

1 “We Will Not Let Our Swords Get Rusty”

On the Cusp of 1933

On April 4, 1932, the Garrison Church in Potsdam opened its doors – or at least its doorway – to torch-bearing Stormtroopers who stood guard as formations of the National Socialist German Workers Party, Stormtroopers, and the SS paraded into the church. Arriving directly from a speech by Adolf Hitler, who was campaigning for election, they had come to pay homage at the tomb of Frederick the Great.¹ Twenty church members signed a letter decrying what they called the desecration of Old Fritz’s grave, and a Potsdam city official complained that the church council had overstepped its authority, but no one was disciplined. For years the church had hosted similar events, supported by members of its clergy and organized by the German National People’s Party (DNVP), the veterans’ association the *Stahlhelm*, relatives of the deposed Kaiser, the German Association of Military Officers (*Deutsche Offizierbund*), and many others. Although this was the first time the organizer was listed as the Nazi Party, the script and cast of characters remained more or less the same.

One key figure was the Protestant pastor of the military congregation, Curt Koblanck. He had held that position since 1925, after serving as divisional chaplain and then chaplain at other garrisons during the Great War. Koblanck was actively connected to an array of right-radical groups, but by mid-1932 he was focusing his energies on the Nazi Party. In November of that year, he addressed a Party rally with a call to fight democracy: “We will not let our swords get rusty but will defend our positions,” he vowed.²

Koblanck was no outlier. His predecessor, Johannes Vogel, a chaplain in the German Army since 1904, was even more stridently pro-Nazi. Already in 1926, Vogel spoke at a ceremony to bless Stormtrooper flags and praised the swastika as a symbol of Christianity united with old *Germanentum*. Known as a vehement antisemite, Vogel regularly preached and presided at events in Potsdam’s Protestant churches throughout the Weimar period.³ In July 1932, Pastor Vogel showed up at his local polling station wearing a huge swastika on his chest.

The spectacle at the Garrison Church raises the central question of this chapter: What was the relationship between Germany’s military chaplains,

Nazism, and Nazis before Hitler came to power? The question seems simple, but it is not easy to answer. One complicating factor is hindsight. Looking back, it is impossible not to view torchlit Stormtroopers swarming into a church in 1932 as an early scene in the catastrophic drama of Nazi Germany. Indeed, Koblanck, Vogel, and the Garrison Church in Potsdam would all feature again in the twelve-year show of support for Hitler.⁴ But the spectacle in April 1932 was both the beginning of something new and the culmination of preceding developments. It also merits attention as a moment in itself, contingent and replete with possibilities. Together with the other events analyzed in this chapter, it shows that the chaplaincy’s embrace of Hitler’s regime was foreseeable, though not inevitable.

Visible in the scene at the church are four issues that shaped the chaplains’ relationship to Nazism on the eve of 1933, established patterns for the years to follow, and continue to influence how this history is viewed. One factor is that in German society, military chaplains carried significance far beyond their immediate function. Connected to the divine through prayers and sacraments, chaplains had the power to bestow legitimacy, as Pastor Vogel did when he blessed the swastika and wore it on his chest like a crusader’s cross. Chaplains bound Christianity to the nation state and its past, present, and future, just as Pastor Koblanck served as the link between “Old Fritz” and the Stormtroopers at the door. To church leaders and nationalist Christians – and to chaplains themselves – military chaplains, with their congregations of soldiers, embodied hope for the revival and remasculinization of Christianity in Germany.

A second, dialectically related factor is that military chaplains on the cusp of 1933 perceived their situation as weak. With Germany’s armed forces cut to 100,000 men under the Treaty of Versailles,⁵ most of the old guard had needed new jobs. Instead of several thousand chaplains, as had served the Imperial Germany Army, there were now just a hundred or so. Koblanck’s defiant words conjure an image of chaplains defending an exposed position, surrounded by enemies, waving their aging and tarnished swords. Shackled to the lost war and grasping for relevance in a society they feared had little interest in organized religion, chaplains and former chaplains sought new partners and new purpose.

A third point, less immediately apparent, is that chaplains actively constructed self-serving narratives, and these constitute many of the existing sources for the period in question. It was Pastor Koblanck himself who documented the procession in April 1932. Reports he and others produced in subsequent years present a teleology that culminated in Nazi triumphs. It was not predestined that military chaplains would land in the Nazi camp, and evidence shows that as individuals, their loyalties, like those of their parishioners, varied and changed. In 1932, after all, twenty people signed the

complaint about Stormtroopers parading in the Garrison Church. But chaplains' own accounts of how they thought and behaved, produced in the twelve years that followed, all but erased the evidence that things could have been different. Meanwhile, histories they wrote after the war present another selective narrative, in which the early enthusiasm for Hitler has vanished.

The fourth factor, only hinted at in the short vignette here, involves the importance of personal ties. Two chaplains who saw eye-to-eye about the Nazi movement, as Vogel and Koblanck did, could silence a colleague who disagreed. Church councilors with friends and relatives among the Stormtroopers could arrange opportunities and defy congregants who opposed them, as the Potsdam group did. Affiliation with the Nazi Party and ideological kinship followed other kinds of networks, including families, friends, clubs, and church communities. By early 1933, many chaplains, Catholic as well as Protestant, had cultivated personal ties to individuals in Hitler's movement, including some in very powerful positions. These connections laid the foundation for the future partnership between military chaplains and the Nazi cause.

Magnified by the Light of Tradition

Chaplains appeared larger than life because their location at the crossroads of Christianity and the military put them in the spotlight of national myths about German strength. This position shaped their self-perception and how others saw them. Military chaplains in Germany in the early 1930s understood themselves as part of a Christian tradition rooted in the modern nation. Catholics as well as Protestants were embedded in a narrative that linked clerical service and military service around themes of history and memory, masculinity, antisemitism, and Christian exceptionalism.

German military chaplains embodied what I call “war Christianity,” and this quality further enhanced their significance. More than just wartime theology, the label implies a version of Christianity that focuses on, and is indeed obsessed with, war and struggle. It defines itself in terms of war, contribution to a war effort, and sacrifice. In war Christianity, the meaning, legitimacy, and relevance of the church, the value of its teachings, and the nature of its members' religious practices are all tied to armed conflict. War Christianity by nature is dynamic and variable: it draws on collective memory because it uses, reabsorbs, and reinterprets the past. German Catholics as well as Protestants partook in war Christianity, although their history of conflict and competition often pitted them against one another.

In speeches and sermons, chaplains pointed to the past as their model for the present. They frequently invoked a glorious legacy going back to the “Wars of Liberation” against Napoleon,⁶ or more immediately to the Great War. Part of

a national narrative of rising power and pride in conquest, chaplains described themselves as present at the creation of German greatness. As is typical of “mythic time,” they collapsed events and centuries in a self-referential teleology,⁷ and omitted inconvenient facts, such as the German switch from being partners of Napoleon’s France to its scourge.⁸ Most of their historical allusions were to the same few scenes: General Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg praying before battle, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg calling for more prayers from the home front. In neither of those canonical moments was a chaplain the main character or even on stage.

Rarely mentioned was the fact that the Prussian army chaplaincy grew out of a quid pro quo in 1713, between King Friedrich Wilhelm of the house of Hohenzollern and the Pietist pastor August Hermann Francke.⁹ The king got a reliable source of discipline and morale-boosting, and the church got access to the soldiers and their souls. This arrangement had far-reaching effects: it empowered chaplains yet made them beholden to the monarch. It also generated significant differences between the confessions, in favor of the Protestants.¹⁰ In fact, the Prussian arrangement initially applied only to Protestants, for whom pastoral care was organized by 1832 in the form of a military church (*Militärkirche*) under the leadership of a military bishop (*Feldpropst*). A Catholic counterpart was not appointed until 1849.¹¹ Protestants continued their ascendancy with the victory over France and unification under Prussia, and confessional rivalry persisted throughout the Weimar years.

For chaplains such as Curt Koblanck in 1932, the past provided an arsenal, a vocabulary tailor-made for the purpose of mobilizing a national religious revival. Chaplains harked back to the outbreak of war in 1914 and the outpouring of euphoria on the part of pastors, priests, and many church people.¹² Christian leaders in Germany had used all the tools at their disposal – sermons, publications, periodicals – to rally to the flag.¹³ In passionate detail, publicists had extolled Hindenburg’s piety and denigrated English Christians for betraying Christ (and Germany!) in favor of pacts with atheists and heathens. Preachers assured their audiences that prayers for German victory redounded to the glory of God.¹⁴

Evident on every page of the most widely read Protestant Church periodical (*Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*) during the years of the Great War had been a profound hope for Christian renewal. One pastor’s jubilant account of the first day of mobilization – August 1, 1914 – illustrates this longing:

That memorable Sunday also mobilized the entire people of the church, who otherwise take it easy and spend their Sundays outside the church . . . Many people spontaneously got down on their knees when the prayer of repentance was recited and also with the

offering of the sacrament. . . . People no longer wiped their mouths so fussily after drinking from the cup, as if they were afraid of being infected. No, they celebrated respectfully, and how many of them had not been seen in church for many years.¹⁵

Two decades later, churchmen yearned to reignite that passion for Christian Germany.

This vision of Christianity triumphant was built on antisemitism, as Protestants and Catholics alike associated Jews with their enemies: secularism, atheism, Communism, and modernity. Chaplains emblemized the aspirational “peace in the fortress,” the *Burgfrieden*, that was to bind all true Germans against their foes. At Tannenburg and Verdun, Protestant and Catholic chaplains had served alongside one another, something invoked later when praising the imagined unity of Germans under arms. But no Christian chaplains after 1918 are on record noting that Jewish clergy had likewise served the cause, ministering to the tens of thousands of Jewish soldiers in the Imperial German Army.¹⁶ And in contrast to their Christian counterparts, Jewish chaplains had not been paid by the military or the state but by their home congregations.¹⁷

One of those Jewish clergymen was Georg Salzberger. In an interview he gave in the 1970s, Rabbi Salzberger alluded to the casual and contemptuous antisemitism of his Christian colleagues during World War I: “My relations with Catholic and Protestant chaplains varied. I had very good contact with some, especially with the Catholics. Jewish soldiers told me that the Protestant chaplain said at services: ‘Yes the Jews: I cannot tolerate them, the Jews.’”¹⁸

Salzberger’s account of how he responded shows his dependence on good relations with his commanding officers. He reported getting a sympathetic hearing and the satisfaction of being recognized as an equal to the Christians:

I lodged a complaint about this at Command and thereupon the authoritative officer asked what he should do and whether I wished to make an incident of the affair. “Not at all,” I said, “I just want the gentleman to be told what the Kaiser said: ‘No parties any more, only German soldiers.’” And this occurred. I was, together with the Catholic and Protestant chaplains, awarded the Iron Cross Second class by the German Crown Prince.¹⁹

With its plucky protagonist, fair-minded Imperial authorities, and happy ending, Salzberger’s story conveys a strong note of nostalgia for Germany before Hitler. Still, his perspective provides a vital insight into how Nazi ideology connected to chaplains’ pre-1933 habits of thought. For Christians, suspicion of Jews was a reflex, a familiar script always within reach.²⁰

World War I shaped the chaplaincy in the Weimar years in concrete ways.²¹ An obvious impact was on personnel. The Protestant military bishop (*Feldprobst*) Max Wölfling turned seventy a month before the war ended in 1918 and retired in January 1919.²² His successor, Erich Schlegel, inherited the task of organizing the dissolution of pastoral care to the army and navy.

During the war, 128 Protestant chaplains with full-time officer status had served the army; 27 men did the same for the navy, and an additional 1,925 civilian clergy had served as military chaplains. Eighteen active chaplains had succumbed to illness or died in the line of duty. In 1919, most of the 128 full-time, regular military chaplains had to be let go. Schlegel wrote to them, inviting opponents of the new Republic to opt out of its service. In his words, "Who among you is deeply opposed to the new situation and does not wish to serve the new tasks of military pastoral care?" Schlegel helped those who chose to step back find civilian congregations,²³ in the process disseminating their antidemocratic views in new circles.

Across Germany, Catholic priests and Protestant pastors who had served as chaplains in World War I spoke at nationalist rallies, welcomed processions, and blessed flags in their churches. Individual clergy fanned resentment, antisemitism, and desire for revenge, at times with deadly consequences. In May 1919, Robert Hell, who had served as one of the Protestant chaplains in Hitler's division, was the Lutheran pastor in Perlach, a working-class suburb of Munich. There he experienced the end of the Bavarian Soviet Republic. When the *Freikorps* came to town, the unit leader, Hans von Lützow, found a warm reception in Hell's home. Later, the pastor's wife, worried about Communist reprisals, telephoned their former houseguest to ask for help: Pastor Hell believed his name was on a hit list. In response, a group of Lützow *Freikorps* men seized fifteen suspected Communist revolutionaries and, with Hell's encouragement, took them to Munich and shot them in the courtyard of the Hofbräukeller.²⁴

Chaplains' public appearances in the wake of 1918 served various causes but many were linked to the Nazi movement. In what looks like a tag-team effort, though it was characterized as much by rivalry as cooperation, Catholic chaplains took the early shift, playing their major contributing role in the immediate postwar years in Bavaria. Protestants grabbed the baton in the mid-1920s, as the Nazi Party transformed from a regional to a national movement. In short, although individuals varied, German military chaplains as a group actively supported the rise to power of Hitler and the National Socialists.

In Bavaria, Catholic chaplains had a prominent part in this process. Derek Hastings has excavated the links between a Catholic-inflected "Positive Christianity" and expansion of the Nazi movement in Munich from 1920 to the Beerhall Putsch three years later. Surprising is the heavy involvement of Roman Catholic priests, including a number of former military chaplains, who served as Nazi speakers and publicists – "storm-troop preachers" in the vocabulary of the time. Also remarkable is the National Socialist Party membership drive of 1923 and its explicit targeting of committed Catholics. The result was an almost threefold increase in the number of Party members and a

movement that contemporaries, both friendly and critical, characterized as “Catholic oriented.”²⁵

Did antisemitism help attract military chaplains to the Nazi movement in this early stage? To address this question, Jewish sources are essential, along with chaplains’ own words from before Hitler came to power. Records of the latter type are not plentiful but they do exist. For instance, in July 1923, the *Völkischer Beobachter* reported on a speech given by the Catholic priest Christian Huber, titled “Antisemitism and the National Socialist Position on Property.” In an extensive tour across Bavaria, Father Huber delivered the three-hour diatribe to numerous local Nazi Party groups.²⁶ As a former military chaplain, Huber embodied the “warrior Christianity” his audiences craved while preaching a message central to the Party’s membership drive: “Catholicism is the born enemy of Jewry.”²⁷ It is not clear whether antisemitism was the main factor that brought Huber into the Nazi fold, but his eagerness to preach against Jews as a Catholic priest and a chaplain-veteran made him a valuable asset to the Party at that fledgling stage and gave him the satisfaction of large and eager audiences.

All of the themes later trumpeted by the predominantly Protestant “German Christian” movement were already evident here: the National Socialist Party as the defender and champion of Positive Christianity; Christianity as a manly, “warrior faith”; and the Aryan Jesus.²⁸ Also noticeable is the way that enormous, open-air Nazi rallies involving former chaplains and other Catholic priests as speakers were patterned after wartime “field services” with their masses of uniformed men, flags, and crusading spirit: “*Gott mit uns.*” Military chaplains must have felt right at home.

As the incarnation of Christian presence in the military, chaplains featured in another powerful storyline: the German soldier as a Christ figure. This narrative of inversion transformed fighting, killing men into suffering victims whose blood cleansed and redeemed the nation. In this tableau, the drama involved German souls seeking salvation, and the only victims in sight were the Germans themselves. The decades before 1933 had provided a number of opportunities to enact this plot. Throughout World War I, German chaplains served and witnessed massacres in Belgium and elsewhere, they numbered among observers of the Armenian genocide in 1915,²⁹ and they watched as their armies expelled civilians from their homes and used them as human shields.³⁰ By witnessing atrocities and providing pastoral care to the perpetrators, military chaplains offered justification for mass violence and genocide.

The narrative of inversion had a colonial variant, and it too formed part of the chaplains’ tradition. Christian clergy participated in Germany’s overseas wars and colonies: as missionaries and chaplains they supported German atrocities in the Boxer Uprising, Herero Nama genocide, and Maji Maji war.³¹ The familiar narrative of European overseas missions – bringing religion to people who



Figure 1.1 “Blessed are the peacemakers,” one of eight mosaics in the Berlin Cathedral depicting the beatitudes from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. This image, designed and created in the midst of German war and genocide in colonial Southwest and East Africa, depicts a familiar inversion: white Christians portrayed as the victim and peacemaker, a Black man as the aggressor. Photographer Katharina Dorn.

supposedly lacked not only civilization but soul-nurturing culture – meshed easily with assumptions of unconditional, Christian, German righteousness. In colonialist and settler accounts of conquest and genocide in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, people of color and Indigenous peoples, victims of attack and mass death, were transformed into vicious aggressors, while the invaders represented themselves as self-sacrificing martyrs and vessels for the triumph of Christian civilization. The story of Christian military innocence and its colonial manifestations would find echoes in the genocidal culture of Nazi Germany.

In his study of Rhenish missionaries in German Southwest Africa, Glen Ryland illustrates this inversion story with an image from the cupola of Berlin’s Protestant cathedral.³² Under construction during the years of brutal German wars in East and Southwest Africa, 1904–1907, and installed in the wake of the genocide of Herero and Nama people, the dome features mosaics designed by Anton von Werner of the eight beatitudes, one on each section. “Blessed are the Peacemakers” depicts a triumphant Christ the King, a cross on his chest and a crucifix in one hand. With the other hand he restrains a muscular, almost naked Black warrior, poised to stab a prone white knight whose eyes are wide with terror (Figure 1.1).

The image is stunning in its unabashed role reversal: white German soldiers cast as victims of Africans, at a time when armed Germans had killed tens of thousands of children, men, and women, hunted them into deadly concentration camps to die of mistreatment and disease, or forced them into the desert and abandoned them to hunger and thirst; a white god extolled as the bringer of peace when his missionaries were actively luring the remaining Herero into German camps and proselytizing among them with the message that the destruction of their families and communities was God’s punishment for their unfaithfulness.

This tradition, too – the colonialist narrative of the white man’s burden that included the work of defeating and dominating other people – magnified the significance of military chaplains. They stood in for the divine ruler and judge, brandishing a cross that blessed His warriors and sanctified their cause.³³

An Exposed Position

The 1932 procession in Potsdam’s Garrison Church asserted Nazi power, but it also reflected divisions within German society, and those tensions cut into the military chaplaincy. One rift was confessional. How did the Protestant chauvinism of Koblanck, Vogel, and their ilk square with the presence of many Roman Catholics in the Stormtroopers, SS, and Nazi Party – including, of course, the venerated leader, Hitler himself?

A related cleft among chaplains, and within German society as a whole, was regional. How did the institution of military chaplaincy, born in Prussia and

wedded to a now defunct monarchy, persist through German unification and defeat fifty years later, then manage to subsume separate, competing, and sometimes conflicting army and church authorities in Hannover, Bavaria, Württemberg, Saxony, and elsewhere?³⁴ In the uneven integration of these armies into the Prussian or Imperial German Army, chaplains appear to have been a low priority, making it difficult to assess their situations and how they changed.³⁵

At the Nazi Party rally in 1932, Pastor Koblanck exhorted his fellow Christian soldiers to keep their swords sharp and shining. But such bravado could not hide the stain of defeat. Germany's failure to win in 1918 incriminated the churches and their leaders in betraying the military. Were the churches to blame for the fact that Germans, in Hindenburg's famous words, had not prayed enough?³⁶ Had Germans not believed firmly enough, either in God or in the national cause? Had they been too sinful? Were Christian clergy implicated in the treacherous home front that supposedly killed its own soldiers through defeatism and rebellion? War Christianity pointed to the past, and particularly to mythologized accounts of 1914, 1870, and 1813, to validate the position of the church as a partner, a servant, and helpmate of the nation. But history was a two-edged sword, as much the German chaplaincy's enemy as its friend.

Church spokespeople themselves provided the language that could be used against them, as they castigated each other as intellectuals and shirkers; womanly, weak, cowardly internationalists influenced by Judaism, who turned the other cheek instead of fighting like men. Anyone who has read about World War I knows the famous bellicosity of German theological circles, with their "*Gott mit uns*," denunciations of "perfidious Albion," and insistence that German victory was God's will. The shrillness of such rhetoric painted German churchmen into a corner, so that for proponents of war Christianity there was no option but victory – or apocalypse. An editorial by Wilhelm Laible of the *Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* from October 1918 illustrates these tendencies:

If the enemies of Germany are triumphant – not only temporarily but with our destruction – then injustice, lies, money, and murder will have won. Trust in God and faith in His presence will be defeated. This is not how God has ruled the world up to now. If He continues doing as He has, He will stop world history, and the prophecy will come to pass: "When injustice gains the upper hand."³⁷

Viewed this way, war Christianity was not a symptom of strength but of weakness. It developed from a specific combination of anxiety and power regarding the Christian churches in modern Germany. Like every defensive stance, it both expressed vulnerability and increased it. For decades, Catholic and Protestant church leaders alike had watched as participation, even

membership dropped. They became fixated on data and statistics and agonized that the church was doomed as de-Christianization and secularization swept Germany and lured its men and its young people away from the churches.

Many scholars have emphasized that a casualty of World War I was a loss of credibility for the churches and Christianity in general.³⁸ Churchmen’s calls to “hold on,” their promises of victory and blessings over the cannons rang hollow in the face of the destruction wrought on all sides.³⁹ Chaplains found themselves in the center of this negative charge. The Austro-Czech Jaroslav Hašek’s satiric novel *The Good Soldier Svejk* featured as one of its most risible characters the Habsburg army chaplain, an atheist, cynic, and drunk (and, a vicious touch, a convert to Christianity from Judaism), who understood that his only function was to supply men as cannon fodder.⁴⁰ Subsequent scholarship has complicated this longstanding assumption by demonstrating the vibrancy of Christian institutions in the midst of the war and after.⁴¹ Both interpretations are essential for understanding the situation of German chaplains before Hitler.

The dynamic interplay of pride and shame helps account for the vitriolic opposition to Weimar democracy on the part of many chaplains. Not an inevitable result of their wartime behavior, it was nevertheless the logical outcome of a specific position that in order to retain its dominance had to silence and discredit others. Michael Geyer has written of “catastrophic nationalism,” a drive to keep on fighting even when defeat is certain, and to try to control memory from the grave.⁴² The concept describes German elites, who after World War I, in an attempt to shift blame and hold onto their power, claimed they had never stopped fighting and erected plaques and memorials and held services to remind themselves and others of their continued bellicosity. The result was a series of dangerous alliances in the Weimar period as the churches joined forces with the German National People’s Party, Stahlhelm, Stormtroopers, and Nazi Party according to the principle, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”⁴³

Anxiety among church leaders generated an obsession with manliness, as churchmen defended themselves against the charge that they were not “real men.” Widespread notions of manhood in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries associated masculinity with hardness, the qualities of a soldier who fought and showed no mercy to anyone.⁴⁴ In societies that associated Christian piety with women and that accused women of “sexual treason” during the war,⁴⁵ clergy were vulnerable to charges they had become feminized. Celibate Catholic priests made especially easy targets, and Protestant clergy frequently and gleefully seized their advantage. For both confessions, military chaplaincy held out the promise of a truly manly Christian faith.

By the 1930s, German chaplains looked back to a world war that represented at the same time their shining moment and the site of their deepest

mortification.⁴⁶ This tension is captured in a memo, written at the time of rearmament in 1935, from a church superintendent in Soest, Westphalia, who advocated for creation of a military chaplaincy. In support of the cause, he offered a table that showed how many Protestant theologians (chaplains, pastors, students of theology, and pastors' sons) had "fallen" in battle between 1914 and 1933. (The Stormtrooper Horst Wessel was included.) The pastor conceded that the chaplaincy during the Great War had not been perfect:

It cannot be denied that in the last big war the church fell severely short in its duty to preach and to minister to souls. The church – and not only the church, but also the military administration – was not able to do full justice to the challenging task of the military chaplaincy. But the church should not lose the right to this task on that basis.⁴⁷

Yet even spun as the noblest sacrifice, defeat smelled of failure. And the stigma of failure stuck to the chaplains and the churches as a whole, while it slid off the military leadership. Indeed, in his blockbuster memoir, the war hero Hindenburg, lionized by Christian leaders as piety incarnate, made no mention of military chaplains at all.⁴⁸

Selective Narration

The sources most commonly used for studying German military chaplains are their own words. I too use their narratives but try to do so carefully. Because such materials have an agenda in terms of chaplains, the churches, and the nation state, it is important to contextualize where the narratives are coming from: they are imbricated in the nation and motivated by efforts to evade blame for its losses and failures. Pre-1933 sources are scarce, and those that exist tend to fixate on the church's position vis-à-vis the loss of World War I. After 1933, German chaplains engaged in eager revision of their personal and institutional pasts from the vantage point of the "new Germany." They presumed compatibility with a Nazi worldview and read those close relations back to the early days of the movement. Chaplains' writings after 1945 underreport or outright deny affinities with Nazism, including early ties.

The most influential history of German military chaplains over the long term remains Albrecht Schübel's *Dreihundert Jahre evangelische Soldatenseelsorge* (300 Years of Protestant Pastoral Care to Soldiers), published by the Protestant Press Association of Bavaria in 1964.⁴⁹ The time frame of 300 years, reinforced every time the book is mentioned, links the Wehrmacht chaplaincy to the Thirty Years War.⁵⁰ Its focus on Protestants only implies a special place in the chaplaincy for the heirs of Martin Luther. Rarely do those who draw on this authoritative book mention – or perhaps even realize – that its author had been a senior Wehrmacht chaplain, who was on record for praising the "courageous deed of the Führer" when Hitler introduced

universal conscription in 1935, and for lauding the German attack on Poland in September 1939.⁵¹ Schübel's book is a useful source of information, and it contains some remarkable vignettes involving chaplains. Yet he organized it in a way that presents the Wehrmacht chaplains, at least the Protestants among them, as worthy successors of Christian heroes of the past, completely separate from Nazis and immune to Nazism.

In contrast to Schübel's account, chaplains' representations of themselves during the Nazi years tended to ignore everything but the connections to Nazism. Not all roads led straight to Hitler, however. During the Weimar era, chaplains and former chaplains moved in multiple directions, and they offered their services to causes of different kinds. They could be described as institutional opportunists, attracted by power and looking for what would serve Christianity, their church, the chaplaincy, and their own need for importance – or simply provide some income. Hitler, too, when first demobilized, took a job giving speeches for the Reichswehr – that is, in the service of the fledgling Republic.⁵² After 1933, chaplains, like Hitler, conveniently forgot those appearances or left out incriminating details. A historian looking back from a century later can easily overlook those non-Nazi moments or mistake their significance.

A case in point is the official world war commemorative ceremony in Berlin in 1923. On August 3, across the city, flags flew at half-mast and people laid wreaths at graves, memorials, and monuments. Many churches held services of remembrance, but the main public ceremony took place in front of the Reichstag, from 11am to 12 noon. Dignitaries gave speeches, church bells rang for a full minute, and an artillery salute followed. At noon sharp, traffic came to a halt and the city observed two minutes of silence.⁵³

Military chaplains played a leading role at that event. After an army band performed songs of mourning, the rest of the hour consisted of sermons from the Lutheran and Catholic field chaplains regarding the German people's sacrifice. Then the German President spoke words of commemoration, followed by a military parade, more musical performances, and finally the national anthem.⁵⁴ The trappings were familiar rituals of war Christianity – the flags and wreaths, even the choice of hymns – but at the 1923 event, the prayers and exhortations of the military chaplains bestowed blessings on the young Republic and connected the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert to the legacies of the past.

The Berlin ceremony, designed and approved by the Interior Ministry, was intended as a template for events throughout the country. Adopted in other settings, the rituals took on additional meanings, including performing Germanness in contested territories. In July 1924, the Silesian German city of Hirschberg, located near the new border with Poland, held its first official commemoration of the Great War. It adhered closely to the Berlin template.

Most of the formal components of the program were musical: the Reichswehr band played the usual lugubrious tunes and the familiar hymn, later standard fare at SS events, “We Gather Together” (*Wir treten zum beten*). Only two speakers addressed the assembly: the local garrison’s Lutheran pastor and its Roman Catholic priest. Ceremonies in the years to follow used the same outline, with garrison chaplains regularly taking center stage.⁵⁵ In short, some chaplains offered prayers for hire, performing legitimacy for whoever invited them.

Chaplains were predisposed but not predetermined to join the Nazi cause, and individuals did not necessarily follow a consistent path. Monsignor Bernhard Lichtenberg, the hero and martyr who prayed publicly for German Jews being sent to be killed, who died en route to Dachau in 1943, and is now a Catholic saint, was a chaplain in World War I with the 3rd Grenadier Guards Regiment.⁵⁶

Another high-profile example is Oscar Daumiller, the Protestant chaplain from Hitler’s regiment. As described by Thomas Weber, Daumiller cycled through many positions over the course of his career. At a service in October 1914, Divisional Chaplain Daumiller told soldiers of the List Regiment that they were about to face “a holy war for the just cause of our people,” and they should be prepared “should they be called by God to a holy death.”⁵⁷ After just a few days of battle, Daumiller confided to his journal the horror he felt at all the suffering and its shattering impact on the troops. Still he comforted himself that they all showed “a longing for God” and willingness to endure for the sake of the Fatherland.⁵⁸

Later, on the border between Belgium and France, Chaplain Daumiller and his Catholic counterpart, the Capuchin monk Father Norbert Stumpf, set up soldiers’ messes to provide a space to enjoy conversation, newspapers, coffee, food, and cigars. Father Norbert, who repeatedly faced overcrowded confessionals,⁵⁹ was awarded an Iron Cross in December 1915.⁶⁰ By the end of that year and over the course of the next, many chaplains reported growing doubts among the men about religion and God. During the Battle of the Somme, Daumiller recorded news of large numbers of deserters and noted that soldiers no longer responded to patriotic slogans. “Only the word of God helps,” he insisted. He wrote about his own questions as he abandoned notions of a holy war for the German national cause. He had gained a “frighteningly clear” understanding of Psalm 90:5–7, he explained, referring to the following passage:

Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death –
they are like the new grass of the morning:
In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered.
We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.

Just as true, he said, was “the emptiness of our entire famed European culture. Men and entire peoples have gone bankrupt and One alone has those who finally listen to Him, the Living God.” Daumiller appears to have kept these thoughts to himself, and in a service honoring the fallen of the Battle of the Somme, he pronounced the dead “heroes” and proclaimed: “There is no more beautiful death in the world than to die at the hands of the enemy.”⁶¹

Daumiller had a successful career after 1933. Like Koblanck, he had come out publicly in support of Hitler in the election campaigns of 1932, and he too advanced up the ranks. By 1934, Daumiller was head (*Kreisdekan*) of the Protestant church in southern Bavaria. But like some other renowned nationalist church leaders, he later distanced himself from the Nazi movement and joined the Confessing Church. Another Protestant chaplain who had served with him in World War I, Friedrich Käppel, did the same. Bishop Hans Meiser would assign Daumiller to Nuremberg to organize against the German Christian movement there. According to Daumiller, the Gestapo repeatedly called him in for questioning, and they also showed up at Pastor Käppel’s house in 1939 to conduct a search.

Given the temptation for chaplains to spin their personal histories, a temptation that would have been amplified in Daumiller’s case because of the early association with Hitler, it is hard to know how credible some of the claims about his past are. Still, the claims themselves are significant: the Gestapo allegedly even tried to implicate Daumiller as connected to the White Rose resistance group.⁶² After the war, Daumiller experienced another round of professional opportunities. As head of the Protestant church in southern Bavaria, his job included providing pastoral care for suspected Nazi criminals. This task often took him to Landsberg prison, where many of the death sentences against Nazis were carried out. As Daumiller recalled, they were hanged in “view of the cell in which Adolf Hitler had been interned.”⁶³

During World War II, the history of military chaplaincy, particularly in Bavaria, became a matter of keen interest to certain German authorities. A specific incident, along with the archival record it generated, reveals the paucity of knowledge about military chaplains outside Prussia and illustrates the complex entanglements of past and present at play around this topic.

In October 1941, General Friedrich von Rabenau, Head of the Army Archive in Potsdam, wrote to the Army Archive in Munich with a request for information:

It has come to our attention that in the various German contingents again and again the civilian clergy has for a period of time exerted influence on the military chaplaincy. This has been the case not only in the Catholic lands but also in Protestant ones. The last breakdown in this relationship, in fact, was in the middle of the nineteenth century. I am requesting research as to in which state or other archives the relevant documents could

be located. At the moment, I am not intending to use these documents, I only want to know where they are. A response by the end of November would be appreciated.⁶⁴

Dozens of pages of correspondence resulted, as the Munich archivist passed the request along to counterparts in state and church archives around Bavaria and beyond.⁶⁵ The responses make it clear that until the early twentieth century, in Bavaria, and likely in the other South German contingents of Wüttemberg and Saxony, there had been no distinction between military chaplains and civilian clergy. Instead, in wartime, priests and pastors served as chaplains without being officially incorporated into the military. Their status, in other words, was very different from the Prussian chaplains, who already in the eighteenth century had institutionalized the chaplaincy as a state organ, separate from the civilian church.⁶⁶ That professional Prussian model, developed in Imperial Germany, would become the foundation for the Wehrmacht chaplaincy. Nonetheless, the situation of Bavarian chaplains before 1918 also had echoes, in the hundreds of base and military hospital chaplains who served the Wehrmacht “part-time” (*im Nebenamt*) or “for the duration of the war” (*auf Kriegsdauer*).

The thick file does not reveal what issue sparked Rabenau’s question. However, the timing – the letter was dated October 29, 1941 – and the fact the query came from the head of the central archive of Germany’s army, a man with the rank of general, suggests the stakes were high. Throughout the summer and fall of 1941, and across an enormous sweep of territory, the Wehrmacht was involved in massacres of Soviet prisoners of war and Jews of all ages. Soldiers’ grumbling about the carnage led General Walter von Reichenau to issue his infamous “order” of October 10, 1941, calling on the men of the armies under his command to show no mercy to Germany’s enemies.

Also circulating that fall was the sermon by Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen, condemning the Nazi murder of disabled people in Germany.⁶⁷ The Catholic bishop of Münster specifically noted the risk this program posed for the Wehrmacht: would a soldier who was wounded be deemed “life unworthy of life?” How would the killing of soldiers’ aging and ailing parents back home affect their morale? Could Rabenau’s inquiry have been part of an effort to isolate military chaplains from Bishop von Galen and other potentially defiant clergy on the home front? Bavaria and Württemberg would have been of particular interest because two of the three “intact” Protestant churches in Germany, whose bishops, Hans Meiser and Theophil Wurm, were well-known opponents of the “German Christian” movement, were located there.

Rabenau’s biography, however, points in a different direction. A year after his 1941 query, Rabenau was consigned to early retirement. In 1944, after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler, he was arrested because of his ties to the

group around Ludwig Beck and Carl Goerdeler. Interned in a series of prisons and camps including Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, on April 15, 1945, on Himmler's orders, Rabenau was executed by shooting in Flossenbürg concentration camp. Given his record as an opponent of National Socialism, could Rabenau's inquiry into the history of chaplains in Bavaria have been an attempt to use historical precedent to encourage resistance among civilian church leaders and open lines of communication between them and military chaplains?

The answer is unknown, but evidence indicates it may be wishful thinking to read Rabenau's query as a sign of defiance. Forced to retire from the army archive, Rabenau devoted himself to the study of theology. His PhD dissertation, completed in 1943, was titled, *Die Entwicklung der Grundzüge der deutschen Heeresseelsorge bis zum Jahre 1929 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des 100.000 Mann-Heeres* (The Development of the Foundations of German Pastoral Care to the Army up to 1929, with Particular Attention to the 100,000-Man Army).⁶⁸ Military chaplains were on his mind during the deadly months of autumn 1941, but his papers, including the thesis and sermons from the war years, show his views on the subject to have been resolutely mainstream.

Rabenau's writings reflect typical antisemitic assumptions and Christian anti-Jewish prejudices, including refusal to acknowledge Jesus was a Jew, narrating intra-Jewish conflicts as attacks on Jesus by “the Jews,” and denigration of Pauline Christianity. He repeated calls from the German Christian movement for a “manly” religion and a church that kept in tune with the state, ideas that were entrenched within the Wehrmacht chaplaincy. Preaching on Philippians 4:7 – “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” – Rabenau insisted that Christians were no “pacifist weaklings.” In a letter from April 1944, he praised Jesus for his incredible “manliness and strength,” and in sermons on John 18:22–36 – the story of the high priest questioning Jesus, Peter's denial, and Jesus's encounter with Pilate – Rabenau emphasized that Christianity was neither alien to German nature nor a religion of “the weak and the sick.” In short, his history of chaplaincy assumed continuity from past glories to his own times, his vision of the duties and qualities of a military chaplain mirrored the current institutional ethos, and his theology fit the notion of Wehrmacht chaplains as model Christians.⁶⁹

As individuals and institutionally, chaplains sought opportunities to advance their interests, and they told stories that positioned themselves as men of virtue, beyond blame. What constituted “virtue” changed over time, but the narrative of Christian heroism and faithfulness would prove capacious enough to absorb those transformations.

Personal Ties

In the years before Hitler came to power, personal connections linked many military chaplains, Catholics and Protestants, to the Nazi cause. Franz Justus Rarkowski, the man who served as Catholic military bishop during World War II, exemplified the ties that bound chaplains to the emerging National Socialist movement. Rarkowski, a staunch nationalist, had been acting head of the army chaplaincy on the Catholic side since 1929. He appears to have drawn close to the National Socialist Party indirectly, through military networks. Indeed, it was thanks to the support of Hindenburg and Werner von Blomberg, and through them Hitler, that Rarkowski was named military bishop over the objections of the Catholic episcopate.

Rarkowski was born in East Prussia and overlapped with Blomberg and the Protestant Naval Chaplain Ludwig Müller in Königsberg, where he served as Catholic Division and Military District priest from 1920 to 1927. Given the similar styles of Rarkowski and Müller – two rough, plain-spoken men with a martial demeanor who were mocked as simple by their theologian peers – it stands to reason that Blomberg, and Hitler, to whom the general deferred obsequiously, would approve of both men.⁷⁰

Rarkowski's Nazification was no less thorough for being, in part, retroactive. In 1938, when Rarkowski's appointment as Catholic military bishop of the Wehrmacht was finalized after years of wrangling, he was touted as the successor of Dr. Töppen, the last army bishop of the Prussian Army, who had died in 1920. A newspaper article lauded the intimate relationship in Berlin between Catholic military and civilian pastoral care and implied it was all the result of chaplains and their advocates, going back four centuries:

Indeed, one can say that it was out of the military chaplaincy in the time of the Reformation that the almost totally defunct Catholic church life in Berlin was resurrected. Friedrich Wilhelm I, the Soldier King, was the one who, for the first time, allowed a Catholic priest into his Residence. He considered it essential, not least for reasons of military discipline, to have pastoral care for his Catholic soldiers. Over time, civilian pastoral care then developed out of military pastoral care.⁷¹

Catholic and Protestant leaders alike trumpeted their close and purportedly longstanding ties to the German nation and National Socialism. In 1943, when Rarkowski turned seventy, he issued a special "Word from the shepherd to all military chaplains." He drew a direct line from his efforts in a military hospital during World War I to the "humiliation and shame" of 1918 and the "new hope" awakened in 1933. The "men of 1914 and the sons of 1939" had much in common, he concluded.⁷² Rarkowski repeatedly reminded "his" Catholic soldiers that he too knew war: he had volunteered for the front in 1914 and become chaplain to a division two years later.⁷³ During the Weimar period, he

had ministered to soldiers based near contested “German borders”: in Koblenz in the west, and in Königsberg and Breslau in the east.⁷⁴ However close his relations with local National Socialists may have been in those places, in hindsight, all of his earlier experience with German soldiers, Freikorps, and Stormtroopers was folded into a teleology of service to Hitler’s cause.

Among Protestants, the most visible of the individuals close to Nazism was Ludwig Müller. He joined the Party in 1931, became the face of the emergent German Christian movement in 1932, and was named Protestant Reich bishop in 1933. Müller had been a naval chaplain in World War I and afterward pastor to the Military District in Königsberg,⁷⁵ facts that were emphasized every time he was introduced. A gruff, crude individual, Müller cultivated a soldierly image, often appearing in clerical robes adorned with military decorations. Though he alleged a friendship with Hitler that reached back more than a decade, Müller’s strongest claim to credibility with church and Party people was his wartime experience. As a former military chaplain, he embodied the ideals of the German Christians, who aimed to transform the church into the spiritual expression of a racially pure, militantly anti-Jewish, manly German nation.

Werner von Blomberg’s interest in religious arrangements in the military was likely both a cause and a result of his connection to Ludwig Müller, who was the Protestant military chaplain in Königsberg while Blomberg was headquartered there as commander of the East Prussian Military District. In *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William Shirer claimed it was Müller who introduced Blomberg to Hitler in 1932.⁷⁶ The historian John Wheeler-Bennett went even further, asserting that in 1930 East Prussia, Blomberg “found in his senior Lutheran chaplain, Ludwig Müller, a devoted follower of National Socialism, and from him the General imbibed the heady wine of the new German totalitarianism.”⁷⁷ I have not seen evidence to support that contention, which sounds like typical German Christian bombast, but it is certain that Blomberg and Müller were well acquainted for at least several years prior to 1933.

The same logic that had reached back into Rarkowski’s biography transformed other long-serving chaplains after the fact into exemplars of Nazi constancy. Rarkowski’s Protestant counterpart, Military Bishop Franz Dohrmann,⁷⁸ and the hardworking Catholic Military Vicar Georg Werthmann, neither of whom had been publicly associated with the National Socialist Party before 1933, but both of whom had served in World War I (Dohrmann as a chaplain, Werthmann as a soldier), had their pasts tweaked in this way. So did many others. A Gestapo report noted that Werthmann, born in 1898, had been a soldier at the front and remained an enthusiastic proponent of

the military. This information plus his support for the Hitler Youth was deemed adequate to balance his initial reticence toward the Nazi movement.⁷⁹

A narrative of proto-Nazi support stretching back decades framed obituaries of chaplains throughout World War II. At the time of his death in 1944, Franz Albert was the oldest active German military chaplain. He had devoted thirty-eight of the forty-four years of his priesthood to pastoral care of soldiers, “in war and peace.”⁸⁰ Albert, who was born in 1876 in Alsace, served as garrison pastor in Glatz in Lower Silesia (Polish Kłodzko) before World War I. There, according to his obituary, he devoted himself to pastoral care of the Reichswehr, “where he was a fearless fighter for Germanness in a region that today is a borderland.”⁸¹ Albert’s trajectory fit neatly into a Nazi story, and even if he was never actively engaged in the Party, his successful career in the Wehrmacht chaplaincy indicates that he was at least sympathetically disposed.

Early bonds with the Nazi movement had a long-lasting impact on the German military chaplaincy. These linkages ensured that the leadership would be men who worked well with their military superiors, Blomberg, Reichenau, and others, and in key cases owed them their positions. The shared history and common narrative of struggle empowered individuals, among them Curt Koblanck and Franz Justus Rarkowski, who were close to Hindenburg, comfortable with Hitler, and linked to the Stormtroopers and local Party bigwigs through personal and family ties, years of cooperation, and mutual obligation. As a result, 1933 and the Nazi revolution that followed was not a barrier for chaplains but an opening onto a wealth of opportunities for personal careers and for military chaplaincy as a whole. Indeed, Koblanck had already been promoted to a high position in the emerging Wehrmacht chaplaincy in 1934. Such possibilities took concrete form with German rearmament in 1935.

The scene in Potsdam, which Koblanck and his supporters at the Garrison Church found so exciting, was perceived quite differently by a young American woman in the early Nazi years. To Martha Dodd, daughter of the US Ambassador to Germany William E. Dodd, writing in the late 1930s looking back, Koblanck and his ilk were buffoons, opportunists, and dupes:

In Potsdam itself there is a nucleus of a pro-Royalist group – retired generals, former ladies-in-waiting and their daughters, relatives, and hangers-on – who are passionate and antiquated partisans of the Hohenzollern cause. . . . The word “Potsdam” in Berlin society was a word of faint opprobrium and the expression, “Don’t be so Potsdam” was used to reprove people who suddenly became smug and hypocritical, or hopelessly dated in intellectual or social ideas. Many of these people, after a period of years, realized which side their bread was buttered on and swung over, half guiltily, to the Nazis.⁸²

It did not have to be that way, Dodd understood, but now it was.



Figure 1.2 The Day of Potsdam, March 21, 1933. President von Hindenburg and Hitler clasp hands in front of the Garrison Church as Defense Minister von Blomberg looks on. This photograph was one of a widely publicized series by a well-known press photographer that framed the new chancellor as the heir to Germany’s military and Christian traditions. Photographer Georg Pahl. BArch Bild 102-16082.

At the Nazi Party rally just months before Hitler became chancellor, garrison pastor Curt Koblanck had called on his counterparts not to let their swords get rusty. His slogan captured the conflation of clerical service and military service and the place of war – and wars, past and future – in the individual and collective sense of worth of German military chaplains. Now, once Hitler was in power, they seized the opportunity to prove themselves and their virtuous Christian manliness to their old hero Hindenburg and the younger man whose hand he would grasp so warmly on March 21, 1933. That day, Koblanck, his fellow chaplains, and all proponents of war

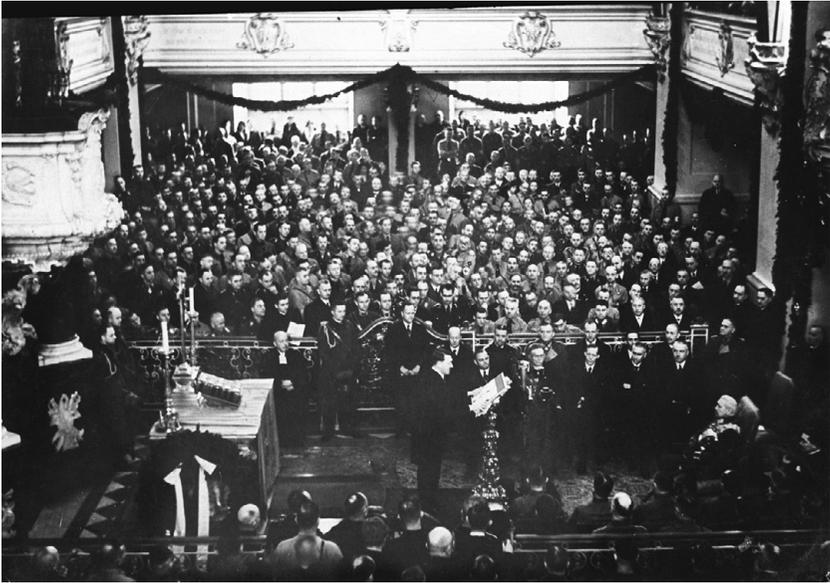


Figure 1.3 Hitler inside the Garrison Church on the Day of Potsdam. This occasion is said to be the only time he gave a speech in a church. Note the positioning of Hindenburg directly in front of him and the almost total absence of women among the listeners, who are attired and arranged to convey the legitimacy and power of the new leader. Photographer Georg Pahl. BArch Bild 102-16093.

Christianity watched with pride as the new regime celebrated its inauguration with a military parade and a religious service inside Potsdam's Garrison Church (Figures 1.2 and 1.3).⁸³