


Paweł Magiera

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6476-3635>

*The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow*

## **A wartime chapter in the history of Bielsko and Białą**

**A review of the book: *Bielsko i Białą podczas II wojny światowej – wybrane aspekty* [Bielsko and Białą during World War II – selected aspects], red. Maciej Bujakowski, Grzegorz Madej, [published by] Wydział Kultury i Sztuki Urzędu Miejskiego w Bielsku-Białej, Bielsko-Białą 2019, pp. 187**

September 2019 marked the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, which provided an opportunity to organise numerous special research conferences, both on a regional and national level. Collective monographs containing conference material were published upon the completion of some of those meetings. This anniversary trend was also present in Bielsko-Białą. An official commemoration of the events of September 1939 in Bielsko and Białą was held under the auspices of the city's authorities and accompanied by multiple cultural events. The focal point of the commemoration was the opening of the exhibition *Bielski wrzesień. Pamięć o latach okupacji* [Bielsko, September '39. Remembering the years of occupation] at the Historical Museum in Bielsko-Białą<sup>1</sup> as well as a popular science meeting organised by the museum on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> September 2019 in cooperation with the Bielsko-Białą branch of the State Archive in Katowice. The book *Bielsko i Białą podczas II wojny światowej – wybrane aspekty* [Bielsko and Białą during World War II – selected aspects] is an outcome of the meeting and contains articles written by researchers from

1. The exhibition was open to visitors from 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020.

Bielsko-Biała on the basis of papers presented during the session, as well as several other texts on the wartime history of both cities on the border of Silesia and Lesser Poland.

The publication fits well into a growing interest in the history of Bielsko and Biała, noticeable over the recent years on the local market. This popularity translates into numerous publications, most of which can be categorised as popular science. With regard to the most recent studies on the subject, readers are particularly keen on albums containing reproductions of photographs and postcards depicting both cities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The overall growth in the interest of Bielsko-Biała residents in the history of their city and frequent opportunities such as round anniversaries of locally significant events led to a number of exhibitions and conferences, the content of which was presented in the book (apart from the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War II one should mention the celebration of 500 years of Reformation in 2017, an event of importance to local members of the Evangelical Church<sup>3</sup>). Therefore, the book under review is part of a broader and undoubtedly positive trend, which stimulates the city's cultural life. At the same time, it is essential in the context of the scarcity of publications discussing a difficult period on the city's timeline. Aside from chapters synthesizing findings in existing monographs on the history of Bielsko-Biała,<sup>4</sup> there are relatively few other works *strictly* concerned with the occupation period. Cognitively valuable information is scattered across

2. For example, the following albums were issued over the recent years: *Ewangelicki krajobraz Bielska-Białej. Albumowa opowieść o trzech luterańskich parafiach śląsko-malopolskiego dwumiasta*, red. E. Chojecka, P. Kenig, J. Szarek, J. Wiencek, Bielsko-Biała 2019; *Bielsko-Biała. Mijają lata*, Bielsko-Biała 2020. An album with photographs from the period of the German occupation generated enormous interest: W. Dziubek, W. Kominiak, *Bielsko-Biała i okolice na dawnej pocztówce i fotografii w czasach II wojny światowej*, Bielsko-Biała 2019. The entire first edition was quickly sold out, and the second one (Bielsko-Biała 2020), with pictures processed by professional colorization, is equally popular.
3. Among other publications, the anniversary paved the way for the following: *Pod znakiem róży nad Białą*, red. I. Purzycka, oprac. P. Kenig, G. Madej, Bielsko-Biała 2017; *Reformacja z perspektywy Bielska i Białej*, red. A.E. Banot, E. Gajewska, T. Markiewka, Bielsko-Biała 2018.
4. T. Fałęcki, *Okupacja hitlerowska*, in: *Bielsko-Biała. Zarys rozwoju miasta i powiatu*, oprac. H. Rechowicz, Katowice 1971, pp. 224 – 260; *II wojna światowa 1939–1945*, in: *Bielsko-Biała. Monografia miasta*, red. I. Panic, t. 4: *Bielsko-Biała w latach 1918–2009*, red. R. Kaczmarek, Bielsko-Biała 2010, pp. 342 – 403.

studies<sup>5</sup> and editions of memoir sources<sup>6</sup> containing diverse subject matter. Thus, in the light of existing literature of the subject, the publication of the book should be seen as a commendable initiative and auspicious endeavour. Among its benefits is the fact that the history of World War II enjoys constant and unabated popularity, both with experts and numerous enthusiasts.

The collective monograph contains a total of eight texts on various subjects, each by a different author, presenting diverse issues and aspects of the history of Bielsko-Biała under the German occupation. Generally, the studies are not related by content, and their only common denominator is the history of Bielsko and Biała during World War II. The monograph features the following studies, in order of appearance: *Ostatnie miesiące pokoju. Wybrane aspekty stosunków polsko-niemieckich w Bielsku i Białej w 1939 roku* [Last months of peace. Selected aspects of Polish-German relations in Bielsko and Biała in 1939] (by Paweł Böttcher, pp. 9 – 26), *Bielsko-Biański wrzesień 1939 roku* [Bielsko and Biała in September 1939] (by Rafał Hojczyk, pp. 27 – 42), *O polską mowę pod niemiecką okupacją* [The struggle for the Polish language under the German occupation] (by Maciej Bujakowski, pp. 43 – 54), *Zagłada Żydów z Bielska i Białej – zarys tematu* [Extermination of the Jews from Bielsko and Biała – an outline] (by Jacek Proszyk, pp. 55 – 68), *Aleksander Ludwik Sułkowski w obliczu września 1939* [Aleksander Ludwik Sułkowski in the face of September 1939] (by Grzegorz Madej, pp. 69 – 100), *Pamięć buduje świadomość* [Memory builds awareness] (by Jacek Kachel, pp. 101 – 116), *Bardzo trefna firma* [A very shady business] (by Sławomir Horowski, pp. 117 – 122), *Pamięć o latach okupacji w zbiorach Muzeum Historycznego w Bielsku-Białej* [Remembering the years of occupation in the collection of the Historical Museum in Bielsko-Biała] (by Marek Matlak, pp. 123 – 186). The articles are preceded by a special foreword by Jarosław Klimaszewski, the mayor of Bielsko-Biała, as well as a brief introduction from the editors of the volume, i.e. M. Bujakowski and G. Madej, who explain the story behind the publication. At this point let me mention that the last, unnumbered pages of the book contain information on another book being released at the same time. The new publication, namely the aforementioned *Bielsko-Biała i okolice na dawnej pocztówce i fotografii*

5. Especially relevant in this respect are research monographs and popular science articles included in the publication series Biblioteka Bielska-Białej.
6. See e.g. *Bielsko-Biała w zwierciadle czasu. Wspomnienia mieszkańców z lat 1900–1945*, red. J. Polak, Bielsko-Biała 2002 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised and updated: Bielsko-Biała 2012).

*w czasach II wojny światowej* [Bielsko-Biała and its vicinity on old postcards and photographs in World War II] by W. Dziubek and W. Kominiak, is also a work which portrays the city under the German occupation.

The book starts with an article by P. Böttcher on the mutual relations between Poles and Germans in Bielsko and Biała on the eve of the outbreak of the war. The author correctly captures surging tension between the two nations, which was on the one hand due to the progress in the Polonization of both cities inspired by the Polish government, on the other hand a direct result of deteriorating international relations between the Second Polish Republic and the Third Reich in the years 1938 – 1939. Based mainly on news in local press, the article vividly presents multiple instances of propaganda activities and ethnic disputes as well as acts of sabotage and provocation performed in both cities by the German population. However, the author presents a multi-faceted picture of mutual relations, also mentioning the Germans who remained loyal to the Polish state and their anti-Nazi beliefs.

The article by R. Hojczyk outlines the hostilities in Bielsko and Biała in early September 1939. Combat between and the movement of clashing German and Polish forces are described in detail, up to the withdrawal of the Polish units from Bielsko in the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> September and the entrance of the Germans on the following day. Special attention should be given to numerous photographs and visual representations showing the condition of Polish fortifications located in the immediate vicinity of both cities.

The next article, written by M. Bujakowski, discusses an intriguing and to date rarely discussed subject of Germanization and school instruction in the Polish language under the German occupation. The author briefly analyses the factors involved in the Nazi ethnic policy and their impact on education. He also recounts methods used by the invader in areas annexed to the Reich, particularly in Bielsko. Research on the subject prompted the author to conclude that the German authorities in Bielsko strictly prohibited schools from teaching the Polish language and planned to remove all teachers of Polish nationality from schools. In the face of those practices, the only possible counteraction was to organise clandestine classes, the scale of which was rather limited in the region.

The text by J. Proszyk, a researcher specialising in the history of Bielsko-Biała's Jewish population, is a systematic attempt at analysing the extermination of local Jews during World War II. The author discusses the burning of the synagogues in Bielsko and Biała in September 1939, first repressions towards Jews used by the invader, and then acts of extermination, i.e. transports

to death camps. It should be noted that the article is based on a wealth of documentary and memoir sources.

G. Madej, an expert on the history of the Bielsko line of the family of duke Sułkowski, describes Aleksander Ludwik Sułkowski, the last owner of the castle in Bielsko, and his behaviour in the face of the events of September 1939. The author attempts to revise the local opinion on the duke's pro-German attitude and his alleged collaboration with the Nazis. The historian enumerates examples supported by relevant sources, proving that Sułkowski's conduct during World War II was in fact more nuanced and that he remained loyal to his Polish nationality. The author argues that the duke's contacts with the German authorities were due to his struggle to keep his family safe in both personal and financial terms, while he himself remained a consistent opponent of Nazism, which was the reason for the Germans' mistrust towards him and numerous instances of administrative harassment on their part. Madej's hypotheses are confirmed by a wealth of sources used in his work. The author's narrative is enriched by photographs, many of which come from the Sułkowski family's private archive.

The article entitled *Pamięć buduje świadomość* [Memory builds awareness] by Jacek Kachel, a recognized populariser of local history, tells the story of Walter König, today an almost forgotten businessman from Bielsko, who despite his German roots and formally Austrian citizenship remained a loyal resident of Poland, and joined the Polish armed forces during World War II. Not only does his eventful biography contained in Kachel's article reveal diverse attitudes and motivations of Bielsko's residents during the war but also constitutes a real-life example of the complex issues of national and cultural identity in multi-ethnic borderlands. Also, the story of W. König reflects transformations of Poland's state and political system in the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of his indomitable spirit and his service in the war, the socialist government of the People's Republic of Poland refused to grant him Polish citizenship (which he sought to obtain before the war), treating him as a German and an enemy of the people (a wealthy factory owner). The text is accompanied by rare photographs from the König family's private collection.

The two last articles in the book are slightly different from the previous ones. *Bardzo trefna firma* [A very shady business] by S. Horowski, a short study printed on a few pages, without footnotes, recounts the story of a Bielsko company, W. Riedel und Sohn Eisenbeton und Hochbau, which in World War II performed many construction works in Auschwitz-Birkenau contracted

by the German authorities with the use of prisoners' slave labour. The last text in the series, written by M. Matlak, is a description of a collection of exhibits from the period of occupation being property of the Historical Museum in Bielsko-Biała. The core part of the article is a list of items displayed at the anniversary exhibition *Bielski wrzesień. Pamięć o latach okupacji* [Bielsko, September '39. Remembering the years of occupation], opened as part of the celebrations of the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, curated by the author of the aforementioned inventory. It is supplemented by photographs of certain exhibits, especially posters, news bulletins and headlines from the early days of September 1939.

Looking at the volume as a whole, one should notice its indisputable merits. First, it was issued with noticeable attention to detail, lavish artwork and printed on high-quality glossy paper. Throughout the book, text is accompanied by many high-resolution illustrations with detailed captions. Nearly all articles contain footnotes, which enhances the scientific value of the publication and proves the authors' diligence. Above all, we should appreciate the content of the book. The authors contribute novel, material findings to the current state of the art with regard to the wartime history of Bielsko-Biała, by shedding light on various, sometimes completely obscure aspects of this chapter in the history of the city, frequently pertaining to long-forgotten people and places.

However, the publication is conspicuously lacking in indexes, especially an index of names, which would facilitate finding specific information in the book. Certain doubts in terms of research methodology arise as to the practice of referring to the bibliography at the end of each article as a "list of sources," since on many occasions it features not only strictly historical sources but also studies. Equally questionable is the method of bibliographic description applied by the publisher when referring to articles from periodicals in the footnotes, which would be more suitable when referring to chapters in a collective monograph. Both of the above shortcomings are probably due to the intention of simplifying the publication's back matter in order to target a larger group of potential readers.

On the whole, the book is an engrossing publication, visually appealing, with a wealth of valuable knowledge, a significant addition to the current knowledge of the history of Bielsko-Biała in World War II. Its subject matter is local in character and hitherto unknown to a broader audience, sometimes even to enthusiasts of the city's history. Despite its certain flaws, the book is thoroughly prepared in terms of research methodology and content.

The publication is a collection of text by renowned experts on the history of the region, and discusses many aspects of the wartime history of Bielsko and Biała. Accordingly, it is highly recommendable to those who deal with history as part of their profession, local historians, enthusiasts of the history of Bielsko-Biała and World War II, as well as other persons who wish to become acquainted with the intricacy and complexity of the eventful history of this city.