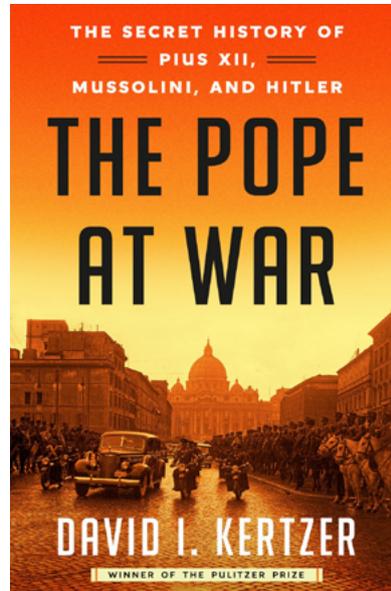


THE SILENCE OF A POPE

ROBERT E. STERKEN JR.



The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler by David I. Kertzer, Fulbright Scholar to Italy in 1978 and 2000.

The Pope at War is a spellbinding, beautifully written examination of the silence of an influential religious leader during World War II. David Kertzer's book highlights the critical role religious leaders play in politics. Recently unsealed documents from the Vatican archives, Kertzer's book provides much-needed, new historical evidence on the complexities of decisions made by Pope Pius XII during World War II. But the book is much more than a history of the successes and failures of a pope. Kertzer, the son of a rabbi who participated in the liberation of Rome as a US Army chaplain, has gifted us with a complex and well-documented history that each new generation must read.

In this meticulously researched book, Pulitzer-Prize winning author Kertzer leaves the reader with a complex set of answers to a hotly debated and difficult question: Should Pius XII be judged a saintly success (his sainthood is still being evaluated) or a moral failure? With the 2020 opening of the archives, Kertzer brings evidence to light that Pius XII secretly agreed not to be involved in what he called the "partisan politics" of the Third Reich. At one point in the war, Pius XII was concerned that Hitler might turn the Vatican into a museum.

Kertzer documents secret meetings between the pope and Hitler's representative. In essence, Pius XII decided to stay silent about politics—which included silence about the Reich's reign of terror and murder of millions of Jews—in return for Nazi protection of the Vatican and Catholic Church. Throughout the war, Pius XII worked diligently to maintain good relations with the Nazis. "No one here is anti-German," the pope told Hitler's envoy. "We love Germany. We are pleased if Germany is great and powerful. And we do not oppose any particular form of government if only Catholics can live in accordance with their religion" (63). With this decision, Pius XII protected the institutional interests of the Roman Catholic Church in a time of great peril.

While he had no love for Hitler, Pius XII was intimidated by him and determined not to do or say anything to antagonize him. By the time the reader gets to Chapter 34, titled "The Pope's Jews," it is painfully clear that remaining silent was a political action. Rather than use his

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position to denounce the terror and murder of the Jews, Pius XII chose silence time and time again. On 16 October 1943, when Nazi soldiers systematically and publicly rounded up more than a thousand Jews from neighborhoods near the Vatican and held them in a military college for two days, he remained silent even as pleas poured in for his help. Pius XII was also silent when the Germans loaded more than a thousand Roman Jews into cattle cars and transported them to Auschwitz where they were murdered. Pope Pius XII put the preservation of the institutions of the Catholic Church ahead of principled, moral leadership.

Along with the vital role and impact of Pope Pius XII, Kertzer has drawn vivid portraits and detailed wartime decisions of many key clerics, nuncios, and cardinals, as well as German diplomats, Italian politicians, and US ambassadors. For example, Kertzer highlights the critical work of Myron Charles Taylor, the American industrialist and philanthropist, and the shocking antisemitic advice of Monsignor Dell'Acqua. In December 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Taylor to be his envoy to Pius XII. Taylor and Pius XII became close, with Taylor serving as a personal advisor to Pius XII. Toward the end of the war, Taylor, working with the pope, established American relief efforts for the people of Italy. Dell'Acqua, a member of the Vatican Secretariat of State staff during the war, was often the expert the pope turned to for questions regarding Jews. Kertzer uncovered documents revealing Monsignor Dell'Acqua's harsh anti-semitic policy statements and repeated advice to the pope to remain silent about the persecution of the Jews.

The comprehensive history presented in Kertzer’s book— not only the astonishing new details (in documents uncovered by Kertzer in 2020) of Pope Pius XII and the Catholic Church, but also the larger history—begs to be confronted. Too many still deny the role of the Church and the impact of the pope’s silence. It is our collective history, and it encompasses a much larger set of moral and political issues than those of an individual pope. This book demands to be read.

David I. Kertzer, *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler*, New York: Random House. 621 pages. \$37.50.

BIOGRAPHY

Robert E. Sterken Jr. is Professor of Political Science at The University of Texas at Tyler. He had two Fulbright Awards: Burma/Myanmar 2015-2016 (included Thailand and Vietnam) and China in 2018. He’s the author of “*Bill Ratliff: A Profile in Courage in American Politics*” and “*Teaching Barefoot in Burma*.” His third book “*The Kings of Buddhism: Power, Religion, and Fury in Myanmar*” will be out in 2023.

