

THE RECREATIONAL POTENTIAL OF ABANDONED FOREST CEMETERIES BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF WAŁCZ PROVINCE (NORTH-WESTERN POLAND) AND EASTERN PRUSSIA (NORTH POLAND)

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Abstract

Old forest cemeteries of abandoned regions in Central Europe are essential cultural landscape elements with a specific biodiversity potential. The research aimed to determine the ecosystem services of four multi-confessional cemeteries in Wałcz province (North-Eastern Poland). Materials and methods: In total, 2 forest cemeteries in Wałcz city were researched, and the results using site observation and photographic documentation were elaborated. The study raises the following three issues- cemeteries as places of biodiversity, cultural diversity, and human recreational diversity. The results show that cemeteries serve as recreational and restorative places for specific urban population groups that sometimes do not find space in other green urban spaces. The cultural diversity of cemeteries of different religions differs considerably within the same city. As a standard feature of all cemeteries, it can be stated that they provide underestimated qualities for relaxation, reflection, and contemplation in noisy and tourism development in abandoned and undiscovered regions of Europe.

Key words: memorial parks, site observation, Eastern Europe, neglected spaces, thanatourism

Introduction

One of the many consequences of the Second World War was the change of the borders of the Polish state (Bilska-Wodecka, 2006). When its pre-war eastern regions were incorporated into the Soviet Union, Poland gained territories in the west that had hitherto belonged to Germany (Lewicka, 2008). These areas were called „recovered lands“. These areas became a part of the newly established Polish state in the aftermath of World War II, the traces of the previous German culture (Kulczycki, 2001). In this way, they had to be removed or recycled to fit the new Polish Soviet system and new country name, the so-called Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (PRL). Within this context and the research conducted by Stachowiak (2015), we can imagine how Polish authorities, as well as the new (resettled) population of the “recovered territories,” treated the formerly German cemeteries. Forest cemeteries are currently the least recognized group of green areas, which is poorly characterized in spatial management and landscape architecture. Thus, thanks to our research on the recognition of socio-ecological issues of old cemeteries, it is possible to reconstruct the history of “recovered lands” and the knowledge about people who lived in recovered lands before the Second World War. In order for this issue, it is worth noting to returning to the idea of memorial green areas or museum parks with the left sepulcher architecture and valuable historic vegetation of these places testifying to the history of these areas, which may become newly available for the needs of thanatourism (Tanaś, 2008), especially for the needs of German, Scandinavian or Jewish visitors looking for their old relatives or recreating family genealogy.

Specific research objectives of our research are: (1) Finding the location of old neglected cemeteries of “recovered lands”; (2) Identification of cemeteries cultural values and their benefits for people (ES); (3) Determination of the land use and future development possibilities of selected cemeteries.

Materials and methods

In our research, we are especially interested in what changes in biodiversity and land use are visible in the “post-German” multi-confessional cemeteries located in the region of “recovered lands” in North-Western: West Pomerania /former ger. Deutsch Krone region (so-called in our research: Pojezierze Waleckie) and how they might be developed for future generations. In this research, we use a multi-mixed method (Długoński et al., 2022), which is based on (1) a Literature query in the fields of “recovered lands” in Poland and cemeteries; (2) GIS Open Street Map analyzes -mapping analysis of the location of cities/villages and historic cemeteries; (3) Field studies. Site observation: cemeteries confession; visitor's activities; sensual experience; vegetation structure; characteristics of graves (materials and size); buildings and their function; cemeteries surrounding, openness, barriers, accessibility, and availability for people; (4) Social research. Interviews and surveys with the local community to broaden the knowledge of the history of given cemeteries and visitors' feelings about the

cemetery space and their opinion on new opportunities; (5) Data collection; (6) Elaborating research conclusions.

Results

During the pilot study and the local vision in August 2023, thanks to the orthophoto map analysis (OpenStreetMap) analysis, we identified the locations and the initial development of 10 forest cemeteries in selected regions. For further analysis, we start with the first selected “recovered land” region - Pojezierze Wałeckie and the city of Wałcz. In the city's boundary are two historically abandoned Catholic and post-Lutheran cemeteries on Wałcz city's outskirts. Site observation depicting the tombstones shows the durability of these places, the tomb style, and the local community culture. However, due to the lack of directions for revitalizing these places, the cemeteries are abandoned and mostly neglected due to local vandals' destruction. This shows a lack of respect for the generations living in these areas before the Second World War. The cemetery's vegetation is also neglected, and rickets do not represent valuable landscape values. However, it is possible to notice tendencies of planting vegetation in alleyways e.g. maples (*Acer sp.*) or linden (*Tilia sp.*), and cover plants e.g. ivy (*Hedera helix*) or solitaire trees formerly planted on graves of the dead to the ground (post-war times), Currently the plants are overgrown and a lot of unplanted new trees tearing out tombstones neighboring graves. During an interview with the local community, we learned the following information on given cemeteries functioning after the Second World War. Just as cemeteries were recycled, so were other objects on them. Surprisingly, widespread use was found primarily by gravestones. The new post-war population partially destroyed some of the tombstones or broke the plates with the names of people buried there. In the mid-1960s, local authorities issued orders to record and store tombstones from destroyed cemeteries. Polish authorities could only order them, but private individuals could also request their use. In Wałcz city case, several tombstones were also used to harden roads in and around the city, then covered with asphalt. In addition, some of the gravestones from the “post-German” cemeteries in Wałcz city were moved to the nearby Raduń Lake area, where they were used to fortify the shores. There have also been cases where “post-German” tombstones have been recycled as enclosures for sandboxes in children's playgrounds or flowerbeds in closed public places. Some examples show that after their recycling, it is also possible to read the names of the deceased on new items.

Surprisingly, in the place of old devastated “post-German” tombstones, new dead people began to be buried after the 1945 year. This interesting trend is visible at the Catholic cemetery in Wałcz, where we also observe old burials of Germans living in Wałcz city (original and harmful German tombs style but mostly partially destroyed) as well as a buried population that remained from the eastern borders e.g. from the vicinity of Lviv which is burial of teachers or lawyers from the closed region of Kaszuby (Fig. 1). Next, we tried to look for examples of pre-war cemeteries in Poland to find suitable land use practices and implement new functions that might be initiated in our research. We found that the opposed consequences of space change after the Second War were also visible in Upper Silesia - directly in Żory in West Silesia. In Żory City in the mid-1990s, a new urban park was built in the place of a “post-German” cemetery. Recently, the park has undergone renovation and reorganization (Fig. 2). It is currently a public space for passive recreation by citizens and tourists, including young families with children. We think that this is a positive trend (not only memorials as presented in mentioned cities like Gdańsk, Łódź, or Szczecin), which we currently found in our pilot studies in South Poland, might also be targeted in the North of Poland. In this way, the former forgotten cemeteries could be a green space for the memory of the dead and recreational purposes while respecting the cultural heritage of past times and generations.

Discussion

While the cemeteries in Wałcz are recognized, and their history is partly preserved on tombstones or information boards, many are still forgotten in other places in both selected regions. Hence, further research will allow us to find villages and cities with forgotten cemeteries in these two “recovered lands” regions, show their interesting history, and protect cultural heritage. This approach might broaden the knowledge of culture and people, which seems especially interesting for the young generation (e.g. school or college history trips from Poland and Germany). One of these dominant are traces of old German cemeteries, the nature of which, compared to other buildings or spaces, carries a certain taboo (Biskup et al., 2023). In order to be able to bury the dead, these places first had to be consecrated according to Polish Christian religious traditions (Luterek, 2016). According to the same tradition, in the case of tombstones, everything in the cemetery belonged to the deceased or a specific deceased. Cemeteries often remain in the same places for centuries, preserving the memory of the dead and the living.



Fig. 1: Graves of resettled citizens (Walcz, Poland). Photo A. Długoński, 2024



Fig. 2: Cemetery park in Żory (Silesia), restored. Photo by A. Długoński, 2024

The tombstones provide a wealth of information about the local people, their nationality, confession, and, in some cases, even political beliefs (Piątkowska, 2012). However, this representation of local memory may also become the subject of censorship, involving the destruction of symbols, inscriptions, or entire tombstones perceived by the dominant culture as alien. Ultimately, the old, neglected cemeteries might be revived these places as places of remembrance or their new recreation function. Many examples of former cemeteries being used as public spaces for recreational purposes are well-presented, especially in Northern and Western Europe (Grabalov & North, 2022; Długoński et al., 2022). The old cemeteries are public spaces that benefit people (ES). However, in Poland, a good example is the old cemetery in Żory (Western Silesia), which has been reopened to the city's

inhabitants as a cemetery museum park. This is the beginning of a new trend in Poland and a change in thinking about cemeteries as terrible, forgotten places or a typical sacred sphere devoid of leisure and the possibility of using it as a public place, as in Western and Northern Europe.

Conclusion

The selected two specific “recovered lands” cemeteries of north-western Poland - Pojezierze Wałeckie show that neglected and abandoned historic cemeteries are material testimony to the past multi-national communities in these lands. Unfortunately, many of these historic places (and information about the deceased and their confession) have been partially forgotten. Moreover, due to neglect of the protection and lack of care for these cemeteries (after the Second World War), they remain unrecognized currently. Therefore, old-forgotten cemeteries deserve special care, so an analysis of the state of development and old digital historical maps should precede them. In this way, it is possible to preserve for future generations the remnants of the tradition of the community that has been co-creating the cultural and natural landscape of old neglected cemeteries as one undiscovered green site of the last hundred years.

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Souhrn

Dva severozápadní regiony Polska, které jsou v současnosti považovány za zapomenuté a zanedbané tzv. rekultivované země, se vyznačují mnohonárodnostní a multikonfesionální dobou a historie obou regionů se odráží na jejich starých hřbitovech. Zatímco historické, památkové a náboženské aspekty lesních hřbitovů jsou poměrně dobře definovány, ekologické a sociologické funkce těchto oblastí jsou méně uznávány. Hřbitovy však stále více nabývají na významu jako „ekologické rezervní plochy“ pro vědní obory zabývající se krajinářskou architekturou, urbanismem a ekologií. Objektem výzkumu budou předem vybrané multikonfesionální staré hřbitovy v Deutsch Krone (město Wałcz). Získané údaje jistě obohatí naše znalosti o různých funkcích zkoumaných hřbitovů. Šíření nově získaných poznatků zvyšuje povědomí veřejnosti o ekologické a kulturní roli studovaných hřbitovů a podporuje správnou praxi při správě hřbitovů ze strany místních úřadů a občanů.

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