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WHAT HAS HISTORY NOT TAUGHT US? DISAPPEARING STRUCTURES AND LANDSCAPES OF THE CZECH-POLISH BORDERLAND

CZEGO NIE NAUCZYŁA NAS HISTORIA? ZNIKAJĄCE OBIEKTY I PRZESTRZENIE POGRANICZA POLSKO-CZESKIEGO

Abstract

This article presents selected spatial interventions that took place after 1989 in the Czech-Polish border region, encompassing the contemporary Nysa County in the Opole Voivodeship and the Jeseník County in the Czech Republic. These actions often led to irreversible transformations, resulting in the destruction or complete removal of spatial elements constituting a significant part of the cultural and natural heritage. For over five centuries, starting from the 13th century, the analysed area functioned as a unified administrative and cultural unit within the Duchy of Nysa. The socio-political transformations initiated after its dissolution in 1742 were reflected in the complex, often inconsistent shaping of the region. The analysis of the transformations of the border region after World War II, and especially after 1989 under the new political regime, reveals a number of disturbing and intensifying phenomena. The conclusions drawn from the research indicate the need for in-depth reflection on the identity of the place, the need to restore cultural continuity and develop a new, conscious approach in both countries to shaping and protecting the architectural heritage of border areas.

Keywords: Nysa-Jesenik borderland, Duchy of Nysa, cultural heritage, sustainable development

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wybrane ingerencje przestrzenne, które miały miejsce po 1989 roku na terenie pogranicza polsko-czeskiego obejmujących współczesny powiat nyski w województwie opolskim oraz powiecie jesenickim w województwie ołomunieckim w Republice Czeskiej. Działania te często prowadziły do nieodwracalnych przekształceń, skutkujących zniszczeniem bądź całkowitym usunięciem elementów przestrzeni stanowiących istotną część dziedzictwa kulturowego i przyrodniczego. Analizowany obszar przez ponad pięć stuleci, począwszy od XIII w., funkcjonował jako jednolita jednostka administracyjno-kulturowa w ramach Księstwa Nyskiego. Transformacje społeczno-polityczne zapoczątkowane po jego rozpadzie w 1742 r. znalazły wyraz w złożonym, często niespójnym kształtowaniu przestrzeni. Przeprowadzona analiza przekształceń przestrzeni pogranicza po II wojnie światowej, a zwłaszcza po 1989 r. w warunkach nowej rzeczywistości ustrojowej, ujawnia szereg niepokojących nasilających się zjawisk. Wnioski płynące z badań wskazują na konieczność pogłębionej refleksji nad tożsamością miejsca, potrzebę przywracania ciągłości kulturowej oraz wypracowania nowego, świadomego podejścia w obu państwach do kształtowania i ochrony dziedzictwa architektonicznego obszarów pogranicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: pogranicze nysko-jesenickie, księstwo nyskie, dziedzictwo kulturowe, zrównoważony rozwój

1. INTRODUCTION

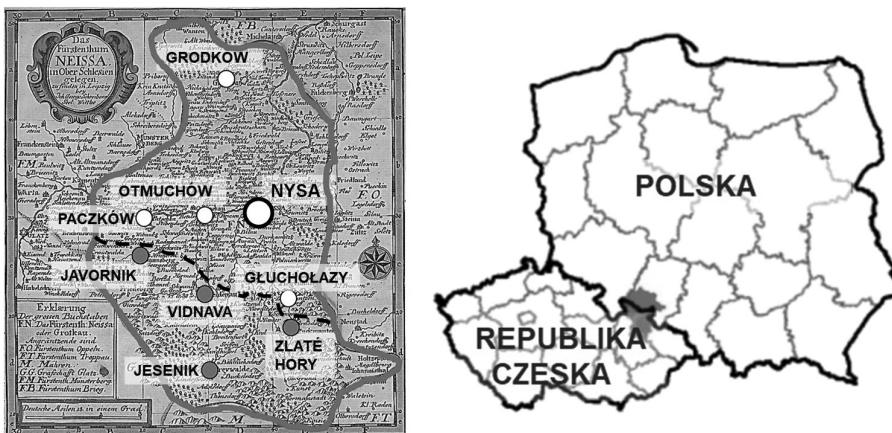
The article discusses selected spatial interventions that took place after 1989 in the Polish-Czech borderland area, encompassing the present-day Nysa County in the Opole Voivodeship (Poland) and the Jeseník District in the Olomouc Region of the Czech Republic. A particularly significant issue in the analysis of spatial transformations in the Nysa–Jeseník borderland is the diversity of transformation directions that occurred as a result of successive territorial divisions. It is important to emphasise that one of the key determinants was spatial management carried out by incoming populations on both sides of the border, who settled in the borderland following the forced displacement of the German population that had previously inhabited the area.

The analysed investment activities and spatial transformations often resulted in irreversible changes to the structure of the cultural landscape, leading to the destruction or complete removal of sites and spatial arrangements of significant cultural and natural heritage value. These actions contributed to the loss of historical continuity and disrupted the spatial identity of the region.

For over five centuries, beginning in the 13th century, this area functioned as a coherent administrative and cultural unit known as the Duchy of Nysa (Ill. 1). Its sustained and relatively balanced development over time provided the foundation for the harmonious shaping of both the settlement pattern and landscape.

Following the First Silesian War in 1742, the northern and substantially larger part of the duchy was incorporated into Prussia and underwent significant transformations based on new patterns, often differing from the previous ones. The southern part, however, maintained continuity of development under Habsburg rule until 1810, when, as a result of the secularisation in Prussia, the episcopal feudal duchy ceased to exist. The border established at that time almost exactly coincides with the present-day boundary dividing the Republic of Poland and the Czech Republic.

The processes of transformation occurring in both parts of the borderland have been, and continue to be, the subject of academic research, usually conducted independently by research institutions in each country. In this context, it is worth noting the considerably



Ill.1. Cities of the Duchy of Nysa on a map by Johann Georg Schreiber, ca. 1750, source: Muzeum Powiatowe w Nysie.

greater body of Czech publications, including studies focused on the disappearance of architectural objects, building complexes, as well as entire settlements and villages.¹

The issue of spatial transformation from architectural, urban, and landscape perspectives after 1989 has been addressed within the framework of cross-border academic cooperation between institutions from both countries.² Nevertheless, to this day, no monograph has been produced that offers a comprehensive analysis of contemporary spatial transformations in the studied borderland area.

In order to obtain a coherent and in-depth response to the research problem, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining multiple case studies with qualitative research. The study presents selected interventions on the landscape, urban, and architectural scales. The research area included disappearing or heavily transformed spaces within both the natural environment and the built environment. *In situ* research was conducted by the author since the early 1990s.

2. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Since 1989, significant transformations of the natural environment have been observed both in Poland and in Czechoslovakia – and, following its dissolution in 1992, in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, the majority of adverse phenomena have been concentrated on the Polish side. An example of irreversible intervention is the transformation of peat meadows, formerly part of the historic Vidnava Meadows, located between the Polish village of Łąka (in the Otmuchów municipality) and the Czech town of Vidnava. On the Polish side, these areas have been exploited for sand and gravel extraction, with the resulting pits later flooded. Meanwhile, on the Czech side, the wetlands have been placed under protection and now function as the Vidnava Wetlands Nature Reserve (Czech: Vidnavské mokřiny). This unique ecosystem, covering an area of 32 hectares, is home to over 150 bird species.

In Nysa, a municipal company – taking advantage of the so-called “Lex Developer” housing act³, which allows for investment projects to bypass standard spatial planning procedures – has begun constructing a housing estate on previously undeveloped land located between two historic Prussian fortifications: Fort Prusy and Fort II Regulicki. The same legal provision has also been used to prepare development plans for part of a 19th-century municipal park. The above-mentioned activities are an example of the disturbing phenomenon of urban sprawl that deforms the natural environment.

In contrast to these negative practices, Czech legislation on the southern side of the border has effectively restricted uncontrolled development encroaching upon green spaces. As a result, towns and villages – not only in the border region – have largely retained a compact spatial structure.

¹ L. Beran, V. Valchářová, J. Zikmund (eds.), *Industriální topografie – Olomoucký kraj*, České vysoké učení technické, Praha 2013; P. Macháček (ed.), *Zmizelé Jesenícko 1. díl: Zcela zaniklé osady*, Hnutí Brontosaurus Jeseníky, Jeseník 2019; J. Zikmund, B. Fagner (eds.), *Co jsme si zbořili: Bilance mizející průmyslové éry: 10 let*, České vysoké učení technické, Praha 2009.

² J. Kiszka (ed.), *Blue Notes*, ACCENDO, Ostrawa-Opole 2013; P. Ptaček, Z. Opravil, P. Roubínek (eds.), *Geographia Moravica 4*, Uniwersytet Palackého v Olomouci, Olomouc 2015; M. Spyra (ed.), *Transgraniczny krajobraz Euroregionu Pradziad*, Politechnika Opolska, Opole 2013.

³ Lex developer, i.e. special housing act – act of 5 July 2018 on facilitating the preparation and implementation of housing investments and accompanying investments.

3. BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Particularly in the final decade of the 20th century, a vast number of structures representing valuable architectural and urban heritage were irreversibly destroyed in the Nysa–Jeseník borderland area. Spatial transformations had a significant impact on the structure of both urban environments and rural settlement patterns. The interventions affected almost every type of built form to varying degrees. The uncontrolled destruction of buildings – whose historical and cultural value had long been underestimated – was facilitated by the absence of appropriate legislation, combined with a lack of effective financial and administrative instruments.

3.1. POST-INDUSTRIAL, POST-RAILWAY, POST-MILITARY ARCHITECTURE

In the new context of socio-political transformation, both urban and rural spaces on the Polish and Czech sides of the border underwent profound changes. One of the significant outcomes of these processes was the systematic degradation – and in many cases, complete elimination – of post-industrial and railway-related architectural structures, along with their associated technical infrastructure.

It was not until the turn of the first and second decades of the 21st century that the first coordinated efforts to preserve and revitalise industrial heritage were initiated on both sides of the border. These initiatives were largely made possible through financial support from European Union programmes. Unfortunately, in many instances, such interventions came too late, and a substantial portion of post-industrial and railway-related assets was lost. This was largely due to the absence of appropriate legislation, including measures ensuring adequate protection of cultural heritage. A telling example is the inclusion of sites in provincial heritage registers. In the register of listed monuments for the Opole Voivodeship, there is currently only one post-industrial site from Nysa County: the former malthouse and drying facilities in Nysa. This complex was only added to the register in 2008. Similarly, the extensive Prussian fortifications in Nysa were largely overlooked; only in the 21st century were selected key elements of the complex – such as forts, bastions, and redoubts – granted legal protection by being listed as monuments.

On the Polish side of the borderland, recent years have seen a policy of systematic degradation of railway infrastructure. In the second decade of the 21st century, dozens of kilometres of railway tracks were dismantled in the Polish border region. Some railway station buildings were adapted for residential purposes, often with deep structural alterations that compromised their historical character. At present, the only remaining elements of the former railway system are neglected steel bridges – devoid of functional context and not under conservation protection.

In contrast to the Polish approach, Czech railway infrastructure policy has been marked by a relatively high level of continuity and protection. Most railway lines have been preserved, modernised, and adapted to contemporary technical standards. Historic railway stations and terminals have also been maintained and continue to serve their original transport functions. A notable example of this approach is the station in Česká Ves, located directly adjacent to the town of Vidnava and near the Polish border. The station, along with its associated track infrastructure, has been preserved and remains operational. In the past, the railway line extended further from this point towards Kałków; however, on the Polish side, the tracks were completely dismantled (Ill. 2).

Unfortunately, across the entire borderland area under discussion, other industrial sites have also disappeared. A notable example is the near-total loss of local brickworks, which once formed an important part of the region's industrial heritage. The only surviving site of this kind in Nysa County is the still-operational brickworks in Strobice.

3.2. WOODEN ARCHITECTURE

In the Jeseník District, a significant number of traditional wooden architectural structures have been preserved. A notable example is Rejvíz, the highest-altitude village in the Opawskie Mountains, where an almost complete ensemble of historic residential buildings has survived (Ill. 3). A similar situation can be observed in many other Czech localities, where wooden buildings, still in use and subject to ongoing maintenance, are protected as part of heritage conservation.

The situation in Nysa County stands in stark contrast, where wooden architecture was almost entirely destroyed even before 1989. This process continued in subsequent years; for



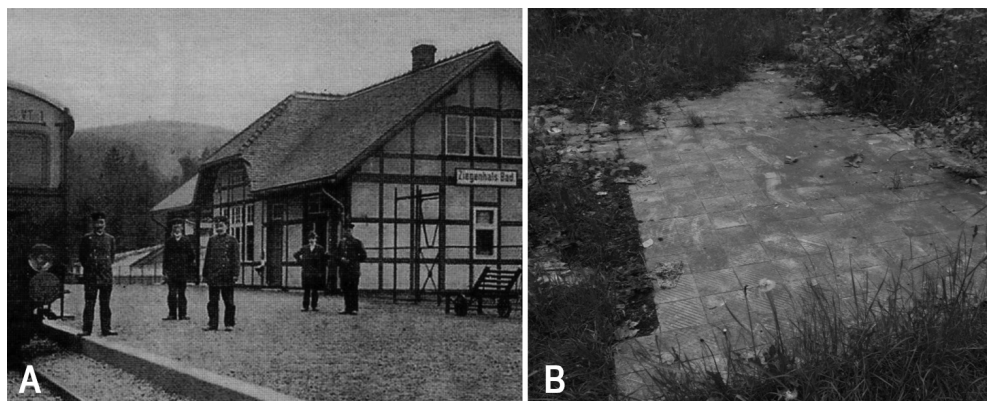
Ill. 2. The end of the railway line in Česká Ves near Vidnava, which once led to Kalków, 2017, photo by P. Opalka

instance, in 2006 the Głuchołazy-Zdrój station building was demolished (Ill. 4). Key factors contributing to this degradation included gaps in the legislative system, the lack of effective protection mechanisms, and deliberate neglect by property owners aiming to avoid tax burdens – often by allowing buildings to fall into ruin and subsequently demolishing them.

As a result, traditional rural wooden architecture has almost completely disappeared from the Polish part of the borderland. It is a sobering fact that the few remaining examples of this building tradition can now be seen only in open-air museums and ethnographic collections – unfortunately, removed from their original cultural and spatial context.



Ill. 3. Examples of buildings preserved to this day in the village of Rejviz, 2022, photo by P. Opalka



Ill. 4. Głucholazy-Zdrój railway station: a – postcard, 1914, source: rok^o, *Przystanek końcowy Głucholazy Zdrój* [in:] *Polska na fotografii*, 23.07.2009, <https://polska-org.pl/778357,foto.html> (access: 12.07.2025), b – detail of the preserved floor after the demolition of the railway station, 2013, photo by P. Opalka

3.3. RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

The phenomenon of the systematic disappearance and ongoing degradation of residential complexes on the Polish side of the borderland has become an established fact. Deprived of function, proper management, and adequate heritage protection, many of these structures have gradually fallen into ruin.



Ill. 5. Renaissance palace in Siestrzechowice: a – courtyard, b – coats of arms in the chapel, state before devastation, 2008, photo by P. Opalka

A striking example is the Renaissance palace in Siestrzechowice, built in the late 16th century. For decades, the building has been in an advanced state of decay. In the early 1990s, its roof was temporarily secured with copper sheeting by its then-owner, the Municipality of Nysa. Unfortunately, in the years that followed – after changes in ownership – the palace was no longer properly maintained. The roofing was systematically “disappearing”, leading to severe damage. The wooden Renaissance ceilings and a large portion of the stucco decorations completely collapsed, and the wooden arcade gallery was also damaged. Makeshift protection against rainwater ultimately resulted in the irreversible destruction of priceless Renaissance frescoes bearing coats of arms, located in the former palace chapel. Associated buildings within the estate – such as the mill with an adjoining residential structure and a barn – have also deteriorated.

In contrast, nearly all palaces and castles in what is now the Czech Republic were fortunately spared from wartime destruction. At the former summer residence of the Bishops of Wrocław in the border town of Javorník, even the original furnishings have been preserved to this day.

3.4. PLACES OF MEMORY

In the Czech–Polish borderland, clear differences can be observed in the approach to the protection and maintenance of memorial sites, which form an important part of both tangible and intangible heritage.

On the Polish side of the border, the majority of gravestones in cemeteries dating from before 1945 have been destroyed. In the post-war years, it was common practice to sell them as building materials. This continued as late as the late 1980s in Sławniowice – a village renowned for its marble quarries. There, the tomb of the pre-war owner of the local quarries and the Thust company was also destroyed. The firm had supplied gravestones, chapels, and a wide range of decorative stonework – including items made from rare locally sourced stones – to clients across what was then Germany. Thanks to the efforts of the local community, this tomb has recently been modestly reconstructed. Today, all that visibly remains of the former cemetery are depressions in the ground, slowly being reclaimed by the forest.

On the Czech side of the border, pre-war gravestones and cemetery chapels have been largely preserved. These structures display a remarkable level of artistic and craft excellence,

bearing witness to the skill of prominent artisans active in the region. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, exceptionally talented sculptors such as Josef Obeth and Engelbert Kaps were working on both sides of the border. Monuments, plaques, and tombstones commemorating residents who died during World War I have survived to this day on the Czech side.

3.4. UNDERGROUND ARTEFACTS

Contemporary infrastructure and construction projects carry the risk of irreversible destruction of valuable archaeological artefacts located within subsurface layers.

An example illustrating the importance of thorough archaeological investigation prior to undertaking development is the market square in Nysa, where the northern part of the former central market block remained undeveloped for over six decades following the end of World War II. In 2015, during archaeological excavations conducted in connection with the planned construction of a shopping centre, remains of medieval underground structures were uncovered on both sides of the former Sukiennicza Street. These included cellars and remnants of two 14th-century hall buildings of a cloth hall character (Ill. 6).⁴ After the archaeological works within the market square area were completed, construction began on a deep underground car park, which entailed the complete removal of the uncovered architectural relics. Consequently, the opportunity to preserve and showcase the medieval structures as an underground tourist and museum route – similar to the one created beneath the Main Market Square in Kraków (the Underground Museum) – was lost.

Also in Nysa, on a plot at the junction of Kramarska and Karola Miarki streets, construction of a multi-family residential building commenced in 2021. During the building works, relics of cellars of medieval origin and a fragment of the underground part of the former synagogue were discovered, including a preserved mikveh (Ill. 7).



Ill. 6. The mid-market block in Nysa: on the left side the buildings from 2016, on the right the Renaissance Old Scales House, 2025, photo by P. Opałka

⁴ Krawczyk M., *Blok zabudowy kamiennej w Nysie u zbiegu ulic Kramarskiej i Karola Miarki – relikty architektury i kultura materialna. Wyniki badań archeologicznych w latach 2021–2022*, “Nyskie Szkice Muzealne” 2023, vol. 16, pp. 7–36.

The ritual bath was dismantled and temporarily secured with the intention of future exhibition *ex situ*. Despite these discoveries, all surviving cellars were demolished to make way for the planned development.

In both cases, the new construction was carried out in disregard of the urban genotype of the town, ignoring historical cadastral divisions, and leading to the irreversible loss of tangible and intangible heritage resources. The new urban structure introduced a uniform, stylistically homogenised form, contrary to the local cultural and historical context.

4. SUMMARY

The Nysa–Jeseník borderland, which once formed a coherent administrative and cultural entity, today represents a fascinating area of study for analysing differing approaches to shaping and preserving cultural heritage. Varied legislation concerning monument protection, different spatial management models, and contrasting attitudes toward cultural education have led to significant disparities in the way the cultural landscape has been transformed. An analysis



Ill. 7. The quarter of the former buildings at the intersection of Kramarska and Karola Miarki Nysie streets: a – fragment of the synagogue basement with a visible mikveh, 2022, b – new multi-family housing development, the arrow marks the location of the former synagogue, 2025, photo by P. Opałka

of post-war transformations, including those after 1989 and more recent developments, has revealed many troubling phenomena occurring on both sides of the border.

The disappearance of objects and spaces constituting cultural heritage should serve not only as a reason to halt negative actions but also as a stimulus for reflecting on the direction and effectiveness of current cultural landscape protection efforts.

Both academic research and empirical observations, accessible to anyone crossing the Czech–Polish border, confirm that crucial factors are public awareness, coherent legislative frameworks, and a long-term spatial planning policy grounded in respect for historical values.

In this context, it seems appropriate to undertake grassroots work that transparently and systematically exposes the scale of neglect, planning errors, and failures in heritage protection across both parts of the borderland. Illuminating these processes could provide a starting point for rebuilding a responsible approach to shaping cultural spaces and for implementing solutions based on proven heritage management models.

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