

Research Week: Proposal

Title – Mussolini’s Italy: An Enigmatic Haven for the Jews of World War II

Program of Study – History

Presentation Type –PowerPoint

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Category – Textual

Abstract: This paper examines the nation of Italy before and during World War II and how unique qualities prepared this country to become a haven for Jews during the Second World War. Perhaps the most familiar war in history, World War II came about through centuries of political and cultural changes that precipitated the eventual adoption of the racialized doctrine of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. The horrors of the concentration and death camps have not been forgotten, and the call to “never again” see a similar holocaust still resounds in textbooks and classrooms today. However, a topic that is not as well-known as that of German atrocity is the enigmatic nature of Italy’s Benito Mussolini and the Fascist views on anti-Semitism. Though Mussolini was considered Hitler’s greatest ally, the Fascist regime actively worked against anti-Semitic propaganda espoused by Germany and saved thousands of Jews from certain death in concentration and extermination camps. Regular Italian citizens, Catholic clergy, and even government officials risked their lives to save Jewish neighbors and immigrants. This paper examines the cultural, ideological, and religious aspects of Italy and attempts to explain why Italian Fascism treated Jews to a relatively mild form of discrimination, and more importantly, why Italy actively fought to save the Jews in many instances throughout the conflict. This study examined period Italian laws, political doctrine, and religious views through official documents and firsthand accounts for a deeper understanding of the context of the time. While it is certainly

relevant to point out the racial injustices perpetrated by Italy against the Jews during World War II, this study shows that earlier Jewish assimilation into Italian culture, the absence of true Fascist anti-Semitism, and the overwhelming saving efforts of individual Italian citizens allowed Italy to be a unique, albeit enigmatic, haven for Jews.