

The Liberation of Rome, 1944: Did Hitler Know?

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I arrived in Rome in October 1945. I was drafted shortly after graduating from high school the previous June. It was a whirlwind experience that included four months of basic infantry training at Camp Blanding, Florida, a few weeks in Virginia, and then I was on the boat for Italy. The second time I arrived was almost half a century later. It was August 1989. I was nominated by then-President George H.W. Bush to be the United States Ambassador to the Vatican. As I walked amongst the historic relics from Roman antiquity, my curiosity reemerged about the peaceful liberation of this city that took place so long ago. I was still perplexed by the narrative of how Rome managed to elude the nightmare of being a battleground while so many of Europe's other historic sites fell victim to the horrors of the world's second greatest war. It is a question that has intrigued me to this day.¹

When I was in Rome for the first time there were several hundred thousand US military veterans with three to four years of combat experience waiting for their return trip home. I was dispatched to Leghorn, Italy, where I was to begin my assignment with the Information and Education Office. With plenty of free time in the late months of 1945 and two GI friends in Rome with me, I befriended some US Catholic clergymen associated with the Vatican.

One of these individuals was an elderly Monsignor of German-American heritage. He facilitated my conversations with a German priest I met while at Vatican City. We were sharing some "victory wine" the first night we met. The wine was recently confiscated as a result of the successful American offensive that helped bring an end to the war. After a few glasses, the conversation became heated. The escalation stemmed from claims made about the recent transition of the forces occupying Rome. At the time, I found the German

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¹ Ambassador Melady first began to wonder about the historic liberation of Rome during his tenure as Ambassador to the Holy See from 1989 to 1993. In 2012, as Professor and Senior Diplomat in Residence at the Institute of World Politics, he encouraged one of his students, Matthew D. Carter, to write a paper on the subject. The author wishes to thank Mr. Carter, who graduated from IWP in May 2012, and Winston D. Reid, the author's Executive Research Assistant, for their assistance in preparing this article.

priest's remarks to be shocking. "The good German leadership," he said flatly, "facilitated the peaceful liberation of Rome."

As an eighteen year-old draftee, I listened but kept quiet. However, in the following months, I investigated the priest's claim and discovered something rather intriguing about Rome's liberation. While the war was still raging, American and German officers met in the Vatican where Vatican officials had facilitated a dialogue between top-level officers of the two warring nations. For a period of three and a half days, no armed fighting in this region of the country occurred. This was highly unusual for wartime. In other campaigns throughout Europe, battles took place every day.

The goal of the dialogue was to save Rome from total destruction through bombardment and armed attack. I have wondered whether Hitler knew that negotiations were going on and whether these talks would lead to a peaceful transition of power from Axis to Allied occupation of Rome. Hitler had a record of bombing historical landmarks such as London when it was deemed strategically necessary for the Nazi expansionist campaign. German forces were well-organized and Hitler was the top commander in June of 1944. Thus, it seems strange that he did not even attempt to use Germany's military forces to prevent a peaceful Allied liberation of Rome. Since Hitler was the highest authority in the military, how could he *not* know about such a stronghold being forfeited to the enemy without a fight?

The first five years of the war were brutal. The Germans and British bombed their enemies' cities without pause. In many cases, the traditional standard of minimizing collateral damage to civilians was abandoned. Many lives were lost during the Allied advance up the Italian coast. Although the campaign nonetheless progressed, no decision had yet been made to take the Italian capital. The decision was not taken until a special meeting between the three Allied leaders: Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain, General Secretary Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union and President Franklin Roosevelt of the United States. They decided to capture Rome and use all military force to attain the objective.

Such a campaign, however, would have irreparable consequences. The eternal city is a bastion of the history of modern civilization and the capital of one of Europe's most expansive empires. The Vatican, the base of the Catholic Church for well over one thousand years, is located in the heart of Rome. If the Allies bombed the city, countless documents, priceless artifacts and antiquities would be destroyed forever.

Between the Germans, Americans and the Vatican officials, those in the Vatican were the most adamant about preserving Rome. The Americans were ready to take Rome through military force. It seemed that the German military leaders in Italy—at least initially—were focused on stopping the American onslaught. Thus, it was the Vatican that was proactive in coordinating negotiations between the warring parties.

Weizsacker's Deal

A leading figure in the deliberations was Ernst von Weizsacker. He is largely credited with saving Rome. He was named Ambassador of Germany to the Vatican on March 16, 1943.² Before leaving Berlin, Weizsacker sought out the specifics of his assignment. Upon speaking with Hitler, Weizsacker received authorization for “mutual non-intervention, no discussions on fundamentals, no quarrels.”³ Although the German government sent him to officially represent their interests, according to Weizsacker's memoirs, he left Berlin for Vatican City with his own agenda in mind. He noted to friends his appreciation for history and for the great architectural monuments of Christian civilization. Indeed, Weizsacker felt that “the real reason for which I have come to Rome [is for conversations about possible peace].”⁴

Early on, Weizsacker concluded that Rome would ultimately fall to the Allies. So what, then, were the most important steps taken to ensure that civilians would be protected, that artifacts would be preserved and that there would be a smooth transition between occupying armies? Weizsacker writes in his memoirs that, indeed, “steps were taken to ensure that Rome would not be harmed during the transition of occupying armies.”

The first step was the demilitarization of the city. This meant removing Axis artillery. The next was to “imbue everyone with the feeling that the Eternal City, with all it contained and signified, must on no account suffer damage.”⁵ By January 3, 1944, Weizsacker was already working tirelessly to accomplish these goals. In his later memoirs, he noted that “we members of the Vatican Embassy were [for] some reason credited with having played a part in the limited sphere of protection of the Eternal City and the Church.”⁶

If Weizsacker was the primary diplomat on the German side involved in the deal that liberated Rome without bloodshed, then General Albert Kesselring was the German responsible for effecting the change on the ground so that Weizsacker's plan could be properly implemented.

In May of 1944, the German army under General Albert Kesselring was reeling from the attacks of US General Mark W. Clark's and British General Harold Alexander's respective armies. During this time, General Kesselring was doing what he could to save what remained of his forces in Italy. Whether under orders from Hitler or on his own accord, General Kesselring made the decision, with Hitler's consent, to send the Allies proposals that Rome be regarded as an open city. (“Open city” status means that the city is declared undefended by one of the warring parties and cannot be a military theater.)

² Ernst von Weizsacker, *Memoirs of Ernst von Weizsacker*, translated by John Andrews, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951, 277.

³ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

According to the June 5, 1944 edition of *The News and Courier* of Charleston, South Carolina which cited a German Radio broadcast, as recorded by the Ministry of Information, General Kesserling submitted the following proposals to the Vatican with the request that they should be conveyed to the Anglo-American high command:

“The proposals confirmed recognition of Rome as an open city and these proposals read as follows: (1) That the belligerents recognize Rome as an open city; (2) Limits of the open city shall be as follows: From San Paolo except for a railway line to the north up to Tizza Maggiore, then from Tizza Maggiore following the railway line and the station Tiburtina to the east of the Villa Chigi; (3) The railway line and Tiburtina station shall be outside the open city area from Villa Chigi up to the Tiber bend one and a half kilometers (nine-tenths of a mile) south-southwest of the race course of the Torre des Quinto, from which the line shall run south of the Tiber to Ponte Milvio, which shall be inside the open area; (4) The line shall then run from the western tip of the Vatican City to Porta San Pancration and the Travestere railway station. The station itself is to be outside the area. The German high command understands to keep no military installations or troops within the confines of the open city. Furthermore the German high command undertakes to carry out no troop movements in Rome. Excepted from this condition are those authorities and police forces necessary for the maintenance of law and order and for supply of the town...”⁷

The Vatican’s influence helped facilitate Weizsacker’s deal and save Rome from a lot of suffering. Pope Pius XII was a chief actor in the campaign for Rome to be granted open city status. The American Catholic Church leadership, led by the influential New York Cardinal Spellman, joined the Pope in this effort. A common remark made by observers in the Spring of 1944 was that the “Germans would resist [doing] the extreme [but would] blow up all the famous places [if need be].” These ‘famous places’ refer to the areas around which the Germans had buried land mines. Aware that the Allied forces soon would advance on the capital, the Germans set up these defense mechanisms to hinder the Allied advance.

It also was rumored that the Pope was preparing to flee the Vatican with a fleet of armored cars. As Robert Katz points out in his book, *The Battle for Rome*, “The truth,” he says, “was that no one would know with any certainty, not the Allies, less so the Resistance and not even the Germans, [that the Pope would leave the city].” In the end, only Italian dictator Benito Mussolini would express his desire to see Rome flattened into rubble like the Abbey at Monte Cassino. Additionally, it would be only the Pope who would lift his voice in a warning of damnation, deeming that “whosoever raises his hand against Rome will be guilty of matricide before the civilized world and the eternal judgment of God.”⁸ It is important to note that Mussolini was ousted from his dictatorship in 1943, the year before Rome was liberated. The ‘Resistance’ mentioned in Katz’s

⁷ “Open City Rules Offered by Kesselring.” *The News and Courier*, 5 June 1944, 1.

⁸ Robert Katz, *The Battle for Rome: The Germans, the Allies, the Partisans, and the Pope, September 1943-June 1944*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, 351.

quotation refers to the anti-fascist Resistance group that was fighting against fascist rule, an effort effectuated in concert with the Allied war campaign.

Vatican-US Correspondence

Pope Pius XII and President Roosevelt kept in close contact throughout the early stages of the war. In these conversations, Roosevelt made clear his desire to help the people of Rome. However, he always maintained that the decision had to be made in terms of the best interests of the United States. Roosevelt illustrated this mindset in a letter he sent Pope Pius concerning the bombing of Rome. Roosevelt wrote on June 16, 1943 that “attacks against Italy are limited, to the extent humanly possible, to military objectives....In the event it should be found militarily necessary for Allied planes to operate over Rome, our aviators are thoroughly informed as to the location of the Vatican and have been specifically instructed to prevent bombs from falling within Vatican City.”⁹

While Roosevelt clearly articulated his intentions in preventing the bombardment of Rome, he could not promise it, particularly if it became necessary in order to achieve a strategic military objective. However, there is evidence to suggest that Roosevelt gave the Pope assurances against the total destruction of Rome. The President did this through his Personal Representative and Diplomat to the Holy See, Myron C. Taylor, in 1941. In a letter from His Holiness to President Roosevelt on May 18, 1943, the Pope described his understanding of the US strategic mindset toward Italy.

“The assurance given to Us in 1941 by Your Excellency’s esteemed Ambassador Mr. Myron Taylor and spontaneously repeated by him in 1942 that ‘America has no hatred of the Italian people’ gives Us confidence that they will be treated with consideration and understanding; and if they have had to mourn the untimely death of dear ones, they will yet in their present circumstances be spared as far as possible further pain and devastation, and their many treasured shrines of Religion and Art, precious heritage not of one people but of all human and Christian civilization will be saved from irreparable ruin.”¹⁰

Pope Pius XII would further implore Roosevelt to officially declare Rome an open city. He also prepared for the possibility that his request would not be respected. He strongly pleaded with the Americans not to bomb any area where Vatican property could be damaged as a result. These instructions were followed with precision because in the end the use of armed force was not necessary.

For his service to the Vatican during wartime, Mr. Taylor gained considerable respect from Vatican officials. This respect was acknowledged in a telegram that Pope Pius sent to President Roosevelt on June 19, 1944. “We shall very happily welcome once again

⁹ Myron C. Taylor, *Wartime Correspondence Between President Roosevelt and Pope Pius XII*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1947, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

your esteemed representative, His Excellency Mr. Myron Taylor...”¹¹ It is clear that Roosevelt’s representative made a lasting impression on the Vatican because Rome managed to be one of the few cities across Europe that could have been severely damaged but managed to survive the war unscathed.¹²

British and Soviet Involvement

The main parties involved in the liberation of Rome were the United States, Germany and the Vatican. The other Allies, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, also played a role. The British took important action to formally declare Rome an open city. Credit for this move is mainly attributed to Winston Churchill and his leadership. But, just as Roosevelt did, Churchill always viewed Rome’s liberation through the prism of operational success for the British war campaign.

Churchill, much like Roosevelt, held that the liberation of Rome was an important event, both in terms of morale and as a military strategy. The liberation of Rome would harm Germany’s militaristic capabilities while boosting the morale of Allied soldiers. In Volume V of his account of the history of World War II, the British Prime Minister writes to General Alexander on May 31, 1944, “I hope that British as well as Americans will enter [Rome] simultaneously.”¹³

The Soviets did not do much in terms of concrete assistance undertaken specifically to propel the effort to declare Vatican City and Rome open cities. While Britain and the United States were liberating Italy’s capital, the Soviets were engaging the Nazis on Germany’s Eastern Front. Although there are few declassified wartime correspondences available that show Stalin’s opinions regarding the liberation, Churchill wrote to General Alexander that Stalin was briefed on the events in Rome. Churchill writes in his book entitled *Closing the Ring*, “I had kept Stalin fully informed from time to time of the progress of these operations, and on June 5, when other things were also going on, sent him our good tidings.”¹⁴ On the same day, Stalin wrote Churchill, “I congratulate you on the great victory of the Allied Anglo-American forces—the taking of Rome. This news has been greeted in the Soviet Union with great satisfaction.”¹⁵

It is important to note that it was the British and the Americans who had a strong military presence in Italy at this time. The Soviets did not, and it is likely for this reason that the Soviets seemed rather disinterested with the liberation effort. Their focus was on the Eastern Front, the part of the Allied war campaign which they were handling almost entirely by themselves. However, it could be logically inferred that Stalin would have at

¹¹ Ibid., 111.

¹² Additional correspondence between Franklin Roosevelt, Pope Pius XII and Myron Taylor is found in The Vatican Files of the FDR Presidential Library and Museum at www.docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/vatican1.html.

¹³ Winston S. Churchill, *Closing the Ring: The Second World War, Volume V*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

least some vested interest in the liberation of Rome with respect to how the outcome would affect the strength of the Red Army's German opposition on the Soviet Union's western border.

The transition of Rome from German occupation to American was undeniably smooth. Not a single life was lost. Not a single bullet was fired. But how? By no stretch of the imagination could Italy's capital be considered a territory of little significance. Why didn't the Germans fight for it? To answer this, Hitler's role must be explored further.

Did Hitler Know?

Within hours of the orderly departure of German troops in the early morning of June 4, 1944, US forces marched into the Eternal City. Recall that Vatican officials at the highest level were advocating for a nonviolent transition of occupying forces. The Pope himself was very verbal about how nonviolence was imperative. High level authorities in the American and British leadership were also aware of the negotiations to settle the question of who would occupy Rome and how that transition would be facilitated. What Hitler's role was, though, is the one question that continues to plague historians to this day. Just how much did he know about the negotiations between his army and the Allies regarding who would occupy the capital of Italy, his only sovereign ally in Europe? He and Albert Speer, Germany's Minister of Armaments and War Production at the time, both provide interesting accounts of what the Nazis thought of Italian art and the Vatican. Neither of them indicates a pure hatred for the art or the city. Rather, they recognized them as symbols of culture.

Even if Adolf Hitler was not the one to order the official retreat of the Nazi army from Rome (that honor belongs to German General Kesselring), his approval certainly would have been necessary. One could even logically argue that Hitler himself was the one who directed the German representatives how to handle the situation. This inference is logical because it is well-known how disciplined the German command structure was. There is evidence to suggest that this was true. It comes from an article published in the June 5, 1944 edition of *The News and Courier* newspaper.¹⁶ Outside of consenting to Kesselring's retreat, Hitler made a remark to Ambassador Weizsacker before the newly appointed ambassador went to the Vatican in 1943. In Weizsacker's own words, "[W]hen I took leave of him in 1943, Hitler said to me: 'I really envy you.' Curious to know what was behind his remark, I asked him why he envied me; in going to Italy I was, it was said, in a sense going to enemy territory. To this Hitler replied: 'I now have to return to my Headquarters in the East. It would suit me wonderfully to spend three months in a *cultural centre* like Rome.'" ¹⁷ Such a statement indicates that, at the very least, Hitler did not wish to destroy Rome. Why otherwise would it "suit [him] wonderfully" to spend time in a "cultural centre [sic] like Rome"? Such approbatory sentiments must have been one of the

¹⁶ "Open City Rules Offered by Kesselring." *The News and Courier*, 5 June 1944, 1.

¹⁷ Ernst von Weizsacker, *Memoirs of Ernst von Weizsacker*, 287.

primary impetuses that contributed to his ultimate decision. Even if he did not officially approve the decision to exit peacefully, Hitler did not object to the plan.

The notion that the Führer may not have desired to completely ravage Vatican City—or Rome as a whole for that matter—is supported by statements elicited in interviews conducted with his Chief Architect, Albert Speer, and Germany’s Ambassador to the Holy See, Mr. Weizsacker. Notable German historian and journalist Joachim C. Fest interviewed Speer. With Fest’s assistance, Speer published his recollections and notes on Hitler, and Hitler’s opinion towards art and architecture in particular.

Speer claims that Nazi Germany’s dictator regarded Italian art as a great example of artistic rebirth. He notes, “Hitler especially liked to speak of the revival in the arts that would occur, or was already occurring, under his rule. He mentioned...Lorenzo’s Florence as [an] exceptional predecessor.”¹⁸ Speer also discusses Hitler’s partiality toward Italian art when he wrote that “Hitler especially liked the art of the Italian Renaissance and mannerism, Titian, Palma, Guido Reni and so on.”¹⁹ At that time, Titian and Guido Reni’s works were on display in the Vatican. An aerial strike would have risked destroying them. Given Speer’s statements, this appreciation for art likely affected Hitler’s decision not to order an attack through air assault.

Based on his actions, one may gather that Hitler perhaps did not wish to damage Vatican City, but instead use Germany’s treatment of it for propagandistic purposes. While visiting Rome, Speer was distressed that St. Peter’s Square was nearly half the size that photographs made it appear to be. If Hitler were to be photographed while speaking there, the image would need to impart an aura of greatness. Speer was reassured that distances appear to be twice as large in photographs as in reality. Therefore, any audience addressed by Hitler would appear to be twice as large in a newspaper photo.²⁰ The more people that are seen listening to and supporting Hitler, the more inclined readers might be to support him, too.

So Who Deserves the Credit?

Almost seven decades have passed since Rome was liberated from Axis occupation. The American and German people are reconciled and at peace with each other. Now, that said, I am not belittling the ugliness of Nazi activities during World War II. (The worst of all atrocities being their hideous, unconscionable treatment of Jews and others.) But it is clear that there were instances here and there where the German leadership demonstrated rationality—if not just goodness. Despite their ongoing campaign to dominate Europe through absolute warfare, it was not done to the extreme where everything good and virtuous perished. This is why I question whether someone in the German military chain of command vouched strong enough for the decision to spare Rome

¹⁸ Joachim C. Fest, *Albert Speer: Conversations with Hitler’s Architect*, translated by Patrick Camiller, Malden: Polity Press, 2005, 25-26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

that a peaceful transition of power was attained. The peaceful liberation process and the German retreat to the north of the city are facts of history. However those events transpired, the end result was positive—Rome's artifacts were saved and its people spared.

It was rumored that Rome would not fall into Allied hands without a struggle. This would be due partially to Hitler's wrath and stubbornness. He ordered the ruthless and ceaseless bombing of London, for example. Relics from England's past are lost forever because of Hitler's ire over the German military's inability to defeat the island nation.

The underlining theme can be gathered based on what transpired in the first several years of WWII in the European arena. It was presumed that the Germans would pose a formidable opposition and do everything in their power to stave off the Allied advance. Rome would have been left in ruins as many other major cities across the continent were. These cities were all collateral damage for the plights of men during a war that went on for half a decade. But this theme of destruction to all does not apply to the Rome case.

Weizsacker's plan to save Rome from utter devastation was a major factor as well. As we learned earlier, Weizsacker regularly consulted Vatican leaders, including Pope Pius XII. There was a price the Vatican had to pay in late 1943 and early 1944 when the Allies were marching up the coast of Italy. The government of the Vatican City State was insistent that their territorial sovereignty be respected. This meant that the German soldiers in the city of Rome were not to enter as soldiers into the territory of the Vatican City State. This was a generally respected rule. As a result, the Vatican authorities from time to time would acknowledge their appreciation of the fact that German troops followed orders and did not enter the Holy See.

Given the various actors who were a part of the negotiations between the hostile parties, it is difficult to determine where credit is due. The Pope certainly played a key role in advocating for the neutrality and liberation of Rome, the only city in the world that encompasses a sovereign state within its borders. Without Hitler and Kesselring, the German Army's decision to retreat would have been highly unlikely. Both Roosevelt and Churchill weighed the decision in terms of national interest and only agreed when such an action aligned with operational success. So who should receive the credit? Such a question did not elude the contemplations of the actors involved. Weizsacker grappled over assigning credit to three individuals. He excluded himself from the list.

“The question will perhaps never be altogether cleared up as to who must be given chief credit for this. I am inclined myself to give the chief credit to the ceaseless quiet activity of the Pope, but after that to the wise instructions given by Kesselring for the withdrawal. Hitler is said to have later made propaganda capital out of the part played by the Germans in the sparing of Rome. I do not know whether he was justified in doing so.”²¹

²¹ Ibid., 60.

To be sure, all sides deserve credit for agreeing to the final deal. A shared respect for Christian tradition and immediate tactical necessities were certainly the main two motivators that shaped the negotiations. But each party involved had its own motivating factors. To continue Operation Overlord's progress, the Allies needed a victory through tactical military advancement or strategic deception.²² It can be argued that Germany's willingness to retreat at all indicated that there was some tactical rationale to forfeit the city and regroup to the north. At this point in the war, the tide had turned in favor of the Allies. Germany had already lost the Battle of Stalingrad. Millions of Allied troops reinforced the British in an effort to push the Germans back from the coast of Normandy inward. Mussolini was already ousted and the weak Italian military was rendered incapable of being a formidable opponent to the Allies. The Allies had momentum.

Whatever the true reasons may have been, this historic event will stand forever as a testament to the effectiveness of strategic diplomacy—to maintain rational thinking and a sense of civility in times of hardship when a predilection toward incompatibility with those beliefs is more natural. It shows us that diplomacy can never be discounted and, when conditions are ripe, should be pursued with vigor.

In the carnage of World War II, the liberation of Rome will remain a shining example of the effectiveness of diplomacy in not only preventing massive destruction in an historic city, but also saving thousands of lives.

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²² "Operation Overlord" refers to the Allies' strategy to liberate Europe from Nazi occupation by working from Germany's Western Front to the hinterland of France. At the beginning, Germany occupied the vast majority of territory up to what is now referred to as the Atlantic Wall. The campaign was initiated on June 6, 1944 with the Battle of Normandy.