

Pius XII and the Battle for Rome

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Robert Katz's The Battle for Rome (2003) is an unfair indictment of Pope Pius XII. Through various distortions and oversights, Katz faults Pius's "open city" strategy and his anti-communism for failing to protect the Jews and other Italians during the German occupation of Rome in World War II. In truth, the pope's strategy was as successful as could reasonably be expected under the circumstances.

While it's usually true that you can't judge a book by its cover, the dust jacket of Robert Katz's *The Battle for Rome* is enough to give historians and others cause for concern. A quotation taken from the author's preface informs readers that the book deals with the role of the "four conflicting parties" during the nine-month German occupation of Rome, which began in September 1943, two days after the formal surrender of the Italian government to the Allies. Katz describes these four actors as

the Allies, trying to capture Rome as their first shining prize of war but discovering Impregnable opposition instead; the Germans, trying to throw the intruders back into the sea, holding Rome hostage and using it rapaciously as a staging ground and a supply line to the front; the Pope, trying to bring the West and the Germans to terms to save the world from "Communism" and to save Rome and the Vatican City from physical destruction; and finally, the Partisans, trying to redeem Italy's honor by making Rome untenable for the occupiers.¹

Why the quotation marks around "communism"? Did communism really exist in Italy or in Europe during the 1940s? Or was it just the figment of a rightwing cleric's imagination? Perhaps it existed, but was not really a threat. Does the author mean to say that there was no likelihood that the Communists would seize power in Italy, or that this might have occurred but would not really have been such a bad thing? After all, for something to constitute a threat, it would have to be both imminent and harmful.

It could be argued that too much shouldn't be made of the use of quotation marks. However in his previous work on the role of Pius XII during the war, Katz himself does just that. He has complained that defenders of the pope generally refer to the "silence," rather than the silence of the pope con-

cerning the Holocaust. Katz has long been in the camp of the pope's critics and he attempts to continue his exposé of the pope's many errors in this book.

Another reviewer of the *Battle for Rome*, also quoted on the dust jacket, describes the book as revealing "what the Germans were thinking, what the Partisans were plotting, when the Allies were coming, and *what the pope was failing to do*" (my italics).² This description of the book proves to be quite accurate, since the pope is the only one of the four actors in the drama who is the subject of "counterfactual" history. This "road not taken" approach to the study of history is controversial enough, but there are at least two especially disturbing aspects of Katz's use of this method.

The first is that it only applies to the pope, not to the three other historical actors. Second, and more importantly, Katz never really tells us what the pope *should have done* under the circumstances. Should the Holy See have abandoned its official neutrality and declared war on Germany? Should the Swiss Guards have attacked the 40,000 German soldiers surrounding the Vatican? Should the pope have called down Allied air strikes on German positions throughout the city? Should he have advocated an armed insurrection by the Communist-led partisans? Counterfactual history can be great fun, but Katz only plays the game part of the way. He simply summarizes the pope's behavior throughout the occupation and presumes that any intelligent reader will see that this was so obviously mistaken that we should all share his disappointment and disgust at the man and perhaps at the institution he represents.

Much of Katz's criticism of Pius centers on the pope's "open city" idea, essentially declaring Rome a demilitarized zone and urging all the belligerents to accept the neutrality of the city. This proposal was supported by Italian Prime Minister Badoglio, the formal head of the anti-Fascist government that replaced Mussolini in July of 1943. Throughout the book, however, the author dismisses the Vatican's concern that Rome might be destroyed by Allied bombing or by a pitched battle between the Germans and the Allies. Katz also dismisses the Church's concern that the power vacuum between a German withdrawal and the Allies' arrival might be filled by the Communist-dominated Committee for National Liberation, the outcome that the author clearly favored. In this respect, Katz becomes another one of those leftist historians who regards the outcome of the Second World War as another kind of "mutilated victory" for Italy, much like Italy's apparent victory in World War I disappointed an earlier generation of Italian nationalists who saw their hopes for Italy's territorial expansion and great power status frustrated by bargains made by the diplomats at Versailles.

For these historians, the revolution of armed workers led by the Communist vanguard, which had not occurred anywhere in the world before or

since, was supposed to have occurred in Italy sometime between 1943 and 1945. Apparently, the fact that this *did not happen* needs to be explained, and much of the blame for this missed opportunity is laid by Katz at the feet of Pius XII.

For Katz, the fact that the city of Rome came out of the war virtually unscathed was a negligible achievement. However, given that Rome was the capital of a Fascist regime that had allied itself with the Germans, had declared war on the Allies, and was just 80 miles from some of the fiercest fighting of the war along the Gustav line, the fact that Rome survived the war intact was itself a miracle, at least figuratively speaking. When we consider the fate of dozens of cities like Berlin, Warsaw, Dresden and Stalingrad, or even the devastation of Naples during the “four days” uprising against the Germans, the Allied bombing of Rome’s San Lorenzo neighborhood on July 19, 1943 was comparatively mild.

In Katz’s *Battle for Rome*, it is virtually an article of faith that the two most egregious atrocities committed during the German occupation, the October 16 raid on the Jewish ghetto and the March 24th execution of 335 Italians at the Ardeatine Caves, both could have been prevented by the pope if only he had chosen to intervene. Katz argues, or really asserts, that the pope’s concern with protecting the city of Rome from physical destruction, with the orderly transition from German rule to Allied rule and with the possibility of mediating some kind of armistice, prevented him from publically denouncing Nazi atrocities, especially against the Jews. More importantly, he skims over the fact that thousands of people including many Jews were sheltered in Catholic churches, convents, and monasteries throughout Rome and the Vatican. Although he cites the famous remark by German General Rainer Stahel that “half the population of Rome lives in the homes of the other half,” he is a little vague about the chronology of events, a failure that should be a cardinal sin for an historian. For example, after the October 16 raid on the old Jewish ghetto, Katz notes that “For every person of the thousand captured and deported, there were eleven Roman Jews who had escaped the net,” and that “in a city of hundreds of parish churches, well over a thousand convents, monasteries and other religious institutions; and tens of extraterritorial and quasi-extraterritorial enclaves and of course the Vatican itself, the Jews would soon come knocking at their doors.”²³

Somehow the fact that over 80 percent of the Roman ghetto’s Jews survived the October 16 raid, and over 80 percent of Italy’s Jews survived the war, needs to be explained. Katz and other critics of the pope cannot have it both ways. Either the arrests and deportations in Rome were abruptly stopped the next day, after papal protests, as many witnesses on both sides of the war

have testified,⁴ or the majority of the city's Jews had already abandoned the ghetto and had gone "knocking at the doors" of their Catholic neighbors before the night of October 16. Perhaps they went into hiding after the Germans entered the city on September 10; or after the Germans demanded the gold ransom from the Jewish community on September 26; or perhaps earlier.

Unfortunately, on many subjects, Katz seems to defer to historian Susan Zuccotti, who has acquired a reputation for arguing from the absence of evidence. In her *Under His Very Windows*⁵ Zuccotti, unlike Katz, does document many of the rescue and relief activities by Catholic institutions and individuals, but doubts that the pope had authorized such activities since she has found no written documentation to that effect. Unlike Zuccotti, Katz does not even mention the thousands of anti-German refugees, partisans, deserters and fugitives living in the pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo. Suffice it to say, any historians who believe that thousands of refugees were actually *living in the pope's home* without the pope's knowledge or approval, should have no difficulty being persuaded by the rest of Katz's argument concerning the pope's allegedly pro-German bias. Similarly, the pope's offer to lend the Jewish community the 50 kilograms of gold initially demanded by the Germans does not seem to alter Katz's judgment concerning the Pius XII's indifference to the fate of the Jews.

Like most of Pius XII's critics, Katz seems to attribute this allegedly pro-German bias more to the pope's militant anti-communism, rather than to anti-Semitism which, in the case of Pacelli, is much harder to demonstrate. Pope Pius XII's staunch anti-communism is undeniable and I'm not aware of any historians who attempt to deny it. However, many of the efforts to portray Pius XII as favoring a German victory seem to stem from this anti-communism, and Katz's book certainly falls into line. While periodically suggesting that the pope's fear of communism was largely fanciful, utilizing phrases like "the Bolshevik bogey," or the pope's "obsession" with "enemies, less real than imagined," the author persists in asserting that Pius preferred a "separate peace" between the Germans and the Allies, presumably allowing the former to continue the war against the Soviet Union. Again he offers little evidence for this policy preference, and it can be contrasted to the memoirs of Harold Tittmann, published one year after Katz's book.⁶

Tittmann was part of the US mission to the Holy See under the direction of Myron Taylor, FDR's special envoy to Pope Pius XII, and he lived in the Vatican during the German occupation. According to Tittmann, Pius XII responded to a request by President Roosevelt in September 1941 to urge American Catholics to support aid to the Soviet Union in the struggle against Nazism. The pope then directed Vatican Secretary of State Car-

dinal Maglione to contact the Apostolic Delegate in Washington to communicate with the US bishops on the subject, the result of which was a pastoral letter making a distinction between aid to the Russian people and aid to communism. With the support of the Vatican, the American Catholic hierarchy emphasized that this aid would not violate the ban on collaboration with atheistic communism urged in the 1937 papal encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*, written by the pope's predecessor, Pius XI. The Apostolic Delegate further noted that while communism might benefit by such aid to the Russian people, the goal of the policy was moral, and therefore the evil that might be produced would have to be accepted along with the greater good. Tittmann concludes,

[T]hus Pius XII himself had joined the President (Roosevelt) in admitting that Hitlerism was an enemy of the Church more dangerous than Stalinism and that the only way to overcome the former was an Allied victory, even if this meant assistance from the Soviet Union.⁷

It should also be noted that Pius's persistent efforts to establish Rome as an open city, as well as his futile attempts to arrange an armistice of some kind, may have excluded the Soviet Union for the simple reason that not only were there no Soviet troops near Rome at the time, but the Vatican had no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, since the Communists had rebuffed all offers of a concordat of the kind that then-Cardinal Pacelli had negotiated in his role as Papal Nuncio to Germany in the 1920s and as Vatican Secretary of State in the 1930s. By contrast, the Holy See was in constant contact with US, British and German diplomats, with some of the Allies' representatives such as Tittmann literally living in the Vatican during much of the war.

The principal heroes of Katz's *Battle for Rome* are the ten Communist members of the GAP (Gruppi di Azione Patriottica) who carried out the attack on an SS battalion marching down the Via Rasella, killing 33 Germans and several civilian bystanders on March 23, 1944. Led by two young lovers Rosario "Sasa" Bentivegna and Carla Caponi, "trying to redeem Italy's honor," the Via Rasella attack provoked the German massacre of 335 Italian men and boys at the Ardeatine Caves the following day.

The impact of the Via Rasella attack and its contribution to the war effort has been debated in Italy to this day, given the horrific reprisals and the threat to the delicate open city negotiations taking place at the time between the Holy See and the Germans. Some historians have raised the question of whether the GAPisti themselves could have or should have taken some action to save the lives of the innocents murdered at the Ar-

deatine Caves, although most seem to agree that news of the executions was not received by the Roman partisans until after the event.

Even the partisans, however, appeared to have been more divided on the wisdom of the Via Rasella attack than is Katz, since he notes that the CLN itself split on whether to deny responsibility for the attack, and was on the verge of falling apart because of tactical differences among the various parties. While a majority supported the Via Rasella partisans and wanted the CLN to take responsibility for the attack, “the required unanimity appeared beyond reach, and the CLN fell silent, more silent than the Pope.”⁸ To Katz, however, the responsibility for preventing the reprisals for actions that the pope had clearly opposed rested principally with the pope, not with those who carried out these acts in blatant defiance of the pope’s wishes. Katz does report the pope’s angry and anguished response when informed of the massacre at the Ardeatine Caves the next day. At no time however, does he doubt that unlike the GAPisti, the pope had both the means and opportunity to stop the slaughter, which he and he alone must have known about in advance. To Katz, Pius XII simply was willing to sacrifice these innocents in order to avoid a confrontation with the Germans that would have upset his overall strategy.

While devoting the entire book, not to mention his professional career, to criticizing Pius XII’s wartime behavior, including the pope’s opposition to a communist uprising, Katz mentions the historic “*svolta di Salerno*” announced by the Italian Communist Party in just one page. Nonetheless, his disillusionment, if not anger, with the Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti, is unrestrained. Katz complains that as a consequence of this new party line, the Communists were now

ready to join hands with the Monarchists—including the King and Badoglio—and every other anti-Fascist Party in a government of national unity. Dissolving all dissent on the right, Togliatti’s *svolta*, a shift rightward deemed “wonderful” by Bonomi, did indeed work wonders. In rapid succession, Bonomi withdrew his resignation, the king announced his abdication . . . and finally Badoglio was named to head an Allied approved government of all six parties, thus closing the rift between Churchill and Roosevelt. . . . While most anti-fascists of the left, especially those of the armed Resistance, believed they were fighting for an Italy rooted in a democracy of ideals, Togliatti’s Herculean feat had given them a glimpse of a more likely future, a democracy of just deals.⁹

At no time however does this historic “turnaround” by the PCI at the end of March cause Katz to reexamine the absurdity of his central thesis concerning Pius XII. In effect, Katz is arguing that the pope should have taken a position to the left of the Communists, Churchill, Roosevelt and just about everybody else by advocating an armed insurrection of the CLN against the Germans. One might even leave aside the observation made by most political scientists today, that the emergence of democracy is always the result of negotiations, bargaining and compromises among elites; and that the 1946 Italian constitution and postwar Italian democracy, warts and all, have been the product of continuous coalitions and “deals” among these same anti-fascist party elites. In any case, a book written in 2003 should display a bit more awareness of what some of those revolutionary ideals of “democracy” might have been and how they panned out in those European nations where the pro-Soviet Communists did not make deals with the other anti-fascist parties. The fact that the Battle for Rome did not result in another political system resembling Poland’s or Bulgaria’s or East Germany’s may well be “blamed” on the efforts of the pope, among others. Likewise, the fact that postwar Rome did not resemble Berlin, Warsaw or Stalingrad after the liberation of those cities could also be attributed to Pius XII’s open city diplomacy. But these outcomes hardly seem to justify the shameful historical verdict that Robert Katz imposes on the pope.

Nonetheless, the *Battle for Rome* closes with the author proudly presenting the defamation of character lawsuit brought against him by the family of the late pope in 1975. In the case of *Pacelli v. Katz*, an Italian court found the author guilty of criminal libel for a screenplay he wrote for the film *Black Sabbath*, which was based on Katz’s earlier book criticizing Pius XII. Katz presents what he considers to be the “smoking gun” vindicating him in the form of a document released from the Vatican archives stating that a memo reached the desk of the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Maglione at precisely 10:15 a.m. on the day of the Ardeatine Cave executions. The anonymous memo stated that there would be ten Italians executed for each of the thirty-three Germans killed by the partisans the previous day. It did not indicate when or where such reprisals would take place, but Katz assumes that the pope had both the means and the opportunity to halt this direct order by Hitler, if only he had chosen to risk his grand strategy.

In a critique of an earlier Katz book, historian Ronald Rychlak noted that sometime that day, the pope sent a priest to obtain more information and the release of the prisoners, but that the Gestapo chief refused to meet the papal messenger and that the executions had already begun. Moreover, Rychlak claims that the existence of this anonymous memo had been

known since 1980 and that in any case, everyone knew that there would be German reprisals against Romans in the event of such an attack, since the Germans had made clear that there would be.¹⁰ In his *Rome '44*, British historian Raleigh Trevelyan seems to concur by pointing out, “The whole of Rome expected some sort of German reaction, possibly violent, but nobody knew it would be so swift.”¹¹

On June 4, just two days before D-Day, the “seamless” and peaceful transition from German to Allied occupation that Katz deplores did in fact take place. Demoralized German troops drifted out of the northern part of Rome, while the triumphant Allied forces roared in from the south to be met by jubilant crowds.

Again, a comparison of Katz’s analysis of Rome’s liberation with the Tittmann memoirs is revealing. According to Tittmann,

Rome was liberated by American and British troops with scarcely any fighting taking place within the city itself. Although Rome was never officially recognized by the Allies as an “open city,” it was as a practical matter treated as such by the belligerents. . . . It is surely fair to assume that the continuous appeals by the Holy See to both sides must have contributed to sparing Rome from the destruction that would have ensued had the city become a battlefield. The Romans of course were tremendously relieved by their relatively painless liberation for which they seemed to give credit to the Pope. On June 5, the first day of the liberation of Rome, a huge crowd of cheering Romans filled St. Peter’s square, where they were blessed by the Holy Father.¹²

Indeed almost everyone seemed elated by the outcome of the Battle for Rome except for Katz (and of course, the Germans). Katz describes this same June 5 rally of about 300,000 people including Communists, but deplores the fact that the pope “allowed” others to think that he played a key role in the happy outcome. According to Katz, even US correspondent Eric Sevareid was taken in by the pontiff’s “showmanship” and “political genius” with which “by inference he took credit for the fact that the city had been spared.”¹³ In other words, virtually everyone at the rally credited the pope with leading the effort to save and liberate the city, but only Katz knows the real truth. Here Katz’s argument becomes truly mysterious. After criticizing, if not ridiculing, the pope’s open city, seamless transition strategy throughout his book, Katz now complains that the pope allowed others to give him credit for the apparent success of that same strategy.

In fact, while reading the rather somber conclusion to Katz’s book, the reader has to keep reminding himself that the Battle for Rome, like both

the Second World War and the Cold War, was, after all, won by the “good guys,” who, like it or not, include Pius XII. While reasonable people can disagree about the current debate concerning the merits of recognizing Pope Pius XII as a Catholic saint, it would seem that Father Pacelli’s refusal to share Robert Katz’s sympathy for revolutionary communism or his indifference to the destruction of the Eternal City hardly disqualifies him from consideration.

Notes

1. Robert Katz, *The Battle for Rome* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 216.
4. These include Jewish historian Michael Tagliacozzo, a survivor of the ghetto raid, Sir D’Arcy Osborne, British representative to the Holy See, Gerhard Gumpart, a German diplomat, and Adolf Eichmann, quoted in Ronald Rychlak, *Righteous Gentiles* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2005), 129–33.
5. Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).
6. Harold H. Tittmann, Jr., *Inside the Vatican of Pius XII: The Memoir of an American Diplomat During World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).
7. Ibid., 64–65.
8. Katz, *The Battle for Rome*, 263.
9. Ibid., 274–75.
10. Rychlak, *Righteous Gentiles*.
11. Raleigh Trevelyan, *Rome ’44* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 227.
12. Tittmann, *Inside the Vatican of Pius XII*, 210.
13. Katz, *The Battle for Rome*, 325–26.