How could it be that in the midst of the inferno of the mass murder of Jews and Russian prisoners of war on the Eastern Front, Catholic priests in good conscience proclaimed the Christian message to German soldiers? This is the question asked by the American historian Lauren Faulkner Rossi in her study *Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism and the Nazi War of Annihilation*. Faulkner Rossi’s question must be seen in the context of a noticeable increase in interest among historians in the connection between Christianity and the war of annihilation that has emerged in Holocaust research. Against this backdrop, Faulkner Rossi and other historians have rediscovered the Archive of the Catholic Military Bishop (Archiv des katholischen Militärbischofs) in Berlin. Faulkner Rossi’s dissertation, supervised by Omer Bartov and published in April 2015, is essentially based on an analysis of this archive. Although it has been accessible to the public since 1978, it has until recently been used mainly by church and military history specialists. But those who realize that it contains an almost complete collection of the personal papers and reports of Catholic priests who took part in the Second World War as military chaplains can understand the heightened interest that has recently been bestowed on the archive and its collections.

The reports and diaries of the *Wehrmacht* chaplains in this archive raise the hope of gaining some insight into what they knew about the Holocaust and how they were able to justify, both to themselves and to their soldiers, a war that has gone down in history as a racial war of annihilation. The founder of the archive, George Werthmann, served as the leading field vicar-general of the Catholic chaplaincy during the Second World War. He preserved, organized, and commented on the documents of his *Wehrmacht* chaplains because he had the intention of writing a book one day about the history of Catholic pastoral care in the field.1 Werthmann’s historico-political interest

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1 Monica Sinderhauf, ‘Katholische Wehrmachtsseelsorge im Krieg: Quellen und Forschungen zu Franz Justus Rarkowski und Georg Werthmann’, in
was in protecting the *Wehrmacht* chaplains from any criticism after the war, indeed, to present them as a thorn in the side of National Socialism and a bulwark of Christianity standing up against the Nazis’ intention to deconfessionalize the *Wehrmacht*.²

Only a few months before the publication of Faulkner Rossi’s book, Martin Röw published his dissertation, *Militärseelsorge unter dem Hakenkreuz*, an empirical study which is also based largely on documents from the Archive of the Catholic Military Bishop. This leads to striking overlaps between the two books, for example, in Röw’s section on ‘Deviance’,³ and Faulkner Rossi’s on ‘Failed Priests and “Brown Priests” ’ (pp. 162–7). Both reflect in detail on the contents of Werthmann’s file ‘Schwache Brüder’ (weak brothers). Yet whereas in his book Röw asks how more than 750 Catholic *Wehrmacht* priests and chaplains⁴ made sense of a war whose crimes must have been obvious to them at least since the beginning of the Eastern Campaign, Faulkner Rossi focuses on a much larger group of more than 17,000 soldier priests, even though organizationally they had nothing to do with pastoral care in the *Wehrmacht* and mostly served as ordinary soldiers in the medical service. What matters to her is why Catholic priests took part in a criminal and genocidal war in the first place.

To answer this question, Faulkner Rossi begins with an overview of the state of research on the attitude of German bishops in the


⁴ This figure is based on information provided by the former archivist in the Archive of the Catholic Military Bishop, Monica Sinderhauf. Sinderhauf, ‘Katholische Wehrmachtesteelsorge im Krieg’, 267.
Weimar Republic. According to the top down logic of the Catholic Church hierarchy, this attitude was typical of all Catholic priests and seminarians, who saw the bishops as their spiritual leaders and role models (p. 63). As the author rightly highlights, the German bishops defended the concordat and the rights it guaranteed the church, but failed to speak up for the victims of Nazi racist policies. This kowtow to the Nazi regime is explained by the author as an amalgam of German nationalism, religious anti-Semitism, and a fear of Russian Bolshevism (pp. 45–6).

The following chapter on pastoral care in the Wehrmacht describes its basic structure, whose special feature was the ‘exempt’ position of field bishops. This meant that field bishops were not part of the German bishops’ conference, but under the sole control of the Army High Command. Field bishops had no institutional connection with the church. The role and character of the shady Catholic field bishop Franz Justus Rarkowsi and his leading field vicar-general, Georg Werthmann, who was the real strong man of Catholic pastoral care in the Wehrmacht, are discussed.

Beyond these well-known facts about Catholic pastoral care in the military during the Second World War, Faulkner Rossi wants to stress George Werthmann’s particular historical significance more than previous research has done. Yet her statements about Werthmann are problematic, as she draws mainly upon the comments he himself made after 1945. Thus, for example, we read that Rarkowski cooperated enthusiastically with the Nazi regime whereas Werthmann sought to protect the independence of Wehrmacht pastoral care from anti-Catholic interventions by the Party and the SS. In contrast to Rarkowski, Werthmann showed more reserve vis-à-vis National Socialism according to Faulkner Rossi (p. 77). If, however, we read the assessment of Werthmann by the district leadership of the Nazi party in Berlin, which set the course for his professional career after 1933, we see that Werthmann was definitely receptive to National Socialist ideas. One suspects that this contrast between the Nazi-friendly bishop and the anti-Nazi field vicar is based on a myth made up by Werthmann. Going back to this, after 1945 he was able to develop the narrative of Catholic military pastoral care unimpeded.

5 Berliner Kreisleitung to Amt für Beamte Gau Bayerische Ostmark, 25 Feb. 1936 (Bundesarchiv Berlin, R 9361-V, 399901).
by the shadows of the past, all the more so as Rarkowski had died in 1950 and was thus an ideal scapegoat for the mistakes made by Catholic pastoral care in the field during the Nazi period.\footnote{Pöpping, \textit{Kriegspfarrer an der Ostfront}, 201.}

The next chapter, on \textit{Priestersoldaten}, that is, the 17,000 to 18,000 Catholic priests and seminarians who did not work in pastoral care, is largely a continuation of the chapter on \textit{Wehrmacht} priests and chaplains. Although the author explains at the start of her work (p. 16) that she intends to concentrate on those born during or after the First World War, her evidence is drawn from the documents of \textit{Wehrmacht} priests and chaplains—the youngest of whom were born between 1905 and 1912—who were not, like many of the soldier priests, shaped by the Hitler Youth.

Yet the difference between soldier priests and \textit{Wehrmacht} chaplains was considerable. Whereas the latter were officers, the soldier priests served in the rank and file, several levels below that of officer. Not least this difference in status, living conditions, and earnings is what made the office of \textit{Wehrmacht} chaplain so appealing. Priests spent one week on a course at the Army High Command in Berlin to become officers in the \textit{Wehrmacht}. This was an opportunity from which Catholic clergy in the largely Protestant-dominated German army had so far been completely excluded.\footnote{Pöpping, ‘\textit{Die Wehrmachtseelsorge im Zweiten Weltkrieg}’, 269.}

The author goes on to describe the anticlerical policy of the Nazi regime, which was also reflected in the increasingly restrictive treatment of the \textit{Wehrmacht} chaplaincy during the war. This policy culminated in the establishment from 1944 of National Socialist Leadership Officers (Nationalsozialistische Führungsoffiziere, NSFO), who were meant to have quite similar functions to those of \textit{Wehrmacht} chaplains in 1939. The NSFOs were also intended to increase the ‘inner fighting strength of the troops’, but this was to be achieved by drawing on National Socialist ideology rather than the Christian religion. The goal was to turn German soldiers into fanatical fighters for National Socialism. Faulkner Rossi highlights that Werthmann and his \textit{Wehrmacht} chaplains certainly felt their professional work was threatened by this competition. But as the military historian Manfred Messerschmidt established in 1969,\footnote{Manfred Messerschmidt, \textit{Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination} (Hamburg, 1969), 474.} NSFOs

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6 Pöpping, \textit{Kriegspfarrer an der Ostfront}, 201.
7 Pöpping, ‘\textit{Die Wehrmachtseelsorge im Zweiten Weltkrieg}’, 269.
emerged on the scene too late to seriously endanger the existence of the Wehrmacht chaplaincy.

The question of why Catholic priests willingly took part in a criminal, genocidal war dominates the last two chapters. Of course, the author knows that Catholic clergy was obliged to serve in the Wehrmacht, even if they were not generally found among the fighting troops. What she means is: why did the clergy not become conscientious objectors, and why did they not accept the death penalty for their refusal? The author admits that the clergy could not have known in 1939 that the Wehrmacht would become a criminal organization (p. 66), but that does not prevent her from repeating her question.

Behind this question lies the accusation that the clergy at the time were acting morally wrongly because, in her opinion, the Christian faith required conscientious objection and thus an acceptance of the death penalty, that is, ‘martyrdom’. Unfortunately, according to Faulkner Rossi, even after the war these priests did not realize that martyrdom would have been the only correct Christian response to their conscription into the Wehrmacht (p. 190). But anyone who makes such claims must be prepared to be disappointed by historical reality—and not only in relation to National Socialism.

According to Faulkner Rossi, during the further course of the war, especially in the racial war of extermination in Poland and the Soviet Union, the main concern of Christian charity should have been to stand up for the Jews, prisoners of war, and the local civilian population who fell victim to the policy of extermination of the Wehrmacht and the SS. But as the author correctly points out, the Christian commitment of the Catholic Wehrmacht chaplains was concentrated solely on their own people. A particularistic morality—so her argument could be summed up—is no morality at all.

Finally, how does Faulkner Rossi answer her most important question, why Catholic priests did not become conscientious objectors in 1939? She lists a number of factors: patriotism, cowardice, a desire to conform, and a Catholic authoritarian and state-directed thinking that resulted in an inclination to trust in, or at least accept unchallenged, orders from higher authorities (pp. 150–1). But she also takes the retrospective accounts by Werthmann and his Wehrmacht chaplains extremely seriously. What the priests wanted to do, it was claimed, was to provide pastoral care to Catholic soldiers
out of pure humanity. Although the author describes this answer as short sighted, she accepts it. Here doubts may arise as to whether the Wehrmacht chaplaincy, which was located right on the intersection between religion and politics, acted from motives of pure human charity. It would have been very illuminating here if the author had investigated the concrete impact of the anti-Bolshevism that she herself elsewhere identifies as an essential element of the worldview of Catholic clergy (pp. 46, 110, 156). The anti-Bolshevism of Wehrmacht chaplains was expressed, for example, in sermons during the Eastern campaign, which revealed a totally different side of Wehrmacht pastoral care, one that had less to do with the spiritual well-being of their own soldiers than a hatred of the enemy motivated by religion. Not least, in a weak moment after the war Werthmann himself admitted to this aggressive aspect of his activities and expressed his regret about it.9

Another aspect which turned the church and its priests into active and positive supporters of the war also remains untold: the church’s hope of evangelizing millions of young soldiers who, as a rule, had long been alienated from Christianity and whom the church could no longer hope to reach in civilian life, as Messerschmidt has emphasized. This hope was probably a reason why both main German churches, which were worried about their survival under National Socialism, saw the war as a chance to win back ground in German society.10

Frequent statements about the growing harshness of the war awakening the religiosity of the soldiers, which are found in accounts of pastoral care and activity reports by Wehrmacht chaplains, can be interpreted against this background. Brushes with death, fear, and pain increased the importance of religion, especially during the war in the east. Faulkner Rossi reports this but not in connection with evangelization. The emphasis on their successes among sick and


dying German soldiers, and even members of the SS, was probably also intended to cast their work in a positive light.\(^\text{11}\)

The author’s discussion of the influence of the theology of ‘corpus christi mysticum’ (the mystical body of Christ) on soldier priests and seminarians is interesting. Promoted by the spiritual leader of the Catholic youth movement in the 1920s, Romano Guardini, and Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (*On the Mystical Body of Christ*), which encouraged emulation of the sufferings of Christ, this doctrine glorifying suffering in war significantly shaped the self-image of soldier priests and seminarians (p. 162).

Faulkner Rossi does not explore how this glorification of suffering in the specific context of the war developed into something like an obscene victim theology, which offered soldiers the sacrificial death of Christ as a model for their own death in battle. Although the author speaks of a victim ideology, she refers only to the period after 1945, when Catholic clergy responded to the Allies’ accusation of collective guilt by pointing to the victimization of Germans (p. 213). While this sounds plausible, the victim ideology had been established during the war, for example, in announcements made by the *Wehrmacht* chaplains in brochures and in sermons to the soldiers, as the theologian Heinrich Missalla stated in 1978, pointing to the example of Catholic sermon aids.\(^\text{12}\) Nor is there any discussion of the important belief in life after death, which *Wehrmacht* chaplains used to ease or transfigure the death of soldiers, and which Martin Röw rightly described as ‘the functional core of the *Wehrmacht*’s pastoral care’.\(^\text{13}\)

The author’s emotional fixation on the moral failure of German priests during the Second World War ensures that her valuable approaches and findings, in the end, remain superficial. Her handling of the sources, contemporary testimonials and accounts that were often written decades after the war, and which are all treated as equally important, fits in with this, as does the fact that the distinct-


\(^{13}\) Röw, *Militärseelsorge unter dem Hakenkreuz*, 315.
tion between soldier priests and chaplains is not always clearly drawn.

Ultimately, Faulkner Rossi delivers a moral treatise based on a historical example rather than a historical study of the morality of Catholic clergy. Anyone who would like to gain deeper insights into the daily working life, thinking, and feelings of Catholic *Wehrmacht* priests during the Second World War is better served by Martin Röw’s study.

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