

# CATHOLICS CAN BE PROUD OF THE WARTIME RECORD OF POPE PIUS XII

*By Kenneth D. Whitehead*

When a scholarly journal, *The Political Science Reviewer*, asked me to do an in-depth review-article on the major books that have recently come out about the Pope Pius XII controversy, I was at first not too eager to get involved. The Pius XII controversy seems to go on and on, with no resolution in sight. The anti-Pius authors, in particular, seem to pay little attention to the facts that have been brought forward concerning the true role of the wartime pontiff; they keep going back to the same old accusations against the pope, regardless of whether they have been answered or not: Pope Pius XII did not do enough to help the Jews during the Holocaust, they say, even though Adolf Hitler had made it clear that he intended to exterminate the Jews (along with some other victims, it needs to be added!). In particular, according to them, Pius XII failed to “speak out” forcefully to denounce the evil and criminal plans of Hitler and the Nazis (as if merely “speaking out” could have deterred Hitler!).

Of course, able people have not failed to come forward to defend the reputation of the wartime pope, often citing the abundant testimony of wartime Jewish leaders which demonstrate that Pius XII was one of the best friends the European Jews had. This is hardly the view of the average person today, however, owing to the incessant negative publicity about the wartime pope. And the defenders of Pius XII have never quite been able to make their case effectively or attract as much attention as his accusers. The latter enjoy the prestige of having their books published by mainstream New York publishing

houses and by university presses—which then promptly get major attention from such publications as *Time* or *Newsweek* or the *New York Times Book Review*—while the latter, the pro-Pius authors, have to turn to small religious publishing houses if they expect their books to see the light of day at all. Nor are the pro-Pius books found on the shelves of public libraries or in bookstores as readily as the anti-Pius books are. The odds have thus regularly been against the defenders of Pius XII ever getting a full and fair hearing to make their case.

Thinking about this, I decided that I should take a serious look at both the recent anti-Pius and pro-Pius books, and try to reach some conclusions about which of them make the stronger case. The academic and professional political scientists who read *The Political Science Reviewer* were surely not committed to any particular viewpoint on the issue, I thought, and were probably honestly interested in what the true facts of the case might be. The whole thing was worth a try. So I decided to plow through the ten major Pius XII books, pro and con, published over the past four years, and to try to provide a serious, scholarly account of just what the continuing Pius XII controversy was all about; what was being said about it on both sides; why the controversy keeps going on and on; and how, in my opinion, the whole question should ultimately be judged.

The results of my efforts became a long review-article of more than 100 pages bearing the title, “The Pope Pius XII Controversy.” It was published in the 2002 issue (Volume XXXI) of *The Political Science Reviewer*, and will now also be available [on the website of the Catholic League](#) for those interested in going into this subject in more detail.

The ten books I read included: *Pius XII and the Second World War* by Fr. Pierre Blet, S.J.; *Hitler’s Pope* by John Cornwell; *The Popes Against the Jews* by David Kertzer; *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace* by Sr. Margherita Marchione; *The*

*Defamation of Pius XII* by Ralph McInerny; *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* by Michael Phayer; *Hitler, the War, and the Pope* by Ronald J. Rychlak; *Pius XII and the Holocaust* by José M. Sánchez; *Papal Sin* by Garry Wills; and *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust* by Susan Zucotti.

Regardless of how they try to bill themselves as more or less scholarly works, five of these books are nevertheless frankly anti-Pius (Cornwell, Kertzer, Phayer, Wills, and Zucotti); four of them are just as frankly pro-Pius (Blet, Marchione, McInerny, and Rychlak); and only one of them attempts—not, however, with completely satisfactory results—to be neutral and above the fray (Sánchez). It was a chore to read through all of them, but now that I have done so, I can speak pretty confidently about what we are dealing with in this particular controversy. We are dealing with what one of the authors, Ralph McInerny, in his title, calls the defamation of Pius XII. Those who so doggedly continue to go after a Roman pontiff more than forty years after his death—and long after all of the essential facts of the case have been put on the record, and do not prove the case against him—are driven by an ideology that really has little to do with the real wartime record of Pius XII, and a great deal to do with discrediting both the man and the Catholic Church he led. Some of the pro-Pius authors understand this. Obviously, I cannot prove it completely here in this short summary, though; readers are referred to the complete review-article on the Catholic League's website; but what I can say is that the anti-Catholic bias in the anti-Pius books approaches the pathological.

Some of the anti-Pius books, such as those of Michael Phayer and Susan Zucotti, appear to be very serious and scholarly; they are heavily footnoted and they carefully cite various sources; in this respect, they do not immediately seem to resemble the books of disaffected Catholics such as John Cornwell and Garry Wills, which are little better than vulgar

polemics. In the end, though, I was obliged to conclude that all of the anti-Pius books are defective in one especially serious, if not fatal, respect: namely, they all rest upon an indefensible view of how the writing of history should be done. Before they get down to any historical facts at all, they start out with the firm premise or presupposition that Pope Pius XII simply should have “spoken out” against Hitler. Even in the wartime conditions that prevailed, they think he should have loudly denounced the Holocaust that was taking place in Nazi-occupied Europe. They rarely credit or even mention all that the Vatican did do to help wartime victims; nor do they recognize any special conditions or constraints that Pius XII might have been under—for example, that the Vatican was surrounded throughout the greater part of the war by hostile Fascist and Nazi regimes able to occupy the pope’s tiny enclave in a matter of hours, as they more than once threatened to do.

If the pope by “speaking out” had called upon Catholics in Nazi-occupied Europe to try to oppose Hitler’s juggernaut, anyone responding to such a call would have incurred instant arrest, deportation to a concentration camp, and probable swift execution in the conditions that prevailed under the Nazis. While the Church does canonize martyrs, she does not call upon Catholics to court certain martyrdom. None of this registers with the anti-Pius writers, however; they still write simply on the basis of what they think the pope should have done. But to write history on this basis is not to write history in the true sense at all. History is the record of what did happen, not what somebody thinks should have happened. Good history hopefully includes the historian’s educated judgment of how and why things happened as they did. Still the historian has to stick to what did happen, not what he thinks should have happened.

All of the anti-Pius books fail this simple test; and hence not one of them is history in the true sense but rather is

special pleading for a pre-established point of view.

The pro-Pius books, on the other hand, do all try to establish and honestly explain what did happen. My conclusion is that you can rely on the accounts that the various defenders of Pius XII provide. The true fact is that Catholics can be proud of the wartime record of Pope Pius XII. In particular, as I remark in my long review-article, in the light of the case made in detail by Ronald J. Rychlak in his *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*, “the case against Pius XII set forth by the anti-Pius writers is simply untenable.”

In view of the importance of the subject—and of the fact that the Pius XII controversy does just seem to go on and on—I am pleased that the Catholic League is willing to reproduce my complete review-article on its website. Go to [www.catholicleague.org](http://www.catholicleague.org) to get the complete story about how the various pro-Pius and anti-Pius authors have treated the Pius XII controversy. Then go to the books themselves. It is vital to be properly informed about this continuing controversy in which the Catholic Church herself is being attacked in the person of her great wartime pontiff.

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