

Ninety years since the coup of Piłsudski

# The Strategy of the Intermarium—Part 1

## The Intermarium and the Russian Revolution

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*May 12 to 14 marks the 90th anniversary of the coup by Józef Piłsudski in Poland with which the Polish bourgeoisie tried to save its rule from the threat of socialist revolution. Today, he is being idealized by large sections of the Polish bourgeoisie and the US imperialist elite.*

*In large measure, this is bound up with the increasing popularity of his conception of the Intermarium, a pro-imperialist alliance of right-wing nationalist regimes throughout Eastern Europe that was primarily directed against the Soviet Union. The resurgent interest in the Intermarium has been bound up with the increasing drive toward a new world war, which, as the ICFI stated in its resolution “Socialism and the Fight Against War,” has been accompanied by a revival of geopolitics among the ideologists of imperialism.*

*This series reviews the history of the Intermarium, the main basis of which emerged in the period leading up to World War I, as a bourgeois nationalist antipode to the United Socialist States of Europe that were proposed by Leon Trotsky.*

### Piłsudski and the Intermarium before the October Revolution

The Latin term Intermarium signifies “land between the seas” and is used to refer to an anti-Russian alliance of the states between the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea. Historically, this region largely coincides with the territory once controlled by the Polish nobility in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which existed from 1569 to 1791, before those territories were partitioned between the Russian Empire, the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The main conception of the Intermarium was formulated by the Polish general and dictator Józef Piłsudski. Throughout the 20th century, its fate has been closely bound up with the development of the Russian Revolution.

The main basis for the Intermarium was formulated as early as 1904 within the context of the Russo-Japanese War and on the eve of the First Russian Revolution of 1905 by Piłsudski, who was at that point a leading member of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS).

The PPS had been founded in 1892 on the basis of a platform blending elements of Marxism with Polish nationalism. The main goal of the PPS was the achievement of national independence from the Russian Empire. In this struggle, the party regarded the non-Russian nationalities in the Tsarist Empire as its main allies. Rejecting any closer association with Russian social democracy and dismissing the possibility of a working class revolution against the tsarist regime, the PPS maintained its closest

ties in Russia with the Social Revolutionaries (SRs). Like the SRs, the PPS was oriented toward layers of the petty bourgeoisie and supported terrorism, rather than the mobilization of the working class. Above all, the PPS had a strong nationalist orientation and was ferociously anti-Russian.

In 1893, the Social Democratic Party of Poland (SDKP) was formed by Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Jogiches and Julian Marchlewski, largely in opposition to the “social patriotic” platform of the PPS. In 1897, the SDKP merged with the Lithuanian Workers’ Union to form the Social Democratic Party of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL). Engaged in an uninterrupted ideological struggle against the PPS, the SDKPiL sought the closest possible relations with the Russian Social Democrats, although the leadership of the SDKPiL differed sharply with the position of the Bolsheviks on the national question, rejecting the slogan of national self-determination.

When the Russo-Japanese War broke out in 1904, the two largest socialist parties of Poland were deeply divided over what policy to pursue. While the SDKPiL organized, together with the Jewish Labour Bund, anti-war demonstrations on May 1, 1904 in opposition to the imperialist war, the PPS pursued a fervently pro-Japanese line. In the hope of winning the support of the Japanese government for the creation of a Polish nation-state and the destruction of the Tsarist Empire, the PPS sent Józef Piłsudski to Tokyo. In his memorandum to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, he suggested utilizing the national tensions within Russia to destroy the Tsarist Empire. He wrote:

“This strength of Poland and its importance for a part of the nations in the Russian state give us the courage to set the political goal of destroying the Russian state into its component parts and [granting] independence to the countries that were placed by force in the [Russian] Empire. We consider this to be not only the fulfilment of our Fatherland’s cultural aspirations for an independent existence, but also a guarantee of this existence, since Russia, deprived of its conquests, will be weakened to such an extent that it will cease to be a threatening and dangerous neighbour.” [1]

The Japanese government rejected the proposal in favor of another war strategy, but Piłsudski stuck to his conception and developed it further in several publications after the defeat of the revolution of 1905. During the revolution of 1905, Piłsudski led the Military Organization, which he had formed on behalf of the PPS, in order to prepare the armed insurrection against Russian rule that the PPS was planning.

The outbreak of a general strike in Russia in January 1905 and the subsequent violent confrontations between the Russian working class and the tsarist autocracy took the PPS leadership wholly by surprise and prompted a shift to the left within its rank and file and sections of the leadership. While Piłsudski’s Military Organization was engaged in bloody battles with the tsarist troops, much of the PPS supported the

general strikes in support of the Russian workers that the SDKPiL and the Bund had called for.

During the Russian Revolution, a significant amount of the strike action took place in Poland and the country was brought to the brink of a civil war. After the bloody defeat of the revolution, the PPS split into a left and right wing. After the formal expulsion of the Military Organization from the PPS, Piłsudski himself soon left the organization. In 1908, he founded the Union of Active Resistance. It incorporated the Military Organization and was designed to prepare the cadres for a future bourgeois government and the armed forces of a Polish nation-state.

The First World War found the Polish elites, the landlords, remnants of the aristocracy and the still relatively weak bourgeoisie, divided. Almost 100 years after the last partition of the country in 1815, the local elites of the partitioning zones of Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Tsarist Empire supported their respective partitioning power in the war. Piłsudski, who had maintained relations with the Austro-Hungarian General Staff for several years, quickly started to form the so-called Legions in Galicia.

While Piłsudski and his co-fighters had pinned all their hopes on Austro-Hungary and its relatively liberal nationality policy in fighting for a Polish nation state, neither Germany, Austro-Hungary's ally in the war, nor the Habsburg monarchy itself had any intention of supporting an independent Polish nation state. For months, Vienna and Berlin engaged in vicious quarrels over who was to get what part of the territories.

The October Revolution, in which the Russian proletariat seized political power under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party under Lenin and Trotsky, radically changed the entire situation in Europe and was the single most significant event for the further development of Poland in the 20th century. The Bolshevik government soon declared that the Polish people had the right to decide about their future and the Russian troops were withdrawn from the formerly Russian parts of Poland.

While the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian governments increasingly descended into bitter infighting about who would get what part of the remaining Polish territories, German soldiers began to desert and withdraw from Poland. Inspired by the events in Russia, revolution broke out in Germany in November 1918, forcing the government to end the war and withdraw its remaining troops from what are now Poland and the Baltic States. It is under these conditions that the Entente powers, the United States, Britain and France, decided that a Polish nation state was in the best interest of European capitalism and the struggle against Soviet Russia.

The western borders of the Second Polish Republic were sealed by the Entente powers with the Treaty of Versailles of June 28, 1919, which ended the state of war between the Allies (France, Great Britain and the United States) and the defeated Germany. While not all demands of the Polish delegation were fulfilled, the Warsaw government was given control over much of Silesia and gained access, although not exclusive, to the harbour of Gdańsk. The settlement of the western borders was motivated to a large extent by the desire to curb the economic might of the defeated Germany and thus prevent a quick recovery of the German economy. The eastern borders, by contrast, were to be fought out only in the war the Piłsudski regime was soon to wage against Soviet Russia.

## The Polish-Soviet War

Historically, the Intermarium federation emerged as the counter-project of the Polish bourgeoisie to Trotsky's United Socialist States of Europe. In opposition to the federation of socialist workers' states to unify the continent on a socialist basis, Piłsudski formulated a federative

framework for the unification of bourgeois nationalist forces in East Central Europe. For the Polish bourgeoisie, which presided over one of the oldest and largest capitalist economies in the region, it was also to provide the framework for satisfying its aspirations as the leading regional power in Eastern Europe and achieve territorial expansion at the expense of Ukraine, Lithuania and what is now the Czech Republic.

However, the social and economic impotence of the Eastern European bourgeoisie, which had proven itself incapable of completing the bourgeois revolution and was faced with the socialist threat of the working class almost as soon as it was born, made this project completely reliant on the benevolence of the imperialist powers, above all the United States.

Indeed, as the coming decades would show, the prospects of the Intermarium, an idea that never left the minds of Poland's leading bourgeois politicians and strategists, rose and fell with the strategy of world imperialism against the Soviet Union and, since 1991, the Russian Federation.

The first time the Polish bourgeoisie attempted, unsuccessfully, to create a federation along the lines Piłsudski envisioned was in the Polish-Soviet war of 1920. It is also in this period that the reactionary content of the Intermarium conception, which had been propagated as a vehicle for the achievement of the national and emancipation aspirations of the peoples oppressed by the tsarist regime, was revealed. In his attempt to realize it, Piłsudski based himself on extreme anti-communism and the mobilization of right-wing, nationalist forces in Ukraine that were as hostile to their native working class and peasant population as they were toward Soviet Russia.

Despite repeated attempts by the Bolshevik leadership to end the military conflict, the Polish-Soviet war, which had been dragging on during 1919 with numerous skirmishes and battles over individual cities, eventually escalated with Poland's invasion of the Ukraine in the spring of 1920.

Throughout the war, Piłsudski tried to pursue his aim of establishing an anti-communist federation of nationalist governments in Eastern Europe that were to be united by their common hostility toward Soviet Russia. However, this effort largely failed. The Lithuanian bourgeoisie was hostile to a project in which it had to subordinate itself to the Polish elites and agree to a Polish-controlled Wilno (Vilnius in Lithuanian; the city, now the capital of Lithuania, was contested for centuries and during the Civil War itself between the Polish and the Lithuanian elites). The Estonian bourgeoisie was equally unenthusiastic. The only real backing Piłsudski received in the region was from the Finnish government. Poland's most important imperialist allies, France and Great Britain, did not support Piłsudski's plans either at that point.

After having knocked on literally every door in Eastern Europe, including that of the former tsarist general and Russian chauvinist Denikin, for whom hardly any political thought was more alien than an independent Poland, Piłsudski eventually ended up with the Ukrainian nationalist leader Symon Petliura, who, in the words of one historian, "could boast the least vigor and the weakest following" of all the factions active in the civil war in Ukraine. [2] Petliura's army, which had largely been recruited on an anti-Polish platform from nationalists in western Ukraine, now passed into Polish service.

While the Warsaw Agreement with Petliura of April 21, 1920, was in part the outcome of the lack of any alternative for either side in their struggle against the Bolsheviks, the territories now comprising the Ukraine occupied a strategic position in Piłsudski's plans for a federation. As one historian pointed out:

"With Ukraine, Piłsudski's Border Federation had a real chance of prosperity and survival. Poland, as chief sponsor, could command a network of trade and commerce stretching from Finland to the Near East. Poland might recover the glory of her medieval past when, or so the story goes, as arbiter of a realm vaster than the Holy Roman Empire, she ruled

over Cossacks and Tartars and drove the cringing princes of Muscovy to their lair. Without the Ukraine, the Border States would be so many barbs on an Allied fence.” [3]

However, the Red Army succeeded relatively quickly in reconquering Ukraine due in no small part to the anti-Semitic pogroms committed by Petliura’s armies and a general lack of support for his “People’s Republic” within the Ukrainian population. The subsequent decision, supported by Lenin but taken against the advice of many Polish Bolsheviks and Leon Trotsky, to not wait for further developments but proceed with an advance of the Red Army into Poland in order to foster the outbreak of social revolution resulted in a military and political disaster for Soviet Russia. In August 1920, Piłsudski’s armed forces successfully defended Warsaw. A few weeks later, the Red army was defeated by Piłsudski’s army. In April 1921, the Bolshevik government signed the Peace Treaty of Riga that defined the eastern borders of inter-war Poland.

*To be continued*

**Notes:**

1. Edmund Charaszkiewicz: Referat o zagadnieniu prometejskim (12 luty, 1940) [Paper on the Promethean Question], in: Charaszkiewicz, Edmund, Andrzej Grzywacz, Marcin Kwiecień, and Grzegorz Mazur: Zbiór Dokumentów Ppłk. Edmunda Charaszkiewicza [Collection of Documents of Lieutenant Colonel Edmund Charaszkiewicz], Fundacja CDCN, 2000, p. 56. Translation by this author.

2. Norman Davies: *White Eagle, Red Star. The Polish-Soviet War 1919-1920 and the “Miracle on the Vistula,”* Pimlico 2003, p. 101.

3. Ibid., p. 102.



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