

HITLER'S POPE: The Secret History of Pius XII

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Pope Pius XII (1939-58)

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[BY JOHN CORNWELL](#)

One evening several years ago when I was having dinner with a group of students, the topic of the papacy was broached, and the discussion quickly boiled over. A young woman asserted that Eugenio Pacelli, Pope Pius XII, the Pope during World War II, had brought lasting shame on the Catholic Church by failing to denounce the Final Solution. A

young man, a practicing Catholic, insisted that the case had never been proved.

Raised as a Catholic during the papacy of Pius XII - his picture gazed down from the wall of every classroom during my childhood - I was only too familiar with the allegation. It started in 1963 with a play by a young German author named Rolf Hochhuth, *Der Stellvertreter* (The Deputy) which was staged on Broadway in 1964.

It depicted Pacelli as a ruthless cynic, interested more in the Vatican's stockholdings than in the fate of the Jews. Most Catholics dismissed Hochhuth's thesis as implausible, but the play sparked a controversy which has raged to this day.

Disturbed by the anger brought out in that dinner altercation, and convinced, as I had always been, of Pius XII's innocence, I decided to write a new defense of his reputation for a younger generation. I believed that Pacelli's evident holiness was proof of his good faith. How could such a saintly pope have betrayed the Jews? But was it possible to find a new and conclusive approach to the issue? The arguments had so far focused mainly on his wartime conduct; however, Pacelli's Vatican career had started 40 years earlier. It seemed to me that a proper investigation into Pacelli's record would require a more extensive chronicle than any attempted in the past. So I applied for access to archival material in the Vatican, reassuring those who had charge of crucial documents that I was on the side of my subject. Six years earlier, in a book entitled *A Thief in the Night*, I had defended the Vatican against charges that Pope John Paul I had been murdered by his own aides.

Two key officials granted me access to secret material: depositions under oath gathered 30 years ago to support the process for Pacelli's canonization, and the archive of the Vatican Secretariat of State, the foreign office of the Holy See. I also drew on German sources relating to Pacelli's activities in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s, including his dealings with Adolf Hitler in 1933. For months on end I ransacked Pacelli's files, which dated back to 1912, in a windowless dungeon beneath the Borgia Tower in Vatican City. Later I sat for several weeks in a dusty office in the Jesuit headquarters, close to St. Peter's Square in Rome, mulling over a thousand pages of transcribed testimony given under oath by those who had known Pacelli well during his lifetime,

including his critics.

By the middle of 1997, I was in a state of moral shock. The material I had gathered amounted not to an exoneration but to an indictment more scandalous than Hochhuth's. The evidence was explosive. It showed for the first time that Pacelli was patently, and by the proof of his own words, anti-Jewish. It revealed that he had helped Hitler to power and at the same time undermined potential Catholic resistance in Germany. It showed that he had implicitly denied and trivialized the Holocaust, despite having reliable knowledge of its true extent. And, worse, that he was a hypocrite, for after the war he had retrospectively taken undue credit for speaking out boldly against the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

In the "Holy Year" of 1950, a year in which many millions of pilgrims flocked to Rome to catch a glimpse of Pacelli, he was at the zenith of his papacy. This was the Pius people now in their mid-50s and older remember from newsreels and newspaper photographs. He was 74 years old and still vigorous. Six feet tall, stick thin at 125 pounds, light on his feet, regular in habits, he had hardly altered physically from the day of his coronation 11 years earlier. He had beautiful tapering hands, a plaintive voice, large dark eyes and an aura of holiness. It was his extreme pallor that first arrested those who met him. His skin "had surprisingly transparent effect," observed the writer Gerrado Pallenberg, "as if reflecting from the inside a cold, white flame." His charisma was stunning. "His presence radiated a benignity, calm and sanctity that I have certainly never before sensed in any human being." recorded the English writer James Lees-Milne. "I immediately fell head over heels in love with him. I was so affected I could scarcely speak without tears and was conscious that my legs were trembling."

But there was another side to his character, little known to the faithful. Although he was a man of selfless, monklike habits of prayer and simplicity, he was a believer in the absolute leadership principle. More than any other Vatican official of the century, he had promoted the modern ideology of autocratic papal control, the highly centralized, dictatorial authority he himself assumed on March 2, 1939, and maintained until his death in October 1958. There was a time before the advent of modern communications when Catholic authority was widely distributed, in the collective decisions of the church's councils and in collegial power-sharing between the Pope and the bishops. The absolutism of the modern papacy is largely an invention of the late 19th

century It developed rapidly in the first decades of this century in response to the perception of the centrifugal breakup of the church under an array of contemporary pressures: materialism, increasing sexual freedom, religious skepticism, and social and political liberties. From his young manhood on, Pacelli played a leading role in shaping the conditions and scope of modern papal power.

Eugenio Pacelli was born in Rome in 1876, into a family of church lawyers who served the Vatican. He had an older sister and brother and a younger sister. His parents, devout Catholics, shared an apartment in central Rome with his grandfather, who had been a legal adviser to Pius IX, the longest-serving Pope in history. There was only one small brazier to supply heat for the whole family, even in the depths of winter. Eugenio was a modest youth, who never appeared before his siblings unless he was fully dressed in a jacket and tie. He would always come to the table with a book, which he would read after having asked the family's permission. From an early age he acted out the ritual of the Mass, dressed in robes supplied by his mother. He had a gift for languages and a prodigious memory. He was spindly and suffered from a "fastidious stomach." He retained a youthful piety all his life. Politically and legally, however, he was capable of great subtlety and cunning.

The Pacelli's were fiercely loyal to the injured merit of the papacy. From 1848, the Popes had progressively lost to the emerging nation-state of Italy their dominions, which had formed, since time immemorial, the midriff of the Italian peninsula. Six years before Eugenio's birth, the city of Rome itself had been seized, leaving the papacy in crisis. How could the Popes regard themselves as independent now that they were mere citizens of an upstart kingdom? Eugenio's grandfather and father believed passionately that the Popes could once again exert a powerful unifying authority over the church by the application of ecclesiastical and international law. In 1870, at a gathering in Rome of a preponderance of the world's bishops, known as the First Vatican Council, the Pope was dogmatically declared infallible in matters of faith and morals. He was also declared the unchallenged primate of the faithful. The Pope may have lost his temporal dominion, but spiritually he was solely in charge of his universal church.

During the first two decades of this century, papal primacy and infallibility began to creep even beyond the ample boundaries set by the First Vatican Council. A powerful legal instrument transformed the 1870

primacy dogma into an unprecedented principle of papal power. Eugenio Pacelli, by then a brilliant young Vatican lawyer, had a major part in the drafting of that instrument, which was known as the Code of Canon Law.

Pacelli had been recruited into the Vatican in 1901, at the age of 24, to specialize in international affairs and church law. Pious, slender, with dark luminous eyes, he was an instant favorite. He was invited to collaborate on the reformulation of church law with his immediate superior, Pietro Gasparri, a world-famous canon lawyer. Packaged in a single manual, the Code of Canon Law was distributed in 1917 to Catholic bishops and clergy throughout the world. According to this code, in the future all bishops would be nominated by the Pope; doctrinal error would be tantamount to heresy; priests would be subjected to strict censorship in their writings; papal letters to the faithful would be regarded as infallible (in practice if not in principle); and an oath would be taken by all candidates for the priesthood to submit to the sense as well as the strict wording of doctrine as laid down by the Pope.

But there was a problem. The church had historically granted the dioceses in the provincial states of Germany a large measure of local discretion and independence from Rome. Germany had one of the largest Catholic populations in the world, and its congregation was well educated and sophisticated, with hundreds of Catholic associations and newspapers and many Catholic universities and publishing houses. The historic autonomy of Germany's Catholic Church was enshrined in ancient church-state treaties known as concordats.

Aged 41 and already an archbishop, Pacelli was dispatched to Munich as papal nuncio, or ambassador, to start the process of eliminating all existing legal challenges to the new papal autocracy. At the same time, he was to pursue a Reich Concordat, a treaty between the papacy and Germany as a whole which would supersede all local agreements and become a model of Catholic church-state relations. A Reich Concordat would mean formal recognition by the German government of the Pope's right to impose the new Code of Canon Law on Germany's Catholics. Such an arrangement was fraught with significance for a largely Protestant Germany. Nearly 400 years earlier, in Wittenberg, Martin Luther had publicly burned a copy of Canon Law in defiance of the centralized authority of the church. It was one of the defining moments of the Reformation, which was to divide Western Christendom into Catholics and Protestants.

In May 1917, Pacelli set off for Germany via Switzerland in a private railway compartment, with an additional wagon containing 60 cases of special foods for his delicate stomach. The Pope at that time, Benedict XV, was shocked at this extravagance, but Pacelli had favored status as the Vatican's best diplomat. Shortly after he settled in Munich, he acquired a reputation as a vigorous relief worker. He traveled through war-weary Germany extending charity to people of all religions and none. In an early letter to the Vatican, however he revealed himself to be less than enamored of Germany's Jews. On September 4, 1917. Pacelli informed Pietro Gaspam, who had become cardinal secretary of state in the Vatican -- the equivalent of foreign minister and prime minister -- that a Dr. Werner, the chief rabbi of Munich, had approached the nunciature begging a favor. In order to celebrate the festival of Tabernacles, beginning on October 1, the Jews needed palm fronds, which normally came from Italy. But the Italian government had forbidden the exportation, via Switzerland, of a stock of palms which the Jews had purchased and which were being held up in Como. "The Israelite Community," continued Pacelli, "are seeking the intervention of the Pope in the hope that he will plead on behalf of the thousands of German Jews." The favor in question was no more problematic than the transportation of Pacelli's 60 cases of food-stuffs had been a few months earlier. Pacelli informed Gaspam that he had warned the rabbi that "wartime delays in communication" would make things difficult. He also told Gaspam that he did not think it appropriate for the Vatican "to assist them in the exercise of their Jewish cult." His letter went by the slow route overland in the diplomatic bag. Gaspatti replied by telegram on September 18 that he entirely trusted Pacelli's "shrewdness," agreeing that it would not be appropriate to help Rabbi Werner. Pacelli wrote back on September 28, 1917, informing Gasparri that he had again seen the Rabbi, who "was perfectly convinced of the reasons I had given him and thanked me warmly for all that I had done on his behalf." Pacelli had done nothing except thwart the rabbi's request. The episode, small in itself, belies subsequent claims that Pacelli had a great love of the Jewish religion and was always motivated by its best interests.

Eighteen months later he revealed his antipathy toward the Jews in a more blatantly anti-Semitic fashion when he found himself at the center of a local revolution as Bolshevik groups struggled to take advantage of the chaos in postwar Munich. Writing to Gasparri, Pacelli described the

revolutionaries and their chief, Eugen Levien in their headquarters in the former royal palace. The letter has lain in the Vatican secret archive like a time bomb until now: "The scene that presented itself at the palace was indescribable. The confusion totally chaotic, the filth completely nauseating; soldiers and armed workers coming and going; the building, once the home of a king, resounding with screams, vile language, profanities. Absolute hell. An army of employees were dashing to and fro, giving out orders, waving bits of paper, and in the midst of all this, a gang of young women, of dubious appearance, Jews like all the rest of them, hanging around in all the offices with provocative demeanor and suggestive smiles. The boss of this female gang was Levien's mistress, a young Russian woman, a Jew and a divorcee, who was in charge. And it was to her that the nunciature was obliged to pay homage in order to proceed. This Levien is a young man, about 30 or 35, also Russian and a Jew. Pale, dirty, with vacant eyes, hoarse voice, vulgar, repulsive, with a face that is both intelligent and sly."

This association of Jewishness with Bolshevism confirms that Pacelli, from his early 40s, nourished a suspicion of and contempt for the Jews for political reasons. But the repeated references to the Jewishness of these individuals, along with the catalogue of stereotypical epithets deploring their physical and moral repulsiveness, betray a scorn and revulsion consistent with anti-Semitism. Not long after this, Pacelli campaigned to have black French troops removed from the Rhineland, convinced that they were raping women and abusing children - even though an independent inquiry sponsored by the U.S. Congress, of which Pacelli was aware, proved this allegation false. Twenty-three years later, when the Allies were about to enter Rome, he asked the British envoy to the Vatican to request of the British Foreign Office that no Allied colored troops would be among the small number that might be garrisoned in Rome after the occupation.

Pacelli spent 13 years in Germany attempting to rewrite the state Concordats one by one in favor of the power of the Holy See and routinely employing diplomatic blackmail. Germany was caught up in many territorial disputes following the redrawing of the map of Central Europe after the First World War. Pacelli repeatedly traded promises of Vatican support for German control of disputed regions in return for obtaining terms advantageous to the Vatican in Concordats. The German government's official in charge of Vatican affairs at one point recorded the "ill feeling" prompted by Pacelli's "excessive demands."

Both Catholics and Protestants in Germany resisted reaching an agreement with Pacelli on a Reich Concordat because the nuncio's concept of a church-state relationship was too authoritarian. In his negotiations, Pacelli was not concerned about the fate of non-Catholic religious communities or institutions, or about human rights. He was principally preoccupied with the interests of the Holy See. Nothing could have been better designed to deliver Pacelli into the hands of Hitler later, when the future dictator made his move in 1933.

In June 1920, Pacelli became nuncio to all of Germany, with headquarters in Berlin as well as in Munich, and immediately acquired a glittering reputation in diplomatic circles. He was a favorite at dinner parties and receptions, and he was known to ride horses on the estate of a wealthy German family. His household was run by a pretty young nun from southern Germany named Sister Pasqualina Lehnert. Pacelli's sister Elisabetta, who battled with the nun for Pacelli's affections, described Pasqualina as "scaltrissima"-- extremely cunning. In Munich it had been rumored that he cast more than priestly eyes on this religious housekeeper. Pacelli insisted that a Vatican investigation into this "horrible calumny" be conducted at the highest level, and his reputation emerged unbesmirched.

Meanwhile, he had formed a close relationship with an individual named Ludwig Kaas. Kaas was a representative of the solidly Catholic German Center Party, one of the largest and most powerful democratic parties in Germany. Though it was unusual for a full-time politician, he was also a Roman Catholic priest. Five years Pacelli's junior, dapper, bespectacled, and invariably carrying a smart walking stick, Kaas, known as "the prelate," became an intimate collaborator of Pacelli's on every aspect of Vatican diplomacy in Germany. With Pacelli's encouragement, Kaas eventually became the chairman of the Center Party, the first priest to do so in the party's 60-year history. Yet while Kaas was officially a representative of a major democratic party, he was increasingly devoted to Pacelli to the point of becoming his alter ego.

Sister Pasqualina stated after Pacelli's death that Kaas, who "regularly accompanied Pacelli on holiday" was linked to him in "adoration, honest love and unconditional loyalty." There were stories of acute jealousy and high emotion when Kaas became conscious of a rival affection in Pacelli's secretary, the Jesuit Robert Leiber, who was also German.

Kaas was a profound believer in the benefits of a Reich Concordat, seeing a parallel between papal absolutism and the FÜHRER-PRINZIP, the Fascist leadership principle. His views coincided perfectly with Pacelli's on church-state politics, and their aspirations for centralized papal power were identical. Kaas's adulation of Pacelli, whom he put before his party, became a crucial element in the betrayal of Catholic democratic politics in Germany.

In 1929, Pacelli was recalled to Rome to take over the most important role under the Pope, Cardinal Secretary of State. Sister Pasqualina arrived uninvited and cunningly, according to Pacelli's sister, and along with two German nuns to assist her, took over the management of his Vatican residence. Almost immediately Kaas, although he was still head of the German Center Party, started to spend long periods--months at a time --in Pacelli's Vatican apartments. Shortly before Pacelli's return to Rome, his brother, Francesco had successfully negotiated on behalf of Pius XI, the current Pope, a concordat with Mussolini as part of an agreement known as the Lateran Treaty. The rancor between the Vatican and the state of Italy was officially at an end. A precondition of the negotiations had involved the destruction of the parliamentary Catholic Italian Popular Party. Pius XI disliked political Catholicism because he could not control it. Like his predecessors, he believed that Catholic party politics brought democracy into the church by the back door. The result of the demise of the Popular Party was the wholesale shift of Catholics into the Fascist Party and the collapse of democracy in Italy. Pius XI and his new secretary of state, Pacelli, were determined that no accommodation be reached with Communists anywhere in the world - this was the time of persecution of the church in Russia, Mexico, and later Spain -but totalitarian movements and regimes of the right were a different matter.

Hitler, who had enjoyed his first great success in the elections of September 1930, was determined to seek a treaty with the Vatican similar to that struck by Mussolini, which would lead to the disbanding of the German Center Party. In his political testament, *Mein Kampf*, he had recollected that his fear of Catholicism went back to his vagabond days in Vienna. The fact that German Catholics, politically united by the Center Party, had defeated Bismarck's Kulturkampf- the "culture struggle" against the Catholic Church in the 1870s--constantly worried him. He was convinced that his movement could succeed only if political

Catholicism and its democratic networks were eliminated.

Hitler's fear of the Catholic Church was well grounded. Into the early 1930s the German Center Party, the German Catholic bishops, and the Catholic media had been mainly solid in their rejection of National Socialism. They denied Nazis the sacraments and church burials, and Catholic journalists excoriated National Socialism daily in Germany's 400 Catholic newspapers. The hierarchy instructed priests to combat National Socialism at a local level whenever it attacked Christianity. The Munich-based weekly *Der Gerade Weg* (The Straight Path) told its readers, "Adolf Hitler preaches the law of lies. You who have fallen victim to the deceptions of one obsessed with despotism, wake up!"

The vehement front of the Catholic Church in Germany against Hitler, however, was not at one with the view from inside the Vatican--a view that was now being shaped and promoted by Eugenio Pacelli.

In 1930 the influential Catholic politician Heinrich Brüning, a First World War Veteran, became the leader of a brief new government coalition, dominated by the majority Socialists and the Center Party. The country was reeling from successive economic crises against the background of the world slump and reparations payments to the Allies. In August 1931, Brüning visited Pacelli in the Vatican, and the two men quarreled. Brüning tells in his memoirs how Pacelli lectured him, the German chancellor, on how he should reach an understanding with the Nazis to "form a right-wing administration" in order to help achieve a Reich Concordat favorable to the Vatican. When Brüning advised him not to interfere in German politics, Pacelli threw a tantrum. Brüning parting shot that day was the ironic observation- chilling in hindsight-- that he trusted that "the Vatican would fare better at the hands of Hitler ... than with himself, a devout Catholic."

Brüning was right on one score. Hitler proved to be the only chancellor prepared to grant Pacelli the sort of authoritarian concordat he was seeking. But the price was to be catastrophic for Catholic Germany and for Germany as a whole.

After Hitler came to power in January 1933, he made the concordat negotiations with Pacelli a priority. The negotiations proceeded over six months with constant shuttle diplomacy between the Vatican and Berlin. Hitler spent more time on this treaty than on any other item of foreign

diplomacy during his dictatorship.

The Reich Concordat granted Pacelli the right to impose the new Code of Canon Law on Catholics in Germany and promised a number of measures favorable to Catholic education, including new schools. In exchange, Pacelli collaborated in the withdrawal of Catholics from political and social activity. The negotiations were conducted in secret by Pacelli, Kaas, and Hitler's deputy chancellor, Franz von Papen, over the heads of German bishops and the faithful. The Catholic Church in Germany had no say in setting the conditions.

In the end, Hitler insisted that his signature on the concordat would depend on the Center Party's voting for the Enabling Act, the legislation that was to give him dictatorial powers. It was Kaas, chairman of the party but completely in thrall to Pacelli, who bullied the delegates into acceptance. Next, Hitler insisted on the "voluntary" disbanding of the Center Party, the last truly parliamentary force in Germany. Again, Pacelli was the prime mover in this tragic Catholic surrender. The fact that the party voluntarily disbanded itself, rather than go down fighting, had a profound psychological effect, depriving Germany of the last democratic focus of potential noncompliance and resistance: In the political vacuum created by its surrender, Catholics in the millions joined the Nazi Party, believing that it had the support of the Pope. The German bishops capitulated to Pacelli's policy of centralization, and German Catholic democrats found themselves politically leaderless.

After the Reich Concordat was signed, Pacelli declared it an unparalleled triumph for the Holy See. In an article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican-controlled newspaper, he announced that the treaty, indicated the total recognition and acceptance of the church's law by the German state. But Hitler was the true victor and the Jews were the concordat's first victims. On July 14, 1933, after the initialing of the treaty, the Cabinet minutes record Hitler as saying that the concordat had created an atmosphere of confidence that would be "especially significant in the struggle against international Jewry." He was claiming that the Catholic Church had publicly given its blessing, at home and abroad, to the policies of National Socialism, including its anti-Semitic stand. At the same time, under the terms of the concordat, Catholic criticism of acts deemed political by the Nazis, could now be regarded as "foreign interference." The great German Catholic Church, at the insistence of Rome, fell silent. In the future all complaints against the

Nazis would be channeled through Pacelli. There were some notable exceptions, for example the sermons preached in 1933 by Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, the Archbishop of Munich, in which he denounced the Nazis for their rejection of the Old Testament as a Jewish text.

The concordat immediately drew the German church into complicity with the Nazis. Even as Pacelli was granted special advantages in the concordat for German Catholic education, Hitler was trampling on the educational rights of Jews throughout the country. At the same time, Catholic priests were being drawn into Nazi collaboration with the attestation bureaucracy, which established Jewish ancestry. Pacelli, despite the immense centralized power he now wielded through the Code of Canon Law, said and did nothing. The attestation machinery would lead inexorably to the selection of millions destined for the death camps.

As Nazi anti-Semitism mounted in Germany during the 1930's, Pacelli failed to complain, even on behalf of Jews who had become Catholics, acknowledging that the matter was a matter of German internal policy. Eventually, in January 1937, three German cardinals and two influential bishops arrived at the Vatican to plead for a vigorous protest over Nazi persecution of the Catholic Church, which had been deprived of all forms of activity beyond church services. Pius XI at last decided to issue an encyclical, a letter addressed to all the faithful of the world. Written under Pacelli's direction, it was called *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Deep Anxiety), and it was a forthright statement of the plight of the church in Germany. But there was no explicit condemnation of anti-Semitism, even in relation to Jews who had converted to Catholicism. Worse still, the subtext against Nazism (National Socialism and Hitler were not mentioned by name) was blunted by the publication five days later of an even more condemnatory encyclical by Pius XI against Communism.

The encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, though too little and too late, revealed that the Catholic Church all along had the power to shake the regime. A few days later, Hermann Göring, one of Hitler's closest aides and his commander of the *Luffwaffe*, delivered a two-hour harangue to a Nazi assembly against the Catholic clergy. However, Roman centralizing had paralyzed the German Catholic Church and its powerful web of associations. Unlike the courageous grass-roots activism that

had combated Bismarck's persecutions in the 1870s, German Catholicism now looked obediently to Rome for guidance. Although Pacelli collaborated in the writing and the distribution of the encyclical, he quickly undermined its effects by reassuring the Reich's ambassador in Rome. "Pacelli received me with decided friendliness," the diplomat reported back to Berlin, "and emphatically assured me during the conversation that normal and friendly relations with us would be restored as soon as possible."

In the summer of 1938, as Pius XI lay dying, he became belatedly anxious about anti-Semitism throughout Europe. He commissioned another encyclical, to be written exclusively on the Jewish question. The text, which never saw the light of day, has only recently been discovered. It was written by three Jesuit scholars, but Pacelli presumably had charge of the project. It was to be called *Humani Generis Unitas* (The Unity of the Human Race). For all its good intentions and its repudiation of violent anti-Semitism, the document is replete with the anti-Jewishness that Pacelli had displayed in his early period in Germany. The Jews, the text claims, were responsible for their own fate. God had chosen them to make way for Christ's redemption, but they denied and killed him. And now, "blinded by their dream of worldly gain and material success," they deserved the "worldly and spiritual ruin" that they had brought down upon themselves.

The document warns that that to defend the Jews as "Christian principles and humanity" demand could involve the unacceptable risk of being ensnared by secular politics--not least an association with Bolshevism. The encyclical was delivered in the fall of 1938 to the Jesuits in Rome, who sat on it. To this day we do not know why it was not completed and handed to Pope Pius XI. For all its drawbacks, it was a clear protest against Nazi attacks on Jews and so might have done some good. But it appears likely that the Jesuits, and Pacelli, whose influence as secretary of state of the Vatican was paramount since the Pope was moribund, were reluctant to inflame the Nazis by its publication. Pacelli, when he became pope, would bury the document deep in the secret archives.

On February 10, 1939, Pius XI died, at the age of 81. Pacelli, then 63, was elected Pope by the College of Cardinals in just three ballots, on March 2. He was crowned on March 12, on the eve of Hitler's march into Prague. Between his election and his coronation he held a crucial

meeting with the German cardinals. Keen to affirm Hitler publicly, he showed them a letter of good wishes which began, "To the Illustrious Herr Adolf Hitler." Should he, he asked them, style the Führer "Most Illustrious"? He decided that that might be going too far. He told the cardinals that Pius XI had said that keeping a papal nuncio in Berlin "conflicts with our honor." But his predecessor, he said, had been mistaken. He was going to maintain normal diplomatic relations with Hitler. The following month, at Pacelli's express wish, Archbishop Cesare Orsenigo, the Berlin nuncio, hosted a gala reception in honor of Hitler's 50th birthday. A birthday greeting to the Führer from the bishops of Germany would become an annual tradition until the war's end.

Pacelli's coronation was the most triumphant in a hundred years. His style of papacy, for all his personal humility, was unprecedentedly pompous. He always ate alone. Vatican bureaucrats were obliged to take phone calls from him on their knees. When he took his afternoon walk, the gardeners had to hide in the bushes. Senior officials were not allowed to ask him questions or present a point of view.

As Europe plunged toward war Pacelli cast himself in the role of judge of judges. But he continued to seek to appease Hitler by attempting to persuade the Poles to make concessions over Germany's territorial claims. After Hitler's invasion of Poland, on September 1, 1939, he declined to condemn Germany, to the bafflement of the Allies. His first public statement, the encyclical known in the English-speaking world as *Darkness over the Earth*, was full of papal rhetoric and equivocations.

Then something extraordinary occurred, revealing that whatever had motivated Pacelli in his equivocal approach to the Nazi onslaught in Poland did not betoken cowardice or a liking for Hitler. In November 1939, in deepest secrecy, Pacelli became intimately and dangerously involved in what was probably the most viable plot to depose Hitler during the war.

The plot centered on a group of anti-Nazi generals, committed to returning Germany to democracy. The coup might spark a civil war, and they wanted assurances that the West would not take advantage of the ensuing chaos. Pius XII agreed to act as go-between for the plotters and the Allies. Had his complicity in the plot been discovered it might have proved disastrous for the Vatican and for many thousands of German clergy. As it happened, leaders in London dragged their feet,

and the plotters eventually fell silent. The episode demonstrates that, while Pacelli seemed weak to some, pusillanimity and indecisiveness were hardly in his nature.

Pacelli's first wartime act of reticence in failing to speak out against Fascist brutality occurred in the summer of 1941, following Hitler's invasion of Yugoslavia and the formation of the Catholic and Fascist state of Croatia. In a wave of appalling ethnic cleansing, the Croat Fascist separatists, known as the Ustashe, under the leadership of Ante Pavelic, the Croat Führer, embarked on a campaign of enforced conversions, deportations, and mass extermination targeting a population of 2.2 million Serb Orthodox Christians and a smaller number of Jews and Gypsies.

According to the Italian writer Carlo Falconi, as early as April, in a typical act of atrocity, a band of Ustashe had rounded up 331 Serbs. The victims were forced to dig their own graves before being hacked to death with axes. The local priest was forced to recite the prayers for the dying while his son was chopped to pieces before his eyes. Then the priest was tortured. His hair and beard were torn off, his eyes were gouged out. Finally he was skinned alive. The very next month Pacelli greeted Pavelic at the Vatican.

Throughout the war, the Croat atrocities continued. By the most recent scholarly reckoning, 487,000 Orthodox Serbs and 27,000 Gypsies were massacred; in addition, approximately 30,000 out of a population of 45,000 Jews were killed. Despite a close relationship between the Ustashe regime and the Catholic bishops, and a constant flow of information about the massacres, Pacelli said and did nothing. In fact, he continued to extend warm wishes to the Ustashe leadership. The only feasible explanation for Pacelli's silence was his perception of Croatia as a Catholic bridgehead into the East. The Vatican and the local bishops approved of mass conversion in Croatia (even though it was the result of fear rather than conviction), because they believed that this could spell the beginning of a return {?} of the Orthodox Christians there to papal allegiance. Pacelli was not a man to condone mass murder, but he evidently chose to turn a blind eye on Ustashe atrocities rather than hinder a unique opportunity to extend the power of the papacy.

Pacelli came to learn of the Nazi plans to exterminate the Jews of

Europe shortly after they were laid in January 1942. The deportations to the death camps had begun in December 1941 and would continue through 1944. All during 1942, Pacelli received reliable information on the details of the Final Solution, much of it supplied by the British, French, and American representatives resident in the Vatican. On March 17, 1942, representatives of Jewish organizations assembled in Switzerland sent a memorandum to Pacelli via the papal nuncio in Bern, cataloguing violent anti-Semitic measures in Germany and in its allied and conquered territories. Their plea focused attention on Slovakia, Croatia, Hungary, and unoccupied France, where, they believed, the Pope's intervention might yet be effective. Apart from an intervention in the case of Slovakia, where the president was Monsignor Josef Tiso, a Catholic priest, no papal initiatives resulted. During the same month, a stream of dispatches describing the fate of some 90,000 Jews reached the Vatican from various sources in Eastern Europe. The Jewish organizations' long memorandum would be excluded from the wartime documents published by the Vatican between 1965 and 1981.

On June 16, 1942, Harold Tittmann, the U.S. representative to the Vatican, told Washington that Pacelli was diverting himself, ostrichlike, into purely religious concerns and that the moral authority won for the papacy by Pius XI was being eroded. At the end of that month, the London Daily Telegraph announced that more than a million Jews had been killed in Europe and that it was the aim of the Nazis "to wipe the race from the European continent." The article was re-printed in The New York Times. On July 21 there was a protest rally on behalf of Europe's Jews in New York's Madison Square Garden. In the following weeks the British, American, and Brazilian representatives to the Vatican tried to persuade Pacelli to speak out against the Nazi atrocities. But still he said nothing. In September 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt sent his personal representative, the former head of U.S. Steel, Myron Taylor, to plead with Pacelli to make a statement about the extermination of the Jews. Taylor traveled hazardously through enemy territory to reach the Vatican. Still Pacelli refused to speak. Pacelli's excuse was that he must rise above the belligerent parties. As late as December 18, Francis d'Arcy Osborne, Britain's envoy in the Vatican, handed Cardinal Domenico Tardini, Pacelli's deputy secretary of state, a dossier replete with information on the Jewish deportations and mass killings in hopes that the Pope would denounce the Nazi regime in a Christmas message.

On December 24, 1942, having made draft after draft, Pacelli at last said something. In his Christmas Eve broadcast to the world on Vatican Radio, he said that men of goodwill owed a vow to bring society "back to its immovable center of gravity in divine law." He went on: "Humanity owes this vow to those hundreds of thousands who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only by reason of their nationality and race, are marked for death or gradual extinction."

That was the strongest public denunciation of the Final Solution that Pacelli would make in the whole course of the war.

It was not merely a paltry statement. The chasm between the enormity of the liquidation of the Jewish people and this form of evasive language was profoundly scandalous. He might have been referring to many categories of victims at the hands of various belligerents in the conflict. Clearly the choice of ambiguous wording was intended to placate those who urged him to protest, while avoiding offense to the Nazi regime. But these considerations are over-shadowed by the implicit denial and trivialization. He had scaled down the doomed millions to "hundreds of thousands" without uttering the word "Jews," while making the pointed qualification "sometimes only by reason of their nationality or race." Nowhere was the term "Nazi" mentioned. Hitler himself could not have wished for a more convoluted and innocuous reaction from the Vicar of Christ to the greatest crime in history.

But what was Pacelli's principal motivation for this trivialization and denial? The Allies' diplomats in the Vatican believed that he was remaining impartial in order to earn a crucial role in future peace negotiations. In this there was clearly a degree of truth. But a recapitulation of new evidence I have gathered shows that Pacelli saw the Jews as alien and undeserving of his respect and compassion. He felt no sense of moral outrage at their plight. The documents show that:

1. He had nourished a striking antipathy toward the Jews as early as 1917 in Germany, which contradicts later claims that his omissions were performed in good faith and that he "loved" the Jews and respected their religion.
2. From the end of the First World War to the lost encyclical of 1938, Pacelli betrayed a fear and contempt of Judaism based on his belief that the Jews were behind the Bolshevik plot to destroy Christendom.

3. Pacelli acknowledged to representatives of the Third Reich that the regime's anti-Semitic policies were a matter of Germany's internal politics. The Reich Concordat between Hitler and the Vatican, as Hitler was quick to grasp, created an ideal climate for Jewish persecution.
4. Pacelli failed to sanction protest by German Catholic bishops against anti-Semitism, and he did not attempt to intervene in the process by which Catholic clergy collaborated in racial certification to identify Jews.
5. After Pius XI's *Mit Brennender Sorge*, denouncing the Nazi regime (although not by name), Pacelli attempted to mitigate the effect of the encyclical by giving private diplomatic reassurances to Berlin despite his awareness of widespread Nazi persecution of Jews.
6. Pacelli was convinced that the Jews had brought misfortune on their own heads: intervention on their behalf could only draw the church into alliances with forces inimical to Catholicism. Pacelli's failure to utter a candid word on the Final Solution proclaimed to the world that the Vicar of Christ was not roused to pity or anger. From this point of view, he was the ideal Pope for Hitler's unspeakable plan. His denial and minimization of the Holocaust were all the more scandalous in that they were uttered from a seemingly impartial moral high ground.

There was another, more immediate indication of Pacelli's moral dislocation. It occurred before the liberation of Rome, when he was the sole Italian authority in the city. On October 16, 1943, SS troops entered the Roman ghetto area and rounded up more than 1,000 Jews, imprisoning them in the very shadow of the Vatican.

How did Pacelli acquit himself?

On the morning of the roundup, which had been prompted by Adolf Eichmann, who was in charge of the organization of the Final Solution from his headquarters in Berlin, the German ambassador in Rome pleaded with the Vatican to issue a public protest. By this stage of the war, Mussolini had been deposed and rescued by Adolf Hitler to run the puppet regime in the North of Italy. The German authorities in Rome, both diplomats and military commanders, fearing a backlash of the Italian populace, hoped that an immediate and vigorous papal denunciation might stop the SS in their tracks and prevent further

arrests. Pacelli refused. In the end, the German diplomats drafted a letter of protest on the Pope's behalf and prevailed on a resident German bishop to sign it for Berlin's benefit. Meanwhile, the deportation of the imprisoned Jews went ahead on October 18.

When U.S. chargé d'affaires Harold Tittmann visited Pacelli that day, he found the pontiff anxious that the "Communist" Partisans would take advantage of a cycle of papal protest, followed by SS reprisals, followed by a civilian backlash. As a consequence, he was not inclined to lift a finger for the Jewish deportees, who were now traveling in cattle cars to the Austrian border bound for Auschwitz. Church officials reported on the desperate plight of the deportees as they passed slowly through city after city. Still Pacelli refused to intervene.

In the Jesuit archives in Rome, I found a secret document sworn to under oath by Karl Wolff, the SS commander in Italy. The text reveals that Hitler had asked Wolff in the fall of 1943 to prepare a plan to evacuate the Pope and the Vatican treasures to Liechtenstein.

After several weeks of investigation, Wolff concluded that an attempt to invade the Vatican and its properties, or to seize the Pope in response to a papal protest, would prompt a backlash throughout Italy that would seriously hinder the Nazi war effort. Hitler therefore dropped his plan to kidnap Pacelli, acknowledging what Pacelli appeared to ignore, that the strongest social and political force in Italy in late 1943 was the Catholic Church, and that its potential for thwarting the SS was immense.

Pacelli was concerned that a protest by him would benefit only the Communists. His silence on the deportation of Rome's Jews, in other words, was not an act of cowardice or fear of the Germans. He wanted to maintain the Nazi-occupation status quo until such time as the city could be liberated by the Allies. But what of the deported Jews? Five days after the train had set off from the Tiburtina station in Rome, an estimated 1,060 had been gassed at Auschwitz and Birkenau - 149 men and 47 women were detained for slave labor, but only 15 survived the war, and only one of those was a woman, Settimia Spizzichino, who had served as a human guinea pig of Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazi medical doctor who performed atrocious experiments on human victims. After the liberation, she was found alive in a heap of corpses.

But there was a more profound failure than Pacelli's unwillingness to

help the Jews of Rome rounded up on October 16. Pacelli's reticence was not just a diplomatic silence in response to the political pressures of the moment, not just a failure to be morally outraged. It was a stunning religious and ritualistic silence. To my knowledge, there is no record of a single public papal prayer, lit votive candle, psalm, lamentation, or Mass celebrated in solidarity with the Jews of Rome either during their terrible ordeal or after their deaths. This spiritual silence in the face of an atrocity committed at the heart of Christendom, in the shadow of the shrine of the first apostle, persists to this day and implicates all Catholics. This silence proclaims that Pacelli had no genuine spiritual sympathy even for the Jews of Rome, who were members of the community of his birth. And yet, on learning of the death of Adolf Hitler, Archbishop Adolf Bertram of Berlin ordered all the priests of his archdiocese "to hold a solemn Requiem in memory of the Führer."

There were nevertheless Jews who gave Pacelli the benefit of the doubt. On Thursday, November 29, 1945, Pacelli met some 80 representatives of Jewish refugees who expressed their thanks "for his generosity toward those persecuted during the Nazi-Fascist period." One must respect a tribute made by people who had suffered and survived, and we cannot belittle Pacelli's efforts on the level of charitable relief, notably his directive that enclosed religious houses in Rome should take in Jews hiding from the SS.

By the same token, we must respect the voice of Settimia Spizzichino, the sole Roman Jewish woman survivor from the death camps. Speaking in a BBC interview in 1995 she said. "I came back from Auschwitz on my own. . I lost my mother, two sisters and one brother. Pius XII could have warned us about what was going to happen. We might have escaped from Rome and joined the partisans. He played right into the Germans' hands. It all happened right under his nose. But he was an anti-Semitic pope, a pro-German pope. He didn't take a single risk. And when they say the Pope is like Jesus Christ, it is not true. He did not save a single child."

We are obliged to accept these contrasting views of Pacelli are not mutually exclusive. It gives a Catholic no satisfaction to accuse a Pope of acquiescing in the plans of Hitler. But one of the saddest ironies of Pacelli's papacy centers on the implications of his own pastoral self-image. At the beginning of a promotional film he commissioned about

himself during the war, called The Angelic Pastor, the camera frequently focuses on the statue of the Good Shepherd in the Vatican gardens. The parable of the good shepherd tells of the pastor who so loves each of his sheep that he will do all, risk all, go to any pains, to save one member of his flock that is lost or in danger. To his everlasting shame, and to the shame of the Catholic Church, Pacelli disdained to recognize the Jews of Rome as members of his Roman flock, even though they had dwelled in the Eternal City since before the birth of Christ. And yet there was still something worse. After the liberation of Rome, when every perception of restraint on his freedom was lifted, he claimed retrospective moral superiority for having spoken and acted on behalf of the Jews. Addressing a Palestinian group on August 3, 1946, he said, "We disapprove of all recourse to force...Just as we condemned on various occasions in the past the persecutions that a fanatical anti-Semitism inflicted on the Hebrew people." His grandiloquent self-exculpation a year after the war had ended showed him to be not only an ideal pope for the Nazis Final Solution but also a hypocrite.

The postwar period of Pacelli's papacy, through the 1950s, saw the apotheosis of the ideology of papal power as he presided over a triumphant Catholic Church in open confrontation with Communism. But it could not hold. The internal structures and morale of the church in Pacelli's final years began to show signs of fragmentation and decay, leading to a yearning for reassessment and renewal. In old age he became increasingly narrow-minded, eccentric, and hypochondriacal. He experienced religious visions, suffered from chronic hiccups, and received monkey-brain-cell injections for longevity. He had no love for, or trust in those who had to follow him. He failed to replace his secretary of state when he died and for years he declined to appoint a full complement of cardinals. He died at the age of 82 on October 9, 1958. His corpse decomposed rapidly in the autumnal Roman heat. At his lying-in-state, a guard fainted from the stench. Later, his nose turned black and fell off. Some saw in this sudden corruption of his mortal remains, a symbol of the absolute corruption of his papacy.

The Second Vatican Council was called by John XXIII who succeeded Pacelli, in 1958, precisely to reject Pacelli's monolith in preference for a collegial, decentralized, human, Christian community, the Holy Spirit, and love. The guiding metaphor of the church of the future was of a "pilgrim people of God." Expectations ran high, but there was no lack of contention and anxiety as old habits and disciplines died hard. There

were signs from the very outset that papal and Vatican hegemony would not easily acquiesce, that the Old Guard would attempt a comeback. As we approach the end of this century, the hopeful energy of the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, as it came to be called, appears to many a spent force. The church of Pius XII is reasserting itself in confirmation of a pyramidal church model: faith in the primacy of the man in the white robe dictating in solitude from the pinnacle. In the twilight years of John Paul II's long reign, the Catholic Church gives a pervasive impression of dysfunction despite his historic influence on the collapse of Communist tyranny in Poland and the Vatican's enthusiasm for entering its third millennium with a cleansed conscience.

As the theologian Professor Adrian Hastings comments, "The great tide powered by Vatican II has, at least institutionally, spent its force. The old landscape has once more emerged and Vatican II is now being read in Rome far more in the spirit of the First Vatican Council and within the context of Pius XII's model of Catholicism." A future titanic struggle between the progressives and the traditionalists is in prospect, with the potential for a cataclysmic schism, especially in North America, where a split has opened up between bishops compliant with Rome and academic Catholicism, which is increasingly independent and dissident. Pacelli, whose canonization process is now well advanced, has become the icon, 40 years after his death, of those traditionalists who read and revise the provisions of the Second Vatican Council from the viewpoint of Pacelli's ideology of papal power--an ideology that has proved disastrous in the century's history.

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Editor's Note

According to the [infallible chronology](#) of the Bible, 1958 was the end of 6,000 years of human history.