
Reviewed by Robert Gordon

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Shira Klein's ambitious book explores a series of dynamically intersecting axes in the history of Italy's Jewish community from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and by extension and comparison also contributes to the modern history of European Jewry more broadly. Areas examined in its eight extensively researched and often vividly written core chapters include emancipation and nationalization, assimilation and integration, exclusion and persecution, exile, nostalgia, and return. These complex and entangled histories are perhaps, ultimately, too many for the book to hold together and sustain, and its structure and general coherence, as well as at times its self-positioning within the field, sag and blur somewhat as a result. There are nevertheless valuable contributions made here, including the excavation of significant new sources, a concerted emphasis on gender and women's history, and a fertile attempt to integrate the history of Italy's Jews with its transnational diasporas, suggesting how each mutually influenced the other.

The book is built on doctoral research and uses an impressive array of different materials and methods, including twenty-five oral history interviews carried out by the author; private family archives and ego-documents; Jewish community archives in several different Italian towns and cities; community journals and other media (including comics, material culture, and radio); Jewish history archives in Italy, the United States, South America, and Israel; and studies in substantial fields of historiography on Italian Jewish history. This latter bibliography is extensively cited in the notes, but there is a certain patchiness or lack of engagement with key contributions, leading to an overplaying or even misconception of the book's own original contribution to research. There are useful local comparisons with other European contexts, especially France and Germany, and occasional nods to the history of the Catholic Church, which always looms large in Italian and European Jewish history, as well as to strands in the general historiography of modern Italian history and culture, although at times this Italian field feels too thinly present. This leads to occasional slips (for example, Primo Levi was not, sadly, a “Nobel laureate” [p. 13]) or to local insensitivities, such as to the term “nazifascist,” which needs to be linked to the lexicon of the anti-Fascist Communist Resistance before it can be related to the relative Nazi or Fascist roles in the Holocaust (p. 222). An uneven national picture makes certain key judgments about how much the Jewish communities differed from national (or regional) realities extremely hard to gauge: for example, regarding crucial questions, such as attitudes and
allegiance to the nation-state, “consent” to Fascism, participation in the Resistance, or shared perceptions of national character. One example: how significantly does our assessment of the reasons that Jews in postwar Italy brushed Italian culpability for anti-Semitism under the carpet (discussed in chapter 8) alter if we set it in line with the widespread tendency at the time, led by the greatest public thinker and philosopher of the day, Benedetto Croce, for Italians to brush the entire history of Fascism under the carpet, to see it in Croce’s famous metaphor as a “parenthesis” in the progressive, democratizing movement of national history?

Each of the eight chapters begins with a vignette or anecdote drawn from little-known or unpublished memoirs or interviews, designed to set the stage for a compilation of key aspects of the particular moment or phase in the history addressed in the chapter. The first and the widest in scope examines the period from 1848, the date of the preunification Albertine Statute commonly taken as the moment of emancipation of Italy’s Jews, through national unification (1861), the First World War, and the first decade and a half of the Fascist regime (1922-38). It focuses in particular on the construction of a deep-rooted and connected Jewish prosperity and patriotism, which was sustained and strengthened over nearly a century of a largely successful individual and communal life experience. Chapter 2, pushing against critiques of Italian Jewish assimilation over this period, presents instead a mosaic of evidence of a vibrant, autonomous practice of Jewish religion and culture in this same period, suggesting that Italy’s Jews were fully able to feel and to live, simultaneously and (largely) pacifically, as both Italian and Jewish, up until and including during the Fascist era (pre-1938). Chapters 3 and 4 are presented as syntheses of the rich recent field of scholarship on Fascist anti-Semitism and the enactment of the Holocaust in Italy, tracking from the regime’s ferocious racist campaigns and legislation of 1938-43 to the Nazi occupation and the murderous persecutions of 1943-45. As Klein vividly shows, this was accompanied in the non-Jewish population both by heroic rescuers and by many enthusiastic or venally corrupt local supporters of the Nazis and Fascists (as chronicled recently for the occupation period in Simon Levis Sullam’s The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy (2018, in Italian 2015)).

Chapters 5 and 6 move in interesting and original new directions by mapping out the experiences of the small—a few hundred in each case —groups and families of Italian Jews who left Italy during the period of persecution, escaping to America (chapter 5) or to Palestine (chapter 6). In each instance, Klein is interested in how these groups maintained or indeed attempted to reject a certain perception of the Italy they had left behind, of its Fascism and its anti-Semitism, while at the same time typically holding onto Italy as an object of emigrant nostalgia and community, often faithfully reconstructed in such social practices as home building, food culture, and other shared customs. Both are especially rich on the complex cross-currents and tensions between these diasporic communities and other intersecting groups in the new “host” country, such as the millions of Italian Americans who were variously anti-Semitic or pro-Fascist, who welcomed Jewish exiles, and/or who fiercely exhibited patriotism toward America (after 1941, at least); or the Israeli kibbutzniks who tried and largely failed to convert the middle-class urban immigrant Italian Jews to agriculture, socialism, and the Zionism of the land.

Finally, chapters 7 and 8 take us back to Italy and the beginning of the reconstruction era during the final months of the war and the years following. Here the influence of Guri Schwarz’s After Mussolini: Jewish Life and Jewish Memories in Post-Fascist Italy (2012, in Italian 2004)) is fully acknowledged and developed. Chapter 7 looks in particular at how the American Joint Distribution Committee generously supported community re-
construction but also encountered resistance when it tried to reshape and reorder the institutions and communal practices of Italian Jewry, which was itself tentatively flowering into a new phase of confidence, while chapter 8 focuses on how and why Italian Jews, as part of the effort to move on and to rebuild, tended to absolve their fellow Italians from culpability in the persecutions carried out on Italian soil.

Across this ample range of periods and questions, covered through a colorful variety of sources, the book aims to tease out and sustain a clear, central, and ostensibly new hypothesis: that Italian Jews were so deeply wedded to the nineteenth-century nation-building project in Italy, which had brought them emancipation and a stable sense of Italian Jewish identity, that they tacked very close to the nationalist Fascist project of the 1920s and 1930s, even playing down the virulent wave of Fascist anti-Semitism when it hit them in 1938. So powerful was this sense of national belonging that they subsequently contributed to and consolidated (or even “helped to create” [p. 132]) a powerful exculpatory postwar myth of Italian immunity to racism, of an innate human decency in the Italian national character. This myth, commonly known as the myth of italiani brava gente (Italians as “decent folk”) blamed Jewish suffering on Nazis and Germans and Fascist vices on the state or on Benito Mussolini himself, rather than on ordinary Italians. But the hypothesis struggles to run as a consistent thread throughout book; indeed, the book is in many ways at its most interesting when it strays from the central line. And key aspects of the hypothesis, which are presented as radically, even polemically, new—such as the fact that a significant proportion of the Jewish population in Italy was convinced supporters of, or at least passive consensers to, the Fascist state—are in reality not so surprising nor so novel within the research field. There has been significant scholarly work on this question recently, in both Italian and English, not to mention as far back as 1991, in a superb work of carefully researched narrative history, Alexander Stille’s Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families under Fascism (mentioned here in passing). On this crucial question of Jewish Fascist allegiance, in fact, Klein is notably uncertain in her formulations, describing, variously, “many,” “most,” or “Jews, as a whole,” as “supporting,” “accepting,” or “not opposing” the regime; or, oddly, adducing as evidence for a postwar distortion of the extent of the pro-Fascist views among Jews the fact no public streets have been named after minor Jewish Fascist sympathizers since the war (pp. 11-13, 44-45). Michele Sarfatti in a recent journal special issue on Fascist Jews has attempted a statistical tally and interpretation.[1]

One telling symptom of the book’s ambivalence over its principal aims and scope—but also a possible clue to redrawing its contours and drawing out its strengths—lies in its title. Italy’s Jews from Emancipation to Fascism looks very much like a neutral and informative title and led me to expect a descriptive survey of a century of community history from 1848 to 1945. And indeed, large parts, although not all, of the book do fulfill this promise. Here is a fascinating array of descriptions and evocations of Italian Jewish life, with particular attention to history from below and the everyday: Jewish soldiers on horseback, colonial adventurers, charity work, professions, cookbooks, fashion and leisure, youth groups and education, marriage, language, prayer, politics, and more (even if, here, too, recent Italian scholarship, such as Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti’s Making Italian Jews: Family, Gender, Religion and the Nation, 1861-1918 [2017, in Italian 2011], is unevenly acknowledged). But, somewhat confusingly, the very first page of the introduction promises something entirely different as the book’s principal aim, focused after 1945 and rooted in historiographical method not in communal or social history but in problems of collective self-representation and memory: “This book offers a new perspective on the myth of Italian benevolence in World War II [in other words, the brava gente
myth], and the role Jews played in its creation,” as if all the history “from emancipation to Fascism” evoked in the title were in reality functional to a later period and another set of interpretative problems not flagged up in the title at all (p. 1). The core purpose of the book feels blurred.

Confirmation comes in a striking copyediting error on page 14, where, at least in the edition I read, the book gets its own title wrong: opening its summary account of its chapters at the end of the introduction, Klein writes, “Clinging to Italy draws on previously unstudied primary sources.” Was Clinging to Italy a previous title, perhaps the author’s preferred version, possibly changed late in production? Was the current title originally a subtitle? As an alternative title, Clinging to Italy immediately shifts the center of gravity of the book to chapters 5 and 6 on exile, where its most original contribution to research probably lies, and it also resonates nicely with the argument about a disingenuous and stubborn loyalty to the Italian state, even in the face of Fascist anti-Semitism in the 1930s (clinging to an imagined Italy that no longer existed). It is not without its own problems, since it carries the risk of a broad-brush psychologism, of reading individual states of mind and emotions (“clinging”) into layered multigenerational communal and social histories, indeed of using the former as a causal historical explanation of the latter. (Symptomatic of how shaky this logic can seem comes in chapter 3, when the deep patriotic bond to Italy is apparently evinced by the failure of 90 percent of Italian Jews to emigrate in 1938-40—one might think 10 percent is a high number, in fact, given the complexities and costs of emigration—or by the reluctance of Italian Jewish parents to send their children on “youth aliya” to Palestine [pp. 95-96]. More immediate and more commonly humane explanations are at hand.)

Although the book performs an important service in setting the longer history of Italian Jewish life and community in close relation to the moment of its fracture and near-collapse under the weight of appalling persecution, I am not fully convinced that it provides enough evidence that affective bonds built during that longer history directly and predominantly caused the collective reaction to the moment of fracture, nor that the history or the reaction were uniform. The result of this and of other difficulties discussed here is a bold but unresolved book, which does not quite achieve what it sets out to do and which perhaps sets out to do too much at once, but nevertheless one that opens up onto important fields and strands of research that are all too rarely examined in the Anglophone academy and which makes significant contributions to scholarship and debate within its 350 pages.

Note


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