

Changing Cultural Landscapes: The Case of Post-German Territories in Poland

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Cultural landscapes of Central-Eastern Europe have been devastated by the Second World War and its consequences. Thinking of demolished cities and destroyed historical buildings, one can easily forget about the intangible part of the landscape, so to the narratives standing behind what we see. These were more affected by the unprecedented mass forced migrations that happened after the military actions had ceased. Among the territories that almost completely changed their population over a very short time after the war were the so-called ‘Recovered Territories’, i.e. former German lands attributed to Poland after the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. New inhabitants, who in the majority came there from former Polish territories in the East, found themselves in a ‘land without landscape’, where everything needed new names and reinterpretation.

Cultural landscapes have their own biographies in the *longue durée* perspective (Samuels 1979). They evolve, along with successive generations of humans, as their physical and non-material parts change over time: some buildings disappear, while others are built; shops are turned into pubs, while other pubs are turned into shops; some parks become shopping malls; some districts undergo gentrification, others decay and the reputation and vibes of both change. Furthermore, the intangible part of a landscape changes: narratives such as local legends, folklore, or collective memory slowly transform over time and take on new forms. Landscapes ‘cannot be conceptualized without taking into account the individuals and groups that have shaped them over time’ (Roymans *et al.* 2009). Their biography is the sum and effect of the deeds of all preceding human beings: their culture, history and everyday life. Every human life, in turn, is lived amidst what was made before (Meining 1979: 44).

Landscapes consist of physical and intangible layers, connected to each other similar to the de Saussurian *signifiant* and *signifié* (Ingold 1993). They are full of narratives, some of which are transmitted between generations in collective memory processes, but which also have an individual dimension, thus contributing to individual and collective identities. Tim Ingold writes that cultural landscapes are therefore experienced both socially and individually.

Sometimes landscapes are subject to turbulence, together with the people who live within them. However, natural disasters and wars most commonly destroy the physical part of the landscape, while a certain continuation of narrative stays unbroken because of the people who survive and remain on the given territory. This was observed even in the most critically destroyed places, such as left-bank Warsaw after 1944, 84% of which was flattened, while the Old Town was completely destroyed (Getter 2004). The city was not only partly rebuilt after 1945 to recreate streets and buildings dear to its population: but also, even today, 78 years after its destruction by the Nazis, Warsaw authorities have not abandoned plans to rebuild the Saxon Palace, one of the most representative buildings in the pre-war city, which was detonated in December 1944.

In addition to unprecedented material losses, the Second World War brought massive population flows, forced migration and border changes. Among other arrangements made during the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, the allies decided to relocate millions of ethnic Germans from former German lands given to Poland and, at the same time, to move millions of ethnic Poles from former Polish territories incorporated into the USSR. Up to 12 million Germans had to leave their homes in Central-Eastern Europe (Ther and Siljak 2001) while nearly 2 million ethnic Poles were relocated from the USSR to Poland in its new borders (Ciesielski 2000; Halicka 2020). In the years 1947–1950, more than 140,000 ethnic Ukrainians and Lemkos were deported from South-East Poland to post-German territories in the North and West (Motyka 2011). Additional migrants came from Central Poland to Pomerania, Masuria, Silesia and Eastern Brandenburg.

Such a nearly complete exchange of population was not only a life tragedy to German, Polish, Ukrainian and other expellees, but it was also a disaster to local heritage. Not only was the landscape looted and destroyed in its physical dimension, but also most of its fragile intangible reservoir disappeared when the former inhabitants left. Some villages were abandoned and their remains are still visible in post-German territories (e.g. Sowiróg or *Eulenwinkel*, Lipa Przednia or *Hinter Lipa*, Kluki Ciemińskie or *Zemminer Klucken*). A similar situation was observed in the South-Eastern part of Poland as a consequence of Operation ‘Vistula’^a (involving former Ukrainian or Lemko villages in Bieszczady, including Hulskie, Krywe, Bieliczna). Roma Sendyka (2013: 324), following Claude Lanzmann (1925–2018), calls such places ‘non-sites of memory’ (*non-lieux de mémoire*), because they are the exact opposite of ‘sites of memory’ (monuments, descriptions, museums). Yet, by their very existence, they testify to a difficult past, even though the narrative that stood behind the visible remains is long gone or kept only in the memory of the oldest former German inhabitants who now live far in the West.

German expellees in both German states were disconnected from their *heimat* by the new border on the river Oder and by the new post-war geopolitical system formed after 1945. To the Polish and Ukrainian newcomers, the post-German territories were hostile and unfamiliar lands, lacking any meaning, filled with descriptions in an incomprehensible language (Kuszyk 2019). They were deprived of narratives, and thus they formed a 'land without landscape'.

Landscape described by Tim Ingold as a reality filled with meaningful spheres and 'points of light' was something that post-war Polish (and Ukrainian) immigrants to former German lands did not experience. Instead, they were surrounded by buildings with an alien architecture, street names they did not understand, cemeteries that were not theirs. Moreover, this landscape was perceived as belonging to the enemy whose occupation they suffered from over the previous six years. Yet, as the post-war reality was harsh and most of the displaced persons could take only very little luggage from their belongings left in the East, they took over German houses with all their home furnishings. As described by Karolina Kuszyk (2019), in the post-war months, Polish immigrants even ate cucumbers and other preserves found in German cellars. Today, post-German furniture, tableware and tools are still in use in many families.

From the outset, the change in the cultural landscapes of the former German territories had a strong politically directed component, manifested largely in the creation of the myth of the so-called 'Recovered Territories'. During the Potsdam Conference (17 July to 2 August 1945), Stalin negotiated the handover of some East German lands to Poland in exchange for Eastern Polish lands given to the Soviet Union. Communist authorities explained this as historical justice, a great return of those old Slavic territories that were held by the Piast rulers at the beginning of the Polish state. The problem was that some of them had been a part of Poland only very briefly and far back in the Middle Ages,^b while other fragments had never been part of the Polish state.^c In his book *Polskie złudzenia narodowe* (2006), Ludwik Stomma juxtaposed the major Polish cities with information for how long they had belonged to Poland during the period between 966 and 2005 (Stomma 2006: 19–20). One might be surprised that the distant East Belorussian city of Vitebsk was longer subjected to the Polish state (or rather the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the time) than Olsztyn (*Allenstein*) or Szczecin (*Stettin*). Furthermore, Eastern territories, despite having a mixed and multicultural population, were more connected to Polish culture before the Second World War than West Pomerania, East Brandenburg or even Silesia and Masuria.

The struggles of local authorities to extract any possible connection to Polishness in the newly granted territories are clearly visible in contemporary sources. On 26 June 1946, the Starost of the Warmian town of Pasłek reported to the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Poland for the Masurian District:

I would like to mention that Pasłek belongs to the purely Teutonic poviats, in which the population was almost completely de-nationalized during the seven hundred years of captivity. There are no Masurians or Warmians.^d

Pasłęk never belonged to Poland, not counting several occasions when it was temporarily occupied by Polish troops in the years 1525–1657 when it formed a Polish fief as part of Prussia. Linking the post-war reality of West Pomerania with that of the twelfth century was sometimes equally artificial. Many contemporary settlements, place-names and narratives were simply non-existent in the Middle Ages or were not mentioned in sources. Many had their beginning in German times. But all traces of the German past were condemned to *dammatio memoriae*. As early as 29 January 1945, that is before the Soviet Army had finished capturing these lands, the Plenipotentiary of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland for the Silesian Voivodeship, General Aleksander Zawadzki, issued an Appeal to the Polish population of Upper Silesia, in which he called for the cleansing of towns and villages of ‘all traces of Germanic rule’ (Krutak 2015: 496).

Such cleansing took various iconoclastic forms – from spontaneous destruction and robbery by the Red Army^e and Polish looters to systematic changing of place names,^f and also of all inscriptions in German preserved in restaurants, hotels, administration buildings, cinemas, factories, etc. In the autumn of 1947, i.e. when the situation had stabilized, voivodship authorities for Upper Silesia set up inspection committees to check whether there were any more German inscriptions left on buildings. Their goal was to ensure that all signboards bearing German company names had been removed and no more German names remained on ashtrays, plates or beer coasters. They also put pressure on parishes to chisel off all German inscriptions on gravestones. A separate document advised control of nightclubs, restaurants, special events and family celebrations in which bands might have German songs in their repertoire (Krutak 2015: 509).

Destruction could not pass over German monuments: not just those erected during the Nazi era, but *all* memorials of the German past. A good example were stones and statues commemorating those who had died in the First World War, which were numerous. Almost every town had one in the centre. However, the form, message, language, and most of all the historical and political context made it impossible to preserve these monuments in the so-called ‘Recovered Territories’ (Szajda 2013). Some of these structures were demolished by the fleeing Germans, such as the Tannenberg Memorial, which after 1934 also served as Paul von Hindenburg’s Mausoleum. This large structure, which resembled a medieval castle, was ultimately demolished in 1949. Ironically, its fragments were used to construct the main building of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (KC PZPR) in Warsaw, and other fragments served as material to erect the Monument of Gratitude of the Red Army in Olsztyn (*Allenstein*). Sometimes, cleansing the landscape of visible German traces was done too fast and not thoroughly enough. For example on the brick wall of the train station in Węgorzewo (*Angerburg*) the contours of the old German name of the town are still visible. Other remains were not destroyed, but simply abandoned, as in the case of many First World War cemeteries, now hidden in the forests of Masuria, Pomerania and Silesia.

Cultural landscapes do not remain empty for very long. After 1945, immigrants started to slowly familiarize themselves with their new homeland. First by creating

socially important places, such as shops, schools and churches, later by adding more and more narratives shared individually or socially (Kielar 2000). Post-German lands were deprived of narratives and the Polish repertoire for local landscape was, in many cases, very limited, as it was hard to link everything with the medieval Piasts. Carefully and slowly, local heritage activists, historians, teachers and artists started to search for inspiration in pre-war German texts referring to local topics. One of the most remarkable examples was the absorption of German legends and tales. Many local legends written after 1945 contain themes and motifs taken from pre-war German regional literature. Enriched by the inventiveness of Polish authors and inspirations drawn directly from the cultural landscape, these texts elude the categories describing the processes of cultural transmission, intertextuality and literary recycling, and the transcultural inventing of traditions. Now this mixed Polish-German legendary repertoire became, in many cases, regional canon (Tressenberg 2005; Świrko 1976).

However, the myth of ‘Recovered Territories’ is not dead yet and German heritage can still play an important role in the local politics and cause controversies. In 2005, a new monument was erected in Szczecin. The inscription says: ‘60 years ago Poland returned here’. In the small Pomeranian town of Miastko (*Rummelsburg*) there was a legend of a sixteenth-century local robber, called Rummel, who, like Robin Hood, took from the rich and gave to the poor. Legend wants him also to be founder of Rummelsburg. During the communist era, the town’s name was of course changed and the local robber-hero to some extent forgotten in the framework of the general policy of ‘de-Germanization’. But from 1989 onwards he has become increasingly present in the local landscape as a very attractive branding element. Local authorities have currently initiated the project ‘Rummel’s Land’, a recreation and nature complex with picturesque nature paths and lakes. There is also ‘Rummel’s Castle’ (*Gród Rummela*) – a reconstructed medieval wooden fortification and ‘Rummel’s fountain’ (*Źródło Rummela*) in the forest. In 2009, the Miastko Town Council even issued a special local coin, called the ‘Rummel’ or *dukat Rummela*. Overall, it is a good example of incorporating non-material German heritage into the new local cultural landscape. Nevertheless, when local authorities decided to erect a wooden statue of the robber in 2007, this was protested against by some Council members and Home Army combatants.⁸

Conclusion

After 1945, the Polish ‘Wild West’^h was therefore one of the few examples of ‘lands without a landscape’ in world history. The revanchist politics of the communist Polish government after 1945 and mythologization of the post-German territories as rightfully Polish and only temporarily under German occupation gave this first phase of Poland’s presence there an iconoclastic dimension. Reinvention of the landscape and gradual transformation of ‘dissonant heritage’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996: 21) into a joint Polish-German heritage was a long and still unfinished process

that strongly relied on imposed political interpretations. The first steps in this process were made by local activists and historians. The transformed geopolitical situation after the Polish 'round table', the fall of the Berlin wall and unification of Germany, and finally the integration of Poland into European Union structures and Polish-German reconciliation opened the door more widely for restoration of the German heritage of Silesia, Pomerania, Masuria and East Brandenburg as an important element of their history and culture.

Political transformations went along with the psychological schema proposed by Gwosdz and Murzyn (2003: 191). The initial hostility and intentional destruction were replaced by adaptation and partial assimilation, which with time started to turn into acceptance, internalization, assimilation and reconstruction. After the breakthrough of 1989, local communities more frequently used the post-German heritage for the 'production of locality' (Appadurai 1996), that is, to create new distinctive symbolic spaces in a given area. Nowadays German heritage tends to be accepted as an important part of the history of these lands, and many regional initiatives refer to the German past for political, cultural, commercial reasons (including regional branding) or simply in search of a new local identity.

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Notes

- a. 1947–1950. Forced relocation of around 140,000 Ukrainians and Lemkos from South-East of Poland in its new borders to former German territories in the North and West.
- b. For example, Szczecin only in the years 1121–1185 (Boras 2001: 43–44).
- c. For example most of Masuria, which was a fief of the Polish crown only briefly, in 1525–1657.
- d. After Jankowska-Nagórka (2017), unpublished doctoral thesis. By 'Masurians' or 'Warmians' the author meant people having anything to do with Polish culture, while 'Teutonic' was another term for 'German', relating to the German Teutonic Knights Order, which ruled over East Prussia in the years 1226 (beginning of conquest) to 1525 (secularization of the Order and its feudal tribute to the Polish Kingdom).
- e. One of most famous examples was the destruction of the old town of Legnica (*Liegnitz*) on 11 May 1945, so after the end of warfare, by Soviet soldiers (Dąbrowski 1998: 573). According to various accounts, almost complete annihilation of the historic centre was made by the drunken army marauders celebrating victory as an act of revenge for the war. Possibly they were accompanied by some Polish looters.
- f. It was the duty of the Commission for Establishing Place Names at the Ministry of Public Administration. Sometimes it was not easy to find a good Polish name for a settlement, river or mountain, especially considering the fact the decision was made quickly and the area was very big. The catalogue of new Polish names was published in 1951 by Stanisław Rospond (1951). See also: Utracki (2011).

- g. Polish Home Army or AK (*Armia Krajowa*) during the Second World War was the largest underground military force in Nazi-occupied Europe. The Rummel statue stands in Home Army Street, which added additional fuel to the fire, as the Army fought against German occupation of Poland.
- h. Poland's new territories in the West were initially the lands where law was not respected and therefore they were sometimes called the 'Wild West'.

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