



ISSN 1732-4254 quarterly

BULLETIN OF GEOGRAPHY. SOCIO-ECONOMIC SERIES

journal homepages:

<http://www.bulletinofgeography.umk.pl/>

<http://wydawnictwoumk.pl/czasopisma/index.php/BGSS/index>

<http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/bog>

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Marxism in the built environment in Poland: its contribution and legacy

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How to cite:

Gorzym-Wilkowski, W.A., 2017: Marxism in the built environment in Poland: its contribution and legacy. In: Chodkowska-Miszczuk, J. and Szymańska, D. editors, *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*, No. 36, Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University, pp. 95–107. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/bog-2017-0017>

Abstract. Due to its tangible character, the built environment constitutes a lasting evidence of past and present socio-economic phenomena. In Poland, these phenomena were developing for several decades according to the principles of Marxist ideology and its consequences. As a result, the built environment in Polish urban and rural areas was shaped by Marxist concepts and the resulting realities of centrally planned economy. Multi-family housing projects, vast and neglected post-industrial areas and monotonous, styleless buildings in rural areas are the main remnants of the period of what was known as “real socialism”. The effects of Marxism on the built environment in Poland are mostly negative in economic and social terms, and the efforts to eliminate these effects often fail to improve the situation. Therefore, the legacy of Marxism in Polish space will still be visible for many years to come.

Article details:

Received: 07 March 2016

Revised: 15 September 2016

Accepted: 01 February 2017

Key words:

Marxism,

Poland,

space,

built environment.

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1. Introduction

“Ideas have consequences”, the title of Richard M. Weaver’s work (2010), is an observation, equally innovative and self-evident, that seems to be particularly accurate with regard to Marxist ideas. This is not only because according to the American conservative, the ideological trends in the recent decades, or even centuries, are a manifestation of the decline of Western civilisation. Contrary to the words of its creator, Marxism has never been a science but rather an ideology for changing the world and creating an entirely new reality, in accordance with the slogan “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it” (Marx 2004, p. 4).

As it turned out, the changes concerned all components of reality in countries that in the 20th century became subordinate to the practical version of Marxism referred to as “real socialism”, and Poland was among them. The political supremacy of Marxism is already a closed chapter in Poland’s modern history but the question remains about how many remnants of this ideology have been preserved in Polish space and how distinct they are. One can formulate a hypothesis that Polish space, in the reality of a socialist economy, developed in a very peculiar way. The economic and, most importantly, political factors created many mechanisms under which Marxist ideology influenced all elements of reality, including space. The natural durability of the physical components of space allows us to assume that many elements – effects of the attempts to implement Marxist ideology – still survive. The symbolic associations concerning the Palace of Culture and Science (originally named after Joseph Stalin) or the MDM district in Warsaw do not exhaust the subject. Space in Poland, among other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, seems to be particularly suited for this kind of consideration. After all, the political borders of Poland were largely determined by the decisions of Joseph Stalin, a disciple and implementer of Marx’s ideas. Thus, the goal of this article is to indicate the processes that were shaping Polish space in the period of the supremacy of the Marxist political system as well as the direct and indirect effects of these processes, also for the reality today.

This paper, however, will primarily focus on the built environment, a term that in Poland is usually

construed as tangible components of space, permanently linked with a specific place, along with the functions they perform (Gorzym-Wilkowski, 2013). In English-language literature, this term denotes all elements of the environment that have been built by humans (see e.g. Anderson et al., 2013); sometimes also the functions performed by them (e.g. Forsyth et al., 2007). The built environment is always a result of socio-economic and political phenomena – their pace, character and structure – that have occurred so far. At the same time, however, the same built environment determines future phenomena of a similar character. Thus, it is a link through which the past shapes the future, often over many years. The built environment is thus contained in Braudel’s concept of “the long term” that exceeds the current, often temporary realities (Braudel, 1999). Therefore, one can hypothesise that the built environment is, and will remain for a long time, a permanent trace of Marxism in Polish territory.

2. Ideological assumptions

Remembering the links between socio-economic life and the built environment, it can be said that the way Marxism influenced the shape of space in Poland was twofold. Changes in the economic and legal-political reality resulting from Marxist ideology were the basic instrument of influence supplemented by urban planning concepts and methods of implementation controlled by this ideology. Of course, it is impossible to separate the consequences of one factor from the other: their impact on space in Poland was concurrent and interdependent. The results, however, were as far-reaching as the Marxist idea that “the earth shall rise on new foundations.”

Typically, the extensive literature left by Marx and Engels contains few references to the way the Communist economy is supposed to function. The Communist Manifesto is among the few sources with relatively clearly formulated demands in this respect. It provided for changes in the ownership structure as part of the changes aimed at introducing “the ascendancy of the proletariat” and quickly increasing production capacity. The expropriation of landed property, state management of arable land and increasing the number of state-owned factories

thus had to lead to changes in space as well (Marx, Engels, 2007). Marx also assumed that greater economic efficiency can be achieved by large factories using the benefits of scale while creating conditions for the formation of the social environment (the “proletariat”) leading to Communism (Landreth, Colander, 2005).

At the same time, however, the works by Marx and Engels contain numerous theses of a virtually “urbanistic” character because the active transformation of the built environment was supposed to be an instrument of shaping an entirely new social and economic life (Chmielewski, 2010). The city and the need to eliminate the disparities between its residents were the main subject of interest for the creators of Marxist ideology which was, after all, based on the affirmation of the “working class” (see e.g. Engels, 1949a). Engels stressed the need for a public housing policy based on letting apartments to workers. On principle, he preferred multifamily housing over single-family housing that makes one “attached to a place” (Engels, 1949b).

Finding advocates of Marxist concepts of shaping cities among urban planners was not difficult. After all, all key concepts of new cities that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, including the ideas of Howard or Garnier, despite differences between them, essentially called for egalitarian housing conditions and opposed the capitalist reality. In his concept of the “industrial city”, Garnier, a confirmed Marxist, emphasised the redundancy of churches in urban space (Jędrzejczyk, 2004). Bringing together modernist architects and urban planners, the CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture), formulated ideas close to Marxism in many of its documents (including the best-known Athens Charter) beginning in the 1920s. They included a call for liquidating “speculation” and even inheriting land as well as a call for planned land management that was to shape the city as an instrument for organising all functions of “collective life”, based on tall, multifamily housing (Ostrowski, 1975). A similar vision of the city was also presented at the time by Joseph Stalin (Goldzamt, 1950) although the avant-garde of Western European architects and urban planners was accused in Communist countries of “cosmopolitanism” and “reformism” (see e.g. Syrkus, Syrkus, 2009). At the same time, however, the leading urban planner Le

Corbusier often had revolutionary ideas that dramatically changed the shape of cities or even destroyed the existing forms (see e.g. Bauman, 1996; Le Corbusier, 2013).

3. Ownership and space in the political system of the Polish People’s Republic (PRL)

Having been installed by Stalin in 1944, the Polish Communist regime gave a legal dimension to the Marxist concepts of changing the economy and society. Brutally enforced ownership changes were essential, of course. The Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN Manifesto) was still quite cautious in this respect as it limited the expropriations to the landed gentry whose land was to be divided among peasants. Privately-owned farms, having an area of a few hectares, were to form the basis of agriculture from then on. Industrial, commercial and other enterprises confiscated by Germans during the war were to remain under state control only for a certain period after which the restitution of ownership would take place (Roszkowski, 1991). These declarations, however, were quickly proved false by the new political reality. The Agrarian Reform, introduced by the PKWN decree dated 6 September 1944, deprived the landed gentry of all their possession, including the so-called “resztówki”(1) and manor houses that were regarded as “agricultural facilities” (Dekret Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego z dnia 6 września 1944 r...). Only slightly more than one-third of the expropriated land and forests was awarded to the peasants while the rest remained in the hands of the state (Roszkowski, 1991). Under the Act of 3 January 1946, the other sectors of the economy were thoroughly and permanently nationalised, pushing private entrepreneurship to the margin (Ustawa z dnia 3 stycznia 1946 r...).

The preconceived changes in the country’s economy, particularly its fast-paced industrialisation, lead to the question of changes in space, particularly the shape of cities. The view of the Polish Communist regime on shaping the built environment was also marked by Marxist ideological assumptions. In many fields, Communist propaganda eagerly used

metaphors drawn from architecture and the construction industry (see e.g. Bierut, 1949). Without a doubt, Communism's grand urban planning ideas were also tempting to urban planners because the ravages of war as well as the post-war destruction and expropriation eliminated the main barriers to bold urban planning visions (Jędrzejczyk, 2004). Therefore, in post-war Poland, the Communists built broad support among architects and urban planners, many of pre-war fame (Tyrmand, 1989).

Indeed, urban planners had enormous possibilities in the Polish People's Republic as most of the economy and capital expenditure was state-owned and local government did not exist. The legal framework concerning spatial planning was another factor. In post-war Poland, similarly to other countries where real socialism prevailed, spatial planning was based on the general assumption that social life could be totally changed according to ideological requirements. The decree on planned spatial development of the state, adopted in 1946 (Dekret z dnia 2 kwietnia 1946 r...), introduced the fundamental principles of managing space in Poland. The most important among them were: the superiority of the public interest over the private interest and the hierarchy of interests of public bodies, among which the central administration had the biggest say. These principles remained in force until the end of real socialism in Poland, maintained by two subsequent pieces of legislation on spatial planning, issued in 1961 (Ustawa z dnia 31 stycznia 1961 r...) and 1984 (Ustawa z dnia 12 lipca 1984 r...). Other related factors included a low level of respect for private property and the ease and relatively small costs of expropriation of land earmarked for public purposes (in the broad meaning of the term). The value of compensation was a little higher than the price of arable land but the actual market value was many times higher, particularly in suburban areas (see e.g. Ustawa z dnia 29 kwietnia 1985 r..., Woś 2014).

4. The realities of the transformations of space in the PRL

The spatial reality of Communist Poland was a result of ideological premises concerning economy and shaping of space as well as unavoidable, al-

beit independent from the regime, effects of these premises. The inefficient and inflexible state economy forced considerable capital expenditure and the building of huge industrial plants employing thousands of people (Słodczyk, 2012). For a certain period, this mechanism was also stimulated by the enormous military needs of the Polish People's Republic. Bringing most areas of the economy and social life under state control also led to a large growth of administration. At the same time, the inefficiency of the economy and disregard for market mechanisms on principle resulted in the limitation of investment opportunities and a necessity of focusing capital expenditure on undertakings of primary importance from the perspective of the regime.

In consequence, space and the built environment in Communist Poland were transformed in a peculiar way. The forced industrialisation and expansion of public institutions by the state translated into rapid urbanisation. City dwellers who represented only 34% of the total population of Poland in 1946 accounted for nearly 62% in 1989. It also had to lead to the adequately-oriented spatial expansion of cities. The shaping of cities in the PRL was undoubtedly an exciting undertaking for the supporters of the creation of a new reality. The hierarchical character of spatial planning, alongside the superiority of the interest of the State and low costs of acquiring land for public purposes, made it easy to designate areas for the future needs of numerous offices, state-owned enterprises or mammoth housing projects managed by "cooperatives". Above all, it resulted in a strong expansion of cities into open countryside, particularly during the housing industry boom during the tenure of Władysław Gomułka (First Secretary of Poland's Communist party PZPR) (Fig 1).

The need to satisfy the demand for flats, resulting from the successive waves of migration to cities, became a key political problem in the first decades of the People's Republic of Poland. The demand for housing was particularly high in cities where new large industrial plants were located (e.g. Warsaw, Cracow, cities in Upper Silesia). Designed to win the favour of the society (and reduce the oversupply of money in the still hungry market), the programme of building "cooperative" blocks of flats encompassed vast tracts of space. For example, in Lublin, a major industrial centre developed by the

Communists in Poland, the area of residential areas increased nearly sevenfold between 1931 and 1981, i.e. from the pre-war market economy period to the end of the Communist economic boom. Despite the

dominance of multifamily housing among the new housing projects and despite a considerable population growth, the area of residential areas per capita increased 2.5 times (Kociuba, 2011).



Fig. 1. General spatial development plan for the city of Lublin 1959 (fragment)

Explanation: shades of brown and red to the north, west and south of the city centre denote the planned residential districts

Source: D. Kociuba, 2010.

This expansion answered the dreams of urban planners as well. The planning of the spatial structure of large, poorly-developed areas was simpler than designing how to fill the usually small gaps in the old, existing buildings in a way that would be consistent with the character and requirements of their location and surroundings. In fact, many old districts, comprising houses taken away from their owners, were not within the scope of interest of the authorities because they usually consisted of buildings in a bad state of repair, not always equipped with elements of municipal infrastructure. Maintaining them and, even more so, modernising them would require huge outlays. Besides,

flats in these districts were relatively large and consisted of large rooms, much larger than what the then housing standards provided for, e.g. 6 m² bedrooms were the norm (see e.g. Uchwała Nr 364...). The “demographic capacity” of old housing was thus incommensurately low in relation to the costs of maintaining it. Subject to the “public housing policy” but not included in investment programmes adequate to their age and state of repair, these districts succumbed to gradual degradation.

The Communist regime was particularly interested in the newly developing multifamily housing projects. The idea was for them to be urban structural units with the optimum spatial form, ensuring

suitable living conditions in harmony with environmental requirements. The reality, however, brought numerous and rather unequivocally negative results. The investment projects, despite being under the centralised control of the state, did not catch up with the demand. First and foremost, residential buildings were built in newly developing districts. It resulted from a strong public pressure to build flats, which influenced the political decision-makers who determined where the capital expenditure would be spent (Kowalewski, 1991). The use of large-panel

system building, the above-mentioned reduction of the average area of the newly-built flats and the limiting of the number of flat types were supposed to make the building of flats faster and easier but instead resulted in poor technical standards and poor thermal insulation of buildings. Another characteristic feature of the large housing projects was the monotonous architecture caused by the ideological departure from traditional urban forms, such as a street or square, and making spatial orientation difficult (Basista, 2001) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Multifamily housing dating back to the Polish People's Republic.

Source: author's photograph

Facilities such as schools, kindergartens or shops were established much later than the flats. Local service centres, beautifully designed and offering an opportunity for rest and recreation, did appear in many places, of course. As a rule, however, as time went by and the country's economic problems accumulated, the disproportion between residential housing and service facilities was becoming greater. In consequence, in the central parts of new districts, in areas designated for service facilities in spatial plans, some spaces remained empty and unused for many years. Some facilities (particularly churches that were at variance with Marxist principles) were deliberately eliminated from urban space already at the stage of spatial planning (Węclawowicz, 2003). In Lublin, whose administrative area quadrupled from the 1930s until the 1980s, industrial areas increased nearly eight times in the same period (Ko-

ciuba, 2011). The under-development of services in the new districts resulted in a lower standard of living and forced people to satisfy their basic needs in city centres. This, in turn, was more time-consuming for the residents and increased the volume of city traffic, thus increasing transport emissions.

The character of the built environment of the new districts also influenced the functioning of social life in them. The homogenisation of society, i.e. the elimination of differences between social strata, was a platform of real socialism. Thus, residents of the huge blocks of flats included members of all social groups, with different educational backgrounds or income levels but in similar age resulting from the date when a particular estate became inhabited (Słodczyk, 2001). Social and financial differences between neighbours did not enable a natural development of community integration. On the contra-

ry, they resulted in the poor and slow formation of social ties in neighbourly relations. As Nowak put it, a “sociological void” formed (Węclawowicz, 1981; Kotus, 2005).

The rushed industrialisation also influenced the character of the built environment in Polish cities. The emphasis on the development of heavy industry meant the construction and expansion of mines, steelworks and machine manufacturing plants. The technological backwardness and high level of militarisation, inevitably accompanying real socialism, translated into the establishment of enormous heavy industrial plants occupying vast areas in cities. The structural inefficiency of Communist economy made it necessary to increase employment in industry. Consequently, industrial areas were gradually occupying greater and greater areas in many cities. Furthermore, spatial development plans designated spaces for industry, setting aside considerable land reserves for development needs in an indefinite future. In consequence, industrial areas were often too vast in relation to the needs as they deformed the spatial structure of cities at the expense of residents’ living conditions and local environmental assets (Węclawowicz, 2002). The creation of superfluous land reserves, unused for many years, for public facilities concerned other functions as well, e.g. social infrastructure, roads, etc.

Several decades of Communist mechanisms of spatial management thus resulted in the “dilution” of space in Polish cities. A lot of areas occupied by cities and planned as residential, industrial or green areas, simply became wastelands that waited to be used for many years despite being equipped with expensive technical infrastructure. In the final period of real socialism in Poland, the population density of the largest Polish cities was several times lower than in the large cities in Western Europe. In the late 1980s, the population density of Warsaw was over twice as low as, for example, the population density of West Berlin whose territory included vast “non-urban” areas: forests, military bases, airports, etc. Furthermore, the large-scale expansion of urban developments into open countryside required the extension of communal infrastructure. In the 1990s the length of communal infrastructure networks per resident in Warsaw was still about four times greater than in Paris (Brzeski 2000, p. 11). It

had to mean an increase in the costs of building and maintaining infrastructure.

Real socialism left an equally strong mark on the shape of the built environment in rural areas, although abandoning agricultural collectivisation at an early stage of the PRL saved Polish villages from being totally transformed into something akin to the Soviet kolkhoz or from even more drastic attempts at the “systematisation” of rural areas in Romania. However, the landed estates taken over by the state and used by state-owned farms as well as the administration and education, etc. suffered considerable degradation (see e.g. Schirmer, 2012). However, the slowing down of the structural transformation of the Polish economy was the fundamental effect of real socialism. Despite the “great socialist projects” and waves of migration to the growing industrial cities, nearly 30% of the workforce was employed in agriculture as late as the end of the 1980s; in Italy, for example, this percentage was three times lower (Rocznik Statystyczny, 1991). This situation created some space for investment initiatives by individual farmers who almost totally transformed Poland’s rural landscape in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the cubic, box-like shape of residential buildings built at that time resulted from the limited availability of building materials, characteristic of the Communist shortage economy, and from the disappearance of the landed gentry, which used to set the standards for centuries, from the rural landscape (cf. e.g. Kisielewski, 1996, p. 89). The newly built rural houses were often oversized, not only for reasons of prestige but primarily because a house was a capital investment in a situation when other commodities were difficult to obtain (Basista, 2001) (Fig. 3).

Private residential housing was one of the elements that, while being alien to the Marxist social platform, was developing more as the structural problems of real socialism deepened. The increasing waiting time for “cooperative” flats led an increasing proportion of Poles to take matters in their own hands. In 1980, i.e. the last year of the “decade of success” under the leadership of Edward Gierek, private investment provided only 38.5% of the usable floor space in newly completed flats. According to the Statistical Yearbook, only a few years later, in 1986, the proportion increased to 45.2% despite the deteriorating standard of living and problems with getting building materials (Rocznik Statystyczny, 1987).



Fig. 3. House in a rural area in the 1970s

Source: J. Bański, M. Wesółowska, 2012.

5. Lasting results

The realities of the system created by the Marxists were shaping space in Poland for a little more than four decades. However, the “long term” of the built environment means that the traces of Communist economy will remain an element of Polish space. They will also leave their mark not only on landscape but also on economic and social phenomena, usually not predicted by the ideologues of Marxist urban planning. The high-rise housing estates, built for several decades using the large-panel system, are a lasting component of urban space. The technical standard of the buildings and the floor space and furnishing of the flats are quickly becoming morally obsolete while their maintenance costs are rising. This causes the escape of the wealthier and more enterprising residents who are replaced by less wealthy people. This leads to the spatial segregation of city dwellers whereby the bleak post-Communist high-rise housing estates become home to a peculiar youth subculture called “błokersi” (block-people), and can turn into slums in the not so distant future (Parysek, Mierzejewska, 2009). Of course, this nullifies the PRL’s objective of making the society

homogeneous. Interestingly, the floor space of new flats built in estates inhabited by people of a similar social standing still corresponds to the “norms” set by the administration back in the 1970s.

In fact, the traces of Marxism are much more numerous also because the change of the economic and social system occurred fairly recently and, to a large extent, was a response to the legacy of the period when economic reality was shaped by political and administrative factors. In consequence, economic phenomena that lasted for several decades in Western Europe, have taken place at a considerably faster pace in Poland. What is particularly noticeable is the growing polarisation of the economic space where poor peripheries deprived of development opportunities exist alongside the fast-developing largest cities (see e.g. Domański, 2008). It can be observed particularly in rural areas where the collapse of state-owned farms (e.g. in Central Pomerania) and the growing inefficiency of small farm holdings (e.g. in Eastern Poland) have triggered strong waves of emigration. The outflow of young people from rural areas and concentration of agricultural production reinforce this process that results in many abandoned houses and dilapidated farm buildings in Polish villages today (see e.g. Wesółowska, 2011).

The sudden departure from centrally-planned economy has also left significant marks in the space of industrial areas. Many enterprises established in the PRL and generously awarded land and facilities in that period could not cope with the growing competition and have gone bankrupt or have limited the scope of their activity. Another reason was the need to pay property tax, in proportion to the area, to the local governments established in 1990. A large portion of the post-industrial land (both developed and yet undeveloped by the end of the PRL era) is still an industrial wasteland occupied by remnants of properties that have often fallen into ruin and are used as rubbish and rubble dumps. At the same time, these areas constitute bankruptcy estates with mortgage debts that effectively discourage prospective new users (cf. Lijewski, 1993). This is one of the reasons why, after the change of the political and economic system, the “dilution” of urban space inherited from the PRL was not used for the proper development of land reserves remaining within cities, and vast post-industrial areas remain a major obstacle to the development of Polish cities (see e.g. Parysek, Mierzejewska, 2009).

Efforts to overcome the legacy of real socialism are still being made, however, and they do not necessarily bring exclusively positive results. For example, due to the authoritarian character of spatial planning mechanisms in the PRL, spatial planning per se came to be associated with Communism. This had to cause the pendulum to swing to the other side after 1989. The successive acts regulating spatial development processes, adopted in 1994 (Ustawa z dnia 7 lipca 1994 r...) and 2003 (Ustawa z dnia 27 marca 2003 r...), gave a privileged position to the interests of private investors and property owners. In consequence, the areas designated for building in the spatial planning documents prepared by local governments in Poland can accommodate over 143 million residents (Śleszyński et al., 2015, p. 105)! This will result, of course, in another wave of dilution of the built environment, which is an unintended effect of Marxist ideas.

It has turned out that the application of Marxist ideology to space in Poland did not bring many benefits, just as it happened in the case of the economy. Poland is not an exception in this respect anyway. The other countries of the former Communist

bloc face similar challenges. Marxism in space failed even when its ideas were backed by great political aspirations and enormous funds. It is exemplified by the fate of Brasilia, a city whose design combined Le Corbusier’s modernism and Communist social ideas of the architect Oscar Niemeyer, and which is surrounded by a ring of slums today (Williams, 2007; Miodek, 2015). Poland thus faces the question of what to do with the legacy of Marxism that remains in the space. One course of action is to follow the example of St. Louis, Missouri (USA) where the Pruitt-Igoe housing project, built according to the CIAM model, was completely demolished in the 1970s, less than 20 years after its completion. In the Polish built environment, however, Marxism occupied too much space to make such radical eradication of its traces possible. Upon the collapse of the Communist system, of course, efforts were made to alleviate the unfavourable impact of the PRL legacy. This is particularly clear in housing estates built using the large-panel system. Thermo-modernisation, i.e. the thermal insulation of buildings and replacement of windows, often combined with the improvement of aesthetic appearance of buildings, has been a common undertaking during the last twenty-five years. The deficiencies in services offered in the estates, particularly those of a commercial character in the new economic system, have been gradually remedied as well (see e.g. Gruszecka, Gzell, Rembacz, 2009). Also, given the level of Poland’s economic development, after all a result of the “artificial” economic realities of the PRL era (among other factors), it is impossible for public and private investors to be excessively lavish. Therefore, it can be assumed that the traces of the attempts to apply Marxism to space in Poland will remain visible for many years to come.

Note

- (1) “Resztówki” (residua): manor houses and the surrounding land whose area was not large enough to be subject to pre-war parcellation.

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Ministry of Science
and Higher Education
Republic of Poland

The proofreading of articles, positively reviewed and approved for publishing in the 'Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series', was financed from the funds of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education earmarked for activities popularizing science, in line with Agreement No 509/P-DUN/2016.

