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Joshua D. Zimmerman’s book on Jozef Pilsudski is clearly written, detailed, and absorbing. This well-researched biography of the first marshal of Poland is based on Polish and English sources and provides a succinct yet complex exploration of life and actions involved in developing a highly contested character, the “Napoleon of Poland.” Zimmerman presents Pilsudski as a classical hero, masterfully balancing the description of events that showcase his hubris and tragedy. The author narrates Pilsudski’s life with ease and focus, shedding light on important details surrounding the emergence of an independent Poland after WWII as well as its place in the politics of twentieth-century Europe. The book does very well with introducing the English-language reader to one of the most controversial and important political figures of interwar Poland.

The biography is divided into eighteen chapters, with an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction starts with describing a “cult of Marshal Pilsudski”—a phenomenon mimicking the cult of the leader or the cult of genius, a widely observed occurrence accompanying usually totalitarian or authoritarian countries that rose to prominence in the twentieth century. Such specific and early framing of Pilsudski sets the tone for the rest of the chapters. After all, the first marshal proved himself in the eyes of the nation to be a de facto “creator and defender of Polish statehood” and a “grandfather” of the people (p. 3). This is evidenced by his creation of the Polish Legions in WWI that help secured Polish independence and his tremendous success in commanding Polish forces in six wars between 1919 and 1921, including the Battle of Warsaw. Yet, only three years after “the brilliant military strategist who led Poland to victory over the Bolsheviks” retired from politics in 1923, he returned to power in the May Coup and introduced the Sanation regime that left a forever mark on his legacy (p. 3). In the remainder of the book, Zimmerman, motivated by the lack of knowledge about Pilsudski in today’s English-speaking world, carefully explores Pilsud-
ski's dual legacy of authoritarianism and pluralism.

In chapters 1-4, Zimmerman investigates Pilsudski's early childhood and adolescence and his growing interest in politics. From an early age, Pilsudski was introduced to Polish literature by his mother, who is often credited with preparing the first marshal of Poland for his future political and military roles as the chief of state and later, the minister of military affairs. Pilsudski's fascination with Polish Romanticism and Napoleon heavily influenced his revolutionary inclinations. Zimmerman notes that Pilsudski's mother, Maria, “looked to the nation's bards for a source of patriotism and pride for her children while instilling in them a love for Polish poetry” (p. 28). This was easily detectable later in Pilsudski's life, especially in his professional speeches, interviews, and writings. Chapters 5-8 are devoted to further exploration of Pilsudski early actions in his ambitious political and military career. Important details about the marshal's early political career come to the surface, such as founding the first party newspaper, Robotnik, foreign travels, conspiracies, and arrest by the Russians. In these first few chapters, the author paints the picture of Pilsudski as a descendant of the culture and traditions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Pilsudski believed in a multiethnic Poland that was inclusive and welcoming of everybody, including ethnic and religious minorities. This is an important aspect of Pilsudski's character and story, which is full of flaws, accomplishments, and paradoxes—he was a pro-European socialist revolutionary, which is quite an unusual profile for a coup plotter.

Chapters 9-14 focus on Pilsudski's emergence as a national leader, diplomat, and statesman. Zimmerman does extraordinarily well in capturing milestone events that contributed to the labeling of Pilsudski as a state builder and servant of the nation. The reader learns about Pilsudski's creation of the Polish Legions that fought alongside Austria-Hungary against Russia during WWI and helped secure Polish independence. The reader also learns about how Pilsudski's self-realized military genius helped him win national support and consecutively affirmed his national heroism. Since then, practically until his death, Pilsudski fulfilled a dual function of a politician-soldier. Zimmerman notes that “after initial expressions of concerns over his absolute authority, foreign press began to soften its view” and Pilsudski's positive image in the international press started to grow (p. 300). However, the suspicion of potential dictatorship overcoming a newly democratic, yet weak and unstable Polish state continued to spread.

Finally, in chapters 15-18 together with the book's epilogue, Zimmerman provides an honest and comprehensive look into Pilsudski's great mystery—the years leading to the May Coup, its aftermath, and the mixed legacy that the “grandfather” left behind. Perhaps this is the most telling and engaging part of the biography. Zimmerman does not spare details to provide the reader with a panoramic portrait of the man whose symbolism and memory continues to live well in the hearts and minds of Polish people today. Piłsudski remains one of the most talked-about leaders of modern Poland, but the ultimate judgment about his character has not been settled yet. He was a state builder of “a home of nations” Poland, and, at the same time, a strongman of the Sanation regime. Undeniably, Zimmerman's book helps to introduce Pilsudski to the English-speaking world, but it may just as well contribute to the overall conversation about the legacy and morality of this influential leader.