
Post-War Transformation: Socio-Economic Development and Urban Evolution in Gryfino, Western Pomerania

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Abstract:

Purpose: This article aims to examine and elucidate the trajectory of socio-economic development and the evolution of urban functions in the cities of Western Pomerania after World War II. Given the publication's constrained scope, findings from a broader research project are illustrated through the specific case of Gryfino.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The primary research methods utilized in this study include critical analysis of archival sources and contemporary literature. Fundamental research techniques applied to the analysis comprise methods of induction, deduction, synthesis, and observational methods, which support arguments for generalized conclusions.

Findings: The study identifies key factors shaping the development and post-war reorientation of urban functions in Western Pomerania's cities, highlighting the predominance of political influences over socio-economic considerations.

Practical Implications: The insights presented in this analysis provide a foundational basis and an impetus for further in-depth studies on the determinants of Western Pomerania's development.

Originality/Value: This article presents original research findings based on primary investigations conducted at the Archive of Modern Records (AAN), the State Archive in Szczecin (APS), and the State Archive in Koszalin (APK). The issue discussed here has not yet been addressed in international academic discourse.

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1. Introduction

World War II, beyond the immense personal and national tragedies it inflicted, served as a catalyst for profound transformations across virtually every dimension of individual and collective life. Among these changes, migration stood out as particularly significant, reshaping Poland to such an extent that, by 1945, it could aptly be described as a "nation in motion" (Kersten, 1993). This characterization reflects not only the widespread displacement and relocation of populations but also the necessity for many Poles to assume new social and occupational roles.

These dynamics were especially pronounced in urban areas. On the one hand, cities emerged from the war heavily damaged; on the other, the decades preceding World War II had witnessed rapid urban growth in this part of Europe. Between 1870 and 1900, the percentage of Poland's urban population rose modestly from 16.4% to 17.8%; however, in the subsequent two decades, this figure surged to 24.1%, eventually surpassing 30% on the eve of the war (GUS, 1939; 2013).

In the post-war era, the processes of migration and adaptation assumed a distinctive character in Western Pomerania. Although modernization and urbanization within the Province of Pomerania progressed at a relatively slow pace under Prussian and German governance, the region was perceived by newly arriving Poles as relatively advanced. They encountered infrastructure that was more developed than in many parts of pre-war Poland, including masonry buildings, electricity, sewage systems, and improved agricultural land. Likewise, the region's urbanization during the interwar period had resulted in an urban population rate nearly double that of Poland as a whole.

In Western Pomerania, the broader nationwide transformations were further intensified by a complete population exchange and the gradual acclimatization of new settlers to the area. The town of Gryfino serves as a representative case. Until the end of World War II, it had evolved in line with the typical development patterns of small towns in eastern German provinces. Classified as a medium-sized town with a mixed commercial, artisanal, and agricultural economy, Gryfino's status was underpinned by its role as a county administrative center.

The local economy featured numerous small industrial enterprises tied to the agricultural hinterland, alongside a variety of artisanal, commercial, and service-oriented businesses. Although its location on the Oder River conferred some advantages for trade and transport, Gryfino did not attract significant migratory flows, with its population growing slowly to nearly 10,000 by 1939 (Kołosowski, 2005).

While these characteristics supported steady development under German administration, they rendered Gryfino particularly susceptible to marginalization after its incorporation into the Polish state. Its border location during the Cold War

significantly limited state investment and posed challenges for settlement. Wartime destruction, Soviet dismantling, and the post-war shift toward collectivized agriculture and state-owned production disrupted the town's traditional economic base, which had relied on small-scale industry, commerce, and crafts linked to local agriculture.

Furthermore, the Oder River, now a border river, failed to become an economic engine for the town, which could not capitalize on maritime trade or health resort opportunities. The proximity of Szczecin further stifled Gryfino's economic prospects. As state functions and administrative authority became increasingly centralized in Warsaw and, regionally, in Szczecin, Gryfino was relegated to a peripheral role, serving primarily as a labor reservoir for the regional capital of Western Pomerania.

2. Literature Review

The trajectory of postwar urbanization in Poland, particularly as it pertains to settlement in newly acquired territories and the associated challenges of urban development, has been a focal point for historians and researchers in spatial economics since the 1960s. Despite limited access to primary sources and political constraints that restricted the scope of inquiry - often necessitating adherence to the official narratives of a totalitarian regime - scholarly publications on the subject began to emerge during this period (Dulczewski and Kwilecki, 1962; Golczewski, 1964; Drewniak and Lesiński, 1967).

These constraints were most acute in research addressing the expulsion of the German population and the so-called repatriation of Polish citizens from territories ceded to the USSR. Issues related to urban settlement, however, received comparatively less scholarly focus, both in terms of interest and analytical depth.

As a result, the postwar history of Gryfino remained largely overlooked by researchers. During the 1960s and 1970s, studies on the histories of individual counties in Western Pomerania frequently bypassed both Gryfino and its surrounding county. It is notable that even the city's subsequent development failed to garner significant academic interest for many years.

This oversight was only partially remedied in the early 21st century with the publication of the monograph *The History of Gryfino and Its Surroundings* (Kołosowski, 2005). While this work provides a bibliographic overview of Gryfino's historical narrative, its coverage of the postwar period is relatively limited.

It is worth noting that within the broader academic discourse, considerable attention has also been directed toward evaluating the development of territorial and settlement units through the prism of their investment attractiveness (Grabiński, Wydymus and Zeliaś, 1982; Pocięcha *et al.*, 1988; Nowak, 1990; Strahl, 1998).

These studies highlight the importance of economic factors in shaping regional development trajectories, although specific analyses of Gryfino within this framework remain sparse.

3. Research Methodology

The authors of this study grounded their research primarily in a comprehensive analysis of primary source materials obtained from Polish state archives. It is important to emphasize that these archival collections are geographically dispersed and, for the most part, remain undigitized.

As a result, the research required numerous sessions of direct engagement with both textual and material sources, which serve as essential evidence for investigating the social, political, and cultural phenomena and processes under examination. The principal methodological framework integrates the methods of induction, deduction, and synthesis, supplemented by an observational approach that facilitates the formulation of generalized conclusions.

While this study partially draws upon findings from the previously mentioned volume edited by P. Kołosowski, its objectives differ significantly, placing greater emphasis on the socio-economic dimensions of the city's development. The research relies heavily on archival materials housed at the State Archive in Szczecin and the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw.

4. Research Results

In the initial years following Poland's annexation of the so-called "Recovered Territories," the processes of settlement and economic restructuring in Gryfino largely mirrored broader trends observed across these regions. By 1948, key milestones such as population exchanges, the establishment of a Polish administrative framework, and preliminary economic recovery efforts had been achieved. Despite the substantial wartime destruction and subsequent Soviet dismantling of industrial and infrastructure assets, Gryfino's socio-economic structure still bore significant resemblance to pre-war patterns.

However, the onset of systemic transformations—marked by state centralization, the collectivization of agriculture, rapid yet regionally selective industrialization, and the elimination of private enterprise from urban economies—imposed significant developmental constraints on Gryfino. Factors that might have been advantageous, such as its geographic location and relatively diversified economic base, instead became liabilities, contributing to its economic stagnation.

These challenges were compounded by broader socio-economic policies and an increasingly hostile international environment. Within the context of the Cold War, small border towns like Gryfino failed to attract investment, as their strategic

vulnerability and peripheral status dissuaded state planners. As a small, agrarian-based settlement, Gryfino was largely excluded from the ambitious industrialization agenda of the Six-Year Plan, which prioritized larger urban centers. Consequently, Gryfino fell into the shadow of nearby Szczecin, further exacerbating its marginalization.

By the early 1950s, many of Gryfino's pre-war German industrial facilities remained inoperative. Efforts to restore these facilities were abandoned, with much of the equipment relocated to factories in central Poland. This industrial vacuum could not be filled by the local crafts sector, which supported a mere 13 individuals. Only two small labor cooperatives – "Metalowiec" and "Stolarska" - and the Gryfino Territorial Industry Plant managed to initiate limited production. These enterprises, however, were insufficient to absorb the growing surplus of unskilled labor, leading to early signs of unemployment.

Gryfino gradually ceded its administrative and economic roles to surrounding rural areas and adjacent urban centers. Collectivization redirected trade and service functions essential for agricultural support toward rural districts, eroding local markets for artisans and repair workshops in the town. Gryfino's integration into the rural supply chain led to the near-total collapse of its commercial activities (APK, 1959; Rybiński, 1997). Concurrently, administrative centralization shifted authority to regional hubs, further diminishing the influence of local governance structures.

These developments severely hindered the integration of Gryfino's new community, stifled local initiatives, and accelerated the emigration of the already scarce intelligentsia. As a low-wage, low-investment area, Gryfino struggled to retain skilled workers, deepening its developmental challenges.

Living conditions deteriorated rapidly. Reports from provincial authorities indicated that only 37% of the region's daily needs were consistently met, with Gryfino performing below even this modest benchmark (APS, 1953). Across all occupational groups, individual incomes in Gryfino ranked among the lowest in Poland.

Housing shortages further compounded the town's difficulties. The state's reluctance to invest in new construction or renovation led to the severe degradation of the existing housing stock. By 1957, of the 366 residential buildings in Gryfino, 294 required repairs; 10% were slated for immediate demolition, while half-constructed using timber frame techniques (the so-called "Prussian wall") - were deemed uninhabitable within a few years (APS, 1957). Notably, no new housing developments were initiated until 1960, and restoration efforts were minimal.

Consequently, Gryfino was neither an attractive settlement option nor a viable investment destination. People from other regions were reluctant to relocate to a town burdened by ruins, limited prospects for development, and the restrictive movement regulations of a border area. The modest population increase to 4,200 by

1955 was primarily driven by natural growth. A decade after the war, Gryfino presented a bleak image: a town with few prospects, plagued by social ills such as alcoholism, prostitution, and vandalism.

Crime rates were nearly double the national average, a phenomenon attributed to high population turnover, instability, and widespread alcohol abuse. This problem was compounded by one of the highest levels of state ownership and cooperativization in Poland. By 1955, crime rates in Western Pomerania's towns and counties had surged by nearly 40% (APS, 1957b).

These issues reflected broader socio-economic difficulties affecting many small towns in Western Pomerania and, to a degree, the entire nation. By the mid-1950s, growing public discontent with state policies responsible for such challenges began to manifest. The socio-economic discourse increasingly emphasized the need for economic revitalization and a more balanced regional development strategy.

Amid these challenges, hope for Gryfino's modernization arose with new plans to repurpose pre-war industrial facilities. In July 1955, the Council of Ministers announced a program targeting the "Recovered Territories," reaffirmed in subsequent resolutions in June 1956 and September 1957 (AKPRM, 1956; 1957).

Gryfino's local authorities quickly mobilized to seize these opportunities. A commission established by the County National Council conducted an inventory of key facilities and, by late 1955, proposed the reconstruction of 30 sites, including a municipal slaughterhouse, the "Filon" felt factory, the Płonia paper mill, and several brickworks. Plans also envisioned the creation of a significant basket-weaving cooperative using reeds from a 12-hectare plantation surrounding the town (APS, 1957c).

These proposals reflected broader regional aspirations for greater decentralization and liberalization of state policies. The reopening of local enterprises was expected to counteract Gryfino's social and cultural decline and address the mounting unemployment crisis. Optimism abounded, with even plans to recruit workers from outside the town. Expansion projects were drawn up for all existing enterprises, aiming to lay the foundation for rapid industrial and construction sector growth (APS, 1956b).

However, these ambitions were only partially realized. A resolution by the Presidium of the Provincial National Council in Szczecin approved the repurposing of the former felt factory into a prefabricated materials plant, employing just 31 workers. Other initiatives, such as small cooperative clothing workshops, a fruit and vegetable processing plant, a dairy, and a furniture factory, had limited impact. A privately owned brickworks, supplying local construction firms and employing local labor, represented one of the few success stories (APS, 1961).

Efforts to revive the paper mill ultimately failed, though the establishment of approximately 90 artisan workshops provided a modest boost to the local labor market.

The county achieved notable progress in addressing its housing crisis. With increased central funding for housing repairs and construction in 1957, the County Economic Planning Commission developed a three-year residential construction plan.

By the early 1960s, significant strides had been made: rubble was cleared, critical repairs were completed, and by 1959, construction began on three post-war apartment blocks, providing 120 units, which were occupied by the end of 1960. In subsequent years, the "Chrobry" estate was developed, adding approximately 400 apartments by 1965. While this represented significant progress compared to the previous decade, it still fell short of meeting demand (APS, 1958; GUS, 1966).

The housing needs in Gryfino continued to grow, driven by the post-war baby boom generation reaching adulthood and, to a lesser extent, by resettlement efforts in the late 1950s. By 1957, the town's natural population growth rate stood at 28.5%, one of the highest in Poland. Since the start of the decade, Gryfino's population had increased by over 1,300, reaching 4,765 (APS, 1958). This growth was further bolstered by the settlement of approximately 150–200 individuals repatriated from the USSR between 1955 and 1959 (Ruchniewicz, 2000).

Economic optimism began to take hold in the latter half of the 1950s, reflected in efforts to modernize and expand local infrastructure, spurred by increased central investment (APS, 1960).

However, this progress proved short-lived. The additional measures required significant state funding, which was curtailed in the early 1960s following an economic downturn in 1962. Discussions of major investments in small towns across Western Pomerania ceased, and central authorities reverted to the strategies of the earlier Six-Year Plan. Consequently, Gryfino remained a peripheral town with limited developmental prospects, and its marginally improved industrial potential, derived from repurposed pre-war factories, failed to catalyze sustained growth.

After a brief period of revival, Gryfino lapsed into stagnation. By the mid-1960s, it functioned primarily as a satellite town to the metropolitan hub of Szczecin. The first post-war generation born in Gryfino increasingly sought educational and professional opportunities elsewhere. Local authorities, facing dwindling prospects, made repeated but unsuccessful appeals for funding to expand industrial facilities, a hospital, a nursery, and a kindergarten. In 1965, Gryfino officials unsuccessfully pursued a joint development program with other Oder-border counties (APS, 1965).

Significant change only came through central directives aligned with Soviet economic strategies for Eastern Europe, which mandated long-term development plans for 1961–1980. A critical element of Poland's task was to enhance national energy capacity, partly to meet East Germany's energy needs (Kaliński, 1995; Karpiński, 1969).

Given the severe energy shortages in northwestern Poland, Gryfino was selected as the site for the new "Dolna Odra" power plant. The town offered key advantages: access to the Oder River for cooling water, convenient rail links, flat terrain, and low-value agricultural land (APS, 1964). In 1965, a state resolution allocated funds for designing the power plant, marking the first major project under Poland's energy expansion program, which eventually led to the establishment of the Gryfino Power Plant Complex.

This monumental project transformed Gryfino's socio-economic landscape, realizing the post-war vision of a dynamic industrial town that local leaders had championed for nearly two decades. The town experienced unprecedented growth, both economically and demographically. Before construction began, Gryfino's population stood at approximately 6,500.

During the initial stages of the power plant project, this figure rose by about 1,000, largely due to incoming construction workers. By the time the first energy block was operational, the population had grown to 10,000, and within five years, it surpassed 15,000. By 1987, Gryfino was home to around 20,000 residents, marking a threefold increase over two decades, despite a declining natural growth rate (GUS, 1989).

The true potential of the town, however, extended beyond mere job creation and population growth. To function effectively under its new circumstances, Gryfino required substantial complementary investments to support residential, municipal, commercial, healthcare, educational, and cultural infrastructure.

Furthermore, providing employment opportunities outside the power sector was critical for family members of power plant employees. Consequently, the power plant became the primary driver of the town's development. Specialized services emerged to support the plant and the surrounding areas, including transport and construction companies, as well as a housing cooperative.

To accommodate the influx of residents, a substantial increase in housing capacity was necessary. Over five years, plans were set to build 4,000 new residential units, with approximately 3,000 designated for power plant workers. The most deteriorated buildings near the construction site were demolished, and residents were relocated to new housing.

A modern city developed adjacent to old Gryfino, eventually surpassing the original town in size. The new Górný Taras housing estate became home to about 10,000

residents, mostly associated with the power plant. Additionally, plans included a company housing estate for 100 families and a workers' hotel with 340 beds (APS, 1973a).

The influx of young families spurred the need for expanded child care and education services. Partly financed by the power plant, two nurseries, two kindergartens, and a large primary and vocational school with a dormitory were built. The town's cultural infrastructure also expanded, with the establishment of a County House of Culture, a cinema, and a library.

Healthcare services were strengthened with a county clinic, an ambulance station, and a large pharmacy. Recreational amenities included a modern sports and recreation center with an indoor swimming pool, sports hall, playing fields, tennis courts, and a marina. In 1973, the power plant became the main sponsor of the sports club "Polonia," renamed "Energetyk."

The rapid population growth and industrial expansion necessitated significant upgrades to technical infrastructure. Gryfino received a new water treatment plant, a sewage pumping station, and a modernized sewage system. An unplanned addition was a fish farming enterprise near the Oder River's discharge channel, with an annual output exceeding 200 tons, supplying the local market (APS, 1973b).

Despite these advancements, Gryfino's rapid development exposed the limitations of the centralized, command-driven economic system. Large state enterprises, including "Dolna Odra," were subject to central planning, and their budgets, determined by the government, often failed to account for the full range of local infrastructure needs. In Gryfino, while energy-related investments were prioritized, residential and social infrastructure projects lagged.

The pace of housing construction, though unprecedented, could not keep up with the growing population. Local construction capacity, initially designed for modest projects, was inadequate for the town's expanded needs (APS, 1973a). A shortage of companies, skilled workers, urban planning resources, and building materials compounded the problem. Priority was given to the power plant itself, often at the expense of housing and other community projects.

Other infrastructure, including retail, education, and healthcare facilities, similarly struggled to keep pace. By the mid-1980s, the worsening economic and political crisis led to delays and cuts in local investment projects. The most notable casualty was the planned new county hospital. Initially included in the 1976–1980 development plan, it was repeatedly delayed and eventually removed from construction schedules due to the state's deepening financial troubles (APS, 1983a).

While Gryfino's rapid industrial growth brought prosperity, it also gave rise to social challenges. Tensions between long-time residents and newcomers, who often had

prior conflicts with the law, exacerbated social divisions. By the 1980s, as the socialist economy faltered, residents increasingly turned to private initiative. This shift laid the groundwork for the economic liberalization that would gain momentum following the political transformation of 1989.

5. Conclusion

The analyses conducted lead to the conclusion that the key drivers of economic and investment development in Gryfino were closely linked to the political and location factors. A cornerstone of Gryfino's economic potential is the "Dolna Odra" power plant, which fosters industrial investments that require specific conditions, including high energy consumption, access to water resources, and proximity to rail infrastructure.

As has been shown, during the socialist era, investments in Gryfino were implemented within a centrally planned economic framework, where decisions regarding capital allocation were made by the state. Investment capital was predominantly funneled into sectors deemed strategically important, such as energy, often to the detriment of other sectors and the consumer needs of the population.

Furthermore, the politically imposed restrictions on access to foreign capital severely limited innovation and modernization efforts. The systemic inefficiencies of the socialist development model became most evident during the immediate post-war period and resurfaced during the economic and political crises of the 1980s, which significantly hindered Gryfino's growth, mirroring broader national trends.

The contemporary model of economic development, initiated by Poland's systemic transformation, is underpinned by private capital and market-driven mechanisms. These mechanisms, for evident reasons, direct investment towards areas with the highest potential for profitability.

Both domestic and foreign investors now base capital allocation decisions on market signals, enabling greater flexibility and fostering dynamic growth across a wide array of economic sectors, including services, modern technologies, and infrastructure.

These activities are supported by the pro-investment strategies adopted by local authorities (Strategy 2030). Such an approach is a critical prerequisite for ensuring the sustainable and dynamic development of territorial units, especially in an increasingly competitive and rapidly evolving economic environment.

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