

# Shoddy Scholarship in the Study of Pope Pius XII

*Ronald J. Rychlak*

In the December 2011 issue of *Commentary* magazine, Kevin Madigan, the Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard Divinity School, put forth the false charge that the Vatican under Pope Pius XII intentionally helped Nazi war criminals escape justice and make their way to South America after World War II. He based his article on Gerald Steinacher's *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice* and David Cymet's *History vs. Apologetics: The Holocaust, the Third Reich, and the Catholic Church*. The combination of sloppy work and over-the-top charges provides a textbook example of how a verifiably false account can be reported as fact in the mainstream media.

At the heart of the matter are two letters, now available on the Catholic League's webpage. Bishop Alois Hudal wrote the first letter on May 5, 1949, to Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Pope Paul VI) who was then working in the Vatican Secretary of State's office. In that letter, Hudal suggests a pardon for political prisoners who have committed no crimes. Montini's reply, dated May 12, says that the Vatican's Secretary of State was already working with several governments toward such an end.

Steinacher incorrectly dated Hudal's letter to April 5, 1949. More seriously, in quoting the letter, he said that Hudal wanted amnesty for *German soldiers*, and elsewhere on the same page he said that Hudal sought pardon for *war criminals*. Actually, Hudal expressed sympathy for *political prisoners* who had already spent four years in prison, but he never mentioned nationalities, war criminals, or soldiers.

Steinacher also badly distorted Montini's reply. He wrote: "Montini replied that the Holy See would welcome an 'extensive amnesty,' but that the German clergy had a different attitude." In fact, nowhere in Montini's letter was there any mention of the pope, the German clergy, or a difference in their attitudes.

Madigan, who did no original research and did not read Steinacher very carefully, made things even worse. He confounded Steinacher's points and wrote: Steinacher "reports that the pope favored an 'extensive amnesty' for war criminals." That is not what Steinacher wrote, and nothing could be further from the truth.

In August 1944, Pius XII received Winston Churchill in an audience at which the pontiff expressed his understanding of the justice in punishing war criminals. In that year's Christmas message, in a section entitled "War Criminals," Pius wrote that no one "will wish to disarm justice" when it comes to punishing "those who have taken advantage of the war to commit real and proved crimes against the law common to all peoples." He also told a Swiss reporter: "Not only do we approve of the [Nuremburg] trial, but we desire that the guilty be punished as quickly as possible, and without exception." Pius even provided evidence to use against Nazi defendants and assigned a Jesuit to assist the prosecution team.

It has long been known that Hudal and a Croatian priest named Krunoslav Draganović helped some former Nazis escape from Europe. Madigan, however, says that they were part of "a sort of papal mercy program for National Socialists and Fascists." That is far from the truth.

In his memoir, Hudal explained that the assistance he gave to those fleeing justice was done without the pope's knowledge. He had never agreed with the Vatican's hostility toward the Nazis. His book, *The Foundations of National Socialism*, was

critical of the hard line that Vatican diplomats took with the Germans. (He once sarcastically asked whether the Church was being directed by the Allies.) In 1949, when Hudal was criticized in the press, he asked the Vatican to defend him. The reply from Montini was: "there is no defense for a Nazi bishop." That same year, Hudal scheduled a papal audience for a group of Austrian pilgrims. Pius, however, refused to meet with the group as long as Hudal accompanied them. In 1952, Pius demanded that Hudal be removed from his position at Santa Maria dell'Anima, the German national church and college in Rome.

Madigan's alleged "papal mercy program" was the Pontifical Aid Commission (PAC). This organization coordinated efforts to assist victims of war and helped return displaced persons to their homes. As the PAC helped hundreds of thousands of legitimate refugees start life anew, some Nazi war criminals (Madigan says hundreds) took advantage of it to flee justice. Madigan would have us believe that the Church knowingly sent Nazi officials to safety. It is, however, inconceivable that the Nazis revealed their background to reputable Church officials. It is even less likely that any such information would have reached the Vatican. The logistics of the massive relocation programs simply made it impossible to investigate most individuals who sought help.

Monsignor Karl Bayer, who was liaison chaplain responsible for prisoners of war in the north of Italy, explained:

"Well, of course we asked questions.... But at the same time, we hadn't an earthly chance of checking on the answers. In Rome, at that time, every kind of paper and information could be bought. If a man wanted to tell us he was born in Viareggio – no matter if he was really born in Berlin and couldn't speak a word of Italian – he only had to go down into the street and he'd find dozens of Italians willing to swear on a stack of Bibles that they knew he was born in Viareggio – for a hundred lire."

The Church was interested in ending suffering. Some Nazis took advantage of these efforts to help dislocated people. So did some Soviet spies. Would Madigan argue that the Vatican wanted to help them? There is no indication that the Holy See intentionally tried to help Nazis escape justice.

Madigan spreads another false charge from Cymet's book. Often when Jewish parents were deported, they left their children behind with Christian families. The children were still at risk of being uncovered and deported. The surest way to protect them was by indoctrinating them in Christianity. Sometimes over-zealous rescuers would have the children baptized. According to Madigan, Pius refused to let any such child be returned to their Jewish parents. That is nonsense.

In 2004, there was a bit of a dust-up when a document was found that purportedly contained Pope Pius XII's directives that: "Children who have been baptized must not be entrusted to institutions that cannot ensure their Christian education." It also said that children whose families survived the Holocaust should be returned, "as long as they had not been baptized."

It was soon discovered that this controversial document was an incorrect summary of a 1946 letter from the Vatican to the papal nuncio in France. The letter actually said that if institutions (*not families*) wanted to take those children who had been entrusted to the Church, each case had to be examined individually. The Church would breach its obligation to the parents if it turned the children over to the wrong institution. There were very few facilities fit for children in Palestine or war-torn Europe, and the pope was concerned for their welfare.

These instructions related solely to *institutions* wanting to relocate orphaned children after the war. It did not relate to children being sought by families. The letter said: "things would be different if the children were requested by their

relatives." Madigan should have done his homework before spreading these malicious charges.

*Commentary* magazine printed a letter in which I pointed out several of Madigan's errors, but as is traditional, Madigan was given the last word. In addition to back-tracks and denials, he made a few statements that call for a response. First of all, this is but the most recent in a string of articles that Madigan has written over the past decade highly critical of Pope Pius XII, the Catholic Church, and those who disagree with him. He can't keep falling back on the argument that he is only repeating charges made by others.

Madigan complained that I referred to Montini as "one of the pope's top assistants," not as Secretary of State. I did so because Montini worked in the Secretary of State's office, but he never held that office or title.

Madigan references a 1947 declassified report that suggested that a Croatian war criminal (Ante Pavelic) was being protected due to his contacts with the Vatican. The report says: "Pavelic's contacts are so high and his present position so compromising to the Vatican, that any extradition...would deal a staggering blow to the Roman Catholic Church." Madigan snidely adds that the authors of that report "knew better than Mr. Rychlak." I have to disagree.

I have written several articles and a book chapter about the post-war situation in Croatia. In fact, the chapter was translated and published in Croatia in 2008. I have studied the topic thoroughly, and I know that Pavelic was offended by how *badly* he was treated by Pope Pius XII and Croatian Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac.

In 1947, when the intelligence report was written, the Communist government in Croatia (Yugoslavia) was conducting show trials of Catholic officials (including Stepinac) for collaborating with the Nazis. I had the advantage of writing

after Communism fell and the new Croatian parliament apologized for those false charges and the bad information that was spread. Agents writing in 1947 Italy had little reason to know that this information was the creation of Soviet disinformation agents. Madigan, however, wrote after the fall of Communism. He could have looked up this history and educated his readers. Instead, he spread false information.

On the last page of Madigan's article he likened those who defend Pope Pius XII (which would include Pope John Paul II and a slew of reputable historians) to Holocaust deniers. In his reply to my letter, he said that it was not he but Cymet who made this charge. While Cymet did make it, Madigan not only quoted and discussed it at length, he said that Cymet had grounds for making it. This is but one of several issues on which Madigan tried to have it both ways, but careful readers will not let him get away with that.

Finally, Madigan dismisses the post-war Jewish praise for Pius and says it was given to garner good will for the state of Israel. In other words, Jews lied for political reasons. This is an insult not only to Catholics, but to the Jewish leaders who worked so hard to rebuild out of devastation. They were wounded; they had lost most everything, but they did not lose their integrity. They were not lying when they thanked the Church and praised Pope Pius XII. They knew the truth. Madigan's claims to the contrary are shameful.

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