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'The Pope Who Would Be King' and 'Vatican I' Review: Rome Infallible

Pope Pius IX began his reign—the longest in history—as a reformer. But the revolutions of 1848 turned him into a firm reactionary.

By Thomas Albert Howard

Feb. 5, 2019 6:46 p.m. ET

In 1881, as the burial procession of Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) neared the Tiber River in Rome, anticlerical protesters breached the escort and attempted to throw the papal bier into the murky water. Although they did not succeed, the episode gives testimony to the fiery passions roused by this pope's legacy, not the least of which was summoning the First Vatican Council, which defined "papal infallibility" as a binding Catholic teaching. This year marks the 150th anniversary of this council, and the past 12 months saw a flurry of publications about "Pio Nono," including a new biographical work from Pulitzer Prize-winning author David I. Kertzer, a longtime student of modern Italy and the papacy.

Beloved by the faithful in his day but reviled by political liberals, Protestants and anticlerical intellectuals, Pius IX cut a path in history rivaled by few others. The longest reigning pope, Pius held the mantle from 1846 until his death in 1878. This was among the most tumultuous eras in the history of Europe—and the church. Shaken by revolutions in 1848, the Continent witnessed the birth of nationalist states like Italy, whose creation entailed the collapse of the Papal States, the pope's millennium-old temporal kingdom in central Italy.

Traumatized in the 18th century by its confrontation with the French Revolution—from its earliest days, the Republic had seized church lands and required priests to swear loyalty to the state—the embattled Church had entered a period tagged as ultramontanism (from *ultra* and *mons*, "over the mountain"—to Rome, the seat of firm authority). As the 19th century progressed, popes denounced the godless "ideas of 1789" while ultramontane intellectuals advocated for strong papal authority as a counterweight to *l'esprit révolutionnaire*.

Although hailed as a reformer at first, Pius became a firm reactionary due to his experience of the revolutions of 1848. "The Pope Who Would Be King" focuses on just three critical years of Pius's papacy: 1848-50. After revolution engulfed Rome and led to the short-lived Republic of Rome, Pius was forced to flee the city in disguise and took refuge in the Neapolitan kingdom of Ferdinand II. He returned to Rome in 1850 with the help of the French, and in the wake of these events defined the controversial teaching of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (1854) and issued an encyclical

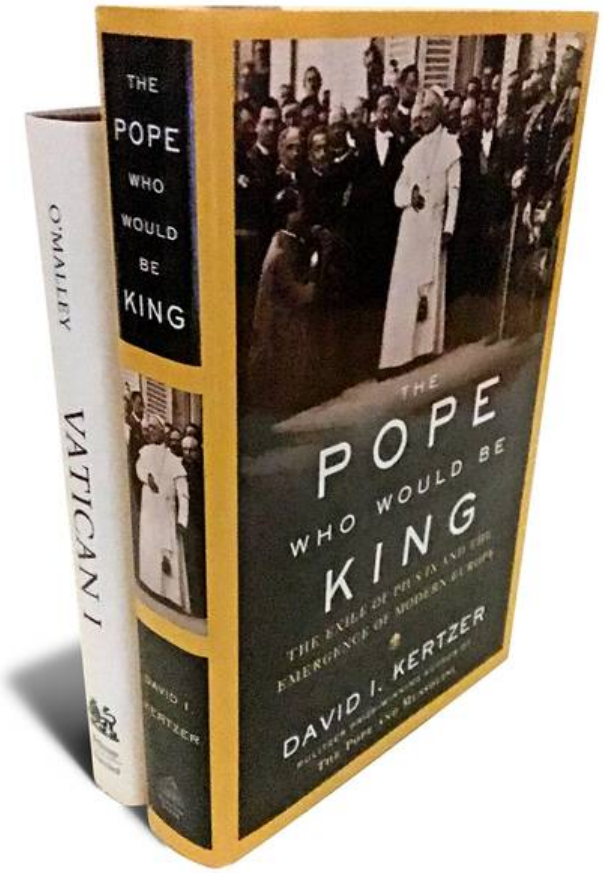

PHOTO: WSJ

THE POPE WHO WOULD BE KING

By David I. Kertzer
Random House, 474 pages, $35

VATICAN I

By John W. O'Malley
Belknap/Harvard, 307 pages, $24.95

accompanied by the "Syllabus of Errors" (1864), a sledgehammer of anti-modern invective that insisted that the papal office stood under no compulsion to "reconcile [itself] . . . to progress, liberalism and modern civilization."

Pope Pius IX. **PHOTO:** GETTY IMAGES

When forces of Italian unification finally liquidated the Papal States in 1870, Pius issued blanket excommunications of Italian nationalists and came to see himself as a "prisoner in the Vatican." No pope, once elected, left the precincts of the Vatican from this point until the establishment of the present-day Vatican City in 1929.

Given the divisive nature of Pius IX's papacy, consideration of it has oscillated between hagiography and indictment. While "The Pope Who Would Be King" veers strongly toward the latter, it is a judicious work of scholarship, carefully researched and elegantly narrated. The author draws from a jaw-dropping range of archival sources, and the portraits that he paints of leading Italian nationalists such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi are first-rate.

Yet Mr. Kertzer interprets Pius IX and his Curia principally as political actors, eager to recover the Pope's earthly kingdom and drag Europe back to "medieval" times. Such an approach offers insight, but fails to examine the theological self-understanding that the pope had of his office and the relationship between its temporal and spiritual authority. Grasping these would require a depth of historical analysis beyond the political circumstances of midcentury Europe.

In "Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church,"

John W. O'Malley, an eminent scholar of modern Catholicism at Georgetown, offers the counterpoint, delving deeply into theological issues but often only hastily treating political ones. While the Council cannot be reduced to politics alone, Pius intended it as a political act to countermand the revolutionary forces roiling Europe. Pius IX convened the first Vatican council specifically to address the challenges presented by the modern world, and to present the Church's response.

The author does situate Pius IX and the council within the intellectual context of the 18th and 19th centuries, and, at times, he reaches back still earlier, as when he explores the complicated theology behind "infallibility," which is often understood expansively by non-Catholics when in fact it applies to papal teachings only in extremely rare circumstances. Although Mr. O'Malley never launches a direct attack on Pius IX, his worries about a "pope-centered" Catholicism become evident in the more favorable treatment that he gives to Vatican II (1962-65), a council that moderated the anti-modern course on which Pius had set the church.

"Only out of the past can you make the future," says a character in Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men." Together these complementary books about Pius IX reveal the difficult past with which the 20th-century church worked to shape its future. Pius's dogged anti-modernism (itself a reaction to unscrupulous anti-clericalism) created the conditions for epic intra-church struggles decades later. Many of these struggles, pitting ultramontane traditionalists against more moderate voices, came to a head at Vatican II; some were resolved, others not. But to understand these struggles and not-unrelated ones under Pope Francis today, one must first understand what came before. Messrs. Kertzer and O'Malley's books ably supply this knowledge, inviting us to see Catholicism's recent history as profoundly shaped by and against the imposing legacy of Pius IX.

Mr. Howard is a professor at Valparaiso University and the author, most recently, of "The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Döllinger, and the Quandary of the Modern Age."

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