

City profile

Krakow – The city profile revisited

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ABSTRACT

The 1984 profile of Krakow published in *Cities* depicted a stagnant city touched by socialist policy. Over 30 years later in the era of ‘always-on’ urbanization this medium-sized European city, which is visited by over 10 million travelers annually, has evolved considerably. After 1989, Krakow began a compound stage of transformation that was accelerated when Poland was admitted to the European Union in 2004. The modern economic and political order in Central and Eastern Europe has served to increase the process of urban dynamism in the city. This new profile describes some of the most significant urban changes that led Krakow to where it is today and explains whether recent processes were successful.

1. Introduction

While some former capital cities decline or remain desperately anchored to the past, others flourish by using the past to build a vibrant future. Krakow (also Cracow), the second largest city in Poland, spread over an area of 326.85 km² and inhabited by 765,320 residents as of 2016 (Statistical Office in Krakow, 2017), is a vivid example of such a dynamic urban center (Fig. 1). In seeking an understanding of what forces have shaped Krakow since 1990s and how currently the city prospers, one has to consider its transformation from the perspective of three interrelated processes: 1) political transformation after 1989; 2) metropolitan changes triggered by globalization and Europeanization after 2004; and 3) mechanisms attributed to the local cultural heritage.

A closer look at the context of the reforms in Central and Eastern European cities explains the reasons for the emergence of the main features and challenges in Krakow. According to Sýkora and Bouzarovski (2012), understanding the transition in post-socialist cities reflects three interrelated and multiplied processes, including institutional, social, and urban transformations. While the institutional and the social transformation is the short- and the medium-term period respectively, the urban one is the longest-term period, in which the patterns of land use and residential segregation are considerably changed. The authors argue that urban transformations are affected by a “common logic” which results in a city center commercialization, inner city regeneration and outer city suburbanization (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012, p. 44). These changes have been also observed in Krakow, and given them a general importance, the key question is to what extent has the urban system in Krakow been shaped by them.

Also, it is interesting how processes associated with the historical and cultural legacy have made Krakow a space of transformation. As

the former capital of Poland (1038–1609) the city belongs to old European centers, where heritage substantially determines its present position (Purchla, 1996). Thus, the essence of what Krakow is today can be extracted from the specific historical, cultural, and political frames in which the city exists. In this regard, the paper aims to interpret the role and the meaning of contemporary Krakow by tracing its historical evolution, and then concentrating on post-1989 changes with a special focus on urban planning, urban governance, population and housing issues. In the final section, the study addresses major challenges the city faces today.

2. Historical background

2.1. Medieval, Hanseatic and Jewish legacy

Krakow, which is situated on the Vistula River in the south of country, became an urban center around the 9th century (Wyrozumski, 2010). One of the fundamental decisions on the city's development was taken in 1257, when the town adopted the Municipal Charter under Magdeburg Law. As a result, Krakow acquired distinct privileges based on self-administration and developed a grid-like urban layout with a rectangular Market Square in the center of the town. This has been preserved as one of the largest medieval agoras in Europe and still functions as the main core of the city (Fig. 2).

In the 14th century, the growth of Krakow led to its inclusion in the Hanseatic League. Hansa, as a leading alliance of towns situated in the Baltic and North Sea area, dominated trade in this region of Europe from the 14th to the 16th century. Because Krakow is an inland city located almost 600 km from the Baltic Sea, it had rather loose relations with the League itself. Nevertheless, the city was able to attract

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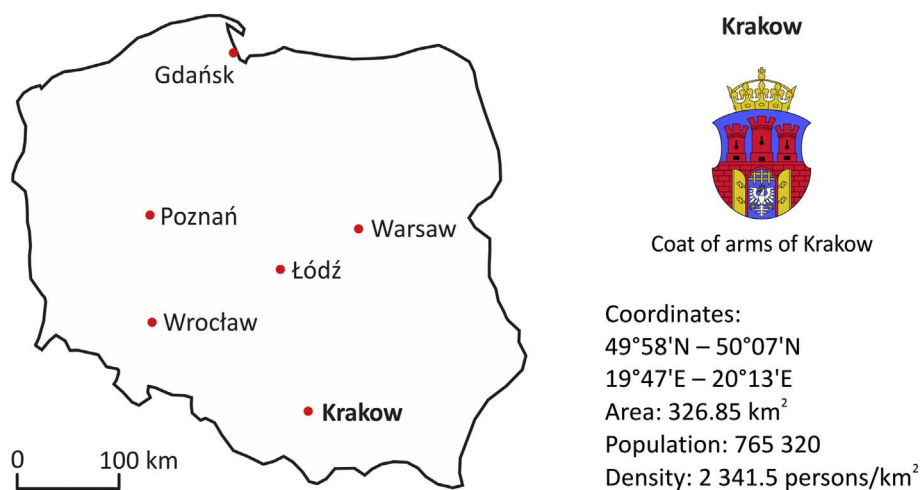


Fig. 1. Krakow in its national context.
 Source: Elaborated by the author.

merchants from various parts of Europe (North, 2013). Among them Germans, Italians, and Jewish were the largest group. Not only did the merchants make Krakow one of the focal points of transit trade in Central Europe, but many of them settled here thereby creating an ethnically and culturally diverse city. This was also confirmed in the growing status of Kazimierz, a Jewish town to the south of Krakow, which was founded by King Kazimierz the Great in 1335. Kazimierz was incorporated into Krakow in 1791 and it currently constitutes a vibrant quarter famous for its Jewish heritage (Fig. 3).

2.2. Jagiellonian legacy

The potential of the city was significantly increased in 1364 by the foundation of the Krakow Academy. It was later renamed the Jagiellonian University due to the prosperity it owed to the Jagiellonian rulers (Fig. 4). Today, the university still determines the position of Krakow as the leading, next to Warsaw, Polish academic center. The establishment of the Academy completed the basic canon of factors which formed the city of Krakow, thereby making it a multifunctional center of scientific, cultural, economic, and political life. As such, at the turn of the 15th and 16th century, the city entered into the period of its great prosperity successively reached by the Jagiellonian dynasty. Not only did the Jagiellonian policy (1386–1572) marked by openness and tolerance stimulate Krakow's growth, but it also transformed the city culturally (Małecki, 2008). It was reflected in the rising population of the Krakow agglomeration, which in the second half of the 16th century amounted to 30,000 residents, 20% of whom were foreigners (Purchla, 2008).

2.3. Habsburg legacy in the shadow of Poland's partition

Soon afterwards Krakow's significance diminished due to the gradual movement of the capital's functions from Krakow to Warsaw. This process started at the turn of the 16th and the 17th century (Karpiński, 1995; Małecki, 2010; Mrozowski & Wrede, 1996; Rożek, 2005). As a result, the city was deprived of spectacular development in the coming centuries. In 1795, due to collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its partition between Prussia, Russia and Austria, Krakow was annexed by the Habsburg Empire and located in Galicia – the largest Habsburg province extracted from the Commonwealth (Wolff, 2010). The city lost its dominant position when Lviv, the capital city of the Galician province, took over major administrative functions (Hrycak, 2003).

Up until the end of the First World War Krakow, called *Festung Krakau*, was garrisoned as a fortress of Austrian troops (Fig. 5). Despite the restraints imposed by Austria, the city enjoyed a relatively high

level of autonomy and important urban development programs were implemented during this period. For example, the Master Plan of Greater Krakow was created and provided the framework of Krakow's development for the next 100 years. As a result of the Master Plan, the city was extended sevenfold from 5.7 km² to 40.9 km², causing the population to grow to 180,000 in 1915. Another striking scheme was a project of boulevards built along the Vistula, as a part of the never realized plan for a navigable canal joining the Vistula and the Oder with the second longest river in Europe, the Danube (Purchla, 2016). Not only did the initiatives reflect the vision of Krakow devised by the then mayor Juliusz Leo, but they also expressed some urban impulses coming there from Vienna.

After 1918, Krakow became a regional center rather than the primary Polish city. Due to the fact that the city was not enjoying a principal status in the country anymore, it avoided total destruction during the Second World War. Following the German invasion, Krakow was occupied, but was not razed to the ground as was Warsaw. There were heavy casualties, especially in the Jewish community (out of 64,000 Jews living in Krakow in 1939 only 2000 survived the war). However, the city itself remained relatively undamaged (Małecki, 2008). In this regard, a heritage of the past concepts of Krakow's development, which can be expressed in the Medieval, Jagiellonian, and Habsburg legacies, withstood the war and still determines Krakow's *genius loci*.

2.4. Socialist legacy

The city's heritage became more important when UNESCO entered Krakow's historic center into the World Heritage List in 1978. UNESCO's action was fundamental in helping to preserve Krakow's cultural sites. These sites provided a striking contrast with the Stalinist style town of Nowa Huta, which was created from scratch in 1949 as a flagship socialist industrial space located just 10 km to the east of the city center. This centrally planned residential complex, with a giant metallurgy plant, at first functioned as a separate town, but was incorporated into Krakow in 1951. The scale of socialist urban policy was clearly expressed in numbers as 28% of Krakow's land was targeted for industrial use (Hirt, 2013). After the Second World War, no other city in Poland was chosen to be a subject of such bewildering urban experimentation. Given the ideological emphasis put on urban development, the case of Nowa Huta confirms that place-making in a socialist regime was chiefly a political process and Nowa Huta was envisioned as a demonstration of the power of the state.

Nowa Huta, a predominantly proletarian community, was supposed to weaken the long-established and intellectual profile of Krakow's middle-class (Watson, 2002). Nevertheless, the mostly Catholic

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