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■ “Liberation” and the Polish takeover - the 75th anniversary of the annexation of the Western and Northern Territories to Poland

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In early 1945, the eastern front of World War II moved across the Polish border of 1939 as, supported by the 1st and 2nd Polish Army and other forces, the Red Army advanced into the German territories that would be annexed by Poland as soon as the war was over. In the spring of 1945, the Eastern Front reached further towns in today's Western and Northern Territories. Since 1945, the residents of these areas have celebrated anniversaries of “liberation” on the dates on which fighting to free their respective towns ended. For several years, various new ways of commemorating these events have emerged in the Western and Northern Territories. Some residents are still celebrating “the return to the Motherland”, while others look for new ideas to remember the “Polish takeover”. Faced with numerous myths built around the events of 1945, the local communities are trying to find their own ways to deal with the problematic overtones of the word “liberation.”

“Liberation” during communism

The Western and Northern Territories were captured in Operation Wisła-Odra launched on January 14, 1945. Its main goal was to breach German defenses, advance across the Odra River and then strike Berlin. The fortification system along Germany's eastern border consisted of three basic elements stretching from north to south: the Pomeranian Wall, the Fortified Region of Międzyrzecz and the Odra Line.

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The incorporation of the Western and Northern Territories into Poland was one of the pillars on which Poland's communist government built its legitimacy. Widespread propaganda and rituals that went back for several decades strengthened the belief that 1945 was the year in which the area's towns were "liberated". While there is nothing illegitimate about this premise when it comes to the recovery of some of the towns (such as Międzyrzecz, Skwierzyna, Babimost) which Poland had held before the country's partitioning, the towns originally built by the Germans (including Gorzów Wielkopolski and Sulęcín) can hardly be described as liberated. Nevertheless "liberation" day remained a central propaganda celebration that underpinned the perception of the Recovered Territories and the Red Army's role in their "recovery". Since 1946, most towns and villages celebrated the anniversary of their capture by the Red Army as one that marked their liberation and the cessation of fighting. The observances were either military or state affairs that fit into the mode of celebrations that was common throughout communist Poland. The fighters for the Recovered Territories were honored with plaques on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw in 1946.

Poland restarted

Due to strong links between the Recovered Territories and Poland's communist government, once communism collapsed in 1989, the myth of the Territories was decommunized along with others stemming from communist Poland. Owing to combatant settlements and the strong involvement of the communist authorities in their development, the relevant parts of communist Poland's heritage have become permanently ingrained into the identities of Western and Northern Territory communities. After the first round of decommunization in the 1990s, the German origins of towns and villages in the Western and Northern Territories, which had long remained taboo, drew considerable interest. As debates on expulsions and resettlements began and the myth of the Recovered Territories was confuted, liberation anniversaries lost a lot of the significance they had in communist Poland. The 1990s saw the emergence of a number of Polish-German initiatives to reconcile the narratives of "the expelled" with those of the Polish pioneers.

In the year of the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, no consistent narrative was in place for commemorating this event in towns and villages across the Western and Northern Territories. End-of-the-world anniversaries continued to be celebrated as "a return to the Motherland" (e.g. in Trzcianka and Zielona Góra), as a Polish administration takeover (e.g. in Świnoujście, Szczecin), and as the cessation of military operations. Despite such diversity, there is a pronounced need to mark the Polish takeover. The residents of the Western and Northern Territories have been trying to devise new ways to honor the anniversary. A shift of focus in recent years has been to celebrate the Polish post-war achievements of the local residents who commenced their pioneering work in the new socio-political setting in 1945. On the 75th anniversary of the annexation of the Western and Northern Territories to Poland, the local residents sought to preserve established historic traditions, reinterpret symbols and invent new ways to mark the occasion.

The 75th anniversary of the annexation of the Western and Northern Territories

In the communist propaganda, the successive anniversaries of the annexation of the Recovered Territories by Poland were celebrated as those of liberation or a return to the Motherland. Some towns still use this symbolism for various reasons. Although many emphasize the ambiguity of terms, they nevertheless continue the Polish traditions in celebrating the anniversaries. This year's 75th anniversary of the annexation of the Western and Northern Territories was observed with history lectures and the laying of wreaths and candles at monuments. Some towns (such as Trzcianka and Jastrowie) celebrated the 75th anniversary by focusing on their return to Poland. The military nature of the celebrations was retained mainly in towns with strong military traditions (such as Żagań and Drawsko Pomorskie). In other places (Wałcz, Szewcowa), a distinctive feature of the celebrations have been meetings with veterans.

A new interpretation of old symbols

A key part of the communist propaganda was to highlight ties to Recovered Territories' ties to the Piast Dynasty tradition. Threads from history were skillfully weaved into the going narrative. In this vein, in a reference to the Posts of Boleslaw the Brave, the Polish soldiers were made to believe that by putting up border posts along the Odra River, they were following in the King's footsteps and thus restoring historical justice. The first border post on the Odra (which by the way only lasted one night) was put up on February 27, 1945 in Czulin in West Pomerania by members of the 6th Warsaw Independent Mechanized Pontoon-Bridge Battalion. Years later, the Czulin post became a celebrated memorial site.

Another key symbol of the fighting for "liberation" was the breaching of the Pomeranian Wall (*die Pommernstellung*). These fortifications of about 275 km in length were erected in the 1930s as protection against a possible attack from Poland. In 1945, 1780 Polish soldiers perished in the fighting to breach the Pomeranian Wall. The swords from the Battle of Grunwald, which were also incorporated into a state decoration used by the communist authorities, became a symbol of the fight. Towns located along the Pomeranian Wall would refer to this symbol for many years. Despite the glorification of the anniversaries of the battle achieved by the involvement of the military, it was not until the 1980s that efforts began to create a Museum of the Pomeranian Wall Battle. Its second opening in March 16, 1985 was attended by the then Prime Minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who himself fought there in 1945 in the 5th Kołobrzeg Infantry Regiment. Following 1989, the Mirosławiec Museum of the Battle of the Pomeranian Wall, which commemorated the war effort of the Polish Army, became problematic due to its links with the communist government and to the photographs of Karol Świerczewski and Wojciech Jaruzelski lining its walls. After 2010, the Mirosławiec facility was given a Military Aviation History Hall, which presented the history of aviation during the communist period (including photos from visits by Fidel Castro and Yuri Gagarin) as well as the 2008 CASA plane crash, which has become a tourist attraction.

Another example of a new interpretation of an old symbol associated with the incorporation of the Western and Northern Territories into Poland is the approach to remembrance adopted in Gorzów Wielkopolski, where - in 1995 - the anniversary of the town's liberation was celebrated as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation, a joint initiative of the Gorzów authorities and the Association of Former Residents of Landsberg. A Peace Bell, funded in 2006 by the former and current residents of the city and closely connected with the former monument of the brotherhood of arms, became a symbol of Polish-German remembrance and cooperation. The penultimate day of January is commemorated as the end of German history in Gorzów Wielkopolski and as the town's Polish beginning, even though the Polish administration did not take the city over until March 28. A survey conducted on the popular social media site *Gorzów Wczoraj* asked the respondents: "Which date should Gorzów authorities and residents officially celebrate: January 30, the day of the capture of the German town of Landsberg by the Russian army in 1945 or March 28, the day of the arrival in Gorzów of Polish settlers and the first Polish authorities, also in 1945?" 88% of the respondents chose March 28¹. Notably, in Gorzów, the 2020 celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation (financed by the European cooperation program Interreg V-A) received a much bigger promotion than the 75th anniversary of the city's capture by the Red Army.

Another example of reinterpreting well-established symbols was the strengthening of emphasis on the role of the pioneer settlers. In 2005, the town of Zielona Góra, which had previously, during communism, observed its liberation in February, the month the Red Army captured the city, shifted the focus of the celebrations to the town's return to the Motherland and moved them to June 6, the day the first Polish mayor of the city took office. In 2009, Liberation Day, previously celebrated on February 15, was replaced with the Day of Zielona Góra Pioneers. Another part of the 75th anniversary celebration was the unveiling of plaques commemorating the first post-war residents of the city and a gathering in the memory of the first Polish administration.

New initiatives

The search for new forms of remembrance for the Western and Northern Territories was necessitated by the Decommunization Act². Some local communities begrudged the new law and the measures taken by the Institute of National Remembrance to eliminate all remembrance of communist history. An example is the late-2018 initiative to take down monuments and boulders commemorating the breaching of the Pomeranian Wall. 700 people signed an open letter to the Governor of West Pomerania, the General Directorate of National Roads and Motorways, and the Szczecin branch of the Institute of National Remembrance. A resumption of public debate on the past and future of the Pomeranian Wall produced new ideas on how to preserve the heritage. An interesting initiative was to form the Pomeranian Wall Association to

¹ The survey polled 1200 people.

² Law of April 1, 2016 on the prohibition to promulgate communism or other totalitarian systems through the names of public buildings, facilities and equipment.

use the Wall for tourist purposes. The project began in a fairly unusual way with the creation of the regional brand Wał Pomorski 1945 (Pomeranian Wall 1945) in mid-2019, that the municipalities near the Wall chose to use in their cooperation. Thus, the association's founding resembled the launch of a commercial venture - it began with building the brand, visual identifiers and promotional gadgets with the stated mission being "to consolidate tourist potential and create a single strong tourist attraction". It took a half a year after the brand was created and promoted for the Wał Pomorski 1945 Association to be founded. Its original founding members were the urban municipalities of Wałcz, Tuczno, Człopa, Jastrów and Mirosławiec.

In addition to strictly tourist ventures, the Western and Northern Territories feature initiatives that are completely new and unrelated to the former propaganda and that allude to the unique heritage of this land. They include sport tournaments, music and art events and happenings.

Anniversary celebrations during the coronavirus pandemic

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, this year's anniversary celebration has been marked by a variety of restrictions. Under the new circumstances, many institutions announced they would reschedule the ceremony to a later date. Some of the celebrations, or at least their educational parts, moved online. Museums prepared videos that could be viewed on the web, while archives opened access to historical presentations and ran a campaign encouraging people to use the Covid-19 lockdown to put their home archives in order.

Conclusions

Despite the numerous controversies surrounding liberation and its use in communist propaganda, the inhabitants of the Western and Northern Territories view the Polish takeover of the towns populated by Poles in 1945 as a momentous event. Some towns (such as Bytom Odrzański, Kozuchów, and Myślibórz) stopped celebrating the anniversaries in their current form. Other than abandoning problematic anniversaries, attempts have been made to fill the symbolic void with new heroes that would link the Western and Northern Territories to symbols recognized nationally and not only locally.

On the other hand, the 1945 anniversaries and the beginning of Polish statehood in the Western and Northern Territories are of great significance for the local communities seeking to celebrate the post-war effort to develop the region, often made by their ancestors. Meanwhile, the towns that are home to veteran associations and former military bases tend to keep the celebrations unchanged. Towns with no military traditions have been searching for new ways to commemorate the Polish takeover in the Western and Northern Territories, focusing mostly on how the land was developed by Poles and on the pioneer settlers. Due to the ongoing pandemic, some of the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the annexation of the Western and



Northern Territories to Poland were either moved online or held with the use of other electronic media.

The views expressed in this publication belong solely to the author.

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