

IN REVIEW

Book stresses pope criticized Nazis and saved Jews

Hitler, the War, and the Pope, by Ronald J. Rychlak, Genesis Press Inc., 493 pp., \$26.95, hard cover; *Our Sunday Visitor*, 548 pp., \$22.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Charlie McKay
Guest contributor

It is supremely ironic that Hitler's stock has remained high all these decades, what with Skinheads, KKK and assorted neo-Nazi groups avidly promulgating his ideas of anti-Semitism and a master race. On the other hand, Pius XII's reputation has steadily (and in recent decades, rapidly) declined, labeling him as not only too neutral in WWII, but an outright anti-Semite who did not do enough to save Jews.

Most recently, he was removed from the cause of beatification (having been paired with John XXIII) and was replaced by Pius IX, a final indignity to a reputation much maligned and besmirched.

In *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*, by Ronald Rychlak, the late Cardinal John O'Connor wrote a brief foreword stating, "I am consoled by the heroic virtue of Pope Pius XII upon whom was placed the cross of shepherding the Church in those most difficult days."

The next 18 chapters and epilogue are the author's efforts to build a carefully nuanced case in support of Pius XII's efforts to save the Jews and also others subjected to Nazi persecution

and Hitler's final solution. The author meticulously mines every speech, encyclical and pronouncement given by the pope during these difficult and supremely sad days. There is a plethora of documentation that is bounty for a professional historian, but a bane to the average reader, as the author chronicles in minute detail the rapid rise of Hitler to world prominence, as well as that of Eugenio Pacelli. The pontiff denounced Nazism numerous times before and during the war. As early as 1929, Pius XII presented a speech in Notre Dame Cathedral ridiculing the Nazi theology and labeling it a "superstition of race and blood."

The book also includes a dissection of the pope's 1939 encyclical, "Summi Pontificatus," exposing "a world in all too dire need of guidance." Though somewhat oblique, it clearly denounced the "godless state" i.e., those of Nazism, Bolshevism or Communism, and Fascism. The author remarks several

times that most people, including Pius XII, perceived for too long a time that Communism was the greater threat and that the Nazis might obliterate this scourge. In those dark days of uncertainty on all sides, there was ceaseless posturing and diplomacy which the author, a law professor, presents like a legal brief with overwhelming details. The pope did what he could under the circumstances; after the war, Yitzak Isaac Herzog, chief rabbi of the Holy Land, praised the pope for "life-saving efforts on behalf of Jews during the Nazi occupation (of Rome)."

There is a myriad of little known tidbits, such as the then rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, who subsequently converted to Catholicism. After the war, he extolled Pius XII's efforts to save Jews and expressed his thanks on behalf of the Jewish community. He even took the baptismal name Eugenio in honor of Pius XII.

For the average reader the last 100 pages are perhaps the most engaging,

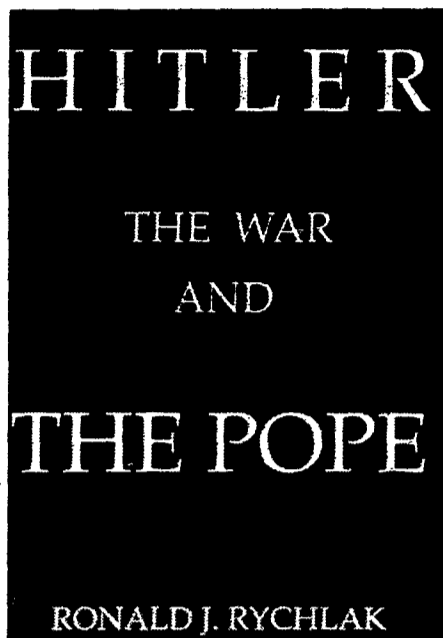
for it is there that the author directly confronts the two slander mongers credited with trashing Pius XII's reputation and perpetuating the notion that he was an anti-Semite: Rolf Hochhuth, whose seven-hour play of 1963, "The Deputy," vilifies Pius XII; and John Cornwell, whose book, "Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII," published this year, portrays the Pope, among other things, as "a single-minded Vatican lawyer and diplomat who set out to establish the greater authority of Rome over Europe's Catholic population."

The author devotes 26 pages of epilogue debunking these outrageous allegations. There is another adage that goes, "Festina lente," which translated from the Latin means, "Make haste slowly." Pius XII was not an anti-Semite but a truly holy man who will in time be vindicated as the truth continually emerges. He will one day be canonized. The book advances this end.

Charlie McKay is a retired teacher and resides in Rochester.

Related books include:

- Pope Pius XII: Architect for Rome, by Sister Margherita Marchione, of the Religious Teachers Filippini, Paulist Press.
- The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965, by Michael Phayer, Indiana University Press.
- Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican, by Pierre Blet, et al, Paulist Press.



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