



M. B. B. Biskupski. *Independence Day: Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 224 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-965881-7.

Reviewed by Patrice M. Dabrowski

Published on H-Poland (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Paul Brykczynski

The Polish poet Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna once exhorted the Polish nation to learn its "list of symbols" (p. 15). High on her list surely was at least one symbol that reflected the signal achievement of Polish independence in 1918. This achievement has come to be associated with the date of November 11, the date that present-day Poles celebrate Independence Day. The original choice of date had little to do with Armistice Day, the end of World War I as celebrated in the West, and everything to do with the arrival of military leader Józef Piłsudski in Warsaw the previous day and the subsequent disarming of the Germans by members of his Polish Military Organization (POW), thus bringing the former Polish capital under Polish control on November 11—in this way symbolically marking the end of over a century of foreign occupation. Yet for this particular date to become universally accepted by Poles, as it is today, some serious collective national forgetting had to be done—shades of Ernest Renan's dictum that both forgetting and getting one's history wrong were constitutive parts of nation building.[1]

The history of Poland's Independence Day is the subject of M. B. B. Biskupski's insightful little (two-hundred-page) book, *Independence Day: Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland.*

According to the author, who holds the Blejwas Endowed Chair in Polish History at Central Connecticut State University, the book is "really a history of responses to evolving historical dilemmas confronting the modern Polish nation" (p. xi). That is a fair assessment, especially when one considers that the choice of November 11 reflected a certain historical interpretation and political tradition with which not all Poles agreed and thus led to the advancement of alternative narratives of how and when Poland achieved independence during the twentieth century. Some seventeen different dates, according to Biskupski, were at various times advanced as possible contenders for the honor.

Ten concise, chronological chapters comprise the slim volume. Biskupski's initial, strong introductory chapter 1 presents mythic and symbolic aspects of the attainment of Polish independence represented by November 11. The "militarization of the discourse of Polish politics" had clearly begun already before World War I, with practically every political faction fielding some paramilitary force (p. 2). This meant that armed action became less unthinkable (which it had been since the defeat of the 1863 insurrection). And already since the dawn of Polish romantic messianism, Poles

had been awaiting a charismatic individual who could unite Polish forces and help Poles break out of their cycle of martyrdom. Piłsudski, the organizer of the POW and the Legions, wanted to be that person. The Polish socialist-turned-military-leader assumed the mantle of Tadeusz Kościuszko and strove to transcend partisanship—certainly during the crucial days of November 1918—to be the leader of all the Poles. Together with his Legions, unusually well educated for a military force and ethnically heterogeneous, Piłsudski united romantic and noble threads while incarnating not an ethno-national but rather a more inclusive, civic-state vision of a future Poland. Finally victorious, the Legions were, in Biskupski's formulation, "the perfect ancestor myth for post-1918 Poland" (p. 20). In focusing commemoratively on the events surrounding November 11, the view that Poles gained independence on their own was emphasized, with pride of place given to Piłsudski and his role in the process.

Chapter 2 discusses the specific course of events that led to this particular date being "discover[ed]" (p. 22). If there were a person who could unite the Poles at that moment, it was Piłsudski, who after his arrest by the Germans in 1917 was in the bad graces of all three partitioning powers. November 11, 1918, also the day Piłsudski assumed control of the Polish armed forces, can be understood as the birth of the Polish army. Yet Biskupski argues—rightly so—that November 11 was "important not for what happened, but for what it represented" (p. 31). At the same time, by representing a certain historical view and political tradition, the date was "politically partisan from its inception" (p. 32). As such, it was contested from early on.

Dealing with the years 1918-26, chapter 3 demonstrates how little support the still-being-fleshed-out Piłsudskiite narrative of events had in Polish society, even after the Polish-Soviet War of 1920. The political Right (*endecja*) sought other emphases that would excise Piłsudski from the course of events, while the Catholic Church embraced May

3, the date still favored, even today, by Polish Americans.

It took Piłsudski's coup d'état of May 12, 1926, to get government offices and schools to close on November 11 for the first time. Chapter 4 ("Formalization of a Discourse, 1926-1935") is, at thirty-six pages, the longest of the book, presenting as it does both Piłsudski's self-fashioning after his return to power and various celebrations of November 11. Witness Piłsudski's fanciful yarn, told to his daughters and broadcast on Polish radio on November 11, 1926, which provided a magical explanation for Poland's return. Yet the political opposition saw November 11—in Biskupski's deft turn of phrase—as an "idolatrous commercial" and would not go along with a 1930 proposal to turn the date into an official national holiday (p. 57). The author insightfully observes that the strategies of the interwar political opposition for dealing with November 11—"diverting attention, selective silence, political syncretism, or referring to events as occurring without human agency"—were the same strategies used by the Communists later (p. 75). They must have thought the celebration even more idolatrous in the period following Piłsudski's death (covered in chapter 5), for under the rule of the Piłsudskiites, November 11 was used to celebrate the man above all; furthermore, a decree of April 1937 finally made the date a national holiday.

World War II (discussed in chapter 6) spawned a surprisingly rich set of attitudes toward November 11, now freed of Piłsudskiite control. The Nazis reacted allergically to the date, which was commemorated unevenly and surreptitiously in occupied Poland, but so too did Władysław Sikorski and the government-in-exile, neither being fans of Piłsudski. Indeed, it was Sikorski, not the Communists, who in fall 1942 "dethroned" November 11 (p. 114). By the end of the war, certain circles had come to regard the date as a "black anniversary of infamy," standing for everything that was identified with Piłsudski and his politics—a status it

would retain under Communist rule, certainly in the Stalinist era (p. 110).

Yet, as shown in chapters 7 and 8, the Communists were not uniformly against all mention of the events of November 1918. Those who wished to acknowledge Polish independence (as early as 1956, with the return to power of Władysław Gomułka) nevertheless had trouble excising Piłsudski from the narrative. Round anniversaries (for example, 1968's fiftieth anniversary) warranted the greatest interest on the part of the regime as well as the opposition. (While he works mainly with printed sources, Biskupski makes good use of less traditional sources, unofficial as well as official, such as stamps, coins, and films.) In 1988, the Communists finally gave in, seeking instead to shore up their legitimacy by assimilating rather than suppressing memory of Piłsudski, but, as Biskupski remarks, "no ideologically based regime can survive the celebration of its antithesis" (p. 147).

The final substantive chapter deals with the fate of November 11 after the fall of Communism, with the holiday being restored as early as February 1989 (that is, already before the June elections)—something that warranted more than just a mention from the author, who immediately turns to the November 11 celebration that year. Still, Biskupski is good at elucidating the metamorphosis of the date, which now has pride of place in the national pantheon of anniversaries, in the Third Polish Republic.

The book is pithy, analytical, richly footnoted, and stimulating, as any study of the commemorations we generally take for granted should be. That said, it neither offers new theoretical perspectives on commemoration nor engages with such literature. It is nonetheless a welcome addition to the growing body of works dealing with Polish commemorations, while shedding light on the fate of the Piłsudskiite interpretation of modern Polish history.[2] As the author himself nicely sums up, "November 11th was but one of several versions of

the factors leading to the birth of modern Poland, but it became the chosen one because it answered so much longing of the Polish spirit: victory, redemption of the past, heroism, the providential figure, the romantic past; the conviction that Poland is not like other nations of Eastern Europe, it represents far more" (p. 178). There is much in the anniversary that appeals to adherents of various political parties today, who—had they lived in the interwar period—likely would not have been supportive of Piłsudski and his minions. Forgetting is indeed important in the creation of a nation.

Notes

[1]. Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in *Being National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

[2]. See, for example, Juraj Buzalka, *Nation and Religion: The Politics of Commemorations in South-east Poland* (Münster: Lit, 2007); Patrice M. Dabrowski, *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003); Keely Stauter-Halsted, "Peasant Commemorations of Polish National Holidays," in *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe*, ed. Maria Bucur and Nancy Wingfield (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2001), 143-167; and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "The Border as Pain and Remedy: Commemorating the Polish-Ukrainian Conflict of 1918-1919 in Lviv and Przemyśl," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 2 (March 2014): 242-268, to give but a selection.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland>

Citation: Patrice M. Dabrowski. Review of Biskupski, M. B. B. *Independence Day: Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45116>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.