On Suffering and Consolation in Times of War


It is safe to say that, from time immemorial, war and suffering have been associated with one another. Such a connection was particularly evident during World War
One, the defining conflict of the twentieth century, which unleashed a paroxysm of violence never seen before, both overseas and within Europe. The stories of civilians in wartime, prisoners of war, and the Armenian genocide of 1915-1916—a tragedy that cost the lives of at least 1 million people—illustrate the themes of grief, violence, and agony. Since war also carries the possibility of death, secular and ecclesiastical authorities have long perceived the crucial importance of providing combatants with at least one valid reason why they should risk, and possibly lose, their lives. The Athenian leader Pericles, for example, understood that necessity when he delivered his famous funeral oration, shortly after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. The need for such reassuring words did not disappear over the many centuries, since that epic—and fateful—confrontation between Athens and Sparta. My second theme, therefore, will be an attempt to illustrate how religion, rather than a certain nationalist rhetoric that, in the age of the nation-state, was inevitably part of the picture, tried to give meaning to all that suffering. Even though World War I was not fought over religion, religious ideas still motivated individual soldiers. Historians intent on exploring religious faith in times of war, however, face a considerable challenge, because faith is something deeply personal and subject to change. Nevertheless, by using as a premise the notion that religion and war are essentially about life and death, this essay will show how a certain theological discourse emphasized the comforting thought that soldiers’ participation in such a murderous carnage contributed to their spiritual growth and, in case of the ultimate sacrifice, to their eternal salvation.

There is a plethora of good textbooks on World War I (or the Great War, as it was called before September 1939), but there are very few, like Empires, Soldiers, and Citizens, that introduce readers to the war of 1914-1918 in Europe, Africa, and Asia (the Americas have been left out—an inexplicable oversight, since the USA decided the issue of the war) through the use of mostly primary sources. The great merit of such an approach is to give the reader a sense of immediacy, a taste of the flavour—bitter as it was—of the times. This sourcebook includes eight thematic chapters that explore different aspects of the war within a chronological framework: The Mood of 1914; War on the Western Front; War to the East and South; Combat in the Machine Age; Mobilizing the Home Front; Whose Nation?; Dissent, Mutiny and Revolution; and Legacies. This is a book that both general readers and specialists will find very helpful.

What does it mean to be a civilian in wartime? This is the main question that Tammy M. Proctor, using an approach that clearly favours description over analysis, answers in her book. A civilian was not someone confined to a home front space that was protected from war. On the contrary, the author argues; with governments calling on all citizens, male and female, to serve their country in a time of great emergency, the Great War made it difficult to distinguish between civilians and soldiers, as well as between home and front. What was, then, the nature of these many contributions, which became ever more vital as the war dragged on? Civilians were conscripted to serve in mass armies. As intellectuals and scientists, civilians were mobilized to support the propaganda war that both sides fought with one another and to work in laboratories, where new experiments
resulted in major breakthroughs in the fields of explosives and chemical warfare technologies, wireless telegraphy, sonics, gas masks, radiology, plastic surgery, dental reconstruction, prosthetics, and infectious disease. Civilians supported military establishments by providing funds for war charities, supplies (food, arms and ammunitions), houses, transportation, and volunteer, prison, prisoner, and forced labour; by doing laundry and serving as cooks; by running escape networks; by working in brothels and for enemy intelligence organizations; and by caring for war orphans and refugees, as well as the sick and the wounded, a service which resulted in the feminizing of medicine, in spite of some initial discrimination. Civilians were subject to emergency legislation designed to increase governmental control over their lives. Civilians suffered from the rationing of food and its concomitant black market, smuggling, hoarding, and profiteering. Civilians were targeted through the blockade of food supplies and aerial bombings, as well as the sinking of passenger ships and explosions of munitions, like the one in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in December 1917, that cost more than 1,500 lives, seriously injured 4,000 Haligonians, and left 20,000 homeless. Civilians, who lived near the fronts or in occupied zones, found their safety threatened and shared the psychological strains of war with soldiers. Civilians—hundreds of thousands of them—were taken into custody behind barbed-wire camps for long periods of time. Despite differences of language, race, class, political structure, age, gender, and geographical location, Proctor concludes, civilians in all countries confronted many of the same challenges in their attempts to make sense of the war and their place in it. In a nutshell, civilians were both objects of war and active participants on home fronts that were militarized to an unprecedented extent. They, too, suffered enormous personal losses as the price of their commitment to their individual nations’ military effort.

Heather Jones’s *Violence against Prisoners of War* ... analyzes the captivity experiences of French, German, and British military prisoners captured on the western front. More specifically, it explores the various kinds of enemy violence that prisoners endured on the battlefields, in transit, in the prison camps, and in the forced labour companies; it also examines how governments and the public at large influenced the use of violence against prisoners, in particular, “the public’s role in defining acceptable violent practices through shifting social, political and legal understandings of what constituted transgressive ‘atrocities’ or acceptable ‘reprisals’” (pp. 2-3). Indeed, the idea of what constituted violence against individual captives, both on and off the battlefields, evolved throughout the war. The types of violence against the prisoners varied greatly too—from spitting, shouting and throwing stones at them; to refusing them water; making them work under shellfire; neglecting the sick ones (like the French victims of a typhus epidemic in German camps, or the German victims of a malaria epidemic in French camps in North Africa); serving them starvation rations; inflicting corporal punishments; and shooting them. But whatever the nature of these brutal treatments, they all shared something in common: their painful, at times traumatic, impact upon individual captives, who were unable to defend themselves and could not flee; reluctantly but inevitably, they became participants in an inherently coercive captivity power
dynamic. A study of these violent practices, Jones contends, offers key insights into the radicalization processes that are at the heart of the conflict itself.

This book consists of three parts. The first part considers the radicalizing impact of the representations of violence against prisoners, many of them based upon real incidents, during the first two years of the conflict. Jones understands representations as “the different ways in which socially determined narratives are constructed, orally, textually and visually, to convey particular messages about violence” (p. 27). A pattern of spontaneous collective anger in both France and Germany, for example, revealed the rapidity with which civilians embraced a culture of hatred of the enemy and, simultaneously, discarded peacetime moral norms that had viewed prisoners of war as a protected group. Whether depicted as a perpetrator or a victim of violence, the image of the POW became a fetish of wartime society. In that sense, prisoners “were not immune from the totalisation process which the war unleashed or a neutral bloc removed from the conflict” (p. 119). Au contraire, their stories of mistreatment, by encouraging aversion towards the enemy, fed a sense of anger and outrage that played a vital role in mobilizing home front populations. They also laid the foundation for subsequent deterioration in the treatment of prisoners of war. The second part examines radicalizing military attitudes in 1916-1918, by looking at the role of violence in collective reprisals and within the labour company system. The labour companies operated near or at the western front and rear zone areas, often on communication and supply lines. A double—and painful—result of this experiment was to subordinate prisoners’ welfare to the military demands of the captor army, and to create a dynamic of increasing violence against the prisoners, particularly in areas controlled by the German army, that had access to a pool of hundreds of thousands of Russian, French, and British captives, and used them ruthlessly to meet the massive work targets related to the 1918 Spring offensive, Germany’s desperate attempt to win the war before the arrival on the western front of the Americans. Finally, the third part explores the legacy of war violence against prisoners, not only during the repatriation phase when the issue radicalized public attitudes (the decision, for example, of the French government to use German prisoners on de-mining and reconstruction projects after the Armistice was seen as cruel, irrational, and motivated purely by a desire for revenge), but also during the interwar period when, under the influence of a change in the public mood in favour of European reconciliation and commemoration of the dead combatants, remembrance practices evolved towards a marginalization of the history of violence against war captives.

Though somewhat unnecessarily repetitive and awkwardly written at times, Jones’s book represents a valuable contribution to the comparative history of the First World War. Both a welcome reminder of how central to the war mass captivity was and a close exploration of how violent practices, occurring at different speeds in France, Germany, and Great Britain, and their representations interacted during the different phases of the conflict, this important monograph is also an illustration of how pivotal this story is in the development of mass incarceration and forced labour in the twentieth century.
If Jones devotes much more space to the continental experience of imprisonment than to the insular one, Panikos Panayi’s book on the approximately 150,000 Germans who found themselves behind barbed wire in Great Britain between 1914 and 1919 more than adequately compensates for this lacuna. Using a wide range of sources, both official and personal, Panayi outlines the evolution of British internment policy, as well as its consequences for the individuals concerned. Who were, then, these German internees, aged between 17 and 55, in the British Isles? These were men who happened to be in the country at the outbreak of the war, either as visitors or as settled immigrants (commercial agents, shopkeepers, waiters, teachers, artisans, fishermen—all part of the established German community), men who were brought there from all over the world (the British colonies and the high seas, in particular), and soldiers from the western front, naval personnel, and members of zeppelin crews, whose vessels had fallen to the ground. All these people faced different internment experiences, particularly in terms of the length of time they spent in the camps (with civilians enduring the longest period of confinement) and their ability to work. Again, in violation of the Hague Convention of 1907 and because of an increasing need for labour at a time when the number of captives within the country was also increasing, both civilians and soldiers did work in a variety of occupations, such as aerodrome, road, shipyard, and railway construction; brick making; farming; mining, timber felling, and land reclamation; factory work and quarrying. Work, though, proved to be only a partial remedy for boredom. Indeed, though statistics indicate a generally sound physical and mental condition among the prisoners of war, loosing control of one’s own life was bound to generate a fair amount of dissatisfaction and resentment. The grim realities of internment were indeed many: an all-male society, or the absence of women; petty criminality; basic accommodation, characterized by a lack of space and privacy (a situation that greatly annoyed educated middle-class prisoners who had experienced different living conditions before the war); repetitive and insufficient food; separation from families, though letters and parcels helped maintain precious contacts with the outside world; restlessness, sleeplessness, irritability, and unhappiness; bouts of melancholy, sadness, depression, and a few rare cases of insanity and suicide. Prisoners showed great imagination devising ways to alleviate their painful situations. Prison-camp societies, for example, created a sense of camaraderie and relieved the monotony of internment. Prisoners also participated in all kinds of activities that provided an intellectual stimulus and made possible the development of a communal life: the holding of religious services to mark the key festivals—Christmas and Easter—of the liturgical calendar; exercise and sport; music and theatre, and educational activities, like informal lectures, reading, and writing. The issue of the plight of prisoners figured prominently in the Anglo-German propaganda war, with both sides claiming, in their respective newspapers and parliaments, that they were treating their foreign prisoners with decency, while the enemy was mistreating the internees whom it held. Fortunately, Panayi concludes, a few individuals and humanitarian organizations, by carrying out charitable activities for German internees, “raised their heads above the parapet of hatred” (p. 255). The end of
internment meant new challenges for the former prisoners. Some returnees had to deal with the break-up of their families, while other deported immigrants had not seen their native country for decades—and they all returned to a Germany in deep political and economic turmoil.

An extremely detailed study of German internees that starts off with a remarkably thorough historiographical survey of the literature, *Prisoners of Britain*, written in a rich but easily accessible prose, represents the final word on German prisoners’ experiences in Great Britain during World War I. My only disagreement would be Panayi’s statement in his last chapter that “(Great) Britain essentially carried out ethnic cleansing during the First World War” (p. 303). The history of Europe in the remaining twentieth century tragically proved that such an assertion is simply false.

Did the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the ruling party in the Ottoman empire since 1913, target the Ottoman Armenians for outright annihilation during World War I, in an attempt to save the “sick man of Europe” from complete extinction? Taner Akçam answers this question in the affirmative. Though many incriminating official documents have been destroyed since 1914, Akçam nevertheless gives central place in his narrative to archival records, that include hundreds of Ottoman documents presented here for the first time. These materials confirm what Western archives have already conjectured or revealed—that the CUP Central Committee deliberately implemented, via the usual governmental channels and, in order to cover its tracks, via special couriers hand-delivering their orders, a policy of ethnoreligious homogenization of Anatolia that resulted in the extirpation of the Armenians. But what were the motives that led the authorities—with Talât Pasha, the Interior Minister, as a central actor—to behave in such a brutal manner? First, there was the Reform Agreement of February 1914 signed between the Russian and Ottoman empires that had foreseen the formation of an autonomous Armenian province within the latter empire. More important, though, was the imperative to preserve the state at all costs. Indeed, the Ottoman authorities were convinced that tolerating the Ottoman Christians, Greeks and especially Armenians, described as a mortal “cancer” in the body of the empire, would lead to national collapse. Using wartime exigencies as a convenient pretext, then, the CUP decided to solve, once and for all, the politically thorny issue of the Armenian presence in a large area that bordered on Russia, the secular enemy and a polity that also contained a sizable minority of Armenians within its borders. Furthermore, the CUP assumed that the Ottoman government could only maintain control of its remaining territories—and thus assuage its existential fear—, if the great majority of its inhabitants were Muslim Turks. Such a conclusion meant that the Christian population had to be removed and the non-Turkish Muslim communities (Kurds, Arabs, Albanians, and Bosnians) as well as the Jews, had to be assimilated (read Turkified). The Armenian genocide was thus the outcome of a number of increasingly radical decisions, on the part of the Ottoman authorities, that set in motion the ethnic cleansing of Anatolia, in particular its strategic regions where Christian majorities constituted for them a major security risk. One way to avoid almost certain death was religious conversion to Islam, but the latter...
was allowed only in areas where Armenians could be easily dissolved within the Muslim majority. The removal of so many Armenians would provide yet another benefit: it would make room for the Muslim refugees coming from the Balkans and the Caucasus, areas where the Ottoman empire had suffered serious military setbacks between 1912 and 1915. In that sense, the author infers, genocide was “the ultimate fulfillment of a demographic vision” (p. 227). Finally, the deportations left in their wake a huge quantity of abandoned Armenian possessions. The revenues from their sale at sub-market prices—at least what survived widespread local corruption—were used to satisfy the needs of Muslim immigrants, militia organizations, and the army (whose needs increased significantly as the war dragged on), to cover the government’s expenses for the deportations, and to facilitate the emergence of a Muslim bourgeoisie. This organized state plunder left nothing that could be given to the Armenians.

In a book that shows “how demographic policy and national security were intertwined in a manner that made genocide a possibility” (p. xix), Akçam focuses his lens on the crucial role played by the rulers of the Ottoman empire, who identified the Armenians as a threat that had to be eliminated.

Raymond Kévorkian, for his part, weaves an extraordinarily detailed account (with no less than 189 pages of footnotes!) of the ideological background, the planning, and, especially, the execution of the first large-scale mass murder of the twentieth century. The author provides a multitude of examples of suffering, as he narrates the stories of extreme violence that unfolded in the various provinces (or vilayets) of the Ottoman empire: arrests of Armenians deeply involved in local social and political life, as well as of those with connections to foreign institutions; extortions of jewels and large sums of money; excesses spawned by the military requisitions of weapons, foodstuffs, farm animals, clothing, and wood; abductions and rapes of girls and women; massacres of soldiers serving in the labour battalions; houses and villages plundered and burned down; throats cut, poisonings, burnings alive, hangings and drownings; and deportations to the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia, where most Armenians died of sickness or hunger. Here again, the author relates such gory brutality to the Ottoman authorities’ perception of the Armenians as a seditious and separatist group, suspected of harbouring sympathies for the Russians and therefore deserving, given the necessities of the war itself, of such lethal punishment. Furthermore, this physical destruction of the Armenians was closely bound up with the construction of a Turkish nation-state—a case of destruction as self-construction. In such a highly-charged political context, it should come as no surprise, Kévorkian concludes, that the trials of those responsible for so much bloodshed were nothing but “parodies of justice” (p. 810); indeed, no one has ever been indicted for mass murder.

Readers with an interest in the Armenian genocide should be warned that they will need a good dose of patience and stamina, if they intend to complete the reading of this massive tome. (The author himself conceded in his conclusion that the writing of “a book like this one” represented a “grueling task”, p. 807). This
is, indeed, a book that should be consulted rather than read from cover to cover; as a reference book, though, it is an essential one.

A Question of Genocide, a rich collection of 15 articles, repeats many of the themes already introduced in the previous two books. The following essays, though, add some new and interesting perspectives: Ronald G. Suny and Fatma M. Göçek (“Leaving It to the Historians”, pp. 3-11) emphasize the real danger that the Armenians represented for the Ottoman rulers as “the wedge” that foreign powers, Russia in particular, “could use to pry apart their empire” (p.7). Fatma M. Göçek (“Reading Genocide: Turkish Historiography on 1915”, pp. 42-52) briefly summarizes the work of most Turkish historians who, by highlighting, for example, the fact that several thousand Ottoman Armenians served as volunteers with the Russian army, place the blame for the massacres on the Armenians’ seditious activities. Stephan H. Astourian (“The Silence of the Land: Agrarian Relations, Ethnicity, and Power”, pp. 55-81) argues that the land question in the late Ottoman empire played a central role in interethnic relations. Hans-Lukas Kieser (“From “Patriotism” to Mass Murder: Dr. Mehmed Reşid, (1873-1919)”, pp. 126-148) introduces one of the founders of the CUP, a medical doctor and a politician who, as a firm believer in the present dynamics of a deadly battle between Christians and Muslims, was deeply involved in the extermination of the Armenians in 1914-1916. Eric D. Weitz (“Germany and the Young Turks: Revolutionaries into Statesmen”, pp. 175-198) notes that the German leaders, whose main concern was a strong and stable central power in the Ottoman empire, their military ally since the Fall of 1914, showed “a massive indifference to the fate of the Armenians” (p. 192)—hence, Weitz concludes, their complicity. Finally, Donald Bloxham (“The First World War and the Development of the Armenian Genocide”, pp. 260-275), inarguably the best article of this book, shows how the Great War accentuated the previous tensions between Armenians and the Ottoman state and provided the authorities with an opportunity to eliminate forever their inner foes, “thereby avoiding the problems of external diplomatic interference” (p. 270).

A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service, a fine collection of well-crafted and perceptive essays, will serve here as an introduction to the theme of consolation. This book is first and foremost an attempt to highlight women’s and girls’ significant, though too often overlooked, contributions to the war effort; indeed, the editors proudly proclaim in their introduction, “(w)hen Britannia called up her sons in August 1914, her daughters responded as well” (p. 27). They knitted socks and sewed bed jackets, rolled bandages, worked on the farm, raised money, and made food to send overseas (Alison Norman, “In Defense of the Empire”: The Six Nations of the Grand River and the Great War”, pp. 29-50; Terry Wilde, “Freshettes, Farmerettes, and Feminine Fortitude at the University of Toronto during the First World War”, pp. 75-97); they entered the paid labour force (Kori Street, “Patriotic, Not Permanent: Attitudes about Women’s Making Bombs and Being Bankers”, pp. 148-170); they worked overseas as drivers and nurses (Linda J. Quiney, “Gendering Patriotism: Canadian Volunteer Nurses as the Female “Soldiers” of the Great War”, pp. 103-125; Terry B. Stirling, “‘Such Sights One Will Never Forget’: Newfoundland Women and Overseas Nursing in the First
World War”; pp. 126-147); they collected books, toys, clothing, and candies for Belgian orphans (Kristine Alexander, “An Honour and A Burden: Canadian Girls and the Great War”, pp. 173-194), and they nurtured the nation’s citizenry through diligence, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and poetic odes (Vicki S. Hallett, “Verses in the Darkness: A Newfoundland Poet Responds to the First World War”, pp. 245-269; Lynn Kennedy, “‘Twas You, Mother, Made Me a Man”: the Motherhood Motif in the Poetry of the First World War”, pp. 270-292). True, women and girls did not take part in the fighting, nor did the Great War “usher in a sweeping transformation of prevailing gender norms” (p. 318); nevertheless, their contributions were all the more remarkable, since they also had, at different times and in various degrees, to carry the many significant psychological, economic, and emotional burdens that attended the absence of husbands, fathers, friends, and brothers. Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw rightly conclude that, for more than four long years, girls and women served, worked, waited, wept, sacrificed, and suffered. They also consoled.

Using public (The Stars and Stripes, the official newspaper of the American Expeditionary Force) and personal writings (memoirs, diaries, and letters) in a rather idiosyncratic manner, Jonathan H. Ebel presents a very complex and challenging interdisciplinary study of the religious reflections and beliefs of American war workers and soldiers, as they prepared for and fought World War I. These men and women—Protestant and Catholic alike—believed in the righteousness of their cause; they were also convinced “that in answering the call to arms, they were answering the call of their faith” (p. 2). Furthermore, war provided them with an arena where death was a powerful presence and in which their faith could be animated, lived out, and tested. The Central Powers (Imperial Germany, in particular) were portrayed as “apostles of a godless militarism” (p. 30) and minions of Satan, while the Allies, like medieval crusaders, were carrying on a Christian tradition: indeed, by waging war for Christ, Americans were redeeming the world from an anti-Christian threat. They were also saving the American nation from the sins of internal division, both ethnic and regional, and isolation, as well as the soldiers’ atrophied souls. The Great War thus became an opportunity to put Christian faith into action and to make sure that, in this gigantic struggle between opposite metaphysical forces, redemption would come with the triumph of good over evil. Such a scenario, though, did not materialize for the African American men and women, who had hoped that war service would demonstrate the depths of African American patriotism and, consequently, dissolve the institutionalized racism—a perennial source of frustration and anger for all of them—that was prevailing in the army and at home. Ebel’s third chapter—“Suffering, Death, and Salvation”—takes a close look at the religious symbols and concepts that soldiers used in order to make sense of death in the midst of war. The bleeding, suffering, and dying were modern forms of martyrdom which, in imitation of Christ who also spilled His blood and died so that the whole world might be saved, brought immediate salvation to the fallen, who had so cheerfully embodied the muscular Christian ideal. As a result, a war death was no tragedy at all; instead, by exiting this world for a righteous cause, a soldier’s life would be remembered as meaningful and heroic, and the dead soldier would become an object of admiration. In the
end, death gave great value to one’s life: it actualized its redemptive potential and purchased lasting glory. As to the existential questions—how and why did I survive?—, many soldiers, realizing the limits of human initiative, answered that God alone was the author of life and death, and therefore of each individual’s fate in combat. Ebel concludes his engaging monograph—an inquiry into how religious ideas framed many American soldiers’ and war workers’ actions and perceptions (or war experiences)—with the story of the American Legion and its post-war battles to mould and sanctify the United States of America against God’s new enemies—socialists in their bolshevik garbs, moralists, pacifists, and strikers, whose very existence and ceaseless conspiracies were deemed a real threat to the American nation’s survival.

Not everyone will agree with the assertion that religion (or religious symbols and discourses) made possible American involvement in the war; other—and possibly more important—considerations explain the entry of the USA into the war in April 1917. All should acknowledge with Ebel, however, “the power of religious ideas to order and express the torrents of emotion that fl(e)w through men and women as they encounter(ed) war and face(d) death” (p. 196).

Under the leadership of the prince-bishop of Ljubljana, Dr. Anton B. Jeglič, the Catholic Church of Slovenia depicted the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the thrones of Austria-Hungary, as a “deplorable and sinful act” (p. 44) and called for God’s punishment of the Orthodox and murderous Serbs, whose constant anti-Habsburg propaganda and agitation justified their descriptions as criminal aggressors. Drawing on a rich reservoir of biblical metaphors that emphasized the theme of martyrdom, as well as the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, who both taught that a war was just when it was fought in self-defence and out of love of peace, the Slovenian clergy argued that this war, forced upon the emperor-king, had to be fought in order to protect the integrity of the dual monarchy. Indeed, fighting for the Catholic faith—the sacred core of the empire and the guarantee of its survival—, the homeland, and the fatherly Franz Joseph gave to the armed conflict a moral dimension that legitimized the shedding of blood. This war also provided people with the opportunity to cure themselves from the modern diseases of materialism and egoism that had led them astray from the authentic Christian ideals of loyalty, bravery, and self-denial, to bring on the rejuvenation and rebirth of the dual monarchy, and to strengthen the faith of its valiant soldiers. Once understood as retribution for human sins, the war would show soldiers the path to true happiness and open the road to their ultimate salvation. On an even larger scale, the Catholic Church employed a rhetoric that presented the war as a major struggle for Western civilization against the Eastern threat. The entry of Italy into the war in May 1915 had the potential to create an awkward situation, since Slovenians would now be fighting against Catholics. Such was not the case; instead, hatred for the new antagonist on their western border became the dominant theme. The Catholic Church urged Slovenians to guard their own soil and defend their faith against Italy, the ungodly and traitorous country that had perpetrated atrocities and that, under the influence of Freemasonry, lacked in moral capacity. Italy’s king and his unfaithful people would be well deserving of
God’s punishment. In many ways, the biggest challenge for the Catholic Church was to find a meaningful and reassuring answer to the following question: how to interpret, in the context of a total war, the notions of sacrifice and suffering? It did so by establishing a link between the soldiers’ pain and death and Christ’s. The blood that was poured out in a righteous war was the blood of martyrs, and the crown of martyrdom gave death a whole new meaning: it promised eternal life! As the ancient Latin dictum per crucem ad lucem once said so eloquently, glory came at a heavy price. This attempt to make the war appear honourable and holy was ultimately grounded on the conviction that God would not abandon His followers, “for why would the Lord send suffering if not for the benefit of his chosen ones?” (p. 103). On the home front, the Catholic Church invited its flocks, through sermons, prayers (to the Virgin Mary, for example, herself a powerful model of faith and the mediator par excellence), and devotions, like pilgrimages, processions, and participation in the holy sacraments, to see the war as a time for the repentance of their sins and to believe in the trusting and healing presence of God in the midst of evil. It also organized multiple activities that aimed at easing the various strains which war imposed on civilians, like charity work for orphans, war widows, and returning invalids, and it comforted those who, as a result of conscription, were suffering from the break-up of their families.

The work of a promising, but still young historian, Pavlina Bobič’s War and Faith…, which started its life as a doctoral dissertation, could have been better written; furthermore, it some-what suffers from a lack of focus: in a book in which the voices of bishops and clergy occupy such a prominent place, there is regrettably no chapter describing the Slovenian Catholic Church (dioceses; clergy, both secular and regular; publications; involvement in health and educational activities; relations with other churches, including the Vatican, where Pope Benedict XV resolutely opposed the war right from its start). On the other hand, there is too much attention given to the internal politics of Slovenia, important as they became towards the end of the war, within the empire itself.

As I complete (August 2014) this review of one aspect of the historiography of World War I, I cannot avoid noticing the supreme—and sad—irony that the centennial of its beginning corresponds with an appalling resurgence of violence in some of the geographical areas that witnessed so many atrocities some one hundred years ago. There can hardly be any better reminder that many legacies of the Great War are still very much with us…

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