

## The Defamation of Pope Pius XII

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IN THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, at least ten books have been published in the United States which deal with the response of the Roman Catholic Church, and particularly of Pope Pius XII, to the Holocaust. Most (and these have been the ones given favorable reviews in the media and in academia) are highly critical of the Church and the Pope, accusing them of the crimes of silence and passivity in the face of the Nazi killing of the Jews. The first three books listed here are among them. A few (and these have been virtually ignored by the media and academia) defend the Church and the Pope against these accusations and argue that they actively and effectively worked to save the lives of as many Jews as they could; a prominent example of these efforts is Italy, where eighty percent of the Jewish population survived the Holocaust. A

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comprehensive case for the defense is presented by the fourth book.

What explains this boom, even fad, in denunciations of the Church and the Pope, almost sixty years after the Holocaust itself? One might have thought that

the question of their role during those terrible events had been fully decided by the answers that Jewish leaders gave at the time of the Holocaust and immediately thereafter. After all, these leaders had far more direct knowledge and experience about what could be done to save Jews than journalists or academics can have when they are writing about events which occurred when they were children, or not even born. During the 1940s and

1950s, numerous Jewish leaders praised and honored the Church and the Pope for what they had done to save Jews.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps the current accusers, like professional historians of other long-ago events, have discovered facts or documents which were unknown to Jewish leaders at the time. This is what John Cornwell

**BOOKS DISCUSSED in this ARTICLE**

***Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII***, by John Cornwell, New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

***Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy***, by Susan Zuccotti, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

***The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965***, by Michael Phayer, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

***Hitler, the War, and the Pope***, by Ronald J. Rychlak, Columbus, Miss.: Genesis Press, 2000.

claims about himself. However, Ronald Rychlak systematically demonstrates that these claims are exaggerated or simply false.

The case of the accusers can be reduced to the following charges: First, there is the crime of silence; in particular, Pius XII did not speak out against the Holocaust or even against the Nazi regime. Second, there is the crime of passivity; in particular, the Church did not work to save Jews from deportation and extermination. Both of these are crimes of omission. (A few authors go further and accuse the Church of crimes of commission, such as allowing anti-Jewish commentaries to appear in Catholic publications.) The accusers argue that the root explanation for these crimes can be found in two sources: in the Church's historical tradition of systematic anti-Judaism;<sup>2</sup> and in the Papacy's modern imperative to privilege its interests as an institution over every other consideration, including moral ones.

The defenders provide an alternative interpretation of the actions of Pius XII and the Church. With regard to the alleged crime of silence, they note that the Papacy is not a secular political regime and that its language is not like that of secular political leaders. In their official statements about political matters, the Popes have used language which criticizes a particular ideology (*e.g.*, communism, national socialism, even liberalism), but they almost never explicitly name an offending government or political leader. This long-established practice continues even today: Pope John Paul II never explicitly names offending political actors, even when they (as was the case with Slobodan Milosevic and his Serbian regime) are engaged in the mass murder of Catholics (as in Croatia in 1991). Within the constraints of papal language, Pius XII made many statements which criticized Nazi persecution of the Jews. As Rychlak and others have dem-

onstrated, this was recognized at the time both by Jewish leaders and by the Nazis themselves.

With regard to the alleged crime of passivity, the defenders note that Catholic institutions hid and sheltered thousands of Jews from Nazi authorities and local collaborators who were intent upon finding and deporting them. These Catholics did so despite the fact that they were putting their own lives at risk. Susan Zuccotti is intent on arguing that Pius XII even allowed the deportation of the Jews of Rome from "under his very windows." To do so, she has to be silent about the much greater number of Roman Jews that the Church, with the approval of the Pope, hid within a wide network of monasteries, convents, schools, and hospitals, "under the very windows" of the Gestapo and the collaborating Fascist police. As Rychlak and others have convincingly argued, the Church seems to have saved as many Jews as was possible, given the totalitarian conditions—including the pervasive presence of police informers—that existed in Nazi-occupied Europe.

To put the role of the Pope and the Church in true perspective, it is useful also to consider the response to the Holocaust of the secular political leaders of the Allied powers who were at war with Nazi Germany. The leaders of the Allies were certainly not bound by any linguistic conventions. Yet neither Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, nor Joseph Stalin spoke out explicitly against the extermination of the Jews. Nor did their nations admit any more than a small percentage of the Jews who desperately sought to find refuge there before the war, when escape from Nazi territory was still feasible.<sup>3</sup> Confronted with the challenge of the Holocaust, the record of the Allied leaders and governments was no better than that of the Pope and the Church; indeed, given the far greater resources available to them,

it was a good deal worse.

It is also the case that Jewish leaders in America and Palestine did not make the rescue of Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe their highest priority.<sup>4</sup> They believed that a focus on rescue would distract attention and drain resources from what were really their top priorities: preserving the good position of the Jewish community in America and preparing for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine when the war was over.

One of the reasons why we know what secular political leaders did or did not do during the Holocaust is that, a generation ago, there was an earlier outpouring of books which condemned the silence and the passivity of leaders and institutions. However, at that time the target was liberal leaders and institutions, especially President Roosevelt, his administration, Congress, and even *The New York Times*. In the 1970s, of course, criticism of liberalism was widespread, with attacks coming from both the radical left and the neo-conservative right.

Each of these two episodes of Holocaust revisionism—the denunciation of liberals in the 1970s and the denunciation of Catholics in the late 1990s and early 2000s—has been a case of applying the speculations and moralisms of one era to the conditions and morals of an earlier one, in a way that is superficial and anachronistic. When writing about events in the past, one can assume two very different stances: the radical mentality, which judges the people of the past by what one claims to be an absolute, timeless standard, but which is really only the dominant norm of one's own time; and the historical mentality, which judges the people of the past by a moral standard which was understood and re-

spected at the time, and also in relation to what other people in comparable circumstances were doing at the time.

Both the anti-liberal and the anti-Catholic versions of Holocaust revisionism are expressions of the radical mentality. But when the two are read together, they can be used to correct each other in a way that leads to a genuinely historical mentality. With respect to the alleged crimes of silence and passivity, the anti-liberal critique points to a much wider range of actors during the Holocaust—including both liberal leaders and Jewish leaders—than merely the Church and Pius XII that are the focus of the narrow anti-Catholic critique.



For the radicals of the 1970s, liberalism was the enemy. However, for both the radicals and the liberals of the late 1990s, Catholicism has been the enemy. Radicals and liberals, as well as post-modernists and modernists, have certainly had their differences and their disputes. In the current era, however, they have united around the supreme value and privileged place of the free individual, around the ideology of expressive individualism, and therefore around the deconstruction of any constraint upon individual assertion, particularly those constraints based upon religion, tradition, hierarchy, or community. Of course, for most of the history of Western civilization, the supreme embodiment of all four of these bases for constraint upon individual assertion has been the Catholic Church.

In our own time, with much of Protestant Christianity conforming itself to some version of liberalism or individualism, and with much of secular conservatism confining itself to advocacy of the free market, the Catholic Church has become the *only* remaining embodiment of all four

bases for such constraints. And within the Church, the most coherent and consistent embodiment of these bases or values has been the Papacy of John Paul II. As the political power and the pervasive sway of expressive individualism reached their apogee at the end of the 1990s, it focused its animus and energy upon its principal remaining adversary. In the intoxication of its triumphalism, individualism sought to crush once and for all its ancient and hated enemy—the Roman Catholic Church and particularly its head, the Papacy. “*Écrasez l’infâme!*”

In the current period, it is thought—and it is certainly taught—that the Holocaust is the worst crime of all history. The Holocaust is surely among the worst crimes of the twentieth century, but it is not the only case of genocide. There have been, for example, the Turkish killing of 1.2 million Armenians and the Hutu killing of 800,000 Tutsi. And it is not the only case of mass murder in concentration camps. There have been the Soviet killing of at least eight million political prisoners in the Gulag and the Khmer Rouge murder of at least 1.5 million Cambodians in “the killing fields.” In both of these latter cases, most radicals and liberals were silent and passive as they occurred.

Since the Holocaust is among the worst crimes of the twentieth century, anyone who can be shown to have contributed to it, even if only by acts of omission, must be among the worst of criminals. In the post-modern age, it is taught that one should not demonize anyone, but it is also taught that one can and should demonize anyone who conceivably made any contribution to the Holocaust (e.g., the Swiss banks, the Swiss people, the French railroads, the French people, the German people in the twentieth century, the German people in the nineteenth century, the German people in the sixteenth century). Surely, it can be arranged to demonize the Catholic Church

and the Papacy too.

One way to discredit the Church is to argue that it did not work to save Jews at the time of the Holocaust, and that it did not do so because of fear of Nazi reprisals. This accusatory move is fine as far as it goes, but it only condemns the Church of the 1940s. An even better way to discredit the Church is to argue that it is intrinsically anti-Jewish. This move provides a darker and therefore better explanation for the crime of passivity, and it condemns the Church in any and all times. This will include the Church in our own time, when it opposes any public policy whose advocates happen to include secular Jews. The Church can be portrayed as acting out once again its eternal, congenital anti-Judaism, and maybe even anti-Semitism.

The books by Zuccotti and Phayer (as well as recent books by James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History* [2001], and David Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican’s Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* [2001]) are attempts to portray the Roman Catholic Church as systematically anti-Jewish and to argue that this is the explanation for its passivity during the Holocaust. These authors may not have deliberately chosen to be part of the contemporary radical and liberal campaign against the Church. However, the hyped publicity and uncritical enthusiasm that the media and academia have given these biased and tendentious works is certainly part of that campaign.

Similarly, one way to discredit the Papacy is to argue that it was silent during the Holocaust because of the particular character and background of Pius XII. This too is fine as far as it goes, but it only condemns the Pope of the 1940s. An even better way to discredit the Papacy is to argue that it is congenitally stunted by its own narrow institutional interests. This move provides the explanation for the crime of silence, and it condemns the

Papacy in any and all times. This will include the Papacy of John Paul II when he defends the values of religion, tradition, hierarchy, and community. It most especially will include the current Pope for his opposition to abortion.

The book by Cornwell (as well as a recent book by Garry Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* [2000]) is an attempt to portray the Papacy as systematically obsessed with its own power and to argue that this is a central explanation for Pius XII's silence (or worse) during the Holocaust. Cornwell's distortions and exaggerations, which are thoroughly documented by Rychlak, are so pronounced that it is difficult to credit him with good faith. Yet this did not prevent the media from giving this most biased and tendentious of books the most enthusiastic praise.

In the end, we must conclude that the promotion by the media and academia of all these denunciations of the Roman Catholic Church and the Papacy is not really about the Holocaust of the 1940s. It is about the liberal and radical agenda of

our own time and the efforts of the media and academia to discredit and marginalize the Church and the Pope for opposing that agenda. And at the center of that agenda is the life-and-death conflict over abortion.

The liberals and the radicals, the modernists and the post-modernists, want to silence the Pope as he speaks out against abortion, which each year kills two million of the unborn in the nations of the West. They want the Church to stand by passively while these millions are sacrificed on the altar of free choice and expressive individualism. In short, they want the Pope and the Church to acquiesce in what has been called another holocaust. It is a demonstration of the depravity and hypocrisy of these liberals and radicals that they seek to achieve the silence and passivity of the Pope and the Church during this current and ongoing holocaust, by falsely accusing them of committing the crimes of silence and passivity during the Holocaust of sixty years ago.

1. See David G. Dalin, "Pius XII and the Jews," *The Weekly Standard*, February 26, 2001, 31-39. 2. Most accusers acknowledge that the Church has not been anti-Semitic, in the literal sense of being hostile to Jews because of racist ideology; rather the Church is said to be hostile to Jews for religious, cultural, social, or economic reasons. 3. David S.

Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York, 1984). 4. Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (New Brunswick, 1970); Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York, 1994).