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“With these two pacts—dictator of Poland Józef Piłsudski told his men in June 1934, referring to the non-aggression pact with the USSR and the declaration of non-violence with Germany—we are sitting on two stools, and this cannot last long. We need to know which one we will fall from and when.”[1] In an attempt to balance Piłsudski’s dual legacy of authoritarianism and pluralism, Joshua D. Zimmerman, the author of *Jozef Piłsudski: Founding Father of Modern Poland,* performs a similar exercise. And contrary to his intentions, but just like in the case of the Second Polish Republic, its inevitable fall can already be seen from between the lines of the book.

What made Zimmerman take up this gymnastics was his undisguised fascination with the marshal, which had accompanied him for well over thirty years. “To Josh, whose excitement for this subject spreads to all of us” is how in December 1992 his mother dedicated the gift he had previously requested for himself, Piłsudski’s only biography available in English at the time, *Piłsudski: A Life for Poland* (1982), by Waclaw Jędrzejewicz. [2]

He discovered Piłsudski while studying at UCLA in California, then only as the leader of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), seeking dialogue with potential partners from the Jewish Bund, trying to convince them of the concept of a nation-state separate from Russia. Zimmerman was attracted by the vision of a pluralistic, liberal community promoted by the young social democrat, a vision born out not from political calculations but from the multiethnic and multireligious environment of the Central European borderland in which he grew up, which—and this is my own footnote—precisely in him developed tolerance and aversion to nationalist prejudices (it also gave rise to other extremely different attitudes). The initial interest turned into fascination, and the fact that the author of the mentioned biography, Jędrzejewicz, was one of the leading Piłsudskites, founder and first director of the émigré Józef Piłsudski Institute in New York, could have had an influence. And it is these two themes—Piłsudski’s attitude toward
Jews and Zimmerman’s attitude toward Pilsudski—that had the greatest impact on the content and form of the book under review here.

Its undoubtedly strong point is how the first theme is presented. It is almost a separate narrative, an overview of the hero’s personal relationships with representatives of the Jewish community and the problems that, at the turn of the twentieth century, connected and divided him with various groups of the Jewish socialist movement. In Siberia, he met exiles who were role models of Jewish involvement in the fight for the freedom of the homeland (according obviously to the standards of the Polish ethnic group). He engaged in dialogue with the Jewish Vilnius Group and Polish socialists who tried to persuade Jewish socialists to cooperate and abandon Russian, in favor of Yiddish, as the language of agitation. He attempted to unite, within one party, the Polish and Jewish proletariat, and he decisively condemned anti-Semitism as a tool of political struggle, despite the final parting of the paths of the PPS and the Bund. I suspect that anyone, like me, who has not read Zimmerman’s older work, published in 2004, Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality: The Bund and the Polish Socialist Party in Late Tsarist Russia, 1892–1914, will find its extensive abstract in Jozef Pilsudski. This part truly constitutes the added value, an important and interesting contribution to the history of relations between the two nationalities in a given time.

However, the story embedded in the structure of the book has one more purpose. In an interview for the newspaper Gazeta wyborcza, Zimmerman admitted that the pragmatic Pilsudski, a supporter of the idea of assimilation and a political nation, did not harbor any special sentiments toward the Jewish community and opposed anti-Semitism only as a threat to the multiethnic, democratic vision of the state that would be supported by Western powers.[3] He gave evidence of his indifference in the fall of 1918, when, already as the head of the nascent state, apart from meeting with one of the Jewish parliamentarians and issuing firm—but ineffective—command to restore order, he did nothing to stop the wave of bloody pogroms. And in 1920, he simply ignored the internment of thousands of Jewish soldiers in the camp in Jabłonna. The final and tragic consequences of his “legacy” were revealed only after his death, when the leaders of Pilsudskites immediately adopted anti-Semitism as a tool of political struggle. And although Zimmerman does not pass over most of these episodes—he only refrains from interpreting and assessing them—it is difficult not to get the impression that the extensive presentation of Pilsudski’s achievements as a friend of the Jews and a champion of ethnic equality before, say, 1918, is intended to balance or even overshadow the ultimate, profoundly disappointing result of his postdate policy toward national minorities.

The attention-grabbing attempt to broaden his biography before 1926 serves the same purpose, that is, expressing the author’s sympathy for his hero and the desire to put him in the best possible light. I consider the chapters devoted to the World War I fate of Pilsudski, who, in the thirteen years between the suppression of the 1905 revolution in Russia and the outbreak of the November Revolution of 1918 in Germany, went a long way from the head of an illegal, socialist, and quasi-terrorist militia into a man of providence and the head of the newly established Polish state, to be the best in the entire book.

The author gives a clear, and in my opinion inspiring, answer to the question that he was later asked by Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski: what is the recipe for a successful freedom fighter?[4] Zimmerman’s Pilsudski was a leader with a risky and tactically complex plan for independence (relying on the military power of the Triple Alliance to defeat Russia and consistently enforcing political concessions in favor of autonomy as war successes were achieved, while at the same time politically distancing himself, to the point of open betrayal, from former allies),
which he had implemented flexibly but consistently and uncompromisingly. What was also interesting and unknown to me before was the background of Piłsudski’s final about-face legitimization: the transfer from the losers to the winners, and convincing the latter, especially American politicians, that his actions would be consistent with their goals and that he was a sincere democrat. Unfortunately, he successfully convinced not only them but also Zimmerman.

The final, most important stage of Piłsudski’s life and public activity, beginning with a May 1926 coup and taking power in the country, and ending nine years later to the day with his death, takes up surprisingly little space: only 90 out of 493 pages of text, of which almost 40 concern foreign policy. For comparison, in the most complete Polish-language biography of the marshal by Andrzej Garlicki, Józef Piłsudski 1867-1935 (2008), more than half of the thousand pages is devoted to the same period. Zimmerman’s introductory explanation, justifying this particular proportion by the desire to fill the gap that, due to the influence of socialist censorship, Garlicki deliberately left in the place of their hero’s greatest successes in the years 1914-20, does not sound convincing.

Such a superficial treatment of Piłsudski’s regime’s internal policy allows the author to legitimize the controversial thesis, saying that the dictator overthrew democracy only to protect and soon restore it and that from beginning to end he was faithful to the idea of a “pluralistic state in which all citizens had the equal right to have their votes counted without regard to sex, religion or nationality” (a quote from the final paragraph of the book). At the same time, Zimmerman responds to the obvious fact that the Second Polish Republic in the 1930s was the opposite of such a state with a statement about its “mixed heritage” (p. 493). This evasive term apparently encompasses his assessment of the 1926 several-day civil war, subsequent electoral fraud and political murders, mass arrests of political opponents, fake trials of democratic opposition leaders, prison or banishment sentences, and finally the establishment of a concentration camp “à la Polonaise.” And again, the author does not clear Piłsudski of the accusations but distracts readers’ attention from them, redirecting it to the alleged successes of his foreign policy in the 1930s or repeating rather ahistorical theses about his key role in saving Western civilization in 1920.

Zimmerman’s goal is to restore the figure of Piłsudski to the Anglo-Saxon world, where he is completely unknown, and the present biography is certainly a milestone toward achieving this goal. Moreover, in the era of Russian aggression against Ukraine, popularizing and updating—for example, by comparing the marshal to President Volodymyr Zelensky—the region’s history is an advisable action, consistent with the European and Atlantic raison d’état, and should arouse the interest and recognition of Western readers. But I have read Józef Piłsudski from a Polish perspective, and my reception is specific, probably different from the one assumed by the author.

A Russian saying goes “nothing is less certain than the past,” and this applies not only to totalitarian lies but also to the ever-changing context in which we interpret historical events and figures. The accusation of Garlicki’s personal dislike for Piłsudski resulted partly from the historical moment in which his book was published—the fall of “communism” and the great comeback of the marshal’s cult crystallized over the previous decades—which meant that in that time, the source-documented critical attitude could have been taken as pettiness, lampoonery, or even spiritual betrayal. But in the context of Polish politics in the last eight years, marked by the government’s progressive violation of the constitution, law, and freedom of elections, economic scandals, and a growing brutality of the police and secret services, downplaying the even worse achievements of the Piłsudski dictatorship and attempting to balance the indisputably anti-democratic legacy of his policies with
previous patriotic merits sounds all too familiar. I am afraid that among Polish readers with liberal and progressive views, such an interpretation will find neither understanding nor recognition.

Notes


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