



French patrol on the streets of Katowice, March 20, 1921. Photo from the 2021 calendar of the Katowice branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (French National Library).

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Upper Silesia under the Allies' control

Author: **SEBASTIAN ROSENBAUM** 10.08.2023

Since February, 1920, to July, 1922, the Upper Silesia plebiscite territory was not in the hands of the German Regierungsbezirk Oppeln nor the Upper Silesian province.

In accordance with the Versailles Treaty, the Inter-Allied Governing and Plebiscite Commission of Upper Silesia held the authority over the region. This was a structure which mirrored the foreign policies of the victorious states - France, Great Britain and Italy.

As occupiers and allies

First, at the end of January, 1920, the French troops arrived. They were mainly Alpine Riflemen, elite units formed in the mountainous terrain. Their characteristic dark berets, similar to the Basque ones, and blue uniforms became the typical sight of the Upper Silesia landscape for months. Trains full of “the blue devils” rode into the stations which had just been abandoned by the Reichswehr units. This was the case i.e. in Zabrze, where the sounds of *Deutschland über alles* almost mixed with the *Marseillaise*.

The French were greeted with the grim faces of the Germans and the joyous Polish delegations. For the former, the newcomers were the occupiers, and even more than that, they were their mortal enemy, which they just fought to the death. For the latter, the French appeared (rightly) as allies, who were there to support them in the fight against the Germans. Tensions were palpable and the security police (*Sipo*) was not always capable of stopping violent clashes. These happened i.e. in Gliwice, where not only the Polish suffered some injuries, but also the French officers.



Arrival of the Inter-Allied Governing and Plebiscite Commission to Katowice. The delegation is greeted at the railway station. Katowice Archdiocese Archives. Photo from the 2020 calendar of the Katowice branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (French National Library).



Employees of the Polish Plebiscite Commissariat with Commissioner Wojciech Korfanty. Photo from the 2020 calendar of the Katowice branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (French National Library).

The French

The first French units reached Opole on January 31, 1920. The contingent, counting 9,375 soldiers, was led by Gen. Paul Marie Joseph Sauvages marquis de Brantes. This 56-year-old officer, who graduated from the famous St. Cyr Military Academy and fought at the Battle of Verdun at the end of the war, remained at the position of the French army commander until the very end. Until February 4, he was the highest authority in the plebiscite territory. On that day, he handed over the command to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Upper Silesia, Gen. Jules Gratier. Gratier, an experienced officer, spent years fighting in the colonies and in the First World War, where he led the 46th Riflemen Division which later became the main part of the French troops in Upper Silesia. The firmly pro-Polish, anti-German and impulsive Gratier had to leave his position in July, 1921, after going into a conflict with the British.

The Italians and the British

The French were not the only ones who made up the Allied military contingent. Already on February 14, 1920, the first Italian troops made their way into the region, led by Col. Filippo Salvioni, from Milano, who spent the last days of the war in Austrian captivity. While the French command was located in Gliwice, the Italians set their camp in the south of the province, in Koźle and Raciborz. There were around four thousand of them, and

they also mainly consisted of Alpine Riflemen.

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Last, but not least, there were the British. Although initially, similar to their allies, they were supposed to send their troops for the entire duration of the allied mission in the region, they first arrived to Upper Silesia as late as March 6, 1921, so just before the plebiscite. They settled in the northern part of the region, from Lubliniec to Kluczbork. Not many of them came, only 2,200 soldiers led by Col. Arthur Wauchope, a 47-year-old with rich war experience, whose time was yet to come. His most important stationing at the time had been the position of High Commissioner for Palestine (1931-1938), when he decidedly supported the Zionists against the Arabs.

The British left right after the plebiscite. They came back later during the 3rd Silesian Uprising, at the end of May, 1921, but this time with nine battalions, nearly 4,700 soldiers. They were led by Canadian Gen. William Giffard Heneker. This time they stayed until the end of the Allies' presence in the region.



French mountain troops marching

through Opole. Photo from the 2020 calendar of the Katowice branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (French National Library).



Upper Silesia police patrol during a road check. Photo from the 2020 calendar of the Katowice branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (French National Library).

The Inter-Allied Commission and its leader

The Allied Forces were only the instrument of maintaining order. The main part of the Allies' presence in Upper Silesia was the aforementioned Inter-Allied Commission. It resembled a government, with its ministries and administration, local governments (poviat controllers) and its own judiciary. Its headquarters was located in Opole, at the non-existent today building of the Regierungsbezirk Oppeln presidium. The goal of the Allies' mission was to make sure that the plebiscite would be conducted fairly, without any voting malpractices.

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