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The Upper Silesian plebiscite of 20 March 1921 - the course of voting

Both the Polish and German sides presented the plebiscite as their own success.





The plebiscite, set for 20 March 1921, was to finally resolve the conflict over where Upper Silesia belonged. Both sides looked forward to it hoping for victory. The optimistic mood among the Poles was boosted by the press, which wrote extensively about the upcoming annexation of Upper Silesia into the Polish state, constantly urging inhabitants of the region to cast their vote for Poland and to encourage the undecided and hesitant to head to the polls. The German press echoed these sentiments, of course encouraging people to vote to keep the region within the Reich. The intensive propaganda and anticipation of the upcoming resolution undoubtedly raised the overall tensions in the plebiscite area.

Everyone received two white cards...

Despite emotions flying high, the vote took place in a calm atmosphere. To maintain order and avoid conflict, the Inter-Allied Administrative and Plebiscite Commission issued an ordinance on 3 March, under which, starting on 9 March, it was prohibited under penalty of a fine or imprisonment, to carry out plebiscite agitation or to sell or distribute alcoholic beverages. Wojciech Korfanty also called for keeping the peace, appealing to the inhabitants to not let the other side provoke them and not to act rashly.

The vote lasted from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Before it began, members of electoral commissions were obliged to ensure that the urn was empty, after which they secured it with two locks, the keys to which were held by the commission chair and deputy chair. Every person eligible to vote, after providing their identification, received an envelope with a seal of the Inter-Allied Administrative and Plebiscite Commission along with two white ballot cards, labelled "Polska-Polen" and "Deutschland-Niemcy". Upper Silesians previously received identical cards from Polish and German trustees, which was intended to guard against possible fraud. After receiving such a "package", the voter went into a specially designated room, which took the form of a closed wooden booth, placed their chosen card into the

envelope, showed their identification again to confirm their right to vote, and then placed the ballot in the urn.

It is worth noting that so-called “emigrants” – people born in Upper Silesia but no longer residing there – received ballot cards in a different colour, which made it easy to tabulate their votes.

Meanwhile, the staff of the Polish plebiscite campaign continued to work at the Lomnitz Hotel. The results from individual municipalities were tracked and analysed in the Statistical Department, which also compared them to previously prepared estimates. Newspapers also asked their readers to send in the results of the vote.

Watch closely what the Germans are doing

It should be emphasised that before the plebiscite, many flyers appeared in the area, informing the inhabitants of Upper Silesia what to do in order to ensure the vote they cast remained valid. In fear of the opponent’s forgeries, the advice was to destroy unused ballot cards to prevent them from fraudulently being used again. The fear of forgeries was very visible and shared by both sides. The Polish Plebiscite Commissariat appealed to the Upper Silesians to closely observe the Germans’ actions. There was even an award set for people who detected any abuse in the process of preparing electoral lists or during

the voting itself. All irregularities were to be reported either to the Polish Plebiscite Commissariat or to the Polish Plebiscite Committees.

In the last hours before the vote, Upper Silesians were also alerted to fake ballot cards and warned against attempts to destroy the proper ones, which they had previously received from Polish trustees.

1 190 637 people (97.5% of those eligible) took part in the plebiscite, including 191,303 so-called “emigrants”. 479,365 (40.3%) votes were cast for Poland and 707,393 (59.7%) for Germany. Interestingly, the Germans, with a few exceptions, triumphed in the cities and won among the so-called “emigrants”, winning 95% of the votes in this group. However, according to the Treaty of Versailles, the results of the plebiscite were tabulated by municipalities.

Each of them was a separate voting district, which in practice meant that regardless of the number of voters, a city had the same significance as a village. In this case, the votes were split a little differently. In 44.7% of the municipalities, which were mainly rural, located east of the Oder line, the majority of the inhabitants voted in favour of incorporating Upper Silesia into Poland.

As a result, each side presented the plebiscite as their own success. Germany received the majority of all the votes, while Poland won in the eastern municipalities. This carried significant interpretative difficulties, with which the members of the Inter-Allier Administrative and Plebiscite Commission now had to deal with.

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