

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

by *Michele Sarfatti*

Andrea Riccardi is a well-known Italian historian, one of the founders of the Catholic Movement “Comunità di Sant’Egidio.” He has published several essays on the Catholic Church in the 20th century. One of them, *L’inverno più lungo. 1943-44: Pio XII, gli ebrei e i nazisti a Roma* (Rome - Bari: Laterza, 2008) [*The Longest Winter. 1943-44: Pius XII, the Jews and the Nazis in Rome*], was written before the Vatican archives on those years were made open to the public. It deals with the assistance given by Catholics to Roman Jews during the Nazi occupation and under the Italian Social Republic [the Repubblica Sociale Italiana], from September 1943 to June 1944.

In 2008, when the book was published, the only documents of the Holy See’s Secretariat of State pertaining to the Shoah available to scholars were those that the Holy See itself had published in *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale*, eds. Pierre Blet, Robert Graham, Angelo Martini and Burkhardt Schneider, 11 vols. (Città del Vaticano: Libreria editrice vaticana, 1965-1981).

On March 2 2020, most of the documents either issued or collected by the Secretariat of State during the pontificate of Pius XII (1939-1958), particularly those dating from 1939 to 1945, were made available for public consultation. A few days later access was discontinued because of the Covid pandemic but was subsequently resumed, starting from May. The documents are kept in the Vatican Apostolic Archives (which until October 2019 were known as the Vatican Secret Archives) [Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, AAV] and in the Historical Archive of the Secretariat of State-Section for Relations with States and International Organizations [Archivio Storico della Segreteria di Stato-Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati e le Organizzazioni Internazionali, ASRS]. The two archives are independent and located on opposite sides of the Belvedere Court. Access may be obtained via a variety of procedures, each requiring special passes, making it less than easy for scholars to access the material.

The pleas for help sent to the Pope or to the Secretariat of State by those who had been classified as being “of Jewish race” in a number of anti-Semite countries, and who professed either the Jewish or (in many cases) the Catholic religion, are to be found mainly in the series “Jews” (Ebrei) in the Fond Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs (Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari), (at the time First Section of the Secretariat of State), kept in the ASRS, or in the section “Race” (Razza) of the Fond Papal Commission for Aid [Pontificia Commissione Soccorsi] (that came under the authority of what was then the Second Section of the Secretariat of State) kept in the AAV. The series “Jews” for the most part contains requests concerning entry visas, passports and issues related to the implementation of anti-Semite laws in various countries, whereas the section “Race” is devoted to requests for aid, financial or otherwise. This division, however, could not be strictly maintained, with the result that other material relating to aid activities can be found in other archival resources.¹

Information on how the Shoah was carried out in individual European territories is to be found mainly in the Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs section of the ASRS archive, in the series organized by nation; but further material may be found in the archives of the Papal Nunciatures, of the Commission for Aid and of other bureaus and organizations kept in the AAV.

After examining these “new” documents, in November 2022, Andrea Riccardi published *La guerra del silenzio. Pio XII, il nazismo, gli ebrei* (Rome - Bari: Laterza, 2022) [*The War of Silence. Pius XII, Nazism, the Jews*, hereinafter referred to as *La guerra*]. The book runs to 380 pages. Though it has an index of names, it lacks a list of archival resources examined. It also lacks a bibliography and an explanatory list of acronyms.

Before the publication of *La guerra*, two books based on these “new” Vatican documents had also been published. Both dealt entirely or partially with the issue of the Holy See in the face of the Shoah. The first, by Johan Ickx, was *Le Bureau. Les Juifs de Pie XII* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Lafon, 2020), translated into Italian with the title *Pio XII e gli ebrei* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2021). This book too lacks an index of names, a list of archival resources, a bibliography and an explanatory list of

¹ Giovanni Coco, “Concevoir le secours. Pie XII, la Secrétairerie d’Etat du Vatican et l’assistance aux Juifs (1938-1947),” *Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah*, 218 (octobre 2023): 93-127.

acronyms. Printed on the cover's inner pages is a list of over half the names on the dossiers contained in the series "Jews." According to the author, the total runs to some 2,800.

Ickx is head of the ASRS and all the Vatican documents he has used for the book are kept in that archive. Since the book's first edition in French was published in September 2020, one may infer that he conceived and partially wrote it while he was preparing to open the documents in his archive to the public. Ickx's book is divided into chapters, each devoted to a single topic following the Vatican's descriptive documentation. The stories have not been subjected to historiographical verification.

The second book is David I. Kertzer's *Un papa in guerra. La storia segreta di Mussolini, Hitler e Pio XII* (Milano: Garzanti, [May] 2022); Id., *The Pope at War. The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler* (New York: Random House, [June] 2022). The book does have an index of names, a list of archival resources consulted, a bibliography and an explanatory list of acronyms.

Kertzer devotes considerable attention to the issue of the Holy See in the face of the Shoah, but the main focus of the book is on the general question of the relations between the three governments, or rather between the representatives of each of them. The concluding chapter, 'Final Thoughts. The Silence of the Pope' is, however, though brief, of importance to the issue.

Kertzer's narrative is based on documents in the main archives of the Vatican and in the archives of five other countries. As to the Vatican material, Kertzer has made ample use of the "new" documental series. For many of the documents already present in the *Actes et documents*, he quotes only this latter publication, and does not add the record reference.

Finally, in November 2022, Riccardi published his *La Guerra*, the subject of this review.

The book consists of a brief introduction, nine chapters, and a few pages of concluding remarks. The author's reflections are scattered throughout the chapters, and it therefore seems easier, in commenting on them, to follow the order in which they appear in the book.

In the introduction, when describing the Second Vatican Council and the changes it ushered in, the author writes: "In this climate, Pius XII's choices during the war appear acquiescent [*accomodanti*], even embarrassing, not just because of the new

awareness of the Shoah that has matured in the Western world, but also because of the Church's 'prophetic vocation'" (p. XI). One might readily see this statement as a clear message to the reader that this book is not only an historian's reconstruction of a prominent Pontiff's actions, but also a Catholic's reflection on the guidance exerted by one of his pastors. As to the terms used in the above-quoted sentence, the word "choices" is noteworthy, as it points to Pius XII as the protagonist of the Holy See's position.

In this section, Riccardi states repeatedly that the subject of his book is "the silence" (or "the silences"). As we know, both in past and in recent years most historians have focused their reconstructions and analyses on the concept of "silence". One might feel, however, that it would have been preferable to focus the historical research on the question of Pius XII's "actions." Clearly, the Pope might on the one hand have publicly expressed hope, solidarity, or condemnation; on the other he might, even in a non-public manner, organize or support actions designed to combat the events. A simple account of the alternative between speaking and keeping silent does not, one might feel, cover the entire range of options that were open to Eugenio Pacelli at the time, although obviously that choice was a formative part of his deliberations. We should not forget, after all, that "Charity" includes "deeds" as well as intentions.

Riccardi informs the reader in his opening pages that "Pius XII's silence" was not limited to Nazi persecution of Jews, but also to other aspects of the war, primarily the Nazis' persecution of the Poles, by which he means the Catholic majority.

The first chapter paints a broad picture of the entire situation, of the Holy See and of some of the key actors in these events. This summary, although rather too succinct, is very useful. One would have appreciated a more detailed description of the people working in the Secretariat of State and an expansion of some of the issues mentioned. For example, "The Church cannot avoid having dealings (even if limited ones) with a State where its followers are living" (p. 12) is a proposition begging for further analysis.

Throughout these pages Riccardi makes a point that is one of the principal conclusions of his research. The theory that Pius XII "was not aware" of the extermination, that "he was not informed (or only very partially informed) of the fate of the Jews," is a theory that "does not hold true in face of documentary

evidence” (p. 52). This is clearly in agreement with his previous statement that the Pope’s course of action regarding the Shoah was the result of a “choice.”

The second chapter describes the prelude to war and the steps undertaken by the pontiff in 1939-1940 to prevent or limit it, steps that were unsuccessful, as is well known.

One might point out that the author can at times be somewhat flexible within the chronological constraints he himself has imposed on this chapter. For example, he mentions that towards the end of a long radio broadcast on 24 December 1942, the pope devoted a few words to the “... hundreds of thousands of guiltless people, (...) [who were] because of nationality or race [stirpe]... fated to die” (p. 80). This phrase is quoted again at a different point in the book, when Riccardi explains how news about the extermination reached the Holy See in the last months of 1942 (p. 191). On both occasions he quotes international reactions to the broadcast, but does not engage with the question as to whether the pope’s words were of any substantive help to the Jews. This might suggest that for Riccardi, as for many other historians, the historiographical issue of the pope’s “silences” on the Shoah has more to do with the pontiff than with the extermination itself.

The third chapter deals with the first of the two great issues concerning the “silences” of the Holy See, namely its position on the Nazi occupation of Poland. Berlin dealt very harshly with Poland as a country and with its (prevalently) Catholic nature. Riccardi writes that at first the Holy See did, on some occasions, express condemnation (for instance in the Encyclical *Summi Pontificatus* of October 20 1939), but then rightly adds that very soon “the term ‘silence’ began to be used to define Pius XII’s attitude towards Poland during the war” (p. 95).

The author tells of various messages concerning this situation that were sent to the Vatican from Poland, both directly, and through Italian military chaplains travelling on Italian army hospital trains; he then writes: “The historian’s role is neither that of a defending counsel nor of a prosecutor: this is obvious, but needs to be kept in mind when dealing with such a dramatic history that has stirred up so great an animosity. The historian’s task is to understand the period and its actors” (p. 107). These reflections are obviously unimpeachable, but in *La Guerra* they come across as those of a prominent Catholic who looks with pain on the unsatisfactory behavior of a past pontiff, rather than the work an analyst intent on “defining,” albeit without “judging.”

As we know, the pope was a man accustomed to pondering the meaning and the perception of his actions. He chose not to express publicly any support of the Polish Catholics, particularly after the theater of war had changed so dramatically in June 1941. His intention was neither to be, nor to be perceived as being, either pro-Russian or anti-German, as such a perception might have proved damaging to both German and Austrian Catholics.

Following these considerations, the chapter becomes even more complex, when the author turns his attention to the extremely harsh persecution of the Jews, particularly in Poland and the adjoining territories. Here, the timing of the narrative shifts from 1939-1942 to 1942-1943.

As in the previous pages, *La Guerra* offers many quotations (some previously unpublished) taken from reports from members of the clergy, from Italian company managers, from representatives of the Polish government in exile. When referring to the Jews, the word extermination appears repeatedly and there are sporadic references to the deployment of gas (pp. 107-121). In this section, Riccardi quotes no less than twice the words written in September 1942 by Giovanni Battista Montini, one of the deputy Secretaries of State, after his well-known conversation with Giovanni Malvezzi, manager of IRI, who had visited Poland on a business trip: “The massacres of the Jews have reached dimensions and forms horrific and heinous [proporzioni e forme esecrande e spaventose]” (pp. 111, 121). These words, one may feel, refer very precisely to news of the use of gas for mass murder.

One senses that it might have been more helpful if these two issues, the position on the Poles and the position on the Jews, had been treated more independently. After all, at the time, the manner and intention with which the two persecutions were carried out by no means fully intersected. Moreover, in March 1943 the Secretariat of State made plans to break the first of the two silences (p. 129) and on June 2 the Pope publicly expressed his warm support of the Polish people. No such declaration was made on behalf of the Jews.

The fourth chapter deals with the complex relationship between the Vatican and Nazi Germany. It might usefully be pointed out that the frequent use of the term “Christianity” instead of “Catholicism” makes it difficult to understand fully the author’s reflections. However, he outlines well how the two “projects” were deeply incompatible. On a different level, he writes that at the time the Catholic

community that looked to the Vatican for guidance faced the following dilemma: “Is it really the Church’s task to defend the Jews? Or should the Church’s priority be defending the interests of Catholics and its own freedom?” (p. 150). Riccardi does not answer his own questions, but the very fact that he does not, and the way in which the two questions are phrased, reveal the relevance that the first of the two has for him and the distress he feels because of the answer the Holy See gave to it.

The fifth section, titled “A Difficult Moment”, is in my view the core of the book. In September 1942 Pius XII received Myron Taylor, whom President Roosevelt had appointed as his personal envoy to the Holy See. It should be noted that the transit of an “enemy” through Italy in wartime was eloquent proof of Rome’s respect for the autonomy of the Vatican. Taylor’s subsequent talks with Secretary of State Luigi Maglione and with deputies Giovanni Battista Montini and Domenico Tardini took place between September 19 and 26, and touched upon many issues. As he was leaving, Taylor handed the Secretariat of State a written report on the extermination of the Jews that he had only just received from Washington. From the late delivery of this report, we might reasonably assume that during the preceding weeks, while the mission was being prepared, the US Government had not included the treatment of Jews by the Nazis among the issues it considered of fundamental importance.

Be that as it may, the report contained extremely serious information, to the extent that the United States felt it necessary to bring it officially to the attention of the pope and of the Secretariat of State. The latter’s opinion was encapsulated in a comment written by Monsignor Angelo Dell’Acqua, who disputed the truth of the facts listed in the report, was critical of what he called mere conjecture on the part of the Americans, and even claimed that an intervention by the Holy See would cause Nazi persecution to grow worse (thus denying that it had reached the level of severity certified in the report, or the level of severity reported to the Secretariat of State by other sources). Again, Riccardi’s comment on Dell’Acqua’s text, phrased as a question, is harsh: “The prelate’s minimizing and dismissive opinion is striking, if only because the Holy See actually possessed very serious information on the treatment of the Jews. How is such an opinion possible, when it was known that the Nazis’ aim was to exterminate the Jews?” (p. 170). Once

again, the author does not answer his own question, which once again takes on the import of a harsh comment by a man of deep faith.

The pages that follow describe how news of the genocide continued to accumulate and record the comments of various leading Catholic personages. One example is the message sent in November 1942 by the Apostolic Nuncio in Berlin, which Riccardi himself calls “important.” Among other things, it contained the phrase: “however, little hope is harbored here that it may be possible, with the country’s internal forces alone [con le sole forze interne del paese], to curb this extreme measure which intends to suppress in Germany any possibility of an even partially non-Arian progeny” (p. 187). This statement deserves to be examined very carefully: one might feel that its mention of the inadequacy of “internal forces alone” implied a request to the Holy See to intervene; *La Guerra*, however, does not dwell further on this aspect.

As already mentioned, towards the end of his radio message on 24 December 1942 Pius XII hinted, in an already quoted excerpt, at the people who “because of nationality or race [stirpe] are fated to die” (p. 191). Riccardi rightly writes that “the Pope, by using the word ‘race’ [stirpe], was convinced that he had spoken out clearly on the massacres of Jews” (p. 191); but in the next paragraph, “Is it a Condemnation?” (pp. 193-196), the author does not elaborate on his view, and simply offers the readers the post-war opinion of Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, that Pius XII’s words were “pallid” and “not easy to decipher” (p. 193).

In the sixth chapter Riccardi gives a brief outline of the course the Pope and the Secretariat of State followed until Pius XII’s public speech on June 2 1943. In that speech one sees on the one hand a short and veiled allusion to the situation of the Jews, and on the other an explicit declaration of solidarity with the Polish people. The allusion consisted in a few moving words about a “race” [stirpe] that had been struck by “exterminatory constraints” [costrizioni sterminatrici] and the declaration went so far as to express the hope of a “future” [avvenire] for those people (pp. 210-213).

Though the speech marked the end of the Pope’s double silence on the two persecuted groups, Riccardi does not highlight this. Certainly, the explicit use of the word “exterminatory” in referring to the Jews was a novelty of enormous importance. One cannot however avoid remarking that this group, the one that was subject to harsher treatment, was not mentioned by name, nor did it benefit

from any good wishes for its future. *La Guerra* does not comment on Pius XII's choice of words, thus showing some timidity in defining the position of the Pope and of the Secretariat of State.

The pages that follow focus on the events in Rome after September 8 1943. In one passage Riccardi writes that, following the meeting on October 16 between the Secretary of State Luigi Maglione and the German ambassador Ernst von Weizsäcker, “in the Vatican they felt that they had saved [salvato] some of the people arrested” (p. 217). Actually, the release of some persons who had been hastily arrested was in accordance with the criteria established by Berlin at the time. Nonetheless, the men in the Secretariat of State may very well have “felt” what the author says; the episode, however, might have benefited from a more detailed description. Apart from that, Riccardi examines the mindset of the pope and his collaborators at the time of the October 16 raid. He reaches the conclusion that they “clearly did [not] think that something might happen to the Roman Jews, despite what the Germans were doing to the Jews all over Europe” (p. 219). Shortly after, he adds that “the Pope believed that the Jewish community [...] would not be deported” (p. 221). These remarks, that the pope and the Secretariat of State “did [not] think” and “believed” are for readers of *La Guerra* an avowal, uttered by a modern-day man of faith, that the men then leading the Catholic world were not equal to the situation they faced.

After that, the author dwells on some cases of assistance tendered to Roman Jews, summarizing parts of his previous book *L'inverno più lungo*.

The seventh chapter deals with countries (not including Italy) that were formally independent from Germany yet contributed to the Shoah. These were Slovakia, Croatia, Romania and Hungary. Riccardi describes the actions of nuncios and bishops in these territories. Although those actions encountered limits they did, however, achieve some results. In some cases, the Secretariat of State was able to obtain an easing or a postponement of some anti-Jewish measures. It was a very fragmented and complex situation.

Describing the specific situation in Budapest in the fall of 1944, which saw further massacres of Jews, along with public actions aimed at shielding them carried out by some foreign diplomats (including the apostolic nuncio Angelo Rotta), Riccardi writes that “somehow [...] a kind of asylum for the protection of the Jews similar to the ‘Roman’ model was put into practice” (p. 268). As to this statement,

it should however be remembered that the help given by Catholics to the Roman Jews was the result of actions neither organized nor initiated by the Holy See's Secretariat of State, and moreover, that no diplomatic status was conferred upon them.

The two following chapters are devoted to the growing news about the true extent of the mass murder of Jews, to the flare up of anti-Semitism in some already liberated territories, to the dawning of awareness of the Shoah.

In these pages the focus of the narrative shifts gradually from the Holy See as actor on the international scene to the Catholic Church as a religious body first and foremost. Greater relevance is thus attributed to issues such as the persistence of areas of Catholic anti-Judaism or the question of how far Catholics understood the various aspects and the meaning of the Shoah.

This shift is prompted by the book's chronological structure and by the interests and the feelings of the author. It does however result in a diminishing of the importance of some of the historiographical questions centering on the Holy See in the face of the Shoah. Did the information that the Secretariat of State received in those years, for instance, and particularly the information that accumulated in the second half of 1942, suffice to make them understand that by the end of that year the number of persons murdered amounted already to several millions? What information did Eugenio Pacelli, Luigi Maglione and the others have and what had they understood? Therefore, what did their "silence" relate to? And however, apart from what was said or not said, what actions or behaviors did they set in motion when they received that information?

The short final chapter of *La Guerra* bears the title: "Conclusions. Horror, Complexity and Defeat." These three words sum up the general historical event and Riccardi's research: the Shoah was a terrible event; the Holy See's response was inadequate; at all events, it was a heavy defeat for mankind.

In my view *La Guerra* offers an important contribution to the reconstruction of this historical event. However, Andrea Riccardi's passionate research is encumbered by the intertwining of questions posed by historiography and questions posed by faith. All of them are legitimate, of course, but the Shoah meant the murder of one, then two, then three, then four, then five, then six million Europeans "of Jewish race," and the main issue is how, while it was taking place, the principal authorities of other countries, of international institutions, of

main religions, received news of it, were aware of it, and acted. The understanding of the Shoah after it ended, of course, is also a very important issue, but that took place after 1945 (and after the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948).

To conclude, I would like to add a specific comment. Along with many other books dealing with the Holy See in the face of the Shoah, *La guerra* too devotes scant attention to the persecution itself, for instance, to the way in which it developed over time and in various places, or to the instances in which the killings decreased because of the extent of the previous massacres, or to other issues. The point is that the facts from which the news originated, news that in turn was greeted by reaction or lack of reaction, are as important as the news and the reactions themselves.

Another significant aspect of the history of the Shoah is the classification employed by anti-Semite governments, particularly the creation of two specific “categories” of people: those of “racially mixed” unions and those who were “of Jewish race” but Catholic by religion. As to the former, one needs to remember that Berlin almost always excluded them from deportation and that the same criterion was obviously applied in Rome in October 1943.²

As for Catholics “of Jewish race,” the Holy See was successful in some countries (but neither in Germany nor in Italy) in obtaining some slight mitigation for them. The Vatican archives, moreover, hold a great many of their pleas for help. Their treatment therefore deserves focused attention.

Finally, I would like to clarify that it was not at the Wannsee Conference that the systematic extermination of the Jews was “planned” or “decided” (pp. 33, 107, 167). The extermination had already been willed, decided, and ordered at the highest level in Nazi Germany. The senior ministerial and political officials who met in Wannsee in January 1944 were concerned only with a few specific aspects of the implementation of that decision, starting precisely with the question of persons of “mixed race.”

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² Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, revised ed. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985); Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews. 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007); Liliana Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria. Gli Ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943-1945)*, 3rd ed. (Milano: Mursia, 2002).

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