



The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe

By David I. Kertzer

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PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

From National Book Award finalist David I. Kertzer comes the gripping story of Pope Pius XI's secret relations with Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. This groundbreaking work, based on seven years of research in the Vatican and Fascist archives, including reports from Mussolini's spies inside the highest levels of the Church, will forever change our understanding of the Vatican's role in the rise of Fascism in Europe.

The Pope and Mussolini tells the story of two men who came to power in 1922, and together changed the course of twentieth-century history. In most respects, they could not have been more different. One was scholarly and devout, the other thuggish and profane. Yet Pius XI and "Il Duce" had many things in common. They shared a distrust of democracy and a visceral hatred of Communism. Both were prone to sudden fits of temper and were fiercely protective of the prerogatives of their office. ("We have many interests to protect," the Pope declared, soon after Mussolini seized control of the government in 1922.) Each relied on the other to consolidate his power and achieve his political goals.

In a challenge to the conventional history of this period, in which a heroic Church does battle with the Fascist regime, Kertzer shows how Pius XI played a crucial role in making Mussolini's dictatorship possible and keeping him in power. In exchange for Vatican support, Mussolini restored many of the privileges the Church had lost and gave in to the pope's demands that the police enforce Catholic morality. Yet in the last years of his life—as the Italian dictator grew ever closer to Hitler—the pontiff's faith in this treacherous bargain started to waver. With his health failing, he began to lash out at the Duce and threatened to denounce Mussolini's anti-Semitic racial laws before it was too late. Horrified by the threat to the Church-Fascist alliance, the Vatican's inner circle, including the future Pope Pius XII, struggled to restrain the headstrong pope from destroying a partnership that had served both the Church and the dictator for many years.

The Pope and Mussolini brims with memorable portraits of the men who helped enable the reign of Fascism in Italy: Father Pietro Tacchi Venturi, Pius's personal

emissary to the dictator, a wily anti-Semite known as Mussolini's Rasputin; Victor Emmanuel III, the king of Italy, an object of widespread derision who lacked the stature—literally and figuratively—to stand up to the domineering Duce; and Cardinal Secretary of State Eugenio Pacelli, whose political skills and ambition made him Mussolini's most powerful ally inside the Vatican, and positioned him to succeed the pontiff as the controversial Pius XII, whose actions during World War II would be subject for debate for decades to come.

With the recent opening of the Vatican archives covering Pius XI's papacy, the full story of the Pope's complex relationship with his Fascist partner can finally be told. Vivid, dramatic, with surprises at every turn, *The Pope and Mussolini* is history writ large and with the lightning hand of truth.

NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

“Kertzer has an eye for a story, an ear for the right word, and an instinct for human tragedy. This is a sophisticated blockbuster.”—**Joseph J. Ellis, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Revolutionary Summer***

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A Conversation between Jon Meacham and David Kertzer, author of

The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe

When Pope John Paul II first announced the opening of Pius XI's archives, what made you think there might be an untold story buried inside?

The Vatican's alliance with Mussolini has long been controversial. Historians and journalists formed two camps. On one side were those who claimed that, far from being an ally, the Vatican was Mussolini's greatest adversary during the twenty years of the Fascist regime. On the other side, people charged that the Church offered the regime crucial support. Yet until the 2006 opening of the Vatican's archives—and with it a series of other Church archives—the controversy remained unsettled.

***The Pope and Mussolini* is based on more than seven years of archival research. Tell me about one or two documents you uncovered that were breakthroughs in your understanding of these two men and this era.**

There were so many revealing documents, of so many different kinds, that it is hard to identify just one or two. Perhaps the most dramatic—what could even be called a kind of “smoking gun”—was the three-page text of a secret agreement between the Vatican and Mussolini reached two weeks before the racial laws were first announced. The trail of documents I unearthed shows the pope's shadowy, but fascinating, Jesuit personal envoy to Mussolini, Pietro Tacchi Venturi, spending the days before the agreement going back and forth between the pope and the dictator to work out an accord. Shockingly, it states the Vatican's agreement to make no objection to the racial laws as long as they were no more repressive than the popes' own restrictions on the Jews in the days of the Papal States. And in fact the laws that were soon announced—expelling all Jewish students from the schools, firing all Jewish teachers, forbidding Jews from holding other positions of influence—were similar to those that had been in effect in Rome as long as the popes held power there.

But not all of the most revealing documents were to be found in the Vatican archives. We know more about what was going on behind the scenes in the Vatican in these years than for any other time in history thanks to the dense network of spies the Fascists placed in and around the Vatican. These too shed much light on the pope and what he was dealing with.

In the final months of his life Pius XI began to realize he had made a poisonous bargain with Mussolini and fascism. He tried to change the course of the church's relationship to Mussolini and Hitler, but it proved too late and he died in February, 1939 as the world was sliding into catastrophe. How much do you think Pius XI understood about what was coming to Italy, Europe, and the church?

Pius XI was in many ways a tragic figure. His mentality was formed in a certain conservative Church ambience of the late nineteenth century and people should not act according to their own beliefs and conscience, but according to the directives of the Church hierarchy.

It was only after he had been pope for over a decade that Hitler's rise to power in Germany and Mussolini's own increasing efforts to portray himself as a demi-god began to challenge the pope's worldview. Something similar might be said about his attitude toward the Jews. He came from a Catholic environment in which the Jews were not only demonized as the crucifiers as Christ, cursed by God, but viewed as part of an occult conspiracy aimed at enslaving Christians and achieving world domination. Yet in his own city of Milan, he had gotten along with the small Jewish community and indeed even took Hebrew lessons from the local rabbi. Watching how his views of Jews percolated in the years leading to the Holocaust is to see a man struggling with a conflict he does not entirely comprehend.

As for his understanding of what was coming by the late 1930s, the newly available archives make clear he was convinced that Europe was hurtling toward a cataclysm.

Do you think there was a moment where a road or course not taken could have changed things significantly?

A huge amount of attention has been paid to the question of the "silence" of Pius XI's successor, Pius XII, during the Holocaust. This has turned into a rather heated debate over whether Pius could have affected German behavior by forcefully denouncing the mass murder of Europe's Jews. I don't want to get involved in that debate here, but what is clear to me is that the popes had much greater influence over Italians than they did over the Germans. Of course the popes themselves were all Italians, as were virtually all the members of the Curia. And while only a third of Germans were Catholic, Italians were overwhelmingly Catholic. So the interesting question for me is could the pope have prevented Italy from allying with Nazi Germany? Might Italy never have entered the war on Germany's side if the Vatican had acted differently? This is a huge question and I am not sure if it has ever been posed in quite this way before.

Jon Meacham is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *American Lion*, *Thomas Jefferson*, *Franklin and Winston*, and *American Gospel*. The former editor of Newsweek, he is an Executive Editor and Executive Vice President of Random House.

From [Booklist](#)

Two leaders came to power in 1922 in Rome, Achille Ratti was elevated to the papacy as Pius XI, and Benito Mussolini was appointed Italian prime minister. How relations between them developed until the pope's 1939 demise occupies this original history, which rests on Kertzer's thorough research of available Vatican archives and other sources. His main line of inquiry, the degree of support Pius XI accorded to Mussolini, guides Kertzer's narrative, which begins with Mussolini's opportunistic about-face from anticlerical socialist to Catholic-tolerating nationalist. Papal approval during the 1920s, when Mussolini's regime survived political crises, received its reward in 1929 with the Lateran Accords that reestablished the Vatican as an independent state. Although he finds points of conflict between Pius XI and Mussolini, Kertzer underscores affinities between the Catholic Church and the fascist state, which may arouse controversy. Was the church as acquiescent to Mussolini's persecutions of Jews as Kertzer portrays? In any event, he adduces evidence that Pius XI seems to have regretted his tacit alliance with Mussolini. An important work of history, Kertzer's adroit profiles of Pius and Mussolini will broaden its audience. --Gilbert Taylor

Review

"David Kertzer has an eye for a story, an ear for the right word, and an instinct for human tragedy. They all come together in *The Pope and Mussolini* to document, with meticulous scholarship and novelistic flair, the complicity between Pius XI and the Fascist leader in creating an unholy alliance between the Vatican and a totalitarian government rooted in corruption and brutality. This is a sophisticated blockbuster."—**Joseph J.**

Ellis, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Revolutionary Summer*

“Much more attention has been given to the Vatican’s compromises and complicity with Hitler, but Kertzer tells a fascinating and tragic story of its self-interested support for Mussolini when he was vulnerable early on.”—*The New Yorker*

“Revelatory . . . [a] detailed portrait of the inner workings of the Vatican in this period . . . The general outlines of this story have always been matters of public record, but Kertzer’s book deepens and alters our understanding considerably. The portrait that emerges from it suggests a much more organic and symbiotic relationship between the Church and fascism. Rather than seeing the Church as having passively accepted fascism as a *fait accompli*, Kertzer sees it as having provided fundamental support to Mussolini in his consolidation of power and the establishment of dictatorship in Italy.”—*The New York Review of Books*

“Gripping storytelling . . . a book whose narrative strength is as impressive as its moral subtlety . . . Kertzer has uncovered a fascinating tale of two irascible—and often irrational—potentates, and gives us an account of some murky intellectual finagling, and an often startling investigation of the exercise of power.”—*The Guardian*

“Captivating . . . the real *Da Vinci Code*—only it’s rigorously documented and far less implausible.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“The papacy of Pius XI remained essentially a foil for discussing his successor. Kertzer’s excellent volume will change all of that. . . . From the outset of his new book, Kertzer deftly reconstructs the parallel lives of Achille Ratti, who became Pius XI, and of Benito Mussolini, both men whose beginnings do not point to the historic role that they began to play in 1922. The narration unfolds along the separate political, ideological, and institutional backgrounds of the Pope’s and Duce’s careers and brings up in fascinating detail the issues on which their interests converged and clashed. . . . Kertzer’s essential book reveals a window on this sordid history—a window that for a long time was shuttered, but will not be obscured anymore.”—*The New Republic*

“Stunning . . . remarkable . . . Kertzer authoritatively banishes decades of denial and uncertainty about the Vatican’s relationship with Italy’s fascist state.”—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“A capstone on David Kertzer’s already crucial work, *The Pope and Mussolini* carefully and eloquently advances the painful but necessary truth of Vatican failure to meet its greatest moral test. This is history for the sake of justice.”—**James Carroll, National Book Award–winning author of *Constantine’s Sword***

“Sweeping and nuanced . . . required reading for anyone with an interest in the Roman Catholic Church and early twentieth-century European history.”—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“The author spares no toes in his crushing of the Church’s ‘comforting narrative’ around its relationship with Mussolini’s Fascist regime. . . . Kertzer is unflinching and relentless in his exposure of the Vatican’s shocking actions. . . . Deeply troubling revelations around Vatican collaboration with evil.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“A compelling case that the Catholic Church should pay greater penance for its support of Mussolini and the rise of fascism . . . *The Pope and Mussolini* matches rigorous scholarship with a fair yet forceful prose voice. It is an impressive work of history.”—*The Daily Beast*

“[Kertzer] reconstructs, as if in a historical docudrama, the paths taken by these two men who had such a great impact on the course of the twentieth century. . . . [A] brilliant narrative . . . [with] pages that display enthralling narrative skill.”—**Marco Roncalli, *Avvenire***

“Meticulously researched and captivating . . . a remarkable achievement.”—*Commentary*

“Brisk, rigorously documented and persuasive.”—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Vividly recounted . . . Kertzer had access to recently opened Vatican archives regarding Pius XI, and his thorough research goes a long way in overturning conventional notions about Catholic church resistance to Mussolini.”—*USA Today*

“Compelling . . . Kertzer charts his own course not only by virtue of the depth of his archival research and analysis, but also by virtue of his engaging prose.”—*America: The National Catholic Review*

“Fast-paced and well-written . . . This book is a readable popular history, with well-drawn characters and interesting incidental detail. It is also a serious study that incorporates the most recent scholarship made possible by the 2006 opening of the Vatican archives for the reign of Pius XI.”—*The Irish Times*

“*The Pope and Mussolini* is a riveting story from start to finish, full of startling, documented detail, and nobody is better prepared to tell it than David Kertzer.”—**Jack Miles, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *God: A Biography***

“Wholly deserving—even demanding—the adjectives ‘groundbreaking,’ ‘courageous,’ and ‘captivating,’ *The Pope and Mussolini* decisively challenges the received narrative about Pius XI and the Fascist leader. The relationship, in short, was one not of hostility but of mutual dependence. David Kertzer’s conclusions are unflinchingly and conclusively proven, thanks to his profound and thorough research, scholarly authority, and narrative panache. This is a meticulously researched and crafted book, exquisitely written, fresh, mesmerizing, and enlightening.”—**Kevin Madigan, Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Harvard University**

“*The Pope and Mussolini* tells the story of two remarkable men, Achille Ratti, Pope Pius XI, and Benito Mussolini, Duce of Fascism. Both demanded absolute obedience. Those who knew the pope called him ‘a block of granite’ and ‘cold as marble.’ The highest prelates trembled in his presence. Mussolini, swollen with his success, became ‘a statue’ who listened to no one. David Kertzer tells their stories in counterpoint as they could never have been told before. The opening of the Vatican archives in 2006 and the discovery of a vast archive of Mussolini’s spies in the hierarchy of the Vatican provide Kertzer staggering new evidence, and his wonderful portraits of everybody involved give this book the fascination of a great novel.”—**Jonathan Steinberg, Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Modern European History, University of Pennsylvania, and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Bismarck***

“David Kertzer, who pored through the recently opened Vatican secret files gives, us a ghastly history of the poisonous alliance between a weakened Vatican and an ambitious Mussolini. The Pope’s blessing gave *Il Duce* the needed credibility to take Italy and the Italian people where he wanted them to go. In exchange for that approval, the Fascists provided the Church with its only perceived bulwark against the forces of Communism and the modern age. Enter Hitler. I can imagine Machiavelli overseeing the manipulations on both sides and saying either ‘Well played’ or ‘You go too far’ or ‘Beware.’ David Kertzer has written a harrowing portrait of a ghastly union whose only by-product was the nightmare of World War II.”—**John Guare, award-winning playwright and author of *Six Degrees of Separation***

“A thoroughly engrossing story with an ever-changing cast of fascinating characters . . . Like a couple in a loveless marriage, entered into for all the wrong reasons, Pius XI and Mussolini could not get free of each other. Mussolini hated priests. Pius XI swallowed his scruples about the Duce’s growing megalomania. Each reckoned that he had much to gain from the other. Beneath their endless squabbling about precedence, their continual posturing, Pius and Mussolini undermined and ultimately squandered the happiness of the millions who trusted them. Kertzer has written the definitive book on this tragic history.”—**Richard S. Levy, professor of history, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and co-editor of *Antisemitism: A History***

“Kertzer unravels the relationship between two of twentieth-century Europe’s most important political figures and does so in an accessible style that makes for a fast-paced must-read.”—***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ruth Haakenson:

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