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Kertzer, David I. 2022. *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler.* **New York: Random House, 788.**

‘The Pope. How many divisions has he?’

Attributed to Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin

The incumbent Pope Francis is the 266th pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church and it is now almost 2,000 years since the first one was inaugurated. Given such a long history, it is not surprising that some of the pontiffs have been rather controversial. The reign of Alexander VI (born Rodrigo de Borgia) from 1492 to 1503 is often considered controversial, and this label is used more as a courtesy to the spiritual institutions, as history books and literature about his time in power have provided so few kind words.

Moving closer to the present day, it is evident that the 20th century also had its share of controversial popes. The book under review is about one of them – Pius XII (born Eugenio Pacelli), who ascended to the papal throne, i.e. St. Peter’s throne, on 2 March 1939, and reigned for almost 20 years. Accordingly, the book examines the head of the Roman Catholic Church who was a controversial historical character, at the time marked by uncontroversial, indisputable evil of the most horrible sort. Those whose view of the pope is favourable (Blet 1999, Hesseman 2022) argue that in those dark times Pius XII did everything that could have been done. Those who think differently consider him to be ‘Hitler’s Pope’ (Cornwell 1999). In contrast, David Kertzer lets the reader judge the pope and his accomplishments, or rather the lack of them, providing ample facts arranged in a very orderly and logical manner, as the ground for such a value judgment. These facts are occasionally supplemented by Kertzer’s own, not

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at all imposing, almost unassertive considerations of the topic. The facts that are provided in the book include those based on the insights into the recently opened the Vatican archive of Pius XII, since Pope Francis decided that this Vatican archive would become accessible for academic research in March 2020.

At the very beginning of the book, the author points out that the newly accessible archive materials should be considered in the context of the time. They should not be pondered in isolation, but in conjunction with previously accessible Vatican archive material, as well as archive material of other countries, especially the great powers of that era. By consistently adhering to these methodological guidelines, the author provides the reader with a detailed report on every momentous event from two viewpoints. For example, on the one hand, the reader is provided with an insight into a note (request or appeal) of a government of a country that is submitted by its envoy (ambassador, in contemporary parlance) to the Holy See, followed by the materials for the meeting with that envoy that were prepared for Pius XII by the Vatican's secretariat of state, and memorandum from that meeting, written by the Vatican's officials. Furthermore, the reader is also acquainted with the memorandum of the very same meeting written by the envoy and his evaluation of the meeting – both dispatched by the cable to the ministry of foreign affairs of the country in question – providing information not only on how the meeting was, what were the contents and outcome, but also on the reasons for such outcome. What follows is the author's interpretation of the event in the context of ongoing developments and his explanation of the reasons for such outcome.

Fully equipped with these archival materials and having the strong determination to provide the reader with a comprehensive and clear picture of the earthly endeavours of Pius XII, the author crafted a voluminous novel-like chronicle of his reign at the time of the Second World War, with an appropriate prologue. On the one hand, the prologue deals with the ascent of Cardinal Pacelli to the Papal throne, and on the other hand, it covers the development of the institutional framework that Pius XII faced when he took the office/throne.

Regarding the first issue, the future pope spent nearly his entirely priestly career in the corridors of the Vatican, serving the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. He was, notably, papal nuncio to Germany for 13 years, starting in 1917. The time in Germany left a lasting impression in him, not only regarding the perfect German language he practised. Before he ascended to the throne, for nine years he had been the Vatican's secretary of state – second only to the pope (Pius XI at the time) in terms of influence and leverage.

As to the second issue, the status of the Vatican was resolved only in 1929 by the Lateran Agreement between Italy and the Roman Catholic Church – the Vatican became a sovereign state. The Italian dictator at the time was not a calm, decent and reasonable person, meaning he had latitude for credible threats of rescission of the agreement or at least non-fulfilment of the obligations from its provisions, especially considering the asymmetry of the (earthly) power between Italy and the Vatican. Furthermore, it was only in July 1933 that the Concordat between Germany and the Vatican was concluded. The German dictator, contrary to the Italian one, was not a man of threats, but a man of action. From day one of the enforcement of the Concordat, he started to violate its provision, of course, against the interest of the Roman Catholic Church and its flock in Germany. If anything, he was consistent, as he violated all agreements that he concluded and signed. For example, immediately after the inauguration of Pius XII, Hitler violated Germany's obligations from the infamous Munich Agreement, invaded Czechoslovakia and dismembered that country. Pius XII was silent about that. He was also silent later. Throughout his papacy he was always silent about Hitler and his deeds.

This (wartime) chronicle has elements of a historical novel.¹ There are many characters, and it is beyond any doubt who is the central one. This writing style enables the reader, if they wish, to step into Pius XII's shoes, and to try to guess what were his beliefs, motives, aims, and how he made his decision, and to try to understand his reasoning – the mechanism which resulted in his actions or, in many cases the lack thereof. That does not necessarily mean that the reader should sympathise with him or justify his conduct.

In his book, Kertzer provides ample evidence based on which the reader can positively conclude that Pius XII, in his official earthly considerations, was interested only in the Roman Catholic Church as an institution, maintaining its prestige, the way he felt it, the protection of its social influence, and the increase of its non-spiritual power. Pius XII did not differentiate the Church from himself. Accordingly, he was interested in all those issues for himself. Furthermore, according to the author, the pope dreamed of becoming – a peacemaker. What a dream: to be a person who would intermediate between two sides and to be glorified for bringing the peace that would

¹ This is only to say that Kertzer's book features some elements of a novel. From the other viewpoint, this is not to say this book is a novelised history – an approach in which historiographic insights on some events are disclosed in the form of the novel, like, for example, Lenin's travel from Zurich to Petrograd in 1917, organised so well by the German government (Marridale 2016).

end the bloodshed! Nonetheless, the German envoy to the Vatican, cited in the book, cheerfully reported that it was the pope who believed that such a peace should be based on justice. Since justice can mean anything – and the information about the pope’s beliefs comes from the German envoy – the author of this review presumes that peace based on justice is the one in which Germany is triumphant and a peace that is not based on justice is the one achieved by the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War.

Removing God from the equation, what did Pius XII believe in? According to the evidence in the book – in autocracy (a right-wing one, of course). He despised democracy and was horrified by communism, needless to say, not because it lacks democracy. He was repulsed by liberalism and disgusted by the constant liberal preaching that church and state should be separated. He firmly believed that the church, as an institution, i.e. the Roman Catholic Church, meaning his church, should decide about public policies, though without (political) consequences for its decision.

The reader wonders whether Pius XII believed in anything else beyond God. For example, in the desirability of ubiquitous peace on Earth, in the peaceful resolution of disputes, in equality of all people, and non-discrimination due to race or confession. Did he believe in tolerance and other things considered today by many as empty slogans of political correctness? The answer to all these questions should indirectly be inferred by the answer to the other one. With whom did Pius XII conclude the accord? With none than – Adolf Hitler. He could have hardly found more horrific Mephisto.

According to the book, the accord was built step by step. On the occasion of the first Hitler’s birthday during Pius XII’s pontificate, on 20 April 1939, Pius XII instructed his nuncio in Germany to personally deliver to the Führer the pope’s best birthday wishes and ordered (the Roman Catholic Church is a strictly hierarchical organisation) all the Catholic church bells to peal in celebration, as priests and their congregation prayed for God’s blessing upon the Führer. What a harmony! This action demonstrated a clear alignment of the Roman Catholic Church with the Nazi regime. For the record, all that happened slightly less than three months after Hitler’s Reichstag Prophecy speech (30 January) in which he announced the ‘annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe’ in case of a war – a war he was planning and actively preparing (Browning 2004).²

² ‘If international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will be not the Bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of

The next steps followed. In 1939, the year in which the Second World War commenced, secret negotiations between Germany and the Vatican started and they were successfully concluded the following year. These negotiations are documented in detail in newly accessible Vatican archive materials, providing not only hard evidence that these secret negotiations actually happened, but also revealing their content. Hitler's personal envoy Philipp von Hessen sought, on behalf of his principal, improvement of relations with the Vatican, meaning the pope's commitment not to speak publicly about 'the racial issue', and that the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, specifically in the Reich (with a substantially increased number of Catholics after the *Anschluss* and annexation of Sudetenland) would not interfere with political issues. Pius XII went one step further. It was important for him to convince Hitler's personal envoy that the Catholics of the Reich would no longer face any conflict in loyalty between the Church and the state. The author points out that such successful secret negotiations paved the way for the visit of German Minister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop to the Vatican in March 1940. The *Reichminister* was delighted with the visit, as Pius XII clearly and unequivocally claimed that there was no 'political Catholicism'. In short, the Roman Catholic Church did not contest Nazism. Furthermore, Pius XII emphasised to his guest that there was no reason for the Vatican to interfere with the 'historical processes' in which, from the political point of view, the Vatican was not interested. Translation of the pope's statement: Germany can attack whomever it likes, invade whomever the way it likes, Germany can do whatever it would like to do, the Vatican would not interfere in it, and the pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church would not be publicly speaking about it. It was not surprising that von Ribbentrop was extremely pleased with such a successful visit – and so was the one who sent him on that mission.

Pius XII swiftly demonstrated that he was a person who honoured his words. He did not interfere, and he did not publicly speak – about anything. Not only was his very first encyclical in his pontificate (the war has already started) tightly packed with uncommitting general statements about universal brotherhood and hard times for mankind, but Poland and its horrible disaster were not mentioned in this very document, let alone condemning those who were responsible for that horror. It was precisely at that time that the pogrom of the Poles, both the laypeople and clergy of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland was taking place and, with the papal

the Jewish race in Europe.' A translation of the entire speech can be found at: [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Adolf_Hitler's_Address_to_the_Reichstag_\(30_January_1939\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Adolf_Hitler's_Address_to_the_Reichstag_(30_January_1939)), last visited July 23, 2024.

silence – was also accelerating. Accordingly, it is not surprising that in the following years Pius XII never publicly referred to any of the German aggressions on the neutral countries (the list is long), never mentioned the *Luftwaffe* bombing of civilian quarters of cities around Europe (again – a long list), never reacted to the *Wehrmacht* and *SS* atrocities and massacres of civilians, nor condemned Italian entry to aggressive war.³ None of that happened. Although, according to the insights from the book, many governments appealed to the pope to do exactly that.

Here comes the most difficult word – the Holocaust. Did Pius XII know about it? Did he comprehend the scale of what was happening? Based on the insights from the book, supported by evidence from the documents from the Vatican archive, the unequivocal answer is – yes. The first reports about the Holocaust started arriving in the Vatican in the autumn of 1941, from Italian (of course Catholic) military chaplains embedded in the Italian units on the Eastern Front. This was before the Wannsee Conference, at the time when *SS* extermination squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) started the implementation of the Final Solution by shooting hundreds of thousands of Jews in the occupied part of the Soviet Union. Even if the pope did not trust the reports about the Holocaust that were coming from the Allies, even if he discredited these reports as biased and the numbers in them as propaganda-motivated exaggerations – the reports by Italian Roman Catholic chaplains from the Eastern Front were highly reliable.

What did Pius XII do? He kept silent. He never mentioned the word 'Jews'. Let alone 'Nazis'. Nonetheless, let us remove announcements from the equation, the question is: did Pius XII do anything behind the scenes? He only intervened on behalf of baptised Jews, those who had converted to Catholicism, that they should not be treated the same way as those who were defiant and who had not changed their confession. Since those who had converted were from that moment under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church, they should be protected – not for their own sake, but because of the Church which should be revered.

³ Quite the contrary, the Roman Catholic Church, i.e. its leadership, publicly endorsed the decisions of the Italian government/dictator to step into an aggressive war both in 1939 (occupation of Albania) and 1940 (aggression against France and Great Britain) and, according to the insights from the book, the ministers of the Roman Catholic Church in Italy appealed to the flock to back Mussolini, to support the war leader in the hard times for the country. For Italians, things would become much harder in the following years.

Honouring the Roman Catholic Church was sacrosanct for Pius XII. A piece of evidence supporting this insight is a document from the Vatican archive, revealed in the book. According to the document, it was Pius XII who complained in early January 1940, through a clandestine envoy, to Adolf Hitler about the discrimination of Catholics in Germany and the scorning of the Roman Catholic Church in the country. As an example of this discrimination practice, the pope pointed out that Catholics could not be promoted within the SS if they did not denounce their affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church. What an injustice – a good Catholic could not become even *Standartenführer*! For Pius XII it was not an issue what on Earth a Catholic was doing in this murderous organisation, and in his eyes, there was no contradiction between the Christian values and the values cultivated within the organisation headed by Heinrich Himmler.⁴ The only relevant issue for the pope was that those who managed to negotiate such a schizophrenic dualism could not advance in this criminal organisation, at least at the same pace as other devout Christians.⁵

How can such behaviour on the part of Pius XII be explained? The author provides ample evidence based on which the reader concludes that it was the pope's political calculation that this was the best way (in the already developed framework for relations with the Nazis) to protect the interests of the Roman Catholic Church. It is interesting to explore the details of this calculation. The point is that the German government authorities constantly violated the provision of the Concordat to the detriment of the Roman Catholic Church in the Reich, i.e. Germany. Pius XII did not trust Hitler and did not believe in his promises – instead, the pope was only monitoring his deeds. However, Pius XII considered the fate of the Roman Catholic within the wider picture – a global one, but predominantly European. Up to the second half of 1942, the pope was convinced that Europe's postwar order would be a Nazi one. His political calculation was based on that assumption, since he was a sovereign without earthly power, without divisions (infantry or armoured) – all these things the Nazis had – but he wanted to preserve and enhance the power of the institution he headed. Considering all these

⁴ Himmler himself was a baptised Catholic, and he was brought up in a devout Roman Catholic family in Bavaria. Obviously, he previously managed to resolve the issue of promotion, since even as Catholic he was promoted to the rank of *Reichsführer-SS* – the highest rank in the SS. Furthermore, his sole superior was born into an Austrian family of devout Catholics.

⁵ Legally speaking, *SS (Schutzstaffel)* was proclaimed a criminal organisation only in 1946 by the decision of the International Military Tribunal in Nürnberg. Nonetheless, its undisputed criminal reputation this organisation acquired much earlier, and it was *Kristallnacht*, the November 1938 pogrom of Jews in Germany, that can convince every sceptic about the true nature of the SS.

things, the author concludes that the reason Pius XII did not stand up to Hitler – was not to infuriate the future victor. It was the pope's inferiority based on fear.

Nonetheless, if there were any second thoughts during the following (1942/43) winter, in mid-1943 it was clear even to Pius XII that the postwar world would not be Nazi-dominated after all. Did this shift of strategic constellation change anything about his stance? Did the pope, after this revelation, condemn Hitler, Nazism, German aggressive war and the Holocaust? Not at all – everything remained the same. It is the pope's other political calculation in 1943 that produced the same outcome, according to the book. It is the Red Army, a godless pack in the pope's interpretation, that was advancing into Europe from the East and, according to Pius XII's assessment, only Hitler and Nazi Germany were the bulwark that could save Europe from the communist plague. Accordingly, the savour of Western civilisation was not to be denounced or infuriated. The shortsightedness of this political calculation by the pope was demonstrated by the fact that the Red Army (contaminating all the taken territories with communism) reached the Elbe and was unable to move further westward only because of the Western Allies and their armed forces – not because of Nazi Germany and the completely shattered *Wehrmacht*.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding a flawed conclusion and completely missed political calculation, the pope's reasoning provides insight into his way of thinking. According to the author, Pius XII was not a person of strong moral convictions or clear political vision but rather the head of the church who made his decisions according to their short-term usefulness. The author supports this insight with a number of archive documents that clearly testify to how the pope's decisions were prepared, what was, for example, the process applied in the case of considering requests or appeals of various countries or even clerics of the Roman Catholic Church related to the war events. Everything was done step-by-step, in a calm and piecemeal way, with responsible officials and advisers being engaged, starting from the Vatican secretariat of state, they provided their opinion and recommendations – without any rush – and at the end of this time-consuming process, it was Pius XII himself who made the decision, based on the current suitability, considering only the interests of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution, as interpreted autonomously by the pope himself.

The reader wonders whether the pope's undisguised pragmatism can explain his deeds, especially those related to Hitler and Nazi Germany. Is there something else, besides cynical pragmatism? Reading the book provides two fascinating, even shocking pieces of information.

The first one is almost grotesque. The British envoy had been told that Pius XII had hoped that there would be no 'coloured' servicemen – effectively Black soldiers, Afro-Americans, according to the modern politically correct vocabulary – among Allied troops that will be garrisoned in Rome. The pope probably thought that they would contaminate Rome.⁶ The reader infers that it is not colour in itself that is the problem, since black was the colour of uniforms of SS units that in 1943 conducted a massive raid on Jews in Rome and their deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau and perpetrated wholesale shooting of the local (Catholic) population due to the partisan actions. In that case, the black colour was not a problem for the pope. The reader cynically concludes that the problem of the promotion of Catholics in the SS, which the pope had complained about to Hitler several years earlier, must have been solved.

The second piece of information is sinister. In mid-March 1943 the papal nuncio in Istanbul, Bishop Angelo Roncalli (later Pope John XXIII), sent a dispatch to Pius XII in which he pleaded the pope to mediate with the head of Slovak puppet government, a Catholic clergyman Josef Tiso, to enable the transfer of one thousand Jewish children, who were awaiting deportation to Poland and certain death, to Palestine, via Turkey and with British authorisation. The pope delegated the preparation of this decision to the officials of the Vatican secretariat of state. Those officials pointed out in their reports, extensively referred to in the book, that such immigration of Jews to Palestine should not be allowed because it would 'offend the religious sentiment of all Catholics and all of those who ... call themselves Christians' and that Jews are 'swindlers'. Accordingly, the recommendation of the State Secretary to the pope regarding the plea to rescue Jewish children for Slovakia was that nothing should be done. Accepting this recommendation, in May 1943 Pius XII refused the appeal of his own nuncio and informed him in a very polite letter that he would do nothing, and he did not contact the head of the Slovak puppet government, despite him being a Catholic clergyman. Quite expectedly, the Jewish children were deported to Poland and ultimately transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

⁶ When one starts down this path, then the things will be reduced *ad absurdum*. According to the book, in January 1945 the Vatican's secretary of state officially complained to Allied authorities that a bordello was operating at a given location in Rome (street name and number are provided in the document) and that its customers were Black American GIs. Accordingly, at the time of the liberation of Auschwitz, the Vatican was concerned with brothel – though prostitution itself was not the problem, but rather the colour of the skin of the customers.

The racism of Pius XII and the Vatican's upper echelon pour out of these two episodes, and other very similar occurrences are also highlighted in the book. Nonetheless, this is not to say that racism and devotion to right-wing autocracies are the only or even the basic explanation of the pope's acquiescence to Hitler and Nazi Germany. Nonetheless, the reader concludes that this rather ideological explanation complements Kertzer's primary explanation of short-term usefulness as the main driver of the pope's obedience to Hitler, considering that Hitler's arguments of brute power and trepidations, especially regarding the status of the Roman Catholic Church in the Reich, were clearly understood by the Vatican and worked extremely well. At the time when these arguments were substantially weakened by the actions of the Allied armed forces and substantial German military losses, on 1 September 1944, in his radio broadcast dedicated to the commemoration of the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War (though without saying it started with the German aggression on Poland), in what was his first worldwide radio address since the liberation of Rome, among many general statements and empty declarations, Pius XII was only specific about focusing on how much Rome and Italy had suffered from the war (read they suffered due to the Allied bombing).⁷ Pius XII demonstrated that he was a person of consistency over time, a steadfast character, not to be shaken by events. When he chose a side, he stuck with it. Once aligned with Nazi Germany, always against the Allies!

Finally, when Hitler and Mussolini vanished from the Earth, when their accomplishments had been destroyed and ideas eradicated, in his Christmas address in December 1945, the pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church condemned totalitarianism – suddenly, out of the blue, the word 'bloodshed' appeared; it had been absent all those years – and he unequivocally denounced the power of the totalitarian state. In his dispatch to the Foreign

⁷ It is worth noting that, according to the author, a letter to *The Times*, dated 4 September 1944, offered 'a common English view, expressed in a typically ironic way'. The author quoted the letter in its entirety, and it is worth done it again in this review: 'I am sorry, indeed, if I have missed the Papal denunciations of Germany's crimes; but I find that my friends are in the same state of woeful ignorance. In fairness to his Holiness, and for the instruction of your readers, perhaps you would permit your correspondent to give us the texts of the pronouncements condemning the German invasions of Poland, France, Holland, Belgium, Norway, Greece, Russia, &c., the systematic slaughter and torture of Poles and Jews, the mass deportations and vast robberies, the bombardments of Warsaw, Rotterdam, Belgrade, London, &c. I have been searching hopefully for such an utterance in your long report ... of the Pope's broadcast address on the fifth anniversary of the war. I do not find it. There is nothing here to show the historians that the war was not begun by America or Greece' (p. 487).

Office, the British envoy to the Vatican laconically remarked that Pius XII had waited until (of the totalitarian states) only the Soviet Union remained, before he denounced totalitarianism.

After all that has been written so far, perhaps the reader of this book review may conclude that there are extremely few nice things to be said about Pius XII. Accordingly, it is reasonable to ask the question: what makes him a controversial figure? What has been written about the pope by those who praised him, justified his deed, or only had some compassion for him? Kretzer leaves the defence of Pius XII to one of his most eloquent and sophisticated defenders (Blet 1999). According to Kertzer, with extensive quotations from the source, two of Blets' insights are relevant: two basic explanations and justifications of the pope's silence.

The first one is that the pope's public condemnation of Nazis would not have produced any gain for the prosecuted and would have only worsened their position. Kertzer has no second thought about this explanation and justification, pointing out that the mechanism of the Final Solution had already been moved into the top gear of annihilation and no words or deeds by the pope could make things any worse than they already were.⁸ The aim for the extermination Europe's Jews had already been set to 100 per cent. The effective percentage of extermination of the Jews depended basically on the answers to technical questions, whose solving had been allocated to Adolf Eichman *et al.*

Nonetheless, Kretzer uses this claim to develop an essential counterfactual argument. Some (perhaps a substantial segment) of those who participated in the Holocaust, who directly or indirectly killed people, were, at least nominally Catholics, hence the appeal of the pontifex of the Roman Catholic Church could have influenced their actions, created some anxiety in them, or triggered some second thoughts about what they were doing. Perhaps some of those Catholics would not have unconditionally obeyed the orders they received. Defenders of the pope (Hasemann 2022a) reject this counterfactual hypothesis, and this attitude is explained by assuming that the pope's message would not have reached the German public, considering the efficiency of the Nazi propaganda machine and the iron grip on the media. Nonetheless, there is a persuasive counterargument to this assumption

⁸ As demonstrated (Browning 2004; Longerich 2021) there was no single decisive moment in the implementation of the Final Solution, not even the Wannsee Conference, but rather there was a set of incremental steps of intensifying the murderous actions that resulted in millions of deaths in the Holocaust. Nonetheless, it is indisputable that the extermination machine of the Holocaust started to operate at full power in the first half of 1942.

(Parks 2022). For Catholics, the media were hardly necessary for spreading the word – the pulpit sufficed. For millennia, it has been the words of the priest that made a substantial impact on the flock; state propaganda and media control simply cannot influence these words and the message from the pulpit. The Roman Catholic Church is and has strictly been a hierarchical organisation and anything that comes from the top – from the pope – is inevitably received in the most remote parishes and military units with chaplains regardless of how far away they have been deployed. The reader of this review can check how persuasive this claim is by looking at the recent history of the Roman Catholic Church in Eastern Europe, during the Soviet/communist period, as communist media control and propaganda were comparable to those of the Nazis.⁹ What would have been the magnitude of the effect of introducing anxiety in the souls of executioners and any second thoughts in their minds? This is an open question and the answer to it is highly speculative. Perhaps those effects would have been negligible, but the words of the priest condemning the Holocaust could not have worsened the position of the Nazi victims, which is claimed in the first line of the defence of Pius XII and the justification of his silence.

The other excuse, even justification for the silence of Pius XII (Blet 1999), with substantial euphemisms and Aesopian vocabulary, is basically the argument that the pope's condemnation of Hitler would have divided the loyalty of the German Catholics. In Kertzer's words, because he wished to make things clear for the reader of his book, Pius XII realised that with his public denunciation of Hitler, German Catholics, those at the reins of the Reich, and the number of that Catholic population was considerable, (slightly more than 30 million), would have to choose between Hitler and the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ If that had been the case, it is quite possible that a substantial number of the Catholics would have chosen – Hitler, and not only because of fervent Nazi propaganda. Such a choice would not only have undermined the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, its might and influence, as well as the prestige of its incumbent pontifex, but

⁹ Perhaps the best historical episode that confirms this thesis is the activities of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland during the communist period, described in detail by Connely (2020). Even at that time, the pulpit was untouchable – out of reach of earthly power, regardless of how unscrupulous it was. There is no reason to doubt that the outcome would have been the same in Nazi Germany.

¹⁰ According to the population census from 17 May 1939, the total population of the Reich (after the annexation of Austria and Suddetenland) was 79.4 million, and 41 per cent of the population was Catholic. Accordingly, there were 31.8 million Catholics on the territory of the Reich, just prior to the onset of the Second World War. Source: https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/deu/JEW_RELIGIONZUGEBTABELLE_GER.pdf, last visited August 13, 2024.

it would have created the possibility of a schism among German Catholics between those who were for the Vatican and those who backed Berlin, more accurately – the Wolf’s Lair (*Wolfsschanze*). This explanation is convincing in Kretzer’s opinion, for the reader perhaps only up to a point; nonetheless, whether Blet’s justification of the pope’s silence is acceptable is a completely separate question.

The author of the book provides enough material for the reader to ask and somewhat respond to a key counterfactual question: What would have happened had Pius XII, as the pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, excommunicated Hitler (who was baptised as a Catholic), publicly denounced Nazism, and condemned German aggression, massive war crimes and especially – the Holocaust? Based on the material provided in Kertzer’s book, the reader infers that the position of the victims of Nazi Germany was very unlikely to get worse – because it was already exceptionally bad. Alas, there was little room for deterioration. Nonetheless, regarding the stability of Hitler’s rein in the Reich – such a move on the part of the pope could have produced some instability. The answer to the hypothetical question and the probability and intensity of such destabilisation remains speculative.

Nonetheless, a reasonable conjecture is that this probability would not have been negligible. This follows from the Hitler’s permanently and clearly communicated wish that the pope remain silent, allowing for peace in the German multiconfessional home, and providing the grounds for the Nazi regime to present, both at home and abroad, that it had the implicit support of the Vatican, and projecting the image of Nazi Germany as the protector of Christianity – especial Catholicism. The insight regarding Hitler’s effort to keep the pope silent, indirectly yet strongly indicates the extent to which the German dictator was concerned about a Catholic rebellion in the Reich.¹¹

Furthermore, Hesemann (2022a) claims that in 1943, immediately following the surrender of Italy and in a debate regarding German policy on the Apennine Peninsula, von Ribbentrop told Hitler ‘If we invade the Vatican, we will definitely have a civil war in Germany one hour after the first bomb is dropped’. It is not known whether Hitler agreed with such an unequivocal and emphatic assessment by his minister of foreign affairs on the danger of Catholic rebellion and a (religious) civil war in Germany. The only thing that is undisputable, perhaps because of that risk, was that there

¹¹ The insight (Kershaw 2011) that the (unsuccessful) attempt on Hitler’s life was a final pivotal moment for his view of the world is quite convincing. After that attempt, Hitler did not show any concern for anyone, only ruthless destruction. Including for Germans. At this stage, the silence of Pius XII and the pope’s attitude towards Nazism was not relevant anymore.

was no German air raid or any other military attack on the Vatican – the Germans never bombed Rome, let alone the Vatican.¹² The open question remains whether the rebellion of several tens of millions of Catholics in the Reich would have been more effective for destabilisation of Hitler's regime than the attempted putsch by a few dozen Wehrmacht generals and officers, which collapsed after the failed attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that even defeating German Catholic rebels in a civil war (an unqualified success from the Nazi point of view) would have taken much longer and would have produced many casualties and more human suffering. After all, that would have been a legacy reminiscent of the Thirty Years War.

It is indisputable that the first years of the pontificate of Pius XII were during difficult, sorrowful and tragic times. Nonetheless, it is exactly in these times that strong people show their best face. It is the old truth, as the Antic tragedies have taught us, that it is easy to be nice in good times – it is the hard times that matter, that provide the background for everyone to show their true abilities and limitations. It was destiny, by setting hard times in the first year of Pius XII's pontificate, that provided him an opportunity that very few people other than him had in recent history. He squandered that opportunity. What remains is his profound silence. The reader wonders whether Pius XII was perhaps a person of modest potential and limited abilities. The evaluation of Eugenio Pacelli, by two cardinals, who happened to be French, just prior to him becoming the pope, quoted in the book, can perhaps provide some guidance. One of the French cardinals 'fault [Cardinal Pacelli] for his weakness of character, for being too prone to bend to pressure' (p. 49). The other cardinal thought that 'Pacelli certainly had his merits [...] he was a man of considerable culture and diplomatic ability, but he was too weak, too easily intimidated' (p. 50). In short, the reader concludes that at the time of a gathering storm the conclave elected the pope who had a featureless personality, weak character, narrow worldview – *Weltanschauung*, in his favourite language – and, timid, very timid. In short, the reader infers that Pius XII was unbecoming and ill-suited to be the pope in difficult times.¹³

¹² The Allies did. Although Pius XII requested that the Allies not bomb Rome, there was no understanding of the other side. The British envoy to the Holy See, on behalf of the British government, only assured the pope that the Vatican would not be bombed. According to the book, it actually was bombed by ostensibly strayed Royal Air Force aircraft. The incident was covered up by the British government.

¹³ The findings of a book (Dimić, Žutić 2017) on Aloysius Stepinac, an archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, point to the significant personality similarities between Pius XII and Cardinal Stepinac. Furthermore, their careers were

This timid and weak person, though his actions, and especially the lack thereof, undermined not only his moral credibility but the moral authority of the Roman Catholic Church in the world. No one is oblivious to this, the only difference is what one would make of it. The most aware of it are those who feel the greatest pain for the moral plunge – the Catholic intellectuals (theologians, philosophers, historians). That is precisely the reason they have defended Pius XII, hoping to control the damage done to the prestige of the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, in their texts, they ask rhetorical questions, such as what else could the Holy Father have done? And it is precisely because of the damage control that they claim that the Holy Father actually did do everything that could have been done – anything else, anything beyond that, would have been fatal and would have caused more death and destruction. Obviously, the topic causes them great pain, and so does Kertzer's book.¹⁴

Nonetheless, for the truth-searching reader, Kertzer's book provides ample high-quality material for their own conclusions on what happened, why it happened, and for their own value judgments and morals. Irrespective of Pius XII, the book provides plenty of food for thoughts about people in hard times, about moral constraints, human identities – who we really are when times are hard – and loyalties. Regardless of whether the people are Catholics or not.

* * *

On 18 November 1965, in the third year of his pontificate, Paul VI, who was an official at the Vatican secretariat of state during the pontificate of Pius XII, started the procedure of his canonisation. In this procedure, only the first step has been made and that happened 44 years after the (cold) start. On 19 December 2009, based on the recommendation of the Conclave, Pope Benedict XVI declared Pius XII venerable (*venerabilis*). Pius XII still did not progress to the following step; he has not been beatified (*beatus*). When or whether that will happen remains an open question.

rather similar: swift ascent in the upper echelons of the Church's administration, almost without any of the pastoral work with the flock on the parochial level. The naval quip would be – 'admirals who never commanded a ship'. In short, it seems that in both cases they were weak characters, unfit for the hard time in which they both held very high offices and were making decisions on crucial matters.

¹⁴ The recent debate on the review of Kertzer's book (Hesemann 2022b) illustrates precisely this way of reasoning.

On 29 April 2020, in an official release to the public on the occasion of the 75th year of the end of the Second World War, the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of Germany declared that Pius XII had made many false interpretations of historical events, and, probably more importantly, how considerable the moral responsibility lay with of the Roman Catholic bishops in Germany, because they did not oppose the aggressive war and extermination of the European Jews.

On this occasion, the Vatican did not issue any statement at all. It chose to be – silent. It seems that the spirit of Pius XII still lingers in *Les Caves du Vatican*.

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