

Uprootedness in the Polish-German Borderlands. The meaning of the transformation revised

**Dystopia's
Provocateurs:
Peasants,
State and
Informality
in the Polish-
German
Borderlands**

Edyta Materka,
Bloomington
and Indiana-
napolis: Indiana
University
Press, 2017,
234 pages.

“Toward the end of World War II, the Soviet Union’s annexation of eastern Poland and Poland’s annexation of eastern Germany precipitated one of the largest demographic upheavals in European history. The Soviet-backed Polish government expelled millions of Germans west of the new Polish–German border and replaced them with millions of ethnic Poles from south and central Poland, along with ‘repatriated Poles’, a group comprising Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Kashubians, Jewish Holocaust survivors, and other ethnic minorities from Poland’s lost east and newly acquired German lands. The Polish government called this new western frontier the ‘Recovered Territories’ (Ziemie Odzyskane) – a Polish homeland that had been lost to German colonialism for a millennium. What these Slavic settlers would ‘recover’, however, was unclear.”

The beginning of Edyta Materka’s book on the narratives of settlers and “remainers” in the territories annexed by Poland in the preliminary Potsdam Treaty already hints at a critical attitude to official historiography. She is searching for the memories of the daily chores, restrictions and possibilities in a situation of uprootedness and societal muddiness. She is a daughter of the area, now returning with the gaze of a trained ethnologist after a lucky draw that brought the family to “Ameryka”. Her maternal village, called Bursztyn, is situated some 100 kilometers west of Gdańsk. Upon returning after many years she finds that the village street is paved with German gravestones, soon covered with concrete in order to conceal history.

Her principal interest is the local people’s use of *kombinacja*, defined as the improvising process of reworking economic, political, or cultural norms for personal gain. Materka asks: How is *kombinacja* socially reproduced, and how does it migrate to new sites? What does it mean to transform into a *kombinator*, and how does this transformation occur?

The concept has a strange history of semantic and spatial transmission from British late 18th-century legislation against combination, the forming of workers’ unions for better wages and working conditions. The resistance against oppression was adopted by the intelligentsia of Congress Poland through the writings of John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx, as a grassroots nation-building against Russification, an “underground republic of the imagination”. In resurrected interwar Poland, *kombinacja* changed character, developing into the “beginning of an internal revolution within the Polish republic of the imagination. Women’s and gay rights activists were beginning to publicly question the organization of Polish society around Catholic-defined, heterosexual, and masculinized spaces.”

Materka’s book is primarily about the Polish version of *kombinacja*, but because the time of what she calls Slavic settlement

is a period of strong if often counter productive Soviet influence, she devotes some coverage to the use of *kombinatsiya* in the great eastern neighbor. During the more permissive slots in Soviet history, heroes of *kombinacja* appeared in literature. “Stalin’s trickster tactics to eradicate the Nepmen capitalists inspired a new antihero ... in interwar Soviet literature.” Materka sees the *kombinator* or *blat* tactics depicted in this literature as symptomatic of Soviet society, from Lenin’s NEP and Stalin’s different hard and softer regimes to Gorbachev’s perestroika.

The Potsdam Agreement endorsed the westward movement of Polish territory, at least as a preliminary solution. The German population of the areas would be expelled. In order to explain the flight of people of diverse ethnic origins from the eastern *kresy*, of Germans from East Prussia and Pomerania, and the necessary repopulation of the newly acquired lands, the Warsaw government adopted a strategy borrowed from interwar nationalist propaganda: The idea of “recovered territories” was a myth based on partly true, partly exaggerated histories of the Piast dynasty ruling a territory resembling the new spatial configuration of Socialist Poland around the turn of the first millennium, before the Germanization of much of the area in the Middle Ages. “Scholars became puppets of the state, manipulating science to validate the Piast myth.” The myth served both as a justification of the land grab and for the reestablishment of a new era, perhaps with the intention of putting the nationalizing aspect before the reality of Sovietization.

THE RESETTLEMENT of the “recovered territories” met with enormous difficulties well exemplified by Materka under the heading “The Second Serfdom”. Land was distributed by faulty or misguided principles to people unprepared for agriculture, villagers were forced to do *corvée* (*szarwerk*, from German *Scharwerk*, group work) against all principles of socialism, and remaining Germans were exploited if needed for specialized work, otherwise harassed or expelled. This was a time for *kombinacja*, especially by the administrators. “The survival of the early Polish elites relied not on following the myth of the Recovered Territories but on navigating official and unofficial identities and discourses to secure



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a bricolage of German and Russian resources to keep them fed and in power.”

While many settlers in formerly German-occupied areas carefully destroyed all remnants of German heritage in the houses taken over, people from the east, especially those expelled after the Vistula campaign, kept inventories from the former German inhabitants. In cases where Germans stayed in their former houses as “lodgers” with the new owners, they gave some of their remaining belongings to the settlers before leaving westwards. These objects, called “gotyk”, were sometimes kept as a link to history and to the future, in case the Germans came back on nostalgia tours, called *Heimat* by the settlers and their descendants.

This time of proto-socialism was one of chaos, but in the villagers’ memories the word *kombinacja* is rarely mentioned. “Socialism in the Recovered Territories was built on the foundations of feudalism that mixed Polish, German and Soviet variants at different points in time. Villages were ruled by father-son teams, commune officials granted themselves landed estates and secured cheap German labor for them; forestry division directors treated workers as their own domestic laborers. The state was defined not by the rule of law from Warsaw but by familial networks.”

Around 1948 the attempts to create Polish socialism were crushed by Moscow. In the Recovered Territories, however, chaos lingered on, but the collectivization measures were easier to impose on the rootless than on the autochthonous peasants from the old Polish areas, and creating *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* partially recreated the old Junker estates. The hard measures did not reach the area until the time of Stalin’s death. There is almost no mention of *kombinacja* in the public archives, only one local report condemning kulaks and kombinators and introducing mandatory quotas of agricultural products to stop speculation. These mandatory quotas marked the Polish peasants’ first encounter with Stalinism, bringing back memories of the Nazi occupation. To the remaining farmers in the area, the quota

system introduced a repression similar to the Stalinist purge of kulaks. Desperation led to the rebirth of the kombinator, as described in Materka’s chapter titled “Magical Stalinism”. Peasants learned to “perform magic tricks to meet the state’s irrational regime of domination and spaces of mobility within the rigid structures of the command economy”. All sorts of trickster behavior are exemplified, all with the aim of deceiving the state while surviving as individuals. But Materka’s somewhat surprising conclusion is: “To make ends meet, officials and collective farm workers both used different *kombinacja* tactics to leverage control over the flow (and pace) of labor and resources between the household and the state supply chain. Thus, the strategy served to stabilize the command economy, preserve the political power of the elites, and lift collective farm workers out of poverty. *Kombinacja* emerged as the will of the collective.” The change in governance from nationalism to Stalinism brought about a change in the practices of informality.

THE MAJOR PROTESTS in June 1956 for better wages and bread led, after strong repercussions, to a certain liberalization, de-collectivization, and an attempt by the new government to induce peasants to form cooperatives. The first enthusiasm soon waned, but the local population found that the new system allowed new forms of *kombinacja*. In the following years a generational shift took place, but many of the children of the settlers opted for other jobs, preferably in the nearby towns. A new type of *kombinacja* worker-farmer extended family emerged, involving the formal ownership or right to land between parents and children, depending on the possibility of utilizing different grants and avoiding quotas.

The 1980 riots in Gdańsk and Szczecin against food scarcity and corruption marked the beginning of a peak in *kombinacja*, remaining until the final breakdown of Socialist Poland. In Pomerania, Materka’s home region, the first generation of peasant settlers were being replaced by a proletarianized generation, resulting in the abandonment of agricultural land, a re-nationalization of agriculture, and further drops in production. With a new generation, *kombinacja* tactics were modernized, now taking place at state factories and farms,

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offices and schools and not in the forests at night as in the old narratives. At the state farms, “workers, bound by the collective experience of poverty, adapted kombinacja to negotiate wages, hours and entitlements, like a loosely formed shadow labor union, without overtly rising up against the state farm administration”. In this way “the state’s dystopia had become their utopia”. In a way, the villagers had taken control of local resources, practicing “socialism” in defiance of the formally socialist central party administration.

Pomerania and its extension into Gdańsk was one of the most nationalized and proletarian of zed areas of Poland, but right from the beginning it suffered from failed policies and implementations at the local level. The two major conurbations in the area, Gdańsk and Szczecin, became the cradle of the Solidarity movement. But while Materka sees the beginning of *Solidarność* in a woman worker’s protest against the supervisor’s stealing from the shipyard, the fate of Solidarity is another story, a drift towards foreign influence and capitalism, far from the peasant-worker kombinacja socialism waged against the state up to 1983. Around 1987, Poland is no longer socialist; Lech Wałęsa is described as a leader of a pro-capitalist movement. Materka’s parents try to open a restaurant, but clients use bad kombinacja, and the project fails. When the Berlin Wall falls the whole area is in disarray. “Communist ghosts and their conjurers continued to torment those villagers through the transformation.” Villagers’ memories of kombinacja are stories of loss: loss of labor power, loss of property, loss of capital, loss of family and solidarity. In Bursztyn’s streets jobless male drunks are seen, using *kombinatorny* manipulation. Former *nomenklatura* now control access to EU funds. A small candy factory uses part-time non-unionized women’s labor. People glean potatoes on privatized lands after machine harvests. Materka summarizes the Balcerowicz-Sachs shock therapy: the recovered territories, the Sovietized region of Poland, emerged with the highest percentage of privatized state and collective farms and ended up with the highest concentration of poverty in Poland.

IN THE LAST CHAPTER, *Border Memories*, Materka accompanies an old German-American

woman across the border into Polish Silesia to trace her roots in the former German territory. The old woman is unappealing in her disdain for the “uncultivated Poles”. But Silesia is described as a more successful mixture of German and Polish influences than Materka’s Pomeranian *Heimat*. The establishment of the state border between Poland and its western “Socialist brother” became a definite hindrance to local contacts. The socially more important boundary was the one between the areas occupied by Nazi Germany in 1939 and areas of ethnic cleansing and settlement.

By concentrating on the local strategies of combination in the areas of uprootedness, Materka has made an interesting and valuable contribution to our knowledge of human behavior. References and the use of Polish words for important concepts are exemplary. From a social science point of view I would have welcomed a more theoretical discussion of kombinacja. Materka mentions Bourdieu’s *habitus* concept, the tendency to follow a traditional pattern of action, but kombinacja also borders on *path dependency*, Lindgren’s muddling through, Hägerstrand’s and Giddens’ *time-space niches* and Ostrom’s *tragedy of the commons*. But her collection of narratives provides food for thought on the relation between formal regulation and human ingenuity. ✖

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