

Border cities: contested identities of the European city

ED TAVERNE* and COR WAGENAAR**

*Dillenburglaan 2, 9717 CA Groningen, Netherlands. E-mail: taverne@home.nl

**Statenweg 183-A, 3039 HP Rotterdam, Netherlands. E-mail: wagenaar-mens@wxs.nl

Much of the rich urban culture of Central and Eastern Europe was abruptly interrupted in the course of the 20th century, leaving towns and cities literally disconnected from the international urban network. Many cities also became border cities in a *metaphorical* sense, because their geographic position and the prestige of their institutions as well as their cityscape made them a focus of both affinity and resistance against national and supra-national political power systems. Successive wars and the ensuing changes on the political map of Central and Eastern Europe led to cities being systematically devastated for political-military and ideological reasons. However, they have demonstrated a striking capacity for recovery and revival.

With the collapse of the Communist Eastern Block, symbolized by the peaceful storming of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the role of cities in the recent history of Central and Eastern Europe has been placed in a dramatic light.

Initiated by the 1914–18 War and continued through a series of subsequent geopolitical border shifts, metropolises that once formed the heart of Europe, such as Budapest, Vienna, Warsaw, Prague, and Berlin, were transformed into typical *border cities*. In other words, as a result of military and political clashes, they became cities trapped *between* the front lines and/or locations enduringly marked as (semi-)permanent frontier cities. This certainly applies to the towns and cities along the Oder and the Neisse (Küstrin, Frankfurt am Oder, Graben, Forst, Bad Muskau, Görlitz and Zittau), and to more than 50 villages split into two as a consequence of the 1991 Polish–German border agreement. But the metropolises, the large, medium-sized and smaller cities of Central and Eastern Europe are primarily border cities in a *metaphorical* sense, because their geographic position

and prestige as well as their cityscape made them a focus of both affinity with and resistance against national and supra-national political power systems. Within their walls, the afflictions of political and military power play were played within the scenery of everyday life. Successive wars and the changes in the political map of Europe led to cities being systematically attacked for political-military and ideological reasons. This also included dramatic major demographic changes as a component of the planned extermination of the Jewish population by the Nazis, and subsequently by the violent displacement of German minorities. In the more than 40 years of Stalin's communist dictatorship, traditionally cosmopolitan cities, such as Budapest, Berlin and Warsaw, were systematically disengaged from international relationships; they were removed from circulation and 'nationalized' in the most literal sense of the term, and were converted into a *state* affairs. This led to the disappearance of a historical and authentic liberal cultural system characteristic of the urban culture of Central and Eastern Europe.

In the introduction to his *Promenade in Jalta und andere Städtebilder*,¹ Karl Schlögel – one of the most profound explorers of the Central and East-European city landscape, declares: 'this book lacks a chapter on the "städtetod" (urbicide) that we have witnessed in the last decade – even if only via television pictures: Vukovar, Sarajevo, and Grozny. The fact that I have not written about these does not mean that I have closed my eyes to them. I simply do not have the talent – at least not to a sufficient extent – to do justice to the harsh reality behind the images of death and destruction. I leave the description of the military enterprise and all its horrors to those who have a true talent for it.' A first inventory of the existing material was made in W. G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur*,² in which he demonstrates how artistic description and depiction of war and violence against cities has been neglected as a result of collective repression and amnesia in (West) Germany immediately after the war, where the wholesale destruction of cities was seen simply as the first step toward reconstruction. In our time Bogdan Bogdanovic,³ the ex-mayor of Belgrade, repeatedly and relentlessly confronts his own people, the Serbians, with their crimes against the city. In the case of Vukovar, the Serbians destroyed the city with the explicit intention of replacing the Christian baroque cityscape with a new city in a non-existent Serbian-Byzantine style. According to Bogdanovic, the destruction was initiated by the Serbian troops under the leadership of Slobodan Milosovic with the purpose of 'liberating' the Serbians. But the fact that the city was reduced to rubble in the course of three months was not only the result of the Serbian urge for ethnic cleansing: 'President Franjo Tudjman of Croatia chose *not to defend* the city, apparently calculating that the destruction of such a photogenic community would win international sympathy for his country'.

The lifting of the Iron Curtain and the improved accessibility to Central and East-European cities has given rise to a new historical awareness of the nature,

size, and range of the ethnic cleansing and the forced relocation of more than 30 million people in post-war Europe (*Heimatvertriebung*). It is a consciousness that is further sharpened by the shocking television pictures of urban destruction and of streams of refugees in former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus. Götz Aly and Andreas Hillgruber, were some of the first historians to take a serious interest in the history of the expulsion of German minorities in post-war Europe (1945–1947) revealing the link between the demise of the urban culture of the German East and Hitler's 'Generalplan Ost' dating from 1941. The war against the Soviet Union, he writes, was not a 'europäischer Normalkrieg', such as the fight against Norway, France or the Netherlands, but was a direct capture-and-destroy war right from the outset, oriented toward the extirpation of 'Jewish bolshevism', colonialization and the subjugation of the Slavonic masses. 'Every association with a Russian metropolis ought to be removed from their memory forever', claimed Andreas Hillgruber⁴ in retrospect. This combined assault on urban culture made a profound impact on the physical and morphological structure of Central and East-European cities: the extermination of the Jewish population and the expulsion of the German minority groups robbed the cities of their quintessence – their 'Mischkultur' and was reinforced in successive decades by the disastrous effects of chaotically structured, socialist urban politics. These were governed, depending on time and place, by differing and often diametrically opposed objectives, such as the forced immigration into former German cities, such as Breslau/Wrocław, of originally agrarian population groups that had been expelled from elsewhere. This strategy was an actualization of tried and trusted socialist, anti-urbanization concepts, directed toward social and cultural levelling. But the opposite effect was produced by theatrical cityscapes in the shape of 'Prachtstrassen', Magistralen, and monumental boulevards inspired by Stalin's new Moscow (Berlin, Kiev, Warsaw, Wrocław), which reduced the existing city to a meaningless backdrop for the military parades and mass manifestations. A new concept arose to replace this in the 1950s: that of the modern socialist city, the city of large-scale industrial housing whose monotonous quality not only neutralized the original skyline of almost all Central and East-European cities, it also made them ridiculously picturesque.

An indication of a changing perspective on the Central and Eastern European city can be found in new urban geographical studies in which the obsolete central place theory has been exchanged for that of the border city. The shifts in the political boundaries, initially after 1945 and again after the 'Wende' of 1989, led to the generation of a new kind of city in Central and Eastern Europe: that of the *divided* border city, ranging from Narva-Ivangorod on the Estonian-Russian border to Gorizia-Nove Gorica in the Italian-Slovenian border region. In 2000, Christoph Waack's book,⁵ which, based on three case studies, considered the effects that the opening of national borders and the sudden division of towns have

upon the behaviour and everyday activities of the citizens as well as upon the general structure of the towns. Local cross-border initiatives contrast with immobility based on national, and especially super-national, politics. Proof of this can be found in the stagnating initiatives along the German-Polish border to create four Euro regions and even two Euro cities with cross-border projects in urban development, culture, and economics. In 1998, a cooperative enterprise was started up in Görlitz-Zgorzelec under the title *Europastadt*, following the example of *Eurostadt*, the successful cooperative ventures between the twin border cities of Frankfurt amOder/Slubice and Gube/Gubin, with key projects improving the local and shared infrastructure, the urban redesign of both city centres, and the (re)founding and extension of the Europa-University Viadrina and the Collegium Polonicum.

The border shifts and the urban culture of the ‘other’ Europe also provided food for thought to historians. The fall of the Iron Curtain has produced a number of symposia and publications on the historicity of (internal and external) borders in Central and Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Several topics are conspicuous. Because the border, viewed in a disciplinary manner, is a spatial-geographical concept, German (cultural) historians have become more conscious of the spatial dimensions of political, economic, and especially socio-cultural facts and situations. Another topic concerns the *reallocation* of the abruptly discontinued rich urban culture of Central and Eastern Europe within the historical panorama of the European city. A number of interdisciplinary and comparative research programmes, which were directly or indirectly oriented toward the reconstruction of the historical *centrality* of the metropolises and capital cities of Central and Eastern Europe, notably the *Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Osteuropa*, at the University of Leipzig, covered the period from the Middle Ages to the Second World War.⁶ Using the methods of urban sociology and anthropology, as well as from literary, media and architectural history, they are developing new concepts to reassign borders and contours to the historical urban landscape of Central and Eastern Europe.

At the beginning of his book on the Danube – the ‘voyage of discovery through the civilization of Central Europe and the crisis of our era’ Claudio Magris⁷ writes: ‘The Germanic scholar who travels along the entire course of the river, bit by bit, how and whenever he can, carries baggage with him full of quotes and delusions; the poet relies upon his *bateau ivre*, his replacement attempts to do *en route* what Jean Paul advised: gather or transcribe pictures, old texts, theatre posters, conversations at stopping places, poems and conflicts, death notices, metaphysical notes, newspaper cuttings, tickets in guesthouses and churches.’ Karl Schlögel¹ a historian who works in the footsteps of Joseph Roth, Walter Benjamin and Karl Scheffler, manages to link the architectonic and spatial properties of border cities such as Berlin, Wrocław, Moscow and Budapest with their geographical situation

and the dramatic events of their recent past. His work displays evidence of an inexhaustible search for the *relief* of a new European, urban culture and for the contribution that large urban nuclei in Central and Eastern Europe can make to this culture. Although they have been damaged by the catastrophes of the past century, they have demonstrated a striking capacity for recovery and renovation. The symbols of a (neo-)liberal system, of an urban citizenship (*Bürger- en Zivilgesellschaft*), can be recognized at countless places under completely different economic and cultural conditions, not only in the physical form and structure of the cities, but in new patterns in European urban networks. These are forms of unregulated transformation, the result of a talent for survival and improvisation, which testify to the resilience of the European city.

References

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About the Authors

Ed Taverne is emeritus Professor of the History of Architecture and Urban Planning at Groningen University. He has published extensively on architecture and urban planning in the Netherlands and is currently working on the history of urban planning in former socialist countries.

Cor Wagenaar is an architectural and planning historian. He is the author of a book on the Rebuilding of Rotterdam during and after the Second World War. He is also the editor of a series of monographs on Dutch urbanists in the 20th century.

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