For the people of Poland, the Armistice of 11 November 1918 marked the demise of the three great European empires which had repeatedly partitioned their country, finally causing it to vanish from the map of Europe in 1795. As the war ended in Western Europe, Poles in the ex-Austrian and ex-Russian Polish territories were declaring an independent state and establishing a government in Warsaw. But, for the Polish people living in the area of the Prussian partition, and the Upper Silesians of Polish sentiment, continued recognition of German sovereignty over them in the Armistice terms appeared to place a barrier to any similar unilateral action. However, on Boxing Day 1918, a rebellion by Polish nationalists against the German authorities in Poznań escalated into full-scale guerrilla-style warfare throughout the Poznań district. When the fighting broke out in Poznań, the German authorities, fearing that it would spread to their valuable industrial districts in Upper Silesia, clamped down on all Polish nationalist activities. With the area under relatively firm military control and Europe in desperate need of the coal it produced, the landowning industrialists, manufacturers and German administrators in Silesia began to hope that, despite Upper Silesia’s apparently overwhelming Polish population, the Peace Conference could be persuaded to leave this important industrial region in Germany’s hands.

The following discussion examines the Polish Upper Silesians’ struggle to prevent this and find their place within the reborn Polish Republic. Major milestones in this struggle include three dramatic insurrections. The first of these occurred in August 1919, resulting from Germany’s success in having a plebiscite declared over all the Upper Silesian territory originally destined for direct handover to Poland. This was compounded by their attempts to intimidate the population before the arrival of the Inter-Allied Commission being sent to administer the territory, implement the plebiscite, and make a recommendation on the line of partition. The other two insurrections, in August 1920 and in May the following year, happened under the aegis of this body, but once again the actions were really directed at the German population. In August 1920 Poles living in urban centres were attacked by gangs of Germans. These elements believed
Warsaw had just fallen to the Red Army and Poland no longer existed. A defensive operation by Polish paramilitary units surprised the Germans and forced concessions both from them and the Inter-Allied Commission. As Polish Silesian military strength and confidence grew, with the Commission’s recommendation to the Peace Conference about to be made, a final insurrection was staged in May 1921. This aimed at demonstrating the Polish population’s resolve and right to the territory they claimed, which now appeared about to be sacrificed on the altar of Great Power expediency.

Poland’s claim to Upper Silesia rested upon Germany’s acceptance of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points as the basis for the November Armistice. The Peace Conference’s ethnographic map of Silesia was formulated using Prussia’s own census statistics of 1910. These had revealed that most of Upper Silesia was ‘inhabited by indisputably Polish populations’. And in a series of papers prepared by the Foreign Office for the Peace Conference, it was noted that

The question has been raised whether the coal-mining districts of Silesia should be included in the new state of Poland. As the inhabitants are without doubt mainly Polish there would seem no good reason for refusing their union with Poland.

But given the scale of reparations that the Allies were talking about imposing on Germany, it was obvious that the removal of the coal mines and their associated manufacturing base would hit the German economy hard. And despite the shock delivered to Germany’s governing classes by the sudden and unexpectedly disappointing outcome to the War, their confidence quickly recovered as the extent of the differences between the Allies on the final peace settlement began to be revealed. To almost all Germans, the idea of yielding to Poland land that had not previously been partitioned Polish territory became increasingly unacceptable. The German arguments for their retention of Upper Silesia began reaching the Allies through various routes. Almost all Germany’s objections were based on economic or historical grounds. She emphasized the danger to the European economy if the territory fell under Polish control and denied any past or present Polish connection with Upper Silesia.

Prussia had acquired its Silesian provinces from the Habsburg Empire by force of arms in 1742, only 30 years before the first Polish partition. Silesia and the Duchy of Cieszyn had fallen into Habsburg hands in 1526, when the Bohemian estates had elected Ferdinand I as their King. The Polish monarchy had renounced its overlordship of both territories in favour of Bohemia in 1335. In 1919, Germany cited Bohemia’s acquisition of the