

# TRACES OF THE COMMUNIST ERA IN THE NAMES OF STREETS AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN ZIELONA GÓRA: A CONTRIBUTION TO POLISH HISTORICAL POLICY FOLLOWING THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

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**Abstract.** *Zielona Góra possesses many traces and places of commemoration that are related to its communist past. The question of why these still exist is more difficult to answer. One factor is almost certainly its special status as a formerly German city in the territories "regained" from the Nazi regime after the Second World War. The Polish Communist Party was in power until 1989. The majority of Poles have tended to remain left-wing. Thus, despite popular resentment over Soviet domination and the relative impoverishment of the communist period, this period is not viewed entirely negatively. The persistence of traces of the communist past may also simply result from political inertia in the region. A third possibility is that Poland has never had an effective policy of decommunization.*

**Keywords:** *decommunization, communist Poland, historical policy, Zielona Góra, regained territories.*

## Introduction

Although more than three decades have passed since the fall of communism in Poland, the period continues to live on, not only in individual human memories, but also in the collective memory – commemorated in the names of cities and places. Many streets, buildings, squares and other infrastructure reflect this past, in their names or in dated construction styles. Subsequent to the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences in 1945, Poland's borders were shifted westward. In compensation for eastern territory lost to the USSR, Poland was compensated by receiving Western Pomerania, the Lubusz/Lubuski region,<sup>1</sup> Lower Silesia, part of Upper Silesia, Opole Silesia, the territory of the former Free City of Gdańsk, Warmia and Masuria. Poland's revised borders were guaranteed by the communist authorities and the Soviet Union. Polish citizens were forced to move from the east to the new territories in the west.

In the western and northern regions of Poland, the memory of the communist period remains particularly vital. The reason for this is that, due to history, these regions were crucial to Communist Party propaganda. The presentation of this territory as emblematic of Polish character, sometimes in an exaggerated way, was an argument by and for the Communist authorities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the various meanings of this term, see Toczewski 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see Domke 2010.

This association made their propaganda more acceptable there, which is why the process of topographical decommunization<sup>3</sup> has proven less complete than in the other, more right-wing parts of Poland.<sup>4</sup> This is why the process of decommunization in western Poland (formerly part of Germany) was not as precise as in areas part of pre-WWII Poland.

Bearing this social context in mind, my work provides an illustrative analysis of the place names, architectural traces and monuments of the communist era (1945–1989) in the city of Zielona Góra. Lying in the west of Poland near the Odra River, this city was German until the end of the Second World War, and many symbolic traces commemorate its complicated history. For the sake of clarity, I have divided my analysis into three sections. Subsequent to a brief historical introduction to the city, the first section treats the names of streets and squares. The second section looks at buildings and architectural remnants characteristic of the communist period, and the final section deals with monuments erected during the Polish People's Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* or PRL).

My working thesis has been that the implementation of decommunization policy since 1989 in many Polish cities is far from complete. For better or worse, based on the example of Zielona Góra, one suspects that many towns still possess names and architecture that reference or derive from the communist era.

### **Historical introduction**

As Zielona Góra has a complicated history, a brief, geohistorical introduction to the city will be useful, to establish context. From the tenth to the thirteenth century, the regions of Silesia and Pomerania were ruled by the (Slavic) Piast monarchy. Subsequently, German settlers arrived, and the city eventually fell under the auspices of the Holy Roman Empire. Over the years, the culture became more Teutonic, and Polish became a minority language. Eventually, the city was located within the borders of Germany (under the name Grünberg). As already mentioned, when the borders were revised after the Second World War, the Soviet Union annexed eastern territory from Poland; as Poland had not been a belligerent, the country received new western and northern territory (former Pomerania, Silesia and the southern part of Eastern Prussia) in compensation. The official state policy was to proclaim that these territories had, at some time in the past, been Polish; its propaganda

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<sup>3</sup> Decommunization is a term used throughout Eastern Europe, describing a process and policy of liquidating the communist symbols and names in places and culture.

<sup>4</sup> Crudely put, the part of Poland from the Vistula River eastward is more right-wing than the other part. The former German territories are more left-wing areas.

emphasized that Poles were “reclaiming,” rather than conquering, this territory. Yet, such a perspective was anachronistic, as it projected a modern nation backward 700 years.

The Polish People’s Republic was a satellite nation of USSR, and as such, Soviet soldiers became the guarantors of its western borders. The political situation was complicated by the fact that, as the Cold War became a reality, western countries, such as Great Britain and the USA, suggested that the Polish western border was a temporary expedient in the eyes of international law. Although the Oder–Neisse line had been agreed upon at Potsdam, it had not been formally settled by peace conference between the two countries concerned. The hypothetical possibility that in the future Germany might “regain its” territories, such as Pomerania and Silesia, would have meant Poland losing around a third of its new territory. For this reason, cities such as Zielona Góra, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Szczecin and Wrocław – which were situated in the disputed areas – displayed a preference for politicians who favoured staying in the good graces of the USSR. One may infer that insecurity about the borders meant good relations with the Soviets were viewed more positively than in other regions of the PRL. Communist propaganda was used to convince inhabitants of the areas that these places belonged to them – as Poles. Of course, the propaganda was not always successful, but over subsequent decades, it had the effect of making the inhabitants feel that these were their territories.

This situation changed upon the collapse of communism. Many toponyms were changed almost immediately, because in their newly free state most Poles were happy to do away with pro-Soviet and pro-Communist propaganda. The names of Lenin or Dzierżyński<sup>5</sup> upon many streets and squares, were erased from the maps. Some streets, however, retained only partially amended such names. Due to its location, Zielona Góra provides an example of the contrast between the policy toward history in the post-German territories and that of the remainder of Poland.

### **Streets**

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that many of the street names which had a direct connection with communist times were changed. For example, Karl Marx Street, Dzierżyński Street and Hanka Sawicka Street were all renamed. Space does not permit here a complete analysis of which names were

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<sup>5</sup> Feliks Dzierżyński was chief of Cheka (later called KGB). He was responsible for a terror campaign during the Soviet Revolution and Civil War in 1917–1921. He was also a Pole which rejected Polish citizenship in order to serve and fight from the Communist paradise in Russia.

changed and why – although this would be a fertile topic for future research. I have chosen to focus here on street names which have not changed at all, or which were only partially renamed – for in these cases, the communist past remains visible. Finally, it is worth noting that the municipal limits of Zielona Góra were expanded in 2015 to absorb many smaller, neighbouring villages, and my analysis does include examples that prior to 2015 were technically located outside the city.

A compelling starting point for this analysis is the 22 July Street (22 *Lipca*) – located in the village of Przylep, which was annexed by the city in 2015. On 22 July 1944, a Communist government, the Polish Committee of National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego* or PKWN), was constituted for the country. It was, however, a puppet political body, controlled by the Soviets. On the same day, the PKWN proclaimed a manifesto popularly known as the Manifesto of the 22 July, which declared that Poland should be a democratic country, albeit with revised borders, and that good relations with the Soviet Union should be cultivated. Thus, during the time of the Polish People's Republic, this day was a national holiday. After the PRL collapsed, the newly democratic government annulled this holiday, instead restoring the 11 November as the preeminent national holiday; until 1945, this had been celebrated as the symbolic date of regained independence in 1918, subsequent to 123 years of non-existence on the map of Europe. The 22 July retains negative connotations for the political centre and right-wing of the country, as it calls to mind the Soviet-controlled Communist regime. It is therefore intriguing that, 28 years after the “round table talks,”<sup>6</sup> no one has got around to changing the name. One possible explanation is simply that Przylep is a small village, and Polish leaders were far more preoccupied with changing the names in large population centres. That said, Przylep is currently part of Zielona Góra, and the national political climate until recently – with a right-wing government and president – would appear to favour its having been renamed. Another explanation might be that, without citing the year 1944, the date is only suggestive, as it is not *definitively* connected to the PKWN. Polish history does in fact feature another famous 22 July, as in 1807 the Duchy of Warsaw received a constitution which had been largely dictated by Napoleon Bonaparte; *this* 22 July still enjoys favourable associations among contemporary Poles.

Unity Street (*Jedności*) is in the city centre of Zielona Góra and serves as an example of a name that has been partially changed. Originally, during the PRL, the street was called *Jedności Robotniczej*, which translates as the

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<sup>6</sup> The “round table talks” were a pivotal moment in the transformation process away from communism in Poland.

Union of Workers or Unity of Workers. Its new, shortened name translates in English simply as Union, or Unity, Street, a popular name in the UK, despite the latter's very different historical context. An unwitting denizen of Zielona Góra is faced with the question: which Union? Does this refer to an integrated Europe? The Union or Unity of what, or whom? Shorn of any clear social and historical contexts, the name is ambiguous.

Tadeusz “Zośka” Zawadzki Street was formerly named after Aleksander Zawadzki, who was a member of the Polish Politburo from the 1940s to 1960s. The historical associations of Aleksander Zawadzki are predictably pejorative for the political centre and right. Cleverly enough, the municipal authorities hit upon the idea of simply connecting the street to a completely different Zawadzki: a young war hero with the Polish scouts in the Second World War, who perished in Warsaw at the hands of German occupiers. The first name was changed, the surname remained, and the street now bears the name (and nickname) of a figure positively recognized across the entire nation.

Despite having clear Communist associations, Anieli Krzywoń Street remains in Zielona Góra. In 1940, young Anieli was deported, along with her parents, to the Soviet Union. When a Polish Communist army was formed in the USSR, Aniela Krzywoń enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry in May 1943. She died on the battlefield near Lenino in October 1943 and was awarded several honours, including the *Virtuti Militari*<sup>7</sup> and Hero of the Soviet Union. A likely explanation for the name having remained is that she was an 18 year-old combatting the Germans, who was not directly interested or engaged in politics.

Hanka Sawicka Street (*ulica Hanki Sawickiej*) also derived its name from a wartime story. Hanka Sawicka, whose real surname was Szapiro (1917–1943), was a Polish Jew deeply engaged in communist activities, having been involved in leftist politics since 1935. She was a member of the conspiratorial communist organization “Spartacus” and, beginning in 1942, of the Polish Worker’s Party (PPR). She served on the staff of the underground paper *Walka Młodych*, which was an organ of Polish communist propaganda. On 18 March 1943, she was wounded in combat with the Gestapo and died a day later. Despite her also having fought in the war, in this case pressure from democratizing forces prevailed and the street name was changed to Leopold Okulicki Street.

The Street of the 2nd Army (*ulica II Armii*) takes its name from an organizational grouping of the Polish communist army created in 1943 in the USSR. This army swelled in size in the following years, and by 1945 it had

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<sup>7</sup> *Virtuti Militari* is the most prestigious military honour in Poland.

been divided into two armies, each having a few military divisions. The 2nd Polish Army's field of operations was in the south; as such, its soldiers fought in Lower Silesia and in Czechoslovakia, serving as part of the Second Ukrainian Front commanded by Marshal Ivan Koniew. Such a past presents a slight problem for contemporary Poles, who wish to distance themselves from anything that recalls Soviet domination. Certainly, fighting German occupiers was an admirable thing: particularly if one served as a member of the Polish army in 1939 or in the Polish Armed Forces in exile, in the West. The situation becomes more ambiguous, however, when one discusses those who stood shoulder to shoulder with Stalin, and contemporary Poles have reservations about taking pride in such fighters. Thus, the street names that derived from such pro-Soviet generals as Zygmunt Berling<sup>8</sup> or Karol Świerczewski<sup>9</sup> have mostly been changed. Although scattered examples of these names remain, one presumes they are intended more to commemorate patriotic blood spilt than the commanders' pro-Soviet policy.

The *Armia Ludowa*, or People's Army, was another resistance force, but it was distinctly different from the other domestic resistance, the *Armia Krajowa*. In 1944, the resistance fighters of this People's Army merged with the Polish People's Army, serving as a part of the Second Ukrainian Front. Before that, this force was highly politicized, as each soldier was also a member of the Communist Party. As such, these forces were something akin to Communist partisans, fighting in the cities and forests, where they fought and dealt out death both to their political enemies and to each other, as they waged internecine struggles for power. It is, in fact, quite surprising that such a politically engaged organization as the *Armia Ludowa* (AL) still figures on the city map of Zielona Góra.

Studzianki Street is named for the village Studzianki, in the vicinity of which a famous battle with German forces took place in the summer of 1944.

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<sup>8</sup> Zygmunt Berling was a Polish general and politician. He fought for the independence of Poland in the early twentieth century. During the Second World War he was sentenced in absentia to death for desertion from the Polish Army of General Władysław Anders. The verdict was overruled by the Polish government-in-exile. Later, he became the commander of the 1st Polish Army in the Soviet Union and played a crucial role in the post-war Polish government (see Grzelak et al. for more details).

<sup>9</sup> Karol Świerczewski was an ethnic Pole serving as a Red Army general. Also, he was a Bolshevik Party member and Soviet officer in the wars fought abroad by the USSR, including those against Polish as well as Ukrainian republics and in Republican Spain. In 1939 he participated in the Soviet invasion of Poland. At the end of the Second World War in Europe he was installed as one of the leaders of the Soviet-sponsored Polish Provisional Government of National Unity. He died early in a country-road ambush, shot by the Ukrainian partisans from OUN-UPA. He was a symbol of Communist propaganda for the following several decades (see Cenckiewicz 2011 for further details).

The village was important from a geostrategic point of view, as it was very close to the Vistula River, which was critical terrain to hold in light of future landings on the far shore and plans for the liberation of western Polish territory. Like the AL, however, the Battle of Studzianki is associated with Communist propaganda and Communist politics. Only pro-Soviet forces from the Polish People's Army took part in the battle. One suspects that, as with the Street of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, these names commemorate the young soldiers and casualties of the battle, and as such the names have not become a political issue.

Romuald Traugutt Street presents a somewhat different case, because Romuald Traugutt was a nineteenth-century socialist, and as such was not directly connected with the future Communist regime in Poland. Traugutt was a participant in the uprising of 1864 against the tsar of Russia and a Polish patriot. After the Second World War, he was obviously a fit object of homage for the Communist authorities,<sup>10</sup> but not having the direct taint of Communism, after 1989 he remained acceptable to Poles, particularly those who are left-leaning.

Ludwik Waryński Street presents a similar case. Waryński was also a political activist in the nineteenth century, albeit noticeably more left-wing than Traugutt. He created the political party The First Proletariat, an organization of Polish Communists whose ideals derived from those stated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1864. The First Proletariat existed from 1882 to 1886.

## Architecture

Aside from names, it also happens that places call to mind the Communist era via architecture that reflects its political context. Prior to treating examples from the city, it is worth noting that the period 1945–1989 saw a few different architectural styles, the most recognizable of which was socialist realism (*socrealizm*), most prevalent from 1949 to 1956. Although buildings built after 1956 are less stylistically conspicuous, one nevertheless can notice differences from buildings erected post-1989.

The best example of *socrealizm* in Zielona Góra is the *Centrum Biznesu* (The Centre of Business), which formerly served as the headquarters of the

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<sup>10</sup> Many historical figures from Poland's past were lauded by the Communists. The primary qualifying factor was that the person should have been associated with the people – particularly the peasants and workers. For this reason, such recognized Polish heroes as Tadeusz Kościuszko, Jarosław Dąbrowski and Stefan Aleksander Okrzeja became even more popular than before the Second World War. They had been critical of the bourgeoisie and were considered friends of the common people, in contrast to, e.g., Józef Piłsudski or Roman Dmowski.

Communist Party in the region, the Voivodeship Committee of Polish United Party of Workers (*Komitet Wojewódzki Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, or KW PZPR). Its history is connected with an administrative reorganization in Poland. In June 1950, 17 new voivodeships were created; as a result, small cities such as Zielona Góra were promoted to capitals of the new provinces. A new provincial capital needed a new “palace,” and thus the PZPR decided on a new building in the city centre. The design clearly reflected the official propaganda style, other notable examples of which are the Palace of Science and Culture in Warsaw (completed in July 1955) and *Nowa Huta* (the New Ironworks) in Cracow.<sup>11</sup> The characteristic elements of socialist realist constructions are: monumentality, realism, pragmatism and extensive use of concrete. One might, of course, raise the question of why such structures should necessarily be perceived as monuments *to* – rather than merely *of* – the communist period. Times change, and it is expedient for some infrastructure from previous periods and political systems to remain undisturbed. For this reason, debate has continued in Poland for years as to whether the most characteristic symbols of the communist period ought to be destroyed. While with more blatant examples, such as sculptures and monuments of Lenin and Dzierżyński, popular opinion has been fairly unanimous, this is not the case with the architectural traces of the PRL. Some members of older generations, particularly those who were personally victims of political oppression, find these also to be objectionable. The question frequently resurfaces in the Polish media of whether even the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, the second tallest building in Poland, should be razed, as it was erected as a symbol of Stalinism. That said, things appear to have quieted down somewhat, and most of these buildings remain unaltered, one good example of which is the *Centrum Biznesu* in Zielona Góra. Indeed, in what is perhaps a fitting irony, it has now become a symbol of capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

A completely different style of architecture is associated with the buildings in many residential areas, which also serve as characteristic examples of their times. Firstly, one might look at *Osiedle Wazów* (The Vasa Residential), which is located near the city centre and has typical 1960s Polish architecture. Flats are situated in four-floor blocks. Each flat has a modest

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<sup>11</sup> This project was unique, insofar as the town was completely planned before being built. It includes not only examples of socialist realist architecture, but also many facilities and modern conveniences for the inhabitants, both rich and poor – which was something quite new for a Polish residential area. In the 1950s, the town was annexed and became a district of Cracow.

<sup>12</sup> <http://zielonagora.wyborcza.pl/zielonagora/1,35161,220763.html?disableRedirects=true>, accessed 27 August 2017.



façade and the interior space is purely functional, without any distinguishing architectural details. This reflects the time when the country was being rebuilt after the war; simply having a flat was the priority, rather than having a spacious or stately place to live. *Osiedle Łużyckie* (Łużyce Neighbourhood) was built slightly later, in the 1970s, between Łużycka Street and Polish Army Alley. By this point, the goal was to build residential zones which would be self-sufficient. As such, alongside flats in tower blocks each neighbourhood has a kindergarten, schools, medical centres, a variety of shops, hairdressers and even a little bit of manufacturing. The smaller blocks here are also four-storey, reminiscent of those in *Osiedle Wazów*, but one also finds ten-storey tower blocks, known in Poland as *wieżowce* (towers). The taller buildings became popular in the 1970s, as they were more efficient in terms of both space and materials. When one sees a building between ten and 12 floors high, it is fairly certain they were built between 1970 and 1990, as styles changed again after that. Rather than simply building so-called *molochs*,<sup>13</sup> the new trend favoured more spacious buildings with better designs and fewer materials: however, last but not least, they were also to be visually pleasing. In summary, one might say that ugly concrete buildings in neighbourhoods without sufficient parking often date from Communist times.<sup>14</sup>

### Monuments and sculptures

Our final and most overt examples consist of monuments and sculptures that allude to the period from 1945 to 1989. The first is in the centre of the city, on *Plac Bohaterów* (Heroes' Square).<sup>15</sup> On this monumental sculpture one sees Polish and Soviet soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder, holding rifles, and an eagle depicted above them. After the collapse of Communism, the new authorities decided to simply add a crown to the eagle, which is the national symbol of democratic Poland. A discerning citizen can, however, still recognize the *pepesha* rifles (PPSh-41) which were used only by the Red Army and Polish Communist forces, *ergo* the soldiers on the sculpture allude to the political and military alliance in the Second World War between Poland and the USSR. Another example is the monument located near the intersection of Wyszyński Street and Zawadzki Street: a huge stone with an inscription commemorating "the return" of the old Piast monarchy territories regained in the west. This, too, dates from communist times. Admittedly, the Polish popular myth of "lost" western territories is not exclusive to the Communists, but it was employed by the PRL in a particularly blatant and vulgar manner.

<sup>13</sup> *Molochs* connotes huge, typically ugly, buildings.

<sup>14</sup> For more information about residential and social settlements, read Jarosz 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, in this case we can also ask: "which heroes?"

Such nuances as the degree to which it is possible to “reclaim” territory after 700 years of absence and the territory's integration into a different culture, were completely neglected. Of course, the situation in Zielona Góra (Grünberg) was different from that in, for example, Bydgoszcz, a city regained after only six years of German occupation, and which had for centuries been connected with Polish culture. Nevertheless, such disparate cases were conflated in the “western myth” propagated by places of commemoration constructed during the Communist regime.

### Conclusions

These examples document that Zielona Góra possesses many traces and places of commemoration that are, directly or indirectly, related to Poland's communist past. The question of why these still exist, despite widespread animosity to the Soviet-dominated era, is more difficult to answer categorically. One factor was almost certainly Zielona Góra's special status as a formerly German city, fairly close to the German border, within the territories “regained” from Nazi Germany after the Second World War. The Communist Party was in power until 1989. The majority of Poles have tended to remain slightly left-wing. Thus, despite popular resentment over Soviet domination and the relative impoverishment of the communist period, this period is not viewed entirely negatively. It could be that, for this reason, traces of the communist past are not viewed overly harshly. That said, the continuing presence of reminders of the communist period may simply result from political inertia in the region. The city authorities in Zielona Góra have a great deal to manage and changing a few street names and razing old monuments may not be their highest priority. The situation in many other Polish cities and towns is similar. The third possibility – and, in my personal opinion, the most convincing – is that we have never had an effective policy of decommunization. Even at the time of writing, when a right-wing party has been in power for eight years, this remains the case. As it is now more than a generation after the fall of communism, this is presumably no longer a pressing matter for the governing authorities or society at large; one therefore expects that many of these communist traces will remain.

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