

Andrea Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio. Pio XII, il nazismo, gli ebrei* (Rome - Bari: Laterza, 2022), pp. 384.

by *Susan Zuccotti*

When Pope Francis ordered and arranged the opening of the records of Pius XII (pope from 1939 to 1958) in the Vatican archives in March 2020, historians of the Second World War looked on with great anticipation. What new material, what deeper insights, could be expected? The Church is not afraid of history, Francis seemed to be saying at the time. All well and good, most scholars responded, but there is nevertheless much to learn, much to clarify, much to explain.

“There is nothing more to be learned,” a handful of specialists replied, and while vastly overstated, they had a point. Pope Pius XII’s extreme reluctance publicly to criticize German aggression and atrocities and condemn the ongoing extermination of the Jews is well known simply because it *was* public. Papal statements, speeches, broadcasts, communications, everything the pope wished at the time to make public is accessible to scholars today and has been endlessly debated. As a result, it is difficult to argue with the fact that, while he made public pleas for peace and compassion for the victims of war, the pope did not utter the words “Nazi,” “Fascist,” or “Jews,” much less describe and denounce the horrors of the Shoah.

With regard to diplomatic efforts by the Holy See to intervene behind-the-scenes on behalf of Jews and other victims of the war, relevant documents exist in the wartime archives of many other countries, including Italy, France, Germany, Britain and the United States, and have been carefully examined by scholars, sometimes for decades. Also available and highly relevant are the eleven volumes of diplomatic documents from the war years selected from the Vatican archives by an international team of historians, all priests, and published as *Actes et Documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale* (ADSS) between 1965 and 1981.¹ Naturally, scholars prefer the independent access to the archival

¹ *Actes et Documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale* (ADSS), eds. Pierre Blet, Robert A. Graham, Angelo Martini, and Burkhart Schneider, 11 vols. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 1965-1981.

sources of the ADSS that has now been granted, but much has already been learned about papal wartime diplomacy.

What then remains? The answer, of course, is that documents shed light on issues in multiple ways, raising, revealing, or answering questions often unexpected by the researchers themselves, and in a manner always invaluable to our understanding of history. With that in mind, therefore, this essay will examine an important new book by Andrea Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio: Pio XII, il nazismo, gli ebrei*.² Founder of the Comunità di Sant'Egidio in Rome and author or co-author of some forty other studies of the Catholic Church in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Riccardi is extraordinarily well prepared to deal again with the subject of Pope Pius XII and the Second World War.

As the word “again” suggests, *La guerra del silenzio* can best be understood as a kind of sequel to Riccardi’s earlier works, especially “*Roma città sacra*”? *Dalla Conciliazione all’operazione Sturzo* (1979) and *L’inverno più lungo, 1943-44. Pio XII, gli ebrei e i nazisti a Roma* (2008).³ In his newest book, Riccardi often refers to events he has treated elsewhere. His primary concern in *La guerra del silenzio* is to present material that is new, both from recently opened Vatican archives and from secondary studies that he has not discussed elsewhere.

In examining Andrea Riccardi’s new book, this essay will address two issues that have long necessitated further clarification and that may benefit greatly from access to the newly opened Vatican archives. The first issue involves the input of the pope’s advisors during the Second World War, particularly regarding endangered European Jews. We may know much about what Pius XII did or did not say publicly, and we have read the many explanations of his reticence—his wish to remain impartial and help negotiate a peace; his worries about a Bolshevik victory in Europe; and his fears of angering the Nazi leadership, endangering institutions of the Church, alienating German Catholics, and making things worse for the Jews. We also know that Pius received pleas from many prominent Catholic laymen, prelates, and priests to condemn Nazi atrocities and antisemitism throughout the war years and beyond. But we know less about the advice Pius XII

² Andrea Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio. Pio XII, il nazismo, gli ebrei* (Rome - Bari: Laterza, 2022).

³ Andrea Riccardi, *Roma “città sacra”? Dalla Conciliazione all’operazione Sturzo* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1979); Andrea Riccardi, *L’inverno più lungo, 1943-44. Pio XII, gli ebrei e i nazisti a Roma* (Rome - Bari: Laterza, 2008).

was receiving from his own staff of Vatican bureaucrats. More knowledge will greatly enhance our understanding of the pope's decision-making process. The Vatican archives can be expected to contain records of internal discussions and debates, and we shall begin by looking at what Riccardi has found on this subject. The second issue to be treated here involves the long-debated but far-from-answered question of Pius XII's encouragement, directives, and involvement behind the scenes in clandestine Jewish rescue. Evidence of such activities, secret by definition, cannot be found in papal declarations, contemporary newspaper articles, or archives other than those of the Vatican. Regarding the Vatican archives, it is to be supposed that the priests scouring them in the 1960s and 1970s would have included any evidence of papal involvement in Jewish rescue in their eleven-volume publication. There is in fact, however, very little there. What more may be accessible to scholars in those same now-public archives, and what has Andrea Riccardi found to date?

Regarding the first issue, requests to the Holy See during the war urging a public papal statement on behalf of the Jews were usually forwarded to Monsignor Angelo Dell'Acqua, the Vatican Secretariat of State staff member considered by the pope to be his foremost expert on Jewish affairs. In his most recent book, Riccardi has found several new documents revealing this bureaucrat's consistently negative advice. On October 2, 1942, for example, when American diplomats at the Holy See Myron Taylor and Harold Tittmann asked for a papal response to the many new eyewitness reports of ongoing massacres of Jews in Eastern Europe, including those addressed to the pope from a trusted Italian Catholic businessman who had recently travelled in Poland and another from the archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Monsignor Dell'Acqua advised against a public statement. A protest would antagonize the Germans and reports of atrocities must still be verified, in part, he explained, because they might be exaggerated and "exaggeration is easy among the Jews."⁴ Never mind that the reports of atrocities did not come from the Jews, or even, in their entirety, from the Allies. Eight days later, the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Luigi Maglione informed Tittmann that the pope would not make a statement.

⁴ Dell'Acqua quote in Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio*, 169.

Dell'Acqua's advice remained consistently negative and influential throughout the war. In November 1943, when Bishop Antonio Santin in Trieste asked the pope to intervene with the Germans on behalf of some 6,000 Italian Jews threatened with deportation from his city, Dell'Acqua objected, explaining that the Nazis would get the false idea that "the Holy See is in agreement with international Jewry, which preaches the necessity of the destruction or almost total destruction of the German people." He went on to wonder why the Holy See has "interested itself in the Jews and not deplored the massacres conducted by Communist Slavs and Germans [the latter, presumably, against Italian partisans]."⁵

A month later, Dell'Acqua advised against a proposal from the Jesuit Father Pietro Tacchi-Venturi, a former papal liaison to Mussolini and a frequent advisor to the pope, that Pius XII should privately request the government of the Third Reich to end the deportations of Jews from Italy, recently occupied by the Germans in September 1943. Tacchi-Venturi had sent his proposal to Cardinal Maglione, who, as he so often did, referred it to the Vatican's expert on Jewish affairs for his opinion. The reason to decline making such a request to the Germans, declared Dell'Acqua, was that it would have no effect and would simply antagonize the occupiers.⁶ Riccardi does not add the sentence that historian David Kertzer found in the same document, revealing that Dell'Acqua, obviously annoyed by the frequent appeals from Jews for help, advised that Vatican authorities should "let the Jewish *Signori* know that they should speak a little less and act with great prudence."⁷ Then, a full year later, in November 1944, after Rome had been liberated and the Vatican City faced no immediate threat from Nazi and Fascist forces, Dell'Acqua continued to advise against papal involvement in opposition to the ongoing deportations of Jews from Hungary, arguing that it would have no effect, would irritate the Germans and augment their suspicions, and would make things worse for the Jews.⁸

⁵ Ibid., Dell'Acqua quote, 173.

⁶ Ibid., 153-155.

⁷ Dell'Acqua quoted in David I. Kertzer, *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler* (New York: Random House, 2022), 383-387, and 565-566.

⁸ Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio*, 175. Pius XII had appealed personally by telegram to the Hungarian head of state Admiral Miklos Horthy on June 25, 1944, as had spokesmen from Sweden, Great Britain, the United States, the International Red Cross, and several neutral nations, and the

Monsignor Dell’Acqua was far from alone when it came to giving such advice on Jewish issues. In March 1943, Monsignor Giuseppe Di Meglio, also on the staff of the Vatican Secretariat of State, dropped all pretense of objectivity in a report to his superiors, including the pope, on the question of helping Jewish fugitives reach Palestine. “Most Jews,” he wrote, “are dedicated more than anything else to industry and especially to commerce. This commerce is quite fruitful when they are among Christians; if instead all and only Jews are gathered together, there is an enormous assembly of [...] swindlers, but a lack [...] of those to be swindled. Therefore most Jews have no desire to migrate to Palestine.”⁹ David Kertzer explains that Di Meglio’s report had been prompted by an appeal to the Vatican by Monsignor Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII but at that time papal delegate in Istanbul, asking for intervention with the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, head of the Slovakian government, so that one thousand Jewish children threatened with deportation could be allowed to emigrate to Palestine. Kertzer adds that in his March report, Di Meglio also commented, “The Holy See is being beseeched to help this emigration [to Palestine] *only* [italics mine] in order to save thousands of people (especially children) from certain death.”¹⁰ Riccardi tells us that Di Meglio also wrote in March that the Holy See should try, with prudence and discretion, to help endangered Jews. Riccardi also explains that, unlike Di Meglio, some other Vatican diplomats were willing to help Jewish fugitives get to Palestine. But he does not make it clear that despite Roncalli’s second appeal in May on behalf of Jewish children in Slovakia, Vatican bureaucrats continued to dither and squabble, and nothing was achieved.

Like Dell’Acqua and Di Meglio, Monsignor Domenico Tardini, head of the section for Affari Straordinari at the Vatican Secretariat of State and one of the top two advisors to Secretary of State Maglione, expressed extreme caution regarding the Germans and not infrequent signs of anti-Judaism. To cite just one example of the latter attitude, in notes on his report on October 18, 1940, on the proper use to be made of a gift to the pope of \$125,000 from the American United Jewish

deportations that had begun in late April were paused on July 6. Deportations and local mass murder resumed in Budapest in autumn 1944 and continued until the liberation of Hungary by Soviet troops in February 1945.

⁹ Ibid., Di Meglio quote, 281-282.

¹⁰ Di Meglio quote, Kertzer, *The Pope at War*, 274-275 and 547 n4.

Appeal, Tardini referred to the donors as “rich American Jews” and observed that Jews who had converted to Catholicism had, “by the nature of their action more honored [...] their race than their Catholicism.”¹¹ Tardini’s official report was included in volume 6 of the ADSS, but these remarks were omitted. Kertzer found them on the original document in the recently opened archives. Riccardi does not mention them, but he does suggest in a different context that the previous research and selection of documents published in the ADSS seem “not to be guided by a defensive strategy” intended to protect Pius XII and his advisors.¹² That observation is apparently not quite accurate.

While many documents indicating the anti-Jewish attitudes of some of Pope Pius XII’s advisors have emerged from the newly opened Vatican archives, the same cannot be said about the second issue to be addressed in this essay. What new information has been discovered regarding the pope’s private efforts to encourage, direct, and involve the Holy See in Jewish rescue? The subject can be divided into two parts, private diplomatic interventions with foreign government authorities on behalf of endangered Jews and more personal appeals to men and women of the Church and Catholic laypersons to support clandestine rescue operations. The diplomatic dimension of this issue is vast, indeed almost too broad to be discussed here. Andrea Riccardi has addressed it in *La guerra di silenzio*, but his relevant pages are complex, dense, and, in a sense, almost necessarily incomplete. Each Axis-affiliated or occupied country had a different chronology and a different context, and while Riccardi presents much useful new documentary evidence, he would require an entire book on each nation to integrate those findings into that already known. Better then, perhaps, to focus here on the nature of the pope’s outreach to individual priests, prelates, and religious institutions on behalf of endangered Jews.

It is clear that some priests and prelates approached the pope during the war for guidance on what to do to help the Jews. We know that when Bishop Konrad von Preysing in Berlin asked Pius XII for such guidance, the pope replied, “we leave it

¹¹ Ibid., Tardini quotes, 186, 525 n5. The United Jewish Appeal had sent the gift to Pope Pius XII in the autumn of 1939 to honor Pope Pius XI, who had died in February. It was to be used to assist war refugees.

¹² Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio*, 338.

to local senior clergymen to decide if, and to what degree. The danger of reprisals and oppression [...] may make restraint advisable—despite the reasons for intervention.”¹³ We know that some bishops in France spoke out publicly against the deportations of Jews from the unoccupied zone in the late summer of 1942; that several prelates in Italy were supportive of regional Jewish escape networks; that many men and women of the Church throughout occupied Europe rescued Jews at great risk to themselves. The pope may have known and approved, but is there any new evidence that he encouraged, much less ordered, such activities? We know also of priests who were ardent Nazis and Fascists; who became involved with violent militia gangs; who publicly endorsed vicious anti-Jewish propaganda. Is there any new evidence that the pope tried to rein in such activities?

There seems to be, as yet, very little that is new. David Kertzer has recently written of one case. Soon after the roundup of 1,259 Jews in Rome on October 16, 1943, a parish priest wrote to the Vatican to ask for help. The parents of two Jewish children, ages nine and fourteen, were desperately trying to hide them in local convents or monasteries, but according to the parish priest, several directors “refused to accept them because they are Jews, claiming a prohibition by the order of higher authorities.” An internal note with the document in the Vatican Secretariat of State files reads, in Latin, “what to do?” A second note responds, “One doesn’t see how the Secretariat of State can intervene.”¹⁴ It is difficult to reconcile this parish priest’s appeal with Riccardi’s undocumented statement that already in the weeks *before* the October 16 roundup in Rome, “some institutions of the Church were beginning to open themselves to hospitality to Jews, fugitives, draft evaders, and political dissidents (in some cases by following a *direct indication of Pius XII*) [italics mine]” and his reference to “clandestine hospitality in Church institutions, already begun” during the same period.¹⁵ That many Church institutions sheltered fugitives before October 16 is not to be doubted, but most of the many Jews who were accepted entered later. More to the point, a “direct indication of Pius XII,” especially at this early date, remains unproven.

In part because he has written of it in earlier works, Riccardi does not provide many details on the rescue of Jews and other fugitives in German-occupied Rome

¹³ Ibid., 195-196.

¹⁴ Kertzer, *The Pope at War*, 380 and 564 n22.

¹⁵ Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio*, 220 and 222.

in *La guerra del silenzio*. If the recently opened archives had provided him with new material, however, he would surely have mentioned it. He does discuss the case of some fifty fugitives who were being hidden by individual prelates in the Canonica, their residence within Vatican City, in February 1944. Soon after the German and Fascist raid on the extraterritorial Basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura on February 3-4 which resulted in the arrests of some sixty-four fugitives including at least five Jews, the prelates living in the Canonica received orders that their fifty “guests” were to be expelled. When the prelates objected to the commission for the administration of Vatican City, the three cardinals in charge, nervous about the security of both the fugitives and the Vatican itself, informed them that the orders of expulsion came from above (“*per ordine superiore*”). Monsignor Guido Anichini, director of the Canonica, appealed directly to the pope on behalf of the fugitives, and the prelates hosting them asked Cardinal Maglione to do the same. Within a few days the orders were apparently modified, and the “guests” seem to have been allowed to choose for themselves whether to remain or seek greater safety elsewhere.¹⁶

None of this information is new. All of it became available with the publication of the ADSS in the late 1960’s and 1970’s. The point here is that Riccardi seems to have found no new details in the recently opened Vatican archives. Are there no internal memos dealing with this issue? Did the pope himself relent after appeals from Anichini and Maglione? Was there more debate among Vatican bureaucrats about this case and about others, as, for example, when the Seminario Lombardo and the Basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura were also ordered to dismiss all non-clerics in February 1944? Was the pope behind the orders to those two institutions and to the Jesuit Father Paolo Dezza, rector of the Università Gregoriana, who was also granting refuge to fugitives, that no false seminarian should be issued clerical garb, knowing full well that clandestine existence was close to impossible without disguise? Are there no records of internal discussions of the case of the Pontificio Seminario Romano Maggiore, where some 200 fugitives, including many prominent anti-Fascists and fifty-five Jews, were hidden with recommendations from individual priests and prelates and with the knowledge of Monsignor

¹⁶ Ibid., 207-208.

Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, but also where the rector, Monsignor Roberto Ronca, was reprimanded by Vatican bureaucrats for excessive zeal and indiscretion and for worrying the pope? And perhaps most interesting, are there any new documents indicating that the pope *directed* religious institutions in Rome to grant shelter to Jews? Riccardi does not mention any in *La guerra del silenzio*. Perhaps there are relevant documents in smaller Vatican archives not yet opened. If so, it would be gratifying to know.

In *La guerra del silenzio*, Andrea Riccardi ranges far beyond the issues of wartime bureaucratic advisors and papal assistance to endangered Jews in Rome described briefly here. His purpose is to integrate new archival material into his past research and to offer his updated conclusions on many relevant questions. There is much here with which one can agree. Riccardi does not deny the “silence” of Pius XII—indeed, on one of the first pages of his book, he writes that it was “a term and a reality that Vatican diplomats had to account for from the very beginning.”¹⁷ While he is careful not to overlook any instance of a public papal declaration on behalf of peace and compassion for the victims of war, he also describes the multiple appeals to the pope for stronger and more specific statements that were ignored. He presents new documents indicating that most Vatican bureaucrats, generally Italian by birth, were partial to an Italian victory in the war and were often sympathetic to Mussolini. He quotes several private Vatican documents that vaguely encourage support for “non-Aryan Catholics,” the prevailing term for Jewish converts, without an equal commitment to individuals who were Jews by religion or culture. And he makes it abundantly clear that attitudes changed slowly or not at all during the first decade after the war, when many Vatican spokesmen sheltered and appealed for compassion for well-known Italian Fascists, maintained their traditional suspicions of Jews, refused to condemn anti-Semitic incidents in Poland, and continued to discourage Jewish immigration to Palestine. He does declare, however, that there is no new archival document indicating the involvement of Pius XII or Montini in the ratline.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., xvii.

¹⁸ Ibid., 328.

Unlike some of the most fanatic defenders of Pius XII, Riccardi never denies that throughout the entire war, the pope and his advisors had extensive reliable information about the ongoing extermination of the Jews. He suggests occasionally that “knowledge” did not always result in full “understanding,” as was tragically true of individuals in other nations and other capacities who were also trying to process the almost incomprehensible news of genocide. That point then leads Riccardi to one of his most important and convincing conclusions, involving the geographical, cultural, and generational isolation of the men who were making the decisions at the Vatican. The Vatican was, Riccardi writes, “a small group of men, united by the same faith and by the same ecclesiastical formation, with different sensibilities, all closely attached to a pope who governed in a reflective and slow manner, totally other than decisive.”¹⁹

Many readers will disagree with some of Riccardi’s other statements and techniques. For example, he occasionally describes a document in which a Vatican bureaucrat approves of a specific private diplomatic intervention on behalf of certain victims of war without telling us whether that intervention was ever made or, if made, whether there were results. Similarly, he quotes documents in which papal advisors instruct those who have sought advice to say that “The Vatican continues to do everything it can,” without acknowledging the frequent deceit and hypocrisy involved in such statements. Typical would be the case of Tardini in October 1944 who, when rejecting a request for papal intervention on behalf of Jews in Hungary that he considered useless, advised that the message of refusal should be “Ample and warm. To say simply ‘we will do what is possible’ seems like bureaucratic coldness. The less that can be achieved, the more necessary to show the concern of the Holy See.”²⁰ Pius XII’s advisors were deeply concerned about the historic record.

Riccardi also sometimes makes a statement without explanation of its sources. For example, he writes, “When a Jew is about to be kicked out of the Vatican, by order of Cardinal Canali, a determined opponent of an activity he considered illegal, the pope blocks the decision.”²¹ Similarly, he writes that “Pius XII reassures the queen mother of Romania, Elena, of the commitment of the Church to promote the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 343-344.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

expatriation of Romanian Jews to Palestine.”²² Both statements may be true, but they require details and documentation. Along the same lines, in some cases Riccardi cites as his only acknowledgement a secondary source known to historians to be consistently biased and unreliable. As an example here, he declares that at Lourdes in 1935 and at Notre Dame in Paris in 1937, Pius XII, at the time papal legate Eugenio Pacelli, publicly condemned “the superstition of race and blood.” He cites a book by David Dalin, a wildly unreliable defender of Pius XII, but in that book, Dalin provides as his source his own article, written four years earlier. However true the statement may or may not be, Dalin does not constitute a standard of proof.²³

From time to time, Riccardi also lets stand without examination a theory that is highly debatable and controversial. For example, he repeats a claim that the German SS security police released some 200 of the 1,259 victims arrested in the Rome roundup of October 16, 1943, because of intervention by a spokesman from the Vatican, when in fact it is clear that those prisoners were freed because they did not meet the Nazi criteria for deportation at the time.²⁴ They consisted of non-Jews arrested by mistake, Jewish spouses and children from mixed marriages, and Jewish citizens of countries where deportations were not occurring. No Vatican intervention was needed for their release.

In his conclusion to *La guerra del silenzio*, Andrea Riccardi expresses his conviction that “the work of the historian is not that of a judge and does not end with a judgment.” He continues, “What is important is that the history of those decisive years [of the Second World War and the immediate post-war period] continues to be studied in order to understand what Europe is.”²⁵ It is difficult not to judge, but it is more important, as Riccardi says, to continue to study and try to understand. But in our effort to understand, it is crucial to confirm and clarify the reality of those years, and to eliminate the tremendous number of false claims that

²² Ibid., 284.

²³ Ibid., 10. Riccardi cites David Dalin, *La leggenda nera del papa di Hitler* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2007), 110. The original English-language edition of Dalin’s work is *The Myth of Hitler’s Pope* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2005), 65 and 177 nn97-98. Riccardi cites several other questionable secondary sources in his work.

²⁴ Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio*, 217.

²⁵ Ibid, 345.

have been made by the most extreme defenders of Pius XII. The pope did not defy the Germans and condemn Nazism and antisemitism courageously and unambiguously, using those words in a manner that all could understand. The Vatican did not issue tens of thousands of fake baptismal certificates in Italy and Romania; the pope was not responsible for saving 6,400 of the 8,000 Jews of Rome after the roundup on October 16, 1943; it is untrue that “Pius XII and his church were able to save up to 970,000 persecuted Jews.”²⁶

With regard to these false allegations, Andrea Riccardi, in *La guerra del silenzio*, disproves the first, the claims of papal defiance and condemnation in his public statements, but he neither repeats nor denies the others. It is to be hoped that the further research and study he recommends will clarify the reality and bring us closer to a shared understanding of the Church as it was during the war, and as it has become in recent decades, and as it can be in the future. In his new book, Riccardi points us in that direction, for as he concludes movingly, “Faced with the war, Pius XII and the Church of his time were witnesses and actors in events much larger than themselves. It was not the Church of Vatican II or of John Paul II in contact with a free and lively public opinion. It was not the opinion of a global world. The isolation was the condition and the grave fragility of the Holy See.”²⁷

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²⁶ These claims and the quotation are from Michael Hesemann, “The Silence of Pius XII: An Exchange,” *The New York Review*, November 24, 2022, 61.

²⁷ Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio*, 343.