

MAREK BIAŁOKUR
University of Opole
Institute of History
ORCID: [0000-0002-8475-033X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8475-033X)

INDEPENDENT POLAND 1918–2018. CELEBRATION OF THE CENTENARY OF THE REVIVAL OF THE POLISH STATE IN OPOLE SILESIA

In Opole Voivodeship, the celebration of the centenary of Poland's regaining independence in November 1918 started already in the autumn of 2017, when its authorities, in reference to the announced government programme "NIEPODLEGŁA" ("Independent"), scheduled for implementation in 2017–2021¹, organized an information-preparatory meeting. Representatives of voivodeship institutions of culture, education and science as well as historians active in associations popularizing widely understood historical subjects were invited to participate. During their second meeting, they discussed – in accordance with the postulate contained in the government programme – on "a dignified and, at the same time, creative celebration of the 100th anniversary of regaining independence" and on the selection of projects whose implementation could be supported by funds from the state budget². It should be noted that the "NIEPODLEGŁA" programme, postulating a "dignified and creative commemoration of the anniversary of regaining freedom", made it possible to take into account various social initiatives organized under the overriding motto "strengthening the sense of civic community". It was also accompanied by the goal of common celebration of values particularly important for Poles, i.e. state freedom, respect for human rights and national dignity and solidarity.

¹ See: <https://www.opole.uw.gov.pl/niepodlegla-czyli-czteroletni-program-na-rzecz-godnego-i-kreatywnego-upamietnienia-rocznicy-odzyskania-wolnosci> (access: 7 XII 2018).

² <https://www.opole.uw.gov.pl/drugie-spotkanie-w-sprawie-niepodleglej> (access: 7 XII 2018).

In the “NIEPODLEGŁA” programme, the centenary activities were outlined in three areas. In the first one, there were to be projects for which the state cultural institutions were responsible. In the second area, addressed to local government cultural institutions and non-governmental organizations, programs were planned to financially support the organization of the celebrations from the group of civic initiatives. The third area concerned the program for the celebrations outside Poland, for which the Adam Mickiewicz Institute was responsible³.

As a result of the organisational activities adopted by the voivodeship authorities, Opolszczyzna received funding in the amount of one hundred thousand zlotys for the implementation of its own three initiatives. The first of them was the unveiling of a patriotic mural on 10th November 2017, whose artistic creation and execution was carried out by employees of the Faculty of Art at the University of Opole. It is located in a representative place in the capital of the voivodeship and the region, i.e. in Opole, on the building of the Voivodeship Office in Piastowska Street⁴. The whole idea was created by the slogan “Polonia Restituta” 1918–2018 and the red logo of the “NIEPODLEGŁA” Programme, which was combined with a composition of images of distinguished Poles treated as “Fathers of Independence”: Wincenty Witos, Wojciech Korfanty, Józef Piłsudski, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Roman Dmowski and the heroes of the struggle for Opolszczyzna to belong to Poland – Alfons Zgrzebniok, Norbert Bończyk and Bronisław Koraszewski⁵.

The second initiative, submitted by the Opole Voivode, which also received support from the state central budget, was a series of six radio broadcasts from Radio Opole entitled: “As it was truly so”, which was carried out in the last two months of 2017. Through them, the audience got to know the history of the distinguished Opolanians, who fought for a free and independent Poland. The broadcasts were realised in schools all over the Opole Voivodship, because the active participation of school children was envisaged in the creation of an information layer about distinguished Poles⁶.

³ <https://niepodlegla.gov.pl/o-niepodleglej/> (access: 7 XII 2018).

⁴ On 11th November 2018, the Opole Voivode unveiled under the mural a plaque with the Decalogue of a Pole written by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka during World War II. For more information see: <https://nto.pl/dekalog-polaka-odsloniety-na-budynku-opolskiego-urzedu-wojewodzkiego/ar/13657104> (access: 7 XII 2018).

⁵ In the original version of the mural, Roman Dmowski was “lacking”, the image of which was added only on 3rd May 2018.

⁶ See: <http://radio.opole.pl/469,2,niepodlegla> (access: 7 XII 2018).

However, the exhibition entitled “Incredible Women of Opole Silesia” aroused the most vivid interest among the initiatives subsidized by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The opening of the exhibition took place on 28th November 2017 in the Voivodship Office in Opole, where the profiles of 32 women, selected in the course of wider discussions, were presented as significant and distinctive in the history of the Opole region. Among them were, i.a. the Piast princesses, an outstanding astronomer from Byczyna, blessed ones of the Catholic Church and well-deserved activists of the national movement, who in the nineteenth and twentieth century were involved in the struggle for Opolszczyzna to belong to Poland. Violetta Porowska, the Opole Vice Voivode, was the originator of this project and the preparation of the exhibition was carried out by the Foundation for the Polish Heritage of Silesia.

Also the local government of the Opole Voivodeship, with the Marshal’s Office at the head, organizing on 23th–24th November 2017, together with the University of Opole, a nationwide scientific conference entitled: “Visions of Polish Independence in the 20th Century. History. Memory. Education”⁷, joined the commemoration of the centenary of regaining independence.

In addition, in November 2017, the Opole Regional Assembly passed a resolution to announce the year 2018 in the Opole Voivodeship – the Year of the Centenary of Independence⁸. The resolution stated that the celebrations will be held under the mobilising motto “Poland – Self-Government – Community”, and the appointed Honorary and Organisational Committee of the celebrations was to propose in each of the Opole powiats the most important tasks to be performed. It focused on supporting the historical education of the youth, organizing cultural events and inspiring local civic initiatives. Referring to the latter initiatives commemorating the centenary of Poland’s regaining of independence, it should be noted that in powiat (county) towns and rural-urban gminas (communes) of Opolszczyzna, concerts of popular music and musical-literary performances with commemorative programmes were organized, as well as many art contests and parades, marches in Polish historical and regional Silesian costumes were prepared.

⁷ <https://www.opolskie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Informacja-nt.-organizacji-jubileuszu.pdf>; <http://radio.opole.pl/18,14069,na-dzien-dobry> (access: 7 XII 2018). See *Wizje niepodległości Polski w XX wieku. Historia – Pamięć – Edukacja*, ed. Marek Białokur, Adriana Dawid and Anna Gołębiowska, Opole 2018, pp. 263 ff.

⁸ The resolution also referred to the simultaneous celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Self-Government of the Voivodeship and Powiats. See: <https://www.opolskie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Informacja-nt.-organizacji-jubileuszu.pdf> (access: 7 XII 2018).

An interesting project was presented by Byczyna, an urban-rural gmina in the Powiat of Kluczbork known in history due to the victorious battle of the army of King Sigismund III Vasa, commanded by the Grand Hetman of the Crown Jan Zamoyski, who defeated the army of Maximilian III Habsburg, Archduke of Austria, on 24th January 1588. On the centenary of regaining Polish independence, it was decided to refer to this event and with the joint financial effort of the inhabitants a hand woven huge tapestry was purchased, being a replica of the painting “Jan Zamoyski at Byczyna” by Jan Matejko (lost during World War II), which was hung in the local historic church of St. Nicholas during a solemn parish ceremony⁹. In Brzeg, in turn, as part of the centenary celebrations, its authorities invited residents to the street program “NIEPODLEGŁA Through the Light”. From 9th to 11th November 2018, at 5 p.m. – 21.00 p.m. multimedia light spectacles were presented to them, which – as it was written – “took the audience 100 years back and told them the history of Poland”¹⁰. Whereas the inhabitants of Kędzierzyn-Koźle, the second largest city in Opolszczyzna after Opole, on 11th November, on the centenary of regaining independence, celebrated the unveiling of a monument to Marshal Józef Piłsudski¹¹. On the same day, in neighbouring Krapkowice, the culmination of the town’s celebrations – on the local Independence Square – was the joint lighting of “one hundred symbolic votive candles” by the inhabitants at 6 p.m.¹²

Museums were particularly involved in the centenary celebrations of regaining independence in Opole Silesia. The list of exhibitions, vernissages, and lectures organised in them is impressive. Employees of the Institute of History of the University of Opole, invited to the Museum in Praszka, conducted a series of lectures on the events of 1918.¹³ At that time, the Museum held two thematic occasional exhibitions: “Towards NIEPODLEGŁA. On the 100th Anniversary of Poland’s Independence” and “Numismatics of NIEPODLEGŁA”, during which each visitor to the exhibition was able to make by themselves their own commemorative

⁹ See: <http://www.ok.byczyna.pl/7619/11-listopada-narodowe-swieto-niepodleglosci.html> (access: 10 XII 2018).

¹⁰ For more information see: <https://bck-brzeg.pl/9-11-11-18-iluminacja-3d-niepodlegla-swiatlem> (access: 10 XII 2018).

¹¹ The monument can be seen, among others, on the website: <https://kk24.pl/obchody-100-lecia-odzyskania-niepodleglosci-w-kedzierzynie-kozlu-fotoreportaz> (access: 10 XII 2018).

¹² <https://krapkowice.pl/6669/wspolnie-swietujmy-100lecie-odzyskania-niepodleglosci.html> (access: 10 XII 2018).

¹³ <http://www.muzeum.praszka.pl/index.php?id=979>; <http://www.muzeum.praszka.pl/index.php?id=1032> (access: 10 XII 2018).

token to celebrate the anniversary¹⁴. The Prudnik Land Museum offered a series of scientific and memorial lectures to the town's residents¹⁵ and the Koźle Land Museum in Kędzierzyn-Koźle arranged an exhibition combined with a concert under the common motto "The Road to Independence". Moreover, educational workshops for school youth were organised under the motto "Independence"¹⁶. The ceremonial lectures took place in the Museum of Silesian Piasts in Brzeg, and the Powiat Museum in Nysa invited to the "Academy of Independence", for a series of lectures illustrated with slides¹⁷. A wider chronological scope was illustrated by the exhibition entitled "Poland Resurrected 1918–2018", prepared in the Museum of Opole Silesia. The exhibition covered not only the atmosphere of the November days, ending the War in 1918, but also the following decades¹⁸.

Particularly noteworthy are the dozens of initiatives carried out in various types of schools, where the most popular form of celebrating the 100th anniversary of regaining independence were students' art and literary competitions and occasional historical presentations, including lectures by invited guests, concerts of patriotic songs and sports competitions. It seems that on the jubilee day of the 100th anniversary there was no educational institution in Opolszczyzna whose youth would not be involved in patriotic celebrations under the white-and-red flag. The culmination of the celebration in most schools was a joint singing of the National Anthem on 9th November 2018 at 11.11 a.m. The most numerous group of performers – with more than 1,500 people – gathered in the Opole Comprehensive Secondary School Complex¹⁹ at 28 Dubois Street. That young people were also joined by a group of students and teachers from the Comprehensive Secondary School No. VIII, the Complex Economic Schools under the name of Gen. Stefan Grot-Rowecki and the Primary School No. 22. With patriotic historical education is connected the presentation

¹⁴ <http://www.muzeum.praszka.pl/index.php?id=1013>; <http://www.muzeum.praszka.pl/index.php?id=1019>; <http://www.muzeum.praszka.pl/index.php?id=1024> (access: 12 XII 2018).

¹⁵ http://muzeumprudnik.pl/muzeum-news-243-100_lat_odzyskania_niepodleglosci___cykl_wykladow.html (access: 12 XII 2018).

¹⁶ <http://muzeumkozle.pl/temat/niepodleglosc-2018/> (access: 12 XII 2018).

¹⁷ <http://zamek.brzeg.pl/aktualnosci/nie-tylko-szabla-wyklad-mariusz-patelskiego/>; <http://muzeum.nysa.pl/web.n4?go=1815> (access: 12 XII 2018).

¹⁸ The exhibition was organised in cooperation with the Silesian Institute in Opole. See: <http://muzeum.opole.pl/uncategorized/polska-zmartwychwstala-otwarcie-wystawy-09-11-2018/> (access: 12 XII 2018).

¹⁹ On this joint singing of the anthem, see: <https://opole.tvp.pl/39883498/wspolne-spiewanie-hymnu-o-1111-w-szkolach-wybrzmial-mazurek-dabrowskiego>; <http://psp2.opole.pl/web.n4?go=3312> (access: 12 XII 2018).

of a commemorative publication issued in 2018 entitled *Polski rok 1918 w podręcznikach do nauczania historii i literaturze dokumentu osobistego* (Polish Year 1918 in textbooks for teaching history and literature of personal document), which was prepared by employees from the Institute of History of the University of Opole, representing the Laboratory of History and Knowledge of Society²⁰.

In the information about the ceremonies commemorating the regaining of Poland's independence in 1918 in Opole Silesia in 2018, it seems necessary to mention the historical specificity of this region, currently called Opolszczyzna and Opole Silesia²¹. In 1918, administratively, it was the Regency of Opole, which was part of the Province of Silesia, part of the Kingdom of Prussia and the Imperial German Reich.

The warfare of 1914–1918 did not reach Silesia, and the truce signed in France, in Compiègne near Rethondes, on 11th November 1918, meant defeat for Germany and victory for the Entente's armies. For many people in Silesia, including the Polish population, this fact was a big surprise, but the creation of independent Poland in November 1918 did not change their legal and state affiliation to Germany. The numerous commemorative undertakings presented earlier, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Poland's Independence, organised in Opole and Opolszczyzna, referred to the events of a hundred years ago in which the Poles of that time could not participate. Only after the defeat of the Nazi Third Reich during World War II did the Great Three on 2nd August 1945 in Potsdam establish the current Polish-German state border.

²⁰ <http://radio.opole.pl/101,261206,polski-rok-1918-w-podrecznikach-do-nauczania-his&s=1&si=1&sp=1>; <https://mbp.opole.pl/relacje-z-wydarzen/polski-rok-1918-w-podrecznikach-do-nauczania-historii-i-literaturze-dokumentu-osobistego/> (access: 12 XII 2018).

²¹ These names were introduced and popularised in the 1920s by Piotr Pampuch, a Silesian publicist, national and plebiscite activist. They are considered to be an ambiguous definition of the administrative area, but, it should be stressed, they have been accepted by many inhabitants of the region.