

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES BETWEEN POLAND AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1938–1945

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ABSTRACT

The historical point of view is important to fully understand foreign affairs. For Polish-Czech relations the crucial period in this respect is 1918–1945. The matter of the conflict were borderlands, with the most important one – Zaolzie, that is, historical lands of the Duchy of Cieszyn beyond Olza River. Originally, the land belonged to the Crown of the Polish Kingdom, then to the Kingdom of Bohemia and Austrian Habsburg dynasty. After World War I, local communities took control of the land. Czechoslovakian military intervention and a conflict with Bolsheviks caused both parties to agree to the division of Zaolzie through arbitration of powers in 28 July 1920. Until 1938, key parts of Zaolzie belonged to Czechoslovakia. In that year, Poland decided to annex territories lost according to the arbitration. After World War II tension between Poland and Czechoslovakia heightened again. Czechoslovakia made territorial claims on parts of Silesia belonging to Germany. Poland once more tried to reclaim Zaolzie, but military invasion was stopped by Stalin. Negotiations failed, but the escalation of the conflict was stopped. Two years later the relationship between the parties was eventually normalized, the final agreement was signed in 1958 and it is still in place today.

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LOCATION AND IMPORTANCE OF THE REGION

Zaolzie is a name referring to the historical lands of the Duchy of Cieszyn located beyond Olza River and reaching as far as Ostrava and Frýdek-Místek to the west, and Bohumín in the north. From the late Middle Ages on, the region of Cieszyn Silesia was the object of conflict between Poland and Bohemia. Originally, the land belonged to the Crown of the Polish Kingdom but, as a result of regional disintegration, the rule over Silesia was taken over by the Kingdom of Bohemia, with the duchy remaining in the hands of the local Piast family line until the 17th century. When the Kingdom of Bohemia lost its autonomy, Cieszyn Silesia was long occupied by the Austrian Habsburg dynasty. In the 19th century, like many other parts of Silesia, this region became industrialised. Ostrava – Karviná mining district was created in the area with vast deposits of hard coal. The scale of the development of the district can be illustrated with the fact that 44 thousand workers and miners found employment there. Slightly to the south, Třinec Iron and Steel Works grew to be the largest plant in the Habsburg Empire. Industry enforced railway development in the region, which became the prevailing means of transport, apart from river transport. The railway line of the highest strategic importance was Košice – Bohumín line.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF POLISH-CZECH CONFLICT

“Polish national awareness in Zaolzie region grew strong in the 1860s with the activities of the Polish national movement that gathered strong support from Galicia. At the time, education flourished through development of the People’s Reading Centres and the establishment of the Polish Educational Society (*Macierz Szkolna*) in 1885”.¹

This rise of national awareness gave its fruits upon the breakdown of the Habsburg Empire. Poles from Zaolzie, just as other local communities of the empire, took over the rule of their lands in October 1918. The National Council of the Duchy of Cieszyn became the administrative authority of the area, and intended to include Cieszyn and Fryštát poviats it controlled in the newly established country of Poland. At the

¹ K. Matyjasik, *Reakcja społeczeństwa miasta Krakowa na zajęcie przez Polskę Zaolzia*, “*Wieki Stare i Nowe*” 2009, vol. 1(6), pp. 295–312.

time, Poland controlled approximately 70 per cent of Cieszyn Silesia, in whose population Poles constituted 69.2 per cent. Analogical measures were taken by the Czech community towards Frýdek and Fryštát poviats, establishing *Národní výbor pro Slezsko* council, which aimed at including their lands in Czechoslovakia. Both authorities controlled areas that largely overlapped with the distribution areas of the respective nations, but they decided to postpone a more precise division until central authorities are ready for negotiations. For this purpose, an agreement was signed on 5 November 1918, which was not recognised by the central authorities of Czechoslovakia, though: they claimed that local authorities had no right to sign such an agreement. In December that year, Józef Piłsudski acting as the Head of State in Poland, issued a proposal for an agreement in the case. The request was ignored, which was a mark the conflict would escalate. On 23 January 1919, Czechoslovak authorities gave an order for the military occupation of Zaolzie. There was little resistance on the Polish side because Polish soldiers had been sent to fight the Ukrainians in the East Galicia. The Polish army and armed civilians were defeated by the prevailing forces of the attacker, and soon drew back to Skoczów. At the time, the Entente enforced armistice. A new demarcation line was agreed upon, and the negotiations between Poland and Czechoslovakia renewed. Failing consensus, a decision was made to conduct a vote to decide about the final division of Cieszyn Silesia. The period before the vote proved to be turbulent. There were clashes of militants, and threatening of the civilians. In these circumstances, people migrated from Zaolzie. It is estimated that 4–5 thousand Poles left the Ostrava – Karviná district, with 279 people being imprisoned.

At the time, Poland was forced to fight against the Bolsheviki in the east; therefore, the conflict with the southern neighbour was extremely unfavourable to the country. Furthermore, Polish authorities sought a path to allow transport of weapons from Hungary and France. These factors caused both parties to agree to the division of Zaolzie through arbitration of powers. The decision was announced on 28 July 1920, diminishing the area controlled by Poland to Bielsko powiat, a part of Cieszyn powiat, and a yet smaller fragment of Fryštát powiat. The historical centre of the region, Cieszyn, was divided along the Olza River. As many as 120 thousand Poles, and the economically most important facilities, such as Ostrava – Karviná mining district, Třinec Iron and Steel Works, and Košice – Bohumín railway remained on the Czech side. The loss of industrialised areas was very

painful to emerging Poland. In particular because, at the time, the fate of other industrial regions in the Upper Silesia still remained unregulated. There were votes in progress, as well as three uprisings. The division of the lands occurred as late as on 20 October 1921 by the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris.

ANNEXATION OF ZAOLZIE TO POLAND

For the Poles inhabiting Zaolzie region, most of the interwar period was the time of fighting for their minority rights. The breakthrough occurred in 1937 with the increasing threat to Czechoslovakia from Germany. Polish diplomacy required the same rights for its minority as the ones awarded to the Germans in Sudetenland region. The Czech side satisfied some of Polish demands. In 1938, Polish associations in Zaolzie united into the Union of Poles in Czechoslovakia, and presented a demand for autonomy. The increased involvement on the Polish part was made visible on 19 September, when the organisation meeting of the Committee for Poles' Rights in Czechoslovakia took place on the initiative of Michał Grażyński. The meeting was chaired by the then Marshal of the 4th Silesian Sejm, Karol Grzesik, and the Governor was represented by the councillor of the Silesian Voivodeship Office, Marek Stanisław Korowicz. On the night of 28/29 September 1938, the Munich Conference decided on the annexation of Sudetenland region to the Third Reich. Therefore, France violated its alliance commitments to Czechoslovakia and, together with Italy and the United Kingdom, agreed to the division of Czechoslovakia. The issue of Zaolzie remained unsolved, but Poland was not admitted to participate in the conference. The only arrangement involved the decision about summoning another conference if Poland were not to reach an agreement with Czechoslovakia. Relying on its experiences related to the arbitration by Western powers, on 30 September, Poland decided to send an ultimatum to Prague demanding a decision regarding the return of Zaolzie within twenty four hours. On the following day, Polish demands were accepted, and the Polish army entered Zaolzie. The order to occupy Zaolzie was issued on 2 October by Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz. He addressed the soldiers of "Śląsk" Autonomous Operating Group (Samodzielna Grupa Operacyjna "Śląsk", SGO "Śląsk") with the words: "In a moment, you are about to cross Olza River, which was for long years sentenced to do a disgraceful service acting as a border that did not exist either in the hearts of those inhabiting

both banks of the river, or in the hearts of the entire Polish nation”² On the same day, the operation of taking over Zaolzie began. Polish troops were commanded by General Władysław Bortnowski, whose soldiers were welcomed by the local people. Popularity of the general grew so much that he was predicted to become the next marshal of Poland. At the same time, there was a German campaign aimed at the annexation of Bohumín to the Third Reich in return for concessions in Gdansk and in Pomerania region. As already mentioned, Bohumín was crossed by an important railway, linking The Third Reich and Slovakia. The proposal was rejected, and Poland referred to prior consent from Berlin to take over the city. The Germans conceded, and the operation of annexing the new lands including Bohumín to Poland was completed on 11 October. On the same day, by the decree of the President of Poland, the Poles from Zaolzie received Polish citizenship. The area of the lands totalled 862 km², which formed about 1 per cent of the Czechoslovakian area. The annexation included the Poviats of Czech Cieszyn, Fryštát, and three municipalities of the Poviats of Frýdek (Szonów, Wojkowice, and Žermanice). The area was then inhabited by approximately 120 thousand Poles. At the end of September, another small area from beyond Zaolzie was annexed, near the City of Czadec (Slovak: Čadca), which included the villages of Skaliste, Czarne, and Świerczynowiec.³

The response of the Polish press to the annexation of Zaolzie was clearly positive, regardless of political sympathies. “Polonia” journal presented it as a triumph of Polish foreign policy, and described the reaction of the residents of the Upper Silesia as extremely enthusiastic. It was also pointed out that the border was removed away from important industrial centres in the Upper Silesia, and that steel production thus significantly increased from 1.7 M tonnes to 2.5 M tonnes per year.⁴ The pro-Sanation “Polska Zachodnia” journal approved of the forceful solution, and also pointed to the enthusiasm of the local people.⁵ The socialist “Gazeta Robotnicza”, however, did not deal with the attitude of the locals, but showed its approval for the policy regarding Czechoslovakia.⁶

² “Kurier Bydgoski”, 4 October 1938, no. 227, p. 2, translation: author.

³ W. Marcoń, *Unifikacja Zaolzia w ramach województwa śląskiego z II Rzeczypospolitą*, “Dzieje Najnowsze”, 2010, year XLII, no. 3, pp. 4–5, translation: author.

⁴ “Polonia”, 6 October 1938, no. 274, p. 1.

⁵ “Polska Zachodnia”, 26 September 1938, no. 264, p. 1.

⁶ “Robotnik”, 2 October 1938, no. 274, p. 2.

The annexation of Zaolzie initiated a number of organisational changes in the area. The attitude of the authorities to the people inhabiting the lands is best illustrated by the words of Silesian Governor, Michał Grażyński: “We, the Poles, like clear situations and appreciate specific characters. That is why we respect honest Czechs and Germans, but cannot tolerate any intermediate types”.⁷ Non-Polish organisations were liquidated, except those of religious or economic nature. Polish became the official language as early as on 10 October, and government commissioners took over power on the same day. Political associations in Zaolzie were incorporated into parties operating in the Second Republic of Poland. “Interestingly, territorial changes also affected religious communities, as Zaolzie was excluded from the jurisdiction of Wrocław diocese, and was annexed by the Katowice diocese. The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession beyond Olza River was also subjected to the Silesian diocese of the community”.⁸

As a result of administrative changes, approximately 35 thousand Czechs decided to emigrate, with the remaining population totalling 10 thousand people. German population, in turn, was estimated as 8 thousand. Both groups openly opposed the changes. The German minority submitted a special memorial to Prime Minister Sławoj Składkowski demanding a transitional period to keep German as the official language in public offices and schools. The postulates were never satisfied, and the only success of the Germans at the time included the opening of a consulate in Cieszyn which since then provided a real support to the Germans.

CONSEQUENCES

The annexation of Zaolzie was used in Poland for propaganda forming part of election campaign in the coming parliamentary election. The accession of such a vast group of Poles to the multi-ethnic Second Republic of Poland was an undoubtedly stabilising factor. Also, the potential economic gain, due to the economic importance of the region and moving the border away from Upper Silesia, seemed to be beneficial, but Poland was presented in the international opinion as a country collaborating with the Third Reich. This version of events was propagated by countries participating in the Munich Conference, particularly by France who violated its alliance commitments

⁷ “Polska Zachodnia”, 3 October 1938, no. 271, p. 1.

⁸ K. Nowak, *Życie polityczne i społeczne*, [in:] *Dzieje Śląska Cieszyńskiego od zarania do czasów współczesnych*, Idzi Panic (ed.), vol. 6: Śląsk Cieszyński w latach 1918–1945, Cieszyn 2015, p. 120.

to Czechoslovakia. Zaolzie remained with Poland for less than a year, until the German army's attack of September 1939. From this perspective, the benefits enjoyed for several months seem to be small when compared to diplomatic losses on the international arena and the incitement of the conflict in the local population again. This does not change the fact that, at the time, with respect to Zaolzie, Poland met the historical and ethnic criteria applied when assessing rights to claim and occupy lands.

After World War II, the territorial dispute between Poland and Czechoslovakia came flooding back. As early as on 20 May 1945, an agreement was signed with the Slovaks in Trstená; it stipulated that the Slovaks renounce the territories annexed in September 1939, i.e. Upper Spiš and Upper Orava. The aim of these actions was to increase the probability of retaining Zaolzie region and the terrains occupied by the Third Reich. Czechoslovakia tried to make the most of the period before the Potsdam Conference to put their territorial policies in place. They thought that some parts of Silesia, such as the Kłodzko Valley, were historically more strongly connected to Czechia than Poland, pointing to their momentary affiliation during the reign and expansion of Bolesław I the Brave. Another argument raised by the Czechs was the presence of Czech minorities in those territories, in particular in and around Kudowa Zdrój. Territorial claims were also made regarding the towns of Paczków, Nysa, Otmuchów, Prudnik, Głucholazy, Racibórz, Koźle, Głogówek, and Głuszyce. To satisfy the abovementioned ambitions, the Silesian National Council issued a document titled *Laški manifest*, whose authors demanded that the aforementioned post-German territories be returned to them.

The time before Potsdam Conference resolutions were made public had been extremely turbulent in those regions. Some of the territories were penetrated by troops of Czechoslovak soldiers. Their will to seize Kłodzko region was also expressed in a note sent by Josef Hejret to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 9 June. On the following day, Czechoslovak soldiers occupied Chałupki, a village near Bohumín, and ordered that its Polish inhabitants leave the village within two hours. In the days that followed, similar incidents took place; on 13 June, the Deputy Foreign Minister, Vladimír Clementis, gave an interview and presented Czechoslovak claims towards some Silesian regions. Faced with Czechoslovakia taking a more harsh course, Polish government decided to take action. On 12 June, a protest note was sent, saying: "The Government of the Republic of Poland feels bound to state that we shall not be responsible for the

consequences should the abovementioned claim not be satisfied”⁹ Later on, the Minister of Defence, Marshal Michał Żymierski, moved the Polish troops near the Czechoslovak border. It forced the opponents’ army to withdraw behind the border as it had been defined in 1938. A delegate in Moscow, Edward Osóbka-Morawski, was replaced by Marshal Żymierski, who decided to extend the dispute with Czechoslovakia to Zaolzie region. Hence, he sent a letter to the Czechoslovak government, demanding the withdrawal of Czechoslovak administration from Zaolzie territories and the creation of the Polish-Czechoslovak Commission. The Czechs were given forty eight hours to satisfy these demands. In the meantime, the army was preparing to cross Olše river. Marshal Żymierski gave a speech in Katowice, in which he clearly expressed his position on the matter: “We do not grant the Czechs any rights to Zaolzie. We are trying to resolve the matter by way of negotiation. If our neighbour opposes – we shall find another way. In that respect, the Interim Government is capable of more than negotiation. We have to defend the victims”¹⁰ However, the inhabitants of that region never saw the fulfillment of that promise – on 18 June, the Interim Government Delegation in Moscow asked Stalin for guidelines concerning Zaolzie. The Russians ordered the cessation of military action and the commencement of mediation. Negotiations between Poland and Czechoslovakia took place at the end of June in Moscow. The government of the People’s Republic of Poland proposed the division of Zaolzie – the Poles were to receive, among others, Karviná coalfield and Třinec steelworks. The proposed area was smaller than the territory occupied in 1918 and 1938. However, the proposal was met with firm refusal and the demand of the internationalization of Oder river. The proposal of concessions concerning Kłodzko and Racibórz regions, in exchange for the resolution of the dispute over Zaolzie, was also met with a harsh response. Thus, negotiations failed. The relationship between the states was eventually normalized on 10 March 1947, under the pressure of the Russians, and a pact on friendship and mutual cooperation was signed, stipulating that the territorial dispute should be resolved within two years. However, the final agreement was signed as late as in 1958; it is still in place today.

⁹ M.K. Kamiński, *Polsko-Czechosłowackie stosunki polityczne przed konferencją trzech mocarstw w Poczdamie (maj – czerwiec 1945 roku)*, “Zeszyty Historyczne”, 1987, vol. 81, p. 233, translation: author.

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