



Horyzonty Polityki
2020, Vol. 11, N° 35



Editorial

In an Age of Global Conflicts – Political Power in the First Half of the 20th Century

The first half of the twentieth century brought the world two global conflicts and genocide on an unprecedented scale. It was a time in which both political reflection and political and legal practice was dominated by various forms of militarism, totalitarianism and authoritarianism, often tinged with nationalism and even racism. The appearance on the intellectual and political scene of such currents as bolshevism, fascism and Nazism left an ominous indelible mark on the chronicles of Europe and the rest of the world. To understand how state-perpetrated crimes could have been committed on such a scale at a time when the cognitive and social optimism characteristic of positivism was still thriving, it is necessary to look to the history of political ideas.

Though human history is filled with countless armed conflicts that left suffering, death and masses of physically and mentally crippled individuals in their wake, the greatest armed conflicts of the twentieth century are nonetheless unprecedented events. What happened during World War II in particular, at the very center of Western European civilization, continues to elicit amazement and disbelief. One result of the horrors of WWII was (and is) the attempt at building international guarantees and a system of preventative measures that could prevent the occurrence of a similar nightmare to the one brought on by those years. On the other hand, scientists and philosophers are working to understand the causes and social, political and psychological mechanisms that enabled the emergence and functioning of systems so antihumanitarian as to be essentially criminal. What is

especially striking is the fact that these authoritarian and totalitarian systems were not simply the result of some anti-intellectual revolt of the masses – philosophers (like M. Heidegger) and lawyers (like C. Schmitt) alike were among the elites of these movements. Understanding the various aspects of this past intellectual period may also be helpful in our times, when nationalistic and authoritarian movements and tendencies seem to be on the rise in our cultural sphere.

The first half of the twentieth century was also an especially significant time for Poles – we regained independence after one hundred and twenty-three years. The return of Poland to the map of Europe placed existing socio-political ideas in a new light and also posed new challenges for Polish political and intellectual elites. One of the most serious challenges, its roots reaching back several centuries, was the so-called peasant question. Earlier, at the end of the nineteenth century, reflection on this issue led to the formulation of the idea of two nations – a nation of the nobility and a peasants' nation. This idea would have far-reaching consequences for the emerging vision of the modern cultural and political identity of the Polish nation.

The period of the Second Polish Republic also resulted in the appearance in Polish political thought of issues typical of European reflection of the time. We were not able to avoid the calling into question of the democratic system and procedures nor the introduction of authoritarian solutions. The issue of democracy and authoritarianism (so alien to Polish history and the Polish archetype of political culture) became one of the most important issues in Polish political debate after 1926.

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