

**Sara Airoidi, *Nazione in patria. Sionismo e identità ebraica in Italia, 1918-1938* (Milano-Torino: Pearson, 2022), pp. 184.**

by *Arturo Marzano*

Sara Airoidi’s book, which is based on her July 2016 PhD dissertation in History at the University of Milan, has several qualities. First of all, it sheds light on an issue so far overlooked by historiography, namely the relationship between Italian Zionism and the definition of Italian Jewish identity. It does so by focusing on Enzo Sereni and Alfonso Pacifici, two prominent figures among Italian Jewry who definitely deserve much more attention than they have been getting from scholars. Second, it bridges the gap between the (mainly Italian) historiography of early twentieth-century Italian Jewry and the (mainly international) historiography of Jewish communities abroad during the same period. By merging two traditions that do not often interact, Airoidi gives us a glimpse into the specificities of Italian Zionism. More specifically, she highlights that the distinction between Zionism and what is defined as “Jewish Diaspora nationalism” in international historiography—the former being a form of nationalism aimed at creating a Jewish territorial state in Palestine, while the focus of the latter was on strengthening Jewish identity without compromising the feeling of belonging to the nation states in which Jews lived—is less relevant in the case of Italy. Airoidi suggests that, contrary to how it was often portrayed, Italian Zionism was not so much philanthropic in nature, nor solely dedicated to assisting the Eastern European Jewish masses in their migration to Palestine, as it was “a movement of cultural and spiritual renaissance aimed at providing form and content to a national identity that was certainly weakened, but not at all extinguished, because of the integration process” (p. 4). Third, Airoidi draws on a wide range of primary sources, in Italian as well as German, Hebrew, and English—something that is not so common among scholars of contemporary Italian Jewry. Finally, the book is written in a style that makes it accessible to both scholars and non-experts, who are not necessarily familiar with the subject.

The book is organized into three chapters, in addition to the introduction and the conclusion. In chapter one, titled “Old issues and new challenges: Italian Zionism and identity politics between 1918 and 1938,” Airoidi traces the history of both

national and local Zionist organizations—such as the Italian Zionist Federation (FSI), re-established in 1918, and smaller Zionist groups and associations that were active in Rome, Florence, and Turin. This allows her to explore different tendencies within the Zionist movement, with a focus on socialist and revisionist Zionism. Airoldi succeeds in proving that even the so-called “philanthropic tendency”—as exemplified by Felice Ravenna, who was the first president of the FSI—advocated not only support for the Zionist project in Palestine but also the “remaking of the Jews” by helping the “diaspora rediscover its own identity and roots” (p. 16). One of Airoldi’s original contributions is to show that Mussolini’s attacks on Zionism had begun as far back as the early 1920s. Mussolini first referred to the “antipatriotic position of Zionism” in an article published in the daily *Il Popolo d’Italia* on 19 October 1920. In his first speech to Parliament the following year, he stressed the risk posed to “Italianness” by “other races, the most dangerous of which was the Jewish one,” as well as intimating that the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine would lead to Italian Jews becoming hostile toward Italy (p. 22). These same arguments would be used again in the 1930s, such as during the notorious anti-Zionist and antisemitic campaign that erupted in 1934, after two Turin Jews were arrested at the Italian-Swiss border on March 19 for carrying anti-fascist material in their luggage. The Italian Zionist movement rebutted accusations that Italian identity and Zionism were incompatible by pointing out that, rather than being a “relief agency” supporting Eastern European Jews, the latter was an instrument through which “Jews could regain self-awareness” (p. 62). The focus of chapter two, titled “Enzo Sereni: Judaism as thought and action,” is on Enzo Sereni, who was born in Rome in 1905, moved to Palestine in 1927, and was deported to Dachau where he died in 1944, after volunteering to parachute into Northern Italy to help rescue Italian Jews under Nazi-fascist rule. Airoldi recounts Sereni’s choice to embrace Socialist Zionism, his faith in what Aaron David Gordon had defined a “religion of labor,” and his decision to establish kibbutz Ghiv’at Brenner in Palestine—where his commitment to supporting Jewish and Arab workers’ common cause was driven by the belief that “class solidarity” was crucial to preventing clashes between Arabs and Jews. Of particular interest are the pages Airoldi dedicates to the “revision of Zionism” (p. 92) that Sereni advocated for during his visits to Germany and the United States. In an essay originally written in German and later translated into English, he criticized

the Zionist project of establishing a Jewish majority in Palestine, arguing that it was necessary to “recognize, once and for all, Arabs’ aspirations to national independence” (p. 104).

Airoldi devotes chapter three to “Alfonso Pacifici: the eternal contemporaneity of Judaism.” Alfonso Pacifici was born in Florence in 1889 and moved to Palestine in 1934, where he died in 1981. According to him, “Jews were a nation, even without a land,” and Zionism should be regarded as “a movement of cultural renovation and return to the observance of Jewish commandments, through which Jews would recover their national identity” (p. 119). Pacifici’s counterargument to fascist anti-Zionism was that no contradiction could exist between being Italian and a Jew at the same time, as “nationality” (i.e., being part of the Jewish nation), was “one of two existential dimensions for Italian Jews,” the other one being Italian “citizenship” (p. 136). But once settled in Palestine, he gradually adopted an anti-Zionist stance, as Zionism had mistakenly believed that “migrating to Eretz Israel was the main instrument through which the Jewish people would fulfill their historical mission.” On the contrary, Pacifici was persuaded that this would only happen by “living in accordance with the principles of integral Judaism,” following in the footsteps of ultra-orthodox supporters of the anti-Zionist Agudat Yisrael party (p. 152).

For all the reasons above, I believe this is an excellent book. Through the contributions of two giants of Italian Zionism, Sara Airoldi provides in-depth insights and better understanding of the debate around Jewish identity, and its relationship with fascist-ruled Italian society and politics, in the 1920s and 1930s.

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