

## Germans in Wrocław: “Ethnic minority” versus hybrid identity. Historical context and urban milieu

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After 1945, German Breslau was transformed into *Ur*-Polish Wrocław at Stalin’s behest. Most of the remaining prewar population was expelled, and a stable population of a few hundred with German ethnic background is estimated to have lived in the city since then. This paper is based on qualitative analysis of 30 oral history interviews from among the self-defined German minority. It pays close attention to historical context, urban milieu, and salient narratives of identity as shaping forces, which include the suppression of German culture under Communism, prevalent intermarriage between Germans and Poles, and the city’s qualified reinvention as “multicultural” after Polish independence in 1989. Together with the group’s relatively small numbers, these narratives play out in their hybrid approach to ethnicity, often invoking blended cultural practices or the ambiguous geographical status of the Silesian region, to avoid choosing between “national” antipodes of “German” and “Polish.” The results follow Rogers Brubaker’s insight into ethnicity as an essentializing category used to construct groups where individual self-perception may differ; and the concept of “national indifference,” previously applied to rural populations. It also suggests we might better approach circumscribed “minority” identities such as these, by seeing them as a form of “sub-culture.”

**Keywords:** ethnicity; identity; Germans; Poland; Wrocław; minority

### Introduction

A small but stable number of Germans, several hundred, have lived in Wrocław in western Poland since 1945.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on their identity, against the background of Wrocław’s transformation from a German to a Polish city under Communism, then as part of independent Poland after 1989. In other words, it considers a minority in a city where they were once the majority, under very specific, and shifting, conditions.

Being recognized as a national minority for Germans in Poland is important for practical as well as emotional reasons (Urban 1993, 113–129; Wittek 2008, 23): it confers transparent legal status and protection of rights, and has enabled structured financial support from both German and Polish sources.<sup>2</sup> These advantages are guaranteed in legislation including bilateral treaties (e.g. 1991),<sup>3</sup> and in Poland and Germany’s shared status as EU members since 2004. None of this is in question here. Yet from a purely definitional point of view, we might ask whether the structuring, top-down perspective of “(ethnic) minority” adequately accounts for the identity of the individuals involved, particularly in local contexts where

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historical and social circumstances mean the ethnic element to their identity is often highly qualified, of secondary importance to individuals, or else expressed as something hybrid. Taking a different approach may allow for a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of individual and group identity and a more nuanced attention of the specificity of history and place in discussions about ethnicity. It does so without challenging a person's right to identify with elements of their ethnic background of choosing.

The work is based both on secondary material and 30 oral history interviews across three generations, conducted in 2014.<sup>4</sup> Results are informed by Rogers Brubaker's insights into how ethnicity, while central to the definition of minorities by national governments or ethnopolitical entrepreneurs such as cultural, social, and religious associations, is just one of several factors behind "groupness" at the subjective level (Brubaker 2004, 8–10). It also means that I understand and use the terms "ethnic" and "ethnicity" in a dual sense. On the one hand, they describe the reified categories used by such external actors, where "ethnicity" is understood as coterminous with nationality: that is, being "German" means having an essentialized understanding of German ethnicity, typically based on documentable origins. On the other hand, the terms were historically open to reinterpretation by the state and remain so by individuals. In short, supposedly immutable ethnic categories hide complex realities and processes of (re-)classification. Another informative concept is national indifference, which challenges the idea that people automatically and necessarily think of themselves foremost in ethnicized national categories. This has been applied to populations outside cities (Stauter-Halsted 2004), but can also be relevant in a contemporary urban milieu.<sup>5</sup>

The paper begins by outlining the background through historiography, then bounding the group in question and outlining the methodology, before demonstrating various ways in which their identity as a "minority" is qualified: by region, through cultural practice, and by the city. I will show that while having universal potential, this relativizing of ethnicity by individuals seems especially pertinent in Wrocław today, since the city itself has given license to hybrid identities over recent years. In the closing section, I suggest how these qualified identities offer a rationale for closer historical and contextual attention in understanding "national minorities." In addition, I note that an experimental definition of "sub-culture" (Pyrah and Fellerer 2015) might also be used to better convey the dynamics of group identity in such cases.

### ***Historical background and research landscape***

Historians have covered in detail the deportations of Germans from Poland's so-called Recovered Territories (Cordell 2000; Kamusella 1999, 2007, 51–73; Ther and Siljak 2001). These were lands taken at Stalin's behest from pre-1945 Germany, in parallel with the incorporation of former Polish borderlands to the east into the USSR. Poland gained the lion's share of historic Silesia, both Lower and Upper parts (Figure 1). The coverage focuses on Upper Silesia, including the city of Opole, meaning that Lower Silesia and its capital, Wrocław, are often elided. Nevertheless, many aspects covered are pertinent for both, including how select categories of Germans (several thousand approximately, across the region) were allowed to stay, for instance to help run industrial plants. Others were reclassified as "Poles" through a process of "verification" into the 1950s, a clear demonstration of state expediency applied to supposedly immutable categories of ethnicity, designed to turn so-called autochthons into "ethnic Poles" (Service 2013). Polish sociologists in particular have considered the consequences for the German minority but do not focus on Wrocław.<sup>6</sup> Danuta Berlinska's research on Upper Silesia (1993, 1998,



Figure 1. Silesia on a map of Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic. Prussian Silesia, 1871, outlined in yellow; (Austrian) Silesia before the annexation by Prussia in 1740, outlined in cyan. Released under the GNU General Public License (Colour online).  
 Source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Silesia?uselang=de#/media/File:Silesia\\_\(Now\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Silesia?uselang=de#/media/File:Silesia_(Now).png) (Last accessed 24 August 2016.)

1999, 2004; also Śmiełkowska 1999) identifies a German-leaning spectrum of identities among those who were subject to policies like verification. Kurcz (1994, 1995) exposes the problem of defining and enumerating Germans with his low-end estimates, corroborated by the census of 2011, which put the German population of Poland at just 148,000. Of those, about 70% lived in the Opole region of Upper Silesia, a weighting that perhaps explains the lack of focus on Lower Silesia.

Where Wrocław more narrowly is concerned, there are excellent studies in social psychology, including work on Polish social attitudes to the city's suppressed or forgotten German heritage (Pabjan, forthcoming), but German ethnicity is not considered.<sup>7</sup> Recent histories of the city emerging since the 2000s across languages do not shy away from covering its transformation from German Breslau, with its negligible Polish population (c. 1%) and overwhelming majority of Germans and Jews (c. 97% and 2%), into *Ur-Polish* Wrocław.<sup>8</sup> As such, the complex strands of history, memory, and myth-making have not gone unexamined, but the city's Germans themselves after 1945 receive very short shrift. Two works, both reaching non-academic audiences in Poland, are emblematic: *Microcosm* by Davies and Moorhouse (2002), and Gregor Thum's *Uprooted* (2011). The former focuses on Wrocław's pathway through different dynastic and later national jurisdictions – Piast, (briefly) Habsburg, Prussian, and German, later Nazi, then Communist, and democratic Polish. The latter analyzes the mechanics of the city's reconstitution as Polish after 1945, including its altered toponymics and new population, drawn from various parts of pre- and postwar Poland. Thum's reasoning for eliding postwar Germans

is quantitative, describing the waves of depopulation and noting that many of those who had not left by the 1950s then did so thanks to the Family Reunification Policy (Thum 2001, 88–89). His main purpose is to analyze the propaganda directed at incoming Poles, to hammer home the message that this once Piast-dynasty-ruled city had simply “returned to Poland” (Thum 2001, 199). Certainly, these official channels were not friendly toward Germans (Kordas and Kudłaszyk 2000); the result was their disappearance from view under Communism due to fear and hyper-assimilation, as Davies and Moorhouse (2002, 435) note in passing.

These are useful starting points, but they do not tell the full story. As Thum (2011, 87–88) concedes and Ociepka (1992) describes, a German presence did remain, even as its connections to the prewar population diminished and its numbers were topped up by migrants from other parts of Silesia. Furthermore, quasi-official representation for Germans in Wrocław has persisted since the 1950s in the form of cultural associations, in particular, the precursor of today’s local branch of the *Deutsche Soziale und Kulturelle Gesellschaft* (DSKG) [German Social and Cultural Society], opened in 1957 and run continuously, with a hiatus after martial law was declared in 1981. Even in illegality, when unofficial fora called *Deutsche Freundeskreise* [German friendship circles] appeared, one was maintained as a focus for the community in Wrocław from 1986, before being reconstituted formally after Communism in 1991 as the DSKG, NTKS in Polish (Kurcz 1993; Lipman and Petrach 2007). Thum (2011, 88) does note the provision of church services, including for the small Protestant community from 1958, and that a string of dedicated Catholic priests made near-continuous provision for the community of that faith right up to the fall of Communism. However, the symbolic imports of these initiatives are in my view underestimated. They include the long stewardship of Catholic priest Pater Leisner (1983–2004), whose efforts on behalf of the city’s minority held symbolic capital well beyond the limits of size and geography, earning him Germany’s Order of Merit in 1997 (Arndt 2007). Also importantly, a permanent German consulate was established in the city in 1990, with a remit that includes, beyond standard consular affairs, the explicit task to “look after” the local minority.<sup>9</sup> All these elements point to the continued and structured existence of German communities and cultural life in Wrocław to the present day, as well as its rhetorical and symbolic importance to German actors – permitting a sample to be drawn, and in part, bounding them.

### ***Bounding the group and research methodology***

Three criteria were used to select interviewees, building on the definitional problematics outlined by Kurcz (1994, 9–32) – first, an ethnic component, following both official and subjective criteria. As already stated, I am not advocating a reified concept of “ethnicity,” instead understanding it as an interplay of “official” definitions on the one hand, and subjective interpretations used by interviewees on the other. It is how and why they use ethnic categories, or blend them, that is of salient interest, rather than any truth claim behind their use.

Respondents were initially recruited from the Wrocław DSKG, which uses an official measure of ethnicity as having one grandparent, and being able to document this fact. However, only interviewing this group excludes those who self-define as German but do not choose (or lack the necessary documentation) to be part of a formal grouping.<sup>10</sup> I therefore also recruited nonmembers, using the snowball technique (direct recommendation by initial respondents). In most cases, these were relatives from subsequent generations; a small number were their friends, or else other figures known among the community.

Secondly, a local basis was required: people needed to live either in Wrocław or close by, and if close by, should principally be active in their work or social and cultural lives there.<sup>11</sup>

Thirdly, respondents needed to display cultural affiliation to or affinity with Germany when prompted to do so through direct and indirect questioning. This category is inevitably looser, being revealed variously through cultural practice, institutional links, choosing friends of a similar ethnic background, attending German-language church services, having a strong interest in and identification with family roots and history, language learning, and so on. Although hard to measure objectively, it was necessary to help exclude those who might, for instance, have had a single German grandparent, but for whom German ethnicity was broadly irrelevant to their self-narrated identity. Such cases negate the point of my research into identities that, at least externally, are in part or whole constituted as “German.”

The methodology of this research is qualitative analysis of narratives about ethnicity and identity within and outside the group, using oral history. Since this work is not intended as sociology, and has ethnicity as its focus, I did not use formal controls for factors such as class, but did aim for a broad balance between genders, and not to over-represent people in official roles, for example, cultural or religious functionaries (no more than 15% of the sample). The interviews were semi-structured, comprising set questions for all participants to allow comparisons, while allowing them to elaborate or digress. Comprising 30 interviewees, this paper is not intended as quantitative. Rather, it aims to provide insights into wider identity dynamics through a snapshot of how individuals in a group bounded externally as the “German minority” define themselves subjectively in more variegated terms, in a specific urban milieu, and against historical and present-day circumscriptions of identity particular to that milieu, applied from the top down. Two further aspects suggest the sample’s validity, with due caution toward generalization: (1) patterns of response repeated themselves across the group, suggesting trends rather than “blips” (2) the character of the group, and differences between the generations, broadly reflect the historical schematics sketched in the previous section, as follows.

It was immediately clear that the Wrocław group differed from populations living in and around Opole in ethnic composition, marriage preferences, and generational stratification, highlighting the role of differing social and ethnopolitical contexts. Opole Germans have intermarried in much greater proportions, meaning that there are more numerous later generations of “fully German” children and grandchildren. Greater concentrations and infrastructure support a public identity as “German.” Opole city functions as a *de facto* capital of Poland’s German minority, as a national seat of the DSKG, and a center for political activism, sourcing electoral candidates and pressing for greater rights and visibility, such as dual-language signs (granted to areas with over 20% minorities in a 2005 law). None of the above applies to Wrocław, with its much lower concentration of Germans (below 1%), many of whom migrated there during the Communist period from other parts of Silesia, meaning they rarely represent a history of uninterrupted inter-generational continuity in the city. The resulting different but no less pertinent public identity politics here are the focus of my closing section.<sup>12</sup>

I defined the generations by age, but also by whether individuals had children belonging to another generational group across the interviews: this explains the slight overlap in categories between the first generation, age range 62–85, and the second, whose oldest member was 65 (that individual had a parent from the first generation who was interviewed). The eldest generation was the largest group overall, about half the total. They were all members of the DSKG (using an official definition of ethnicity), and therefore



the simplest to bound and recruit. At least superficially, this was the most self-consciously “German” of the groups, reflecting historical common sense. Most were widows who chose German when offered a choice of languages for the interview; almost all said they were fully German in ethnic terms (exception: one half-Pole, interview 2). With just two exceptions, all had married “ethnic Poles,”<sup>13</sup> a choice that when asked about, respondents described as typical, one mentioning unprompted the difference with common practice in Opole (interview 3).

The remaining groups were evenly split between the second generation, age range 39–65, and the third, ages 25–32. The second generation, again following expectations from Communist policy across Silesia, was strongly Polonized, almost all having one German parent and one Polish parent. This set displayed mixed knowledge of German, with most preferring to answer in Polish in a ratio of roughly 2:1. As had their parents, most took Polish partners and grew up with different forms of public pressure against them developing outward identities that were anything other than Polish. Until 1989, public discussion of Silesia’s prewar German history was limited and subject to ideological censure (while, in Upper Silesia, teaching the German language was fully prohibited); meanwhile, the educational system encouraged further Polonization. These factors all came up in interviewees’ responses. Some from the first and second generations brought up indirect social pressure, with two commenting that Poles used derogatory terms such as “Schwabka” or “Niemra” against them (interviews 4, 29) if they made linguistic lapses. Indeed, most of these respondents were candid about the difficulty of growing up with German background under Communism, saying their identity was mainly expressed in private or among trusted people with a similar profile.<sup>14</sup> Even at home in families, German was overwhelmingly a private language, with spousal knowledge of it mixed to poor (first generation; exception: interviewee 15 had a second husband who was German; 20 is unmarried), or nonexistent (second generation). In these general terms, therefore, my respondents confirm that outward assimilation was the pattern for these generations.

The third generation, brought up and schooled outside Communism, displayed a “return” to an awareness and manifestation of ethnic German roots, although most had just one self-declared “German” grandparent. Obvious influences are the more relaxed environment of post-Communist Poland, a reformed education system with (in theory) the lifting of historical taboos, EU membership from 2004, and the possibility of freer travel. Language learning was particularly prevalent, according to some respondents, for reasons of personal interest and family history (6, 12, 22). While economic motivations cannot wholly be discounted, these interviews took place a whole decade after the return of easier emigration, and a positive economic outlook for Poland. Indeed, “England” and English-language learning exerted a preferential pull on some.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, a good number of my respondents were born outside Wrocław, as per Thum’s observation about intra-Silesian migration.<sup>16</sup> However, in line with the selection criteria, all interviewees identified with and carried out their social and cultural lives principally in the city; only one intra-Silesian migrant (third generation) had lived there for less than five years. The remainder had either been born in or close to Wrocław, or had moved to the city in their formative years to study, then married and settled there.

### *Qualified categories: nation versus region, and the meaning of “Silesia(n)”*

Clearly, ethnicity helps bound the group externally. It allows us to define a sample of “Wrocław Germans,” partly with the help of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs like the DSKG;

it helps define generational patterns within the group through intermarriage. Turning to the interview results, however, these same patterns help explain why, subjectively, ethnic categories were broadly qualified by these respondents, including when ethno-national labels were applied to them by others in a seemingly essentializing manner.

Of course, subjective variation should occur in any group of size. In this case, the interest was in the detail of how, with patterns emerging that point the way toward features other than ethnicity *per se* that might bound the group. In order not to prejudice outcomes against ethnicity from the outset, I framed the purpose generally as research into the history and identity of the minority. The questions were of two kinds, to elicit conscious and unconscious self-definition.

Each interview began by establishing a respondent's age and asking them to describe their ethnic background in their own words. The next question was about identification with place, asking respondents to choose among preselected categories of belonging, in ranked order or combined if desired. These were construed along a sliding scale from international, national, regional via city, to the personal: Germany, Poland, Europe, Silesia, Wrocław, or "my house." The second was an open question: what is their homeland, *Heimat* (German) or (*mała*) *ojczyzna* (Polish). Remaining questions were about domestic traditions and rituals, covering cultural practice rather than more visible ethnic classifications (e.g. "how did / does your family celebrate Christmas, and what are the typical dishes?") and attitudes toward the city.

The first key observation is that while people initially reproduced ethnic labels ("German," "half-Polish," and so on), when it came to place and belonging, nations were not overwhelmingly popular choices, neither to the question of category identification, nor of *Heimat* / (*mała*) *ojczyzna*. Of 25 who answered the question about categories of identification, only four put "Germany" first (two from the first generation, two from the second). "Poland," meanwhile, was first choice for a single respondent from the third generation (12). Of the 28 answering on "homeland," none chose Germany. Three gave Poland and Germany equal weighting, one on *Heimat* (interview 19, second generation) and two on category preference (first generation interviewees 3, 18). Here, Poland was chosen in more predictable patterns, if not large overall numbers – and even these may be skewed by the terminology in Polish, which automatically suggests a link with nation (*ojczyzna* literally means "fatherland"), in contrast to the geographically unspecific *Heimat* (Applegate 1990; Zimmer 2013). Still, just one interviewee (2) of the first generation named Poland in this context; three among the second (5, 7, 23); and four among the third (10, 11, 12, 30). Even among the third generation, two responses were hedged, with Poland not being named initially until I asked for an explicit interpretation of their general answers, which were couched subjectively in terms of place: "the place in which I live;" "there where I live" (interviews 12, 10).

Primary identification was therefore *local*: variously defined, but eliding ethno-national categories. "My house" was first choice for three interviewees (first generation, 1; 6 and 30 from the third) and as with the answers about Poland just quoted, at least three from the first generation talked about *Heimat* very locally and subjectively, for example, "I live in the *Heimat*;" "where I was born," "my immediate surroundings" (interviews 17, 18, 28). The city of Wrocław/Breslau, a different form of local identification, was first choice for six respondents overall: three from the first generation who had been born there, two from the second, and one from the third (15, 20, 28; 7 and 23; 22). Unsurprisingly perhaps, those elder respondents also chose their birthplace in answer to the question about *Heimat*.<sup>17</sup> According to this preference for local identification, "Europe" was first choice for just one interviewee (2, first generation). It otherwise featured as a hyphenated

second choice to qualify other category answers by six respondents, most of these from the third generation.<sup>18</sup>

I will come to the relevance of city and locality in the next section, since it builds on a more fundamental tension between national and non-national categories favored by respondents: region, meaning Silesia. This merits closer scrutiny for its range of loaded meanings, which can retain ethno-nationalist connotations when suitably glossed, be ostensibly neutral and purely geographic, something in-between, or else *sui generis*. Among my group it refers either specifically or loosely to historic German Silesia; or it posits Silesia as defying the ethno-national antipodes of “Polish”/“German” altogether.

“Silesia” was the most popular first category of belonging for the first, “most German” generation: chosen by seven of interviewees (1, 4, 13, 17, 21, 25, 27) with eight giving it as their defined *Heimat* (3, 4, 13, 16, 21, 25, 27, 29). Two from the second generation chose it as *Heimat* (8, 26), one of them also making it first category choice owing (in her words) to being born outside Wrocław (8). This was also the reason given by the single respondent of the third generation naming Silesia as *Heimat* (11). One other from that set (22) mentioned Silesia in the answer on category, as part of a secondary identification with Lower Silesia for someone born and raised in the city. Again, these patterns might broadly be expected: weak national identifications that reflect mixed ethnic backgrounds, being born and raised in almost fully Polish, post-Communist Wrocław showing less affinity with Silesia than someone a generation older born outside the city.

However, the terminology needs unpacking. Of the six first-generation respondents who chose “Silesia” as their first category, four amended the choice to “German Silesia,” a place that ceased to exist in 1945, but in which several were born. The label purports to resolve an ambiguity, making a distinction both with Poles and the dialect-speaking Silesian population, which today has its own autonomy movement based in Katowice (Berlinska 1990; “Ruch autonomii Śląska” 2015).<sup>19</sup> Yet in practice, the categories are neither so sharply defined from without, nor are they perceived subjectively in unified terms. As Service has discussed, national indifference among Silesians was common, as encountered for example by the Polish Sociologist Stanisław Ossowski on visiting the region in 1945:

[...] most people were much more likely to identify themselves as “Silesians” (*Ślązacy*) or “locals” (*swojacy*) than “Germans” or “Poles.” They tended to be bilingual in the local Polish dialect and German and could move easily between the two languages, but did not view this as contradicting their feelings of distinction from “Germans.” (Service 2013, 177–178)

Under the Nazis, purely dialect-speaking “Silesians” encountered outside the boundaries of the Reich until 1945 were included on the *Volkliste*, used to classify those purported to have Germanic roots on a sliding scale of purity. However, their “German” character was ambiguous to many, reflected by their (mostly) third-grade position on the list, and their dialect was known popularly and pejoratively as “Wasserpölnisch” [Water Polish]. I have already mentioned that, after 1945, Communist Poland set about designating many Silesians as “autochthons” in an attempt to “verify” them as suitable postwar citizens; but Silesians were regarded by many as sympathetic to German culture and often treated as second-class, for example, being passed over for promotion. Indeed, Berlinska’s research shows that after decades of such engineering, “Silesians” by the 1990s displayed a spectrum of identifications, from Polish (least frequently) via independently “Silesian,” through to fully German (1993, 296). Today, therefore, the category of region potentially covers a range of, in some cases, elective (ethnic) affinities. This breadth has the potential to supersede or reconcile the ethno-national polarity of “Polish”/“German;” but it also means that some who categorize themselves as members of the “German minority” are from groups



containing members who may self-define or orient themselves in ethno-cultural terms very differently. In short, region highlights the inherent subjective potential of particular ethnic categories.

Some of this flexibility was on display among interviewees, six of whom declared ethnic roots in the dialect-speaking “Silesian” minority, while others said they spoke elements of it at home with parents but identified in ethnic terms as German. Among the latter was an interviewee from the eldest generation (4), who chose “Silesia” as her primary category of identification but qualified it as culturally German in historic terms, with examples from cooking, folk music, costumes, religion, and traditions at Easter and Christmas. According to her daughter (interview 5), she had been branded an “autochthon” by the Communist authorities, but after 1990, became heavily involved in minority associations, speaking mainly high German, appearing in and contributing to publications that construct her as an exemplar of the *German* minority, simply one with a regional inflection (Berendt 2012, 2013).<sup>20</sup> This is indubitably her choice and right; it also differed from three others in my group with “Silesian” background, who are no less externally bounded in today’s terms as “German.” These three identified primarily as *Silesian* in ethnic terms, although not for identical reasons. One from the second generation with parents who spoke the Silesian dialect to each other at home (8), is firmly cast through her professional function and language use as a member of the *German* minority. However, she was socialized in Communist Poland and expresses distaste for the question of whether she is Polish or German and the idea of choosing between them, instead stressing she is Silesian “without hesitation.” For this respondent, “Silesian” cancels out a false binary. Similar reasoning is expressed unambiguously by a member of the third generation (interview 10), who also identified as “Silesian.” His lineage is “three-quarters German” but with two “Silesian” dialect-speaking grandparents, and the following take on personal identity:

If they ask me, for example, if I’m a German, I laugh, and rather say that I’m a Silesian, because I think this better reflects the truth as it is, than if I were to say I’m a typical German, or if I were to say I’m just a Pole, because neither of those distinctions would be fully truthful. If I say that I’m a Silesian, well that’s, *sort of a mix*, isn’t it? That they [Silesians] had been always here. (emphasis added)

Of course, perceptions here matter more than a respondent’s accurate grasp of history; indeed, this response repeats the “autochthonic” mythology created under Communism. Nevertheless, it says much about the subjective potential of the label “Silesian,” particularly for a group constructed by some as the “German minority,” which outwardly displays and inwardly perceives elements of mixing, here expressed verbatim. “Silesian” appears to express a feeling of “in-betweenness” as a conscious neither-nor in the ethno-national choice of German/Polish, or a reconciling factor between them. As a third generation member (one German grandparent, one Polish, “two Silesians”) put it:

It would be difficult to distinguish precisely between Polish and German, because this Silesian history was definable in terms of how it was so Polish *and* German.

When choosing a primary category of belonging, he opts for Silesia. However, when asked about feelings toward Germany, he says that while having the passport, he consciously sides more with *Poland*. He says it happened when he learned of his two grandfathers’ different wartime experiences. The “Silesian” (I am reproducing the labels given by respondents) fought at Monte Cassino on the Polish side and became his hero, while the “German” was in the Wehrmacht: “I don’t feel especially [German], well ... [...] knowing the history [...] I prefer to feel more Polish than German, observing it ...”

This respondent's choice of identity countermands the assumption of ethnic bias as automatic, and shows how top-down ethnic categories can be overturned at the subjective level; his statement also underscores the inherent flexibility of identifying as "Silesian." We can speculate about influences on this decision, notably a (Polish) social, educational, cultural, and family environment; nevertheless, it happened among someone of the third (non-Communist) generation, despite "German" roots, and various manifestations of affiliation (passport, friendship circles, and language).

Among those not professing roots in the dialect-speaking Silesian minority, the region similarly offered a way out of the national binary. In some cases, it was felt to better reflect their lived experience, for example, place of birth and upbringing, as in several answers about *Heimat*. One of these stated simply that Silesia is his only real choice, because "Germany itself was always a foreign country" (interview 21). Interviewee 27 of the first generation put it more strongly still:

I feel absolutely like a Silesian, I'm connected to this region ... to describe it as a percentage ... I cannot feel absolutely like a German. I cannot say I feel absolutely like a Pole. But here's what it is: a German from Silesia.

One member of the second generation, born in the Cieszyn region of Silesia to "two ethnic Germans" made a similar observation: "[I] can't say 100% that I don't feel Polish, because I was born here," an in-betweenness reflected by his choice of category: his private home, but qualified: "because it's in Silesia."

This last answer shades into the other category of how "Silesia" functions for some, representing something uniquely its own. Seven interviewees (4, 7, 9, 13, 16, 20, 25) exemplified this through cuisine, naming such "typical" dishes as *modra kapusta*, *rolada*, *kluski śląskie*, and *Nudelsuppe*. One second-generation interviewee (5) of Polish-German parentage, who identified first with the personal category "my home" and secondarily "Silesia," went a step further, describing the region as "so European," for her meaning different cultural traditions can be practiced without controversy. The local region, cherished by some for its narrower historical link to German ethnicity and family, here reached a different extreme, telescoped to transnational significance.

Silesia, therefore, is both of itself and in-between: a non-nationally marked "homeland," a space in which categories are elided, and a primary category of belonging, all along a subjective scale, with various ethnic moorings. As such, it represents an important component in the definition of Wrocław's "German minority," itself a flexible category, deployed to suit people of varying self-identification.

### ***Layered identities, hybrid practices***

In addition to using region to avoid ethno-national boxes, another method used by my group was to layer, hedge, and hyphenate, as with the following description of her identity by a second-generation member with two German parents (interview 9):

That's difficult ... certainly Silesia with the component "German," and Poland in any case too, but with the component "Breslau," because my professional life has been here for 20 years, and that influences a person too. So, in popular terms, I'd say Silesian-German, and professionally, also German-Polish.

Here, layering consciously distinguishes among different identifying elements: origins, life experience, socialization, and working life. Similar considerations influence the qualified answers by some first-generation members with full German ethnicity: life experience

weakens any tendency to favor one national element, as in this example with more straightforwardly dual Polish/German layering:

Of course, I went to a Polish school, my husband was a Pole too, and I don't like it when Germans say bad things about Poles, but I also don't like it the other way around. It's like this: you're living in two dimensions. (interview 4)

Another first-generation interviewee (3), who gave her categories of choice as Germany and Poland equally, said it depended on the time and phase of her life. In the case of a half-German of the second generation (7) with "part Silesian-German origins" (one set of grandparents spoke a mixture of the Silesian dialect and high German), domestic and working milieu were given as reasons for a layered identity. His parents discouraged from a young age discussing German origins, and he claims that in his (blue collar) workplace "there's a lot of hostility toward Germany ... [discussing origins] would not be pretty." The result is another layered identity. The first category he identifies with is the city of Wrocław, and Poland second, but qualified "with great respect for things connected to Germanness," borne out by his active membership of the DSKG and plans to encourage his two young daughters (by a Polish wife) to learn German.

With subjective variance in mind, another half-German DSKG member of the second generation (interview 19) took precisely the opposite course, accentuating German elements of his self-narrated identity as part of a different, but no less layered formulation: "I feel I'm a German and beyond that that I'm a Wrocławian Silesian." Nevertheless, this formulation and his situation were exceptional in the group; he explained these choices by a connection to his mother, her difficult life in Communist Poland and honoring her legacy.

The third generation layered its responses more consistently, around categories of local place first, then Poland and Germany. One such interviewee (6), who identified firstly with place, went on to offer a variegated self-analysis: "I feel I'm a European; for sure I'm a Pole; I'm conscious that partly within me there is German [sic] and through my grandmother, albeit to some degree, I also feel a little bit German."

Of course, the simple fact of "layering" answers, with sometimes very different subjective contents, is insufficient on its own to bound the group, beyond having a consciously expressed, common ethnic element. However, together with the flexible function of region, cultural practice emerged as another feature suggesting *hybridity* as a linking component. Notably, the concept of hybridity was not mentioned directly to respondents, but it emerged spontaneously in descriptions of culinary and other rituals, as well as indirectly in attitudes toward ethnicity, through the layering of answers discussed.

Mixed marriages often predictably led to more hybrid domestic practices (e.g. interviews 2, 13, 20, 23, 27, 28). Among the many who noted overlapping influences were three from the first generation. One woman talked about how she supplemented the German setup by taking on the Polish Christmas Eve practices of having sacramental wafers (*opłatek*) that are broken and shared, and of keeping a space at the table free in case there is an unexpected arrival – according to her, simply because she liked the traditions (interview 20).<sup>21</sup> Another "ethnically half-German" interviewee (2) described her domestic Christmas as follows:

In the Polish tradition they give you 12 courses ... [in our home] the whole festive setup is German, but on the table there are 12 courses, according to recipes that are [short pause as she searches for the word] *mixed*, not necessarily Polish, because there are German dishes too, but 12 courses.

Another still described her culinary strategy of combining her husband's Polish family traditions from the east with her own, making meals composed of local dishes

(*Streuselkuchen*) and ones from his childhood over a single meal. Conscious blending was therefore prominent, but also unconscious: some respondents said they were not sure how to categorize traditions they followed, such as the Silesian and Polish practice of having carp at Christmas, knowing instinctively it is not typically German (interviews 20, 25); another talked about the difficulty of distinguishing between “German” and “Silesian” traditions, saying she simply followed what she knew from childhood (interview 4).

In the third generation, at least three raised their familiarity with German cultural practices through exposure at home by grandparents (interviews 6, 22, 30). In turn, a majority of first-generation respondents claimed having a Christmas tree and the Easter Bunny as definitively German domestic practices, with many saying that both traditions were unknown in Poland until recently: disputable, but a noteworthy perception. Some said that Polish friends in the past expressed surprise on finding out they had such alien practices (interview 4). However, the tendency to carry on such traditions in private and uncommented likely resulted in some respondents saying they could not distinguish “national” elements, seeing certain traditions as simply belonging to their family but not others (e.g. interview 6).

Layered, qualified identities, allied to mixed cultural practices, sometimes without consciously ethnicized explanations, underscores hybridity as a linking factor. Indeed, hybrid self-identification and cultural practice are to some extent a clear *consequence* of the ethnic patterns within this particular group; but not only. Place and context, that is, Wrocław in its historical incarnations from 1945 to the present, emerged as another important factor that both links and shapes these blended expressions of identity.

### *Licensed hybridity? City and place attachment*

I began by mentioning the conditions operating in Opole, which helps bound and define German identity as an “ethnic minority.” Public identity politics in Wrocław after 1989 shape ethnic consciousness differently.

After Communism, a new, official narrative of the city emerged that had a clear, even verbatim influence on certain answers. It concerns an official push to stress the city’s open, Western credentials, in part by acknowledging in broad brushstrokes its multi-layered history. The City Council thus depicts Wrocław through its official slogan, attributed to Pope John Paul II, as *miasto spotkań* (official translation: “the meeting place”). It is now widely visible across the center, adorning flower carts, signage, and tourist literature. The council’s website offers an account of the city’s historical periods including the years under German control, as does the City Museum.<sup>22</sup> This emphasis on successive layers of past cultural influence mirrors the account by Davies and Moorhouse in *Microcosm*, an official commission by Wrocław’s mayor. The city also promotes a “quarter of four temples” or zone of tolerance around the restored central synagogue; and Wrocław’s (successful) bid for joint European Capital of Culture in 2016 was from the outset at pains to stress the city’s “historical polysemantics” (Chmielewski and Zarzycki, n.d.)<sup>23</sup> with elements of the program thematizing the non-Polish past.<sup>24</sup> While based on factual engagement, this agenda may be promoting myths of a new kind, with the historical “multiculturalism” it invokes broad and unspecific, and taking place in a contemporary context that is, in Western European terms, monocultural. In addition, it does not contradict persistent older myths, for example, the popular overestimation of numbers coming from the former Polish city of Lwów (now Lviv in Ukraine; Thum 2011, 95).

Both of these unspecific mythologies, old and new, were repeated and reinforced by respondents, and are linked to having primarily local forms of identification. This chimes with findings by Polish psychologist Maria Lewicka about Poles in Wrocław being more

locally than nationally attached (2006, 109), showing a correlation between local “place attachment,” and weaker “higher-order” identifications (e.g. national or ethnic; 2008, 224). This first quotation is from a third-generation interviewee (6) who identifies first and foremost with “my place,” explaining his view of the city as follows:

For sure, Wrocław is for me overall a sort of mix of very many cultures, but German culture is within it I think the most visible [...] but there are also many people from the east of course, from Lviv, in today’s Ukraine.

This statement reinforces the old myth about Lviv, while repeating the new one to the point of clear exaggeration (“very many cultures”). Multiculturalism is also over-emphasized by interviewee 5, of the second generation, who likes Wrocław because it is “European” and, according to her, you can meet a lot of other peoples without being able to witness discrimination against them. Meanwhile, interviewee 12, third generation, identified with Wrocław because having grown up in what he claims was a more monocultural context, he felt it provided opportunities through its “openness” due to “the influx of many new people.” He went on to suggest that this has positive consequences for how people treat ethnic or national differences:

[Here] if someone says that I’m, I don’t know, a German, or a Ukrainian or let’s say some other nationality, that wouldn’t be some kind of hostility or some kind of rejection, but in fact, [their reaction would be] simply, “ah, that’s great.”

A similar sense of historical rather than contemporary “newness” inspired another third-generation respondent. Also being one-quarter German, he defined himself “a Pole, *but* from Wrocław,” with the qualification explained as feeling comfortable with mixed roots because “in Lower Silesia it’s in fact great in the sense that everything is so mixed, because the people from here in fact came from elsewhere.”

Clearly, such sentiments are also filtered by the observer’s age, social position, and profession: these third-generational examples are regularly in contact with other younger people through work and university circles. Yet, the sense of the city permitting the qualified identities described runs across the group, influenced by years of lived experience in a place that is *not* part of Germany, and socially constructed until the 1990s as Polish. Moreover, place attachment by its very nature, and attachment to the city in particular, are able to counter a pull toward ethnic “homeland.” *Heimat* in German is not nationally connoted, and for many respondents it remains the city. In turn, the city seems to purposely avoid imposing ethno-national conditions on being able to call it thus.

Notably, this also held true for first-generation respondents, including the first, whose primary category was her home. She transferred this subjectivity to the city itself, describing as more important to her than the representative monuments and buildings mentioned by others, “particular streets and districts.”<sup>25</sup> Interviewee 15, who is a rare, remaining *Breslauerin* born to two German parents, told a harrowing story of survival, poverty, and malnutrition in postwar Communist Wrocław; but having escaped to live abroad as an adult, she found the pull of her birthplace inescapable. Regardless of her ethnic identification with Germany, the city is and was her *Heimat*: “I’m on home turf, and that is important. Well, I prefer Germany, it’s cleaner and better than here [...] but this is my home. I take her as I find her.” Interviewee 27, while clear about being fully “German” in ethnic terms, also stressed lived experience as a qualifier. Choosing to answer in Polish, she freely conceded elements of a Polish identity: “of course, I’ve spent my whole life here, [and] Silesia belongs to Poland.” Albeit not referring specifically to Wrocław, another still gave a place-specific answer when asked about her attitude toward being a German in Poland: “We feel at home, even if it’s Poland, it’s our homeland” (interview 18). This



in turn reflects answers among this generation about feelings toward contemporary Germany: occasionally warm (those who visit regularly and have relatives there) but just as often neutral or even negative, presumably linked to their conscious choice to stay.

Overall, these responses fit a pattern of identification with place, which has two main effects: (1) to minimize or relativize ethnic categories and (2) to inform the very language used to frame personal identity. Even when not used verbatim, identification with the city reflected the sense of it being a sanctioned space where ethnically qualified or otherwise hybrid, hyphenated, or multiple forms of belonging are possible. Indeed, for those of the first or second generations not born in Wrocław, its “meeting place” motto suggests actively embracing newcomers. Thus, the wider story is of an interplay between a Silesia of origins, where people emphasize their rootedness in different ways, and a cosmopolitan city that embraces variegated identifications. Linking the two is the concept of hybridity: people’s life experiences, families, marriages, and cultural practices expressed as such. Silesia as a point of origin to many also symbolizes mixing; while Wrocław, the city, gives hybrid identity explicit license.

### **Conclusion: ‘sub-cultural’ identity?**

Identifying with place first and foremost, where national categories do not quite fit, is surely a condition afflicting many a minority. Nevertheless, in combination with the specifics of this case, it offers an important element to help bound the group across generations beyond stated or supposed ethnic kinship. Indeed, as Lewicka demonstrates, ethnicity is weakened as a first-order category when anchored specifically in local place. Moreover, the “place(s)” themselves here have ambiguous dimensions, frequently used to dissolve the national binary. We have seen how it works in the case of “Silesia;” similarly how for several respondents the milieu of Wrocław post-Communism neutralizes ethnic difference, albeit in its relative absence. Indeed, for historical and contextual reasons, their milieu appears to have given “Wrocław Germans” license to express hybrid forms of subjectively perceived identity, which may better reflect their patterns of marriage, cultural practice, and social conditions, in contrast to other German minority groups in Silesia operating under different conditions and with different characteristics.

With these features in mind, I would like, briefly, to propose another way of thinking of the case by way of conclusion. In a paper published in *Nations and Nationalism*, Pyrah and Fellerer (2015, 701–707) set out thoughts on how certain groups in East-Central Europe with more hybrid forms of identity than accounted for by the term “ethnic minority” might better be described using an experimental definition of the term “sub-culture.” The term’s use departs from its traditional definition referring mainly to subaltern or youth groups, for example, British punks; but it does take cues from these older theories in focusing on how groups can be bounded through common modes of expression. Applied to “minorities,” it allows us to understand how certain groups cohere beyond ethnic ties, where that lens may not be salient or fully adequate. Patterned features by which such “sub-cultures” are defined are found in hybrid expressions of classical ethno-nationalist categories, such as use of language and cultural practices; as well as in ways of framing history and personal identity. I have not applied the concept of “sub-culture” systematically in this paper, partly in order not to bias outcomes toward fulfilling the criteria. I would also not suggest that the case study would adequately prove a larger theory *in toto*. However, as I hope to have demonstrated, there are clearly patterns of response that may work toward fulfilling the experimental idea of being a “sub-culture” rather than purely an “ethnic minority,” suggesting the possible usefulness of the term for this group, whose hybrid

identity beyond ethno-national classifications has been the main finding of research. Patterns may be discerned as follows.

First, German language use bounds the group along generational lines: broad fluency in the first; mixed to poor in the second, increased uptake in the third. Polish was spoken fluently by all. Second, categorical expressions of identity, especially around ethnicity, are layered and qualified, in strikingly patterned ways. The primary lenses are regional, itself a flexible category, and local, relating to the city or a person's own home or space. This approach elides the ethno-national and bounds the group along alternate lines. Third, primary identification with place by definition weakens ethnic ties (Lewicka). Fourth, cultural practices are regularly mixed. I did not separate out social class, profession, gender, sexual orientation, or other variables, but ones that might more clearly relate to qualifying ethnic self-understanding.<sup>26</sup> Finally, I concluded that the post-Communist context of Wrocław both shapes and permits these hybrid and layered self-understandings among a group that might otherwise be bounded as an "ethnic minority." It leads us to qualify our understanding of them as a group: a product of particular historical circumstances, with a range of self-definitions, and, above all, an overriding sense of comfort in their place of residence, family background, whether classically "German" of the first generation or more "in-between" of the second and third.

Finally, this case study shines a spotlight on the importance of present and past micro-context when seeking to understand "minority" identities. For students of any comparable case, such questions are not only relevant to understanding overlooked corners of the historical record. The legacy of hybridity in subsequent generations, together with mixed identities, and how to account for ethnicity and cultural practice, is increasingly crucial. The Wrocław case may be relatively small in scale and benign in nature – German–Polish relations are after all good, cultural differences relatively slight, and ethnic difference visually indistinct – but the lesson of looking carefully at hybridity and context, as well as perhaps thinking outside our standard categories of "ethnic majority / minority," is increasingly relevant to modern, globalized societies where mobility and migration are the norm. In the context of German history, this case is a positive footnote in the story of German–Polish relations, as well as a hyper-local contribution to the wider story of migration, displacement, and integration. It shows the potential range of identification with both countries, and in that sense, is a quiet story of success in the face of an all-too-often exclusive or divisive ethnocentric gaze. In a Europe that all too often falls back to ethno-cultural particularism, this is surely good news.

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## Notes

1. Official statistics are hard to come by, partly due to the desired invisibility of Germans from the 1950s. This figure accords with sources used by Thum (2001), Davies and Moorhouse (2002), and Madajczyk (2000a, 2000b). The city's overall population rose from 315,000 to 622,000 in 1981, reaching 645,000 by 1991 (Thum 2001, 89). A 2015 estimate c. 630,000, see "UN Data" (2015).
2. The minority still occasionally insists on enhanced rights, for example, "Minderheiten wollen ihren EU-Kommissar haben" (2014). Background: Fleming (2002, 531–548).
3. For example, Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation. For more background, including official Polish definitions of the minority: Łodziński (2005).
4. Anonymous, with age/gender noted, recorded with informed consent, following Oral History Society guidelines and with ethical approval from the University of Oxford.
5. This paper is informed by awareness of the tendency to reify "identity;" theorizing it systematically is out of scope. See Brubaker and Cooper (2000).
6. These include the very recent work by Kurasz (2015), not seen when compiling or writing up this research. Without relevant coverage of identity: Ociepka (1992).
7. Various essays in Żuk and Pluta (2006), especially Maria Lewicka, "Dwa miasta – dwa mikro-kosmosy. Wrocław i Lwów w pamięci swoich mieszkańców," 100–133. Also, Lewicka (2008, 209–231). For a study of Polish attitudes to another previously German town: Mach (1998).
8. Figures from Lewicka (2008, 220).
9. Agenda and scope: "Deutsche Vertretung Polen" (2015).
10. Note that this also distinguishes my sample from Kurasz *op. cit.*, who interviewed only DSKG members. The DSKG has two membership categories, standard and supporter members. Standard need to document their German ethnicity, supporters do not. Combined total: around 1200. Source: DSKG (2015).
11. Three respondents (three generations of the same family) lived in Sobótka, all others in Wrocław.
12. For a summary of the 2007 Polish government report on minorities, including statistics see Raport (2015) and "Oberschlesisches Landesmuseum" (2015).
13. Interviews 20: unmarried, and 15: first husband was Polish-German, second German.
14. Totalling 19 responses, interviews 1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29.
15. Third-generation interviewees 22 and (by implication) 30; plus the late-born daughters of first-generation interviewee 25.
16. Of those not born in Wrocław, around half (16, mainly first generation), were born in other parts of Silesia: 1, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 18, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29. Three others were from close to Wrocław and from childhood had used the city as a main point of orientation and cultural life (5, 6, 9). Interviewee 12 was the only outlier, being from northern Poland (third generation, one German grandfather).
17. Interviews 15, 20, 24 (first generation); 13 (second; by implication); 22 (third).
18. Four of them, interviews 6, 12, 22, 30; interview 8, second generation; interviews 27 and 28, first generation.
19. The autonomy movement's aims and scope: <http://autonomia.pl> (last visited 26 September 2015).
20. Publications using Silesian dialect in the title, sponsored by the regional government and the EU "village programme," eliding national narrative(s).
21. Arndt (2007, 116) notes this was also taken on as a practice by German Catholic priests during the Communist period.
22. The museum's role in retelling the city's history is explored in a forthcoming doctoral thesis by Kretschmann (2015) at the Freie Universität Berlin.
23. Informal conversation with Zarzycki in 2014 about plans to address Wrocław's multiethnic past during his tenure as coordinator of international projects for the Capital of Culture project.
24. Conversations by the author with Chris Baldwin, an artistic director of the Wrocław 2016 European Capital of Culture. For details of his programme, see Baldwin (2005).
25. More typical answers were the Gothic Town Hall or Max Berg's Jahrhunderthalle [centennial hall], known today by simple translation into Polish (Hala Stulecia). Two from the second generation reflected their Communist-era upbringing by referring to it as the Hala Ludowa (people's hall) (interviews 7 and 23).
26. Religion does not serve sufficiently to bound the group in "sub-cultural" terms, as almost all said they were Catholic, some going to German Mass, others to Polish.

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