

The Forgotten Marshal. Ferdinand Foch in the Eyes of a Polish Historian. Wiesław Śladkowski, *Ferdinand Foch. Marszałek trzech narodów*, Drukarnia 'Tekst' spółka jawna Emilia Zonik i Wspólnicy, Lublin 2018, pp. 231

The figure of Ferdinand Foch, regardless of the fact that he was, after all, a Marshal of Poland, has not been studied in the form of a monograph in our historiography¹. It is therefore a good thing that this task was undertaken by a historian who not only is an eminent expert on the history of France and the relations between Poland and France, but also an excellent biographer. Monographs on G. Clemenceau², M. and H. Gierszyński³, the history of Polish emigration in France⁴ or the French public opinion in the period of the First World War⁵ are just examples of great writing by Wiesław Śladkowski. There are definitely more examples, but the listed ones already guarantee high quality of the freshly published biography of Marshal Ferdinand Foch⁶. This book is worthy of a few comments, as it definitely deserves attention of a reader.

The book is slightly different in its narration from the publications on the First World War, which we were being accustomed to by Polish (and not only Polish) historiography in the recent twenty years. The author takes a look at the historical reality through the prism of those living at that time, and shuns from evaluations made from the perspective of decades. Meanwhile, these two looks are very different. Nowadays, the events from the years 1914–1918 are most often described as a failure of Europe and the end of an era of its domination in global politics. This is how it was, without a doubt. Unleashed nationalism, the fall of the idea of solidarity

¹ Meanwhile, in French historiography itself there are several dozens of books on F. Foch, several authors also made their attempts at this figure in the Anglo-Saxon world.

² W. Śladkowski, *Ojciec zwycięstwa – Georges Clemenceau*, Lublin 1998.

³ Idem, *Wysepka polska we Francji. U Marii i Henryka Gierszyńskich w Ouarville 1878–1930*, Lublin 2005.

⁴ Idem, *Emigracja polska we Francji 1871–1918*, Lublin 1980.

⁵ Idem, *Opinia publiczna we Francji wobec sprawy polskiej w latach 1914–1918*, Wrocław 1976.

⁶ Idem, *Ferdinand Foch. Marszałek trzech narodów*, Lublin 2018.

and militarism are alternating aspects of the First World War emphasised in modern historiography⁷. Meanwhile, while not negating these observations, W. Śladkowski introduces the reader to an atmosphere and a way of looking at the reality of the generation of his protagonist. The historian adopts a goal to not so much justify, but rather understand the reasons for which the French (and not only them) sacrificed hundreds of thousands of human beings in the front trenches. Without approval for militarism, he takes note of somewhat patriotic effort of the French, personified by Ferdinand Foch. In the course of analysis of his military career he indicates the moments which shaped not only the marshal, but an entire generation of the French. Therefore, the pages of this monograph reveal the tone of narration – let us call it heroic-valiant, and, to a lesser extent, it is an analysis of war as a tragedy for the nations participating in it.

Such a take on the subject can, after all, raise certain controversies, or maybe even accusations of practicing historiography which is somewhat archaic, marked by the narration of the previous age. However, anyone who becomes well familiar with the discussed work will immediately abandon this opinion.

The structure of this work is chronological and factual, that is almost natural for biographies, which most often present the protagonist through the prism of his or her subsequent events, often enclosed as somewhat separate wholes. The presented monograph follows this pattern, but it should be emphasised at this point that this is most of all a biography of an eminent military man, which is, after all, specified by its title. The first of nine chapters is dedicated to the events of the First World War. These chapters determine the value of the entire work and they form its essential part.

The factual sphere of this work constitutes a major value in this part of the work. The author uses military sources, gives very detailed descriptions of war events, almost with the precision of a staff officer. In this respect the work can easily compete with other publications, focusing on the backstage of military operations of the First World War. Certainly, this is not a monograph on this matter, such as the works of J. Pajewski⁸ or M. Zgórnjak⁹. Nevertheless, the detailed nature of the discussed issues is sometimes surprising and it can be assumed that this monograph will become a useful compendium of knowledge on the war operations in the

⁷ Among the numerous publications on this matter in line with this trend the works that should be listed include: A. Chwalba, *Samobójstwo Europy. Wielka Wojna 1914–1918*, Kraków 2014, as well as the ones by foreign authors: I. Kershaw, *Do piekła i z powrotem. Europa 1914–1949*, Kraków 2016.

⁸ J. Pajewski, *Pierwsza wojna światowa 1914–1918*, Warszawa 2004.

⁹ M. Zgórnjak, *1914–1918. Studia i szkice z dziejów I wojny światowej*, Kraków 1987.

Western Front in the years 1914–1918. This is especially probable since, regardless of the mentioned granularity, narration does not get blurred in the rush of information. This rare ability to reconcile the need to list the facts with the maintenance of continuity of interesting narration became a distinguishing mark of W. Śladkowski and it is not different in this case. Anyway, nobody who read the works of this historian has to be convinced that he is simultaneously a great writer, who can simply engage a reader emotionally, and at the same time remain a precise reproducer of historical reality. It should, however, be emphasised strongly in the context of the discussed book, since all these elements, so very characteristic to the writing of W. Śladkowski, make a really strong appearance in its pages.

Also significant from the point of view of the entire monograph as a biography are its first two chapters, which could appear to be less important. This is because they are dedicated to the years of youth of the protagonist, and the Author does a great job at introducing us to the atmosphere of France at the turn of the 19th century through the prism of history of a single man. This is a very characteristic narration, which allows the reader to understand the French national interest better and to a large extent clarifies the attitude of the army and its command in the time of the Great War, so very different from the one in 1940. One could even risk a statement that a reader is in these parts subjected to a quick course on the history of France from 1871 to 1914, without even noticing.

On the other hand, the issues raised by the Author in the final parts of the monograph go beyond the caesura of 1918. However, they constitute a great introduction to understanding of mutual English-French relations in the context of Polish policy practised by both countries after the war. Ferdinand Foch, Marshal of France, Great Britain and Poland was an ideal figure that could be used to exemplify these relations. On one hand he was definitely a doubtless icon of joint military effort of eastern countries. Since the Russian revolutions France has been declaring openly on the side of Polish independence aspirations, Marshal Foch was in line with this trend of pro-Polish sympathies expressed upon Seine, therefore his role in the defining of the Polish issue as the main designer of military victory could have been substantial. On the other hand, as emphasised by the Author, it was the politicians in Versailles, not the military people, who determined the fate of Europe. The great merits of the Marshal in the military field did not necessarily have to translate to the decisions made on the Polish matter in Paris, and they did not. In addition, the difficult French-English relations, in particular concerning the issue of the future and role of Germany, which in general also affected the Polish matters, put the protagonist in a very uncomfortable position. As we read in the

work, Foch himself sometimes treated the Polonophilia attributed to him with caution. It even seems that the military man being honoured with the dignity of Polish Marshal was more aimed at emphasising the political hopes set by the designers of the reborn Polish Republic, than resulted from the real merits of Foch with regard to the idea of Polish independence. This aspect is analysed in detail by the Author of the monograph in its final chapter titled 'Foch a Polska'.

Apart from the mentioned advantage of this part of work, its certain flaw can be indicated at this point. The Author describes a visit of Ferdinand Foch in Poland, at times indicating even the not-very fortunate, at times inappropriate circumstances (cool relationship with Piłsudski or the Frenchman being honoured with the dignity of a Marshal at some basically unknown train station instead of at the capital). Although the information on this subject drawn from press sources is presented fairly well by the Author with interesting comments, it seems that the title of this part of the monograph suggests a slightly more extensive field of interest than the visit of Foch in Poland itself. Of course, this was the most convenient opportunity to emphasise the attitude of the Marshal to Polish matters, however, having read this part of work, a reader can have a sense that it is a sort of a continuation of the previous style of narration, dedicated rather to analysis of particular events (which for the parts focused on military operations is by all means justified), than to a synthesis of a more general issue (which is foretold by the title of this chapter).

The objectivity with which the Author approaches his protagonist is worth emphasising. It is not that clear at all in the case of biographies. Authors have a tendency to form an emotional relationship with the described figure, which is after all a totally natural tendency in a humanist. The discussed book, on the other hand, shows a high degree of distance of the Author. There is no doubt that the figure of F. Foch evokes sympathy and is presented in a very positive light, but this has not prevented W. Śladkowski from indicating its weaknesses, mistakes and inaccurate decisions. The failure of trench war, inadequate measures applied by the Marshal in order to change the image of war, a kind of theorising on the strategy, which was not in line with the reality of the front, and other Foch's weaknesses are no such exceptions on the pages of the discussed monograph. Its Author tries in turn to cast light upon them and interpret them in an appropriate way. As a result, we receive a multifaceted image of a man who faced one of the greatest challenges of his age, which also must have revealed his weaknesses.

This objectivity of the historian is after all visible in every other plane raised by the Author in his work. The difficult relations between the Church

and the State in the period of the Third Republic, the slightly fossilised social structure, in which Foch came to grow up and develop his career, the unjust relations in the army or the problems on the line between France and Britain – all this (and many other threads) is present in the book and interpreted matter-of-factly, with as long distance from the subject of study as possible. As a result, the reader receives a certain panorama of the age. This is certainly not an image to the extent of a volume on the history of France on this period by J. Chastenet¹⁰, but an outline of the Third Republic for the purposes of understanding its participation in the war received by a reader is by all means accurate.

It should also be mentioned that the monograph was published on the 100th anniversary of the regaining of independence by Poland. This is no coincidence. Engagement, patriotism and devotion of a generation of Poles at the turn of the centuries with regard to the great work that was the revival of the Independent Poland was emphasised numerous times during the recent celebrations of this major anniversary. And rightly so. However, we should not forget that the reconstruction of the Polish Republic would not have been possible without a major support from France. This support was multi-dimensional: political, economical and military. This third dimension, regardless of its own, i.e. French interests, turned out to be highly valuable to Poland. The history of the Blue Army, which constituted the core of the reborn forces of the Polish Republic, resolutions of the armistice of Trier, ending the Greater Poland Uprising, and, finally, the slightly more advantageous resolutions to the Poles in Silesia in comparison to the results of plebiscites and uprisings are not just our achievements, but also result of the support from France, and Foch in particular. It seems that reminding the facts, as well as this peculiar atmosphere grouping Poles around France is nowadays particularly justified, as this sheet in the modern historical memory seems to be somewhat faded.

At the end of these short comments one should note the editorial diligence of the publication. The book is well-prepared in this respect as well. The credit for this probably goes to the entire publishing team, not just to the listed editors. In the age of common digitisation and abandonment of the traditional editorial school it is not that clear and one should be happy that the readers receive such reliably developed and published book¹¹.

¹⁰ J. Chastenet, *Histoire de la Troisième République. Jours inquiets et jours sanglants, 1906–1918*, Paris 1957.

¹¹ It should be noted that this is yet another such successful edition of the works of W. Śladkowski published due to the endeavours of the same editor. Cf. W. Śladkowski, *Szkice polsko-francuskie XIX–XX wiek*, Lublin 2015.

It should definitely become a part of a library of anyone interested in the history of France, but also in the relations between Poland and France.

Over 100 years have passed from the end of the First World War. This conflict still invokes major interest, not only in historians, but also in wider circles of the societies of the countries which participated in it. Their historical memory is different, as well as the evaluations and interpretations, regardless of the usually accordant ascertainment that this event was a tragedy to Europe. In this situation it is highly important to fill in the gaps in historiography of that period, which, regardless of the passing years, allows to restore the historical reality and draw some conclusions from it for the future with increasing accuracy. The discussed book by W. Śladkowski is not only a supplementation to our factual knowledge, but perhaps most of all an interesting and through-and-through French interpretation perspective on the events in the years 1914–1918 shown through a prism of the history of one of the most significant participants of those events, the Marshal of three nations – Ferdinand Foch.

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