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The Soviet diplomacy with regard to Józef Piłsudski's coup d'état of 1926

One of the more interesting and the more important aspects showing the attitude of the so-called “official Moscow” to the May Coup d’État is the activity of the Soviet diplomacy in the period in question. In my text, I would like to point out not only specific actions of the diplomacy of the USSR in the period immediately preceding the coup, during it, or after Józef Piłsudski seized power, but also the methods and opportunities of functioning, the sources of information, the influence on the Polish political scene enjoyed by Soviet diplomats, and the information sent by them to the Headquarters and its significance for making strategic decisions regarding the Polish affairs.

When I familiarised myself with the Soviet diplomatic records on the political, economic and social life in Poland in the period in question, I was quite astonished. I had not expected such a great activity and such extensive surveillance of many Polish political environments and such a wide circle of interlocutors, particularly among National Democratic activists, in industrial and various right-wing circles. I admit that I was also amazed by the wide, extensive and multifaceted scope of observation done by Soviet diplomats concerning the internal affairs of the Second Polish Republic. I do not mean spy information provided by both Polish communists or their supporters (e.g. one of such informers was a member of a renovation team that worked at Belweder when J. Piłsudski moved into the palace)¹ and secret agents specially sent from Moscow, who were even in the ranks of the army fighting in May on the side of the Marshal.² In this case, I only mean the activity of Soviet diplomats. To illustrate my point I am going to name people who corresponded with Moscow regularly, scrupulously, at the same time and to some extent independent-

¹ Российский государственный архив социально-политической истории (below: РГАСПИ), ф. 495, оп. 123, д. 81, Letter from Szczepan (J. Mizisz) of 12 June 1926, ff. 14-15.

² Ibidem, д. 153, Со слов видного профессионалиста, прибывшего 18 мая в Д. из Варшавы, ff. 68-70.

ly of each other about the internal political situation in Poland in 1926. These people were: Plenipotentiary Representative Pëtr Voykov with Boris Stomonyakov, the member of the College of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs who was responsible for the Polish affairs; the counsellor of the Plenipotentiary Representation of the USSR in Poland Aleksandr Ulyanov (died 1937)³ with Mikhail Karsky (1900-1937), a specialist in the affairs of Central Europe,⁴ the first secretary of the Plenipotentiary Representation of the USSR in Poland, Mikhail Arkadyev⁵ with the head of the Department of the Baltic States and Poland in the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs Mieczysław Łoganowski (1895-1938), a Pole born in Kielce, who was a member of the Polish Socialist Party before World War I, and then went over to the Bolsheviks, participated in the Polish-Soviet war in the ranks of the Red Army, and in the years 1922-1924, he was a resident of GPU-OGPU in Warszawa.⁶ In crucial moments, the initiative was taken over by the head of the Soviet diplomacy, Georgy Chicherin, by his deputy, Maxim Litvinov, born in Białystok, by a member of the College of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs Fyodor Rotstein (born in Kovno), not to mention Feliks Dzierżyński, who was active in the Polish affairs till his death and whose proposals, suggestions and advice were examined not only by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) but also by the Soviet diplomacy. The person to whom I would like to draw particular attention was Pëtr Rayevsky (1884-1943), most probably the resident of the military intelligence, working at the Trade Representative Office (Torgpredstvo) of the USSR in Berlin, the author of lengthy, thorough, matter-of-fact and systematic analyses of the internal situation in Poland.⁷

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The Soviet diplomacy correctly estimated the weakening of the international position of Poland after the Locarno Treaties were signed, as well as the weakening of the alliance with France.⁸ This is why Moscow believed in the alleged English inspiration of the coup d'état in Warszawa. Successive reports on the economic situation in Poland stressed the increasing unemployment, the difficult situation of the industry, which lost the markets in the former Russian Empire, the discontent among Polish peasants due to the agricultural reform, which was being carried out ineptly and

³ *Справочник по истории Коммунистической партии и Советского Союза 1898-1991* - <http://www.knowbysight.info/UUU/03717.asp> (accessed on 22 May 2011).

⁴ Ibidem - <http://www.knowbysight.info/KKK/03677.asp> (accessed on 22 May 2011).

⁵ Ibidem - <http://www.knowbysight.info/AAA/03887.asp> (accessed on 22 May 2011).

⁶ Ibidem - <http://www.knowbysight.info/LLL/03558.asp> (accessed on 22 May 2011).

⁷ Ibidem - <http://www.knowbysight.info/RRR/13023.asp> (accessed on 22 May 2011).

⁸ Архив внешней политики Российской Федерации (below: АВП РФ), ф. 04, оп. 32, п. 217, д. 52674, Обзор взаимоотношений с Польшей of 25 December 1925, ff. 7-12.

sluggishly, due to the acreage structure and to the great influence of the great land-owners, as well as the necessity of taking out a foreign loan for the reconstruction of the Polish economy. Both Soviet diplomats accredited to Poland and analysts from the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs had no doubt that the only country that could grant Poland a loan was Great Britain, which considerably strengthened its position in the international arena after Locarno.⁹ What was emphasised in this context was Piłsudski's increasing criticism of France as well as his personal contacts with the British envoy to Poland, William Max Muller, and the military attaché, Lt Col Emil Clayton, who visited Sulejówek. These visits were associated with the description of Austen Chamberlain as a politician, which was received from London. According to it he was not only far from being an opponent of dictatorship in Poland, but he even "supports military dictatorship, and is convinced that only Piłsudski could be a dictator in Poland."¹⁰ In Moscow, it was perfectly known that the threat of isolation of Poland in the international arena deepened after Treaty of Berlin had been signed in April 1926, though this event – perhaps erroneously – was not viewed as an element stimulating the crisis of power in Poland, and consequently, another cause of the coup d'état that was carried out soon afterwards.¹¹

Voykov and his collaborators observed meticulously not only the circles of the Piłsudski-ites, but also other parties and political organisations that could mount a coup d'état in Poland. From the diplomatic reports sent from Warszawa to Moscow, there emerges an interesting picture of the National Democracy, which, like the Piłsudski-ites, prepared for seizing power by force of arms. I would like to emphasise particularly the close relations of Soviet diplomats with the leaders of the National Democracy, especially with the economic circles linked with the National Democracy. In one of his reports, Mikhail Arkadyev even complains that the Plenipotentiary Representation of the USSR has too good relations with the right-wing circles and virtually none with the Piłsudski-ites, let alone the Marshal's closest circle.¹² On 31 December 1925, a 2-hour conversation between Voykov and Roman Dmowski took place. I would like to point out only two aspects mentioned during this meeting. While analysing the internal situation of the country, Dmowski stressed that "there are a lot of thefts" in Poland.¹³ It is hard not to see in this statement an analogy between Dmowski and Piłsudski as to the perception of various immoralities in the

⁹ АВП РФ, ф. 0122, оп. 9, п. 115, д. 26, Докладная записка по польскому вопросу, ff. 25-29.

¹⁰ Ibidem, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 10, Памятная записка (no day date, from the end of March or the beginning of April 1926), ff. 210.

¹¹ АВП РФ, ф. 09, оп. 1, п. 8, д. 80, Voykov's report of 26 April 1926, no. 72, ff. 117-121.

¹² АВП РФ, ф. 0122, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 10, Arkadyev's report to Łoganowski of 22 March 1926, ff. 230-233.

¹³ АВП РФ, ф. 04, оп. 32, п. 219, д. 52693, Выписка из дневника Полпреда СССР в Польше тов. Войкова of 31 December 1925, ff. 1-4.

Second Republic, which were one of the causes of the coup. Another matter in question was of a more practical nature. Voykov aimed to sound out the possibility of using the National Democracy to cause Poland to loosen or abandon the alliance with Romania formed in 1921, which was to be prolonged in March 1926. On this matter, a day after the meeting with Dmowski, the Soviet diplomat wrote: “But were it not for the fear of strengthening Germany, National Democrats would easily abandon any alliance with Romania.”¹⁴ It seems hardly probable that Piłsudski’s closest circle did not have information about the meeting between Voykov and Dmowski as well as other National Democratic activists. Soviet diplomats and their Representation were closely observed by the agents of Division II, many of whom sympathised with the Marshal. In my opinion, this would take on a practical dimension in the actions of the Piłsudski-ites trying to establish contacts with the Soviets already before the May Coup d’État. I will go back to this subject later.

The Soviet diplomats had also a lot of information on the feeling in the army, its discontentment with the economic situation, the political sympathies and antipathies of individual generals, their attitude to Piłsudski and his opponents. They were right to view the army as the only real force that could determine the victory during the coup. Voykov drew his superiors’ attention to the fact that since 1923 the National Democracy had a policy of removing from the army the followers of the Marshal who would have had the highest positions after his rise to power. Among veterans’ and paramilitary organisations, very favourably disposed to Piłsudski and ready to support him during the coup d’état, the Soviet diplomat mentioned the Association of Legionnaires and the Riflemen’s Association. Voykov underscored the great involvement of Maj Kazimierz Kierzkowski, who, after resigning from Division II of the General Staff, was actively involved in the development of the “Rifleman,” which had – according to the diplomat – 60 000 registered members.¹⁵ People mentioned as fierce opponents of the Marshal included Stanisław Szeptycki, Władysław Sikorski, Stanisław Haller, Juliusz Malczewski, and Włodzimierz Zagórski. And as his followers: Daniel Konarzewski, Leonard Skierski, Gustaw Orlicz-Dreszer, Edward Śmigły-Rydz, and Lucjan Żeligowski, referred to as a ‘zealous Piłsudski-ite.’¹⁶

Information sent by Voykov to Moscow included not only information about attempts at expanding the influence of the National Democracy in the army, but also about practical preparations of this political party for the coup, e.g. about the fact that the followers of Dmowski stole ammunition from storehouses at the Citadel in Warszawa in the spring of 1926. In March that year, he wrote even about the fact that the National Democrats wanted to launch an “offensive,” go “into the masses” on the

¹⁴ Ibidem, п. 217, д. 52674, Voykov’s report of 1 January 1926, ff. 15-19.

¹⁵ АВП РФ, ф. 0122, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 10, Выписка из письма Полпреда СССР в Польше т. Войкова от 5 апреля 1926 года, ff. 222-223.

¹⁶ Ibidem, оп. 9, п. 115, д. 26, Памятная записка (no day date, from the end of March or the beginning of April 1926), f. 208-209.

rising tide of discontentment caused by the economic crisis, and, after trials, to dissolve the Sejm.¹⁷ Soviet diplomats generally agreed that, from the point of view of the political interests of the USSR, a coup d'état carried out by the National Democracy and its rise to power were far more advantageous to Moscow than Piłsudski's rule. This is worth taking into consideration. Voykov reported not without a certain regret that the treaty between Moscow and Berlin signed on 24 April caused a sudden drop in the National Democrats' approval of the USSR and made his work in Warszawa more difficult.¹⁸ However, it would be erroneous to claim that the sympathies of the National Democracy, with their distant pro-Russian roots, and the interests of the USSR with relation to this party ceased to play any role after Treaty of Berlin had been signed. The best proof of this is the letter from Chicherin to Stomonyakov of 17 May 1926, which I take the liberty of quoting in the full wording: "At around 5 a.m., we received a coded telegram from comrade Voykov, in which he demands from us an immediate decision whether we would like to be the first to recognise the new government [i.e. Kazimierz Bartel's cabinet – MW] or we are going to wait for other governments. I think that comrade Voykov is right in saying that the National Democrats will never forgive us if we step out of line and are the first to recognise the new government. The National Democrats still exist and will play an important role."¹⁹

I have already mentioned the lack of contacts between the Piłsudski-ites and Soviet diplomats accredited to Warszawa, which limited Voykov's possibilities of gathering information on the planned actions of the Marshal and his environment and sending this information to Moscow. Therefore, it was attempted to find a channel of access to Sulejówek through the MP Jan Bryl from the Peasant Party, who went to Moscow in January 1926. At Voykov's request, he was received in the capital of the USSR with more honours than it would appear from Bryl's position. Even a meeting between the Polish MP and Chicherin was planned. But the idea was torpedoed by the Polish envoy to the USSR Stanisław Kętrzyński, who stated that Bryl and his colleagues represented a minority in the Sejm and the opposition, and that their visit was not official. However, the Soviet diplomacy obviously tried to use Bryl, who had two good points for Voykov and his collaborators: he was positively disposed to the USSR and had access to Sulejówek.²⁰ However, these efforts did not bring the expected results.

¹⁷ Ibidem, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 10, Выписка из письма Полпреда СССР в Польше тов. Войкова of 1 March 1926, ff. 237-239.

¹⁸ АВП РФ, ф. 09, оп. 1, п. 8, д. 80, Voykov's report of 26 April 1926, no. 72, ff. 117-121.

¹⁹ АВП РФ, ф. 0122, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 12, letter from Chicherin to Stomonyakov no. 359 of 17 May 1926, f. 16.

²⁰ АВП РФ, ф. 04, оп. 32, п. 217, д. 52674, Выписка из письма т. Войкова т. Литвинову от 8 января 1926 г., no. 56, f. 24 and letter from Chicherin to Voykov no. 1 of 14 January 1926, f. 31.

On the other hand, the Piłsudski-ites themselves sought contacts with the Soviet side. In my opinion, their objectives were obvious. They wanted not only to sound out the attitudes of Polish communists to the Marshal, and perhaps their support during the coup d'état. As a matter of fact, this was done by Maj Kierzkowski during his meeting with Adolf Warski on 1 March 1926 (documents concerning it have been published recently by Bogdan Musiał).²¹ Their aims were much broader. The Piłsudski-ites wanted to convince Moscow that the Marshal's potential rise to power was not inspired from abroad, and not from Britain in particular, and that it would not change the policy of Warszawa towards the USSR, let alone Piłsudski's alleged aggressive plans towards the East. One can hazard one more hypothesis explaining the causes of the fact that the Piłsudski-ites, and probably Piłsudski himself, sought contact with the Soviets. The Piłsudski-ites feared a kind of a monopoly of the links of the National Democracy with the Soviet diplomacy, which was dangerous for them, for instance, because of the one-sided picture of the internal situation in Poland transmitted to Moscow via the Plenipotentiary Representation of the USSR by the members of Dmowski's camp, and by Dmowski himself. Therefore, they needed to establish contacts on a considerably higher level than Kierzkowski and Warski, and to gain access to the Soviet authorities, but not through Voykov, who might be too conspicuous in Warszawa. Several weeks before the coup d'état, the diplomat Stanisław Janikowski, a former member of the Polish Military Organisation, connected with Sulejówek,²² over the heads of Kętrzyński, the envoy to Moscow, and probably the foreign minister, Aleksander Skrzyński, suggested that Karsky and Arkadyev should send Mieczysław Łoganowski to Warszawa as he would be received by the Marshal himself in Sulejówek.²³ It was even suggested by Sulejówek that the Communist Party of Poland should be legalised, which was to prove the Marshal's goodwill. However, the meeting between Piłsudski and Łoganowski did not take place. The reason was prosaic, namely mistrust prevailed – Moscow feared that being an old conspirator, the Polish Marshal might organise a set-up.²⁴ As a matter of fact, the Soviets turned out to be inconsistent on this matter. On the one hand, they sought contacts with Piłsudski themselves, and on the other, when they were offered this opportunity on a plate, they refused to respond to Janikowski's in-

²¹ *Przewrót majowy 1926 roku w oczach Kremla (The May Coup d'État of 1926 in the Eyes of the Kremlin)*, ed. Bogdan Musiał, in collaboration with Jan Szumski, Warszawa 2009, pp. 82-86; ПГАСИИ, ф. 495, оп. 123, д. 72, A. Warski's report of the meeting with Maj Kierzkowski (in the text misspelled as Kieszkowski), ff. 99-102.

²² K. Smolana, *Słownik biograficzny Polskiej Służby Zagranicznej 1918-1945 (A Biographical Dictionary of the Polish Foreign Service 1918-1945)*, vol. II, Warszawa 2009, pp. 58-60.

²³ АВП РФ, ф. 0122, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 10, Памятная записка (no day date, from the end of March or the beginning of April 1926), f. 209.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, Ulyanov's report to Karsky of 12 April 1926, ff. 203-207.

initiative. They believed more in their own efforts than in the proposals put forward semi-officially by the Poles.

By analysing the attitudes of other parties to the possibility of a coup d'état, the Soviet diplomats accredited to Warszawa concluded that the "heart of the Piłsudskites" is the Polish People's Party "Wyzwolenie" (Liberation) with its contemporary members and the Peasant Party led by Bryl, who has already been mentioned, and by Jan Dąbski. The National Workers' Party and Stanisław Thugutt's group moved closer in the same direction.²⁵ The attitude of the Polish Socialist Party was analysed separately. Voykov believed that the leaders of this party would not want to show their hand right up until the coup d'état in order not to lose "their socialist flawlessness," but that within the party there was a group that was in favour of Piłsudski and was strong enough and ready to support him actively if the party was to be given a due position in the future government.²⁶ Interestingly, Voykov saw pro-Piłsudski tendencies distinctly also among the more leftist members of the Polish People's Party "Piast." The Soviet diplomat was of the opinion that "Piast" could not act openly against Piłsudski and a coup d'état in order not to lose influence and support among the peasantry. On the other hand, "Piast" had to oppose the increasing influence of Bryl's group, which they considered not only close to the Marshal's line but also aiming at a rapprochement with the USSR. All these parties were far from being uniform, let alone any attempts at coordinating actions against the order or rather disorder existing in Poland before the coup, but in the spring of 1926 Voykov saw attempts at seeking an agreement between them due to the discontent with the policy of Skrzyński's government and the spreading economic crisis.²⁷

It did not escape the Soviets' attention either that Gen. Władysław Sikorski met with Wincenty Witos in the first half of April 1926 in Zakopane. In his comment, Voykov wrote: "Undoubtedly, Sikorski craves for activity and power, and undoubtedly, Witos is too cunning and too unwilling to take risks to decide on a serious incident in the form of disrupting the parliamentary system."²⁸

It is worth emphasising that the most interesting and the most turbulent group in Piłsudski's closest circle according to the Soviet diplomats were the young officers from the Vilnius garrison, called even "national communists" by them. A month before the coup, Ulyanov wrote the following sentence about them: „Among this public, there are no doubt good boys (*хорошие ребята*) who might become useful to us in the future."²⁹

²⁵ Ibidem, Выписка из письма Полпреда СССР в Польше тов. Войкова по. 67 of 22 March 1926, f. 234.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem, ff. 235-236.

²⁸ Ibidem, Выписка из письма Полпреда СССР в Польше тов. Войкова от 12 апреля 1926 г., ff. 201-202.

²⁹ Ibidem, Ulyanov's report to Karsky of 12 April 1926, ff. 203-207.

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The military coup d'état carried out in May 1926 did not come as a surprise to the Soviet diplomacy. Already on 22 March 1926, Voykov wrote: "I think that the question of Piłsudski's coup d'état should be considered as a permanent threat, although it does not seem to be possible to be carried out very soon."³⁰ The representatives of the USSR closely observed the Marshal's and his followers' actions already since the demonstration in Sulejówek in November 1925. Interestingly, in the first report written right after the coup d'état (15 May), Voykov stressed that: "Piłsudski's action was unexpected for him himself too. On the one hand, it was a result of Piłsudski's extreme annoyance, and on the other, of the unclear but provocative line of the right wing."³¹ In his description of the meeting between the Marshal and President Stanisław Wojciechowski on the Poniatowski Bridge and of the events that followed shortly afterwards, Voykov reported: "The Marshal's soldiers are getting across the bridges in Warszawa and occupying Warszawa after the shooting on the Kierbedź Bridge. The National Democrats are not ready for the coup, so no more or less significant troops have been sent to the bridge and no barricades are even being built. However, the Marshal does not think either that he is mounting a coup d'état; **he is still staging a demonstration** [emphasis MW] to force the President to repudiate Witos's government and to force Witos himself to resign from his duties as the Prime Minister."³² In the same report, the Soviet diplomat called Piłsudski "a political coward," who after three days of fights in the capital of Poland is afraid to solve social problems and who does not have any political, economic or social programme.³³ Actually, this subject would run through in the Soviet diplomats' analyses repeatedly.

On 12 July 1926, in the evening, in the foreign minister August Zaleski's private flat, at the invitation of the Polish side, there was a meeting between Piłsudski and Voykov, which lasted more than 3 hours. In a joking form that was typical of him, telling numerous anecdotes and stories from this own life, the Marshal tried to convince the Soviet diplomat that he was not in favour of a war against the USSR and that his rise to power would not entail such a conflict. Piłsudski used, as Voykov wrote, a "risky argument," asking the Soviet diplomat why he should risk his renown as a victorious leader, which he wished to hand down to his offspring, by coming into another conflict and not being sure of its result. Moreover, the Marshal assured Voykov that Poland was not interested in Soviet Belarus and Ukraine, because it had enough representatives of these national minorities within its boundaries: "It is you

³⁰ Ibidem, Выписка из письма Полпреда СССР в Польше тов. Войкова по. 67 of 22 March 1926, f. 234.

³¹ АВП РФ, ф. 09, оп. 1, п. 8, д. 80, Voykov's report of 15 May 1926, f. 11.

³² Ibidem, f. 13.

³³ Ibidem, ff. 13-25.

that work against us among the Belarusians and Ukrainians, and not we against you,” he said. Piłsudski believed that the main aim of Poland was to strengthen the state on the inside, so that it would not give in to pressure from the outside. He called the coup d’état “a small perturbation” done with the use of the army. He estimated the number of victims at around 200. The Marshal did not oppose the resumption of negotiations aiming at a non-aggression pact about which Voykov enquired in accordance with the instructions from Moscow, but as for the details, he referred the Soviet diplomat to Zaleski, who was present during the meeting.³⁴ I believe that the objective of the Piłsudski-Voykov meeting was in fact the same as the one of the Piłsudski-Łogonowski meeting, which was planned several months before but did not take place. The main aim was to reassure the Soviets and convince them that the new authority did not have any aggressive designs against the USSR. But the meeting took place in new political circumstances and therefore it had a more official form. Voykov was well aware of the fact that the Marshal did not want a war against the USSR, but Moscow still used the argument about Poland’s alleged aggressive plans in order to assume the convenient role of a victim, to justify their own moves on the international arena (e.g. the treaty with Lithuania of September 1926)³⁵ and to enfeeble the position of Poland and to belittle the policy of its new authorities.

After the coup d’état, the representatives of the USSR analysed in detail the Marshal’s moves, the composition and actions of Kazimierz Bartel’s government, Piłsudski’s particular interest in the army and the fast expansion of his influence among the soldiers, as well as the removal of unwanted generals.³⁶ In his reports, Rayevsky emphasised the Marshal’s efforts to legalise the coup d’état, which he explained with the fear of introducing social reforms. The Soviet diplomatic correspondence more and more often included the word “fascism” as the best description of the new rule in Poland. Rayevsky, citing publications in the pro-Piłsudski paper “Głos Prawdy” (The Voice of Truth), underlined the fascist motives and results of the May Coup d’État, and even drew his superiors’ attention to the fact that the paper emphasised an older tradition of the movement of the Piłsudski-ites than the one of Italian fascism.³⁷ Arkadyev, in turn, in the early autumn of 1926, on the eve of the formation of the government of the Marshal himself, considered in all seriousness a possibility of another coup d’état carried out by Piłsudski, which would untie his

³⁴ Ibidem, д. 81, Voykov’s report of 13 July 1926, ff. 131-138 (quotes); see also: *Rozmowy Piłsudskiego z Wojkowem: fragmenty raportów (Talks Between Piłsudski and Voykov: Fragments of Reports)*, compiled by Piotr Wandycz, Jerzy Borzęcki, Zeszyty Historyczne (Historical Notebooks) Paris 2004, fasc. 149, pp. 10-22.

³⁵ АВП РФ, ф. 04, оп. 32, п. 219, д. 52693, Разговор с Кноллем от 30 сентября 1926 г., ff. 74-82.

³⁶ АВП РФ, ф. 0122, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 10, a copy of Voykov’s report no. 96 from the beginning of October 1926, ff. 135-139.

³⁷ Ibidem, Rayevsky’s report of 1 October 1926, ff. 140-145.

hands tied by the presence of the Sejm, the activity of political opponents and increasing discontent of the left-wing activists who had recently been his allies and of peasant parties discouraged by the lack of social reforms that they expected when they supported the coup in May.³⁸ In this particular case, the deliberations of the Soviet diplomat can hardly be considered a proof of his perceptiveness and knowledge about the rules governing the Polish political scene.

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The communists, both in Poland and in Moscow, had a considerable problem with Józef Piłsudski. Seeing him from the angle of ideological dogmas, and considering the experiences of the last few years from the Russian Revolution and the history of Europe after World War I, they could not answer the question: is the Marshal somebody like Aleksandr Kerensky or is he rather closer to Benito Mussolini? Many communists, including activists of the Communist Party of Poland and the Polish Section of the Comintern, considered Piłsudski a representative of the small bourgeoisie, who, overthrowing Witos's "fascist" government, would carry out the first stage of a revolution and lay the ground for a socialist revolution. It was the ultimate cause of the so-called "May mistake."³⁹

Nevertheless, I do not subscribe to the view promoted by the communists and then repeated in the historical literature that the very fact that the Communist Party of Poland actively supported Piłsudski in May 1926 should be considered a "mistake." The party describing itself as a revolutionary one and promoting revolutionary ideas, actively inspiring various social disturbances, demonstrations, revolts, protests, and revolutions, could not stand by and passively watch fights on the streets of Warszawa. It had to take part in the battle for people's hearts and minds, for the acclaim and support of the masses. The real mistake lied elsewhere. In my opinion, the superior aim of the communists who decided to support Piłsudski was to transform the May fights into a civil war, which would open for them the doors to the desired power. If supporting Witos's government and all its forces had given a bigger chance of triggering a civil war in Poland, both the communist leaders at the Kremlin and the leaders of the Communist Party of Poland in Warszawa would not have hesitated even for a moment to support the troops defending President Wojciechowski and Prime Minister Witos. However, tactically, it was easier to support Piłsudski, who was much more popular with the masses than his opponents. The heart of the "May

³⁸ Ibidem, О новом перевороте Пилсудского, ff. 146-148.

³⁹ РГАСПИ, ф. 495, оп. 124, д. 145, Arguments about the mistakes of the Communist Party of Poland, about the current situation and the objectives of the party. Plans of the minority of the Central Committee (no day date), ff. 49-73; ibidem, д. 182, Direct and indirect causes of the May Coup d'État (no day date), ff. 43-62.

mistake” lied completely elsewhere. The events of May 1926 showed unambiguously that the Polish communists who were supported financially, materially and ideologically by the USSR – *toutes proportions gardées* – were too weak, had too little influence among workers, craftsmen and peasants to achieve their goal. The transformation of the coup into a civil war turned out to be beyond their capabilities and it was the incorrect estimation of their power that was the real “May mistake.”

Unlike the Polish communists, who were plunged into faction wars, with their dogmatic and theoretic perception of the world, the Soviet diplomats, both those accredited to Warszawa and those working at the headquarters in Moscow, assessed the events in Warszawa much more practically, without ideological spectacles. It was the real **national interest** of the USSR that counted there. It will be no exaggeration to say that the Soviet diplomats watching the political scene in Poland were more knowledgeable about the situation than the Polish communists. They were also more aware of the aims of the Kremlin and knew more about the ways of achieving them. The crucial stage was the Sovietisation of Poland, opening the doors for the expansion of influence and power of Moscow in Europe. It could be achieved by triggering a civil war, during which the radical leftist forces would sooner or later seize the initiative, as Moscow was deeply convinced. It could also be achieved through a consistent enfeeblement of the international and internal situation of Poland. In this context, it is worth remembering Voykov’s reflections on the possibility of breaking the Polish-Romanian alliance with the help of the National Democracy. The Communist Party of Poland and its departments were only one of the tools that were used to achieve strategic, long-term goals. I am not even sure that the Polish communists were the most important of these tools. This was why Voykov and his comrades were so active among the National Democrats, tried to reach Piłsudski’s closest circles through such people as the MP Bryl, strived to increase their influence among peasant parties, looked for allies in the ranks of the officer corps of the Polish Army (the case of the so-called “national communists” from the Vilnius garrison). These tactics were designed to realise the long-term strategy but they could bring notable and tangible effects in the near future as well. In this context, it is worth quoting Łoganowski, who wrote to Arkadyev at the end of March 1926: “Among the Polish comrades, there is an idea that Piłsudski’s rise to power will turn out to be a new stage on the road to the revolution. I would only subscribe to this view if Piłsudski came to power through a civil war and the wide masses of peasants and workers were moved. If Piłsudski called these masses to arms, he would be forced to use a far-reaching slogan and then the communist party could influence the course of the battle and lead the masses. But Piłsudski understands this situation perfectly and as a revolution in Poland is not in his interest, it is doubtful that he will choose this path. From the point of view of our **national interests** [emphasis MW], Piłsudski’s rise to power should be considered without doubt as a hostile move, which may lead

in the end to serious perturbations in the relations between us and Poland. This is why I definitely disagree with some of my comrades, who are inclined to believe in Piłsudski's peaceful intentions and let him allay their suspicions by his attempts at reaching an agreement with us."⁴⁰ The words quoted here prove as well that, contrary to appearances, after the defeat of the Bavarian Revolution in 1923, the policy-makers from Moscow did not renounce the idea of moving the revolution to the west of Europe.⁴¹ From this perspective, Poland was a barrier for them, an obstacle that stood in their way and had to be removed.

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⁴⁰ АВП РФ, ф. 0122, оп. 10, п. 121, д. 10, a copy of the letter from Łoganowski to Arkadyev from the end of March 1926, ff. 226-229.

⁴¹ On this subject see interesting reflections by Viktor Zubachevsky from Omsk – В. А. Зубачевский, *Политика России в отношении восточной части Центральной Европы (1917–1923 гг.): геополитический аспект*, Омск 2005.