

"But now there is no more water, / Neither farms nor low-slope roofs. / [...] / A forested world, / Distant from villages, / Continues as a place". This is a description of the fading Masurian landscapes by a local poet Erwin Kruk. Partial settlement decline that occurred after World War II in Warmia and Masuria has irretrievably changed the face of the cultural landscape of the former East Prussia.

What are the scale and fundamental causes of these transformations? What is the material dimension linked to the broken continuity of settlement? What has happened to these abandoned villages? How do the depopulated settlement units remain in the landscape? What can be told from their preserved relics? What are the past and the present reflected in their cultural heritage? What can be told from the so-called memory of the landscape? Since these questions remain unanswered, the project aims to provide explanations.

This research project covers localities situated within the area of the former East Prussia incorporated into Poland based on a decision made at the Potsdam Conference. During the Second World War and after 1945, these localities became completely depopulated. The project looks at the material dimension of settlement decline.

**Two main research objectives are:**

1. To determine both the numerical and spatial dimension of the total depopulation of localities within the research area between the end of World War II and the present;
2. To determine the scale, type, course and directions of transformations in the landscape relics of localities in decay.

In terms of methodology, the research strategy is based on the non-anthropocentric current of contemporary humanistic studies concerning a turn toward materiality. Moreover, the project's assumptions follow an interdisciplinary approach that combines the theoretical and methodological perspectives of both archaeology of the contemporary past and historical geography.

**The first objective** will be accomplished based on a progressive comparative analysis utilizing, for example, cartographic and remote sensing materials (e.g. archival aerial photographs, topographic maps, and LiDAR derivatives). This will allow the author to identify abandoned localities and provide an initial overview of the transformations in their material structures. The causes and circumstances linked with the broken continuity of settlement will also be specified. For this purpose, a critical analysis will be made with regard to the materials published and acquired during preliminary surveys in institutional resources (e.g. archives, the German Minority Association of Masuria in Elk, and the Center for Research in Central and Eastern Europe).

**The second objective** will be accomplished based on field research, the aim of which is to identify and inventory the material cultural heritage within the selected sample of abandoned settlements. The author will also explain the transformations reported in the physical landscape of these localities and the nature of their material culture based on the results of a non-invasive surface survey including detailed photographs and technical drawings. Objects of the highest research value will be inventoried using terrestrial laser scanning or digital photogrammetry. The effects of these works, along with other data and analyses, will allow the author to obtain the material dimension of the events inscribed in the landscape. They will also be used to partially reconstruct the abandoned localities and explain their structures.

The examples of characteristic and still little-known testimonies to the recent past include the areas of localities in decay. According to Rowley and Wood (1982), they are "historical data repositories". Although studies that look at settlement decline after 1945 have developed methodology for various places like the Czech Republic, they have not yet properly developed it for Poland, where it is also possible to identify the phenomenon of total depopulation and locality decline. In addition, the exact dimension, especially the material nature of these processes, has not been defined either due to the lack of broader regional studies concerning especially the so-called recovered territories. Detailed field research has been conducted in very few cases, the results of which would supplement the knowledge of the transformations in settlement relics. Therefore, the analysis of the processes of (material) settlement decline on the Polish territory of the former East Prussia is the first Polish research project that addresses these issues in such a wide-ranging manner and combines both theoretical approaches and the methodology of archaeology of the contemporary past and historical geography. Moreover, the project proposes a novel research approach that places abandoned settlement units in the center of analysis. To be specific, their materiality and landscape identification, biography and spatial distribution will be the starting point for analyses of settlement decline, including its cultural and socio-political circumstances.