

Christian Chaplains and the Holocaust

REVIEW OF: Doris L. Bergen, *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). ISBN: 978-11-084-8770-2, \$35 (online edition), 334 p.p.

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Though criticisms of the myth of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht began appearing in the mid 1960s, since the end of the *Historikerstreit*, a scholarly consensus has formed on the Wehrmacht’s involvement in the crimes committed by the Third Reich.¹ In the process of reaching this consensus and after its concretization within the historiography, the role of the Wehrmacht in the Nazi Regime’s genocidal violence, as with every other topic concerning the Holocaust has been the fount of countless and increasingly specialized scholarly work. Not all the nooks and crannies of the topic have yet been covered, however, as is evidenced by Doris Bergen’s recent book on the approximately 1,000 men holding the position of military chaplain in the Wehrmacht (Bergen, p. 2).

Despite what seems like a rather limited scope of analysis, Bergen uses the Wehrmacht chaplain as a conduit to ‘analyze the failure of Christianity’ as a whole ‘in the midst of massive violence’ (p. x). This more conceptual topic characterizes Bergen’s book which takes an explicitly cultural, integrated, and gendered approach to a subject traditionally favored by conventional political history. Anyone familiar with the tomes of political history about the Wehrmacht and unfamiliar with Bergen (a scholar deservedly well-known for her advancement of integrated approaches) might have seen the title of this book and expected a dry military history that, though condemning the perpetrators, recreated their gaze. Instead, the book painstakingly seeks to continually reassert the humanity and lived experiences of the victims of the violence Bergen describes. Furthermore, *Between God and Hitler* does not lose sight of the explicitly gendered aspects of the role of the Wehrmacht chaplain and of weaponized Christianity more broadly. *Between God and Hitler* is a reminder that writing integrated history is not topic-dependent but something that, in 2023, should be a historian’s responsibility.

1 Ben Shepherd, ‘The Clean Wehrmacht, the War of Extermination, and Beyond’, *The Historical Journal*, 52.2 (2009), 455–73.

Unfortunately, however, this integrated approach was not complemented by the material Bergen collected on the Wehrmacht chaplains which, it became increasingly evident while reading, was far too little to convincingly prove her conclusion that 'Christian chaplains were essential components in a system of ideas, structures, and narratives that protected and rewarded the perpetrators of genocide' (p. 232). Components they might have been, but whether they were *essential* components, based only on the arguments and evidence set forth by Bergen, seems implausible. A few decisive, interwoven issues contribute to this failure to prove that the Wehrmacht chaplains were truly key figures in legitimizing the genocidal violence perpetrated by the Wehrmacht. The first is the aforementioned paucity of primary source materials written by chaplains or that directly mention chaplains. Bergen herself identifies this issue in the preface and asks whether she was 'stretching the evidence' (p. x). Over the course of the book, it became clear that she was. As a result, fascinating and necessary reflections on gender, victim experience, and even photography felt like unrelated asides to fill space and live up to the integrated approach rather than truly incorporated discussions contributing to the reader's understanding of the role of the chaplains.

The second issue is that the scarce source material directly mentioning chaplains (and even those written by the chaplains themselves) lead to the conclusion that the Wehrmacht chaplains were the precise opposite of essential – *irrelevant*. Bergen brings this up in passing as well, quoting Wehrmacht veteran Wolfgang Schrör: 'Among my fellow soldiers, there was dead silence around the subject of God. [...] In my entire time as a soldier I never met a single priest. We had no conversations about the meaning of the war' (p. 205). Bergen does not reflect further on this charge of irrelevance. The paragraph begins and ends with this reflection and is not subject to any form of analysis despite the fact that if this reflects the experience of the majority of Wehrmacht soldiers (as the remainder of the book leads the reader to believe it was), it completely disproves her assertion of the chaplains legitimizing genocidal violence for the soldiers as representatives of Christianity.

The lack of material specifically regarding chaplains to support Bergen's hypothesis leads her to fall back on analysing the role of Christianity as a whole, while superficially attaching chaplains to these arguments despite there being no evidence to show that either soldiers or civilians saw chaplains in this light (pp. 171, 175). Perhaps the most troubling result of this lack of material is that Bergen, on occasion, makes

unfounded statements that amount to conjecture and puts words in the mouth of both chaplains and victims. One example is this remark towards the end of the book: 'Unfortunately, Laasch's text is not in the file. One can speculate that he found a similar answer to the question [...] as his counterpart, Wehrmacht chaplain Dr. Hugo Gotthard Bloth' (p. 202). Similar statements are found throughout the book (e.g., pp. 178, 193).

An explanation for why Bergen makes such bold conclusions without much evidence to support them can perhaps be found again in the preface. Here, Bergen mentions that she had already made her conclusions decades before writing the recently published volume: 'I decided my story was a moral tale, about the chaplains' failure, their weakness, and their efforts to uphold Christianity that ended up serving the cause of genocide' (p. x). And again: '[I] knew what I wanted to say: the Wehrmacht chaplains were witnesses to the murder of Jews, they were complicit in the Holocaust' (p. x).

In the end, though Bergen was able to 'situate chaplains with some of the most murderous units of the war' and, therefore, passively prove their complicity as witnesses, the book does not prove that 'their presence helped normalize extreme violence and legitimate its perpetrators' nor that they 'played a key role in propagating a narrative of righteousness that erased Germany's victims and transformed the aggressors into noble figures who suffered but triumphed over their foes.'² Despite this, I can wholeheartedly recommend this book for anyone looking to examine how religious leaders and institutions operate and position themselves within genocidal regimes or those interested in Christian masculinity during the Holocaust.

2 Cambridge University Press, 'Book Description: Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany', 2023 <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/between-god-and-hitler/59D40311ABD58AF74889ABBF5E36ADB7#fndtn-information>>. [accessed 30 November 2023]

Works Cited

Cambridge University Press, 'Book Description: Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany', 2023 <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/between-god-and-hitler/59D40311ABD58AF74889ABBF5E36ADB7#fndtn-information>> [accessed 30 November 2023]

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