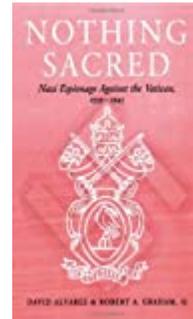




David Alvarez, Robert A. Graham, S.J. *Nothing Sacred: Nazi Espionage Against the Vatican, 1939-1945.* London: Frank Cass, 1997. xiv + 190 pp. \$47.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7146-4302-1; \$170.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7146-4744-9.



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Fr. Robert Graham, who sadly died last year, was a notable journalist and Jesuit who wrote several books on the history of the Papacy and the wartime policies of Pope Pius XII. In the course of these studies, Graham uncovered a large amount of material relating to the espionage and surveillance efforts by foreign governments or emissaries directed against the Vatican. With the assistance of a younger colleague from California, David Alvarez, his bulky findings have now been reduced to a compact and readable 183 pages, concentrating on the Nazi attempts to spy on the Vatican during these turbulent years.

The Vatican was, and is, a strictly hierarchical entity, whose policies are not subject to public scrutiny. Its diplomacy, similarly, is enveloped in secrecy, a characteristic which became even more tightly controlled once the European war broke out in 1939. The result was that all sorts of groundless rumours, imagined scenarios and even calculated falsehoods were rife about what the Pope would do or say, purveyed by “informants” who were only too ready to satisfy the world’s curiosity, often for personal gain. Since this “information” was never authorized, but equally rarely officially denied, fanciful speculations abounded, some of which were later repeated in post-war journalistic books.

The Holy See was widely assumed to have consider-

able spiritual power which could affect the Catholic citizens of many nations. Such influence was worth cultivating. For this reason, during the war, “all of the major belligerents (with the exception of the Soviet Union) maintained diplomatic missions at the Vatican to press the righteousness of their cause and to solicit the support of the Pope and his advisers. At the same time all of the major belligerents (including the Soviet Union) sought to determine the sympathies of the Papacy, and to uncover and frustrate the intrigues of their opponents by maintaining intelligence coverage of the Vatican” (p. ix).

Prominent among these players was Nazi Germany. Hitler and his associates always had a hostile and suspicious attitude towards Catholicism. The Papacy, they believed, employed a world-wide network of clerical agents supplying potentially dangerous information to Rome. In consequence their deliberate aim was to curtail and curb such activities, not only by a ruthless persecution of “political Catholicism” in Germany and its occupied territories, but also by establishing their own networks of agents in the Vatican environment itself.

A principal locale was the German Embassy to the Holy See. The Ambassador, Diego von Bergen, however, was a diplomat of the old school, rightly sceptical of much of the supposed “insider information” fed to him by various dubious contacts, and even by some pro-Nazi

clerics. But Bergen was near retirement and no longer enjoyed much support in Berlin. Much more significant were the intrigues of Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA), whose pathological hatred of the church made him lose all sense of logic or proportion. He built a large staff in Munich and Berlin and in 1941 declared that “our ultimate goal is the extirpation of all Christianity” (p. 59). In the meanwhile intelligence operations against such a dangerous foe should be intensified. The Vatican, as the center of this anti-Nazi activity, was particularly suspect. Already in March 1939 an agent had been sent to Rome to report on the papal election, though his speculations proved entirely erroneous. This debacle showed that spying on the Holy See required better staffing, despite strong opposition from the regular diplomats. The RSHA was successful in penetrating not only the Nunciatures in Berlin and Slovakia, but also the central office of the German Catholic bishops. Various agents with contacts to high ecclesiastics were paid large sums to send in information.

These machinations, on the other side, aroused alarm in the Vatican, leading to the belief that the Nazis were about to invade Vatican territory or even kidnap the Pope. In August 1943, this threat seemed so imminent that sensitive diplomatic documents and the Pope’s personal files were hidden under the marble floors of the papal palace. Despite the authors’ diligent researches, they have been unable to find any hard evidence that such a plot was instigated, but the fears were genuine, even if “inspired” by western agents.

The closest the RSHA got to penetrating the Vatican itself was by bribing some exiles from Georgia with funds to buy a convent in which they tried to install a secret radio transmitter. But this failed when the Allies reached Rome first. They did manage to “turn” a young Soviet agent from Estonia, who did translations for the

Congregation for the Eastern Churches, but he promptly reverted when the Germans left and was last seen in a Siberian “gulag.” The harvest was very meagre.

The only real success came from eavesdropping on the Vatican’s signals communications and deciphering the Vatican’s diplomatic codes. Despite being the first in history to use cryptography, by the 1940s the Vatican’s methods were primitively out of date. Both Germany and Italy had no difficulty in reading most of the papal traffic, or in tapping the various nuncios’ telephones. In fact, the Vatican officials knew their systems were insecure, and hence were obliged to be even more discreet than ever. It was a severe restraint, and probably the greatest weakness of papal wartime diplomacy.

The authors conclude that the results were mixed. No high-level Nazi agent was placed in the Papal entourage, and none of the very small number of individuals in the Vatican responsible for policy decisions was disloyal. This lack of success was partly due to the duplication of efforts by rival Nazi agencies, but also to the total misapprehension of the Vatican’s stature in the world, which was nothing like as powerful (or sinister) as the Nazis imagined. Nazi espionage was only one of the reasons why the Vatican’s influence and prestige suffered disastrously during the Second World War. Essentially much more significant was the growing gap between its ideals of peace and justice and the meagre achievements of its diplomacy, for example in its efforts to mitigate the Holocaust. But the authors succeed very well in depicting vividly the turgid, claustrophobic, and conspiratorial atmosphere which prevailed during those fateful years.

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