

Chapter 14

Imagining Their Lands as Ours: Place Name Changes on Ex-German Territories in Poland after World War II

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Introduction

Every proper noun has a story related to a particular language, culture and society and because of this relationship, many are reluctant to change a proper name. When it comes to geographical names, they can fascinate people and stir the imagination about the regional or local identity because geographical names are inseparable from their mother tongue. In the modern world, all land, except for the Antarctic, is divided into territories of states. However, it is absolutely impossible to segregate people with different identities along the borders. There is sometimes an overlap across the borders and the larger the overlap, the increased possibility that conflict over place names will occur, as places may have different names in different languages. A place name can be political.

This paper examines the political problem of place names, specifically examining the situation in Poland immediately after World War II. Poland is used as an example here because it experienced one of the largest boundary changes after World War II. In addition, tens of millions of people crossed these questioned territories. The extent of the overlap mentioned above was enormous.

As a result of World War II, Poland acquired a large amount of German territories, which cover a space of 103,000 square kilometres, while it had to hand over 180,000 square kilometres of land to the Soviet Union. This large-scale boundary shift resulted in Poland being responsible for unprecedented and complicated tasks. First of all, the newly established communist regime had to justify Poland's possession of the ex-German territories. The communists repeatedly referred to history, which shows that these territories had been under the rule of the Piasts, or the first Polish dynasty, from the tenth until the fourteenth century. Putting forward the historical claim to the territories, the communist regime took measures to rid the territories of German elements and to *re-install* Polish ones. One of these measures was to change all German place names and physiographical object names on the acquired territories, the size of which is larger than the whole area of today's Czech Republic, into Polish names. This was regarded as a vital and national undertaking by the communist regime.

Interestingly enough, the undertaking of 'de-Germanisation' and '*re-Polonisation*' involved academic circles including historians, geographers and linguists, among others, who were not always supportive toward the communist regime. Indeed, without active participation of a number of experts who were seeking to give proof for the Polishness in ex-German territories, the place name changes on these vast areas could not have been carried out. This is the first point that will be made clear by analysing the process of place name changes in post-war Poland. It is likely that the effort of the Polish communists to assert Poland's national and historical rights to rule ex-German territories could mobilise certain parts of society and became one of the few bridges between unpopular communists and the society.

Nationalistic rhetoric was so effective, especially when Poland had just recovered independence after six years of harsh occupation by the Nazis. Reflecting this atmosphere of the times, everything on the questioned territories was apt to be dichotomised into two categories: German and Polish, of which the former was absolutely negated. Some scholars who were engaged in the process of place name changes fell into a pit of the dichotomy and dismissed a localness of so called autochthons, or the in-between Slavic inhabitants on the German-Polish borderlands. This paper will also show the characteristics of Polish nationalism at that

time and its implications for the ordinary people living in the lands concerned.

1. Polonisation of ex-German Territories as a National Undertaking

World War II greatly transformed Poland's territorial and demographic shape. According to an agreement by 'the Big Three' at the Teheran conference in November–December 1943, Poland was to receive part of Germany's provinces east of the Oder River after the War while giving the territories east to the so-called Curzon Line to the Soviet Union. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, however, the Big Three failed to reach a consensus about Poland's exact western borders. The Soviet Union, supporting the communist-led Polish Provisional Government, insisted on the Oder-Western Neisse line, which included Lower Silesia on the Polish side, as the Polish-German boundaries. Great Britain and the United States opposed this boundary claiming that an overwhelming majority of Lower Silesia was German.

The Polish Provisional Government, following upon the westward advance of the Red Army, took over the German eastern provinces while the boundary problem was left unsettled. Stalin helped the Polish Provisional Government in establishing administrative structures on these territories, handing over the areas only just occupied by the Red Army to the Polish authorities with the exception of railroads and front areas. As early as March 1945, when the whole area east of the Oder-Western Neisse line had not been seized by the Polish authorities, they divided these areas into four administrative districts: Masuria (*Mazury*), Western Pomerania (*Pomorze Zachodnie*), Lower Silesia (*Dolny Śląsk*) and Upper Silesia (*Górny Śląsk*). Furthermore, the prefecture of *Gdańsk* was established in the area of the former Free City of Danzig on 30 March 1945, the same day that the Red Army gained control of the city.

The problem of the Polish western borders remained unsettled after the end of war and even after the establishment of the Polish Provisional Government of National Unity on 28 June 1945, which the Yalta agreement had anticipated. Even at the Potsdam Conference in July–August 1945, this problem was not brought to a resolution. The *Communiqué* of the Conference reads that 'the final delimitation of the

western frontier of Poland should await the peace settlement’ and that ‘pending the final determination of Poland’s western frontier, the former German territories east of the line along the Oder-Neisse Rivers ‘shall be under the administration of the Polish State’ (*Foreign Relations* 1960: 1509) (See the map).

The temporariness of the Yalta and Potsdam solutions gave the Polish authorities a feeling of insecurity about ‘German revanchism’ and made them hurry to accumulate *faits accomplis*: de-Germanisation and Polonisation of these ex-German territories. By the wholesale exclusion of

The shift of Poland’s boundaries and ‘the Recovered Territories’



Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1993), p. 161.

the German population and its replacement by Poles, the Polish authorities made a determined effort to establish a demographic *fait accompli*. That is why the speediest repopulation and economic reconstruction of the western provinces became the most important task on the Polish government's agenda. As early as 6 February 1945, Władysław Gomułka, Secretary General of the Polish Workers' (Communist) Party and the first deputy premier of the Polish Provisional Government, noted the following during a plenary session of the Central Committee of the party:

It is obvious that de-Germanisation of these territories should be carried out in principle in this way: Germans will be thrown out of these lands and we should lead Poles into these Western Territories and resettle them . . . This is not to say that it affects only thousands of people, but millions, so this action will involve almost whole nation (*Polska Partia Robotnicza* 1984: 294).

Resettlement and development of the ex-German territories through de-Germanisation and Polishisation were regarded as a national undertaking with the greatest importance in history. As a declaration, which was issued at the first session of the Science Council for Problems of the Recovered Territories (*Rada Naukowa dla zagadnień Ziemi Odzyskanych*) emphasised, it was considered to 'decide whether the Polish state and nation had rights to survive' (Lechowicz 1985: 247).

The Polish authorities often referred to the validity of the Polish historical claim to these ex-German lands in the west and north, emphasising that they had belonged to the medieval Polish state, and they began to call them 'the Recovered Territories' (*Ziemia Odzyskana*). It is true that the aforementioned four districts on the Recovered Territories had been within the domains of the medieval and/or early modern Polish state for a given period. A large part of Western Pomerania and Lower and Upper Silesia were under the rule of the first Polish dukes who laid a foundation for the medieval Polish state in the late tenth and the eleventh centuries. But after the period of Poland's fragmentation (1138–1320), these areas had been beyond the suzerainty of the Polish Crown. Since about the same time the influence of German settlers increased in the areas. As for the Masuria district, the southern part of the former East Prussia, it had long been an area in dispute between Poland

and the Teutonic Knights. In 1526, the greater part of the areas became a Polish fief after centuries of conflict and war.

In spite of a relatively short term of Polish possession, it was said that the Poles did not come to an alien land but came back to their own land which had been robbed of them for centuries. It was also said that one proof of Polishness on the 'recovered' western and northern territories was geographical names which were of Slavic origin, although they had been under influence of Germanisation.

2. Place Names in Chaos on ex-German Territories after the War

When Polish settlers from the central provinces of Poland and from ex-Polish territories annexed to the Soviet Union came to the Western and Northern Territories, they found themselves surrounded by German place names. Almost everything, including signboards in the station and town office, road signs, store signs and billboards, among others, was written in German. Some parts of the place names had a Polish or Slavic origin, but they had undergone changes under the influence of Germanisation for several centuries, especially after the Polish state gave up suzerainty over these territories. Moreover, a further Germanisation of place names within the eastern provinces of the Third Reich, which aimed at sweeping away Slavic place names, was carried out during the interwar period and wartime under the Nazi regime (Pałucki, 1947: 54–8).

When these place names within the former eastern provinces of Germany were to change into Polish ones, a lack of consistent guiding principle caused chaos, allowing each relevant part (e.g. the administrations, academic circles, settlers, etc.) to change names in their own way. Generally, there were several patterns of arbitrary naming:

1. Continuing to use the German names;
2. Pronouncing and spelling the German names in a more Polish way:
Zechow–*Czechów*, *Boyadel*–*Bojadla*, *Poberow*–*Pobierowo*, *Duchow*–*Duchowo*, *Grabow*–*Grabowo*, *Albertinenhof*–*Albertynów*;
3. Translating literally the German names into Polish:
Eichberg–*Dębogóra* (oak mountain), *Glashütte*–*Huta Szklana* (glass factory), *Linde*–*Lipka* (linden), *Neudorf*–*Nowawieś* (new village);

4. Giving names according to the places' topographical characters: Bergkolonie–*Górki* (mountainous), Pätzig–*Piaseczno* (sandy);
5. Giving names according to an important event or a local public person of importance within the place;
6. Adopting the name of the homeland (Białecki 1981: 106; Wagińska-Marzec 1997: 374).

There were many cases where one place had three or even four names. Even a name of an administrative district, such as prefecture (*województwo*) had several names. For example, the name of the prefecture with its capital in Gdańsk (the former Free City of Danzig) had four different names: *morskie*, *kaszubskie*, *gdańskie* and *wiślane*. Another example of confusion is the case in which the municipal office, the local office and the railway administration used different names for a place. For example, today's Dzierżoniów in Lower Silesia was called differently by these three offices: *Rychbach*—*Reichenbach*—*Drobniszew* (Wagińska-Marzec 1997: 373, 381). It can easily be imagined how the different names disrupted correspondence and transportation.

In this situation, it was the railway administration that took the initiative in coordinating the place names which competed with one another. Interested in establishing a consistent principle for station name changes, the Regional Administrative Bureau of the National Railway in Poznań organised a commission on the revival of Slavic names in the area along the Oder in the beginning of April 1945. A marked characteristic of this commission was that many scholars of different disciplines, such as geographers, historians, archivists, linguists, jurists and sociologists, to name a few, took part in the commission and helped to make a guiding principle in confirming place names, that is, the principle of restoring old Polish or Slavic names.

What deserves special mention is the active participation of Stanisław Dołęga-Kozierowski, a historian and linguist, and a Professor of Poznań University. As early as the interwar period when the Western and Northern Territories had still been under German sovereignty, he researched geographical names of Slavic origin on these areas which had been part of the medieval Polish state. His publications of the results of this research, 'Atlas of Geographical Names of Western Slavs' (Kozierowski 1934–7), became a kind of bible of the commission when

drawing conclusions. By the end of September 1945, the commission held ten meetings and discussed mainly the names of stations and larger cities in Western Pomerania including Szczecin (Stettin), with the help of Kozirowski's *Atlas*.

Another important role was played by the Institute for Western Affairs in Poznań (*Instytut Zachodni*). This Institute was established on 27 February 1945 for the purpose of promoting researches on German problems including Polish-German relations and on Poland's Western and Northern Territories. The initiative in founding the Institute was taken by Professor Zygmunt Wojciechowski, a vivid medieval historian from Poznań University. Keeping pace with the railway administration's commission on the revival of Slavic names, the Institute organised the Onomastic Section within itself in July 1945. This Section, with Professor Mikołaj Rudnicki, a linguist from Poznań University, acting as the director, energetically gathered and filed materials and published within the year of 1945 'The Pocket Dictionary of Place Names' (*Słowniczek nazw miejscowych*), the only bilingual gazetteer at that time.

Despite efforts of those concerned, in order to carry forward further confirmation of the place names within the rest of the Western and Northern Territories and of the names of smaller towns and villages, more cooperation was needed among specialists not only from various levels of the administrations, but also from scientific institutions. To this end, the first onomastic conference was organised at the initiative of the Regional Administrative Bureau of the National Railway in Poznań.

3. The First Onomastic Conference at Szczecin

The first Onomastic Conference was held at Szczecin on 11–13 September 1945. There were 37 participants representing academic institutions including Poznań University, the Institute for Western Affairs and the Baltic Institute in Gdańsk (*Instytut Bałtycki*, its location had just been shifted from Toruń), and representing the administrations in Szczecin, Poanań and Gdańsk, such as municipal offices, prefectural offices, the information and propaganda offices and postal services, among others. Stanisław Kozirowski, the aforementioned author of *Atlas*, presided over the conference, and Marian Mika, the director of the Poznań Municipal Archives, took the position of the secretary-general.

Participants elected Professor Mikołaj Rudnicki, a famous linguist from Poznań University, as a member of the executive board. Cooperating with Kozierowski, he took the initiative in setting up the Institute of Western Slavs (*Institut Zachodnio-Słowiański*), which was affiliated with Poznań University as early as in 1921, and stimulated and promoted research on western Slavic heritages including place names on the areas which were then under German rule.

The purposes of this Conference were the following:

- Revival of old Polish-Pomeranian names on the newly allotted territories;
- Liquidation of later marks of Germanisation (often taking place in the time of the Nazi rule);
- Polonisation of German names;
- Removal of dialects (jargons) from the name of some places (Wagińska-Marzec 1997: 378).

For these purposes, 5 general norms for deciding a place name on the Western and Northern Territories were set up:

1. The 16 volumes of 'Dictionary of Geographical Names of the Kingdom of Poland and Other Slavic Lands' (*Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich*), where were published in the end of the nineteenth century, was adopted as a principal source for fixing a place name;
2. If a name had several forms in light of medieval sources, the one that was nearest to the contemporary written Polish should be adopted;
3. Translation of German names into Polish should be avoided;
4. In case of ancient names, the first two cases of declension and the adjective should be shown for the sake of correct usage by settlers;
5. In such cases when there were only German names, Slavic names in the neighbouring area could be adopted. If there were no neighbouring Slavic names, the name of the former address of settlers could be adopted with a slight change (for example, from Kalisz–Kaliszany) (Białecki 1981: 110–11; Wagińska-Marzec 1997: 380–1).

Thus, a consensus about a systematic method for considering place names was achieved in this Conference. After the Conference, the aforesaid confusion as to place names was considerably reduced, though not swept away. On 8 November 1945, the governor of the prefecture of Poznań, who was helped by the Onomastic Section of the Institute for Western Affairs, could issue a proclamation announcing confirmed place names. This meant that a great step forward in uniting the scattered efforts to change German place names into Polish names was made.

Another interesting point of the Conference is that the problem of dialect became a topic of a discussion. There was a controversy as to whether provincialism should be admitted. To give an example, Pomeranian place names are characterised by the suffix ‘-gard’ (*Starogard*, *Bialogard*, *Nowogard* and so on), while the orthography of the written Polish employs the suffix ‘-gród’ (*Starogród*, *Bialogród*, *Nowogród*). On the former side stood Professor Mikołaj Rudnicki, who insisted on the preservation of Pomeranian language features, though he regarded it as nothing but an offshoot of Polish. On the other hand, those who supported the latter followed Kozierowski’s *Atlas of the Geographical Names of Western Slavs*. This controversy was settled by voting and the latter won by 15 to 3. In other words, provincialism was then denied, although it was later reversed (Wagińska-Marzec 1997: 381–2).

It might be pointed out that this reflects the then current atmosphere of dichotomous nationalism: Polish or German, us or them, black or white, good or evil. In such a dichotomy there would have been little room for the localness of in-between historical-cultural regions, such as Pomerania, Silesia, Masuria, and others.

4. The Committee for Settling of Place Names

In January 1946, the Committee for Settling of Place Names was started up as an advisory committee of the Ministry of Public Administration in Warsaw. This indicated further development of the cooperation between the administrations and the scientific institution dealing with place name changes.

The Committee consisted of the chair and 6 committee members (3 from the academic circles, and another 3 from such Ministries as

Transportation, Postal Services and Defence). Professor Stanisław Srokowski, a geographer and a cofounder of the Baltic Institute established at first in Toruń in 1925, took over the chair, and the following scholars were invited as members: Professor Kazimierz Nitsch, a linguist and dialectologist who took a post of the President of the Polish Academy of Learning (*Polska Akademia Umiejętności*), Professor Mikołaj Rudnicki, a linguist from Poznań University, Professor Witold Taszycki, a specialist of geographical names from Kraków, a historian Władysław Semkowicz and a linguist Stanisław Rospond.

The characteristic of this Committee, distinguishing it from the organisations mentioned in the previous sections, was the engagement of central structures, both administrative (ministries) and academic (the Polish Academy of Learning), and the involvement on a nationwide scale. Above all, a role that the Polish Academy of Learning played cannot be overlooked. It set up a special committee for geographical names which coordinated various opinions among academic circles and consolidated them in order to run a discussion at the Committee for Settling of Place Names smoothly. Moreover, coordinating local institutions like the Institute for Western Affairs in Poznań, the Silesian Institute (*Instytut Śląski*) in Katowice and the Baltic Institution in Gdańsk, it organised the following three subcommittees that prepared drafts of settlements of a place name for the main Committee:

- Kraków Commission I: composed of staff from the Silesian Institute; having charge of the Prefectures of Wrocław (in German: Breslau) and Katowice, namely Lower and Upper Silesia;
- Kraków Commission II: composed of staff from the Baltic Institute and the Masurian Institute (*Instytut Mazurski*) in Olsztyn (in German: Allenstein); having charge of the former East Prussia and the former Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk);
- Poznań Commission: composed of staff from the Institute for Western Affairs; having charge of the Western Pomerania and Lubusz regions, whose centre is Zielona Góra (in German: Grünberg).

Work of the subcommittees was so practical that up to 98 per cent of their draft proposals were adopted at the main Committee

(Wagińska-Marzec 1997: 394). This means that academic circles' initiatives displayed at the subcommittees had the real say in deciding place names. After having been adopted at the main Committee, a new place name was sanctioned by the ministers concerned (Minister of Public Administration and Minister of Recovered Territories), then it was fixed and published in an official gazette. Centralisation and institutionalisation of decision making enabled the Committee to work efficiently.

The first meeting of the Committee for Settling of Place Names was held on 2–4 March 1946 and decided the name of prefectures and about 220 place names of cities, counties, transportation crossroads and towns with a population of more than 5,000. The following meeting on 1–3 June 1946 dealt with names of towns that had a population of 1,000–5,000, and the third one on 26–8 October 1946 decided names of villages with populations between 500–1,000. By the end of 1946, the Committee decided on about 4400 place names. By June 1947, the Committee was said to fix almost all names of stations and places with a population of more than 500 in the Western and Northern Territories. By the end of 1950, the Committee confirmed 32,138 place names in total (Wagińska-Marzec 1997: 400–2).

Conclusion: Historical Aspect of Place Name Changes

Place name changes on ex-German Territories in Poland after World War II were directly related to a national demand for the rapid de-Germanisation and Polonisation of these lands, and they were characterised by the fact that many scholars took an active part in the project. According to the scholars, this was a historical project about the 'return to the motherland of the Piasts', and place name changes were not the process of Polonisation but of *re*-Polonisation.

In the process of place name changes, the logic of re-Polonisation inclined these scholars to seek more ancient and primitive forms, which were not contaminated by the process of Germanisation in confirming a Polish name of place. Kazimierz Kolańczyk, a jurist who had been concerned with place name changes, considered the place names of Slavic origin as a fundamental proof of legitimacy of territorial claim because, according to him, it was place names that the Germans could not succeed in Germanising to the last moment (Kolańczyk 1946: 542).

Some scholars who participated in this attempt had elaborated a plan of Poland's return to the western 'motherland' as early as the interwar period and wartime. Some of these westward-oriented scholars, including Zygmunt Wojciechowski, who was the director of the Institute for Western Affairs, had been related to the nationalist camp led by Roman Dmowski. World War II pushed Poland westward and changed this western 'imagined' Polish lands into real ones, and moreover, even Dmowski's concept of 'non-German Central Europe' was close at hand, this time demographically. At the very beginning of the post-war era, the westward-oriented scholars seized a chance to leap onto centre stage, overlapping their concept with national policy. The role these scholars played in the process of national consolidation of post-war Poland, that is, the communist Poland, was enormous. It was not without reason that Władysław Gomułka proudly addressed the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Polish Worker's Party on 20 May 1945:

One of the factors in gaining popular support for the government is matters of the Western Territories. They neutralise various elements and tie them together. Territorial expansion to the west and the land reform connect nation to the regime (Kochański 1992: 11).

But ordinary people did not always share the 'academism' of scholars and the rhetoric of national consolidation which the communist regime then advocated. This was shown by the many petitions from the inhabitants against the decision of the Committee for Settling of Place Name. For some time after the confirmation of a Polish name by the Committee, the decision was not always accepted by the local population. This was especially the case in Upper Silesia and Masuria, where so-called autochthons, the Slavic inhabitants who had developed a culture of their own although influenced by both Polish and German culture, had accepted and lived for many years with the former names. Some of them boycotted new names and even broke road signs that identified the new name. They autochthons never came to terms with the logic of re-Polonisation of the scholars. For them, place name changes on the lands in which they had been living were never the processes of re-Polonisation, but rather Polonisation against their will.

Nationalism is, in principle, dichotomous. The ex-German territories, which had been ceded to Poland after World War II, were the scenes of

outburst of dichotomy of nationalism: German or Polish, or at least, German or non-German. Place names were no exception. It was intended that German marks in place names should be completely liquidated and in exchange, 'pure' Polish-Slavic names should be installed. With such an atmosphere, the localness, such as dialects that autochthons used, was dismissed.

On the face of this dichotomous nationalism, such in-between ethnic groups of Polish-German borderland as Silesians, Masurians and Kaszubians were pressed to clarify their ambiguous national consciousness, which meant for them a forcible separation of the sheep from the goats, and they rejected to be absorbed into the dichotomy of nationalism. They Slavic autochthons were regarded by the Polish authorities as one of the proofs of the Polishness of the 'recovered' ex-German territories, but many of them felt out of place with a Polish place name which was also considered as a proof of the Polishness on the territories.

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