

Three Days That Shook the Republic, May 12–15, 1926

WHEN WINCENCY WITOS (1874–1945), the leader of the right-wing branch of the Polish peasant movement, the Polish People’s Union–Piast (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe–Piast, PSL–Piast), entered into a coalition government with other right-nationalist parties on May 10, 1926, riots broke out across Warsaw, Poland’s capital.¹ The formation of another “Chjena-Piast”² government, as its detractors referred to the coalition, recalled the devastating inflation, unemployment, and worker unrest that had marked Witos’s earlier coalition government of 1923. The sense of desperation in a population already dealing with serious economic and political crisis in the Polish Second Republic was raised to dramatic heights.³ As it happens, the new Witos government would last only five days before it crumbled in the face of a military coup launched by renowned political leader Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935).

By the mid-1920s, Piłsudski had already devoted himself to Poland in a variety of remarkable ways: he had been an antitsarist socialist revolutionary in the Russian partition during the late nineteenth century, a founding member of the pro-independence Polish Socialist Party (PPS), and an early editor of the influential underground socialist newspaper the *Worker (Robotnik)*.⁴ Piłsudski had served as the Second Republic’s head of state from 1918 to 1922, Poland’s first marshal since 1920, and chief of the general staff from 1918 to 1923. He was a resolute patriot and an indefatigable proponent of Polish independence.

In his vitriol against the new Witos government and the right-nationalists, Piłsudski was supported by a loosely linked assortment of men and women drawn from Poland’s intelligentsia, many of whom shared past experiences

first in the Socialist Party and later in the wartime struggle for independence. Linked primarily by their loyalty to the charismatic Piłsudski, the Piłsudskiites (Piłsudczycy), or the Belvedere Camp,⁵ as they were also known, formed one of the most important political forces in the new state. Even though the Piłsudskiites did not have a definable political structure or party until after the coup of May 1926, their ideology and political goals had been taking shape since independence. Notably, the Piłsudskiites shared an attachment to nineteenth-century Polish romanticism and to the idea of a brotherhood of nations and were steadfastly committed to maintaining the multiethnic heritage of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁶ These views made the Piłsudskiites the sworn enemies of the right-nationalist camp, best represented by the National Democrats. National Democracy's cofounder, elder statesman, theoretician, and symbolic leader throughout the interwar period was Roman Dmowski (1864–1939). Dmowski subscribed to an integral Polish nationalism and believed that ethnic and national bonds were the highest forms of social cohesion; he envisioned a Poland that was ethnically homogenous, Catholic, and morally and socially conservative.⁷ The National Democrats' political party, the People's National Union (Związek Ludowo-Narodowy, ZLN), was the strongest and largest party of the right. The National Union was included in the May 1926 Witos coalition.⁸

The formation of this right-nationalist coalition in May 1926 greatly angered Piłsudski and his supporters and served as an occasion for them both to rage against the nationalist right generally and to condemn the whole state of political life in the new Poland. From the Piłsudskiite perspective, the course of postpartition Polish history—that is, the history of Poland since independence in 1918—had yielded few glorious moments, and in this regard, the Piłsudskiites claimed, the nationalists had much to answer for.⁹ Since the very inception of the Second Republic, one political crisis after another emerged to shake citizens' confidence in the ability of the government, indeed of the democratic process generally, to address adequately the many pressing social and economic challenges that the new state faced. Most notably, there was the assassination by a National Democracy supporter of the Second Republic's first regularly elected president, Gabriel Narutowicz (1865–1922), in 1922. Narutowicz had won the presidency with the votes of a significant portion of the country's ethnic minority population, which accounted for about 30 percent of the whole.¹⁰ That Narutowicz had been Piłsudski's favored candidate

for the job further discredited him in the eyes of the nationalist right, and his victory sparked a series of violent street riots. His assassination shortly after the election widened the gulf between, on the one hand, the Poland of the nationalist camp and, on the other, the Poland of the Piłsudskiites, the political left, and the progressive liberal-democrats—grouped, at least for a time, into a single polarity.¹¹ This tension between the two positions became even more pointed when, in certain right-nationalist circles, Narutowicz’s assassin was hailed as a hero.¹² The assassination of the first president of the newly independent nation marked an early turning point in the republic’s short history and further poisoned an already tense political and social environment. Independence was fast becoming, as Witold Gombrowicz had suggested, “more humiliating than bondage.”¹³

A total of fourteen governments had attempted to govern Poland from 1918 to May 1926, and by the mid-1920s political polarizations had reached a fever pitch; there were almost one hundred political parties in Poland, close to a third of them represented in the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament.¹⁴ The basic point on which even people of wildly opposed political views agreed was that there existed a pressing need to “fix” the Second Republic. Many blamed the unfortunate political situation on the March 1921 constitution, which had provided for a weak presidency and a strong Sejm. The critics argued that this arrangement made successful majorities difficult to maintain and necessitated a reliance on coalition governments—which were themselves difficult to achieve in a highly polarized political environment—and had laid the groundwork for the impractical and ultimately disastrous “Sejmocracy” (parliamentocracy) that had emerged in Poland.¹⁵ So it was that politics in the Second Republic, until those fated days in May 1926, was defined by a succession of short-lived and unstable governments. The Witos government of 1926 appeared as yet another in a long line of uninspired and ineffective coalition governments.

As the Witos government was forming, the Piłsudskiites spread a rumor that the new coalition was prepared to act decisively against the constitution and that it was orchestrating a coup to assure long-term political preeminence for the nationalist right. From the Piłsudskiite perspective, there was some real cause for alarm: in a short political statement published earlier in 1926, *The Times and the People* (*Czasy i ludzie*), Witos had raised the ire of Piłsudskiites by advocating radical changes to Poland’s parliamentary democracy. He had

warned that the already “catastrophic” situation in Poland could deteriorate even further, and he implied the need for a “strong hand” to take charge of the situation.¹⁶ In these early days of May, Witos’s words underscored the foreboding that many felt.¹⁷

The events that unfolded during the coming days should not have come as much of a surprise to any astute observer of the Second Republic. As journalist Konrad Olchowicz stated in his memoirs, no one could have predicted what exactly would happen during these early days of May, but many were able to sense change in the air: “One could have expected anything.”¹⁸ Demonstrations, some spontaneous and some planned, in opposition to the Witos government and in support of Piłsudski erupted across the capital on May 11.¹⁹ Piłsudskiites paraded around Warsaw shouting, “Long live Piłsudski” and “Down with Witos.” In an effort to recall the Polish Legions, which had been organized to spearhead the fight for an independent Polish state during the Great War and in which Piłsudski had been a dominating personality, Piłsudskiites forced people to sing the march of the First Brigade. Piłsudski himself had commanded the First Brigade, and several years after Polish independence had been achieved, the march continued to function as a Piłsudskiite national anthem. The tension was further heightened when rumors spread that gunshots had been fired on Sulejówek, a villa on the outskirts of Warsaw to which Piłsudski, disgusted by a political system burdened with what he had called “the moral responsibility” for the assassination of President Narutowicz, had ostensibly retired in 1923. The rumors did much to provide Piłsudski with a moral justification for what happened next.²⁰

On May 12, Piłsudski and his army of about two thousand men advanced toward Warsaw.²¹ Piłsudski’s aim was to organize a nonviolent show of force and to mount an impressive political demonstration that would prove to everyone that only Piłsudski could save a nation plagued by social, economic, political, and ethnic tensions and that, accordingly, he should be handed executive power peacefully.²² Confronted with resistance from the government, however, Piłsudski was forced to consider other options, and so it was that the May coup d’état unfolded. By the end of the three-day civil war, as many referred to the events, close to four hundred people would be dead and about one thousand injured.²³

Late on the fourteenth and into the morning of the fifteenth, the government forces asked for a cease-fire in order to prevent the escalation of violence

across Poland.²⁴ The president resigned, as did Prime Minister Witos and his government. Piłsudski became minister of military affairs (from May 15) and inspector general of the Polish armed forces (from August 28).²⁵ On Piłsudski's instruction, Kazimierz Bartel (1882–1941) became prime minister on May 15. A short while later, the Sejm and the Senate elected Piłsudski president of the republic, but Piłsudski refused the position. On Piłsudski's recommendation, scholar and former socialist Ignacy Mościcki (1867–1946) was elected president in June 1926; he held the post until 1939.²⁶

The coup of May 12–15, 1926, expressed frustration with the profound failures of each successive government of newly independent Poland, with the deep polarization of political life, and with the quality of independence generally. The young republic had been experiencing what the Piłsudski faction referred to as a “moral breakdown” of its public life.²⁷ Supporters of Piłsudski emphasized that the coup had been waged for the “moral good” of the nation and with the intention of effecting a Poland-wide spiritual rebirth. The Polish Socialist Party, of which Piłsudski had been a founding member but with which he had long ago broken, hailed Piłsudski's actions as a revolution against the Chjeno-Piast coalition, which threatened to ruin the nation “politically and morally,” and they welcomed the “better future” that lay ahead.²⁸ Warsaw's liberal *Morning Courier* (*Kurier poranny*) similarly hailed the “moral rebirth of the nation” that the coup promised to introduce and proclaimed that the event formed a necessary precursor to wider economic and political reform.²⁹

Piłsudski himself had remarked just weeks after the coup, “In the reborn country, there did not emerge a rebirth of spirit . . . rather, scoundrels and rogues and blackguards held sway. The nation has been reborn in only one area, that is, in terms of individual boldness and service to the state in times of battle. Thanks to this I was able to take the war to its successful end. In all other areas I have found no rebirth.”³⁰ It was Piłsudski, moreover, who had issued a nationwide call on the night of May 12, just as the events were getting under way, to focus on what he called *imponderabilia*—“like honor, virtue, courage, and generally, all the internal strengths of a person.”³¹ It was this appeal to widen the scope of what was considered political and to embrace imponderables that resonated powerfully and in a wide variety of unexpected ways with the populace of the Second Republic. This resonance forms the backbone of the present study. Piłsudski's coup of 1926 gave birth to what

became known as the *sanacja*, a word derived from the Latin *sanatio*, meaning healing, rejuvenation, cleansing, or reform. The *sanacja* period lasted, in various permutations, right to the outbreak of the Second World War and to the last days of the Second Republic, in 1939.

Historians have traditionally interpreted the coup as the product of a profoundly sick postpartition political culture. They have understood the *sanacja* as a period devoted to effecting fundamental reforms in the state's political structures and practices, especially to rewriting the March constitution and securing a stronger executive branch of government. The *sanacja* was an era dominated by appeals to a new, modern, and more productive citizenship, to the primacy of collective over individual interests, to "clean hands," "the state above all else," and "work as the highest calling." Studies emphasizing these aspects of the question have been numerous and important.³² The present study, rather than offering a broad overview of the post-May regime and in contrast to traditional approaches to the period, is interested in the wider cultural significance of the *sanacja* and in the ways in which its language of purification, health, and rebirth resonated outside the very public and strictly political and military contexts in which the event is customarily considered. This is a study of the incredibly powerful yet underexplored subtext of the period, of the ways in which the *sanacja* was imbued with a fantastically wide range of meaning after 1926, and of the way in which it was used, misused, and manipulated in the cultural and political discourses of the Second Republic; it is a study of the *sanacja* as symbol and potential. As such, it understands *sanacja* broadly, as a particularly flexible and reverberant idea that could move between and speak simultaneously to both the political and the cultural realms.

The May coup and the *sanacja* it proclaimed initiated a fascinating national forum on what the new state had become, and it provided a focus for the ideas about national and moral identities that had been circulating in Polish society ever since the inception of the Second Republic. By popularizing a vocabulary of rebirth and change, of moral responsibility, civic duty, and citizen accountability, work and collective action, the *sanacja* sparked a widespread debate about the meaning of Poland and Polish national identity in the modern era. Both as a concrete political mandate and as an idea, the *sanacja* was astonishingly imprecise: it favored a rousing rhetorical appeal to imponderables—abstract invocations of morality, virtue, action, and civic

courage—over practical reform measures. The utopian open-endedness of the *sanacja*, the very malleability and mobility of its language, made it available to opponents and proponents alike as a set of ideas with which to critique contemporary social, political, and moral ills. It was in the malleability of the term *sanacja* and in its applicability to a varied range of problems that potential lay.

Maria Dąbrowska (1889–1965), one of the most successful and well-respected writers associated with the progressive leftist interwar intelligentsia and for some time a proponent of Piłsudski's actions, wrote in her diary, on May 17, 1926, just days after the coup: "There happened in Warsaw a thing at once terrifying and wondrous, like a chapter from Greek history. A military revolution with a moral ideal. . . . Two moral nations have clashed in Poland. One a nation of action and perfection, of getting to the heart of questions, and the second a nation of lies and convention. The values for new life have been formed. But what will we, society, do with them? Piłsudski cannot do everything for us."³³

Dąbrowska's words reveal the tremendous anticipation that she and many like her placed in the May coup; it would be the start of something positively momentous and of a revolution unlike any other. This idea that Piłsudski had rescued the nation from a dreadful future and had laid the basis for positive change was perpetuated by the press as well as in personal attitudes and commentary; it was also reflected in the emergence of organizations devoted to specific aspects of the *sanacja*'s potential. Those who supported Piłsudski and the coup—men and women drawn mainly, though not exclusively, from the left-liberal intelligentsia—claimed a morally just position for themselves. Theirs was the nation of "action and perfection"; these were people who embraced the modern age and the new intellectual currents and cultural shifts that came with it, and they saw in the *sanacja* the opportunity for secularism and for a severing of the seemingly inviolable connection between Catholicism, Polishness, and patriotism. Their positions could not be reconciled with the nation of "lies and convention," associated so clearly in the minds of the Piłsudskiites with their archenemies, National Democracy and the right-nationalist-Catholic camp generally. For right-nationalist-Catholic opponents of the coup, the *sanacja*, supported as it was by agents of secular reform, was itself irrefutable evidence of the lingering ill effects of the partitions and of the deep moral rot that had infested the Polish national body. The May coup reflected these polarized political allegiances in the

republic, but it also exacerbated them by creating even more obviously divergent camps and transforming them into irreconcilable moral categories.

At the most reductive level, the clash of Poland's moral nations was between left and right. But at a more essential level, the struggle was over "who" would shape and ultimately control definitions of everything from models of femininity and definitions of the nation to ideas about citizen activism and service to the state. The fight was over symbols and definitions of Polishness and of Poland, over who and what would determine and control the postpartition future. The political caesura of 1926 forced people to take sides, declare allegiances, and articulate visions of the ideal future. This study will explore how the moral nations took shape after the coup; it will probe the political and cultural landscape that was formed in Poland after May 1926 with the proclamation of a very powerful—and very flexible—notion of moral reform.

The Imponderables

Individuals and groups imbued Piłsudski's *sanacja* with varied and creative meaning. Each chapter begins with the May coup itself and studies a particular reading of the event and the ensuing *sanacja*; each focuses, that is, on a different rendering of Piłsudski's imponderables. I begin by examining the preoccupation with moral crisis evident in the Warsaw-based press immediately before and after the May coup. Though they had existed since the start of independence, debates about culture and morality escalated in the right-nationalist press as a result of the proclamation of a *sanacja* and generally, as a result of the Piłsudskites' dominance over the political life of the state. Right-nationalist opponents of Piłsudski used the *sanacja* as a springboard from which to launch wholesale condemnations of the moral and cultural state of the nation. Already we see a persistent tendency in post-May Poland for public discussions of the *sanacja* to refer back continually to themes related to gender, sexuality, and moral degeneration and regeneration. This focus on sexual and moral questions, as reflected in the debates studied throughout this work, is an important element in the broader political culture of the Second Republic.

Letters written to Piłsudski during the *sanacja* from segments of the public—some from the margins of society—show that a wide range of individuals

believed they had something important to say about the sanacja and that Piłsudski himself should listen to their opinions. After all, had Piłsudski not invited precisely this sort of active citizen involvement in shaping discourses about the moral fabric of the nation? These letter writers adopted much of the same language about national and moral cleansing that appeared in more formal and important renderings of the sanacja project, but each added his or her own unique twist to the basic sanacja concept. The simple fact that these letters were written in the first place encourages us to understand the sanacja in its widest possible incarnation and in terms of its broadest potential. While people differed over what kind of a sanacja was necessary, few would have denied that some sort of a serious reflection on the state of Poland was necessary.

The left-liberal intellectuals who formed the little-known Warsaw-based Society for the Moral Rebirth of the Nation (*Towarzystwo Odrodzenia Moralnego Ojczyzny*) (1926–32) embraced Piłsudski's coup as an important catalyst for moral and national rebirth. While it is fair to say that the society remained ineffective for the duration of its existence (if one measures effectiveness in terms of membership numbers and projects completed) it nevertheless saw a number of prominent sanacja politicians—like Walery Sławek and Janusz Jędrzejewicz—pass through its ranks. Though the group achieved little, its statements of intent and its analyses of the meaning of sanacja and of the state of Polish independence reveal much about the mood, expectations, and hopes of the period.

A wave of women's activism was also sparked by the coup, resulting in the formation of groups like the Women's Democratic Election Committee (*Demokratyczny Komitet Wyborczy Kobiet*) (1928) and the Women's Union for Citizenship Work (*Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet*) (1928–39). Some women of the pro-Piłsudski, left-liberal intelligentsia, with Zofia Moraczewska in the lead, argued that, as women, they had a special role of fulfill in the sanacja project. The sanacja, after all, had declared the importance of moral health and of achieving a national cleansing, and according to such women, the moral realm was women's preserve. If the formal political sanacja were serious about moral reform, then women needed to be brought in on the project; in the process, women would themselves be transformed into fully engaged female citizens of the new state.

Returning to the ideas about gender roles and sexual morality raised at the beginning of this study, I introduce Tadeusz Boy Țeleński—cabaret

writer, publicist, exponent of women's rights over their bodies, medical doctor, and prolific translator of classic French literature—as the most powerful symbol of what critics identified as the pernicious cultural *sanacja* that had raged within Poland since May 1926. Right-nationalist-Catholic critics created the term *Boy's sanacja* to register a link between the political *sanacja*, on the one hand, and, on the other, liberal attitudes toward modern and Western cultural trends and values. This coupling represents perhaps one of the most creative and telling manipulations of the *sanacja* word and idea. Right-nationalist critics argued that the *sanacja* had authorized flagrant violations of Polish history, religious beliefs, and appropriate gender roles and had licensed a private (im)morality that was inconsistent with political stability and good citizenship. “Boyshevism,” Bolshevism, a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, and the *sanacja*, critics maintained, were all expressions of a single threat.

Through these five different sites of analysis, I examine *sanacja*-era Poland's preoccupation with the idea of impending moral collapse. Each section explores contemporary discourses about the moral health of the nation—discourses fueled by anxiety about Poland's postpartition cohesion and stability, its identity, cultural autonomy, and encounters with European modernity. This book, then, is as much about the forms that debates about collective national identities took during Poland's interwar period and about the struggles inherent in reconciling competing visions of the nation, as it is about the *sanacja* specifically.

In all these renderings of the imponderables, moreover, this study focuses (though not exclusively) on the so-called elites of the Second Republic, on the intellectual stratum of society.³⁴ The majority of the population in the new Polish state was composed of peasants and agricultural laborers, and the divide between social groups was wide; this was, arguably, one of the defining features of the new Poland. The intelligentsia, in contrast, formed a very small group: in 1921 it constituted about 3.5 percent of the economically engaged population (out of a total population of about 27 million) and by 1931 it had grown by just over one percent.³⁵ The Polish interwar intelligentsia included not only those who had professional qualifications from institutes of higher education but also all those who made a living from nonmanual labor—writers, scholars, artists, office workers, civil servants—whether or not they had been formally educated.³⁶ The Polish intelligentsia, like the eastern European intelligentsia more broadly, was not typically part of a traditional middle

class, as it was in western Europe.³⁷ It was, rather, part of an economically insecure group. Yet the intelligentsia in eastern Europe, and in Poland especially, was a culturally, politically, and socially central group. Its centrality derived from the singularly important role it had played during the nineteenth-century partition period, when it was engaged in what historians have called a rule of souls.³⁸ During this period, members of the intelligentsia played an almost sacred role in the nation, serving as political leaders and as the unofficial ambassadors of the Polish nation and its independence cause.³⁹

Confronted with independence, the intelligentsia was forced to renegotiate its role in and its relationship to the nation. Indeed, a self-reflexive interest in what role the intelligentsia played or should play in the nation was a key feature of postwar debates not just in Poland but across Europe. In contrast to western Europe, the intelligentsia in Poland after the war could for the first time “abandon” the nation and what had hitherto constituted the defining imperative of its existence. Independence allowed some members of the intelligentsia to rethink their moral responsibility to the nation and to eschew, for example, the tendency to use literature as a way of furthering the Polish national cause; members of the intelligentsia could act instead to develop new terms of interaction between themselves and the nation. Individuals might have chosen to remain committed popularizers of patriotic ideas, or conversely, they might have opted to ignore the national question completely. The very recognition of that choice was anathema to certain cultural commentators, and the question produced intensely polarized views.⁴⁰

As we shall see, ideas regarding the role of the intelligentsia in independent Poland were linked, in turn, to debates about what the *sanacja* was or should be. It was the intelligentsia that was most engaged with questions about the nation’s moral health and potential and that found in the *sanacja*’s call to defend the nation’s imponderables a focus and inspiration. Through the debates that the intelligentsia generated and in which it was involved, it engaged some of the most fundamental ideas about what it meant to be Polish.

This exposition, moreover, is focused on personalities who were based in Warsaw and on the cultural products and trends that emanated from the Second Republic’s capital city. Warsaw’s population in 1918 was 758,400 (down from 884,500 in 1914); it reached 936,700 by 1921. The city enjoyed a comparatively diversified work force, including a high percentage of blue-collar workers. Its population also included a significant percentage of self-employed

artisans and merchants. The population was composed mainly of Polish Catholics and Jews; Germans and Ukrainians existed only in small numbers in the capital city.⁴¹

Emphasis on a single city, surely, cannot accommodate the various regional divisions and peculiarities evident in the Second Republic. The need for caution, then, in drawing certain generalizations from a study based on Warsaw, is acknowledged. At the same time, and as some contemporaries themselves argued, Warsaw functioned as the undisputed cultural and intellectual center that shaped nationwide patterns.⁴² The intelligentsia, whose ideas underpin this study, was either physically present in Warsaw or was engaged with the ideas that emanated from that city. In addition, Warsaw was by far the most important center of publishing in the Second Republic, and most of the major periodicals of the period, some of which are used in this study, were published there.⁴³

Warsaw was also invested with great symbolic meaning. As the capital city, it was the seat of the government and the locus of the many important political happenings that were central to the way that contemporaries thought about the trajectory of independence. Piłsudski's May coup, moreover, did much to cast Warsaw into the spotlight. The fighting between Piłsudski's forces and the government troops had actually taken place in Warsaw, and it was there that men had died fighting during those fateful days in May. Piłsudski's ensuing sanacja government was based in Warsaw; it was, for better or worse, the seat of the moral revolution.⁴⁴

Narrating the Event

From the beginning, the coup d'état provided fertile terrain for political, social, and cultural analysis. Contemporary reporters, writers, politicians, and intellectuals all wrote about some aspect of the event, pondered its causes and its ramifications, and declared their allegiances.⁴⁵ Historians have also shown great interest in the coup and are agreed that the event was the single most important political caesura of the interwar period.⁴⁶ The earliest communist scholarship tended to depict the Piłsudski coup and the Second Republic generally as a socially, economically, and politically reactionary period that stymied the real potential of socialism.⁴⁷ Beginning with the late

1970s and early 1980s, the coup and the sanacja became the subject of several important works in political history.⁴⁸ This interest in the sanacja, and in the Second Republic generally, has blossomed during the postcommunist period, as historians of the Third Republic draw parallels between Poland's most recent period of independence and the Second Republic.⁴⁹

In the whole of this scholarship on the coup and the sanacja era, a number of specific emphases emerge. One of the most richly studied topics concerns whether the coup was planned or whether it was a more improvised affair. There is some evidence to suggest that Piłsudskiite conspiratorial groups, especially within the army, had worked assiduously for a few years before May 1926 to position the ostensibly retired Piłsudski for a future return to public life. That the portion of the army loyal to Piłsudski encouraged Piłsudski's return to public life is beyond doubt, and that Piłsudski had used his semiretirement to rally support for himself and to arouse hostility toward the center-right coalitions is also clear.⁵⁰ But it is fair to say, too, that the coup d'état, as it actually occurred, was a blend of both meticulous planning and spontaneous and intrepid action. Piłsudski did not expect to spark a civil war in Poland, though he was prepared in May 1926 for a number of developments and was willing to consider a wide range of actions.⁵¹ But whether the actual May events were planned or not is beside the point of this exposition. What is important is that during those days in May, Piłsudski unleashed forces and ideas that he did not and would not control. The unpredictability of the sanacja and its ability to seduce different individuals and groups in unanticipated ways reveal much about Polish conceptions of independence and national identity.

Historians have also been interested in the extent to which we can understand the affront to democracy in May 1926 as a uniquely Polish affair, or conversely, as symptomatic and reflective of a Europe-wide postwar phenomenon marked by frequent assaults on democratic institutions and a profound crisis of faith in democratic potential. Clearly there were many similarities between what was happening in the Polish context and what was occurring throughout Europe at this time. In the eastern European context, this question of democracy in the interwar period has been a particularly vexing one: all the states in the region, with the exception of Czechoslovakia, succumbed quickly and thoroughly to varying forms of authoritarianism.⁵² Historians of Poland tend to regard the government from 1926 to 1930 as a

“guided democracy.” During this period, certain structures and forms of the parliamentary system were retained. At the same time, however, Piłsudski himself appointed the cabinets, played a preponderant role in decision making, and assumed some of the postures of a dictator.⁵³ Typically, 1930 is taken as the end of guided democracy and the end of the first, comparatively mild, period in the sanacja’s history. In September 1930, Piłsudski imprisoned at the fortress of Brześć (Brest Litovsk) members of the sanacja political opposition, grouped together in a bloc of center-left parties called Centrolew.⁵⁴ The sanacja camp defended its actions in this matter by arguing that the opposition activists were preparing a coup against the government and that time was limited; in this reading of the event, the continued assaults on democracy become a purely defensive attempt to prevent the spread of anarchy.

After Brześć, the regime turned increasingly authoritarian and lost much of the support on which it had relied since 1926. According to Maria Dąbrowska, Brześć represented the final severing of the moral links between the people and Piłsudski.⁵⁵ By 1930 the sanacja was viewed by many former supporters as an immoral, spent idea. Many condemned the political regime that the sanacja had created as authoritarian and cursed the regime’s promoters as fallen moral beacons who had failed to make good on the sanacja’s promises of national rebirth. The present study does not fundamentally overturn either this sensible periodization or characterization of sanacja phases. It does place the emphasis, however, on the continuity of the utopian or neoromanticist elements of the sanacja and on the willingness of people to keep imagining and reimagining how they might reach the imponderables and effect the wholesale rebirth of Polish society.

Things changed with the death of Piłsudski, in 1935. This was the moment that the actual sanacja regime lost its uniting force and inspiration. By this time, too, any claims that the sanacja represented higher morality and that it worked for the greater good could scarcely be made. Finally, by this time (the early to mid-1930s) pressing social and economic concerns eclipsed arguably intangible questions about moral health and national renaissance. At the moment of Piłsudski’s death, the sanacja camp had largely disintegrated (though its successors ruled to the outbreak of World War II), and it became impossible to imbue the sanacja with virtue and positive potential.⁵⁶

A great deal of scholarly attention has also been accorded the fact that a significant segment of the political left, most notably the Polish Socialists,

and the Communists, initially supported the military coup and saw in it the hope and potential for a real socialist revolution.⁵⁷ The figure of Piłsudski himself was instrumental in this.⁵⁸ There were a number of compelling reasons for the socialists to place their faith in Piłsudski, their old comrade from the prewar socialist movement. Piłsudski had the real support and confidence of a number of prominent socialist men and of a large part of the left-liberal progressive intelligentsia. Piłsudski, moreover, was a far better option than that represented by the nationalist camp. Furthermore, Piłsudski's language about the need for fundamental transformation and dramatic revolution, for a purge and cleansing, was easily absorbed into and accommodated by a socialist worldview. The contention of this study is that the language of the *sanacja* was so broad and open-ended as to make a daunting variety of interpretations possible.

And yet the reality was that the Piłsudski of the Second Republic was not a socialist; historians have often repeated Piłsudski's alleged statement that he had stepped off the socialist train at the stop marked independence.⁵⁹ The results of the coup, as Polish Socialists of the period would quickly see, hardly approximated a left-wing agenda. Shortly after the coup, Piłsudski issued a press interview in which he attempted to clarify his intentions and to dispel any thoughts that the coup d'état had been waged to effect fundamental changes to the status quo. The interview was published in Warsaw's *Morning Courier* on May 27, 1926. His would be "a revolution without revolutionary consequences," Piłsudski stated, and he cautiously but deliberately distanced himself from the left.⁶⁰ In the months following the coup, Piłsudski would build political support not on the left, as many had hoped he would. Rather, he reached out to the political and economic conservatives (not to be confused with National Democrats and nationalists generally) on the right.⁶¹ It became clear that the coup was intended to preserve and protect the status quo rather than overturn it.⁶²

The *sanacja*, as previous scholarship has emphasized, possessed no real program beyond the open-ended avowals of cleansing, reform, and strengthening the state.⁶³ My own treatment of the *sanacja* does not construct a political program for the regime nor does it attempt to bring narrative coherence to official *sanacja* policy decisions and programs. Instead, I argue that it was precisely in the post-May camp's lack of clear goals, purpose, and ideology that possibilities existed. This open-endedness meant that the *sanacja* could

successfully attract a variety of different groups—large and small, central and marginal—to its fold and incorporate many different tendencies. It meant, too, that opportunity existed to mold the sanacja idea in many imaginative ways. My interest is in the forms of these manipulations; it is in understanding why so many people reacted so strongly—either in support of or in opposition to the sanacja—and in why the idea of sanacja proved to be so compelling. As such, this project introduces a new way of understanding the period generally and the sanacja specifically. It builds on the many and very good studies that have understood the coup as an extraordinary political event. Instead of retracing the fortunes and failings of the political sanacja and of the Piłsudskiite camp as a government and regime, however, I begin from the premise that the sanacja must be understood, first and foremost, as a potential and as a tantalizing idea infused with neoromanticist and even utopian assumptions. I understand the sanacja not as a political force (in the narrow sense of *political*), but as a forum through which different actors in the young state could talk about moral disintegration and moral renewal, about nation and identity, about gender and politics. Independence, as Gombrowicz stated, had “awakened the riddle that was slumbering within us”;⁶⁴ the very idea of a sanacja encapsulated this process of awakening, while it also acted as a catalyst for even more pronounced reflection on what Poland had become and what it should be.