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Sacralizing a Battlefield: The Religious Heritage of the Battle of Warsaw 1920

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Abstract: This article presents a process of creating religious heritage that goes beyond the “sacralization of heritage” or the “heritagization of religion”. It is grounded in the assumption that religious heritage may be an element of lived religion, while the strategies of managing the past (and of preserving and transmitting values) observable within Roman Catholicism all fit within the discourse of heritage. This text focuses on the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw developed in Roman Catholic religious practice. The battles fought in 1920 are also referred to as the “Miracle on the Vistula”, since the Polish victory in that confrontation is seen as resulting from a divine intervention. Such an image of the battle permeates its heritage, allowing the Roman Catholic Church to shape it in accordance with religious teachings. This article is based on fieldwork on the anniversary events of the Battle of Warsaw. It aims to illustrate how the battlefield may become sacralized, blurring the lines between religious practices and heritage. The haptically experienced materiality of the battlefield makes it possible to localize heritage perceived not only as the site of bloody conflict, but also as the scene of the Virgin Mary’s intercession and divine intervention.

Keywords: religious heritage; sacralization; commemorative practices; Roman Catholic Church; Battle of Warsaw



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1. Introduction

Fought in August 1920 as one of the most significant armed confrontations in Polish history, the Battle of Warsaw now functions as an element of the Polish national heritage. In the present article, however, it is used as an example illustrating the process of shaping not military, but religious heritage (Roman Catholic, to be exact). Focusing on anniversary events commemorating the battle, I wish to offer a perspective of religious heritage that goes beyond the symmetrical analysis of the processes of the “sacralization of heritage” and the “heritagization of religion”. These approaches allow for religious heritage to be considered separate from religious practice (see [Salemink et al. 2020](#); [van den Hemel et al. 2022](#)). My analysis, however, pertains to religious heritage shaped by the Roman Catholic Church as grounded and included in lived religion (see [Ammerman 2015](#)). In the case under scrutiny, the processes of “sacralization” and “heritagization” of the battlefield, crucial for the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw, take place in close relation to religious teachings.

My investigation of how the materiality of the battlefields of 1920 affects the shaping of religious heritage, and how it allows for military history to fit into religious narratives, serves two purposes. On the one hand, it is to present activities involving the preservation, transmission and protection of certain messages and values as central in religious education; on the other, it is to describe a situation in which the practices of heritage are at the same time religious practices. Thus, I intend to shift the focus of the analysis of religious heritage from considering the relations between secular and religious uses of heritage sites and items to examining how heritage discourse and practices are incorporated into the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, allowing it to propagate religious values as the values of Polish national heritage.

In Poland, it is Roman Catholic institutions that are actively involved in the creation of heritage (see [Baraniecka-Olszewska 2019, 2022, 2023](#)). The presence of that denomination in heritage discourse and practice stems from the privileged status the Roman Catholic Church enjoys in the public sphere in Poland (see [Pasięka 2015](#)), as well as its prominent role in state politics and the processes of development of national identity (see [Kubik 1994; Zubrzycki 2006](#)). In these circumstances, the investments Roman Catholic institutions make in creating visions of the past (see [Bogumił and Głowacka-Grajper 2019](#)) also leave their mark on the shape of Polish heritage. The involvement of other religions in this process is less pronounced, which may result not from their different attitude to the past and managing its image as a part of religious practice, but rather from their limited access to the public sphere (see [Baraniecka-Olszewska 2022](#)).

I begin the analysis with a systematizing overview of academic discourse pertaining to the phenomenon of “religious heritage”, indicating a direction I believe to be underexplored in research, namely, heritage created within the framework of religious practice. Before discussing my case study and the construction of the religious heritage of the Battle of Warsaw, I will briefly outline the history of the event and the contemporary process of its heritagization. Subsequently, I will describe the roots of that process, which trace back to the interwar period: when Polish statehood was emerging after decades of foreign rule, and when the myth of the battle as the “Miracle on the Vistula” was created. Presenting ethnographic material gathered during contemporary events marking the anniversary of the Battle of Warsaw will allow me to show not only the continuity between the interpretations of these events formulated in the 1920s, but also the role which religious practice and the associated processes of sacralization play in the creation of heritage.

2. The Ambiguity of the Concept of “Religious Heritage”

In recent years, scholars have paid increased attention to the phenomenon of “religious heritage”. However, approaches to the concepts vary, as do its definitions. At the core of the analysis lies the process of the “sacralization of heritage” ([Meyer and de Witte 2013](#)). In Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte’s understanding, the connection between sacralized heritage and religion is based on analogy. Heritage items become sacred, elevated and important, while interaction with them may take the form of veneration. However, the decision regarding what to elevate is not only aesthetic but also political in nature, as its central element is selection. “Understood as a political—aesthetic practice [. . .] sacralization involves concrete acts of selecting, setting apart, designing, fashioning, and inscribing cultural forms as heritage” ([Meyer and de Witte 2013](#), p. 280). Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales, in turn, present this process thusly: “cultural heritage inscribes certain objects and buildings in a public and non-religious domain, in order to be preserved, displayed, studied, and respected as material signs of the past. This process of heritage-making has been labeled as ‘sacralization,’ with works of art in museum collections and historical monuments being classified as a new kind of ‘sacred’ object and regarded as symbols of a new kind of civil religion” ([Isnart and Cerezales 2020](#), pp. 1–2).

In the context of heritage, the term “sacred” often means originally connected to religion, stemming from it. This is the other prominent direction present in analyses of religious heritage. It offers the tools for tracing how religious sites, messages and items become subjected to the process of heritagization. In this vein, Birgit [Meyer \(2019\)](#) wrote of churches being converted into museums and heritage sites. She even noted that in the case of heritage “the qualifier ‘religious’ indicates that Christianity itself is subject to heritagization and culturalization” ([Meyer 2019](#), p. 71). Simon Coleman and Marion Bowman, who studied English cathedrals as religious, heritage and tourist sites, point to the necessity of commingling the different functions served by temples ([Coleman and Bowman 2019](#); see also [Coleman 2019](#)). Analyzing the “adjacency” of religious and heritage-related discourse in cathedrals, they indicate the “possibility of contact and osmosis” between them ([Coleman and Bowman 2019](#), p. 11). Ultimately, however, the heritage they describe functions outside of the realm of lived religion, and parallel to it, since “the sacredness conferred

on heritage objects and sites only shares the name and the notion of the sacred with religion, for they are not religious themselves" (Isnart and Cerezales 2020, p. 3), yet remains "sacred" in Durkheim's understanding of the term (Isnart and Cerezales 2020, p. 3).

This is because the process of heritagization is identified with secular, universal values that transcend the particularities of religion. In spite of all discussion on the oppressive nature of universalist discourses of heritage (Smith 2006; Harrison 2012) and their illusory inclusivity (de Cesari 2012), the belief still remains that heritage needs to promote values that are open and accessible—and these are identified with secular values. Thus, within this framework, religious heritage belongs to the realm of the secular. Ernst van den Hemel, Oscar Salemink and Irene Stengs write that "the category of heritage can be understood as part of the paradigm of secularization, understood in Talal Asad's way (2003). The global criteria for heritage recognition, as brought out in the UNESCO heritage conventions, are secular in nature in the sense of predicated on immanent, this-worldly cultural values—cultural, aesthetic, historical, ontological—but **never** directly on transcendental, religious values" (van den Hemel et al. 2022, p. 5 [emphasis KB-O]; see also Salemink et al. 2020, p. 72).

Adopting such a perspective, one may describe heritage—secular in Asad's understanding—as contextualized, historically defined and remaining in a mutually constitutive relation with religious heritage (Asad 2003). Defending this methodological approach, van den Hemel et al. (2022, p. 6) polemicize with Isnart and Cerezales, citing their statement: "the divorce between religion and cultural heritage is not a universal rule and the religious metaphor increasingly blurs this issue. Religious buildings, rituals, and objects do not always lose their original religious values and powers when entering the heritage realm" (Isnart and Cerezales 2020, p. 14) and adding "but their [Isnart's and Cerezales'] perception that religion and cultural heritage might overlap in practice does not constitute a convincing rebuttal that these two categories are aligned with and predicated on two different types of valuation" (van den Hemel et al. 2022, p. 6). Thus, van den Hemel, Salemink and Stengs consistently emphasize the dichotomy between the religious and the secular. In my own estimation, such an approach may stymie the study of many cases in which the "heritage gaze" and "lived religion" are difficult to separate, or religious practice also constitutes heritage practice.

Heritage created within the framework of lived religion may also be perceived in terms of living heritage (see Poullos 2014; Gilchrist 2020), since it is practiced on an ongoing basis, and forms a part of people's experience. It stems from communities and their needs. For this reason, "a living heritage is a changing heritage" (Holtorf and Fairclough 2013, p. 202). Such an approach to heritage puts the most emphasis on grassroots involvement in its creation and the fact that its users share the same values. Although in the case under scrutiny the state and the local administration also play a significant role, which is why it can be interpreted in terms of heritage regimes (see de Cesari 2012), religious values transmitted and preserved within heritage are endorsed by the faithful and involved in its promotion. As Roberta Gilchrist (2020) indicates, the analysis of lived heritage should be expanded to include spirituality, which is an integral aspect of the relation with heritage and the living thereof.

In my opinion, cases that involve heritage spirituality and religion, and refer to all these spheres require a separate approach. Scholars present complex and multiform relations between heritage and religious practices, and the shared use of places of worship by tourists and believers (see Coleman and Bowman 2019; Coleman 2019); they also notice how heritage discourses are used by religious communities (see Niedźwiedź 2019; Isnart and Cerezales 2020). In order to accurately portray the elaborate, layered relations between heritage and religion, Isnart and Cerezales (2020, p. 6) introduce the term "religious heritage complex", which "describes the continuity between the *habitus* of conservation of the past within religious traditions and a conscious *policy* regarding the care of the past in heritage contexts", and "is a theoretical tool to capture the coexistence of two different layers of values attributed to religious practices and materiality".

In the case of the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw, which is the focus of the present study, the separation of these two layers (the heritage and the religious) is possible to an extent, yet the decision to do so would limit the interpretation of the phenomenon under scrutiny. I wish to present an example of the Roman Catholic Church becoming the principal heritage custodian and stakeholder, and the military past being incorporated into a heritage discourse that—contrary to the statements made by [van den Hemel et al. \(2022, p. 5\)](#)—directly promotes “transcendental and religious values”. This is because the preservation of such values is precisely the mission of the Roman Catholic Church ([Niedźwiedź 2019, p. 195](#)). Thus, it creates heritage aimed at reinforcing and propagating the principles that lie at the core of that denomination; moreover, it does so under the assumption that these values are prevalent and universal ([Baraniecka-Olszewska 2023](#)). Pope John Paul II and his successor Benedict XVI explicitly incorporated heritage discourse into the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church ([Niedźwiedź 2019, p. 195](#)); however, this practice is implicitly noticeable not only in the activities of ecclesiastical institutions, but also in the creation of national heritage in Poland (see [Baraniecka-Olszewska 2019](#)).

In the case under scrutiny, heritage ought not to be understood as a global concept imposed top-down, but as a vernacular category—living heritage—that is used by different groups (see [van den Hemel et al. 2022, p. 5](#)), some of which may be religious communities and institutions. They actively participate in the shaping of heritage, and take over existing discourses and practices to adapt them to their purposes. This is not to mean that religious discourse is fundamentally inclusive and has no designs for hegemony or authoritarian aims. In the case of Roman Catholic heritage in Poland, its dominant character makes it difficult for other religious group to make their heritage present in the public sphere (see [Baraniecka-Olszewska 2019, 2022, 2023](#)). Thus, any reflection on that phenomenon must be critical *a priori*. As regards the present article, however, my aim is to draw attention to the fact that in many cases the study of religious heritage requires different tools than invoking the secular concept of heritage.

The works of the aforementioned scholars pertain to cases in which religious heritage emerges in the process of the heritagization of space or an object of worship ([Meyer 2019](#); [Salemink et al. 2020](#); [van den Hemel et al. 2022](#)). In brief: the religious becomes heritage, thereby gaining additional secular functions. In this work, I focus on a process that has the opposite direction, namely, when religious heritage is created as a result of secular events being appropriated and reinterpreted by the Roman Catholic Church. Presenting ethnographic material from anniversary events commemorating the Battle of Warsaw, I intend to discuss the causality of space and the influence of its materiality on the creation of religious heritage. The main point of focus is the role that the battlefield in Ossów plays in the emergence of this phenomenon. It was one of the places where the fate of the Russo–Polish war of 1920 was decided.

3. The Heritage of the Battle of Warsaw

The Battle of Warsaw comprised a series of clashes between the Polish forces and the Red Army that took place over several days during the Russo–Polish war of 1919–1921. It was fought between 13 and 25 August 1920, and stopped the Soviet offensive on Warsaw in its tracks. It was one of the most important military confrontations in Polish history, which is why the battlefields, monuments and war cemeteries are regarded as parts of the national heritage and the heritage of the region of Mazovia,¹ in which the battle took place. The earlier successes of the Soviet forces and their advantage in numbers did not bode well for the defenders of the Polish capital. Ultimately, however, the simultaneous operation along several front lines allowed Polish forces to successfully engage the Soviets and halt their advance on Warsaw. The tide of the war started to turn at Ossów (13–14 August) and Radzymin (13–16 August). The Red Army offensive was disrupted ca. 15 km from the capital, opening the way to a Polish victory, first in the Battle of Warsaw, and then in the war.

The process of heritagization of the Battle of Warsaw began after the political transformations of the 1990s and the fall of Communism and gained more momentum in the 21st century. It developed along two axes, involving both the state authorities and the local administration and activists from the towns in which the clashes had taken place. The Roman Catholic Church has been a part of that process from the very beginning. Memorial plaques, monuments and crosses have been consecrated by the clergy. Religious services have been held for the combatants, and to give thanks to the Virgin Mary for her intercession in the battle. The figure that has become central in the heritage of the battle of Warsaw is father Ignacy Skorupka, chaplain of the Polish Army. He was killed at Ossów, most likely by a stray bullet. In narratives pertaining to the clash and its visual representations, however, he is depicted running at the head of the Polish troops, a cross held high in his outstretched hand, imploring soldiers to put their trust in God, to turn their lives over to the care of the Virgin Mary, and to fight fearlessly for their homeland (see [Ochman 2017](#)). The heritage of the Battle of Warsaw was shaped under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church and supported by its authority. It incorporated certain myths about the battle (described below), which arose soon after the end of the Russo–Polish war. The contemporary heritage discourse facilitated their re-emergence and modification, while their original connection to the Roman Catholic Church paved the way for the history of the Battle of Warsaw to be integrated into the framework of religious heritage.

Discussing the heritage of English cathedrals, [Coleman \(2019, p. 125\)](#) notes that temples need to develop exhibition and display techniques, just as museums had to learn to present religion, implying that the models of depicting heritage originate from outside religious practice. In my own analysis, however, I am more inclined to agree with [Isnart and Cerezales \(2020\)](#), who indicate that many religious communities have developed their own methods of preserving and transmitting knowledge, history and practices. The Roman Catholic Church draws from this experience when performing the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw. In liturgy, prayer, iconography, gestures commemorating the fallen and religious theatre, the secular military victory and its immense significance has consequently been incorporated into religious history. Today, this process is applied not only to shaping the memory of the war of 1920, but also to creating the heritage associated with the battlefield.

4. Sacralization of History, Sacralization of Heritage

The Battle of Warsaw is also known under another name: the Miracle on the Vistula. The history of the military confrontations in 1920 is intertwined with events of religious significance. Faced with the Red Army's advance on Warsaw in early August 1920, the bishops appealed to the city's residents to pray for its successful defense. Novenas for victory over the enemy were held for nine successive days; a procession bearing the relics of Bl. Andrzej Bobola (now a patron saint of Poland in the Roman Catholic Church) and Bl. Władysław of Gielniów (now the patron saint of Warsaw in the Roman Catholic Church) passed through the streets of the capital. The latter event allegedly had ca. hundred thousand participants. Services for the Polish victory were also organized in the Marian sanctuary of Jasna Góra in Częstochowa.²

The military plan for the battle could be described as bold. Poland's victory hinged on the success of several maneuvers that had to be done simultaneously. Ultimately, the less numerous Polish forces managed to defeat the Red Army. For the Polish State, newly re-established in 1918 after decades of foreign rule, winning the Battle of Warsaw and consequently the war was profoundly important, as it halted the Soviet westward offensive. Due to the significance of that outcome, as well as the political situation in the country, the battle was quickly mythologized ([Ochman 2017, p. 3](#)). Identifying the subjects responsible for the victory became a political issue. The religious interpretation of the Battle of Warsaw was allegedly promoted, for instance, by the opponents of Poland's Chief of State Józef Piłsudski, who was not only one of the authors of the military plan, but also had a hand in its implementation. His political adversaries belittled his achievements, instead pointing to the decisive role of divine intercession and providence ([Ochman 2017](#)).

Regardless of political views, the belief that the clashes in 1920 had involved a divine intervention was widespread and expressed by both the Church and the state authorities. In the 1920s and 1930s alone, three votive churches were erected as thanksgiving for Poland's victory. One of these is located in Rembertów, not far from the battlefield; two are found in Warsaw, in districts on the eastern bank of the Vistula. The altarpieces of these churches feature paintings illustrating the Virgin Mary's role in the victory of the Polish Army. In 1930 the painter Jerzy Kossak completed the work entitled *Miracle on the Vistula* (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A copy of Jerzy Kossak's painting *The Miracle on the Vistula* displayed in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory in Ossów, photo by author, Ossów 15 August 2020.

The very center of the painting shows chaplain Ignacy Skorupka leading the Polish assault on the Red Army with a cross in his hand. In the upper left of the canvas, Holy Mary is seen suspended over the battlefield, in a cloud she shares with spectral shapes of hussar³ troops, symbolically supporting the Polish forces fighting below. The painting is an apt visualization of the myth of the campaign fought in August 1920, which emerged soon after the Russo–Polish war.

According to this mythologized version of event, the victory in the Battle of Warsaw came as a result of the prayers of the Polish people, and the Virgin Mary's intercession which led to divine intervention. The person who incited the Polish troops to battle was none other than the brave chaplain Skorupka. From the very beginning, interpretations of the Battle of Warsaw were built around divine intervention and the deep faith of the Polish people. Such a portrayal of historical events appeared not only in narratives controlled by the Church; it was also promoted by the authorities that sponsored the votive churches. Furthermore, the religious story of the victory in the Battle of Warsaw was presented in some of the plays written and staged in the 1920s and early 1930s (see [Ratajczakowa 1994](#)) and permeated the press (see [Bańdo 2020](#)). Although the events of August 1920 were not invariably perceived in terms of divine intervention, it was this interpretation that delineates the point of contact between the history of the Russo–Polish war and lived religion, which now makes it possible for Roman Catholic heritage to be constructed around these historical events.

In recent years, the religious interpretation of Poland's victory scored against the Red Army in August 1920 has experienced something of a resurgence. In the People's

Republic of Poland established after WWII, narratives that presented the outcome of the Battle of Warsaw in terms of a “miracle”, or even openly mentioned any conflict with the Bolsheviks, were simply incompatible with Communist propaganda (see [Przybysz 2011](#)). It was not until the political transformation and the associated anti-Communist revision of history that an official social memory of that conflict could emerge (see [Ochman 2017](#)). The current state historical policy aims, among other things, at revising the manner in which Poland’s history was presented by the Communist authorities ([Traba 2010](#)). The fact that knowledge regarding the Battle of Warsaw was deliberately eliminated from public discourse in the People’s Republic of Poland has now resulted in information on the 1920 events being not only put into circulation, but even referred to in the construction of national identity. At the same time, these processes have been conducive to the heritagization of sites associated with the Russo–Polish war. Battlefields, war cemeteries and monuments commemorating military clashes of that conflict became a part of the Polish cultural heritage ([Ochman 2017](#)). As the memory of the Battle of Warsaw was revived and its heritage emerged, the anniversaries of the event began to be celebrated. Contemporary forms of commemorating the battle at Ossów include religious motifs woven into the story of the Battle of Warsaw. Thus, they perform the history of the “Miracle on the Vistula”, setting it in a specific location—on the sacralized battlefield, which is now identified as a site of a divine intervention.

5. The Battlefield at Ossów

The following analysis focuses on two events that lead to the sacralization of the battlefield and affect the process of creating the religious heritage of the Battle of Warsaw: the solemn Mass for Polish soldiers, and the reenactment of the battle at Ossów. This is because in Ossów religious heritage has a specific location (see [Knott 2005](#)) and an area of direct influence. It is set at the site of a military confrontation and has a connection to the materiality of the space and the materiality of its commemoration. Examining the interrelation of space and heritage, as well as the process of sacralization that accompanies it, is therefore a crucial element in the study of the religious heritage of the Battle of Warsaw. Such an approach facilitates the analysis of phenomena that are not easily categorized in a dichotomous view of secular and religious practices.

Battlefields commonly become an element of heritage (see [Chronis 2005](#); [Miles 2017](#)) and are visited by tourists. Such visits often lead to modifications in identity, identification with those who fought there and experiencing the past ([Lloyd 1998](#); [West 2008](#)). Not infrequently, visits to battlefields turn into pilgrimages. In such cases, the sites of battles become “sacred spaces” that engender spiritual rapture and specific kinds of emotions or feelings but are also conducive to prayer and contemplation. Visitors to these sites thus build connections to the people who gave their lives there, are presented with an opportunity to confront their own worldview with the choices made by those soldiers and consider the values that prompted them to make the ultimate sacrifice ([West 2008](#)). The materiality of the sites and the chance to haptically experience the physical space in which people fought, suffered and died gains a particular importance. Being personally present on a battlefield makes it possible to become immersed in the past, but also to contact a particular type of the sacred—the site of a sacrifice ([Baraniecka-Olszewska 2018](#)). Although battlefields also facilitate critical relations with the past ([West 2008](#); see [Digance 2003](#)), the experience of identification with the combatants, and feelings of admiration towards them, are still present ([Iles 2008](#)). In Ossów, the sacralization of the battlefield stems from the commemoration of the heroic struggle, the blood spilled and the lives cut short. The site is visited by tourists, but also pilgrims from Roman Catholic organizations who come there to pray, light grave lanterns and lay flowers.

Nowadays, Ossów is the location of events commemorating each successive anniversary of the Battle of Warsaw. The ceremonies held there are attended by representatives of the Polish government, local politicians, Church dignitaries, tourists, pilgrims, as well as the inhabitants of towns and villages in the vicinity. My field research in Ossów was

conducted over the period of several years; the present article, however, will refer only to the material gathered during the commemoration of the 99th and centennial anniversary of the battles (in the year 2019 and 2020). The year 2019 saw the last “complete” event; although 2020 marked the centennial anniversary of the battle, the restrictions introduced in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the scale of the event was greatly reduced. Every year—with the exception of the centenary of the battle—the program of the commemoration involved three permanent features: a service in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory, a historical reenactment of the Battle of Ossów and a family picnic. In 2020 the reenacted battle did not take place. Thus, official commemoration involving representatives of the state authorities were limited to Church rituals; the full schedule of events returned in 2021. No interpretation of the development of the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw can be complete without an analysis of the historical reenactment of the clashes at Ossów in 1920. Thus, the present article contains references to the reenactment event organized in 2019 and the ecclesiastical ceremonies held in 2020.

6. The Historical Reenactment of the Clashes at Ossów

The reenactment of the battle at Ossów plays a significant role in the process of sacralization of the battlefield. The battle is reenacted on an annual basis on 15 August, one day after the anniversary of the Polish victory in that confrontation. In Poland, 15 August is celebrated as the Armed Forces Day⁴ and the day of the Assumption of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church. It is a bank holiday, which is why the anniversary events may attract large crowds of spectators. The reenactment takes place directly after the solemn Mass at the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory in Ossów, so that the guests invited to attend the liturgy could also see the reenacted battle. The script for the event remains essentially the same every year, and although the exact location changes, it is always organized near the sanctuary and the historical battle grounds.

In 2019, the reenactment was staged on a large meadow close to the sanctuary, by the road leading to the original battlefield. Politicians and Church dignitaries took their seats on the VIP stand; ordinary spectators stood in a dense crowd on the platforms and along the tapes cordoning off the space of the reenacted battle. The organizers, going against the ethos of historical reenactment as such (see [Cook 2004](#); [Gapps 2009](#)), designed many elements of the presentation to be purely conventional, as the crux of the message lay in narration and relationship with the space, not historical accuracy. This is not to mean that all other historical reenactment events present history in a much more reliable fashion, only that they invest in portraying past events rather than highlighting a particular interpretation. Before the reenacted scene began, the spectators could see a mockup hamlet—several tiny houses with thatched roofs—with ditches imitating trenches dug between them, and a cross placed at the center of the miniature village.

The spectacle started with a conversation between Ossów’s residents watching the smoke rise in the distance—a sign that fighting was going on not too far away. After a while, a wachmeister rode up to them to announce that soldiers would be digging trenches in the nearby meadows and that help from the locals was needed. Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a group of refugees, fleeing the surrounding villages already engulfed in the fighting. The narrator informed the spectators of the difficult situation of the Polish troops and the Soviet offensive nearing Warsaw. In the next scene, the Red Army’s assault on the village began. Set on fire, the farmhouses burned in front of the audience, while their inhabitants turned to run. The Polish soldiers attempted to hold their positions but were overrun by the Red Army. Their defeat was symbolically marked by the Soviets toppling down the cross at the center of the village (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Reenactment of the battle at Ossów, Red Army soldiers are toppling the village cross, photo by author, Ossów 15 August 2019.

The Poles withdrew, and the reenactors impersonating Red Army soldiers could be heard making plans how to celebrate their victory upon taking Warsaw in a few days' time. With that mindset, they advanced on the retreating Polish forces. It was at that moment that the chaplain Ignacy Skorupka appeared on the battlefield. Raising a cross in his arm, he implored the Polish soldiers to entrust themselves to the Virgin Mary and move forward

with faith, to fight for the freedom of their homeland: “Gentlemen, do not be troubled! *Sursum corda!* Our Lord will grant us victory through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, our Queen. Before the day of the Ascension of the Hetmaness⁵ of our forces is done, our hearts shall rejoice at having prevailed over the Muscovite foe. It shall be hard, it shall be bloody, but Our Lord God and the Most Holy Lady will help us” (Figure 3). Hearing these words, the Poles launched a counterattack.



Figure 3. Reenactment of the battle at Ossów, father Ignacy Skorupka leads the charge of the Polish troops, photo by author, Ossów 15 August 2019.

In the tumult of battle many soldiers fell; nurses rushed about to tend to them on the reenacted battlefield. Father Skorupka knelt by one of the wounded—and at that moment was hit by a bullet. The narrator informed the spectators that there were no nurses to take care of the wounded priest, and that his death initially went unnoticed in the chaos. The audience also learned of a shift in the balance of power in the battle, and the incoming reinforcements for the Polish army. The Red Army troops were surrounded and forced to retreat. Polish soldiers reentered the village of Ossów, hoisted the cross toppled by the Soviets, and laid beneath it the body of father Skorupka, which they had discovered in the battlefield. The villagers came to pay respects to the deceased priest. In the final scene, they were praying by his body, beneath the cross (Figure 4).

The item that served as the focal point of the entire reenacted scene was the cross—the one in the village, toppled and raised again, and the one held up by father Skorupka. Although presenting the general outline of the fighting at Ossów, the reenactment reproduced the religious interpretation of the event. It was faith—juxtaposed with the Soviet atheism (manifested by the destruction of the cross)—that led the soldiers to victory. Before father Skorupka reminded the troops of the protection of the Virgin Mary, the battle had been going according to the Red Army’s plan. Only the act of entrusting themselves to God and his aid allowed the Poles to win the confrontation. Even though the scene presented military maneuvers to the sounds of gunshots and explosions, and the wounded and dead fell to the ground, it seems that the efforts of the soldiers were not enough to secure a victory. The way the reenactment unfolded indicated that it was only the heroism of father Skorupka and his sacrificial death that brought about the defeat of the Red Army.



Figure 4. Reenactment of the battle at Ossów, people praying over the body of father Ignacy Skorupka, photo by author, Ossów 15 August 2019.

In a sense, the reenactment of the battle at Ossów was an example of religious theatre. It was a spectacle about trusting in God and the intercession of the Virgin Mary. Thus, historical reenactment performed not only the military achievements of the Polish troops, but also religious history. The confrontation between Polish and Soviet soldiers was put into the framework of a struggle between religion and atheism, an archetypal fight between good and evil. The battlefield, in turn, became a site marked by the sacred: the sacrifice of father Skorupka, as well as the space of divine intervention. The performance did not portray the supernatural aid literally, unlike the aforementioned painting by Jerzy Kossak, yet the presentation of the battlefield was fully consistent with the narrative of the “Miracle on the Vistula”.

Historical reenactment sacralizes the battlefield, while also corroborating the religious nature of the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw. The reenacted scenes presented the battleground at Ossów as the site of a triumph of faith, and the Hetmaness Virgin Mary mentioned by the actor playing Ignacy Skorupka as one of the combatants. In his synthetic analysis, Brian Porter (2005, p. 155) writes that in the case of Poland “Mary was both monarch and field commander, both the crowned embodiment of power and the active leader of Polish troops in battle”. The militant Mother of God, depicted on the banners and supporting soldiers in their fight, is a part of the Catholic religious imagery, both in Poland (Niedźwiedź and de Busser 2009; Niedźwiedź 2010; Porter 2005) and in other countries (Turner and Turner 1978). This is precisely the image of the Virgin Mary that appears in Kossak’s painting—she commands the spectral hosts of the hussars to rouse the soldiers to action. According to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, the battlefield at Ossów is a sacred space, hallowed not only by the blood of the fallen but also the aid of a saint and divine intervention. The same image is replicated in historical reenactment, which presents the story of the “miracle”, thus performing the sacral aspect of the site of the battle in a location where the physical connection to the original events amplifies the significance of the spectacle.

7. The Holy Mass at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory in Ossów

A lavish celebration was planned for the centenary of the Battle of Warsaw in 2020. A monument commemorating the confrontation was to be erected in the center of the capital city; and a dedicated museum was to be opened in Ossów. Some of these plans were foiled by the COVID-19 pandemic (which prevented the organization of many activities in the public sphere and made a grand celebration impossible), but also by funding gaps. Consequently, the centennial anniversary events were rather modest, and the most ceremonial part proved to be the solemn Mass (Figure 5). The liturgy was held in the chapel of the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory, in the war cemetery which is the resting place of the soldiers who fell in the battle at Ossów.



Figure 5. Mass at the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory in Ossów, photo by author, Ossów 15 August 2020.

The chapel was erected in 1928–1929. In 1944, the outskirts of Warsaw became the grounds of a tank battle between German troops and the Red Army. It resulted in the destruction of many villages and towns in the vicinity, including Ossów. The same fate befell the war cemetery from 1920 and the sanctuary. After WWII, when Poland was under Communist rule, the area was a part of a military training ground and was, therefore, inaccessible to the public. By limiting access to the space, the authorities of the day were also able to manage the memory, or rather the non-remembrance, of the battle. It was only in 1978 that the cemetery and the area around the sanctuary were excluded from the training grounds, due to the efforts of the local clergy. The sanctuary underwent reconstruction in the 1980s and is now a memorial site to the Battle of Warsaw and a destination of pilgrimages. The interior of the chapel is filled with paintings, plaques and mementos of the clashes that took place in 1920. Among them is a copy of Kossak's *Miracle on the Vistula*, as well as are depictions of father Skorupka, including one that portrays him lifting a cross with the Virgin Mary above him. The commemorative plaques on the walls include one that informs of Pope John Paul II's visit to the chapel, and one dedicated to chaplain Skorupka "on the 90th anniversary of his death and the glory of 'the Miracle on the Vistula'". The altar features a painting of Our Lady of Victory. It is a copy of the depiction of Our Lady of Częstochowa—a miracle-working image of the patron saint of Poland (see [Niedźwiedź 2010](#)), to which prayers for the successful defense of the capital

were made in August 1920. The copy at Ossów gained its own separate identity, becoming Our Lady of Victory—the depiction of the saint that helped defeat the Red Army.

On 15 August 2020, the day of the Assumption of Mary, a solemn Mass for the soldiers involved in the Battle of Warsaw was celebrated in the sanctuary. It was also a Mass to give thanks to the Virgin Mary for her intercession, and to God for intervening in the conflict. The liturgy started at 9:30 a.m. It was led by abp. Stanisław Gądecki, and concelebrated by more than a dozen priests, including the bishop of the Warsaw-Praga diocese, Romuald Kamiński, who celebrates the commemorative Mass on non-decennial anniversaries. The service was held outside of the chapel, in the pine grove within the grounds of the war cemetery. Due to the pandemic-induced restrictions, people were required to maintain social distancing; thus, the several hundred participants spread over a large area. The Mass was attended by delegates of the highest state authorities: a representative of the President of Poland, the Speaker of the Sejm, several ministers and their deputies, ambassadors, as well as representatives of the local administration from the towns and villages in the vicinity. The Mass itself was preceded by the public reading of official letters from members of the government. They all acknowledged the valor of Polish soldiers and the tactical genius of the commanders, but also mentioned the role Poland had played in defending Christian Europe from the Soviet invasion and expressed thanks to the Virgin Mary for her aid. The Head of the Office for War Veterans and Victims of Oppression, minister Jan Kasprzyk, ended his letter by stating openly that “God granted us victory”. Thus, the religious ceremony became an official state celebration, while the religious interpretation of the events of 1920 was the one promoted by official state media.⁶

The sermon of the Mass was delivered by abp. Gądecki.⁷ His homily is a good example of how the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church have put the events of 1920 within the framework of religion, sacralizing the battlefield, validating the religious interpretation of the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw and creating Roman Catholic heritage. The archbishop emphasized that the Mass was being held at the location when the aforementioned events had unfolded. He began his sermon by citing the counsel issued by Pope Benedict XV in August 1920, for Poles wishing to secure a victory to entrust their fate to the Virgin Mary and pray the Rosary to her on the day of the Assumption. He also recalled the words of chaplain Skorupka, who is said to have foretold that the Polish victory would come on that very day. Archbishop Gądecki provided two examples of clashes from August 1920 which were, as he emphasized, impossible for Poles to win from the military standpoint: the one at Wólka Radzyńska (the Battle of Radzymin) and at Ciechanów.⁸ According to the archbishop, historians have described the Polish victories in these confrontations as “irrational”. At the same time, these incidents were instrumental in the triumph of the Polish forces in the Battle of Warsaw, and ultimately in the entire Russo–Polish war. To help explain these “irrational” wins, abp. Gądecki recalled the statement made in December 1920 by Józef Teodorowicz, the archbishop of the Armenian Catholic Church in Lviv: “Our Lord granted us the grace of victory and gave us a miracle at Warsaw through the agency of the One that is Queen of Poland. A priest working in the military hospital told me that Russian soldiers assured him and described how they had seen the Blessed Virgin over Warsaw, cloaking the Polish capital with her robe. And similar testimonies came from various sources”. The archbishop concluded his homily with the statement: “It was a victory so great that it could not be explained with purely natural causes, which is why it was called the Miracle on the Vistula”. That miracle, he emphasized, had been paid for with the sacrifice of the soldiers who “now rest here in the ground drenched in their blood”. The sermon had an additional pacifist overtone, warning against the madness of war. The archbishop also put emphasis on the importance the memory of the Battle of Warsaw has for future generations.

The homily was followed by the crowning of the image of Our Lady of Victory (Figure 6). The archbishop placed decorative metal crowns above the heads of Mary and the child Jesus held in her arm. This is an official procedure in the Roman Catholic Church, intended to elevate the status of specific sacred images. It is applied to depictions of the

Virgin Mary, predominantly those recognized as miracle-working. The canonical coronation of an image sanctions its veneration and authenticates its supernatural influence. Performed on the centennial anniversary of the battle, the crowning of the image of Our Lady of Victory in Ossów served as corroboration of the saint's involvement in the conflict. Thus, with yet another gesture the Roman Catholic Church authorized the religious interpretation of the history of the Russo–Polish war of 1920.



Figure 6. The crowned image of Our Lady of Victory in the Sanctuary in Ossów, photo by author, Ossów 15 August 2020.

The activities mentioned above (abp. Gądecki's sermon, the reading of letters from government officials, and the coronation of the image) all referred directly to religious values: first and foremost, to the faith in God that had saved Warsaw, Poland and the entirety of Europe from the Soviet offensive and the threat of atheism. The heritage of the Battle of Warsaw is therefore actively used by Church institutions, state authorities and local administration precisely to promote religious values. In this case, however, merging religion with heritage may be exclusionary in nature, since not everyone identifies with the mentioned values. However, the fusion of religious values and heritage, on the one hand, allows the Roman Catholic Church to consolidate its dominant position in the public sphere and extend its influence over yet another space (see [Baraniecka-Olszewska 2023](#)). On the other, it enables local and state authorities to use heritage discourse (as well as religious practice) to promote its policies.

This state of affairs contributes to the consolidation of the identity project of the "Polish-Catholic". In her analysis of religious pluralism in Poland, Agnieszka Pasięka coined the term "hierarchical pluralism", demonstrating that, despite being heavily criticized as a very narrow concept of identity, the "Polish-Catholic" compound does constitute a certain model normalizing religious views as related to identity ([Pasięka 2015](#)). "The normativity of being 'Polish-Catholic'—promoted in various ways by the discourses of the Polish state and the Catholic Church and grounded in local perceptions—suggests that the people who are most likely to reject this kind of claim are those who find themselves outside this normative frame" ([Pasięka 2015](#), p. 10). Geneviève Zubrzycki notes that, in Poland, the memory of alternative identities is removed from public space, in spite of the fact that "Catholicism has not always been, as nationalists claim, the hallmark of the Polish nation" ([Zubrzycki 2006](#), p. 21). Presently, however, the right-wing policy of the state promotes the

mono-ethnic and mono-denominational identity of Polish-Catholics. The heritage of the Battle of Warsaw fits into the framework of this identity project. The acts of externalizing that heritage using crosses, temples and chapels determine its religious interpretation. Its source, in turn, is found in the sacral dimension of the battlefield: the site of divine intervention which has become the destination of pilgrimages, a set design in religious plays and a religious heritage site.

8. Conclusions: Sacralization of the Ossów Battlefield

Today, the battleground at Ossów is marked with a cross. It serves as a monument to father Ignacy Skorupka and stands at the presumed site of his death. It also constitutes a stop on the heritage route known as “The Battle of Warsaw Route”. In Ossów, parts of the battlefield have been left undeveloped—admittedly, some of it is overgrown with a forest, yet there is a sizable stretch of a mown meadow that creates the impression of a space separate from its surroundings. It is where the cross commemorating the death of father Skorupka is located (Figure 7).

In its material aspect, that meadow is connected with the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory near the war cemetery, not only by virtue of their spatial proximity. The bodies of the fallen soldiers were moved from the battlefield and buried in the nearby cemetery in several collective graves. The material presence of the battle grounds actualizes the “Miracle on the Vistula”, combining the religious motifs with secular history in a specific space. The religious heritage of the Battle of Warsaw is a heritage in situ. Traces of the battle and symbols of divine intervention are materialized in the space of Ossów, delineating religious heritage.

Heritage emerges out of the relation with the battlefield and its proximity. This is because the process of shaping heritage is continuous and stems from successive actions (Smith 2006). At Ossów, the practices constituting heritage are religious in nature and belong in the category of lived religion. They include services, prayers and pilgrimages. In the case of religious heritage born of transforming sacral buildings into tourist attractions, opening sanctuaries to visitors or placing works of sacral art in museums, it is possible to identify secular heritage practices, the so-called “heritage gaze” (Salemink et al. 2020). However, the development and preservation of the national heritage of the Battle of Warsaw is managed by religious institutions and practices. The history of this confrontation was already integrated into the teachings of the Church in the 1920s and was propagated by religious institutions. Nowadays it is heritage discourse that has become the platform for the religious interpretation of the battles fought in 1920. The contemporary heritage boom allowed for stories from the interwar period to be rediscovered and incorporated into religious practices that are heritage practices as well. At the present stage, when the clashes of 1920 are undergoing the process of heritagization, the Roman Catholic Church remains the custodian of that heritage and determines its principal interpretation. Consequently, even events that are fundamentally secular, such as combat reenactment, portray the battlefield at Ossów as the arena of religious miracles. The religious dimension of the heritage of the Battle of Warsaw does not prevent it from being used for secular purposes, but it is inscribed into the materiality of the battlefield itself, as well as into the commemorative practices, symbolic gestures and physical markers of heritage: chapels, crosses, cemeteries, churches, memorial plaques. The experienced, tangible aspect of religious materiality is an instrument of heritagization for the Battle of Warsaw, accentuating the close connection between the discourse of religion and heritage. Physical contact with the heritage of the battle at Ossów facilitates religious experiences. Analyzing English cathedrals, Coleman and Bowman (2019, p. 18) present an example of a process of heritagization in which “sacralized history is turned into more secular, commodifiable forms”. At Ossów, the opposite is true: secular history is turned into more sacralized, religious form.



Figure 7. The battle grounds at Ossów and the cross commemorating the death of father Ignacy Skorupka, photo by author, Ossów 15 August 2020.

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Notes

- ¹ See: <http://dziedzictwomazowska.pl/szlak-bitwy-warszawskiej>; <http://ossow1920.pl/inauguracja-szlaku-bitwy-warszawskiej-1920/> (accessed on 3 October 2022).
- ² Jasna Góra is one of the more important Marian sanctuaries in Poland, and is the destination of many pilgrimages. It houses the miracle-working image of Our Lady of Częstochowa, the patron of Poland.
- ³ In the Kingdom of Poland, hussars were an elite formation of heavy cavalry known for their effectiveness in battle. They were also recognizable by their striking look, as the riders had wing-like structures fastened to their saddles.

- 4 The main public celebrations of the Armed Forces Day are held in Warsaw. They take place on 15 August and include the commemoration of the victory in the Battle of Warsaw. Although the battle is mentioned during the events, the nominal aim is to commemorate all clashes involving Polish forces.
- 5 Hetman is the historical rank of the military commander in chief. The title ‘hetmaness’ (*hetmanka*) would therefore be its female counterpart; the term is used almost exclusively in relation to the Virgin Mary.
- 6 See for example <https://niepodlegla.dzieje.pl/wydarzenie/abp-s-gadecki-w-ossowie-dziekujem> (accessed on 10 October 2022).
- 7 A recording of the entire liturgy is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aICyZmySfTA&t=5186s> (accessed on 12 October 2022).
- 8 It was the clash that broke the ranks of the Red Army, preventing them from rejoining the units fighting near Radzymin.

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