Primed for Violence

Published in English in 2016 and translated into Polish one year later,[1] Paul Brykczynski's study is an important contribution to the subject of Polish interwar politics and antisemitism. The author concentrates on the events which surrounded the election and assassination of the first president of the Second Polish Republic, Gabriel Narutowicz. It is not an attempt to answer the question "why", but to define "how" it was possible that a nationalistic and antisemitic discourse introduced to Polish interwar politics by the National Democrats led to that tragedy. However, Brykczynski does not stop at the assassination itself or the trial and the execution of Eligiusz Niewiadomski, who committed the murder. The author points at the wider political and social issues related to that event and the impact the murder had on interwar Poland as a whole.

The historical background of the events presented in the book is well known to every student of Polish history. In December 1922 the Polish National Assembly (consisting of both houses of the Parliament, Sejm and Senat) decided on who should be the first president of the Second Polish Republic. The process of election took place on 9 December and by the end of the day, the two remaining candidates were Count Maurycy Zamoyski, great landowner and Polish ambassador to Paris, and the relatively unknown Gabriel Narutowicz, a non-Jewish Polish engineer who had spent many years studying and working in Switzerland. Zamoyski was the candidate put forward by the right-wing National Democracy, while Narutowicz, "the accidental president" (p. 97) was never a favourite of the left-wing parties. His eventual election was the result of the nationalists' decision to support Zamoyski – a candidate who was unacceptable by any other political party. The result of the election was, therefore, not a wide support for Narutowicz, but rather the unwillingness of central and left-wing parties to vote for the National Democracy's candidate.

The retelling of these events constitutes only a small part of Brykczynski's book. The author is primarily interested in the political and social background of those days (which he refers to as "the December Events") as a way of helping us to "better understand not only the anatomy of constitutional crises but also, more controversially, the discursive transformation of Polish nationalism and the acute intensification of anti-Semitism in the interwar period" (p. 5). Since the book was written in English and was initially addressed to an English-speaking audience, it also consists of larger pieces of text explaining the nuanced character of Polish contemporary politics. It includes such themes as the division between the ideas of Poland presented by Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski (defined, rather accurately, as "different ways of imagining the imagined community", p. 7) and the development of antisemitism as one of the central elements of the National Democracy's political discourse. The latter subject is, as Brykczynski argues, crucial to understand the events of December 1922.
Late 1922 saw two types of election in Poland. A month before the aforementioned election of the first president of the Republic of Poland a parliamentary election took place across the country. Its results determined the shape of both houses of Polish parliament and, effectively, divided the power between the parties which were later to elect the president. By analysing pamphlets and newspaper articles published around the time of the parliamentary elections, Brykczyński relies on this "underutilized source" (p. 70) to stress the growing use of antisemitic rhetoric by the National Democracy. While the right-wing propaganda cannot be considered as the most subtle, it nevertheless appealed to people's emotions and, therefore, had a great impact not only on the voters. In its pamphlets, the National Democracy presented itself as the only truly national (i.e. Polish) political group. The argument went even further – every other party was stigmatised as either Jewish (this applied to both communists and socialists, not to mention the Block of National Minorities) or controlled by Jews (all other parties which refused to join the right-wing block, p. 74). Instead of opposing that antisemitic rhetoric, "the left was beginning to manipulate [the racist premises of the right] for its own purposes" (p. 73). For example the left ridiculed their opponents by pointing out that despite their own rhetoric, one of the right-wing candidates in the parliamentary election was Mr. Feintuch-Szarski, a rich Jewish banker from Cracow.

Between the parliamentary and the presidential elections, in the atmosphere of growing hatred and antisemitism, the National Democracy developed a new political idea. The "Doctrine of the Polish Majority amounted to the explicit exclusion of all people defined by the NDs as 'non-Polish' from any political role in the state" (p. 91). Effectively, when Gabriel Narutowicz was elected thanks to the votes of the Block of National Minorities (constituting 20% of the National Assembly), the right claimed he had no right to be the president, since he was not elected by the Polish majority. The events which followed, a series of press publications, mass protests and manifestations, "set the scene for the murder of the president" (p. 105). Inspired by the campaign of hatred, Eligiusz Niewiadomski decided to act.

The brief account of Niewiadomski's life, political views, his trial and eventual execution serves Brykczyński as a way of pointing at much more disturbing elements of post-1922 reality. Firstly, the assassination of Narutowicz (by many considered as political suicide committed by the right) did not put an end to the activities and popularity of the National Democracy. By distancing itself from the murder (confirmed by the later confession of Niewiadomski, who admitted he acted alone and without any connection to the right-wing parties), the right was able to save its face. Moreover, the subsequent trial and press debates which followed passed in silence over the issue of antisemitic rhetoric surrounding the election of Narutowicz. It appeared as the most significant issue related to the assassination, and – by some universal and unwritten consent – disappeared from the later debates.

Secondly, the very character of the assassination and the character of Niewiadomski was also slowly but steadily transformed on the pages of right-wing press. At first the right tried to distance itself from the murderer "and portray the latter as a mentally unbalanced renegade" (p. 106). Already the day after the murder, the right-wing press began "the process of rehabilitating the murderer, and turning him into a symbol of Polish resistance to the Jewish threat" (p. 111). Niewiadomski's trial, execution and funeral completed the process of transforming
him into a political martyr, who acted as the representative of the nation.

As the author concludes, the assassination of Narutowicz opened a completely new chapter of political discourse in interwar Poland. The silence with which the antisemitic campaign of the National Democracy was met by other parties, and the virtual acceptance of its "Doctrine of Polish Majority" by other parties, became a major victory of the right (p. 140). The fact that the left was using antisemitic rhetoric against the National Democrats was a sign that this brand of discourse was becoming dominant in the interwar politics (p. 152). While defending Jews was risky, using antisemitic rhetoric was not. The left accused the right of double standards by pointing out, for example, that one of their senators, Ludwik Hammerling, was of Jewish origin. Essentially, after the antisemitic actions which led to the murder of Gabriel Narutowicz, the Jews became a political liability. As a result, "the temptation to sacrifice the minorities in the service of political expediency was inherently embedded in the Piłsudskiite political calculus" (p. 155).

Brykczynski created a short (just over 200 pages long) and very concise book, which not only retells the story of December 1922 and the election of the first president of the Second Polish Republic. Much more important is the background of the event and the consequences it had for the future of Polish interwar politics. Although at times too one-sided (the majority of sources used by the author are right-wing publications), the book is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the history of interwar Poland.


Zitierweise: