

Nazism and Pope Pius XII

The Slander of the Righteous

When Pope Pius XII died on October 9, 1958, the world mourned at the passing of a great man. Among believers, he was widely considered to be a saint (Allegrì) and indeed, the beatification process began five years after his death. Even among non-Catholics, including Jews, the Pope who led the Church through some of the darkest days in history enjoyed “an enviable reputation” (Dalín 1) for all that he had done to save Jewish lives during World War II. He was thought to be a moral prophet and a righteous gentile, one who stood up to Nazism when very few others did. For example, Albert Einstein, himself a refugee from Nazi Germany, was a proud spokesman for the goodness of the Pope’s efforts: “Being a lover of freedom, when the Nazi revolution came in Germany, I looked to the universities to defend it...I looked to the great editors of newspapers...but they were [all] silenced in a few short weeks. Only the Catholic Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing the truth...I am forced to thus confess that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly” (Einstein).

However, today that picture has changed, and Pius XII is now widely considered to have been, at best, far too weak in the face of Hitler’s evil, or at worst, a Nazi sympathizer and supporter. This slander has been spread recently by such author’s as John Cornwell (*Hitler’s Pope*), James Carroll (*Constantine’s Sword*), Garry Wills (*Papal Sin*), and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (*A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*). These screeds have been pushed to bestsellers status by extensive and uncritical coverage in such publications as *The New York Times* and the *New Republic*.¹

¹ For example, the January 21, 2002 issue of the *New Republic* published Goldhagen’s essay, “What Would Jesus Have Done?,” a 24 page cover story that Rabbi David Dalín calls “one of the most hateful attacks against the Roman

What happened? Why how did the Pope's reputations become so tarnished? The change began in earnest with the appearance of Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* in 1963 (Graham). In the play, Hochhuth, a Communist West German writer², depicts Pius XII as "a Nazi collaborator, guilty of moral cowardice and 'silence' in the face of the Nazi onslaught." According to Father Pierre Blet, the production is "a scathing indictment of Pope Pius XII's alleged indifference to the plight of European Jewry during the Holocaust" (Allegri). The play was fictional and polemic, but it ignited the controversy that is ongoing. As Blet notes, "it inspired a new generation of revisionists journalists and scholars, who were intent on discrediting the well-documented efforts of Pope Pius XII to save Jews during the Holocaust" (Allegri). "*The Deputy* was more than merely a play", attests Robert Graham, "it was a sustained exercise in character assassination that was resoundingly echoed in the popular press" (Graham).

Why did the world grab on to this view of Pius XII so readily? Graham suggests one reason was that people needed someone else to blame. *The Deputy* was produced at about the same time as the publication of *Anne Frank's Diary* and the trial and execution of Adolf Eichmann. "With no more real Nazi's left to punish, the image of a pusillanimous pope offered just the right scapegoat" (Graham).

Anthony Esolen offers another, more generally applicable hypothesis. He points out that recent discoveries by a Jewish historian doing research at the Vatican suggest that Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII), as Secretary of State, was responsible for directives as far

Catholic Church (and in particular, Pope Pius XII) ever printed in a major American publication" (Dalin 3). Dalin also notes that while publications such as the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books* and the *Jewish Forward* have given extensive coverage to books critical of the Pope and the Church, "none has seen fit to review, critically or otherwise, any of the scholarly books written in Pius's defense" (Dalin 117).

² Former KGB agent Ion Mihai Pacepa alleges that the play was actually part of the Soviet Union's plot to destroy the Church (National Review, January 25, 2007) [<http://article.nationalreview.com/303351/moscows-assault-on-the-vatican/ion-mihai-pacepa>]. The evidence seems to be mounting in support of the Soviet Union's role in producing the play. See, for example, "Who Brought Down Pius XII?" at zenit.org [<http://www.zenit.org/rssenglish-26180>]

back as 1930-33 recommending excommunication of any Catholic who joined the Nazi party or even flew the swastika. However, this evidence has not been trumpeted by the media. Instead, they stick to the standard talking points about Pacelli being a closet Nazi. Why? Because undermining righteous Catholics undermines the Church and, more personally, the holiness of saints “strikes fear in the heart” of many. (Esolen). For the same reason people rejected Jesus, they reject his body on earth. They don’t want to face the ramifications of true holiness.

In this vein, Esolen compares the treatment of Pius XII to the current treatment of Mother Theresa by Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens labels Theresa “Hell’s Angel” and searched through “the thousands of deeds of love that she and her sisters performed, to find fault, somewhere, anywhere.” Esolen also notes that the current pope, Benedict XVI, has been similarly slandered over the sex abuse scandal. Before he became pope, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was called “God’s Rottweiler”³ for his unswerving pursuit of doctrinal purity and biblical righteousness among the ranks of the clergy. Yet now the press blames him for being too soft on these issues. The two sidedness of the coverage suggests that there are factors other than the pursuit of truth at play here. One of them certainly is the desire to defame the church.

Both the Nazis of 60 years ago and today’s accusers have one common goal – to destroy the moral authority of the Papacy. Because Pius was such a strong Pope, destroying his good name would weaken the confidence of many Catholics and increase hostility to the Church everywhere. Scripture describes the cruel logic of Pius’s detractors in a single sentence: Strike down the shepherd and the flock will be scattered. (Mark 14:27) (Vatican Staff).

We will now turn to the specific charges against Pius XII and summarize some of the evidence offered in his defense.

³ For example, see the ABC News story here: <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=1859740&page=1>

The “Silence” of Pius XII

The major sin Pius XII is charged with by his detractors is one of omission, particularly in regards to statements Pius did not make. They believe he should have spoken more forcefully and specifically in condemning the slaughter of Jews by the Nazis. Although some critics accept that the Church did some things to help, the words of Shira Schoenberg sum up the thinking of many: “Whatever his motivation, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Pope, like so many others in positions of power and influence, could have done more to save the Jews” (Schoenberg).

There are two main answers to the charge that the pope was silent. One is to note that, while there was not an explicit document such as an encyclical released by Pius XII explicitly condemning Hitler, the pope was not silent. His public position was unequivocally (and well known to be) in opposition to Hitler and Nazism. The second is to point out that an official statement would have actually made things worse for the Jews (and Catholics and others) and led to even more death. We will deal with each of these areas in turn.

In regards to Pius XII’s anti-Nazi public proclamations, we can start with the Vatican’s official stance on Nazism as espoused in the 1937 encyclical *Mit brennender sorge* (“With Burning Anxiety”). Although this was released before he became pope, not only did Pius XII never distance himself from it, he clearly had a large hand in writing it! “Before a group of German Bishops in Rome to thank him for [*Mit brennender sorge*], the pope [Pius XI] pointed directly at Cardinal Pacelli and said: ‘Thank him! He has done everything: he will [continue to] deal with everything’” (Vatican Staff). It should be noted that this condemnation of Nazism came at a time when “the leaders of the Western democracies were scurrying to Munich to negotiate with Hitler” (Graham).

Cardinal Pacelli's opposition to Nazism was almost universally recognized at the time, including by the Nazis themselves. They considered him a "Jew-loving" cardinal, do doubt partly due to the fact that, "of the forty four speeches he gave in Germany as papal nuncio between 1917 and 1929, forty denounced some aspect of the emerging Nazi ideology (Dalin 63). Throughout the 1930s Pacelli sent more than fifty-five protests to the Nazi regime while serving as Vatican secretary of state, something that led Hitler's regime to lobby against him as successor to Pius XI (Lichten). The day after his election, the Berlin *Morgenpost* noted: "The election of Cardinal Pacelli is not accepted with favor in Germany because he was always opposed to Nazism and practically determined the [pro-Jewish] policies of the Vatican under his predecessor." (Lichten). As Rabbi Dalin notes, Cardinal Pacelli was not shy about his views of Nazism:

In March 1935, in an open letter to the bishop of Cologne, Pacelli called the Nazis "false prophets with the pride of Lucifer." That same year, speaking to an enormous crowd of pilgrims at Lourdes, he assailed ideologies "possessed by the superstition of race and blood." At the cathedral of Notre Dame two years later, he named Germany "that noble and powerful nation whom bad shepherds would lead astray into an ideology of race." The Nazis were "diabolical," he told friends. Hitler "is completely obsessed," he said to his longtime secretary, sister Pascalina. "All that is not of use to him, he destroys; ...this man is capable of trampling on corpses." Meeting with the heroic anti-Nazi Dietrich von Hildebrand, he declared: "There can be no possible reconciliation" between Christianity and Nazi racism; they were like "fire and water." (Dalin 65)

After becoming Pope, Pius XII's first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, dealt with the oneness of human beings. In paragraph forty eight he speaks of the Church's openness to all, describing St. Paul's visions of "the new man who is renewed unto knowledge, according to the image of Him that created him. Where there is neither Gentile nor Jew." He then goes on in paragraph forty nine to affirm that, while love of country is good, it must never "make us close our eyes to the all-embracing nature of Christian Charity, which calls for consideration of others

and of their interests in the pacifying light of love.”⁴ This is clearly a shot at the nationalism and racism of Nazism. *The New York Times* certainly thought so, summing up their October 28, 1939 story with the headline: “Pope Condemns Dictators, Treaty Violators, Racism: Urges Restoring of Poland.”

Time followed suit on November 6. Under the headline “No Dove,” they editorialized that in his encyclical Pope Pius XII had accomplished what others had failed to do: speak clearly and unequivocally: “[D]evout Catholic that he is, he knew which side he was for, and, unlike his predecessors during War I, said so. It certainly did the Allies no harm when 61,000,000 German and Polish Catholics were told by their Supreme Ruler that ‘the idea which credits the State with unlimited authority’ was abhorrent to him.” The editors went on to note that “Pius also made Nazis squirm on the subject of Poland.”⁵ This type of coverage was typical of the period,⁶ and, as can be expected, “The Nazis were furious.” (Vatican Staff).

The Pope’s position didn’t change over the next years of war, nor did the clarity of his announcements. On Christmas Day, 1941, the *New York Times* wrote “The voice of Pius XII is a lonely voice in the silence and darkness enveloping Europe this Christmas. The Pope reiterates what he has said before....The Pope put himself squarely against Hitlerism...he left no doubt that the Nazi aims are also irreconcilable with his own conception of a Christian peace.”⁷ The means by which the Pope made statements included pastoral letters, pronouncements from cardinals and bishops expressing the Pope’s wishes and broadcasts to the world via radio.

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20101939_summi-pontificatus_en.html

⁵ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,762726,00.html>

⁶ For example, The Manchester Guardian, on January 24, 1940, wrote “Tortured Poland has found a powerful advocate in Rome, noting that Vatican Radio warn “all who care for civilization that Europe is in mortal danger” (Vatican Staff). On January 23, 1940 a *New York Times* headline read “Vatican Denounces Atrocities in Poland; Germans Called Even Worse Than Russians.”

⁷ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/3005157/1941-New-York-Times-Pope-Piux-XII-against-Hitlerism>

Through all of these he was steadfastly opposed to Nazism. Reacting to his Christmas, 1942 broadcast to the world, the German SS analyzed the message thusly: “The pope has repudiated the National Socialist New European Order. His speech is one long attack on everything we stand for. God, he says, regards all peoples and races as worthy of the same consideration. Here he is clearly speaking on behalf of the Jews and makes himself the mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals” (Vatican Staff).

Even though he was clearly speaking against Nazism, it is true that the Pope did not issue an official and explicit announcement against Hitler. Why? Because he thought doing so would endanger more lives. According to Blet, “If the Pope had released a statement condemning Hitler and Nazism, it would have meant the end for millions of German Catholics as well as the Jews. There are no doubts about this.” (Allegri). As Dalin notes, “When Pius XII’s revisionist critics attack the pope’s “silence,” they do so while ignoring the fact that Jewish leaders and Catholic bishops in Nazi-occupied countries strongly advised him not to incite the Nazis to further atrocities” (Dalin 79). The idea that official protests would have led to severe reprisals is supported by the example of the Dutch bishops, who protested more loudly and frequently than clergy of any other country. Unfortunately, this resulted in the deportation of the highest percentage of Jews and Catholics of any Nazi-occupied nation (Lapide 202). Also, as Bishop Jean Bernard of Luxembourg told the Vatican about his experience as an inmate in Dachau, “whenever protests were made, treatment of prisoners worsened immediately (Dalin 80). Marcus Melchior, former chief rabbi of Denmark and Holocaust survivor, argues that “if the Pope had spoken out, Hitler would probably have massacred more than six million Jews and perhaps ten times ten million Catholics, if he had the power to do so” (Allegri).

As we have seen, the pope was not silent about the Nazis, but he tried to be prudent with his statements, realizing that he had a responsibility to protect as many people as he could. In this Pius was, in fact, much more vocal than such agencies as The World Council of Churches and The International Committee of the Red Cross, who steadfastly refused to say anything at all against Hitler.⁸

Actions Taken to Save Jews

Protect people is just what the Pope did, not just with prudent speech but with concrete actions. In fact, according to former papal critic Gary Krupp, Pius XII was “the greatest hero of World War II. He saved more Jews than Roosevelt, Churchill and all the rest of them combined” (Vitello).

One of the ways the Pope did this was to order Catholic churches to be sanctuaries for Jews and to have local clergy do all they could to help Jews escape the Nazis.

For example, Henri de Lubac explains in his book, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism*, that the Pope directly inspired his work to save Jews in Vichy, France (de Lubac).

In Fiume, Italy, Bishop Giuseppe Palatucci and his nephew, the chief of police, distributed false identity papers to five thousand Croatian Jews, enabling them to escape the internment camps and find refuge in his the diocese (Dalin 89). Palatucci was later executed by the Nazis for helping Jews. Recently released Vatican documents show that he was working on the direct instructions of the Pope, who also sent money for the “support of Jews interned in your diocese” (Burleigh).

⁸ http://www.catholicleague.org/piusxii_and_the_holocaust/howto.htm

Indeed, the Vatican sent out vast amounts of money sent to support pro-Jewish efforts. Not only did he send Catholic funds, Pope Pius also supervised the receipt and dispersal of funds sent from Jews from all over the world. In particular, American Jews put huge sums into his hands, which he then distributed according to their wishes. According to Father Robert Leiber's estimate, the Pope received around 2 billion lire from U.S. Jews by the end of 1945 (Lichten).

In Hungary, bishops, priests and nuns "sheltered several thousand Jews, distributed false papers and provided information, clothing, and food" to such a degree that Laszlo Endre, the Undersecretary of the Interior in the Nazi government complained that the aid efforts were "first rank" and operating on a scale never before seen (Lichten).

During the Nazi occupation of Rome, most of Rome's Jews were saved, primarily through Catholic intervention. Over seven thousand hid in the Vatican itself.⁹ Three thousand Jews were sheltered at the Pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo. Kosher food was provided and the private apartments of Pius XII were turned into a maternity ward for the Jewish children that were born there (Weigel 484). This is an important site in this discussion because no one but the Pope has the authority to open the doors of Castel Gandolfo. According to eyewitnesses, that is just what Pius XII did (Dalin).

Historian Sister Grazia Loparco explains that the Jews of Rome were helped in many different ways by the Church. They found shelter with Catholic friends and acquaintances, businesspeople and even in cloistered monasteries. In some cases, "Jews were hidden in wine cellars, underground shelters, hidden rooms, attics, storage rooms, hatchways, being able to

⁹ This according to the German Catholic News Agency (KNA). In an article titled "Most Of Rome's Jews Were Saved From Hitler's 'Final Solution'" they interview Mr. Nikolaus Kunkel, a witness to Pius XII's actions to save Roman Jews during the Second World War. The interview took place on November 7, 2000. Mr. Kunkel, 80 at the time, was an officer at the headquarters of the military governor of Rome. He directly witnessed the SS roundup of the Jews and the fact that the majority of them were saved by taking refuge in the Vatican. [<http://catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0039.html>]

come out to stretch their legs and breathe fresh air only after school hours. In the case of hospitals and clinics, they were camouflaged among the patients” (Zenit.org).

A Righteous Gentile

Because of these efforts in these and other countries, Pope Pius XII was celebrated as a hero at the end of World War II. Most tellingly, this was the attitude of several major Jewish figures of the era. For example, Golda Meir praised Pius, saying, “When fearful martyrdom came to our people in the decade of Nazi terror, the voice of the Pope was raised for the victims” (Duke).

In 1944, Rabbi Maurice Perlzweig, on behalf of the World Jewish Congress, wrote that “the repeated interventions on behalf of the Holy Father on behalf of Jewish communities in Europe has provoked the profoundest sentiments of appreciation and gratitude from Jews throughout the world” (Dalin 100).

Chief Rabbi Alexander Safran of Bucharest, Rumania, wrote in an April 7, 1944 statement, “In the most difficult hours which we Jews of Rumania have passed through, the generous assistance of the Holy See was decisive and salutary. It is not easy for us to find the right words to express the warmth and consolation we experience because of the concern of the Supreme Pontiff” (Duke).

The Chief Rabbi of Israel, Isaac Herzog, expressed gratitude for the actions of Pius XII by writing “we will never forget what His Holiness and his illustrious delegates...are doing for our unfortunate brothers and sisters in the most tragic hour of our history, which is living proof of Divine Providence in this world (Dalin 100).

Other illustrious figures who spoke openly in praise of Pius XII included Chaim Weizmann, who would become Israel's first president, Moshe Sharett, who would become Israel's first foreign minister and Dr. Leon Kubowitzky, the secretary general of the World Jewish Congress.

One of the most dramatic shows of support “would have to be Israel Zoller, Chief Rabbi of Rome from 1939 to 1945. After the war, he actually converted to Catholicism and adopted the name *Eugenio Zolli* — in honor of none other than Pope Pius XII” (Duke).

At the Pope's death, tributes from Jewish leaders from around the world poured in. Typical was the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, which wrote that Pius XII “made it possible for thousands of Jewish victims of Nazism and Fascism to be hidden away” (Dalín 102). Former American Hebrew columnist William Zuckerman wrote that no other leader “did more to help the Jews in their hour of greatest tragedy, during the Nazi occupation of Europe, than did the late pope” (Cavalli).

As Rabbi Dalín notes, “no other pope in history has been so universally praised by Jews,” and “it is hard to imagine that so many of the world's greatest Jewish leaders, on several continents, were all misguided or mistaken in praising the pope's wartime record” (Dalín 105). Indeed. It seems that the record of history is far kinder to Pope Pius XII than his current attackers would have us believe.

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