

# HIGH TREASON

## Pius XII, Stauffenberg and the Conspiracy against Hitler

By *Michael Hesemann*

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Not even half a year after the failed assassination attempt, Adolf Hitler learned the whole truth about the plot of July 20, 1944. He read it in a report prepared by SS General Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Chief of the SS "Sicherheitsdienst" (SD) (Security Service), on November 29, 1944. This report had a volume of 27 typewritten pages and contained all what about 400 SD and Gestapo (Secret State Police) officers who had interrogated the arrested conspirators under severe torture, had learned about the foreign contacts of the Anti-Hitler opposition.

The German Resistance movement, Hitler learned, was formed after he invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938. General Ludwig Bekh, Chief of Staff of the Wehrmacht (German Army) resigned and hoped that the entire Staff would follow his example, but it didn't. Instead, Colonel (later promoted to General) Hans Oster and Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Head of the "Abwehr" (Counterintelligence), planned a coup d'état. But when England and France accepted the German territorial demands and signed the Munich Treaty, they put their plans on hold for a while. Instead of the expected escalation, the result of the "appeasement" policy was a domestic strengthening of Hitler. Only after the Declaration of War by France and England, following Hitler's invasion of Poland, they saw a second chance to prepare a change of the regime. But for this purpose, it was necessary to contact the other warring nations. Therefore, a constellation came up which was indeed unique in history. To quote the Kaltenbrunner-report:

*"Canaris and Oster established a connection to the Pope with the help of the former Munich Lawyer Dr. Joseph Mueller, who was 'built into' the Abwehr solely for this purpose ... Müller got, during the War, namely in the fall of 1939, into contact with the Jesuit Father Leiber, the personal secretary of the Pope. From Leiber he received a lot of information on the position of the Pope and the enemy powers. He discussed possibilities of a peace and learned by Leiber that the condition for a peace agreement with Germany would be a change of the regime."*<sup>1</sup>

After the war, the official Vatican newspaper "L'Osservatore Romano" confirmed the Pope's involvement into these talks: *"Following the principle to try anything possible which might serve the matter of peace in any way, the Holy Father Pius XII accepted at that time, when he was contacted by important political and military circles in Germany, to deliver some questions of this circles about their intentions and the conditions for peace to the other warring side as well as the answers this side believed to give on these questions:"*<sup>2</sup>

Although written in the typical, unexcited and downplaying language of the Vatican organ, it confirmed nothing less than a stunning fact: Pope Pius XII participated into a conspiracy against Hitler, which eventually ended in the heroic but unsuccessful plot of July 20, 1944!

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobsen, Hans-Adolf (Ed.): Spiegelbild einer Verschwörung, Stuttgart 1984, p. 509

<sup>2</sup> Osservatore Romano, February 11/12, 1946

This surprising fact is extremely well-documented. It was confirmed by nobody else but Dr. Josef Müller himself, who became a Co-Founder of the Christian Social Union, Bavaria's most important political party, after the war. The son of a Franconian farmer, known under the nickname "Ochsensepp" (Ox-Joe) since he once looked after the oxen of his father, studied and made a career as a lawyer in Munich after World War I. Before he passed away in 1979, he had not only released his autobiography ("Up to the Final Consequence", 1967). He also testified under oath in the beatification process of Pope Pius XII, files I was allowed to review during the research for my book "The Pope Who Defied Hitler" (2008). Documents released by the London Foreign Office confirm each detail of his "Roman Talks".

His story begun with a fellow citizen of Munich, Dr. Wilhelm Schmidhuber, the honorary consul of Portugal. He was called up to an exercise of the German Army Reserve, when the general mobilization was ordered on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939. The consul was ordered to serve as a report officer under General Sperrle in Nuremberg. But Schmidhuber, at the same time a compolitan playboy and a devout Roman Catholic, disliked the perspective of a military career. He used his connections in the Munich society and contacted an old friend, Lt. Col. Teschemacher, Head of the Munich Counterintelligence Division. Teschemacher was a devout Catholic, too, and had never joined the Nazi Party. Schmidhuber offered him to use his consulate for Intelligence purposes, as long as he could stay in Munich. But Teschemacher was more interested to learn if Schmidhuber had any contacts in the Vatican. The Consul replied in the positive. Now the Counterintelligence got interested in him.

Lt. Col. Teschemacher sent Schmidhuber to the counterintelligence Headquarters in Berlin to present himself to Col. Hans Oster, at the same time a personal friend and the recruiting officer of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the mastermind of the plot. Once again, Schmidhuber referred to his contacts in the Vatican. Would he be willing to travel to Rome in a Counterintelligence mission?, he was asked. "Sure", replied Schmidhuber, but he needed to be accompanied by a friend. This friend was Dr. Josef Müller.<sup>3</sup> Müller got infamous in Nazi-circles when he defended Catholic monasteries and orders on court against the harassments by the Nazis. Therefore, Canaris and Oster considered him trustworthy. The Admiral invited him to Berlin where Oster asked him frankly, if he would join "a Christian initiative against the dictatorship" of Adolf Hitler: "We both agree", Oster continued, "that it was a crime to start this war. We want to stand together in the service of Christ and restore the peace among the nations." Müller was more than willing to join their circle.

When he met Admiral Canaris the next day, he learned more about this conspiracy. Both, Catholics and Protestants within the highest ranks of the Army were disgusted and ashamed by Hitler's harassments of the Church, his violations of international law and the brutality of the SS in the occupied Poland. Canaris frankly called the "Führer" "the biggest criminal of all times". The Counterintelligence, he revealed, at the same time was the center of the German military opposition against Hitler. It was headed by General Beck, who was supposed to form a provisorical government after a coup d'Etat, following the assassination of Hitler. Müller was asked "due to his contacts in the Vatican" to contact the Pope and to find out if he would be willing to support the plot and serve as an intermediary to England and France. The plan was to agree to an immediate armistice after the military takeover: "*We have to prove to the world that there is another, a decent Germany!*"<sup>4</sup> Only the Pope had the integrity to convince the Allied Powers that there is a serious group of German patriots who have nothing in common with the Nazi criminals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Konstantin Prinz von Bayern, Der Papst, Munich 1952, p. 119 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Josef Müller, Bis zur letzten Konsequenz, Munich 1967, p. 16

<sup>5</sup> ibd., p. 81

Müller knew that he would risk his life when he joined the resistance. But he did not hesitate a moment. He was immediately convinced of the personal integrity of Oster and Canaris and knew too well that only killing Hitler would stop the millionfold bloodshed. He just followed his conscience as a Christian, even if it would require high treason. Therefore he gave his word of honour to join the common cause “up to the final consequence”, what could mean the gallow.<sup>6</sup>

Canaris officially recruited him for the Counterintelligence, ordered to “clean up” his records and sent both, Schmidhuber and Oster, to Rome, officially to report on defeatistic tendencies in Italy. From then on, Schmidhuber remained in the background and Müller took over the initiative.

Müller, himself a devout Catholic, indeed has excellent contacts to the Vatican. He once joined the political advisor of the Archbishop of Munich, Michael Cardinal Faulhaber, on several visits to Rome, he was married in the Grottoe of St. Peter by a German prelate, Msgr. Schönhöffer, and became the economical advisor of the Secretary of State, Cardinal Pacelli, since March 1939 Pope Pius XII. Through Schönhöffer, Müller contacted Prelate Ludwig Kaas, a personal friend of the Pope, who once was the head of the Catholic “Zentrum” Party and searched for asylum in the Vatican after Hitler’s takeover. Kaas introduced Müller to Fr. Robert Leiber, a German Jesuit, who was the personal secretary of Pius XII.

In the presence of Fr. Leiber, Müller for the first time revealed that German Generals and the Counterintelligence planned a military coup d’Etat against Hitler. Their aims were the end of the war, the restoration of the German democracy and the withdrawal of the troops from Poland and Czechoslovakia. The conspirers knew that Hitler had immense sympathy within the population and that they had to worry about the outbreak of a civil war. Therefore before they acted they needed at least the assurance of England that the Western powers would recognize the new government, would be willing to end the war and would not take any advantage from the vulnerability of Germany during the transition period. Their ideal intermediary would be the Pope. General Beck trusted him unconditionally after he had met him in the 1920ies, when he still was the Apostolic Nuntius in Berlin. Would Pius XII be willing to contact the British and receive guarantees from the Chamberlain government for them?<sup>7</sup>

When Pius XII learned about the plot by Fr. Leiber, he asked for a night to think about it. The next morning he unconditionally agreed. It was the most risky decision of his Pontificate. Not only the Vatican historian Fr. Robert Graham SJ was stunned when he learned about it: “*How could the Pope take part in such a risky operation?*”<sup>8</sup> Even Fr. Leiber did not understand his decision; he always believed that Pius XII “*went much too far*”<sup>9</sup> on this, but he had to follow his orders. He “*told me through Fr. Leiber that not as the Head of the Vatican State, but as a Pope his conscience not only allows but obliged him to offer his life and the Church for peace*”, Müller stated in his affidavit.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Josef Müller, Affidavit to the Delegate Judge in the Beatification Process of Pope Pius XII, Munich, March 27, 1972, p. 4

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Kaltefleiter, Werner/Oschwald, Hanspeter, Spione im Vatikan, Munich 2006, p. 137

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, S. 152

<sup>10</sup> Müller, Affidavit of March 27, 1972, p. 2

Indeed the consequences would have been terrible if Hitler had learned about the conspiracy and the participation of the Pope in this time. He would have ended the Concordate, probably arrested the Catholic hierarchy as part of the plot, condemned them to death for high treason. At the same time, Mussolini could have seen the act of the Pope as a violation of the Lateran treaty which obliged the Vatican to political neutrality. Even an occupation of the Vatican by the Fascists would have been possible. But Pius XII was willing to take any risk, considering the plot the only way to restore the peace and to defeat Hitler. *“My Roman Talks are an obvious evidence how dearly the Holy Father wished to restore a Germany of law, order and peace, which ceased to be the nightmare of its neighbors – a Germany without Hitler”*<sup>11</sup>, Müller wrote in his autobiography.

On November 6, 1939, Müller was told that Pius XII. was willing “to do all in his powers”. It was his own, sole decision; not even his Secretary of State was informed or consulted.

Three weeks later, Msgr. Kaas met the British Vatican Ambassador Francis D’Arcy Osborne and informed him about the plans. On January 12, 1940, Pius XII received him in a private audience. Another, secret meeting took place four weeks later. During the following weeks, secret messages went back and forward between Berlin, the Vatican and London. The German Military Opposition wanted to learn about Great Britain’s condition for peace. The answer was precise: if they manage to overthrow Hitler before he starts an offensive in the West. This would be possible, given that the British conditions for a peace are acceptable, Berlin replied. Müller sent the conditions, the Military Opposition found them acceptable. But nothing happened, neither a coup d’Etat nor an offensive in the West. Was the German Resistance Movement just an invention, a trick by the Nazis to paralyze the British readiness to defense? London wanted the names of the conspirers, Pius XII had promise not to reveal them, but mentioned that “a German General” belonged to them.

In fact, the German Military Opposition had overestimated their possibilities. Pius XII was angry, felt exposed. The British lost any confidence in these negotiations. Müller returned to Munich, Schmidhuber started a last attempt to win back the trust of the Allies. The Counterintelligence had learned the date of the planned invasion in the West, May 10, 1940, 4.00 AM. Immediately the Vatican warned France and the neutral states, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland. But after consulting London, Brussels decided to ignore information, claiming that similar warnings in the past had already proven to be unreliable. Eventually the Benelux countries were surprised by the German invasion, although they were warned beforehand by the Vatican.<sup>12</sup>

On the very same day when the secret information turned out to be accurate, the German Military Opposition had to realize it had no chance anymore. The reaction of the German population on Hitler’s military success in the “Blitzkrieg” was euphorical, he was celebrated by the Nazi press as the revisor of the Versailles Treaty of 1919. In London, Winston Churchill’s war cabinet formed the new government, reacting with deep silence on all exploratory talks regarding peace with Germany. Only three years later, after the Battle of Stalingrad, the Military Opposition saw another opportunity for a coup d’etat. Now the same circle which collaborated with the Pope in 1939, was joined by the men of the plot of July 20, 1944, first of all Henning von Tresckow and Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg.

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<sup>11</sup> Müller 1967, p. 84

<sup>12</sup> von Bayern 1952, p. 124

Once again, in February 1943, Josef Müller was sent to Rome on behalf of General Beck, to inform Pope Pius XII about an “imminent overthrow in Germany”<sup>13</sup> and ask him, once again, to negotiate an acceptable peace treaty for Germany. After both assassination attempts on Hitler planned by General von Tresckow went wrong, Müller was arrested in April 1943, Oster – meanwhile promoted to General – and Admiral Canaris were put under house arrest. Shortly before July 20, 1944, while in a Gestapo prison, Müller was informed that he would be released soon, to travel to Rome on behalf of the plotters to negotiate a peace treaty with the help of the Pope. But unfortunately the assassination attempt, followed by “Operation Valkyre”, failed, too, and its protagonists were executed by the Nazis.

Only Josef Müller survived miraculously, although he was sent to the Concentration Camps Buchenwald and Dachau after he plot. Since he was already imprisoned on July 20, 1944, a participation in the plot could not be proven. But it is also possible that Hitler only spared him for what he called “the final solution of the Church problem”. After the “Endsieg”, he planned a major strike against the Catholic hierarchy, claiming they were involved into High Treason, the collaboration with the enemy powers and the support of the Military opposition.

Although the plot of the German resistance failed, the bravery of the Pope, according to the eminent historian Harold Deutsch “one of the most stunning events in the modern history of the papacy”<sup>14</sup>, reveals a lot about his character. He was anything but the coward, Rolf Hochhuth made of him in his controversial play “The Deputy”, and even less John Cornwell’s “Hitler’s Pope”. Instead, the German historian Erich Kosthorst is right with his comment: “When the Pope ignored all justified concerns and lent through his authority the best possible credence to the German Military Opposition, than this is a statesmanlike act of the highest rank. It does not loses its importance just because it did not create the peace it was supposed to serve.”<sup>15</sup> Also the men of the plot of July 20, 1944 did not lack of heroism just because their attempt failed so tragically.

Indeed, the secret connection between the Pope and the German resistance delivers a plausible explanation for the biggest secret of his pontificate, his heavily criticized “silence”, the cover of apparent neutrality, which he upheld until the end of World War II.

In 2004, a remarkable book was published in the United States. “Inside the Vatican of Pius XII” contains the memories of the American diplomat Harold H. Tittmann jr., who moved into the Vatican and kept the contact between the US government and the Holy See during World War II. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945, after a speech by the Pope to the College of Cardinals, during which Pius XII had severely castigated National Socialism, the diplomat met Müller, who, after his liberation from the Concentration Camp, had travelled to Rome. A long conversation followed and was summarized two days later by Tittmann in a memorandum to US Ambassador Myron Taylor. It states:

*“Dr. Müller said that during the war, his anti-nazi organization in Germany had always been very insistent that the Pope should refrain from making any public statement singling out the Nazis and specifically condemning them and had recommended that the Pope’s remarks should be confined to generalities only. Dr. Mueller said that he was obliged to give this advice, since, if the Pope had been specific, Germans would have accused him of yielding to the promptings of foreign powers and this would have made the German Catholics even more*

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<sup>13</sup> Müller 1967, p. 160

<sup>14</sup> Kosthorst, Erich, Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler zwischen Polen- und Frankreichfeldzug, Bonn 1967

<sup>15</sup> Kaltefleiter/Oschwald 2006, p. 153

*suspected than they were and would have greatly restricted their freedom of action in their work of resistance to the Nazis.*"<sup>16</sup>

That he indeed gave this advice to Pius XII, Müller also confirmed in his autobiography: *"Again and again I stressed in Rome that it would be of highest importance not to provoke the Nazis by any thoughtless action ... Firmly I warned not to give the Nazis any cheap reason to strike."*<sup>17</sup>

The Pope obviously took the warnings of the German opposition and Christian resistance serious, sharing their urgent hope to stop the evil dictator and with him the millionfold murder of innocent victims. *"The Pope wanted nothing more urgently and dearly than a Germany liberated from Hitler and Nazism. There is no other way to explain his brave support of the German Military Opposition"*<sup>18</sup>, Müller resumed. Pius XII risked as much and even more and demonstrated the same courage as the protagonists of the plot, although most of them had to pay their heroism with their lives.

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Dr. Josef Müller



General Ludwig Beck



Admiral Wilhelm Canaris



General Hans Oster



Stauffenberg (left) and Hitler (center) on July 20, 1944

<sup>16</sup> Tittmann jr., Harold H., Inside the Vatican of Pius XII, New York 2004, p. 212 f.

<sup>17</sup> Müller 1967, p. 84 f.

<sup>18</sup> Müller 1967, p. 141