Catholic Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and Pope Pius XII: Hitler's Pope or Maligned Savior?

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Introduction

What did the Catholic Church, in particular its leader Pope Pius XII, do to address anti-Semitism and the Holocaust during World War II? For fifty years, the debate has continued to rage. Critics and defenders of the church have engaged in a spirited back and forth in print and other forms of media, and neither Catholics nor Jews find themselves united in opinion on whether or not Pius XII and the Catholic Church did enough to save Jews. The controversy opens up divisions between liberal and reformist Catholics and Jews who are mostly critical of Pius XII, and conservative Jews and traditionalist Catholics who strongly disagree. A review of the sources available, both contemporary to the Holocaust and later analyses, reveal that Pius neither single-handedly saved hundreds of thousands of Jews from certain death, nor did he do nothing at all. The reality, as usual, is complex. The question to be asked is how did the pope himself respond to the crisis, and what particularly did he do to alleviate the Jews' ordeal? As can be seen, evidence for the pope's direct, active involvement in combating the Holocaust is scarce.

The Popes and the Jews—From Gregory to Pius

To understand the position of the church in World War II, one must understand the tortured, complex relationship between the Catholic hierarchy and the Jewish people over many centuries. From the sixth century CE through the Renaissance, popes were fairly tolerant and broad-minded toward the Jews, despite traditional Christian antipathy toward those they held responsible for the death of Christ. Gregory I (the Great) was the first to issue decrees granting rights and protections to the Jews, tolerating Jewish worship and granting protection from violence to life and property. In the fourteenth century, Pope Clement VI absolved Jews of "responsibility" for the Black Death. During the Renaissance, a succession of popes welcomed Jewish scholars to the papal court and raised Jewish men to positions in the papal households, some becoming close advisors and personal physicians to the popes. The popes also continually condemned specific cases of "blood libel", the practice of falsely charging Jews with the ritual murder of Christian children for the purposes of using their blood for unleavened bread for the Passover holiday. Such attitudes emanating from the Holy Father were not uncommon through the sixteenth century.

Pope Julius III, the last of the pro-Jewish Renaissance popes, died in 1555. His successor Pope Paul IV signaled a marked reversal in papal attitudes toward the Jews. Prior to Paul's election, Jewish residents of the Papal States had freedom of movement and could live wherever they desired. After Paul's election, participation in commerce was restricted to "selling rags", and Jewish land ownership was forbidden. Jews were forced to wear identifying yellow badges, and were forced to live in ghettos. The reign of the unpopular Paul IV was short-lived, but his death in 1559 did not herald a return to the previous enlightened attitudes of the past. His successors through the early eighteenth century maintained the restrictions. 451 Later, more tolerant popes,

⁴⁴⁹ David G. Dalin, *The Myth of Hitler's Pope: How Pope Pius XII Rescued the Jews From the Nazis*. Washington, D. C.: Regnery Publishing, 2005. 19-20.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 20-32.

⁴⁵¹ David I. Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism.* New York: Vintage Books, 2001. 27-28.

chief among them Pope Clement XIV (1769 -1774), eased restrictions and allowed Jews to work in more occupations than in the previous two centuries. Clement's successor, Pius VI reinstated the harsh restrictions in place since the reign of Paul IV. Since then, with the exception of periods of occupation by French troops from 1798-1799 and 1809-1814, during the Napoleonic Wars, Jews in the Papal States continued to suffer under the onerous restrictions laid upon them by the Roman Pontiff. Efforts at liberalizing anti-Jewish laws failed after the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815. Hard-line cardinals prevailed for the better part of the nineteenth century, but the election of Pope Pius IX in 1846 seemed to indicate a shift in attitudes.

The election of Pope Pius IX was hailed by Jews and political liberals as a victory for enlightened attitudes and those seeking change in policy toward Jews in the Papal States. Initially, they were encouraged by the modest reforms Pius IX agreed to: opening the gates of the Roman Ghetto, abolishing the practice of compulsory Catholic sermons designed to convert Roman Jews, and religious instruction of Jews that had been baptized against their parents' will. 454 455 These hopeful signs were soon dashed by the revolutions of 1848. Monarchical, autocratic governments were being challenged throughout Europe, and as the spirit of revolt spread to the Papal States in mid-November 1848, Pope Pius was compelled to flee Rome himself, escaping in the garb of a priest. Giuseppe Garibaldi led troops into Rome, where a republic was declared in February 1849. The Jews were emancipated and the ghetto and the old papal restrictions were done away with. The republic was short-lived, however, as French forces took the city on behalf of the pope in July 1849, and Pius returned with a vengeance the next year. 456

Contrary to his popular perception, Pope Pius IX was neither a liberal nor a reformer. Pius ordered Jews back into their ghettoes and reinstated the draconian anti-Jewish restrictions of his predecessors, despite taking loans from Jewish bankers. Further infuriating liberals, Pius condoned the 1858 abduction of a six-year old Jewish child, Edgardo Mortara, who had supposedly been baptized by a Christian servant girl when she feared he would die from illness as a baby. Refusing calls to return the child to his parents from governments around the world, Pius kept the child and raised him as a Catholic at the papal court as a surrogate son. 458

The pontiff's anti-Semitism became ever more strident and pronounced as the nationalists closed in. Pius railed against the "synagogue of Satan, which gathers its troops" in the "great war being waged against the Catholic Church." Pius "helped to give the charge of Jewish ritual murder," the blood libel, "new respectability" by legitimizing the cult of a child martyr who had allegedly been killed by the Jews in the late fifteenth century, and publicly praised new literary works that resurrected the blood libel. The aging Pius IX and his successor, Pope Leo XIII (elected 1878) supported and exerted a great deal of influence over Catholic periodicals, of which the most influential and most closely tied to the Holy See were *L'Osservatore Romano* and the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. The latter publication was especially vicious in anti-Semitic

⁴⁵² Ibid., 26-27.

⁴⁵³ Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, 29-36.

⁴⁵⁴ John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. New York: Viking Press, 1999. 11.

⁴⁵⁵ Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, 108-111.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid. 113-115.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 118-125; Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 27.

⁴⁵⁹ Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, 126-128.

campaigns, reprinting the racial theories of leading anti-Semites in its pages, along with their own diatribes against Jews, continuing throughout the reign of Leo XIII. 460

Such campaigns were curtailed in most Catholic journals immediately upon the 1903 election of Leo's successor, Pope Pius X. Pius X held very positive views of Jews, once telling Pope Leo that he felt "as far as charity is concerned...the Jews" made the best Christians. To the editor of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the new pontiff stated that he "often found [the Jews] to be upright and trustworthy people." Pius X also forcefully denounced anti-Jewish pogroms and the blood libel legend on more than one occasion during his papacy. ⁴⁶¹ This was a drastic change in attitude from Pius X's predecessors. This shift was maintained after his death in 1914, as Pope Benedict XV, elected as Pius' successor, stopped the lingering racist anti-Semitic campaigns in the two publications most closely tied to the Vatican, *L'Osservatore Romano* and *La Civiltà Cattolica*. ⁴⁶²

Pope Benedict XV continued to advocate for better relations between Jews and the Catholic Church throughout his seven and a half year reign, which partly coincided with the First World War. He continued to denounce anti-Jewish pogroms in Eastern Europe, and pleaded for respect for the Jewish people, though Benedict stopped short of offering support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Never of robust health, Benedict did not long survive the war; a cold in December 1921 soon developed into bronchial pneumonia, and the pope died on 22 January 1922. Benedict's successor, Pope Pius XI (previously Cardinal Achille Ratti), was much more ambivalent toward the Jews than Pius X or Benedict. Previous to being made a Cardinal and Archbishop of Milan, Ratti was papal nuncio (ambassador) to the newly reestablished nation of Poland. During his term as ambassador, Ratti "imbibed the anti-Semitic stereotypes that prevailed in certain Polish circles and the anti-Judaism that lingered in the Vatican, sometimes merging the two in his rhetoric". 463 When requested by Pope Benedict to investigate reports of anti-Jewish murders in Poland, Nuncio Ratti did his best to forestall any meaningful intervention by the Vatican; indeed, Ratti downplayed the severity of the situation and decried what he saw as a disproportionate influence of Jews, many of whom were communists, in Polish public life. 464 After his election as Pope Pius XI, Ratti's attitudes underwent a gradual evolution. During his pontificate, the Vatican was careful to differentiate between what it saw as two different types of anti-Semitism: that which is based on biology (racial anti-Semitism), and that which is based on faith (religious anti-Judaism). Pius XI condemned on numerous occasions the racial anti-Semitism that dominated Catholic periodicals during the reigns of Pius IX and Leo XIII, and gained adherents again in the 1920s and 1930s, but Vatican journals were slow to moderate their religious anti-Judaism under Pius XI's leadership. 465 The pope's condemnations were also offset by his support for authoritarian anti-communist governments in Europe that often restricted the religious liberty of non-Catholics, including the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini in Italy. After the capture of Rome by Italian nationalists in 1870, the popes went into seclusion as "prisoners in the Vatican," and refused to acknowledge the new Kingdom of Italy. Pius XI made it a priority to reach détente with the Italian government, and concluded the Lateran Treaty with the Fascist regime in 1929, which recognized a united Italy,

⁴⁶⁰ Frank J. Coppa. *The Papacy, the Jews, and the Holocaust*. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006. 109-112.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 126-132.

⁴⁶² Ibid, 132-133, 141.

⁴⁶³ Ibid, 136-138, 143.

⁴⁶⁴ Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, 250-253.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, 270-273

established Vatican City as an independent state, and regulated the Holy See's relations with and the role of the Catholic Church in Italy. 466

Prelude to the Holocaust—The Vatican and the Rise of Nazism

The rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany caused special problems for the Vatican. Of the 13 million Catholic voters in Germany, author Frank Coppa estimates that 6-7 million voted for the Nazis in the election of March 1933, and some in the Vatican, including the Cardinal Secretary of State (foreign minister), Eugenio Pacelli, previously the papal nuncio to Berlin, and the current papal nuncio to the German Reich, Cesare Orsenigo, were advocating rapprochement with the new regime in Berlin. Even so, the Nazi regime and the Vatican remained wary of each other, and when the new government passed its first racial laws against Jews, the Vatican Jesuit journal La Civiltà Cattolica strongly condemned them, in what was seen as a signal of papal disapproval. 467 Nevertheless, the Vatican hierarchy, particularly the Cardinal Secretary of State, Pacelli, considered it of vital importance to reach an understanding with the German government. A concordat (treaty) was negotiated by Cardinal Pacelli and German vice-chancellor Franz von Papen, Hitler's deputy, which saw the withdrawal of Catholic political parties from German life, and sanctioned a legal basis for Catholic religious and educational freedom in Germany. The Vatican made clear that it reached this settlement because it had no choice: Catholic self-preservation in Germany was at stake. In the eyes of the Holy See, all else was secondary. The concordat was signed on July 20, 1933. But almost immediately, Hitler began violating it. 468

The Vatican continued to make protests when provisions of the concordat relating to Catholic social and political organizations were violated throughout the 1930s, nearly resulting in Pope Pius XI abrogating the concordat himself, changing his mind only when Pacelli informed him that breaking off diplomatic relations might further endanger the German Catholic church. The blunt-spoken, confrontational pontiff yielded to the cautious, diplomatic cardinal on this issue, but Pius' evolving anti-Nazism was not deterred; over thirty protests were made by the pope between 1933 and 1936 alone. The previously anti-Semitic journal La Civiltà Cattolica began lambasting Nazi philosophy, including its racial laws and theories. The papal opposition to Nazism culminated in the publication of the encyclical Mit brennender Sorge in 1937. The encyclical condemned racism, but did not explicitly mention anti-Semitism by name. The conflict between the Vatican and the Nazi regime, having simmered under the surface of diplomatic niceties for four years, broke out into the open. 469 470 Pius XI became more and more forthright in his denunciations of Nazi racial philosophy. At an audience with Belgian Catholics in September 1938, the pope was moved to tears as he declared that "spiritually, we are all Semites...it is not possible for Christians to participate in anti-Semitism."⁴⁷¹ The introduction of Nazi-style racial laws in Fascist Italy in 1938 further angered the pope, but the nullification of marriages between Catholics and Catholic converts from Judaism in particular drew his ire. The pontiff vociferously protested this law on the grounds that Jews, once converted to Catholicism, were no longer Jews. Pius XI wrote a personal letter to King Victor Emmanuel III protesting the provisions against

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⁴⁶⁶ Coppa, The Papacy, the Jews, and the Holocaust, 145-148.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 151.

⁴⁶⁸ José M. Sánchez. *Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Controversy*. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002. 85-88.

⁴⁶⁹ Frank J. Coppa. "Between Morality and Diplomacy: The Vatican's 'Silence' During the Holocaust," *Journal of Church and State* 50, no. 3: 541-568.

⁴⁷⁰ Michael Phayer. *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. 18.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, 3.

intermarriage between Jewish converts and Catholics, to no avail. Why did Pius speak out on this one subject, but remained silent on the ever-widening Nazi and Fascist campaigns against the Jews, including the terror of "Kristallnacht" in the fall of 1938? A popular suggestion is that Cardinal Pacelli, knowing that he would be the front-runner at the next papal conclave, dissuaded Pius XI from speaking out to protect his own chances at gaining the papacy when the ailing pontiff died. More plausible is that Pius XI planned to make an official, definitive condemnation of racism and anti-Semitism in an encyclical he commissioned the previous August. The document, while not as forceful as it could have been, clearly and unmistakably condemned both racism and anti-Semitism. Historians speculate that had Pius XI lived longer, he might have revised the draft to give it a more forceful tone. However, the pope, suffering the lingering effects of two significant heart attacks in the fall of 1938, died of a third on 10 February 1939, before any changes to the draft encyclical could made.

Pacelli Takes Charge

Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, to the surprise of few, was elected pope on the third ballot of the conclave, the quickest in three centuries, and took the name Pius XII in tribute to his immediate predecessor and Pope Pius X. Some cardinals voted for Pacelli with reservations, fearing that the top diplomat might be too diplomatic in a world on the edge of war. ⁴⁷⁵ Those within the Vatican that hoped Pius XII would continue where Pius XI left off in confronting Nazism and totalitarianism must have been disappointed when the new pope suppressed his predecessor's draft encyclical, tentatively titled *Humani generis unitas*, and filed it away, not to see the light of day for fifty-six years. 476 Pius XII can certainly be said to have held some negative impressions of Jews. During his time as papal nuncio to Bavaria in the aftermath of World War I, a Communist revolt took place in the Bayarian capital of Munich. Nuncio Pacelli was greatly influenced by this event; in one letter dated April 1919, Pacelli's disgust is palpable as he goes out of his way to emphasize the Jewishness of the deprayed, debauched revolutionary leaders he is forced to deal with. He labels all the Communist agitators as Jews, demonstrating his contempt for both. 477 As late as 1938, one year before his election as pope, Pacelli indulged in what some historians have deemed anti-Semitic language. To the International Eucharistic Conference, held in Budapest, Hungary in May 1938, Pacelli emphasized opposition to those "foes of Jesus" who demanded his crucifixion and condemned "those whose lips curse [Christ] and whose hearts reject him even today."478 Pacelli developed a visceral hatred of Bolshevism during his stay in Germany. He became convinced that Bolshevism was the great and powerful enemy of the Catholic Church and that it had to be stopped at any cost. He also developed a deep affection for Germany; many of his domestic servants and confidants that he brought back to Rome when he became Cardinal Secretary of State were German. That great affection, combined with his loathing of Communism and his less than positive impressions of Jews, may have caused Pacelli as pope to view Nazism

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⁴⁷² Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, 287-288.

⁴⁷³ "Kristallnacht," or the Night of Broken Glass, was an anti-semitic pogrom carried out by the Nazi regime on November 9-10, 1938.

⁴⁷⁴ Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, 1930-1965, 3-4.

⁴⁷⁵ Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 206-208.

⁴⁷⁶ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. A Moral Reckoning: the Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair. New York: Vintage Books, 2003. 39-40. ⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

⁴⁷⁸ Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 185-186.

as the lesser threat to Europe and the Catholic Church than the Soviet Union, and to not speak out as forcefully against Nazi oppression as he might have. 479 480

Missed Opportunities

A missed opportunity came in October 1939 with the release of Pius XII's first papal encyclical, *Summi pontificatus* shortly after the start of World War II. Rather than forthrightly addressing and naming Nazi and Fascist anti-Semitism, Pius settles for a vague reference to the creed of the Apostle Paul: that there is "neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision...: but Christ is all and in all." He decries the invasion of Catholic Poland, but leaves unmentioned the invaders themselves. Weak and feeble though the encyclical was, it satisfied the Allied powers and enraged the Nazi regime, quick as always to take offense at the slightest provocation. ⁴⁸¹

The case of Pius XII is marked by his great desire to be a peacemaker. In a fall 1942 discussion with the American chargé d'affaires Harold Tittman, Pius told him that he could not speak out at that time because if he did, and the Germans later lost the war, the German people would blame him, if only in part, for their defeat. He also stated in a later conversation with Tittman that he could not condemn Nazi atrocities without also condemning Soviet atrocities, which would upset the Allies. Pius' single-minded focus on Vatican diplomacy as a means of ending the war caused him to overlook atrocities committed by the Nazis and their satellites throughout Europe. When the Nazi puppet state of Croatia committed genocide against Jews and Orthodox Christians, the apostolic visitor to Croatia (roughly equivalent to a modern United Nations observer), answerable to the Cardinal Secretary of State, made only perfunctory attempts to intervene on their behalf. Pius also did not let the mounting evidence of the genocide of Europe's Jews distract him from seeking a diplomatic end to the war. The Vatican did not involve itself in negotiations with the United Kingdom and the United States to evacuate Jews seeking to escape occupied France and avoid being shipped to Auschwitz. Pius also tired of being harangued about the Jews in Poland, snapping at the Polish ambassador when he brought up the subject repeatedly. 482 483 To the pope, unfortunately, genocide was a distraction from his goal of bringing war-torn Europe to peace.

The closest Pope Pius XII ever came to a clear, ringing denunciation of the anti-Semitic Nazi genocide was his Christmas address of 1942: "Humanity owes this vow to those hundreds of thousands who, without any fault on their part, sometimes only because of their nationality or race, have been marked down for death or gradual extinction." Pius not once mentions Nazism, Germany, Hitler, or the Jews. He provided no direct, moral guidance to the world as to what to do, instead he offered a vague, nebulous statement that did not adequately convey the enormity of what the Vatican, by this point, knew from reports of diplomats throughout Europe, like the March 1942 memorandum from Richard Lichtheim and Gerhard Riegner describing violent anti-Semitic acts in the occupied Balkans and in occupied France: that the Nazi regime was committed to eliminating the Jewish population of Europe, and was well on its way to achieving that goal. 485 486

Pius, the Jews of Rome and the German Occupation

⁴⁷⁹ Coppa, The Papacy, the Jews, and the Holocaust, 181.

⁴⁸⁰ Goldhagen, A Moral Reckoning, 43-44.

⁴⁸¹ Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 233-234.

⁴⁸² Phayer, The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965, 56-61.

⁴⁸³ John F. Morley. *Vatican Diplomacy and the Jews During the Holocaust 1939-1943*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1980. 162-165.

⁴⁸⁴ Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, 292.

⁴⁸⁵ Goldhagen, A Moral Reckoning, 114-115.

⁴⁸⁶ Morley, Vatican Diplomacy and the Jews During the Holocaust 1939-1943, 212-215.

When the Italian government dismissed Benito Mussolini and reached an armistice with the Allies, they turned their country into another target for Nazi occupation and conquest. As Jewish refugees poured into Rome after the fall of Mussolini in late July 1943, they suddenly found themselves at high risk when the Germans invaded in September. An unidentified Italian Jewish lawyer approached Monsignor Giuseppe di Meglio of the Vatican Secretariat of State on September 17 to ask permission to accommodate the refugees in Roman religious institutions such as convents and monasteries that were treated as neutral and extraterritorial under the Lateran Treaty of 1929 which established Vatican City as an independent state. Di Meglio discouraged the lawyer, and in his report of the meeting written the following day, makes clear that no official action would be taken on the part of the Vatican hierarchy. 487

Religious schools, convents, monasteries, and other Vatican properties throughout Rome were indeed opened to Jewish refugees and to Jewish residents of Rome, with those that did so claiming the pope's direct orders, but concrete evidence beyond the anecdotal that indicates a papal directive at the time to do so is lacking. Also About 1,023 Jews did not manage to make it to a safe hiding place. On October 16, less than a month after Monsignor di Meglio's meeting with the Jewish lawyer, and in the shadow of the Apostolic Palace itself, these remaining Jews were rounded up by the SS and military police. Two days later, they were packed aboard trains headed for Auschwitz. All but 196 did not survive the week. Only seventeen survived the war. When informed of the roundup, the pontiff claimed surprise and indignation, but no protest of the roundup of Roman Jews to the German occupation authorities was ever registered by Pius XII or his Cardinal Secretary of State, Luigi Maglione. Another was liberated by the Allies on 4 June 1944, and the immediate threat to the city and the pope was removed.

Conclusion

The evolution of opinion over the years has gone from unqualified praise for Pius XII from all quarters to heated debate over his role in World War II. At his death, he was praised by Jewish leaders for his work in rescuing Jews from the Nazi onslaught. As time went on, Pius' reputation began to suffer as historians discovered missed opportunities for the pope to assert his moral authority in the crisis. Pius XII was not a monster. He held negative views towards Jews, but was probably not an anti-Semite in the way most people understand the term. He had great, though misplaced faith in diplomacy and in his own abilities to achieve peace. He inherited a church that paradoxically at times treated Jews humanely, yet still vilified them for the execution of the Christian savior. He had a misplaced desire to protect that church from the ravages of Communism that blinded him to the more immediate and dire threat of the Nazis. He was a man of good intentions that was probably the wrong person for the job at the wrong time. But the best that can be said of Pius during the Holocaust is that he passively contributed to saving thousands of European Jews through the efforts of subordinates both inside the Vatican and farther afield. He did not make active contributions, did not speak out forcefully in the manner of his predecessor for fear of making the situation of the Jews worse, did not understand that their situation could not get any worse than genocide, and that the moral authority of the Roman Catholic pontiff might be useful in mobilizing resistance to and perhaps even sabotage of the Nazi killing machine. This lack of empathy and understanding is the tragedy of Eugenio Pacelli, Pope Pius XII.

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⁴⁸⁷ Susan Zucotti. *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. 171-174.

⁴⁸⁸ Dalin, The Myth of Hitler's Pope, 80-83.

⁴⁸⁹ Zucotti, *Under His Very Windows*, 204-214.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid, 155-160.