

Gdańsk - miasto od nowa: kształtowanie społeczeństwa i warunki bytowe w latach 1945-1970

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Piotr Perkowski's "Gdańsk - Miasto od nowa" is another addition to the growing body of urban history works on the Polish West after 1945. Yet, Perkowski's study stands out, as it does not primarily focus on the changing physical and political processes in the cityscape from a German to a Polish character as many other works do. Instead, the author conducts a highly readable socio-historical analysis of Gdańsk's post-war society, with a strong focus on the citizens' every-day life under communism. Since the study spans to 1970, Perkowski is able to provide his readers with a colorful image of Gdańsk during the exciting period between the end of the war and the rise of the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement. This unique perspective does not only close a gap in the existing scholarship, but it also allows the author to analyze how long term developments in the city led to the political protests of the late 1960s.

"Miasto od nowa" is divided into two parts, which contain three separate chapters covering events in the time period between 1945 and 1970. The first one is entitled "Shaping of Society" and deals primarily with the social development of post-war Gdańsk. Large parts of its three chapters cover developments which could also be found in other Polish cities and abroad. This accounts for the tense relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Communist Party, and for attempts to control the public sphere under Stalinism. In order to describe these, Perkowski concentrates on two interesting phenomena with which political leaders at the time were obsessed, namely rumors and sabotage. Perkowski gives some striking examples of how paranoid local authorities made "mountains out of molehills." For example, sabotage was suspected in a Gdańsk chocolate factory when a scoop dropped into one of the kettles.

According to the author, a primary feature of the communist ruling policy in Gdańsk was taking advantage of existing social and ethnic differences within the city. A key part of this strategy was the invention of an "enemy other" that prevails in the city. At first, this enemy was the German population, which was gradually expelled. However, as Perkowski demonstrates, this process of othering did not stop when the vast majority of Germans were gone. Paradoxically, it also largely affected former Polish Danzigers and the so-called "autochthons" who had lived in the city well before World War II, and who had often been the target of Nazi-German hatred. According to Perkowski, the communist leaders did not know the local realities and did not make any attempts to understand them. Thus, even people who had passed the communist government's ethnic screening process

(so-called verification) and who were allowed to remain in Gdańsk experienced hostilities, from harassment to violence and expropriation. The third large group labeled as the "other" consisted of unwanted Polish newcomers in the city. It was easy in the Stalinist years to be classified as part of the so-called harmful element ("element zbędny" or "szkodliwy"). This diverse group of people included prostitutes, thieves, private traders, and also clergymen and members of the intelligentsia. Specific for the coastal region was also a group called "blue birds", people who came to Gdańsk during the tourist season to engage in different kinds of illegal private businesses and sometimes criminal activities such as pickpocketing. Using border security measures as a pretext, all people who were unwanted on the Baltic coast could be easily expelled to inner Polish regions further away from the border and from Gdańsk.

The long-term perspective of Perkowski's study works particularly well in the part about Gdańsk's youth. During the 1960s a new generation of Polish teenagers and young adults rebelled against their parents and communist mainstream culture, although to a lesser extent than in Western Europe. After Warsaw and Cracow, Gdańsk became one of the centers of youth subcultures which had started with the beatniks in the 50s and continued with the hippie movement in the 60s. Mainstream Polish youth also became gradually estranged from the state throughout the 1960s. Perkowski points out that students and young shipyard workers played a prominent role in the protests of March 1968 and December 1970. Authorities reacted by shooting at the protesters, making mass arrests and drafting hundreds of young men as a disciplinary measure. As Perkowski shows, an alternative to violence and repression towards the young protesters and a change in communist youth policy was not even considered.

The second part of the work, entitled "Living Conditions," mainly centers around the shortage of housing in post-war Gdańsk and its consequences. Within this key topic, Perkowski strives to show that housing was a central question for the build-up of a communist Gdańsk, and manages to blend in other important aspects such as health, work, transport and economy. Perkowski puts particular emphasis on the forced accommodation of people in shared apartments and houses. This phenomenon is usually associated with the Soviet "kommunalka" (communal apartment). However, shared apartments could also be found in post-war Gdańsk, and the fierce disputes among neighbors, which Perkowski provides a glimpse into, fill the shelves of local archives. Equally numerous are the stories about rural newcomers sticking to their traditional lifestyle, which at times included poultry farming on balconies. Again, these post-war phenomena, as well as constant problems of supply shortages and queues in front of the shops do not differ significantly from the experiences in other Polish cities. [1]

Much more interesting is Gdańsk's role as Poland's biggest port region, together with neighboring Gdynia, and the resulting consequences for everyday-life. With tens of thousands of foreign sailors and tourists coming to Gdańsk every year, the city, for Polish standards, had a huge grey economy. People who made business with Western "waluta" (currency), such as private bar owners, illegal money changers and prostitutes were extremely wealthy compared to the rest of the population. Hence a new 17-storey high rise in Gdańsk's Wrzeszcz district, where apartments could be purchased for Western currency was nick-named "dollar prostitutes' house." A part of the income gap in the region, however, was legally sanctioned by the government. The salaries of Polish sailors, fishermen and dockworkers were much higher than average. Even more

importantly, these people officially had the opportunity to earn Western currency and access to rare foreign goods. The rest of the population could only dream about such opportunities. This divide caused social tensions that should not be underestimated. According to Perkowski, not only price hikes and worsening working conditions played a role for the large shipyard workers' strike in 1970, but also the fact that the disillusioned workers could see every day that other groups in the city were much better off.

A great asset of the book is the variety of sources it is based on. Apart from research in local Gdańsk and central Warsaw archives, Perkowski also often refers to films and literary works. More remarkable than these rather traditional sources, however, are the over 100 interviews Perkowski has conducted together with his students. These interviews do not only add to the narrative, they also put interpretations from other sources into question. As such they could have played an even greater role in the book. The author often refers to the important English language literature available on the history of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, among others by Sheila Fitzpatrick and Stephen Kotkin. However, this is not unproblematic. First, as the author states himself, there are certain limits for the comparison of the early Soviet and communist Polish post-war societies. What is more, there is a rich body of socio-historical research available on other communist countries in the same era, which Perkowski unfortunately ignores. The extensive scholarship on the GDR for example could have provided further impulses for this study. [2]

These minor shortcomings by no means lower the high quality of the book. Perkowski's work complements Jacek Friedrich's study on the physical post-war reconstruction in Gdańsk. [3] Hopefully, the title under review will also be translated into German, like Friedrich's book, or English, as this outstanding work is of great interest to a wider audience. It is quite surprising that there is no English or German summary included. Last but not least, Perkowski has to be congratulated on the numerous illustrations accompanying the volume, which perfectly capture the atmosphere of Gdańsk's post-war decades. Rather unusually, the pictures precede the text, but this way they work well in setting the stage for the intriguing read to follow. Perkowski's book is highly recommended to anyone interested in modern Polish history and communist post-war societies.

[1] See, for example, Thum, Gregor. *Die fremde Stadt. Breslau nach 1945*. Berlin: Siedler. 2003. English Edition: *Uprooted: How Breslau Became Wrocław During the Century of Expulsions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

[2] One prominent example is the fierce debate around Mary Fulbrook's concept of "normality and normalization" in the GDR, which triggered elaborate discussions among both German and Anglo-American historians on the role of the state in every-day life under communism. Furthermore, the work of scholars such as Alf Lüdtke, Ina Merkel, Jonathan Zatlín, Mark Landsman, Andrew Port, and Eli Rubin cover parts of every-day life in East Germany, which are also themes of Perkowski's study.

[3] Friedrich, Jacek. *Neue Stadt in altem Gewand: der Wiederaufbau Danzigs 1945-1960*. Köln: Böhlau. 2010. Polish Edition: *Odbudowa Głównego Miasta w Gdańsku w latach 1945-1960*. Gdańsk: Słowo/ Obraz Terytoria, 2015.



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