

Refuge Among the Ruins:

Sacred Space and War

Thomas Brodie



Armed conflict has been a recurring feature of human history since Ancient Times, and one which often featured the destruction of religious space. Puccini's *Tosca* is set in 1800, an era in which the formidable ideological and military forces unleashed by the French Revolution were transforming the European continent. Napoleon first invaded Italy in 1796 as a General of the French Republic, and his successes there against the Austrians and Italian states played a key role in establishing his reputation as a formidable military commander – and in propelling his eventual rise to political power. The soldiers under Napoleon's command often bore with them anti-clerical attitudes forged in the ideological climate of the French Revolution (1789–99), and on many occasions looted Catholic sites in the regions they occupied. In 1797, French troops sacked Piedmont's most important shrine, the Madonna of Vico, sending its treasures to Paris. Napoleonic forces also stole priceless works of sacred art, such as Paolo Veronese's masterpiece, *The Wedding at Cana* (1562–63), which they took from the San Giorgio Monastery in Venice. Scarce wonder many of Napoleon's opponents came to see the struggle against him as a religious war to save Christian Europe.



It was nevertheless in the recent past, during the early to mid-20th Century, that war acquired its most 'total' forms and reached previously unknown degrees of scale, intensity and violence. In both Europe and East Asia, the majority of those who lost their lives during the Second World War were noncombatants, such as the Jewish victims of the 'Final Solution', or the Soviet and Chinese civilians who died under German or Japanese occupation. In addition to them, however, the Second World War wrought devastation on the fabric of towns and cities around the world, with the technologies of aerial bombardment acquiring ever greater destructive power, culminating in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

'Total War' accordingly visited unprecedented devastation on sacred spaces in many combatant societies, with churches, synagogues, temples and other religious sites falling victim to the bombing raids which engulfed the cities in which they were located. As early as November 1940, Coventry Cathedral fell victim to the Luftwaffe's raid on the city, and by 1945 around 90% of Cologne's Catholic churches lay either destroyed or badly damaged. In neighbouring Aachen, only 43 of the city's 498 churches survived the war unscathed. In March 1945, the American firebombing of





Tokyo destroyed many historic religious sites, including Sensō-ji, the city's oldest Buddhist temple.

For the societies enduring such cultural attack, the experience has often been profoundly traumatic, with the loss of sacred space threatening understandings and everyday practices of communal identity and belonging. For one German priest working in Cologne amid Allied bombing during the Second World War, the destruction of the city's churches represented nothing less than an erasure of the 'Christian Rhineland' itself, and its architectural representation dating back to the Middle Ages. From 1943 onwards, Goebbels' propaganda would seek to mobilise such sentiments, by attacking the Allied bombing campaign as cultural vandalism. It was surely no coincidence that in 1940 British propaganda deployed the image of St Paul's Cathedral towering intact during the Blitz as an encapsulation of national defiance. Such examples highlight the ongoing emotive power of sacred space in the 20th Century, and the flaws manifest in axiomatically associating modernity with secularism, as so many historians and social scientists did prior to the 1980s. When Notre Dame Cathedral caught fire on 15th April 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron poignantly wrote: 'Like all of my fellow citizens, I am sad to see this part of us burn tonight.' As Bryce Dessner's haunting composition *The Forest*, written in the aftermath of this particular disaster invokes, the destruction of sacred space also entails its erasure as a site of historic musical

performance. As historian Claire Morelon has observed, many of the church bells confiscated across Germany and Austria-Hungary for use in armaments production between 1914 and 1918 were never durably replaced. As a consequence 'the soundscape of bells, as they rang in towns and villages in the early part of the twentieth century, is lost forever.'



The reconstruction of sacred spaces destroyed by war or natural disaster has often prompted societies to rethink the symbolism and cultural politics of such sites. For example, new modernist styles dominated the mass rebuilding of churches in early West Germany, ensuring their aesthetics were defined by what historian Paul Betts has termed 'radical simplicity', emphasizing openness and natural light instead of ornate decoration. Such designs reflected the conscious desire of contemporary architects to develop a chastened post-war – and post-fascist – aesthetic defined by humility and intimacy. As one journalist wrote in 1950: 'We should not feel ashamed about our poverty. We do not want the church to be what we are not. We want the church simply to stay true to its word and provide no place for dishonesty.'

Such reconstruction projects have occasionally served as representations of renewed international relationships. In an Anglo-German context, the transformation of Coventry Cathedral into a memorial in the 1950s and 60s, and the reconstruction of Dresden's *Frauenkirche* at the turn of the 21st Century, have acted as mutually reinforcing projects of renewed friendship and reconciliation between the two nations. In Great Britain, the Dresden Trust was founded in 1993 with the aim of assisting the reconstruction of the Saxon city devastated by Allied bombing in February 1945. This organisation directly assisted in the restoration of the *Frauenkirche*, an 18th-century Baroque church which had laid in ruins throughout the long years of state socialist dictatorship between 1949 and 1989. The Trust raised the funds to create the Golden Orb and Cross which were installed on the *Frauenkirche*'s dome in 2005. The main craftsman responsible for the creation of these items, Alan Smith, was the son of an RAF pilot who had bombed Dresden sixty years earlier. Smith stated in an interview of 2004: 'My father used to tell me about the horrors and the suffering of Dresden... He did not want it to be forgotten. By working on the cross I've come closer to my father and it's my way of saying goodbye to him and fulfilling his wishes'. Such heartwarming examples of reconciliation and forgiveness are nevertheless far from representative. Most of the synagogues destroyed in the Holocaust were never rebuilt, with tiny and vulnerable communities of Jewish survivors unable to access the financial resources or political influence necessary to save them in the postwar decades. Across the Eastern Bloc, damaged synagogues were often demolished to make way for apartment blocks and other buildings embodying the functionalist ethos of the communist present.

As Alan Smith's poignant words above underline, the reconstruction of sacred space can represent a search for meaning and consolation in the face of destruction and loss. As a key component of worship in many faiths, music has been a central part of this process, with individuals turning to its emotive power for an expression of memories and feelings which often defy articulation via written prose or speech. I would like to give the final word here to a German woman who, as the Reich collapsed in Spring 1945, found herself in

southern Bavaria. One morning she was able to attend a Protestant service in the small town of Erpfting; a rarity in this primarily Catholic region. She recalled that, as the church's organ began to play, 'I lost my composure. All of the emotions which I had suppressed these long years now broke through... I place my life in God's hands and know that, however he directs it, this is right and good for me.'

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