

# A “Common Enterprise”? The Role of Utility Infrastructure in the Divided City of Teschen, 1920–1938

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On September 30, 1932, municipal representatives of the once united city of Teschen, now Polish Cieszyn and Czechoslovak Český Těšín, gathered in front of their shared gasworks to celebrate a half-century of its existence. Josef Koždoň, the mayor of Český Těšín where the gasworks happened to be located, lauded its exemplary work in providing the city with light. He also stressed its importance for the municipal economy. His counterpart, Cieszyn’s major, Władysław Michejda, proclaimed: “This gasworks is a common enterprise, because at its inception both cities stood as an undivided city of Teschen. We see the invitation [to the anniversary ceremony] as more than an act of politeness and a proof of the joint work of the two towns. Indeed, in all questions of the future, we hope that one Teschen will always help the other.”<sup>1</sup> Standing in front of his fellow urbanites, Michejda expressed hope for ongoing inter-municipal cross-border cooperation. Two years later, this idyll seemingly ended. On the morning of February 25, 1934, Michejda famously addressed hundreds of Polish patriots gathered on Cieszyn’s main square. Portraying Czechs as ruthless occupiers of *Zaolzie*, a contested region inhabited by Polish-speakers but controlled by the Czechoslovak Republic, he called for border revision along ethnic lines. Moreover, Michejda vowed that he would not “abandon the lands of [their] ancestors.”<sup>2</sup> Energized by the speech, several hundred spectators moved to a nearby hill to sing patriotic songs and point their swords toward Český Těšín.

Whereas the first event has been ignored by the existing historiography, the second has been unduly amplified. Indeed, depicting the urban center of Teschen Silesia on the brink of violence, Michejda’s speech from February 1934 is portrayed as indicative of the region’s interwar history. Yet, nothing serious happened. The boisterous gathering of locals and visitors alike dispersed without major incidents, and the gas produced over the border continued to flow into the Polish town until the city’s reunification with Poland

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1. Władysław Michejda quoted in the Municipal Assembly on September 30, 1932, in Státní okresní archiv Karviná (SOAK), Fond Archiv Města Český Těšín (AMČT), inventární (inv.) číslo (č.) 56 (Sitzungsprotokolle der Stadtvertretung, 1932).

2. Władysław Michejda, *Nie rzucim ziemi skąd nasz ród* (Cieszyn, 1934), 12–13.

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following the Munich Agreement in 1938.<sup>3</sup> By examining the utility infrastructure of not only gas, but also electricity and water in the divided city of Teschen, this article shifts the focus of historical inquiry from nationalist discourses of animosity and upheaval to local stabilization and cross-border cooperation. Consequently, it demonstrates that local interests and economic pragmatism often trumped national antagonisms even in the face of pressures from the central government.

The city emerged as a center of the Duchy of Teschen. In 1653, it became part of the Habsburg Monarchy. In 1849, following a constitutional reform, it was the seat of the district authority and local court. While mining and metallurgical production started to dominate other towns in Austrian Silesia, Teschen's industry evolved around furniture manufacturing, printing, and construction. It could not rival the crownland's capital Troppau/Opava and fell behind as economic center. Still, the city operated as commerce hub and the Teschener Chamber continued to fulfil important administrative functions. The social composition mirrored this specialization. Out of the 22,500 men and women living in Teschen in 1910, 27% of them worked in trade, 34% in industry and almost 37% in administration, military, and independent professions, significantly more than in other towns of the region.<sup>4</sup> World War I spared the city most of its horrors—its daily life at the foothills of the Beskid Mountains disrupted only by the bustle of the Supreme Command of the Austro-Hungarian Armed Forces that operated from Teschen between 1914 and 1916.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, Polish Cieszyn and Czechoslovak Český Těšín originated in violence. Following the dissolution of Austro-Hungarian empire, Teschen Silesia became a point of contention between Poland and Czechoslovakia. While Poles claimed the Upper Silesian territory of approximately 800 square miles on ethnic grounds, Czechoslovaks perceived the railway junction connecting its Czech lands with Slovakia as vital to their economic and political survival. The rich coal reserves in the area naturally appealed to both sides. During the weeklong Polish-Czechoslovak War in January 1919, Czechoslovakia captured most of Teschen Silesia, including its picturesque urban center inhabited by not only Polish and German-speakers, but also by Czech-speakers, Jews, and self-proclaimed Silesians.<sup>6</sup> Although Polish soldiers surrendered

3. According to Czechoslovak police files, some 1,500 individuals participated. See report from February 26, 1934, in *Zemský archiv v Opavě (ZAO), Fond Policejní ředitelství v Moravské Ostravě (PŘMO), karton (k.) 357, signatura (sign.) 1/46*.

4. The remaining 2% worked in agriculture. See *Berufsstatistik nach den Ergebnissen der Volkszählung vom 31. December 1910 in Österreich*, vol. 3, no. 9 (Vienna, 1916), 11.

5. See Idzi Panic, ed., *Dzieje Śląska Cieszyńskiego od zarania do czasów współczesnych: Śląsk Cieszyński w okresie od Wiosny Ludów do I wojny światowej*, vol. 5 (Cieszyn, 2013).

6. According to the last Austro-Hungarian census of 1910, more Polish- than Czech-speakers lived in the region. The majority in Teschen, 61.5%, indicated German as “everyday language,” 31.7% Polish, and 6.6% Czech. The city's most represented religious groups were Roman Catholics (67.3%), followed by Protestants (23%), and Jews (10%). After WWI, the number of self-proclaimed Germans decreased due to out-migration and the fact that many bilingual individuals now declared themselves as members of the respective new nation-states. The Czechoslovak census of 1921 shows that in Český Těšín “Germans” still dominated, but in Cieszyn “Poles” already outnumbered “Germans.” In

the town to minimize casualties, the Czechoslovak army introduced what many perceived as “brutal military rule” characterized by religious suppression and arbitrary arrests.<sup>7</sup> Still, the Czechoslovak grip on Teschen did not last; troops withdrew on February 24, 1919 at the behest of the Allies. The ensuing limbo engendered crime and paramilitary violence in the region. While the local population pillaged and settled personal scores, secret Polish and Czechoslovak organizations crossed the newly established demarcation line to commit acts of terrorism.<sup>8</sup> In early 1920, an Allied Commission arrived to organize a plebiscite and faced violent obstruction.<sup>9</sup> Later, in May, the Commission declared martial law but abandoned the mission shortly after in favor of arbitration. Finally, in July 1920, the Allies discussed the issue at the Spa Conference in Belgium. They decided to split the region between the two new nation-states, severing the city of Teschen in the process and thus creating the Polish city of Cieszyn and the Czech Český Těšín.<sup>10</sup>

Considering the multiethnic nature of the town, the memories of the recent, nationally conditioned conflict, and the significant number of Polish-speakers left in Czechoslovakia, Teschen seemed destined to become a hotbed of ethnic violence. Yet, while other parts in east central Europe continued to be steeped in bloodshed, the divided city began a period of stabilization, boundary delineation, and of inter-municipal, cross-border cooperation.<sup>11</sup> The municipal administrators of Cieszyn and Český Těšín quickly realized they needed one another to provide their constituents with basic utilities such as gas, electricity, and fresh water. Quite literally, while the Allies severed Teschen in half, the pipes and electrical wires that connected the city remained as they were: unified and functioning.

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1930, Český Těšín was 45.4% Czech, 33.5% German and 15.0% Polish. In 1931, Cieszyn was 82.7% Polish, while the rest consisted mostly of Germans. Silesian nationality further complicated these census categories. As a distinct regional minority, Silesians typically spoke the transitional Teschen dialect referred as *po naszymu* (“in our own way”). It was included as national category in the 1921 and 1930 censuses with a required choice of an attribute (Silesian-Czech/Pole/German). The statistics offer even less reliable data than usual. See Dan Gawrecki, *Jazyk a národnost ve sčítání lidu na Těšínsku v letech 1880–1930* (Český Těšín, 2017).

7. “Die Besetzung von Teschen,” *Silesia*, January 29, 1919, 1.

8. *Tajna Organizacja Wojskowa* (Secret Military Organization), *Konfederacja Śląska* (Silesian Confederation) in Poland, and *Občanská obrana* (Civil Defense) in Czechoslovakia. See Krzysztof Nowak, “Polsko-czechosłowacki konflikt graniczny (1918–1920),” in Idzi Panic, ed., *Dzieje Śląska Cieszyńskiego od zarania do czasów współczesnych: Śląsk Cieszyński w latach 1918–1945*, vol. 6 (Cieszyn 2015), 58–65.

9. Isabelle Davion, “Teschen and its Impossible Plebiscite: Can the Genie be Put Back in the Bottle?,” in Marcus M. Payk and Roberta Pergher, eds., *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War* (Bloomington, 2019), 38–58.

10. The decision left the larger portion of the region, including its coalmines, to Czechoslovakia. See Benjamin Conrad, *Umkämpfte Grenzen, umkämpfte Bevölkerung: Die Entstehung der Staatsgrenzen der Zweiten Polnischen Republik 1918–1923* (Stuttgart, 2014), 186–90.

11. Poland was still fighting the Soviets in the northeast, and violent plebiscite agitation hit Prussian Silesia in the northwest. For more examples, consult Jochen Böhrer, Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera, eds., *In the Shadow of the Great War: Physical Violence in East-Central Europe, 1917–1923* (New York, 2021).

In focusing on stabilization after political upheaval, I seek to challenge the common historiographical image of interwar east central Europe as a site of ethnic conflict. Many recently published studies examining the continuation of violence following WWI obscure the relative peace that characterized regions such as Teschen Silesia for most of this period.<sup>12</sup> Highlighting national rivalry, localized literature likewise adheres to this trend. Indeed, the plebiscite period with its paramilitary activity and aggressive nationalist rhetoric has captivated scholarly interest.<sup>13</sup> The same can be said for the time after the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact of 1934, which registered renewed intensification of nationalist fervor culminating in the Polish seizure of Teschen Silesia after the Munich Agreement. However, by focusing on moments of violence, these works often succumb to teleological arguments that present a direct road from the 1919 Polish-Czechoslovak War to the events of October 1938.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it forces scholars to recast the complex nexus of local interests through a nationalist prism, and thus present a highly reductionist image of the borderland's complexity.<sup>15</sup>

This article builds on recent scholarship that traces the afterlife of imperial structures. It shows that east central Europe between the two World Wars cannot be explained through nationalist discourses alone.<sup>16</sup> Works centering on municipalities demonstrate how the wide-reaching municipal autonomy of Habsburg cities not only stimulated the creation of particular urban identities but also buttressed a tradition of local problem solving, both of which were carried over into the interwar period.<sup>17</sup> This scholarship has also emphasized

12. See Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, "Vectors of Violence: Paramilitarism in Europe after the Great War, 1917–1923," *The Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 3 (September 2011): 489–512; Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, *Nasza Wojna*, vol. 2, *Narody, 1917–1923* (Warsaw, 2018); Michal Frankl and Miloslav Szabó, *Budování státu bez antisemitismu?: Násilí, diskurz loajality a vznik Československa* (Prague, 2016).

13. Ellen L. Paul, "Czech Teschen Silesia and the Controversial Czechoslovak Census of 1921," *The Polish Review* 43, no. 2 (1998): 161–71; Marek K. Kamiński, *Konflikt polsko-czeski 1918–1921* (Warsaw, 2003); Felix Buttin, "The Polish-Czechoslovak Conflict over Teschen Silesia (1918–1920): A Case Study," *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs* 25 (Winter 2005): 63–78.

14. Broader overviews of the interwar period nestle these arguments in narratives that deliberately skip over the peaceful years. See Jerzy Wiechowski, *Spór o Zaolzie, 1918–1920 i 1938* (Warsaw, 1990); Edward Długajczyk, *Tajny front na granicy cieszyńskiej: Wywiad i dywersja w latach 1919–1939* (Katowice, 1993); Jiří Bílek, *Kyselá těšínská jablčička: Československo-polské konflikty o Těšínsko 1919, 1938, 1945*, 2nd ed. (Prague, 2018). Others rely on sources that naturally highlight conflict, such as nationalist press or police reports. See, for example, Dan Gawrecki, *Politické a národnostní poměry v Těšínském Slezsku 1918–1938* (Český Těšín, 1999).

15. Notable exceptions include Kevin Hannan, *Borders of Language and Identity in Teschen Silesia* (New York, 1996).

16. See for example Dominique K. Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2020); Gábor Egry, "Navigating the Straits: Changing Borders, Changing Rules and Practices of Ethnicity and Loyalty in Romania after 1918," *The Hungarian Historical Review* 2, no. 3 (2013): 449–76; Natasha Wheatley, "Central Europe as Ground Zero of the New International Order," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 900–11.

17. For legal dimensions of local government see Artur Warzocha, "Samorząd terytorialny w II RP—w drodze ku własnemu państwu," *Samorząd miejski i jego elity*, a

the role of personal continuities. Administrators who started their careers within imperial and pre-war structures often returned to their work. They continued to shape political reality whether they identified with the newly emerged nation-state or not.<sup>18</sup>

Many scholars of borderlands who explore this relationship between the state and local leaders on the periphery highlight the limits of centralization and nationalization. Rather than portraying local leaders as obedient servants of national governments, they depict them as active participants in borderland politics.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, they demonstrate the pervasiveness of local, regional, and religious identities. Some even point to feelings of national indifference.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, this latter idea cannot be applied to most, if not all, administrative elites in Cieszyn and Český Těšín. Operating in a political environment where parties created blocks according to national rather than merely economic interests, leaders simply had to pick a side. They were neither mindless perpetrators of violence, nor victims of imported nationalisms. Yet, nationality was often secondary to municipal interests. Local administrators on both sides of the border were active agents who appropriated and pushed back against national regulations and centrally issued security policies to further their local agendas, especially where their constituents' basic interests were concerned.

The intricate fate of utility infrastructure in Cieszyn and Český Těšín illustrates this pragmatic behavior. Whereas large technical systems of everyday life tend to be seen as stable and permanent, scholarly literature shows that these structures are often reconfigured to match current political boundaries.<sup>21</sup> Studies examining the processes of reorientation of such systems in

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special issue of *Res Politicae* (2012): 351–63; Karel Schelle, *Organizace československého státu v meziválečném období (1918–1938)* (Prague, 2006). Examples of municipal transition offer Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton, 2002); Johannes Florian Kontny, “Herrschaftssicherung an der Peripherie? Die Transformation der städtischen Selbstverwaltung in Eupen und Znojmo/Znaïm nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg (1918–1922),” *Bohemia* 56, no. 2 (2016): 381–405. For an excellent study of the regional level see Martin Klečacký, *Poslušný vládce okresu: Okresní hejtman a proměny státní moci v Čechách v letech 1868–1938* (Prague, 2021).

18. See Ivan Šedivý, “K otázce kontinuity nositelů státní moci: Jmenování vedoucích úředníků v kompetenci ministerstva vnitra v letech 1918–1921,” in Jan Hájek and Dagmar Hájková et al., eds., *Moc, vliv a autorita v procesu vzniku a utváření meziválečné ČSR (1918–1921)* (Prague, 2008), 184–97. See also selected articles in Paul Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States After 1918* (New York, 2019).

19. Peter Sahllins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1989); Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (Oxford, 2011); Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (New York, 2021).

20. James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor, 2008); Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, 2008).

21. Jane Summerton, “Introductory Essay: The Systems Approach to Technological Change,” in Jane Summerton, ed., *Changing Large Technical Systems* (Boulder, 1994), 1.

cities divided after WWII, such as Berlin or Nicosia, demonstrate this point.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, utility infrastructure can also serve as a site conducive to cooperation, especially when the system in question is largely apolitical and when its replication is unaffordable.<sup>23</sup>

Standing up for their towns, rather than their states throughout most of the interwar period, I argue that local leaders on the periphery acted as administrators first, and nationalists second. Moreover, the careful reading of Cieszyn and Český Těšín's municipal records, as well as local newspapers, suggests that inter-municipal cross-border cooperation was not merely an unwelcome product of necessity, but rather the result of political pragmatism and economic convenience that often intersected with local and personal interests. This does not mean that politics were entirely absent. Utility networks were a subtle yet visible remnant of the imperial era. This made them not only a national security risk due to the possibility of foreign sabotage, but also a symbolic reminder of the malleability of borders—issues the nation-states naturally attempted to prevent or downplay. Consequently, they were also a site where local concerns clashed with national ones. As small-town officials struggled to make do with meager municipal budgets and ensure the comfortable life of their constituents, they often turned against their new nation-states.

### Urban Organism Shattered

The new border drawn along the shallow river Olsa/Olza/Olše cut right through the middle of Teschen, creating multiple logistical challenges. Whereas Český Těšín originated as a suburb featuring light industry, Cieszyn's scenic historical center was cut off from its manufacturing and its only railway station while it kept administrative, religious, and educational infrastructures, including the city's hospital and cemeteries. The border also symbolically severed the town's pipes and power lines running under and above its two main bridges. Teschen's recently built electrical powerplant fell to Poland, while the gasworks became the sole property of Czechoslovakia. Scattered on both sides of the dividing line, the city's freshwater distribution system was even more problematic.<sup>24</sup> Yet, when former Tescheners awoke on August 10,

22. In Berlin and Jerusalem, utility infrastructure was reoriented shortly after the border introduction and reintegrated once it vanished. Timothy Moss, "Divided City, Divided Infrastructures: Securing Energy and Water Services in Postwar Berlin," *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 7 (October 2009): 923–42; Meron Benvenisti, *Jerusalem: The Torn City* (Jerusalem, 1976), 31–62 and 129–48.

23. The mutual use of Nicosia's sewage system by Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots is often hailed as rare example of municipal cooperation between antagonistic sides. See Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (Philadelphia, 2009), 125.

24. For precise border delineation and allocation of utility facilities see SOAK, Fond Okresní Úřad Český Těšín (OÚČT), k. 2, inv. č. 80, spis 289 (International Commission for the Czech-Polish Border Delineation, "Protocol" from August 12, 1921). Border diplomacy is further discussed in Dagmar Perman, *The Shaping of the Czechoslovak State: Diplomatic History of the Boundaries of Czechoslovakia, 1914–1920* (Leiden, Netherlands, 1962), 97–120 and 228–75, and Conrad, *Umkämpfte Grenzen*, 185–90.

1920, as members of newly created nation-states, the lights in the Prochaska printing works located in Český Těšín were lit by Polish electricity and the fountain on the main square in Cieszyn bubbled with water that originated in Czechoslovak soil.

This continuity is not entirely surprising given that many wished for swift reunification independent of their national sentiments. The first reaction to the city's split was general outrage, coupled with hopes for border revision. Local periodicals across political spectra depicted the decision as an imperialist ruling of the Allies against the will of the people. Published in Cieszyn, the popular Polish-language periodical *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska* (Cieszyn Star) commented:

Surely there isn't any stupidity that couldn't be hatched in diplomatic heads. How else can the plan to halve the city be described if not as thoughtlessness, stupidity? ... The city center would look like a cripple without hands, the Saska Kępa would look even worse ... without a brain and a nerve center.<sup>25</sup>

The Czech-language *Moravsko-slezský deník* (Moravian-Silesian Daily) followed suit: "Every objective observer must see that Těšín must not and cannot be divided."<sup>26</sup> The German liberal *Silesia* agreed. It highlighted possible economic impacts of the split and argued that the decision would transform the once mighty city into a "small" and "sleepy" town, while calling the international arbitrators its "gravediggers."<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, even if most wished for border revision, the ideal solution varied depending on national sentiment. While the Polish press lobbied for the entire town's annexation to Poland, Czech newspapers saw its future in Czechoslovakia. Having lost all hope for Silesian autonomy, the local Germans first and foremost wished to protect economic interests that presupposed a strong, unified regional center.<sup>28</sup> Hence, while many German-speaking middle-class liberals and small factory-owners leaned toward the industrially more developed Czechoslovakia, their main goal was to keep the city unified.

Once the border became reality and initial disenchantment passed, two administrative commissions responsible for the day-to-day running of their respective sides attempted to shield urbanites from the division's most tangible impacts. Many, if not all, Tescheners crossed the Olsa/Olza/Olše river daily, be it to go to work, attend school, or to visit their places of worship, while doing a little shopping on the side. This cross-border movement by those reluctant to give up the "benefits of an undivided homeland" along with the need to provide medical and fire services, impelled local leaders to favor a porous border for official and unofficial traffic. Moreover, while Cieszyn

25. F.B., "Przyszłość Cieszyna," *Gwiazdka Niedzielną: Tygodniowe wydanie Gwiazdki Cieszyńskiej*, August 1, 1920, 1–2, here 1.

26. "Pro nedělitelnost Těšína," *Moravsko-slezský deník*, September 26, 1920, 4.

27. "Die Entscheidung über Teschen," *Silesia*, July 25, 1920, 1.

28. The Silesian minority often shared this sentiment. See Andrea Schmidt-Rösler, "Autonomie- und Separatismusbemühungen in Oberschlesien 1918–1922," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 48, no. 1 (1999): 1–49; Piotr Dobrowolski, *Ugrupowania i kierunki separatystyczne na Górnym Śląsku i w Cieszyńskim w latach 1918–1939* (Krakow, 1972), 192–218.

petitioned Warsaw to have a consulate set up in Český Těšín for the “good of the people,” the Czechoslovak town lobbied their government for guarantees to continue using not only the once shared institutions, such as hospitals and religious structures, but also all municipal utility infrastructure.<sup>29</sup>

Local administrators knew that the issue of utility supply could wait neither for the hoped-for border revision nor for national sanctioning. They acted. Within a month of Teschen’s split, Cieszyn and Český Těšín formed a Joint Liquidation Committee featuring ten members from each city, including the two future mayors—Władysław Michejda and Josef Koždoň. Just like most Teschen’s administrators, both men were born and educated in Teschen Silesia. Michejda (1876–1937) hailed from a prominent family of Polish Protestants. With a law degree from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, he took positions in L’viv and Kyiv, while becoming an active member of Narodowa Demokracja (Polish National Democracy). In 1919, Michejda returned to Cieszyn where he was elected as the town’s mayor ten years later, a position he held until his death. A teacher in Strumień and Skoczów, Josef Koždoň (1873–1949) likewise became involved in municipal and regional politics. In 1907 he founded the Ślōnskō Ludowō Partyjō (Silesian People’s Party), which he led until its dissolution in 1938. Serving four terms between 1923–1938, Koždoň was the only mayor of Český Těšín in the interwar period.<sup>30</sup>

Alternating their meetings between Poland and Czechoslovakia, the Committee attempted to solve the most pressing matters, such as the allocation of the once-shared city administrators and police force, the abolition of the local savings bank and drafting of provisional agreements ensuring a continuous supply of gas, electricity, and water.<sup>31</sup> Teschen’s sewers proved a non-issue, as both riverbanks happened to possess an independent sewage system.<sup>32</sup> This does not mean that the wheels of local bureaucracy moved quickly. The first meeting of the Committee took place no sooner than November 3, 1920, and it was only in the following year that local

29. SOAK, OÚČT, k. 2, inv. č. 80, spis 289 (Declaration of the Municipal Assembly of Český Těšín, undated); and Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach Oddział w Cieszynie (APwKC), Zespół Akta Miasta Cieszyna (AMC), sygnatura (sygn.) 4/13/0/1/61 (Administrative Commission on September 27, 1920, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Komisji administracyjnej miasta Cieszyna z 1920 roku*).

30. Władysław Michejda’s uncle, Jan Michejda (1853–1927), became the first mayor of Polish Cieszyn and was like Koždoň a member of the Silesian Landtag. For more information, see *Elektroniczny słownik biograficzny Śląska Cieszyńskiego* at [katalog-sloownik.kc-cieszyn.pl/](http://katalog-sloownik.kc-cieszyn.pl/) (accessed November 30, 2023).

31. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 4/13/0/1/61 (Administrative Commission on August 31 and December 7, 1920 in *Protokoły posiedzeń Komisji administracyjnej miasta Cieszyna z 1920 roku*). The habit of meeting alternately in each town mirrors the practice instituted after the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise when the two royal delegations overseeing shared ministries met once in Vienna and once in Budapest. The *Ausgleich* more generally is discussed in Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), 259–64.

32. SOAK, OÚČT, k. 2, inv. č. 80, spis 289 (International Commission for the Czech-Polish Border Delineation, “Protocol” from August 12, 1921). See also SOAK, OÚČT, k. 2, inv. č. 80, spis 365 (Meeting regarding Implementation of Article 37 of the Liquidation Agreement from April 24, 1925, held in Pl. Cieszyn on March 16, 1927 and in Cz. Cieszyn on March 17, 1927).

leaders agreed to create new, expert-staffed subcommittees to handle one issue at a time.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, response on the national level was much slower. While the two nation-states saw the management of the cities' utility infrastructure as too important for local arrangements, it proved too specific for regular international treaties. Hence, when Poland and Czechoslovakia finalized the Liquidation Treaty in March 1924, they intentionally excluded the town's shared energy sector and picked it up only five years later in December 1929 in the "Treaty about the Use of Municipal Buildings of the former Municipality of Teschen," signed in the Czechoslovak city of Olomouc.<sup>34</sup> Drafted predominantly by local actors from both Cieszyn and Český Těšín, the treaty replicated many already existing homegrown agreements, offering the two towns a large degree of autonomy. However, as the following analysis demonstrates, official guarantees were often not enough. While municipal administrators used the treaty to protect their local interests against the centralizing power of the state, Warsaw and Prague sought loopholes in the text to achieve their national agenda. Therefore, rather than a tension between "Czechs" and "Poles," as often highlighted by existing historiography, the debates surrounding the two towns' shared utility networks reveal a clash between local leaders and their respective national governments.

### Reoriented Gas and Electricity Power Grids

In February 1921, the Joint Industrial Committee was the first special subcommittee. Consisting of ten core members, three technicians, an accountant, and a lawyer from both Cieszyn and Český Těšín, it also featured six representatives from the towns' financial subcommittees—a fact that would soon come in handy. At first, the administration of the electricity and gas infrastructures seemed easy to navigate, as each town controlled exactly one energy industry. Built in 1882 in the city's quickly growing suburb, gas production was located on Czechoslovak territory. In Cieszyn, approximately 9 miles of underground piping powered not only most Polish streetlamps, but also its hospital and a significant number of heaters and gas cookers.<sup>35</sup> In turn, the eleven-year-old electrical power plant lay in Poland, just below Cieszyn's picturesque castle hill. Although only 0.6 miles of electrical wires ran through Český Těšín in 1920, Polish electricity supplied some of the town's most important industries, such as the famous Prochaska printing works.<sup>36</sup> Considering the demand for

33. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/63 (Administrative Commission on February 14 and September 7, 1921 in *Protokoły posiedzeń Komisji administracyjnej miasta Cieszyna z 1921 roku*).

34. §20 in "68/1931 Sb. Smlouva mezi republikou Československou a republikou Polskou o užívání městských objektů bývalé obce Těšína podepsaná v Olomouci dne 21. prosince 1929" in *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení Státu Československého* (Prague, 1931), 507–517, here 515. Various drafts can be found in SOAK, OÚČT, k. 2, inv. č. 80, spis 365.

35. For more on the introduction of the gasworks, see Karel Sedláček, "Plynárenství v Těšíně a Českém Těšíně," *Těšínsko* 25, no. 4 (1982): 27–29.

36. Teschen's electrification is described in Czesław Gamrot, "Elektrifikace Těšína na počátku 20. století," *Těšínské listy: Informační dvouměsíčník města Český Těšín* 12, no. 4 (2018): 14–15.

gas and electricity on both sides, the Committee quickly agreed on continuing mutual supplies at a fixed monthly price paid in the provider's currency. However, the divergent situations of the Polish and Czechoslovak national economies soon rendered this arrangement rather difficult to maintain.

Forged from three independent parts of the Prussian, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, the Second Polish Republic struggled to introduce a unified economic system.<sup>37</sup> In 1920, three different currencies still circulated on the newly delineated territory. Moreover, the state continued to fight at its borders, including in the Polish-Czechoslovak and Polish-Soviet War. The result was two-fold. First, the state amassed massive debt financing these military ventures. Second, combat devastated large plots of land, leading to shortages in agricultural products and dramatic price hikes. By printing additional Polish Mark banknotes (Mp), a currency created by the German administration during WWI, the government attempted to stabilize the economy. Issued without cover, however, this endeavor ultimately sent the country into hyperinflation.<sup>38</sup> While at the end of 1918 one US Dollar equaled nine Mp, in spring of 1924 it approximated nine *million* Mp. In Cieszyn, the relatively stable Czechoslovak Crown (Kč) further exacerbated this dire economic situation. First introduced in March 1919, one US Dollar equaled 16 Kč. Despite mild currency inflation in the following two years, the Czechoslovak currency fell to 35 Kč for one US Dollar in spring 1924.<sup>39</sup> This disparity between the value of the states' national currencies had an enormous impact on the municipality's cross-border gas purchases in Cieszyn. Already in May 1921, local leaders complained about the "horrendous" prices that made their gas "the most expensive in Lesser Poland." To remedy this situation, they agreed to reduce the number of gas-lit streetlights from 240 to 168 and push for general electrification.<sup>40</sup> Approved in March 1923, it ironically modernized the public space.<sup>41</sup>

In 1924, Polish Prime Minister Władysław Grabski introduced a series of economic reforms that altered this adverse situation. The formation of the central Bank of Poland and a new currency—the Polish Złoty—helped to end hyperinflation.<sup>42</sup> The slow economic upturn brought relief for Cieszyn. Although the town managed to reduce their overall gas consumption and total number of

37. Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Geschichte Polens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010), 134–49.

38. Janusz Kaliński and Zbigniew Landau, *Gospodarka Polski w XX wieku, 2 ed.* (Warsaw, 2003), 71–74.

39. For the exchange rates see Jürgen Schneider, Oskar Schwarzerer, and Markus A. Denzel, eds., *Währungen der Welt II.: Europäische und nordamerikanische Devisenkurse 1914–1951* (Stuttgart, 1997), 334.

40. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/63 (Administrative Commission on May 30 and February 14, 1921 in Protokoły posiedzeń Komisji administracyjnej miasta Cieszyna z 1921 roku).

41. See APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/74 (Municipal Assembly on 14 March 1923 in Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1922–1925); and Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach (APwK), Zespół Urząd Wojewódzki Śląski w Katowicach (UWSwK), sygn. 12/27/0/9.8.27/1771 (Letter from the Municipal Council of Cieszyn to the Economic Subdivision of Silesian Voivodeship from July 11, 1937).

42. The reforms are discussed in Kaliński and Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, 74–80.

gas consumers, it was only in 1926 that vice-mayor Artur Gabrisch,<sup>43</sup> responsible for the city finances, felt confident enough to declare he “was no longer worried about becoming indebted to Český Těšín.”<sup>44</sup> Beyond the border, the stabilization of the Polish economy had a different result. While before 1924 Český Těšín enjoyed extremely cheap electricity, now the cost started to weigh on its budget.<sup>45</sup> Soon, the Czechoslovak municipality started to look for other providers. In January 1926, it abandoned the Cieszyn power station for a domestic one: Moravskoslezské Elektrárny (Moravian-Silesian Powerplants, MSE), located in the near-by city of Ostrava.<sup>46</sup>

The December 1929 “Treaty about the Use of Municipal Buildings of the former Municipality of Teschen” demonstrates further economic pragmatism. Although Český Těšín had not been buying Polish electricity for years, the treaty allowed the Czechoslovak town to rejoin Cieszyn’s power plant any time. Moreover, it stated that if either energy facility needed to expand because of rising demand across the border, the two towns would negotiate a special agreement to share the costs.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, even if the treaty gave the two cities certain autonomy regarding their mutual relations, it left at least one tacit way for national governments to terminate any unwanted inter-municipal, and thus, cross-border dependency.

In 1931, almost two years after the treaty’s signing, the Polish government announced it was introducing a new toll on gas imports. This regulation would affect only *two* municipalities in the country: Piła, a small town on the Polish-German border, and Cieszyn. Quite understandably, local municipal leaders were appalled. They perceived the toll as an unjustified move against the city’s profitable foreign ties and lobbied to drop the planned regulation. Accusing Warsaw of misreading the 1929 international treaty, they reiterated their right to draw gas from Český Těšín. In addition, they offered precise practical arguments. Considering the falling number of gas consumers in Cieszyn and the relatively high cost of gasworks construction, the administrators claimed that gas independence was economically nonsensical.<sup>48</sup> The toll

43. Born in Teschen, Artur Gabrisch (1881–1963) first ran a chimney sweep firm before becoming the manager of the municipal power plant. He was a member of the Liberal German Party. In September 1939, he became mayor of Teschen under Nazi occupation. *Elektroniczny słownik biograficzny Śląska Cieszyńskiego* at [katalog-slownik.kc-cieszyn.pl/](http://katalog-slownik.kc-cieszyn.pl/) (accessed February 9, 2024).

44. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/75 (Municipal Assembly on February 15, 1926, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1926–1929*).

45. 100 zł equaled 666 Kč, while in May 1924 one million Mj equaled 3.80 Kč. See Schneider, Schwarzerer and Denzel, eds., *Währungen der Welt*, 346.

46. See APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/75 (Municipal Assembly on February 15, 1926, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1926–1929*); Gamrot, “Elektryfikace Těšína,” 14. For more on MSE see Jan Mikeš, “Elektryfikace Československa do roku 1938” (PhD diss., Charles University in Prague, 2016), 299–301.

47. §20 in “68/1931 Sb. Smlouva mezi republikou Československou a republikou Polskou o užívání městských objektů bývalé obce Těšína podepsaná v Olomouci dne 21. prosince 1929,” in *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení Státu Československého* (Prague, 1931), 207–517, here 515.

48. APwK, UWSwK, sygn. 12/27/0/9.8.27/1771 (Letter to the Subcommittee for Industry and Trade of the Silesian Voivodeship by Rudolf Halfar, April 20, 1937).

made the city's gas once again "the most expensive in all of Poland."<sup>49</sup> Their demands were heard in Warsaw, but largely ignored. Hence, soon after the regulation came into force in October 1933, local leaders were forced to accept the need of a gas facility.<sup>50</sup> Still, the state's unwillingness to acknowledge municipal interests impelled some administrators to look across the border. Ing. Hajduk proposed bypassing the national center by asking Český Těšín to lower their prices—a suggestion that Michejda immediately questioned. Perhaps recalling his "common enterprise" speech, likely uttered in hopes of compelling Český Těšín to lower their gas price, he argued that similar negotiations in the past had no positive results.<sup>51</sup>

Czechoslovak municipal leaders approached Cieszyn soon thereafter. Trying to prevent the loss of their largest gas consumer and income, they proposed to resubscribe to the town's electricity in the hopes of recreating the exchange economy of the immediate post-war years. During a lobbying trip to Prague in October 1933, a delegation from Český Těšín inquired at the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry if the Polish toll on gas imports did not violate the 1929 treaty. Dr. Ing. Václav Roubík and Dr. J. Rousek regrettably informed them that no clause in the treaty prohibited the placement of an import toll. Nonetheless, having served as governmental representatives during the negotiations about the towns' shared properties, they were receptive to the delegation's concerns and promised to contact their Polish counterpart. Furthermore, when the delegation asked if Český Těšín could return to receiving electricity from abroad, they stated there was no legal prohibition against it.<sup>52</sup>

This encouraging attitude of the central authorities did not last, even if the two cities' continued negotiations.<sup>53</sup> Back at the Labor Ministry in March 1935, Český Těšín's representative, Dr. Erwin Grünbaum, found that their contact person had changed. Roubík, with whom the delegation convened on several occasions, had been assigned a new portfolio. Instead, Ing. Jan Tománek met them and "made all sorts of objections" against the town's proposal.<sup>54</sup> Tománek's antagonistic attitude here is hardly surprising; he was not only a governmental representative, but also the Chairman of MSE—the very energy provider that Český Těšín was trying to abandon for a better price abroad. When

49. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/77 (Municipal Assembly on January 5, 1934, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1934–1936*).

50. The press covered matters of infrastructure only factually. Yet, while reporting on the toll introduction, *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska* defended the central government's actions and argued that the city should "naturally" build its own gasworks. N.D., "Z cieszyńskiego wydziału gminnego," *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska*, January 12, 1934, 3.

51. See APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/77 (Municipal Assembly on March 21, 1934, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1934–1936*).

52. SOAK, AMČT, k. 1, inv. č. 88 (Report from Intervention in Prague on October 24 and 25, 1933 in *Intervence Městského úřadu u různých ministerstev v Praze v obecních záležitostech*).

53. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/77 (Municipal Assembly on February 22, 1935, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1934–1936*).

54. SOAK, AMČT, k. 1, inv. č. 88 (Report from Intervention in Prague on March 26 and 27, 1935 in *Intervence Městského úřadu u různých ministerstev v Praze v obecních záležitostech*).

confronted with this conflict of interest, Tománek became defensive, claiming he always saw himself as a servant of the state and thus would consider the matter objectively. Grünbaum did not believe him. Noting that Tománek kept pushing for the municipality to abandon their practice of buying electrical energy in bulk and letting consumers be connected individually, he deduced that the man had first and foremost the company's interest at heart, not the city's.<sup>55</sup> The town's electricity supply became a site where national, local, and personal interests intersected and clashed. Both parties acted rationally, nonetheless, their pragmatism begged a widely different course of action.

The Labor Ministry's new stance forced Český Těšín to reframe their argumentation. They used their unique position of drawing energy from Poland to leverage a price reduction from their domestic power plant supplier. Considering that rising Czechoslovak energy prices plagued the already indebted city, they suggested that returning to the once shared power plant would allow the town to save up to 24% of their expenses while guaranteeing the continuous retail of their gas. Unsurprisingly, Tománek did not share this view. Noting that Polish coal prices were much lower than Czechoslovak ones, thus allowing for the retail of energy at a lower rate, he made clear that Český Těšín could not expect any price reduction. Moreover, he accused the town of energy profiteering.<sup>56</sup> Soon thereafter, the discussion ended for good. An undated report suggests that Prague authorities—presumably represented by Tománek—forbade Český Těšín to purchase electricity from Poland, no matter how many times the councilors explained their rights based on the Olomouc Treaty.<sup>57</sup> Although the Czechoslovak town tried to attain what was best for the local economy of both cities, the national government did not allow it.<sup>58</sup>

In the meantime, Cieszyn succumbed to the state's pressure. Not only did they launch a project for their own gasworks, they also negotiated an exemption from the newly imposed toll. If the city could prove they were trying to build the gasworks once every six months, the local representatives hoped the government would continue to exempt them from its self-imposed legislation.<sup>59</sup> In 1933, the administrators were faced with two possibilities. Cieszyn could build a facility either for mixed gas with coal or for ether-carburized water gas. Still, local leaders made clear they were not willing to pay for either: "Since the city does not have any money of its own, construction of the gas plant depends on financial aid in the form of a grant or an interest-free loan."<sup>60</sup> Even if Cieszyn held an open competition, the lack of financial means hindered any real progress.

55. *Ibid.*

56. SOAK, AMČT, inv. č. 58 (Municipal Assembly on February 16, 1934, in *Sitzungsprotokolle der Stadtvertretung 1934*).

57. SOAK, AMČT, k. 1, inv. č. 88 (Report from Intervention in Prague on July 17, 1935, in *Intervence Městského úřadu u různých ministerstev v Praze v obecních záležitostech*).

58. National politics often curbed energy pragmatism. See Maria Hidvegi and Nikolaus Wolf, "Power Failure: The Electrification of Central-Eastern Europe, 1918–39," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 26, no. 2 (March 2019): 1–24.

59. *Sprawozdanie z zamknięcia rachunkowego gminy miasta Cieszyna za rok 1935–36* (Cieszyn, 1936), 130.

60. *Ibid.*, 88–89.

Gas prices continued to rise due to old, corroded piping while consumer numbers dropped steadily. When the city started to repair the pipes in 1934, Cieszyn was losing approximately 33% of delivered gas—a number they managed to lower by 10% over the span of a year. Consumers dropped from 829 in 1934 to 718 a year later.<sup>61</sup> Without the state's help or cheap credit, the issue remained unresolved, which the administrators repeatedly blamed on higher authorities, not the city.<sup>62</sup> Ironically, the actual construction of the new gasworks did not commence before October 1938, when, following the Munich Agreement, the reunited town no longer needed independent gas. In other words, despite the Polish government's efforts, Cieszyn continued to draw gas from the Czechoslovak side until the end of the interwar period.

Warsaw's attempt to pressure Cieszyn into self-sufficiency despite the dire economic costs reveals tensions between national and local interests. While the Polish and Czechoslovak governments sought to erase the towns' connections from the imperial era, curb foreign dependency, and delineate its borders, local economic interest guided the actions of municipal leaders. The Polish national center did not deny the town the right to draw gas from across the river, but instead made such action economically unfeasible and forced the municipality into submission. Thus, while Cieszyn leaders were ready to be dependent on Český Těšín, the national government was not. Similarly, the choice of the Czechoslovak town to draw electricity from Ostrava rather than Cieszyn was neither definitive nor ideological. When the economic situation dictated that Český Těšín reorient its energy policy abroad once more, local representatives fought against authorities set on safeguarding their newly gained national sovereignty and energy security. Both towns largely lost their battles. Yet, the fact they fought them in the first place suggests that their actions were guided by economic pragmatism that could either bolster cross-border relations or disentangle them based on economic demand.

### Shared Water Supply Network

The administration of the shared waterworks system proved even more problematic than the local energy sector. Constructed in 1890 following a Typhus epidemic that contaminated local wells, the waterworks were comprised of several dispersed facilities. This rendered the determination of a sole owner impossible.<sup>63</sup> Although each town without doubt controlled the piping on their territory, most equipment, including water collection points along the Tyrka and Javorový creeks fell to Český Těšín. The Polish city nevertheless controlled the waterworks, which stored fresh water. Hence, while the water originated on Czechoslovak soil, it was stored in Poland and released back to the Czechoslovak municipality upon demand.<sup>64</sup> To solve this complex issue, the Joint Waterworks Committee was founded in September 1921 with three members from each

61. *Ibid.*, 127–130.

62. *Ibid.*, 127.

63. "Z historie těšínského vodovodu," *Těšínsko* 28, no. 2 (1985): 36–38.

64. §2 in "68/1931 Sb. Smlouva mezi republikou Československou a republikou Polskou o užívání městských objektů bývalé obce Těšína podepsaná v Olomouci dne 21. prosince 1929" in *Sbírka zákonů*, 508.

town. The group's solution was surprisingly simple. They agreed to treat the system as a shared property and distribute the water according to a 6:4 ratio, based on Cieszyn's larger population. To monitor the water flow across the state border, the Committee decided to install new meters on the two bridges where the border/river cut through the pipes and to share the cost.<sup>65</sup>

The two chairmen, Ing. Oton Silwester for Cieszyn and Ing. Eugen Fulda for Český Těšín, were educated technicians from the local German-speaking population. Sharing the same cultural heritage, both were not as invested into the recent national conflict, which certainly eased the negotiation process. Nonetheless, it should not be seen as the only cause for smooth collaboration. No matter the members in any given subcommittee, all resolutions had to be approved by city assemblies that reflected the ethnically diverse urban composition. Following the first municipal elections, culturally German-oriented conservative parties dominated both towns. Overtime, however, the power shifted. In Cieszyn, culturally Polish-oriented conservative groups won most mandates by 1929, while in Český Těšín Czechs gained in seats but never managed to overcome the joint powerhouse of the Silesian Party and German Club. Still, these runners-up took positions as vice-mayors and were vocal participants in policymaking. Moreover, in both assemblies, votes were hardly ever split along national lines.<sup>66</sup> Considering the heterogeneous nature of the administrative bodies as well as the possibly untrustworthy municipality just across the border, no party could ever focus on a singular *Other*. Thus, it was diversity that engendered the willingness to compromise.

To the great bewilderment of the Czechoslovak town, Prague was not amused by this cross-border water arrangement. When four municipal emissaries of Český Těšín, among them the mayor Koždoň, traveled to the capital in May 1924 to lobby for their town, the section chief of the Ministry of Health made clear that the city should strive for a "complete detachment from Polish Teschen" in terms of its water network. The delegation disagreed, highlighting the unproblematic nature of its cooperation: "Regarding the shared water supply, there were no complications or conflicts. . . the joint Waterworks Commission works based on the agreed rules. . . relatively smoothly. . ."<sup>67</sup> Besides, the two towns did not see this simple and mutually beneficial agreement as a temporary solution only. In 1924, the Polish municipality asked the Silesian Voivodeship in Katowice to enter into a binding agreement with Český Těšín. This arrangement would not only secure the supply of freshwater to Cieszyn, the "joint use, maintenance, and construction" of

65. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/63 (Administrative Commission on September 7, 1921, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Komisji administracyjnej miasta Cieszyna z 1921 roku*).

66. Unless discussing a strictly national matter, such as schooling, the assemblies worked mostly harmoniously. For the composition of the municipal governments see Waclaw Dubiański, "Skład władz gminnych Cieszyna w okresie międzywojennym," *Pamiętnik Cieszyński* 15 (2000): 103–12; and Dan Gawrecki, "Politický a správní vývoj 1849–1918/1920," in Radim Jež, David Pindur and Henryk Wawreczka, eds., *Český Těšín 1920–2020* (Český Těšín, 2020), 64.

67. SOAK, AMČT, k. 1, inv. č. 88 (Report from Intervention in Prague on May 12, 13 and 14, 1924 in *Intervence Městského úřadu u různých ministerstev v Praze v obecních záležitostech*).

waterworks, and the sharing of all resulting costs and debts, but also link the two cities' waterworks system as an "unbreakable whole for a period of 50 years."<sup>68</sup>

Both Polish and Czechoslovak regional administrations were skeptical. Examining the proposed contract, the Silesian Voivodeship charged their own waterworks commissioner to probe the case. In his report from July 1924, he not only endorsed the treaty but presented it as particularly beneficial for Cieszyn. After all, Český Těšín would only need to build their own water reservoir to gain full independence—an investment much smaller than what the Polish town would need to gain self-sufficiency. Indeed, he stated that the agreement seemed a little *too* favorable for Cieszyn and rumors said the Czechoslovak counterpart, the Regional Administration in Opava, was reluctant to endorse it.<sup>69</sup> His concerns proved valid. While local leaders in Cieszyn and Český Těšín were ready to seal their interdependency for another half a century, the Czechoslovak regional authorities did not certify the contract.<sup>70</sup> Yet, not much was done instead. The official Liquidation Treaty between Poland and Czechoslovakia signed in March 1924 did not include the issue but postponed it to a later date.<sup>71</sup> In the meantime, the two municipalities continued to use the water system based on their local contract. In 1928, they even co-funded an additional collection point in Tyra called "U Lotra" (At the Crook) to increase their joint water supply.<sup>72</sup>

The contrast between local and national interests continued. In June 1928, Cieszyn hosted a meeting between Czechoslovak and Polish government officials about the shared freshwater system. Onsite inspections of collection points in Tyra and the drafting of a future international agreement were planned. Outraging the municipal leaders in Český Těšín, the Czechoslovak authorities neither invited nor informed them about the long-awaited gathering. Only their contacts with the Polish municipality across the border made them aware of the meeting. Cieszyn's municipal authorities inquired on multiple occasions about the Czechoslovak city's preparations for the meeting. In response, Český Těšín embarrassingly admitted that without an official governmental invitation, they could not participate in negotiations. Even though their Polish counterparts asked them to join the discussions and an official

68. See APwK, UWSwK, sygn. 12/27/0/5/1300 (Contract and municipal council letters to the Silesian Voivodeship).

69. See APwK, UWSwK, sygn. 12/27/0/5/1300 (Letter from the Waterwork Commissioner to the Silesian Voivodeship).

70. SOAK, OÚČT, k. 2, inv. č. 80, spis 365 (Minutes of the Joint Committee for the Waterworks meeting on November 6, 1924).

71. §37 in "56/1926 Sb. Smlouva mezi republikou Československou a republikou Polskou o otázkách právních a finančních ze dne 23. dubna 1925," in *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení Státu Československého* (Prague, 1926), 271–306, here 288.

72. Senát Národního shromáždění R. Čs., "Tisk 281" Zpráva o vládním návrhu, kterým se předkládá Národnímu shromáždění Smlouva mezi republikou Československou a republikou Polskou o užívání městských objektů bývalé obce Těšína, podepsaná v Olomouci dne 21. prosince 1929, se Závěrečným protokolem z téhož dne," *Senát PČR*, at [www.senat.cz/informace/z\\_historie/tisky/3vo/tisky/T0281\\_00.htm](http://www.senat.cz/informace/z_historie/tisky/3vo/tisky/T0281_00.htm) (accessed November 30, 2023).

lunch—a fact Koždoň later stressed—the leaders of the Czechoslovak town had to decline.<sup>73</sup>

This neglect prompted the municipal council to draft an official letter of complaint to the Czechoslovak government. Calling the shared water system an “existential matter for both towns,” Český Těšín’s leaders praised the Polish authorities for their timely notification of Cieszyn while shunning the Czechoslovak ones: “Responding to objections raised by Cieszyn that such a treatment of a municipality by its government is completely incomprehensible. . . we had to shamefully confess that such practice is inexplicable to us as well.”<sup>74</sup> Even following the meeting, the leaders claimed they were dependent on Cieszyn for information, highlighting the paradox of having to ask a “Polish institution” about the “opinions of our [Czechoslovak] experts and intentions of our [Czechoslovak] government.” To prevent any similar occurrence, they demanded the appointment of a new governmental clerk on this matter.<sup>75</sup> The government dismissed the complains as a misunderstanding and blamed the Polish authorities.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, the municipal representatives participated in all future bilateral talks, protesting no further.

When the councilors of Český Těšín were unable to gain information from their own authorities, they turned to Cieszyn to keep themselves informed. Together, they worked to ensure that the waterworks agreement would be amenable to both. To a certain degree, they succeeded. As already stated, the treaty from December 1929 mirrored the locally crafted contract from five years before and changed little in terms of the system’s daily use. There was one palpable difference, however. The Polish and Czechoslovak governments scrapped the fifty-year commitment clause and established that each town could announce changes to its water supply system only five years after the contract’s signing—in December 1934.<sup>77</sup>

The reluctance of the two national governments to sanction the towns’ long-term commitment impelled the more water dependent Cieszyn to start exploring its options for their own waterworks. The process of scouting favorable locations and securing funds began as soon as January 1930.<sup>78</sup> Progress was slow. Nonetheless, while Polish central and regional governments refused to subsidize the town’s gasworks, they offered funds to separate the shared waterworks. A suitable source was found in the village of Pogórze at the Vistula River, roughly 6.2 miles east of Cieszyn. After the five-year binding

73. SOAK, OÚČT, k. 2, inv. č. 80, spis 365 (Letter to the Ministry of Public Works in Prague by Josef Koždoň in the name of the Český Těšín City Council, July 9, 1928).

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*

76. Archiv Ministerstva Zahraničních Věcí České Republiky, Fond II. Sekce 1918–1939 III. Řada, k. 193 (Letter to the Český Těšín City Council from the Ministerial Officer Roubík in the name of the Minister of Public Works, September 25, 1928).

77. See §2–17 in “68/1931 Sb. Smlouva mezi republikou Československou a republikou Polskou o užívání městských objektů bývalé obce Těšina podepsaná v Olomouci dne 21. prosince 1929” in *Sbírka zákonů*, 508–14.

78. See APwK, UWSwK, sygn. 12/27/0/5/1300 (Władysław Michejda’s letter to the Office of the Silesian Voivodeship in the name of Cieszyn City Council, January 20, 1930).

clause of the international treaty ran its course, the leaders of the Polish municipality started to build their own collection points in October 1934.<sup>79</sup>

There were more reasons than national security to build an independent waterworks. The Great Depression hit the already fragile financial situation of the Polish town.<sup>80</sup> While some continued to worry a project of this size would ruin the budget, others argued the exact opposite. Especially the Polish socialists contended that a large-scale construction could hire many of the town's unemployed. Other representatives highlighted that local firms would also profit from the construction. Even some white-collar jobs would be saved. Following the split, the waterworks' headquarters remained in Cieszyn's municipal house, even though all collection points were in Czechoslovakia. Since Český Těšín did not possess any administrative buildings, this had practical reasons. Once the Czechoslovak city built a new town hall and wanted to relocate the office, Cieszyn's municipal assembly unanimously protested.<sup>81</sup> As part of a modern building boom on the Czechoslovak side of the border, the new town hall was a thorn in the eye of the Polish city.<sup>82</sup> The Polish administrators noted this fact bitterly, claiming Prague helped the Czechoslovak town build government buildings, hospitals, and schools even if "the city did not suffer such material losses like [Cieszyn] did." In this way, administrators tried to pressure the Polish state to finance the waterworks project: "Justice demands that [our] government gives us a helping hand. . . and covers the sum of 1,500,000 zł." Considering the city already built one waterworks, local representatives argued that it was taken from them due to "political and overall national reasons," and thus the urbanites could not be expected to finance another one.<sup>83</sup>

New waterworks did not necessarily mean independence. The idea was rooted in the assumption that the towns will "maintain commonality as before, because this method turned out to be quite practical. . . there has not been a single case of any friction between the cities of Cieszyn and Český Těšín."<sup>84</sup> When the construction was completed in 1937, Cieszyn leaders maintained they would keep all the prerogatives granted by the 1929 agreement, namely continuous access to Czechoslovak water and already-existing

79. The projected costs were shared equally by the National Treasury and Silesian Voivodeship. See APwK, UWSwK, sygn. 12/27/0/5/1300 (Letter from the Silesian Voivodeship Council to the Department of Construction, September 20, 1932).

80. For Great Depression in the Polish context, see Zbigniew Landau and Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Gospodarka Polski Międzywojennej 1918–1939*, vol. 3, *Wielki kryzys 1930–1935* (Warsaw, 1982). For Czechoslovakia, see Vlastislav Lacina, *Velká hospodářská krize v Československu, 1929–1934* (Prague, 1984), and the general overview of Jakub Rákosník and Jiří Noha, *Kapitalismus na kolenou: Dopad velké hospodářské krize na evropskou společnost v letech 1929–1934* (Prague, 2012).

81. See APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/75 (Municipal Assembly on March 18, 1929, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1926–1929*).

82. Ironically, Cieszyn representatives accepted an invitation to attend the opening ceremony. See SOAK, AMČT, inv. č. 53 (Municipal Assembly on April 14, 1929, in *Sitzungsprotokolle der Stadtvertretung 1929*).

83. See APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/75 (Municipal Assembly on March 18, 1929, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1926–1929*).

84. *Ibid.*

facilities. However, technical issues had to be considered. Due to the cities' shared water piping, a new source would necessarily result in the mixing of freshwater. Czechoslovak municipal leaders across the border worried about the bacteriological quality of the Vistula water. The Polish town took all the necessary steps to pacify them. They commissioned the renowned Charles University in Prague to conduct a chemical study of their own water source and presented it as proof of its quality.<sup>85</sup>

Throughout the entire three-year building process the Polish city continued to honor its original responsibilities. The Cieszyn Hospital still conducted the bacteriological examinations of water from Tyra at a reduced price. In addition, the town helped with repair costs after a water pipe burst on Czechoslovak territory on August 21, 1936, even supplying better-priced repair material from Katowice.<sup>86</sup> Still, the old water network could not compare with the new one, which upon completion in March 1937, boasted four collection points extracting 90 liters per second and 10.5 miles of piping between Cieszyn and Pogórze, as well as a fully functioning telephone line to ensure its smooth operation.<sup>87</sup>

Water from the Vistula filled the city pipes early May 1937, although an official opening ceremony did not take place until the late afternoon of June 13. Representatives from the government, city, and local elites—around 150 people in total—gathered in Pogórze to celebrate. After speeches by Cieszyn's mayor Rudolf Halfar, the head of the waterworks construction committee from Katowice, and others, a prelate blessed the new facilities.<sup>88</sup> The Silesian Voivode, Michał Grażyński, symbolically opened the waterworks and simultaneously became the first honorary citizen of Cieszyn in the interwar period. The whole event concluded with a tour of the facilities and a celebratory tea-time in the park.<sup>89</sup> The town administration was pleased: "And so, the three-year long waterworks construction period found a happy ending with divine providence," noted the budget summary while highlighting that the town finally became independent.<sup>90</sup>

85. See SOAK, AMČT, inv. č. 58 (Municipal Assembly on October 9, 1934, in Sitzungsprotokolle der Stadtvertretung 1934). For initial debates about the construction see APwKC, AMC, 14/13/77 (Municipal Assembly on July 10, 1931, in Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1934–1936).

86. See *Sprawozdanie zamknięcia rachunkowego gminy miasta Cieszyna za rok 1936–37* (Cieszyn, 1937), 101–6.

87. *Ibid.*, 103. For more on the building process consult APwK, UWSwK, 12/27/0/5/1300 (Construction of Waterworks in Cieszyn). Detailed construction plans are in APwKC, Zespół Starostwo Powiatowe Cieszyńskie (SPC), sygn. 14/11/0/4/38 (Waterworks Project for the City of Cieszyn).

88. Rudolf Halfar (1884–1967), a teacher and school director, became member of the National Council of the Duchy of Cieszyn following WWI and acted as an ardent Polish plebiscite activist. As supporter of *Sanacja*, he subsequently served the city council before becoming mayor in 1937. *Estownik biograficzny Śląska Cieszyńskiego* at [katalog-sloownik.kc-cieszyn.pl/](http://katalog-sloownik.kc-cieszyn.pl/) (accessed February 9, 2024).

89. Based on the available sources, it cannot be determined if representatives of Český Těšín were invited or if they attended the occasion. See "Otwarcie wodociągu miasta Cieszyna," *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska*, June 18, 1937, 4 and "Die Eröffnung der neuen Wasserleitung von Cieszyn," *Silesia*, June 15, 1937, 2.

90. *Sprawozdanie zamknięcia rachunkowego gminy miasta Cieszyna 1937–38* (Cieszyn, 1938), 105.

Although Cieszyn's waterworks project was an undeniable step towards independence, factors outside national ideology influenced the decision. Frequent droughts of the Tyrka and Javorový creeks and the barely sufficient volume of water for the growing urban agglomeration worried municipal leaders on both sides of the border. The representatives quickly realized the need to monitor water consumption. In 1926, the Joint Waterworks Committee first proposed to install water meters in each house as the "simplest and cheapest way to prevent water shortage."<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, deficiencies continued. The issue came to a head in the summer of 1930 when, even with the new collection point "U Lotra," the creeks were no longer able to cover the consumption. The water-connected cities had to seal bathrooms and order stones for toilet flushing tanks to decrease their volume.<sup>92</sup> It did not take long before more extreme measures had to be taken. Beginning July, the city council of Český Těšín issued a public decree in which it chastised the town's inhabitants for ignoring their pleas and announced that it would turn off the water supply from 8 p.m. in the evening until 6 a.m. in the morning.<sup>93</sup> The press just over the border echoed this announcement, claiming that each urbanite used 115 liters daily—an amount that surpassed the capacity of the waterworks inlet pipe—and hence forbade the watering of plants.<sup>94</sup> By 1937, this was no longer necessary. As the Cieszyn budget proudly summarized, for the first time in the last twenty years, there was no need to close garden taps.<sup>95</sup> The addition of another water source was not merely preferable, it was necessary for both cities to survive.

Polish representatives never forgot the waterworks would bring Cieszyn self-sufficiency and assuage worries that Český Těšín could build their own reservoir and cut the town off from freshwater. Nevertheless, considering the project's timeline from 1930 to 1937, the municipal leaders' distrust was not yet rooted in the growing international insecurity created by the rise of Nazi Germany and the subsequent Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact of 1934 that caused a significant downturn in Polish-Czechoslovak relations.<sup>96</sup> Rather, it was a result of the pressures originating in the two national centers that strove to dissolve existing cross-border connections to clearly delineate borders. Warsaw and Prague did not coerce the city's split of the water system. However, by not allowing them to make a binding commitment to one another that would solidify cross-border cooperation for the next decades, they nevertheless enforced it.

The plan worked only in part as the two towns became self-sufficient, but not necessarily severed from one another. Unwilling to accept a "position of

91. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/75 (Municipal Assembly on February 16, 1926, in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1926–1929*).

92. "Z historie těšínského vodovodu," 37.

93. Český Těšín City Council, "Uzavření vodních přítoků," July 1, 1930 (Permanent exhibition of Muzeum Těšínska in Český Těšín).

94. "Brak wody w Cieszynie," *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska*, July 1, 1930, 3.

95. *Sprawozdanie Zamknięcia Rachunkowego za Rok 1937–38*, 104.

96. For the international context see Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939* (New York, 2011); 62–66. For Polish-Czechoslovak relations consult Gawrecki, *Politické a národnostní poměry*, 248–55; and Jerzy Kozeński, *Czechosłowacja w polskiej polityce zagranicznej 1932–1938* (Poznań, 1964), 86–89.

weakness,” Český Těšín greenlit a project to construct their own water reservoir as reaction to the neighboring city’s construction.<sup>97</sup> Still, once the Polish water piping was built, Český Těšín again opted for ongoing relations. The administrators decided that rather than drawing their water solely from the Tyra, which continued to be expensive due to additional fees by Tyra’s municipality, it would use the newly available freshwater from Poland.<sup>98</sup> Starting in May 1937, Český Těšín agreed to pay for water from Cieszyn. The water in the towns would stem from both Javorový Creek and Pogórze, while the original source, Tyrka, was turned off from the network’s supply.<sup>99</sup> Thus, even if the two towns could have blocked the water pipes that connected them, their local leaders chose not to do so. Rather, their actions led to the maximization of water supply for both parts of the divided city.

### The Divided City’s Common Enterprise

On October 2, 1938, the Polish army crossed from Cieszyn into Český Těšín through a corridor of jubilant crowds. “Welcome,” read one of the banners prepared by the animated Polish bystanders, “from this day on, forever together.”<sup>100</sup> Three days prior, on September 30, Warsaw used the Munich Agreement to present the Czechoslovak government with an ultimatum demanding the annexation of Teschen Silesia. Under pressure from all sides, Prague caved. After more than eighteen years of separation, the city of Teschen stood united again, albeit on different terms. Immediately after the takeover, the new administration fired many local Czechs and Germans from their jobs, often expropriating their homes. As Polish became the sole official language, all public expressions of diverging nationality were banned, including educational and cultural organizations. A wave of expulsions followed. While some Czechs and Germans were forced to leave their homes, others relocated on their own to avoid discrimination.<sup>101</sup> The new rulers dissolved the municipal assembly of Český Těšín, renaming the town Cieszyn Zachodni (Cieszyn West). Soon, representatives of the former Polish half rejoiced over having “one, whole Cieszyn” again.<sup>102</sup> This time, Teschen became entirely Polish.

Yet, the unification was not so simple. The variety of biding and diverging regulations prohibited an immediate merger and forced the Silesian Voivodeship to set up a temporary administrative commission to oversee the reunification process.<sup>103</sup> Administratively the two towns had become

97. See SOAK, AMČT, inv. č. 58 (Municipal Assembly on October 9, 1934, in *Sitzungsprotokolle der Stadtvertretung 1934*).

98. See SOAK, AMČT, inv. č. 60 (Municipal Assembly on December 21, 1937, in *Sitzungsprotokolle der Stadtvertretung 1937*).

99. *Sprawozdanie zamknięcia rachunkowego za rok 1937–38*, 105.

100. Banner quoted in Bílek, *Kyselá těšínská jablůčka*, 173.

101. Jan Benda, *Útěky a vyhánění z pohraničí českých zemí 1938–1939: Migrace z okupovaného pohraničí ve druhé republice* (Prague, 2012), 112–18.

102. APwKC, AMC, sygn. 14/13/0/1/79 (Municipal Assembly on December 12, 1939 [sic] in *Protokoły posiedzeń Wydziału Gminnego w Cieszynie z lat 1937–1939*).

103. Ibid. The overall integration process is explored in Witold Marcoń, “Unifikacja Zaolzia w ramach województwa Śląskiego z II Rzeczpospolitą,” *Dzieje Najnowsze* 42, no. 3 (2010): 3–14.

incompatible. However, what proved a non-issue was the city's utility infrastructure as Poland and Czechoslovakia never managed to force Cieszyn and Český Těšín to entirely separate from another. Thus, ironically, it was local pragmatism rooted in the city's multiethnic past that eased the way for Polish nationalist rule in October 1938.

The uninterrupted supply of energy and water from one side of the border to the other throughout the interwar period demonstrates not only the incredible resilience of utility networks amidst political upheaval but also the inclination of local leaders to put the common urban interest above nationalist strife. Despite hyperinflation and Warsaw's introduction of a toll on gas imports, the Polish town continued to purchase gas from their local gasworks that just happened to be in Czechoslovakia after the border introduction in August 1920. In Český Těšín, local leaders admittedly abandoned the Cieszyn power plant due to unfavorable rates, yet when the economic situation changed, they sought to return to it once more. Certainly, the fact that each side possessed one crucial facility helped to smooth the process. Interdependence was not the only reason, however. The central governments' obstructions notwithstanding, the towns were ready to not only disentangle but also re-entangle their utility sectors upon demand. The situation of the connected water network was no different. When the two towns hoped to seal their water interdependence for the next half-century, the national centers refused to sanction it and forced them to become self-sufficient. Yet once both towns became self-supporting, they chose to stay connected to increase their water supply and combat draughts. Thus, it was convenience and economic pragmatism that constituted the most important factor in local decision-making. Utility infrastructure proved to be a site of local cooperation rather than dispute, becoming a common enterprise.

Indeed, no municipal leader wished for the city to be halved. While Polish and Czech nationalists welcomed the emergence of their respective nation-states, they soon realized Warsaw and Prague had little interest in their misfortune. Having sentenced a relatively prosperous urban center to a life of struggle at a national periphery, the border fostered a collective sense of abandonment shared across national divides. This unique situation, along with the sheer ethnic diversity of the municipal assemblies, no doubt added to the men's willingness to compromise. Yet, the triumph of pragmatism in terms of municipal administration is not unusual. Identity politics does not always top the hierarchy of needs. Even in historically contested cities such as Berlin or Nicosia, local governance was primarily concerned with urban development, welfare services, and public utilities. The case of Cieszyn and Český Těšín thus invites us to reconsider the dynamics of municipal life in east central Europe, which has been long overshadowed by the thrill of nationalist rhetoric.

At the same time, this overview of the divided city's management of their shared gas, electricity, and freshwater networks negates neither the rampant violence of the plebiscite period nor the slowly escalating tensions following the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact of 1934 that culminated in the Polish annexation of the region. Rather, it presents a parallel narrative of a relatively mundane municipal reality that necessitated the Polish and Czechoslovak representatives to cross the newly established border and work towards a

common municipal goal despite the worsening political situation. It reveals that shared utility infrastructure engendered conflicts between local leaders and their respective national governments, not nationalist antagonisms on the local level. Local administrators acted as independent agents, defending the interests of their constituents not only alongside those of their nation-states but, when necessary, also against them.

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