

**Pope Pius XII and the European Conflict**

**By**

**Paul Angove**

**Senior Seminar: HST 499  
Professor Max Geier  
Western Oregon University  
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**Readers  
Professor Narasingha Sil  
Professor John L. Rector**

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## Understanding the Historical Problem

Pope Pius XII's convictions and conduct during World War II have been widely debated since Rolf Hochhuth published his play *The Representative*,<sup>1</sup> in 1963. Until then, the pope had been highly regarded as one of the heroes of World War II. Hochhuth was the first to publicly condemn the pope for his actions during the war. In the play, he was depicted as an anti-Semitic Nazi sympathizer. Historians differ on this issue; some agree with Hochhuth while others argue that Pope Pius XII was doing all he could with his limited power.

Arguably the pope maintained a policy of complete neutrality with respect to the Axis powers during World War II. While the exact reasons for his attitude remain unclear, it is possible to appreciate his actions. Previous popes had tried to shape the Vatican in a certain way, and Pius XII wished not to waver from his predecessor's policies. Like Benedict XV in World War I, Pius XII did not wish to compromise the position of the church by condemning a particular country's actions.<sup>2</sup>

Historian Carlo Falconi believes that though the pope was fully aware of Fascist and Nazi atrocities, and he maintained his silence because of a conflict of interest. In his, *The Silence of Pius XII*, Falconi insists that the pope was constantly urged to speak out against what the Nazis were doing. He writes: "That Pius XII was subjected to this sort of insistent hammering for over five years without being substantially deflected from his

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Hochhuth. *The Representative: A Christian Tragedy*. (London: Methuen, 1963)

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Rhodes. *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973)

line leaves us amazed at the sheer tenacity of his powers of resistance.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Pope, who knew full well the extent of Nazi actions, would not be swayed from his policy of neutrality.<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic Church has published a twelve volume set of documents pertaining to World War II called Records and Documents of the Holy See Relating to the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> The first volume, the only one published in English, shows the efforts that Pius XII made to maintain peace in Europe. Margherita Marchione, who helped publish later volumes, has written extensively on her analysis of the records from the war. Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace<sup>6</sup> and Consensus and Controversy: Defending Pope Pius XII,<sup>7</sup> both by Marchione, vehemently defend the pope. She gives detailed analysis of what she found to be indisputable evidence that Pius XII did all he could to save war victims.

More recently, John Cornwell wrote a book titled, The Secret History of Pius XII in which he claims that Pius XII was a power hungry leader. Cornwell accuses the pope of attempting to further papal power throughout his entire career in the church. He blames Pius XII for helping Hitler to power in Germany. He points out that the Reich Concordat in Germany gave Catholic Germans money for public education and many privileges to the Catholic community in Germany. The concordat, however, that Catholics would not engage in any political activity. As Cornwell says, “Pope Pius

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<sup>3</sup> Carlo Falconi. The Silence of Pius XII (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 69

<sup>4</sup> Falconi, 43

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Blet, Angelo Martini, Burkart Shneider. Records and Documents of the Holy See Relating to the Second World War: The Holy See and the War in Europe. (Washington: Corpus Books, 1969)

<sup>6</sup> Margherita Marchione. Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace. (New York: Paulist Press, 2000)

<sup>7</sup> Margherita Marchione. Consensus and Controversy: Defending Pope Pius XII. (New York: Paulist Press, 2002).

ensured that Nazism could rise unopposed by the most powerful Catholic community in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, Hitler, the War, and the Pope, by Ronald Rychlak defends, Pius XII by arguing that the Pope was powerless to oppose Hitler and Mussolini. Rychlak says the pope could do more good by being secretive about the actions he was taking to help refugees. If the Vatican were occupied, by the Fascists, it would no longer be a sanctuary for these people. Rychlak also cites several people who praised the pope after the war for saving many lives.

Similarly, Anthony Rhodes does not believe that Pope Pius XII acted in any reprehensible manner. In his The Vatican in the Age of Dictators, Rhodes examines the pope’s rationale for his political neutrality. He claims that the Pope did all he could to condemn Hitler’s actions, but that he did not want to put the Church in a vulnerable position. He argues the Pope did not have the power to stop Hitler. Rhodes also argues that the Pope did all he could to negotiate peace among the European countries.

In 1939, the historian Oxford, Nathaniel Micklem published a book National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> This book presents an interesting outline of the conflict between the Nazi party and the Catholic Church in the 1930s. Micklem shows that the Nazis led the Catholic Church to believe that it would have a number of rights in the German state with the signing of the Concordat. Micklem illustrates how the Nazis had no intention of dealing with an opposing power in Germany, especially one as powerful as the Catholic Church. What is interesting about about Micklem’s book is that he wrote it long before the controversy over Pius XII’s actions during World War II.

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<sup>8</sup> John Cornwell. Hitler’s Pope (New York: the Penguin Group, 1999), 7

<sup>9</sup> Nathaniel Micklem. National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church. (London: Oxford University Press, 1939)

Having been written before the war start of the war, it is an unbiased account of the development of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the German Nazis. The book is incredibly helpful in understanding Pius XII's character because it helps to illustrate the tension between the Nazis and the Catholic Church. In particular the part that Bishop Pacelli, later Pius XII, played in those difficult years.

### **Thesis**

In order to understand Pius XII's actions during World War II, it is important to recognize two things. First, the Church leaders established a strong anti Liberal and anti Socialist political agenda during the papacy of Leo XIII: Leo XIII, however, sought to keep the Church neutral with respect to the political ideologies of his time, whether Liberal or not. Through the Church's opposition Communism led the Church to sacrifice some of it's objections to the other ideologies. Such a stance put the Church in a difficult position during World War II. The Catholic Church did not fully support any of the political systems of the countries, but it would have been disastrous for the Church if Communism had become the dominant world power.

Secondly, we must have a thorough understanding of the political beliefs of Benedict XV, and Pius XI. The thoughts and actions of these men shaped the way Pius XII governed the Church. Pius XII's exertions to prevent the war and save Christian and Jewish lives during the war are well known. He condemned the crimes against innocent people in general, but he was careful not to condemn the Nazi party outright, as this could have been disastrous for Catholics during and after the war. The accusations that Pius XII was an anti-Semitic are speculate at best. His relationship with the National Socialist Party in Germany refutes claims that he was in league with Hitler. However, Pius XII and

his predecessors may justifiably be criticized for the political system they created. In the wake of the communist revolution, the pope's were too eager to make peace with totalitarian states, and they did not understand that the Catholic Church could not survive a totalitarian dominated Europe. The evidence of this is in the German and the Italian Concordats, where the Catholic Church attempted to negotiate rights with the Fascist regimes. It is impossible to judge Pius XII for his actions based on his judgment alone. The Catholic Church does not work that way. As will be seen, that the popes have a system whereby they pass knowledge through the generations. They use each others ideas and practices to further strengthen the teachings of the Catholic Church. No pope ever stands alone in what he is teaching. For this reason, the German and Italian Concordats are important. They show how the popes deal with conflicts about political ideologies.

### **Early life of Eugenio Pacelli**

Eugenio Pacelli, the man who would become Pope Pius XII, was born in 1876 into a relatively humble background in Rome. His father, a Vatican lawyer, helped shape the path that Pacelli would follow. A pious young man, he wanted to devote his life to the Church from his youth. On April 2, 1899, at the age of twenty three, Pacelli became a priest.<sup>10</sup>

Soon after becoming a priest, Pacelli studied canon law, the set of rules that govern the Catholic Church, at the St. Apollinaris Institute. He excelled in his studies, and in 1904 he received his doctorate from the college. He was recognized in the Vatican for having a strong grasp of Church doctrine, and he also excelled in matters of diplomacy. He was soon called to Rome to receive extensive training in these two

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald Rychlack. Hitler, the War, and the Pope

areas.<sup>11</sup> Pacelli was promoted in the hierarchy of the church quickly, and he was made a bishop in 1913. When the nuncio, the representative of the Vatican to foreign countries, in Germany died in 1917, Pope Benedict XV decided that Bishop Pacelli, who was only thirty one, was an ideal replacement. He became an archbishop and was sent to Munich to fill this position.<sup>12</sup>

Pacelli had a natural grasp of the way that the Church wanted to practice politics throughout Europe. He felt that everything could be solved through diplomacy. He was not a temperamental or angry man, and rarely would he ever show his feelings. Some of his disgust for the Nazis can be seen in his letters, but for the most part, Pacelli was a stoic and strong man who believed in political compromise.<sup>13</sup> Benedict showed extreme confidence in sending Pacelli to Munich. The pope needed a diplomatic and compromising man to send to a volatile state like Germany.

As a young man Pacelli was shaped by the political policies of Benedict XV, and this formation later influenced Paccelli's policies as Pope Pius XII. He well understood the political direction that Benedict XV, and Pius XI, who followed him, wanted to for the Church. This policy was to move the Church, and it's clergy, away from political parties in favor of trusting Catholic Action groups to influence all aspects of life. Pacelli was trained by these two men, and he would practice politics the same way that they did. He made peace in countries where he could, and he remained neutral in all matters of foreign aggression. Like the other two, Pacelli would not be afraid to speak out on matters of social justice.

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<sup>11</sup> John Cornwell. *Hitler's Pope* (New York: the Penguin Group, 1999), 6

<sup>12</sup> John Cornwell. *Hitler's Pope* (New York: the Penguin Group, 1999), 45

<sup>13</sup> Rhodes, 185-190

Throughout the course of his ten years in Germany, Pacelli became fond of the German people. Germany was in a state of anguish following World War I. Benedict XV had remained neutral during World War I because Catholics were fighting on both sides. Pope Benedict did, however, condemn the actions of aggressors in a more discreet way. One such speech on December 4, 1916 illustrates this point. The Pope gave a speech on the German invasion of Belgium saying ““We see minority nations, even those invested with high dignity, shamefully outraged and a number of peaceful citizens taken from their homes and deported to distant regions.””<sup>14</sup> In this speech he is referring to the German invasion of Belgium, but he carefully avoids condemning a certain nation by name. He makes it clear to the world, however, how he feels about what the Germans were doing. World War I was different from the Second World War in that it was not a war of ideologies. As far as the pope was concerned, all the countries involved were in the wrong. Benedict XV was not invited to the peace conference following the war because of his neutrality. The pope was extremely upset because he was worried that the Germans would have to pay huge amounts of reparations. When the Germans were forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles, many Catholics were affected by the resolution.

The Church had not wanted to impose such strict penalties on Germany following the Great War. Archbishop Pacelli had spent his first years in Germany traveling the country. He had seen much despair, and it was his goal to ease the suffering of the Germans.<sup>15</sup> While Pacelli was not in Germany during the mid-1930s, he did witness much of the National Socialist rise to power, and much of how Pius XII treated the

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Rhodes. *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 236

<sup>15</sup> Sual Freidlander. *Pius XII* (Charles Fullman, Trans.. New York: Knopf), 121



German state during World War II flowed from his time in Germany. He had a deep compassion for the German people because of the suffering he had witnessed there.

In 1930, Pacelli was recalled to Rome by Pius XI to fill the vacant position of Secretary of State. Archbishop Pacelli was elected Cardinal and made Secretary of State of the Vatican in 1930, he would hold this position until 1939. The Secretary of State represents the Vatican in all matters of foreign policy, and his authority is second to only the pope. It is the pope that has to approve any negotiations with foreign countries, but it is the Secretary of State, along with the papal nuncios, that conduct matters of foreign relations. In 1934, Pius XI sent Pacelli over the world to be his personal representative, and during this time Cardinal Pacelli became the most recognized figure in the Vatican besides the pope. He had negotiations with countries all over the world. It was long Pius XI's hope that Pacelli would succeed him as the head of the Church, and he felt that making the Cardinal well known would accomplish this goal. Pius XI once said "I make him travel so that he may get to know the world the world may get to know him...he will be a splendid Pope"<sup>16</sup>

### **The European Political Problem**

When he did become Pope, Pius XII inherited a Church that had a very specific stance on political ideologies and the proper way to interact with foreign countries. Therefore, before giving the account of what Pius XII said and did during World War II, a brief overview is needed of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the political ideologies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and how Cardinal Pacelli viewed them. The Catholic popes believed that corruption could be found in all the various political ideologies. The extensive rise of liberalist and socialist ideologies in the

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<sup>16</sup> John Cornwell. Hitler's Pope (New York: the Penguin Group, 1999), 167

mid 19<sup>th</sup> century led to major crisis for the Catholic Church. Liberalism, to the Catholic Community meant a new type of thinking. A way of thinking that promoted Socialist, atheistic, anti-clerical, and communist ideologies.<sup>17</sup> The Liberal ideologies deemphasized the authority of the divine, and instead put more emphasis on the power of human beings. The Socialists sought to eliminate private property and equalize the working world. These political ideologies were either extremely collective or extremely individualistic, but both of them went away from the authority of God and his Universal Church. The Church believed that politics should include a faith in God, and the popes presented their own middle ground based on social justice. To the Catholics, the Liberalist movement was one that directly opposed the authority of the Catholic Church. In 1864, Pius IX wrote an encyclical with strong objections to the Liberal movements. He said that

Therefore, by our Apostolic authority, we reprobate, proscribe, and condemn all the singular and evil opinions and doctrines severally mentioned in this letter, and will and command that they be thoroughly held by all children of the Catholic Church as reprobated, proscribed and condemned.<sup>18</sup>

The Catholic Church feared the Socialist and Liberal political ideologies and saw them as a worldwide threat to the Catholic Community. It was the Vatican's belief that new governments were rejecting fundamental Christianity. In 1917, the Russian communist revolution resulted in persecution of Catholics on every level. The rise of the Fascist and Communist parties in Italy had the potential to destroy the fundamental acceptance of the Church. Germany, with a strong communist faction, posed no less a threat to the persecution of Catholics and the Church's rights. The Spanish revolution

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<sup>17</sup> From Anthony Rhodes. The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators.

<sup>18</sup> Claudia Carlen. "Quanta Cura," in The Papal Encyclicals Ann Arbor : Pierian Press, 1990), paragraph, 17

had jolted the Church in that country and attempted to remove any trace of it. A similar communist revolution occurred in Mexico as well. The Church was put in a position where it had to lobby for the rights of its members in all of these countries. The pope, as the supreme head, was forced to make decisions about the Church's official stance on these different ideologies.

In the 1920s and 1930s the papacy was forced to come to terms with the new governments in Europe. On the one side was the Fascist type of regime that arose in Italy and Germany. On the other side was the Communist movement that swept across all of Russia. On July 10, 1918 the leader of the Russian communist party, Lenin, released the constitution of the Russian state. The entire constitution is anti-struggle, anti-class, and anti-individualistic. Some of the constitution reads that "its fundamental aim being abolition of all exploitation of man by man, complete elimination of the division of society into classes, merciless suppression of the exploiters, socialist organization of society, and victory of socialism in all countries."<sup>19</sup> The goal of Communism was not just the abolition of capitalism in its own country, but also the abolition of capitalism in all countries. While the Church had its own misgivings about Capitalism and Democracy, the Church taught that it was an inherent human right to own land. In the eyes of the papacy, communism proclaimed itself as a Utopia, in which everybody was equal. According to the papacy, "there naturally exist among mankind manifold differences of the most important kind; people differ in capacity, skill, health, strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of unequal condition."<sup>20</sup> The political ideology of the

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<sup>19</sup> 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR. Taken from <<http://europeanhistory.about.com/cs/communistrussia/>>

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau, Richard W. "Rerum Novarum," in Human dignity and the common good : the great papal social encyclicals from Leo XIII to John Paul II. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), paragraph, 17

Russians went against everything that the Catholic Church taught, and therefore the popes spoke harshly against the new form of government in Russia. Pius XI said that “This all too imminent danger...is Bolshevistic and atheistic Communism, which aims at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization.”<sup>21</sup> The popes, fearful of a world dominated by communists, taught vehemently against communist ideology. The Catholic Church, therefore, was put in a position where it must be somewhat supportive of other types of governments. The totalitarian states that surrounded the Vatican were the only choices. Not only because dictators controlled the countries and could potentially control the Vatican, but also because there had to be some sort of government that could oppose communism. In both Italy and Germany, there was a strong communist movement. The two future leaders of both these countries eliminated the communist threat in their countries. Both Hitler and Mussolini looked to the Catholic Church to endorse and legitimize their leadership. The pope has not troops and he cannot fight a war, and so he must find a strong ally that will support Catholic rights throughout the world. An ally that is opposed to communism and appears to be supportive of the Catholic faith appeared to be a good choice for the papacy.

Concordats provide guaranteed laws for the Catholic Church in countries all over the world. They often make Catholicism the state religion, as was the case in Italy. In the period between the two great wars, the Catholic Church signed forty concordats. Secretary of State Pacelli was instrumental in orchestrating many of these agreements.

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<sup>21</sup> Claudia Carlen. “Divini Redemptoris,” in The Papal Encyclicals. (Ann Arbor : Pierian Press, 1990), paragraph, 3

Two of the most important Concordats were the Italian concordat<sup>22</sup> or the “Lateran Agreements,” and the German Concordat.<sup>23</sup> Part of the German Concordat reads

Instructions, ordinances, Pastoral Letters, official diocesan gazettes, and other enactments regarding the spiritual direction of the faithful issued by the ecclesiastical authorities within the framework of their competence may be published without hindrance and brought to the notice of the faithful in the form hitherto usual.<sup>24</sup>

The language of the Italian Concordat is similar to the above. The Italian Concordat, however, made Catholicism the state religion and outlawed all others. It is easy to understand how the Holy See was attracted to such treaties.

Pius XI’s agenda was to support Christian values throughout the world and eliminate Catholic political parties. His vehicle for doing this was Cardinal Pacelli. Pacelli was widely known for his prudence and patience and his excellent abilities as a diplomat. As Pius XI saw it, making a country entirely Catholic was much better than simply having a Catholic political party. Instead of political parties, Pius XI instead promoted Catholic Action. Instead of direct political parties, the goal Catholic Action was to Christianize every part of life, thus having a much more effective influence on the politics of a country than a political party. The papacy saw that the political parties were becoming moving from the left to the right as was the case in both Italy and Germany, and Pius XI could justifiably support these regimes. The concordats that Pius XI, and his Secretary of State Cardinal Pacelli, gave the Catholic community in countries guaranteed religious freedom.<sup>25</sup> The governments in Italy and Germany had not only crushed communist groups, but it also appeared that they would support Catholic teachings and

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<sup>22</sup> Signed in 1929

<sup>23</sup> Signed in 1933

<sup>24</sup> Concordat Between the Holy See and the German Reich, Article 4

<sup>25</sup> It was Cardinal Pacelli who signed the German Concordat

social values in their respective countries. In the case of both Italy and Germany, the Catholic Church sought to ebb the flow of the increasing nationalism throughout Europe, and maintain its authority to teach Christian values.<sup>26</sup>

The papacy did not understand that in completely totalitarian and national state, there cannot possibly be room for any type of competition for political and social teaching, such as would come from the Catholic Church. As Nathaniel Micklem correctly pointed out in 1939, “the Catholic Church as a whole had not realized what National Socialism meant, and the National Socialists had only a lay and rough and ready idea of the philosophy of the Catholic Church.”<sup>27</sup> Dictators, such as Hitler and Mussolini wanted to control every part of life. According to Micklem, “on principle the totalitarian State cannot permanently tolerate any organization of the masses that is independent from itself.”<sup>28</sup> The papacy had not fully realized how National Socialism really worked when the concordat was signed in 1933. Throughout the rest of the decade, however, the Holy See would come to understand that the National Socialist party, and the Fascist regime in Italy, had no intention of honoring the agreement that they had signed with the Roman Catholic Church.

Both the German and Italian leaders felt that they had solved the Catholic problem in their respective countries. Mussolini bragged that he had completely

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<sup>26</sup> The backlash to the signing of the German Concordat was tremendous. Many European countries felt that the Vatican was endorsing National Socialism and by dissolving the Centre Party had given Hitler a clear path to absolute power in Germany. One French Newspaper wrote that “The Church has retreated out of fear, because it believes that this is the only way to save Catholicism in Germany.” From Rhodes, 178.

<sup>27</sup> Micklem, 63

<sup>28</sup> Nathaniel Micklem. National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church. (London: Oxford University Press 1939), 25

destroyed any Catholic opposition to his authority.<sup>29</sup> It appeared that the Catholic Church had given an endorsement to their regimes.

Opposition from Catholic political parties had ceased to be a problem with the signing of the Concordats.<sup>30</sup> Dissent among the two factions, however, was imminent. The Germans had a problem with the way that the Church was signing Concordats with all the European countries, even those that were more toward the left of politics. One German newspaper wrote

In Germany no one will ever be able to understand that the Pope issues an Encyclical against atheistic Communism, strictly forbidding Catholic any co-operation with Bolshevism, while his chief representative in a signal manner makes common cause [creating Concordats] with the Marxist Popular Front and goes out of his way to do honour to a France that is tied to Moscow and Free Masonry. The ways of God are wonderful, but the ways of Cardinal Pacelli are unsavoury.<sup>31</sup>

Cardinal Pacelli had an extreme ability to compromise with the countries of Europe, and the Germans were unhappy with Pacelli accepting any government that was associated with communism.<sup>32</sup> The Vatican, in turn, was distressed that the Germans and Italians were increasingly violating the terms of the agreements. Not all of the violations are needed to be documented here, but the Germans especially did not honor the free speech agreement of the Catholic Church. Priests that were outspoken in their opposition to Hitler were executed or deported to prisons. Catholic Action in Germany was not given

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<sup>29</sup> Rhodes, 78

<sup>30</sup> The Catholic Centre party was abandoned in Germany in favor of Pius XI Catholic Action group. The Centre party was large and was the last opposition strong opposition that the Nazis faced. The same was true in Italy as Pius XI turned to Catholic Action to have an influence over life instead of a Catholic political party.

<sup>31</sup> Quotation taken from National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church, 78

<sup>32</sup> The Germans were also upset that the Holy See would not adopt its "race, blood, and soil" politics. The Italians had a similar slogan, but it was well understood that Pius XI would not agree to that particular language and the Italians made little effort to get the Church to adopt it. Cardinal Pacelli eventually was able to get the Germans to remove the clause from the concordat. From National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church, 76

the freedom that Pius XI had hoped it would have. On March 14, 1937, the pope officially released a protest of the German actions. In this encyclical he says

despite many and grave misgivings, We then decided not to withhold Our consent for We wished to spare the Faithful of Germany... We shall continue without failing, to stand before the rulers of your people as the defender of violated rights, and in obedience to Our Conscience and Our pastoral mission, whether We be successful or not, to oppose the policy which seeks, by open or secret means, to strangle rights guaranteed by a treaty.<sup>33</sup>

The Germans confiscated every copy of this encyclical and refused to allow it to be distributed in the country, thus proving that they were violating one of the main tenets of the concordat. Anthony Rhodes says of Cardinal Pacelli that “he supported every word in the encyclical stating that, as the normal diplomatic channels had been exhausted, this form of public protest was all that remained.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Pope Pius XII**

In 1939, Pius XI’s wishes came true. Eugenio Pacelli succeeded him as the Vicar of Christ on earth.<sup>35</sup> He took the name Pius XII in time of great struggle between the European nations, as it was right on the eve of World War II. By claiming the throne of St. Peter, Pius XII became responsible for the protection of all Catholics in every nation, a task that he had been attempting to accomplish throughout his career in the Church.

Cardinal Pacelli had a clear stand against the rising Nazi party in Germany. He addressed the city of Lourdes in 1935 and made clear how he felt about Hitler’s regime.

They [The Nazis] are in reality only miserable plagiarists who dress up old errors with new tinsel. It does not make any difference whether they flock to the banners of the social revolution, whether they are guided by a false

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<sup>33</sup> Pope Pius XI. Encyclical on the Church and the German Reich, March 14, 1937.

<sup>34</sup> Rhodes, 205

<sup>35</sup> Eugenio Pacelli election as pope was, and still is, the fastest election of a pope, taking only three days.



conception of the world and life, ore whether they are possessed by the superstition of a race and blood cult.<sup>36</sup>

This speech was made four years before Cardinal Pacelli became Pope. It shows that during his time in Germany from 1917 to 1929 he had come to understand how dangerous the Nazis were becoming. The Catholic Church, however, still did fear National Socialism as it did communism. Pacelli still believed that the Nazis, unlike the communist regimes, could be negotiated with and peace could remain.

The day after Cardinal Pacelli was installed as the leader of the Catholic Church a German newspaper wrote “The election of Cardinal Pacelli is not accepted with favor in Germany because he was always opposed to Nazism and practically determined the policies of the Vatican under his predecessor.”<sup>37</sup> This speech shows two things. First, the Germans obviously did not wish for Cardinal Pacelli to become the next pope. More importantly, it shows that the German leaders understood that the new pope did not approve of their government. They understood that Pacelli had long been critical of their actions, and he had warned the previous pope about their wrongdoings and potential aggressions.

Pius XII did have a special relationship with Germany, but in no way did he support Hitler or Germany’s aggressive actions. Pius XII did not wish for war to break out amongst the European nations. When the Pope was elected in 1939 war was imminent, but still he made repeated efforts to make peace among the factions. He wrote numerous letters to the major European powers urging them to avoid confrontation. He

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph L. Lichten A Question of Judgment: Pius XII and the Jews (The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2002),

<sup>37</sup> Joseph L. Lichten A Question of Judgment: Pius XII and the Jews (The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2002), 4

had seen what the war had done to Germany, and he did not wish a repetition of those atrocities on anyone. In a letter of May 4, 1939, the pope wrote a letter to Victor Emmanuel III, the King of Italy, to persuade him to hold a peace conference saying “begging that Your Government, accepting Our proposal, will not refuse to meet the Representatives of France, Germany, Great Britain and Poland in a friendly ‘conference.’”<sup>38</sup> He made great efforts to prevent the war diplomatically before it ever started.

It is true that the Pope maintained a policy of complete neutrality when it came to the axis powers of World War II. While the exact reasons for this remain unclear, and will probably always remain unclear, it is possible to defend the pope’s actions. The previous popes had tried to shape the Vatican in a certain way, and Pius XII wished not to waver from his predecessors policies. Like Benedict XV had done during World War I, Pius XII did not wish to compromise the position of the church by condemning a certain countries actions.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to understand the difficult position that the Pius faced while trying to orchestrate peace in Europe. He had been one of the principle characters in arranging the signing of the German Concordat. He had helped to establish the Church’s rights with a Nazi-controlled German state and a Fascist-controlled Italian. Up to this point, no European nations knew what atrocities were going to occur during World War II. While the Vatican understood that the Nazis were dangerous, as they had violated many of the agreements of the concordat, the Vatican was still unaware of the horrible outcome of the war that would ensue. His attempt at peace failed, but Pius did not wish to give up yet.

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<sup>38</sup> Actes de Documents, 113.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony Rhodes. The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973)

He next sent his nuncio in Germany to warn the leaders that if the United States was to enter the war, the Germans would not be able to stand up to them. The German leaders sent word back that they were not afraid of the United States. As late as August 1939, Pius XII again pushed for peace amongst the European nations. He said that “nothing is lost by peace. Everything can be lost by war...may the strong and proud listen to Us, and use their power not for destruction but for the protection of peace.”<sup>40</sup>

Pius XII wrote countless letters and gave many messages similar to this one. He urged the European powers to put down their arms and come to a peaceful agreement. It can be seen that the pope had a strategic plan to prevent for the outbreak of war. None of these messages condemn one country or the other. Germany, however, was the clear aggressor on the European path toward war. He wanted to negotiate a settlement between all the European powers. The case may be that the pope felt as though Germany had a right to try and rectify some of the wrongs that had been incurred from the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was demanding that the area of Danzig in Poland be returned to the Germans. This area had been taken from the Germans following World War I. The Pope suggested that in order to avoid war, the Polish should willingly give up this area to the Germans. In the Vatican this was criticized because the Catholic population in Poland might interpret this as a pro-German act. Pius did not see this as a pro-German act. Pius XII had spent many years in Germany and had seen the effects of World War I. It is evident, though, that he did not believe that war of any kind was the answer to the problem that the Germans had. The Germans invaded Poland and World War II started just six months after Pius XII became the Pope. The British minister in the Vatican said

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 217

after “We are in a position to state that His Holiness, up to the last moment, has unceasingly tried to prevent hostilities.”<sup>41</sup>

Pius XII took the same approach to Nazi Germany throughout the course of World War II that Benedict XV had. He condemned needless acts of aggression, but he refused to criticize countries by name. Pius understood that he had much more to fear from Hitler and his commanders, than the previous popes had. He understood that subtlety was the only way be critical. After the invasion of Poland by the Germans, the Pope was urged to give a speech reproving the Nazi measures. On October 27, 1939 the Pope said this on the Vatican radio “The blood of countless human beings, including many civilians, cries out in agony, a race as beloved by Us as the Polish...giving them the right to invoke the brotherly sympathy of the entire world.”<sup>42</sup> The retribution to this statement in Germany was swift. The Germans quickly outlawed the rebroadcast and retransmission of this speech.

Leaders around the world felt that this was not a strong enough condemnation. Pius was criticized for not publicly naming Germany as the aggressor. Hitler, however, knew what the Pope was saying. Following the broadcast, the Nazis imprisoned hundreds of Polish priests, and many Catholic churches were defiled. It is easy to understand why the Pope hesitated in the future to publicly denounce Nazi movements. He was afraid that his protests would incite more acts against his people.<sup>43</sup>

One thing that the pope may have failed to understand is the difference in nature between World War I and World War II. Benedict XV had much more leeway to be neutral because the First World War was not a battle of ideologies or race. By contrast,

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<sup>41</sup> Anthony Rhodes. The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 233

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, 237

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, 238

the Second World War was much more based on issues of race and nation. It was Hitler's intention to conquer the whole world. This was something that Pius did not understand at the beginning of the war. Nobody, including the pope, had any idea of the extermination of the Jews that occur throughout Europe, or Hitler's true intentions. If the pope had understood that the Church could not survive in the totalitarian world that Hitler wanted to create, he may have been more outspoken against Hitler at the beginning of the war. As the war continued, Pius became more aware of the terrible crime, he became more outspoken about the needless killing. In 1943, Pius said

Those who, because of their nationality or descent, are pursued by mounting misfortune and increasing suffering. Sometimes, through no fault of theirs, they are subjected to measures which threaten them with extermination...we do not forget a single one of the suffering peoples...even if at the present moment We wish to direct your compassion in a special manner to the Polish people.<sup>44</sup>

In this speech, it is clear that Pius was becoming more forceful with his words as the war progressed. He still refused, however, to criticize a country by name, but it is clear that this speech was directed toward the Nazi occupation of Poland.

While Pius does not directly give reference to the Jews, he does condemn acts of aggression based on nationality and race.

Many historians have asked what exactly Pius XII did to help the Jews. The study of the Vatican archives left many questions unanswered. Personal visits by many prominent leaders around the world went unrecorded. The account of what Pius XII did for the Jews in Europe comes from mostly from personal testimony. Testimony comes not only from members of the Catholic Church, but also from the Jews that the pope saved during the war. In the years following the war he was praised by Jewish leaders

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<sup>44</sup> Quote taken from Sanchez, 58

who learned that the Pope had done all he could do to save the lives of war refugees.

Joseph L. Lichten, a prominent Jewish leader, wrote a response to many of the accusations made against Pius XII. He argues that the Pope told his nuncios, bishops, and all other clergy members to do all in their power to alleviate the suffering of the Jews in the European countries. In an article published in 1967, Lichten wrote “Pius XII’s aim was to utilize the Vatican’s spiritual and material resources as completely as possible to help the oppressed in their misery.”<sup>45</sup>

This article has documented all of the works that Pius and his clergymen did throughout Western European countries. When the Pope learned that Jewish people were being persecuted in Slovakia and Hungary, he sent the nuncios to the various governments to protest. When this did not work, all the Pope could do was send word to the Archbishop in Istanbul to do all he could to help the suffering of the people.

Another example comes from Southeastern France. The Jews had been gathering in the free zone of France, but in 1942 German commanders were ordered to gather the refugees there and send them to concentration camps. A local priest, Marie-Benoit, organized a plan to smuggle these people to Northern Africa, where allied troops were winning battles. When Father Marie-Benoit approached Pius with these plans the Pope agreed with the plan and sent word to the allied troops who also agreed to help.

According to Rabbi David Dalin, a historian from New York, Pope Pius XII was “righteous among the nations, who must be recognized for having protected and saved hundreds of thousands of Jews.”<sup>46</sup> Dalin points out that it is well documented about 80% of the Jews living in Italy were saved from Nazi concentration camps. This had much to

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph L. Lichten *A Question of Judgment: Pius XII and the Jews* (The American-Israeli Cooperative

<sup>46</sup> David Dalin, “Pius Saved more Jews than Schindler: An interview with Historian Rabbi David Dalin. New York,” *L’Osservatore Romano English Edition*, 5 September 2001, 11

do with the Pope and what he instructed his clergy members to do. People were hidden in churches, convents, and even in the Castel Gandolfo, a papal residence.

Many accounts of Jews that were protected by the Catholic Church can be found in the book Yours is a Precious Witness: Memoirs of Jews and Catholics in Wartime Italy.<sup>47</sup> Numerous Jews were hidden in convents and Catholic sanctuaries throughout Italy. Ines Gistrone wrote “it has been said that Pius XII did not speak out against the Nazi crimes...because of his prudence, did he not succeed in saving many lives, including mine?”<sup>48</sup> One Cardinal in Genoa named Pietro Boetto helped Jews by giving them money to escape capture. Cardinal Dalla Costa of Florence was also instrumental in helping Jews in his area escape capture. Father Cipriano Ricotti was asked by the Cardinal if he would dedicate himself to the protection of Jews in Florence. Ricotti was more than willing, and he helped establish an underground railroad that providing homes and food for Jewish refugees. There are accounts similar to this all over Italy. Perhaps the most famous account comes from the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli. Zolli, who became Catholic immediately following the war and took the baptismal name Eugenio, was highly thankful of the help that Pius XII gave to the Jews in Rome. Zolli visited the Vatican

to officially thank him for all he, personally and through the Catholics in Rome, had done in favor of the Jews, opening convents and monasteries, dispensing with papal cloister as stated in canon law, so that Jews could be received even in female monasteries and protected from the fury of the Nazis.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Margherita Marchion. Yours is a Precious Witness: Memoirs of Jews and Catholics in Wartime Italy (New York: Paulist Press, 1997)

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, 74

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, 144

There was an organized effort by the Catholic Church to help ease the suffering of the Jewish people.<sup>50</sup>

One indisputable fact is the humanitarian work that the Catholic Church made for victims of the war, including the Jews. The Vatican openly attempted to obtain the names of victims and prisoners of war. Countless telegrams were passed through the Vatican attempting to reconnect families. This mission by the Vatican was undertaken without discretion.<sup>51</sup>

The United States and Great Britain implored the pope to take stronger actions throughout the war. The two countries wanted the pope to publicly condemn Nazi Germany for their wartime actions. The pope had to face a hard decision; he could either remain silent or attempt to continue his humanitarian efforts unheeded, or he could publicly denounce the Nazis and risk further aggression against Jews and Catholics alike. In a letter referring to the conditions in Poland, Pius declared

Many times I have thought of hurling excommunications at Nazism, of denouncing the bestiality of the extermination of the Jews to the civilized world...after many tears and many prayers I have come to the conclusion that a protest from me would not only not help anyone, but would arouse the most ferocious anger against the Jews and multiply acts of cruelty because they are undefended.<sup>52</sup>

Pius XII was fearful that publicly condemning the Nazis would only make it worse for Catholics and Jews alike. Many of his Bishops, including the Archbishop Sapieha, requested that the Pope keep silent for fear of Nazi retaliation in Poland.<sup>53</sup> It is

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, 92

<sup>51</sup> Jose M. Sanchez. Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Controversy. (Washington D.C.:The Catholic University of America, 2002), 120

<sup>52</sup>quote taken from Sanchez, 116

<sup>53</sup> Carlo Falconi. The Silence of Pius XII (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 76



understandable that the Allied powers would want the Pope to make a strong stand against Hitler. They hoped that the pope could rally more countries and people to their side in the war.

### **Conclusion**

Pope Pius XII remains one of the most controversial figures of the twentieth century. Every aspect of his life has been analyzed and critiqued by scholars all over the world. It is impossible to completely understand every thought process of the pope. It is possible, however, to make a judgment based on his career in the Church and the known sources that document his papacy. He made valiant efforts to create a Europe that tolerated religious freedom. He believed that this could be accomplished through the cultivation of diplomatic relationships. As a Cardinal, he helped orchestrate a relationship with Germany that had the potential to maintain freedom for Catholics. What Pius failed to understand was that, in a totalitarian state, the Catholic religion could not have survived. Hitler's goal was to nationalize everything, including religion. Had Pius understood the danger of National Socialism, perhaps the Catholic Church's attitude toward that particular type of government would have been much different in 1933 when the concordat was signed. The papacy may have chosen to fight the National Socialist governments the same way that they fought the communists throughout the world. After the signing of the German concordat he recognized how dangerous the National Socialist actually were, but by then it was too late. The Nazis had completely taken control of the country, and Pius feared that by speaking out against the Nazis, he risked too many Catholic lives.

Pius made repeated efforts to prevent war in Europe. After the war started, he was critical of act of aggression, and he did all that he could to save the lives of Christians and Jews alike. He did so in a much more subtle way than many people would have liked, but the pope felt that he was doing what was best. It is impossible to imagine what the outcome would have been if the pope made a more public denunciation of Nazi horrors, simply because that did not happen. It may be that, if the pope had responded more vehemently to Nazi atrocities, countless more would have lost their lives. The historians that question his judgment fail to recognize the position that he faced. Publicly condemning Hitler could be disastrous in multiple ways. Hitler or Mussolini could have easily taken control of the Vatican and spread propaganda through it. Even where he did speak out against Fascism or Nazism, he saw Catholics suffer as a result. His dilemma, then was how to oppose totalitarianism without making life worse for Catholics.

Recently the Vatican has made efforts to come to an understanding of Pius XII and his policies during the war. A select group of Catholic and Jewish historians were granted permission to sift through many unpublished documents in the archive of the Vatican. After studying this material the group could come to no definite conclusion about the pope's position toward Jews during World War II. They could not dispute, however, the efforts the pope made to save lives during the war. The evidence resides in the personal testimony of the Jews that survived the holocaust. These people defend what Pius XII said and did during the war.

Pius XII may not have done exactly what some modern historians say he should have, he felt that his course of action was the best way to keep the Church intact and save lives. Albert Einstein said of the Pope during the war "Only the Church stood squarely

across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing truth...because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom',<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Stephen Boyle. Pius XII and the Jews: Greatness dishonored, (Ignatius Press, April 1999), 32

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