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## All Along the Watchtower

**Book Review: Wolfgang Sofsky, *Ustrój terroru: obóz koncentracyjny*. Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma 2016 (pp. 383). ISBN 978–83–65254–21–4. Price: PLN 49.00.**

The subject of the Nazi terrorist state has gained quite extensive literature over seventy years since the end of World War II. However, new monographs give rise to new interpretations of the system of German totalitarianism. It seems as if humanity still – or perhaps never – could not fully understand or deal with the horrible burden of genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century history of European civilization. Most of the major books on the state of terror and the Holocaust were created in the 1940s and 1950s. It was an understandable response of academics to the criminal and dreadful twelve years of European history. The authors of this generation have themselves experienced war trauma as participants or observers of events.

Hannah Arendt (1951) wrote about the cause of totalitarianism, and Karl R. Popper (1945) pointed to philosophical sources in European traditions that underlie totalitarian orders. Alan Bullock (1952) gave a realistic psychological portrait of the totalitarian dictator. Victor Klemperer (1947) showed how destructive is the totalitarian manipulation of language in social communication, and Richard Grünberger (1971) in his excellent study showed the everyday life of the society of the Third Reich. Beginning with Eric Voegelin (1951), some scholars examine totalitarian ideologies as forms of secular political religions transposed by elements of Gnosticism (Griffin 2005). Zygmunt Bauman (1989), in turn, deconstructed Eurocentrism with its idea of progress, interpreting the Holocaust as the inevitable creation of modernity. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1956) formulated the classical definition of

totalitarianism in relation to Hitler's state and Stalin's Russia. In the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, apart from the Third Reich and the USSR, Maoist China, Cambodia under Pol Pot, North Korea, the Iranian theocracy in the 1980s, the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic State (ISIS) are also included in the totalitarian regimes. The genocidal terror does not have to be a constitutive feature of the totalitarian state, it also happens in non-totalitarian systems, as in the case of the extermination of the Herrero and Namaqua people in German South Africa, the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey and the genocide in Rwanda.

In the case of Poland, it is really difficult to talk about totalitarianism, apart from the period of German occupation (which is considered a peer reviewed book). By contrast, the postwar, eight-year period of Stalinism of 1948–1956 can only be regarded as the seedling phase of totalitarianism, which ended after the turn of October '56, giving way to the authoritarian dictatorship that lasted until 1989. It is therefore not right for Poland to talk about communism, decommissioning and the elimination of totalitarianism (that is, only ideological constructs calculated for the benefit of the present political rivalry) because apart from the indicated direct management of Poland by the USSR there was no totalitarian dictatorship or communism *modo sovietico* in Poland.

It is amazing how the Polish reader receives professor Wolfgang Sofsky's book only 23 years after her first German edition, especially since the earlier Polish edition of the *Treaty of Violence* (Sofsky 1996) proved to be a success story in our market. However, it must rejoice that the Jewish Historical Institute. Emanuel Ringelblum filled this gap on the Polish reader market by presenting a book which was the habilitation thesis of one of the most prominent contemporary anthropologists.

Sofsky represents a rarity in current science of versatility and erudition, as he studied both sociology, philosophy, political science, and history. It should, however, be called primarily a cultural anthropologist. The work of Helmuth Plessner, Georg Simmel and Elias Canetti's writing, particularly his essay *Mass and Power* (Canetti, 1960), was the most influential in shaping his views. In some considerations, the author explicitly approaches Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2002), but never refers to the work of the Italian philosopher *expressis verbis*.

The book is composed of five chapters devoted to the discussion of the nature of absolute power, the totalitarianism of space and time, the analysis of social structures, labour and violence and death. The whole is complemented by extensive, because seventeen pages, bibliography in which the publisher expose Polish editions of works devoted to Holocaust and terror. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, a professional and excellent literary translation of the Goethe Institute, deserves a high rating.

The author begins his study by reflecting on the possibilities of researching the reality of camps and the current research approaches, some of which he believes are fraught with errors in the relativization of Nazi crimes and some of the desire to obliterate the criminal past by the Germans themselves. He considers the topos of incomprehension of the crime and incomparability of Auschwitz by presenting the inexcusable arguments with iron logic. To accept the existence of incomprehensible would allow Sofsky to leave the crime without analysis, but the proclamation of the thesis of uniqueness is also unscientific because it is a priori view, and without comparison, it cannot be ruled incompatible (Sofsky, 2016, p. 15–17).

Considering the nature of absolute power, Sofsky states that in the camps, power developed, whose dynamics could not be planned or predicted. Thus, the subject of the author's deliberations is not the whole of Hitler's state, which has long been associated with monographs (Ryszka 1985), but the SS regime (*SS-Staat*), and thus the organization and functioning of the Nazi concentration camps. The author gives detailed statistics on the number and types of concentration camps, sub-camps, POW camps, ghettos, etc. (Sofsky, 2016, p. 21).

Reading the book suggests an association with the deliberations of Bruno Bettelheim (1980) on human behaviour in extreme situations. The comparison of the 'state in the state' with the Solzhenitsyn (1973) *Gulag Archipelago* is also an obvious comparison. In this world, terror generates constant fear, and for itself is the goal. Sofsky's historical view that it is wrong to believe that everything has to have some intellectual justification and historical meaning (Sofsky, 2016, p. 33) is an expression of his rationalism and of Popper's scepticism in relation to great historical processes. The main research objective of the study is to reconstruct the practices, structures, and processes that take place in the social community (Sofsky, 2016, p. 16). The camp is a special kind of power system different from the known types of power and control. Organized terror can not be placed in the continuum of forms of power. The purpose of absolute power in the camp is not to enforce obedience - writes the professor - but to create the universe of uncertainty (Sofsky, 2016, p. 28). The author has succeeded in describing the essence of absolute power, extending to all spheres of prisoner life and how they were killed.

In the camp reality, the prisoners were not able to act logically against the 'terror system'. In extreme situations, they could not demonstrate either a common-sense reaction or disclose their humanity. Sofsky, seeking to deepen the Nazi evil, focuses on the fractography by enumerating the ways of killing and giving them detailed descriptions of what might shock them, thus violating the conventions they have created in the Holocaust discourse. In chapter two, the author discusses how the authority seeks to control and manage the time and space of its subjects. Natural space has

become a space of coercion, but unlike prison, it was not about isolation, but about the density and segmentation of human mass. Time was, in turn, both included in the schedules, but also by the absolute authority manipulated so that there would be no sense of permanence, regularity and predictability.

The third chapter is devoted to the analysis of the social structure of the camp. Sofsky characterizes SSman as a 'political soldier' whose life has become a terrorist fight against internal enemies. In-depth analysis of the relationships between the various groups of guards and prisoners is perhaps the most moving part of the book. It would seem that the camp life has already been written, whereas Sofsky creates a new quality of sociological analysis of KL. In the next chapter, the author discusses the appropriateness and effectiveness of the labour camp, demonstrating its economic nonsense and pointing out that it was primarily a form of torture. The camp was not a form of slavery because the target was not economic exploitation of slaves but terror and death (Sofsky, 2016, p. 224). The regime of violence puts people in a permanent state of dying (Sofsky, 2016, p. 362). The fifth chapter deals with issues of violence and death. Sofsky underlines in depth the phenomenon of the so-called *Muselmänner*, or 'living corpses', so prisoners of extreme destruction who have lost their will and desire to live.

Sofsky's writing is not easy to read. It is not about the level of knowledge required by the reader about the history of the Third Reich. The author's arguments are understandable. It is about showing special attention and special kind of reflexivity and anthropological imagination while reading. Sofsky's analysis hurts accuracy, uncompromising and clarity of judgment. The book also confirms that the problems of mass crime, ethnicity, genocide can be described in the field of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, political science. However, they can not be explained comprehensively without an anthropological approach.

Finally, there is the reflection that after reading all the work on totalitarianism, terror and genocide, in the depths of the reader's consciousness, there is a fear of how easily the collapse of the civilizational order can begin. How quickly demolished order can fall under the blows of terror and the bestiality. How quickly legal, social and cultural norms can collapse in the face of naked violence that unleashes the mad orgy of persecution. For the first time, this type of case in the history of Europe took place already in the year 404 B.C. The transient decline of the Athenian democracy lasted only eight months when the dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants took place. In Germany – Sofsky (Sofsky, 2016, p. 41) reminds us – since the constitutional freedoms were abolished after the Reichstag fire until the first concentration camps were completed, it took less than six months. By organizing new camps, terror was extended to successive groups, thus creating subsequent categories of 'enemies of the

people'. "Regression to barbarism" is a euphemism that undermines the image of facts. War, torture, torture, war crimes are still part of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century reality. Wolfgang Sofsky's book is undoubtedly a warning that in every authoritarian, tyrannical and undemocratic power there is a temptation of terror.

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