

## PIUS XII and the Holocaust

Jonathan Gorsky

The role of the Vatican during the Holocaust years remains highly controversial. The argument is focused upon the alleged failure of Pope Pius XII to speak out on behalf of the victims of the Holocaust and explicitly condemn Nazism.

Supporters of the Pope point to thousands of Jews rescued by Catholic institutions in Rome and across Europe, as well as the endeavours of Nuncios (Papal Ambassadors) on behalf of Jews in different countries occupied by Nazi Germany. They note that in the post-war years distinguished Jewish figures expressed gratitude to the Vatican for their endeavours and a forest was planted in Israel, in memory of the Pope on his death in 1958. They argue that controversy was only stirred up when Rolf Hochuth's play, *The Representative*, appeared in 1963 and accused the Pope of complicity with Nazism, motivated by fear of the Bolshevik threat sweeping across Europe.

### Papal Critics

Papal critics point to the failure of Pius XII publicly to condemn either Nazism or the Holocaust. There was no explicit papal reference to Jewish suffering throughout the war years, nor was there clear condemnation of Nazism in the Pope's addresses. Information received by the Vatican from 1942 onwards was not disseminated, nor was direction given to bishops and the Catholic faithful, with regard to the treatment of Jews. Church efforts on behalf of Jews in the occupied countries depended on local initiative and the particular inclinations of the Nuncios, who might or might not be sympathetic. It was only late in 1944 that the Vatican responded adequately in helping to forestall the deportation of the Jews of Hungary, and throughout the war the Vatican appeared indifferent to the horrors perpetrated by a Catholic government in Croatia.

Each case requires careful analysis, for neither set of arguments is as clear cut as its protagonists maintain.

The Vatican endeavored to find places of refuge for Jews after "Kristallnacht" in November 1938, and the Pope instructed local bishops to help all who were in need at the beginning of the war.

The rescue of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust, and the opening of Catholic institutions as places of shelter, could not have occurred in the face of papal disapproval. This is especially true with regard to institutions within the confines of Rome and the Vatican. The fact of the rescue is not disputed. Although critics have maintained that some of the figures produced by papal supporters are considerably exaggerated, no one has denied the significant scale of Catholic rescue activity, and gratitude was indeed expressed by leading Jews after the war.

## Crucial Testimony

But compilations of Jewish post-war responses in Vatican documents have tended to ignore the crucial testimonies of Gerhardt Riegner and Rudolf Vrba. Riegner manned the office of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva throughout the war years and endeavoured to convey information about the Holocaust to the Allies. He was more closely involved with the Vatican than the Jewish figures whom Pius XII's supporters tend to cite. Rudolf Vrba escaped from Auschwitz in April 1944 and, like Riegner, made desperate efforts to solicit help in the free world. He too had important contact with the Vatican. Riegner maintains that the Vatican was unhelpful until 1944, and Vrba, who had a meeting in that year with a papal diplomat, which lasted six hours, claims that none of his material was ever circulated or publicized.

The argument adduced by Pius XII's supporters that the papal policy commanded general assent until the Hochuth play in 1963 also requires qualification. The Pope was aware of criticism during the war, and it was not confined to Jewish spokespersons, who tended to be quite reserved. At the highest level, the French Cardinal Tisserant wanted a forthright condemnation of Nazism, and Jacques Maritain was a notable post-war critic of papal policy. Other dissenters included the leader of the Polish Government in exile and the United States representative in the Vatican. It is important to note that criticism was not only voiced by Jews, but by others who were looking for a

forthright religious stand on Nazism and German behavior in occupied Europe. It has also been claimed that the Pope himself agonized over his wartime policy and believed that he was confronted by moral dilemmas that were apparently insoluble.

The key criticism of Pius XII revolves around his 'silence', that is his failure to speak out explicitly about the Holocaust. Critics, particularly at popular level, tend to assume that the issues were straightforward and require no analysis. In consequence they have not attended to the Pope's own stated position.

### Guarded Statements

It is important to note that the Vatican strongly condemned Nazi ideology in the late '20s' and throughout the '30s'. Cardinal Pacelli, as Pius XII then was, was particularly outspoken. But even his supporters do not dispute that papal pronouncements during the war were extremely guarded.

At its strongest, the case for this policy is that explicit attacks on the Nazi regime would have had serious consequences for Catholics throughout occupied Europe, and might have made the situation even worse for Jews and anyone the Church sought to defend. The example usually cited is the reprisals taken against Catholics of Jewish origin in Holland in 1942, after an outspoken condemnation by Holland's Catholic bishops of the deportation of Dutch Jewry. Catholic institutions were able to shelter victims of Nazism, only provided their neutrality was respected by German forces.

This is a substantial argument, albeit one that has in turn been open to controversy. The Dutch example, when the bishops clearly decided where their duty lay, is not the only instance of religious protest in occupied Europe and there are equally well-known cases when no reprisals were taken, notably Cardinal von Galen's indictment of the Nazi euthanasia policy in 1941.

Pius XII's position appears to have been formulated soon after the Nazi occupation of Poland. In 1937, Cardinal Pacelli, as Pius XII then was, helped draft Mit Brennender Sorge, his predecessor's powerful critique of Nazism; and his own first encyclical, issued soon after the invasion of Poland in 1939, included a strong statement about Polish suffering, although it did not

explicitly condemn German aggression. But he was informed by some leading Polish Catholics that similar statements made over Vatican radio were leading to vicious Nazi reprisals; and the papal responses to the invasion of the Low Countries in 1940 were noticeably muted.

### Sister Pasqualina

In 1998, Sister Pasqualina, who supervised the Pope's household during the war years, claimed that the Pope had intended to write about Jewish suffering in 1942, but stopped short when he heard about the savage response to the Dutch bishops' endeavours in Holland. There is also evidence that the Pope instructed church leaders to act positively at local level, if they felt that some good could be achieved, but he appears to have believed that the consequences of a papal statement were dangerously unpredictable, as such a statement would be heard in every part of occupied Europe, regardless of particular circumstances.

Throughout the war, the Pope was determined to maintain Vatican neutrality, and in the early years he hoped to be able to negotiate peace between Germany and the Allies. The Pope was following a well-established Vatican policy in times of war, but clearly Nazism represented an unprecedented political evil, and in the circumstances of World War II, such neutrality raised complex moral issues, exacerbated by a lack of interest in Vatican mediation on the part of the belligerents. Furthermore, the policy of neutrality inhibited the Vatican's capacity to act on behalf of the victims, and might have been responsible for the obstacles encountered by Gerhardt Riegner.

Some commentators have emphasized the Papal Concordat with Hitler's Germany signed in 1933 and negotiated by Cardinal Pacelli as Papal Nuncio. Combined with the Pope's profound hostility to Bolshevism, this seems to provide damaging insight into Vatican policy, but the argument has considerable weaknesses. By the period of the Holocaust, Vatican relations with Germany were very tense, and little remained of the Concordat. Nazi intentions for the Catholic Church were made very clear in the Warthegau, a Polish territory assimilated to the Reich, where the Church was subject to

draconian legislation, as well as in Germany itself. Also, the Vatican did not recognize German territorial expansion, and offered no support for Operation Barbarossa, when Germany invaded Soviet Russia in 1941. American Catholics who had qualms about working in armament factories supplying weapons to Russia were privately reassured by the Vatican. The Roman Catholic Church indeed opposed Bolshevism, but as the Russian people had been attacked, they were entitled to defend themselves.

## Vatican Archives

Controversy in recent years has also focused on the unwillingness of the Vatican to open its wartime archives to public scrutiny. The Vatican has in fact published twelve volumes of important archive documents but only one has been translated into English - the others appear in the original languages with introductory essays in French. The material is copious and has been mined by a number of historians, notably Professors John Conway and Owen Chadwick, who drastically revised Hochuth's damning verdict on Pius XII's involvement in the 1943 deportation of 1000 Jews from Rome, but there is also material that has been used by Pius' critics. The archive documentation was edited 'in-house', by Catholic scholars selected by the Vatican, and inevitably, this has been a source of disquiet. Also the editors have been faulted for their failure to include the 1942 Riegner Memorandum, which provided the Vatican with crucial information about the Holocaust, but the material that has appeared is substantial and important.

It is important to note that we are not dependent on Vatican archival material alone for our understanding of papal policy during the war. Vatican radio transcripts and *Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, are available, as are the public speeches given by the Pope. Memoirs, diaries and diplomatic archives published by the belligerents provide vital sources of information. Carlo Falconi's examination of the papers of Croatian emissaries to the Vatican yielded material of great importance, as did his study of similar papers from Poland. (Falconi's highly critical analysis of the Croatian material has as yet elicited no satisfactory response from Vatican supporters).

The role of the Vatican in the Second World War leaves many moral dilemmas unresolved. During the war the Vatican remained neutral, and did not endorse the allied campaign. Historic Vatican policy in times of war is to remain equally available to all sides as a peacemaker. This role would be compromised by partisan support. But when an evil of the magnitude of Nazism arises, is neutrality really an option for religious leadership?

There were major Roman Catholic communities on both sides of the conflict, and from the perspective of Roman Catholic belief, the preservation of the Church is of paramount importance, for it is the decisive instrument of human salvation. But Croatia in particular exposes the dilemma that supporting Church interests might run counter to clear moral obligation in time of horrific suffering. The Catholic regime in Croatia was perceived as being of great significance for the Church, but its murderous behavior was unacceptable to religious morality. Failure to condemn this behavior obviously sent messages to the Croatian regime.

## The Ultimate Dilemma

Two clear positions do emerge from the debate about Pius XII. For his supporters, the Pope avoided making public statements because there was a strong possibility that they would expose innocent people to drastic Nazi reprisals. They emphasize that Catholic institutions rescued thousands of Jews. Papal opponents focus on the particular evil that Nazism represented and maintain that in such circumstances religious leadership must be clear, forthright and outspoken. Nazi aggression and brutality should have been explicitly condemned; Roman Catholics might have been inspired to do more for Jews and other victims of persecution, who would at least have had the comfort of knowing that the world was not indifferent to their fate. The argument exposes the dilemmas facing religious leaders who confront political tyranny; these dilemmas have much contemporary relevance in both religious and political spheres and clearly warrant further exploration.

**Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith and Irena Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000, pp. 133-137**