

THE MYTHS AND SYMBOLISM OF POLAND'S INDEPENDENCE DAY

Biskupski M. B. B (2012). Independence Day. Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland. Oxford: Oxford University Press, XVI+200 pp.

CLEARLY, THE CELEBRATION OF INDEPENDENCE DAY on 11 November in Poland in recent years became politically salient but the attitudes to it reflect certain divisions within contemporary Polish society. These differences are not over which particular Independence Day to celebrate but over the attitude to this holiday and the meaning of independence or even, on a deeper level, over national identity. One has to look at Poland's past, at the origins of this holiday and the views of it the society held at various stages of history in order to comprehend all these peculiarities. An attempt at studying all these problems has been made by the Polish Canadian historian Mieczysław Biskupski who presented his observations and conclusions in a book titled "Independence Day. Myth, Symbol, and the Creation of Modern Poland."

The author uses problematic-chronological approach and distinguishes four periods in the history of the perception of Independence Day throughout the ten chapters of the monograph. These are the interwar era, World War II, post-war period of 1945-1989 and democratic Poland. Biskupski further subdivides the interwar era into the periods of the making of the holiday and its perception during the years of parliamentary regime, the making and constitutional consolidation of the *sanacja* regime and the last prewar years. He also focuses on the attitudes of the communist authorities and their opponents analysing Poland's post-war history. Biskupski finishes his book with the study of functions of Independence Day in the Third Republic after 1989.

In his introduction to the book, Biskupski notes that during the last century the holiday of national independence was not always celebrated on 11 November. Nevertheless, this day together with the symbols and traditions associated with it well deserves researchers' attention. One can hardly disagree with that. One can likewise hardly disagree with the author's remark about the Independence Day in Poland as a

time for remembrance of national martyrdom and it is not surprising that the tone of the celebrations is very restrained and somber (p. X).

In the preface the author gives his definitions of myths and symbols of Independence Day. First, he focuses on the myths of soldier and martyr and traces their origins to the times of national rebellion of 1794 and Polish Legions fighting on the side of Napoleon. Biskupski observes that under the influence of Romantic ideas, heroic exploits of 1794-1831 became mythologised and quickly became part of national tradition (p. 2).

The last third of the nineteenth century saw significant social, economic and political transformations which resulted in the replacing of rebellion tradition by the "organic work" (a Polish version of positivism) that in its turn adapted national tradition to face the challenges of the new era. However, the picture is far from simple. In the late nineteenth century, the question of possibility of an armed uprising was raised again. In view of social and economic changes, the uprising of 1863-64 began to be viewed not as a national disaster but as an experience of social mobilisation and military tactics. This also marked a new stage in the exaltation of Polish martyrdom.

Another myth closely related to the military traditions is the martyrological view of Polish history: "*Poland as a victim of cruelty of history and Polish patriots as sacrificial sufferers*" (p. 3). This, in Biskupski's opinion, is reflected in art, literature and the cult of Tadeusz Kościuszko who was perceived by many as a personification of the armed uprising.

Thus, in the twentieth century, legends and myths viewed as moral justification for the actions of some Polish politicians gained currency in Polish society. First, that is true about Józef Piłsudski who gave a new meaning to the myth of national uprisings trying to combine it with socialist ideas. This was manifested in the organisation of an underground Union of Armed Struggle in 1908 and later of Polish Military Organisation and Polish Legions, which, in Biskupski's opinion, were much mythologised since their beginning. Their symbolisation far exceeds their real significance (p. 10-16, 18-21) which, by the way, was noticed by the Russian researcher Gennady Matveev (Matveev, 2008).

It is noteworthy that Piłsudski was not alone in his efforts at "militarising the politics." Similar attempts were made by the Polish national democrats and their leader Roman Dmowski which is mentioned not so often when it comes to the history of Poland of the twentieth century

(Poland in the Twentieth Century..., 2012). For Biskupski, the reason for this lies in the struggle between both politicians and their conflicting views on territorial, national and other questions.

Discussing the choice of the date for Independence Day, the author observes that in various periods 17 dates were proposed which varied according to the ideological preferences of different political forces. The ambiguity is also reflected in the fact that on the telegram Piłsudski sent to the world powers to inform about the establishment of an independent Polish republic there was no date of that event while its author signed as just the "Supreme Commander of the Polish Army" (p. 30).

11 November did not become an Independence Day from the very beginning. This can be explained in the first place by the political and ideological differences between Piłsudski and his supporters, and Dmowski and his allies. In this respect, the author provides a detailed account of the process whereby the institutionalisation of the holiday took place, the attitudes of national minorities to it, and its manifestations in the public discourse coming to a conclusion that even the celebration of the tenth anniversary of Polish republic's independence was accompanied by the struggle between its two conflicting narratives and the competition between their respective myths.

The Independence Day's peculiarity during the interwar era was its close association with the image of Piłsudski. This was reflected in the military parades during the official celebrations which were their indispensable part. Thus, it was emphasised that it was Piłsudski and the army who laid the foundations of Poland's independence and were its guardians. After the death of Marshal Piłsudski in 1935, the ceremony of the Independence Day celebrations underwent some changes. In fact, 11 November became Piłsudski's day, eventually overshadowing independence itself.

After analysing the situation with Independence Day during the years of World War II, Biskupski notes that Germans traditionally arrested prewar Polish public and political figures before 11 November. The situation on the territories ceded to the USSR is less clear as the author recognises that available information is scarce and does not allow drawing any conclusions about Independence Day celebrations there. That, by the way, raises the question of whether the changes of the Soviet policy in the Polish question in 1940 had any bearing on au-

thorities' attitudes to the events of 11 November 1918. Was it indeed in 1943, in Biskupski's view, that the first attempt to give a new meaning to the celebration of Independence Day was made (p. 108)?

No less complex was the attitude to the events of 11 November 1918 among the émigré circles. Polish government in exile was influenced by the political rivalry inherited from the interwar era, between Piłsudski and Władysław Sikorski who was the head of the wartime cabinet and a critic of the *sanacja* regime. This resulted in a split within the émigré circles over the question of the date for Independence Day. Biskupski observes that even before the communists took power in Poland, Sikorski attempted to ruin Piłsudski's myth and the holiday associated with it. He made a decision that only 3 May, the Constitution day deserved a status of a national holiday (p. 114).

The end of World War II did not spell the end of the debates over 11 November and the role of Piłsudski. While for Piłsudski's supporters (the piłsudczycy), Independence Day was closely associated with their ideological leader, the political forces on the right tried to stress the role of several other factors that led to Poland's independence and to downplay the role of the Marshal in it.

Celebrations of 11 November in post-war Poland were out of the question. The official state holiday was 22 July 1944, the day when the pro-communist Polish Committee of National Liberation was proclaimed. As for the pre-war Independence Day, it was closely associated with the Bolshevik October Revolution in Russia, proclamation of Ignacy Daszyński People's government. Interwar Poland was severely criticised and the Piłsudski's figure was very rarely referred to, mostly in a negative context.

The author observes that after 1956, in the official Polish People's Republic one can notice changes in the attitude towards the events of 11 November 1918 and Piłsudski but they were not systematic in their nature. Only on 11 November 1978 a mass celebration of Independence Day took place in Poland but it was not yet recognized officially.

Referring to the opinion expressed by another Canadian researcher Adam Bromke about Polish history being a dialectical struggle between idealism and realism, Biskupski remarks that for the opposition circles in the Polish People's Republic, 11 November was a highly idealised holiday. One has to bear this in mind because the leaders of Solidarity refused from the nineteenth century uprising tradition of

idealist Piłsudski but rather embraced the methods of realist national democrats (p. 136).

11 November was restored as the Independence Day of the Polish Republic on 11 February 1989 (p. 157) and thus, after 50 years, became an official holiday again. Along with the political reforms there took place an official recognition of the places of memory of the interwar era as well as the ideological justification of the holiday. If in 1990, the celebrations focused on the defeat of bolshevism; later, other historical topics were raised during the celebrations such as restoration of Piłsudski and the legions cult, the tradition of national uprisings. At the same time there took place a process of shaping of an alternative view of history by the far right forces, and a politicization became concomitant to the celebrations.

In the conclusion to the book, Biskupski notes that 11 November celebrations as a symbol can tell us much about the modern Polish consciousness. First, this holiday itself is an evidence of existence of an independent Poland for which Piłsudski fought. The myth of the Polish legions is closely associated with his personality and reflects the tradition of national uprisings in Polish society. Besides, Piłsudski has a halo of a winner who selflessly fought for restoration of his state. This holiday has a bitter taste, as the Poland restored in 1918 was only a part of a bigger historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of which Poles dreamt. That is why the Independence Day has an undertone of nostalgia for a lost greatness.

One cannot but agree with Biskupski's statement about 11 November as underlying many aspects of the modern Polish spirit such as victory, heroism, determination for a bright future, a romantic view of the past devoid of any sad episodes in it. Moreover, this holiday stresses how different Poles are from other nations of Eastern Europe. Thus, for Poles, Independence Day is an occasion to ponder about the honour and tragic fate of their nation (p. 178).

Summing up, it is worth noting that Biskupski uses an unorthodox approach to the study of his subject. Along with myths and symbols announced in the very title of the book, there are also elements of the history of everyday life, an account of places of memory, politics of history, collective consciousness, etc. This book allows looking at well-known facts of Polish history from a fresh perspective, and this can inspire other researchers to investigate the seemingly well-researched topics anew. This is true about not only Poland but other nations, too.

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