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Has a lack of historical scholarship suppressed Italy’s role in the Holocaust and therefore affected how it is remembered?

Agatha Elliott

This essay seeks to examine the effects of the Holocaust on Italian national identity, and how it has been influenced by revisionist interpretations of the period. It is focused heavily on Italy, but also acknowledges the transnational nature of the Holocaust and its widespread devastation. There was a lack of early historiography on the topic owing to the focus on Germany’s substantially larger role in the atrocity, which meant that Italy was widely viewed as an innocent bystander, rather than as a perpetrator. However, recent historiography has revealed that Italy’s role is much more complex than popular memory indicates, which has had an impact on how it is commemorated. Hence, this paper explores how these commemorations have developed, including the begrudged taking of responsibility for anti-Semitic actions that occurred on Italian soil.

The effect that the Holocaust had cannot be contained to one single nation; it had a universal impact, and affected Jews globally. The role that Italy played in this atrocity had long been overshadowed by German Nazism, meaning that on the whole the Italians have never really had to take responsibility for their actions. This essay will therefore explore the evolving historiography of this period, from how a collective view of Italy as a victim came to fruition, to the revision of these interpretations, and seeing if this has changed attitudes towards Italy’s role. I will aim to achieve this through studying the work of a range of historians, who address differing aspects of Italy’s role in the Holocaust. Furthermore, I will address how the Holocaust is commemorated in Italy, and whether the way in which it is remembered has been affected by a lack of historical scholarship in the years immediately following the end of World War Two.

Fascist antisemitism does not tend to feature in early historiography of wartime Italy. Rather, for around forty years after the Second World War ended, the premise of *brava gente* or “the myth of the Good Italian” was at the core of historical interpretations of Italy.[1] The historian Paolo Favero believes that this image of Italians being intrinsically good came into being through the “structured forgetfulness” of public memory.[2] Having grown up during the postwar years, he recounts that he was taught about the evilness of Nazism and that Mussolini never intended to persecute the Jews. This view is also discussed by Guri Schwarz, who suggests that Italians had perceived themselves in this way for decades in the wake of war, which made it easy to “obscure the many atrocities committed during the Fascist regime and the war years.”[3] This was a fundamental factor to consider when attempting to understand how Italians originally remembered the Holocaust, as until the 1980s this interpretation had the support of a significant portion of the Italian Jewry.[4] This emphasises how deep *brava gente* had become entrenched in national identity across this period, so how did it become the accepted version of the role that Italy played in the Holocaust?

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[1] Guri Schwarz, “On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the ‘Myth of the Good Italian’, 1943–1947”, *Telos* 164 (2013): 11.

[2] Paolo Favero, “Italians, the ‘Good People’: Reflections on National Self-Representation in Contemporary Italian Debates on Xenophobia and War”, *Outlines: Critical Practice Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 2010): 140.

[3] Schwarz, “On Myth Making and Nation Building”, 12.

[4] Ibid, 43.

The historian Robert Ventresca argues that the execution of Benito Mussolini in 1945 was central to the re-writing of the history of the Holocaust, as "postfascist Italy would need in some way to define itself against the very image of Mussolini and of fascism itself."[5] I therefore began to see Mussolini's death as a symbol for the death of Italian Fascism, which is emphasised in early historiography. This resulted in the myth that Italy was inherently antifascist, which is key to the purposes of this essay as I attempt to ascertain the influence of collective memory. Walter Audisio is an example of its power. As Mussolini's executioner, he was the sole individual responsible for the Duce's death, yet he believed that it "was carried out on behalf of the Italian people, as an expression of collective will".[6] At first I interpreted this as a fantastical attitude that should not have had an impact, but it has become apparent that it epitomises the attitude of Italian politicians at the time. They wanted the nation to be united once again, so I believe that their sole aim was to emphasise how far removed they were from the actions of the Fascist regime, especially anti-Semitism. Schwarz discusses the widely-accepted belief that it had "no roots in Italian society," and that the racist laws drawn up by Mussolini were "highly unpopular and not efficiently implemented".[7] Owing to a lack of historical scholarship looking closely at Italy's role in the Holocaust, representations that tended to suppress the true extent to which they were involved became the foundation of the postwar Republic.

In lights of this, I am quite certain that Favero's judgement on public memory can be deemed accurate, as Italy was in a unique position where it could be viewed as either a victim or a perpetrator. This "strategic and cruel" collective re-writing of recent Italian history was therefore paramount, as Italians subsequently became known as "intrinsically good folk".[8] Moreover, in this period Italian Fascist antisemitism was overshadowed by the atrocities that had been committed by the Nazis. The "bad German-good Italian" rhetoric has dominated historiography of the period, as this view showed Italy to be the lesser of two evils.[9] Ruth Ben-Ghiat believes that this diminishing of Mussolini's totalitarian actions has negatively impacted how well historians can assess the true extent to which Italy was complicit in the Holocaust. She writes that the "underestimation of Fascist violence committed both within and outside Italy… has minimize[d] Italians' agency and their responsibility for such violence."[10] The lack of Italian war criminals who were convicted after the war supports this theory, with the government "closing the door on […] the prosecution of war crimes" in order to ensure a smooth transition away from Fascism, and any direct links to the Holocaust.[11] These interpretations give us an explanation as to why the Italians' role in the Holocaust went largely unquestioned, as there is a lack of documentation from the period. This allowed for the *brava gente* argument to become engrained in collective memory, which portrayed Italians to be innocent bystanders in mass genocide.

This view of Italy's role in the Holocaust did not start to be questioned by historians until the 1980s. Using the work of Susan Zuccotti, it is possible for me to see how scholars began to revise the historiography of Italy. In doing so, they reassessed the extent to which the nation is culpable for the role it played in the extermination of the Jewish population. In her book *Italians and the Holocaust*, Zuccotti acknowledges that while Italy's Jews were "mildly observant and respectful of their heritage" before the Holocaust, they were "nevertheless fully integrated […] yet the Holocaust occurred in Italy."[12] Questioning how some of the most integrated Jews in Europe could become the victims of genocide was key to the revision of the previously accepted *brava gente* view of Italians in this period. Therefore, more recent interpretations of Italy in this period have attempted to address the actions of the Italians during the Holocaust, and questioning how complicit they were in the persecution of the Jews. For example, although the deterioration of the treatment of Jewish prisoners at Italian detention camps has been noted after the arrival of Nazi officers, Zuccotti brings attention to the experience of Emilio Jani. A Jewish tenor, he was held in Rome before being transported to Fossoli, and he believes that "unfortunately […] the Germans behaved better than the Fascists."[13] Insights such as this were essential insofar as gauging how anti-Semitism affected Jews' lives independently of the German influence, which for many had been the reason why anti-Semitic behaviour came to Italy.

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[5] Robert Ventresca, "Mussolini's Ghost: Italy's Duce in History and Memory,", *History & Memory* 18, no. 1 (2006): 91–92. Project MUSE.

[6] Ibid, 94.

[7] Schwarz, "On Myth Making and Nation Building", 13.

[8] Favero, "Italians, the 'Good People'", 140.

[9] Ventresca, "Mussolini's Ghost: Italy's Duce in History and Memory", 107.

[10] Ibid, 108.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 285.

Upon further research, I discovered that many revisionists have pinpointed the introduction of racial legislation in 1938 as the moment that the persecution of the Jews began in Italy, which is before the Nazi invasion part-way through World War II. Dan Vittorio Segre, who was raised as a Fascist Jew, describes the impact of this legislation in his memoir, noting that "after the publication of the laws […] I went to live […] in Turin," which was one of the only Italian cities where Jewish communities could arrange education "for students who had been thrown out of the public schools".[14] This supports Zuccotti's argument that Jewish assimilation in Italy "extended well into the years of Fascism […] [and] many Jews were loyal Fascists" yet when the legislation was published, they were abandoned by Mussolini, who they had supported since the March on Rome in 1922.[15] While Schwarz highlighted the collective argument of the Italians that these laws were not officially implemented, one can see from Segre's own experience that this was not necessarily the case. He acknowledges how fortunate he and his family are to have survived the persecution that ensued, as elsewhere entire families were subject to the inhumane death sentences inflicted by the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Therefore, I tend to agree with Zuccotti's revised view that assimilation was not as engrained as some were led to believe. It is arguably a more accurate notion with regards to the treatment of Jews in Italy in the lead up to and during the Holocaust.

Indeed, Joshua D. Zimmerman notes that it was not until recently that "the degree of Italian complicity in the implementation of Nazi Jewish policy on Italian soil" was acknowledged by historians.[16] He explains his confusion at the acceptance of Italy being an innocent bystander in the implementation of the Final Solution, especially considering the Axis agreement. Jonathan Steinberg seeks to explain the complicated nature of the Axis, giving examples of Italian diplomats making an effort to rescue Jews in Croatia, whilst also acknowledging that "the rise of fascism was really 'prior' to the emergence of Nazism."[17] In this way, he is addressing the fact that Hitler was influenced by Mussolini's ability to inspire "a mass movement to the right" at a time when the Nazi party was still forming and lacking support in the Weimar Republic.[18] This is essential in my understanding of how far Italians impacted the Holocaust, as it becomes clear in this interpretation that it was too simplistic of historians to previously argue that Italy was merely Germany's puppet. Mussolini was an influential leader, and his support throughout Italy should not be undermined. Although it may be uncomfortable to accept, Steinberg argues that it is "naïve […] [and] dangerous to see Hitler as uniquely guilty," as despite many Jews being "patriotic Italians," they were still persecuted owing to the laws that the Fascist regime implemented.[19]

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[13] Ibid, 178.

[14] Dan Vittorio Segre, *Memoirs of a Fortunate Jew* (Bethesda, Md.: Adler & Adler, 1987), 49.

[15] Zuccotti, S., *The Italians and the Holocaust*, 23–24.

[16] Joshua D. Zimmerman, "Introduction," in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi rule, 1922–1945*, ed. by Joshua Zimmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) http://assets.cambridge.org/052184/1011/excerpt/0521841011_excerpt.htm.

[17] Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941–43* (London: Routledge, 1990) 1, 243.

[18] Ibid, 243.

[19] Ibid, 242, 222.

The effect of the Axis agreement and the racial laws can be seen in Alexander Stille's *Benevolence and Betrayal*, which details the lives of five Italian Jewish families during the Holocaust. Although only published in 1991, Stille acknowledges that some Italian Jews attempted to dissuade him from researching his topic, "out of fear of stirring renewed anti-Semitism".[20] This emphasises how much of an impact new research into Italy's role in the Holocaust had on modern Italian historiography. His work highlights, importantly, how their experiences differed depending on their geographical location and financial situation. While some families could afford to go into hiding, some, such as those living in the Rome Ghetto, "didn't have enough money […] ever since the itinerant peddlers had lost their licenses."[21] The loss of these licenses was a result of Fascist racial laws that had been implemented prior to the Nazis occupying Rome in September 1943, showing that the persecution of the Italian Jewry existed before Mussolini fell from power.

The pre-existence of Jewish persecution is further supported by the experience of Olga Di Veroli, who recalls the night that Mussolini was voted out of power, and how "the weight of racial persecution was lifted."[22] There were celebrations as Fascism fell, and Olga notes that subsequently, "everyone was an antifascist."[23] As a result of this, I can now imagine how the subsequent deportations and massacres of the Jewish population were blamed on the "treacherous" Germans rather than the Italian government, as the Italian people would have liked to believe that it was simply out of character for their people to have committed such appalling crimes.[24] The view that all Italians were antifascist was a driving force in the belief of *brava gente*, which makes it difficult for me to determine the extent to which Italy played a role in the Holocaust.

The research of Michele Sarfatti was effective in demolishing the view that Italian anti-Semitic policy was merely an attempt by Mussolini to keep his alliance with Hitler, and to provide Italy with a strong ally. He emphasises the independent thought of Mussolini, who throughout the early 1930s systematically attacked "the anti-fascist and anti-Italian Jews", which eventually led to the damning legislation of 1938.[25] Chronicling his Fascist regime from 1922–1943, Sarfatti has written many works on the effect of Italian Fascism. In this way, he has removed the façade that Mussolini's laws did not have much of an impact on Italy's Jews, which supports the experiences of the families in Stille's book—who, in varying ways, were all affected by changing attitudes towards them as the Holocaust gathered momentum.

With this insight, it became possible to see why many wanted Mussolini's execution to mark the end of Fascism in Italy. I interpreted this as a national attempt to remove it from its past and build a new Republic, which was easier for Italians than attempting to understand their culpability in the Holocaust. Robert S. C. Gordon's work appears to support my observation. He expresses his surprise at "the relative neglect of Italy within this field", as he too is aware of the impact that the model of Fascist Italy had on the development of Hitler's dictatorship.[26] Moreover, he emphasises the fact that despite claims that Mussolini and other Italian officials "did much to frustrate deportations and massacres of Jews during the early phase of the war", Italy became a part-collaborator in genocide.[27]

Gordon is of the opinion that the Italian position became more complicated after July 1943, when the Germans occupied the centre and north of the country, and as Italians became victims of their policies; whilst the Salò Republic still upheld "the racial bureaucracy of the former Fascist state".[28] This complicated state of affairs, he argues, combined with individual narratives of "local acts of solidarity with the Jewish population" led to the Italian population believing that they were subsequently immune to racism.[29] This view became embedded in the public memory of the atrocities, allowing for *brava gente* and other such myths to be built into the Italian psyche. Combining this with the research of other revisionist historians, it is possible to consider how this developed as a notion, especially after Mussolini's very public death, which many have taken to be the collective rejection of the Fascist regime.

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[20] Alexander Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 6.

[21] Ibid, 189.

[22] Ibid, 185.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 74.

[26] Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 9.

[27] Ibid.

However, the truth was much more complex than many in the postwar era were led to believe, owing to a distinct lack of historiography. I believe that this had an unquestionable impact on the collective memory of the Italian people, and the way in which these events were recalled for decades after the war ended. Therefore, I felt it was important to research the impact that more recent historiography has had on the Italian public memory, and the way in which the Holocaust is now remembered. This can be seen in another work by Robert Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Collective Memory: Il giorno della memoria*, and the work of Susanne C. Knittel, as they explore the way in which the Holocaust is commemorated in Italy today. Gordon views Italy's first *Giorno della memoria* in 2001 as "a crucible in which public uses of history and memory […] were on vivid display."[30] The date, 27 January, is recognised globally as the day that Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army in 1945; it is now an International Memorial Day.

The first official commemoration day took place in Italy after the unanimous passing on law number 211 on 20 July 2000, with the view that it would remember "the racial laws, Italy's persecution of its Jewish citizens, Italians who underwent deportation, imprisonment and death, as well as those […] who, risk their own lives, saved others and protected the persecuted."[31] This was groundbreaking on the principle that the government publicly accepted responsibility for the part that they played in the Holocaust. However, the irony is not lost on Gordon that this vote took place in the same houses of parliament where the racial laws had been passed "enthusiastically and unanimously" on 17 November 1938.[32] This once again highlights how complex an issue the Holocaust is in Italian historiography, as it took decades for an official admission that Italy was complicit in the crime.

Susanne C. Knittel also addresses the political tensions raised by the remembrance of the Holocaust in modern day Italy. She notes that in practice, the *Giorno della memoria* still emphasise the period of Nazi occupation, despite the law explicitly recognising the anti-Semitic attitudes of 1938–1942, before the Italians became Germany's collaborators.[33] This shows that although historical scholarship has identified anti-Semitism in Italy prior to the Nazis taking control, the national rhetoric is still very much focused on the image of the Italian people, in that they were all victims of the Nazis and therefore inherently good. Moreover, she discusses the confusion caused by a second commemoration day, *Giorno del ricordo*, which could be "quite deliberate[ly] […] reinforcing the narrative of innocence and victimhood" that had been at the centre of Italian historiography for such a long period of time.[34] This highlights the levels of contention caused by the questioning of Italy's role in the Holocaust, as it has completely changed the national identity of its people.

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[28] Ibid, 11.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Robert S. C. Gordon, "The Holocaust in Italian Collective Memory: Il giorno della memoria, 27 January 2001", *Modern. Italy* 11, no. 2 (2006): 168; *Giorno della memoria* is the Italian term for "Day of Memorial".

[31] Ibid, 169.

[32] Ibid, 170.

[33] Susanne C. Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 178, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/35563.

[34] Ibid, 179; *Giorno del ricordo* is the day of remembrance specifically for Italians that has been held every February since 2005.

It is difficult to disagree with Knittel's confusion surrounding the creation of two commemoration days. I was therefore interested in understanding how they came into existence, especially considering that the premise of *brava gente* was an accepted historical interpretation for such a long time. Thus, I must question why there was a resurgence in Italian historiography towards the end of the twentieth century. During the 1990s in particular, there was a significant push for anti-Semitism during the war to be officially recognised in the form of a memorial day, which has been explored above. The historian Rebecca Clifford discusses a range of factors that may have caused people to seek answers.[35] Most notably, she covers the demographic changes that occurred owing to the aging of the wartime generation. With the people who witnessed the war firsthand becoming elderly, the opportunity to learn more about their experiences- both those of victims and perpetrators- was slowly decreasing. Moreover, she acknowledges the impact of the fiftieth anniversary of the roundup of Rome's Jews on 16 October 1943.[36] Remembering the significance of this event sparked public debates over Fascism and how it had been historicised, as for many it was the nadir of Italy's treatment of the Jewry. Up until this point, Italy had not admitted any guilt, which appears to confirm my understanding that there had been a national rejection of Facism, which Italians believed would erase it from their country's history.

Thus, the controversial dichotomy of splitting Italian Fascism into two periods, 1922–1938, before the passing of the racial legislation, and 1938–1945, served a "clear political purpose" in the 1990s, with the latter period allowing for the deportation and massacre of Italian Jews to be blamed primarily on the Germans, as though they were a scapegoat.[37] Whilst historians attempted to decipher what really happened in Italy during the Holocaust, politicians attempted to reconcile the left and right wing members of the population. "'Reconciliation' was often viewed […] as an act of conscious forgetting for the benefit of national unity," which provided my research with context as to why passing legislation for commemorative events took so long to pass through parliament, as well as showing the nation's unwillingness to face its past and accept that Italian anti-Semitism was real.[38] I believe that this is at the heart of how the Holocaust is remembered in Italy, as revised historical scholarship has shown that the events of this period cannot be suppressed. However, it is worthy of note that the impact of this coming to light has destroyed how many Italians had previously identified themselves. In my opinion, this shows how deeply engrained certain attitudes towards the Holocaust were in the Italian psyche, and how these actions shaped the way that a generation of people saw their country.

In conclusion, as a result of revisionist interpretations of this period, Italy has begun to accept responsibility for the role it played in the Holocaust. Although the complexity of this contentious period cannot be undermined, the acknowledgement of anti-Semitic actions occurring on Italian soil, without Nazi encouragement, has prevented knowledge of this period from being suppressed. We may never know the true extent of what was lost in the adoption of selective memory in attempts to pursue an antifascist identity. However, the changing historiography of the last thirty years or so has had a profound effect on the way in which the Holocaust is remembered in Italy. Therefore, although a lack of early historical scholarship suppressed the extent of Italy's complicity in the Holocaust, and as a result affected how it was remembered for nearly half a century, a subject that was once avoided is now publicly discussed. I believe the issues at hand will never be fully comprehended, owing to the nature of the atrocities committed. The Holocaust was a transnational tragedy that will never be simple to dissect. As such, the commemoration of anti-Semitism in Italy highlights how far historiography has taken a nation which was once viewed as an innocent bystander, even a victim, of mass genocide. While there may have been higher survival rates than other European nations, it is necessary to understand why the Holocaust occurred in Italy. The Italians are culpable, as they played a part in a global phenomenon that impacted many countries. This cannot be ignored. Thus, I think that historical scholarship is fundamental to our understanding of events such as the Holocaust, as has been shown by Italy beginning to remember and commemorate its fascist past. ■

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[35] Rebecca Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemma of Remembrance in France and Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid, 146.

[38] Ibid, 147.

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