

Judging Pius XII: What the pope didn't do

by [Kevin Madigan](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

In the debate over Pius XII's response or lack of response to the horrors of Nazi Germany, very few writers have been able to overcome the temptation to depict him either as "Hitler's pope" (as in John Cornwell's book title) or as a saint (as in the case of those pushing for his canonization). Rabbi David G. Dalin comes to the latter conclusion in a recent article in the *Weekly Standard* (February 26).

Actually, he does much more. Dalin declares that "Pius XII was, genuinely and profoundly, a righteous gentile." That highly charged term is used, officially and with authority, only by Yad Vashem, Israel's respected Holocaust Memorial Institute. The honor is conferred (often posthumously) upon those who heroically, often at lethal risk to themselves and their families, sheltered Jews from detention and deportation into the maw of death.

Even if one were to argue, as I would, that the picture of Pius as reprehensibly complicit with Hitler (as he is portrayed in Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy*) is irresponsibly overdrawn and even scurrilous, one may still question whether Pius deserves the sort of secular canonization bestowed by Yad Vashem (and, it seems, not so subtly recommended by Rabbi Dalin). To dignify Pius as one of the "righteous," after all, would place him in the company of undisputed heroes like Raoul Wallenberg and Jan Karski.

Karski perilously infiltrated the Warsaw ghetto, then had a dentist yank several of his teeth so that, if stopped while carrying back to London the intelligence he had gathered about the Nazi apparatus of extermination, no one would detect his Polish-accented German and thus become suspicious.

The Vatican was, along with England, the government in the West best informed about Nazi atrocities. Despite numerous appeals for speech or action from the Polish government in exile, from Allied diplomats, from Jewish leaders and organizations and even from Catholic prelates (among others), Pius never came close to risking

personal or institutional martyrdom, as had Karski and Wallenberg (who, recent evidence has suggested, may have paid for his heroism with more than 50 years of incarceration in communist Russia).

Indeed, as the trains continued to roll to Auschwitz, Pius XII ever more forcefully and explicitly insisted to the Allies that the city of Rome be preserved from aerial bombardment. Whatever he did say on behalf of imperiled Jews—and Dalin is correct to point out that Pius was not “silent”—the pontiff never said anything so emphatic, unequivocal or explicit on behalf of those innocent Jewish civilians being conveyed to the charnel houses of Poland. Was the fabric and integrity of Rome’s classical and ecclesiastical patrimony more precious to Pius than the fate of innocent Jews deported from their homes for certain death? More precious than the moral integrity of the Vicar of Christ?

However we respond to those necessarily hard questions, it is clear that, aside from not saying much emphatically, Pius did nothing, by way of shelter and rescue, on anything like the magnitude suggested by Dalin. Unfortunately, Dalin cites approvingly the now thoroughly discredited statement of Pinchas Lapide, who estimated that Pius “was instrumental in saving at least 700,000 but probably as many as 860,000 Jews from certain death at Nazi hands.” Ultramontane Catholics have since 1967 been quick to seize upon these figures. Why, defenders of the wartime pontiff invariably inquire, would an Israeli and a Jew like Lapide have reason to exaggerate? In this and similar cases, the answer is transparently clear: political exigency.

Lapide was in the 1960s an Israeli consul in Milan and was attempting, at the time he made his inflated estimates, to secure Vatican recognition for the state of Israel. Similar motives explain statements made in the immediate postwar period by Golda Meir and Moshe Sharett, foreign ministers of the new state of Israel. Had these statements been accurate within even an order of magnitude, Pius would perhaps deserve to be honored by Yad Vashem and celebrated by Rabbi Dalin as a righteous gentile. They were not. Whatever was thus gained diplomatically by these statements—in the short run, precious little—was purchased at the cost of considerable historical untruth.

Rabbi Dalin also recklessly impugns the motives of those Catholic authors (like Garry Wills and James Carroll) who have searchingly wondered whether their church had not shockingly—sinfully—compromised its moral integrity, its mission, its very

essence during the war years. Not only had it largely remained “silent” about the outrage of the deportations. Perhaps more egregiously, it had actively complied by furnishing the Nazis baptismal records identifying those of “non-Aryan” descent.

Authors like Wills and Carroll have wondered what such conduct meant, and means, for the credibility of Catholic Christianity. To dismiss their genuine questions as contaminated somehow by their status as ex-priests (Carroll) or ex-seminarians (Wills) is to use a dishonorable strategy. Wills and Carroll, disagree with them as Rabbi Dalin may, are both also honorable men; and both have always been, and remain, devout Catholics. In addition, some of Pius’s most eloquent, measured and authoritative critics, like John Pawlikowski, O.S.M., of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and the diocesan priest and Seton Hall professor John Morley (whose book is the best on the subject and, oddly enough, widely ignored in recent debates), have remained in priestly orders.

Finally, though, I must agree with Rabbi Dalin that it is a gross historical and especially moral error to make Pius XII a primary target of moral outrage. To do so is to lose sight of the stark fact that Hitler, not Pius, was the Prince of Darkness in 1940s Europe. It is also to fail to perceive that other churches, Protestant as well as Catholic, played a terrible role not only in not resisting but in actively promoting National Socialism. (The pyramidal ecclesiology of the Roman Church makes it all too easy to single out one man for blame.) One thinks especially of the largely Evangelical “German Christian” churches, whose members installed swastikas in churches and blasphemously raised extended right arms in homage to Hitler.

If Pius XII never approached that level of moral depravity, it is still fair to say that he was a cautious, passive diplomat, conditioned by his training in canon law and his career in foreign service to proceed with prudence and discretion. In other words, he was a bureaucrat at a time when the world, and especially the Jews of Europe, needed a prophet, or at least a priest more alert to demonic evil. That doesn’t make him Hitler’s pope. Nor a righteous gentile, either.