

Decision-Making in Cultural Heritage Security Management under Armed Conflict: A Case Study of Karol Estreicher*

Dariusz RAŚ¹, Anna PRUSAK² and Evelina KRISTANOVA³

¹Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków, Department of Communication, Poland,
ORCID: 0000-0002-8112-8748

²Department of Process Management, Krakow University of Economics, Kraków, Poland,
ORCID: 0000-0002-8344-658X

³Institute of Social Sciences, SWPS University,
ORCID: 0000-0003-4935-7417

Correspondence should be addressed to: Dariusz RAŚ, dariusz.ras@upjp2.edu.pl

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Abstract

This paper examines decision-making in cultural heritage security management through the case of Karol Estreicher Jr. (1906-1984), an art historian, university professor, and one of the leading figures involved in the protection and post-war restitution of Polish cultural heritage. The analysis focuses on his efforts to safeguard the Veit Stoss Altarpiece - one of the largest and most important late Gothic altarpieces in Europe - before, during, and after the Second World War. Using a retrospective case study approach, the analysis combines historical sources, a review of 177 press articles published between 1946 and 2021, contemporary legal regulations concerning the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts, and an interview with the current custodian of the Altarpiece. The findings show that many of the challenges resulted from the absence of formal protection plans, coordinated risk management, and institutional cooperation. The case also demonstrates how risks may be incorrectly identified and assessed under conditions of uncertainty. While the decision-makers primarily anticipated the threat of physical destruction resulting from bombing and military operations of the Nazi authorities, they underestimated the likelihood of cultural looting by the occupying forces. The study therefore highlights the importance of early planning, systematic risk assessment, scenario analysis, and stakeholder coordination in safeguarding cultural heritage before and during armed conflicts.

Keywords: cultural heritage security management, armed conflict, risk management, decision-making, Veit Stoss Altarpiece, Karol Estreicher, cultural heritage protection, wartime evacuation, press coverage

Introduction

Since the Second World War, the issue of cultural heritage security management has never been as relevant as it is today. Contemporary armed conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, have renewed interest in strategies for protecting cultural assets under conditions of uncertainty and risk. In Poland, one of the most frequently cited historical examples in discussions on heritage protection during wartime is the case of Karol Estreicher and his decision to evacuate the Veit Stoss Altarpiece from St. Mary's Basilica in Kraków in 1939.

The Great Altarpiece of St. Mary's Basilica in Kraków, commonly known as the Veit Stoss Altarpiece, is among the most extensively documented and researched monuments of Polish cultural heritage. Owing to its artistic significance and wartime history, it has attracted the attention of historians, art historians, journalists, filmmakers,

and heritage professionals for decades, although most of them are published in Polish language (i.a. Walczy 1983, Walczy 2012, Pencakowski and Gąsior 2025). More recently, the altarpiece has been analysed from the perspective of heritage management and conservation management, particularly in relation to the large-scale conservation project carried out in the years 2015-2021 (Raś *et al.* 2024). As a result, the Veit Stoss Altarpiece may be regarded not only as an exceptional work of art but also as a valuable case study in cultural heritage management, conservation planning, and heritage security.

The Altarpiece is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding achievements of late Gothic sculpture in Europe. Measuring approximately 13 metres in height and 11 metres in width when fully opened, it is also one of the largest Gothic altarpieces in the world. It was carved between 1477 and 1489 at the commission of the municipal authorities of medieval Kraków by the Nuremberg-born sculptor Veit Stoss (Wit Stwosz), whose work was financed through donations, foundations, and municipal funds. The total cost of the project amounted to 2808 florins, roughly equivalent to the annual budget of the city of Kraków at that time. Over the centuries, the altarpiece became one of the most important symbols of Poland's cultural identity (Pencakowski and Gąsior 2025).

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Karol Estreicher Jr. (1906-1984) - a well-established art historian, museologist, and university lecturer associated with the Jagiellonian University - initiated measures intended to safeguard one of Poland's most valuable cultural monuments from the anticipated consequences of military occupation. Although his actions have generally been regarded as a good example of cultural heritage protection, the decision itself continues to raise important questions concerning risk assessment, emergency planning, and decision-making under conditions of extreme uncertainty (Raś 2024a).

The present study employs a retrospective case study approach combining historical analysis, document analysis, media content analysis, and normative legal assessment. The history of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece has already been extensively documented in historical and art-historical scholarship and therefore does not require further reconstruction. Instead, the analysis focuses, for the first time, on the decision-making processes associated with the evacuation, concealment, recovery, and restitution of the altarpiece from the perspective of contemporary cultural heritage security management. Particular attention is devoted to the identification of risks, the evaluation of alternative courses of action, the coordination of stakeholders, and the consequences of decisions taken under conditions of uncertainty. The ultimate objective is to formulate recommendations that may contribute to the protection of cultural heritage assets during armed conflicts and other crisis situations. In this sense, the evacuation of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece remains one of the most instructive case studies in Polish cultural heritage security management and decision-making under uncertainty.

Decision-making background

The wartime loss of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece and the activities of Karol Estreicher have been extensively documented in both Polish and international literature. Detailed historical accounts can be found in Estreicher's own memoirs and wartime records, *Dziennik wypadków* (Journal of Events), a seven-volume series (published in eight physical books) covering the years 1939-1984 (Estreicher 2001-2013). Additional analyses can be found in studies on wartime cultural losses and restitution (Witek 2003, Kowalski 1998), examinations of Nazi art looting in Europe (Nicholas 1994, Kurtz 2009), publications concerning the restitution of Polish cultural property (Cieślińska-Lobkowicz 2008), as well as works devoted specifically to Estreicher's role in the protection and recovery of cultural heritage (Siewierski and Zielonka 2018). The post-war history of the altarpiece, including its conservation, exhibition at Wawel Castle, political disputes concerning its status, and its final return to St. Mary's Basilica in 1957, is discussed in detail by the aforementioned publications by Walczy (1992, 2009), Waltoś (2025) and Wolska (2019). Therefore, the following section provides only a concise historical overview necessary for understanding the decision-making processes analysed in this paper.

It should be emphasised that the evacuation of the retable was not a spontaneous decision taken in the final days before the outbreak of war. In 1938, following the Anschluss of Austria, Karol Estreicher began advocating measures aimed at protecting Kraków's most valuable cultural treasures. Acting through the Society of the Friends of History and Monuments of Kraków (in Polish: Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Zabytków Krakowa - TMHiZK), he repeatedly called for the preparation of emergency protection measures, including the establishment of a dedicated committee, the development of evacuation procedures, and the preparation of shelters for the city's most valuable monuments. Throughout 1938 and 1939, these proposals were discussed by municipal authorities, conservation services, church representatives, and government institutions. However, despite numerous meetings, memoranda, and consultations, these discussions produced no tangible results (Waltoś 2025, pp. 31-57).

The evidence suggests that Estreicher was among the very few individuals who consistently attempted to transform growing concerns about the approaching war into protective actions. Several months before the war, he even proposed transferring the Altarpiece to the United States, a solution that would correspond to what contemporary heritage protection standards described as preventive evacuation abroad. The proposal, however, was not approved by the Polish authorities. At the same time, the discussions initiated by TMHiZK revealed the limitations of the existing system. Although various institutions acknowledged the threat, no comprehensive protection plan, dedicated funding mechanism, or centrally coordinated evacuation programme was ever established (Waltoś 2025, pp. 50-60).

When war became imminent in August 1939, the range of available options had narrowed considerably. Under intense time pressure and with the risk of military invasion, Estreicher ultimately advocated the evacuation of the altarpiece to Sandomierz. He succeeded in obtaining the support of key decision-makers, including representatives of the Church, the academic community, and local authorities. In the second half of August 1939, with the approval of local church authorities, Estreicher initiated the dismantling and evacuation of the altarpiece. Approximately 2000 individual elements of the monument were dismantled, packed into crates, and transported from Kraków to Sandomierz, a historic town located on the Vistula River in south-eastern Poland. The transport was conducted under increasingly dangerous wartime conditions, including the risk of aerial bombardment. In Sandomierz, the sculptures were concealed in the Cathedral Seminary and other ecclesiastical buildings (Waltoś 2025, pp. 67-108). The evacuation did not achieve its intended objective. Following the German occupation of Poland, Nazi authorities initiated a systematic campaign of cultural plunder and quickly located the hidden components of the altarpiece. The monument was confiscated and transported first to Berlin and later to Nuremberg (Estreicher 1986, p. 147). The altarpiece held particular symbolic value for the Nazi administration because Veit Stoss was regarded as a German artist, and the work was therefore presented as part of German cultural heritage. From 1940 onwards, the dismantled structure was stored in the cellars of Nuremberg Castle, where it remained throughout the war (Waltoś 2025, pp. 111-126).

Following the collapse of the Third Reich, Estreicher was one of the leading figures involved in the recovery and restitution of Polish cultural property. He worked with the Allied Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives programme, and as such participated in finding the altarpiece and coordinating its return to Poland. In April 1946, the recovered elements of the monument were transported to Kraków aboard a specially organized train. However, the recovery of the altarpiece did not mean its immediate return to St. Mary's Basilica. Extensive conservation work was subsequently carried out at Wawel Royal Castle, where the altarpiece remained for years outside its original setting. Political disputes concerning its future status, including attempts by the communist authorities to retain it within museum collections, further delayed its return. The monument was finally reinstalled in St. Mary's Basilica in August 1957 (Uroczyste odsłonięcie... 1957, Machay 1957B).

Methodology

The analysis is based on four complementary categories of sources. First, it draws upon historical studies, memoirs, and archival publications concerning the wartime fate of the altarpiece and the activities of Karol Estreicher, including cited works by i.a. Estreicher (2001-2013), Walczyk (1983, 1992, 2012), Waltoś (2009, 2025) and Wolska (2019).

Second, the study incorporates the results of a media content analysis of 177 press articles on the Veit Stoss Altarpiece published between 1946 and 2021 in Kraków-based newspapers and magazines, including *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* (IKC), *Dziennik Polski*, *Gazeta Krakowska*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and *Echo Krakowa*. These materials document both the wartime and post-war history of the altarpiece and the evolving public perception of the decisions and actions undertaken to protect it.

Unlike previous studies, which have relied primarily on historical literature, memoirs, and archival documentation, the present analysis systematically incorporates media sources into the examination of the case. The study is therefore based on the triangulation of historical scholarship, memoir and archival sources, legal documents, expert testimony, and press coverage. This approach makes it possible to confront established historical narratives with contemporary and retrospective media accounts, thereby introducing an additional interpretative dimension. While historical studies primarily focus on reconstructing events and establishing factual accuracy, press materials reveal how these events were communicated, interpreted, and reassessed over time. They also make it possible to identify discrepancies, omissions, and alternative perspectives that may not be visible in official records or retrospective accounts, thus providing a broader understanding of both decision-making processes and cultural heritage protection under conditions of crisis.

Third, the analysis refers to the current legal framework governing the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflict and crisis situations, in particular the Regulation of the Polish Minister of Culture of 25 August 2004 on the organisation and protection of monuments in the event of armed conflict and crisis situations (Journal of Laws 2004, No. 212, Item 2153).

Finally, the study incorporates information obtained through a direct interview with the current custodian of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece, whose observations provided valuable insights into both the historical circumstances of the evacuation and the practical realities of contemporary monument protection. Given the extensive body of source material and the limitations of article length, the results are presented in a synthetic and thematic manner. Rather than discussing each source individually, the study focuses on recurring patterns, critical decisions, institutional relationships, and key management challenges identified across the analysed materials.

An important limitation of the media sources should nevertheless be acknowledged. Due to wartime conditions, the evacuation, concealment, confiscation, and recovery of the altarpiece were not systematically documented in the press as the events unfolded. Consequently, much of the available press coverage was published after the end of the war and is therefore retrospective in nature. The subject of the wartime loss and post-war recovery of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece repeatedly reappeared in public discourse, particularly during anniversaries, restitution debates, and conservation projects, including the most recent conservation campaign carried out between 2015 and 2021. Karol Estreicher, the individual most closely associated with the wartime history of the altarpiece, occupies a prominent place within these press narratives. A content analysis of the collected material indicates that Estreicher was the second most frequently mentioned individual in the corpus of 177 articles, surpassed only by Veit Stoss himself as the creator of the monument (Raś 2024b, p. 180).

Results of the study

Evaluation of measures undertaken during the preventive phase (ex ante)

a. Preparation and protection of immovable and movable cultural property (§1(3)(1-5), §1(4)(1-6), §1(5))

This section of the *Regulation* defines the measures that should be implemented during the preparatory phase, the period of increasing threat, and the phase of active conflict. These measures include the development of protection plans, improvement of the technical condition of cultural assets, installation of security systems, preparation of documentation, design of technical safeguards, and the organisation of cooperation among owners, public authorities, emergency services, and heritage institutions.

In the case of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece, a formal protection plan, as understood under contemporary heritage protection standards, simply did not exist. No document defined responsibilities, procedures, institutional roles, logistics, or decision-making mechanisms for the protection of the monument in the event of war. Protective measures were initiated only a few days before the outbreak of war and were undertaken on an *ad hoc* basis, without prior agreement with the owner of the monument. As reported in the press, “Karol Estreicher (...) heads towards Wielopole, to the Press Palace. What he needs now are newspapers. Not publicity, but waste paper (...)” (Grzywacz 2019). Obviously, this shortcoming should not be interpreted as the result of Estreicher’s negligence or lack of foresight. As it was mentioned above, he spent many months attempting to persuade municipal authorities, conservation services, church representatives, and government institutions to undertake preventive measures and prepare a coordinated protection strategy for the altarpiece. However, despite his efforts, meaningful action was repeatedly delayed by institutional inertia, fragmented responsibilities, and the absence of a coherent national framework for cultural heritage protection.

The absence of measures corresponding to §1(3)(5) and §1(4)(3-6) of the *Regulation*, including the accumulation of equipment, the organisation of specialised teams, monitoring systems, and cooperation mechanisms, is also reflected in another press account: “Estreicher was pleased to discover that Veit Stoss, in order to position the several-hundred-kilogram wooden figures, had constructed a winch in the church attic. Thanks to this device, the sculptures could be detached from their bases” (Grzywacz 2019). The significance of this quotation lies not merely in the absence of modern technical systems. It illustrates the lack of even basic operational procedures and management structures. The newspaper *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* (ICK) provided the waste paper required

for packing the sculptures, which further demonstrates that logistical support was not supplied by institutions formally responsible for heritage protection but was obtained from external sources. As reported in the press, “IKC provided waste paper for packing the figures and panels from the four wings of the retable” (Grzywacz 2019).

Particularly significant is the apparent failure to meet the requirements of §1(4)(6) of the Regulation, which obliges responsible entities to organise cooperation among owners, managers, users of cultural property, and relevant public institutions and services. In practice, this would require the active involvement and consent of the owner - in this case, St. Mary’s Parish. Contemporary sources indicate that the parish priest, Rev. Kulinowski, strongly opposed both the dismantling and evacuation of the altarpiece. As one source stated, “Despite his objections, the altarpiece was dismantled” (Machay 1957A). It is known, however, that the Archbishop ultimately approved the evacuation, leading Kulinowski to withdraw his opposition. Nevertheless, the lack of prior agreement resulted in a conflict situation in which representatives of the academic and governmental heritage protection community acted contrary to the position initially adopted by the immediate custodian of the monument, albeit with the intention of safeguarding it.

Taken together, these findings show that the key requirements of the preventive phase - including the preparation of a protection plan, the establishment of technical and organisational infrastructure, and the coordination of actions among owners and public institutions - were not fulfilled. Instead, the protection effort relied largely on the initiative, determination, and personal authority of a single individual. Although these actions may be regarded as courageous and well-intentioned, they could not provide the level of risk management, coordination, and institutional resilience required by contemporary standards of cultural heritage security management.

b. Protection in situ or evacuation of movable cultural property (§1(7)(1-6))

Section 1(7) of the Regulation identifies six possible measures for the protection of movable cultural property in the event of armed conflict: (1) protection and supervision at the place of permanent storage; (2) relocation to other premises within the same institution; (3) dispersal to other facilities within the same locality; (4) evacuation to designated facilities outside the locality if adequate protection and supervision cannot be ensured on site; (5) evacuation abroad; and (6) temporary storage by public cultural institutions. When the protection of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece in 1939 is assessed against these provisions, numerous deviations from contemporary standards become apparent. In the case of the altarpiece, there is no evidence that protection in situ was seriously considered. No information has been found regarding the construction of protective structures, the implementation of fire-protection measures, or the establishment of a permanent security and monitoring system. Instead, a decision was made to evacuate the monument. As discussed earlier, this decision was taken without a documented contingency plan and initially against the wishes of the parish priest responsible for the church (Machay 1957A).

Nor was the monument relocated to alternative premises belonging to the parish. Instead, it was transported outside Kraków to Sandomierz. In principle, such a decision could be regarded as consistent with §1(7)(4) of the Regulation, which permits evacuation outside the locality when adequate protection cannot be ensured on site. However, the manner in which the evacuation was carried out raises serious concerns when evaluated against security standards. The wooden and polychromed elements of the altarpiece were packed into crates and transported from Kraków to Sandomierz by river. Although contemporary accounts emphasise that “the altarpiece [...] was carefully packed into several dozen crates and loaded onto barges during the night of 31 August to 1 September” (Klein 1953), there is no evidence that the receiving facilities had been previously prepared for the arrival and storage of such a valuable monument. More importantly, the evacuation was conducted after the outbreak of hostilities. As reported in the press, “the sculptures were removed from St. Mary’s Altarpiece [...] and transported on 1 September 1939 to the Cathedral in Sandomierz” (Osmańczyk 1946).

Paradoxically, by the time Estreicher finally succeeded in convincing - and, in some cases, effectively pressuring - the relevant decision-makers to approve the evacuation of the altarpiece, the available options had already become severely limited. From the perspective of contemporary risk management, it may therefore be argued that **the key problem was not the decision itself but its timing**. Once the military operations had already begun, the dismantling, transportation, and concealment of such a large and fragile monument inevitably introduced new risks. Under these circumstances, it is conceivable that enhanced protection *in situ* might have represented a lower-risk alternative than evacuation. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that St. Mary’s Basilica ultimately survived the German air raids largely unharmed (Waltoś 2015, p. 130), while the evacuation transport itself came under attack: “during the journey the barges were fired upon by German aircraft” (Klein 1953) and the hidden altarpiece was subsequently located by German authorities. Consequently, rather than reducing the risk to the

monument, the evacuation exposed both the cultural property and those responsible for its protection to additional dangers.

Nevertheless, such assessments must take into account that the decision-makers could not have foreseen either the limited physical damage to the church or the subsequent looting of cultural property carried out by the Nazi authorities. Significantly, Estreicher himself later acknowledged that the decision-makers had focused primarily on the threat of military destruction rather than deliberate looting. In his testimony before the District Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland in 1972, he explained that the aim of the operation had been to protect the sculptures from bombing, fire, or artillery strikes, adding that *“no one considered the possibility that the altarpiece might be looted. We simply did not expect that something like that could happen, especially since the enormous thirteen-metre-high altarpiece structure was left in place”* (Waltoś 2025, pp. 71-72). However, his decision to remove and conceal the most valuable parts of the altarpiece outside Kraków suggests that at least some form of hostile interference with cultural property was anticipated. This apparent contradiction may reflect the distinction made by the decision-makers between the risk of wartime destruction and the possibility of systematic, state-organised cultural plunder, the latter not yet being fully understood or anticipated in August 1939. The statement nevertheless demonstrates the inherent difficulty of making risk-based decisions under conditions of uncertainty, where the most feared threat does not necessarily become the most significant one.

Another weakness of the operation was the choice of the storage location and the lack of a formal framework governing the protection of the evacuated monument. It was not entrusted to a public cultural institution, as is now envisaged in §1(7)(6) of the Regulation. Instead, it was deposited in the cathedral buildings in Sandomierz without a formal administrative framework governing its storage, supervision, or protection. The entire operation was essentially clandestine, improvised, and dependent on the initiative of a small group of individuals. It lacked the procedures, contingency plans, institutional coordination, and clearly defined responsibilities that constitute the foundation of contemporary systems for the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflict.

Significantly, the interview conducted with the custodian of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece suggests that some of the above challenges remain relevant today. Although contemporary legal regulations provide a much more developed framework for the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts and crisis situations, practical issues related to risk assessment, preparedness, coordination, and decision-making continue to present significant challenges for heritage institutions.

Evaluation of measures undertaken during the recovery phase (ex post)

c. Protection and documentation after the end of the conflict (§1(6)(1-3))

The provisions of the Regulation concerning the recovery phase focus on three principal responsibilities: the physical protection of cultural property against further deterioration, the preparation of formal documentation concerning losses, events, and recovery measures, and communication with the competent public authorities. In light of these provisions, the measures undertaken in relation to the Veit Stoss Altarpiece after 1945 should be examined from several perspectives.

First, with regard to the protection of the monument from further damage (§1(6)(1)), an important role was played by Karol Estreicher himself, who returned to Poland after the war and became actively involved in efforts to recover looted cultural property. Press accounts indicate that he played a leading role in organising the restitution of the altarpiece and coordinating its return to Poland. As one newspaper reported, “Estreicher [...] organised the Bureau for the Restitution of Polish Cultural Property under the Polish government in London. There he remained until the end of the war. [...] After the war he returned to Poland and established cooperation with the authorities installed by the Soviets” (Korczak 2003). His involvement was not only professional but also deeply personal. In a later recollection he stated: “It was I who transported the St. Mary’s Altarpiece from Kraków to Sandomierz and dismantled it in August 1939 - I was responsible for it. Returning it to Kraków was both my ambition and my duty” (Nowy 2008).

Although Estreicher played a crucial role in the restitution process, press sources - particularly *Tygodnik Powszechny* - also highlight the significant contribution of Colonel Emeryk Czapski. Acting independently of Estreicher’s restitution office, Czapski succeeded in locating the altarpiece on 5 June 1945 with the assistance of American military intelligence services. As he later recalled: “I decided to use my presence in Germany to search for the Stoss triptych (...)” (Czapski 1966). Although his role has received considerably less attention in public discourse, it should be regarded as equally important for the successful recovery of the monument.

With regard to the obligation to document losses and recovery measures (§1(6)(2)), Estreicher maintained the aforementioned personal record - Journal of Events, covering the years 1939-1984. Today, this publication constitutes one of the most important primary sources concerning the wartime fate of Polish cultural heritage. However, it did not serve as an official conservation record and cannot be considered equivalent to formal institutional documentation. As one press account observed, “Estreicher knew that his place was in Poland and that he had to continue the mission he had undertaken: saving the treasures of Polish culture (...) as described in the second volume of the Journal” (Korczak 2003). A systematic assessment of the condition of the monument and documentation of wartime losses was undertaken only after its return to Poland, during the conservation programme carried out at Wawel Royal Castle between 1946 and 1949. Contemporary newspapers provided detailed coverage of these conservation works (Raś 2024b, p. 192).

An additional aspect of the recovery phase concerns the legitimacy of the individuals responsible for restitution. Although this issue is not addressed by the Regulation, it became highly significant in the international context after 1945. A dispute emerged between Estreicher and sections of the Polish émigré community, which questioned his authority to represent the interests of the Polish state and the Catholic Church. According to one press account, “they believed that Major Karol Estreicher, as a representative of the communist Polish government, [...] had no right to reclaim the Altarpiece, since it was the property of the Polish Church” (Weber 2008). Despite these controversies, Estreicher ultimately succeeded in recovering the monument. However, this process took place before the adoption of the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (UNESCO 1954) and therefore lacked a universally recognized international legal framework. According to contemporary accounts, the American authorities formally transferred the altarpiece to representatives of the Catholic Church rather than directly to the communist state administration. This arrangement illustrates the legal, institutional, and political tensions surrounding the restitution process.

Moreover, the formal return of the altarpiece to Poland in 1946 did not mark the end of the recovery phase. For the following eleven years the monument remained outside its original location in St. Mary’s Basilica. During this period, it remained partially disassembled and was displayed as part of the so-called Wawel Exhibition lasting till 1957. This situation demonstrates that the recovery process remained incomplete and prolonged, shaped not only by conservation requirements but also by political and institutional considerations. From the perspective of contemporary heritage security management, the recovery phase may therefore be regarded as only partially successful. While the monument was ultimately recovered, conserved, and returned to its original location, the process extended over more than a decade, lacked a coherent institutional framework, and was strongly influenced by political circumstances. Nevertheless, compared with the preventive phase, the post-war recovery efforts demonstrate a substantially higher degree of organisation, documentation, and inter-institutional cooperation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The case of the Veit Stoss Altarpiece offers a valuable opportunity to analyse decision-making processes in the field of cultural heritage security management under conditions of extreme uncertainty. From the perspective of contemporary regulations, many of the measures undertaken in 1939 would not meet current requirements concerning risk assessment, protection planning, institutional coordination, documentation, logistics, or cooperation between stakeholders.

Evacuation of the Altarpiece was undoubtedly a high-risk decision. It was carried out at the last possible moment, during a rapidly deteriorating security situation, without a comprehensive protection plan, established logistics, or guaranteed security at the destination. However, it was made under exceptional circumstances and after months of unsuccessful attempts to secure alternative solutions. In this sense, the evacuation reflected not only Estreicher’s personal convictions but also the limitations of a system that had failed to develop an effective and coordinated strategy for protecting cultural heritage before the outbreak of war. The decision also raises an intriguing question: how was a relatively young art historian able to convince both Church and public authorities to approve, at the last moment, the dismantling and evacuation of one of Poland’s most valuable cultural monuments? The answer may lie not only in Estreicher’s determination and professional authority but also in the atmosphere of uncertainty and growing panic that accompanied the final days before the outbreak of war. The case therefore illustrates both the potential influence of individual leadership in times of crisis and the vulnerability of decision-making processes when they occur under intense time pressure and in the absence of established procedures.

The purpose of this paper was not to evaluate individual actors but to examine the broader conditions under which decisions were made, as well as to raise awareness of the problems that may emerge when no formal protection plans, risk assessment procedures, or coordinated decision-making mechanisms are in place. In this context, the events surrounding the Veit Stoss Altarpiece highlight the importance of systematic and multi-stakeholder risk

analysis in cultural heritage protection. Effective safeguarding requires not only the identification of immediate threats but also the consideration of alternative scenarios, secondary risks, logistical constraints, and long-term consequences. The historical experience analysed in this study suggests that risk management should be understood as a continuous and collaborative process involving heritage professionals, owners, public authorities, security services, and other relevant stakeholders.

The findings of the present study are consistent with recent research highlighting that the effective protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts requires coordinated planning, institutional cooperation, and the implementation of appropriate legal and technological support mechanisms, rather than ad hoc actions undertaken during emergencies (Neglia *et al.* 2024). Beyond the field of cultural heritage protection, the findings also offer implications for contemporary organizations operating in uncertain and high-risk environments. The case demonstrates the importance of early risk identification, scenario planning, clearly defined responsibilities, stakeholder coordination, and contingency planning before crises occur. Organizations should avoid relying on the initiative of individual leaders alone and instead establish formal decision-making procedures, communication protocols, and institutional cooperation mechanisms.

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