

Doris L. Bergen
Between God and Hitler:
Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany

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Doris Bergen is the Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Toronto. Her books on the Holocaust (*War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* [2002] and *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* [1996]) are standard works in the field. In her most recent work, she studies the one thousand Christian chaplains in the Wehrmacht during World War II. Specifically, she asks whom chaplains were in service to during the war. She shows that a few chaplains served the regime, most served the soldiers in their care, and virtually none served the victims of Germany's wartime atrocities.

Bergen first asks what chaplains knew about the annihilation of the Jews and whether or not they tried to intervene. Working with letters individual chaplains sent to their bishops, friends, and family, official Wehrmacht reports on the chaplaincy, and more, Bergen paints an unsurprising but devastating picture. She demonstrates that the chaplains she studied were committed to their pastoral duties as they understood them. They celebrated religious services, counseled individual soldiers, and accompanied soldiers sentenced to death by a German court-martial on their final way. Before the war, Bergen shows, the chaplains continuously sought to demonstrate their relevance to the soldiers in the field, both to prove their Germanic manliness and to prove themselves worthy of serving at the front. As Lauren Faulkner Rossi showed in her work *Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism and the War of Annihilation* (2015), the chaplains were constantly fighting efforts by the Nazi regime to curtail their activities, including the wartime decision not to replace chaplains killed or wounded in action with other chaplains and to appoint *Nationalsozialistische Führungsoffiziere* (Nazi officers [*NSFO*]) instead.

At the heart of the study lies the chaplains' responses (or lack of responses) to the antisemitic atrocities occurring around them. Bergen shows that chaplains hardly ever wrote or spoke about massacres observed near their positions. Instead, Bergen convincingly argues the chaplains focused their pastoral care on both active

duty and wounded soldiers, often more intensely than the regime desired. The chaplains' presence and pastoral care allowed some soldiers to feel absolved of any guilt incurred during combat and in violence against the civilian population (8, 10, 20). Bergen asks, "Were the chaplains Nazis? A more fruitful question asks how people who were not fervent Nazis or eager killers ended up playing an essential role in atrocity" (15).

Bergen's work contributes to current scholarly inquiry into the behavior of Christian clergy during the Nazi era. How did Christian clergy respond to persecution of minorities such as Jews and individuals with disabilities? Bergen shows that the military chaplains were indifferent to their suffering. Just as clergy in the *Altreich*, with exceptions, failed to protect Jews, military chaplains closed their eyes to the atrocities committed by the German armed forces. This attitude was held by Christian leaders in general already in 1933, as seen in the statement by Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich who argued that "Jew-Christians" (*Judenchristen*) could take care of themselves. In addition to the concerns Bergen mentioned about manliness and loyalty, Faulhaber feared that defending Jews might lead to the persecution of Catholics. The desire to avoid opposing Nazi policy prevailed among military chaplains just as it did among most civilian clergy. This has been shown in the exemplary work of Kevin Spicer (*Resisting the Third Reich: Catholic Clergy in Hitler's Berlin* [2004] and *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* [2008]). Also, military chaplains faced the additional burden of supporting troops on the front lines. Bergen argues, "The Wehrmacht chaplaincy acted as an insulating layer, protecting German soldiers from listening to their consciences or reflecting on Christian teachings. The buffer also covered the chaplains themselves and absorbed objections they may have had. The chaplaincy became a cone of silence, a tunnel" (20).

While Bergen's argument is strong, one wishes she had done more to explore subjects that might weaken her argument. Most importantly, putting pen to paper during the Nazi era was perilous. It may have been dangerous to warn those involved in atrocities of the sinful nature of their acts. It also would have been helpful to understand the chaplains' reports and letters home in the context of military censorship of the mail from the front. Given the regime's hostility to the chaplaincy, might the chaplains have been particularly concerned their mail would be intercepted and exploited? Bergen herself notes that clergy who contradicted the regime's official line on the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom found themselves barred from service as chaplains (74). She shows that the vetting process for chaplains sought to weed out anyone previously critical of the regime. As she notes, this kept principled clergy from becoming chaplains, which led to a chaplain's corps more inclined to support the regime. Bergen might have displayed more understanding of the pressures chaplains felt while caring for their assigned flock under the scrutiny of the regime. They focused on the soldiers in their units, supporting them and providing them with solace, which they could not have done had they protested the atrocities German forces were committing.

Furthermore, with few exceptions, Bergen does not show direct awareness by chaplains of atrocities committed by German forces: “Many chaplains’ activity reports situate individual clergy squarely in the areas of major massacres of Jews, although they do not explicitly mention these events” (123). A more detailed analysis of the stations at which Christian chaplains served at any given point during the war and their proximity to massacres would have been helpful. Likewise, she might have provided a more detailed analysis of the distribution of Christian chaplains among Wehrmacht units.

Nonetheless, Bergen’s fundamental question remains valid: “Whom or what does a chaplain serve?” (2). Christian clergy should first serve God and obey God’s commandments and, especially in this case, eschew national or ideological biases and hatred. Seeing evil, or at least the evidence of evil, clergy should have interceded for the victims. Instead, and this Bergen might have emphasized further, the chaplains considered their mission limited to the welfare of German soldiers, not to all those they encountered. As a result, “In the Nazi empire, Christianity and Christian chaplains were essential components in a system of ideas, structures, and narratives that protected and rewarded the perpetrators of genocide and their communities even as it erased their victims and denied their crimes” (232).