

## BOOK REVIEW

David I. Kertzer:

### **The Pope at War. The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler**

New York (Random House) 2022

The most remarkable thing about this book is not its content but what it omits. Because Kertzer's latest reckoning with the Vatican is anything but a "secret history," i.e., a look behind the scenes. I know what I'm talking about because I sat just a few tables away from Kertzer in the Vatican archives during the first week of March 2020 and on other occasions to review the new material on Pius XII that Pope Francis had declassified. I have read many of the documents from which he quotes excerpts in their entirety, but also those that belong to their context and which he withholds. Since 2008 I have been doing this archival research in the Vatican on behalf of the American-Interreligious Pave the Way Foundation with prominent Jewish leadership. I have discovered dozens of documents and published them in my book "The Pope and the Holocaust," which speaks a different language than Kertzer's latest work. Surprisingly, two years after the Vatican archives were opened for the pontificate of Pius XII, it contains alarmingly little that is new. Kertzer could have written it in the 1980's when Owen Chadwick's important "Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War" (1988) was published. Admittedly, Kertzer is the better narrator. The only question is why he systematically ignores two decades of Pius XII research, as a glance at his bibliography reveals. Susan Zuccotti's "Under His Very Window" (after all, from the year 2000) is considered the latest research. New works, especially those that paint a much more positive picture of the Pope of World War II, such as the books by Feldkamp, Rychlak, Doino, Tornielli, Napolitano, Krupp, and - yours truly - Michael Hesemann (my "The Pope and the Holocaust" was published in 2018 in German) are consistently ignored. His only "coup," his alleged sensational find in the Vatican archives, which at least helped Kertzer make headlines in the USA and Israel, is none. That Prince Philip of Hessen, son-in-law of the Italian King Victor Emmanuel III, not only was Hitler's liaison to Mussolini but also met Pius XII several times, has been known since 2006 at the latest, when Jonathan Petropulos' "Royals and the Reich" was published. Previously, it was mentioned several times in the Vatican's edition "Acts and Documents of the Holy See on the Second World War" and in no

way, as Kertzer claims, was it silenced and suppressed by the Holy See. Only Kertzer seriously accuses the Pope of having received the "Nazi Prince" in 1939, when he used every official and unofficial diplomatic channel to prevent the threatening outbreak of World War II, but also wanted to leave no stone unturned to protect the Catholic Church from persecution by the regime. After all, the prince offered in Hitler's name, an extension of the Concordat to the occupied territories (Austria and Bohemia), an offer that Pius XII, all diplomat, did not demonstratively refuse but made dependent on five conditions that were practically unacceptable for the Nazis. But as much as Kertzer likes to moralize, it is historically highly questionable to evaluate history retrospectively, i.e., from today's perspective. With the knowledge of 2022 or even 1945, it would have been immoral to maintain diplomatic contacts with the government of the German Reich, the murderers of six million Jews. But in 1939, no one could ever have suspected that Hitler was planning the Holocaust. Diplomacy is always the often-desperate attempt to seek dialogue instead of confrontation and to accept the lesser evil (here, meeting a representative of an anti-Christian regime) to prevent the greater evil (war, Holocaust, open persecution of the church). Who, if not the Pope, the representative of the one who proclaimed the Sermon on the Mount and preached love of one's enemies, is almost obliged to accept offers of talks from all sides to fulfill his providential role as a peacemaker? Pius XII consistently followed the example of his teacher, Pope Benedict XV, who tried to establish the Vatican as a global force for peace through strict neutrality during World War I.

But that was not a "secret history," as Kertzer claims, but, on the contrary (even if the talks with the prince were strictly confidential), Vatican politics. The secret story that Kertzer knowingly keeps silent about is a different one. When the war did break out and brought endless suffering to the Polish nation and the Jewish minority, other, much more secret talks took place in the Vatican. Since October 1939, Pius XII collaborated with the German military opposition, those officers of the Wehrmacht who wanted to overthrow Hitler and even assassinate him if necessary and asked the Pope to negotiate an armistice with the Allies if they would succeed. That Pius XII indeed informed the British about this "conspiracy against Hitler in the twilight war" (as Harvard historian Harold Deutsch called it) in the winter of 1939/40, and he later notified England, France, and the Benelux countries in advance about Hitler's invasion plans (but met with skepticism because Hitler postponed the invasion date several times), that he was regularly informed about the plans to assassinate Hitler until July 20, 1944 (Valkyrie), was either ignored or deliberately covered-up by Kertzer,

since this fact alone would ultimately call into question the image he painted of Pius XII, if not as "Hitler's Pope" then at least as a willing supporter of Mussolini and Italian fascism.

Kertzer's continuous silence on all negative statements by Eugenio Pacelli/Pius XII about Adolf Hitler - starting in 1923, when he sent his first report on "the anti-Catholic character of the Nazi uprising" to Rome or in 1925, when he described National Socialism as "probably the most dangerous heresy of our time – as well as of all his activities in favor of the Jews - beginning in 1917 when his diplomatic initiative prevented the Jewish settlers in the Holy Land from being deported and murdered by the proto-fascist Young Turks - is the real "red thread" of Kertzer's book. Instead of citing internal documents and assessments, which have been known and published for decades, he quotes almost exclusively the records of external, diplomatic communications, preferably with Mussolini's Italian fascists, as if diplomacy had ever been a legitimate source, as if the art of diplomacy lies in blunt frankness rather than cautious approach, hoping to keep the conversation going.

It is indisputable that there was an initial sympathy for Mussolini in the Vatican, but it gradually dwindled the more the "Duce" approached Adolf Hitler. This is by no means surprising. After all, Mussolini's government was the first since the capture of Rome in 1871 that was not decidedly anti-church but sought cooperation with the church. The Italian Concordat, which led to the founding of the Vatican State and turned the "prisoner in the Vatican" into an internationally operating sovereign, was a highlight in church history. Monarchy and church were two of the three pillars on which the fascist state was to be built according to its self-definition. Nor was early Italian fascism anti-Semitic; it became so only after Hitler visited Rome and the resulting alliance between the Duce and the Führer in 1938. From then on, the Vatican used its good contacts with Catholic fascists such as the foreign minister and Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Ciano, to exert a moderating influence on Hitler, the church's archenemy. At least the Vatican managed in this way to prevent Italy's Jews from being handed over to the Nazis, at least until the Duce's ejection from power in July 1943. In this way, Italy and Italian-occupied southern France became a place of refuge for Jews from all over Europe who escaped the Holocaust. This would not have been possible without the dialogue between the Church and Italian fascism. But exactly that, the ulterior motives of the church, its efforts to face an unchangeable reality and to use dialogue to prevent the worst, is something that Kertzer keeps silent about. No matter how

worn, every polite diplomatic address with him indicates an intellectual and ideological closeness.

Kertzer cannot avoid naming indisputable historical facts. For example, when he has to admit in his prologue bluntly: "Pacelli himself had no love for Hitler or the Nazis...Rather than alienate Mussolini by condemning his alliance with Hitler...it would be more effective to keep him happy and take advantage of his close bond with Hitler to convince the Führer to make peace with the Church." (xxxvi) In plain language: Hitler was at war with the Church, and the Vatican used Mussolini to induce moderation. It's one of the most honest sentences in the whole book. What a pity that Kertzer wrote it but never internalized it.

The list of concealed facts and outright false statements in Kertzer's book is so long that we must concentrate on five examples:

- On page 6, Kertzer mentions the encyclical "Mit brennender Sorge" (With burning concern), Pius XI's condemnation of National Socialism from 1937. It was Pacelli's project: he had the three most radical Hitler opponents among the German bishops, Cardinal von Faulhaber, Bishop von Galen, and Bishop Preysing, come to Rome, where Faulhaber finally produced the first draft of the encyclical. As the various versions we find in the Vatican archives with his handwritten corrections show, Pacelli significantly tightened its language. Even the title, which in Faulhaber's version was "with great concern," seemed too harmless to Pacelli; he pushed through the more dramatic "With burning concern." Nevertheless, Kertzer claims that the last 15 years of archival research had not existed: "Cardinal Pacelli, worried about antagonizing the Führer, advised against such a public protest..." The opposite is true.

- Kertzer portrays it as if Eugenio Pacelli's election as Pope was positively received by Nazis and Fascists. The opposite is true. Even before the election, the Nazi propaganda publication "Who Makes Politics in the Vatican?", published by the NSDAP's central publishing house, railed "Pacelli is ultimately responsible for the Vatican's harsh stance against the Rome-Berlin Axis. He hopes that his political system will be saved by leaning on western democracies." Goebbels commented on the Papal election in his diary as "A political pope and possibly a clever and skillfully fighting pope. So watch out!" According to Goebbels, Hitler even wanted to revoke the Concordat with the Holy See after Pacelli's election: "That will be the case with Pacelli's first combat measure." The "Berliner Morgenpost" commented that the election "was not well received in Germany, since he was always hostile to National Socialism." On the other hand, the Palestine Post, the organ of the Jewish

settlers in Palestine, commented: “The warm reactions to the election – especially in France, England and America – are not surprising when we recall the important role Pacelli played in the recent papal opposition to pernicious racial theories.” None of this is to be read in Kertzer’s book. Nor that Pacelli, since the pogrom night in November 1938, has been desperately trying to obtain visas for 200,000 German Jews to enable them to emigrate to safe overseas countries – another undeniable fact documented in the Vatican Archives but covered up by Kertzer.

- Rather boldly, Kertzer claims that Pius XII copied his motto "Opus Iustitiae Pax" (The work of justice is peace) from Mussolini, who called for "peace with justice" in his speeches (p. 147). Pacelli, who read the call to be a peacemaker in his family name, had already chosen this heraldic motto when he was ordained a bishop in 1917, eight years before Mussolini came to power. Originally, the saying comes from the Latin translation of the book of Isaiah (32:17). It is downright absurd to deduce a closeness to Mussolini or fascism and his rejection of the Versailles treaties from it, though Kertzer does.

- Kertzer's presentation about the Vatican and the Holocaust is criminally one-sided. While he laments for pages that the Vatican did not react or reacted too hesitantly to the news of the mass murder of Jews, while untruthfully claiming that the Pope was only interested in converted Jews, i.e., so-called "Catholic non-Aryans," the Vatican documents speak an entirely different language. It was not until June 2022 that the Historical Archives of the Second Section of the Vatican Secretariat of State put the documents on 2,700 requests for help from persecuted Jews to the Holy See online, which impressively bears witness to the tireless efforts of Pius XII to help people in need regardless of their religion. In around 25,000 cases, the Holy See helped Jews escape Nazi-occupied territories. Through more than 40 papal interventions in Hitler's vassal states - Vichy France, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria - hundreds of thousands of Jews were saved from deportation to the death camps. But on all these, of course, strictly confidential diplomatic efforts, many of which have been known since the 1980's through the publication of the "Acts and Documents of the Holy See on the Second World War," you will not read a single word in "The Pope at War"! Only this obvious omission of well-documented historical facts enables Kertzer to maintain the false impression of indifference to the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust by Pius XII. The opposite is true. But it was precisely these risky rescue attempts that made it necessary to act particularly cautiously on the outside. One wrong word would not only have

led to the smashing of the Catholic Church in Germany but, above all, would have destroyed any possibility to save lives instead of fruitless protests. Yes, converts of Jewish descent were often the first mentioned Vatican interventions, but this “preference” was just part of the strategy. Nobody could blame the Holy See for defending those who, by nature, are a legitimate part of the Roman shepherd's flock. If the Pope had stood up for the Jews instead, Hitler's vassals would have replied that they were none of his business. Hitler could even have exploited such an intervention for propaganda as "proof" that the Vatican was an instrument of Judaism, which he had declared Germany's archenemy and used as an excuse for further persecutions of the Church in Germany. On the other hand, if any of his vassals would exempt “baptized Jews” from the deportations, it opened the door for the next step. For example, the Vatican distributed tens of thousands of false baptism certificates in Italy and Romania to protect Jews from deportation. Indeed, Pius XII intended to save as many human lives as possible, regardless of denomination or religion. Is he to blame that, for example, after the SS raid against the Roman Jews, he managed to get 252 out of 1259 arrested Jews released because they were converts or had Christian spouses? Should he better have missed that opportunity just because there was no way to get the other 1007 released, too? Of course, Kertzer does not mention that because of Pius XII's intervention at the German town commander, General Stahel, the “razzia” was suddenly stopped four hours earlier than planned and was never continued.

- Unfortunately, this deliberate silence and suppression of historical facts are continued when Kertzer reports on the fate of the Jews of Rome. From the reactions of Pius XII on the “Judenaktion” of October 16, 1943, he only mentions the summon of the German Ambassador Ernst von Weizsäcker, against whom Cardinal Secretary of State Maglione threatened a papal protest. That Pius XII chose a second way, that he contacted the German military commander of Rome, General Stahel, through the German Father Pancratius Pfeiffer (whom Kertzer wrongly slandered as a Nazi sympathizer) and the Austrian bishop Alois Hudal, who eventually called Heinrich Himmler and got the “Judenaktion” stopped – is, once again, ignored by Kertzer. Stahel, at the request of the Pope, declared 550 Roman religious houses to be extraterritorial Vatican property and forbade German soldiers to enter them, that about 4,300 Jews survived the nine months of German occupation in these monasteries – no word about it. Once again, Kertzer ignores or conceals the results of 20 years of Pius research and considers the account of the events by the American historian Susan Zuccotti from the year 2000, long before the publication of so

many relevant documents, in other words, outdated secondary literature, to be the only relevant source. More than 6,000 of the 8,000 Roman Jews owed their survival to the Pope - but that doesn't count for Kertzer. Instead, he tries to prove the supposed disinterest by stating that Pius XII met the British envoy Osborne "on the day the Jews were being forced onto the train in Rome" and allegedly didn't mention a word about the raid on the Jews. Even when he received the American envoy Tittmann "the next day," the fate of the Jews was not worth mentioning, according to Kertzer. But here, he proves that he is a lousy historian. Had he consulted British archives, he would know that on October 31, Osborne informed his government of the Vatican's response to the deportation, verbatim: "As soon as he heard of the arrests of Jews in Rome, Cardinal Secretary of State sent for the German Ambassador and formulated some protest." His Slovak colleague Karol Sidor, who the Pope also received during these days, even added, "On the orders of the Holy Father, more than a hundred Jews were ... hidden in the Generalate of the Jesuits. Similarly, Jews and their entire families were hidden in every monastery." Only Tittmann does not mention this, in fact, he did not meet the pope, as Kertzer claims, on October 19, but already on October 14 at 11:00am, that is, two days before the "Judenaktion." However, it took until October 19 for him to inform his government.

Not only is Kertzer oblivious to any facts that would challenge his narrative, but he also displays a degree of naivety when he claims that an open papal protest would have deterred "a large number of the men murdering the Jews" of their criminal actions. Does he think Nazi censorship would have allowed news of a condemnation of the Holocaust to reach Wehrmacht or SS barracks? Does he not know that SS men who wanted to make a career had to leave their church beforehand? And who would have listened to the Pope? Even today, when every papal speech is broadcast live on the Internet, even US Catholic soldiers didn't care when John Paul II protested so passionately against the war in Iraq. In World War I, Benedict XV condemned the genocide of the Armenians, but the world ignored his appeal, including the Catholic German soldiers who fought side by side with the Turks and witnessed the massacres, death marches, and death camps. An open protest by Pius XII would only have had three results: it would have turned Hitler's unbridled anger on the pope and subsequently denied him every opportunity to continue saving Jews clandestinely; it would have provoked the dictator to strike at the Catholic Church, the infrastructure that ultimately saved almost a million Jews from the Holocaust; it would have increased the pace of the murder because Hitler

wanted to achieve his devilish goal at any cost, all the more fanatically, the more oppressed he felt. Pius XII knew this very well. He hoped, perhaps naively, that the German resistance would succeed in their plans to overthrow Hitler and that the Allies would be victorious quickly. Until then, damage control was his goal – rescue and help wherever possible. Whether acting is more valuable than talking may be an open question, given the brutality of the Nazi dictatorship about which Pius XII had no illusions, he had no choice. One should ask why the Allies, who had completely different options than the Vatican, "besieged" by Nazis and Fascists, did not handle it differently. They, too, had had evidence of Nazi murders since 1942, and still, there was only one public statement on this, a week before the Pope's Christmas address, mentioning and confirming its content. The Allies had concerns like those of the Pope. He didn't want to buy posterity's praise with the blood of innocent people who would have fallen victim to Hitler's retaliatory action after a public protest. It is easy, as Kertzer does, to moralize about it and write bestsellers. But who would have risked a "brave step" if it could cost countless lives?

*Michael Hesemann, Ph.D., is a German historian who teaches at the Gustav Siewerth Academy in Bierbronn and a German representative of the Pave the Way Foundation. Since 2008, he has worked on Pope Pius XII's life in the Vatican Archives. In March 2020, he was one of just 25 international historians who were granted access to the newly released wartime files of the Holy See. His book "The Pope and the Holocaust" (Ignatius Press) was published in the US.*