

ABOUT SILESIA

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A Brief History of Silesia and Upper Silesia

The name Silesia refers today to the territory of the middle and lower basin of the European Odra (Oder) River. The historical region of Silesia has gone through many developments due to political, ecclesial, and ethnic changes that shaped its identity. Before the year 1000, numerous Slavic tribes inhabited the region. According to some historians, in the 9th century these tribes were politically affiliated with Great Moravia. Great Moravia ceased to exist between 904-905 due to the Hungarian invasion which resulted in the establishment of the country of Bohemia (Czech). During this period, Silesia, together with other parts of Bohemia, became Christianized. At this time, north of Bohemia, Duke Mieszko I, from the Piast dynasty, united the various tribes of the region into one political body and formed a new country, Poland. Mieszko married Princess Dobrawa from Bohemia and was baptized in 966, which led to the Christianization of his country. At the end of the 10th century, around 990, he took advantage of the dispute between Bohemia and the German Nations and incorporated Silesia into Poland.

In the year 1000 AD, the link between Silesia and Poland was solidified through the establishment of a new church administration in this part of Europe. Gniezno, the first capital of Poland, became the head of the new archdiocese and the area of Silesia, as the diocese of Wratislavia (Wrocław; Breslau) became part of the new establishment. The ties between Silesia and Poland weakened after the death of Polish King Boleslaw IV (Wrymouth) in 1138; his decision to divide his kingdom among his five sons brought turmoil and uncertainty to the entire country. In the region of Silesia, this led to further divisions and the establishment of several small principalities. Through many church foundations and monasteries, however, the region deepened in its Christian identity.

The growing significance of the Czech kingdom during the 13th and 14th centuries and the political instability of Poland at the time led the different Silesian dukes to align themselves with the Czech King. In an attempt to unify Poland and persuade the Czech King to renounce all rights to the Polish throne, King Kasimir the Great of Poland used Silesia as a negotiating tool. In 1335, the Polish king renounced his rights to Silesia, which subsequently became part of the Czech kingdom. During this time, the terms "Upper and Lower Silesia" were used to refer to the various parts of Silesia with "Upper Silesia" referring to the lands of the Opole-Racibórz (Oppeln-Ratibor) Duchy. Czech and Hungarian kings ruled Silesia until the death of Ludwik II Jagiellończyk in 1526. The death of this monarch brought Hungary, Czech, and Silesia under the Austrian rule of the Habsburg family according to terms of the international agreement of 1516. The Habsburgs ruled over all of Silesia until 1742. It was a time of great changes in land ownership and a time of the devastating Protestant-Catholic war (1618-48). The land, until now in the hands of the Silesian Piast, was bestowed on or sold into many noble families, and the war resulted in political instability and crises which greatly impoverished Silesia. In the struggle for European dominance at the time, alliances were made and broken through marriages, and European

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politics became almost a family affair. When Charles VI, a Habsburg who was the Archduke of Austria and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had no sons, his daughter Maria Theresa inherited the throne. For the King of Prussia, Frederick II, this was a pretext to invade Maria Theresa's country. In 1740, he invaded Silesia, which led to war between Austria and Prussia. In 1742, Frederick II incorporated Silesia without the principality of Cieszyn (Teschen; Těšín) into his kingdom. Under Prussian rule, a new chapter began in the history of Silesia. Many reforms were introduced in Prussia. In Silesia this led to development of agriculture and to industrialization and urbanization due to the abundance of natural resources. The administrative reform in 1816 created the Eastern Regency with the head office in Opole (Oppeln). This region encompassed lands lying east as far as Katowice (Kattowitz), Gliwice (Gleiwitz), and Bytom (Beuthen). The term "Upper Silesia" was also used to identify the region. On the educational front, elementary schooling became mandatory and consequently almost completely eliminated illiteracy. Classes were taught in German throughout the region and also in Polish in Upper Silesia. From the beautiful but little-known province of Austria-Hungary, Silesia became a powerful and economically important part of Prussia. This change, however, was not without sacrifice and pain. Various armies were crossing Silesia during the wars with Napoleon. Taxation became a big problem for the people, which led to social instability and revolution in 1848. Additionally, widespread famine caused an outbreak of cholera and typhoid fever that devastated the entire region. To escape the misery and find a better life, some left Silesia for different parts of Prussia while others found their way to North and South America. Texas in particular, due to the encouragement and the invitation of Fr. Leopold Moczygamba in the years 1854-1859, became a place of new opportunity and new life for many. After the war with France and the unification of Germany in 1871, Protestant Prussia became a dominant factor in the new German Reich. Silesia played a significant role in strengthening the new country; however, people in Upper Silesia, because of their Slavic roots and their affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church, were not allowed to fully participate in the benefits of the new country. Economically, they became better off, but their cultural life was impoverished especially due to the elimination of the Polish language from schools and public life. The Treaty of Versailles ended World War I and brought new countries onto the map of Europe, among them Poland and Czechoslovakia. Poland, which was partitioned between Prussia, Russia, and Austria for 123 years, received its independence; Czechoslovakia was created on the rubble of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. At the time, there were many questions surrounding Silesia. Subsequent political decisions of the European powers tied five districts of Silesia to Czechoslovakia. Three Silesian uprisings and a plebiscite in the disputed area of Upper Silesia resulted in the division of Upper Silesia between Poland and Germany in 1921. This division called by some "the Silesian Tragedy" created a scar on the Silesian soul, which was later deepened by the nationalistic propaganda that spread, both in Poland and in Germany.

World War II and the defeat of Germany left Silesia wounded and half-dead. Thousands of Silesians were killed, some as German soldiers, others as members of the armies fighting on the Polish side. The "liberation" of Silesia by the Red Army in 1945, which resulted in the appropriation of almost the entire historical Silesia to the Country of Poland, brought additional tragedy to the region in the form of

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destruction of many cities, killing innocent women and children, and a massive exodus of millions of those considered “German” to the West. It also brought to Silesia, Poles from the Eastern part of Poland that after 1945 became part of the Soviet Union. The communist ideology in post-World War II Poland contributed to uncontrolled industrialization and made Silesia one of the most polluted regions in Europe. The repressive policy of government toward the people and the hope for a better economic future in Germany resulted in legal and illegal exodus. At this time, hundreds of thousands of people left for Germany, keeping Silesia only in their minds and hearts. For those who stayed, the hardships continued but were overcome with the help of the church, which provided them a sense of freedom and helped in some degree to preserve the rich Silesian identity.

The election of John Paul II in 1978, his visits to Poland, and the Solidarity experience of 1980, brought new hope for Silesia and the entire continent. In 1990, the governments of unified Germany and the new free Poland, signed a document acknowledging the 1945 border between Poland and Germany as the permanent border between the two countries. In 1991, they signed an agreement of cooperation and friendship which presented Silesia hope for a better future with new opportunities to protect the rich Silesian identity. The unification of Europe, which in 2004, brought Poland together with Silesia into the new political reality, in a very powerful way helped Silesia and its citizens to once again acknowledge its multi-lingual culture, and to be proud of its rich multi-ethnic identity.

This brief history of Silesia clearly shows that the illusion maintained by the communist government and its supporters that the ‘history of Silesia stopped at the time of the Piast (14th century) and restarted after 1945’, is not a historical truth but just an illusion. Therefore, the rich, tumultuous and complicated history of the region of Silesia should always be considered when its cultural heritage and the identity of its people is being discussed or deliberated.

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