

Not Hitler's Pope At All

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On Monday, January 27, to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day and the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the office of Permanent Observer of the Holy See at the United Nations empaneled a symposium of Catholic and Jewish scholars and researchers to present on a controversial theme, the role of the Catholic Church and specifically of Pope Pius XII, during the Holocaust. Pius XII and the Catholic Church have been accused of at best turning a blind eye to the mass murder in the name of self-preservation and at worst being directly complicit in the Holocaust itself.

In a three-hour discussion, these scholars provided detailed presentations and arguments stressing the depth of the Pope's antipathy towards the Nazi regime and actions taken by him and the Church to protect European Jews. Gary Krupp, the Jewish founder of the Pave the Way Foundation which seeks to promote peace between major religions, opened discussions by recounting how he had become involved in researching a book that drew on interviews done in the 1970s with General Karl Wolff who was Reichsfuehrer Heinrich Himmler's deputy. These interviews shed light on a cunning Nazi plot to send provocateurs to attack the Holy See, whereupon German soldiers would stage a rescue but the Pope would be killed in the operation. Horrified German commanders eventually persuaded Hitler not to go forward.

In further research, Krupp found to his surprise that despite Pope Pius' poor contemporary reputation that the opposite was true during his pontificate and immediately after his death. In fact, Pius and the church were widely praised at the time by prominent Jews like Albert Einstein and the chief rabbis of Rome, Egypt, Denmark, and other countries. Upon Pius' death in 1958, Israeli Foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister) Golda Meir sent the following message: "...When fearful martyrdom came to our people in the decade of Nazi terror the voice of the Pope was raised for its victims...We mourn a great servant of peace."

Eugenio Pacelli, in fact, was quite the opposite of a Nazi sympathizer even before his elevation to the Bishop of Rome. Dr. Michael Hesemann, professor of history and author of *The Pope and the Holocaust*, recounted a

young Pacelli's close friendship with a Jew, his denunciation of Nazism as early as the 1920s, calling Hitler a 'fundamentally wicked person' and considering Nazism a greater evil than communism. In fact, Pius XII offered to finance the evacuation of as many as two hundred thousand Jews, but countries willing to take in such substantial numbers could not be found.

Perhaps the most fascinating presentation of the day was given by Dr. Ronald Rychlak, professor of Law at the University of Mississippi, who detailed a spectacularly successful Soviet smear campaign called Seat 12 which commenced shortly after the Pope's death in 1958. This effectively introduced doubt into the intentions and actions of Pius XII during World War II. According to Rychlak, after World War II, the atheistic Soviet government found itself with dominion over deeply Christian nations in Central and Eastern Europe. In order to advance their communist doctrine, Soviet leaders looked to undermine the Church. The best way, of course, would be to associate it with the Nazis.

They couldn't smear Pius XII who was still alive and not under their control but among

the prominent prelates the Soviets besmirched was the Croatian Archbishop Aloysius Stepinac – an outspoken anti-Nazi – who was convicted in a show trial of being a Nazi collaborator. Pius XII was the Pope who elevated Stepinac to Cardinal. Stepanic, for whom the high school in White Plains is named, died in prison, likely slowly poisoned by his captors.

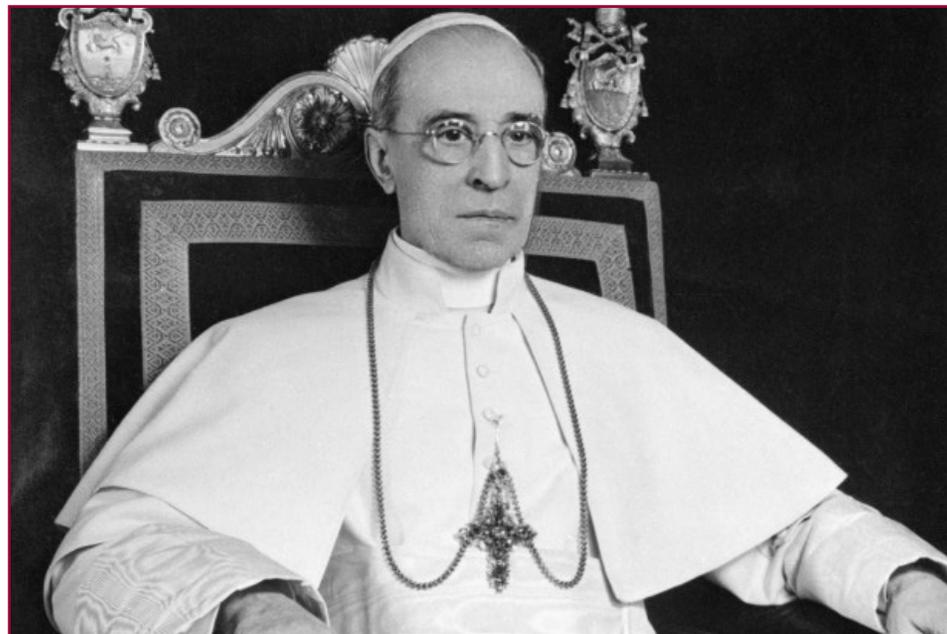
Rychlak recounted that a few years after Pius died a little known German playwright named Rolf Hochhuth wrote a play called 'The Deputy' which was prima facie 'fiction' but cast a callous wartime pope who was clearly meant to be Pius. Translated into English, it played prominently in the West End and on Broadway to rapturous reviews. Its influence initiated a vicious erosion of Pius' reputation. The proof that 'The Deputy' was, in fact, insidious libel produced by Soviet intelligence to undermine the Catholic Church was finally uncovered many years later in the testimony of Romanian Lieutenant-General Ion Pacepa.

Pacepa, who defected in 1978, was the highest-ranking Soviet bloc officer to ever defect. Pacepa recounted how he was personally involved in writing the play and getting it

produced in the West using Soviet intelligence assets including, ironically, Ramparts, an influential Catholic magazine that had fallen under the control of the KGB. Moreover, Pacepa laid bare in his book *Red Horizons* how Soviet intelligence fed material to the Italian writer Carlo Falconi who wrote *The Silence of Pius XII*. Material from this book was later widely used by British author John Cornwell who produced the scandalously titled *Hitler's Pope* in 1999. When confronted later with exculpatory evidence, Cornwell partially recanted his thesis though he still insisted that the Pope could have done more.

Mark Riebling, author of *Church of Spies*, filled in more of the Pius story by detailing how the Pope was involved, primarily as an intermediary between the Allies and anti-Hitler Germans, in three plots to assassinate Hitler including the most famous one, Operation Valkyrie. His closest advisors also secretly met with the intrepid German cleric Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Tomb of St. Peter to discuss how to remove Hitler. Bonhoeffer, a vocal opponent of the Nazis who refused to be silenced, was executed weeks before Germany surrendered.

While some continue to criticize Pius XII for not openly condemning Hitler and Nazi Germany, perhaps due in large part to the Soviet propaganda machine, the evidence that Pope Pius XII worked tirelessly against Hitler and saved Jews, including several thousand Roman Jews in October 1943, is compelling. Vatican Archivist Dr. Johan Ickx who presumably had access to documents not yet available to the general public presented a meticulous accounting of Roman Jews present in the city on October 16, 1943 (according to impeccably detailed German records), the date of the infamous raid where 1300 Jews were arrested. Ickx credits the church for getting 20% of those arrested released. According to Ickx, written testimonies confirm that it was on the basis of "the order of the Pope to give shelter in the monasteries to those persecuted" that 4200 Jews were hidden in convents and monasteries around the Holy City and saved. The entire presentation can be viewed on the UN's website.



Victim of Russian propaganda? Pope Pius XII has had a reputation of being a Nazi sympathizer. New information shows that may not be the case.

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