Book Review

Anna Wylegała, **Sabine Rutar**, **Małgorzata Łukianow (eds.),** *No Neighbors' Lands in Postwar Europe. Vanishing Others*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

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The publication, edited by Anna Wylegała, Sabine Rutar, and Małgorzata Łukianow, presents the authors' focused view of the period after the end of World War II in Europe.

The publication opens with stories of two towns, Barysz/Barysh (Galicia) and Piran/Pirano (Istria), and focuses on their postwar fate and the stories of their inhabitants. Postwar changes of the borders of European states, issues of citizenship, departures and arrivals, and (free or forced) migration of people highlight the radical changes that Europeans faced in their daily lives and in their efforts to start a postwar life. The text undermines the idealistic, simplified notion that persists in some public discussions about the joyful beginning of a new life in peace.

The authors of the individual contributions focused on processes that took place at the local level, on the fates and actions of individual groups of inhabitants, and on the interventions of state power and politics. In case studies, they reveal the causes (the history of the place they researched), the processes (that took place there), and their consequences. Their attention is primarily focused on those who remained (or arrived) in the localities to become their (old) new postwar inhabitants.

They thus build on the work of Omer Bartov, Natalia Aleksiun, Jan T. Gross, Joel M. Halpern, David A. Kideckel, and Max Bergholz – their expertise and concepts of local genocide, intimate violence, killing neighbors, and terror and territory.

They use the concept of "no neighbors' land" to analyze postwar resettlement and migration processes that followed the genocide, mass violence, and ethnic cleansing, as well as the border changes They use this concept not only to understand the immediate situation following the end of the war, but also to analyze the long-lasting consequences, politics of memories, and collective memory in territories that were marked by mass atrocities during WWII and lost a significant part of their inhabitants. The focus is on the last decades and the process of change in the cultures of remembrance in the territories under study after the fall of the communist regimes.

The book is divided into four logical and well-thought-out sections. The contributions in each of these portray the processes that shaped reality in selected

territories and localities during the postwar years and their impact on local and newly arrived inhabitants.

In the first part (The Point of Departure: Experiencing the Catastrophe), the authors focused on how people at the local level experienced the catastrophe that destroyed their previous lives and the environment that was their home. The process of radical change continued after the war. This was also the case in the city of Königsberg/Kaliningrad, where the fate of the original German inhabitants was marked, among other things, by efforts to legitimize the Soviet occupation through anti-cosmopolitan campaigns and myths about ancient Slavic territory. N. Eaton notes a surprising similarity in other contexts whereby national majorities in Eastern Europe combined postwar anti-fascism with ethnic nationalism to assert state legitimacy. An example of this is the microhistory of postwar ethnic cleansing and the tragic fate of children's homes for Jewish orphans in Rabka (K. Panz). The main goal of the events in question was to place pressure on the remaining Jews to leave Poland.

The next study looks at the complexities of population movements in another part of Europe – the Istrian peninsula – between 1943 and 1955, when it passed from Italian to Yugoslav sovereignty. The research was conducted in the mid-1990s among the Italian minority and was undoubtedly influenced by the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia and the subsequent war, as pointed out by P. Ballinger who examined issues of solidarity and neighborliness following the significant population exchanges in the town of Rovinj/Rovigno.

M. Venken examines the consequences of changes in state borders in postwar Europe using examples of children's memories of national verification processes in the Belgian-German and Polish-German border areas. She notes the similarities and differences in the narratives, the strategies of the people being verified, and their impact on their daily lives. She points out that her "child" respondents could not understand the complexity and consequences of the whole process at the time they remember, but they witnessed how it affected their parents and loved ones, and disrupted the social order of their communities.

The second part of the book (A New Brave World: Dysfunctionality, Justice, Reconstruction) is devoted to the consequences of "vanishing others", to the attempts to record crimes against civilians in order to punish the perpetrators, and the processes of reconstructing the social and professional structure of the population. A. Wylegała describes the situation in postwar Galicia, a multi-ethnic region where, since 1939, mass violence and murder had been perpetrated against local Jews, Ukrainians, and Poles. When it was finally divided – Western Galicia became part of postwar Poland and Eastern Galicia became part of Soviet Ukraine – there was an exchange of populations between the two states. These events crippled the social and economic system of the region, where entire professional groups became absent,

causing temporary or permanent dysfunction. The economic consequences were only one of the results. The original inhabitants who "disappeared" represented an authentic social system, culture, and way of life that was lost along with them.

V. Bartash describes the consequences of Nazi persecution on Roma communities in the Polish-Ukrainian border areas. She states that it went beyond human losses, physical destruction, and the collapse of community life. The travelling groups used the same route every year and had established contact with the local population, and it was precisely these patterns of cohabitation that the war challenged. Some scholars understand the postwar nomadism as an economic strategy. But Bartash claims this perspective does not sufficiently explain this socio-cultural phenomenon because it overlooks the personal and familial aspects of Romani mobility. She focuses her attention on internal migration within the Soviet Union, as well as cross-border mobility, observing new family-like relationships, "surrogate families" (N. Aleksiun 2020), and the healing and reconstruction processes within Roma communities.

The following study examines the postwar situation in Bulgaria through the lens of the postwar trials of 1944–1945. N. Ragaru traces the social dynamics of violence against Jews during the war, anti-Semitic attitudes at the end of the war, and Jewish reactions to the prosecution of members of the anti-Jewish bureaucracy. She notes manifestations of banal anti-Semitism in these courts, the slow process of restitution of Jewish property, and contrasts these findings with the (still prevalent) construct of a Bulgarian society free of anti-Semitism and tolerant of its minorities.

In her text, M. Havryshko examines the issue of gender-based violence, noting that Soviet authorities had little interest in investigating specific sexual crimes during the war. Nevertheless, she found sufficient material on this issue in the Soviet war crimes trials archives. The author presents records from investigations and witness testimonies, and examines the strategies of victims, eyewitnesses, and perpetrators in individual cases. She points out that although these trials were primarily a powerful tool to restore and reinforce Soviet rule in Ukraine, they contributed significantly to the prosecution of local perpetrators in connection with sexual violence, which was also linked to ethnic violence.

In the third part of the publication (The Unbearable Lightness of Things: Property Issues), the authors explore the question of "vanished others" through the concept of property. B. Klacsmann provides an overview of Jewish property in Hungary and its role in the history of anti-Jewish legislation, which created the context for the Holocaust in this country. She follows the process in which the original Jewish owners sought to recover their property in selected case studies, which, although they do not cover the whole range of restitution cases, highlight the complexity of the various issues surrounding Jewish property. She compares the restitution process in Hungary with that of neighboring countries and concludes that

postwar Hungary was no exception in this region. It also represented a "no neighbors' land" where the local non-Jewish population participated in and profited from the destruction of the local Jewish community. This fact had long-lasting consequences in both economic and social terms, which persist to this day.

E. Grama focuses on the fate of ethnic Germans in postwar Romania, the confiscation and (non-) return of their property. She traces the strategies of the state and the communist regime, which turned this minority into a kind of hostage, exploiting them to implement its plans both domestically and in foreign policy.

The Gottschee Germans, inhabitants of Kočevje/Gottschee, a region in present-day Slovenia, belonged to one of the oldest German ethnic groups outside Germany and Austria. They had been living mainly from agriculture since the 14th century. M. Ferenc outlines the historical and social context in which the territory and its inhabitants found themselves from 1941 onwards. He traces the fate of the original German inhabitants and the localities they inhabited. Their postwar fate is like that of German minorities in other parts of Europe. The author notes that the consequences of these processes reach into the present day, with the disappearance of the original inhabitants and traces of their 600-year presence blurred in the landscape and memory.

In her contribution, S. Rutar analyzes the Slovenian film Piran-Pirano, which she calls "a drama about belonging to a place to which one cannot truly return." It artistically records the return of an emigrant, an original Italian inhabitant of the city, after 60 years, and explores issues such as the violent loss of home and social voids created in the northeastern Adriatic by the upheavals associated with World War II and its aftermath.

The fourth part of the publication (Living with the Dead: Memory and Commemoration) includes studies that focus on the content of collective memories and ways of remembering those who "disappeared" or were expelled during and after the war. It is a logical conclusion to the previous sections and observes how the current inhabitants of these countries (do not) come to terms with the past of their localities in the process of commemoration.

Irina Rebrova describes the difficult process of commemorating the Holocaust in (post)Soviet Russia. She presents the actors, arguments, situations, and "search for the right words" that accompanied efforts to commemorate the victims of the mass murder of Jews at Zmievskaya Balka, now part of Roston-on-Don.

Similar situations are described by J. Wyss, who studies collective amnesia in Czech Silesia. She uses the example of the city of Opava to illustrate the efforts and arguments accompanying attempts to create two memorials – one to the Jewish inhabitants who "disappeared" during the Holocaust and one to the original German inhabitants who were expelled from their hometown after 1945. While a memorial to the local Jewish community has existed in the city since 2013, there is still no

memorial to the German inhabitants. The text presents the arguments of local authorities and representatives of the German minority in negotiations on the erection of the memorial. The author places it in a broader national context. In doing so, she reflects on the construction of the city's collective memory and self-presentation and points to the determinants that shape it.

Like the previous text, Łukianow's article is based on interviews with eyewitnesses and their descendants. In her study, which follows the stories of two locations (Łubno and Barysh), she combines historical facts about ethnically motivated violence and mass killings with what has been preserved in the memories of current residents. In addition to interpretations concerning the construction of local/national memory, the role of emotions, feelings of shame, guilt, and responsibility, we also find reflections on the positionality of the researchers, their role during research interviews, and their perception by research partners. It is precisely such analyses and considerations that are important for a better understanding of the research results.

The publication "No Neighbors' Land" brings together detailed studies by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists who take a comprehensive and comparative approach that focuses on the processes of destruction and renewal in the very places where "others disappeared."

It offers new perspectives on the processes of postwar reconstruction in destroyed European communities, on ways of coming to terms with what happened, and on how memories were negotiated and recounted. The scope of the book ranges from the period when Europe was on the edge of the Cold War to the present day. The texts cover a wide range of territories, although countries that became part of the Soviet bloc following the war predominate. At the same time, they present a combination of different methodological approaches, which, thanks to their focus on the subjective aspects of social change and locality, result in a new picture of the situations and phenomena under investigation.

Eighty years have passed since the end of World War II. We live in a time of uncertainty, armed conflicts, even in Europe, mass violence, but also the falsification of scientific facts and propaganda. At the end of the book, the editors express their hope that their work will help our contemporaries understand that we are still living with the consequences of World War II and that knowledge about the postwar period can help us better understand current processes and situations in European countries. It makes sense to me – may their wish come true.