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***An H-Diplo Book Review Essay***

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**Thomas Brodie. *German Catholicism at War, 1939-1945*.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780198827023 (hardcover, \$85.00).

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What does war do to religious communities? This is a basic and crucial question for our violent and faithful times. The foreign policy of the United States seems to presume the magical view that conflict might make them less radical and militarist, and more open to compromise. The evidence points rather in the opposite direction. The apocalyptic experience of death raining from the skies—from storms or planes or drones—does not seem to lead human beings to temper their apocalyptic beliefs and adopt more ‘secular’ and conciliatory attitudes.

One of the sources of this magical belief might be the German experience during and after the Second World War, which has done so much to shape the foreign policy establishment’s views of what can be accomplished during an occupation. The American occupying forces (OMGUS) bent over backwards for the churches, believing that they provided the best source of democratic humanism for a recovering fascist nation. They helped to cement and spread the myth that Christians had been opponents of Hitler from the beginning, and that the terror of war especially had led Germans to flock back to the Churches and rediscover their commitment to human dignity and human rights. For decades, professional historians added ballast to this story. And while in recent years many of us have painstakingly devoted ourselves to uncovering the Christian complicity with fascism, the basic structure of the wartime portion of the narrative has stood largely unscathed.

There has never been much evidence for the role of religion in Germany during World War II, on one side or the other. We have a good number of studies of religious leaders in wartime, and of state mobilization of religious rhetoric in wartime, and even of religion on the actual front lines of war. What we lack are social histories of religion on the home front: how did religion impact the lives of the men, women, and children behind the front lines? Did the war actually lead Germans to flock back to the Churches? And if so, why? Finally, how did wartime religiosity relate to the more peaceful Christianity of the postwar era, which certainly did exist, and which certainly did play a central role in the democratic reconstruction? These are the questions that Thomas Brodie sets out to answer in his excellent and impressively researched study on the Catholic faithful in the Rhineland and Westphalia, an economically and culturally important region in Western Germany. His answers seriously revise the accepted narrative of this period.

*German Catholicism at War* is above all a social history of the war years, drawing on an impressive array of primary sources (sermons, diaries, letters, government surveillance, and more). In its basic approach, it is clearly influenced by Nicholas Stargardt's influential *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945*.<sup>1</sup> Brodie seeks to analyze the home front, keeping in mind that very few Germans were actual 'resisters,' but that many who were skeptical of Nazism nonetheless supported the war effort in the name of patriotism. It seeks, too, to tell a story of the ordinary German citizen rather than the leaders or writers who have normally received outsized attention. For instance, the 1941 sermons of Bishop von Galen are widely remembered for bravely challenging the Nazi assault on the disabled. Instead of narrating those sermons again, Brodie instead probes unused sources to ask how they were received, or not, by ordinary parishioners.

The first section of the book (three chapters) is chronological, and asks about the nature and level of Catholic support for the war effort between 1939 and 1944. It has, in my reading, two basic conclusions. The first is that Catholic support for the war effort should be distinguished from Catholic support for Nazism. Within the Catholic milieu, there was a surprising degree of criticism of the Nazi regime: not only for its conduct of the war, but for its treatment of Jews and Poles. It remains basically true that Catholics, like other Germans, voiced little protest against Nazi atrocities on the Eastern front. Nonetheless, it is also the case that Catholics engaged in minor acts of rebellion, ranging from refusing to give the sanctioned Nazi greeting to extending unsanctioned welcome to Polish Catholic refugees. The second basic finding of these chapters is that Catholic support for the war effort waxed and waned over time, and did so differently for people of different ages, classes, and genders. It is impossible here to summarize Brodie's granular reflections on these themes, but the major takeaway is just that: it is not the case that the Church, in any simple way, beat the drums of war on the one hand or provided a beacon of resistance on the other.

The second section (two chapters) is more thematic, and more concerned with the institutional and infrastructural requirements of religious practice in an age of total war. One chapter covers Catholic institutional life on the home front, and one treats the experience of displacement and diaspora. The basic conclusion is that the war years did not play host to a religious "revival" as is normally believed. This has less to do with the human soul and its needs than with the material requirements of religious practice. German Catholicism had developed in such a way that it required a great deal of resources to thrive: buildings, charitable organizations, pastoral personnel, and the like. This simply was not forthcoming during the war years, as many men were called to the front and military restrictions on building usage in response to air raids severely hampered the continuation of normal pastoral life. The experience of the many millions of displaced people was even more dramatic: those Catholic Rhinelanders relocated to largely Protestant regions to the East had little pastoral care during the war.

The last chapter, on the military occupation and the myth of religious renewal in 1945-6, returns us to the reflections broached at the opening. In it, the broader stakes of Brodie's painstaking archival work become clear. I will quote his own pithy summation of his finding: "Far from having already attained the status of 'victor among the ruins' in May 1945, the Catholic Church's restoration as a major social and political force in the Rhineland and Westphalia was overwhelmingly a product of the post-war period." (217) The chapter shows that the Catholic Church was, like every other institution in Germany in 1945, decimated by the war. It suffered massive shortages of men and material, and it was in no position to set itself up as the moral vanguard of the nation. For that, it needed help—help that the occupying British authorities were more than

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

willing to provide (the Rhineland was in the British zone of occupation; the Americans performed a similar feat in their own zone). Occupiers were predisposed to see the churches as their most reliable operating partners, despite the fact that many Church leaders publicly criticized the occupiers and often remained as conservative and nationalist as ever. By granting numerous privileges to the Churches, and by setting up priests as privileged interlocutors between Catholic populations and foreign aid agencies, the occupying authorities created the conditions for the very religious revival that they purported to find when they arrived.

Brodie's work constitutes a major intervention into the history of twentieth-century German Catholic history, and one that casts new light on the understudied relationship between religion and war. While this is the sort of book that is reluctant to make claims beyond its archival remit, it also speaks to the broader concerns with which I opened this review. If it is true that many of our presumptions about the relationship between war and religion are rooted in the experience of the Second World War, then Brodie's work asks us to rethink them. It is simply not the case that the dislocating experiences of war led Germans towards more pacific and America-friendly forms of religiosity. At the same time, and here his results are more discomfiting for the left, it seems to have been true that the provision of material resources by occupying authorities did play a major role in transforming the meaning and political status of religion. Brodie shows us that religion is not always an antidote to war, or even a refuge from it. It is, instead, made and remade, as a sociological and institutional reality, by the horrors of war—and then again by the horrors of peace.

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