

Michael Phayer: The Catholic Church and the Holocaust 1935-1960

By Michael Phayer Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis

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Pope Pius XII (1939-1958), as Secretary of State to Pius XI and as pope, faced Nazi Germany with a remarkable consistency. The Nazis considered him an implacable foe,¹ and he was hailed both during and after World War II as the strongest voice – often the only voice – speaking out in Europe against the Nazi terror.² The Church under his leadership is credited with saving more Jewish lives in the face of the Holocaust than any other agency, government or entity at the time.³ Pius' combination of diplomatic pressure, careful but sustained criticism while maintaining an essential Vatican neutrality in war-torn Europe, as well as direct action through his nuncios and the local Church where possible, saved what some have estimated as 860,000 Jewish lives.⁴ If that estimate is accurate by only half, it remains a historic effort for a Church fighting without weapons against the most horrific campaign of genocide the world had yet seen.

Yet, in the face of this clear historical record, Pope Pius XII has come under attack since his death. Beginning with Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* in 1963, a revisionism set-in Pius five years after his death and a new picture of Pius was created.⁵ Accused of an alleged "silence" in the fact of the Holocaust, critics have gone further, insinuating that he may have been a crypto-Nazi sympathizer. In John Cornwell's

*Hitler's Pope*⁶ he is portrayed as an anti-Semitic, silent bystander to the Holocaust.

In an afterword to Ronald J. Rychlak's masterful defense of Pius XII, *Hitler, the War and the Pope*⁷, Robert P. George examines this defamation of Pius XII. George sees two sources for this new myth: "anti-Catholic bigots and anti-papal Catholics have a large stake in preserving the myth that Eugenio Pacelli was 'Hitler's Pope.' The myth is of enormous utility in their continuing efforts to undermine the credibility of the Catholic Church and the teaching authority (magisterium) exercised by the Pope and the bishops in communion with him... (The myths) originate in, and are to a large extent sustained as part of a larger effort to undermine the credibility and weaken the moral and cultural influence of the Catholic Church. Why? Because the Catholic Church – and, within the Church, the institution of the papacy – is the single most potent force of traditional morality in cultural conflicts with communism, utilitarianism, radical individualism, and other major secular ideologies."

George hints at an often understated but important aspect to the revisionism concerning Pius XII: his anti-communism and his image as a Cold War pontiff. John Cornwell's book on Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust, *Hitler's Pope* was an amateur's hatchet job that exploited the Holocaust to attack the papacy of Pope John Paul II. Cornwell is a self-described Catholic who sees a strong papacy as standing in the way of his own vision of proper Church reform. The Holocaust is simply a weapon to be used by Cornwell in this inter-Church debate.⁸ Editorials in the *New York Times* tend toward the more surreal, anti-Catholic position, lumping in the alleged silence of Pope Pius XII with a laundry list of complaints about Catholicism: the Church's refusal to ordain women, its opposition to abortion, and its teaching on homosexuality.⁹

An additional, critical source of the myth of Pius as Holocaust collaborator comes from certain students of history who loathed Pius for his anti-communism. This was an important aspect that served Hocchuth's interpretation. Popular in the late 1950s through the 1970s, this school of revisionist historians saw anti-communism as a dangerous threat, and all tainted by it deserving nothing but approbation. Pius certainly fit such a category.

Michael Phayer, professor of history at Marquette University, has authored a new book on the Catholic response to the Holocaust. Phayer seems particularly affected by that "anti-anti-communism" school of thought on Pope Pius XII. He assumes "papal silence," and attributes it primarily to a fear of communism. In *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* ¹⁰ Phayer states that his purpose is to go beyond the issue of the silence of Pope Pius XII to explore how the Church in various countries, and through various individual Catholics, responded to the Holocaust, and how that response eventually led to the Church's official rejection of anti-Semitism during the Second Vatican Council. Yet throughout the book, he paints Pope Pius XII as a meek pontiff unwilling to engage the Nazis. He states that Pius was motivated by the hope that he could secure a negotiated peace that would leave a powerful Germany as a European defense against an aggressive communist Soviet Union.

Yet, Phayer does not examine the allegation of silence on the part of Pope Pius XII, but merely accepts it as a given, bowing to contemporary conventional wisdom rather than the historical record of what was accomplished for Jews by Pius and the Church during the horror of the *Shoah*. In doing so, Phayer does not present a prosecutor's case for Pius' alleged silence, nor for his motives in being silent. Instead, he assumes that silence and postulates motives to fit that alleged reality, without proving that such motives existed.

Though Phayer's book shows serious professional historical study and background on the events of World War II, it has similarities to Cornwell's screed. Phayer's prejudices against Pius determine the scholarship he brings to bear on the issue. Phayer's book requires a more serious response than one would give to Cornwell's ravings. Yet, it is a deeply flawed work that will play its own role in the ongoing slander of Pope Pius XII.

Phayer does not portray Pius XII as a Nazi sympathizer, or as a closeted anti-Semite. But for a book that he claims is meant to go beyond the debate over the alleged papal silence, his indictment of Pius is draconian. He claims that Pius "did little for Jews in their hour of greatest need."¹¹ While acknowledging that working through his papal nuncios he was able to save Jewish lives, his "greatest failure...lay in his attempt to use a diplomatic remedy for a moral outrage."¹² At the same time, he charges that the "image that emerges of Pope Pius is that of a pontiff whose deep concern about communism and the intact physical survival of the city of Rome kept him from exploring options on behalf of the Jewish people."¹³ He charges that in the immediate post-war period the Vatican under Pius XII consciously assisted Nazi war criminals to escape and "worked against U.S. policies that sought to make German society responsible for the murder of the Jews."¹⁴ Why? To maintain a strong Germany in response to the communist threat, and to keep unsullied the enhanced image of the Church in Europe as a result of its actions during the War. While Phayer spends a small portion of his book presenting heroic stories of individual Catholics who engaged in rescue work, he returns consistently to the theme of a silent, almost cowardly Pope Pius XII, whose only desire was to limit communist expansion, even if it meant ignoring the plight of the Jews. Yet while Phayer states this case, he never makes it. He over relies on Nazi interpretation of Vatican action, as well as the editorial opinion of secondary

sources rather than documentation.

Phayer argues that if Pius XI had lived five more years, Church reaction would have been different to the Holocaust and to Nazi Germany.¹⁵ While that is unknowable, of course, and Pius XI was certainly a different personality than Pius XII, Phayer ignores or downplays the important role played by Cardinal Pacelli in determining Vatican reaction to the Nazis in the 1930s. Phayer cites a series of events under Pius XI that he interprets as signaling a new direction that would be reversed under Pius XII. He notes, for example, the 1937 encyclical of Pope Pius XI, *Mit brennender sorge*, which condemned racism and idolatry of the State. He makes no mention that it was the future Pius XII, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who drafted the encyclical.¹⁶ In 1938, Phayer describes how Cardinal Theodore Innitzer of Vienna was called to Rome for a dressing-down after he publicly welcomed the Nazi *Anschluss* of Austria, a rebuke distributed throughout Vatican diplomatic channels. He does not mention that it was Cardinal Pacelli who summoned Cardinal Innitzer to Rome and told him he must retract his statement.¹⁷ Finally, he notes that when Hitler visited Rome on an official visit to Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy, "the pope snubbed the dictators by leaving the city."¹⁸ He fails to mention that Cardinal Pacelli departed with the pontiff.

Clearly, the future Pope Pius XII had a strong hand in the development of the Holy See's attitude toward both the Nazi movement and its anti-Semitic policies during the pontificate of Pius XI. There was no difference in substance between the two pontificates in addressing Nazism and anti-Semitism. The differences in approach between the two pontificates, such as they were, centered on the fact that within six months of the election of Pope Pius XII, Germany invaded Poland and Europe was at war.

Throughout Phayer's book, he suggests that Cardinal Pacelli's work on the 1933 Concordat between Hitler and the Holy See "linked the Vatican with the new Nazi regime" and its maintenance became an obsession with Pius XII, thus limiting his ability – or desire – to protest the treatment of the Jews.¹⁹ The concordat was concluded at a time when the Vatican was forced to deal with the reality of Hitler's rise to power. In June 1933 Hitler had signed a peace agreement with the western powers, including France and Great Britain, called the Four-Power Pact. At the same time Hitler expressed a willingness to negotiate a statewide concordat with Rome. The concordat was concluded a month later, preceded by both the Four-Power Pact and a similar agreement concluded between Hitler and the Protestant churches. The Church had no choice but to conclude such a concordat, or face draconian restrictions on the lives of the faithful in Germany. Pope Pius XI explained that it was concluded only to spare persecution that would take place immediately if there was no such agreement. The concordat would also give the Holy See the opportunity to formally protest Nazi action. For example, it provided a legal basis for arguing that baptized Jews in Germany were Christian and should be exempt from legal disabilities. Though the Nazis routinely violated the Concordat before the ink was dry, its existence allowed for Vatican protest, and it did save Jewish lives. The first protest filed with the Nazi government under the terms of the concordat concerned the Nazi government-sponsored boycott of Jewish businesses.²⁰

Phayer cites as another example of the laxity of Pius XII the case of Bishop Alois Hudal – the "Brown Bishop" – an Austrian Nazi sympathizer. Phayer states that even with his well-known anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi sympathies, Hudal "won an appointment as the rector of the Collegia del Anima in Rome, the school of theology for Austrian seminarians. There he remained throughout the Nazi era acting on occasion as an

intermediary between Pius XII and Nazi occupational forces, and, after the war, helping Holocaust perpetrators to escape justice.”²¹ Rather than winning his appointment, Hudal was in Rome to be kept on ice. Though he claimed influence in Vatican circles, both the curia and the pope ignored him. Even the Nazis dismissed Hudal as having no influence. (He could not even influence his seminarians that embarrassed Hudal by making themselves absent during Hitler’s state visit to Italy in 1938.) Pius XII did use him once, to serve as an intermediary with the Germans to halt the arrest of Jews during the Nazi occupation of Rome.²² Though Hudal may have personally assisted Nazis to escape after the war, there is no connection between him and the Holy See, or that Pius XII had any knowledge of such actions. Phayer cites no documentation or source other than anti-papal conjecture.²³

He charges that Pope Pius XII contributed by his silence in the Nazi slaughter of Catholics in occupied Poland, particularly from 1939 to 1941. Yet, Phayer himself acknowledges that Vatican Radio was the first to inform the world of the depths of the Nazi atrocities in Poland just months after its occupation through broadcasts in January, 1940, broadcasts given at the direction of Pope Pius XII.²⁴ Phayer alleges that the broadcasts were suspended in the face of German threats on the Vatican. The Nazis did protest and make veiled threats, but they were hinting at retaliation on the helpless Poles, not the Vatican itself. For a short time, Vatican Radio ceased comment on the Polish situation, though this was done over concern with how the British were altering and re-broadcasting Vatican reports as propaganda.²⁵ By the following January, Vatican Radio was continuing its vociferous critique of German atrocities in Poland.

Pius XII had raised the issue of Poland in Easter and Christmas messages, in articles in the Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, as well as in the first encyclical of

his pontificate, *Summi Pontificatus*. The Vatican also refused to cooperate with the German demand to control the appointment of bishops in occupied Poland. In a March 1940 confrontation with Joachim von Ribbontrop, Hitler's foreign minister, Pius XII read to him in German a detailed report on Nazi atrocities in Poland aimed at both the Church and the Jews. That meeting received in depth coverage in the *New York Times*. The nuncio to Germany was also instructed by Pius repeatedly, as Phayer himself notes, "to plead for better treatment of Polish priests and lay people."²⁶ Yet, Phayer proclaims papal silence and complains that Pius XII chose a diplomatic rather than a moral approach, without citing what that moral approach would have been, or how it could have been feasible or successful in the face of Nazi aggression.

Phayer raises the complaint that Pius would not join in a public statement from the allies in 1942 condemning Nazi atrocities in Poland. He states that Pius XII would not join in the statement, quoting a British diplomat at the time, because he was determined to act as a mediator between Germany and the Allies to end the war. The real reason was that this would be an official statement of the Allied governments and it was impossible for Pius XII, representing a neutral state, to join the effort. However, in his annual Christmas message of 1942, Pius XII condemned totalitarian regimes and mourned the victims of the war, "the hundreds of thousands who, through no fault of their own, and solely because of their nation or race, have been condemned to death or progressive extinction." He called on Catholics to shelter any and all refugees. The statement was loudly praised in the Allied world. In Germany, it was seen as the final repudiation by Pius XII of the Nazis: "(H)e is virtually accusing the German people of injustice toward the Jews, and makes himself the mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminal." Oddly, Phayer claims that this Christmas message was not understood and that "no one, certainly not the Germans, took it as a protest against

the slaughter of the Jews.”²⁷ He states this despite the negative German reaction and Allied praise for the statement. A prominent Christmas Day 1942 editorial in the *New York Times* stated: “No Christmas sermon reaches a larger audience than the message Pope Pius XII addresses to a war-torn world at this season...When a leader bound impartially to nations on both sides condemns as heresy the new form of national state which subordinates everything to itself...when he assails violent occupation of territory, the exile and persecution of human beings for no other reason than race or political opinion...the ‘impartial judgment’ is like a verdict in a high court of justice.”²⁸

Phayer makes a number of broad statements that are at best open to contrary interpretation, and at worst seem to misstate the facts. He claims that a private audience between Croatian Fascist leader Ante Pavelic and Pius XII, and the appointment of a nuncio, was a victory for Fascist Croatia.²⁹ However, Pius XII refused to greet Pavelic as a head of state and formal recognition was never extended. Pavelic left Rome in an insulted rage, rather than “satisfied” as Phayer contends.³⁰ The Vatican refused to recognize an independent state of Croatia and did not receive a Croatian representative. The pope’s representative in Croatia, Archbishop Marcone, would work tirelessly in defense of the Croatian Jews.

Phayer states that the Vatican “refrained from promoting a separate Italian peace with the Allies because it would necessarily weaken Germany.”³¹ Pius had, in fact, pressed Mussolini to negotiate a separate peace and advised the Badoglio regime that succeeded him to do so as well.³² Phayer cites an underling’s memo to von Ribbentrop that the only obstacle to a “loyal relationship between the church and National Socialism is the latter’s euthanasia and

sterilization policies. The murder of Jews was left out of the equation.”³³ He seems to take at face value Nazi interpretations of the position of the Vatican as, in fact, the Vatican’s position.

He states that while Archbishop Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, engaged in the rescue of many Jews, he quotes another historian who states that may have done so without Vatican orders and “possibly even against them.”³⁴ This would make Archbishop Roncalli a liar as he clearly stated that as nuncio he acted solely at the direction of Pope Pius XII.

Phayer charges that the Vatican had prior knowledge of the German roundup of 1,200 Jews in Rome on October 16, 1943 and did nothing to forewarn them.³⁵ He relies for this charge on self-serving German diplomatic explanations, and then makes the preposterous case that it was the German diplomatic corps that “saved” Roman Jews. Throughout Italy, Jews were hidden by the Church. When it seemed certain that German troops would soon occupy the city, Pius helped Jews to evacuate and to hide. Many of those not evacuated, about 5,000, were in hiding in Church buildings when 60,000 Nazi troops occupied Rome. On October 16, the Nazis initiated a roundup of the Jews not in hiding. There is no evidence that Pius had specific prior knowledge, or concealed such knowledge. Reason dictated, of course, that such a raid could happen at any moment. There was little ignorance of what the Nazis were capable of doing to the Jewish community. The Germans had invaded the main Roman synagogue a month earlier and secured a list of Jewish families.

Immediately upon being notified of the German seizure, Pius demanded that the arrests be halted. He even used Bishop Hudal as a go-between to bring an end to the arrests. The Nazis stopped large-scale roundups and the Jews in hiding in Rome were protected.

The central thesis in Phayer's book is that Pius refused to speak out against the Holocaust and sought a negotiated peace because he wanted a strong Germany to face down the threat of Soviet communism. Yet, nowhere in the book does Phayer cite documented statements of Pope Pius XII to support that assertion. Though he charges ³⁶ that Pius wanted the Soviet Union abandoned by the Allies in order to free up Germany to destroy the Soviet Union, the source for such a conclusion seems to be Nazi wishful-thinking than documented Vatican positions. "Pius XII did not change his position when Germany began its war with Russia, and he never spoke, even by means of allusion, about a 'crusade' against Bolshevism or a 'holy war.'" ³⁷

Which is not to argue that Pope Pius XII was unrealistic concerning Stalin's Russia. He was certainly more realistic about Stalin's intentions than were the U.S. and Great Britain during the war. During Stalin's rule from 1928 to 1953, historians estimate that he was responsible for at least 20 million deaths. His all-out war against religion, and the Catholic Church in particular, was well known to Pius XII. Yet there is no case for arguing that Pius modified positions against Germany, or refused to speak out on the Holocaust, to somehow prop up Germany and divide the Allies. While anti-papal historians consistently assign that motive to Pius, there is no documented evidence of such a policy. But much is known to the contrary. It is known, for example, that Pius intervened to assure American supplies to the Soviet Union. When some American Catholics raised the issue that giving such supplies was aiding communism, the Holy See assured them that assistance to the Russian people unjustly attacked by Nazi Germany was appropriate. Pius also acceded to an American request not to publicly raise Stalin's past persecution of the Church after he joined the Allied cause. As cited in *Hitler, the War and the Pope* ³⁸ Pius wrote to Myron C. Taylor, Roosevelt's personal representative to the pope: "(A)t the

request of President Roosevelt, the Vatican has ceased all mention of the Communist regime.. But this silence that weighs heavily on our conscience, is misunderstood by the Soviet leaders who continue the persecution against churches and the faithful. God grant that the free world will one day not regret my silence." As Rychlak noted, ironically, "he would later come to be attacked for a different silence."

Historians such as Phayer assume this anti-Soviet strategy because of Pius' concern over the Allied demand for complete and total German surrender. Pius did make clear his belief that failing to attempt to negotiate a peace and demanding complete and total German surrender would only prolong the war and the killing. But that was his reason for the position, a position one would expect from the Vicar of Christ in any war. Certainly, it was not a position without merit. It can be argued – and has been argued – that peace could have been obtained earlier with many lives saved if the Allies had not demanded an unconditional surrender, but rather the removal of Hitler and his Nazi cronies. Many share the view that this did, indeed, both prolong the war and help keep Hitler in power to the very end. Others argue, of course, that the hope for a negotiated peace was simply impossible as Hitler remained in absolute control until his death in a Berlin bunker. In any case, the papal position was viable. And there was nothing in such a papal position that implied anything more than the desire to save lives. To see the papal call for a negotiated peace as either a grandiose ploy on the part of the pontiff to set himself up as the great peacemaker of Europe, as Phayer contends, or to maintain a strong Germany as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, as Phayer also contends, is to invent motives that are historically undocumented.

There are elements in Phayer's book that are interesting and worthy. He outlines well what the Church – and individual Catholics – were able to accomplish in rescuing

Jews. He makes clear that the Church did not sit by idly as the Jews were taken to slaughter. Of particular interest is his overview of what the Church did and did not do within Nazi Germany itself. He points out that there were those within the Church who were able to accomplish more than many assume within Nazi Germany in defense of the Jews, though he cannot help but add that they went "further than Pius XII."

Rather than "go beyond" the issue of Pius XII as he claims to be the intent of his book, Phayer returns to Pius repeatedly. "To the extent that Pope Pius chose to intervene at all, he did so through intermediaries, the nuncios, rather than by responding to the Holocaust publicly from Rome. In other words, when the pope chose to deal with the murder of Jews, he did so through diplomatic channels rather than through a moral pronouncement such as an encyclical." ³⁹ But that is precisely the point. First, there was no absolute "papal silence" on the Holocaust. Pius XII spoke carefully, certainly, but the Holy See and its representatives condemned Nazism and its atrocities long before any governments raised the issue. Yet Pius XII was primarily concerned with saving lives rather than high-minded pronouncements that would have accomplished little.

As outlined in the Catholic League's research paper on Pius XII and as exhaustively detailed in Rychlak's definitive work, *Hitler, the War and the Pope* and Pierre Blet's *Pius XII and the Second World War*, work behind the scenes and at the scenes through the papal nuncios was more effective than issuing public statements from the safety of the Vatican. As Phayer himself acknowledges, there was little the Holy See could do to force the Nazis to end their campaign for a "Final Solution." But Pius could save lives. Dramatic anti-Nazi gestures could have severely limited, if not ended altogether, the Church's capability to save lives, particularly in Germany and the Axis satellite states. The Jewish lives saved by actions of the Church under the

direction of Pius XII accomplished what no other agency, government or entity at the time was able to accomplish. Phayer claims that if Pius XII had issued a formal bombshell, more lives would have been saved. He does not, however, explain how that could have been accomplished and it appears to be wishful conjecture.

Phayer concludes that immediately after the war, the Holy See under Pius XII attempted to undercut Allied efforts to prosecute German war criminals and to provide the means for Nazis to escape Europe. As the Soviet threat grew more ominous, Pius was perceived to be “uncannily wise to western statesman. Only he had followed a pro-German course consistently.”⁴⁰ Finally, Phayer states that because of Pius, the Church would not address the issue of anti-Semitism for years after the war had ended. It would only be after his death at the Vatican Council that the Church would squarely address the issue.

That Pius followed a consistently pro-German course during the war is simply wrong. From the outset of the War, Pius was on shaky ground maintaining the semblance of Vatican neutrality as he clearly and consistently led the Church in a position that supported the defeat of Hitler. Nazi authorities over and over again described Pope Pius XII as the enemy of the Reich, and Hitler went so far as to plot his kidnapping.⁴¹ There is no evidence, of course, that the Holy See aided in an organized way the escape of Nazis. While individual Catholics supplied help, and certain Nazis hid their identities and used Holy See-sponsored refugee services to escape, charges that there was any kind of general policy of Vatican assistance to German war criminals have been completely debunked. Phayer believes that Pius consistently encouraged clemency for Nazi war criminals as part of his strategy for maintaining a strong Germany. Some German bishops intervened for specific acts of clemency. German bishops would complain about the defamation of all the German people over the actions of the

Nazis, yet the Holy See was relatively mute on the issue, though it did oppose in certain cases direct executions. Pope Pius' personal representative to postwar Germany and liaison to the Allied military authorities, Bishop Aloysius Muench of the United States, advised the Vatican not to intervene and, for the most part, this was the policy that was followed.

Concerning the issue of anti-Semitism, the Church had never endorsed the racial anti-Semitism of the Nazis. As early as 1928, when the Nazi part was still in its infancy, the Church had condemned anti-Semitism. The Church, certainly spurred by the horror of the Holocaust, moved to eliminate religious anti-Jewish sentiments that existed within Catholic theology and devotional life. When the Second Vatican Council issued *Nostra Aetate*, its powerful declaration against anti-Semitism, it is impossible to argue that this somehow contradicted the papacy of Pope Pius XII. Theological and Scriptural studies encouraged by Pius, as well as the very atmosphere of his pontificate and that of Pius XI, were the foundations for *Nostra Aetate*. The bishops who supported the statement, including a young Polish prelate, Karol Wojtyła, were for the most part those raised to the episcopacy during his pontificate.

Pius was praised throughout the war and throughout his pontificate for the actions he took in defense of Jews during the war. The actions of the Church in the face of Nazism greatly enhanced its image in the post-war world. Phayer's primary contentions in this book – that Pius XII was pro-German, placed an anti-Communist agenda ahead of both concern for the Jews and the defeat of Nazi Germany – are not supported by any documented evidence. Most important, no case is built for an alternative strategy by Pope Pius XII that could have saved more Jewish lives. The Church under Pius saved more Jews from the Holocaust than any other entity in that terrible time. That is the undeniable fact that critics

of Pius, whatever their motivation, must answer. Phayer does not.

For a complete understanding of the role of Pope Pius XII in World War II, we strongly recommend Ronald Rychlak's *Hitler, the War and the Pope* (Our Sunday Visitor Press, \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. Call 1-800-348-2440). While there are a few good sections in Michael Phayer's book, his overall treatment of Pius XII is prejudiced and unconvincing.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Pius XII's combination of diplomatic pressure, careful but sustained criticism while maintaining an essential Vatican neutrality in war-torn Europe, as well as direct action through his nuncios and the local Church where possible, saved what some have estimated as 860,000 Jewish lives. If that estimate is accurate by only half, it remains a historic effort for a Church fighting without weapons against the most horrific killing machine the world had yet seen. Yet in the years after his death, a myth of Pius as a "silent collaborator" in the Holocaust has grown.
- A critical source of the myth of Pius XII as Holocaust collaborator comes from certain students of history who loathed Pius for his anti-communism. Popular in the late 1950s through the 1970s, this school of revisionist historians saw anti-communism as a dangerous threat, and all tainted by it deserving nothing but approbation. Pius certainly fit such a category.
- In *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Indiana University Press 2000) Michael Phayer states that his purpose is to go beyond the issue of the silence of Pope Pius XII to explore how the Church in various countries, and through various individual

Catholics, responded to the Holocaust, and how that response eventually led to the Church's official rejection of anti-Semitism during the Second Vatican Council. Yet throughout the book, he paints Pope Pius XII as a meek pontiff unwilling to engage the Nazis. He states that Pius was motivated by the hope that he could secure a negotiated peace that would leave a powerful Germany as a European defense against an aggressive communist Soviet Union.

- Phayer does not present a case for Pius' alleged silence, nor for his motives in being silent. Instead, he assumes that silence and postulates motives to fit that alleged reality, without proving that such motives existed.
- Phayer claims that Pius "did little for Jews in their hour of greatest need." While acknowledging that working through his papal nuncios he was able to save Jewish lives, his "greatest failure...lay in his attempt to use a diplomatic remedy for a moral outrage."
- Phayer argues that if Pius XI had lived five more years, Church reaction would have been different to the Holocaust and to Nazi Germany. While that is unknowable, of course, and Pius XI was certainly a different personality than Pius XII, Phayer ignores or downplays the important role played by Cardinal Pacelli in determining Vatican reaction to the Nazis in the 1930s.
- The future Pope Pius XII had a strong hand in the development of the Holy See's attitude toward both the Nazi movement and its anti-Semitic policies during the pontificate of Pius XI. There was no difference in substance between the two pontificates in addressing Nazism and anti-Semitism. The differences in approach between the two pontificates, such as they were, centered on the fact that within six months of the election of Pope Pius XII, Germany invaded Poland and Europe was at war.
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Concordat between Hitler and the Holy See “linked the Vatican with the new Nazi regime” and its maintenance became an obsession with Pius XII, thus limiting his ability – or desire – to protest the treatment of the Jews. The concordat was concluded at a time when the Vatican was forced to deal with the reality of Hitler’s rise to power. The Church had no choice but to conclude such a concordat, or face draconian restrictions on the lives of the faithful in Germany. The concordat also gave the Holy See the opportunity to formally protest Nazi action. Its existence allowed for Vatican protest and it did save Jewish lives. The first protest filed with the Nazi government under the terms of the concordat concerned the Nazi government-sponsored boycott of Jewish businesses.

- Phayer states that Bishop Alois Hudal, an Austrian Nazi sympathizer, “won an appointment” as rector of the Collegia del Anima in Rome, the school of theology for Austrian seminarians. There he remained throughout the Nazi era acting on occasion as an intermediary between Pius XII and Nazi occupational forces, and, after the war, helping Holocaust perpetrators to escape justice.” Rather than winning his appointment, Hudal was in Rome to be kept on ice. Though he claimed influence in Vatican circles, both the curia and the pope ignored him. Even the Nazis dismissed Hudal as having no influence. Though Hudal may have personally assisted Nazis to escape after the war, there is no connection between him and the Holy See, or that Pius XII had any knowledge of such actions. Phayer cites no documentation or source other than anti-papal conjecture.
- He charges that Pope Pius XII contributed by his silence in the Nazi slaughter of Catholics in occupied Poland, particularly from 1939 to 1941. Yet, Phayer himself acknowledges that Vatican Radio was the first to inform the world of the depths of the Nazi atrocities in Poland

just months after its occupation through broadcasts in January, 1940, broadcasts given at the direction of Pope Pius XII.

- Phayer raises the complaint that Pius would not join in a public statement from the allies in 1942 condemning Nazi atrocities in Poland. The reason was that this would be an official statement of the Allied governments and it was impossible for Pius XII, representing a neutral state, to join the effort. However, in his annual Christmas message of 1942, Pius XII condemned totalitarian regimes and mourned the victims of the war, "the hundreds of thousands who, through no fault of their own, and solely because of their nation or race, have been condemned to death or progressive extinction." The statement was loudly praised in the Allied world. In Germany, it was seen as the final repudiation by Pius XII of the Nazis.
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seizure, Pius demanded that the arrests be halted. He even used Bishop Hudal as a go-between to bring an end to the arrests. The Nazis stopped large-scale roundups and the Jews in hiding in Rome were protected.

- Though he charges that Pius wanted the Soviet Union abandoned by the Allies in order to free up Germany to destroy the Soviet Union, the source for such a conclusion seems to be Nazi wishful-thinking than documented Vatican positions. Pius XII did not change his position when Germany began its war with Russia, and he never spoke, even by means of allusion, about a “crusade” against Bolshevism or a “holy war.”
- There was nothing in the papal position for a negotiated peace that implied anything more than the desire to save lives. To see the papal call for a negotiated peace as either a grandiose ploy on the part of the pontiff to set himself up as the great peacemaker of Europe, as Phayer contends, or to maintain a strong Germany as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, as Phayer also contends, is to invent motives that are historically undocumented.
- There are elements in Phayer’s book that are interesting and worthy. He outlines well what the Church – and individual Catholics – were able to accomplish in rescuing Jews. He makes clear that the local Church did not sit by idly as the Jews were taken to slaughter. Of particular interest is his overview of what the Church did and did not do within Nazi Germany itself. He points out that the Church was able to accomplish more than many assume within Nazi Germany in defense of the Jews.
- Phayer states: “To the extent that Pope Pius chose to intervene at all, he did so through intermediaries, the nuncios, rather than by responding to the Holocaust publicly from Rome. In other words, when the pope chose to deal with the murder of Jews, he did so through diplomatic channels rather than through a moral

pronouncement such as an encyclical.” But that is precisely the point. First, there was no absolute “papal silence” on the Holocaust. Pius XII spoke carefully, certainly, but the Holy See and its representatives condemned Nazism and its atrocities long before any governments raised the issue.

- Pius XII was primarily concerned with saving lives rather than high-minded pronouncements that would have accomplished little. Working behind the scenes and at the scenes through the papal nuncios was more effective than issuing public statements from the safety of the Vatican. As Phayer himself acknowledges, there was little the Holy See could do to force the Nazis to end their campaign for a “Final Solution.” But Pius could save lives. Dramatic anti-Nazi gestures could have severely limited, if not ended altogether, the Church’s capability to save lives, particularly in Germany and the Axis satellite states.
- The Jewish lives saved by actions of the Church under the direction of Pius XII accomplished what no other agency, government or entity at the time was able to accomplish. Phayer claims that if Pius XII had issued a formal bombshell, more lives would have been saved. He does not, however, explain how that could have been accomplished and it appears to be wishful conjecture.
- That Pius followed a consistently pro-German course during the war is simply wrong. From the outset of the War, Pius was on shaky ground maintaining the semblance of Vatican neutrality as he clearly and consistently led the Church in a position that supported the defeat of Hitler. Nazi authorities over and over again described Pope Pius XII as the enemy of the Reich, and Hitler went so far as to plot his kidnapping.
- There is no evidence that the Holy See aided in an intentional and organized fashion the escape of Nazis. While individual Catholics supplied help, and certain

Nazis hid their identities and used Holy See-sponsored refugee services to escape, charges that there was any kind of general policy of Vatican assistance to German war criminals have been completely debunked.

- When the Second Vatican Council issued *Nostra Aetate*, its powerful declaration against anti-Semitism, it is impossible to argue that this somehow contradicted the papacy of Pope Pius XII. Theological and Scriptural studies encouraged by Pius, as well as the very atmosphere of his pontificate and that of Pius XI, were the foundations for *Nostra Aetate*. The bishops who supported the statement, including a young Polish prelate, Karol Wojtyla, were for the most part those raised to the episcopacy during his pontificate.
- Pius was praised throughout the war and throughout his pontificate for the actions he took in defense of Jews during the war. Phayer's basic contentions in this book – that Pius XII was pro-German, placed an anti-Communist agenda ahead of both concern for the Jews and the defeat of Nazi Germany – are not supported by any documented evidence. No case is built for an alternative strategy by Pope Pius XII that could have saved more Jewish lives. The Church under Pius saved more Jews from the Holocaust than any other entity in that terrible time. That is the undeniable fact that critics of Pius, whatever their motivation, must answer. Phayer does not.
- For a complete understanding of the role of Pope Pius XII in World War II, we strongly recommend Ronald Rychlak's *Hitler, the War and the Pope* (Our Sunday Visitor Press, \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. Call 1-800-348-2440). While there are a few good sections in Michael Phayer's book, his overall treatment of Pius XII is prejudiced and unconvincing.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Hitler, the War and the Pope*, by Ronald J. Rychlak (Our Sunday Visitor 2000) p. 95 for Nazi reaction to Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli as Secretary of State. The German ambassador to the Holy See, Diego von Bergen, spoke to the College of Cardinals on February 16, 1939 after the death of Pius XI and issued a "veiled warning against the election of Cardinal Pacelli." P. 107.

² *New York Times*, December 25, 1942

³ *Adolf Hitler*, John Toland (Ballantine Books, 1984) p. 549

⁴ Estimating the exact number of Jews assisted by the Church during the Holocaust virtually impossible. By its very nature, this kind of work did not involve the keeping of records. In *Three Popes and the Jews* (Hawthorn Books 1967), Pinchas E. Lapidé estimated 860,000 Jewish lives were saved by Church action.

⁵ *The Deputy*, by Rolf Hochhuth (The John Hopkins University Press, 1997)

⁶ *Hitler's Pope*, by John Cornwell (Viking Press, 1999)

⁷ *Rychlak*, p. 310

⁸ *Cornwell*, pp. 360-371

⁹ *New York Times*, March 14, 2000 editorial

¹⁰ *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, by Michael Phayer (Indiana University Press 2000)

¹¹ *Phayer*, p. xi

¹² *Ibid*, p. xii

¹³ *Ibid*, p. xv

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. xvi

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. xv

¹⁶ Curiously, Phayer somewhat dismisses *Mit brennender sorge* as failing directly to condemn Hitler or National Socialism. But considering that the encyclical was written in German, rather than Latin, smuggled into Germany for printing and distribution on Palm Sunday, referred to by the Nazis as “almost a call to do battle against the Reich government,” that printers who had made copies and those caught distributing it were arrested, it would seem that it was rather clear who and what the encyclical targeted.

¹⁷ *Rychlak*, p. 101-102

¹⁸ *Phayer*, p. 2

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

²⁰ See *Rychlak*, pp. 57-64

²¹ *Phayer*, p. 12

²² *Nothing Sacred: Nazi Espionage Against the Vatican, 1939-1945*, by David Alvarez and Robert A. Graham, SJ (Frank Cass Publishers 1997) pp. 98-100

²³ *Phayer*, p. 166

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25

²⁵ *Rychlak*, p. 156

²⁶ *Phayer*, p. 27

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49

²⁸ *New York Times*, December 25, 1942

²⁹ *Phayer*, p. 44

³⁰ *Rychlak*, p. 304.

³¹ *Phayer*, p. 59

³² *Rychlak*, p. 198-199

³³ *Phayer*, p. 59

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59

³⁷ *Pius XII and the Second World War*, by Pierre Blet (Paulist Press 1999) p. 63

³⁸ *Rychlak*, p. 164

³⁹ *Phayer*, p. 82

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161

⁴¹ *Rychlak*, pp. 265-266