

Adriana Merta-Staszczak
***Niechciane dziedzictwo: nieruchomości
zabytkowe na Dolnym Śląsku
w latach 1945–1989***
**[Unwanted heritage: Historic property in
Lower Silesia in the years 1945–1989]**

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The protection of monuments is still a rather novel and insufficiently-researched subject in the recent historiography of the Polish People's Republic. Apart from pre-1989 publications, which today should be viewed rather as historical sources themselves than thorough topical studies, the majority of more comprehensive works that have been penned so far pertain to Warsaw – the reconstruction and conservation of its historic substance or, conversely, the negligence in that respect (Bojarski, 2015; Majewski, 2009; Majewski, 2018; Popiołek, 2012).¹ The broader picture presented by Piotr Majewski (Majewski, 2009) is an exception here, though he also adopts a clearly Warsaw-centric perspective. For this reason, all new research that on the one hand sees beyond the capital city and on the other no longer focuses on post-war reconstruction and instead explores, for example, the problem of making use of existing historic property, should be met with enthusiasm. Such studies should not only offer a critical review of the hitherto unknown source materials, but also utilize them as a foundation for presenting a new vision of monument protection (or, more broadly, care for monuments) as an integral element of the more comprehensive cultural policy pursued by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic and as an important factor in shaping the post-war society ruled by a communist regime and subjugated by the USSR. After all, the broadly-understood practices of monument protection, which combine institutional policies and social awareness, act as a litmus test of the processes of shaping collective (national) identity on the basis of history.

A book that undoubtedly helps in understanding the intricacies of this phenomenon is the monograph under review, Adriana Merta-Staszczak's *Unwanted Heritage: Historic Property in Lower Silesia in the Years 1945–1989*.

1 See other publications not related to Warsaw (Oleksicki, 2002; Friedrich, 2015).

The author serves as an assistant professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Wrocław University of Science and Technology. In 2010, she defended her PhD thesis in history at the University of Wrocław; her dissertation, written under the supervision of Prof. Franciszek Walerian Kusiak, was devoted to changes regarding the institutionalization of farming in Lower Silesia in the years 1989–2006. Research conducted for the purposes of the thesis was eventually presented in a monograph (Merta-Staszczak, 2014). Therefore, the book under review clearly follows on from the author's previous research and publication activities which combine elements of economic history, legal and political history and heritage studies in Lower Silesia. As she herself declares, "the main purpose of the book is to confront the ideas of monument protection, their use and activities of state institutions with the actual process of utilizing historic property" (p. 14). What changed is the time frame: in this case it is the period of the Polish People's Republic, which entails a different political and social context for the functioning of monuments in the area (it should be noted, however, that the author claims in the book that this period had a major impact on the attitudes of the Polish society towards monuments after 1989).

In her work, Merta-Staszczak uses the term Lower Silesia to denote the post-war Wrocław Voivodeship, which later underwent considerable changes. The most significant of them took place in 1975, when it was divided into four separate units of comparable size: the voivodeships of Wrocław, Jelenia Góra, Wałbrzych and Legnica. The source basis comprises mostly state records from the State Archive in Wrocław and, to a lesser extent, from the National Museum in Wrocław and the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw, not to mention individual fonds from other archives. The author rather infrequently references published sources (e.g. articles in the local press or professional journals such as "Ochrona Zabytków"). Although the illustrative material is rather limited and incidental (thus not adding much to the text), the book under review boasts numerous tables, graphs and diagrams concerning, for example, the financing, planning and organization of various institutions who at the time were responsible for monuments in the region. Moreover, at the end of the book there is a list of monuments from Lower Silesia which were removed from the register in the period of the Polish People's Republic, as well as a list of all objects from the area entered in the 1949 register.

The book is divided into five chapters plus preface and afterword. In the preface, Merta-Staszczak emphasizes the unique, controversial nature of monuments in Lower Silesia, thus providing an explanation for the title of her book. She notes that the "preservation and protection of monuments was especially important in the peculiar territory of Lower Silesia, which throughout history had found itself under Polish, Czech, Austrian, Prussian and German influence. Material traces of the region's history and of the melting pot of cultures and religions were numerous

monuments of various character. [...] One of the outcomes of the Second World War that had a considerable impact on the preservation of monuments in the area was the formation of a new society whose members had experienced tragic events, had no attachment to their place of living and were lacking social and often even familial bonds. For the majority of them, [local – M. G. K.] monuments did not carry sentimental or esthetic value connected with national traditions and history” (p. 9). As Merta-Staszczak points out, the foreignness of monuments in Lower Silesia greatly affected not only the attitudes of new inhabitants of the region, but also the activities undertaken by the local authorities. Rather infrequent attempts at transforming particular sites into memorials to Poles who had once lived in Silesia were made amidst the more widespread indifference to the matter or even purposeful destruction of monuments. However, the author also provides many examples of a purely esthetic approach that recognized the artistic rather than the national-historical value of Silesian monuments.

Due to the multitude of approaches, it would be justifiable to give the book a slightly different title, as the current one does not fully reflect the situation described in its pages. The heritage in Lower Silesia was not as much unwanted as it was troublesome and controversial, as the book itself convincingly illustrates. Cited by Merta-Staszczak as a source of inspiration, British studies on *dissonant heritage* perfectly fit the case of Lower Silesia. This concept, however, does not correspond to the Polish term of “unwanted heritage”, and even the author herself translates it as “difficult heritage” (p. 11, note 11).

In the first and longest chapter, “The situation of historic property in Lower Silesia in the years 1945–1989”, Merta-Staszczak presents general circumstances for the functioning of monuments in Lower Silesia in the period of the Polish People’s Republic. She briefly outlines the legal situation and explores the problem of “activation” (i.e. adaptation to new functions), evaluation, and financing of cultural heritage protection. The author also takes up the issue of the historical and cultural foreignness of local monuments – that is, their Germanness – which was often problematic both to the authorities and the users, though rather not to the conservators. This topic certainly deserves a separate study, as the work under review is not exhaustive in that respect. This, in turn, follows from the research interests of the author, who focused more on discussing institutional activities than on analyzing ideological issues (though in many passages the latter provide context for the former).

In the second, rather short chapter, “The reconstruction of Wrocław and its monuments in the postwar period”, the author describes the activities of the Voivodeship Reconstruction Department in Wrocław and the Wrocław Reconstruction Office. These two institutions were responsible, among others, for the reconstruction of historic buildings in the capital of Lower Silesia in the years 1945–1951. The next chapter, “The cultural

and educational activities and monument protection in the work of the Wrocław Art and Culture Department”, concerns a voivodeship institution which was tasked among others with drawing up inventories and managing utilization of historic property. The fourth chapter, “State institutions in the restoration of monuments in Wrocław and Lower Silesia”, is devoted to the conservation agencies, chief among them the Voivodeship Monument Conservation Office. A section of this chapter also describes the involvement in the matter of employees of the Wrocław University of Science and Technology. The final and rather short fifth chapter, “Organizations and associations engaged in education and promoting knowledge about monuments and cultural heritage”, presents the activities of non-governmental organizations, with particular focus on the Lower Silesia Educational Association.

The fact that the author had previously specialized in the issue of use of historic property after 1989 – which was mentioned at the beginning of the present review – seems to influence her approach to the epoch she describes in her book. In the opinion of the reviewer, such statements as “the period of the Polish People’s Republic is considered to be the time of the most advanced monument degradation in the history of the state” (p. 26) (with no bibliography provided, specifying who exactly thinks so) are rather disputable (if not perplexing). Similarly, a claim that “the society’s limited understanding of the value of monuments and low sensitivity to their historical, esthetic and artistic relevance” results first and foremost from a lack of “monument-related education” (s. 295) calls for an explanation. It should be borne in mind that the period of the Polish People’s Republic cannot be described as the time of the “most advanced” deterioration in the field of monument protection in the history of the Polish “state” (the author seems to include here also the pre-partitions period, even though the modern concept of monument protection had not yet been known then) if only because the very idea of monument protection was still young at the time. The lack of appreciation for the historical and esthetic value of monuments, shown both by the political elite and the society in general, should be considered in the context of the interwar period, when the modern system of monument protection and the new way of thinking about them were being introduced (not without various obstacles, including ideological factors, which were not characteristic only for the Polish People’s Republic) (Dettloff, 2006).

In the reviewer’s belief, only such a diachronic approach allows for a proper handling of even the most conscientiously researched source material and for steering clear of the pitfall of doctrinairism (which in this case would mean adopting an a priori negative view on the Polish People’s Republic as a period of absolute stagnation in various spheres). From this perspective, many more positive aspects of the post-war situation of monuments in Lower Silesia can be noticed (the attitudes of the conservation community itself were very uplifting, and the considerable development

of social awareness as regards the socio-cultural relevance of monuments, which the author herself writes about, cannot be emphasized enough). At the same time, the situation was undoubtedly region-specific and comparable only to that in the remaining lands of the so-called Recovered Territories. In the post-war reality, the Polish populace could hardly be expected to show great appreciation for the German past of the region, except perhaps for a small circle of art historians and architects with a passion for history, who viewed Silesian monuments through the lens of their elitist (and, truth be told, rather cosmopolitan) education. As was already mentioned, the author does not overlook this aspect of the case in her book, but she often arrives at conclusions which she then extrapolates to the entire territory of the Polish People's Republic. In light of the current state of research on monument protection in the whole of post-war Poland, such an approach is not very convincing.

Setting aside these critical remarks, which come to mind after reading *Unwanted Heritage*, the work under review is a valuable book on the post-war practices of monument protection, an issue which still remains inadequately researched. An impressive source basis (though apart from archival materials, it would be advisable to pay closer attention to public discourse of the time, accessible in the form of various printed utterances) is a great asset of the book, which should be read not only by historians specializing in heritage issues, but also researchers interested in the workings of the state apparatus and various aspects of social life in the Polish People's Republic. The institutional perspective adopted by the author can serve as a valuable point of departure for research on other regions of the Polish People's Republic, as each of them had its own peculiar character – which should be both emphasized and analyzed – and its own “unwanted” or (more or less) controversial heritage.

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