

# NTR

KEEPING CURRENT

## CHURCH HISTORY

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### **Pius XII and the Jews**

Over the past three years a number of important books have been published on the role of Pope Pius XII and the Vatican during the tragedy of the Holocaust. Much of the energy sustaining this recent flurry of publishing originated in the process for the canonization of the wartime pope, which, as recently as three years ago, seemed likely to result in his beatification. Interest in Pius and in the role of the Catholic Church and the Holocaust in general increased again with the publication in 1998 by the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews of "We Remember," the controversial document in which the Church apologized for the failures of those of its "sons and daughters" who, by sins of omission or commission, helped contribute to the tragedy.

Probably nothing so contributed to the energy of the renewed debate, however, as the publication of John Cornwell's searing indictment of Pius XII in his morally dualistic, tendentiously-titled *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. Many reviewers of this book concluded that Cornwell was driven to produce a near-diabolical portrait of the pope in part out of a desire to pre-

vent his canonization and frustrate restorationist Catholics intent on reversing the accomplishments of Vatican II. Be that as it may, the portrait Cornwell drew of Pius was scathing. He scores him for being anti-semitic, for fatally weakening (as Pius XI's Secretary of State) the Catholic Central party, and thus neutralizing any effective opposition in concluding a Concordat with the Nazi government and for being "complicit" in the Nazi genocide in this and in not speaking out, even when almost 2000 Jews were deported from Rome. He was, Cornwell concludes, "Hitler's pawn," the ideal Pope for Hitler's unspeakable plan."

Two of the books under review here present a much more sympathetic picture and one, Ronald Rychlak's *Hitler, the War and the Pope*, was written in part as a direct refutation of Cornwell (though Rychlak had nearly finished his book when *Hitler's Pope* was published). Rychlak is a lawyer and dean of the University of Mississippi School of Law, and his book a powerful brief, an *apologia pro Pio* that presents the case for the defense quite effectively. One of the great strengths of Rychlak's lengthy defense is that he proves that contemporaries

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saw Pius much differently than his critics in the fifty years since the war. An epilogue to the book stands as a forceful counter-argument to Cornwell's claims.

A similarly effective defense was published almost simultaneously as *Hitler's Pope* by Pierre Blet, one of the four Jesuits who assembled the eleven-volume collection of acts and documents of the Holy See during the Second World War. This is the work of a pacific author who, relying heavily on the acts and documents he did so much to edit and publish, quietly assembles hundreds of details regarding the Vatican's work in sheltering and rescuing victims of war. What is lacking here, though, is any overall argument or even analytical framework. Blet does, however, effectively summarize the facts. He shows that the Vatican was not passive and was not quite silent. What he does not do is ask the hard questions, such as, was it enough? And was it early enough? Much of the activity Blet describes occurs after the machinery of the Holocaust had killed the majority of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. What would have happened had the Vatican acted earlier or more forcefully?

These are the sorts of questions taken up by the other two books under review, which might be considered the case for the prosecution. In his fine book, Phayer concludes, quite sensibly, that Pius "could not have halted the Holocaust." But Phayer is also convinced that Pius could, through intermediaries such as bishops, rebuked collaboration and encouraged more vigorous rescue-and-shelter operations. These actions, he thinks, surely would have reduced the number of victims.

Why, then, did the pope at least not begin these sorts of initiatives? First, Pius was "fixated" on diplomacy and diplomatic solutions to international problems, including aggression and atrocity. Everything in his background as diplomat, nuncio, and

secretary of state conditioned him to proceed cautiously and prudently rather than, as some might have it, "prophetically." Second, he was, as Phayer points out perhaps too confidently, "obsessed" with the threat of atheistic Communism and, to some degree, saw Germany as a bulwark against Russian Bolshevism. That, and a longtime fondness for Germany, nourished during his years as nuncio in Munich and Berlin, probably made him shy of seeing Germany emasculated, and he was always alarmed by Allied determination to force "unconditional surrender" on the vanquished Axis. This obsession led Pius, finally, to plea for lenience for perpetrators of atrocity *after* the war, which Phayer counts among "the first and greatest moral ambiguities of the Cold War," as well as indicative of the "ethical shallowness of his pontificate."

Phayer has no qualms in talking about the absence of Vatican leadership. Indeed, as he points out, it was in the lower regions of the hierarchical ladder—in convents, monasteries, dioceses, parishes, organization offices, and the homes of individuals—that virtually all of the sheltering and rescue work was accomplished in Europe. (Phayer also acknowledges that several nuncios were able to save many thousands of lives.) Had the Holy See, or even the bishops, been more morally forceful and alert, they could, Phayer argues, have organized a much more effective operation underground. Pius's "greatest failure," then, was to have attempted a "diplomatic remedy for a moral outrage." One can surely agree with that verdict, even if one wishes more evidence had been presented in support of Phayer's central claim that Pius's determining motive was fear of Soviet expansion, and even if one disagrees with his argument that Pius's Christmas Day address of 1942 was so mild that no one, not even the Germans, "took it as a protest

against the slaughter of the Jews.” That is *precisely* how the editors of the *New York Times* took it and, more importantly, that is exactly how it was interpreted by the Reich Main Security office of Reinhard Heydrich, who observed, with typical logical and moral perversity, that in the speech Pius had allied himself firmly with the Jewish war criminals.

With Phayer’s thesis that there was much that Pius XII did not do, and more he could have done, Susan Zuccotti is certainly in sympathy. She agrees also with Phayer’s judgment that a flaming public protest over Vatican radio might not have altered Nazi policy toward the Jews in any case. She argues, however, that “it would have prompted more Jews to hide sooner, and saved lives.” And such a protest would have encouraged Catholics to provide assistance. Why, then, did he not issue such a protest?

Zuccotti insists, correctly, I think, that it was not because Pius was morally numb. There is little doubt that (*pace* severe critics like the German playwright Rolf Hochhuth), he suffered terrible anguish over the suffering of war victims. First, he was convinced that a public denunciation could well have made matters worse. Pronouncements might have accelerated deportations and heightened reprisals, not only against Jews, but against Catholics, Pius argued, and Zuccotti concludes that the pope was “probably correct” about this. Like Phayer, Zuccotti emphasizes the pope’s diplomatic priorities and his hopes to be called on to negotiate a truce which, as mentioned, seem increasingly quixotic after January 1943, when the Allies insisted on unconditional surrender. In addition, “above all else,” Zuccotti argues, the pope feared for the physical integrity of the Vatican (more, perhaps, than its moral integrity?), and it is true that either Fascist Italy or Fascist Germany could have easily invaded and occupied the Vatican.

Zuccotti mentions almost in passing the crucially important theological point that these were religious men and that, in their eyes, “suffering was regrettable but, compared with the vast expanse of eternity, insignificant.” She continues: “The Church, however, had to be defended in all places at all costs, for individuals could attain salvation only through the sacraments it offered. It was a harsh doctrine with harsh consequences. The implication was that the Church could accept any compromises as long as it was able to keep going, to minister the sacraments to those in need of them.”

Very harsh, all too harsh, yet true. Pius’s first priority was to keep intact the one institution, as he saw it, that provided a link between this profane world and the realm of the heavenly and divine. There was much, Zuccotti concludes, that he could have done to save lives, especially in Italy. But with priorities like this, and the others she mentions, he was predisposed to less obviously effective methods, like prayer. That we now in the Church find such conduct unacceptable and even sinful is itself a result of the profound moral introspection that Pius’s docile behavior has engendered. That it took such an unspeakable tragedy for Catholic attitudes toward our religious siblings to change can only be cause for everlasting grief and serious contrition, probably at the institutional level above all.

### References

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