



BOOK REVIEW

German Yu. Kapten (2020). Problema sakralizatsii voiny v vizantiiskom bogoslovii i istoriografii [Problem of Sacralization of War in Byzantine Theology and Historiography]. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii.

Andrey D. Nazarov

Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 20-18-00240.

The question about whether there was the idea of *sacred war* in the Orthodox Eastern Roman Empire has been in the focus of scholarly attention for a long time. In her seminal study, Athina Kolia-Dermizaki argued that the Byzantine warfare against the Persians and the Arabs prefigured the western European knighthood's Crusades (Kolia-Dermizaki, 1991). Some scholars in Byzantine Studies (Koder & Stouraitis, 2012), though, contested that thesis. There is still no scholarly consensus about the role that religion played in Byzantine wars (see, for example, Stephenson, 2018; Stouraitis, 2018). German Kapten's book is thus the first attempt (in Russian) to systematize the questions related to sacralization of war in the Eastern Roman Empire in a comprehensive manner.

In the introduction to his book, Kapten remarks that the "Byzantine attitude to war is underpinned by a rather complex conflict between Eastern Orthodox theology and the everyday lives of the people who built their world outlook in accordance with its religious dogmas" (Kapten, 2020, p. 9). He then goes on to define the key features of the *sacred war* in the following way:

- 1) it is an armed conflict between adherents of different religious traditions;
- 2) the decision to start the war is authorized by the leaders of these religious traditions;

3) combatants are promised spiritual rewards;

4) refusal to assist in such a conflict may be considered sinful (Kapten, 2020, p. 11).

Kapten distinguishes between the notions of *sacred war* and *just war*. The latter, in his view, is waged by a lawful ruler for a just cause and for the benefit of all. In making this conclusion, Kapten cites Thomas Aquinas and Hugo Grotius and points out that the Byzantine Church Fathers took little interest in social philosophy (Kapten, 2020, p. 28). However, it might be a more viable approach for the researchers to look at the vast body of Byzantine political literature which reflected on the questions of public peace, responsibilities of the emperor, the limits to his power, and so on (see: Valdenberg, 2015).

The first chapter in the book, *Voina v bogoslovii* [War in Theology], discusses the views of the early Christian thinkers, who, according to Kapten, strove to protect the believers from all that is sinful; bloodshed was included in the latter. The author focuses on Tertullian, whose reasoning is undoubtedly of great interest. It should be noted, however, that this theologian's views belonged to Montanism, which was a radical movement without a universal support in the Roman Empire. Therefore, Tertullian's ideas should be considered more as an exception rather than as a general rule (Shean, 2010, p. 77).

Kapten also mentions the diversity of opinions expressed by the Church Fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries concerning the permissibility and nature of military service. He emphasizes that in the Christian circles the unquestionable preference was given to peace although there was also a general agreement that wars are inevitable. As a result, many Christians chose to abstain from military service, devoting themselves to peaceful occupations. The Edict of Milan of 313, however, removed some of the moral objections to military service, which had been theretofore associated not only with violence but also with participation in the worship of the imperial cult (Kapten, 2020, pp. 20–24). Nevertheless, as John F. Shean has shown, Christians were enlisted in the army as early as in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Moreover, Christian religious pacifism of the late antiquity should not be equated with modern ideology of pacifism (Shean, 2010).

Kapten points out that the works of the Church Fathers of the 4th century also dealt with the questions of war and violence: for instance, St. Basil of Caesarea wrote in his canonical epistle that although the killing of the enemy in self-defense is allowable, it still remains a reprehensible act. For this reason, St. Basil admonished that the soldiers who had taken enemies' lives should be excommunicated from the Holy Communion for three years. However, John Zonaras and Theodore Balsamon, 12th-century commentators on St. Basil's epistles, remarked that his words in this case should be considered a recommendation rather than a strict rule (Kapten, 2020, pp. 28–32).

Kapten argues that the diverging historical paths of the Latin West and the Greek East resulted in different models of war sacralization in these regions. In Byzantium, the distance between the clergy and the military was defined rather clearly. The Catholic tradition saw sin as a legal breach of one of the commandments, while the

Eastern Church Fathers did not provide any precise definitions of guilt. Rather, they saw sin as a disease, which made war inadmissible in their eyes, even if the secular law did not see warfare as objectionable (Kapten, 2020, pp. 38–39). Any warfare was to defend the empire's borders or to win back the territories that used to be a part of the empire (Kapten, 2020, p. 42).

In Kapten's exposition, the Byzantine emperors' will had not acquired equal status with God's will, coercion in religious matters and forceful conversions were inadmissible, while the doctrine of just war was hardly developed (Kapten, 2020, pp. 46, 50–51). The idea of war as it was presented in the Holy Scripture was not adopted by the Eastern Roman tradition. In the eyes of the Byzantine intellectuals, the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucids was an isolated incident belonging to the distant past while the figures of the Old Testament's heroes were primarily a source of literary allusions.

In the second chapter *Sakralizatsiia voiny v istoriografii* [The Sacralization of War in Historiography], Kapten points out the incompatibility of the notions of "war" and "sacred" in Byzantine historiography. Epithets *ἅγιος* and *ἱερός* ("saint" and "sacred") were used to denote categories related to the religious sphere and also to characterize the emperor's power. War as a cause of misery and destruction by definition cannot be sacred (Kapten, 2020, pp. 70–71). Therefore, the ideal to strive for was the world that excluded the need to wage war (Kapten, 2020, p. 74).

Kapten emphasizes the Byzantine rulers' desire to maintain social justice. Similarly, a war should only be fought for a just cause. Piety of the soldiers and their righteous conduct were necessary to ensure divine support for the army. Remarkably, protection of faith proved to be an important factor that determined much of the Eastern Roman foreign policy in the 6th century. Kapten observes that this is particularly true in regard with the wars of Justinian I (527–565) against the Germanic kingdoms in the Western Mediterranean. The rulers of these realms belonged to Arianism, anathematized by the Ecumenical Councils of 325 and 381. Kapten contends that the foreign policy doctrine of Justinian I stemmed primarily from his desire to exterminate heresies. This opinion, however, seems questionable for the simple reason that the idea of the Reconquista of the West started to crystallize only after the first victories Belisarius had won in Africa and Italy in the 530s (Serov, 2008).

Under Emperor Heraclius (610–641), when Byzantium engaged in the devastating war with the Sasanian Empire, the attempt was made to give wars religious significance and turn them into *sacred wars*. Kapten argues that Heraclius was strongly influenced by the Sasanian model of the relationship between secular and religious authorities. Thus, at the beginning of the 7th century, warfare in defense of religion was sacralized and the emperor assumed the role of a spiritual leader (Kapten, 2020, pp. 93–103).

During Iconoclastic crises (730–787, 814–842), the emperors sought to expand their power by subjugating the Church. The preamble to the *Ecloga*, a compilation of Byzantine law published under Emperor Leo III (717–741), stated that the task of utmost importance for the ruler is to ensure that all his subjects are secure and well protected, which can be achieved by maintaining a just order, and that the

cornerstone for the success on the battlefield is piety (Kapten, 2020, pp. 114–121). According to Kapten, between the 7th and 10th centuries, in Byzantium the prevailing principle that prioritized justice was replaced by the one that prioritized Orthodoxy. A righteous ruler, regardless of his moral qualities, could bring peace to his subjects. The emperor's military expertise was of no importance because the enemies of the pious empire were weak (Kapten, 2020, pp. 122–123). However, Kekaumenos, a prominent 11th-century Byzantine general and writer, postulates that adherence to the principles of justice only entitles a person to be in command positions but the victory on the battlefield depends entirely on the commander's personal qualities and faith in God (Kapten, 2020, p. 126).

It should be noted that the *Taktika* of Leo VI (Taktika, 2010) written in the early 10th century describes at some length the ways of ensuring that war has a just cause. The treatise uses a common rhetorical device by claiming that although wars are the devil's work, the empire has to engage in warfare in order to defend itself from its aggressive neighbors (Mokhov & Kapsalykova, 2019, pp. 84–85). We cannot overlook the fact that among the Byzantine writers there were not only armchair experts but also those who had real combat experience.

Unfortunately, in his book Kapten fails to describe how Byzantine idea of war evolved during the rule of Komnenoi and Palaiologoi, while the author occasionally makes extensive digressions into the history of cultural contacts between the Byzantines and the Latins. The book also makes scarce use of the rich variety of sources of that period, including the renowned works of John Kinnamos, Nikephoros Gregoras, Laonikos Chalkokondyles and others. Regarding the last centuries of the empire, Kapten observes that it was hard to maintain the sacred status of war while being on friendly terms with the Ottoman sultans. Moreover, there was a shift from the universalist imperial ideology to the national Greek vision, which undermined the traditional models of war sacralization (Kapten, 2020, p. 181).

The third chapter *Sakralizatsiia voiny v nekotorykh aspektakh vizantiiskoi kul'tury* [Sacralization of War in Some Aspects of Byzantine Culture] is especially riddled with controversial statements and unsupported generalizations. The chapter begins with outlining the Byzantines' attitude to the barbarians, including foreign immigrants. The author notes that valor was considered as a merit only among the peoples surrounding the empire while in Byzantium itself warfare was not seen as a respectable occupation (Kapten, 2020, p. 205). However, this statement is contestable since Byzantine literature provides ample examples of soldiers being praised for their courage on the battlefield (Mokhov & Kapsalykova, 2019, p. 177 ff.).

Kapten then goes on to discuss the *hierotopy of the battlefield*. The author describes various sanctificatory rituals for the troops and offers examples of how religious imagery was used in the propaganda (Kapten, 2020, pp. 205–222). Then, the analysis of the Byzantine soldiers' worldview follows (Kapten, 2020, pp. 223–242), which deserves strong criticism. It should be noted, first, that there was a significant difference between the soldiers of the early Byzantine army, where the traditions of the imperial army of the Principate period were still very strong, and the late Byzantine

*pronoiaroi*¹. Moreover, even if we do not take into account foreigners, the imperial army was ethnically quite diverse. There were differences that stemmed from the specific living conditions and military traditions, for instance, between natives of Isauria and Thrace. In short, the author's attempt to embrace the Byzantine army's culture in its totality leads him to undue oversimplification.

To sum up, the most successful part of Kapten's book, in our view, is the first chapter, which analyzes the ideas about war in the early Byzantine theology. But in the subsequent chapters the author seems to be misled by his own conceptual framework, in particular, by trying to maintain his distinction between the notions of justice and righteousness for the Byzantine political thought. Moreover, the third chapter sticks out in the general argumentative structure of the book. In our view, the book has failed to take into consideration necessary primary sources and recent relevant literature on the subject. Despite these weaknesses, Kapten's book is well worth reading as it sheds a great deal of light on the understanding of war in the Byzantine Empire.

References

Kapten, G. Yu. (2020). *Problema sakralizatsii voyny v vizantiiskom bogoslovii i istoriografii* [Problem of sacralization of war in Byzantine theology and historiography]. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii.

Koder, J., & Stouraitis, I. (Eds.). (2012). *Byzantine war ideology between Roman imperial concept and Christian religion* (Proceedings of the International Symposium, Wien, 19–21 May 2011). Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. <https://verlag.oeaw.ac.at/product?info=14373>

Kolia-Dermitzaki, A. (1991). *Ho Vyzantinos "hieros polemos": he ennoia kai e provole tou threskeutikou polemou sto Vyzantio* [The Byzantine "Holy War". The idea and propagation of religious war in Byzantium]. Athens: Stefanos Vasilopoulos.

Mokhov, A. S., & Kapsalykova, K. R. (2019). «Pust' drugie rasskazyvayut o vygode i roskoshi, chto prinosit voyna»: vizantiyskaya polemologicheskaya traditsiya X-XI ["Let the others speak of the benefits and luxury that the war brings": Byzantine polemological tradition of the 10th–11th centuries]. Yekaterinburg: Izdatel'stvo Ural'skogo universiteta.

Serov, V. V. (2008). "O vremeni formirovaniya yustinianovskoy idei rekonkisty" [Creation of the ideology of Justinian's Reconquista]. *Izvestiya of Altai State University*, 60(4–3), 236–240. <http://izvestia.asu.ru/2008/4-3/hist/TheNewsOfASU-2008-4-3-hist-45.pdf>

Shean, J. F. (2010). *Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman army*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

¹ *Pronoiarios* was a person whom the emperors granted a right to collect taxes on a certain territory (a *pronoia*). This practice was common from the 11th to 15th centuries and often these grants were bestowed for military service.

Stephenson, P. (2018). The imperial theology of victory. In Ya. Stouraitis (Ed.), *A companion to the Byzantine culture of war, ca. 300–1204* (pp. 23–58). Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Stouraitis, Ya. (2018). State war ethic and popular views on warfare. In Ya. Stouraitis (Ed.), *A companion to the Byzantine culture of war, ca. 300–1204* (pp. 59–91). Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Taktika–Dennis, G. T. (Ed.). (2010). *The Taktika of Leo VI*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Valdenberg, V. E. (2015). *Istoriya vizantiyskoy politicheskoy literatury v svyazi s istoriey filosofskikh techeniy i zakonodatel'stva* [History of Byzantine political literature in connection with the history of philosophical movements and legislation] (2nd edition). St. Petersburg: Dmitry Bulanin.