THE EVENTS OF 1938 IN SILESIA AS A PRELUDE TO THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

WYDARZENIA 1938 ROKU NA ŚLĄSKU JAKO PRELUDIUM DO WYBUCHU DRUGIEJ WOJNY ŚWIATOWEJ

ABSTRACT: The article presents the genesis of the Second World War in Central and Eastern Europe from the perspective of 1938, highlighting in particular the area of Silesia, which in the 20th century belonged to the German Reich, the Czechoslovak Republic and the Republic of Poland. The text focuses primarily on the diplomatic situation in which Silesia became an object of a political game, both of the great powers and of the actions taken by small and medium-sized Central European states (including Poland), seeking to guarantee their sovereignty in the new geopolitical conditions. The main role in these events was played by Nazi Germany, which occupied Czechoslovak Silesia, treating this fact as a preliminary to future territorial conquests during the Second World War.

KEYWORDS: Silesia, Second World War, Munich Conference, Anschluss of Austria, Opava

The outbreak of the Second World War is inextricably linked in Poland with the date of 1st September 1939, which has a unique character in the history of our country, comparable to: the Baptism of Poland, the Grunwald and Vienna victories, the years of the Three Partitions and Poland’s regaining of independence after the First World War and the creation of “Solidarność” (“Solidarity”). However, in universal history textbooks, the date marking the outbreak of the Second World War does not necessarily indicate 1st September 1939. In the Far East, it was more likely 1937, when Japanese troops occupied much of China. Historians from the Soviet Union (and later also from Russia) claimed that the War began only after
the German aggression against the USSR in June 1941. Similarly, in the history of the USA, this date is determined by the attack of the Japanese air force on the American naval base at Pearl Harbour in December 1941. We may risk a thesis that in many countries and regions the beginning of the Second World War was conditioned in historical interpretations by the beginning of hostilities on their territories. Silesia in the 20th century was not a homogeneous whole, and the inhabitants of this region belonged to 3 different states: the German Reich, the Czechoslovak Republic and Poland, and therefore events in Europe were assessed differently from the political perspective of these states.

In the introductory article to a book defining the historical perspective of the Second World War and its consequences for the Czechoslovak Republic, the Czech historian Jindřich Dejmek leaves no doubt that, in the analysis of international relations in the area of Central and Eastern Europe, the Second World War – as seen from the European capital cities lying along the Danube – had two distinct phases: the first, which began with the annexation of Austria in 1938 and ended with the attack on the USSR in 1941, and the second, between 1941 and 1945. He justifies it as follows: “If in the 1930s Europe [peace in Europe – R.K.] was secured by a series of peace agreements of 1919–1921, this is how Czechoslovakia and its neighbours, among others, existed, then more or less in a period of 3 years, from March 1938 to spring 1941, this system was completely broken up and at the same time these states, either came under occupation or were divided, and most of the smaller states, at least, were territorially truncated. Gradually, 16 medium-sized and smaller states of Central, Northern, Eastern and Western Europe became victims of the aggression of the great powers, above all of Nazi Germany”. Taking into account other factors, not geopolitical but national, this conclusion is shared by Philipp Ther, because according to him, 1938 and the decisions taken in Munich marked a definite departure, not only from the letter of the Treaty of Versailles and the “splatter treaties” of 1919-1920, but also an abandonment of the idea of self-determination which had been accepted there as a principle for the defence of small and medium-sized historical nations. The Munich Agreement of Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy was a clear signal that the international European order,

---

1 Jindřich Dejmek, Malé státy a velké výzvy třicátých let: příklad Československa, Polska a Norska (obrysy komparace), [in:] Československo a krize demokracie ve střední Evropě ve 30. a 40. letech XX. století, eds. Jan Němeček et al., Praha 2010, p. 11.
which was the starting point for the creation of a new order based on ethnic criteria throughout Central and Eastern Europe, was disintegrating².

Looking more broadly, therefore, at the differences concerning the reasons for the involvement of the great powers and small and medium-sized European states in a war conflict, the question arises as to whether the events of 1938 were for Germany a prologue to the War (1938 as part of a longer historical process), or whether it was only in 1939 that a sudden turn in European politics occurred, resulting from Poland’s negative stance towards the German proposals made after the Munich Conference. This question is particularly relevant to the history of Silesia, which at the end of the 1930s remained mostly outside Polish borders, but was at the centre of events taking place in Central and Eastern Europe. The following is an analysis of issues, which seem to be key to answering the research question posed, concerning the place of Silesia in the diplomatic negotiations in 1938, the preparations for war in German Silesia and the military situation in the area.

According to Eberhard Jäckel, Hitler was already determined on a war, not one limited to a local one and a revision of the Versailles borders, in 1938, although he did not share the details of his plan with the military or even with some of his close associates. At the time, the most important thing for him was the realisation of his ideological goal, namely the acquisition of “living space” (Lebensraum) for the German Reich. According to Jäckel, the stages of his plan were already designed by Hitler in the 1920s in Landsberg when he wrote Mein Kampf³. After 1933, it was only for the sake of current political tactics that he emphasised the need to revise the Treaty of Versailles, fearing that revealing his political objective might be shocking even to his supporters. It was only during the famous meeting with senior military commanders in November 1937 that he no longer concealed his wish to achieve his political goals in the future⁴. The pretext for the November meeting was economic, but the most important for Hitler’s war plans was the subjugation of Central and Eastern Europe, where he planned to find “living space” for Germany.

Among the Central European states, Czechoslovakia became increasingly important in Hitler’s aggressive plans, because, unlike the Balkan states and Austria, it was not willing to subordinate its national economy to German interests. In contrast to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, already in the mid-1930s the Czechoslovak economy was least linked to the German economy. In the years 1929–1937, Czechoslovak imports from Germany fell sharply from 25% to 15.5%, and exports to Germany from 19.4% to 13.7%\(^5\). For Hitler, this meant the necessity of annexing both Austria (in this case not only for economic reasons, but also for ideological and sentimental ones) and Czechoslovakia, in order to realise his plans for a “large area” economy. It was supposed to ensure, at the latest between 1943 and 1945, the self-sufficiency of the German armaments industry and the start of a war for “living space”. At the meeting, most of the military commanders (even Hermann Göring) regarded both Hitler’s long-term plans and the prospect of a possible local war in Central Europe with caution. Because of this reluctance of some senior officers to his plans, Hitler brought about a brutal change in the Wehrmacht command a few months later, deciding on the dismissal of Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg and General Werner von Fritsch\(^6\).

The gradual change in Germany’s foreign policy goals at the turn of 1937/1938 is also evidenced by the situation in the Foreign Ministry. A month before his appointment as head of German diplomacy, Joachim von Ribbentrop, then still ambassador in London, assessed that Hitler was already convinced that a change of the status quo in the East could only be achieved by force\(^7\). At the same time, Ribbentrop was fully aware that the aim of his mission, i.e. to convince London to be neutral in such a conflict, had not been achieved. He wrote to Hitler that England, contrary to Berlin’s hopes triggered by the signing of the Naval Treaty in 1935, would enter the war alongside France, and might even draw the United States into it as well. So Germany had no choice but to enter into an alliance with Italy and Japan\(^8\).


Hitler, when deciding in March 1938 to aggress first against Austria and then to formulate an ultimatum towards Czechoslovakia, was taking a great risk, not having the support of the army and the public surprised by the decision. He was aware of the reluctance towards a new war of the majority of Germans, to whom he had been repeating for 5 years that his aim was to ensure a lasting peace. He risked aggression, correctly assessing the decision paralysis of the Western powers and the readiness of Great Britain and France to continue the appeasement policy and ensure the security of their own countries at any cost, even for agreeing to overthrow the system of collective security that had existed in Europe since 1919. From the point of view of the interests of small and medium-sized European states, this meant reopening the discussion on how to guarantee the security of their countries. It could no longer rely solely on the military alliances signed after the First World War. This was later demonstrated by the fate of Czechoslovakia, although the country had not yet been liquidated in 1938. However, pressure from Berlin and later from French and English diplomats on Prague in 1938 forced the ceding of part of the territory of the sovereign state (including Silesia), in the hope that the tactic adopted would allow the remnant of the Czechoslovak state to survive. These hopes were expressed not only by Western diplomats but also by some Czech politicians, above all by agrarians (Republikánská strana zemědělského a malorolnického lidu), led by the new Prime Minister Rudolf Beran, appointed after the Munich Conference. It was not until March 1939, after the occupation of Prague and the creation of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, that it became clear how groundless these calculations had been. The Germans had not even envisaged for Czechoslovakia the same place as for other satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e. the status of Hungary or Romania.\footnote{Stanisław Żerko, \textit{Polska a kryzys sudecki 1938 r.}, [in:] \textit{Československo a krize demokracie}, p. 122.}

The lack of real guarantees from the Western powers was also noticed by Polish diplomacy. According to Stanislaw Żerko, in Warsaw, despite a sober assessment of the international situation, they were unable to find adequate answers to the challenges posed by the events of 1938, and their attempts at manoeuvring ended in a fiasco. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was aware of the plans for German expansion in Central and Eastern Europe. Hermann Göring informed Józef Beck about them in general terms, so the head of Polish diplomacy did not let himself be drawn into a formal anti-Czechoslovak alliance. He also firmly refused
Poland’s entry into the Anti-Comintern Pact, although he had already sent a warning to the Czechoslovak government in March that Poland would not tolerate the hostile activity of the Comintern in Prague. Beck’s hopes at that time to build, apart from the weakening political-military agreement with France of 1921, a Romanian-Hungarian-Polish alliance securing Poland against both the USSR and Germany had no chance of being achieved. Economically and militarily weak, Poland was not an attractive partner for the Central European states, and could not provide them with the security that Germany was realistically offering. This prompted Józef Beck in 1938 to form a temporary alliance with Berlin, in order to obtain Zaolzie from already non-sovereign Czechoslovakia. According to S. Żerka, at the end of the 1930s, Beck realistically assessed the danger from the USSR and Germany. However, by deciding to occupy Zaolzie, “Poland took an extremely risky path, leading to far-reaching isolation from the Western powers, and the Polish ultimatum to Prague was met with unanimous condemnation in the democratic world”10.

The great diplomatic game played out in European capitals in 1938 led to territorial changes in Silesia, the first since 1922. They were initiated by the Munich Conference. The decision taken there on 25th November 1938 resulted in the incorporation of Hulčín Region and the districts of Bílovec, Bruntál, Frývaldov and Krnov from the historic Silesia within the boundaries of the Czechoslovak Republic into the German Silesian Province (Provinz Schlesien). They were included in the Opava region (obvod Opava), in the Reichsgau Sudetenland incorporated into the German Reich. From the pre-1938 Czech Silesia, the Frýdek district remained within the borders of the Czechoslovak Republic only temporarily, until it was incorporated into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in 1939, when the Czech Republic was completely occupied by the German army.

The reaction of the inhabitants of the Opava Silesia at that time to the invading Germans depended on their nationality. Czechs openly displayed their bitterness and helpless anger in the streets of cities. Nor were there any signs of enthusiasm when German soldiers arrived in the villages with a predominantly Czech population11. But when the Freikorps, led by the former local councillor, entered Opava, it was enthusiastically welcomed by the Mayor Reinhart Kudlich (he remained the Mayor and was appointed the head of the Opava NSDAP).

10 Dejmek, Malé státy, p. 11.
Local Germans, upon seeing the volunteers and the Wehrmacht soldiers marching behind them, raised shouts of *Sieg Heil* in euphoria.

The border changes in Silesia after the Munich Agreement in 1938 also concerned Poland, although the first decisions to change the attitude of Polish diplomacy towards Czechoslovakia were taken as early as on 12th May, at a meeting with President Ignacy Mościcki. The Polish Government was determined not to get involved in the German-Czechoslovak conflict, and at the same time, accurately assessing the danger from the USSR, it rejected the demand to let the Red Army pass through Poland to help the Czechoslovak Army. According to Warsaw, the agreement to provide external assistance to Czechoslovakia could only concern the military involvement of France\(^{12}\). However, it was not until the betrayal of Czechoslovakia by the Western powers in Munich that Poland made its own territorial demands. They were officially presented to Germany in a note of 20th September, and at the same time a similar note with Polish demands concerning Zaolzie was sent to Prague and other European capitals. The principle of reciprocity was applied, i.e. receiving the same guarantees for the Polish minority as the German minority obtained in the Sudetenland. The Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 25th September rejected Polish demands for the cession of Zaolzie, but expressed readiness to provide additional guarantees for the Polish minority. In a letter from President Edward Benesz, attached to the Czechoslovak government’s stance, the possibility of border adjustments was nevertheless admitted, which was confirmed by the French and British ambassadors in Warsaw, yet at the same time they warned Poland against carrying out independent military action.

After the Munich Conference Czechoslovakia yielded to the dictates of the superpowers, renouncing also its alliance with the USSR, which, according to today’s perspective of Russian historiography, was to ultimately induce Moscow to ally with Berlin in order to avoid war with Germany and Japan\(^{13}\). Poland was not invited to the Munich Conference, so, in order to achieve immediate political effects in Zaolzie, after a meeting of the Polish Foreign Minister with President Ignacy Mościcki and Chief Inspector of the Armed Forces Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz, it was decided on 30th September 1938 to issue Poland’s 24-hour ultimatum to the ČSR, demanding the cession of Zaolzie. With no possibility of

---


resistance, Prague accepted the ultimatum and two Czechoslovak districts were annexed to Poland: Český Cieszyn and Fryštát (total area 1871 km²), which became part of the enlarged Silesian Voivodship. The new Polish-Czechoslovak border, after long negotiations conducted in two phases until November 1938, ran along the line: Vrbice – Heřmanice – Rychvald – Petřvald – Šenov – Bludovice – Žermanice – Domaslavice – Vojkovic – Lhota – Moravka.\(^{14}\)

In Polish Cieszyn Silesia, on 2\(^{nd}\) October 1938, after hearing the radio address of the Polish Commander-in-Chief, which ended with the order “March!” soldiers from the Independent Operational Group Silesia, under the command of General Władysław Bortnowski, crossed the border on the Olza River. To take over the functions in the occupied territory\(^ {15}\), a temporary Polish administration was prepared already at the end of September. However, the entry of Polish troops into Czech Silesia was a political mistake, which was particularly emphasised by the anti-__Sanacja__ opposition, including the Christian Democrats influential in Polish Upper Silesia. Its leader, Wojciech Korfanty, repressed by the __Sanacja__ and who had found refuge in Czechoslovakia since 1933, regarded the Polish decision as short-sighted\(^ {16}\). His assessment was shared by Wincenty Witos, leader of the People’s Party (PSL), residing in Rožnov in the Czech Republic, the other main Polish political émigré. He warned his supporters at home against the occupation of Zaolzie, seeing it as a collapse of the principles of collective security and the creation of a deadly threat to Polish sovereignty, as well as making it impossible to reach a lasting agreement with Prague in the future\(^ {17}\).

The Polish troops, on the border bridge in Cieszyn, were greeted with applause by Polish officials and politicians, led by Silesian Voivode Michał Grażyński, Polish Mayor Rudolf Halfar and Leon Wolf, leader of the Polish minority in Zaolzie (later Starost of Fryštát). It was a day of triumph for the Silesian voivode, who


expected the soonest possible integration of the annexed territory into Poland. He
did not agree to the merging of German organisations from the Polish part with
their counterparts in Zaolzie, including the creation of German minority schools.¹⁸

However, the cost of the spectacular success of Polish diplomacy was high,
as the annexation of Zaolzie had been interpreted in European capitals as a polit-
ical “leaning” towards Berlin and dependence on Germany. Whereas in Berlin,
after agreeing to the Polish annexation, the additional demands of Warsaw were
received with growing impatience already from the beginning of October. The
Germans were surprised by the accession of Bogumin, which was seen as an
attempt by Poland to regain the diplomatic initiative and the desire to construct an
independent alliance of Central European states. The coming turn in German
policy towards Poland was already visible during Warsaw’s efforts to obtain a com-
mon border with Hungary. The Chief of the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht
(General Wilhelm Keitel), in a letter to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs
dated 5th October 1938, strongly protested against yielding to pressure from War-
saw and Budapest in this matter. He stressed that it was not in the German interest
to rebuild a common bloc of Central European states, all the more a one influenc-
ing the mood in the Balkans, and especially “it is undesirable for military reasons
to create a common Polish-Hungarian border”. He believed that this would jeopardise
the expected future subordination of Czechoslovakia to the German Reich, as it
would create for them an illusory vision of an alternative alliance.¹⁹

The Munich success paved the way for the Reich Chancellor to implement
plans that, as late as in the spring of 1938, might have seemed unrealistic, and
which – both among the military and in German society – were regarded with
distrust. The Munich success paved the way for the Reich Chancellor to implement
plans that, as late as in the spring of 1938, might have seemed unrealistic, and
which – both among the military and in German society – were regarded with
distrust. From then on, the opinions of officers who had been sceptical about the
new war no longer mattered.²⁰ As one of them (Anton Detlev von Plato) wrote

idem, Wojewoda śląski Michał Grażyński wobec Zaolzia i pogranicza polsko-słowackiego, [in:]
¹⁹ Document no. 39: Der Chef des OKW an das Auswärtige Amt, Berlin, den 6.Oktober 1938,
[in:] Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945. Aus dem Archiv deutschen Auswärtigen
after the war, the Munich Agreement was greeted with relief and cheers. The confidence of most Germans in Adolf Hitler had risen extremely because he had overturned, without war, the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles and enlarged Germany by Austria and the Sudetenland\textsuperscript{21}. The Führer of the Third Reich could already afford to show not only his close associates but also the general public his new vision of the already imminent war for “living space”. This, in any case, is how it is interpreted today his speech at a meeting with more than 400 members of the press on 10\textsuperscript{th} November, after his triumph in Munich. He admitted that previously, only tactical foreign policy considerations made him talk about peace. Now this had to be ended, because peaceful means had been exhausted and it was necessary, in his view, to make all Germans aware that war awaited them\textsuperscript{22}.

In Silesia, changes in German domestic policy were perhaps most noticeable because a large part of the international conflict that almost led to war as early as 1938 was played out in this area. In the areas annexed to the Silesian province, the German administration tested, in a sense, scenarios for the future annexation of new territories. In the area of Austria and the Sudetenland, a completely new administrative model was adopted – the so-called Reichsgaue (districts of the German Reich). In these, the civil and party administration was merged under the authority of newly appointed party leaders – the Gauleiters\textsuperscript{23}. The position of Reichsgau Sudetenland Gauleiter (Říšska župa Sudety) with the regional (Gau) headquarters in Liberec was taken over by Konrad Henlein, the former leader of the Sudeten German Party. In the former Czech Silesia, the so-called East Sudetenland (Ostsudetenland/Východní Sudety) was established with its seat in Opava as part of the Reichsgau Sudetenland. The Opava District covered only 1/3 of Czech Silesia (i.e. 7 of the 15 municipalities), the rest belonged to historical Bohemia. The state administration in Opava was headed by the Reich Commissioner plenipotentiary – Fritz Zippelius, who from November was replaced by Ferdinand von Planitz with the title of President\textsuperscript{24}. A separate solution was found for Hulčín, which was incorporated into the already existing Prussian Province of Silesia, so no special administration was established. Both


\textsuperscript{22} Ausschnitt aus einer Rede Hitlers vor 400 nationalsozialistischen Journalisten und Verlegern am 10. November 1938, [in:] Dokumente und Berichte, p. 22.


\textsuperscript{24} Gawrecki, \textit{Opava za nacistké}, p.290.
models would later find application in the various territories incorporated into the Third Reich after 1939.

As head of the civil and party administration, Henlein represented a new quality in the German administrative system. He implemented the principle of chieftainship and therefore had no need to concern himself with the German and Prussian official tradition. He created a new power elite. Lower-level party activists were interested in such a solution, as it opened up a career in civilian administration, combined with a number of benefits, even though they did not have the relevant education and experience to hold such positions. This was an attractive vision, above all for the leaders of the German minority in the occupied territories, who previously, in the course of normal civil service promotion, could not dream of reaching high positions with real power. The promotion took place under the control of the Party Chancellery in Berlin, and the Silesian NSDAP played a rather secondary role in this process, limited before the Munich to the border areas. At that time it was a direct resource base for the activities of the Sudeten Germans. Under the idea of mass events uniting Germans living in the German Reich and those abroad (Auslandsdeutsche), Wrocław (Breslau) became the centre of political support for Konrad Henlein and his supporters from the Sudeten German Party (Sudentendeutsche Partei – SdP), which was very strong in Czech Silesia. According to the results of the parliamentary elections of 1935, the SdP prevailed especially in the Opava part, from the Javorník judicial district (68%) to Opava (51%) and Hulčín (58%). Only in the east the range of German influence was smaller, because in Klimkovice and Bílovec and Frýdek, also in the Ostrava-Karviná districts, the Social Democrats and Communists had the advantage. Poles prevailed in two districts: Český Těšín (26%) and Jablunkov (43%), where they were represented by a collation of Polish minority organisations. The apogee of the cross-border cooperation between the SdP and the NSDAP in Silesia occurred on the occasion of a sports meeting organised for Sudeten Germans in Wrocław in July 1938. During the growing crisis in German-Czechoslovak relations, it turned into a rally of Sudeten Germans and was meant to show their enthusiasm and desire to join Germany. It was attended by the leading leaders of the Third Reich, above all

25 Mirosław Węcki, Fritz Bracht (1899–1945). Nazistowski zarządcza Górnego Śląska w la
tach II wojny światowej, Katowice 2014, p.111.
26 Marie Gawrecká, Politické poměry ve Slezsku v letech 1815–1939, Opava 2011, pp.130–133.
Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, who met with representatives of the Sudeten Germans on the eve of crucial talks with the Western powers on the future of Czechoslovakia, which, after the failure of the “last chance” mission of the British Prime Minister’s envoy Walter Runciman, led to the Munich Conference.

The NSDAP in Silesia in 1938 was only just preparing for a change in its tasks and the wartime mobilisation of the hinterland, which would become its main task when hostilities began. Before the peak of the Munich crisis in September, Rudolf Heß, as Hitler’s deputy in the NSDAP, sent out a detailed directive on that matter (it was implemented in Silesia by Fritz Bracht, then deputy to Gauleiter Josef Wagner, responsible for party organisation). The main task of the party structures in case of the outbreak of war was to maintain production and supply for the civilian population (it was feared that the situation from World War I, when food supplies collapsed, would be repeated). NSDAP-affiliated organisations were also mobilised to carry out tasks in the area of protecting the hinterland against sabotage, diversion, and air attacks. In principle, the party structures were thus handed over supervision of the entirety of what during First World War was called the Home Front (Heimatfront).

In 1939, when preparations for the attack on Poland began, no new regulations were introduced in the NSDAP, but only the preparations of 1938 were repeated. In 1938, in Silesia, changes in the German terror apparatus triggered by the aggression against Czechoslovakia can also be observed, especially the creation of paramilitary organisations. Despite the conciliatory attitude of the Czechoslovak authorities towards the German minority in the Sudetenland (the mass emigration of Sudeten Germans to Silesia was not prevented), Henlein issued a proclamation to the paramilitary Freiwilliger Schutzdienst, which had been created by his party even before the Munich Conference, calling on its members to be ready to take part in the “incorporation into Germany” campaign. The SdP press organ even stated that from now on the Schutzdienst would no longer be an organisation just parading in the streets, but would become the “sharpened knife of our movement”. After Henlein’s failed putsch on 12th September 1938 and the dissolution of the SdP, the Sudetendeutsches Freikorps was formed in the German province of Silesia ready to launch a diversion in Czechoslovakia, just as in Poland a year later. Hitler issued an order to the SA (Sturm Abteilungen) to this effect on 17th September 1938, ordering the use of Sudeten Germans staying in camps in Silesia for the formation of volunteer units. Two

---

days later, Fritz Bracht gave the SA order in Silesia, which even includes a name “Konrad Henlein’s Freikorps”. It was to be formed in four areas (one of which was Wrocław), and help (organisational, personnel and material) was to be given to the “Sudeten volunteers” by the Silesian SA\textsuperscript{30}. The number of Freikorpslers, positioned along the entire German border, was to reach 34,500 men, grouped in 41 battalions. Their commanders became officers delegated from paramilitary organisations affiliated to the NSDAP. Wrocław was at first the base of one group of Henlein’s Freikorps, the so-called Gruppe I, later divided into two separate groups: V – Wrocław and VI – Jelenia Góra (Hirschberg). The groups were divided into sections (Abschnitte) with the strength of a battalion. Both Silesian groups recruited refugees and German volunteers delegated to them (a total of 6,851 people, 11 battalions). They took part in provocations and fights in the Silesian borderlands. Freikorpslers attacked Czechoslovak border and customs posts, and the climax of the whole action took place on 22\textsuperscript{nd}–23\textsuperscript{rd} September\textsuperscript{31}. It had numerous similarities with an analogous diversionary action in September 1939, as Grzegorz Bębnik writes about in his study, and among the commanders of the Sudetenland Freikorps were Wilhelm Pisarski and Karl Rolle, also known from September 1939\textsuperscript{32}.

The formation of the Sudeten Freikorps was preceded by the taking over of repressive tasks in the occupied territories by the police and SS, which did not happen without conflict with the Wehrmacht. An example was the dispute over the command of the Sudeten Freikorps. When the Chief of Wehrmacht High Command, General W. Keitel, issued orders (28\textsuperscript{th} and 30\textsuperscript{th} September 1938) to subordinate the volunteer units to his command, Himmler opposed it, as he had already subordinated the Freikorps to the leadership of the Silesian SS senior-district on 26\textsuperscript{th} September. The dispute had to be settled personally by Hitler, who, on 30\textsuperscript{th} September, gave the command of the Freikorps to the Reichsführer SS, thus deciding that it would perform police tasks (this remained the case until the Freikorps was disbanded on 10\textsuperscript{th} October 1938)\textsuperscript{33}. This was still far from an “SS state”, but in retrospect it is

\textsuperscript{30} Węcki, Fritz Bracht, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{31} Dušan Janák, Akce terorystyczne na pograniczu śląskim we wrześniu 1938 roku (z działalności Nadzwyczajnego Sądu Ludowego w Opawie), [in:] Układ monachijski jako przykład prawnomiędzynarodowej kapitulacji wobec agresji, eds. Stefan M. Grochalski, Michał Lis, Opole 2009, pp. 70 ff.
\textsuperscript{32} Grzegorz Bębnik, Sokoly kapitana Ebbinghausa. Sonderformation Ebbinghaus w działaniach wojennych na Górnym Śląsku w 1939 r., Katowice–Kraków 2014, pp. 55–58.
\textsuperscript{33} Rudolf Absolon, Die Wehrmacht im Dritten Reich, vol. 4: 5. Februar 1938 bis 31. August 1939, Boppard am Rhein 1979, p. 271.
possible to see this acceleration in the taking over of repressive tasks from the hands of the civil administration, which had been reluctant to do so due to the still living tradition of legal legitimacy. When preparations were made for the entry of German troops into Austria and later Czechoslovakia, the police and SS units were already responsible for securing the rear and temporarily administering the occupied territory. As special task forces (*Sonderkommandos*), they were first created in the spring of 1938, during the annexation of Austria. They were the forerunners of the SS and SD special groups (*Einsatzgruppen*), known from the September campaign and from the genocidal actions of the SS and SD special groups on the Eastern Front in 1941.

A turning point in the activities of the political police was also the radicalization of anti-Jewish policy, which in many cases is attributed precisely to the annexation, especially of Austria and the reappearance, as it seemed already solved in the German Reich, of their question after the passing of the Nuremberg Laws. If the *Kristallnacht* and its consequences in the form of the so-called “Aryanization” were to be part of the process of radicalization of this policy, then its next stage meant getting rid of the Jews from the area of the German Reich through forced migration, deportation or a decision to murder. Even from the perspective of Silesia, according to Franciszek Połomski, the *Kristallnacht* meant the final conviction of German society of the purposefulness of the policy of institutionalised and police-led persecution of the Jews as a separate social group.

The elimination from political and social life of other groups judged hostile to the Reich, and the conviction of the majority of Germans to this, also opened the way to a confrontation in the eastern territories over the aims of national and racial policy. The annexation of Silesia entailed not only the incorporation of a certain territory, but also posed the crucial question of the legal status of the new inhabitants of the expanding German Reich. The simple implementation of revisionist policy was not a cause for controversy among most Germans about the legitimacy of occupying these territories lost after the First World War. The lands that were returned to the German Reich were still inhabited (except for the immigrant population) by former German citizens and their descendants. However, this point of view was no longer so obvious in the context of racial policy objectives. It became necessary to answer the question that was first raised in Germany with the introduction of the

---

Aryan paragraph and later with the Nuremberg Laws: who deserved to be included in the so-called German national community (*deutsche Volksgemeinschaft*). This was because the connecting element was not only ethnic and political unity, but above all racial origin. Perhaps this is also the reason for the intensification of agitation in 1938, which reached back to the genesis of the post-war German-Polish conflict over Silesia. The expiry of the Polish-German Upper Silesian Convention (Geneva Convention) not only led to the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in the eastern part of Upper Silesia, which had not been in force until 1937, but also contributed to apologia of the German sacrifice during the fights with Polish insurgents in 1921. Those who fought in the Silesian German Self-Defence (*Selbstschutz*) were treated as the first fighters of the Nazi movement, and a symbol of this was the unveiling of the monument of the German Self-Defence next to St Ann’s Mountain on 22nd May 1938. Gauleiter Josef Wagner, who was present at the ceremony, heralded an ideological “border struggle” in the Polish-German border area, which would be led primarily by the *Bund Deutscher Osten*. Ernst Thiele, one of its leaders, explained the purpose of this action in Opole in late 1938: “When the call ‘nation to arms’ reappears one day, then the whole nation will move together with Upper Silesia”.

The agitation brought results. According to official German data, in January 1939 in Hulčín Region more than 95% of the population declared their German nationality and, on the basis of the German Nationality Act of 1938, were granted citizenship of the Third Reich. Thus, the principles of the former Wilhelminian policy of Germanization were accepted in this small area, recognising (more or less forced, but nevertheless subjective) accession to the German nation. In the part of former Czech Upper Silesia that became part of the Reichsgau Sudetenland, the solution to the problem of German citizenship was already different, close to what would happen in the Polish territories incorporated after 1939. Not everyone became a full-fledged German citizen and initially this issue was resolved on the basis of the Czechoslovak-German agreement of 26th November 1938, according to which one could opt for German or Czechoslovak nationality (but then had to leave Opava Silesia). After the annexation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, German officials automatically qualified those who had lived in the Sudetenland before

---


1910 as German citizens. Others, who opted to belong to the Czech or Slovak nation, were considered “Reich citizens of Czech nationality”, under the “protection” of the German Reich (*Schutzangehörige*). They were allowed to remain in their places of residence, but without the political rights of members of the German national community and with significantly reduced civil rights in comparison to the so-called citizens of the German Reich (*Reichsbürger*).

The measures taken in 1938 foreshadowed the problems that would confront the German authorities a year later in occupied Polish Upper Silesia, where a similar solution was initially adopted. It was only after the police census in December 1939 that Himmler pressed for the application of racial theory in place of an approach derived from the tradition of the nation-state. In this approach, Upper Silesians could no longer opt for national belonging, but were included in a group that would be assessed as to whether they could be included in a racial community. As it was impossible in the 1930s to empirically determine their hereditary traits, the only way to decide was to observe their mentality, attitudes and characters, and on this basis, decide whether they belonged to a national community. This became the basis for the introduction of the German People’s List (*Deutsche Volksliste*) in 1941.

In 1938, also in the German army in Silesia, it was easy to see the rapid changes preparing the Wehrmacht for aggression. After the dismissal of Blomberg and Fritsch and the liquidation of the War Minister’s office, Hitler, as Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht, handed over the command of the armed forces to the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – OKW*), whose head was General W. Keitel. The annexation of Austria was followed by the dismissal of General Ludwig Bock as Chief of Staff and the taking over of his duties by General Franz Halder. All these personnel changes eliminated from the German army those senior officers who had been critical to Hitler’s aggressive plans in 1937. At the same time, the occupation of Austria resulted in a significant increase in the Wehrmacht’s numbers and strength, reducing the hitherto unquestioned military advantage of the Western powers. After the taking of Vienna and the incorporation

---

37 The first to bring this subject into German discussions was Alfred Beck, *Schwebendes Volkstum im Gesinungswandel: eine sozial-psychologische Unteruchung*, Stuttgart 1938.
38 The State Archives in Katowice (Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach), NSDAP Gauleitung Oberschlesien Kattowitz, Ref. 603, Redner-Information anlässlich der Stossaktion im Gau Oberschlesien, Kattowitz, 18–21.02.1943, p. 50.
40 *Ibidem*, p. 221.
of soldiers from the Austrian army, the size of the Wehrmacht on 1st July 1938 was almost 1 million soldiers. These were: ground troops (Heer) 25,000 officers, 175,000 NCOs, 584,000 soldiers (784,000 in total, and of the 50,000 or so reservists not conscripted before March 1935 hastily trained in two-month courses, 834,000); in the air force (Luftwaffe), 6,000 officers and 15,000 NCOs and privates served; in the navy (Kriegsmarine), 3,200 officers, 40,000 NCOs and sailors. This process was further accelerated after the annexation of Czechoslovakia, whose army, when mobilisation was announced in September 1938, numbered 1.5 million soldiers (including: 300,000 Sudeten Germans who deserted en masse by fleeing across the border into Germany). This army was well equipped, which was due to a well-developed arms industry. It had at its disposal 348 light tanks, 70 tankettes, 75 armoured cars and 568 combat aircraft. The infantry increased by 124 battalions, the artillery by 41 divisions and the armoured units increased from 24 to 34. By the end of 1938 the German ground forces already numbered: 35 divisions (32 in 1937), 4 motorised divisions (no change), 5 armoured divisions (3 in 1937), 4 so-called light infantry divisions (none in 1937), 3 mountain divisions (none in 1937) and 1 cavalry brigade (no change). In total, the German land army after the annexation of Austria, the Sudetenland and Czech Silesia increased by 10 divisions, reaching 52 divisions already by the end of 1938.

In the new German mobilisation plan, the German army was divided into 4 so-called army group commands (Heeresgruppenkommandos):

1) in Berlin (Feldmarschall Gerd Rundstedt, Feldmarschall Fedor Bock),
2) in Kassel (Feldmarschall Wilhelm Leeb, Feldmarschall Wilhelm List, General d. Inf. Erwin Witzleben),
3) in Dresden (General d. Inf. Johann Blaskowitz),
4) in Leipzig (Feldmarschall Walther Brauchitsch, General d. Inf. Walter Reichenau),
5) After the annexation of Austria, the 5th Group command in Vienna was taken over (Feldmarschall Wilhelm List),
6) At the turn of 1938/1939, Group 6th group command was established in Hanover (Feldmarschall Günther Kluge).

---

41 Ibidem, pp. 217–218.
42 Ibidem, p. 222.
44 Kozaczuk, Wehrmacht, p. 218.
To the commands of these groups were subordinated corps commands (at the same time they were territorial commands – *Wehrkreis*). The number of German military districts was gradually increased from the initial 6, at the time of the adoption of the law on general conscription, to 10 in 1935, another 2 were added in the spring of 1936, and Silesia was added at the end of 1937 as the 8th military district.

Alfred Konieczny presented in detail the organisational transformations, increase in the number of units and trained soldiers in Silesia before the outbreak of the Second World War. At the beginning, in 1935, the core of the Wehrmacht in the Province of Silesia consisted of two infantry divisions (the later 8th ID, whose units were stationed in Upper Silesia, and the 18th ID deployed in Lower Silesia), which in 1936 were joined by a third division (the 28th ID in Wrocław). These divisions had already been included in the mobilisation plans before the outbreak of war, forming the 8th Army Corps, which at the turn of 1938/1939 numbered 52,471 thousand soldiers45. These units, especially the 8th DP, had already been actively involved in the occupation of the Sudetenland in 1938. After the incursion into Czechoslovakia they were deployed in local garrisons: 3 battalions of the 28th infantry regiment in Opava, Šternberk/Místek, Nový Jičín, and the 8th artillery regiment in Opava46.

The strongest military unit in Silesia was the 5th Panzer Division (Armoured Division), formed only after the Munich Crisis, by order of 24th November 1938. Its creation was directly related to the annexation of the Sudetenland, where new German units began to be formed, including the 31st Panzer Regiment in Krnov. The division was prepared extremely fast, and it was used already during the occupation of the Czechoslovak Republic in March 1939, directed to shield operations in the area of Olomouc. The author describing its history had no doubts that this most modern unit in Silesia was already “a child of 1938, which was a turning point in the history of the German army, not only preparing for war, but then already waging it, although still without spectacular victories on the battlefields”47.

In concluding the reflections on the significance of 1938 for Silesia from the perspective of the coming war, it seems possible to summarise them with a few conclusions of a more general nature. In Silesia in 1938, the “hot war” was not yet

---

46 Ibidem, p.151.
underway, but if we are looking for the beginnings of the Second World War in Central and Eastern Europe, it certainly began with the events of that very year, above all the annexation of Austria and part of Czechoslovakia. These events cannot be regarded as a continuation of previous policies, not only of Germany, but also with regard to international relations in Europe. Referring once again to the Czech historian J. Dejmek, it should be concluded that as a result of the aggressive German policy, the independence of small and medium-sized European states came to an end already in 1938, when the Western powers definitively abandoned the defence of the Versailles order. Looking more broadly at the Second World War as a whole and its aftermath, most Central European small and medium-sized states from 1938 onwards were no longer able to defend their full sovereignty, first against Germany and then against the Soviet Union. At the moment of this geopolitical turn, Silesia became for Germany a place of experiment and gathering of experience for conducting policy in the occupied territories of the former borderland. Of particular importance was the experience used in 1939–1945 in the so-called lands incorporated into the Third Reich. On the territory of the former Czechoslovak Silesia, the Germans could test the capabilities of the civil administration and emergency offices, as well as those of the terror apparatus, which were small in number in the vast occupied area due to permanent shortages of human resources. Perhaps most important, however, was the confrontation between theoretical ideological assumptions and the practical implementation of racial policy. In Silesia, in 1938, the problem of how far the German national community would be based on the assumptions of a crime racial ideology, which was to lead Germany to a policy of genocide, emerged in full force for the first time. Germany would pay a huge price for this, as Detlef Brandes pointed out when he wrote that the beginning of the expulsion of Germans after 1945 was already in Munich. From that moment on, it became clear in both Poland and Czechoslovakia, and was tragically reinforced by the Nazi occupation, that Germans could not live in one country with Czechs and Poles. As a result, almost the entire German population living on almost two thirds of the territory of Silesia was expelled, and only in Upper Silesia did the native population remain.

---

48 Dejmek, Malé státy, p. 11.
today’s perspective, 1938 was thus the beginning of events that triggered migration movements in Silesia on a scale unmatched by any other that had swept through the region, including the Hussite Wars, the Thirty Years’ War and the Silesian and Napoleonic Wars.

STRESZCZENIE

W artykule przedstawiono genezę II wojny światowej z perspektywy 1938 r. oraz losów Śląska, jednego z regionów na obszarze Europy środkowo-wschodniej. Jego mieszkańcy, zróżnicowani etnicznie, należeli wtedy do Rzeszy Niemieckiej, Republiki Czeshosłowackiej i Polski, dla których Śląsk w 1938 r. stał się przedmiotem gry politycznej, w której główną rolę przegrali jednak nazistowskie Niemcy. Należący do Czeshosłowacji Śląsk Opawski, potraktowano jako miejsce politycznego eksperymentu, będącego wzorem dla wprowadzenia przyszłych okupacji, na tzw. ziemiach wcielonych do III Rzeszy w latach 1939–1945. Tam Niemcy mogli testować możliwości działania ich administracji cywilnej, urzędów nadzwyczajnych i aparatu terroru. Tam, po raz pierwszy, nastąpiła konfrontacja teoretycznych założeń ideologicznych polityki rasowej III Rzeszy z praktyką wprowadzania jej w życie. Ich skutkiem były ruchy migracyjne, które po II wojnie światowej spowodowały zniknięcie z mapy politycznej Europy niemieckiego Śląska, po włączeniu jego części do Czeshosłowacji i Polski oraz przesunięciu granicy państwowej do linii Nysy Łużyckiej.

BIBLIOGRAFIA / REFERENCES

Sources
The State Archives in Katowice (Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach)
NSDAP Gauleitung Oberschlesien Kattowitz

Studies
Bębnik Grzegorz, _Sokoły kapitana Ebbinghausa. Sonderformation Ebbinghaus w działaniach wojennych na Górnym Śląsku w 1939 r._, Katowice–Kraków 2014.


*Handbuch zur deutschen Militärgeschichte 1648–1939*, vol. 4, eds. Friedrich Forstmeier et al., München 1979


Janák Dušan, *Akcje terrorystyczne na pograniczu śląskim we wrześniu 1938 roku (z dzia-
alności Nadzwyczajnego Sądu Ludowego w Opawie)*, [in:] *Układ monachijski jako przykład prawnomiędzynarodowej kapitulacji wobec agresji*, ed. Stefan M. Grochalski, Michał Lis, Opole 2009.


Konieczny Alfred, *Administracja wojskowa Trzeciej Rzeszy na Śląsku i jej rola w roz-
budowie Wehrmachtu w latach II wojny światowej*, Wrocław 1992 (Acta Universi-
tatis Wratislawiensis, 1247, Prawo CXCIV).


Nowak Krzysztof, *Wojewoda śląski Michał Grażyński wobec Zaolzia i pogranicza pol-


Plato Anton Detlev von, *Die Geschichte der 5. Panzerdivision 1938 bis 1945*, Regens-
burg 1978.


Struve Kai, *Nationalismus und Minderheitenforschung*, [in:] *Historische Schlesienfor-
schung. Themen, Methoden und Perspektiven zwischen traditioneller Landesge-
The events of 1938 in Silesia as a prelude to the outbreak of the Second World War


Układ monachijski jako przykład prawnomiedzynarodowej kapitulacji wobec agresji, ed. Stefan M. Grochalski, Michał Lis, Opole 2009.


