

The Role of Pope Pius XII in World War II

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ABSTRACT

The controversy that followed Pius throughout his life did not stop with his death. Though upon his death he was praised effusively by world leaders and especially by Jewish groups for his actions during World War II on behalf of the persecuted, within a decade he was depicted in German playwright Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1963) as indifferent to the Nazi genocide. More recently, John Cornwell's controversial book on Pius, *Hitler's Pope* (1999), characterized him as anti-Semitic. Both depictions, however, lack credible substantiation. Furthermore, though Pius's wartime public condemnations of racism and genocide were cloaked in generalities, he did not turn a blind eye to the suffering but chose to use diplomacy to aid the persecuted. It is impossible to know if a more forthright condemnation of the Holocaust would have proved more effective in saving lives, though it probably would have better assured his reputation. Not surprisingly, the move to beatify Pius XII alongside John XXIII in 2000 provoked a storm of controversy that may have contributed to the decision to postpone Pius's beatification.

Key Words: Roman Catholic Church, Russia, Religious Affairs, Communism, Holocaust, War crimes, ideological barricades, sympathy for jews,

INTRODUCTION

Pope Pius XII [02-03-1876 to 09-10-1958], original name, Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli], was the head of the Catholic Church and sovereign of the Vatican City State from March 1939 to his death in October 1958. Before his election to the papacy, he served as secretary of the Department of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, papal nuncio to Germany, and Cardinal Secretary of State, in which capacity he worked to conclude treaties with European and Latin American nations. Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli was born on 2 March 1876, in Rome into a family of intense Catholic piety with a history of ties to the papacy (the "Black Nobility"). His parents were Filippo Pacelli (1837–1916) and Virginia Pacelli (1844–1920). His grandfather, Marcantonio Pacelli, had been Under-Secretary in the Papal Ministry of Finances and then Secretary of the Interior under Pope Pius IX from 1851 to 1870 and helped found the Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1861.

In 1894, Pacelli began his theology studies at Rome's oldest seminary, the Almo Collegio Capranica, and in November of the same year, registered to take a philosophy course at the Jesuit Pontifical Gregorian University and theology at the Pontifical Roman Athenaeum S. Apollinare. He was also enrolled at the State University, La Sapienza where he studied modern languages and history. At the end of the first academic year however, in the summer of 1895, he dropped out of both the Capranica and the Gregorian University. As a young boy and in later life, Pacelli was an ardent follower of the Virgin Mary. He was consecrated as a bishop on 13 May 1917, the very first day of the apparitions of Our Lady of Fátima. Based on the Portuguese mystic Alexandrina of Balazar requests, he consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1942. His remains were to be buried in the crypt of Saint Peter's Basilica on the feast day of Our Lady of Fátima, 13 October 1958. Raised in a religious family, Pacelli excelled as a student and athlete in his early years. After deciding to become a priest rather than a lawyer, as was family tradition, Pacelli entered both the Capranica Seminary and the Pontifical Gregorian University in 1894. He received a Baccalaureate and Licentiate in Theology *summa cum laude* in 1895. Pacelli officially joined the priesthood on 2 April 1899, and while serving his first appointment in his home church, he pursued doctorates in Canon Law, Civil Law, Philosophy, and Theology at the Papal Athenaeum of St. Apollinaris. In 1904 Pacelli became Monsignor Pacelli and began assisting the Office of the Congregation of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs. He gradually fell into diplomatic assignments for the Vatican due to his sharp memory and uncanny ability to master new languages. In 1917 Pope Benedict XV appointed him an

archbishop and Nuncio to Bavaria, Germany. His work with the poor there continued through the beginning of World War I and his dedication to peace won him the vote of every cardinal in the electorate, except his own, for his appointment to the papacy, which took place on 2 March 1939.

Pius XI died on February 10, 1939. Pacelli was elected pope on March 2, 1939, and took the name Pius XII. As pope, he had three official positions. He was head of his church and directly communicated with bishops everywhere. He was chief of state of the Vatican, with his diplomatic corps. He was also the Bishop of Rome. In theory, at least, his views could influence 400 million Catholics, including those in all the occupied eastern territories – the Poles, Baltics, Croatians, Slovaks, and others. As soon as he was appointed, Pacelli did speak out against the 1938 Italian racial laws that dealt with mixed marriages and children of mixed marriages. His concern was not about the mistreatment of Jews but the unfairness of applying the laws to Jews who had converted to Catholicism. As the security of the Jewish population became more precarious, Pius XII did intervene in March 1939 to obtain 3,000 visas for European Jews who had been baptized and converted to Catholicism to enter Brazil. Two-thirds of these were later revoked, however, because of “improper conduct,” probably meaning that the Jews started practicing Judaism once in Brazil. At that time, the pope did nothing to save practicing Jews. Pius XII explained the Catholic faith in 41 ‘encyclicals’ and almost 1000 messages and speeches during his long pontificate. *Mediator Dei* clarified membership and participation in the church. The encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* opened the doors for biblical research. His magisterium was far larger and is difficult to summarize. In numerous speeches Catholic teaching is related to various aspects of life, education, medicine, politics, war and peace, the life of saints, Mary, the Mother of God, things eternal and contemporary. Theologically, Pius XII specified the nature of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. He also gave a new freedom to engage in theological investigations.

Though much of his papacy concentrated on issues of world peace and religious tolerance, Pope Pius XII also took time to address the world on issues regarding procreation. He repeatedly affirmed the Catholic support of the sanctity of life, rejecting therapeutic exceptions to abortion in speeches to Catholic midwives, obstetricians, and medical councils. He likewise condemned sterilization and the birth control pill to prevent conception, only approving the use of such procedures or medicines when medically necessary for other health reasons. His statements on the rhythm method and the concept of a birth control pill influenced the creator of the pill, John Rock, to seek a natural means of monitoring and suppressing reproduction; he and Rock simply disagreed as to what constituted a “natural” method. During World War II Pius saw his primary obligation as being to ensure the continuation of the “Church visible” and its divine mission. Pius XII lobbied world leaders to prevent the outbreak of World War II and then expressed his dismay that war had come in his October 1939 *Summi Pontificatus* encyclical.

He followed a strict public policy of Vatican neutrality for the duration of the conflict mirroring that of Pope Benedict XV. In 1939, Pius XII turned the Vatican into a centre of aid which he organized from various parts of the world. At the request of the Pope, an information office for prisoners of war and refugees operated in the Vatican under Giovanni Battista Montini, which in the years of its existence from 1939 until 1947 received almost 10 million information requests and produced over 11 million answers about missing persons. The pope gave a reason for his consistent refusals to make a public statement in December 1942. The Allied governments issued a declaration, “German Policy of Extermination of the Jewish Race,” which stated that there would be retribution for the perpetrators of Jewish murders. When Tittman asked Secretary of State Maglione if the pope could issue a similar proclamation, Maglione said the papacy was “unable to publicly denounce particular atrocities.” One reason for this position was that the staunchly anti-communist pope felt he could not denounce the Nazis without including the Communists; therefore, Pius XII would only condemn general atrocities.

The Pope employed the new technology of radio and a series of Christmas messages to preach against selfish nationalism and the evils of modern warfare and offer sympathy to the victims of the war. Pius XII's 1942 Christmas address via Vatican Radio voiced concern at human rights abuses and the murder of innocents based on race. The majority of the speech spoke generally about human rights and civil society; at the very end of the speech, Pius XII mentioned “the hundreds of thousands of persons who, without any fault on their part, sometimes only because of their nationality or race, have been consigned to death or to a slow decline”. According to Rittner, the speech remains a “lightning rod” in debates about Pius XII. In his Christmas message of 1942, Pius came close to revealing his sympathy for those “who without fault...sometimes only because of race or nationality, have been consigned to death or to a slow decline.”

He refused to say more, fearing that public papal denunciations might provoke the Hitler regime to brutalize further those subject to Nazi terror—as it had when Dutch bishops publicly protested earlier in the year—while jeopardizing the future of the church. Although he allowed the national hierarchies to assess and respond to the situation in their

countries, he established the Vatican Information Service to provide aid to, and information about, thousands of war refugees and instructed the church to provide discreet aid to Jews, which quietly saved thousands of lives. During his papacy, the Catholic Church issued the Decree against Communism, declaring that Catholics who profess Communist doctrine are to be excommunicated as apostates from the Christian faith. The church experienced severe persecution and mass deportations of Catholic clergy in the Eastern Bloc. He explicitly invoked ex cathedra papal infallibility with the dogma of the Assumption of Mary in his Apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*. His forty-one encyclicals include *Mystici corporis*, on the Church as the Body of Christ; *Mediator Dei* on liturgy reform; and *Humani generis*, in which he instructed theologians to adhere to episcopal teaching and allowed that the human body might have evolved from earlier forms. He eliminated the Italian majority in the College of Cardinals in 1946.

After the war, however, the pontiff was sharply criticized for not having done more to aid Hitler's victims and was seen by some as a "Pope of Silence" in the face of the Holocaust. At the same time, it was noted that Pius had much to say on subjects unrelated to the war. In his *Divino afflante spiritu* ("With the Help of the Divine Spirit"; 1943), for example, he sanctioned a limited use of critical historicism for biblical studies, while his *Mystici corporis Christi* ("Mystical Body of Christ"; 1943) sought to promote a more positive relationship between the church and nonbelievers. The Nazis themselves responded to the speech by stating that it was "one long attack on everything we stand for. ... He is clearly speaking on behalf of the Jews. ... He is virtually accusing the German people of injustice toward the Jews, and makes himself the mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals." The *New York Times* wrote that "The voice of Pius XII is a lonely voice in the silence and darkness enveloping Europe this Christmas. ... In calling for a 'real new order' based on 'liberty, justice and love', ... the pope put himself squarely against Hitlerism." Historian Michael Phayer claims, however, that "it is still not clear whose genocide or which genocide he was referring to". Speaking on the 50th anniversary of Pius's death in 2008, the German Pope Benedict XVI recalled that the Pope's voice had been "broken by emotion" as he "deplored the situation" with a "clear reference to the deportation and extermination of the Jews". During the war, Pius tried to spare Rome from aerial assault. After the Anglo-American bombardment of the city on July 19, 1943, he visited the wounded in the San Lorenzo quarter, whose railroad yard had been targeted. When German troops occupied the city after Italy's surrender to the Allies in September 1943, Pius proclaimed it to be an "open city" and came to be known as *defensor civitatis* ("defender of the city"). Several thousand antifascist politicians and Jews found refuge in church buildings during the German occupation. Less fortunate were 1,259 Romans rounded up in Jewish homes on the Sabbath, October 16, 1943. The Vatican managed to secure the release of 252 of these, who were either "Aryan" or the children of mixed marriages, but more than 1,000 Jews were transported to Auschwitz, where some 800 were quickly killed.

In December 1943, Vatican officials discussed whether the pope should say or do anything after the deportation of Rome's Jews. The pope's Jesuit emissary to the Italian Fascist regime, Father Pietro Tacchi Venturi, believed the Vatican should privately call on the Germans to end the persecution of Jews in Italy. It was not until two months after the deportation of Rome's Jews, however, that he drafted a statement that said there was no need for the measures taken against the Jews because they were already kept in their proper place by Italy's racial laws. He also argued Italians did not have the same hostility toward Jews as gentiles elsewhere because many had intermarried. There was no need to offend the "good sense of the Italian people" by putting Jews in concentration camps when "the racial Law sanctioned by the Fascist Government against the Jews five years ago is sufficient to contain the tiny Jewish minority within its proper limits." Hence, he said, "the German Government will want to desist from the deportation of the Jews, whether that done en masse, as happened this past October, or those done by single individuals." While the Vatican was officially neutral during World War II, the Reichskonkordat and his leadership of the Catholic Church during the war remain the subject of controversy—including allegations of public silence and inaction about the fate of the Jews. Pius employed diplomacy to aid the victims of the Nazis during the war and, through directing the church to provide discreet aid to Jews and others, saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Pius maintained links to the German Resistance, and shared intelligence with the Allies. His strongest public condemnation of genocide was, however, considered inadequate by the Allied Powers, while the Nazis viewed him as an Allied sympathizer who had dishonoured his policy of Vatican neutrality. According to Oversteins, "he found testimonies that Pius XII asked at least 49 convents to hide and house Jews and declared those convents to be extraterritorial areas under the authority of the Vatican. In addition, Pius XII hid 336 Jews in parishes and diocesan hospitals. Another 152 Jews were hidden in private homes under the protection of DELASEM, the Delegation for the Assistance of Jewish Emigrants."

Some cite the pope's Christmas Eve radio broadcast in 1942 as evidence of his concern for Jews though he never mentions them: Mankind owes that vow [the renewal of society] to the countless dead who lie buried on the field of battle: The sacrifice of their lives in the fulfillment of their duty is a holocaust offered for a new and better social order. Mankind owes that vow to the innumerable sorrowing host of mothers, widows and orphans who have seen the light, the solace and the support of their lives wrenched from them. Mankind owes that vow to those numberless exiles whom

the hurricane of war has torn from their native land and scattered in the land of the stranger; who can make their own the lament of the Prophet: "Our inheritance is turned to aliens; our house to strangers." Mankind owes that vow to the hundreds of thousands of persons who, without any fault on their part, sometimes only because of their nationality or race, have been consigned to death or to a slow decline". As the war neared an end, the pope opposed the unconditional surrender demanded by the Allies, fearing that it would prolong the fighting and bring the Soviet Union and its communist ideology and imperium into eastern and central Europe. He also had serious reservations about the agreement reached by Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin at the Yalta Conference and the prominent role envisioned for the Soviet Union in postwar Europe. Pius's worst fears soon materialized as Soviet domination spread and József Cardinal Mindszenty of Hungary and Stefan Cardinal Wysziński of Poland were imprisoned. Fearing a communist incursion into Germany and Italy, Pius endorsed postwar western European integration and adamantly condemned the expansion of communism into eastern Europe. In 1949 he issued a decree attacking the Soviet Union's totalitarianism and authorized the Holy Office to excommunicate Catholics who joined or even collaborated with the "godless" communists. In what may have been an attempt to avoid further weakening Germany, Pius controversially encouraged clemency for convicted German war criminals, especially Catholic ones, in the name of Christian forgiveness.

Only twice in his pontificate did Pius XII hold a consistory to create new cardinals, in contrast to Pius XI, who had done so 17 times in as many years. Pius XII chose not to name new cardinals during World War II, and the number of cardinals shrank to 38, with Dennis Joseph Dougherty of Philadelphia being the only living U.S. cardinal. The first occasion on 18 February 1946 yielded the elevation of a record 32 new cardinals, almost half of the College of Cardinals and reaching the canonical limit of 70 cardinals. In the 1946 consistory, Pius XII, while maintaining the maximum size of the College of Cardinals at 70, named cardinals from China, India, the Middle East and increased the number of Cardinals from the Americas, proportionally lessening the Italian influence. Pius XII issued 41 encyclicals during his pontificate—more than all his successors in the past 50 years taken together—along with many other writings and speeches.

The pontificate of Pius XII was the first in Vatican history that published papal speeches and addresses in vernacular language on a systematic basis. Until then, papal documents were issued mainly in Latin in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* since 1909. Because of the novelty of it all, and a feared occupation of the Vatican by the German Wehrmacht, not all documents exist today. In 1944, a number of papal documents were burned or "walled in". Though Pope Pius XII was principally known for his actions during World War II, his reactions to the new birth control pill, abortion procedures, and sterilization techniques of the mid-twentieth century helped shape Roman Catholic views on these issues. His stance on these early development and fertility topics still represents the Church's opinion on beginning of life and fertility matters, as confirmed by each of his successors. Pope Pius XII died 9 October 1958, and was succeeded by Pope John XXIII, who often extended, clarified, and reiterated Pope Pius XII's statements on matters regarding procreation and human life.

The controversy that followed Pius throughout his life did not stop with his death. Though upon his death he was praised effusively by world leaders and especially by Jewish groups for his actions during World War II on behalf of the persecuted, within a decade he was depicted in German playwright Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1963) as indifferent to the Nazi genocide. More recently, John Cornwell's controversial book on Pius, *Hitler's Pope* (1999), characterized him as anti-Semitic. Both depictions, however, lack credible substantiation. Furthermore, though Pius's wartime public condemnations of racism and genocide were cloaked in generalities, he did not turn a blind eye to the suffering but chose to use diplomacy to aid the persecuted. It is impossible to know if a more forthright condemnation of the Holocaust would have proved more effective in saving lives, though it probably would have better assured his reputation. Not surprisingly, the move to beatify Pius XII alongside John XXIII in 2000 provoked a storm of controversy that may have contributed to the decision to postpone Pius's beatification. Until 2020, knowledge of Pius XII's motives and actions, or lack thereof, was limited by what the Vatican made available to researchers. Now that the entire archive is supposed to be open, much more should be learned and, as noted above, has already revealed new information.

The controversy over his behavior has also affected the canonization of Pius XII. He was declared "venerable" in 2009, part of the process toward sainthood. This, and subsequent discussion of his being declared a saint, has been vigorously opposed by Jews around the world and some non-Jews as well. In 2014, pope Francis said he would not allow the beatification of Pope Pius XII, a step before sainthood that requires proof that he performed at least one miracle. "There's still no miracle," he said. "If there are no miracles, it can't go forward. It's blocked there." In addition, the historical record, which is becoming more apparent as the Vatican archives are examined, may also play a role.



Historical facts can dictate “whether it is appropriate or not to do a canonization,” according to Cardinal Angelo Becciu, the head of the Vatican office that scrutinizes the cases for possible sainthood.

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