

THE VATICAN AND THE GERMAN RESISTANCE DURING WORLD WAR II: 1939-1940

Sr. Mary Gloria Chang, OP
The Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist
Ann Arbor, MI

Critics of Pope Pius XII usually fail to account for the dangerous role he took as mediator in a conspiracy against Hitler at the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Peace negotiations between German military rebels and the British government flowed through the Vatican as a secret conduit. First-hand testimonies by German conspirators, and secondary studies by historians of the German Resistance and British-Vatican relations, all give evidence of the Pope's heroic courage in the face of grave threats to himself and the Catholic Church.

Introduction

When Adolf Hitler emerged victorious in Poland in September 1939, elements of resistance within the German military, foreign office, and political sector mobilized to plan a coup against the regime. Nazi brutality against the conquered in Eastern Europe clashed with the Opposition's ideal of a "decent Germany" that respected individual freedoms. Several attempts to negotiate a pre-coup pact with the British government by peace feelers went out during the course of the war, but the most promising channel involved Pope Pius XII as mediator for the Abwehr (German Armed Forces Intelligence) in Rome between late 1939 and the spring of 1940.¹

The existence of a conspiracy demonstrated a deep commitment by many high-ranking German military officers and civilian leaders to a peaceful Germany, and initial openness by the British to a revolt against the Fuehrer within the Nazi state. Although skepticism ran high against any possibility of an overthrow, the British Foreign Office considered the papal channel as being "the most reliable," and proceeded furthest in its negotiations with this group vouched for by the Pontiff.²

Military historian Harold C. Deutsch judges the role of the Vatican in this exchange "among the most astounding events in the modern history of the papacy."³ Pope Pius XII risked his life and the political neutrality of the Holy See by engaging in this scheme between two belligerent nations. The complexity and intrigue involved on all sides exacerbated his perils. In the light of modern-day criticism of the

wartime Pope as “silent” and indifferent to the plight of the Jews, the combined testimonies of key players in the Opposition, and scholarly consensus among historians of the Resistance paint a picture of a man who suffered greatly in his role as head of the Roman Catholic Church, and who made prudent decisions in the hope of saving as many lives as possible under hazardous circumstances.

Pope Pius XII as Mediator

Conditions favored an internal revolt in October of the outbreak of the war. Buoyed by his successful Polish campaign, Hitler had scheduled an invasion of France and the neutral countries of Holland and Belgium to launch a week from November 5, which many in the military ranks regarded as insane. At the Nuremberg trials in 1946, a survivor of the German Resistance, Hans Bernd Gisevius, testified that the motive for the conspiracy was to “prevent the war from spreading” in the West.⁴ The head of the Abwehr, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, also disseminated information about SS atrocities in Poland among Hitler’s generals to gain further support for a military coup.⁵

The most important prerequisite to deposing Hitler was a guarantee from the Allied Powers that they would accept the new government and not exploit the revolutionary situation.⁶ Opposition leaders considered Britain the best target for their aims because France would follow suit if the former established an agreement first. The choice of Pope Pius XII as mediator originated with the group led by General Ludwig Beck, former Chief of the Army General Staff (OKH), with Abwehr officers Colonel Hans Oster and Major Hans Dohnanyi as central planners.⁷ Admiral Canaris protected the secret operations by convincing Hitler to keep all Nazi surveillance out of Abwehr territory.⁸

Though Beck, Oster, and Dohnanyi were Protestants, they viewed Pius XII as an ideal intermediary because of his international prominence and close ties with Germany.⁹ Between 1917 and 1929, Archbishop Eugenio Pacelli acted as nuncio in Munich and Berlin, and from 1930 until his election to the papacy in 1939, guided diplomatic relations with Germany as Cardinal Secretary of State. Pacelli also knew Beck and Canaris as reputable and trustworthy military leaders from his days in Berlin, as all three enjoyed riding and often encountered each other in early morning excursions.

If the Pope, who acted impartially between nations as spiritual leader, could guarantee the *bona fides* of its principals, it was thought that the British would take the Opposition’s overtures more seriously. Indeed, documents from the British Foreign Office have revealed that

the Pope's role as guarantor greatly enhanced its receptivity to the Beck-Oster group.¹⁰ Early papal efforts to reconcile world powers and prevent war made clear the Vatican's desire for peace. In May 1939, Pius XII attempted to gather a five-power conference of London, Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, and Rome to discuss divisive issues, but Hitler rejected the proposal.¹¹ In August 1939, Pius XII tried again unsuccessfully to intervene.

Pacelli's antipathy for the Hitler regime displayed itself unequivocally in the 1937 papal encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, which he helped write for his predecessor Pius XI.¹² The encyclical condemned German racialism and won the respect of the British diplomat Sir Francis D'Arcy Osborne and other top British government officials.¹³ Two years earlier in April 1935, in a speech to pilgrims at Lourdes, Pacelli denounced Nazism with these strong words: "They [the Nazis] are in reality only miserable plagiarists who dress up old errors with new tinsel... they are possessed by the superstition of a race and blood cult."¹⁴ Mussolini and Hitler opposed the election of Pacelli to the papacy in 1939 because of his criticism of Nazism and Fascism. The conspirators believed that Pius XII's clear stance against totalitarianism would persuade him to cooperate in their communications to Britain.

With his ready access to Abwehr foreign and counterintelligence machinery, Canaris took the responsibility of strategizing a secret way to communicate messages to the British government.¹⁵ Oster proposed recruiting the Bavarian lawyer Dr. Josef Müller as envoy to the Vatican because of his high connections in Rome.¹⁶ Müller's record of resistance to the Nazis and his legal work on behalf of Catholic institutions earned him the trust of Cardinal Pacelli, who sometimes consulted him about Hitler's foreign policy. His intimate relations with Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, former chief of the German Center Party and administrator of St. Peter's Basilica, and his acquaintance with Rev. Robert Leiber, SJ, Pius XII's principal personal aide and confidant, also placed him in an excellent position to seek the assistance of the Pope.

In a plan that came to be known among the conspirators as "Operation X," Müller assumed the cover of an Abwehr reserve officer with the intelligence assignment of discovering political developments in Italy. His real mission was to communicate messages to Britain through the Vatican, with the ultimate objective of obtaining acceptable peace terms for a post-Hitler government. Müller agreed to die in silence if the Nazi Security Service (SD) caught him.¹⁷

The Vatican Exchanges

The nature and content of the Vatican exchanges have posed difficulties for historians because most written sources were destroyed.¹⁸ The only extant document written by Müller about his Roman mission that has survived was deposited in the World War II Records Division of the National Archives in Washington, D.C.¹⁹ Professor Deutsch wrote the definitive study on this phase of the Opposition in the English language.²⁰ He conducted extensive interviews with survivors such as Dr. Müller, Fr. Leiber, Christine von Dohnanyi (widow of Hans von Dohnanyi), military Generals Franz Halder, Georg Thomas and others.

The diaries of Halder, Lieutenant-Colonel Helmuth Groscurth, the German Ambassador Ulrich von Hassell, and the written and oral testimonies of Gisevius offered corroborating primary evidence. When the papers of the British Foreign Office became available a few years after Deutsch's publication, documentation of the Allies' responses added greater depth and detail to the historical account. However, the chronology presented by Deutsch also came under question with the availability of the British documents.²¹ Nonetheless, the basic narrative remained intact, with overall agreement concerning the Pope's mediatory role and the trust placed in him by the British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary.

Müller traveled to Rome at least five times between late September and late December 1939. In early 1940, he was "constantly en route," and in early May 1940 the visits came to an end.²² The procedure for the operations always began with instructions received from Oster and Dohnanyi in Berlin, directed by Beck. Müller delivered the messages to Pius XII through Fr. Leiber as liaison. The Pope in turn met with Sir Francis D'Arcy Osborne, the British minister to the Holy See, who transmitted the communications to the Foreign Office in London. At the same time, Msgr. Kaas regularly met with Osborne, a close friend, and passed news on to Müller.²³

On Müller's first visit to Rome, Msgr. Kaas advised him to reach the Pope through Fr. Leiber who saw him two or three times a day. The Pope consented to the Opposition's request after only a day of reflection by saying, "The German opposition must be heard in Britain."²⁴ His quick reply was all the more remarkable given his deliberating temperament.²⁵ By agreeing to act as mediator between Berlin and London, he risked the papacy, the Church in Germany, Austria, Poland and the surrounding areas. The lives of Fr. Leiber and the German Jesuits, as well as the members of the Opposition hung upon his decision. The possibility that Osborne's messages might be

intercepted by the Nazis worried him. If the public found out about the negotiations, the Vatican's ability to act as a neutral mediator in the future would be eclipsed. Benito Mussolini's increasing hostility to papal interference in nearby Vatican City aggravated the situation. Indeed, in Fr. Leiber's opinion, "the Pope went much too far."²⁶

Pius XII weighed the pros and cons before him, and opted to act. Evidence that he was prepared to suffer the worst consequences came during a confrontation with Hitler's Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, on March 11, 1940. When the Pope condemned Nazi abuses, Mussolini sent a threat to which the Holy Father replied that he was ready to go to a concentration camp.²⁷ In 1919, on the steps of the Munich Nunciature, his opposition to Communism incited a belligerent to point a pistol at his head.

The Pope's decision only made sense if he believed that his role as mediator for the Resistance had any chance of success. In a telegram from Rome to British Foreign Secretary Lord Edward Halifax on February 7, 1940, Osborne wrote that Pius XII "intensely disliked having to pass it [the messages] on... but his conscience could not allow him to ignore it altogether lest there might conceivably be one chance in a million of it serving the purpose of saving lives."²⁸

Precautions were taken to ensure the safety of all those involved. Pius XII never met with Müller in person to protect him; in the event that the Nazis arrested the Bavarian, he could honestly say that he never visited the Pope after the onset of the war. Except for Fr. Leiber and Msgr. Kaas, Pius XII kept the information secret from his closest aides, Cardinal Luigi Maglione, Cardinal Tardini and Msgr. Giovanni Montini.²⁹ Upon his arrivals in Rome, Müller called Fr. Leiber from an Abwehr telephone with a short, "I am here," to which the latter rejoined with only the time of appointment. Exchanges consisted mainly of a roster of questions and answers from each side conducted verbally.³⁰ Fr. Leiber occasionally left a written note in Müller's hotel, which the latter destroyed after reading it.

The earliest reports of the Vatican exchanges generated much optimism among the Opposition. The mediation of the Pope gave them hope that their biggest obstacle to mobilizing a coup might be overcome, namely, to convince General Halder and his Commander-in-Chief General Walther von Brauchitsch in the OKH that an internal revolt had the backing of the Allies. Although Halder and Brauchitsch both felt repulsed by Hitler's policies, deeply ingrained military traditions prevented them from supporting measures that might be considered national treason. "If the Pope were intervening personally," Gisevius wrote, "the two generals could no longer fall back upon such an

evasion.”³¹ Groscurth also recorded in his diary, “The Pope is very interested and holds an honorable peace to be possible. Personally guarantees that Germany will not be swindled as in the forest of Compiègne. With all peace feelers one encounters the categorical demand for the removal of Hitler.”³²

On the British end of the exchanges, London agreed to proceed with the negotiations by Müller’s second or third meeting with Fr. Leiber.³³ Sir Alexander Cadogan, the British Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, noted in his diary on October 24 that he discussed with Halifax two questions put forward by the Germans.³⁴ Wary of Winston Churchill’s talk of aggression toward Germany, Cadogan saw the proposal as a “means of helping G[ermany] to beat herself.”

Yet the British were by no means as optimistic as the Germans. At the time of the Vatican negotiations, the chief of German police Heinrich Himmler sent two German agents to pose as anti-Hitler conspirators at the Dutch border of Venlo to discover what treasonous plots might be afoot. They tricked two British intelligence officers into a meeting to discuss peace terms, and on the night of November 8, SS officers seized and imprisoned them.³⁵ After this deception, London became suspicious of all German peace feelers. The Venlo Incident delayed negotiations by up to six weeks. Osborne resumed them only because the Pope vouched for the German conspirators, and assured him that they were not associated with the Nazi Party.³⁶ Pius XII never told Osborne the names of Müller and the German generals, but said that he personally knew them as reliable men.

Throughout the negotiations, the British agreed to support the military coup and not take the offensive, as long as a responsible German government replaced the Nazi regime, and no major attack took place in the West. Pius XII concurred and said that he was “ready to use all his influence to see that Germany receives a fair peace, as long as the preconditions are there.”³⁷

The first official document on the Vatican exchanges found in the British Foreign Office was dated December 1, 1939. Osborne reported that German military circles planned to execute a coup as long as Britain and France guaranteed a “fair and honorable peace.”³⁸ However, doubts about the ability of the unnamed generals to carry out the plan also abounded. The proposal seemed “very nebulous” and unclear as to how the generals would remove Hitler and the Nazis. Two weeks later, Cadogan got wind of a “Halder-Beck plan to get rid of Hitler, Goering, Rib[bentrop], &c.”³⁹ By this time, Pius XII had been in contact with the German Opposition for at least seven weeks, and hoped for a peace settlement soon. An attempt to propose peace in his Christmas message failed to gain the desired response.

At the beginning of 1940, the Pope received a warning from Müller that Hitler had scheduled a Western offensive for mid-February or earlier through Belgium and the Netherlands. He met with Osborne on January 11 and passed on the message that the attack “need never take place” if the Allies guaranteed a peace that would “not be Wilsonian in nature.” The generals would replace the current regime with “a government with which it was possible to negotiate.”⁴⁰ Territorial terms included the restoration of Poland and Czechoslovakia, and a vague mention of dealing with the Russians. In earlier communications, the Opposition had expressed their disapproval of the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the spread of Communism within their borders.

Osborne again voiced skepticism and reminded the Pope of Venlo. The Opposition probably intended the warning to convey its goodwill, but to London it sounded a little like blackmail, particularly the part about the offensive that need never happen. Why did the generals not simply get on with it, change the government, and then negotiate peace? In the face of Osborne’s doubts, Pius XII became discouraged and told him that maybe it was not worth proceeding with the exchanges after all, and to regard them as not having been made. Osborne turned down the offer because he “refused to have the responsibilities of His Holiness’ conscience unloaded on to my own.”⁴¹

The Pope stood in a quagmire between Berlin and London. On the one hand, if he convinced the British to offer peace terms and the coup failed to take place, he might be charged with deception. On the other hand, if he did not act on the information presented to him by the Opposition, he might be turning his back on a real chance for peace. In the end, he called Osborne because “he felt his conscience would not be quite easy unless he sent for me.”⁴² Pius XII could not promise the execution of the generals’ plan, and had to be cautious about conveying an over-optimistic attitude.

An atmosphere of disquiet also fell upon the Vatican in January. Rumors about Hitler’s imminent attack on the Low Countries had diffused to Cardinal Maglione and the Belgian ambassador, Adrien Nieuwenhuys. Suspicions that the Pope had a secret line of communication from Germany prompted the French ambassador, Francois Charles-Roux, to try to procure information from Osborne on January 13.⁴³ Several Roman ecclesiastics also perceived the true nature of Müller’s mission.⁴⁴ Fr. Leiber’s Jesuit superior, Vladimir Ledochowsky, worried that his subordinate’s involvement in the conspiracy would endanger the order. Msgr. Kaas told Osborne that he “strongly resents this endeavor to involve the Vatican in dubious and nebulous intrigue.” When neither a coup nor an offensive took place, questions arose concerning the Vatican’s reliability.

The War Cabinet in London rejected Osborne's proposal of January 12, but decided to notify the French.⁴⁵ The Opposition's lack of condemnation for the seizure of the Sudetenland and the plebiscite in Austria hindered a positive response.

Pius XII met with Osborne again on February 5, but took greater precautions this time due to the January rumors. He sent his maestro di camera (head of the papal household) to Osborne's apartment the previous night to instruct him to dress informally and come to his office the next day. No one was to know about this audience with the Pope. When he arrived, the maestro di camera inconspicuously escorted him to the papal apartment without announcement. Osborne chuckled and thought the cloak-and-dagger arrangement "all very E. Phillips Oppenheim" (writer of suspense thrillers).⁴⁶

The Holy Father's efforts at secrecy made a deep impression on Osborne this time, and gave greater credibility to the Opposition. Apparently, Hitler had postponed the invasion of the Low Countries because the Belgians had discovered his intentions. The "reliable intermediary" had again visited the Pope and gave him four typed pages in German containing Resistance plans to replace the Third Reich with a "democratic, moderate, conservative, decentralized and federal" government. A military dictatorship would replace the regime until order was established. They anticipated a civil war to follow the coup.

On behalf of the German generals, the Pope asked Osborne if the British would sanction the *Anschluss*, while granting independence to Poland and the non-German parts of Czechoslovakia. The Opposition also asked for the annexation of the Sudetenland, and a land connection through western Poland between East Prussia and the rest of Germany.⁴⁷

Osborne interpreted the terms as a desire to uphold the Munich Agreement, but wondered if the new government would be less belligerent. As Owen Chadwick notes, the British had no inkling of the Final Solution at this point.⁴⁸ If they had, they might have welcomed the new leadership more readily. On February 16, Osborne expressed his impatience to the Pope, "If they want a change of government, why don't they get on with it?"⁴⁹

When Osborne raised questions about the reliability of the new government, Pius XII "made no attempt to defend it or even to recommend serious consideration," for the papacy had no jurisdiction over the political status of the territories. He simply wanted to pass the message on in the hope that it might save lives. He asked that Osborne not record this conversation on paper, save for one letter to London. If the British minister rejected the proposal, he asked that the conversation be buried.

Within the next few days, London decided to negotiate, but only with the cooperation of France.⁵⁰ A reply from Chamberlain and Halifax on February 17 indicated Britain's willingness to consider the proposal seriously. As a condition for peace, the Allies asked that Germany make reparations to its smaller neighbors, and show evidence of security for the future. A clear plan must be drawn up, for the terms as presently stated were too vague to show the French.⁵¹ London approved the prospect of a "decentralized and federal" government.

A few days later, Pius XII received a final answer from Osborne in writing concerning London's agreement, and notified Müller immediately.⁵² Fr. Leiber left a message on his visiting card at Müller's hotel with the words, "Today O. was with my chief. He told him something which will cause you to go home at once. We must have a talk about it today."⁵³

Leiber gave the Bavarian a heavy sheet of paper stamped with the Vatican watermark, at the top of which stated, "*Conditio sine qua non*: constitution of a government capable of negotiating."⁵⁴ The British listed about seven conditions for a peace settlement. Contrary to Leiber's wishes that the page be destroyed, Müller took it to Berlin. Oster and Beck received it optimistically as a sure sign that the coup would be executed. In fact, Müller assured Leiber that the overthrow would take place very soon. None of the Opposition leaders foresaw how difficult it would be to move the generals in the Army High Command (OKH) at this point in Hitler's military campaign.

Dohnanyi summarized the British points in a comprehensive report dictated to his wife Christine. Called the "X-Report," in which Müller was referred to throughout as "Mr. X," the document described the history of the Vatican exchanges, its purpose, and final result. The objective of the X-Report was to convince Halder and Brauchitsch to take action. If they could be persuaded that the Allies still had faith in a decent Germany, the fear of committing national treason might be overcome.⁵⁵

As for the exact contents of the X-Report, historians have had difficulties in reconstructing it precisely because the Gestapo destroyed any remaining copies. Müller's secretary destroyed his personal papers on April 5, 1943 after his arrest.⁵⁶ The Nazis found Dohnanyi's copy in a safe at Zossen on September 22, 1944, and probably burned it in 1945 with other Gestapo files. Halder made the first public reference to the X-Report during his interrogation by American intelligence in June 1945.⁵⁷

A number of survivors testified to the contents of the report, with varying degrees of divergence.⁵⁸ Ulrich von Hassell left the best known written testimony of the X-Report in his diary of March 19, 1940:

Oster and Dohnanyi... read me some extraordinarily interesting documents covering the conversations of a Catholic intermediary with the Pope. Following these conversations the Pope established contact with Halifax through Osborne.

The Pope was apparently prepared to go to surprising lengths in his understanding of German interests. Halifax, who spoke definitely for the British Government, was much more cagey in formulating his statements and touched on points like “decentralization of Germany” and “a referendum in Austria.” On the whole, the desire to make a decent peace is quite evident, and the Pope emphasized very strongly to the intermediary that such things as “decentralization” and “plebiscite in Austria” would certainly be no barriers to the peace if there was agreement on other points. The prerequisite for the whole thing, naturally, is a change in the regime and an avowal of Christian morality.⁵⁹

Taken all together, the witnesses all agreed (or did not disagree) that the X-Report contained a plebiscite for Austria, maintenance of the Munich Agreement for the Sudetenland, and no mention of Poland. The Opposition must eliminate Hitler, institute a decentralized and federal government, and prevent an attack in the West.

In spite of Beck’s careful orchestration and the efforts of the Pope, in the end the X-Report failed to convince Halder and Brauchitsch. By the time Thomas, the chosen messenger, showed the document to Halder on April 4, the latter had gotten “cold feet.”⁶⁰ Now that Germany was at war with Britain and France, he felt obligated to follow it through. When Halder took the report to Brauchitsch, his commander-in-chief, the latter angrily called it “pure treason against the State.” He demanded to arrest the man who brought the report, but Halder offered himself instead which put an end to it.⁶¹

The failure of the generals to embrace the plan in the end was due to a combination of their fear of being accused of treason, Hitler’s popularity, their personal military oath, and lack of faith in the goodwill of the Allies. Generations of military tradition in Halder’s family, and the possibility of civil war in the wake of Hitler’s victories, trumped any consideration of treasonous action. Prospects of a coup worsened when Hitler successfully defeated Denmark and Norway on April 9. Halder had hoped that a military blunder would destroy Hitler’s credibility and justify a rebellion. In fact, Halder carried a pistol in his pocket for three years from 1939, intending to use it on Hitler during a meeting, but he never had the nerve to do it.⁶²

During these tense weeks of waiting, Pius XII worried that no news came from Germany. He had optimistically intimated to the French minister at the Vatican in mid-March that “something unexpected might happen.”⁶³ When nothing materialized by the end of the month, the Pope became anxious that Britain might lose hope in the Vatican as a channel for peace.

Then, when he learned from Osborne that there were other peace feelers independently approaching the British government at this time, he feared that they would diminish the importance of the Vatican-Abwehr channel and fuel British skepticism.⁶⁴ The existence of multiple channels might cause the British to second-guess the reliability of any single channel, and reduce the prospects for peace. At least one instance is also recorded in which the Third Reich sent agents to Britain masquerading as anti-Nazi conspirators.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Pope was disturbed that he may have needlessly endangered the papacy when other avenues of communication could have accomplished the same mission. He had been under the impression that his mediatory role was essential to the operation.

In point of fact, Pius XII’s role as guarantor gained the confidence of the British more successfully than that of Germany’s professional diplomats.⁶⁶ Amid the flurry of appeals, the British paid the most attention to the Oster-Beck proposal mediated by the Pope. On the other hand, the impact of several requests simultaneously—from as high as Germany’s Deputy Foreign Minister—might have helped Pius XII’s efforts by adding on to his prestige other illustrious rebels against the Nazi regime.

From Berlin, a disappointed Beck sent Müller to tell the Sovereign Pontiff that they were unable to mobilize the generals and prevent the Western offensive. Hitler’s plan to invade Belgium, Luxembourg, and The Netherlands reached the Vatican by May 1.⁶⁷ In the face of their failure to execute the coup, Beck and Oster sent this warning to maintain the trust of the Pope. They also wished to show their authenticity to the British and French, and avoid being associated with the Venlo deception.

In response to Müller’s messages, Pius XII immediately alerted the Low Countries, and on May 3 sent telegrams to the nuncios in Brussels and The Hague. On May 6, in a papal audience, he warned the Prince and Princess of Piedmont of the imminent attacks. Cardinal Montini warned Osborne and Jean Rivi re of the French embassy on May 7 under the Pope’s orders. This last warning contained details of the military operations about to take place, such as a parachutist drop and interference with communication lines.⁶⁸

The dreaded invasion came on May 10. Pius XII sent three telegrams expressing his sorrow and sympathy to King Leopold of Belgium, Queen Wilhelmina of Holland, and the Grand Duchess Charlotte of Luxembourg.⁶⁹ Three days later, an infuriated Mussolini sent his ambassador, Dino Alfieri, to inform the Pope that the telegrams violated Vatican neutrality and that he may have to suffer for it.⁷⁰ The Holy Father replied that he was prepared to go to a concentration camp and that there were times when a Pope cannot keep silent. “The Italians know well enough what horrible things happen in Poland. We ought to speak words of fire against things like that. The only reason we don’t speak is the knowledge that it would make the lot of the Polish people still harder.”⁷¹

Conclusion

The role of Pope Pius XII in mediating for the German Resistance from 1939 to 1940 has given historians a rare window into his position toward the warring powers during World War II. With the trust of the British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary on one side, and the confidence of the German Oppositionists on the other, Pius XII stood in the breach for two enemy nations and used his influence for peace. Although the coup d’état failed to take place in the end, the Vatican exchanges uncovered a unique episode in modern history in which a Pope consented to the clandestine plot of military dissidents to oust a ruthless dictator. The risks that Pius XII took in mediating for the Opposition among Hitler’s own military ranks demonstrated a firm resolve to resist Nazism even at personal cost.

Recent investigations into Nazi espionage against the Vatican have shown that the stakes were high against the Opposition throughout the papal mediations. German intelligence targeted the Holy See more intensely than any other country during the war. In the early phases of the exchanges, the SD hired a Benedictine monk, Hermann Keller, to spy on Josef Müller when information about the plot leaked from an indiscreet source.⁷² Nazi code breakers worked in multiple branches of the military and Foreign Ministry. Secret agents in Rome watched the Vatican closely. Müller warned Leiber in 1943 that cryptanalysts had broken the papal codes.⁷³ A plot to kidnap Pius XII that same year came to light after the war, based on the testimonies of German Ambassador Rudolf Rahn and former SS chief Karl Otto Wolff.⁷⁴

Historians of the Resistance unanimously agree that the Pope wished to save lives and end the Nazi regime. “He gambled this once and lost,” Deutsch writes, “But the risk, however great for the Church and

himself, was incurred for the greatest stake of all—world peace.”⁷⁵ Chadwick writes, “Never in all history had a Pope engaged so delicately in a conspiracy to overthrow a tyrant by force.”⁷⁶ John Conway’s studies of the British Foreign Office papers reveal a Pope entangled in a complex web of relations who had to act cautiously and diplomatically.

Pius XII’s action in the anti-Hitler plot disclosed a dimension frequently overlooked by critics of his wartime record. In a survey of scholarly works criticizing the Pope, only one mentions his role in the conspiracy against Hitler.⁷⁷ John Cornwell, author of the influential polemic, *Hitler’s Pope*, writes:

Then something extraordinary, and in deepest secrecy, occurred... it betokened neither cowardice nor a liking for Hitler. In November 1939 Pacelli became centrally and dangerously involved in what was probably the most feasible plot to depose Hitler during the war... he was unafraid on account of his personal safety. His hatred of Hitler was sufficient to allow him to take grave risks with his own life.⁷⁸

Cornwell sums up the Pope’s action as “foolhardy valor,” thus paying him a mixed compliment.⁷⁹ The Pontiff’s subsequent silence and inaction he finds inexcusably culpable. Yet taken to its logical conclusion, if the Pope’s secret operation was “foolhardy,” then would not a more public protest be reckless in the extreme?

Indeed, members of the Opposition warned Pius XII to keep a low profile and avoid provoking the volatile Nazis. Harold H. Tittmann, Jr., the American Chargé d’Affaires inside Vatican City during the war, reported a conversation with Dr. Müller in 1945 in which the latter told him that the German Resistance ring:

had always been very insistent that the Pope should refrain from making any public statement singling out the Nazis and specifically condemning them and had recommended that the Pope’s remarks should be confined to generalities only... since, if the Pope had been specific, Germans would have accused him of yielding to the promptings of foreign powers and this would have made the German Catholics even more suspected than they were and would have greatly restricted their freedom of action in their work of resistance to the Nazis... the Pope followed this advice throughout the war.⁸⁰

Documents from the Third Reich corroborated these fears. A telegram on January 24, 1943 from Ribbentrop to Ernst von Weizsäcker, German ambassador to the Vatican, threatened: "Should the Vatican... oppose Germany... the German government would have... retaliatory measures at its disposal to counteract each attempted move by the Vatican."⁸¹ Indeed, the Nazis seized Jews in the Netherlands immediately after a protest by the Dutch bishops in 1942. When Pius XII protested Nazi atrocities in Poland, persecution intensified.⁸² The International Red Cross avoided disputes so that their efforts would not be terminated. Even some Jews did not want the Pope to speak out: "None of us wanted the Pope to take an open stand... The Gestapo would have become more excited and would have intensified its inquisitions... It was better that the Pope said nothing."⁸³ Rational negotiation was not possible with a fanatical regime.

Pope Pius XII suffered intensely in his position as head of the Roman Catholic Church during the war. This study of his pivotal role in the Abwehr negotiations with Britain illuminates his dilemma. Saddled with a naturally cautious temperament, the Pope agonized in making decisions on behalf of the human family which he served. Weighty considerations were sifted in his communications with London and Berlin. In his dealings with Hitler's Germany, any overt action he took potentially risked thousands of innocent lives. Under these treacherous circumstances, Pope Pius XII showed an unusual courage and willingness to use his authority for world peace, and played an important role in Opposition history.

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Notes

1. Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 94.
2. Sir Orme Sargent, Head of the British Foreign Office, FO 371/24405, quoted in Patricia Meehan, *The Unnecessary War: Whitehall and the German Resistance to Hitler* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), 294-295.
3. Harold C. Deutsch, *The Conspiracy Against Hitler in the Twilight War* (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1970), 121.
4. Hermann Göring, *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal: Nuremberg: 14 November 1945-1 October 1946*, Vol. XII (Nuremberg, 1947), 228. Henceforth, IMT.
5. Anthony Cave Brown, *Bodyguard of Lies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 179.
6. Gerd R. Ueberschär, "General Halder and the Resistance to Hitler in the German High Command 1938-40," *European History Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (July 1, 1988), 335; Deutsch, 107.
7. John H. Waller, *The Unseen War in Europe: Espionage and Conspiracy in the Second World War* (New York: Random House, 1996), 99; John S. Conway, "The Vatican, Great Britain, and Relations with Germany, 1938-1940," *The Historical Journal* 16.1 (1973), 157, <http://www.jstor.org/>; Klemens Von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad, 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 172; Deutsch, 107-108; Meehan, 285.
8. Brown, 180.
9. His sympathy for the German people did not extend to the Nazis and Hitler. The latter actually accused Pius XII of hostility to Germany. See John S. Conway, "The Silence of Pope Pius XII," *The Review of Politics* 27.1 (1965), 109, <http://www.jstor.org/>
10. Owen Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 152.
11. Conway (1973), 152.
12. Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, *Mit Brennender Sorge: On the Church and the German Reich* (Rome: 14 March 1937), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_14031937_mit-brennender-sorge_en.html
13. Conway (1973), 149.
14. Joseph L. Lichten, *A Question of Judgment: Pius XII and the Jews* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1963), 12.
15. Brown, 180.
16. Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy: The*

- Secret Resistance to Hitler in the German Army* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1969), 72-73; Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 158-159; Hans Bernd Gisevius, *To the Bitter End*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 446-447; Deutsch, 114; Waller, 99; Brown, 181; Von Klemperer, 58; Meehan, 286.
17. Gisevius praised Müller for his steely nerves under Gestapo interrogation after 1943, which impressed even the Nazis (*To the Bitter End*, 427).
18. The first public revelation of the conspiracy surfaced at the 1946 Nuremberg trials. See Conway (1973), 158.
19. The document is reprinted in *Helmuth Groscurth, Tagebücher Eines Abwehroffiziers 1938-1940: Mit weiteren dokumenten zur Militäropposition gegen Hitler*, ed. Helmut Krausnick and Harold C. Deutsch (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1970).
20. Two German sources that preceded Deutsch's work include the monographs of Erich Kosthorst (1957) and Kurt Sendtner (1956). Josef Müller's autobiography was also published in German under the title, *Bis Zur Letzten Konsequenz: Ein Leben Für Frieden Und Freiheit* (1975).
21. For discussions of discrepancies in dates among the various sources, see Conway (1973), 159-160; Meehan, 289; Von Klemperer, 174-175.
22. Von Klemperer, 205; IMT, 230.
23. Chadwick, 88.
24. Deutsch, 120.
25. Domenico Cardinal Tardini, a longtime aide to Pius XII as Secretary of State, described him as "not only slow in finding a solution on the spot, but when it came to formulating the solution, he seemed to have difficulty even in choosing his words," and he "did not like to make up his mind immediately." The Pope sometimes even telephoned his inquirer after further thought with a completely different solution. See *Memories of Pius XII*, trans. Rosemary Goldie (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1961), 51-52.
26. Deutsch, 121.
27. Tardini, 85-86.
28. FO 371/C2522/89/18, quoted in Conway (1973), 163. Gisevius also wrote, "The German Opposition was not a government competent to offer a binding signature to treaties or agreements. It, therefore, redounds greatly to the honor of the Pope that he, for the sake of European peace, put aside all misgivings and volunteered his services as a mediator" (*To the Bitter End*, 447).
29. Chadwick, 87-88.
30. Gisevius, 447.

31. Ibid., 447. Concerning Müller's trips, he also wrote, "The inquiries he made there and the answers he received gave us the right to assure Halder and Brauchitsch that all bonds had not been severed and that there were still understanding people on the enemy side who were willing to collaborate toward an honest liquidation of the Nazi system" (p. 379-380).
32. Groscurth's diary for October 20, 1939, quoted in Brown, 182.
33. Deutsch, 121. This timing, reported by Müller, was confirmed in Groscurth's diary. See Conway (1973), 159-160.
34. Sir Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, O.M. 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1971), 226 and 228.
35. Brown, 186-187.
36. FO 371/24405, referenced in Ronald J. Rychlak, *Hitler, the War, and the Pope* (Columbus: Genesis Press, Inc., 2000), 129; Hoffmann, 160.
37. Josef Müller's report on the Roman mission, November 8, 1939, reprinted in Groscurth, 506-509. The excerpt was translated by Professor Robert Citino at Eastern Michigan University, Winter 2008.
38. FO 371/C19745/13005/18, quoted in Conway (1973), 160.
39. Diary entry for December 13, 1939 in Cadogan, 237.
40. The phrase in German, "Verhandlungsfähige Regierung," appeared several times during the negotiations. For the January messages, see Chadwick, 90; Hoffmann, 160; Meehan, 289-290; Conway (1973), 162. The quote is found in FO 371/C1137/89/18, Osborne to Halifax, 12 January 1940. General Franz Halder also noted succinctly in his diary on January 8, 1940, "Visit to the Pope." See *The Halder War Diary: 1939-1942*, ed. Charles Burdick and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (Novato: Presidio Press, 1988), 83.
41. FO 371/C1137/89/18, Osborne to Halifax, 12 January 1940, quoted in Conway (1973), 162-163.
42. Ibid.
43. Chadwick, 91; Deutsch, 140.
44. David Alvarez and Robert A. Graham, *Nothing Sacred: Nazi Espionage against the Vatican, 1939-1945* (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1997), 27-28.
45. Cabinet Paper 1940, 65/11, p. 159, quoted in Conway (1973), 163.
46. FO 371/C2522/89/18, Osborne to Halifax, 7 February 1940, quoted in Meehan, 292. Osborne's diary the same day also notes, "Interesting talk with Arborio Mella, the Pope's Maestro di Camera," quoted in Chadwick, 92.
47. Peter Hoffmann, "The Question of Western Allied Co-Operation with the German Anti-Nazi Conspiracy, 1939-1944," *The Historical Journal*. 34.2 (1991), 450, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

48. Chadwick, 98.
49. Ibid.
50. FO 371/24405, a “Memorandum of February 15, 1940,” quoted in Rycklak, 130. Chamberlain also wrote in a note by hand, “Great Britain will do nothing without France,” quoted in Chadwick, 93.
51. The full text of the response in FO 371/C2522/89/18 is cited in Conway (1973), 164.
52. Hoffmann, 161-162. Müller reported the final British answer as arriving on February 1, which he estimated from memory. See Deutsch, 146-148.
53. Deutsch, 147. In the code, “O” stood for Osborne, and “chief” for the Pope.
54. Ibid., 294.
55. Testimony of Gisevius concerning “Vatican Action” in IMT, 230. See also Gisevius, 379.
56. Von Klemperer, 173-174; Chadwick, 96-97. Müller ate some of the more incriminating of the papers during his 1944 interrogation when his examiner momentarily left him alone in the room. See Deutsch, 290.
57. Meehan, 298-299.
58. For a discussion of the testimonies, see Deutsch, 297-303. The main point of divergence came from Halder, who claimed that the British included the return of Alsace-Lorraine in its terms, which Muller and the others denied. Deutsch speculated that either Halder’s memory was faulty, or he received a doctored version of the original report—upgraded to persuade the Generals to act. Halder and Thomas offered the latter theory.
59. Ulrich Von Hassell, *The Von Hassell Diaries: The Story of the Forces Against Hitler Inside Germany, 1938-1944* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1947), 125.
60. Diary of April, 6, 1940 in *ibid.*, 130. See also Ueberschär, 336.
61. Deutsch, 312.
62. *Ibid.*, 197. Gisevius also wrote: “Thus failed the last impressive attempt to prevent the extension of the war and to persuade the top leadership of the Wehrmacht to take action. Brauchitsch and Halder had their choice, and they made it. They chose Hitler—and world war” (*To the Bitter End*, 447).
63. Report to Halifax from Osborne in Rome and Cadogan in London, quoted in Meehan, 296.
64. Osborne’s report of his meeting with Pius XII on March 30, 1940, referenced in Hoffmann, 162; Chadwick, 97; Conway (1973), 166; Von Klemperer, 179. See also Deutsch, 149-174.
65. Deutsch, 107.

66. Ibid., 149-174.
67. Ibid., 335; Ueberschär, 336.
68. Deutsch, 340.
69. Chadwick, 110.
70. Ibid., 111-112.
71. *Actes et Documents du Saint Siège relatives à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Vatican: 1965-81, 1, 455), quoted in Chadwick, 112.
72. Alvarez and Graham, 28; Waller, 102; Deutsch, 132.
73. Alvarez and Graham, 163-164.
74. Clyde Haberman, "Magazine Says Hitler Planned to Abduct Pope," *The New York Times* (July 21, 1991), <http://www.nytimes.com/>.
75. Deutsch, 349.
76. Chadwick, 91.
77. No mention was made in Guenter Lewy's *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (1963), Saul Friedländer's *Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation* (1980), and Susan Zucotti's *Under His Very Windows* (2000), to name a few important works.
78. John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking, 1999), 234 and 240.
79. Ibid., 380.
80. Letter to Ambassador Myron Taylor on June 4, 1945 in Harold H. Tittmann, *Inside the Vatican of Pius XII: The Memoir of an American Diplomat During World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 212-213.
81. Lichten, 5.
82. Letter by Sir Alec Randall, former British representative at the Vatican, to the London *Times* *ibid.*, 6.
83. A Berlin couple, Mr. and Mrs. Wolfsson, who escaped to Spain with Pius XII's aid, quoted in *ibid.*, 5-6.