toward victims who were known to be special targets, and trust in the
brakes that had traditionally checked complete moral depravity. These
shortcomings raised questions about how this manifest corrosion in the
ability of human beings to look out for themselves had come to pass in
the twentieth century. And they raised the question, "Where was God?"

The Life and Death of God

It was in World War I that the saying "There are no atheists
in the trenches" was first popularized. World War II updated it to read
"There are no atheists in foxholes." The premise was that the exposure of
human beings to extreme danger, as in these conflicts of man-made mass
death, would induce them to seek shelter in the grace and mercy of God.
To tolerate terrible events, contemporaries needed to acknowledge the
realm they could not control. Another wartime maxim pushed the other
way, however, following the remark in Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to
Arms that "All thinking men are atheists." While the restored presence of
God in the "trenches" or "foxholes" provided meaning in terrible times,
and presumed the sufficiency of faith, to reject God was to register that
somehow events were so terrible that they could not be reconciled with
ideas of God and his ability to protect or offer solace to the believer. The
two contradictory ideas share the assumption that, in the modern age,
extreme events force individuals to fundamentally reassess their place in
the world, either by refurbishing faith as a source of abiding strength or
by abandoning it altogether on account of its flimsiness.

Thus, it is perhaps most surprising that twentieth-century Europeans
continued to muddle along without moving in large numbers to one or
the other position with regard to God. After World War I, most soldiers
and citizens shared what one scholar calls a "diffusive Christianity." This
"comprised a general belief in God, a conviction that this God was both
just and benevolent although remote from everyday concerns, a certain
confidence that 'good people' would be taken care of in the life to come, and a belief that the Bible was a uniquely worthwhile book." They prayed in a rationalist and petitionary manner, assuming that God had the capacity to intervene and that events were subject to divine agency, but they also did not have clear answers as to why God chose to intervene when he did. As a result, Christian faith had a certain flexibility; people did not feel the need to avow God in their everyday lives but also did not question his presence or existence. This-diffusive Christianity explains why, even in conditions of extreme violence, there were not large numbers of people who either reestablished intimate relations with God or rejected him altogether. If anything, parishioners became less deferential to the priests and preachers who had so effortlessly justified the declaration of war in 1914 and grew less convinced that God was somehow present in the bloody course of events that mocked such justifications in the years thereafter. After World War I, relationships to God became more personal and less a matter of public routine.

Christians continued to hold church funerals, but they were less committed to baptisms, confirmations, and religious weddings. World War II barely budged these secular trends. Yet the unquestioned, almost commonsense faith in God and in a Christian way of doing things, as embodied in the "Golden Rule," "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," also made any concerted ejection of Christ or God from daily life extremely difficult, as the Nazis themselves would find. Perhaps because the experience of God was no longer so central to the lifeworld of modern Christians, the extreme violence of the occupation in World War II did not shake the premises of the "diffusive Christianity" that people in the end did hold on to. Neither the fate of the Jews nor the part Christians played in their torments disturbed theological assumptions or raised general questions about Christian responsibilities. Observers may have condemned this or that religious figure for not protesting specific un-Christian or antichurch policies the Germans carried out, but they did not reconsider in a fundamental way the relationships between God, faith, punishment, and suffering.

By any measure, church attendance increased modestly during World War II. There were those who believed that parishioners were rejecting the corruption of modern life that the outbreak of the war, the rise of the Nazis, and the defeat of the republican regimes had allegedly confirmed. While church pronouncements in France in the first year after the armistice with Germany did refer to God's punishment of a wayward, self-indulgent French republicanism, most parish priests sought to rally parishioners behind ordinary Christian virtues of humility, patience, charity, and love. They used the liturgical calendar to provide structure to everyday lives disrupted by the difficulties and displacements of war. They urged Christians to love their neighbors, without explicitly suggesting they should engage in radical or subversive acts of solidarity with Jews, the most imperiled neighbors. The focus on the parishioner and on the neighborhood, as well as the ability of Catholic traditions, particularly in France and Poland, to reaffirm national identity, meant that religious experience tended to uphold social and theological conventions rather than to question them. The violence of the occupation was evidently never so great as to create "foxhole" conversions, nor so unsettling when human suffering was contemplated as to force the issue of the existence of God as such.

This broad brush applies across much of Europe, but not to the Jewish experience of the occupation. Here there was much more querulous discussion, even if most Jews remained believers throughout the war. Jews were in a much better position than Christians to see the hypocrisy of Christian injunctions to show mercy and love, because they were on the sharp receiving end of Christian anti-Semitism or indifference. Jews also had developed a relationship to God in which the integrity of the Jewish people, its history of suffering punishment and renewing faith, and its particular covenant as God's chosen people all combined to encourage more theological debate. And finally, the nearly boundless scale of the calamity that nearly wiped out the Jewish communities of Europe threatened the very existence of Jewish God, who could not be imagined without the presence of Jewish believers. The Nazi war against the innocent raised questions about divine justice and biblical authority. It raised the question of precedent since the Jews had suffered not only in the annals of modern history but in the ancient books of the Bible.

Paradoxically, it was also the tormentors of the Jews, the Germans, who, in small theological circles during World War II, began to reconsider their relationship to God on account of the massive suffering that defined
Germany's enduring experience of the war. But their God was one who remained focused on Germans rather than on their victims. The presence of suffering on the part of the perpetrators, but the absence of Jews, who had been their victims, makes the German reckoning with God at the end of the war worth examining; it reveals the stubborn limits of new theological insights. In an odd way, both perpetrators and victims, Germans and Jews, began to formulate new ideas of a wounded, suffering God that resonated in the postwar era.

The God of the Jews

The most extraordinary transcript about the gassing in Chelmno in January 1942 came from an escaped prisoner who has now authoritatively been identified as Szlamek Winer. A thirty-year-old native of Izbica, a village about two-thirds of the way up the road from Lwów to Lublin, and not so far from Zygmunt Klukowski's hometown of Szczepanow, Winer had been confined to the ghetto since 1941. In January 1942, Winer volunteered to work with about forty other men and found himself assigned as a "grave digger" in Chelmno, about twenty miles away. Under the guard of SS policemen, including one leader known as "the Whip," Winer and his fellow Jews emptied customized furniture vans filled with murdered Jews who had been asphyxiated with carbon monoxide—there were about seven or eight loads each day—and buried the bodies in ditches. They often saw friends and relatives among the dead. At night and in the morning, the men in the various cells of the dilapidated "mansion," where the workers were housed, prayed and talked about "politics, God, and our situation." After a week, Winer managed to escape and flee to the Warsaw Ghetto, where Oyneg Shabes archivists urged him to reconstruct a diary of the horrifying events he had witnessed. Written in Yiddish, the report was transcribed into Polish and eventually made its way to the Polish Government-in-Exile; The Ghetto Speaks, the newspaper of the New York City branch of the General Jewish Workers' Union, published a detailed summary of the "gas-executions" in a special edition dated August 5, 1942. It provided dates, locations, and the names of the grave diggers, their murdered relatives, and the SS men, including "the Whip." Ghetto leaders, believing that Winer was in danger in Warsaw on account of what he knew, arranged for him to flee to the ghetto in Zamość, where he was rounded up and murdered in Belzec in late April 1942. The original Yiddish diary survived the war as part of Emanuel Ringelblum’s Warsaw archive.

In his diary Winer detailed the operations of Chelmno and recounted the horrified conversations among the teams of Jewish grave diggers, who saw the "whole Jewish community being swept away." At "about five in the morning everyone was awake because of the cold," he wrote, and the work began around seven. "We began talking," and the talk was about God. "Gecel Chrzanowski, a member of the Bund, and Ajzensztab (Ajzensztab owned a fur shop in Włocławek)—both from Kłodawa—had lost their faith in God. The others, however, myself included, were strengthened in our belief." They repeated what a man named Mojżesz Asz from Izbica had said the previous evening: "It has fallen to us to be victims, because the time of the Messiah is approaching." Despite his faith, Winer also felt the great pain of abandonment. In the middle of the night, he had been awakened by nightmares or the cold: "O despair, if there is a God in heaven, how is it possible to permit the murder of innocent people! Couldn't He perform a miracle?" At the end of the day, new grave diggers arrived and brought (false) news that "the Russians had already retaken Smolensk and Kiev" and were "advancing toward us." Even so, some of the older people had "completely lost their faith in God. They said that these are fairy tales. There was no God. How could He see our suffering and do nothing?" Others "remained firm in their faith," even though "we are not able to understand God's actions."

Some in the group recited evening prayers and, the next morning, the Psalms, though "weeping bitterly"; "others lay still, completely indifferent." A few "even mocked us for our piety saying that there is certainly no God and that all attempts to console ourselves seemed childish," Winer recorded. "But we responded that our lives are in the hands of God and that, if this was His will, we would accept it with humility. All the more so, since the time of the Messiah was coming." "Even Ajzensztab," who earlier had lost faith in God, took part in the prayers.
The events recounted in the diary became widely known among leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto, and the diary undoubtedly prompted renewed discussions about God and about questions regarding faith, the suffering of innocents, and the coming of the Messiah posed by Winer and his fellow Jews. Winer depicts the divisions among Polish Jews quite clearly: perhaps more than half of the grave diggers remained firm in their belief in God. In face of the terrible course of events, a good number of others, perhaps more secular Jews (such as those mentioned by Winer who had been active in the anti-Zionist Bund or in more worldly business dealings), had lost their belief. Believers professed not to know the will of God, while nonbelievers could not comprehend a God who would permit terrible suffering or would not intervene to help.

Holocaust survivors Primo Levi and Jean Améry argued that the clearly defined groups of believers and nonbelievers in the camps approached the horrors unfolding around them in fundamentally different ways. According to Levi, “believers lived better,” because the frameworks of the Bible kept their sorrows from overflowing into “despair.” In his view, “Their universe was vaster than ours, more extended in space and time, above all more comprehensible.” In an odd way, believers knew where they were even if they did not know the will of God, while nonbelievers were genuinely cast adrift from all intellectual anchorages. There was a self-sufficiency to believers because, as Améry put it, even in Auschwitz “nothing unheard-of occurred.” As a result, “The grip of the horror reality was weaker.” By contrast, assimilated Jews neither had God nor, once they found themselves in the camps, could they put stock in Enlightenment ideas about morality, which the catastrophe had completely debased. As a result, they had fewer resources to confront their conditions, which they found more shocking and disorienting. They were left speechless in the face of the “unheard-of,” while believers could use the precedents and lessons of Jewish history to make sense of events that they did not consider to be “unheard-of.”

Levi and Améry both approached the believer, who whittled down the “horror reality” with the sure knowledge of tradition, with a mixture of envy, of those who lived better, and resentment, against those who could diminish in some way the scale of the crimes against the Jews. But

the distinction between believers, who could assimilate what was happening, and nonbelievers, who could not, is too tidy. The distinction does not account for the enormous labor of comprehension, the challenge of doubt, and the effort to reconcile God with the accumulating evidence of the destruction of Jews, even for the most fervent believers. In their efforts to explain the horrible events, Jews drew on different aspects of biblical interpretations and Jewish history, giving different weight to precedent, to the ability of the faithful to understand the divine, and to the presence of God in the suffering of the innocent. Although many Jews lost faith, most did not. But even among believers, new conceptions of God as less powerful and more vulnerable and also more aligned with suffering victims took hold. If Germans during the Nazi period shared the question of how to become “Aryan,” Jews shared the question of how to remain Jewish.

Many thousands of victims faced death singing “Ani Ma’miri,” a hymn whose title translates as “I believe.” “Ani Ma’miri” was widely sung in the Warsaw Ghetto. To sing the lines, each of which begins with the phrase “I believe with perfect faith,” gave powerful expression to the idea that the Jews had entrusted their lives into the hands of God. This perfect faith sometimes troubled Jews and other observers because it seemed to imply complete submission, a lack of engagement with the world, and an unwillingness to acknowledge the “horror reality.” Indeed, German killers regarded the alleged passivity of the Jews as evidence of complicity in their own deaths that were ultimately willed by God. But Germans were also puzzled by the unbrokenness of the Jews’ faith and trust in God. Perhaps they did not see that the Jews refused to be defined by their enemy. Instead of “going to one’s death degraded and dejected,” Jews confronted it “with an inner peace, nobility, upright stance, without lament and cringing to the enemy,” a stance that dignified and sanctified God. Indeed, the biblical phrase “sheep to slaughter,” which was widely quoted at the time to describe Jews’ alleged passivity, in fact has a different meaning in the well-known “Suffering Servant” lines in the Hebrew Bible’s book of Isaiah. In those verses the metaphor connotes obedience rather than passivity—obedience to God, not to the tormentors of the Jews. The more “marred” the suffering servant’s “appearance” was,
the greater the suffering of the Jews, "despised, shunned by men," as the poet wrote in Isaiah, and the higher the value placed on the sappiness of "my people," the Jews, in relation to other evildoing "kings" and "nations," and the higher the value placed on silence during the Jews' maltreatment (Isa. 53). "Sheep to slaughter" was often, undoubtedly, a phrase of bitter self-criticism in the ghettos. "Why did we allow ourselves to be led like sheep to the slaughter? Why did everything come so easy to the enemy?" asked Emanuel Ringelblum after the Germans had completed the "Great Action" in the Warsaw Ghetto at the end of the summer of 1942. But the phrase also registered steadfast, even untroubled, faithfulness, one that distinguished the "sheep" from "those who shear." In similar fashion, the New Testament also refers to Jesus as the "lamb of God."

"Ani Ma'amin" also contains words about the coming of the Messiah. "And even though he may tarry, Nonetheless I will wait for him." The word "tarry" summed up the painful experience of God's silence or his absence and even the possibility that he had abandoned the Jews. Although ending with a declaration of constancy and faith that makes do without definitive answers, the text nevertheless poses the question of how long the suffering can be endured, how long its alleviation can be postponed. Upon hearing about the murder of Vilna Jews at Ponary at the beginning of September 1941, Herman Krusk tried to write in his diary: "The hand trembles, and the ink is bloody." "Hard to describe," the "dreadful thing" demanded more of the witnesses of history. "Can the world not scream?" And it demanded more of God: "If the heavens can open up, when should that happen if not today?" Szlamek Winer himself wondered, "Couldn't He perform a miracle?" one that would have prevented the "murder of innocent people" in Chelmno? Why God tarried was a question widely discussed among Jews as the Germans expanded their murderous policy in 1941 and 1942. The ultimate promise, "Nonetheless I will wait for him," did not erase fretfulness about the knowledge that "he may tarry" and about the dire consequences of tarrying.

The notion of "nonetheless" or "despite everything" is an important plank in Jewish theology. "Despite everything," k&d;lo (yes-no), writes one scholar, is "one of the permanent values of Jewish thought" in which
dead his sense of God's justice "causes a 'yes' to spring up out of the roots of 'no.'" The key text for this theological perspective is the book of Job in which Job, certain of his piety and aware of how he and those around him have suffered, experiences an unjust, indifferent God yet persists in believing in justice. Both Job himself and the angry, grieving poetry of the book of Job figure in what has been called "a theology 'in spite of' God for the sake of God." But the years 1941 and 1942 strained that theology, as the "everything" behind the "despite" kept getting larger, the "no" louder, and the "nonetheless" more terribly contrived.

The "nonetheless" revealed the degree to which Jews understood the gap between expectation and experience, understanding and faith, and suffering and sin. It acknowledged that the universe was not legible, and therefore it moved past the foundational story of God's covenant with the Jews. In the book of Deuteronomy, the Jews are presented with a covenantal relationship in which the Jews as a people are enjoined to worship and obey, promised the favor and blessings of God, and, though warned against transgression, comforted by the possibility of repentance. The legalistic structure of the book creates a shared sense of expectation and understanding that is consistent with a covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and God. "Nonetheless" ponders the difficult things the Jews learn long after establishing the covenant with God in Deuteronomy: that the innocent may suffer for the sins of others or for no clear reason at all.

There were still numerous Deuteronomic interpretations of German actions against the Jews, which some Orthodox Jews interpreted in terms of the wrath of a God angry at the secular ways and "false religions" (Zionism, communism) of Jews, but they steadily lost their plausibility. For more and more Jews, the scale of the disaster had completely wrecked the balance between punishment and sin. In the space of the ambiguities created by "nonetheless," Jews, in increasing numbers and with sharper arguments, wondered not about their own mortal sin but about God's divine justice. What was at stake was the meaning and pertinence of interpretations about Jews' suffering in the Jewish religious tradition. Could the Jewish people, as they had done before, preserve faith in the face of biblical and historical ruptures? Or was the calamity of Europe in
intellectual work to make sense of the terrible events befalling the Jews. However, what Shapira wanted Jews to remember was that they had always suffered and done so in ways that did not immediately make sense. There was nothing about the scale of the disaster to lead Jews away from identifying with the already established resilience of their people and their faith. Precedence provided sufficient answers. Thinking about the stories of the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile in the Jewish Bible, philosopher Martin Buber went so far as to say that the experience of God’s silence, the dreadful events that threatened faith, and the resulting incomprehensibility regarding divine actions were a central part of the history of Jewish faith; the Holocaust was not qualitatively different from other terrible events the Jews had endured. Therefore, the lessons of “nonetheless” still applied.21

Even if the catastrophes occurring in 1942 could be shown not to be without precedent, the perception that events in the present had exploded the frameworks of the past remained profoundly unsettling. Shapira himself had growing difficulty finding words of consolation. “The words are now stale,” he wrote in the third winter of the war; “they will not have any effect” on the rabbi who might attempt to console or on his listeners. After the “Great Action” in the summer of 1942, Shapira returned to his earlier sermons and added postscripts, which offer extraordinary evidence of the increasingly difficult labor of orientation. To an August 1941 sermon in which he had admonished Jews to continue their “study of Torah and divine service” for the sake of the future, he added in September 1942 that such admonishments were no longer possible. “When our communities are almost completely destroyed,” and when “even those few individuals who are spared are . . . crushed and suffused with the fear of death, there are no words with which to lament our sufferings; there is no one to admonish, there is no heart to rouse to religious activities.” A few months later, in November 1942, he appended the following to a sermon delivered the year before: “Only until the end of the year 5702 [summer 1942] was it the case that such sufferings were experienced before. However, as for the monstrous tortures, the terrible and fantastic deaths which the malevolent, monstrous murderers invented against us, the House of Israel, from the end of 5702 and on—according to my
knowledge of rabbinic literature and Jewish history in general—there has never been anything like them.”

Shapira’s amended sermons indicate how the Holocaust had begun to make understanding God and his ways exceedingly difficult. Faith that, despite his tarrying, God would intervene to save the Jews crumbled. Shapira admonished Jews in Warsaw to remain faithful despite the lack of evidence that he would be able to save them. He spoke in sermons of God’s withdrawal into “His inner chambers,” where he had fled to weep and grieve in silence. But while faith in a God who could not save the Jews revealed the pure and martyr-like qualities to faith, it also opened the door to suspicions that God could only weep as all the Jews disappeared, a complete burning or devouring that would completely short-circuit the thousand-years’ history of the Jews and their faith.

Many similar scenes of theological torment unfolded in Jewish ghettos and hiding places across Europe in 1942 and 1943. To explain their experiences, Jews looked to their own sinfulness, reminded themselves that the innocent suffer disproportionately the sins of the guilty, and reassured themselves that ancient Jews, too, had suffered in mysterious, incomprehensible ways. Only such ancient precedents could offer hope of containing the scope of the present calamity by making it simply horrible but not comprehensive and final. Yet the calamity seemed more comprehensive and more final. Thus, the relationship between ancient narratives and present-day suffering was intensely debated.

Jews read and reread the book of Psalms, the book of Lamentations, and the book of Job. They studied the expulsions, the Crusades, and the pogroms. In the Brussels apartment where he lived on false papers with his parents, sixteen-year-old Moshe Flinker “realized once again that the troubles of the Middle Ages and our troubles today are identical.” From the perspective of two thousand years, “our troubles, from the first to this most terrible one, are multiple and endless, and from all of them rises one gigantic scream.” The cry “is identical to the cries in other places or at other times.” Yet if Moshe heard the echoes of the past, he was almost deafened by the cries of the present, the “one gigantic scream.” The present witnessed such great suffering that the time of the Messiah was surely drawing nearer. Deliverance, he maintained, would not come from the Russians, or the British, or the Americans, whose postwar world would be at least as anti-Semitic as the prewar world: “Salvation will only come when the whole world and particularly the Jews have given up the hope for an Allied victory... Precisely when all expectations have come to an end, God will stand by us.” Amid the suffering of the innocent in the present, Moshe hoped he recognized the “birth pangs of the Messiah.” Many rabbis similarly assured that “the harsher the persecution of the Jew, the greater the ground for the rescue.” In this view, the agonies of the present beckoned the Jewish future by hastening the coming of the Messiah.

But Moshe’s time management fell apart. He wondered why the chain of calamities was so long, and he imagined the possibility of time without end, without future or redemption: “Perhaps this is only one link in a long chain of anguish which will continue in the future.” In this case, empty, repetitious time without meaning would win out over the cumulative redemptive promise of Jewish history as described in the Bible; a litany of terrible events would be left unorganized and unreflected by the words of God and merely confirm his eternal absence. In Moshe’s reading of Jewish history across five thousand years, the present could reaffirm the historical time of the Jews who maintained faith despite everything. This expressed the authority of precedence. The immense suffering of 1942 could also redeem Jewish history in an “eye blink” if the unprecedented disaster of the present hastened the coming of the Messiah. But Jewish history could also be invalidated altogether if the unendingness of suffering no longer fitted with precedents and simply had the effect of removing the idea of the end, the idea of resolution and redemption.

Moshe’s reflections never quite found a harbor. They moved constantly between comprehension and incomprehension, and they took up consideration of the books of the Bible as well as news releases from the BBC. But untethered to a particular model as it was, the despair grew larger and more unmanageable; this is the “plot” of his diary, so to speak. “Before,” he reflected, “that was three or four months ago, it did not cost me any effort to answer these questions. With every fiber of my being I felt linked to my people and to my brothers. But now,” at the beginning of 1943, he wrote, “everything is different. Since the time that emptiness...
has caught me in its clutches, I feel that nothing concerns me anymore, as if I was already dead.” Commentary gave way to cries, prose to poetry and song. In some ways, the diary, typically a record of events, began to document the impossibility or futility of keeping such a record. In a poem titled “An Event,” Moshe was still able to fit the events of 1943 into the Jewish calendar’s 5703, though the tenses flicker between present, future, and conditional:

Now we are here
here we are standing
In this year of the twentieth century
We stand here and wait
Our God, will you stand by us
Yes, our God, you will stand by us
Yes, our Redeemer—you will redeem us
You have forgotten—you will remember
You have abandoned—you will return
You have pity on us
And have mercy on us
You will plant us once more
In the earth of our land
You will bring us to stand once more
In the place of our heritage.

But in moments of despair, as in another poem, titled “Before Afternoon Prayers,” 1943 threatened to push 5703 into the abyss of total catastrophe. Flender anticipated the death of God, who would not exist in a world without the Jews. He therefore appealed to God’s own self-interest, urging him to save the Jews “for Your sake.” He wrote:

Over our head, catastrophe upon catastrophe has come and comes
Not long, and then everything is destroyed
Two thousand years we bore the yoke of exile
Two thousand years we allowed children
to be burned
for catastrophe—for suffering . . .
If it is not for our sake
Do it for Your sake.
Quick, Eternal God—save us!

The juxtaposition of Quick and Eternal perfectly expressed the quandary of Moshe’s consternation and his faith. Everything depended on “the speed of an eye blink.”

Why was it no longer possible to easily contain the disastrous events befalling the Jews in 1943 in the larger framework of historical Jewish time, in the calendar in which it was the year 5703? And how did Europe’s persecuted Jews come to conceive of God as a result?

First of all, the manifestations of the calamity were increasingly general rather than specific or localized. This omnivorous quality qualified the pertinence of precedence in the past. The news of events in Chelmno or Treblinka indicated that the German assault on Jews was systematic. The death camps were no longer the work of a “roving execution squad or a localized pogrom,” and they were not associated with offensive military operations in the Soviet Union or with a German withdrawal. Their operation seemed to be a directed, well-organized, and sustained war on civilians, like a new world order. Moshe himself came to believe that precedent did not apply because of the sheer extent of the catastrophe. “First of all,” he reflected, “in former times the persecutions were always localized,” giving the examples of the expulsion of Jews from Spain and pogroms in recent eastern European history. “In one place Jews were very badly treated, while in another they lived in peace and quiet.” “The second difference,” he continued, “is of the official character that the present-day persecutions take, and the organized manner in which one continuously increases our suffering.” In Warsaw Rabbi Shapira agreed: “In all our previous troubles, there was always at least a refuge for us. In one land they considered us expendable and spilled our blood out like water, yet in another land we were free people and nobles. If we were to only flee the land of blood, we could bring ourselves into the hands of its foe and king, with praises. Such is not the case today, when it is as if the entire world has risen against us—this one raises the axe before
our eyes, and this one prepares to stab us with the spear.” We alone, he added, our “faces blackened and hearts confused, must wander among with fear and suffering, insulted, degraded and pursued without refuge, every step a danger for us, every morning presenting new dangers for us.” 18 In both Brussels and Warsaw, the disaster seemed unprecedented although it was less so when Jewish commentators in Jerusalem or New York looked at it.

The second reason the calamity seemed to be outside the boundaries of Jewish history was the complete disassociation of the imprisoned Jews from the rest of humanity for whom they had always considered themselves torchbearers of truth and justice. Jews often identified with the fate of the Armenians who had been slaughtered by the Ottoman Turks in 1915, for instance, and Franz Werfel’s account of the catastrophe, The Forty Days of Musa Dagh, was a popular book in the ghettos. But if Jewish writer Werfel had “bewailed” the Armenians, poet Yitzhak Katzenelson asked, “Who will write a Jewish Musa Dagh?” Captive Jews emphasized their terrible isolation and the total silence of the rest of the world. To be sure, Emanuel Ringelblum pointed out, “Demonstrations are held in democratic countries protesting the massacre of Jews in Europe. Various parliaments permit discussion of the persecution of the Jews.” 19 In the end, however, no French steamer Guichen and no Captain Joseph Brisson arrived on the horizon in 1942 or 1943 to shell German positions, as Werfel had plotted the happier end to the suffering in Turkey. The Jewish people were murdered before the war ended; as Paul Celan noted, the one who kept his promise was Hitler.

The third reason for the unprecedented nature of the calamity was the murder of children. Certainly, there is plenty of infanticide in the Jewish Bible. Abraham was enjoined to sacrifice Isaac; the wind came, and Job lost his sons and daughters. But the death of children is not the primary point of these Bible stories, which address through radical means the motives of Abraham and Job, yet contemporaries in 1942 and 1943 remarked repeatedly on the murder of children as marking a new, unparalleled phase in the catastrophe. Rabbi Shapira wrote at the end of June 1942, when the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto had heard of the wholesale slaughter of children: “Now innocent children, pure angels, as well as adults, the saintly of Israel, are killed and slaughtered just because they are Jews, who are greater than angels. They fill the entire space of the universe with these cries and the world does not turn back to water, but remains in place as if, God forbid, He remained untouched?” In this turn of events, “the father is as orphaned as the world is cold.”

Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto contemplated the “theology of the child.” In June 1942, Ringelblum referred to the fact that children “are the first to be exterminated.” He continued: “Except for Pharaoh, who ordered the newborn Hebrew babes thrown into the river Nile, this is unprecedented in Jewish history” (in fact, Ringelblum’s point about precedence is even sharper since only male infants were murdered by the Egyptians). “In the past,” he wrote, “whatever was done with the grownups, the children were always permitted to live—so that they might be converted to the Christian faith. Even in the most barbaric times, a human spark glowed in the rudest heart, and children were spared. But the Hitlerian beast is quite different. It would devour the dearest of us, those who arouse the greatest compassion—our innocent children.” Yitzhak Katzenelson made a similar observation. He knew that Jews in the sixth century had been defeated in battle, that their soldiers had been massacred and their people exiled. But the Germans, he insisted, “do not kill us in battle.” This was not like Babylonia, as described in the book of Lamentations, because “they destroy us while we are peacefully employed in their service. They transport us in trains; tens of wagon loads daily, to Treblinka and other like places.”

When Yitzhak Katzenelson sang “The Song of the Murdered Jewish People,” the poem he wrote in the holding camp in Vittel, France, where the Germans had deported him after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, he removed the year 1942 from the traditional Jewish calendar. The calamity that had befallen the Jews was almost completely coextensive with the Jewish nation, which had almost ceased to exist. The song mourned a people unable to honor and cherish God or to wait for even a tarrying Messiah because it had been murdered. To be sure, Katzenelson himself was a survivor and recorded the song, but “the Murdered People”
registered the victory of Amalek, the enemy of the Jews, over the Messiah and thus the end of Jewish history. In all previous disasters, Jews had been able to reassemble and to mourn their dead according to the stories of faithfulness and devotion as told in books of the Bible. Living Jews had recomposed the living spirit of the Jewish nation, but Katzenelson wrote from a place where that living spirit was completely in tatters. This unparalleled situation demanded a new accounting. If God had been forced to abandon his people, had not that led them astray?

When Moshe Flinker urged God on with the imperative Quicks, he placed himself in the Jewish tradition of arguing with God, just as Job had. The book of Job uses the horrible sufferings meted out to Job, the end of his prosperity, the death of his children, the wrenching of his body, to dispute the idea that there is meaning in human pain but also to give voice to the questions that the faithful nevertheless have about God's relationship to his people. As they witness Job's torments, his friends insist that he repent because, if Job had not been sinful, God's punishments would make no sense. His wife would simply curse God and see God as merely human. But Job does not go down either route, because to do so would mean betraying himself and his faith. The book of Job thus associates faith with suffering, and eventually speaks to Job without answering his questions, and Job must live with the unconsoling thought that God is both incomprehensible and distant from his human creations. In fact, God reminds Job of the sheer awesomeness of his universe, which includes the beasts of Leviathan and Behemoth, terrible things that faith must accept. In this universe, intellectual justifications or understanding of human suffering is puny and insufficient. The book of Job can do nothing more than propose for Jews a vexed faith in a powerful, arbitrary, and, last, silent God—he withdraws completely from the Jewish Bible after the book of Job. With Auschwitz among the beasts of creation, however, Jews quarreled with greater obstinacy. They did not let it go, as Job had, when he heard about Leviathan and Behemoth, and God's unknowable nature, and they disputed Job's notion that suffering was a simple expression of faith. The comfort Job took in his own "dust and ashes" was not satisfactory as long as the terrors of God's universe manifested themselves exclusively in Jewish "dust and ashes."

In some ways, Jews in the 1940s began to read the book of Job from the perspective of Job's children, who were swept out of the Bible by God's capriciousness, and not from the perspective of Job's friends, who continued to believe that punishment came from sin and therefore could not be malevolent, nor from the perspective of Job, who remained steadfast in his faith despite the afflictions he suffered. What possible lesson was there to learn when the children of Jews were being murdered and when the Germans always took the children first and wanted more? (The resurrection of Job's children is a Christian, not a Jewish, idea.)

Job's successors, as they undoubtedly thought of themselves in the Polish ghettos of the 1940s, did not just press God with questions but prepared briefs of indictment. The anger and impatience of the faithful revealed how Jewish relationships with God had begun to change and no longer accommodated Job's conclusions about God's awesome or distant nature. He came to be closer at hand, and more dirtied up. In his poem "Slaughter Town," poet Simcha Bunem Shayevitch, who was deported from Lodz and murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, sounded out: "Poet of wrath and vengeance...Mother Rachel...And Rabbi Levi Yitzhok...go, all three, to God. You will thunder and demand." You "will weep and plead." One day in Warsaw, after the "Great Action," Wladyslaw Szlenge finally took "out a large book," and "a Waterman pen," and "opened an account" with God, the "gentle elderly Man / with whom I drank at the same table." "I prayed," Szlenge began, weighing his part of the bargain, "I fasted," "I have said: God will help," "I have had faith: God is with me." God had not done his part. "Look!" Szlenge concluded the argument, "The page of Your deeds / In relation to me—is clean." Like Job, Szlenge in Warsaw demanded an answer. "For all my deeds," what did Szlenge's Jews get? Only "the tin tablets" identifying the remaining laborers in the workshops, only "the Umschlagplatz," "Treblinka," and "Prussian gas." In fact, Jews in Lodz staged a trial of God in the fall of 1942, after the deportations of thousands of old, ill, and very young residents. Elie Wiesel imagined a similar court in Auschwitz, writing in his autobiographical novel Night, "I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted His absolute justice," in which case, "I was the accused, God the accused." For poet Itzik Manger, writing in London, the judgment was harsh.
Creator of the worlds, You are mighty and terrible beyond all doubt. But from the circle of true lovers of Israel, we Galicians, forever shut You out!

For a number of Jews, God had betrayed the Jews rather than the Jews having disobeyed God, but this did not induce them to give up the faith of their fathers, which provided the resources for the judgment against God. If God had abandoned his people, the Jews would not. In this regard, Jews were anticipating the postwar idea that the Torah was more important to cherish and to love than God.

Wladyslaw Szlengel's poem "It's About Time" is the most dramatic account of imaginary trial at which God is not only brought to account for his guilty actions but also punished and killed. It is hard to imagine the tremors of doubt, anger, and fear as Szlengel refused the reconciliation of 'ham-lo in the last months of the Warsaw Ghetto. "We will pay back," shouted his Jews in "It's About Time." "For the agony of the Ghetto," "For the death in Treblinka." The people promised that the punishment would be terrible. Once God has been transported by the Jews to the "slaying place," Szlengel imagines the events that follow: the hangman, who is presumably the German, the same hangman who had murdered the Jews, will push God "into the steam chamber / And hermetically closed the hatch behind you." After the "torture of dying," "they" take over from the Jews who had overseen the trial and the transport of God. "They will drag your body along and throw it into a monstrous pit." "They will pull your stars out—the gold teeth out of your jaw." In the end, "they will burn you," as they had burned the Jews, and "you will become but ashes," intermingled with the ashes of the Jews that God had abandoned. The future-perfect construction suggests that the punishment has not yet taken place. Szlengel's anger, and his contemplation of God's execution, remain fantastical. But more Jews contemplated how God had become wounded or incapacitated or even culpable.

When Moshe in Brussels appealed to God to save him for God's own sake, if he was not going to save the God-fearing Jews for theirs, then in effect he was warning God that in a world without Jews, there would be no God, either. Moshe's lament was a final expression of faith, an attempt to save God. But this God was a God who had to be cajoled to act, a God who was possibly crippled or wounded, a God who tarried because he could not do otherwise. Contemplating God's vulnerability, Moshe began to see God in terms of his people's sufferings, to see God, that is, as a Jew in 1943. If, in his "Song of the Murdered Jewish People," Katzenelson composed the "last song by the last Jew," after which there would be no more Jews to "fight or sacrifice" or to "soothe someone's pain," a bitter scene in which God stands by as a third party, alone amid murdered Jews and victorious Germans, in his diary he imagined God as the dead Jews themselves. "They are God!" Katzenelson exclaimed. "A great and vast nation of Jesuses," "not only Jesuses of thirty years of age, but old and venerable Jesuses," "infant and child Jesuses," all of them "murdered Gods." Katzenelson's God is not Job's, awesome and distant; he is no more than the Jewish people and no less than their suffering. Perhaps Katzenelson finally has his murdered people provide a sanctuary to the grieving, weeping, hidden God who was no longer able to save his people but would remain with them. Instead of being given a trial and perhaps executed, God is returned to the community of Jews, if only as "ashes and dust."

In her Amsterdam apartment, where she had learned to pray, Etty Hillesum sought to protect and console God just as her fellow Jews began to be deported. "Paradoxically," writes one scholar, "in a world in which God is powerless his existence is predicated on the faith of those whom he cannot save." Etty came to recognize herself as "the girl who could not kneel but learned to do so on the rough coconut matting in an untidy bathroom." On July 12, 1942, she wrote, "One thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well." "The jasmine" behind her house, she wrote, had been "completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days"; "white blossoms are floating about in muddy black pools on the low garage roof. But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as ever it did. And it spreads its scent round the House in which You dwell, oh God. You can
see, I look after You. I bring You not only my tears and forebodings on this stormy, grey Sunday morning, but even bring you scented jasmine... I shall try to make You at home always.”

The catastrophe of 1942 and 1943 did not deny the God of Deuteronomy because many victims believed that God had indeed chastised his people for their sins, even as the faithful innocent were afflicted more than the assimilated guilty. The calamity did not deny the God in Job because many Jews believed that faith always required a leap of faith, a ken-lo, a despite everything, even if that meant the death of children who made orphans out of parents, a condition of childlessness that imperiled the very existence of Jewry. But the events of 1942 and 1943 did make more pertinent the idea of a crippled God who stood in for his horrible-wounded people, of God weeping in the hidden inner chamber that Shapira imagined, of God who was the Jew in the train cars and in the gassows, of God as “seven million” Jesuses. Kneeling on her rough cocomatting, Etty Hillesum neither overturned nor validated anyone’s theology. But the rough matting in her untidy Amsterdam bathroom on which she knelt provides a foundation for postwar theological reassessments that saw God as present exactly in the wounds of his people. In the Nazi attempt to kill God, God’s people deliberated, they argued and raged, they shared the anguish of Katzenelson and Szlengel as they contemplated the end of Jewish history. For some Jews, God was indeed dead, or else did not exist; it is estimated that about one-third of Holocaust survivors, most of them Orthodox, lost faith in God, and almost no nonbelievers became believers in the same period. Yet for most believers, and that is for most Jews, God remained present in the catastrophe, first and foremost as the God of the Jewish Bible to whom they expressed faith when they sang the words “I believe with complete faith,” but also as an “old new God” who would share suffering but could not annul affliction.

The God of the Germans

The Nazis' mobilization of violence against innocent civilians was so unrelenting that it is hard to think of the perpetrators as anything but godless men. In some ways, this state of fearlessness and godlessness is what the Nazis wanted to achieve in their racial revolution. In their view, Germany would prosper only if its citizens accepted their responsibilities as racial comrades who were willing to sacrifice the weak and crippled among their own families and to exterminate the dangerous and alien among the inhabitants of Europe they conquered. To destroy biologically unworthy elements in modern life meant rejecting the Judeo-Christian God of mercy and love and the humanistic ethic that had developed as a common part of European civilization. According to the Nazis, morality had to be oriented around Germany, not “Man.”

The Nazis had considerable success in producing genuine conversions to National Socialism, especially among the young people on whom Hitler had set his sights. Across the Third Reich, individuals debated for themselves the whole question of becoming, becoming a National Socialist, becoming a comrade, becoming a race-minded German. They grappled with questions about the importance of fitting in, the convenience of going along, and the responsibilities the individual owed to the collective. Their answers were never absolute, but almost until the end, Nazism remained a highly relevant moral and ethical current, and an alternative to Christianity, in Germany. The Nazis certainly accelerated secular trends: 50 percent more Germans left the church during the Third Reich than had done so during the Weimar Republic. Although exits slowed dramatically after the beginning of the war, because there were very few returns, the churches, especially the Protestant churches, continued to lose parishioners.

Yet on such matters as the divinity of each individual, the consolation of the afterlife, euthanasia, and even the deportation of Jewish neighbors, the Nazis found they could go only so far before encountering arguments. The Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule were not so quickly erased from conscience. To be sure, most Christians succeeded in reconciling their diffuse Christianity with fervent National Socialism, and they hoped that the Nazis would not impede such a reconciliation by moving in a concerted way against the churches. But the Nazi project to undermine universal humanitarian impulses, to argue that instead of “Man” there were only men or races, to contravene international law,
required effort. It gained traction but not without friction. Christians were deeply complicit in the policies of the Third Reich inasmuch as they made deliberate efforts to reconcile Nazism with Christian principles, but they continued to distinguish themselves from those they considered to be fanatic National Socialists. As a result, they experienced life in the Third Reich as a series of acceptable compromises and as a sequence of tense standoffs.

The Third Reich was a predominately secular place, and so soldiers who were religious found themselves isolated and even ostracized, mocked as “praying soldiers” or “brothers” who never fully fitted into the military cultures of the fighting unit, which was based on comradeship. In World War II (as in World War I), the virtues of (military and ethnic) comradeship were prized over (sectarian or universal) Christian brotherhood and were routinely enforced by soldiers themselves through collective hazing rituals, ranging from visits to brothels to the execution of prisoners of war and even the murder of Jewish civilians. For most soldiers, the conventional Christian view of war as punishment for sin and as a test of faith did not make sense; Volks, nation, and especially comradeship cut deeper. Whereas Christian soldiers saw the war as an opportunity to bring religiously inclined young people into contact with comrades in order to spread the word of God and strengthen religious experience in the postwar world, most soldiers simply wanted to return to the prewar world.

Most Wehrmacht soldiers accepted the National Socialist premise that Germany was fighting for its very existence, and their faith in this idea made it less likely for combatants to question whether the war against civilians was right in God’s eyes. What they did begin to wonder about was why God was subjecting them to unrelenting war and violence, which meant that a universal humanitarianism did begin to slip back into the discourse. It was a humanitarianism that tended to erase differences between Germans and their enemies by merging the fate of the two groups. Some soldiers on the eastern front began to refer to the killing simply as murder, with both Germans and Russians as victims. These sorts of equivalencies across the military front suggest the growing difficulty soldiers had in continuing to explain the war in the National Socialist terms of “us” and “them,” but it did not produce real insight into the nature of National Socialist violence against civilians. It certainly did not lead to equivalencies between Germans and Jews. In the end, German soldiers experienced violence as mobile military forces free to advance and retreat. They could not see themselves as the Jews did, as a people or nation overtaken by death and abandoned by God. The insights they gained about how suffering did not confer meaning, the lesson of Job, they gained as soldiers who, on the battlefield, suffered and faced death, but not as active agents in a machinery of destruction. They forgot that it had been the Germans who had acted in God’s name by wreaking such terrible judgments on the world in the first place.

Mimeographed newsletters produced by two close-knit Protestant groups contain extensive excerpts from letters written by their members who were fighting in the field. These letters indicate how conceptions of God in Germany’s war changed over time. The Sternbriefe were newsletters that Hans Graf von Kanitz, the commander of the Chemical Warfare School in Celle, sent to about four hundred Christian Wehrmacht officers who had participated in Kanitz’s Bible-reading groups in the 1930s. They recorded more conservative theological views and a robust patriotism. The Rundbriefe were produced by soldiers who, before the war, had studied with Marburg archaeologist Erich Dinkler and theologian Hans von Soden, both of whom were members of the quasi-dissident Confessing Church and were strongly influenced by a colleague of Soden, liberal theologian Hermann Bultmann. These newsletters provided more open-ended and inquisitive views. In contrast to the officers’ Sternbriefe, the students’ Rundbriefe were much less tied to the state and National Socialism. Both are singular sources for understanding the religious thinking of Christian Wehrmacht personnel. Although they are not representative—they do not include Catholic voices, and the soldiers who contributed were much more self-consciously Christian than most Wehrmacht members—they document writers who deliberately searched for religious meaning, just as Moshe Flinker and Etty Hillesum had. The collections reveal both changes in German religious experience over the course of the war and German soldiers’ limited reckoning with the nature of Nazi violence.28
The Sternbriefe quoted patriotic writers such as Gorch Fock, Walther Flex, and especially Otto von Bismarck. The officers repeatedly cited Bismarck's words—"I am God's soldier and I must go where he sends me, and I believe that he sends me and fashions my life as he needs it"—almost as much as they did the Old and New Testaments. The career officers made little distinction between soldiering for God and soldiering for Germany. "This double duty does not imply a division," wrote Kanitz. "On the contrary, we do not want to be surpassed by anyone differently minded in loyalty, dutifulness, and readiness for action." They adopted the militant language of National Socialism—Führer, Final Victory, Terror Attacks—with ease. There is only one reference to tensions between a Christian and a Nazi worldview that discussions about "the war and the Fifth Commandment" (Thou shalt not kill) and "the universality of Christianity and the ethnically specific nature of belief demanded in the present day" were intended to reconcile. In contrast to the Rundbriefe, the Sternbriefe did not promote a vision of a new, respiritualized Germany after the war. For Kanitz's group, being Christian represented a better way to serve Germany, a country that had found God's favor. The Sternbriefe took note of officers' promotions as they made their way up the Wehrmacht chain of command, as well as the deaths of those who had been called to God's side.

Again and again, the letter writers described their isolation as Christians in the army; fellow officers stationed in France showed little interest in discussions about the Bible or in Sunday worship, preferring movies and cafés, "femaleness" and "food." When things became tougher in Russia, the Christian officers felt terribly estranged from the usual code of conduct expressed in the words of singer Lale Anderson's hit "Es geht alles vorüber, es geht alles vorbei" (This too will pass when all is said and done), which comrades quoted repeatedly in letters home. In one field hospital in Stalino, "all the wounded" sang it, "slowly, wistfully," whenever it played on the radio. To the Christian officers, such an attitude indicated a lack of faith in God as well as in Germany. Kanitz's officers believed that Christians, with their sense of duty and discipline, and seriousness of purpose, made better soldiers than the itinerants who sang along with Anderson. The reverse was also true: the ordeal of soldiering offered the opportunity to combat personal weakness, to wrestle with "the bastard in us," "our good old boy aspect," and thus to become better Christians.

"God with us," the phrase stamped imperiously on the belt buckle of every Wehrmacht soldier, embossed around the Prussian eagle and swastika, well describes how Kanitz's Christians thought about God's relationship to Germany. Major Boesenberg, writing from France at the end of June 1940, reflected on the "incredible" and "inconceivable" turn of events that had resulted in Germany's victory, but at the same time he knew what "God has done to us and for us." "Christians have the obligation," agreed Oberleutnant Fligge, "to thank God that he so obviously blessed our weapons." After the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Christian officers believed not only that God remained on Germany's side but also that he had chosen Germany as his tool in the "holy crusade" against Communism. "If in Poland God's purpose was not recognizable," commented First Lieutenant Loetsch in August 1941, "then the devil is literally here," in Russia, "without a mask.

The Nazi condemnation of Judeo-Bolshevism meshed seamlessly with biblical descriptions of the struggle between light and darkness. "Isaiah 1, 3–4; Genesis 28, 15; Matthew 27, 25, and probably also Psalm 109, 16–18" could be cited to confirm "God's judgment against the still-cursed Jews," one letter writer declared. The fact that the war became more brutal and German casualties mounted made the struggle against the "devil" more recognizable and righteous. "So we can see," wrote First Lieutenant von Dietlein in November 1941, "that this war, in which everything is heightened in excess, is a judgment on the nations, and particularly violent states such as Russia and England.

Theoretically, the horrors of the battlefield could intensify unremittingly and only further confirm that an apocalyptic struggle with the forces of evil was under way. Even after Stalingrad, von Dietlein confidently read "all the events of the last years" into "the prophecies in the Bible." The "what" was clear—Germany's victory; what was not clear was the "when," which only God knew. But by 1942, the bitter course of the war made it more and more difficult to see the viciousness of the fighting as evidence of the righteous cause. The spectacular violence
of the war, which had brought no quick or clear resolution, began to disperse Germany’s unified crusade against Bolshevism into countless individual struggles of endurance in battle. This dispersion was manifest in the “brooding” or “chatter” that the Christian soldiers repeatedly enjoined themselves to resist. Kanitz himself remained convinced in December 1941 that “the Wehrmacht had proven itself to be the best in the world,” but he also admitted that “we have also had to learn how little man can do, how dependent he ultimately is” on God, “the Lord of history.”

Whereas in France God was acknowledged as “the Lord of history” because he had ordained Germany’s victory, in Russia he was “the Lord of history” because he withheld it.

The sense of desperation grew worse over time. “The people are being tossed about by the endless hardships” of the war, observed First Lieutenant Schröter in November 1942. “There is no quiet, no peace in sight, no way out of this misery.” It was from this terrible place that God would finally lead the faithful. “We have to first find ourselves at a dead end, where no amount of doing and thinking will get us over the wall, only God who will then be able to tell us: my ways are perfect!”

References to suffering and anguish drenched the Sternbriefe, which sought consolation in the unfathomable nature of God or in the mercy that he extended to those who suffered in adversity. Officers reported a widespread feeling among the troops they led that God had fallen silent. But, objected First Lieutenant Sturm, “God is never silent! He speaks to us, but in his fashion.” Images of “dead ends” and high “walls” indicated the sheer difficulty of the circumstances, but left open the possibility of a breakthrough, although it was no longer clear whether this opening coincided with Germany’s victory. In considering Germany’s fate after Stalingrad, Lieutenant-Colonel Bösenberg recalled the ancient Jews. “God doesn’t need our people, as little as he needed the chosen people in the Old Testament!” he warned: “Whether the German people continue to be the decisive instrument of God in the reorganization of the world of nations and remain the blessed vessel of the divine mission, or will be cast aside, will depend on whether Germany allows itself to be called to its God and to be prepared for his tasks. Otherwise, God could also abandon our people and let them perish in the Bolshevist collapse.”

Kanitz’s Christian officers began to conceive of God as wrathful, judgmental, and even capricious. As the war turned against the Germans, they were humbled, but generally remained true to their conception of themselves as “God’s soldiers.”

Unlike Kanitz’s Sternbriefe, Dinkler’s Randbriefe, circulated for members of Marburg’s “evangelical student community,” were written without calibrating the religious texts to Germany’s national history. Letters made few references to Germany’s triumph over France or to a Christian, anti-Bolshevik crusade in Russia. The soldiers did not express devotion to the Führer, hope for a “final victory,” or indignation at “terror attacks” on German cities. On the contrary, the letters documented a growing sense of alienation from the Third Reich and from the ordinary soldiers who had been raised under the “influence of propaganda and in the hustle and bustle of life.” If Christian soldiers at first regarded the war as an opportunity for self-examination through suffering, a period of probation from which better Christians would emerge, the offensive in Russia undermined the pedagogical model of the “punishment rod” by producing unrelenting violence and suffering. In the end, soldiers emphasized not the comrades who had yet to become better Christians, but the Christians who had been called to suffer and fight alongside their comrades. The Christians came to identify with the very comrades they had disparaged at the beginning of the war. In contrast to the Sternbriefe, the Randbriefe reveal much less anguish about the judgment of God because the students did not interpret the war in terms of Germany’s certain victory. If anything, although the letters did not explicitly say so, the students regarded war as punishment for the Third Reich.

Before Christmas 1940, Erich Dinkler described the war as “a great time of waiting, a great time of advent, when we listen with particular attention to the word: open the ‘gates, that the King of glory may come in’” (Psalm 24). It was first and foremost a “battle against ourselves.” The students also expressed the hope that the simple struggle to open hearts and minds to the word of God would have an ecumenical effect, bridging the differences between the “parties” within German Protestantism, that is, between the Confessing Church and the pro-Nazi German Christians, and between the confessions, between Protestants and Catholics. Both
he was killed in Crimea in December 1941, Gerhard Wackerbarth wrote about his war experiences: “All horrors and miseries are served up here, it is the deepest darkness that can be imagined. The eternal light with its bright glow is supposed to light the way.” Wackerbarth’s confidence that only great darkness can bring light seemed about to give way to despair that any light would emerge from such darkness. Fighting near Moscow, Dinkler himself wrote to Hans von Soden that “the individual is literally being devoured in the battle with nature and men. The manifestations are more ghastly than ever.” The war in Russia prompted the students to reassess their comrades. “Here in the trenches I have learned,” acknowledged Gerhard Arning, exactly “what our German soldier can achieve and what is demanded of him.” “To be a soldier” was the state of being in which “war, death grief, and suffering belong together.” Soldiers were called to act, and as actors they were also condemned to “impotent suffering.” To “actually be a soldier” “in the firezone” facilitated a relationship to God, which is why Dinkler felt that he belonged “with the comrades right on the front lines.” In their suffering, he saw soldiers as almost Christlike figures. God affirmed his presence amid the misery the soldiers endured, but this meant that he could not or would not alleviate the afflictions of the faithful, a motif Jewish quarrelers with the Lord outlined as well. A handful of German and Jewish commentators alike anticipated postwar theologies that scaled God to twentieth-century calamity by reducing his power but discovering his presence in suffering.

Hermann Bousset’s reasons for transferring to the front lines were more specific. “From the very beginning,” he had seen things in the rear that “were not easy to cope with—they were about the Jews.” In his view, “German soldiers distinguished themselves fundamentally from the administrators of the master race,” that is, the SS. However, his was a minority voice even in the Randbrieft, the silence is conspicuous; the calamity of war was usually understood as something German soldiers shared with other belligerents, but it is not imagined in scenes of the mass murder of the Jewish people.

In the end, many of the theology students fighting on the eastern front had nothing more to say. Writing early in 1945, Gerd Wicke reflected on how hard it had become “to open one’s mouth to speak.” Theological dogma and institutional interests had betrayed the hopes and hardships that ordinary Christians shared in common. The student’s ecumenical spirit had taken shape in face of the hostility of the Third Reich to the churches. Simply to pose the question “Will there emerge a Christendom in Germany which in unmistakable attachment to God and Christ is compatible with being a ‘genuine citizen’ of the 3. Reich” indicated the perceived gulf between the religious and the party-political spheres. Long conversations with an “old SS leader” about church-state tensions, and the dangerous Jewish influence of the Old Testament did not leave Erich Dinkler much hope that he would return home to “a world of peace” in which his “probation on the front” had earned him the right to “practice Christian religion and seek a Christian calling.” Rather, he suspected that his fight with the Nazis would continue, “but with unequal weapons.”

The key to creating Christianity in Germany was to approach comrades in arms as Christians. The war presented this opportunity. “Never again will theologians have such intensive contacts with German men” as they have on the battlefield, observed Heinrich Giesen in May 1940. The young theologians tried to approach their comrades, but discussions never went beyond the “quotidian.” Given the “spirit of the age,” explained Günther Dehn, most soldiers had lapsed into “lazy” National Socialist thinking. They were far too “transfixed” by “big historical perspectives,” that is, by Germany’s victories, to accept the war as punishment. For Kanitz’s officers, most soldiers were bad Christians and thus bad National Socialists, whereas for Dinkler’s students, soldiers were bad Christians because they were good National Socialists. As a result, members of the “student community” constituted a “community of loneliness” in the fighting units. Kanitz’s officers were lonely because they read the Bible; Dinkler’s were lonely because they rejected the historical grandeur of the war.

If German victories kept comrades from accepting Dinkler’s interpretation of war as punishment, the stalled offensive on the eastern front made Dinkler’s brothers ready to abandon the whole idea of punishment altogether. This revised understanding of suffering made it possible for the Christian brothers to come closer to their comrades. Just a week before
November 1943, a young twenty-five-year-old Catholic who was serving as a medic wrote home to Passau: “Serious and most serious matters... What am I supposed to recount? The shot-up limbs, the stomach and lung wounds, the dying... What should I write to you... Once in a while I have time to write, but I almost never do. What ever. What for?”

The *Randbriefe* quoted German novelist Gertrud von Le Fort: “Today we fall silent quite easily, simply out of helplessness in the face of the size and terribleness of events, which words can no longer master. We have the feeling that we have to fall silent! All we can do is endure in silence to God.” If Kanitz’s *Sternbriefe* focused on interpreting the outcome of the war in terms of God’s judgment, Dinkler’s *Randbriefe* discovered the spirit of Christ in the ordinary soldier whose sufferings the students came to share. Both sets of letters reveal how the violence of the war gradually overwhelmed theological knowledge. The result was more speechlessness.

What is missing in either the *Sternbriefe* or the *Randbriefe* is any compassion for or reference to the civilian population, Russian prisoners of war, or Jews. Only German soldiers embodied suffering in these pages. The example of Konrad Jarausch, a reserve officer who had studied theology before the war, shows that it was possible for soldiers to see the extraordinary suffering of Russian prisoners of war—Jarausch considered them Christlike figures—but the vast majority of soldiers saw only people like themselves. Moreover, there was little sense of the extreme violence that German soldiers in particular deployed, although the student letters drew distinctions between the ordinary *Landser* on the front and more sinister SS officers in the rear. Erich Dinkler noted the growing moral degradation among the troops, but interpreted cold-bloodedness in terms of human weakness and frailty. Especially in the extreme conditions of the eastern front, “God talk” tended to emphasize the helplessness of soldiers, not their agency; it thus overlooked the terrible imbalance between the force projected by the Germans and the vulnerability of unarmed civilians. For most Wehrmacht soldiers, like most Germans, God at the end of the war was not the God of Deuteronomy, who meted out punishment according to sin; he had withdrawn and remained unfathomable, but in ways that permitted Germans to behold their own sufferings without seeing the suffering of others. They consoled themselves without raising further questions about their parts in the war. Perhaps the advancing speechlessness at the end of the war indicated how inadequate theological discourse was when it addressed only German victims; perhaps it revealed the moral desert in which more and more Germans found themselves.