

THE SOLDIER AS CHRIST

GERMANY:

National Cemeteries and National Revival: The Cult of the Fallen Soldiers in Germany

Author(s): George L. Mosse. Source: Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Jan., 1979), pp. 1-20. Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

4-5—The cult of the fallen assimilated the basic themes of a familiar and congenial Christianity. The exclamation ‘Now we are made sacred’ implied an analogy of the sacrifice in war to the passion and resurrection of Christ.

The wars of liberation had already been likened to the Last Supper, and now Walter Flex, one of the chief myth-makers of the First World War, repeated this analogy: the war is the Last Supper, it is one of the chief revelations through which Christ illuminates the world. The sacrificial death of the best of our people, he continued, is only a repetition of the passion of Christ.’ The passion leads to the resurrection: ‘On Christmas night the dead talk in human voices.’”

Here, the stages in Christ’s passion are made relevant to the modern war experience. Max von Schenkendorf had exclaimed in 1813, ‘The fatherland is risen again, O what a wonderful Easter.’”

GERMANY:

SABINE BEHRENBECK: “The Transformation of Sacrifice: German Identity between Heroic Narrative and Economic Success”

Already in the nineteenth century as an interpretive framework had been adopted for locating the death of the soldier in the scheme of Christian sacrifice. In most European states, sacrificing one’s live “on the altar of the Fatherland” was a common trope in justifying a soldier’s death. Here the nation served as the highest ethical value, justifying and thus demanding any sacrifice. As the refrain of a famous soldier’s song by Heinrich Lersch went, “Germany must live, even if we must die.”

The crisis of meaning reinforced the value of the willingness to sacrifice as a virtue in and of itself, even if the question of “to what end?” remained largely unaddressed. The fallen advanced as the elite of the nation. They symbolized the internal integrity of the Reich and kept society from further degenerating into a dissolute and fractious present. The idea of dying for the nation transformed their plural lives into a singular form of existence based on service and devotion to others (*Proexistenz*).

Most inscriptions on German war monuments invoked this obligation of the living to the dead. Remembrance of the dead was supposed to elicit a willingness to sacrifice among the living. Living a life in their spirit filled with the same dedication would guarantee the resurrection of the despairing and downtrodden Fatherland.

Just as the Wars of Liberation of the nineteenth century had already been understood as a national Easter, so was the First World War often interpreted as a profane communion and revelation. Walter Flex’s *Der Wanderer zwischen heiden Welten* or Julius Zerner’s *Kriegmesse 1914* are good examples. Death on the battlefield was bestowed with the aura of a sacred act. The sacrificial death of the nation’s best was a reenactment of ‘Christ’s Passion, as suffering was supposed to lead to resurrection.

UNITED STATES: General Douglas MacArthur told graduating West Pointers in 1962 that they as soldiers “above all other men” were required to practice “the greatest act of religious training—sacrifice.”

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GERMANY: Baird, J. W. (1990). *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press

Both high culture & popular culture in Germany were pervaded with the themes of struggle, battle, and death, that is, the redemptive death of the warrior. Death in battle not only guaranteed eternal life for the martyr but also acted as a resurgent life force for the Father land. Death in combat took on the ennobling force of a sacrament.

12--Wehner mused on the enduring meaning of the Great War. It had been a religious experience for him and for those who had served at the front. Christ's passion had found its parallel in the deeds of those soldiers, who had sacrificed themselves for the nation. But the tears of Good Friday gave way to the joy of a German Easter & the promise of eternal life. Wehner celebrated this sacrifice in his poem "Vom Blut der Helden Schlagt das Herz der Welt:"

You should neither cry nor grieve,
For our sacrificial blood was life win.
God created death as a brother to life:
The heart of the world beats with the blood of heroes.
We marched before you through the dark gate
And shone for your resurrection.

69--Rudolf Hess: The stream of blood which for Germany is eternal--the sacrifice of German men for their Volk is eternal--therefore Germany will also be eternal.

Heinrich Anacker glorified this blood bond in his poem "Mothers of the Dead":

Do you know the mothers of our dead warriors?
Have you seen the women wan & transfigured by pain,
They bear their burdens nobly & quietly
Ever ready, to continue the efforts of the dead.
Pale transfigured Mary, Mother of Christ, lives in them,
She who mourned her own son at the Cross,
And his love, his holy service
United them in sacred humility.

"The mothers," according to Josef Magnus Whner, "are the great nameless ones of the Volk." Their "sacred grief, the tears of the widows & orphans, will lead to the pain of a new birth, and finally there will arise out of blood and death the new man, the Fuhrer, on whose shoulders rests the construction of the future." The Reich would arise from the shattered bodies of the dead: They died, that we might become. Without their sacrifice we would not have been transformed, our heart beats with their blood. The true meaning of their death is our resurrection in the Reich.

232-3--In his last letter to his mother, written before his death on the western front in 1940, Hitler Youth officer Ernst Nielsen tried to prepare her for the loss of her son. When the news arrived, he warned, she was not to grieve; rather, she was to affirm the nobility of the cause:

"If I die, mother, you must bear it,
And your pride will conquer your pain,
Because you have the privilege of offering a sacrifice
That is what we mean, when we say Germany."

UNITED STATES: Marvin, Carolyn: "The myth of the sacrificed Christ who dies for all men makes every sacrificed soldier a remodeled Christ dying to redeem his countrymen."

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FRANCE: (text before and after the quotes are by RAK):

Barres, Maurice (1918). *The Faith of France: Studies in Spiritual Differences and Unity*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company

A French soldier, Gaston Millon, relates his own sacrifice to that of Jesus Christ:

Our victory will be the fruit of individual sacrifice. Sacrifice remains the one great law, Jesus Christ Himself has given us the example. The Church lives through the virtue of her Masters and of His disciples, virtue only acquired through sacrifices. Sacrifices unto death.

(Barres, p. 41)

The Christian meaning of dying for one's country is vividly expressed by another soldier, who was wounded and gave a letter to one of his comrades before dying:

I was struck by a ball which sent through my thigh and I fell. I am still on the same spot, for, by a truly unworthy similarity with the fate of my Savior Jesus on the Cross, I am actually nailed to my cross, being unable to move my leg even the smallest part of an inch. You knew that, before I left, I had made a vow to sacrifice my life. I have no fear of death. There is nothing horrible about it, because it brings happiness.

(Barres, pgs. 46-7)

Barres comments on the fate of this soldier:

The mystics insist that one must long to be nailed to the Cross of Christ. But what is the most inspired teaching compared to one act! This soldier priest, nailed to his cross on the soil of France, is a glowing fact which transports us.

(Barres, p. 47)

RAK: These passages, I believe, reveal a central meaning of war in Western Civilization: The soldier who dies for his country is replicating Christ's sacrifice for God. As Christ died so that man might live, the soldier dies so his nation might live. The idea of immortality or eternal life, for the nationalist, is embodied in the idea of his nation. The soldier imitates Christ by submitting to the "omnipotent object" (the nation replacing God) in the hope that he might partake of eternal existence.

And there is a *physical dimension* to such a form of dying. Just as Christ was nailed to the cross, paralyzed, unable to move, so is the soldier nailed to the soil his nation, paralyzed, unable to move. The sacrificial act is a form of *fusion* between the human being and a material object. In this passage we also glimpse the idea that the nation is *born out* of the sacrifices made by soldiers: "The church lives through the virtue of her Masters and of His disciples, virtue only acquired through sacrifice unto death."

Just as the Church is born out of the sacrifices of Christ and his disciples, so is the nation born out of the sacrificial deaths of soldiers. Just as the Church is the body of Christ, so is the nation created on the foundation of the bodies of soldiers who died in her name.

GERMANY: Hoover, Arlie J. (1986). *The Gospel of Nationalism*. Stuttgart: Steiner-Verlag

Introduction: Nationalism and Religion

3--One of the primary theses of this study is that the fluidity of the religious sense makes it easy for man to switch the *object* of his religious veneration, from church to nation, from God to country. In nationalism, the nation, like the church in religion, becomes a body of elect believers. The nation offers rituals and emotional satisfactions; it gives to the faithful the sense of belonging to an esoteric identifiable group, one that has been "called out," that has been "saved."

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77--However, the prize for adapting the Holy Spirit to patriotism must go to Gustav Freybe of Hanover. In sermon on Pentecost, 1915, Freybe described the "mobilization day" of August 4, 1914, in words that paralleled almost exactly the passage in Acts 2, when the Spirit first came upon the Christian community:

81--When preachers used the Christian church to parallel the *Volksgemeinschaft* they found Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 12 very appropriate: "Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." There is a mutual affection pervading the organism: "If one member suffers, all suffers together, if one member is honored, all rejoice together".

84--Sermons stressing this belief usually contained the following argument: a man who will fight and die for his fatherland shows that he has conquered his egoism and expressed love for the most important earthly community, the *Volk*. Truly, such a person can rejoice with Paul, "I have fought a good fight" (2 Tim. 4:7). He has given his life for something eternal, ideal, and unseen, not for something material or corporeal. He can rightly claim the crown of life, promised to those who are faithful even unto death (Rev. 2:10).

84—Patriotic atonement implies patriotic immortality. One of the most universal convictions of the Protestant clergy was that patriotic devotion, especially fighting and dying for the country in a just war, deserved a reward in heaven.

A fallen soldier illustrates perfectly the word of Jesus that no man has greater love than one who will die for his friends (John 15:13).

85--If there is a heaven for true patriots, then there is also punishment and hell for selfish, unpatriotic individuals. This quality of retribution is common to most religions, which have warnings for the faithful to avoid the non-elect and their influence. "Take note of those who create difficulties," said St. Paul, "in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught: avoid them" (Rom. 16:17). German preachers recommended what one might call "patriotic excommunication" of the egoist.

92—Far from being innately sinful, the life of the soldier was actually one of the most exemplary lives one could choose, a life of moral courage, devotion, and self-denial...The soldier must (the Germans pastors said), like Christ, be ready to place his earthly life on the altar of love, ready to die for family, brethren, or country. He must say: "It is not necessary that I live, but it is necessary that I do my duty."

The German pastors, like their Teutonic ancestors, looked upon the warrior's death as the most beautiful of all deaths. In it lay the ultimate meaning of the mystery of human existence. The hero's death resembled the free-will offering of Christ himself, who left his life voluntarily for his brethren. Walter Lehmann expressed it well: "German nationality and Christianity agree at their very core in heroism—nothing is greater than to leave your life for your friends & your brethren. Both are fulfilled in the hero's death."

GERMANY: Hoover, Arlie (1989). *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: A Study in Clerical Nationalism*. New York: Praeger

98--Heroism is the great link between *Christianity* and warfare: "Heroism: nothing is greater than laying down your life for your brothers. Both are fulfilled in the death of the hero."

108—The nature of war makes it easy for the soldier to understand the essence of Christianity: heroism, love, sacrifice, devotion to duty. As Patton said, soldiers understand the Cross because they have borne a cross themselves. They know instinctively what Jesus meant when he said, "Greater love hath no man than the man who would lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

109--Harnack said that soldiers can claim the promise of scripture: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14). "Whoever dies in battle dies in the Lord," claimed Windisch, "because he has subordinated his bodily good to the good of the *Volk* and has offered

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his life for his own." Speaking of soldierly sacrifice, Meyer said, "Truly, here is holy ground. Here is the gate of heaven. Sacrifice is the key that breaks it open."

THROUGHOUT EUROPE AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR: Gilbert, Martin (1994). *The First World War: A Complete History*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

525--Throughout Europe, wherever armies had clashed, or towns and villages had been bereaved, monuments continued to be put up, some small, some large, a few, as at Vimy or on the Somme, immense. Many of these monuments were often idealized beyond visual recognition of the conflict. In Budapest, to this day, a Hungarian cavalryman, shot on the battlefield, stands in his stirrups, his hand over his heart, as Jesus, descending from the Cross, beckons the way to heaven, leading the dead man from the dark clouds of war to the bright light of eternity. The cavalryman's sword and helmet lie on the ground at his horse's feet. The inscription reads:

"From Christ's faith, from the blood of heroes, arises the homeland."

KOENIGSBERG'S THOUGHTS: Soldiers don't complain, nor do citizens complain about the sacrifices the soldiers have to make: This is the essence of goodness. As long as one believes that sacrifice is good, then you can't stop wars—because the purpose of war is to give soldiers the opportunity to sacrifice their lives for their nation—and to give everyone the warm and fuzzy feeling that the soldier (like Christ) is dying for all of us.

The perpetuation of war is based on our belief that sacrifice is good and that soldiers are good people because they are willing to make a sacrifice. If sacrifice is good, then war is good. The institution of war grows out of the belief that sacrifice for your country is good. The idea of sacrificing comes before the conflict for which sacrifices are believed to be necessary. If there is no real danger, people will invent dangers in order to provide the occasion for sacrifice.

War is a wonderful thing because it is the occasion when we can see that some people still are willing to die for the sacred ideal (example of Pat Tillman). How can one achieve peace if people think war is a good thing, not a bad thing? People love and desire war: think of violence as a moral obligation, virtue or form of goodness.

As Christ died for our sins, so does the discourse of war conceive of the death of the soldier as a beautiful thing (thus gravestones throughout the world memorialize the death of soldiers). What makes the dynamic of warfare so diabolical and resistant to change is not the fact that fathers are evil and wish to kill their sons; rather, the ideology of warfare is so powerful because *everyone* derives a sense of satisfaction upon contemplating the idea that young men (like Christ) might be willing to sacrifice their lives for our sake.

Based on the example of the Battle of Normandy (and one can think of hundreds of other examples): War is the sacrifice of human beings in the name of preserving the good thing. Soldiers become martyrs when a nation believes that the ideals for which a war is initiated are significant enough to justify the loss of life. Wars are not fought for economic reasons. For all the wars I've studied, I've never found this to be the case. The sacrifice of hundred-of-thousands or even millions of men can only be undertaken when what is at stake is imagined to be far more significant than money.

The soldier does not wish to imagine that he is a victim, at the mercy of the cultural fathers. This notion of sacrifice as a form of love is the delusion that lies at the core of (the sickness of) society. The soldier is lauded as a hero precisely because he is like the sacrificial Christ, dying for all of us. The heroes and masculinity of the soldier is emphasized in order to lure him into being a sacrificial victim.
