

Wrocław and the myth of the multicultural border city

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After the collapse of the communist power block in 1989, capital cities such as Budapest, Prague and Warsaw had the best starting positions for the development of their own distinctive post-socialist variant of the international market economy. Since then, however, smaller cities, such as Wrocław – the fourth largest city in Poland in terms of population – have been more creative in devising economic and cultural initiatives and strategies to position the city in both the Eastern and the Western European landscape in a recognizable fashion. One of the themes by means of which Wrocław presents itself is that of a European multicultural border city. The issue concerns the extent to which the myth of a richly stratified multicultural history does justice to the reality of the city's recent turbulent and violent past.

The cities of Eastern Europe are the motors transforming the post socialist world. The breathtaking changes that have taken place since 1989 are most visible in the streets of cities such as St Petersburg, Vilnius, Budapest or Ljubljana. Whether we think of splendidly restored Old Towns invoking a pre-socialist past or of new skyscrapers, symbols of economic success, it is as if the cities have suddenly come to life again after a long deep sleep during socialism. They set the tune for the economic, social and cultural transformation from Prague to Vladivostok, and largely shape the new image of the post-socialist countries. Because proximity to the centres of political power is always an important factor for international business, cities such as Moscow, Riga, Warsaw, Budapest and Prague started in 1989 from the 'pole position' in the race for international investment. The capitals were also in much better shape than the often run-down cities at the peripheries and thus benefited more from the growing stream of tourists bringing additional money into the country. They have made the most impressive progress in leaving behind the grey drabness of socialism. Today their

elegant shopping arcades and grand hotels can compete with those in any cities in the world.

The smaller cities are trying to catch up with the privileged capitals and are seizing the opportunities furnished by the market economy. Wrocław is among the most ambitious of these. The urban centre of Silesia in western Poland, Wrocław is the country's fourth most populous city. But Wrocław is in a geographically privileged position. The city is closer to the economic centres of the European Union than Warsaw and Krakow, and it has a key location in the emerging pan-European network of highways, railroads, and waterways. In addition, Wrocław offers much that seems promising for a prosperous future in the new Europe: a strong industrial base, skilled labour, several colleges and universities, a vivid cultural life, and one of the most impressive historical city centres in Europe. Furthermore, the city has a dynamic local government, which has worked hard in the last decade to make Wrocław widely known. In 1997, the Eucharist World Congress met in Wrocław, and was attended by Pope John Paul II. In 2000, the city celebrated its millennium by inviting guests from all over the world. Two years later, the University of Wrocław celebrated its 300th anniversary, again a major event with an international audience. In the same year, a new city history was published in three editions – Polish, English and German.¹ Interestingly enough, the municipal government itself took the initiative in this ambitious project, chose the famous British historian Norman Davies as the principal author, and came up with a good deal of the necessary funds. Wrocław's application for the World Exhibition in 2010, submitted at about the same time, was not successful, but Wrocław, a city of 650,000 inhabitants, was hardly ashamed to be defeated by a booming metropolis such as Shanghai with a population of over 13 million!

One of the key elements in Wrocław's campaign to build its reputation abroad is the image of a multicultural European border city. In one of the advertising brochures that the local Expo 2010 Committee published during Wrocław's application for the World Exhibition, we read: 'Wrocław's history, full of changes, has contributed to the development of an open-minded and multicultural city, a city where various European traditions are blended and tied together.'² On its official homepage, the municipality depicts the city in a similar way, calling it 'an excellent example of a multicultural metropolis situated at the interface of ethnically diverse areas.'³ According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 'multiculturalism' means 'the coexistence of many cultures in a locality, without any one culture dominating the region.'⁴ Wrocław's present-day population, however, is completely Polish, and approximately 99% of the citizens belong to the Catholic Church. With respect to the ethnic composition of the population, it would indeed be hard to find a city more homogeneous than Wrocław. So what is Wrocław's

contemporary self-perception as a place of extraordinary multiculturalism based upon, if not on its present day population?

It is based on Wrocław's history and that of the entire province of Silesia. Silesia constitutes a border region *par excellence*. Located between Bohemia, Germany and Poland, the province was exposed to various cultural influences and belonged in the course of history to a number of different states. Silesia was a part of Poland and Bohemia in the Middle Ages, became a province of the Habsburg Empire in the 16th century, and of Prussia in the 18th century. Besides this, a complex history of migration and acculturation brought about an ethnically mixed German–Polish–Czech population, parts of which felt more bound to Silesia itself than to the rising nation-states of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Silesia was also heterogeneous in terms of religion, with more Protestant areas in the north and more Catholic ones in the south, and with large Jewish communities existing in the Silesian towns and cities, the largest of which was in Wrocław. At the turn of the 19th century, Silesia, then part of the German Reich, was predominantly a German-speaking region with larger Polish communities living only in the southeast. Nevertheless, there were still remnants of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity in Silesia that had been typical for Eastern Europe at a time when Western Europe was already comprised of nation states with ethnically more or less homogeneous societies.

But by the start of the 20th century, Eastern Europe's multi-ethnicity was about to disappear by force. When the multinational Empires of the European East fell at the end of World War I and were regarded disparagingly as 'peoples' prisons', the homogeneous nation-state became the model from Tallinn to Sofia. But the national liberation of some led to the nationalistic suppression of others. Ethnic minorities, coming into being in all the self-declared nation-states, found themselves in an unfavourable position. The new national elites saw them as obstacles in the path of national homogeneity or even as a potential threat to their nation's territorial integrity. A tragic history of forced assimilation and resettlement, of expulsion and genocide began. Over the course of the 20th century, half a continent was 'ethnically cleansed', many millions were driven from their homes in order to create idealized ethnically homogeneous societies. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives due to the action of states and their police or military forces, which carried out these forced resettlements. Incidentally, this violent ethnic homogenization has not yet come to an end as we are witnessing a similar ongoing process in the former Yugoslavia and at Russia's Caucasian border.

As a result of this 'unmixing' of populations,⁵ entire provinces and cities of Eastern Europe have changed their face. It is especially border cities, caught in conflicts, that fell victim to this policy. Present-day Bratislava (Pressburg, Pozsony), the capital of Slovakia that once belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary,

is ethnically more than 90% Slovakian with only small Czech and Hungarians minorities. In 1930, however, the Slovaks constituted only one third of its population, of the remainder, 25% were Germans, 22% Czechs, 16% Hungarians, and 4% Jews. Lviv (Lwów, Lemberg) was once the capital of the Habsburg province of Galicia. On the eve of World War II, the city, then called Lwów, was part of Poland. In ethnic terms its inhabitants were overwhelmingly Polish and Jewish. The Ukrainian minority was politically active, but numerically small. However, as a consequence of the Holocaust, the Soviet annexation of East Galicia, and a Ukrainian–Polish population exchange immediately after the war, Lviv became an ethnically Ukrainian city.

Among the cities that drastically changed their ethnic composition due to forced resettlements, Wrocław constitutes one of the most extreme cases.⁶ When the ‘Big Three’ decided to shift the Polish state 150 miles to the West at the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945, Breslau, with over 600,000 inhabitants, which was the largest German city east of Berlin, overnight became a place in Poland. The residents of Breslau, 99% of whom were ethnic Germans, suddenly found themselves foreigners in their own town, now called Wrocław. Those who fled from Wrocław in the face of the advancing Red Army at the end of the war were not allowed to return when the war was over. Those Germans, who stayed in Wrocław and survived the tragic siege of the city in the last months of the war, were forced to leave in the subsequent months and years. Then about 250,000 Poles from numerous regions were resettled in Wrocław. Many of them had been expelled from those Polish provinces that the Soviet Union annexed in 1945 and cleansed of its Polish population. In three years between 1945 and 1948, Wrocław’s entire population was replaced, turning an ethnically German city into a Polish one.

Today, Polish citizens of Wrocław passionately celebrate their city’s old traditions, be it Wrocław’s millennium or the 300th anniversary of the university. But it is exactly the consciousness of an unbroken local tradition that these citizens lack. They are all resettlers or their descendants. Very few people know the city from the time before the war. Those not born in Wrocław after the war were raised in Poznań or Łódź, in Kielce or Lwów, from villages in Galicia, Mazovia or Kujawy, or came as Polish re-emigrants from Belgium or France. Wrocław, the melting pot of communist Poland, was a place with all sorts of traditions, except local ones, which had inevitably disappeared with the expulsion of the Germans and had to be re-invented by Wrocław’s new inhabitants.

Creating these ‘traditions’ was all the more necessary as the Polish settlers coming to Wrocław after the war had a hard time accepting the former German city as their new home. Apart from the unpleasantly foreign, Prussian-German impression Wrocław made on the settlers, the city fell short of the high expectations the Polish administration raised after the war in order to win settlers

for Poland's depopulated Western territories. Wrocław had been heavily damaged, entire neighbourhoods had become rubble during its siege, and it had taken weeks to put out the fires raging all over the city. In addition, the deserted houses and ruins had been looted. When the Polish administration assessed the extent of destruction in Wrocław, it concluded that nearly 70% of the buildings and the urban infrastructure had been lost.

Wrocław's crime rate was very high after the war, the supply situation remained poor, the administration was often chaotic, and economic revitalization made only slow progress. The future of the city itself did not seem promising to the Poles who had found a roof over their heads and for many it was a foregone conclusion that the borders drawn in Potsdam in 1945 were only of provisional character, and that the Germans would sooner or later return to Wrocław and evict the Poles. The fact that the government in Warsaw hesitated about making larger investments in Wrocław seemed to confirm these pessimistic expectations. As a result, most of the settlers saw their time in Wrocław as temporary and hardly anyone was ready to put money and time into the repair or preservation of the houses and flats they occupied in Wrocław. As a consequence, the city became further dilapidated.

From a political point of view, this trend was alarming. The government had to take action to stop Wrocław's decline, or Poland would seem unable to incorporate, resettle, and revitalize the former German territories. Things changed in the mid-1950s when Wrocław, became a focus of state investment. Of great political significance was the effort to reconstruct and revitalize the historical city centre, most of which had been vacant and neglected since the war, and by the beginning of the 1960s, the major streets and squares of the Old Town were reconstructed and most of the landmarks rescued. After a decade of instability, stagnation and decline, Wrocław again came to life, the population grew rapidly, and eventually it became one of the country's leading economic and cultural centres.

Improving local living conditions through investments in the urban infrastructure, housing, and the economy was an important step, but it took much more than material improvements to encourage the Polish population to believe in Wrocław's future. First and foremost, the new Wrocław citizens had to be convinced of the irreversibility of the border and the population shifts of 1945. Given the traumatic experiences of 1939, there was a perception in Polish society that the Potsdam agreement could become null and void if a sudden political change took place in the international constellation, and that Poland could not rely solely on Soviet guarantees of the post-war borders. In the case of the former German city of Königsberg which became the Russian city of Kaliningrad in 1945, its incorporation and Sovietization could be based primarily on the on the right of the conqueror and the military power of the Soviet Union. However, the

Polonization of Wrocław would not have been possible without the effort that the Polish government devoted to the historical justification of the border and the population shifts of 1945.

The propaganda apparatus of the People's Republic promoted the idea that Wrocław did not become Polish because of arbitrary political decisions made by the 'Big Three' in Potsdam, but that the border shift of 1945 was to be interpreted as the culmination of a long-term historical development that allowed Poland to 'recover' old Polish territories. Based on the fact that Silesia had belonged to Poland in the Middle Ages, Wrocław was declared a Polish town 'returning to the Motherland' in 1945 after seven centuries of foreign occupation. In addition to the dissemination of this interpretation of history, an attempt was made to reshape the public space in Wrocław in a way that it would fit into the new, Polonocentric view of local history. Wrocław was cleansed of all obvious records of its German past, tens of thousands of topographical names were Polonized, all German national monuments were removed, often replaced with Polish ones, and all German inscriptions were removed. Not a single advertising slogan on a house facade, an overlooked manhole cover from the time before 1945, or a German epitaph at one of the churches should remind the new inhabitants of the city's German past. Even the German cemeteries were dismantled, because they were unmistakable records of a non-Polish local history, but this took time since it met resistance from parts of Polish society.

The Polish administration secretly referred to this as the 'liquidation of the traces of Germanity', Wrocław was filled over the years with monuments and commemorative plaques supporting the myth of the city's eternal Polishness. Even the reconstruction of the Old Town, in itself one of the greatest achievements of post-war Poland, served the promotion of this myth to a certain degree. The ideal of architects and city planners was not really the reconstruction of the architectural ensembles destroyed in 1945. The aim was rather to re-create a non-German-looking Old Town in the style of the period around 1800, interspersed with as many architectural records of the Polish Middle Ages as possible. One has to agree with Norman Davies that 'the elaborate historical ceremonial, which the ideologists have laid on to sanctifying the decision of 1945, is almost as breathtaking as the great Settlement itself.'⁷ But perhaps the most striking is the fact that this ceremonial successfully served its purpose. Thanks to the creation and promotion of the myth of the old Polish city, which answered the obvious psychological need for such reassurance among the settlers, the city's new inhabitants learned to see Wrocław as a town as Polish as Krakow or Poznan. The myth of the Polish town completely insulated from Wrocław's German past was the collective amnesia that provided the fundament on which the modern Polish city was built; it was the prerequisite for commencing Polish life in Wrocław after the war. But the feeling of alienation from Wrocław, so common

among the Polish settlers during the first post-war years, did not entirely disappear. The Wrocław citizens could learn much about archaeological traces of early Slavic settlement and Wrocław's medieval architecture, but could obtain no information on the tenement blocks and villas, the public buildings and storehouses, the industrial architecture and the railway stations built in the 19th and 20th centuries when the city was part of the Prussian/German state. Modern Wrocław, the city in which people actually lived, remained a place without history! 'Wrocław is a city whose memory has been amputated'. These are the words of Andrzej Zawada, a Polish philologist at the University of Wrocław, as published in his remarkable essay 'Bresław', which appeared in 1996.⁸ Zawada belongs to a new generation of Wrocław citizens, most of whom were born in the city and are less burdened with the traumatic experiences of World War II and the Cold War prejudices. They began to question the official view of the local history and to point to its shortcomings and contradictions. In the 1980s, the subversive search for Wrocław's suppressed past went hand in hand with the growing opposition to the existing political order in Poland. But it was not until the collapse of communism and the fundamental change in the international constellation after the end of the Cold War, that the distortion of the local history was openly criticized and rejected and that the search for a new understanding of local history became a matter of general concern in Wrocław.

It is too early to come to any conclusion about where this search will end and what kind of new self-perception Wrocław will eventually develop. Some initial observations concerning the search for a new identity are possible. The most striking phenomenon in the years after 1989 is the curiosity of Wrocław's society towards the city's history in the decades before 1945. New city guides and historical surveys were published in the 1990s, confronting Wrocław citizens with photographs and information about German Breslau to which they had never previously had access. Marek Krajewski's 'Death in Breslau', a crime thriller set in the German Wrocław of the 1930s, became a local bestseller in 2000.⁹ On the occasion of the city's millennium in the same year, Wrocław's regional edition of Poland's leading newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a series of translated articles from pre-1945 Wrocław newspapers. The change in the attitude towards the German past has been fundamental. A history suppressed for so long seems to be embraced. Even some of the German epitaphs, removed after the war and concealed from the public for half a century, have returned, displaying the non-Polish history of the city. Representatives of the German Wrocław, like the writer Karl von Holtei, the Nobel physics prize-winner, Max Born, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or the beatified Edith Stein (the last two both murdered in the resistance against Hitler), have in the meantime taken their place in the pantheon of local collective memory.

But the encounter with the German Wrocław inevitably leads to the question of how the German city came to an end. Bonhoeffer or Stein, honoured today by Wrocław citizens, would have been expelled from the city in 1945 if they hadn't already been killed by the Nazis. This idea is painful, and it seems as if Wrocław's society has not yet come to terms with the extreme discontinuity of local history, caused less by the border shift than by the expulsion of the former inhabitants. When Polish intellectuals from Warsaw recently made the suggestion that Wrocław instead of Berlin should become the seat of an international institute dealing with the history of forced migration, the reaction of the Wrocław citizens was cool. To connect the city too closely with that unpleasant and still contentious historical issue clearly made some feel uncomfortable.

Nobody in Wrocław today would deny that Germans contributed greatly to the city's history over the centuries. But the idea that Wrocław was as German before 1945 as Polish after 1945, and that it became Polish based on political decisions that from today's perspective seem arbitrary and illegitimate, like many decisions in history, would still be seen as a provocation. Until quite recently, thought and discussion about local history since 1945 had been dominated by justification of the border and population shifts. Suddenly living without these historical justifications and nevertheless feeling at home in Wrocław seems difficult. Apparently, the majority of Wrocław citizens still wish somehow to preserve the myth of the old Polish town that returned to its Motherland in 1945 and simply to add the history of the German city and put a strong emphasis on Wrocław's Europeanness. The population exchange of 1945 is included in the new historical picture, but by persistently placing it in a wider framework of the numerous changes the city underwent in the course of its history, it appears a less dramatic and significant part of the city's narrative. By and large, it is this historical patchwork that has thus far emerged from the search for a new understanding of the local history. But multiculturalism in this sense may become a new historical myth, not justifying but downplaying the tragedy of Wrocław's historical past.

Polish Wrocław is a fascinating case study from the perspective of historical anthropology and deserves more research. By the end of the 1940s it had become an urban population comprising uprooted individuals thrown together through the vagaries of history. We can observe the collective search for stability and societal cohesion, the invention of traditions, the formation of a new local identity, and the shifts within this identity due to political changes. But we should always bear in mind that the Wrocław citizens had – and still have – to carry the burden of a tragic, unpleasant, violent local past, particularly a forced population exchange they were not responsible for, but with which their history in Wrocław began. They have exerted much effort since 1945, explicitly or not, to cope with this past and to develop a positive relationship with a place most Polish settlers initially rejected. Wrocław is not unique in this respect. The Silesian city is only one among

many cities, towns and villages in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe that emerged from the turmoil of the forced migrations of the past century. What we can learn from the attempts in Wrocław to live with that history is therefore of great value in understanding the psychology of so many places in Europe that share Wrocław's destiny.

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Gregor Thum teaches history at the University of Pittsburgh, USA; he has studied history and Slavic languages in Berlin and Moscow. In 2002, he published *Die fremde Stadt. Breslau 1945*. In this book the 'collective memory', as documented by historiography, spatial development, and urban architecture, is presented as a key category for analysing and interpreting the 'miracle' of post-war Breslau.

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