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Lauren Faulkner Rossi, *Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism and the Nazi War of Annihilation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015. Pp. ix, 336. ISBN 978-0-674-59848-5.

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During the Second World War, some seventeen thousand Catholic priests and seminarians wore the German army uniform, serving in various roles, from military chaplains to stretcher bearers and doctors' orderlies. In her excellent study of this neglected topic, Lauren Faulkner Rossi (Univ. of Notre Dame) states that her "central task is to reconstruct the frameworks that these men adapted, sometimes repeatedly, to process what they were witnessing and surviving" (3). She asks why men whose "commitment to [their] vocation" (4) was extremely strong would nonetheless provide succor and support to an army that waged a savage and criminal war against the Soviet state and its people. She identifies two important motivations: first, "these men were deeply German" (241). They had grown up in an age of fervent nationalism and in a state that stressed the overarching significance of being German. "Despite their vocation, they proved as fallible as the common man. They were also as patriotic as lay Germans and went to defend the Fatherland from an even greater evil than anything German Kultur had faced before. This nationalist impulse proved as durable as any faith-based reasoning" (190). Secondly, their very profession somewhat paradoxically led them to serve willingly in the army: "in their own words, this solidarity with their fellow soldiers is why they chose to stay. Such camaraderie convinced them that soldiers needed their particular spiritual care. By providing this care, they fulfilled their yearning to do their national duty to the Fatherland as well as to their fellow Germans" (151).

The book's five chapters explore "the relationship between Catholic faith and Nazi ideology, as exemplified by the behavior of selected priests and seminarians, from the ascent of Nazism to the downfall of the Third Reich" (7). Chapter 1 sets the historical context for the war years. Here, Faulkner Rossi focuses on the behavior of the German bishops during the 1920s and 1930s. She pinpoints two primary themes in the Catholic Church's accommodation with the Nazi regime. From a long-term perspective, the Church's institutional memory of the Kulturkampf, Otto von Bismarck's attempt to destroy the Catholic Church as an institution during the 1870s, affected its reaction to the Third Reich. "Questions of accommodation and dissent, conformation and opposition, required thinking of the price to be paid. This was possibly the most important lesson of the Kulturkampf for Church leaders.... Consequently, they would choose carefully the points over which they were willing to defy the state. They would push just far enough to preserve the religious rights and freedoms of Germany's Catholics, but no further" (22).

The second factor that influenced the Church's attitude to the Third Reich was the Russian Revolution and the triumph of Bolshevism in the newly established Soviet Union. The chaos in Germany during the immediate post-First World War era as well as the ascent of the political left in the Weimar Republic caused German bishops to fear the spread of Bolshevism to their nation. Their anxieties were fostered by Eugenio Pacelli, the Vatican's Nuncio to Bavaria (and, beginning in 1930, Germany as a whole until he became Pope Pius XII in 1939). Pacelli viewed Bolshevism as a mortal threat to Western Civilization. Faulkner Rossi cites a pamphlet by two Cologne priests that proclaimed "two worlds fight each other: belief and unbelief. Light and dark. Life and death. Both powers compete for existence, not only in Soviet Russia, *but also among us*. We too had to make up our minds." As the author notes, "in this totalizing worldview, there was no room for passivity or indifference" (24). The Church's attitude to Bolshevism thus closely paralleled the Nazi Party's and this resulted in at least tepid support for Adolf Hitler during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

This ideological antipathy to Bolshevism, however, was not enough to cement the relationship between the Church and National Socialism. Anti-religious tendencies inherent in Nazism soon disturbed the bishops, but their freedom of action was limited by internal disagreements, the legacy of the Kulturkampf, and,

most importantly, according to Faulkner Rossi, the Nazi-Vatican Concordat signed in July 1933. This agreement seemed to guarantee what the Church most desired—that Catholics could “live without fear of state-directed persecution” (37)—but it soon became clear that the Nazi Party would not live up to its commitments. For example, it waged a ruthless struggle against Catholic youth groups through its Hitler Jugend movement. No organized resistance to the state emerged, however, because “the bishops set the example for their flocks that would persist through the war years: equivocation was justified, even if the regime undermined the Church, because the larger threat was the complete abrogation of religious freedom and, even worse, godless communism” (42). Faulkner Rossi judiciously concludes that

as a group, however, the bishops are difficult to defend. They were unable to decide unanimously how to respond to the regime and its policies; they consistently defended the terms of the concordat, even as it became increasingly apparent that the Nazis had no intention of honoring it; they praised Hitler’s anti-Bolshevik rhetoric and action; and they failed to defend—or even protest on behalf of—non-Catholics whose lives were imperiled by the regime’s racial policies. (62)

Chapter 2 concerns the chaplaincy as a whole within the larger context of the German army and the Third Reich. On the one hand, the Nazi political and military leadership both recognized the fundamental value of morale in maintaining the army’s combat efficiency and saw religious leaders as a useful component in the process. On the other hand, the August 1939 Bulletin issued by Army High Command (OKH) and the more radical 1942 Guidelines for the Performance of Pastoral Care in the Field were explicitly designed to curtail the power and influence of both the Protestant and Catholic churches. According to Faulkner Rossi, the chaplain service confronted this challenge with a divided leadership. Franz Justus Rarkowski, the first and only Catholic field bishop of the war, was the supreme Catholic leader in the army. He nonetheless failed to provide the spiritual and moral leadership that his flock expected of him: “he never offered a word, explicit or implicit, that was critical of the regime” (75). The true champion of the chaplaincy was his deputy, Vicar General Georg Werthmann, who figures prominently in *Wehrmacht Priests*, in part due to the substantial amount of papers he left behind. While he certainly fought tooth and nail to secure for military chaplains the necessary tools to fulfill their primary duty—providing spiritual care to Catholic souls under their charge—Werthmann’s writings reveal the tenuous boundaries between the two belief systems, especially in the charnel house of the Eastern Front. Stringent nationalism, intense anti-Bolshevism, and the need to care for the spiritual well-being of the troops (whether from a Nazi or Catholic perspective), converged to allow the chaplaincy’s leadership to participate in Hitler’s true war.

Chapters 3 and 4, the heart of the book, focus on the priests and seminarians who served in the *Ostheer*. Some 542 chaplains served during the war, with a peak of 390 in 1941. This number steadily decreased because of OKW’s decision in October 1942 not to replace chaplains who died during the war. This resulted in situations in which ten chaplains were responsible for the spiritual care of 200,000 soldiers and 80,000 casualties in an area of 55,000 square miles. Fully recognized chaplains were supplemented by so-called *Priestersoldaten*, that is, priests, seminarians, and novices conscripted into the army. By the terms of the Concordat, these men served with the medical service and did not carry weapons. Forbidden to conduct religious services in the field, some were apparently allowed by sympathetic officers, aware of the dire shortage of authorized chaplains, to tend to the spiritual needs of the troops. Faulkner Rossi notes that both chaplains and *Priestersoldaten* helped maintain morale in the field, connected with grieving families at home, and provided last-minute guidance to soldiers sentenced to death under the army’s murderous judicial system. The collective “biography” of these men is distinguished by their genuine devotion to the troops around them. Many preferred to remain at the front or in combat units in order to face the same dangers faced by German soldiers and earn more credibility with them by their shared experience of war. One chaplain, who died at Stalingrad, wrote:

I speak from the hearts of all the men here, aged youth who have grown gray in the midst of senseless murder and inhumanity. The pen is reluctant to describe it, the most unspeakable thing, which I have experienced here.... I am proud to live through these times with these men. My people are proud that their priest endured

with them here, too. An ironclad camaraderie emerges, which helps lift us away until a happy hour arrives for us once more. (122)

Such determination to both save the souls and ease the worries of Catholic soldiers led religious men to accept the war. Even decades later, after the scale of German war crimes was public knowledge, former chaplains and other priests still looked back on their wartime service with pride and often declared their willingness to perform such duties again.

Confrontation with the Nazis was tantamount to abandoning those Catholic souls when they most needed spiritual aid. Their compromise with Nazism was, therefore, essential. To demand otherwise would be asking these priests and seminarians to go against their religious authorities and God. It would be asking Catholics to reject centuries of tradition. It would be asking Germans to betray not only their government, but also their country and fellow German citizens. (255)

This same devotion to German Catholics, however, led to a type of myopia. Jews are strangely absent from the writings and postwar reminiscences of former chaplains and *Priestersoldaten*, as are the sufferings of Soviet POWs and even noncombatant civilians. The author attributes this to “the beliefs of chaplains and seminarians alike that their mission—their crusade—into Soviet Russia was not only justifiable, but also God-given. Such a conviction echoed the Church’s official line about battling Bolshevism to the death to save Russia” (142). One wonders what the Church—from the bishops down to the clergy—thought about the common term “Judeo-Bolshevism.” Did it, like the army and other institutions, link Jews and Communism? Did its priests in the field see Jews as the puppet-masters of Bolshevism and their murders as a necessary component of the war? Faulkner Rossi relies on reports collected in the Catholic Military Bishop’s Office, but an examination of divisional records housed at the Federal Archive-Military Archive in Freiburg would yield additional insights on such matters.

The book’s final chapter analyzes the Church’s response to German defeat and to revelations of the Third Reich’s ghastly war crimes. In both cases, there was a concerted effort to portray the Church as a victim. While Faulkner Rossi is sympathetic to Werthmann’s postwar claim that, had the Third Reich triumphed, the German churches would have been destroyed and the Protestant and Catholic leadership “liquidated” (109), she is also quite critical of the memory of the war that posited “the only two contestants on the battlefield were party and Church” (178). The Catholic clergy’s narrow focus on “providing spiritual solace to the good Christian men who found themselves in a horrific war in defense of German civilization and culture” (151) blinded them to the crimes committed by the very state they so loyally and ably served. Faulkner Rossi justly concludes that the moral problem here lies in “what they failed to do, neglected to say, and proved incapable of facing: that to accommodate or compromise with a racist, genocidal regime was antithetical to everything their faith stood for” (255). *Wehrmacht Priests* is a well written, cogent, and nuanced examination of Catholic priests in the German army. It enlarges our understanding of the motives and actions of Germans during Hitler’s genocidal war.