**Pius XI, Mussolini, and Hitler**

As a former socialist, Mussolini had long been an ardent atheist and very hostile to the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, to eliminate strong opposition to his regime, in 1929 Mussolini entered the Italian Concordat (*The Lateran Treaty*) with Pope Pius XI and the Catholic Church. The Concordat established the one square mile around St. Peter’s Basilica as an independent nation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rome had been absorbed into the Kingdom of Italy in 1870, and Pope Pius IX (not XI) had lost all temporal control. He considered himself *Prigioniero nel Vaticano,* a “prisoner in the Vatican.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The Catholic Church had gained its temporal power as an independent state 1,114 years earlier in A.D. 756. Pope Stephen II named Pepin the King of the Franks, as *Patrician of Rome*, the Pope’s protector. He gave Pepin the title as a reward for defeating the Germanic Lombards in Central Italy. Pepin donated the land in the middle of Italy that he had taken from the Lombards to Pope Stephen II as the *Donation of Pepin*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*The Lateran Treaty* named Catholicism the official state religion of Italy. The Concordat gave the Church authority over all marriages and education, and it required Italy to compensate the Vatican for property that the King’s grandfather, Victor Emanual II, had earlier seized from the Church.[[4]](#footnote-4) Subsequently, in 1930 Mussolini’s government also passed the Falco Laws that sanctioned a type of *entente* (or understanding) between Italy and non-Catholic religions, including Judaism. Pope Pius XI afterward referred to Mussolini as the “man whom Providence has sent us.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Nonetheless, tensions between the two states and the two leaders were seriously exacerbated by Mussolini’s later adoption of racial laws in 1938, similar to those of his new allies in Nazi Germany.

Earlier, Pius had aggravated Vatican relations with both the Fascists and the Nazis. In 1937, he served as a thorn in German dictator Adolf Hitler’s side. Hitler’s attempts to greatly reduce the Church’s influence in Germany incensed the Pontiff. Hitler’s Nazification of Germany replaced Catholic parochial schools with state schools, closed many religious institutions, and supplanted Christian teachings with Nazi ideology. An exasperated Pius XI released the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Anxiety, published in German, not Latin) to denounce the German government for its oppression of Catholicism, along with its advocacy of a Nordic Pagan dogma.[[6]](#footnote-6) The encyclical was partly written by Pius XI’s successor, Eugenio Pacelli, whom with like-minded German Cardinals, such as Clemens August von Galen, urged the Pontiff to go public with his denunciation of Nazi policies. The papal encyclical infuriated Hitler. Pius XI continued to provoke Germany’s *Führer* (leader).[[7]](#footnote-7) A year later, when Hitler visited Rome, Pius XI abandoned the “Eternal City” for the papal summer retreat, Castel Gandolfo, in the Alban Hills to avoid any possible meeting. Pius XI further angered both Mussolini and the German dictator when he remarked he could not tolerate the glorification of the Aryan swastika, which he called a “cross that is not the cross of Christ.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

A furious Pope Pius XI sent a vehement protest of the 1938 laws to Mussolini. The Church staunchly rejected eugenics, even though those eugenic theories had been championed by both science and prestigious international universities. Pius XI pointed out the laws were actually promoted for political considerations, not science. He insisted they were part of the avidly pro-German wing of the National (Italian) Fascist Party (PNF) and by Mussolini himself. *Il Duce* insisted that Italy have an attitude symbiotically consistent with their German allies, or the alliance could not efficaciously prosper. The effect of Italian racial laws was the “Aryanization” of businesses, education, and jobs, along with the expulsion of Jewish members of those communities. Pius lamented, “It is impossible that Christians follow anti-Semitism . . . In a spiritual sense, we are all Semites.” Pius XI wrote and looked to issue an encyclical to condemn racism and anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, he died before publication.[[9]](#footnote-9) With the 1938 anti-Jewish laws in Italy, Pius XI grasped that his attempt to use Mussolini’s regime for the Catholic cause had failed. He grieved, “What a lout and traitor Mussolini was to me!” Mussolini realized likewise he could not control the Church. He called Pius XI, the “most harmful pope of all time.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Despite the 1938 alliance, Italy does not have the traumatic history of genocide as Germany does. After Mussolini entered that partnership, he produced his *Manifesto of* (Italian) *Racism* to placate his insistent new ally. He asserted that Italians were part of the "pure race" along with the Nordic Aryans. Italy then expelled Jews from all public services, such as the army and public schools. He also applied these laws to Northern and Eastern Africans living in Italy and its colonies.[[11]](#footnote-11) Many Jews quickly looked to escape Italy in case the environment denigrated to the deleterious condition that fellow Jews were experiencing in Germany.

1. *Ibid.:* “How the Lateran Treaty Made the Catholic Church Into a State,” *Concordat Watch – Italy*. <https://www.concordatwatch.eu/how-the-lateran-treaty-made-the-catholic-church-into-a-state--t841> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robert P. Lockwood, “Pope Pius IX,” *Catholic League for Civil and Religious Rights*, September 2000. <https://www.catholicleague.org/pope-pius-ix/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Donation of Pepin,” *Academia-Lab*. <https://academia-lab.com/enciclopedia/donation-of-pepin/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “How the Lateran Treaty Made the Catholic Church into a State.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe*, (New York: Random House, 2016). <https://www.amazon.com/Pope-Mussolini-Secret-History-Fascism/dp/081298367X> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge*: *Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on the Church and the German Reich to the Venerable Brethren The Archbishops and Bishops of Germany and Other Ordinaries In Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See*, March 14, 1937. <https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_14031937_mit-brennender-sorge.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Daniel Utrecht, *The Lion of Munster: The Bishop Who Roared Against the Nazis,* (Charlotte, North Carolina: Tan Books, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David I. Kertzer, “The Pope’s Secret Back Channel to Hitler.” *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2022.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/pope-pius-xii-negotiation-hitler-catholic-church/639435/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.;* Jörg Ernesti*, “*Pope Pius XI and Mussolini: No First Deputy,” *Church Life Journal: A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life,* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, June 09, 2020). <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/pope-pius-xi-and-mussolini-no-first-deputy/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hibbert, *Mussolini*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)