

Historical Culture and Territoriality

Social Appropriation in the German-Polish Border Region
in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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ENTANGLED HISTORICAL CULTURES AND APPROPRIATION OF A HYBRID TERRITORY

Border areas and regions characterized by their multicultural past, as exemplified by Germany's former eastern region and Poland's western region today, are experimental fields for changing "territorial regimes." This term refers to the individual and collective relationship to a politically structured territory, defined here as historical territory, i.e. as a geographical system of historically evolved relations. In the following, the changing forms of subjective identification of the territory situated in this area of tension between Germany and Poland are discussed.

The present contribution aims to clarify the changing modes of social appropriation of territories, especially border territories. In other words, it seeks to analyze the mutually dependent relationship of territoriality and historical culture.¹ Its focus is on German-Polish border areas. How did historical culture determine the geographical perception of this territory? To what extent did perception of the territory influence the historical culture(s) in the society on each side of the border? Obviously, significant changes emerged in the way people experienced this border region in the interplay with its political affiliations. Conversely, political constellations that resulted in territorial changes were also produced on a symbolic level (see Bourdieu 2001). It follows that analysis of the diverse constructions of

1 | For the term *historical culture*, see de Jong (1997: 282).

*mental mapping*² is a promising method for approaching the German-Polish border region.

It is critically important to recognize that the interwoven strands of “real history” are also reproduced on the terrain of recollections, cultural memories, and politics of history. The tense political and social relationship that characterized the region’s multicultural existence is reflected in a correspondingly complex interplay and counterpoising of cultural memories and politics of history in which the actual demarcations or mental mapping of the territory fulfilled a key function.

METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS: SOURCES AND CASE STUDIES

We shall focus on four different cultural landscapes, moving from north to south: East Prussia with its strong mythical connotations (Kossert 2005); Danzig (Gdansk), which has stood as the outstanding example of a city on the border between Poland and Germany since the Middle Ages and which has a highly distinctive local identity (Loew 2003); the region of Greater Poland (*Wielkopolska*), which consisted of the Grand Duchy (later Province) of Posen in the Prussian and Prussian-German eras and which became the central setting for struggles over national identity before 1914 (Serrier 2002a, 2005); and finally, Silesia, which encompasses also Upper Silesia (Struve/Ther 2002; Struve 2003).

Of the three dimensions of historical culture defined by Jörn Rüsen – the cognitive, the aesthetic, and the political – we shall focus on the latter two, giving examples from travelogues, light fiction, and belles lettres as well as architecture and urban planning.

TERRITORIAL REGIMES: FROM SEALED TO OPEN TERRITORY?

If we now look specifically at the successive “territorial regimes” that governed the German-Polish border region over the last two centuries, we can draw a broad line through all the political and territorial upheavals from the 19th century to the post-1989 period and trace the transition from the desire for closure and mutual partitioning of the territory to recent

2 | For the term *mental map*, see Schenk (2002).

attempts to promote “open regionalism” (Robert Traba) or “postmodern regionalism” (Kazimierz Brakoniecki) by glorifying the diversity of the historical legacy, giving equal weight to each position.³ In doing so, however, we have to be careful to avoid succumbing to a sentimental, idealized image of the present.⁴

This brings us to a point of principle. A disturbing effect of the tragic chapters in the history of 20th-century German-Polish relations is that the contemporary, and quite spectacular, attempts observable in Germany and Poland to establish identity in a “postmodern” sense, whether viable or not, are doomed to be backward projections of destroyed multiculturalism. It is impossible to understand the present vision of “remixing Europe”⁵ without noting the bitter paradox that this imaginary process of remixing is actually flourishing against the backdrop of the radical schism that ultimately divided the Germans and the Poles geographically from each other during the war and the immediate postwar period.

Some pessimists offer arguments that cannot be contemplated within the bounds of political correctness: they argue that it was actually the ethnic-territorial homogenization of the Third Reich and the early People’s Republic of Poland that created the necessary conditions for today’s German-Polish dialogue. Proponents of this view include Stefan Chwin, whose novel *Hanemann* was published in 1995 (and appeared in English as *Death in Danzig* in 2004). Chwin’s Gdansk novel established him as one of the first contemporary Polish authors to focus on the moment of expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland as a central issue (Chwin 1999). Modern commentators like Chwin suggest provocatively that the Western Allies already mooted pacification of the German-Polish border as the result of the enforced resettlement of Germans east of the Oder and Neisse in the context of the Potsdam Treaty (Brandes 2001).

On the topic of expulsion, at this point we should mention the difference between two types of multiculturalism, a distinction that is fundamental for perception of the symbolic territory. There is a multiculturalism of togetherness or contiguity, or even mutual opposition, which is typical for the regions under consideration in the period of population shifts. This was counterpoised after 1945 or 1989 to a “multiculturalism”

3 | See the *Borussia* magazine series.

4 | For a polemic view of “reconciliation kitsch,” see Bachmann (1994: 41f.).

5 | Borrowed from the term “unmixing Europe”. See Schlögel (2001).

of successive existence, in which in one case the national homogeneous society of postwar Poland replaced the earlier multicultural society, but in many other cases it succeeded and replaced a different homogeneous society, namely German society. In this context, the careful use of quotation marks fulfils a precise purpose, because this “successive multiculturalism” involves the idea of the palimpsest that allows us to read the present and the lost past simultaneously on the historical parchment of a given space. In the space we commingle the periods.⁶

CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

In the political context of the Prussian and Prussian-German state in the 19th century, the processes of mutual social exclusion based on categories of national identification were revealed in several stages. Around 1900 the dominant picture was of a mirrored dynamization of competing nationalisms.

The territorial conflict was expanded and intensified with terrible cruelty under the auspices of the “brutalization” of political morals after the First World War (Mosse 1990). The plans for mutual exclusion, intended at the time to achieve “healthy relations” (Esch 1998) in the central European mosaic of nationalities, were actually implemented in the wider context of the Second World War (1939-1948) by resettlement policies. The Germans began this during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Only a few years later, German inhabitants fled in the opposite direction to escape the advancing Red Army at the end of the war or and in the following months and years were forcibly resettled from their “adopted” homes in Silesia, Pomerania, and East Prussia by Poland’s new communist rulers and by “repatriated persons” from the territory of “Kresy” in eastern Poland.⁷ The current idea (at least in the context of the EU) of a territory that has become wide open again and of a shared historical legacy (Mazur 2003) blatantly contradicts the momentous exclusion of the mutual “other” from the national community’s imagination. Despite the new type of reconciliation paradigm, this still partly persists today and was a major structural factor for the region until the collapse of the Iron Curtain.

6 | Paraphrasing Schlögel’s title. See Schlögel (2003).

7 | For a general overview see Ther (2011).

FLUID TRANSITIONS: POSEN IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The collective processes of differentiation typical of the whole nation in the 19th century were even more intense in the province of East Prussia, which was very mixed in terms of language, ethnicity, and culture in that period. For example, the eastern border regions of Prussia, or the German Reich after 1871, were populated by Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, and several Slavic-speaking minorities of unspecified national identity. From a transnational perspective the Reich appears as an empire of linguistic hybridity, particularly in the Prussian area of partitioned Poland (Serrier 2005).

The Prussian province of Posen around the year 1900 is a good example of the relation between historical culture and territoriality. The attempt by this border region with its Polish majority to identify itself with Germany was based on the creation of a “German” homeland conceived as a local metaphor for the whole nation (Cofino 1997). The invention of a German-encoded border province in the former Polish area of Greater Poland was largely achieved by trying to produce an adequate regional image. The representatives of the administration, and not least the assimilated Jews, played a bigger role in this than the weak regional elites on the German side (Serrier 2009).

Despite the exploitation of history in this province of eastern Prussia with its historically Polish character, the basically emotional relationship between “our own private little country” and the national fatherland implied by the term “homeland” (*Heimat*), which was rooted in a person’s self-identification with his or her surroundings (Petri 2001), proved extremely difficult to maintain. The Germans, confronted by the encroachment of the “Polish community in the Prussian state” (Bernhard 1907), were concerned about their self-image. The “Polish threat,” sometimes extrapolated to the whole Slav people, was a common catchphrase (Renz 1905; Schlager 1902; Schirmacher 1908).

The centrality of the region in Polish memory contrasted with this. As a result, from the German standpoint, the territory was seen first as a region of fluid transitions, and second as an underdeveloped, still uncharted area – a typically colonialist view. “The east begins at the Silesian Railway Station in Berlin.” This remark was made shortly before the First World War by a reporter from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* newspaper on his way to the so-called “Ostmark” (“Eastern March”) (*Frankfurter Zeitung*

1911). His description clearly contradicted the propagandist speeches about the province's successful integration since its annexation by Prussia a century earlier.

The problematic situation described above gave rise to several simultaneous dilemmas for the Germans of Posen. Historical claims based on events that occurred before 1793 could sometimes prove extremely complicated, since the "German" epoch of medieval colonization of Eastern Europe was followed by the unambiguous "Polonization" of the modern era. The experience of historical characterization of the territory influenced the perception of the space and the regional relationship to history. The fashion for futuristic projections was enthusiastically welcomed, as was the trend for erecting historicizing buildings. A prime example of this was the Kaiserpfalz (Imperial Palace), dedicated in 1910. At the same time, inventing tradition went along with exhibiting innovation. The 1911 East German Exhibition (*Ostdeutsche Ausstellung*) in Posen served to elevate the province to a showcase of German modernity on the eastern border. Even if it had not been German in the past, so the argument went, Posen should at least be a flourishing area of Germany in the future.

The "toponymic waltz" (Serrier 2005: 262ff.) characteristic of the Posen region for the entire period of the partition of Poland offers a good introduction to the relationship between territoriality and historical culture. The historical watershed of the divisions of Poland raised the issue of a suitable name for former Greater Poland. The old name *Wielkopolska* seemed appropriate as a reminder of historical continuity. Even the Germans used the term "Greater Poland" (*Großpolen*) until 1848. In the second half of the 19th century there were three rival proposals for identification, which illustrates the mutual interaction of historical cultures as well as their mental positioning: "Wielkopolska," "Province of Posen," and "Ostmark." All these terms were used by various social groups around 1900; they express the historically nourished Polish resistance against the Prussian *tabula rasa*, or the current relations at that time (the term "province"), or the future projections typical of the German mode of mental appropriation of territory.

THE TROUBLED PAST: DANZIG IN THE PRUSSIAN-GERMAN PERIOD

While a symbolic landscape first had to be created for the German side in Posen, the city of Danzig was a very different case. The tense relationship between the perspective of the local patriots and that of the Prussians, later Prussian-Germans, influenced the city's historical culture in the 19th century. Just as the Prussian takeover in 1793 led to inevitable confrontation between the old and new referential frameworks for the territory, some of the corresponding historical narratives proved incompatible. With the Prussianization of the geographical coordinates by the Prussian-state camp, those who saw themselves as city patriots recognized the oppositional potential of local history as an opportunity for identification beyond any state-endowed meaning. In relation to the affiliation of the symbolic territory over time, the historical interpretation models ultimately shifted towards a national interpretation. The project of re-establishing the nation as German resulted largely in anachronistic retrograde projections of emerging German-Polish antagonism onto the local past.

The degree of tension between local and national identities and the game played with history arising from this conflict are well illustrated by the literally "moving" fate of the statue of August III in the Artushof, as described by Peter Oliver Loew. The Artushof, along with the town hall and the imposing edifice of St. Mary's Church (the Marienkirche), was a major landmark in the city. A renowned emblem of the social and urban life of the Hanseatic city, it demonstrated the revived political self-confidence of Danzig's citizens to the outside world. Domestically it had always functioned as a special place of identification (Serrier 2002b).

Around the turn of the 18th-19th century, it became clear that nationalism was insidiously usurping the symbolism of the Artushof. Yet the identification was by no means wholly German nationalist. In fact, the Danzigers' pride resided in their enduring independence from the Teutonic Order-State and the German Reich during the centuries of unified rule by the Kingdom of Poland. The marble statue of the Polish king August III was dedicated in the Artushof in 1755. However, commemoration of the Polish king, who belonged to the Saxon dynasty, was not very welcome in Prussian Danzig. In 1831 the statue had to be removed from its place in the middle of the courtyard to an unobtrusive corner. The relegation caused inevitable uproar, resulting in August III being restored to his for-

mer place in 1857. In 1931, in the Free State of Danzig, then surrounded by Polish territory, the statue was finally retired to the city museum (Loew 2000).

Posen and Danzig both became Prussian at the same time, and both belonged to the larger German-Polish border region. Yet in some respects they present widely diverging pictures of historical politics and historical culture. This relates back to the different forms of territoriality in the two cities. The enforced concentration on local factors for pragmatic reasons posed a challenge to the 19th-century idea of the nation state and its desire for unity and homogeneity.

UPPER SILESIA AND EAST PRUSSIA AS THE “BULWARK” AND “POSTERN” TO THE EAST IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

The experiences of the maximum expansion of the German eastern front during the First World War and the subsequent defeat of the German Empire and reconstitution of the Polish state, together with the restructuring of Europe decided in Versailles, profoundly changed the political and psychological framework of territorial perception in the German-Polish border region (Chu 2008). Hope of assimilation of the Polish population was not just destroyed. In fact, the resurrection of a Polish state confirmed the reality of the “Polish threat.” Many Germans had already lost their homeland in Posen, West Prussia, and parts of Upper Silesia. In the course of this upheaval, a fundamental change also occurred in relation to the border area. It was no longer a matter of assimilating a territory of mixed nationalities under a German government, but of defending or recapturing a territory that would be seen as under threat from a German nationalist point of view, while the Poles were the new nation-state (Dyroff 2007). Every party in the Weimar republic shared the revisionist border policy on the Reich’s eastern border with the sole exception of the German Communist Party (KPD). The denial of Poland’s right to the former Prussian or German eastern regions fostered the revanchist propaganda of the anti-democratic right-wing in the Weimar parliament. It was only logical for Hitler to describe the Nazi military conquests in the Poland campaign of 1939 as reclaiming the seceded territories.

Nationalist resentment in Germany after 1918, after its great power ambitions had been quashed, opened the way for extremely rash imperial

concepts of territory in Central Eastern and Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the new German complex about the east (Koenen 2005), and the sense of wrongful injury to the organic integrity of the national corpus, inspired the exact opposite: obsessive fixation on border regions. It was not only the physical border, but also that the new acceptance of collective brutalization meant that a psychological threshold had been crossed. On the scale of possibilities for national dramatization, defense of the border *per se* replaced the image of a territory to be pacified.

This process is clearly illustrated by the transition from the turn-of-the-century Ostmark literature to the borderland literature of the interwar years, combined with a geographical shift from Posen to Upper Silesia or East Prussia. “Where was Germany?” was the question in *Die Geächteten* (*The Outlaws*, 1930), Ernst von Salomon’s novel about the Freikorps. “Germany was the place that was being fought for [...] Germany was on the border.” The answer is so surprising because, with harsh brevity, it elides the identity of the whole nation with the mystique of the border. Statements or notions of this kind were by no means isolated occurrences in the Weimar period.

The cover picture of Herybert Menzel’s Nazi novel, *Umstrittene Erde* (*Disputed Soil*, 1930), shows shadowy Polish lancers emerging from the dark night and crossing a graphically demarcated border, the Reich border. Similarly, the entire perception of the German-Polish border, which is sometimes described as “bleeding,” became more or less “militarized.” By contrast, utopias of reconciliation, as in Viktor Kaluza’s novel about Upper Silesia, *Das Buch vom Kumpel Janek* (1934), were a rarity. An extreme example of propagandist manipulation was a novel from 1932 that actually caused a diplomatic incident with Poland. Its title was deliberately aggressive: *Achtung! Ostmarkenrundfunk! Polnische Truppen haben heute Nacht die ostpreußische Grenze überschritten!* (*Attention! Ostmark Radio! Polish Troops Crossed the East Prussian Border Last Night!*) This unusually long title with its strident tone masqueraded as a genuine press report. To make it look like an authentic newspaper cutting, the advertising poster for the book omitted details about the author and publisher. A radio announcement triggered a panic reaction in East Prussia. The newspaper *Die Weltbühne* of 23 February 1932 explained Hitler’s lead over Hindenburg in the 1932 presidential elections in some Masurian electoral districts with reference to the book’s local impact. Its author, Hans Nitram, was later employed in Goebbels’ propaganda ministry (Traba 2005a: 275.).

REMIKING MEMORIES: FROM DIVIDED REMEMBRANCES TO A COMMON MEMORY?

Given the traumatic experience of “unmixing Europe” during the Nazi occupation and the early postwar period, it is evident that the perception of territory as a key cultural meeting-place between Germany and Poland was initially blocked. In the second half of the 20th century, independently of all the retrogressive steps conditioned by conjoining factors, there was a gradual development, picking up speed after 1989, from the destruction and burial of the “foreign” encoding of a symbolic territory to the discovery of (or search for) traces of the “other” past. As numerous local examples show, the past is not just a legacy that cannot be repressed; on the contrary, increasingly large groups from the second or third generation, descendants of more recent Polish settlers in the northwestern Polish regions, are consciously tracking it down and bringing it to light.

Looking at the interplay of territorial and historical consciousness, it is important to note that the moment of a mirror-inverted psychological blocking off of the “other” among the Polish and the Germans meant shutting out specific historical experiences and periods. German publications in expellee circles after the war sometimes gave the impression that the history of Danzig and Breslau had come to a standstill in 1945. Similarly, Polish attempts at establishing Polish neighborhoods by changing street names, deliberate “de-Germanizing actions” (Linek 1997) and Polish re-coding of existing places in Opole, Gdansk, Szczecin, or Wrocław,⁸ were caught in the same need for homogenization.

In Poland, with the flourishing of free speech since the fall of the Iron Curtain, there has been a great increase in literary and scholarly works and a growth in regional cultural and historical associations discussing the topic of the pluricultural past of the northwest of Poland today. After 1945 the new political leadership in Warsaw created the image of a Poland that had been eternally homogeneous in order to stabilize the deep turmoil in the country and legitimize the Communist regime (Zaremba 2005). Although the myth of the “reclaimed” original Polish regions was

8 | To read how German Danzig turned into Polish Gdańsk see Loew (2003a); for Breslau/Wrocław see Thum (2011); about Breslau/Wrocław see also Davies/Moorhouse (2002); for Stettin/Sczcecin see Musekamp (2010); for a general overview see Serrier (2007).

increasingly questioned over time, for a long period any doubts about this dogma were seen as a provocation, both domestically and geopolitically. Jan Józef Lipski's statement that the Poles are the "depositories of German cultural heritage in Poland" was only accepted by the government and wide sections of society after 1989, and actually adopted as a new principle of action. More recently, the step from the cultural responsibility Lipski meant by the term "depository" to the freedom of players to shape society together was taken by Robert Traba, the head of the Allenstein cultural association, *Borussia*, when he wrote in 2001, the 300th jubilee of the coronation of the first Prussian king, Frederick I:

We are no longer only depositories; we are becoming intellectual co-inheritors of the Prussian cultural heritage. For the first time, this is happening not as a result of attempts at national appropriation, but because of the natural desire for emotional identification with the cultural landscape that has to be saved (Traba 2005b).

On the same note, after the Prussian jubilee year in 2001 Adam Krzemiński, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Polityka*, published an article with the still-provocative title, "Prussia, that's us!" (Krzemiński 2001). It has become quite common for Polish authors today to tackle controversial topics like the expulsion of the Germans from their cities, as Stefan Chwin did in his novel *Death in Danzig*, or Artur Daniel Liskowacki in his Szczecin trilogy. In this context we should mention the most spectacular and best-known process of historical revision: Polish scholarly historical studies and literary works on the expulsion of the Germans from Poland. The four-volume edition of the Polish records of this, produced by joint German-Polish cooperation, is a particularly important example here (Lemberg/Borodziej 2000-2004).

"Letting other people tell your story from their viewpoint" corresponds exactly to Paul Ricoeur's recent ideas on the topic of the mourning process and translation between cultures. A revived image of history and a new relationship to the concept of "*Heimat*" are inseparably linked here. In the northwestern regions of Poland, the former "German East," a new regional identity is taking root with a liberated approach to the history before 1945.

Writers such as Günter Grass, Horst Bienek, Siegfried Lenz and Arno Schmidt in West Germany, and Christa Wolf and Johannes Bobrowski in East Germany, alongside public figures like Countess Marion Dönhoff

and, not least, the turn in West German policy towards East Germany associated with Willy Brandt, have made a significant contribution in this area. All these influential figures showed their willingness to tackle the past by critically challenging the overly emotional attitude to the concept of *Heimat* propagated by German expellee associations, or by dissociating themselves from the “anti-fascist” discourse of the former East German regime. Their approaches were welcomed particularly eagerly in oppositional circles in Poland. They served as a rebuttal of alleged “West German revanchism.” Through this, the representatives of a “different” Germany paved the way to fundamentally question the legitimacy of the communist rulers in the People’s Republic of Poland with their policy of suspicion towards Germany.

There is little doubt that the preparatory effect of that ideological criticism, particularly on the West German side, was essential for the “open regionalism” advocated by groups such as the Polish cultural society *Borussia* in Olsztyn, in former East Prussia. In the literary sphere this mutual rapprochement and recognition is reflected in works by authors such as Paweł Huelle, Olga Tokarczuk, Stefan Chwin, and Artur Daniel Liskowacki, who have become so important now and who are explicitly re-evaluating the intellectual heritage of the German past for their new home towns, Gdansk, Szczecin, and Wałbrzych. This paradigm change in the perception of the symbolic territory is also reflected on the symbolic level of the politics of history. For instance, in 2002 the city of Gdansk, to honour its “expelled son” Günter Grass, erected a statue of his fetish figure, Oskar Matzerath (Serrier forthcoming).

The essay “Bresław” by the writer Andrzej Zawada from Wrocław represents this trend, which tends towards hybridization, of combining the German past with the Polish present. The city of “Bresław” doesn’t exist on any map. The name, a fictitious blend of Polish and German, suggests there could soon be intermingling of identity and not only in historians’ fantasy or in writers’ imagination (Zawada 1996). It may really be the case that the regime of national territoriality, which relies on demarcation, is in the process of dissolution (at least in some people’s minds).

CONCLUSION

We could derive the following proposition on these current events in Poland's northwestern regions. Despite the discontinuity of players, the unity of place fulfils the decisive function in the configuration of "cultural memory," while the dividing moment is mainly preserved in "communicative memories," which remain unique. We still have to ask, how representative is the change in the territorial regime and in historical culture at the moment? Meanwhile, the shared retrospective view of this territory, which was once partitioned and partly disputed, testifies perhaps only to the constitution of a specific German-Polish "field" that is legitimated on both sides by maintaining political dialogue and by the sphere of cultural and scholarly collaboration, but that is far from being equivalent to the societies as a whole. Now and then, signs of return to a traditional victim discourse hit the headlines on both sides of the Oder.

Whatever the case, despite their fragmentary character, which can hardly be denied, the individual studies outlined in the present contribution have demonstrated that the *histoire croisée* approach based on historical relations can prove fertile for the specific field of research on collective memory. In fact, examining the interrelation of German and Polish collective memories from the aspect of their mutual interdependence is proving extremely productive, whether for analyzing the mutual delimitation of collective memories that characterized the regime of symbolic national territoriality, or for setting the present approaches of a German-Polish "memory transfer" against the historical backdrop with due caution and sobriety.

Translated from German by Karen Margolis

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