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Far-Right Parties and the Jews in the 1930s

The Antisemitic Turn of Italian Fascism Reconsidered through a Comparison with the French Case

Abstract

The Italian fascist turn toward antisemitism is a very controversial topic, which especially in recent decades has provoked much debate among historians. By adopting a transnational approach that compares the Italian and French cases, this article aims to show that it is a mistake to equate Benito Mussolini's movement with Adolf Hitler's National Socialism with regard to their approaches to the 'Jewish question', as antisemitism is not inextricably linked to fascism. Above all, it suggests that a key factor driving the Italian fascist regime toward antisemitism was the increasing influence that Nazi Germany began to exert upon the entire far-right movement in Europe after 1933.

For a long time, Italian historiography neglected to deal with fascist antisemitism, even after the publication in 1961 of Renzo De Felice's pioneering monograph,¹ which followed shortly after the first attempt by the Israeli historian Meir Michaelis to approach the 'Jewish question' in fascist Italy.² Only since the late 1980s, in reaction to the fiftieth anniversary of the enactment of the Racial Laws in Italy in 1938, has the antisemitic policy of Benito Mussolini's regime begun to awaken interest among Italian scholars and, in subsequent years, to stimulate considerable research.³

1 Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* [History of Italian Jews under Fascism], Preface by Delio Cantimori, Turin 1961. In the following, I cite the English translation: *The Jews in Fascist Italy. A History*, translated by Robert Lawrence Miller, Preface by Michael A. Ledeen, New York 2001.

2 Meir Michaelis, *On the Jewish Question in Fascist Italy. The Attitude of the Fascist Regime to the Jews in Italy*, in: *Yad Vashem Studies* 4 (1960), 7-41, an extended version of which was published in Italian: *I rapporti italo-tedeschi e il problema degli ebrei in Italia (1922-1938)* [Italian-German Relations and the Problem of the Jews in Italy (1922-1938)], in: *Rivista di studi politici internazionali* [Journal of International Political Studies] 28 (1961) 2, 238-282. From then onward, Michaelis carried out extensive research on the topic, culminating in a fundamental monograph published in the late 1970s: *Mussolini and the Jews. German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy, 1922-1945*, Oxford 1978.

3 Though an overview is necessarily limited to the most general studies, the following must at least be mentioned: Alberto Cavaglion/Giampaolo Romagnani (ed.), *Le interdizioni del Duce. Le leggi razziali in Italia* [The Interdictions of the Duce. The Racial Laws in Italy], Preface by Piero Treves, updated and expanded second edition (=Libertà e giustizia [Freedom and Justice], 2), Turin 2002; Roberto Chiarini (ed.), *L'intellettuale antisemita* [The Antisemitic Intellectual], Preface by Stefano Folli (=Ricerche. I colloqui di Salò [Research. Salò Talks], 4), Venice 2008; Enzo Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei. Le leggi razziali in Italia* [Fascism and the Jews. The Racial Laws in Italy], Rome 2003; *Conseguenze culturali delle leggi razziali in Italia* [Cultural Consequences of the Racial Laws in Italy] (=Atti dei convegni lincei [Proceedings of the Lincei Conferences], 84), Rome 1990; Francesco Germinario, *Fascismo e antisemitismo. Progetto razziale e ideologia totalitaria* [Fascism and Antisemitism. Racial Project and Totalitarian Ideology], Rome 2009; Giorgio Israel, *Il fascismo e la razza. La scienza italiana e le politiche razziali del regime* [Fascism and Race. Italian Science and Racial Politics of the Regime], Bologna 2010; *La legislazione antiebraica in Italia e in Europa* [Anti-Jewish Legislation in Italy and Europe], Proceedings of the Conference on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Racial Laws (Rome, 17-18 October 1988), Rome 1989; Roberto Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista* [Italian Science and Fascist Racism], Florence 1999; Daniele Menozzi/Andrea Mariuzzo (ed.), *A settant'anni dalle leggi*

At the same time, relevant contributions on this topic have continued to appear outside of Italy,⁴ including miscellaneous works produced through cooperation between Italian and foreign scholars.⁵

Therefore, a lively debate has been sparked about the meaning of the Racial Laws within the historical experience of fascist Italy. In this regard, crucial questions have been addressed, such as:

- (a) Are racism and antisemitism as intrinsically linked to the ideology and politics of Italian fascism as they are to those of German National Socialism;
- (b) why did Mussolini pursue anti-Jewish persecution; and
- (c) what did he aim to achieve through this decision?

In discussing the various interpretations advanced by the scholarship on this topic, this paper tries to provide an answer to these questions. In particular, it suggests on the basis of a comparison between the Italian and French cases that the powerful force of attraction that Nazi Germany began to exert upon the entire far-right movement in Europe after 1933 played a key role in driving Mussolini's regime toward antisemitism. For Italian fascism, adopting antisemitism was made necessary by the Axis alliance and also made use of the crucial importance of anti-Jewish policy as a mobilising device for the totalitarian transformation of society, along the lines of the Third Reich.

The Debate on the Origins of Italian Fascist Antisemitism

Although most scholars agree that the Racial Laws of 1938 marked a turning point in the history of Italian fascism, several of them question whether they represented a fundamental departure from the Mussolini regime's previous attitude toward the 'Jewish question'. In this respect, De Felice's and Michaelis' approach, which explain the Racial Laws mainly as a consequence of Italy's choice to join the Axis alliance with Germany, has been openly challenged. Both these historians, indeed,

razziali. Profili culturali, giuridici e istituzionali dell'antisemitismo [Seventy Years after the Racial Laws. Cultural, Juridical, and Institutional Aspects of Antisemitism] (=Studi storici Carocci [Carocci Historical Studies], 162), Rome 2010; La menzogna della razza. Documenti e immagini del razzismo e dell'antisemitismo fascista [The Lie of Race. Documents and Images of Fascist Racism and Antisemitism], Bologna 1994; Michele Sarfatti, Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938 [Mussolini against the Jews. A Chronicle of the Development of the 1938 Laws], Turin 1994; Michele Sarfatti, The Jews in Mussolini's Italy. From Equality to Persecution, translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi, Madison, Wisconsin 2006; Mario Toscano, Ebraismo e antisemitismo in Italia. Dal 1848 alla guerra dei sei giorni [Judaism and Antisemitism in Italy. From 1848 to the Six-Day War], Milan 2003; Angelo Ventura, Il fascismo e gli ebrei. Il razzismo antisemita nell'ideologia e nella politica del regime [Fascism and the Jews. Antisemitic Racism in the Ideology and Politics of the Regime], Introduction by Sergio Luzzatto, Rome 2013.

4 See in particular Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, London 2002; Michael A. Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy. Mussolini's Race Laws, 1938–1943*, Cambridge 2014; Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italie fasciste et la persécution des Juifs* [Fascist Italy and the Persecution of Jews], Paris 2007, now available in Italian: *L'Italia fascista e la persecuzione degli ebrei*, Bologna 2008; Alexander Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal. Five Italian Jewish Families under Fascism*, New York 1991; Klaus Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf. Exil in Italien, 1933–1945*, 2 vols., Stuttgart 1989–1993.

5 See above all Franklin H. Adler (ed.), *Italian Jews and Fascism*, special issue of *Telos*, 164 (Fall 2013); Laura Fontana/Georges Bensoussan (ed.), *L'Italie et la Shoah. Vol. 1. Le fascisme et les Juifs* [Italy and the Shoah. Vol. 1. Fascism and the Jews], special issue of *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah* [Review of the History of the Shoah], 204 (March 2016); Gudrun Jäger/Liana Novelli-Glaab (ed.), "... denn in Italien haben sich die Dinge anders abgespielt." Judentum und Antisemitismus in modernen Italien (=Frankfurter kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge, 2), Berlin 2007; Daniel Tilles/Salvatore Garau (ed.), *Fascism and the Jews. Italy and Britain*, London 2011; Robert S. Wistrich/Sergio Della Pergola (ed.), *Fascist Antisemitism and the Italian Jews*, Jerusalem 1995; Joshua D. Zimmerman (ed.), *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922–1945*, Cambridge 2005.

argued that Italian fascism, before its alignment with Hitler's National Socialism, had neither racist nor antisemitic inclinations. According to De Felice,

“the decision made by Mussolini to introduce state-sponsored antisemitism into Italy stemmed from the belief that, in order to give credibility to the Axis, it was necessary to eliminate the most glaring difference in the policies of the two regimes”.⁶

Michaelis arrived at similar conclusions in analysing the impact of the Italian/German relationship on the genesis and development of racism in fascist Italy: “Until the birth of the Rome-Berlin Axis there was no attempt whatever on the part of the Fascist authorities to create a ‘Jewish problem’ in Italy”,⁷ he pointed out, adding that “it was only when [Mussolini] became totally committed to the Axis alliance that the Fascist dictator decided to sacrifice the Jews on the altar of German-Italian friendship”.⁸

This interpretation was challenged by Michele Sarfatti, who argued that Italian fascism, as soon as it came to power, launched a religious policy aimed at undermining equality between different communities in order to grant Catholicism a dominant position in the state.⁹ Moreover, Sarfatti emphasised that the fascist rise to power in Italy was followed by violent – albeit isolated and not directly encouraged from above – incidents against the Jews, as well as by increasing anti-Jewish propaganda.¹⁰ Particularly significant, in his view, was the antisemitic campaign launched by the fascist press in 1934. This event proved that, even before the German/Italian rapprochement, “a true antisemitic current existed in Fascism, but also that its leader, even though he did not publicly support it, considered it legitimate and entitled to exist”.¹¹ The conquest of Ethiopia two years later marked the transition from the attack on religious equality and the autonomy of Italian Judaism to the persecution of individual Jews and their rights, culminating in the Racial Laws. Such a result, Sarfatti pointed out, was the logical conclusion of the development of fascist politics from 1922 onward, not the consequence of a metamorphosis towards racism and antisemitism that Mussolini would undergo due to the Axis alliance.¹²

Explaining the Duce's decision to persecute Jews in the context of rapprochement with Nazi Germany also seemed too easy an argument to Angelo Ventura. He claimed that antisemitic racism, far from being a marginal component of fascist ideology, “was, however, nascent in the genetic code of fascism” and represented “the logical development” of its nationalist and hierarchical views, which repudiated “humanistic values and the liberal democratic principles of Western civilisation”.¹³ Therefore, Ventura saw racism and antisemitism as features common to the entire phenomenon of fascism. Associating Italian fascism and German National Socialism, he definitively rejected De Felice's thesis that, until Mussolini's anti-Jewish turn, these factors distinguished fascist Italy from the Third Reich.¹⁴

6 De Felice, *Jews*, 231.

7 Michaelis, *Mussolini*, 27-28.

8 Michaelis, *Mussolini*, 102. Using words very similar to De Felice's, Michaelis also explained the Duce's decision by referring “to his desire to cement the Axis alliance by eliminating any strident contrast in the policy of the two Powers”, Michaelis, *Mussolini*, 126.

9 Sarfatti, *Jews*, 42-48.

10 Sarfatti, *Jews*, 48-52.

11 Sarfatti, *Jews*, 68.

12 Sarfatti, *Jews*, 97-100.

13 Ventura, *Il fascismo*, 9.

14 See De Felice, *Jews*, xl.

Ventura's conclusion has been regarded as unacceptable by other scholars, such as Roberto Vivarelli, who stressed that for a long time fascist Italy showed a different attitude toward Jews than did Nazi Germany. Before embracing racism, fascism did not consider Jews its enemies, nor did most Jews have hostile feelings toward Mussolini's regime. This is proven by the significant participation by Italian Jews in public life, with some even holding prominent positions as a result, not in a few cases, of their strong fascist views.¹⁵ In this regard, Sarfatti himself, when discussing the Jewish presence in the ranks of Italian fascism, admitted that it "for many years was not in general anti-Semitic".¹⁶ Indeed, it is difficult to deny that the decade after the March on Rome was marked by overall cordial relations between the new authorities and the Italian Jewish community. It is also a fact that there was no antisemitic campaign throughout the 1920s, a period during which, as Michaelis pointed out, "Italy was still a model of tolerance as far as treatment of her Jewish minority was concerned".¹⁷

Obviously, this does not mean that Italian fascism was entirely free of anti-Jewish feelings. Mussolini himself had prejudices toward Jews that were reflected in some of his statements. However, as Luc Nemeth rightly noted, these anti-Jewish stances "appear to be not so much an expression of a racial hatred [...] as connected with the stereotypical image of the Jews as bankers or of the Jews as masters of the world, either through capitalism or bolshevism".¹⁸ It is true that some of Mussolini's utterances sounded like warnings to Jews not to antagonise the fascist regime by giving rise to doubts as to their sense of belonging to the Italian nation.¹⁹ However, it should not be forgotten that there is no shortage of public statements in which the Duce condemned racism and antisemitism. Therefore, one can agree with Michaelis that "Mussolini's attitude toward the Jews was inconsistent and mostly opportunistic, influenced by circumstances".²⁰

In light of such considerations, it seems incredibly hard to put German National Socialism and Italian fascism on the same footing with regards to their approaches to the 'Jewish question'. Hitler "loathed the Jews more than anything else in the world" – Michaelis again argued – and made racialism "the foundation and corner-stone of his whole being".²¹ By contrast, until the second half of the 1930s, Italian fascism did not include antisemitism as a core element of its ideology. It can be said, using Nemeth's words, "that antisemitism, even if consistent with fascist ideology, is not part of it".²² Should one then conclude that Mussolini's racist turn has to be exclusively attributed to the requirements of the Axis alliance?

Other studies suggest a different explanation, focussing on the internal development of the fascist regime. Franklin H. Adler argued that the Racial Laws were enact-

15 See Roberto Vivarelli, *Le leggi razziali nella storia del fascismo italiano* [The Racial Laws in the History of Italian Fascism], in: *Rivista Storica Italiana* [Italian Historical Review] 121 (2009) 2, 738-772.

16 Sarfatti, *Jews*, 15.

17 Michaelis, *Mussolini*, 55.

18 Luc Nemeth, 'The First Antisemitic Campaign of the Fascist Regime', in: Stanislaw G. Pugliese (ed.), *The Most Ancient of Minorities. The Jews of Italy* (=Contributions in Ethnic Studies, 36), Westport 2002, 247-258, here 248.

19 In this regard, it is worth recalling the harsh attack launched in late November 1928, following the Zionist congress held in Milan, by the newspaper *Il popolo di Roma* [The People of Rome] with an anonymous article (the author of which was almost certainly Mussolini himself) entitled *Religione o nazione?* [Religion or Nation?]. The article, which was directed at the Italian Jews, led many, including prominent cultural personalities, to send declarations of patriotism and loyalty to fascism to the newspaper. On this episode, see De Felice, *Jews*, 86-88; Michaelis, *Mussolini*, 30-31; and Sarfatti, *Jews*, 59-60.

20 Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini, Benito*, in: Israel Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. 3, New York 1990, 1026-1027, here 1027.

21 Michaelis, *Mussolini*, 183.

22 Nemeth, 'The First Antisemitic Campaign', 247.

ed in pursuit of two complementary ends: to strengthen the alliance with Germany and to support the totalitarian aspirations of Mussolini, which included an anthropological revolution aiming to create the 'New Fascist Man'. Jews were seen as inextricably linked to the old liberal order that fascism intended to overcome and therefore appeared to be an obstacle to such a project. According to Adler, there is a close connection between the anti-Jewish turn and the antibourgeois campaign launched by Mussolini in the same period.²³

This approach has also been adopted by other scholars such as Aaron Gillette, who regarded antisemitism as a device used by the Duce in order to achieve his aim of changing the character of the Italian people. In other words, Jews were targeted as representatives of the epitome of the decadent bourgeois, lover of the easy life, given to laziness, and lacking the virtue of sacrifice and martial feelings.²⁴ In this regard, Giorgio Israel, in his well-researched study *Il fascismo e la razza* (Fascism and Race), emphasised that even in the late 1920s Mussolini began to develop the intent "to turn Italian people, too unwarlike, peaceful and mild, into a tough people, sure of themselves and their own destiny, able to impose their will and to decide their future".²⁵ Studies like this stress that fascist racism did not rise suddenly as a consequence of the Axis alliance, but was a product of a long period of development that started long before 1938.²⁶

Such a perspective, explaining the racial turn of Italian fascism as a result of its revolutionary and totalitarian aspirations, deserves to be considered with attention and may help to better understand the reasons for Mussolini's decision to persecute the Jews.²⁷ It is worth noting that De Felice himself, in the most recent edition of his book on Jews in fascist Italy, partially adopted this view. He confirmed his previous point that Mussolini's turn toward racism and antisemitism was mainly due to the alignment with Nazi Germany, yet also emphasised another important factor: the view – arising in the Duce's mind after the conquest of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Italian Empire – that fascism had to bring about a 'new civilisation'. Mussolini had become convinced, De Felice observed,

"that the historical mission of Fascism was to fight the bourgeois spirit and mentality, which was responsible for the decay of the spiritual race of Judeo-Christianity, and also to fight against the Jewish spirit and therefore the Jewish race because its culture was at the root of the bourgeois mentality".²⁸

However, this approach needs to be integrated into a transnational analysis exploring another crucial factor in instigating anti-Jewish feelings within various fascist movements across Europe after 1933: the powerful force of attraction of Nazi Germany.

23 See Franklin H. Adler, Why Mussolini Turned on the Jews, in: *Patterns of Prejudice* 39 (2005) 3, 285-300.

24 Gillette, *Racial Theories*, 52-59.

25 Israel, *Il fascismo*, 111.

26 Maiocchi, *Scienza*.

27 I do not find Vivarelli's criticism entirely persuasive that the scholars who take seriously Mussolini's totalitarian project and his aim to create a 'new Italian' therefore also accept the propaganda slogans of the fascist regime as reality. Vivarelli, *Le leggi razziali*, 761-765.

28 De Felice, *Jews*, 227-228. De Felice's change in perspective is also evident in the introduction to the fourth edition of his book, published in 1987, in which he openly criticised Michaelis' approach. According to De Felice, Michaelis' work "has one serious limitation, which is to reduce the Jewish policy of the Fascist regime to a foreign policy 'event', and in particular to relations with Germany", *ibid.*, xxxvii. Such an approach, De Felice continued, "underestimates and, at times, ignores [...] the reality and the inner working of Fascism itself, and how these changed in time, as well as the repercussions that these changes had on the attitude towards the Jews, and on the autonomous developmental process of a home-grown antisemitism on the part of Fascism in general, and by Mussolini in particular", *ibid.*, xxxvii-xxxviii.

The Value of a Transnational Perspective

In her extensive research on anti-Jewish policy in fascist Italy, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci also explained Mussolini's Racial Laws mainly as a response to the requirements of domestic policy, arguing – like other authors cited above – that the Italian fascist regime saw antisemitism as an extremely effective mobilising device to revitalise itself and to fulfil the revolutionary project of the 'New Man'.²⁹ However, her analysis does not ignore the role played by the international context. Firstly, Matard-Bonucci pointed out that other south-east European countries led by authoritarian and fascistic regimes had also adopted anti-Jewish legislation. This showed that antisemitism had become an almost inevitable component of the ideology and policy of fascist regimes.³⁰ Above all, Matard-Bonucci shed light on the growing influence of Nazi Germany on the far-right and nationalist European organisations, which made the relationship between fascism and antisemitism increasingly inescapable. Such developments affected Italian fascism as well, as Matard-Bonucci rightly stressed, drawing attention to "the attraction exerted by Hitler's regime on the fascist elites", in whose eyes "Germany had become the model [...] of a totalitarian regime".³¹ According to her, Nazi Germany therefore played an important role in the antisemitic turn of Italian fascism, even though Mussolini's decision was not primarily dictated by reasons of foreign policy, as suggested by De Felice and Michaelis.

Matard-Bonucci's approach is similar to that followed by Francesco Germinario, who also argued that Italian fascism used antisemitism as a powerful driving force in the process of building a totalitarian system and overcoming the bourgeois values seen to be embodied by 'the Jew'.³² Moreover, he remarked that adopting antisemitism involved relevant changes to traditional fascist beliefs, such as the view of the nation as a spiritual entity. Through the antisemitic turn, such a view was abandoned, and the nation was identified with race.³³ As a consequence, Germinario emphasised, Mussolini's regime progressively fell "into the ideological orbit of Nazi Germany", a development that he qualified as a "*nazification of fascism*".³⁴

Matard-Bonucci's and Germinario's studies suggest that, even if one explains the origins of fascist antisemitism mainly by referring to the requirements of domestic policy, the role of German influence can hardly be ignored. Analysing it more broadly than the purely Italian context, Arnd Bauerkämper and Aristotle Kallis demonstrated how the radicalisation of European far-right movements after 1933 went hand in hand with their increasing admiration for Hitler's regime. From the United Kingdom to Belgium, from the Netherlands to Norway, and from France to Italy, the force of attraction exerted by Nazi Germany drove fascistic organisations to adopt antisemitism as a central tenet of their ideology and politics. As Bauerkämper pointed out:

"after they had rapidly established their undisputed dictatorship in 1933–1934, the Nazis considerably increased their influence among European fascists. The seemingly unbeatable Third Reich emerged as the dominant model, surpassing Italian Fascism, with the turn to antisemitism as a keynote of its growing attractiveness".³⁵

29 Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italia fascista*, 124–134.

30 Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italia fascista*, 138.

31 Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italia fascista*, 120–121.

32 Germinario, *Fascismo*, 13–14.

33 Germinario, *Fascismo*, 51–76.

34 Germinario, *Fascismo*, 58 (emphasis in the original).

35 Arnd Bauerkämper, *Transnational Fascism. Cross-Border Relations between Regimes and Movements in Europe, 1922–1939*, in: *East Central Europe* 37 (2010) 2–3, 214–246, here 233.

Nazi Germany provided a very influential model for political forces that shared a vision of the future of Europe as a rebirth of civilisation, to be achieved by removing the perceived threat of socialism as well as the harmful influence of plutocratic capitalism, and above all by cleansing “alien’ and detrimental communities”.³⁶ This goes some way toward explaining why even countries in which antisemitism had hitherto been marginal, such as Italy, succumbed to the drive of Nazi racialist ideology: “The Fascist regime’s seemingly incongruous introduction of racial anti-Jewish legislation in 1938–39”, Kallis claimed, “is indicative of the sway that the Nazi racial antisemitic paradigm – and the regime as a whole – had come to exercise across Europe by the late 1930s.”³⁷

Scholarship has not yet provided extensive research findings illustrating the influence of Nazi Germany on the politics and culture of Italian fascism. However, some points, which will be explained in the next section, suggest that the approach proposed by Bauerkämper and Kallis – and partially adopted by Matard-Bonucci and Germinario – is probably accurate and worthy of further development.

The Impact of Hitler’s Rise to Power on Fascist Italy

In the late 1950s, the well-known historian of antiquity Arnaldo Momigliano, who had lost his position at the University of Turin in 1938 due to the Racial Laws and had been forced to leave Italy, described the period 1933 until 1943 as a “decade not only of Nazism in Germany, but also of nazification in Italy”.³⁸ This statement is not entirely correct, as it overlooks the conflict (concerning above all the Austrian question) that marked the relationship between fascist Italy and the Third Reich until the mid-1930s. Moreover, one can observe that, in the period following Hitler’s rise to power, the official attitude of the Italian regime toward the ‘Jewish question’ did not substantially change: From April 1933, Italy hosted German Jews who fled Nazi persecution while at the same time Italian Jews continued to hold prominent positions in the public life of the country.³⁹ However, Momigliano was right in recognising the dangerous repercussions of the Nazi triumph in Germany within Italian fascism. In this regard, he recalled the first antisemitic campaign unleashed in 1934 and the rise of personalities with strong racist beliefs, such as Telesio Interlandi, Giovanni Preziosi, and Julius Evola, who until then had only played marginal roles in the fascist regime.⁴⁰

De Felice also emphasised the increase of antisemitism in some fascist quarters after the Nazi rise to power, attributing this development explicitly to “the example of what was happening in Germany”. He explained that

“this originated both in the anti-Jewish policy as well as the much more totalitarian character, when compared to Italy, adopted by the Nazi regime, leading many Fascist extremists to think it a good idea to import, in whole

36 Aristotle Kallis, *Fascism and the Jews. From the Internationalisation of Fascism to a “Fascist Antisemitism”*, in: Tilles/Garau (ed.), *Fascism and the Jews*, 16-37, here 34.

37 Kallis, *Fascism*, 29.

38 Momigliano made this statement in the first draft of an obituary of Carlo Antoni that was to be published in the *Rivista Storica Italiana*. It provoked an indignant reaction by Federico Chabod and led to a dramatic exchange of letters between the two historians. See Federico Chabod/Arnaldo Momigliano, *Un carteggio del 1959 [Correspondence of 1959]*, edited and introduced by Gennaro Sasso, Afterword by Riccardo Di Donato, Bologna 2002, 89.

39 On this point, see Vivarelli, *Le leggi razziali*, 744.

40 Letter from Momigliano to Chabod, 10 November 1959, in: Chabod/Momigliano, *Un carteggio*, 111.

or in part, the German model to finally give rise to the much-awaited 'second wave'. If, however, it could not simply be transplanted [...] at least it could use antisemitism to pressure Mussolini to restart the 'forward march of the revolution'.⁴¹

This interpretation was affirmed by Germinario, who claimed that, in the eyes of many radical fascists, Hitler's regime represented "what fascism should have been".⁴² The example of Nazi Germany made clear that adopting an antisemitic platform would speed up the process of building a totalitarian system in Italy.

It is not by chance that the antisemitic campaign of 1934 was particularly fuelled by Interlandi's newspaper *Il Tevere* (The Tiber), which the year before had welcomed "the advent to power of Hitler, loyal friend of fascist Italy, admirer of Mussolini".⁴³ The anti-Jewish offensive first targeted Zionism, charging its supporters with anti-patriotism. Yet over time it became more and more antisemitic, especially after March 1934, when a group of antifascist activists from Turin – most of whom had Jewish names – were arrested. The attacks were subsequently extended to all Italian Jews, with the entire press joining in. During that summer, however, the campaign suddenly stopped, coinciding with the Nazi putsch attempt in Austria that resulted in the murder of the Austrian chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuß. Such dramatic events marked the moment of maximum tension between fascist Italy and the Third Reich, leading Mussolini to take explicit anti-German and anti-racist stances. In this troubled situation, it was not convenient for the Duce to let the anti-Jewish press attacks continue.⁴⁴ However, as De Felice stressed, the Nazi victory in Germany as well as the first antisemitic campaign in Italy had serious consequences for Italian fascism by legitimising groups hostile to the Jews within it:

"Antisemitism was no longer a marginal and individual occurrence within the Fascist party; although it still had few supporters, it had become one of the most motivating issues of some groups. For the moment, Italian foreign policy and the struggle between forces within the party kept these groups at a disadvantage; however, external conditions and power plays could change all this in the not too distant future. Fascism, in any event, had to deal with them, because of a reality that could no longer be ignored: Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the commitment demonstrated by Nazism to replace Fascism as the leader of Fascist-type political parties by using anti-semitic and racist ideology."⁴⁵

Nazi Germany's challenge to the leadership role of fascist Italy was another important factor that drove Mussolini's regime to move toward antisemitism, as Kallis also pointed out:

"Sensing that the Nazi Regime had started to eclipse his own in terms of influence on the European ideological-political landscape, Mussolini anxiously tried to compete against National Socialist Germany in the highly influential domain of racial politics, and to match the dynamism of the German regime in the eyes of international supporters."⁴⁶

Therefore, Nazi influence affected fascist Italy on two levels:

41 De Felice, *Jews*, 128-129.

42 Germinario, *Fascismo*, 65.

43 Hitler, *la nuova Germania e l'Europa* [Hitler, the New Germany, and Europe], in: *Il Tevere*, 31 January 1933, quoted in Nemeth, *The First Antisemitic Campaign*, 249.

44 On these events, see Nemeth, *The First Antisemitic Campaign*, 250-254.

45 De Felice, *Jews*, 137.

46 Kallis, *Fascism*, 28.

- (a) by strengthening the most radical components within Mussolini's party, which pushed for a totalitarian turn of the regime, and
- (b) by forcing Italian fascism "to make some concessions"⁴⁷ in order "to stonewall the ambitions of the Third Reich"⁴⁸ of achieving hegemony over the other fascist movements.

In both cases, this led to an increase in anti-Jewish feelings in fascist Italy. More extensive research exploring the role of Nazi Germany's impact on Italian fascism could prove helpful for better understanding Mussolini's turn toward antisemitism. In this regard, important suggestions have also come from the analysis of French fascism. Indeed, the context of interwar France was marked by the rise of several extreme-right groups, which over the 1920s showed an overall generally tolerant and inclusive attitude toward French Jews. Hitler's rise to power produced a radical change, driving most of the nationalist movements to embrace antisemitic ideology.

French Fascism and the Jewish Question

Before discussing the development of the approach to the 'Jewish question' adopted by French far-right leagues, it is useful to summarise the view of fascist Italy that circulated among the Jewish population in France. It is perhaps surprising, and therefore worth noting, that although most French Jews held progressive political views – rooted in the values of equality, justice, and democracy launched by the Revolution that had brought about their emancipation in 1791 – large segments of the Jewish population were sympathetic to Italian fascism. To all but the most leftist of French Jews, Mussolini's regime appeared, until 1938, to be friendly toward Jews, and the Racial Laws implemented that year came as an appalling surprise, not as the result of an inevitable development. Focussing on the concrete political action of Italian fascism from 1922, the conservative and moderate Jewish press in France reported any act of goodwill toward Jews, emphasising that some were appointed to prestigious offices. Moreover, the presence of Jews within Mussolini's party (even at the highest level) proved that Jewishness and fascism were by no means mutually exclusive. Even in the early 1930s, the majority of French Jews held the belief that fascist Italy was immune from antisemitism, as their Italian coreligionists' approval of the Duce's policy seemed to demonstrate. Therefore, they thought, Italian fascism would never join other fascist movements based on racism, like German National Socialism. In the eyes of most French Jews, racism radically distinguished Hitler's movement from Mussolini's. In the years 1933 until 1936, they continued to regard fascist Italy as a bulwark against antisemitism; however, the division between leftist and moderate elements within the French Jewish community increased. The antifascist Jews, gathered in the *Ligue internationale contre l'antisémitisme* (International League against Antisemitism), lamented that the situation of their coreligionists in Italy was taking a turn for the worse. To them, the beginning of the antisemitic campaign by the Italian regime was proof that there was an irreducible opposition between fascism and Jewishness. On the other hand, the more conservative French Jews explained Mussolini's racial turn by referring to his alignment with Nazi Germany. In their eyes, the anti-Jewish persecution launched by the Duce totally contra-

⁴⁷ De Felice, *Jews*, 138.

⁴⁸ Bauerkämper, *Transnational Fascism*, 235.

dicted not only the Italian tradition of tolerance toward Jews but also the policy adopted by the fascist regime until that point.⁴⁹

In conclusion, the attitude of the French Jewish community toward fascist Italy provides interesting context to the understanding of the relationship between fascism and antisemitism. In particular, this view of Italian fascism from abroad contradicts the overly simplistic comparison between Mussolini's regime and the Third Reich, as Jérémy Guedj rightly pointed out: "Generalisations and simplifications arouse confusion. Italy was not Germany. Antisemitism was not as much linked to Italian fascism as it was to Nazism, in reality as well as in the minds of contemporary observers."⁵⁰

The French case is also helpful in understanding the reasons for Italian fascism's turn toward antisemitism. Indeed, several far-right leagues emerged in France during the 1920s that looked with admiration toward fascist Italy and adopted an approach to the 'Jewish question' very similar to that of Mussolini's movement. Obviously, comparing a unified political force that seized power and turned itself into a regime – as Italian fascism did – with heterogeneous groups such as those of the French extreme right, which never unified or came to power, is problematic. It is worth considering, however, that neither in Italy nor in France did fascism reflect a compact ideology and a consistent system of beliefs.⁵¹ Any comparison must focus on the specific political actions implemented by each fascist movement within its own context. In this regard, one can observe that in the France of the 1920s significant far-right leagues welcomed Jews as members, just as Italian fascism did, and regarded Jews (except those with leftist views) as an integral part of the different spiritual families of France. At that time, the country was still deeply marked by the spirit of the Union sacrée (Sacred Union) achieved in the Great War. The patriotic attitude held by French Jews in the war and their participation in the Union sacrée were widely acknowledged and valued. However, this situation radically changed in the 1930s, when a new wave of antisemitism erupted in France. The development of the far-right leagues' attitude toward Jews in interwar France is effectively illustrated through the cases of some particularly important organisations such as the Jeunesses Patriotes (Young Patriots), the Faisceau (Fascies), the Mouvement Franciste (Francist Movement), and the Solidarité Française (French Solidarity).⁵²

The league of the Jeunesses Patriotes, founded in late 1924, was – at least in the first years of its existence – the most deeply permeated by the spirit of the Union sacrée. Although the Jeunesses Patriotes were openly xenophobic and conducted violent attacks against leftist Jews, they rejected antisemitism, which appeared to the majority of their members as an internal enemy that divided the country. The Jeunesses Patriotes' approach to the 'Jewish question' was not different from that of

49 On the attitude of French Jews toward fascist Italy, see the extensive and well-researched study by Jérémy Guedj, *Le Miroir des désillusions. Les Juifs de France et l'Italie fasciste (1922–1939)* [The Mirror of Disillusionment. The Jews of France and Fascist Italy (1922–1939)], Preface by Ralph Schor, Paris 2011. Useful remarks can be also found in Ralph Schor, *L'Antisémitisme en France pendant les années trente* [Antisemitism in France during the 1930s], Brussels 1992, 291–292.

50 Guedj, *Le Miroir*, 18.

51 On this point, see the remarks of Michel Winock, *Nationalism, Antisemitism, and Fascism in France*, translated by Jane Marie Todd, Stanford, California 1998, 200–201.

52 On the far-right leagues in interwar France, see in particular Samuel Kalman, *The Extreme Right in Interwar France. The Faisceau and the Croix de Feu*, Aldershot 2008; Paul J. Kingston, *Anti-Semitism in France During the 1930s. Organisations, Personalities, and Propaganda*, Hull 1983; Richard Millman, *La question juive entre les deux guerres. Ligues de droite et antisémitisme en France* [The Jewish Question in the Interwar Period. Far-right Leagues and Antisemitism in France], Paris 1992; Robert Soucy, *French Fascism. The First Wave, 1924–1933*, New Haven 1986; Robert Soucy, *French Fascism. The Second Wave 1933–1939*, New Haven 1995.

Italian fascism. Unsurprisingly, their leader, Pierre Taittinger, was a convinced admirer of Mussolini and regarded him as a model to be followed. Moreover, the Jeunesses Patriotes shared with Italian fascism the belief in corporatism and the military mystique derived from the First World War.⁵³

Another organisation, both strongly rooted in the spirit of the Union sacrée and modelled upon Mussolini's movement, was the Faisceau. Founded in late 1925, the short-lived Faisceau ceased to exist in 1928; it is worth mentioning nonetheless, if only because it was one of the first groups outside Italy that defined itself as fascist. The leader of the Faisceau, George Valois, saw Italian fascism as a revolutionary movement that would replace the liberal and capitalist order. Like the Jeunesses Patriotes, the Faisceau showed hostility towards leftist Jews, but disavowed anti-semitism. Valois explicitly invoked toleration of French Jews:

“Do you want to kill all the Jews? No one will listen to such a proposition. Do you want to send all the Jews to Palestine? That is not serious, as we know well that they would not go. Do you want to create a special regime for Jews? That is no more serious than the previous proposition. Thus you arrive at this conclusion: there are Jews in France who are French. It is necessary to live with them and to see to it that our lives in common are not a trick on anyone, which is perfectly possible.”⁵⁴

Moreover, the league counted Jews among its members, some of whom contributed to the group's official paper, *Le Nouveau Siècle* [The New Century].⁵⁵ Both the Jeunesses Patriotes and the Faisceau reflected the prevailing atmosphere of the 1920s in France, marked by a decrease in antisemitic feelings.

The 1930s, however, saw a resurgence of antisemitism, due to various factors. According to Ralph Schor, the most crucial were (1) the consequences of the world economic crisis of 1929, (2) the influx of refugees fleeing Germany after Hitler's rise to power, and (3) the victory in 1936 of the Front populaire (Popular Front) and the appointment of Léon Blum, a socialist and a Jew, as prime minister.⁵⁶ Moreover, the resumption of a nationalist mythology that had arisen during the time of the Dreyfus Affair, which identified the Jews with the secular Republic, must not be ignored.⁵⁷ Another point also deserves to be mentioned. Analysing the trend of anti-Jewish publications over the period, Schor pointed out that the antisemitic wave increased especially after 1933.⁵⁸ This suggests that observers should not overlook the impact of the Nazi political victory in Germany as a further key factor in this revival, although the antisemitic front was divided over the Third Reich, as Schor also showed.⁵⁹ Paula Hyman remarked that “the triumph of Nazism inspired a shift in emphasis from

53 On the early years of the Jeunesses Patriotes, see Millman, *La question juive*, 69-79; Soucy, *The First Wave*, 39-86.

54 G. Valois, *Le Fascisme* [Fascism], Paris 1927, 57, quoted in Soucy, *The First Wave*, 171.

55 On the Faisceau, see Kalman, *The Extreme Right*; Millman, *La question juive*, 81-95; Soucy, *The First Wave*, 87-173. Kalman suggested a different interpretation to those of Millman and Soucy, arguing that antisemitic stereotypes “continually found a place within the doctrine of the Faisceau”, Kalman, *The Extreme Right*, 192. He acknowledged, however, that the anti-Jewish statements of Valois and the members of other leagues were addressed to opponents, whereas the patriotic Jews were not under attack. It seems clear that “the issue concerned adherence to Faisceau doctrine, and not religion or race”, *ibid.*, 197.

56 Schor, *L'Antisémitisme*, 145-180. The reaction of the French Jewish community has been analysed by Paula Hyman, *From Dreyfus to Vichy. The Remaking of French Jewry, 1906-1939*, New York 1979, 199-232; David H. Weinberg, *A Community on Trial. The Jews of Paris in the 1930s*, Chicago/London 1977, 72-147.

57 On this aspect, see in particular Pierre Birnbaum, *Antisemitism in France. A Political History from Leon Blum to the Present*, translated by Miriam Kochan, Oxford 1992, 227-247; Winock, *Nationalism*, 119-122.

58 Schor, *L'Antisémitisme*, 28.

59 Schor, *L'Antisémitisme*, 156-159.

unfocused xenophobia to antisemitism”.⁶⁰ It is difficult to deny that Hitler’s rise considerably affected the far-right leagues’ views, as demonstrated by the Jeunesses Patriotes abandoning the spirit of the Union sacrée and moving toward antisemitism. As early as August 1932, Pierre Taittinger published an article in *Le National* [The National] – the official paper of the league – in which he welcomed Hitler’s success and praised the extremely dynamic character of his movement:

“The progress of Hitler’s propaganda, the organisation of his shock troops, the creation of a veritable regular army of 300,000 completely militarized men, [the formation of a] select elite who leads, the constant development of racism in all classes of Germans, and the enthusiasm of [Hitler’s] troops for a leader who makes their heart beat under their brown shirts – all of this cannot be explained as the simple play of circumstances or luck. It denotes a personal action at every moment on Hitler’s part. At the same time that he continues to exert his will, he manoeuvres with a firmness and competence, holding his army between his hands, that allows him to overcome all obstacles, crises and seditions, assuring him of new and thundering successes without end.”⁶¹

Above all, Taittinger remarked that racism had become a “great activating force” in Germany, enabling the rise of the Nazi Party. After its rise to power, *Le National* glorified the new Germany and justified the first anti-Jewish measures. This was a significant departure from the tolerant attitude toward Jews the Jeunesses Patriotes had displayed until then.⁶²

Nazi antisemitism also strongly influenced far-right groups that arose in France after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany. This is especially true of Francism, founded in September 1933. For a long time, its leader Marcel Bucard had been a fervent supporter of the Union sacrée. Therefore, he had regarded the French Jewish community as part of the nation and rejected antisemitism. At the same time, Bucard admired Mussolini and Italian fascism. However, when Hitler came to power, he welcomed the event and took an ambivalent attitude toward the first anti-Jewish measures implemented by the Nazi regime. During the years 1933 until 1935, the Francist leader swung between traditional belief in the Union sacrée and his admiration of the Third Reich. It is worth noting that there were several Jews among the league’s members in the early days, so Francism worked to show that it was not antisemitic, although it harshly criticised foreign and leftist Jews. From June 1935 the movement adopted a definitive antisemitic approach, blaming the Jews for playing a key role within Freemasonry, and Bucard’s anti-Jewish feelings escalated in the following years.⁶³

What was the reason for Bucard’s metamorphosis on the ‘Jewish question’? As Richard Millman persuasively argued, the answer lies in “the evolution of fascism” which took place in various European countries as a consequence of the powerful rise of German National Socialism.⁶⁴ “The primary instigator of antisemitism in Bucard and in many others was Nazi Germany”, Millman claimed.⁶⁵ “Hitler shows, then, that antisemitic policy can prove useful” and was able to convert a lot of people to antisemitism, in his country as well as abroad. In France, Millman continued,

60 Hyman, *From Dreyfus to Vichy*, 200.

61 Pierre Taittinger, Hitler, l’homme qui vient [Hitler, the Man Who Is Coming], in: *Le National*, 6 August 1932, quoted in Soucy, *The First Wave*, 211.

62 See Millman, *La question juive*, 116-131; Soucy, *The First Wave*, 211-215.

63 On Francism, see Millman, *La question juive*, 153-167.

64 Millman, *La question juive*, 165.

65 Millman, *La question juive*, 166.

“Pierre Taittinger was among the first to notice the success of National Socialism as partly a result of its Judeophobia”, and several personalities were driven to join the antisemitic camp as a result, such as Gaston Bergery, Marcel Déat, Jacques Doriot, Gustave Hervé, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, and Jean Renaud. “Along with Bucard, they adopted antisemitism for reasons having more or less to do with the increasing importance and influence of Nazism.”⁶⁶

This development also affected another influential far-right organisation: the Solidarité Française. This league was launched in June 1933 by François Coty, a businessman who during the 1920s had gained much power over public opinion thanks to media control (he had become the owner of the famous newspaper *Le Figaro* and then had founded the *Ami du peuple* [Friend of the People]). At that time, Coty was also an admirer of Mussolini and fascist Italy; strongly anti-communist, he saw Italy as a natural ally of France against the ‘red peril’. However, Coty held deep anti-German feelings too and, at the beginning, did not at all welcome Hitler’s National Socialism or his promotion of pan-Germanism. Coty was antisemitic, yet this did not seem to have been the core of his belief system, as his anti-Jewish attitude was mainly a consequence of his anti-communist obsession, while on the other hand some Jewish writers were permitted to publish their articles in *Le Figaro*. Coty radically changed his approach to Germany after Hitler rose to power. The Solidarité Française developed an increasing admiration of the Führer, which drove it to call for a French/German rapprochement. This attitude continued after Coty’s death in July 1934, and antisemitic tendencies within the league inevitably grew.⁶⁷ In this respect, it seems correct to claim – as Robert Soucy did – that the Solidarité Française between 1933 and 1936 “was closer to German Nazism than to Italian Fascism”.⁶⁸

In 1936 the far-right leagues were dissolved by Léon Blum’s government. Nonetheless, in the years before the Second World War, the antisemitic trends in French society became stronger, and most of the nationalist movements rejected the Union sacrée.

Final Remarks

The comparison between the attitudes of Italian and French fascism toward the ‘Jewish question’ suggests some points that are worthy of consideration. First, it seems quite problematic, as Robert O. Paxton rightly noted, “to consider an exacerbated antisemitism the essence of fascism”.⁶⁹ Even Zeev Sternhell, who regarded antisemitism as a crucial factor in the genesis of fascist ideology at the end of nineteenth century, specified that this was not “a necessary precondition for the development of fascism”.⁷⁰ Therefore, placing Mussolini’s movement (and other fascist groups modelled upon it) on the same footing with Hitler’s National Socialism – at least with regards to their approaches toward Jews – does not prove convincing. In this regard, Soucy’s conclusion is persuasive:

⁶⁶ Millman, *La question juive*, 165.

⁶⁷ On Coty and the Solidarité Française, see Millman, *La question juive*, 171-186; Soucy, *The Second Wave*, 59-103.

⁶⁸ Soucy, *The Second Wave*, 74.

⁶⁹ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, London 2005, 9.

⁷⁰ Zeev Sternhell, *Le fascisme, ce “mal du siècle” ...* [Fascism, this “Evil of the Century” ...], in: Michel Dobry (ed.), *Le mythe de l’allergie française au fascisme* [The Myth of the French Allergy to Fascism], Paris 2003, 361-406, here 376.

“Whereas the Hitlerian variant of fascism was deeply racist and assigned Jews a central role in its demonology, Italian fascism was neither racist nor antisemitic during its first fifteen years in power. And most French fascist movements were not racist either during the interwar period.”

For a long time, Soucy emphasised, “the major bonds between German, Italian, and French fascism [...] were anti-Marxism and antiliberalism, not racism and antisemitism”.⁷¹

Above all, a transnational approach provides useful elements for better understanding the reasons that drove Mussolini’s regime down the road of antisemitism. Explaining fascist Italy’s turn toward racism simply in terms of requirements of the Axis alliance does not seem satisfactory. Even if one accepts as more convincing an approach focussing on the internal development of Italian fascism, committed to achieving its totalitarian aims, one feels that such an interpretation remains incomplete. As the events of various fascist leagues in interwar France show, the power and ascendancy of Nazi Germany played a key role in instigating antisemitism among far-right organisations across Europe. In this way, the Third Reich was able to replace Mussolini’s Italy as the universal model of fascism after 1933. This point is effectively stressed by Millman:

“After Hitler’s rise to power, and increasingly over the years, the benevolence of powerful Germany was often essential in order to thrive within the fascist world or, in some cases, simply to survive. Sooner or later, fascists [...] who wanted to avoid its anger or to gain its trust submitted to the Nazi doctrine, the hatred of the Jews.”⁷²

Fascist Italy, in the end, could not escape such a destiny either, and the consequences were devastating – for the Jews, the regime and, ultimately, the country as a whole.

⁷¹ Soucy, *The Second Wave*, 152.

⁷² Millman, *La question juive*, 166.

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