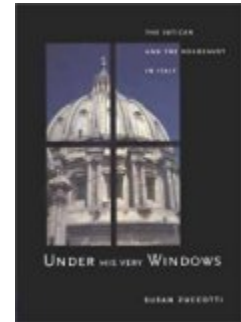


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Zuccotti. *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. 396 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-09310-0; \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08487-0.

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Under His Very Window

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There are two types of non-fiction book which seem to sell, if the shelves of my favorite bookstore are anything to go by: War and Holocaust Studies. Turning to the Religious History section, it is clear that Pope Pius XII seems to be a sure thing commercially for commissioning editors. For Pius's life had it all—the rise of Fascism in Italy and Germany, diplomatic relations and accommodations with Mussolini and Hitler, and not least of all the Pope's response to the Holocaust during World War II.

All of this adds up to a book which will surely sell well beyond the markets for religious history. Further spice is added to this publishing project by the closure of the Vatican Archives for the period after the death of Pope Benedict XV. Hence the pontificate of Pius XII is rich grounds for conjecture and conspiracy theories.

Speculation over the role of Pius XII during the Holocaust is nothing new, and has been the subject of sustained historiographical debate since Rolf Hochhuth's play *Der Stellvertreter* opened in Berlin on February 20, 1963 and subsequently in London as *The Representative* and in New York as *The Deputy*. The speculation raised by this, in an era of official histories by the belligerent nations and the broadcasting of the BBC's television series *The Great War* contributed to the launching of a monumental publishing project as certain church historians printed selected documents from the closed archives.[1]

Again the conjecture and conspiracy theories abounded. How complete was this definitive work? How objective were its editors? Certainly Zuccotti's publishers must have read with glee of the publishing phenomenon caused by Jon Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. Highly controversial, this book must have rated alongside Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, in terms of sales and column-inches of newspapers. Better still for Yale University Press, John Cornwell had concentrated on Vatican and German sources not consulted by Zuccotti, who researched principally in church and secular archives in Italy. Nor was Zuccotti a new author, having earlier penned *The Holocaust, the French and the Jews*, which won the National Jewish Book Award for Holocaust Studies.

Setting the scene in her introduction, Zuccotti's chapter on "The Vatican and Anti-Semitism" provides a modern historical background to the Catholic Church's attitudes towards the Jewish faith and people prior to 1939. This is further developed in the light of Pius XII's actions in the light of Italian anti-Jewish laws. Subsequent chapters then discuss acts and silences at all levels of the Catholic Church in a broad chronological order, followed by detailed examinations of developments in Genoa, Turin, Milan, Florence, Assisi, Venice and Trieste. There then follows a chapter on "The Vatican and Jews Arrested in Italy, December 1943 - May 1945," which covers the fall and rise of Mussolini, relations with the German occupying forces and finally the period after the liberation of Rome by Allied forces.

Zuccotti's central thesis is that the image cultivated after the Second World War of Pius XII as a defender of the Jewish people, silently marshalling his army of thousands of Bishops, priests and believers to shield Jews from the Holocaust, is thoroughly undeserved. Exhaustive searches of diocesan archives across Italy have found no words of encouragement for the ad hoc shelter and aid provided courageously by many in the Catholic Church. Even where incriminating evidence of financial involvement with Jewish refugee charities was kept, no written evidence has survived showing that these acts and deeds had any support or encouragement from Pius XII or the Curia.

This is surely damning for a candidate for sainthood, and should be read eagerly by anyone interested in the roles played by the Vatican and the Catholic Church in Italy during the Second World War. It is perhaps in looking at the wider part played by the Catholic Church across Italy that Zuccotti writes her most original work. Closed and incomplete archives, however, make it difficult to know even the number who received aid, while the numbers given for those who euphemistically failed to return from the Holocaust are startlingly finite and no doubt accurate.

In assessing the numbers given shelter, Zuccotti herself admits the limitations of her research: "There were in Rome in 1943 and 1944 hundreds of parish churches, 1,120 religious institutions for women, and 152 for men. Given that surprisingly large number, the statistics of 100 female convents and 55 male institutions (including eleven parish churches) that sheltered Jews becomes less impressive. Most Catholic institutions, after all, took pride in their reputation as dispensers of hospitality and succor. It should have been the norm rather than the exception for them to shelter Jews and others in distress. Perhaps more did, but perhaps not. What is certain is that we will never really know" (p. 201).

Despite outlining various attempts to provide shelter to Jews and others requiring sanctuary at St. Peter's, there is an assumption made that because no documentary evidence has been found involving Pius XII in sheltering Jews and Allied military personnel within the precincts of the Vatican City, the many individual acts giving shelter had no sanction from the Pope: "This book has

made it clear that the pope did not welcome Jews in the Vatican" (p. 253).

Further lack of documentary evidence is taken as proof of Zuccotti's thesis: "Pius XII personally seems to have made no contacts and no appeal to the Italians for the Jews. Likewise, he seems never to have appealed personally to any German officials. At the very least, he might have asked that Italian Jews might be allowed to remain in internment on Italian soil. He did not do so" (p. 294).

The evidence gleaned from this research shows many but by no means all figures and institutions in the Catholic Church in a positive light, but one is left with a nagging feeling that more research is required in the Vatican Archives before support can be given to Zuccotti's thesis. Published in 2000, this work was an eloquent argument for the general opening of the records of the Archivio Segreto Vaticano for scholarly research.

Written from a background in Holocaust Studies, Zuccotti has a tendency to be judgemental in her analysis of archival evidence and gaps in knowledge, a criticism also made of John Cornwell. It is a pity that an opportunity was not taken to write a biography of Pius XII with the more measured tone of John Pollard's *The Unknown Pope*, for many the gold standard of modern church history.[5]

Notes

[1]. Pierre Blet et al, eds., *Actes et Documents du Saint-Siege relatifs a la seconde guerre mondiale*. 11 vols. (Citta del Vaticano: Editrice Vaticana, 1965-1981).

[2]. Jon Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking, 1999).

[3]. Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

[4]. Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

[5]. John Pollard, *The Unknown Pope: Benedict XV (1914-1922) and the Pursuit of Peace* (London and New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999).

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