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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ HISTORY

Unvanquished: Joseph Pilsudski, Resurrected Poland and The Struggle For Eastern Europe

Peter Hetherington
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Unvanquished is a monumental work of stunning detail and impressive depth. In it, Peter Hetherington chronicles the life of Marshal Joseph Pilsudski, the soldier who almost single-handedly resurrected Poland from the ashes of the Great War in 1919 and then led its armies to throw back the Bolshevik hordes of Soviet Russia.

Hetherington admits that there are many similar works on Pilsudski, but, in his estimation, none quite capture the backstory of both the man and the country of which he writes. The author is determined to correct that failing by bringing together in one massive volume the history of Poland and the true story of the man who briefly saved it between the world wars.

The book opens with a wonderful anecdotal episode of Pilsudski escaping from a Tsarist prison by feigning madness. This is one of a number of entertaining stories from the hero's life to which Hetherington treats the reader. Together, these chapters form about three hundred pages of absolutely terrific reading.

Unfortunately the *Unvanquished* is seven hundred pages long—and the other four hundred pages are as thick as a Polish country road in a spring thaw. Half of this unwieldy content comes right after the first chapter about Pilsudski's escape from prison, bringing the narrative to a sudden halt. For the next two hundred pages, Hetherington gives us a primer on the history of Poland. While it is all well written and researched, it would have been better presented in summary and then set aside in a lengthy appendix.

Eventually, Hetherington brings us back to Pilsudski and continues with an extensive section on his formative years. Some of this information is interesting and informative, but much of it is dizzying and confusing. The staccato introduction of people, political parties, and contentious relationships is at times numbing.

Despite the leaden interludes, Hetherington does shine when he writes of strife and struggle. After Poland rises from the pages of the Versailles Treaty, it is immediately set upon by Lenin and Trotsky, who seek to bring their politics to the West. Pilsudski is the Napoleonic-caliber soldier who leads a grievously outnumbered Polish Army to victory. Hetherington covers this episode brilliantly, and in a manner worthy of the finest military historians.

Unvanquished is a must-read for anyone interested in this fascinating, yet flawed character and the tumultuous times in which he lived. It is also a great resource for students of Polish history, especially those focused on the period of revolution and resurrection that was Poland from 1867-1935. Those seeking a dynamic narrative on the controversial hero will find much of what they want here, but they may have to skim some of the book so as not to become lost.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (September 14, 2011)

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