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## 6. FORUM

# Piłsudski Was a Democrat

## An Exchange between Joshua Zimmerman and Andrzej Brzezicki

**ANDRZEJ BRZEZICKI:** You write that there is a striking contrast between the lack of knowledge about Józef Piłsudski in today's English-speaking world and the importance attached to him during his lifetime. Why is this so?

**JOSHUA ZIMMERMAN:** To a large degree, the paucity of knowledge about Piłsudski today, outside of Poland, is the result of the fact that Piłsudski's principal achievement from 1918 to 1921—the creation and defence of an independent democratic Poland that formed a bulwark against the spread of communism and fascism—was eclipsed by events that followed his death on 12 May 1935: the disappearance of Poland from the map of Europe in 1939, the catastrophe of the Second World War, and the Soviet occupation of Poland that followed. Sealed behind the Iron Curtain during the cold war, Poland receded into the background of world affairs. Interest in Poland's recent past correspondingly waned. This is evident in the fact that, before my biography of Piłsudski appeared in June 2022,<sup>1</sup> only two general biographies of Piłsudski written in English had been published since 1945.<sup>2</sup> It is my hope that my *Jozef Piłsudski: Founding Father of Modern Poland*—based on archival research in Poland, England, and the United States—will begin to restore Piłsudski's memory in the English-speaking world.

**AB:** You write a lot about the relationship between Józef Piłsudski and Jews. What in your opinion made him an anti-antisemite? Was he a philosemite, or was he just not concerned with the national question, so that the class struggle and the liberation of Poland were more important to him? You quote Ozjasz Thon from 1927, who wrote that Józef Piłsudski had not taken a moment of his free time to think through the Jewish question.

**JZ:** Although Thon may have been right about Piłsudski's state of mind at the end of November 1918, less than three weeks after Polish statehood, Piłsudski in fact devoted a considerable amount of time before 1914 to thinking and writing about Jewish issues. I first examined Piłsudski's attitude and behaviour towards the Jews in my doctoral thesis, completed in 1998, on relations between the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna; PPS), led by Józef Piłsudski, and the Jewish Labour Bund in imperial Russia between 1892 and 1905. I synthesized my findings in a 1998 article and in the book that followed.<sup>3</sup>

Until Szymon Rudnicki published his article, 'Żydzi a Józef Piłsudski', in 2008, my studies were the only scholarly works on the topic since before 1939.<sup>4</sup> In these works, I examined Piłsudski's early writings and his private correspondence, as well as his friendships with party members of Jewish background, like Feliks Perl, Stanisław Mendelson, Feliks Sachs, and Maks Horwitz. I discovered that one of Piłsudski's major objectives in the 1890s and the first years of the twentieth century was to incorporate Jews into the party in the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, particularly given that Jews made up significant portions of the urban populations in these territories. Of 196 surviving letters that Piłsudski wrote between 1894 and 1903, sixty-eight are devoted to the subject of improving relations with Jewish socialists and workers.<sup>5</sup>

Later, when I embarked on a project to write a biography of Piłsudski, my research into his early childhood in the multinational, multi-religious, and multilingual setting of tsarist Lithuania, I demonstrated key character traits in the young Piłsudski. Among these was an innate discomfort with stereotypes and prejudice. From an early age, he judged individuals not by their religion or nationality but rather by their character. It was the latter trait combined with his sense of history—he was a voracious reader of history with a uniquely analytical and high native intellect—that led him to recognize the Jews as a part of Poland's heritage. This attitude is made clear in his writings, in public statements, and in private correspondence. When Artur Śliwiński sat down to interview the then 63-year-old leader of Poland in November 1931, Piłsudski commented: 'Most people think in terms of stereotypes. I have opposed stereotypes throughout my whole life. From the time I was a young boy, I thought differently from everyone around me.'<sup>6</sup>

You ask whether Piłsudski was a philosemite or an anti-antisemite. He was surely the latter: as a pragmatic statesman, who led the transition of reborn Poland to a parliamentary democracy with equal civil rights and an independent judiciary in the years 1918 to 1921, including the right of women to vote, Piłsudski insisted that legal rights had to be granted equally to all citizens without exception. Pluralism and tolerance were to become embedded in Polish law. In Piłsudski's mind, then, antisemitism was a threat to democracy and had to be unambiguously opposed. When pogroms broke out in the territories administered by Poland between 11 and 30 November 1918, Piłsudski met on two occasions with representatives of Polish Jewry. In an audience Piłsudski gave on 29 November, the Zionist leader, Ozjasz Thon, subsequently elected to Poland's first parliament in January 1919, came away with the impression that Piłsudski had a limited understanding of the 'Jewish question.' While he listened carefully and insisted he would work to stop the violence, Thon observed pointedly, 'he has not yet taken the time to think about it.'<sup>7</sup> What Thon meant was that, while Piłsudski was certainly no foe of Polish Jewry, and clearly opposed antisemitism, he appeared to have no interest in issues specifically concerning the Jewish community. When I reflect on Thon's comment, it

occurs to me that on 29 November 1918 Piłsudski had the entire weight of the newly created Polish state on his shoulders, a state carved out of three empires in lands decimated by five years of war. The demands on Piłsudski's time were so great in November 1918 that he sometimes had little or no time for sleep. On 18 November 1918, for example, Piłsudski's first foreign minister, Leon Wasilewski, visited him at his home in the late afternoon. When Wasilewski arrived, he was directed to the bedroom. He found Piłsudski lying in bed, physically in tatters, so tired that he was unable to sit up to greet his visitor. Wasilewski remarked later that evening in his diary: 'Piłsudski suffers from exhaustion, for he has gotten a mere 1½ hours of sleep in the last few days.'<sup>8</sup> It is likely that when Thon sat opposite Poland's head of state on 29 November, Piłsudski was so physically and mentally exhausted, had so many demands on his time, and had been so overstretched with responsibilities that he simply did not have the mental capacity to address specifics regarding the concerns of the Jewish community other than promising to do whatever he could to stop the anti-Jewish violence.

But there are also black spots in Piłsudski's relations with the Jews. The first is connected to his refusal publicly to condemn the pogroms of 1918/19 despite repeated requests to do so. When Piłsudski met with Jewish representatives of Poland on 29 November 1918, fifty-nine Jews had already been murdered in pogroms in Western Galicia as well as seventy-three in the Lwów pogrom in Eastern Galicia. With emotions running high, Thon met face-to-face with Piłsudski and pleaded with him to issue a statement condemning the anti-Jewish violence. 'I am not an autocrat and I cannot issue proclamations of a political character other than at the request of the government . . . Solving these problems cannot take place before the convocation of the Legislative Sejm', Piłsudski said, referring to the parliamentary election scheduled for 26 January 1919. Yitzhak Grünbaum, a Zionist leader who subsequently served in the Polish parliament, was outraged, replying: 'Stopping Anti-Jewish pogroms is not something that can wait for the convocation of the Parliament!'<sup>9</sup> Yet, after February 1919, when the country's freely elected parliament gathered for the first time and named him head of state, Piłsudski didn't issue a statement on the anti-Jewish violence, even though pogroms in territories administered by Poland continued throughout 1919 in places like Vilna and Pinsk, in the immediate aftermath of the arrival of Polish troops. It has to be said, on the other hand, that Piłsudski did not hesitate to condemn the pogroms in interviews he gave to foreign newspapers and to foreign diplomats in private, as documented in my biography.

The second black spot relates to the Jabłonna affair of August/September 1920, when Poland's minister of war in the Piłsudski government, General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, ordered the internment of Jewish soldiers of the Polish armed forces on 16 August during the Polish–Soviet war. The order alleged that reports of Jewish soldiers laying down their arms and siding with the Bolshevik

enemy gave General Sosnkowski no choice as the Red Army came within seven miles of Warsaw city centre. Today, over a century after the scandal, the question of Piłsudski's involvement has not been definitely established, but as commander-in-chief and head of state, there is no doubt that he would have had to approve the order. An interview he gave during the Jabłonna affair gives us a window onto his thinking on the Jews at the time. When he sat down with a journalist on 26 August 1920—ten days after the Jewish soldiers had been interned—he was asked about his thoughts on Polish Jews. The reply pretty much confirms his complicity: 'Jews did not behave poorly everywhere', he said. 'In Łomża and the Mazovia provinces, Jewish soldiers bravely held back the Bolshevik advance. In Mazovia, many were killed. On the other hand, not far away in Łuków, in Siedlce, in Kałuszyn, in Białystok and, further away, in Włodowa—even on a mass scale—could be found treason from the Jewish side.'<sup>10</sup> Two weeks after he gave the latter interview—on 9 September 1920—the Jewish soldiers were released in the wake of Poland's victory. For the remainder of the interwar period, Polish Jews regarded the Jabłonna affair with bitterness, and a photograph of the Jewish soldiers of Jabłonna is displayed at the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in one of its permanent exhibitions for all to contemplate.

- AB:** Was there any difference between Józef Piłsudski's attitude towards Jews and towards other non-Polish and stateless peoples like Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians?
- JZ:** In theory, Piłsudski recognized Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, along with Jews and even the some 750,000 ethnic Germans inhabiting the state, as part of Poland's heritage. He nevertheless made a distinction between territorial minorities (Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans), who contested Polish rule over what they perceived to be their own lands, and whose motherland, with which they hoped to unify, lay across the border, and the Jews, a non-territorial minority spread throughout Poland who had no claims to Polish land. Unlike his opponents on the right such as Roman Dmowski and his followers, who stood for Polonization or national assimilation (*asymilacja narodowa*) for minorities (at least for Christian minorities), Piłsudski promoted the principle of state assimilation (*asymilacja państwowa*) for all minorities, Christian and Jewish, in which cultural and linguistic rights were to be granted in exchange for state loyalty. In my view, Piłsudski believed—as did President Tomáš Masaryk of Czechoslovakia—that Jews had more potential to be loyal state citizens than any other minority.
- AB:** You write that the emerging federalist principle derived to a large degree from Piłsudski's geographical origin. How would you describe the region of Piłsudski's youth? A melting pot?
- JZ:** I am of the opinion, shared by other historians and writers, such as Adam Michnik, that Piłsudski's upbringing in the Vilna region constituted one of the

important influences that shaped his support for pluralism and civil society, as well as his advocacy for tolerance towards national and religious minorities. As Michnik put it, in a 1973 essay smuggled abroad and published under a pseudonym two years later in the Paris-based *Kultura*,

Piłsudski saw Poland as the motherland of many nations, a commonwealth of many cultures. Piłsudski envisioned a state in which not only Poles but Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews could live in solidarity . . . He was shaped by the specific character of the Vilna region, a common homeland for people of different nations, cultures, and religions; a multilingual mixture, a land where the Lithuanian coexisted with the Belarusian, the Jew with the Tartar, and the Pole with the Karaites. The people of this land (including those from the Borderlands) were more accustomed to different customs and hostility to xenophobia than those in central Poland.<sup>11</sup>

Recall that in Vilna, where Piłsudski was raised between the ages of 7 and 17, no single ethno-linguistic group constituted a majority. In 1897 the native languages of Vilna's inhabitants were 40 per cent Yiddish, 30.8 per cent Polish, 20.9 per cent Russian, 4.2 per cent Belarusian, 2.1 per cent Lithuanian, and 1.4 per cent German. Michnik's observations were shared by a generation of Polish intellectuals who grew up in the Vilna and Kresy regions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of them, Ksawery Pruszyński, commented in 1943 on the distinctive features of these lands, an area of historic Poland–Lithuania. Poles from these regions, Pruszyński maintained, 'shared a certain sense of the history of Poland, an idea of Poland as a multinational imperium, not repulsion towards other peoples but, on the contrary, an attraction. Treating national minorities not as a necessary evil but as valuable constituents that broadened my motherland and enrich our shared house.'<sup>12</sup>

Antoni Gołubiew was a Polish historian and essayist from Vilna who relocated to Kraków after the Second World War, where he served on the editorial boards of *Znak* and *Tygodnik Powszechny*. In his beautifully written retrospective essay on the heritage of the Vilna region published in 1970 in the pages of *Znak*, Gołubiew painted a portrait of the pre-war multi-ethnic and multilingual milieu and maintained that Piłsudski's world-view, his tolerance and embrace of diversity, was directly linked to the specific environment he grew up in.<sup>13</sup> Czesław Miłosz, a Pole from Lithuania who, like Piłsudski, moved to Vilna as a child, made similar observations. Miłosz commented that 'only his territorial origins can explain' Piłsudski's understanding of Poland's place in history. 'For him,' Miłosz wrote in *Native Realm*,

a Poland confined within ethnic boundaries was an alien concept, and as such he had no real love for it. He cherished a different vision, inherited from many generations, of the *Respublica* such as it had been during the last phase of its existence in the eighteenth century. His was, therefore, a vision of a non-national state embracing both the Polish kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.<sup>14</sup>

Miłosz continued: 'In trying to restore the Commonwealth as far as the

Dnieper, Piłsudski did not have in mind an attack on Russian lands, but simply an expedition to regain the property of his ancestors which had been seized by the Czars.<sup>15</sup> But of course, the regional environment was only one factor. Another important one, in my view, were the values that Piłsudski's mother instilled in him of decency and kindness towards individuals without regard to their nationality or religion.

- AB:** As you write, Rosa Luxemburg posed the question in 1896 as to why the international socialist movement needed to pass a resolution on the national question limiting its demand for the separation of Poland. Why not also make mention of the Czechs, the Irish, et cetera? This is a good question, isn't it?
- JZ:** While Rosa Luxemburg's idea was in many ways quite fair and impartial—why should Poles be singled out in the international socialist congress when many other stateless peoples in Europe yearned for self-determination?—Piłsudski was cut from a different cloth. Born into a land-owning gentry family, he was raised in the unique romantic-insurrectionary tradition of the nineteenth century in a family that dreamed of righting the wrongs of the partitions. Piłsudski thus viewed the struggle for Poland's rebirth as uniquely deserving of redress for the moral health of Europe as a whole. When he was a small child, Piłsudski's mother inculcated into her children the Polish messianic idea, using bedtime as an opportunity quietly and clandestinely to recite verses from Poland's national bards: Krasiński (her favourite), Mickiewicz, and Słowacki (Piłsudski's favourite). One of these passages was Adam Mickiewicz's 'The Pilgrim's Litany', part of the poet's messianic manifesto, *The Books of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage*, published 1832 in Paris after he was forced into exile. Regarded as Mickiewicz's finest expression of the Polish messianic idea, the poem refers to Poland's unique, universal mission to free Europe from despotism.

From the slavery of Moscow, of Austria, and of Prussia,  
Deliver us, O Lord.

For a universal war for the Freedom of the People,  
We beseech thee, O Lord.  
For the arms and the eagles of our nation,  
We beseech thee, O Lord.

For the burial of our bones in our own land,  
We beseech thee, O Lord.  
For the independence, unity, and freedom of our Fatherland,  
We beseech thee, O Lord.<sup>16</sup>

Mickiewicz's verses reverberated powerfully in the Piłsudski home. We know this because both Piłsudski and his elder brother, Bronisław, recorded as adults the deep impression these 'clandestine readings' had on them as children.

Thus, while Piłsudski was certainly sympathetic to other stateless Europeans, he harboured the view that Poland's restoration was a prerequisite for the moral regeneration of Europe and that its statehood would trigger others to follow suit, but he was a true believer in the slogan of the 1830 insurrection, 'For our freedom and yours'.

- AB:** And Piłsudski didn't like the answer given by the International Socialist Congress.
- JZ:** No he did not. The background here is important: Piłsudski arrived in London in March 1896, five months ahead of the Fourth Congress of the Second Socialist International that took place in the last week of July. During these exhilarating months, he distributed a draft resolution calling for the congress's endorsement of Polish independence, using his powers of persuasion to gain their support. Bolesław Antoni Jędrzejowski, co-founder of the PPS, advocated for the draft resolution in the pages of *Justice*, the organ of the British Social Democratic Federation, where he took the opportunity to make the text of the resolution available to English readers. 'There was only one political claim ever cherished by Polish people', he wrote, 'understood and felt by millions in the remote corners of our country as well as in Warsaw—it is the claim for an independent democratic Polish republic.'<sup>17</sup> The creation of an independent Poland would provide a space for the establishment of democratic institutions. That is why the upcoming international socialist congress had to go on record in support of Polish independence. National independence, he argued, was a precondition for the attainment of social democracy in Poland.

At the time Jędrzejowski was working to counter the influence of the indefatigable Rosa Luxemburg, leader of the rival Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland, who came out strongly opposed to the pro-independence platform. In April 1896 Luxemburg reprinted the PPS resolution in full, using the pages of the German and Italian socialist press to express her staunch opposition. Her critical article opposing the draft resolution appeared in *Critica Sociale*, organ of the Italian Socialist Party, and in *Die Neue Zeit*, organ of the German Social Democratic Party.<sup>18</sup>

Several European socialist leaders, including Georgi Plekhanov and Karl Kautsky, nonetheless came out in favour of the PPS position.<sup>19</sup> After Piłsudski met personally with Wilhelm Liebknecht, co-chairman of the German Social Democratic Party and editor-in-chief of its central organ, and Henry Hyndman, founder of Britain's Social Democratic Federation and congress chairman, both publicly lent their support to his resolution, but it turned out that, of the 755 delegates present, few had any familiarity whatsoever with Polish concerns. This made them vulnerable to Rosa Luxemburg's forceful opposition to the resolution. Her sharp intellect and persuasive writing style convinced the majority of delegates that a resolution on the rights of peoples to national self-determination had to be general for all people rather than specifically for

Poland. Given that Piłsudski's resolution did not have enough support, the congress revised the draft: it now championed the principle of national self-determination in general without reference to Poland. Compared to the resolution in support of Polish independence that passed at the First International in 1866 put forward by Karl Marx himself, Piłsudski saw the revised resolution in 1896 as a step backwards for the Polish cause. On the other hand, the congress made the 28-year-old Piłsudski a known entity in international socialist circles for the first time. Although the resolution failed, Piłsudski brought the Polish cause to the attention of European socialists. As Henry Hyndman forcefully argued, 'the only hope of pushing reactionary Russia back from central Europe lies in the reconstitution of a strong Poland'.<sup>20</sup>

**AB:** How important was socialist ideology for Piłsudski then? Was it just a tool to fight for Poland?

**JZ:** At the age of 16, after being exposed to socialist literature in an illegal study group at the Russian State Gymnasium in Vilna, Piłsudski began to self-identify as a socialist. During his last year of gymnasium, in the 1884/5 academic year, he concluded that national independence for Poland had to be not only about sovereignty for Poles but also about equality before the law. Thus, the struggle against the partitioning powers had to go hand in hand with an internal struggle within Polish society against anti-democratic and anti-pluralist forces. For Piłsudski, the embrace of socialism had little to do with theory and everything to do with action: the reconstitution of Polish lands into a democratic, constitutional republic. As he wrote in October 1902 in the pages of *Walka*: 'Our fight for the transformation of the political system is indistinguishable from the struggle for independence.'<sup>21</sup> One year later, Piłsudski reflected on his embrace of socialism in his best-known essay, 'How I Became a Socialist', recalling that his first encounter with the writings of Karl Marx was as a first-year university student in Kharkiv in the 1885/6 academic year. In an illegal study group, Piłsudski read for the first time parts of Marx's *Das Kapital* in Russian translation. It did not excite him: 'I cannot say that this reading made a great impression on me . . . Marx's abstract logic and the idea that economics dominated man did not suit my brain', Piłsudski remarked. However, it is in the same essay that we begin to understand what socialism meant to Piłsudski. 'A socialist in Poland', he wrote, 'must strive for the independence of the country, and independence is a crucial condition for the victory of socialism in Poland.'<sup>22</sup> As Adam Michnik remarked in his 1973 essay I mentioned earlier, one could say Piłsudski was in favour of a struggle against Russia for the separation of Poland and was therefore anti-Russian, but that sentiment had many aspects: 'Yes, Piłsudski was anti-Russian. But his revolt was not merely a revolt against Russia. It was also a revolt against a large part of Polish society. It was a revolt against conformism, intellectual, and moral sloth, against the backwardness of his compatriots.'<sup>23</sup> Yet we should also

mention that to Piłsudski, as to many young men and women of his generation, social democracy was also connected with decency and fairness; with the idea of protecting the rights of the working classes, who, especially in Russia, had no protections. We could ask the question—why did Piłsudski join the newly formed PPS in 1893 at the age of 25? The PPS that Piłsudski joined in 1893 had already issued a programme in Paris in November 1892—entirely unique at the time among socialist platforms—that demanded both the independence of Poland and a democratic, constitutional state.

Piłsudski wholeheartedly embraced the party's Paris platform: equality before the law without regard to sex, religion, or nationality; freedom of speech, the press, and assembly; equal pay for equal work for women; an eight-hour working day, a minimum wage, and the right of workers to form unions and to strike. To Piłsudski, then, social democracy was about the dignity and inalienable rights of the individual; sovereignty was about justice for the inhabitants of the Polish lands. The principles spelled out in the founding PPS programme reflected Piłsudski's own deeply held beliefs about the centrality of open society and the struggle for Polish statehood. Recall that Poland under Piłsudski granted women the right to vote on 28 November 1918, long before the United States, Britain, and France, a right he personally insisted on against the advice of many of his advisers. What is more, it should be noted that the first regulation introduced by reborn Poland on 23 November 1918 was the introduction of the eight-hour working day.

- AB:** What did Europe know about Piłsudski at the beginning of the First World War?
- JZ:** Prior to the First World War the only Piłsudski who was known in western Europe and America was Bronisław. With the publication in English in 1912 of his *Materials for the Study of the Ainu Language and Folklore*, a pioneering work of ethnography on the native population of Sakhalin Island in Japan, where he had been banished for fifteen years, reviews immediately appeared in major American, French, and British journals of folklore. What's more, Bronisław summarized his findings in an article he published in English in spring 1912 in the *Journal of American Folklore*.<sup>24</sup> Before the First World War Józef Piłsudski was known outside the Polish lands only in Austro-Hungarian and German military circles as one of the leaders of the Union of Active Struggle in 1908 in Austrian Galicia, which he had established to organize and train military units, and afterwards as leader of the Riflemen's Association in Kraków beginning in 1910, a paramilitary fighting squad to which the Austro-Hungarian Army gave legal status and recognition, to the great chagrin of the Russians. Piłsudski's name first appeared in the French, British, and American press in 1917 during the so-called 'Oath Crisis', when the Germans arrested him for refusing to swear allegiance to the German and Austro-Hungarian armed forces. His name first appeared in the *New York Times* on 28 July, 1917, six days after his arrest. On

7 September 1917 the *New York Times* ran a front-page story on protests in Warsaw over Piłsudski's arrest: 'The Austro-German masters have dared to lay their hands on a man of whom the entire Polish nation is proud and who, in a sense, is the living symbol of Polish independence and freedom.'<sup>25</sup>

- AB:** How did the Western powers receive Piłsudski in 1918? An inscrutable leader and a socialist who collaborated for a while with the Central Powers? Was there any trust in him among Western leaders?
- JZ:** This is a central question connected to Piłsudski's legacy: how he overcame Western unease and scepticism about him in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. For, when the guns of Europe fell silent on 11 November 1918 and Piłsudski became Poland's leader, the Western Allies knew very little about him, but what they did know they did not like. They had not forgotten Piłsudski's service in the forces of the Austro-Hungarian Army as commander of the Polish Legion's First Brigade or his brief collaboration with the Germans in the Warsaw-based Provisional Council of State in 1917. They didn't properly grasp the significance of his imprisonment by the Germans for the last sixteen months of the war. But even more damaging to Piłsudski's standing in Western diplomatic circles in November 1918 was his socialist orientation and long revolutionary career, even though, in 1918, he was no longer affiliated with any political party. The fear of communism was at its height at a time when Bolsheviks replaced Germans as the West's new foe.

Another factor at play was that, during the last period of the First World War, in autumn 1917, when Piłsudski languished in a German military prison, France, Britain, the United States, and Italy formally recognized the Paris Poles, the Polish National Committee (Komitet Narodowy Polski; KNP), as the official representatives of Poland, a body headed by Roman Dmowski and consisting exclusively of conservative landowners and members of the right-wing National Democratic Party, Piłsudski's long-time political foes. When the First World War ended on 11 November 1918 and Piłsudski formed a government one week later, the victorious Allies were slow to react and instead continued to maintain their recognition of the Paris Poles as Poland's future government. For the next three months, until the United States recognized Warsaw on 30 January 1919, there were two Polish governments—one in Paris and one in Warsaw. This stalemate was in part due to the KNP itself, which steadfastly opposed Piłsudski and his socialist-dominated government. In the course of the next three months, between November 1918 and January 1919, the KNP embarked on a disinformation campaign to delegitimize and discredit Piłsudski. We know this because the minutes of KNP meetings between 1917 and 1921 have been published.<sup>26</sup> At a session held on 11 December 1918, for example, the KNP discussed the idea of 'active intervention' to bring about a change in the Warsaw government. In other sessions some proposed a military coup, suggesting that General Józef Haller's Polish Army in France could be used for

such a purpose. In a letter dated 12 January 1919 to Colonel Edward House, President Woodrow Wilson's chief adviser, Ignacy Paderewski of the KNP remarked that the Warsaw government 'is almost exclusively radical-socialist'.<sup>27</sup>

But as Western diplomats met Piłsudski in person for the first time in January 1919, they were struck by the contrast between the perception that had been shared with them by members of the KNP in Paris and the man they met in the Polish capital. Among the Western diplomats was R. C. Foster, representative of the American mission to Poland, who met with Piłsudski in Warsaw on 14 January 1919. 'My whole impression of Piłsudski', Foster cabled Washington that evening, 'was that he was working for Poland and he spoke with a certain force and conviction that I had not expected to find as a result of the impression given me.'<sup>28</sup> William R. Grove and Vernon Kellogg of the American Relief Administration met with Piłsudski on 4 January 1919. They wrote a report the same day, stating that the West had no reason to fear Piłsudski. On the contrary, the United States should regard him as a strong ally. President Wilson's press secretary, R. S. Baker, drew up a memorandum on 13 January 1919, maintaining that Piłsudski was competently running the country, building an army, and establishing democratic institutions. Piłsudski's foreign policy agenda, Baker continued, was in full accord with President Wilson's, favouring strong ties with Western democracies and halting the spread of communism from Bolshevik Russia. By January 1919 the British and American governments began to view the KNP as representing not Poland but rather one political party. On 7 January 1919 Piłsudski told Kellogg that he understood that military aid, loans, and supplies of food and raw materials were dependent on forming a coalition government that satisfied both the Paris Poles and the Western allies. And so, on 16 January 1919, at Piłsudski's request, Prime Minister Jędrzej Moraczewski resigned and Piłsudski appointed Paderewski to head a new coalition government. The Paderewski-Piłsudski agreement led to a diplomatic breakthrough, with the United States, Britain, France, and Italy extending full diplomatic recognition to Warsaw by February 1919. Looking back on this period, William Grove remarked: 'We Americans had to learn about Piłsudski. He was a national character in Poland but in the armistice period was scarcely known outside of Central Europe. That accounts for our lack of knowledge of the real character of the man. But as the weeks and months passed . . . our respect for his administrative and military talents increased rapidly.'<sup>29</sup>

Piłsudski also skilfully used the Western press to counter disinformation about him spread by the Paris Poles that he was radical socialist. When an Associated Press correspondent sat down with Piłsudski on 17 December 1918, expressing American concerns about Piłsudski's socialist background, he replied, 'I am neither a Socialist nor a Bolshevik; I am a Democrat.'<sup>30</sup> Through this interview, readers could surmise that Piłsudski was, in fact, staunchly anti-Bolshevik, fiercely pro-Western, and was in the process of overseeing a transition to democracy. In a statement that could be taken almost word for

word from one of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's addresses to NATO since 24 February 2022, Piłsudski told the correspondent: 'Poland's role in Europe is to guarantee the frontiers against Bolshevism.' But for it to succeed, he added, Poland needed massive military aid from the West.<sup>31</sup>

- AB:** Do you think that Józef Piłsudski was a real democratic politician? He had no experience with democracy: all he knew was tsarist autocracy and conspiracy against it. Definitely it was not a good school of democracy.
- JZ:** As in any new democracy emerging from the collapse of an authoritarian state, the new leaders are, so to speak, sitting in the pilot's seat and flying the plane for the first time. What prior experience did Piłsudski have when, on 14 November 1918, the acting authorities in Warsaw handed over to him complete power as head of state and commander-in-chief?

It is true that for most of his life, Piłsudski had lived in non-democratic and politically repressive tsarist Russia. He first set foot in a democratic country at the age of 27, when he travelled to London to take part in a meeting of the Union of Polish Socialists Abroad. Two years later, he returned to London for five months to take part in the International Socialist Congress. But, while he understood democratic government and democratic society in theory only, we have to take into account that between the ages of 34 and 46, from 1902 to 1914, Piłsudski lived in Kraków, a city with a Polish majority in constitutional Austria-Hungary, where he experienced freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. In Kraków, Piłsudski could appear in public legally and publish under his real name. Just one year after settling in Kraków, Piłsudski published *The Revolutionary Struggle in the Russian Partition: Facts and Impressions from the Last Ten Years*,<sup>32</sup> as well as his famous essay, 'How I Became a Socialist', under his real name for the first time. He now lived in a country where his friend and colleague Ignacy Daszyński sat in parliament as a representative of the Polish Social Democratic Party of Galicia, and where that party's daily, *Naprzód*, was legal and public.

The most controversial aspect of Piłsudski's legacy was the 1926 coup and the turn to authoritarian rule. I argue in my book that this transformation from democratic to authoritarian rule was not the outcome of any shift in Piłsudski's ideological belief in the democratic ideal. Rather, it was the result of the economic and political chaos that befell Poland between 1918 and 1926, a period that saw sharp fluctuations in the value of currencies, tragic political violence, and thirteen short-lived governments. Between the 1926 coup and his death in 1935 Piłsudski did not lose faith in democracy or in government. He lost faith in the Poland that was emerging before his eyes—in Polish society's ability to exercise its new freedoms responsibly, to respect the constitutionally guaranteed right to equality before the law for all citizens, particularly the right of all citizens to have their votes counted, and to accept the outcome of free elections even if the results were disappointing. The man who presided over the establishment of a genuine liberal democracy while serving as head of state

from 1918 to 1922 did not, in my opinion, become a foe of the very institutions he worked to build. Unlike Mussolini and Hitler, who entered already existing parliamentary democratic systems as prime ministers with the explicit goal of toppling the democratic state and replacing it with a dictatorship, Piłsudski himself was given absolute power in November 1918 and chose to lead a speedy transition to democracy. Yet there was a dark legend to the period after the 1926 coup, when Piłsudski, on a few occasions, ordered the confiscation of newspaper editions whose editorials he opposed and, even worse, the arrest of MPs and their confinement at Brześć in 1931 and the internment of political prisoners at Bereza Kartuska in 1934. So I argue that, after 1926, Piłsudski abandoned the principle of democracy as freedom bound by the rule of law.

Why did this transformation take place? The watershed moment that changed Piłsudski forever was the assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz on 16 December 1922, five days after being elected as Poland's first president. The murder, by a deranged gunman, Eligiusz Niewiadomski, had followed five days of a relentless, vicious smear campaign by Piłsudski's right-wing opponents, who referred to the new president in print as 'Mr Narutowicz, president of the Jews', based on the claim that the Jewish vote—along with the votes of other minorities—had tipped the electoral balance in Narutowicz's favour. Only ethnic Poles, it was argued, had the right to elect a president. The politicians of the right, despite having taken part in the drafting of the constitution adopted in March 1921, were clearly unwilling to live by the most fundamental tenet outlined in that very constitution: the right of all citizens to have their vote counted without the threat of violence or intimidation. But for Piłsudski, it was not only the assassination that crushed his spirit but the shocking aftermath. At the assassin's trial, where he proudly admitted to the deed, Niewiadomski stated that he had originally intended to assassinate Piłsudski and regarded what he did as a noble act of patriotism. Several prominent right-wing members of the Sejm and members of the public praised the wanton act of political violence. Reporting on the trial in the pages of a National Democratic Party weekly, the well-known columnist Adolf Nowaczyński remarked that the assassin 'cannot but provoke admiration for his strength and capacity for sacrifice'. The assassin's trial testimony, he concluded, constituted 'a monument to a man of great character'.<sup>33</sup> The open praise of the assassin in the right-wing press and reports of Polish households in Poznań hanging pictures of the assassin in their windows profoundly embittered Piłsudski. As Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski observed in 1956:

The turning point was in the quite distant year 1922: the murder of Narutowicz committed by the right wing and the complete impunity of the main moral perpetrators of that crime had already led the marshal to the conviction that nothing could be done in Poland with kindness and persuasion, that it was necessary to impose and enforce, to be tough and ruthless, not to back down from obstacles, but to remove them, break them, even crush them.<sup>34</sup>

- AB:** What was the knowledge of Poland during the Paris Conference? You cite Sir Esmé Howard who wrote that Poland was then like ‘a closed and forgotten book put away on the topmost shelf’.<sup>35</sup>
- JZ:** When I first read the memoirs of Sir Esmé Howard, a British delegate to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, I was struck by the passage you cite about how little British diplomats knew about Poland in 1919. The late historian Joseph Rothschild remarked in 1966, ‘it must be acknowledged that Piłsudski merits primary credit for the fact that today the notion of a Europe without a Polish state is no longer conceivable.’<sup>36</sup> If we go back to the year 1918, however, when Poland re-emerged as a state after 123 years, the west European and American public had very little if any familiarity with Polish matters. And the west European diplomats who descended on Paris in 1919 for the Peace Conference—mostly in their forties and fifties—had spent their childhood, adolescence, and formative adult years in a world where Poland did not exist. Howard, aged 55, remarked that he knew practically nothing about Poland and the Polish people when he attended the conference. ‘Most Englishmen of my age at least’, he reflected, ‘were brought up in complete ignorance about everything concerned with Poland’,<sup>37</sup> even those diplomats who were dealing with the Polish question at the conference. Howard’s experience mirrored the vast majority of other Western diplomats immediately after the First World War who supported the cause of Polish statehood—some even passionately—but who knew almost nothing about Poland.
- AB:** Was it due to Western ignorance or Poland’s non-importance in international affairs?
- JZ:** It is a combination of both. I suspect that for educated west Europeans who grew up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their knowledge of the history of Poland was that it disappeared from the map of Europe in 1795; that its history ceased to continue. France, however, was somewhat different, because Paris became the centre of émigré Polish national life in the nineteenth century. The remnants are still visible. In the heart of Paris on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, one finds the Librairie Polonaise, founded in 1833, and the Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, founded in 1838. Seeing these two buildings when I travel to France has made a certain impression on me.
- AB:** Józef Piłsudski claimed during the 1920 war that his goal was to extend Western democracy to the East. Do you think he was sincere about his policy? What did he know about Western culture?
- JZ:** In the immediate aftermath of two critical periods—independence in November 1918 and the coup in May 1926—Piłsudski described himself as a democrat, an admirer of the United States, and an admirer of the American constitution. He was, however, highly critical of Poland’s 1921 constitution, because it left the office of the president nearly impotent, but Piłsudski favoured wholeheartedly

those parts of the constitution that guaranteed individual rights without regard to religion or nationality and other personal freedoms. A good window onto Piłsudski's thinking on government in the aftermath of the 1926 coup can be found in the interview he gave to the Paris-based newspaper *Le Matin* on 26 May 1926. Asked what he envisioned for Poland, Piłsudski replied that it was the American system that he favoured: 'I am not saying that we must imitate exactly the United States of America, where the great power of the federal government is balanced by the autonomy of the individual states, but we must seek something of this kind and apply it to Poland.'<sup>38</sup> The latter statement demonstrates that he had studied the French, British, and American systems of government and had determined that he preferred one over the others, no doubt favouring the strong executive branch in the American system.

At the age of 50, in November 1918, Piłsudski had spent his entire adult life fighting for sovereignty and democracy for his country. Connected to the struggle for Polish freedom was the desire to right the wrongs of the partitions. Russia, in his view, had to be pushed back to her 1772 frontiers, both to establish historical justice and also because Russia had brought to these lands autocratic, authoritarian, and oppressive rule. Piłsudski's words, in public and in private, reflected a belief that the only hope of spreading democratic institutions into the territories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania—whether as independent states or in a voluntary federation with Poland—was to push Russia back to its ethnic frontiers. That is why he decided to put Polish boots on the ground to aid Ukrainian forces in April and May 1920 to take Kyiv and declare Ukrainian independence. As he wrote:

As early as 1918 with no aid from outside, I had come to a clear conclusion about the objective of our war against the Soviets. Amongst other things, I had decided to make every possible effort to remove as far as possible from the place where the new national life was burgeoning and taking shape, any attempt that might be made or any snare that might be set with a view to imposing once more a foreign life upon us, a life not organized by ourselves. In 1919 I accomplished this task. I threw back the Soviet attacks to such a distance that the work of reconstruction of our own national life . . . could not be troubled or imperilled by them.<sup>39</sup>

In an interview printed in February 1920 in the Paris-based newspaper *L'Écho de Paris*, Piłsudski revealed with Napoleonic fervour his ambitions to free the captive peoples of the borderlands between ethnic Poland and ethnic Russia, stating: 'I do not want to see Poland control large stretches of territory inhabited by unfriendly people . . . But to give freedom to a neighbouring people would be the pride of my life as a statesman and soldier.'<sup>40</sup> Asked whether the liberation of Ukraine from Russian control was merely a pretext for Polish conquest, Piłsudski replied: 'Bind this people to Poland by force? Never in my life would I do that.'<sup>41</sup> While in France on his first foreign trip as head of state in 1921, Piłsudski reflected on Poland's place in Europe, stating:

‘Poland is aware of her peaceful and civilizing mission, which fell to her in the east of Europe and which corresponds to the mission of France in the west. Poland will fulfil her mission with perseverance and in ever closer union with France, remaining faithful to the great principles which led the Allies to victory.’<sup>42</sup> This statement is arguably the truest expression of Piłsudski’s belief that he could serve as a Napoleonic figure, spreading democratic institutions to the farthest corners of the territories of historic Poland–Lithuania.

- AB:** You claim that the 1926 coup (and its aftermath) was not the outcome of any shift in Piłsudski’s ideological beliefs in democracy but rather the result of political and economic problems overwhelming Poland, but wasn’t there any alternative to Brześć prison, Bereza Kartuska camp, forged elections, et cetera?
- JZ:** You are right. I agree fully that the 1926 coup was a clear violation of the rule of law, of the constitution, using extra-legal means to topple a legally formed government. And I also agree that Brześć and Bereza Kartuska comprise the darkest chapters of Piłsudski’s rule. I would only say that Piłsudski did not take power in 1926 with the intention of overthrowing democracy. On the contrary, he believed he was saving Poland’s democratic system from ruin, believing the right-wing government of Wincenty Witos installed on 10 May 1926 was proceeding on a path that would further destabilize the country and weaken its ability to preserve its frontiers in the wake of a new German–Soviet alliance that had just been signed one month prior to the coup.
- AB:** You call Piłsudski the founding father of modern Poland—on the other hand, Anthony Eden noted in 1935 that Piłsudski was a man living in the past. In other words, Piłsudski, who was an anticlerical socialist as a young freedom fighter, turned out to be a conservative who sought an alliance with reactionary forces. How is this contradiction to be explained?
- JZ:** It should be noted that British foreign secretary Anthony Eden’s visit to Warsaw in April 1935 took place one month before Piłsudski’s death. Piłsudski was already in the advanced stages of liver cancer, so much so that his cognitive skill had begun to deteriorate. In his report of the meeting drawn up the following day, for example, Eden noted that Piłsudski had slurred speech and that much of what he said was barely intelligible. It is reasonable to conclude that the part of Piłsudski’s remarks that Eden comprehended did not represent the marshal’s normally lucid views on state matters.
- AB:** In 1933 and 1934 Piłsudski decided to negotiate secretly with the Third Reich due to lack of Western support. So who is to blame for the Polish–German alliance? London, Paris, and Warsaw had the same goals but completely different strategies? Why could Polish and Western leaders not have met each other half-way?
- JZ:** On the basis of my research, I would argue that London and Paris alone were to blame. Few of Piłsudski’s decisions have received more scrutiny than the one

to sign a German–Polish non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in January 1934, but few have examined the evolving circumstances that drove Piłsudski to conclude that a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany was necessary for Poland’s short-term security. Recall that Piłsudski signed a similar accord with Soviet Russia in 1932. The accord with Nazi Germany was the outcome of Poland’s so-called *polityka równowagi*, a policy of equilibrium regarding Poland’s two giant neighbours. As historian Marek Kornat convincingly demonstrated, the British and French policy of appeasing Germany in the period 1925 to 1933 gave Piłsudski no alternative but to normalize relations with these neighbours. Piłsudski nevertheless had no illusions, stating in private that he believed the ten-year non-aggression pact with Germany would last for four to five years at most, a premonition that became real all too soon after his death.<sup>43</sup>

**AB:** What made Piłsudski so interesting for you? How much of his legacy do you find in today’s Poland?

**JZ:** Although I conducted research as an undergraduate history major on the 1920 Polish–Soviet war, I was first drawn to Piłsudski in a serious way in graduate school at UCLA. I took a seminar called ‘Varieties of Jewish Nationalism’, in which the professor gave me the assignment of an oral presentation on the Jewish Labour Bund in pre-1914 tsarist Russia. It was a new topic for me, so I asked the professor to suggest some sources. Without hesitation, he recommended Henry Tobias’s *The Jewish Bund in Russia from Its Origins to 1905* and Jonathan Frankel’s *Prophecy and Politics*.<sup>44</sup> As I began taking notes on the formation and ideological evolution of the Bund in the 1890s, both books included a discussion of Józef Piłsudski—then leader of the PPS in tsarist Russia—and his campaign to incorporate the Bund as a Jewish division of his own party. In Frankel’s work, a lengthy quotation from one of Piłsudski’s articles criticizing the Bundist leaders for agitating among Jewish workers in Russian rather than in Yiddish made an impression on me. I learned that Piłsudski pressured the Bund to support demands for the separation of Polish lands from Russia. I also learned from Frankel that some of Piłsudski’s closest party comrades were Polish Jews, like Feliks Perl and Stanisław Mendelson. This sparked in me further interest in the enigmatic Polish leader. It was then that I came to the conclusion that Piłsudski was an exceptional figure who marched against the broader trends of authoritarianism and antisemitism that took root in central and eastern Europe during his lifetime. More and more, the subject of Piłsudski began to command my attention as I finished my doctorate and began teaching at university level in New York City.

In answer to the second part of your question, I would say the following: in the Cold War era, a white legend of Piłsudski prevailed in the West among historians of eastern Europe and among the Polish émigré communities. The white legend views Piłsudski as the gallant statesman and soldier who presided over the formation of independent Poland, established democratic institutions, defended Jewish and minority rights, and personally commanded Polish forces

in 1920 to defeat the Red Army. Inside communist Poland, meanwhile, the ‘dark legend’ camp of historians portrayed Piłsudski as a dictator responsible for Brześć and Bereza Kartuska, the author of a ‘fascist’ constitution in 1935, and an enemy of progress. I fear that, today, the liberals in Poland downplay Piłsudski’s illiberal coup and turn to authoritarian rule, while the populists and nationalists in Poland entirely omit from their praise of Piłsudski the fact that he defended Jewish and minority rights.

## Notes

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