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Reckoning with History. Public perception of the communist past from the perspective of Poland and Russia[1]

1. Introductory notes

The topic of the perception of the communist past in Poland (the attitude towards the People's Republic of Poland) and in Russia (in relation to the USSR) is very broad and wide-ranging. After the collapse of communism in 1989, Eastern European countries were faced with the task of coming to terms with their totalitarian past. This was a difficult and controversial issue and was tackled differently by each country. A number of top-ranking activities in this regard were to include the following issues: in practical terms – among others, legal compensation for the victims of crimes and persecutions, judging the perpetrators of these crimes, normatively preventing the officers of the former communist secret services and their collaborators from participating in public life (the lustration process) and making the files and documents collected by the secret service organs available to the victimized persons; in the theoretical or scientific-educational dimension – the creation of a database of victims of the system and a thorough examination of individual cases, the organisation of remembrance institutes with a broad scientific-research base, the dissemination of knowledge on the subject in scientific literature and publications of a popular-educational nature.

Pursuing these comprehensive measures was seen not only as a form of justice and reparation to the victims of this system, but also as an attempt to prevent the decision-makers of this system and their ideological successors from having any influence on

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the shape of the sovereign state that aspired to be a state under the rule of law. Fundamental to this process, important for both perpetrators and victims of the communist system, was the formation of a common remembrance, the creation of a common narrative of reckoning with the past. Noteworthy is that the systemic transformation, which took place differently in each country but in a stepwise manner everywhere, made this process a part of the political struggle. In turn, the process of accounting for the past itself became embroiled in a dispute that further contributed to political divisions.

In the Republic of Poland after 1989 and in the Russian Federation since 1991, the wholeness of these processes was quite different and fundamentally dependent on the social perception of the communist past. The attitude of the citizens of both countries to the system of the previous era constituted a worldview element classifying them into the background of particular political options, which in the election process directly influenced the shape, dynamics and direction of the process of accounting for the past. In Poland (as well as in other countries of the communist bloc), the representatives of the new authorities, stemming from the anti-communist opposition (strongly supported by society), regarded the process of settling accounts with the communist system, which formed a form of limited sovereignty imposed from above after 1945, as an evident not only political but also moral obligation. In Russia, on the other hand, after the collapse of the USSR, there is an institutional continuity of the power elite, formed and active in the previous period. The Russian leadership had no need to work towards drawing a significant line under this issue, as any systemic solution to the issue posed a direct threat to themselves . Nor was there a significant social force in Russia (even under Boris Yeltsin) that wanted to pursue such a radical scenario. Nor was there a widespread social demand to pursue such a policy. Over time, the policy of the authorities, aimed at historical resentment, shaped a social model nostalgic for the times of the USSR and glorifying that period.

Drawing on public opinion polls providing an assessment of the communist era, the article will present similarities and differences in the perception of this period by the societies of Poland and the Russian Federation and analyse the reasons for such attitudes. More than thirty years after the collapse of communism, it is worth considering what were the common features of the public perception of the previous era, and what were the peculiarities and distinctive features of Poland and Russia.

2. Poles about the PRL

The attitude of Poles towards the People's Republic of Poland will be exemplified by the surveys published in 2000, 2009 and 2014 by the Public Opinion Research Centre. In the year 2000, they were presented in a publication entitled *Oblicza SLD, czyli o tożsamości nowej partii,* w 2009 – pt. *Oceny i rozliczenia okresu PRL w opinii publicznej,* a w 2014 –pt. *PRL – doświadczenia, oceny, skojarzenia*[2].

[2] *See* Oblicza SLD, czyli o tożsamości nowej partii, "CBOS research communication", Warsaw, February 2000, BS/30/2000, http://www.cbos.pl, inf. of 17 IX 2022; Oceny i rozliczenia okresu PRL w opinii publicznej, "CBOS research communication", Warsaw, June 2009, BS/93/2009, http://www.cbos.

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Table 1. How do you assess the period of the People's Republic of Poland in Polish history?

Responses	Percentage by year		
	2000	2009	2014
Definitely positive	8	9	9
Rather positive	36	35	35
Rather negative	34	31	32
Definitely negative	13	12	14
Hard to say	9	13	10

Source: PRL – doświadczenia, oceny, skojarzenia, „Komunikat z badań CBOS", Warsaw, May 2014, http://www.cbos.pl, inf. of 17 IX 2022.

In response to one of the key questions about perceptions of the past, Poles were almost evenly divided: 44% of respondents positively assessed the period of the People's Republic of Poland in the history of their own country and an almost identical group of 43% holds a negative attitude towards this era. Over the fourteen years of CBOP's surveys, the percentages of positive and negative opinions about the People's Republic of Poland have remained basically unchanged.

The main factors that affected the attitudes of respondents included: the age of the respondents, education, income criterion, the place of residence and political orientation. The age parameter suggests that the lack of a specific attitude towards the communist times mainly concerned very young people, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The evaluation of the communist period in Polish history by the age of the respondents

Age of the respondents	The evaluation of the communist period in Polish history		
	Positive	Negative	Difficult to specify
To 34 years	24%	45%	31%
40 years and more	54%	42%	4%

Source: PRL – doświadczenia, oceny, skojarzenia, „Komunikat z badań CBOS", Warsaw, May 2014, NR 61/2014, http://www.cbos.pl, inf. of 17 IX 2022.

The above data indicates that the age limit below which the percentage of "hard to say" declarations fell noticeably was 40: every third person in this age group did not have an opinion on the subject. Among older respondents, only a few were unable to express an opinion on these times, and more than half assessed the PRL period in Polish history well. The reasons for the unspecified opinions of people in the age group of 40 should be sought primarily in their lack of memory of the PRL and, consequently, their lack of an emotional-empirical attitude to that era.

pl, inf. of 17 IX 2022; PRL – doświadczenia, oceny, skojarzenia, "CBOS research communication", Warsaw, May 2014, NR 61/2014, http://www.cbos.pl, inf. of 17 IX 2022.

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The opinions concerning the perception of the PRL period also depended on the level of education, place of residence and political preferences of the people participating in the survey. The most critical attitude was presented by the respondents with higher education (68% of negative opinions), with the highest income (64%), the residents of large urban areas (59%), with right-wing political views (62%). A favourable attitude to PRL was declared by the respondents with left-wing views. Political preferences played an important role in the perception of the country's communist past. For example, the respondents who belonged to the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) before 1989 had an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the communist times (65%). On the other hand, among former members of the Solidarity movement, the answers were proportionally opposite – a negative attitude to this period clearly prevailed (64%)[3].

The respondents' perception of the communist past depended largely on their political affiliation. Those who belonged to the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) before 1989 had an overwhelmingly positive view of the People's Republic of Poland, while Solidarity members shared divided opinions, with a slight predominance of negative attitudes towards this period of history. The percentages were as follows:

– among those who declared membership of the Polish United Workers' Party before 1989: 77% – positively evaluated the People's Republic, 21% – negatively, 2% – had no opinion;

– among those who functioned within the anti-system opposition, -45%, 52% and 3% respectively. With a reference to the political options of the first fifteen years of the 2000s, a critical attitude to PRL in the potential electorate was declared by the majority of PO and PiS supporters (respectively: 61% and 57% of negative evaluations). To a large extent, voters of PSL (65% of positive ratings) and SLD (57%) had positive attitudes to that period. Also, respondents with unspecified political views and non-voters more often spoke positively than negatively about PRL[4].

In this context (of political preferences), the attitude of Poles towards settling the country's post-war history also came out quite clearly in the survey. The vast majority of respondents (76%) felt that the settlements should be terminated and that the period should be left for historians to study. Less than one out of five respondents (18%) thought that the process should be continued because the People's Republic of Poland had not been sufficiently settled. Table 3 presents respondents' attitudes to the PRL settlements in relation to potential political preferences.

[3] PRL – doświadczenia, oceny, skojarzenia, „Komunikat z badań CBOP", Warsaw, May 2014, NR 61/2014, http://www.cbos.pl, inf. of 17 IX 2022.

[4] *Ibidem.*

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Table 3. „The attitude towards PRL settlement in relation to potential political preferences"

Potencjalne elektoraty	In your opinion, should we now deal with these issues of settling accounts in the People's Republic of Poland or should the settlements be terminated and that period left for historians to study?		
	The following should be dealt with	It should be completed	Hard to say
PO	13	81	6
SLD	12	86	2
PiS	40	53	7
People not intending to vote for any political option	16	78	6

Source: Oceny i rozliczenia okresu PRL w opinii publicznej, „Komunikat z badań CBOS", Warsaw, June 2009, BS/93/2009, http://www.cbos.pl, inf. of 17 IX 2022

The data presented in Table 2 clearly indicate that the potential electorates of PO and SLD, as well as the group of people not represented on the political scene, did not differ significantly in their views on the issue of settling accounts for the PRL period: the majority believed that the evaluation of that era should be left to experts. In contrast, the supporters of the Law and Justice party were far more likely to be in favour of settling accounts for the PRL period. The results of the CBOS poll also showed that more than two-thirds of Poles (69%) believed that it is impossible to judge fairly the people in power at that time in their contemporary times. Only one in five respondents (21%) expressed the opposite opinion. Significantly, the majority of respondents (56%) would accept such a form of accounting for the past, which would be based on a moral judgement of those times and the stigmatisation of what was wrong. In turn, more than half of the respondents were in favour of disclosing the data of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) from the years 1944–1989. The authors of the report noted, however, that one cannot overlook the fact that there is a growing group of people in Polish society who are increasingly opposed to this[5].

In relation to the presented research ("Attitude towards the PRL settlements"), a survey conducted in April 2007 by the Institute of Social and International Research of the Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz Foundation, within the framework of the omnibus research of the research centre Mareco Poland, concerning the evaluation of social settlements of the PRL period with regard to the "new historical policy" of the Law and Justice party, is worth mentioning. At the time, more than half of the respondents to this survey (56.1%) believed that a fair and objective assessment of the PRL period in the form implemented by the PiS authorities was impossible. The opposite view was held by 17.5% of the survey participants. It is worth pointing out that the vast majority of respondents representing the Law and Justice (PiS) option felt that a fair and objective assessment of the PRL period in the form realised by the government of the day

[5] *Ibidem.*

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(this was the period of PiS rule) was possible. The electorate of the Civic Left and Civic Platform was, in the vast majority, sceptical about the possibility of achieving fair and objective evaluations of the PRL period in the political conditions of the time.

To conclude this stage of reflections, it is essential to formulate some general conclusions resulting from the analysis of the presented reports:

– Polish society was strongly divided in its opinions about the PRL period in Polish history, and this division largely depended on factors such as the age of the respondents, social position, education, place of residence and political orientation;

– Poles were convinced that there was no way to fairly assess the PRL period and the people who created the politics of the time. This attitude probably stemmed from the conviction that this subject matter was entangled in current politics and the atmosphere of accusations and conflicts that often accompanied the public evocation of this period;

– Poles allowed for the following forms of accounting for the past: a moral judgement of what was wrong at the time and punishment of those who broke the laws of the time;

– There were also noticeable differences in attitudes regarding the disclosure of documents collected by IPN: more than half of the respondents were in favour of some form of disclosure of data from 1944–1989, but a large proportion of Poles opposed it.

3. The Russian perception of the USSR era

The Russian perception of the time of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) will be presented primarily on the basis of the research conducted by the Analytical Centre of Yuri Levada (Аналитический Центр Юрия Левады – Левада-Центр) [6]. The first of the surveys on the evaluation of Soviet times was organised by the Levada Centre in 1992 (one year after the collapse of the USSR) and continued with regularity for at least several years. The survey was conducted on a sample of at least 1,600 people over the age of 18 in 44 regions of the Russian Federation. The first and basic question addressed to the respondents was: Do you regret the collapse of the USSR in 1991? The answers to this question in a time perspective from 1992 are presented in Table 4.

[6] The Yuri Levada Analytical Centre is one of Russia's largest non-governmental organisations that conducts sociological research. The Levada Centre team was organised in 1987 as part of the All-Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research (Russian: Всероссийский центр изучения общественного мнения – ВЦИОМ). In 1987–1988, the Levada Centre organised a network of sociological centres in the republics of the USSR and regions of Russia. This made it possible in November 1988 to conduct the first mass surveys on representative samples of the adult population of the state, and in the following years research was conducted on a systematic basis. Since the early 1990s, the centre has been self-sufficient – it has not received funding from the state budget. In 2003, the research team established an autonomous non-profit organisation, the Analytical Yuri Levada Centre (Levada Centre). The centre continues research projects started in the 1990s and conducts new research on Russian society. The first director of the Levada Centre was Yuri Levada. See the website of the Analytical Yuri Levada Centre, http://www.levada.ru.

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Table 4. Do you regret the collapse of the USSR in 1991?

Answers	Percentage by age									
	1992	1994	2000	2004	2007	2009	2013	2016	2018	2021
Yes	66	66	75	67	55	60	49	56	66	63
No	23	19	19	26	36	28	35	28	26	28
I don't know	11	15	6	7	9	12	16	16	8	9

Source: „Ностальгия по СССР. 24.12.2021", http://www.levada.ru, inf. of 17.09.2022.

The general conclusion emerging from the presented survey clearly indicates that more than half of Russians regretted and regret that the Soviet state ceased to exist. Only once in the history of these surveys has the number of people nostalgic about the Soviet era slipped below the 50% mark – 49% in 2013. In contrast, over almost 20 years of regular surveys, there has been a noticeable increase in nostalgia for the Soviet period in the first decade after the collapse of the USSR: from 66% in 1992 to 75% in 2000. The last year of the 20th century, on the other hand, was an absolute record year: ¾ of the population of the Russian Federation at that time said they regretted the previous era. The following years show a downward trend to a record high of 49% in 2013 and an upward trend in the following years to the level of the original numbers of 66% at the time of the survey's inception.

The authors of the report pointed out that a characteristic feature of this survey was the correlation of responses with the age of the respondents. Those answering "yes" to the question posed above comprised a sizable group of people in the over 55 age group – 86% – and only 24% – young people aged 18 to 24[7]. Conversely, the hierarchy of reasons according to which respondents characterised their grief after the collapse of the USSR remained almost unchanged throughout. Accordingly: destruction of the "unified economic system" – 49%, loss of the "sense of belonging to a great superpower" – 46%, increased sense of distrust and social tensions – 36%[8].

The next question of the survey offered participants an analysis of the process that was the collapse of the USSR and read as follows: How do you think the collapse of the USSR was inevitable or could it have been avoided? The responses to this question are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. Do you think the collapse of the USSR was inevitable, or could it have been avoided?

Answers	Percentage by age							
	1998	2001	2004	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
It was inevitable	24	29	24	27	30	30	28	32
It was avoidable	58	58	65	59	56	55	57	53
Hard to say	18	13	11	14	14	15	15	15

Source: «Россияне жалеют о распаде союза. 06.12.2010», http://www.levada.ru, inf. of 17 IX 2022.

[7] «Россияне о распаде СССР.14.01.2014», http://www.levada.ru, inf. of 17 IX 2022.

[8] «Ностальгия по СССР. 24.12.2021», http://www.levada.ru, inf. of 17 IX 2022.

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More than half of the population of the Russian Federation in 2010 believed that the Soviet Union did not have to collapse (53%). The dynamics of the answers to the question posed above have hardly changed in 12 years. The largest group of people who believed that the collapse of the USSR could have been avoided were pensioners – 79% and people with the lowest income – 74% . Levada Centre director Lev Gudkov, in an interview with The New Times (Новое время), analysing the above data said: "[...] the majority of society has slightly changed its attitude to the collapse of the USSR. Nostalgia for the Soviet times still prevails, but among younger respondents it is much less than among older people. Moreover, nostalgic attitudes to the USSR largely concern poor and poorly educated people as opposed to more affluent, educated, success-oriented people, who are generally closer to a pro-Western orientation"[9].

Similar surveys were conducted by the All-Russia Public Opinion Research Centre (Всероссийский центр изучения общественного мнения (ВЦИОМ)[10]. A survey called "The collapse of the USSR: an inevitable or accidental event?" was done on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the first President of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev. The questions of this survey were designed to put the process of the collapse of the USSR into the perspective of Mikhail Gorbachev's actions. The main conclusions arising from the analysis of this research are as follows:

– Russians' opinions on the assessment of the role of the first President of the USSR in the decomposition of the Soviet state were divided: 42 per cent of respondents blamed him for the process; 37 per cent felt that the state had no chance of survival in the form in which it existed and was inevitably heading for collapse;

– young respondents (up to 30 years of age) overwhelmingly believed that the collapse of the USSR occurred without Gorbachev's involvement (41%), while older people, conversely, attributed a primary role in the process to him (57%);

– The split in the survey results was also due to factors such as political orientation, place of residence and social position: for example, the belief that the Soviet Union would have collapsed with any other leader was most widespread among supporters of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (Russian: Либерально-демократическая партия России, ЛДПР) – 42%, wealthy Russians – 44%, residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg – (49%)[11].

Levada Centre director Lev Gudkov, mentioned above, commented on the data presented above as follows: "The causes and essence of the process of the collapse of the

[9] «Ильичев Георгий: Демография против ностальгии, № 44–45 (229), 26.10. 2011», http://new-times.ru/, inf. of 10 IX 2022.

[10] The All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (Всероссийский центр изучения общественного мнения – ВЦИОМ) is the oldest and best-known public opinion research institute in Russia, which was established in the USSR in 1987 under the name of the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (Всесоюзный центр изучения общественного мнения). Website of the All--Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, http://wciom.ru/.

[11] «Новости. Пресс-выпуск №1700. Распад СССР: ниезбежность или случайность?», http://wciom.ru/, inf. of 11 X2022.

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USSR are of little interest to Russian society. There is still a conspiracy theory in the mass consciousness – a myth that is also quite aggressively maintained by official propaganda. There is nothing unusual in this, for this myth serves mainly to justify the actions of today's authorities. The latter, in turn, builds its ideology on the principles of denial: everything used to function badly and now – well"[12]. In a very similar way, albeit more accurately and vividly, the attitude of nostalgia for the times of the USSR in post-Soviet society was portrayed by the Ukrainian poet and writer Serhiy Zhadan. He wrote: "In all of this, beyond doubt, there is a protest – against the colourlessness of everyday life, against lost illusions, against the temporality of time, which pulls us out of our comfortable surroundings and litters our lives without any airbags or seatbelts. It is likely that this is an unconscious mood of protest, non-verbalised and undisguised, understandable only to clever political technologists who comprehend that it is best to suppress the social and economic discontent of the masses with ideological clichés and propaganda pressure. That is why, after a long and diligent brain drain, the Soviet Union remains for the older generation an area of honest work and well-deserved stability. For the mid-generation, it epitomises a more efficient and fairer system of redistribution and cooperation, and the younger generation, deriving their knowledge of it mostly from television, is unlikely to be able to explain their affection for, say, Stalin. We live surrounded by paradoxes and oxymorons, feed on clichés and stereotypes, believe in legends and myths and stubbornly refuse to call a spade a spade. Indeed, it is much easier to build on the past and continue to fight against a carefully crafted image of the enemy."[13].

Overall conclusions from the analysis of Russian surveys:

– more than half of Russians regret the collapse of the USSR, which implies in turn that they have a positive view of the communist period;

– more than 50% of the Russian population believe that the collapse of the USSR was not inevitable and that the Soviet state had a right to exist in the form in which it did until 1991;

– the Russian public was divided in its opinions on the role of Gorbachev, as the leader of the state, in the process of the collapse of the USSR;

– the divisions on the issues discussed depended primarily on the respondents' age, education, social position, location and political orientation.

4. Common features, differences and distinctive characteristics

On the basis of the presented results of surveys of public opinion in both countries concerning their attitude to their own historical past, it is worthwhile to delineate the similarities and the differences in the perception of the communist era, as well as to reflect on the factors which caused these differences. Among the commonalities is the division of societies (Polish and Russian) in their assessment of the communist era

[12] «Ильичев Георгий: Демография против ностальгии, № 44–45 (229), 26.10. 2011», http://new-times.ru/, inf. of 10 IX 2022.

[13] S. Żadan, *Czułość, łzy, propaganda,* „Nowa Europa Wschodnia" 2011, no. 6, p. 24.

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against the background of their own country's history. The Poles were more critical of the communist era than the Russians were of the Soviet period (44% to 55% – a positive assessment in 2010). Criticism from the Polish side towards the PRL era was evident even at the stage of the questions posed in the survey, which largely concerned the issue of settling accounts of that era and the people in power at the time. From the Russian perspective, the perception of the times of the USSR was presented as a nostalgic issue, and the question of settling accounts concerned above all those in power at that time, with a suggestion of their guilt in the process of transforming the state.

Another common feature was the division in the opinions of respondents in both countries in terms of age, education, social position, place of residence and political orientation. In both cases, there was a visible difference in the opinions of the inhabitants of the younger generation, who, having no emotional-empirical relation to those times, more often evaluated them negatively or had no opinion on the subject. In the case of older people, an uncritical attitude towards the previous regime and a positive attitude towards everything that those times represented were widespread. It should be noted, however, that a great deal of sentiment for those times was shown by the older generation of Russian society, living in an atmosphere of communist indoctrination from birth and not accepting the principles of social functioning after the regime changes in 1992. The older generation of Poles, on the other hand, evaluated the previous era positively mainly through the prism of their own position and participation in power during the PRL. It is also evident in the case of both Poland and Russia that people with lower incomes, living in small towns or in the countryside, poorly educated and usually of a left-wing orientation had a greater sympathy for the times of "social equality".

Discrepancies in the assessment of the communist era of the two countries are inevitable and are due to many historical, systemic, social, political, cultural and mental factors that divide the two countries. Among some of the conditions through the prism of which, from the author's point of view, these differences should be presented, it is worth mentioning:

1) the attitude in both countries towards communist ideology,
2) with regard to the process of legitimising communist power[14],
3) the actual source of power,
4) attitude to democracy.

[14] By the virtue of their ideology and the need to maintain social order, communists felt a perpetual need to obtain legitimacy. The literature on the subject is rich in descriptions of the means of legitimising power used by communist governments. See R.C. Taras, Ideology in a socialist state, Cambridge 1984; W. Sokół, Legitimizacja systemów politycznych, Lublin 1997; W. Lamentowicz, Kulturowe aspekty legitymizacji monocentrycznych struktur politycznych, [in:] Legitimizacja. Klasyczne teorie i polskie doświadczenia, ed. by A. Rychard, A. Sułka, Warsaw 1987, pp. 84–85; J. Potulski, System partyjny Rosji. Tradition and contemporaneity, Gdańsk 2007, pp. 170–179; J. Tarkowski, Economic efficiency as a substitute for legitimisation of power in post-war Poland, [in:] Legitimisation. Classic theories and the Polish experience, ed. A. Rychard, A. Sułka, Warsaw 1987, pp. 77–125; M. Zaremba, Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalist legitimization of communist power in Poland, Warsaw 2001, pp. 98–118.

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Ad. 1) Communist ideology played a prominent role in both countries (the PRL and the USSR). The attitude of the Russian and Polish societies towards communism had a fundamental impact on the perception of the previous historical epoch. Russia – until 1905 – was a state where citizens, irrespective of their wealth or social position, did not have political rights. The changes that took place in the political system of the Russian Empire after the promulgation of Emperor Nicholas II's Manifesto of 17 October 1905 "On the Improvement of the State Order" (russ. Высочайший Манифест "Об усовершенствовании государственного поря́дка"), also known as the first Russian constitution, changed little in this respect [15]. Absolute power continued to be exercised by the emperor unchallenged, and the minor restrictions on his power were fictitious. After the so-called Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, communist ideology replaced imperial ideology, but in many cases formed a continuation of it. It was, however, closer to ordinary citizens insofar as it appealed to a sense of social justice and, as a matter of principle, 'cared for the poorest.'"[16].

For Poland, it was quite the opposite. The first attempt to conquer by communism in 1920 ended in defeat in Poland. In the interwar period, communism in the ideological and institutional sense was a marginal phenomenon in the Republic of Poland, leaving aside certain circles, above all national minorities in the borderlands adjacent to the USSR[17]. At that time, the Soviet Union was perceived by the majority of Polish society as a state with an expansive ideology hostile to Polish statehood. The creation of a state with the primacy of communist ideology in Poland after the Second World War was a difficult, bloody process, and probably never fully accepted by society, because it was always measured through the prism of dependence on the USSR[18].

[15] The manifesto contained three main tenets: firstly, the people of the empire were given "unshakeable principles of civil liberty", including freedom of conscience, speech, assembly, personal inviolability; secondly, it was established that legislative power would be delegated to the people's representatives, assembled in the State Duma; thirdly, it was announced that the composition of the Duma would be elected by the entire nation. Russia 20th Century. From Communist Utopia to Globalist Reality, ed. J. Zlotowski, Krakow 2004, p. 21.

[16] A groundbreaking paper on the subject was written by Richard Pipes in 1974 Russia under the old regime (in the Polish version Russia of the Tsars). In a synthesis covering the period from the time of Kievan Rus until the 1880s, the Harvard professor illustrated the thesis that the Bolshevik regime was a continuation of the tsarism in terms of political system. The author showed that Russia's political system had always been absolutism, and in this case the Bolsheviks only changed their ideology and banners, while the essence of power remained the same. See R. Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime, New York: Charles. Scribner's Sons, 1974; R. Pipes, Russia of the Tsars, Warsaw 1990.

[17] *See* K. Trembicka, Między utopią a rzeczywistością. Myśl polityczna Komunistycznej Partii Polski (1918–1939), Lublin 2007; E. Kirwiel, Kresy Północno-Wschodnie Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej latach 1918–1939. Oblicze polityczne, Lublin 2011; W. Śleszyński, Bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne w polityce państwa polskiego na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej, Warsaw 2007.

[18] *See: Komunizm w Polsce: zdrada, zbrodnia, zakłamanie, zniewolenie*, pod red. W. Bernackiego, Kraków 2010; A. Kemp-Welch, *Polska pod rządami komunistów. 1944–1989,* Cracow 2010; *Odmiany i oblicza komunizmu. Węgrzy, Polacy i inni,* pod red. M. Koźmiński, Warszawa 2007; *Opowiedzieć*

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Ad. 2) The process of legitimisation of communist power was tragic and bloody in both cases, with the only significant difference being that in Russia it took place within the country (Bolshevik coup, cruel civil war). Significantly, the memory of these terrible times for the Russian people in the public memory was strongly erased by the heavy experience of the Second World War (although in this case, however, one should operate with a more important category and of greater significance for the Russians – the Great Patriotic War). In Poland, the process of legitimising the communist system was ruthlessly associated with an external force, supported militarily by the Red Army. With regard to the perception of the communist past, these experiences had a direct bearing on a more positive attitude towards the USSR in the case of Russians, and a critical attitude towards the Polish People's Republic.

Ad. 3) Crucial in the difference in the perception and evaluation of the communist past in Poland and Russia is the question of the attitude of the people of both countries to the position which that state held in the arrangement of communist states. The USSR, seen from this perspective, was the undisputed leader of this arrangement. The first state with a system of 'social equality' in the world, dictating the conditions of existence to the other communist states and scrupulously controlling compliance with the principles of coexistence. In this arrangement, Poland was only one of a group of Central and Eastern European states to which the communist order was imposed through the decisions of the so-called Big Three in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam.

In the bloc of the communist states, the distribution of power was clear for all to see: the USSR acted as the hegemon and the rest of the satellite states not only modelled their political order on it and adopted its ideological principles, but also carried out orders and directives from above. Any disobedience or "deviation from the course" was ruthlessly punished and order was restored. This applied equally to "rebel" leaders and grassroots social movements.[19].

Ad. 4) The attitude towards democracy of Poles and Russians can be measured through the prism of democratic experience. In the case of Russia, as mentioned ear-

PRL, red. K. Chmielewska, G. Wołowiec, Warszawa 2012; A. L. Sowa, *Polityczna historia Polski 1944–1991,* Cracow 2011.

[19] Roman Graczyk, on the pages of Tygodnik Powszechny, reflecting on the crises in the People's Republic of Poland, wrote: "Marxism was a closed ideology, communism was a closed system of government. That is why it was difficult to reform (some would say: unreformable). But once a crisis occurred, its course was convulsive. [...] There were more revolts in the Polish province of the Soviet empire than elsewhere. June '56, October '56, March '68, December '70, June '76, August '80, then the time of legal Solidarity until 13 December 1981, martial law, and finally the events of the end of the People's Republic of Poland, from spring 1988 to June 1989. – i.e. a lot and often. It is interesting to compare the nature of the successive revolts; the build-up of experiences that allowed the rebels to better understand the reality they were contesting over time; their complex and changing attitude to communism over time. Also important is the question of what to call the state of tension, and sometimes boiling, that notoriously – some scholars claim constantly – occurred between outbursts of social discontent." See, "R. Graczyk: Crisis in the People's Republic – or a People's Republic in (constant) crisis? 01.12.2012", http://tygodnik.onet.pl/, inf. 07 X 2022.

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lier, there were no such experiences. In Poland, the period of parliamentary democracy, although very short (from 1918 to 1926/30), had an enormous impact on social awareness. This is evidenced, inter alia, by the difficulties with the introduction of the communist system in Poland after World War II and the rather long period (compared to other countries of the communist bloc) of the incorporation of unambiguous political solutions modelled on the USSR, which was finally ended by the enactment of the constitution of 22 July 1952 – known as the Stalin Constitution[20].

4. Conclusion

The standpoints of Polish and Russian respondents with regard to the communist times in their own historical past have points of convergence: the polarisation of attitudes in evaluation, the dependence of the division in opinions in terms of age, education, social position, place of residence and political orientation. However, Poles' criticism of the communist era is evident in the prism of such factors as attitudes to communist ideology, the process of legitimising power and its actual source, and in relation to democracy. Russians recall the times of the USSR with much more nostalgia and blame those in power at the time for the disintegration of the great empire, referred to by many as the 'true motherland'. In this case, Russia's permanent functioning in the imperial paradigm is one of the key elements of the desire to 'return to the past'".

Abstract: This article, based on public opinion polls presenting the evaluation of the communist era, will present the similarities and the differences in the perception of this period by the societies of Poland and the Russian Federation and examine the reasons for such attitudes. The positions of Polish and Russian respondents with regard to the communist era in their own historical past have points of convergence: polarisation of attitudes in evaluation, dependence of the division in opinions in terms of age, education, social position, place of residence and political orientation. However, Poles' criticism of the communist era is evident in the prism of such factors as attitudes to communist ideology, the process of legitimising power and its actual source, and in relation to democracy. Russians recall the

[20] The Constitution broke with the division of power accepted in Polish constitutional practice by introducing the institution of the Council of State, modelled on the Soviet Constitution's principle of unity of state power. The preamble declared that the state was a republic of the working people, and identified a new subject as the source of power – the nominal sovereign, presumably in an attempt to emphasise the differences between socialist and bourgeois constitutionalism. The procedure was meant to differentiate between the old sovereign – the people – and the new one – the 'working people', thus emphasising the revolutionary social changes and the distance from the 'possessing classes'. The principle of popular rule was to mean the participation of the masses in the running of the state and the elimination of class, economic and social antagonisms. P. Bała, Under the Call of God or Nation? Religion and the system – a case study of Polish constitutions, Warsaw 2010, p. 203.

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times of the USSR with much more nostalgia and blame those in power at the time for the disintegration of the great empire, referred to by many as the 'real motherland'.
Keywords: perception of the communist past, Poland, Russia

Rozliczenia z historią. Społeczne percepcje przeszłości komunistycznej z perspektywy Polski i Rosji

Streszczenie: W artykule, bazując na badaniach opinii publicznej, przedstawiających ocenę epoki komunistycznej, zostaną przedstawione podobieństwa i różnice w postrzeganiu tego okresu przez społeczeństwa RP i FR oraz przeanalizowane przyczyny takich postaw. Stanowisko respondentów Polski i Rosji w odniesieniu do czasów komunistycznych we własnej przeszłości historycznej mają punkty zbieżne: polaryzacja postaw w ocenie, uzależnienie podziału w opiniach pod względem wieku, wykształcenia, pozycji społecznej, miejsca zamieszkania i orientacji politycznej. Widoczny jest jednak krytycyzm Polaków do czasów PRL w pryzmacie takich czynników, jak stosunek do ideologii komunistycznej, procesu legitymizacji władzy i jej faktycznego źródła oraz w odniesieniu do demokracji. Rosjanie z o wiele większą nostalgią przypominają czasy ZSRR oraz obarczają winą ówcześnie rządzących za rozpad wielkiego imperium, nazywanego przez wielu „prawdziwą ojczyzną".
Słowa kluczowe: percepcja przeszłości komunistycznej, Polska, Rosja

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