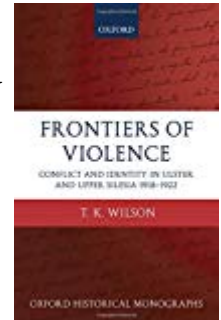


Timothy Wilson. *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia, 1918-1922.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 288 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-958371-3.



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In his study *Frontiers Of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia, 1918-1922*, T. K. Wilson strives to compare and contrast the events which took place in those areas at the beginning of the twentieth century. He mainly focuses on the differences as well as similarities between the societies in question. Both countries dealt with an exceptional bout of sectarian violence after the First World War which was not exclusively caused by its direct aftermath. While the troubles in Upper Silesia, which used to be part of the German empire, were a direct result of the Treaty of Versailles, life in Ulster had been difficult since the Irish people began to resent British rule and fight for their political independence, a battle in which Ulster was stuck in the middle from the beginning. Wilson's book aims to reveal the ways in which those two areas were comparable as well as different. In order to take a well-rounded look at both situations, the book deals with the concept of loyalism, which played an important role in both cases, as well as the seed of nationalism and its persistent growth

in Upper Silesia. Having considered the situation from as many different angles as possible, Wilson concludes that though the outbreaks of violence may have been alike, the initial situations were not and therefore must not be equated.

For this comparative study to be as accurate as possible, Wilson takes care to emphasize the difference between the two countries' backgrounds. To simply equate both Ulster and Upper Silesia due to the societies' segregation along confessional lines would be to overlook the complex factors that caused the violence. Firstly, Wilson stresses the boundary created by confessional differences in Ulster. In society's opinion, whether one was born and raised a Protestant or a Catholic served to immediately determine his political convictions as well. To attend a Protestant church automatically meant to support the British government and to oppose Irish attempts at independence from the Crown. Naturally, to be a Catholic then meant to support Irish Republicans and to detest the lasting connection to Great Britain. Since this categorization was anything but fluctu-

ating, the people in Ulster were relatively easily recognized as friends or foes, depending on where they attended church on Sundays, and could just as easily avoid getting mixed up with "the other side."

This clear distinction is something that Upper Silesia was completely lacking. While it is true that the population of Upper Silesia consisted of both Poles and Germans, who also tended to belong to separate religious confessions, they had mixed so thoroughly in the past that it was impossible to divide the province along lines of language or religion. Wilson emphasizes the human ability to master more than one language. The fact that Upper Silesia was a widely bilingual area that had also developed its own dialect, which was a mixture of German and Polish, makes a clear linguistic division impossible. Also, due to the long history of Upper Silesia as part of the German empire and the constant mixing of people of both Polish and German descent, nationality had lost its importance. Most people considered themselves neither Polish nor German, but Upper Silesian, and refused to take either side. Division along the lines of religion, which seemed to apply in Ulster, was also not apparent: while nearly all Upper Silesians with Polish roots were practicing Catholics, that did not mean that all those with German roots were Protestants. Logically, this difficulty in categorization does not only apply to Wilson's attempts at studying Upper Silesian society, but was experienced firsthand by the people who lived there in the early 1920s.

Wilson carefully examines the situations people faced in both Upper Silesia and Ulster during the time of the troubles. While he reaches the same conclusion as other scholars before, that violence was more brutal and less predictable in Upper Silesia, his explanations for this phenomenon vary, for he refuses to accept a simple hypothesis as truth. Did the British government care more for the people in Ulster than the German government did for those in Upper Silesia? Wil-

son's book accurately answers this question with a solid No. Both counties were basically left to their own devices after the First World War, partly because the governments were busy rebuilding what was left of their countries, partly because they were simply weary of discussing a question which most likely could not be answered satisfactorily. While in Ulster both Unionist and Nationalist militants fought for dominance and aimed to expel all those of different mind from certain local districts, the situation in Upper Silesia was complicated further by an impending plebiscite which was supposed to determine whether the province's political future lay under German or Polish rule. Militant groups attempted to convince voters to either vote for the one, or at least not vote for the other. Like the question of the primarily spoken language, this was a matter one could easily change his mind on. Though to the public eye, it seemed that those who had Polish ancestors wanted Upper Silesia to fall to Poland and vice versa, that was not entirely true, either.

Having pointed out the impossibility of neatly dividing Upper Silesia along a defined borderline, Wilson moves on to a detailed analysis of subgroups that marked society in both countries. Just as in Upper Silesia, where not all Catholics were of Polish descent and opposed to German rule, in Ulster, whose partitioning is often considered exceptionally clear, not all Catholics were Irish Republicans, or "Sinn Féiners," as the Irish militants were called. However, the simple division between Catholics and Protestants was what mattered most to both the people of Ulster as well as their military and paramilitary units who served only to defend their particular group. Ironically, Protestant militants were rarely tried for attacking or killing Catholics because they were believed to be acting for the greater good of society. The conviction that all evil came from "the others" was deeply rooted. Therefore, the military units on both sides justified their actions to the rest of the community in a quasi-legal way. Neither the IRA on the Catholic side nor the Protestants' Spe-

cial Units attempted to hide their ruthless killings, which added to the climate of terror that gripped the epicenters of fighting in Northern Ireland, especially because the government seemed simply not to care.

In this respect, the difference from Upper Silesia is striking. While in Ulster militants of either side were sure of their community's support, those in Upper Silesia worked hard to hide their deeds, which were exceedingly cruel. More often than not, it was unclear which side had committed a particular crime. Here as well, the government's failure to act and the lack of consequences is striking. Of course, since society was so thoroughly mixed, this may reflect both the people's and the police's inability to figure out whom to pursue for retribution.

Wilson concludes that in Upper Silesia, which he characterizes as an incredibly paranoid society, each side wanted to obliterate any trace of the other. Violence in Upper Silesia proved to be not only more ruthless, but also more widespread than in Ulster. In a way, this is ironic because aggressions in Ulster were not as one-sided as in Upper Silesia: both sides in Ulster were inclined to take an eye for an eye. Revenge played an important role there. Overall, the number of people killed in raids was smaller than in Upper Silesia, though, mainly because there were no mass killings.

As I read, Wilson's explanations struck me as increasingly tedious. Not only did he devote the entire first chapter to the clarification of the differences and similarities between the two countries, but he repeats them again and again. By the time he reached his conclusion, his point had been made four times already: the less clear a society's divisions are, the more vicious the struggles between them, mainly because of the impossibility of avoiding one another.

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