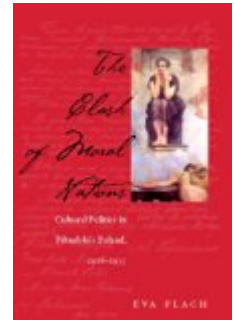


Eva Plach. *The Clash of Moral Nations: Cultural Politics in Pilsudski's Poland, 1926-1935.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. xvi + 262 pp. \$42.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-1695-2.



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In *The Clash of Moral Nations*, Eva Plach addresses an old topic from a fresh point of view. The multivalent competition to define the Polish nation after its return to statehood at the end of World War I and after more than a century of partition has provided historians with one of the main themes of modern Polish history. While most historians have focused on categories of language, religion, ethnicity, geography, and politics in their efforts, Eva Plach has attempted to analyze Jozef Pilsudski's coup in 1926 and subsequent regime of *Sanacja* in terms of moral culture and gender identity. Plach translates the word *sanacja* as "healing, rejuvenation, cleansing or reform" (p. 6) and properly relates it to the general perception that Poland's polarized political culture was profoundly sick and demonstrably unviable. Plach argues that the *Sanacja* regime nowhere clearly defined its program or goals, beyond the desire to see a moral and civic uplift of an ethnically, religiously and politically divided population floundering in exceedingly difficult circumstances after the war and reunification. She sees in this lack of definition or clarity an opportunity for many people, especially women, who other-

wise may have felt excluded from the political process, to take the initiative as citizens and attempt to influence the shaping of the nation. It seems an interesting and worthwhile topic.

In a chapter entitled "Poland Writes to Pilsudski," Plach argues that Pilsudski himself was such a powerful symbol for *Sanacja*, and in any case, a more or less benevolent dictator, that people who wanted to engage with it often wrote to him personally. She points out that the letter writers were very frequently individuals from the margins of public life, and that by the time of Pilsudski's death in 1935, a full quarter of them were women. In Plach's view, this shows the "pliability" of *Sanacja*, and its susceptibility to "creative manipulations" from below (p. 75). She then devotes the remainder of the book to the exploration of some of the organized expressions of "creative manipulation," such as the Society for Moral Rebirth, devoted to realizing the aims of *Sanacja* in the real world. Unfortunately, the main problem faced by the society, never a large group and toward the end in 1932 no more than a few dozen members who only sporadically attended meetings, was its

inability to define their goals concretely, much less effect any real change or make any difference. This forces the reader to decide whether they merit the careful chronicling accorded them here. The society may have defined *Sanacja* in their own "creative" ways, but far from providing evidence that anyone outside their small group paid the slightest attention to their efforts, Plach convincingly demonstrates that they were irrelevant in the end even to themselves (as one after the other they abandoned the organization for more pressing endeavors)! If this was a "manipulation" from below, it went largely unnoticed. Women comprised the majority of the Society for Moral Rebirth, such as it was, and in other ways were also publicly active during this time. Plach devotes a chapter to the commitments of "Pilsudskiite women," in a number of organizations, which (similar to the Society) seem to have been wholly unsuccessful in achieving their rather vague goal of a "more moral" political life in Poland, partly because they fell prey to the same divisions that afflicted the society as a whole. However, I think the main problem for them, and for Plach as well, is that their activities were pretty well removed from conventional political life, which really was what the *Sanacja* was primarily about.

Potentially the most interesting chapter in Plach's book, "The Playboy in the *Sanacja* Nation," is about the theater critic, translator, writer of scathing feuilletons, and famous libertine, Tadeusz "Boy" Zelenski. Among other things, Zelenski was a vigorous proponent of a sexual revolution in Poland. Plach argues that "Boy" stood as a symbol of cultural *sanacja*, because he had relatively freer access to the public than would have been possible prior to the *Sanacja* and, thus, he became for its critics a symbol of everything that was wrong with the *Sanacja* regime (all manifestations of laxity and tolerance). Unfortunately, this is the least convincing chapter, as it reduces a

brilliant and complex cultural figure to a stereotype of gendered historical analysis.

Plach argues in her conclusion that the main significance of Pilsudski's coup is not as an "event," but as a process with "revolutionary consequences" because it engaged the people themselves in defining Poland's great "imponderables" (p. 164), yet she does not demonstrate this effectively in her book. Instead, these organizations, by her own admission, had very little useable creativity or relevance, much less influence. Moreover, she presents her argument with slim regard for the broader context, either in Poland or in Europe as a whole. While "Boy" was certainly an original figure, he also fits comfortably into the modernizing ethos of the 1920s well beyond the confines of the *Sanacja* regime. Plach does a good job of thoroughly researching her specific subjects in the published literature, archives and periodicals of the time, but as far as making the case that her analysis of them amounts to an analysis of cultural politics in Pilsudski's Poland, her book falls short.

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