

# **On the threshold to visibility and dignity**

## **The long story of Polish migrants at Görlitz/Zgorzelec**

### **with special emphasis on the role of the Roman Catholic**

### **and the Evangelical United Churches**

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**Abstract:** Görlitz has been split by political decisions after World War II along the river Neisse into a Western German part and an Eastern Polish part, named Zgorzelec. For many decades, old Prussian anti-Polish stereotypes such as "Polacks" or "Polish economy" dominated; especially in those parts of the city's society whose ancestors were exposed to flight and expulsion from the former German eastern territories after 1945. Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the picture has changed considerably: without its new Polish citizens, Görlitz could neither operate the municipal hospital nor provide a high-quality range of goods nor attract international companies such as Birkenstock to settle here. A singular process in contemporary Germany is the gradual conquest of visibility and dignity by Polish citizens, especially in the Roman Catholic parish with its unusual growth rates against all trends, but also in the Protestant-United Church parish.

**Key words:** European City of Görlitz-Zgorzelec, Migrants, Polish Diaspora, Polish Economy, Immigration, Overcoming Old Prussian Anti-Polish Stereotypes

## **1. After 1989: Good neighbourly relations of the churches versus**

### **revanchist actions of German right-wing extremists**

It is a good Christian duty of mercy to support the poor. This is what we want to do with today's meeting on the visibility and dignity of migrant workers.<sup>1</sup> But it is also a good Christian duty of mercy to provide objective data, especially if it can help to overcome a subjective misery. This is what I want to do in the next few minutes, using the city of Görlitz as an example.

In the Middle Ages, Görlitz was one of the 50 wealthiest and most important cities of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. In modern times, it moved more and more to the periphery of political events. After the end of the Second World War, the hitherto German city was divided into a German part on the left of the Neisse River and a Polish part on the right. One part is still called Görlitz, the other Zgorzelec, the origin of both names being the Old Slavic Yzhorelec—Burn Site.

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<sup>1</sup> See for a recent enculturation theory of immigration: Vogt, Matthias Theodor; Fritzsche, Erik; Meißelbach, Christoph; with contributions by Siegfried Deinege, Werner J. Patzelt, Anton Sterbling and numerous responsible persons in business, politics and culture; foreword by Rita Süßmuth and afterword by Olaf Zimmermann: *Ankommen in der deutschen Lebenswelt. Migranten-Enkulturation und regionale Resilienz in der Einen Welt*. Europäisches Journal für Minderheitenfragen. [Arriving in the German Way to Live. Migrant Enculturation and Regional Resilience in the One World. European Journal on Minority Issues] Vol. 9 No. 1-2 2016. Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag 2016, 526 pp. [print and e-book; cf. also the speech at the launch of the volume with Rita Süßmuth et al., Berlin 6.10.2016: <https://kultur.org/forschungen/merr/>]

And Görlitz is a burn site also in a metaphorical sense. From the point of view of the German population, a catastrophe has been taking place since 1945, or more precisely: a catastrophic demographic process. The population has been decreasing from a maximum of over 100,000 inhabitants after the war to just over 50,000 inhabitants around 2010; reunification has accelerated the process. *Harmageddon*, according to the narrative, is imminent: a little more and the population will drop to zero, and Görlitz might be wiped out. *Finis civitatis (et, sine Gorelica, finis mundi praevallet)*.

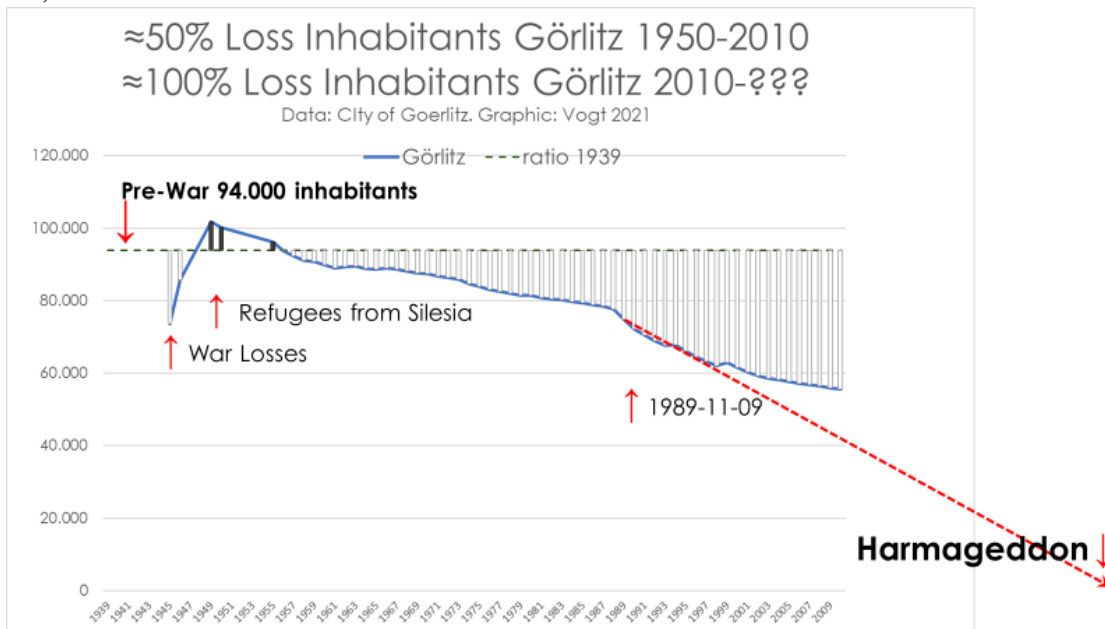


Figure 1: German fears: After having lost almost 50% of Görlitz population 1950—2010, how long will it last to lose the rest of the population? Data: City of Goerlitz. Graphic: Vogt 2021

In addition, among Germany's larger cities, Görlitz is home to the highest number of refugees and displaced persons from the lost German eastern territories: 40% or almost half of the inhabitants have family ties to Silesia in particular. This is why the historically problematic name "Lower Silesia" is used in Görlitz and why there were provocative actions against Poles in what is now Polish Lower Silesia among the right-wing radicals on the German side. For them, the Poles were beasts of the devil. Here a poster campaign on the occasion of Poland's accession to the EU on 1 May 2004, carried out by German politicians of the far-right DSU party, including a member of the Görlitz city council. The action was later punished extremely leniently by the Polish district court in Hirschberg / Jelenia Góra, with a fine of 1,200 euros.



Figure 2: “Poles & Czechs / ♥ Welcome to the EU. / Our justice system is already working diligently, because FOR MURDER THERE IS NO STATUTORY LIMITATION. / Documents of Polish and Czech atrocities against Germans”. Border crossing Poster campaign by German right-wing radical politicians from Görlitz at Bolesławiec, Poland, 2004. [“Polen & Tschechen / ♥ willkommen in der EU! / Unsere Justiz arbeitet bereits fleißig, denn Mord verjährt nicht. / Dokumente polnischer und tschechischer Grausamkeiten an Deutschen“]. Data: District Court in Jelenia Góra, Poland.

The progressives among the German Goerlitzers, on the other hand, were generally enthusiastic about reconciliation with Poland. The Polish bishops had laid the foundations for this at the Second Vatican Council with their letter to the German Bishops' Conference of 18 November 1965: "... przebaczymy i prosimy o przebaczenie / ... We grant forgiveness and ask for forgiveness".<sup>2</sup> The Polish letter was written by the Apostolic Administrator in Wrocław, Archbishop Bolesław Kominek. The German response of 5 December 1965 was drafted by two church leaders from the GDR: Bishop Alfred Bengsch from Berlin and Chapter Vicar Gerhard Schaffran from Görlitz.

Reconciliation with Poland could be realised as a concrete friendship across the border after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 - made possible largely by Poland's Solidarność. In 1945, only a small part of the Catholic Archdiocese of Wrocław remained in the later GDR; only in 1972 was the now Polish Archdiocese of Wrocław reconstituted and the Apostolic Administration of Görlitz spun off. Finally, in 1994, on the initiative of Cardinal Lehmann of Mainz, the administration became a separate diocese of Görlitz<sup>3</sup> with the task of establishing a living link between the two states as an institutional response to the letter of the Polish bishops. The Protestant churches maintain a similar living link across the Neisse.

In summary: after 1989, the liberal middle classes and the two churches strove for reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. In this spirit, the city councils of the two cities proclaimed the formation of the *European City of Görlitz-Zgorzelec* on 5 May 1998 with the (fictitious) goal of forming a joint administration by 2030.

In contrast, the right-wing in Görlitz, even after 1989, was characterised by revanchism and railed against the "Polacken" and their "Polish economy", using expressions that had already been used to defame Prussia's largest minority in the imperial era before 1914.

## 2. Historical classification of Prussian contempt for Poland

In order to be able to classify this defamation historically, a look at the world map of empires according to Rein Taagepera<sup>4</sup> helps. Outside the Eurocentric-colonial view, the Ming and Mogul dynasties, and later the Manchus, play a major territorial role, as do India and a number of American states. In Europe, however, there is only one state large enough to be mentioned in this list, not counting its non-European colonies. This is the *Res Publica Utriusque Nationis—Rzeczpospolita Korony Polskiej i Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*, the binational republic of the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It covers 1.1 million km<sup>2</sup> at the end of that Thirty Years' War, which deprived the approximately 300 German states of their ports and world trade relations for a long time,

<sup>2</sup> *Botschaft der polnischen Bischöfe an die deutschen Bischöfe vom 18. November 1965*, in: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Hg.): *Dokumentation der Predigten und Ansprachen bei der Begegnung des Primas von Polen, Kardinal Stefan Wyszyński und einer Delegation der Polnischen Bischofskonferenz, Kardinal Joseph Höffner und der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz in Deutschland im September 1978*, Bonn 1978 (Stimmen der Weltreiche 4), S. 76–87, hier S. 87. Siehe auch Pękala, Urszula: *Briefwechsel der polnischen und deutschen Bischöfe*. In: Online-Lexikon zur Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa, 2018. URL: [ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/p43232](http://ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/p43232) (Stand 21.05.2021). See also: *Die Lage der Vertriebenen und das Verhältnis des deutschen Volkes zu seinen östlichen Nachbarn. Eine evangelische Denkschrift*, hrsg. von der Kirchenkanzlei der EKD, Hannover 1965; zweisprachige Neuauflage: *Die Lage der Vertriebenen und das Verhältnis des deutschen Volkes zu seinen östlichen Nachbarn. Eine evangelische Denkschrift / Położenie wypędzonych i stosunek narodu niemieckiego do wschodnich sąsiadów. Ewangelickie memorandum*, Bielsko-Biała 2015.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/la/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_19940627\\_gorlicensis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/la/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19940627_gorlicensis.html) (Stand 21.05.2021)

<sup>4</sup> Taagepera, Rein (1997): *Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia*. *International Studies Quarterly*, 41(3). Cf. Turchin, Peter (2009): *A theory for formation of large empires*. *Journal of Global History* (2009) 4, pp. 191–21.

so that they will be meaningless for the following century. In contrast, the Prussian crown, founded in 1701 on former Polish feudal territory, came at its peak, in 1871, with just 350,000 km<sup>2</sup>, i.e. one third of the Polish-Lithuanian territory. The long defamation of Poland by Prussians and Germans can be understood historically as a defence against something far greater. It is no coincidence that, to our knowledge, a graph of the proportions of the two states—like Figure 3 of this article—has not yet been drawn.

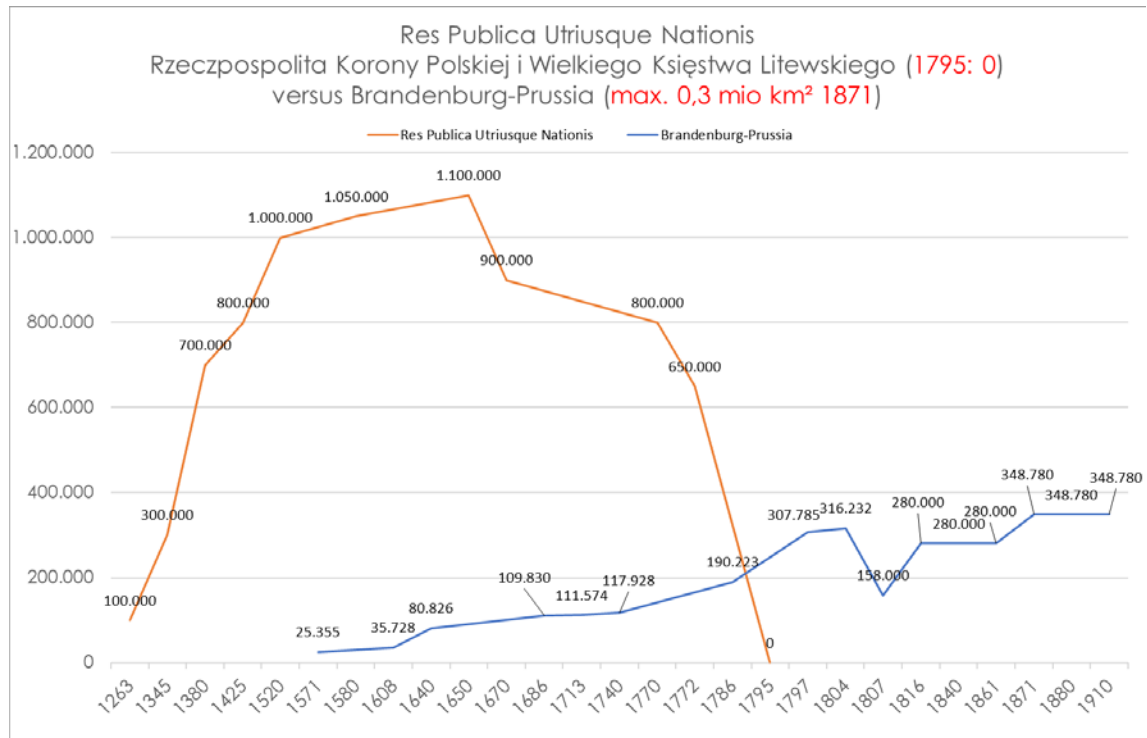


Figure 3: Res Publica Utriusque Nationis – Rzeczospolita Korony Polskiej i Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego (1795: 0) versus Brandenburg-Prussia (max. 0,3 mio km<sup>2</sup> 1871). Graph: Vogt 2021

The state eradication of Poland by the Romanovs, Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns was to last for 123 years, until 1918, accompanied by considerable anti-Polish narrative efforts by the Romanovs and Hohenzollerns. Their successor states, the USSR and the Nazi state, were then to seal the “4th Polish Partition”<sup>5</sup> of 1 September (Wehrmacht) and 17 September (Red Army) respectively in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939.

In contrast, Polish science and politics flourished on Habsburg soil, in Krakow and Lemberg, from 1795-1918, and Polish migrants are currently making a decisive contribution to the revival of the city of Vienna. In contrast to the invisible “nerd migrants” (Emilia Smechowski 2017)<sup>6</sup> in Berlin, the Poles in Vienna form a very visible community.

In 1795, part of Poland-Lithuania fell to Muscovy-Russia, which was to reach its greatest expansion of 22.8 million km<sup>2</sup> in 1895 and become the largest state on earth as the USSR after the disintegration of the British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires around 1960. In 1945, Russia's westward expansion, already envisaged in 1914, turned Poland into a “state on wheels”, the total area of which was shifted westwards until it reached Görlitz. The city had already belonged to Poland in 1018-1030, in the Peace of Bautzen between the Roman-German Emperor Henry II and the Polish ruler Bolesław I Chrobry.

<sup>5</sup> “4th Polish Partition” is a term occasionally used but not a settled one in historiography. Norman Davies in *God's Playground* refers to the 1939 partition as the seventh. Others, including the 2013 film, use it to refer to the formation of Polonia by Polish expats.

<sup>6</sup> Emilia Smechowski [born Emilka Elżbieta Śmiechowska]: *Wir Strebermigranten*. Carl Hanser, München 2017.

### 3. Poles and Germans in today's Görlitz

As the town name Yzhorelec attests, we are dealing with a mixed settlement area where Slavs first settled, then Jewish long-distance traders became active, and finally German settlers were called by the Slavic rulers of Poland and Bohemia to found towns. The area was not mono-ethnic until the German-Soviet invasion of Poland on 1 or 17 September 1939; the sharp border of 1945 along the Neisse River is not in keeping with the history of the area.

In 2007, I examined the above-mentioned narrative of the German Görlitzers and found it to be extremely incomplete.<sup>7</sup> The tenfold increase in the population of Görlitz after the Prussian seizure in 1815 (with 9,000 inhabitants) until the census in May 1939 (with 94,000 inhabitants) played out on both banks of the Neisse. So after 1945 one has to take into account both the left bank of the Neisse and the right bank of the Neisse, today's Zgorzelec, in order to arrive at the figures for the twin city of Görlitz/Zgorzelec. I am pleased that this new representation has in the meantime found its way into the Wikipedia article on Görlitz and has thus recently come to characterise the city narrative.

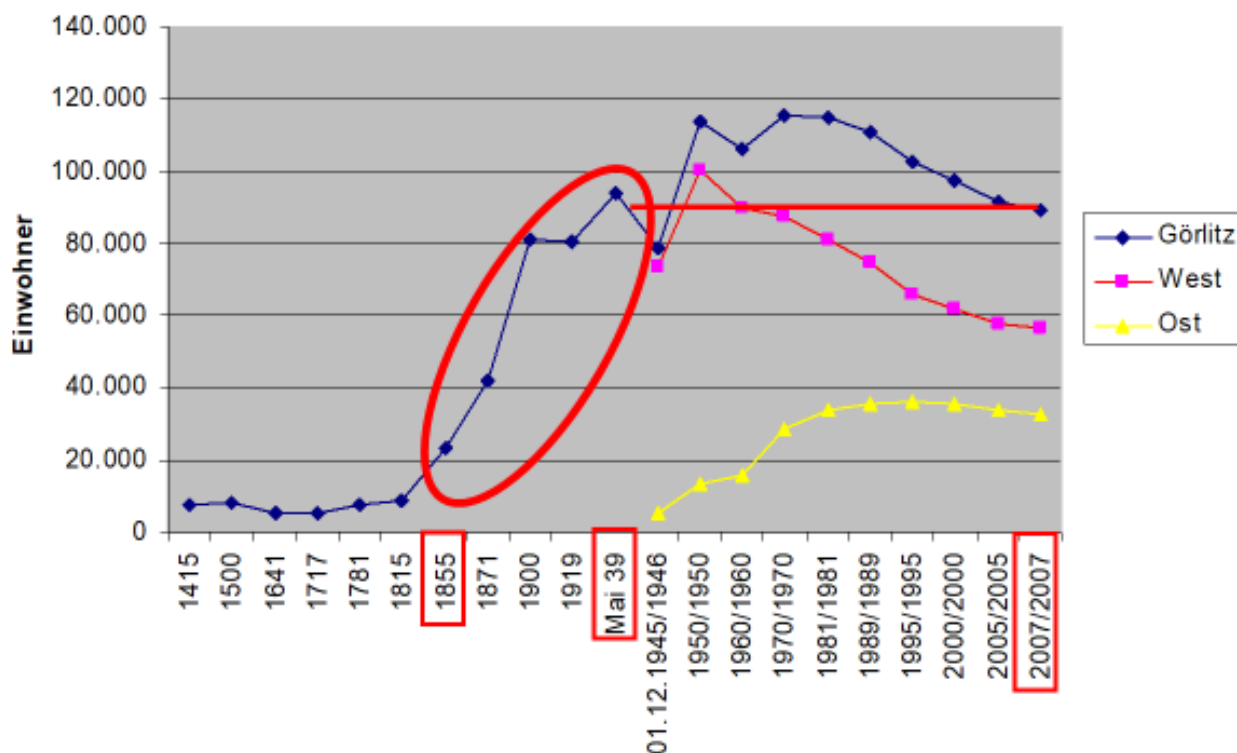


Figure 4: Demographic development Görlitz resp. Görlitz-Zgorzelec 1415 – 2007. Graph: Vogt 2007

In principle, the number of inhabitants is stable, if the temporary special factor of the influx of refugees is taken into account. However, it is noticeable in recent years that the population of Zgorzelec is slightly decreasing, while that of Görlitz is increasing.

<sup>7</sup> Vogt, Matthias Theodor (2007): *Görlitz-Zgorzelec - Stadt auf der Grenze*. In: Deutsches Polen-Institut (Hrsg.): *Jahrbuch Polen 2007*. Darmstadt 2007. S. 134 – 145.

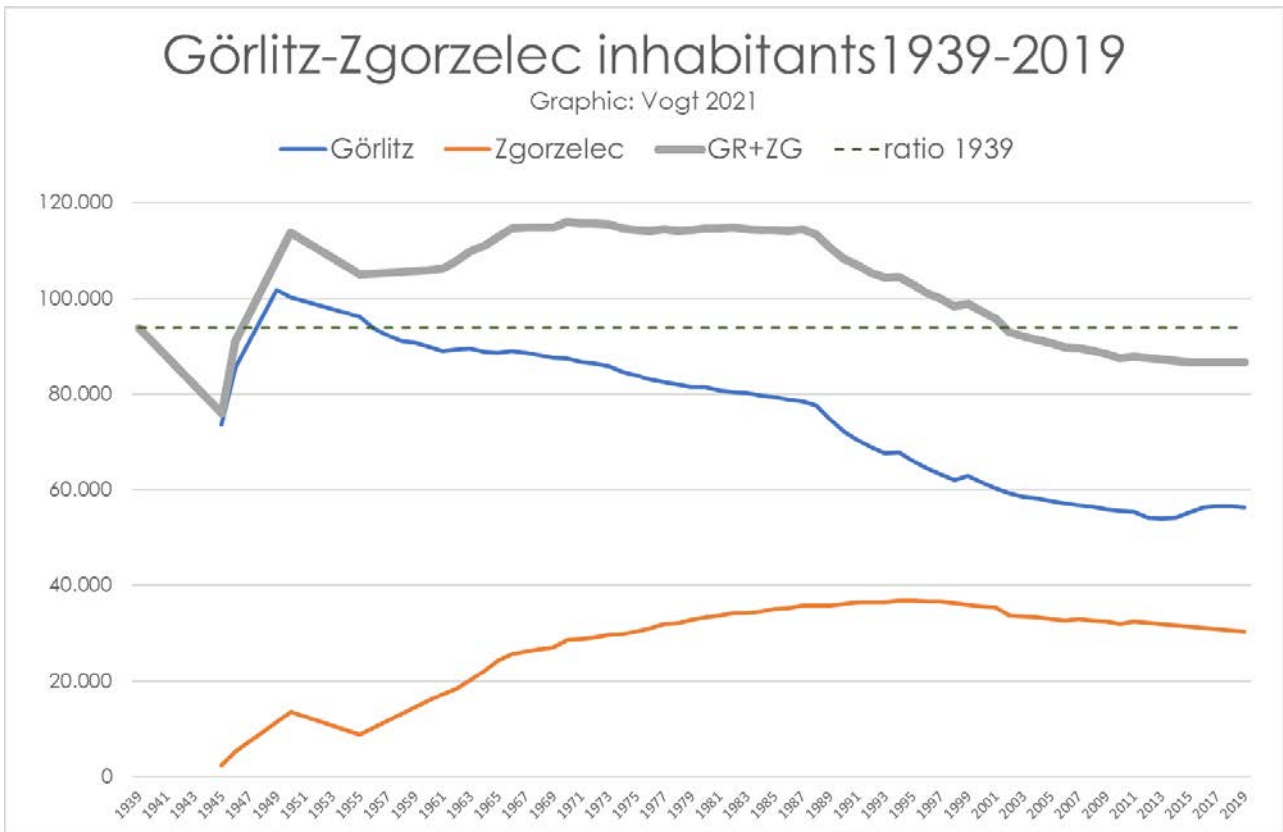


Figure 5: Einwohnerentwicklung Görlitz 1939-2017. Data: City of Görlitz 2021. Graph: Vogt 2021

There are reasons for this, which we can study in the municipal hospital of Görlitz. Here, the nationalities of the group of doctors who are decisive for the quality of the hospital can be divided into three groups: 151 Germans, 47 Poles, 57 other nationalities. 40% of the doctors have a nationality other than German. Without Poles and other highly visible and indispensable foreigners, the hospital system in Görlitz would collapse.

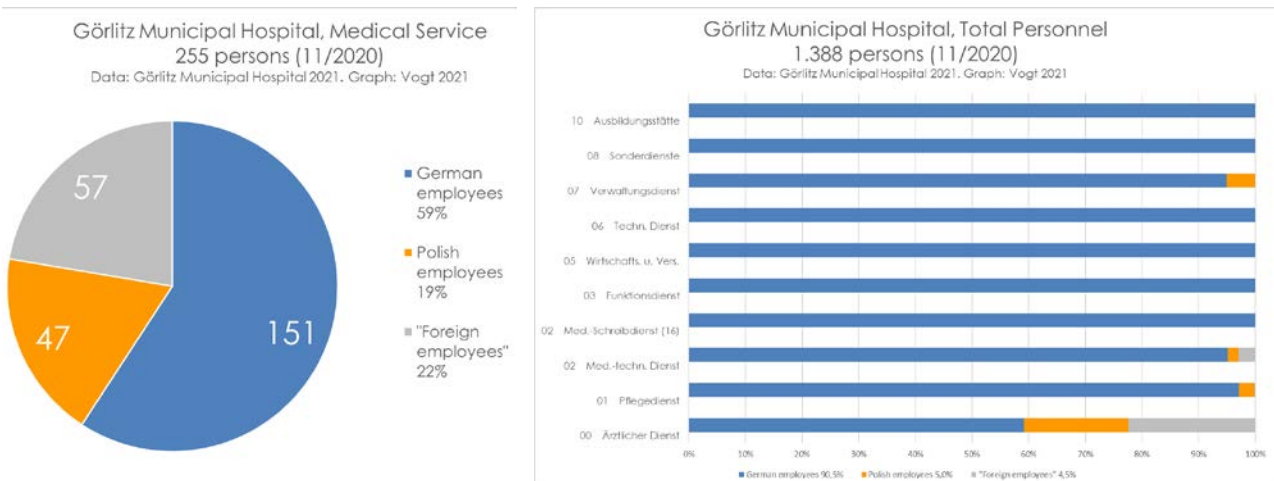


Figure 6: (a) Görlitz Municipal Hospital, Medical Doctors' Service: 255 persons (11/2020). (b) Görlitz Municipal Hospital, Total Personnel, 1,388 persons (11/2020). Data: Görlitz Municipal Hospital 2021. Graph: Vogt 2021



A look at the city as a whole shows the same three groups: in 2019—if you will allow me to shorten it—there are 49,790 Germans living in Görlitz plus 4,005 or 7.15% Poles, as well as 'foreigners', namely 2,186 or 3.90% non-Polish foreigners.

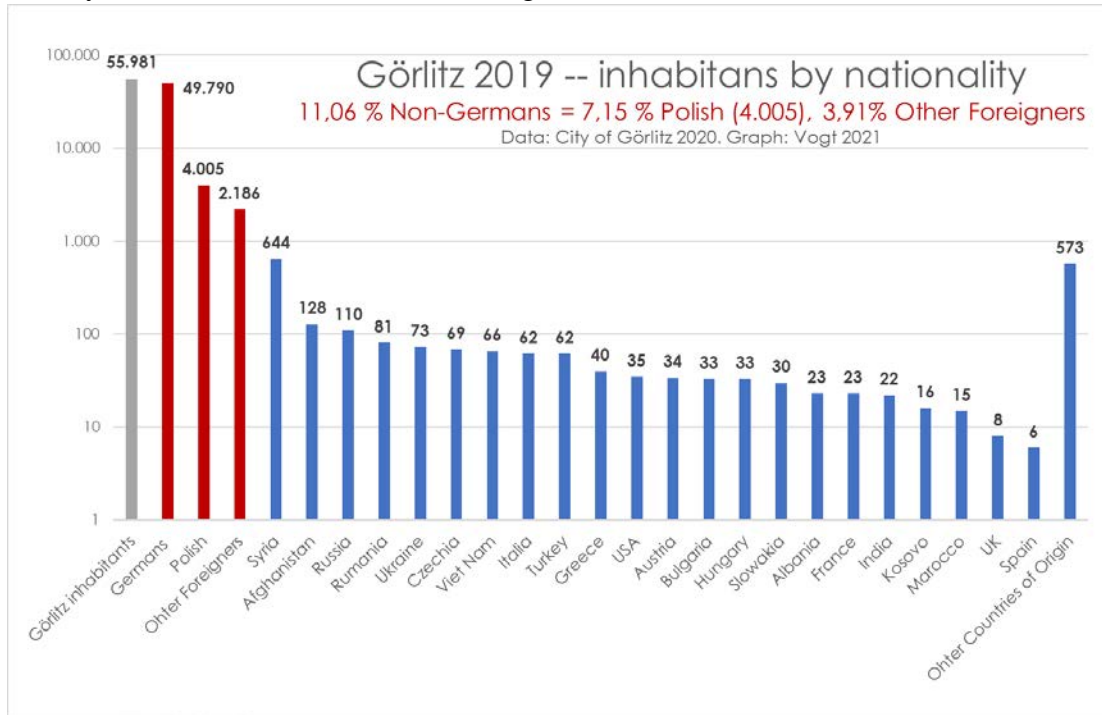


Figure 7: Görlitz 2019 -- inhabitants by nationality. Data: City of Görlitz 2020. Graph: Vogt 2021

The group of Poles increases twenty-fold in just one generation: from 0.4% (1994) to 7.8% (2020). The influx of Poles compensates for the loss of Germans due to emigration and death. Only because of this is the population stable to slightly increasing.

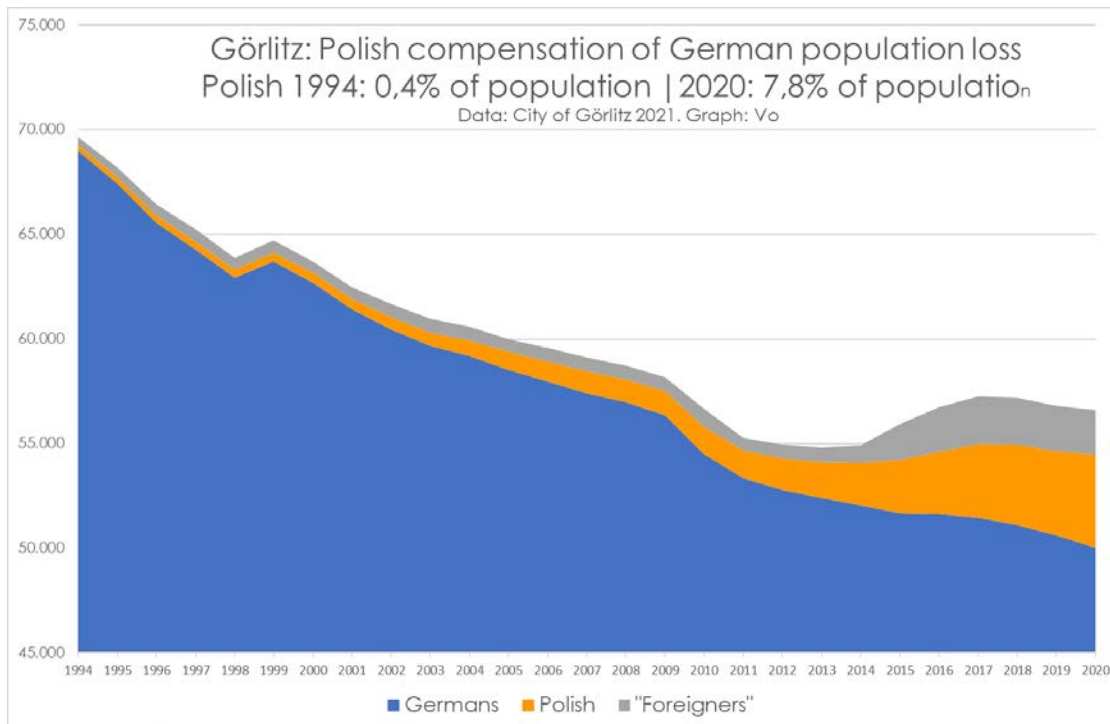


Figure 8: German – Polish - other Foreigners among Görlitz inhabitants 1994--2020. Data: City of Görlitz 2020. Graph: Vogt 2021

The proportion of Poles among foreigners living in Görlitz increases from 40% (1994) to 67% (2020).

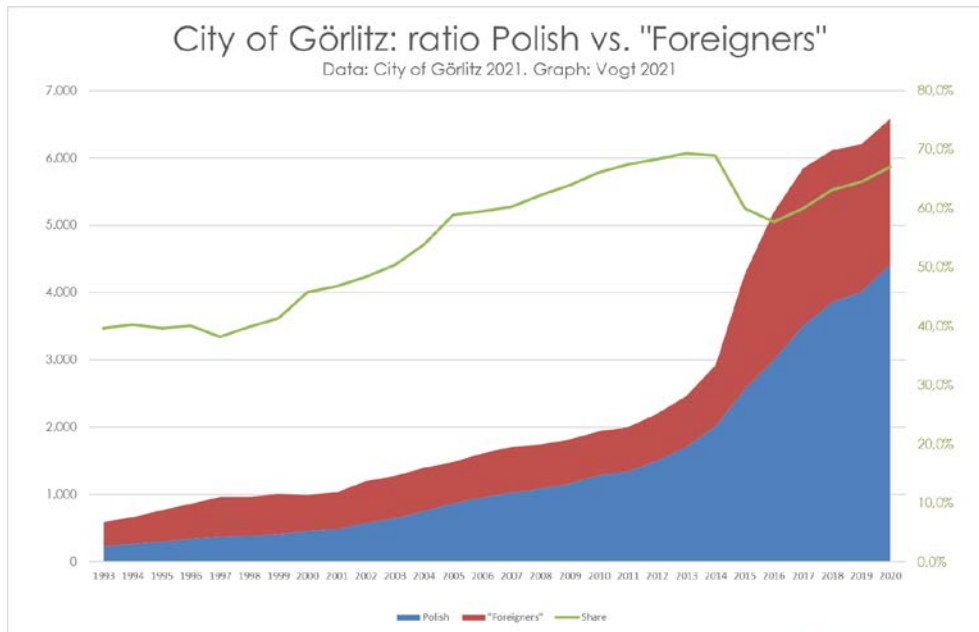


Figure 9: Share of Polish among Foreign Görlitz inhabitants 1994--2020. Data: City of Görlitz 2020. Graph: Vogt 2021

In a comparison of Saxon cities, the capital Dresden is only in fourth place, preceded by Europe's Capital of Culture 2025 Chemnitz in third place, the swarm city Leipzig in second place and Görlitz in first place with a current 11% share of foreigners, more than double the Saxon average of 5.1%.

A detailed analysis shows that the proportion of foreigners in the County of Görlitz is smaller than the Saxon average and has even been declining for some years. In the city of Görlitz, on the other hand, the number of Poles alone is almost as high as the total of all foreigners in Dresden; Poles make up about 70% of all city Görlitz foreigners.

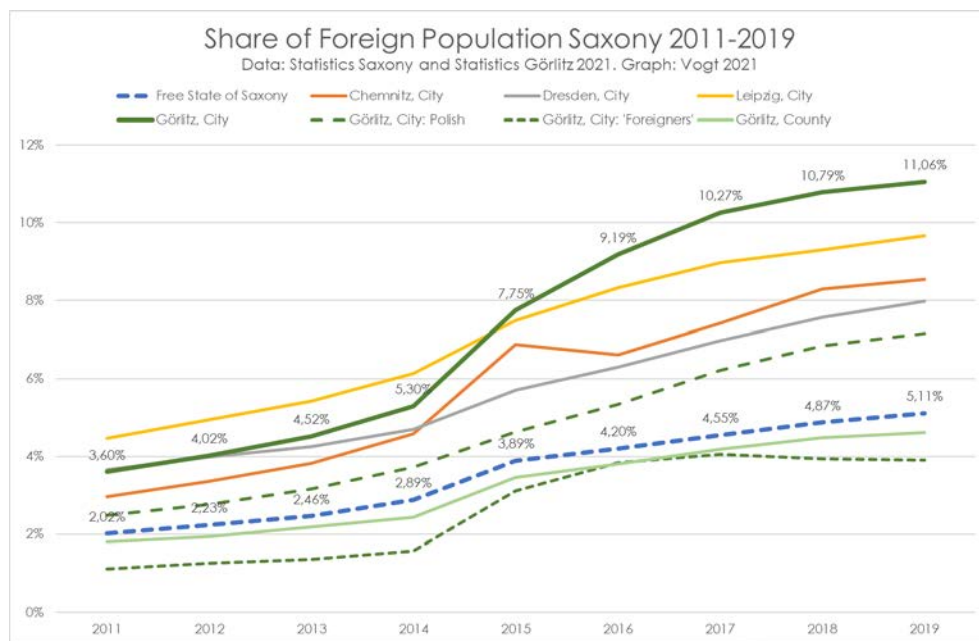


Figure 10: Share of Foreign Population Saxony 2011-2019: Cities of Görlitz, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Dresden; Görlitz county. Data: Statistics Saxony and Statistics Görlitz 2021. Graph: Vogt 2021



And here again, the Catholic Church is a pioneer. The diocese not only takes on a model role externally - as a link between the German and Polish episcopates. The same applies to the Protestant side, which is a sustainable relay of numerous grassroots connections. The Catholic diocese, in turn, is also doing a model job internally at its parish of St. Wenceslas and in the rest of the diocese - the diocese of Görlitz is the only German diocese whose number of believers is growing. And this is especially true for the episcopal see of Görlitz, which had been on a downward trend since 1969 that suddenly turned into a steep upward trend in 2010. The parish priests come from Germany and speak Polish or from Poland and speak German, the baptised, the first communicants and the confirmands have long been mostly Polish. The Catholic parish of St. Wenceslas is probably the most multicultural community in Saxony.

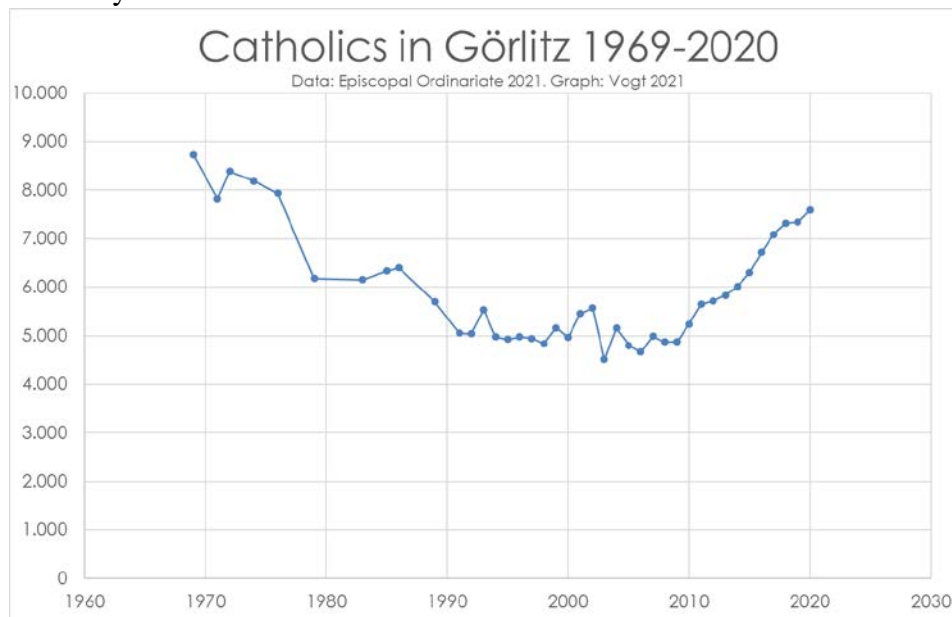


Figure 11: Share of Foreign Population Saxony 2011-2019: Cities of Görlitz, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Dresden; Görlitz county. Data: Statistics Saxony and Statistics Görlitz 2021. Graph: Vogt 2021

Unlike the Polish ghettoisation in Great Britain after 1990 with a Polish supermarket, Polish trade fair, Polish television, Polish circle of friends, and almost no contact to British people, there is no such ghettoisation in Görlitz. The children go to the mostly German kindergarten or school as normal; but they also have the option - the only place in Germany - of a bilingual German-Polish grammar school with a German-Polish double degree. Sociologically, the essential point is that an important proportion of those Poles who settle in Görlitz come either from the big cities of Poland or the big cities of Western Europe; many of them are urban. And much more urban than the majority population of Görlitz who have never lived elsewhere. The Poles, who are often employed as doctors or at other levels of service, or who are self-employed, thus embody a decisive modernisation potential of the urban community.

One must never forget that among the Germans of Görlitz about 8% of the girls and about 12% of the boys do not make it to school, so that they cannot learn a profession and remain forever stuck in the loser's street. In the sense of our conference, they could be classified as Invisible Non-Labour Non-Migrants in Western Europe. They experience as little social solidarity as the members of the slave systems in the care of the elderly,<sup>8</sup> the asparagus harvest or the meat factories, on whose exploitation the German economic and social system is partly based.

<sup>8</sup> Bundesarbeitsgericht, Urteil vom 24. Juni 2021 - 5 AZR 505/20. Vgl. [https://juris.bundesarbeitsgericht.de/cgi-bin/rechtsprechung/document.py?Gericht=bag&Art=pm&Datum=2021&nr=25345&pos=0&anz=16&titel=Gesetzlicher\\_Mindestlohn\\_f%C3%BCr\\_entsandte\\_ausl%C3%A4ndische\\_Betreuungskr%C3%A4fte\\_in\\_Privathaushalten](https://juris.bundesarbeitsgericht.de/cgi-bin/rechtsprechung/document.py?Gericht=bag&Art=pm&Datum=2021&nr=25345&pos=0&anz=16&titel=Gesetzlicher_Mindestlohn_f%C3%BCr_entsandte_ausl%C3%A4ndische_Betreuungskr%C3%A4fte_in_Privathaushalten)

Polish migrants at Görlitz/Zgorzelec belong to a different category. As recently as 2004, our PhD students discovered signs with the German half saying: "Herzlich willkommen!" and the Polish half saying: " Tutaj nie ma kradzieży!" (No stealing here!). Today it says in German: "Herzlich willkommen!" and in Polish: "Bardzo serdecznie witamy!"(A very warm welcome to you!). Polish customers come to Görlitz from as far away as Wroclaw and buy in particular the high-quality goods that German residents of Görlitz are reluctant to buy. The variety of goods on offer in Görlitz is largely due to the quality-conscious Polish clientele.

#### 4. Change in the right-wing and left-wing image of Poland

On the right-wing political spectrum in Görlitz, the image of Poland has changed radically: Who, if not Jarosław Kaczyński's national conservative Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party, represents the values of the family, the nation and the West and thus deserves the support of right-wing Germans? There is no more talk of Poles or of the Polish economy here. This is particularly remarkable against the backdrop of the economic disparity and the accompanying criminality and its statistics, which virtually invite stereotypes.

The current situation is quite different among the bourgeois liberals of Görlitz. The drift of Jarosław Kaczyński and his Prawo i Sprawiedliwość into an anti-abortion and homophobic camp beyond legal structures, which has attempted to symbolically secure the borders with the help of scouts, has created a great deal of unease, which also has a negative effect on the commitment to bridge-building. The border stones between Poland and Germany have started to move; they are currently found in quite surprising places in the political and social discourse.

In Görlitz, at any rate—just look at the clinic and the Catholic parish—Polish immigrants have reached the threshold of visibility and dignity. Görlitz is—*cum grano salis*—a city “with Germans, Poles and [other] foreigners”, which in the words of the former mayor Deinige “is lost without immigration”. It has achieved significantly greater stability through the Polish influx than is the case with comparable East German or even Polish cities.



Figure 12: Young Germans, Polish, and other Foreigners Studying together in the European City of Görlitz-Zgorzelec. Picture: Institut für kulturelle Infrastruktur Sachsen 2012.

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