The Holy See and Communications During WWII

1940 – Vatican Pope Pius XII Issue

1942 – Vatican War Refugee Issue

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The Vatican Office of Information: Overview
Vatican Office of Information: World War I Origins

Pope Benedict XV made several efforts to mediate the conflict of WWI. In addition to providing for humanitarian assistance, the Vatican also established a limited service, via a network of diplomatic Nuncio’s, to provide information regarding the status of military personnel. This effort served as both a precursor and model for the much more extensive Office of Information established during WWII.

Cover postmarked 20 Dec. 1917 from Rome to Martirano Lombardo, Italy containing a message from the Vatican Secretary of State (arrow) communicating the POW status of a soldier held in Germany.
Vatican Office of Information: Notice of a POW in Egypt

Registered cover postmarked 7 Sept. 1943 from the Vatican Office of Information addressed to Torrebelvicino, Italy communicating a message that an Italian soldier is a POW in Egypt.

Message:

From the Vatican – 3 Sept. 1943
The Office of Information of the Secretary of State of His Holiness informs you that the Apostolic Delegation in Cairo, in a list sent on 22 July 1943, Infantryman Vittorio Pietrobello #385190 is indicated as a POW located in Camp 313 Egypt and is in good health.

Also enclosed is a message form that can be returned to this office and sent to the POW via Vatican Radio.
Vatican Office of Information: Message to a POW in India

Message form dated 3 Sept. 1941 from Verona, Italy transmitted via the Vatican Office of Information, Secretary of State to a POW in British India. Received 10 April 1942.

Message:
“Yesterday, after a long wait, I received your letter of April 29th and postcard of June 28th. Rest assured of our good health. Our thoughts are always with you. Mother.”

The Office of Information maintained a Central Index Card file with nearly 4 million cards. A new card was created for each individual and annotated with all messages that were sent and received.

The annotation (E.6.C pag. 296) indicated that Lt. Corà’s name was from a list of 35,000 POWs transferred from Egypt to India that was received by the Vatican in Sept. 1941.

Lt. Renato Corà – POW in Egypt
Status: Transferred to India

Status: POW in India
Vatican Messages to and from an Internee in Eritrea

Message form dated 21 Dec. 1942 from Camaiore, Italy to a civilian at the Naval Installation in Embatalla (Eritrea), Italian East Africa (under British Occupation). Asmara, Eritrea transit – 3 April 1943.

Reply Message:
“21 April 1943
With an emotional heart I return your greetings with all my affection and all my strength of soul and spirit. Giulio.”

Reverse

The message was returned via the Apostolic Vicar of Eritrea and the Italian Red Cross.

Message form dated 22 Dec. 1944 from Massaua, Eritrea to Italy transmitted via the Apostolic Vicar of Eritrea.

The background design printed on this special Christmas and New Year message form (left) features a design of the Star of Bethlehem over the Dome of St. Peter’s Basilica.
Vatican Office of Information: Notice to a POW in the US

Message form dated 26 May 1943 from Maresca, Italy to an Italian sailor at the Taranto Naval Base serving on the R.M. San Marco forwarded by the Vatican and redirected to Camp Lordsburg, New Mexico.

Reply Message:
“7 Feb. 1944
Dear Rina. I have hurried to answer your message that was received yesterday. I have received great pleasure in seeing your writing again. Concurrently, I have received your photo and that of our baby. It has been the greatest joy that I have tasted in my life to see you again. I am well. Do not worry yourself. Pray that the time passes quickly that I may soon see all of you again.”

Status: POW in Camp Lordsburg, NM

Initial request from wife

Cover postmarked 5 June 1943 from the Prisoner of War Department, Apostolic Delegation, London to Bexley Heath, Kent containing the message (left) and notice (below).

Enclosed printed instruction notice
A Worldwide Vatican Network of Communications
US Apostolic Delegation: Messages from an Interned Seaman

Message forms to and from an interned Italian seaman dating from April & Dec. 1942 transmitted via the Washington D.C. Apostolic Delegation. Ft. Missoula, MT held several thousand Italian internees during the War.

The Italian luxury liner, Conte Biancamano, was seized in the Canal Zone in 1941. It was modified as a troopship by the US and was returned and refitted as a liner after the War.

From: Ft. Missoula, MT to Genova – April 1942
Reply: Aug. 1942
From: Genova to Ft. Missoula, MT – Dec. 1942
Message form dated 12 June 1944 from the Union Minière Mining Camp in Sofwe, Katanga returned to the sender via the Leopoldville Apostolic Delegation, Belgian Congo with an attached note returning money order funds.

During WWII, the Union Minière Mining Camp was the key strategic source for the Uranium ore used to build the first atomic weapons by the United States.

Attached note returned to the sender:

“Leopoldville - 8 July 1944

Mr. Prina, Union Miniere Camp, Sofwe, Katanga

Sir, we are obliged to return to you the postal money order for 5,000 Francs sent from the Bank of the Belgium Congo on May 27 intended for Madam Prina. Due to the current (wartime) conditions, the Vatican, cannot for the moment transmit this remittance. When Northern Italy is liberated, we will again attempt to contact your family.

Accept Sir my best salutations
The Apostolic Delegate”
The Story of a POW in Australia

From the initial arrivals in 1941, a total of 18,432 Italian POWs were held in 15 Australian camps during WWII.

Camp Myrtleford, located 284K from Melbourne, was in operation from Feb. 1942 to Oct. 1946 with a population of ~1,000.

Message form dated 5 Nov. 1943 from an Italian POW in Camp Myrtleford, Australia, transmitted via the Sydney Apostolic Delegation to Milano, Italy.

POW - Lt. Giorgio Madureri

POW Summary Profile

Vatican Archive Index Cards – providing details of numerous messages transmitted to and from POW Lt. Giorgio Madureri.

German forces occupied Hungary on 19 Mar. 1944. In May 1944, the Hungarian authorities, in coordination with the German Security Police, began to systematically deport the Hungarian Jews. Of ~850,000 Jews living in Hungary in 1941, ~500,000 died our were killed under the German occupation. Some 255,000 Jews, less than one-third of those who had resided within enlarged Hungary during WWII, survived the Holocaust.

Approximately 110 Jews lived in Nagy-Ida, Hungary prior to the start of WWII.
An integral part of the Vatican message service throughout WWII was the crucial role played by the Vatican Radio. Vatican Radio was established in 1931 under the technical direction of Gugliemo Marconi, who was a personal friend of Pope Pius XI. At the outbreak of the war, Vatican Radio was transmitting on a limited basis a variety of religious and news information programs in ten languages to a worldwide audience. Due to the increased activity of the Office of Information as the war progressed, the activity of Vatican Radio was eventually almost entirely devoted to the transmission of messages. The Vatican Radio message service grew in scope from contacts with Papal representatives from initially eight nations in 1940 to thirty nations during 1943-44.

A total of 1,240,728 messages were transmitted from 1940-1946 in 12,105 hours of transmission time.

Message dated 12 Sept. 1941 transmitted via Vatican Radio to the Apostolic Delegation in Egypt and Palestine located in Cairo. Forwarded to a POW held in the Middle East. Manuscript arrival notation - 19 Nov. 1941.

The Apostolic Delegate, Msgr. Gustavo Testa, has the pleasure of letting you know that yesterday, by means of the Vatican Radio, your loved ones have sent the following message:

"Received your postcard. Do not worry yourself. God will watch over you always and our hearts will always be near you. We are all well. Kisses from all. Mother"

The same Apostolic Delegate, happy to be able to convey this message, and in anticipation of your response, sends his special benediction.
Vatican Radio: Message to a General in India


Printed Text:

Msgr. Apostolic Delegate as the pleasure of communicating this message received yesterday via Vatican Radio:

Message:

“Affectionate greetings. Have courage. God will save our homeland. Affectionately, Colombo”

Three cards from the Central Index File provide a chronological record of the locations and messages to General Tracchia sent by Vatican Radio from several family members.

The date for each message is noted along with the indication RT - “Radio Trasmissione”.

Vatican Archive
Central Index File cards

Status: POW in Egypt

Status: Transferred to India
Vatican Radio: Message from a POW to New Zealand

Message form dated 10 June 1943 from a New Zealander POW in Camp 85 - Tuturano, Italy transmitted via Vatican Radio to the Apostolic Delegation in Sydney, Australia and forwarded to St. Kilda, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Nearly 8,500 POW's from New Zealand were held by the Italians and Germans in WWII.

**From The Prisoner Of War: Camp PG85, Italy - Camp Policeman, 10 March 1943**

“I will try to give you some idea of how we live. There are three thousand in the camp. We live in wooden huts, with a hundred in each hut. Rise at six, have coffee. Parade and counted at seven. I now have a job as camp policeman, so that fills my morning and afternoon in. One pint of stew at eleven. Tea made from Red Cross parcels at twelve. Ten ounces of bread at one; pint of stew at four. We are now getting a parcel and fifty cigarettes every week from the Red Cross.”

Archbishop Giovanni Panico (1895-1962) was the Apostolic Delegate in Sydney from 1935 to 1948.

Under his leadership, in 1941, links were established with the Australian and New Zealand governments to initiate the Vatican message service between POWs and internees. He personally visited many of the POW and internee camps throughout Australia as an important part of his humanitarian mission.
Vatican Radio: News of a British Prisoner in Japan

Privately printed postcard dated 22 Sept. 1943 from the periodical *Catholic Times* (London) relaying a notice transmitted via Vatican Radio of a British POW in Fukuoka, Japan.

The weekly periodical *Catholic Times*, directed by Mr. James Walsh, assisted the Vatican Apostolic Delegation in London by transcribing messages from Vatican Radio and transmitting notices to recipient families.

Periodically, lists of POWs as well as individual messages were also published in the pages of the magazine.

Fukuoka camp, located on the island of Kyushu, was in operation from Jan. 1942 to Sept. 1945 and housed over 10,000 POWs in 18 satellite camps throughout the area.

Of the 130,000 POWs held by Japan in WWII, approximately 50,000 were British, a quarter of which died in captivity.
Towards the end of the war, the Holy See established a Pontifical Commission for Assistance for the benefit of tens of thousands of refugees and repatriated POWs. In addition to a central Vatican Office, branches of this Commission operated from Archdioceses located throughout Italy. Since the Commission was involved in a major humanitarian mission, the branch offices were granted the franking privilege by the Italian government.

Cover dated 6 Aug. 1947 from the Pontifical Commission for Assistance – Vatican City central office to Novara, Italy

Notice communicating the death of an ex-internee returning from Germany on 18 April 1945 due to aerial bombing.

Cardinal Ildelfonso Schuster (1880-1954) Archbishop of Milan, met with Mussolini on 25 Apr. 1945, but was not successful in an effort to mediate peace. Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans three days later.
Folded letter dated 28 July 1946 from an internee located in Camp 354 Nanyuki, Kenya (British Africa) to Rignano Garganico, Italy. The letter was personally delivered by a repatriated comrade to Napoli and transmitted free via the Vatican Pontifical Commission for Assistance in Napoli.

Located 100 miles north of Nairobi, Camp Nanyuki held several thousand Italian POWs captured in the Ethiopian campaign.

Message:

“28 July 1946 Nanyuki.

Dearest Antonietta,

I am writing the present letter to let you know that I am in good health as I hope you, the baby and the entire family. Dear, I am sending this letter by a friend who is departing (the Camp) shortly and will mail it from his town on arrival. I hope shortly, that also I will depart. I hope to be with the family for S. Matteo (feast celebration of the local patron Saint) if all goes well. Regards to all the family and affectionate kisses to little Vincenzo.

Your husband, Pietro.”
On 23 Dec. 1941, the Japanese invasion of Wake Island captured 1,603 men with the fall of the island garrison. Among those were 1,150 civilian contractors employed by the Morrison-Knudsen Company. Headquartered in Boise, Idaho, Morrison-Knudsen was contracted to build an airfield, seaplane base, and submarine base and to dredge a channel into the island lagoon to allow access for submarines.

On 12 Jan. 1942 approximately 1,221 Wake Island POW's left Wake on the converted Japanese luxury liner, "Nita Maru", a troop transport ship. Five of them were beheaded aboard the vessel enroute to Japan.

On 7 Oct. 1943 Rolland E. Light of Noonan, ND; one of 98 civilian workers who remained behind on Wake Island, were bound with barbed wire and machine gunned to death by order of Japanese Admiral Sakaibara.

POW Rock – Wake Island

“Change the Heart and the world will be changed. Root out greed and plant charity. Do you want Peace? Do justice, and you will have Peace.”

Pope Pius XII
References & Acknowledgements


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Daniel Piazza – Smithsonian Institution, National Postal Museum

Professore Marino Carnevale-Mauzan
The Holy See and Communications During World War II

Introduction

The Second World War was the most widespread and devastating conflict in human history. In many ways the War was the defining event of the 20th century. The economic, industrial, scientific, social and geopolitical changes that followed changed the world in innumerable ways.

The hostilities directly involved over 50 nations on every inhabited continent, and resulted in nearly 70 million total deaths. Millions more were held captive as POWs and civilian internees. They were dispersed from their families and loved ones for years on end, often held under difficult to inhuman living conditions. Within this backdrop of world events, the ability for individuals to communicate was at best fragmentary, and often non-existent. The most well known efforts to transmit communications during the War are those of the Red Cross.

The subject of my talk today will focus on the little-know, but extensive, efforts of the Holy See (Vatican State) to mediate world-wide communications between POWs, internees and separated civilians during the War. I will focus on the documentary evidence of this Vatican communication network, and present specific examples of messages that illustrate the methods and routes used for communication within the historical context of the time.
Abstract

The Holy See and Communications during WWII

“Nulla è perduto con la pace, tutto può esserlo con la guerra!”
“Nothing is lost with peace, everything can be with war!”
Pope Pius XII – 1939

The horrors and devastation of World War II divided millions of families world-wide. During the war, and for several years after the end of hostilities, the Holy See played a significant and largely overlooked role in communications between POWs, civilian internees and separated families with the establishment and operation of a unique message service. Through a vast international network of diplomatic Nunciatures, Apostolic Delegations, Bishoprics, local parishes and various Catholic organizations, the Holy See was able to establish and maintain communications in often impossible situations. The organizational intermediary for this supra-national communication network was the Vatican Office of Information (Ufficio Informazioni), established shortly after the outbreak of war in 1939. An integral part of the Vatican message service was the essential role played by Vatican Radio, which transmitted over one million messages from 1940 to 1945. In addition, as part of its humanitarian efforts throughout and after the war, the Holy See established a Pontifical Commission for Assistance which was involved in the repatriation of large numbers of POWs and displaced persons and in some measure was also involved in communications between separated individuals.

The relatively scarce philatelic/postal-historical evidence for this Vatican communication network is little known, and to my knowledge has been examined only in a fragmentary manner. The worldwide scope of the message service operated by the Vatican Office of Information exceeded contacts with over 50 nations on every continent. Remarkably, the efficiency of the Vatican message service was extraordinary, at times reaching a success rate of up to 70% of all inquiries received. The purpose of this presentation is twofold. The first is to present a representative survey of examples of this material to illustrate the international scope and wide variety of channels that were used to convey the messages. The second is to place the material, and the communications they convey, in context with the historical events of the period to allow the reader a more personal perspective into the turmoil of this tragic time.