

# PILSUDSKI AND THE POLISH REVOLUTION

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THE revolution which occurred last May in Poland attracted at the time the notice of the world out of proportion, doubtless, to its actual international significance, as it seemed to illustrate a general trend of European political affairs since the war away from democracy to the rule of dictators. It was widely feared (and in some quarters hoped) that Marshal Pilsudski was destined to become another Mussolini and to supersede parliamentary government. This seemed a blow to believers in a democratic order, it gave hope to those who have been advocating more autocracy as a cure for our ills, and it could not but appear as an occurrence of importance to all serious students of politics. It is now sufficiently a thing of the past for us to endeavour to form some idea of its course and causes, and to consider whether it is in truth a work of reaction in that struggle, defined by President Wilson, "to make the world safe for democracy."

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The actual course of the revolution was short, and was fully described in the newspapers at the time, so that one need only recall its outline. On May 12 last, Marshal Pilsudski complained of a mysterious "attack" on his home, which is situated not far from Warsaw, and where he had been living for some time in retirement. This "attack" (it has not been verified) he charged against soldiers sent by the government. Immediately regiments of the army, with which he is very popular, rallied to him and forced him (so he said) to join them as a "protesting delegation" in a march on Warsaw. They were not opposed until they attempted to cross the long Poniatowski bridge leading across the river Vistula from the suburb Praga into the heart of the city. On the bridge they found posted regiments that had remained loyal to the government. There then occurred the dramatic meeting between Pilsudski and his former friend and close associate, President Wojciechowski, who in fact owed his election to Pilsudski's support. The President came to meet the Marshal, and begged him to retire and abide by constitutional procedure, but the latter presented his demands

for the immediate resignation of the government headed by Premier Witos and for the dissolution of parliament. To these proposals the President refused to agree, and he had to retire unsuccessful in his mission of changing Pilsudski's purpose. The advance was now continued and shots were fired. One report says that the advancing troops were first fired on. At any rate the "delegation" here became an attacking force. The ensuing battle raged through the streets of Warsaw for three days; several hundred soldiers are said to have been killed and over a thousand wounded. May 15 saw Pilsudski victorious through sheer force of numbers and established in the Belvedere Palace, the residence of the President. Regiments were being hurried from other parts of the country, and particularly from the Posen district, to the support of the government, when resistance suddenly crumbled. The President and the Premier, who had retired a short distance from Warsaw to Wilanow, sent for Mr. Rataj, the Speaker of the Diet, and tendered their resignations. Mr. Rataj became thus automatically, by the Constitution, Acting-President. He consulted with Pilsudski; a government was formed with Mr. Bartel as Premier and Pilsudski as Minister of War, after which matters returned to what was at least nominally a legal course, with the election of a new President as the first business on the agenda.

The revolution was then quite a small one as revolutions go, a mere coup d'état. It broke out suddenly, it was completely successful in a short period of time, and the revolting side seemed determined as far as possible to maintain every appearance of "constitutionality." However, there had not been wanting signs that trouble was brewing; if the action seemed abrupt and mysterious, it was so mainly to those who had not been closely watching events and who were unacquainted with the characters of the chief actors. In order to gain some idea of the causes which brought it about, we shall have to glance back over the rôle which Pilsudski has played in reconstructed Poland.

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He spent the last sixteen months of the Great War in prison at Magdeburg. Pilsudski was put there in July, 1917, by the Germans who had at the time control over the greater part of Poland. They believed that while he was ostensibly assisting them in Warsaw in their efforts to raise Polish volunteers for an army allied with them, he was in fact secretly blocking their plans. On his release and return to Poland in Nov., 1918, he was immediately made temporary head of the country with the title "Chief

of State" and also Commander-in-Chief of the army. He thus presided over the critical formative years of his country when a new Constitution was being threshed out, and he commanded the army during its almost continuous fighting for two years on the eastern boundaries. During this time occurred his famous march on Kieff in an unsuccessful endeavour to raise up a Ukraine State in federation with Poland, an adventure of considerable imagination, whose foundations were also unfortunately imaginary. There also occurred the still more famous attack of the Bolsheviks on Poland, when the fate of western Europe hung for a while in the balance, and when the invaders were with great difficulty repulsed from the very gates of Warsaw. The Polish armies finally triumphed, and drove the enemy back far to the East. In the Treaty of Riga with Russia, in 1921, the Poles were able to draw their eastern boundaries practically as they willed. During this fighting, although other generals gave brilliant service, particularly General Rozwadowski (the author of the plan of the successful battle which drove the Bolsheviks from Warsaw) and also the French General Weygand who was sent to assist with advice in the hour of peril, still Pilsudski as Commander-in-Chief derived most credit and was universally heralded as the saviour of his country.

It was different however with the other great task which confronted the newly arisen country, the drawing up of a Constitution. In this matter the lead of Pilsudski was by no means entirely followed. All parties in the temporary Diet which was elected in Jan. 1919 were in favour of a republic on broad democratic lines, the grant of the vote to the widest sections of the population without distinction of sex, and of equal, direct, secret, and proportional elections. The two chief matters of dispute were, whether there should be an Upper House, and how the head of the State should be elected and endowed with powers. The parties of the Right demanded that there should be a Senate, that a President should be elected by the combined Houses of Parliament, and that it should be enacted in the Constitution that the offices of President and Commander-in-Chief of the army should never be joined. The Left, who were the followers of Pilsudski and were supposed to be expressing his views, were anxious that there should be no Upper House, that a Chief of State should be elected by universal vote, and that in time of war he should be empowered to take over the command of the army. The views of the Right parties finally prevailed for the most part. A Constitution was adopted calling for a President elected for seven years by a majority vote of the united Diet and Senate. He was to be titular head of the army,

but in wartime he must name a separate Commander-in-Chief. His powers, outside that of representing the State, were in fact to be few, and he was entirely divorced from legislation. The control of the administration was given to a cabinet supported by the vote of the Diet. There was to be an elected Senate composed of one-quarter of the number of members of the Diet, but its powers were limited to changing and retarding legislation.

It was no secret that Pilsudski did not like this arrangement, by which he considered that the President was given far too little power, especially over the army. Still he offered no overt opposition, and it was universally expected that he would be elected first President of Poland after the elections to the first regularly constituted Senate and Diet, which took place in Nov. 1922. However, to everyone's surprise, he declined the office and allowed a comparatively unimportant man, Narutowicz, to be elected. When this new official was shortly afterwards assassinated, Wojciechowski, the President who recently resigned, was chosen in his place. Pilsudski remained Chief of the General Staff of the Army until 1923, when he resigned and retired into private life, to reappear in so dramatic a fashion as the leader of the May revolution. His remark on retiring was that public office, as it was constituted, gave him far too little to do. However, it appears that the quiet of private life was still more distasteful to his active nature.

There is no doubt whatever that Pilsudski during his tenure of the post of Chief of State rendered his country extraordinary services. After the collapse of the German army, and before his arrival in Warsaw, there had immediately commenced a chaotic strife of obscure parties and local governments, none of which could gain any wide recognition. But on his appearance in Warsaw, all this was magically changed. He was unanimously invited by all parties to assume the leadership as the one man who possessed the necessary national prestige. From that time things moved forward comparatively smoothly; the necessary organizations for army, civil service, judiciary, elections, and other functions of government were speedily achieved by the hearty co-operation of all parties under his leadership; Poland proceeded to face bravely her encircling enemies and her many internal problems. Had Pilsudski not been present during the critical formative years to supply the needful authority and initiative, there is no telling what horrors of confusion the country might not have suffered.

There was, however, one very instructive event in June, 1922, just before he ceased to be Chief of State. He suddenly came out with vague charges against the cabinet of Premier Ponikowski



which was doing fairly well and preparing for the coming elections. The cabinet resigned, and there ensued for two months a government crisis. No cabinets could be formed that could meet at the same time with Pilsudski's approval and with the support of the Diet. The Polish mark fell speedily, and financial affairs went from bad to worse. Finally, at the end of July, a weak compromise cabinet was set up for the sole task of carrying out the elections. The course of this crisis, occurring largely behind closed doors, was a mystery to the general public. It created a sinister impression, and there seemed to be only one adequate means of explaining it. This was the conjecture that since the party conducting the elections would be in a very favourable position to influence their result, for reasons not unknown in Canada, Pilsudski wished to get his Left parties into power. His conduct, however, was clumsy and violent, and far from being completely successful.

This incident may, perhaps, throw light on the circumstances of the May revolution. The life of the Polish parliament is fixed at five years, and in 1926 the time was approaching when another general election would be inevitable. Count Skrzynski's cabinet had just fallen,—a cabinet which had been proceeding with an arrangement to bring back Pilsudski into active life as Inspector-General of the army with the supreme command in case of war. The succeeding Witos cabinet proposed to carry through proposals made by the previous government to reduce the numbers of the army and also the staff of the State railways, for economic reasons. Neither of these proposals met with any favour from Pilsudski. One was aimed at the army, the darling of his heart; the other displeased the Socialists, his warmest supporters. Pilsudski thereupon roundly denounced the government in an interview published in the *Kurjer Poranny*; the government foolishly confiscated the issue; and then ensued the events of the coup d'état as before related. In acting forcibly as he did, he undoubtedly wished to prevent measures of which he disapproved. He also wished to carry out his old project of strengthening the power of the executive. Was it possible, too, that he had in mind the intention to put himself and his followers in as favourable a position as possible with a view to influencing the result of the approaching elections? Pilsudski says himself that he came merely to protest, that he had no thought of violence, and that he was forced to fight because he was fired on. It certainly seems unfortunate, in that case, that a man of his tremendous prestige should find it necessary to come at the head of regiments of soldiers. Whether or no his motives were as

mild and constitutional as he says they were, we have another forcible example of the clumsiness of his actions.

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What has Pilsudski done with the power he gained by his bold stroke? For by the results we may best judge his motives and the tendencies of his politics. The first business was the election of a new President. A National Assembly (the combined Senate and Diet) was summoned for this task in May. Pilsudski allowed his name to be proposed, with the idea that if he were elected he would have constitutional amendments passed giving the President power to dissolve parliament and then for a limited period to assume absolute control with the co-operation of his cabinet. He was elected President on the first ballot, receiving 292 votes as against 193 for Count Binnski, the candidate of the united Opposition, with 60 blank votes and a number of abstentions. The majority was not nearly large enough to suit Pilsudski. He declined the Presidency on the ground that without a change in the Constitution strengthening the powers of the President he would be a mere figure head; and since parliament did not vote for him more heavily, it seemed unlikely that he would be able to get such legislation passed. On his advice, Professor Moscicki, an engineer, was elected.

The Diet met shortly afterwards, on June 22, and passed the budget proposed by the government with unprecedented speed. Then in July changes in the Constitution were passed which greatly increased the power of the President by authorizing him to adjourn and dissolve parliament for a fresh election on his own authority, and by permitting him to issue decrees having the force of law while parliament is not in session. They also give the President the right of veto,—subject, however, to annulment by a two-thirds majority of parliament. Moreover, they enact that if the Diet does not pass the budget within three and a half months after it has been presented, it will go automatically to the Senate which has power to amend and adopt it; and if neither Diet nor Senate adopts the budget, the President has power to promulgate it.

It will be at once seen that while these reforms in the Constitution are far reaching and greatly increase the powers of the President, they are by no means subversive of democracy, nor do they make the President an autocrat. His increased powers are plainly intended to be used only in crises to break down deadlocks; as long as parliament is at all reasonable and workable, the real control lies still in the hands of the Premier and his cabinet. If no further strokes

of violence are attempted, and no further changes in the Constitution made, it may well be that Pilsudski has greatly improved it and made it much more truly democratic by trimming away many of the theoretic and doctrinaire parts which are bound to occur in any hastily written paper Constitution. However, it was quite clear that the real driving force which might make the changed Constitution effective was Pilsudski himself, so that the general public heard with much satisfaction that he had come out into the open and had as Premier formed a government of his own, in which the former Premier, Mr. Bartel, became one of his cabinet. This was on Oct. 2. Pilsudski now has an opportunity to show what his real policies are, and what he can do as the head of a responsible government.

Without question, he has the public opinion of the country behind him, and will have it so long as he can solve the four big problems of every Polish government,—finances, foreign relations, the army, and agrarian reform. The motto of the vast majority of the population is "Dajcie nam spokój", "Give us tranquillity", and they will not greatly care what happens to the present parliament so long as they get good government. So far there seems to be no great menace to democracy; but the two chief factors which are bound to affect future developments are the political character of the population and the personal character of Pilsudski. Let us glance at these in turn.

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The wonder really is not that democracy in Poland appears to be in danger of breaking down, but that it has not broken down a long while ago. A tremendous experiment in self-government is being tried there, and the measure of success that it has already achieved is remarkable when one considers the difficulties. A people less idealistic than the Poles would have quailed before them. In the first place, the three parts of Poland's severed body have been joined together, but it is no wonder if such wounds do not heal all at once. France has been experiencing considerable difficulty in reattaching Alsace and Lorraine to the body politic, although the separation there has been for only fifty years. The parts of Poland, however, were severed for over a hundred years, and in that interval the different sections of the people were trained in the very different schools of law, politics, and administration set up by Germany, Austria, and Russia. Barriers between the parts were high and hard to cross, and the people kept growing ever insensibly further apart. Their burning patriotism has brought

them together again to co-operate in a common parliament, but it is small wonder if the lines of cleavage are still visible, if the different sections have not as yet learned to forget their local interest, to think nationally, and to act together in nation-wide parties.

Then again there is the tremendous problem of illiteracy, a legacy in the main of Russian hostility and Russian and Austrian inefficiency (German education in Posen district was quite good). I do not vouch for the figures, but I have seen it stated that well over sixty per cent. of the adult population is absolutely illiterate. In any case, the proportion is very high. In some cultured nations of the western world, though the number of illiterates be small, this is nevertheless felt to be a severe handicap to successful self-government and it has frequently been proposed to make the ability to read and write a test for exercise of the franchise. At the present time the Poles are doing their best to provide facilities for the education of all children, but it will be some years before such will be everywhere available, and it will be many more before the full effects of education can be felt. In the meantime the Poles have shown a wonderful confidence in the natural wisdom of human nature by giving the vote to all adult citizens, both men and women. Poland was put to sleep in the eighteenth century before democracy was fashionable; she has awakened in the twentieth amid a world of democracies, but she has determined to be no whit behind the most enlightened, for she has adopted not only universal adult suffrage but also the latest system of proportional representation, a measure which is in Canada as yet purely a subject of academic debate. Naturally people who cannot even read the newspapers, and who are kept long hours at grinding toil in order to gain a bare living, cannot all at once adopt a wise and nation-wide outlook. The members of the Diet have been mostly of a poor type, and elected solely for local reasons. Peasants elect peasants; workers, workers; few educated and politically trained men have been able to get a following. . . Thus even the parties, which in the present parliament number almost thirty, have mostly a local significance. In such a parliament unstable coalitions have to be formed largely by appeals to selfish interest and often, it is alleged, by outright graft or corruption. Political principles and stable views are scarce; crisis succeeds crisis, brought on by waves of easy and discreditable emotion. The present parliament deserves all the hard things that have been said about it, not least of which has been the scorn heaped upon it by Pilsudski. No doubt it has also richly deserved to have its wings clipped in the

way he has done in order that the nation's business may be prosecuted. But in extenuation, one must remember that this is Poland's first parliament since the infamous partitions (the one elected in Jan. 1919 was temporary and incomplete) and that it is the first really democratic parliament in her whole history. With a boldness that almost takes one's breath away, the Poles have immediately begun the political education of every adult citizen by giving him an active part in the franchise, and that from the first moment of their freedom. One cannot help feeling that such a brave effort will bear rich fruit in the future.

The Polish political situation is, however, further complicated by the problem of national minorities. These all have their own representatives in parliament, they form parliamentary blocks, and in their own interests strive to bedevil the working of the government. This problem is partly the legacy of the old Russian government that tried to herd the Russian Jews into Poland, with the result that there are now some three millions of them in a total population of about twenty-seven millions. Also it comes in part from the extraordinary mixture of peoples on the eastern borders of the country. Not even an archangel could draw a satisfactory boundary line there. The line as it runs at present leaves many Poles outside their land, but it brings in about six millions of White and Little Russians and Lithuanians. Then there are many Germans in the west, and a few Czechs. Altogether foreign minorities form over one-third of the population. Their parliamentary groups, for the most part hostile and receiving inspiration and direction from abroad, form a big handicap to the smooth working of parliamentary institutions, and bid fair to be a bigger nuisance than was the Irish party in Westminster.

Such is a brief sketch of the political character and situation of the Polish people and parliament at the present time. Their inefficiency, if highly excusable, is extremely unfortunate in view of the great difficulties they have to face. Some estimate of these latter is essential to an understanding of the present circumstances. Let us see what they are.

The first great tasks of providing a Constitution, education, legal codification, and administrative organization, have at least been boldly tackled. Finances form a knotty problem. The question is how to persuade a poor, hitherto down-trodden people that it is in their own interest to tax themselves. A series of able finance ministers have just about solved this puzzle, and to-day the Polish zloty is comparatively stable on the world exchanges. But there is an army of half a million men to be fed and clothed



and equipped at ever increasing cost, and this it is which is ever precipitating fresh financial crises. It is the old European problem of how to meet the cost of armaments. Then the question of agrarian reform is pressing. The large numbers of landless peasants have been promised their own property, to be carved from the large estates and unoccupied lands. But the process of expropriation is a complicated business, and requires much money for the payment of compensation, so that it is proceeding slowly, far too slowly for the peasants who are kept in a state of dissatisfaction by the non-fulfilment of the pledges made to them. Perhaps, however, the chief problem for the Poles is their foreign policy. Were Poland an island like Great Britain or a peninsula like Spain, her worries would be reduced almost to the vanishing point. Instead of that, she is placed in the centre of Europe, with no natural boundaries except on the south, between the two strongest continental powers, Germany and Russia, both of whom are for long-standing reasons hostile to her, and who may at any time unite against her as they have done in the past with such terrible results. The consequence is that Poland clings closely to France, her one real friend in Europe, and to the League of Nations, and that all her efforts are directed to preserving the present European *status quo*. For this purpose she deems it essential to have an adequate army for her own defence, and her diplomatists have been busy weaving a net-work of treaties, political and economic, with her neighbours. It seems unlikely that Poland is contemplating any militaristic adventures whatever, especially now that her recent election to the Council of the League of Nations has set the seal on her policy of peaceful co-operation. So rapid and sudden, however, have been the changes in the international situation in Europe since the war that much of Poland's attention has been concentrated on maintaining her own proper position in the concert of nations, and on carrying into effect the two treaties of Versailles and St. Germain as they affect her. I do not need to specify in detail her individual problems, such as those of Vilna, Memel, Danzig, and Upper Silesia.

To these peculiar difficulties of Poland are added the general one of post-war Europe, of economic depression, of a shortage of housing, of fitting her industry and commerce to her new boundaries, of finding work or outlet for surplus population. Certainly the situation calls for hard and continuous work, and for leadership, and it is unlikely that Poland will get the former without the latter. Pilsudski is admittedly the outstanding man in the country

to-day. What kind of a man is he? Is he able and willing to give the required leadership?

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In endeavouring to answer these questions, it may be said at once that he is never likely to have the whole nation united behind him as President Masaryk has Czecho-Slovakia. He has not the latter's character nor political genius. There is no doubt, however, that he is capable, courageous, and above all things a man of action. It is commonly believed, too, that he is scrupulously honest, self-denying, and desirous only of the good of his country. His worst defects are that he is too little of the politician and the demagogue. He does not know how to make his policies clear to the people, and to take them with him. He tends to be an egotistical and overbearing speaker, and is unrestrained in his abuse of those of whom he disapproves. Also he is secretive, sudden, incalculable in his actions. In short, his faults are those of the soldier politician.

He could hardly be otherwise, though, in view of the school of experience in which he has been educated. Pilsudski was a conspirator against the Russians while still an undergraduate in the Russian University of Kharkoff. The Russians sent him off for five years to Siberia, on suspicion of complicity in a plot to murder the Tsar. When he was freed, he conspired in earnest, but so skilful was he that he was only once caught again, and from that imprisonment he was clever enough to escape within a year. He was one of the most successful of the Polish conspirators owing to the qualities he developed of secrecy, cunning, boldness, and self-reliance. Moreover, he displayed great initiative. At a time when almost all of his compatriots had become hopeless of re-establishing their political independence, and had turned their attention to making themselves economically powerful so that they might gain importance through industry and commerce, he was one of the very small band who still dared to put their faith in active armed resistance. He became one of the leaders of the wing of the Socialist party which was strongly nationalistic, and which continually organized armed raids on post-offices, banks, railway trains in order to provide themselves with funds to arm against Russia. With the connivance of Austria he was one of the foremost in organizing in Galicia "Riflemen's Associations", whose avowed object was attack on Russia. At the outbreak of the war he hastened to invade Russian territory with his volunteer riflemen. These grew into the famous Polish Legions that fought

as volunteers in the Austrian army against Poland's chief oppressor, Russia. Pilsudski was made General in command of the first brigade, and won military distinction in that capacity. When general conscription for the Austrian army and German intrigues made the position of the Legions difficult, Pilsudski resigned his post. For a while he devoted himself to perfecting the organization of a secret military association in Russian Poland, and then he accepted an invitation to join the Council of State which the Germans had set up in Warsaw. Pilsudski was to raise further Polish volunteers to fight the Russians alongside the Germans, in return for political concessions to be made to Poland. It was in 1917 that, owing to disputes over this matter with the Germans, he was interned in Germany. Thus it will be seen that up to the time when he was made Chief of State in Nov. 1918, his whole experience had been of two kinds. First he had been a conspirator against the Russians, and during the war he had been a soldier. In neither capacity was his training such as might fit him to become a constitutional parliamentary leader. He was born in 1867, so that he is now nearly sixty years of age, and we may surmise that his character is not likely to change much in the future.

He has, however, great advantages. Just because he was the leader who was boldest in action as also in words, both before and during the war, he has come out with the greatest reputation. Moreover, the miracle of the rebirth of Poland has served to render him almost a legend to his countrymen, and to place him on a level with the heroes of the past, such as Prince Joseph Poniatowski and Tadeusz Kosciuszko. The Poles did not win their independence. It was really a gift to them as a result of the Allied victory. But the emotions of joy aroused in the average Pole by this wonderful event have crystallized not so much about the Allies as about the national hero, Pilsudski. He is the visible embodiment of their great good fortune, and so has acquired enormous prestige which he will surely retain as long as he lives. Coupled with this are his own sterling qualities of character, principally his love of getting things done. It is for these reasons that most of his fellow citizens are very glad to see him where he is now, in October, when this is being written, the Premier of his country. The premiership is still, notwithstanding the recent changes in the Constitution, the leading position of the government, and it is felt to be only right that Pilsudski should take hold there and show what can be done.

The interesting question is,—What is likely to happen in the future? It is pretty clear that something must happen soon, for the government has been meeting with sharp opposition from

parliament over the adoption of the army estimates. Either Pilsudski must have parliament dissolved by the President or he will have to proceed to further repressive measures. Is it likely that he will go on to establish himself as a dictator? It is agreed that if he chose, he might easily do so. So far he has seemed to be desirous of clinging to constitutional forms, but it is the incalculable element of his character that leaves everyone in doubt, and perhaps not even his closest friends know for certain what he will do. If he does become a dictator, it will not be of the Bolshevist type. Although he has all his life been a professed Socialist and had led the parties of the Left, his Socialism has always been tempered by nationalism, and he is unlikely to tread a doctrinaire path to supreme power. In fact recently he has obtained more support from the Centre and the Right than from the Socialists. He is more likely to follow the example of Mussolini, who is also a quondam Socialist, should he decide to clutch the power. There are whispers heard that he might even become King of Poland. Meanwhile Poland and the world watch and wait.

Whatever happens, one inference from the situation can be drawn. Even if parliamentary government should fail for the time being in Poland, it cannot be said that democracy has failed. Real democracy, resting as it must on educated and enlightened people, has not yet been tried, and Poland will have to stumble on yet through many mistakes before true democracy can be achieved there.