

BOOK REVIEW

Zimmerman, Joshua D. *Jozef Piłsudski: Founding Father of Modern Poland*

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Joshua Zimmerman has written what is likely to be the definitive biography of the Polish political conspirator, military commander, and statesman Józef Piłsudski for the foreseeable future. The “founding father of modern Poland,” who guided the establishment of Poland as an independent state and as a democracy after World War I, has been the object of cult-like devotion in his own country since at least his victory over the Bolsheviks in 1920, and was, in the 1920s and 1930s, also widely admired and esteemed outside of it. “He belonged to the group,” wrote one American author in 1936, “small throughout history, whom God chooses to carve out human destiny” (5). Zimmerman notes that while Piłsudski retains a place of central importance in Polish culture, he is now little known outside of it, suggesting that one of the aims of this book is to reintroduce this formidable figure to the English-speaking world.

Jozef Piłsudski is an exhaustive exploration of the Marshal’s (as he is sometimes called) public and private life, beginning with his family background and childhood and continuing into Poland after his death. The writing throughout is clear and accessible, devoid of jargon and unnecessary theorizing. (Zimmerman, however, made an odd decision to preserve the proper Polish spelling for all places and names, with two exceptions: the name Piłsudski, rendered as “Pilsudski” throughout, and Józef, spelled as “Jozef”—but only when referring to Józef Piłsudski [and not, for example, to Józef Lipski]. He argues, in a “Note on Pronunciation,” that this enhances the book’s “readability” for those unfamiliar with the language, but the effect is quite jarring.) To write this book, Zimmerman has read extensively in the Polish and English scholarly literature on Piłsudski, while for primary sources he draws heavily on published material, including collections of Piłsudski’s writings; memoirs of those who knew and interacted with the Marshal, such as Wincenty Witos; and seemingly every article written by and about him in newspapers and magazines, in a range of publications, like *The Boston Globe*, the pro-Piłsudski journal *Niepodległość* (Independence), or the Yiddish-language *Haynt*. Despite the impressive breadth of this research, the use of such sources has its limitations, especially when dealing with an enigmatic and calculating figure such as the Marshal. It is difficult to get a glimpse of the man behind the image created of Piłsudski by his admirers and detractors alike. In addition, at several key points, Zimmerman makes an argument about Piłsudski’s state of mind based primarily on what those around him are saying, as on p. 387, when the devastating impact that assassination of Poland’s first president, Gabriel Narutowicz, has on Piłsudski is established based on the recollections of contemporaries and the works of historians. Nonetheless, the evidence convinces, and the figure who emerges in these pages is as likely as close as we are ever going to get to the “real” Piłsudski.

This is not a thesis-driven book, though a central concern of Zimmerman’s is to illustrate the Marshal’s dual legacy: that of the democrat who organized independent Poland’s first elections, who worked to ensure that the country’s new national minorities had a say, and who, in 1922, and handed over the power with which he’d been invested as “Chief of the State” to the newly constituted representative government; and that of the dictator, who led an armed coup against the state in 1936, overthrowing it and installing a dictatorship that took on the unnerving name of “Sanacja” (Healing).

Zimmerman argues that Piłsudski's turn to authoritarianism was contingent and produced largely by the assassination of Narutowicz and its celebration in the right-wing press, along with the political and economic instability that marked the year 1926. In other words, he wishes us to believe that the democratic Piłsudski was the authentic article, and the authoritarian one a reluctant stance forced upon him by the nastiness of the Polish right wing and the severe challenges of the 1920s. Maybe; but reading through Piłsudski's comments about the development of the Polish state, it is clear that he found actual democracy, as opposed to the idea of it, disappointing if not repellent. (In 1922, Piłsudski compared the business of politics unfavorably with that of prosecuting the war against the Bolsheviks, complaining that the Sejm was possessed of a "stinking atmosphere full of venom and meanness" [380].) Piłsudski's laments against the factionalism, corruption, and putative weakness of democracy in moments of crisis are very much characteristic of other authoritarians, of both the left and right, of the era.

The Piłsudski who emerges from these pages is not always a particularly appealing figure; his vanity, for example, is truly extraordinary, and will probably grate even those readers who know to expect it. Nonetheless, these were probably the same qualities that made him the right man at the right place at the right time, that is, Poland after World War I. There is a trend now in Polish historical writing to downplay that there is anything particularly special or unusual about Poland—a necessary corrective to decades of national mythmaking—but it is easy to go too far. Piłsudski was a warlord who founded a pluralistic democracy, a nationalist who hoped to find a way to integrate the political aspirations of all the region's peoples, and, perhaps most remarkably for a Central European statesman of the 1920s and 1930s, a political figure who harbored no hostility against the Jews. Even-handed and eschewing the hagiographic and iconoclastic extremes of earlier biographies, Zimmerman's book is sure to find a wide and admiring readership.