I. Introduction

In November 1945, the head of the county land office in Gryfice, a small town in Western Pomerania in the northwest of Poland’s new postwar territories, reprimanded the mayors and village heads in his jurisdiction for that fall’s “sad” harvest campaign. “We cannot allow that the fall sowings [which were underway] have the same outcome,” he wrote.

Everyone has to be mindful of the fact that there will only be a Poland in the west in as much as the Poles can take over the west [as their possession, wsiąść w posiadanie]. But to take something over as one’s possession, that means to farm the land correctly. There cannot be space for fallow fields [Nie może być miejsca na odłogи]! Consequently each horse must work in the fields. Any other occupation is not just something criminal, it’s treason against one’s own fatherland.1

As a state representative charged with the welfare of the impoverished incoming Polish settlers, the county head was, of course, worried about food production. Starvation and hunger-related diseases ran rampant in most of postwar central Europe, even in rural areas. To let arable land waste away was irresponsible. But the root of his anxiety lay elsewhere. If Poles did not farm the new land they were given, he recognized, the legitimacy of the Polish takeover of former German territory east of the Oder and Neisse rivers would be questioned. This concern was widely shared. Polish officials from all over the province pleaded with their superiors in Warsaw for help in the fields. Newspapers instructed arriving settlers to root out thistles covering large swaths of territory. Mastering, owning a territory, Polish officials understood, meant making the land yield harvests. But in the context of postwar chaos and Soviet military occupation competent land ownership proved elusive.

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1 Archiwum Państwowe w Szczecinie (APSz), Oddział w Międzyzdrojach, Gminna Rada Narodowa w Trzygłowie (GRNTrzg) 24, 28. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
My dissertation—the main arguments of which I present here—examines postwar daily life on the former landed estates of the Prussian nobility (the *Junker*) in Western Pomerania between the spring of 1945 and the summer of 1948. During this time, three groups of people—Germans, Poles, and Soviets—were forced to work alongside each other on the estates’ vast holdings and share space in the manor homes and workers’ quarters. Throughout this period, it remained unclear who actually owned the land in the region, who was responsible for tilling it, and who would invest in its future. I argue that in a space where borders were not definitively drawn and at a time when property and land had not been officially assigned to new owners, how people acted towards their surroundings mattered. In the countryside of northwestern Poland, landownership was not defined by international treaties or property titles but by whether or not a given population took proper care of the land. Thus, for the first three years after World War II, in the estate villages of the Prussian nobility, Germans and Poles watched each other relate to the land. They also watched a third group, the Soviet military force occupying the area, block most attempts at restoring the region’s agricultural economy. Germans—mostly (but not exclusively) the noble families who had farmed this land for generations—wanted to stay in Western Pomerania and preserve the land for future generations. Arriving Poles were aware that they had to return war-torn land to cultivation. The Red Army, in contrast, was not interested in looking after the land in Pomerania, but in exploiting the territory under its occupation for the short-term provision of troops. In the summer of 1948, after three years of military occupation, a large share of arable land in the province lay fallow, many fields not having been tended since 1944. The land, seemingly, belonged to no responsible owner. It was literally No Man’s Land.

II. Land and Landownership

Whereas most recent local studies of postwar central Europe have focused on urban environments, I examine the postwar transformations of the continent from a new angle: the countryside, where the majority of central Europeans still lived and worked after 1945. I focus specifically on a relationship that was altered by the war and the chaos that followed, the relationship between rural communities and their land.

The idea for this dissertation came to me when I read the diary of a Pomeranian estate owner, Käthe von Normann, who carefully recorded
her family’s last year in Barkow, their village in Greifenberg (Gryfice) county east of Stettin (Szczecin), between March 1945 and April 1946. After her family’s expulsion from Pomera-nia, von Normann submitted the pages of her diary to the Federal Ministry for Expellees, Refugees, and the War Dam-aged (the Bundesministerium für Vertriebene und Kriegsversehrte, BMVFK), where the historian Theodor Schieder had assembled a group of young historians to collect personal memoirs, diary entries, letters, and answers to lengthy questionnaires completed by expellees soon after they arrived in West Germany. The hundreds of testimonies eventually comprising the five volumes of the Dokumentation der Vertreibung (the Documentation of the Expulsion), while carefully edited, unambiguously reflected the commission’s main aim of documenting German victimhood. Schieder’s colleague, the federal archivist Adolf Diestelkamp, thought the Dokumentation could be a “decisive factor in our fight to win back the German east,” in particular those territories under Polish administration.  

Käthe von Normann was clearly aware of the commission’s objectives. In a letter accompanying the submission of her diary, she noted to the historians, 

Barkow was, by August ‘46, cleared of all Germans; at the end the skilled workers were removed. Specific reports about current conditions there are not available. The estate in Barkow seems to have been turned into a state-owned farm. [...] Of the 2,000 acres of arable land belonging to the estate only 280 acres are being tilled. Root crops are not being harvested in time before the
winter frost arrives. The cemetery is completely overgrown.⁴

It was this letter that caught my attention. Her note confirmed what the Ministry’s efforts sought to demonstrate: that Polish farmers were incapable of properly tilling the land in Pomerania, and were thus not worthy of owning it. Poland should return this land if Polish farmers were not able to use it properly. But I also sensed that aside from pursuing this political agenda, von Normann’s letter simply revealed her as a landowner worried about the fate of her holdings. She knew of the damage that might result if hundreds of acres were left to lie fallow for too long; she knew when the sugar beet harvest needed to begin for the crop to be brought in before it was frozen in the ground. She knew because her and her husband’s families had resided and worked in Greifenberg County for generations. Von Normann, attached to this land and familiar with its challenges, was probably right in observing that new settlers struggled to farm her former fields properly. I wanted to find out more about this traumatic transition in the countryside: the profound loss of homeland suffered by rural German expellees and the overwhelming anxiety of newcomers who had to build an emotional attachment to this new land as well as acquire the competency to farm and own it.

Rural populations experienced forced displacement differently than did urban communities. For the German landowners and rural laborers who had worked the land for generations, it was painful to be forced off land they and their families had tended for decades, if not centuries. Certainly the inhabitants of Breslau (Wrocław) felt a deep sense of loss when they were forced from their urban homes, but the sense of loss was of a different character for those in the countryside who were pushed from their farms. For landowners, leaving their land meant ceasing to take care of something they had inherited from their ancestors and which they had planned to preserve for their heirs. It meant losing their calling, the (pre)occupation of their adult lives. New arrivals found it hard to develop the same kind of emotional attachment to an unfamiliar and foreign landscape. More importantly, as the Polish sociologist Zdzisław Mach has pointed out, relocated peasants lost not only their homes, but also the knowledge, cultivated and passed on in families for centuries, of how to grow crops in their specific environment.⁵

In the first few years after the war it remained unclear who exactly “owned” the land in Western Pomerania. If landownership meant

⁴ Normann, 179, fn 52.
properly taking care of arable fields and forests, then Germans continued to act as owners long after the end of the war. On the former Junker estates, Germans still constituted the largest labor force. Even on farms where Germans were in the minority, Polish and Soviet authorities usually kept a few former German estate employees around in order to draw on their local knowledge. On paper, Poland was given the right to administer the Oder-Neisse territories, but between 1945 and 1947, the Soviet Army, not Poland, was the largest landowner in the region. This occupying army, however, hardly acted like a normal “landowner.” Rather than taking care of the land, keeping it fertile and productive for the future, Soviet officers had their men exploit the territory for short-term gain, the temporary provision of their troops. Arriving Polish settlers felt overwhelmed by their assigned task, feeling they could never be successful landowners in this hostile environment. The land and climate were unfamiliar; material conditions prevented them from farming successfully on their own; and the Polish state was too strapped for resources to be of much help. This added greatly to Polish fears. Germans saw how the Poles and Soviets failed to act as proper stewards of the land. Poles, aware of this German judgment, grew increasingly anxious as the share of fallow fields in Western Pomerania increased. Soviet soldiers on the ground seemed poised to hand this wasteland back over to the Germans at the end of the “occupation.”

III. Postwar Settlements and Landownership in Western Poland

International agreements during and in the aftermath of the war did not yield final border settlements in central and Eastern Europe. At the Allies’ wartime conferences in Tehran (in November 1943) and Yalta (in February 1945), the American, British, and Soviet leaders had agreed in principle that Poland would be compensated for a significant loss of territory to Stalin in the east with portions of former German territories in the west. Germans living in those western territories would have to be expelled. But neither during these two conferences, nor during their August 1945 conference at Potsdam, did the Big Three agree on the final delimitation of the Polish-German border. Increasingly worried about large-scale population movements, the Western leaders were more comfortable postponing final territorial decisions to a future peace conference. They were also hesitant to cede too much German territory to postwar Poland. At the Yalta conference in February 1945, British Prime Minister [6 United States Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers. The Conferences at Cairo and Tehran, 1943 (Washington, DC: 1961), 512, 598-600. For a good summary of the Allies’ decisions regarding postwar border changes and population transfers see R. M. Douglas, Orderly and Humane. The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War (New Haven, 2012), 65-92; his discussion of the Tehran conference is on p. 79.
Winston Churchill had famously agreed to the expulsion of Germans from western Poland and for Poland to take over formerly Germany territory, “but not more than they wish or can manage. I do not wish to stuff the Polish goose until it dies of indigestion,” he told Stalin and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov. He reassured them that he was not afraid of a transfer of populations, “as long as it is in proportion to what the Poles can manage[…].” A peace conference never took place, and a Polish–German Border Treaty was not signed until 1990.

While Stalin wanted Poland to expand as far west as possible, the Soviets would impose clear limits on Polish sovereignty in former German lands. Following the Yalta decisions, the Soviet wartime leadership did formally recognize the Oder and Neisse rivers as the temporary border of postwar Poland. And, at this time, Stalin officially allowed the Polish government to set up civil administrations east of that border. But no one doubted that the new territories of western Poland were effectively under Soviet, not Polish, control. This was evident in the agreements signed between the provisional Polish government and Moscow. These agreements stipulated clearly that Poland did not own anything there. Rather, the Red Army had the right to treat all real estate, farming implements, and livestock available in the former German territories as its property. The Polish state only owned those landed estates, factories, warehouses, machines, and animals that individual leaders of the Soviet Army voluntarily handed over to the Polish civil authorities. In the countryside, this meant that the Red Army was the largest proprietor of livestock and agricultural machinery and by far the largest proprietor of land.

The presence of Red Army troops in the western territories was overwhelming. The Oder–Neisse lands were occupied territory. In the first few months after the war, Soviet soldiers were stationed in every Pomeranian town and in almost every village. In Western Pomerania in November 1945 (the first month Polish authorities could gather data), divisions of the Red Army occupied about half of the largest landed estates. Each estate housed a staff of ten to twenty Red Army soldiers. In addition to these military headquarters, about sixty thousand men belonging to the Soviet secret police moved in. The NKVD set up and staffed about seven or eight POW camps for German soldiers in the region. This meant that in a small rural town, Red Army soldiers often greatly outnumbered the civilian population. Polish historians estimate that during the first year after the war, through the summer of 1946,
at least 100,000 Red Army soldiers were stationed in the province. This state of affairs changed only gradually. Warsaw and Moscow signed a series of agreements that had the Red Army draw down troop numbers and give up most of their military headquarters by the end of 1945. But generally, the Red Army leadership did not heed these agreements. In May 1948, the Soviet military still occupied 177 large estates in the Szczecin Voivodeship comprising an area of over 80,000 hectares (just over 300 square miles).

On the ground, Germans, Soviet soldiers, and arriving Polish settlers were not necessarily aware of the agreements re-ordering the boundaries of central Europe. This was certainly true for most of the first year after the war. In Western Pomerania, the population was completely cut off from the rest of the world as early as January 1945. Mail service and newspaper deliveries had stopped with the Soviet advance and did not resume after the armistice. Many Germans on the Pomeranian estates only learned about the armistice weeks after it had occurred. Germans and Polish villagers in the Pomeranian countryside lived day-to-day, their expectations for the future completely dependent on rumors they heard from Soviet and Polish military members or other travelers who happened to be passing through. This sense of isolation and the way in which their anxiety about the future waxed and waned with bits of information trickling in is especially apparent in diaries written during this period. In her daily notes, Käthe von Normann, the owner of Barkow, obsessed over every piece of news she heard and what it might mean for the future of her holdings. In mid-March 1945, a Soviet officer told her neighbor that all women would be sent to Russia and could return to their homes after four years. On May 7, just after she learned about Hitler’s death, von Normann heard that the future German border would run near

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14 Machałek, Przemiany, 75-78.
Stolp in the northeast of the province. In early May, villagers in Barkow heard first that the Soviets would leave the region on May 20, 1945. Later that date was revised to May 27. Finally they were told that both Russians and Poles would withdraw from Pomerania for good in October. At the end of May, rumors circulated that Great Britain and the United States had declared war on the Soviet Union. Everyone in the village spent June waiting for “America” to help them. At the end of June, von Normann was plagued with worries that the Germans would be expelled from their homes, but her fears were allayed when she saw Poles rapidly leaving the village in droves. Some rumors suggested that all Germans (including women and children) would be deported to Siberia. People also believed that the territories east of the Oder and Neisse rivers would be occupied by the Soviet military for twenty years and then revert back to Germany. Interestingly, diary entries by villagers note that Soviet and Polish military personnel themselves never seemed quite sure what the future would hold. For the Germans, these rumors were a never-ending source of hope that they might remain in their homes. For those German workers whom the Soviet military retained as the main workforce on the Junker estates past the main phase of the expulsions in 1946 and 1947, this hope remained alive well into the 1950s. For the new Polish arrivals to the region, circulating rumors about impending border revisions were of course deeply unsettling. In the absence of more reliable information, both groups closely scrutinized what was happening to the countryside around them to draw conclusions about their future on this land.

IV. Germans and Soviets

German memoirs and diaries of the Soviet invasion and occupation brim with the Germans’ moral outrage and pain over the destruction

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15 Von Normann, 31, 86, 94, 105, 123, 125.

16 See also the diary by Ilse von Zadow who continued to live on her family’s estate in Dramburg county until the middle of 1946, Bundesarchiv (BA) Bayreuth, Ost-Dokumentation 2, Nr. 130, Kreis Dramburg, 376-378, 380, 387, 391.

17 See for example, Irma Gloor-Radüntz. Mein Leben (Unterentfelden: unpublished manuscript, 2002).
of the landscape that surrounded them. As has been well documented, the civilian population of eastern Germany suffered a lot of violence during the Red Army invasion. They expected that the victors would exact revenge, but were outraged when Soviet soldiers acted with what seemed like excessive and unjustified brutality. Interestingly, when Soviet soldiers abused nature and the land around them, Germans were just as deeply affected. That the land should be punished seemed egregious and immoral to them.

Regrettably, it remains unclear what individual Soviet soldiers thought they were doing on the former estates of the Prussian nobility. Soviet soldiers appear in this account only as the Germans and Poles perceived them. There are two reasons for this. First, in 1950 Soviet authorities ordered the Polish government to destroy all Polish and Soviet materials relating to Red Army involvement in the administration of Poland’s new territories. Even the Russian archives to which Polish historians have had access do not provide a complete picture of the Soviet experience on the ground in postwar Pomerania. Second, it is difficult to find personal testimony from Soviet soldiers who were stationed specifically on Western Pomeranian estates during the postwar years. A number of recent studies have analyzed the experience of individual Soviet soldiers during World War II and their lives in occupied Germany afterwards. These studies have helped render the Red Army soldier, often a flat and cartoonish character in German and Polish accounts, more three-dimensional.

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Questions about the role Soviet soldiers thought they were playing in the Pomeranian countryside—for example, whether they expected the land to become Polish or be handed back to the Germans—are important. But locating enough diaries or letters to reveal details about Soviet soldiers’ perceptions of their postwar life on Pomeranian estates exceeded the scope of my project.

Still, it is clear that the Soviet military, and the individual officers and soldiers that comprised it, were intent on extracting as much value as possible from the territory under their control. This meant that Red Army soldiers not only plundered Pomeranian homes, but that they also dismantled the basis for a functioning agricultural economy in the province. Villagers and estate owners alike understood that Soviet soldiers stole their personal belongings—china, fur coats, jewelry, or foodstuffs—either in revenge or for personal gain. More surprising to them was how, in the spring and summer of 1945, the Soviet military showed so little regard for the occupied land itself. Fritz Bonow, the son of a tractor driver from an estate near Köslin (Koszalin), was shocked at how one Soviet soldier tanned the hides of cows and sheep:  

He collected this the bark of oak trees, which he stripped up to a height of three meters. Inevitably, the trees died after this, because without bark, the roots cannot supply the necessary sap for the growing of new shoots. In winter 1946/47, which was very cold, the dried-up trees were felled and used as firewood. For stoves and ovens the oaks were of course good fuel. [...] So many trees were felled that by spring one could see from afar across the whole forest, something which had never been the case before.  

From the German perspective, the Soviet occupiers and Polish army units were thoughtlessly and wastefully ravaging the countryside, without regard for the long-term consequences. Most Pomeranians found this behavior heartbreaking and inexcusable.

The landscape began to look desolate, and not simply because the Soviet military did not care for it. Over the course of the first few months of the occupation, Soviet officers ordered all agricultural machinery to be shipped off, and so it gradually became impossible to take care of the estates’ vast holdings. “All the farm implements and machinery, anything that could be moved was moved and taken..."
away in lorries and on trailers, driven by Russian soldiers,” Barbara Fox von Thadden, the daughter of an estate owner in Vahnerow, in Greifenberg county, remembered. She wondered how the Soviets were going to plant anything in the spring without any inventory or seed grain.23 At small train stations across Pomerania, Germans watched all kinds of machinery being loaded onto freight trains. A villager from Köslin County recalled that in his county all agricultural enterprises were robbed of their machinery: “From the most complicated machinery to the most primitive tool, everything was loaded up under the supervision of the Russian military and brought to the station in Pritzig. From here, everything was shipped off, after they had first shipped off sewing machines, grandfather clocks, [...] pianos and upholstered furniture.”24 A woman from Deutsch Krone County in southeastern Pomerania, whose family leased an estate in Schrotz, had to help load onto trucks all of the agricultural machinery, radios, and furniture from the estate.25

More shocking to Pomeranians perhaps than the shipping off of agricultural machinery was that the Soviet army was also sending large herds of cattle either west towards Berlin, or east, all the way to Moscow. The villager from Köslin County remembered: “All livestock was being herded together. There were many villages in which one could not find a single head of cattle.”26 The von Thadden’s estate in Vahnerow was without a single animal by early spring 1945. Everyone in Pomerania remembered thousands of heads of cattle on Pomerania’s roads. “Often large herds of cattle would be driven by us, going east, then again going west. We couldn’t quite make sense out of this chaos [Wirrwarr],” remembers a countrywoman from eastern Pomerania.27 As she noticed, these cattle herds were organized only haphazardly. German women and men were ordered to accompany them, to feed the cattle on the road, and to make sure that the cows were milked. Barbara Fox von Thadden and Irma Radüntz, the von Thaddens’ kitchen maid, accompanied one such march westward. The animals’ suffering on these marches was immense. Max Heger, a farmer from a village in Belgard County who was ordered to go along with one of these herds, recalled that most of the cattle perished because the few accompanying Germans were unable to take proper care of the thousands of animals:

Because it was impossible to milk even just a small share of the cows, diseases and epidemics were soon rampant, for example milk fever, foot and mouth disease, and others.

We had to get fodder from the villages in the vicinity, but with thousands of cows even a primitive feeding was impossible. Hay and straw were thrown on the ground. Those in the front would get something, but those in the back pushed after them, and immediately everything was trampled into the ground. We had to build feed racks, we also had to ready shacks at a brickworks for the animals. But all these were only half measures. The cattle died *en masse*.  

Most of those who were sent to tend to the cattle eventually made it home, but the Pomeranian villages lost forever the livestock necessary to sustain agriculture. Germans took the Soviets’ seemingly callous and careless attitude towards these animals as further proof that the Red Army did not care about the land it was occupying.

Soviet soldiers were not the only ones stripping the province of its livestock, resources, and farming equipment in the first year after the war. The Polish army also gathered cattle from some estates under its command and sent the animals to Warsaw. On June 18, 1945, Käthe von Normann watched “hundreds of sheep and cows” being transported to the Polish capital. “One can conclude from this,” she noted in her diary, “that the Poles also have to vacate this land again, but by taking our last cattle with them.” The Polish historian Małgorzata Machałek points out that Polish civilians arriving in the province had drawn the same conclusions. Many central Polish enterprises and factories treated the province as one big tool shop. Poles arrived from the former Polish-German border areas and took furniture, household goods, machines, or cattle from estates and farms. Bands of so-called *szabrownicy* (the Polish word for plunderers) roamed the countryside, looking for machinery, horses, cows, and other valuables to be sold on the black markets of central and southern Poland.

To the Germans, this disregard for the needs of agriculture, the lack of foresight evidenced by all of this plunder, and the destruction of valuable agricultural resources, signaled that neither the Soviets nor the Poles were truly interested in staying in Pomerania. No responsible landowner would have treated the land, animals, or valuable machines in the way Germans saw them being treated. So, despite the horror they felt while watching sick and dying herds of cows trudging along country roads, Germans drew hope from the spectacle. In May 1945, Käthe von Normann was planning a new beginning at

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29 Normann, 123-124.
30 Machalek, 69.
home. She wrote in her diary: “As long as we can keep the land and the empty house! Somehow we’ll be able to rebuild everything!”

Soviet commanders on the large estates reinforced Germans’ sense that they were still the keepers of their natural surroundings. Because Red Army troops in Pomerania and those further west had to be provisioned, many officers did try to return the largest estates to working order by the summer and fall of 1945. This meant that all Germans still living on the estates and their adjoining villages had to work. The work was arduous; most workers were not fed sufficient rations, and many succumbed to diseases, weakened by hunger and fatigue. Still, the cyclical demands of agriculture and the daily encounter with a familiar environment also provided Germans with a sense of continuity.

The Pomeranian landscape itself gave Germans a sense of hope that first year after the war. First came spring. In women’s joyous descriptions of the budding trees and bushes in May and April 1945, one gets the sense that this recurring spectacle of nature was a source of comfort and succor to people whose lives had always been paced by the change of seasons. On April 29, 1945, a Sunday, Ilse von Zadow, an estate owner who continued living on her estate in Dramburg county through 1946, noted in her diary: “A glorious morning. [...] I take a walk around the park. The beeches are already green, the firs are blooming, and the cherry trees are also starting to bloom. Wonderful spring.” Barbara Fox von Thadden remembered that the spring of 1945 was “so beautiful.” Her mother, Barbara von Thadden, insisted that the spring of 1945 was more beautiful than any other spring: “...spring began regardless of all the horrors. Was there ever such a spring? The grass greener than green, and everything, everything in bloom, wild and raging. [...]” She and her daughter remembered that the wisteria plants covering two sides of their house, which had never bloomed, were suddenly covered in blossoms filling the air with their scent.

That first summer, the idea that life would eventually return to normal must have been especially strong in rural communities when villagers began to see the fruits of their previous year’s labor grow and ripen. On the von Zitzewitz estate in the east of the province, German women joyfully donned their white harvest dresses and left singing to cut hay in the fields. “The scent of the ripening fields, the calm cycle of life between sowing and harvest welcomed us back into their peaceful midst. We almost forgot what had happened to our
home and to us,” the cousin of the estate’s owner recalled. Eva-Maria Mallasch, an East Prussian refugee, remembered that in the spring of 1945, when she and her mother arrived in Zimmerhausen, a village neighboring that of the von Thadden’s in Vahnerow, the German agricultural workers from the estate went about their usual business (almost) as if nothing had happened. In her memoirs she wrote how “[a]griculture, farming, has a simple regularity: at the right time one has to do the right and necessary thing. And so that this is going to work out here, the Polish administrator allows the Germans to continue working mostly under their own direction.” The Polish administrator, Jan Wojciechowski, a former forced laborer who had worked in Zimmerhausen’s gardens during the war, put the old foreman of the estate in charge, who in turn delegated each day’s work to the rest of the workers in the village. Mallasch remembered being amazed at how smoothly the estate continued to operate. The summer of 1945, she remembered, seemed to the workers on the estate like every other summer:

> As fateful and consequential as this year may be from a political and a human perspective, the everyday in the countryside is as monotonous and uniform as the previous years, too. [...] On the estate, the hay harvest, then rapeseed and winter barley follow in quick succession, and then rye is ready. I am not a stranger to farming, but I am deeply impressed by how systematically and practically each chore is undertaken and how the highest degree of efficiency is achieved.

Zimmerhausen might have been an exception. But there was a widespread sense in the first year after the war that despite the hardships they endured Germans continued their work on the land as they always had, because it was their duty and because they believed that ultimately they would stay.

Finally, the fact that Soviet commanders relied so heavily not only on Germans’ labor, but also on their skill and expertise allowed Germans to think that they were still the respected and competent owners of their holdings. The Soviet commanders looked to German landowners and former inspectors for help in administering the large domains; they employed former German foremen and skilled craftsmen to run the day-to-day operations on the estates, and to manage the unskilled German labor force. In some cases, skilled laborers enjoyed better

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34 Monika von Zitzewitz, Auch so ist der Ivan: Ein Erlebnisbericht aus Pommern (Zurich: Origo Verlag, 1953), 57.

conditions — higher provisions and better living quarters—than unskilled farm workers. Many of the Germans working on the estates felt pride in their accomplishments and drew comfort from the fact that the Soviet commanders so clearly needed them. When, during the height of the harvest (both in 1945 and in 1946), most Soviet commanders prevented the Polish military and Polish militia units from expelling Germans across the Oder, Germans were even more reassured that they would remain the owners, guardians, and permanent residents of this land, their Heimat. The land needed them.

V. Poles and Soviets

Not surprisingly, if the Soviets’ actions were (at times) reassuring to the remaining Germans in Pomerania, they were deeply unsettling and upsetting to the Poles who began arriving in the region in the spring of 1945. As Polish historians have noted in numerous works published in the last decade, Polish arrivals in Poland’s new northern and western territories were often subjected to the same kind of violence that Red Army Soldiers inflicted on the defeated Germans. In fact, in many cases, Soviet officers treated the Germans better than they did their nominal allies. Settlers complained to the Polish authorities that in disputes, Soviet soldiers often took the side of Germans and protected Germans from Polish law enforcement officials. Across the province, the Soviet military command made it impossible for both Polish settlers and Polish administrative officials to take over the land and establish themselves.

The Red Army’s continued presence became especially vexing in the countryside, where Polish administrators struggled to plan for and execute their two most important tasks: the swift return of all arable land to agricultural production and the distribution of incoming rural settlers to those farmsteads and estates where they were most needed and where they were most likely willing to stay. Settling and tilling the land were important, not just because the population in postwar Poland’s cities desperately needed to be fed, but also because Poland had to show the world—not only the Germans, but also the Soviets, the Americans, the British—that it could effectively and productively govern its new territories. No land could be left to lie fallow or unproductive for too long. The problem was that during the first two years following the war, Soviet actions made it all but impossible for Poland to re-establish a functioning agricultural economy in Pomerania.

36 Bonow, *Zu Hause Fremd*, 35.
39 See for example, a report by the Białogard land commissar complaining to the voivodeship office about preferential treatment for Germans. APSz, Urząd Ziemski (UZ) 15, 5. Other complaints about violence, looting, and rape are in APSz, Urząd Wojewódzki Szczeciński (UWS), sygnatury 1259-1282, “Intervencje Biura Łącznikowego.”
Because Soviet forces controlled so much land, the first Polish officials in Western Pomerania had no access to territory that was, on paper, under Polish administration. Soviet commanders did not allow Polish town clerks to enter villages occupied by the Red Army; Soviet commanders did not grant permission to Polish agronomists to survey estates where Soviet troops were quartered. Thus local government officials were unable to take stock of the region, to get to know the land (and the people) they were to govern. Individual administrators frequently voiced their frustration over their inability to do the work they were sent to do. The plenipotentiary of Drawsko (Dramburg) County reported in May 1945 to Szczecin that he could not verify the amount of fodder, foodstuffs, and grains in silos and barns across the county. The Red Army would not give him “any information” on the amounts they controlled.40 In his June 1945 report to Szczecin, the Białogard Land Commissar Radoński complained to his superiors in Szczecin that the military administration was withholding information: “This data [on agricultural inventory in the county] is very imprecise, since the army units who have certain economic objects in the county under their command do not want to share information […]”41 A year later, land office clerks in Gryfice County faced a similar problem.

They were tasked with compiling statistics on the size, state of the inventory, livestock, and buildings of estates of over one hundred hectares in Trzygłow (Trieglaff), the home village of another branch of the von Thadden family. Clerks were able to describe estates under Polish administration in great detail. They listed the number of rooms and kitchens on each property, described the quality of their construction, noted the number of agricultural machines and livestock, and the amounts of available stocks of seed grain and artificial fertilizer. By contrast, the clerks were unable to gather any information about the estates under Soviet command. The questionnaire for the von Thadden’s estate was left blank, except for the size of its holdings and the estate’s distance to the county seat, information Polish administrators would have easily gathered from older German statistics.42 At the end of the four-page-long questionnaire, the clerk wrote a note to explain the meagre information: “This cannot be verified, because the estate is occupied by the Red Army.”43 A clerk trying to collect similar information about the estate in the fall of 1946 was equally unsuccessful. Without precise information concerning many of the largest landed properties within their jurisdiction, land that the Polish state was slated to own and to manage, county officials could not properly plan ahead.

40 APSz, UZ 15, 229.
41 APsz, UZ 15, 1. Most likely the commissar meant Polish and Soviet units.
42 APSz, Oddział w Międzyzdrojach, PUZGr 19, 13-59; the questionnaire for Trzgłów is on pp. 52-59.
43 APSz, Oddział w Międzyzdrojach, PUZGr 19, 54.
Soviet exploitation of the province’s agricultural resources and the constant requisitioning of material by Soviet army units made it impossible for Polish officials to return arable land to production. In April 1945, the Białogard Land Commissar Radoński shared his worries about the spring sowing with his superiors: “About 60 percent of this year’s sowing has been completed. [...] We meet with a lot of difficulties because of a lack of draft power. There are even a lot of horses in the county, but they are systematically requisitioned by the Soviet army.”44 As the first harvest approached in the summer of 1945, local Polish officials across the region sent exasperated pleas to their superiors in Szczecin. The Soviet military was not only withholding essential economic information on the estates it was occupying. Red Army soldiers also gathered all inventory—livestock, agricultural machinery, seed grain, fertilizer, and fodder—from the surrounding villages and brought them to their respective estates. This left Polish settlers and administrators on Polish estates without sufficient draft power to bring grains, potatoes, and root crops from the fields to the barns. In mid-June 1945, the Polish head of Drawsko County Grzybowicz wrote to Szczecin:

> It has to be emphasized that there are villages, made up of some ten or so farms which together have maybe two or three horses, where cases of sudden requisitioning and taking of the horses from the fields are not a rarity. Meanwhile the number of livestock on the estates administered by the Red Army or the Polish Army exceeds everywhere by a factor of two the necessary amount. [...] The Russian military leadership requisitions agricultural machinery without paying attention to the needs of a given farmstead. Some villages remain without harvesting and sowing machines.45

In July 1945, the land commissar for Gryfice County also shared his worries about the approaching harvest with authorities in Szczecin. Neither Polish settlers nor the county land office owned enough horses. The few functioning tractors that were available were useless without gasoline.46 By contrast, the Red Army had collected all livestock from the large abandoned farmsteads in the county and held them on the twenty estates under its command without granting Polish officials any access to the animals.47

At harvest time, Soviet soldiers not only brought in the harvest on their own estates, but also took the harvest on the holdings controlled

44 APSz, UZ 15, 14.  
45 APSz, UZ 15, 233.  
46 APSz, UZ 15, 411-412.  
47 APSz, UZ 15, 412.
by the Poles. In July 1945, the *starost* of Kołobrzeg (Kolberg) County wrote to the voivodship land office in Koszalin that the Soviet Army in his district was not only organizing the harvest on its own estates, but also on Polish farms. “This creates great confusion both for the harvest campaign as well as for the settlement campaign, as it contradicts the circular from the county land office.” In an August follow-up letter sent directly to Leonard Borkowicz, the head of the province, the Kolobrzeg County office specified that the Soviet Army was taking the harvest from holdings that exceeded by 12,881 hectares the area to which it was officially entitled. In their letter, the county *starost*, the land commissar, and the manager of the district’s harvest campaign pleaded that the voivodship office intervene on their behalf with the Red Army command. “We consider this concern very important, since the people, both the Poles (around 10,000) and the remaining Germans (around 38,000) are threatened by hunger.”

When Soviet divisions handed over an estate to the Polish administration, they usually left it devastated. In July 1945, the land commissar for Gryfice County reported to Koszalin that none of the estates over 100 hectares taken over by his administration had any livestock. “Each administrator had to show much energy and devotion in order to bring to life the estate anew and to return it to a functioning state.” The same month, the *starost* of Łobez County reported to Borkowicz that the Red Army in his district had only handed over four large estates “almost with no living inventory.” His administration would not be able to take over more estates that had been stripped bare. He explained that doing so “would amount to taking on the responsibility of bringing in the harvest without the slightest chance of success.” In a January 1946 letter to the voivodship office, the Kołobrzeg land commissar also complained about the state of landed estates his administration took over from the Red Army. While the transfer protocols described orderly hand-overs, he wrote, the reality was quite different. At three estates in the region, instead of handing over the estates complete with inventory and machinery, Soviet commanders had herded cattle away and moved the machinery to other Soviet-occupied holdings before handing them over. They also moved the Germans still working on the estates along with their inventory and tools. In February 1946, the head of state farms in Gryfino County complained to the State Land Office in Koszalin that in his district one Red Army unit often simply abandoned estates without notifying the Polish authorities. “So [...officials of] the State Farm Administration only by coincidence, passing by, confirm that

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48 APSz, UWS 1271, 10.
49 APSz, UWS, 1271, 31-32.
50 APSz, UZ 15, 412.
51 APSz, UWS 1277, 2.
52 APSz, UWS 1271, 84.
the [estate] is completely empty, without people, seed grain, inventory, and supplies, not secured and open. Buildings and the rest of the implements [are] mainly in a deplorable state ...”53 In April 1946, the Kołobrzeg County land commissar wrote to Koszalin to complain that Polish institutions responsible for them had not bothered to secure these empty and devastated estates. In the meantime, locals and the Red Army were looting the estates even further. On one estate in the county, ten families of “Siberians”54 had now settled without official permission from the settlement office and were sharing the remaining seven cows and five horses.55 In Kołobrzeg County, the Polish officials charged with properly settling and administering the large estates were clearly not in control.

As time went on, Polish officials anxiously watched how Soviet soldiers treated the holdings of the estates slated to be handed over to the Polish Land Office. Polish agronomists and engineers considered the Red Army’s agricultural skills to be dismal. Already by July 1945 the Kołobrzeg County starost wrote to Koszalin complaining about the behavior of both the Red Army and the Polish Army units stationed on the large estates: “The winter rape seed has been destroyed to a great degree because of the incompetent upkeep of the holdings of estates occupied by the Red and Polish Army.”56 The longer the process of handing over estates lasted, the more worried local officials grew about the properties they would eventually have to administer. In January 1947, the voivodship land office reminded Borkowicz that the Red Army still occupied 166 estates covering over 57,000 hectares and 1,678 smaller farmsteads covering over 32,000 hectares, all in violation of the treaties signed by the Polish and Soviet governments in April 1946. The economic situation on these holdings was growing worse by the day. On the estates the Red Army still occupied in violation of the April treaty, workers had barely sown 30 to 50 percent of the fields.

[O]ne part lies completely fallow. As far as the buildings are concerned, there are cases of complete devastation. For example: The Voivodship Land Office reports most recently: in Bialogard County a unit of the Red Army stationed on the estate Czarny Wąs, which has been promised the PZHR [Państwowe Zakłady Hodowli Roślin, the State Enterprises for Plant Cultivation] has destroyed the living quarters (the palace). […] On the estate of Nowy Buków, a unit of the Red Army stationed there, takes apart the farm buildings for

53 APSz, UZ 68, 102.
54 The Polish document says “Sybiriaków,” a derogatory term often used for the repatriants returning from forced exile in the Soviet Union.
55 APSz, UWS 1271, 11.
56 APSz, UWS 1271, 11.
firewood. (Has already managed to take apart half of the stables.) On the estate Rambin, a unit stationed there takes apart the buildings for firewood, the destruction is estimated at 50%. 57

The continued occupation of the region’s large landed estates would render the future work of the Polish administration virtually impossible.

Polish administrators soon began to grow worried that the Soviets might never leave. In Gryfi ce County in January 1947, ten large estates were still occupied by the Red Army in violation of official agreements, including Batzwitz (Bzowo), which was right next to the von Thadden’s Vahnerow estate. 58 In some reports sent to superiors, Polish officials mention anxiously how many Soviet civilian employees were working on the large farms. 59 Civilian employees on the large estates heralded plans for an even more extended Soviet presence in the countryside. Local Polish administrators and agricultural experts knew that a continued Soviet presence on the large landed estates in Pomerania would harm the rural economy. By the end of 1946, it was clear that it would take Poles a long time and a significant amount of resources to return these large holdings to working order. Polish officials were outraged by the behavior of the Soviet Army. Like the Germans before them, they observed that Soviet soldiers did not act as responsible caretakers of the land in Pomerania, and they certainly did not seem interested in preserving the long-term value of a given piece of territory, or in carefully preserving the holdings for the future use of their Polish ally.

Quite clearly, the Soviet military and Polish authorities were working at cross purposes. The Soviet Army was essentially interested in itself, in short-term material gain—well-fed, rested, and content troops; well fed, strong, and fast horses; and modern machinery and other loot shipped off to Moscow. This was not land the Soviet state would eventually own. In contrast, Polish authorities and Polish settlers were very much interested in the land and what it had to offer. By 1946, that no longer seemed to be much. In January 1946, Leonard Borkowicz, the head of the province and a long-time Communist, wrote in his monthly report to Warsaw that settlers were losing hope and might leave the region again: “[…] part of the population does not see in the Red Army an ally and a friend. Voices saying, why has the Red Army been in Poland until now and why does it exploit Poland like a vanquished country, are being heard more frequently.” 60

57 APSz, UWS 1274, 43.  
58 APS, UWS 1274, 47.  
59 See for example, Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Ministerstwo Rolny i Reform Rolnych (MRiRR) 3112, 242.  
60 AAN, Ministerstwo Administracji Publicznej, sygn. 2462, 187-188.
VI. Consequences of the Soviet Occupation

The consequences of Soviet occupation for the Western Pomeranian countryside were dire and they were visible almost immediately. In March 1945, Borkowicz had traveled the region and found it wealthy and full of economic potential.61 But as early as August 1945, an employee of the Warsaw Ministry of Public Administration reported from an inspection trip to Western Pomerania that the countryside there resembled a desert, a barren, empty wasteland.62 He warned his superiors that settlers were leaving the area in droves. A year later, in June 1946, Borkowicz reported to Warsaw: "Everywhere one sees fields overgrown with weeds, and for the young crops the appearing thistles are especially harmful."63 The winter sowing was delayed again in 1946. In October, Borkowicz estimated that out of Western Pomerania’s 1.5 million hectares of arable land more than 100,000 hectares would lie fallow, and since most of these fields were lying fallow for the second year in a row, their productivity would certainly be hurt.64

Fallow fields meant weeds, which began covering arable fields beginning in the late summer of 1945, and which, by 1946 and 1947, had become an ever-growing concern for local authorities. Borkowicz lamented “chwasty” (weeds) in almost all of his monthly reports to Warsaw in 1946 and 1947.65 For example, in his report on the harvest sent to Warsaw in October 1946, Borkowicz noted that due to the fields’ “overgrowth” with weeds, the loss to the grain harvest was significant.66 Patrycja Dziurzyńska, the Warsaw official in charge of rural settlement at the Ministry for Recovered Territories, estimated that the fast growth of weeds in the fields was just as much an impediment to successful rural settlement in the province as was the lack of draft animals or agricultural machinery. Weeds had already lowered the expected yield per hectare below the level of all previous calculations. But the battle against weeds would take time, Dziurzyński warned.67 Thus, in issue after issue, the advice columns in Osadnik, the Ministry of Recovered Territories’ biweekly publication for settlers, obsessively covered all kinds of weeds—thistles, couch grass, burdock—and different methods to eradicate them.68 One article exhorted its readers in bold large print: “Weeds—a universal plague—let’s fight them collectively!”69

Worse than the weeds were the mice that were attracted in large numbers by ripe crops left standing in unplowed fields. The destruction these rodents caused was devastating. According to a Polish

63 AAN, MZO 1764, 31.
64 AAN, MZO 1764, 38.
65 See monthly reports for this period in AAN, MZO 204 and 205.
66 AAN, MZO 205, 43.
67 AAN, MZO 943, 33.
68 See for example, Osadnik na Ziemiach Odzyskanych, Nr. 3 (September 1946), 12.
69 Osadnik na Ziemiach Odzyskanych, Nr. 2 (August 1946), 11.
historian, in the summer of 1945, in Lubieszewo (Lübsow), a small village in Gryfice County, mice ate fifteen hectares of rye.70 The following summer, Borkowicz wrote to Warsaw that in some of his counties, such as Nowogard and Kołobrzeg, field mice had destroyed about sixty percent of the cereal harvest.71 Mice continued to be a problem through the early fall of 1946. In addition, wild boars were destroying all kinds of crops.72 The state had no means to help the settlers fight the mice invasion or battle the boars. New settlers from central Poland, Dziurzyński warned, would not go near those areas “haunted by the mice catastrophe.”73

The settlers themselves were completely overwhelmed by the rodents. In their memoirs, they described the growing invasion of mice in the summer of 1946 as a scourge of biblical proportions. Henryk Zudro, a young settler from Drawsko County in the east of the province, remembered that walking through the fields of ripening grains that summer, everywhere one saw piles of stubble, chewed to pieces by small teeth. “The stalks of the grains were chopped up to straw. […] I remember how after the harvest I was shocked to see such a huge number of mice turned up. Looking into the furrows, I would see them teeming with a mass of escaping gray creatures. The crows, not very numerous in this area, were not able to destroy the mice. They were only destroyed by torrential rains in the fall of 1946.”74 Zudro’s memory was that in that summer eighty percent of the harvest in his area of Drawsko County was lost. Tomasz Piłka, a settler from Duminowo in the north, described what the mice did to his fields in a stream of consciousness revealing his despair:

Mice there was no help against them and they thrived not only in my field but also on the other farmers’ the little that was left to be harvested they destroyed I thought that someone in the middle of the night was harvesting my rye and was taking it away because the mice cut up everything to straw […] in my life I have never seen so many mice and I didn’t even know that mice could do something like that and if not for the torrential rains in the fall I and others would have been forced to leave the west.75

Tomasz Piłka had little to harvest that fall. After a very difficult start in Duminowo, hostile and unpleasant encounters with Germans, Soviets, and the Polish settlement authorities, suffering from poverty, and complaining constantly of not having sufficient draft power or

71 AAN, MZO 204, 109. In some communities 70 percent of the harvest was lost that year; others lost the entire cereal harvest. See Machałek, Przemiany, 152.
72 AAN, MZO 204, 168.
73 AAN, MZO 943, 33.
74 Instytut Zachodni (IZ) Poznań, P62.
75 IZ Poznań, P136.
seed grain, Pilka felt that the plague of mice had almost done him in. Reading his memoirs, one meets a man who was thoroughly exhausted and demoralized. For him, the invasion of mice confirmed his complete powerlessness as a farmer operating in an inhospitable, if not hostile, environment.

The solution to dealing with this hostile environment, Polish authorities decided, was reforestation. Borkowicz realized early on that the arriving, mostly destitute Polish settlers were not equal to the task of managing the vast stretches of arable land in Western Pomerania—at least not without state help and certainly not amidst chaotic postwar conditions. In September 1946 he wrote to Warsaw, alarmed that Polish settlers had only sown 18.4 percent of the area that had been sown in 1939. Later that fall, he noted that “agricultural affairs” were one of the most difficult problems for him to solve, which is why “they show such numerous shortcomings, of which the most glaring example are the gargantuan territories that are lying fallow.” Without more competent and well-equipped farmers moving into the region, some of the areas that Germans had used as arable land would need to be turned into woodland. Those were areas, Borkowicz wrote in October, “which, given the character of the soil, the water conditions, or other factors, are only suited to forestation in the current, new, general economic conditions.” Borkowicz sounded like he was giving up. And Polish struggles with the Pomeranian countryside continued. Reports by the head of the “sowing campaign” for Western Pomerania show that up to the end of the decade a significant portion of the voivodship’s fields was not tilled.

Germans, most of whom were forced out by late 1947, left the area with images of overgrown, barren fields in their heads. In their recollections, they described their former Heimat as a wasteland, a desert, a steppe, a thicket of sky-high thistles and other weeds. Germans consciously employed these images to emphasize that they left formerly fertile (and beautiful) land in the hands of incompetent stewards. The presence of fallow fields to them (and they assumed to everyone else) was ample proof that the transfer of territory to Poland had been and remained illegitimate.

Interestingly and, I would argue, tragically, most German expellees ignored that it was not Polish incompetence that was to blame for fallow fields, but the initial and rather long postwar Soviet occupation of large tracts of land in the northwest. I should note here that the Soviet occupation was not the only factor hindering the
establishment of a properly functioning agricultural economy in Western Pomerania—one also has to blame the soil, the climate, the war, and the drastic demographic decline of the region. Still the Soviet occupation certainly robbed local Polish administrators of any chance at a successful beginning in new surroundings. Germans had lived through the Soviet occupation and had seen with their own eyes what this occupation had wrought. But Germans conflated the Soviet occupation of their land—an act of exploitation, not of stewardship—with the Polish attempts at establishing a new government in this region. In the Germans’ eyes, because Soviet soldiers treated the environment so recklessly and not in a way a legitimate owner ever would have, by extension, Polish settlers (the Soviet soldiers’ allies and their successors after all) were also not legitimate owners. How the Soviet occupation transformed the countryside in northwestern Poland does not feature in the German narrative of the postwar period in this region. Instead, German expellees carried west with them the memory of a destroyed homeland that forever tarnished the moral legitimacy of the transfer of the Oder-Neisse territories to Poland. That Nazi Germany would be punished was something most Germans could accept. That their land had to suffer, that it would be handed to — in their eyes — irresponsible and incapable caretakers, that to them was a sin.

VII. Conclusion
Some of the tensions that still exist in the Polish-German relationship regarding this topic today stem from this postwar narrative of what happened to the land after 1945. Rural Pomerania today remains empty. Young Pomeranians are leaving the villages to find work in Germany or the United Kingdom. After the closure in 1990 of the voivodship’s large state farms (all housed on former Prussian estates), a significant portion of the land lies fallow. Today, this is mostly a story about post-communist transition in agriculture and about the consequences of EU expansion, which has brought large agribusinesses (which do not rely on Polish labor and plant crops that do not require much caretaking) to the region. But former German inhabitants of Pomerania, who experienced the postwar destruction of their homeland as children and who are now returning in great numbers as tourists every summer, do not see it that way. When I interview them, they show me pictures of fallow fields, of shattered greenhouses, and sadly shake their heads. Polish Pomeranians in turn are frustrated by the Germans’ condescension and their continued criticism of Polish stewardship of the land. They are also very aware of what the region
looks like in German eyes today. They resent this German gaze, but accept the notion that ownership requires proper caretaking. On a visit to a former Prussian estate village in Drawsko (Dramburg) County four years ago, I noticed a large banner on the grey and crumbling facade of the nineteenth-century manor house in the village center. It reassured visitors in German: “Dieses Objekt wird aufgebaut.” To me, this banner is a continuation of the story about the early postwar encounters between people and the Pomeranian countryside I have described in this paper.

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