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

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Facing threats and continuing the performance staged under police protection, Frlíč 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 Kłatwa continued to play to sold-out audiences. The heated controversy sparked by Frlíč’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, Frlíč 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.

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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


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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” and “obvious” symbol of Polish “national traditions,” “values that Poles hold dear,” “national memory,” and “Polish identity.” 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. 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

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.” 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.” 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.
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. In 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. Repressive military regimes in countries like Paraguay, El Salvador, Brazil, and Chile made extensive use of Christian symbols as they attempted to legitimate themselves as defending “Western Christian civilization.” 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.

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. 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 antidemocratic Italian Nationalists and proto-fascists. 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.

17 Levine, Religion and Politics in Latin America, 50.
secularization measures and framed the predicament of Spanish Catholics as that of martyrs. 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.

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." 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.

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.

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." 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." Such instrumentalization of religious symbols by right-wing populists is not limited to regions with a predominantly Catholic population. 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.

24 Griera et al., "Banal Catholicism."
During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, the crucifix became part of the protest paraphernalia of the anti-vaccine movement, too.\footnote{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).}

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.\footnote{Timothy Snyder, The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1569–1999 (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}

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,\footnote{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.} the intersection of nationalism and religion remains an area where...
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; 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; or tracing the role of the Catholic Church in Polish politics and the negotiation of “national values.” But, while the populist mobilization of the “realm of symbolic imagination” and the emergence of a new “mnemonic language of...


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...
politics 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.” 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. Only a few


studies have critically addressed the symbol of the cross in the Polish political realm. 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. 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,” 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. 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. Seemingly limitless possibilities of association render particularly “opaque” symbols like the cross incredibly powerful and subject to intense appropriation. Paul Ricoeur, 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.” A single symbol’s capacity to invoke even seemingly disjointed ideas and images, but also to