



Leon Grosfeld

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21, 1970WERE THE ENGLISH REALLY THE INSTIGATORS OF THE MAY
COUP D'ETAT?

There is a widely publicized opinion, in literature and the press, that prior to the May *Coup d'Etat* the British government, or its representatives in Warsaw, have been meeting with Józef Piłsudski and advising him to stage a *coup* and take over power in the country; they have also helped him or, at least, have promised their assistance. Piłsudski was supposed to have been closely linked with British imperialism which has used him as a tool of its policy.¹

This latter thesis, formulated as above, has been explicitly put forward by S. Daszyński and Jan Radopolski², who, as a proof of it, quoted from some, allegedly English documents (though this was never said openly) whose name, character and origin has not been disclosed. E. Brand wrote: "On the other hand, for several months before May, Piłsudski maintained friendly relations with British representatives and came to power with their blessing."³

Britain's cooperation in Piłsudski's coming to power was mentioned in the resolutions of the September plenum of the Polish Communist Party Central Committee.

S. Arski quotes from the press of those days. Thus "The Times" of May

¹ Pre-war sources: S. Daszyński, J. Radopolski, *Imperialistischer Kreuzzug gegen Kommunismus*, Hamburg-Berlin 1929; article headlines: *Przewrót faszystowski w Polsce a KPP [The Fascist Coup in Poland and the Polish Communist Party]* in the P.C.P. journal "Nowy Przegląd," 1926, No. 6/7 (re-edited, Warszawa 1963, p. 311), which was reprinted from "Kommunističeskij Internacjonal," 1926, No. 8; resolutions of the September plenum of the P.C.P. Central Committee, published in the same issue of "Nowy Przegląd" (re-edition, p. 354); E. Brand, *Ekonomiczne momenty w przewrocie majowym i w polityce obecnego rządu [Economic Factors in the May Coup and the Policy of the Present Government]*, Warszawa 1927. Post-war literature: S. Arski, *My Pierwsza Brygada [We of the First Brigade]*, Warszawa 1962; J. Kowalski, *Zarys historii polskiego ruchu robotniczego 1918 - 1939 [Outline History of the Polish Working Class Movement 1918 - 1939]*, part 1, Warszawa 1962; A. Ajnenkiel, *Od "rządów ludowych" do przewrotu majowego [From the "people's Government" to the May Coup]*, Warszawa 1964.

² S. Daszyński, J. Radopolski, op. cit., p. 55.

³ E. Brand, op. cit., p. 26.

28th, 1926 wrote about "the conviction prevailing among large circles of Polish intellectuals as well as among less educated groups, that the British government was behind Piłsudski's *coup*, that the Polish leader was financed by Britain through the intermediary of H. M. Minister in Warsaw and that he still was on British payroll." ⁴ "Vossische Zeitung" of June 14th, 1926 wrote "there is some talk about considerable influence of Britain," and "Kurier Poznański" of May 19th of that year reported that "it is being said in the parliament lobbies that Chamberlain was well acquainted with Piłsudski's plans." To crown this evidence there was the customary argument: the British minister in Warsaw, Max Muller and the military attaché Cpt. Clayton frequented Sulejówkę (among others on November 13th, 1924). The subjects discussed during these visits are unknown.

J. Kowalski states that "there are several indications to prove [...] that even before the May *Coup* Piłsudski enjoyed the support of British imperialists [...], that he was well received by the British government and evoked a feeling of satisfaction in German imperialist circles." ⁵ A. Ajnenkiel, referring to S. Arski, wrote that "Piłsudski maintained close contacts with representatives of foreign powers, particularly with British diplomats. The British minister in Warsaw, Max Muller, visited him in Sulejówkę." ⁶

The matter was approached more cautiously by A. Micewski, who, speaking about the influence of British politics as a factor in Piłsudski's success in May, 1926, stated that the problem "has not been sufficiently clarified to this day." ⁷ Some authors refer also to the reports by the Polish minister in London, K. Skirmunt, of May 20th and 21st, published by Z. Landau. ⁸

But what do these reports prove? They show great caution of the Foreign Office in its assessment of the *Coup*, its reserve and a wait-and-see attitude, fear, lest the new government should be able to resist revolutionary trends by advancing a "reasonable programme" and thus to attract foreign capital, and finally if it would be strong enough "to nip in the bud any attempts at a counter-*Coup*", and if it would be willing and able to oppose subversive pressure. ⁹ We can also find in the reports a statement that the English have foreseen Piłsudski's return to active participation in state life and that they have reckoned with the anti-Soviet and pro-German course of the new regime.

Already at this point it is rather easy to question the significance of this alleged evidence that the British were supposedly cooperating in Piłsudski's bid for power.

⁴ S. Arski, op. cit., p. 435.

⁵ J. Kowalski, op. cit., p. 347.

⁶ A. Ajnenkiel, op. cit., p. 293.

⁷ A. Micewski, *Z geografii politycznej II Rzeczypospolitej [Political Geography of the 2nd Republic]*, Warszawa 1966, p. 106.

⁸ Z. Landau, *Przewrót majowy w raportach poselstwa R. P. w Londynie [The May Coup in the Reports of the Polish Mission in London]*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1959, No 1.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 157, 158.

In his published memoirs, the then French ambassador in Warsaw, J. Laroche, described his meeting with Piłsudski in Sulejówek at the beginning of May, 1926, the events which preceded it and the motifs. J. Laroche arrived in Warsaw as the new French ambassador on April 26th, 1926. Three days later, after presenting his credentials to President S. Wojciechowski, Laroche told the director of protocol in the Foreign Office, S. Przeździecki, that he would like to pay a visit to Marshal Piłsudski, "who has been in France as the then Chief of State and had sponsored the signing of the Franco-Polish alliance."¹⁰

The expressed desire to visit Piłsudski was not, of course, a private idea of J. Laroche. "I wanted to make the visit in accordance with specific instructions. Paul Boncour has just been in Poland where he met with the Marshal. He returned to France convinced that Piłsudski's come-back was very close. Of this he persuaded Briand, who, during my farewell visit to him, instructed me to make a gesture of courtesy towards the former Chief of State. The instruction was fully in line with my own views. Everything I knew about Poland's internal situation corresponded with the impressions which M. Paul Boncour has kindly shared with me."

In the talks with the heads of other diplomatic missions, Laroche felt "anxiety about the political situation," which, in turn, provided an even stronger inducement to "quickly contact the man whose shadow has evoked all this commotion."¹¹

With the assistance of Colonel Wieniawa-Długoszowski, Laroche was granted an audience with Piłsudski in Sulejówek. It has certainly taken place prior to May 6th, because on that very day the Ambassador has sent a political report to Quai d'Orsay, in which he wrote, among other things: "With every passing day, the Marshal is nearer to power. If his opponents would try to keep him away from it in too brutal a manner, he would probably not hesitate to attain it with the use of force."¹²

Thus, it was not only the representatives of Britain who visited Piłsudski before he came to power in May 1926¹³, and it was not only Britain which reckoned with Piłsudski's return to active state life. Yet, nobody suspected France of participating in the conspiracy or of instigating the *Coup*.

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We now have at our disposal certain source material which, though indirectly but on the basis of observation, throw a light on the attitude of Britain's diplomatic

¹⁰ J. Laroche, *Polska lat 1926 - 1935* [*Poland in 1926 - 1935*], Warszawa 1966, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 134.

¹³ This was correctly noticed by B. Ratyńska in her work *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie w okresie wojny ekonomicznej 1919 - 1930* [*Polish-German Relations in the Period of the Economic War 1919 - 1930*], Warszawa 1968, p. 232.

representatives in Warsaw to the May *Coup*. That source material is the political documentation of the German Reich's Foreign Ministry kept in *Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes* (abbrev. AAA) in Bonn and, — in exceptional cases, is accessible to students of foreign affairs.

Let us start with presenting, in chronological order, the opinion of two German diplomatic representatives in Poland on the subject discussed.

In a telegramme of May 14th, 1926 the German minister plenipotentiary in Warsaw, Ulrich Rauscher, reported that on the following day the diplomatic corps is to get together in order to establish a common position: "In these circles [i.e. the diplomatists' — *L.G.*], there prevails a deep feeling of pessimism as to the results of the *coup d'état*."¹⁴ On May 15th, Rauscher informed about the unanimous adoption by members of the diplomatic corps of a note protesting against the heavy damage done to many embassies and other diplomatic buildings, the intrusion of troops into these buildings, disrupting telephone communications and withholding telegrammes¹⁵.

In the telegramme of May 25th, Rauscher reported that the British minister, like diplomatic representatives of other countries, feared a "Polish Kerenski era" ("*vor einer polnischer 'Kerenski-Epoche' Angst haben*"), and had no particular sympathy for Piłsudski. "Max Muller told me today that Piłsudski is a *fou complet* and that he described him as such in his yesterday's report to the King."¹⁶

On June 10th, 1926 the German Consul General in Katowice, von Grünau, sent a report to the *Auswärtiges Amt* which, on the surface of it, supported the thesis about Britain's role in preparing the May *Coup*¹⁷. "The oft repeated conjectures that Britain had a hand in Piłsudski's *Coup*, has been — wrote von Grünau — to some extent confirmed by the information I have received from a well informed source. The commercial attaché at the British legation in Warsaw, Kimens, is said to have maintained close relations with Piłsudski; he visited him very often especially in the period immediately preceding the *Coup*. Kimens, whose mother was Polish-born, was educated in Warsaw and had a fluent knowledge of the Polish language, thanks to which he was particularly suited to become an intermediary. It was also noted that the success of the *Coup* was received with great satisfaction in the British legation."

According to current information the improvement in the rate of exchange of the zloty was the outcome of an agreement between Piłsudski and Kimens and of London's intervention measures. Piłsudski was promised a considerable loan from Britain, which was to have been granted after the conclusion of a Polish-German trade agreement and that was why Piłsudski sought to reach agreement

¹⁴ Rauscher to the *Auswärtiges Amt*, 14 5 1926 (AAA, Büro Reichsminister Polen, vol. IV, pp. D 572208 — D 572209).

¹⁵ Rauscher's telegramme to *Auswärtiges Amt* of 15. 5. 1926 - *ibidem*, p. D 572213.

¹⁶ Rauscher to *Auswärtiges Amt*, 25. 5. 1926 (AAA, IV Polen. Pol. 5, vol. 10, p. 79).

¹⁷ Grünau to *Auswärtiges Amt*, 10. 6. 1926, *ibidem*, vol. 11, pp. 171 - 173.

with Germany, whatever the price. In this connection, the author of the said report presented the wishes of German industrialists of Upper Silesia. Of the many other rumours, opinions and proposals, mention should be made also of an information which has thrown a certain light on the credibility of the whole report, concerning the alleged contacts between the Soviet minister in Warsaw and representatives of Polish right-wing groups, prior to the elections of a new President. The Soviet minister was said to have assured them support in opposing the election of Piłsudski to that post, and even to have promised that Communist deputies in the Sejm would vote for Count Bniński (!)

The above report was sent by the *Auswärtiges Amt* to U. Rauscher with a request for his opinion about it. There, it was sharply criticized and totally rejected.

In an extensive report of July 1st, 1926¹⁸ the German minister in Warsaw presented the immediate reaction and the attitude of British diplomats to the May *Coup*. Rauscher regarded the information contained in the Katowice report, deriving, in his opinion, from mining industry circles, as mistaken, false and even fantastic. He dismissed altogether questions, whose untruth was, in his view, absolutely obvious (such as the alleged promise of Soviet support for the National Democrats in presidential elections) and devoted the main part of his report to the position taken by the British legation during the May *Coup*. He wrote as follows: "It is absolutely out of question that the British commercial attaché, Kimens (whom I have known personally and politically for many years and who has often been at my house and visited other members of the legation) played the part of an intermediary between Piłsudski and Britain. There can be no doubt that the *coup d'état* has come as a surprise to the British legation as much, or perhaps even more so, as it did to the others. Sir William Max-Muller [the British minister plenipotentiary in Warsaw — *L.G.*] has banked fully on Count Skrzyński (Poland's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, 1925 - 1926) and all his reports, like all his activity here, were based on the premise that the Anglo-ophile Skrzyński would be the permanent factor of the governments of the coming years and thus a guarantee of a peaceful development, in line with the British wishes connected with the loan. Max-Muller has never spoken well of Piłsudski and his opinion was shared by that part of the upper circles of the society with whom he had been associating. For him the *coup d'état* meant a complete bankruptcy of his hitherto policy ("*Piłsudski est un fou complet*"). How Sir William and Kimens had reacted to the *coup*, I could well see with my own eyes in the British legation on Friday, May 14th, at 6 p.m., when street fighting has just ceased. There could have been no question whatsoever that "the success of the *coup* was a cause of great satisfaction in the British legation." On the contrary, I have never seen two people so shocked as these two gentlemen. Especially Kimens,

¹⁸ Rauscher to *Auswärtiges Amt*, 1. 7. 1926 (AAA, IV. Pol. V, vol. 12, pp. 7 - 8).

the supposed intermediary, was a completely broken man (his house was the most damaged in Warsaw). The impression he made was that of a man in despair and he kept repeating, with Sir William indicating his assent, that this was the end of Poland and that, on the basis of his Russian experiences (Kimens spent part of the Revolution years in Russia) he was convinced that Poland was doomed to bolshevization. He has maintained that opinion ever since and in this vein evaluated the situation in Poland at various social gatherings of members of the legation and other diplomats."

The feeling of uncertainty and reserve with regard to further developments in Poland, and the fear lest they should take the undesirable course of radicalization and stirring up of the masses of the people, prevailed not only among British diplomatic representatives in Warsaw. As we have seen from Skirmunt's reports, the reaction of the Foreign Office, immediately after the *coup*, was very much the same. In Paris, during the first days following the *coup*, there was a feeling of anxiety whether "the events in Poland would not eventually lead to a civil war and a catastrophe."¹⁹ In Washington "the *coup* has met with strong disapproval [. . .] The State Department gave it to be understood that the question of whether or not the revolutionary government could be recognized by the United States should be given serious thought, and it was said to have warned American tourists leaving for Europe against visiting Poland."²⁰

But within a short period of time the situation has changed. The above quoted report from Washington informed that the initial feelings soon gave way to a conviction that the civil war would not take an undesirable course. In Paris, too, the fear has disappeared that a revolution and civil war would destroy the Polish ally and "presently one breathes with relief reading the eagerly published news that Piłsudski has restored order."²¹

The horizon has brightened even more in London. On May 21st, 1926, the German ambassador in London, on the basis of confidential information from the Foreign Office, wrote that "the British government is satisfied with Piłsudski's success."²² The British minister in Warsaw was said to have been instructed that Piłsudski be informed of the opinion that "it would not be advisable to say or to do anything that could damage relations between Poland and Russia. If relations between these two countries remained correct, the possibility would emerge of improving relations between Poland and Germany and — as far as Poland was concerned — Piłsudski was best suited to achieve this goal. Skirmunt, the Polish minister in London, is to be recalled. I have heard from other sources

¹⁹ Telegramme from the German Embassy in Paris to *Auswärtiges Amt* of May 18th, 1926 (AAA, *Büro Reichsminister Polen*, vol. 5, pp. D 572245 — D 572249).

²⁰ Report of the German Embassy in Washington to *Auswärtiges Amt* of July 2nd, 1926 (AAA, IV, Polen, Pol. 5, vol. 12, pp. 137 - 139).

²¹ Report from Paris (*ibidem*).

²² Telegramme from the German ambassador in London to *Auswärtiges Amt* of 21. 5. 1926 (AAA, *Büro Reichsminister Polen*, Vol. 5, p. D 572251).

that the British government would welcome Skrzyński as Poland's minister plenipotentiary in London." ²³

Let us recall that our intention was not to give a general assessment of the sources and the driving force behind the May *Coup*, nor to show its repercussions on the international scene or the eventual re-orientation of Poland's foreign policy, nor even to describe the attitude of the different powers to Poland, but solely to discuss the role which Great Britain was said to have played in Piłsudski's coming to power. It is true that we do not know the character, the course and the purpose of the visits which the British military attaché Captain Clayton, allegedly paid to J. Piłsudski. Some questions could be clarified only after the study of the documents which are kept in the archives of the Foreign Office and of the W. Sikorski Institute in London.

It seems, however, that in the light of the information at our disposal, there is nothing to confirm the thesis, maintained for the past 43 years, that Britain pushed Piłsudski towards a *coup* or that he had staged it with the knowledge and consent of British government representatives.

(Translated by Leon Szwajcer)

²³ As is known this did not come about. A. Skrzyński to the day of his death in 1931, did not play any active part in political life. K. Skirmunt remained the minister, and later ambassador in London until 1934.