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Imagining Europe In Postsocialist Cities

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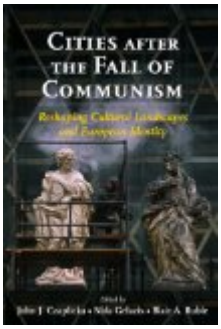
John J. Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, Blair A. Ruble, eds. *Cities after the Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. 384 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9191-5.



Reviewed by Maya Nadkarni (Department of Anthropology, Swarthmore College)
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Imagining Europe in Postsocialist Cities

In the first days of 1991, the eleven cities examined in this edited volume all lay within the territory of Poland or the Soviet Union. A year later, they belonged to six countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine), each with new orientations toward both the recent past of communism and the broader urban and historical legacies they sought to mobilize for the future. Key to many of these imaginings, as the contributions to this collection demonstrate, has been a claim to European belonging, whether articulated within the frame of European Union membership in 2004 (in the case of Lodz, Szczecin, Tallinn, Vilnius, and Wroclaw), or as one of a number of global and international contexts into which these newly democratic cities now seek to insert themselves.

The objective of this volume is to examine the "unique path[s] to the center of Europe" that these cities have embarked on, and the different urban pasts they have used to pave their way (p. 342). Based on a conference titled "Cities after the Fall: European Integration and Urban History" held at Harvard University in 2005, it offers a chapter on each city (Kaliningrad/Koenigsberg, Kharkiv, L'viv, Lodz, Novgorod, Odessa, Tallinn, Sevastopol, Szczecin, Vilnius, and Wroclaw), written by specialists on the region and organized into three thematic sections. An introduction and conclusion by editors John J. Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, and Blair A. Ruble synthesize these contributions and assess their broader implications.

Once united by the "common forces" of Sovietization (p. 2), these cities have faced similar challenges in their transition to democracy and a market economy. They have also each struggled with the task of rewriting urban histories that would support their reinvention as nations: a process ironically challenged by the post-communist democratization of history itself, in which competing social actors and institutions battle to determine the historical meaning and present-day use of the cityscape. As the contributions to this collection illustrate, what is thus at stake in post-communist urban historical politics is not merely restoring the pre-Soviet past, but rather drawing selectively on contested and discontinuous histories in order to support equally embattled contemporary claims to national and European belonging. (Indeed, in the Polish city of Wroclaw, the lack of historical consensus and the collapse of the official/oppositional poles of collective memory has led to a fragmentation of urban memory that Gregor Thum, one of the contributors to the collection, characterizes as postmodern.)

As a result, each of the cities examined offers a slightly different answer to the question of what it means to be European. In Tallinn, for example, as Jorg Hackmann argues, Estonian architects look northward toward Finnish modernism in conceptualizing both their own twentieth-century tradition and contemporary neomodernist practice. Other cities draw on other pasts: from the Hanseatic League to Habsburg rule to the memory of expelled German inhabitants. Yet even similar

historical references are differently inflected according to what Olga Sezneva terms "the politics of location" (p. 198). On the one hand, in Wroclaw, the memory of the city's German past was kept alive by its citizens under Soviet rule through their material traces (furniture and household goods), which became emblems of a standard of quality and craftsmanship lacking under Soviet rule. On the other hand, the process of recuperating such memories of German heritage has been more fraught in Szczecin, which lies on the border of unified Germany and Poland and whose citizens, as Jan Musekamp notes, continue to fear a "German return" now phrased in economic rather than political terms (p. 330).

Similarly, the "politics of location" also has an impact on the extent to which narratives of national or European belonging reinforce–or overwrite–local histories. In some cases, national and local interests coincide, such as the way that Russia seeks proof of its own Europeanness through the "Novgorod myth" of Novgorod's locals, as examined by Nicolai N. Petro. In L'viv, in contrast, as Liliana Hentosh and Bohdan Tscherkes discuss, the official transformation of the cityscape has sought to eliminate not only the Soviet past but also local memory of the city's multiethnic heritage, in order to narrate the city as purely Ukrainian. Yet common to all the case studies in this collection is the recognition that urban visions of the past must always contend with present-day realities. L'viv's fellow Ukrainian city of Sevastopol, which identifies itself as Russian rather than Ukrainian or European, has thus been better able to resist inclusion into national narratives thanks to its historical and current identity as a port city where the Russian Black Sea fleet is based, as Karl D. Qualls argues. More prosaic–yet no less crucial to understanding the contemporary stakes of urban history and memory–is the fact that a number of the plans for urban transformation examined in the collection still lack financing (or were financed by private and/or international investors). Indeed, the detail with which the chapters chronicle the uneven success of public and private attempts to materialize both a chosen past and desired future on the post-communist cityscape is a particular strength of the volume.

This book is thus one of the rare edited collections that is more than the sum of its parts. Although the contributors span disciplines that include history, architecture, sociology, and political science, the chapters are similar in thematic and historical scope, and they draw on similar resources (historical and literary sources, contemporary media and political debates, urban planning, etc.) to guide their analyses. Moreover, the editors do an admirable job of highlighting common themes and challenges in their introduction and conclusion. With such thematic coherence and so many fruitful points of comparison among the various cities, one can only wish for a stronger structural framework: two of the three sections are concerned with geography (ports and borders) and the first with medieval histories. Organizing these sections according to themes that speak more directly to the central concerns of the book (orientations toward Europe and the selective reimagining of diverse historical pasts) might have helped to reinforce the book's otherwise strong comparative dimensions.

However, this very unity of approach also means that the volume raises questions that a broader disciplinary reach might have better enabled it to address. In particular, the book might have benefited from contributions that more explicitly solicited the voices of the people who live in the cities themselves. (Olga Sezneva's excellent chapter on the politics of location in the Russian enclave territory of Kaliningrad, which before 1945 was the German town of Koenigsberg, is the exception here.) Of course, a number of the chapters do broadly refer to the opinions and initiatives of urban residents, as one of many collective social actors that include state and municipal governments, private developers, and community groups. Yet such references are mostly made in passing, and as a result, it is difficult to get a sense of these cities as not only planned spaces, but also lived ones. That is, how are urban citizens experiencing the transformations examined in these chapters? What determines the ways in which they "incorporate seamlessly these new structures into their lives" (p. ix), as well as avoid them, contest them, or actively remake both their form and meaning? And how do these interactions with their changing cityscapes ultimately determine the sense of history, nation, and European belonging that is being produced in these cities? Fuller answers to such questions would also enable the collection to offer a more variegated picture of present-day urban diversity by showing not only how cities draw on, rework, or deny various multiethnic pasts, but also how contemporary articulations of difference (such as gender, age, ethnicity, and new and established forms of social stratification) inform how citizens experience the new forward-looking histories produced in the cityscape.

Cities after the Fall of Communism offers an impressive analysis of the different historical pasts these cities are deploying in order to enter variously imagined European futures. Understanding such efforts, as the editors make clear, illuminates the challenges faced by post-

communist nation-states, and may also help "to unlock the puzzle of what unites all Europeans" (p. 346). Scholars of post-communism, European integration, and urban history will thus find the book to be an important contribution to their fields, and the different case studies will easily lend themselves to course adoption for undergraduate and graduate students.

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