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**Mariusz Patelski, *“Czujni strażnicy demokracji” ludowej. Urząd cenzury w województwie opolskim 1950–1990 [Vigilant Guards of People’s Democracy. The Censorship Office in the Opole Voivodeship 1950–1990], Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2019, pp. 426.***

The monopoly of information belongs to the basis of the functioning of totalitarian systems and is an indispensable mechanism of their oppressive power. That is because it ensures concentration of the media and social persuasion in the hands of the State apparatus (or the State Party), as well as effective takeover of preventive control of information introduced into the social circulation. In the so-called People’s Poland (regardless of the closeness of its political references to the ideal totalitarian model), this role was fulfilled from 1944 by the Press Control Office, later transformed into the Supreme Office for Control of Press, Publications and Spectacles. This institution, relatively small in terms of personnel, in the period of its greatest flourishing comprising just over 300 substantive employees, exercised supervision over almost the entire cultural and scholar life in Poland, as well as over the sphere of entertainment. Due to the competences and capacity for action given to them, censors became reviewers, editors and even to some extent – behind alphanumeric symbols – anonymous and hidden co-authors of individual texts. They thus occupied an important place in the creation of the world of ideological representations, persuasions and justifications.

This extremely important role played by the censorship in post-war Poland and in other “Real Socialist” states before 1989 certainly had to have aroused the interest of historians and press experts, especially since the political breakthrough of 1989/1990, which caused it to disappear. However, there remained a certain

nimbus of secrecy surrounding this structure (which did not apply to authors who were summoned to the Office and came into direct contact with its functionaries). Its tendency at that time to remain in the shadows and to conceal its interventions has largely been maintained and is also a result of a fairly thorough action of destroying its archives. This made it difficult and sometimes impossible for researchers to gain a fuller understanding of its history and the whole range of its control activities, especially its field agencies. These problems are reflected in the present state of research and in the lack of not only a comprehensive monograph on the existence of the Supreme Office for Control of Press, Publications and Spectacles in Warsaw, but also on its voivodeship structures. That is why research works, often interesting and valuable, usually cover only a fragment of the history of particular local offices.

This makes M. Patelski's attempt to show the functioning of censorship in Opole Silesia in the years 1950–1990 all the more important and scientifically valuable. The aforementioned periods in the monograph cover the functioning of a separate Office for Control of Press, Publications and Spectacles, from the creation of the Opole Voivodeship in 1950 to the dissolution of censorship structures in Poland in 1990. This does not mean that the Author omitted censorship activities in the years 1945–1950 in the Opole region – administratively subordinated to Katowice at that time. At that time, censorship offices and agencies of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda went under the name: Voivodeship Press, Publication and Spectacles Control Office and later as Voivodeship Office for Control of Press, Publication and Spectacles, or Voivodeship Office of Information and Propaganda.

A certain substantive problem of the book is the fact that the Opole Voivodeship was created only in 1950, by detaching several poviats from the Silesian and Lower Silesian Voivodeships. Moreover, in 1975, it changed its area and boundaries as a result of the administrative reform. Therefore, the Author correctly deals in the monograph with the censorship activity in Opole Silesia within its borders in 1950–1975. For this reason, he does not write about the functioning of the censorship organs before 1950 in Brzeg, but mentions Namysłów. The issue of censorship activity in Racibórz, which found itself in the Katowice Voivodeship, was not discussed regarding the period following the reform of 1975.

The source base for the work under review is – despite the above-mentioned action of destroying the records – the materials of the Opole Press, Publications

and Spectacles Control Office, preserved in the Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw. The files of the Opole censorship were transferred to Warsaw in 1990, and it turned out, as the Author writes in the Introduction to the monograph, that despite the official “disappearance” of the documentation (or rather deliberate concealment of its traces), the majority of monthly, quarterly and semi-annual reports on the activities of the Office in Opole in the years 1951–1960 and annual reports from the years 1961–1989 survived. It transpired that the nationwide character of the censorship system made it possible to use archival materials stored in Gdańsk, Poznań and Zielona Góra, Rzeszów, as well as in the collection of the Institute of National Remembrance. The substantive content of censorship files from various regions, combined with analyses of extensive literature on the subject, enabled the Author to establish the scope and specificity of the functioning of censorship in the Polish People’s Republic at that time, both on a national and a local – Opole – scale.

The research undertaken by Mariusz Patelski deserves attention as an effective and fruitful collection of evidence of censorship activities from the resources of the Archdiocesan Archives in Opole. They concern editorial materials of the local Catholic *Wiadomości Urzędowe Kurii Biskupiej Śląska Opolskiego* [Official News of the Episcopal Curia of Opole Silesia] and *Wydawnictwo Św. Krzyża* [The Holy Cross Publishing House], whereas evidence of the simultaneous political control of the editorial staff of the local cultural monthly *Odra* and the Regional Broadcaster of the Polish Radio in Opole was provided by documents stored in the State Archives in Opole. The scope of archival searches undertaken by the Author is impressive, but other information – albeit not fundamental from the point of view of his work – could be found in the collections of the State Archives in Wrocław and the State Archives in Olsztyn. In both cases, due to the similar specificity of the area – inhabited by a significant number of native people – M. Patelski also reached for extensive literature on the subject, including studies analysing the functioning of censorship in individual periods of the Polish People’s Republic, both on a national and local scale.

The work consists of three chapters, i.e. separate parts whose narration is conducted in a chronological and chronological-thematic order. Chapter I, titled *Zanim powstało województwo opolskie* [Before the Opole Voivodeship was established], is introductory and aimed to show the genesis of censorship in the initial post-war stage of the so-called Polish People’s Republic. It concerns the creation

of field structures of the Supreme Office for Control of Press, Publications and Spectacles in the western districts of the then Silesian Voivodeship (until 1950) and the activities of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda (until 1947), when it competed with the censorship units in the sphere of publishing control.

An extensive Chapter II titled *Wojewódzki Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk w Opolu – powstanie, struktury i kadra* [Provincial Office for Control of Press, Publications and Spectacles in Opole – Establishment, Structures, and Personnel] covers the process of creating organisational foundations and the formation and functioning of the censorship office in Opole during the 40 years of its existence (from 1950 to 1990). This issue is discussed in a broader context of the scope of the activities of Supreme Office for Control of Press, Publications and Spectacles, as well as changes this institution underwent during its existence. The Author attempted a comprehensive discussion of the scope and range of censorship interference, which served not only to ration information, but also to create a kind of ideal “world of representations”, as the literature on the subject refers to the reality created by propaganda. The discrepancy between the reality and the censored image of the Polish People’s Republic is documented by the content of censorship regulations and recommendations, discussed in detail in the monograph, which, in conjunction with the instructions for censors, often in the form of large prints, now inform about the content and media forms of reality falsification and distortion. The Author’s findings are also original and valuable as they allowed for a closer characterisation of the censorship staff in Opole, especially two of them – Stanisław Dąbrowski and Eugeniusz Kanioka – who headed the Office from 1960 to 1990. These findings made it possible to show the peculiar absurdities of the history of People’s Poland, such as the inclusion, in the 1970s, of Party officials from the Provincial Office for Press, Publications and Spectacles Control in the composition of the Polish United Workers’ Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza – PZPR) Basic Party Organisation at the Creative Associations in Opole, and even electing the head censor (in 1975) the First Secretary of the Basic Party Organisation at the Creative Associations, which could almost seem like an idea borrowed from the satirical works of Sławomir Mrożek.

The last, very voluminous Chapter III deals with the activity of censorship officials in the Opole Voivodeship and provides an analytical overview of the main areas of their concern. These included: control of the daily and periodical press (especially the party newspaper *Trybuna Opolska*), censorship of non-periodical

publications, and supervision of local publications and the Catholic and religious press. In addition, detailed control was exercised over library book collections, as well as the repertoire of theatres and artistic groups or cabarets, from the State Theatre in Opole to amateur groups in communes.

The annual specificity of the city since 1963 was the National Festival of Polish Song in Opole; therefore, the Author (correctly) dealt with the characteristics of the activity of the Opole censorship also in this context. The Provincial Office in Opole was entrusted with supervision of the proper ideological and political face of the events constituting the Festival; the authorities were aware that the influence of the event extends beyond the local area. While the song contest itself did not pose any major concerns for the censorship team and entailed no problems in detecting and attempting (more or less successfully) to eliminate any ideological or moral misconduct, the Kabareton (the event during which cabaret programs are presented), which accompanied the Festival, became a serious political challenge, especially in the 1980s. Its popularity stemmed from political accents, so the activities of the Provincial Office were monitored in Warsaw and assessed by the highest party and state authorities. One could get the impression that in those circumstances, for a short time, Opole became the capital of Polish song, including political and artistic one, subject to the vigilance of the local censors.

Mariusz Patelski tried to capture and highlight the specificity of the Opole censorship activities, which – due to the ethnic composition and historical experiences of the Opole Silesian population – manifested itself in a particular sensitivity to any content concerning the autochthonous (native) population and German issues. Censors in Opole were equally scrupulous in searching for “harmful content” in the provincial organ of the PZPR, *Trybuna Opolska*, as well as in the publications of the Episcopal Curia of Opole Silesia, i.e. weekly magazines *Katolik* (1954–1961) and *Niedziela*, the latter published in Częstochowa (1981–1990), but printed in Opole. Manifestations of “dissidence, opposition, and anti-Sovietism” were tracked down in them.

In this context, it should be added that the local censorship team, weak in terms of expertise, was generally unprepared for this politically responsible role. Nevertheless, it was also burdened with releasing for publication or banning scientific and scholar texts, including historical ones. With reference to these commitments, it should be noted that the monograph lacks information on the selection criteria of censorship employees, including their knowledge of foreign languages – especially

German. This matter was important, taking into account the specificity of the area in which they operated and the rank of the tasks to which they were engaged, including the inspection of book collections and the search for the presence in them of “forbidden works” in German. There were also other shortcomings in the source material which prevented Mariusz Patelski from characterising the activities of the censors in the periods of the well-known crisis events of the Polish People’s Republic, when the “protection of state secrets” was strengthened. For this reason, it was not possible to discuss the social range and methods of operation of the so-called poviati plenipotentiaries of the Office, which functioned until the administrative reform in 1975.

The title of the monograph *Vigilant Guards of People’s Democracy. The Censorship Office in the Opole Voivodeship 1950–1990* seems appropriate and adequate for the activities of its staff. The Author has successfully undertaken the equally ambitious as well as difficult task of reconstructing the history of the censorship office in Opole and characterising its activities. The ideological vigilance of the office was institutional and specific, concentrated in a small group of people nestling in a few rooms of the city’s offices. During the 40 years of Office’s existence in Opole, it changed its headquarters five times, constituting only 2% of the apparatchiks from the army of functionaries of political and ideological struggle serving the Polish People’s Republic. Compared to the Central Office and even some of its local branches, e.g., in Wrocław and Katowice, Opole could seem a marginal unit. However, it had its political value in the fact that it exercised control over an area where the problem of the native population was particularly evident. After 1963, due to the significance of several June days and nights, when Opole became the centre of national stage life, the local unit of censorship also probably gained in importance.

Despite the scarcity of local archival materials and the resulting information gaps concerning the Censorship Office in Opole, Mariusz Patelski has done his best to fill them. The result is an important and very interesting work about an oppressive political system, outlining the functioning of a crucial institution in the sphere of propaganda and politics of the time. Although it remained in the shadow of the extensive structures of the security apparatus, it was an extremely important and effective tool for controlling society and consolidating the omnipotence of the Party-State.