

HITLER'S PLAN TO KIDNAP THE POPE

by Dan Kurzman

As soon as Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was ousted from power on July 25, 1943, Adolf Hitler began hatching a plan to kidnap Pope Pius XII and plunder the Vatican. Clearly, the Fuehrer thought, the "Jew-loving" pope had encouraged King Victor Emanuel II and some rival fascist leaders to overthrow his Italian puppet.

The following day Hitler called for an urgent meeting of his military leaders. They must liberate Mussolini and return him to power, he cried. And "we must occupy Rome" and "destroy the Vatican's power, capture the pope, and say that we are protecting him." The pope might even have to be killed.

About six weeks later, on September 13, SS General Karl Wolff, the SS commander in Italy, received a phone call from his boss, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler, orchestrator of the Holocaust. Himmler, Wolff told me, bellowed that the Fuehrer wanted to see him urgently.

The general, who had previously served as Himmler's chief of staff, suspected why. Three days earlier, on September 10, German troops had marched into Rome, and German intelligence soon snatched Mussolini from captivity. The Duce was now to regain power in Nazi-occupied northern Italy, and Wolff would be sent to the capital in Fasano, near Salo, primarily to make sure that Mussolini followed the Nazi line. But Himmler had revealed to Wolff that Hitler had an additional secret mission in mind for him.

According to notes that Wolff told me he had taken during and after the meeting, Hitler barked: "I want you and your troops to occupy Vatican City as soon as possible, secure its files

and art treasures, and take the pope and the curia to the north," probably Liechtenstein.

Referring to the threat of an Allied invasion of Italy, he added: "I do not want the pope to fall into the hands of the Allies or to be under their political pressure and influence."

Wolff promised to do his best but was conflicted, feeling that such an operation could alienate Italy and the entire Catholic world. Besides, he worshipped power, and the pope, like Hitler, was one of the world's most powerful leaders. The two men, although holding diametrically contrary views, were to the calculating general like earthly gods. Still, he felt, his mission might be useful—if he could sabotage it and obtain a blessing from Pius for saving his life and the Church itself. Wolff could perhaps also save his own life if Germany lost the war and he was tried for his war crimes.

But Wolff, who revered the SS, may have been prompted as well by other more sordid details of the kidnap plot that were later discovered in a letter that one Italian fascist leader wrote to another. It was headed Massacre of Pius XII with the Entire Vatican.

According to this message, which repeated what a high SS official (perhaps Wolff) told the fascist writer, the purpose of the plot was to avenge "the papal protest in favor of the Jews"—apparently referring to an expected papal outcry when the Roman Jews were rounded up.

The plan called for soldiers of the SS Florian Geyer Cavalry, disguised in Italian uniforms, to invade the Vatican shielded by night, kill all members of the curia, and take the pope prisoner. Then troops of the Hermann Goering Panzer Division would surge into the Vatican to "rescue" the pontiff and kill the disguised SS men, assuming they were Italian assassins rather than SS compatriots. Thus, no witnesses.

If the pope tried to escape (or was perceived as trying to),

he, too, would be shot. The world, like the panzer soldiers, would be led to believe that the "Italians" were guilty.

Meanwhile, Wolff described Hitler's order to Rudolf Rahn, the German ambassador to Italy, who was to be transferred from Rome to Fasano as the emissary to Mussolini's new republic. Rahn then joined in a conspiracy with Wolff and several other like-minded German officials against the plot and went to see Hitler. If the people learned that their pope had been abducted, Rahn told the Fuehrer and his chief lieutenants, they might rise up against the Germans.

Most of Hitler's men seemed cool to an attack, fearing such a reaction. Even Himmler, who had been meeting secretly with the German Resistance, was uncertain; he had to choose between striking the Church, which he hated, and seeking to improve his image in Allied eyes in case Germany lost the war.

The only one present who strongly supported an attack was Martin Bormann, Hitler's ruthless secretary, who wanted to replace Christianity with a new religion headed by the Fuehrer. Bormann, Rahn told me, turned beet-red with anger as he, the ambassador, made his plea. But Hitler trusted his secretary most, and it appeared that his advice would be taken.

Meanwhile, General Wolff revealed to the Vatican that Pius was in danger. The pope loathed Hitler. And Hitler loathed him, viewing him as an obstacle to his –and Bormann's–grandiose plan to capture the minds and souls of much of mankind after a victorious war.

In 1939, realizing what was at stake, Pius had actually joined in a conspiracy by some German generals to overthrow Hitler and, if necessary, a high Vatican official told me, to kill him. The risks, he said, to both the pope personally and the Church were incalculable. But in the end the plot fell through.

In 1943, as the tension between the two men grew, Monsignor Domenico Tardini, the Vatican's assistant secretary of state, told the cardinals to "keep a suitcase ready because we might be deported at any time." The pope himself called a meeting of cardinals to choose a possible successor in case he was kidnapped. And friends of the pope prepared a plan for him to flee to Spain if necessary, though he vowed to remain in the Vatican unless he was carried out.

Ernst von Weizsaecker, the German ambassador to the Vatican, another anti-Hitler conspirator, tried to convince Pius that he should remain silent when the Nazis rounded up the Jews of Rome. The Pope, until then, had felt that if he spoke out strongly against the Jewish genocide, Hitler would not only attack the Vatican but would drag out the hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Vatican institutions in which they were hiding throughout occupied Europe, as well as their Christian protectors.

But the German diplomats were afraid that he would nevertheless speak out publicly if the Roman Jews, his neighbors, were deported. If he did, they argued, there was virtually no chance that Hitler would cancel his kidnap plan. And on October 16, the Gestapo in Rome began rounding up the Jews.

That rainy morning, Princess Enza Pignatelli Aragona, a friend of Pius, was awakened by a phone call from a friend, who informed her of the arrests. The princess told me she rushed to the Vatican and, interrupting a papal mass, blurted the news to the pope, crying, "Only you can stop them!"

"But they promised me that they would not touch the Jews in Rome!" Pius exclaimed. He then ordered Cardinal Luigi Maglione, his secretary of state, to summon Ambassador Weizsaecker urgently and protest the action. As the princess departed, the pope promised, "I'll do all I can."

When Weizsaecker arrived for a meeting with Maglione, he said he would “try to do something for these poor Jews.” But, he asked, “what would the Holy See do if these things were to continue?”

“The Holy See would not want to be faced with the need to express its disapproval,” the cardinal answered ... “If the Holy See were forced to [protest], it would trust the consequences to Divine Providence.” In other words, he would speak out publicly if the roundup of Jews continued.

Shaken, the ambassador responded, “I think of the consequences that a protest by the Holy See might precipitate.”

Clearly, the word “kidnap” was on both their minds.

Meanwhile, other German diplomats—and, the Vatican would say, the pope’s nephew—urged an eminent priest, whom Berlin trusted, to write an urgent note to a cooperative German commander in Italy that was to be wired to Berlin echoing Cardinal Maglione’s warning.

At the same time, in Germany, General Wolff managed to convince Hitler that he would have a hard time suppressing an uprising in Italy if the pope felt forced to speak out and had to be dethroned. So, finally, Himmler ordered that the roundup stop after only about 1,000 of the 8,000 Roman Jews were picked up. And the pope, who had apparently been prepared to publicly condemn the roundup, felt there was no longer a need to do so now.

Several months later, in May 1944, Wolff secretly met with Pius, who, having learned of the general’s role in helping to sabotage the kidnap plot, felt that the man must have some good in him, whatever his background.

Both men agreed that the war would best end in an Allied-German alliance, without Hitler, to halt the Soviet advance on Europe. And Wolff assured the pope that he would try to

frustrate any new plot against him.

Wolff was overwhelmed when the pope then blessed him. He now had the full confidence of both the Vicar of Christ and the Antichrist, an incredible interworld feat. The general rose, clicked his heels together—and raised his arm in the Nazi salute! The pope smiled forbearingly. His visitor had simply confused his gods. But he would eventually betray one of them—surrendering the entire German army in Italy, on his own, to the Americans.

The kidnap plot had failed, but it had helped to shape the policies and attitudes of the pope, Hitler, and their subordinates during a most important segment of World War II history.

Award-winning author Dan Kurzman is the only journalist who ever interviewed General Karl Wolff. His newly released book, A Special Mission: Hitler's Secret Plot to Seize the Vatican and Kidnap Pope Pius XII, is available from [Da Capo Press](#).