A Few Notes on Józef Piłsudski and the Treaty of Riga

Abstract

Historical literature often suggests that Józef Piłsudski, the Commander-in-Chief, won the war with Soviet Russia, but lost the peace. He lost in many respects: he lost his Polish eastern policy, which ended in failure; he lost to the Sejm and politicians who were pushing for an armistice with the Bolsheviks and who took the matters of peace in Riga into their own hands. These politicians were also asked: did nothing in Riga actually depend on Piłsudski? What did he know about the pending talks, did he try to influence them somehow behind the scenes? Did he see any alternative to the decisions being made in the Latvian capital? And finally – how did he remark on and evaluate the provisions of the Riga peace? The purpose of this article is to analyze all these narratives, bring out their main themes and re-examine them. The main conclusion is that Piłsudski’s defeat in Riga was also a defeat for Poland: of its attempt to achieve independence as a superpower between Germany and Russia. The failure of Piłsudski’s eastern policy, of which Riga may be a symbol, determined not only further Polish–Soviet relations, but the fate of Poland in general in the interwar two decades, a fact of which Piłsudski was well aware.
On March 18, 1921, the peace ending Poland’s war with Soviet Russia (and formally also with Soviet Belarus and Ukraine) was signed in Riga.¹ It was a peace that, in the fairly frequent opinion of commentators and, later, historians, Józef Piłsudski lost, despite the earlier wartime successes of the Polish Army under his command. He lost both as Commander-in-Chief and Head of State; as a soldier and as a politician. And he lost on many counts too. Piłsudski was reproached for his defeat in the clash with the Sejm over his influence on the staffing of the peace delegation that had negotiated the truce and the Peace of Riga; for the final terms of the treaty with the Bolsheviks²; for suffering a defeat of his own, and from the viewpoint of the state, independent Polish eastern policy, which Riga symbolized, to use Juliusz Mierszewski’s words, “as a tombstone on its grave” (1967, p. 36). With the war unresolved by either side, some—most famously Józef Mackiewicz (1965) – also questioned Piłsudski’s earlier rejection of an agreement with “white” Russia and his failure to use this route to crush the Bolsheviks. These allegations are well-known and have been rehashed by historians and essayists for more than 100 years. Some questions constantly crop up along the way: did nothing really


² No longer in the form of a novel, but expounding the whole matter directly, Mackiewicz wrote: “my view of these historical events (not a bilateral war with Russia, but a fragment of the global battle against the Bolshevik invasion) and my attitude toward Piłsudski, could raise objections” while in another passage, he stated that “There is no doubt whatsoever that Bolshevism was saved on October 12, 1920, more decisively than in the fall of 1919, by the Mikashevichy agreement” (Mackiewicz and Toporska, 2015, pp. 207, 236).
depend on Piłsudski in Riga? What did he know about the ongoing talks? Did Piłsudski try to influence their course behind the scenes? Did he see an alternative to the decisions being made in the Latvian capital? Finally, how did he comment on and evaluate the provisions of the Riga peace? In this essay, I will select the main themes from these narratives, revisit them and try to provide my view on these matters.

One of the persisting narratives in historiography is the opinion that Piłsudski—although he brought about an ultimately fortunate settlement in the war with Soviet Russia as Commander-in-Chief—lost the domestic battle for peace; that peace in Riga from September 1920 was being brokered by politicians who will forever be symbolized by the chairman of the parliamentary delegation, Stanisław Grabski and Deputy Foreign Minister, Jan Dąbski (1931). In the fall of 1920, Major Karol Polakiewicz, a member of the military delegation in Riga, and a man fanatically loyal to Piłsudski (a few years later he would threaten General Władysław Sikorski that he would expose all his betrayals and affairs and then commit suicide if Sikorski did not stop fighting Piłsudski) spoke with Grabski (Rataj, 1965). This is how Polakiewicz summarized the gist of the meeting with Grabski in one of his reports:

Grabski naturally made sure to engage me in a few conversations and triumphantly say that this peace is his peace and that Piłsudski has no say here. Recently, in Gdańsk, I answered him that this was not his peace, but only a peace out of the fear of the specter of a future great war.

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3 Andrzej Chwalba recently wrote that in September 1920, Piłsudski’s position “was already weaker than it had been a few months earlier; despite the fact that he led the troops to the successful Warsaw operation. He had won an important battle, but lost his previous place in the decision-making arena. It was the politicians, for the most part from the camp of his opponents, who took the baton of managing Polish affairs from the hands of the Commander” (2020, p. 289).

4 As an aside, when mentioning Dąbski, we can cite the opinion of Piotr Wandycz about his book. He noted that “Dąbski did not fantasize ex post, because I have reviewed his contemporary reports and you can tell that he used them when writing his memoirs,” (Nowinowski and Stobiecki (eds.), 2019, p. 585).
Russia, that we would always be doomed under these circumstances to pursue a backyard policy and be treated as a game-ball between Russia and Germany, that, however, the word independent Ukraine had been uttered, and that this was only the result of the expedition to Kiev, and so on (Bruski, Wofos (ed.), 2021, p. 551).

From the very beginning, therefore, when the rumble of cannons could still be heard in the frontline, Stanisław Grabski stressed his paramount importance among the Sejm officials and in general in the entire Polish delegation, which was entering the talks with the Bolsheviks, being then still truce negotiations, and downplayed Piłsudski’s role. However, Grabski also made it clear from the outset, and he made no overtures about it, that he was playing some kind of personal game with Piłsudski, which would lead to the final defeat of Piłsudski’s eastern policy and to settlements over Poland’s eastern borders according to the ideas of the National Democracy camp, or perhaps Grabski himself (Wojdylo, 1998; Borzęcki, 2013). On the other hand, the Piłsudskiites, here represented by Polakiewicz, began to pit their Commander against the members of the delegation, with Grabski at the forefront, and placed the Riga negotiations and the decisions they anticipated to result from them in the broader context of the overall Polish–Soviet war. In other words, I am trying to generalize the narrative of the Piłsudskiites here, all of Piłsudski’s eastern policy thought was sound, though a serious crisis was not avoided in the summer of 1920, but overall he implemented it successfully, while politicians who were hostile to him picked the fruits and spoiled them. Piłsudski could do nothing about it, although he tried his best to counteract the decisions made in Riga (Pruszyński, 1995)\(^5\).

Both narratives – about Grabski in the role of a demiurge, scheming against Piłsudski, conducting the policy of the Polish delegation in Riga to spite the Head of State, and about the victorious Piłsudski, who was stripped of his laurel wreath by politicians in the Latvian

\(^5\) In the margins of Pruszyński’s book, Tadeusz Wyrwa seconded him: “After the cessation of hostilities, Piłsudski no longer had the powers he had had as Commander-in-Chief. The Treaty of Riga, ratified unanimously by the Sejm, marked Poland’s abandonment of Piłsudski’s plans, pivoting on the creation of an independent Ukrainian state allied with Poland” (1995, p. 195.).
capital – were complementary and became firmly established in the Polish view of the Polish–Soviet war and the Riga peace. They played into the hands of both Piłsudski’s opponents and his supporters, as they fit perfectly into the broader dispute over the “government of souls” in Poland and the legitimacy of power in the resurgent state. Stoked later in the interwar period, they became so entrenched that 35 years after the end of the Polish–Soviet war, already in exile, the struggle with the Bolsheviks, along with the Peace of Riga, was still being judged through political sympathies from the interwar period, when Piłsudski was the benchmark (Hostowiec, 1955).

On the basis of the sources available to us, and in consideration of the in-depth studies that have already been carried out, like the book by Jerzy Borzęcki (2013), it must be noted that the picture outlined above has little to do with the truth. First of all, Grabski was not omnipotent and was not able to get the Polish delegation to concede to all his opinions. Secondly, Piłsudski was not the source of his program, contradictory at all costs, which he pursued in Riga. It was a program that Grabski understood as the Polish national interest as he saw it at the time (Pruszyński, 1972). Third, Grabski was not in a position to impose his will on the Soviet delegation. Thus, one can discard as fiction his cold-blooded burying of Piłsudski’s eastern plans, by, for example, relinquishing some territories that the Bolsheviks had previously wanted to generously donate to Poland. Fourth and finally, moving on to the Piłsudski supporters, their narrative of an infallible Piłsudski, who was nearly betrayed by the politicians in Riga, also does not stand up to criticism. I will return to this point in this article.

There is another issue in the context of what has already been said above. In my opinion, the very claim that pits Piłsudski against politicians as such is fundamentally flawed. Piłsudski was always, despite his rifleman’s uniform – or later marshal’s uniform – a politician

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6 Jerzy Stempowski noted that “The second most common argument of critics is that the Kiev expedition was a risky and unnecessary undertaking, because it was possible to obtain from Russia through negotiations conditions even more favorable than those brought by the Treaty of Riga. One participant in the survey even accuses Piłsudski of maliciously concealing from the public the auspicious prospects offered by the settlements with Moscow” (1955, p. 4).
and remained so until his death in 1935. This is also how he was perceived by his supporters: he was simply a Commander who “was in charge” of all state affairs, both military and foreign. This is beyond any doubt to me. Therefore, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between Piłsudski the politician – Chief of State – and Piłsudski Commander-in-Chief, not just in this period. General Tadeusz Kutrzeba (1937, p. 246) accurately put it:

And although in legal terms, according to the so-called “Small Constitution” that was in force in Poland in 1920, it was the government and individual ministers within the scope of their ministries that bore the constitutional responsibility for the actions of the Commander-in-Chief collectively, the full real and moral responsibility for the consequences flowing from the operations was borne by the Commander-in-Chief, who was also the Chief of State.

Criticism of Piłsudski’s actions also followed the same logic. In the dramatic days of July 1920, during the meetings of the Council of National Defense, he was attacked by, among others, Roman Dmowski for a policy that he could only pursue because of his military authority. This was also how Piłsudski was attacked in Spa by Prime Minister Władysław Grabski, who said that “Poland had been pushed off the correct course by strong men with grand plans, however, these plans conformed neither to common sense nor to the sense of patriotism of the vast majority of the nation” (Gostyńska (ed.), 1964, pp. 148–149). The policy that the Commander-in-Chief devised and was responsible for – in the context that is of interest to us, I mean eastern policy – was then implemented until the fall of

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7 As Kazimierz Okulicz argued, “They believed in him as a leadership force to whom one should surrender. This was another resurgence of the tradition of uprising struggles, manifesting itself in one way or another in every generation. But this time, there was a factor that had not been present in liberation struggles since the time of Kosciuszko. There was an undisputed military and political leader in one person” (1973, p. 120); Kloc, 2021.

8 On July 19, 1920, Piłsudski answered Dmowski, among others: “I ask you gentlemen to put yourselves in the position of the man who has been placed at the head of the newly emerging Poland, who holds in his hands the office of Chief of State and Commander-in-Chief” (Leinwand and Molenda, 1965, pp. 205–206).
1920 with the tools he wielded as Commander-in-Chief, and by no means did Piłsudski cease to be a politician overnight at that point.⁹

Dwelling for a moment further on the problem of Piłsudski-politician, Piłsudski vs. politicians, I believe Piłsudski drew several conclusions from the war with Soviet Russia and the ongoing peace talks, which translated into his later, post-1921 actions in the context of the relationship between politics and the military.

First, one must broach the question of Piłsudski’s policy toward the army and the issue of the organization of the Supreme Military Authority, which Piłsudski, using his political prerogatives as Head of State established by decree on January 7, 1921. Henceforth, Piłsudski did not even contemplate that parliament and political parties could have any direct influence on the army and its command (Marshall, 2011). His later conflict from 1923–1926, with Generals Władysław Sikorski and Stanisław Szeptycki, among others, to preserve the full independence of the Supreme War Council, instituted by the aforementioned decree, is a well-known fact. Some researchers viewed this as a mere pretense on Piłsudski’s part, an excuse to maintain constant tension and power struggles in the state. Meanwhile, in December 1922, in the introduction to Piłsudski’s opinions on Polish generals, which are well known in historiography, drafted after the assassination of President Gabriel Narutowicz, he highlighted the following among the main obstacles to the Commander-in-Chief’s work: “The frenzied ambitions of the generals, which are unrestrained by anything, but on the contrary, exploited by the political parties, the generals’ patronizing attitude towards their subordinates and the unusual, sometimes sharp friction between each other in various functions, between subordinates and superiors” (Cieplewicz, 1966, p. 320). He went on to list “Fierce political battles among the parties and people, which sometimes center solely

⁹ Adolf Bocheński observed: “The Polish-Russian campaign is perhaps one of the most interesting examples of the good sides of the superiority of military power over political power, concentrated in one hand in this case” (1933, p. 5).
around the attitude toward the Commander-in-Chief” (Cieplewicz, 1966, p. 320).

Secondly, Piłsudski, drawing on his experiences of 1919–1921 and their conclusion at Riga, was convinced that in the future war the Commander-in-Chief should not occupy any of the top positions in the state. He pointed out how difficult it was to work in a political body that had not been established in the traditional way, with the functions of the supreme command concentrated with the highest political functions in one hand. I believe that over the following years Piłsudski began to grasp this problem more broadly, especially after the May coup. In Poland, with only himself as an exception, politics should not be done by any man wearing a uniform. This was the conclusion from the war with Soviet Russia and the merging of the posts of Chief of State and Commander-in-Chief. He would sometimes remind his subordinates of this, unfortunately – as the example of General and then Marshal Edward Śmigly-Rydz will show – to no avail.

And thirdly, the work of successive governments between 1919 and 1921 amid the unfolding conflict with Russia, and especially Piłsudski’s experience of the Council of National Defense, and the subsequent low influence of the Commander-in-Chief on what was happening in Riga made him rethink the model of managing the state during the war. Therefore, in the first half of 1932, Piłsudski came up with the notion of a so-called War Government, a kind of “super government” that, in the event of conflict, in order to improve cooperation with the Commander-in-Chief and the organization of the state under new conditions, would consist of only a few ministers, responsible for the main policies: apart from managing the war effort, internal affairs and the economy (Świtalski, 2012).

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In January 1921, Stanisław Janikowski offered the most comprehensive interpretation of Piłsudski’s narrative that, if peace had been the sole responsibility of their Commander, and not of the Polish Sejm and the delegation in Riga, it would have been possible, among other things, to expand Polish territorial acquisitions; so it would have been
possible to receive more from the Bolsheviks. He was the secretary of the Polish delegation, but closely associated with the Piłsudski camp. Let me quote at length from his report sent to Warsaw from the Latvian capital:

The memory of the Bolshevik invasion was certainly weighing on the psyche of the Government and the Council of National Defense, as well as that of the Peace Delegation; the subsequent victories of the Polish army were underestimated. In matters of territory, the instructions that the Peace Delegation received in Riga did not differ much from those adapted to the terms of the Minsk negotiations. The Polish demands were to be based on the line of the former German trenches. The delegation in Riga came to the conviction that these instructions were too restrictive and that the Bolsheviks were willing to grant much greater territorial concessions. Neither the Warsaw leadership nor the Delegation, however, gained any further revision of the initial position. This was largely due to the makeup of the Delegation, which was essentially a sort of convention of the Sejm’s seniors. While the Sejm Delegation was in solidarity when it came to national defense – and fulfilled the negative task, i.e., defending Polish interests during the transition and the Bolshevik invasion – the moment it was time to formulate a positive program of Polish territorial demands, all the disputes previously waged in the Sejm broke out in the ranks of the Delegation. The Bolsheviks were no doubt ready to make greater territorial concessions than we had demanded; thus, we had all the more opportunity to obtain far-reaching rights for the lands disputed between Poland and Russia, which had been left by the Treaty of Riga inside the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Bruski and Wołos (eds.), 2021, p. 718).

Similar opinions persist to this day, and Minsk almost always takes center stage in them, usually mentioned alongside the suggestion that the Bolsheviks wanted, or were only inclined, to give it to Poland, especially since it had been seized by the Polish Army in the last days of hostilities. The Poles – here Stanisław Grabski is often invoked – did not accept this gift. Piłsudski, abstracted from the context of the Riga talks and the position of the Bolsheviks, is fairly often mentioned in
such deliberations, pitted against Grabski, implicitly as the one who, had it not been for Grabski and the parliamentarians, would have personally seen to peace, thus ensuring a different outcome. Jerzy Giedroyc, who was convinced to the end of his life of Grabski’s active role in the Minsk affair, explained to Mikhail Heller in 1979 that:

as far as the peace of Riga was concerned, the Soviet side offered Poland much more than the Curzon line, for example, the entire Minsk area and Ukrainian territories up to Kamianets Podolsky. You must take into account that the negotiations in Riga were led by members of the Sejm, which was hostile to Piłsudski and his concepts, and this Polish delegation – under the influence of Grabski – rejected these offers, believing that such large territories could not be Polonized. That’s where the crippled border came from, derailing Piłsudski’s plans. You must additionally consider that Polish society was very tired and devastated and did not want the war to continue (Giedroyc and Heller, 2022, pp. 315–316).

Returning to Minsk, there is no – as Jerzy Borzęcki has proved – indication in sources or documents that such a claim could be made (2013). The information about Minsk and about the fact that it could probably be bargained away from the Bolsheviks comes from the memoirs, or rather their far-reaching interpretation, of the secretary of the Polish delegation, Aleksander Ładoś. He published them in the second half of the 1930s, in conversation with Mieczysław Pruszyński in Giedroyc-run Bunt Młodych, which perhaps might explain the Editor’s later opinion (Pruszyński, 1936). This interview was published under the telling, albeit unedited, title: “How we lost Minsk and federation with White Russia.” Ładoś recounted friction in the Polish delegation between supporters of the Piłsudski policy – Dąbski and Leon Wasilewski, who wanted to return once again to discussions with the Bolsheviks on some form of a free Belarus, and a group, say, the parliamentary group, represented by Grabski, who strongly advocated dropping these ideas, as well as giving up on Minsk within Poland’s borders.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that the belief that greater territorial acquisitions in the east, most notably Minsk, could be won in
Riga, later influenced assessments of Piłsudski’s eastern policy, the Riga Treaty and the further fate – during World War II – of the Polish eastern border. Historian Piotr Wandycz wrote in the 1960s that “Joffe was ready to make concessions in Belarus and was surprised that the Polish side had not made territorial demands in the region. We also know, which is written about less often, that they were opposed by National Democracy” (1962, pp. 82–83). Thus, this was at one time even “common knowledge.” In his reflections on Piłsudski’s eastern policy, Józef Łobodowski took for granted that “much more could have been achieved in Riga,” although even these potential acquisitions – annexed to Poland by peaceful means – would not have decided the success of the Commander’s eastern program (1964, p. 1). For that, according to Łobodowski, further war was necessary. Marian Zdziechowski, as we know, treated the “surrender” of Minsk as a bad omen. He wrote, “I fear that in twenty years’ time, based on the same good reason (that is, no reason at all) why we have now surrendered Minsk, we will be forced to surrender both Vilnius and Grodno and the entire swath of our Eastern Territories, and who knows if not all of Poland” (“Kościałkowski” 1964, pp. 182–183).

Jerzy Stempowski, a keen observer of Polish eastern policy between the wars, especially its Ukrainian strand, wrote in 1945 that just as the Poles parted without regret with the lands that remained on the other side of the border in the Riga Treaty, so now – when Stalin was deciding on the future Polish–Soviet border – “Lutsk, Pinsk, and Novogrudok are likely only distant notions for them already, not associated with any personal memory” (Letter from J. Stempowski to St. Paprocki of February 3, 1945). The only exceptions were to be Vilnius and Lviv.

One must note here that according to Michał Sokolnicki, one of the Commander’s closest aides at the time – Piłsudski did not want Minsk within Poland’s borders. Many years later, already in exile, Sokolnicki cited his conversation with Piłsudski from the period of the Polish–Soviet war, in which the latter explained the territorial details of his eastern policy. As Piłsudski allegedly said:

The strategic cornerstone of the defense of the Polish state must be the Pinsk marshes, separating a possible offensive front into two separate
complexes, northern and southern; the future border must give Polish people the possibility of castling movement, i.e., a railroad through Luninets; **Poland should not go after Minsk** [my emphasis – K.K.], encompassing only Belarusian–Lithuanian–Polish mixed population districts, without the numerical or cultural predominance of the foreign population; finally, in Volhynia, only as much as is needed for communication with Eastern Lesser Poland ... I do not want,” Piłsudski was to conclude, “to create contentious border issues between Poland and Russia for the future” (Sokolnicki, 1950, p. 65).

Bearing in mind, of course, that we are talking here about Sokolnicki’s ex post account, I think it is worth remembering it when we return to pondering Piłsudski’s eastern policy. Especially since, in September 1919, in a conversation with Belarusian activist Antoni Lutskevich, Piłsudski reportedly said – half-jokingly – “I didn’t like your Minsk... it smacks too much of the Russo-Jewish spirit, you can’t hear any language other than Russian on the street” (Nowak, 2021, p. 344). Piłsudski wanted, as Andrzej Nowak argues, for Minsk to remain the Belarusian center in the eastern lands (2021).

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At the beginning of the essay, I cited Mieroszewski’s remark that Riga was the tombstone of Piłsudski’s eastern policy. Mieroszewski added that “historians cite dozens of reasons for the failure of Piłsudski’s eastern program. The fact is, however, that at that time we still had a chance to embark on the eastern strategy on our own behalf” (1967, p. 36). According to the publicist, Riga was „only a postponement of defeat” by 19 years; “We won the battle but lost the eastern program. We won the battle but lost the war. It seems that too small a percentage of Polish society fully understood what the battle was for” (1967, p. 36). Piotr Wandycz (1964, pp. 200–201) struck similar tones:

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10 I do not want to get into a terminological discussion on whether we are talking strictly about federation policy, because that is not the issue here. In fact, this problem has been studied extensively. Of recent works on the subject, see (Pi-suliński, 2021). There are ample bibliographical references in the footnotes.
The Treaty of Riga ... is ... a breakthrough that was bound to affect the fate of the entire Polish foreign policy during the twenty-year period. With the collapse of Piłsudski’s plan to detach Ukraine and Belarus from Russia and make them buffer states with close ties to Poland, Poland’s role as a potential great power inevitably ends. What is left is a weak state between two giants, one of which, true, is disarmed and the other militarily defeated, but with which Poland is unable to forge a lasting modus vivendi.

In another passage, the researcher of the history of diplomacy plainly called the Peace of Riga not a compromise, but a “catastrophe” (Wandycz, 1969, p. 285). Piłsudski was aware of all this. According to Jerzy Stempowski, Piłsudski, and with him only a negligible number of Poles coming from the eastern lands of the Commonwealth, realized that “the borderlands can be tied to Poland only under some kind of federation system, in the absence of which, sooner or later, the countries beyond the Bug and San will fall away from Poland at the first shock” (Letter from J. Stempowski to K. Dziewanowski, July 6, 1960).

Was there any alternative to the nascent peace of Riga from the fall of 1920 through the spring of the following year that Piłsudski could have resorted to? To call things by their true name: was Piłsudski ready for further war and did he have the strength to impose it on politicians and society? A state of transition of neither peace nor war did not seem – and still does not seem in retrospect – to be a likely solution. Łobodowski was of the opinion that Piłsudski “could have taken the matter into his own hands and led it his way, but that would have meant a sharp conflict with the government and the Sejm, and most likely the need for a coup d’état” (Łobodowski, 1964, p. 1). It seems that Piłsudski would then have had to go against

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11 Pruszyński strongly argued such a point in the margins of his book Dramat Piłsudskiego [Piłsudski’s Drama...], as he noted that “The Riga armistice, which ended the war, was signed by the Sejm delegation against the will of the Chief of State and Commander-in-Chief. Piłsudski wanted to continue the war in order to achieve his political goal: to tear Ukraine away from Russia. He failed to do so because the nation wanted peace at long last and his previous political allies refused to support him” (1998, p. 170).
the whole of the Polish political scene and the general public. I have a hard time imagining a coup d’état whose short-term goal would not be to seize power in the state, but to conduct further armed conflict outside...

In September 1920, in a widely known and oft-quoted instruction, the head of the Polish Foreign Ministry, who was a close associate of Piłsudski, Minister Eustachy Sapieha wrote:

The last months of the war showed that the Polish treasury could by no means withstand further war on its own without the help of the Allies. Both political parties and society in general are actually thirsty for peace. Our army, although capable of momentary effort, cannot be considered an army against which difficult and long-range war operations could be conducted. Peace is essential for the economic upliftment and consolidation of the state, for the formation of a government genuinely capable of steering the national ship, and finally a state organization and offices capable of judicious administration. Continuing to wage war would therefore be nonsense if it is possible to obtain the peaceful minimum demands of the Polish people (Gostyńska (ed.), 1964, p. 406).

At around the same time, just before the Battle of the Niemen River, Piłsudski, in a conversation with General Piotr Machrow, General Piotr Wrangel’s envoy to Warsaw, said that Poland could temporarily delay signing the preliminary terms, but that peace must ultimately be agreed (Nowak, 2013). On December 3, 1920, according to the account of General Władysław Bortnowski, at a meeting of the command of the 2nd Army of the Polish Army, Piłsudski asked the question, “What is the Polish army supposed to do now, standing undemobilized along the Soviet border, which is not yet established by a peace treaty, and facing the Soviet army that we beat not so long ago and a completely ravaged Russia?” (Jędrzejewicz, Cisek, 1994, p. 220) Piłsudski answered:

We should now recapture Kiev and Minsk so that we can unite all of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania into a federation or union with Poland. Alas, I am unable to do this at present. Poland does not want it, Jagiellonian ideas are alien to it, moreover, Poland is severely exhausted...
by the long war, our army is heavily fatigued... and poor. No, we cannot undertake this task (Jędrzejewicz, Cisek, 1994, p. 220).

Is there no indication, then, that Piłsudski wanted to continue the war nonetheless? Without referring to ex post accounts, we should mention Piłsudski’s statement to Prime Minister Wincenty Witos on August 12, 1920. This was the breakthrough time: the eve of the Warsaw operation and the Minsk talks with the Bolsheviks. While considering the situation in which Poland found itself, Piłsudski said, “I was and am partial to an à outrance war with the Bolsheviks because I see absolutely no guarantee that they will keep these or any other agreements” (Okulicz, 1966, p. 40). However, on November 4, 1920, in a statement that Kazimierz Świtalski noted in his Diary, Piłsudski was speaking in the past tense: “I was an opponent of peace” (Świtalski, 1992, p. 64). Leaving aside the term “peace” that Piłsudski used in the context of the truce with the Soviets, we should mention that during a conversation with Świtalski, Piłsudski further added that “today one can see that the establishment of our borders, which is the result of peace, is beginning to yield good results” (Świtalski, 1992, p. 64).

Piłsudski’s influence on the events in Riga was admittedly not great, however he was well informed about what was going on in the Latvian capital. He had his men there – both during the truce and peace talks – notably Mieczysław Birnbaum, Stanisław Janikowski, Karol Polakiewicz, Wacław Jędrzejewicz, and most importantly Ignacy Matuszewski, who together with Adam Koc, Bogusław Miedziński and Wacław Stachiewicz formed the direct support team or the so-called “Commander’s Team,” i.e., the Riga Team. Commander’s Team included Aleksander Prystor, Walery Sławek, Kazimierz Sosnkowski, Kazimierz Świtalski and Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski (Kloc, 2021). It was thanks to them that he had a full and clear view of the situation in Riga. And, as the surviving documents show, perhaps with the exception of a few cases that we can safely consider as tactical skirmishes in talks with the Bolsheviks, as far as the general goals of the Polish delegation were concerned, Piłsudski agreed with them and did not insist on changes. Most likely, he did not like the enthusiastic reception among Polish society, among politicians, in press releases of any news that Poland would settle the disputed issues with the
Bolsheviks as quickly as possible, because this created the impression that Poles consider the materializing peace plans as the maximum of their claims, their interests.

The aforementioned general goals, on the other hand, were obvious to the entire Polish political scene since the fall of 1920, and a consensus prevailed among the elite. Poland – this is what the nation wanted more than anything else; this is what public opinion (which was heeded, though some downplay this fact today) needed: imminent peace. One may wonder, incidentally, whether the popularity of the slogan “Miracle on the Vistula,” a call “for the Miracle on the Marne” from the first weeks of the Great War paraphrased by Stanislaw Stroński was only a testimony to Poles’ piety and their faith in divine intervention, or perhaps also a testimony to their widespread war fatigue and doubt in the strength of Polish arms?

None of this is to say that the Bolsheviks in Riga did not act on Piłsudski’s war threat; that they themselves did not believe in this threat on some level. Joffe, who headed the Soviet delegation in Riga, mentioned Piłsudski repeatedly in his talks with the Poles and noted the unpredictability of his actions. The head of the Soviet delegation did not believe in Piłsudski’s peacemaking intentions, and contrasted them, for example, with the peasant parties in Poland, who were sincere in their desire for peace, according to Joffe. In one report, written on November 22, 1920, Matuszewski reported to Piłsudski that:

Soviet Russia and the Soviet Delegation still do not have any faith in the sincerity of the Communist Party’s peace intentions. On the other hand, I understand that the reconciliation of the national democracy program and the peaceful position of the incumbent party is a political juggling act without any basis, for the creation of a permanent balance. I attribute Grabski’s role in making peace to the fear that the Bolshevik invasion caused, and the desire to wrest the Supreme Command from the hands of the Commander (Bruski and Wołos (eds.), 2021, p. 591).

On the same day Matuszewski stated that:

The Bolsheviks are well aware that breaking the armistice by the Polish side – so the very thing that can only pose a significant danger to
them – is almost impossible because of the position of all parties and internal disputes. Only Piłsudski being Commander-in-Chief and his well-known ability to take tough decisions creates that fear that still lingers in their attitude toward us (Bruski and Wołos (eds.), 2021, p. 617).

“The ability to take tough decisions” is nothing other than Piłsudski’s unpredictability, which the Bolsheviks feared, and which Warsaw saw to its advantage during the negotiations. So much so that Matuszewski even postulated inspiring rumors of Piłsudski’s readiness for a new war and French policy’s support for such ideas, which was expected to have a tempering effect on Moscow.

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We know that the army reacted badly to the decision on the truce and the later necessary withdrawal from their positions. In a letter to the Prime Minister dated November 19, 1920, Chief of General Staff of the Supreme Command Gen. Tadeusz Rozwadowski wrote that faced with “responsibility before history and the nation” he had to state:

that on the southern front we are leaving positions that are currently very favorable from a strategic point of view
that we are withdrawing from the wealthy areas of Podolia which have provided sustenance for some of our divisions for a period of several months
that we are surrendering a considerable amount of supplies that have not yet been utilized there to the Bolsheviks
that we are also withdrawing, needlessly, from the exceptionally valuable forest areas of the Turow Forest in Polesia
and that we are therefore creating more and more favorable conditions for a future Soviet attack (Letter of General T. Rozwadowski to the Presidium of the Council of Ministers of November 19, 1920).

Rozwadowski went on to warn the Polish authorities that if Moscow does not commit to signing an actual peace as a consequence of all these concessions and if Poland fails to take advantage of this situation to impose a deadline on the Soviets for signing it, then
indeed “the fruits of our recent victories should be considered wasted” (Letter from Gen. T. Rozwadowski to the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, November 19, 1920). The general argued that otherwise the Bolsheviks would delay peace until they got strong enough to strike Poland again. Was this merely pressure on the government and parliament from the army to tread more harshly in negotiations with the Bolsheviks? Piłsudski – the Commander-in-Chief – must have known about this letter.

The studies of the Operational Branch III of the General Staff of the Supreme Command from December 1920 followed a similar line. One of the documents warned that as soon as the armistice with Poland was signed, the Bolsheviks managed to smash Gen. Wrangel’s army and therefore “eliminate their internal enemy” (Ref. III. Branch of the Supreme Command. “On our situation in the East and the Indications Flowing Therefrom”). It was noted that the Bolsheviks had not significantly depleted their forces on the potential front with Poland. Not only that, the success against the “whites” stiffened the position of the Soviet delegates in Riga; they became “pushy and arrogant,” inclined to the blackmail of either peace or war. We should add that Minister Sapieha predicted such a turn of events and the evolution of the Soviet attitude after the suppression of Wrangel’s troops in his instruction to the Polish posts on September 10, 1920.

In the meantime, according to Polish officers, Moscow gained the strategic advantage, while the main blame for this rested with Polish politicians, who had already “surrendered it without an equivalent in the form of military, territorial or, finally, economic guarantees” (Ref. III. Branch of the Supreme Command. “On Our Situation in the East and the Indications Flowing Therefrom”). This statement was perhaps only an excuse for further conclusions. Namely, as a result of politicians’ negligence, it was remarked that “the military

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12 “The peace treaty with the Bolsheviks,” wrote Minister Sapieha, “gives no guarantee of permanence, and although the Bolsheviks now seem inclined to enter into a reasonable peace, they want a free hand to destroy Wrangel, and perhaps next year they may launch a campaign against us” (Gostyńska (ed.), 1964, p. 406). Stanisław Grabski, at the time of signing the preliminary terms of the peace, said to Jan Dąbski: “We are signing a death sentence on Wrangel’s army right now” (Pruszyński, 1972, p. 45).
must draw the consequences and think seriously about being able to continue fighting in the event of an aggressive Soviet policy” (Ibid.). It was cautioned that this time Poland could not count on “the miracle of the Vistula,” “the miracle of the Wieprz River,” or “things working out,” just as it could not build its security policy on potential aid from the West. The country’s readiness for war and proper preparation for it – “this will be the best argument for peace” (Ref. III. Branch of the Supreme Command. “On our situation in the East and the Indications Flowing Therefrom”).

Peace, on the other hand, was not something that people particularly believed in. The analysis of options for future Soviet policy came closest to the Polish officers’ view that Moscow would choose war and attack westward. “The dismemberment of Poland,” they stated, “will overturn the value of the Versailles Treaty, and may lead to Russo–German hegemony in Europe” (Ref. III. Branch of the Supreme Command. “On Our Situation in the East and the Indications Flowing Therefrom”). An alliance between Moscow and Berlin was therefore anticipated in the longer term. Such a Soviet policy would be mainly aimed at “meddling in the foreign policy of Europe, ailing since the Treaty of Versailles” (Ibid.). Correct lessons were drawn from the experience of 1918–1920 and the essence of the ideology of the new Soviet state was accurately interpreted: “the Bolsheviks will try to smash this treaty, create confusion and take advantage of it for the purposes of active propaganda of communism” (Ibid.). In another of the documents, it was forecast that hostilities could resume in April 1921. It alerted that “The Polish State will find itself in a very difficult position … The present state of affairs fills one with trepidation. We have demobilized too quickly in fact and spirit” (Response of the III. Branch of the Supreme Command to MP Rosset’s inquiry of December 1, 1920).

Of course, the army also looked after its own interests. Increased military spending, new investments and purchases, subsidies – these were constant demands that went hand in hand with comments that

13 In January 1921, Kazimierz Świtalski noted: “The present time is very hard. This is neither peaceful military work, nor war. On top of that, what gets in the way is the belief that the army is an organization of some kind, and therefore a brick cannot be moved, because the crumbling edifice will collapse” (1992, p. 72).
flouting the army’s requests in the face of a new conflict with the Soviets would end in tragedy for the state. Similar concerns, as we have seen, were expressed by Sapieha at the time, and Konstanty Skirmunt’s associate, Sapieha’s successor on the ministerial post, Erazm Piltz, an MP in Prague, also refused to believe in the permanence of the Riga peace. In September 1921, he wrote from the Czechoslovak capital: “I cannot consider this [Polish–Soviet – K.K.] border as secure and safe, and not share the conviction, common throughout the world today, that it was not peace in the full meaning of the word, but rather a great truce which conceals the disturbing riddle of the future relations in the vast areas of Russia” (Wandycz, 1985, p. 123).

I believe that Piłsudski could have easily uttered these words. The Commander did not believe in a lasting peace either. I mentioned his remarks to Witos that he did not trust any guarantees from the Bolsheviks. Nor did he trust Lenin himself. In conversations with Bogusław Miedziński in December 1919, Piłsudski described the Soviet leader as someone fundamentally distinct from the Polish Marxist, for whom “a quote from Marx is decisive.” Unlike communists from the SdKPiL (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania) or PPS Lewica (Polish Socialist Party – Left), according to Piłsudski, Lenin:

is far from using principalnej tochka zrenia (principled viewpoint) in his tactics. He is a radical opportunist. Any compromise, any deception are acceptable and advisable. He has the makings of a Teutonic knight from Sienkiewicz’s novels. He will make any deal, any alliance, if he needs it even for a moment, and break it the moment that suits him, and still accuse his partner of having perfidiously deceived him (Jędrzejewicz, Cisek, 1994, p. 123).

Also Leon Wasilewski, who was a member of the Mixed Border Commission on the Polish side, noted that Piłsudski did not believe in peace with Soviet Russia even in the first months after the signing of the Riga Treaty, and considered this state of affairs between the two countries to be eminently transitory. When asked by Wasilewski when the war would break out again, Piłsudski replied “still this
year,” and added, “unless the Bolsheviks turn all their attention to the
East. In that case, we would not be directly threatened” (Wasilewski,
1935, p. 224). In June 1921, Piłsudski said that “if Russia engages in
a conflict with Japan, we are secured from a Bolshevik attack for
a year.” (Switalski, 1992, p. 89). This view, I might add, was consist-
ent with the conclusions that flowed from the Branch III study cited
above, in which Soviet “eastward expansion” as an alternative to
Soviet policy was also considered (Ref. III. Branch of the Supreme
Command. “Concerning Our Situation in the East and the Indications
Flowing Therefrom”).

Finally, at the end of July 1921, Piłsudski was reported to have said,
“There will be no war with Russia. Famine and epidemics will not
allow an attack to be made now” (Świtalski, 1992, p. 95).

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Leon Wasilewski’s notes from conversations with Piłsudski, which
were later included in a volume of memoirs about the Commander,
are, regrettably, one of the very few sources that do not constitute ex postaccounts of Piłsudski’s opinions and comments on the Peace of
Riga. Elsewhere, Wasilewski cites the following opinion of Piłsudski:

He was satisfied with the line we finally obtained in applying the line
of the Riga treaty on the ground, but he thought that we could have
safely left a certain town, which I do not want to mention here, to the
Bolsheviks, as it has no significance for Poland. Meanwhile, we could
have treated it as an exchange token for those Polish settlements which,
under the terms of the Riga treaty, were outside the border line in quite
substantial numbers, and over which we waged protracted disputes
with the Bolshevik delegation in the absence of suitable settlements
or areas for exchange (Wasilewski, 1935, pp. 224–225).

Unfortunately, we do not know which city Piłsudski had in mind here.

In the context of the resolution of the Polish–Soviet War and the
Peace of Riga, the literature usually cites several later statements by
Piłsudski. One is an excerpt from the so-called Vilnius Lecture of
August 1923. Piłsudski said during this lecture that “the Bolshevik
invasion ended in a great defeat” (1937a, p. 124). He explained that although “the Bolshevik army was so shattered that I had no military obstacles to reach where I wanted,” he was stopped by “the lack of moral strength in society” (1937a, p. 124). This was a time when Piłsudski was increasingly caught up in the narrative of his almost single-handedly winning the war against the Soviets, during which he struggled not only against the invaders, but also against the politicized MPs and his own people (Piłsudski, 1937b, p. 217).

In one of his conversations with Gen. Janusz Głuchowski, sometime around the turn of 1924, Piłsudski was said to have commented on the failure of his eastern policy. He then said famously, “You – meaning here the Legion generation – will not keep this Poland.” He explained that “the storm that is coming is too large. Poland today is capable of living only in some happy, golden period of history. Unless, unless the Polish peasant understands his role. This can save Poland, because I have wasted my life. I have failed to establish a large federation with which the world would have to reckon” (Katelbach, 1945, p. 105). We often revisit this prophecy, forgetting, however, that it was not absolute. What usually escapes consideration is the peasant with national awareness who, according to Piłsudski, as one might surmise, finally had to let himself be won over to the state. Another thing is that the state throughout the interwar period did not have a good idea of how to win the peasant over, but this is a topic for another discussion. It is certain, however, that Piłsudski did not believe in a unified nation-state, nor did he believe that the Polish territory sealed by the treaty of Riga could provide a sufficient foundation for building an imperial Poland, which, after all, was the only kind of Poland that could survive between Germany and Russia, from it failed to insulate itself with an independent and allied Ukraine. Analyzing Piłsudski’s dilemmas, Kazimierz Okulicz said

14 This narrative, as during the well-known conflict with General Marian Kukiel, sometimes included profane language. In October 1925, during a speech to a commission investigating the status of the 1920 operations, Piłsudski said: “But in conducting the war, I completely disregarded the opinion of the Supreme Command. I achieved victories in such a way that I f... dropped other matters, I threw myself into one thing, took command and won. The victories were won with me at the helm.”
that the Polish state after 1921 was, in the eyes of the Commandant, “something like a powder keg, which any nearby fire could turn into an all-out conflagration” (Okulicz, 1966, p. 33). Jerzy Stempowski, in turn, wrote that after 1921 the resigned Piłsudski was no longer interested in such matters as federation and Prometheism (Letter from J. Stempowski to K. Dziewanowski, July 6, 1960).

Okulicz left behind another account of Piłsudski’s views on the Peace of Riga. In the fall of 1923, a meeting took place in Vilna at the home of Witold Abramowicz, which Piłsudski attended and which Okulicz, among others, witnessed. At the meeting, Piłsudski was said to have claimed that the Treaty of Riga “left in Moscow’s hands all the trump cards for playing the anti-Polish game by manipulating the Belarusian and Ukrainian affairs” (Okulicz, 1964, p. 102). Furthermore, Piłsudski complained that the policy of the Polish administration in the east of the country officially appealed to the ideas of the Commander, while in reality “it was playing into Dmowski’s ideas” (Okulicz, 1964, p. 102).

Exhausted by several years of hostilities over its borders, yearning for a moment’s breathing space through the voice of its people, constantly trying to sort out its internal affairs, and looking with constant hope to Upper Silesia, Poland could not afford further war at the turn of 1920. Any alternative to a quick truce and peace with the Soviets was illusory. Piłsudski, contrary to later narratives that pit him against popular Polish opinion, was well aware of this. The exhaustion of the state organism, moreover, was accompanied by a permanent grimace of anger and impatience on the part of the West, particularly Great Britain, at “imperial pipe dreams” in the East, a grimace that the Polish victory at Warsaw did not erase (Nowak, 2015). What was said earlier in Spa was still considered binding. For London, both Dmowski’s so-called “incorporation” program and Piłsudski’s so-called “federation” program were equally anachronistic and imperialistic, since they claimed rights to lands east of the Bug River: the ultimate border for Polish interests for English people (Noël, 1966). “No one caused more trouble than the Poles,” David Lloyd George would say during
the Paris Conference, and add that, “they found themselves a leader for whom patriotism was the only legitimate criterion of conduct” (1939, pp. 277–278). All this was secondary to the failure of Piłsudski’s eastern policy in clashing with the interests of the nations living in those lands, who, as it turned out, were far from seeking close ties with Poland\textsuperscript{15}. Piłsudski, aware of the failure, reportedly said: “they are not waiting for me there.” However, he knew that the defeat of his plans was the defeat of Poland in the long run. He seems to have been a determinist. Regardless of the motive – whether it be Russia’s imperial policy or an ideologically justified expansion and another attempt to export the Communist revolution to the West, Poland’s confrontation with the Soviets seemed inevitable. Riga proved to be merely a stepping stone to further settlements from which, Piłsudski knew all too well, Poland could expect nothing good. The years 1919–1921 were Poland’s first and last chance to assert itself as a superpower and settle relations in Central and Eastern Europe in its favor. If, therefore, to reiterate, Piłsudski lost in Riga, Poland lost with him.

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\textsuperscript{15} In the event of a new war, Piłsudski said in February 1921, the Bolsheviks “will lose Minsk, we will reach the Berezina, even the Dnieper if necessary, all this has been done before” (Świtalski, 1992, p. 75).
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