



The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler

01.05.2024 | Martin Menke

At this year's American Catholic Historical Association conference, held in conjunction with the American Historical Association's 2024 Annual Meeting, four colleagues in twentieth-century Italian and German history – Mark Ruff, Suzanne Brown-Fleming, Martin Menke, and Roy Domenico – met to offer a panel discussion of David Kertzer's latest work, *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler* (Random House, 2022). Kertzer then offered a response to their comments. The discussion built on a review forum of his work, to which the panelists contributed, that had appeared in the summer 2023 issue of the *Catholic Historical Review* (Vol. 109 (2023): 752-767). The in-person conversation proved fruitful by adding new insights and perhaps a more nuanced understanding of this complicated topic.

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The first to speak was Mark Ruff of Saint Louis University. He succinctly summarized the book's topic, what he described as the cause of the "sullied reputation" of Pius XII, which was his action, or lack thereof, to protect or at least protest against the persecution of Europe's Jews during the war. Ruff noted that Kertzer shows, relying on the papers of Angelo Roncalli (the later Pope John XXIII), that Pius XII was well aware of the damage that his silence might do to his reputation, which meant he was aware he was being perceived to be silent. Ruff notes that Kertzer distinguishes between the early years of the war, when a German victory seemed possible, and the later years when an Allied victory became much more likely. During the earlier period, Vatican officials considered the need to arrange itself with a victorious National Socialist German regime in Europe. Kertzer also showed how well Pius XII was informed of Jewish suffering throughout Europe, especially in his beloved Rome. While the pope did not clearly condemn Jewish persecution, he did vehemently decry Allied bombings of Rome and personally visited the affected areas. Ruff pointed to Kertzer's explanation for this papal reticence, which was the pope's "personal weakness, not ideological affinity." This is an essential break with earlier scholars who argued that Pope Pius XII preferred authoritarian fascism to liberal democracy. Kertzer notes that, in the safety of June 1945, Pius XII described National Socialism as a "satanic ghost." Ruff emphasized Kertzer's "unsparing judgment" that this pontificate was a moral failure.

Ruff's most significant contribution to the discussion is related to the historiographical context of Kertzer's work. Ruff notes that while Kertzer refuted the pope's apologists, his critique of Pius differs from that of previous critics. Pius XII had no affinity for fascism, nor is there evidence that, in contrast with leading papal officials, he was an antisemite. Ruff also noted that Church history has

become increasingly globalized. Since the pontificate of Pius XII extended another thirteen years, was he, as Kertzer's title suggests, always a "pope at war?" What about his public interventions in the Middle Eastern question, in defense of Christians in Communist China, or his criticisms of Cold War communism in Eastern Europe? Ruff's concluding questions suggest that a better understanding of the remainder of Pius XII's pontificate might contribute by extension to a better understanding of his wartime behavior.

Next, Suzanne Brown-Fleming from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offered comments. She expanded on Kertzer's argument that, until 1943, the pope had to expect a future Europe dominated by National Socialist Germany, in which the Church would need to find ways to survive. Brown-Fleming argued that the necessary proof of the importance of Kertzer's work lies in the many responses to the book and related articles in *The Atlantic* First, "What the Vatican's Secret Archives are about to Reveal" (March 2, 2020), "The Pope, the Jews, and the Secret of the Archives" (July 27, 2020), "The Pope's Secret Back Channel to Hitler," (May 31, 2022). Perhaps the most robust rejoinder appeared in a full-page article in *L'Osservatore Romano* (20 June 2022). Given the depth of Kertzer's archival research, Brown-Fleming found the resistance to his findings surprising. She voiced hope for a new manner of historical scholarship and dialogue that is open-minded and evidence-based rather than a continuation of the type of conjecture typical of much of the scholarship produced before the recent opening of the relevant archival materials in the Vatican archives, both supportive and critical of the pope.

Martin Menke of Rivier University noted that, while defenders of Pius XII have pointed to particular statements that can be interpreted as statements of concern for persecuted Jews, Kertzer emphasized that the pope's contemporaries considered the statements weak. Menke pointed out that the chair of the Fulda bishops' conference, Cardinal Adolf Bertram of Breslau, similarly refrained from public pronouncement but relied instead on private petitions out of fear that public opposition would yield further repression of Catholics. Kertzer shows that, in the pope's private encounters with German diplomats, he was at times more candid than in his public pronouncements. Menke noted that Pius XII's greatest fears were for the survival of both the Church in Europe, as much as the Vatican State. Menke said, "Ultimately, the pope's fear of jeopardizing the sacramental life and the integrity of the institutional church led to his reticence." Pius XII did not realize how fascist forces had already compromised this integrity. Menke also compared Pius XII's criticism of moral decay in Allied-occupied Rome with Bishop Clemens Graf von Galen's criticism of the British treatment of Germans in occupied Westphalia, which reflected willful blindness to German crimes. One doubts whether Italian fascists or German National Socialists would have been as tolerant of criticism of the pope's criticism as were the Allied powers.

Menke asked if Kertzer might have shown greater understanding of the pope's humanity, in all its weakness, or if one might consider the Catholic teaching of accidentalism, that governments are to be obeyed as long as they defend Catholic moral teaching. Finally, Menke pointed out that Pius XII privately resented the silence of many German bishops, such as Cardinal Bertram, and applauded the more confrontational stand of Berlin's Bishop Konrad von Preysing. In the end, Menke agreed with Kertzer that timidity prevented Pius XII from being a great, forceful leader of the Church and instead led to his failing as Pontifex Maximus.

In his remarks, panel chair Roy Domenico of the University of Scranton contributed a critical Italian historical perspective to the discussion. He emphasized the *romanità* of Pius XII, which eventually made him an alternative authority figure to fascist leader Benito Mussolini. Domenico shows that the pope's popularity rose as that of Mussolini and, eventually, the king declined. He also discussed the pope's significance in promoting the postwar idea of Italians as *brava gente*, hardly responsible for the regime's collaboration with the National Socialists and the Italian fascist regime's atrocities. Crucially, Domenico reminded those present that the Church cannot be reduced to one man, even one as necessary as the pope. Many Catholics in Italy and elsewhere

did do much to save persecuted Jews. He stressed that at no time did the moral authority of the Italian fascists outweigh that of the Church. One might add that, in Germany, too, most of the bishops proved weak, but their priests and laypeople often risked their lives to help those persecuted by the regime.

The author of *The Pope at War*, David Kertzer of Brown University, responded to the other panelists. Despite his profound archival research and his kind acknowledgment of the other panelists' comments, his response reflected the fundamental confusion or astonishment at the moral failure of Pius XII by all those who expect the Church, and especially the pope as its head, to live up to the higher moral calling they claim to embody. Many scholars and laypeople share in this confusion about the poor record of the Christian churches during this time. In the end, Kertzer argued that the Church perhaps needed a two-fold leadership: the pope as a moral leader and some other administrator of the Holy See and its interests worldwide, since someone tasked with moral leadership, as history shows, is easily compromised by diplomatic and other political considerations.

Source: [Contemporary Church History Quarterly](#), Volume 30, Number 1 (Spring 2024).