Book Review

David I. Kertzer

Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe
(New York: Random House, 2014).

The main merit of David Kertzer's new book lies in his attempt to change the common narrative about the relationship between the Catholic Church and Italian Fascism as reflected in the story of two complex figures: Pope Pius XI and Benito Mussolini, both of whom came to power in the same year of 1922. The author has convincingly shown that 'the Vatican played a central role both in making the Fascist regime possible and in keeping it in power' (405). Just how close a relationship is revealed in the embarrassing story (already the subject of an article by Giorgio Fabre) of the secret deal Pius XI made with Mussolini in August of 1938 'to refrain from any criticism of Italy's infamous "racial laws" in exchange for better treatment of Catholic organizations' (405). The central players in making this pact were Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who a few months later would become Pope Pius XII, and the Jesuit Pietro Tacchi Venturi, who acted as unofficial liaison between the dictator and the pope. Kertzer's reconstruction of the events that took place in the crucial years between the world wars is based on the author's tenacious, seven-year-long screening of thousands of documents not only from Italian state archives but also church documents which have been fully available only since 2006.

David Kertzer, a professor of social science at Brown University, is well known for his strong criticism of the Vatican's policies in modern times — he published *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*,¹ *The Popes Against the Jews*,² and *Prisoner of the Vatican*.³ Given the author is a respected academic, one immediately asks about the genre of his book and thus its audience. Is it intended as a scholarly monograph or 'trade' nonfiction? The book's structure makes an answer to this question difficult. The text has detailed notes but they

1 David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

2 David I. Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

3 David I. Kertzer, *Prisoner of the Vatican: The Popes' Secret Plot to Capture Rome from the New Italian State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

are placed in the back of the book and are very hard to connect with the main text. Instead of a scholarly introduction, the book provides a prologue (which reads like the beginning of a novel) and the 'Author's Note' (a sort of conclusion) at the end of the main text, placed before the acknowledgments and the notes. The reader is introduced to a cast of characters, as if what follows were a drama and not merely dramatic. Furthermore, the narrative is not built on a systematic development of the author's argument but rather a series of episodes that are not always interconnected, as in a novel or in a newspaper article.

This mixture of genres leads – in my opinion – to misrepresenting historical evidence or, at least, to presenting it with insufficient complexity. More than a few examples in Kertzer's book could be examined to prove this point but space is limited here. Let us look, then, at just one example: a story of the attempted assassination of the Jesuit Pietro Tacchi Venturi – a major actor in Kertzer's narrative, and rightly so. The story appears in the chapter provocatively yet misleadingly titled, 'Assassins, Pederasts, and Spies.'

Here is Kertzer's account of what happened on 27 February 1928: 'Sixty-seven-year-old Father Pietro Tacchi Venturi, confidant of both the pope and the Duce, had narrowly escaped death. As he would later tell the story, he had been working at his desk in the building adjacent to the Church of Jesus [Il Gesù] when he heard that a young man wanted to see him. He told the doorman to let him in. As the young man entered, he pulled a knife from his coat and, without saying a word, plunged it into the Jesuit's neck. Only the priest's reflexes saved him, as he instinctively recoiled; the wound narrowly missed the jugular. The assailant ran from the building. Stunned, the bloodied Jesuit staggered to the hallway, where his colleagues rushed to his aid, the knife still lodged in his neck' (90).

In order to explain the motive behind the Jesuit's attempted assassination, Kertzer supports an argument offered by the director of Mussolini's political police that the young man did so because of the illicit relations he had with Tacchi Venturi. The author concludes, 'This was the secret that Tacchi Venturi wanted so desperately to conceal' (92). A startling explanation indeed, prompting this reader to search the back of the book and find note 18 buried on page 428. There, Kertzer explains that 'whether Tacchi Venturi had actually had an affair or sexual liaison, or sexually abused a boy or a young man, remains in the realm of speculation' and that 'the evidence, while tantalizing, is far from conclusive.'

Is it possible that the tale tantalized Professor Kertzer so much that he presented it not as a scholar seeking truth but as a journalist seeking sensational stories which cannot be fully verified but which, sadly, contribute to indicting

the character of his subject? A non-academic reader, inclined to skip the endnotes, especially if they are difficult to find, will remain impressed by Kertzer's portrayal of the Fascist Jesuit who tried to conceal his sexual relation with a young man, especially if this image is again repeated – in contradiction to the author's own endnote – in the book's conclusion (406).

Kertzer's entire account of Tacchi Venturi's attempted assassination is almost exclusively based – if you carefully look at the notes – on the documents from the police archives and, as far as I can see, there is no mention, let alone citation, of a document from the *Fondo Tacchi Venturi* at the Jesuit Central Archives in Rome, of which Kertzer was aware while working on his book (406). He also observed that '[w]hile Church documents offer precious new insight, they do not tell the full story' (406). One could counter that while state documents offer precious insight, they also do not tell the full story. During my work in the Jesuit archives, I counted 879 documents related to Tacchi Venturi's attempted assassination. Even if most of them are condolence letters and therefore not useful in reconstructing the attempted assassination, they should have been examined to offer a fuller account. For example, finding out that several people, including the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Gasparri, visited the Jesuit in the hospital, suggests that he must have stayed there for some time because his wound could not be just 'a relatively superficial, if long, cut' (93). Furthermore, Kertzer cites the 29 February issue of the *New York Times* dedicated to the episode but does not report that the article actually mentions the name of the youth and that he was arrested and considered insane. In Kertzer's version, which follows the report by the police, the youth escaped from the scene and was never found, and Tacchi Venturi tried to conceal his identity (93–94). Whatever sources the American newspaper relied on in its account of the episode, they should be at least taken into consideration by Kertzer in order to present a more balanced version of the facts.

Some other documents from Tacchi Venturi's archive in Rome, which apparently were not consulted by the author, may cast more light on that February day. In his intimate diary that the Jesuit priest wrote during the spiritual exercises he did in July 1928 – a few months after the attempted assassination – he wrote:

My God, my God! This is the 50th time in your Society that I had the grace to retire with you, all alone, in the [Spiritual] Exercises. A full half-century! For forty-one years following the death of my dear mother who taught me about you, I almost had a persuasion that I would follow her, that I would be the first of her children to join her in the grave! Time has

shown how these feelings were fallacious! Twice, in the space of nearly two years, I have been on the brink of the grave, and both times the hand of God drew me back.

Even though there is no explicit mention of the February episode in this excerpt, the context would suggest that Tacchi Venturi alludes in his confession to God to the attempted assassination that put him 'on the brink of the grave.' At least in the Jesuit's conscience, that incident was not just an altercation, as Kertzer believes, following the police report (93).

If Tacchi Venturi's spiritual diary does not prove sufficiently reliable to understand the nature of the attempted assassination, let us look at the Jesuit's calendar (which has been preserved in the Jesuit archives). Under the date 27 February 1928, Tacchi Venturi wrote: 'At 9:25AM I am assaulted by a hitman [*sicario*] in the parlor. God saves me miraculously. *Deo gratias* [Thanks God]! My life be chosen for him. *Deo gratias* [Thanks God]. My God, I love you. Save me!' I think any commentary to this text would be superfluous.

In conclusion, Kertzer's book should be for us a caveat of how our understanding of history depends on narratives offered to us by scholars who build them based on arbitrary decisions of what sources they decide to use and how they decide to present them to the public. It is unfortunate that Kertzer's often excellent effort to challenge the traditional history of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Italian Fascism has been tainted by the misrepresentation of primary sources.

Robert A. Maryks

Boston College

robert.maryks@bc.edu