

British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 1, March 2024

Review of *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany* . by Doris L Bergen

Bernard Kelly

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 22 March 2024

Citation: Bernard Kelly, 'Review of *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany* . by Doris L Bergen', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.1 (2024), pp. 221-223.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

REVIEWS

the First World War, once we divorce ourselves from Eurocentric narratives that revolve around German defeat and the subsequent rise of Nazism. Drawing on ideas developed in the field of global histories, *The Last Treaty* places Lausanne at the centre of a re-imagined idea of nationalism, empire and ethnicity, as well as the form of emergent post-war internationalism. The Ottoman Empire and Turkish Nationalist movement during this period are skilfully repositioned in the analysis in such a way that challenges older, Eurocentric perspectives that treated them as an appendage of the German Empire.

This book is an excellent choice for any person, academic or not, interested in any aspect of the end of the First World War in the Middle East. I would also make the case that it is a strong starting point for the study of modern humanitarian institutions and how we in the twenty first century make assumptions about refugee crises and their solutions. Particularly interesting is the exploration of film and its role in the early humanitarian movement. The current situation in Gaza and the mass displacement of Palestinians creates deeply unsettling comparisons to the displacement of Armenians in the aftermath of the First World War. It is broken down thematically in a way that creates an engaging narrative but eschews the drawbacks of an exact chronology, allowing aspects of the themes to dictate the flow of writing. It is particularly of relevance to those studying the political formation of the modern Middle East, providing excellent insight into what Tusan describes as ‘the blurry edges’ of the First World War and the interwar period.

ALEX WORSFOLD

University of Leeds, UK

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1789](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1789)

Doris L Bergen, *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xix + 322 pp. 2 maps. ISBN 978-1108487702 (hardback). Price £30.00.

The title above reflects the post-1945 view that German military chaplains had of themselves: men trying to carry out a difficult duty, caught between remaining true to their Christian faith on one hand and the Nazi regime on the other, thereby casting themselves in as positive a light as possible. In this well-researched and extremely readable book, Doris L Bergen deconstructs this self-created myth and lays out a

compelling narrative of German military chaplains serving as facilitators and legitimisers of genocide during the Second World War.

Chaplains play a contradictory role in military forces in any era, balancing the obligations of their religion and the requirements of the military. This was especially the case in Nazi Germany, where the regime and the military were responsible for genocide, mass death and unprecedented violence. How chaplains carried out their role in the midst of this, and what their relationship was with the Nazi state, lies at the core of this book.

Discussions of religion in Nazi Germany generally centre around the relationship between the main Christian churches and the state. In this context, the approximately 1000 army and naval chaplains (the Luftwaffe did not employ any) make an interesting case study, particularly as they were equally divided between Catholics and Protestants. As Bergen points out in the conclusion, it may come as a surprise that the German forces employed chaplains at all. She firmly anchors the military chaplaincy in its historical context, convincingly arguing that the mainstream Christian Churches were sensitive to any accusations that they played a role in German defeat in 1918. The coming to power of the Nazis in 1933 offered the chaplaincy the opportunity to demonstrate its utility to the state, and it forged a close relationship with the authorities. Bergen explains that cooperation between the military, the Churches and the state in the selection process meant that any potential 'troublemakers' were weeded out, with both the Church and the Gestapo vetting all nominees before appointment. She highlights the importance of gender and the widespread evocation of a culture of 'manliness' which chaplains used to assimilate with their units. She also notes a type of 'war Christianity' in which both Protestants and Catholics extolled the virtues of conflict and sacrifice as redemptive and playing an important role in the wartime attitudes of chaplains.

There are interesting chapters on the early German campaigns in Poland, Scandinavia and the West, in which chaplains saw – but did not stop – deadly military violence against civilians, which are well constructed and argued. However, the real power of the book is the core segment which deals with the 1941-1944 period on the Eastern Front, where chaplains witnessed, and sometimes recorded, genocide carried out by members of their flock. While individuals reacted to this differently, Bergen discerns a distinct pattern within the chaplaincy as a whole: rather than oppose or object to the crimes being perpetrated in front of them, chaplains turned inwards and focused on the daily personal and pastoral needs of their men. This led to some jarring incongruities in which they sought to combat immorality in the forces (usually sexual activity, consumption of alcohol or stealing) while doing nothing to stop the slaughter of Jewish men, women and children around them. There was no protest, either from the institution or individual chaplains. It was only in 1944-45 that the chaplaincy began

REVIEWS

to tentatively push back against the regime, but on trivial matters such as the awarding of military decorations. To the last, the Nazi regime remained hostile to the Churches and the Party-controlled *Volkssturm* did not have any chaplains attached to it.

One of the great strengths of Bergen's work is her multi-layered approach to analysing chaplains. She identifies their multiple reporting structures – the religious hierarchy, the military, the state, their own units – while also clearly and lucidly explaining how historical experiences of the German military chaplaincy as a whole and the brutality of the war itself further informed their attitudes and actions. The chaplains themselves are examined from multiple vectors too – as witnesses, perpetrators or facilitators – and the result is a coherent and compelling narrative. Her writing style is easy and authoritative, and she is willing to acknowledge when sources are lacking, as she admits for the 1944-45 period. The amount of detail provided on the selection, administration and deployment of chaplains means that scholars of the military are likely to find much that is of use, while her ability to connect the content to current affairs shows that it is relevant to a general audience as well.

Above all, Bergen deftly unpicks the various post-war memoirs written by chaplains, which – as discussed above – tended to depict them as decent men caught in a difficult situation. By contrast, she clearly shows that some had been selectively rewritten or edited to create a more acceptable or even rehabilitative narrative. Chaplains were as alert as any other group to their public image and many grasped the opportunities offered to them by the Cold War to refashion their wartime service as a positive. By contrast, what Bergen has shown in this work is that while chaplains may not have participated directly in genocide, their inaction meant that they – and the religious authorities that worked so closely with the state to select, train and support them – were complicit in the monumental crimes carried out by the Nazi regime.

BERNARD KELLY

Research Historian, Fingal County Council, Ireland

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1790](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1790)

Prit Buttar, *To Besiege a City: Leningrad 1941-42*. Oxford: Osprey, 2023. 429 pp, 11 maps, 28 photographs. ISBN 978-1472856555 (hardback) Price £21.90.

On 1 May 1945, just a few days before the end of the Second World War in Europe, Joseph Stalin issued a directive to his commanders that a twenty-salvo artillery salute