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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gregor Thum. *Die fremde Stadt: Breslau 1945.* Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2003. 639 S. EUR 32.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-88680-795-6.

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Published on H-German (April, 2006)

Breslau into Wroclaw

As British author and journalist Jonathan Freedland recently remarked, the state of Israel in its early years was often referred to as the "land without grandfathers."[1] Something similar, at least metaphorically, could also be said of the Polish city of Wroclaw in Lower Silesia. For centuries it had been a predominantly German town ruled by the Habsburgs and later the Prussians. However, as part of the postwar settlement in 1945-47, it was completely divested of its original German inhabitants and repopulated by several waves of Polish immigrants, refugees and expellees from further east. Few, if any, of these newcomers had any roots in the area, and fewer still identified with the Stalinist rulers who brought them there. Many had been forced to give up their homes in what was now Soviet territory to come and live in a "foreign" city that still bore the physical scars of the final months of the Second World War. In the end, the psychological traumas involved in rebuilding and transforming German Breslau into Polish Wroclaw proved to be just as profound and long lasting as the economic costs.

Gregor Thum's superb new study examines the consequences of the fateful year 1945 for the future national, cultural and economic identity of this city, and for German-Polish relations more generally. Deploying Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description," Thum focuses on how events in the wider world combined with more local concerns to make Wroclaw appear to be a hostile and unwelcoming environment for its new Polish inhabitants, including those born after 1945. As he shows, the city's infrastructure was destroyed not only by the terrible violence of the last weeks of the war, but by postwar looting and vandalism and in particular by the more organized forms of *dÃ©montage* practiced both by the Soviets and by the Polish authorities in Warsaw. Astonishingly, in the early 1950s, up to 165 million bricks per year were collected and taken to building sites in Central Poland, while Wroclaw's dwindling stock of habitable housing fell into neglect and disrepair (p. 198). This state-sponsored spoliation in turn increased feelings of impermanence about Poland's position in the newly-acquired western territories, while doing little to discourage ordinary Poles–even law-abiding ones–from helping themselves to whatever unclaimed property they could lay their hands on, an activity known in popular parlance as *Szabrownicy*.

At the local level, ethnic tensions also blighted early attempts to turn Breslau into Wroclaw. In 1945-46, before the mass expulsions, Poles suspected that the Soviet occupiers were deliberately favoring Germans in terms of administrative autonomy, employment and housing opportunities (pp. 88-93). Later, antisemitism grew as Poles began to accuse resettled Jewish Holocaust survivors of dominating the black market and exploiting the economically vulnerable (p. 127). There were even rivalries and tensions between Poles from Central Poland and those arriving from territories further east, some of whom belonged to the Ukrainian minority, which was 150,000 to 200,000 strong by 1947 (p. 128). Only after 1956 did Wroclaw's identity begin to settle a little, partly due to the rehabilitation and reemergence of the purged communist Wladyslaw Gomulka as first Party Secretary and the end of the Stalinist phase of economic reconstruction. By this stage, demographically at least, Wroclaw was a largely Polish city with considerable potential as a modern provincial capital, but without the self-confidence and "rootedness" of a Warsaw or KrakÃ³w. It was, in other words, a "Stadt ohne GedÃ¤chtnis," (p. 498) with only a fragile sense of its past, present and future.

While the first half of the book deals with events in the immediate aftermath of the war (from 1945 to the late 1950s), the second part is focused much more on the "politics of memory" (*GedÃ¤chtnispolitik*) of the whole Cold War period and beyond. This is the most interesting aspect of the book, and owes much to authors like Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, who advanced the idea of nations being "imagined communities" based on "invented traditions."[2] In Wroclaw's case, this process of "imagining" was complicated not only by the continued presence of remnants of German culture in everyday life and objects, and the lack of a final peace treaty with a German recognition of the new borders, but by the fact that many of the newcomers were not previously city dwellers, but rural folk from Central Poland and from the eastern territories lost to the Soviet Union in 1945. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Wroclaw even underwent a process of *VerdÃ¶rflichung* since "mit der Aussiedlung der deutschen Einwohner … die bisherigen TrÃ¤ger der Stadtkultur verschwanden … [und] die soziale Basis der UrbanitÃ¤t verloren [ging], an der sich die lÃ¤ndlichen Immigranten bei der Suche nach Mustern und Normen eines groÃstÃ¤dtischen Lebens hÃ¤tten orientieren kÃ¶nnen" (p. 163).

Two factors were key to the invention of a local Polish tradition in Wroclaw. The first was the need of individuals to acclimatize themselves to their new home in a part of the world still living with the devastating effects of the last war and the ever-present risk of a new one. And the second was the need of the Polish communists and their Soviet masters to defend the postwar settlement against a perceived threat from the West (reinforced, in their eyes, by Bonn's continued refusal in the 1950s and 1960s to abandon its claim to former German territories beyond the Oder-NeiÃe line). Between these two pillars–the individual and the state–stood autonomous and semi-autonomous groups representing different parts of Polish society, the most important of which was the Catholic Church. Thus Thum shows how individual priests and the Polish episcopacy as a whole played a key role in cementing national claims to the "regained" territories in the West. The same applied to Polish historians, linguists, ethnologists and other academics, who not only produced popular and scholarly works emphasizing the historic identity of Wroclaw and the Polish nation, but also served on committees helping to erase German names and artifacts from street signs, schools, museums, parks, public monuments, places of worship and so on.

In terms of church law and administration, the Vatican was extremely reluctant to recognize the finality of the new German-Polish borders until the early 1970s. But this state of affairs did not stop the Polish Primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski from openly proclaiming in 1965, in a speech delivered at Wroclaw's cathedral, that the re-Polonization of the western territories had corrected a centuries-long injustice: "Hier waren wir … und wir sind wieder hier. Wir sind in das vÃ¤terliche Haus zurÃ¼ckgekehrt" (p. 288). This statement, of course, was a reference to the medieval Kingdom of Poland that existed when Silesia had been a stronghold of the Piast dynasty before falling under the control of Bohemia, the Habsburgs and finally Prussia. In history books, the Piast era was now presented, somewhat anachronistically, as a key moment in the birth of Polish national consciousness; another related milestone was the founding of the diocese of Wroclaw, KrakÃ³w and Kolobrzeg in 1000 AD, when, according to legend, the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III undertook a pilgrimage to the Polish town of Gniezno and was received there by the Piast King Boleslaw Chrobry (p. 314). The public endorsement of the Catholic Church and nationalist intellectuals indeed explains why government propaganda celebrating the "reacquisition" of Wroclaw was successful in gradually transforming popular attitudes after 1956, while propaganda celebrating Polish-Soviet friendship was not. The former was "therapeutic" in that it fulfilled a popular psychological need for *Verwurzelung* after the great political

and demographic upheavals of the years 1939-53, while the latter simply reminded people that they were still living with the consequences of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Russian seizure of the eastern half of the country (p. 302).

One aspect of this question that seems to be missing, however, is the role of communist ideology itself, which in Thum's narrative definitely takes a back seat to the comparison with nationalism. On a general level this prioritization probably is a fair reflection of the reality of life in postwar Poland. Indeed, the nearest the country got to a genuine workers' revolution was the Solidarity movement in 1980-81, which, in the words of Leszek Kolakowski, was "directed against a socialist state and carried out under the sign of the cross, with the blessing of the Pope."[3] Nonetheless, one cannot help wondering whether the inhabitants of Wroclaw were any more or less enthusiastic about the "Polish October" and the return of Gomulka, formerly Minister for the New Regions, as First Party Secretary in 1956, than were their compatriots in Central Poland. Communist propaganda also stressed the importance of the "struggle for world peace" against the "imperialists" in the West, and official representatives from both sides of the GDR-Poland border were often interested in organizing joint events celebrating the "achievements" of socialism in "overcoming" past national conflicts. In 1964, for instance, the governing council of the SED-controlled National Front of Democratic Germany issued the following instructions to its constituent members: "Am 1. September, dem 25. Jahrestag des Ausbruches des zweiten Weltkrieges (zugleich Weltfriedenstag) sind entlang der Oder-NeiÃe Friedensgrenze und an der Grenze zur CSSR Friedenskundgebungen durchzufÃ¼hren. In den BezirkstÃ¤dten und an den wichtigsten Grenzpunkten treten Vertreter der Parteien und Massenorganisationen als Redner auf. Zu den Kundgebungen an der polnischen und tschechoslowakischen Grenzen werden internationalen GÃ¤ste eingeladen, die als zweiter Redner sprechen.... In Zusammenarbeit mit den BezirkssekretÃ¤ren und dem Komitee fÃ¼r die antifaschistischen WiderstandskÃ¤mpfer ist dazu rechtzeitig ein Plan fÃ¼r diese Kundgebungen auszuarbeiten."[4] Did such events, one wonders, have an impact on the cultural outlook of the new Polish inhabitants of Wroclaw? Did they ever get to hear about them?

The growth of a local press and the way it sought to build a new identity for the city that fulfilled the diverse needs of the population and the state authorities could also have been given broader consideration. How, for instance, could imported Polish journalists who knew little of the topography of the city begin to function as purveyors of local knowledge and local news items? To what extent were they, too, responsible for popularizing new myths about Wroclaw's past while burying or distorting aspects of the city's former German identity?

These minor criticisms apart, this book undoubtedly makes an important new contribution to our understanding of the legacy of the Second World War in an area long torn by ethnic conflict. What stands out in particular is Thum's ability to contextualize. The Poles–nationalists, Catholics and communists–rewrote history in order to legitimate the new postwar borders and the wholesale expulsion of the German population after 1945, but the first act in the destruction of Breslau's centuries-long urban culture came in the 1930s, when the Nazis drove out the local Jewish community and communities like it across the Reich (p. 17). The brutal German occupation of Poland between 1939 and 1945, during which approximately one in five Poles (including three million Polish Jews and almost as many non-Jews) were killed, could only engender further acts of violence. In effect Breslau's fate was sealed at the Tehran conference in November 1943, when Churchill and Roosevelt gave their agreement in principle to Stalin's request for a revision of Poland's prewar borders. The pointless German defense of the city in 1945, on Hitler's direct orders, did the rest. The subsequent population transfers and the failure to engage in an open confrontation with the recent past under communism in turn fostered a sense of individual and collective alienation that was passed on from one generation to the next and was not fully addressed until after 1990. In this way Thum's conclusions corroborate the more general findings of Eric Hobsbawm: "National myths do not arise spontaneously from people's actual experiences. They are something which people acquire from someone else."[5]

Notes

[1]. Jonathan Freedland, "Israel braced for the loss of its grandfather," in *The Guardian* (January 6, 2006), p. 1.

[2]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[3]. Leszek Kolakowski, "Earthly ideal is a most niggling dream," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, No.

1,725 (January 13, 2006), p. 19.

[4]. Sekretariat des Nationalrates, "MaÃnahmen anlÃ¤Ãlich des 50. bzw. 25. Jahrestages des Beginn des Ersten bzw. Zweiten Weltkrieges," 13 May 1964, in Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, DY 6 / 388 / 2.

[5]. Eric Hobsbawm, *The New Century*. trans. Allan Cameron (London: Abacus, 2000), p. 24.

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Citation: Matthew Stibbe. Review of Thum, Gregor, *Die fremde Stadt: Breslau 1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

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