**The Holocaust**

Of all the horrific events that took place during the World War II era, none is more grotesque nor unsettling than the Holocaust. The Nazi Germans had created a systematic plan to segregate, imprison, exploit, and eventually exterminate groups that they had defined as racially inferior or politically dissident. That Hitler and his staff could plan such a project is awful enough, but the fact that it was carried out, often with uncoerced support of millions of Germans, was abysmal. Furthermore, what makes the situation more detestable is numerous citizens and officials from German-occupied nations such as Poland, France, and Russia, especially in the Ukraine, had participated.[[1]](#footnote-1) Estimates of eleven to fourteen million people, six million of whom were Jewish, died before the destruction of Hitler’s Reich in 1945. A 2012 study by the National Holocaust Museum has the numbers even higher at fifteen to twenty million.[[2]](#footnote-2) The noncombat Nazi victims had tragically died in a war, but not on a battlefield. Those who perished died like cattle in a slaughterhouse, a high-tech, low-cost mass murder of innocent millions.

When Hitler’s regime began to ratchet up the anti-Jewish program in Germany and its allied and occupied countries, Mussolini’s government unenthusiastically enacted legislation restricting rights of Jewish citizens. They also complied with Nazi demands that Italy turn over non-Italian Jews to the Germans. At the enforcement level, however, Italian officials were usually slow to act on these orders. Little could Mussolini and the Italians have imaged in 1938 to what extreme limits the Nazis would take their nefarious racial worldview.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the entry to his diary on December 13, 1942, Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels complained:

*The Italians are extremely lax in their treatment of Jews. They protect Italian Jews both in Tunis and in occupied France and won’t permit their being drafted for work or compelled to wear the Star of David*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Italian officials and military personnel were often willing to ignore restraints on the Jews and often assisted Jews in evading the later edicts of Nazi Germany. Many in the Catholic clergy and even private citizens also went out of their way, many times at risk to their own safety, to help Jewish people keep out of the Nazi’s clutches.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When discussing the Italians and the Holocaust, there must be an investigation into the role of the Catholic Church. The Church was the only institution in Fascist Italy able to orchestrate any type of rescue operation, along with contending with the Nazis in Germany. Pius XI’s successor, Eugenio Pacelli, Pope XII had been the Vatican’s Secretary of State and the Papal Nuncio to Bavaria (for all intents and purposes all of Germany at that time). Pius XI’s reign as Pope has caused controversy among scholars that he did not do enough to stop the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that he did much, especially after Mussolini’s 1938 Racial Laws and especially considering the Vatican was surrounded by Fascist-controlled Italy.[[6]](#footnote-6) Pacelli, on the other hand, comes under considerably more criticism for allegedly doing even less.

Some scholars argue he had to be cautious to not risk the lives of his clergy, religious orders, and the Catholic faithful. He knew that at any moment after 1943, Nazi troops could march into Vatican City. In addition, they contend that too much public opposition to the Nazi and Fascist regimes would only increase the pain experienced by both Catholic and Jewish inmates in the myriad concentration camps throughout Europe. They also point out that Pius XII had developed a network to rescue Italian Jews and had full knowledge of like networks throughout Catholic Europe. Proponents of Pius XII offer copious evidence of the thousands of Jews who had been rescued through the Church’s efforts, all with Pius’ knowledge or tacit approval, especially in Italy. Today, there is even strong evidence that Pius had knowledge of and assisted in three attempts on Hitler’s life, including the nearly successful Valkyrie plot.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Students should also investigate the critics of Pius, such as David I. Kertzer who criticizes both Popes for not doing enough.[[8]](#footnote-8) Kertzer wrote that Pius XII was, "neither the antisemitic monster often called 'Hitler’s Pope' nor a hero.” He avers that both Italy and the Vatican must come to terms with their complicity in the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the murder of Rome’s Jews.[[9]](#footnote-9) John Cornwell goes much further and accuses Pius XII of being “Hitler’s Pope.” He adduces:

*I found evidence, moreover, that from an early stage in his career Pacelli betrayed an undeniable antipathy toward the Jews, and that his diplomacy in Germany in the 1930s had resulted in the betrayal of Catholic political associations that might have challenged Hitler's regime and thwarted the Final Solution.* [[10]](#footnote-10)

Like-minded scholars report that the Church baptized many Jewish children and would not return them to their Jewish families. Some believe this was done under the Pope’s direction. Others contend that the Nazis were not worried about religion, rather they looked at race-blood, so baptism would not have saved Jewish children in any case.[[11]](#footnote-11) Students must comprehend the events in the context of the time and consider what would happen if Pius XII had taken more aggressive actions within totalitarian militarized regimes. Could he have done more? Many say “yes.” Would Pius XI have done more if he had lived longer, or would he have caused more damage? The other question that should be asked is, “What other institution did more to save the lives of those running from the Nazis or suffering in the camps”? In 1941, after the Pope’s Christmas message, *The New York Times* editorialized:

*Yet his words sound strange and bold in the Europe of today, and we comprehend the complete submergence and enslavement of great nations, the very sources of our civilization, as we realize that he is about the only ruler left on the Continent of Europe who dares to raise his voice at all. The last tiny islands of neutrality are so hemmed in and overshadowed by war and fear that no one but the Pope is still able to speak aloud in the name of the Prince of Peace.[[12]](#footnote-12)*

While in Germany, Pacelli had preached against “the superstition of race and blood,” and rejected anti-Semitism. Pacelli held meetings with German cardinals to discuss how to handle the Nazi issue. Transcripts show he complained that “The Nazis had thwarted Church teachings, banned its organizations, censored its press, shuttered its seminaries, seized its properties, fired its teachers, and closed its schools.” He repeated what a Nazi official had said: “After the defeat of Bolshevism and Judaism, the Catholic Church will be the only remaining enemy.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Pacelli appreciated that Communists were also a mortal enemy of Christianity and all religions. He understood that the fate of the Church would be bleak whether the Bolsheviks or the Nazis were to prevail.

Back in Italy as Pope Pius XII, he negotiated with the Nazis in efforts to protect Catholic clergy, religious, parishioners, and churches in Germany and subsequently in conquered Catholic territories. As *Nuncio* and as Secretary of State, Pacelli had used the Concordat he had negotiated with Hitler’s new government in 1933 to press the Church’s position. He formally protested to Hitler at least fifty-five times about violations.[[14]](#footnote-14) Early on in his papacy, he issued the encyclical *Summi Pontificatus* on October 20, 1939. The encyclical was subtitled "On the Unity of Human Society.” In his first encyclical, Pius XII set the tone for his papacy. He critiqued ideologies such as racism, cultural superiority, and the totalitarian state. He grieved the destruction of Poland and condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia and demanded the restoration of independent Poland.[[15]](#footnote-15) In Germany, Nazi propagandists routinely published articles, pamphlets, and books attacking the Catholic Church as antithetical to the new, racially pure German Third Reich. Catholics were under constant threats, and many had already been imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps.

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2. Matthew Day, “’Shocking' Holocaust Study Claims Nazis Killed Up To 20 Million People,” *The Telegraph,* March 4, 2013. <https://www.businessinsider.com/shocking-new-holocaust-study-claims-nazis-killed-up-to-20-million-people-2013-3?op=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Frank Johnson, “Don’t Mention that Mussolini Saved Jews: It’s Politically Inconvenient To Do So,” *The Spectator*. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/don-t-mention-that-mussolini-saved-jews-it-is-politically-inconvenient-to-do-so> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Joseph Goebbels Complains of Italians’ Treatment of Jews.” *This Day in History, HISTORY*, December 12, 1942.

[*https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/goebbels-complains-of-italians-treatment-of-jews*](https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/goebbels-complains-of-italians-treatment-of-jews) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Margherita, Marchione, “Pope Pius XII and the Jews,” *Crisis* 15, no. 1, (January 1997): 20-23.

<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/history/pope-pius-xii-and-the-jews.htmln> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mark Riebling , *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War Against Hitler*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016). <https://www.amazon.com/Church-Spies-Secret-Against-Hitler/dp/0465094112>; George J. Marlin, “Pius XII’s Secret War Against Hitler.” *The Catholic Thing*, January 13, 2016. <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2016/01/13/pius-xiis-secret-war-against-hitler/>. Tom Michael, “Vatican Spy Plot: Never-seen-before Nazi War Crime Files Tell Story of Pope Pius XII’s Vatican Spy and the Plot to Kill Hitler.” *The Sun*, January 2017. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2631557/nazi-war-crime-files-pope-pius-xiis-vatican-spy-plot-kill-hitler/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*; Kertzer, “The Pope’s Secret Back Channel to Hitler.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jason Horowitz, “Deep in Vatican Archives, Scholar Discovers ‘Flabbergasting’ Secrets,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/27/world/europe/vatican-history-secrets-david-kertzer.html>; David I. Kertzer, *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler*, (New York: Random House, 2022). <https://www.amazon.com/Pope-War-Secret-History-Mussolini/dp/0812989945> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, (New York: Penguin Books. 2008). <https://www.amazon.com/Hitlers-Pope-Secret-History-Pius/dp/014311400X>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission, “The Vatican & the Holocaust: Preliminary Report on the Vatican During the Holocaust,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, October 2000. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/preliminary-report-on-the-vatican-during-the-holocaust-october-2000-2>; Search Stories of Baptism of Jewish Children and Houses of Life, *International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation*. <https://www.raoulwallenberg.net/?s=pius+XII+baptism&Search.x=0&Search.y=0> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Editorial, *New York Times*, December 25, 1941; “The New York Times Editorials Praising Pope Pius XII.” *Catholic League for Civil and Religious Rights,* <https://www.catholicleague.org/the-new-york-times-editorials-praising-pope-pius-xii/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Marlin. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*: *Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on the Unity of Human Society to our Venerable Brethren: The Patriarchs, Archbishops, Bishops, and Other Ordinaries In Peace and Communication with the Apostolic See*, October 20, 1939. <https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20101939_summi-pontificatus.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)