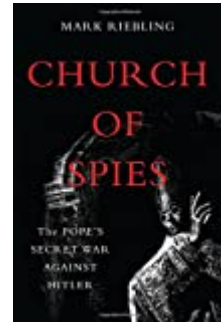




Mark Riebling. *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War against Hitler.* New York: Basic Books, 2015. 384 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-02229-8.



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In *Church of Spies*, Mark Riebling attempts to provide a defense for Pope Pius XII and the Catholic Church against charges of inaction and complicity with Nazi Germany in WWII. In *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (2002), John Cornwell writes that Pius enabled Hitler and had "drawn the Catholic Church into complicity with the darkest forces of the era." [1] While this argument is not explicitly stated within the book, the summary included in the dust jacket suggests directly that Pius was "Hitler's Pope." It is clear throughout that Riebling aims to respond to Pius's critics by providing the details of his secret wartime actions. He seeks to provide an explanation for why the Vatican showed "public moderation" and neutrality towards Hitler and Nazi atrocities (p. 28). *Church of Spies* sheds light on the secret actions and covert war waged by Pius, the Vatican, the German Catholic Church, and various German Catholic citizens against Hitler and the Nazis.

Pope Pius XII's role in diplomacy with the German resistance as well as his support for the removal of Hitler is a central theme in this book. The pope's largest contribution to the anti-Hitler elements was to negotiate on their behalf with the Western Allies for a post-assassination peace treaty. Through a variety of examples, the reader is shown the critical role that this diplo-

macy played in driving German resistance groups' attempts to overthrow the Nazi regime, as such an agreement was a prerequisite for a successful coup. In addition, Pius provided the moral authorization for the assassination of Hitler by justifying the action under the church doctrine of tyrannicide. Providing this moral justification to the Catholic conspirators was essential to their involvement. Riebling provides evidence that Pius made a conscious decision to directly support the removal of Hitler, who would be replaced by "any government without Hitler" (p. 63). Although the author attempts to show that Pius took direct action to assist European Jews, only a few examples are given. For instance, the author provides an excerpt of a conversation between Pius and a bishop where Pius claims to have diverted "large amounts of American currency ... to help Jews escape Europe" (p. 168). If true, this claim would certainly add to the stated purpose of the book, but no further evidence is provided, to the overall detriment of his argument.

Although the focus of the author is on Pope Pius XII, many prominent German Catholic citizens' roles in the attempts on Hitler's life are highlighted in this book. In particular, the story of Josef M  ller and his dominant role in the Vatican's involvement in the various intrigues

is crucial to the story. Acting as an intermediary between German anti-Hitler factions and the Vatican, M  ller played a central role in the secret diplomacy between these groups and the Western Allies. Based on the evidence provided, M  ller is painted as both a devoutly religious man of high morals as well as a German patriot who views Hitler as a threat to Germany's ultimate existence. The author also provides compelling evidence to highlight the extent of Catholic influence on various assassination plots. Among others, he highlights the role played by Father Augustinus Rosch in a failed December 1941 plot as well as the religious motivations of Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, a devout Catholic and central figure in the more well-known July 20, 1944, plot to assassinate Hitler inside his East Prussian field headquarters. The detailed and interesting nature of the descriptions of these plots aids in the effectiveness of this work.

Riebling uses a storytelling approach to highlight the various exciting and clandestine aspects of this subject. By weaving together numerous storylines in a chronological fashion from 1939 to 1945, the history of this period reads more like an exciting popular fiction spy novel than an academic work. For example, Riebling's description of Pope Pius's first day as pope gives the reader a colorful account of his decision to start a secret archaeological excavation in search of Saint Peter's crypt. While details such as these parallel recent works of fiction, this exciting style by no means distracts the reader from the factual basis from which the work is derived.

The author uses many sources to demonstrate the extent of the church's efforts to counter Hitler in Europe. Perhaps the most compelling are transcripts of se-

cretly recorded conversations between Pope Pius and senior German clergymen as well as numerous personal accounts taken from postwar testimony. Using sources from Germany, the Vatican, and Allied intelligence agencies, the author provides an extremely credible evidentiary basis for his overall argument.

Church of Spies is an extremely readable and interesting work on Catholic influence on German resistance efforts. However, the book does not provide a sufficient level of evidence to counter the perceptions of papal silence towards atrocities committed against Europe's Jews. Although Riebling shows how the highest levels of Vatican leadership stoked the fires of the German resistance through acting as diplomats to the Western Allies and through providing the moral justification to assassinate Hitler, he falls short of convincing the reader that any meaningful action to counter the Holocaust was taken directly by the Vatican. Rather, the Vatican and Pius seem to have placed a higher value on official silence in order to minimize reprisals to Catholics in Europe at the expense of Hitler's Jewish victims. However, the book does convincingly portray the important roles played by numerous Catholic citizens as well as German Catholic clergy. Ultimately, Riebling presents an important counter argument to Cornwell and other critics of the Vatican and Pius's lack of action in WWII, making this a valuable work that sheds light on the role of organized religion in modern warfare, politics, and international relations.

Note

[1]. John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), xi.

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