



Introduction

A woman in protective gear resolutely strides towards a tall wooden cross, carrying a chainsaw. She lowers her face shield and starts the chainsaw's motor. The metal teeth meet the wood, spitting an arc of sawdust into the air. Within a few minutes, the vertical beam has been cut in half and the cross tumbles to the ground. Behind it, a surface covered with electric bulbs suddenly lights up, forming the shape of the Polish national emblem – a crowned eagle. This scene is the epilogue of *Klątwa* (*The Curse*) by Oliver Frljić, a play that premiered in 2017 in Warsaw and that one critic pronounced “the most iconoclastic and blasphemous performance of the century.”¹

Frljić's play, which ruthlessly denounces the hegemony of the Catholic Church in Poland and tests the boundaries of artistic freedom in a country where the principles of liberal democracy are in question, provoked a harsh response from conservative politicians and state-owned media, who branded it “an attack on Poland.”² While right-wing activists and religious groups protested against the play in front of the theater, the Polish Bishops' Conference called for expiatory prayers, municipal authorities attempted to ban performances in state-owned theaters, and the state attorney placed the production under investigation for offending religious feeling and inciting violence.³

¹ Aneta Kyzioł, “Skąd to święte oburzenie ‘Klątwą’ w Teatrze Powszechnym? Polska klątwa,” *Polityka*, February 22, 2017, www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/1695242,2,skad-to-swiete-oburzenie-klatwa-w-teatrze-powszechnym.read (accessed December 6, 2017).

² “Wulgarny i obsceniczny spektakl. Zbiórka na zabójstwo Kaczyńskiego pod politycznym patronatem,” TVP INFO, February 21, 2017, www.tvp.info/29162149/zbiorka-na-zabojstwo-kaczynskiego-pod-politycznym-patronatem (accessed December 6, 2017); Natalia Staszczak-Prüfer, “Rosenkranz ins Gesicht,” *nachtkritik.de*, www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13772:theaterbrief-aus-polen-15-klatwa-fluch-vonoliver-frljic-in-warschau-analyse-eines-hochpolitischen-theaterskandals&catid=416&Itemid=100055 (accessed December 6, 2017).

³ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, “Rzecznik Episkopatu: Spektakl ‘Klątwa’ ma znamiona bluźnierstwa,” February 21, 2017, <http://episkopat.pl/rzecznik-episkopatu-spektakl-klatwa-ma-znamiona-bluznierstwa> (accessed December 6, 2017); “Warszawska Platforma broni ‘Klątwy,’” *Nasz Dziennik*, March 16, 2017, <http://naszdzienik.pl/polska-kraj/178305,warszawska-platforma-broni-klatwy.html> (accessed December 6, 2017); “Nie chcą ‘Klątwy’ w Warszawie. Przepychanki przed Teatrem Powszechnym,” *Do Rzeczy*, May 28, 2017, <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/30798/Nie-chca-Klatwy-w->

Facing threats and continuing the performance staged under police protection, Frljić made an open call to the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, to take a stance on the “clear violation of human rights and [...] attack on freedom of speech” occurring in Poland.⁴

Pickets and skirmishes in front of the theater accompanied the performance throughout the year, as *Kłątwa* continued to play to sold-out audiences. The heated controversy sparked by Frljić’s work was not the first of its kind in Poland, but it revealed with particular poignancy a fundamental fissure in Polish society.⁵ *The Curse* threw into relief the contradiction between two constitutive elements of the Polish national narrative: the will to freedom and self-determination and the centrality accorded to the Catholic faith and its symbols and rituals. The clash of the independent state (symbolized by the crowned eagle) and the all-powerful Church (the cross) depicted in the play’s closing scene represented *the* major conflict over which values should define Polishness. Felling the cross on stage and equipping his actors with machine guns assembled from wooden and iron crucifixes, Frljić touched a nerve not only because of the play’s anticlerical message, but also because the symbols he used had long ago begun to represent the nation itself.

Why the Cross?

No other symbol is as omnipresent in Poland as the cross. It features prominently in public spaces and state institutions; it is anchored in the country’s visual history, inspires protest culture, and dominates the natural landscape itself. No other symbol is as multilayered and contradictory either: the cross recalls Poland’s historic struggles for independence and anti-Communist dissent, but it also encapsulates the country’s current position in Europe as a bulwark of Christianity and a champion of conservative values. It is both

[Warszawie-Przepychanki-przed-Teatrem-Powszechnym.html](http://www.warszawie-przepychanki-przed-Teatrem-Powszechnym.html) (accessed December 6, 2017); “Prokuratura: ws. spektaklu ‘Kłątwa’ – przesłuchania świadków,” *Gazeta Prawna*, May 15, 2017, <http://kultura.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1042772,prokuratura-spektakl-klatwa-przesluchania-swiadkow.html> (accessed December 6, 2017).

⁴ Oliver Frljić, “Campaign against ‘Curse’ Is a Disgrace [Letter to Jean-Claude Juncker],” *Krytyka Polityczna & European Alternatives*, March 1, 2017, <http://politicalcritique.org/world/eu/2017/oliver-frljic-jean-claude-juncker> (accessed December 7, 2017). See also Frljić’s video statement hosted by Teatr Powszechny at www.powszechny.com/aktualnosci/wypowiedz-olivera-frljicia-dot-spektaku-klatwa.html (accessed December 7, 2017).

⁵ See the controversy over another play, *Golgota Picnic* (*Golgotha Picnic*) by Rodrigo García in 2014: Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Iwona Kurz (eds.), *Piknik Golgota Polska: Sztuka, religia, demokracja* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2015). Another pertinent example is the trial of the artist Dorota Nieznalska, see Magda Romańska, “The Anatomy of Blasphemy: Passion and the Trial of Dorota Nieznalska,” *TDR* 51, 2 (2007): 176–181.

a national symbol – defining the boundaries of Polishness in opposition to a changing constellation of the country's Others, be it Russians, Jews, or Muslim refugees – and a key object of contestation in the creative arts and political culture. Yet, despite the centrality of the symbol in Polish culture, political history, and social life, a cultural history of the cross in Poland has not yet been written.

Cross Purposes is a cultural history of the symbol of the cross in modern politics that, focusing on the case of Poland, traces the symbol's political genealogy and the ways different secular projects appropriated it for their own ends. Doing that, it debunks the popular misconceptions that the symbol's semantic content is set in stone or that, in the political realm, the cross is the symbol of conservative values par excellence. Both in Poland's current public discourse and in much of the critical writing, the cross emerges as a "natural"⁶ and "obvious"⁷ symbol of Polish "national traditions,"⁸ "values that Poles hold dear,"⁹ "national memory,"¹⁰ and "Polish identity."¹¹ In this kind of narrative, all these categories appear to be clearly defined, invariable, uncontested, and perennial. The supposedly shared principles, legacies, and narratives that the symbol embodies are invariably positively valued and presented as requiring to be protected, defended, and preserved.¹² It is, therefore, the physical presence of the cross in the public arena that becomes a visible guarantor of their continuity. From this point of view, the cross appears as the embodiment and material guardian of the old order, the ultimate shorthand for "the nation" that indexes the past, encodes stability, and withstands change.

In reality, the cross has never meant just one thing. Its meaning has changed from epoch to epoch; it has been contested and is contingent on partisan

⁶ Michał Łuczewski, "Katastrofa, Mesjasz, Krzyż," in *Katastrofa: Bilans dwóch lat*, edited by Jan Filip Staniłko (Warsaw: Instytut Sobieskiego, 2012), 100.

⁷ Tomasz Żukowski, "Długa wędrówka przez mgłę: Poglądy Polaków na katastrofę smoleńską," in *Katastrofa: Bilans dwóch lat*, edited by Jan Filip Staniłko (Warsaw: Instytut Sobieskiego, 2012), 79.

⁸ Józef Darski, "Krzyż: Symbol religijny czy narodowy," *Gazeta Polska*, August 27, 2010, www.salon24.pl/u/autorzygazetypolskiej/222719,krzyz-symbol-religijny-czy-narodowy (accessed April 10, 2020).

⁹ "Oświadczenie Komitetu Politycznego PiS," August 2, 2010, cited in Andrzej Draguła, "Rzecz o narodowości krzyża," *Więź* 625 (2010): 58.

¹⁰ Joanna Burzyńska in Ewa Stankiewicz (dir.), *Krzyż*, Film Open Group, 2011, available at <https://gloria.tv/post/tUqAPTeQLFUe6dGtinqTnwnAR> (accessed June 4, 2020), at 22:00.

¹¹ See two cross defenders cited in Stankiewicz (dir.), *Krzyż*, at 43:20 and 38:20.

¹² See, for example, Andrzej Nowak, "Wolność krzyżami się mierzy," in *Krzyż Polski*, edited by Adam Bujak and Leszek Sosnowski (Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2011), 10–83; Bishop Edward Frankowski cited in Katarzyna Wiśniewska, "Wojny o krzyż nie będzie," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 22, 2010, 2; Tadeusz Rydzik in an interview with Małgorzata Rutkowska, "Nowa lewica walczy z krzyżem," *Nasz Dziennik*, July 17–18, 2010, 3.

interests. In different periods, the cross has even connoted diametrically opposed ideas. While at the turn of the twentieth century Polish socialists used it to communicate ideals of social justice, to their opponents, the National Democrats, the cross denoted the right-wing worldview and served as a rallying sign against the Communist “heresy.”¹³ While in the *Solidarność* era it served as “a sign of diversity against an imposed monolithic worldview,” after the fall of Communism it became to many Poles a symbol of “right-wing oppression within the nation.”¹⁴ And if the symbol’s history demonstrates any continuity, it is in the fact that its tremendous emotional impact has always provided the ultimate resource for those demanding radical political change or attempting to legitimize a new and still vulnerable political system. Indeed, the reconstruction of the symbol’s historical trajectory reveals a paradox that lies at the heart of its political success: the cross gained its political appeal as a tool to legitimize new and risky political projects. Rather than being a synecdoche of the old order, for the last century and a half, the cross came to embody political projects that were radical, daring, emancipatory, or outright revolutionary. Tracing the history of the cross as a symbol of transformation allows us to see not only how society mobilizes support for new and risky political undertakings, but also how it articulates new demands and reconfigures its boundaries vis-à-vis the Others.

Looking at modern Polish history through the prism of the multiple iterations of this crucial symbol helps us challenge the myth of the immutable national canon. Such a microperspective reveals paradoxes, contradictions, and creative appropriations under the surface of the ostensibly linear narrative of national endurance and the preservation of the nation’s values. The story of the cross discloses how even the most iconic symbols of what are routinely seen as the unchanging bedrock values of “the Polish nation” have undergone multiple, and sometimes mutually contradictory, symbolic mobilizations, served disparate agendas, and demarcated the core of the national community each time anew. Focusing on the symbol of the cross in the *longue durée*, this book also illuminates the way Poles have used religious symbols to rally their ranks, but also to disempower, demonize, and exclude their adversaries. By doing that, the book foregrounds the costs of grand narratives of national unity, including the stigmatization and silencing of the minorities, but also symbolic violence against those cast out of the national collective.

To be sure, Poland is not unique in the way its political culture is intensely interconnected with religion. The political appeal of the cross has been a global phenomenon, too. Yet, despite its long history of political deployment not just

¹³ Andrzej Chwalba, *Sacrum i rewolucja* (Kraków: Universitas, 1992), 232–81.

¹⁴ Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 179, 212.

in Poland, but across the world, including in the colonization of the Americas, the Nazi rise to power, and the recent storming of Capitol Hill, the cross has never been systematically studied *as a political symbol* in its capacity to mobilize for action and solidify power structures, much less across different historical epochs.

In other regions of the world where Catholicism has a traditionally prominent position, such as Latin America, the symbol of the cross has also been repetitively used for political mobilization.¹⁵ Peronism in Argentina employed religious imagery to craft a “civil religion” that was detached from the Catholic Church, but deployed as an ideology to unite the nation behind its leader.¹⁶ Repressive military regimes in countries like Paraguay, El Salvador, Brazil, and Chile made extensive use of Christian symbols as they attempted to legitimize themselves as defending “Western Christian civilization.”¹⁷ And radical proponents of Liberation Theology, who preached the necessity of politically organized combat for social justice, envisioned the cross as “a symbol of challenge and struggle” in the name of the poor and the oppressed.¹⁸

Also in Western Europe, considered the most secularized region of the world, the symbol of the cross has accompanied a number of disparate political enterprises, particularly in Catholic countries, like Spain, Italy, and Ireland.¹⁹ Catholic imagery was used, for example, to mobilize support for Italy’s colonial ambitions in Libya, and, later, served as a reference point for the anti-democratic Italian Nationalists and proto-fascists.²⁰ Catholic symbols were also salient in the so-called Northern Ireland Troubles, where the involvement of the Catholic Church in the conflict caused a lot of controversy.²¹ In the Spanish Second Republic, religious symbols and rituals became a bone of contention in the confrontation between the republican government, seeking to confine religion to the private sphere, and its opponents, who protested the

¹⁵ Stephen J. C. Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile: The Politics of Transnational Catholicism, 1920–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143, 218.

¹⁶ Daniel H. Levine, *Religion and Politics in Latin America: The Catholic Church in Venezuela and Colombia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 50; Austen Ivereigh, *Catholicism and Politics in Argentina 1810–1960* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 158–160.

¹⁷ Levine, *Religion and Politics in Latin America*, 50.

¹⁸ Bastiaan Wielenga “Liberation Theology in Asia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, edited by Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 56.

¹⁹ Mar Grier, Julia Martínez-Ariño, and Anna Clot-Garrell, “Banal Catholicism, Morality Policies and the Politics of Belonging in Spain” *Religions* 12, 293 (2021): 1–12, here 2.

²⁰ Richard A. Webster, *The Cross and the Fasces: Christian Democracy and Fascism in Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), 28–30, 31–34.

²¹ Margaret M. Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1968–1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 32–33, 108–111.

secularization measures and framed the predicament of Spanish Catholics as that of martyrs.²² The ensuing Franco regime, with its “liturgical triumphalism,” reaffirmed the central role of the Catholic imaginary in the Spanish public sphere, as Catholicism became the “ideological pillar” of the regime.²³

Catholic symbols remained ubiquitous and “invisible” in the public spaces even after the demise of Italian fascism and the Franco regime, turning into markers of “banal Catholicism.”²⁴ They become salient only if challenged by pro-secularist activists or court rulings. Over the last three decades, major controversies around the presence of crucifixes in public institutions have taken place in Italy, Spain, and Germany, for example.²⁵ The political engagements with the symbol of the cross continue, however, as right-wing populists across Europe (and beyond) have begun to brandish Christian religious symbols as markers of “a civilizational identity” pitched in opposition to Islam.²⁶ Since the refugee crisis of 2015, the symbol of the cross has been increasingly instrumentalized in anti-immigrant discourse across Europe, aimed in particular against Muslim refugees. The German party Alternative für Deutschland, for example, used the image of a crucifix on their 2018 election posters, one of which read “Islam does not belong in Bavaria.”²⁷ Meanwhile, Matteo Salvini, Italy’s interior minister (2018–2019) and leader of the Lega Nord party, caused a nationwide controversy with his 2019 tweet: “If you’ve got a problem with the crucifix in public buildings, go back where you came from.”²⁸ Such instrumentalization of religious symbols by right-wing populists is not limited to regions with a predominantly Catholic population.²⁹ And the political context in which the symbol of the cross is being used extends beyond the core populist issues of the defense of conservative values, or immigration.

²² Mary Vincent, *Catholicism in the Second Spanish Republic: Religion and Politics in Salamanca 1930–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 185–190.

²³ *Ibid.*, 259; Eugenia Relaño Pastor, “Spanish Catholic Church in Franco Regime: A Marriage of Convenience,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 20, 2 (2007): 275–287, here 286.

²⁴ Grier et al., “Banal Catholicism.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*; John Pollard, *Catholicism in Modern Italy: Religion, Society and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 168; Dieter Grimm, Oliver Lepsius, Christian Waldhoff, and Matthias Roßbach, *Dieter Grimm: Advocate of the Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 95–104.

²⁶ Rogers Brubaker “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Movement in Comparative Perspective” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, 8 (2017): 1191–1226, here 1193–1194.

²⁷ Alternative für Deutschland Landesverband Bayern, “Dafür steht die AfD!,” www.afdbayern.de/themenplakate (accessed June 29, 2020).

²⁸ Matteo Salvini, <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1185580927679975424> (accessed June 29, 2020). Lega Nord also captured public attention in 2011 when the party proposed a new law obliging public institutions in Lombardy – including schools, universities, and public administration buildings – to display crucifixes.

²⁹ For more examples, see Florian Höhne and Torsten Meireis, *Religion and Neo-nationalism in Europe* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, the crucifix became part of the protest paraphernalia of the anti-vaccine movement, too.³⁰

Poland, therefore, does not stand alone in having developed cultural scripts that employ religious symbols as shorthand for political agendas. And the specifically Polish brand of Catholicism, which frames the Polish nation as a unique recipient of divine patronage, is, likewise, not as singular as it might seem from the Polish perspective.³¹ Yet, against the wider canvas of different global employments of the symbol of the cross, Poland still provides a perfect case to investigate the permutations of religious symbols in the political realm. Focusing on Poland – today a nearly homogeneously Catholic country, where the long history of foreign rule conditioned the symbol's incorporation into the national iconography, enables us not only to trace the role of religious symbolism in a modern nation state, but also to study its shifting significance under dynamically changing political conditions. Given that the semantic content of any symbol can only be understood in a long chronology, Poland, where the symbol of the cross changed hands, serving a number of sometimes diametrically opposed political agendas, provides a rich field of analysis. Once a multiethnic regional power that fell into the orbit of the Russian Empire, the Habsburg Empire, and Prussia, losing its sovereignty for more than a century, Poland re-emerged on Europe's political map in the twentieth century, only to meet a series of further challenges, including Nazi and Soviet occupation, genocide, major border shifts, mass migration, and decades of Soviet control. Looking at the politicization of religion in a territory marked by foreign occupations, mass-scale liberation movements, forced migrations, and oppressive authoritarian regimes, the analysis of the Polish case also offers insights into the historical experience of a European region that disrupts the neat binary of the so-called Global North and Global South.

Cross Purposes aims to fill a considerable historiographical lacuna by critically tracing the iterations of a single but highly contentious political symbol – one of the most powerful and polarizing images in Poland's modern political life. While Polish nationalism is far from being an understudied field,³² the intersection of nationalism and religion remains an area where

³⁰ Julius Geiler and Alexander Fröhlich, “‘Querdenker’ rufen zu Corona-Demo an deutsch-polnischer Grenze auf,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, November 25, 2020, www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/nach-protesten-in-berlin-und-leipzig-querdenker-rufen-zu-corona-demo-an-deutsch-polnischer-grenze-auf/26655406.html (accessed December 2, 2021).

³¹ For a comparative analysis of the political instrumentalization of Catholicism in seventeenth-century Poland–Lithuania, France, and Bavaria, see Damien Tricoire, *Mit Gott rechnen: Katholische Reform und politisches Kalkül in Frankreich, Bayern und Polen-Litauen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 89–94.

³² Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1596–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Rafał Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The*

critical research is still needed. A number of authors have investigated the entanglement between Polish nationalism and Catholicism, examining how Romantic nationalism fed on the Christian motifs of crucifixion, resurrection, and salvation, generating the philosophy of Polish Messianism;³³ exploring how the idea of the nation became central to the Polish Catholic Church and led to the emergence of the concept of *Polak-katolik*;³⁴ or tracing the role of the Catholic Church in Polish politics and the negotiation of “national values.”³⁵ But, while the populist mobilization of the “realm of symbolic imagination”³⁶ and the emergence of a new “mnemonic language of

Patriots (London: Routledge, 2010); Michael Fleming, *Communism, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Poland 1944–1950* (London: Routledge, 2012); Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

- ³³ Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Adam Zamoyski, *Holy Madness: Romantics, Patriots, and Revolutionaries 1776–1871* (New York: Viking, 2000); Maria Janion, *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2000); Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Paulina Małochleb, *Przepisywanie historii* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2014).
- ³⁴ Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity and Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Stanisław Obirek, *Polak katolik?* (Stare Groszki: Wydawnictwo CiS, 2015); Krzysztof Kosela, *Polak i katolik: Splątana tożsamość* (Warsaw: IFIS PAN, 2003).
- ³⁵ For example, Danuta Waniek, *Orzeł i krucyfiks: Eseje o podziałach politycznych w Polsce* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2011); Andrzej Micewski, *Kościół–państwo 1945–1989* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1994); Mieczysław Ryba, *Studia nad polityką polską XX wieku: Relacje państwo–Kościół* (Lublin: Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, 2016); Agata Chelstowska, Małgorzata Druciarek, Jacek Kucharczyk, and Aleksandra Niżyńska, *Relacje państwo–Kościół w III RP* (Warsaw: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2013); Paweł Łubiński, *Naród w służbie Kościoła, Kościół w służbie narodu: Więzy, relacje i zależności w XX i XXI wieku* (Lublin: Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, 2017); Robert E. Alvis, *White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). A few studies have also considered the Polish case against the wider canvas of Eastern European nationalisms: Bruce R. Berglund and Brian Porter-Szűcs (eds.), *Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010); Robert E. Alvis, *Religion and the Rise of Nationalism: A Profile of an East-Central European City* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005); Martin Schulze Wessel (ed.), *Nationalisierung der Religion und Sakralisierung der Nation im östlichen Europa* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006); Albert S. Kotowski, “Polen in Deutschland: Religiöse Symbolik als Mittel der nationalen Selbstbehauptung,” in *Nation und Religion in Europa: Mehrkonfessionelle Gesellschaften im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, edited by Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Dieter Langewiesche (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2004), 253–280.
- ³⁶ Joanna Niżyńska, “The Politics of Mourning and the Crisis of Poland’s Symbolic Language after April 10,” in *East European Politics and Societies* 24, 4 (2010): 467–479, here 470. On the use of religious symbols by right-wing populists in Poland, see also

politics³⁷ in Poland have been noted in the existing scholarship, a more systematic study of the symbols used to maintain cleavages and sustain partisan identities is still missing.

What is more, a large part of Poland-based scholarship on the intersection of nationalism and Catholicism lacks the necessary critical distance, often celebrating rather than questioning Poland's "nationalized Catholicism."³⁸ Insofar as the impact of religious symbols in the Polish public domain is concerned, it is their religious meaning and their status as sacred art objects that has attracted most of the attention of historians and ethnographers.³⁹ Only a few

Krzysztof Jaskułowski, "Polityka krzyża," in *Wspólnota symboliczna: W stronę antropologii nacjonalizmu* (Gdańsk: Katedra, 2012); Ben Stanley, "Defenders of the Cross: Populist Politics and Religion in Post-Communist Poland," in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, edited by Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (London: Hurst, 2016), 109–128; Zbigniew Mikolejko, *Między zbawieniem a Smoleńskiem: Studia i szkice o katolicyzmie polskim ostatnich lat* (Warsaw: IFIS PAN, 2017); Ireneusz Krzemiński, "Narodowo-katolicka mowa o Polsce," *Czas Kultury* 4 (2017): 50–64.

³⁷ Kate Korycki, "Memory, Party Politics, and Post-transition Space: The Case of Poland," in *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 31, 3 (2017): 518–544, here 535.

³⁸ Bogumił Grott, *Różne oblicza nacjonalizmów: Polityka, religia, etos* (Kraków: NOMOS, 2010); Bogumił Grott, *Nacjonalizm Chrześcijański* (Kraków: Ostoja, 1996); Maciej Strutyński, *Religia i naród: Inspiracje katolickie w myśli ruchu narodowego w Polsce współczesnej (1989–2001)* (Kraków: NOMOS, 2006); Rafał Łętocha (ed.), *Religia, polityka, naród: Studia nad współczesną myślą polityczną* (Kraków: NOMOS, 2010); Krzysztof Ożóg, *Kościół na straży polskiej wolności*, vol. 1: *Korona i krzyż* (Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2012); Robert Kościelny, *Kościół na straży polskiej wolności*, vol. 2: *Przedmurze Chrześcijaństwa* (Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2013). I borrow the notion of "nationalized Catholicism" from Krzysztof Jaskułowski, "W obronie krzyża: Rzecz o używaniu i nadużywaniu symboli w polityce," *Dyskurs: Pismo Naukowo/Artystyczne ASP we Wrocławiu* 16 (2013): 90–91.

³⁹ Renata Rogozińska, *W stronę Golgoty: Inspiracje pasyjne w sztuce polskiej w latach 1970–1999* (Poznań: Księgarnia Świętego Wojciecha, 2002); Adam Bujak and Leszek Sosnowski (eds.), *Krzyż Polski*, 4 vols. (Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2010–2011); Tadeusz Seweryn, *Kapliczki i krzyże przydrożne w Polsce* (Warsaw: PAX, 1958); Jan Adamowski and Marta Wójcicka (eds.), *Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne jako znaki społecznej, kulturowej i religijnej pamięci* (Lublin: Uniwersytet Marii Curie Skłodowskiej, 2011); Tomasz Czerwiński, *Kapliczki i krzyże przydrożne w Polsce* (Warsaw: Sport i Turystyka Muza, 2012); Grażyna Holly, "Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne na pograniczu polsko-słowacko-ukraińskim," *Roczniki Bieszczadzkie* 20 (2012): 309–345; Kamila Gillmeister, *Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne, czyli opowieść o świętych i przestrzeni* (Tczew: Fabryka Sztuk, 2015); Anna Niedźwiedz, *The Image and the Figure: Our Lady of Częstochowa in Polish Culture and Popular Religion* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2010); Catherine de Busser and Anna Niedźwiedz, "Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol," in *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, edited by Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen, and Catrien Notermans (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 87–100; Anna Niedźwiedz, "Religious Symbols in Polish Underground Art and Poetry of the 1980s," in *Underground Publishing and the Public Sphere*, edited by Jan C. Behrends and Thomas Lindenberger (Vienna: LIT, 2014), 189–211.

studies have critically addressed the symbol of the cross in the Polish political realm.⁴⁰ Adopting a diachronic perspective, this book takes such analyses further by examining both the way the symbol of the cross has been politically instrumentalized in different historical epochs and how the meaning of the cross has changed over time.

Reconstructing the genealogy of a single symbol, as this book does, can open our eyes to more than just the “historical depth” of a given emblem. If “we think only in signs,” as Charles Sanders Peirce had it, symbols are not only our gateways into the concepts they represent, but can also help us understand the human capacity to interpret, to ascribe meaning, and to associate.⁴¹ Understanding how symbols work can tell us how we communicate, but also what we hold dear, what evokes our emotions, and how societies change over time. If symbols have the capacity to “synthesize a people’s ethos,”⁴² they provide important points of entry into the inner workings of communities, too. Reconstructing the history of a key Polish symbol, the cross, therefore allows us to probe not only the ways Poles have conceived of themselves as a nation over time, but also the very weave of Poland’s culture itself.

The Cross as a Polyphonic Symbol

“[S]ymbols are dynamic entities, not static cognitive signs,” argued Victor Turner in his path-breaking *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* from 1974.⁴³ The often volatile situations in which symbols emerge and operate mean that some connections between symbols and their meanings are temporary and contingent. This “uncertainty of meaning” is, however, what constitutes the strength of the symbol.⁴⁴ Seemingly limitless possibilities of association render particularly “opaque” symbols like the cross incredibly powerful and subject to intense appropriation. Paul Ricœur, who used the notion of “opacity” to define the quality of symbols, in which their literal meaning points to further latent layers of significance that are accessible only through the primary meaning, argued that the “depth” of a symbol can be “inexhaustible.”⁴⁵ A single symbol’s capacity to invoke even seemingly disjointed ideas and images, but also to

⁴⁰ Chwalba, *Sacrum i rewolucja*; Kubik, *The Power of Symbols*; Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*.

⁴¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 1994) (electronic edition), CP 2.302.

⁴² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

⁴³ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 96.

⁴⁴ David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 11.

⁴⁵ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 15.

render some of them less obvious and accessible, makes the analysis of symbols an ideal starting point from which to study changing master narratives and societies in transition.

Examining the different meanings ascribed to the cross, this book aims to reveal mechanisms by which certain visions of community become fortified through symbolic practices, while others are repressed and forgotten. Investigating how those meanings have been recycled or overwritten, it also aims to pinpoint the specific circumstances that have given rise to shifts in the symbol's semantic field. One phenomenon in particular that the book sets out to explore is cycles of protest and institutionalization.

One of the main theoretical concepts informing this analysis has been Victor Turner's premise that political symbols follow a cycle of "structure" and "antistructure." To Turner, symbolic shifts are always a result of changes in social relations.⁴⁶ In other words, the content of symbols transforms continuously as societies evolve, adapting to new agendas, goals, and master narratives. If "structure" corresponds to periods in which power is solidified, "antistructure" stands for dissent, rebellion, and change.⁴⁷ The symbols of structure thus legitimize hierarchies, underscore differences between "us" and "them," secure boundaries, and define the rules undergirding a given group. The symbols of antistructure, in turn, are characterized by creativity; have non-rational, emotional appeal; and point to alternative, more egalitarian modes of coexistence.⁴⁸ In Turner's vision, structure and antistructure are not two fully separate conditions, but rather phases in a cycle that blur into one another. Even though antistructure "*communitas*," or communities of dissent, rebel against established structures, if they succeed, their discourses solidify into a new mainstream and "are converted into institutionalized structure, or become routinized, often as ritual."⁴⁹ Initially daring and innovative protest language is thus harnessed by the emerging structure once again. As a result of ritualizing previously spontaneous practices and introducing sanctions for violating the new symbolic order, power holders eventually find themselves confronted with fresh opposition. And given that this flux in the significance and status of political symbols is caused by moments of change (e.g. transition of power), the history of symbolic upheavals will also reflect the political history of a nation.

The Turnerian cycle helps us to understand how a single symbol might perform an entirely different function depending on whether it is used to mobilize the public for collective acts of defiance ("antistructure") or to help solidify power ("structure"). For example, in the period leading up to the

⁴⁶ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 55.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

Polish national uprising of 1863–1864, the cross served as an inclusive symbol of emancipation from absolutist power and was meant to rally different ethnic groups to join the anti-tsarist struggle. In those years, anti-Russian demonstrations, which were usually headed by a large crucifix, also attracted a number of progressive Warsaw Jews, who not only marched alongside ethnic Poles, but also, after one cross had been damaged by the gendarmes, even raised funds for a new one.⁵⁰ Yet, if the cross was initially used as a symbol of interethnic solidarity in a fight for national sovereignty and a more egalitarian society, the message it embodied changed fundamentally after Poland regained its independence in 1918. Now the cross was no longer a sign of defiance on the part of an oppressed ethnic group, but rather a tool of domination utilized by a colonizing power in multiethnic areas, where other groups were expected to abandon their aspirations to nationhood.⁵¹

The Cross as a Political Symbol

While the cross is an extremely multilayered symbol whose primary religious signification has been reflected both in Poland's sacred art and in its vernacular culture, this book concerns itself solely with its political dimension. The obvious challenge of this approach, however, lies in the difficulty of discerning where the religious transforms into the political. While some ambiguity in the symbol's use and reception is always a given, my analysis is guided by Brian Porter-Szücs's dictum that a religious symbol becomes political when it turns into a "means of easily labeling combatants in struggles motivated primarily by secular concerns."⁵² Thus, even if the symbol of the cross features in social practices that may include acts of devotion, it is its use in the articulation of secular agendas that gives it its political character.

A religious symbol employed in a political setting can also signal something entirely different from the spiritual message it originally carried. As David

⁵⁰ Norbert Getter, Jakub Schall, and Zygmunt Schipper, *Żydzi bojownicy o niepodległość Polski* (Warszawa: Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa, 2002), 62–64; Julian Komar, *Warszawskie manifestacje patriotyczne 1860–1861* (Warszawa: PWN, 1970), 91; N. M. Gelber, *Die Juden und der polnische Aufstand 1863* (Vienna: Löwit, 1923), 42.

⁵¹ Henryk Mościcki, *Pomniki bojowników o niepodległość 1794–1863* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Robót Publicznych, 1929); Jarosław Komorowski, *Kresowym szlakiem: Kapliczki, pomniki, groby*, vol. I: *Polesie* (Świdnica: Polskie Towarzystwo Turystyczno Krajoznawcze, 1997); Jarosław Komorowski, *Kresowym szlakiem: Kapliczki, pomniki, groby*, vol. II: *Nowogródzczyzna* (Świdnica: Polskie Towarzystwo Turystyczno Krajoznawcze, 2000); Czesław Skiba, "Kult Nieznanego Żołnierza na Kresach Wschodnich," *Przegląd Historyczno-Wojskowy* 3 (54), 1 (2002): 58–78; Tadeusz Swat, "Listopad 1918 roku: Miejsca upamiętnione i pomniki," *Niepodległość i Pamięć* 10, 1 (2003): 95–105.

⁵² Porter-Szücs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 167.

Kertzer convincingly demonstrates, “the power of the ritual transcends its ideological content.”⁵³ And, by being “less obviously political in form,” religious symbols can actually be much more politically efficacious than others, especially since they are not only widely recognizable, but also provide political movements with a moral authority and a transcendental legitimation of their political objectives.⁵⁴ Last but not least, if such “secular concerns,” bolstered by religious paraphernalia, win the endorsement of religious leaders, they enable political actors to tap into the logistics, networks, and mobilization mechanisms that religious organizations have at their disposal.⁵⁵ This malleability of religious symbols and their tremendous emotional appeal are what renders them so irresistible on the political scene and brings them onto so many different barricades.

But when did the cross first become a political symbol? There is some point to the argument that the cross was a political symbol from day one. As the biblical scholar Neil Elliott notes, the crucifixion of Jesus was “one of the most unequivocally political events recorded in the New Testament.”⁵⁶ If Jesus was a victim of political persecution and the form of capital punishment he received was “an instrument of imperial terror”⁵⁷ that enabled the Romans to exert large-scale social control, then the political character of the symbol of the cross predates Christianity itself.

With Emperor Constantine the Great (c. 280–337), the cross became for the first time a state symbol. Representations of the cross in the form of christograms and staurograms appear on his coins and, with time, the cross becomes more and more diffused as the “victorious symbol of the emperor” and a military insignia.⁵⁸ The cross also becomes a symbol of conquest and subjugation. As later Christian emperors take control over new territory, they place crosses on pagan temples and “Christianize” heathen human statues

⁵³ Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, 45.

⁵⁴ Abner Cohen cited in Kubik, *The Power of Symbols*, 6.

⁵⁵ Ulrich Willems, “Religion und soziale Bewegungen – Dimensionen eines Forschungsfeldes,” *Forschungsjournal NSB* 17, 4 (2004): 28–41, here 33–34.

⁵⁶ Neil Elliott, “The Anti-Imperial Message of the Cross,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, edited by Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 167. See also Thomas Söding, “Der König am Kreuz: Politik und Religion in der Passionsgeschichte,” in *König und Priester: Facetten neutestamentlicher Christologie: Festschrift für Claus-Peter März zum 65. Geburtstag*, edited by Martina Bär, Markus-Liborius Hermann, and Thomas Söding (Würzburg: Echter, 2012), 89. On the legal aspect of crucifixion, see John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 358–416.

⁵⁸ John Granger Cook, “Crucifixion in the West: From Constantine to Recceswinth,” *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum*, 16 (2012): 234–235; Dale C. Allison et al. (eds.) “Cross,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 5 (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2012): 1059.

by having crosses etched on their foreheads.⁵⁹ Coins adorned with the cross in the role of an imperial symbol first appear in Constantinople in the fourth century.⁶⁰ Soon, the Byzantine iconography, like the *globus cruciger*, the cross-bearing orb, establishes itself as a Christian symbol of authority and royal regalia.⁶¹ By the fifth century, memorial crosses marking the military victories of Christians are already a widespread tradition, and soon even liturgical hymns include the topos of the cross as battle insignia.⁶² The military use of the cross becomes even more articulated in the Middle Ages, when not only are crosses carried to the battlefields, but also the institution of the crusade captures the imagination of contemporaries.⁶³

The political history of the cross in the Polish context can also be traced a long way back. In the early fifteenth century, as the conflict between the Teutonic Knights and the Polish crown reached its apex, King Ladislaus Jagiełło's diplomatic efforts focused on delegitimizing the Order's crusade in the international diplomatic arena. Contesting the Teutonic Knights' right to raid, dispossess, and forcibly convert the heathens, Paul Wladimiri, Jagiełło's legal expert and representative in this debate, sought to present the Polish king, in a state of war with the crusaders, as the bearer of true Christian values.⁶⁴ The symbol of the cross, adorning the robes of the Order, also known as the Crucifers (*Cruciferi*), thus became the central object of contention. And, as the Teutonic Knights insisted that they had been "adorned with the sign of the cross to [fight] the enemies of the Cross of Christ,"⁶⁵ Wladimiri, in his numerous political writings, went to great lengths to wrest from them the claim to the symbol. Reporting about the Order's atrocities against the civilian population, Wladimiri spoke of "the diabolic devotion cloaked under the white

⁵⁹ Stefan Heid "Vexillum crucis: Das Kreuz als Religions-, Missions- und Imperialsymbol in der frühen Kirche," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 78 (2002): 228, 233.

⁶⁰ Cook, "Crucifixion in the West," 234.

⁶¹ Dimiter Angelov and Judith Herrin "The Christian Imperial Tradition – Greek and Latin," in *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, edited by Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 156.

⁶² Heid "Vexillum crucis," 227. A good example is the sixth-century Latin hymn *Vexilla Regis* (*Royal Banners*), available at www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/Vexilla.html (accessed April 4, 2021).

⁶³ Allison et al., *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1047; Heid, "Vexillum crucis," 239. On the role of the physical object of the cross during the crusades, see also Anne E. Lester, "Remembrance of Things Past: Memory and Material Objects in the Time of the Crusades, 1095–1291," in *Remembering the Crusades and Crusading*, edited by Megan Cassidy-Welch (London: Routledge, 2017), 73–94.

⁶⁴ Ludwik Ehrlich, *Rektor Paweł Włodkowic: Rzecznik obrony przeciw Krzyżakom* (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1963).

⁶⁵ John Frebach of Bamberg, cited in Paul Wladimiri, "Quoniam Error, part II, 1417," in *Pisma wybrane Pawła Włodkowica/Works of Paul Wladimiri (A Selection)*, vol. II, edited by Ludwik Ehrlich (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1969), 376.

gown”⁶⁶ and “the iniquitous causer of darkness, and father of lies, hiding under [the Crucifers’] black cross.”⁶⁷ With the emergence of modern Polish nationalism, the image of the Crucifers and their black cross was to return as a powerful symbol of German subjugation of Poland, inspiring both the visual arts and, later, post-1945 Communist propaganda.⁶⁸

The period of the Counter-Reformation brought a surge of Catholic piety and a more intensive dissemination of Catholic symbols in public space. To discourage the spread of “heresy,” the Catholic hierarchy ordered all Protestants “under severe penalty” to participate in the Corpus Christi public processions, and banned Protestants (and Jews) from displaying their own religious worship publicly.⁶⁹ After a synod of 1621 had ordered Catholic parishes to plant wayside crosses “to manifest that God-fearing Catholics have nothing to do with heretics, Jews and pagans,”⁷⁰ wayside Latin crosses mushroomed across the country. Their function was both ritual – delineating the perimeter of the spaces believed to be thus protected from evil, disease, and other harm – and political, signaling the privileged position of the Catholic Church in the Commonwealth.⁷¹ This symbolic marking of space survived in Poland for centuries. As the author of a Polish-language *Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia* noted in 1878, “No other country of today has as many large

⁶⁶ In the original: “quam idem auctor iniquus tenebrarum et pater mendacij sub nigra cruce latitans.” Paul Wladimiri, “Ad Episcopum Cracoviensem, 1432,” in *Pisma wybrane Pawła Włodkowica/Works of Paul Wladimiri (A Selection)*, vol. III, edited by Ludwik Ehrlich (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1969), 211.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ A remarkable example was Tadeusz Trepcowski’s poster “Grunwald 1410–Berlin 1945” celebrating the Soviet victory over the National Socialists as the continuation of King Jagiełło’s triumph over the Teutonic Knights in the Battle of Grunwald. See Jacek Friedrich, “Krzyżacy w niemieckiej i polskiej kulturze wizualnej,” in *Obok: Polska–Niemcy: 1000 lat historii w sztuce*, edited by Małgorzata Omilanowska (Cologne: DuMont, 2011), 108.

⁶⁹ The obligation for Protestants to participate in the Corpus Christi processions was introduced in Kraków and Lublin in 1689. The prohibition banning Jews and Protestants from engaging in public processions was passed at the 1717 synod of Wilno. See Magda Teter, *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Beleaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 124, 139.

⁷⁰ Kamila Gillmeister, *Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne, czyli opowieść o świętych i przestrzeni* (Tczew: Fabryka Sztuk, 2015), 20.

⁷¹ Wayside crosses delineated the symbolic boundary of a village. It was outside of the village perimeter, marked by the cross, that suicides would be buried and illnesses or poverty would be ritually discarded. It was also believed that such crosses protected the crops and prevented the spread of epidemics. See Holly, “Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne,” 336; Jan Adamowski, “Motywacje stawiania krzyży i kapliczek przydrożnych,” in *Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne jako znaki społecznej, kulturowej i religijnej pamięci*, edited by Jan Adamowski and Marta Wójcicka (Lublin: Uniwersytet Marii Curie Skłodowskiej, 2011), 35–36; Gillmeister, *Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne*, 7; Piotr Drapkiewicz, “Krzyże wsi Żegary,” *Almanach Sejneński* 6 (2008): 19–27.

crosses beside the roads, in the fields, and in village cemeteries as we do.”⁷² In 1936, a local priest from Janów reported that there were so many crosses lined up along the roads in his parish that they could be mistaken for overhead telephone lines.⁷³

Another key early modern episode that helped to cement the central position of Catholic symbolism in the Commonwealth was King Sobieski’s Relief of Vienna in 1683. Arriving to aid the international military alliance formed in defense against the Ottoman invasion, Jan III Sobieski went down in European historiography and literature as the “last crusader,”⁷⁴ the “defender of Christ,”⁷⁵ and a “destroyer of the Muslims”⁷⁶ who was “converting mosques into churches.”⁷⁷ Though the iconography of the period does not make very intensive use of the symbol of the cross in representations of the battle,⁷⁸ the image of the fearless crusader who rallies his troops “to defend the Cause of God, and to preserve the Western Empire”⁷⁹ did leave a lasting mark on the political imagination of the Commonwealth’s elites. As European poets eulogized Sobieski as “a man sent by God”⁸⁰ who “has no fear

⁷² Michał Nowodworski, quoted in Holly, “Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne,” 309.

⁷³ Artur Gawel, “Przydrożne krzyże i kapliczki na Sokólszczyźnie jako dawne i współczesne ‘akty wiary’ ludu wiejskiego,” in *Krzyże i kapliczki przydrożne jako znaki społecznej, kulturowej i religijnej pamięci*, edited by Jan Adamowski and Marta Wójcicka (Lublin: Uniwersytet Marii Curie Skłodowskiej), 2011, 230.

⁷⁴ John Bingham Morton, “Sobieski and the Relief of Vienna,” *Blackfriars Monthly Review* 25 (1944): 244.

⁷⁵ Marco Antonio Martorelli, “Per la glorissima vittoria riportata contro il commune nemico dal valore delle armi imperiali” (1683), cited in Bronisław Biliński, *Le glorie di Giovanni III Sobieski vincitore di Vienna 1683 nella poesia italiana* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1990), 202.

⁷⁶ Carlo Andrea Sinibaldi, “Vienna invitta e trionfante,” cited in Biliński, *Le glorie di Giovanni III Sobieski*, 77.

⁷⁷ Morton, “Sobieski and the Relief of Vienna,” 248.

⁷⁸ Though King Sobieski himself is often portrayed as carrying the Order of the Holy Spirit, and some individual memorabilia of the Battle of Vienna do contain the symbol of the cross (e.g. a silver votive crucifix placed atop a Turkish banner pole), see Jerzy T. Petrus and Magdalena Piwocka (eds.), *Odsiecz wiedeńska 1683: Wystawa jubileuszowa na Zamku Królewskim na Wawelu w trzechsetlecie bitwy*, vol. 2 (Kraków: Państwowe Zbiory Sztuki na Wawelu, 1990), fig. 211, fig. 147, fig. II; Jerzy Szablowski, “Obchody jubileuszowe zwycięstwa pod Wiedniem w 1683 roku w ciągu trzech stuleci,” in *Odsiecz wiedeńska 1683: Wystawa jubileuszowa na Zamku Królewskim na Wawelu w trzechsetlecie bitwy*, vol. 1, edited by Jerzy T. Petrus and Magdalena Piwocka (Kraków: Państwowe Zbiory Sztuki na Wawelu, 1990), 7–40; Dagnosław Demski, “Jan Sobieski: Anniversaries of the 1683 Battle of Vienna (from 1783 to 1983) and Its Historical Imagination,” *Traditiones* 1 (2014): 13–28; Tadeusz Gasiński, “A Croatian Poetic Echo of King John III Sobieski’s Victory at Vienna,” *The Polish Review* 15, 1 (1970): 46–53.

⁷⁹ *A Speech Delivered by the King of Poland to His Army before the Battle, September 12th, 1683* (London: N. Thompson, 1683).

⁸⁰ Biliński, *Le glorie di Giovanni III Sobieski*, 18.

of any force”⁸¹ because he “raises the Cross as his standard”⁸² and may even “return Byzantium to worshipping the Cross,”⁸³ the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was forging its own myth as the eastern “bulwark of Christianity.” Emerging in this turbulent period, the image of Poland as the *Antemurale Christianitatis*, a state on the edge of the “Western Empire” resisting invasions by Protestant Swedes, Orthodox Muscovites, and Muslim Ottomans, continued to shape the Polish political imagination for centuries to come.⁸⁴ And, in the early twentieth century, as Polish ethno-nationalism was taking its modern form, the memorialization of the Battle of Vienna and of Sobieski as the “defender of the cross” returned in full force, serving new political agendas.⁸⁵

The cross became an important symbol in intra-Polish political clashes at the latest during the Confederation of Bar (1768–1772). An alliance of Catholic Polish gentry formed to rebel against King Stanisław August Poniatowski and took to arms when the Polish parliament, pressured by Catherine the Great, passed an unpopular bill that granted Protestants and Russian Orthodox believers equal political rights and limited the liberties of the nobility. The armed mobilization in defense of “faith and freedom,” which led to four years of civil war and precipitated foreign intervention and the first partition of Poland, carried the symbol of the cross on its banners and insignia.⁸⁶ The Catholic symbols not only served as rallying signs for adherents of the Confederation, but also provided the means to confound the opponent in battle by changing the register of the encounter from armed struggle into an act of religious devotion. As Paweł Jasienica recounts, based on an eyewitness report, when the joined royalist and Russian forces approached the stronghold of the rebels, the fortress of Bar, expecting to start the siege with negotiations, “from the ramparts of Bar, resounding with hymns and supplications, instead of envoys, descended ‘four priests with crucifixes and the fifth one with the statue of Virgin Mary, whom nobody knew how to deal with.’”⁸⁷ From that point on, the symbol of the cross not only came to connote political projects that entailed the supremacy of Roman Catholics and the

⁸¹ Antonio Cutrona, “Gia (lode al Ciel) disciolto il fosco velo . . .” (1683), cited in Biliński, *Le glorie di Giovanni III Sobieski*, 170.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Giovan Battista Fracanzano, “Vienna liberata dalla Maestà di Giovanni III Re di Polonia,” cited in Biliński, *Le glorie di Giovanni III Sobieski*, 119.

⁸⁴ Porter-Szücs, *Faith and Fatherland*, 209.

⁸⁵ See Marja Dynowska, *Jan Sobieski: Obrońca krzyża* (Warsaw: Dobra Prasa, 1933). On the twentieth-century iconography of the Battle of Vienna, see Joanna Wolańska, “The Interior Decoration of the Sobieski Chapel at the Church on Kahlenberg Hill in Vienna,” *Sacrum et Decorum* 10 (2017): 67–86.

⁸⁶ For some examples of the iconography, see Władysław Konopczyński, *Konfederacja Barska: Przebieg, tajemne cele i jawne skutki*, 2 vols. (Poznań: Zysk i Spółka, 2017).

⁸⁷ Paweł Jasienica, *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów: Dzieje Agonii* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1999), 273.

privileged position of the Catholic Church in the Polish state, but also became a symbol that marked the banners of partisan conflicts. With the Polish parliament declaring 2018 the year of the Confederation of Bar, the ambiguous legacy of the rebellion and its aesthetics got revived both in the right-wing populist “historical politics” and in the popular culture at large.⁸⁸

A true golden age for religious imagery in the Polish political discourse came, however, with the Romantic era. The motif of crucifixion as an allegory of the suffering of partitioned Poland had been particularly popular among the Polish Romantics. Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish national bard, verbalized this metaphor most powerfully in his *Books of the Polish Nation and of the Pilgrimage of Poland*, published in Paris in 1831. Comparing Poland to the crucified Christ was a way of expressing hope for Poland’s resurrection – that is, regaining independence. “For the Polish nation did not die,” wrote Mickiewicz, “its body lies in the tomb [. . .] And on the third day the soul will re-enter the body and the nation will rise from the dead and liberate all the peoples of Europe from slavery.”⁸⁹ The biblical language of this vision reinforced a narrative of Poland as the Christ of nations, but also invested a series of images – related to crucifixion, death, entombment, and so on – with not only spiritual, but also political meaning. Thus, the cross, a bier, and a crown of thorns became symbols of foreign rule in the Polish lands, as well as visual shorthand for the failed uprisings and the repercussions in their aftermath.

This language of symbols established itself as early as in the 1820s and soon gained resonance in the political sphere. During the November Uprising of 1830, the symbol of the cross featured on the insurgents’ banners, while the symbolism of crucifixion and resurrection inspired a flurry of patriotic images and lyrical texts in its aftermath.⁹⁰ The symbol also reappeared in 1846, when a group of

⁸⁸ See “Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 8 czerwca 2017 r. w sprawie ustanowienia roku 2018 Rokiem Konfederacji Barskiej,” http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/proc8.nsf/uchwaly/1513_u.htm (accessed January 30, 2021). Under the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) government, the Confederation of Bar received a good deal of attention both in the traditional memorial genres (like postage stamps) and in pop-cultural productions, like comic books and board games. See Paweł Kołodziejcki, *Konfederacja Barska w komiksie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo AA, 2018).

⁸⁹ Adam Mickiewicz, *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1983 [1831]), 221.

⁹⁰ The best-known banner from the November Uprising, reading “In the name of God, for our and your freedom,” from 1831, featured the symbol of the cross, painted in red on a white background. One of the most renowned texts of Polish Romanticism, written in the aftermath of the November Uprising and referencing the symbol of the cross as a representation of the Polish predicament, is Juliusz Słowacki’s *Kordian*, first published in 1834. Among the images commemorating the uprising with the symbol of the cross, see Teofil Kwiatkowski, *Dziewczyna przy powstańczej mogile* (1850), in *Polona*, <https://polona.pl/item/dziewczyna-przy-powstanczej-mogile,NDU4Nzk5NTA/0/#info:metadata> (accessed January 30, 2021); *Die trauernden Polinnen*, in *Polona*, <https://polona.pl/item/die-trauernden-polinnen,MzExMDA4NTc/0/#info:metadata> (accessed January 30, 2021).

revolutionaries carried it in a rally to mobilize peasants in the area of Kraków for an uprising against the Austrians. The envoys with the crucifix were not successful, however, and twenty-four-year-old Edward Dembkowski, who marched at the head of the group, was killed when the demonstration was attacked by the Austrian troops supported by local peasants.⁹¹ The incident and the resulting Austrian policy of containment sparked off a massacre of over 2,000 Polish nobles, students, and other activists in the course of the so-called Galician Slaughter (*Rabacja Galicyjska*).

It was only at the time leading up to the January Uprising, however, that the circulation of these Romantic symbols in the public sphere reached significant dimensions. “Widely used in a limited number of variations,” note Opalski and Bartal, “these biblical images spread rapidly, enriching the language of the street as well as that of political propaganda.”⁹² Adam Zamoyski, observing this trend in a transnational comparison, does not mince his words, speaking of Poland “developing a pathology of martyrdom” in this period.⁹³ What contributed to the spread of these symbols was not only the revolutionary mood, but also the advent of new technologies that facilitated the reproduction and wide circulation of such contents. The advances in printing, lithography, and photography allowed contemporaries to disseminate greater amounts of visual material both to rally support for armed struggle against foreign rule and to report on current events in the ever more widely circulating illustrated press. The middle of the nineteenth century was precisely this point in time when the rising interest in matters of politics and the increasing literacy rate coincided with a greater and cheaper supply of the printed word and visual materials.⁹⁴ With the advent of machine-made paper, the rotary press, mechanical binding, and new techniques that reduced the cost of printed illustrations, activists of the national cause could reach an exponentially larger audience than ever before, and communicated their ideas with visual symbols on an unprecedented scale.⁹⁵ Mass manufacturing, in turn, supplied the new material vehicles of dissent, in the form of patriotic jewelry, medallions, and other small objects that encapsulated the message of national resistance.

⁹¹ Zamoyski, *Holy Madness*, 331–332.

⁹² Magdalena Opalski and Israel Bartal, *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1992), 52.

⁹³ Zamoyski, *Holy Madness*, 291.

⁹⁴ Sigfrid Henry Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 189.

⁹⁵ Thanks to the mechanization of paper mills and the invention of wood-pulp paper around 1850, annual paper production increased tenfold from 1800 to 1860. The invention of the rotary press in 1848, in turn, made it possible to make 24,000 impressions per hour, whereas a hand press yielded only 300 impressions. See Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 191–195.

It is in this period that the revolutionary imagery begins to reach a wide audience and symbols like the cross enter the visual canon of a nation-in-the-making. It is also at this point that religious symbols, decontextualized from their original use, become visual shorthand for the profound social change unfolding in Polish society. The time of the last and most tragic nineteenth-century Polish insurrection, with the “patriotic fever” that accompanied it, was such a watershed for the Polish symbolic imagination because the revolutionary impulse that sparked the uprising brought with it a promise of very radical social changes. The abolition of serfdom by the revolutionary National Government and the promise of social equality extended to Jews, at least in the short period of Polish–Jewish rapprochement, meant an epochal transformation of social relations. And, indeed, the period of the January Uprising counts as “one of the greatest breakthroughs and upheavals” of Polish history – a military failure that “ploughed through Polish life more deeply than any other and weighed with a great force on the minds of at least two generations to come.”⁹⁶ Beginning my scrutiny at this historical juncture, I take up the long history of the cross midstream, but also at a crucial caesura that marks the true onset of modern forms of political participation. It is in the 1860s that new social challenges emerge that require a novel language of politics. Thanks to the new technologies of communication, the visual language developed at that point continued to inspire Polish political debates for decades to come.

The story of the symbol of the cross entering the visual arsenal of political communication parallels in many ways that of the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa. Ever since the consecration of the Virgin Mary as the “Queen of Poland” by King Jan Kazimierz after the defense of the Jasna Góra monastery against the invading Swedes in 1656, the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa has had a prominent place in the Polish “national sensorium.”⁹⁷ It is also an immensely popular symbol, both in Polish culture and in the process of negotiating the national identity.⁹⁸ De Busser and Niedźwiedz go as far as to

⁹⁶ Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski, *Najnowsza historia polityczna Polski*, vol. I: 1864–1914 (London: B. Świdorski, 1963), 9.

⁹⁷ Geneviève Zubrzycki, “History and the National Sensorium: Making Sense of Polish Mythology,” *Qualitative Sociology* 34 (2011): 26, 29–30. See also Kubik, *The Power of Symbols*; Anna Niedźwiedz, *The Image and the Figure: Our Lady of Częstochowa in Polish Culture and Popular Religion* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2010); Catherine de Busser and Anna Niedźwiedz, “Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol,” in *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, edited by Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen, and Catrien Notermans (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 87–100; Niedźwiedz, “Religious Symbols in Polish Underground Art and Poetry,” *Alvis White Eagle, Black Madonna*.

⁹⁸ Niedźwiedz, *The Image and the Figure*; Niedźwiedz, “Religious Symbols in Polish Underground Art and Poetry”; Andrzej Draguła, “Od kapliczki do mody: Obraz Maryi w kulturze współczesnej,” *Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana* 2 (2018): 43–64.

say that the icon is a “Polish master symbol” that “enshrine[s] the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society.”⁹⁹

Indeed, the two symbols have coexisted on political banners, often used to rally for the same cause and, at times, even appearing in combination. The images of *Maria Regina*, just like those of the cross, have served to legitimize imperial authority, crusades, and conquests since late Antiquity.¹⁰⁰ The symbol of the imperial Virgin Mary, which featured on Byzantine coins, spread from Constantinople throughout the Mediterranean, but also far beyond.¹⁰¹ The representation of Mary as a triumphant “war goddess,” who is both “imperious” and “pugnacious,” served the Teutonic Knights to morally sanction the conquest of pagan peoples in Prussia.¹⁰² The image of the Virgin Mary as “La Conquistadora” also figured in the Spanish colonization of New Mexico “as an embodiment of military conquest and of religious conversion.”¹⁰³ The icon of Mary likewise inspired warfare against the Muslims during the Reconquista and the Battle of Vienna.¹⁰⁴ In the era of rising nationalisms, the Virgin Mary also remained a politically relevant symbol from partitioned Poland to Mexico.¹⁰⁵ Finally, the cult of Marian apparitions, like those in Medjugorje and Transcarpathian Ukraine, continues to inspire ethno-nationalist discourses, and their locations become sites of political contention.¹⁰⁶

Despite the functional similarities in the way the symbol of the cross and the image of the Virgin Mary have been politically instrumentalized to legitimize power, draw lines of demarcation between different groups, mark territory,

⁹⁹ De Busser and Niedźwiedz, “Mary in Poland,” 87.

¹⁰⁰ Dragos Boicu, “Marian Devotion as a Form of Legitimation of the Imperial Authority,” *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 6 (2014): 102–120; Eileen Rubery, “Pope John VII’s Devotion to Mary: Papal Images of Mary from the Fifth to the early Eighth Centuries,” in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, edited by Chris Maunder (London: Burns and Oates, 2008), 176–184; Susie Speakman Sutch and Anne-Laure van Bruaene, “The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary: Devotional Communication and Politics in the Burgundian–Habsburg Low Countries, c. 1490–1520,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, 2 (2010): 252–278; Tricoire, *Mit Gott rechnen*.

¹⁰¹ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 49.

¹⁰² Marian Dygo, “The Political Role of the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Teutonic Prussia in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Medieval History* 15 (1989), 67, 71.

¹⁰³ Amy G. Remensnyder, *La Conquistadora: The Virgin Mary at War and Peace in the Old and the New Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 15–30; Petrus and Piwocka, *Odsiecz wiedeńska 1683*, vol. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Vaughan and Stephen Lewis (eds.), *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico 1920–1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Agnieszka Halemba, *Negotiating Marian Apparitions: The Politics of Religion in Transcarpathian Ukraine* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015); Mart Bax, *Medjugorje: Religion, Politics and Violence in Rural Bosnia* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1995).

and mobilize for armed conflicts, the two symbols have divergent semantic fields and a different materiality. The uniqueness of the symbol of the cross in the political context, as I will argue throughout this book, results from its simplicity, abstractness, and ease of reproduction and adaptation, as well as from its vertical expressivity and the variety of performative uses that it affords. A cross can be planted, painted on surfaces, assembled from other objects, performed as a gesture, or used as a weapon. It can also become a canvas for other images, messages, or manifestos, and a site of performance (e.g. during a mock crucifixion). It can be toppled, destroyed, or burned. While the image of the Virgin Mary circulates in the Polish political context as a symbol much akin to, and, in some instances, functionally interchangeable with, that of the cross, it is the latter that offers a uniquely efficient tool for political mobilization, thanks to its visual minimalism, symbolic opacity, and wide range of affordances.

This book sets out to survey moments of symbolic mobilization in Poland's modern history as symptoms of social change. Focusing on key political caesuras in modern Polish history, it looks at how different moments of transition necessitated efficient and impactful means of political mobilization and how the symbol of the cross successfully delivered that tool. It is a story of how a very old symbol, inextricably embedded in the nation's centuries-long history and tradition, became a vehicle to domesticate political ideas that were new, radical, and, sometimes, revolutionary. The simple, but powerfully expressive symbol of the cross captured the eye, synthesized complex contents in a visually minimalist message, underscored intellectual arguments with an emotional overtone, and, last but not least, could reach a wide audience before the era of mass literacy.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, it has always been a contested and polarizing symbol that political actors of different colors, and sometimes opposing factions in the same conflict, placed a claim on. The inappositeness of the sacred symbol put to a profane political use made this kind of instrumentalization inevitably controversial – the politicized cross has always triggered emotions and a cacophony of contesting voices. The story of what political messages the cross came to amplify and what responses it catalyzed is the heart of this book.

Inspired by theories of nationalism and classical semantics, but also by political anthropology, cultural studies, and gender studies, this text draws on a wealth of sources, ranging from the visual arts to political pamphlets, patriotic music and literature, monuments, and performative practices, using a radically interdisciplinary toolkit. It offers a cultural history of the cross spanning the period from the national uprisings of the nineteenth century, when the cross was first used as a political symbol on a mass scale, to the present day. Taking this diachronic perspective, it fills a gap in the existing

¹⁰⁷ Chwalba, *Sacrum i rewolucja*, 217.

scholarship while also critically exploring a number of controversial issues, such as the role of the Catholic Church in shaping Polish nationalism and the interethnic violence, antisemitism, and misogyny that have long undergirded the Polish nation-building project. At the same time, the book aims to address a number of broader issues.

Taking the symbol of the cross as a point of departure from which to explore Poland's key political upheavals, it traces the country's dramatic transformations on both a macro- and a micro-scale, addressing the nation's grand narratives as well as its forgotten margins: geographic borderlands, ethnic minorities, and the female voice. Despite being primarily a historical study, the book aims to contribute to understanding of how religious symbols work to bolster national discourses and become powerful tools to mobilize political action. By examining how the symbol of the cross has been used as a tool to exclude certain groups from the national community and how it emerged as *the* symbol of popular dissent against a ruling elite perceived as illegitimate, the book also traces the roots and symbolic repertoire of contemporary Polish populism. At the same time, it provides insight into legacies of nationalism specific to the East-Central European region more generally, including nineteenth-century imperialisms, national consolidation in the interwar period, state socialism, and neoliberal transformation after 1989.

Organization of the Book

The chapters to follow focus on a sequence of case studies that afford insight into six key moments in Poland's modern history in which the symbol of the cross loomed large as a rallying sign: the anti-tsarist uprisings of the nineteenth century, the First Republic (1918–1939), the early decades of state socialism, the Solidarity era (1980–1989), the years of systemic transformation, and, finally, the aftermath of the Smolensk plane catastrophe in 2010. Although this book tries to provide an overview of the evolution of the symbol of the cross in Poland's modern history, the story also takes large leaps forward, skipping over, most notably, the period of World War II and the Holocaust. Given the extent to which wartime occupation regimes in the Polish lands repressed free public expression, decimated the political elites, stripped whole groups of civil rights altogether, limited political participation, and criminalized political dissent, I regard the years between 1939 and 1945 as a caesura in the story of political evolution that this book tries to tell. This is not to say that the symbol of the cross was absent from the grassroots expressions of wartime piety and collective mourning, or that the tribulations of World War II and the profound traumas that Poland's population suffered in these years did not have a bearing on what the symbol of the cross came to signify to Poles in the changed political reality after 1945. My argument here, however, is that the new political articulations of the symbol could only truly unfold after the traumatic

earthquake that the war-related violence brought with it. And, indeed, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, they came out with full force during the 1956 “symbolic revolution” and its aftermath. The ripples of the exogenous shocks that Poland’s population suffered in the war could become visible in the symbolic sphere only in the ensuing period of (relative) calm.

Although each of the chapters to follow paints, in broad strokes, the general atmosphere, ideological goals, and underlying frictions that motivated political actors in a given period, they go beyond a synthetic overview. Focusing on specific micro-histories, they shed light on the cracks, paradoxes, and discontinuities of the grand narratives; point to local idiosyncrasies; and deliver what Marci Shore has termed “excessive detail”: the unexpected, curious, and jarring facts that challenge the master framework, revealing its silences and limitations.¹⁰⁸

Chapter 1 recounts how the cross began functioning as a political symbol in modern Polish history. Set against the background of the last and most tragic nineteenth-century Polish insurrection and the patriotic fever that preceded it, the story opens with the figure of the Jewish defender of the cross, Michał Landy, shot dead while carrying a crucifix at an anti-tsarist demonstration in 1861. Landy’s death and its resonance provide an entry point into the story of how the cross was first used to voice protest, mobilize action, and convey a strictly political vision – in this case, that of an interethnic alliance of the Central Eastern European nations subjugated by the tsarist regime rising in a joint struggle for freedom, equality, and emancipation.

Chapter 2 takes us to the moment when partitioned Poland regains its independence in the aftermath of World War I. As the young nation attempts to delineate its new borders and defend them against threatening Others, in particular atheist Soviet Russia, the symbol of the cross comes to denote an ethno-nationalist vision of the country’s future. Harnessed to legitimize Poland’s claim to the multiethnic territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the cross is now used as a symbol of military dominance and morally grounded supremacy over Lithuanians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Jews, who are symbolically excluded from the national fold. Three case studies illustrate this transition in the symbol’s meaning, focusing on three highly controversial and politicized “borderland crosses”: the Three Crosses monument in Wilno (Vilnius), the Cross of the First Corps at the fortress of Bobrujsk, and the Cross at the Legionnaires’ Pass in the Carpathian Mountains.

Chapter 3 traces the emergence of a spectacular and uniquely Polish form of protest – the “defense of the cross.” It focuses on the iconic defense of a wayside cross that took place at the heart of the model socialist metropolis of Nowa

¹⁰⁸ Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation’s Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 6.

Huta in 1960, an initially peaceful protest that transformed into violent street riots against the Communist authorities. The case study not only illustrates how the cross became a rallying sign for anti-systemic protest in Communist Poland, but also sheds light on the role of women in devising creative modes of nonconformist behavior in the gray zone between religiosity and rebellion.

Focusing on the transformative decade marked by the rise of the Solidarity movement (1980–1989), Chapter 4 examines how the cross served as a source of metaphysical legitimation for Poland's growing opposition movement. The chapter traces how Solidarity used the symbol to mark spaces of anti-Communist dissent, mourn workers killed in confrontations with the police, and foster a rift in the popular mind between "the nation" and the Communist power holders, portrayed as "anti-nation." Three case studies illustrate how the symbol of the cross was instrumental in both solidifying and challenging this boundary: Communist attempts to hijack celebrations held at the foot of the Poznań Crosses in commemoration of the workers' rebellion of 1956, Solidarity's campaign to rebrand May Day using Catholic symbols, and the project to display the symbol of the cross during the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising throw into sharp relief the ambivalence and contradictory nature of the symbol in the late socialist period.

Chapter 5 covers the immediate post-1989 period, when exploitation of the symbol of the cross by a variety of political actors was unabated and it continued to define new frontlines of conflict. Examining a number of contexts in which the symbol intersected with politics, including the abortion debate, the anti-pornography campaign, and Poland's lustration process, the chapter reveals the inner workings of an ideological shift that deeply transformed the country.

Finally, Chapter 6 revisits the events of the year 2010, when a fatal crash suffered by the Polish presidential plane near Smolensk sent massive shock waves through society and triggered some of the most iconic symbolic clashes in the country's contemporary history. The rise of right-wing populism, which followed the Smolensk crash and laid the groundwork for the country's recent shift towards illiberal democracy, coincided with a surge in the use of religious imagery, which came to dominate mainstream expressions of national pride and belonging. Taking as a case study the so-called Smolensk cross planted in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw, which for six months was fiercely defended by a group of the late President Kaczyński's supporters, this chapter investigates populist instrumentalization of Catholic symbols and the opposition it triggered.

A comprehensive history of the symbol of the cross in Polish political life could fill volumes, and this book certainly has no ambition to list encyclopedically every single manifestation of the symbol. Nor is it a history of Polish religiosity or an anthology of a single motif within the national culture. Instead, tracing how the central symbol of Christianity came to feature on

very different political barricades, harnessed in conflicts over entirely secular concerns, the book aims to illuminate how the symbol of the cross has achieved its present status as a ubiquitous, unmarked, and almost transparent element of the public realm in Poland. In doing so, it journeys through a territory exceptionally fraught with taboos and befogged with myths. While at times the story follows the mainstream Polish national narrative, revisiting well-known events, at other points it meanders into obscure, marginal, and uncharted tributaries, exploring unexpected facts and unconventional sources. It is a history of political crusades, appropriation, and power, but also of cultural resistance and nonconformism – a story of hope and of outrage.