

Gerald J. Steinacher

# Forgive and Forget

## The Vatican and the Escape of Nazi War Criminals from Justice

### Abstract

The Vatican and other Catholic leaders' ideas about crime and punishment were different from those of the Allies. The leadership of the Catholic Church – Pope Pius XII, his closest advisors, and many cardinals and bishops – opposed the Allied war crime trials and denazification efforts after World War II, and their opposition intensified over time. This included criticism of war crime trials as well as rejections of widespread administrative purges. Catholic organisations assiduously provided moral, financial, and material support for accused and convicted Holocaust perpetrators. By 1948, the efforts of saving Nazis from the gallows had turned into a full-blown Catholic crusade against Nuremberg.

The Vatican Secretariat of State and the Pope himself obstructed Allied justice by violating international agreements for the extradition of war criminals to the countries where they had committed their crimes (e.g. the Moscow Declaration). By using archival sources, I illustrate this second point with the case of the Croatian war criminals and quislings hiding in Italy – some of them inside the Vatican – which were circumstances that did not escape the attention of the Allies. Also, I make it clear that the Papal Aid Commission was extensively involved in helping Nazi war criminals escape justice by channelling them overseas, to places where they could not be extradited.

Very few studies investigate in tandem the Vatican responses to Nuremberg justice and the issues of the so-called “Ratline”. In my view, these two – often separately discussed – topics are closely intertwined, and establishing the link between them is one of the major contributions of this paper. While actively aiding Nazi escape and shielding perpetrators from prosecution represent different points on a spectrum, it is often unclear where one ends and the other begins. I argue that Catholic help for Nazi war criminals was ultimately one aspect of the Vatican's response to the new post-war order and the early Cold War. This article also serves as a starting point for further research in the recently opened Vatican archives.

### Introduction

Pius XII, born Eugenio Pacelli (1876–1958), remains the most controversial pope in recent history. Ever since Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 play *The Deputy*, the role of the Catholic Church leadership and the actions of the pope during the Holocaust have inspired a heated debate sometimes called the “Pius War”. For some, Pius XII was “Hitler's Pope” who kept silent on the Holocaust, while for others the “vicar of Christ” did everything possible to help Jews and other Nazi victims. In any case, the ongoing push for his canonisation has done nothing to calm the waters. Both sides in this global debate have generated an ever-growing volume of research. Even with the available rich scholarship on wartime Pope Pius XII, many questions remain about the Catholic Church's post-war role on two important aspects of the Holocaust:

1. the involvement of Church institutions in helping Holocaust perpetrators escape Allied justice;

## 2. the Vatican's stance on the Nuremberg trials and denazification.

In this paper, I will offer a brief overview of the Vatican's stance on the Nuremberg trials and the Allied program of "denazification" (in the broadest sense of the word). I will then discuss the Vatican's role in the escape of Holocaust perpetrators and Nazis. And lastly, I will conclude with some of the driving forces behind the Vatican's responses to Allied post-war justice. As we will see, the question of motivation is probably the most difficult to answer, but it is the question in which I am most interested. My findings on motivation are still preliminary, and I intend to further research and develop this in my new book project after I finish examining sources from the recently opened Vatican archives. The Catholic leadership's stance on post-war justice and peace for war-torn Europe and its role in the escape of Holocaust perpetrators and Nazi criminals are closely intertwined issues. However, the Vatican's opposition to the Nuremberg trials and its active role in shielding perpetrators from prosecution are rarely discussed in tandem.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these issues reveal the Catholic Church's position on the Nazi regime, communism, and the early post-war order. Most broadly, my current research aims to understand the Vatican's responses to guilt and responsibility after dictatorship, war, and genocide. What was the Vatican's model for justice and establishing a stable peace in the war-torn societies? With these research questions, I see my ongoing work on the Catholic Church and international relations after 1945 as a contribution to the broader field of historical peace and conflict studies.<sup>2</sup>

### The Third Reich, the Holocaust, and the Vatican

Eugenio Pacelli, later known as Pope Pius XII, was not a friend of the Nazis. However, once the Nazis established their rule, he was hopeful that a compromise might serve Church interests. After all, this strategy had worked with another fascist dictatorship, that of Benito Mussolini, with which the Lateran Treaty with Italy was signed.<sup>3</sup> As the Cardinal Secretary of State, Pacelli pressed toward some middle ground and drove the 1933 Concordat with Germany, which regulated the Church-state relationship and its related rights and obligations. Perhaps it was a protectionist move to defend the Church. However, this could also be seen as the pope's blessing of the newly appointed government of Adolf Hitler. The Vatican did not condemn the early discrimination of German Jews as they were fired from public offices, nor did it protest the notorious Nuremberg laws on race. But even with the 1933 Concordat, relations between the Nazi state and the Catholic Church's leadership soon soured. In 1937, Pius XI denounced the constant violations of the Concordat and the Nazi

1 Michael Phayer and Robert Ventresca are among the few church historians who are to date looking at the Vatican Ratline in the bigger context of the pontificate of Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the early Cold War. But the Vatican's role in the Nuremberg trials and the wider issue of post-war justice is only touched on in their important work. My previous book, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fleed Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), documents the structures of the Italian Ratline in great detail, but the role of the Church comprised only one chapter of the book.

2 For the Church and the post-war order, see the works of Peter Kent, Charles Gallagher, or Guiliana Chamedes, to name a few. Peter Kent, *The Lonely Cold War of Pope Pius XII: The Roman Catholic Church and the Division of Europe, 1943–1950* (Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); Charles R. Gallagher, *Vatican Secret Diplomacy: Joseph P. Hurley and Pope Pius XII* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

3 See David Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe* (New York: Random House, 2014).

teachings of superior races, which stood in blatant opposition to basic Christian teachings. These Nazi teachings contradicted Church doctrine that all humans are created in the image of God, and they challenged the power of the sacraments, especially baptism. In the Church's view, Jews who converted to Catholicism were reborn in Christ through the sacrament of baptism. For the Church they were Catholic Christians, but Nazis still considered them of the "Jewish race". The fate of these so-called "non-Aryan" Catholics became an element of constant tension between the Nazi state and the Church leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Pacelli became pope shortly before World War Two broke out in 1939. As pope, Pius XII still counted on cautious diplomacy and official neutrality to navigate the Church through the stormy waters of war. With Hitler's attack on the "godless" Soviet Union, many Catholic leaders prayed for the victory of this anti-Bolshevik crusade, though with a heavy heart. The pope knew about the criminal nature of Hitler's regime. It is well documented that the Vatican had early and detailed knowledge about the systematic mass murder of Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe,<sup>5</sup> but Pius XII worried that an open break with Nazi Germany would only worsen matters. He feared that opposing the Nazis could lead to reprisals, but even more importantly, that resistance could threaten the integrity of the Church as an institution and its mission of universal charity and the saving of souls for Christ. As Mark Riebling notes, "the Church's essential role, after all, was to save souls. But in practice, the spiritual purpose entailed a temporal one: the achievement of political conditions under which souls could be saved."<sup>6</sup>

Early hopes for an arrangement of sorts with Hitler had long withered. After the Allies denounced the genocide in a joint declaration in 1942, the pope included in his Christmas radio message a vague and carefully worded sentence about "the hundreds of thousands who, without personal guilt, are doomed to death or to a progressive deterioration of their condition, sometimes for no other reasons than their nationality or descent [*stirpe*]."<sup>7</sup> The pope did not mention Jews and "non-Aryans", nor did he name the German government as the perpetrator of these crimes. Ever the diplomat, Pius avoided public confrontation with the Nazi government. It is worth noting, however, that on numerous occasions the pope felt able to strongly and repeatedly condemn communism, which he saw as the principal enemy of the Church.<sup>8</sup> Even when, in 1943, the Nazis and their collaborators arrested and deported many of the Roman Jews "under his very windows", the pope did not protest publicly.<sup>9</sup>

4 See Hubert Wolf, *Pope and Devil: The Vatican's Archives and the Third Reich* (Harvard University Press Cambridge, MA, and London, 2010); Ursula Büttner and Martin Greschat, *Die verlassenen Kinder der Kirche: Der Umgang mit Christen jüdischer Herkunft im "Dritten Reich"* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998); and Patrick J. Hayes, "American Catholics Respond to Kristallnacht: NCWC Refugee Policy and the Plight of Non-Aryans," in *American Religious Responses to Kristallnacht*, ed. Maria Mazzenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 111–144.

5 Robert Ventresca, *Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pope Pius XII* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 180–184.

6 Mark Riebling, *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War against Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 25.

7 Michael Phayer, *Pius XII, the Holocaust and the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 53.

8 See Gerald Steinacher's book review on Klaus Kühlwein, "Pius XII. und die Deportation der Juden Roms" (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 284–286.

9 See Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), and Giovanni Miccoli, *I dilemmi e i silenzi di Pio XII*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Milan: Rizzoli, 2007). For claims that Pius XII saved large numbers of Jews and Christians of Jewish ancestry, see Ronald J. Rychlak, *Righteous Gentiles: How Pope Pius XII Saved Half a Million Jews from the Nazis* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Company, 2005); Pinchas E. Lapide, *Three Popes and the Jews* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967); and Giovanni Sale, *Hitler, la Santa Sede e gli ebrei: Con i documenti dell'archivio segreto Vaticano* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2004).

Take, in contrast, the pope's unusual outspokenness against the Allied unconditional surrender formula for Germany. To the pope, this strategy would only prolong the war and provided no incentive for internal opposition or resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany. With the war dragging on, the pope hoped to broker a peace settlement, but despite several secret negotiations behind the scenes, including with German opposition circles, no major successes ever materialised.<sup>10</sup> With the front-line nearing Rome in 1944, the pope grew increasingly concerned about the protection of the "holy city", then more than ever as the Bishop of Rome. In June 1944, Rome was liberated by American and Allied forces without a shot fired. Then, on 2 June 1945, just a few weeks after Germany's unconditional surrender, the pope gave one of the most important programmatic speeches about his views on World War Two and a just post-war order.<sup>11</sup> He communicated four main points:

1. the Catholic Church was a victim of the Nazis: the Church spoke out against and condemned the Nazis early on;
2. the Germans are not collectively guilty: after the guilty are punished, the German nation must be welcomed back into the family of nations;
3. the Soviets' brutal occupation regime in Central and Eastern Europe is condemnable;
4. the Church is needed for the consolidation of true peace.

The pope's views, articulated in this address regarding the Church's role during the Nazi regime and its ideas for the future treatment of Germany, are important. Concerning Germany, the pope stated that he worked in Germany as a nuncio and knew the country well. In his years spent in Germany, Pius XII learned to appreciate "the great qualities" of the German people and was close to many of their representatives. The pope said early on that a rebirth and a re-established dignity would be possible for Germany "after it has rejected the satanic spectrum exhibited by National Socialism and after the guilty (as we have already had occasion to state at other times) will have atoned for the crimes they have committed".<sup>12</sup> The pope proposed mild treatment for the German people and stood firm against radical solutions of collective punishment and the permanent weakening of Germany, as proposed by the United States' Secretary of Finance Henry Morgenthau.

Regarding the Church's role during the Nazi years, the pope stressed its own victimhood.<sup>13</sup> The Catholic Church and its faithful had suffered terribly under the National Socialist regime. According to him, 2,800 Polish priests and hundreds of Austrian and German clergymen were imprisoned by the Nazis in the Dachau concentration camp alone. The pope announced in a somewhat triumphal tone that the Nazis had indeed sought to destroy the Church, but were unsuccessful. Non-com-

10 The Vatican was involved in the secret surrender negotiations between German commanders in Italy and American intelligence, which led to the German capitulation on 2 May 1945. For more on this topic, see Richard Breitman, et al., *U.S. Intelligence and the Nazis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kerstin von Lingen, *Allen Dulles, the OSS, and Nazi War Criminals: The Dynamics of Selective Prosecution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Bradley F. Smith and Elena Aga-Rossi, *Operation Sunrise: The Secret Surrender* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

11 "Allocuzione di Sua Santità al Sacro Collegio [dei cardinali presenti a Roma] in risposta agli auguri per il Suo onomastico. Il Sommo Pontefice, delineata la natura e i caratteri del sistema nazionalsocialista e le sue persecuzioni contro la Chiesa Cattolica, indica all'umanità la via sicura per eliminare ogni violenza brutale e traccia per i reggitori dei popoli le note essenziali di una vera pace." *Osservatore Romano* (3 June 1945), 1; "Text of Pope Pius XII's Address to the Sacred College of Cardinals", *New York Times* (3 June 1945), accessed 3 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/1945/06/03/archives/text-of-pope-pius-xiis-address-to-the-sacred-college-of-cardinals-i.html>.

12 "Allocuzione di Sua Santità al Sacro Collegio."

13 See, for example, Mark Edward Ruff, *The Battle for the Catholic Past in Germany 1945–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

munist societies reacted positively to the pope's speech. However, it is noteworthy that even at that time American observers criticised the pope (and his neutrality) "because he had waited until Germany had been defeated before attacking the Nazis in public".<sup>14</sup> The Allies, in contrast, had condemned the Nazi crimes and stated the need for their punishment much earlier.

### The Vatican and Nuremberg

Even before the end of World War II, the Allied governments resolved that the horrific crimes committed by the Nazi regime and its collaborators should not go unpunished. Yet they debated: How should this stance be translated into action? Who were the wrongdoers and how should they be punished? One principle the Allied powers could agree on was the "denazification" of German society, but the British, the Americans, and the Soviets disagreed on what that meant and how it should be implemented. Revenge was initially also a major factor, particularly among the Soviets, who lost over twenty-seven million citizens, most of them civilians, in Hitler's total war. The advancing Soviet forces often used brutal violence against civilians and raped hundreds of thousands of German women.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the United States' authorities immediately tried to restore some sense of order and normalcy in devastated German communities. Thanks to the American and British commitment to stability, acts of brutal violence and vengeance remained relatively rare in the Western occupation zones of Germany.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, the United States' argument for denazification through the rule of law prevailed, even though this could be a long and complicated process. The case of Italy shows how things could have turned out quite differently if another style of denazification had been followed. In Italy, war crime trials and *epurazione* (defascisation) courts were established. However, vendettas were widespread, as pointed out by Hans Woller.<sup>17</sup> Long-time Italian dictator Mussolini was killed in cold blood, along with an estimated twelve thousand others, without any legal proceedings.

On the road to denazifying German (and Austrian) society, the Allied victors eventually agreed to abandon the idea of summary executions, and to instead jointly prosecute a number of the surviving Nazi leaders. The resulting International Military Trial in Nuremberg ran from 1945 through to 1946. Later, the United States' authorities held twelve subsequent Nuremberg trials, the last ending in 1949, bringing to book dozens of representatives of the German "elite", including medical doctors, diplomats, generals, SS (*Schutzstaffel*, Protection Squadron) leaders, and industrialists. Altogether, 5,133 people were prosecuted for war crimes in the Western zones of Germany, and 668 were sentenced to death.<sup>18</sup> Alongside these proceedings, thousands of trials of lesser Nazi officials as well as local collaborators and fascist leaders were held all over Europe. But to denazify German society, the Allies had to

14 Harold Tittmann, Jr., "For the ambassador, June 4, 1945," *Inside the Vatican of Pius XII: The Memoir of an American Diplomat during World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 213.

15 Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (New York: Picador St. Martin's Press, 2012), 54 f.

16 Ian Buruma, *Year Zero: A History of 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013), 77.

17 For more on this topic, see Hans Woller, *Die Abrechnung mit dem Faschismus in Italien* (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 1996). See also Roy Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial, 1943–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

18 See Richard J. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 744.

deal not just with the killers and party leaders but also the millions of “ordinary” Nazis. Thus, denazification tribunals looked for Nazi party membership and roles inside the regime. In addition to criminal guilt, denazification sought to address moral guilt and responsibility, too.<sup>19</sup> These efforts to achieve some form of justice played out differently from country to country. For the most part, they were quickly wrapped up by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The Cold War had become hot, and the new enemy of the West was communism.

Unsurprisingly, the Vatican and other Catholic leaders thought differently about crime and punishment. This can partially be viewed through Pope Pius XII’s love for the German people and culture. For good reason, he was known in Rome as the “German Pope”. His deep connection to Germany dated back to his time there as papal nuncio ambassador in the 1920s. During the war and the immediate post-war years, he felt strong empathy for ordinary Germans and wanted to improve their plight. As early as 1945, Pius XII left no doubt that Germans should not be treated as pariahs but as members of the Christian family, and that they should therefore be quickly re-integrated into the West.<sup>20</sup> Pope Pius XII and his closest advisors, together with many cardinals and bishops, opposed the Allied war crime trials and the overall project of denazification after World War II. Their opposition intensified over time. The Vatican began diplomatically by offering cautious critiques against victor’s justice, the dangers of revenge, and a strong rejection of any notion of collective guilt. Accusations of victor’s justice had already been raised in the context of the International Nuremberg Military Tribunal in 1945 and 1946. But with a handful of top Nazi perpetrators, the Church grudgingly went along with this Allied trial. The Vatican even agreed to provide some documentation about the persecution of the Catholic Church by the Nazis for the Nuremberg prosecutors.<sup>21</sup> The Church’s limited support was for practical and political purposes. Some of it – like the Church’s victim narrative – was also self-serving. Officially, the Church tried to be as neutral as possible, attempting to appear neither opposed to nor in support of the trial, but rather focused on saving souls and on other religious work. However, large-scale punishment and administrative purges were denounced as wrong from the very beginning. After the conclusion of the International Nuremberg Trial in October 1946, Catholic opposition quickly became increasingly outspoken against ongoing retributive criminal justice.

One day after the death sentences in Nuremberg were executed,<sup>22</sup> Cardinal Joseph Frings of Cologne, one of the highest-ranking German Catholic clerics and a confidant of Pope Pius XII, made clear that denazification and war crime trials needed to stop immediately. In a high-level meeting with a group of English bishops, Frings spoke firmly that the end of the international Nuremberg trial “must [also] be the end of revenge, and the beginning of reconstruction”.<sup>23</sup> From that point on, among the most active in crusading against war crime trials, besides Cardinal Frings, were Auxiliary Bishop of Munich Johannes Neuhäusler, Archbishop Andreas Rohrer of Salzburg, United States’ bishop and later papal nuncio Aloysius Muench, Cardinal and long-time papal nuncio to the United States Amleto Cicognani, and New York’s

19 Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Beck, 1996), in its English version *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

20 “Allocuzione di Sua Santità al Sacro Collegio.”

21 Telford Taylor, *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 94.

22 The executions took place on 16 October 1946.

23 Archives of the Archdioceses of Cologne (AEK), CR II 25.18,8 / 186 [Delegation], Cologne at Cardinal Frings’ House, 17 October 1946, 17.20 hours.

Cardinal Francis Spellman, together with Monsignor Giovanni Montini, the future Pope Paul VI.<sup>24</sup>

Their outspoken opposition included general criticism of war crime trials as well as rejections of widespread administrative purges. Many Catholic Church leaders not only voiced their concerns at the outset, but before long tirelessly attempted to undermine and even derail these Allied efforts. The Church intervened by sending petitions to officials at every level, up to and including the United States' president, providing witness statements for the Nazi defence, initiating and managing public relations campaigns for defendants and against the prosecution, working as close aids to the defence lawyers, and even writing letters of support for defendants. Catholic organisations assiduously provided moral, financial, and material support for accused and convicted Holocaust perpetrators. Clergymen from cardinals and bishops down to parish priests intervened for both big and small Nazis, always finding reasons to plead for clemency or even protection from punishment. They took their cues from the Vatican Secretariat of State, an office under the direct and personal supervision of Pius XII.<sup>25</sup>

Take, for example, the case of the Prince-Bishop of Bressanone (Brixen), Johannes Geisler. Likely incited by his pan-German General Vicar Alois Pompanin, Geisler wrote a letter asking for a clemency for SS *Standartenführer* (Colonel) Wolfram Sievers, who was sentenced to death in Nuremberg.<sup>26</sup> Sievers was involved in medical experiments on concentration camp inmates, including the murder of Jewish prisoners to collect their skulls and skeletons for anthropological "research". The bishop stated that, although he did not know Sievers personally, he was asked by a highly esteemed Catholic personality to intervene on the Nazi criminal's behalf.<sup>27</sup> The prince-bishop's right-hand man, Monsignor Pompanin, in his own name appealed in support of Hitler's governor of the state of Tyrol, Franz Hofer – a truly hardcore Nazi.<sup>28</sup> But the archbishop of neighbouring Trent had only good things to

24 Ernst Klee, *Persilscheine und falsche Pässe: Wie die Kirchen den Nazis halfen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1991); Phayer, *Pius XII, The Holocaust, and the Cold War*.

25 The Catholic "clemency" campaigns and interventions for Nazis and Nazi collaborators are well documented. See Phayer, *Pius XII, The Holocaust, and the Cold War*; Uki Goi, *The Real Odessa: How Perón Brought the Nazi War Criminals to Argentina* (London and New York: Granta Books, 2002); Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik*; Felix Bohr, *Die Kriegsverbrecherlobby: Bundesdeutsche Hilfe für im Ausland Inhaftierte NS-Täter* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag AG, 2018); Suzanne Brown-Fleming, *The Holocaust and Catholic Conscience: Cardinal Aloisius Muench and the Guilt Question in Germany* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Klee, *Persilscheine und falsche Pässe*; Frederic Spotts, *The Churches and Politics in Germany* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973). For Austria, see Eva Maria Kaiser, *Gottes Hirten und Hitler's Jünger: Der Einsatz der katholischen Bischöfe Österreichs für ehemalige Nationalsozialisten nach 1945* (Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2017).

26 Pompanin knew Sievers from his work in South Tyrol. See James R. Dow, *Heinrich Himmler's Cultural Commissions: Programmed Plunder in Italy and Yugoslavia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 120, 128.

27 Johannes Geisler, Prince-bishop of Brixen (Bressanone) to General Lucius Clay, 3 October 1947, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) archives, RG-14.069M Theophil Wurm papers, Microfilm Reel 64, 305/1. Copies from the Landeskirchliches Archiv Baden-Württemberg.

28 Josef Gelmi, *Fürstbischof Johannes Geisler (1882–1952): Eines der dramatischsten Kapitel der Südtiroler Geschichte* (Brixen: Weger 2003), 116–117. The North Italian diocese of Bressanone (Brixen) was also a hot spot for the saving of souls of former Nazis and their families, big and small. Just one example must suffice here: in July 1949, Father Leopold von Gumpfenberg, a close confidant of Hudal's, became the godfather of a certain Hildegard D. The woman from Düsseldorf was in her youth of "Protestant denomination", as the baptism register shows. For her "second" baptism in Bressanone, D. used her maiden name; maybe she did that on purpose. Her husband, SS-*Hauptsturmführer* (Captain) Dr. Erich Petschauer, was the local representative of Himmler's resettlement organisation, with ties to Bishop Geisler and his general vicar Pompanin. Petschauer was raised Catholic, officially renounced the Church in 1938, and became "gottgläubig" (in other words, he was likely a Nazi atheist). In any case, with this step he showed his full allegiance to Hitler's regime. The return to Christ at war's end helped to get the support of the Church for the Petschauer family. See Baptismal entry Hildegard D. 24 July 1949, Pfarrarchiv Brixen, Taufbuch Brixen, XIV, 1943–50, 358. See also Steinacher, *Nazis*

say about the former top Nazi official of his city. According to the Church leader's October 1945 letter, the South Tyrolean Nazi acted as a perfect "gentleman" during the German occupation from 1943 to 1945 and was inspired by "Christian charity". The archbishop therefore wished "god's protection" for the Nazi and his family.<sup>29</sup> Or consider Munich's influential Cardinal Michael Faulhaber who intervened for Jozef Tiso, a priest and president of the Nazi puppet state of Slovakia, where an estimated 75,000 Jews were murdered. Pope intimus Faulhaber asked the Americans to leave the priest alone in his comfortable Bavarian monastery hideout. As a Catholic monsignor, Tiso deserved honourable treatment like a family member of the pope, Faulhaber argued.<sup>30</sup> Or take the Vatican's efforts in the war crime trials in behalf of high-ranking German leaders like industrialist Alfried Krupp, former vice-chancellor Franz von Papen, and top Nazi diplomat Ernst von Weizsäcker. Hans Frank, the Nazi ruler of occupied Poland, could also count on the Vatican's intervention for him early on. So could Albert Forster, Nazi *Gauleiter* (regional leader) of Gdańsk/Danzig, a man responsible for a murderous occupation regime. The pope's clemency plea for Arthur Greiser, a fanatical ethnic cleanser, caused outrage in Poland.<sup>31</sup> Pius XII's personal plea for Otto Ohlendorf, leader of a killing squad in the Soviet Union, found little to no understanding among the United States' prosecution team.<sup>32</sup> The list of Catholic and Vatican interventions for prominent and lesser-known Nazis and fascists goes on at great length and provides material for many books.

*SS-Obergruppenführer* (Lieutenant General) Oswald Pohl was another Holocaust perpetrator who found Vatican support. Pohl oversaw the slave labour universe of the Third Reich and was sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials. His conversion (which included a "second" baptism *sub conditione*)<sup>33</sup> in the Landsberg prison, from former Lutheran Christian turned Nazi worshipper ("Gottgläubiger")<sup>34</sup> to post-war Catholic, was compared to Saint Paul's conversion.<sup>35</sup> Pohl's prison

on the Run, 151; Peter W. Petschauer, "Uncomfortable Realities: Drs. Erich Petschauer (1907–1977), Gerhard Bast (1911–1947), and Kurt Waldheim (1918–2007)," *Life Writing*, 12, no. 3 (2015): 341–352; and Peter W. Petschauer, *Der Vater und die SS: Erich Petschauer und das NS-Regime* (Brixen: Verlag A. Weger, 2007). For the SS career of Petschauer, see NARA, RG 242 (BDC), Roll SS officers 374A, Dr. Erich Petschauer, 29 September 1907. Thanks to Dr. Peter Petschauer for his help in this case.

29 Letter from Carlo de Ferrari, archbishop of Trent, to Dr. Kurt Heinricher, October 28, 1945. Reprinted in Gerald Steinacher, *Das Trentino in der Operationszone Alpenvorland 1943–1945* (Master's thesis: University of Innsbruck, 1995), xv.

30 Ernst Klee, *Persilscheine und falsche Pässe: Wie die Kirchen den Nazis Halfen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1991), 10.

31 Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 120 ff.

32 For an overview on the role of the Catholic clergy in Germany and the Vatican, see Wolfgang Benz, *Im Widerstand: Größe und Scheitern der Opposition gegen Hitler* (München: C. H. Beck, 2018); Olaf Blaschke, *Die Kirchen und der Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: Reclam 2014); and Gerald Posner, *God's Bankers: A History of Money and Power at the Vatican* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2015), 78–168.

33 Until the Second Vatican Council, the relationship between the Catholic and Protestant churches was tense. The baptisms were fundamentally acknowledged in principle, but could be repeated in dubious cases if (*sub conditione*) the first baptism was incomplete or was invalid. That is normally extremely rare. By canon law at the time, baptism *sub conditione* could only occur in four cases: 1. if it was questionable whether the baptised was alive; 2. if there was a suspected lack of intention on the part of the baptismal sponsor or the baptised; 3. if the baptismal formula was badly corrupted at the "first baptism"; 4. if the baptismal water did not touch the body of the child. Cf. Carl Holboeck, *Handbuch des Kirchenrechtes*, 2 vols. (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1951), ii, 521–530. To my knowledge, I am the first one to document this rather common practice in the post-war years: on this topic, see Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 148 ff.

34 The Nazi terminology "gottgläubig" is difficult to define as it is vague – it could mean deist, atheist, or a believer in Nazi-paganism (Germanic gods). In any case, it is a clear indication that somebody broke with their traditional Christian religion, left the Lutheran or Catholic churches, and was fully committed to the Nazi *Weltanschauung*.

35 Oswald Pohl, *Credo: Mein Weg zu Gott* (Landshut: Girnth, 1950).

chaplain reported to his Bishop of Augsburg on Pohl's return to Christ: "with the same enthusiasm, which he once served a phantom, he [Pohl] now wants to dedicate his life to the Catholic religion and as an apostle wants to lead many back to the Church."<sup>36</sup> Pohl's conversion to the Catholic faith was celebrated by the local dioceses in the 1950 booklet *Credo – My Path to God*, in the hopes that many ordinary Nazis would follow in the footsteps of their former leaders and reject the "false teachings of Nazism". But even with his conversion to Catholicism and all the subsequent interventions of high-ranking Catholic dignitaries on his behalf – including by Pope Pius XII himself – Pohl was not saved from the gallows.<sup>37</sup> Pohl's prison chaplain, Karl Morgenschweis, invested much of his energy bringing the Nazi war criminals locked up in the Landsberg war criminals' prison back to Christ. He was supported in his effort by the German Catholic Church leadership, who also kept the Vatican informed about all efforts made to save Nazi souls. A quick look at the Catholic chaplain in the large war criminals' prison in Dachau (where the United States' army tried hundreds of concentration camp personnel) shows the same picture. *Pfarrer* (priest) Leonhard Roth, closely supervised by Munich's Cardinal Faulhaber and Auxiliary Bishop Neuhäusler, looked after the thousands of interned SS men there. Roth reported in November 1945 to his superiors about a recent conversion: "They slowly come to their senses and find their way back to God. About twelve men are Protestants. About five of the men, who were baptized Catholic [as children], are still in stubborn delusion. [...] Camp leader Rupert was the first to find God, the Lord."<sup>38</sup> On 25 December 1945, Roth told Neuhäusler that the Nazi prisoners said that only the Catholic Church would help them. Roth then wrote to the Munich clergyman: "With this love that you [Neuhäusler] showed, you became the trailblazer for Christ in these men."<sup>39</sup> But Roth, too, was encouraged in his mission from the very top. Monsignor Montini from the Vatican Secretariat of State wrote to Roth in June 1946 and lauded his important work.<sup>40</sup> These few examples already show that the religious concerns, or saving souls by returning former Nazis to Christ, motivated Church leaders. It was so important for the Vatican that it was even willing to risk public attacks, as in the cases of the mass murderers Pohl and Greiser. One should not be surprised. Sister Pascalina Lehnert, the personal confidant and secretary to Pius XII, stated in her memoirs: "Despite all his busy charity work, the concern for the salvation of souls remained always the main mission of Pius XII."<sup>41</sup>

By 1948, the efforts of saving souls, and saving Nazis, from the gallows had turned into a full-blown Catholic crusade against Nuremberg. The pope set the tone. A *New York Times* article from 16 April 1948 cited a letter from Pope Pius XII to the German Catholic leaders, stating that "the world should forgive and forget Germany's war crimes" and instead help to rebuild the country. The vicar of Christ then de-

36 Karl Morgenschweis to the Bishop of Augsburg, 8 January 1950, "Betreff: Aufnahme in die Kirche des ehemaligen SS-Generals Oswald Pohl." Archiv des Bistums Augsburg (ABA), Bestand, Pfarreiakten/Landsberg am Lech – Mariae Himmelfahrt/Gefangenenanstalt/Personalien 1933–1960, (192).

37 Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 154 ff. For new findings on Pohl and the Vatican, see Suzanne Brown-Fleming, "Pope Pius XII, Vatican Neutrality and the Holocaust: Case Studies from the Newly Opened Vatican Archives" (book chapter in print).

38 Norbert Göttler, *Die Akte Pater Leonhard Roth: Sein Leben und Sterben im Einsatz für Gerechtigkeit und historische Wahrheit*, Dachauer Dokumente, vol. 6 (Dachau, 2004), 50.

39 Lagerpfarrer Roth an Domkapitular Neuhäusler, 25 December 1945, Bistumsarchiv München-Freising, Pastorale Mitarbeiter Nr. 3031, (477).

40 Montini to Roth, 4 June 1946, in Göttler, *Die Akte Pater Leonhard Roth*, 53.

41 Pascalina Lehnert, *Ich durfte Ihm dienen: Erinnerungen an Papst Pius XII* (Würzburg: Verlag Johann Wilhelm Naumann, 1982), 102.

plored the fate of millions of expelled Germans and the harsh living conditions in the devastated country. Pope Pius XII acknowledged the crimes committed by the Nazis in Russia and Poland, but emphasised that revenge was not the answer. All the energies should be focused on reconstructing Germany and Europe.<sup>42</sup> With the blessing of “Christ’s deputy on Earth” (a term used at the time), the Christian churches in Germany now engaged in a systematic campaign to discredit the whole war crime trials programme. Accusations of the mistreatment and alleged torture of prisoners, like in the Malmedy war crime case, provided additional (but mostly unfounded) additional ammunition for the clergymen’s discrediting campaign.<sup>43</sup> Cardinal Frings and Auxiliary Bishop Neuhäusler tirelessly spearheaded the Catholic efforts in Germany.<sup>44</sup> They were supported in their goal by Protestant Church leaders like Theophil Wurm, *Landesbischof* in Württemberg. This was a quite unusual alliance for the time, given that tensions between the Protestant and the Catholic churches in Germany were still high. By 1948, Wurm’s opposition was also of principal nature. When answering an appeal by the Lutheran leaders of Germany (including Wurm) concerning the United States-led war crime trials, the United States’ Military Governor stated: “I regret that an effort is now being made to discredit a court which with high intent is endeavouring to establish precedents in international law, which may serve to prevent again a world being plunged into chaos.”<sup>45</sup> The ultimate goal of German Christian leaders was not just mercy and the commutation of death sentences, but a general amnesty. In other words, they worked toward the undoing of much of the Allied denazification policy and toward the freeing of convicted Holocaust perpetrators.

The interventions of high-ranking Church officials, including the pope’s spokesman in Germany, Bishop Aloisius Muench, culminated in demands for a generous amnesty because the “spirit of vindictiveness [...] is not good for peace and prosperity”. In his December 1949 plea to Allied authorities, the antisemitic papal nuncio blamed rising antisemitism on the Jews and their ongoing revengefulness.<sup>46</sup> The United States’ High Commissioner for Germany, John McCloy, then responded to Muench’s letter: “[...] I do not believe that world opinion generally is prepared to accept the proposition that the crimes have yet been sufficiently atoned for or that the German people should now be allowed to forget them. Anything approaching a general amnesty would I fear, be taken as an abandonment of the principles established in the trials of the perpetrators of these crimes.”<sup>47</sup> The Church’s call for almost unlimited forgiveness through a generous amnesty is somewhat surprising as the perpetrators did not meet even the minimum standards of Catholic forgiveness: they almost never admitted personal guilt, did not repent, nor did they ask for forgiveness. Also, it should be noted that the victims of the Holocaust were not asked their

42 “Forgive Germany, Pope Urges World,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1948, 10.

43 Steven P. Remy, *The Malmedy Massacre: The War Crimes Trial Controversy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

44 As a close confidant of Cardinal Faulhaber and defender of the Church’s rights, Neuhäusler was imprisoned by the Nazis in the Dachau concentration camp for over four years, only to be liberated by the Americans in May 1945.

45 General Lucius D. Clay to Bishop Wurm, 19 June 1948, USHMM archives, Wurm papers, Reel 61, Bueschel 287–289.

46 Bishop Aloisius Muench, Apostolic Nuncio in Germany, to John J. McCloy, US High Commissioner for Germany, 19 December 1949, NARA, RG 466 HICOG, McCloy papers, Entry 1, 1950, box 6, folder D (50) 57. For more on Muench, see Suzanne Brown-Fleming, *The Holocaust and Catholic Conscience: Cardinal Aloisius Muench and the Guilt Question in Germany* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

47 John McCloy to Aloisius Muench, Bishop of Fargo, Apostolic Nuncio in Germany, 11 January 1950, NARA, RG 466 HICOG, McCloy papers, Entry 1, 1950, box 6, folder D (50) 57.

opinions, nor in many instances could they be asked for their opinions, in this Catholic campaign of “cheap forgiveness”.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, many Nazis and their collaborators escaped Allied justice by fleeing overseas to the Americas, Spain, Australia, or the Near East. Vatican institutions and Catholic priests were heavily involved in this, as the example of the Papal Aid Commission (*Pontificia Commissione Assistenza*, or PCA) shows. My previous book *Nazis on the Run* documents the structures of the so-called “Italian Ratline” in great detail.

### The Papal Aid Commission

At the war’s end, Europe was in ruin and millions of uprooted were on the move. These displaced persons comprised a diverse group: Holocaust survivors, prisoners of war, expelled ethnic Germans and members of other minorities, as well as Eastern European anti-communists, among others. The Vatican wanted to bring relief to the many war victims and refugees, especially Catholics. In 1944, Pope Pius XII established the PCA, which was supervised by the Vatican Secretary of State, especially by Giovanni Battista Montini (future Pope Paul VI). The PCA worked closely with other Vatican relief offices, all part of the Vatican’s overall effort to aid war victims. The PCA organised cafeterias and soup kitchens for the poor, homeless, and the numerous Catholic refugees. In addition, the PCA provided religious, legal, and material support for those in prison and camps, and sent food and clothing to countries like Germany. Much of the needed money came through the National Catholic Welfare Conference. Cardinal Francis Spellman from New York was a key player in this fundraising effort.<sup>49</sup> Pascalina Lehnert stressed that the pope had a particular interest in the work of the PCA when saying: “How much Pius XII welcomed it when Monsignor Baldelli asked him to create the Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza. How very much interested the Holy Father was in this! It was really his ideal, for the modest humble beginnings corresponded with his tendency to do good in secret.”<sup>50</sup>

The PCA based its work on the idea of neutral humanitarianism in the tradition of the Good Samaritan. These views are reflected in the official working philosophy of the PCA:

Assistance extends to all the needy: It must not be limited to people facing this or that need, there must be no limits in helping those who knock on the door of the Common Father, whoever they are, from wherever they come, wherever they go, whatever their political orientation or religious beliefs are. That is, the more we maintain absolute apoliticality in the exercise of the ministry of Charity, putting oneself above any consideration of a political nature, we are confident that the spirit of Faith and Truth will slowly but deeply affect the souls of those we are assisting. Not doing politics is good

48 On this topic, see Björn Krondorfer, Katharina von Kellenbach, and Norbert Reck, *Mit Blick auf die Täter: Fragen an die deutsche Theologie nach 1945* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006). See also Katharina von Kellenbach, *Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

49 See Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 108 ff.

50 Lehnert, *Ich durfte ihm dienen*, 103.

politics; by not proselytizing, we are nevertheless carrying out a work of religious penetration.<sup>51</sup>

In reality, help was given mostly to Catholic refugees, although non-Catholics were helped as well. However, in the eyes of many priests, Catholic anti-communists were particularly worthy of Vatican aid. The records indicate that the Catholic priests involved made hardly any distinctions between prisoners of war and war criminals, refugees and fugitives, perpetrators and victims. The boundaries of victimhood blurred. At least in theory, the Vatican shared a similar philosophy of neutral humanitarianism with the Red Cross. The two institutions worked closely together, particularly in Italy. Many refugees went to Italy because its overseas ports, like Genoa, were the closest and easiest routes through which to leave Europe behind and start anew elsewhere. There was plenty of work to go around so the PCA shared tasks with different national aid committees, operating under its umbrella.

The Austrian committee was led by Bishop Alois Hudal, a Christian antisemite, anti-communist, pan-German nationalist, and Catholic priest.<sup>52</sup> Like other churchmen, Hudal was convinced that compromises between the National Socialist regime and the Catholic Church were possible.<sup>53</sup> As rector of the Austrian-German national college in Rome, the Santa Maria dell'Anima, he had some initial influence in shaping the Vatican's reaction to Nazi ideology. For his efforts, Hudal was in 1933 made titular bishop, with Pacelli presiding over the ceremony – as a marble plaque in the Anima Church reminds visitors. But in 1937, Pope Pius XII published the canonical letter “With Burning Concern”, in which he condemned certain teachings of the Nazis, especially their racial hatred.<sup>54</sup> Hudal, however, did not change course, and in the same year he published his controversial book, *The Foundations of National Socialism*, to popularise his own views.<sup>55</sup> Hudal would not abandon his attempted compromise between Nazi ideology and Christianity and went on dreaming of a “Chris-

51 AAV, POA, Busta I, fasc. 3: “Attività e caratteristiche della PCA” [1947], 2. “Attività assistenziale estesa a tutti i bisognosi: Come non deve esserci limitati nell'affrontare questa o quella necessità non vi debbono essere neanche limiti nel scorrere quelli che bussano alla porta del Padre Comune, chiunque essi siano, da dovunque provengano, dovunque vadano, qualunque sia la loro professa politica e il loro credo religioso. Cioè, apoliticità più assoluta nell'esercizio del ministero della Carità, mettendosi al di sopra di ogni considerazione di carattere politico, sicuri che lo spirito di Fede e di Verità lentamente ma profondamente inciderà nell'animo di quanto formano oggetto della nostra assistenza. ‘Non facendo politica, facciamo una buona politica; non facendo opera di proselitismo, facciamo opera di penetrazione religiosa.’”

52 On Hudal, see Johannes Sachslehner, *Hitlers Mann im Vatikan: Bischof Alois Hudal. Ein dunkles Kapitel in der Geschichte der Kirche* (Vienna: Molden Verlag 2019); Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*; Klee, *Persilscheine und falsche Pässe*; and Hans Jakob Stehle, “Bischof Hudal und SS-Führer Meyer: Ein kirchenpolitischer Friedensversuch 1942/43,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* no. 2 (1989): 307–322.

53 Thomas Ruster, “Roman Catholic Theologians and National Socialism: Adaptation to Nazi Ideology,” in *Christian Responses to the Holocaust: Moral and Ethical Issues*, ed. Donald J. Dietrich (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 12–23.

54 Wolf, *Pope and Devil*, 266–270. While racial antisemitism was condemned, religious antisemitism was still widespread inside the Catholic Church and its leadership. See, for example David Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002). For the German Protestant-Lutheran churches, see also Kevin P. Spicer, ed., *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2007). A major turning point in the Catholic Church's relationship to Judaism came with the Second Vatican Council and the new missal in the 1960s and 1970s. Regarding *The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* in 1965 and its highly contested statements on the Jews, see John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 239 ff. In this book, Connelly states: “For Jews, *Nostra Aetate* came late, too late. But for Catholic theology it came too soon, and to this day had not been fully digested” (245). See also James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002).

55 Alois Hudal, *Die Grundlagen des Nationalsozialismus: Eine ideengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Günther, 1937). See Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 25–27.

tian National Socialism.”<sup>56</sup> From that point on, Hudal diverged with the pope on this issue.

Hudal engaged in relief work, but he was no neutral humanitarian. He first and foremost helped Catholics (this included Catholics of Jewish descent, so-called Catholic “non-Aryans”). Helping communists, socialists, and Jews was not his priority.<sup>57</sup> After 1945, Hudal became one of the most active helpers for wanted Nazis, a fact he bragged about to the press and later in his memoirs. Although Alois Hudal was the most notorious of this group, he certainly was not an exception within the Catholic Church. The Hungarian, Slovenian, Ukrainian, and Croatian national committees worked with the PCA in a very similar fashion. They, and other national committees, followed a simple system: the PCA would issue reference letters for ordinary refugees but also wanted Nazis (often with fake names and backgrounds) to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Rome or Genoa. The Red Cross would then provide travel documents for displaced persons, based on the names and information given by the PCA. Typically, the reference letters issued by the PCA went unquestioned since the Vatican and, by extension, the PCA were respected authorities at a time when very few such authorities remained in Italy. The wanted Nazis escaped Europe thanks to these letters and travel papers.

### The Italian Ratline

The PCA grew popular for serious war criminals and perpetrators of the Holocaust from Central and Eastern Europe. With Red Cross travel documents facilitated by the PCA, they could emigrate overseas to the Americas, the Near East, or elsewhere. The Red Cross’s entire issuing process was ramshackle and led in many cases to inaccurate or totally false identification papers. One prominent example was that of Franz Stangl, the commander of the Treblinka extermination camp, where Nazis murdered almost one million people between 1942 and 1943. Because of his membership in the SS, Stangl was imprisoned at the war’s end in the United States’ internment camp Marcus W. Orr near Salzburg (also known as internment camp Glasenbach). His involvement in the euthanasia murder programme, in which his extermination career started, did not remain a secret and his trial loomed. In 1948, Stangl fled to Italy with his accomplice Gustav Wagner.<sup>58</sup> Like other SS members, Stangl likely heard by word of mouth that Bishop Alois Hudal in Rome helped Catholic SS officers. According to Stangl, Hudal received him in Rome with open arms: “You must be Franz Stangl. I’ve been expecting you.” Although safe in Italy, he still needed travel documents for the trip overseas.<sup>59</sup> Bishop Hudal procured for Stangl a travel document from the ICRC in Rome under the name “Paul Stangl”. Hudal had turned Franz Paul Stangl’s middle name into his first. When Stangl protested that they had made a mistake, Hudal reportedly calmed him with the words: “Let sleeping dogs lie.”<sup>60</sup> Hudal knew that Franz Stangl was wanted by the authorities, but Paul Stangl

56 Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican: Inside the Secret Archives that Reveal the New Story of the Nazis and the Church* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 54.

57 During the war in Italy, Hudal helped to hide a few Allied prisoners of war and German deserters, reportedly all Christians, in the Anima. See Sachslehner, *Hitlers Mann im Vatikan*, 160 ff. Hudal claimed that, during the German occupation of Rome, he could not hide Jews in the Anima as he was constantly visited by Nazi officials. The latter part is certainly true. See Hudal, *Römische Tagebücher*, 201.

58 Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 250–253.

59 Sereny, *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 312.

60 Sereny, *Into that Darkness*, 305.

was not. Hudal confirmed the false information on the ICRC travel document with his signature. Stangl's address listed on the travel document, "Via della pace 20", was Hudal's official address at the Papal Institute Santa Maria dell'Anima. Both Stangl and his accomplice Wagner received a letter of recommendation from the PCA's aid section for foreigners, signed by a Vatican official.<sup>61</sup>

Stangl's case is interesting because of his typical Austrian background of unclear citizenship. In order to obtain ICRC travel documents (*titres de voyage*), one had to meet the basic condition of being stateless. Of course, refugees often could not prove this, so their word had to suffice. In the case of Stangl and other Austrian Nazi "refugees," however, the situation was different. Here "Austrian" was stated under former citizenship and "stateless for political reasons" (*per motivi politici*) given as a justification. Anyone familiar with Austria's recent past – and the Austrian Hudal was certainly one of them – knew what that meant. Those who listed "stateless for political reasons" were Austrian "illegal Nazis" before 1938, who had lost and not regained their Austrian citizenship after 1945. Quite a few of these Austrian Nazis had been involved in the unsuccessful July putsch in 1934 (therefore committing high treason) and fled to Nazi Germany. National Socialists like Stangl and Wagner made no secret of their brown background when they asked the Vatican and Red Cross offices for help. Since the Vatican and Red Cross showed no squeamishness when it came to their Nazi membership, a good number of Austrian Nazis asserted their statelessness "for political reasons" and thus received Red Cross travel documents. In some cases, the applicants even included a curriculum vitae with their real name and listing their Nazi career.<sup>62</sup> Stangl and Wagner (who received ICRC papers under his real name) first travelled to Syria and then to Brazil. Wagner never faced justice, and Stangl was extradited to Germany in 1967, dying in prison a few years later.

Nazi war criminal Erich Priebke, formerly a Protestant, underwent "de-nazification through re-baptism" (as I call it) before Italian priests provided him and his family with new identities and channelled them from Italy to Argentina, thanks to the PCA. Priebke was responsible for one of the worst war crimes in Italy, the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine caves in Rome, where 335 Italian hostages were murdered (among them were a large number of Jews).<sup>63</sup> After that atrocity, Priebke was wanted as a war criminal by Allied and Italian authorities. At the war's end, he first made it to South Tyrol, where his wife and children had lived since 1943. Later, the Americans interned Priebke in a POW camp in Rimini, but he escaped in December 1946. He went into hiding again with his family in Sterzing (Vipiteno) and received help from the parish priest, Johann Corradini, who took special care of Priebke. Investigations into him by the Italian police and the trial against his superior Herbert Kappler prompted Priebke to seek safety overseas. Corradini asked the Bolzano Franciscan Father Franz Pobitzer for assistance in obtaining Red Cross travel papers for Priebke. Pobitzer was in close contact with Hudal and repeatedly procured such ICRC documents for fugitive Nazis.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, it comes as little surprise that Pob-

61 Application for travel document for Stangl Paul, ICRC Rome, 25 August 1948, ICRC, Geneva, Archive, 'Titres de voyage CICR 1945–1993', application 84,227; Letter of Recommendation PCA – Sezione Stranieri to the ICRC in Rome for Paul Stangl, 17 August 1948.

62 Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 125.

63 Gerald Steinacher, "Das Massaker der Fosse Ardeatine und die Täterverfolgung: Deutsch-italienische Störfälle von Kappler bis Priebke," in *Italy, Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany in Europe*, eds. Michael Gehler and Maddalena Guiotto (Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2012), 291–315, 291 ff.

64 For more on Pobitzer, see also Christoph Franceschini, *Geheimdienste, Agenten, Spione: Südtirol im Fadenkreuz fremder Mächte* (Bolzano: Edition Raetia, 2020), 138 f. and Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*.

itzer was also willing to provide Priebke with new papers. “Father Pobitzer assured us that he would see to it that we would receive the passport at the Roman headquarters of the ICRC”, Priebke notes in his memoirs.<sup>65</sup> Pobitzer contacted Hudal to initiate securing the Red Cross papers for Priebke. Bishop Hudal’s archive recorded where to find Priebke under his new alias, “Otto Pape”: “Can be reached through Father Dr. Fr.[anz] Pobitzer, Bozen, Franciscan monastery.” And crucially the note stated: “Religion: Protestant, wants to convert.”<sup>66</sup> However, Priebke’s SS records clearly show what the clerics did not mention: Priebke had officially left the Protestant Church in 1938 and became a Nazi “Gottgläubiger”, therefore openly breaking with the Christian faith.<sup>67</sup> Priebke was now willing to convert to the Catholic faith and undergo a “new” baptism (the former Protestant had been baptised as a child). Also included in Hudal’s papers is a letter from Corradini to Hudal from February 1948, in which he confirms the good Catholic attitude and the intended conversion of “Otto Pape” in the near future.<sup>68</sup> Corradini informed Hudal that he knew the family of “Otto Pape” very well. This is not surprising, because the family had lived in Sterzing since 1943. The reverend, however, did not mention that the “Pape” family was called “Priebke” until 1945 and that the father of the family was a well-known SS officer in the town.

In correspondence with Hudal, Corradini used Priebke’s alias “Otto Pape”. This decision was certainly not unreasonable as Hudal’s activities constituted an open secret and Priebke was a wanted war criminal in Italy. However, Corradini personally baptised the former SS officer, albeit under his real name “Erich Priebke”, born in Berlin in 1913, as the baptismal register clearly reveals. The baptism entry also states that permission to “re-baptise” Priebke came from the ordinariate of the Bishop of Bressanone (Brixen).<sup>69</sup> In sum, Corradini “re-baptised” Priebke under his real name, but procured papers for him under the alias “Otto Pape”. These facts demonstrate that the town priest of Sterzing knew the true identity of the SS officer. Father Pobitzer held up his end of the bargain in this endeavour.<sup>70</sup> On 26 July 1948, Priebke applied in Rome as a “stateless ethnic German” from Latvia, under the name “Otto Pape”, for an ICRC travel document to go to Argentina. As proof of his identity, he presented a letter of recommendation from the PCA in Rome and an identification document from the town of Krimml near Salzburg. Under the form’s religion category, he stated “Catholic”.<sup>71</sup>

Priebke was tracked down by an American journalist in Argentina in the 1990s and put on trial in Italy. He died under house arrest in Rome in 2013.<sup>72</sup> Historian and Vatican legal scholar Pierluigi Guiducci seemingly argued in 2015 that the priestly escape aid for Priebke and his wife was somehow justified because “it was a process of approaching the Catholic faith” (*fu un processo di avvicinamento alla fede*

65 Erich Priebke, *Vae victis (Wehe den Besiegten)* (Rome: Eigenverlag, 2003), 200.

66 Notes regarding Otto Pape in the Anima Archives ASMA, Nachlass Hudal, K23, Dokument 9; AH 23/9. See also Guy Walters, *Hunting Evil: The Nazi War Criminals Who Escaped and the Quest to Bring Them to Justice* (New York: Random House, 2009), 174 f.

67 NARA, RG 242, BDC, Roll 3343 – SSO 393A, Erich Priebke, 29 July 1913.

68 Letter Corradini, Stadtpfarramt Sterzing, to Hudal, 15 February 1948, ASMA, Nachlass Hudal, K23, Dokument 10; AH 23/10; see also Walters, *Hunting Evil*, 169.

69 Pfarramt Sterzing: Entry in the baptism register for 13 September 1948, Pfarre Unsere Liebe Frau im Moos 1943–1951. See Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 149 f.

70 Priebke, *Vae Victis*, 201.

71 Archives ICRC Geneva, «Titres de Voyage» Application with number 83.023: Application for a travel document for Otto Pape, ICRC-Delegation in Rome, 26 July 1948; see Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 92 f.

72 See Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, and Walters, *Hunting Evil*, 174 f.

*cattolica*).<sup>73</sup> Hudal defended his help for “the former members of the Nazi party and of fascism, especially [for] the so called ‘war criminals’” as Christian “charity work”. In his memoirs, he stated unapologetically: “To help people, to save a few, to work selflessly and determinedly without thinking of the consequences, is naturally what should have been a demand of true Christianity, which does not believe in the hatred taught by the Talmud, but in Christian love, mercy and forgiveness. [...]”<sup>74</sup> Hudal was not alone in his views. In 1961, a conservative German Catholic newspaper defended Hudal’s reported escape aid for Adolf Eichmann, stating: “No doubt [...] bishop Hudal acted as a Christian.”<sup>75</sup>

Catholic aid organisations in Italy also helped Eichmann, Ludolf von Alvensleben, Otto Wächter, Walther Rauff, Josef Schwammberger, Hans Fischböck, Klaus Barbie, and many other Nazi criminals evade justice.<sup>76</sup> Thanks to the Vatican, the entire Ukrainian *Waffen-SS* (Armed SS) Galicia division (about 9,000 Catholic men) got new starts in Great Britain, Australia, and Canada. Bishop Ivan Bucko from the Greek Catholic Church appealed to the pope directly for the SS men, calling them the “*blossom of the Ukrainian nation*”.<sup>77</sup> In numerous cases, substantial evidence exists that Catholic officials knowingly and willingly helped Nazi perpetrators (as was the case of SS officer Erich Priebke discussed in detail above).<sup>78</sup> At the end of this period, with the help of the pope-created PCA, large numbers of Nazis, war criminals, fascists, and Nazi collaborators from all over Europe made it to new shores. This large-scale and coordinated effort cannot simply be deemed the acts of a few “rogue priests”.<sup>79</sup> As my research shows, these actions were not isolated incidents but instead represent a sustained pattern of behaviour.<sup>80</sup>

73 Pierluigi Guiducci, *Oltre la leggenda nera: Il Vaticano e la fuga dei criminali nazisti* (Milan: Mursia 2015), 242.

The foreword of this book was written by Vatican official Peter Gumpel S. J., the promotor of the beatification process for Pius XII. While apparently showing a certain understanding for the priestly help for Priebke, author Guiducci condemns the practice of re-baptism as violating Church law and abusing a sacrament. Everyone who was involved in it in any way or gave permission for it made himself guilty, he states: “Di conseguenza, chi ha approvato i succitati battesimi, e chi li ha amministrati, si è macchiato di peccato grave oltre a essere incorso in responsabilità penali. Per tali motivi, non ha rappresentato la Chiesa e si è allontanato da quest’ultima sul piano morale e disciplinare.” [“Consequently, those who approved the aforementioned baptisms and those who administered them are guilty of a grave sin and are criminal responsible. For these reasons, they did not represent the Church and at the same time estranged themselves from it on the moral and disciplinary level.”]

74 Alois C. Hudal, *Römische Tagebücher: Lebensbeichte eines alten Bischofs* (Graz and Stuttgart: Leopold Stocker Verlag, 1976), 21.

75 “Bischof Hudal handelte als Christ,” *Deutsche Tagespost: Katholische Tageszeitung für Deutschland*, 21/22 April 1961, 8.

76 See Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*; Goñi, *The Real Odessa*; Klee, *Persilscheine und falsche Pässe*; Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Philippe Sands, *Ratline: Love, Lies, and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020); and Peter Hammerschmidt, *Deckname Adler: Klaus Barbie und die westlichen Geheimdienste* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2014). For the structures in Italy, see also David G. Marwell, *Mengele: Unmasking the “Angel of Death”* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), and Daniel Stahl, *Hunt for Nazis: South America’s Dictatorships and the Prosecution of Nazi Crimes* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

77 Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: The First Full Account of America’s Recruitment of Nazis and its Disastrous Effects on the Cold War, Our Domestic and Foreign Policy* (New York: Collier Press, 1989), 180; Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 186; Mark Aaron and John Loftus, *Unholy Trinity: The Vatican, The Nazis, and the Swiss Bank* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 192–193.

78 Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*, 92–93, 148–149.

79 For a good summary of the escape aid, see Benz, *Im Widerstand*, 205 ff.

80 See Goñi, *The Real Odessa*, 327–348. In addition to the CIA’s Operational Files, Goñi investigated, at the Public Record Office (PRO) in London, unearthed British dossiers that contained documents from the immediate post-war era. See also Michael Phayer, “Canonizing Pius XII: Why Did the Pope Help Nazis Escape?,” *Commonweal* (9 May 2003), 22–23. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/canonizing-pius-xii>; Phayer, *Pius XII, The Holocaust, and the Cold War*; Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*; Klee, *Persilscheine und falsche Pässe*; and Ventresca, *Soldier of Christ*.

## Vatican Complicity

Father Krunoslav Draganović, a priest at the Croatian institute of San Girolamo – the Pontifical Croatian College of St. Jerome – in Rome, helped many high-ranking Nazi criminals and their collaborators escape Allied justice.<sup>81</sup> Draganović was a fanatical supporter of the Ustaša, the Croatian fascists, and their cause for a Catholic and ethnically pure independent Croatian state. During that state's short wartime existence, thanks to Hitler and Mussolini, the Ustaša murdered hundreds of thousands of Jews, Serbs, Roma, and political opponents in an orgy of violence, shocking even their Nazi overlords. When the war ended in the spring of 1945, many of the Ustaša leaders tried to flee to neighbouring Austria or Italy from the brutal and often indiscriminate revenge of Tito's communist partisans.<sup>82</sup> At the war's end, Draganović was stationed in Rome and therefore in a position to help many of his Croatian countrymen on the run. The Ustaša fascists were the first to benefit from Draganović's ratline network, which also operated under the umbrella of the PCA. Most of the fugitives ended up in the Americas, but also in Great Britain and Australia.

In late October 1943, the Allies issued a joint declaration during the Moscow conference of foreign ministers, stating their intent to try perpetrators in the locations where they had committed the crimes. Therefore, by actively opposing the extradition of Axis war criminals two years later, Draganović went against these agreements and obstructed Allied justice. By 1946, the British and Americans had severely raised the bar for extraditing anyone to their newly communist home countries. The Vatican was assured that no one stranded in Western Europe had to fear Stalin's or Tito's revenge, except for war criminals when a *prima facie* case of their guilt could be made.<sup>83</sup> But the Vatican was opposed even to that and instead supported the activities of Draganović's Croatian band of brothers.

Already in 2002, Argentinian journalist Uki Goñi noted that British government papers "demonstrate not only how Pius XII was fully aware of the sanctuary provided to war criminals at Roman ecclesiastical institutions but also how he personally liaised with the Nazi-smuggling operation at the Croatian Confraternity of San Girolamo, a connection long denied by the Vatican".<sup>84</sup> The papers unearthed by Goñi document that the pope secretly pleaded with London and Washington to spare Nazi collaborators and prominent war criminals from extradition to their homelands. Official appeals came from the Vatican Secretariat of State, an office under the direct and personal supervision of Pius XII and led by the monsignors Montini – the future Pope Paul VI – and Tardini. These interventions began as early as August 1945, when hundreds of Ustaša stranded in Italy were interned by the Allies. In at least one such case, Goñi found a plea issued in the pope's own name.<sup>85</sup> On 27 March 1946, the pope appealed directly on behalf of Father Draganović's conspirative network. The Vatican Secretariat of State urged the British and the American governments not to release to Tito a group of Croat expats interned in southern Italy. The

81 There is much literature on Draganović and the Ustaša. For the most recent studies, see Pino Adriano and Giorgio Cingolani, *Nationalism and Terror: Ante Pavelić and Ustashe Terrorism from Fascism to the Cold War* (Budapest: Central European University, 2018), and Robert B. McCormick, *Croatia under Ante Pavelić: America, The Ustaše and Croatian Genocide in World War II* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

82 McCormick, *Croatia under Ante Pavelić*.

83 Repatriation Croatian POW, 9. April 1946 "Correspondence relating to the appeal of the Croatian Confraternity of the St. Jerome addressed to His Holiness the Pope on behalf of Croatians in Italy who are alleged to be 'threatened with extradition or repatriation' is attached." PRO, WO 204/11133.

84 Goñi, *Real Odessa*, 328.

85 Goñi, *Real Odessa*, 328.

document added that “[t]he Confraternity has appealed to His Holiness asking Him to recommend this matter”, continuing that “[t]he Confraternity would also most earnestly ask that, lest irreparable measures be taken at this time when political passions and partisan hatreds so often prevail over moral and juridical values, the Croats living in Italy might not be obliged to return to their home country at the present time”.<sup>86</sup> In other words, wanted war criminals and quislings hiding in Italy should enjoy impunity for the time being. But not even Yugoslav protests against Draganović’s college deterred the Vatican.

The so-called “Andrea Gritti” incident of December 1946 provides additional proof that the Vatican Secretariat of State was aware of accusations that the PCA and the Croatian college were helping war criminals escape overseas. The Yugoslav government accused the PCA, in coordination with the Allied Refugee Organisation, of having shipped war criminals on the liner “Andrea Gritti” from Italy to South America. Among the “318 assisted refugees” were many wanted Croatia and Serbian war criminals “for whom the Allied Military Authorities are searching in order to hand them over to the Yugoslav Government”.<sup>87</sup> Yugoslav authorities alleged that the PCA gave the criminals visas and financial assistance while the “Brotherhood of St. Jerome” at the College of San Girolamo provided them travel documents under false names.<sup>88</sup> The British Foreign Office took a closer look into the affair and confronted the accused. A Foreign Office report from January 1947 under the title “Exodus of Yugoslav War Criminals to S. America” states:

Sir D. Osborne interviewed Colonel Tomlin British representative of the Inter-governmental Committee on Refugees and also a representative of the Vatican, the American Monsignor [Walter] Carroll. Both representatives denied that they were deliberately engaged in smuggling known Yugoslav war criminals out of Italy. They did admit that one or two war criminals may have escaped on M.S. ‘Andrea Gritti’ as it is impossible to verify the identity of all the refugees who seek their aid.<sup>89</sup>

In addition to uncovering how the Catholic Church helped Nazis escape overseas, in many cases the Allies also identified war criminals hiding in Vatican institutions or property. The Vatican refused or hesitated to hand over any Nazi sheltering within its walls. One example of this is a memorandum from January 1947 to the Vatican:

The Yugoslav Government were informed by the Foreign Office in their Note No.17586/58/92 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1947, that the Yugoslav war criminals Vladimir Velmar Jankovich, Dr. Milorad Nedeljkovich, Engineer Miloslov Vasiljevich, Marisav Petrovich and Ilija Bujovich, are on Vatican territory. The guilt of these men has already been affirmed both by the Yugoslav competent authorities and by the American and British authorities, who carried out a search for them in Italy in order to hand them over for trial to the Yugoslav Government. The Yugoslav Government requests the Holy See to issue the necessary orders for the above mentioned Yugoslav war criminals to be arrested immediately and handed over to the Yugoslav Government.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Vatican Secretariat of State, March 27, 1946 to Harold Tittmann, assistant to the personal representative of the President of the United States to His Holiness. PRO, WO 204/11133. See also Goñi, *Real Odessa*, 329.

<sup>87</sup> Exodus to S. America of Yugoslav war criminals / Five Yugoslavs in Vatican property; Copies of two notes by the Yugoslav government to Vatican Secretariat of State, British Embassy, Belgrade to Foreign Office, February 3, 1947. PRO, FO 371/67371, File No. 97.

<sup>88</sup> Exodus to S. America of Yugoslav war criminals / Five Yugoslavs in Vatican property.

<sup>89</sup> Exodus of Yugoslav War Criminals to S. America, Report from Sir. D. Osborne; Holy See, January 31, 1947. PRO, FO 371/67371, File No. 97.

<sup>90</sup> Exodus to S. America of Yugoslav war criminals / Five Yugoslavs in Vatican property.

The Yugoslavs lost no time and published the accusations against the Vatican before the Holy See could even respond.<sup>91</sup> Despite this undiplomatic move, the British supported the Yugoslav demand for these five men. In instructions to its ambassador in the Vatican, London did not mince words:

In informing the Secretariat of State of the above His Britannic Majesty's Minister would add that the British authorities entertain no doubt as to the guilt of the five men and, careful as they are to accede to none but fully justified demands of this nature by the Yugoslav Government, would have no hesitation in surrendering them. In considering their response to the demand for surrender which will presumably be made to them, the [Vatican] Secretariat of State will no doubt bear in mind the repercussions of their response upon Catholic interests in Yugoslavia and elsewhere and will also not overlook the undesirability of supplying material for the charge that the Vatican defends and protects the former agents and tools of Hitler and Mussolini.<sup>92</sup>

The British envoy Sir D'Arcy Osborne even met with Tardini and confronted him with the allegations of harbouring the five wanted war criminals in the Oriental Institute in Rome, on Vatican property. According to Osborne's report to Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin, in this meeting he also raised the PCA's involvement in the "Andrea Gritti incident".<sup>93</sup>

The Vatican, obviously cornered, found a solution: it neither denied the presence of the criminals, nor did it hand them over. Instead, the Vatican Secretariat of State succinctly answered the British diplomats, that the five Yugoslav men had already left the Pontifical Institute.<sup>94</sup> And, regarding the PCA and Nazi escape, Tardini told Ambassador Sir D'Arcy Osborne that the Vatican Secretariat had nothing to do with the PCA. Osborne strongly rejected this excuse, and stated that it is a "Vatican organisation and the instrument of Papal charity and that consequently responsibility for it could not be disavowed".<sup>95</sup> It is not surprising that the Allied officials were unconvinced by these Vatican claims. In its own publications at the time, the Vatican made clear that the PCA was its institution and that the sixteen national sub-commissions were an integral part of it. A published Vatican activity report for 1945 and 1946 reads:

Assistance to foreigners interned or refugees displaced from their homeland is implemented with individual aid or sent to the various camps established in the Italian territory, *through sixteen national committees set up for individual nationalities within the Papal Aid Commission*. Cash subsidies, free meals, clothing and various provisions were paid with a monthly expense of over one million lire due to the paternal charity of the Supreme Pontiff. The PCA was also interested in the emigration of those foreign refugees who intend to move to other countries, facilitating – in agreement with the international authorities – *the issuance of the necessary documents*. (my emphases)<sup>96</sup>

91 Exodus to S. America of Yugoslav war criminals / Five Yugoslavs in Vatican property.

92 Five Yugoslav quislings alleged in Vatican, Aide-Memoire, January 13, 1947 (CONFIDENTIAL). PRO, FO 371/67370, File No. 97.

93 Sir D. G. Osborne to Ernest Bevin, (RESTRICTED), Yugoslavia, February 4, 1947. PRO, FO 371/67371, File No. 97.

94 Aide Memoire, Vatican Secretariat of State, February 3, 1947. PRO, FO 371/67371, File No. 97.

95 Sir D. G. Osborne to Ernest Bevin.

96 *L'Attività della Santa Sede dal 15 Dicembre 1945 al 15 Dicembre 1946 (non ufficiale)* (Vatican: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana 1946), report about the Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza starts at page 111 ff, here page 115 (I consulted these volumes at the Facoltà Teologica del Triveneto, Padova, Biblioteca).

The Vatican official newspaper *Osservatore Romano* regularly reported on the activities of the PCA with pride and great interest in the Vatican's own charity work.<sup>97</sup> The frustration felt by some British diplomats is well summarised by an internal note:

I am afraid the Vatican have not been helpful in spite of the recommendations given in our letter of Jan. 3 to Sir D. Osborne [...] and duly passed on to the Papal authorities. The main fact is that the R.[oman] C.[atholic] Church apparently has no wish to come to terms with Tito and is willing to support his enemies. But if Pope Pius XII wishes to assume the mantle of Gregory VII [an eleventh-century saint and one of the greatest Roman pontiffs] he can do it better than by harbouring Ustashi.<sup>98</sup>

For Pius XII, however, shielding Ustaša from extradition was only part of a wider program.

The American counterparts of the British also worked to confront Vatican officials about hiding Ustaša, focusing on Monsignor Carroll, a key player in the Vatican Secretariat of State, and one of the very few Americans in Rome. Monsignor Carroll provided a contact between United States' representatives and the Vatican. It therefore comes as little surprise that both British and American diplomats confronted him with allegations of obstructing justice. After meetings with the British and Americans, Carroll was seemingly concerned about the unclear distribution of responsibilities and the wild growth of the many organisations under the Vatican umbrella that were devoted to refugee relief. On 10 March 1947, he wrote to his superior in the Vatican Secretariat of State, Monsignor Giovanni Montini: "The fact that a papal committee plays a significant part in the transportation of refugees to South America, without adequate organizational preparation for it, could expose the Holy See to rather severe criticism on the part of the authorities, who cannot differentiate between the Vatican and the committees and institutions that bear its name."<sup>99</sup> Despite Carroll's letter, Montini's behaviour suggests he was not overly concerned with censuring the PCA's activities.

The massive problems with the Red Cross travel documents (and the PCA's work in securing them) constituted an open secret at the time. Examples of this practice abound, with United States' diplomat and intelligence reports on the subject dating back as early as 1946.<sup>100</sup> One of the most often quoted sources in this context is the report by Vincent La Vista, a senior official at the United States' Embassy in Rome, declassified in 1984. On 15 May 1947, La Vista wrote in strict confidence to the State Department in Washington:

The Vatican of course is the largest single organization involved in the illegal movement of emigrants [...] The justification of the Vatican for its participation in this illegal traffic is simply the propagation of the Faith. It is the Vatican's desire to assist any person, regardless of nationality or political beliefs, as long as that person can prove himself to be a Catholic. This of course from the practical point of view is a dangerous practice. The Vatican further justifies its participation by its desire to infiltrate, not only European countries

97 Here are just a few examples: "Pontificia Commissione Assistenza – Rimpatrie di profughi", in *Osservatore Romano*, 17 February 1945, 2; "Una nuova disposizione per la Pontificia Commissione Assistenza illustrata dall' Em.mo Cardinale Nicola Canali," *Osservatore Romano*, 14 November 1945, 1.

98 Note by J.R. Colville 13/2 – Foreign Office official. Five Yugoslavs on Vatican property: Exodus of Yugoslav war criminals to S. America. See also Goñi, *Real Odessa*, 332–333.

99 Hansjakob Stehle, "Pässe vom Papst? Aus neuentdeckten Dokumenten: Warum alle Wege der Ex-Nazis nach Südamerika über Rom führten," *Die Zeit*, 4 May 1984, 9–12 ('Dossier'), 12.

100 See Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*.

but Latin-American countries as well, with people of all political beliefs as long as they are anti-Communist and pro-Catholic Church.<sup>101</sup>

One of the American diplomats at the Vatican, Graham Parsons, discussed the findings from La Vista's report with Monsignor Carroll. In his written instructions from the State Department, Parsons was to stress that criminal elements and spies were taking advantage of the humanitarian aid and were able to "secure documentation for travel". On 29 August 1947, Parsons reported from the Vatican to the State Department in Washington:

Monsignor Carroll has promised to bring this matter to the attention of the top Catholic authorities interested in aiding displaced persons and, in due course, to give me something in reply to the 'oral Message'. I have asked him if possible to see that consideration of this matter extends down to the type of agencies mentioned in La Vista's report, although such agencies, he said, are not connected with the Vatican. I will report by dispatch with copies to Berne and Rome when I receive a reaction to our representations of today.<sup>102</sup>

Beyond his notes, we do not know exactly what Parsons said to Monsignor Carroll. However, it is clear that the Vatican felt a need to distance itself from Catholic aid organisations operating under the umbrella of the PCA. But even with this distancing, the Vatican would make clear to Allied officials just a few weeks later that it had no intention of extraditing wanted war criminals to Yugoslavia. In September 1947, an official from the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) reported to the United States' ambassador in Rome, James C. Dunn, in a "strictly confidential" memo about a recent meeting with the Vatican's leadership: "I had a very interesting talk with the Pope, and later with Msgrs. Tardini and Montini, as well as Msgr. Carroll of the Vatican Secretariat of State." On this occasion, Tardini told him in confidence that the Vatican opposed the extradition of Nazi collaborators to Yugoslavia. The Vatican was also concerned that the Italian government appeared willing to acquiesce to demands of the neighbouring communist country. Alarmed about the imminent withdrawal of Allied troops from Italy, the Vatican feared that Italy would become "another Greece".<sup>103</sup> This reference to Greece, where a bloody civil war between pro-Western and communist forces raged, was clear. The possibility of a communist seizure of power in Italy – the heartland of Catholicism – shocked the Vatican. Like Pius XII, his nuncio to the United States, Cardinal Cicognani saw communist atheism as a deadly enemy of religion and Christianity, when he stated: "Atheistic Communism will make a police state of Italy if it gains the victory. Atheistic Communism will consider the subjugation of Italy as its greatest achievement. It aims at the destruction of Catholicity in Italy in order to limit and to nullify the world influence of the Catholic Church."<sup>104</sup>

101 Vincent La Vista to Herbert J. Cummings, 15 May 1947 (TOP SECRET), NARA, RG 84, Austria, Political Adviser, Gen. Records 1945–55, entry 2057, box 2, 2.

102 Graham Parsons in Vatican City to the Division of Southern European Affairs, Department of State, Washington DC, 29 August 1947 (TOP SECRET), Simon Wiesenthal Center, Investigative Report May 1984, "SS Col. Walter Rauff: The Church Connection 1943-1947," File on Rauff, Mappe 2: Vienna Wiesenthal Institute (VWI)-SWA, I.I, Rauff, Walter (02).

103 Pierre de L. Boal, Preparatory Commission for the IRO, to James C. Dunn, US ambassador in Rome, 10 September 1947, 'Strictly confidential', NARA, RG 84, Italy, US Embassy Rome, classified General Records, 1947, Box 20, Entry UD2780, Folder 848-IRO. See also James Clement Dunn to Pierre de L. Boal, Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organization, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Rome, Italy, 22 September 1947, NARA, RG 84, US Embassy Italy, Rome, classified General Records, 1947, Box 20, Entry UD2780, Folder 848-IRO.

104 Memoranda of the papal delegate in the USA Amleto Giovanni Cardinal Cicognani to Monsignor Howard J. Carroll of the American conference of bishops NCWC, 7 February 1948, Catholic University of America, Washington D.C., Archives, NCWC, Box 25, Folder "Communism Italy 1944-1954."

A clear indicator that communism was enemy number one of the Church came in 1949 soon after the Italian election, when the Vatican officially excommunicated all Catholics who were active members of the Italian Communist Party. With this formal act, the Church excluded Communists from the sacraments, shunned them from the Church community, and exposed them to eternal condemnation. The pope never took such a radical step with Hitler and his followers.

The Vatican knew, the United States' State Department knew, the British Foreign Office knew, the ICRC knew, the Italian government knew.<sup>105</sup> All players knew as early as 1946 or 1947 about the misuse of Red Cross travel documents and PCA papers by criminal elements, including Nazis and other fascists. But one did not have to be a diplomat or secret agent to know about these occurrences. By 1947 or 1948, Italian, Swiss, and German newspapers were repeatedly reporting on the escape structures and routes, as well as reporting on the PCA, Hudal, the Red Cross, and other key players.<sup>106</sup> For example, in January 1947 a group of "refugees" – under the protection of the PCA – had been arrested in Genoa. The group was housed in a Catholic workers' dormitory. It soon turned out that the Catholic men were French SS members who apparently wanted to evade extradition to France by fleeing to South America or Spain. The Nazi collaborators had in their possession travel documents from the ICRC and letters of recommendation from the PCA. The incident was widely reported in Italian newspapers.<sup>107</sup> To cite another example, in December 1949, under the heading "People Smuggling Headquarters Munich – Illegal Channels to Spain, South America and the Middle East", the Munich evening newspaper *AZ* published the escape routes from Bavaria via Tyrol to Italy. The well-informed authors named Hudal as an important contact in Rome, and the article culminated in this telling sentence: "In church circles Hudal is considered the brown bishop."<sup>108</sup> Yet, little changed. The PCA kept vouching for Nazis and the Red Cross continued issuing travel papers. Adolf Eichmann fled Europe with the help of the PCA and the Red Cross in 1950, three whole years after the misuse of Red Cross and PCA documents had become known to all involved in the post-war landscape. SS officer Klaus Barbie, "the butcher of Lyon", escaped thanks to the working cooperation between United States' Intelligence Services, and Draganović fled via the Italian Ratline in 1951.<sup>109</sup> Author Gerald Posner observed:

Since the Church had been silent during the Holocaust, on which there was a flood of grisly evidence since the end of the war, it was reasonable to wonder if Pius and his advisors felt any moral duty to unequivocally prohibit clerics from assisting criminals involved in that mass killing. There was no such policy. Pius, Montini, and Tardini [in public] never uttered a word in opposition to the priests who helped the fugitives.<sup>110</sup>

105 For the knowledge of the ICRC, see the very detailed Steinacher, *Humanitarians at War*, and Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*. For the other institutions mentioned, see Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run*.

106 One example is the contemporary media coverage on the Wächter case. For this topic, see Johannes Sachslehner, *Hitlers Mann im Vatikan: Bischof Alois Hudal. Ein dunkles Kapitel in der Geschichte der Kirche* (Molden Verlag 2019), and Sands, *Ratline*.

107 See *L'Unità*, 29 and 31 January 1947, *Il Quotidiano*, 1, 2, and 4 February 1947. The *L'Unità* frontpage article of 31 January is titled "Per i criminali è facile emigrare: Lettera n. 1241 della Commissione Pontificia".

108 "Menschenschmuggel-Zentrale München – Illegale Kanäle nach Spanien, Südamerika und den Nahen Osten," *Münchener Abendzeitung AZ*, 3 December 1949, 7.

109 Tom Bower, *Klaus Barbie: Butcher of Lyons* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: The First Full Account of America's Recruitment of Nazis and its Disastrous Effects on the Cold War, Our Domestic and Foreign Policy* (New York: Collier Press, 1989); Hammerschmidt, *Deckname Adler*.

110 Gerald Posner, *God's Bankers: A History of Money and Power at the Vatican* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 144.

These facts beg the question: why did Catholic dignitaries help Nazi perpetrators escape justice? This is an often-raised question, especially since 1984, when the La Vista report was made public. Nazi-hunter and Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal struggled to find answers. His biographer stated: "... he was never able to find even the slightest justification for the Vatican's actions, or for those of the ICRC, who made it possible for the Nazi murderers to make their escape."<sup>111</sup> While there is much to say on this topic, I will conclude with a few preliminary findings about the driving forces behind the Catholic Church's actions.

## Conclusion

While actively aiding Nazi escape and shielding perpetrators from prosecution represent different points on a spectrum, it is often unclear where one ends and the other begins. Catholic help for Nazi war criminals is ultimately only the tip of the iceberg in the large landscape of post-war order and the early Cold War.

Based on my preliminary research findings, Catholic leaders were deeply disturbed by the destruction and suffering caused by the Nazi regime and World War II. They looked for ways to heal the wounds of German society and build lasting peace. Catholic responses, particularly those of the Church's leaders, were likely based on two thousand years of experience with war's atrocities and how Christian societies came to terms with them. Catholic leaders pleaded for a rejection of Nazi teachings and a return to Christ and Christian values as a way to mend post-war society. At the same time, the Vatican and prominent Catholic leaders strongly condemned anything perceived as revenge (or collective guilt) and demanded forgiveness for the perpetrators. By taking this position, they also aimed to strengthen the influence of Catholic teachings and the Church in society. But even with these aims, the response of Pope Pius XII to the Nuremberg trials and denazification was loaded with political implications that reflected the geo-strategic realities of the day.

During the Second World War, Pius XII worked tirelessly to preserve the interests of the Church as an institution in a delicate balancing act between the dictatorships of Stalin and Hitler. In order to successfully defend Church interests, he was prepared to compromise. Although the portrayal of Pius XII as Hitler's ally is unfair, research strongly suggests that he viewed "godless" communism as the principal enemy of the Church. Anti-communism served as a bracket of the Vatican's pre- and post-1945 world. For many Church leaders, Nazism seemed only an episode, albeit a horrible one, but still just an episode in the larger fight against communist atheism. Therefore, the Vatican waged its lonely Cold War against communism years before the United States did. In the words of American historian Michael Phayer, "Pope Pius was the world's first Cold War warrior."<sup>112</sup> The Vatican showed itself to be very concerned about the religious persecution in the then Soviet-controlled parts of Central and Eastern Europe, including eastern parts of Germany. Before long, the Vatican was engaged in a secret war via diplomacy and intelligence operations. The pope was also convinced that harsh denazification and ongoing purges would weaken Germany and therefore make the country (and Western Europe) easier prey to communism. While the Vatican's views on guilt and responsibility were initially at

111 Hella Pick, *Simon Wiesenthal: A Life in Search of Justice* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 127.

112 Phayer, *Pius XII, the Holocaust and the Cold War*, 134. See also Peter C. Kent, *The Lonely Cold War of Pope Pius XII: The Roman Catholic Church and the Division of Europe, 1943–1950* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2002).

loggerheads with the Western Allies, this quickly ended after 1947/1948. The Americans did not dismantle the escape structures they discovered early on, and eventually used them for their own clandestine warfare against communism.

The re-Christianisation of society was a crucial long-term goal for the Vatican.<sup>113</sup> The Christian churches in Germany competed for souls, which often led to a barely hidden rivalry between the Catholic and Lutheran clergies. Catholic bishops, including the Bishop of Rome, encouraged Nazi criminals with Lutheran backgrounds to convert to Catholicism. In some not-so-rare cases, a Catholic baptism was the precondition for Catholic aid. It shows that religious/theological teachings and motivations should be studied seriously in this context (next to the political motives, which are obvious). For this aim, the Vatican was even willing to face attacks and some damage to the Church's reputation. As Pius XII stated when attending the conversion of American GIs in Rome: "The harvest of souls is worth any sacrifice!"<sup>114</sup> The Vatican and pope's involvement here can be understood through the lens of soul saving. As Catholic teachings indicate that no salvation is possible outside of the Church, the Church aimed to save as many souls as possible. Therefore, re-Christianisation and strengthening the Church as an institution went hand in hand.

After 1945, the Catholic Church depicted itself as a victim of the Nazis, engaged in total resistance against Nazi or fascist rule – which is not quite true. The Church's initial compromises with fascism, like the 1929 Lateran Treaty with Italy, had worked well for the Church. Why would they not work in Germany? After all, some thought that Hitler was just a German Mussolini. But soon after the Concordat of 1933, the interests of the Nazi state and the Catholic Church clashed repeatedly. However, no full-blown conflict and break ever occurred. The Church mainly resisted and opposed Nazi efforts when Church interests were at stake. Given its own Christian antisemitism, it also found it difficult to clearly speak out against the discrimination and persecution of Jews. Christian antisemitism did not disappear in 1945, as evident in repeated statements by Catholic dignitaries "blaming" the Jews for Allied "revenge" and "victor's justice". The Church largely rejected considerations of widespread guilt and responsibility (as argued at the time by philosopher Karl Jaspers, Lutheran theologian Martin Niemöller, and survivors like Simon Wiesenthal). After 1945, the rejection of punishment, not the demand for it, was a rallying cry for the Catholic Church. As the Church forcefully opposed Nazi prosecution and just as forcefully preached forgiveness for the war criminals, its message contained an underlying desire: for the world to move on, to forgive and forget. The perpetrators were quickly forgiven, and the victims were quickly forgotten.

A version of this paper was given as a talk at the Vienna Simon Wiesenthal Institute on 26 May 2021. I take this opportunity to thank the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for hosting me as a senior fellow in the spring and summer of 2021. I really do appreciate all the support and interaction with the wonderful colleagues and staff there. Thanks also to the fellows: it was great to exchange ideas and I was very thankful for the support from them and the institute during the pandemic. Thanks to all colleagues for their feedback on this paper, particularly Prof. Kerstin von Lingen and Dr. Linda Erker from the University of Vienna, as well as Dr. Norbert Sparer, Dr. Steven Wees, Tim Turnquist, Uki Goñi, and Anne Johnson. Special thanks also to the University of Ca' Foscari in Venice, particularly to professors Giovanni Vian and Valentina Ciciliot for all their generous support during my tenure as a visiting scholar there in the fall of 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Chamedes, *A Twentieth Century Crusade*.

<sup>114</sup> Lehnert, *Ich durfte ihm dienen*, 111.

**Gerald J. Steinacher** is the James A. Rawley Professor of History at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (United States). He is the author of numerous publications on twentieth-century European history, most recently *Humanitarians at War: The Red Cross in the Shadow of the Holocaust* (2017), and *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler’s Henchmen Fleed Justice* (2011), both published by Oxford University Press.

Email: [gsteinacher2@unl.edu](mailto:gsteinacher2@unl.edu)

---

Quotation: Gerald J. Steinacher / Forgive and Forget: The Vatican and the Escape of Nazi War Criminals from Justice, in: S.I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. 9 (2022) 1, 4–28.

[https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0122/art\\_gste01](https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0122/art_gste01)

S.I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 9 (2022) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0122>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-NC-ND (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives)

In appreciation to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) for supporting this publication.