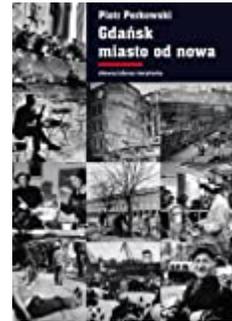




Piotr Perkowski. *Gdańsk: Miasto od Nowa.* Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2013. 536 pp. n.p. (paper), ISBN 978-83-7453-118-4.



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Published on H-Poland (July, 2015)

Commissioned by Paul Brykczynski

Gdańsk: A City Anew

Scholarly work on cities has recently experienced a renaissance. Traditional studies on the development of cities limited to chronology or their physical development have given way to investigations of cities as complex microcosms with their own unique social and cultural dynamics. In his recent study of Gdańsk, Piotr Perkowski contributes to this trend. Equipped with the tools of new cultural history, he shows the richness of the cultural, social, and political life of Gdańsk—an important port city in northern Poland—in the first three decades after World War II. The book begins in 1945, with the birth of Gdańsk and the passing of Danzig. It ends in the late 1960s with the period of “little stabilization,” when, as Perkowski explains, the various methods used to discipline the society changed, without disappearing completely. While referring to the watershed moments of Polish history as a framework for the history of Gdańsk, Perkowski not only skillfully demonstrates how the history of particular cities may diverge from a historical master narrative but also exposes his readers to the richness of individuals’ interactions with socialism on a local

level.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part concentrates on shaping the city’s society and hence examines the decisions and practices that authorities undertook and introduced in order to shape Gdańsk “od nowa” (from the beginning), as alluded to in the title. The second part deals with the material/living conditions of life in the city. Even though, as Perkowski emphasizes in the introduction, he is interested in the forces that shaped the city, his book does not follow a top-down approach. Rather, the image of political life that Perkowski constructs is one of constant negotiations between citizens and authorities. He infuses the book with voices of individual citizens of Gdańsk drawn from letters, memoirs, novels, press articles, oral interviews, and archival documents of the local and central Communist Party.

The introduction of the new postwar Polish Communist order into what was in 1945 still essentially a German city was accompanied by a forceful removal of an undesired German population. At the end of June 1945,

of the city's 134,000 inhabitants only about 8,500 were Poles. But already by autumn, the predominantly German city ceased to exist: the Polish and German populations each numbered around 60,000. Just two years later, in 1947, there were 165,000 Polish residents of Gdańsk, while only just over 100 Germans remained (p. 51). The German population was expelled from the physical as well as the imaginary and symbolic space of the city. As Perkowski emphasizes, from the outset Communist authorities sought to write a new history of the city that omitted the German population and their postwar fate.

To a large extent, the transformation of the city unfolded literally overnight, with the influx of new populations into sections of the city that were spared full-scale destruction. There was no surplus of these relatively intact sections of the city: in Poland, Perkowski notes, only Warsaw and Wrocław suffered greater physical destruction than Gdańsk. Germans were replaced with Poles, mostly Poles who migrated from rural areas of eastern Poland, *Kresowiacy*, as well as from central Poland in search of a better life. In no time, *Kresowiacy* contributed to the spread of the stereotype of the poor, uneducated Pole, who had difficulty adjusting to urban life. Poles arriving from central Poland, mainly from Warsaw, occupied a different place in the social memory of the newcomers; well educated and accustomed to life in a large city, these new arrivals took the most prestigious jobs and administrative positions.

The attempts of local authorities to exploit national antagonisms are perhaps the most visible in the case of prewar Gdańsk inhabitants, autochthons, who had to go through the process of national verification to prove they were Polish, not Germans. The verification process was often confused with the process of vindication of people registered to the *Volkliste*. The term "autochthon," which local authorities as well as ordinary citizens used, added to the complication. The designation was usually associated with the settled Danzig population, which for many who did not understand the complicated local history, meant Germans. Prewar Poles perceived the requirements as an unnecessary slight, a sign of distrust that they did not deserve.

Vast differences divided the new Gdańsk community: language, social and cultural practices, and various stereotypes and prejudices, which crossed national, social, and class divides. Did the city authorities have a vision of what kind of community they wanted to develop? Perkowski suggests that during this period the priority was the physical rebuilding of a city ravaged by

war. Around 1950, national antagonisms contributed to the creation of a broad category of people whom the authorities viewed as untrustworthy: remaining Germans or those identified as autochthons went from a suspect group who needed to prove their loyalty to the Polish state into likely saboteurs who threatened the safety of the community. They were often accused of spying and subversion, Perkowski states. In this sense, Gdańsk does not seem to be unique. The history of Poland in the early 1950s provides us with many examples of the politicization of various social categories.

One of the most interesting aspects of this rich book is the exploration of the process of establishing (or inventing) traditions in Gdańsk, which eventually led to re-imagining of the city from a cosmopolitan port city to a stronghold of Polishness. The process of transforming Danzig into Gdańsk was facilitated by the myth of the city as a center of Polish life in the midst of Germanism. "In this game with associations, school children as well as politicians were confusing Teutonic Knights with Prussians, and Teutonic Knights and Prussians were equaled with Nazis (*hitlerowcy*)," writes Perkowski (p. 32). Throughout this process, Gdynia—the neighboring port city that was constructed by the new Polish state in the 1920s as a response to the decision to turn Danzig into a free city under the protection of the League of Nations—gained the status of a port city, where most residents had jobs somehow connecting them to the sea.

Regardless of the direction the reconstruction of the city's past took, Perkowski emphasizes that Gdańsk attracted brave, resourceful, and entrepreneurial people. Throughout this period, the population of the city was increasingly becoming a diverse community—a group that certainly challenged the sense of security of the Communist state. This diversity contributed to the uniqueness of the city in postwar Poland; here, rich tourists were more frequently spotted and more attractive black-market items were more easily accessible. As Perkowski notes, "freedom of decisions, proximity to the sea, and large distance from the supervising delivery market in Poland, Warsaw, attracted private initiative" in Gdańsk (p. 36).

Interestingly, while writing about the 1970s and 80s, decades not covered by the book, local historians often evoke the city's unique spirit, *genius loci*, to explain why a large number of anti-Communist groups, including Solidarity, the largest anti-Communist movement in Eastern Europe, originated in Gdańsk. The particular quest for freedom first manifested itself on a large scale in the

1970s, when authorities responded violently to a workers' strike. Perkowski argues that if the city was unique its exceptionalism lay in the composition of the population that consisted predominantly of young people who arrived there expecting the promises of socialism to be fulfilled in their lifetimes: the two most notable examples are Lech Wałęsa and Anna Walentynowicz. The connection between Solidarity and the city's history is probably different than has been long assumed—an issue that awaits its historian, perhaps a second volume

to Perkowski's book.

This is a rich book that provides us with countless stories of daily negotiations between authorities and citizens. The source material is so compelling that a number of times after reading an anecdote I wanted to ask, "So, what happened next?" But Perkowski skillfully avoids turning his book into a collection of anecdotes. I only wish the book included a city map that could help the reader locate the places that he discusses, or allow the reader to visualize the city's physical changes.

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Citation: Anna M. Muller. Review of Perkowski, Piotr, *Gdańsk: Miasto od Nowa*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. July, 2015.

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