

Nicola D'Elia

Italian Universities in the Face of Fascist Antisemitism

Current Status and Perspectives of Research Eighty Years after the Passing of the Racial Laws

Abstract

In 2018, on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the enactment of the Racial Laws in Italy, Italian universities apologised for their support of the antisemitic campaign launched by the fascist regime in the late 1930s. Such a valuable and remarkable event would have been unlikely without the impetus of an increasing amount of research, which, especially in the last twenty years, has investigated Italian academic institutions as the preferred forum for the incubation, development, and implementation of fascist racism and antisemitism. This paper discusses the most relevant issues addressed by recent scholarship dealing with the topic. Furthermore, it highlights the need to explore to a greater extent the relationship between Jewish academics and Italian fascism.

The eightieth anniversary of the enactment of the 1938 Racial Laws in Italy was marked by huge numbers of initiatives such as conferences, exhibitions, and other public events in numerous cities. This is not surprising, given the special sensitivity to the issue of Jewish persecution in fascist Italy that has been developing in public conscience in Italy over the last thirty years. However, this time something new happened, which deserves close consideration: On 20 September 2018, the deans of all the major Italian universities gathered in Pisa to publicly apologise for the implementation of the measures that saw Jewish professors and students being expelled from all academic institutions.¹ It has taken a long time for the Italian universities to acknowledge their responsibility in participating in the antisemitic campaign put in place by Mussolini's regime. This can be explained by considering the long-standing belief that the universities, and more generally the world of culture, did not compromise with fascism and that scholars, who would become the future ruling class of democratic, republican Italy, were inspired by antifascist values. On the contrary, the Racial Laws enjoyed extensive approval among intellectuals and academics, as Renzo De Felice first denounced in his pioneering work on the 'Jewish question' in fascist Italy, which appeared in 1961.² According to Angelo Ventura, who addressed the issue much later, "long would be [...] the list of university professors, scholars, writers, journalists, and intellectuals of different professions who actively contributed, by

1 This event, which was called *Cerimonia delle scuse e del ricordo* (Ceremony of Apology and Commemoration), was reported in the international press, too. See: Anna Momigliano, Italy's Universities to Apologize for anti-Jewish Laws that Ape'd Nazi Germany, in: Haaretz, 1 September 2018. The choice of Pisa as the meeting place was not random: The first decree implementing the Racial Laws was signed by King Vittorio Emanuele III on 5 September 1938 at the royal estate in San Rossore on the outskirts of Pisa.

2 Renzo De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy. A History*, translated by Robert Lawrence Miller, preface by Michael A. Ledeen, New York 2001, 374-379.

their writings and authority, to the racist campaign”.³ It is thus understandable, though not justifiable, that Italian culture remained silent for so long on the fascist persecution of Jews.

No one today questions, as Gabriele Turi already wrote in 1989, “the importance, if not the centrality, of academia, intellectuals, and culture in the anti-Jewish campaign” unleashed by Mussolini’s regime.⁴ Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that Italian academics played a crucial role in launching the racial crusade. As a case in point, the document *Il fascismo e i problemi della razza* (Fascism and the Problems of Race, better known as the *Manifesto of Racist Scientists*), published in July 1938, which represented the starting point of state racism, was authored by university-affiliated scholars.⁵

It is, therefore, no coincidence that the education sector was the first to be hit by the antisemitic measures, which were implemented with particular zeal by the administrative officers. The Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai, who is regarded as a protector of those intellectuals who were destined to play a leading role in post-fascist Italy, stood out for his determination to expel Jews from schools and universities. Even before the Racial Laws came into force, he adopted a series of administrative provisions aimed at restricting Jewish access to educational institutions and their activities.⁶ In light of this behaviour, Michele Sarfatti described Bottai as a “resolute supporter of an *abrupt, absolute, and immediate* Aryanisation”.⁷

The exclusion of Jews from the universities inflicted major damage on Italian scholarship and culture. At that time, the Jewish presence in the scholarly community was disproportionately high compared to the small fraction of the Italian population who were Jewish (little more than 0.1 percent). The fact that around seven percent of teaching staff was hit by the Racial Laws evinces that the proportion of Jews in the universities was 70 times greater than in the general population. The academic world stands out as the sector of national life in which the Jews were probably best represented.⁸

This reflects the characteristic path of integration of the Jews into the Italian nation described by Arnaldo Momigliano, who suggested that “the transition from the

3 Angelo Ventura, *Sugli intellettuali di fronte al fascismo negli ultimi anni del regime* [On the Intellectuals in the Face of Fascism in the Last Years of the Regime], in: Idem (ed.), *Sulla crisi del regime fascista 1938–1943. La società italiana dal “consenso” alla Resistenza* [On the Crisis of the Fascist Regime 1938–1943. Italian Society from “Consent” to the Resistance]. Proceedings of the International Conference held in Padua, 4–6 November 1993, Venice 1996, 365–386, here 370.

4 Gabriele Turi, *Ruolo e destino degli intellettuali nella politica razziale del regime* [The Role and Destiny of Intellectuals in the Racial Politics of the Regime], in: *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, 95–121, here 97.

5 See: Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Universities under Fascism*, in: John Connelly/Michael Grüttner (ed.), *Universities under Dictatorship*, University Park, PA 2005, 45–73, here 67.

6 For more detailed information, see: Giorgio Israel, *Il fascismo e la razza. La scienza italiana e le politiche razziali del regime* [Fascism and Race. Italian Science and the Racial Politics of the Regime], Bologna 2010, 203–231; Michele Sarfatti, *La scuola, gli ebrei e l’arianizzazione attuata da Giuseppe Bottai* [The School, the Jews, and the Aryanisation Implemented by Giuseppe Bottai], in: Davide Bonetti/Riccardo Bottoni/Grazia Giargia De Maio/Maria Grazia Zanaboni (ed.), *I licei G. Berchet e G. Carducci durante il fascismo e la resistenza* [The High Schools G. Berchet and G. Carducci during Fascism and the Resistance]. Proceedings of three Afternoons of Studies: Milan, High School “G. Carducci”, 20 February, 9 March, and 20 April 1995, Milan 1996, 37–66, here 42–47.

7 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, 101.

8 See: Michele Sarfatti, *Per un censimento degli effetti della legislazione antiebraica nelle università* [For a Survey of the Effects of the Anti-Jewish Legislation on Universities], in: Valeria Galimi/Giovanna Procacci (ed.), “Per la difesa della razza”. *L’applicazione delle leggi antiebraiche nelle università italiane* [“For the Defense of the Race”. The Implementation of the Anti-Jewish Laws in the Italian Universities], Milan 2009, 211–217, here 216.

ghetto to the upper class happened more frequently in Jewish families through entry into the civil service and the universities than through prospering economic activities".⁹ That does not mean that the Italian case was unique. Undoubtedly, it indicates a radically different situation from the societies of Central Europe, such as Germany and Austria-Hungary, in which bureaucratic discrimination made it extremely difficult for the Jews to gain public appointments unless they converted to Christianity.¹⁰ On the other hand, the Italian path to Jewish emancipation appears not to be so different from that which took place in France from the Revolution of 1789 until its final accomplishment in the Third Republic.¹¹ However, it would be a mistake to characterise the choice of French and Italian Jews to enter into civil service as representative of the whole of Western Europe. As Hans Daalder argued with reference to the Dutch case, "in the universities, the number of Jewish professors was far from numerous, with the possible exception of the law faculties".¹²

The high percentage of Jews in Italian academic institutions makes this a very appropriate field of investigation to assess the devastating impact of fascism's anti-semitic policy and its long-term effects.¹³ In this context, it is worth recalling that Italian universities expelled distinguished academics and promising scholars, some of whom would later be awarded the Nobel Prize.¹⁴ The blow caused to Italian culture by the enactment of the Racial Laws was effectively expressed in the words spoken fifty years later by the eminent scholar Eugenio Garin, who had been personally affected by that event.¹⁵ The list of academics removed from the universities, he affirmed,

"includes many of the most illustrious scientists, historians, philosophers, and jurists, who for a long time honoured Italian culture and academia,

9 Arnaldo Momigliano, *Essays on Ancient and Modern Judaism*, edited and with an introduction by Silvia Berti, translated by Maura Masella-Gayley, Chicago/London 1994, 129. The historian of antiquity Momigliano was himself a victim of the Racial Laws. Following his dismissal as Professor of Roman History at the University of Turin, he moved to the United Kingdom. For a biographical profile, see: Riccardo Di Donato, Arnaldo Momigliano, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* [Biographical Dictionary of Italians], 75, Rome 2011, 475-481.

10 See the remarks by Todd M. Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold. Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, Princeton/Oxford 2015, 103-105.

11 For an effective summary of the French case, see: Pierre Birnbaum, *Between Social and Political Assimilation. Remarks on the History of the Jews in France*, in: Pierre Birnbaum/Ira Katznelson (ed.), *Paths of Emancipation. Jews, States, and Citizenship*, Princeton 1995, 94-127.

12 Hans Daalder, *Dutch Jews in a Segmented Society*, in: Birnbaum/Katznelson (ed.), *Paths of Emancipation*, 37-58, here 53.

13 On this point, see: Roberto Finzi, *The Damage to Italian Culture. The Fate of Jewish University Professors in Fascist Italy and After, 1938-1946*, in: Joshua D. Zimmerman (ed.), *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945*, Cambridge 2005, 96-113, here 103-105; Giorgio Israel, *The Expulsion of Jewish Professors from University Science Departments during Fascism*, in: *Telos* 164 (Fall 2013), 97-115, here 107-109.

14 This was the case with (1) the physicist Emilio Segré, a full professor at the University of Palermo, who moved to the United States and received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1959; (2) the microbiologist Salvatore (Salvador) Luria, a postgraduate at the University of Rome, who also emigrated to the United States and received the Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1969; (3) the neurobiologist Rita Levi Montalcini, a postgraduate at the University of Turin, who remained in Italy, survived the Holocaust, and was awarded the Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1986; and (4) the economist Franco Modigliani, still a student at the University of Rome in 1938, who moved first to Paris and then, after briefly returning to Rome to discuss his thesis and receive his degree, to the United States, who received the Prize for Economic Science in 1985. Another Italian Nobel Prize winner, the physicist Enrico Fermi, was also a victim of the Racial Laws, not because he was himself Jewish but because he had married a Jewish woman. Fermi received the Nobel Prize in Physics in the autumn of 1938, just as Mussolini's regime was implementing the anti-Jewish legislation. Taking advantage of the trip to Stockholm for the award ceremony, he and his family departed for the United States, where he was employed in the project to develop the atomic bomb.

15 Garin replaced his teacher Ludovico Limentani in teaching moral philosophy at the University of Florence. It was Limentani's wish that his student took over from him, as Garin himself later recalled. See: Eugenio Garin, *Intervista sull'intellettuale* [Interview on the Intellectual], edited by Mario Ajello, Rome/Bari 1997, 48.

masters who formed generations of researchers and scholars, people who fought for the common fatherland, integrated in the history of the nation whose sons they were. Their sudden 'dismissal' left a gaping hole and an ineradicable feeling of guilt and shame in those who did not prevent it.¹⁶

Therefore, apologies by Italian universities for their compliance with the Racial Laws, even if belated, are not without value. It must be said, however, that they would hardly have been issued if it were not for the impetus of an increasing amount of research which, especially in the last twenty years, has investigated Italian academic institutions as the preferred forum for the incubation, development, and implementation of fascist racism and antisemitism. This article aims chiefly to discuss the most relevant issues explored by such studies: (1) the impact of the Racial Laws on universities; (2) the lack of opposition by the academic community to the exclusion of Jewish scholars, with the controversial case of Giovanni Gentile being the main focus of attention; (3) the role played by Italian scientists in the development of fascist racism; and (4) the approval by fascist students of the antisemitic campaign. It is worth noting that issues such as these also represent an integral part of the historiographical work on the antisemitic policies of National Socialism in German universities, which provides valuable suggestions for new comparative research.¹⁷ Finally, this paper addresses the need to explore to a greater extent an aspect that is peculiar to the Italian case: Jewish scholars' support for the fascist regime.

The Impact of the Racial Laws on Universities

The great array of studies focusing on the implementation of anti-Jewish legislation at Italian universities and academic institutions enables us to quantify with some precision the extent of the exclusions, not only in general but more and more by exploring individual local cases.¹⁸ The data collected shows that altogether 96 full

16 Eugenio Garin, *Fascismo, antisemitismo e cultura italiana* [Fascism, Antisemitism, and Italian Culture], in: *Conseguenze culturali delle leggi razziali in Italia* [Cultural Consequences of the Racial Laws in Italy] (Rome, 11 May 1989) (=Atti dei Convegni Lincei [Proceedings of the Lincei Conferences], 84), Rome 1990, 9-24, here 24.

17 Scholarship has highlighted that in the Third Reich (a) the dismissal of all non-Aryans from the universities, which began in the spring of 1933 and ended in 1937, took place almost without protests; (b) pro-Nazi students actively worked toward the dismissal of Jewish academics by blacklisting them or boycotting their lessons; and (c) scientists in the fields of ethnology and eugenics showed an absolute willingness to put their expertise at the service of the regime's racial policies. For an exhaustive account of the impact of Nazi politics on academic institutions, see: Michael Grüttner, *German Universities under the Swastika*, in: Connelly/Grüttner (ed.), *Universities, 75-111*; Konrad H. Jarausch, *Universität und Nationalsozialismus. Aspekte einer erschreckenden Beziehung*, in: Regina Fritz/Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe/Jana Starek (ed.), *Alma Mater Antisemitica. Akademisches Milieu, Juden und Antisemitismus an den Universitäten Europas zwischen 1918 und 1939*, Vienna 2016, 21-36.

18 In this regard, the following are worth mentioning: Angelo Ventura, *Le leggi razziali all'Università di Padova* [The Racial Laws at the University of Padua], in: Idem (ed.), *L'università dalle leggi razziali alla Resistenza* [The University from the Racial Laws to the Resistance], *Proceedings of the Day of the Italian University on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Liberation* (Padua, 29 May 1995), Padua 1996, 131-204; Idem, *La persecuzione fascista contro gli ebrei nell'università italiana* [The Fascist Persecution of Jews in the Italian University], in: *Rivista Storica Italiana* [Italian Historical Review] 109 (1997), 121-197; Roberto Finzi, *L'università italiana e le leggi antiebraiche* [The Italian University and the Anti-Jewish Laws], Rome 1997; Francesca Cavarocchi/Alessandra Minerbi, *Politica razziale e persecuzione antiebraica nell'ateneo fiorentino* [Racial Politics and Anti-Jewish Persecution at the Florentine Athenaeum], in: Enzo Collotti (ed.), *Razza e fascismo. La persecuzione contro gli ebrei in Toscana (1938-1943)* [Race and Fascism. The Persecution of Jews in Tuscany (1938-1943)], Rome 1999, 467-510; Gabriele Turi, *L'università di Firenze e la persecuzione razziale* [The University of Florence and Racial Persecution], in: *Italia contemporanea* [Contemporary Italy] 28 (2000), 227-248; Elisa Signori, *Le leggi razziali e le comunità accademiche. Casi, problemi, percorsi nel contesto lombardo* [The Racial Laws and the Academic Communities. Cases, Problems, and Paths in the Lombard Context], in: Antonio

professors, no fewer than 141 assistants and associates, and no fewer than 207 qualified lecturers were expelled. So, the total number greatly exceeds 400, not including administrative staff expelled from the service of the Ministry of National Education and the individual universities, which remains unrecorded.¹⁹ Likewise, no precise estimate can be given as to the number of students banned from the universities. It has to be taken into account that, according to the antisemitic legislation, Jewish students enrolled before 1938 were allowed to complete their course of studies. It has been conservatively estimated that there were around 1,000 Italian Jewish students enrolled in academic years beyond the first year in the autumn of 1938. A census carried out by the Ministry of National Education in February 1938 moreover counted 1,344 foreign Jewish students registered in Italian universities in the academic year 1937/1938.²⁰ The majority were enrolled in the medical faculties and concentrated in the universities of northern Italy. They were mainly refugees from countries that had been experiencing academic antisemitism, such as Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Germany.²¹ It is noteworthy that among the foreign Jewish students who could undertake their degree in Italy, there were scholars who would go on to play a relevant role in the academic life of the countries to which they eventually emigrated.²²

The most accurate investigations have so far been conducted in the university centres of Bologna, Florence, Padua, Pisa, Trieste, Turin, and in those of Lombardy. Surprisingly, some important universities, such as those in Genoa and above all Rome, have still not been paid sufficient attention.²³ The case of the Sapienza Univer-

Casella/Alessandra Ferraresi/Giuseppe Giuliani/Elisa Signori (ed.), *Una difficile modernità. Tradizioni di ricerca e comunità scientifiche in Italia 1890–1940* [A Difficult Modernity. Traditions of Research and Scholarly Communities in Italy 1890–1940], Pavia 2000, 431–486; Gian Paolo Brizzi, *Bologna 1938: Silence and Remembering. The Racial Laws and the Foreign Jewish Students at the University of Bologna*, with a preface by Rita Levi-Montalcini, Bologna 2002; Annalisa Capristo, *L'espulsione degli ebrei dalle accademie italiane* [The Expulsion of Jews from the Italian Academies], Turin 2002; Domenico Mirri/Stefano Arieti (ed.), *La cattedra negata. Dal giuramento di fedeltà al fascismo alle leggi razziali nell'Università di Bologna* [The Negated Chair. From the Oath of Loyalty to the Racial Laws at the University of Bologna], Bologna 2002; *Le leggi antiebraiche del 1938, le società scientifiche e la scuola in Italia* [The Anti-Jewish Laws of 1938, the Scientific Societies, and Academia in Italy], Conference Proceedings, Rome, 26–27 November 2008, Rome 2009; Francesca Pelini/Ilaria Pavan, *La doppia epurazione. L'Università di Pisa e le leggi razziali tra guerra e dopoguerra* [The Double Purge. The University of Pisa and the Racial Laws between War and Post-War], Bologna 2009; Galimi/Procacci (ed.), "Per la difesa della razza"; Valeria Graffone, *Espulsioni immediate. L'Università di Torino e le leggi razziali, 1938* [Immediate Expulsions. The University of Turin and the Racial Laws, 1938], presentation by Gianmaria Ajani, Dean of the University of Turin, with a preface by Fabio Levi, Turin 2018.

19 See: Sarfatti, *Per un censimento*, 211–217, here 214–215.

20 The highest numbers of foreign Jewish students were recorded in Bologna and Pisa. See: Elisa Signori, *Contro gli studenti. La persecuzione antiebraica negli atenei italiani e le comunità studentesche* [Against the Students. Anti-Jewish Persecution in the Italian Universities and Student Communities], in: Galimi/Procacci, "Per la difesa della razza", 173–210, here 177, 185.

21 On this point, see: Klaus Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf. Exil in Italien, 1933–1945*, 2 vols., Stuttgart 1989–1993, Vol. 1, 213–220; Agnes Katalin Kelemen, *The Exiles of the Hungarian Numerus Clausus in Italy*, in: *Judaica Olomoucensia* 2014, 1–2, 56–103.

22 Ephraim Urbach, a student in Rome, was president of Israel's Academy of Sciences and Humanities; Nicolai Rubinstein, a student in Florence, became one of the most renowned historians of the Renaissance period after moving to the United Kingdom; as a young student of the Medical Faculty, Lothar Kalinowsky began to do research in the field of electroshock therapy, which he further developed in the United States; while Albert Otto Hirschmann, a student in Trieste, became an influential economist and taught in the United States. See: Voigt, *Zuflucht*, 220.

23 For a preliminary investigation, see: Maria Stella Rollandi, *Le leggi razziali e l'università di Genova. Prime ricerche* [The Racial Laws and the University of Genoa. Preliminary Research] in: *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria* [Proceedings of the Ligurian Society for Homeland History], New Series 42 (2002) 2, 477–493; and Fabio Franceschi, *Le leggi antiebraiche del 1938 e la loro applicazione nella Facoltà giuridica della R. Università degli Studi di Roma* [The Anti-Jewish Laws and their Implementation in the Faculty of Law at the Royal University of Rome], in: *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale* [State, Churches, and Confessional Pluralism], online journal (www.statoechiese.it) 38 (2014), 1–69.

sity of Rome is particularly remarkable: After the advent of fascism, it achieved a prominent position within the national framework due to the special care that the regime devoted to its development. It was an ambition of Mussolini himself to make the Italian capital's university the main centre of learning in the country. Therefore, it experienced an unprecedented expansion under fascism, becoming the biggest Athenaeum in Italy.²⁴ Also largely missing from the historiographical recognition of the impact of fascist antisemitism on the academic environment are the universities of southern Italy, with the partial exception of Naples.²⁵

From the investigations conducted so far, it has emerged that in some cases (such as Trieste and Bologna) the rate of exclusion was considerably higher than the national average.²⁶ At the same time, it has been confirmed that the 'measures for the defence of the race' were diligently and zealously implemented almost everywhere. Only the University of Pisa seems to have partially escaped this reality, as both the anti-Jewish laws and the directives from the Ministry of National Education with regard to the racist orientation of teaching are reported to have been carried out without the enthusiasm that has been noted in other cases.²⁷

The Controversial Case of Giovanni Gentile's Attitude to the Racial Laws

Recent scholarship corroborates the view that no substantial opposition to the racial campaign came out of the academic sector. However, the position held by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile raised a lively debate that is worth dwelling on, if only because he was one of the most influential intellectuals of Mussolini's regime. As Minister of Public Education from October 1922 to July 1924, Gentile led a major reform of the Italian educational system. In 1925, he launched the most ambitious cultural project of fascist Italy, the *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti* (Italian Encyclopaedia of Sciences, Letters, and Arts), of which he was editor until 1943. Gentile was appointed president of the Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura (National Fascist Institute of Culture) in 1925, a position he held until 1937. Three years later, he was placed at the head of the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore (Superior Normal School) in Pisa. According to De Felice, Gentile was the only one among the leading fascist intellectuals who after the racial campaign was unleashed was "able to avoid the uproar of those years".²⁸ Successive studies challenging this interpretation argued that Gentile's attitude to fascist antisemitism had to be reconsidered, given that he rejected racism but never publicly opposed the antisemitic turn of the fascist regime. Therefore, Gentile would share with the academic community the blame for remaining silent in the face of the racial campaign. By avoiding open

24 For further information, see Maria Rosa Di Simone, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" [University of Rome "La Sapienza"], in: Gian Paolo Brizzi/Piero Del Negro/Andrea Romano (ed.), *Storia delle Università in Italia* [The History of the University in Italy], Vol. 3, Messina 2007, 124-128.

25 On this point, see: Gloria Chianese, *Le leggi antiebraiche. Il caso napoletano tra scuola e università* [The Anti-Jewish Laws. The Neapolitan Case between School and University], in: Galimi/Procacci (ed.), "Per la difesa della razza", 159-172.

26 Four full professors out of 13 were expelled from the University of Trieste. See: Anna Vinci, *L'università di Trieste e le leggi razziali* [The University of Trieste and the Racial Laws], in: Galimi/Procacci (ed.), "Per la difesa della razza", 73-87, here 79. In Bologna, eleven full professors out of 86 (almost 13 per cent) and 21 qualified lecturers out of 219 (about 10 per cent) were dismissed. See: Simona Salustri, *L'ateneo bolognese e la politica della razza* [The Bolognese Athenaeum and the Politics of Race], *ibid.*, 89-109, here 92-94.

27 See: Francesca Pelini/Ilaria Pavan, *La persecuzione razziale nell'ateneo pisano* [The Racial Persecution in the Pisan Athenaeum], in: Galimi/Procacci (ed.), "Per la difesa della razza", 111-138, here 125, 131-134.

28 De Felice, *Jews*, 375.

expressions of disagreement with the anti-Jewish measures, he chose to align with the regime's politics.²⁹

Yet several Jewish scholars hit by the Racial Laws requested Gentile's help in order to escape the consequences of discrimination and, in some cases, to find a new academic position abroad, as a well-researched study by Paolo Simoncelli shows. Gentile was regarded by his Jewish colleagues as a trusted bulwark against racist antisemitism, which had no place in his intellectual and scholarly activity carried out under fascism.³⁰ In the context of the efforts made by Gentile on behalf of some victims of racial persecution, the case of Paul Oskar Kristeller is well known. With the advent of the Nazi regime, Kristeller, a young Jewish German scholar of the Renaissance, had been forced to give up his academic career in Germany and had settled in Italy. Thanks to Gentile, in the late spring of 1935, Kristeller was appointed as a German language instructor at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. When fascism unleashed its antisemitic campaign, Gentile requested an audience with Mussolini in order to plead the case for Kristeller and other Jewish scholars. This attempt was not successful, but Gentile's friends who were forced to leave Italy because of the Racial Laws did not forget his benevolent approach, maintaining correspondence with him from their new lands of asylum. Not only Kristeller, who settled in the United States, but also the philosopher Rodolfo Mondolfo, who secured a new position as a university professor in Argentina with Gentile's help; the scholar of Greek philosophy Richard Walzer, who relocated to the United Kingdom; the philosopher Isacco Schaky, who found refuge in Palestine; the economist Gino Arias, who moved to Argentina; and the historian of Christianity Alberto Pincherle, who also emigrated to South America – all remained bound to Gentile by sincere gratitude.³¹

Thus, it is evident that Gentile cannot be accused of disregarding the fate of Jewish colleagues. Even if his behaviour in Kristeller's case can be explained as essentially motivated by the desire to protect the autonomy of the Scuola Normale Superiore and to maintain the high scholarly standards of its teaching staff,³² it should nevertheless lead to an evaluation of Gentile's role in more positive terms. Indeed, he tried – albeit cautiously – to prevent the complete subjugation of the academic institutions and cultural centres in which he was involved to the totalitarian project of the regime as embodied in the racial campaign. Thus, it seems difficult to deny that Gentile's attitude to the Jewish scholars hit by the Racial Laws – especially if one compares it with the cynicism and opportunism of the vast majority of Italian academics, who took unscrupulous advantage of the situation to seize the positions thereby vacated – deserves a more generous appraisal.

29 For this interpretation, see above all: Annalisa Capristo, Italian Intellectuals and the Exclusion of their Jewish Colleagues from Universities and Academies, in: *Telos* 164 (Fall 2013), 63-95, here 63-80; Giovanni Rota, *Intellettuai, dittatura, razzismo di Stato* [Intellectuals, Dictatorship, and State Racism], Milan 2008, 11-49.

30 See: Paolo Simoncelli, "Non credo neanche io alla razza". Gentile e i colleghi ebrei ["Neither do I Believe in Race". Gentile and his Jewish Colleagues], Florence 2013. A similar approach was adopted by Rosella Faraone, Giovanni Gentile, "the Philosopher of Fascism". *Cultural Leadership in Fascist and Antisemitic Italy*, Lewiston 2017.

31 See: Simoncelli, "Non credo neanche io alla razza".

32 This interpretation was suggested by Rota, *Intellettuai*, 43-44. As is known, Gentile, guided by the same principle, in his capacity as Director of the *Scuola Normale Superiore* guaranteed support and protection also for scholars not politically aligned with the fascist regime. On this point, see: Paolo Simoncelli, *Cantimori, Gentile e la Normale di Pisa. Profili e documenti* [Cantimori, Gentile, and the Normale of Pisa. Profiles and Documents], Milan 1994.

Italian Scientists and the Development of Racism

In order to explain the widespread approval that the Racial Laws found in the academic community, one should not overlook the role played by eminent scientists in the development of race theories, which – although they may have had different orientations and often even been in conflict with each other – paved the way for the anti-Jewish measures. This is demonstrated by some remarkable studies conducted since the end of the 1990s that have shed light on the massive involvement of the Italian scientific community in the genesis and growth of fascist racism.³³ This did not arise suddenly as a consequence of Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany, but developed over a long period. According to Giorgio Israel, the racial question became crucial in the politics of fascism from the late 1920s onwards; it was then that Mussolini began to develop the ambition to change the character of the Italian people and to make them a 'master race'.³⁴ Therefore, there was an increasing interest among scientists regarding the issue of 'race', its quantitative growth, and its qualitative improvement, which was particularly pronounced in fields such as demography, eugenics, and anthropology. The pathologist Nicola Pende, the physiologist Sabato Visco, and the demographer Corrado Gini were some of the most active scholars participating in the racial project of the fascist regime.

The commitment of the academic community to this objective had considerable propagandist effects. It contributed to creating, as Roberto Maiocchi pointed out, "a racist rhetoric, a racist lexicon, which got Italians accustomed to thinking that the government was engaged in a politics of care and protection of the quality of the race".³⁵ This was regarded as a highly important and worthwhile activity. Thus, well in advance of the antisemitic campaign, Italian eugenics was committed to encouraging "the dissemination and success of the idea that it was desirable, even necessary, to fight to make the *Italian* race a great race".³⁶ No less relevant was the role played by demography and its support of the regime's nativist policy. This was not just dictated by the intent to avert the risk of a decline in the population, but was also aimed at creating one of "the most important cultural antecedents" of state racism, namely the exaltation of the special qualities of "Italian progeny", which would provide a scientific legitimation for colonial expansionism and generate a sense of superiority over other peoples.³⁷ So, when fascism unleashed the antisemitic campaign, the ideological ground had already been abundantly prepared for these racist policies to be welcomed in cultural and scholarly circles.

Research focussing on Italian scientists' involvement with the racial politics of Mussolini's regime shows that racist trends were not of marginal relevance in Italian culture under fascism. They would first be practically executed with the racial policies applied by fascist Italy in Abyssinia. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the anti-Jewish legislation was simply an extension of these policies. The development of racist theories that occurred in fascist Italy, as Roberto Finzi explained well, "does *not* inevitably imply the antisemitic outcome". Indeed, "racism toward colonial peoples cannot be immediately juxtaposed to aversion to Jews. [...] There-

33 See in particular: Roberto Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista* [Italian Science and Fascist Racism], Florence 1999; Aron Gillette, *Racial Theory in Fascist Italy*, London 2002; Israel, *Il fascismo*.

34 See: Israel, *Il fascismo*, 111.

35 Maiocchi, *Scienza*, 57.

36 *Ibid.*, 61.

37 *Ibid.*, 137-138.

fore, it is possible to support and adopt a racist policy toward 'coloured' peoples without this being necessarily associated with anti-Jewish policies".³⁸

According to Garin, "it was the increasingly closer link with Nazi Germany that led to the Racial Laws and persecution", not the racist views developed by Italian intellectuals.³⁹ This point may be acceptable, provided that the antisemitic turn of fascism is not reduced to an act of deference toward the Nazi ally or a concession to its demands. What has to be taken into account is the powerful force of attraction exerted by the 'Third Reich' on far-right organisations across Europe, which promoted antisemitism among them.⁴⁰

Fascist Students and the Antisemitic Campaign

The support for racism and antisemitism displayed by youths was first reported by De Felice.⁴¹ More recently, studies have emerged exploring in greater depth the world of fascist university students and highlighting the approval they gave to the racial campaign. The works of Luca La Rovere⁴² and Simone Duranti⁴³ in particular have challenged the traditional interpretative paradigm based on the memoirs of the protagonists of the time, according to which youths had by the mid-1930s already discovered the reactionary character of fascism and reached detachment from the regime. The most famous example of such an approach is the book by Ruggero Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo* (The Long Journey through Fascism), published in the early 1960s, the central thesis of which was that "fascism failed to influence the youth of its time, in spite of flatteries and deceptions".⁴⁴ On the contrary, newer research shows that the regime's totalitarian project to create an integrally fascist generation proved to be particularly effective among students. Most university youths supported the regime's project, believing that it was the prelude to a new, superior civilisation. This may explain the enthusiastic approval given by the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (Fascist University Groups, GUF) to the racial campaign, which was seen as a crucial aspect of the fight conducted by fascism to get rid of all cultural and material obstacles that hindered the full achievement of such a goal.

Duranti's study emphasised that an antisemitic inclination existed among university youths well in advance of the racist turn of the regime. This is testified by the vehement campaign against the 'Jewish influence' on the economy, unleashed from 1936 by the students of the University of Rome in the pages of their journal, *Roma*

38 Roberto Finzi, La cultura italiana e le leggi antiebraiche del 1938 [Italian Culture and the Anti-Jewish Laws of 1938], in: Studi Storici. Rivista trimestrale dell'Istituto Gramsci [Historical Studies. Quarterly Journal of the Gramsci Institute] 49 (2008), 895-929, here 909.

39 Garin, *Fascismo*, 23.

40 For a thorough analysis of this topic, see: Aristotle Kallis, Fascism and the Jews. From the Internationalisation of Fascism to a 'Fascist' Antisemitism, in: Holocaust Studies. A Journal of Culture and History 15 (2009) 1/2, 15-34; 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.

41 See: De Felice, *Jews*, 379-383.

42 Luca La Rovere, Storia dei GUF. Organizzazione, politica e miti della gioventù universitaria fascista 1919-1943 [History of the GUF. Organisation, Politics, and Myths of the Fascist University Youth 1919-1943], with a preface by Bruno Bongiovanni, Turin 2003.

43 Simone Duranti, Lo spirito gregario. I gruppi universitari fascisti tra politica e propaganda (1930-1940) [The Gregarious Spirit. Fascist University Groups between Politics and Propaganda (1930-1940)], with a preface by Enzo Collotti, Rome 2008.

44 Ruggero Zangrandi, Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo. Contributo alla storia di una generazione [The Long Journey through Fascism. A Contribution to the History of a Generation], Milan 1963, 12.

fascista (Fascist Rome). Their stance on the Spanish Civil War was also emblematic, namely associating antisemitism and anticommunism. The journals of the GUF invoked the spectre of 'Judeo-Bolshevism', endorsing the idea of a clash of civilisations between Christian fascist spiritual values and 'Jewish communism', which was regarded as a grave international threat.

With the official beginning of the racial campaign, the anti-Jewish hostility of fascist university students increased. The Racial Laws were welcomed with enthusiasm by the GUF, which did not limit its activity to the mere execution of the directives received.

They pursued antisemitic propaganda with resolution and zeal through various initiatives such as competitions, workshops, and the creation of new periodicals. This campaign continued during the war, when the GUF perpetuated the stereotype of an 'international Jewish conspiracy' against the Axis nations. In this context, the 'Jew' became the symbol that embodied all the enemies of Nazi fascism, namely Western democracies and Soviet communism, and enabled antibourgeois and anti-communist beliefs to be held together.⁴⁵

The strong antisemitic feelings of fascist university students were confirmed by Nazi representatives in Italy, according to the well-researched study by Kilian Bartikowski, which explored German attitudes toward Italian racial and anti-Jewish policies. In particular, the reports written by 'Third Reich' consuls in various Italian towns and cities during the violent anti-French demonstrations of December 1938 emphasised that students were enthusiastic about the fascist regime's pro-German and racial shift, shouting slogans against Jews and waving swastika flags.⁴⁶

That having been said, it would be incorrect to argue that the whole student community unanimously supported the antisemitic campaign. In this regard, it is worth mentioning some testimonies reported by Elisa Signori of leading members of the fascist university youth such as Ugoberto Alfassio Grimaldi and Luciano Bolis.⁴⁷ They claimed that Mussolini's racist turn weakened their fascist faith and, even if it did not cause an immediate break with the regime and a move toward antifascist positions, led to an inner struggle for both.

An ambivalent response to the fascist persecution of the Jews came from the Federazione Universitaria Cattolica Italiana (Italian Catholic Federation of University Students, FUCI), most of whose members at that time were also affiliated to the GUF. As Jorge Dagnino shows in his history of the FUCI, some Catholic intellectuals, such as Emilio Guano and Renzo De Sanctis, rejected any kind of antisemitism and declared Christian beliefs to be at odds with anti-Jewish feelings; others, on the con-

45 See: Duranti, *Lo spirito*. Similar conclusions have been reached by studies that investigated the activity of the university fascist groups on a local basis, focussing on the cases of Rome and Bologna. See: Amedeo Osti Guerazzi, *Il nemico perfetto. Il GUF di Roma e l'antisemitismo* [The Perfect Enemy. The GUF of Rome and Antisemitism], in: Marina Caffiero (ed.), *Le radici storiche dell'antisemitismo. Nuove fonti e ricerche* [The Historical Roots of Antisemitism. New Sources and Research]. Proceedings of the Seminar held in Rome, 13–14 December 2007, Rome 2009, 159–187; Simona Salustri, *La nuova guardia. Gli universitari bolognesi tra le due guerre (1919–1943)* [The New Guard. The Bolognese University Students between the Two Wars (1919–1943)], with a preface by Elisa Signori, Bologna 2009. Both these works validate the thesis of a close relationship between the strong antisemitic impulse of fascist students and their approval of the totalitarian project of the regime.

46 See: Kilian Bartikowski, *Der Italienische Antisemitismus im Urteil des Nationalsozialismus 1933–1943* (=Dokumente, Texte, Materialien, 77), Berlin 2013, 111–114.

47 See: Elisa Signori, *La gioventù universitaria italiana di fronte alle leggi antiebraiche* [Italian University Youth in the Face of the Anti-Jewish Laws], in: Daniele Menozzi/Andrea Mariuzzo (ed.), *A settant'anni dalle leggi 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, 267–303, here 286–291.

trary, such as Guido Lami, branded the Jews as an unassimilable race and welcomed their exclusion from Italian universities.⁴⁸ However, no exhaustive research has yet been carried out on the reactions of Italian Catholic students to fascist antisemitism.

In any case, there is still a lot to be done in order to capture in a single framework the attitudes adopted by different sectors of the student community toward the racial politics of fascism, which is a particularly complex task.

Jewish Scholars and Italian Fascism

Following the above discussion on the most relevant issues explored by recent scholarship dealing with the impact of fascist antisemitism on Italian academic institutions, it is worth concluding with an aspect that has so far received less attention: the relationship between Jewish scholars and the fascist regime. Unfortunately, despite a great amount of research conducted to date, the biographical and intellectual profiles of those academics who were dismissed by the universities remains fragmentary. Therefore, it is not possible at present to obtain a precise understanding of their ideological and political attitudes, especially regarding Mussolini's regime, and so we are not yet able to measure the quantitative extent of Jewish academics' support for fascism. Nevertheless, memoirs by protagonists of that time suggest that a few of them were involved – even in leading positions, in some cases – in the cultural policy of the regime and actively participated in the 'fascistisation' of the Italian university system.

One of the most interesting testimonies in this respect was cited by the orientalist Giorgio Levi Della Vida in his 1966 autobiography *Fantasma ritrovati* (Remembered Ghosts). In this work, Levi Della Vida, who had been excluded from the university in 1931 due to his refusal to pledge the oath of loyalty to the fascist regime, maligned the fact that in the post-war narrative his treatment had been equated with that of the academics banned in 1938 for racial reasons. Among them, he claimed, "there was more than one who from the first hour to the last had been an enthusiastic and dedicated activist under the banner of the fasces".⁴⁹ As examples, Levi Della Vida named Gino Arias,⁵⁰ the legal philosopher Giorgio Del Vecchio,⁵¹ the physiologist Carlo Foà,⁵² the historian of antiquity Mario Attilio Levi,⁵³ and the biologist Tullio Terni.⁵⁴

48 See: Jorge Dagnino, *Faith and Fascism: Catholic Intellectuals in Italy, 1925–1943* (=History of the Sacred and Secular, 1700–2000), London 2017, 165–167.

49 Giorgio Levi Della Vida, *Fantasma ritrovati* [Remembered Ghosts], Venice 1966, 239.

50 Arias moved closer to the Fascist Party on the eve of the March on Rome and, during the regime, held important public offices, including being appointed a member of the Commission of the Eighteen for constitutional reforms in 1925. In 1934, he became a Member of Parliament. In the fascist period, Arias taught political economy first in Florence and then in Rome and stood out as a major theorist of fascist corporatism.

51 Del Vecchio was a fascist of the first hour. In 1925, Mussolini himself appointed him Dean of the University of Rome. In this role, which he held for two years, Del Vecchio made every effort for the spirit of fascism to penetrate university life and to accommodate the ambitions of the regime regarding the development and expansion of the Roman Alma Mater. In 1930, he became Head of the Faculty of Law, remaining in office until 1938.

52 Foà joined the Fascist Party in 1924. In the same year, he was appointed to the Chair of Physiology at the University of Milan, where he played an important role as a member of a university fascist organisation in leading the academic staff to adhere to the regime's directives.

53 Levi joined the fascist ranks at a young age, participating in squadristi activities when he was still a student in Turin. After teaching at the Piedmontese University, Levi became Professor of Ancient History at the University of Milan in 1936. His historical works in the 1930s were clearly inspired by fascist views: Roman imperial civilisation was interpreted as the starting point of a historical course culminating in the revolution of the Blackshirts.

54 Terni taught at the University of Padua from 1924. He was first appointed to the Chair of Histology and then to that of Anatomy. It is reported that, in the mid-1920s, Terni was one of the founders of the *Associazione fascista della scuola* (Fascist Association of the School).

While acknowledging that they were “distinguished names in the academic field”, he clearly stated that being associated with them made him feel uncomfortable.⁵⁵

The fascist beliefs and militancy of these scholars have to a certain extent been explored by scholarship, but much work remains to be done to reach an exhaustive overview of the relationship between Jewish academics and the regime.⁵⁶ In his 1985 essay *Gli Ebrei d'Italia* (The Jews of Italy), Momigliano, who had been a student of Levi Della Vida at the University of Rome, tended to reduce Jewish involvement with fascism to a few people guided by economic interests. As for the academics with “fascist ideological sympathies”, he only recalled the cases of Arias and Del Vecchio, “who wanted a reform of the Italian state on corporate lines”. Yet, Momigliano emphasised, “most of the Jews were clearly out”.⁵⁷ More accurate research on the scholars dismissed in 1938 would likely prove that such a claim has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

The ruthlessness and violence of the antisemitic policy adopted by Mussolini's regime appears even more evident if one considers that it hit distinguished personalities of proven fascist faith and great international renown who brought honour and prestige to fascist Italy. This is illuminated by some examples drawn from documents of the University of Rome, which show the particularly harsh approach taken by the Ministry of National Education to Jewish scholars. On 13 August 1938, before the antisemitic measures came into force, the ministry refused the eminent mathematician Federico Enriques, Professor of Higher Geometry, permission to travel to Amersfoort in the Netherlands to participate in a meeting of the International Institute of Philosophy.⁵⁸ In a letter dated 9 September, the same ministry informed the dean that Del Vecchio was not permitted to accept the appointment as President of the Italian-Bulgarian Association.⁵⁹ A further statement from 4 October instructed the dean to make sure that Arias (who was even a personal friend of Minister Bottai) was not called as a member of examination and degree boards. This decision was made before it was established whether he was to be considered a member of the Jewish ‘race’.⁶⁰ Documents such as these go a considerable way toward highlighting the devastating impact of Italian fascist antisemitism on academic institutions.

55 Levi Della Vida, Fantasmi, 239-240.

56 On Arias, see: Omar Ottonelli, Dealing with a Dangerous Golem. Gino Arias's Corporative Proposal, in: The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought, 20 (2013), 1032-1070; idem, Zionism, Fascism, Racial Laws. The Case of Gino Arias, in: Luca Fiorito (ed.), A Research Annual (=Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology, 32), Bingley 2014, 83-125. On Del Vecchio, see: Olindo De Napoli, Roma val bene una messa: identità ebraica e fascismo in una vicenda degli anni Venti [Rome is Well Worth a Mass. Jewish Identity and Fascism in a Story from the 1920s], in: Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell'Ottocento e del Novecento [Contemporary. Journal of History of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries] 16 (2013), 581-612; Nicola D'Elia, Jüdische Schwarzhemden an der italienischen Universität. Giorgio Del Vecchio und der Faschismus, in: Fritz/Rossoliński-Liebe/Starek (ed.), Alma Mater Antisemitica, 285-304. For information on Foà and Levi as fascist supporters at the University of Milan, see: Signori, Le leggi razziali, 448-453. On Terni, whose support of fascism is a controversial issue, see Paolo Simoncelli, Il dramma di uno scienziato ebreo. Il suicidio di Tullio Terni e l'epurazione ai Lincei [The Drama of a Jewish Scientist. The Suicide of Tullio Terni and the Purge in the Lincei Academy], in: Nuova Storia Contemporanea [New Contemporary History] 7 (2003) 1, 101-118; Angelo Ventura, Tullio Terni, l'Università di Padova e l'epurazione all'Accademia dei Lincei [Tullio Terni, the University of Padua, and the Purge in the Lincei Academy], in: La memoria ritrovata. Giornata in ricordo di Tullio Terni e Mario Camis [The Recovered Memory. A Day in Memory of Tullio Terni and Mario Camis] (Rome, 12 March 2004) (=Atti dei Convegni Lincei [Proceedings of the Lincei Conferences], 212), Rome 2005, 13-61.

57 Momigliano, Essays, 132.

58 Archivio Storico dell'Università di Roma “La Sapienza” [Historical Archive of the University of Rome “La Sapienza”], serie personale docente, fascicolo AS 481.

59 Ibid., AS 18.

60 Ibid., AS 1427.

Nicola D'Elia is an independent scholar. He completed his MA in Contemporary History at the University of Pisa in 1997 and his PhD in the History of European Political Thought at the University of Perugia in 2003. His main fields of research are the history of socialism and the labour movement between the end of the nineteenth century and the First World War, the history of German-Italian cultural relations in the interwar period, the history of fascist antisemitism, and the history of Italian intellectuals during the fascist period. His major publications include: *Democrazia e "modello inglese". Eduard Bernstein scrittore politico nell'esilio di Londra (1890-1901)* [Democracy according to the "English Model". Eduard Bernstein as a Political Writer in Exile in London (1890-1901)], Florence 2005; *Delio Cantimori e la cultura politica tedesca (1927-1940)* [Delio Cantimori and German Political Culture (1927-1940)], Rome 2007; *Giuseppe Bottai e la Germania nazista. I rapporti italo-tedeschi e la politica culturale fascista* [Giuseppe Bottai and Nazi Germany. Italian-German Relations and Fascist Cultural Politics], Rome 2019. E-mail: wulfgar2@hotmail.com

Quotation: Nicola D'Elia, Italian Universities in the Face of Fascist Antisemitism. Current Status and Perspectives of Research Eighty Years after the Passing of the Racial Laws, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 7 (2020) 1, 87-99.

DOI: [10.23777/SN.0120/ART_NDEL01](https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0120/ART_NDEL01)

S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 7 (2020) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0120>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-NC-ND (Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives)