

# **A moral authority critiqued**

Rethinking the role of the Roman Catholic  
Church during the Holocaust

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## Introduction

"To the Church belongs the right always and everywhere to announce moral principles, including those pertaining to the social order, and to make judgments on any human affairs to the extent that they are required by the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls."<sup>1</sup>

"In the moral order she [the Church] bears a mission distinct from that of political authorities: the Church is concerned with the temporal aspects of the common good because they are ordered to the sovereign Good, our ultimate end."<sup>2</sup>

Theoretically, professing a doctrine of absolute morality which contains eternal commandments like "Thou shalt not kill", an institution like the Catholic Church would presumably have rebuked vigorously an event as terrible as the Holocaust, and must have done everything in its power to stop the genocide and aid its victims during the 1930s and 1940s. However, according to historians Daniel Goldhagen and Michael Phayer, this was not the case. Although the discussion about the Catholic Church's precise role during the Holocaust and whether or not it fulfilled its moral obligation lingers on, both authors conclude that the Catholic Church's obligation as a prominent non-state institution, and as a universal force propagating Christian values, was left unfulfilled.

Goldhagen argues that the largest Christian Church, with its powerful hierarchy, clergy and billions of adherents to Christian morality, refused to condemn the global outrage which was the Holocaust. He questions how an authoritative moral institution like the Catholic Church can choose not to take any actions that are explicitly based on its moral code; and especially during something so heinous as the Holocaust. How is it possible it did not immediately, forcefully, and unanimously condemn the mass extermination of millions of Jews? Goldhagen claims that its own inherent anti-Semitism was the main reason for the Church to deviate from its moral role. José Sánchez argues for a more economic or pragmatic explanation; that the Catholic Church acted primarily to protect its own clergy, schools and property to secure its own existence. According to Sánchez, where these institutional interests

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<sup>1</sup> Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 'Catechism of the Catholic Church. I. Moral Life and the Magisterium of the Church' (version May 7 2013), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P74.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P74.HTM) (November 4 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 'Catechism of the Catholic Church. III. The Social Doctrine of the Church' (version May 7 2013), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P8C.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P8C.HTM) (November 4 2003)

of the Catholic Church exist, concerns with these material needs severely disrupted the Church's role as a moral authority.<sup>3</sup>

My own explanation and the first part of my hypothesis is that the Catholic Church, as an institution that is involved in so much more than merely professing the Christian faith, has a double agenda. That is to say, as the largest single institution propagating the Christian faith, it is a spiritual 'world power', however, as an institution, this is supplemented with worldly, economic and political motivations that are prone to obstruct the execution of its role as moral arbitrator. Besides religion, the Catholic Church as an institution has many other interests. It strives to obtain as many followers as possible, (implicitly) aspiring to expand its authority; and tries to further the interests of the institution in a society. Therefore, the Catholic Church is more than just a spiritual institution. In a society where it exercises, or has the ability to exercise substantial power, it is nevertheless bound to other interests. Moreover, I would argue that the Catholic Church's moral obligation often succumbs to these institutional interests.

Throughout history, it is clear that the Catholic Church's aspirations have mainly been about expanding its scope. The great paradox of its history is that Christianity proscribes certain precepts, condemning the abuse of power, wealth, and sensual pleasures, whilst emphasizing humility and equality of men before God; yet this basic message of Christianity is constantly threatened by the very institution founded to spread this message amongst its followers.<sup>4</sup> It is my hypothesis that a grave discrepancy exists between the Catholic Christian religious doctrine, and the interests of the institution that is supposed to promulgate this doctrine and profess a moral role in society based upon this doctrine.

Whilst reading a large number of books that can be regarded as standard works on genocide in general and the Holocaust in particular, it came to my attention that almost none of the authors of the books I will discuss on the following pages, explicitly addressed the role of the Catholic Church. I expected that when researching a subject like genocide, it is not extraneous, and even necessary for historians to consider the role of such a socially relevant institution as the Church. What role does the Church have in the realization of genocide? Does it speak up for the victims or support the perpetrators? Does it privately disapprove, or publicly denounce mass murder? Questions like these strike me as particularly urgent. After all, genocides take place in the context of a society either persecuted or complicit, and the

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<sup>3</sup> José M. Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust. Understanding the controversy* (Washington 2002) 91.

<sup>4</sup> Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide* (New York 1999) 19.

Church is a large and important part of this society. More often than not, the Church has a substantial influence on a broad cross section of society; the same people that are supporting or opposing genocide, or are simply indifferent to it. These attitudes are of crucial importance to the course genocidal events take.<sup>5</sup> Assuming that both complicity and protest are to some extent choices, the Church and its clergy must be able to influence these choices. Churches "are intrinsically involved in the daily lives of people on a local level"<sup>6</sup>, influencing their moral habits and world view. Moreover, since the Church is the institution "claiming the monopoly of moral sanctions, the acts of its leaders should be sources of public definition of the situation and emergent norms in time of crisis."<sup>7</sup>

"Mass harm", as Jennifer Balint calls it, is amongst other things enabled by the participation or collaboration by state and non-state institutions.<sup>8</sup> These institutions, and especially an institution that claims moral authority like the Church, have an obligation to protect civil society. In addition, both consent or opposition to state policy by non-state institutions can be crucial in the perpetration of state-led crimes like genocide. Balint argues that genocidal state policy must resonate with significant institutions and sections of the population in order to be systematically and successfully applied.<sup>9</sup> Balint mentions the example of apartheid when discussing the role a Church can have in a genocidal society. The report of the Truth and Reconciliation commission of South Africa states that "the failure by religious communities to give adequate expression to the ethical teaching of their respective traditions, all of which stand in direct contradiction to apartheid, contributed to the climate in which apartheid was able to survive. Religious communities need to accept moral and religious culpability for their failure as institutions to resist the impact of apartheid on the nation with sufficient rigor."<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, there are important works on genocide that do not say anything about the role of the Church. René Provost and Payam Akhavan's *Confronting Genocide*<sup>11</sup>, Christiaan Gerlach's *Extremely violent societies: mass violence in the 20th century world*<sup>12</sup>, *Genocide*,

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<sup>5</sup> Nico Vorster, 'Preventing genocide: the role of the church', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 59 (2006) 375-394, 384.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, 387.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Fein, *Accounting for genocide* (New York 1979) 46.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Balint, *Genocide, State Crime, and the Law* (Abingdon 2012) 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 166-168.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 163.

<sup>11</sup> R. Provost and P. Akhavan (ed.), *Confronting Genocide* (New York 2011)

<sup>12</sup> Christian Gerlach, *Extremely violent societies: mass violence in the 20th century world* (New York 2010)

*war crimes & the West. History and complicity* by Adam Jones<sup>13</sup>, Christopher Powell's *Barbaric civilization. A critical sociology of genocide*<sup>14</sup> ignore the role of Churches. Nor does Donald Bloxham's book *Political violence in 20th century Europe*<sup>15</sup> say anything concerning the role of the Church in genocide.

The book *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide studies*, edited by Donald Bloxham<sup>16</sup>, starts out with defining and describing the concept of Genocide. Raphael Lemkin's conception of genocide is mentioned, summing up several techniques used by the Nazis to undertake genocide.<sup>17</sup> One of these techniques is the disturbance of the religious life of the occupied people, itself an indication of the importance of religion in a society and its potential role in obstructing genocide. In addition, moral techniques are mentioned, aiming to "weaken the spiritual resistance" of the occupied group, leading individuals away from a higher morality which might encompass a wider society.<sup>18</sup> Both these techniques to facilitate the Nazi extermination project are situated within the sphere of influence of the Church; religion and morality. It is therefore remarkable that no mention is made of the Church itself. In the second part of the book, Genocide is approached from an interdisciplinary method: sociological, anthropological and psychological perspectives are considered. Several factors influencing the accomplishment of genocide are mentioned: the state or regime, political leaders, individual psychology, group behaviour and modernity. Nevertheless, the Church remains out of the picture.

Even books like *Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide: Identity and moral choice* by Kirsten Monroe<sup>19</sup> and *Genocide: a normative account* by Larry May<sup>20</sup>, that seem to put an extra emphasis on the moral side of genocide, do not mention the conduct of the Church. Although May discusses the feeling of unity within a group or nation, or alternately a "them and us" mentality, he disregards the influence of the Church on this concept of exclusion and inclusion in a nation. When looking at the primary inciters of genocide, May rightly ascribes an important role to the media yet never mentions the influence a Church could have on people's worldview.<sup>21</sup> In the remainder of the book, May describes intentions and motivations

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<sup>13</sup> Adam Jones, *Genocide, war crimes & the West. History and complicity* (London 2002)

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Powell, *Barbaric civilization. A critical sociology of genocide* (Montreal 2011)

<sup>15</sup> Donald Bloxham, *Political violence in 20th century Europe* (Cambridge 2011)

<sup>16</sup> Donald Bloxham and A.D. Moses (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide studies* (Oxford 2010)

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Kirsten Monroe, *Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide: Identity and moral choice* (Princeton 2011)

<sup>20</sup> Larry May, *Genocide: a normative account* (Cambridge 2010)

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, 18-19.

for genocide and he discusses responsibility of institutions and people. The role of the Church is omitted.

In *Genocide: a comprehensive introduction*<sup>22</sup>, Adam Jones proceeds by defining the term Genocide, he discusses several case studies and concludes the book with the international response to genocide. Jones mentions the role of imperialism, war and social revolution in the instigation of genocide. The book also views genocide through the lens of the social sciences. The main psychological factors that could predispose an individual or a group to cooperate in genocide are summed up: narcissism, greed, fear and humiliation. Fear of a social group might result from a perception that the target group is an economic or political threat, whilst both greed and narcissism contradict the Christian doctrine directly. Arguably both these psychological states could be influenced by the Church, yet the Church's role is not noted here. Jones also thinks that the defining of the 'self' and the 'we' against the 'other' is of fundamental importance.<sup>23</sup> Such sentiments of unity are likely to be affected by the influence of a moral institution like the Church, yet there is no mention of it. With regard to the Holocaust in particular, anti-Semitic ideas are referred to as an important influence on the perpetrators of genocide.<sup>24</sup> However, one of the most important factors in the shaping of popular attitude, the Church, is not mentioned. In the book, Jones acknowledges that religion can prevent genocide; that religion is a factor that can influence both rescuers and perpetrators; and that religion can be exclusive. Yet there is no mention of the institution representing this religion.<sup>25</sup>

I did find a number of books containing some information on the role of the Church, however scant. In *The Historiography of genocide*, edited by Dan Stone<sup>26</sup>, there was one chapter that had the potential to elaborate on the role of the Church: chapter 7 on Religion and Genocide. However, although focusing on religion, there is barely any mention of the institution in which the religion was imbedded: the Church. Stating that the literature on the role of the Christian churches in the Holocaust is "voluminous", almost all books cited exclusively address Germany.<sup>27</sup>

In his book *The dark side of democracy*, Michael Mann only discusses the role of Pope Pius XII and the Vatican, shortly mentioning that "according to critics, the role of the Catholic

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<sup>22</sup> Adam Jones, *Genocide: a comprehensive introduction* (New York 2010)

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 262.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 271.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 400.

<sup>26</sup> Dan Stone, *The Historiography of genocide* (London 2010)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 195.

Church was one of occasional protest to the Nazi regime".<sup>28</sup> It is striking that Ronald Berger in his book *The Holocaust, Religion and the politics of collective memory*, barely pays any attention to the role of the Church in the Holocaust, and the information that is given solely relates to the role of the Popes and the Vatican.<sup>29</sup>

In his book *Worse than war. Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity*, Daniel Goldhagen confines his analyses of the role of the Church to the role of the Vatican, judging that the Catholic Church was "openly behind the general eliminationist program" of Nazi Germany.<sup>30</sup> He attributes this attitude to the inherent anti-Semitism of the Catholic Church.<sup>31</sup> Saul Friedländer exclusively focuses on Pius XII and his predecessor Pius XI in *The years of extermination*.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, if the authors bring up the subject of the role of the Church in genocides at all, they all too often tend to focus on the role of the Pope and the Vatican. What is even more striking is that there seems to be little regard for formulating a more extensive theory on Catholic Churches and their role in genocides in general.

I have managed to find three books on genocide that do tend to elaborate a bit on the subject of the Church and its role in genocides. The first is by Jennifer Balint, *Genocide, State Crime, and the Law*. Although the book mainly aims at discussing problems of institutional guilt in law and accountability, in chapter 4 she examines accountability and responsibility of institutions during genocide, and mentions the Church as one of the non-state institutions that bears responsibility as an institution. Balint argues that state and non-state institutions have a duty to protect civil society: 'civic liability'. Whilst regarding institutions like the Church as 'less core institutions' and thus less active in the perpetration of (state) crime, she does not overlook their potentially influential role.<sup>33</sup> Jacques Semelin is the first author who presents some ideas on the Church's moral role or responsibility during genocides, and how it came to fail to act as a moral institution. However, after shortly presenting this idea in his book *Purify and Destroy: the political uses of Massacre and genocide*, he only examines three different cases (Germany, Rwanda and Serbia) and, after hardly any elaboration, concludes by accounting the Church's role to the "quasi-institutional collaboration between the religious

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Mann, *The dark side of democracy* (Cambridge 2005) 241.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Berger, *The Holocaust, Religion and the politics of collective memory* (New Jersey 2012) 117-118.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Worse than war. Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York 2009) 196.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Saul Friedländer, *The years of extermination* (New York 2007) 73.

<sup>33</sup> Balint, *Genocide, State Crime, and the Law*, 166.



and the political".<sup>34</sup> In *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yehuda Bauer acknowledges that there is no such thing like *the* Catholic Church: a distinction should be made between the policy of the Vatican and the attitude of lower clergy and ordinary believers. However, instead of pursuing this idea further, he simply concludes that "The priests ranged from martyrs to murderers, just as all the rest of the people did."<sup>35</sup>

It seems to me that, ultimately, there are two problems in the historiography of genocides in general and the Holocaust in particular. First of all, it seems that in none of these books is there a clear theory on Churches and their role in genocide; most of the authors that allot some attention to this subject cease to elaborate on the role of the Church, or tend to restrict the information to the Pope and the Vatican. This is the second problem that presents itself: in contemporary literature on the Catholic Church and the Holocaust there is a general trend to focus on the Pope and the Vatican. However, *the* Catholic Church is not easily summed up by exclusively looking at the role of the head of this Church. He may represent it on a high level, yet he cannot speak for the entire institution or for its entire clergy.

There is a multitude of books that explicitly deal with the Pope and the Vatican during the Holocaust. To name a few: *Pius XII, the Holocaust and the revisionists: essays* by Patrick J. Gallo<sup>36</sup>, *Hitler, the war, and the pope* by Ronald J. Rychlak<sup>37</sup>, *Popes and politics: reform, resentment, and the Holocaust* by Justus George Lawler<sup>38</sup>, *Pius XII and the Holocaust: understanding the controversy* by José M. Sánchez<sup>39</sup>, *The Vatican and the Holocaust: the Catholic Church and the Jews during the Nazi era* by Randolph L. Braham<sup>40</sup>, *Papal sin: structures of deceit* by Garry Wills<sup>41</sup>, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* by John Cornwell.<sup>42</sup> And this list is far from complete. Yet there are far fewer books in which the authors *claim to* look at the role of the whole Catholic Church, including its lower clergy and local, national churches, instead of the one, Catholic state and its leader. I deliberately stated "claim to", because of the few books available on the subject, there are already two of them that contend to focus on the entire Catholic Church, but predominantly describe the role of the Pope and his cardinals. Daniel Goldhagen is one of them, in his book *A moral reckoning: the*

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: the political uses of Massacre and genocide* (New York 2009) 81.

<sup>35</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven 2002) 75.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick J. Gallo (ed.), *Pius XII, the Holocaust and the revisionists: essays* (Jefferson 2006)

<sup>37</sup> Ronald J. Rychlak, *Hitler, the war, and the pope* (Huntington 2010)

<sup>38</sup> Justus G. Lawler, *Popes and politics: reform, resentment, and the Holocaust* (New York 2004)

<sup>39</sup> José M. Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust. Understanding the controversy* (Washington 2002)

<sup>40</sup> Randolph L. Braham, *The Vatican and the Holocaust: the Catholic Church and the Jews during the Nazi era.* (New York 2000)

<sup>41</sup> Garry Wills, *Papal sin: structures of deceit* (New York 2001)

<sup>42</sup> John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York 2000)

*role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and its unfulfilled duty of repair* he explicitly rejects the focus on the Pope and the Vatican, while at the same time dealing almost exclusively with the role of Pius XII.<sup>43</sup> His conclusions on the role of the Church are therefore misleading, as they are based on the papal attitude. Although less obvious than Goldhagen, Michael Phayer also tends to emphasize the role of the Pope. In his book *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, Phayer describes the cases of individual states and their churches more elaborate than Goldhagen, only to generalize again by discussing the reaction of the Pope and Vatican on the individual case.<sup>44</sup>

I found only one book that significantly contributes to the research on the role of the Catholic churches during the Holocaust. But although the book *Religion under siege; Vol. I: The Roman Catholic church in occupied Europe (1939-1950)*<sup>45</sup>, edited by Lieve Gevers, focuses on the role of local Catholic Churches instead of the Pope and the Vatican, it does not exclusively look at the local Church's reaction to the persecution of the Jews, and mainly focuses on the Church under the Nazi occupation in more general terms and with regard to the German policy towards the Church. In addition, although the individual case studies are very interesting and detailed, it lacks an overarching conclusion.

If I would regard my hypothesis to be complete by simply stating that the Catholic Church deviates from its role as a moral institution because of its institutional interests, I would make the same mistake as many other authors: I would generalize and at the same time undermine the fact that there is no such thing as *the* Catholic Church. Although many would regard the Pope – being head of the Catholic Church – to represent the Church as such, the local variety in churches, church leaders and clergy is so great, that one man could never speak on behalf of all of them. Nor is it plausible that the Pope is able to determine the policy of every single one of these local Catholic Churches or communities spread all over the world. Therefore, the second part of my hypothesis is that a nuance must be made when speaking of *the* Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is not the Pope, not the Vatican, not one local Church or a priest. So when looking at the first part of my hypothesis – the idea that institutional interests are an important motivation for the actions or non-actions of the Catholic Church – I will also make a distinction between the Pope and the Vatican on the one hand; and local churches and their clergy on the other, distinguishing between lower clergy and local hierarchy as well.

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel J. Goldhagen, *A moral reckoning: the role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and its unfulfilled duty of repair* (New York 2003)

<sup>44</sup> Michael Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington 2000)

<sup>45</sup> Lieve Gevers (ed.), *Religion under siege ; Vol. I: The Roman Catholic Church in occupied Europe (1939-1950)* (Leuven 2007)

In sum, I would like to argue that, despite the fact that the Catholic Church is a moral institution, propagating the Christian doctrine and its teachings, values and morals, its interests as an institution make that the Catholic Church did not act exclusively as a moral authority during the Holocaust. Within this supposition a nuance is in order when speaking of *the* Catholic Church; one has to consider both the role of the Pope and the Vatican, as well as that of local hierarchy and lower clergy.

The reason to choose to examine the role of the Catholic Church during the Holocaust, and not the Protestant or Orthodox or any other Church, is mainly because of the extended historiographical discussion on the role of the Catholic Church in society throughout history. In addition, the Catholic Church is the world's largest Christian Church, yet appears to be ruled by just one man: the Pope. A man that through his function ensures that Catholicism is not just a Christian faith within national boundaries, but is a supranational power, overriding frontiers. A fact that, more than in the case of any other Church, calls for a nuance when speaking of *the* Catholic Church.

In an attempt to approach things from a different angle, I have decided to start from a theory instead of a case study. I intend to test my theory, or, hypothesis, by means of examining two case studies. I will look at two different countries occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II, and consider the reactions of local Catholic churches on the persecution of the Jews during the 1930's and 1940's, whilst making a distinction between lower clergy and the country's Catholic hierarchy. In addition, I will examine the reaction of the Pope and the Vatican on some of the key moments during the Jewish persecution by Nazi Germany, throughout Europe. When describing these reactions of both local Catholic clergy and the attitude of the Pope and his Cardinals, I will try to unravel what motivated these reactions and the role the clergy, hierarchy and Pope played during the Holocaust.

The countries chosen to serve as case studies to test my hypothesis are countries where the Catholic Church was (and is) an important societal force and of great influence on people's mind-set. This is important, because I believe that the responsibility to react, and to react in a moral way becomes even greater when a Church as such is firmly established in a particular society. The Catholic Church in the country in question must have a public responsibility; not just as any church, but as the largest church with the most extensive flock in the country. So, the case studies are chosen based on a Catholic majority and therefore a considerable sphere of influence of the Catholic Church through its hierarchy and clergy. I chose Poland (the Second Polish Republic) and Belgium as my two Catholic case studies. In

Poland, almost 65 per cent was Roman Catholic in 1931<sup>46</sup> and in interwar Belgium a staggering 98 per cent was baptized Roman Catholic.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the precondition of Catholic predominance, my choice is based on the differences between the two countries: whereas in Poland, because of its proximity to and partial occupation by the Soviets, the threat of communism must have been of significant additional influence on the population, in Belgium, this threat was considerably less acute. In addition, testing my theory on countries representing both Western and Eastern Europe, will contribute to the scope of my theory.

In the first chapter, I will consider the position of Pope Pius XI and Pius XII and the Vatican during the preparation and execution of the Holocaust. I will look into the relations between Nazi Germany and the Vatican and I will try to determine what motivated the papal reaction to the Holocaust. Was it Pius XII's personal antagonism against the Jews, as Goldhagen argues, or were there other reasons for the Papal stance towards the persecution? This chapter will serve as a general overview of the role of the Popes and the Vatican, and is needed to compare the supranational with the national or local level of my two case studies.

The last two chapters will consider the role of the Polish and Belgian Catholic Clergy during the Holocaust. For each case study, I will start with outlining the interwar situation: describing the Jewish community, the position of the Catholic Church in the society in question, the degree of anti-Semitism in the country in general and within the local Catholic Church in particular. In the second part of the chapter, I will look into the German occupation of the country: the anti-Jewish policy, the German policy towards the Church, the reaction of the people in general to the Holocaust and that of the Catholic Church in particular, distinguishing papal reaction, the reaction of the country's Catholic hierarchy and the lower clergy. I will examine what motivated the local clergy's actions regarding the exclusion, psychological violence towards and finally the deportation of the Jews. If possible, I will briefly compare their actions and motivations to that of the Pope and the Vatican's with regard to the specific country

In the conclusion, I will compare the case studies to examine both differences and similarities when we look at the situation of both interwar and occupied Belgium and Poland. In addition to the analyses of the differences between the local hierarchy and lower clergy within one country, I will also discuss the differences between Polish and Belgian Catholic leadership and lower clergy. Next, I will discuss the differences between the Pope and the

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<sup>46</sup> P. S. Shoup, *The East European and Soviet data handbook. Political, social and developmental indicators 1945-1975* (New York 1981) 162.

<sup>47</sup> Werner Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium. 1940-1944* (New York 1993) 10.

local Catholic Churches; looking into the differences and similarities between the Churches in the case studies and the Papal reaction. I will determine whether or to what extent my hypothesis has proved to be correct, looking at what laid at the heart of these different reactions: institutional or moral motivations; and I will determine whether a nuance is indeed in order when analysing the attitude of *the* Catholic Church during the Holocaust.

## Chapter 1

### **The Pope and the Vatican**

Ever since Rolf Hochhuth's play *Der stellvertreter (The Deputy)* in 1963 questioned the indisputability of the positive role of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust, the historical debate on this topic has been on-going. What was the position of Pope Pius XI and Pius XII and the Vatican during the preparation and execution of the Holocaust? In this chapter, I will present a general overview of the reactions of the Popes and their administration to the implementation of Nazi policy in Germany and several states occupied by Germany. The focus will lie on the relations between Germany and the Holy See, and the reactions by the Pope and his cardinals will mainly be those on German policy. I will also look at some of the Nazi occupied states and Nazi puppet regimes, or allies who were guilty of persecuting Jews as well. When considering the specific reactions to, and relations with, individual states, the papal delegates called 'Nuncios' acted on behalf of the Pope, and therefore it will be prescient to examine their policy in these countries as well. Whilst considering the muted responses of the Holy See to the segregation, persecution and finally mass extermination of the European Jews, I will mainly focus on trying to reveal what motivations laid behind the choices made by the Popes and the Vatican between 1933 and 1945. I will test my hypothesis that despite the fact that the Catholic Church is a moral authority, designed to propagate Christian values, its institutional interests made the Catholic Church deviate from its moral role in the years prior to and during the Holocaust.

#### ***The Concordat***

Signing concordats with secular states to protect the rights or position of the Catholic Church and its followers in that country was standard Vatican policy by the 1930s. In general, such a concordat entailed the assurance of the continued existence of Catholic schools; the teaching of the Catholic religion in state schools; state subsidies for Catholic schools; the maintenance of the rights and privileges of the clergy, and the guarantee that the Catholic Church kept its traditional privileges like the sacrament of marriage. These conditions were often traded for a substantial influence of the state (or even the right to veto) in the appointment of higher Catholic clergy.<sup>48</sup>

On July 20 1933, Eugenio Pacelli, the Cardinal Secretary of State, on behalf of Pope Pius XI, and Vice Chancellor Franz von Papen, on behalf of President Paul von Hindenburg,

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<sup>48</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 83.

signed a Concordat between the Vatican and Germany. Although Pacelli was by appearance simply Pius XI's representative, in reality the Secretary of State was the mastermind behind the whole agreement – as he continued to be during the last years of Pius XI's life – between the Vatican and Germany. The main reason for the Vatican to sign this Concordat was the protection of German Catholics and the German Catholic Church against the volatile political situation in the country, and to have a legal fundament to protest against maltreatment of these Catholics and the Catholic Church.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the Vatican demanded that the Concordat would ensure that the rights of the Catholic Church and that its freedom was preserved, with a special emphasis on Catholic religious education and Catholic schools and associations (of a non-political nature).<sup>50</sup> Cardinal Pacelli and Pius XI regarded the Concordat as a means through which Hitler would be bound to the will of the Catholic Church, as the Vatican would be able to appeal to the agreement if –or rather, when – Hitler would deviate from the Concordat.<sup>51</sup>

The existence and support of Catholic schools was indeed agreed to. The Concordat also guaranteed that the religious instruction in state schools would be Catholic; that Catholic confessional schools were preserved and additional schools opened; and that state subsidies to the Catholic Church would continue.<sup>52</sup> The German Catholic Church would be independent and all German Catholics would be allowed to practice their religion. The Holy See would be free to communicate with the German bishops, and these bishops were on their turn free to communicate with their congregation. Catholic clergy would also maintain their old privileges, like not having to report for jury duty and other comparable civil obligations.<sup>53</sup>

These rights of the German Catholic Church were in accordance with the rights of any other "publicly recognized corporation".<sup>54</sup> However, this was all in accordance with German civil law, and since the German government was prone to subjugate the Catholic Church, like any other power in the German state that might interfere with the National Socialist totalitarian rule, this regulation might turn out to be just a token gesture to the Catholic Church.<sup>55</sup> The protection of the rights of the Catholic organizations in Germany was also restricted to a certain extent, as only purely "religious, cultural, and charitable" organizations would receive

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<sup>49</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Gerard Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler* (New York 2010) 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 74.

<sup>52</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 85.

<sup>53</sup> Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (London 1964) 79-80.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, 81.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 81.

the asserted protection. Catholic organizations were not allowed to have any political aspirations whatsoever.<sup>56</sup> Yet by July 18, two days before the Concordat was signed, there still was no concrete list containing the Catholic organizations that were to receive state protection. Nevertheless, the Holy See decided to agree that this specification of which organizations would be protected and which would not would be 'of further notice'. The Concordat was thus signed July 20, 1933, without any clear settlement regarding the protected organizations.<sup>57</sup>

This came at a high price. According to Gerard Noel, for Hitler the Concordat was a way of silencing the powerful Catholic bishops of Germany. This was accomplished through the restriction of political activity of the German Catholic Church.<sup>58</sup> By "depoliticizing" the German Catholic Clergy, Hitler rid himself of a great amount of potential opposition to his regime, abolishing the Catholic Centre Party, and restricting other Catholic political activity. Although the German Catholic Centre Party did not pose a threat to Hitler's National Socialist Party, Hitler did acknowledge that the very well organized German Catholic Church and its 23 million German followers posed a potential threat. It should be added that Pius XI as well as Pacelli did not approve of Catholic political parties or political activity by Catholic clergy in general.<sup>59</sup> With the signing of the Concordat, the Catholic clergy was removed from the political arena. The Nazi government could veto the German bishops elected by the Church, and so prevent potential opponents from acquiring political leverage through a high clerical position. The regular Catholic clergy and the Catholic hierarchy were required to pledge an oath of loyalty to the government and had to persuade their flock to do the same.<sup>60</sup>

According to Gerard Noel, Hitler's additional advantage from the Concordat was that he would implicitly receive the Vatican's recognition of Nazi Germany as an approved state and regime, enlarging Hitler's prestige worldwide. This endorsement by the highest Catholic authority would not only have the potential to sooth internal opposition from German Catholics, whether lay or clergy, but could also have consequences for the international Catholic opinion and their acceptance of Hitler and his National Socialist state.<sup>61</sup> As National Socialism was generally regarded to be anti-Christian, the Concordat could potentially detract

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<sup>56</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 84.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 79.

<sup>58</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 67.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 70.

<sup>60</sup> John F. Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945* (New York 1980) 103.

<sup>61</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 70.



from this reputation and create a less hostile attitude of both Christians in general and Catholics in particular towards National Socialism.<sup>62</sup>

Pacelli denied Hitler's suggestion that by negotiating with him and signing the Concordat, the Vatican implicitly recognized the National Socialist state. The Secretary of State argued that the accord was only agreed upon to make sure the German state would enforce the Catholic Canon Law.<sup>63</sup> Despite this defence of intentions, Guenter Lewy regards it hardly questionable that the Concordat was internationally interpreted as a rapprochement by the leading authority of the Catholic Church.

With the Concordat, Hitler focused on the effects it had on both domestic as well as international relations, all the while having no intention whatsoever to abide the extended rights of the German Catholic Church.<sup>64</sup>

Remarkably enough, in February 1933 Germany's Apostolic Nuncio Cesare Orsenigo had already communicated to the Vatican that the Nazi regime was to be considered objectionable. However, the motive to go ahead with the Concordat anyway was exactly how Orsenigo stated it: that it was not a good idea to openly condemn the regime "in the name of religion", as he feared this might lead to another *Kulturkampf*.<sup>65</sup> This memory of the fervently anti-Catholic Weimar Republic was still fresh in the minds of Pacelli and Pius XI. In comparison, the conservative Nazi government and its policy towards the German Catholic Church seemed to be quite the improvement, rejecting liberalism and modernism.<sup>67</sup> According to Guenter Lewy "she [the Vatican] was prepared to sign a concordat with whoever promised to enhance and safeguard essential interests like state subsidies to the Church and the confessional schools."<sup>68</sup> A concordat that was said to have been signed 'in the name of religion', turned out to be beneficial only to the Church as an institution, paradoxically entailing that it was not salutary from a doctrinal viewpoint.

### ***The communist threat***

As far as Hitler received the benefit of the doubt, according to Peter Godman, Saul

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<sup>62</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 78.

<sup>63</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 79.

<sup>65</sup> The German policies enacted from 1871 to 1878, in relation to secularity and the curtailment of the influence and position of the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican. Inside the Secret Archives that Reveal the New Story of the Nazis and the Church* (New York 2004) 31.

<sup>67</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 84.

<sup>68</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 92.

Friedländer, Michael Phayer, John Cornwell and Carol Rittner, this was due to the threat of communism. According to Godman, Orsenigo was under the impression that the Catholic Church could never on its own, without any 'help' from Nazi Germany, face her most urgent threats: liberalism, socialism and bolshevism.<sup>69</sup> In the early 1930's, besides the Pope himself, Hitler was the only leader openly condemning Bolshevism.<sup>70</sup>

It is not surprising that Pacelli and Pius XI feared communism, or Bolshevism, as the communists of the 1917 revolution proved to be atheistic and very hostile towards all religions. The 1.5 million Catholics in Russia were violently suppressed and teaching children that there was such thing as a God was considered a crime. In Mexico and in Spain as well, there were comparable communist regimes in power, persecuting clergy and obstructing the rights and interests of the Catholic Church. Russia, Spain and Mexico formed the "Red Triangle" and were often regarded as the embodiment of the biggest possible threat to Catholicism in the literature, jeopardizing – in the eyes of the Vatican – the very existence of the Catholic Church. Expecting that the communist ideology would also gain more ground in Germany in the early 1930s, the Holy See feared that it would gradually spread through the whole of Europe; that countries would one by one fall prey to communism. Fascism was regarded to be the most liable force to stop this trend in Germany as well as worldwide. This fear of communism combined with rejection of social democracy – both detrimental for the interests of the Catholic Church – made fascist parties to be the most obvious ally in the Pope's battle against this godless ideology.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Early anti-Jewish policy***

In line with this strategic policy is the reaction by the Vatican to the early anti-Jewish policy by Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Although the measures against the German Jews were noticed by 1933, Orsenigo supposedly decided it was 'bad timing' to protest against them, as comparable actions might be taken against German Catholics. Despite the earlier initiative of Pius XI to oppose the situation in Germany, he and Pacelli decided not to and to observe Orsenigo's advice instead. With this decision the Holy See seemed to choose to deviate from its moral responsibility to condemn secular policy that conflicted with Christian doctrine, and instead went down the path of opportunism focusing on the interests of the institution of the Church. When Edith Stein, a German Roman Catholic philosopher and nun, wrote a letter to

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<sup>69</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 32.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 61-62.

the Pontiff in 1933, informing him about the inherent danger in the anti-Jewish policy, and mentioning that this might have consequences for the fate of the German Catholics in the long run; Peter Godman writes that Pacelli's response appears to be concerned merely with the fate of the Catholics and the Catholic Church in Germany.<sup>72</sup>

In April 1933 Jewish enterprises were boycotted throughout Germany; Jewish employees were excluded from the German businesses; and Jews were no longer permitted to teach, work in healthcare or fill legal positions. Yet according to Gerard Noel, this did not lead to any response from the Vatican.<sup>73</sup> Whilst Nazi Germany's violation of human rights continued throughout the thirties, the Pope failed to take a stand, except when it concerned the rights or the position of the German Catholic Church. It seemed that the Vatican's priority was to maintain the position of its own institution, at any cost.<sup>74</sup>

In 1934, Pacelli was inclined to protest the sterilization policy the Nazis had introduced, yet once again the Vatican abstained from impairing the German government. The plan was to protest by means of a scholarly book, instead of providing the pulpits with a clear statement against the measures. In the end, no disapproval was expressed at all.<sup>75</sup>

During 1934 and 1935 the Vatican ordered Jesuits to do extended research on the National Socialist doctrine. This resulted in a list enumerating all the ideas that were inconsistent with the Christian doctrine. The most important was the idea of the 'unity of mankind', which was denied by the Nazis as they made distinctions based on race. After all, "to emphasize the differences between races, rather than their points in common, was to deny all peoples' subjection to divine providence and to negate God's desire for their salvation and eternal happiness."<sup>76</sup> However, this problem overshadowed the Jewish question, which they eventually failed to mention explicitly. Godman states that the situation of the Jews was only dealt with when it touched on Catholic life directly.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the research turned out to be observational, rather than advice regarding the actions that should be taken accordingly. It was a presentation of ideas, saying something about the sentiment present in the Vatican, yet adding nothing to the outward policy.<sup>78</sup>

Even when, in June 1934, The Night of the Long Knives saw the leader of Catholic Action, Erich Klausener, and several other Catholic laymen murdered, there was no reaction

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<sup>72</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 33-35

<sup>73</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 69.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, 75.

<sup>75</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 38.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, 87-88.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, 67.

from the Vatican. Following its policy of diplomatic prudence, the Vatican chose not to act in response to these and similar excesses. Only when things were contradicting the Concordat, the Holy See responded; and when the Vatican did not anticipate a certain situation, Pacelli took a step back. This inaction continued to be defended by the Vatican's caution that protesting would worsen the situation for the German bishops. Both Pius XI and Pacelli appeared to have been calculative and opportunist in their reactions.<sup>79</sup>

The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 secured that Jews could not have German citizenship, and that they were not allowed to marry non-Jews. The German Nuncio was well aware of the plans for this legislation and communicated them to Pacelli. Pacelli, on his turn, did not disclose this information to the Pope and refused to act upon it. This is said to have been typical for Pacelli, who kept clinging to the Concordat.<sup>80</sup>

According to Peter Godman, the list drafted by the Jesuits was used to compose a document in 1936 that would denounce both Nazism and fascism, not only as opposed to the Catholic Church and its flock, but as being against the whole of humanity based on Christian morals and basic human rights. Even the Semitic race was explicitly mentioned.<sup>81</sup> Yet despite the existence of such a document, Pacelli chose to maintain a diplomatic posture and continued to base his decisions on the Concordat. He regarded this 1933 agreement as the only solid ground the Vatican had to negotiate, infringing it in any way was considered too risky, and therefore publicly, virtually nothing was said to the detriment of the Nazis. The Nazis on their turn had much less difficulty violating the Concordat; the persecution of Catholics in Germany was on-going. Every time Pacelli asked Hitler for an explanation for the ill-treatment of German Catholics, Hitler claimed that these anti-Catholic policies were conducted by his party members without his consent; and Pacelli chose to believe him. In addition, Pacelli had to draw a line between becoming entangled in purely German domestic politics and speaking out on behalf of the German Catholic Church.<sup>82</sup>

In 1936 Pacelli was still mediating and the involvement of Catholics in the Spanish Civil War with attending anti-clerical excesses made Pius XI even more resolute to focus all his attention on the communist threat again. According to Godman, the condemnation of National Socialism or Nazi Germany is taken out of the equation the second the communist

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<sup>79</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 74-76.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, 80-82.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, 104.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, 113.

menace becomes more acute. The situation of the German Catholic Church was cause for concern, but more so was the recurring threat of Bolshevism.<sup>83</sup>

### *Papal Encyclicals*

The first substantial reaction to Nazi atrocities was the 1937 encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (*With Burning Concern*). The Holy See had communicated its protest on the maltreatment of the German Catholic Clergy and other violations of the Concordat, and Pius XI had threatened with public complaint several times, yet Pacelli had always managed to prevent this in order to preserve the relations between Nazi Germany and the Vatican. However, in 1937 it finally came to a public disapprobation of the German policy. *Mit Brennender Sorge* was directed against the infringement of the Concordat: the rights of the German Catholic Church and its clergy, but it also condemned the Nazi racist ideology to the extent that it was contrary to the Christian doctrine.<sup>84</sup> The encyclical rejected Nazism's racial laws that were opposite to the Christian 'unity of mankind'. However, José Sánchez claims that Pius XI only dismissed totalitarianism in its social and political form when it conflicted with the rights of the Catholic Church – as perceived by the Vatican. The encyclical never mentioned Hitler or Nazism by name.<sup>85</sup> Pius XI and Pacelli deliberately avoided the explicit condemnation of the entire Nazi policy against the Jews or the Church's moral objections to the regime. Moreover, Pacelli reasoned that, if hostility towards the German Catholic Church would cease, the relations between the Vatican and Nazi Germany could continue on amicable terms. The Holy See also had to be cautious with promulgating very explicit statements against German policy because supposedly, a good number of lapsed German Catholics had fallen victim to anti-Catholic propaganda and the Vatican wanted to prevent them from further estrangement from the Catholic Church.<sup>86</sup>

In addition to the failure to explicitly mention the persecution of the Jews, the earnestness of the whole encyclical deteriorated with the publishing of another encyclical directed against communism: *Divini redemptoris*. This was an attack on the communist ideology, for a large part fuelled by the Spanish Civil war, where nearly 7000 Catholic Priests and laymen were murdered.<sup>87</sup> Considering that fascism was generally regarded to be the

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<sup>83</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 129-130.

<sup>84</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 156.

<sup>85</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 17.

<sup>86</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 158-159.

<sup>87</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 104.

counterpart of communism, the relentless condemnation as expressed through *Divini redemptoris* further weakened the already moderate protest of *Mit Brennender Sorge*.<sup>88</sup>

In November 1938, 800 Jews were murdered; as many as 26,000 Jews were sent off to concentration camps; and the segregation and expropriation of the Jews continued. German Jews were forbidden to visit cultural places like the cinema and were not allowed into German schools anymore. By this time, an extensive dehumanization of the German Jews had been put into motion. Closely related to the list drafted by Jesuits in 1936, Pius XI ordered three Jesuits to draft an encyclical denouncing racism and anti-Semitism by name. However, this encyclical was never published, as Pius XI died February 10 of that year. The Vatican's bureaucracy, most importantly Pacelli, considered a document that challenged fascism to be too great of a risk. March 2 1939 Pacelli was elected Pope Pius XII.<sup>89</sup> It is not certain that, if Pius XI had lived, he had published the encyclical. After all, he would have risked coming at odds with both Hitler and Mussolini, and also Franco, who was fighting the enemies of the Church in Spain with fascist assistance.<sup>90</sup>

### ***World War II***

In March 1939 Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and occupied Prague. The Jews were "poisoning the nation", according to Hitler. The Archbishop of Canterbury wanted to join forces and form an alliance of all Christians against the war. Pope Pius XII refused to be a part of it, according to Noel, this was because he declined equating Catholicism or the Catholic Church with Protestantism and Orthodoxy. The "splendid isolation" of the one, true Church – the Catholic Church – was to be upheld at all costs.<sup>91</sup>

In August 1939 Pius XII stated in a radio appeal that much is lost through war and nothing with peace, condemning neither fascism nor communism. Pius XII claimed to want to uphold a policy of neutrality, yet when the Spanish Republican forces surrendered in April 1939, he congratulated nationalist leader General Francisco Franco with his 'Catholic' victory.

In September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland, World War II began. October 20 of that year, Pius XII issued his encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*. With it, he denounced warfare and atrocities, expressing sympathy for the victims; yet it lacked any explicit referral to

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<sup>88</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 88.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, 90.

<sup>90</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 162.

<sup>91</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 105.

Nazism. He once again emphasized the 'unity of the human race' but failed to dismiss Nazi Germany and its aggression.<sup>92</sup> It was not even seen as an explicit denunciation by Germany itself, resulting in no attempt to remove the encyclical from German Catholic pulpits.

Overall, despite the fact that the Allies would sometimes read it into them, the declarations by Pius XII were not meant to explicitly denounce Nazi Germany and they were deliberately written in a way so that they could hardly be understood differently.<sup>93</sup>

February 9, 1942 The Vatican was informed about the suppression of the Jews in France and Eastern Europe. Both areas were in Catholicism's sphere of influence and therefore within that of the Pope's powers. At the end of June of that year a million Jews were murdered throughout Europe; yet the Pope maintained a public silence, presumably to remain neutral and continue playing his submissive role as peacemaker and diplomat.<sup>94</sup> Pius XII chose to remain neutral in situations where with any reference to Christian morality, such as the extermination of hundreds of thousands of innocent souls, neutrality was surely impossible

In his Christmas message of 1942 Pius XII denounced the violence and referred to the victims as people that were "marked down for death" by reason of nationality or faith; yet he stopped short of mentioning either the Jews or their executioner: Nazi Germany.<sup>95</sup>

In addition to the general statements and Vatican policy concerning the German situation, the Holy See was also involved in several specific countries during World War II through its Apostolic Nuncios.

The Pope maintained a diplomatic approach towards all the countries where Apostolic Nuncios resided. States like Croatia and Slovakia were fascist puppet states, pursuing their own genocidal racial policies. In Croatia, for instance, the fascist Ante Pavelić ruled the Catholic Independent State of Croatia, formed in 1941. Pavelić led the Ustaše and pursued murderous policies against minorities like Jews and the Serbian Orthodox.<sup>96</sup> Yet Pius XII did not break the bonds with these countries, nor did he publicly condemn the regimes. This fitted in Pius XII's policy to choose silent diplomacy over public protest, trying to maintain his neutrality in the conflict. Therefore, when in 1942 Germany occupied the French Vichy zone;

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<sup>92</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 105-107.

<sup>93</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 245-246.

<sup>94</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 127-128.

<sup>95</sup> John Roth and Carol Rittner (ed.), *Pius XII and the Holocaust* (New York 2002) 176.

<sup>96</sup> Noel, *Pius XII. The hound of Hitler*, 121.

many political powers broke their diplomatic bounds with Vichy, the Vatican chose not to.<sup>97</sup> In the case of Poland, this line of silent diplomacy was not only implemented with regard to the fate of the Jews, but Pius XII also chose silent diplomacy over protest when Polish clergy were arrested and religious practices were gravely restricted by the German occupier.<sup>98</sup> So even though the Pope was aware of the situation of the Jews in individual countries, no public statement of protest was forthcoming from the Vatican. As late as 1943, when over a thousand Jews were deported from the Roman ghetto, Pius XII refused to risk the relations with Germany.<sup>99</sup> Apart from diplomatic reasons, the lack of public protest was also motivated by the fact that Pius XII was eager to secure Catholic regimes, like the one in Croatia, instead of a pluralistic state.<sup>100</sup> In Vichy France, before the occupation by Germany, Apostolic Nuncio Valerio Valeri had not received any instructions by Maglione to intervene on behalf of the Jews. This was probably due to the good relations between Vichy and the Vatican.<sup>101</sup> After decades of hostility towards the Catholic Church and its values by the Popular Front, Marshal Pétain's Vichy promised to be a regime with respect for religious and traditional values.<sup>102</sup>

To the extent that there was any protest issued with regard to the maltreatment of the Jews throughout Europe, it was mostly passive. In addition, it almost exclusively concerned the fate of the baptized, Catholic Jews. Jews converted to Catholicism or married to a Catholic were regarded as members of the Catholic Church. Therefore, any assaults against these Jews were often regarded as indirect attacks on the Church. On several occasions, Nuncios protested and prevented the deportation of baptized Jews, sometimes on the orders of the Pope. In line with the conception of the baptized Jews as equal converts were the Vatican's protests against the racial laws. These laws contradicted the idea that baptized Jews were not the same as 'regular' Jews. In addition, they prohibited the right of a Jew to marry a non-Jew, without any exceptions for the converted Jews. As the sacrament of marriage was a traditional right of the Church, these regulations met with Papal resistance.

Another previous right of the Church that was affected in several cases was the right to religious education of its flock.<sup>103</sup> In Slovakia, Jewish students were expelled from their schools, and forced to go to a Jewish school instead, without any exceptions made for

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<sup>97</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 69.

<sup>98</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 154-155.

<sup>99</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 192-194.

<sup>100</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 40.

<sup>101</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 70.

<sup>102</sup> Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford 1981) 197.

<sup>103</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 46-47.



baptized Jews. This was opposed by the Vatican, as this was regarded to be a measure that violated the right of the Church to "teach its followers". The Vatican feared that the students' forced attendance of Jewish schools would loosen their bonds with the 'only true Church'.<sup>104</sup> This focus on the interests of the Church was also clear in the German case, where Apostolic Nuncio Cesare Orsenigo got orders from Maglione only to interfere in Germany when religious matters were involved.<sup>105</sup>

Overall, John Morley reasons that the different Nuncios did not use the entirety of their diplomatic weight to prevent the persecution of the Jews. This was largely due to the lack of open criticism of the anti-Jewish measures by their most direct authority, the Vatican's Secretary of State, Maglione. They did manage for the most part to effectively defend the rights of the Catholic Church.<sup>106</sup>

### ***Motivations***

Two of the most important arguments against the theory that the Vatican did not live up to its moral obligations during the Holocaust, are the arguments that barely any information on the persecution of the Jews was known by the Holy See; and that more fervent protest would not have the desired effect on the situation of the Jews, that it would even make things worse for them.

Based on the evidence, Papal ignorance seems quite unlikely: the Vatican had delegates in every European country, and information reached the Holy See through a multitude of connections. It must have been known that the Jews were vigorously persecuted, as pleas for protest poured in from all over Europe. Pacelli knew as early as 1933 that in Nazi Germany Jews were being persecuted, and he was also informed on the escalations by 1939.<sup>107</sup> Of course, some information and reports about Nazi conduct were probably treated with caution, coming from subjective sources like the Allied governments. However, there was no reason for Nuncios or bishops to lie or exaggerate about the Jewish suffering in their communication with the Vatican.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 98.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*, 128.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, 200-201.

<sup>107</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 42-43.

<sup>108</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 36.

The Vatican knew; there were consequences had they acted accordingly in an effort to halt the progress of the Holocaust. A public condemnation of the atrocities could have resulted in greater awareness amongst both Jews and Christians that mass deportation and murder was going on. The added value of a papal condemnation is based on the Pope's presumed objectivity and therefore credibility, as opposed to the information disclosed by the Allies. As a result, Jews could have been more inclined to flee, being aware of their fate, and Christians might have been more eager to shelter them. The excommunication of Hitler or the revocation of the Concordat would probably not have stopped Hitler. However, the threat of excommunicating all Catholics who aided in mass destruction might have had some impact.<sup>109</sup> Some of Pius XII most fervent critics have argued that excommunication or more fierce public protest would have prevented or stopped the Holocaust from taking place, but this kind of reasoning will always remain of a speculative nature. I would like to argue that the relevance of public papal protest would not have laid exclusively in the assumption that it had the desired effect. Instead, I agree with the notion that a more active and public protest would have been the moral responsibility of the Vatican, whether or not it would have saved the European Jews.

So the Vatican and both Popes knew, and public, explicit protest against the atrocities and the aggressors might have had some effect. The question is why no weighty protest was issued and the Vatican ceased to publicly denounce the Nazi regime.

Two key explanations that are often given are the Pope's anti-Semitism and his tendency to favour Germany.<sup>110</sup> Of course, the anti-Semitism present in Western tradition had an implicit influence on the ideas of people like Hitler and the degree to which people were open to these thoughts, yet I do not want to argue that Pius XII was an anti-Semite, nor that Vatican policy was based on anti-Semitism. Moreover, Hitler's racial anti-Semitism did not correspond to the religious form, according to which Jews could be 'saved', and a baptized Jew was regarded a Catholic just the same.

The idea that Pacelli would have favoured the Germans because he had been Nuncio there between 1917 and 1930 seems somewhat unlikely to me. I agree with José Sánchez that it is not probable that Pacelli agreed to the restricting of the power of the German Catholic

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<sup>109</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 303.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*, 268.

Centre Party in order to prevent it from getting in Hitler's way.<sup>111</sup> I would like to argue that neither Pius XII nor anyone at the Vatican was in favour of Hitler or Nazism on itself. Yet despite these reservations, the Vatican chose to make concessions to Hitler, Nazi Germany and other morally condemnable regimes.

What did cause the largely passive and prudent attitude of the Vatican and both Popes during the Holocaust?

Although not decisive, communism must have been part of the motivation. Many critics of Pacelli support the idea that the threat of communism and Russia caused the Vatican's refusal to explicitly condemn German atrocities including the persecution of the Jews. In an attempt to hold the line against this Bolshevist threat, Pius XII would have deliberately avoided making statements that would in any way harm or weaken the German position.<sup>112</sup> This conception is supported by the fact that, after the war, Pius XII issued fervent protests against everything that was leftist and therefore associated with communism. Why had he not been so explicit in his condemnation of the Nazi regime? There did not seem to be any illusions with respect to the validity of the National Socialist state and Hitler. There was no support by the Vatican of Nazism on itself not even as a bulwark against communism.<sup>113</sup> The biggest difference, in the eyes of the Vatican, was that Nazi Germany was not persecuting Catholics, only when they openly opposed the regime. The Catholics in communist states were outright suppressed by the regimes; German Catholics were largely free to practice their religion.<sup>114</sup>

I would argue that the communist ideology, like liberalism and modernism, was another threat to the interests of the Catholic Church as an institution. Nazi Germany so happened to oppose the same ideologies.

The 1933 Concordat with Germany was a constant factor of consideration during both Pius XI and Pius XII's papacy. The Vatican went out of its way to prevent a war between Germany and the Catholic Church.<sup>115</sup> Any form of conflict with the German regime was said to be regarded as a potential risk to lose the privileges that were granted to the German Catholic Church in the Concordat. This agreement was arguably one of the main reasons the Vatican

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<sup>111</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 249-150.

<sup>113</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 106.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibidem*, 95.

<sup>115</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 164.

withheld from protesting explicitly against German policy.<sup>116</sup> Although Pius XII was clearly anti-Nazi by 1939, he insisted to continue his diplomatic approach and found himself repeatedly willing to negotiate with Germany.<sup>117</sup> The constant and persistent hope of both Pius XI and Pius XII that Hitler would be prepared to change his religious policy, despite all his violations of the Concordat up to that point, resulted in on-going negotiations between Germany and the Vatican.<sup>118</sup>

Apart from the Concordat, Pius XII often invoked the Vatican's neutrality as a state instead of finding himself obligated to act like a moral authority. According to John Morley, this "desire to offend no nation, particularly Germany, placed a straitjacket on Vatican diplomacy and made it little different from the diplomatic practices of civil states."<sup>119</sup> Pius XII self-assumed role as neutral mediator in the war was part of the reason why he did not condemn Nazi Germany or any other specific aggressor.<sup>120</sup> In line with his neutrality, Pius XII chose not to make explicit statements with regard to who the victims were, who the aggressors were or to refer to specific atrocities.<sup>121</sup> As late as 1942, the Holy See maintained that in light of their neutrality it was unable to denounce specific atrocities and had to "limit itself to condemning immoral actions in general".<sup>122</sup> Pius XII had the dual task of being impartial and at the same time to denounce immorality.

With regard to his mediating role, it could be argued that the purpose was not to arbitrate in the war, but to retain the unity of the Catholic Church. Disapproving or approving one side or another would result in the possible estrangement of the Catholics inhabiting the countries ruled by the regime condemned by the Vatican. This theory would also explain why Pius XII steadfastly maintained this mediating role in the course of the war, when it was already clear that there would be no room for compromises on either side.<sup>123</sup>

One of the options the Vatican had protesting the deportation and persecution of the European Jews was the breaking of diplomatic bonds with the country in question by recalling their Apostolic Nuncio. However, Morley argues that this would contravene the desire of the Vatican to have delegates in every European country, and hence its influence on the country's

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<sup>116</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 90.

<sup>117</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 17.

<sup>118</sup> Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*, 157.

<sup>119</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 209.

<sup>120</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 92.

<sup>121</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 250.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, 299.

<sup>123</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 111-112.

religious policy. The Nuncios were necessary to protect the Catholic Church and its followers. The Vatican had a choice: either it could act like a moral and religious body, or, it could choose to protect the interests of the Catholic Church as an institution, over its moral obligation. The Vatican, Pius XII, chose the second. The interests of the Catholic Church as an institution took the upper hand, at the expense of the Church's role to propagate and act according the Christian doctrine. "Politics came first and doctrine second in establishing the Church's order of priorities."<sup>124</sup>

Although claiming to be a religious and moral authority, the Vatican appears to have pursued a policy that would suit any other self-interested institution. This brings me to my theory with regard to the interests of the Catholic Church, in this case represented by the Vatican, and my conception that it is not an exclusively spiritual institution. The duty of the Pope to protect the institution of the Catholic Church conflicted with his role as 'Vicar of Christ', obligated to condemn all things immoral and unjust.<sup>125</sup>

My hypothesis was that the Catholic Church deviates from its role as a moral authority because of its interests as an institution. To put it differently, the Catholic Church would prioritize its institutional interests over its responsibility to propagate the Christian doctrine and its corresponding morals. This chapter has shown that the Vatican did exactly this. It did so by choosing to more fervently and openly condemn the communist ideology than fascism, as communism appeared to be a more severe threat to the Church. It chose to keep the Concordat of 1933 intact, trying to maintain the rights and privileges of the German Catholic Church and its clergy. It mediated and did not choose sides in order to preserve the unity of the Church and evade any risks for the diplomatic position of the Church.

Having established that my hypothesis is largely correct with regard to Pope Pius XI and Pius XII and the Vatican prior to and during the Holocaust, one must keep in mind that the decisions of the Popes and the policy of the Vatican is not the same as the attitude of individual priests or any other regular local clergy in different countries. The Pope did not directly influence the extent to which individual clergy helped Jews in their own countries. However, the Catholic hierarchy of a country does take notice of papal policy. Although Church policy in individual countries was not controlled by direct orders from the Vatican,

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<sup>124</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 204.

<sup>125</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 36-37.

the Catholic hierarchy could follow Vatican policy in their own local decisions.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, it is, as José Sánchez put it, "a common fallacy to believe that the pope – any pope – has absolute control over Catholic clergy throughout the world."<sup>127</sup> So how did these local, lower clergy and hierarchy respond to the Jewish persecution between 1933 and 1945? Were they silent, or did they zealously protest the persecution of their Jewish compatriots? Were they united in their point of view, or did attitudes differ between and amongst the hierarchy and lower clergy? Moreover, what were the motives for their attitudes? In the next two chapters, I will try to answer these questions with regard to the clergy of Poland and Belgium.

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<sup>126</sup> Sánchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, 138-139.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*, 137.

## Chapter 2

### Poland

Poland became an independent state once more between the two World Wars, known as the Second Polish Republic. After several regional conflicts, the borders of the state were fixed in 1922; Poland's neighbours were Czechoslovakia, Germany, the Free City of Danzig, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and the Soviet Union. Poland was an area of about 389,000 square km, with over 27 million inhabitants in 1921 and over 35 million by 1939.

About seventy per cent of the population was dependent on agriculture that was badly in need of reform.<sup>128</sup> Added to the economic hardships Poland suffered, it was also reconstructed of three geographic parts with different political, economic, and judicial systems and traditions. In addition to the Polish majority, almost a third of Poland constituted minority groups: Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians, Germans, Czechs, Lithuanians and Russians.<sup>129</sup> This coincided with a variety of religions present in the interwar state, with a great Catholic majority of almost 65 per cent in 1931.<sup>130</sup> All of these different peoples, adhering to different religions, were living in a state that based its policy on Polish, Catholic demands.

Despite these social and economic circumstances, the Second Polish Republic continued to exist until 1939, when Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of World War II in Europe.<sup>131</sup>

In order to answer the question how the Polish Catholic Church and its clergy reacted to the Holocaust and what motivated their attitudes, in the first part of this chapter I will look into the history of the Jewish population in Poland, and Poland's interwar anti-Semitism. In the second part of this chapter, I will continue to analyse Poland during the Second World War, looking at German anti-Jewish policy in Poland and the Nazi demolition of the Polish Catholic Church. I will consider the reactions of both the Polish people and the Polish Church to the Holocaust, whilst making a distinction between the Catholic hierarchy, religious orders and individual clergy. By means of such a distinction, I will be able to analyse Poland with regard to the second part of my hypothesis: whether there is a failure of responsibility within

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<sup>128</sup> Józef Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War* (London 1985) XVII.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*, XVIII.

<sup>130</sup> Shoup, *The East European and Soviet data handbook*, 162.

<sup>131</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, XX-XXI.

the clergy. Finally, I will consider the voices coming from the Vatican, comparing the Pope's response to the Polish Holocaust with that of the local hierarchy and clergy.



## ❖Part I: Interwar Poland

### *The Jewish population*

Serving as a Jewish safe haven – as opposed to European countries like Spain that was fervently trying to expel their Jewish community – Medieval Poland was subject to a large influx of Jews. Despite the fact that the secular Catholic authorities found themselves prepared to offer these Jewish immigrants a certain degree of protection and equal citizenship, the Jews did encounter opposition from the Polish Catholic Church, where clergy preached that Jews would go straight to hell.<sup>132</sup> In addition, the Polish population were found to be less tolerant than their rulers. Due to the economic position of the Jews as intermediaries – mediating between peasant and landowner – instead of the landowner, the Jews were often blamed for the misfortunes of the poor peasant. Christian merchants and minor nobility were also resentful of the economic position of the Jews as moneylenders, a profession that Christians were excluded from because their faith forbade them.<sup>133</sup> Being at odds with the Catholic Church and in the face of Polish economical envy of the Jews, the Jews themselves, their schools, cemeteries and synagogues were frequently attacked. Polish discrimination, violence and contempt towards the Jews were largely the result of the attitude of the Polish Catholic Church, who considered it its task to maintain Poland's national Catholic values. Overall, many Poles were clinging to a form of theological anti-Semitism, perceiving the Jews as 'Christ-Killers' and ritual murderers.

In the eighteenth century, when up to eighty per cent of the Jewish world population lived in Poland, there had been largely peaceful coexistence between Polish Catholics and Jews, mainly because the Jews proved to be advantageous for Poles economically.<sup>134</sup> At the same time, Poles were still envious of rumoured or actual Jewish economic prosperity. Eventually, dormant religious and economic anti-Semitism resulted in a third kind of anti-Semitism: political anti-Semitism. This development was partly due to the rising external threats posed by Austria, Russia and Prussia: the Jews were associated with these enemies from the east. The new form of anti-Semitism was also partly caused by internal disunity, resulting in rising social tensions, as Poland ceased to exist as an independent state in 1795. Regaining its independence after World War I in 1918, the state was characterised by pluralism, economic

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<sup>132</sup> Robert Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism* (New York 2008) 145.

<sup>133</sup> Nechama Tec, *When Light pierced the darkness. Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland* (New York 1986) 13.

<sup>134</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 145-147.

hardship and a general lack of cohesion.<sup>135</sup>

When Poland became independent once more in 1918, it was a multinational state; one third of the population was not Polish. Over three million Jews were spread over the country, making up for ten per cent of the population, a higher percentage than in any other European country.<sup>136</sup> Over half of the Jews lived in large cities in (mainly central) Poland with over twenty thousand people like Warsaw en Łódź.<sup>137</sup> Up to thirty per cent of the Polish urban residents were Jewish.<sup>138</sup> Due to this unequal distribution of the Polish Jews, they seemed perhaps more prominent than they actually were.<sup>139</sup>

From the end of the eighteenth century until the early twentieth, the economic, social and political situation of the Jews heavily deteriorated.<sup>140</sup> The largest percentage of the Jews worked in retail trade; they were shoemakers, tailors etc.<sup>141</sup> By 1921 over sixty per cent of the Poles working in commerce were Jewish. In 1931 over half of the doctors that had a private practice and one third of the lawyers were Jews. Textile and food production was largely in the hands of the Jews, and prior to World War II, over forty per cent of the Polish workforce was on the payroll of Jewish Firms. It is striking that, despite these numbers, Jews could not be regarded as part of Poland's rich upper-class, they were primarily small businessmen and often even had trouble getting by.<sup>142</sup>

The cultural differences within the Jewish diaspora in Poland were so great, that you could not really speak of a 'Jewish community'. In the western parts of the country, Jews were largely westernized; and in former Galicia – eastern Poland – Jews remained very traditional. Overall, the majority of the Polish Jews were Orthodox, yet there were also more enlightened Jews who embraced Polish culture.<sup>143</sup> Jewish political parties, although present, did not have any substantial power or influence in political life, but did leave their mark on the everyday lives of the Polish Jews through the formation of Jewish institutions and organisation. This resulted in lively communities with their own Jewish hospitals, sport clubs, theatres, cinemas etc. The thriving political movements of Socialism and Zionism resulted in about a dozen

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<sup>135</sup> Tec, *When Light pierced the darkness*, 13-14.

<sup>136</sup> Ronald Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939* (Jerusalem 1994) 26.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibidem*, 32.

<sup>138</sup> Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, 280.

<sup>139</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 152.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibidem*, 147.

<sup>141</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 32.

<sup>142</sup> Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead. Poland and the memory of the Holocaust* (New York 1997) 16/17.

<sup>143</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 32.

youth organisations linked to Zionist and Socialist parties, recruiting members throughout Poland.<sup>144</sup>

### ***Polish anti-Semitism***

The newly independent Poland was a patchwork of a variety of regions with many differences between them with regard to their economic, political and social needs. Moreover, Poland's demographic makeup was one consisting of several minorities: Ukrainian, Jewish, Belorussian and German. Although only two thirds of the population was Polish, government policy was entirely focused on Polish needs and predominantly hostile towards the minorities.<sup>145</sup>

The Polish politicians Marshal Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski had by far the biggest influence on the Polish political landscape during the early twentieth century. Piłsudski's party strove for a pluralistic federation led by a Polish majority. Dmowski, however, preferred a unitary state where all minorities were to be 'polonized' or forced to migrate. Dmowski's National Democratic movement (*Endecja*), founded in 1897, was regarded to be at the forefront of Polish nationalistic anti-Semitism.

Despite the fact that *Endecja* found little support amongst the Polish Catholic bishops, Dmowski's nationalistic ideas were popular amongst the young Polish clergy. Yet the vast majority of its supporters resided in the Polish middle class. Dmowski convinced them that Jews were interfering with their economic and social ambitions. When in 1912 *Endecja* lost the elections due to the, in their perception, overrepresentation of the Jewish vote for the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), the boycotting of Jewish businesses became part of the *Endek* policy. Dmowski and his fellow nationalistic ideologues started presenting the Jews in Poland as the country's main social and economic problem; their removal as the main solution.

After Poland's proclamation of independence there was an upsurge of pogroms against the Jews of Poland. This was the result of the Polish-Soviet war to fix the new state's boundaries. Jews had no interests in the victory of one side or another, so they were accused of disloyalty by all sides: Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. The international community focused on the Polish role in these pogroms, and expressed its worries about the Polish Jews. Poland signed a Minorities Treaty in 1919 in Versailles. This treaty guaranteed civil rights and additional minority rights for the Jews in Poland. In Poland, this was regarded as a direct violation of

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<sup>144</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 18.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibidem*, 15.

the autonomy of the country; for Dmowski and his supporters the treaty confirmed the perception that the Jews were an (anti-Polish) international force to be reckoned with.<sup>146</sup> Despite the treaty, Poland continued to be governed by parties who denied these rights to the Jews. For instance, the treaty dictated the establishment of Jewish schools, but the government refused to finance them.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, the additional minority rights the Jews were entitled to according to the treaty angered large segments of the Polish population.

On May 26 1926, a coup d'état was carried out in Poland by Piłsudski, and the *Sanacja* regime came to power. This regime was often portrayed as 'Jew-infested' and 'anti-Catholic' by its nationalist opponents. Despite Piłsudski's dictatorship, anti-Semitic propaganda pressed on and developed a new, additional idea that Jews were a detrimental influence on Polish culture. Even Jews who wanted to assimilate into Polish culture and baptized Jews were to be isolated.<sup>148</sup>

Subjected to economic and political pressure, Piłsudski's ideals of reconciliation with and integration of Poland's minorities were thwarted.<sup>149</sup> When in 1935 Piłsudski died and thereby created more room for Poland's right-wing parties, the situation of the Polish Jews deteriorated. The upcoming, nationalist parties were anti-Jewish and supported ideas like the boycott of Jewish businesses and violence against the Jews.<sup>150</sup> In 1937 the remaining *Sanacja* party members formed the *Camp of National Unity* and reorganized in order to be able to compete with the National Democrats of *Endecja*. This reorganization also entailed their view on the 'Jewish-question'. In order to wean the masses from communist propaganda and tolerant opinions, the party became fervently anti-Semitic. With the propagation of this anti-Semitism the party aimed at strengthening the bond between Poland and Nazi Germany, with whom they signed a treaty in 1943. All social and economic problems of Poland were blamed on the Jews. One of those problems was the landowning problem. The *Endecja* organized a campaign allowing the landless peasants in Poland to take over the market stalls of the Jews in small towns, instead of equally dividing the large land-holdings of the landowners. The massive unemployment was another real problem, yet instead of finding solutions, the government simply claimed that the Jews were responsible.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 23-26.

<sup>147</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 17.

<sup>148</sup> Ibidem, 20.

<sup>149</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 29.

<sup>150</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 150.

<sup>151</sup> Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War* (Jerusalem 1974) 10-13.

From the Polish-Soviet war of 1919-21 on, the most common accusation Polish nationalists and anti-Semites made against the Jews was their alleged sympathy for communism.<sup>152</sup> This political form of anti-Semitism was neither completely unfounded nor incomprehensible, as communism was internationalist, and therefore in theory inclusive of all minorities. However, communism was a dangerous ideology to be associated with in the new Polish state. After all, when Poland was declared independent after World War I, it had to endure another war that lasted for three more years, in order to determine its borders with the Soviet Union. During the Polish-Soviet war, the neutrality of the Jews was regarded as disloyalty by the Polish, Soviet and Ukrainian side, resulting in atrocities and pogroms against the Jews throughout Poland.<sup>153</sup>

The interwar anti-Jewish violence escalated in the 1930's. As a response to the developments in neighbouring Germany and the overall economic catastrophe, Jews were segregated in universities and the number of Jewish students and professors were restricted. Jewish merchants were boycotted and anti-Jewish riots erupted all over Poland.<sup>154</sup>

Overall, Polish interwar anti-Semitism was the result of a longer tradition of Polish economic envy and Catholic anti-Semitism. This was combined with the devastating economic consequences of World War I: mines and factories were bereft of both raw materials and machinery. After the war the economy of the Polish Republic had to be reconstructed from virtually nothing. Added to these economic hardships was the presence of large minorities which meant that different political, cultural, social and economic conditions that had to be unified. Anti-Semitism was strengthened by the communist revolutions, allegedly supported and financed by the Jews, and the Polish-Soviet war, fought from an already depleted resource base, in which the neutrality of the Jews made them suspicious. The weak introduction of a Parliamentary democracy took place. Until the late 1920s, due to the different political, economic, and judicial systems and traditions present in the country, it proved impossible to form a government that could effectively manage the exceptionally difficult affairs of the country. Finally, the economic depression of the interwar years made the Polish Jew an even more popular scapegoat.

The main absentee in this enumeration of factors influencing the interwar anti-Jewish stance is the Polish Catholic Church.

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<sup>152</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 35.

<sup>153</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 25.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibidem*, 33-35.

### *The Polish Catholic Church*

The additional factor of the Catholic Church's ideological influence regarding the Jewish question cannot be absent in any credible analysis of Polish anti-Semitism. In a country where religion was considered very important, the Polish Catholic Church "wielded supreme power".<sup>155</sup> Being by far the largest religious body in interwar Poland, the political and moral influence of the Catholic Church was hard to circumvent.

This central and influential position of the Catholic Church in Polish society was due to the fact that the Church was the only, continuous factor throughout Poland's partitions over the previous centuries.<sup>156</sup> The Church remained the sole, unifying institution after Poland lost its independence in 1795; and it regained its old prominent position as the only central Polish institution in 1918.<sup>157</sup> This leading position of the Catholic Church was consistent with Poland's religious landscape where a large majority was Catholic. The Polish constitutions of 1921 and 1935 recognized the pre-eminence of the Catholic Church in Poland amongst all other religious affiliations. However, Catholicism was not the official state religion.<sup>158</sup> It never achieved this (by some) desired status of a national Established Church. Interwar Poland had a diverse religious landscape, and the Catholic Church had to compete with many other religions.<sup>159</sup> Almost 65 per cent of the Poles were Catholic, compared to an 11.8 per cent who were Orthodox; 10.4 per cent Greek Catholic (Uniat), 9.8 per cent Jewish and 2.6 per cent Evangelical.<sup>160</sup>

Another obstacle was the anti-clerical attitude of the ruling elite after World War I, but this changed when in 1926 Dmowski announced that he wanted to strengthen the bond with the Catholic Church. *Endecja* and other nationalistic movements promised the Church "complete independence and an appropriate position in the state in virtue of it being the director of the nation's moral life".<sup>161</sup> Piłsudski's party also strove for a better Church-State relation. Despite the comment of the alleged pro-Piłsudski newspaper that the 1925

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<sup>155</sup> Tec, *When Light pierced the darkness*, 181.

<sup>156</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 149.

<sup>157</sup> Tec, *When Light pierced the darkness*, 138.

<sup>158</sup> Celia S. Heller, *On the edge of destruction* (New York 1977) 109.

<sup>159</sup> Norman Davies, *God's playground. A History of Poland. Volume II 1795 to the Present* (New York 2005) 164.

<sup>160</sup> Idesbald Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation (1935-1945) and the First years of communism (1944-1948)', in: Lieve Gevers (ed.), *Religion under siege; Vol. I: The Roman Catholic church in occupied Europe. 1939-1950*. (Leuven 2007) 1-38, 6.

<sup>161</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 30.

Concordat<sup>162</sup> between the Pope and Poland was too beneficial for the Polish Catholic Church, Piłsudski did eventually agree to it. Although not all Catholic thinkers were positive about *Endecja*, some criticized that it used religion for its own nationalistic, hate-spreading purposes, most Parish priests were drawn to certain ideas of the National Democrats that revolved around an ideal of Polish, Catholic unity.<sup>163</sup>

After 1918 the Catholic Church had sought to infiltrate Polish cultural life through education, youth movements, charity, culture, press etc.; yet it avoided political involvement.<sup>164</sup> In his book, *God's playground. A History of Poland. Volume II*, Norman Davies rejects the idea that the Roman Catholic Church could remove itself from any implicit involvement in Polish politics as "not only in its corporate existence as a wealthy, ancient, and respected institution, but also through the actions and attitudes of its priests and people, it has exerted a powerful influence on all political developments."<sup>165</sup> As Catholicism was interwoven with the Polish identity, nationalist ideology had a voice in the Polish Catholic Church in the early twentieth century. Ambitions to make Catholicism the "exclusive touchstone of national identity" appeared to outweigh the Church's inherent desire to separate itself from Polish politics.<sup>166</sup>

### ***Anti-Semitism in the Polish Catholic Church***

Considering that the Catholic Church was the most important institution in Poland with considerable authority shaping Polish public opinion, this same Church would have been one of the few forces able to prevent anti-Semitism and its spread throughout Poland in the interwar years.<sup>167</sup> Yet it does not appear to have done so.

The persistent anti-Semitism shown in Poland during the interwar years generally speaks for itself: the Polish Catholic Church was not making sufficient attempts to challenge or dispel the anti-Jewish sentiment prevalent among the Polish Catholics. Many priests did not frustrate anti-Semitic sentiment in their parishes; some even promoted and encouraged it. When in the 1930s nationalist parties were on the rise, propagating anti-Jewish policy by means of boycotts and calls for the expulsion of and violence against the Jews, there were barely any examples of condemnation by the Polish Catholic Church's leadership. Moreover,

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<sup>162</sup> This Concordat guaranteed the freedom of the Church and the faithful. It regulated the usual points of interests, Catholic instruction in primary schools and secondary schools, nomination of bishops, establishment of seminaries and a permanent nuncio in Warsaw.

<sup>163</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 30.

<sup>164</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 7.

<sup>165</sup> Davies, *God's playground*, 152.

<sup>166</sup> Ibidem, 163.

<sup>167</sup> Heller, *On the edge of destruction*, 109.

the ideas of these political parties were often regarded to be in line with the Church's program.<sup>168</sup> Theoretically, the Polish Catholic Church had the influence to put a halt to Polish anti-Semitism. In reality it was this same institution that had a large share in fuelling anti-Semitism in the first place.<sup>169</sup> There are examples of individual Polish Priests, instigating anti-Semitism personally. Many Catholic priests were authors of anti-Semitic literature: Stanisław Trzeciak preached a highly influential gospel of hate in his sermons and writings, and there are many other examples of anti-Semitic preaching of Catholic Clergy.<sup>170</sup> A lay member of the Polish Catholic Church (Count Antoni Sobański) complained of priests tolerating the distribution of anti-Semitic pamphlets in front of the church doors.<sup>171</sup> However, simply stating that in Poland, in addition to the Polish people and political parties, "the Catholic Church was also anti-Semitic" will not suffice.<sup>172</sup>

In Medieval times, practicing Jews were regarded as a threat to the Catholic faith in Poland. In interwar Poland, the secularization of the Jewish youth was seen as a new version of this threat. There was a secularization trend discernible amongst the Polish youth, yet this was not so much an outward tendency. In addition, these youths remained close to the Catholic faith. On the one hand, the secularization of these Jews was dismissed and seen as a rejection of the 'one true faith'. On the other hand, the Church's leadership feared that this same secularization, regarded as inherent to the Jews, would integrate in Polish society through Jewish integration. This fear was part of a larger anxiety of the Polish Catholic hierarchy that the intensified European secularization trend that set in from the late eighteenth century would gain a footing in Poland as well, undermining the central position of Catholicism and the Catholic Church. According to Ronald Modras, fears of secularization of marriage, schools, science, politics and arts;<sup>173</sup> of the separation of church and state; of the efforts of the Polish Free Thought Union (*Związek Wolnej Myśli*) to break Poland's Concordat with Rome, paralyzed Polish Catholic hierarchy.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 150.

<sup>169</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Golden harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York 2012) 15-16.

<sup>170</sup> Heller, *On the edge of destruction*, 111-112.

<sup>171</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 35.

<sup>172</sup> Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, 280.

<sup>173</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 61.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibidem*, 67.



The secularized Jewish youth was not the only threat in the eyes of the Catholic leadership. The Jewish community at large was associated with all thinkable perils of modernity, regarding the rights and position of the Catholic Church in Polish society.

In the interwar period, the attitude of the Polish Catholic leadership was directly related to its hostility towards Freemasons.<sup>175</sup> Freemasonry was at odds with the Catholic Church as these Freemasons pioneered in the French Revolution of 1789, which separated church and state and constrained all conceivable rights of the French Catholic Church. Since the eighteenth century, Jews had access to the Freemason membership, admitting them to the social elites and profiting from all kinds of business advantages.<sup>176</sup> All together, the "efforts by freethinkers and Masons to secularize Poland on the model of Western Europe were of central concern to [Polish] Catholic leaders". The association between Masons and Jews included the Jews in this central concern.<sup>177</sup>

Within leadership circles of the Polish Catholic Church, the correlation of Jews with 'godless' communism was present as well. Although only few members of the communist parties in Poland were Jewish, still these parties were often regarded as Jewish dominated. In the Soviet Union communists were internationalists, and therefore anti-Semitism was not on the agenda. Claiming that the Soviet communist policy of inclusiveness would be inherently advantageous to the Jews, the Catholic leadership concluded that Jews were closely affiliated to the ideology.<sup>178</sup> The fear of communism that Pius XI expressed in his encyclicals was extra urgent in Poland with regard to its proximity to the Soviet Union. When the Soviets invaded Poland two weeks after the German occupation, every assimilated Jew was a liability.<sup>179</sup>

Catholic leadership also regarded Jews as the agents of liberalism, an ideology that allegedly aimed to disestablish the Church. The Polish Catholic hierarchy perceived the Jews in Poland as "being among the chief advocates of liberal efforts to secularize the state and public education."<sup>180</sup>

During the turbulent first half of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church faced competition in its sphere of influence by all kinds of modern ideologies. During the Plenary Synod in 1937, the Polish bishops presented the country as the Catholic force against all its

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<sup>175</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 45.

<sup>176</sup> Ibidem, 53.

<sup>177</sup> Ibidem, 60.

<sup>178</sup> Ibidem, 110-111.

<sup>179</sup> Ibidem, 403.

<sup>180</sup> Ibidem, 127.

enemies, the "individuals and groups who attacked the clergy for their 'unlimited power' and were attempting to subordinate the Church and its institutions to the state."<sup>181</sup> As these threats were all associated with the Jews by the majority of the Polish clergy, their struggle became an anti-Semitic one.<sup>182</sup> At the root of this 'political anti-Semitism' lay an age old religious anti-Semitism. After all, it is not a mere coincidence that time and again it were the Jews who were variously stereotyped as Freemasons, communists and other enemies of the Church. Nevertheless, this political anti-Semitism, associating Jews with every possible enemy the Catholic Church faced in the age of modernity, is too often overlooked or dismissed as mere rhetoric rather than the popular held conviction it was.

### ***Church reactions to anti-Semitism***

Catholic Church leaders wanted the nationalisation of Polish life to be nonviolent, as violence was still regarded as contrary to good Christian conduct. The "Church leaders had called for a nonviolent war on behalf of Catholic Poland, but wars rarely remain nonviolent."<sup>183</sup> In the face of the anti-Jewish riots spreading all over Poland, in Grodno in 1935, in Przytyk in 1936 and in Brest-Litovsk in 1937, a reaction of the Catholic hierarchy was inevitable. In a tone set by the bishops, Cardinal Hlond stated that the Nazi racial theory and violence against Jews conflicted with the Christian doctrine.<sup>184</sup> Although violence was condemned by the Polish bishops, this was often combined with certain ambivalence with regard to the Jews, who were still viewed as a real danger for Polish Catholic culture.<sup>185</sup> According to the Catholic Press Agency (KAP), the Catholic clergy rejected violence against Jews from a Christian viewpoint, but also stated that they brought it on themselves.<sup>186</sup> When a delegation of Rabbis came to visit bishop Aleksander Kakowski of Warsaw in 1934, they implored him to dismiss the anti-Semitic violence occurring all over Poland. Kakowski drafted a pastoral letter that read that he "condemned all violence and excesses, from whatever side they came from, whether Catholic or Jewish."<sup>187</sup> He added that he thought that the Jewish atheists were fighting against the Christian religion, telling the Rabbis that he regarded the violence as a reaction against the Jewish atheists and Freethinkers who were insulting Christianity and the Catholic clergy.<sup>188</sup> In 1936 Cardinal Hlond, Primate of Poland, published a pastoral letter dismissing the violence

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<sup>181</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 342.

<sup>182</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 148.

<sup>183</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 300.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibidem*, 315.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibidem*, 148.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibidem*, 316.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibidem*, 315.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibidem*, 119.

against Jews. The letter was read out in most Polish pulpits.<sup>189</sup> Although the letter did indeed disapprove of violence, it also emphasized the negative influence the Jews had on Polish society and that Jewish influence on schools was bad from a religious and ethical point of view. Hlond stated by saying that "it is a fact that the Jews fight against the Catholic Church, they are free-thinkers, and constitute the vanguard of atheism, of the Bolshevik movement and of revolutionary activity."<sup>190</sup> Moreover, the letter explicitly approved of the boycotting of the Jews.

Ultimately, "for the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, anti-Semitic violence was unethical but so too was a liberal secularism that relegated the Catholic Church to the merely private sphere of Polish life as one group among others."<sup>191</sup> Where the Polish Catholic hierarchy appeared to have been unanimous in their attitudes towards the Jews, the lower clergy could be rebuking as well as encouraging in their opinion on the anti-Jewish violence, based on personal choices. Nevertheless, the overall attitude of the lower clergy in interwar Poland seemed to have been represented by the statements of the hierarchy.<sup>192</sup>

Although the Polish Church leaders claimed to regard the Jewish boycott as a "peaceful and ethically proper" way to "offset the economic advantages which Jewish merchants enjoyed"<sup>193</sup>, Modras argues that their main concern was the restriction of Jewish influence on Polish society through its economy. Jewish influence on the economy would result in Jewish influence on other aspects of Polish life, like education, art and literature. In addition, working with Jews was equal to permitting secular influences into Polish life, destroying the Polish tradition of Catholic culture. In the end, "for the Polish Catholic leadership of the 1930s, poverty in a Catholic Poland was preferable to prosperity in one that was secular."<sup>194</sup>

The Polish Catholic periodicals were mostly published by religious orders for men. However, the entire Polish Catholic press was under the control of the hierarchy, as every publication had to have the consent of the local bishop.<sup>195</sup> With regard to the situation in 1930s Germany, there was a world of difference between the way the Polish Catholic press presented the situation of the German Jews and that of the German Catholic Church. With the

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<sup>189</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 21.

<sup>190</sup> Heller, *On the edge of destruction*, 113.

<sup>191</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 383.

<sup>192</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 153.

<sup>193</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 241.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibidem*, 242.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibidem*, 40.

implementation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, only the presumed martyrdom of the German Catholic Church and the *Kulturkampf* against it were mentioned.<sup>196</sup> There were many reports on the efforts of the Pope to protest against the persecution of the German Church by the Nazis. With regard to the Nazi mistreatment of the Jews, the Polish Catholic hierarchy remained in line with the Pope, and fell silent.<sup>197</sup> Polish bishops generally did not react to *Kristallnacht* in 1938, and thus refrained from criticizing it as well.<sup>198</sup> With the violence that was occurring in Poland itself in mind, the absence of an adverse reaction by Polish bishops and clergy is to some extent explained.

Surely, "Catholic leaders in Poland criticized the anti-Semitic brutality in Germany as barbarous and primitive, but self-interest prevented them from criticizing too loudly."<sup>199</sup> After all, "with the analogy of a just war as the dominant metaphor to define Catholic efforts to maintain a preferred status for the church, violence could be justified as self-defence".<sup>200</sup>

So the attitude of the Polish Catholic Church, mainly represented here by the opinion of the Church's hierarchy, was overly anti-Semitic during the interwar years. How did this effect the reaction of the church hierarchy and lower clergy to the Holocaust, when the anti-Jewish policy resulted in mass murdering? Was their appeal to Christian values against violence strengthened? Or did the Church's interwar anti-Semitic trend continue relentlessly during the war years?

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<sup>196</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 141.

<sup>197</sup> Ibidem, 143-144.

<sup>198</sup> Ibidem, 301-302.

<sup>199</sup> Ibidem, 322.

<sup>200</sup> Ibidem, 322.

## ❖Part II: World War II and the Holocaust

### *German anti-Jewish Policy*

Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, while the Soviet invasion of Poland commenced on 17 September 1939. The campaign ended on October 6 1939 with Germany and the Soviet Union dividing and annexing the whole of Poland. The demarcation line for the partition of German- and Soviet-occupied Poland was along the Bug River.

Poland's North-western part was incorporated in the German *Reich* because it was the area where many Polish Germans resided, and because of it was a rich source of industry and mining to the Germans. The German occupation of Poland was to be the cornerstone in the Nazi architecture of a Eurasian empire, stratified by race. It would become a new order, where the Germans would rule over the racially inferior.<sup>201</sup> The Nazi expression towards Poland was of a particularly aggressive nature, as the very existence of Poland – part of which had been part of Germany before 1919 – was a symbol of the humiliation suffered by Germany losing World War I and having to accept the Versailles Treaty. Both Poles and Jews were seen as primitive and inferior. For them, all good things in Poland were the result of the former German settlers, and all the negative aspects the result of Jewish corruption and Polish laziness. Poland was destined to become a laboratory for the forming of a solution for the Jewish problem, whilst experimenting in Nazi racial imperialism.<sup>202</sup>

The expansion of German Lebensraum could only be accomplished if there was a solution to the Jewish problem. After the September invasion, plans were made to push the Polish Jews out of Germany.<sup>203</sup> All residents in the Polish regions incorporated into the Reich were obligated to register themselves on the German *Volkslist*<sup>204</sup>. Poles could be registered as *Reichsdeutsch*, this meant that you were born within the old borders of the German *Reich*; *Volks-Deutsch*, entailing you were from three generations of Germans; *Nichtdeutsch*, which meant you were not a Jew; and *Juden*, then you were a Jew. Based on this registration, people received ID passes and ration cards.<sup>205</sup> Many of these *Nichtdeutsch* and all of the *Juden* were forcefully emigrated to the part of Poland that was not annexed but occupied by the Germans:

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<sup>201</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 23-24.

<sup>202</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *The origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln 2007) 14-16.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>204</sup> a Nazi Party institution whose purpose was the classification of inhabitants of German occupied territories into categories of desirability according to criteria systematized by Heinrich Himmler

<sup>205</sup> Davies, *God's playground*, 330.

the *General Government*, situated in central Poland. This area included almost half of the Polish population and the largest cities of Poland: Warsaw, Kraków, Lublin. It became a dumping ground for everyone who was racially undesirable.<sup>206</sup>

During 1939 and 1940, the Germans kept expelling Jews to the General Government. In addition, one Einsatzgruppe in Poland was ordered to continuously terrorize the Jewish population in the annexed zone, so they would flee to the Eastern part of Poland, occupied by the Soviets.<sup>207</sup> Jews were to be expelled over the demarcation line, a process that would be spread over a year, in the meantime the Jewish population was centralized and organized in ghettos. This was convenient for control over the Jews and for the organization of later deportations. The remaining Polish Jews were moved from the country to the cities.<sup>208</sup>

So, until the time was ripe for the ‘final solution’ – which then still entailed only the expulsion of the Jews – the Jews could be controlled and exploited in the ghettos. In Łódź, along with the Warthegau and the bordering Western part of the Warsaw district, Jews from the surrounding area were concentrated in the spring of 1940.<sup>209</sup> In October and November of 1940, over 100.000 non-Jewish Poles were moved from the North-westerly district of Warsaw. The Germans ghettoized this area of the city, and over 100.000 Jews living elsewhere were brought into the ghetto. If they were seen outside the ghetto walls, the Jews faced a death penalty.<sup>210</sup> In 1940, racial segregation was in full swing. Ghettoization continued between 1940 and 1941; large ghettos like the one in Warsaw often formed a village on its own, they had their own market, *Judenrate* and police force. Labour camps were erected, where Jews were forced to work in war-related industries. In these camps, tens of thousands died as a result of deplorable living conditions; and another ten thousand Jews were executed.<sup>211</sup> By the end of 1941, the Jews had been deprived of all means of livelihood and the ghettos were almost completely enclosed. Jews were secluded from working in public institutions, and (portable) property was confiscated. The Jews here were forced to wear bracelets with a yellow star on them.<sup>212</sup> In 1941, a German rationing system was

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<sup>206</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 24.

<sup>207</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York 2010) 127.

<sup>208</sup> Browning, *The origins of the Final Solution*, 26.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibidem*, 137.

<sup>210</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 144-145.

<sup>211</sup> Tadeusz Piotrowski, *Poland's Holocaust: ethnic strife, collaboration with occupying forces and genocide in the Second Republic, 1918-1947* (Jefferson 1998) 29.

<sup>212</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 163.

implemented, allowing a mere 184 calories per person per day for the Jews of Warsaw. This led to starvation and diseases with a ten per cent death rate.<sup>213</sup>

Polish ghettoization of 1940 and 1941 was not the result of the September order of 1939 to concentrate the Jews in the cities, but of the fact that, subsequently, the planned expulsions were not executed. Initially, the concentration of the Polish Jews in cities became ghettoization because the Germans had to deal with the subsidiary problems these concentrations of people caused. It also facilitated the plundering and confiscation of Jewish possessions. Additionally, the Germans were able to exploit the Jewish workforce and better provide the German officials, businessmen, and other staff with housing. Finally, Nazi ideology dictated that Aryans should not live together with Jews in any case, adding a further impassive logic to the tragic events.<sup>214</sup>

German attempts to remove the Jews from the Reich, sending them elsewhere, failed. The former 'temporary' ghettos became warehouses "to store an unwanted population in isolation from the rest of society".<sup>215</sup> The invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 resulted in a radicalization of the Nazi anti-Jewish policy.

Frustrations with regard to the solving of the Jewish problems lowered the threshold to systematic mass murder. Until the spring of 1941, the policy of expulsion remained the leading motive in Nazi demographic engineering. Yet because of practical reasons, this proved an impossible quest: operation Barbarossa was being prepared and with the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Germans added even more Jews to the occupied territory.<sup>216</sup>

By March 1941, the last evacuations of Jews to the General Government came to a halt. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, occupying the remainder of Poland, an additional 250.000 Jews came within reach of the German Nazis. Instead of forcing these eastern Jews into ghettos, they were now killed en masse. By the end of 1941, already half a million Polish Jews were shot.<sup>217</sup> The problem of the 'temporary' ghettos was the overcrowding. A solution was found in 1941: the Germans would not halt the transports, but would reduce the Jews through other means.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 29.

<sup>214</sup> Browning, *The origins of the Final Solution*, 113.

<sup>215</sup> Ibidem, 137.

<sup>216</sup> Ibidem, 89.

<sup>217</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 164.

<sup>218</sup> Browning, *The origins of the Final Solution*, 334.

The gassing of Jews commenced in 1941, reaching its zenith in January 1942, when the largest number of Polish Jews got killed.<sup>219</sup> In December 1941 the experimental mass gassing of Jews in vans began, and there were "places of instant extermination", or extermination camps, erected in Chełmno and Pomerania. In March and April 1942 camps were established in Bełżec, close to Lublin, and in Sobibór. The fourth camp was in Treblinka. At first the interned Jews were shot with machineguns and their bodies burned; later they were killed through gassing. In addition to these four camps, the mass killing commenced in Auschwitz and Majdanek as well in 1942. In 1943 another four big gas chambers and crematoria were built in Auschwitz.<sup>220</sup> By the end of 1942, almost four million Polish Jews had been exterminated by the German occupier.<sup>221</sup>

### ***German Church policy***

Although comparably worst off, the Jews of Poland were not the only ones severely suffering from the German invasion and occupation. The Nazi plan for Poland was to break its foundations. In order to accomplish the destruction of the Polish society, its "social glue" had to be dissolved. During the first two years of the German occupation, the Polish elite was exterminated, cultural activities, schools and universities were banned or restricted.<sup>222</sup> Part of their design being the creation of *Lebensraum* for Germans, the Nazis wanted to subjugate the Polish people and culture, and in order to do that, they knew that the eradication of Poland's most important religion, Catholicism, and its most powerful institution, the Catholic Church, was crucial.<sup>223</sup> This manifested itself in the relentless German policy against the Polish Catholic Church. However, there was a considerable difference between German policy in the annexed part of Poland, and in the General Government. In the latter, German policy was restrictive, yet not in all areas of life. In the annexed territories, nearly the entire Catholic clergy were banished or arrested.<sup>224</sup>

The annexed territories, that became part of the German *Reich*, included the archdiocese of Gniezno-Poznań, dioceses of Chełmno, Katowice and Włocławek as well as parts of the diocese of Częstochowa, Kielce, Cracow, Łomża, Łódź, Płock and Warsaw.<sup>225</sup> Here, the Church suffered severely. Since this area was meant to be incorporated, every shred of Polish

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<sup>219</sup> Piotrowski, *Poland's Holocaust*, 29.

<sup>220</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 164.

<sup>221</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 29.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>223</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 22.

<sup>224</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 2.

<sup>225</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 60.



identity had to be removed. Clergy were arrested and persecuted; convents and churches were closed.<sup>226</sup> Nevertheless, Catholicism continued to exist, albeit germanised, because of the millions of catholic Germans in the Reich.

In the Pomerania region, almost every Church was closed, many were turned into warehouses, garages or stables and church property was confiscated. After some time these churches reopened, but only the priests who were registered on the German *Volkslist* were still there, which were few, as the rest were interned in concentration camps. In the Chełmno-Pelplin diocese the bishop was removed, along with everything in the churches that was remotely Polish. The bishop was replaced by the German bishop Carl Maria Splett.<sup>227</sup>

In the Warta region the Polish Catholic Church was "virtually decapitated."<sup>228</sup> The Church's involvement in charity or teaching was forbidden; the Church was deprived of its rights to possess buildings or land; and churches and seminaries were closed. The churches that remained were open only limited, barely any church holidays were recognized and ceremonies relating funerals, baptizing or marriage were only allowed to be attended by a small group of people. Materially, the Catholic Church in this region was constrained in every possible way. Between 1940 and 1941 all church property was confiscated and the Cathedral of Poznań was plundered. Church buildings were destroyed or turned into public secular buildings like concert halls.

The number of Priests in the Warthegau region was severely limited, and church attendance restricted. At the end of 1939 mass arrests and deportations of Polish clergy to the General Government were taking place. Of the 2500 priests of the region, 725 died in concentration camps and another 800 survived.<sup>229</sup> All these measures were designed to "diminish the religiosity and the patriotism of the Polish population in Wartheland."<sup>230</sup>

Danzig-Westpreussen and Kattowitz were treated slightly less severely, as the Germans aimed to germanise, not destroy, the Catholic Church in these two provinces. Polish attributes visible in language, objects, inscriptions and images were removed. Although at first, many Catholic buildings and their valuables were confiscated, these were yet again made accessible later on.

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<sup>226</sup> Dariusz Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', in: C. Rittner, S. D. Smith and I. Steinfeldt (ed.), *The Holocaust And The Christian World: Reflections On The Past Challenges For The Future* (Green Forest 2004) 74-78, 75.

<sup>227</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 60-61.

<sup>228</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 11.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibidem*, 11-12.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

The situation in Upper Silesia and West-Prussia was different. Here, intensive germanisation of the Catholic Church meant not only the replacement of Polish clergy, but also their arrest or execution. In the Diocese of Chełmno, over two thirds of the priests were arrested. Over 46 per cent of the Polish clergy were killed in Chełmno; 50.2 per cent in Włocławek; 38 per cent in Łódź; 36.5 per cent in Gieźno; 35.4 per cent in Poznań; 30.4 per cent in Płock. In all other dioceses less than twenty or even fifteen per cent of the priests was killed.

East of Upper Silesia laid Katowice, which became a part of Germany in 1939 as Kattowitz. The area was industrialized and therefore it was beneficial to the Germans if they stayed on friendly terms with the Poles there and kept the germanisation to a minimum. This policy included a moderate stance towards the Catholic Church. Indeed, clergy and Polish sacraments were removed from the Churches, yet to a much lesser extent.<sup>231</sup> In addition, the bishop of the diocese of Katowice, bishop Stanisław Adamski, appeased the Germans somewhat by cooperating: he called on the clergy and Polish lay Catholics to sign the *Volkslist*; and he accepted German clergy into the Church.<sup>232</sup>

In the General Government – which entailed Eastern Galicia as well after the Germans attacked the Soviet Union – German policy was different. The Church's fate was by no means propitious, yet here at least it was not "dismantled and destroyed".<sup>233</sup> Until 1941, the border region between the Soviet Union and Poland was especially well treated, as Hitler hoped to receive the support of the Catholic Church when he would declare war on the Soviets. Partly derived from the Papal tendency to denounce communism, he figured that the Polish Catholic Church might be quite eager to spread anti-communist thought amongst Poles. The idea was that the Catholic Church could be used by the Germans as a means of propaganda against communism.

No churches were closed in this area and the Archbishop of Cracow Adam Sapieha was not badly treated. However, some seminaries and monasteries were closed and their possessions confiscated; and despite the lack of direct confrontation with the clergy, there were several examples of the arrests and imprisonment of clergy.<sup>234</sup> However, these arrests were mostly limited to the clergy that were involved with resistance movements or illegal patriotic practices in education or charity. Death rates were relatively low: in the diocese of

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<sup>231</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 13-16.

<sup>232</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 63.

<sup>233</sup> Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', 75.

<sup>234</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 65.

Warsaw 11.5 per cent of priests died, in Lublin 10.9 per cent, in Cracow, Tarnów, Sandomierz en Siedlce it was a 'mere' 4.2, 4.3, 5.6 and 6.8 per cent.

Although considerably more moderate in the General Government than in the annexed areas, German policy towards the Catholic Church in Poland was still very restrictive when compared to the rest of Europe.<sup>235</sup>

### ***The Poles and the Holocaust***

In addition to the suffering of the Jews, the Poles themselves were victims of Nazi mass murder as well. How did they respond to the slaughter of their Jewish neighbours? In literature on the Polish Holocaust the idea is often presented that the anti-Semitism that was present in interwar Poland diminished due to the 'shared victimization', creating a bond between the Jews and the Poles.<sup>236</sup> However, this does not prove to be true, with regard to the overall Polish reaction to the Holocaust in Poland. In addition, there was quite a big difference between the fate of the Jews and the Poles during the German occupation, namely: every Jew was in danger of his or her life, not every Pole.<sup>237</sup>

According to Józef Garliński, the fate of their fellow Jewish countrymen was not prioritized by many Poles, as they were often more concerned with their own hardships during the occupation.<sup>238</sup> Even during the last, most destructive phase of Nazi anti-Jewish policy, the general Polish reaction was one of indifference, leading to passivity. This was perhaps motivated in part by the fear that the Poles would be the next recipients of such persecutions. During the first two years of the occupation, in addition to the German policy of discrimination and ghettoization, many Poles engaged in anti-Jewish excesses.<sup>239</sup> Garlinski argues that the German policy caused existing tensions between Poles and Jews to escalate, resulting in this kind of behaviour.<sup>240</sup> It might also be considered that the occupier's effective removal of punitive measures for crimes against Jews, facilitated politically extreme or simply antisocial elements among the Polish to act with tacit consent of the occupiers.

Jan Tomasz Gross paints an even more sombre picture with regard to the Polish reaction to German anti-Jewish policy. He argues that large parts of the Polish population

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<sup>235</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 17-18.

<sup>236</sup> David Bankier, *Nazi Europe and the final solution* (Jerusalem 2003) 158.

<sup>237</sup> Ibidem, 178.

<sup>238</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 165.

<sup>239</sup> Bankier, *Nazi Europe and the final solution*, 159.

<sup>240</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 164.

were even quite content with the German anti-Jewish policy.<sup>241</sup> In addition to their own anti-Jewish sentiments, German policy potentially provided economic benefits for the Poles. According to Gross, in Polish villages surrounding the concentration camps, property of interned or murdered Jews seeped into the local Polish communities.<sup>242</sup> Starving and dehydrated Jews awaiting certain death in one of the extermination camps were offered water and food by villagers for extremely high prices.<sup>243</sup> And whilst Jews were being gassed, their neighbours would search their houses for anything of value.<sup>244</sup>

In Eastern Poland, the existing anti-Semitism was given a new impetus when Poland was confronted with the Soviet Union in 1939. When the Soviets occupied Poland's eastern half, they presented themselves as the liberators of the Ukrainians, Belarusians and impoverished Jewish working-class from the yoke of the Polish landowners, encouraging revenge on these Poles.<sup>245</sup> Moreover, the Soviet invasion of Poland was less feared by the Jews than the Nazi occupation. This idea that Polish Jews would be better off in Soviet occupied Poland proved to be an illusion. In March 1940, the NKVD chief Beria decided that people who refused to accept a Soviet passport should be deported. People without a Soviet identity could not efficiently be observed and punished. In addition, the refusal of a Soviet passport could indicate the rejection of the Soviet system. The large majority of the Polish refugees were Jews from the German occupied part of Poland, who feared they would not be allowed to return if they would accept the Soviet identity. So the Jews became the victims of two regimes, as deportation awaited them in the East as well.<sup>246</sup>

So although in retrospect, the fate of the Jews under Soviet rule was grim, it is understandable that at the time, the Jews could not think of a worse fate than the one that would be suffered under German occupation. As a result, it was said that in many towns "Jews and other minorities participated in greeting the Red Army with flowers and cheers; Jews apparently were particularly conspicuous for kissing Soviet tanks."<sup>247</sup> The supposed collaborationist attitude of the Jews towards the Soviet Union combined with the suffering of the Poles by that same regime, enhanced Polish resentment of the Jews.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Gross, *Golden harvest*, 15-16.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibidem*, 31-32.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibidem*, 34.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibidem*, 42.

<sup>245</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 33.

<sup>246</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 141.

<sup>247</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 36.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibidem*, 37.

When in 1941 the Eastern part of Poland was invaded by Germany as well, Polish citizens murdered at least three hundred Jews during pogroms in the summer and fall of that year in Jedwabne, and other cities and villages in the Bialystok voievodeship.<sup>249</sup> These pogroms, not without reason situated in the area formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, were essentially expressions of anti-Soviet sentiment, relating Jews to bolshevism.<sup>250</sup>

Despite these extremes, the evidence does suggest that the Polish response to the Holocaust was immensely varied. Reactions varied from Poles risking their lives to aid Jewish friends or neighbours, to a general indifference, to an active participation in the persecution of the Jews.<sup>251</sup> Even the extermination of the Jews evoked a range of responses: from a genuine compassion, to the idea that “their fate is not our business”, to the extreme conviction that the Germans provided a timely solution to the Jewish problem in Poland.

Evidence of compassionate and altruistic behaviour among the Poles is also apparent. Polish Jews were indeed aided by thousands of individual Poles, coming from all classes of society. The help offered varied, from bringing the Jews in a death transport a glass of water, to creating and maintaining hideouts where several Jews could survive for months or even years. If Jews were married into Polish families, these families would often hide them during the war. There were also Jews who were helped, housed and fed by total strangers.

Whether caused by indifference to the fate of the Jews, anti-Jewish sentiments, the fear of death penalty, the severity of the situation of the Polish Catholics, or otherwise, Michael Steinlauf argues that it was passivity that characterized the general Polish reaction to the Holocaust.<sup>252</sup>

In his book *The Forgotten Holocaust. The Poles under German occupation 1939-1944*, Richard Lukas enumerates the causes for Polish anti-Semitism during the War years. Lukas states that the alleged Jewish pro-Soviet attitude and the association of Jews with hated communism resulted in greater anti-Jewish popular sentiment. He also claims that German anti-Jewish propaganda played a role. In addition, he agrees with Steinlauf that the lethal situation the Poles found themselves in did not lead to more compassion for the Jews; nor did the fact that helping Jews was punishable by death.<sup>253</sup> He omits one important factor: the

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<sup>249</sup> Gross, *Golden harvest*, 46.

<sup>250</sup> Mann, *The dark side of democracy*, 281.

<sup>251</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 30.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibidem*, 41.

<sup>253</sup> Richard C. Lukas, *The forgotten Holocaust. The Poles under German Occupation 1939-1944* (Lexington 1986)

influence of the anti-Semitism of the Catholic Church and the effect this must have had on Catholic Poles.

This is the factor that Ronald Modras emphasizes in his book *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland, 1933-1939*. Modras argues that after years of interwar anti-Semitism, encouraged by the Polish Catholic Church leadership, the "characters were well-defined" and the "mental habits and attitudes had become ingrained".<sup>254</sup> Indeed, by the time the Germans invaded and initiated their means of mass killing, with the help of Catholic leadership the Poles had already been convinced that the Jews were the enemies, and that they were the victims. So when "brutality came to Poland in September 1939, it was too late to inaugurate a massive change of public opinion".<sup>255</sup> According to Modras, popular Catholic attitude during the Holocaust was not substantially different from what it had been in the years prior to it: Jews were regarded as excluded from the Catholic sphere of moral obligation, and "the conviction that Jews were hostile to Catholic interests constituted a major reason for that exclusion."<sup>256</sup> The anti-Jewish stance of the Catholic Church would result in the fact that the fate of the Jews was viewed with "something less than outrage" by the majority of Poland.<sup>257</sup>

### ***The Polish Catholic Church and the Holocaust***

Gross concludes that "the war had demoralized people".<sup>258</sup> It is worth asking where, then, was the self-proclaimed national authority on morality, the Catholic Church; how did this central Polish institution influence and react to the mass murder and inhumane treatment of the Polish Jews. Did the gruesome realities of the Jewish persecution alter the pre-war anti-Semitic stance of the Polish Catholic Church?

Whereas most information on Church opinion during the interwar years was based on the attitude of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, during the war years a distinction can be made between the Catholic hierarchy; the convents, monks and nuns; and the individual, lower clergy, like priests.

In 1941 Polish Primate August Hlond issued a rapport on the situation of the Catholic Church to the Polish government in exile in London. In the rapport he mentioned that the Jews were

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<sup>254</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 323.

<sup>255</sup> Ibidem, 323.

<sup>256</sup> Ibidem, 406.

<sup>257</sup> Ibidem, 406.

<sup>258</sup> Gross, *Golden harvest*, 81.

corrupting Polish national and religious life, stripping the Catholic character of Polish villages and small towns, and that Jews were associated with everything that could potentially impair the position of Catholic Church in Poland. He also complained about the advancement of bribery by the Jews, their houses of prostitution, pornography and drinking. He concluded the rapport by saying that the Germans posed a solution to this Polish 'Jewish problem'.<sup>259</sup>

The silence with regard to the Jewish situation that followed the rapport was partly due to the fact that Hlond departed Poland to flee to Rome and later France. Cracovian Archbishop Sapieha replaced him. In Sapieha's letter to Hans Frank – Governor-General of occupied Poland's General Government territory – he raised religious affairs, the closing of higher education and the restrictions on charity.<sup>260</sup> Sapieha did not mention the Nazi slaughter of the Polish Jews, but did show his concerns regarding the German misdeeds against the Polish Catholic Church and Catholic Poles in general.<sup>261</sup> Although in his formal appeals he did not seem to care about the Jewish fate, Polish literature claims that he was generally regarded as helpful to the Jews. It was said that "a number of Jewish families had even found refuge in the Archbishop's home in Lvov".<sup>262</sup> Although according to Dariusz Libionka, up until mid-1942, this aid was only directed towards baptized Jews, other sources mention that Sapieha himself ordered priests to baptize Jews in order to save their lives.<sup>263</sup> Yet despite Sapieha's repeated protests against aspects of the Nazi policy, both publicly and privately in letters to Hans Frank, he did not protest against the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis.<sup>264</sup>

Archbishop Andreas Szeptycki of Lwów, ordered his clergy to let Jews take refuge in their Churches, and the bishop of Pinsk, Karol Niemira, cooperated with the Polish underground, aiding Jews.<sup>265</sup> Yet these were the exceptions to the rule. Despite the fact that the bishops in the General Government and in the former Soviet territories witnessed the murder of the Polish Jews first hand, it is argued that "not one of the three Councils held by the Polish bishops during the German occupation mentioned the mass murder of the Jews."<sup>266</sup> In the letters of the bishops to the pope as well, the annihilation of the Jews received little to no attention, and their concerns about the Polish Catholic Church had the upper hand. Overall,

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<sup>259</sup> Shmuel Krakowski, 'The Polish catholic Church and the Holocaust (some comments on Prof. Zielinski's Paper)', in: Otto Dov Kulka and Paul R. Mender-Flohr (ed.), *Judaism and Christianity under the impact of national socialism* (Jerusalem 1987) 395-400, 396.

<sup>260</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 21.

<sup>261</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 157.

<sup>262</sup> Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', 75.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibidem*, 75.

<sup>264</sup> Gross, *Golden harvest*, 112.

<sup>265</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 404.

<sup>266</sup> Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', 76.

testimonies and documents often reveal negative attitudes toward Jews held by Church leaders.<sup>267</sup> Even in documents published between 1942 and 1943, there is no sign whatsoever of concerns about the fate of the Jews by the Polish Catholic leadership.<sup>268</sup>

Stanisław Adamski, the bishop of the diocese of Katowice, cooperated with the Germans to the extent that he believed that submission to the occupier provided the only chance of survival of the Church.<sup>269</sup> Adamski was one of the many examples of Polish bishops in the General Government who searched for a *modus vivendi* with the Germans for the sake of the continued existence of the Church. In May 1940, the bishop of Kielce, Czesław Kaczmarek called his congregation to obey the Germans "in everything that did not clash with the Catholic conscience".<sup>270</sup> There is however, no additional explanation of what this may entail. Looking at the 'Catholic conscience' of the interwar years, the persecution of the Jews may not have conflicted with it.<sup>271</sup>

Catholic convents and monasteries appear to have been very helpful to Jews and Jewish children specifically. The Polish Żegota organization saved 2500 Jewish children. This was a secular Catholic organization founded by Zofia Kossak, a prominent lay Catholic and anti-Semitic author. Despite the fact that she still saw the Jews as alien and dangerous for the Polish culture, she decided to act according to *theologia crucis*: according to Christian morality, preventing the Jews from getting harmed. Of the Jewish children saved during the war, 500 took refuge in religious Catholic establishments, 180 of these Catholic institutions were run by 37 female orders.<sup>272</sup> An example of a female order aiding Jewish children is that of the Ursuline Sisters.<sup>273</sup> In the book *Judaism and Christianity under the impact of National Socialism*, Zygmunt Zieliński presents data on the aiding of Jewish children by twelve male orders (of the 44 present in pre-war Poland) and of 23 female orders (of the 63 present). When analysing the reports from survivors, the image emerges that Polish Catholic orders generally played a positive role in saving lives or otherwise aiding Jews.

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<sup>267</sup> Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', 76-77.

<sup>268</sup> Gross, *Golden harvest*, 113.

<sup>269</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 23.

<sup>270</sup> Ibidem, 24.

<sup>271</sup> Ibidem, 24.

<sup>272</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 155.

<sup>273</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 404.



In the parish of All Saints in Warsaw activities were organised to help Jews.<sup>274</sup> The Sisters of the Family of Mary, with its convents mainly located in Warsaw, sheltered groups of twenty to fifty Jewish children, and the Pastor gave them Aryan and Christian documents. The Sisters of Resurrection saved another fifty Jewish Children.

Other cases are known in which individual sisters provided food and water for Jews hiding in the forest after escaping the ghettos. There are also many reports of complete families finding shelter in these convents.<sup>275</sup> The help received by the Jews in these monasteries and convents was generally motivated by the idea that "it was a duty of conscience for the monks and nuns to help them."<sup>276</sup> However, in the part of Poland that was incorporated in the German Reich, most religious orders were abolished; and the remainder were under strict surveillance by the Germans. Plus, most Jews were expelled to the General Government and the eastern part of Poland. So the aid to Jews in the North-Western part of Poland by Catholic orders was severely restricted. Aiding Jews who fled ghettos or were looking for shelter was mainly possible in the General Government. Here, according to Władysław Smólski, most or even all of the Catholic orders participated in the aiding of Jews.<sup>277</sup> However, like everyone else in Poland, clergy faced the death penalty by helping Jews, as did everyone else present in the convent, monastery or educational institute where the Jews were sheltered.

With regard to individual lower clergy like priests, the picture appears to be more ambivalent. Polish circumstances assured that sympathetic actions towards the Jews were not without considerable risk. At the same time, "the inactivity of certain priests stemmed directly from their pre-war views on the Jewish problem."<sup>278</sup> Consequently, there are stories of both heroism and cowardice; even of outright support of the persecutions. While some priests helped Jews during the Holocaust, sometimes in contradiction to their own pre-war anti-Semitism, others admired the Nazi anti-Jewish policy and took advantage of it by confiscating Jewish property and valuables. Some individual clergy only aided Jews to convert them and gain souls for the Catholic Church.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Zygmunt Zieliński, 'Activity of Catholic orders on behalf of Jews in Nazi occupied Poland', in: Otto Dov Kulka and Paul R. Mender-Flohr (ed.), *Judaism and Christianity under the impact of national socialism* (Jerusalem 1987) 381-394, 384-385.

<sup>275</sup> Ibidem, 393.

<sup>276</sup> Ibidem, 386.

<sup>277</sup> Ibidem, 391-392.

<sup>278</sup> Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', 77.

<sup>279</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 155.

To demonstrate the ambivalence of reactions among the lower clergy, I will present some examples of clergy aiding the Jews and of clergy encouraging anti-Semitism or watching the Jewish persecution with indifference or even consent. Although up until 1942, help was mainly offered to baptized Jews, there are many examples in the literature of clergy risking their lives for Jews, providing them with false documents like baptismal certificates etc.<sup>280</sup> There are also examples of priests calling for resistance against Nazi policy from their pulpits. One of these priests was Dominik Wawrzynowicz, who urged people to help the Jews.<sup>281</sup> In the village Kampinos, a priest is said to have rescued Jews who were imprisoned in a camp nearby. After having himself discovered the gruesome circumstances in the camp, he preached to his congregation that they should aid their Jewish fellowmen. However, there is also evidence of anti-Jewish sermons by Polish clergy.<sup>282</sup> There were sermons in churches in which priests did not distance themselves from the anti-Semitism so closely associated with the German occupying force. Priest Feliks Grela expressed his appreciation for the Nazis during his sermons, stating that he regarded the extermination of the Jews as a good initiative.<sup>283</sup> According to Emmanuel Ringelblum, however, the most widespread reaction of the Polish clergy was one of general indifference to the fate of the Jewish people.<sup>284</sup> Indeed, there are many instances that confirm this suggestion. When in June and July 1941 Poles massacred the Jews of Jedwabne, the priest there did not take any action to prevent the mass killing from happening.<sup>285</sup> In Gniewczy, a Jewish family was abducted by the Polish Trinczer family. The women of the family were raped, the men tortured until the Trinczers got the information they wanted about the location of their valuables. The mother of the Jewish family escaped and reached the church stairs, begging the priest to save the lives of her daughter and grandchildren. The priest refused to help her.<sup>286</sup> When a pogrom occurred in Radziłów in July 1941, 800 Jews were murdered. The town's priest, Aleksander Dogolewski, was begged to denounce the atrocities by a part of his congregation, but he simply replied that all Jews were communists and that he had no interest in defending them.<sup>287</sup>

However, the reaction of the lower clergy cannot be generalized in such a simplistic way, as most individual clergy made their own choices, which differed according to personal character and beliefs. This lack of unanimity amongst the lower clergy was partly due to the

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<sup>280</sup> Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', 76.

<sup>281</sup> Krakowski, 'The Polish catholic Church and the Holocaust', 395.

<sup>282</sup> Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War*, 207-208.

<sup>283</sup> Krakowski, 'The Polish catholic Church and the Holocaust', 395.

<sup>284</sup> Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War*, 206.

<sup>285</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 156.

<sup>286</sup> Gross, *Golden harvest*, 60.

<sup>287</sup> Goddeeris, 'The catholic Church in Poland under Nazi Occupation', 5.

fact that the Polish Catholic leadership did not adopt an official public position towards the persecution of the Jews. Without a top-down imposed policy, or at least a suggested course of conduct, there was substantial room for the perception of the individual clergy, resulting in a variety of reactions.<sup>288</sup> The ones who decided to save lives, often did so because it was in accordance with their own, personal beliefs and interpretation of the Catholic faith. Although some clergy risked their lives, according to Nechama Tec, the overall contribution of the Polish clergy to the rescuing or aiding of the Jews is regarded as very modest.<sup>289</sup> The role of the Catholic clergy in helping Jews was by no means major in comparison to that of other segments of the Polish population.<sup>290</sup>

There appears to be a substantial variation in the reactions to the Holocaust of the local representatives of the Polish Catholic Church. It is instructive then, to compare this attitude to the Papal reaction and pronouncements in relation to the persecution of the Polish Jews. Were the local reactions partially in line with the guidance of the Holy See, or was it a departure from the Catholic Church's highest authority?

### ***Papal reaction***

The Vatican regarded Poland –often referred to as 'Rome's daughter'– to be the 'Bastion of Christianity' and the most prominent bulwark against the Soviet communist threat.<sup>291</sup> In addition, no Roman Catholic Church is autonomous, as they are all part of an international network, centralized in Rome. Bishops are evaluated every five years by the Vatican, and the religious situation and the Catholic Church in a country is under surveillance of the Apostolic Nuncio.<sup>292</sup> Therefore, the influence of the Vatican on the Polish Catholic Church is expected to have been considerable during the interwar and war years. During the turbulent 1930s, Pius XI did not say anything with regard to the thriving Polish anti-Semitism that was supported by the Catholic hierarchy. According to Michael Robert, a unanimous disapproval of anti-Jewish policy and behaviour by the Vatican could have made a substantial difference. Yet the Vatican remained silent.<sup>293</sup>

During the war, the Polish Catholic hierarchy made many appeals to Pius XII, informing him on the German atrocities against the Polish Catholic Church and its clergy. The

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<sup>288</sup> Tec, *When Light pierced the darkness*, 186.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibidem*, 147.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibidem*, 186.

<sup>291</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 329.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibidem*, 332.

<sup>293</sup> Michael, *A History of Catholic Anti-Semitism*, 149.

hierarchy of the Polish Church desperately wanted the Pope to denounce these actions of the Nazis against the Church, and, in any event, certainly expected him to do so.<sup>294</sup> The Polish Church was their main concern, and this was apparent in the communication of the Catholic leadership with the Vatican as well. With regard to the Polish Jews the Bishops whose dioceses lay in the Soviet Zone were mostly complaining about the Jews who had fled the German occupied part of Poland. These Bishops did not agree with the fact that the Jews were looking for shelter in chancery office buildings and Episcopal residences. Further to this, the hierarchy communications accuse these Jews of attempts to dominate the economy using unethical methods. The Apostolic Nuncio too, refrained from informing the Pope about the on-going massacres of the Jews; instead he made the decision only to report on the situation of the Catholic Church in Poland.<sup>295</sup>

In December 1939 the Pope expressed his grievances to the College of Cardinals with regard to the atrocities against the elderly, women and children. He also informed the world on the wrongdoings against the Polish people through radio and press in 1940. He mentioned the poor conditions the Poles and Jews were in. In his Easter speech he shortly mentioned the atrocities in Poland again, but only vaguely.<sup>296</sup> The Pope's apparent passivity towards the bearings of the Polish Catholic Church surprised even members of the Gestapo. Some of the Polish clergy interpreted it as either an alliance between the Pope and Hitler, or an outright sign of indifference of their hardships. Cardinal Hlond pointed out to the Pope that, through his silence, he was implicitly aiding Hitler and risked estranging the Polish Catholic Church from the Vatican. When this appeared to be of no avail, Hlond stated that he "doubted that it was the will of God that the atrocities and anti-Christian programs of the Nazis be passed over in silence".<sup>297</sup>

Through Nuncio Orsenigo, the Vatican pleaded the Germans for better treatment of Polish priests and Catholic laypeople, but this fell on deaf ears. In January 1942 the detailed letter the Pope sent to Hitler on the religious situation in Poland was answered with a threat towards the wellbeing of the Vatican itself. Later in the war the Pope made some desperate attempts to maintain the connections with Poland via charity and diplomacy. For example, he urged Hitler to stick to the Concordat between Poland and the Vatican with regard to the rights of the Catholic Church in Polish society, but this was in vain.<sup>298</sup> Finally, the Polish

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<sup>294</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 22.

<sup>295</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 133-135.

<sup>296</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 25.

<sup>297</sup> Ibidem, 23.

<sup>298</sup> Ibidem, 26-27.

bishop Stanislaus Adamski wrote in 1943 that Catholic Poland felt as if it were forgotten by its Pope.<sup>299</sup>

It was not until May 1942 that the systematic mass murder of the Jews in Poland was communicated to the Vatican by the Polish Catholic leadership. The bishop of Lwow, Andrej Szeptyckyj, wrote to Pius XII that Jews were killed en masse, and that he feared that the Polish and Ukrainian people would be next. Although substantial disclosure of the fate of the Jews by the Polish Bishops was not forthcoming, assuming that a certain degree of ignorance could explain the Pope's silence would be highly erroneous. There were other sources providing the Pope with the necessary information on the situation of the Jews in Poland. As early as 1940, the Polish embassy reported to the Vatican that pogroms against Jews were occurring all over Poland. When in 1941 all of Poland was occupied by Germany, the Jews residing in the area that was formerly under Soviet rule were shot instantly. This was not passed on to the Pope by the Polish Catholic hierarchy or any Catholic delegate in Poland. Pius XII was, however, informed by Monsignor Giuseppe Burzio 'chargé d'affaires' in Slovakia. A year later, Filoppo Bernardini, Apostolic Nuncio to Switzerland reported on the ghettoization of the Polish Jews.<sup>300</sup> The Polish embassy informed the Vatican in October 1942 that Polish Jews were being gassed, ghettos emptied, and that Jews were interned in camps and later killed. Many letters from all kinds of Jewish organisations and leaders arrived in Rome, discussing the desperate situation of the Jews in Poland. Even the President of Poland, Wladislas Raczkiewicz, informed the Pope from his exile in England on the mass killing of Jews and baptized Jews. In May 1943 the Vatican received an appeal on behalf of the Jews from the American Orthodox Rabbis, asking it to respond to the atrocities against their coreligionists.<sup>301</sup>

If his own Bishops, clergy and Polish Catholics were disregarded, how would Pius XII respond to the fate of the Jews? In the course of 1941, German terror throughout Poland was escalating with filled camps, many round-ups and public executions. This year later saw the start of the systematic mass murder of the Jews. Poland was now expecting the authority from the Vatican to protest, yet this was still not forthcoming.<sup>302</sup> Even when in 1942 calls for action came from all over the world, warning Pius XII that he should speak on behalf of universal

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<sup>299</sup> Morley, *Vatican diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*, 139.

<sup>300</sup> Ibidem, 134-136.

<sup>301</sup> Ibidem, 138-140.

<sup>302</sup> Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, 74.

Catholic morality in the Polish case, Pius XII refused act.<sup>303</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The outward reaction to the Holocaust by the Polish Catholic hierarchy was generally characterized by silence. There were some bishops who privately helped Jews, or that called for the assisting of Jews within their congregations. However, the general attitude of the Catholic leadership with regard to the Jewish question was one of apathy and even consent. Considering the hierarchy's impassiveness, their reaction was very similar to that of the Pope. In contrast, many convents and monasteries, monks and nuns, risked their lives to save, help, or shelter Polish Jews. So did a part of the lower clergy, personally or through their parishes and pulpits. Yet the overall attitude of the individual clergy is hard to define, as some did indeed risk their lives to save Jews, whilst others welcomed their persecution and expressed their enthusiasm for the German anti-Jewish policy in their church sermons.

Clearly there was considerable variation of behaviour within the ranks of the Polish Catholic Clergy, especially between the Catholic hierarchy and the religious orders. To the extent that the clergy and hierarchy played a negative role during the Holocaust, the question is why they were hesitant to prevent or obstruct the execution of a murderous policy –imposed by an occupying power that had severely harmed their Catholic Church as well.

Part of the answer already lies in the question: the Catholic Church itself endured substantial hardships during the German occupation of Poland. Its property and buildings were destroyed or confiscated, its clergy arrested or executed, its lay associations dissolved, its legal privileges removed and its educational work inhibited. Therefore, the majority of the Catholic hierarchy and clergy was pre-occupied with their own adversities in the General Government, whereas the Church in the incorporated parts of Poland was almost destroyed in its entirety. This German policy towards the Catholic Church drew the hierarchy's attention away from the fate of the Jews and considerably restricted the physical possibilities of individual clergy and religious orders to help the Jewish population. The situation of the Catholic population in Poland was also very alarming. The perils of their own, Catholic flock, was probably of more importance in the eyes of the Church's leadership than that of their Jewish neighbours. A third factor was the punishment the Polish Catholic clergy faced if they would aid the Jews: the death penalty.

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<sup>303</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 28.

However, all these factors would be insufficient to explain the culture of indifference, and sometimes even, collaboration on the part of the Polish Catholic clergy and hierarchy, if such attitudes were apparent in a country or environment where popular and Church sentiments were jovial and inclusive towards the state's Jewish population. Therefore, the most viable explanation for the negative role of the majority of the Catholic hierarchy and parts of the lower clergy during the Holocaust is that it was the result of the existing, pre-war attitude of the church leaders towards the Jews, regarding them as both an alien community, and a probable threat.<sup>304</sup> The pre-war anti-Semitism of the Polish Catholic leadership resulted in the fact that Jews were never considered fellow citizens by large parts of the clergy. The silence of the hierarchy and parts of the lower clergy was derived from a worldview regarding Jews as a corrupting influence on Polish society.<sup>305</sup> This anti-Semitism had its roots for the most part in the interwar period, and influenced both Polish laypeople and Polish Catholic clergy during the Holocaust. After years of fervent encouragement of anti-Jewish sentiments and policies, the majority of the Catholic leadership and part of the lower clergy were neither likely nor able to deviate from this interwar trend when the Jewish persecution reached its zenith during the Holocaust.

Although originated from a theological anti-Semitism, this anti-Semitism in the Polish Catholic Church was mainly political in expression, as Catholic antagonisms were "much more contemporary, this worldly, self-interested."<sup>306</sup> The Jewish community at large was associated with all thinkable perils of modernity. All these ideologies had one thing in common: they would weaken the position of the Catholic Church in Polish society, impairing the institution's interests and self-proclaimed rights. In the end, the majority of the Polish Catholic leadership, considered their struggle against modern ideologies, as expressed in anti-Semitism, to outweigh the Christian doctrine that condemns violence. With their political anti-Semitism, they were in accordance with the Pope, resisting "any effort to attenuate the power and influence of the church over Poland's public life."<sup>307</sup>

Yet in the absence of a uniform policy expressed by the church leaders, the monks, nuns, priests and other lower clergy were left on their own to decide whether they would act righteously according to the Christian doctrine, or would be guided by interwar anti-Semitism. Therefore, the individual reactions of the lower clergy to Jewish persecution were to some extent determined by local circumstances and personal principles as well.

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<sup>304</sup> Libionka, 'The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945', 76.

<sup>305</sup> Gross, *Golden harvest*, 114-115.

<sup>306</sup> Modras, *The Catholic Church and anti-Semitism. Poland 1933-1939*, 407.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibidem*, 341.

In conclusion, despite the fact that the Polish Catholic Church was a moral authority, its institutional interests, as expressed through political anti-Semitism, were the main reason for the majority of the Polish Catholic leadership, and a part of the individual lower clergy, not to act exclusively from a position of principled Christian moral reasoning during the Holocaust. Although this anti-Semitism had its roots in theology, the association of Jews with every possible enemy the Catholic Church faced in the age of modernity really was a conviction of the Polish Catholic leadership. For them, battling the Jews really meant fighting for the interests of the Catholic Church in Poland. For the Polish religious orders, the interwar anti-Semitism did not play any role in their considerations. Many monks and nuns risked their lives for the Polish Jews, and so did a part of the Polish priesthood.

This case study also shows that generalizing when speaking of *the* Catholic Church can be deceptive. The anti-modernism of the Polish Catholic hierarchy, leading to indifference to the fate of the Jews, was very much in line with Papal policy. However, the Polish convents and monasteries run by numerous brave monks and nuns are wronged when addressed in the same way as other parts of the Polish Catholic Church. The same goes for the individuals within the Polish clergy, preaching to their congregations that the fate of the Jews was indeed of their concern.



## Chapter 3

### **Belgium**

In 1830, The Netherlands was divided into two states according to cultural and religious differences within its population. The Northern Netherlands were overtly Protestant and the Southern part was dominated by Catholicism – differences appeared to be untenable. The people of the South, the Belgians, established their own nation: the Kingdom of Belgium.<sup>308</sup>

After World War I, political democratization, social legislation and the Flemish movement gathered momentum in Belgium. In 1918, King Albert I and his government announced the introduction of universal male suffrage. From then on, the Catholic majority in parliament ceased to exist and the coalition governments were divided on many issues.<sup>309</sup>

Discontent with their position in bilingual Belgium caused a marked shift to the right among many Flemings. In 1930, the Belgian government made Flanders and Wallonia legally unilingual regions, with only the Brussels area remaining bilingual.<sup>310</sup> In addition, the Belgian economy of the interwar period faced serious difficulties, as it was affected by the stock market crash of 1929 in the United States.

By the 1930s, the Belgian parliamentary democracy did not function properly. There was a widespread discontent with regard to the operating of the political system.<sup>311</sup> In addition, there were insurmountable social and economic issues on which the government failed to reach an agreement. The Socialists agitated for better circumstances for the Belgian workers, whereas the Liberal party committed itself to the interests of the middle class. The Catholic party was divided on the issue. Another problem was the Flemish question, entailing the plea of the Dutch speaking Belgians for effective equality and greater autonomy. The Catholics wanted to safeguard the Flemish interests; the Liberals were opposed to the Flemish demands; and the Socialists were divided on the issue.<sup>312</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, King Leopold III faced an increasingly tense international situation. Leopold advocated a policy of neutrality aimed at sheltering Belgium from the gathering storm of European conflict. Yet this effort proved to have been in vain. Germany invaded

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<sup>308</sup> Lieve Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War. Belgium and the Netherlands: a comparative approach.', in: Lieve Gevers (ed.), *Religion under siege; Vol. I: The Roman Catholic church in occupied Europe. 1939-1950*. (Leuven 2007) 205-240, 205.

<sup>309</sup> Martin Conway, 'Building the Christian City: Catholics and Politics in Inter-War Francophone Belgium', *Past & Present*, 128 (1990) 117-151, 119.

<sup>310</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 32.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibidem*, 17.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

Belgium May 10 1940, and King Leopold accepted capitulation on May 28 1940, after a campaign that lasted but eighteen days. From then on, Belgium was under a German military regime called the *Militärverwaltung*. This military administration was headed by General Alexander von Falkenhausen, who was primarily assisted by Eggert Reeder, head of the administrative staff of the *Militärverwaltung*. Formally, the Nazis did not profess any direct power over the country, and the Belgian administration remained intact. The public servants, mayors and police force continued to function under the leadership of Secretary Generals.<sup>313</sup> Although the Belgian civil administration was left almost completely intact under the German occupational force, it was subjected to a commanding government during World War II.<sup>314</sup>

In October 1940, the first anti-Jewish ordinances were promulgated by the German occupier. To learn how the Belgian Catholic Church and its clergy responded to the Jewish persecution by the *Militärverwaltung*, the first part of this chapter covers the (early) history of the Jews in Belgium, and the interwar anti-Semitism. The second part of the chapter will analyse Belgium during World War II, examining the German policy towards the Jews in Belgium and the relation between the occupier and the Belgian Catholic Church. I will consider the overall Belgian attitude towards the Holocaust and that of the Catholic Church in particular, distinguishing between hierarchy and (lower) clergy. In addition to determining what motivated the attitudes of the Belgian Catholic Clergy – answering the first part of my hypothesis – I will look for any discrepancies in the reactions within the Catholic Church, answering the second part of my hypothesis for the Belgian case.

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<sup>313</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 206.

<sup>314</sup> Ludo Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen* (Antwerpen 2006) 315.

## ❖Part I: Interwar Belgium

### *The Jewish population*

In Belgium, Jews had been present since the Middle Ages, many arriving as refugees from other European countries where they were persecuted for economic and religious reasons. In the Middle Ages, Belgium was still part of the Low Countries ruled by the Holy Roman Empire until 1433, when the Low Countries became part of Burgundy. Then, the Jews were relatively welcome, but did not integrate or assimilate. It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century when the first Jews were accepted into the bourgeoisie and granted civil (but not political) rights. By the end of the eighteenth and during the first years of the nineteenth century, the position of the Jews improved. Influenced by the enlightenment, Jews were very much integrated into civil society; a development that resulted in political, social and economic advancement. When the Southern Netherlands was incorporated into the French empire, a decree was issued on September 27, 1791 determining the overall emancipation of the Jews. From then on, legally, the Jews were equal to the rest of the population. In 1815, William I reunited the Netherlands after the French occupation, and the Jews in the south of the Netherlands received equal citizenship. The government and society welcomed the Jews and other religious minorities into the country.<sup>315</sup> In addition, the Jewish faith was recognized in the Dutch Constitution of 1815.

Belgium became independent in 1830 and the Belgian constitution of 1831 entailed freedom and equality for all religions. The majority of the Jewish communities were recognized by the state, legally protected and to some extent financed by the Belgian State.<sup>316</sup> With the law of March 1870 on equal treatment of all acknowledged religions, the last step was taken in the acceptance of the Jews into the state organs and civil society. This coincided with economic prosperity in Belgium. The Jewish emancipation stimulated these economic developments, and at the same time, the economic conditions contributed to this emancipation.<sup>317</sup>

In light of this governmental attitude represented in Belgian laws of equality and respected citizenship, it seems unlikely that there was any significant anti-Semitism present in Belgium. However, since 1585, the southern part of the Netherlands has been Roman Catholic

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<sup>315</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 212.

<sup>316</sup> Lieven Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews.' in: Lieve Gevers (ed.), *Religion under siege; Vol. I: The Roman Catholic church in occupied Europe. 1939-1950*. (Leuven 2007) 243–280, 246.

<sup>317</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 218.

almost in its entirety, which resulted in a strong religious anti-Semitism amongst the Belgians. Although the power of the Catholic Church was somewhat affected during the occupation of the French Republican and Napoleonic rule, the alliance between liberals and conservative Catholics against King William I once again strengthened the position of the Catholic Church in Belgium. According to Ludo Abicht, this church was pre-modern, and moreover, anti-modern. This means that its perception of the Jews had not been influenced by the enlightenment, resulting in a Catholic populace that still regarded the Jews as Christ-killers, according to the old stereotypes.<sup>318</sup>

When the conservative Catholics of France chose to support the adversaries of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, the Belgian Catholic opinion followed. The Dreyfus affair added a secular variation of anti-Semitism to the existing religious anti-Semitism. Apart from the fact that Jews were heretics, they were now regarded as part of an international conspiracy as well. French anti-Semitism infiltrated Belgian public opinion through French publications too, mostly due to the fact that Belgians were still predominantly French speaking. In 1889 Eduard Drumont wrote *La France Juive*, associating Jews with suspicious minorities like Protestants and Freemasons, claiming that they were manipulated by Jews behind the scenes.

So at the end of the nineteenth century, the more secular, economic anti-Semitism was present in Belgium, in addition to its traditional religious form. Despite governmental tolerance, there were anti-Semitic outbreaks between 1880 and World War I. The Jews stood out and were subjected to all kinds of critique, mostly economically orientated. There were reactions from the Belgian press that were most insulting, like that of the Catholic *Gazet van Antwerpen* (1891), excelling in its scolding of the Jews.<sup>319</sup>

In the year of its independence, less than a thousand Jews resided in Belgium. This number increased substantially from 1880 on, when East European immigrants, traveling through Belgium on their way to North and South America, settled in Belgium instead.<sup>320</sup> Many of these immigrants were Jews from Poland and Ukraine. In these countries, the Jews had a weak societal position; being a minority, they were discriminated against and they experienced substantial animosity. In 1881 this resulted in urban pogroms, leading to the

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<sup>318</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 246.

<sup>319</sup> Ibidem, 246-247.

<sup>320</sup> Pim Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945: overeenkomsten, verschillen, oorzaken* (Amsterdam 2011) 161.

aforementioned wave of immigrants, and part of them settled in Belgium.<sup>321</sup> The pogroms, which lasted until 1903, resulted in the eventual immigration of nearly 10.000 Jews who settled in Belgium.<sup>322</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, there were two Jewish centres in Belgium: Brussels, where mainly Jews from Germany and Holland had settled, and Antwerp, where Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia resided. Both cities counted thousands of Jews who at first were mainly travelling merchants, then craftsmen and factory workers, primarily residing in the middle class of society.<sup>323</sup> During the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews came to pursue more prominent professions. They became bankers, academics and industrial workers. Although these Jews hardly represented the entire community, it displayed the change in the Jewish social and political climate.<sup>324</sup>

Of the nearly 75.000 Jews residing in Belgium in 1940, 85 per cent had come to Belgium after 1918.<sup>325</sup> The first substantial migration of Jews to Belgium in the interwar years took place in the 1920s. These immigrants were mainly Polish Jews who had left Poland because of increasing anti-Semitism and underemployment. Many of these immigrants originally wanted to settle in America, but when the borders of the United States closed in 1933, a substantial number stayed in Belgium.<sup>326</sup>

The second wave was in the 1930s, with its peak in 1938 and 1939, when the Jewish persecution in Germany was at its height. Nearly 10.000 Jews fled Germany and settled in Belgium. Although they did not exactly receive a warm welcome from the Belgian government, they were tolerated, as their stay was at that point still only perceived as temporary.<sup>327</sup> During the 1930s, the Jewish population in Belgium went from 50.000 in 1930, to 70.000-75.000 in 1940. This was still less than one per cent of the total Belgian population as opposed to the Jews in Poland, where the three million Jews made up ten per cent of Poland's population. Moreover, whereas almost all the Jews in Poland were native, only six

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<sup>321</sup> Frank Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolgning tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 53-64, 54.

<sup>322</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolgning in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 161.

<sup>323</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 216.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibidem*, 222.

<sup>325</sup> Rudi van Doorslaer, 'Jewish immigration and communism in Belgium, 1925-1939', in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem 1998) 63-82, 63.

<sup>326</sup> Lieven Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews from 1918 to 1940 and its implications for the Period of the occupation', in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem 1998) 159-198, 160.

<sup>327</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolgning in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 162.

per cent of the Belgian Jewry was of Belgian nationality.<sup>328</sup> At the end of the 1930s, 90 per cent of the Jews in Belgium were immigrants, coming mainly from Poland. To a lesser extent they came from Hungary, Romania, Russia and Czechoslovakia. A large majority of the Jews settled in Antwerp and Brussels, the two other Jewish centres in Belgium were Charleroi and Liège.<sup>329</sup>

Despite popular prejudices, most Jews in Belgium were part of the lower middle class. The Jews that came to Belgium after World War I kept the same occupations they had in Eastern Europe, which generally entailed "commercial and industrial hand-crafted luxury goods sectors"<sup>330</sup> and the garment trade in Brussels and Antwerp in particular. The Jews were active in the diamond trade and industry, in cloth industry, and in manufacturing leather and hides. Overall, there were many Jewish industry-workers, small entrepreneurs and shopkeepers, Belgium's lowest income group.<sup>331</sup> Only a small minority of the Jews in interwar Belgium were part of the rich bourgeoisie. As the Jews were mostly small shopkeepers, the economic depression of the thirties had a devastating effect on their businesses. These small initiatives were struck the most by the economic crisis, leading to the impoverishment of a large part of the Jewish population. Many Jews turned to cottage industry and peddling and part of them became unemployed.<sup>332</sup>

With the large influx of Jewish immigrants came their social, cultural and religious organizations. In Antwerp, Jews tried to persuade the city and state to subsidize both public and Jewish schools, alongside the Catholic schools. Where Brussels had a more secularized Jewish community, in Antwerp there were a substantial number of synagogues and Jewish religious schools: schools for Jewish Orthodox girls and schools for Jewish Orthodox boys.<sup>333</sup> Yet the majority of the schools in pre-war Belgium were 'neutral': not associated to any particular religion.<sup>334</sup> In the 1920s, the Eastern European Jews created leftist political parties in Antwerp and Brussels, having in common the desire to create organizations "relating to every aspect of the Jewish immigrants' life."<sup>335</sup> Through education, moral and material aid, sports, etc. they formed a separate community.<sup>336</sup> There were native Belgian Jews as well, but

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<sup>328</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 160.

<sup>329</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 54-55.

<sup>330</sup> van Doorslaer, 'Jewish immigration and communism in Belgium, 1925-1939', 64.

<sup>331</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 163.

<sup>332</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 55.

<sup>333</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 162.

<sup>334</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 280.

<sup>335</sup> van Doorslaer, 'Jewish immigration and communism in Belgium, 1925-1939', 65.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibidem*, 65.

there were only four to five thousand of them, making up only seven per cent of the total Jewish population. Overall, the integration of the East European Jews in the Belgian society was limited. The foreign Jews kept their own language, culture and religion. This is partially explained by the fact that they were planning to migrate again, to America, later on.<sup>337</sup>

Although Chassidism stayed intact amongst the Eastern European Jews, and religion maintained an important place in Jewish life, the interwar period saw an increasing secularization amongst the Jews. This secularization trend was stronger among the Jews than the Belgians. Over half of the Jews in Belgium were freethinking.<sup>338</sup> Due to the exclusion, persecution and overall social misery, combined with the Russian revolution of 1917, many Eastern European Jews were socialists and predominantly communists.<sup>339</sup> Communism and socialism were the egalitarian solutions to the Jewish question. Communism served as a counterbalance for the insecurity they had in a society that had rejected the Jews. After leaving this overtly hostile environment, the Jews once again found themselves on the margins of another society, reinforcing their communist tendencies.<sup>340</sup>

### ***Belgian anti-Semitism***

According to Frank Seberechts, before and during World War I the anti-Semitism in Belgium was relatively weak.<sup>341</sup> In the nineteenth century, there was an anti-Jewish stance in Catholic circles, mostly based on the perception of Jews as Christ-killers and ritual murderers. In addition to this traditional, religious anti-Semitism, there were accusations of dubious financial activities. From 1880 on, the anti-Semitic publications increased in Belgium, but this was in no comparison to the anti-Semitic trends in France and Germany. As stated, anti-Jewish stereotyping was mostly found in Catholic circles, but this was also an international trend, comparable to that of the attitude of the Catholic Church as an institution. Liberal city governments were unfavourably associated with the Jewish financial world by many Catholics in Belgium; and many thought that the Jews were involved with revolutionary actions and conspiracies.<sup>342</sup> Despite the latent anti-Semitism in Catholic circles, Belgium did not have a real anti-Semitic tradition.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 163.

<sup>338</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 245.

<sup>339</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 164.

<sup>340</sup> van Doorslaer, 'Jewish immigration and communism in Belgium, 1925-1939', 81.

<sup>341</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 57.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibidem*, 56-57.

<sup>343</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 60.

It was not until the second half of the 1920s that aversion was expressed amongst the Belgian populace with regard to the presence of foreigners in general and Jews in particular. In magazines and during elections Jews were often made scapegoats based on perceived economic advantages and the fact that they were immigrants. Yet up to this point, there were no organized anti-Jewish press organizations.<sup>344</sup> The struggle for emancipation of the Dutch speaking Flemish from the French speaking Walloons was what occupied the minds of the Belgians first and foremost.

From the 1930s onwards, catalysed by the economic depression and the developments in Germany, anti-Semitism gained more ground. In Antwerp, for example, dissatisfaction with the local Jewish community emerged.<sup>345</sup> Jews were more often regarded as competition, stealing jobs from native Belgians. They were said to possess a monopoly in the economy, and were suspected of evading laws and taxes. Jewry was associated with capitalism, usury, and unlawfully obtained wealth. Ironically, Jews were also seen as Marxists and freemasons in politically conservative circles, often Catholic. Organizations were established whose sole reason for existence was anti-Semitism, based on Belgian, not Flemish, nationalism.<sup>346</sup> There were five anti-Jewish and seven National-Socialist organizations, having in common that they were all established after Hitler's rise to power; that the majority of their members came from the middle class, and that they were in close contact with the Nazis.<sup>347</sup>

Interwar Belgium saw the emergence of extreme right and fascist movements that had a limited yet very prominent following. The two most important right-wing political parties were *Rex* and *Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond* (VNV). The VNV claimed that the Jews conspired with communists, and communists were the enemies of the VNV.<sup>348</sup> By the mid-thirties, the press of the extreme right and fascist movements like *Verdinaso* published more and more anti-Semitic articles.<sup>349</sup> The extreme right associated Jews with communism and capitalism at the same time, considering them to be a threat to the Christian civilization.<sup>350</sup> From 1938 onwards, when more Jews fled from Germany to Belgium and the economic recession reached a new low, the Belgian right-wing strengthened its anti-Jewish stance.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 57.

<sup>345</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 165-166..

<sup>346</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 58.

<sup>347</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 168.

<sup>348</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 250.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibidem*, 247.

<sup>350</sup> Emmanuel Debruyne, 'Gedooogbeleid in al zijn gedaanten. Joodse vluchtelingen en België, januari 1933-september 1939', in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolgging tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 65-116, 78.

<sup>351</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 181.



Due to the economic situation and the prevalent idea that the Jews were outsiders who stole Belgian jobs, in the middle class sectors where many Jews worked, the situation was disastrous – annoyances developed into xenophobia and anti-Semitism. In order to win the popular vote over, Belgian right-wing political parties were inclined to target their positions according to these sentiments present among the middle class. With use of anti-Semitic statements, utilizing the economic argument and responding to the fear of communism –that was said to be spread by Jews, as they came from the 'communist east' – they aimed to win over the electorate.<sup>352</sup>

Anti-Semitism was not exclusive to the right-wing of Belgian politics. During the 1930s, the moderate part of Belgian political and popular groups toughened their attitude towards the Jews as well.<sup>353</sup> The stance of the Belgian government towards the Jewish refugees was somewhere between tolerance and a harsher approach, depending on the events in the country and the unstable political situation characterizing interwar Belgium. In a report of the *Openbare Veiligheid* of April 1938, considerable attention was paid to the Jewish question in Belgium. The immigration of the Jews and the dangers connected to it was mentioned. Those dangers were twofold: the Jews would spread communist ideas and they constituted unfair competition, using illegal practices. The report even went so far as to blame the anti-Semitism present in Eastern Europe on the Jews themselves.<sup>354</sup>

The Liberals and the Socialists rejected anti-Semitic ideas; the Communists defended the Jews as they were persecuted by the regime they despised. In addition, the conception of Jews being associated with communists strengthened this attitude. This same association made the Liberals wary of the Jews, despite the fact that they were against totalitarian regimes and therefore supportive of the victims of these regimes. Nevertheless, although the Liberals and Communist aligned themselves in solidarity with the Nazi victims, they were also to use popular anti-Semitic sentiments on occasion, in order to deflect the support for the right-wing and to win over the electorate of the country.<sup>355</sup>

Under the influence of the right-wing parties, the Catholic party became more conservative. Partially led by the traditional Christian anti-Semitism and strengthened by their fear of the atheistic threat of communism a spiritual and ethical anti-Semitism was indeed present, yet the Catholics did not propose concrete anti-Jewish measures nor support anti-

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<sup>352</sup> Debruyne, 'Gedoogbeleid in al zijn gedaanten', 109.

<sup>353</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 59.

<sup>354</sup> Debruyne, 'Gedoogbeleid in al zijn gedaanten', 80-81.

<sup>355</sup> Ibidem, 109-110.

Semitic violence.<sup>356</sup> The Catholics wanted the corrupting influence of Marxism and Freemasonry – both implicitly associated with Jewry – on Christian society to come to an end. In addition, for many Belgians, nationalism and Catholicism went hand in hand, due to the widespread association of the Belgian identity with Catholicism. The minority of Christian-democrats were less receptive to anti-Semitic ideas, emphasizing neighbourly love, the accommodating of refugees and toleration of the Jews.<sup>357</sup>

Despite some disunity in the Belgian government, Belgian immigration policy became stricter over time. With the large influx of Jews in 1933, the Belgian government decided that the Jews were no longer welcome. This decision was adhered to by all the different coalitions.<sup>358</sup> Over nine thousand police reports of the time concerned 'crimes' committed by immigrant Jews like bad hygiene, no valid passport and illegal street trade.<sup>359</sup> The Jewish refugees from Germany by the end of the 1930s were especially problematic for the Belgian government, as it aimed to maintain neutrality and avoid any involvement in the war. Thousands were held back at the borders and returned to Germany.<sup>360</sup>

This decision by the government to prevent Jewish refugees from entering Belgium was also partially motivated by fear of 'Jewish-communist activities'.<sup>361</sup> Overall, Belgian anti-Semitism was to a large extent motivated by the perceived communist-bolshevist threat, that seemed much more urgent than Nazism and Fascism. According to Ludo Abicht, this was partially the result of the fact that the Vatican "had, after all, signed a concordat with Nazi Germany."<sup>362</sup> Catholic Belgium sympathized with the Portuguese fascism of Professor Salazar and the discipline and order maintained in Mussolini's Italy. Years of anti-Semitic propaganda also had an effect on Belgian popular opinion. This anti-Semitism was theological, based on the Christian anti-Judaism; economic, arguing that the Jews were trying to rule the Belgian economy; and based on fear of communism and bolshevism. Catholic Belgians were told in their churches that Catholic clergy and faithful were persecuted in Russia and that the Church associated Jews with this godless regime, claiming that its leadership was filled with Jews. Only very independent minds would have been able to separate themselves from these anti-Semitic images of Jews as Christ-killers, capitalistic

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<sup>356</sup> Debruyne, 'Gedooftbeleid in al zijn gedaanten', 79.

<sup>357</sup> Seberchts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 59-60.

<sup>358</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 166.

<sup>359</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 248.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibidem*, 281.

<sup>361</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 184.

<sup>362</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 314.

exploiters and anti-religious communists.<sup>363</sup> In publications, authors regularly associated Jews with Medieval legends, Freemasonry, liberalism, inciters of revolution, socialism and capitalism.<sup>364</sup>

However, a distinction should be made between interwar anti-Semitic attitude in Antwerp and in Brussels. As Lieven Saerens stated, "an analysis of the general opinions of the Population of Antwerp regarding Jews in the 1930s shows that there was apparently, in the pre-war metropolis, a high degree of intolerance."<sup>365</sup> The Jews here were already stigmatized to a large extent when the German occupation started. Although the Jews were stigmatized in Brussels as well, more serious confrontations and hostility were apparent in Antwerp. This was probably the result of the local situation and the fact that many extremists lived in the Antwerp region. Almost all Jews in Antwerp were segregated in a separate part of the city, and there were separate Jewish trades and professions.<sup>366</sup> In addition, there were anti-Semitic riots, like the one in August 1939, when Jewish stores were plundered. This riot found the approval of the Antwerp Catholic press, claiming that certain Jews lacked respect for public order.<sup>367</sup> By the end of the 1930s, the staff at the German consulate in Antwerp reported to Berlin that "among the local population one hears more and more sounds expressing dissatisfaction about Antwerp being overcrowded with aliens because of the Jewish presence."<sup>368</sup> There were initiatives by Catholics in Belgium to fight anti-Semitism, but the populace lacked interest. This is probably due to the fact that over ninety per cent of the Jews were foreigners, not Belgian. Added to that is the fact that Belgian Catholics – seen from a long churchly, theological tradition – were prone to support anti-Semitism.<sup>369</sup>

With regard to the situation in Germany during the thirties, the Belgian Catholic public opinion was well informed, yet few spoke with disapproval in the press. Only the racist ideology and the violence against the Jews were explicitly frowned upon.<sup>370</sup> The Belgian government was indeed aware of the misdeeds and discrimination against the Jews in

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<sup>363</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 314-315.

<sup>364</sup> Lieven Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation' in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem 1998) 117-158, 126.

<sup>365</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 278.

<sup>366</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 189-191.

<sup>367</sup> Emmanuel Debruyne, 'Vluchtelingen en buitenlanders in een land op voet van oorlog, september 1939-mei 1940', in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolging tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 117-170, 119.

<sup>368</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 187.

<sup>369</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 304.

<sup>370</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 60.

Germany. They were in possession of an extensive report on the treatment of the Jews by the Germans: *Het IIIe Rijk en de Joden. Eenige Documenten, 1933*. This report should have alarmed the Belgian municipalities that their immigration policy endangered the lives of many Jews, but had no such effect.<sup>371</sup> Belgian public opinion was twofold: almost everyone disapproved of the persecution, especially when violence was used. Yet at the same time, the mass influx of needy refugees frightened the Belgians.<sup>372</sup> *Kristallnacht* did come as a shock in 1938, but taking in the Jewish immigrants was a whole different matter.<sup>373</sup>

Although Belgian anti-Semitism was more latent than dominant before the 1930s, the importance of the anti-Jewish discourse during the interwar years cannot be overstated.<sup>374</sup>

### ***The Belgian Catholic Church***

It is striking to see the extent to which Belgian politics, press and public opinion coincided with Catholicism or Catholic concepts. The influence of the Belgian Catholic Church is not to be disregarded. Ever since Belgium became independent in 1830, the relation between church and state had been favourable. The Catholic Church was independent and free of state control, yet received support from the state through the payment of the salary of the ministers and pastors. Belgium had six dioceses: Bruges and Ghent in Flanders, Namen and Doornik in Wallonia; two dioceses that overlapped both a part of Wallonia and a part of Flanders: Liège and Mechelen.<sup>375</sup>

The interwar Catholic Church was very powerful and had a considerable moral influence.<sup>376</sup> According to Martin Conway, even "despite a decline in religious practice at the end of the nineteenth century, Belgium remained dominated in the interwar years by the symbols and institutions of Catholicism."<sup>377</sup> Notwithstanding the effects of interwar secularization, Catholic influence was greater than ever. "The press, catechization, social and professional organizations, educational networks, and the pulpit, to mention only the most important, offered the Catholic Church numerous channels for propagating its ideas."<sup>378</sup> So, besides apostolic matters, the Church was also heavily involved in Catholic lay organizations, through which the Church had considerable influence on the Belgian youth, for instance. Catholic monks and nuns cared for the sick and the elderly, bishops were often viewed as the

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<sup>371</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 249.

<sup>372</sup> Debruyne, 'Gedooogbeleid in al zijn gedaanten', 109.

<sup>373</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 185.

<sup>374</sup> Seberechts, 'De Joden in België in het Interbellum', 61.

<sup>375</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 10.

<sup>376</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 207.

<sup>377</sup> Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 118.

<sup>378</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 117.

spiritual counterparts of the provincial governors; and priests played a prominent role in many areas of public life.<sup>379</sup>

In the interwar years, 98 per cent of the Belgians were baptized. A mere 1 to 1,5 per cent was protestant and the other minority religions had even less followers.<sup>380</sup> Eighty per cent of the funerals and marriage rituals were held in the Catholic Church.<sup>381</sup> Over half of the Belgian populace were churchgoing and the majority of the ones that did not go to church did still regard themselves as religious.<sup>382</sup> Belgium was the only European country where over half of the country's youth received Catholic education.<sup>383</sup> Belgium had been ruled by the Catholic Party between 1884 and 1914. Moreover, the Catholic Party saw its primary role in guaranteeing the interests of the church "ensuring through its actions in the temporal sphere that the institutions of the faith were able to operate effectively."<sup>384</sup> The clergy had a substantial influence on Catholic party politics, as the party acted according to the advice of the Belgian Episcopacy and the Pope.<sup>385</sup>

However, there were some regional differences. Flanders was more rural than Wallonia, so levels of religious practice were higher than in Wallonia. Catholic lay organizations like schools, youth movements and social organizations were especially represented in Flanders, where the church's strength was at its height, more than in industrialized Wallonia.<sup>386</sup> Nevertheless, the overall impression "remains one of a powerful and well-organized church exerting a preponderant influence over many areas of Belgian life".<sup>387</sup>

### ***Anti-Semitism in the Belgian Catholic Church***

Despite this strong position, the Belgian Catholic *Zuil* was constantly threatened. In the nineteenth century this threat presented itself in two conflicting and, from a Catholic point of view, hostile ideologies: liberalism and socialism. In the interwar period, the threat came from within as well: part of the Belgian Catholics felt drawn to the ultra-nationalist movements, resulting in the organization of separate political parties.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Mark van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem 1998) 225-234, 226.

<sup>380</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 10-11.

<sup>381</sup> Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 118.

<sup>382</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 225.

<sup>383</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 117.

<sup>384</sup> Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 119.

<sup>385</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 18.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibidem*, 10.

<sup>387</sup> Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 119.

<sup>388</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 208.

After World War I, the influence of the Catholic Church's official political representative significantly lessened. When universal male suffrage was introduced in Belgium, the Catholic Party had to share its power with other parties in coalition governments. In the interwar years, the Party was unable to obtain an absolute majority, and was forced to cooperate with Liberals and Socialists. Anger within Belgian Catholic circles about this loss of power in the government resulted in an overall disapproval of parliamentary democracy. Even the highest Belgian representative of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier, expressed his discontent with the universal suffrage. Publications such as *Revue catholique des idées et des faits* (1921), supported by Cardinal Mercier, traced the vices of modernity back to the corrupting influence of the liberal dogmas of 1789. The publication adhered to the idea that behind the parliamentary democracy, it were the Freemasons and the industrial elite who were pulling the strings.<sup>389</sup>

These Catholic grievances led to the emergence of dissident Catholic movements, groups and political parties. Whilst the Belgian Catholic Party represented the interests of the Catholic Church and positioned itself against the liberal anti-clericals, groups like the Catholic Action aimed for the "spiritual reconquest of the modern world by Catholicism".<sup>390</sup> In 1921 the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge* (ACJB) was established by Belgian intellectuals and students. The organization wanted "conquest and conversion", opposing the secularization trend. Catholic values were to, once again, "permeate the whole of society".<sup>391</sup> The organization aimed to stimulate Belgian Catholics to actively participate in the life of the Church. The ACJB received the support of Cardinal Mercier and Pope Pius XI. Both church leaders agreed with a more militant, offensive attitude towards the modern world.<sup>392</sup>

Had Cardinal Mercier been largely supportive of the ACJB, when Cardinal Jozef-Ernest van Roey succeeded him in 1926, the Church's leadership found that the ACJB rhetoric adhering an "expansive, integral and radiant Catholicism" conflicted with its conservative attitude. Van Roey aimed to protect Belgian Catholics against the evils of the modern world, resulting to some extent in a culturally closed, Catholic community. The intellectuals of the ACJB opposed this secluded form of Catholicism.<sup>393</sup> Although the militant Catholicism of the

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<sup>389</sup> Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 119-121.

<sup>390</sup> Ibidem, 123.

<sup>391</sup> Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 124.

<sup>392</sup> Ibidem, 122.

<sup>393</sup> Ibidem, 129.

Belgian youths was consistent with the ideas of Pope Pius XI, Cardinal van Roey and the Catholic Party positioned themselves against it.<sup>394</sup>

In the 1930s right-wing Catholic parties like *Rex*, *VNV* and *Verdinaso*, whose support had Catholic roots, became anti-Jewish.<sup>395</sup> The Belgian Catholic hierarchy was against these dissident movements. When in 1936, these extremist parties had great electoral successes the bishops made a statement denouncing not only communism, but also right-wing totalitarianism, emphasizing that they regarded democracy to be the best regime to secure the freedom of the Church. By this and similar statements, they weakened the position of these extremist parties and the position of the sympathizers of an authoritarian society within their Catholic Party itself as well.<sup>396</sup>

Clearly, the interwar Catholic hierarchy, headed by Cardinal van Roey, opposed the dissident, extremist (right-wing) movements, some of which developed an anti-Semitic stance during the 1930s. The question is if this also entailed an overall rejection and condemnation of anti-Semitic sentiments by the Belgian Catholic hierarchy and its clergy.

Anti-Semitism was present in the interwar Belgian Catholic Church. It had a religious background, regarding Jews as "money-hungry usurer" and guilty of deicide. These ancient religious and theological themes, combined with a segregated Jewish minority compared to large Christian majority enhanced the "we-they awareness". Religious anti-Semitism was strengthened with nineteenth century economic, political and social anti-Semitism, entailing new prepositions and themes.<sup>397</sup> The nineteenth century saw an on-going secularization and an increasing idea of Jewish 'competition'. As a result, the theological anti-Semitism succumbed to the more relevant social, economic and politically based anti-Jewish sentiments. Assimilated Jews were regarded as representatives of the French Revolution, undermining Christian values by means of commercial dishonesty, influence on the press and Jewish involvement in Freemasonry, socialism and capitalism. Through the association of Jews with all these reprehensible ideologies and activities, Jews were said to have a negative influence on the norms and values of the Christian society.<sup>398</sup> Although all these conceptions were adhered to by the Belgian Catholic clergy, racist anti-Semitism was denounced by them,

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<sup>394</sup> Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 127.

<sup>395</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 118.

<sup>396</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 209.

<sup>397</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 118-119.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibidem*, 151-152.

as conflicting with church doctrine.<sup>399</sup> The nineteenth century, 'updated' anti-Jewish attitude of Belgian Catholic clergy was part of the Catholic Church's overall response to modernization and secularization.<sup>400</sup>

The secularization of the Belgian lower classes was "proceeding apace and, from the 1880s onward, the Church saw the anti-clerical socialist movement, which maintained close contacts with Freemasonry, grow into an overwhelming danger."<sup>401</sup> These clerical prejudices against the Jews were illustrated by several events in the nineteenth and twentieth century. For example, when in September 1870, Italian unification troops occupied Rome, Belgian Catholic publications claimed that Garibaldi, who was known for his anti-papal sentiments, was supported by the Jews. In addition, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic clerical press was unanimous in their position that the "campaign for a review of Dreyfus's conviction was a conspiracy hatched by freemasons, Jews, anarchists and assorted anti-clericals."<sup>402</sup>

Belgian Catholic clergy found themselves confronted with a dilemma: on the one hand, the Church regarded Jews as enemies because of their religion and their presumed political and social affiliations. On the other hand, they had to propagate neighbourly love and the love for "thy enemies", in conformity with the Catholic doctrine, thus precluding physical violence and persecution.<sup>403</sup> This ambivalence was clear in the Belgian clerical publications that did not respond negatively to psychological violence against the Jews, but did condemn physical violence. In addition, whilst the communist or socialist press fiercely condemned anti-Semitism, they failed to denounce the persecution of the Church in Mexico, Spain and Russia. Relating Jews to communists and socialists, this fact made the clergy less inclined to outright condemn anti-Semitism in their publications.<sup>404</sup> This attitude of the Belgian clerics as expressed in their articles "faithfully reflected the views expounded in the official teachings of the Vatican."<sup>405</sup>

Despite this anti-Semitism, leaving virtually no room for clerical rapprochement to Jews or Jewry, there were lay initiatives for exactly this purpose: the improvement of Jewish-Christian relations. One of these initiatives was the *Katholiek Bureau voor Israël* (KBI),

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<sup>399</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 121.

<sup>400</sup> Ibidem, 151.

<sup>401</sup> Ibidem, 123.

<sup>402</sup> Ibidem, 124.

<sup>403</sup> Ibidem, 138.

<sup>404</sup> Ibidem, 138-139.

<sup>405</sup> Ibidem, 153.



founded in 1936.<sup>406</sup> The KBI functioned independent of the Catholic Church, but could, at first, count on Cardinal van Roey's support. It was however Van Roey who ordered the bureau to close in 1938. The answer to what motivated him to issue this order remains unclear, Lieven Saerens proposes a few plausible explanations. The disbandment could have been the result of increasing opposition coming from the more traditional Catholic circles and the Antwerp Catholic hierarchy. A second answer is that it could have been caused by the fact that Oscar de Férenzy gave a lecture in Antwerp on Jewish-Masonic conspiracy. Later, the leader of the anti-Jewish journal *Volksverwering*, René Lambrechts, had contact with Van Roey's secretary, and it is possible that he convinced Van Roey that the Jews were involved in Freemasonry.<sup>407</sup> This is especially credible, according to Saerens, as Van Roey was asked for his permission by the World Alliance for Combating Anti-Semitism in 1933 to let the London Jesuit Arthur Day speak in Antwerp in Brussels. Allegedly, Van Roey declined because he had been informed by Jesuit Karel van de Vorst that the Alliance had bonds with the Freemason lodges. In addition, Van Roey felt that the condemnation of anti-Semitism should be paralleled with the denouncement of communist anti-Church matters and the persecutions by the communist regimes; a common idea among Belgian Catholics at the time. A third possible reason Saerens mentions, is the supposed connection between the KBI and *Amici Israël*, which had been disbanded by the Pope. Finally, Saerens claims that the Cardinal may have thought that the KBI presented the Jews in too positive a way, stating that he "preferred that intervention in the interests of Jews be limited to saving souls."<sup>408</sup>

In March 1937 Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, denouncing myths concerning blood and race, but he did not mention nor explicitly condemn anti-Semitism and the persecution of the Jews. On April 13 a year later, the Holy Congregation of Seminaries and Universities, of which Van Roey was a member as well, issued the letter *Instructio de Raxismi Erroribus*, henceforth known as the *Race Syllabus*. It refuted racial doctrine, yet did not mention anti-Semitism. The Race syllabus was copied and sent to all European cardinals.<sup>409</sup> As a reaction to both the papal encyclical and the Race syllabus, Van Roey denounced the Nazi racial doctrine and National Socialism, labelling it as incompatible with the Christian doctrine.<sup>410</sup> In line with the papacy and the racial syllabus, Van Roey remained theoretical, and did not explicitly condemn or mention anti-Semitism and the Jewish

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<sup>406</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 142.

<sup>407</sup> Ibidem, 144-145.

<sup>408</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 146.

<sup>409</sup> Ibidem, 148-149.

<sup>410</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolgving in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 304.

persecution; an attitude that was copied by the Belgian clergy, and expressed in the majority of clerical articles.<sup>411</sup> In addition, Mark van den Wijngaert argues that Van Roey's attitude towards Nazi Germany was motivated by the news of the persecution of the Catholic Church in Germany. Van Roey would have feared that, if the Nazis would come to power, it "would undermine the strong position of the Catholic institutions".<sup>412</sup>

*Kristallnacht* was elaborately mentioned in the Belgian press, and with regard to the churchly disapproval of physical violence, it was widely assumed that this upheaval, resembling a pogrom, would be dismissed by the Belgian Catholic Church. Although there were some clerics who responded to *Kristallnacht* by taking on a more positive approach towards the Jews, the majority of the Catholic journals hardly mentioned the incident.<sup>413</sup>

In conclusion, in interwar Belgium, the Catholic Church, its clergy as well as its hierarchy, maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the Jews. Physical violence against the Jews was condemned, but psychological violence, by means of anti-Semitic legislation for instance, was tolerated. Either way, there was no open sympathy towards the Jews from either the Belgium clergy, or its church leaders.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 150.

<sup>412</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 227.

<sup>413</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 150-151.

<sup>414</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 243.

## ❖Part II:

### World War II and the Holocaust

#### *German anti-Jewish Policy*

During the first months of the occupation, no anti-Jewish policy was implemented yet by the *Militärverwaltung*. It was not until the end of October 1940 that the first series of anti-Jewish ordinances were promulgated.<sup>415</sup> This policy of leaving the Belgian Jews alone in the early months of the occupation was based on the instructions for the *Militärverwaltung* drawn up by Reeder in 1939-1940, ordering to avoid special measures against the Jews, trying to avert the impression that the Germans were planning to annex Belgium. In the summer of 1940, General von Falkenhausen assured the Belgian Socialist leader Henri de Man that "no special measures against the Jews were intended."<sup>416</sup> The *Militärverwaltung* reported to Berlin that the Belgian Jews were too few to present any problem in public life. By the end of October 1940, the implementation of anti-Jewish regulations was ordered from Berlin. Reeder and von Falkenhausen wanted to avoid political complications, but this conflicted with Himmler and the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA), the Reich's main security office. Throughout the Belgian occupation, there was a conflict between Reeder and his subordinates in the *Militärverwaltung* on the one hand; and the Brussels office of the *Sicherheitspolizei* (SIPO) and the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) on the other.

German anti-Jewish policy started with the registration and gradual isolation of the Jews in Belgium; between October 1940 and July 1942 their possessions were confiscated and their means of livelihood removed. On October 23 1940, ritual slaughter was prohibited and on the 28th of the same month, the definition of 'Jewishness' was specified. Someone was defined as 'Jew' if he or she had three Jewish grandparents or more and was part of the Jewish religious community, or if someone was married to a Jew. In case of doubt, everyone who was part of the Jewish religious community was defined as Jewish. In the same year, the registration of Jews and Jewish businesses was announced. Businesses, economic institutions, foundations or associations that were active economically and were in Jewish hands had to be registered as such. At the end of November, cafés, restaurants and hotels run by Jews had to be identified as Jewish enterprises. A Jewish register was created in Belgian municipalities. All Jews over fifteen had to be registered before November 15. These registrations were visible on their

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<sup>415</sup> Frank Seberechts, 'De Duitse instanties en de anti-Joodse politiek', in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolgning tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 271-286, 277.

<sup>416</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 150.

identity cards and the register was accessible to everyone. Jews were removed from public functions and professions that influenced municipalities or the government. They were not allowed to work as advocates, teachers or in the media.<sup>417</sup> Finally, it was decided in 1940 that the Jews who had fled Belgium, would not be allowed to return.<sup>418</sup>

Statutes regulating the Aryanization of the Jewish enterprises were implemented in March 1941.<sup>419</sup> By the end of May of that same year, a decree was issued, stipulating that the Jews had to register their possessions. In addition, in this month Jews were banned from supervising or managing functions. A curfew was set in August 1941, prohibiting Jews to go out between 8 p.m. and 7 a.m., and Jews were only allowed to move to Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroi and Liège.<sup>420</sup> In November, mixed marriage was banned; one month later Jewish children were excluded from public schools, and Jewish students were removed from universities.<sup>421</sup> From then on, they were only allowed to be educated in Jewish schools, by Jewish teachers.

During the first months of 1942, Jews were not allowed in medical professions anymore, unless they were treating other Jews. On January 17, Jews were forbidden to leave Belgian territory. In May, Jewish employees were deprived of their rights; only the worked hours were paid and the employer could fire them at will.<sup>422</sup> In the same year, the Jewish diamond trade was liquidated.<sup>423</sup> The regulations of 1942 were completed with the marking of the Jews, making them identifiable to the outside world: May 27, Jews over six years old were forced to wear the Star of David. It was not until June that the regulation was implemented, partly due to the fact that the *Militärverwaltung* feared it would cause compassion among the Belgians, but mainly because they feared that the Belgian administration would resist the regulation.<sup>424</sup>

When the Jewish community was effectively removed from Belgian society, the months August, September and October of the year 1942 ushered the next phase: the 'hundred days of deportation'. Within the *Militärverwaltung*, Reeder tried to maintain close supervision of the anti-Jewish policies because of their "potentially explosive political implications".<sup>425</sup> Yet by

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<sup>417</sup> Seberechts, 'De Duitse instanties en de anti-Joodse politiek', 277-279.

<sup>418</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 196.

<sup>419</sup> Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945* (Oxford 1990) 343.

<sup>420</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 154-155.

<sup>421</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 203.

<sup>422</sup> Seberechts, 'De Duitse instanties en de anti-Joodse politiek', 281.

<sup>423</sup> Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945*, 343.

<sup>424</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 204.

<sup>425</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 151.

the time the deportations started, the SIPO and SD took charge, directly acting on Berlin's orders. This while *Militärverwaltung* tried postponing and limiting all measures ordered from Berlin, planned by the police.<sup>426</sup> In July, Himmler did the concession to the Belgian Administration that the Belgian Jews would not (immediately) be deported. On the fifteenth, the Nazis organized a 'labour draft', which, in order to maintain this false pretext, did not include children or elderly. On August 4, the first convoy left from Mechelen to Auschwitz.<sup>427</sup> In July and August the sign-up was voluntary, but these applications decreased considerably as more Jews began to suspect the earnestness of their fate. The German police proceeded with the raiding of homes and arresting people, snatching them from the street, in order to reach their quotas. The labour pretext was no longer valid, as children and elderly were deported as well.

In Antwerp, in the end of September, the Germans raided rationing offices and schools. This resulted in a fierce reaction from the Belgian authorities. The *Militärverwaltung* responded by putting large scale operations on hold, aiming to prevent further agitation. The German police continued arresting Jews in their houses, at work, on the street and in their hiding places. November 1942 to August 1944 was characterized by the arresting and deporting of as many Jews as possible. It was a slow but steady hunt on the Jews who had escaped previous round-ups.<sup>428</sup>

Although German anti-Jewish policy in Belgium was comparable to that of the rest of German occupied Europe, some anti-Jewish regulations were prolonged because of the *Militärverwaltung's* political prudence. The *Militärverwaltung* zealously tried to avoid actions that would arouse adverse political reactions by the Belgian administration. This tendency characterized the entire occupation period, as they tried to avoid any actions that would obstruct the cooperation with the Belgians and the Belgian administration.

The *Militärverwaltung* succeeded in fending off any popular or political protest during the Belgian occupation and was able to maintain the framework of cooperation.<sup>429</sup> The German policy in Belgium was that of 'Lesser Evil', entailing a quiet persecution and trying to secure Belgian institutional cooperation on a national, provincial and local level.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 150.

<sup>427</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 245.

<sup>428</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 157-160.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibidem*, 149-150.

<sup>430</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 245.

### ***German Church policy***

This policy of 'Lesser Evil' was also applied to the German dealings with the Belgian Catholic Church. The occupier adapted the public services and the socioeconomic environment of the country to its own purposes, meaning that the Belgian political parties had no say in the governing of the country. Yet Belgium's main Church remained undisturbed, making it the "only major institution in the country that was able to retain the same stability as it had before the war."<sup>431</sup>

The *Militärverwaltung*, sensitive to popular feeling and governmental reactions, was aware of the moral authority and power of the Catholic Church in Belgium, and left it unharmed in an attempt to maintain the peace in the country.<sup>432</sup> The Germans were familiar with the Catholic Church's power, remembering the occupation during World War I, when they had experienced substantial troubles with the Church. Therefore, the German administration sought a *modus vivendi* with the Church: if the Church would not interfere in political activities, the occupier would withhold itself from meddling in the moral and spiritual spheres.<sup>433</sup> The German administration feared the influence of the Church and decided that churchly and religious activities could continue as usual in Belgium if they were not interrupted by warfare. They did restrain the Church's public activities, ordering that processions would be held in the church building itself.<sup>434</sup> Cardinal Van Roey accepted the compromise without any hesitation.<sup>435</sup>

This policy towards the Belgian Catholic Church was in stark contrast to the German Church policy in Poland. Recognizing the power and influence of the Catholic Church in Poland as well, in Poland, the Germans reacted with fervent suppression of the institution and its clergy instead.

### ***The Belgians and the Holocaust***

Like the German occupier, the Belgian government applied its own policy of 'Lesser Evil' with regard to their reaction on the anti-Jewish regulations. The Belgian Council of Legislation did not take a principal position against the registration of the Jews, nor against the posters saying that an enterprise was Jewish. Frank Sebrechts regards this to be in line

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<sup>431</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 226.

<sup>432</sup> Ibidem, 227.

<sup>433</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 304.

<sup>434</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 213.

<sup>435</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 304.

with the overall pragmatic and even compliant attitude of the Belgian government.<sup>436</sup> The Belgian government agencies and authorities in the economic sector were heavily engaged in the steps taken to segregate and remove the Jews in the Belgian economy. Overall, little action was taken by the various authorities to prevent the plundering of the Jews. Administrations involved in the organization of trade and industry were involved in the looting of the Jews, almost without any diffidence. However, the judicial authorities, amongst whom many notaries, obstructed the confiscations of Jewish possessions.<sup>437</sup> Up until May 1942, the Belgian immigration police fully cooperated with the Germans in the implementation of the anti-Jewish ordinances, including the regulations that violated the Belgian constitution.<sup>438</sup>

When the Jewish persecution became visible after the implementation of the Star of David, signs of protest appeared, as the municipal governments of Liège and Brussels refused to distribute them. In 1942 it became clear that the Jews were not deported to 'normal' labour camps, as entire families, including the elderly and children, were being deported. Although on a central level the Belgian government seemed to have been satisfied with the assurance that Belgian Jews would not be deported, local authorities started to resist the German policy.<sup>439</sup> Antwerp was the exception in the country. The German authorities had much more freedom in implementing the anti-Jewish regulations and persecuting the Jews than in the rest of Belgium. According to Lieven Saerens, the local administration, the officials and the city council loyally cooperated with the Occupying force.<sup>440</sup> In contrast to Brussels and Liège, the mayor of Antwerp did not oppose the enforcement of the yellow star amongst the Jews of Antwerp.<sup>441</sup> In addition, in the summer of 1942, two round-ups were carried out by the Antwerp police.<sup>442</sup>

Generally speaking, despite the attempts by local authorities to obstruct German anti-Jewish policy during the period of open persecution of the Jews, the "public statements of the civil

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<sup>436</sup> Frank Seberechts, 'De Belgische overheden en de Jodenvervolging, 1940-1942' in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolging tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 287-402, 288.

<sup>437</sup> Frank Seberechts, 'Spoliatie en verplichte tewerkstelling', in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolging tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 403-478, 460-461.

<sup>438</sup> Nico Wouters, 'De jacht op de Joden, 1942-1944', in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolging tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 545-654, 629.

<sup>439</sup> Ibidem, 565.

<sup>440</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 191.

<sup>441</sup> Wouters, 'De jacht op de Joden, 1942-1944', 551.

<sup>442</sup> Maxime Steinberg, 'The Judenpolitik in Belgium within the West-European Context: comparative observations', in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem 1998) 199-224, 212.

leaders really failed to measure up."<sup>443</sup> In compliance with the government, the Belgian population was generally indifferent towards the first regulations against the Jews. In the summer of 1940, people would stick notes to shop windows and doors indicating that a 'foreigner' or Jew lived there. There were several small riots at the market of Antwerp, but in Brussels and Liège as well, Jews became the victim of these anti-Semitic brawls.<sup>444</sup> When in May 1942 the wearing of the yellow star was implemented and persecution became visible, the solidarity of the Belgian populace enhanced, up to the point that many would eventually lend a hand in the aiding of Jews.<sup>445</sup> However, it was not until the mass round ups and deportations in 1942 that the passivity of many Belgians towards the occupier transformed into a more active opposition. Even then, for a long time, most people would resign themselves to the lies and illusions presented by the *Militärverwaltung* and the SS with regard to the true nature of the deportations.<sup>446</sup> In addition to the Star of David and other escalations of the level of persecution of the Jews, one of the main triggers to promote opposition was the implementation of drafting for compulsory labour in Germany, October 1942. Added to the increasing scarcity of basic necessities and overall harsher conditions, this development made many Belgians realize that they themselves too would now have to pay the price for the German occupation policy. The deportation of Belgians resulted in a certain amount of mutual understanding and solidarity. To some extent, interwar anti-Jewish sentiments were overshadowed by the presence of the German common enemy.<sup>447</sup> The razzias of the summer of 1942 did not result directly in open protest, but they did cause Belgian sympathy towards the Jews. Combined with a more general anti-German sentiment, help came from all layers of Belgian society: common worker to wealthy bourgeoisie, many offered shelter to the hunted Jews – yet still this was a minority.

Although the outcome remained the same, many of the help offered to the Jews in Belgium was motivated by an anti-German stance instead of a sincere sympathy towards the Jews.<sup>448</sup> The German occupation contravened Belgian patriotism. Unlike the Polish case – where anti-Semitism was completely disengaged from sympathy for the occupying force – in Belgium, because people were opposed to the occupier, they were opposed to the anti-Semitic

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<sup>443</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 229.

<sup>444</sup> Seberechts, 'De Belgische overheden en de Jodenvervolging, 1940-1942', 287.

<sup>445</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 193.

<sup>446</sup> Elisabeth Maxwell, 'The Rescue of Jews in France and Belgium during the Holocaust', *Journal of Holocaust education*, 7 (1998), 1-18, 6.

<sup>447</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 539.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibidem*, 535-536.



policy as well.<sup>449</sup> Many Belgians were very suspicious of the occupying force and would do anything to thwart the regime. If this meant that by it, the Jews were helped as well, this was not always due to humanitarian considerations.<sup>450</sup>

However, it is entirely plausible that many Belgians did indeed act out of compassion or sympathy as well. The attitude of the Belgian populace differed per regulation and evolved during the war. Virtually all Belgians condemned the razzias and deportations; even some pre-war anti-Semites recanted their opinions as a response to the harsh anti-Jewish measures in 1942.<sup>451</sup> Yet the majority of the Belgians first and foremost sought to survive themselves, not participating in opposition, or in the collaboration. A large part of the population kept to themselves as the country was infested with informants from the totalitarian regime.<sup>452</sup> In addition, the interwar anti-Semitism did have the effect of causing a certain degree of Belgian indifference towards the Jewish fate.<sup>453</sup>

There was a recurring discrepancy concerning Antwerp. In addition to the extended operations the Germans undertook with regard to the implementation of the anti-Jewish regulations, the anti-Semitic policy found more support amongst the Polish population in Antwerp, than comparable cities elsewhere in Belgium.<sup>454</sup> In Antwerp, the Jewish situation had worsened even before the deportations of 1942. On April 14, 1941, during a pogrom by collaborating Flemish organizations, the houses of two important Rabbis were set on fire together with two synagogues. Talmuds and Thoras were torn and burned on the street together with other religious objects, and hundreds of shop windows were smashed. A year later there was still disquiet in Antwerp; Jews were attacked and religious objects were destroyed.<sup>455</sup> Even though the pogroms "gave rise to real indignation among the populace for the first time" the attitude of Antwerp's citizens towards the local Jews still remained ambivalent.<sup>456</sup> This difference presented itself on wider scale between Wallonia and Flanders, and also showed in the percentage of deported Jews by the end of the war.<sup>457</sup> The fact that "Jews in Antwerp were less protected and more vulnerable than Jews in the rest of Belgium", resulted in a 67 per cent

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<sup>449</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 192.

<sup>450</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 317.

<sup>451</sup> Emmanuel Debruyne, 'Confrontatie met een ondenkbare uitroeiing, zomer 1942- zomer 1944', in: Rudi van Doorslaer (ed.), *Gewillig België: overheid en jodenvervolgning tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen 2007) 699-800, 724-725.

<sup>452</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 316.

<sup>453</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 228.

<sup>454</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 164.

<sup>455</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 249.

<sup>456</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 192.

<sup>457</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolgning in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 540.

deportation rate in Antwerp. This opposed to 42 in Charleroi, 37 in Brussels and 35 in Liège.<sup>458</sup>

Yet the documents of the SS showed that, as in all of Belgium, there were citizens in Antwerp that did in fact lend helping hands to the Jews during the War. Children and grown-ups were sheltered in individual houses and convents; boarding schools and orphanages housed Jewish children.<sup>459</sup> Belgian help was effective to the extent that almost half of the Jewish population was spared during the occupation.<sup>460</sup>

In conclusion, between 1940 and 1942 there was little to no reaction from the majority of the Belgian populace on the German anti-Jewish policy. There was virtually no discontent, open protest or outrage. In 1942, this changed as the persecution became visible with the implementation of the Star of David, and more severe during the deportations. This had substantial impact on Belgian public opinion. Nevertheless, the deportations of the Belgians themselves triggered more outspoken opposition to the German occupier, resulting in the aiding of Jews. Yet at the same time – to some extent in line with the government – there were Belgians who remained passive or indifferent spectators, in general and even with regard to the deportation of the Jews.<sup>461</sup>

### ***The Belgian Catholic Church and the Holocaust***

According to Lieven Saerens, the interwar anti-Semitism of the Catholic Church had caused a paralysis in the 1930s and prevented a timely, clear, unanimous attitude against Nazi anti-Semitism by the Belgian population. The fact that the interwar Catholic Church condemned physical violence, yet tolerated its psychological counterpart, already displayed certain ambivalence.<sup>462</sup> By 1940, after Germany occupied Belgium, the already widespread authority and power of the institution of the Catholic Church became even more important than in the interwar years. The Catholic Church was the Belgian authority least affected by combat, dislocation and exodus.<sup>463</sup> Traditional political parties and unions were either removed or marginalized by the Germans, causing the majority of the Catholic population to turn to one of the few remaining forces of the old order, the Church.<sup>464</sup> In addition to the Catholics, other Belgian groups now turned to the institution as well, seeking leadership and guidance in the

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<sup>458</sup> Saerens, 'Antwerp's attitude toward the Jews', 194.

<sup>459</sup> Abicht, *Geschiedenis van de joden van de Lage Landen*, 319.

<sup>460</sup> Ibidem, 324.

<sup>461</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 540.

<sup>462</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 152.

<sup>463</sup> Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium*, 11.

<sup>464</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 304.

years of occupation, "many were to call upon the Catholic Church for protection against Nazi terror and violence."<sup>465</sup> How did the Belgian Catholic Church respond to these requests?

### Silent Hierarchy

Despite Belgian expectations of clear, authoritative moral leadership during the perilous years of occupation, generally, the Catholic hierarchy failed to give any public lead to its flock regarding the rescue of Jews.<sup>466</sup> No bishop made any public statements condemning the deportation of the Jews; nor openly protested the persecution of the Jews.<sup>467</sup> Well aware of the circumstances in which the Jews in Belgium found themselves, Cardinal Van Roey never publicly condemned or opposed the razzias and deportations.<sup>468</sup> According to Maxime Steinberg, the hierarchy "stayed behind; it allowed the faithful to act [as they believed they should] but failed to give them its support".<sup>469</sup>

This silence of the Catholic Church's hierarchy was complimented with a mediating stance towards the German occupier during the first years of the occupation. When the Germans occupied Belgium, Van Roey realized that the German policy towards the Catholic Church was relatively mild in comparison to Poland, for example.<sup>470</sup> Van Roey acknowledged the occupier as ruler, adapted to the circumstances, and instructed the Belgian Catholics to do the same. He ordered his flock to adjust to the guidelines of the German authorities.<sup>471</sup> In the bishops' pastoral letter of October 1940 they called on the Belgians to love their fatherland within the limits of the occupational force. They stressed national solidarity and political passivity: no discussions should be held that could potentially divide the populace and threaten the future unity of the country.<sup>472</sup> This attitude of the Catholic hierarchy resulted in a 'peaceful' relationship during the first two years of government by the *Militärverwaltung*. The Belgian bishops were eager to maintain this stable situation, wanting no open confrontation with the German authorities, as this "could only have negative consequences for the Church."<sup>473</sup> Up until March 1943, there were no open, hostile manifestations towards the regime by the Cardinal, as the hierarchy wanted to prevent any harassment of Belgian clergy

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<sup>465</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 226.

<sup>466</sup> Maxwell, 'The Rescue of Jews in France and Belgium during the Holocaust', 5.

<sup>467</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 93.

<sup>468</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 269.

<sup>469</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 156.

<sup>470</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 305.

<sup>471</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 227.

<sup>472</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 216.

<sup>473</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 227.

and laymen.<sup>474</sup> These attempts to prevent any irritations between Church and occupier therefore served to protect the Catholic institution and its position in occupied Belgium.<sup>475</sup> Van Roey stated during the first year of the occupation that he was not principally against an autocratic regime, as long as it would acknowledge the rights of the Church.<sup>476</sup>

As a result, no commentary was made with regard to the German anti-Jewish policy during the first years of war. Van Roey did condemn any forms of collaboration with the occupier. He claimed that this conflicted with the Christian faith and the Belgian interests. This anti-collaborationist stance was expressed in general statements and through an ecclesiastical policy in which collaboration by church members was fervently discouraged.<sup>477</sup> Van Roey's attitude toward collaboration and collaborationist groups like *Rex* and the *VNV* was based on the fear that it would divide Belgium and Belgian Catholicism.<sup>478</sup> By July 1941, Van Roey publicly denounced collaboration, prohibiting the cooperation with a regime that affected "the rights of conscience and freedom of the Church".<sup>479</sup> From 1940 onwards, Van Roey did protest on behalf of the Belgian Jews, sending private protests to the German authorities, requesting exceptions for Jews with Belgian citizenship.<sup>480</sup> During the summer of 1941, Van Roey protested in a struggle for autonomy of churchly lay organizations, and in particular on behalf of the *Roman Catholic Workers Federation* and the Flemish wing of the *Catholic Trade Union*.<sup>481</sup>

In the course of the war, as the occupying regime evolved into a more repressive one, the Catholic hierarchy was not long to distance itself from their former position towards the regime.<sup>482</sup> This reaction was mostly centred around the interests of the Church and the Belgian populace, not the persecuted Jews. When in 1942 the Germans decided that miners had to work on Sundays and Christian or church holidays, the Archbishop protested with a pastoral letter that was read aloud in all the Belgian pulpits.<sup>483</sup>

The tensions between Church and occupier increased and culminated in March 1943 when the Germans declared that Belgians born between 1920 and 1924 were forced into

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<sup>474</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 227.

<sup>475</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 213.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibidem*, 239.

<sup>477</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 227.

<sup>478</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 305.

<sup>479</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 221.

<sup>480</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 228-230.

<sup>481</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 237.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibidem*, 214.

<sup>483</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 541.

compulsory labour in Germany. This regulation coincided with the news that the Germans had removed church bells required for the German war industry. Not amenable to the German argument that the compulsory labour served the battle against communists, in 1943 the Belgian bishops answered with a public letter against these compulsory labour round-ups.<sup>484</sup> On March 15, a pastoral letter by the bishops was read in all pulpits, condemning the forced labour, the sanctions taken against Belgians who refused to work and the confiscation of the Church bells. Nothing was said about the deportation of the Jews, as Van Roey tried to prevent a lasting breach between the Church and the regime.<sup>485</sup>

Despite Van Roey's silence, he had condemned the doctrine of blood and race in March 1942. The content of the speech continued his pre-war general line: a rather theoretical and heavily spiritual message that did not mention anti-Semitism or the persecution of Jews specifically.<sup>486</sup>

Where other Belgian bishops followed Van Roey's example, the only known exception was Louis Josep Kerkhofs, Bishop of Liège since 1927.<sup>487</sup> Bishop Kerkhofs "inspired lower-ranking clergy-men in his diocese to step forward and provide shelter for fleeing Jews."<sup>488</sup> His episcopate was the only one who organized direct help to Jews.<sup>489</sup> Kerkhofs supported illegal rescue organizations that brought Jewish children to Catholic institutions to take shelter. In his assistance of the Jews "Kerkhofs was obviously moved by his personal religious interest in the Jewish question. Even before the war, he had been the main inspiration for a pious Catholic organization for the Conversion of Israel."<sup>490</sup> Albert van den Berg was ordered by Kerkhofs to contact Leonard van Eynde, vicar general of Van Roey, to take care of some business with regard to the shelter of Jewish children. In Van Eynde's answer, he tried to avoid any connection with the official responsibility of the church authorities.<sup>491</sup>

While Van Roey only sparsely backed the Catholics who aided the Jews, Kerkhofs became the main stimulator of Jewish aid in the Liège region.<sup>492</sup> Van Roey worried about the activities his colleague from Liège was involved in and accused Kerkhofs of endangering the

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<sup>484</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 224.

<sup>485</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 541.

<sup>486</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 270.

<sup>487</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 223.

<sup>488</sup> Mordecai Paldiel, 'The rescue of Jewish Children in Belgium during World War II', in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem 1998) 307-326, 314.

<sup>489</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 231.

<sup>490</sup> Luc Dequeker, 'Baptism and Conversion of Jews in Belgium, 1939-1945', in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem 1998) 235-272, 241.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibidem*, 241-242.

<sup>492</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 542.

Catholic population, the young clergy and the interests of the Catholic Church. In an attempt to accommodate Van Roey, Kerkhofs refrained from public protest against the deportations of the Jews.<sup>493</sup>

Van Roey himself, despite his public prudence, on several occasions intervened through his secretary to help persecuted Jews and convinced the mayor of Antwerp not to cooperate with the deportations. However, the majority of these requests for intervention concerned Belgian Jews, baptized Jews or Jews in mixed marriages.<sup>494</sup> Van Roey also encouraged lay Catholics and clergy to help Jews, yet he refused to claim any responsibility for their actions and never publicly pronounced his approval. Although Van Roey was never personally involved in the aid, he did provide Jewish children with all kinds of provisions and financed the *Belgian Relief Committee for the Jews* to a large extent.<sup>495</sup>

What laid behind this prevailing silence of the Belgium Catholic hierarchy? According to Luc Dequeker the hierarchy reasoned that her opinion on the Jewish persecution would be clear, looking at the Christian doctrine. In addition, the bishops preferred to act in secret, supporting underground actions by clergy and shelter of Jews in religious institutions.<sup>496</sup> Lieven Saerens explains Van Roey's attitude by the fact that the Germans had assured him that the persecution would only involve foreign Jews; the fact that protesting to the Germans was useless; and the fear Van Roey had that he would endanger Jewish children already in hiding.<sup>497</sup> Pim Griffioen attributes the attitude of the hierarchy to the theological anti-Semitism, combined with Van Roey's fear that the Jews were connected to communists and Freemasons. In addition, Griffioen claims that Van Roey's priorities lay in the maintenance of Catholic organizations and education, avoiding all possible confrontations with the occupier. His prudent policy would have been aimed at preserving Church institutions.<sup>498</sup> Lieve Gevers attributes the hierarchy's attitude to the maintenance of the autonomy of the Church and Catholic organizations and the leadership's attachment to a unified nation, stating that Van Roey also felt responsible for the safety of the Catholic people and the defence of Catholic interests.<sup>499</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 223.

<sup>494</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 265.

<sup>495</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 222.

<sup>496</sup> Dequeker, 'Baptism and Conversion of Jews in Belgium, 1939-1945', 237.

<sup>497</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy Toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 156.

<sup>498</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 305.

<sup>499</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 222.

Although Van Roey was indeed informed about the open protests of bishops and priests in France and Norway, and he considered protesting the mass deportations in 1942, instead he chose to act in accordance with the Vatican: he chose quiet diplomacy.<sup>500</sup> In Van Roey's reactions to the policy of the occupying regime he seems to have prioritized the interests of the Catholic Church, the Catholic population and the fatherland above the issue of the persecution of Jews, although he was certainly worried about it.<sup>501</sup>

When Germany invaded Belgium, Pope Pius XII sent messages of sympathy to Belgium, yet did not condemn Hitler's aggression.<sup>502</sup> Although there was some communication between Van Roey and Cardinal Maglione, there are no specific reactions given by the Pope regarding the Holocaust in Belgium. The general inactivity of the Pope caused an authoritative Catholic message to be absent with regard to the Jewish persecution. As a result, the attitudes of the Catholic Churches differed per country. There is, however, a papal influence observable in the attitude of Van Roey, as it bears striking resemblance to the Papal attitude towards the Holocaust. Van Roey's attitude was one of prudent diplomacy, striving for a lesser evil, especially with regard to the interest of the Catholic Church in Belgium.

### Audible Clergy

Contrary to the Catholic hierarchy many lower clergy were actively involved in aiding the Jews in Belgium.<sup>503</sup> Dioceses wrote recommendations for Jews, provided false baptism certificates and Identity documents, offered shelter, supplied food stamps, and helped them flee the country.<sup>504</sup> Research shows that one out of five Belgian priests was directly involved in activities concerning Jews. This was mainly in the cities where the raids took place like Mechelen, Liège, Tournai and Namur.<sup>505</sup> Individual Catholic priests, nuns and monks took it upon themselves to act to save the Jews.<sup>506</sup> Priests opened their churches as places of refuge and gave baptism certificates.<sup>507</sup> Michael Phayer states that Belgium also exemplifies organized diocesan rescue to some extent. "Encouraged by their parish priests, Belgian Catholics responded by joining an effective underground rescue operation. Even more comprehensive than convent networks, diocesan rescue saved a great number of potential

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<sup>500</sup> Gevers, 'Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War', 222.

<sup>501</sup> Ibidem, 239.

<sup>502</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 55.

<sup>503</sup> Saerens, 'The attitude of the Belgian Roman Catholic Clergy toward the Jews Prior to the occupation', 155-156.

<sup>504</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 249.

<sup>505</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 231.

<sup>506</sup> Maxwell, 'The Rescue of Jews in France and Belgium during the Holocaust', 5.

<sup>507</sup> Ibidem, 10.

genocide victims."<sup>508</sup> Mordecai Paldiel even attributes the large survival rate of the Belgian Jews as being due in part to the "attitude of the country's predominantly Catholic clergy, who played a pivotal role in helping Jews elude their Nazi pursuers by sheltering the former in various religious institutions and urging laymen to do likewise."<sup>509</sup>

A few individual examples of clergy that organized activities to help Jews were Father Joseph André from Namur, Abbé De Breucker and Abbé Bruylants of Brussels, Dom Brun Reynders and Frater Paul de Man from the convent of Keizersberg in Louvain and a Frater Pierre Cappart.<sup>510</sup>

With the German invasion cumulating in the arrests and deportation of Jews, Father Joseph Andre Abbey of St. Jean de Baptiste Church in Namur, southern Belgium, told the *Commitee for the Defense of the Jews* (CDJ) (1942) that his church doors would be open.<sup>511</sup> He coordinated activities with the CDJ in finding hiding places for over two hundred Jewish children.<sup>512</sup>

Frater Henri Reynders, Benedictine in Abby Keizersberg in Leuven, sheltered some three hundred Jewish children in religious buildings.<sup>513</sup> Pastor Georges Meunier of Saint John and Saint Nicholas in Schaerbeek and his assistant Pastor Arman Spruyt baptized over 130 Jews between 1939 and 1944. They aided 22 Jewish children and many Jews turned to them for advice on hiding places for themselves or their children. Meunier was part of a secret association of priests who devoted themselves to rescuing Jews: *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (JOC)/*Katholieke Arbeidersjeugd* (KAJ). The JOC or KAJ counted twelve active members, amongst whom Pastor Meunier, Armand Spruyt, Schaerbeek priest Antoon de Breucker, Namur priest Joseph André en Benedictine Paul Démann. In Schaerbeek Antoon de Breucker, together with Fernande Henrard and a few parishioners, saved a total of 250 Jewish children.

The clergy from Kuregem were also heavily involved in the effort to help the Jews. The parish priests of Our Lady Immaculate played a big part in Jewish assistance: Pastor Jan de Ridder and assistant pastors Victor Verbiest, Leonard Bernaerts en Jan Bruylandts. Bruy is

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<sup>508</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965*, 125.

<sup>509</sup> Paldiel, 'The rescue of Jewish Children in Belgium during World War II', 307.

<sup>510</sup> van den Wijngaert, 'The Belgian Catholics and the Jews during the German occupation, 1940 – 1944', 232.

<sup>511</sup> Sally M. Rogow, *They Must Not Be Forgotten: Heroic Priests and Nuns Who Saved People from the Holocaust* (Martinsburg 2005) 97.

<sup>512</sup> Paldiel, 'The rescue of Jewish Children in Belgium during World War II', 314.

<sup>513</sup> Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940-1945*, 542.



said to have helped eighty Jews. During the raids on May 20 1943, the Sisters of the Holy Saviour in Kuregem saved and sheltered ten Jewish girls who had managed to escape.

The Franciscan Sisters for the Dissemination of Faith in Forest also offered help to the Jews in the Brussels area. Assistant Pastor Jean Massion persuaded his whole parish to help shelter the Jews.<sup>514</sup>

With regard to the clerical aid as well, there were some differences between the Flemish and Walloon part of Belgium. In Brussels and the French speaking part of Belgium, resistance among the clergy was more widespread than in the Flemish part.<sup>515</sup> In the Antwerp region, according to the homage list published in 1963 by Ephraïm Schmidt, only three of the 97 determined helpers of the Jews were clergy. In Mechelen, two priests aided the Jews, of the five helping clergy known in Mechelen.<sup>516</sup> Constant Goethals, assistant Pastor in Cathedral of Our lady, placed a Jewish girl in a nunnery. Assistant Pastor of Saint Anthony in Antwerp, Lodewijk De Paus, who was involved in this organized action, provided false baptismal certificates and sheltered a few Jewish youths and children. Priests of the Antwerp parish of Saint Joseph did not mention any help to the Jews by them or colleagues.<sup>517</sup>

This difference between Flemish and Walloon Belgium, or Antwerp and Brussels, is probably attributable to the deep penetration of anti-Semitism in the Antwerp region. Lieven Saerens states that, in Flanders, people were more anti-Semitic, making it more difficult for the clergy to aid Jews. In addition, helping Jews in Antwerp was more hazardous, as the occupying force was much bolder in its punitive measures.<sup>518</sup> However, taking into account the influence of the Catholic Church and its clergy on the Belgian populace, the difference between Flemish and Walloon clergy could also be the result of a more prevalent anti-Semitism within the Flemish Catholic Church itself.

In total, groups of clergy, primarily active in the French speaking region of the country, are reported to have saved over 1300 Jews.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 259-261.

<sup>515</sup> Ibidem, 251.

<sup>516</sup> Ibidem, 263.

<sup>517</sup> Ibidem, 261-262.

<sup>518</sup> Ibidem, 279.

<sup>519</sup> Saerens, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Catholic Church towards the Persecution of Jews', 276.

## *Conclusion*

Although interwar Belgium did not have an outspoken anti-Semitic tradition, there was a latent anti-Semitism present; initially influenced by Catholicism's theological variant, and later complemented with the European trend of political, social and economic anti-Semitism that had emerged in the nineteenth century. Yet it was not until the 1920s that real aversion towards the Jews was present amongst the Belgians; and even then, Belgian discontent was more generally focused on the many foreigners settling in the country and 'taking their jobs'.

By the 1930s Belgian anti-Semitism became more urgent, mainly influenced by the economic situation and the threat of communism. These attitudes were not surprising, as during the services in the Catholic Church, the Belgians heard about the persecution of the Church in 'godless' Russia and other communist countries. Belgian Catholic clergy told their congregations that the leadership of the communist regimes responsible for these atrocities was filled with Jews. Regarding the dominant position and considerable influence of the Belgian Catholic Church, separating oneself from these anti-Semitic images would have taken a very independent mind.

Notwithstanding the interwar Catholic attitude, the stance of the Church during the occupation was not as concerted as the years prior to World War II. With regard to the hierarchy, the first part of my hypothesis – stating that the Church acted in its own interests, disregarding its moral role – is largely correct. Although there is a difference observable between the attitude of the hierarchy before and after 1943, generally speaking, the attitude of the Catholic hierarchy was not particularly favourable towards the Jews. Especially during the first three years of the occupation, Van Roey and the Belgian bishops were mainly focused on preserving the rights and the position of the Catholic Church in Belgian society; its Catholic organizations; and Catholic influence on education. Because the Germans were relatively mild towards the Catholic Church, the hierarchy zealously tried to maintain the *modus vivendi*, as it was in the interests of the Church. The on-going anti-Jewish policies implemented by the Germans were no reason to deviate from this protective position towards the Church's own interests. In addition, interwar anti-Semitism, both its theological variant and its political counterpart – associating Jews with Freemasonry and communism, both threats to the Church – had laid the foundation for the hierarchy's attitude.

The hierarchy continued this mediating to minimize the damage to the interests of the Church, until it started to distance itself from the regime during 1942, mostly because the rights of the church were being eroded, but also due to the compulsory labor for the non-

Jewish Belgians, showing that the fact that the Jews in Belgium were foreign was of some importance. However, the idea that the hierarchy acted solely out of prudence to safeguard the secret, underground actions of its clergy, does not seem to have been of greater or equal importance to the hierarchy as the interests of the Church as an institution. It is clear to me that the Belgian Catholic hierarchy, especially Van Roey, acted in a wary and diplomatic manner towards the occupier, with the interests of the Church in mind. This attitude bears a striking resemblance to that of the Vatican and the pope during the war years.

During the interwar period no clear difference between the attitude of the Catholic hierarchy and lower clergy was observable – at least, none can be deduced from the literature. Both clergy and hierarchy denounced physical violence against the Jews; yet tolerated psychological violence. However, during the Holocaust, there was indeed a significant difference between hierarchy and clergy in Belgium. The hierarchy's diplomatic approach was in sharp contrast with the sincere sympathy of the majority of the Belgian lower clergy, who saved many Jews, providing them with false baptism certificates and Identity documents, offered shelter, supplied food stamps, and helped them flee the country. Contrary to Belgium's Catholic hierarchy, many lower clergy were actively involved in the attempted saving of Jewish lives. This case study shows that in Belgium, there was no such thing as the attitude of *the* Catholic Church during World War II. The hierarchy's stance, aiming to preserve the interests of the Church, be it at the expense of the Jews, differed substantially from that of the lower clergy, helping the Jews en masse. Yet Van Roey and the bishops' attitudes seem to have been very much in line with the papal, cautious diplomacy, largely neglecting their moral obligation, trying to stay on favourable terms with the Germans in order to preserve the interests of the Catholic institution.

## Conclusion

In the introduction of this Thesis, I stated that a grave discrepancy exists between Catholicism as a theology, and the interests of the institution that is supposed to promulgate Catholic doctrine and provide a morally authoritative role in society based on this doctrine. The first part of my hypothesis was therefore that, despite the fact that the Catholic Church is supposed to propagate the Christian doctrine, its interests as an institution meant that the Church's attitude during the Holocaust was not exclusively motivated by moral considerations. I have tested this theory on the Papal policy between 1933 and 1945, and on the attitude of the Catholic Church in Belgium and Poland during the Holocaust.

In order to find out what motivated the local Catholic hierarchy and clergy in their attitudes towards the persecution of the Jews, I first had to analyse the situation of both interwar and occupied Belgium and Poland.

During the interwar period, there are several very distinctive differences between Poland and Belgium, but also striking similarities. First of all, in Poland existed a large, native Jewish minority. There were almost three million Jews in interwar Poland, making up over ten per cent of the population. In Belgium, the Jews were a small minority that had only recently migrated to the country. There were approximately 75.000 Jews in Belgium, which was less than one per cent of the population. In both countries, the Catholic Church had been a theological enemy of the Jewish population throughout history, substantially influencing the popular opinion towards the Jews.

This was especially true for the interwar period. Anti-Semitism was strengthened in interwar Poland by economic hardships, political troubles due to Poland's disunity, and the Polish-Soviet war. In Belgium, anti-Semitism was less pronounced. Although initially anti-Semitism was latent and religious, during the 1930s, it became more political and dominant due to the economic depression and influenced by the developments in Germany. Yet Belgian interwar anti-Semitism was mostly part of an overall resentment towards the large influx of immigrants. In both countries, Catholicism was the dominant religion, and the Catholic Church the most influential institution. This resulted in the fact that both the Belgian and the Polish Catholic Church were able to exert considerable influence on the formation of the public's burgeoning anti-Semitism between the wars. The Polish Catholic hierarchy, but also parts of its clergy, proved to be highly anti-Semitic during the interwar years. This anti-Semitism had religious roots, but became incorporated into modern political arguments,

associating Jews with all kinds of threats to the Church as an institution like communism, secularism, Freemasonry and liberalism. Therefore, the clergy and hierarchy did not stop anti-Semitism; they actually helped to promote it. The anti-Semitism of the Belgian hierarchy and clergy was less pronounced, it was based on a traditional religious and economic anti-Semitism, but from the nineteenth century onwards, Jews were also associated with every possible modern enemy of the Catholic Church. In Belgium as well as in Poland, racism and physical violence towards the Jews was denounced by both the lower clergy and the hierarchy, yet there was very little open sympathy towards the Jews either.

The occupation by the Germans differed considerably in both countries. In Poland, the Germans adopted a very aggressive approach. Poles and Jews were seen as primitive and inferior races. Poles were not to be collaborated with; the whole country had to be trampled, especially Poland's most important institution and nationalist bulwark: the Catholic Church. The Germans executed a fervent anti-clerical policy, arresting or murdering clergy. In addition, church buildings were destroyed and church property confiscated. In Belgium, the *Militärverwaltung* adopted a policy of lesser evil. The administration wanted to prevent any upheaval amongst the Belgian populace, and particularly wanted to avoid any opposition within the Belgian Administration. Instead of an aggressive approach, the *Militärverwaltung* was cautious. They approached the Catholic Church in the same way. Although just as prominent as in Poland, the Germans chose to handle the Church with precaution, exactly because of the influence the institution had. With regard to the non-Jews, there was a difference between Poland and Belgium as well. In Eastern Europe, Jews and non-Jews were regarded to be *untermenschen*. In the West the Nazis felt a certain bond with their 'fellow Germanic peoples'. Therefore, in Belgium, the Jewish deportees were subject to much greater harm than were the non-Jewish ones; whereas in Poland, the Poles suffered considerably during the Holocaust.

The Polish reaction to the Jewish persecution was immensely varied. Yet there is a general sense of passivity amongst the Poles. Interwar anti-Semitism probably contributed to this stance. Although the Belgian population was generally indifferent towards the first anti-Jewish regulations, there is an observable difference between the period before, and during the deportations. Nevertheless, the help the Belgians offered was to a large extent based on an anti-German patriotic attitude, due to the introduction of compulsory labour in Germany. Many Belgians aided the Jews, but many more were concerned primarily with their own fate.

Now the question is what different reactions were evident in the local hierarchy and clergy over these disparate public behaviours of interwar and occupied Belgium and Poland. Which events were to spur the local Catholic clergy and leadership to speech or action?

The Polish hierarchy seemed to mainly concern itself with the German misdeeds against the Polish Catholic Church and the Catholics in Poland. The anti-Jewish policy was disregarded in all communications by the bishops. Direct protests to the Nazis did not involve any protests against the Jewish persecution. Even during the mass exterminations, there was no sign of concerns about the fate of the Polish Jewry by the Catholic leadership. This attitude was probably for a large part attributable to the interwar anti-Semitism of the Catholic Church. This anti-Semitism had religious roots, but was mostly political, associating the Jews with all possible threats to the Church. During the war, these ideas were supposedly still thriving amongst the Polish Catholic hierarchy. In addition, the lack of concern over the Jewish fate is probably also due to the simultaneous persecution of the Church itself and her Polish flock.

In Belgium, the hierarchy's response to the Jewish fate was generally one of silence. Although some privately helped Jews, neither Van Roey, nor any other bishop publicly condemned the persecution. Neither did they openly lead their congregations into protesting against the maltreatment of the Belgian Jews. Until 1943, the hierarchy was preoccupied with upholding a *modus vivendi* with the occupying regime. In 1943, there still was no public protest with regard to the Jewish fate, but there was regarding the confiscation of church property and the compulsory labour of native Belgians. Nevertheless, open confrontation between occupier and Church remained absent out of a certain wariness of potentially negative consequences for the Church. As most Jews in Belgium were immigrants, they were therefore of little concern to the hierarchy. However, the most important motivation to maintain a silent, diplomatic stance towards the Jewish persecution was the interests of the Church. The hierarchy aimed at keeping the Church out of the crossfire, and maintain the relations with the *Militärverwaltung* in order to protect the rights and position of the Catholic Church in Belgium.

The Catholic convents and monasteries in Poland committed themselves to helping Jews, especially to Jewish children. According to reports from survivors, the Polish Catholic orders generally played a positive role in the saving or aiding of Jews. Many female and male orders offered help sheltering Jews; and individual sisters and monks brought Jews in hiding water

or fed them. For them, it was a duty of conscience to help these Jews. Yet in the annexed parts, severe restrictions on Polish religious life obstructed help by these men and women to some extent.

Individual lower clergy, like Polish priests, were more ambivalent. Whether they helped Jews or not, depended on the individual. There was no top-down policy imposed by the hierarchy, so there was room for the individual perception of the clergy, resulting in a variety of reactions. Some helped Jews, and others admired the Nazi anti-Jewish policy or availed themselves of it by confiscating Jewish property and valuables. Whereas some told their congregation that they should come to the aid of their Jewish brethren, others preached anti-Jewish sermons. The attitude of these clergymen was influenced to some extent by interwar political anti-Semitism, but also by personal economic gain or theological conviction. In addition, next to the fate the clergy themselves suffered under the Nazi regime, aiding Jews was dangerous, as the clergy would risk a death penalty.

As opposed to many Polish priests, the Belgian lower clergy were actively involved in providing assistance to the Jews. Priests, nuns and monks often took it upon themselves as individuals to save Jews. Although there was a difference between the aid offered by Flemish and Wallonian clergy, overall, the Belgian lower clergy are reported to have saved over 1300 Jews. The lower clergy was highly motivated by personal considerations. Although in general, the clergy was less influenced by interwar anti-Semitism than the Polish clergy, this also differed in Flanders, where anti-Semitism had been more fervent. In addition, it should not be disregarded that the Belgian Catholic clergy and the Belgian populace were themselves in much less peril than the Polish were under the German occupiers.

In both Poland and Belgium, local circumstances played a role shaping the attitudes of the clergy and hierarchy. However, whereas individual lower clergy based their actions on personal moral convictions, in the case of both the Belgian and Polish Catholic leadership, a pattern emerges that indicates that the interests of the Church as an institution played a significant part in their attitudes towards the persecution of the Jews.

These attitudes of the hierarchy largely coincided with the Pius XII's policy, defending the rights and the position of the Catholic Church throughout Europe. Pius XII was clinging to the 1933 Concordat during the entire Holocaust, protecting the rights of the Church and the Catholics in Germany. Although certain documents from the Vatican showed that the Pope and his cardinals were essentially opposed to the National Socialist regime and its anti-Jewish policy, from a diplomatic viewpoint, Pius XII found it unwise to publicly protest against Nazi

Germany and the persecution of the Jews. This diplomatic stance was also visible in the Pope's reactions to the fate of the Polish and Belgian Jews; Pius XII remained silent. The Pope did however make himself heard, through his nuncios, when traditional rights such as marriage, education, or material interests of the Catholic Church were compromised. In addition, diplomacy did give way to fervent protest in the case of the communist ideology, which was regarded as a graver threat to the Catholic Church.

In the second part of my hypothesis, I argued that a nuanced approach is required when considering the role of *the* Catholic Church during the Holocaust, distinguishing between the Pope, the local hierarchy, and lower clergy. From the comparison and the analyses of motivations, it has become clear that a nuanced approach is indeed necessary when speaking of the role of *the* Catholic Church during the Holocaust. It appears from this study that a substantial difference exists between hierarchy, clergy and monks and nuns between countries, but also within one country. The hierarchy in both countries was largely motivated by the interests of the Church. In Poland this was expressed through political anti-Semitism that was based on a hostility towards all external threats to the position of the Catholic Church; and in Belgium this was visible in the conspicuously silent diplomacy of the hierarchy. These two aspects, speaking up against ideologies that threaten the Catholic Church, and overall diplomacy that was in the interest of the Church, were both visible in the policy of Pope Pius XII. Therefore, speaking of *the* Catholic Church, whilst only addressing the Pope, is correct to the extent that the local hierarchy of my two case studies were partially influenced by Papal policy based on the defence of the interests of the Church as an institution. The Belgian hierarchy embodied more the diplomatic part of the Papal line, and the Polish hierarchy the anti-modern and anti-communist political line. These choices were also influenced by local circumstances: a *modus vivendi* between Church and occupier in Belgium, but German suppression of the Catholic Church in Poland, where traditional anti-Semitism was also more of a factor.

The role of the lower clergy in both Poland and Belgium was based on individual choices. The fact that the role of the Belgian clergy was predominantly positive, as opposed to that of the Polish clergy, was due to local, political and historical factors. The Polish clergy was highly influenced by interwar political anti-Semitism and the perilous situation they were in themselves. The Belgian clergy on the other hand, were encouraged to aid Jews privately, and their fate was in no way comparable to that of the Jews. Then again, the role of the Polish and Belgian convents and monasteries in the aiding of the Jews was overtly positive, and



seemed to have had nothing to do with the sometimes negative role of the clergy and overtly negative role of the hierarchy. However, the help of the Polish monks and nuns was to some extent obstructed by the suppression of the Church and the dangers that they themselves faced.

In conclusion, the attitude of *the* Catholic Church towards the Holocaust differed when looking at the Pope, the hierarchy and the clergy. Attitudes even differed per individual and were largely depended on the local circumstances as well. However, to the extent that there appeared to have been a negative role for the Pope, and for the most part, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in both Poland and Belgium, this was bound to a remarkably high extent to the urge to protect and preserve the interests and survival of the Catholic Church as an institution.

Having stated in the introduction that no clear theory on churches and their role in genocide exists, this study shows the necessity of a more extensive research on the role of churches in genocides. My thesis has revealed that the attitude of the Catholic Church prior to and during a genocide has a significant influence and impact on popular attitudes and therefore on the effective accomplishment of mass murder or genocide. The Church has always claimed, and arguably holds, an important moral role in society, but with this comes also great responsibility. More importantly, I have demonstrated that in order to prevent genocide, "it is vital that the Church remains true and faithful to its prophetic vocation."<sup>520</sup> This was exactly where it went wrong: the Catholic hierarchy and the Pope chose the institutional interests of the Church above its role of propagating Christian morals, and encouraging action in the face of injustice.

I have also shown that, whilst researching the role of the Catholic Church in genocide, exclusively focusing on the policy conveyed by the Pope and the Vatican is misleading. Papal diplomacy, partially copied by a countries hierarchy, had little to do with the individual choices made by local clergymen. Local historical and political factors, the rank of clergy and their role within the institution, and lastly individual conscience; all these variables resulted in a great variety of behaviours within the Catholic Church, with morality being extremely relative.

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<sup>520</sup> Vorster, 'Preventing genocide: the role of the church', 388.

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