

DEMOCRATIZING POLAND WITH HANNAH ARENDT

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Abstract

In communist Poland, uprisings against the ruling regime broke out time and again. For this reason, Poland was regarded as a «focus of revolution» within the Eastern bloc. Striving for freedom and independence was always a marked interest in the country, which was fuelled by the endeavours of many Polish intellectuals who kept in touch with Western Europe and the United States. Mainly in the 1960s, intellectual life in Poland formed a barrier of resistance against communism. Already before the political upheaval in the year 1989, the works of Western philosophers were read and received in select circles of Polish intellectuals. Neither was Hannah Arendt an unknown person. Despite problems with censorship, three of her books, *Eichmann in Jerusalem (A Report on the Banality of Evil)*, *The Life of the Mind*, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, were published in 1988. After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989 Hannah Arendt's works ceased being something forbidden and mysterious.

In this paper, Hannah Arendt's literary reception in Poland before and after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc will be analyzed and evaluated. Afterwards the question will be discussed, how much influence Hannah Arendt's ideas had on the consolidation of democracy in Poland.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, communism and postcommunism, intellectual resistance, Poland, democracy.

During the twentieth century Central Eastern Europe was impacted by both types of totalitarian regimes, i.e. National Socialism and Communism. In the reappraisal of these both regimes, the works of Hannah Arendt, predominantly *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, are appreciated in numerous circles primarily located in Poland and Hungary. However, even before the political upheaval in 1989 Hannah Arendt was not an unknown personality in the former Eastern Bloc. In the following presentation the reception of Hannah Arendt in Poland before and after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc will be portrayed and analysed.

Interest in Hannah Arendt in Poland began in the nineteen-seventies and increased in the eighties. This was the period of resistance against the Communist regime, in which role models were

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sought for the achievement of freedom in their own land. The struggle for freedom is a Polish tradition. This aspect was detected in the works of Hannah Arendt and used as a role model for the reestablishment of freedom. Despite a publication ban and censorship of Polish philosophers, even within Poland, total rule was still studied. Beginning in the mid-nineteen-seventies documents, reports and analysis of the use of power and the nature of the totalitarian system in Poland were published in the independent press. Alongside with Hannah Arendt's, works by George Orwell, Karl Mannheim, Hans Kelsen, Isaiah Berlin, Friedrich von Hayek, Zbigniew Brzeziński, Richard Conquest and Raymond Aron also appeared in Polish.

Hannah Arendt's works were discussed in the intellectual circles of the *Solidarność* movement. Her literature was also referred to often in opposition circles, such as *ResPublica*, *Arka* and *Przegląd Polityczny*. Despite censorship problems, Cracow publishing house *Znak* published *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1988 and Warsaw underground publishers released *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. At the famous Polish universities in Warsaw, Cracow and Danzig illegal seminars and debates took place, in which the theories and thoughts of Hannah Arendt were analysed. During Jerzy Jedlicki's private seminars between 1976 and 1980 his students became acquainted with Hannah Arendt's literature. Włodzimierz Heller observed that since the mid-nineteen-eighties Hannah Arendt's thoughts have served as a cure for proceedings in the political sphere.¹

There was no reaction to Hannah Arendt's essay *Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution* in Poland, although she also mentioned revolutionary activity in Poland in 1956.² During the nineteen-eighties intellectual life in Poland formed a bastion of resistance and contributed to the intellectual strengthening of those who profited from it in some form. It spread a feeling of moral recovery. In the nineteen-eighties the Poles showed great bravery in resisting Communist ideology as well as the institutions that served it and in accepting the repression this caused.³

In 1989 Poland achieved her goal by distancing herself from the Eastern bloc and adopting western values. All important works by Western political scientists that appeared after the Second World War were published in Polish. Even Hannah Arendt's works were no longer forbidden and secretive.⁴ The uncensored version of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* had already been published in 1989 and was published again in 1993, in a Poland, which was already free. At the end of the nineteen-eighties and the beginning of the nineties the translation of the following works by Hannah Arendt were published: *The Life of the Mind* (1989), *On Revolution* (1991), *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1994), *On Violence* (1998) and *The Human Condition* (2000). In 1990 Nina Gładziuk published an analysis of the thought of Hannah Arendt.⁵ The Polish sociologist, Paweł Śpiewak, observed that after 1989 the difference between the western and Polish thinking quickly disappeared.⁶

Polish correspondents became involved with the *Hannah Arendt Newsletter*. It is a discussion and information forum, which was established in the mid-nineteen-nineties under the influence of Hannah Arendt's ideas.⁷

Polish academics often refer to Hannah Arendt in their writings. Józef Tischner, a philosopher and clergyman, used Hannah Arendt's thesis on the totalitarian exploitation of the relationship between people in his article *Die totalitäre Herausforderung. Judentum, Christentum und der Totalitarismus des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*The totalitarian challenge: Judaism, Christianity and the totalitarianism of the twentieth century*). In doing so he slightly modified it. He agreed that totalitarianism exploited people's behaviours. However, the Stalinist form of totalitarianism became a tool for a certain direction: «The human becomes a fighting tool and is more like a canon or a revolver than the hammer and sickle»⁸.

Paweł Śpiewak used the thoughts of Hannah Arendt in his description of the character of totalitarianism.⁹ The book by Cezary Wodziński *Światłocienie zła* (*Chiarosauro of Evil*) characterised the presence of Hannah Arendt in Poland's intellectual life. One important work that is concerned with Hannah Arendt is a book by Włodzimierz Heller. In it he attempts to describe the problems of political pluralism as a property of the political sphere, which returns to Hannah Arendt. In search of sources on the pluralist perception of politics he refers to Arendt's concept of the human condition and the „political being“ as well as to two activities, which according to Arendt and her life, determine what is political. These include the power of judgement and the power of political action.¹⁰ In conclusion Heller describes his own images of the Polish political sphere today, which reflect the topicality and vitality of the Hannah Arendt project. As the first proof for the effectiveness of Hannah Arendt's thought in Poland he lists the establishment of a great number of non-governmental organisations. The incorporation of a large number of citizen groups into the framework of non-governmental organisations was characteristic of the first years of democratic Poland after the 1989 regime change. Foundations, unions, political organisations and informal groups form the third sector of the democratic system after national and local government. They are the «expression of civil freedom and express civil needs and emotions»¹¹ Włodzimierz Heller regards the second proof of the consolidation of democracy in Poland after 1989 as the situation of the national minorities. They are increasingly granted more rights and take part in Poland's political life. However, since Heller's evaluation the situation of the national minorities in Poland has worsened. In the Fourth Republic of the ruling party «Law and Justice» (PiS) attempts have been made to reduce the rights of the biggest minority in Poland, i. e., the German minority.¹²

In the anthology, *Totalitaryzm a zachodnia tradycja* (*Totalitarianism and the Western Tradition*), which was published in 2006, contributors from the fields of history, philosophy, sociology and politics repeatedly return to Hannah Arendt. Ryszard Legutko agrees with Hannah Arendt that the totalitarian soul is a lonely one.¹³ Miłowit Kuniński in his contribution presents the most important points of Hannah Arendt's totalitarian

theory, namely that the development of the capitalist economy goes hand in hand with the extension of the social sphere, which transforms the private sphere into the public sphere. Open society and caring about the common welfare become increasingly weaker. Mass society without a traditional class structure becomes increasingly isolated in the sphere of politics and increasingly lonely. Such societies become progressively more susceptible to totalitarian ideologies.¹⁴

A few authors have used the writings of Hannah Arendt in their analyses of the *Solidarność* movement. Marek Latoszek, a sociologist, considered which of the models of revolution that Hannah Arendt spoke of, the French or the American, most closely resembled the one carried out by *Solidarność*.¹⁵

Polish scientists also referred to Hannah Arendt's work when analyzing the state of war from December 13th, 1981. In celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the introduction of a state of war, Polish quarterly, *Przegląd Polityczny* (Political Review) surveyed well-known Polish historians, sociologists, philosophers, and political scientists as to whether Poland was a totalitarian state as of December 13th, 1981. Daniel Grinberg, a historian, analyzed Poland under Edward Gierek and declared the following:

«Against the background of a democratic, modern Western Europe, Gierek's Poland represents a relatively mild form of a state that is not entirely sovereign, ruled in an authoritarian manner, but, despite all that, still has many of the trappings of Democracy».¹⁶

He asserted that Poland had little to do with the classical «totalitarian syndrome» and Hannah Arendt's analysis at that time, since elements of pluralism were present in almost all areas of life.

Marek Kornat, likewise a historian, responds first to the totalitarianism concept in his article. He asserts that not every discrepancy with democracy can automatically be classified as totalitarianism. The author argues for Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism as it was presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. According to her, the Third Reich only had a totalitarian character in the years from 1938 till 1945 and the Soviet Union possessed one during the Stalinist times from 1929 till 1956. Before 1938, there was a totalitarian movement and totalitarian leadership (Adolf Hitler), but still not a totalitarian state. Kornat emphasized this differentiation in Arendt's work. According to this idea, he asserts that there was a turning away from totalitarianism in the time between the end of Stalinism and the appearance of *Solidarność*, which was very meaningful to the People's Republic of Poland. This process put Polish society, not party reformers in action. When Hannah Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she knew that her theories would have to be supplemented in view of the experiences of the year 1956. In further paragraphs, Kornat discusses the question of what the state of war introduced on December 13th, 1981 means according to the perspective of engagement with totalitarianism. The historian came to the conclusion that whenever the characteristics of a totalitarian system are actually a totalitarian mass

movement – as Hannah Arendt asserted – after the introduction of a state of war, there were no such movements in Poland. That is the best proof of the thesis that Poland was already a post-totalitarian state at that time.¹⁷

Ireneusz Krzeмиński, a sociologist, Paweł Machcewicz, a historian, and Zdzisław Najder, a literature historian also all refer to Hannah Arendt in their analyses of the state of war in Poland. Machcewicz emphasizes the fact that Arendt revised her thesis that totalitarianism eliminates the possibility of the development of inner opposition and that it cannot be eliminated through inner strength after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.¹⁸

Aleksander Smolar, publicist and political scientist agrees with Hannah Arendt at length in his contribution. He begins by discussing the concept of totalitarianism. He states that while this concept is presently of great importance in Poland and other Central Eastern European countries, it has lost topicality in the West. Smolar refers to intensive discussions that have taken place among scientists and publicists in Western Europe throughout the fifties. The totalitarian paradigm prevailed until the middle of the nineteen-fifties. Here, Smolar mentions the work of Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski: *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* as well as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt. According to his contribution, Hannah Arendt's model of totalitarianism remains true, even to this day due to deep philosophical reflection and literary strength. The cooling of ideology, abolition of mass terror, and the stabilization of the ruling class led to totalitarianism's self-destruction. This had led Hannah Arendt to announce the end of Communist totalitarianism in the nineteen sixties. These changes had led to the collapse of totalitarianism as a system of government in the years 1989–1991. Smolar agrees with Hannah Arendt that totalitarianism would decline along with the end of deep belief and terror. After the totalitarian system had lost the revolutionary triad – movement, ideology, and terror – it had no chance of survival.¹⁹

Popular Polish historian of ideas, Andrzej Walicki utilized Hannah Arendt's ideas to prove his thesis, which claimed that Poland was no longer a totalitarian state after 1956. According to Walicki the first signs of a thaw had already appeared in Poland by 1954, and by 1956 Gomułka's Poland had lost its totalitarian characteristics altogether. Walicki responds first to the concept of totalitarianism. He declares that the concept of totalitarianism's confinement to use as a simple tool of the anti-Communist right during the Cold War period was a huge mistake. There were definitely representatives of a leftist philosophy among the great thinkers who engaged in the fight against totalitarianism including the following: radicals (George Orwell, Hannah Arendt), liberals (Karl Popper) or the ex-Communist left (Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender, and Richard Wright). Walicki emphasized an important characteristic of totalitarianism: the ability to rob people of not only outer but also inner freedom. This causes individuals to lose their deepest identity, the right to be themselves.²⁰ Here, Walicki makes a connection with Hannah Arendt, who proved that «totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means ... totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within»²¹. The model of Totalitarianism de-

scribed by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, according to Walicki, proved too static and ideological since they did not take into account the consequences of its unplanned evolution. This model did not clarify the process of changes that began in the U.S.S.R. through Stalinization. Here, Walicki refers again to Hannah Arendt, who, in the preface to the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, states that the Soviet Union began an authentic, although not a clear-cut process of destroying totalitarianism after Stalin's death and therefore, one could no longer label the Soviet Union of the sixties «totalitarian» in the most narrow meaning of the word.²² In the end Walicki emphasizes one more time that Poland was no longer totalitarian after 1956. The most important changes to the system were not the division of power and thus political democratization, but rather the limitation of the amount of power, and thus liberalization. In place of a system of totalitarian control over all areas of life, political authoritarianism took over, which gave the individual in society considerable freedoms in the private sphere as well as in cultural and intellectual life.²³

References

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- ² Cf.: Arendt, H. *Die Ungarische Revolution und der totalitäre Imperialismus*. In: *ibid.*, *In der Gegenwart. Übungen im politischen Denken II*, 73–126.
- ³ Cf.: Legutko, R. Die Intellektuellen und der Kommunismus. In: Śpiewak, *Anti-Totalitarismus*, 235–264, here: 262.
- ⁴ *Świat ten wart jest troski*. In: *Przegląd Polityczny*, 55 (2002), 34–43, here: 34.
- ⁵ Cf.: Gładziuk, N. (1991) *Cóż po Grekach? Archetyp polis w twórczości Hannah Arendt*. Warsaw.
- ⁶ Śpiewak, P. (2003) *Polnische Erfahrungen mit dem Totalitarismus*. In: *ibid.* (ed.) *Anti-Totalitarismus. Eine polnische Debatte*. Frankfurt a. M.: 15–67, here: 25.
- ⁷ Cf.: Leszczyńska, K. (2002) *Hannah Arendt Newsletter*. In: *Przegląd Polityczny*. Vol. 55. P. 214–215.
- ⁸ Tischner, J. *Die totalitäre Herausforderung. Judentum, Christentum und der Totalitarismus des 20. Jahrhunderts*. In: Śpiewak, *Anti-Totalitarismus*, p. 129–151, here: 1–33. Self translation from: «Der Mensch wird zum Kampfwerkzeug und gleicht eher einer Kanone oder einem Revolver als Hammel und Sichel».
- ⁹ Cf.: Śpiewak, Die Zählung der Finsternis. In: *ibid.* (ed.) *Anti-Totalitarismus*, p. 152–175.
- ¹⁰ Cf.: Heller, *op. cit.*, 14.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170. Self translation from: «Ausdruck der bürgerlichen Freiheit, drücken bürgerliche Bedürfnisse und Emotionen aus».
- ¹² Cf.: *Gazeta Wyborcza*. 2006. 9–10.9, № 1.
- ¹³ Cf.: Legutko, R. (2006) *Totalitaryzm i dusza ludzka [Totalitarianism and the human soul]*. In: M. Kuniński (ed.) *Totalitaryzm a zachodnia tradycja*, Cracow, 46–56.
- ¹⁴ Cf.: Kuniński, M. (2006) *Totalitaryzm w ujęciu Hanny Arendt [Totalitarianism in the understanding of Hannah Arendt]*. In: *ibid.* (ed.) *Totalitaryzm*, 116–142.
- ¹⁵ Cf.: Latoszek, M. (2005) «Solidarność»: ruch społeczny, rewolucja czy powstanie? [*«Solidarność»: gesellschaftliche Bewegung, Revolution oder Aufstand*]. In: Fr. Adamski, u. a., «*Solidarność w imieniu narodu i obywateli [«Solidarność im Namen der Nation und der Bürger*], Kraków, p. 240–282, 251.

- ¹⁶ Przegląd Polityczny, 79/80 (2006), 173.
¹⁷ Cf.: ibid, 175–180.
¹⁸ Cf.: ibid, 187.
¹⁹ Cf.: ibid, 194–197.
²⁰ Cf.: ibid, 209–210.
²¹ Arendt, H. (1976) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, 325.
²² Cf.: ibid, XXXV–XXXVII.
²³ Przegląd Polityczny, 79/80 (2006), 214–215.