



Edyta Materka. *Dystopia's Provocateurs: Peasants, State, and Informality in the Polish-German Borderlands.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. Illustrations, map. 257 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-02896-9.

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Published on H-Poland (May, 2019)

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With Allied support, after World War II, Poland annexed Germany's eastern regions, including Pomerania, Warmia, Mazuria, Eastern Brandenburg, and Silesia, in return for surrendering its own interwar eastern borderlands to the Ukraine. This westward geographic shift was accompanied by massive forced population exchange. The German inhabitants of Poland's newly annexed territories, which in Poland were officially referred to as the "recovered territories," were almost all expelled and lost their lands, property, and possessions. Migrants from the heartlands of Poland as well as expellees from east of the Curzon Line filled the void in these lands and inherited what the Germans had left behind. The new Soviet-controlled regime dominated what effectively was a colonizing Polish state that captured the annexed borderlands, socially engineered them, and then distributed lands and property as it saw fit. It did all this with the ultimate goal of building a Soviet communist society.

Since the fall of communism and the opening of Polish state archives to researchers, historians working with archival documents, as well as with other written sources, have dominated scholarship on the German-Polish borderlands. This left one aspect of this topic largely unexplored: how ordinary people remembered the history of the post-

war era. In focusing on this issue, Edyta Materka's book makes a pioneering historiographical contribution, even as her work is largely one in ethnography. As a cultural anthropologist carrying out ethnographic work with (current and former) inhabitants of these borderlands, she introduces not only a new methodology to but also a new way of writing the history of Poland's western territories. One of the unique features of her book vis-à-vis the existing historical literature is that the author includes herself as an agent in her narrative and analysis. For example, Materka writes about her background as a child of Polish immigrants to New Jersey in the United States during the 1990s, who as a graduate student moved to the Pomeranian village of Bursztyn (Bernstein) near the city of Słupsk (Stolp) with her family to carry out her fieldwork. She interviews her relatives and other "pioneers," the first postwar Polish settlers who appropriated and "Polonized" this village and larger province from the Germans after the war. Some of them were communist government agents and others were ordinary farmers. She also interviewed the descendants of Germans who were expelled from the "recovered territories," as they come back to visit their family's former homes.

Materka's ethnographic methodology allows her to write a history of an aspect of everyday life

in the “recovered territories” and People’s Poland that would have been quite difficult to do strictly based on archival sources. (To her credit, however, she does supplement her oral historical work with research in regional Polish archives.) Her focus is on a particular type of informal practice in these areas during the entire postwar communist era, which she refers to by the Polish name, as there is no exact English-language equivalent—*kombinacja*. She describes it as “the improvisational process of reworking economic, political, or cultural norms for personal gain” (p. 2). She demonstrates the term’s linguistic origins in the English word “combination,” which since the early days of the Industrial Revolution was an association for workers that fought management for better pay and conditions, whereby the term received the attributes of scheming, trickery, and resistance. According to Materka, her book “attempts the impossible: to give the kombinators [or agents of kombinacja] a history” (p. 5).

While Materka provides an overview of kombinacja in the literary and official discourses of the era of Poland’s partition, as well as the development of a foundation for the practice during the Nazi occupation, the focus of her analysis is its function during the communist era. She examines kombinacja both as a practice and as a discourse, whereby not only was it a scheming way of acquiring scarce resources, but it was also a way of labeling oneself as a good/moral *kombinator* and putting down the kombinacja of one’s competitors and opponents as bad/corrupt. Moreover, Materka devotes extensive space to examining what she calls “kombinacja stories.” On the basis of telling oral histories of their kombinacja, or in other words, of how through tricks, swindling, and cleverness, ordinary people managed to acquire more resources than they would have if they abided by state rules, forged group bonds, shaped collective consciousness and identity, and passed onto future generations knowledge of how to survive and even thrive in a dystopian society. Materka argues that kombinacja marked a “distinct way of life” rather

than just a practice on the margins of official politics and the formal economy. It had “its own histories, discourses, cultural practices, moral systems, arts, and platforms for political change.” Moreover, it constituted a “field that enables invisible people who have no access to formal political process to alter power, capital, and labor in their locality” (p. 9).

She presents a nuanced and multifaceted analysis of kombinacja, as neither just a means of resistance on the part of a subaltern people against an oppressive colonial state nor a practice through which opponents of the communist system sought to undermine and overthrow it—even during the particularly tyrannical Stalinist era. Instead, she argues that “bending the rules became everyone’s *modus operandi*” to the point that kombinacja became an inherent part of communist society and government, rather than a threat, opposition, or even contradiction to it (p. 111). For example, Materka demonstrates that during the Stalinist era, “kombinacja became the process whereby villagers worked up to and helped actualize the state’s vision of socialist modernity” (p. 162). They justified practices like stealing bricks and selling them on the black market, or using them for private construction projects, on the basis of Soviet ideological values, such as that they, as the “proletariat,” were the true owners of the means of production, which they were “taking rather than stealing” (p. 164). Moreover, state agents at the village level used all sorts of wheeling and dealing not only to make dysfunctional Stalinist collective farming work somehow but also to exploit it for personal gain. Interestingly enough, Materka argues that even the “Polish way to socialism” exemplified the practice of kombinacja on the part of Poland’s eminent communist leader, Władysław Gomułka, whereby he outwitted the Soviet centralist system by using it to extenuate his own national autonomy (p. 111).

Materka notes two major results of all of this. On the one hand, there was massive corruption, at

various levels of society and government, as people “manipulated space, resources, and labor to ensure their family’s subsistence needs were met” (p. 111). On the other hand, there was collective identity formation based on this informal practice of politics and economy: for example, “collective silence about proletarian kombinacja contributed to this new process of identity formation” (p. 162). As kombinacja became a way of life, it is no wonder that it persisted in Poland after communism’s demise. Materka demonstrates that the same people who fought the Soviet state now fought capitalism, which wrought unemployment, poverty, and corruption in such villages as Bursztyn. Moreover, Materka also notes that Polish immigrants took their kombinacja practices with them to America, where they used them to get around the dystopia they encountered there—for example, bureaucratic red tape and difficulties of making ends meet.

Most of the findings of Materka’s book, in particular, the role of kombinacja during the Stalinist, post-Stalinist, and post-communist periods, were quite common to all of Poland, or at least to the Polish countryside, rather than peculiar to the “recovered territories.” However, in the last section of chapter 2, all of chapter 3, and the last chapter on “border memories,” Materka examines phenomena that were quite exclusive to these western borderlands. This included the settlement of these formerly German regions with a diverse population, which included, in addition to Poles, Kashubians, and Jewish Holocaust survivors, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and others. Materka analyzes how the state treated the “recovered territories” as its settler colonial grounds. She argues that while it propagated the so-called Piast myth or notion that “Poles” were merely taking back their medieval lands from the descendants of German colonists, in actuality, the state treated both Germans and the new settlers (“pioneers”) in a similar way, for example, by subjecting both groups to forced labor and suppressing cultural autonomy among the non-Polish groups of settlers and Germans alike. Based on her interviews, Materka demonstrates

that ordinary pioneers practiced kombinacja, taking advantage of the official “Piast myth” to justify taking German property, exploiting Germans for labor, and erasing the memory of crimes and abuses they and the state waged against them. However, as she also demonstrates, some of the kombinator pioneers saw themselves and Germans as common victims of state oppression, took a distance from the “Piast myth,” and refrained from destroying and erasing German heritage. In fact, many settlers and their descendants privately preserved various cultural relics of expelled Germans (referred to as “gothics”) for the sake of “ethical stewardship” and “respect for the German Heimat” (p. 108).

Certainly, one of the strongest chapters of this book is the one on Stalinism, where Materka demonstrates how collectivization in Bursztyn forced peasants into kombinacja in order to be able, on the one hand, somehow to meet the unrealistic productivity quotas of the state and, on the other, to feed their families. The weakest of the chapters is the last one, titled “Border Memories,” in which Materka writes on her journey from Berlin to Silesia with her German friends, who are visiting their former Heimat. Particularly in the first part of this chapter, she emphasizes the anti-Slavic racism of these Germans and notes how they were “laughing at Slavs” to the point that she herself became offended and did some kombinacja of her own to distance herself psychologically from them (p. 201). She refers to their anti-Polish biases as the “Heimat myth,” which, in contradiction to the “Piast myth,” dictates that the “recovered territories” remain German. While certainly in the rest of the book the author does a great job in analyzing the nuances of the agency of class, gender, minority groups, and individuals, in this chapter she makes some statements that risk coming across as a specimen of ethnic/national categorical thinking. For example, the author’s statement that “Germany paid dearly for the Holocaust but never for racism against the Slavs” can be questioned not only on grounds of validity (for ex-

ample, in light of the postwar expulsions of Germans from Eastern Europe, including to forced labor in the Soviet Union) but also in that it seems to treat “Germany” as a category of analysis (p. 198). Another questionable statement she makes is that “all of these everyday conversations and slanting of memories and contexts [among the Germans Materka travels with] revealed to me [her] the careful, and almost intuitive, crafting of the German historical narrative that positively spins the German settlement of the east and victimizes the postwar expulsion” (p. 200). However, there is certainly no one “*German* historical narrative” but rather nationalist and post-nationalist discourses on the former “German East”/Poland’s “recovered territories.” Moreover, the small group of people she interviewed for this chapter can at best represent only a certain position within what is a broad spectrum of thinking among Germans on this issue. Nevertheless, this last chapter of the book also has its more positive aspects, such as Materka’s explicit condemnation of the expulsion of Germans; her demonstration that the memory of the borderlands remains divided among Germans, Poles, Kashubians, and other ethnic groups; and her assertion that the “Piast myth” and “German Heimat myth” are both flawed, backward-looking, and utopianist historical narratives.

To her credit as an anthropologist, Materka engages with some of the most important English- and Polish-language historical works on the “recovered territories.” However, some of the most recent and important English-language historical scholarship on this topic was not consulted, perhaps partly due to schedule conflicts with the book’s production—for example, she does not consult T. David Curp’s *A Clean Sweep? The Politics of Ethnic Cleansing in Western Poland* (2012), Hugo Service’s *Germans to Poles: Communism, Nationalism, and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War* (2013), or my *Recovered Territory: A German-Polish Conflict over Land and Culture, 1919-1989* (2015). Materka’s analysis of German-Polish borderlands could also have used some engagement

with the German-language scholarship, which, since the nineties, has been pivotal in shaping the historiography of these regions, for example, the work of Peter Loew, Andreas Hofmann, Philipp Ther, and Jan Musekamp (she does, however, engage with that of Gregor Thum).

However, none of the imperfections noted above weakens the book’s argument or diminishes the importance of its scholarly contribution. Materka has produced an eloquently written, exciting, and meticulously analyzed ethnographic history that marks an alternative to the vast majority of strictly archival-based historical literature on the German-Polish borderlands. Within the field of Polish history, this book is also an important contribution as the first extensive work on the critical role of informality in the politics, society, and economy of People’s Poland. In historicizing kombinacja, Materka’s work is the first to conceptualize and analyze what is indeed a pivotal aspect of Polish culture and identity: in fact, one can hardly truly understand Poles and Poland without a grasp of this concept. The work will be of particular interest to those with a background in Polish history and Polish-German borderlands, but it is also an important read for anyone interested in the history of communism, the Soviet Empire, and the post-Soviet transformation period.

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Citation: Peter Polak-Springer. Review of Materka, Edyta. *Dystopia's Provocateurs: Peasants, State, and Informality in the Polish-German Borderlands*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. May, 2019.

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