Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities: Representation of Powers and Needs
Mariusz Czepczyński
Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008, 224 pp., £55.00, hardback, ISBN 978 0 7546 7022 3

On Thursday April 26, 2007 a riot broke out in central Tallinn. Violence flared again the following evening, leading to considerable damage, multiple arrests, injuries and one death. These events were triggered by the removal and relocation of a Soviet war memorial dating from 1947. This and other incidents connected to Estonia's so-called 'war on monuments' has rightly been the focus of considerable public attention. I, together with a many other academics from a range of disciplines, have used it as a means of addressing the intersection of memory politics and cultural landscapes in contemporary Europe.[1]

It was, then, with considerable interest that I began to read *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities: Representation of Powers and Needs*. I was therefore rather surprised to discover that the Estonian affair is mentioned once and then only in a footnote (p. 121). This is because the frame of reference lies elsewhere – as is evident from the outset in the book's only map. It highlights a chain of nations stretching from the southern Baltic Sea to the western Black Sea. What name to give this region is contested. The author of the book – Mariusz Czepczyński of the Department of Economic Geography at the University of Gdansk – discounts the label 'Eastern Europe' given its connotations with 'the Soviet empire and Russia' (p. 3) in favour of 'Central Europe' or, in the penultimate chapter, the 're-branding of the region' as 'New Europe' (p. 149). The term 'post-communism' is equally problematic, hence the use of 'post-socialist' in the title (pp. 3 & 149).

This underscores the complexity and sensitivity of the issues raised by '45 years of [an] enforced communist 'dictatorship of landscape'' (p. 173) followed by two decades of transition. This has produced cultural landscapes which 'are the result of battles between varieties of versions of the past' (p. 130) meaning that 'one object or feature can have different constructivist meanings, dedicated by different social groups' (p. 132). This encapsulates the reason for the riots in Tallinn of April 2007: what for one section of society was a marker of liberation was, for another, a symbol of occupation.

Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities is, therefore, a relevant and, at times, valuable book. At its best it begins to tackle the burdensome legacies of 'the ambiguous communist period' (p. 53) – such as the decision to preserve rather than demolish Warsaw's gargantuan Palace of Culture and Science completed in 1955 (p. 130). This and a succession of other case studies are treated in a series of numbered 'boxes'. Unfortunately these tend to be rather superficial accounts. Neither they nor the accompanying empirical descriptions of socialist cities are linked to the more theoretically informed opening chapters (pp. 9-58). The latter indicate that the author is both well read and familiar with alterative strategies for construing cultural landscapes. It is, however, unclear which of these many approaches he found most suitable in his endeavour to 'interpret cultural landscape as an *entity reflecting relationships* (sic)' (p. 2).

The rather clumsy wording here is indicative of a book that desperately needed proof-reading by a native English speaker. It is marred by grammatical and typological errors. References cited in the body of the text – e.g. Holmes 1997 (p. 3), Lewis 1979 (p. 41), Passent 2004 (p. 130) – are missing from the bibliography. Statements are repeated: 'the meaning of cultural landscape is always verified by everyday users' (pp. 182 & 184). And a puzzling quotation from Oscar Wilde is cited twice, with a different source given for each (cf. pp. 12 & 184). Inconsistencies also extend to the actual substance of the book: at one point we are told that the 'Stalinist new town' of Poruba in the Ostrava district of the Czech Republic is promoted 'as one of the main tourist attractions of the city' (p. 92) and yet later it is claimed that the 'Poruba complex… is in fact barely present in official promotional materials' (p. 133, note 13). Discrepancies such as this completely undermine the author's hard work. With proper editorial support he would have been better able to produce a finished, publishable book that might have justified a cover price of £55.

One thing is however clear: the author – a forty-something male whose school years were spent in communist Poland (pp. 4 & 84) – is closely involved in the issues he addresses. This he readily admits (p. 7). Even so, the book does try to present a fair account: when it came to heritage conservation, for instance, Czepczyński concedes that 'there was also a positive side to the balance sheet in the communist stewardship of the past' (p. 82). Nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid seeing this book as anything other than a confirmation that present-day Poland is, to use the author's own words, 'often loudly anti-communist' (p. 140). This emerges most emphatically in the chapter entitled 'Post-communist landscape cleansing' (pp. 109-147). Here we learn that the 'process of separating and eliminating' Central Europe's communist-era monuments remains incomplete (p. 123). But how does this square with the author's later assertion that '[w]e cannot turn our backs on the legacy of the past if we want to understand the present and plan the future' (p. 184)?

The tone and language of this chapter with its talk of separating, eliminating and cleansing seems unfortunate to say the least. One need only travel to the Polish town of Lublin to see a depressingly effective instance of this when it comes to the 'separating and eliminating' of its Jewish population. But the presence of Nazism in the cultural landscape of Central Europe is notably absent in this book (or, on the rare occasions it *is* mentioned, conflated with the 'socialist… landscape of terror' (p. 88)). That this is so provides a perhaps unwitting confirmation that 'what we opt to select from the past' is 'used everywhere to… support particular political ideologies' (p. 54). This is as true of the communist landscape with all its 'wounds' and 'scars' (p. 185) as it is the 'emancipated' transition landscapes of contemporary Central Europe with their 'new hierarchies and new exclusions' (pp. 181 & 150).

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[1] See, for example, 'Contested and Shared Places of Memory: History and Politics in North Eastern Europe' a special issue of *Journal of Baltic Studies* edited by Joerg Hackmann and Marko Lehti (volume 39, no 4, 2008).