Introduction
An Incongruous Institution

> Bluntly put, a chaplain is the minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War – Mars. As such, he is as incongruous as a musket would be on the altar at Christmas. Why then is he there? Because he indirectly subserves the purpose attested by the cannon; because too he lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force.
>
> Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*

> If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will He not also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. . . . As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." . . . I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)
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> Wehrmacht chaplain, sermon to soldiers on Germany's eastern front, late 1941

By any standard measure, Hitler's Germany was a Christian country. Throughout its existence, around 95 percent of its people remained baptized members of the two established churches: Roman Catholic and Protestant (Lutheran, Reformed, and a combination of the two). Germans paid substantial church taxes, which authorities of the National Socialist (Nazi) state collected and passed along to ecclesiastical bodies, just as their predecessors had done in the Weimar Republic and before that in Imperial Germany. Church buildings dominated the streetscape in big cities and villages alike, and Christian traditions and holidays structured daily life, even if they shared the stage at times with rituals invented by Nazi propagandists and neo-pagans. Although German law recognized only civil marriage, many couples still chose to have their unions blessed in a church ceremony. Almost all German children received religious instruction in school from a Catholic priest or a Protestant pastor. With few exceptions, Germans hoped for and received a Christian burial when they died.[1] At the time Hitler came to power, Jews, the largest non-Christian minority by far, made up less than 1 percent of the population.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108767712.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Under these circumstances it should come as no surprise that Christian chaplains served the Wehrmacht, Nazi Germany's conscription-based military, from its creation in 1935 until its defeat a decade later. Over the lifetime of Hitler's regime approximately 1,000 men held official positions as Wehrmacht chaplains.[2] Catholic and Protestant in about equal numbers, they accompanied German troops wherever they went: into Poland, France, Greece, Yugoslavia, North Africa, the Soviet Union, and points between and beyond; on the retreats back toward their shrinking homeland; and into POW camps on four continents. Like their counterparts in the British, American, and Canadian militaries, the Wehrmacht chaplains were formally incorporated into the armed forces and held officers' ranks. Like chaplains in those forces, too, they ministered to the men in their care, performed the sacraments, comforted the sick and wounded, and buried the dead. But as part of the German war of annihilation, the Wehrmacht chaplains carried out these familiar tasks under circumstances that raised the stakes to terrifying heights. Whom or what does a chaplain serve?

Witnesses to Atrocity

A deadly incident illustrates some key themes of this study. In July 1941, advancing Wehrmacht units reached a city in central Ukraine called Bila Tserkva, about midway between Zhytomyr and Kyiv.[3] Bila Tserkva – (Біла Церква) in Ukrainian, Belaya Tserkov (Белая Церковь) in Russian, and Biała Cerkiew in Polish – means "White Church," specifically, an Eastern Rite church. Located on the Ros' River, a tributary of the Dnieper, and major rail lines, the city was an important transportation hub. On the eve of World War II, according to census records, it was home to 9,284 Jews.[4] The "big synagogue" was a landmark, as were two Jewish schools. Sholem Aleichem had lived there in the 1880s, and Yiddish culture thrived during the early Soviet period. In 1929, when the ethnomusicologist Moisei Beregovsky set out to collect Jewish songs, he began his expedition in Bila Tserkva. There he recorded hundreds of songs about love, family, and the struggle for social justice.[5]

Especially fruitful for Beregovsky was the neighborhood of Gruziia. Locals called it "Georgia" because the decrepit housing fit their image of the ramshackle Caucasus. There Grisha London, a teenaged shoemaker, performed a ballad that began, "Oy vey, in 1915, a new decree was issued." The lyrics lamented the fate of a young recruit in the tsarist army, his family forced to surrender him: "Oh every father must lead his child/like a slaughterer the cattle." Out on maneuvers on Shabbat, the singer bemoaned, with nothing to eat or drink, "you get slapped too." Viewed through the prism of the Holocaust, it is hard not to read certain lines as clairvoyant:

Oy vey brothers, we're lost
We are in murderous hands, oy vey.

Dire as circumstances may have been, however, the balladeer ended by asserting not doom but Jewish agency, at least for men:

We took Jewish girls
And wasted their lives.[6]

The song framed the travails of military service as part of the ongoing drama of Jewish communal existence.

Jewish life in Bila Tserkva was diverse and distinctive, but the destruction of Jews there was typical of hundreds of massacres the Germans carried out in the summer of 1941, throughout Ukraine, eastern Poland, and the Baltic states. In Bila Tserkva, members of a mobile killing squad, Sonderkommando 4a of Einsatzgruppe C, conducted most of the murders, with assistance from German Order Police units, Ukrainian auxiliaries, and some of the local population. The killers used techniques that were rapidly becoming standard practice: they rounded up Jews using coercion and deception; commandeered people nearby, sometimes the condemned Jews themselves, to dig pits at designated sites; forced the victims to take off their clothes, and then shot them one small group at a time, so that their bodies fell directly into what became mass graves. Afterward the killers helped themselves to the belongings of the people who were now dead.[7]

The slaughter of Jews in Bila Tserkva followed standard practice yet differed in a crucial respect from all but a handful of such killings: it drew attention after the war not only in the Soviet Union but also in the west. In 1967–68, eleven members of Sonderkommando 4a stood trial in Darmstadt, West Germany, for the murder of thousands of Jews in the southern Soviet Union. Among those called to testify were two chaplains with the 295th Infantry Division: the Roman Catholic priest Ernst Tewes and the Protestant pastor Gerhard Wilczek.[8] Their account of how, in Bila Tserkva, they tried and failed to save a group of Jewish children from death drew international headlines and remains the best known – indeed, the only – documented case of Wehrmacht chaplains intervening on behalf of Nazi Germany's victims.

For the court and in subsequent publications, Father Tewes reproduced events, relying on his memory and notes he had taken at the time. German soldiers had approached him and his Protestant counterpart to ask for their help, he said. According to the soldiers, a large number of children were locked in a school near the field hospital. The two clergymen went to see for themselves, and Tewes recalled what they encountered:

I am sure I would still recognize that building today. We found about ninety little Jewish children, among them some infants, in a hopeless situation: packed together,

whimpering, crying, hungry and thirsty in the mid-day heat. Most of their parents had been shot, and some of their mothers were confined in an adjacent room. Through a window they could see their children's agony but they could do nothing to help them. Both of us agreed absolutely that against all orders, we would get involved and put ourselves on the line. The children and their mothers, like so many others before them, were to be shot by an SS Sonderkommando.[9]

Tewes described how he and Wilczek, both young men at the time – he was thirty-one – first appealed to the local commander, characterized by Tewes as "an elderly Austrian." That effort failed, Tewes reported, because the man "turned out to be a convinced antisemite."[10] Then they enlisted the support of two senior chaplains in the area.[11] Together the four persuaded Lieutenant Colonel Helmuth Groscurth to take up the cause.[12] As Tewes told it, Army High Command approved one postponement, but Security Service representatives and military officers on-site prevailed, pointing to instructions from General Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, commander of the Sixth Army. Eventually, word came from Berlin that all the children and the women were to be killed.

On August 21, 1941, the children were taken from the school and shot. No one mentioned the women again. Whether it was Germans – Tewes noted only the possibility it was members of the Waffen-SS – or Ukrainian "volunteers" who did the job the chaplains would not say.[13] In a report dated August 1941, they emphasized that the men guarding the school were "Ukrainians," whom they suspected of acting "on their own initiative."[14] Looking back decades after the massacre at Bila Tserkva, Tewes underscored the image of himself and his fellow chaplain as powerless: "All of the people we tried to save were shot," he remarked. "Because of our efforts, it just happened a few days later than planned."[15]

Tewes's account constitutes powerful evidence that Wehrmacht chaplains witnessed the Holocaust. Witnessing is not a neutral act, a fact recognized in many traditions where it is taboo to look upon the victims of violence.[16] Those who see and watch violence are changed by it – traumatized, brutalized, mobilized, paralyzed.[17] At the same time, the presence of witnesses changes the event itself and affects how participants experience and remember it. Tewes's testimony presents Christian chaplains as tragic figures, good and decent men who tried and failed to save the lives of innocent children. His version of events was directed at an audience and shaped by its purpose, and like every narrative, it is incomplete. What Tewes left out – whether because he did not know, failed to notice, blocked, forgot, deemed inappropriate, or denied – is as significant as what he included for understanding the role of Wehrmacht chaplains during the war and afterward.

One thing Tewes omitted was context. His testimony described an isolated event, but the assault on Jews in Bila Tserkva started before and continued

after the massacre of the children in the school. Germans arrived in the region in mid-July and began killing Jews immediately. The first mass shooting took place on July 14, 1941. In a park by the river, Germans shot ten Jewish men and dumped their bodies in a shallow grave. By the end of the day, they had shot and killed 200 Jews.[18] The Red Army report that provided these numbers detailed additional atrocities to follow. Soviet sources also document German and Ukrainian destruction of physical markers of Jewish presence. In 1943 the municipal government of Bila Tserkva demolished the Jewish cemetery. Workers gathered the tombstones, 300 cubic meters in total, and brought them to municipal headquarters, where they were mixed with untreated stone.[19] Soviet liberation of the city in January 1944 made the front page of the *New York Times*.[20] That same month, the Soviets created a Commission including local people to investigate evidence of Nazi crimes in the area. According to their report, of 6,000 bodies found 5,000 were Jews, many of them children and women.[21]

Germans had killed those Jews in plain sight, and eyewitness accounts survived in various forms. Already in 1941, Soviet collectors of Yiddish folklore documented a song about the murder of Jewish children in Bila Tserkva. It located the massacre at the seventh military square, on the outskirts of the city, and sounded the call for revenge:

> Oy, what should we say and what should we tell,
> when little children were buried alive.
> People, this happened on the seventh square;
> they were buried in a pit like a barrel.
>
> The assassins, the fascists, were pleased, –
> they thought all the Jews had finally met their end.
> From the still-fresh graves, one can hear a cry:
> "People, revenge – take revenge on them!"
>
> Not a single drop of their blood will go unanswered –
> we will destroy, wipe out the murderers.
> We will crush every one of them into dust, –
> they will pay for everything, for everything![22]

Jewish sources tell other stories that offer insight into the situation. In Yiddish, Bila Tserkva was sometimes known as *Shvartze Timme* (Black Tumah, or black abomination). In Jewish tradition, *tumah* is associated with withering and decay. A dead body is a site of *tumah*, not only because the corpse itself is decaying, but also because living people who come into contact with it often suffer emotionally and experience spiritual fragmentation, a counterpart of the corpse's physical disintegration.[23] The play on the city's name – transposing "white church" to "black rot" – is not only a grim joke but a reference to the history of violence against Jews as remembered and

imagined there. Jews in the region viewed Bila Tserkva as the epicenter of successive pogroms: in 1648, it was said, the Chmielnicki uprising destroyed the large Jewish community; Jews rebuilt, only to be ravaged again in 1919–1920.[24] In the German narrative, the murder of Jewish children in Bila Tserkva was a tragic anomaly in an obscure place with a cumbersome Slavic name. In the story of *Shvartze Timme*, however, Christians killing Jews was the brutal norm in a place called White Church.

Perhaps because of past experience, in 1941, shortly before the Germans arrived, Jewish community leaders arranged to evacuate hundreds of children from Bila Tserkva.[25] This feat may explain why the number of children in the August massacre was small relative to the hundreds and thousands of Jewish children Germans were killing all over the region in the summer of 1941. Interviews in the Shoah Foundation collection with two survivors, Dimitri Kalinski and Isaac Piatsetski, provide valuable perspectives. Like the chaplains' accounts, these testimonies are part of a conversation with an anticipated audience and need to be analyzed accordingly. They are all the more precious because together with the song about the seventh square, they constitute the only Jewish sources I have found on Bila Tserkva in 1941.

Dimitri Kalinski was interviewed in 1998 in Nevada. He told the interviewer he was born in 1932 but did not know exactly when or where. By 1939, he said, he was in a boarding school in Bila Tserkva, where he remained "for two winters." He recalls disjointed episodes: being told in 1941 that "something's gonna happen in a month's time," and experiencing bombs being dropped near the school one night. The next morning, when soldiers appeared, Kalinski and another child set out across the river to find a teacher. They were unsuccessful, and Kalinski ended up alone, "wandering around" begging. At one house, people gave him food in exchange for looking after their cow.[26]

Kalinski remembers being "picked up" by German soldiers in "large trucks that were carrying a lot of people," though he was the only child. They were driven "quite a ways," told to get out of the trucks, and then the Germans began shooting. Kalinski implies the location was Babyn Yar: he says the adults kept saying the name and he saw Kyiv burning. He survived because people fell on top of him, he recounts; he crawled out from underneath them and "left the area." Later, Kalinski told the interviewer, he was put on a cattle train and sent to Auschwitz. The account has the marks of embellishment: did he really survive both of the most infamous killing sites of the Holocaust, Babyn Yar and Auschwitz? Kyiv was burning before the Babyn Yar massacre, but would the fire still have been visible from the ravine? The details on Bila Tserkva seem reliable though: why fabricate a connection to a place his interviewer almost certainly had never heard of? Kalinski may well have evaded the August massacre at the school only to be pulled into another of the many killing actions nearby.

The other survivor, Isaac Piatsetski, had adult memories of Bila Tserkva. Born in 1914 in Kielce, he too was interviewed in 1998, in Florida. After the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, he recalled, he fled east. Drafted into the "Russian army," he was sent to an army base near the former Polish border. In 1941, after a complicated series of moves, he ended up in Bila Tserkva, where he was arrested by the Soviets. Put to work with other refugees at a brick factory, he was given a place to stay near the train station. There he described seeing evacuations:

> They were evacuating from the front zone, children – and a lot of Jewish children and Jewish families because it was a Jewish-Ukraine there. Belorussia, there were a lot of Jewish people. And the local commanders were also Jewish, and they put all the trains to their, uh, evacuation. So we met such a train which was evacuating, uh, small children from preschool age – maybe a few hundred – in a separate train.[27]

Piatsetski's account includes some flourishes. Notably, his subsequent remark, "The train ended up in Ural," was probably an assumption based on common knowledge and desire for a positive outcome. How would he know what happened to that particular train? More convincing is the offhand comment that local commanders designated evacuation trains for children, because it emerges in passing and does not serve any immediate interest.

Kalinski's and Piatsetski's accounts challenge the claim of tragic Christian impotence. At Bila Tserkva, the military chaplains lamented, they were unable to help a single Jewish child. Yet Kalinski, nine years old at the time, managed somehow to save himself. Under intense pressure from the advancing Germans, Soviet efforts succeeded in evacuating hundreds of children from Bila Tserkva to Central Asia. In short, reversing the gaze, looking at events through the eyes of Jews in the region, interrupts the narrative of German military chaplains with a pointed question: How did a massacre of Jews become a story of Christian heroism?

Power and Legitimation

Tewes and Wilczek did not stop the murder of the Jewish children at Bila Tserkva but they were by no means powerless. To the contrary, they and the other military chaplains had considerable power by virtue of the office they held and the moral authority of Christianity in their society. It is difficult to quantify that power, because it was articulated and exercised for the most part informally, and its practitioners repressed and denied it after the fact. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot trenchantly observed, "The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility."[28] Yet its traces can be seen even in the events of August 1941 and their aftermath.

Soldiers acknowledged the importance of the chaplaincy, for instance at Bila Tserkva where, according to German sources, it was soldiers who

approached the chaplains. Without the soldiers' initiative, Tewes and Wilczek might not have learned about the children confined in the school or at least they might have avoided coming face-to-face with that reality. Wehrmacht chaplains were ordained Christian clergymen, recognizable by the white and violet armbands they wore with their uniforms and other markers that ranged from subtle – the absence of the signs of rank worn by other officers – to more dramatic: crucifixes around their necks; on occasion ceremonial robes. Their physical presence in the midst of a brutal war signaled a kind of normalcy that many Germans read as legitimating. Even when the killers and the Wehrmacht units that accompanied, supported, and sometimes directly assisted them did not see an actual chaplain, they all knew Christian chaplains were part of the war effort, and that knowledge added a protective layer of moral reassurance. Those soldiers who told Tewes and Wilczek about the crying babies locked in the school could feel they had done what they were supposed to do: bring their troubled consciences to the chaplain.

Of course things may not have happened as Tewes remembered or recounted them. Perhaps the chaplains learned about the children from their own observations or from the locals among whom they were billeted. The emphasis on the conscience-stricken soldiers fits neatly with other details in Tewes's testimony that support the myth of the honorable German Army: his description of the antisemitic commander as "Austrian"; his repeated references to the SS as distinct from and opposed to the Wehrmacht; his speculation that "Ukrainian volunteers" did the actual killing.[29] Other details slide easily into insinuations of Jewish passivity, even complicity: note the image of Jewish women helplessly watching through a window as their children suffered, when in fact it was the chaplains who were passively peering in. (Why would there be a window between two rooms inside a small building?) But even with its self-serving elements, Tewes's account makes clear that chaplains had the standing to approach military commanders and the credibility to testify years later in court, as representatives of an intact Christian conscience within the Wehrmacht.

Military, state, and Party leaders regarded the chaplaincy as a moral force, even if that recognition was sometimes backhanded. Soon after the murder of the Jews in Bila Tserkva, both Tewes and Wilczek were transferred to different units. Nothing suggests this step was punitive, nor was it unusual. Nevertheless, given the tendency for chaplains to remain with the same units as long as possible, it could be that the transfers were a deliberate effort to distance Tewes and Wilczek from the men who had been with them at Bila Tserkva. Why allow seeds of conscience to take root or encourage misgivings to be shared with a sympathetic audience?

Certainly the Wehrmacht leadership was eager to forestall discussion of moral qualms. In October 1941, Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau issued

his infamous directive to address "uncertainty regarding behavior of the troops" in the east. To destroy the "Jewish Bolshevist system," he assured his men, Germany was compelled to bypass the rules of war and show no mercy to "Jewish subhumans."[30] Murmurings of discontent about the active part the Wehrmacht had played in the slaughter of Jews at Babyn Yar just weeks earlier appear to have prompted Reichenau to take the unusual step of justifying himself to the men under his command and assuming the burden of moral responsibility. But the spark of conscience the chaplains showed at Bila Tserkva may also have contributed to Reichenau's directive, especially since it was Reichenau, at least as Tewes and others told it, who gave the order to have the children killed.[31]

Chaplains themselves had a sense of their authority. In his postwar recollections of Bila Tserkva, Tewes acknowledged the potential power of his position, something he said he fully grasped only later. It was in the 1968 courtroom, he claimed, that he learned he and Wilczek had been investigated:

> we who had set in motion this whole thing from within the Army against the SS. I learned that the High Commander of the 6th Army, who was in charge of this southern sector of the front, General Field Marshal von Reichenau himself, had personally intervened in this matter, sharply criticized our meddling, and clearly planned to take measures against us.[32]

Yet the two chaplains were not punished, nor is there evidence that their actions at Bila Tserkva damaged their careers. Tewes's new assignment, to an armored division in Russia, was dangerous but not unusually so. In his version of events, German atrocities were a lamentable part of warfare, balanced by the perilous conditions there. "There were partisans," he observed in describing his new post in his reminiscences. "German soldiers and officers were shot in partisan attacks. Then there were the terrible reprisals, shootings of hostages, to which Jews and others fell victim."[33] In the mind of Chaplain Tewes – or at least in the way he presented his past to the world – the targets of Nazi violence had changed from innocent children to dangerous bandits.

One argument of this book is that the German military chaplaincy helped legitimize Hitler's regime and its genocidal war. Wehrmacht chaplains were effective legitimators precisely because they stood somewhat apart from the overt proponents and practitioners of violence. Although Christianity and Nazism coexisted, they were not identical, and Tewes, Wilczek, and their fellow chaplains abhorred such crimes as the murder of children. Their influence, however, depended less on individual intent than on the prestige of military chaplaincy and the venerable tradition of Christianity in Germany. Like the chaplain Melville described in *Billy Budd*,[34] the Wehrmacht chaplains were all the more effective in sanctioning force because they represented a self-proclaimed "religion of the meek."[35]

The Wehrmacht chaplains' moral authority made them key to creating a reassuring version of events for the soldiers and families to whom they ministered and also for themselves. Over the course of the war, they developed a vested interest in a narrative that normalized atrocity or elided it with German suffering. If they felt shame about their country's crimes, they could hide it behind blame of the victims, a process facilitated by propaganda that depicted Jews as a mortal threat to Germany, the sinister force behind its military foes. Chaplains were not the only people to engage in this sleight of hand: Jews were to be "exterminated as partisans," Hitler reportedly told Himmler.[36] Turning the Holocaust into a Christian morality tale served to transform Jews from victims to enemies and then to erase them from the story altogether.

The Wehrmacht chaplains enabled killing but they were not themselves hands-on killers. In thirty years of researching this subject, I have not found evidence that German chaplains personally killed Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, or civilians in occupied Poland or elsewhere. They were permitted to carry a sidearm, usually a pistol, while at the front or in occupied territory, and some of them boasted about participating in combat. In many circumstances, however, they were unarmed.

The intervention by German military chaplains at Bila Tserkva was almost certainly a singular event. Why did other Wehrmacht chaplains, who also witnessed or had direct knowledge of extreme violence – rape of Polish, Jewish, and Soviet women;[37] mass murder of Black French soldiers, Norwegian and Soviet prisoners of war, Jews in Lithuania and Belarus, Christian civilians in Yugoslavia and Greece – not raise comparable objections? Indeed, why did the chaplains at Bila Tserkva not follow up their protestation there with further actions? Both Tewes and Wilczek continued in their jobs until the end of the war, and apparently neither of them caused any subsequent trouble.

This book identifies four factors that together explain the Wehrmacht chaplains' patterns of behavior. One was the institutional structure of the chaplaincy, which rewarded cautious leadership and weeded out potential troublemakers. A second factor involved the chaplains' defensive position vis-à-vis the Nazi regime and a general crisis of relevance for the churches in the modern era. War itself, above all the confusion and moral numbing it entailed, was a third factor, and a fourth was time: the passage of time and habits and patterns formed over time. The Wehrmacht chaplaincy of 1941 – of the war of annihilation and the Shoah – would not have been possible in 1933, but chaplains would not have become what they were by then without the developments of 1935, 1939, and 1940.[38] By the same token, chaplains' actions in 1941 shaped their behavior in the years that followed and how they remembered and represented it.

Systems and Dynamics

Institutions, professions, and the systems that govern them have their own logic. Rather than asking why German chaplains were silent in the face of Nazi murder of Jews, it can be more fruitful to ask why there was no apparatus for them to protest or articulate opposition to the state.[39] What structures generated certain options for what they did and perceived they could or should do? What dynamics channeled their actions, including those that went against the rules, into legitimation of the dominant system?

A key factor was the way chaplains were selected. Appointment of military chaplains involved a multistep process that privileged men who counted as theological and political moderates. Local bishops proposed names, which the Ministry of Church Affairs, the appropriate military bishop (Catholic or Protestant), and the Gestapo then vetted. About one-third of the men considered were rejected. On the Catholic side, this meant above all keeping out priests who had been involved in youth work that contravened police restrictions. On the Protestant side, it usually meant excluding clergy with a strong record of activity in the Confessing Church, because it had opposed Nazi efforts to control who held church offices. Once selected, chaplains went through training processes and participated in professionalization events of various kinds. These shared experiences, along with a sense of duty to their calling, exerted a palpable influence on them. To be a military chaplain meant to be a soldier, to be manly, to serve one's country and one's faith.

If the office shapes the man, the leaders set the tone. Two military bishops headed the Wehrmacht chaplaincy, the Catholic Franz Justus Rarkowski and the Protestant Franz Dohrmann.[40] In position by 1935, Rarkowski and Dohrmann in effect created the chaplaincy that served in World War II. They were responsible for appointing chaplains and they represented the churches' interests to the military and military interests to the churches. Both men were traditional patriots who had served in World War I. Neither was a member of the Nazi Party, and both proved willing to speak out to protect the institution of the chaplaincy when they considered it threatened by the Party or state. This independence, in turn, gave them credibility that made them more effective as legitimators of the regime than ardent Nazis could have been.

Legitimation is a two-way street, and if the Nazi regime needed the German military chaplains, chaplains may have needed the regime even more. Their credibility and entire reason for existing depended on their bond with war and the men who fought it. Yet soldiers' taunts of irrelevance echoed around the Wehrmacht chaplains, most loudly during periods of German ascendancy, quieter but with a bitter tone in times of setback. Who needed God if they were winning? And if they were losing, had God not failed them? Meanwhile,

some Nazi ideologues were openly hostile, regarding chaplains as rivals who propagated an outmoded and enfeebling world view. A series of measures introduced over the course of the war indicate that policy makers sought to curb the chaplaincy's impact and perhaps eventually phase it out altogether.

Chaplains responded with what I call "compensatory compliance": they tried to forestall criticism by proving they were essential fighters for Germany.[41] They publicized evidence that soldiers and officers regarded them as necessary to maintain morale, particularly when casualties were high. They engaged in ostentatious demonstrations of loyalty to Hitler, including special prayers and services on his birthday and other occasions.[42] This dynamic, readily apparent in contemporary sources, recedes from view in chaplains' postwar accounts. Those tend to downplay cooperation with the regime and emphasize its hostility, consistent with the chaplains' pattern of protecting their institutional interests.[43]

Like the chaplains, under Hitler the Christian churches as a whole occupied a defensive position vis-à-vis actual and imagined critics. On the one hand, Christian leaders enjoyed enhanced recognition and prestige. During wartime, the importance of the churches grew, because they sanctified sacrifice and comforted the bereaved, tasks the German leadership increasingly valued as casualties among their own people mounted. On the other hand, elements within the Nazi movement were suspicious of Christianity. After all, Christianity grew out of Judaism and called on its followers to "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek" – attitudes antithetical to the Nazi world-view. Hitler did not destroy German churches or persecute ordinary Christians, but officials imposed restrictions and police practiced forms of harassment to keep the churches in line. Often state or Party accusations of Christian weakness sparked church leaders to redouble efforts to prove their value to the nation.

A wider, older struggle of religious leaders to remain relevant in changing times is crucial to understanding German chaplains in the mid-twentieth century. Scholars of religion have abandoned a simple secularization thesis, with its assumption that modernity replaced "traditional religion" with other loyalties. Political religion – the sacralization of a leader, a party, a cause – turns out to coexist easily with "religious religion," or, to put it differently, religion is always intertwined with political, social, and familial relations.[44] Nor did religion simply get squeezed from public into private spaces. Often the opposite occurred, as individuals became less attentive to religious practice and belief in their personal affairs but remained firmly located within Christian frameworks. In an era of "diffusive religion,"[45] Christian leaders and institutions sought out sites where they could wield influence explicitly as well as implicitly. Germany's military chaplaincy turned out to be such a site, but it

was laden with risk: credibility hung by a thread and particular institutional interests sometimes trumped the churches' broader goals.

This state of affairs made churchmen nervous, and the chaplaincy typified that unease. The existing institutional arrangement seemed proof of the ongoing vitality of Christianity in modern German society, yet if chaplains could not demonstrate their value to established power structures, for instance by building morale, the churches stood to lose that platform. Church representatives worried that their target audiences – men, and specifically soldiers – were indifferent to religion. They hoped to use their institutional presence in the military to gain a place in individual hearts and minds. But if chaplains sold out the interests of their clientele, or if soldiers perceived them to have done so, the churches would lose credibility.

Military chaplaincy, in other words, was a major arena for representatives of the churches to demonstrate their relevance and perform their loyalty. When Germany rearmed in March 1935, Catholics and Protestants successfully lobbied for immediate appointment of military bishops to create a Wehrmacht chaplaincy. The chaplains proved to be reliable partners. In Spain, where the new air force's Condor Legion dropped bombs in 1937, at least one chaplain was there too, celebrating the triumph over what Nazi propaganda called Jewish Bolshevism. When Hitler purged the military leadership in 1938, not a single chaplain lost his post. No chaplains (indeed, no German church leaders) protested in August 1939 when the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed, although earlier they had been vociferous critics of Communism. Nor did any of the chaplains who accompanied the Wehrmacht in the invasion of Poland in September 1939 join the handful of bishops and military officers who spoke out against the assault on Polish civilians, including Roman Catholic priests and Jews. Likewise the massacre of French Black soldiers in 1940, the vicious reprisal killings in the Balkans, the rape of Soviet women,[46] and murder of millions of Soviet prisoners of war – all violence carried out by the Wehrmacht,[47] not special SS units – elicited no protest, at least none that has left a trace in the records – although military chaplains were present at all those places.

The Fog of War and the Force of Habit

What did Wehrmacht chaplains actually do? This simple question draws attention to the deep uncertainty of their circumstances and the complex ways that war both magnified and limited their agency.[48] Chaplains were deployed across the enormous territory conquered by the Wehrmacht and occupied by Nazi Germany. The nearest fellow chaplain or supervisor could be hundreds, even thousands of miles away. As a result, chaplains operated under

remarkably little oversight. This degree of independence set them apart from other professionals under Nazism – schoolteachers, social workers, or clergy serving civilian parishes – and made the position attractive to ambitious men. In addition, the officer's rank that chaplains held provided a protective layer of prestige. No one in Nazi Germany had to be coerced into becoming a military chaplain: the number of aspirants always outstripped the number of appointments. Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer at one point considered entering the chaplaincy.[49]

Yet the Wehrmacht chaplains' position was also circumscribed in significant ways. Although chaplains had considerable leeway, isolation left them exposed and vulnerable to certain pressures. Their ability to function depended on the relationships they cultivated with the men physically closest to them: commanding officers, military doctors, and soldiers. Without a means of transportation – a motorized vehicle and fuel, a bicycle or horse – a chaplain was useless, no matter how lofty his intentions. Chaplains expended enormous amounts of time and energy in daily struggles to locate the men for whom they were responsible, to obtain supplies, or to source and distribute religious reading material. The vicissitudes of war had a particular impact on chaplains, whose ability to perform the most fundamental tasks – visit the wounded and sick, administer the sacraments, bury the dead – could be nullified by a sudden movement of the front, an ambush, or a blizzard. The stresses of what one chaplain delicately referred to as the "special nature of our war in the East" added to the burden. Under such circumstances, there was little time to read the Bible, pray, or even think. And thinking, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, is the essence of ethical existence.[50]

One obvious explanation for the Wehrmacht chaplains' behavior is missing from the discussion so far. What about conviction in the Nazi cause? Certainly some chaplains are on record as staunch Nazis. One of my earliest encounters with the topic involved a German Lutheran pastor in Luseland, Saskatchewan (Canada), who wrote to the Protestant military bishop in 1936 begging to be appointed to the chaplaincy so he could serve the Führer.[51] (Neither he nor a Baptist pastor who wrote a similar request around the same time was accepted.) Active members of the pro-Nazi German Christian movement also sought positions. In some high-profile cases they succeeded: Chief Navy Chaplain Friedrich Ronneberger and Dean of Chaplains Heinrich Lonicer were the two most prominent. However, some clergy were disqualified from the chaplaincy as being too fanatically pro-Nazi, and nothing indicates that men signed on as chaplains in order to kill Jews or other supposed enemies. The SS murder squads known as Einsatzgruppen did include former Christian clergy, most infamously the Lutheran theologian Ernst Biberstein, head of Sonderkommando 6 of Einsatzgruppe C,[52] and their murderous activities raise

urgent and neglected questions about Christians as perpetrators of genocide. Such men, however, did not become chaplains, or if they did, they left no trace.

Were the chaplains Nazis? A more fruitful question asks how people who were not fervent Nazis or eager killers ended up playing an essential role in atrocity. One response can be found in the letters of Konrad Jarausch, a Protestant theologian who served with the Wehrmacht in the invasions and occupations of Poland and the Soviet Union. A devout educator and publicist, Jarausch was committed to serving his country and his faith. By autumn 1941 a master sergeant, he was put in charge of the kitchen in a camp that held thousands of sick, starving, and dying Soviet prisoners of war. Sergeant Jarausch tried his best to keep order. His hand became swollen from dealing out blows, he told his wife. And yet he felt empathy for the prisoners and became close to some of them. In his words, it was "already more murder than war." Jarausch died of typhoid fever in January 1942. His letters show neither the "clean Wehrmacht" nor Nazified killers but dutiful, if reluctant, accomplices.[53]

This book is organized chronologically, because while writing it I discovered that lines of continuity and change only became visible when I put developments in order. Following the chronology highlighted a factor often neglected in historical analyses: force of habit, at a personal and an institutional level. The Nazi period divides equally into the six prewar years from 1933 to 1939 and six years of World War II. The years of peace – or more accurately, of Hitler talking peace while preparing for war – are of key importance in showing how the chaplaincy developed to play the role it did during Germany's wars of annihilation.[54]

Even before its official launch in 1935, the Wehrmacht chaplaincy adjusted and accommodated itself to the National Socialist regime. It was built on tracks and looked back to patterns established during the previous world war and Germany's short-lived colonial empire. Christian chaplains were present in German Southwest Africa during the genocide of the Herero and Nama;[55] chaplains witnessed atrocities against civilians during World War I, and some former chaplains loudly stumped for Hitler and the National Socialist Party during the Weimar years.[56] In short, Germany's eastern front in 1941 was an escalation but not an aberration, either from what came before or from what followed, or even from the war in the west and the southeast. The habit of cooperation, part of the chaplaincy's raison d'être, proved hard to break, and the higher the stakes became, the less likely it was that chaplains – those at the top of the hierarchy and those at the bottom – would venture out of the deep ruts of their well-worn path. One compromise led to another, and each subsequent step in one direction raised the cost of turning back. When does a compromise become a betrayal? When does it turn into a trap?

Looking backward and forward from the murder of the Jewish children at Bila Tserkva highlights continuities in both directions. Study of the Wehrmacht chaplains reveals the ongoing viability of Christianity in Germany even after defeat in 1945. People seemed to need institutionalized Christianity, and it outlived Nazism, although in a weakened form. But continuities can be paradoxical. After World War II, both the German military and its chaplaincy fell out of view, only to be reinvigorated by the Cold War and the interests of NATO. In West Germany in the 1950s, creation of the new Bundeswehr was accompanied by considerable debate around how to constitute the military chaplaincy. It took two years for the new chaplaincy to be set up, and the result looked completely different from its World War II predecessor. Chaplains no longer held an officer's rank, and their purpose was not to boost morale but to be a voice of conscience within the military. In the German Democratic Republic there were to be no military chaplains at all.

Rarely did anyone mention Jews or other victims of Nazism in the public discussions about how to reconfigure the German chaplaincy. But Jews were remembered, if vaguely and uneasily, in articles like one published in 1965. In the Protestant journal *Junge Kirche* (young church), the theologian Uwe Lütjohann invoked the Holocaust as a call for Christian repentance:

> The evil in the church must be pulled out by the roots. The military chaplaincy of World War II only helps us now if we learn from its mistakes. Genuine military chaplaincy today leads us back to the law of Christ, that we love our enemies. And only a perverted definition of love can mean killing our enemies.[57]

Sources and Methods

This book is part of a wave of research on the Holocaust that surged in the early 1990s and endures decades later.[58] I build on older scholarship on German military chaplains,[59] more recent contributions,[60] and the revival of interest in the crimes of the Wehrmacht associated with an 1995 exhibition in Germany and the ensuing controversy.[61] My study also fits into a body of work that examines Christianity under Nazism. Some studies deal only with Catholics;[62] another group focuses on Protestants.[63] I consider all the Wehrmacht chaplains, Protestants and Catholics, together, as part of a wider conversation about the connections between religion, war, and genocide.[64]

Sources for this study include chaplains' periodic reports to their superiors; correspondence among church and state authorities; chaplains' letters and diaries, and eyewitnesses' postwar recollections.[65] I use all of these materials in order to see the chaplains as historical actors with personalities, values, theological and political positions. It is not my goal to recreate the chaplains' inner world, however.[66] As I have thought about this subject over many years, I have wondered whether starting the story in 1941 in Germany's east and

letting chaplains speak for themselves without analyzing their accounts risks reproducing a self-justifying version of events. Chaplains were active agents in constructing their own narrative, as individuals and collectively, and my analysis considers such efforts to be an integral part of their history.[67]

Accordingly, I try to interrupt records by the Wehrmacht chaplains with sources that offer other perspectives.[68] Integrated histories of the Holocaust shift and reverse the gaze to disrupt grand narratives with the voices of victims, in particular Jewish victims.[69] This book applies that method. Outside sources are not easy to find, because rarely did anyone other than chaplains mention chaplains. Nonetheless, German troops, French prisoners of war, members of SS killing squads, captured Jews, civilians under German occupation, and Allied authorities all encountered Wehrmacht chaplains, and some of them recorded their impressions. In a letter home, a German soldier described the execution of a comrade convicted for desertion and noted the presence of a chaplain at the condemned man's side. A young Leningrad woman confided to her diary her admiration for the German chaplain who presided over the reopening of a church.[70] An SS report complained that Wehrmacht chaplains caused friction among locals in Ukraine by holding church services for different Christian denominations. Even such fleeting glances provide a valuable corrective to the view from inside the chaplaincy.

Integrated approaches to history invite attention to gender, sexuality, bodies, and the materiality of everyday life. When I started this project, paying attention to gender did not seem that important to me. But now I consider it essential. The Wehrmacht chaplains held two positions only men could hold: they were Christian clergy and members of the military.[71] Chaplains constantly invoked notions of manliness – their own and that of others – although they did not explain what they understood "manliness" to mean.[72] They were more explicit in describing Christian morality, which they tried to uphold among soldiers by railing against sex with enemy women.[73]

Representations of military chaplains in German history and culture are essential to this study. I have drawn on literary and other creative sources: novels and films, and even popular representations of military chaplains in other times and places. These materials have helped me break out of some preconceived notions about the Wehrmacht chaplains and also illuminated certain issues common to many chaplaincies. One such issue is the quest for relevance, which is evident in fictional accounts of chaplains from Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Svejk* all the way to Mort Walker's long-running comic strip, *Beetle Bailey*.

Photographs are valuable sources, and they too require interpretation. Early in my research I happened upon a remarkable exhibit in a regional church museum in Ludwigsburg, based on the papers of Bernhard Bauerle, a Protestant chaplain with the German 16th Army. Bauerle's daughter had found

a cache of his correspondence after he died, and she donated it to the museum. Two curators did a superb job of organizing that material into a thought-provoking display.[74] The contrast is striking between what Bauerle wrote and what his photographs depicted: alongside claims that "we had nothing to do with attacks on the Jews," he archived a photo of an emaciated individual, who was labeled on the reverse side of the photo, in Bauerle's hand, as *Jude* (Jew). Silence regarding German killing of Soviets is belied by images of walking skeletons gnawing on bones and corpses hanging from nooses, captioned *Kriegsgefangene* and *Partisanen* (prisoners of war and partisans). To Bauerle it seems, both aspects were important: the articulation of noninvolvement, even innocence, and the evidence of witnessing. I have puzzled over that tension and come to view it as central to understanding the Wehrmacht chaplains, who functioned, like their counterparts in other settings, under a "sign of contradiction."[75]

Every source, whether written, visual, or oral, is produced at a certain time, and what "the time" is influences what the source says, who reads or hears it, and how.[76] Many of the most detailed and certainly the most personal accounts of German military chaplains come from after the war, often long after. These materials reflect the world around them. For instance, by the 1990s, it had become unacceptable among educated people to talk about the Nazi period without mentioning the Holocaust, specifically the persecution and killing of Jews.[77] Chaplains who wrote memoirs decades after the war internalized that convention. Recognizing this process does not make later accounts worthless, but they need to be analyzed with an eye to the multiple contexts they reflect.

A concrete example illustrates my point. A few years ago, in a small archive in Berlin, I read an extensive diary by Alphons Satzger, a Wehrmacht chaplain.[78] Satzger was already known to me from wartime records.[79] A Roman Catholic, he won acclamation and an Iron Cross when in 1941, armed only with a pistol, he captured twenty-one Red Army soldiers. The diary, sixty-five pages long, was a historian's dream: articulate, detailed, and deeply introspective. It was even typed. Unlike the dry, official reports chaplains submitted to their military superiors, this document overflowed with feeling.

The author described his horror when, in early July 1941, he accompanied German troops into Lviv and witnessed the massive violence against Jews there. I knew German military chaplains must have been present at this site of carnage, but I had never before found one who mentioned it. Here was not only a fleeting reference to the violence but a detailed account of how a chaplain reacted. In vivid prose Satzger depicted his venture into the prison, where locals had found corpses of victims killed by the retreating Soviets. Antisemites seized on this evidence to launch an all-out assault on Jews in the region, dragging hundreds of them into the prison, forcing them to dispose

of the rotted bodies and scrub walls and floors, and then murdering them there. The sickening stench, Father Satzger wrote, stayed in his uniform for days.[80]

That remark about the smell jumped off the page. Graphic and specific, it is the kind of detail that makes personal accounts so unforgettable. And I have no reason to doubt that it is true. But how would Satzger have known on July 4 – the day he entered the prison and the date of the diary entry describing what he saw there – how many days *later* the stench of death would still linger in his clothes? As I read on, I found other things that could only have been added after the fact: comments about the outcome of developments that could not yet have been known, details about military locations and operations that were not to be revealed, and use of terms that were not in currency in the 1940s. What is more, there was a pattern: almost all of the tell-tale signs appeared within entries that dealt directly with wartime atrocities, especially against Jews. In other words, precisely those passages that made this diary so different from firsthand accounts written during the war were almost certainly added afterward, with the benefit of hindsight and aligned with contemporary mores.[81] This is not to say the diary is a fraud. Indeed, in a note at the end, Satzger mentioned that he retyped it in the 1970s, and he did not deny he made revisions. The researcher can find much of value here, but the diary is no clear window into the chaplain's wartime soul.

Because the Wehrmacht chaplains cannot be seen without looking back from our own present, this study also reveals linkages between the past and what follows it. For my experience, September 11, 2001 is significant. When the planes struck the World Trade Center towers in New York, I had already been working on the Wehrmacht chaplains for a decade. But in the 1990s, religion was a hard sell for a historian of modern Europe. The 9/11 attacks and the response in the United States, where I lived and worked at the time, changed that: they sparked a new interest in the intersections of religion and violence, often construed in Islamophobic terms.[82] The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan added a specific focus on military chaplains, and suddenly I found that work I had done made me an "expert," called on to comment on such issues as the significance of the first Muslim and Buddhist chaplains in the US Armed Forces.[83] Decades later, the sobering tale of the Wehrmacht chaplains continues to resonate with current events.[84] Increased attention to systemic racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in 2020, and exposure of institutional complicity in genocide of Indigenous people in Canada have sharpened my approach.[85]

In the epigraph I chose from *Billy Budd*, Melville characterizes the military chaplain as "incongruous," an embodiment of the contradiction between the violence of war and the "Prince of Peace." Were the Wehrmacht chaplains any different in this regard from their counterparts in other times and places?

Since the emergence of the institution, military chaplains have served the cause of war.[86] Like German chaplains in World War II, others must sometimes have felt pulled in opposite directions by unconditional loyalty to the military and the implicit claim of righteousness. Maybe others, too, found relief in mild acts of defiance that, though they carried a risk, ended up normalizing brutal systems. The Wehrmacht chaplaincy acted as an insulating layer, protecting German soldiers from listening to their consciences or reflecting on Christian teachings. That buffer also covered the chaplains themselves and absorbed objections they may have had. The chaplaincy became a cone of silence, a tunnel. Precisely this reinforcing, silencing effect necessitates an integrated approach to research. In order to see the tunnel, you have to get inside and outside of it. Only people on the outside can get an impression of its overall shape.

The testimony of Agnes Adachi provides such a glimpse. Born in 1918 to Hungarian Jewish parents, Adachi (then Agnes Mandl) lived, traveled, and attended school in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and France. By 1944, she had returned to Budapest, where she was baptized a Protestant Christian. Through a complicated chain of events, the charismatic, multilingual Adachi ended up working with the Swedish businessman and diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in his mission to rescue Jews.[87] In a 1996 interview with the Shoah Foundation, she sketched this horrifying scene:

> There was a little child, with a star, who had evidently lost her parents, and there was a church, and out came a Catholic priest wearing inside his collar the Hungarian Nazi collar, and he had a revolver. And he saw that little kid, and he shot her. . . . I picked up the child, and she was dead.[88]

Adachi's shocking account raises a number of questions. Was the man a chaplain? What is a "Hungarian Nazi collar?" Where was the church? What was Adachi doing there? Did she shape this account for maximum impact: an innocent little girl gunned down by a devil in disguise? Could she be describing András Kun, the Catholic priest, Arrow Cross leader, and notorious killer of Jews in Budapest?[89] Considering multiple perspectives and reading for narratives, as well as evidence, cannot necessarily provide answers but it does promise insight. My method in this book is to afford sources like Adachi's – the incomplete, flawed, tainted-by-hindsight voices of victims and observers outside the chaplaincy – the same analytical attention I give to sources from chaplains and those close to them. Conversely, I try to approach accounts such as Chaplain Tewes's testimony in court or Chaplain Satzger's diary – incomplete, flawed, and tainted by hindsight – with the reflexive skepticism and theoretical consideration that many scholars of the Holocaust bring to survivor testimonies.[90]

Discerning Christianity's role in the Holocaust requires listening to chaplains' narratives and also to accounts that supplement and challenge them. The past appears different from divergent perspectives. To Wehrmacht Chaplain Eberhard Müller, whose sermon to German soldiers in occupied Soviet territory is quoted in the second epigraph, the war and the Holocaust were folded into a story of God's boundless love for His people.[91] To Agnes Adachi, who as a young woman saw Germans and their Hungarian partners destroy her family and community, genocide looked like a Christian priest murdering a Jewish child in front of a church.