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Citation for final published version:

Heimann, Mary 2021. How the Vatican became a world player. Chamedes Giuliana. A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. [Book Review]. Diplomatic History 45 (5) , pp. 1010-1021. 10.1093/dh/dhab060

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhab060>

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## How the Vatican Became a World Player

*A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe*, by Giuliana Chamedes. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2019. 440 pp. Hardback \$39.95, £28.95, €36.00. ISBN 9780674983427

The Vatican, if by that we mean the central government of the Catholic Church, ceased to be taken seriously by most diplomats in the last century. According to an excellent new book by historian Giuliana Chamedes, who worked briefly as a journalist for ANSA, the Italian news agency based in Rome, this underestimation of the Vatican's role in international affairs is a mistake. Building on the 'religious turn' in recent scholarship which rejects master narratives of secularization and modernization as the keys to understanding the twentieth century, Chamedes' *A Twentieth-Century Crusade* returns the Holy See to a more prominent place in international relations.

Like other paradigm-shifting histories, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade* does not so much uncover sensational archival findings – despite being steeped in the Vatican Secret Archives and a diversity of state archives - as to reframe familiar topics, shaking the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into a different pattern, one which was hiding in plain sight. Where others have remembered Pius XII simply as 'Hitler's Pope', the silent papal bystander to the wartime destruction of European Jews, or else as the vociferous anti-Communist who helped to launch the Cold War, Chamedes places the pope's notorious actions (and inaction) within the broader context of a Vatican foreign policy developed during the First World War and which lasted until the 1960s.

At the start of the twentieth century, Chamedes reminds us, barely thirty years after the unification of Italy and loss of the papacy's temporal power, the Vatican's main bogeys were still liberalism and materialism. It was the United States, not Russia, which then appeared the most threatening to Catholic values and objectives. The opportunity for remaking Europe at the war's end was eagerly grasped by the Vatican, whose sympathies lay rather with defeated Germany and the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire than with the victorious architects of the 'new' Europe. It was the papacy's ambitious proposal for peace in 1917 which prompted US president Woodrow Wilson's to articulate his Fourteen Points, not the other way around.

Determined to seize the day, the Vatican brought out a five-volume Code of Common Law which came into force on 19 May 1918. This new codex significantly expanded the powers of the papacy within the Catholic Church. Crucially, it stated that 'where religious law conflicts with secular law, the former should be heeded.' One of the drafters of this hard-line version of Canon Law, Eugenio Pacelli, later became pope Pius XII. It was also Pacelli who radically changed the legal meaning of an old tool of papal diplomacy, the Concordat, in order to seek to recreate a series of 'Christian' states across Europe.

In what Chamedes describes as a 'veritable Concordat revolution', the Vatican persuaded newly emergent or remerged states such Estonia (which, despite its miniscule Catholic population, proved willing to sign a concordat), Latvia, Poland and Lithuania, to accept Catholic law. Presenting itself as the maker of an alternative peace settlement which was neither Wilsonian nor Leninist, the Vatican signed a dozen or more concordats with various leaders, mostly on the radical right. Having won back a state of its own, the papacy launched a first international radio station, Vatican Radio, and established a new arm of propaganda, the Secretariat on Atheism.

As left-wing radicalism became more threatening, not just in Russia, but also in Hungary, Austria, Germany, Italy and especially Spain, the Vatican's Concordat diplomacy began to be presented to national leaders not simply as a way to resist the Paris Peace settlement and

advance their own nation-building goals, but also to defend their states against the growing threat of international Communism. Hitler followed Mussolini in promising not to ‘infringe’ the rights of the Catholic Church, to honour the Holy See’s concordats with individual German states, to maintain state support for Catholic schools and to join in the Vatican’s fight against ‘atheistic organizations’.

Increasingly, the perception in Rome was that a Catholic international was needed to check the ambitions of the Communist international. A fatal turning-point, according to Chamedes, came in 1936, at the height of the Spanish Civil War. The 1864 Syllabus of Errors was being updated to include modern heresies, such as Nazism and Fascism, before being reissued by reigning pope Pius XI. The pope fell ill, leaving his tasks to be undertaken by Pacelli, then his secretary of state. Instead of publishing the updated Syllabus, which clearly condemned Fascism and Nazism, Pacelli sat on the paperwork. Eventually, in March 1937, the Holy Office explained that it was indefinitely postponing the planned update to the Syllabus, replacing it instead with a series of Encyclicals. These encyclicals, as Chamedes shows, ‘entirely subverted’ the originally explicit condemnation, turning the Vatican into an accomplice rather than a clear opponent of Fascism. The decision was to have long-term consequences for the Catholic Church.

The papacy focussed on European Catholics, not humanity at large, during the Second World War. On the rare occasions that papal concern was shown for the plight of European Jews, it was nearly always restricted to those Jews who had converted to Christianity. Even after the war, the Vatican’s anti-Semitic assumption of a link between Judaism and Bolshevism was not immediately shaken. Nor was its commitment to concordat diplomacy and anti-Communism. The Vatican resumed its interwar diplomacy, seeking new agreements with Italy and Germany and signing a new concordat with Franco’s Spain in 1953. Suppressing qualms about American materialism and liberalism, the Vatican joined the USA in vociferous condemnations of ‘godless Communism’ and helped to launch and sustain the global diplomatic impasse known as the Cold War. Meanwhile, lay Catholic movements, often inspired or led by those who had sharply criticised interwar and wartime Vatican policy at the time, created the post-war Christian Democratic international network which laid the modern foundations of European politics, family law, educational policy and civil society.

The Vatican’s past finally came back to bite it in the 1960s. Unable to restrain lay Catholic pressure from all parts of the globe for the Church to decolonize, democratize and modernize, the Church was led into unexpected directions by the Second Vatican Council. By the end of the twentieth century, under pressure from all sides, the Vatican had come to adopt almost every position dear to the liberal left, with the notable exception of sexual politics. The papacy, now presenting itself as a neutral force serving all humanity, embraced democracy and human rights; it denounced racism, colonialism, anti-Semitism and neo-Fascism. Following the Second Vatican Council, it even agreed to enter into dialogue with Marxists and to launch its own version of *Ostpolitik*.

The conservative-liberal pendulum has continued to swing first one way – as under John Paul II - and then the other – as under the current pope, Francis. Chamedes’ work suggests that these political swings are beside the point. Whatever one may think of any particular pope or individual policy, the significant fact is that the pontiff remains ‘a *sui generis* sovereign’, who ‘wields a megaphone’ and ‘commands a following right around the world’. The twentieth-century revolution which occurred in plain sight, but which it has taken Giuliana Chamedes’ imaginative, painstaking research to reveal, was the transformation of the papacy into a powerful political force for international Catholicism in the modern world.

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