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The Silence of Pope Pius XII

Pope Pius XII could not have halted the Holocaust, but even without a public protest, he could have communicated with church leaders throughout Europe, admonishing those who disdained the Jewish people and encouraging all of them to urge Catholics to provide shelter for Jews. The consequence would have been fewer Catholic collaborators and bystanders, on the one hand, and more Catholic rescuers and fewer victims, on the other. . . .

[In 1941 two] German bishops, having heard that 10,000 Jews would be sent from Austria to the General Government in Poland, asked each other "whether the episcopacy should intervene for them out of humanitarian concern or whether this must be left up to Rome to do." Catholic bishops felt the need of a coordinated policy.

It was not as if Germany's bishops were out of touch with the Holy See. Pius's letters to individual prelates during the war years number well over a hundred. . . . But Pius never divulged to them the horrible news that the Vatican had learned in 1942 and confirmed in 1943, namely, that Germany had built extermination centers in occupied Poland where millions were being murdered. Rather, Pius commiserated with German bishops about their bombed-out cities and churches, recalling with fondness his years in Germany and the particular churches, now in ruins, where he had celebrated this or that holy day liturgy. When the war turned against Germany, Pius assured its church leaders that he was praying daily, almost hourly, for peace.

But he almost never said a word about the Jews. Writing to Bishop Preysing, Pius said in April of 1943 that he was heartened to hear that Berlin Catholics were showing empathy for the city's Jews. To fend off Preysing, who pressured him more than any other Catholic bishop to

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speak out about the Holocaust, Pius adroitly put the blame on the United States. Recalling that a few years earlier in 1939 Bishop Preysing had urged him to assist emigrating Jews, Pius said that he "didn't want to mention all the difficulties the United States made for Jewish immigration." Of course, it is true that the United States had been painfully negligent in the matter, not even admitting the allowed quota of Jews. But the difference between disallowing immigration of foreign nationals and persecuting and killing one's own citizens need not be belabored. The pope used the United States as a dodge for failing in what Bishop Preysing believed was his responsibility.

At times, lack of communication became miscommunication. In November 1943, Cardinal Bertram of Breslau wrote the Vatican secretary of state asking what could be done to provide the last sacraments for those being condemned to death and summarily executed in occupied Poland. Instead of telling Bertram that it would be impossible to get permission to provide the last sacraments for the victims because Germans were murdering them by the tens and hundreds of thousands, Maglione assured him that the Vatican was doing everything it could through local church officials (in Poland) to get permission to spend the sacraments. There was clear intent here to conceal the facts about genocide.

Nor did the Holy See share its information about the Holocaust with Catholic resistance movements that were trying to save Jews. Volume eight of the Vatican's World War II documents contains numerous reports from French bishops and Nuncio Valerio Valeri that briefed the Holy See on their statements opposing Vichy antisemitic policies, made known the courageous rescue work of the *Témoignage Chrétien* group, and gave voice to their fears for the Jews. But one looks in vain in this and subsequent volumes of the documents for any kind of response from the Vatican regarding Jews. It would have been quite possible to share information about the Holocaust with Zegota in Poland, with Catholic resistance movements in greater Germany that were centered in Berlin and Vienna, and with the *Témoignage Chrétien* circle in France. Historian Gerhard Weinberg believes that had Pope Pius spoken out about the murder of the Jews, many more Catholics would have had the courage to hide them. Such encouragement, even given privately, would certainly have bolstered the work of the four groups mentioned here. . . .

How could the Holy See have supported the work of these groups? Rescue work required organization and numbers as much as courage.

Because of food rationing and the frequent relocation of refugees, rescue work was more of a group than an individual activity. The French newsletter *Cahiers du Témoignage Chrétien* sought to inspire people to become active by reminding readers of Pius XI's "Spiritually we are Semites" statement and by urging action. "The church cannot disinterest itself in the fate of man, wherever his inviolable rights are unjustly threatened." The *Cahiers* was clandestinely delivered to all French bishops and to thousands of priests and laypeople — even Pétainists read it. As early as the end of 1942 the *Cahiers* affirmed, based on information from Cardinal Hlond, that hundreds of thousands of Jews had been murdered in gas chambers; in 1943, it reported that Hitler intended to exterminate all the Jews of Europe. Had the newsletter received confirmation of this information from the Holy See, or had it received encouragement from Pius XII similar to that of his predecessor, some French bishops would have continued after 1942 to protest the deportation of Jews, and more French Catholics would have become involved in rescue work. No, the Holocaust would not have been stopped, but as Elie Wiesel has written, "the trains rolling toward [Auschwitz] would have been less crowded."

The Zegota rescue circle in Poland had no need of Holocaust information; they had firsthand knowledge of the gruesome details. But the papacy could have assisted them with money. Since Polish Catholics had been the first victims of Nazi aggression and had felt totally abandoned by the papacy, any Vatican support of Jews, when their hour of desperation came, may have angered Poles. As we have seen, however, after the battle of Stalingrad, Polish church leaders became reconciled to Pius's ways. Certainly, more Poles would have been swayed to help rescue Jews if they had known the work had Rome's blessing. Zegota had need of money because Polish Catholics would not always harbor a Jew altruistically, and even if they would, they often did not have the money needed to feed extra mouths. . . .

. . . During the war years, the Vatican budget for its operations in Europe fluctuated between 1.3 and 2.2 million dollars. By converting some of the dollars into Swiss francs, the Vatican could finance its work in Nazi-occupied Europe. Clearly, the Holy See could have supported rescue operations. As it was, Zegota and *Témoignage Chrétien* depended solely on the Polish government-in-exile and on American Jewish organizations for infusions of cash. . . .

To find the actual reasons for Pius XII's silence about the Holocaust, we must look . . . toward two concerns of utmost importance to the pope: his desire to play the role of a diplomatic peacemaker, savior of western Europe from communism, and his fear that Rome and the Vatican, entirely defenseless, would be obliterated by aerial attacks before the war came to an end.

Years after the end of the war, Robert Leiber, the German Jesuit who was one of Pius's closest confidants, made clear the connection between the pope's silence about the Holocaust and his diplomacy. The reason that Pius XII did not speak out about the murder of the Jews, Leiber confided to the Dutch historian Ger van Roon, was that he wanted to play the peacemaker during the war. To safeguard his credentials for such a role, the Holy See had to preserve Vatican City's status as an independent state and neutral government. Pius's role model in this respect was Pope Benedict XV, whose efforts to negotiate a European peace during World War I had impressed a younger Eugenio Pacelli. There would have been nothing negligent about this policy had it not kept Pius from dealing adequately with the Holocaust. In his postwar report to the British Home Office, Minister Francis Osborne said that Pius had at his disposal two strong weapons against Nazi criminality — "excommunication and martyrdom." Pius did not use these, Osborne said, because he wanted to be the mediator of a negotiated peace. Thus, the Englishman, Osborne, a close observer of Pius, and the German, Leiber, his trusted adviser, are in full agreement on this point. . . .

A negotiated peace became an overriding concern for the Holy See. Before Stalingrad, Pius believed that the Americans should help the Russians, but with reservations, so that hostilities on the eastern front remained far from Germany. After the battle of Stalingrad and the successful Allied invasion of southern Italy in July 1943, Pius hoped that England and the United States would abandon the Russians so that Germany could deal with the Communist threat. Ideally, he hoped England would recognize the danger to the Christian west that communism posed, and conclude a separate peace with the Axis powers. This would pay a second dividend: Rome would no longer be threatened with air raids.

When Germany switched ambassadors to the Vatican in 1943, Pius tried to impress the departing Diego von Bergen and the newly appointed Ernst von Weizsäcker with his belief in a powerful Germany to withstand

the Marxist threat from the east. If the Nazis would just live up to the terms of the Concordat,¹ Pope Pius could support a German mission against Russia. After his first private audience with the pope, Weizsäcker reported to Berlin that "hostility to Bolshevism is, in fact, the most stable component of Vatican foreign policy," and that "the Anglo-American link with the Soviet Russia is detested by the [Holy See]."

The combination of Russian successes on the eastern front, the invasion of Italy by Anglo-American forces, and the fall of Mussolini (July 1943) led to a very noticeable increase in Communist activity in Rome and northern Italy, where a number of Catholic priests were murdered by Communist guerrillas. This disturbed Pope Pius, particularly because of vehement anti-church Communist propaganda. Still, the Vatican refrained from promoting a separate Italian peace with the Allies, because it would necessarily weaken Germany. The radical cure for Italian communism lay in the defeat of Communist Russia.

But Communist agitation in Rome was close to home, and it rested uneasily on Pius's mind. It would necessarily have reminded him of the tumultuous days in Munich at the end of the Great War when he had himself faced down a gun-toting Red revolutionary. Pius's concern over Italian Communist activity coincided with Germany's concern about Rome's Jews, whom they wished to "resettle." When the roundup of hundreds of Jews took place in October 1943 just outside Vatican city, Ambassador Weizsäcker and other Germans held their breath to see if the pope would protest. He did not, but three days later he requested that Germany increase its police manpower in Rome in order to cut down on Communist agitation.

The same priority of concerns was reflected several months later, in December 1943, when a Vatican consultation about Germany was intercepted by Berlin or allowed to leak out by the Holy See. Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office) chief Ernst Kaltenbrunner sent a memorandum to Joachim von Ribbentrop, German minister for foreign affairs, which reported that the main obstacles to a loyal relationship between the church and National Socialism lay in the latter's euthanasia and sterilization policies. The murder of the Jews was left out of the equation.

¹A 1933 treaty between the Vatican and Nazi Germany that promised religious freedom to German Catholics. — Ed.

Pius XII's response to the Allies' Casablanca ultimatum for an unconditional surrender was to call for a peace of justice rather than a peace of force in his 1943 Christmas address. Sitting on the diplomatic sidelines, Pius referred derisively to the "Big Three" in conversation with Germany's Ambassador Weizsäcker. Pius had been upset with Germany when Hitler negotiated a non-aggression pact with Russia and invaded western Europe, but when the dictator returned to his quest for Lebensraum and invaded Russia in 1941, the pope became visibly emotional in conversation with the Spanish ambassador about what appeared to be the German defeat of the Communist menace. Because in Pius's mind Germany remained the last line of defense against Russian communism, the pope frequently discussed schemes for a negotiated peace with Weizsäcker.

The troubling aspect of Pius's preoccupation with diplomacy was that Jews would continue to be murdered as peace negotiations were under way. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were murdered during the time period between the battle of Stalingrad and the end of the war. Instead of confronting Weizsäcker with these crimes, Pius discussed peace negotiations with him. The subject of the Jews and their fate never came up. During 1943, Pius's attention remained riveted on his church and the potential danger to it from aerial attacks and from communism. Historian Saul Friedlander asks,

How is it conceivable that at the end of 1943 the pope and the highest dignitaries of the church were still wishing for victorious resistance by the Nazis in the east and therefore seemingly accepted by implication the maintenance, however temporary, of the entire nazi extermination machine?

Pius would necessarily have been aware of the ongoing murder of the Jews because of reports about it to the Holy See and appeals for him to intervene. This continued almost to the end of the war, when international efforts, which involved the Holy See, got under way to save Hungarian Jews from deportation to Auschwitz. A high-ranking official in the secretariat of state, Monsignor Domenico Tardini, told the German ambassador that the United States would probably object to his (latest) proposal for negotiations because of the Holocaust (the "Jewish matter"). While Weizsäcker fished Vatican waters for negotiations, the Allies pressed Pius to speak out about the Holocaust.

Although Catholics and non-Catholics inside and outside the diplomatic corps reminded Pius of his role as a moral leader with reference to

the Holocaust, he concentrated on diplomacy, often to the exclusion of genocide. The pope allowed the Vatican to become involved with German resistance in an attempt to overthrow Hitler. Later, when Italy wearied of the war, Pius again violated the Vatican's neutrality by allowing England's minister to the Holy See to be an intermediary between England and Italy. But when it came to the Holocaust, strict diplomatic rules were adhered to. The Holy See did not allow its diplomatic offices to involve themselves in the negotiations with England and the United States that were necessary to ensure safe passage across the Mediterranean for the Jews in the Italian zone of France, who were desperately seeking to avoid deportation to Auschwitz.

As the Holocaust lingered on into the latter years of the war, Pius wearied of hearing about the Jews. "I remember," Polish ambassador to the Vatican Kazimierz Papée recalled, "when I came to see the Holy Father for . . . perhaps the tenth time in 1944; he was angry. When he saw me as I entered the room and stood at the door awaiting permission to approach, he raised both his arms in a gesture of exasperation. 'I have listened again and again to your representations about Our unhappy children in Poland,' he said. 'Must I be given the same story yet again?'" Even though ambassador Papée and western diplomats repeatedly pressed Pius about the Holocaust, the pope omitted time and again to discuss it with Germany's Ambassador Weizsäcker, who would later be found guilty of war crimes against Jews at the Nuremberg Trials.

The correspondence and dispatches of the German ambassador and the American envoy to the Vatican make it clear that Pope Pius's second great concern was the possible bombing of Rome, not the murder of the Jews. With the Holocaust in full force, the Vatican's diplomatic staff and the pope himself devoted most of their energy to ensuring that neither Germany nor the Allies would bomb Rome. This became possible for the Allies after General Erwin Rommel's Panzerkorps had been pushed out of northern Africa, allowing English and American troops to cross the Mediterranean and occupy Sicily. Driving German forces from mountainous southern Italy proved a more difficult task, one that lasted from the summer of 1943 to the summer of 1944. During these months of acute danger, the Holy See communicated directly with Envoy Taylor or Chargé d'Affaires Tittman no fewer than thirty-four times in an effort to forestall the bombing of Rome. . . .

President Roosevelt . . . promised that no American aircraft would drop bombs over the Vatican. The Holy See continued to press the issue

relentlessly, both through Envoy Taylor and through the apostolic delegate to the United States, trying to exact promises that Vatican property outside Vatican City would also not be harmed. Roosevelt, somewhat exasperated, finally gave instructions that the apostolic delegate should be informed that "war is war," and that with the Germans in charge of the city of Rome, no further promises would be forthcoming. The Holy See responded that if Vatican property were indeed bombed, the pope would protest publicly. No such threat was ever made regarding the murder of the Jews.

It exasperated observers, both inside and outside the Vatican, that the pope would be so concerned over what had not yet taken place and so little concerned over the ongoing murder of the Jews. Cardinal Tisserant remarked as early as 1940 that the pope dwelt too much on the danger of Rome's being bombed and not enough on the affairs of the church. In September, Myron Taylor told Montini that the "deplorable inhumanities in Germany against civilian populations are even more reprehensible than the attacks on all her neighbors whom she invaded." Minister Osborne put it to the Vatican secretary of state more bluntly on December 14, 1942: "Instead of thinking of nothing but the bombing of Rome, [the Holy See] should consider [its] duties in respect to the unprecedented crime against humanity of Hitler's campaign of extermination of the Jews."

Bishop Preysing,⁵ writing to Pius from heavily bombed Berlin, adopted the perspective that Minister Osborne found lacking in the pope. "Even more bitter [events than the air raids] face us here in Berlin with the new wave of Jewish deportations that were put in motion just before the first of March [1943]." Preysing then asked the pope to speak out again about the Holocaust. Six months later, in October 1943, Pope Pius was confronted with the precise choice that Bishop Preysing had put to him so pointedly — deportation of Jews versus aerial bombardment. It was at that time that the Reich Security Main Office moved to deport the Jews of Rome to Auschwitz.

When the catastrophe struck the Roman Jews, the bombing of the Basilica of San Lorenzo, which took place in July, still weighed heavily on the pope's mind. . . .

. . . The evening of the day on which San Lorenzo was bombed, Pope Pius wept as he prayed the rosary while looking out over the city of Rome from his Vatican quarters. When Vatican City itself became the victim of an air raid, the Holy See assumed, incorrectly as it turned out,

that an American plane was to blame. Because of all of the destruction by the Allies, Ambassador Weizsäcker could report to Berlin that Germany was winning the propaganda war. How could this be, survivor and historian Saul Friedlander has asked, at a time when the pope was aware of the nature of Hitler's regime?

In his correspondence with Bishop Preysing, Pope Pius made no secret of his priorities. Responding to the Berlin prelate, who had urged the pope to address the Holocaust, Pius asserted that the most pressing problem facing him lay in maintaining the absolute trust of Catholics, regardless of which side they fought for, so as to ensure the church's unity. Pius felt that if Rome became contested by Germans on one side and Anglo-Americans on the other, this trust would be in jeopardy. Pius also defended his policy by saying that he was conscience bound to bring all the pressure he could muster on the Allies not to bomb Rome. Catholics the world over, he said, saw the Eternal City as the center of Christendom and the birthplace of the church. As such, Rome symbolized the universal nature of the church. Should this symbol be destroyed, Pius affirmed, faith and hope among Catholics would be shaken.

What Pope Pius told Bishop Preysing, he could not tell the rest of the world. The fortunes of the war made the threat of Allied bombardment greater than bombardment by Germany so long as Pius remained silent about the murder of the Jews. The Holy See dared not link its concern over the possible bombing of Rome to its silence about the Holocaust because of the implication that the murder of Europe's Jews was a lesser priority.

Earlier Pius had assured Bishop Preysing that he was doing all that he could for the persecuted Jews, that he deeply sympathized with them, and that he prayed for them. The pontiff asserted that what he had said about the persecution of the Jews in his 1942 Christmas address² "was short but well understood," and he said that he intended to speak out again when the circumstances were right. Whatever circumstances the pope had in mind evidently never came to pass.

The inconsistencies of papal policy relative to the Holocaust may best be understood in the light of Pius's assumptions and priorities. These

²The Pope had broadcasted a general statement of sympathy for those who "by reason of their nationality or race are marked down for death or gradual extinction." — Ed.

were, first, that the welfare of Catholic states took precedence over the interests of Jews. The Holy See used diplomacy rather than (public) moral strictures to attempt to curtail the involvement of Slovakia and Croatia in genocide. Pius XII did not want to undercut popular support for the fledgling governments of these new Catholic countries by threatening their leaders with excommunication. The same policy held in western Europe for Catholic Vichy France. The Vatican avoided interfering with the "resettlement" of Jews after a sharp government warning following the courageous statements of a number of French bishops.

Second, the long-term danger that communism potentially held for the church preoccupied Pope Pius. His assumption that Germany would be the west's defense against bolshevism ensured that Pius's diplomatic course would be rocky, since Hitler instigated both the Second World War and the Holocaust. But Pius stayed his course inflexibly. The Vatican warned Slovakian leaders that "resettlement" meant perdition for its Jews, but only months later Pius allowed the Germans to "resettle" the Jews of Rome without uttering a word. Earlier, before the German occupation of Italy, the Vatican and officials in Mussolini's government had cooperated smoothly to save Jews. When the Germans took control of the country, the Vatican refrained from even approaching them on behalf of Jews.

Pius's assumptions and priorities are clearly set forth in his letters to Bishop Preysing in 1943 and 1944. He wanted his German friend from Weimar years to know that he cared about the Jews, but that his first concern was for the Catholic church, its universality and unity. Pius may have feared that communicating throughout the church word of the murders perpetrated by the Catholic Ustasha,³ the complicity in genocide of Catholic Slovak priest Tiso, and the crimes of Catholic Austrians and Germans committed against Catholics in Poland would deeply divide the church. But this apprehension does not explain the Vatican's deceleration of information about the murder of the Jews.

Pius XII harbored a personal ambition to play an important role in world diplomacy, and he felt duty bound to shield the visible center of Catholicism from destruction. Standing amid the ruins of the Basilica of San Lorenzo, Pope Pius said, "Almost in the center of Rome . . . is our Vatican City, an independent state and an independent neutral

³The regime that controlled Croatia, a German satellite state during the war. — Ed.

state, which shelters priceless treasures, sacred not only to the Apostolic See but to the whole Catholic world." The Vatican's "priceless treasures" were not worth the lives of millions of Jewish men, women, and children, but in Pius's view what those treasures stood for were worth those lives.

Pius XII's priorities put Jews at mortal risk. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of additional Jews would have eluded Hitler's death camps had the Holy See accelerated rather than decelerated information about genocide. Did Pope Pius think the church so fragile that, should he speak out, it would not survive the war, even though it had survived the fratricidal Great War intact? Should the possible bombardment of Rome have been Pius's primary concern, or, as Bishop Preysing pointed out, should not the moral issue of the murder of the Jews have taken precedence? Were the churches and other structures of Rome and the Vatican really the nerve center of Catholic faith that Pius believed them to be? Was the possible future clash between Christianity and atheistic communism more important than the slaughter of the Jews who were being murdered in eastern Europe, and who would continue to be murdered while Pius hoped for a negotiated settlement to the war that would favor genocidal Germany, the church's defender from Russian communism? . . .

Pius XII's leadership failures inevitably affected how Catholics in high and low stations reacted to the Holocaust. The centuries of pogroms and antisemitism notwithstanding, the murder of the Jews was an unprecedented event that struck Catholics, especially in eastern Europe, as an apocalyptic event in some sense. Germans, hoping not to be held responsible for the Holocaust, did not wish to hear news of it. Elsewhere in Europe, the Nazi terror had the same effect on people to a greater or lesser extent, depending upon the degree of collaboration in each region. Only very strong papal leadership could have broken through these several obstructions to rally more Catholics to the cause of the Jews, who were traditionally regarded as outsiders.

The necessity for incisive leadership was most obvious in Catholic Hungary. Eastern European bishops often held leadership positions in both the church and the state prior to the Holocaust. Acting on cultural animosity toward Jews, they helped to enact antisemitic legislation as parliamentarians during the interwar period. Hungary's Cardinal Serédi played this role, and then turned a blind eye to the murder of the Jews during the course of the Second World War. Were these prelates unable

to see or to regret that what they had done before the war led ineluctably to what happened to the Jews during the war? When they persisted in their antisemitic convictions, did they think that the Nazis were the hand of God punishing his Chosen People? Since some eastern European bishops showed a correct and courageous attitude toward the persecuted Jews, we may assume that a sharp Vatican rebuke toward callous members of the Slovakian, Croatian, and Hungarian hierarchy would have had some effect.

Those bishops who harbored no ill will toward Jews — and they were numerous in western Europe, including Germany — tried to rescue them. We have seen that this occurred in Italy, France, Belgium, and Germany, although not uniformly throughout the land. Many bishops believed that in the face of Nazi ruthlessness, Catholics could accomplish more by sheltering a few Jews than by a public protest against their mass slaughter. But the postwar statement of Cardinal Frings to the effect that the passivity of German bishops before the Nazis resembled the passivity of Christ before Pilate is completely lacking in credibility. A number of bishops would very likely have spoken out if Pope Pius himself had done so or had encouraged them to do so. Pius XII's limitations as a church leader register here clearly, because, while claiming that when bishops spoke they spoke for him, he failed to tell them about the death camps in eastern Europe. In the absence of Vatican leadership, no European bishop had the courage to follow the example of Berlin priest Bernhard Lichtenberg and protest publicly.

We must look lower down the hierarchical ladder to find the Catholics who sacrificed the most for the Jewish people. Bearing in mind that they were only a tiny minority of all Catholics, we find that priests, nuns, and laypersons, rather than bishops, were prepared to intervene on behalf of Jews. A walk along the Avenue of the Righteous at the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem gives witness to the number of Polish Catholics who sacrificed themselves, even their lives, for Jews. Operating through convent and monastery networks, within diocesan structures, through individual parish communities, through their own organizations such as *Zegota*, or, quite simply, as individual believers, hundreds, if not thousands, of Catholics throughout Europe came to the assistance of Jews. On the basis of their efforts, we may speculate that if there had been effective leadership on the part of the Holy See or on the part of bishops, the Catholic church could have organized a much more extensive and effective underground rescue operation.

We must not exaggerate about what might have been accomplished. Regardless of who the pontiff was, the centuries-old tradition of anti-semitism, dating back to the Fathers of the Church, if not to the Gospels themselves, could not have been reversed quickly enough either to forestall the Holocaust or to cause the majority of Catholics to come to the rescue of the Jews. In the middle of the war, Pope Pius wrote to Bishop Konrad Preysing that his pontificate was the most difficult of modern times. There can be no doubt about that. No other pope had to deal simultaneously with the problems of communism, world war, and genocide. Nevertheless, it remains lamentable that the murder of the Jews found a low place among Pope Pius's concerns. The pope's Cold War policies, giving precedence to the danger of communism over justice for Holocaust war criminals, speak volumes about his priorities. Had either Pius XII's predecessor or his successor led Catholics during the Second World War, historians would have more words of praise and fewer words of regret for the history of the church during the Holocaust.

Walter Laqueur

The Failure to Comprehend

[T]here is one main pitfall in a work of this kind: the temptations of hindsight. Nothing is easier than to apportion praise and blame, writing many years after the events: some historians find the temptation irresistible. But the "final solution" more perhaps than any other subject should be approached in a spirit of caution and even humility. It is very easy to claim that everyone should have known what would happen once Fascism came to power. But such an approach is ahistorical. Nazism was an unprecedented phenomenon. In Fascist Italy, with all its evils, it is also true that during the twenty years of its existence some

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twenty enemies of the state (or of Mussolini) were actually executed, and of those some had, in fact, engaged in terrorist action. There was no precedent in recent European history for the murderous character of German National Socialism and for this reason most contemporaries were caught unprepared.

To understand this reluctance not only in Britain and the United States but also inside Germany and even among the Jews themselves to give credence to the news about the mass murder, one ought to consider the historical impact of the atrocity propaganda in the First World War. While this had not, of course, been the first war in which allegations had been made of widespread massacres and unspeakable cruelty, such propaganda campaigns had never before been conducted systematically on such a large scale. Both sides engaged in such propaganda, but the British and French with much greater effect than the Germans who felt aggrieved that they were losing the battle of words even though they had made a valiant effort to charge their enemies (and especially the Cossacks in East Prussia) with every possible crime.

Western allegations of German atrocities began with the violation of Belgian neutrality by the Germans in August 1914. The Germans, it was said, had ravished women and even young children, impaled and crucified men, cut off tongues and breasts, gouged eyes and burned down whole villages. These reports were not only carried in sensationalist newspapers but also endorsed by leading writers. . . .

Some readers probably remembered these stories when in June 1942 the *Daily Telegraph* was the first to report that 700,000 Jews had been gassed. For when the First World War had ended it soon appeared that many of these reports had either been invented — and some of the inventors admitted this much — or grossly exaggerated. The invasion of Belgium had indeed been a war crime, many Belgian civilians had been executed by the Germans on charges of armed resistance which were frequently unproven and there was a considerable amount of wanton destruction. But neither had the Allies always been wholly innocent and, in any case, it was a far cry from these acts to the allegations previously made with regard to German outrages. In the mid-twenties, Austen Chamberlain, the Foreign Secretary, admitted in Parliament that the story of the corpse factory had been without foundation. And as late as February 1938, on the eve of another war, Harold Nicolson said, also in the House of Commons, that "we had lied damnably," that the lies had done Britain tremendous harm and that he hoped that he