



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on May 14, 2009

## Critics Rebuke Pope Benedict XVI

Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech at Israel's Yad Veshem Holocaust Memorial this past Monday, during which he paid tribute to the Jewish victims of Nazi genocide. His words were not well-received by all, however, as some Israeli critics expected an apology from Benedict and felt that he was "restrained" in his remarks. Most notably, speaker of the Knesset, Reuven Rivlin, said, "[I was] hoping to hear an apology and a request for forgiveness from those who caused our tragedy, and among them, the Germans and the church. But to my sadness, I did not hear any such thing." Reuters tells us that the speaker also "referred to Benedict as 'a German who joined the Hitler Youth and ... Hitler's army.'"



The Israeli speaker's remarks are ironic since he is falling victim (assuming he's sincere) to a technique that none other than Adolf Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, spoke of when he infamously said, "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it." In fact, Rivlin is in the grip of at least a couple of big lies, ones that, lamentably, are widely embraced.

First we have this silly notion that Benedict "joined" the Hitler Youth and German army. Membership in the Hitler Youth was [made compulsory](#); consequently, Benedict was absorbed into the organization in 1941 when he was 14. Despite this, however, Benedict did not attend Hitler Youth meetings.

Now, I realize that those who condemn the Pope for being born in the wrong place at the wrong time are a cut above the rest. Being intrepid souls, I'm sure that at the tender age of 14 they would have commandeered a tank and attacked the Berghof (Hitler's mountain retreat). But perhaps they should consider that young Benedict was a mere mortal, like the rest of us.

Benedict was later drafted into the German army, but mirroring his unwillingness to participate in Hitler Youth activities, subsequently deserted. And these principled actions entailed sacrifice. As Bill Donohue of the Catholic League [said](#), "[Benedict's] failure to attend Hitler Youth meetings brought economic hardship to his family: it meant no discounts for school tuition." And what of his desertion from the army? He could have been shot.

Now we come to Rivlin's desire for an apology from the Pope. I might ask, "What for?" The idea the Pope was a Nazi is vile slander, and the fact that he is German is irrelevant. Just as we wouldn't charge [Omar bin Laden](#) with terrorism because his father is Osama, it's silly to hold an individual responsible for the sins of his (mostly dead) countrymen. Just as significantly, the Pope did not visit Israel as a German but as the leader of the Catholic Church. And, now, this brings us to the mother of all lies.

What of the Catholic Church? Rivlin clearly implicated it in the Holocaust, describing the church as having "caused our tragedy." And this is where he does a Goebbels on steroids, because this idea is the precise opposite of the Truth.



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As you may know, the idea that the Catholic Church collaborated with the Nazis during WWII is common today. In fact, the Pope at the time, Pius XII — sometimes called “Hitler’s Pope” by shameless calumniators — may qualify as *the* most unfairly maligned man in history. Truth be known, he is a hero, an individual who saved lives and engaged in a cold war against the Nazi regime.

One of the best defenses of Pius XII is a relatively recent [book](#) by Rabbi David Dalin entitled *The Myth of Hitler’s Pope: How Pope Pius XII Rescued Jews from the Nazis*. Dalin, a professor of history, actually states that Pius should be recognized as a “righteous gentile.” Imagine that, “Hitler’s Pope” called righteous by a rabbi! What gives? Let’s look at the facts.

My family never believed the Catholic Church was complicit in persecuting Jews. There are many reasons for this, but a good one is that I actually have a Jewish relative who was provided safe haven in Europe during WWII by *Catholic priests*. Yet, was she an anomaly? Well, let’s examine what Thomas E. Woods, Jr. [reveals](#) in his review of Dalin’s book. He writes, “Israeli diplomat Pinchas Lapide, cited to this day by those who defend the Pope, wrote in his *Three Popes and the Jews* (1967) that Pius ‘was instrumental in saving at least 700,000, but probably as many as 860,000 Jews from certain death at Nazi hands.’”

Woods also points out:

Hitler’s regime actually lobbied against the election of Pacelli [Pius XII] to replace Pius XI as pope. Pacelli was referred to as Pius XI’s “Jew-loving” cardinal. Rabbi Dalin points out that “of the forty-four speeches Pacelli gave in Germany as papal nuncio between 1917 and 1929, forty denounced some aspect of the emerging Nazi ideology.”...

His [Pius’] inaugural encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus* (1939), made clear the incompatibility of National Socialism with the Catholic faith. The *New York Times* headline read, “Pope Condemns Dictators, Treaty Violators, Racism.”

While it’s hard to imagine the *Times* revealing such facts today, don’t be shocked. In fact, Speaker Rivlin and other Pius critics should know that WWII-era Jews would be shocked (and often appalled) at their attitude, as Pius’ heroism was common knowledge at the time. Prominent Jews such as the aforementioned Lapide; Golda Meir; Rabbi Isaac Herzog, chief rabbi of Israel; Albert Einstein; Moshe Sharett; and many, many others all praised Pius roundly for his work on behalf of their people.

And such benevolence toward Jews was no anomaly on the Catholic Church’s part, either. As Dalin points out and contrary to the modern narrative, the church has been a friend of the Jews since at least the 13th century.

Despite this, critics will still condemn some of Pius’ actions, upset that he didn’t rail against the Nazi regime with fire and brimstone. But let’s place this in perspective.

Most of us have seen the movie *Schindler’s List*, the Academy Award-winning 1993 hit. It tells the story of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who saved the lives of more than 1,000 Polish Jews during WWII. The movie depicts Schindler as a reluctant hero, a man who witnesses atrocities and then rises to the occasion. He ingratiates himself to Nazi officials — often seeming somewhat obsequious — and then uses his clout with them to rescue the damned from the gas chambers.

Now we get to the problem with telling only half a story. If we had portrayed Schindler’s seeming coziness with Nazi monsters and neglected to place it in context — and especially if we had the gall to omit mention of the fact that his actions were directed toward saving lives — he wouldn’t have seemed



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like such a hero, would he? And this is precisely what has happened with Pope Pius XII and the Catholic Church. Yet, if Schindler is cast the hero for using diplomacy to save 1,000, shouldn't Pius XII be heroicized 700-fold for applying the same techniques on a macro scale and saving 700 times as many?

Of course, just as with the crack I made about pubescent boys attacking the Berghof, it's easy to be the tough guy 65 years after the dragon has been slain. It's also man's nature to expect our heroes to spit in the eye of the villains and give them no quarter. The reality, however, is that when most people are put to the test, they become quite cowardly. A very rare few do hiss and spew venom at the vipers, and they seldom last long. And then there are the wise resisters, those who understand that sometimes your visible revulsion for an oppressor must be bayed, that sometimes you have to dance with the Devil to obscure your defiance of his ends. Pius XII knew, just as Schindler knew, that overt opposition to the Nazis was a recipe for disaster. It would have provided Hitler an ideal pretext for shuttering parishes and arresting all their officers, thus ending their life-saving endeavors. Of course, the flip side is that no one today could accuse Pius XII of being a Nazi collaborator. No, they would just call him an artless fool.

So how was this Goebbels-worthy lie about the Catholic Church born? Many analysts trace it back to 1963, when the left-wing German writer Rolf Hochhuth created a fictional play entitled *The Deputy*, which, as Woods wrote, "portrayed Pius XII as callous and indifferent in the face of Jewish suffering under the Nazis." This was picked up by liberal Catholics and secular forces bent on undermining the Catholic Church, and the rest, you might say, is revisionist history.

On another personal note, my father was a Jewish man who saw action in WWII and was a prisoner of war in Germany, so he had as much a moral right to weigh in on these matters as anyone. But he was neither an angry man nor a professional victim. He therefore never placed an onus on the Catholic Church — and he would never have. Falsely accusing an entity of complicity in the Holocaust is akin to blood libel. And Rivlin and his fellow travelers have, as many of his co-religionists of yore would have pointed out, a lot to repent for come Rosh Hashanah.

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