

Mussolini's Fascism, Literary Censorship, and the Vatican

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The essay discusses the framework and the actual practices through which the Fascist regime attempted to control Italy's literary production. It concentrates on Mussolini's role as "prime censor" and on his centralization of censorship through the development of his Press Office into a powerful ministry. The essay also examines the relationship in this area between Fascism and the Vatican, and finally it charts the impact of the anti-Semitic legislation of 1938.

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As schoolchildren, most Italians of my generation were told the anecdote of how Mussolini used to leave his Palazzo Venezia office lights switched on all night to make passers-by believe that he was always hard at work for the nation. Both teachers and students would smirk at this story as one example of the many lies that the Fascists told the Italian people. Many years later, as a cultural historian, I spent a few years studying Mussolini's papers at the Central State Archive, or *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. The object of my studies being book censorship, its most revealing aspect was the realization of Mussolini's heavy involvement. With hindsight, this has led me to the conclusion that, in the field of censorship, the office light was sometimes on for a reason.¹

Considering that Il Duce was an ex-journalist and newspaper editor with clear intellectual ambitions, it is not surprising to discover that he enjoyed being involved in censorship matters. Whether this was an efficient use of a dictator's time, particularly of one that presided over several ministries, is an easy question to answer. Within the few pages of this essay, I outline the structural and personal reasons why Mussolini ended up being so deeply involved in Fascism's censorship machine. At the same time, I also seek to show the true complexity behind any simplistic notion of censorship.

In a utopian totalitarian state, censorship should not exist because all citizens are fully committed to the realization of the nation's goals. Reality is naturally very different; even so, Fascist propaganda tried to live the lie as much as possible. This meant that, whenever possible, acts of censorship had to be prevented or discreetly dealt with. Mussolini himself was careful in making sure that doors would be left ajar, thus allowing space for negotiation, self-interested acts of toleration, and plenty of *ad hoc* solutions, sometimes illegal ones. Moreover, when considering censorship one has to take into account the degree of consensual collaboration through which publishers and authors acquired credit with the regime which could then be invested in requests for adjustments and exceptions. In some cases, Fascism also had to come to terms with another censorship authority operating on the Italian peninsula: the Vatican. Although there were no formal links concerning book censorship, this paper shows how challenges to Catholic morality were sometimes taken up by the Church.

Literature and Fascist Censorship in the Early Years of the Regime

Once he had seized power in October 1922, and particularly after the introduction of the draconian legislation of 1926–27 (the *leggi fascistissime*), Mussolini's preoccupation with ensuring control of the Italian media meant that censorship was greatly focused on the press. Most of the legislation and illegal attacks against printing works sought control of the output of opposition newspapers and periodicals. If the publishing industry was involved, it was mainly because the legislation often included periodical and non-periodical publications (*stampa periodica e non periodica*) under the same heading. The key to the expansion of Fascist censorship was the Press Office of the Head of Government (*Ufficio Stampa del Capo del Governo*). Under previous governments and a more concise denomination as *Ufficio stampa*, its role had been that of a relatively passive monitor of national periodicals. Through the appointment of one of his most ruthless lieutenants, Cesare Rossi, Mussolini's Press Office was given the more disturbing aim of shaping public opinion through a range of legal and illegal means. It thus became an increasingly more powerful player directly under Mussolini's leadership.² In matters of censorship, its operations were in direct competition with the Ministry of the Interior, which, traditionally and legally, had the responsibility of overseeing all publications through its network of prefectures. The following quotation from a

confidential letter by Mussolini to all prefects, dated 30 September 1927, clarifies the priority the Press Office was supposed to take: “Do not take any initiative with regard to bans or seizures of publications prior to my personal authorization, which will reach you exclusively through the Press Office of the Head of Government.”³ What was happening in the early years of the regime was a process of centralization for which Mussolini was the active catalyst.

A first example of the complexity of book censorship, and of its careful management by Mussolini, regards the publication of a novel by Guido da Verona in January 1930. By then, Da Verona was an established author of risqué novels constantly testing the limits of the censors' toleration. He was also an outspoken Fascist, although his decision to join the party in December 1925 – when Italy's dictatorship had become a *fait accompli* – suggests a good amount of opportunism. In his most recent book, Da Verona had tried his hand at a sardonic parody of Italy's most famous 19th-century novel, Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* [The Betrothed]. This was one step too far because his satirical treatment of one of the literary icons of Italian and Catholic identity met with outraged reactions from various circles. The official censorship authority (the Milanese prefecture because the book had been published by Unitas of Milan) had not raised any objections to its publication. It was Fascist and Catholic organizations that took action, and they did it with different strategies. As soon as copies of the novel were displayed in the windows of Milan's bookshops, groups of young Fascists started to barge into the shops demanding that all the books be removed from the shop windows and shelves. In one case, the shop manager called the police, who promptly arrived and arrested two of the more hot-headed Fascists. Da Verona and his book were also savagely attacked by the Fascist press, and when Da Verona presented himself to the Fascist headquarters in Milan to try and explain his position, he was first refused a meeting and later, on his way back to the hotel, he was surrounded and beaten up by a group of Fascists.

At the other end of the spectrum, Catholic circles reacted in a more discreet manner but were no less effective. Da Verona's entire *oeuvre* had been put on the Vatican's List of Prohibited Books only a few months before, in April 1929.⁴ The publication of a new provocative novel could not silently be allowed to pass, particularly at a time when, with the Lateran Pacts, Mussolini seemed to have come to a peaceful agreement with the Holy See. First the Milanese Diocese protested with a letter to the Milan prefect, on 9 January 1930. It was more important, however, to reach Mussolini's own ear and, as we now know thanks to the recently opened

files of the Vatican Secret Archives, this happened a few days later. On 15 January the Vatican ambassador to the Italian government (the *Nunzio Apostolico*, Cardinal Duca Borgoncini) tackled the issue during one of his regular meetings with Il Duce. According to Borgoncini's own detailed report, he told Mussolini in no uncertain terms that the pope himself had characterized Da Verona's novel as a "muddy parody." Mussolini sent a brief answer to his request for an immediate ban, revealing knowledge of the situation and, more importantly, showing his unwillingness to resort to draconian methods:

We fought against it, and I believe that the book is almost out of circulation; some Fascists even got to the point of challenging the author to a duel. But it is dangerous to attack it frontally and publicly, because we would end up raising interest in it.

In the end, as the Italian ambassador to the Vatican confirmed a week later, Mussolini agreed to ban the novel.⁵

This episode condenses most of the practices that characterized book censorship in Fascist times. First, the relative tolerance of the prefectures (which, we must remember, had not been "fascitized" by Mussolini for fear that they would become fiefdoms of unorthodox local Fascist leaders); second, the tendency to resort to illegal means such as threats and violence on the part of Fascist militants; third, Mussolini's role as ultimate censor and his preference for *ad hoc* solutions;⁶ and, finally, the openness of the system to revisions and policy changes for those that had the means (the Vatican in this case) to reach the chambers of power of the Fascist regime.

The development of literary censorship in Fascist years was not dissimilar with respect to theatre. In this case, centralization was actually welcome. Since the unification of Italy, theatre companies had requested it to avoid the fact that the prefect of each town had the authority to censor or ban any play that was performed in his jurisdiction. This was embraced in 1931, when theatre censorship was centralized with the creation of a censorship department run by a single officer, Prefect Leopoldo Zurlo. Thanks to Zurlo's efficiency, the archives of the Theatre Censorship Office (*Ufficio Censura Teatrale*) have remained in excellent shape and now are a great source of information for researchers. To this, Zurlo added a 500-page long autobiographical account of his activity. What emerges is that, once more, Mussolini was heavily involved in theatre censorship as well. Zurlo was supposed to report directly to the head of police but, as the documents show, Arturo Bocchini – who was head during most of the Fascist period – was uninterested in cultural matters and did little more than pass Zurlo's reports on to Mussolini during their daily morning meetings.⁷

An example of theatrical censorship that is also exemplary of Mussolini's involvement and, once more, of the interference of the Catholic Church, concerns Sem Benelli's play *Caterina da Siena* (Catherine of Siena). Benelli was at the time a popular playwright, whose most successful work was *La cena delle beffe* (The Feast of the Jesters, 1909), set in Renaissance Italy. In the winter of 1933–34, Benelli returned to a Renaissance setting, but this time he chose a highly contentious theme. *Caterina Sforza* (1934) was a historical play containing two scenes in which two popes – Sixtus IV and Alexander (Borgia) VI – were presented in no uncertain terms as depraved and corrupt. When reading the script, Zurlo expressed his reservations to Mussolini, who replied suggesting a number of cuts, particularly regarding the representation of Sixtus IV.⁸ Soon after sending that note, however, Mussolini must have suddenly changed his mind, because Zurlo was told that Il Duce had decided to leave the play untouched. Unfortunately the documentation does not say what reasoning led him to that decision (but we know that Zurlo double-checked and received the order confirmed by the head of police). By then, the honeymoon period between the regime and the Holy See was well over. Tensions had started to rise with regard to the competition between the youth organizations of each party, and there had been numerous cases of violence on the part of the Fascists that the pope had condemned and Mussolini tacitly tolerated. It could well be, therefore, that Mussolini had simply decided to let the matter take its course, well aware of its negative effects.⁹

The production went ahead and *Caterina Sforza* was premiered in the city of Forlì in February 1934. After the first unsuccessful protests of the local bishops and curates, once more it was decided to intervene directly with Mussolini. This time the person involved was one of the Vatican's most senior diplomats, Father Pietro Tacchi Venturi, a Jesuit historian that had been one of Pius XI's trusted envoys during the prolonged negotiations leading to the Lateran Pacts mentioned above.¹⁰ After a meeting between Tacchi Venturi and Mussolini on 22 February, the latter agreed to ban the play from being performed in the holy city of Rome (April 1933–34 was a special Jubilee Year). A few weeks later, however, it emerged that Benelli's company had every intention of ending their tour in Rome. The Vatican decided to return to the matter with increased force. In addition to Tacchi Venturi, another senior diplomat – Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo of the Secretariat of State – was involved. They both wrote to Mussolini on 15 April 1934 reminding him of his promise not to have *Caterina Sforza* staged in Rome. Mussolini, however, was determined to let it happen and only compromised by agreeing to the cut of the initial scene involving Pope Sixtus IV (as he had previously suggested to Zurlo). The Vatican

had to accept partial defeat but did not do so silently. This time it was the turn of Catholic militants to protest in person during the performance of the play, some of whom were duly arrested by the police. Through its official newspaper, *Osservatore romano* (The Roman Observer), the Vatican also opened a rather crude press offensive. It attacked Benelli with anti-Semitic innuendos (which were totally inappropriate – despite being named Sem, Benelli came from a Catholic family) and also openly protested against the regime's vested tolerance, explicitly hinting at the presence of Mussolini's hand.¹¹

Towards the Ministry of Popular Culture and the anti-Semitic turn

The early 1930s is also the period in which the regime reached a new stage in its centralization of cultural policies. Two factors seem to have played a substantial role. First, Hitler's rise to power and the immediate creation of Goebbels' Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda in April 1933 gave Mussolini a powerful example of an organized, totalitarian approach to cultural matters. There is no space here to explore this in any detail, but even a cursory look at the development of the *Ufficio stampa* shows the extent to which it followed the Nazi example. In August 1933, Mussolini appointed his son-in-law and closest aid, Galeazzo Ciano, as head of his Press Office. Within a couple of years, the department was expanded to the level of an under-secretariat first and later a fully-fledged ministry. It was called the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda between 1935 and 1937, and then acquired its definitive status as the Ministry of Popular Culture in the summer of 1937. Following the Nazi example, a number of government departments dealing with cultural matters were moved under its umbrella, to the point that its staff increased from the 6 employees of 1923, to 30 at the time of Ciano's arrival in 1933, to a final 800 by the time the Ministry of Popular Culture came into being in 1937.

The second factor relates to a single act of literary censorship that ignited a sudden realignment of censorship procedures. The object was a romantic novel by the female author Maria Volpi Nannipieri (pen name "Mura"), *Sambadù amore negro* (Black Love, Sambadù) a love story between a white Italian widow and an educated black gentleman from Africa. The content in itself was not particularly unorthodox; by the end of the novel, both protagonists realize the extent of their "mistake" and separate. Unfortunately, the novel presented a rather provocative cover with the

photograph of a black man sensually embracing his white mistress. Once more the decision to act came from Mussolini himself, on whose desk the book had mysteriously landed. On 2 April 1934, a telegraphic circular was sent to all prefectures ordering them to inform all publishers that, with immediate effect, three copies of each new publication had to be submitted for the joint vetting of the local prefecture, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Press Office. The priority of the Press Office was once more underlined with the ruling that whenever prefectures found any dubious content in a book they were supposed to “immediately report this to the Press Office of the Head of Government and await instruction.”¹² The regime could still boast of having no pre-publication censorship in Italy because the submission of the three copies was simultaneous with the publication of the book. However, it is easy to imagine the drastic effect this had on the publishing industry. The element of internal censorship and extreme caution exerted by publishers and editors became even more pronounced. A number of major publishers began to submit their publications when still in proofs in order to avoid any production costs if the book were to be cut or banned. At the same time, prefectures became much more alert and proactive. Galeazzo Ciano ordered each major prefecture to add a press officer to its staff. The result was remarkable: whereas only three books were banned during the first three months of 1934, between April 1934 and August 1935 the total was to rise to a staggering 260.¹³

The Mura case is a perfect example of Mussolini's unpredictable (and mostly unplanned) intervention in book censorship. With the creation of the Ministry of Popular Culture the situation did not change. The various heads of the ministry that followed Ciano – who moved on to the Foreign Office in 1937 – all stooped to Mussolini's will. They continued to consult him whenever there was a difficult case. More importantly, Mussolini would still take the initiative because publishers often consulted him first, in order to both test the waters with regard to the publication of a certain book and avoid the red tape of the Ministry of Popular Culture. We have seen how the Vatican preferred to follow this route, although not always with success (depending on Mussolini's stance towards the Church at the given time). Father Tacchi Venturi is a name that constantly recurs in the documents and memoirs of those concerned with Fascist book censorship.¹⁴ It was a system fraught with internal contradictions and potential embarrassment for prefects and ministry officers, who risked being suddenly overruled by Il Duce's intervention.

With regard to the publishing industry, a restricted number of publishers benefited most from their close collaboration with Fascism. The

most prominent ones were Arnaldo Mondadori, whose support for the regime predated the March on Rome, and the Florentine publisher Attilio Vallecchi. They published numerous works that were publicly favoured and often directly financed by the regime. In exchange, they were often given commissions for lucrative contracts for schoolbooks and official publications, and allowed to publish popular books – particularly translations of foreign fiction, in the case of Mondadori – which were at the very limits of the censors' tolerance.

There is a sense that Mussolini never stopped preferring to settle censorship issues outside formal channels and explicit legislation. Publishers or authors were often just given a phone call, or asked to stop in at the ministry, outside of official and formal procedures. Exceptions were made according to the status of the author or the influence of the publisher. On the surface, the regime could then boast that Italy was still a country with a non-nationalized, independent publishing industry, and authors and publishers could hope to benefit from the many distinctions and exceptions.

A final acceleration to the organization of censorship in Fascist Italy was the result of the introduction of anti-Semitic legislation in the autumn of 1938. This was a racial policy single-handedly imposed by Mussolini, although historians are still divided as to whether his decision was mainly instrumental to his social policies or it was the final outcome of deeply felt racism.¹⁵ Since 1936, there had been a slow build-up towards an official stance of the regime. The publishing industry was put into motion in the summer of 1938 when Dino Alfieri, then minister of popular culture, set up a Commission for Book Reclamation. Its aim was to create a list of works that were contrary to the principles and values of Fascism. Representatives of the publishing industry were invited to participate, along with other bodies such as the Royal Academy of Italy, the Institute of Fascist Culture, the National Fascist Party, and the Fascist Confederation of Artists and Writers (this last represented by the popular culture minister-to-be, Alessandro Pavolini, and Futurist maestro Filippo Tommaso Marinetti). The workings of the committee continued throughout the last years of the regime, but it was the publishers themselves that were asked to do most of the “cleansing.” In September 1938 Alfieri ordered an internal census of Jews working in the publishing industry and started to ban novels written by foreign Jewish authors (particularly German and Austrian exiles). All publishing houses were then required to identify works by Jewish writers, translators, or editors published since World War I and to start self-purging their catalogues. The process reached a climax in March 1942 when, following a similar initiative

taken by the Nazis, the Ministry of Popular Culture produced a “List of Authors Unwelcome in Italy” whose work was to be totally banned. This totalled 893 names, of which about 800 were Jews. Prefectures were given the task of making sure all publishers would comply with it. This was the first time that the regime had gone public with regard to its anti-Semitic policies. Indeed, no actual legislation was ever produced officially banning Jews from publishing books.¹⁶

As far as Mussolini is concerned, it must be noted that, despite his role as an initiator of this “racial turn”, he was not particularly involved in anti-Semitic censorship on books. Perhaps shrewdly, he preferred to stay at the margins of the policy’s implementation, distancing himself from an issue that he knew to be contentious and also easily ascribed to Nazi derivation. Perhaps he need not have worried because very few Italians dared to raise their voices against such grave suppression of freedom. One exception was the Jewish publisher Angelo Fortunato Formiggini, who, when asked to change the name of his publishing house and hand it over to a non-Jew, tragically reacted on 28 November 1939 by throwing himself from the Ghirlandina tower of the Modena Cathedral. Jewish authors accepted their fate in silence, most accepting having their work entirely banned, some managing to publish under pseudonyms (such as the case of Natalia Ginzburg’s first novel, *La strada che va in città* – The Road to the City, 1942). Among Italian “gentile” intellectuals, it seems that only liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce had the courage to raise his voice. When the Laterza publishing house, to which he was closely connected, was ordered to withdraw twenty-two books from its catalogues in December 1939, Croce wrote a letter of protest that reached Mussolini’s office. Once more Il Duce showed his tendency for *ad hoc* solutions. Aware of the potential international embarrassment that the criticism of such a prestigious name might bring, Mussolini allowed most of the Laterza books to remain in print.¹⁷

Fortunately, the regime did not have long to live. The anti-Semitic legislation, however, remains a testimony to the racial barbarity into which Mussolini’s Fascism had descended. It is also an embarrassing example of the extent to which Italian society had become subservient to the dictatorship. Active anti-Fascism and the partisan movement grew quickly in the very last months of the war, mainly after the summer of 1943. When anti-Semitism was introduced, in 1938, Italians proved unable to react and rebel.

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank the British Academy for its support of the archival research needed to complete this essay, in particular at the Vatican Secret Archives and the archive of the Jesuit Order in Rome. Abbreviations used: ACS: Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome; ARSI: Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome; ASV: Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Rome.

² On the activities of the Press Office during the early years of the regime, see Canali.

³ The text of the circular can be found in Mussolini's *Opera Omnia*, vol. 22, p. 469.

⁴ It should be clarified that the Vatican's List of Prohibited Books (*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*) was not recognized by the Italian state. Indeed, there were cases in which prestigious Fascist figures had been put on it, such as the poet and novelist Gabriele D'Annunzio (in 1928) and the philosopher Giovanni Gentile (in 1934).

⁵ ASV, AES Italia, p. 794, f. 389 "Colloqui importanti Mussolini-Nunzio." Udienza 15 gennaio 1930.

⁶ Indeed, we know that in this case Mussolini had first ordered the book to be returned to the publisher so that the cover could be changed for a more acceptable one, with no mention of Alessandro Manzoni. It was only after the Vatican ambassador's pressure that he eventually agreed to a total ban. ACS, SPD, CO 209.651.

⁷ Prefect Leopoldo Zurlo is a good example of Mussolini's decision not to "fascistize" the Italian police forces. A learned and witty gentleman, Zurlo had never shown any allegiance to Fascism and, indeed, most of his career had taken place before Fascism's seizure of power. He had worked as secretary in Giovanni Giolitti's liberal government of 1912–14 and in Facta's and Bonomi's governments of 1921 and 1922.

⁸ Zurlo kept Mussolini's note and published it in his memoirs. Also in Bonsaver (68–69).

⁹ Other causes of tension related to the Vatican's hospitality and protection accorded to anti-Fascist Catholic leaders such as Alcide De Gasperi. For example, on 15 April 1931 Pius XI told the Italian ambassador (Cesare De Vecchi) in no uncertain terms that he had no intention to stoop to Mussolini's repeated demands to get rid of De Gasperi, who at the time was working at the Vatican as a librarian. ACS, AES Italia, f. 389, Udienza 15 aprile 1931.

¹⁰ Father Pietro Tacchi Venturi (S. Severino Marche 1861 – Rome 1956) was Secretary General of the Jesuit Order from 1914 to 1921, author of *Storia della Compagnia di Gesù* (3 vol., 1910, 1922, 1951) and editor of *Storia delle religioni* (2 vol., 1934, 1936). A close collaborator and a discreet diplomat working for the Vatican's Secretary of State, he also directed the section devoted to ecclesiastical affairs of the *Enciclopedia Italiana*. See Turi, *Il mecenate*. On 27 February 1928 there was a mysterious murder attempt at Tacchi Venturi. Documents related to the event are held at ARSI, Fondo 'P. Pietro Tacchi Venturi', 1017–I, f. 1010.

¹¹ The articles in *Osservatore romano* were published on 22 and 26 April 1934. A long article by another Catholic paper, *Avvenire d'Italia*, published on 7 March 1934, had already addressed the historical inaccuracies of Benelli's representation of Pope Sixtus IV. The Vatican archives reveal that a number of leaders of Catholic organizations were present at the Roman premiere of *Caterina Sforza*. Carlo Costantini, a militant Catholic that led a Diocese of Rome committee on public morality, was there armed with a copy of the Mondadori edition of the play (which contained the uncut version), accompanied by the chief editor of the Catholic paper *Avvenire d'Italia* and other editors from *Osservatore romano*. Costantini subsequently sent a long report to the Vatican's secretary of state. ASV, SS, Schedario, r. 324 (1935), F.3, f. 132268. For his militant effort, Costantini was rewarded with a medal

from Pius XI on 5 February 1931 for his “services to the cause of morality and Religion”; on 23 November 1932 he was also given a “special Apostolic Blessing” from the pope (ASV, SS., r. 324, 1935, f. 3). See also Bonsaver, 64–75.

¹² Copies of the telegram are in ACS, MI UC, In partenza, 2.41934. See also Bonsaver (95–103); Fabre (22–28).

¹³ It should be clarified, however, that almost all cases were related to books of dubious morality. More or less explicit anti-Fascism had already been uprooted from the Italian publishing industry well before 1934. See Bonsaver (95–114). Catholic publications themselves were not exempt. For example, the first volume of the *Manuale di Azione Cattolica* by Mons. Luigi Civardi was seized in February 1935 despite the fact that it had been originally published in 1924 and had already seen eight uncontroversial reprints. Once more, Father Tacchi Venturi was asked to intercede. ASV, AES, f. 646. Documentation at ASV seems to indicate that the Marietti publishing house, based in Turin and specializing in official Catholic publications, was recurrently targeted by Ciano’s Press Office, sometimes despite the *nulla osta* of the Turin Prefecture (ASV, AES, f. 615, f. 646).

¹⁴ Rome’s Historical Archive of the Jesuit order (ARSI) contains a substantial holding of Tacchi Venturi’s private papers. However, the vast majority consists of simple letters of recommendation that give a sense of the huge network of contacts centred around his person (he even gave some tuition on the Christian faith to the daughter of Margherita Sarfatti, Mussolini’s Jewish lover and close collaborator), but tell us little about his actual role as one of the Vatican’s major diplomats. More research on this subject is needed.

¹⁵ At the opposite ends of this spectrum of opinion lie Renzo De Felice’s *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Einaudi, 1961) and the more recent study by Giorgio Fabre, *Mussolini razzista* (Garzanti, 2005).

¹⁶ On this see Bonsaver (169–213) and Fabre.

¹⁷ Bonsaver (193–94). With regard to the position of the Vatican regarding Fascist anti-Semitic policies in culture, it seems that, like most Italians, the Holy See decided to accept the situation without manifesting particular enthusiasm or disgust towards it. The current state of historical research, however, is still severely hampered by the fact that the files at ASV related to the pontificate of Pius XII (which started in March 1939) remain unavailable to the public.

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