

Shira Klein, *Italy's Jews from Emancipation to Fascism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 369.

by Gadi Luzzatto Voghera

Students of the history of the Jews in Italy in the modern period must come to terms with a number of unjustified yet frequently made assumptions. Not easily accountable for as to their origin, these assumptions lie at the source of narratives which have become dominant in historiography. The same narratives also tend to thwart research efforts to shed unprejudiced light on the complex and richly articulated experience of the Jewish minority in the Peninsula without subscribing to a deterministic historical bias. The idea, in itself of extremely questionable merit, is commonly accepted that in Italy antisemitic attitudes were a marginal phenomenon, especially by comparison with other European countries such as France, Germany, or Austria, to say nothing of Eastern Europe. Moreover, the conviction is widespread – without being actually borne out by any documentary evidence – that fascist Italy adopted anti-Jewish legislation only under pressure from its Nazi ally, and that the Italian regime's persecution of the Jews was not harsh. It is typically – and erroneously – maintained in this connection that Italians overall did not approve of the anti-Jewish measures enacted by the fascist government and often took active steps to oppose them. Historians working in the field are well aware of how daunting a task it is to undercut such widespread beliefs. Whether the focus is on personal or local events, or on the project of creating, as has now been done by Shira Klein, a collective fresco to span modern Italian Jewish history in the long term – over a hundred years in this case, from 1848 to the years following the Second World War – the challenge is enormous.

*Italy's Jews from Emancipation to Fascism* by Shira Klein, based on a series of interviews and extensive study of documents kept in state archives, is structured in eight chapters preceded by an overall introduction and concluded by a final recapitulating chapter. A large apparatus of notes and a very rich bibliography complete the work.

Klein develops a programmatic approach to her topic, unfurling an ambitious and wide-ranging agenda before her readers. This begins by extending the chronological scope of her work, devoting the book's first two chapters to the nineteenth century and to the process of Jewish emancipation and integration – both as communities and as individuals – into the pre- and post-unification

Italian society. These decades in the mid-1800s, Klein argues, are the key to understanding the near-unanimous support which Italy's Jews gave to two very clear and in some ways mutually contrasting dynamics. One was the process of their intensive Italianization, which would later lead the Jews of Italy to mistake the oppressive and dangerous portent of the fascist regime's coming to power in the 1900s for a benign indication of growing Italian nationalism. The other was the re-elaboration – an apparently self-contradictory one, as per the interpretive framework proposed by Klein – of new models of Jewish identity. The emergence of these new identity models, as Klein sees it, calls into question the view that emancipation marked the beginning of a rapid process of Italian Jewish assimilation, thus indicating a no less rapid departure from Jewish religious tradition and cultural roots. Klein's title only partly captures the intent of the book, which is made explicit from the beginning of her text: to use documentary analysis to challenge the myth of the so called *bravo italiano*, demonstrating how the image of the selflessly brave and committed Italian national type distorts historical reality. The author also purposes to investigate how Italian Jews have strongly contributed to the construction of the myth, telling a story of peaceful cohabitation while the reality was much more complex and problematic.

Klein's work is a courageous and insightful project, which however comes in conflict with a number of current important concerns. I begin with the book's predecessors: earlier studies of the history of the Jews in Italy in the modern period have all devoted considerable attention to the age of emancipation, proceeding thence to a discussion of the years of fascist rule and its persecution of the Jews. The historian Renzo De Felice is the original author and proponent of the concept of *bravo italiano* in connection with the persecution of the Jews in Italy. By contrast, Michele Sarfatti in his work emphasizes the long history of antisemitism in modern Italy. Tracing its evolution, he effectively counteracts the view that in Italy anti-Jewish persecution was imposed by Germany and practiced only incidentally or perfunctorily. Other scholars in recent decades have similarly seen twentieth-century developments as an outgrowth of the dynamics of nineteenth-century Jewish emancipation.

Another problem arises in connection with the claim, consistently repeated by the author (especially in chapters three and four, which focus on the years of fascist rule and persecution) that “most Jews accepted Fascism from the time it came to power in 1922 until the late 1930s.” The question of minority acceptance, acquiescence, or rejection of a political regime is a matter asking for consideration independently of prefabricated historiographical hypotheses, especially ones

based on distorted general ideas about Italians' attitudes to fascism. In the case of the Jews, the complex social, cultural, and political predicament of the small Italian community does not seem to have been accorded the attention it deserves. The behavior and the attitudes of elites risk overshadowing the truth by being extrapolated from and extended to the entire community. As George L. Mosse conclusively demonstrated more than forty years ago, fascism served as the leading means of nationalization for the Italian masses. This forms a fundamental chapter in the historiography of modern Italy – one that cannot be passed over in silence by any author grappling with the period. Taking stock of the nationalization enabled by fascism is indispensable in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the endorsement of fascism by many members of the Jewish bourgeoisie. At the same time, this is far from saying that most Jews – or Italians, for that matter – subscribed to the fascist version of the Risorgimento or took on Italian identity as this appeared beginning in 1922.

A third problematic issue is bound up with the underestimation of the involvement of the Jewish bourgeoisie in anti-fascist and a-fascist movements emerging in Italy since the end of the First World War. This is particularly significant, given the extent of Italian Jewish participation in anti-fascist activism. The Jewish involvement was the opposite of marginal or scarce; witness the rich archive preserved by the CDEC Foundation. This is accessible at: <http://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-web/storico/detail/IT-CDEC-ST0002-000001/antifascisti-e-partigiani-ebrei-italia-1922-1945.html>. The archive contains hundreds of names. True enough, many of these were partisans whose anti-fascist affiliation was made clear only after 1938, but there were also many others – whose existence remains unacknowledged in Klein's volume – who were directly exposed during the earlier years of the regime. Among some of the best known are four of the 18 university professors who in 1931 refused to pledge allegiance to the fascist government: Vito Volterra, Fabio Luzzatto, Giorgio Levi Della Vida, and Giorgio Errera. Umberto Terracini, Eugenio Colorni, Giuseppe Emanuele Modigliani, and many others are similarly left unmentioned by the author. Mention also needs to be made of the intensive Zionist propaganda which, primarily through the pages of the popular weekly *Israël*,<sup>1</sup> created a novel space for cultural and political encounter. The freedom which this afforded for thought left an indelible mark upon Italian Jewish identity as it was being constructed during these decades.

---

<sup>1</sup> Accessible online at: <http://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-web/biblioteca/rivista-israel.html>

The book's chapters five through eight comprise a new section which offers important insights pertaining to the rebirth of Jewish communities in Italy after the Second World War. The period has formed a new focus of scholarly research in recent years, especially at the local level; this explains in part why the collection of primary sources available to the historian today is still incomplete. The chapter on Italian Jewish refugees in the United States and in Palestine under the British Mandate puts forth noteworthy suggestions, as do the pages covering Italy during the immediate post-war period and the activity of the American Joint Distribution Committee.

The volume closes with a chapter on the construction of the myth of the *bravo italiano* in the thinking of those whom the author identifies as "the" Italian Jews. This is an elaborate reiteration of Klein's essential thesis grounding the entire research project. It proffers to the English reader an image of the Jews of the Peninsula as substantially nationalist – and thus supportive of fascism – and unassimilated. Rather than Italianized, the Jews are supposedly bearers of a new Jewish identity (evidence of which is nonetheless hard to find in Klein's book). They are also infatuated with their Italian affiliation, even in the post-war period, to such an extent that they are unable to take cognizance of the misbegotten notion underlying the reassuring and cozy mental construct referred to as the *bravo italiano*.

Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, CDEC, Milan

**How to quote this article:**

Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, Review of *Italy's Jews from Emancipation to Fascism*, by Shira Klein in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, n. 15 August 2019  
*url*: [www.quest-cdecjournal.it/reviews.php?id=143](http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/reviews.php?id=143)