

Books

BY DAVID M. SHRIBMAN | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The passing of three-quarters of a century has cleared up almost all the mysteries buried in the rubble of World War II. Among those few that remain, one retains enormous intellectual, emotional, and spiritual power: the role of Pope Pius XII and the Vatican in the rise and fall of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and in the destruction of European Jewry in roundups, mass killings, and concentration camps.

Now we have the definitive answer. “The Pope at War” comes after a Brown University scholar plowed through thousands of pages of Vatican documents newly released by Pope Francis, and it helps us sort out the question of whether the pontiff was a silent collaborator with the dictators or a quiet conspirator against them — and whether by his silence he promoted antisemitism or whether by his actions he mounted a subtle campaign to aid the Jews at the hour of their greatest peril.

The answer, David I. Kertzer tells us in nearly 500 pages of spellbinding detail, is far more nuanced than the usual narrative, with the result that his book is far more interesting, far more revelatory, and far more relevant to today’s struggles than the many scores of earlier volumes that set out to resolve one of history’s most persistent and perplexing questions.

In the end, Kertzer concludes that Pius was a “moral failure,” having failed to move beyond his determination to preserve the role, power, and prerogatives of the church and to view the catastrophe outside the windows of the Vatican and across the continent of Europe as a mortal threat to the values he espoused, in theory and then in reluctant, opaque, highly subtle, almost grudging public statements.

His goals repeatedly changed but always were complementary: To preserve the church for a future with Germany as the dominant power in Europe as Nazi forces swept through Central Europe, Belgium, and France. To preserve the place of the church in its home base of Italy as Benito Mussolini’s ties with Adolf Hitler hardened. To keep Communism out of Italy as Soviet military power advanced. To assure that Rome, and especially the Vatican, wasn’t bombed or attacked on the ground as the Allies began their march to lib-

“THE POPE AT WAR,” Page N9

**THE POPE AT WAR:
The Secret History of
Pius XII, Mussolini,
and Hitler**

By David I. Kertzer
Random House,
672 pages, \$37.50

A deadly silence

Assessing the moral failings of Pope Pius XII during World War II



BORIS SÉMÉNIAKO FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

BIBLIOPHILES

Reading everything by Edith Wharton

BY AMY SUTHERLAND | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Toni Bentley joined the New York City Ballet when she was 17 and began dancing for and observing the genius of George Balanchine. That experience has inspired a number of her books, including her most recent “Serenade,” which tracks the making of Balanchine’s masterpiece. A Guggenheim Fellow, Bentley has also written for many publications on dance and culture. She lives in Los Angeles.

BOOKS: What are you reading?

BENTLEY: I am just starting Edith Wharton’s short story collection from the 1930s, “Human Nature.” I’ve been reading only Wharton for the last 2½ years.

BOOKS: What started the Wharton binge?

BENTLEY: I was mourning my capacity to read in the way that I did when I was teenager, when I would devour books like food. When I was a ballet dancer I would walk to Lincoln Center with a book in front of me and read. I wondered if I could get that back. The pandemic provided a perfect opportunity to try. I set time aside every day to read. Then it was ques-



“There wasn’t one I didn’t love.”

tion of what I would read. I never had read Edith Wharton. I can’t remember which I read first, but I immediately fell back in love with books.

BOOKS: What were some of the highlights for you?

BENTLEY: There wasn’t one I didn’t love. I printed out a list of all of her books from Wikipedia. I’ve read all the ones people haven’t heard of, such as “The Fruit of the Tree,” “Glimpses of the Moon,” and the awkwardly titled “Hudson River Bracketed.” Then I got all the books about her, including the R.W.B. Lewis biography that won the Pulitzer, Hermione Lee’s biography and Wharton’s letters. I just

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RELATED READING

Three books on Stalin that shed light on Russian history

By M. J. Andersen
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Repressive states tend to like their authors best when they are safely dead. Joseph Stalin admired Nikolai Gogol but criticized him as a reactionary. During World War II, to boost morale, Stalin’s regime exalted Tolstoy. “War and Peace” was read obsessively by Soviet generals and even summarized for soldiers.

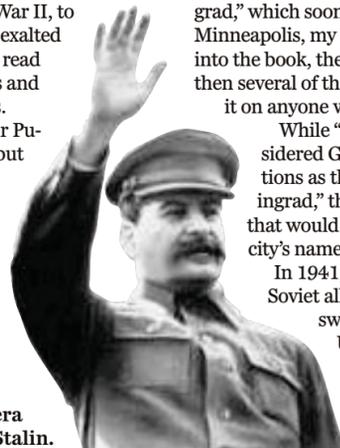
Unfortunately for Vladimir Putin, Vasily Grossman is dead but not safely. His novel “Stalingrad” succeeds like nothing I can think of at conveying what it is like to be invaded. Only in Grossman’s account, it is the Russians who are under siege — and not the ones now mutilating

Ukraine. “Stalingrad” throws the shame of Putin’s aggression into painfully high relief.

A few years ago, it seemed that everyone I knew was suddenly pressing Grossman’s novels on me. Finally cornered, I picked up “Stalingrad,” which soon I was pressing on others. In Minneapolis, my high school speech teacher dug into the book, then his brother in California, then several of the teacher’s friends. I now press it on anyone who is left.

While “Life and Fate” is generally considered Grossman’s masterpiece, it functions as the second of two volumes. “Stalingrad,” the first, centers on the battle that would become synonymous with that city’s name. (Today it is called Volgograd.)

In 1941, after Hitler turned against his Soviet allies, German forces moved swiftly through Belarus and Ukraine before stalling near Moscow. Eighty years ago this summer, they shifted their focus southward, attacking Stalingrad. It would prove a



AP/FILE 1941

Three writers look at the era of Russian leader Joseph Stalin.

RELATED READING, Page N9

Dancing through all of Edith Wharton's works

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ordered the last of her two short story collections. I'm nearing the end of her. It's really silly but I'm having trouble moving on. I started to read two books by other authors and I couldn't do it.

BOOKS: What were you reading as a teenager?

BENTLEY: I didn't have a proper education because I was dancing. The only education I had was the reading I did with a girlfriend, like a mini book club. We worked our way through Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal, and Freud. We

read all of Henry Miller and Anais Nin. I first learned about sex by reading them. One book would lead to another. We read the ones Miller mentioned, such as Oswald Spengler's "The Decline of the West." I don't know how I read so much. We had 12-hour days, six days a week, and yet there I was plowing through Freud and all these French authors.

BOOKS: What did you read before this Edith Wharton project?

BENTLEY: I read mostly nonfiction or classic literature, like Henry James. I read a lot of books about men and women relationships. I've always been inter-



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Edith Wharton in 1902.

ested in women who gained power by doing the ultra, extreme female thing, like being the lover of the king. I have a whole section on my bookshelves about the great courtesans of the 19th century. I have Liane de Pougy's "My Blue Notebooks" about her life as a courtesan, Betsy Prioleau's "Seductress," and Virginia Rounding's "Les Grandes Horizontales." I also have Nickie Roberts's "Whores in History," which I have only dipped into. One must know who the whores of history are, right?

BOOKS: Do you have books on ballet?

BENTLEY: I have a vast library of all the classic dance books, including a lot of books on Balanchine. I have a biography by Richard Buckle and a small one by Robert Gottlieb. A new one by the dance critic Jennifer Homans is coming out this fall. I have a special place for

the first biography, which was written by Bernard Taper in the '60s. Until that book I didn't know the scope of Balanchine's incredible life.

BOOKS: Who will you read after Wharton?

BENTLEY: A friend suggested Elizabeth Bowen. I could go back to Henry James. Wharton said that Sinclair Lewis's "Main Street" and David Graham Phillips's "Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise" gave her hope for American literature. I managed to get "Susan Lenox." I have to say I'm so connected to Wharton's prose that about four sentences into that novel I thought, "Oh dear, it's not Edith."

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