

Concern over relaxation of German heritage

German expellees request bilingual city names.

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Local Polish politicians in Silesia, Pomerania and former East Prussia have become increasingly relaxed about their municipalities' German heritage. Some members of Poland's national-conservative government say they have become too relaxed, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) reported.

"The re-Germanisation of the Recovered Territories is a real threat," recently warned Jan Zaryn, a historian at Poland's Institute of National Remembrance, in the conservative Polish newspaper Rzeczpospolita.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, the political battle lines were clearly drawn: West Germany had not yet recognized the Oder-Neisse Line (the border between Poland and East Germany) as Poland's permanent western border. Poland declared the erstwhile German territories gained at the hands of the Allies after WWII "Recovered Territories" that is, "The stones of Wroclaw (Breslau in German) and Szczecin (Stettin) speak Polish," the Poles contended. Just last year, Wroclaw's Centennial Hall was added to the UNESCO World Heritage list. Built in 1911-1913 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig (also called the Battle of the Nations, it marked the end of the French Empire east of the Rhine), the building, seen by Polish authorities as a symbol of Prussian nationalism, was renamed Hala Ludowa (People's Hall) after WWII.

In Szczecin, Haken Terrace has been named after Hermann Haken, the city's German mayor from 1878 to 1907. And inhabitants of the Masurian, formerly East Prussia, village of Eichmedien attracted attention last year when a two-thirds majority backed a monument in honor of Otto von Bismarck. Prussia's "Iron Chancellor" was known, among other things, for his Germanization policies and attempts to subject the Roman Catholic Church to state controls. More than six decades since WWII ended, people throughout previously German-ruled Poland are thinking pragmatically, for the most part. German tourists visiting the region often want to see traces of Germany, so the Poles are happy to oblige - even if it means showing off Bismarck. In Danzig, there are organized walking tours that trace the haunts of Germany's Nobel literature laureate Guenter Grass, its native son. Sopot commemorates the late German actor Klaus Kinski, who was born there. Now the municipal government of the Silesian town of Swidnica wants to get into the act too. It has decided to remind visitors that German WWI ace Manfred von Richthofen, the "Red Baron," once lived there. Those opposed to the plan point to the aviator's cult status in the Third Reich. Krzysztof Grzelczyk, conservative governor of the province of Lower Silesia, looks askance at the German reawakening. "Legally speaking, German influence in Poland's western territories stretches just 200 years," he said, urging an intensive search for Polish imprints on the region. While Silesia fell to Prussia with the partition of Poland only in the 18th century, Grzelczyk, like his Communist predecessors, ignores the fact that the region's German heritage goes back much further. Teachers, amateur historians and local politicians in Silesia and Masuria frequently say, "Our homeland's German heritage is part of its identity." Generally speaking, that heritage is no longer a problem for the regions' inhabitants, largely descendants of Poles resettled from eastern Polish territories annexed by the Soviet Union at the end of WWII.