



**Gerard Noel.** *Pius XII: The Hound of Hitler*. London: Continuum, 2008. 220 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84706-355-7.

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## Eugenio Pacelli–Pius XII: Still Looking for a Biographer

The role of Eugenio Pacelli, elected pope as Pius XII on March 2, 1939, is still and always debated, not only among historians but also theologians, especially after the election of Benedict XVI in April 2005. Sometimes, however, the debate appears unable to move beyond the ideological entrenchment whose contours were shaped in the controversy following “The Deputy” (1963). Noel’s attempt to appeal to the reader’s hunger for sensational new discoveries is signaled in the title. The book aims to demonstrate Pacelli’s physical and psychological, not to mention intellectual and spiritual, inability to resist the extraordinary pressures he faced, first as a Vatican diplomat in Germany, then in Rome as secretary of state, and finally as pope during World War II.

Pacelli is described as having experienced many nervous collapses during his early years in Munich (beginning in May 1917) and then in Berlin (from 1925). As Pius XI’s secretary of state (from December 1929 to February 1939), Pacelli is depicted as “the flying Cardinal” and held responsible for a “catastrophic miscalculation” in signing the 1933 concordat with the National Socialist regime. After his rather summary chapters on World War II, Noel draws a dramatic picture of the institutional chaos in the last months of Pius XII’s Vatican, especially between 1954 and 1958. Noel’s contribution provides the debate about Pius XII with a sort of psychological determinism: “Given his political inheritance, could he have broken the mould and initiated an entirely different strategy for the Holy See in his time? The answer is yes—but only if he had been a man of very different psychological make-up from what he was. It was the combination of papal outlook, as inherited from the late nineteenth century, with the personal character of Pope Pius XII, which determined the course

of history during this period” (p. 194).

The final chapters, far from offering an “apologia pro Pacelli,” sound a guilty verdict on Pius XII’s pontificate. Noel bluntly affirms that “even so terrible a fate as the slaughter of millions of Jews was not so great an evil as would have been the fatal weakening of the one, true, Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church, of which he was guardian”—and this while he was “making superhuman efforts at all times to give shelter to Nazi victims and save Jewish lives” (p. 197). Noel’s biographical approach aims at inferring personal biographical elements in support of a neutral (neither apologetic, nor criminal) view of Pacelli, more than informing or suggesting new interpretations of the quite complex and indeed crucial role Pacelli played in Vatican diplomacy between the end of World War I and the late 1950s. When Noel affirms that Pacelli was totally dominated by Sister Pascalina Lehnert, who is depicted as the real power behind the scenes of the Roman Curia, he takes up again a series of rumors about Pacelli’s staff that circulated well before Pius XII’s death.

In the end, the book is mostly the result of the author’s long personal contacts with the Roman-Vatican milieu along with his experience as a translator of one of the twelve volumes of the *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale*, although the main sources of his work are a rather gossipy book about the role of Lehnert, John Cornwell’s controversial *Hitler’s Pope*, and an account of the “miraculous” medical treatment that kept Pius XII alive between 1954 and 1958.[1] Reading Noel’s book will not help anyone assess the state of the scholarly and public debate on Pacelli’s relationship with the Nazi regime, either as diplomat or pope, whether during World War II or the Shoah.

A considerable number of books (not to mention

articles) are published every year on this subject, but few focus on the contribution that might come from the newly, albeit partially, declassified files in the Vatican Secret Archives that document Pacelli's work as a top diplomat, which were opened to scholars between 2003 and 2006.[2] The Vatican milieu has always tried to rescue Pacelli from the most serious accusations, while the German Catholic research establishment and its lack of critical approach to German Catholicism in the twentieth century have been servants of the accusers of Pius XII.[3] Despite the ongoing clash between his accusers and his advocates, Eugenio Pacelli, one of the key figures in the twentieth-century history of the Roman Catholic Church, is still in search of a biographer.

#### Notes

[1]. Paul I. Murphy and R. René Arlington, *La Popessa* (New York: Warner Books, 1983); John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (London: Viking, 1999); Gilles Lambert, *Conquest of Age: The Extraordinary Story of Dr Paul Niehans* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1959).

[2]. During approximately the last year alone: Charles R. Gallagher, *Vatican Secret Diplomacy: Joseph P. Hurley and Pope Pius XII* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2008); Michael Phayer, *Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Klaus Kühlwein, *Warum der Papst schwieg: Pius XII. und der Holocaust* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2008); Hanspeter Oeschwald, *Pius XII, Der letzte Stellvertreter: Der Papst, der Kirche und Gesellschaft spaltet* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2008); Hubert Wolf, *Papst und Teufel: Die Archive des Vatikan und das Dritte Reich* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2008); Alessandro Persico, *Il caso Pio XII: Mezzo secolo di dibattito su Eugenio Pacelli* (Milano: Guerini, 2008); and Andrea Riccardi, *L'inverno più lungo 1943-44: Pio XII, gli ebrei e i nazisti a Roma* (Roma: Laterza, 2008).

[3]. See, for example, Karl-Joseph Hummel, ed., *Zeitgeschichtliche Katholizismusforschung: Tatsachen, Deutungen, Fragen. Eine Zwischenbilanz* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004).

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