

“Pope Pius XII did nothing to help the Jews during World War II.”

The claim that Pope Pius XII (r. 1939–1958) stood by as the Jews were being exterminated during the Second World War is one of the most malicious and misleading anti-Catholic myths. The accusation was first made nearly twenty years after the war in *The Deputy*, a play by a former Hitler Youth member, Rolf Hochhuth.³⁴³ The play is written so that the same actor can play both Pius XII and the fictional Baron Rutta, a character that serves as an apologist for the policies of the Third Reich; thus the audience is steered toward seeing Pius as a Nazi collaborator. The plot centers on the actions of the fictional Fr. Riccardo Fontana, an idealistic young Jesuit who trades passports with a Jew to help him escape the Nazis—for which Fr. Fontana is arrested by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp, where he

is eventually shot. Throughout the play Fr. Fontana complains loudly and frequently about Pope Pius XII, as when he shouts, “His voice? Where is his voice? Doing nothing is as bad as taking part”; and “God can forgive a hangman for such work, but not a priest, not the pope!”[344](#)

The play was presented internationally, and ran for 300 performances on Broadway, winning a 1964 Tony Award for its producer, Herman Shumlin.[345](#) Its effect was such that Pius came to be seen as a money-grubbing hypocrite who was indifferent to Jewish suffering and failed to speak up against Nazi tyranny. By the 1990s there was a booming business in anti-Pius books, including John Cornwall’s *Hitler’s Pope* (1990) and Daniel Goldhagen’s *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (2002). News sources such as *The New York Times*, which praised Pius XII during the war, now joined in the chorus of slander and libel against him.

Before he became pope, Eugenio Pacelli was known as a gifted linguist who was fluent in Latin, Greek, English, French,

Spanish, German, Portuguese, and Aramaic along with his native Italian. He also took the time as a young man to learn Hebrew from one of his many Jewish friends.³⁴⁶ Ordained a priest on Easter Sunday in 1899, Pacelli served a brief tour as a parish priest before getting doctorates in theology and canon and civil law. He later entered the Vatican diplomat training program, and in 1917 was appointed papal nuncio to Bavaria, the southeastern portion of Germany; and in 1920 he was made nuncio to the whole of Germany. During his time in Germany, he witnessed the rise of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party. In 1929 Pacelli was created a cardinal and appointed Vatican secretary of state by Pope Pius XI (r. 1922–1939).

Days after Hitler used the Enabling Act of 1933 to become dictator, Cardinal Pacelli ordered the nuncio to Germany “to intervene with the government of the Reich on behalf of the Jews and point out all the dangers involved in an anti-Semitic policy.”³⁴⁷ In 1936 he traveled to the United States, where he praised Jewish contributions to the nation, de-

nounced anti-Semitism, and expressed concern about the broadcasts of the anti-Semitic “radio priest” Fr. Charles Coughlin. In 1938, Pacelli issued a letter to the world’s bishops asking them to appeal to their national governments to generously grant visas to Jews trying to escape Nazi Germany.³⁴⁸ Bishop Fulton Sheen once recalled a meeting with Cardinal Pacelli in Rome where “the cardinal . . . pulled out a number of German newspapers from a file and began reading and translating them. For over an hour he spoke with considerable vehemence against Hitler and Nazism.”³⁴⁹

Pacelli’s efforts to warn of the dangers of Nazism and to assist the Jewish people continued when he was elected pope on March 2, 1939, in the briefest conclave (one day) in 300 years. Germany’s reaction was not favorable. One Berlin newspaper editorialized, “The election of Cardinal Pacelli is not accepted with favor in Germany because he was always opposed to Nazism.”³⁵⁰ At the outbreak of war later that same year, Pius XII sent top secret orders to the nuncio to Poland to help in hiding Jews, and to the nuncio to Tur-

key (the future Pope St. John XXIII) to “prepare thousands of baptismal certificates to give the Jews which will allow them passage through Turkey to the Holy Land.”³⁵¹ In a letter to his nuncios dated December 23, 1940, Pius instructed them to work with the local bishops to help the Jews escape persecution.³⁵² The letter was kept secret at the time “for the same reason the International Red Cross and the World Council of Churches had avoided making any public statement that would increase the suffering of the Jews.”³⁵³

The accusations against Pius XII concerning his wartime conduct are chiefly two: that he did not speak out against Nazi treatment of the Jews, and that he did not do enough to stop their deportation and extermination. To begin with, there are many examples of Pius, and those under his direction, speaking out against Nazi treatment of Jews, including his Christmas addresses of 1941 and 1942, which were praised by *The New York Times* editorial board.³⁵⁴ But Pius understood that he had to tread carefully in his public pronouncements, knowing that a strong papal condemna-

tion of the Nazis' treatment of the Jews could make a bad situation worse. As he put it in an address to his cardinals on June 2, 1943, "Every word we address to the competent authority on this subject, and all Our public utterances, have to be carefully weighed and measured by Us in the interests of the victims themselves, lest, contrary to our intentions, We make their situation worse and harder to bear."[355](#)

There was ample reason for Pius's caution: When the Dutch bishops publicly denounced Nazi mistreatment of Jews in 1942, the Nazis retaliated by increasing the number of Jewish deportations. (Indeed, 79 percent of the total Jewish population was deported from Holland during the war!)[356](#) That's why it was not only bishops in Nazi-occupied territory but Jewish leaders themselves who cautioned Pius against speaking out too forcefully against the Nazis.

Which is not to say, though it is often said, that Pius did not do enough to help the Jews. The pope intervened in the case of 500 Jews on a steamer ship who were refused entry to Istanbul, imprisoned on Rhodes by the Italians,

and eventually transferred to an improvised refugee camp in southern Italy due to Pius' efforts.[357](#) After Mussolini's downfall and the German conquest of Italy, the Nazis rounded up 12,000 Jews in Rome for deportation to concentration camps. When news reached the Vatican, Pope Pius XII sent a message to Heinrich Himmler that he would publicly denounce the deportation unless it was stopped, which it was.[358](#) When the Roman Jewish community was threatened with deportation unless they met a Nazi demand for gold, Pius offered to make up the difference if the Jews were short the amount. He instructed the Italian bishops to hide Jews in monasteries and convents; he also hid many in his own summer residence, Castel Gandolfo. The Jewish historian Pinchas Lapide estimated that the Church under Pius XII rescued 860,000 Jews from the Nazis, representing 37 percent of Jews who survived the war.[359](#)

The Real Story

Although far too many people today think of Pope Pius XII as either "Hit-

ler's Pope" or a sanctimonious coward, at the time of his death he was praised for his wartime assistance to the Jewish people. The chief rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, who later became a Catholic—taking the pope's own name, Eugenio—remarked that "no hero in all history was more heroic than Pope Pius and his readiness to defend the children of God."[360](#)

The World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Jewish Assistance Committee, the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, among others, conveyed sincere gratitude for the efforts of Pius XII and the Church on behalf of the Jewish people during the war. Many Jewish politicians, scientists, and historians, among them Golda Meir (1898–1978) and Sir Martin Gilbert (1936–2015), likewise expressed gratitude to Pius and the Church. The claim made especially by the political left that Pope Pius XII and the Church did nothing to help the Jews during World War II is intended to undermine its moral standing in the eyes of men,

and thus its influence in moral matters.³⁶¹ The truth about Pius, however, was aptly put by Pope Benedict XVI (r. 2005–2013) as follows: “I believe that he was one of the great righteous men and that he saved more Jews than anyone else.”³⁶²

³⁴³ Ironically, Hochhuth was a friend of David Irving, a revisionist historian who was sentenced to three years in prison in Austria for denying the Holocaust. See “David Irving Jailed for Holocaust Denial,” *The Guardian*, February 20, 2006, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/20/austria.thefarright>.

³⁴⁴ Rolf Hochhuth, *The Deputy*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964), 100, 155.

³⁴⁵ http://www.tonyawards.com/p/tonys_search, accessed March 15, 2017.

³⁴⁶ Pacelli was a frequent guest at the home of Guido Mendes, where he participated in Sabbath dinners. He had at least twelve close Jewish friends when he was young. See Gordon Thomas, *The Pope's Jews: The Vatican's Secret Plan to Save Jews from the Nazis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 4.

³⁴⁷ Margherita Marchione, *Did Pius Help the Jews?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), Kindle ed., loc. 600.

³⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Michael J. Miller and Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), Kindle ed., loc. 1498.

³⁴⁹ Fulton Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 46.

[350](#) Ronald J. Rychlak, *Hitler, the War, and the Pope* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2000), 110.

[351](#) Thomas, *The Pope's Jews*, 49.

[352](#) Marchione, *Did Pius Help the Jews?*, Kindle ed., loc. 315–316.

[353](#) Thomas, *The Pope's Jews*, 198.

[354](#) See Marchione, *Did Pius Help the Jews?*, Kindle ed., loc. 138–139 and Rychlak, *Hitler, the War and the Pope*, 166, 179 and 196.

[355](#) Marchione, *Did Pius Help the Jews?*, Kindle ed., locs. 712, 717.

[356](#) Pinchas E. Lapide, *Three Popes and the Jews* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1967), 202.

[357](#) Marchione, *Did Pius Help the Jews?*, Kindle ed., loc. 624.

[358](#) Of the 12,438 Roman Jews, 1,007 were arrested and sent to Auschwitz in the time it took for the stop order to be received. Of the 1,007, only 196 survived the war. See Thomas, *The Pope's Jews*, 230.

[359](#) Lapide, *Three Popes and the Jews*, 215.

[360](#) Thomas, *The Pope's Jews*, 266.

[361](#) Rabbi David Dalin recognized this motivation behind the attacks on Pius XII in his book *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*.

[362](#) Benedict XVI, *Light of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), Kindle ed., loc. 1496.

More info on Pius XII

<http://catholicbridge.com/catholic/pope-pius-XII.php>

When Pius ordered Hitler's death

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/70776/when-pope-ordered-death-adolf-hitler>