

Simon Levis Sullam

The Italian executioners: revisiting the role of Italians in the Holocaust\*

The Italians and the Holocaust: a genocide

On 5 April 1944, in a crowded public hall overlooking St. Mark's Square in Venice, the esteemed physician Giocondo Protti delivered a lecture on 'Israel' as an 'illness for humanity'. The lecture, very well attended according to the local press, dwelled upon the Jewish aspiration to wealth and power as demonstrated by the 'famous and dreadful *Protocols of the elders of Zion*', described Jews as a 'spiritual monstrosity ... as cancer is a biological monstrosity grafted onto the healthy flesh of humanity', and foretold a pitiless 'punishment' for the 'Christ-killers'. As secretary of the Fascist Union of Physicians, Protti had been active in the persecution of the Jews since at least 1942, in the context of the fascist attack on professions following the 'racial laws' of 1938, and became a prolific antisemitic propagandist at the beginning of the Republic of Salò.<sup>1</sup>

Anti-Jewish propaganda was one of the most visible aspects of the fascist return to power in German-occupied Northern and Central Italy in the fall of 1943, sustaining the arrest and deportation of Italian Jews, which would number 8,869 deportees by the end of the war (over 25% of the Jews present

---

\* Post-print version of Simon Levis Sullam (2016): The Italian executioners: revisiting the role of Italians in the Holocaust, *Journal of Genocide Research*, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2016.1215043

<sup>1</sup> See reports on Protti's lecture in *Il Gazzettino*, 1 and 6 April 1944, cited in Renata Segre (ed.), *Gli ebrei a Venezia, 1943-1945. Una comunità tra persecuzione e rinascita* (Venice: Il Poligrafo, 1995), p. 170, and the article by Giocondo Protti, 'Il dramma di Israele', *Orizzonti* (single issue), (Venice-Rome: Edizioni Erre, 1944), pp. 39-43. For Protti's anti-Jewish activity around 1942, see documents in Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Gabinetto Prefettura, versamento 1956, box 7, file Attività professionali Ebrei.

within the Italian peninsula at the time).<sup>2</sup> Revisiting and reinterpreting recent research literature this article considers the role of Italians in the hunting down, arrest and deportation of the Jews in Italy and underlines that, contrary to assumptions still often holding sway in international historiography, this role was very relevant, involving significant segments of Italian society to different degrees, and essential to the accomplishment of the ‘Final Solution’ in Italy, in collaboration with the Germans.<sup>3</sup> Although Italians did not participate in the actual killing of Italian Jews, which took place at the hand of the Nazis in death camps in Eastern Europe (mainly Auschwitz), they nonetheless autonomously initiated the genocide of the Jews of Italy by arresting them on a racial basis, imprisoning them and handing them over to the Germans, they produced antisemitic propaganda, betrayed and turned in fellow citizens, and they pillaged their property, without any direct external orders. The speed and ease with which they were able to do so were mostly a consequence of the racist administrative system and propaganda put into place and active in Italy since Mussolini’s enforcement of antisemitic laws in 1938. In the wake of the reassessment of the history of Italian antisemitism and of the specific path taken by fascism in embracing state racism carried out by Italian historiography over the past twenty-five years, a close re-examination of the fascist participation in the Holocaust is necessary in order to definitively challenge the ‘myth of the good Italian’, which—despite this historiography—is still often

---

<sup>2</sup> On Fascism and the Jews, the classic account by Renzo De Felice, *The Jews in fascist Italy: a history* (New York: Enigma Books, 2015), was criticized and partly revised by Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: from equality to persecution*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press 2006). I have used the Italian edition: *Gli ebrei nell’Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Turin: Einaudi 2000). See also Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, *L’Italia fascista e la persecuzione degli ebrei* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008). Overviews are offered, in English, by Joshua D. Zimmerman (ed.), *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and, more broadly Marcello Flores et al. (eds.), *Storia della Shoah in Italia. Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, 2 vols (Turin: UTET, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> This is the thesis of my recent book *I carnefici italiani: scene dal genocidio degli ebrei, 1943-45* (Milan: Feltrinelli 2015), from which I draw materials presented in this article.

enduring especially outside Italy.<sup>4</sup>

Italy's participation in the Holocaust came after five years of state antisemitism, briefly interrupted in the summer of 1943 during the 45 days of the Badoglio government, which however did not formally abolish the racial laws. It was made possible by the participation of hundreds—possibly thousands—of Italians, with different roles, without whose contribution the process of deportation, and eventually extermination, could not have been completed. These Italians were mainly policemen and military policemen (*Carabinieri*), fascist party members, State and local administrative bureaucrats and officers, journalists and propagandists, but also clerical workers and common citizens. Some participated in the roundups and arrests, some in the propaganda efforts, others drafted the lists of wanted Jews and their orders of arrest; many acted as spies or informants, turning in fellow citizens and neighbors. This article suggest that the use of the category of genocide in the interpretation of the Holocaust in Italy should not be applied exclusively to the German design of the 'Final Solution', but also to Italian responsibilities. At the same time, such events should be contextualized within the Italian civil war, which divided Fascists (and Nazis) and the antifascist resistance in 1943-45, violently splitting Italian society. Reframing anti-Jewish politics and policies in Italy in the twilight of fascism within the category of genocide and in the context of civil war makes it possible to consider a broader spectrum of causes and motivating factors, and different forms of implication in the process of rounding up and deporting Jews. Considered in terms of the basic, historical definition, which goes

---

<sup>4</sup> On the myth of the "good Italian" see, David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan il Saggiatore, 1994); Angelo Del Boca (ed.), *Italiani brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2010); Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: la rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Rom-Bari: Laterza, 2013). Major revisions of the history of Italian antisemitism and racism began with the following volumes: Centro Furio Jesi (ed.), *La menzogna della razza. Documenti e immagini del razzismo e dell'antisemitismo italiani* (Bologna: Graphis, 1994); Alberto Burgio (ed.), *Nel nome della razza: il razzismo nella storia d'Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).

back to Raphael Lemkin, genocide is the attempt to entirely or partially destroy a group, defined on ethnic, racial or religious grounds:<sup>5</sup> and there is no doubt that Italians not only participated in, but also took the initiative in the process of the extermination of the Jews, by means of decisions, agreements, and acts that made them actors and accomplices in the Holocaust.

As we know from the historiography of the Holocaust in Europe and of genocides more in general—the findings of which should be applied more thoroughly also to the Italian case—antisemitism and the ideological drive were not the only motivation behind the arrests and deportation of Jews and pillaging of their property. In the Italian context, too, military, hierarchical and bureaucratic compliance with orders, fear of internal enemies and violence against them (typical also of civil war), greed as well as competition, imitation, emulation, and selfishness, must all be taken into account as factors contributing to the execution of genocide. In genocide—and this is true also of the Italian phase of the Holocaust—obedience, loyalism, conformity, but also a search for satisfaction, reward and success often prevail over ideology. In fact, such factors can rarely be isolated and should be seen as ‘a series of incremental and not always intentional shifts across the shared space to a point where active participation could be more easily self-justified’.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as underlined by Raul Hilberg and Zygmunt Bauman, division and fragmentation of functions, and distance from the final aim and result

---

<sup>5</sup> See Raphael Lemkin, *Axis rule in occupied Europe* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944). For a variety of approaches to and possible applications of this category see Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of genocide studies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Donald Bloxham, ‘Organized mass murder: structure, participation and motivation in Comparative Perspective’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 22, 2, 2008, pp. 203-245, esp. pp. 207, 216-217; more, in general, Bloxham, *The Final Solution: a genocide* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of extermination, eased the procedures and the different phases of the destruction of the Jews.<sup>7</sup> This should be taken into account also in the interpretation of the Italian experience: here, as in other instances of participation in the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Europe, distance from direct extermination seems indeed to have favored participation in anti-Jewish policies. Finally, it has been noted that ‘in civil war, violence is never purely instrumental. It acquires a strong symbolic dimension’, and it also ‘develops until it reaches its own dynamic, and becomes an end in itself’<sup>8</sup>: violence, of all sorts, thus becomes self-propelling. Without downplaying the fact that large numbers of Italian Jews were rescued and protected by fellow Italian citizens,<sup>9</sup> we cannot ignore the genocidal nature of Italian anti-Jewish policies in 1943-45, even if rescue should be taken into account<sup>10</sup> when trying to gauge the support for

---

<sup>7</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), esp. p. 24, quoting Raul Hilberg, *The destruction of the European Jews* (New York, London, Holmes & Meier, 1985), p. 1024.

<sup>8</sup> Enzo Traverso, *A ferro e fuoco: la guerra civile europea, 1914-1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), p. 78. English translation: *Fire and blood: the European civil war, 1914-1945*, trans. David Fernbach, (London: Verso 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Davide Rodogno’s study of fascist occupation policies in the Mediterranean, including the rescue of Jews from the hands of the Germans by Italian military authorities in the Balkans and in Southern France in 1940-43, has established that such interventions were dictated first and foremost by reasons of defense of Italian interests, decision-making autonomy and even diplomatic and military prestige, see Davide Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo: le politiche di occupazione dell’Italia fascista in Europa, 1940-1943*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); the English edition is *Fascism’s European Empire: Italian occupation during the Second World War*, trans. Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006). See also Enzo Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei: le leggi razziali in Italia*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008), pp. 117-20, which insists on Rodogno’s line of interpretation, though it also suggests relative absence of antisemitism in the Italian army and the prevalence of anti-Slavic racism.

<sup>10</sup> This article does not deal with the important question of the rescuing of Jews by the Italian population, which is the object of ongoing research, but which has also been overemphasized in public discourse and especially by international historiography (a recent assessment is: Liliana Picciotto, *Il soccorso agli ebrei nel 1943-1945* in *Storia della Shoah in Italia*, 1, pp. 577-601). Nor do I deal specifically with the role played in this context by the Catholic clergy, which was certainly active, but also included significant instances of indifference or inaction, starting from the highest echelons of the Vatican, see Giovanni Miccoli, *I dilemmi e i silenzi di Pio XII* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000); Susan Zuccotti,

such policies among the Italian population at large.<sup>11</sup>

Italian events can also be placed in the broader context of the Final Solution in Western Europe, where the most appropriate comparison for Italy—all differences notwithstanding—is probably the French case.<sup>12</sup> Though France had a far larger Jewish population, here, as in Italy, about 25 percent of Jews were deported (about 80,000 out of a total of 300,000).<sup>13</sup> Both Italy and France had German military administrations and domestic governments, centered on Salò and Vichy respectively, that were partly comparable.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the role of the French and Italian administrations in the rounding-up of Jews, especially by prefectures and police corps,<sup>15</sup> was similar. However, from the fall of 1943 onwards, Italy, which had been an ally of Germany since 1936 and had adopted antisemitic policies since 1938, proved to be far more radical than France with regard to many aspects of its anti-Jewish

---

*Under his very windows: the Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven.: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Other geopolitical factors should be also taken into account: for example Italy's proximity to a neutral country such as Switzerland, which allowed a considerable number of Italian Jews to find refuge there. Moreover, the Allies' advance along the Italian peninsula forced the Germans to make a quicker retreat, shortening the occupation period, as well as the existence of the Republic of Salò, and thus of the anti-Jewish policies.

<sup>12</sup> For the context: Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, 'The Nazis and the Jews in occupied Western Europe, 1940-1944', *Journal of Modern History*, 54, December 1982, pp. 687-714, although their treatment of the Italian case is entirely superseded; Wolfgang Seibel, 'The strength of perpetrators: the Holocaust in Western Europe, 1940-1944', *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions*, 15, 2, April 2002, pp. 211-240, although it does not deal with Italy.

<sup>13</sup> The total Jewish population in the Italian peninsula had shrunk to 33,360 and 8,869 Jews were deported according to Liliana Picciotto Fargion, *Il libro della memoria: gli ebrei deportati dall'Italia, 1943-1945*, 2nd edn. (Milan: Mursia, 2002) p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> For a broad overview: Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Studies dealing with arrests in France and the role of the French administration include: Tal Bruttman, *Au Bureau des affaires juives: l'administration française et l'application de la législation antisémite (1940-1944)* (Paris: La Découverte 2006); Laurent Joly, *L'antisémitisme de bureau: enquête au coeur de la préfecture de Police de Paris et du Commissariat général aux questions juives, 1940-1944* (Paris: Grasset, 2011).

policies. For example, when rounding up and handing over Jewish victims to the Germans, the RSI never distinguished between Italian Jews and foreign Jews residing in Italy while Vichy consistently favored French Jews over non-French Jews residing in the country. Moreover, Vichy also created a Jewish administrative structure (as did the Netherlands and Belgium),<sup>16</sup> something never contemplated by the RSI: in fact, already at the end of January 1944 it ordered that Italian Jewish Communities be dismantled.<sup>17</sup> And while fascist Italy resisted embracing the project of the ‘Final Solution’ in Southern France and in Croatia and Slovenia during the early years of the war, after the establishment of the RSI it was in a position to rapidly participate in the Holocaust. In fact, Italy could draw upon the anti-Jewish administrative and propaganda apparatus put into place from 1938 onwards, while Vichy had to go through several organizational and administrative steps, beginning with the census of the Jewish population, before it could join in the ‘Final Solution’.<sup>18</sup>

Some political and organizational premises (1938-1943)

During the first ten years of the fascist movement and regime, antisemitism was expressed occasionally by Mussolini and within fascism. But from the mid-1930s onwards it began to appear more stably in the extremist fringes of the fascist movement and in certain academic and administrative contexts of the regime. The creation of an Italian empire in May 1936, after Italy’s conquest of

---

<sup>16</sup> Paxton and Marrus, ‘The Nazis and the Jews’, p. 697; Seibel, ‘The strength of perpetrators’, p. 224.

<sup>17</sup> Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell’Italia fascista*, p. 250.

<sup>18</sup> The comparison between the RSI and Vichy also holds true for two factors that probably represented a counterweight to the German project of extermination, at least in terms of the speed of the deportations (contrary to cases such as the Netherlands and Belgium). In both Italy and France, Nazi policies were hindered – albeit in different ways – by the presence of a national government; and the territorial dispersion of the Jews (reinforced in the case of France by the territorial fragmentation of the regimes of occupation) also delayed the deportations. On such factors in the French case, see Seibel, ‘The strength of perpetrators’, p. 227.

Ethiopia, promoted state racism, and in 1937 a law against miscegenation was enforced in the African colony.<sup>19</sup> The summer of 1938 saw the publication of a ‘manifesto’ affirming the existence of a ‘superior Italian race’, drafted by a group of Italian scientists and academics. In the fall of that year the Fascist regime enforced ‘racial laws’, which excluded Jewish students and teachers from public schools, severely limited the professional activities and businesses in which Jews could engage, and imposed restrictions on property, creating a state of ‘apartheid’ for Jews in Italian society. This included, for example, the ban on books by Jewish authors, which could no longer be published or even lent by libraries,<sup>20</sup> as well as the prohibition—to give another example of the extent of bureaucratically-imposed social segregation—of Jewish participation in associations for the protection of animals.<sup>21</sup> Antisemitic culture and propaganda flourished in education, newspapers and magazines, some of which—like the infamous and widely diffused *La Difesa della Razza*<sup>22</sup>—sprang up in the wake of the new racial policy.

The onset of the world war worsened conditions for Italian Jews.<sup>23</sup> In the late spring of 1940 the secretary of state in the ministry of the interior, Guido Buffarini-Guidi, sent the following message to the Italian chief of police: ‘The Duce desires that, in case of war, concentration camps also be prepared for the Jews’. A further message sent on the following day made his orders clear: ‘In case of an

---

<sup>19</sup> See Gianluca Gabrielli, ‘Un aspetto della politica razzista nell’impero: il problema dei “meticci”’, *Passato e Presente*, 15, 41, 1997, pp. 77-105. For the broader context, see Ruth Ben Ghiat and Mia Fuller (eds.), *Italian colonialism* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Fabre, *L’elenco: censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei* (Turin: Zamorani 1998).

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Simon Levis Sullam, *Gli ebrei a Venezia nella prima metà del Novecento*, in Mario Isnenghi and Stuart J. Woolf (eds.) *Storia di Venezia. L’Ottocento e il Novecento* 3 Vols. (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 2002), 3: p.1679.

<sup>22</sup> Francesco Cassata, “*La Difesa della razza*”. *Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> This escalation has been especially emphasized by Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei*, pp. 106-117.



emergency, Italian Jews are also to be removed from their place of residence and interned, in addition to the foreign Jews mentioned in previous messages, because they represent a real danger'. Six months later, since the Jews had 'once again revealed their most obtuse misunderstanding with regard to current political and historical events, proving themselves to be constitutionally adverse to any form of national feeling'—another official note said—the consignment in concentration camps of foreign Jewish 'elements who were more suspect because of their feelings and conduct should [had] be[en] expedited'.<sup>24</sup> In the summer of 1942, numerous Italian Jews were ordered to carry out forced labor, and one year later, some weeks before the end of the fascist regime, a joint document of the ministry of corporations and of the general division of demography and race and of public order ordered the creation of 'work camps for [Italian] citizens of Jewish race' between the ages of 18 and 36. Although Mussolini's deposition on 25 July 1943 caused this project to remain unfulfilled, it would have represented a new step in the chain of persecutions initiated by fascism and exacerbated by the situation of war, further subjugating and exploiting the Italian Jewish population on a racial basis.<sup>25</sup> At this stage, while the nazi 'Final Solution' was already producing victims at an industrial rate in Eastern Europe, fascist antisemitism did not yet envision extermination. However, the existence of a project

---

<sup>24</sup> Following the enforcement of racial laws in 1938, foreign (i.e. non-Italian) Jews were treated more severely by the fascist regime. To begin with, all Jews who had entered Italy after January 1919 as well as Jews who had received Italian citizenship after that date were ordered to leave the country under threat of expulsion. However, many foreign Jews did not comply with such orders, and many others continued to pour into the Italian peninsula in 1939-40 (see Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *I campi del Duce. L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista, 1940-1943*, Turin: Einaudi, 2004, pp. 92-95). Once deportations began, no distinction was made between Italian and foreign Jews residing in Italy.

<sup>25</sup> All documents quoted above concerning internment in concentration camps are published in *La menzogna della razza*, pp. 337-340; for an overview on Jewish internment under Fascism: Mario Toscano, 'L'internamento degli ebrei italiani 1940-1943: tra contingenze belliche e politica razziale', in Costantino Di Sante (ed.), *I campi di concentramento in Italia. Dall'internamento alla deportazione (1940-1945)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001), pp. 95-112; Capogreco, *I campi del Duce*.

intended to imprison and exploit through forced labor a relevant segment of the Italian Jewish population, which had already experienced five years of separation and heavy economic and social constraints, makes it possible to surmise that this treatment of the ‘Jewish question’ by Italians could itself have had genocidal consequences. In fact, both earlier and contemporary Italian military operations involving imprisonment in camps—in occupied Slovenia during the war, and previously in Libya in the 1930s (i.e. in the colonial context, on an ethnic or racial basis)—had produced victims by the thousands<sup>26</sup>: the same fate could have befallen Jewish prisoners in a similar situation.<sup>27</sup> It is impossible to establish a necessary direct link—certainly in terms of planning—between the camps for foreign Jews of the early 1940s, the planned forced labor camps of the early summer of 1943, and the arrests and imprisonments of Jews in 1943-45 under the RSI and the German occupation, a prelude to deportation and extermination by the Nazis. However, there is evidence of a plan, from the end of December 1943, for the creation of two major national concentration camps: Fossoli (which was actually almost immediately activated as the main Italian transit camp)<sup>28</sup>, and a second camp for which existing sites in the Veneto, in Liguria and in Tuscany were taken into consideration.<sup>29</sup> This plan may have represented a project for the prolonged detention of Jewish prisoners and their exploitation

---

<sup>26</sup> Costantino Di Sante, ‘Deportazione e campi di concentramento in Cirenaica e in Jugoslavia’ *Italia contemporanea*, n. 252-253, September-December 2008, pp. 547-565.

<sup>27</sup> This hypothesis should be compared with Davide Rodogno’s conclusion in his study of fascist occupation policies in 1940-43, which maintains that the ‘fascist imperial project’ was meant to ‘establish a racial hierarchy of peoples, which would remain enforced *ad libitum*’. Rodogno emphasizes that this project ‘insisted on a “civilizing mission”’ which in itself ‘implied the existence of the other, the survival of the dominated’ (Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo*, p. 489). One wonders, however, whether this still holds true for the occupation and internment policies during fascism’s new radical phase in 1943-45.

<sup>28</sup> On Fossoli see Liliana Picciotto, *L’alba di colse come un tradimento: gli ebrei nel campo di Fossoli, 1943-44* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> See Giuseppe Mayda, *Storia della deportazione dall’Italia 1943-1945: militari, ebrei e politici nei lager del Terzo Reich* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), p. 149.

through forced labor. Independently of German initiatives, this would have threatened and even endangered the lives of Jewish prisoners, due in particular to the perilous living, sanitary and work conditions involved.

#### The beginnings: embracing radical antisemitism

Back in October 1943, before reborn fascism officially resumed and harshened its antisemitic policy in the context of the RSI, the grassroots level of the Fascist Party (now called *Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, PFR) requested measures to deal radically with the Jews. The assembly of the fascist party of Rome, for example, asked that ‘all the Jews be immediately interned in concentration camps’, and similarly, a military squad of the party in Padua invoked ‘the internment of all Jews’.<sup>30</sup> It has been suggested that the PFR was developing a tendency—identified by Emilio Gentile as already being present in the party in the last years of the regime—to become ‘totalitarian’ and ‘paramilitary’ (*squadristica*), and to consider political adversaries as ‘enemies to be eliminated or humiliated’.<sup>31</sup> This also raises the question of the long-term evolution of the enemies of fascism and of fascist violence against them<sup>32</sup>: from socialists since 1919-22 onwards, to communists and anti-fascists generally, to Jews at least since 1938, and more radically from the fall of 1943 onwards. Over time different contexts and changing factors would shape the identification of the enemies of fascism. The toppling and imprisonment of Mussolini in July 1943, combined with Italy’s unexpected and dramatic change of

---

<sup>30</sup> Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell’Italia fascista*, p. 247 note 53, and Luigi Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camice nere*, Milan: Garzanti, 1999, p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> See Dianella Gagliani, ‘Il partito nel fascismo repubblicano delle origini: una prima messa a punto’, *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, XXIII-XXIV, 1994-1995, 1-2, pp. 159-160 and n. See more broadly, Gagliani, *Brigate nere. La militarizzazione del partito fascista* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> For lingering violence towards different enemies during fascism, see Michael Ebner, *Ordinary violence in Mussolini’s Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

alliances from the Germans to the Allies in September 1943, caused a sense of betrayal in fascist militants, as well as giving rise to the agonizing search for ‘traitors’ that was to become a recurrent theme and attitude during the Republic of Salò. This led to the public search for and identification of new internal enemies among the so-called *badogliani* (the followers of General Pietro Badoglio, Mussolini’s successor after the end of fascism, considered the symbol of treason), once again among antifascists and, perhaps first and foremost, among Jews. A traditional internal enemy throughout Europe over the centuries, Jews had officially been identified as such by fascism since 1938 and were thus readily available to the Italian political imagination as the by-now-familiar target of suspicion and attacks.<sup>33</sup> This imagination had been further radicalized by the world war, and finally by the Italian civil war which, beginning in the fall of 1943, divided fascist and antifascist partisans,<sup>34</sup> and exacerbated feelings that enemies could be hiding anywhere.

Radical antisemitism as an official line not only for the party but also for the new fascist state was resumed and adopted at the PFR conference in Verona, held on 14 November 1943. The party assembly established among the founding principles of the RSI the definition of Jews as ‘foreigners’ and ‘enemies’, since they did not belong to the ‘Italian race’. Transcripts from the conference speech of the party secretary, Alessandro Pavolini, include reactions to his speech, and although this source should be treated with caution, appear to document a heated anti-Jewish atmosphere. ‘As you know’, Pavolini said, ‘We are busy these days with the confiscation of Jewish patrimonies (from the audience: ‘It was about time’, ‘The right decision’, expressions of approval). Without indulging in rhetoric, [this

---

<sup>33</sup> For a comparison with the construction of the enemy by Nazi propaganda, see Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish enemy. Nazi propaganda during world war 2nd and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> The now classic interpretation of the 1943-45 period in Italy as a civil war is offered by Claudio Pavone, *A civil war: a history of the Italian resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

wealth] comes from blood sucked from the people (from the audience: ‘Watch out for wealth moved from Jewish to Italian hands’, ‘When will Jews be transferred?’, ‘This is not enough, not enough’). Some Jews deserve... (from the audience: ‘All of them’, ‘All’, ‘Sure’). They are certainly foreigners who belong to a enemy nation (from the audience: ‘Well said!’, ‘Very well’, ‘That is certain’) and they are enemies!’.<sup>35</sup> This final statement about the status of Jews would appear among the constitutional principles of the RSI as point 7 of the Verona manifesto.<sup>36</sup>

The fascist party had thus dictated the new line, which emphasized the Jewish question as one of the central aspects of the Republic of Salò. But it fell to the prefects and heads of police of the Italian state being rebuilt at that time (which had mostly been moved to the Center-North of Italy from nazi-occupied and later liberated Rome) to put the new anti-Jewish policy into practice. In the chaotic and polycratic context of the war, of the German occupation<sup>37</sup> and of the civil war, some of the first steps of this policy were actually taken autonomously on the peripheries of the new fascist administration. First, the local *Questure* (police offices) had provided the Germans with support for their early round-ups of Jews beginning in Rome on 16 October 1943: not least by providing lists of Jews and their whereabouts in every Italian city, town or village, based on the constantly updated racist census of 1938.

After the party conference in Verona and a meeting with prefects in Florence during which the minister of interior Guido Buffarini Guidi announced imminent anti-Jewish measures, the prefect of

---

<sup>35</sup> Transcripts of the PFR conference in Verona are cited in Mayda, *Storia della deportazione*, p. 144.

<sup>36</sup> The complete document is published, for example, in Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato. II. La guerra civile 1943-1945* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), pp. 610-613. Point 7 of the manifesto states as follows: ‘Those belonging to the Jewish race are foreigners. During the current war they belong to an enemy nationality’.

<sup>37</sup> Lutz Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia: 1943-1945* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1993).

Grosseto in Tuscany, Alceo Ercolani, carried out an independent initiative before even receiving any orders from the ministry. On 25 November, following a new census of Jewish families, households, and properties, after the beginning of confiscations in mid-November, Ercolani gave orders for the internment of ‘all Italian Jews’ in the province of Grosseto. Consequently, on 28 November, a concentration camp began operating in Roccatederighi. The camp, which was jointly guarded by members of the fascist militia and by *Carabinieri*, ended up hosting about 60 prisoners, including women, children and the elderly, who had mostly turned themselves in spontaneously following the order of internment by the prefect. The camp was operational until February 1944, when all prisoners were transferred to the national transit camp in Fossoli. Long before that, the prefect of Grosseto, together with his colleague the prefect of Pisa, had both received praise from the Germans for having been ‘energetic and dynamic’ and for their ‘lively desire for loyal collaboration’ with the German army. Prefect Ercolani had also been able to count upon the support of the local bishop who had rented out—in the face of what he called ‘the necessities of war’—the campsite and buildings owned by the Church and used as a summer seminary. By agreeing to this lease the bishop had also expressed his ‘special homage to the new [fascist] government’”, as he wrote in a post-war letter still claiming the full payment of the rent from the ministry of interior.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, on 30 November 1943, police order n. 5, issued by the RSI Minister of Interior Buffarini Guidi, ordered the arrest of all Jews on Italian territory, their transfer to concentration camps, and the confiscation of their property by the Repubblica Sociale Italiana. Thus Italian fascism reborn at Salò

---

<sup>38</sup> Events in the province of Grosseto are detailed by Luciana Rocchi, ‘Ebrei nella Toscana meridionale’, in Enzo Collotti (ed.). *Ebrei in Toscana tra occupazione tedesca e RSI: persecuzione, depreazione, deportazione (1943-1945)* 2 vols. (Rome: Carocci, 2007), 1: pp. 254-318, from which I also draw the quotes.

had almost immediately embraced radical antisemitism: early pressure from the grassroots of the party for a radicalization of anti-Jewish measures was followed by an official endorsement by the party (a driving force for the RSI), and local initiatives in the hunting-down and arrest of Jews preceded centralized police orders. During this phase, there was no evident direct intervention by the Germans, who even praised Italians for their keenness to deploy anti-Jewish initiatives. Moreover, such policies and initiatives were soon bolstered, at times even inspired, by a new wave of widespread antisemitic propaganda.

The Jewish enemy: a new beginning for antisemitic propaganda

For five years after 1938, Fascist propaganda had represented Jews as dangerous elements not belonging to the Italian 'race'. National and local newspapers, satirical journals and propaganda magazines such as the infamous *Difesa della Razza*, as well as school programs, radio shows and public lecture series all contributed to spreading the notion of an alien Jewish race within Italian society.<sup>39</sup> Beginning in the fall of 1943, the project of physical persecution, arrest and deportation of Jews brought radical forms of antisemitic propaganda back on to the agenda. The context of the war, of the German occupation and especially of the Italian civil war, instigated a hunt for internal enemies who could be hiding anywhere.

The political press now spread antisemitism on a daily basis. For example *Il fascio*, the weekly organ of the fascist party in Milan, wrote: 'An iron hand is now required both against the invader and against his internal accomplices: Jews and antifascists', creating a parallel between the political and the

---

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, materials collected and reproduced in *La menzogna della razza* and Cassata, *La Difesa della razza*.

‘racial’ internal enemy. The fascist newspaper *La provincia*, published in Como, wrote that Jews had been ‘The greatest supporters of this war. It would therefore be a crime not to act consequently and with maximum strength, and to fall prey to silly sentimentalism’.<sup>40</sup> Shortly after the start of the police round-ups, *Rivoluzione*, in Padua, denounced Jews as those who had ‘poisoned the world for many years, pursuing a crazy project of universal domination’.<sup>41</sup> The orders of arrest were finally greeted by the militant *Il regime fascista*, edited by the fascist extremist leader Roberto Farinacci, as a welcome ‘radical solution’.<sup>42</sup> Also following official directives, national and local daily newspapers took positions in line with the political situation: they called the arrests of Jews ‘necessary and ‘decisive’,<sup>43</sup> commented on their ‘revolutionary speed’,<sup>44</sup> or—like *Corriere della sera*—prophesied the decline of ‘espionage’, ‘terrorist acts’ and ‘conspiracies’, thanks to the arrest of the ‘diehard [Jewish] enemies’.<sup>45</sup>

Well-known figures involved in antisemitic propaganda since 1938 (or even before) returned onto the scene, while others resumed the activity they had interrupted at the fall of Mussolini, just two or three months earlier; yet others became energetic and indefatigable propagandists. The most infamous member of the first category was Giovanni Preziosi, a former priest who already after the First world war had become a delirious conspiracist, translating the *Protocols of the elders of Zion* into Italian in

---

<sup>40</sup> The quotes, taken respectively from the issues of 12 and 10 November 1943 of *Il Fascio* and *La Provincia*, are cited from Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 143.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Tutti gli ebrei in campo di concentramento’, *Rivoluzione*, Padua, 5 December 1943, cited in Mario Isnenghi, ‘Stampa del fascismo estremo in area veneta. Tracce e reperti’, in *Tedeschi, partigiani e popolazioni nell’Alpenvorland (1943-1945)* (Venice: Marsilio, 1984), pp. 131-132.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 139 (2 December 1943). See also, concerning a local case, the revival of Fascist press in Tuscany, Matteo Mazzoni, ‘I nemici della RSI nella propaganda del fascismo toscano’, *Italia contemporanea*, September 2001, n. 224, pp. 445-466.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Gli ebrei in campi di concentramento’, *Il Gazzettino*, 1 December 1943, cited in *Gli ebrei a Venezia 1943-1945*, p. 151.

<sup>44</sup> *L’Arena*, Verona, 3 December 1943, cited in Mayda, *Storia della deportazione dall’Italia*, p. 147.

<sup>45</sup> On 1 December 1943, cited in Matard-Bonucci, *L’Italia fascista e la persecuzione degli ebrei*, p. 360 (cf. Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei*, pp. 129-130).



1921 (his translation was republished in 1937-38, and reappeared in three new editions in 1943-45).<sup>46</sup> After finding refuge in Germany in the summer of 1943, Preziosi started broadcasting pro-fascist radio propaganda from Munich to Italy with nazi support, as well as publishing fiercely antisemitic articles in the nazi organ *Völkischer beobachter*. In December 1943 and in January 1944 he sent to Mussolini two memorandums on the Jewish question. In the spring of 1944, Mussolini put Preziosi at the head of the newly created General inspectorate for racial affairs, where he led a team of 21 people. The inspectorate's mission was to ascertain the 'racial situation' of Italian citizens; collect information on the freemasons, 'plutocracy' and 'occult' political forces; control the confiscation of Jewish wealth; and promote antisemitic propaganda in schools and through the press.<sup>47</sup> Preziosi also drafted new anti-Jewish measures targeting 'mixed-blood' Italians and foreigners on Italian soil and designed 'genealogical cards' for individual certification of one's 'Italian blood'. Most of Preziosi's proposals were modeled on nazi programs, and his reference to the 'radical solution of the Jewish problem' most likely reveals his knowledge and awareness of the ongoing nazi 'Final Solution'.

On a more local level, propaganda was meant to create a favorable atmosphere during the arrests. In Florence, Giovanni Martelloni, head of the Office for Jewish affairs, was involved in both propaganda and the rounding up of Jews. Between January and May 1944, Martelloni published a series of supposedly scholarly articles in the newspaper *Il nuovo giornale*, on the historical origins of the Jewish community of Florence.<sup>48</sup> In April 1944, Martelloni prefaced the booklet *La confisca dei beni ebraici*

---

<sup>46</sup> Michele Sarfatti (ed.), *La Repubblica sociale italiana a Desenzano: Giovanni Preziosi e l'Ispettorato generale per la razza*, (Florence: Giuntina, 2008); Luigi Parente et al. (eds.), *Giovanni Preziosi e la questione della razza in Italia*, (Soveria Mannelli (CT): Rubbettino, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> See Raspanti, *L'Ispettorato generale per la razza*, in *La Repubblica sociale italiana a Desenzano*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>48</sup> Giovanni F. Martelloni, 'Gli ebrei in Firenze': this is a series of articles which appeared between

(The confiscation of Jewish wealth), which illustrated the ‘historical continuity’—starting from ancient Rome and the Church of the early modern times—of anti-Jewish measures, now made even more necessary by the Jews’ responsibility for ‘unleashing on the world a horrible storm of hate, iron, and blood’.<sup>49</sup> The lecture in Venice, in April 1944, by the medical doctor Giocondo Protti was already mentioned: Protti’s lectures were accompanied by the publication of his writings in the extremist political press. In one of these pieces, *Israel’s drama*, he described how the ‘gentiles’ became the victims of the Jews, drawing upon the *Protocols of the elders of Zion* to illustrate the immense power of ‘corrosion and infiltration’ of the Jews and the Jewish plots, led by a group of rabbis who were the ‘brain of an international organ’ aspiring to world domination.<sup>50</sup>

Although it is hard to measure the effects of propaganda, we can certainly say that antisemitism was central to the political platform of the reconstituted fascist party and was included among the defining policies of the RSI. As such it was largely diffused in the national, local and political press and was part of the training of at least certain cohorts of the young members of the fascist militia (GNR): students and youth organizations had actually been a special target of racist and antisemitic propaganda since 1938. In one case during the RSI we can actually study the circulation of antisemitic ideas among the GNR officer cadets by examining their final essays for a ‘racial-political culture course’, held in Fontanellato, near Parma, between March and August 1944: some of these were preserved in the

---

January and May 1944, now reprinted in *Ebrei in Toscana*, 2: pp. 163-174.

<sup>49</sup> Id., *La confisca dei beni ebraici. Decreto legislativo 4 gennaio 1944 – XXII n. 2. Premessa – Testo – Commento* (Florence: Cya Editore, [1944]), in *Ebrei in Toscana*, 2: pp. 181-188 (quote on p. 187).

<sup>50</sup> Protti, ‘Il dramma di Israele’, pp. 39-43, and Id., ‘Israele o Cristo?’, *Il solco fascista*, Reggio Emilia, 6 and 10 January 1944, cited in Antonio Zambonelli, ‘Ebrei reggiani tra leggi razziali e Shoah, 1938-1945’, *Ricerche Storiche*, XXXV, 91-92, December 2001, p. 53.

archives and published by historians.<sup>51</sup> The course was taught by Major Sergio D'Alba, the son of Aura D'Alba, a GNR general who was part of an RSI extremist fringe close to Giovanni Preziosi. It was organized in three parts, each one comprising a series of lectures on themes such as 'human races', 'Judaism and freemasonry', or 'the modern world and its wars'. The title of the students' final assignment was: 'How do you conceive a racist action in the RSI?'. The surviving essays show the intertwinement in the students' answers of several streams of antisemitism and racism, both spiritual and biological, of catholic anti-Judaism, and of references to nazism as an ideological model. The essays written by Fontanellato's officers in-the-making combine racial conceptions with the fascist myth of Rome, as well as a new racist synthesis sometimes modeled on and sometimes critical of German racism. Although such essays must be treated with caution because they were produced by students eager to prove their competence and ideological commitment, they clearly document a pervasive anti-Jewish atmosphere in the ideologically committed segments of Italian society under Salò. Students suggest 'hygienic' or 'medical' measures be taken to protect the 'purity of the race' or pedagogical projects to reinforce 'racial consciousness'. Others affirm the necessity of a 'boundless hunt for Jews in all corners of [Italian] national life', or the 'total elimination' of the Jews: 'in this case, G. M. wrote, 'I would use serious methods, without compromises or middle grounds. There would be secrecy, surprise, severity and complete eradication'. Some of the situations evoked in these essays seem inspired by the anti-Jewish policies that were being carried out by the RSI, and perhaps by at least a partial knowledge of the ongoing Nazi extermination.

The local and the national press had thus resumed and recast the propaganda effort begun by fascism

---

<sup>51</sup> See Paolo Ferrari e Mimmo Franzinelli (eds), 'A scuola di razzismo: il corso allievi ufficiali della Gnr di Fontanellato', *Italia contemporanea*, n. 211, June 1998, pp. 417-444, from which I also draw the following quotes.

in 1938, at times by its own initiative, although usually in response to centralized directions. There was now a continuous, aggressive outpouring of articles and publications, together with original contributions from zealous ideologues. No mere empty rhetoric, this new propaganda now sustained genocide.

### Round-ups in Florence and Venice

On 6 November 1943, almost a month before the introduction of police order n. 5 enforcing the arrest of all Jews and the confiscation of their property, there were dawn round-ups in Florence led by the same German soldiers who had captured Jews in Rome on October 16.<sup>52</sup> But the support of the Italian fascists was unwavering: their presence was helpful and often necessary in leading the German trucks through cities; and it fell to the fascist militia to pillage and confiscate Jewish property. In Florence, they began with the main synagogue: here, according to eyewitness accounts, ‘fascists in plain clothes’ invaded the temple, fired shots into the air, and destroyed part of the synagogue’s sacred furnishings. In the following days the fascists emptied the offices and the [Jewish] school of all objects. The archive, the books from the temple and from the office, firewood, and *taledoth* [ritual shawls], were all sold and mostly bought as old junk by a charcoal burner’.<sup>53</sup> The arrests had spread throughout the city to include foreign Jews who had been rescued by local Jewish organizations,

---

<sup>52</sup> Events in Florence have been reconstructed in detail by Marta Baiardi, *Persecuzioni antiebraiche a Firenze: razzie, arresti, delazioni in Ebrei in Toscana*, 1: pp. 45-140 (from Baiardi I also draw the following quotes). On the role of Italians in the roundups in Rome, see Frauke Wildvang, ‘The enemy next door: Italian collaboration in deporting Jews during the German occupation of Rome’, *Modern Italy*, 12, 2, June 2007, pp. 189-204, and Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Caino a Roma. I complici romani della Shoah* (Rome: Cooper, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> The quote is from a report based on various first-hand accounts and drafted in the summer of 1944, after the liberation of Florence, in Baiardi, ‘Persecuzioni antiebraiche’, p. 53.

reaching approximately one hundred people. Days later, on the night between 16 and 17 November 1943, a group of thirty armed men, numbering both Germans and Italians, surrounded and attacked the convent of the Carmine church, where many Jewish women were hiding with their children. The Carità gang (named after its leader, the fascist Mario Carità) took part in these arrests. The victims were held in the convent for four days and then sent on a truck to Verona, from where they would be deported to Auschwitz. Some of the Jewish women who had been left in the hands of Italians were sexually harassed before their deportation.

The Carità gang was a semi-autonomous squad that was mainly active in antipartisan warfare, with the support of the prefect of Florence. They became well known for their violence and for their torture sessions, which were mainly inflicted upon partisans in confiscated villas on the outskirts of the city, some of which had been formerly owned by Jews. According to historian Marta Baiardi, to whom we owe possibly the best available essay on Italian executioners, although anti-Jewish persecution was ‘secondary’ in the gang’s action, it was ‘neither occasional, nor marginal’, and was mainly aimed at greedy profit.<sup>54</sup> On December 3, 1943, following an abortive anti-partisan action in the area of Greve in Chianti, Mario Carità and his men turned to the villa of the Jewish industrialist Goffredo Passigli, arresting him together with his twenty- and thirty-year-old sons: they would all be deported to Auschwitz, where they would die. Although the partisans had been his original target, Carità was particularly satisfied with his accomplishments that day: clearly the opportunity to confiscate Passigli’s property counted; but it should be noted that the arrests of Jews had become an official policy of the fascist state just two days prior to Passigli’s capture. Moreover, according to a post-war police report, Mario Carità periodically walked around Florence accompanied by ‘four to six thugs’ in arms: ‘they

---

<sup>54</sup> Baiardi, ‘Persecuzioni antiebraiche’, pp. 73-74.

made occasional and quick appearances in bars and restaurants where [Carità] would occasionally harass an Israelite turned in by the gang's followers or by informants'.<sup>55</sup>

In Florence, the local Prefect had set up the *Ufficio affari ebraici* (Jewish affairs office), directed by another fascist bully, the already mentioned Giovanni Martelloni. The office grew out of the network of centers for the study of the Jewish question created by the fascist ministry for cultural affairs in the early 1940s. The *Ufficio affari ebraici* not only inherited part of the center's staff, but also information on the city's Jewish population and their whereabouts. Martelloni began working for the center's propaganda branch in 1942, and during the RSI he spent his time publishing pseudo-historical antisemitic articles on the Jews of Florence in the local press, on the one hand, and, on the other, leading the office staff—who acted like his personal gang—in the arrests of Jews and in the seizure of Jewish property. Martelloni's office claimed the right to control the city's anti-Jewish activities and, from March 1944, even the authority to issue and sign orders for the requisition of Jewish assets. With the support of the prefect of Florence and cooperation of all police and public offices and administrations, as well as of the Germans, Martelloni and his men arrested and interned Jews, pillaging and taking over their property. In some cases they confiscated entire businesses, redistributing the salaries of Jewish employees based also on the socialization of businesses, a catch-phrase introduced by the RSI, officially inspired by corporatist principles. Like Carità, Martelloni organized occasional, even casual, violent anti-Jewish actions, arresting Jews as he walked around Florence with photos of wanted victims under his coat. Triggered by the German-led arrests, the Italian 'Final Solution' initiative in Florence was often autonomous, taking the form of random attacks by the Carità gang or by a scoundrel like Martelloni. However, the various forms of anti-Jewish aggression—arrests,

---

<sup>55</sup> Baiardi, 'Persecuzioni antiebraiche', p. 73.

confiscations, and propaganda efforts—soon became highly coordinated and centralized thanks to the activities of the local office for Jewish affairs, which stood out in the Italian context for its efficiency and aggressiveness.

One of the worst round-ups of Jews after the Rome arrests of October 16 took place in Venice, on 5 December 1943. In just one night over 160 Jews were arrested and transferred to the local prisons. A few days later, some of them were confined to the Jewish rest home in the ancient ghetto. From there, on the night of 31 December 1943, a group of about 90 people was transferred to the train station and shipped to the transit camp of Fossoli.<sup>56</sup> We have evidence that the *Carabinieri* in charge of the transfer made sure that it would happen at night, to limit the presence of witnesses or possible protests from bystanders. Apparently, however, some people observing the transport of the Jewish prisoners on a public waterbus hired for the purpose, ‘deprecated what was happening in soft murmurs as they were worried about being overheard by spies’.<sup>57</sup> Less than three weeks later they were followed by other prisoners: this time it was a group of four children who, according to the Questore, ‘were not in the condition of being transported’ at the time of the arrest. They were apparently two brothers, and a brother and sister, as listed in a message for the director of the Fossoli camp, who were to be accompanied by police on their train journey to the transit camp.<sup>58</sup> One wonders if this group was also transported by night to reduce the number of onlookers, or what other train passengers may have thought about the guarded transfer of Jewish children under the age of six. Still, arrests and transfers

---

<sup>56</sup> On the arrests in Venice see *Gli ebrei a Venezia*.

<sup>57</sup> The report by the non-Jewish helper at the Jewish rest home, under the title ‘Relazione per la signora Fano’ (Report for Mrs. Fano), no date (1951?), is preserved in Archivio della Fondazione Centro Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, Milan, Comunità Ebraiche in Italia, 1.2.2.1., box 4, file Venezia (ex: AG-13B, Venezia).

<sup>58</sup> The phonogram from the Questura di Venezia to the Direzione del campo di concentramento di Fossoli is cited in *Gli ebrei a Venezia*, p. 155.

continued unabated, both in broad daylight and at night, on the open streets, on trains and waterbuses, and were carried out by independent initiative and under the exclusive surveillance of the Italian police.

### Building and ending the myth of the good Italian

In the immediate post-war period, despite the active Italian involvement in the arrest and deportation of Italian Jews, most of these responsibilities were either erased or heavily limited at different levels. A general amnesty passed in June 1946—known by the name of the minister of justice who signed it, Palmiro Togliatti, then also the secretary of the Italian Communist party—erased all military and political crimes with a sentence of less than five-years' imprisonment, including crimes of massacre, plunder, destruction, and collaborationism. An earlier decree passed in April 1945 had included under the offence of collaborationism all roles of political responsibility, such as ministers, presidents of special courts, newspaper directors and fascist militia commanders. Overall, the Togliatti amnesty led to the release of about 10,000 of the 13,000 prisoners sentenced or under trial in the summer of 1946.<sup>59</sup> Although this was done in the name of 'reconciliation' and 'pacification' among Italians after a twenty-year dictatorship, which had ended in a civil war, it created a judicial void, as well as a lack of knowledge concerning fascist crimes and responsibilities. Moreover, as at the Nuremberg trials,<sup>60</sup> no specific anti-Jewish offence was taken into consideration, either as a crime in itself or as an aggravating circumstance.

Particular ensuing efforts were made, both at diplomatic and military level, as well as in public

---

<sup>59</sup> See Mimmo Franzinelli, *L'amnistia Togliatti. 22 giugno 1946: colpo di spugna sui criminali fascisti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006).

<sup>60</sup> See David Bloxham, *Genocide on trial: war crimes trials and the formation of Holocaust history and memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).



commemorations, and in individual memoirs and autobiographies to bring about the erasure of Italian responsibilities in the Holocaust. After the war, the minister of foreign affairs was especially keen on decontextualizing and singling out the assistance given to Jews by the Italian army in southern France and in the Balkans, while a war criminal like General Mario Roatta, responsible for great violence and repression against civilians, attempted to portray himself first and foremost as a rescuer of Jews.<sup>61</sup> Later, almost ten years after the end of the conflict, even the national representatives of the Jewish communities continued to insist on the generosity and kind-heartedness of most Italians towards the Jews. This once again confirmed early praise of Italians by the international press—such as the *New York Times*—and by the pioneering historiography of scholars such as Léon Poliakov, founding figure of Holocaust studies.<sup>62</sup>

In the following decades, the dichotomy between the ‘bad German’ and the ‘good Italian’ gradually crystallized thanks to memoirs, fictional representations, movies and documentaries<sup>63</sup>: even classic accounts and interpretations by outstanding witnesses such as Primo Levi insisted on the evil nature of the Germans,<sup>64</sup> indirectly downplaying the role of Italians and thus also contributing to the diffusion of this kind of representation at the national and international level. And the lessening of Italian antisemitism and Italian responsibilities in the Holocaust was also part of a general underestimation of

---

<sup>61</sup> Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano*.

<sup>62</sup> Guri Schwarz, *Ritrovare se stessi. Gli ebrei nell’Italia postfascista* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005), pp. 136, 138-139 (the English translation is: *After Mussolini: Jewish life and Jewish memories in post-fascist Italy*, trans. Giovanni Noor Mazhar (London-Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2012)).

<sup>63</sup> Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano*; Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian culture, 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2013); Rebecca Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust. The dilemmas of remembrance in France and Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> See Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: De Silva, 1947); Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986).

the criminal nature of fascism, built on lasting contributions by recognized authorities like, for example, Hannah Arendt, who, in the *Origins of totalitarianism* (1951) denied that the Fascist regime could be considered totalitarian.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in recent years, the search for Italian righteous has intensified, with the number of recognized cases rising from 120 in 1994 to 634 in 2015.<sup>66</sup> However, scholars have disputed the criteria adopted by Yad Vashem for its investigations leading to the acknowledgment of the ‘righteous among nations’, and some famous cases now appear to have been exploited by family members, or by religious, public or military institutions.<sup>67</sup>

Over sixty years ago, Léon Poliakov’s somewhat romanticized remarks on Italy’s participation in the Holocaust tended to diminish, if not exclude entirely, Italian responsibilities: ‘As genocide shakes the inner fabric of the national soul, it cannot be committed without complete collective consent’.<sup>68</sup> Today, genocide is no longer necessarily conceived as a unanimous, collective endeavor: rather, the use of the term indicates a historical process which requires multi-causal explanations, a variety of aims and complex of motivations, and different kinds of agencies. Considered in such terms, nothing in Italy’s ‘national soul’ (to quote Poliakov), or, rather, in Italian behavior prevented the active

---

<sup>65</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> enlarged edition (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 308.

<sup>66</sup> See the table ‘Names and numbers of the righteous among the nation per country and ethnic origin as of January 1, 2015’, available at: <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/statistics.asp>. Retrieved 30 November 2015. The number has increased especially since the institution by the Italian state, in 2001, of the Holocaust day of remembrance: on this date and its implications see Robert C. Gordon, ‘The Holocaust in Italian collective memory: *Il giorno della memoria*, 27 January 2001’, *Modern Italy*, 11, 2, 2006, pp. 167-188, For the broader context, see Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian culture*

<sup>67</sup> Bracha Rivlin and Liliana Picciotto (eds.), *I giusti d’Italia. I non ebrei che salvarono gli ebrei, 1943-1945* (Milan: Mondadori; Jerusalem Yad Vashem, 2006); Patricia Cohen, ‘Italian praised for saving Jews is now seen as Nazi collaborator’, *New York Times*, 19 June 2013. Italy is still lacking a study of the political uses of the righteous, as the one now available for France: Sarah Gensburger, *Les justes de France. Politiques publiques de la mémoire* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> I translate from the Italian edition: Léon Poliakov, *Il nazismo e lo sterminio degli ebrei* (Turin: Einaudi, 1955) (orig. ed. Paris 1951), p. 226.

participation of Italians in the Holocaust, with different degrees of responsibility and awareness.

In conclusion, a total of 8,869 Jews were deported from within the Italian territory of that time, which included the Dodecanese islands (6,746 Jews were deported from the Italian peninsula). Almost six thousand of the deportees were killed in the camps, while over three hundred died in Italy in massacres, individual killings or due to other causes.<sup>69</sup> According to currently available data, 2,210 arrests were carried out with the direct involvement of Italians (1,898 by Italians alone, 312 by Italians and Germans) while 2,489 were carried out by Germans. However, almost all of the latter category of arrests took place with the support of or in the presence of Italians, and it is reasonable to believe that many of the 2,314 arrests carried out by unknown parties can actually be attributed to Italians, who tended to take the initiative in such arrests, were well-acquainted with the areas where Jews were hiding, and often led or provided various forms of support for arrest operations at local level. The cooperation of local police and administrative officials was an essential tool that allowed the Germans to carry out the 'Final Solution' on a wider scale in Western Europe. In fact, the Germans often preferred local authorities to initiate anti-Jewish measures.<sup>70</sup>

A final, emblematic case in which the responsibility of Italians should be carefully reconsidered concerns the concentration, transit and death camp in Trieste, the *Risiera di San Sabba*, the former rice factory turned into a *lager* in the heart of the *Adriatisches Küstenland*, the Nazi-controlled autonomous

---

<sup>69</sup> See, for these and the following figures, Picciotto Fargion, *Il libro della memoria*, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> Marrus and Paxton, 'The Nazis and the Jews in occupied Western Europe', pp. 706; 696; 702. On the essential role of Italians during the 'Final Solution' in collaborating with the Germans at all levels of the RSI government and administration see also Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei*, pp. 126, 141-142.

province in the North-East of the Italian peninsula.<sup>71</sup> Although exclusively attributed to the Germans in the past, the creation and functioning of the camp would have been impossible without Italian connivance and practical support.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, recent research has drawn attention to a group of 372 Italians from Trieste and Istria, employed by the SS in Trieste to carry out different administrative and organizational functions: ‘interpreters, secretaries, typists, clerical workers, unskilled workers, drivers’.<sup>73</sup> The German occupier could thus count upon a dense network of collaborators, whose role was vital for the accomplishment of the ‘Final Solution’ in Italy. Hundreds of Jews arrested in North-Eastern Italy passed through the Risiera di San Sabba: some were killed there, others were briefly imprisoned on their way to the death camps of Eastern Europe.

Despite the shelter offered to many Jews, Italy was therefore also a place of grassroots Antisemitic initiatives and active collaboration, and thus no ‘periphery’ to the Holocaust:<sup>74</sup> if indeed such a periphery can be said to have existed anywhere in Europe, in the climate of consent, violence, greed, accommodation, betrayal and indifference that prevailed during the genocide of the Jews.

---

<sup>71</sup> The Risiera is now one of the central focuses of Susan C. Knittel, *The historical uncanny: disability, ethnicity, and the politics of Holocaust memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015). Knittel also emphasizes that the Italian involvement in the camp has always been downplayed.

<sup>72</sup> See various instances of collaborationism emerging from the trial concerning the Risiera in ANED-Ricerche, *San Sabba. Istruttoria e processo per il Lager della Risiera, a cura di Adolfo Scalpelli*, 2nd ed. (Trieste: Aned – Edizioni Lint, 1995) for example: 1, pp. 145-148, 198-209; 2, pp. 72-75; 103-108.

<sup>73</sup> See Roberto Curci, *Via San Nicolò 30. Traditori e traditi nella Trieste nazista* (Bologna, Il Mulino 2015), p. 103, note 1.

<sup>74</sup> I partly revisit here the use of the category of ‘periphery’ as suggested by Jan T. Gross, Irena Grudzinska-Gross, *Golden harvest: events at the periphery of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. pp. 68-69.