

The Churches

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Summary

Reflecting current historiography, this article focuses primarily on Christian churches centered in the main European theater of the Great War, including more global interactions with the other Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Islam. The polarizing “just war” bellicosity of the clergy mattered greatly, especially regarding prominent clerics who championed the disparate interests of nation-states. Both above and below official nation-state levels, however, the churches had a variety of influences that represented a wide spectrum of faith and works. Churches advanced the cause of war and state-sponsored violence, but they also served as advocates of peace and healing. Myriad state contexts produced a plethora of church-state situations, not easily categorized. Above all, one must avoid instrumental readings of the churches as “successful” or “failed” to the extent that states won or lost the war. As traditional institutions, the churches adapted to the Great War in manifold ways. Thus, with significance for large-scale patterns of 20th century world history, scholars will continue to investigate religiosity in both public and private demonstrations of faith across the globe.

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Introduction

The behavior of the churches during the war represents a variety of adaptations, not the wholesale acceptance or denial of religious tradition. Highlighting a new historiographic generation, transnational, and comparative histories are essential for advancing beyond the framework of single nations.¹ This article focuses on the churches in Europe, as well as

imperial and colonial aspects on a global scale. Precisely in this vein, more global religious patterns, such as the development of military Shinto in [Japan](#), make linear narratives of European secularization seem even more ludicrously inadequate to describe official religion during the years 1914-1918 and its global effects.²

Future histories will develop these global investigations. In one of the few surveys to address religion during the Great War on a global level, Philip Jenkins has written that, “religion is essential to understanding the war, to understanding why people went to war, what they hoped to achieve through war, and why they stayed at war.” Framing the Great War as a modern Crusade, Jenkins argues that the war “ignited a global religious revolution” that reordered the world’s religious map, especially between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.³

Quantitative official statistics give only the briefest outline of the [historiographic](#) shifts underway, highlighting the amount of future work to represent the [everyday experiences](#) of religious believers globally. The World Christian Database claims that the world of 1914 had 560 million Christian believers, of whom 68 percent lived in Europe and a further 14 percent lived in North America; thus, the population reflected the Eurocentric historiography that has dominated representations of the conflict. However, the story of global Christianity must include Europe but move beyond it. In particular, Jenkins forcefully argues for the importance of Christianity’s development in Africa and the relevance of the Great War as an epochal moment of global reordering. In 1900, there were 10 million African Christians, less than 10 percent of the continent’s population. By 2000, there were 360 million African Christians, which was 46 percent of the population in Africa. It is estimated that by 2050 there will be 1 billion African Christians, a projection that will represent 33 percent of Christians globally.⁴

Even within Europe, the religious history of the Great War remains underexplored. Drawing on figures from 1920, nominal Catholics comprised 194.83 million out of a total of 353.57 million people, or 55.10 percent of the population of Europe, yet the pan-European story of Catholic religiosity remains untold. In Eastern and Southern Europe, long-neglected areas of First World War studies, regional disparities were more lopsided. In Eastern Europe, Catholics represented 12.93 million out of 43.08 million total inhabitants or 30.01 percent, whereas Protestants comprised 3.61 million or 8.38 percent. In Southern Europe, Catholics comprised 66.28 million out of a total of 75.41 million, or an overwhelming 87.89 percent, whereas Protestants numbered around 168,000 or a mere 0.22 percent.⁵ Despite their importance for 20th century history, geo-political hotspots such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, where interactions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims were vital, remain virtually unknown historiographically. This is even more so for religion in non-European colonial domains.

Considering the role of the churches, it is fundamental to assess the ways that official forms of religiosity looked both backward and forward.⁶ On the one hand, during the conflict, an overwhelming majority of religious believers and the clerical hierarchy clung to traditional modes, using structures of belief and action that stemmed largely from the 19th century, trying to make sense of the war in terms that people already knew. On the other hand, new forms of official religiosity were already taking shape during the conflict and would have important 20th century effects.

It is essential to note the disparate ways that state churches and their national and imperial contexts experienced the war, comparing and contrasting particular as well as more universal experiences of religious practice. Although space considerations preclude such minute detail in this essay, one has to consider the precise legal situation of the churches in a wide variety of contexts, specifying matters such as the nature of an establishment church, episcopal appointments, and official recognition of minority religions. Even within the major combatant states, there was a wide range of different church-state arrangements, ranging from official state secularism in [France](#) to theocracy in Tsarist [Russia](#), where state policy rapidly turned to official anti-religious atheism after the [1917 revolution](#), which had parallels to the [Ottoman Empire](#) and the successor state of the Republic of Turkey. In between these extremes, there were “liberal” states like [Italy](#) and [Belgium](#) where religion was strongly present but not officially privileged. By contrast, the middle of the spectrum also contained monarchies with intimately favored confessions, including Protestantism ([Germany](#), [the UK](#)) and Catholicism (the [Habsburg Empire](#)). In any case, analyzing the varieties of official religion in the era before 1914 will help to clarify what changes the war caused, providing a measure for how religious traditions adapted.

Ideological Mobilization

When war finally broke out in 1914, the majority of church officials and prominent clerics in the public sphere devoted themselves to the interests of the state. Underpinning this mindset was the belief shared by all sides that they were fighting a just war of defense against aggression. This war of civilization included religious rationales, with official churches as a key element in heightening ideological hatreds during the conflict. In the interwar period, official religion easily blended into political religion.⁷ During the war, this resulted in a hateful theology of sanctimoniousness. Perhaps the most infamous formulation was by the Anglican Bishop of London, [Arthur Winnington-Ingram \(1858-1946\)](#), who proclaimed to his congregation in 1915:

Everyone that loves freedom and honour...are banded in a great crusade – we cannot deny it

– to kill Germans: to kill them not for the sake of killing, but to save the world; to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young men as well as the old, to kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those fiends who crucified the Canadian sergeant, who supervised the Armenian massacres, who sank the *Lusitania*, and who turned the machine guns on the civilians of Aerschott and Louvain – and to kill them lest the civilization of the world should itself be killed.⁸

Even a seemingly transnationally fraternal organization such as the Catholic church saw its bishops and clergy engage in vicious wars of words in the service of state propaganda, trading base insults about national stereotypes. Sponsored by French Cardinals in 1915, the publication of *La guerre allemande* promoted essays by clerics who drew upon contemporary accounts of the war's opening phases of destruction. The French churchmen argued that Prussian-German [militarism](#) was the continuous outgrowth of the same Teutonic barbarism that had destroyed the Roman Empire. The German response, issued later in 1915, advanced the counter-argument that German *Kultur* was in fact the true preserver of eternal values in face of the atheism of [Jean-Jacques Rousseau \(1712-1778\)](#) and [Voltaire \(1694-1778\)](#), which had unleashed the destructive forces of the French Revolution culminating in the present war.⁹

Sermons preached from the pulpit were a fundamental way for clerics to speak to their flocks, and these messages covered the gamut of emotions from consolation to agitation. In a flood of literary [propaganda](#), religious messages were also reprinted in religious newsletters, magazines, journals, pamphlets, and books. Especially in nationally oriented state churches, insufficiently victory-proclaiming religious messages often met with official state [censorship](#). Even in heavily Catholic empires such as Austria-Hungary with strong ties to the Holy See, military authorities attempted to suppress papal prayers for peace.¹⁰

Especially from the safety of the home front, the virulent tone of “no peace without victory” helped to inflame hatreds. After the war, such agitation fostered grievances that survivors on the losing side had a duty to fulfill, keeping the battle going to avenge the sacrifices already incurred.¹¹ During the conflict, however, at the stagnating battlefield, such rhetoric issued by military chaplains and religious leaders often proved counterproductive. Chaplains adjusted their message to more universalistic comforting messages of pastoral care.¹²

Distributed nationwide via weekly war sermons, German Protestant-led bellicosity was a key factor in escalating the ideological dimensions of the conflict. Protestant clerics were also leading figures in the bellicose Fatherland Party, founded on Sedan Day, 1917. The 400th

anniversary of the Protestant Reformation also occurred in 1917, which increased in German believers' minds the sense of linear destiny. In its most trenchant form, the German Protestant social moral milieu was a decisive factor in the "origin, spread, and dissemination" of the [stab-in-the-back \(*Dolchstoß*\) myth](#).¹³ The scholarly literature attributes the emergence of *Dolchstoßlegende* to early February 1918, and especially to one 3 February sermon of [Bruno Doebling \(1879-1961\)](#), a preacher at Berlin Cathedral. In this sermon, Doebling commented on the recent wave of transportation strikes in many German cities and referred to those who instigated the strikes as

venal and cowardly creatures who treacherously have desecrated the altar of the Fatherland with the blood of their brothers...who...have poisoned the good spirit of our people, who stirred up the unfortunately misguided people from the place of quiet, productive work onto the street, pressed the murder weapon in their hand, and let it be hoist into the backs of their brothers who still lay near the enemy.¹⁴

The public ideological symbolism was set at the highest levels, reflecting throne-and-altar alliances. Both [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) and his cousin [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) were the heads of their respective established churches in Germany and England. Drawing on a close association with the prominent church historian [Adolf von Harnack \(1851-1930\)](#), who was a signatory of the infamous inflammatory 4 October 1914 Manifesto of the Ninety-Three, Wilhelm II declared that in contrast to pre-war domestic squabbling, he now saw "no more parties, only Germans." Germany's Protestant clergy drew on historical examples from the Wars of Liberation in 1813 and Unification in 1870-71, arguing that the Great War was yet another stage in the unfolding German national spirit. In the *Reichstag* on 4 August 1914, the court chaplain [Ernst von Dryander \(1843-1922\)](#) preached a sermon in which he declared,

We are going into battle for our culture against the uncultured, for German civilization against barbarism, for the free German personality bound to God against the instincts of the undisciplined masses. And God will be with our just weapons! For German faith and German piety are ultimately bound up with German faith and civilization.¹⁵

George V declared official days of prayer for the [Church of England](#), and the established church (including the Church of Scotland) zealously supported the monarchy, which in 1917 changed its very name to the House of Windsor, suppressing its Germanic roots as the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.¹⁶

The churches' support of the state was also more indirect or at least not as visibly aligned to

the cause of a nation-state. Ethnic ties complicated religious loyalties in Protestant-dominated [empires](#) such as the United Kingdom and the [United States](#), as well as Catholic Austria-Hungary, Orthodox Russia, and the Islamic Ottoman Empire. U.S. Catholics of German and Irish heritage, for example, were noticeably reticent about supporting the Allied cause, even after the American Catholic hierarchy positively affirmed the Allied cause after the U.S. declaration of war on Good Friday 1917. By contrast, English-speaking Protestant denominations such as Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians were much stronger supporters of U.S. intervention. Similarly, religiously motivated populations in [Australia](#), [Canada](#), and [Ireland](#) resisted the Allied war effort in numerous uprisings against the Entente, especially after 1916 when universal conscription was introduced. The Irish-born Catholic bishop of Melbourne, [Daniel Mannix \(1864-1963\)](#), was an outspoken advocate against compulsory conscription.¹⁷ Perhaps most famously, the [Easter Rising](#) in Ireland in 1916 had undeniable religious dimensions, as Irish Catholics chafed against British Protestant imperial rule, thus representing an imperial mini-war for the United Kingdom while engaged against the Central Powers.¹⁸

The American churches' involvement in the Great War also highlighted the complexities of religiosity in multi-ethnic societies adjusting to industrial [warfare](#). At first glance, the collective sacrifice of the war would seem simple: America entered the war late (and thus was not exposed to the prolonged slaughter and home front deprivation): it participated decisively in a successful coalition that achieved victory. Beneath the surface, however, were many undercurrents. Mainline Protestant Christianity remained aggressively [masculine](#) and centered on the redemptive uplift of the white Anglo-Saxon races, deeply suspicious of Catholic, Jewish, and non-white participation in the war effort. As [Jonathan Ebel](#) has argued, the [American religious experience](#) of the Great War showed that religion was a necessary but not wholly sufficient cause of American involvement in the war. However, though the Great War was not a religious war, American religious experiences permeated [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\)](#) call to arms, demonization and suspicion of "subversives," and soldiers' self-understandings of their individual experiences of war. Religious symbolism and religious language infused the American war effort, dominated by an overarching conception of "America's responsibility to set things right." This notion fitted in well with past traditions dating back to the Puritan origins of the "City upon a Hill" and it would influence further American military involvements in an increasingly globalized world. Yet, despite this textbook example of American religious faith in war, the American religious experience of the First World War remains understudied and comparatively forgotten, occluded between the American Civil War and the Second World War.¹⁹

Technically speaking, the only official wartime proclamation of just war issued by a high-

ranking religious leader in his official capacity was from [Mehmed V, Sultan of the Turks \(1844-1918\)](#), who proclaimed a *jihad* on behalf of the Ottoman Empire in November 1914. Even within the Ottoman borders, however, this declaration failed to incite Islamic fervor against the Allies.²⁰ Nevertheless, in the minds of Christian believers, just-war terminology was not limited by official casuistry, and general impressions of righteousness metastasized into a widespread belief that participants were fighting a “just war.” Contemporary lay believers often thought that they had received official church sanction for fighting a war of defense against aggression, always based on the perceived debased intentions of the opposition. Low-ranking clergy as well as some church leaders helped to confuse the issue with their publications and proclamations. For example, [Michael von Faulhaber \(1869-1952\)](#), the Bishop of Speyer and later Cardinal of Munich, was the de facto head of Bavarian military chaplaincy during the Great War. In his collected sermons from the Great War, Faulhaber called the conflict a “textbook example of a just war.” Faulhaber became a leading figure of German Catholicism and its complicated relations with the developing Nazi movement in the interwar period.²¹

Clerics’ blessing of [weapons](#) was a highly charged symbolic issue related to just war debates. Published in heroic fashion, the Austro-Hungarian chaplaincy, for instance, denied that a church-sanctioned blessing of weapons had taken place during the war, arguing that individual priests’ blessing of weapons was not an endorsement of the war or its justice.

Weapon-blessing, so the volume argued, was analogous to blessing a baker’s yeast.²² While this was technically accurate in terms of ecclesiastical prerogatives, numerous contemporary reports, however, show that the issue quickly became confused in the minds of lay and religious believers. In the heady days of August 1914, for instance, in St. Stephan’s Cathedral in Vienna, Professor Justin Bodnitz, after a fiery sermon in Hungarian, conducted an official blessing of soldiers’ weapons and validated the concept of a just war, conducted in concert with Apostolic Field Vicar [Emmerich Bjelik \(1860-1927\)](#), the head of Austro-Hungarian chaplaincy.²³ Weapon-blessing was a symbol that disgusted both believers and non-believers, contributing to the impression of the churches’ supposed moral bankruptcy.

Theologically speaking, most prominent clerics rendered therefore unto Caesar, issuing conservative support for their individual state causes, but this was not always the case, especially with new developments in Protestant theology. Some of the most foundational Protestant theology of the modern era, namely [Karl Barth’s \(1886-1968\)](#) dialectical theology, was formed in explicit reaction against the [nationalist](#) jingoism of autumn 1914 and the patriotic excesses of liberal theologians such as Adolf von Harnack and [Wilhelm Hermann \(1846-1922\)](#). Barthian Neo-Orthodoxy looked both backward and forward beyond the Great War. Most dramatically in Germany, facing the question of sacrifice for a losing cause,

Protestant theology in Germany underwent a profound grappling with the existential questions that the war posed for individual believers and their loyalties to larger collectives. Barth and his theological adversaries, most prominently [Paul Althaus \(1888-1966\)](#) and [Emanuel Hirsch \(1888-1972\)](#), would culminate in German Protestantism's ultimate split into opposing branches that abhorred or embraced Nazism.²⁴ [Paul Tillich \(1886-1965\)](#), serving as a military chaplain, explicitly linked his conception of Religious Socialism to reaction against war jingoism, while [Rudolf Otto's \(1869-1937\)](#) notion of the numinous would continue to inspire existentialist philosophy.²⁵ Protestant theology in particular took a wide variety of inspired forms based on the experience of the Great War.

New reenergized theological movements were not limited to Protestantism: for example, [Martin Buber's \(1878-1965\)](#) existentialist Zionism, most famously its "I-Thou" dialectic. Seeing firsthand in Vienna the plight of Galician Jews caused by the war's [Eastern Front](#) disruptions, Buber's theology began as an existential observation of [refugees](#) on the streets of the capital.²⁶ Similarly, [Romano Guardini \(1885-1968\)](#), serving as a [hospital](#) chaplain in Bavaria, would draw fundamental concepts from a reinvigorated church tradition, informing the future liturgical and youth movements so central to interwar European Catholicism, as well as laying the groundwork for Vatican II developments.²⁷ More perniciously, Catholic theologians, too, could articulate theologies founded in the Great War that would help Catholic believers embrace Hitler as an authority figure of national regeneration.²⁸

Practical Aims

Beyond the [war cultures approach](#) as an intensifier of ideological hatred, one must look at the churches' roles both more broadly and more deeply in a cultural history of religion. The concept of culture itself, as the symbols and practices of everyday life, hints that, for religious believers, the churches were key sites of social interaction for all facets of human existence: from cradle (or conception) to grave.²⁹

On a global level, the churches helped to mobilize resources. They contributed personnel, sometimes as combatants, but more often in networks of care for the physical and psychological healing of soldiers and their families. Sometimes this was through official state sponsorship, as in the case of military chaplains accompanying units into battle or lobbying for church funds devoted to war expenditures. Church leaders, for the most part, served important diplomatic roles: both as firebrand agitators for their respective states as well as diplomats attempting to bridge borders that the modern nation-state was unable to cross. Often accompanying unwelcome telegrams bearing news of death or disappearance, clerics

were mediators and caretakers. They accompanied the dead through last rites according to religious traditions, which had to be adjusted to circumstances of war.

Churches took leading roles in disseminating official propaganda. In the military, courses in “Patriotic Instruction” were often led by clerics and military officers, stressing the need for obedience to the state. In the unraveling multi-ethnic polity of Austria-Hungary, this proved particularly problematic. Rising ethno-nationalism after 1917, viewed increasingly outside of the framework of the Habsburg monarchy, caused increasing disbelief in the monarchy and its religiously inspired patriotism.³⁰

On the home front, religious education fostered loyalty to the state. Religious figures, both men and women, faced overpowering demands between home front and battlefield. In Germany, conscription took a large toll on male teachers, and many women stepped in to fill their place. Teachers allowed these [children](#) a surprising degree of pedagogical freedom, using new methods such as reading current events and composing reflection pieces. Although the methodology was innovative, religious teachers channeled the children’s opinions toward demonstrations of patriotic loyalty to the state.³¹

Religious non-combatants also played a huge role in the war, especially important in roles for women. In this capacity, female religious became involved in hospital networks, helping to heal the many wounds of war. Indeed, many religious sites such as cloisters, monasteries, and churches, became hospitals. Organized social welfare took a decisive step forward during the Great War, in ways that blurred boundaries between private and public welfare. Churches helped organize those moves within state auspices, through such measures as religious collections of money and diverting material earmarked for fighting soldiers. However, especially in the powers whose governments were losing the great battle of socio-economic mobilization, churches on the home front stepped in to fill gaps where the state was unable to provide. Organizations such as the *Deutscher Caritas Verein* and *Reichsverband der Wohltätigkeitsorganisationen in Österreich* became major players in social welfare during the Great War, and this would continue into the interwar period and beyond. Even if many of the leading positions in the public sphere were still male-dominated, women, both lay and religious, played a large role in the development of religious welfare organizations. Similar to the [Red Cross](#), religiously inspired NGOs, foremost the Catholic Church, experienced the Great War as an enormous boost to their actions and credibility.³²

The Holy See highlighted the opportunities and challenges of transnational cooperation. The archconservative [Pope Pius X \(1835-1914\)](#) died in the war’s opening phase in autumn 1914. His successor, [Pope Benedict XV \(1854-1922\)](#) was besieged with high-level diplomatic

requests, as well as thousands of individual pleas for aid. The papacy found itself under mutual suspicion from the Central Powers and the Allies, thus ironically helping to ensure the Catholic Church's comparative neutrality. A more reactionary pope in the vein of [Pope Pius IX \(1795-1878\)](#) or Pius X could have remained inactive, simply fulminating against the horrors that modernism had unleashed. Though Benedict XV strongly denounced the war as a "catastrophe" and the "suicide of civilized Europe," the pontiff's actions spoke louder than his words. Indeed, the Great War was a milestone in the Catholic Church's advancement as an activist humanitarian institution, relatively impartial to party politics. Benedict XV nearly bankrupted the Vatican coffers in his efforts to secure aid for [prisoners of war](#), displaced persons, and refugees. Furthermore, the Pope's 1 August 1917 Peace Note was one of the war's most concrete attempts to end the conflict, though by this time, the Note's basic suggestion of a status quo ante was impossible given the sacrifices that had already occurred. Complicated by the Vatican's relationship with Italy, the Catholic Church was specifically excluded from the post-war peace negotiations.³³

Far from increasing irrelevance, 1917 was an important year for the Catholic Church, highlighting a Church that would demonstrate invigorated associational membership and popular enthusiasm in the interwar period. On a political level, this mobilization sometimes allied directly with [fascist](#) states. The newly revised Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law (*Codex Iuris Canonici*), was so called because the project was initiated by Pope Pius X and completed by Pope Benedict XV. The new Code of Canon Law came into effect in 1918 and represented the first major reorganization of the Church since the Council of Trent (held on and off between 1545 and 1563). Spelling out the laws and hierarchies of the Church as well as articulating general precepts of membership, the Code of Canon Law centralized what had been an array of disparate decrees, confirming authoritarian hierarchies within the Church. As a legacy long after 1918, this new Code of Canon Law would continue in force through most of the 20th century. The Code was revised in 1983, initiated by [Pope John Paul II \(1920-2005\)](#).³⁴

Military Service and Official Observance

Most conspicuously embodied in the notion of military service, church involvement in the war depended heavily on agreement with the state. As codified in 1917, Canon Law prohibited ordained Catholic clergy from bearing arms, but some clerics took up arms and killed enemy soldiers, either through lack of church-state agreement, such as in the French case, or else in eagerness to fit in with soldiers at the front. At one end of the spectrum was the republican French state, where the separation of church and state occurred in 1905. Consequently, no French priests, ministers, or rabbis were exempt from active military service. Around 79,000

Catholic clergy served as soldiers, with France alone providing 45,000: of those French clergy, 3,101 priests and seminarians, and 1,517 members of religious orders died on active duty.³⁵ At the other end of the spectrum were imperial states such as Austria-Hungary, with explicit ties to the interests of the Vatican.

Despite the modernist war [literature](#) from such authors as [Robert Graves \(1895-1985\)](#) and [Siegfried Sassoon \(1886-1967\)](#), in the 20th century British army, a “diffusive Christianity” permeated the military. In the United Kingdom, the Army Chaplains’ Department showed tremendous increases in state-sponsored chaplaincy. At the beginning of the war in 1914, the entire army had a mere 117 chaplains, eighty-nine of those from the Church of England; of the remainder, eleven were Presbyterians and seventeen were Roman Catholics. By August 1918, the number of chaplains had risen to 3,416, including 298 Presbyterians and 643 Roman Catholic chaplains. The Army Chaplains’ Department now comprised chaplains of more diverse faiths including Wesleyan, United Board (i.e., Baptists, Congregationalists, United Methodists, and Primitive Methodists), Welsh Calvinist, Jewish, and Salvation Army. British High Command would recognize the utility of chaplains as morale-builders essential to military discipline and comfort, sentiments that would continue into the Second World War. At a thanksgiving service in Cairo after the Battle of El Alamein, Field Marshal [Bernard Law Montgomery, Viscount Montgomery of Alamein \(1887-1976\)](#) declared that he would “as soon think of going into battle without my artillery than without my Chaplains.”³⁶ In a recent study, [Edward Madigan](#) has concluded that Anglican chaplains performed their duties of pastoral care effectively and were not simply mouthpieces for the military authorities.³⁷

As state-sponsored clerics, military chaplains were an extremely visible symbol of church-state alliance. Chaplains were assigned to military units, usually at the division level. However, some units, such as Tyrolean formations of the Austro-Hungarian army, had chaplains at the battalion level. Because of the complicated politics of ethno-nationalism, the Austro-Hungarian Army represented religious-military bureaucracy in its most complex form, managing military chaplains of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christianity as well as Jewish and Muslim chaplains. This last instance was due to [Austria-Hungary’s annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) in 1878.³⁸

Even in heavily Catholic regions, the number of chaplains was often insufficient for the needs of massed industrial armies. From 1915-1917, for instance, the heavily Catholic region of Bavaria, around 70 percent Catholic, increased its military contingent in the German Imperial Army from 380,000 to 530,000 soldiers. The number of Catholic military chaplains, however, only increased from 170 to 189. In contrast to pre-war norms, where a Bavarian Catholic

priest ministered to around 665 lay parishioners, in wartime, this meant that a Catholic chaplain was responsible for around 1,600 Catholic soldiers.³⁹ This increased the number of group confessions and mass burials at the front. Growing battlefront and home front needs also created a shortage of religious personnel, both male and female. The churches struggled to keep pace with the industrial dimensions of [total war](#).

Chaplains were assigned to military units, usually at the division- or regiment level. Because of the physical layout of the battlefront (covering dozens of miles with at most the aid of a horse and servant), chaplains often held regular services at central points, several miles from the front, frequently regional headquarters or hospitals. From there, they made visits to the front to distribute care packages, minister to the troops, and generally act as a form of moral support. During times of battle, especially with time for preparation before a known offensive, chaplains went to the front to offer final blessings and last rites to departing soldiers, known in its Catholic form as General Absolution. This form of mass ministry was a distinct departure from more individualized forms of pre-war confession. During battle, chaplains remained at the hospital awaiting the imminent arrival of new casualties.⁴⁰

In the presence of visiting high commanders, chaplains held ecumenical services, especially between Protestants and Catholics; national minorities such as Jews and Muslims could normally use such services if they wished but their exclusive faith traditions were not incorporated into communal services. In the thick of battle, however, barriers broke down more easily. Chaplains ministered to wounded and dying soldiers, even from faith traditions other than their own. A wounded or dying Catholic soldier could receive rites from a Protestant chaplain (and vice versa). Survivors' records indicate that this type of practice was normally seen as a heroic act of great comfort to both parties involved, and even the family of the deceased. Objections arose to such practice usually only after the fact, especially through a disgruntled third party such as an officer or church official intervening to enforce a pedantic point of church-state relations, with little regard for the real-world effects of religious care in battle.

Emerging in Western mass democracies, [pacifism](#) and [conscientious objection](#) were primarily supported by Protestant sects, but these views were extreme minority positions that largely developed after the Great War. The First World War was an important milestone in the public perception of senseless violence and the need to resist state compulsion.⁴¹ In the United Kingdom, conscientious objection was only enshrined in law due to stronger traditions of state-sponsored Protestant conscience. Furthermore, chances for success were greater in recognized sects such as the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Christadelphians. These groups drew on early church pacifist traditions or adopted millenarian beliefs about the

Kingdom of God being at hand, and relished the roles of martyrdom (bearing witness) for their beliefs in face of state persecution. Few Anglicans or Catholics, by contrast, became objectors. State traditions and context mattered: not a single German Mennonite was recorded as a conscientious objector. Heavily watched by the Wilhelmine State, the main pacifist Protestant source of dissent in Germany was the *Zentralstelle evangelischer Friedensfreunde* and the activities of [Martin Rade \(1857-1940\)](#) and [Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze \(1885-1969\)](#). This largely left dissent in the hands of anti-religious Socialists, mainly [Karl Liebknecht \(1871-1919\)](#), with baleful influences when Germany lost the war. Defeat was blamed on supposed Jewish-Bolshevik treachery undermining collective will to victory.⁴²

In terms of official observances, recorded through such measures as church attendance and distribution of communion hosts, there were some general patterns. The initial rush to war saw a huge upsurge of attendance at religious services in 1914-1915. As the war stagnated, however, attendance dropped and especially in some military units in conflict zones, the flood of public religious observance slowed to a trickle by the war's end. Here, however, different theaters of war and local context mattered enormously, as did seasonal cycles of religious worship and individual life stories. Measured in other ways, especially on the home front, religious statistics were not so clear-cut. Even in the capital cities, preeminent sites of modernist culture, religious "counter-statistics" indicated religious vitality through a steady rise in per capita rates of church marriage, Sunday school attendance, and baptism among the working-class, as well as increases in church burials, especially when compared to pre-war trends. It should not be assumed that cities were inherently causes of secularization during the Great War.⁴³

It was perhaps Russia that offered the starkest example of social upheaval; consequently, there are particular difficulties in assessing the extent of religious or quasi-religious behavior. In the Russian Orthodox Church on the eve of the Great War, observable public piety among the conservative agrarian peasant society approached participation levels that Western religious leaders could scarcely imagine. In 1900, 87 percent of Russian men and 91 percent of women regularly participated in the sacraments of confession and communion. The trio of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality" was strong, though direct autocracy as public policy had been much weakened, especially after the 1905 Revolution. Similarly to the other established state churches in Europe, Orthodoxy became swept up in a wave of pro-war fervor. However, due to the strong ideological intertwining of throne and altar in support of the Tsar, anti-war sentiment set in earlier and became more pronounced as the war stagnated. The excesses of Rasputinism (as experienced not only by [Grigori Rasputin](#) himself but also his supporters), along with perceived German influence on the monarchy, only made things worse. During the February 1917 Revolution that brought down the monarchy, the

conservative Synod refused the autocracy's appeal for help.⁴⁴ Disillusioned by years of war, soldiers made eager converts to the [Red Army](#). Though here, too, however, anti-religious sentiment often used emotional content and appeals drawn from religion, perhaps most pointedly in terms of the Bolshevik inquisitors' Manichean worldview and persecutions of non-Communist believers.⁴⁵ Overall, Russia in the Great War was an overwhelmingly agrarian society, fundamentally conservative in nature. The war's unprecedented collective traumas no doubt shook Russian society into a thorough revolution, making peasants susceptible to new Bolshevik influences. However, the adaptation of peasant religious traditions, not simply their transformation, made a subject worthy of further research into the nature of the Russian Revolution.⁴⁶ This was complicated by the Bolsheviks' self-declared and widely perceived perception of the Communist Party as the vanguard of the proletariat, at the forefront of a movement of world-historical change.

Religious Minorities

The majority of official religions during the conflict were dominant social forces in largely Christian societies. In all combatant states, however, minority religious groups were a key part of the war effort. Especially in multi-national imperial entities such as Russia, Austria-Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States, majority Christian societies had to incorporate believers of all faiths into theories and practices of war effort. Considering the later effects of the Holocaust, the dilemmas of assimilation and exclusion were most apparent in Germany. Most infamously in the [Judenzählung](#) (Jewish Census) of November 1916, [anti-semitic](#) factions of the Prussian Army initiated an official inquiry that tried to prove statistically that Jews were shirking their official service in the military. When the results proved the opposite, namely that German Jews were proportionally over-represented in the German military, the authorities suppressed the statistics until after the war ended.⁴⁷ Some conservative reactionary elements in majority Christian societies refused to acknowledge Jews as full-fledged members of society.

Many Jewish soldiers and their families experienced the Great War precisely as did other non-Jewish minorities: i.e., caught up in a groundswell of nationalist assimilation dedicated to victory, such as the [Burgfrieden](#) in Germany, or the *union sacrée* in France. In army life, Jews and Muslims had to cope with official chaplaincies that were even more piecemeal and thinly scattered than those of their Christian counterparts. Military religious authorities made regular attempts to foster religious observance in everyday military life through such matters as dietary regulations and official burial. Despite the best efforts of individual field rabbis and field imams, perhaps most famously [Leo Baeck \(1873-1956\)](#) who served in the German army, religious services were sporadic at best. Religious services for minority religious in the

military were usually dependent on the particular travel schedule of individual chaplains attempting to traverse hundreds or even thousands of miles of ground. For instance, elite Bosnian units skilled in mountain warfare, consisting of many observant Muslim soldiers, helped to bolster problem areas of the Austro-Hungarian defenses on the [Italian Front](#). Consequently, heavily Catholic areas of the Habsburg Empire, such as South Tyrol, saw field imams conducting Muslim burials. Thus, the Habsburg Army, ideologically opposed to the encroachment of Islam for centuries, actually incorporated Muslim units into the defense of Habsburg territorial interests. While some religious believers were caught up in waves of nationalist assimilation, others had alternative experiences that were more individualist as well as focused on other collectives. For instance, the idiosyncratic religious behavior of the Orthodox community gathered around Rabbi [Selig Schachnowitz \(1874-1952\)](#) of Frankfurt showed that there were multiple currents of Judaism alive and well in one city, sometimes in alignment and sometimes in conflict with each other.⁴⁸

Religious sentiment played a role in escalating the ideological hatred that enabled genocide, and it is essential to focus attention on the importance of religious difference as motivation for other 20th century genocides.⁴⁹ Most infamously, state-organized actions took place in the Ottoman Muslim genocide of the Armenian Christians. The [Armenian genocide](#) should be understood in terms of aggressive pre-1914 Young Turk policies, which were exacerbated by the Great War and the threat of Entente invasion. This resulted in both military campaigns and paramilitary irregular warfare across unstable borders in Central Asia. Overall, Turkish politicians of the [Committee of Union and Progress](#) (CUP) remained highly suspicious of Armenians as treacherous agitators undermining the military campaigns. Beneath this imperial veneer, however, recent research has done much to clarify the importance of local elites in the Diyarbekir province, particularly the governor [Mehmed Reshid \(1873-1919\)](#), who assumed office on 25 March 1915. Convinced that Armenians were destabilizing his province in their quest to form an independent [Armenia](#), Reshid was instrumental in escalating violent deportations of Armenians and unleashing [paramilitary violence](#) against civilians. Immediately after becoming governor, he formed a "Committee of Inquiry" supported by militia units, who drew on such local activists near Mardin and openly called for pogroms against Armenian Christians. Contemporary accounts from 1915, including reports from a leader of a German charitable organization with personnel in Turkey, indicated that the phase "solution of the Armenian question" became an ominously recurrent part of Reshid's political program.⁵⁰ By 5 April, Reshid himself was participating with his gendarmes in warrantless searches and targeted roundups of Christian clergy and community leaders. In conjunction with brutal fighting around Van, and the threat of Allied invasion that was materializing around [Gallipoli](#), by 24 April 1915, local persecution became imperial: throughout the Ottoman Empire, the CUP officially targeted the entire political and cultural elite of the

Armenian community for arrest and deportation to the interior, with 250 notables rounded up in Constantinople. By 22 May, the first large-scale massacres were underway in the village of Qarabash, where looting, arson, and mass rape all took place as the entire Armenian population of the village was killed with daggers, swords, and axes, murdered by Kurdish horsemen incited to violence by Governor Reshid's paramilitary units.⁵¹

Due to the patchwork nature of ethnic affiliations, the genocide of ethnic Armenians drew on important elements of more broadly inspired religious violence between Christians and Muslims. It was not always an eliminationist form of ethnic cleansing, however, from which there was no escape. For example, in the 10 June massacre of nearly 400 Christians of all denominations near the village of Adirshek, the Ottoman commander of the execution unit, [Mehmed Memduh Bey \(-1919\)](#), read the death sentences aloud to the group, adding that any Christian converting to Islam would be spared. Most of the Christian believers present followed the example of their leader, Bishop [Ignatius Shoukrallah Maloyan \(1869-1915\)](#), who declared that he would rather die as a Christian than live as a Muslim. After the Bishop's persistent refusal, Memduh drew his handgun and personally executed Maloyan with a single gunshot to the head.⁵² Ottoman government secrecy, censorship, and denial were key elements of the genocidal plan, which would claim around 1 million victims. Other ominous elements of German encounters with Jews on the Eastern Front during World War I, particularly the failed attempts at military administration, would help to lay the ideological foundations for organized killings during World War II.⁵³ Convoluted historical-territorial claims in the Middle East, inspired in part by religious cultural identities, would help to lay the foundations for future violence and political enmity.⁵⁴ Religion's relevance for the course of 20th century global history continued long after the guns of the [Western Front](#) fell silent.

Commemoration and Legacy

The churches were heavily involved in commemoration efforts during and after the war. Religious figures took part in the dedication of major state sites of commemoration, such as the [Cenotaph](#) on Remembrance Sunday, standing by the Victory Column as well the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Churches and civic sites included religiously themed plaques or statuary dedicated to the war dead. The remembrance tablets would often be expanded to include, or would be found adjacent to, memory tablets for the dead of the Second World War, thus enshrining the war dead as part of one pan-European cycle of violence and loss from 1914-1945. This process occurred in churches at every level of European society, from national cathedrals in major [urban centers](#) to small [rural parishes](#). The churches also helped plan, finance, build, and maintain war cemeteries in which Christian motives and conceptions

of sacrifice helped mourners make sense of the losses they had endured. Avant-garde modernism helped some intellectuals represent if not understand the stupefying social destruction of war. Such conceptual impulses, however, rarely comforted the vast majority of survivors. Organized religion and traditional modes of understanding helped the bereaved mourn the loss of their beloved dead.⁵⁵ Organized religion, especially the Catholic Church, also attempted to set limits to its believers' behaviors, especially with official decrees against spiritualism or other perceived forms of "black magic" that believers used to attempt to contact the dead.⁵⁶

The Catholic case highlights the different transnational implications of religion, even for powers that won the war. Aggressively secularizing prewar states like France and Italy reacted collectively differently to the war's outcome. Framing the war in terms of atonement and a successful defense of the nation, in October 1919 French Catholics consecrated the basilica of Sacré Cœur in Montmartre. This symbolized the continuity of sacrifice between the events of 1870-1871 and 1914-1918. As [Annette Becker](#) has argued, the consecration of Sacré Cœur was, at least for French Catholics, "the key moment in France's return to normality, from defeat to victory."⁵⁷ Helping to reverse the bitterness of the pre-war *laïcité* laws, the French state reestablished diplomatic ties with the Vatican, symbolized by the canonization of [Joan of Arc \(1412-1431\)](#), who was declared a saint on 16 May 1920. For France, and especially French Catholics, the Great War was a heroically successful defense of the nation, and the sacred-secular hatreds became greatly disarmed through continued rapprochement, especially through the efforts of war veterans.⁵⁸

The Italian case presented a much more ambiguous collective outcome for Italian Catholics, whose country "won" the war, but whose society failed to understand the sacrifices incurred in the conflict. In Italy, there was no plausible collective interpretation of sacrifice because the state had bungled the war effort so badly. A latecomer into the war through diplomatic intrigue, Italy's disastrous performance in the main [Alpine combat](#) area highlighted the fissures of Italian society and the ineptitude of its war leaders. Only Entente intervention staved off [disaster at Caporetto](#) in 1917. Despite Italy being counted as a winner at the [Paris Peace Conference](#) and receiving territorial concessions, [Italian society](#) remained deeply fragmented about the war's meaning. With a lack of strong political leadership and lingering social tensions, Italy would prove especially fertile ground for the rise of Fascism and a leader figure like [Benito Mussolini \(1883-1945\)](#) whose promises were both reactionary and ultra-modern.⁵⁹

With a ruthless combination of delusionary ideology and pragmatic acumen, political religions

emerged dedicated to restructuring society along visions of organic communities. This often coalesced around exclusionary hatreds of others perceived to have caused defeat during the Great War. Most ominously, this hatred was especially forceful in states that lost the war in Central and Eastern Europe.⁶⁰ [Commemorations](#) were contested affairs, especially in losing states that nonetheless had to validate the sacrifice involved. In Germany, for example, there were certainly extreme nationalists who sanctified the war dead and agitated that only victory through another war would redeem the sacrifice and expunge the perceived betrayal by a supposedly disloyal conspiracy of Jewish-Bolshevik agitators. Such stark ravings would become a key element of Nazi ideology. The Nazi version of events, however, did not capture the hearts of many former soldiers. In complete contrast, pacifist left-leaning Republicans, for example, formed a counter-memory in which former soldiers drew upon their war experience to testify to the horrors and futility of war, advocating instead for peace and brotherhood between nations.⁶¹

Conclusion

Religion was a motivating force for war and for peace, both sustaining enthusiasm for violence as well as diminishing it. In Eastern Europe, war had spawned [revolution](#) and this engendered counterrevolution, thus blurring the boundaries between war and [civil war](#). After the conflict on the Western Front had ended, churches became engaged in a crusade against communism that inclined them towards sympathy for fascist and Nazi movements, culminating in the Holocaust. Pacifists found ample cause to denounce the churches' warmongering during the conflict. However, in the interwar period, besides comforting those afflicted by war, official churches also shifted away from their unquestioned advocacy of war as in 1914; instead, they emphasized their religious role as peacemakers. International Peace Conferences, such as the one in Constance that disbanded due to the outbreak of war in 1914, resumed in the interwar period, leading to ecumenical movements and transnational peacemaking networks that would bear much fruit after 1945. Religious institutions of many creeds and dominations were well represented in these new peace efforts that took place in cities such as [Freiburg](#), Paris, and Vienna. Post-1945 Christian Democratic parties drew on these networks and experiences of reconciliation, which would be vital to the formation of the European Union.⁶²

The churches represented religion's most visible public institutions, but those public institutions were composed of private individuals acting in various degrees of official behavior – and sometimes directly against officially sanctioned religiosity. Keeping pace with historiographical shifts in the study of modern religious history, scholarship now embraces forms of popular religion and its vibrant, multifaceted dimensions on a global level. Future

scholarly research will continue to explore how individual believers, kinship groups, and larger associational networks experienced the war through myriad religious beliefs. Religion in Europe was only one part of a story of global religious patterns, and the Great War marked an epochal shift in relations between Christians, Jews, and Muslims across the world.⁶³ Far from being an archaic 19th century relic made irrelevant by the events of 1914-1918, the religious legacy of the churches during the Great War continues to the present day across the globe.

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Notes

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