

Ad Defends Pope Pius XII

by Eve Tushnet

NEW YORK – *The New York Times* is of two minds about Pope Pius XII. During the war years, he was a saint for standing up to the Nazis – but the paper today seems to have forgotten that history. This is the contradiction the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights highlighted with its full-page advertisement in the April 10 Times. The ad quotes 10 editorials and news articles published in the Times during World War II, all praising Pius XII's courageous defense of the Jews against Hitler. On Christmas Day, 1941, the editorial page of the New York Times wrote, "The voice of Pius XII is a lonely voice in the silence and darkness overwhelming Europe this Christmas." But on March 16 that same editorial page wrote. "Some now hope that the pope [John Paul II] will use his trip to Israel next week to ask forgiveness for Pius XII's silence during the Holocaust."

In the past two years, a spate of new books have attacked and defended Pius XII. The attackers – principally James Carroll in *Constantine's Sword*, John Cornwell in *Hitler's Pope*, Garry Wills in *Papal Sin*, and Susan Zuccotti in *Under His Very Windows* – charge that Pius XII stood by in silence or even collaborated with the Nazis. This claim first surfaced after the pope's death, in a 1963 play, *The Deputy*, which portrayed Pius XII as a Hitler totally obsessed with his personal hygiene. The recent anti-Pius books are more sophisticated. Cornwell and Carroll both received positive front-page coverage in *the New York Times* Book Review, which also praised *Papal Sin*.

The Catholic Leagues' Patrick Scully said that the purpose of the advertisement was to say, "You don't have to take the Catholic League's word" that Pius XII strongly opposed Hitler. "Here's what was said, when it was happening, by the New York Times. We're saying 'Here's the evidence; you decide.'" Scully said that the *Times* insisted on seeing evidence that the material quoted actually appeared in the newspaper. The quotations are "rock-solid," he added.

Robert Rychlak, author of *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*, said "It's fair enough to question certain things, say you could have done this differently, but to suggest that he was callously indifferent is to disregard the clear record." Why didn't Pius XII speak more forcefully by, for example, publicly excommunicating Hitler, or using the word "Nazi" in his condemnations of racism? "The same reason the National Red Cross did not do that," Rychlak replied – when international authorities spoke too sharply, the Germans cracked down, slaughtering hundreds more Jews.

But Pius XII worked against Hitler behind the scenes, Rychlak said, funneling information about German troop movements to the Allies. And in October 1943, Pius XII asked Italian churches and convents to hide Jews. In Rome, five thousand Jews were sheltered from the Nazis. Three thousand fled to the pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo. Hundreds lived within the Vatican itself. Pius XII is being considered for sainthood, and Rychlak said, "The study of his life would have been completed but for delays caused by the eruption of this controversy."

The New York Times is a focal point of the controversy, because it has undergone a high-profile reversal.

- In January 1940 the Times editorialized: "Now the Vatican has spoken, with authority that cannot be questioned, and has confirmed the worst intimations of terror which have come out of the Polish darkness."
- The headline reporting Pius XII's first encyclical, on October 28, 1939, read, "Pope Condemns Dictators, Treaty Violators, Racism."
- Headlines on August 6, 1942, read, "Pope is said to plead for Jews Listed for Removal from France;" three weeks later, the headline was "Vichy Seizes Jews; Pope Pius Ignored."

But in 2000, editorial and news coverage sounded very different. It was the eve of Pope John Paul II's "mea culpa" address asking forgiveness for past sins of Catholics - including the mistreatment of Jews. A March 14 Times editorial condemned John Paul II for failing to "candidly [acknowledge] the failure of Pope Pius XII to speak out against the Nazi genocide." On March 24, the foreign desk reported, "But in all of his many statements of regret, the pope has never faulted the behavior of Pope Pius XII, a figure whose silence during the Nazi era remains a source of deep division between many Jewish groups and the Vatican."

Hitler's Pope made the case in its strongest form. The Times review, headlined "A Deafening Silence, " argued that the pope failed to speak out because of his alleged anti-Semitism, desire for autocratic rule, and fear of communism. The review speaks of Pius XII "tolerating" convents that sheltered Jews, rather than encouraging them. The Times review ends with a description of the modern Vatican as "a fortress built against the tide of time." The Times refused to comment on the grounds that it had not reviewed all of its coverage of Pius XII to track how that coverage had changed.

Rychlak praised a recent article by Rabbi David Dalin in the Weekly Standard for pointing out what he sees as the motive for the opposition to Pius XII. Many people are focusing on Pius XII and arguing one way or another as a way of trying to effect some changes in the Catholic Church for the future," Rychlak said. "Many people who want to criticize the pre-Vatican II Church are pointing to Pius XII, the last pre-Vatican II pope." Rychlak pointed to the last chapter of *Hitler's Pope*, "Pius XII Redivivus." Cornwell is "saying John Paul II is Pius XII all over again." He said. Similarly, Constantine's Sword calls for a "Vatican III" to reform the Church and Papal Sin advocates that the Church ditch doctrines like its teaching on contraception.

On the other hand, one thing that angered Rabbi Dalin is that attacks on Pius XII require discrediting the testimony of Jews – Jewish leader like Golda Meir, Albert Einstein and the Holocaust survivor and Chief Rabbi of Denmark Marcus Melchior. As Rabbi Dalin wrote: "Faced with such monstrous moral equivalence and misuse of the Holocaust, how can we not object?"

Copyright © 2001 [National Catholic Register](#)

Eve Tushnet is a Staff Writer for the National Catholic Register

Posted on StayCatholic.com