

THE MYTH OF THE “GOOD ITALIAN”, THE ANTISEMITISM AND THE COLONIAL CRIMES

El mito del “buen italiano”, el antisemitismo y los crímenes coloniales

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ABSTRACT:

My paper aims to reconstruct the fortune of the myth of the «good Italian» in the international historiography in order to analyze its impact on the minimization of the Fascist anti-Semitism. Firstly, I will go back to the origins of the myth, considering the reasons of the Fascist attitude in French departments occupied by Italian troops from November 1942 to September 1943. Secondly, I will retrace the occurrence of this *cliché* in post-war historiography, particularly in the volumes of historians Léon Poliakov and Renzo De Felice. Thirdly, I will observe that also recent studies on this topic did not rectify, for the most part, that uncorrected interpretation. At the same time, I will try to point out that the Fascist anti-Semitism was not shaped according to Nazi racial laws, but on autonomous basis, following a previous regulation of discrimination introduced in Ethiopia by the colonial administration.

Key words: fascism; Italian anti-Semitism; racial laws; Mussolini; De Felice; Poliakov.

RESUMEN:

Mi texto pretende reconstruir las peripecias del mito del «buen italiano» en la historiografía internacional con el propósito de analizar sus consecuencias en la minimización del antisemitismo fascista. En primer lugar me remontaré a los orígenes del mito, considerando los motivos de la actitud fascista en los departamentos ocupados por las tropas italianas entre noviembre de 1942 y septiembre de 1943. A continuación rastrearé la incidencia de este cliché en la historio-

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grafía de posguerra, particularmente en los libros de los historiadores León Poliakov y Renzo De Felice. En tercer lugar señalaré que, en su mayor parte, los estudios recientes sobre el tema no han rectificado esta interpretación incorrecta. Al mismo tiempo intentaré evidenciar que el antisemitismo fascista no cobró forma siguiendo las leyes raciales nazis, sino de forma autónoma, siguiendo una regulación previa de la discriminación que había sido introducida en Etiopía por la administración colonial.

Palabras clave: fascismo; antisemitismo italiano; leyes raciales; Mussolini; De Felice; Poliakov.

1. FASCISM AND ITALIAN ANTI-SEMITISM

The Italian Jewish community has a long history of real integration into the nation. Even Fascism did not apply anti-Semitic measures in the first period of the regime. In more reactionary sections of the party there were some prejudices – for example, the image of the Jew as a hidden manipulator of the economic power. However, Mussolini in 1932 nominated the Jew Guido Jung as Minister of Finance and for years maintained a sentimental relationship with the Jewish writer Margherita Sarfatti. There were also numerous Jewish fascists in the 1920s and 1930s: some of them had seats in Parliament; others held posts of responsibility in the public office¹.

When, in autumn 1938, the first anti-Jewish laws were proclaimed, many observers were amazed at the decision. As this was outside the Italian tradition, people were convinced that the measures depended on an explicit request from Hitler, which Mussolini, with the aim of alliance, had agreed to bring into effect. Historical research has, however, completely contradicted this interpretation². From Germany, in fact, no specific request arrived and it was Mussolini who wanted to open a «question of race» in order to promote the «cultural revolution» which would have helped the forging of the Fascist *homo novus*³. With the starting off of the imperial expansion and the war now on the horizon, it seemed, in fact, pro-

¹ Cf. Marie-Anne MATARD-BONUCCI, *L'Italie fasciste et la persécution des Juifs*, Paris: Perrin, 2007; Michele SARFATTI, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione*, Torino: Einaudi, 2007.

² Cf. Michele SARFATTI, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronache dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938*, Torino: Zamorani, 1994.

³ Cf. Giorgio FABRE, *Mussolini razzista. Dal socialismo al fascismo: la formazione di un antisemita*, Milano: Garzanti, 2005.

fitable to Mussolini to begin a process of reinforcing morality, which, following the model of Ancient Rome, would defeat the immobility of a bourgeoisie considered too pacifist and prudent. The racial laws were consequently adopted autonomously and not following the model of Nuremberg, but following a previous regulation of discrimination introduced in Ethiopia by the colonial administration⁴.

At this point, I suggest a brief digression, because we are faced with a very interesting aspect of Fascist anti-Semitism: when the regime decided to enhance its own identity demonizing the "Other" in order to create a model of an Italian *homo novus*, the propaganda did not directly target the Jews – as it was happening in Germany or France – but the African peoples under Italian rule: Ethiopians, Somalis and Libyans. In this perspective the laws against «*madamismo*» (concubinage with a native mistress), punishable by up to five years in prison, preceded the anti-Semitic laws by one year⁵. In general, the images of purity of blood or Italian superiority were built first in relation to the colonized African and only later, when Mussolini chose to institutionalize anti-Semitism, this paradigm was extended to the Jewish community – that in Italy did not constitute the traditional scapegoat of the racist policies⁶. In other words, the reference model of the racial laws was not the Nazi legislation, but a discriminatory attitude – authentically fascist – developed since the war in Ethiopia.

The myth of the good Italian is therefore contradicted especially by colonial crimes. It must not be forgotten, e.g., that already in 1930 Pietro Badoglio, the then governor of Libya, authorized bombing of mustard against suspected Tripolitanian rebels, although Italy in 1925 had signed an international treaty prohibiting biological weapons⁷. Later on, during the World War II, outrageous military operations devastated Libya, Eritrea, Somalia and Slovenia and the concentration camp of Rab in Croatia had a mortality rate higher than that of Buchenwald⁸.

⁴ Cf. Aaron GILLETTE, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, London-New York: Routledge, 2002.

⁵ Cf. Angelo DEL BOCA, "Le leggi razziali nell'impero di Mussolini", in A. Del Boca, M. Legnani and M. Rossi, eds., *Il regime fascista. Storia e storiografia*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1995, pp. 329-351; Nicola LABANCA, "Il razzismo coloniale italiano", in A. Burgio, ed., *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia. 1870-1945*, Bologna: il Mulino, 1999, pp. 145-163.

⁶ Cf. Marie-Anne MATARD-BONUCCI, "D'une persécution à l'autre: racisme colonial et antisémitisme dans l'Italie fasciste", *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine* 55, no. 3 (2008): 116-137.

⁷ Cf. Angelo DEL BOCA, ed., *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991; Id. *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005.

⁸ Carlo Spartaco CAPOGRECO, *I campi del duce. L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista, 1940-1943*, Torino: Einaudi, 2004, pp. 68-69.

The first anti-Jewish laws were preceded by a fierce anti-Jewish campaign: the pamphlet by Paolo Orano *Gli Ebrei in Italia* (1937) and a *Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti* (1938) had a large impact on public opinion⁹. Furthermore, since August 1938 the fortnightly magazine *La difesa della razza*, devoted to the growth both of colonial politics and of anti-Semitism, had been published¹⁰. Up until the fall of Mussolini in July 1943, however, the regime, unlike in many other countries, did not bring into effect the transfer of the «persecution of rights» to the «persecution of lives». The postponement of deportation ended by strengthening the idea of a particular benevolence of the Fascists towards the Jews. In this lay the ancient myth of the «good Italian»: a benevolent boaster, a racist with a heart¹¹. Even in a totalitarian context, the Italians would be recognized as «brava gente» (good people). In fact, the behavior of the Fascist authorities in the large region in the South-East of France occupied by Italy from November 1942 to September 1943, is used as a proof of this myth: the Italian troops ensured a protection of the Jews who resided in those territories, preventing them from being mopped up by the collaborating government of Vichy¹².

Actually, this activity was not dictated by humanitarian beliefs but by the advantage of the strategy: the Italian government was against Vichy government, partly in order to affirm its own authority in an occupied region and partly because Mussolini considered the Jews a precious «rate of exchange», a bargaining chip. In the case of a German victory, in fact, with reference to the treatment reserved for them, Italy would have shown a degree of deep pity, revealing a difference from the ruthlessness of the ally; in this way Mussolini could have become candidate for the leadership of a «nuovo ordine mediterraneo» (new Mediterranean order)¹³. In the case of a defeat, the detachment from the «final solution» would instead have been used as an aid - a mitigating circumstance - in the negotiations with the Anglo-Americans.

The same reasoning was valid for a conflict of competence regarding Tunisia. The North African country, under the control of Vichy, was inhabited by nearly

⁹ Paolo ORANO, *Gli ebrei in Italia*, Roma: Pinciana, 1937.

¹⁰ Cf. Valentina PISANTY, *La difesa della razza. Antologia 1938-1943*, Milano: Bompiani, 2007.

¹¹ Cf. David BIDUSSA, *Il mito del bravo italiano*, Milano: Il saggiatore, 1994.

¹² Davide RODOGNO, «La politique des occupants italiens à l'égard des Juifs en France métropolitaine. Humanisme ou pragmatisme?», *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 93, no. 1 (2007): 63-77.

¹³ Id., *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo. Le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Europa. 1940-1943*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003.

five thousand Jews of Italian origin. They had been defended on several occasions by the Italian institutions, which impeded the application of the *Statut des Juifs* – the anti-Jewish laws passed by the Vichy government in October 1940 – merely because of Italian economic interests in that territory – an area of flourishing commercial activities run by the Italian community. The Fascist government acted in this way in order to protect a turnover, which would otherwise have flown into German hands or into the Vichy vaults¹⁴.

Every remaining doubt regarding the nature of Fascist anti-Semitism was eliminated in the successive phase of the Italian Social Republic (RSI) from September 1943 to April 1945. There was then a policy characterized by an intense cooperation, leading to systematic persecution and deportation. It is difficult not to interpret this as the result of a trend connected to the ideology of the regime, which has been unable to express itself before, due to the institutional compromises in the 1920s and 1930s. In other words, it can be shown that RSI was not a Fascist system epiphenomenon, but the extreme confirmation of a regime inherent tendency that had not expressed itself sooner because of the institutional compromises with the monarchy and the Vatican¹⁵. This evidence was not, however, sufficient to attack the *cliché* of the «good Italian». In fact, the reason for this behavior was attributed to the subordinate position of the Italian Social Republic to the German ally. In this regard, the fortune of the term «Nazi-Fascism», frequently used in Italian discussion in order to indicate this experience, confirmed the will to reduce the national responsibility to a secondary and subordinate – even irrelevant – role¹⁶.

2. LÉON POLIAKOV, RENZO DE FELICE AND THE «GOOD ITALIAN»

It was, first of all, French historians who, at the beginning of the post-war period, praised the «*brava gente*», convinced that it was indeed in occupied France that the humanitarianism of the Fascists had been expressed in an exemplary way. In 1946 Léon Poliakov, pioneer of the studies on persecution, published a volume on *La*

¹⁴ Cf. Daniel CARPI, *Between Mussolini and Hitler. The Jews and the Italian Authorities in France and Tunisia*, London: Brandeis University Press, 1994; Michel ABITBOL, *Les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord sous Vichy*, Paris: Riveneuve, 2008.

¹⁵ Cf. Enzo COLLOTTI, *Fascismo, fascismi*, Milano: Sansoni, 1994, pp. 37-63.

¹⁶ Cf. Lutz KLINKHAMMER, *Zwischen Bündnis und Besatzung. Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland und die Republik von Salò. 1943-1945*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993, pp. 15-36.

condition des Juifs en France sous l'Occupation italienne. The text is a condemnation of the collaboration of Vichy, beginning with a confrontation with the action of Italian soldiers which transformed the occupied region – «magically» and in virtue of the «Mediterranean wisdom» – «into political asylum for the fugitives»¹⁷. In his following works, Poliakov, although he was able to consult new sources of information, did not correct his original opinion. In his well-known *Bréviaire de la haine* (1951), he affirmed that «wherever the Italian troops arrived, a protective screen was raised in front of the Jews»¹⁸. Then in a book on *Les totalitarismes du XX siècle*, published over thirty years later (1981) he continued to sustain the independence of the Italian anti-Jewish legislation from that of the Nazi¹⁹.

In a similar way, Henri Amouroux – the best read narrator of the history of Vichy – affirmed, in the fifth volume of his *Grande histoire des Français sous l'Occupation* (1981), that the «amiable character of the people» and the «firm wish of Mussolini» had the effect that the Italians intended to solve the Jewish problem in the «Latin manner», which was an antithesis of the «German manner»²⁰. And it is surprising that even Serge Klarsfeld, a scrupulous investigator of Nazi actions, adopted the same line, entitling a chapter of his volume on *La Shoah en France* (2001): *the German desire for a massive deportation of the Jews from France was impeded by the clearly pro-Jewish attitude of the Italian authority*²¹. Nothing was done in Italy to break the spell and to recognize the responsibility which had been so fully excluded. In a report of the work by Poliakov, published in the newspaper *La Stampa* on 17th November 1956, for example, the reviewer Paolo Serini commented that research, observing that its results «returned to be in honor of our people and their sense of humanity» and also stated that Mussolini «had brought into force an anti-Semitic law modeled on the German example».

Even from the point of view of Italian historians, the commonplace view of the «good Italian» increased rapidly. In 1946 the anti-Fascist solicitor from a Jewish family, Eucardio Momigliano, published by the publishing house Mondadori a *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista* in which he denied the presence of an

¹⁷ Léon POLIAKOV, *La condition des Juifs en France sous l'occupation italienne*, Paris: Éditions du Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, 1946.

¹⁸ Id., *Bréviaire de la haine. Le Troisième Reich et les Juifs*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1979, p. 226.

¹⁹ Id., *Les totalitarismes du XX siècle. Un phénomène historique dépassé?*, Paris: Fayard, 1987, p. 176.

²⁰ Henri AMOUROUX, *La grande histoire des Français sous l'occupation. V: les passions et les haines. Avril – Décembre 1942*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981, pp. 304-305.

²¹ Serge KLARSFELD, *La Shoah en France. I: Vichy-Auschwitz. La «solution finale» de la question juive en France*, Paris: Fayard, 2001, p. 209.

anti-Jewish attitude in the Italian culture and justified Mussolini's change towards anti-Semitism as a «slavish imitation» of Germany²². The leaders of the Jewish community themselves generally agreed with this interpretation through repeated public declarations. They also maintained that a full re-integration into the Italian society was the most important of the objectives and the removal of the memory of the racial laws would certainly have been favorable to them.

One of the first analyses of Fascist anti-Semitism based on official sources appeared in Piero Calamandrei's magazine *Il Ponte* in four articles written between 1951 and 1952 by Antonio Spinosa. The author wrote that «in effect the idea [of persecution] did not arise from a profound conviction but following a decision by Mussolini, who had to transplant it into Italy from Nazi Germany in order to satisfy the requirements of his foreign policy». Forty years later, when those articles were published again in a volume, Spinosa confirmed the thesis, concluding that «you can certainly talk, though with caution, of a Mussolini who was a reluctant or even opportunist racist»²³. At the beginning of the Sixties it was, instead, the historian Renzo De Felice who was appointed by the President of the Union of the Italian Jewish Community to write a *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*, which was published by Einaudi in 1961²⁴.

De Felice managed to have access to the archives of the Union and ministerial dossiers with reference to the regime and conducted detailed research from which four conclusions regarding the attitude of the Italians emerged: a) popular culture in Italy had never really known anti-Semitism - and more generally racism; b) despite some traditional prejudice, Mussolini himself was not an anti-Semite; c) the racial laws promulgation depended on the deleterious influence of the relations with Germany; d) the racial laws provoked a strong shock in public opinion creating a gap between people and politics.

These four points have been reset by later historiography that has often produced conflicting theories: a) the Christian tradition, well rooted in Italian culture, served as a sounding board for the anti-Semitic prejudice; b) since the second half of the Thirties, Mussolini has been authentically anti-Semite; c) the racial laws were independently enacted - and so not only because they didn't depend on a Nazis' request, but because fascism chose anti-Semitism for domestic policy; d) the anti-

²² Eucardio MOMIGLIANO, *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista*, Milano: Mondadori, 1946.

²³ Antonio SPINOSA, *Mussolini. Razzista riluttante*, Roma: Bonacci, 1994, p. 17.

²⁴ Renzo DE FELICE, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, Torino: Einaudi, 1962.

Semitism did not seem to have provoked a special discontent among the population.

It should be noted that De Felice himself, continuing research on Mussolini, partially retracted his initial opinions²⁵. In particular – and this directly affects my paper's topic – he recognized the colonial matrix of the racist policy. In *Rosso e nero* (1995) he said that it would be inappropriate to talk about Fascist anti-Semitism until the conquest of Ethiopia: «It was with the empire that the Duce, adopting a racist rhetoric for colonial policy reasons, adopted an attitude of anti-Semitism. In the first editions of *Storia degli ebrei italiani* [...] I had not identified the close relationship between the racial laws and the conquest of the empire [...] I discovered it with the progress of my research for Mussolini's biography»²⁶. Nevertheless, the cornerstones of the myth of the «good Italian» were fully rooted in the public opinion, thanks to their aspect of acquittal and reassurance. In a *Storia degli ebrei italiani* published by Attilio Milano in 1962 – a year after De Felice's *History* – a further confirmation appears: the anti-Semite measures were dependent on «a kind of magnetism towards German models»²⁷.

3. THE MYTH IN THE INTERNATIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

The incredible luck of the *cliché* of the «good Italian» also regards international historical texts, from which numerous and authoritative examples can be drawn. Gerald R. Reitlinger, for example, in his *The Final Solution* (1953) maintained that «Italian soldiers and officials put their pliable intelligence in the service of reason and of kindness»²⁸. Two years previous to this, Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) had given a softened description of Fascism, considering many aspects of it as being «ordinary»: not a real totalitarianism but a nationalist dictatorship, risen from the difficulties of a weak multiparty system²⁹. Even though only

²⁵ Cf. Id., *Mussolini il duce. II: Lo stato totalitario. 1936-1940*, Torino: Einaudi, 1981, pp. 315-316.

²⁶ Id., *Rosso e nero*, Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995, pp. 161-162.

²⁷ Attilio MILANO, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia*, Torino: Einaudi, 1963.

²⁸ Gerald P. REITLINGER, *The Final Solution. The Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945*, London: Jason Aronson, 1987, p. 352.

²⁹ Hannah ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1966, pp. 256-257.

five works on Italian Fascism were cited, her thesis had a lasting influence on international discussion in the second half of the Twentieth century³⁰.

This might be because, referring to the «final solution» in Italy, Arendt devoted some pages of another of her well-known books, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), in which she revealed «an element of farce» in the racist laws, consisting in the fact that the laws were not applied to people belonging to the Fascist party, nor even to their families. Although the author admitted that she had no statistics on the subject, she drew a hasty conclusion, supposing that, as a result of that norm, the overwhelming majority of Italian Jews – many of them had been members of the party – escaped from discrimination. In order to motivate the lack of persecution, Arendt finally adopted a poetic register. She recognized that an important reason came from the long tradition of assimilation, but she connected it above all to a collective motivation of civil sensitivity, «the outcome of the almost automatic general humanity of an old and civilized people»³¹.

Even more recent publications have invariably reproduced this *cliché*. Arno J. Mayer in *Why Did the Heavens not Darken? The «Final Solution» in History* (1988), after praising the benevolence of Mussolini towards the Jews, stated that: «Italian Fascism has never been Judaic-phobic or anti-Semitic, except in 1943-1944, but it was under the threat of the Nazi arms»³². Saul Friedländer in *The Years of Extermination* (2007) confirms the theory: «With the implicit support of the highest level of the state, wherever it could [...] Italy was protecting the Jews» and adds that «by March 1943, some 30,000 of them lived under fascist protection in southeastern France», without giving any further details³³.

Finally it is necessary to point out that Raul Hilberg himself, although not supporting the theory of innate benevolence, even in the latest edition of *The Destruction of the European Jews* (2003), relates a series of anecdotes which prove the good nature of Fascist authorities, not counterbalanced by an extensive list of the crimes committed³⁴. It is not therefore surprising that in some authoritative works,

³⁰ On this issue, cf. Emilio GENTILE, «Le silence de Hannah Arendt. L'interprétation du fascisme dans *Les origines du totalitarisme*», in *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine* 55, no. 3 (2008): 11-33.

³¹ Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 179.

³² Arno J. MAYER, *Why did the Heavens not Darken? The «Final Solution» in History*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988, p. 54.

³³ Saul FRIEDLÄNDER, *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*, New York: Harper Collins, 2007, p. 553.

³⁴ Raul HILBERG, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, London : Yale University Press, 2003.

for example in *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust* (2000), the terms «Italy» and «Fascism» do not even appear in the bibliographic lists - as if they had no connection to anti-Semite persecutions.

Other recent historical researches have nevertheless brought the question to light. The terms «Italien» and «Mussolini» in the *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust* (1993) edited by Eberhard Jäckel, Peter Longerich and Julius H. Schoeps clearly prove the responsibility of Fascism, with a suggestion, that can be agreed, of a division into periods of the growing anti-Semite hostility of the regime. *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (2001) edited by Walter Laquier and published by the Yale University Press, under the word «Italy», written by Daniel Carpi, offers an objective and extensive view of the question. Already, between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the works of Meir Michaelis and Susan Zuccotti had contradicted the common expression of «good people»³⁵. These few exceptions have, however, passed on almost unobserved in the historical - and public - debate of the last twenty years, enabling the myth of the «good Italian» to prosper, and the Italian society continues to feel itself foreign to the persecution of the Jewish fellow citizens during the Second World War.

³⁵ Meir MICHAELIS, *Mussolini and the Jews. German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy 1922-1945*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978; Susan ZUCCOTTI, *The Italians and the Holocaust. Persecution, Rescue and Survival*, New York: Basic Books, 1987.