

Antisemitic Agitation and the Emergence of Political Catholicism in Mantua around 1900

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Abstract:

Whereas the Italian state constituted in 1861 was long considered to be a nation without antisemitism, recent studies have shown that the Catholic Church had in fact vigorously advocated antisemitic positions in liberal Italy and actively spread new accusations against Jews. In no other Italian city however did a more vehemently antisemitic political Catholicism develop than in Mantua. Following a brief recapitulation on how the Catholic Church in Italy had responded to the political, cultural and socio-economic challenges, the second section of this essay presents the news coverage of the Catholic paper "Il Cittadino di Mantova." Founded in 1896, the first year's issues will examine how the Catholic journalists in the city picked up and propagated the language of antisemitism. The third section moves the attention from language to politics analysing the antisemitic election campaign of the political catholicism in Mantua for the local elections of 1903. Attention is focused on identifying to what extent antisemitism had 'arrived' as a political movement in Italy.

Whereas the Italian state constituted in 1861 was long considered to be a nation without antisemitism, recent studies have shown that the Catholic Church had in fact vigorously advocated antisemitic positions in liberal Italy and actively spread new accusations against Jews.¹ In no other Italian city however did a more vehemently antisemitic political Catholicism develop than

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¹ Giovanni Miccoli, "Santa Sede, questione ebraica e antisemitismo fra Otto e Novecento," *Storia d'Italia. Annali 11, Gli Ebrei in Italia., Vol. 2, Dall'emancipazione a oggi*, ed. Corrado Vivanti, (Torino, Einaudi, 1997), 1371-1574; "Antisemitismo e chiesa cattolica in Italia (XIX-XX sec.). Ricerche in corso e riflessioni storiografiche," ed. Cristiana Facchini, *Storicamente. Laboratorio di Storia 7 (2011)*; Simon Levis Sullam, "Per una storia dell'antisemitismo cattolico in Italia," *Cristiani d'Italia. Chiese, società, Stato (1861-2011)*, ed. Alberto Melloni, (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani, 2011), vol. I, 461-470; Annalisa Di Fant, "Stampa cattolica italiana e antisemitismo alla fine dell'Ottocento," *Les racines chrétiennes de l'antisémitisme politique*, ed. Catherine Brice, (Roma: École Française de Rome 2003), 121-136; Andrew M. Canepa, "Cattolici ed ebrei nell'Italia liberale (1870-1915)," in *Comunità. Rivista di informazione culturale* 32 (1978), 43-109; Andrew M. Canepa, "Pius X and the Jews: A Reappraisal," in *Church History*, 61(1992): 362-372.

in Mantua.² In January 1903 accounts of the formation of an antisemitic league in Mantua appeared in a variety of Catholic newspapers across Italy. For instance the Catholic organs in Bologna, *L'avvenire d'Italia*, and *La Difesa* in Venice reported in almost identical fashion: "Mantua. Today an antisemitic league was formed in our city where people from all parties have come together to build a dam against the Jewish invasion."³

The antisemitism of the Church was directly tied to the development of political Catholicism, which itself in turn needs to be seen as the response given by the Catholic Church to the three fundamental challenges facing the Christian churches in Europe during the long 19th century.⁴ Firstly, since the French Revolution the Christian churches confronted political challenges arising from the demands for constitutions as well as the limitation and legitimacy of political power, demands threatening the old privileged status enjoyed by the churches in the pre-constitutional dynasties. Secondly, the churches in all European countries faced profound cultural challenges emerging out of new scientific discoveries. The churches were in danger of losing their intellectual supremacy and cultural hegemony, for the Christian faith was no longer the ultimate authority of truth. Thirdly, grave social challenges assailed the churches, triggered by socio-economic upheavals and the burgeoning dominance of a market system and rapid industrialization, challenges which could no longer be met by appeals to the old notion of Christian compassion.

The various Christian dominations in all European countries were forced to face up to these challenges, albeit to varying degrees and in different forms. Large sections of the Protestant and Catholic Churches shared the conviction that Jews were to blame for these upheavals and social changes.⁵ On the foundations of the century-old Christian religious animosity towards Jews and searching for a guilty party for the challenges of the 19th century yet to be overcome, large sections of the Christian churches were active in the crystallization of a new of form of hostility towards Jews, antisemitism.⁶

² For the social history of Mantua in the Nineteenth Century see Maurizio Bertolotti, "La società. Ceti, conflitti, identità," *Storia di Mantova. Uomini - ambiente - economia - società - istituzioni*, Vol. 2. *Le radici del presente*, ed. Marzio A. Romani, (Mantova: Tre Lune Ed., 2008), 339-429.

³ *La Difesa*, January 16-17, 1903.

⁴ Martin Friedrich, *Kirche im gesellschaftlichen Umbruch. Das 19. Jahrhundert*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

⁵ For the German case see, Olaf Blaschke, *Katholizismus und Antisemitismus im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997); Wolfgang E. Heinrichs, *Das Judenbild im Protestantismus des deutschen Kaiserreichs. Ein Beitrag zur Mentalitätsgeschichte des deutschen Bürgertums in der Krise der Moderne*, (Köln: Rheinland Verlag, 2000).

⁶ For the Catholic Church see, Olaf Blaschke, "Antikapitalismus und Antisemitismus. Die Wirtschaftsmentalität der Katholiken im Wilhelminischen Deutschland," *Shylock? Zinsverbot und Geldverleih in jüdischer und christlicher Tradition*, eds. Johannes Heil, Bernd Wacker, (München: Fink Verlag, 1997), 113-146; for the Protestant Church see, Michael Imhof, *Einen besseren als Stoecker finden wir nicht'. Diskursanalytische Studien zur christlich-sozialen Agitation im deutschen Kaiserreich*, (Oldenburg: Bibliotheks- und Informationssystem, 1996).

Following a brief recapitulation on how the Catholic Church in Italy had responded to these challenges, in the second section of this essay we will turn our attention to the news coverage of the Catholic paper *Il Cittadino di Mantova*.⁷ Founded in 1896, we examine the first year's issues as to how the Catholic journalists in the city picked up and propagated the language of antisemitism. In the third section we will move from language to politics and analyze the local election campaign of 1903 in Mantua. Here our interest is focused on identifying to what extent antisemitism had 'arrived' as a political movement in Italy.

The Catholic Church in Italy and the emergence of antisemitism

Although the new form of church animosity towards Jews in the various countries of Europe took on specific characteristics depending on the respective social and political context, and not all church circles took part in shaping and spreading antisemitism, in all European countries clergy were active who decidedly informed the language of antisemitism and put the new anti-Jewish attitude into practice.⁸

Common to the various shades of anti-Jewish attitudes amongst the Christian churches in Europe was the fact that the traditional religious motifs were no longer at the forefront in this new animosity; instead, focus was placed on the alleged responsibility of the Jews for the socio-economic and cultural upheavals of the time.⁹

In Italy the situation was exacerbated by how the newly founded nation state, which provided its citizens with a constitution as well as political rights and civic freedoms, had been asserted against the clergy's secular claim to power and the real-existing state that was the Church. Although the government of the new Italian nation state had left the Pope the Vatican, guaranteeing its sovereignty, and assured him the exercise of his spiritual office, Pius IX dismissed these overtures, seeing himself as a "prisoner in the Vatican."¹⁰ This dramatically intensified an already unyielding stance against all political developments.¹¹

Immediately after the revolution of 1848/9 Pius IX had adopted a strident anti-liberal, anti-nationalist and anti-Jewish course.¹² Founded in 1850, the journal *Civiltà Cattolica* became the mouthpiece of Catholic antisemitism,

⁷ *Un secolo di stampa periodica Mantovana 1797-1897*, eds. Clara Castagnoli, Giancarlo Ciaramelli (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2002) 55-60.

⁸ For Croatia see the article of Marija Vulesica and for Galicia of Tim Buchen in this issue.

⁹ O. Blaschke, "Antikapitalismus"; Imhof, 'Einen besseren als Stöcker'.

¹⁰ David I. Kertzer, *Prisoner of the Vatican: The Popes' Secret Plot to Capture Rome from the New Italian State*, (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

¹¹ David I. Kertzer, *The Unholy War: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism*, (London - Oxford: Macmillan, 2002).

¹² Giacomo Martina, *Pio IX*, 3 Vol., (Roma: Ed. Pontificia Univ. Gregoriana, 1974-1991); Ulrich Wyrwa, "Pius IX," *Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. 2/2, ed. Wolfgang Benz, (Berlin-München: DeGruyter-Saur, 2009), 641-643.

circulating a host of anti-Jewish prejudices.¹³ In 1858 the Catholic Church set off a wave of public indignation across Europe by kidnapping the Jewish child Edgardo Mortara in Bologna.¹⁴ Following the founding of the Italian nation state, Pius IX's political stance was not only against liberal Italy, but also, and with particular vehemence, against Jews. In 1872 he held a sermon in front of the Curia attacking the influence of Jews in the press, and in the following year he vilified Jews in a public sermon, claiming that they are solely dedicated to their love of money.¹⁵ With this Pius IX anticipated some of the key motifs of the new antisemitic language as was then formulated directly afterwards in Germany by Wilhelm Marr, Adolph Stoecker or Heinrich von Treitschke, and which henceforth determined the semantics of antisemitism. Catholic journals, in particular the *Civiltà Cattolica*, expressly spread this new rhetoric. Above all the priest Giuseppe Oreglia di Santo Stefano made a mark with his attacks on Jews, defaming them as “eternally insolent children, obstinate and impure” and alleging that they are striving to seize the country's wealth and gain sole control over money flows.¹⁶

With its vehement rejection of contemporary political culture, which even led in 1874 to the passing of a *Non expedit*, a prohibition declared for all Catholics on taking part in political elections, let alone stand for election, the Catholic Church isolated itself from politics and thus diminished its influence on public opinion in liberal Italy.

Pius IX died in 1878 and his successor, Leo XIII, avoided any public appearances that could be construed as anti-Jewish. In an interview published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1892 he evaded answering a question that explicitly sought his position on antisemitism; at the same time though, he addressed the rule of money, a key element in antisemitic rhetoric. During his pontificate Vatican newspapers and journals attacked Jews on numerous occasions in connection with the Dreyfus Affair.¹⁷

Despite various social and political initiatives the Catholic Church remained outside the mainstream national political culture. The consequence of this self-isolation was that antisemitism in Italy initially failed to develop into a political force. While in all other countries of Europe antisemitic attitudes increasingly came to the fore in the various political cultures, repeatedly enjoying the express support of the Christian churches, and to varying degrees antisemitism emerged as a political movement, at this point in time antisemitic views in Italy

¹³ Ruggero Taradel, Barbara Raggi, *La segregazione amichevole. 'La civiltà cattolica' e la questione ebraica (1850-1943)*, (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2000); Josè David Lebovitch Dahl, “The Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Formation of Modern Anti-Semitism: La Civiltà Cattolica 1850-1879,” *Modern Judaism* 23/2 (2003), 180-197.

¹⁴ David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, (New York: Knopf, 1997).

¹⁵ Pasquale de Francis, *Discorsi del Sommo Pontefice Pio IX pronunziati in Vaticano*, Vol. 1, (Roma: Tip. Paravia, 1872), 124; 294.

¹⁶ David Kertzer, *Die Päpste gegen die Juden. Der Vatikan und die Entstehung des modernen Antisemitismus*, (München: Propyläen Verlag, 2001), 183.

¹⁷ Annalisa di Fant, *L'affaire Dreyfus nella stampa cattolica italiana*, (Trieste, Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2002).

had no influence on the country's political culture and public life. Thus, Italian Jews were able to advance socially and politically in a way that was unique in Europe, largely undisturbed by public hostility, practices of exclusion by state institutions or violent assaults.¹⁸

The news of the formation of an antisemitic league in Mantua in 1903 we quoted at the outset is thus all the more remarkable. The socialist movement in the city promptly questioned the announcement. The newspaper *La Provincia di Mantova. Giornale della democrazia sociale* stated firmly: "We have trouble believing that the news reported in *L'avvenire d'Italia* is true, because Mantua is not an area suitable for a struggle against civilization."¹⁹

This statement was made against the backdrop of local elections to be held in July 1903, and for which the editor of Mantua's Catholic paper, *Il Cittadino di Mantova*, Don Venanzio Bini, campaigned for election on the basis of a markedly antisemitism program.²⁰

Don Venanzio Bini and the Catholic newspaper *Il Cittadino di Mantova*

Before examining the reporting of the Catholic newspaper *Il Cittadino di Mantova*, a couple of brief biographical details about Don Venanzio Bini, a decisive figure in shaping the outlook of this paper, are necessary.

Born into a petit bourgeois family of Mantua with many children in 1875, Bini began attending the city's seminary in 1888 before being ordained to the priesthood in September 1897.²¹ At first he taught at the seminary, but soon became involved in the Catholic social movement, *Azione cattolica*, and joined the staff of local Catholic paper *Il Cittadino di Mantova* at an early stage, whose editorship he then took over in 1902. The focal point of his interest was the struggle against the materialistic *Zeitgeist*, which he saw as not only being advanced by the capitalist economic order but also liberalism. Responsible for both, so Don Bini and *Il Cittadino*, were the Jews.²²

The antisemitic campaign conducted by Don Venanzio Bini at the local Mantua elections in 1903 was by no means the first time that antisemitic propaganda had featured in the newspaper of Mantua Catholics. One of the very first editions in January 1896 declared its admiration for the antisemitic politics of the Austrian Christian Social Party and paid tribute to Karl Lueger

¹⁸ Attilio Milano, *Storia degli Ebrei in Italia* (1963), (Torino, Einaudi, 1992), 382-391; Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, "Per uno studio sulla presenza e attività di parlamentari ebrei in Italia e in Europa," *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 69/1(2003): 73-92.

¹⁹ *La Provincia di Mantova*, January 18, 1903; for this newspaper see *Un secolo di stampa periodica Mantovana 1797-1897*, 218-225.

²⁰ *Cittadino di Mantova*, June 17, 1903.

²¹ Dante Bettoni, Ida Bozzini, *Venanzio Bini. Sacerdote mantovano accanto a San Giovanni Calabria*, (Roma: Editrice AVE, 2000).

²² Irene Paganini, *Chiesa e Antisemitismo a Mantova 1896-1945*. Tesi di Laurea in Storia del Cristianesimo, Università di Bologna, a/a 2005-2006.

for his anti-Jewish politics,²³ just a few days later it accused the Jews of Turin to have been involved in anti-clerical riots.²⁴

The extent to which Mantua's Catholic journalists adopted the new motifs of antisemitic rhetoric was revealed a little later in a remark made in passing, namely that the press agencies were completely in the hands of Jews. The topic of the article in which this defamatory remark was made was once again a report on Karl Lueger's antisemitic election campaign in Vienna.²⁵

The newspaper again took up the secular motif of the power Jews had over the press in the article "The Jewish Danger", claiming: "Whoever has the money owns the press as well, and whoever owns the press possesses the power."²⁶

The slogan coined by the Berlin historian Heinrich von Treitschke during the Berlin Antisemitism Controversy of 1879 – "Die Juden sind unser Unglück"²⁷ – was repeatedly picked up and used in antisemitic propaganda, advancing to one of the key catchphrases of antisemitic rhetoric. It thus comes as no surprise that the newspaper of the Mantua Catholics ran with the slogan in the first year of its publication, emphatically announcing: "Gli ebrei sono la nostra rovina."²⁸ The topic of this article was the assertion that antisemitism is by no means a religious issue. The core concern is rather – and this is the central aspect of the new form of animosity towards Jews formulated by the language of antisemitism – the dangerous influence Jews are exerting on social life. As the *Cittadino di Mantova* puts it, when antisemitism is concerned with "freeing us from the jaws of the Jews", then Mantua's Catholics fully back the rallying cry of the antisemites. The thought expressed following this remark shows just how much the Catholic journalists had appropriated the antisemites' main message: "We know very well that Jews rule over Mantua."²⁹

Besides the motifs of Jewish political dominance or the purported power over the press, the Mantua Catholics employed another element of antisemitic rhetoric, the semantic linkage between Jewry and Freemasonry. Italy's Catholics should follow an example north of the Alps. In this case *Il Cittadino di Mantova* was referring to Hungary and reported enthusiastically that Hungarian Catholics had founded forty newspapers in their struggle against Jewish Freemasonry in the last two years. "We, too," emphasized Mantua's Catholics, "moan under the Jewish-Freemasonry yoke."³⁰ A further article

²³ *Cittadino di Mantova*, January 11-12, 1896.

²⁴ *Cittadino di Mantova*, January 25-26, 1896.

²⁵ *Cittadino di Mantova*, March 4-5, 1896.

²⁶ *Cittadino di Mantova*, October 7-8, 1896.

²⁷ Jacob Katz, "Die Juden sind unser Unglück". Reflexionen über ein antisemitisches Schlagwort," *Messianismus und Zionismus. Zur jüdischen Sozialgeschichte* by Jacob Katz, (Frankfurt/M.: Jüdischer Verlag, 1993), 108-118. For the development of Treitschke's Antisemitism see Ulrich Wyrwa, "Genese und Entfaltung antisemitischer Motiven in Heinrich von Treitschkes 'Deutscher Geschichte im 19. Jahrhundert', *Antisemitische Geschichtsbilder*, eds. Werner Bergmann, Ulrich Sieg, (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2009), 83-101.

²⁸ *Cittadino di Mantova*, July 22-23, 1896.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Cittadino di Mantova*, July 11-12, 1896.

characterizes the ghetto, so the headline, as a hearth of Freemasonry,³¹ and only a little later they claim: “The Freemasonic Jews are the cancer plaguing our civil Christian society.”³²

Italy’s Catholics focused their agitation on the ‘struggle against the Italian nation state, continually exploiting antisemitic insinuations. Mantua’s Catholic newspaper is no exception, defaming the Kingdom of Italy as Jewish, and in this vein they concluded an article on Jews and festive holidays: “Our legislators are less concerned with the needs and rights of the Christian population, but are rather calculated according to the Jewish minority. So the abbreviation R.d.I on the crest of the state no longer stands for Regno di Italia, Kingdom of Italy, but Regno di Israele, Kingdom of the Israele!”³³

In this vein *Il Cittadino di Mantova* did not pass up on the opportunity to respond to a speech given by the Jewish finance minister Luigi Luzzatti with a harsh article full of antisemitic insinuations.³⁴

This employment of the new language of antisemitism by the Catholic journalists of Mantua went so far that they even occasionally resorted to the concept of race, defaming the Jews with racist expressions.³⁵ An article entitled “Jewish Arrogance”, a tag significant in antisemitic rhetoric, spoke of the Jewish race and how its arrogance had bloated to an enormous degree.³⁶

A detailed leading article – “Israelite Heroics” – compiled a list of traditional insinuations and accusations against Jews, covering the whole spectrum from the Middle Ages onwards.³⁷ At the same time, the paper insisted that it is “not the earlier crimes of the Jews but the current repression by the Jews, not the old hate against Christian names but their devilish work today which is decisive in the Jews trying to destroy the foundations of Christian civilization.” For this reason the Mantua Catholics demand in this article what numerous antisemites across Europe were campaigning for, the expulsion of Jews: “Out with the adversaries of Christian civilization, out with the Jews.”³⁸

As the numerous references to the Habsburg Monarchy already showed, Mantua’s Catholics looked beyond their city and indeed Italy as a whole. The threat represented by “the Jewish hordes” – so the title of another article in *Il Cittadino di Mantova* – is looming across the whole of Europe.³⁹ “Unfortunate Europe”, begins the article, “as if the Huns were not enough, or the Goths, the Visigoths [...] and the other barbaric hordes, [...] as if the shattering invasion by the Turks was not enough, in this century you have fallen victim to a new

³¹ *Cittadino di Mantova*, July 25-26, 1896.

³² *Cittadino di Mantova*, August 8-9, 1896.

³³ *Cittadino di Mantova*, August 1-2, 1896.

³⁴ *Cittadino di Mantova*, September 9-10, 1896.

³⁵ *Cittadino di Mantova*, March 7-8, 1896.

³⁶ *Cittadino di Mantova*, August 19-20, 1896.

³⁷ *Cittadino di Mantova*, August 22-23, 1896.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Cittadino di Mantova*, August 26-27, 1896.

invasion, new barbaric hordes have befallen you as leeches: the Jewish hordes!”⁴⁰

In December 1896 the Mantua Catholics even printed a lengthy interview with Karl Lueger that opened with the pronouncedly direct question: “Why are you an antisemite?” Lueger was given ample opportunity to then elaborate his antisemitic positions.⁴¹

The reporting and commentaries in this first year of the Church publication *Il Cittadino di Mantova* shows that the Catholic journalists of the city had made the vocabulary of antisemitism their own, in all its shadings and across its full range. What is most remarkable is how much the Catholic clergy had detached themselves from traditional and religiously-justified animosity towards Jews and swung towards the secular motifs of antisemitism, concentrating on the alleged role of Jews in the state as well as society and the economy.

By no means were Mantua’s Catholics alone in taking this position, with these features of secular antisemitism evident in other newspapers and journals published by the Catholic Church in Europe. Besides the aforementioned organ of the Vatican, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, other publications were prominent in spreading and propagating the language of antisemitism in Italy, such as the intransigent journal of the Milanese priest Don Davide Albertario, *L’Osservatore cattolico*,⁴² or, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree, the paper serving Venetian Catholics, *La Difesa*.⁴³

What made the situation in Mantua and Italy different from the rest of Europe was the fact that the Church in Italy was unable to exert any real influence on the political culture due to its self-imposed isolation. Whereas the Churches in other European countries were able to strongly influence public life with their antisemitism, thus aiding the new form of animosity towards Jews to find a broad echo in society, in Italy the Catholic Church’s antisemitic agitation initially came to nothing.

The political culture of unified Italy was characterized more by liberalism and accepting Jews as citizens with equal rights, and this tolerance led in turn to a political advancement of Jews that was unparalleled in Europe.⁴⁴ Nowhere else could Jews point to such far-reaching political success as in Italy, in no other European country were Jews active in the state administration in so large numbers, and this was not confined to merely the level of officials and state

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Cittadino di Mantova*, December 2-3, 1896.

⁴² Annalisa Di Fant, “Stampa cattolica italiana e antisemitismo alla fine dell’Ottocento,” *Les racines chrétiennes de l’antisémitisme politique*, ed. Catherine Brice, (Rome: École française de Rome, 2003), 121-136.

⁴³ U. Wyrwa, “Der Antisemitismus und die Gesellschaft des Liberalen Italien 1861-1915,” “... denn in Italien haben sich die Dinge anders abgespielt”. *Judentum und Antisemitismus im modernen Italien*, eds. Gudrun Jäger, Liana Novelli-Glaab, (Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 2007), 87-106; see also Ilaria Pavan, “L’impossibile rigenerazione. Ostilità antebraiche nell’Italia liberale (1873-1913),” *Storia e problemi contemporanei*, 50 (2009): 34-67.

⁴⁴ Susan Zuccotti, “Italian Jews in Public Life, 1848-1922: Between Liberalism and Anti-Semitism,” *Studia Judaica* XV (2007): 82-90.

secretaries, but included ministers. Some of the most prominent names were the finance ministers Luigi Luzzatti and Leone Wollemborg, and the minister without portfolio, Salvatore Barzilai. In the person of Ernesto Nathan a Jew was mayor of the capital Rome, the former capital of the Papal State. A further factor distinctive to the Italian situation was that Jews could be promoted to the highest military ranks in the Italian Army, and in the years France was still being shaken by the Dreyfus Affair, Italy even had a Jewish war minister, Giuseppe Ottolenghi.⁴⁵ Finally, and just as unique in Europe, Luigi Luzzatti became prime minister of Italy in 1910.⁴⁶

In this political climate it was impossible for antisemitic movements to form; anti-Jewish positions like the ones propagated in *Il Cittadino di Mantova* evoked no public response. Due to its own refusal to become involved in politics, the Catholic Church was unable to influence public opinion and the political climate with its antisemitic agitation, neither in Mantua or any other Italian city.⁴⁷

The weakness of antisemitism in the society of liberal Italy is not so much due to how Jews and non-Jews were 'nationalized' at the same time as the nation state was formed,⁴⁸ the high degree of assimilation of Italian Jews, the actual low proportion of Jews in the population, or Italy's economic backwardness, to name but just some of the arguments frequently brought forward in the secondary literature.⁴⁹ The decisive point is that the Church was not a determining factor in Italy's political culture. In republican and anticlerical tradition the academic milieu proved just as resistant to Church propaganda as the world of small business and tradesmen.⁵⁰ In turn, Italian nationalism was

⁴⁵ Attilio Milano, *Storia degli Ebrei in Italia*, 382-387.

⁴⁶ Francesco Piazza, *Luigi Luzzatti: riformatore sociale e statista*, (Treviso: Canova, 1987); *Luigi Luzzatti e il suo tempo*, ed. Pier Luigi Ballini, (Venezia: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1994).

⁴⁷ For the catholic Antisemitism in Turin see Michele Nani, *Ai confini della nazione. Stampa e razzismo nell'Italia di fine Ottocento*, (Roma: Carocci editore, 2006) 157-230; see also Simon Levis Sullam, "Per una storia dell'antisemitismo cattolico in Italia," *Cristiani d'Italia. Chiese, società, Stato (1861-2011)*, ed. Alberto Melloni (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani, 2011), vol. I, 461-470.

⁴⁸ This was the interpretation given by Arnaldo Momigliano in 1933 in the journal *La nuova Italia. Rassegna critica mensile della cultura italiana e straniera*, 20/4 (1933):142-143, as part of a review *History of the Jews in Venice* by Cecil Roth. This thesis proved particularly popular in Italian historiography as a result of Antonio Gramsci including it in his Prison Notebooks; see, Mario Toscano, "Risorgimento ed ebrei. Alcune riflessioni sulla 'nazionalizzazione parallela'," Mario Toscano, *Ebraismo e antisemitismo in Italia. Dal 1848 alla Guerra dei sei giorni*, (Milano: Angeli 2003), 13-23; Simon Levis Sullam, "Arnaldo Momigliano e la nazionalizzazione parallela. Autobiografia, religione, storia," *Passato e Presente*, 25/70(2007): 59-82.

⁴⁹ Ulrich Wyrwa, *Der Antisemitismus und die Gesellschaft des Liberalen Italien*, 104-106.

⁵⁰ For the shopkeeper in Milan see Jonathan Morris, *The Political Economy of Shopkeeping in Milan (1886-1922)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); for France and Germany in contrast see, Philip G. Nord, *Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Robert Gellately, *The Politics of Economic Despair. Shopkeepers and German Politics 1890-1914*, (London: SAGE Publ., 1974).

immune to antisemitic rhetoric for as long as the Church *milieu* kept out of national politics and stood aloof of everyday political culture.⁵¹

Revealingly, the situation changed the moment the Church eased the strict *Non Expedit*, the prohibition to take part actively or passively in elections to the Italian parliament, and a young generation of Catholics entered the political fray in the first decade of the 20th century.⁵²

This is precisely the historical moment when news of the founding of an antisemitic league in Mantua began circulating in the Italian public, and antisemitism had thus arrived as a political movement in Italy, with Don Venanzio Bini campaigning with antisemitic slogans for election in Mantua.

Antisemitism and political Catholicism in Mantua

Don Venanzio Bini, who had taken over editorship of the *Cittadino di Mantova* in 1902, expressly supported the program of Christian democracy and the participation of Catholics in politics. As early as the end of 1902 his newspaper claimed, following weak results for Jewish candidates at provincial elections, that Mantua was “at heart” antisemitic, that antisemitism was “in the blood.”⁵³

Once the Papal prohibition on taking part in elections was eased, Don Venanzio Bini stood for local elections to be held in July 1903, campaigning with a markedly antisemitic program; the aforementioned announcement of the founding of an antisemitic league in Mantua is directly connected to preparations for this election campaign.

A few days after the announcement published in Catholic newspapers, for instance in Bologna and Venice, the *Cittadino di Mantova* spoke in passing of the “Lega antisemita”, without indicating whether the founding of such an organization had in fact gone ahead.⁵⁴ The non-Catholic newspapers in the city wasted no time in questioning the announcement. The democratic, pro-republic *La Provincia di Mantova. Giornale della democrazia sociale* stated in no uncertain terms: “Mantua will not tolerate such crusades anathema to civilization.”⁵⁵

After Bini had published the small work *Il libero pensiero* at the end of January, praised in his newspapers as being written completely in “antisemitic colors” and triggering not inconsiderable agitation in the city,⁵⁶ in the following month *Il Cittadino di Mantova* declared, as the programmatic title heralded, “Why we are Antisemites” in a three-part article series: “We are not antisemites just to gain approval, nor is this just a passing whim, we are antisemites because of facts which legitimate the forming of antisemitic parties in all European

⁵¹ Ulrich Wyrwa, *Der Antisemitismus und die Gesellschaft des Liberalen Italien*, 92.

⁵² Cesare Marongiu Buonaiuti, *Non expedit. Storia di una politica 1866-1919*, (Milano: Giuffrè, 1971).

⁵³ *Cittadino di Mantova*, December 10-11, 1902.

⁵⁴ *Cittadino di Mantova*, January 21, 1903.

⁵⁵ *La Provincia di Mantova*, January 18, 1903.

⁵⁶ *Cittadino di Mantova*, January 31, 1903.

nations.” The articles go on to explain that “our antisemitism addresses both a religious-moral question as well as a social question.”⁵⁷ In the following months *Il Cittadino di Mantova* reported time and again on alleged usury by Jews and Jewish Freemasonry, or took up rumors of ritual murders, before announcing in mid-June that Catholics will stand for election with an antisemitic program. “Mantua is deeply antisemitic,” begins the article, and for this reason Mantua’s Catholics have decided to run at the local elections on an antisemitic program.⁵⁸ Once again employing the title “Why we are Antisemites”, the *Cittadino* wrote that we do not hate the Jews because they had killed Jesus Christ, but because they control “business and speculation.”⁵⁹ “They want to rule over us through hunger, and we are forced to humiliate ourselves just to get a crust of bread.” The Jewish question is therefore, so the conclusion drawn by Mantua’s Catholics, a social question.⁶⁰ Over the course of the election campaign the *Cittadino* ranted continually about perceived Jewish intolerance and portrayed in great detail the antisemitic politics of Karl Lueger’s Christ Social Party as a role model.⁶¹

The *Gazzetta di Mantova*,⁶² a newspaper steeped in tradition that took part in the campaigns against Freemasonry, now saw itself forced into distancing itself from the antisemitic struggle of the Catholics against the Freemasons. In one of the numerous articles published on the issue they state that “our campaign against Freemasonry has nothing to do with the antisemitic campaign.”⁶³ The newspaper of social democracy, *La Provincia di Mantova*, had already responded to the first rumors of a founding of a “Lega antisemita” in Mantua, calling it into question, and had drawn attention to the publication of the antisemitic *Il libero pensiero*. Antisemitism, emphasizes *La Provincia*, can only be seen as uncivilized, and such an organization can only lead to resurrecting the old and sinister or criminal forms of caste hate under the command of priests.⁶⁴ Just a few days before the elections the democrats from *Provincia* again warned its readers of the antisemitic campaign conducted by the *Cittadino*: “What the priests and the clerical powers are undertaking here is disgraceful. They are profiting from the elections and whipping up the basest and most morbid passions, and they are trying to stir a vicious storm between peoples, between one religion and another. Their newspapers, their brochures and their lectures lead to nothing other than a real preying on citizens who grew up in one religion instead of another.”⁶⁵

The newspaper of Mantua’s Socialists, *La nuova terra giornale socialista mantovano*, had already emphasized its rejection of antisemitism in January as the rumor

⁵⁷ *Cittadino di Mantova*, February 7, 1903; February 21, 1903; February 25, 1903.

⁵⁸ *Cittadino di Mantova*, June 17, 1903.

⁵⁹ *Cittadino di Mantova*, June 20, 1903.

⁶⁰ *Cittadino di Mantova*, February 25, 1903.

⁶¹ *Cittadino di Mantova*, June 24, 1903.

⁶² *Un secolo di stampa periodica Mantovana 1797-1897*, 112-137.

⁶³ *Gazzetta di Mantova*, January 26-27, 1903.

⁶⁴ *La Provincia di Mantova*, January 25, 1903.

⁶⁵ *La Provincia di Mantova*, July 9, 1903.

spread that a 'Lega antisemita' had been founded in Mantua, declaring that the antisemites formed a *camorra* based on racial hatred.⁶⁶ During the election campaign Mantua's Socialists criticized the antisemitic line taken by the Catholics in no uncertain terms: Mantua's priests have tried to rally fifty votes. "They peddle the program: wage war against the Jews! Mantua for Mantuans!" In its rebuttal *La nuova terra* adopted the slogan German Social Democrats had coined to combat antisemitism: "Antisemitism is the socialism of fools."⁶⁷ In this context *La nuova terra* reminds readers of two fundamental articles by Giovanni Zibordi published three years before in which he expressly dismissed antisemitism: "Pillory", concluded Zibordi, "for the foolish antisemites who only hate the Jews because they cope better in this capitalist system."⁶⁸

The elections ended in a clear victory for the Democrats. With 16 deputies they made up more than half of the delegates. But Don Bini was also able to enter the chamber with his "lista antisemita", for, as the results published in *La Gazzetta di Mantova* stated, they sent four deputies, the same number as the moderate Liberals and the Socialists.⁶⁹

The Catholics had mainly waved the flag of antisemitism according to a commentary published a few days later in the *La Gazzetta*, and the brain of *Il Cittadino* is still a bit hazy from the frenzy of victory.⁷⁰

La nuova terra commented the politics of the antisemites shortly after the election with the remark: "Only the ignorant, the obsessed or imbeciles hang firmly onto their thoughts when these not only contradict logic but also the laws of history, and so those of economics."⁷¹

After the election which had seen their political direction score a clear victory, *La Provincia di Mantova* published an open letter to the Catholic newspaper. Entitled "For Historical Truth", it drew attention to various instances of intolerance shown by the Catholic Church and closed with the remark: "These incidents, esteemed *Cittadino*, are not incidents which took place in antiquity, nor are they incidents from recent history, they are incidents from our present day."⁷²

Despite this criticism, the protagonists of political Catholicism in Mantua felt vindicated by the elections and shortly after the *Cittadino* reported that Catholics in Ferrara were now campaigning for local elections with an

⁶⁶ *La nuova terra. Giornale socialista mantovano*, January 24-25, 1903; for other positions within the socialist camp of Mantua see Maurizio Bertolotti, "I contesti dell'ambiguità. Manifestazioni antisemitiche nel mondo socialista italiano dell'Ottocento," *Antisemitismi a confronto: Francia e Italia. Ideologie, retoriche, politiche*, eds. Michele Battini, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci (Pisa: Edizioni Plus, 2010), 57-78.

⁶⁷ *La nuova terra. Giornale socialista mantovano*, July 12, 1903.

⁶⁸ *La nuova terra. Giornale settimanale Socialista Mantovana*, June 24, 1900.

⁶⁹ *Gazzetta di Mantova*, July 13-14, 1903.

⁷⁰ *Gazzetta di Mantova*, July 18-19, 1903.

⁷¹ *La nuova terra. Giornale socialista mantovano*, June 5, 1904.

⁷² *La Provincia di Mantova*, July 16, 1903; for *La Provincia di Mantova* see yy, 218-225.

antisemitic program. “We wish the Catholics of Ferrara,” the article concluded, “the favor of fate in their battle against the ghetto.”⁷³

Jewish contemporaries were well aware of the antisemitic campaigns of Don Venanzio Bini. In the fall of 1903 *Il Vessillo Israelitico* – the most important Jewish periodical in Liberal Italy edited by the Rabbi Flaminio Servi –⁷⁴ reported: “Mantua. Yesterday the local antisemitic party distributed an untitled pamphlet that was full of savage hate against Jews. From now on, it announced, we are boycotting the businesses of the circumcised.” According to *Il Vessillo Israelitico*, there followed an avalanche of the most insulting abuse against the Jews of Mantua.⁷⁵

The entrance of Antisemitism into the Italian Political Culture

As these episodes from Mantua in 1903 show, Italy’s self-perception as a land without antisemitism needs to be revised. While it is obvious that the situation of Jews in Italy was much more favorable than in other European countries, that Italian Jews were faced with far fewer hurdles and met far less resistance in terms of their employment and professional opportunities, their involvement in society and political activities, and that antisemitism entered political culture and public life much later than in other European countries – the society of liberal Italy was by no means free of antisemitism. As the example of Mantua shows, this antisemitism was particularly prevalent in the Catholic camp. While in the 1890s Catholics remained within their own *milieu* with their antisemitic agitation and had no real influence on public life, in the election campaign of 1903 they took to the political stage of the city, bringing the political antisemitism of the Catholic Church to the local level.

With the deal between Giovanni Giolitti and the Christian Social politician Vincenzo Ottorino Gentiloni for the elections from 1913, a new Catholic constituent tied to the Church entered national politics, and in the respective election campaigns antisemitic rhetoric found its way into Italy’s political culture.⁷⁶ The Catholic journalist and editor of the newspaper *L’Avvenire* Filippo Crispolti, who ran for the Italian parliament in this year, reproached his democratic rival during the election campaign that he was not in a position to represent the electorate in parliament because he was a Jew.⁷⁷

Tellingly, it were the former priest, Giovanni Preziosi together with the cleric Umberto Benigni, who only a few years later translated *The Protocols of the Elders*

⁷³ *Cittadino di Mantova*, September 26, 1903.

⁷⁴ Bruno Di Porto, “‘Il Vessillo Israelitico’. Un vessillo ai venti di un’epoca tra Otto e Novecento,” *Materia giudaica. Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana per lo Studio del Giudaismo*, VII (2002), n. 2, 349-383.

⁷⁵ ‘Notizie diverse’, *Il Vessillo Israelitico*, 51/11 (1903), 371-372.

⁷⁶ For the Gentiloni Pact see, Alexander De Grand, *The Hunchback’s Taylor. Giovanni Giolitti and Liberal Italy from the Challenge of Mass Politics to the Rise of Fascism*, (Westport, Conn., Praeger, 2000) 180-184; Frank J. Coppa, “Giolitti and the Gentiloni Pact between myth and reality,” *Catholic Historical Review*, 53 (1967), 217-228.

⁷⁷ Enzo Lolli, ‘La questione dell’Ebreo’, *Il Vessillo Israelitico* 61 (1913), 668-671.

of Zion, a “work” that was to play a key role in antisemitic agitation in the 20th century.⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ Sergej Nilus, *L'internazionale ebraica. Protocolli dei 'Savi anziani' di Sion*, (Rome: La Vita Italiana, 1921); Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy. From Equality to Persecution*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 13-14, 291-292; Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide. The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode 1967); Wolfgang Benz, *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion. Die Legende von der jüdischen Weltverschwörung*, (München: C. H. Beck, 2007); Maria Teresa Pichetto, *Alle radici dell'odio. Preziosi e Benigni antisemiti*, (Milano: Franco Angeli 1985).