



REVIEWS
POLEMICS

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CORRECTING THE PICTURE? SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE USE
OF SOURCES IN *DALEJ JEST NOC. LOSY ŻYDÓW W WYBRANYCH
POWIATACH OKUPOWANEJ POLSKI* [NIGHT WITHOUT AN
END. THE FATE OF JEWS IN SELECTED COUNTIES
OF OCCUPIED POLAND]²

Although many books have been written on the fate of the Jews in German-occupied Poland,³ the death of around three million Polish Jews still motivates successive generations of Holocaust scholars and researchers studying the history of Poland's Jewish community to take up the subject. After 1989, i.e. after Poland regained its independence and cast off the restrictions of Communist censorship, interest in the subject grew steadily among historians, who could now take advantage of academic freedom, propelled by a wave of interest

¹ I would like to kindly thank all those who have helped me prepare this review by sharing their comments and observations with me. I am especially grateful to Maciej Korcuć PhD from the Cracow Branch of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance.

² This review refers to the entirety of the book (*Night without an end. The fate of Jews in selected counties of occupied Poland*, vol. 1–2, ed. Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, Warsaw 2018) with a special focus on Łuków, Złoczów and Miechów counties (*powiaty*). The abbreviated title *Night without an end* is used throughout this article.

³ I use the terms 'Germans' and 'German' instead of 'Nazis' and 'Nazi' because all the persons of German origin (by occupation-era standards) employed in the administrative apparatus of the occupied territories were in fact acting on behalf of the German state, i.e. the Third German Reich.

in Jewish culture. Because of omissions effected during the Communist period, however, we are still far from having treated the problem exhaustively. There is still a visible shortage of studies in areas such as the physical extermination of Jews organised by the German authorities, or the attitudes of different ethnic groups under German occupation toward the Holocaust.

Any attempt to fill these gaps in our knowledge deserves praise. Great expectations were sparked by information about a forthcoming volume, carefully released by the publisher, purporting to present new findings concerning the fate of Jews during the Holocaust outside big cities, in 'local Poland' (although it would have been more appropriate to speak of the *Kreishauptmannschaften* of the General Governorate (GG), since we are discussing the period of German occupation).

Night without an end. The fate of Jews in selected counties of occupied Poland, the book that I am referring to, is a two-volume work consisting of nine chapters devoted to the fate of Jews in selected counties (*powiaty*) – as the authors designate these territorial units – of occupied Poland: Bielsk Podlaski, Biłgoraj, Węgrów, Łuków, Złoczów, Miechów, Nowy Targ, Dębica and Bochnia. The chapters were authored by Barbara Engelking, Alina Skibińska, Jan Grabowski, Jean-Charles Szurek, Anna Zapalec, Dariusz Libionka, Karolina Panz, Tomasz Frydel and Dagmara Swałtek-Niewińska, respectively. The volumes were edited by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski – scholars associated with the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Engelking and Grabowski also wrote the *Foreword*. The book was published thanks to funding from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (within the framework of the National Programme for the Development of Humanities), the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The authors have emphasised that their study is a continuation of previous research conducted by the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research, presented *inter alia* in *Zarys krajobrazu*⁴ and *Judenjagd*.⁵ In their view, “a number of questions

⁴ *Zarys krajobrazu. Wieś polska wobec Zagłady Żydów 1942–1945*, ed. B. Engelking, J. Grabowski, with an introduction by K. Persak, Warsaw 2011.

⁵ J. Grabowski. *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu*, Warsaw 2011. English edition: *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-occupied Poland*, Bloomington, Indiana 2013.

appeared at the time concerning the role of the Germans, the reactions and actions of the Jews, and the attitudes of the Poles” (vol. 1, p. 13). The discussion “concerning the scale of Polish complicity in the extermination of Jews and, above all, the attitudes of Poles after *Aktion Reinhardt* [...], that is during what is known as the third phase of the Holocaust”, which followed the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’s *Neighbours*⁶, provided “an additional impulse” for writing the book (vol. 1, p. 13).⁷ This time the authors decided “to examine selected areas of occupied Poland from up close using a similar methodology” (vol. 1, p. 13). The idea was to use microhistory to trace the fate of as many Jews as possible in the selected territories and to reconstruct the attitudes of other local groups toward them. This is an interesting research area, albeit one that requires an in-depth, accurate examination of thousands of discrete events. One of the most important aspects of the present review will be to determine whether the authors have successfully met this challenge.

The authors’ use of sources is of paramount importance here. The large source base and the use of materials from Polish and international archives make a positive first impression. They suggest to the reader that both the book as a whole and the descriptions of particular events in it are based on in-depth research and a thorough analysis of everyday life in occupied Poland, and that in keeping with academic standards reliable archival materials, accounts, memoirs and diaries have been used. These are the things that give testimony to the quality of a scholar’s methodology and expertise, which in turn determine the value of a work.

⁶ J.T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka, Sejny 2000. English edition: Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, Princeton 2001.*

⁷ It is a pity that the authors have referenced this discussion in a one-sided way, largely accentuating non-academic voices. They have completely skipped over critical remarks pointing to flaws in the methodology and academic treatment *inter alia* in the works of J. Grabowski. See B. Musiał, ‘Judenjagd’ – „umiejętne działanie” czy zbrodnicza perfidia?, *Dzieje Najnowsze* 2011, no. 2, pp. 159–170. Response to B. Musiał: J. Grabowski, ‘Rznięcie nożem po omacku, czyli polemika historyczna a la Bogdan Musiał’, *Dzieje Najnowsze* 2011, no. 4, pp. 163–170, and polemics in B. Musiał, ‘Odpowiedź na replikę „Rznięcie nożem po omacku, czyli polemika historyczna a la Bogdan Musiał”’, *Dzieje Najnowsze* 2011, no. 4, pp. 171–177. After the publication of *Night without an end*, Radosław Józwiak published a pamphlet criticising the credibility of Bielawski’s memoirs, which had been prepared for publication with academic commentary by J. Grabowski. See R. Józwiak, *Zagłada społeczności żydowskiej Węgrowa we wspomnieniach Szrągi Fajwla Bielańskiego. Studium jednostkowego antypolonizmu*, Warsaw 2018.

In a certain sense, the book recapitulates the authors' knowledge about the fate of Jews in the territories examined. Due to the size of the work, it has been possible to provide a systematic overview of a number of topics. One can also see how much still needs to be done to fully reconstruct the history of local communities subjected to German terror. The authors' programme of focusing exclusively on the stories of Jewish victims has allowed them to showcase a large number of individual experiences. However, this has not always proven helpful in reconstructing the full background of the events or individual stories mentioned in the sources that they had found.

And yet historical studies should, as far as possible, provide a comprehensive picture of the past. It is particularly important for a historian to compare documents from different sources in order to ensure maximum objectivity.

The present review is divided into two parts: general remarks and specific remarks. The first part is concerned with the structure of the book, the problems touched upon in it, and the selection of sources. In the second part I will address the principal issue, namely that of how the authors and editors actually used the sources.

The analysis of the structure and concept proposed by the editors and authors of *Night without an end* should start with a basic issue, namely the choice of territories to be investigated, which throughout the book are consistently referenced as 'powiaty' (counties). According to the premise of the book, these areas were chosen as exemplifying a diverse "range of conditions [...], which influenced the progress of the Holocaust and the different possibilities that Jews had of hiding" (vol. 1, p. 16). This gives the impression that each author examined the same kind of administrative entity, and that the division of the work is orderly and methodical.

Unfortunately, this impression is misleading. What the authors refer to as 'counties' (without quotation marks) in the title of the book, the chapter headings and the narrative itself are, in fact, focus areas chosen at will by each of the researchers without following any uniform criteria. This is the opposite of what one would have expected from an academic publication. Moreover, the use of the Polish term 'powiat' (county) suggests that the counties so designated date back to a specific historical period when they were actual administrative units. The choice of focus is always up to the author, of course; but it should be consistent

and correspond to the administrative geography of a given time period. Here, the boundaries of Poland's pre-war or post-war counties could have served as reference. The administrative structure of the General Governorate would have been another natural choice, had 'county' simply stood for the German name of the GG administrative units, *Kreishauptmannschaften*. Indeed, any frame of reference would have been admissible as long as the authors all referred to the same administrative system. The use of a single term (county) suggests to the reader that the selected *counties* were actual entities on a single historical administrative map, a term that they use in the titles of the individual chapters.

From the point of view of the time of Poland's occupation described in the book, the logical choice would have been to describe the conditions in different *Kreishauptmannschaften* (and, accordingly, to use the German term). This would have corresponded with the time period under discussion and with the unique political structure of these administrative units. It would also have reflected a new scope of political power, as the German *Kreishauptmänner* enjoyed different powers than the pre-war Polish *starostowie* (county governors).⁸ This, however, would have necessitated taking into account the fact that the German *Kreishauptmannschaften* were often several times larger than the pre-war Polish counties. And as evidenced by statements in the *Foreword*, the authors seem to be aware of this.

Meanwhile, although the chapter headings all refer to 'counties', there is absolutely no consistency with regard to *what* is being referenced, despite a veneer of terminological uniformity. This veneer is only reinforced by the title of the book, which speaks of 'selected *counties*'. However, in the cases of Miechów, Nowy Targ, Dębica and Biłgoraj, we are effectively dealing with descriptions of *Kreishauptmannschaften*. In that case, to maintain a logical structure in the whole, the reader should be told up front that the remaining chapters relate not to the same kind of administrative units, but to smaller and larger parts of such units, which the authors have delimited quite liberally. Since '*Kreishauptmannschaft*'

⁸ The German occupiers aimed to fill the maximum number of top administrative positions with Germans (*Reichsdeutsche* – Germans from the Reich, or, failing that, *Volksdeutsche*); at the beginning of 1940 they carried out an administrative reform of the GG, combining the pre-war Polish counties into larger entities. This is how the *Kreishauptmannschaften* and *Stadthauptmannschaften* (city counties) came into being. *Kreishauptmannschaften* and *Stadthauptmannschaften* were superior administrative centres with a broad range of powers, through which the Germans controlled the local administration.

has been translated as 'county', it should be stated that Swałtek-Niewińska has researched a small eastern part of *Kreishauptmannschaft* Krakau, and not a fictional 'Bochnia county', which did not exist on the map of the GG. In fact, the author also uses the term 'Cracow county' (vol. 2, p. 563) in her text, which only adds to the confusion. The readers should be informed that what Grabowski describes is only part of Sokołów-Węgrów county (*Kreishauptmannschaft* Sokolow-Wengrow), and not 'Węgrów county', which did not exist at the time. Zapalec discusses only the central part of Złoczów county (*Kreishauptmannschaft* Zloczow), and not of 'Złoczów county', which is absent from the GG map. Szurek describes part of Radzyń 'county' (*Kreishauptmannschaft* Radzyn), and not 'Łuków county', which, again, was not a GG administrative entity. Meanwhile Engelking only describes the western part of Bielsk 'county' (*Kreisskomissariat* Bielsk), rather than 'Bielsk county', which did not exist in *Bezirk* Bialystok. Here, the boundaries of the area researched have been drawn even more liberally: to the west, it is bounded by *Landkreis* Bielsk from the occupation period map, and to the east, by the contemporary Polish border, which splits the area into two parts. The *Foreword* (vol. 1, p. 14) falsely claims that what is analysed in this case are *gminy* (communes, Ger. *Gemeinde*) within the boundaries of the 1939 county, since the eastern part of the said county extended beyond the border later imposed by the USSR. Nor does the eastern part of the county so defined correspond to the territorial scope adopted for research purposes. The area covered by Engelking's research, referenced as a 'county', was not a county before the war either.

These remarks also apply to the titles of the maps placed at the beginning of each chapter. These also create a semblance of 'county' uniformity. The map titles, which correspond to the chapter headings, only reinforce the reader's false conviction that each author has made a geographically and chronologically consistent choice. All of this causes structural and chronological confusion, which deviates considerably from any academic standards.

The general map showing the division of the occupied Polish territories on the front endpapers of both volumes only makes this confusion greater. The map shows the geographical location of the 'counties' described in the chapters to help the reader locate them. Perhaps the purpose was to underline the thought-through structure of the book. However, the errors that one finds here only spark

more confusion. The map is entitled 'The Division of Occupied Polish Lands after 22 June 1941'. The 'counties' in the titles of the chapters, which did not exist as administrative units under German occupation, are shown as legitimate entities in their own right along with the GG *Kreishauptmannschaften*. We are therefore dealing with non-existent administrative units: 'Węgrów county', 'Łuków county', and 'Bochnia county'. 'Złoczów county' is marked as if it had covered the entire *Kreishauptmannschaft*, even though, as already mentioned, the author only dealt with the latter's central part. At the same time 'Bielsk county' has been marked erroneously (Bielsk Podlaski has been confused with Biała Podlaska) within the boundaries of Lublin District, even though it should be inside Białystok District (which was not part of the General Governorate).

Of course it is a very positive fact that each chapter includes a separate map for each area analysed (in a black-and-white and colour version), showing the location of ghettos, labour camps for Jews, different kinds of German police stations (blue police stations have been marked separately) as well as major roads and forested areas.⁹ Aside from the titles erroneously identifying the areas as 'counties' of one and the same kind, we should nonetheless appreciate this effort, since good maps always enrich the content of a book and help one to verify the information.

It is another issue altogether that the selected 'counties' do not exemplify the entirety of Poland's territory in a well thought-out way. Considering their territorial scope, they are little more than a research *sample* – too small, in my view, to extrapolate conclusions about the entirety of Polish lands. Why these and not other counties? This is not explained. Is it merely a coincidence? After all, it would be difficult to prove that the chosen areas exemplify a comprehensive variety of geographical or social conditions and are representative of Poland as a whole. Of the nine 'counties' investigated in the book almost half (!) – as many as four (Miechów, Bochnia, Dębica, Nowy Targ) – were part of a single German district (Cracow); two (Biłgoraj, Łuków) were in Lublin District; and one each were in Galicia (Złoczów) and Warschau Districts (Węgrów). Moreover, only one 'county' (Bielsk Podlaski) was not in the General Governorate but in Białystok District.

⁹ The book includes (in volume 2), a list of the sources (bibliography), a list of abbreviations, and indexes of places and people (both volumes), which, given the size of the work (around 1400 pages of text), is an important advantage.