

The Pope's Secret Back Channel to Hitler

Newly revealed Vatican documents uncover a long-held secret: As war broke out, Pius XII used a Nazi prince to negotiate with Adolf Hitler.

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In August 1939, as he was finalizing plans for the invasion of Poland, Adolf Hitler was also engaged in negotiations with Pope Pius XII so delicate that not even the German ambassador to the Holy See knew about them. The existence of these talks was a secret the Vatican was eager to maintain long after Pius XII's death—as it did for eight decades. The 12-volume compilation of the Holy See's documents on the Second World War, completed in 1981, which to date has constituted the official record of Vatican activity during that period, contains no reference to the negotiations. Knowledge of them has only now come to light with the recent opening of the Pius XII archives at the Vatican.

Few topics in Church history, or the history of the Second World War, are as hotly contested as Pius XII's decision to avoid direct public criticism of Hitler or his regime, and to remain publicly silent in the face of the Holocaust. Many Church conservatives portray Pius as nonetheless a steadfast, courageous foe of Hitler and fascism. Others have harshly criticized him for failing to denounce the Nazi war of aggression and Hitler's effort to exterminate all of Europe's Jews. Even when the Nazi SS rounded up more than 1,000 Jews in Rome itself, on October 16, 1943, the pope refused to make his voice heard. Held for two days in a complex near the walls of the Vatican, the Jews were then placed on a train bound for Auschwitz.

Pope John Paul II was reportedly preparing to beatify Pius XII in 2000 when opposition, especially from Rome's Jewish community, caused him to put the process on hold. His successor, Benedict XVI, called for waiting until the Vatican's archives for the war years were opened before making a final decision. He did, though, agree to proclaim Pius XII "venerable," a step on the way to sainthood. In 2019, Pope Francis authorized the opening of the Pius XII archives, which became available to scholars in 2020. In the two years since then, no new finding has been as dramatic as the discovery that, shortly after he became pope, Pius XII entered into secret negotiations with Hitler, a story told here for the first time.

In the last months of his life, Pius XII's predecessor, Pius XI, had become a headache for Adolf Hitler. The pope had become more and more incensed by Hitler's whittling away at the influence of the Church in Germany, replacing Catholic parochial schools with state schools, closing many religious institutions, and supplanting Christian teachings with Nazi doctrine. In 1937, Pius XI issued an encyclical that condemned the Nazi government for its persecution of the Church and its championing of a pagan ideology. Hitler was irate. A year later, when Hitler visited Rome, Pius XI abandoned the city for Castel Gandolfo, his summer retreat in the Alban Hills. In remarks that infuriated Benito Mussolini, Italy's ruler and Hitler's host, the pope said he could not abide the glorification of the swastika, which he termed a "cross that is not the cross of Christ."

Pius XI died in early 1939, much to Hitler's and Mussolini's relief. Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who had been the secretary of state, was elected pope, taking the name Pius XII. Hitler now saw a chance to improve relations with the Vatican, or in any case to keep the new pope from openly criticizing his regime. As his secret go-between with the pope, he chose 36-year-old Prince Philipp von Hessen, the son-in-law of Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III. Few German aristocrats had a more illustrious pedigree than von Hessen, whose grandfather was the German emperor Frederick III and whose great-grandmother was Britain's Queen Victoria. He was an early member of the SA, the Nazi Party's storm troopers, and wore its brown-shirted uniform. And he had experience keeping secrets, having taken steps to prevent his amorous relationship with the English poet Siegfried Sassoon from coming to light.

Shortly after Pacelli's election, Hitler summoned von Hessen to his headquarters. Given the new pope's evident eagerness to turn the page on the Vatican's rocky relations with the National Socialist regime, Hitler had decided to explore the possibility of a deal. Von Hessen was told to see if he could schedule a secret meeting with the pope to begin discussions.

To maintain secrecy, the talks between von Hessen and the pope had to be arranged through unofficial channels. The roundabout route, which would be used repeatedly over the next two years, involved a man named Raffaele Travaglini, a shadowy friend of Prince Umberto, Italy's future king and the brother of von Hessen's wife, Princess Mafalda. Travaglini was a schemer and self-promoter, as well as an avid fascist. And he was deeply enmeshed in a social network that reached into the Vatican.

On a Sunday in mid-April of 1939, barely a month after Pacelli had become pope, von Hessen summoned Travaglini to the Italian royal residence in Rome. There he explained that Hitler had asked him to initiate negotiations with the new pontiff outside normal diplomatic channels. Travaglini immediately wrote to Cardinal Lorenzo Lauri, a man close to the pope, asking for his help in arranging a meeting between von Hessen and Pius XII.

The pope met Hitler's envoy for the first time on May 11. To help ensure secrecy, the pope took the highly unusual step of holding the meeting in the apartment of Cardinal Luigi Maglione, his secretary of state. The two men spoke in German, in which the pope was fluent, having spent a dozen years as the papal nuncio in Germany. The Vatican archives contain a German-language account of their conversation. Remarkably, the pope had a German prelate concealed in such a way as to take down a full transcript of their conversations without apparently being observed by the Nazi prince. The resulting transcripts, recently unearthed, offer a precise account of what was said.

At this first meeting, the pope took out a copy of a letter he had sent Hitler, expressing his appreciation for the führer's well wishes on his election to the papacy. He read it aloud to the prince, then read Hitler's reply. Upon finishing the reading, the pope said, "I have been very considerate, and the Reich Chancellor's reply was very kind. But the situation has since deteriorated." By way of example, he cited the closing of Catholic schools and seminaries in the Third Reich, the publication of books attacking the Church and the papacy, and the slashing of state funds benefiting the Church in Austria. He told the prince that he was eager to reach an agreement with Hitler and was ready to compromise insofar as his conscience allowed, "but for that to happen, there must before anything else be a truce ... I am certain that if peace between Church and state is restored, everyone will be pleased. The German people are united in their love for the Fatherland. Once we have peace, the Catholics will be loyal, more than anyone else."

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Featured image: From left to right: Adolf Hitler, Prince Philipp von Hessen, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and Pope Pius XII (Illustration by Cristiana Couceiro. Sources: Ullstein / Getty; Süddeutsche Zeitung / Alamy; Real Easy Star / Fotografia Felici / Alamy)

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