



Preface

Russia's all-out aggression on Ukraine in February 2022 reopened discussions about the unresolved legacy of Communism and the possible resurgence of totalitarian practices. The long existence of Russian state institutions rooted in the Soviet tradition, and the narrative employed by the authorities to justify the aggression, undoubtedly reveal an imperial resentment grounded in history. At the same time, the resistance put up by Ukraine is evidence of how crucial it is to maintain without faltering the state structures and the institutions comprising them. The issue of totalitarianism, ostensibly a relic of the past, has once again become relevant and gained a universal dimension under the influence of current events. It is significant that the themes of the texts submitted to this volume are interconnected through the overarching categories of institutionalism and the state. The institutions of a totalitarian state strip away freedom, manipulate citizens, and kill and plunder their victims, thus becoming a dark caricature of institutions in a democratic state. Simultaneously, against the backdrop of a structuralist approach to history, the agency of individuals motivated by noble intentions, or conversely by service to a corrupt power, influences the shape and activities of these institutions.

In Karol Józwiak's article, the fate of the film *Wielka droga* becomes a pretext for a narrative not only about the paradoxes of the Cold War (when political interests aligned anti-communist Christian Democrats and communists under the leadership of Stalinist Palmiro Togliatti) but above all about why soft power policies are doomed to fail without institutional support. What constituted the hard power of the 2nd Corps of the Polish Armed Forces under General Anders was devalued and ultimately neutralized due to the propaganda activities of its opponents. The political dimension of propaganda – this time extremely utilitarian and ideologized – is depicted in Mykola Bryvko's text, where analyses of German discourse on Soviet crimes describe how truth can become a tool of manipulation.

German propaganda aimed to exploit the tragedies of the occupied nations, as perfectly demonstrated by actions surrounding the Katyn massacre and the massacre in Bykivnia forest.

The functioning of the judiciary in a totalitarian state is analyzed by Michał Turski and Konrad Graczyk. The former shows the impact of individual motivations on the fate of German-descended lawyers in Łódź during the war, and their usefulness to the National Socialist regime, which, guided by ideological criteria and utility, selected a group among them to serve its interests. On the other hand, Graczyk traces the activity of the Special Court in Stanisławów and its longest-serving chairman. Erwin Wester, who imposed the death penalty for the slightest offenses, became the embodiment of a bloodthirsty judge, a person who possessed average legal competencies but who contributed to the totalitarian regime with zealous service. His death during post-war proceedings, in which he was the main accused, prevented him from being brought to justice; nevertheless, the issue of the incomplete settlement of the German judiciary in the occupied territories remained significant. The issue of justice resurfaced in the 1950s and 1960s, as described by Florine Miez and Anna Schattschneider. An informal network of contacts linking Polish and German lawyers, as well as victims and witnesses, became the foundation upon which was built the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt am Main in December 1963. Thanks to the involvement of specific individuals, a ground-level view in Auschwitz-Birkenau became possible. It not only had legal significance, as it confirmed the truthfulness of the victims' testimonies, but also helped familiarize Western Germans with the enormity of the crimes committed. The Auschwitz trial became a breakthrough, a result of the work of determined individuals on both sides.

Another aspect of the German occupation is presented by Miroslaw Kłusek. His in-depth study of the destruction of Polish financial institutions and their replacement with German ones not only demonstrates how money and banking served the occupiers but also highlights the problem of systemic economic degradation of the population in the occupied territories. The economic policies aimed to support the military of the Third Reich while simultaneously leading to the radical impoverishment of all ethnic groups except Germans. It was a result of political goals and racist ideology.

The entirety of the issues discussed inclines toward reflection on both the shape and the character of institutions comprising various forms of the state, as well as the responsibilities of the individual in history.

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