



# Preface

The central theme of the issue concerns the validity of using the term “totalitarianism” to describe the phenomena occurring within the Fascist, Nazi and Communist systems in the context of the history of 20th century Europe. The goal is to initiate a discussion on the relevance and applicability of the word “totalitarianism” to further our understanding of the evolution of these systems of organization of power, society and economics, their peculiarities, and, above all, the methods which they used. However, our focus is not only on stimulating a discussion and initiating deliberations of a theoretical and methodological nature, but also on linking theory with specific phenomena and processes, and with their long-term effects.

Thus, we are concerned both with presenting the ways in which totalitarian systems are portrayed in historiography and determining the variables governing these individual interpretative approaches (a process accompanied by an analysis of totalitarian ideologies and attempts at defining totalitarianism in a historical perspective), and highlighting the practices specific to totalitarianism in a comparative approach, which allows them to be distinguished from authoritarian practices. It is crucial for us not to center on classical models, which have been faulted as being static and are treated as a kind of ideal type, but on the dynamics of the processes of totalitarianization and detotalitarianization – in accordance with the concept of Andrzej Walicki. It will also be important for us to reflect on the phenomena of post-totalitarianism and neo-totalitarianism, which have resounded in recent decades in topical literature, and also to study the relationship with processes of democratization and dedemocratization. In such an approach, totalitarianism becomes a dynamic phenomenon that emphasizes specific peculiarities depending on the period.

In terms of theory, our goal is a critical look – a reconceptualization of the term. The concept of totalitarianism has been questioned

on numerous occasions, with many scholars pointing out its definitional difficulties and explanatory weaknesses, alleging that it does not lend itself to operationalization and that its applicability to specific phenomena is problematic. At the same time, the paradigm has a strong body of adherents and supporters. In this light, there also appears the question of the justifiability of using the term outside the context of the 20th century. We strive to address current discussions present in topical literature and in the public space – to ascertain whether or not the concept of totalitarianism, alongside terms such as “Fascism”, is used non-reflexively in the debate. In recent years, in an era of dynamic social and economic change brought about by the so-called fourth industrial revolution and the rapid development of artificial intelligence, as well as the associated intense socio-political transformations, the term is once again gaining prominence. On the one hand, there are debates over the validity and ahistoricity of applying labels such as “Fascism” to Putin’s Russia (although there exist many proponents of such an approach, Timothy Snyder chief among them) or “the process of totalitarianization” to the People’s Republic of China, in which attempts are made to properly capture the processes of transformation of these non-democracies, pointing out their hybrid nature; on the other hand, considerable scrutiny is devoted to socio-political problems and the erosion of liberalism in the developed democratic systems of the Western world, drawing attention to trends that carry with them the risk of totalitarianization (as does Shoshana Zuboff, for example, in her famous book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*).

Hence, in the current issue you will find, among others, a text by Roman Bäcker, who seeks to analyze the trajectories and evolution of the process of totalitarianization and detotalitarianization in 20th century Russia – from Leninism to Putinism. The author does not shy away from the difficult task of defining Putin’s system, referring, for example, to the concept of totalitarian political gnosis. The following texts focus on specific examples of the phenomenon in question. Basing on documents from the Latvian State Archive, Jakub Wojtkowiak has undertaken an analysis of the repressions that befell Polish officers of the Leningrad Military District during the Great Purge, that is, at the apogee of Stalinism. Danuta Drywa, on the other hand, has used the documentation of KL Stutthof to present the concentration camp as an exemplification of the Nazi totalitarian system, and emphasizes the important role played by this archival fonds when considered as a *sui generis* measure of the totalitarian impact of the system and its proficiency at harnessing individuals. Another contributor, Ludwika Majewska, has attempted to show the perspective of children displaced during the Second World War from the so-called Łódź administrative region – an act which caused the victims tremendous trauma; importantly, she also poses the question of how the process of development of their memory proceeded in adulthood. She conducts her analysis on the basis of memoirs, accounts and

testimonies of persons who were incarcerated in German resettlement camps in Łódź as children. Aleksandra Kmak-Pamirska, in turn, presents the fates of Polish children who were deported deep into the Soviet Union following the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, drawing on their memoirs and diaries. Finally, Sebastian Rakowski outlines the history of the Otwock CENTOS – a facility dedicated to the care of Jewish orphans with intellectual disabilities – and details the tragic end of its wards, who were murdered during the liquidation of the Otwock Ghetto in August 1942.

Further reflections on the central theme of this volume can be found in Katarzyna Woniak’s text on Stefan Ryniewicz and John Cornell’s report on the scholarly congress “The Future of Central and Eastern European Studies in Light of Russia’s War of Aggression Against Ukraine”, which was organized by the Pilecki Institute (in partnership with the Center for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw, the Davies Center at Harvard University, the Center for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin, the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University, and the Institute of Lithuanian History in Vilnius) and brought together prominent experts from around the world. Finally, the yearbook also contains two reviews: of Olena Palko’s *Making Ukraine Soviet. Literature and Cultural Politics under Lenin and Stalin*, authored by Damian Markowski, and of Adam J. Koch’s *A Captain’s Portrait. Witold Pilecki – Martyr for Truth*, written by Patryk Pleskot.

It is our sincere hope that the present issue of “Totalitarian and 20th Century Studies” will be viewed as a valuable contribution to research, inspire further study, and, significantly, encourage authors to explore the potential for collaboration.

On behalf of the editorial team  
Dr. Bartłomiej Kapica, Dr. Krystian Wiciarz

(transl. by Maciej Zakrzewski)