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Inscriptions of the political prisoners of the security authorities of People's Poland in 1944–1956 as a historical source (illustrated with an example of the detention centre in Radzyń Podlaski)

This article describes the outcomes of the research on the inscriptions made by political prisoners in the detention center of the Poviát Public Security Office in Radzyń Podlaski in the years 1944–1956. It is an effect of a research project implemented in the years 2014–2024 whose aim was to supplement the missing archival sources concerning the activity of the opposition and independence underground movement in Poland in the post-war period. The inscriptions provide valuable information on the experiences of victimized people and constitute an alternative historical source. This article also presents a historical background of the operations of the detention center which was the place of brutal interrogations and victimization of the members of the independence underground movement and regular citizens accused of anticommunism. This paper discusses the meaning of these inscriptions in the context of understanding the functioning of totalitarian systems and the fortunes of prisoners. The outcome of the research is the photographic inventory of inscriptions; whereas, the analysis of investigation files and contextual research contribute to learning about this period in the history of Poland to a greater extent.

Keywords: Political prisoners, Communism, Inscriptions, Post-war Poland, Repression, Independence underground, Historical sources.

Introduction

The research on the inscriptions of political prisoners in Radzyń Podlaski from 1944–1956 is not only current, but also extremely important for understanding the complexity of the period of Stalinist terror in Poland. The significance of such notes is very important as unique historical sources. They constitute ego documents that document the personal experiences of the repressed. In the context of the lack of archival materials produced by the underground and the independence opposition, these inscriptions become an invaluable testimony to the fight for freedom and opposition to the oppression of the communist apparatus. This research could be undertaken thanks to the democratization of political life after the fall of the communist regime and the access historians received to places where political terror was carried out. At the moment, they are part of a scientific analysis conducted on similar sources of this type in Europe, concerning prisons in modern England or Nazi Germany.

The research conducted allows for the reconstruction of the fates of people involved in anti-communist activities, who were supposed to be doomed to oblivion. Both the historical context and the analysis of the inscriptions provide valuable information that can enrich our knowledge of the mechanisms of repression. At the same time, they enable social and moral education, reminding us of the heroism of individuals who opposed oppression. In the era of contemporary challenges related to historical memory, this type of research is not only necessary but also urgent, so as not to forget the suffering of the victims.

Materials and Research Methods

This study is the result of a research project which I carried out in the years 2014–2024. It concerned the problems of the communists fighting the Polish independence underground and the political opposition in the years 1944–1956; whereas, the special object of the research were the prisoners' inscriptions left on the walls of the building of the detention center located in the poviát city of Radzyń Podlaski in the northern part of Lublin region in central-eastern Poland. The history of the terror of the power installed in Poland with the aid of the Soviet army in 1944 already has abundant scientific literature created after the collapse of the communist rule in 1989. Unfortunately, the details of the functioning of the underground and the opposition in this period still leave much to be desired. This is mainly due to the lack of archival sources created by the opponents of the regime. For over half a century of communism fighting all the manifestations of the freedom activities of society resulted in nearly complete lack of documentation of the post-war structures of

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democratic political opposition represented by the Polish People's Party of Stanisław Mikołajczyk and the armed underground (the National Army and the Freedom and Independence Association, and the National Armed Forces). The few documents prepared by them, which are currently in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, were collected by the communist security services during their investigations. Therefore, they constitute very fragmentary, residual, repeatedly intermediate collections, composed of records that are often accidental and unrepresentative of underground and opposition activities [1].

Gaining access to the former headquarters of communist terror by researchers became an opportunity to supplement the archives of the opposition's provenance with historical sources of a different kind. The usefulness of such objects for these purposes was quickly noticed both in relation to Poland and other post-communist countries. It is worth mentioning, for example, Polish studies on the places of repression [2], the traces of crimes in Gdańsk Voivodeship [3] and in the discussed area [4], the search and identification of corpses on the so-called Łączka at the Powązki Military Cemetery in Warsaw [5]. As for literature discussing similar issues in other parts of the world, one should mention the works of Stephane Courtois [6], Orlando Figes [7], Michael Jakobson [8] or David Chandler [9]. The places of torture and everyday life of prisoners provide valuable information on the experiences and feelings of the repressed, and thus constitute an important source for research on the mechanisms of operation of the oppressive systems and their understanding. The prisoners' inscriptions have a special place here. The importance of such records was appreciated in many historical objects, which over time became not only memorial sites, but also museums. One can mention here a collection of electroplating from wax forms of graffiti left by prisoners on the stone walls of the London Tower in the 16th and 17th centuries, when it served as the most important prison in England [10], the inscriptions of prisoners in the German extermination camp Auschwitz I [11], or 1800 inscriptions and drawings of prisoners from the years 1943–1945 in the former Gestapo prison located in the Nazi Documentation Centre of the City of Cologne in Germany [12].

As for the inscriptions left by prisoners of the Polish communist security authorities, they are preserved in many of their former headquarters scattered all over the country. In the prison in Radzyń Podlaski there is one of the richest collections of this type, and its research is among the most advanced ones. The building at 5A Warszawska Street is one of the best-preserved material substances of this type, with an original spatial arrangement. Inscriptions are placed on the walls of the prison cells. They were made using what they had at hand: nails, screws, charcoal, pencils, pieces of chalk.

Discussion and Results

Historical background: The years 1944–1956 were a period of intense changes in Poland, characterized by socio-political tensions, reorganization of public life and brutal introduction of the communist system by the authorities controlled by the Soviet Union. It was the time of the formation of a new political, economic and social reality, and at the same time, the continuation of the struggle for independence by the armed underground, the so-called Cursed Soldiers, and the political resistance on the part of the political opposition towards the new regime. The process of taking power by the Communists was gradual but systematic. A key role was played by the falsified parliamentary elections of 1947, which enabled the Polish Labour Party to take control of the parliament, and the security services, thanks to mass arrests, torture and executions, eliminated the opposition and organized underground structures. Detention centers, as the one in Radzyń Podlaski, were the places of execution and detention of thousands of people accused of cooperating with the underground or opposing the authorities. Public life control was reinforced by censorship, surveillance and propaganda, which were intended to perpetuate the new power.

Characteristics of the detention center

The gloomy history of the detention center in Radzyń Podlaski dates back to the 19th century, when the gendarmerie of the Russian Empire, under the rule of which the Kingdom of Poland was placed, established its post here, which existed until the withdrawal of the tsarist administration in 1915. The detention center of the occupying authorities returned here again as a result of the victory of Nazi Germany over Poland in 1939 in the form of a post of the Secret State Police (Gestapo). As part of the occupation structure, it played a key role in the implementation of the extermination and repressive policy towards the Polish, Jewish and other groups recognized by the Nazis as inferior races [13]. The history of this place is a tragic testimony to the suffering brought by the German occupation. The detention center in Radzyń served as a place of temporary detention of persons suspected of conspiracy activity and accidental victims of raids. Prisoners, whose number could be up to 400 at a time, were later transported to other institutions, such as Lublin Castle, and then

sent to concentration camps: Auschwitz, Majdanek and Gross-Rosen [14]. The Germans left the city on July 21, 1944, two days before the entry of the Soviet army. The detention center is a tragic reminder of the brutality of the German occupation.

After the end of World War II, the building was taken over by the new communist government. In August 1944, the Poviatic Public Security Office (PUBP) was organized there, which again became a local center of repression, this time against the anti-communist underground and people inconvenient for the “people’s” power [15]. The PUBP facility in Radzyń was established on the initiative of the Polish Committee of National Liberation — a quasi-government being a tool of the Soviet Union’s power in Poland. Its aim was to pacify the political opposition and the anti-communist underground. The structure of the office included sections responsible for counter-intelligence, investigations, records and agency, as well as operational work. In addition, there were bureaucratic support units, such as a law firm or an economic department. The PUBP leadership consisted of people associated with the communist movement, often with experience in pro-Soviet military organizations.

The head of Radzyń PUBP was a pre-war communist agent. His activities were supervised by a soldier of the Red Army and the Polish People’s Army, known for his participation in the battles against the independence troops. The staff also included members of the PPR and people associated with the pro-Soviet structures. Brutal investigations were carried out in the detention center, and they were primarily aimed at breaking down the structures of the underground. In the years 1944–1956 about 1790 people passed through its cells, including approximately 450 soldiers of the independence underground, and besides deserters from the Polish People’s Army, people evading enlistment, as well as political opponents of the authorities, often without justified evidence, which was fabricated during investigations.

The effectiveness of PUBP’s activities was based on an extensive agency network that functioned among the local population and opposition structures. As early as in 1944, the institution had 41 agents and informants operating in the surrounding society, and their number was systematically growing. Incrimination, blackmail and intimidation became the common tools of population control.

The prisoners of Radzyń detention center were subjected to brutal interrogations, the aim of which was to force their testimony or break their spirit. Conditions in the detention center were extremely difficult — damp prison cells, hunger and psychological violence were commonplace. After a short time, many prisoners were transported to Lublin, where investigations continued or they were sent to further places of repression. The allegations made by PUBP officers were often fabricated and abused in order to eliminate people who were inconvenient for the authorities. People were accused of “cooperating with gangs”, “spying” or of “economic sabotage”, even if their only fault was to help underground soldiers or to oppose communist politics [4].

The most intense period of repression occurred in the years 1944–1947, when the communist authorities were struggling with the active resistance of the society. In 1946, during the peak of the repression, the number of detainees reached a climax. After 1947, due to the announcement of amnesty and the falsification of parliamentary elections, the number of political prisoners decreased slightly, but the terror returned with new force in the following years. Not earlier than in the 50’s of the 20th c., with the progressive consolidation of communist power and the elimination of social resistance, the number of people passing through Radzyń detention center began to decrease slowly. As a result of the political thaw of 1954–1956 the security authorities underwent a significant reorganization.

The facility is located in the depths of the courtyard, behind the tenement house, which served as the administrative and office building of PUBP. It is based in a brick, ground-floor barrack. Administrative rooms and interrogation rooms were located on the ground floor, while the prison cells were located in the basement. There are wooden stairs leading to it, at the end of which there is a corridor running along the entire building. The prison cells are located on the left side of the corridor (six cells) and opposite its end. The cells are numbered — from the entry: No. 1, No. 2, No. 3, No. 4, No. 6 and No. 7. Their area ranges from several to several dozen square meters. The prison cell doors are original, made of solid boards reinforced with metal bars. They are equipped with prison peepholes allowing to look inside the cell, and which could be covered from the outside with a metal lock. The interiors of the rooms have remained almost unchanged since the use of the facility by the security police. The walls of the prison cells are varied — some are covered with plaster, others made of red brick whitewashed with lime. In the walls there are small window openings located at the ground level.

Typology and analysis of inscriptions

The research activities, carried out as part of the research project, were divided into three phases. In the first one, all the inscriptions engraved by prisoners on the walls and left on the door of the prison cells were photographed and then stock-taken. The second phase consisted of performing an archival query in the documents of investigations conducted by the Poviát Public Security Office in Radzyń Podlaski, stored at the Institute of National Remembrance with its Branch in Lublin [15]. In the third phase, a research analysis of the information collected on the detention center was carried out, taking into account the historical context of its operation. Its result was the preparation of:

- The outline of the history of the detention center [16],
- The catalogue of the prisoners' inscriptions with reference to the photographic material [17],
- The list of the independence underground soldiers imprisoned in the center [18],
- The list of PUBP officers [19],
- The list of informants and secret collaborators of PUBP [20],
- The list of all the independence underground soldiers in Radzyń powiat [21].

To date, 595 inscriptions have been inventoried, including 198 names and surnames [22]. The dates left by the persecuted proved that they are from 1944–1950. The preserved and legible inscriptions are divided into several categories, which show the diversity of emotions and experiences of prisoners. They can be divided into:

- personal — they allow to identify the authors and bring their fate closer,
- religious — they show the strength of faith in the face of suffering and uncertainty,
- sentential — they show the sense of isolation and hopelessness of prisoners,
- dates — document specific dates of imprisonment,
- the names of the places — indicate the territorial origin of the prisoners and reflect a wide range of repression,
- drawings — emphasize an attempt to preserve humanity and deep spirituality.

Each of these elements testifies to the fact that the inscriptions were the ultimate form of the resistance of the prisoners — a way to leave something behind in a place that was supposed to erase all the traces of their existence.

The analysis of the inscriptions demonstrated that many of their authors are the Cursed Soldiers. The fate of some of them has already been documented in historical materials. The memory of others was only restored by public presentations and publication of the outcomes of the project. Finding documents in the archival material concerning a man who had recorded his first and last name on the wall of the prison cell was accompanied by extreme emotions of both the project participants and the readers of the publication, especially the families of persecuted people, about whose tragic fate they often knew nothing about. Such an example is the inscription of Aleksander (Olek) Mróz from Niewęgłosz, whose research led to the reconstruction of the history of this soldier of the Freedom and Independence Association, nicknamed “Wiosna”, who was in the detention center of the PUBP in May 1946 [23] (Fig. 1).



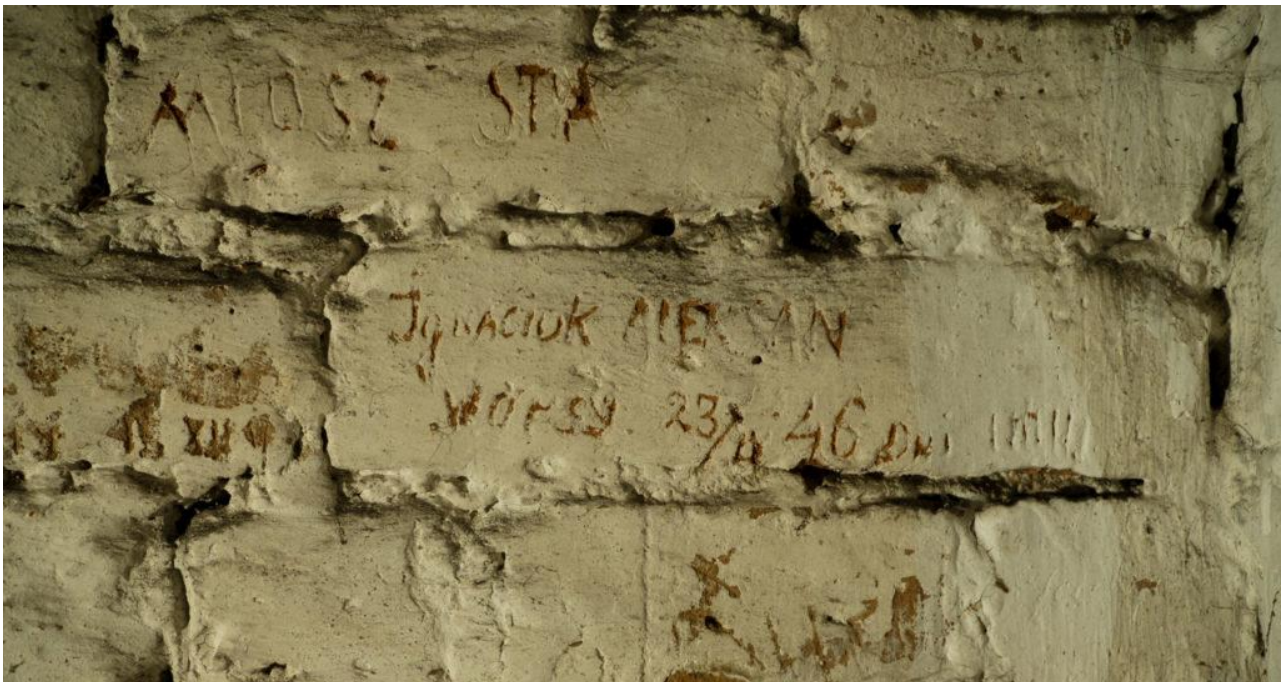
Figure 1. On the left, an inscription by Aleksander Mróz on the wall of the detention center in Radzyń Podlaski; on the right, a photo of him in the investigation files of the communist political police.

Source: D. Magier, *The anti-communist underground soldiers in the detention center of the Poviát Public Security Office in Radzyń Podlaski (1944–1954)*, Radzyń Podlaski 2014, p. 18.

The inscriptions in the prison cells, put at the time of uncertainty of the prisoners as to their future fate, were the final form of a protest against the brutal treatment and investigative methods used by PUBP. The engraved dates and names are a proof that the walls of these cells were also witnesses to the struggle for freedom, but also to the systemic terror against the citizens. In this way, they become an affective historical source describing events that for years were falsified and marginalized by the official narrative. They are a kind of a living archive, a witness to events, a testimony to individual dramas which are a national tragedy in the times of systemic terror. The inscriptions left by the prisoners are not only a proof of their presence, but also the expression of courage and the need to leave a trace that has survived the inhuman time. In this way, they became a bridge between the past and the present, reminding of the price paid by those who had the courage to resist oppression.

History leaves traces in various forms: documents, witness accounts, material artefacts. One of the least obvious and, at the same time, extremely meaningful historical sources are the inscriptions left on the walls of the seclusion places. In the PUBP detention center in Radzyń Podlaski, such inscriptions are a special testimony to the post-war Soviet era of Poland. These signs engraved in plaster and brick, drawn on wooden doors, not only document the fate of the prisoners, but also reveal the mechanisms of the communist regime terror and resistance to it. It is worth mentioning at least a few aspects resulting from the in-depth analysis of this specific historical source.

It is certainly a testimony to the fate of individual people. The inscriptions left by the prisoners of the detention center in Radzyń Podlaski are primarily a source of information about the individuals. Names, surnames, dates and locations, such as “Ignaciuk Aleksander, Worsy, 22 IV 46” (Fig. 2) or “Szaniawski Władysław, Ulan commune, on 20 II 1946” (Fig. 3), allow historians to identify the authors of these inscriptions and reconstruct their fate. They are a direct record of the existence of people whose lives were largely erased from the official narrative of the Polish People’s Republic.



Source: http://instytutzłubowskiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/5_018.jpg (access: 6.01.2025).

Figure 2. Inscription by Aleksander Ignaciuk from Worsy dated 22.04.1946.

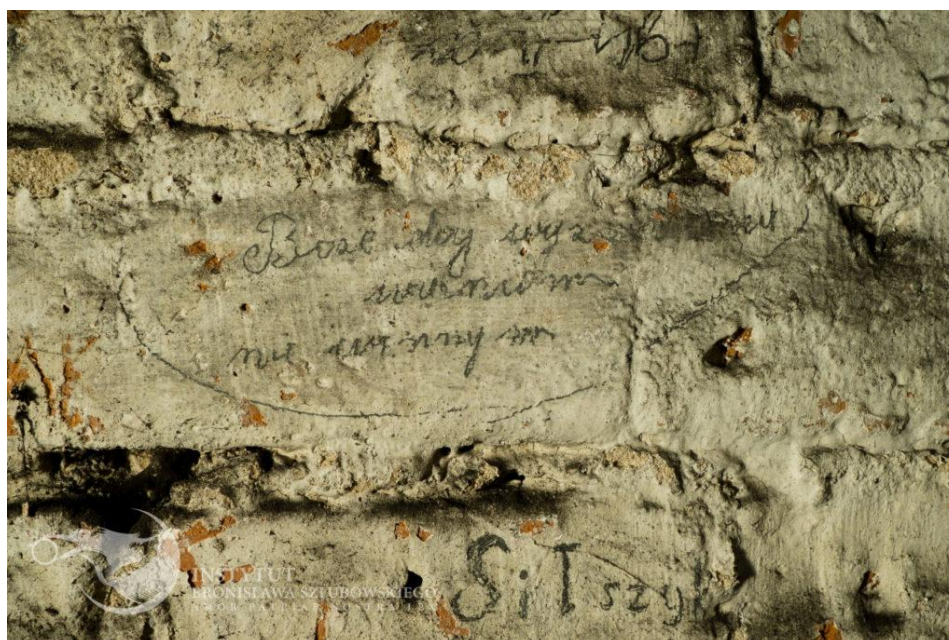


Source: http://instytutszlubowskiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/6_030.jpg

Figure 3. Inscription by Aleksander Szaniawski from Ulan commune dated 20.02.1946.

It allows to get emotionally close to the characters from the past. The names engraved on the wall are the proof of the human need to leave a testimony, even in the most difficult conditions. Thanks to this, they become a carrier of memory about people who found themselves in the modes of a ruthless machine of repression.

Religious inscriptions, such as “God, give liberation to innocent prisoners” (Fig. 4) or “Oh, God, save us” (Fig. 5), show the spiritual side of the life of the prisoners. Faced with suffering and uncertainty, faith was the only source of hope for many of them. The drawings of crosses and chapels prove that for these followers of Christianity religion was a form of consolation and also an instrument of resistance to dehumanization. For historians, these elements testify to the spiritual life of prisoners and show how important the Catholic religion was in Polish society during the communist era.



Source: http://instytutszlubowskiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/6_036.jpg

Figure 4. Inscription reading as follows: “God, give liberation to innocent prisoners”.

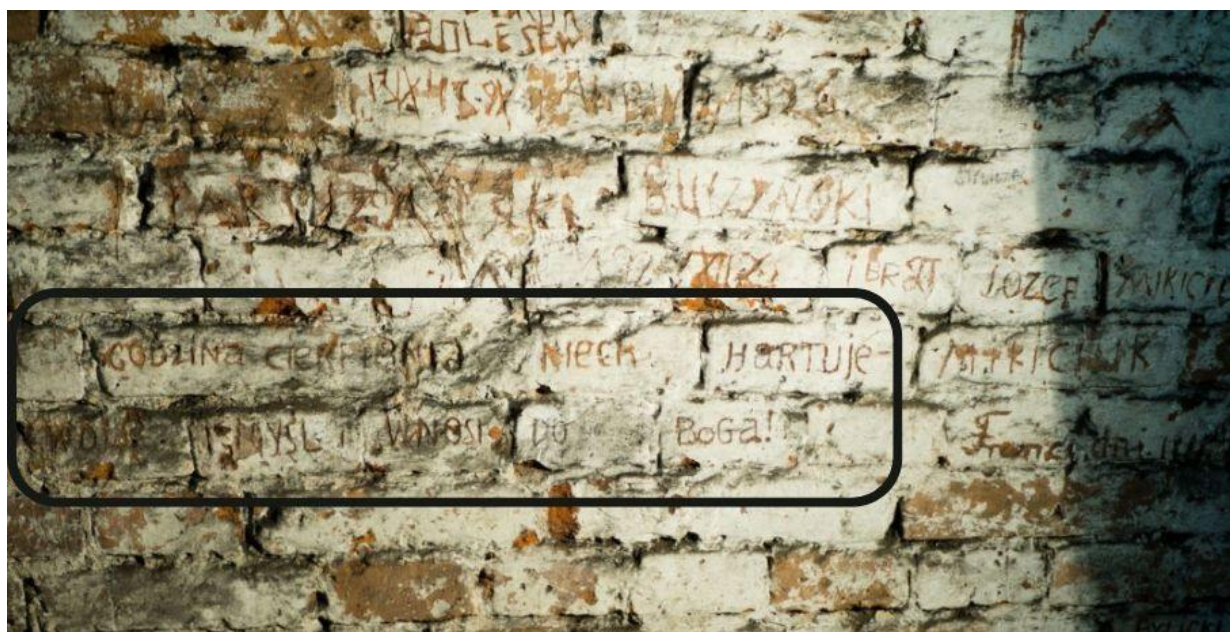


Source: „http://instytutzłubowskiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/6_015.jpg (access: 6.01.2025).

Figure 5. Inscription reading as follows: “Oh, God, save us”.

The dates engraved on the walls clearly indicate the period of operation of PUBP in Radzyń Podlaski and are a kind of the indictment of the perpetrators. The inscriptions become a proof of systemic terror, which affected not only the soldiers of the armed underground, but also ordinary citizens. The prison walls tell the truth about the scale of repression and brutality of the regime.

In addition to personal and religious data, there are also sentences on the walls, such as “Let every hour of suffering harden the will and raise the thoughts to God” (Fig. 6) or “Human life is fragile and unstable like porcelain” (Fig. 7). They testify to the thoughts and emotions of prisoners, which could not be recorded in official documents. This information is of great value to researchers because it reflects the subjective experience of terror and isolation, and also shows the strength of hope for regaining freedom. In this way, they play the role of not only a historical source, but also a carrier of national memory. In the context of contemporary reflection on the communist period in Poland, it is a reminder of the victims of the regime and their heroism. It is also a warning against ignoring individual destinies in the name of political goals.



Source: http://instytutzłubowskiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/6_043.jpg

Figure 6. Inscription reading as follows: “Let every hour of suffering harden the will and raise the thoughts to God”.



Source: http://instytutszlubowskiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/7_004.jpg

Figure 7. Inscription reading as follows: “Human life is fragile and unstable like porcelain” from 1949.

Conclusions

The research on the inscriptions of political prisoners from the period of People’s Poland in the PUBP detention center in Radzyń Podlaski sheds new light on the tragic events of 1944–1956. These records are a unique testimony to the lives and deaths of people who resisted the communist regime. They are not only historical sources, but also a symbol of human determination, faith and courage in the face of terror. Thanks to the research project, it was possible not only to secure them for posterity, but also to restore the memory of their authors, often forgotten by official historiography. The outcomes of the research bring educational and moral value, reminding the contemporary people about the dark pages of history and the need to cultivate the memory of those who fought for the freedom and independence of Poland.

The legacy left by the prisoners of the PUBP detention center in Radzyń Podlaski is also a reminder of their suffering and sacrifice. The awareness of these events and the analysis of such testimonies as prisoners’ inscriptions allow for a deeper understanding of the repression mechanisms of totalitarian regimes and pay tribute to the victims of oppression systems.

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Дауриш Магер

**1944–1956 жж. Халықтық Польша қауіпсіздік органдарындағы
саяси тұтқындардың жазбалары тарихи дерек ретінде
(Радзын-Подлясктегі тұтқындау орталығының мысалында)**

Мақалада 1944–1956 жылдары Радзынь-Подласк қаласындағы «Повят» Қоғамдық қауіпсіздік басқармасының тергеу изоляторында саяси тұтқындардың жазған жазбаларының зерттеу нәтижелері сипатталған. Бұл 2014–2024 жылдары жүзеге асырылған зерттеу жобасының нәтижесі, оның мақсаты соғыстан кейінгі кезеңде Польшадағы оппозиция мен астыртын Тәуелсіздік қозғалысының қызметі туралы жетіспейтін мұрағаттық дереккөздерді толықтыру. Жазбаларда зардап шеккен адамдардың басынан өткен оқиғалары туралы құнды мәліметтер бар және балама тарихи дереккөз болып саналады. Сондай-ақ мақалада астыртын Тәуелсіздік қозғалысының мүшелері мен антикоммунизммен айыпталған қарапайым азаматтардан айуандықпен жауап алу мен тұтқындарды қамауда ұстау орталығының қызметі туралы тарихи анықтама берілген. Автор бұл жазбалардың маңызын тоталитарлық жүйелердің қызметі мен тұтқындардың тағдырын түсіну тұрғысында қарастырған. Зерттеудің нәтижесі жазулардың фотографиялық тізімдемесі болып табылады, ал тергеу істерін талдау және контекстік зерттеулер Польша тарихындағы осы кезеңді тереңірек зерттеуге ықпал етеді.

Кілт сөздер: саяси тұтқындар, коммунизм, жазулар, соғыстан кейінгі Польша, қуғын-сүргін, астыртын тәуелсіздік, тарихи дереккөздер.

Дауриш Магер

**Надписи политических заключенных органов безопасности
Народной Польши 1944–1956 гг. как иллюстрированный исторический
источник (на примере следственного изолятора в Радзыне-Подляском)**

Данная статья посвящена результатам исследования надписей, оставленных политическими заключенными в следственном изоляторе Управления общественной безопасности «Повят» в Радзыне-Подляске в 1944–1956 гг. Исследование является частью проекта, реализованного в 2014–2024 годах, цель которого – восполнить пробелы в архивных источниках, связанных с деятельностью оппозиций и подпольного движения за независимость в Польше в послевоенный период. Надписи заключенных содержат ценную информацию об их переживаниях и представляют собой альтернативный исторический источник. В статье также представлена историческая справка о деятельности центра содержания под стражей, который был местом жестоких допросов и репрессий в отношении участников подпольного движения за независимость, а также граждан, обвиненных в антикоммунизме. Обсуждается значение этих надписей для понимания функционирования тоталитарных систем и судеб заключенных. Результатом исследования стала фотографическая опись надписей. Кроме того, анализ следственных дел и контекстуальные исследования способствуют более глубокому изучению данного периода в истории Польши.

Ключевые слова: политические заключенные, коммунизм, надписи, послевоенная Польша, репрессии, независимое подполье, исторические источники.

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