

Guardians of the Memory
Пазители на паметта

JÓZEF PIŁSUDSKI – CREATOR OF INDEPENDENT POLAND

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Abstract. The article presents the significance of Józef Piłsudski (the Head of the State and the Commander-in-Chief at the beginning of the Polish state re-established in the 20th century) for the process of regaining independence by Poland. Piłsudski acted in this direction as a socialist activist, a creator of a paramilitary movement before World War I, and a legionary commander in 1914-1916. Without his actions, both on paramilitary and purely political grounds, the process of re-establishment of Poland as a sovereign state would have been significantly hampered and slowed down.

Keywords: Józef Piłsudski; Independent Poland; irredentism; Legions; bidding upwards

In the history of Poland, there were few figures with a similar scale of achievements¹⁾. Figures that have become symbols in their lifetime. Both due to undisputed merits and, above all, to the fact that he devoted his life to Poland. The country which, thanks to his efforts, came back from non-existence. And, though for too short time, she managed to confirm the will to exist. The claim that he was the creator of the Independent Poland is fully legitimate. I wish to develop and justify this thought.

Piłsudski was the type of statesman, for whom the deed was the most important. This feature can be seen very early, from his youngest years. However, the goal was even more important. The goal was called: the Independent Poland. The life of Piłsudski from the moment he returned from the Siberian deportation, invariably led to this very goal.

In the early 1890s, by joining the newly established *Polska Partia Socjalistyczna* (PPS; Polish Socialist Party)²⁾, Piłsudski entered the ranks of the Polish irredentism for many years. Those advocates of offensive actions aimed at bringing Poland back to the map of Europe nurtured a fully legitimate conviction that Russia was the most powerful enemy on the road to Independent Poland³⁾. Thus, until 1917, the struggle fought by Piłsudski, whether at the head of the socialist irredentism, of the

Strzelec (Shooter) movement, or finally in the uniform of the Polish Legions, was a struggle against the Tsar's empire.

For a successful fight for the Independent Poland, the future Head of the State sought strength. Initially, he saw resources of it, abundant and unused, in the growing strength of the workers movement, among which he intended to find personnel for the national army. The West European proletarian would be a potential ally, but already in late XIX / early XX century Piłsudski began to attach more and more importance to the people who, like the Poles, were part of the Russian empire, but represented the “countries conquered by force and tethered by chains of enslavement to the tsardom”. First of all, the Poles, but also Lithuanians, Latvians, and Ruthenians, were to create this force together, which “will turn the power of the tsardom into dust”⁴⁾ and thus open the way to the creation of their own states.

The path of struggle chosen by Piłsudski, extremely risky, which could bring an execution instead of glory, was a necessity for a Polish patriot in the reality of foreign occupation. However, as an ‘underground man’ he understood that those times when he had to act, required a new type of man: a romantic in his plans, but a positivist in the selection of means. He was able not only to unravel this apparent contradiction, but to successfully apply it in practice. The plans he constructed reached far into the future. The actions he took were down-to-earth. He took a failure into account, but he always had an alternative, and even considered such variants of developments that may have seemed unlikely at first glance. And, most importantly, he invariably tried to extract action from the people, who were more and more accustomed to the conditions of foreign occupation.

Piłsudski consistently prepared the party he led, before any other group, for an active fight for the Independent Poland. The first real opportunity, brought about by the Russo-Japanese war and the revolutionary confusion in the empire, was used by him to try to win an external ally for the Polish cause and to create a core of staff that could lead the national uprising. The Japanese aid, however, was only of an ad hoc, utility nature, while the heroic efforts of socialist fighters did not translate into universal mass resistance. Moreover, the merciless terror of the tsarist repressive system, marked by gallows and firing squads, threatened a total physical annihilation of the irredentism structures.

In a situation where internal forces proved too weak to regain the Independent Poland, all that was left was to wait for the emergence of favourable external conditions. This development of the situation, desirable from the view point of the Polish cause, was also noticed by other eminent politicians, so from 1908 onwards we have, on the one hand, the emergence of the so-called orientation dispute, and on the other, intense efforts aimed at creating advantages that could be used to assist the arrival of Independent Poland. Piłsudski was the main creator of the assumptions of the anti-Russian orientation, which foresaw the possibility of restoring the Polish state after taking Polish lands by force from the hands of the Russian empire.

The irredentism camp, which Piłsudski led, assumed a defeat of the tsar in a war: either in a clash of local nature, or as a result of a major widespread war⁵⁾. Piłsudski, as was convincingly shown in the literature on the subject, probably took into account the unlikely possibility of the final defeat of all three occupying powers, although the vision did not result from prophetic skills but from an extremely deep analysis of the situation at the time and of the various variants of international alliances. In any case, each of the cases taken into account required an own force created by the Poles themselves. Hence the intense activities aimed at forming military staff, and at the same time the choice of a tactical ally, who would tolerate such an undertaking.

From 1908 up to 1921, Piłsudski leads a particularly intense game about Poland. He is followed by very few. Especially, characteristically, representatives of the youngest generation. For them, Piłsudski created an unprecedented opportunity: to set off with arms in their hands for an open combat for Poland. To live, in reality, the generations' 'dream of a sword'. And yet, this *Strzelec* avant-garde, created on a Galician base, took an extreme risk, which its leader was well aware of. Not a theoretical analysis, but a practical "agitation by war"⁶⁾ was supposed to answer the question, whether the Russian-occupied Kingdom of Poland would respond to it with an uprising. Piłsudski must therefore have assumed that the transformation of the *Strzelec* expedition into a mere armed demonstration would greatly extend the march to independence. He knew, however, that "the end of the war, regardless of who wins, means the weakness of the vanquished"⁷⁾, and that is why it was so important to have a real force at that moment.

Started in August 1914, the *Strzelec*, and soon the legionary, epic became the foundation for the reconstruction of Polish military traditions. It has created, also thanks to poets, writers and painters, the legend of a new Polish army and its leader. However, it is not the military aspect of Piłsudski's actions (sometimes, as at Ulina, nearing a disaster⁸⁾) that should be considered the most important. From the summer of 1915, the Brigadier undertakes the "bidding upwards"⁹⁾ of the Polish cause, raising the political stakes based on the "capricious" Legions and the "Sphinx-like" Kingdom. He lured the politicians, and especially the German and Austrian military, with the prospect of using the legionary base to build a strong army of many thousand men, capable of deciding the fate of the war in the east. In return, he demanded concessions, above all of political nature, and especially a national government of his own, which could take responsibility for this army. The essence of the bidding procedure consisted in the fact that the new occupiers, willing to pay the political price offered to them (and only declarations sanctioned by the monarchs could have turned the Polish issue into an international matter) learned that the price had increased whenever they expected to conclude the deal. And Piłsudski did not give up his actions, even though his political game, combined with provoking of internal crises, especially in the Legions, eventually resulted in his removal

from the service by the Austrians. Until the summer of 1917, he did so as a member of the *Tymczasowa Rada Stanu* (Provisional Council of State)¹⁰⁾, a substitute Polish civilian authority, established after the November act. The outbreak of the Russian revolution that he had anticipated enabled him to lift the tactical veils that had concealed the general concept of the march towards the Independent Poland. For him, the war with Russia was over, so in the changed situation it was necessary to oppose the two remaining occupying powers, above all the Germans. It was their plan to create a vassal Polish army that Piłsudski hit with the most dramatic legionary crisis: the “oath crisis”, which led most of his subordinates behind the barbed wires of internment camps. The Brigadier shared their fate. He awaited the end of the war behind the walls of the Magdeburg fortress, and the game, led by him, though brutally interrupted, came to fruition with support, especially in the West, of the initiatives of his political opponents.

After November 1918, Piłsudski fully exploited the political capital and military experience accumulated during the war. As the Head of the State, he concentrated first on the creation of the army, and then on laborious forging the borders of the re-emerging Poland. He did not neglect any direction, although, in the face of the decisive voice of the victorious powers as regarded the western and southern borders of Poland, he considered the settlement in the East to be decisive for the fate of the reviving Poland. It was the federal concept realised by him, undoubtedly ahead of its time, that was to ensure Poland’s security by effectively separating it from Russia, regardless of the latter’s colour¹¹⁾. And although ultimately he did not succeed in achieving the long-term goals, he gave the emerging Poland a glorious, proud victory. And, more importantly, faith in their own strength.

Piłsudski, which is worth emphasizing, was not the only one who fought for a free, independent Poland. There is no doubt, however, that he occupies a primate place within the Polish political elites of the time. Not only because he rose above the age in which he lived. And also not because he was able to give a real shape to his political dream. He has become, for generations, a special kind of master model, who ordered respect for the Polish freedom gene on the inner ground, and care “not to lower the head” in external relations. He only cared for Poland’s interest, as he understood it. He fought and worked for her. As best he could.

NOTES

1. Works about Józef Piłsudski would fill with a huge library room. On Polish soil, attempts to present his entire life were made already in the inter-war Poland (H. Cepnik, W. Pobóg-Malinowski), but today the biographies by W. Jędrzejewicz, A. Garlicki and the undersigned are quoted most frequently. The works of B. Urbankowski should be mentioned separately here, while the three-volume chronicle of life, prepared by J. Cisek and W. Jędrzejewicz, occupies a special

place; it was based on the pioneering edition of the diary, collated by the last surviving minister of the Marshal.

2. The presence of Piłsudski in the PPS was described in the most comprehensive, so far, monograph of this party, by Jan Tomicki, see: Tomicki, J. (1983). Polska Partia Socjalistyczna 1892 – 1948, Warsaw.
3. I wrote in a synthetic way about the history of the Polish irredentism in 1997, see: Suleja, W. (1997). Kosynierzy i strzelcy. Rzecz o irredencie. Wrocław.
4. Piłsudski, J. (1937). Pisma zbiorowe, vol. I, Warsaw, pp. 90 – 91.
5. These views were present in the political discourse of the time, see, for example: Polonus Viator [W. Jodko], Kwestia polska wobec zbliżającego się konfliktu Austrii z Rosją, Cracow 1909 or Studnicki, W. (1910). Sprawa polska, Poznań.
6. Piłsudski, op. cit., vol. III, pp. 175.
7. Ibid, vol. V, p. 266.
8. An excellent description of this dramatic episode was included by Piłsudski in an essay that he wrote during his stay in the Magdeburg prison, ibid, vol. IV.
9. I wrote about this ‘game’ in a separate essay, see: Suleja, Proklamowanie „zlicytacji wzwyż” w sprawie polskiej – Warszawska wizyta Józefa Piłsudskiego i jej reperkusje, w: Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji. Studia poświęcone pamięci Edwarda hr. Raczyńskiego Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na wychodźstwie, Warsaw 1994.
10. For information on Piłsudski’s activity in the Provisional Council of State, see: Suleja, W. (1998). Tymczasowa Rada Stanu. Warsaw.
11. Piłsudski’s position on the Eastern problem was described competently and most completely by A. Nowak, Polska i trzy Rosje. Studium polityki wschodniej Józefa Piłsudskiego (do kwietnia 1920 roku), Cracow 2001.

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