
Against Bolshevism: Georg
Werthmann and the Role of
Ideology in the Catholic
Military Chaplaincy,
1939–1945

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Abstract

From 1939 to 1945, Georg Werthmann worked tirelessly to preserve the Catholic military chaplaincy of the German armed forces from Nazi Party interference. He and the men who worked under him valued their service as integral to the Catholic German soldiers in need of spiritual help; they also viewed the war in which they were engaged as a crusade against Bolshevism, an enemy to be beaten at any cost. The article focuses on the reactions of Werthmann and select chaplains and seminarians to two military regulations concerning the chaplaincy, and on their understanding of Bolshevism, revealing that Nazi and Catholic ideologies shared significant commonalities that encouraged their wartime service.

At the end of April 1945, a US infantry division apprehended three Germans wearing Wehrmacht uniforms near Deggendorf, in eastern Bavaria. When the lieutenant-colonel filed his report on the incident, he explained that the three men in question were not officers, as he had initially presumed, but in fact clergymen – the acting Catholic field bishop, Georg Werthmann, and the two leading Protestant spiritual authorities in the military.¹ They were interned for the next several weeks at the

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¹ From the document collection 'Sammlung Werthmann' in the Katholisches Militärbischofsamtes Berlin (henceforth referred to as KMBA SW), 1009/VII (Nr. 1), copy of official report filed by John Cotter, 1 May 1945.

monastery where they had been found. During this time, Werthmann professed to have been a staunch opponent of National Socialist ideology and Hitler. When pressed as to why he had served in the army, Werthmann answered with conviction,

We felt that we could be of greater service if we remained outside [the] concentration camp [system]. But we never compromised our principles, or our souls. We have been persecuted ever since the Nazis came to power. . . . And I know personally that if Germany had won this war there would have been no more clergy in Germany.

He was certain of this last potentiality, exclaiming, 'I know that if Germany had won this war, the entire Church in Germany would have been dissolved. . . . and that all clergymen, both Catholic and Protestant, would have been liquidated.'²

Such was the immediate post-war image of the Catholic Church's relationship with National Socialism in Werthmann's mind, an image of oppression about which he would never change his opinion. In the copious notes he made during his internment, focusing on his experiences in the army during the Third Reich, he offered opinions about his colleagues, the evils of Bolshevism, the inseparability of German culture and Christianity, and the consistent challenges facing chaplains, priests and seminarians who wore the army uniform that to some extent support his contention about the regime's enmity towards institutionalised religion in Germany. As a witness, he was remarkably well placed to be offering such observations: he became the field vicar-general of the Wehrmacht chaplaincy in 1936, his authority second only to the Catholic field bishop, Franz Justus Rarkowski. He made the bulk of these notes post facto, as a prisoner of the Allied forces, with the full knowledge that the thousand-year Reich had disintegrated along with, literally, entire German cities. There can be little doubt that this affected his understanding of the previous twelve years and his own role during that period. This complicates the historian's task of situating Werthmann and his significance by relying solely on these notes. But the task is crucial, as they provide an important and hitherto ignored eyewitness account of a devoted German priest coming to terms with the Nazi regime and his own role in its history, who was writing at the critical time between total defeat and the beginning of reconstruction, well before the dirt and rubble had settled.

This article intends to use Werthmann's reflections for two purposes: to begin a discussion of why devout Catholic priests and seminarians would willingly go to war for Nazism, and to explore the complexities of their wartime experience due to the two authorities – spiritual and temporal – under which they found themselves. Werthmann and his fellow Catholic priests and seminarians who found themselves wearing the army uniform before 1939 and 1945 displayed a jarring inability to comprehend to what exactly they acquiesced when they said 'yes' to conscription and service. The penalty for refusal was death, but this was not a factor in their decision to go; the evidence indicates that most saw it as their duty, as Germans and as Catholic priests, to accompany men to war, and did not consider *not* going. In focusing on their most frequently mentioned motivation, their conviction that

² KMBA SW 1009/VII (Nr. 1), copy of Gregor Zimmer interview (English version); undated.

they were needed to defend Christianity – a concept that, to them, was intrinsic to and inseparable from Germany – in an existential battle against atheistic Bolshevism is underscored. To what extent this reasoning was a conscious adaptation of the National Socialist Party's own ideological goals during the war will be explored. The conclusions suggest that these devout Catholics had few qualms about compromising with a regime that displayed openly anti-Catholic tendencies because they focused on elements of the war that Nazi ideology also emphasised.³

Despite his importance as one of the leaders of the Catholic chaplaincy, Werthmann does not figure prominently in the military or religious history of the Third Reich.⁴ This article seeks to fill this gap by introducing Werthmann and his significance, not merely for the chaplaincy, but also as a representative of the challenges that Catholic priests and seminarians faced in the German armed forces (the bulk of them conscripted after 1939), and how they navigated them.⁵ In particular, I shall use two regulations drafted by military commanders for the governing of the chaplaincy – the first the promotion of a supradenominational service of worship, the second a restriction on the activities of priests conscripted into the army who were not part of the chaplaincy – to explore Werthmann's reaction, as well as the reactions of priests in uniform. The responses to these decrees reveal the complexities that defined the relationship between individual Catholic priests and the criminal Nazi war machine, a relationship that reflected the struggle for these men between obedience to temporal authority, defined by the regime and the war, and their spiritual vocation.

³ I have chosen to focus on Catholic conscripts because of their unique military status. According to a secret appendix of the 1933 concordat signed between Nazi Germany and the Vatican, during a general mobilisation, Catholic theology students and seminarians who had not been ordained to the sub-deacon level were liable for military service, but the authorities accorded men who had been ordained beyond this point – as well as conscripted Catholic priests – special status: they did not have to bear weapons. Protestant seminarians and clergy were liable for full military service.

⁴ Werthmann is mentioned in the following works that analyse the function and impact of the German Catholic chaplaincy during the Second World War: Thomas Breuer, *Dem Führer gehorsam: wie die deutschen Katholiken von ihrer Kirche zum Kriegsdienst verpflichtet wurden: Dokumente* (Oberursel: Publik-Forum, 1989); Johannes Güssen, *Die katholische Militärseelsorge in Deutschland zwischen 1920 und 1945: Ihre Praxis und Entwicklung in der Reichswehr der Weimarer Republik und der Wehrmacht des nationalsozialistischen Deutschlands unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Rolle bei den Reichskonkordatsverhandlungen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1989); Manfred Messerschmidt, 'Zur Militärseelsorgepolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg', *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 1 (1969), 37–85; Messerschmidt, 'Aspekte der Militärseelsorgepolitik in nationalsozialistischer Zeit', *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 1 (1968), 63–105; Heinrich Missalla, *Für Volk und Vaterland: Die kirchliche Kriegshilfe im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Königstein/Ts: Athenäum Verlag, 1978); Monica Sinderhauf, 'Katholische Militärseelsorge im Krieg. Quellen und Forschungen zu Franz Justus Rarkowski und Georg Werthmann', in Karl-Joseph Hummel and Christoph Kösters, eds., *Kirchen im Krieg: Europa 1939–1945* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna and Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2007); Gordon C. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962). There exists only one lengthy biography of Werthmann, found at the KMBA. It remains unpublished because of discrepancies in some of the factual details of the manuscript that were never revised. See Klaus-Bernward Springer, 'Ein guter und getreuer Knecht': *Georg Werthmann (1898–1980): Generalvikar der Militärseelsorge im Dritten Reich und in der Bundeswehr* (Bonn, 1999).

⁵ There were approximately 17,000 German Catholic priests and seminarians conscripted between 1939 and 1945; between 500 and 600 served as chaplains. Statistics taken from Georg Werthmann, 'Übersicht', KMBA SW 1052/IX, dated April 1944, which gives the total number of 17,776.

Werthmann had experienced war before he became involved in the chaplaincy in 1936; like many of his generation, he served in the Kaiser's army during the First World War, volunteering in 1916 at the age of eighteen. He spent some months in French captivity at the end of the war and was released in January 1920, when he began studying for the priesthood, into which he was ordained in July 1924. He held various positions in Bavaria for the next several years. At the request of his diocesan superior, the archbishop of Bamberg, he reported for service in the Wehrmacht military chaplaincy in 1935; he was stationed in Berlin and impressed Rarkowski so much that the latter appointed him his field vicar-general in October 1936.⁶ Nor did he remain tethered to his desk once the war began. He was based from June to October 1941 at the Fifteenth Army Headquarters near Lille. In June 1943 he journeyed to Riga, in March 1944 to Krakow, in April 1944 to Prague and Holoubkov (Hloubka, Czech Republic), and in June 1944 to Orscha (Orsza, Belarus) and Biala Podlaska (Poland), making extensive reports about his experiences.⁷ In January 1945, because of Rarkowski's failing health, Wilhelm Keitel, head of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Armed Forces High Command, OKW), informed Werthmann that he was provisionally in charge of the offices of the Catholic field bishop.⁸ In March, he fled the German capital, moving south and west until he was intercepted by the invading Allies and interned at the monastery near Deggendorf.⁹

Werthmann and his superior, Rarkowski, were responsible for making the pastoral care system of the armed forces of the Third Reich an efficient part of the military. The terms of the concordat signed in July 1933 between the Holy See and the fledgling Nazi government guaranteed a military chaplaincy; the treaty had offered initial details concerning the spiritual care that would be available for Catholic soldiers, as well as a secret appendix dealing with the conscription of priests and seminarians in case of a general mobilisation for war. Two years later, Hitler announced compulsory military service, and the slow build-up of the chaplaincy followed. While Rarkowski chose to co-operate enthusiastically with the regime – his pastoral letters embrace Nazi language and rhetoric without restraint¹⁰ – Werthmann worked to sustain the chaplaincy's independence in the face of hostility from unchecked anti-Catholics in the Party, which included the Party Chancellery chief Martin Bormann (also Hitler's personal secretary from 1943) and the SS leader Heinrich Himmler, as well as Keitel

⁶ Archbishop von Hauck evidently did this to protect Werthmann from the Gestapo, which had searched Werthmann's apartment 'because of his attitude towards National Socialism'. Transferring him into the Wehrmacht chaplaincy 'took him out of the Gestapo's firing line'. Springer, *'Ein guter und getreuer Knecht': Georg Werthmann (1898–1980) Generalvikar der Militärseelsorge im Dritten Reich und in der Bundeswehr* (Bonn 1999), unpublished manuscript, KMBA, 45–6; Sinderhauf, 'Katholische Militärseelsorge im Krieg', 282–3.

⁷ Werthmann's reports are found at the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg (henceforth: BA-MA), RH 15 Nr. 280, 9 July 1943, 27 March 1944, 5 May 1944 and 25 June 1944 respectively.

⁸ KMBA SW 1009/VII Nr.1, letter, 29 Jan. 1945.

⁹ KMBA SW 1009/VII Nr. 1, copy of HQ report, Twenty-Sixth Infantry Division, 1 May 1945.

¹⁰ Some of Rarkowski's various sermons and pastoral letters are reprinted in Heinrich Missalla, *Wie der Krieg zur Schule Gottes wurde: Hitlers Feldbischof Rarkowski: eine notwendige Erinnerung* (Oberursel: Publik-Forum, 1997), 20–112.

and Hermann Reinecke, liaison between the armed forces and the Party Chancellery and, after 1943, director of the National Socialist Leadership Office. For this reason, Werthmann has been depicted as the true leader of the Catholic military chaplaincy during the Second World War.¹¹

It is difficult to know how Catholic priests and seminarians conceived of the Nazi movement when they began their military service, and the extent to which they understood such service to be support for a regime which in post-war interviews they claimed to loathe. While many may have held themselves distant at the time because of its anti-Christian aspects, we know of only seven Catholics who refused the conscription order; six of them paid for their refusal with their lives.¹² As one veteran chaplain later insisted, echoing the sentiments of other veterans, ‘Because the men and young boys of our parishes were forced to go to the front, we went with them as spiritual aids, according to the postulate, “Soldiers have a right to religion”.’¹³ Priests and seminarians willingly donned the Wehrmacht uniform, not to proclaim their support for or acceptance of the dictates of Nazism, but rather to provide for the spiritual needs of their fellow Christian (and German) men, and to give them a feeling of comfort and familiarity when they were far from home and risking their lives. References to the homeland (*Heimat*) were, in fact, explicit, one chaplain declaring in a 1941 report that ‘through our activity in this strange place [likely the Eastern front], we can give to the soldiers a piece of *Heimat*’.¹⁴

One can debate the morality of such a decision, and certainly it is not a unanimous conclusion that soldiers have the kind of inalienable ‘right’ to religion as stated above. Moreover, this deceptively simple aim – of making spiritual care available to soldiers – was subverted during the war; as other historians have pointed out, most recently Doris L. Bergen and Kevin P. Spicer, the presence of priests gave to German soldiers ‘a kind of spiritual relief. . . a haven of normalcy that harked back to the religious practices of childhood’.¹⁵ One cannot doubt Werthmann’s sincerity or his devotion

¹¹ See Messerschmidt, ‘Aspekte der Militärseelsorgepolitik in nationalsozialistischer Zeit’, 82, as well as various chaplain-veterans in *Katholisches Militärbischofsamt*, ed., *Mensch, was wollt ihr denen sagen? Katholische Feldseelsorge im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Augsburg: Pattloch Verlag, 1991).

¹² According to Zahn, the six executed men were Franz Reinisch, a Pallottine priest; Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian peasant beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in June 2007; Josef Mayr-Nusser, the Catholic Action leader of Austria; and three men associated with the religious community *Christkönigsgesellschaft*: Max Josef Metzger, Brother Maurus and Brother Michael. See Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars*, 55 n. Heinrich Missalla contests some of these names, pointing to unresolved discrepancies in more recent German-language historiography. Other names of conscientious objectors that Missalla cites include Michael Lerpscher, Josef Ruf, Ernst Volkman and Richard Reitsamer. On one thing they all seem to agree: Josef Fleischer, from Freiburg, was the only survivor. Missalla, *Für Gott, Führer, und Vaterland: Die Verstrickung der katholischen Seelsorge in Hitlers Krieg* (Munich: Kösel, 1999), 228, n. 41.

¹³ Taken from the introduction in Hans Jürgen Brandt and Peter Häger, eds., *Biographisches Lexikon der Katholischen Militärseelsorge in Deutschlands 1848 bis 1945* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2002), xvi.

¹⁴ KMBA SW 811/III, Akte Martin Seitz, Seelsorgebericht, 1 Oct., 1941.

¹⁵ Doris L. Bergen, ‘Between God and Hitler: German Military Chaplains and the Crimes of the Third Reich’, in Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack, eds., *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 134; see also Kevin P. Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

to his vocation, or that he was deeply committed to his country and his God. But he, like the many chaplains and priests who served under him, failed to see how his wartime service enabled those soldiers looking to priests for guidance to compromise their morals by serving a regime with murderous intentions.

One measure of the impact of ideology on Werthmann are his descriptions of the various rules and decrees drawn up that governed the chaplains under his care, and the ways in which various priests and seminarians reacted to them. Werthmann and his superior, Rarkowski, ran the chaplaincy, but effectively had very little input regarding the wartime regulations that delimited its operations and sphere of responsibility. The Oberkommando des Heeres (Army High Command, OKH) and, later, the Party Chancellery issued several detailed lists between August 1939 and late 1944 of rules and individual decrees relating to pastoral care in the field. While we do not know Rarkowski's reactions to these beyond his attempts at implementation and, on one or two occasions, his meek protests, some of Werthmann's opinions survive, and the regulations themselves are evidence of the extent to which the regime and the army understood the work of chaplains as a military necessity and, in the eyes of the former, a potential area of ideological rivalry. He was most outspoken about two rules in particular: the use of supradenominational worship services up to 1942, and the restrictions placed on priests who were not part of the chaplaincy.

From the first detailed list of regulations distributed in August 1939, pastoral care was described in terms of military strength, as 'an important means for the fortification of the army's vigour' that would serve 'to maintain and nurture the inner fighting strength of German soldiers'.¹⁶ Duty and devotion to the Fatherland was a mandate from God, it asserted, and services of worship, described as 'the core' of pastoral care for both Catholic and Protestant chaplains, were to be held as often as possible for the entire unit, and as a rule not divided according to denomination. Opportunity would be given to soldiers to 'participate voluntarily in denomination-specific ceremonies such as confession and communion', but the stress on uniformity was unavoidable. Such regulations subtly used religious identity to reinforce national identity: one could be Catholic or Protestant, but all soldiers were German and, accordingly, the military leadership heavily favoured a unitary, and therefore unifying, religious service.

Such a 'supradenominational service' posed a significant problem on doctrinal grounds for Catholic chaplains, as historian Manfred Messerschmidt has pointed out but not fully explained.¹⁷ The Catholic Church could not have recognised such a service, theoretically involving non-Catholic celebrants and non-Catholic rituals, as a mass. Subsequently, the Catholic field bishop, Rarkowski, and Werthmann, as his aide, were also bound not to recognise it as the equivalent of a Catholic mass in the field. This was a sphere, however, circumscribed by military commanders, and the rules were explicit. Moreover, the supradenominational service proved to be

¹⁶ KMBA SW 1006/VI, 'Merkblatt über die Feldseelsorge', 21 Aug. 1939. All the following direct quotes are taken from here.

¹⁷ Messerschmidt, 'Zur Militärseelsorgepolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg', 51–2.

popular among unit leaders and soldiers because of its unifying quality. Protestant chaplains in general were also inclined to support it because of its similarities to the Protestant service and because they viewed it as having attracted the participation of increasing numbers of soldiers.¹⁸ Catholic chaplains were slower to embrace it; chaplains' official pastoral-care reports from the front remarked that Catholic services continued to be said separately from Protestant services, or that opportunities were available for confession-specific ceremonies such as communion, indicating that the enforced uniformity was not as successful among the more devout Catholic soldiers and chaplains.¹⁹ And yet there is no evidence that Rarkowski or Werthmann ever spoke out against it or condemned it.

An important clue as to why they quietly acquiesced in the use of this service is revealed in the notes of Karl Edelmann, the department chief for replacement and military affairs in the OKH, who handled the majority of correspondence between the Field Bishop's Office and the OKH. He was one of the few military personnel of whom Werthmann wrote positively during his internment; in the later post-war years he would testify for Edelmann at the latter's denazification trial.²⁰ According to Edelmann's statements, troops gravitated naturally, even enthusiastically, to supradenominational services. Through these kinds of group activity the cohesion and 'inner peace' of the soldiers would be best preserved. Whether it was before, during or after a battle,

[T]he troop belongs together . . . without distinction of denomination. Just as the troop steps into battle, so they will step before God, also . . . The interest of the troops in these supradenominational services is unquestionably greater than those of purely denominational devotions.

The supradenominational service was the best way to approach soldiers as well, because it was this activity that best achieved 'the most cohesive participation of the group'.²¹ And while Edelmann and, by extension, the OKH may have been interested in using a service like this for military reasons – it is undeniable that such participation in an activity at the front would have presented an atmosphere that bolstered morale and solidarity, and given soldiers another foundation upon which to foment a hatred for the ultimate ideological enemy, Bolshevism – for men like Werthmann, desperate to safeguard the influence of priests in the army and guarantee religious outlets for Catholic soldiers, such motivations, while relevant, were ultimately secondary. What

¹⁸ Georg May, *Interkonfessionalismus in der deutschen Militärseelsorge von 1939 bis 1945* (Amsterdam: Verlag B. R. Grüner, 1978), 274.

¹⁹ National Archives and Records Administration, Captured German and Related Records (henceforth NARA), T312 roll 118 fr. 7648807, report dated 25 Oct. 1940; NARA T312 roll 142 fr. 7679814, report dated 31 March 1941; NARA T312 roll 419 fr. 7995362–63, report dated 12 April 1942; NARA T312 roll 177 fr. 7715692, report dated 9 Oct. 1942.

²⁰ KMBA SW 1019/VII 3c, 'Der Amtsgruppenchef'. Contains copies of letters that Werthmann wrote on behalf of Edelmann during the latter's denazification trial as well as personal correspondence between the two, December 1945–1971 (the year of Edelmann's death).

²¹ BA-MA RH 15/282, 'Wesen und Aufgabe der Feldseelsorge', signed by Edelmann, undated (likely written sometime in mid-1941, given the date references within the text and the lack of any direct mention of or allusion to the war in the east, with the Soviet Union).

mattered for him was that the outlet was there, in order to preserve souls for God. In other words, it was a compromise worth making.

Yet when the supradenominational services were rescinded less than three years later, in a list of modifying regulations released in spring 1942, Werthmann was much more critical of this than of the enforcement of the services themselves.²² According to Werthmann, these newest rules reflected the increasingly open hostility of the Party leadership to the army's Christian traditions – taking particular aim at chaplains – as well as the heightened concerns of the Party and certain OKW commanders about the direction of the war.²³ The rules broke little new ground; most of what they laid down had already been elaborated in earlier series of guidelines. Neither Rarkowski's office nor Catholic chaplains had protested against them (nor had their Protestant counterparts). Why, therefore, did the Party seek more direct interference in 1942?

Werthmann's understanding indicates an ambivalence vis à vis his military superiors and the Party, bound up in the supradenominational service. He located the Party's 1942 interference as rooted in its hostility to such services that earlier regulations had promoted:

[T]he so-called supradenominational divine service was not, as was often assumed, a form of divine service pushed by the Nazis, [designed] to wear out both denominations and establish a "religion of unity" . . . In contrast, the Nazis acted very early on as decisive opponents of the supradenominational divine service and attempted to eliminate it.

He explained that the supradenominational service was interpreted in political circles as 'an attempt to sabotage and circumvent voluntary participation in divine service', and that these circles hoped to prove with its elimination that soldiers would then become uninterested in religion and thereby demonstrate that there was no need for spiritual care of any kind within the army – at least, no need for spiritual care as offered by the churches.²⁴ It revealed the Party's continued distrust of institutional religion, which it still regarded as a competing ideology despite the co-operation of the churches both on the home front and at war, and its desire to eliminate its potentially harmful effects on the fighting men of Germany.

Werthmann did not view the guidelines as an attack explicitly on Catholicism, but rather as an unambiguous move towards eliminating Christian culture and tradition within the ranks of the army. Attempting to bring the army more in line with the

²² KMBA SW 1006/VI, 'Richtlinien für die Durchführung der Feldseelsorge', OKW decree, 24 May 1942. All the following direct quotations are taken from here. Werthmann states unequivocally that this decree came from the Party via the OKW; its identifying abbreviation is OKW Az v AWA/J (Ia) Nr 4100/42, revealing that it originated in Amtsgruppe Inland (AWA/J), or the Interior Group, an armed forces liaison body that operated between the OKW and civilian agencies – the Party – in Germany, whose orders Werthmann consistently categorised as coming from the Party.

²³ For Werthmann's reflections, see KMBA SW 1006/VI, Werthmann's personal notes entitled 'Die Geschichte der Feldseelsorge' (History of pastoral care, henceforth referred to in endnotes as GeschFSS), 1 June, 28 June, and 17 July 1945. Werthmann made the bulk of these notes during his three-month internment period, intending to write a history of pastoral care under the Third Reich. The project was never realised, but the notes survive.

²⁴ KMBA SW 1006/VI, GeschFSS, 1 June 1945.

Party's own attitude in the matter of pastoral care could only occur at the expense of the army's autonomy, which was clinging 'more and more to the Christian tradition'.²⁵ The 1939 regulations were backwards, according to the Party. Werthmann's comments suggest, however, that the new guidelines went further than this. The army needed to be converted to the Party's comportment towards Christianity, a comportment manifesting itself with increasingly rigid reserve and hostility. In the process of this wartime co-ordination of the army with the Party, the chaplaincy had no room to manoeuvre and no sphere of autonomy to retain. Supradenominational services were definitively abolished.

In Werthmann's mind this was not the most controversial decree to be passed during the war. In February 1940, in order to adjust regulations to reflect the experiences of occupation in Poland, and to prepare the army for its upcoming war in western Europe, the OKH released a series of directives regarding the chaplaincy, indicating that certain liberties had been taken that the army command was keen to eliminate.²⁶ The most significant point was an emphasis on the fact that *only* chaplains were to undertake pastoral care within the army: administration of a spiritual nature performed by 'priests serving as soldiers should occur only in exceptional circumstances, with the approval of the unit commanders'. These exceptional circumstances included death, a solemn feast day and at the special request of soldiers before or after battle, and only if the chaplain was unavailable. This effectively prohibited priests who were not part of the chaplaincy, but who by far outnumbered official chaplains, from administering to others.

How many priests this affected is difficult to say. Several historians have established that the approximate number of conscripted Catholic priests and seminarians was around 17,000 between 1939 and 1945, with between 500 and 600 serving in the chaplaincy.²⁷ This number is based on Werthmann's notes for an official report, dated to April 1944, which set the number of conscripted clergy and seminarians at 17,776, broken into priests (6,218), seminarians and theology students (6,439), lay brothers (4,237), and order novitiates (872).²⁸ In the post-war period, Werthmann estimated that the total number of Catholic chaplains active over the course of the war was 545, a number that included those who fell or went missing, who became prisoners of war and who were dismissed for various reasons. The highest number at any one time was 390, in summer 1941.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., 17 July 1945.

²⁶ KMBA SW 1006/VI, copy of OKH report, 13 Feb. 1940.

²⁷ See above, n. 5.

²⁸ KMBA 1052/IX, 'Übersicht' notes, April 1944. There is a discrepancy of ten if one checks the numbers, a mistake in the original breakdown. Although there is a category in the breakdown of how many chaplains were serving in the chaplaincy, no number is given. The total number of civilian priests is listed at 34,000, broken into diocesan priests (27,000) and order priests (7,000).

²⁹ KMBA SW 84/1 14, GeschFSS, 22 April 1952. Werthmann noted that there had been 307 chaplains active with the armed forces in February 1939. See May, *Interkonfessionalismus*, 79. May estimated that according to research up to 1964, a total of 673 Catholic priests had served in the chaplaincy between 1935 and 1945, with a lower total of 428 Protestant chaplains. Ibid., 495. He does not offer an explanation for the difference.

If these numbers are accurate, this would mean that fewer than 10 per cent of conscripted priests served in the chaplaincy, and that 90 per cent were positioned in field hospitals or medical companies. Clearly, chaplains were stretched very thin from the very beginning of the war, and it was not uncommon for divisions to be without chaplains for years. This chronic shortage was common enough reason for priests (and occasionally advanced seminarians) who were not chaplains to administer to their soldiers in time of need, with or without permission. The speedy and unmistakable prohibition above indicates that the army command was both aware of the shortage and unwilling to offer any compromise.

Werthmann viewed this as a deliberate decision ‘from the Nazi side’ to ‘starve out spiritually and morally’ the young priests who were serving outside the chaplaincy.³⁰ He reflected bitterly and at length during his internment that it was a deliberately maintained shortage, with OKW commanders Keitel and Alfred Jodl or the Party Chancellery, led by Bormann (or both, in conjunction), laying out numerous obstacles to the conscription of more chaplains. He pointed to the presence of fully ordained priests who, under army regulations, could not administer to others as such.

So ensued such nonsense as, for example, an infantry division having, with their 12,000 to 15,000 soldiers, basically only a single Catholic chaplain, whereas in the same division, twenty to thirty Catholic priests could also be found as medical orderlies, who often performed the lowliest of services and who were forbidden to exercise pastoral care for their comrades, with the exception of very particular circumstances.³¹

One of his wartime reports, composed after a visit to Krakow in spring 1944, recounted that a mere ten Catholic chaplains were present in an area of 142,000 sq km, to care for more than 200,000 soldiers and 80,000 casualties. Rarkowski and Werthmann attempted to provide pastoral care by shifting chaplains from one of the nearest army groups into the General Government, and Werthmann cited the support of military leaders. It is difficult to imagine that he was ignorant of the presence of priests outside the chaplaincy; that he made use of them is not something of which he could have written. Still, Werthmann’s frustration is palpable, that such an enormous group of men was legally prevented from acting in any official capacity as priests for their units and divisions, which more often than not lacked a chaplain.³²

The value of these men as such, though, did not go unnoticed, nor did officers who worked closely with chaplains to help find spiritual outlets for their soldiers underestimate it. In an activity report detailing the year 1942, the chaplain Egon Schmitt wrote, ‘with the permission of the general of the division, medical soldiers [who were priests] were occasionally allowed to help with pastoral care. The masses that were said by these medical soldiers in this region were not included [in official

³⁰ KMBA SW 1052/IX, ‘Stellungnahme zu der Frage der Militärpflicht der Kleriker’, Heidelberg, 19 Jan. 1952.

³¹ KMBA SW 148/III (Nr. 5), GeschFSS, 19 Jan. 1952.

³² KMBA SW 1052/IX, GeschFSS, no date given, although likely written in the 1950s, using notes he made during his internment. Werthmann gives the precise number of 17,776 priests and seminarians who had been conscripted up to early 1944, including those conscripted from Austria and the Sudetenland. See KMBA SW 1052/IX, April 1944.

reports]’.³³ Dietrich von Hülsen, chaplain for the navy, wrote in a 1944 report that ‘The perpetually growing number of wounded . . . keeps a lone priest completely occupied . . . The only alleviation is the presence of two priests in the medical service, who in most cases give spiritual guidance and support to the dying.’³⁴ In fact, many of the ordained priests who found themselves operating as stretcher bearers or doctors’ assistants preferred to remain where authorities assigned them for the duration of the war because they felt closer to the men. Some who became chaplains recalled that their former positions had allowed them more intimacy with other soldiers. Rudolf Peifer was conscripted as a medical orderly along with five other priests. When his division chaplain suggested that he attend a seminar to become a full chaplain, his initial answer was ‘no’, ‘because I meant to stay side by side with simple soldiers, and fulfil my priestly duty in this way’.³⁵ Authorities informed Wilhelm Großkortenhau shortly after his training was complete that he would be assigned to a medical unit in the Luftwaffe, from which he always refused transfers into the chaplaincy: ‘I lay in the mud with soldiers and shared their experiences. In this way I rubbed shoulders with people with whom I otherwise would never have met.’³⁶ Several veterans interviewed in the 1990s stated that they had preferred their time as conscripted men, and that as chaplains they were somewhat removed from the experiences of the fighting men.³⁷

It may not be immediately comprehensible why Werthmann – or any Catholic priest – chose to become involved in an army that served a racist, antisemitic regime such as that run by Hitler and remain faithful to it even as it attempted to eradicate their presence in the army. The antisemitism of the regime did not appear to bother many of them, and the Catholic Church was certainly no stranger to such agitation within its own ranks.³⁸ But issues of racism or anti-Jewish sentiment may not have figured consciously in their justifications for volunteering or, as in the majority of cases, their response to conscription. This is not to say that it could not have been a motivating factor; neither the seminary classroom nor the cassock was a guaranteed defence against these elements of Nazi ideology. But most often, another enemy was identified explicitly as an evil to be fought at any cost.

References to the war against the Soviet Union unmask this ultimate enemy as Bolshevism. Priests and seminarians alike imagined and spoke of this war as a crusade

³³ KMBA SW 750/III, Akte Egon Schmitt, Tätigkeitsbericht, 17 March 1941.

³⁴ KMBA SW 447/III, Akte Dietrich von Hülsen, Tätigkeitsbericht covering the period 1 Jan.–31 March 1944, undated.

³⁵ KMBA SW 632, 633/III, Akten Peifer, ms., 105–6. This was later published as *Den Menschen ein Angebot: Erinnerungen eines Seelsorgers* (Cologne: Styria, 1993). All subsequent quotes will reference the manuscript contained in the Nachlass.

³⁶ Hans Jürgen Brandt and the KMBA, eds., *Priester in Uniform: Seelsorger, Theologen und Ordensleute als Soldaten im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Augsburg: Pattloch, 1994), 80, 82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, including, for example, A. Allroggen, 37; F. G. Cremer, 59; J. Rosenberger, 170.

³⁸ The literature on Catholic and Vatican antisemitism is extensive. The most important studies utilised in my work are David I. Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930–1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); and Kevin P. Spicer, ed., *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2007).

commanded by God. One front-line training seminar in the east encouraged priests to equate the fight for a terrestrial homeland with attempts to qualify for the eternal homeland of God, in a lecture that came the closest to granting the Nazi slogan of *Lebensraum* a religious connotation; another presented the fight for the Fatherland as a fight for Christ.³⁹ Seminarians were one group that feverishly advocated the idea that Bolshevism needed to be crushed using any means necessary, echoing Werthmann's post-war writings that continued to identify Bolshevism as a deadly enemy that Germany had failed to defeat.⁴⁰ These young, impressionable men were educated to identify the strain of communism in the Soviet Union as an enemy that would destroy Christian – and German – culture if it was not first destroyed. Using language that once more reveals the extent to which Germany and Christianity were a single vital object worth dying for, one seminarian wrote, 'As long as holy love glows within us, Bolshevism will never violate the soil of our homeland, and no one will discover us weak. Above all, our dead admonish us ceaselessly never to tire in the battle for Christ and homeland.'⁴¹

The words in which seminarians especially chose to describe it revealed the extent to which anti-Bolshevik propaganda, both Christian and Nazi, had permeated the seminary, as well as how closely it could be entwined with antisemitism. As one seminarian wrote,

Hopefully this bloody battle will soon find a good end, and with it, Bolshevism will be extirpated once and for all. Otherwise, the many victims of this crusade against the world enemy would have died in vain. Indeed, it would be the greatest tragedy if, simultaneously, the godlessness of the east led us to battle at the same time that religion was proscribed at home.⁴²

Leo Sutor wrote from Melitopol in 1942 that 'two world-views will slug it out here in a battle of civilisation; the civilisation of the Christian world against the Judeo-Bolshevik will to destruction, the battle of the individual against collectivisation.'⁴³ Franz Kurz, not a seminarian but rather a devout Catholic soldier, who wrote to Cardinal von Faulhaber in Munich about his experiences, described the conviction at which he arrived during the Russian campaign:

The longer one is in Russia, the more one adopts the conviction that, in this place, one battles Satan and his helpers in this world, and that this power must not only be fought, but totally destroyed.

³⁹ KMBA SW 152/III (8), Frontlehrgänge in Charkow, 16–17 April 1942, and Deutsch-Brod (now Havlickuv, Czech Republic), 22 Sept. 1944.

⁴⁰ KMBA SW 150/III Nr. 7, GeschFSS. The bulk of excerpts written at the end of June and during July 1945 make either explicit mention of Bolshevism or allude to it using language that is clearly spiritual but could also be confused with Nazi rhetoric: 'The experience of war has made you [soldiers] mature. The mild, benevolent maturity of a fruitful harvest is in you in spite of the fact that your heart beats still young and strong. . . Your maturity is not the decay of the smug, super-saturated, disappointed, broken man, not the fatigue of the exhausted. A firm calm stands behind your countenance. The stability of a knowing and complete man is within you, which is certain and secure, which possesses eternity' (dated 27 June 1945).

⁴¹ Erzbistumsarchiv München-Freising, Faulhaberarchiv – Cardinal von Faulhaber collection (henceforth EAM-FA), Priesterseminar Freising, Box I: Hans Anneser, 4 Jan. 1944.

⁴² Ibid., Box I: Georg Gratz, Strassröd, 28 July 1941.

⁴³ Ibid., Box IV: Leo Sutor, Melitopol, 7 Feb. 1942.

If the sacrifices are difficult to make and sullenness besets us, the idea remains that here we are charged with a holy task, with the preservation of the kingdom of Christ and occidental culture.⁴⁴

Another seminarian lamented that the war was not over, but insisted with his next breath that ‘we are ready to make any sacrifice that is required of us. Bolshevism will be broken into pieces, and that is the only possibility! Only the war can overthrow this system’.⁴⁵ To them as well as to the soldiers with whom they marched, the material conditions they encountered as they made their way into Russian territory proved the idea that Bolshevism was the most destructive force in existence, because ‘the impoverishment, the depletion is terrible . . . every village has a church [in Polish territory], but here [in Russia], such cannot be found anywhere, for, even in our own quarters it exists only as a ruin’.⁴⁶ Devout Catholic soldiers were prone to approaching the war in the Soviet Union in this way as well, propelled to do so by the three-pronged influence of Nazi propaganda, the antipathy of the Catholic Church, and priests and seminarians in uniform with whom they served. One soldier wrote to Cardinal von Faulhaber from the east in 1942, ‘There’s no church here. That’s the tragic lot of these people. God has been torn from their hearts. This is why so many German soldiers must lay down their lives, in order to help justice triumph.’⁴⁷

Some priests and seminarians regretted that they were unable to better gauge Bolshevism’s effects on the Russians themselves. Like most invading German soldiers, their experiences of the Soviet Union were limited to the open fields and evacuated villages, bereft of inhabitants, in which they took cover. Those civilians they did encounter presented a perplexing blend of elements that could be astonishing: ‘New, childlike beliefs coexist with fanatical, passionate faith, and honest will and severe ethical principles coexist with bestial sadism . . . What is contrary to us is nothing of the kind for them, because they live their lives in the depths, where antitheses unite everything.’⁴⁸ Others saw the Russians in a more propagandistic light, as personifications of an ideology bent on destroying Christian faith. Johann Lechner wrote from the eastern front,

We must fight on against a netherworld of brutish men who are possessed with the goal of tearing belief in God out of the hearts of men. But they will be completely destroyed. May the love of God always inspire me to remain a true, brave, and courageous fighter true, true to the oath to battle for Führer, Volk and Fatherland.⁴⁹

These anti-Bolshevik statements, clearly in line with Nazism’s own depiction of Germany’s enemies, offer the impression that devout young Catholics, including those studying for the priesthood and younger priests, were ready to defend their homes

⁴⁴ EAM-FA 6796/3, letter (copy) from Franz Kurz, 3 March 1942. Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber was one of the most outspoken anti-Nazi members of the German episcopate.

⁴⁵ EAM-FA, Priesterseminar Freising, Box III: Hans Reiter, Soviet Russia, 5 July 1941.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Box II: Jakob Mürbock, 23 July 1941.

⁴⁷ EAM-FA 6796/3, letter (copy), 15 April 1942.

⁴⁸ EAM-FA, Priesterseminar Freising, Box II: Werner Miller, 2 July 1944.

⁴⁹ EAM 6796/3, letter (copy) from Lechner to Cardinal von Faulhaber, 17 Jan. 1942.

utilizing the regime's own ideological language. Indeed, older priests and chaplains were likely little different, as front-line training seminars for chaplains included lectures given about the necessity of 'destroying the Bolsheviks'.⁵⁰ In the light of the anti-clerical regulations above, this suggests that the working relationship between the regime and the system of pastoral care in the military – or, macrocosmically, between Nazism and Catholicism – was splintering on one side; as Dagmar Herzog described it in the home-front context, the termination of this 'unrequited love affair' came from members of the regime, and not from those in the Church, who continued to exhibit attitudes of accommodation despite the onslaught until the end of the war.⁵¹

The extent to which Bolshevism and antisemitism were congruent in the minds of these men is difficult to determine. Explicit references to Jews are rare; references to Bolshevism, particularly its atheistic, anti-Christian aspects, occur much more frequently. It is conceivable that Catholic priests and seminarians implicitly meant to include the Jews whenever they mentioned the Bolshevik enemy that needed to be vanquished, particularly given the rampant antisemitic ideology that governed daily life in Germany before the war and that continued to drive the war machine at the front. This was especially true after the invasion of the Soviet Union, when Nazi propaganda declared repeatedly that the assault on 'Jewish Bolshevism' was intended 'to save European civilization and culture' from 'a system of Jewish criminals and their accomplices whose purpose is the exploitation and enslavement of humanity'.⁵² But it remains unclear whether specifically Catholic ideology, focusing on the areligious and anti-religious aspects of Bolshevism, or Nazi ideology, with its more racial-biological concentrations, provided the basic framework through which priests and seminarians perceived their enemies on the eastern front.

Werthmann did not dwell on specific elements of Nazi ideology such as racism and antisemitism, although one wonders if such opinions may have been contained in his now-lost personal diary of the time.⁵³ He did make three observations in May and June 1945 about the connection between Nazism and Christianity, and the former's inevitable breakdown. The first came in mid-May:

The spiritual formation of a people cannot be improvised. In my opinion, National Socialism broke down because it attempted to annul the essential, valuable elements of its own historically established spiritual formation. With this, National Socialism obliterated the noblest element of the Volk and dug its own grave.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ KMBA SW 152/III.8, Frontlehrgang für katholische Kriegspfarrer im Bereich AOK 6 (6. Armee), Charkow (now Kharkiv, Ukraine), 16–17 April 1942.

⁵¹ Dagmar Herzog, 'Theology of Betrayal', *Tikkun* 16, 3 (2001), 69–73.

⁵² See Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), especially 92–137, quotes from 100. Herf's excellent volume concentrates primarily on the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, run by Joseph Goebbels, and on Reich press chief Otto Dietrich, both of whom operated on the home front. Their relations with the army, and the army's own methods of propaganda, are not addressed.

⁵³ This diary, no doubt meticulous, was destroyed on his death in 1980, according to his own wishes.

⁵⁴ KMBA SW 997/VI, GeschFSS, 15 May 1945.

The second took up the same themes a few weeks later:

Germany is – from a historical viewpoint – a Christian nation. The renunciation of God . . . was a grievous catastrophe for our people. For us Germans, whose historical development is formed significantly on Christianity, this de-Christianisation signifies the dissolution of the basis of our existence and the destruction of our being.⁵⁵

And at the end of June Werthmann reflected,

Why did Nazism struggle repeatedly against the Church with every available means? It [Nazism] appeared to be anchored in the entire Volk and certainly didn't fear for itself in the face of the small gaggle that avowed itself to Christ. The answer to this question can only run as follows: it is the malediction and fate of the blasphemous spirit, that it must resort repeatedly to violence and persecution almost against its own intelligent will; within itself, it is too weak to battle its opponent with spiritual weapons, so it is compelled repeatedly to make ready his opponent for the Cross and to thrust this opponent into the grave – a grave that will always be glorious.⁵⁶

Each of the three quotes is layered with judgement and condemnation; this was not a man who sat by idly refusing to think about Nazism, or ignoring it by burying himself in his work. Each quote gives evidence of how Werthmann reconciled being German and being Catholic, and what had led ultimately to Nazism's collapse.

It should come as no surprise that Werthmann, a man of God, perceived the essence of the conflict between Nazism and Catholicism as one of control: the attempt by Nazism to tear Christianity out of the German people was what led to its downfall, for part of the German's identity is being Christian, a sentiment that no doubt many of Werthmann's Protestant counterparts shared. Less clear is how far the Nazi Party succeeded in rooting Christianity out of Germany. It was a common refrain among the spiritual leadership that institutionalised religion was targeted and persecuted. Much history writing shows that the Party never trusted the churches, and at times individual members were arrested, although not always because they were members of institutional churches.⁵⁷ The Party did not find the churches ideal allies, even when the churches indicated that they would raise no objections to the most significant element of the Nazi world-view – antisemitism and the concurrent discrimination against and later murder of the Jews. On this subject, Werthmann was silent.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 31 May 1945.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 30 June 1945.

⁵⁷ These include the Bavarian Jesuit priest Rupert Mayer, an outspoken Nazi critic, the well-known Protestant theologians Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer), also with known anti-Nazi proclivities, and one Austrian priest, Franz Reinisch, who refused to take the army oath of loyalty. Messerschmidt's articles in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, cited above, detail well the ways in which individual Party members, in particular Bormann and Goebbels, were hostile to the Church as an institution, and Guenter Lewy's groundbreaking study is also still useful on this count: Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965). Saul Friedländer's recent authoritative volumes on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust complement these perspectives, detailing the extent to which Church leaders accommodated the regime, even in the face of its hostility. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), and *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

The explication of Werthmann's silence lies in the wording, and deeper meaning, of his third reflection, which addressed Nazism's seemingly inexhaustible enmity for Christianity. By focusing on the problem from this angle, he discussed neither the Church's active role in appeasing the Nazi Party, which began with the signing of the Concordat in 1933, nor its consistent refusal to speak out on behalf of the most persecuted victims of Nazism, namely the Jews, nor the ways in which the willing service of priests and seminarians contributed to the regime's war effort. Instead, he spoke of constant Nazi hostility to the Church and located this in the movement's rejection of God, a rejection that inevitably led to violence as a means of both conviction and defence. Regardless of the reaction of the churches, Nazism had no recourse but to hound their members to the death, a death that was a 'glorious' conquest because it would make those Church members martyrs. In contrast to the hundreds of Catholic priests who languished in Dachau during the Third Reich, few priests and seminarians who were conscripted actually suffered this martyrdom; they took Werthmann's path, and compromised for the sake of the souls they were saving. In doing so, they emptied this compromise of any meaning because they viewed those around them according to a hierarchy of importance, placing German Catholics at the top. Beyond this was a large area of ambiguity, which included non-German Christians and sometimes (but not always) Orthodox Christians threatened by the spread of Bolshevism. They understood the war not as an aggressive, criminal undertaking, but as the defence of Christian, German – even European – culture, and in this sense a crusade. With this world-view, these priests and seminarians allied themselves with the ideology of a regime that they otherwise rejected.

Werthmann's obstinate expression in early May 1945, that German wartime victory would have led to the elimination of the churches in Germany, could have come to pass. The twelve-year Reich was unwilling to compromise with any institution that it could not entirely control – other political parties, the legal and education systems, the medical profession, youth groups, even the army, were all ultimately subjected to either dissolution or the process of co-ordination (*Gleichschaltung*). The churches likely would have been no exception. But such statements obscure the more fundamental fact that intelligent and devoted men like Werthmann chose to compromise with this regime on the basis of the common goal of obliterating Bolshevism and looking after soldiers' spiritual needs. In this way, despite increasing limitations on its activities, a functional military chaplaincy existed during the Third Reich. This was a great feat for Werthmann, who fought to protect the men within and outside its ranks. But it came with a price that he and most others failed to see clearly; by focusing on the German Catholic souls in their care and the Bolshevik enemy they were enjoined to destroy, Werthmann and most priests who served in the army embraced significant elements of an ideology they later claimed to abhor, sacrificing their own moral integrity in the process.