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# BETWEEN TRUTH AND AUTHENTICITY



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“Łabiszyn Encounters with History” is one of Poland’s largest historical reenactment events

**H**istorical reenactors are not merely mad eccentrics; they are also earnest history aficionados eager for us to learn from the past – says **Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska** from the PAS Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology in Warsaw.

### How do you interpret the significance of historical reenactments?

**KAMILA BARANIECKA-OLSZEWSKA:** To me, historical reenactments are fascinating as a form of cultural performance and a means of representing historical events. My earlier research in the anthropology of religion focused on Passion plays, staged during Easter. Later, applying the same theoretical framework, I shifted my attention to historical reenactments.

What really draws me to these reenactments is how they connect with our current times. They're more than just historical narratives viewed through a modern lens. It's remarkable to see how individuals deeply entrenched in modern lifestyles can nevertheless adopt roles from the past and fully engage in the recreated environments, which operate on principles drastically different from their everyday lives.

My primary research area has been World War II reenactments, which involves a shift to rather extreme conditions. On the one hand, such reenactments portray wholly different, almost inconceivable experiences, and on the other, they entail entering into highly hierarchical structures. It's also important to acknowledge that these are predominantly military reenactments with a masculine emphasis. Although women participate, the overall tone of these events is heavily male-oriented and militaristic.

### What motivates people to participate in historical reenactments?

My research indicates that reenactors are primarily driven by a desire to empathize with others, to understand what it's like to be in extreme circumstances. They do not want to really trade places with historical figures or relieve the horrors they experienced. Instead, they are captivated by the ethos of struggle, without romanticizing it. Many reenactors avidly read memoirs and other historical sources, and know very well that these were often people who were very afraid. There is a lot of humanity evident in their experiences, and reenactors want to get a sense of what it might have been like to actually be facing such challenging situations.

There are some theories – posited by Wojciech Burszta, for instance – suggesting that historical reenactments might reflect a certain longing for war as a kind of childhood play. I approach this view with caution. There certainly is a strong significant element of play in reenactments; these events are about having

fun, but that enjoyment is not as shallow as it might seem. They offer a chance to engage with experiences far removed from everyday life. Reenactors can't fully replicate the experiences of wartime soldiers or medics, but they do strive to imagine and understand what those people must have gone through.

Many reenactors get tangled in the trap of modern-day historical policies. Some of the individuals in the reenactment community, particularly those focusing on World War II, do get deeply drawn into such rhetoric. These individuals tend to be most visible and vocal in the public domain, but this doesn't represent the whole spectrum of the reenactment community. Anthropology helps us to gain a richer understanding of this phenomenon, to view reenactments from various angles, and to appreciate the diverse motivations of those who participate. These motivations aren't always rooted in patriotism; often, they stem from a deep-seated human curiosity to explore and empathize with different perspectives, bringing them to life in a recreated, alternate reality.

### Who exactly are the reenactors?

Certainty, to be part of the reenactment community, a deep interest in history is almost a prerequisite. These are people who have a passion for specific aspects of history, like the design of weapons during a particular period or a specific campaign of World War II. A broad fascination with the past is essential for anyone deeply involved in this community.

But do these individuals really want to become someone else? There's been some discussion suggesting that historical reenactment is a form of modern escapism, an opportunity to step into another's shoes and assume a different identity. In my view, that's not



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Part of the WWII-era reenactment in Łabiszyn

## ACADEMIA INSIGHT Anthropology

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the point at all. While reenactors do create impressions of commanders and historical figures, this isn't necessarily the most fulfilling part of the experience.

Doing so would be hard to avoid, because history dictates it, but the real value for participants lies in applying their skills in an alternative, often historical, reality. It's about testing oneself within a historical backdrop while recognizing that perfect historical accuracy isn't always achievable. Participants often share thrilling experiences from field games where they adopt the roles of soldiers or medics, focusing more on authenticity of action and skills rather than strict adherence to a scripted scenario. It's also hard to recreate the scenario of a battle exactly, and reenactors enjoy this freedom. They are not looking for a chance to become someone else, but to test themselves in different circumstances.

Reenactment attracts a diverse group of people, each with their own reasons for participating and unique approaches to both history and the art of reenactment. The extent of historical accuracy and creative liberty varies from person to person. Some may approach reenactment with a casual attitude, like in a game of paintball, where historical accuracy is of secondary importance.

#### How large is this community in Poland?

Piotr Kwiatkowski has attempted to gauge the scale of the historical reenactment scene in Poland, spanning from antiquity to nearly modern times. His findings suggest it's a community of several thousand, though these numbers are more estimates than concrete figures, as comprehensive studies to back them up are

lacking. Furthermore, it's challenging to envision how such detailed research could be conducted. Kwiatkowski also explored how reenactments resonate with the Polish populace, discovering that nearly every adult in Poland has encountered some form of reenactment in their lives. This indicates that reenactments have a significant presence in Polish public sphere, which is a view I share. However, I must note that the reenactment scene has changed a lot in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, brought a significant downturn in public events, impacting reenactments as well. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has had a profound effect. Its nearness led many people to shy away from war-themed reenactments, particularly those related to World War II. As a result, the focus has shifted more towards private gatherings and the pursuit of uniforms and props. Last year there were no World War II reenactments at all, although this year they are slowly starting to return.

#### How are reenactment groups organized?

The reenactment movement is incredibly diverse, with members varying in their approach to both history and reenactment techniques. There are groups dedicated to various eras: from antiquity, the era of barbarians, through the early to late medieval periods, the Renaissance, and up to the world wars, extending nearly to modern times. I've even observed attempts at Neolithic reenactments, although these tend more towards playful experimentation than strict historical accuracy due to the scarcity of sources. Reenactments encompass more than just historical battles; they also delve into social customs, traditional crafts-



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manship, and the recreation of historical settlements, all of which are integral parts of the experience. The movement is increasingly professionalizing, leading to greater access to authentic materials. Previously, reenactors spent considerable time searching for costumes, often using creative substitutes. Working on developing an accurate impression, including finding period-appropriate attire, still represents a significant part of a reenactor's personal time commitment. Nowadays, there are comprehensive guides to reenactment, offering detailed information on appropriate costume designs. For World War II era reenactments, numerous companies produce period-specific costumes. However, many reenactors strive to find original items that precisely match the events they are depicting. In terms of materials and props, historical accuracy is paramount. Every element on the long list of things a reenactor needs – from evening gowns and uniforms to various props – has to be consistent with the historical era being recreated. During the actual reenactment event, while not everything may be historically accurate, authenticity is always the goal. It's important to distinguish between historical truth and the authenticity of the reenactment experience, as they are two different aspects of bringing history to life.

#### **How does the reenactment movement enhance our understanding of the present?**

To me, reenactment serves as a critique of modern times, functioning through the lens of comparison. Reenactors discover values in historical periods that, they believe, if applied today, could help alleviate issues in social communication. Qualities such

as courtesy, politeness, and chivalry are held in high esteem by reenactors, and many strive to embody and promote these traits in their daily lives.

There's also a prevailing sentiment within the movement that history should be viewed as a warning. The past, reenactors argue, can show us the devastating effects of problems like racism or social exclusion. This perspective might seem surprising, given that reenactments are sometimes associated with nationalist or right-wing groups. While there's some truth to this association, there's a significant portion of the community that recognizes the valuable lessons history can offer.

The hands-on nature of reenactment also highlights our deep-seated need for direct, personal interactions. Not everyone finds the sense of community they seek through online, digital communications, including younger generations. Participating in historical reenactments, which often involves travel, training, and practical exercises, emphasizes the importance of in-person interactions. Although reenactors engage in social media, their real-world activities underline the importance of face-to-face contact – something that's been particularly missed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of online interactions. Reenactors are sometimes viewed by the broader society as mad eccentrics, a label they sometimes adopt themselves. However, at their core, they are passionate about history, finding both camaraderie and a sense of belonging within their community.

INTERVIEWED BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PHD