

The Meeting between Pope Pius XII and Ribbentrop

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The controversy aroused by Hochhuth's play "The Representative" caused the Vatican to take the unprecedented step of publishing some of its recent diplomatic archives. The appearance so far of five substantial volumes for the period of Pope Pius XII's pontificate enables a much clearer assessment to be made of the Vatican's policies during the Second World War, and in particular of the disputed topic of Pius XII's attitude to Nazi Germany. The diplomacy of the Holy See during this period has already become the subject of a number of critical studies, giving rise to some current misrepresentations, which can now be re-assessed in the light of the official documentation.

This is particularly true of certain allegations made about the controversial meeting in March 1940 between Pius XII and Ribbentrop. At the time, the *New York Times* printed a despatch from its correspondent in Rome, claiming that the meeting had been made by Ribbentrop to submit to the Pope a far-reaching proposal for peace. The correspondent, Camille Cianfarra, published the details of this proposal in his book *The Vatican and the War*,¹ and his version was followed by other writers, both before and after the publication of the official German record in 1954,² and most recently by Saul Friedländer in *Pius XII and the Third Reich*, whose book first appeared in a French edition in 1964.³ According to Cianfarra, the proposals allegedly were:

1. General, simultaneous, and immediate disarmament on land, sea and in the air.
2. A return to the four-power pact, which would take the form of a new European "directory" and serve as a sort of substitute for the League of Nations. The four states would divide the zones of influence in Europe and would inaugurate an anti-Bolshevist policy with the idea of "liberating" Russia by arms if necessary, from Communism.

¹ C. Cianfarra, *The Vatican and the War*, New York, 1944, pp. 209-210.

² *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, Series D. Volume VIII, no. 668.

³ Paris, 1965, Hamburg 1965 and London, 1966.

3. Recognition of absolute religious freedom, but first, Germany would force all her Jews to emigrate under the direction of Britain (to Palestine), Italy (to Ethiopia) and France (to Madagascar).
4. The status quo in the Balkans to be guaranteed.
5. The restitution within twenty years of German colonies or equal colonial compensation or, at least, the protection of German emigration in determined areas of Africa.
6. Reconstruction of an independent Poland, composed primarily of the central zone of Polish territory, with about ten million inhabitants. Gdynia to be a Polish free port; free trade for the Poles through Danzig, and a general facilitating of Polish communications to the sea. The Polish frontiers to be determined on the basis of a plebiscite controlled by international commissions. Minority problems in Poland and the whole Danube basin to be solved by a vast transmigration of peoples, after which minorities would disappear.
7. Czechs, Slovaks, and Magyars to constitute a tripartite state allied to the Reich. For twenty-five years, the Reich would enjoy certain privileges regarding industries and communications in those territories.
8. Austria to remain in the Reich.
9. Creation of a Danubian federation as a sort of customs union to equalize the interests of large and small states in the Danube basin. In the federation, two great powers (Germany and Italy), two Balkan powers (Yugoslavia and Rumania), and three smaller powers (Bohemia, Slovakia and Hungary) would participate.
10. Absolute freedom of trade and access to raw materials; close contacts with the United States for economic co-operation; the facilitation of German and Italian emigration.
11. Free customs transit for Italian goods through Jibuti, French Somaliland; free passage through the Suez Canal on expiration of the present Suez convention in 1945; a new statute for Italians in Tunis.

Friedländer accepted at face value the alleged plans as “exposed” by Cianfarrà. He went even further to suggest that Ribbentrop and the Pope had discussed the possibility of a return to peace based on a recognition of a *de facto* German hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe, and the possibility of a “liberation of Russia.”⁴ Although Ribbentrop’s official note on this conversation which had appeared eleven years earlier, contained no reference at all to such a suggestion, Friedländer explained the deletion from the German record as being due to the “then state of relations between the German Reich and the Soviet Union.” He repeatedly stressed his view that when the Vatican archives were open, more incriminating evidence would be

⁴ Friedländer (English edition), p. 47.

found. But in 1965 in the interval between the appearance of the French and the English editions of his book, the Vatican version of this conversation was made public⁵ and likewise contained no such reference. Friedländer still did not see fit to alter his text, but preferred instead to claim that “what has been published up to now does not, on the whole, seem to contradict in any way the impression given by the documents in my book.”⁶

Friedländer was anxious to prove that Pius’ attitude throughout was one of sympathy towards Nazism.⁷ In this he followed not only Rolf Hochhuth, but also several earlier writers, such as Avro Manhattan,⁸ who had sought to show that the Vatican diplomacy in the early months of 1940 had favoured a pro-German peace settlement in the West in order that Germany could then turn against the Soviet Union. Indeed, he claimed “the Vatican was continuing to urge Hitler to attack Russia.”⁹ This was the view also of the Soviet writer, M. M. Scheinmann, who attributed to the Pope a sinister scheme whereby Pius XII promised to the Nazis the assistance of the Vatican in a common front against their mutual enemy, the Soviet Union.¹⁰ A similarly pejorative attitude was taken by Maxime Mourin in his book *Le Vatican et l’URSS*.¹¹ Even writers more sympathetic to the Vatican, such as Pierre Duclos,¹² repeated the view that Ribbentrop had offered the Pope this ill-paid offer of peace, as “a last Nazi attempt to draw the Pope into their game before their great offensive in the West.”¹³

The maintenance of these views, even after the appearance of the official German documentation, would seem to indicate that their authors were motivated not so much by the desire for historical accuracy as by political

⁵ *Actes et documents relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale, Volume I, Le Saint Siège et la guerre en Europe: Mars 1939 - Août 1940*, Vatican City, 1965, no. 257.

⁶ Friedländer (English edition) p. x.

⁷ Friedländer sought to discredit the account given by the Vatican writer Mgr. Giovanetti in his book *Der Vatikan and der Krieg* (Cologne 1961), which can now be seen to be based on the Vatican record. The Italian writer, L. Caviglione whose book *Pius e il nazismo* (Turin, 1965), also appeared before the publication of the official Vatican version, lent support to Giovanetti’s rather than to Cianfarrà’s version, and commented with some asperity that “Friedländer naturally adopted Cianfarrà’s hypothesis as his own, ready as he is to repeat all the most absurd, outlandish and distorted suppositions”: p. 176.

⁸ A. Manhattan, *The Vatican in World Politics*, New York, 1949.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 197.

¹⁰ M. M. Scheinmann, *Der Vatikan im zweiten Weltkrieg*, Berlin, 1954.

¹¹ M. Mourin, *Le Vatican et l’URSS*, Paris, 1965.

¹² P. Duclos, *Le Vatican et la seconde guerre mondiale*, Paris, 1955.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

prejudice. An examination of the four official accounts, now published from the Vatican, the German, the American¹⁴ and the Italian files,¹⁵ and a closer analysis of the motives of the participants, enables the historian to discount these hypothetical allegations, for all the texts agree that no such peace proposals were put forward, nor did the Pope make any offers to assist the Nazis against the Soviet Union. Far from leading to any such collaboration, the results of the meeting were negative. Ribbentrop failed to convince the Pope of the imminence of a total German victory; the Pope failed to persuade Ribbentrop to allow any concessions to the persecuted Catholic church. The meeting was in fact no more than an unsuccessful diplomatic encounter.

The first year of Pius XII's pontificate had been a dispiriting experience. Despite the Pope's attempts to use his good offices to initiate negotiations in May and August, 1939, for a peaceful settlement of the German-Polish crisis, Hitler had plunged Europe into war. The failure of Papal diplomacy was now overlaid with concern for the sufferings of the largely Catholic nation of Poland. However, despite his sympathy openly expressed to the exiled Polish Primate, Cardinal Hlond, Pius resolved not to allow the Papacy to be drawn into the vortex of wartime emotions or propaganda.

Like Pope Benedict XV during World War I, Pius was determined to follow a course of neutrality between the warring sides, still nursing the hope that a negotiated settlement might be achieved. He allowed himself to believe that the German people did not stand united behind the Nazi leaders. He was strengthened in this conviction by the secret advances made to the Vatican by a group of German army officers in November, 1939. Through their emissary, Joseph Miiller, they expressed a desire for assurances from the Western Allies that if Hitler were overthrown negotiations for peace would be undertaken. These requests were forwarded to the diplomatic representatives of Britain and France at the Holy See with the Pope's tacit approval. In March, 1940, Cardinal Maglione, the Papal Secretary of State, expressed his belief to the American Under Secretary of State, Sumner Welles, that the Germans would not launch a military offensive against the Western Allies because "he knew there was a widespread opposition to such an undertaking on the part of the General Staff, and he was by no means sure that there was not a movement on foot within the General Staff, to bring about a change of regime."¹⁶ Such wishful thinking was premature. The hoped-for *coup-d'état* did not take place, and the Vatican was obliged to take more seriously the increasing rumours that Hitler would undertake new military offensives in the West as soon as the

¹⁴ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1940, Volume I, Washington, 1959, pp. 106-110.

¹⁵ *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Nona Serie, Volume III, Rome, 1959, no. 536.

¹⁶ *F.R.U.S., op. cit.*, p. 109.

weather improved.

In this situation Ribbentrop sought an audience with the Pope. Some members of the Curia argued that the Pope should follow the example of his predecessor Pius XI who, during Hitler's visit to Rome in May, 1938, had ostentatiously retired to Castel Gandolfo, rather than remain in a city beflagged with "the banner of an alien cross hostile to that of Christ." Pius XII, however, was more circumspect; he recognised that such a demonstrative gesture would, on the one hand, be interpreted by all anti-German forces as an unequivocal sign of sympathy for the Western Allies, and would, on the other, do nothing to alleviate the position of the German Catholics. Rather, he decided to seize the opportunity of a meeting with Ribbentrop to protest the continuing widescale breaches of the Concordat, which the Germans sought to justify with the excuse of "wartime necessity." Pius also wanted to urge on the Foreign Minister his serious concern for the state of the Catholic Church in Poland, in the hope that such representations might help to restore the channels of communication to the Polish Catholic hierarchy by leading to the re-appointment of a Vatican representative in Warsaw. But there is no evidence to suggest that the Vatican was eager to see peace restored on the basis of a German hegemony, still less that Pius was prepared to discuss with Ribbentrop his views on the persecution of the Church in the Soviet Union.

Ribbentrop's motives in seeking this audience were somewhat more complex. According to Dr. Erich Kordt,¹⁷ Ribbentrop's political advisor, his main object in coming to Rome was to persuade Mussolini to enter the war on Germany's side. But he had taken notice of early communications from Rome reporting that Italian public opinion would be more easily influenced to side with Germany if the Nazi persecution of the Catholic Church was halted, or at least curtailed.¹⁸ From this perspective Ribbentrop's visit to the Vatican was intended to be a gesture towards Italian opinion. In part, however, Ribbentrop was prompted by wider considerations of a more general foreign political nature, which were being urged upon him by his subordinates. In the first place the German Foreign Ministry were anxious to head off the possibility of any open statements against Nazism by the Papacy. Recent Papal pronouncements had shown signs that the Pope felt strongly about events in Poland. The Vatican was also alarmed by rumours of the Nazi "euthanasia" programme and by the German's open disregard for Christian morality.¹⁹ For example, in October, 1939, Himmler had put out a decree to the German S.S. and Police, in which he had advised the Storm troopers to beget more children, legitimate or illegitimate, to make up for the losses

¹⁷ E. Kordt, *Kahn and Wirklichkeit*, Stuttgart, 1947, p. 236.

¹⁸ See for example D.G.F.P., D. VIII, nos. 505 and 527.

¹⁹ See J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, London, 1968, pp. 273-274.

suffered in the war. In the Christmas Day edition of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, a letter signed by Rudolf Hess and addressed to “an unmarried mother” had publicly advocated sexual promiscuity in order to produce “racially healthy children.”

Any public protest on these matters by the Vatican would give at least a propaganda advantage to Germany’s enemies and might affect opinion in neutral countries, such as those of Latin America. And beyond the goal of meeting Papal protests there was the hope – admittedly a faint one – that the Papacy could be induced to recognize Germany’s recent conquests and their incorporation into the Third Reich. Such an acknowledgement would be of undoubted advantage in that it would discourage the exiled governments to believe that Catholicism could become the centre of resistance to German rule. The German Foreign Ministry therefore urged at least a regularizing of relations between Berlin and the Vatican. As the State Secretary, von Weizsäcker, noted in January, 1940:

I think we all agree that no general settlement can be reached at the present time... The only thing to do at the moment is probably to avoid creating new points of friction and gradually to improve relations by attending to certain individual complaints.²⁰

Finally, Ribbentrop was intent upon strengthening his hand against other Ministries and Party agencies in Berlin, such as the Ministry of Church Affairs, the Gestapo, the Party Headquarters and the numerous agents employed by Rosenberg and Himmler, whom he suspected of encroaching on his preserves. He was anxious that all relations with the Vatican should be channelled through the Foreign Ministry alone, and no doubt hoped that a favourable response from the Pope would help him to achieve some of these long-range objectives.

In January, 1940, he remarked to one of his officials that “he was watching very attentively the efforts of the Vatican. He was of the opinion that an understanding with the Church was useful. He reminded the Führer of it every week almost. Thus far, however, the Führer had turned a deaf ear to it because of his bad experience with the Vatican.”²¹ Hitler’s opinion was clearly shared by others in the Nazi hierarchy, who were not prepared to consider any concessions to the Church, either for the sake of the Italians, or to achieve the Foreign Ministry’s wider goals. As a result, Hitler’s instructions to Ribbentrop were that he should avoid all discussion of practical issues and confine himself to generalities.

²⁰ Unpublished Nuremberg document, NG-4603, files of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich.

²¹ D.G.F.P., D. VIII, no. 596

Ribbentrop's conduct at the audience with the Pope confirms Alfieri's view that the visit was intended to be nothing more than a sensational item in the German propaganda programme.²² Any prospect the Pope had for initiating discussions on the possibility of a negotiated settlement were deliberately forestalled by Ribbentrop with a categorical insistence that Germany would win the war.

Germany was engaged in a struggle for existence which she would fight, in all circumstances, to a victorious end; naturally, this occupied all her efforts and did not permit the Führer to get interested in other problems.²³

Ribbentrop insisted on telling the Pope that Germany is very strong, that it has half the world at its disposal, that it can have all the petroleum it wants from Roumania and that without any doubt it will win the war in the course of 1940. He extended such assurances without any hesitation whatsoever. He repeated this assurance more than once, raising his voice and waving his arms. He added that the entire people without any exceptions is behind Hitler.²⁴

In reporting this conversation to Sumner Welles, Cardinal Maglione noted that Ribbentrop "had been utterly intransigent in his point of view, insisting that Germany was determined to carry the war through to a victorious conclusion and that the German government would consider no other alternative."²⁵ It is clear that Ribbentrop had no intention of allowing the Pope to hope that the Vatican's good offices could be used – possibly in conjunction with those of the United States, whose emissary, Sumner Welles, was at that time touring the European capitals – in any attempt to mediate between Germany and the Allies.

Ribbentrop's vigorous assertions about the support of the German people for their Führer was likewise designed to demolish any remaining hopes in the Vatican that a wedge could be inserted between the Germans and their government. According to Ribbentrop, Hitler wanted a lasting and solid understanding with the Catholic Church.

He has already given proof of this goodwill by terminating several hundred trials against the clergy but Hitler is a man with far reaching designs who thinks more of the future than of the present. (?) One must

²² D. Alfieri, *Dictators Face to Face*, London, 1954, p. 36.

²³ D.G.F.P., D. VIII, no. 668.

²⁴ *Actes et documents du Saint-Siège, op. cit.*, p. 385.

²⁵ F.R.U.S., *loc. cit.*

not think therefore that one can arrive at a settlement *now*.

Germany is now engaged in a tremendous war for its existence and for its greatness. Hitler has behind him all the German people, from the first to the last; all were ready to fight heroically. All German energies are directed towards this one goal, victory. One cannot think of other questions at this time. Hitler has united the German people and has saved Germany – and therefore Europe – from Communism. He has obtained all this by raising himself above the parties. Now there is only the State which conducts political life, and things must be this way. Catholicism and also for that matter Protestantism were so involved in politics, and the Catholics of the Centre were so involved in politics, that they reduced themselves to voting enormous sums to the more extreme parties in order to keep themselves in power.

Even today the clergy has not yet understood that it is not their business to meddle in politics. What is needed is time and patience to arrive at a perfect understanding and at a religious settlement which is desired by Hitler.²⁶

Although the delicate state of the Vatican's relations with Italy was not discussed, Ribbentrop's firmness was clearly intended to deter the Pope from any further attempts to prevent Italy's intervention on Germany's side. Ribbentrop failed in this attempt; in the following three months Pope Pius tried repeatedly to keep Italy out of the war – measures which were to provoke Mussolini to numerous and violent anti-clerical outbursts.²⁷

Ribbentrop's other objective – to assuage Papal anxieties about the persecution of the Catholics in Germany – was likewise not achieved. Ribbentrop's case was that:

The Führer was of the opinion that a basic settlement between National Socialism and the Catholic Church was quite possible. There was, however, no point in wanting to settle the relations between these two by raising separate questions of this or that kind or by provisional agreements. Rather, they must come sometime to a comprehensive and, so to speak, secular settlement of their relations; this would then form a

²⁶ D.G.F.P., D. VIII, no. 668.

²⁷ Commenting to Ribbentrop on the following day, Mussolini remarked: "There was little to be gained from having the Catholic Church for a friend, but the enmity of the Pope, even if it was not dangerous, could be quite troublesome, as he knew from experience": D.G.F.P., D. VIII, no. 669. For an excellent account of the relations of the Vatican and the Italian government, see C. F. Delzell, "Pius XII, Italy, and the Outbreak of War," in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 137-161.

really lasting basis for a harmonious co-operation between them. However, the time had not yet arrived for such a settlement. Moreover, it ought to be borne in mind, that an understanding between National Socialism and the Catholic Church depended on one principal preliminary condition, namely, that the Catholic clergy in Germany abandon any kind of political activity and limit itself solely to the care of souls, the only activity which was within the clergy's province. The recognition of the necessity of such a radical separation, however, could not yet be considered to be the dominant view of the Catholic clergymen in Germany.

The Catholic Church in Germany had come into the possession of positions and rights of the most various kind which it considered, to be sure, duly acquired, but which were not compatible with the absolutely necessary limitation to its spiritual functions. The Catholic clergy must be imbued with the realisation that with National Socialism an entirely new form of political and national life had appeared in the world. Only after this had happened could a fundamental settlement and understanding be approached with any chance for a lasting success.²⁸

The Pope was far from convinced. The Vatican's well-documented case was carefully prepared in the Secretariat of State in an *aide-mémoire* containing annotations on the current persecuted state of the Catholic church in Germany.²⁹ Pius, who was not persuaded by Ribbentrop's specious arguments about Hitler's good intentions, stated his case bluntly: "The facts show that in Germany there is a war against the Church."

And then he cited several examples, clear and specific ones. Van Ribbentrop was a bit taken aback ... He answered that at the bottom it is a question of a revolution and that compared with other revolutions the National Socialist Revolution has not caused grave harm to the churches. To which the Pope replied that in reality there had been many injuries – and he continued to point out examples. Ribbentrop underlined that the State spends a great deal for the clergy and the Church. The Pope replied that a great deal has been taken away from the Church,

²⁸ D.G.F.P., D. VIII, no. 668.

²⁹ The text of the note which listed the most severe measures taken by the Nazis against the Catholic church is printed in *Actes et Documents du Saint-Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale*, Vol. II: *Lettres de Pie XII aux évêques allemands, 1939-1944*, pp. 134-135. It bore the heading: "The Principal points concerning the painful situation of the Catholic Church in Germany, which His Holiness saw and approved and recommended to the particular attention of His Excellency Herr Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Foreign Minister of the Reich."

houses, institutions of education – kicking out the legitimate owners *malo modo* in a few hours. The Holy Father insisted particularly on the schools.³⁰

Ribbentrop, however, was not prepared to discuss the specific points raised in the Pope's document. He airily evaded them. Hitler, he said, was totally engrossed with the conduct of the war, and only "at some later date" wanted a "fundamental and comprehensive settlement of the whole relationship between Church and State." When Cardinal Maglione attempted later to pin Ribbentrop down to some specific concessions, such as the re-appointment of a Vatican representative in Poland, the Foreign Minister was equally evasive.

The Cardinal stated his view "that the Holy See desires to be informed precisely" and for that reason it has insisted several times in obtaining Berlin's agreement to send a trust-worthy clergyman to Poland, and specifically Mgr. Colli, the Counsellor of the Nunciature in Germany; up until today, the Cardinal stated, I have not had any answer on this.

In the meantime several things have taken place which cannot be contested and which are very sad. Several bishops have been removed from their sees, some, like the Bishop of Lublin³¹ are in jail together with many priests; great numbers of clergymen have been arrested; very many churches have been closed; in those which are still open it is only permitted for a few of the faithful to attend and that only for a few hours!

- But, Ribbentrop answered, even in Poland the clergymen have done nothing but take part in politics and are against the Germans.

- One can ask the Polish priests to remain quiet and to think only of their ministry and not to give trouble to the occupation authorities, but one cannot expect from them to give up their love for their country. The presence of an envoy from the Holy See would be useful in dissipating misunderstandings and would confirm the clergy's intention

³⁰ *Actes et documents du Saint-Siège*, p. 366.

³¹ On the 27th November, 1939, the Bishop of Lublin as well as his auxiliary Bishop and thirteen other priests, had been condemned to death by the German authorities on the charge of hiding weapons in their rooms. After strong representations made by the German Foreign Ministry, they were reprieved and sentenced to forced labour and transportation into Germany. The Bishop was later released and banished under house arrest to a distant diocese. His auxiliary, Mgr. Coral, was transported to the concentration camp of Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, near Berlin. Frequent representations for his release made by the Nuncio to the German authorities, on the orders of the Vatican, were all in vain. He died in captivity at the end of December, 1944, or at the beginning of January, 1945.

to dedicate itself exclusively to its ministry.

- But Poland is under military occupation: one can have there neither consuls nor diplomats.

- The envoy of the Holy See would not have a diplomatic mission but a religious mission. By keeping in contact with German authorities it is possible that he would be able to give useful instructions, good advice and help the bishops to restore to normal gradually the religious situation.

- But how is it possible to have in a territory occupied and governed by the military a representative of the Holy See?

- Your Excellency should remember that during the occupation of the Ruhr and of the Saar Germany was happy to have an envoy of the Holy See in those regions. The French Government permitted at that time the presence of a representative of the Pope. As I recall the work done by that representative, Mgr. Testa, Germany was more satisfied than France

...

The work carried out by that envoy was not too friendly towards us. In any case, Ribbentrop concluded, I will think about it.³²

In this way the Papacy's hope that Ribbentrop's visit might produce concessions to the German Catholics had to be abandoned. Indeed as the Pope told Sumner Welles a week later, "Ribbentrop had given him no satisfactory assurances whatever."

On the contrary, Ribbentrop had asserted that German Catholics possessed complete liberty to practice their faith and to undertake their religious activities, provided they did not engage in politics as Catholics. The Pope stated that this was, of course, not the fact. He said that he had asked Ribbentrop whether he believed in God, and Ribbentrop had replied "Ich glaube an Gott, aber ich bin unkirchlich." (I believe in God but I am not addicted to any Church.) The Pope repeated this phrase in German sarcastically two or three times, and with a smile said that was Ribbentrop's statement but he could not help wondering about its truth. He said that he had spoken to Ribbentrop with regard to the distressing situation of the Catholics in Poland, and had asked whether the German government would not agree to the appointment of a papal delegate to proceed to German occupied Poland in order to investigate what the conditions there might in fact be. He said that he had been unable to obtain any assurance from Ribbentrop on this point and that the latter had merely said, when pressed, that he

³² *Actes et documents du Saint-Siège, op. cit.*, pp. 389-390.

would take the matter under consideration ...³³

The Vatican's disappointment was noted, on the following day, by the Italian Ambassador to the Holy See, Alfieri, who reported to his government:

From the interview it became clear (and the Pope is so convinced) that Ribbentrop wanted to be received in the Vatican only for the purposes of domestic politics – especially to impress the vast Catholic masses in Germany and to exploit in a manner favourable to Germany the repercussions which the conversation had in the world.³⁴

Papal scepticism about German intentions was reinforced when, on 19 March, the Ministry of Church Affairs in Berlin decreed that the jurisdiction over Roman Catholic Affairs in Austria be transferred from Vienna to Berlin. This move produced a strong Papal protest.³⁵ In fact, the initiative had been ordered by the Ministry of Church Affairs without consulting the Foreign Ministry. Ribbentrop almost certainly knew nothing about it, but the impression left in Rome did not reflect to the Germans' advantage.³⁶ Nor was the Pope persuaded by Ribbentrop's remarks to take a more favourable view of the alliance between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia which had all along been regarded in the Vatican with the gravest apprehension. Ribbentrop claimed that the Nazi-Soviet pact was a war time expedient and nothing more. Far from placing the Church in a more dangerous situation, the "firm and lasting basis for a positive relationship between the two countries" now made the German people "immune to any kind of Communist infection."

According to the Vatican record, Von Ribbentrop talked a great deal against Communism, saying that National Socialism has prevented the triumph of Communism in Germany. In the years 1930 to 1932 (when, Von Ribbentrop said the Pope had already left Germany) Communism was about to triumph. Hitler defeated it. Otherwise there would not have remained in Germany even one church, as has happened in Russia – a fact which Ribbentrop has been able to see for himself³⁷

³³ F.R.U.S., *loc. cit.*

³⁴ *I Documenti Diplomatici italiani, op. cit.*, p. 467.

³⁵ M. Maccarone, *Il Nazional socialismo e la Santa Sede*, Rome, 1947, p. 232.

³⁶ For its part the Vatican radio on April 3rd sharply denounced racial idolatry and issued a new series of programmes to illustrate the persecution of the Catholic Church in German-held territories, particularly in the Tyrol.

³⁷ *Actes et documents du Saint-Siège, op. cit.*, p. 386.

It was due, in the last analysis, Ribbentrop claimed, “only to National Socialism that Bolshevik chaos did not break out in Europe and thus destroy church life altogether.” In view of the anti-clerical persecution organized by the Nazis, which bore so many resemblances to the policies of the Soviet government in this field, it is hardly surprising that the Pope remained sceptical. Writing on 17 March to the senior German Cardinals, Bertram of Breslau and Faulhaber of Munich, the Pope concluded that “in human terms at the present time We see no cause for far-reaching expectations, neither as regards peace nor with respect to the position of the Church in Germany ... In patience and in fortitude We must now await from Providence the development of material results.”³⁸

Since no communique was issued after Ribbentrop’s audience, and no official press report followed, it was natural that considerable speculation arose both in Germany and abroad about the nature of the talks. The Nuncio reported from Berlin that “the commentaries (of various newspapers, political circles, and foreign diplomats) are immensely varied. Some speak of a victory, as if it was the beginning of reconciliation, others of a kind of “road to Canossa,” and a kind of last rite for the regime, in a spirit of sheer reparation. Equally varied are the expectations aroused.”³⁹

A few days later, however, Ribbentrop told the Slovakian Premier, Mgr. Tiso, that the press reports were neither true nor creditable, and in a telegram to the German Ambassador in Moscow, he described his visit as “purely and simply an act of courtesy ... The conversation had not exceeded the bounds of general discussion of the relations between National Socialism and the Catholic Church.” Yet Ribbentrop “had also taken the opportunity to explain to the Pope our new relations with the Soviet Union. I had left no doubt in the Pope’s mind that it was a question of a final reorganization of our relations on a firm basis and that we hope to consolidate these relations further.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, as he also told Mgr. Tiso, the Pope had “left an extraordinary, not to say an overwhelming, impression on me. But I met an enemy of German National Socialism in the Cardinal Secretary of State.”⁴¹

In Rome itself, as the *New York Times* correspondent, Camille Cianfarra, reported:

For days, after the meeting, every correspondent in Rome was trying to

³⁸ *Actes et Documents*, Vol. II, p. 132. The originals of these letters were in German.

³⁹ A. Giovanetti, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ D.G.F.P., D. VIII, no. 675.

⁴¹ A. Giovanetti, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-190. No record of this conversation is contained in the published version, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D.

find out what the subject of the talks was. Finally, one of four tipsters, who enjoyed the confidence of a high prelate in the Secretariat of State gave us what he said was an accurate outline of the reasons that had prompted Ribbentrop's "going to Canosse." In the private mail box at my house the tipster left a sealed envelope containing the story.⁴²

On the basis of this somewhat dubious source, the report was written which contained the details of the alleged peace plan, which has since received such wide currency. At the time these hypothetical speculations were immediately denied officially in Berlin as a propaganda move of the western Allies. London responded "frigidly." The Vatican, according to Cianfarra, "did not debunk the proposals. It merely stated that it was not supporting that or any other plan of mediation."⁴³ In fact, all the published reports agree that Ribbentrop unequivocally asserted his view that Germany was determined to win a total victory. Since Hitler had already decided to launch his offensive on the Western Front, it is inconceivable that he should have sent Ribbentrop to ask for Papal mediation for a peaceful end to the war, and still less conceivable that he should have thought of restoring peace to Europe on the basis of a four-power pact, which would have curtailed, if not destroyed, his determination to be the undisputed master of Europe.

Remarkably enough, in this instance, a final possibility still remains of determining the exact words exchanged between the German Foreign Minister and the Pope. In an interview with an American Journalist, Mr. Joseph Roddy,⁴⁴ Father Robert Leiber, S.J., the German-born secretary and personal confidant of Pope Pius XII, revealed that a listening device had been installed in the meeting room by technicians of the Vatican radio, and according to Father Leiber "the exact words are extant even today on tape." In this case, the decision to make a secret recording of this unsuccessful encounter may have been prompted by easily understandable motives of prudence. But the reluctance to publish this valuable source is surely now regrettable.

The secrecy of the Vatican's diplomacy has long been a subject of criticism. The contrast between the Pope's claim to be the representative of Christ on earth and what often appears to be a policy of expediency designed to safeguard the institution of the Catholic Church has exercised moralists in every generation. Since Pius XII's attitude to Nazi Germany is still capable of arousing heated public discussion, it is to be hoped that in the fullness of time, the record of this particular incident will be made available to historians seeking for the truth about the role of the Papacy in those troubled years.

⁴² C. Cianfarra, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

⁴³ C. Cianfarra, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁴⁴ Published in *Look* magazine, New York, May 1966.