

‘100 Years without the State, 100 Years on behalf of the State’.
Conference held at the German Historical Institute Warsaw,
26–27 March 2018

‘100 Years without the State, 100 Years on behalf of the State’ was the motto of a workshop on Polish Prison history which took place at the German Historical Institute Warsaw. It was organized jointly by Anna Machcewicz (Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Science), Mateusz Rodak (Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History, Polish Academy of Science) and the author of this report (GHI Warsaw) in order to bring together colleagues from Poland, Germany, Austria and Ukraine who work on and within the prison system in Poland. The mix of theoreticians and practitioners with various professional backgrounds lent a special quality to the workshop. The participants prepared posters, especially for the workshop, for a pop-up exhibition at the conference hall of the German Historical Institute Warsaw. Those posters offered a visual overview and thematic orientation to the field of existing research.

Instead of discussing the material in a chronological order, the organizers set up thematic panels. The first covered the history of introspection as a religious practice and its application in Polish prisons. In his introduction, Felix Ackermann (Warsaw) offered the takeover of the Franciscan monastery at Rawicz and the creation of a new Central Penal Prison of the Poznań district in nineteenth century Greater Poland as two different forms of infrastructures provided by the state in order to introduce and run a legal system based on codified penal law. Bartłomiej Perlak (Świdnica) covered former monasteries in Lower Silesia, and particularly analyzed the history of detention in Świdnica/Schweidnitz. Jacek Moczulski (Olsztyn) shared his insight into the history of the inclusion of the Catholic church of Barczewo/Wartenburg into the local prison complex, and Oleh Razyhraev (Luck) enlarged the geographical focus in his paper, which concerned prisons in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in the interwar period. A particularly thoughtful comment was provided from Michał Godlewski (Wronki). As the informal custodian of the prison in Wronki, he shared his insights within the institution and showed high quality pictures, documenting the prison’s role as a modernizing facility.

A second section – on the history of penal thought and the role of work in concepts of incarceration – turned out to be a hot topic of discussion between normative approaches and empirical projects. Marcin Nowicki and Dawid Schoenwald (both of Grudziądz) analyzed the layers of architectural history of the Grudziądz/Graudenz penal facility and pointed out the long

term continuity in the organization of work as a part of prison spaces. Dariusz Sarzała (Olsztyn) gave a broad overview on the development of normative thinking regarding the role of work in the Polish prison system and its transformation in the 1980s and 1990s. Matthias Kaltenbrunner (Vienna) hinted, in his comment, at new perspectives which might allow a fresh look at the discussed material in future research.

For many participants the third panel, its focus on the body of the prisoners was rather surprising as it completely changed the focus, i.e. from the prison system itself to the human beings who are confronted with it on an everyday basis. Andrzej Purat (Bydgoszcz) shared his insights into the history of the Detentionary for women in Fordon, and argued that while in the 1920s and 1930s the living conditions were bad, they even worsened in the 1950s. Anna Machcewicz (Warsaw) asked, based on her research on Wronki in the post-war period, whether prisoners – both political and criminal – actually felt their own bodies. She pointed out the long term impact of both physical and psychological violence on the prisoners and on their ability to act within the prison. Renata Szczepanik (Łódź) took this discussion into the late twentieth century by analyzing violence in Polish prisons and the perception of recidivist criminals. In his comment, Mateusz Rodak (Warsaw) drew on his own research on women in Warsaw prisons and hinted at the need to write a gendered history of incarceration in Poland.

The final session covered a blank spot in the discussion to date on Polish prisons – the guards. Dariusz Schmidt (Warsaw) introduced the theoretical ideas of Obermaier and Wichern regarding the role of prison guards. Jerzy Czołgoszewski (Olsztyn) analyzed a central normative document issued in the Kingdom of Poland in 1859. Ryszard Maleszyk (Krasnystaw) discussed the involvement of prison personnel in occupation regimes in twentieth century Poland. As an example he analyzed their agency under German occupation in the Lublin district in 1939–44. In one of the final papers, Tomasz Kozłowski (Warsaw) shared his insights into the role of guards in the pacification of prison uprisings in late communist Poland. Adam Redzik (Warsaw) pointed to the need to write a long term history of prison personnel and to include legal thinkers, lawyers, and theoreticians into this history.

The discussions during the workshop brought together insights into a highly diverse field and gathered together different perspectives on the Polish prison history. They showed that in the various contexts prison history still needs to be more strongly synthesized. But they also manifested the potential of a dialogue between those who work, or used to work, within the prison administration and those who conduct research with an outside view.

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