

EXPRESSIONS OF POLISH IDENTITY IN RESISTANCE TO NAZI OCCUPATION

Abstract:

This paper examines the role of Polish cultural identity and Polish Catholicism as a means of resistance against Nazi occupation during World War II. Poles used culturally coded signs and symbols to subvert Nazi authority and build morale for the armed resistance movement. This paper focuses especially on visual symbols of Polish identity such as posters, shrines, and statues.

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The Poles fought back against their foreign oppressor through active resistance, but also through culturally coded signs and symbols in the form of graffiti, shrines, and other public displays. Some symbols, like the Kotwica (anchor), carried ethnic and religious meaning, while other symbols, like the image of a turtle, had more practical purposes (organizing a work slow-down, in this case). The impromptu creation of shrines at sites of Poles murdered by Nazis was a widespread practice throughout Poland, which served to memorialize conflict between the Germans and the Poles, in order to further the dichotomous construction of their ethnicities. Much of Polish resistance was organized around ideas of Polish culture and nationalism, many of which were informed by the Catholic Church. Polish expressions of national identity in reaction to Nazi occupation shaped Poland's wartime experience.

The two resistance groups I will examine in detail are the Underground State and the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*), in terms of their forms of cultural resistance to Nazi occupation, as well as examining the actions of supposedly unaffiliated individual Poles. The Home Army was the military branch of the exiled Polish government in London.¹ The Underground State was the resistance government still clandestinely operating from within Poland. Polish resistance groups and their members and supporters were highly regarded by the general public, in fact "it was just as dangerous to serve the Germans as it was to join the resistance".² Both groups ran programs of cultural resistance which included patriotic displays of Polish identity, and whenever possible I will identify which group carried out which actions. Due to the anonymous nature of many of these representations, necessitated

¹ István Deák, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution During World War II* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 145.

² Deák, *Europe on Trial*, 147.

by the constant threat of Nazi reprisal, not every image, symbol, and action I will examine can be clearly attributed to a specific resistance group.

Displays of Nationality and Resistance

Graffiti is a visual representation of power, territory, and identity, and thus it held an important position in cultural resistance to German occupation. Although the anonymous nature of graffiti provided some protection for members of the resistance, there was real danger in using this method to communicate. High-ranking Nazi officials, including Hitler himself, paid close attention to “cultural policy” because they recognized the threat to their regime from free construction of national identity.³ Operations in Poland depended on day-to-day collaboration, which was only possible if Poles did not see their identities as fundamentally opposed to constructions of German identity. The imagery occupying public spaces defined and controlled narratives of occupation, so graffiti and the removal of German posters were considered crimes punishable by death.⁴ Some graffiti was spontaneous, but much of it was organized under the Home Army through the Bureau of Information and Propaganda (henceforth the BIP).⁵ The BIP separated propaganda by its aims, into three categories: positive propaganda, aimed at those already engaged in active resistance; counterpropaganda, meant to negate German propaganda; and written propaganda, which covered everything from graffiti to broadcasts.⁶ Under the BIP, the Directorate of Civil Resistance implemented programs to “depress and dishearten the

³ Alan E. Steinweis, “German Cultural Imperialism in Czechoslovakia and Poland, 1938-1945,” *The International History Review* 13, no. 3 (1991): 466.

⁴ Mordecai Paldiel, “Poland: The Historical Setting,” *Frontline*, 2014.

⁵ Stefan Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State: A Guide to the Underground, 1939-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Germans” through “demonstrations of patriotic feelings”.⁷ One of the Directorate’s most successful programs, Action N, headed by Tadeusz Zencyzykowski under the pseudonym Kania, consisted of small-scale actions like the making of graffiti⁸ as well as larger, more disruptive resistance.⁹ The BIP also produced pamphlets which were passed out to Poles sympathetic to the resistance (who were not necessarily officially involved in the movement). One set of pamphlets contained fifty thousand stickers with the image of a white eagle, Poland’s national symbol.¹⁰ Stickers were easy to quickly, and thus safely, place around Polish cities to create public, visual displays of Polish nationalism and undermine ideas of German authority and control. Official Underground State graffiti served practical purposes, too. For example, depictions of turtles let workers know that there was an organized work slow down in order to undermine German war efforts.¹¹ Graffiti allowed the resistance to produce large-scale, public communications, as well as to construct a Polish identity as the antithesis to German identity.

Nazi Responses to Polish Cultural Resistance

Graffiti and other forms of propaganda did not exist in a vacuum. Germans and Poles responded to each other through these media, so we must examine these interactions as a form of communication as well as a way to display identity and promote in-group morale. One common form of German-Polish interplay in propaganda was the defacing of German

⁷ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 81.

⁸ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 95.

⁹ Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and Poles in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 272.

¹⁰ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 68.

¹¹ Longina Jakubowska, “Political Drama in Poland: The Use of National Symbols,” *Anthropology Today* 6, no. 4 (1990): 11.

slogans on posters to change the meanings. For example, it was easy to take the phrase *Deutschland siegt an allen Fronten* (“Germany wins on all fronts”) and replace the “s” in *siegt* with an “l”, changing the meaning to “Germany is flat on her face on all fronts”.¹² Posters featuring SS General von Model were also commonly displayed, and Poles quickly edited his last name to read *Mörder*, or “murderer”.¹³ The Germans deployed similar tactics against Polish resistance, too. A Minor Sabotage Unit of the Underground State wrote the word “October” on thousands of walls and houses to commemorate the anniversary of German defeat in World War I.¹⁴ The German response was to paint “26” before “October” and add *vier Jahre des GG*, to change the meaning of the full phrase to “October 26, four years of the *General Gouvernement*”. The Poles responded in kind, editing the message once more by adding “and not a day longer”.¹⁵ Another common expression was *Deutschland verloren*, or “Germany is lost”.¹⁶ Its audience is clear, because it is written in German – the message was a tactic to intimidate the occupying force. Much of the battle for power and control was fought on city walls. Graffiti like this was everywhere, and served either as a reminder of German oppression or hope in the resistance, and neither message served the Nazis well.

¹² Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 94; Stanisław Likiernik, *By Devil's Luck: A Tale of Resistance in Wartime Warsaw* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2001), 88.

¹⁵ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 94.

¹⁶ See Image 1.

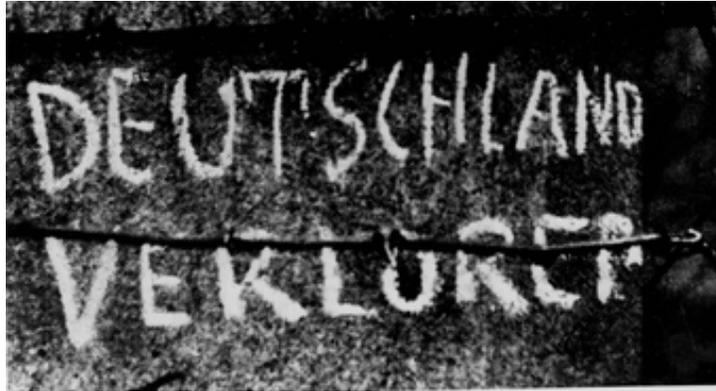


Image 1: Graffiti declaring “Germany is lost”. Photograph submitted to Yad Vashem archives by Alexander Bernfas.

Polish resistance and Nazi officials had a significant exchange over representations of Polish figures memorialized as statues, too. The plaque beneath a statue of Nicolaus Copernicus, the Polish astronomer and mathematician, was replaced by the Germans in 1942 with a plaque claiming that Copernicus was German.¹⁷ Some members of the resistance removed the sign. In response, the Nazis ordered the removal of a statue of Jan Kiliński, a leader in an eighteenth-century uprising against Russian rule. The Kiliński statue was hidden in the Polish National Museum, but once the resistance learned of its location, they wrote on the walls of the museum “People of Warsaw, I am here. –Kiliński”. The Nazis suspended food rations to Warsaw Poles for a week, only to find that a sign had been posted from “Nicolaus Copernicus” declaring a reprisal of an additional two months of winter on the eastern front – and, in fact, winter did last unusually long that year.¹⁸ The statue of Copernicus was of no tactical importance to the Underground State or the Home Army, but

¹⁷ Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed*, 274.

¹⁸ Ibid.

his rebranding as German threatened the movement's power to define for themselves what was Polish and thus became a flashpoint in Polish cultural resistance.

One significant way that Polish resistance responded to Nazi ordinances, which were publicly displayed, was to change them in ways that were harmful to the Germans, either in credibility, morale, or concrete tactical ways. These imposter orders were mostly organized by the BIP and carried out through Operation N.¹⁹ One set of false orders, requiring the registration of Polish cats, was posted and had begun to be carried out before Nazi officials realized they were following forged commands.²⁰ In addition, posted delivery schedules were changed by the BIP, which caused havoc for the administration and created considerable obstacles for the German war effort.²¹ To the same effect, notices were posted around Warsaw announcing that May 1, 1942 would be a paid holiday. Many Germans were deceived, and despite official Nazi efforts to enforce Polish labor, factories remained closed, and the German military manufacturing lost a full day of production.²² The BIP also circulated pamphlets purported to be written by German officials which contained satirical representations of Nazism. One, for instance, promoted Auschwitz's practicable and "humanitarian" methods of extermination.^{23,24} This type of resistance publicly undermined the authority of the Nazi leadership in Poland through their inability to identify orders of their own regime.

In planning cultural resistance to foreign oppression from the Nazis, the Polish resistance used Polish holidays to firmly plant the resistance movements as a part of Polish

¹⁹ Kochanski, *The Eagles Unbowed*, 272.

²⁰ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 94.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed*, 273.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 94.

national identity. On May 3rd, 1943, Poland's Constitution Day, which had been characterized by patriotic demonstrations prior to occupation, the Directorate of Civil Resistance seized control of the loudspeakers placed along the streets of Warsaw to play the Polish national anthem and other patriotic works. So many people gathered in the streets to listen that the Germans grew "anxious [and] slunk away quickly".²⁵ Nationalist displays did not always end so peacefully, however. Early in the occupation, on Polish Independence Day, November 11, 1939, Poles placed celebratory posters around Kraków. Hans Frank, Germany's Governor-General of Poland, ordered that one man should be executed from each home that displayed a poster. SS Chief Otto Wächter deemed this action insufficient and took one hundred and twenty hostages to ensure there were no further displays for Independence Day. He continued to take hostages for the same purpose in subsequent years.²⁶ Both the Poles and the Nazis understood the galvanizing force of a national holiday.

Catholicism as a Representation of Nationality

Even before Nazi occupation, many Poles used Roman Catholicism as a way to differentiate their political and national identities from other groups around them. In the year 966, King Mieszko I accepted Christianity from a papal envoy.²⁷ Because he did not accept the Orthodox Christianity of neighboring Russia, Poland's religion became a form of political distinction, especially after neighboring nations adopted Protestantism after the Reformation.²⁸ After the partition of 1795, Poles used Catholicism as a way to express national identity, and it was viewed as "a form of resistance to foreign domination and

²⁵ Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State*, 81.

²⁶ Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed*, 112.

²⁷ Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed*, 1.

²⁸ Jakubowska, "Political Drama in Poland," 11.

oppression by non-Catholic powers”.²⁹ Nazi officials understood the Church’s importance. Hans Frank kept a diary during occupation, and in an entry from 1940, he wrote, “The Church is a central rallying point for Polish minds, which radiates in silence and therefore functions as a perpetual light.”³⁰ Because of this, although Nazi policy towards expressions of patriotism were generally harsh, their policy towards expressions of religion was more lenient and strategically implemented. However, only parts of Polish identity which benefited the German regime were allowed to be expressed, which extended to expressions of Catholicism.³¹ The Nazis put out propaganda proclaiming Judaism as the absolute opponent of Christianity, using statements from the Pope and other Catholic leaders to lend credibility to their statements.³² The Nazis also fully recognized how dangerous expressions of Catholicism could be to their regime. Although they attempted to direct Catholic sentiment to become anti-Semitic, they also banned prayer books to try to quell additional nationalist passions among the Poles, though the press of the Underground State continued to print and distribute them.³³ Banning certain forms of worship and religious expression certainly furthered the dichotomy between Polish and German identities, and made Catholicism into even more of a political belief. Polish religiosity became greater during occupation, and every night at curfew, Catholics living in Warsaw would stand in their

²⁹ Mirella W. Eberts, “The roman Catholic Church and Democracy in Poland,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 5 (1998): 818.

³⁰ Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 42.

³¹ Klaus-Peter Friedrich, “Die deutsche polnischsprachige Presse im Generalgouvernement (1939-1945). NS-Propaganda für die polnische Bevölkerung,” *Publizistik* 45, no. 2 (2001): 163.

³² Friedrich, “Die deutsche polnischsprachige Presse im Generalgouvernement”, 178.

³³ Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State: My Report to the World* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 258.

courtyards with candles to say prayers and sing hymns.³⁴ Nazis recognized the cultural importance of Catholic traditions, and used them to punish Poles who aided Jews, by purposely burying their bodies in unconsecrated ground.³⁵ It didn't take long for expressions of Catholicism to become nearly synonymous with expressions of national resistance.

Polish resistance manipulated traditional forms of Catholic cultural expression to naturalize ideas of resistance as inevitably stemming from Polish Catholic identity. The Underground State's press printed and distributed the "Polish Lord's Prayer", which was learned by "thousands of boys and girls" in secret schools.³⁶ It contained all of the original prayer, with added lines about Poland's martyrdom. Lines like, "And forgive us our trespasses. Forgive us, Oh, Lord, should we be too weak to crush the beast. Strengthen our arm lest it tremble in the hour of revenge. They have sinned against Thee, they have trespassed on Thine eternal laws. Do not let us sin against Thee with weakness as they sin with criminal debauch"³⁷ entered into everyday religious ceremonies and observances. This enforced the idea of resistance as an extension and duty of religion. Saying the Lord's Prayer would have already been a ritual in the lives of Catholic Poles, so the integration of nationalist sentiments became a *natural* part of an already-familiar cultural expression. The use of shrines allowed Poles to perform their politicized religious identity in a public way, as well as to promote representations of German cruelty. On All Saints' Day of 1940, citizens of Krasnobród crowded in the cemetery, where several hundred Polish soldiers who had died in the 1939 campaign were buried. They laid wreaths and candles on the graves, put up Polish flags with the white eagle, lit red and white lamps, and placed rifles on the

³⁴ Bernard Goldstein, *Five Years in the Warsaw Ghetto* (Oakland: Nabat Books, 2005), 180.

³⁵ Paldiel, "Poland: The Historical Setting".

³⁶ Karski, *Story of a Secret State*, 256.

³⁷ Ibid.

graves of important officials. Nazi officials watched, but did not step in to prevent the display.³⁸ However, the majority of shrines were placed, primarily by women, spontaneously at the sites of executions.³⁹ They would leave flowers, candles, and religious artifacts where Poles had been killed by Nazis, then sit and pray. This drew attention to the deaths, and further painted Germans as cruel and murderous. Aware of the way these shrines were perceived and the way they functioned in resistance, at the sight of a large shrine, a German patrol “sprayed [the praying women] with machine-gun fire, leaving many dead and wounded”.⁴⁰ It is unlikely that this improved the image of Nazi cruelty.



³⁸ Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed*, 117.

³⁹ Jack Bell, “Street shrines in Warsaw Mark Nazi Atrocities,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 20, 1946.

⁴⁰ Likiernik, *By Devil’s Luck*, 108.

Image 2: The Black Madonna depicted with the white eagle. Image taken from The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe.

The Black Madonna of Częstochowa is a specifically Polish Catholic symbol, placing her image well within the bounds of national identity rather than the denoted religious identity. The Black Madonna is an image of Mary, holding the baby Jesus⁴¹, and this specific representation is considered the Queen of Poland⁴², which was officially sanctioned by King Jan Kazimierz in 1656.⁴³ Furthermore, she was “crowned” by Pope Clement XI in 1717 as “Queen of the World”⁴⁴. She is called the *Matka Polka* and the *Matka Polska*, Mother Pole and Mother Poland, and she is often called upon in battles against foreign oppressors.⁴⁵ Her legend claims that her icon saved Poland from an invasion by the Swedes in 1655, which led to her 1656 coronation, and performed various other miracles to protect Poles from outsiders.⁴⁶ In the traditional poem *Strażniczko granic*, she is described as the “Vigilant Queen of the outskirts and of the camps”, “dressed in the glory and metal brilliance of white eagles” who will “let not the enemy wound the Motherland”.⁴⁷ The Black Madonna’s role is much larger than that of a religious figure, then. She is used to represent Poland itself, symbolizing “the power of the weak”⁴⁸ through the intersection of her gender and important role in Christian doctrine. It must also be noted that the appeal of

⁴¹ See Images 2 and 3.

⁴² Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe*, 3.

⁴³ Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe*, 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe*, 39.

⁴⁶ Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe*, 18.

⁴⁷ Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe*, 39.

⁴⁸ Jakubowska, “Political Drama in Poland,” 12.

the Black Madonna transcends traditional social strata, unlike many Catholic holy figures, which allows her use as a symbol of all Catholic Poles.⁴⁹



Image 3: The Black Madonna with scenes of Polish resistance and text “Holy Virgin, Thou who defend the bright Częstochowa”. Image taken from The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe.

The BIP printed posters of several saints and religious figures, including the Black Madonna and Saint Barbara, which held political meaning and made visual representations more practicable for the individual Poles who received them. Much like the white eagle stickers, these posters made participation in public visual resistance easily accessible to officially unaffiliated Poles. Saint Barbara, according to Catholic tradition, was beheaded by

⁴⁹ Ibid.

her father after refusing to renounce her faith.⁵⁰ Catholicism in Poland almost always meant an identity which opposed the Nazi invader, so Barbara's maintenance of her faith symbolized the Poles' maintenance of the struggle against Nazism. Saint Barbara is also the patron saint of miners⁵¹, which in this context can be seen as the patron of those underground – the Underground State. Thus, when the public places of Warsaw were plastered with posters of Saint Barbara, she represented something far more political than religious.

Visual Displays of Religion, Nation, and Resistance



Image 4: The Kotwica. Photo submitted to Yad Vashem by Alexander Bernfas.

⁵⁰ *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary*, 30.

⁵¹ Peter Murray, Linda Murray, and Tom Devonshire Jones, "Barbara, Saint," *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art & Architecture* (2013).

One of the predominant symbols of Polish resistance is the “Kotwica” (literally “anchor”), an image that holds an explicit political meaning and an implicit religious meaning. The icon consists of an anchor made from the letter “P” connecting to the letter “W”, an acronym sometimes used alone and sometimes spelled out fully to read *Polska Walczaca*, or “Poland Fighting”.⁵² Anchors have long been a symbol of Polish Catholicism, too, similar to other Catholics’ symbolic use of fish scales, representing persecution of Christians.⁵³ Further symbolism can be found in the anchor imagery: an anchor’s purpose is to stay in place, to resist movement – just like the Underground State and Home Army were resisting the Nazis.



⁵² See Images 4 and 5.

⁵³ Jakubowska, “Political Drama in Poland,” 11.

Image 5: The Kotwica can be faintly seen beneath the bottom-right window panel on this storefront. Photograph taken by Guenther Schwarberg.

Graffiti showing scenes of Jesus' crucifixion was common, as was increased use of the crucifix in other settings. It holds an elevated political meaning based on Polish narratives of religion and nation. Not only is Christ's death central to Christian religion, the crucifixion narrative of both sacrifice and death *and* resurrection was meant to mimic Poland's own subjugated state, and the inevitability of its return. Even before Nazi occupation, Poland had been referred to as "the Jesus Christ of Nations", a comparison dating back to its 18th century patriots.⁵⁴ This representation is largely based on an unstated understanding of religious symbolism as it functioned politically, because this symbol would be impossible to separate from Christianity, which gave it a covert power in the everyday lives of Poles.

Under Nazi occupation, Poles used their religious and national identity to create cultural representations of resistance and to construct a new identity in opposition to German oppression. The Underground State, Home Army, and individual Poles risked their lives to protect their definitions of what it meant to be Polish. In Poland, the Catholic Church played a crucial role in the construction of a rebel identity during the Second World War partly because of its history in previous partitions. Cultural resistance should be taken seriously as an impediment to foreign regimes through its use as a means of intimidation, communication, and its ability to galvanize the public to act.

⁵⁴ Jakubowska, "Political Drama in Poland," 12.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Bell, Jack. "Street Shrines in Warsaw Mark Nazi Atrocities." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 20, 1946.
- Bernfas, Alexander. *Poland, A graffiti declaring "Poland is fighting"*. Yad Vashem Photo Archives.
- Bernfas, Alexander. *Warsaw, Poland, Graffiti reading: "Germany is lost"*. Yad Vashem Photo Archives.
- Goldstein, Bernard. *Five Years in the Warsaw Ghetto*. Oakland, California: Nabat Books, 2005.
- Hajenina, Lester. *Warsaw, Poland, An anti-German slogan drawn on a wall*. 1943. Yad Vashem Photo Archives.
- Karski, Jan. *Story of a Secret State: My Report to the World*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013.
- Schwarberg, Guenther. *Warsaw, Poland*. 1941. Yad Vashem Photo Archives.

Secondary Sources

- Deák, István. *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution During World War II*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2015.
- Eberts, Mirella W. "The Roman Catholic Church and Democracy in Poland." *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 5 (1998): 817+.
- Friedrich, Klaus-Peter. "Die deutsche polnischsprachige Presse im Generalgouvernement

- (1939-1945). NS-Propaganda für die polnische Bevölkerung.” *Publizistik* 45, no. 2 (2001): 162-188.
- Jakubowska, Longina. “Political Drama in Poland: The Use of National Symbols.” *Anthropology Today* 6, no. 4 (1990): 10-13.
- Kochanski, Halik. *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Korbonski, Stefan. *The Polish Underground State: A Guide to the Underground, 1939-1945*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.
- Likiernik, Stanisław. *By Devil’s Luck: A Tale of Resistance in Wartime Warsaw*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2001.
- Murray, Peter, Linda Murray, and Tom Devonshire Jones. “Barbara, Saint.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art & Architecture*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, Małgorzata. *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.
- Paldiel, Mordecai. “Poland: The Historical Setting.” *Frontline: Shtetl*. 2014.
- “Saint Barbara.” *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary*. 1st ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996. 30.
- Steinweis, Alan E. “German Cultural Imperialism in Czechoslovakia and Poland, 1938-1945.” *The International History Review* 13, no. 3 (1991): 466-80.