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Moscow's Assault on the Vatican

The KGB made corrupting the Church a priority.

By Ion Mihai Pacepa

The Soviet Union was never comfortable living in the same world with the Vatican. The most recent disclosures document that the Kremlin was prepared to go to any lengths to counter the Catholic Church's strong anti-Communism.

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In March 2006 an Italian parliamentary commission concluded “beyond any reasonable doubt that the leaders of the Soviet Union took the initiative to eliminate the pope Karol Wojtyla,” in retaliation for his support to the dissident Solidarity movement in Poland. In January 2007, when documents disclosed that the newly appointed archbishop of Warsaw, Stanislaw Wielgus, had collaborated with Poland’s Communist-era political police, he admitted the accusation and resigned. The following day the rector of Krakow’s Wawel Cathedral, the burial site of Polish kings and queens, resigned for the same reason. Then it was learned that Michal Jagosz, a member of the Vatican’s tribunal considering sainthood for the late Pope John Paul II, has been accused of being a former Communist secret police agent; according to the Polish media, he had been recruited in 1984 before leaving Poland for an assignment to the Vatican. Currently, a book is about to be published that will identify 39 other priests whose names have been found in Krakow secret police files, some of whom are now bishops. Moreover, this seems to be just scratching the surface. A special commission will soon start investigating the past of all religious servants during the Communist era, as thousands more Catholic priests throughout that country are believed to have collaborated with the secret police. And this is just Poland — the archives of the KGB and those of the political police in the rest of the former Soviet bloc have yet to be opened on the subject of operations against the Vatican.

In my other life, when I was at the center of Moscow’s foreign-intelligence wars, I myself was caught up in a deliberate Kremlin effort to smear the Vatican, by portraying Pope Pius XII as a coldhearted Nazi sympathizer. Ultimately, the operation did not cause any lasting damage, but it left a residual bad taste that is hard to rinse away. The story has never before been told.

BATTLING THE CHURCH

In February 1960, Nikita Khrushchev approved a super-secret plan for destroying the Vatican’s moral authority in Western Europe. The idea was the brainchild of KGB chairman Aleksandr Shelepin and Aleksey Kirichenko, the Soviet Politburo member responsible for international policies. Up until that time, the KGB had fought its “mortal enemy” in Eastern Europe, where the Holy See had been crudely attacked as a cesspool of espionage in the pay of American imperialism, and its representatives had been summarily jailed as spies. Now Moscow wanted the Vatican discredited by its own priests, on its home territory, as a bastion of Nazism.

Eugenio Pacelli, by then Pope Pius XII, was selected as the KGB’s main target, its incarnation of evil, because he had departed this world in 1958. “Dead men cannot defend themselves” was the KGB’s latest slogan. Moscow had just gotten a black eye for framing and imprisoning a living Vatican prelate, József Cardinal Mindszenty, the primate of Hungary, in 1948. During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution he had escaped from jail and found asylum in the U.S. Embassy in Budapest, where he began writing his memoirs. As the details of how he had been framed became known to Western journalists, he was widely seen as a saintly hero and martyr.

Because Pius XII had served as the papal nuncio in Munich and Berlin when the Nazis were beginning their bid for power, the KGB wanted to depict him as an anti-Semite who had encouraged Hitler’s Holocaust. The hitch was that the operation was not to give the least hint of Soviet bloc involvement. The whole dirty job had to be carried out by Western hands, using evidence from the Vatican itself. That would correct another mistake made in the case of Mindszenty, who had been framed with counterfeit Soviet and Hungarian documents. (On February 6, 1949, just days before Mindszenty’s trial ended, Hanna Sulner, the Hungarian

handwriting expert who had fabricated the “evidence” used to frame the cardinal, escaped to Vienna and displayed microfilms of the “documents” on which the show trial was founded. Hanna demonstrated, in an excruciatingly detailed testimony, that all were forged documents, “some ostensibly in the cardinal’s hand, others bearing his supposed signature,” produced by her.)

To avoid another Mindszenty catastrophe, the KGB needed some original Vatican documents, even ones only remotely connected with Pius XII, which its *dezinformatsiya* experts could slightly modify and project in the “proper light” to prove the Pope’s “true colors.” The difficulty was that the KGB had no access to the Vatican archives, and that was where my DIE, the Romanian foreign intelligence service, came in. The new chief of the Soviet foreign intelligence service, General Aleksandr Sakharovsky, had created the DIE in 1949 and had until recently been our chief Soviet adviser; he knew that the DIE was in an excellent position to contact the Vatican and obtain approval to search its archives. In 1959, when I had been assigned to West Germany in the cover position as deputy chief of the Romanian Mission, I had conducted a “spy swap” under which two DIE officers (Colonel Gheorghe Horobet and Major Nicolae Ciuciulin), who had been caught red-handed in West Germany, had been exchanged for Roman Catholic bishop Augustin Pacha, who had been jailed by the KGB on a spurious charge of espionage and was finally returned to the Vatican via West Germany.

INFILTRATING THE VATICAN

“Seat-12” was the code name given to this operation against Pius XII, and I became its Romanian point man. To facilitate my job, Sakharovsky had authorized me to (falsely) inform the Vatican that Romania was ready to restore its broken relations with the Holy See, in exchange for access to its archives and a one-billion-dollar, interest-free loan for 25 years. (Romania’s relations with the Vatican had been severed in 1951, when Moscow accused the Vatican’s *nunciatura* in Romania of being an undercover CIA front and closed its offices. The *nunciatura* buildings in Bucharest had been turned over to the DIE, and now housed a foreign language school.) The access to the Papal archives, I was to tell the Vatican, was needed in order to find historical roots that would help the Romanian government publicly justify its change of heart toward the Holy See. The billion (no, that is not a typographical error), I was told, had been introduced into the game to make Romania’s alleged turnabout more plausible. “If there’s one thing those monks understand, it’s money,” Sakharovsky remarked.

My earlier involvement in the exchange of Bishop Pacha for the two DIE officers did indeed open doors for me. A month after receiving the KGB’s instructions, I had my first contact with a Vatican representative. For secrecy reasons that meeting — and most of the ones that followed — took place at a hotel in Geneva, Switzerland. There I was introduced to an “influential member of the diplomatic corps” who, I was told, had begun his career working in the Vatican archives. His name was Agostino Casaroli, and I would soon learn that he was truly influential. On the spot this monsignor gave me access to the Vatican archives, and soon three young DIE undercover officers posing as Romanian priests were digging around in the papal archives. Casaroli also agreed “in principle” to Bucharest’s demand for the interest free loan, but he said the Vatican wished to place certain conditions on it. (Up until 1978, when I left Romania for good, I was still negotiating for that loan, which had gone down to \$200 million.)

During 1960-62, the DIE succeeded in pilfering hundreds of documents connected in any way with Pope Pius XII out of the Vatican Archives and the Apostolic Library. Everything was immediately sent to the KGB via special courier. In actual fact, no incriminating material against the pontiff ever turned up in all those secretly photographed documents. Mostly they were copies of personal letters and transcripts of meetings and speeches, all couched in the routine kind of diplomatic language one would expect to find. Nevertheless, the

KGB kept asking for more documents. And we sent more.

THE KGB PRODUCES A PLAY

In 1963, General Ivan Agayants, the famous chief of the KGB's disinformation department, landed in Bucharest to thank us for our help. He told us that "Seat-12" had materialized into a powerful play attacking Pope Pius XII, entitled *The Deputy*, an oblique reference to the pope as Christ's representative on earth. Agayants took credit for the outline of the play, and he told us that it had voluminous appendices of background documents put together by his experts with help from the documents we had purloined from the Vatican. Agayants also told us that *The Deputy's* producer, Erwin Piscator, was a devoted Communist who had a longstanding relationship with Moscow. In 1929 he had founded the Proletarian Theater in Berlin, then sought political asylum in the Soviet Union when Hitler came to power, and a few years later had "emigrated" to the United States. In 1962 Piscator had returned to West Berlin to produce *The Deputy*.

Throughout my years in Romania, I always took my KGB bosses with a grain of salt, because they used to juggle the facts around so as to make Soviet intelligence the mother and father of everything. But I had reason to believe Agayants's self-serving claim. He was a living legend in the field of *desinformatsiya*. In 1943, as the *rezident* in Iran, Agayants launched the disinformation report that Hitler had set up a special team to kidnap President Franklin Roosevelt from the American Embassy in Tehran during the Allied Summit to be held there. As a result, Roosevelt agreed to be headquartered in a villa within the "safety" of the Soviet Embassy compound, which was guarded by a large military unit. All the Soviet personnel assigned to that villa were undercover intelligence officers who spoke English, but, with few exceptions, they kept that a secret so as to be able to eavesdrop. Even given the limited technical capabilities of that day, Agayants was able to provide Stalin with hourly monitoring reports on the American and British guests. That helped Stalin obtain Roosevelt's tacit agreement to let him retain the Baltic countries and the rest of the territories occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939-40. Agayants was also credited with having induced Roosevelt to use the familiar "Uncle Joe" for Stalin at that summit. According to what Sakharovsky told us, Stalin was more elated over that than he was even over his territorial gains. "The cripple's mine!" he reportedly exulted.

Just a year before *The Deputy* was launched, Agayants had pulled off another masterful coup. He fabricated out of whole cloth a manuscript designed to persuade the West that, deep down, the Kremlin thought highly of the Jews; this was published in Western Europe, to great popular success, as a book entitled *Notes for a Journal*. The manuscript was attributed to Maxim Litvinov, né Meir Walach, the former Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, who had been fired in 1939 when Stalin purged his diplomatic apparatus of Jews in preparation for signing his "non-aggression" pact with Hitler. (The Stalin-Hitler Non-Aggression Pact was signed on August 23, 1939, in Moscow. It had a secret Protocol that partitioned Poland between the two signatories and gave the Soviets a free hand in Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Bessarabia, and Northern Bukovina.) This Agayants book was so flawlessly counterfeited that Britain's most prominent historian on Soviet Russia, Edward Hallet Carr, was totally convinced of its authenticity and in fact wrote an introduction for it. (Carr had authored a ten-volume *History of Soviet Russia*.)

The Deputy saw the light in 1963 as the work of an unknown West German named Rolf Hochhuth, under the title *Der Stellvertreter. Ein christliches Trauerspiel* (The Deputy, a Christian Tragedy). Its central thesis was that Pius XII had supported Hitler and encouraged him to go ahead with the Jewish Holocaust. It immediately ignited a huge controversy around Pius XII, who was depicted as a cold, heartless man more concerned about Vatican properties than about the fate of Hitler's victims. The original text presents an eight-hour play, backed by some 40 to 80 pages (depending on the edition) of what Hochhuth called "historical

documentation.” In a newspaper article published in Germany in 1963, Hochhuth defends his portrayal of Pius XII, saying: “The facts are there — forty crowded pages of documentation in the appendix to my play.” In a radio interview given in New York in 1964, when *The Deputy* opened there, Hochhuth said, “I considered it necessary to add to the play a historical appendix, fifty to eighty pages (depending on the size of the print).” In the original edition, the appendix is entitled “*Historische Streiflichter*” (historical sidelights). *The Deputy* has been translated into some 20 languages, drastically cut and with the appendix usually omitted.

Before writing *The Deputy*, Hochhuth, who did not have a high school diploma (*Abitur*), was working in various inconspicuous capacities for the Bertelsmann publishing house. In interviews he claimed that in 1959 he took a leave of absence from his job and went to Rome, where he spent three months talking to people and then writing the first draft of the play, and where he posed “a series of questions” to one bishop whose name he refused to reveal. Hardly likely! At about that same time I used to visit the Vatican fairly regularly as an accredited messenger from a head of state, and I was never able to get any talkative bishop off into a corner with me — and it was not for lack of trying. The DIE illegal officers we infiltrated into the Vatican also encountered almost insurmountable difficulties in penetrating the Vatican secret archives, even though they had airtight cover as priests.

During my old days in the DIE, when I would ask my personnel chief, General Nicolae Ceausescu (the dictator’s brother), to give me a rundown of the file on some subordinate, he would always ask me, “For promotion or demotion?” During its first ten years of life, the *Deputy* leaned toward the Pope’s demotion. It generated a flurry of books and articles, some accusing and some defending the pontiff. Some went so far as to lay the blame for the Auschwitz atrocities on the pope’s shoulders, some meticulously tore Hochhuth’s arguments to shreds, but all contributed to the huge attention this rather stilted play received in its day. Today, many people who have never heard of *The Deputy* are sincerely convinced that Pius XII was a cold and evil man who hated the Jews and helped Hitler do away with them. As KGB chairman Yury Andropov, the unparalleled master of Soviet deception, used to tell me, people are more ready to believe smut than holiness.

FALSEHOODS UNDERMINED

Toward the mid 1970s, *The Deputy* started running out of steam. In 1974 Andropov conceded to us that, had we known then what we know today, we would never have gone after Pope Pius XII. What now made the difference was newly released information showing that Hitler, far from being friendly with Pius XII, had in fact been plotting against him.

Just a few days before Andropov’s admission, the former supreme commander of the German SS (*Schutzstaffel*) squadron in Italy during World War II, General Friedrich Otto Wolff, had been released from jail and confessed that in 1943 Hitler had ordered him to abduct Pope Pius XII from the Vatican. That order had been so hush-hush that it never turned up after the war in any Nazi archive. Nor had it come out at any of the many debriefings of *Gestapo* and SS officers conducted by the victorious Allies. In his confession Wolff claimed that he had replied to Hitler that his order would take six weeks to carry out. Hitler, who blamed the pope for the overthrow of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, wanted it done immediately. Eventually Wolff persuaded Hitler that there would be a great negative response if the plan were implemented, and the Führer dropped it.

It was also during 1974 that Cardinal Mindszenty published his book *Memoirs*, which describes in agonizing detail how he was framed in Communist Hungary. On the evidence of fabricated documents, he was charged

with “treason, misuse of foreign currency, and conspiracy,” offenses “all punishable by death or life imprisonment.” He also describes how his falsified “confession” then took on a life of its own. “It seemed to me that anyone should at once have recognized this document as a crude forgery, since it is the product of a bungling, uncultivated mind,” the cardinal writes. “But when I subsequently went through foreign books, newspapers, and magazines that dealt with my case and commented on my ‘confession,’ I realized that the public must have concluded that the ‘confession’ had actually been composed by me, although in a semiconscious state and under the influence of brainwashing... [T]hat the police would have published a document they had themselves manufactured seemed altogether too brazen to be believed.” Furthermore, Hanna Sulner, the Hungarian handwriting expert used to frame the cardinal, who had escaped to Vienna, confirmed that she had forged Mindszenty’s “confession.”

A few years later, Pope John Paul II started the process of sanctifying Pius XII, and witnesses from all over the world have compellingly proved that Pius XII was an enemy, not a friend, of Hitler. Israel Zoller, the chief rabbi of Rome between 1943-44, when Hitler took over that city, devoted an entire chapter of his memoirs to praising the leadership of Pius XII. “The Holy Father sent by hand a letter to the bishops instructing them to lift the enclosure from convents and monasteries, so that they could become refuges for the Jews. I know of one convent where the Sisters slept in the basement, giving up their beds to Jewish refugees.” On July 25, 1944, Zoller was received by Pope Pius XII. Notes taken by Vatican secretary of state Giovanni Battista Montini (who would become Pope Paul VI) show that Rabbi Zoller thanked the Holy Father for all he had done to save the Jewish community of Rome — and his thanks were transmitted over the radio. On February 13, 1945, Rabbi Zoller was baptized by Rome’s auxiliary bishop Luigi Traglia in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli. In gratitude to Pius XII, Zoller took the Christian name of Eugenio (the pope’s name). A year later Zoller’s wife and daughter were also baptized.

David G. Dalin, in *The Myth of Hitler’s Pope: How Pope Pius XII Rescued Jews From the Nazis*, published a few months ago, has compiled further overwhelming proof of Eugenio Pacelli’s friendship for the Jews beginning long before he became pope. At the start of World War II, Pope Pius XII’s first encyclical was so anti-Hitler that the Royal Air Force and the French air force dropped 88,000 copies of it over Germany.

Over the past 16 years, the freedom of religion has been restored in Russia, and a new generation has been struggling to develop a new national identity. We can only hope that President Vladimir Putin will see fit to open the KGB archives and set forth on the table, for all to see, how the Communists maligned one of the most important popes of the last century.

—Lt. General Ion Mihai Pacepa is the highest-ranking intelligence officer ever to have defected from the former Soviet bloc. His book *Red Horizons* has been republished in 27 countries.

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