

Pius XII: Puppet of Hitler or Protector of Jews?

Historians' Changing Perspectives on Pope Pius XII's Involvement in the Holocaust

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During the course of World War II, the Nazis systematically killed and abused millions of minority groups in central Europe, mainly Jews. While experts disagree, the most conservative estimates of those killed range from about six to seven million. Hitler and the other leaders of the Holocaust were baptized but not practicing Catholics, and many of their subjects were also of that same faith. Over the years, historians have assigned Catholics large amounts of blame in the conflict, especially the bishops. But by far the most debated figure remains Pope Pius XII, the reigning pontiff of World War II. During and immediately following the Second World War, critics of all kinds praised the Pope's involvement and leadership in defending Jews from the Holocaust; later an anti-Catholic group of historians (referred to in this paper as the revisionists) began arguing that the pope neglected the Jews and conspired with Hitler to destroy them; in response, various historians (referred to as the revivalists) keenly defended the Pope, claiming he did everything in his power to stop the devastation of the Holocaust. Today, the debate still rages on and Pope Pius XII remains one of the most controversial twentieth century figures of the Catholic Church.

Ever since he took control of the National Socialist German Worker's Party, Hitler was known to be a hater of Jews. One of the major points of his famous Mein Kampf was the extermination of the Jewish people. Using the Jews as a scapegoat for the loss of the First World War allowed his extraordinarily swift rise to power. Anti-Semitism was not uncommon in Europe, and Hitler's actions were barely noticed at first. Even when he publicly announced his goal of "the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe" (qtd in "The Making of the West", 930), most nations failed to recognize the evil at work. One of the few leaders who did was Pope Pius XII. Born Eugenio Pacelli, he was a native Roman by birth. At the early age of twenty-three, he was ordained a priest, and he became a bishop when he was only forty-one. Pope Pius

XI died in 1939, at the height of tension before World War II, and Pacelli was chosen as his successor. According to the media at the time, Pius XII persistently condemned Hitler and his agenda from the beginning of his pontificate. He released his first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus (Of the Supreme Pontificate)*, the year he was elected pope. According to historian and Rabbi David Dalin, it “begged for peace, expressly rejected Nazism, and expressly mentioned Jews” (73). Various media outlets recognized and praised the work; the *New York Times* gave it a place on the front page of its October 28, 1939 publication. “Pope Condemns Dictators, Treaty Violators, Racism” the headline read (Rychlak, 227). Not only was the work acknowledged by opponents of the Holocaust; the infamous leader of the Gestapo, Heinrich Mueller, comprehended that it was directed against the Germans and consequently informed his superiors.

Pius XII’s efforts were not just limited to the release of Catholic doctrine. Utilizing modern media outlets, he ordered Vatican Radio and also the Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, to report on the atrocities of the Nazis inflicted on the Jews. Aware of the Christian call to action, he sheltered Jews in the Vatican and protected them from nosy Italian authorities. Not only did he hide them, but “[w]henver possible, kosher foods for the Jews were supplied” (Marchione 39). Whether secular or religious, the media of the time praised his stand against Hitler. Jewish publications, such as the *Jewish Advocate* of Boston, made special mention of his involvement. Here, the important point to remember is that the pope was very outspoken for his times and his geographical location. Italy was under the control of Benito Mussolini, a fascist dictator who shared many values with the Nazis. Not only that, the Germans later overran Italy to take direct control. Through all of this, Pope Pius XII continued to speak out against aggression towards Jews. Today, his actions do not seem as critical and blunt as they did back

then. He did what he could to help the Jews, despite the threat of being captured by Hitler. Indeed, he was “ready to let himself be deported to a concentration camp, rather than do anything against his conscience,” according to a foreign minister of Mussolini’s (Dalin 76). During the war, various news sources and experts came to a consensus that the pope did effectively help the Jews, as seen in many news articles, letters, and other primary sources from the period.

Following the radical changes in society during the 1960s and 1970s, some historians’ views on Pope Pius XII’s role in the Holocaust began to change. During that time period, many young people rebelled against the existing authorities in place: the government, private corporations, and religion. The new age released a wave of aggression toward Catholics, and the popes were not exempt. While it took them many years to be published, there can be no doubt that anti-Pius XII literature had its roots in the countercultural movement.

One of the most prominent revisionist books was Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII, written by John Cornwell. Accompanied by a title written in authoritative block letters reminiscent of the Third Reich and German power, the book uses its four hundred pages to construct a pejorative argument of the pope’s guilt. The work roots its assessment of Pius XII in the centuries-old history of Catholic anti-Semitism. “Practically every right-wing dictator of the period had been born and brought up a Catholic – notably Hitler, Franco, Petain, Mussolini...” it says, conveniently forgetting the fact that a Christian is defined by his personal piety, not a childhood, bygone religious affiliation (Cornwell, 280). Cornwell’s main claim against Pius XII is reflected in the section heading: “Pacelli’s Journey into Silence” (281). He discusses *Summi Pontificus*, claiming that it represents the failure of the pope because the final draft was not quite as pointed as one of the drafts. Cornwell’s main arguments stem from the records of various diplomatic figures present at the Vatican. He claims that all throughout the war, the ambassadors

from England, France, and other countries constantly notified the pope that his public statements were not strong enough. These feelings are summed up by historian Guenter Lewy:

“A public denunciation of the mass murders by Pius XII, broadcast widely over the Vatican radio and read from the pulpit by the bishops, would have revealed to Jews and Christians alike what deportation to the East entailed. The Pope would have been believed, whereas the broadcasts of the Allies were often shrugged off as war propaganda” (qtd in Cornwell 286).

Another point that the revisionists take issue with is that the pope and other Catholic leaders often sought sanctuary for former Jews that had converted to Catholicism. What is interesting is that these scholars often ignored public opinion of Pius XII at the time of the war and following it. Their problem is that they try to judge the pope’s actions based on current standards. For his time, before the massive and explicit social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, his statements would have appeared to be very critical of Hitler and the Holocaust.

Following the publication of such books like Hitler’s Pope, there was a reactionary, literary movement in opposition to the defamation of the pope. These books sought to separate the truth from the lies and to vindicate the action of Pope Pius II. While some might examine the books and claim they are all written by Catholics, the truth remains that several are authored by Jews, some in positions of great religious influence. As a whole, these books conclude that the pope indeed did all that he could to prevent deaths in the Holocaust. Obviously, the greatest danger to the pope’s ability to protest was the imminent threat of Hitler taking control over the Vatican. However, historians from the revivalist period also add the key bit of information that Pius XII also did not want to alienate the millions of Catholics living under the rule of Hitler and his allies. For instance, in January 1942, the Vatican officially established diplomatic relations

with the Japanese. This action caused the Allies to complain. However, “the Holy See felt that it needed to have diplomatic relations with the Japanese government. It was simply a reflection of the role of a neutral church in the time of war” (Rychlak 170). Despite the fact that Hitler was an oppressive dictator and killer of millions, the Vatican was first a peace-keeping organization and had no place in taking sides in a world war. The revivalists also bring up the fact that many ordinary Italian Catholics helped out Jews without question. They claim this was encouraged by the pope in many confidential messages sent to various Catholics. Evidently, Pius XII hid many Jews within the Vatican and his summer residence, Castel Gandolfo. “While civil authorities fled, the Pope personally took care of the immediate needs of the victims, providing food and disturbing funds to the homeless” (Marchione 39-40). Both privately and publicly, Pius XII defended the Jews from the atrocities of Hitler.

Ever since the end of World War II, a debate has raged over Pope Pius XII’s role in saving the Jews from the Holocaust. While most authorities seemed to approve of his actions during and after the war, a group of historians rose in the second half of the twentieth century claiming that the pope did not do enough to help the Jews. In reaction, other experts argued that the pope did indeed do his part to prevent the Holocaust. His legacy lives on and “[c]ontrary to how posterity has portrayed him, he was truly interested... in all members of the human race” (Machione 40).

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