The intellectual context and historical legacies

Researching into postwar problems connected to the national question in Polish Upper Silesia is difficult. The difficulty lies mainly in the very topicality of the issue and the moral and legal implications of what occurred in the aftermath of National Socialist rule. Research in this area must also be undertaken with an eye to Polish-German inter-state relations, and all who engage in this work are dependent on historiographies which have frequently been written from a nationalist point of view.

Two opposing parties who approached the field from different perspectives, emerged in relation to the question of what has occurred in Upper Silesia since 1945 and why. Polish researchers have always had access to archival records, but until the late 1980s could rarely write on the past objectively due to ideological constraints. On the other hand, German researchers had access to Polish monographs, but often appended them with frequently one-sided accounts by the *Vertriebene* (expellees) and postwar migrants to Germany.²

Research still tends to concentrate upon the most controversial period, i.e. the period of expulsions, which commenced immediately after the war and continued until 1950. Subsequent research, especially on the Polish side, has tended to concentrate on analysis of the Action Link family reunification/repatriation programme. A few exceptions to one side, German scholars following the precepts of the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law), tended to be oblivious to the transformations in identity which had been triggered off by the Polonizing policies of the Polish government. In a rather legalistic and purblind manner, they continued to presume that the indigenous population of Upper Silesia was
unambiguously German. Both parties persisted in their mutually exclusive approaches until 1989, when with the final collapse of Polish communism came the reappearance of Poland’s German minority, especially in Upper Silesia. Unfortunately, whereas German and Polish scholars are increasingly in agreement on post-1989 developments in this field, the aforementioned constraints continue to effect research into the period 1945–89. In addition after 1945, research concentrated mainly on Opole, i.e. western Upper Silesia. This legacy dictates that our observations will largely deal with the experiences of western Upper Silesia, but we will make reference to the eastern part of Upper Silesia, as well as Lower Silesia where possible and appropriate. Indeed, because the Polish government failed in its policies of assimilation throughout the whole of Silesia, this task is essential. Before dealing with what occurred in Upper Silesia, let us first mention events in Lower Silesia. Given that the population of Lower Silesia was almost exclusively German, the task that the incoming Polish administration set itself was in some ways more simple than that which confronted it in Upper Silesia.

Immediately after the war Lower Silesia along with other former Deutsche Ostgebiete incorporated into Poland, became somewhat multicultural. Alongside Poles lived the so-called ‘indubitable Germans’ who were not expelled as they were needed to man Lower Silesian factories and mines especially in the Walbrzych-Nowa Ruda industrial basin. The town of Walbrzych was especially mixed, as it contained both German and Jewish populations of some size, together with migrant Polish miners from France and Belgium, who sometimes spoke more French than Polish and returning servicemen who had fought for the Polish Government-in-Exile. After the thaw of 1956, the ‘indubitable Germans’ were allowed to organize themselves in German cultural societies, a privilege which remained forbidden to German-oriented Upper Silesians. In 1946 the German population of Lower Silesia amounted to 1,234,00, but by 1950 this had been reduced to perhaps as few as 200,000. After the implementation of the Action Link family reunification program in 1956, most Germans in Lower Silesia left for Germany and by 1961 only a few thousand remained.

The new inhabitants of the former Deutsche Ostgebiete were afraid that the Germans would one day return, recover their land and property, and once again leave the new inhabitants homeless and destitute. Within this context it is important to remember that the incoming Poles especially those from the kresy, were not only destitute, they were often barely literate and had also suffered extreme deprivation at the