Pius the Good; The brief for a much-maligned pope

By William Doino Jr.

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The Myth of Hitler's Pope: How Pope Pius XII Rescued Jews from the Nazis by David G. Dalin Regnery, 256 pp., $27.95

EVER SINCE THE GERMAN PLAYWRIGHT Rolf Hochhuth produced The Deputy—a long, unwatchable 1963 production that depicted Pope Pius XII as indifferent to the Holocaust—the notion that the Vatican bears a large portion of the guilt for Hitler's murder of six million Jews has waxed and waned. But it seemed mostly to be fading away, one of the sillier ventures in historical misunderstanding.

And then, suddenly in the late 1990s, it was back—and back with a vengeance. James Carroll published a long essay in the *New Yorker* in 1997 called "The Silence," setting up his 750-page book, *Constantine's Sword*, using Pius XII to indict all things Catholic. With the success of John Cornwell's ingeniously titled *Hitler's Pope* in 1999, the I-hate-Pius-XII books came fast and furious. Garry Wills's *Papal Sin*, Michael Phayer's *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, Susan Zuccotti's *Under His Very Windows*, David Kertzer's *The Popes Against the Jews*, Daniel Goldhagen's *A Moral Reckoning*—who could keep up with them all?

Well, one person who managed was David G. Dalin, a rabbi and historian who became increasingly bothered by these attacks on the role of the Vatican during World War II. In 2001—in the pages of this magazine, as it happens—Dalin published "Pius XII and the Jews," a 5,000-word blast at the anti-Pius ideologues. Every so often an essay comes along that changes the way people approach a controversial topic. After it appeared, Dalin's essay became one of the most talked about statements ever published on Pius XII: widely praised, challenged, and reprinted throughout the world.

Dalin has now expanded his essay into a book-length treatment of Pius and related themes. As Dalin shows, with copious documentation, the "silence" of Pius XII and the Catholic Church is one of the great falsehoods of the 20th century. During the rise and reign of the Third Reich, Hitler's racism and the Nazis' anti-Semitism were being condemned by Catholic spokesmen from every corner of the globe—especially the Vatican.

This is not to say that the Church's record is unassailable. Just as one can find bad Catholics today, so one can easily find ecclesiastical cranks, anti-Semites, and collaborators during the Nazi era. But they do not represent the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and the accurate history of those days shows how they lost their attempt to influence the Church.

Among the Catholic leaders who stood tall during that time, argues Dalin, was Eugenio Pacelli, the man who was to become Pope Pius XII. Tracing his life as a young priest, Dalin examines his service as nuncio to Germany (1917-1929), secretary of state to his predecessor Pius XI (1930-1939), and pope (1939-1958). Refuting the notion that Pacelli was a reactionary anti-Semite, Dalin proves that he was, if anything, a philo-Semite. As early as 1916, the young Pacelli helped craft a powerful statement against anti-Semitism, then followed that up by befriending and rescuing Jews from outbreaks of anti-Semitic pogroms.

On November 14, 1923, writes Dalin, just five days after Hitler's failed putsch against the local government in Munich, "Pacelli wrote to [Secretary of State] Cardinal Gasparri denouncing Hitler's National Socialist movement and favorably noting Munich archbishop Michael Faulhaber's vocal defense of Bavaria's Jews." Later, after Pacelli succeeded Gasparri, the very first protest he sent Germany was against Nazi anti-Semitism in April 1933, just months after Hitler became chancellor.

Concerning the much-maligned Concordat, signed between Germany and the Church in July 1933, Dalin argues persuasively that it was a necessary defense mechanism against a ruthless totalitarian state. True, Hitler began violating it almost immediately, but had it not been signed, the situation would have been even worse. As Zsolt Aradi, who covered Pius XI's pontificate and wrote one of the best accounts of it, commented: "Actually, the little freedom that the Concordat left for the clergy and hierarchy was widely used to save as many persecuted Jews as could be saved." Critics of the Concordat have never proposed a viable alternative.

Using newly released archives, Dalin establishes that Pacelli was something of a prophet in the 1920s and '30s, warning everyone who would listen about the dangers of Hitler. After a 1937 meeting with Cardinal Pacelli, the American consul A.W. Klieforth wrote to the State Department that Pacelli "regarded Hitler not only as an untrustworthy scoundrel but as a fundamentally wicked person." According to Klieforth, he "did not believe Hitler capable of moderation," in spite of appearances, and that Pacelli "opposed unalterably every compromise with National Socialism."

Klieforth's son, Alexander, has recently confirmed the secret meetings and his father's testimony: "What was divulged was critical, sensitive information, because, among other things, it proved that the pope-to-be was anti-Nazi and hated Hitler. Cardinal Pacelli thought the whole Nazi ideology an abomination because it persecuted the Jews and it persecuted the Church."

Pacelli's abhorrence of anti-Semitism was seen a year earlier, during a visit to America, when he publicly snubbed the notorious anti-Semitic radio priest Charles Coughlin—choosing, instead, to meet with Jewish leaders. Shortly thereafter Coughlin mysteriously vanished from the airwaves and, as Dalin notes, he always blamed Pacelli for his fate.

World War II began only months after Pacelli became pope in March 1939, and his first encyclical, Summi Pontificatus, is a searing condemnation of racism and totalitarianism. The new pope immediately made contacts with the anti-Nazi Resistance and actually approved a plot to assassinate Hitler. In his allocutions and famous Christmas addresses, Pius defended minorities and sharply condemned the persecution of people based upon their race. He ordered his nuncios to intervene for Jews and vigorously protest their deportation. Pius XII also authorized Vatican Radio to publicly condemn Nazi atrocities—which it did, often quite explicitly, citing Jews by name. Despite ongoing Nazi reprisals, Vatican Radio continued to broadcast defiant words like this, reported in the *New York Times* on June 27, 1943: "He who makes a distinction between Jews and other men is unfaithful to God and is in conflict with God's commands."

During the German occupation of Rome, from September 1943 to June 1944, Pius XII—contrary to his detractors—made several energetic protests against the Nazi seizure of Rome's Jews, and took decisive action to protect them. Thanks to Pius and his subordinates, three quarters of them did survive, and Italy, as a whole, had a far higher survival rate of Jews than most other Nazi-occupied countries.

Pius's reaction to the Nazi round-up of Rome's Jews is at the heart of the campaign against him, and in *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*, Dalin is emphatic, demolishing the attack with hard facts and firsthand testimonies. Pius's anti-Nazi activities so enraged Hitler that he planned to kidnap the pope, eliminating him as an obstacle to global domination. During his pontificate, Pius was as strong an opponent of evil as John Paul II was in time: For good reason John Paul called Pius XII "a great pope."

In a 1943 cover story, *Time* declared, "No matter what critics might say, it is scarcely deniable that the Church Apostolic through the encyclicals and other papal pronouncements, has been fighting against totalitarianism more knowingly, devoutly and authoritatively, and for a longer time, than any other organized power. . . . Moreover, it insists on the dignity of the individual whom God created, in his own image, and for a decade has vigorously protested against the cruel persecution of the Jews as a violation of God's Tabernacle."

Dalin makes three major criticisms of Pius's detractors. He maintains that many of those who assail Pius are not really interested in the history of the Jews, or the tragedy of the Holocaust, but merely want to exploit them for their own ideological agendas. As Dalin notes, the Hitler's pope myth has proven quite useful to dissident Catholics who disagree with Catholic teaching. If they can prove that the Vatican was complicit in the Holocaust, then they can weaken papal influence on every issue today, and advance their own agendas.

Dalin also accuses the anti-Pius ideologues of framing him with tainted documents—a mistranslated 1919 letter about revolutionary Jews in Munich, for instance, a phony postwar memo about the Catholic view of baptized Jewish children (fraudulently presented as a "Vatican instruction")—while omitting exculpatory evidence. That very nearly all Pius's detractors ignore his heroic actions at Castel Gandolfo—the papal summer residence, which took in thousands of desperate people, including many Jews, upon Pius's direct orders—underscores this point.

Finally, pointing to the extraordinary tributes the Jewish community offered Pius for saving Jews and fighting anti-Semitism, Dalin slams those authors who have tried to explain these tributes away as mistaken or manufactured in order to promote good Jewish-Catholic relations and reduce anti-Semitism. The idea that Jews manipulate events in their own interests is a motif of classic anti-Semitism, and Dalin confronts Pius's detractors with their own bigotry: To "dismiss and deny the legitimacy of their collective gratitude to Pius XII is tantamount to denying the credibility of their personal testimony and judgment about the Holocaust itself. To so deny and delegitimize their collective memory and experience of the Holocaust . . . is to engage in a subtle yet profound form of Holocaust denial."

If critics are so concerned about anti-Semitism, Dalin asks, why have they ignored the anti-Semitism of one of Pius's major contemporaries, Hajj Amin al-Husseini? Who? you might ask. That's just the problem. Few people know about this virulent character, the scion of a wealthy Arab family who became the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in 1922.

"From his earliest years," writes Dalin, "al-Husseini was known as a virulent anti-Semite and as an opponent of Jewish immigration to Palestine." His hatred of Jews was so intense that he made overtures to the Nazis, with whom he soon formed an alliance.

"While in Berlin," writes Dalin, "al-Husseini met privately with Hitler on numerous occasions, and called publicly—and repeatedly—for the destruction of European Jewry." At the Nuremberg trials, Adolf Eichmann's deputy was even more explicit: "The mufti was one of the initiators of the systematic extermination of European Jewry and had been a collaborator and adviser of Eichmann and Himmler in the execution of this plan. . . . He was one of Eichmann's best friends and had constantly incited him to accelerate the extermination measures."

Hitler had a favorite cleric, but it wasn't Pius XII. Dalin is not the first to draw attention to al-Husseini, but he is the first to discuss the mufti within the context of the Pius debate. Juxtaposing the records of the two religious leaders—al-Husseini, the Nazi collaborator par excellence, and Pius XII, who never met Hitler—highlights the duplicity and hypocrisy of Pius's critics.

In defending the good name of Pius XII, Dalin does not stand alone. One of the most encouraging signs in recent years is the wealth of new scholarship supporting Pius. The work of Margherita Marchione and Ronald Rychlak in America; Michael Feldkamp in Germany; Matteo Luigi Napolitano, Andrea Tornielli, and Antonio Gaspari in Italy; and Michael Burleigh and Sir Martin Gilbert in Great Britain all indicate a new outlook on the wartime pontiff. In fact, Gilbert, Winston Churchill's official biographer, and one of the most respected historians of the Holocaust, has been particularly eloquent in his praise of Pius.

So we have come full circle. Pius's reputation declined after Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 attack in The Deputy, only to climb slowly up again as the fraudulence of Hochhuth's complaint became clear. His reputation plummeted again in the 1990s as multiple books attacking him hit the bestseller lists. With *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*, David Dalin has begun the work of reestablishing the truth.

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