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Did Hitler know about the liberation of Rome?

Thomas P. Melady | May. 27, 2011

I arrived in Rome in November 1945 as an 18-year-old draftee and part of the U.S. occupation army. My very pleasant assignment was to arrange trips to Rome for GI veterans, who, after several years of duty in war-torn Europe, were returning to the States. With plenty of free time in the months of late 1945 and two GI friends in Rome, I made contact with some U.S. Catholic clergy associated with the Vatican -- and I also made contact with a German priest.

One of my American priest friends was an elderly monsignor of German-American background. He facilitated my conversations with the German priest. After a few glasses of Italian victory wine one evening, the conversations became heated, especially when the German priest said something I found shocking at the time.

?The good German leadership,? he said flatly, ?facilitated the peaceful liberation of Rome.?

I wondered then, as an inquisitive 18-year-old private first class, if this implied that even Hitler knew about it. As Hitler was the top commander of the German state in June, 1944, I felt then at a minimum he did not prevent the peaceful U.S. liberation of Rome.

I remained in Rome until mid-1946, and once in a while I would think about it, but all the official literature stated Rome was actively freed and the Americans had played the major role in that liberation. The Americans not only liberated the Eternal City, but also, it was said, arranged the peaceful transition from German control to Allied control.

Vatican officials, because of their worldwide contacts (including Germany and its allies), were in a unique position at the time. President Franklin Roosevelt understood this and tried to establish full diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1939, but the U.S. Senate refused to cooperate. Roosevelt conceived the concept of a special envoy to the Vatican. This could not be a full ambassador, but it meant it would not require Senate approval, giving Roosevelt the direct contact that he wanted with the Vatican.

As years passed on, I more or less forgot about my Roman experience. However, in 1989, 44 years later, when I arrived as the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, the question reemerged in my mind. The beautiful, historic city of Rome could have been like other major cities in England, France and Germany, many of their historic

antiquities significantly destroyed, gone forever. How fortunate we are that this did not happen. During my four years, through unofficial conversations with Vatican friends, I continued to hear the observation that somehow, somewhere in the German command, a decision was made to spare Rome, and, as this reasoning goes, that during World War II not all Germans were all bad.

It has been almost seven decades since the liberation of Rome and there has long been a significant reconciliation between the American and German peoples. Meanwhile, no one wants to diminish the ugliness of the Nazis during World War II, most importantly their hideous and unconscionable treatment of Jewish people and others, including Eastern Europeans, most strikingly the people of Poland.

But it appears to be that there were flashes of reason, if not goodness, among the German people, even as the German military was focused on executing immorality throughout Europe. Within this context I am still confronted with the baffling question of whether someone in the German military chain decided to spare Rome. The peaceful liberation of Rome -- the peaceful retreat by the Germans -- is a fact of history.

Can one now advance the question of whether Hitler himself was aware of the peaceful ?liberation? process that was worked out among American, Vatican and German officials -- and he did not prevent it? The liberation of Rome on June 4, 1944, was a great victory for the Allies. German troops departed only a few hours before the American troops entered and the Eternal City was saved from a bloody battle between the German, partisan and Allied troops.

The facts are well known: The Allied advance toward Rome from Sicily and Naples was full of destruction. The Germans fought hard before giving up any inch of land. Meanwhile, the Vatican, an independent sovereign state within Rome, had forcefully proclaimed to the world its neutrality.

It was recognized by both the German and Allied forces. As the Allies approached Rome in the weeks preceding June, there were contacts within the walls of the Vatican between Vatican and U.S. diplomats and between German diplomats and papal authorities.

All histories of those several important weeks, including the records of Msgr. Alberto Giovannetti and the records of German Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring, clearly establish that the German military leadership did not want to see Rome, the historic seat of Western civilization destroyed.

It is also known that the fuehrer himself indicated that certain bridges should be protected from destruction. After seven decades, maybe new insights are coming to light in one chapter of the larger horrific tale that is World War II.

[Thomas P. Melady, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, 1989--1993, was a soldier in the U.S. army of occupation in Italy from 1945 to 1946. Melady?s executive research assistant, J. Cushman Laurent, assisted with this article. Both are now associated with the Institute of World Politics.]

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