

Pius XII and the Nazis

by Darlene Shelton

Background

The year, 1860, was the beginning of a new era for the papacy. This era brought on a problem which was to take sixty-nine years to resolve -- the "Roman question." Prior to 1860, the Papal States comprised sixteen thousand square miles within the borders of Italy. Rising Italian nationalism forced the annexation of all the states, except the land immediately around Rome, to the Italian kingdom.

The pope was protected by French soldiers until the fall of the French Empire in 1871. The Italians seized Rome and an embittered Pius IX withdrew into the Vatican, where he and his successors remained virtual "prisoners" until 1929. With the signing of the Lateran Treaty, the papacy did not gain its former secular power; however, the Vatican State was created and political sovereignty was granted within Vatican City.

This "Roman question" radically changed diplomatic tactics of the pope and the Roman Catholic Church. The papacy maintained its world-wide influence, but was politically weakened. The Lateran Treaty was almost a Pyrrhic victory for the Church. The Church has lost many years in world politics, and its hands were further tied by the Lateran Treaty.

The Church promised that all Catholic organizations in Italy would refrain from all political actions. The Vatican was empowered to act only as a moral and spiritual guide in the prevention of war. The recognition of the House of Savoy as the rulers of Italy was, also, to check any future papal ambitions. Pius XI announced that the Church and Italy were completely reconciled.

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Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli was born March 2, 1876. The Pacelli family was noted for its loyalty and service to the papacy. His ancestors included churchmen, papal attorneys, and even a founder of a moral-political newspaper which supported the Church in an era of Italian nationalism and anti-clericalism.

Pacelli was a gifted child, and in adulthood, was recognized as one of the most brilliant men in the first half of the twentieth century. His family encouraged him to become an attorney and he was given the best education. He attended the state-controlled Collegio Romano, a school that was founded by the Jesuits. He was devoted to sports because he was plagued with poor health.

In his early years, he began to identify with the Church. In an anticlerical school, he twice opposed his teachers and wrote opposite assignments; he wrote a negative argument on the illegality and immorality of the seizure of the Papal States; and when he had to write

about a great hero of history, he chose St. Augustine. His arguments and logic were so well organized and his courage so remarkable that his professors were unable to dispute him.

In August, 1894, Pacelli entered Capranica, a college for seminarians. Due to ill health, he almost had to withdraw, but Pope Leo XIII intervened and Pacelli became a day student. He studied at the Pontifical University and the Sapienza. He was ordained Easter Sunday, April 2, 1899, and was personally congratulated by Leo XIII. Following his ordination, he received his doctorate in Canon Law.

Pacelli's rise in the Church was meteoric. In 1901, he joined the Congregation of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, and became a major collaborator in the drawing up of the Code of Canon Law. Pacelli became a Monsignor in 1904, domestic prelate in 1905, and was a professor of ecclesiastical diplomacy from 1909 to 1914. One of his many gifts was linguistic, and the pope made good use of Pacelli's gift in Church diplomacy.

It was most unusual for a churchmen of his age and rank to receive such personal papal attention. In May 1917, Pacelli was named archbishop, was consecrated by Benedict XV in the Sistine Chapel, and was appointed papal nuncio to Bavaria. The appointment was more than routine; Pacelli's diplomatic abilities had been proven and the pope was eager to place him in war-torn Germany.

The position of the Catholic Church in Germany was at an all-time low. Protestant liberalism, culture and government were becoming too similar. The goals of Protestant Christianity were seen as the goals of German society. The Catholic Church was threatened and in great need of such a man as Pacelli. Pacelli's reputation preceded him to Germany; the pope had paved his way.

The new papal nuncio arrived in Bavaria with a message for the Bavarian king, Ludwig, but this message was intended for Kaiser Wilhelm of Prussia and other German leaders. Benedict XV desired a peace based on Christian ethics. Within thirty days, Pacelli was received by the Kaiser. The German leaders quickly realized the new nuncio was honest, direct and determined. His message was a request for an international court of arbitration, freedom of the seas, disarmament and no war damages.

This message was then sent to the other warring nations. Only England and the United States looked seriously at the papal message. The other countries were too suspicious and returned noncommittal answers.

Pacelli continued the war effort work he had done so well in Italy. There were not enough hours in his days and his health remained poor. His fluency in many languages made him a most welcomed figure in the prison camp; he spent hours hearing confessions, giving out supplies and just talking and listening. His relief work included civilians and soldiers.

The children profoundly disturbed him. Pacelli himself went without food so that the children would receive milk and bread. He instituted food programs within the parishes of Bavaria. His diplomatic services were not really needed at this point in the war so he devoted himself to charity. His visitations were a huge success and he became known and beloved throughout Germany; however, his growing reputation was a threat to some political factions, and he was verbally and physically assaulted.

Pacelli stood steadfast in his role of charitable archbishop and increased his war efforts. At the end of the war, Pacelli was appalled by the harsh war terms with which Germany had to contend. He felt Germany had been left poor and humiliated, and that the harsh terms would create a further divisiveness among the German people. In this opinion, he was correct. It is ironic that Pacelli's rise in Germany would coincide with that of Hitler's.

It was because of the "Roman question" that the Vatican was not invited to participate in the peace negotiations. Italy had made certain that the Vatican was excluded by a secret treaty with the Allies. The Vatican was, also, excluded from the League of Nations. This forced the Vatican to utilize another instrument for peace, the concordat. Pacelli said these "concordats made the Church's presence felt even in places where it was unwelcome." <1>

The pope placed Germany under one nunciature, based in Berlin. The well-loved and respected Pacelli left Munich with much fanfare. Pacelli, however, maintained his ties with Bavaria and secured a concordat in 1924; but, in Prussia, he was to find there were many stumbling blocks.

Archbishop Pacelli was greeted in Berlin by people of all faiths, but Prussia was basically Protestant and more than wary of the Vatican. The term "concordat" was controversial. Pacelli's anticlerical education was excellent training for his stay in Berlin. Finally in 1929, he achieved a *solemnis conventio* with Prussia. Unlike Bavaria, no legal status was given to the Church, but its hierarchy was established and a foundation was laid for future Catholic freedom.

The year, 1929, was a memorable year for the Holy See. The resolution of the "Roman question" with the Lateran Treaty was to reopen many doors. Pius XI needed his best diplomats to achieve a new status in the world. He looked first to Germany.

In the same year, Pacelli was called to Rome to become a cardinal. With a heavy heart, he gave a departure speech and waved good-bye to more than twenty thousand people. Pacelli had done much to improve the status of the Catholic Church, and his handling of the German leaders had been applauded by the world.

Cardinal Pacelli was soon appointed secretary of state for the Vatican in February 1930. In this same year, the Nazi gains in the German government caused the bishop to alert all Catholics of the possible ill effects that could result in supporting the Nazi movement. Again, in 1932, the bishops repeated their warning, but in stronger terms: Catholics were told to vote only for Catholic candidates and they were forbidden to vote for Nazis.

The Third Reich, with Hitler as its chancellor, was shrewd enough to realize that Catholic support was a necessity. The Reich initiated the action to formalize a concordat with the Vatican. Following the first step, the German bishops announced that Catholics could cooperate with the new state, despite the vast differences between the Church and the Third Reich.

Cardinal Pacelli had just concluded a concordat with Austria. In considering the possibility of a concordat with Germany, he had to consider the bishops' present stand in Germany. Hitler was offering the free practice of the Catholic religion and was agreeing to all of the papal demands. Catholic education would continue without political intervention and the former concordats with the German states would be recognized.

The Holy See found itself to be in a compromising situation. The Vatican would appear to be in the wrong and German Catholics would be placed in a precarious position if the concordat were not signed. The German Catholics were looking for the support of the Vatican; German Catholics were discovering that their legal rights were questionable. German Catholic hopes could only be fulfilled by papal intercession in the form of a treaty with Hitler. In effect, Hitler blackmailed the Vatican into a treaty which was to lend respectability and credibility to the Third Reich. Hitler was correct in his theory; the suspicions of the world were temporarily forgotten as he "sincerely" negotiated with the Vatican.

Almost immediately the Third Reich began to violate the treaty. From 1933 to 1939, there were over sixty memoranda, in Pacelli's writing, which called the Nazis to observe the concordat. As the violations increased, Pius XI became angry enough to defy the Nazis.

In spring 1936, Pius issued an encyclical against Nazism and Communism. He ordered the following to be read from all German pulpits:

. . . only superficial minds can fall into the error of speaking of a national God, a national religion, or make the attempt to imprison, with the frontiers of a single people, God, the Creator of the world.

This was the first time Germany heard the opinion of the Church against Nazism. When Hitler heard, through channels, of the papal order, he banned its reading. It was too late. Not only had millions of Germans already heard the encyclical, but so had the world. Hitler was furious and ordered several reprisals. Over one thousand priests were confined at Dachau after undergoing "immorality trials."

Catholic schools were attacked. Church property was confiscated and Church leaders were harassed, but, once again, Hitler was shrewd. He ordered that no priests from the higher ranks of the Church were to be arrested. He emphasized continually that Germany wanted no Catholic martyrs.

Pius XI, with Cardinal Pacelli as his secretary of state, continued his verbal attacks upon Hitler and Nazism. The German bishops were ordered to read pastoral letters and give sermons which denounced the Third Reich. In 1937, the Italian government assured the pope that all rights of the Jews would be respected. In 1938, Pius XI delivered an encyclical that raged against racism when he stated that "we are all spiritual Semites . . . "

Then July 28, 1938, the government of Italy dealt the pope a political blow. A manifesto was issued, stating that Jews did not belong to the Italian "race." The government withdrew all protection from the Jews. The Italian people were uneasy; the "Aryan Manifesto" was an unpopular political move. Great tension arose between the Holy See and the Fascist government under Mussolini.

Pius XI urged all Italian Catholic groups to fight and reject Italy's racial policies. Pacelli, with his brilliant legal background, ascertained that the pope's exhortations were "spiritual" and, thus, within the agreements of the Lateran Treaty. The pope became openly defiant in his defense of both Catholics and Jews. In 1938, Hitler decided to publicly lessen his immoral, but "legal" actions against the Church and Jews; privately, he accelerated the pace of solving the Jewish question.

Hitler was well aware that the Church was a force with which to reckon. Its power, under the stress of attack, had added a cohesiveness to German Catholics which had been absent for decades. As a matter of fact, "the Vatican, the bishops in Germany, and the papal legations were . . . the only authorities Hitler continued to respect following the unwelcome entry of the United States into the war." <2>

Pius XI died in February 10, 1939. The College of Cardinals was convened for the election of a new pope. With the nomination of Pacelli came a few dissensions. "According to Domenico Cardinal Tardini, they are reputed to have said: 'Pacelli is a man of peace and the world now needs a Pope of war'." <3> Nevertheless, Pacelli was elected Pope on March 2, 1939, his sixty-third birthday.

The rumors of open warfare were rampant. The new pope, Pius XII, was anxious to improve the Church's position in Germany. The German cardinals, still in Rome, suggested that Hitler be the first to be officially notified of Pacelli's election. Pacelli even went so far as to break protocol by "signing the translation and expressed his warm hope for friendly relations." <4> Pius XI had become increasingly anti-German and the German cardinals were hoping for a reconciliation.

Many German officials, however, greatly feared Pacelli because they considered him to have a strong influence upon Pius XI. Also, they remembered Pacelli from his days in Germany and knew him to be a formidable opponent. Pius XII was a pope of peace. Three days after his crowning, Great Britain and France asked the Vatican to join with them in protest against the German annexation of Bohemia and Moravia. The Pope refused. The German ambassador, Bergen, reported from the Vatican:

He [Pius XII] has given those around him to understand that he sees no reason to interfere in historic processes in which, from the political point of view, the Church is not interested. <5>

This lessened the fears of Germany and they began to accelerate their war preparations.

With Europe on the verge of war, Pius XII delivered his Easter message. He briefly mentioned the breaking of peace treaties, but stressed world peace. Many felt he should have condemned the treaty violations. These people did not want gentle reproofs; they wanted open verbal assaults. The strength and determination of the Pacelli of the past had disappeared with his papal election.

The Archbishop of Canterbury promised Anglican support if only Pius XII would lead a new crusade against the aggressors. Again, the answer was a firm, but negative, response. Pius XII justified his response with the hope that peace could be salvaged without his antagonizing Hitler. (The German papal nuncio had even warned the Pope of a military pact between Mussolini and Hitler.)

Traditionally, the popes have refrained from declaring any war just or unjust. Considering the many Catholics in many countries in war against each other, it was difficult to make such a declaration without forcing Catholics to make a choice between Catholicism and nationalism. Pius XII took this traditional stance and pleaded for world peace until Germany attacked Poland; the Vatican, then, took its next traditional stance, neutrality.

Once again, the Lateran Treaty became an issue. Mussolini kept a careful watch on the Vatican. The neutrality did not represent a concession, but even the Pope's "spiritual" and "moral" influence was questionable. Following the attack on Poland, the Pope expressed his sympathy to the Polish people, but neglected to even allude to German aggression. The Lateran Treaty and traditional neutrality were the original excuses given for Pius XII's ineffectiveness during World War II.

Pius XII delivered his first encyclical October 20, 1939. He appealed to the nations of the world to strive for a peaceful resolution of their conflicts and gave his sympathy to those who were oppressed and persecuted. The Allies dropped copies of the encyclical throughout Germany. The Nazis considered the encyclical totally harmless and allowed it to be read from the pulpits.

Following the assassination attempt upon Hitler in November, 1939, the Pope sent him a personal note of congratulations on his miraculous survival. Later that month, the Pope assured Menshausen, a German official, that the Church did not oppose totalitarian regimes, and that he (Pius XII) went out of his way to keep all of his declarations ambiguous so that no finger could be pointed at Germany. <6>

Pius XII was increasingly criticized for the Church's neutrality as German atrocities became published. World leaders maintained that there could be no neutrality on moral questions. ("The pot calling the kettle black" routine did not deter the pope.)

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the German bishops wanted to crusade against Bolshevism. Shortly thereafter, the Soviets joined the Allies. The Pope had remained quiet with this invasion, possibly because communism had become a grave threat to the Church. This new alliance, however, succeeded in giving the Vatican a new excuse for neutrality; the pope could not possibly speak of the war as a Christian crusade now that the atheistic Russians had joined the Allies.

The desire of the Holy See not to weaken the German power of resistance against Russia was one of the most important reasons why all efforts on the part of the Allies failed to persuade the Vatican publicly to denounce German atrocities, including the extermination of the Jews . . . Pius wanted to avoid being blamed for a German defeat as had . . . Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922). After the war Pius XII declared that he had always condemned acts of injustice and moral outrages and had merely avoided expressions that could have done more harm than good. <7>

Pius refused to name the guilty party in any of his declarations. He was continually sympathetic to Germany's victims, but never condemned Germany or Hitler. He justified his actions by continually stating that he was protecting German Catholics. In an effort to avoid all partiality, the pope urged all Catholics to do their patriotic duty, remember Christian love, and he praised all those who died in battle.

In 1942, the Allies began to furiously denounce the extermination of European Jewry. They asked the Pope to issue a similar statement. Many people believed the extermination accounts to be war propaganda. A condemnation from the Pope would be recognized as truth. The Vatican responded through Maglione, the secretary of state, and stated it could only condemn immoral acts in general; specific denouncements would invalidate their neutrality. The Allies were assured that, privately, the Vatican was doing everything possible to aid the Jews.

These private "doings" are not known even today. In 1976, Pope Paul VI published a multi-volume history of the Vatican's wartime actions. Volume IX, *The Holy See and the Victims of War*, is an effort to shed some light on the subject. It relates the pressures on Pius XII and documents over one hundred attempts in 1943 to help Jews in Eastern Europe. It even proves that some private protests were made to Hitler against Nazi atrocities. If anything, this volume has "heightened the debate of Pius XII's behavior." <8>

In June 1943, the German papal nuncio made several inquiries to the German government regarding the fate of the deported Jews and about mass shootings. The German Foreign Ministry responded that the Vatican was conducting itself very well in these matters and hoped this policy would be continued. The nuncio took the hint and withdrew. Himmler, visiting Rome in October 1942, "praised the 'discretion' of the Vatican." <9>

Pius XII succeeded in the spring, 1942, in gaining a respite for the Slovakian Jews. He appealed to the head of government, Dr. Joseph Tiso, a Catholic priest, that fifty two thousand deported Jews were headed not for labor duty, but extermination. The

deportations were halted and Eichmann's henchman was instructed to avoid political confrontations. The Slovakian Jews lived in relative peace until September 1944.

The Vatican's neutrality received its supreme test in the fall 1943, when the Nazis began gathering Rome's eight thousand Jews. Before the arrests, the Nazis demanded a ransom of fifty kilograms of gold, or three hundred hostages would be taken. Only thirty-five kilograms were collected and Rabbi Israel Zolli applied for a loan from the Vatican treasury. The pope approved the loan.

The arrests began on October 15. The German bishops sent a message to the German commander of Rome to remember the good relations between the Vatican and Germany and to cease arresting Jews; otherwise, the pope would be forced to take a stand which would be anti-German. The arrests continued and Pius XII remained silent. Over one thousand Jews, of which two thirds were women and children, were transported to the Auschwitz killing center.

Seven thousand Roman Jews escaped the Nazis. More than four thousand Jews, with the knowledge and approval of the Vatican, were hidden in monasteries in Rome. Several dozen were given sanctuary within the Vatican. As the "Aryan Manifesto" had been unpopular, Italian civilians hid the rest of the Jews. The Third Reich was so relieved that they had avoided a public confrontation with Pius XII that they considered the escape of the Roman Jews insignificant.

Pius XII's charity work in World War I was to prove excellent experience in his reorganization of the charity work of the Vatican. He established the Pontificia Commissione Assistenza (PCA) which aided needy individuals and countries. Prisoners, deportees, refugees and all hungry or oppressed persons were fed, clothed and housed without discrimination. The PCA relocated fifteen hundred individuals to the United States. The pontifical information center received nine million inquiries about missing persons and made over eleven million inquiries of its own. <10> Many families were reunited as a result of these inquiries; but many more families would never be reunited because six million Jews had been annihilated.

The diplomat, Pacelli, was recognized by the world as a brilliant and determined man. As secretary of state of the Vatican, however, he allowed the Vatican to be trapped by the Third Reich into an agreement, which was to later become a document of ridicule. Pius XII had spent ten years in Germany and was well aware of its governmental machinery. Rolf Hochhuth states: ". . . Hitler's instincts were better than Roosevelt's; he knew that the Pope did not possess the personal stature commensurate with his tremendous prestige throughout the world." <11>

Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* has been a definite reason for the great debate over the silence of Pius XII to become more publicly known. Several books discuss the thesis that Pius XII's silence made him an accomplice to the genocide of European Jewry. The excuses of the Lateran Treaty, neutrality and protection of the German Catholics have already been mentioned. Another excuse was reputed kidnap attempts. There was a rumor

that Hitler wanted to occupy the Vatican and re-establish the "Babylonian Captivity" of the fourteenth century popes.

The pope intervened in Germany's euthanasia program and it was halted. He condemned the invasion of Scandinavia, but its Catholic population was so small that he did not need to be concerned with Nazi reprisal. The Church intervened in Holland when non-Aryan Catholics (converted Jews) were being transported, but Pius XII failed to comment upon the "moral" issue of exterminating Jews.

Pius XII had his own super weapon which he could have utilized excommunication. Traditionally, however, excommunication has been used against those for their wrong beliefs, not their wrong actions. <12> Excommunicating Hitler would probably have been pointless, but excommunicating all Catholics who supported his policy of extermination might have, at the very least, put reins on his policy. On the other hand, excommunication might have had the opposite result; many Catholics would have left the Church rather than reject their country.

There has been much debate over the question of Pius XII using excommunication as a weapon against Nazism.

Given the indifference of the fate of the German population toward the fate of the Jews, and the highly ambivalent attitude of the German hierarchy toward Nazi anti-Semitism, a forceful stand . . . on the Jewish question might well have led to a large-scale desertion from the Church. <13>

The pope knew that the German Catholics were not prepared to suffer martyrdom for their church; still less were they willing to incur the wrath of their Nazi ruler for the sake of the Jews whom their own bishops for years had castigated as a harmful influence in German life. <14>

Some writers suggest that excommunication would have done more damage to the Jews, to the half-Jews and to the Church. Obviously, the condition of the Jews could not have been worse. Rolf Hochhuth asserts that excommunication was the answer; he argues that Hitler backed down with each papal intervention. Furthermore, Pius XII excommunicated active communists, so why not Nazis?

There are other reasons suggested for the Pope's silence. There was a moderate, but, long-lived, tradition of anti-Semitism within the Vatican. Another suggestion is that during World War II the Society of Jesus made profits from the Allies and the Nazis from the sale of mercury. Supposedly, the Italian mines supplied the Germans; there has not been an official denial of this economic arrangement.

As an adolescent, Pacelli defied the anticlerical educational system by bravely defending the Roman Catholic Church. As Monsignor Pacelli (WWI), his determination to render aid to the poor and oppressed (German and enemy alike) was not hampered by verbal or physical assaults. As Cardinal Pacelli, and secretary of state, he was often the voice of

Pius XI. The Church openly deplored and denounced all Nazi moral and spiritual wrongdoings.

Pius XII had been the protege of three popes. He served the Vatican in a brilliant diplomatic capacity; he had earned the respect of the world and had increased the status of the Church. His papal election was the climax of a remarkable career; yet, the responsibilities of the Vatican changed the former Pacelli.

His fiery courage was no longer recognizable. His supporters, however, maintain that it took great courage for him to preserve the Vatican's traditional neutrality. Pius XII's silence has become a much debated topic; the truth may never be known. Pius XII's papal accomplishments did not begin until after the war, and continued until his death on October 9, 1958. He is remembered for his many encyclicals, Catholic education, theological doctrine, Vatican archaeology, religious discipline and the ecumenization of the College of Cardinals. All of these achievements were post-World War II.

In 1973, an American author, Robert Katz, produced a film entitled *Massacre in Rome*. His film intimated the inaction of Pius XII in regard to Nazi World War II atrocities. The Vatican sued him and Katz spent years in the Roman Civil Courts. Katz was found guilty of defamation. <15>

In 1975 a reporter, Dan Kuryman, wrote *Race for Rome*, in which he contended that Pius was silent because of alleged kidnapping attempts and that he feared that the Vatican City would be destroyed if he publicly denounced Hitler. <16>

On February 9, 1959, Pope John XXIII released a draft of a speech which was to have been delivered by Pope Pius XI. Pius's death "prevented him from publicly comparing Hitler to Emperor Nero and warning mankind against the homicidal and suicidal folly of the armament race of that time." <17> Pius XI's draft denounced Fascists as spies who would destroy their neighbors. No comment was given by John XXIII upon making this document public. "Students of modern history said the proposed address of Pius XI would have had profound repercussions in Italy had it been delivered." <18>

Notes

1 Katherine Burton, *Witness of the Light* (New York, 1958), p. 58.

2 Rolf Hochhuth, "The Vatican and the Jews" (*Society*, 1983), p. 6.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

4 Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (New York, 1964), p. 220.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

7 Ibid., p. 250.

8 "Behind the Silence," *Time*, 1976, p. 56.

9 Lewy, p. 300.

10 *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967), p. 416.

11 Hochhuth, p. 7.

12 Dr. Janz, Loyola University, Dept. of Religious Studies.

13 Lewy, p. 303.

14 Ibid., p. 304.

15 "Behind the Silence," p. 55-56.

16 Ibid.

17 Hochhuth, p. 20.

18 Ibid.