

A Bad Day at Little Big Horn

HEADED east from Billings, Mont., on Route 87, you drive through bare hills over a road with something of a roller-coaster rhythm about it—a bleak landscape, at first glance, but with a beauty that grows upon you until you begin to understand why, in the drought-ridden days of the 1920s and 1930s, impoverished ranchers and homesteaders left it with sorrow. Then, as you come into the town of Hardin, some fifty miles from Billings, and turn south, a curious thing happens.

Suddenly it is not 1966 but June 25, 1876, and above the sound of your car's motor you seem to hear other, quite different sounds. Bugles fill the air with a wild music. Voices scream in agony and triumph. Dying horses shriek. Then, in a few minutes, you are there, looking up at the forlorn hill above the east bank of the Little Big Horn River where George Armstrong Custer and five companies of his Seventh Cavalry had their annihilating rendezvous with destiny.

What, aside from this terrible fact, actually happened on that fearful Sunday afternoon? Historians, and mere Little Big Horn buffs, never will know all the details, and that makes for a proper kind of battle—one that can be hashed over endlessly, with a more than ordinary quota of what-ifs and why-did-he (Custer)-do-what-he-did, and how many Indians was he up against, anyhow, 2,500 or 4,000? According to those who should know, the Little Big Horn literature by now is second only to that of Gettysburg among renowned American military bloodlettings, and the reason is easy to see. It is, simply, the mystery that surrounds the whole thing; that, and the shocking surprise of it, even though in the long run the result was less than decisive, for the victors at the Little Big Horn were of course ultimately doomed to failure in the gory, running war between the U.S. Government and the American Indian.

When I was a boy in Montana old-timers still argued about Custer's behavior on that final day of his life. That he was a man of utmost personal courage no one dreamed of denying. His Civil War record proved it. That he was cruel, selfish, and a gaudy exhibitionist was a generally accepted judgment. But then the old-timers, one of whom had fought elsewhere on the field that Sunday, would try to figure out what had gone on in Custer's mind, what aberration—if such it was—moved him to take a fatal

chance. On the morning of the 25th he was warned by Crow and Ree scouts that a huge encampment of Sioux and Cheyennes was strung out along the northern end of the valley of the Little Big Horn. If he chose not to believe them, it was because he held that his Seventh could whip any Indian force of any size. And, to be sure, he might have won if he had kept his twelve companies intact, instead of dividing them into three battalions, one sent off under Captain Frederick W. Benteen on a senseless scouting expedition, another ordered into the valley under Major Marcus A. Reno to attack the Indian village against overwhelming odds, while Custer and his immediate command men rode south along the ridge east of the Little Big Horn, never again to be seen alive by their old comrades-in-arms.

"It was a grandstand play," one old-timer would say. "He had to have a big victory to get himself out of all that trouble he was in with the Grant Administration."

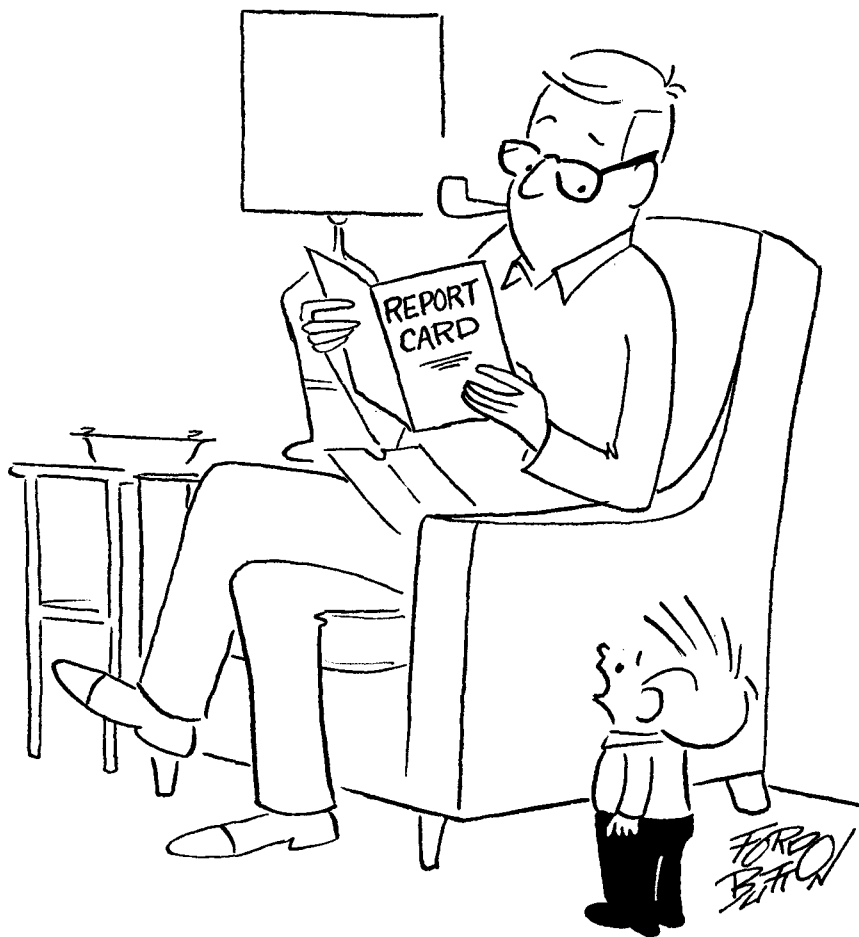
There was considerable merit in this contention.

"He had to attack when he did, or he'd have been court-martialed if he let those Indians get away after he saw 'em."

There was some truth in that, too—I heard a distinguished retired Army officer say the same thing several years ago—but no one to this day can be sure why he split up his forces as he did. Did he plan to attack the Indian village from the rear while Reno was charging it frontally? Or did he have no real battle plan at all? Did he deliberately disregard the orders of his superior, General Alfred H. Terry, to await the arrival of Terry and Colonel John Gibbon from the north on June 27, a scheme by which the Indians were to have been neatly boxed in?

Into the fray now comes the late Mari Sandoz, she of the memorable *Old Jules*, *Crazy Horse*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, etc., whose knowledge of the Great Plains Indians was matched by few. As an admirer of the Cheyennes, her loathing for Custer was intense; in the frontier West in which she grew up his murderous destruction of a Cheyenne village on the Washita River in 1867 remained a grisly memory. Just offhand, then, Miss Sandoz would scarcely have seemed to qualify as an impartial chronicler when her publisher was casting about for the author of this latest addition to its Great Battles

(Continued on page 36)



"Let's face it, dad. Lots of geniuses have sons with just average I.Q.'s."

WAS SILENCE THE ONLY SOLUTION?

How did the Pope justify his impartiality concerning the Axis and the Allies?

Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation, by Saul Friedländer, translated from the French and German by Charles Fullman (Knopf, 238 pp. \$4.95), and **Actes et Documents du Saint-Siège Relatifs à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale**, edited by Pierre Blet, et al. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome, Italy. Vol. I, 553 pp. \$12. Vol. II, 453 pp. \$11), present documents from British, American, Israeli, and Vatican archives on the Holy See's policy toward Nazi persecutions in Europe. Guenter Lewy is author of "The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany."

By GUENTER LEWY

THE ATTITUDE of Pope Pius XII toward Nazi Germany and the reasons for his silence in the face of the murder of six million Jews have been the subject of extensive and often acrimonious debate ever since the young German playwright Rolf Hochhuth chose this problem as the theme for *The Deputy*.

In Saul Friedländer's *Pius XII and the Third Reich* we now have a source of valuable information that generates light rather than heat. The author is associate professor of contemporary history at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. His study consists of documents with brief accompanying notes which provide the historical setting and contribute to the readability of the book. A large proportion of the documents included come from the files of the Nazi Ministry of Foreign Affairs; others are taken from British and American diplomatic papers and from the Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. Most of them have been known to specialists in the field, but many are now published for the first time.

The author admits frankly that a study of the Holy See's policy toward Nazi Germany based in the main on German diplomatic papers cannot but be biased. These German documents give us only one dimension of the problem; moreover, diplomatic reports, especially under a totalitarian régime, are often influenced by a desire of the writers to tell what their governments want to hear. And yet, despite a very real need for caution,

the Nazi documents contribute to a better understanding of these tragic events. Much of what they contain is corroborated by accounts of American, British, and Polish diplomats. The documents just released from the Vatican archives, which were not available to Professor Friedländer, further confirm some of his main interpretive findings.

Without claiming to state definitive conclusions Friedländer notes that the documents presented by him reveal impressive agreement on two points. First, Pope Pius XII, who had spent many years in Germany as papal nuncio, had a predilection for that nation which was not substantially diminished by the nature of the Nazi régime. Second, the Pontiff feared a Bolshevization of Europe and therefore was anxious not to weaken Germany by criticizing its wartime policies. The documentary support for the first of these conclusions is extensive; the second finding is based on more circumstantial evidence, though the considerable number of documents quoted serves to enhance the plausibility of this interpretation. The Pope's failure to protest the "final solution," argues Friedländer, is thus in part accounted for by Pius's love for Germany and by his fear of undermining German resistance in the East. Other factors were his desire not to make a bad situation worse and to avoid greater evils—for the Jews as well as for the German Catholics, on whom Hitler might have sought vengeance. The Pontiff's wish to pursue a policy of neutrality also receives mention.

In the years immediately following World War II some Catholic writers attributed the silence of the Pope (and of the German bishops) on Nazi atrocities to lack of knowledge to these deeds. The Pope and the bishops, wrote a high German church dignitary in 1946, did not protest against many Nazi horrors because they did not know of them. This explanation, the documents now available show clearly, is untenable. The Holy See received detailed information about the mass killings of Poles and Jews from a variety of sources. After much prodding by Allied diplomats, Pius XII in his Christmas message of 1942 finally expressed his concern for the "hundreds of thousands of people who, through no fault of their own and solely because of their nation or their race, have been condemned to death or progressive ex-

tingtion." Beyond this cautious comment the Pope was not prepared to go.

Less than ten days after this Christmas message, Wladislaw Racziewicz, President of the Polish government in exile, implored the Pontiff to issue an unequivocal denunciation of Nazi violence in order to strengthen the willingness of the Poles to resist the Germans and to help the Jews. His people, wrote Racziewicz on January 2, 1943, "do not ask so much for material or diplomatic help, because they know that the possibilities of their receiving such help are slim, but they implore that a voice be raised to show clearly and plainly where the evil lies and to condemn those in the service of evil. If these people can be reinforced in their conviction that divine law knows no compromise and that it stands above any human considerations of the moment, they will, I am sure, find the strength to resist."

SIMILARLY, on September 5, 1944, after more than half a million Hungarian Jews had been sent to their death at Auschwitz, the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Isaac Herzog, urged through the Papal Delegate to Egypt and Palestine that "the Pope make a public appeal to the Hungarian people and call upon them to place obstacles in the way of the deportation; that he declare in public that any person obstructing the deportation will receive the blessing of the Church, whereas any person aiding the Germans will be denounced." Whether any sizable number of Polish or Hungarian Catholics would have been influenced by such a papal appeal for the Jews we will never know. Both interventions failed; the Supreme Pontiff maintained his silence.

At the end of his book Friedländer expresses the hope that the documents of the Vatican archives will soon be published "so that the events and personages can be brought into proper perspective." His wish, shared by many other historians, now seems a step nearer fulfillment. At the end of 1965 the Secretariat of State of the Holy See published the first volume of a series entitled "Acts and Documents of the Holy See Concerning the Second World War." The second volume appeared in March 1966. The series is edited by three Jesuit scholars who, in the preface of the first volume, explained the willingness of the