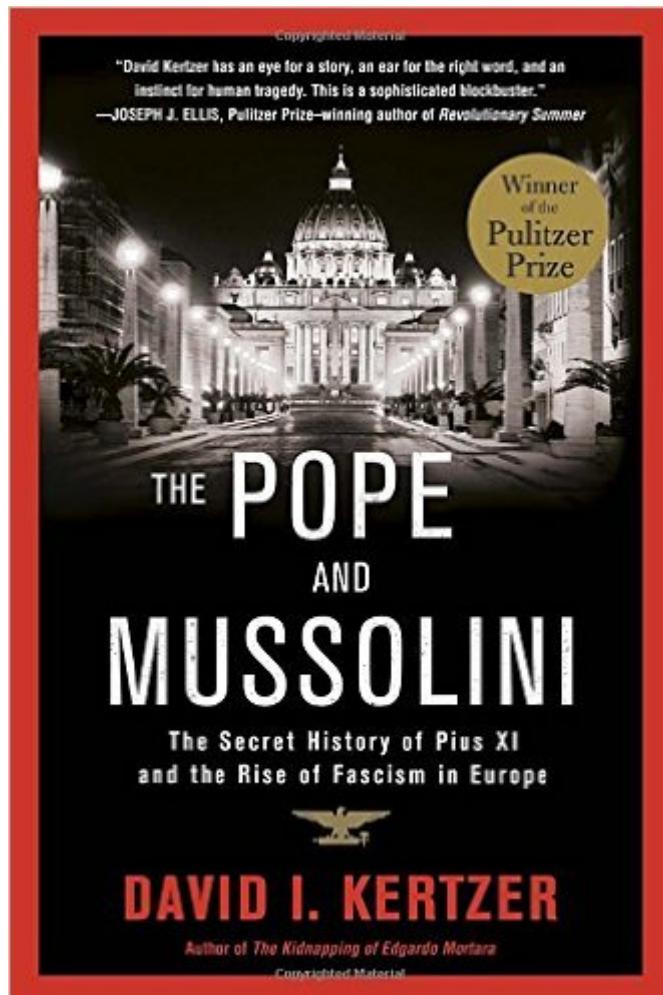


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# The Pope And Mussolini: The Secret History Of Pius XI And The Rise Of Fascism In Europe



## Synopsis

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 the 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. **AMED 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* A fascinating and tragic story." "The New Yorker" Revelatory . . . [a] detailed portrait." "The New York Review of BooksFrom the Hardcover edition.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

I saw a PBS interview of the mild mannered academic researcher, and read his book which I found to be carefully researched, thorough, and insightful. It took seven years to write. Kertzer, in my opinion, did not do a "hit job" on the pope. If there is a hit job, it was done by the pope to himself, and not incidentally, to the Italian people. But the reasons are revelatory. Pius XI's withdrawal of support of the center Catholic party, made Mussolini's reign possible, which the dictator readily acknowledged. In fact he couldn't believe his good fortune, that his chief opposition would cave. With this tacit backing, all other political parties were destroyed by the thug black shirts. Pius XI, as enabler, was more comfortable with a dictator, who like himself, demanded absolute obedience. Mussolini was "the man of Providence", to use Pius's words. Pius was happier with a dictator than he ever could be with a democrat, or anyone on the left. If the reader is uncomfortable with this idea, be forewarned, for it is very well documented. Additionally, the author presents a very acute discussion of the difference between German and Italian attitudes towards Jews....both anti-Semitic. One, the Nazi, purely being race based; the other, the Italian, being behavior based.

How all this got mixed with nationalism, politics...and historically, with religion, is an important thread of the book. In fact, it was those same ancient (now renounced) historic sources of anti-Semitism of the RCC, which were part of what gave Mussolini legitimacy, as he used church support for his particular strain of anti-Semitism. Church support was initially in harmony with Mussolini's own cult of the self, and then was expanded into other of his many crimes, including the unprovoked attacks on Ethiopia and Albania, the destruction of Italian democracy, not to mention the disgraceful Italian racial laws. Throughout it all, Pius's protests seem of the trivial sort, for in truth his aim was to reestablish pre 1870 church ascendency, where there was no separation of church and state, all controlled by an all powerful RCC. It seems that this pope, like many popes before him, and Mussolini, and Hitler for that matter, had little tolerance for democracy...and the "rights of man"...which he openly ridiculed. As Pius's doubts grew about Mussolini, we have the perspective of history to see it all blow up in his face. Kertzer follows him, as he lamely tried to undo the results of his own deeply immoral imprudences, only to be suppressed by a coterie of clerics, chief among whom was his own secretary of state, the future Pope Pius XII...the controversial Pacelli. This is a powerful thesis, made most convincing by the thorough research to support it. There are 100 pages of footnotes. Kertzer's sources include the newly opened Vatican archives, the Italian state files of Mussolini, mistresses, family members; and diaries, correspondence, and literally thousands of pages of newspaper articles from all the key media outlets of the day, written and/or approved by the key operators. It's an impressive work, and I think, believable. The reader will have to decide for himself or herself, for this serious attempt at an objective understanding of complex truth paints not a pretty picture of this pope, his era, and his minions. Kertzer writes in his *Afterwards*, that the usual Catholic conservative reaction will double down, as always, on the myth of a brave Vatican fighting against fascism. It's to be expected. But change is afoot. I hope that Francis, with his exhortation on the poor, is taking the more democratic approach, and is interested to setting the record strait...balancing right and left...which Pius XI and XII, didn't. I hope so.

The title of David Kertzer's new book is technically accurate, in that many of the details revealed here were not public knowledge until recently, but it suggests a level of shocking intrigue on which the book doesn't necessarily deliver. Readers who imagine the Catholic Church of the mid-twentieth century to have been benign and apolitical will be surprised to discover the wheeling and dealing of Pius XI's Vatican, and the reactionary attitudes that made an alliance with Mussolini's fascism seem a reasonable option. (Of course, there was more at work than ultra-conservative ideas, and Kertzer's treatments of the rise of Fascism and of the uneasy Italy/Vatican relationship explain well

the pragmatic aspects of the alliance.) Those who expect large institutions, religious or otherwise, to fall short of their ideals will be less amazed, and may find Kertzer's solid, detailed, and carefully-supported account a touch on the dry side: despite chapter titles like "Assassins, Pederasts, and Spies," it can be slow going at times. But the frank portraits of grand ambition and petty "office politics" are frequently striking. I might quibble with Kertzer's use of government spy reports as sources: like many scholars using similar material, he acknowledges the issues of bias and gossip that render them questionable and suggests interpretive caution, but tends not to exercise that caution in specific cases. That aside, though, this is a balanced account, critical but never unduly so, and a fine study of an unpleasant chapter in history.

I heard Mr. Kertzer speak in DC a few nights ago, purchased the book, and read it right through in just a couple of days. It is a gripping, well-told, well-documented and largely appalling story that should be read by anybody interested in the origins of World War II and in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Pius XI and Mussolini each had their own reasons for supporting each other, but in the end it was a disaster for everybody concerned. The Pope was blinded by his own lust to regain the stranglehold he once had over the Italian people, a dominance which was lost once the Papal States were absorbed into a united Italy in 1870. He and the rest of the hierarchy were obsessed with the supposed dangers of democracy, Protestantism, separation of church and state, the imaginary world-wide Jewish Conspiracy that somehow controlled both Communism and Capitalism, freedom of thought and association, Freemasonry, etc. etc. and were more than eager to let a ruthless totalitarian state help the Catholic Church regain its old glories. Mussolini, for his part, needed the visible backing of the Vatican to maintain the loyalty of Italy's Catholic faithful. Kertzer's book fully describes the rise and fall of this unholy alliance. Though the author spent seven years in research for this book through previously secret records from the Vatican and other sources, I am amazed by just how much of the sordid story has been a part of the public record all along. If there has been controversy among historians and others over just how much support the Vatican provided Mussolini, much of it must be because of a refusal in some quarters to admit the all-too-real fallibility of the political judgments of the Catholic Church. One figure who winds his way constantly through Kertzer's story is Eugenio Pacelli, Secretary of State under Pius XI, later Pius XII. His machinations would put Macchiavelli to shame. His canonization now seems to be but a matter of time; too bad the Vatican has abolished the office of the Devil's Advocate, because such a person today would have a field day with the material in this book.

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