

Impolite Reflections on Pope Pius XII

by [Samuel Hux](#) (November 2022)



After Giotto's Navicella, Francesco Berretta, 1628

The only attractive thing about Eugenio Pacelli, Pope Pius the 12th, was his habit of dining. Pius dined alone, except for his cage of canaries. Pius would open the cage so that the birds exited, flew about and joined him at the table. When through with his repast, the Pope would extend his hand so that each bird would alight upon a finger and allow itself to be returned to the cage.



Pope Pius XII

And that's about it. Pius was physically unattractive; although moderately tall and lean he could have resembled a cowboy, but with a face resistant to a smile he looked so classically ascetic it is impossible to imagine him enjoying his food, and no ascetic has ever appeared appealing. Compare him with John XXIII, who had no tools to be handsome but was nonetheless enjoyable to look at as he so clearly enjoyed life. It may seem odd—it is odd—to think of masculine attractiveness and Vatican accountability at the same time. But both John Paul II and Benedict XVI—although foreign to Hollywood stereotype—were very attractive in a manly way, in large part for seeming so aggressively intelligent, as, both philosophers, they were. So I am not equating masculine appeal with matinee idol-ness.

Pius XII, on the other hand, although he wrote overly specialized encyclicals on theological minutiae, nothing approaching the consequence of John XXIII's great *Mater et Magistra* for instance, does not strike one as particularly intellectual, certainly not philosophical, simply monomaniacal

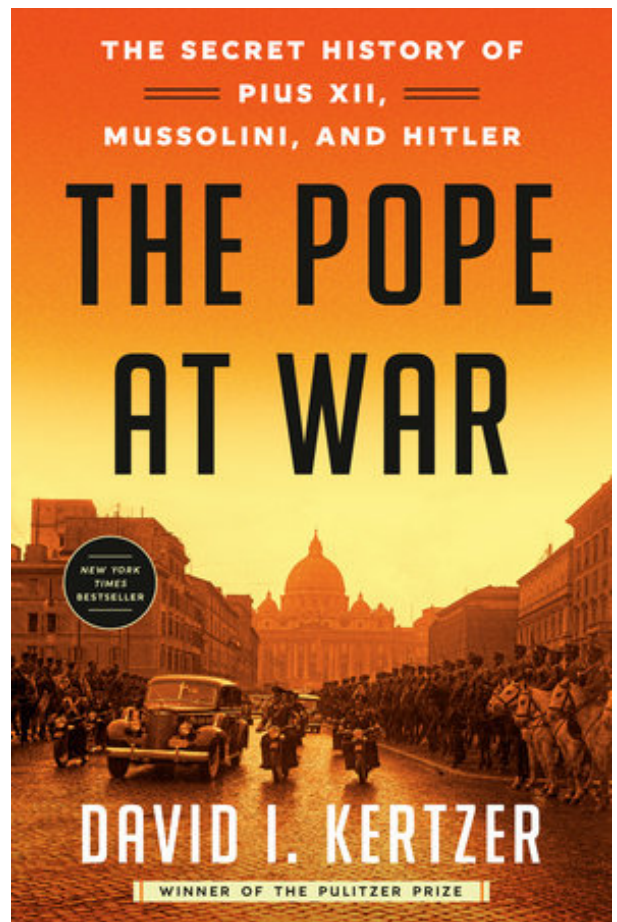
in a pragmatic way. And that finally is what is so unattractive about him. Rather than trying to protect the Faith, he was obsessed with protecting the Established Church in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. While his predecessor Pius XI despised Hitler and grew increasingly critical of Mussolini, Pacelli, as Vatican Secretary of State, tried to shut the older man up and when Pius XI died made sure a Letter he'd planned to make public died with him.

There is no reason to believe that Pacelli had any general objection to antisemitism. He really got exercised over the policy of treating Jews who had converted to Catholicism as if they had not, whether priests or lay people. This is not to suggest he was not horrified by the Holocaust, as much as he could know of it during the war, no. But it is to suggest—no, to say outright—that Pius XII was the most disappointing Pope of the 20th century. What I am saying will disappoint, maybe will anger, a close friend of mine, who over the years has defended in conversation Pius or sought mitigation. So I say, “Excuse me ‘Bo, but I can’t help it.”

For I have been reading David I. Kertzler’s *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler*, 2022 by Random House, not known for sensationalist-risky publications. The author of four previous books on Papal and Vatican subjects and University Professor of Social Science as well as Italian Studies at Brown University, Kertzler is not someone to ignore. The tone of his 600-plus page study is captured by a sentence on page 54 which could not be clearer.

“With the election of Pope Pacelli, one matter Mussolini would no longer have to worry about was the likelihood of papal protest against the Duce’s campaign against Italy’s Jews, who had been driven out of the nation’s schools and universities, and out of their jobs. No such criticism of the racial laws would ever escape the pope’s lips or pen, not in 1939, nor over the following years when they were in place.”

And the title is interesting. *The Pope at War*. When you read or hear that someone is at war, you wonder immediately, “at war with whom?” A damned good question! It certainly was not with Benito Mussolini! Nor with Adolf Hitler either. But let’s us hold on here; things get very complicated and tense.



Surrounded by Fascist Italy, in Rome no less, the Vatican, although an independent and neutral state with diplomatic representation even from states at war with Italy, was in no position to go to war with Fascism. On the basest level, as Stalin once asked, “How many divisions does the Pope have?” But we’re not talking about *that kind* of war; rather the moral propaganda war of brave and irascible Pius XI that so vexed Mussolini and annoyed Hitler. There was talk among the ecclesiastics of giving the Vatican more independence by moving it, perhaps to Portugal, but Pacelli made it clear that even in that case he would keep his residence in Rome. He was very comfortable with Fascism. The only “war” possible was with the 1938 anti-Jewish Racial Laws created by Mussolini in foolish emulation of the *Fuehrer*. But Pius XII zipped his lips, just as he avoided protesting Hitler’s laws in order to avoid direct political involvement that could endanger Catholicism in Germany. Not a brave picture any way you look at it. The Pope’s sympathetic letters to the heads of three

essentially Catholic nations invaded by Germany–Luxembourg, Belgium, and France–published in the Vatican press, so raised the wrath of the *Duce*, and at a distance of the *Fuehrer*, that Pius XII learned his lesson. Orally and in print more times than a few Pius announced that as patriots the Italian people must support Mussolini's war. Which made him a Mussolini ally, although officially a neutral.

Was there something that Pius could have been against, if not antisemitism? Of course. The Vatican, like Roman Catholicism itself, was always anti-Communist. Which put Pius in a bind. Since Germany and the Soviet Union were allies for two years, Pius could not be "at war" with Communism without being at war with the Axis. His relief must have been immense when Hitler betrayed Stalin. In any case, until Mussolini was removed from power in 1943, Pope Pius XII, and thus the Vatican, was in effect an Axis ally! If not as much as Francisco Franco was, that's because the Pope had no *División Azul*.

I have suggested above that Pius was horrified by the Holocaust. As the saying goes, "much that it mattered," which means the opposite of course, for he did nothing about it—not that he could have done much other than with words, although that would have been *something*. But when *did he know*? There has been a lot of nonsense written and spoken about when "the world" knew, but it has become increasingly obvious over the years that people knew long before the popular myth that it was a mystery until the Allied troops discovered the camps at war's end. Kertzler documents that Pius received reports from witnesses, laymen and priests, constantly and early, from Poland and Ukraine and points east before "Auschwitz" was a name to speculate about. By the end of 1942 there can be no doubt that Pius *knew*! And there is no doubt that he received countless requests from Poles and others to "intervene" with threats of excommunication and such, but to what avail? In his traditional Christmas message to the world he let that world know that "hundreds of thousands of people who, through no

fault of their own and solely because of their nation or race, have been condemned to death or progressive extinction"—although he made no mention of Jews or of Nazis! Kertzler does not say this, perhaps out of caution, but I will risk saying it for him: Pope Pius XII knew of the murder of Jews before practically anyone else except the Nazis themselves. He habitually explained that he could not speak out directly and with specifics for fear not only that such action could endanger the Church and the Catholic faithful in Germany ... but also *because it might make matters worse for the victims*. Good God Almighty! All this time Pius thought his self-perceived "neutrality" was for the good of peace.

This is not a book review. I assume that's clear. My focus is not Kertzler's, but much narrower. I am not much interested—no matter how important—in the relations between the White House and the Vatican during the war. Nor in any encouragement or its opposite King Victor Emmanuel III might have received from Pius before the royal removal of *il Duce* from power. Nor in the Pope's efforts to have Rome declared an Open City by the Allies. Etcetera, *eccetera*, *und so weiter*. However, I was thrilled to learn that Father Angelo Roncalli, later to be Papa Giovanni XXIII, tried his damndest to get Slovakian Jewish children out and to Palestine, although without success. Papa Pio was not interested. Perhaps because the president of the Nazi puppet state of Slovakia was Roman Catholic Father Jozef Tiso? My focus is clearly on how well or not Pope Pius XII lived up to his moral responsibility in the matter that the reader knows quite well by now.

With the arrest of Mussolini in the summer of 1943, and his replacement by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, the 1938 Racial Laws were "reformed" at Badoglio's instigation but with advice from the Vatican, that advice approved by Pius. *Reform* generally means change in a positive direction. Let the reader decide. The restrictions were not lifted from all Jews, but, rather, from biological Jews who had converted to Christianity and to

the offspring of mixed marriages. The restrictions still applied, as Kertzler puts it, "only to those whom the church regarded as Jews." That is to say: practicing or secular Jews. That's a reform? My exceedingly sketchy Italian does not tell me how to say "big deal!" But in Mafioso, "Fagettaboutit!"

I apologize for the irony; it's so easy to indulge it. Badoglio and the royal family were safe in the south while Pius was still in Rome, the Vatican surrounded by German forces, so the Pope still had to walk a tightrope. By innocent but dreadful happenstance the king's daughter Princess Mafalda was not with the royal family, was arrested by the Gestapo and would die at Buchenwald. No wonder if Pius did not feel safe. On the other hand, the reformulation of the racial laws was Badoglio's responsibility, and Pius could have advised their abrogation. In any case, the Germans did not need Italian laws: the Nazis' murderous antisemitism was sufficient. . . as was clear when they began rounding up Auschwitz-bound Jews in German occupied Rome, including some baptized as Catholics. Berlin was pleased that the Pope refrained from any comments on the deportations. No matter that he may have approved—as apparently he did—of individual priests, nuns, and laypersons hiding Jews; his approval was not made public, as of course it could not have been anyway. Still, nonetheless ... let the reader finish the sentence. But another nonetheless yet: when the Germans finally evacuated Rome and moved north in defense of Nazi-liberated Mussolini's Italian Social Republic, some 40 Jews, only a few of them baptized, survived for being hid in Vatican City. Blessings on some morally brave Catholic souls.

I remind the reader again that this is my own quirky essay, heavily dependent on Kertzler's book but not a formal review of it. Because ... I am not a professional or professorial historian (except in that small academic branch of History of Ideas): I am an amateur, which does not mean not serious but simply for the love of. *Were* this a review I would tell you that Kertzler—although thorough about Mussolini's

crimes—presents him oddly almost sympathetically. (Well, I just did that, didn't I?) But I won't explain how.

Professorially speaking, I am a retired philosopher, not of the Anglo-American systematic sort but of the old-fashioned sort focusing on issues like beauty (Aesthetics) and morals (Ethics), not in George Santayana's class but convinced as he was that beauty and morality are cousins.

There is so much to praise in Kertzler's book. Not least is the thoroughness of his research. It is *impossible* to reject Kertzler's conclusions. But, I am sorry to say, it is not *improbable*. For the conclusions are devastating. This is not because the tone is condemnatory. It is not. There is not the least bit of pope-bashing roughly associated with Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* and polemical works inspired by it. The tone is always relaxed and cool. Kertzler simply lays out the facts with impeccable and honestly unanswerable documentation. So that the last few chapters including an epilogue are stunning. Kertzler never loses his temper, so to speak, at the often intellectually dishonest white-washing of Pius XII's career even by churchmen who should know better, both historically and morally. Nor does he lose his temper with Pius himself. But I am not David Kertzler ... and *my temper is already lost*.

There are those who think Pacelli's papacy was a success. And, of course, it was if you judge—as Kertzler ironically does—that he kept the Church and the Papacy safe from destruction by Fascism and National Socialism. That's a sort of socio-political success, but not a moral success—unless you think that morality depends primarily upon the statue of an established church alone, which only the most rabid ultramontane are going to accept.

I accept that *there was probably nothing Pius could have done* that would have altered or hindered the Holocaust. But that is different from saying *there was certainly nothing Pius could*

have done. We just do not know. What we know is that he did nothing and did not try. No public condemnation, no threat of excommunication, no nothing. Only a pained observation that hundreds and thousands of people were being killed for their nation or race, with neither the victims nor the perpetrators identified.

Of course there was a difference between Mussolini's Racial Laws making life miserable for Italian Jews and Hitler's making life a death sentence for Jews. Since Pius did not protest against the first it was not to be that he would protest against the latter. But, really, why not, since the latter was the purer evil, since the Roman Pontiff was supposed to be God's greatest champion against evil. We already know the answer to that, the answer that Pius's defenders and apologists are comfortable with: any "war" with *der Fuehrer* and/or *il Duce* could or would endanger the position of the Church in Italy and Germany, to which was/is added the puerile inanity that any strong protest might make matters worse for the Jewish victims than they already were, which no one could really believe because there was little that was worse than the already worse and worst.

Could Pius really have thought that what he did was enough? Given where and when I was brought up I am used to Protestant ministerial frauds, all those Billy Graham imitators, but it is hard to near impossible for me to think of a modern pope as a fraud, no matter the record of various medieval pontiffs. But it is easy enough to think of one as a failure. As Pius XII was a failure. No Catholic myself, I want a pope with at least the character of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Or closer home to the Catholic faith, at least the character of two martyrs, Father Maximilian Kolbe and the nun Edith Stein, both of whom died at Auschwitz. And the size of failure can be measured by the size of potential success. Name me a success that could compete with some kind of intervention against the greatest crime in modern history. What has any modern pope

done that was/is of that size? The creation of the Syllabus of Errors turns out after all to have been a negative achievement. The doctrine of papal infallibility was of large theological and ecclesiastical consequence but has been just as often rejected as embraced. I do not mean to be disrespectful, and confess an imperfect knowledge of papal history; I would be happy to hear of some papal decision or lack of decision that competes with Pius XII's.

There was something foolish and ironic about the whole affair, by which I mean about the whole fear. Pius certainly should have known that there was no danger to Catholicism from the Fascists, in spite of a small hard core of anti-clericals like the repulsive Roberto Farinacci. Whether really devout or not the Italians were Catholic in their bones, and were far more loyal to the Papacy than to *il Duce*. Pius seemed to have feared a weak rumor that when-if Hitler became master of Europe he would emasculate the Roman Catholic Church, a rumor denied up and down the Nazi power structure which on occasion had the capacity to tell the truth. There is no evidence suggesting that *Germania*, fiercely Protestant north and habitual Catholic south, was in danger of becoming a radical atheist homeland like the USSR. Yet Pius was convinced that protection from the totalitarian ideologies was purchased by silence. The only alternative to that conclusion, it seems to me, is that Pius simply did not mind that Jews were murdered and/or approved of the Jews' fates. Does anyone wish to go there?

I will not even bother to ask if Jesus would have been silent before evil. But I do have a possibly offensive question nonetheless, a question that seems not to occur to Pacelli's defenders. It will, however, take me a few minutes to get there, and I beg the reader to indulge me if I seem to be getting off the subject, which I hope one will ultimately see I am not doing.

I am not convinced that that Pius's reasons for silence are

real. I find them, rather, incomprehensible, mysterious, irrational ... as if Pius simply had no idea himself what the hell he was doing. Now I get, *apparently*, off the subject. The 19th century French "bluestocking" Madame de Stael famously opined that "to understand is to forgive," which I do not believe at all as a general truth but only as a possibility in some circumstances. A close friend, Jewish, having seen Ken Burns' *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, was still curious how Hitler could hate Jews so much. "What was his reason?" Good question—but forget it, I advised her. Leave it a horrible mystery, an abysmal irrationality. To try to understand his *reason*—a different thing from *motive*!—and, without intending it consciously, you are seeking something *rational*. And there is a danger there. For if you find something that seems convincing, for instance about the war experience, economic difficulties in postwar Germany and Austria, the conventional pervasive antisemitism of Vienna politics, the cunning of rightwing appeal to the lumpen, and so on and so forth, you could end up thinking, "Oh, I see: he did have reasonable reasons after all, don't y' see." If you share that not so brilliant conclusion with others you become without intention a sort of defender-explainer of a mentally and spiritually deranged piece of human dreck. Forget about it. Sometimes utter contempt is morally preferable to the desire to "understand." An analogy follows.

If one dismisses the notion that Pius XII's actions and inactions in relation to the injuries and murder of the Jews was rationally inexplicable and a mystery and argues instead that the Pope had to be silent about the Jews in order to insure the safety of the established Roman Catholic Church and individual Catholics in the Nazi and Fascist states, which is the classical defense of Pius XII's silence, how is that different—except stylistically—from saying the following, which no defender of papal silence seems to grasp he or she is saying? *To insure that safety by that silence, Pacelli judged it necessary, and forgivable, to sacrifice the Jews of Europe.*

Pray tell me how in clear honesty to avoid that conclusion.

If there is a Hell, and if sins are punished in Hell, the soul of Eugenio Pacelli should be rotting in Hell.

[Table of Contents](#)

Samuel Hux is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Moment*, *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Midstream*, *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others. His new book is [Neither Trumpets nor Violins](#) (with Theodore Dalrymple and Kenneth Francis)

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)