Introduction
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Houses of Worship in Times of War

Thomas Brodie and Bridget Heal

On 4 June 2022, dramatic film footage of the destruction of All Saints’ Church at the Svyatogorsk Monastery in the Donetsk region of Ukraine circulated via news outlets and social media. The sixteenth-century wooden church had, it seemed, become the latest victim of Russian hostilities, engulfed in fire as a result of shelling.¹ In the aftermath of the attack, Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, reiterated his parliament’s call to expel Russia from UNESCO, arguing that no other state had destroyed so many monuments and cultural objects since the Second World War. In his impassioned response to the events at Svyatogorsk he wrote that ‘The occupiers know exactly what … they are shelling. They know that there are no military targets on the territory of [the] Svyatogorsk Monastery … They do not care what they turn into ruins’.² In the Ukrainian press, parallels were drawn with the cultural destruction unleashed by Nazi Germany.³ In March 2023, as we write this introduction, UNESCO has verified damage to 245 sites of cultural significance in Ukraine, of which 106 are religious in nature.⁴

In any war, human loss and human suffering constitute the greatest tragedies. But the destruction of religious and cultural heritage can also have a devastating impact, erasing the history of a community and imperilling its members’ sense of belonging. Moreover, cultural devastation and humanitarian disaster are often intertwined. Attacks on religious and secular monuments are frequently precursors to, or unfold alongside, attacks on ethnic groups. Alon Confino’s research has, for example, highlighted the ways in which Nazi antisemitic violence during the 1930s focused on the destruction of religious Jewish spaces and objects, such as Synagogues and Torahs, seeing in them the quintessential embodiment of Jewish life and cultural presence in Germany.⁵ In the aftermath of World War Two, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property (1954) recognised the significance of this intertwining, calling on warring parties to protect sites of historical importance.

² https://t.me/V_Zelenskiy_official/1910 accessed 06/03/2023
³ https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/03/15/making-russia-answer-for-its-destruction-of-cultural-heritage-in-ukraine/?_cf_chl_tk=41mcmW85e.r13No0y392AGmHq18HqMmTESTDfj25XYo-1664443365-0-gaNycGzNCFE accessed 06/03/2023
unless their destruction was necessitated by military imperative.⁶ And the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (2002) now defines as war crimes any attacks on ‘buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, [and] historic monuments...’⁷ In practice, the efficacy of such provisions is inevitably limited. But twentieth-century history has at least taught us to recognize the significance of moments such as the burning of All Saints’ Church in Svyatogorsk.

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What do such emotionally charged and poignant examples from our own present tell us? And what does the study of religious spaces in past times of war and political rupture help us see as historians? To tackle this question, these essays take as their focus the confessionally divided and frequently war-torn canvass of Central Europe, from the seventeenth to the early twenty-first century. Their central premise is that a focus on the destruction, reconstruction and transformation of religious spaces can cast new light on a variety of crucial historical themes, ranging from societal conceptions of the sacred and its delineation from the profane, to the politics of memory, and the policing of community boundaries between insiders and outsiders. As Mary Vincent has recently argued regarding anti-clerical attacks on churches in 20th century Spain:

Church buildings contain and, in some senses, capture the sacred, which is—in Christianity as in other religions—both ineffable and embedded in space and time. Church burning targeted the interface between sacred and secular space, the building and the outside ... arson acted as a confrontation between those who frequented churches and those who saw them from outside.⁸

In short, this focus not only helps us to better understand the ways in which religion shaped cultural understandings and social experiences of war, but also the manner in which armed conflict so often literally remade the fabric of sacred spaces in Central Europe throughout the early modern and modern periods, as well as the meanings invested in it. As Claire Morelon has observed, among the casualties claimed by the First World War in Germany and Austria-Hungary was an age-old sonic landscape created by church bells, which never recovered from these items’ mass confiscation for use in war production. Life in Central Europe never sounded the same after 1918 as it had done prior

During the Second World War, the Cologne priest Robert Grosche – himself the author of a doctorate on the city’s ecclesiastical architecture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – interpreted the destruction wrought by Allied bombing on its churches as the symbolic erasure of Cologne’s Christian heritage. Tasked by Cologne’s episcopate with planning the reconstruction of the region’s churches, Grosche saw this task as analogous to the re-Christianization of the Rhineland itself. And in post-war Poland, as Jim Bjork’s essay for this volume argues, the Roman Catholic Church’s acquisition of thousands of new church buildings transformed the country’s religious landscape and helped absorb the German past into a Polish future.

Exploring as they do the entangled histories of war and religion, these essays build upon the transformative developments within both these historiographies since the 1980s. War has, of course, long been recognised as a defining theme of German and wider Central European History, and a distinguished tradition of writing on the subject had established itself in the Federal Republic as early as the 1950s, in the work of scholars such as Gerhard Ritter. Reflecting the on-going Rankean influences within early post-war (West) German historiography, this intellectual tradition privileged a top-down approach to the history of war, focusing on political decision making, diplomacy and military strategy. Nevertheless, from the 1980s onwards, the influence of social and cultural history began to transform the historiography of war and armed conflict internationally, as well as in West Germany. This scholarship progressively opened up new fields of investigation, such as the experiences of ordinary soldiers and civilians, the emotional impact and legacies of war, and postwar cultures of memory and commemoration. Scholarship on early modern conflict has moved in similar directions. In his 1994 study of the lived experience of mercenary soldiers, Peter Burschel argued that whoever wished, as a social historian of Germany, to study the history of war

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would be well advised to label themselves as a ‘researcher of peace’ [Friedensforscher]. This taboo has certainly been broken: the reluctance of social and cultural historians to engage with war beyond the level of causes and consequences has diminished significantly, and studies of the day-to-day experience of the Thirty Years War, of its material and psychological impact, and of the commemorative culture that it generated have proliferated in recent decades.

Such trends can also be readily discerned in the literature on Wilhelmine Germany during the First World War. Among the most influential works published in this field since German reunification in 1990, are studies of soldiers from rural Bavaria, working-class housewives in Berlin, and investigations into the impact of hunger and malnutrition on women and children. As Holger Afflerbach has recently noted, this focus on the period’s social and cultural history has become so dominant in recent decades that traditional historiographical preoccupations with ‘strategy, war aims and politics’ have been confined to the margins of the field. In a similar fashion, the most influential recent study of Germany during the Second World War focuses primarily on the mentalities, subjectivities and experiences of society at large, with ‘ego documents’ such as letters and diaries occupying centre stage as primary source material. Indeed, the use of ego documents and eyewitness accounts to illuminate the lived experiences of war at all socio-economic levels from the seventeenth century onwards is one of the most noteworthy historiographical developments of recent decades. It is a key methodological task of our volume to continue this expansion of the history of war’s boundaries.

15 See, for example, Matthias Asche and Anton Schindling (eds), Das Strafgericht Gottes. Kriegserfahrungen und Religion im Heiligen Römischen Reich Deutscher Nation im Zeitalter des Dreißigjährigen Krieges 2nd ed. (Münster, 2002); Benigna von Krusenstjern and Hans Medick (eds), Zwischen Alltag und Katastrophe. Der Dreißigjährige Krieg aus der Nähe (Göttingen, 2001); as well as a plethora of local studies.
17 Holger Afflerbach, On a Knife Edge: How Germany Lost the First World War, (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 4-6.
This special issue’s intellectual foundations also rest on the profound reconceptualization of religion as a subject of inquiry within the historiography of Central Europe in recent decades. Early modernists have always appreciated the significance and power of ecclesiastical structures and religious beliefs, and have largely dismissed the Weberian notion of the Reformation as a time of desacralization, a step on the path towards a more ‘rational’ modernity.\(^{20}\) Prior to the 1980s, however, it was commonplace for historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to dismiss the importance of religion, juxtaposing an allegedly secular modern period against an ‘enchanted’ early modernity.\(^{21}\) To cite but one notable example, these Weberian assumptions were deeply engrained within the work of the Bielefeld School, and its arguments regarding the development of German society over the long nineteenth century.\(^{22}\) The research that was carried out on religion in modern Germany and Austria typically represented the work of church historians, confessionally-affiliated scholars housed in departments of theology rather than history, often approaching their subject matter from an institutional perspective, and displaying little interest in new social and cultural approaches.\(^{23}\) Given these institutional frameworks, church historians typically specialized in the history of their own confession, with their works representing a form of ‘Konfessionshistorie’\(^{24}\). As Chris Clark has noted, mutual indifference and incomprehension defined the relationship between ‘church historians’ and their ‘profane’ peers, ensuring religion remained marginalised within the emerging social histories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced during the 1960s and 70s.\(^{25}\)

Research since the 1980s has, of course, massively revised this picture, with the pioneering works of scholars such as Jonathan Sperber, Margaret Lavinia Anderson and David Blackbourn, among others, highlighting the considerable and often rejuvenating influence of religious belief, practice and political mobilization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^{26}\) As a consequence, the


\(^{25}\) Clark, ‘Religion and Confessional Conflict’, pp. 84-85,

distinction between an ‘enchanted’ early modernity and a secular modernity has collapsed, leaving in its wake a more nuanced appreciation of religion’s adaptability, transformations, and resilience across traditional historiographical dividing lines such as 1517, 1789/1800 or 1914. Indeed, if we follow the arguments articulated by much recent work regarding not only Germany, but Europe as a whole, the decisive moment of religious decline, or, for want of a better term, secularisation, fell comfortably within the late modern or contemporary era, during the mid- to late twentieth century. Without the transformative developments outlined above, the chronological canvass employed by these essays, spanning both early modern and modern periods, would scarcely have been conceivable.

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Both religion and warfare are clearly key to understanding the longue durée of German history. Where better to study their interaction than in houses of worship? Christian churches had dominated the urban and rural landscapes of central Europe since the middle ages; the fate of synagogues was, of course, much more varied, reflecting the history of Jewish persecution across the region. As several of the essays emphasize, the members of a religious minority could shape sacred topography only within limits strictly defined by the dominant group. Michael Rowe describes, for example, the efforts of Cologne’s small Jewish community to acquire land for a cemetery and, eventually, a synagogue in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. But whatever their history, houses of worship were, as Rowe argues, key expressions of ‘communal solidarity’.

Jim Bjork’s essay shows clearly, in the context of post-1945 Poland, the importance of parish churches in creating collective identity. As a result of forced migration to Poland’s Recovered Lands in the west and north, clergy and laypeople had to create Roman Catholic religious spaces in previously German and Protestant territories. This complex process, which involved conflict and negotiation, helped the transplanted and recently formed communities settle in their new surroundings and contributed towards the formation of an at least outwardly cohesive religious-national community. This interplay between war, population displacement and the creation of new


30 Rowe 00

31 Bjork 00
religious spaces has also recently been highlighted by David Motadel’s work on Nazi Germany’s wartime attempts to mobilise support within Islamic communities in the Balkans and southern Soviet Union. He notes that some of the first Mosques on German soil were established after 1945 by Muslim veterans of the vanquished Reich’s armed forces, with the unintentional consequence of Nazi foreign policy in this area being that the regime ‘brought more Muslims to Germany than had ever lived there before’.  

Houses of worship provided settings for religious ritual and collective worship but also, in some traditions, dwelling places for a divine presence. Different faiths and confessions of course had varying understandings of sacred space, and of the roles played by images, objects, texts, and rituals in defining and maintaining that sacrality. In the essays contained in this volume, for example, the distinctive role played by images and relics in constituting Catholic sacred space emerges as an important theme from the seventeenth through to the twentieth century. During the Thirty Years War, Catholic clergy went to great lengths to protect their miraculous relics and other treasures. And in post-1945 Poland, Catholic migrants to the Recovered Lands saw the provision of vestments, liturgical vessels, images, and reliquaries as a necessary part of adapting Protestant church space. But as recent work in religious studies has emphasised, whatever understanding of sacrality prevails, the material and physical presence of the building itself is always key: a house of worship is not simply ‘a stage for religious experience’ but rather ‘an integral, constitutive component of it’. And sacred space shaped behaviour, as Cologne’s officials recognized during the French occupation when they noted that churches were key because there people gathered in large numbers and ‘their immediate surroundings instilled in them a sense of respect and obedience’.

Such words should encourage modern historians, in particular, to engage more closely with the spatial dimensions of religious practices, which have featured little in the rich recent literature on religion in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Central Europe. Much of this excellent - and transformative - work has displayed a distinctly sociological focus; for example, by approaching the study of Catholic Germany through the concept of a ‘milieu’, or by analysing statistics of formal

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34 Heal 00
35 Bjork 00
37 Rowe 00
church membership for the post-1945 era. The past decade has, moreover, witnessed a flowering of intellectual approaches, and an engagement with the influential contributions made by churchmen, theologians and lay intellectuals to debates about politics, welfare, gender and the body. These works have greatly enriched our understandings of religion’s diverse roles in Modern Central—and indeed wider—European history. Yet they are marked by a focus on the sociological or intellectual dimensions of religious life, not its spatial constellations within individual communities. Perhaps the rebellion against Kirchengeschichte—so foundational to the approaches taken by recent historians of religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—has led to an aversion to approaches even faintly evocative of an antiquarian focus on individual religious spaces and their design.

War imperils sacred space. All of the essays in this special issue analyse, in various ways, the destruction of houses of worship, showing the ‘fragility and mutability’ of what ought to have been long-lived, perhaps even eternal, expressions of faith and of the power of organised religion. Bridget Heal’s essay discusses, for example, seventeenth-century reactions to the destruction of sites that should have been held sacred, to what were perceived as breaches of the proper conduct of war. Instead of showing respect and obedience towards the church and its officials, mercenaries murdered, mutilated and destroyed, committing what were, to contemporary eyes, ‘sacrilegious barbarisms’. Over time, the nature and extent of the destruction was transformed by developments in the technology of warfare: by the arrival of heavy artillery, of tanks, of Zeppelins and eventually, of course, by the devastating aerial bombardments of the Second World War. Houses of worship were sometimes intended targets, and sometimes collateral damage. The difference between deliberate acts of violence, such as those often directed at synagogues, and the destruction of churches as part of bombing raids is significant. As Michael Meng’s exploration of the motivations behind Hitler’s war against the Jews argues, Kristallnacht was much more than just a ‘thuggish explosion of hate’: ‘The Nazis vandalized and destroyed synagogues in a passionate display

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40 For the rebellion against Kirchengeschichte, Heilbronner, 'Ghetto to Ghetto’, pp. 455-57.


42 Heal 00
of destroying the communal spaces in which Jews gather to affirm their religious commitments to morality and God.\textsuperscript{43}

Desecration, too, is a key part of our story and the question of intention again looms large. How far was the damage and looting carried out by seventeenth-century mercenaries motivated by a desire to destroy a sacred space, and how far was it simply a by-product of poor pay and poor military discipline? In Swedish-occupied Augsburg, as Emily Gray’s essay shows, Catholic observers watched in distress as Lutherans demolished altars and confiscated valuable liturgical items to redistribute to the poor. Elsewhere, however, it was Protestant writers who were shocked by the behaviour of Protestant (Swedish) troops who vandalised the churches of their alleged co-religionists.\textsuperscript{44}

Theoretical assumptions about ideologically determined confrontation are often confounded by the untidy realities of war. In the Catholic Rhineland, for example, churches were indeed damaged during the French occupation of 1792-1815, and some were briefly requisitioned to serve as temples to the Cult of Reason. But the behaviour of the ‘supposedly anticlerical French revolutionary army’ could defy expectations, as in 1795 when its officials sided with Premonstratensian canons against local peasants in the aftermath of the sacking of Knechtsteden Abbey.\textsuperscript{45}

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After destruction and desecration came, where possible, rebuilding and renewal. As the architectural historian Anthony Vidler has noted, post-war reconstruction, and the rhetoric surrounding it, served to demonstrate ‘resilience, resistance, and hope’.\textsuperscript{46} Within the broader landscape of restoration and renewal, houses of worship had particularly important symbolic and practical roles to play. In post-War West Germany the rebuilding of churches constituted a ‘vital dimension of moral and material rebirth’, as Paul Betts argues in this volume.\textsuperscript{47} Churches were presented as moral compasses amidst the darkness of defeat, and as powerful symbols of denazification and German cultural renewal. In Warsaw, where Nazi occupiers had deliberately destroyed houses of worship, the reconstruction of churches functioned for Polish Catholics ‘as a gesture of national defiance and re-assertion’.\textsuperscript{48} Their rebuilding also, of course, served pressing practical needs. Ecclesiastical space had to be restored in order to accommodate survivors and, in many cases, refugees and migrants. Wartime stories of liturgy performed outdoors or in unsuitable

\textsuperscript{43} Meng 00, Confino, ‘Hebrew Bible’.
\textsuperscript{44} Gray 00, Heal 00
\textsuperscript{45} Rowe 00
\textsuperscript{47} Betts 00
\textsuperscript{48} Bjork 00
spaces abound: in seventeenth-century Saxony, in forests and fields, in twentieth-century Poland, ‘in cramped restaurant halls or other places that are inappropriate for Holy Offerings’, as one bishop reflected.49 After conflict ended there was, as Bjork notes, an ‘urgent need for embedding ritual in permanent spaces’.50 Rebuilding churches was a necessary part of the process of rebuilding congregations and stable communal life. But as ever, inclusion and exclusion went hand-in-hand: the restitution and restoration of Jewish sacred spaces played no part in the remaking of post-war Germany or Poland.51 As Thomas Brodie’s essay highlights, well into the 1960s, West Germans constructed and adapted memorial spaces in churches to honour and mourn their own war dead, rather than Nazism’s overwhelmingly Jewish and Eastern European victims.52

The logistics of rebuilding were hugely challenging. It required money, materials and physical labour, all of which were in short supply after prolonged periods of conflict. Ruined churches with particular symbolic significance might benefit from national or even transnational fundraising campaigns. Augsburg’s Protestant Heilig Kreuz, for example, was demolished by its Catholic neighbours in the aftermath of the 1629 Edict of Restitution. It was rebuilt in 1651-3 after its pastor raised sufficient funds through begging tours of Protestant Europe in a campaign that owed its great success to the city’s status as the home of the 1530 Augsburg Confession.53 As Betts notes, in the Second World War’s aftermath the Western Allies offered substantial support for high-profile ecclesiastical rebuilding projects, welcoming them as ‘vital signs of denazification and cultural recovery’.54 And Otto Bartning’s famous Notkirchen [emergency churches] were financed by international Lutheran bodies and Protestant donors abroad.55 The extensive Anglo-American involvement in the reconstruction of Dresden’s Frauenkirche following the GDR’s collapse in 1989 also corresponds to this transnational pattern, with US President Barack Obama visiting the church in June 2009.56 Often, however, reconstruction was driven forward at a local rather than at a national or international level. In the aftermath of the Thirty Years War, churches were restored and refurbished thanks to the donations and labour of local parishioners, sometimes supplemented by financial offerings from less destitute neighbours.57 Inter-parochial contributions played a part in post-1945 Poland too, but

49 Heal 00 Bjork 00
50 Bjork 00
51 Michael Meng, Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland (Harvard, 2011).
52 Brodie 00
53 Gray 00
54 Betts 00
55 Betts 00
57 Gray 00 and Heal 00
there, church rebuilding was, Bjork shows, ‘narrated primarily as a story of voluntary communal solidarity, of local Catholics coming together behind a common project’. Even Bartning’s prefabricated Notkirchen were designed to be constructed on site by members of the local community. A rebuilt, restored, or refurbished parish church was a statement of local pride and a symbol of hope for a better future.

But what should that church look like? In seventeenth-century Germany, rebuilding provided an opportunity to construct churches designed for the post-Reformation age and, where possible, adorned in the latest baroque style. But in twentieth-century Germany, the aesthetic decisions required during the huge project of post-war reconstruction generated tension between those who wished for the ‘comforting recreation of a historic landscape’ and those who favoured more avant-garde, modernist experiments. Betts’ essay, which addresses the cultural politics of the restoration of damaged churches and construction of new ones, argues that in the two decades after 1945 ‘church building resumed its historical role … as the international avant-garde of modern architecture’. In western Germany there was a veritable flourishing of ecclesiastical modernism, both Protestant and Catholic. Architects from Otto Bartning to Rudolf Schwarz blended the avant-garde with centuries-old traditions of sacred space ‘to give fresh form to a new post-fascist Christian community’. Their churches were designed with a simple aesthetic, suited to ‘a new, chastened Christian sensibility after Nazism and the war’, and often made exquisite use of natural light.

As Brodie’s essay notes, after 1945 these fashionable new modernist styles also had to be reconciled with existing cultures of commemoration surrounding the war dead. One Lutheran church official wrote from Hamburg in 1962 that it was difficult to know what to do with memorials commemorating the fallen of the First Schleswig War of 1848-51. On the one hand, these now ‘stylistically unbearable’ memorials clashed awkwardly with the newly renovated interiors of post-war churches, and the names displayed upon them belonged to individuals beyond the reach of living memory. On the other, this individual confessed to feelings of guilt at seeing such memorials removed from parishes, along with their admonitions to remember the dead. He pondered whether, following this logic, a time would come when the memorials for the Second World War would be removed. As this example illustrates, the reconstruction and renovation of sacred spaces always

58 Bjork 00
59 Betts 00
60 Heal 00 and Gray 00
61 Bjork 00. On the historical preservationist cause see Rudy Koschar, Germany’s Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill, 1998).
62 Betts 00
involved engagement with the highly visible legacies of the past, and the interface between aesthetics, emotion and memory.

Of course, not all churches were rebuilt. After 1945, the devastated landscape held deep symbolic significance for many Germans, and ecclesiastical ruins were particularly powerful sites of memory and admonition. The transition from rubble to ruin, the preservation and careful curation of broken buildings, can be seen in the history of Berlin’s Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche or of Dresden’s Frauenkirche. Such histories contrast markedly with the post-war neglect of destroyed synagogues. As Betts notes, for Christian West Germans ‘the religious ruin and church cemetery supplanted the public square as the key commemorative site for post-war national and local memory’. Similarly, Brodie’s essay highlights that, even as late as 1967, the fate of a single parish church’s war memorial in Flensburg provoked such an emotional response across the Federal Republic that it even came to the attention of international media, including the New York Times.

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The Thirty Years War was arguably Europe’s last ‘war of religion’: it was certainly the last European war in which religion played an important role at the level of politics and diplomacy. This volume shows, however, that even once religion was no longer central to statecraft, it continued to shape experiences of war. Houses of worship were expressions of communal solidarity, and their loss endangered collective identity. After periods of conflict, the need to re-establish sacred space and religious ritual was acute. From the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, campaigns of restoration and rebuilding reflected local and regional, national, or even international power dynamics, as well as the aesthetic preoccupations of the age. Who was able to rebuild what, and how did they choose to do it? Which groups were included in this process, and which excluded? Similar questions could be asked across much broader chronological and geographical boundaries, from the Iberian Peninsula during the era of Christian-Muslim conflict to the Spanish conquest of the Americas to the Bosnian and Iraq Wars. And of course, not all destruction is the result of war. The fire at Notre Dame in Paris on 15 April 2019 unleashed a flood of feeling. As President Macron stated that evening: ‘Notre Dame is aflame... Like all of my fellow citizens, I am sad to see this part of us

65 Meng, Shattered Spaces.
66 Betts 00
67 Brodie 00
68 For the debate see, for example, Peter Wilson, ‘Dynasty, Constitution, and Confession: The Role of Religion in the Thirty Years War’, International History Review, 30, 3 (2008), pp. 473-514.
burn tonight.⁶⁹ As these words imply, the images and tributes broadcast around the world in the wake of the Notre Dame fire show the emotional power that such buildings continue to hold even in contemporary, secular society. To study historical debates regarding the construction, destruction and reconstruction of sacred space is therefore not only to explore the aesthetic preferences of past societies, but also their self-understanding, the legitimation of political and religious authority, and the delineation of boundaries between insiders and outsiders. In this respect, the study of religious space and its wartime transformation can cast new light on questions and themes ranging far beyond the traditional confines of ecclesiastical history.

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