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Peter Polak-Springer. *Recovered Territory: A German-Polish Conflict over Land and Culture, 1919-1989.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2015. xxi + 280 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78238-887-6.

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What happens to the identity and culture of a region when its national borders change three times within that many decades? This question underpins Peter Polak-Springer's study of Upper Silesia in *Recovered Territory: A German-Polish Conflict over Land and Culture, 1918-1989*. Primarily focusing on the border shifts in 1922, 1939, and 1945, the book oscillates between Polish and German efforts to win over the nationally indifferent Upper Silesian population. By investigating "successive episodes of border redrawings during the heyday of war and nationalism in Europe from a (trans)national political [and] a local 'everyday life' perspective," Polak-Springer reveals how ideological clashes during this "territorial cold war" of the interwar period strengthened the Silesians' national indifference (p. 9). This reinforced regional identity, he contends, ultimately helped to stabilize the Silesian population amid warfare, border shifts, and oppressive regimes. In dialogue with recent works by James E. Bjork (*Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* [2008]), Hugo Service (*Germans to Poles: Communism, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War* [2013]), John J. Kulczycki (*Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1939-1951* [2016]), and Brendan Jeffrey Karch (*Nation and Loyalty in a German-Polish Borderland: Upper Silesia, 1848-1960* [2018]), Polak-Springer's book offers a valuable contribution to Central European history, nationalism and ethnicity studies, and borderlands scholarship. *Recovered Territories* not only demonstrates that national indifference animated interwar and postwar Upper Silesia but also showcases *how* German and Polish nationalizers learned from one other in their intensifying

efforts to quench this indifference—though it only grew stronger as a result.

Beginning with the 1919 resurrection of the Polish state and ending with the collapse of communism in 1989, the study proceeds chronologically with some overlapping time frames. Relying on a wide range of sources from German and Polish archives, Polak-Springer moves deftly between the two national perspectives while framing them in relation to one other. What emerges is a picture of competitive nationalism in which German and Polish leaders continually looked to the other's tactics and strategies during the interwar and postwar periods. For instance, in analyzing the "duel of borderland rallies," Polak-Springer shows how "the invented tradition of border spectacles" served to fuel and legitimize the idea of a "bleeding border" in Upper Silesia (pp. 64, 58). As German and Polish officials observed each other's methods from a distance and sought to outperform one another, they escalated the tension over Upper Silesia and legitimized their respective national claims to it. Polak-Springer highlights parallel and interrelated developments like this one throughout the monograph.

The first of the five chapters, "The Making of a Contested Borderland, 1871-1939," provides a concise yet thorough overview of Silesian history since the late 1700s, along with a summary of recent historiography. For the purposes of the book, the section on the 1921 plebiscite is particularly important. After the League of Nations mandated the vote to determine whether Silesia should belong to Germany or Poland, nationalists from both sides co-opted Silesian regionalism to secure

the vote. Once the Germans won the majority vote, the Silesian Uprising—an armed conflict that was supposedly a grassroots Polish movement—resulted in the partition of Upper Silesia. Polak-Springer contends that the plebiscite and partition led to the ensuing “cultural war” and “ended hope of accommodating an Upper Silesian collective,” or purely regional, “identity” (pp. 48, 31). Along with setting the stage for the remainder of the text, the first chapter offers a compact primer on Upper Silesia’s complex history. This chapter also includes an outline of the monograph’s key themes, including regionalism, nationalism, multilingualism, modernization, and industrialization.

In chapter 2, “A Transnational Tradition of Borderland Rallies, 1922-1934,” Polak-Springer examines the process by which both sides staged competing rallies to commemorate the 1921 plebiscite (in the German case) and the subsequent uprisings (in the Polish case). Through carefully staged rallies, which included visits from the countries’ respective presidents, nationalists “kept the idea of 1921 alive” (p. 57). The author makes clear that the nationalists’ ideas did not develop in a vacuum; rather, this evolution “of a ‘tradition’ of irredentist spectacles was an inherently *transnational process*, in which German and Poland influenced each other’s discourse and strategies” (p. 81, emphasis added). Silesian apathy further fueled the desire to observe and imitate, prompting more over-the-top measures, such as creating film projects, broadcasting radio programs, and incentivizing citizens from other parts of the country to attend the rallies. Although these efforts proved largely unsuccessful at winning Silesian support, Polak-Springer argues that this continual escalation of tactics produced an important, albeit unintended, consequence. By drumming up nationalist support, the authorities “played into the hands of the right-wing forces” and made reconciliation impossible (p. 77). Polak-Springer concludes that, even though Nazis (temporarily) ended the borderland rallies in 1934, these events had already established an irredentist “borderland rhetoric,” which “later became the bread and butter of the Sanacja, Nazi, and postwar Communist regimes” (p. 82).

Architects and urban planners emerge as the key actors in the third chapter, “Acculturating an Industrial Borderland, 1926-1939,” as both sides used building projects to emphasize their “superior stewardship” in what amounted to a wave of “competitive modernization” (p. 89). On the Polish side, the industrial city Katowice and its surrounding vicinity became the focus of these efforts. Through constructing a new airport, apart-

ment buildings, and improved rail and road networks, the Polish authorities sought to ensure Upper Silesia’s “successful integration with the [Polish] nation” (pp. 99-100). Architecture itself also contributed to this cultural war. For instance, the new Voivodeship Government Building in Katowice (VGB, pictured on p. 96) intentionally resembled a military bastion and thus “symboliz[e] the nationalist myth of Katowice as Poland’s frontier fortress city” (p. 96). The Germans employed a parallel strategy in their half of the industrial region, building the imposing Haus Oberschlesien in Gleiwitz (pictured on p. 107), Reich Memorial and one-hundred-thousand-seat amphitheater at the Mount of Saint Anne (pictured on p. 111), and the forty-meter-tall Borderland Tower in Ratibor (pictured on p. 112) to demonstrate German dominance over the landscape. With all these examples from both sides of the border, Polak-Springer convincingly demonstrates how German nationalists, Polish nationalists, and eventually Nazis deployed their own “cultural work” (*Kulturarbeit*) to legitimize an exclusive “right” to the Upper Silesian territory (p. 126).

Chapter 4, “Giving ‘Polish Silesia’ a ‘German’ Face, 1939-1945,” builds on this theme of symbolic dominance as Nazi occupiers leveraged strategies from the “territorial cold war” to strengthen their claim on the border region and its inhabitants. Academics and cultural experts (*Heimatkundler*) helped develop the “social engineering-oriented cultural politics” that underpinned the physical and ideological re-Germanization of Upper Silesian society and territory (p. 151). Polak-Springer shows, for instance, how celebrating architecture that harmonized with Nazi values (regardless of its national origins) and destroying “degenerate” structures, such as the modernist Silesian museum, the Nazis engaged in a “symbolic relabeling of the existing [Polish] landscape” (p. 154). The Nazis also followed a similar approach to “re-Germanizing” the population by glorifying all things German and vilifying all things Polish; however, Polak-Springer argues that this strategy failed. As he points out, these efforts to “win back German blood” ultimately “reinforced the contingent and material nature of local ties to the nation” and perpetuated the Upper Silesians’ national ambivalence (p. 174).

Chapter 5, “Recovering ‘Polish Silesia,’ 1945-1956,” highlights continuities in Nazi and postwar Polish approaches toward the Upper Silesians. Like the Nazis, Polish communists viewed “the Upper Silesian locals [as] ‘theirs,’ in this case, inherently ‘Polish’” (p. 186). The Poles also recognized the need for renationalization through “cultural (not population) politics” (p. 189).

Specifically, the Polish government “demonized all individuals of German heritage, as well as all cultural traits, relics, and behaviors”; banned the use of German; and mandated “re-Polonization” courses (p. 205). Polak-Springer contends that this strategy backfired; like under the Nazis, these policies pushed Upper Silesians “to a haven in ‘local solidarity’ and ‘local cultural distinctiveness’” (p. 219). Contact with relatives in West Germany in the 1950s made matters worse, as previously indifferent Upper Silesians gravitated increasingly toward a German identity.

The brief, fifteen-page epilogue carries the narrative to the present. Polak-Springer focuses on the continued role of irredentism during the Cold War, the emigration of “ethnic Germans” from Upper Silesia, and the post-1990 rise of the Silesian Independence Movement. The author ends his analysis by explaining the region’s reconciliatory position in Europe today, noting that “once a hotbed of transnational myths that long defined irreconcilable German and Polish national identities, [Upper Silesia] now plays a role as a bridge between two interwoven pasts” (p. 247). At long last, the “iconic borderland ... contested by two hostile nation-states” had transformed a Central European connecting point (p. 22).

Polak-Springer has written a highly readable, in-depth, and compact history of an iconic Central European borderland as well as a superb example of transnational scholarship. That said, the book’s strengths are also the source of its weakness. Compact as it is, the monograph has little space for stories and anecdotes about individual Upper Silesians. As a result, although

the author illuminates the personalities, attitudes, and actions of administrators, officials, and activists, the population itself remains largely absent. For instance, in chapter 5, we learn that Polish reassimilation policies “alienated” the Upper Silesians and that sixty-seven thousand locals claimed German nationality on a 1952 government survey, but we do not read about any individual people or their stories of resistance (p. 222). Although the residents’ absence does not detract from Polak-Springer’s overall thesis, their presence would have added to the story.

My second observation deals with its temporal scope. According to the title, the book looks at the years 1918 to 1989; however, the text essentially ends in 1953. In the epilogue, Polak-Springer covers the entire Cold War through Poland’s 2004 entry into the European Union. Thus, while the book technically does contain the years through 1989, the interwar period through 1953 are its primary focus. As a result, I find the dates in the title to be rather misleading, though I recognize this time frame likely reflects the publisher’s wishes more than the author’s intent. Similarly, the few translation inconsistencies and the occasional typo point more to editing mistakes than to writer oversights.

In conclusion, *Recovered Territory* is a valuable read for anyone seeking to understand how borderland cultures develop and change over time due to warfare, ethnic cleansing, and regime changes. Borderland scholars of Central Europe and elsewhere could benefit greatly from Polak-Springer’s transnational approach to a regional culture.

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