

Marek Kornat, Mariusz Wołos

JÓZEF BECK. BIOGRAFIA

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It is difficult to imagine narratives on the period preceding the Second World War that do not include Józef Beck. As minister for foreign affairs, he was not just a key figure in Polish diplomacy; because of the important role that he played at a critical moment in global history, historiography pays much greater attention to him than it does to other representatives of the political elite of the Second Polish Republic.

Written in English by the Scottish commentator and politician John Hunter Harley in 1939, the first ‘authentic biography’ of Józef Beck contains a foreword by Edward Raczyński, the Polish ambassador to London. Raczyński, who two years later became Polish foreign affairs minister, called Harley’s biography ‘especially needed at the present hour’, claiming ‘Beck has for a long time been regarded by many as the “mystery man of Europe”’.¹

Since this first autobiography, written shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, there have been many publications on the subject of Beck, who continues to be vigorously debated in public discourse. The fact that the former head of Polish diplomacy remains of such unshinting interest for historians is clear from the publication of more recent academic biographies.² As the authors of this book note, Beck is one of ‘the best-known as well as most controversial’ (p. 7) and ‘fiercely contested’ (p. 872) figures in Polish history. Beck, who is usually discussed solely in the context of the *annus horribilis* of 1939, is frequently a personification of ‘wrong’: the great loser, and the ‘gravedigger’ of the Second Republic. A dark legend surrounded him, carefully nurtured both by advocates of the appeasement policy and by the anti-Sanation Polish government-in-exile

¹ Foreword by the Polish Ambassador, in *The Authentic Biography of Colonel Beck*, ed. by John Hunter Harley (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1939), p. 9. The book is based on a biography of the reportage writer and journalist Konrad Wrzos. Konrad Wrzos, *Pułkownik Józef Beck* (Warszawa: Nakład Gebethnera i Wolffa, 1939).

² *Płk Józef Beck (1894–1944), Żołnierz, dyplomata, polityk*, ed. by Sławomir M. Nowinowski (Łódź–Warszawa: IPN – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, 2017); Jerzy Chociłowski, *Najpierw Polska. Rzecz o Józefie Becku* (Warszawa: Iskry, 2019).

(including Prime Minister Gen. Władysław E. Sikorski³). This legend developed not just because of the official historiography of the Polish People's Republic; it was also disseminated on various occasions (e.g., in December 2019) by the president of the Russian Federation and the Kremlin propaganda machine.

The first academic biography of Józef Beck that covered his entire life (1894–1944) is the culmination of more than two decades of research by Marek Kornat and Mariusz Wołos, professors and authors with an impressive academic output to their names.⁴ One of the reasons why it is considered a ground-breaking work is the rare breadth of content, which results from the authors maximizing all of the available archival and bibliographical sources.

Unlike Józef Piłsudski, a statesman ubiquitous in the public space and collective memory of today's Poland, Beck 'lost the battle for historical remembrance among his compatriots' (p. 7). Kornat and Wołos' monumental biography goes some way towards making amends for this 'loss'; its scope exceeds that of all other academic biographies of eminent figures in Poland's recent history (the only comparison that comes to mind is Marcei Handelsman's three-volume biography of Adam Jerzy Czartoryski). Almost 1,000 pages of text (close to 900 of which are the authors' original work, together with references to sources) is the result of an enormous heuristic effort, including research from 40 archives in 11 countries around the world.

The book is divided into 10 chapters of chronological order. Each of these consists of several subchapters which are not listed in the contents. These unnumbered chapters make working with the book somewhat harder, especially when frequently checking the footnotes. However, these remarks are of a technical nature and are addressed to the publishing house that opted for this approach.

The author of the first four chapters, Wołos, fills in the gaps in Beck's curriculum vitae from the period before he became minister. He presents Beck's long evolution from being one of Piłsudski's many ardent followers to becoming his closest colleague. Józef Beck never completed any diplomatic courses and never finished school. He perceived himself as a soldier

³ For example, in a conversation with the interim chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy in France, Sikorski complained that Beck's conduct in Romania had been scandalous ['spending large sums of money in pursuit of pleasure'] while Poles were dying of hunger. The National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Records of The Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Poland, 1916–1944, Microcopy 1197, Roll 70 (1940–1944), pp. 534–36. R.D. Murphy's note from a conversation with Gen. W. Sikorski on 21 March 1940, sent to the Department of State on 22 March 1940.

⁴ For example: Marek Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Mołotow. Problem zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w polityce zagranicznej II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warszawa: PISM, 2002); Marek Kornat, *Polityka równowagi 1934–1939. Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem* (Kraków: Arcana, 2007); Marek Kornat, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski 1938–1939. Cztery decyzje Józefa Becka* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Oskar, Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, 2012). Mariusz Wołos is the author of several biographies of politicians and military figures (including Gen. Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski) and the editor of the volume *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1931*, ed. by Mariusz Wołos (Warszawa: PISM, 2008).

serving the foreign policy of the reborn Poland, and more specifically as the implementer of the Supreme Commander's orders and ideas. Beck learnt diplomacy as he went, through practice. He received his first stripes in 1919, carrying out special diplomatic and military missions in Romania, Hungary, Brussels and France, which were entrusted to him by Piłsudski. As the Chief of State's personal emissary, he held confidential discussions on close Polish-Hungarian cooperation with Miklós Horthy in October 1920; he participated actively in negotiations on the proposed Polish-Lithuanian military convention in spring 1921; in 1922–1923 he acted as Polish military attaché in France (which Wołos illustrates with hitherto unused documents, including from the Russian State Military Archive in Moscow). After the May Coup, Lt Col Beck became chief of staff to Piłsudski, the minister for military affairs. After four years of collaboration, the Marshal allowed Beck full access to all areas of Polish foreign policy, seeing him as a future head of the foreign ministry. It is clear that this key period in Beck's career launched him on the proverbial trampoline to a much higher state position. The penultimate chapter examines the final five years of Beck's life. It diverges somewhat from the other chapters: there is a large amount of information about his worsening health, and it contains personal accounts from those close to Beck, including colleagues who were with him in his final days. This is also a depressing chapter which exposes the true and tragic extent to which he became a hostage of the Romanian government. The final chapter, 'Life and politics in review', reiterates the salient arguments raised by earlier chapters, with the authors' conclusions and reflections on alternative positions.

The dominant theme, which takes up five chapters and more than 600 pages of the book, is Beck's career at the helm of the Second Republic's diplomacy in the position of deputy minister (December 1930 – November 1932) and then minister of foreign affairs (2 November 1932 – 30 September 1939). Wołos and Kornat follow the rule that no biography of Beck is complete without a precise analysis of this foreign policy, particularly during the period when he was serving as minister. This approach enabled the authors to strike a good balance between their profile of the main figure in the book and the historical context, but one might have few reservations about how successfully they achieve this. Although there are a few passages where Beck's presence somehow gets lost amid the wealth of detail, in general his reflections and moves remain clear despite the thicket of exhaustive descriptions of events in the international arena.

From 1932–1935, Beck followed the guidelines set by Piłsudski, who was the *de facto* head of foreign policy at the time. After the Marshal's death, Beck stuck to the canons of this diplomacy: a balance of power

policy, maintaining an alliance with France, drawing Great Britain into to the affairs of Central European states, bilateralism, and the idea of creating an 'Intermarium' bloc based on the foundation of Poland's alliance with Hungary and Romania. The basis of both Piłsudski and Beck's foreign policy was a belief in the need for Poland's complete independence: a striving for maximum sovereignty. This is not to say, however, that Beck merely 'copied' Piłsudski – which was in any case impossible given the dynamic of change in the international arena after 1935. In his relatively brief period of less than seven years as head of Polish diplomacy, Beck faced an exceptionally dynamic period in international politics which was abounding in radical changes in geopolitics, especially in Central Europe.

Did Beck violate the policy of 'equal distance' by forming closer relations with the Third Reich and increasing the gap with the Soviet Union, as critics of this policy suggest? The equal distance policy theory is controversial, as it suggests that Polish-German and Polish-Soviet relations were analogous. This understanding might be misleading, considering the fact that diplomatic contact between Warsaw and Berlin was very intensive under Beck and, one might say, warmer than it was between Warsaw and Moscow. This disproportion is particularly visible in 1938 when viewed against the backdrop of the Czechoslovakian crisis. Beck himself confirmed this when boasting to his close colleagues in November 1938 about Poland's successful collaboration with Germany ('we are in a good political place'), while Poland's political relations with the Soviet Union at the same time were 'icy'. Yet, the authors argue that it was not the hard-to-gauge atmosphere in mutual relations or the number of official visits that was the true indicator of the balance of power policy. In their view, Beck stuck consistently to this key principle, citing geopolitical concerns and a fundamental opposition to the policy of creating blocs (pp. 440–41), since Poland had not made any commitments to Germany over the USSR (e.g., in November 1937, when Beck deemed Poland's entry to the anti-Comintern pact impossible) or vice versa (e.g., by not approving the Eastern Pact proposed by France, a replication of Locarno containing Poland, USSR and Czechoslovakia).

The book's consistent narrative is to present Józef Beck as a pragmatic politician whose moves were guided by absolute rationalism. In keeping with this perspective, the authors offer their views on Beck's most important decisions as foreign affairs minister: the rejection of the Eastern Pact projects proposed by France; his attempts to maintain an alliance with France (1936); his refusal of Germany's territorial demands, and his acceptance of Great Britain's political guarantees in 1939.

Certain passages in the book are characterised by the authors' tendency to rationalise Beck's moves as minister *ex post*, taking the events of 1939 as a reference point. In particular, this concerns Beck's policy towards Czechoslovakia, and indirectly also towards France. The Czechoslovakian state held a crucial position in Beck's thinking. In common with his mentor Piłsudski, he regarded the Czechoslovak Republic as an artificial construct doomed to failure. Relations between the two states were characterised by antagonism, with several justifications from Poland's point of view (for example, the Czech armed action in 1919 that resulted in Zaolzie being incorporated into Czechoslovakia, and more generally the perception of Czechoslovakia as Russia's 'aircraft carrier' in the middle of Europe following the signing of the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty of 1935). The Czechoslovakian crisis was the only moment in Beck's ministerial career when he categorically rejected holding a common position with the Western states, turning down the opportunity to join Great Britain and France's joint protest in Berlin in May 1938. Beck, the author explains, predicted that England and France would not be able to meet their obligations to Czechoslovakia. In his view, Czechoslovakia would have no chance of survival without the Sudetenland. The foreign ministry's decision to deliver an ultimatum to Prague demanding that parts of Cieszyn Silesia be incorporated into Poland was determined by historical factors and took into account the dangers of Polish diplomatic inaction after the Munich Agreement. Beck did not intend to allow a situation to exist in which Hitler would be the arbiter between Poland and Czechoslovakia. According to the authors of his biography, 'it is extremely difficult to see an alternative to Beck's actions in September 1938' (p. 575). Eighty years after the events in question, they assume that 'it might seem that utter passivity towards events would have been the best solution in 1939' (p. 580), but they have no doubt that 'no Polish policy could have ensured that the Czechoslovak state would be saved' (p. 579). At the same time, following the motto that 'a good policy will defend itself', Beck refused to recognise the importance of Poland's international image, which suffered greatly as a consequence of the ultimatum to Prague. The authors are correct in their assertion that it suited Great Britain and France to present Poland as a troublemaker. These countries, as architects of the disastrous appeasement policy in which Nazi Germany's territorial appetites were sated at the cost of sovereign Central European states, followed similar logic in forcing Czechoslovakia to accept the Munich diktat. The authors do not see any common line of action between Beck and Germany in the period of the Czechoslovak crisis, or any violation of the balance of power policy, since Polish policy merely replicated Germany's demands of Czechoslovakia,

without prior agreement with Berlin. Beck failed to take the initiative to counter views unfavourable to Poland, which included rumours of a clandestine pact with Germany in its action against Czechoslovakia, alluding to speculation regarding the 'secret clauses' of the Polish-German declaration of non-aggression of 1934. This lack of activity by Poland's diplomatic chief of public relations can be explained by his general attitude towards rumours, to which he did not respond (such as the fantastical reports of his supposed role in the death of Włodzimierz Ostoja-Zagórski in August 1927). On the other hand, did issues of image really have an impact on the concrete decisions of the powers in questions of territory in 1938 and 1939? 'After all, Beneš, popular in the West, did not manage to secure help for his country in 1937, while the fiercely criticised Beck obtained an alliance with Great Britain a year later' (p. 878), the authors conclude. Leaving aside the actual importance of this alliance for Poland, it is not entirely accurate to assert that in spring 1939 'nobody was talking about Poland as Germany's partner anymore' (p. 639). In March that year, for instance, the secretary general at the Quai d'Orsay, Alexis Léger, warned Eric Phibbs, the British ambassador in Paris, against Beck, calling him a fraud who is 'entirely cynical and false'.⁵

Beck's foreign policy did not always correspond with Poland's true potential in the international arena. He overestimated the capabilities of the Polish army, which was supposed to be the mainstay of this policy. Contrary to his expectations, Beck was not invited as an equal partner to conferences held in Munich and Vienna that were intended to solve Czechoslovakia's territorial questions. His determination in securing Poland's interests did not win the country any sympathy, as shown by the aforementioned reaction of Western powers to the Polish ultimatum to Prague. Moreover, Beck's policy towards Czecho-Slovakia was based on an erroneous calculation of the consequences of his decisions. He was not far-sighted in the case of Slovakia, which represented 'the most difficult problem of all questions' (p. 590) in the 'jigsaw puzzle' known as the 'Third Europe'. In order for Beck's idea (referring to the concept of Intermarium) to become a reality, the fundamental condition that had to be met was a common Polish-Hungarian border. However, this was not achievable without a revision of the Versailles order, which, specifically, would reduce or partition Czechoslovakia. It is worth emphasising that the topic of Slovakia was an integral and, unfortunately, overlooked part of Beck's policy towards Czecho-Slovakia in 1938–1939, which did not end with the annexation of Zaolzie and joint

⁵ 'Telegram from E. Phibbs to Lord Halifax, 18 March 1939', in *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919–1939*. Third Series, vol. 4: 1939 ed. by Ernest Llewellyn Woodward and Rohan Butler, 10 vols (London: H.M.S.O., 1949–61), iv (1951), p. 373.

Polish-Hungarian actions in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. The omission of Poland at the Vienna arbitration probably affected the decision to remove all territorial claims over Slovakia, described in Warsaw as correcting the existing border. As was the case with Munich, Poland emphasised its regional position, acting 'in parallel' with the powers and demanding territories in the areas of Čadca, Orava, and the Spiš region. The 'reclamation' of several villages, during which armed incidents resulted in deaths and injuries on both sides, thwarted work on rapprochement with the Slovakian autonomists, and the psychological damage done significantly outweighed the scraps of land that Poland secured. In Polish diplomacy, Beck included, there was a naïve conviction that the Slovaks would treat these border 'corrections' as proof of Polish self-limitation. In reality, they considerably weakened the position of Slovakian Polonophiles (K. Sidor) and the possibility of Polish influence in Slovakia, thus facilitating the German anti-Polish campaign there. For Polish diplomacy, being encircled from the south 'was a surprise' (p. 666), which begs the question: what caused this 'surprise'? Leaving aside Wincenty Witos' problematic view of Czechoslovakia with its pre-monarchy borders as a 'bastion' covering Poland's southern border, Beck failed to take advantage of the opportunity to shape Poland-friendly moods south of the Carpathians. His active participation in Central Europe's 'territorial reconstruction' led to destabilisation of the Versailles system. Beck's hope that the disintegration of Czecho-Slovakia would usher in Polish-German collaboration proved illusory.

There is a palpable hint of sympathy in the tone that the authors use when writing of Beck (as well as Piłsudski). Yet this is not to say that they defend all his decisions and views unconditionally. Among Beck's actions that they criticise are those following the May Coup, when he 'played an inglorious role in the harsh trial of the previous government and harassment of the vanquished opponents' (p. 205). Beck's assessment of Polish-German relations was overly optimistic (not only in November 1938, but also earlier, in May–June 1935); the minister's optimism was not shared by the Polish ambassador in Berlin, Józef Lipski. Beck did not reckon on the possibility of a tactical German-Soviet alliance, stating in July 1939 that 'any stories about Rapallo are not realistic' (p. 729). He genuinely believed that in the event of war Great Britain would help Poland in accordance with the guarantees offered in March 1939, and that France would consistently follow England in such a move.

Historians customarily consider possibilities other than the decisions actually taken. However, they should always base these on the facts and realities of the times, rather than on conjecture. The authors of this book are also guilty of this practice. The concluding chapter abounds in their

reflections on alternatives to Józef Beck's policies. Were there better opportunities to fight for the Polish *raison d'état* in the most controversial period of his career (1938–1939)? Were there alternatives to his foreign policy?

The authors' verdict is unequivocal: 'It cannot be negative' (p. 876). They do not discern 'major errors in the minister's actions – in any case none that threatened the Polish *raison d'état*, and most importantly, they occurred where there was an opportunity to choose a better option' (p. 876). Beck neither wanted nor was able to follow the path of vassal to Nazi Germany. He was profoundly aware of the value of Berlin's guarantees to its neighbours (for example, those given to Czecho-Slovakia in the Munich agreement, which had already been broken by March 1939), and rejected Hitler's territorial demands of Warsaw. Beck demonstrated realism by accurately reading the intentions of Poland's aggressive Western neighbour. In the long term, this intention was proved to not be about creating *Mitteleuropa*. Instead, National Socialist Germany's intention was the gaining of *Lebensraum*. Beck's actions in 1939, as expressed in his speech of 5 May 1939 (his most famous as well as the only one he gave during a plenary session in the Sejm), were about honour as the supreme value in the life of nations and states; as such, his actions were devoted to defending Poland's sovereignty and independence. If we treat these values as imponderables, Beck's decisions cannot be seen as irrational. The authors assess Beck's policy as one of success, as he did not allow other states to impose their interpretation of the Polish *raison d'état*. I fully agree with the conclusion of the authors of the biography, which one cannot fail to repeat even though it seems obvious: facing two totalitarianisms – German and Soviet – geared towards territorial expansion, and given the lack of effective initiatives from the Western powers, Great Britain and France, there was no real prospect of preserving the independent, sovereign existence of Central European states (including Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland).

Edward Raczyński, the doyen of the Polish diplomatic services, concluded his foreword to Beck's biography 83 years ago with the following words:

I shall be exceedingly happy if, thanks to this book, there may emerge a deeper understanding of Colonel Beck which will correspond more exactly with the real man as he is and as he works. Perhaps in that progress he will drop some of these qualities which embroider the 'man of mystery'.⁶

It would be no exaggeration to state that the authors of this new biography were motivated by a similar goal. They have compiled an admirable

⁶ Foreword by the Polish Ambassador, p. 11.

collection of documents which were not just from official provenience but also included documents from new or little-known sources from Russian, French and other archives. Combined with solid methodology, they have created a wide range of tools for examining Józef Beck, his reasoning, and the decisions he made.

The cover photograph, depicting Beck with a subtle smile on his face, portrays a different image from that of the minister's 'sphinx'. This stereotypical perception could potentially be countered by attempting to sketch his complex personality, including presenting the aspects of his characteristics not necessarily associated with his professional duties. Some readers would no doubt be interested in getting to know Józef Beck as a private individual, including gaining insights into his family life, hobbies, and interests. This is also suggested by the subtitle, 'Biography', but it should be stressed that this is, above all, a political biography, and the authors were only able to cover those episodes of Beck's life that were available in the source material. The reason for this is that there is a huge shortage of sources; this hinders any attempt to understand the reasons for the break-up of Beck's first marriage, the minister's views on Poland's internal problems in the late 1930s, or the content of discussions at the top of the Polish state. Beck did not leave behind any personal notes or a private archive and he did not keep a diary. Private letters written by him are a rarity. His work *Dernier rapport* (1951) is not a memoir but a subjective and unfinished analysis of Polish foreign policy.

Biography is a difficult art. Not all authors manage to escape the trap of excessive emphasis on the positive or negative characteristics of their subject, which can result in hagiographic tendencies or character assassination. In the context of the 'black legend' surrounding Beck, how did the authors deal with this dilemma in his case?

Above all, Wołos and Kornat's writing technique is not polemical but factual. The authors deliberately avoid directly disputing Beck's black legend, as they are aware that to do so could limit the context and topics covered. Among the works they cite, the reader will not find any pseudohistorical pieces full of insinuations and judgements on Beck. Following the rule of *sine ira et studio*, their objective was to give their readers material to think about. The best target for the book is an expert with substantive knowledge of the intricacies of interwar international politics. Readers seeking unequivocal judgements and a 'quick fix' to decipher Beck might be disappointed (regardless of the fact that history enthusiasts of this kind seldom reach for 'thick' academic books). Yet, this is certainly not to say that the authors do not express their observations and conclusions concerning Minister Beck's specific views, ideas, and decisions.

Wołos and Kornat's book caught historians' attention shortly after publication. This is demonstrated by the numerous discussions of it in the press, history websites, reviews, and specialist journals,⁷ in which the authors also had their say.⁸ The debate on the foreign affairs minister of the Second Polish Republic is therefore not going to go away, but the information on which it is based has now grown considerably.

- ⁷ Wojciech Mazur, 'Józef Beck w roku 1939 – kilka uwag na marginesie najnowszej biografii', *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, 86.3 (2021), 160–75; Stanisław Żerko, 'O najnowszej biografii Józefa Becka', *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, 86.3 (2021), 176–82; Marcin Furdyna, Marek Rodzik, 'Beck sportretowany, czyli kilka słów o centryzmie w historiografii', *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, 86.3 (2021), 183–98.
- ⁸ Marek Kornat, Mariusz Wołos, 'Polemika wokół biografii Józefa Becka', *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, 87.4 (2021), 155–72.