

The tragic missed opportunity to stop the Holocaust: New book reveals how an American Jesuit worked with the Vatican in plot that could have saved millions of Jews

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The slaughter of six million Jews during the Holocaust remains among the darkest periods of human history but one author is exploring what could have been, had the Vatican used its platform to speak out in condemnation of the Nazi regime.

Though Pope Pius XII has been labeled Hitler's Pope for his failure to denounce the Third Reich, author Peter Eisner points to his predecessor, Pius XI, and his attempts to build a church campaign to stand in opposition to oppressive regimes sweeping across Europe.

Pius XI, branded a fearless leader wise to the dangers of Hitler's ideology, enlisted the help of an American Jesuit civil right's activist and was in the midst of composing a Catholic encyclical to denounce the Holocaust but his message was muted due to his untimely death in 1939.



Refuge for the oppressed: A new book by author Peter Eisner explores the efforts underway by Pope Pius XI (pictured in 1931) to condemn the Nazi regime in the lead up to World War II

In his [book The Pope's Last Crusade](#), Eisner paints a picture of a divided church in the lead up to World War II, with many seeking to thwart the strong-willed pontiff resolved to use his position to speak on behalf of the oppressed and the marginalized.

As Hitler and Mussolini ruled with terror across Europe, the pope used increasingly damning



American Jesuit Fr. John LaFarge was a progressive voice during the Civil Rights movement

language to denounce their regimes but many Catholic leaders feared retaliation for the statements.

He sought to take a more formal stand with the composition of an encyclical, an edict sent to Catholics worldwide, to formally call for the end of the atrocities.

With the help of an American Jesuit, Fr. John LaFarge, the Holy See was moving toward announcing a definitive Catholic campaign against the racist ideology and religion of nationalism that was being preached.

LaFarge had worked among the impoverished African American community in southern Maryland and then moved to New York to report for the Catholic magazine, America. In this role, he wrote extensively of the evil of the myth of racial superiority and caught the attention of the activist pope.

Fr. LaFarge was summoned to the Vatican to meet with the pope and he spent time in Paris drafting a document and sent a draft to the pope for his consideration.

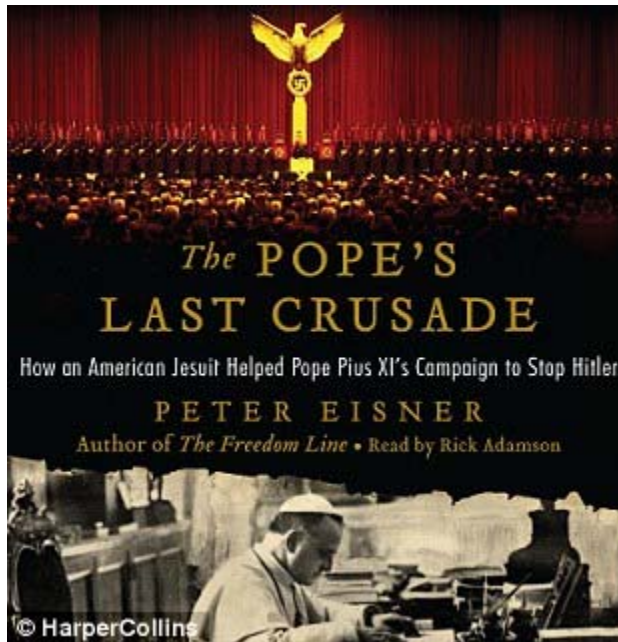
But other factions working within the walls of the Vatican worked actively to suppress the message and just days before Pius XI was set to launch a campaign targeted at the immoral movements pervading Europe, he died in February 1939.



Hitler's Pope: Pope Pius XII (pictured in March 12, 1939 on his portable throne) has been remembered for failing to use his influence to denounce the Holocaust

With his death, his declaration failed to reach the millions of Catholics and even non-adherents who looked to religious leader for guidance during the turbulent period.

Hitler felt 'he could go to any length with the Jews, without fear of attack from any church,' Irish politician Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote in 1989, according to Eisner's account.



The Pope's Last Crusade by Peter Eisner details the efforts by Pius XI to speak against Hitler

'Had Pius XI been able to deliver the encyclical he planned, the green light would have changed to red. The Catholic Church in Germany would have been obliged to speak out against the persecution of the Jews. Many Protestants, inside and outside Germany, would have been likely to follow its example.'

Instead, Cardinal Pacelli, who had worked for the pope as his Secretary of State, became the new pontiff, Pius XII, and ensured the message never saw the light of day, reportedly ordering that correspondence and written messages from Pius XI be burned.

Pius XII has been judged for not using the institution of the church to speak for those who could not speak for themselves, choosing to stay neutral in the face of glaring evil.

In a 1972 report about the encyclical that was never released, the editors of the National Catholic Reporter stated 'we must conclude that the publication of the encyclical draft at the time it was written may have saved hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of lives.'

In an effort to repair his tarnished legacy, the Vatican has recently released new documents about clandestine efforts the Vatican undertook to try to protect Jews under the watch of Pius XII.



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Alliance: Cesare Orsenigo, the Vatican's representative to Nazi Germany, meets with Adolf Hitler and Joachim von Ribbentrop in early 1939. He is accused of advocating for 'compromise and conciliation' with the Nazis



Appeasement: Bishops doing a Nazi salutes in honor of Hitler with Joseph Goebbels (far right) and Wilhelm Frick (second from right)

According to a new book by British author Gordon Thomas, *The Pope's Jews*, instructions were given to priests to issue baptism certificates to hundreds of Italian Jews and convents and monasteries were used to hide more than 4,000 Jews across Italy.

Though individual efforts by Catholics across Europe are laudable, the church's unwillingness to use its worldwide influence to stand up to evil is a mark of shame that remains today.

Under Pope John Paul II, the Vatican formed a joint commission in 1999 with scholars from the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultation to study questions about Pope Pius II during the War.

But the joint study yielded little since the Vatican would not release records from the war period and the commission disbanded after a year.



Reign of Terror: Historians say that the church's failure to denounce the Nazi regime gave Adolf Hitler (pictured in 1945) a carte blanche in his campaign of genocide that led to the slaughter of 6 million Jews



Faces of the innocent: The church has been blasted for failing to speak out in defense of the innocent brutally murdered at the hands of the Hitler (pictured men and women wait in line to enter a concentration camp in Warsaw, Poland in 1944)

Bits of information have since been released since 2003 but Eisner says that without the facts about what actually occurred during the war, it is difficult to review the issue and move toward reconciliation.

With the recent drama surrounding the resignation of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and the selection of Pope Francis as his successor, once again all eyes are on the Vatican to see how he will use the papacy to offer healing to those wounded by the church.

Francis' leadership style is a stark contrast to the pomp and circumstance that come with the title. Forgoing the luxury papal apartment and comfortable accommodations, he is seeking to strike a humble tone.

On Maundy Thursday, in remembrance of the Last Supper when Christ ate with his disciplines, Pope Francis visited a group of disenfranchised youths, washing and kissing their feet and on Good Friday, he lay face down on the floor in St Peter's Basilica before the cross.

The celebration of Easter is the hope of resurrection after the horror of the crucifixion.

As Pope Francis reminded Catholics in a series of meditations for Holy Week, 'he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed,' Isaiah 53:5.