the character of this border differed greatly from those already studied by Eckert and Coates. Particularly in the 1920s, but generally throughout the entire period in question, the border was characterized by its permeability rather than by large-scale restrictions on human activity. The border placement — through densely populated and industrialized areas — did not require the abandonment of the land and therefore could not meet the criteria for typical environmental *shelter zones*. What is interesting, though, is that early measures concerning the border's establishment even appeared to pose a threat to biodiversity and nature, similar to the destruction Eckert noted in the initial stages of the Iron Curtain.

In German written sources from the interwar period, images of reappearing nature played an important role. National Socialist publications tended to depict the decay of traffic connections and infrastructure that resulted from the demarcation of borders, emphasized by the return of flora to these areas. However,

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<sup>97</sup> Rogmann, *Schlesiens*, 79.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Polak-Springer, „Landscapes of Revanchism: Building and the Contestation of Space in an Industrial Polish-German Borderland, 1922–1945”, *Central European History* 45 (2012): 491.

<sup>99</sup> T. Nowak, „Die Grünflächen der Stadt Beuthen O/S”, in *Beuthen O./S.*, ed. Stadtbaurat Stütz, Magistratbaurat Salzbrunn (Berlin-Hallensee: Dari-Verlag, 1929), 50.

<sup>100</sup> Nowak, „Die Grünflächen”, 50.

a comparative look at Polish and German sources with genuine environmental interest has shown that these mentions should not be taken at face value. Rather than indicating the creation of environmental *shelter zones*, they are more an expression of revisionist disdain for the new border and the entire Polish state. The natural element of these accounts served to reinforce German claims at cultural superiority and ownership of Upper Silesia. In no way did they resemble acknowledgments of positive side effects of the border, as was seen with the Iron Curtain. Therefore, we also cannot assume any parallels in this regard.

Nevertheless, further research on this topic is still advisable. Firstly, the larger-scale environmental impacts of the border, which were beyond the scope of this study, would warrant respective investigations. Secondly, the ultimate vicinity of the former border could be examined from more perspectives. Field-based research could evaluate whether the border can be assumed to have had positive environmental impacts that were not noted by contemporary observers. Furthermore, such studies could evaluate the effectiveness of isolated nature conservation projects like the planned “green belt” around the city of Beuthen / Bytom. Finally, following a systematic approach, various sources could be investigated to determine whether they support or contest the findings of this paper. A possible starting point would be the works of Stanisław Bieniasz, Horst Eckert and Horst Bienke, writers born in Silesia in the 1930s and 1950s who, among other things, published their own memoirs about their childhood in Upper Silesia.

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