

The First Outrage from the New Archives

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One of the Soviet Union's most effective disinformation campaigns was the charge that Pope Pius XII, leader of the Catholic Church during World War II, failed to provide moral leadership during the Holocaust. This has been variously attributed to anti-Semitism, attraction to Nazism, fear of Hitler, a desire to centralize papal power, and maybe half a dozen other false motivations. This disinformation campaign was instituted after the pope's death in 1958, despite the enormous praise that he had received from Jewish leaders and other Catholic and non-Catholic sources during and after the war.

Of course, the Soviets were not actually concerned about the reputation of an already deceased pope. However, by associating any pope with the Nazis, they could discredit the papacy, the Catholic Church, Christianity, and maybe even the concept of religion itself. That served the interests of atheistic Soviet leadership, and it was the same approach that had been used after World War II to discredit religion in heavily Christian areas that were suddenly under the Soviet thumb, such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Croatia.

When the disinformation campaign was launched in the early 1960s (building significantly on the post-war efforts in Eastern Europe), Pope Paul VI authorized four Jesuit priests access to still-sealed Vatican archives so that they could publish the "Acts and Documents of the Holy See" in 11 large volumes. Those documents reveal many heroic efforts to save victims (Jewish and other) from the Nazis. However, despite this publication, until quite recently most of the archives relating to the war years remained sealed.

On March 2 of this year, the archives were made available to accredited scholars. Unfortunately, due to the coronavirus, they remained open for only about a week. So, not many scholars got to see them, and not many new relevant documents were discovered. (My own appointment, scheduled for June, seems unlikely to happen.)

One researcher however, Father Hubert Wolf, a professor of Church history at the University of Münster, found a document that he claims proves the pope was an anti-Semite. His “new evidence” is from September 1942, when Myron Taylor, President Roosevelt’s personal representative to the pope, gave the Vatican a report on the mass murder of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. It said about 100,000 Jews had been massacred in and around Warsaw and that an additional 50,000 were killed in the Ukraine. The Allies asked whether the Vatican could confirm this information. That report isn’t new. I first wrote about it in the 2000 edition of *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*, and I expanded on it in the 2010 edition.

The new part is an “Appunto,” an internal memo written by Msgr. Angelo Dell’Acqua. He would later (1967) go on to become a high-ranking official, but at this time he was a simple prelate in the Secretariat of State.

Dell’Acqua had been ordered to look into the claims that the Nazis were “systematically evacuating the ghettos, the Jews were being transported to death camps and shot, their bodies were being turned into fat and their bones into fertilizers, and not a single Jew is alive in East Poland and the German occupied parts of Russia.” Dell’Acqua could not confirm all the claims. He could confirm massacres but not death camps. As such, he said that the U.S. report could not be automatically accepted, “since exaggerations easily happen, also among Jews.” Wolf claims that this statement captured Pius XII’s anti-Semitic motivation for not openly condemning the Nazis. The argument is preposterous.

As an initial point, the statement was not from the pope but from Dell'Acqua. As such, there is no reason to attribute such sentiments to the pope. Digging deeper, however, it must be noted that exaggeration had been common in similar reports during the First World War, so caution was warranted. Moreover, the accounts of rendering the bodies and bones in this report were exaggerations. Most telling, however, is that Dell'Acqua warned that "any joint American-Vatican protest could be harmful, not so much for the Holy See as for the persecuted Jews, fearing retaliation measures by the Nazis."

Looking across Dell'Acqua's life, he was no anti-Semite. Rising through the ranks to become a bishop and then a cardinal, he eventually was one of Pope Paul VI's closest associates and joined the pope for his historic visit to the Holy Land. In fact, according to his *New York Times* obituary, Dell'Acqua "was a guiding administrator" at Vatican II, which clarified and strengthened Catholic-Jewish relations.

The Vatican, by the way, did not dispute the American report on Nazi atrocities. The immediate response was that it too had received reports of "severe measures" taken against the Jews, but that it had been impossible to verify their accuracy. The reply went on to note that "the Holy See is taking advantage of every opportunity offered in order to mitigate the suffering of non Aryans."

In an official summary prepared by Myron Taylor of conversations that he had with the Pope in that month – September 1942 – the U.S. diplomat spoke of how "the parallel efforts of His Holiness and President Roosevelt for the maintenance of peace were energized by their very spiritual qualities." Reporting on Pius XII's attitude, Taylor wrote: "Despite all propaganda, His Holiness would never propose or approve of peace by compromise at any cost" and "there can be no compromise of moral principles." He added that "we need have no fear that any pressure from outside the Vatican will ever make it change its course."

At this very time, Pius was working through Cardinal Spellman of New York with the American bishops on a statement regarding persecution of the Jews. The US bishops had two things going for them that neither the pope nor the European bishops did. They lived with a free press, and neither they nor their people were subject to retaliation from the Nazis. So, their words could do some good and would not cause great harm.

In November (about six weeks after the report from the Allies), the American bishops published their statement, announcing:

"Since the murderous assault on Poland, utterly devoid of every semblance of humanity, there has been a premeditated and systematic extermination of the people of this nation. The same satanic technique is being applied to many other peoples. We feel a deep sense of revulsion against the cruel indignities heaped upon Jews in conquered countries and upon defenseless peoples not of our faith... Deeply moved by the arrest and maltreatment of the Jews, we cannot stifle the cry of conscience. In the name of humanity and Christian principles, our voice is raised."

The bishops repeatedly invoked Pius XII's name and teachings with favor. In a letter published at this same time, Pius expressed his thanks for the "constant and understanding collaboration" of the American bishops and archbishops.

Six weeks later, in his 1942 Christmas statement broadcast over Vatican Radio and reprinted around the globe, Pope Pius XII said that the world was "plunged into the gloom of tragic error," and that "the Church would be untrue to herself, she would have ceased to be a mother, if she were deaf to the cries of suffering children which reach her ears from every class of the human family." He spoke of the need for mankind to make "a solemn vow never to rest until valiant souls of every people and every nation of the earth arise in their legions, resolved to bring society and to devote themselves to

the services of the human person and of a divinely ennobled human society.” He said that mankind owed this vow to all victims of the war, including “the hundreds of thousands who, through no fault of their own, and solely because of their nationality or race, have been condemned to death or progressive extinction.”

Everyone who cared understood the papal message that year. The Polish ambassador to the Holy See thanked the Pontiff, who “in his last Christmas address implicitly condemned all the injustices and cruelties suffered by the Polish people at the hands of the Germans.” British records reflect the opinion that “the Pope’s condemnation of the treatment of the Jews & the Poles is quite unmistakable...” The Dutch bishops issued a pastoral letter in defense of Jewish people the following February, making express reference to the Pope’s statement. Moreover, a well-known Christmas Day editorial in the *New York Times* praised Pius XII for his moral leadership in opposing the Nazis:

“No Christmas sermon reaches a larger congregation than the message Pope Pius XII addresses to a war-torn world at this season. This Christmas more than ever he is a lonely voice crying out of the silence of a continent... 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 declares that whoever wants peace must protect against “arbitrary attacks” the “juridical safety of individuals”; when he assails violent occupation of territory, the exile and persecution of human beings for no reason other than race or political opinion; when he says that people must fight for a just and decent peace, a “total peace”—the “impartial judgment” is like a verdict in a high court of justice.”

A similar editorial from the *Times of London*, pre-dating the Christmas address and commenting on the Pope’s statements in general, said:

A study of the words which Pope Pius XII has addressed since his accession in encyclicals and allocutions to the Catholics of various nations leaves no room for doubt. He condemns the worship of force and its concrete manifestation in the suppression of national liberties and in the persecution of the Jewish race.

Even the Axis powers knew to whom the Pope was referring. The Germans were conspicuous by their absence at a Midnight Mass conducted by the Pope for diplomats on Christmas Eve following the papal statement. According to a Nazi report on the Christmas address by Heinrich Himmler's Superior Security Office to Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop's office:

"In a manner never known before, the Pope has repudiated the National Socialist New European Order.... It is true, the Pope does not refer to the National Socialists in Germany by name, but his speech is one long attack on everything we stand for.... God, he says, regards all people and races as worthy of the same consideration. Here he is clearly speaking on behalf of the Jews.... [H]e is virtually accusing the German people of injustice toward the Jews, and makes himself the mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals."

German Ambassador Diego von Bergen, on the instruction of von Ribbentrop, warned the Pope that the Nazis would seek retaliation if the Vatican abandoned its neutral position. When he reported back to his superiors, von Bergen stated that the pope "is no more sensible to threats than we are."

Despite all of this, Wolf would have us believe that Pius XII was an anti-Semite who did not make his opinion of the Nazis or the Jews known for reasons mentioned in a report from a low-level assistant. Ridiculous.

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