

## §I The Shape of Italy's Holocaust

This book is about the wide field of cultural responses to what we call the Holocaust or the Shoah, as it emerged in Italy over the long postwar era.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, a great deal of research has been devoted to Holocaust legacies, memories and cultures in key national arenas such as Germany, Israel, France and America, and an array of other countries and areas, including, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the nations of Eastern European and Russia.<sup>2</sup> But relatively little work of either analysis or synopsis has been produced on Italy.<sup>3</sup> Although varying widely in discipline and methodology—from history, to literary or film studies, to sociology, political theory or cultural studies—this body of work dovetails sufficiently well to allow us to shape out a common, cross-border chronological template of phases in the cultural elaboration—what the Germans call ‘working through’ (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*)—of knowledge about the Holocaust:

1. *Mid-1940s*: following the camp liberations of spring 1945 and the rapid spread of horrific newsreel and print imagery of the survivors and the dead,<sup>4</sup> there is widespread revulsion at the Nazi crimes, elaborated further at the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–46. Early testimonies appear, but very few gain a wide readership.
2. *Late 1940s to late 1950s*: in a period of reconstruction and Cold War tension, there is a widespread indifference to, even silence surrounding, Nazi crimes against Jews and the camp system. An exception is the spreading international reputation during the 1950s—as book, Broadway play and Hollywood film—of Anne Frank’s diary.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of the State of Israel is linked to the Holocaust (as will be the

counternarrative of the *Naqba*, the displacement of Palestinian populations in the war of 1948).

3. *1960s*: the Final Solution begins to emerge as a key historical phenomenon and as a distinct subject for memory and historical understanding. Most accounts point to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 as a crucial turning point, but also relevant are the generational politics of the 1960s, with the young challenging the settled narratives of the war and their parents' complicity; and the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six Day War, which brought the very survival of the Jews back into vivid play, before Israel's dramatic victory.
4. *1970s–80s*: awareness of the Holocaust emerges on a wide scale as a newly central feature in national histories and memory. France 'rediscovered' from the early 1970s, through books, films and trials, the extent of Vichy's collaboration and complicity (e.g. Marcel Ophüls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, 1971). In 1978–79, America, Germany and much of Europe learn the term 'Holocaust' through the hugely popular television miniseries of that name.<sup>6</sup> France and Germany struggle with scandals of negationism (the Faurisson affair of 1979 in France) or revisionism (the *Historikerstreit*, the historians' debate, in Germany in 1986–87).<sup>7</sup>
5. *1990s–2000s*: mass awareness peaks in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, and translates into a pervasive Americanisation of the Holocaust, through the global success of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and the opening of the Washington Holocaust museum in 1993, among many others.<sup>8</sup> Following the events of 11 September 2001, as well as accelerated globalisation and multiculturalism, there is a geopolitical shift away from the 'postwar' paradigm, towards a new phase of war and tensions between Muslims and the West: the Holocaust remains, however, a powerful shadow over the West and its newly uncertain role in the world.

With many local variations, this broad-brush 'history of memory' flows with remarkable consistency across different national contexts, perhaps especially in the 'Western' sphere (US, Western Europe, Israel). The story of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was tellingly different, since until the revolutions of 1989 the Soviet vulgate of the war as a heroic struggle of Communism against Fascism left little room for the racial aspects of Nazism. A very different account would also be needed

for a history of responses to the Holocaust in the Arab world or beyond. Nevertheless, one of the striking features of the field of Holocaust memory seems to lie in its transnational, deterritorialised dynamics, frequently decoupled from local history.

This macrohistorical picture should not, however, preclude national particularities: on the contrary, as Arjun Appadurai has argued in relation to local-global intersections, the two levels are in constant symbiosis.<sup>9</sup> At the local level, the microhistories of each nation which confronts the Holocaust interweave highly specific national discourses of culture and tradition, history and politics with this emerging transnational phenomenon. The particular mediators and operators within a cultural sphere have a crucial role to play in the timing and nature of local engagement with the Holocaust; and the particular inflections of a national setting determine how talk about it will, in turn, spread back into political and cultural spheres and into the collective cultural memory. Furthermore, elements of particular, national discourses can then emigrate in turn to become global Holocaust artefacts or events in their own right.



The relative neglect of Italy within this field is surprising, not least because it presents compelling instances of continuity and discontinuity with the template above.

Fascist Italy was the model and origin for Hitler's totalitarian racial state and adopted many of the latter's racist laws from the late 1930s onwards, although debate still rages as to how far, and how early, Fascism was (or was not) inherently racist.<sup>10</sup> Fascist Italy was also Nazi Germany's prime European ally as the genocide of the Jews was undertaken and was responsible for administering anti-Slavic and anti-Semitic policy in several occupied regions (e.g. Slovenia), often with ferocious violence, just as it was responsible for horrific colonial crimes in Africa, and just as it had operated forms of racial politics and ethnic cleansing in home border areas, such as Alto Adige, before the war; although important historiographical work has also proposed that Italian officials—up to Mussolini himself—did much to frustrate deportations and massacres of Jews during the early phase of the war.<sup>11</sup> Italy was, then, both part progenitor of and collaborator in genocide, and part uncertain fellow-traveller, even flibusterer. After July 1943, this already complex status was made notably more so as Mussolini fell, and Italy signed an armistice with the Allies and found itself split in two, invaded from the south by the Allies and

occupied in the centre and north by Germany (with the help of a restored Mussolini and the diehard Fascists of the Salò Republic), with a civil war or partisan Resistance war raging. The Nazis now started deporting Jews from Italy (mainly to Auschwitz), although the numbers were relatively small, in the thousands;<sup>12</sup> and also approximately 30,000 political prisoners (mostly partisans), deported to Mauthausen, Gusen and nearby; and large numbers—up to 750,000—of Italian soldiers were imprisoned in brutal internment camps.<sup>13</sup> Now Italians were victims of the whole gamut of Nazi violence, although the Salò Republic was also an active perpetrator of deportations and massacres, and the racial bureaucracy of the former Fascist state was still in place to abet the deportation of Jews. Once again, however, alongside this picture of complicity runs an alternative narrative of many individual or local acts of solidarity with the Jewish population, the product of an apparent Italian immunity to racism built into the Italian ‘national character’.<sup>14</sup>

This tangled history left Italy with an immense baggage of unresolved questions about itself, its historical responsibilities and its future after the war. It is commonly argued that the entire postwar era in Italy, up to the turn of the 21st century, was spent working through answers to those questions. Initially, as elsewhere, what was later termed the Holocaust did not separate itself out as a discrete event within the mire of the war’s and Fascism’s history and legacy; but once that distillation process did begin, the Holocaust too would pose deep and troubling questions to the polity and collective identity of Italy and Italians, adding layer upon layer of complexity and daunting challenge.

In response to this history, postwar Italian culture has thrown up striking clusters of writers and filmmakers, artists and architects, historians and intellectuals intent on coming to terms with the phenomenon of the Holocaust. Several of these have taken up prime places in the vast international spectrum of responses to the genocide—authors such as Primo Levi, Giorgio Bassani and Natalia Ginzburg; and directors such as Vittorio De Sica, Lina Wertmüller, Francesco Rosi and Roberto Benigni. Merely for this weight of cultural production, the relative neglect of Italy in accounts of the spectrum of Holocaust culture is surprising.

But the aim of this book is neither to restate the history of Fascist Italy’s entanglement with Nazi Germany; nor to collate a canon of the worthiest works about the Holocaust to have come out of Italy. It aims rather to survey and embed those works in the wider field of responses that produced and shaped them, and thereby to trace the progress of the slow, but

profoundly illuminating encounter between Italian culture and the Holocaust. The field it draws on includes a wide range of cultural artefacts, agents, works of testimony, events and practices, collectivities and debates. And this field is presented as in turn embedded in a series of other local fields, giving local inflections to the reception and understanding of the Holocaust. So, talk of the Holocaust in Italy is shown persistently to mask questions about Fascism, the anti-Fascist Resistance and its legacies, national character, Cold War politics, the role of the Church, European identity, immigration, multiculturalism and so on.

The book describes the circles of production and reception of this field of knowledge and representation of the Holocaust in Italy, tapping into the work and activism of concentration camp survivors and their associations, the Jewish community and its organs, spreading outwards into the wider culture through culture industries and media, civic commemorations, institutions and all the varied arenas of modern cultural practice. It traces how, by the late 20th century, a vast tranche of Italians—from ageing survivors to young children—came to know something of what was referred to by the terms Holocaust or Shoah, to have some sense of what Norberto Bobbio meant when he described the genocide as ‘*the monstrous event* in world history’.<sup>15</sup>

As indicated above, the Holocaust can never be wholly contained at the ‘national’ level, neither in its history of perpetrators, victims and bystanders, of individuals, groups, ethnicities and states; nor in its a posteriori cultural representations. It is and was always a porous, plurilinguistic, transnational phenomenon. This is evinced by the extraordinary, migratory global reach of the pivotal cultural events in our template, from the liberation photographs to Anne Frank’s diary, from Eichmann in Jerusalem to *Holocaust* on TV to *Schindler’s List* at the movies. This book, then, looks not only at the specifics of Italian responses to Italy’s role within experience of the Shoah; but also at the interactions of this field with that larger, transnational phenomenon. In Italy as elsewhere, these two strands—the Holocaust at its broadest and the Italian case at its most local—co-exist and are mutually dependent layers in history and in the production of discourse around it; and the nature of this co-existence is central to the story told here. To give two examples, as Manuela Consonni has shown, Italy had its own responses to the Israeli—and global—media event of the Eichmann trial, even as the Italian press reflected on the extraordinary global attention it was garnering.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, an Italian film such as Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*, 1997) was a product

of deep and largely hidden local and generational histories, masquerading as a Holocaust story (Benigni's father was a military internee);<sup>17</sup> and yet as it was marketed across a global circuit of cinema festivals and mass distribution, filtered through American success, it entered the sphere of transnational Holocaust culture, acquiring new meanings along the way.

This mutual dependence operates wherever the Holocaust establishes itself as a datum of cultural knowledge; but it seems to be charged with particularly interesting dynamics in the Italian case, because of the strange interplay of centrality and marginality in Italy's encounter with the Holocaust. As we have seen, Italy was ostensibly marginal to the mainstream history of the Holocaust (certainly in bald numerical terms) but was also bound to its core through key figures, moments and alliances; similarly the Holocaust has been ostensibly marginal to the mainstream of Italian culture, as has the small Jewish community (hovering for two millennia around 30–40,000 people, or 1/1000th of the modern population), and yet the stories and voices of Italian Jews have at times loomed surprisingly large within the dominant national culture. The web of oblique connections, indirect transmissions, displacements and graftings these telescopic interrelations throw up are at the core of this book's interests.

The same displacements, both within competing fields of national conversation and culture and between national and transnational fields, suggest further that 'memory' is not necessarily the only, nor the best, framing vocabulary for talking about how the Holocaust has taken on cultural form, despite the fact that a language of memory has come to seem *de rigueur* in research in this area. The cultural emphasis in this book is, in part, designed to challenge assumptions about mechanisms of collective memory, seeing instead cultural form as a means to shared knowledge about or awareness of aspects of the past, which become part of a shared cultural conversation (with its own codes and markers), of which 'memory effects' are only one element.<sup>18</sup>



Before setting out the structure of the book, we need to set out the scope of meanings around the term 'Holocaust' itself, in general and as it concerned Italy in particular.<sup>19</sup> Instead of attempting a potted history of events—from Fascist anti-Semitism to war, occupation and deportation, alongside the rise of the Nazis, the Nuremberg laws and the Final Solution<sup>20</sup>—it seems more pertinent to gauge this history and its legacy through some questions of definition. Even this preliminary task

is fraught with problems of inclusion and exclusion, echoing issues of 'uniqueness' or comparability in the wider field of Holocaust historiography.<sup>21</sup> We need to know what precisely is being named, and what is stake, when the Holocaust—and cognate terms that cluster around it—is named in Italy and in Italian. In asking this question, it swiftly becomes clear that we are also asking questions of agency, identity and belonging—whose Holocaust is it?—since it can variously be read as an event in Jewish history, German history, also Israeli prehistory, but also Italian history (and many other national histories), Italian-Jewish history, European history, global history, human history, and so forth.

Here are four possible parameters of definition for the Holocaust, each touching on events of the Holocaust in relation to Italy, and each with differing purchase in particular corners and moments within the field of cultural responses this book maps out.

1. The Holocaust has narrowly been taken to refer to the Nazi genocidal project to murder the Jews of Europe (and beyond), the Final Solution to the Jewish Question, particularly as enacted after the Wannsee conference of 20 January 1942. As noted, Italy was a prime ally of Nazi Germany and had already become a 'racial state' in 1938 with the passage of drastic anti-Semitic laws akin to the Nuremberg Laws. As noted also, each phase from 1938 to the early war years to the Salò years produced counternarratives of Italian opposition to the genocide, of moral heroism and resistance. Thus, even under the umbrella of Italy's direct involvement with the tightest definition of the Final Solution, we find in circulation competing narratives and historiographies, each with claims to authenticity. Even simple dating is of consequence here: the backdating of Italy's involvement with the Holocaust to 1938, pushed in the historiography of the 1980s, marks a crucial stage in redefinitions of Fascist complicity and of the definition of the Holocaust itself as viewed from Italy.

2. The term 'Holocaust' has variously taken on stretched or loosened definitions, for more or less coherent historiographical reasons: thus, in much postwar discourse, the place-name Auschwitz came to stand for the entire network of Nazi labour, concentration and extermination camps (often merged together as concentration camps). Under this definition, the Holocaust 'equals' the camps;<sup>22</sup> a slippage which suggests Italian victims might include not only Jews, but also partisan deportees, forced labourers and military internees (and indeed Jewish internees in Fascist camps in Southern Italy up to 1943, or Slovenes in Italian-run camps in

the war, or colonial camp prisoners in Africa). Certainly, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the millions of 'survivors', 'returnees' (*reduci* in Italian), DPs (displaced persons) making their way home across a devastated and chaotic Europe, were something of an indistinguishable mass, alike even in their sheer physical emaciation. Furthermore, if these survivors were visible and mostly similar in appearance, the dead, by contrast—where massive differences in number and degree of suffering lay—were of course invisible.<sup>23</sup>

The consequences of this blurring for Italy, in the postwar months but with shifting balances also for decades thereafter, could hardly be weightier. Around the identity, legacy and moral and ideological valency of those *other* types of 'deportees'—partisans, the conscript army of the Fascist state, forced labourers—traumatic national struggles for memory and identity were played out over the postwar period. This is familiar terrain for historians of modern Italy: the anti-Fascist myth of the Resistance as the founding narrative of postwar Italian democracy; the counter-myth of the 'fall' of Italy in 1943 as 'the death of the nation', the abandonment of the state of its alliances and indeed its legitimacy; and the refraction of each of these through Cold War left-right politics.<sup>24</sup> In other words, talk of the Holocaust—here, deportation to camps of Jews *and others*—circulated at the margins of and in tellingly oblique relation to centrally important, fiercely contested terrains of ideology and memory.

3. A third variant in the definition of the Holocaust points to further blurring between Italian and Holocaust history. A key corrective to the tendency to conceptualise the Holocaust through the site of the concentration camp—the *Lager*, as it has been commonly labelled in Italian—has been to recall the mass, *nonindustrialised* killing of more than a million people, Jews and others, by shootings, gassings in mobile vans and massacres in the Eastern occupied territories after 1941.<sup>25</sup> These operations, carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen*, constitute a central element of the history of the Holocaust not catered for by the category of 'the camp'. Opening up the term to take in this important history challenges certain stereotypical ideas of the Holocaust as uniquely modernised, systematised, bureaucratically controlled, industrial-scale extermination, and moves towards characterising all extreme Nazi (perhaps especially SS) brutality and mass murder as co-extensive with the Holocaust. In the Italian context, this brings into play a highly contentious set of events: the Nazi massacres of Italian civilians in the years of occupation, Resistance and civil war. These so-called *eccidi* took place in now infamous locations such as



Civitella, Marzabotto, Sant'Anna di Stazzema and the Fosse Ardeatine. As repressed memories of these events returned to the surface, especially in the late 20th century, the tortured legacy, the 'divided memory' of the Resistance loomed very large once again, especially in those cases when the Germans were acting, notionally, in retaliation for partisan attacks.<sup>26</sup> Again, discourse related to the Holocaust coincides with discourse around a central wound in the national collective memory, either through analogy with a particular kind of Nazi violence—the cold-blooded murder of local civilians, in Eastern Europe or Italy—or through an even closer entanglement of histories, as at the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, where 75 of the 335 murdered were Jews.<sup>27</sup>

4. A fourth definition of the Holocaust is already in evidence in this last example, and it goes hand-in-hand with the emergence of the idea of the Holocaust as a universal phenomenon, as something like the essence of Nazism, of modern totalitarianism, or indeed of a dark side of modernity itself.<sup>28</sup> Under this conception, once again, Italy is placed in an ambiguous position, since Italian Fascism stands as the principal precursor and model for Nazism and indeed for all modern totalitarianisms (although some would reject this typological affinity precisely because of the apparent absence of race in its core doctrine).<sup>29</sup> So discussion of the Holocaust in Italy morphs into an indirect discussion of the legacy of a generic Fascism, for Italy and the wider world.<sup>30</sup>

Loaded, local issues of memory and history, then, turn on these shifting definitions of the label 'Holocaust': Italy's complicity and victimhood, the nature and morality of violence in both Fascism and the Resistance, the histories and myths of the Resistance and of the nation-state (embodied in its army), myths and realities of 'national character' and individuals' relation to the state, the general legacy of Fascism. And this list omits other key issues that inflect Holocaust talk in Italy in localised ways, such as the role of the Catholic Church, with its highly controversial relations to both Nazi Germany and the Italian state; and the idea of Italy's Europeanness, in the context of a historical understanding of the war and the Holocaust as somehow a 'founding' event for Europe's postwar polity and institutions.<sup>31</sup> Yet each of these definitions is primarily rooted in the horrific specificities of Nazi violence against the Jews and other ethnicities as it emerged as perhaps the single most significant historical phenomenon of the modern age. The semantic field of the term 'Holocaust' points us to the same field of oblique interactions outlined above that will recur and find multiple form in

the events, publications, stories, images, debates, and sites of Holocaust culture in postwar Italy examined in this book.



Part I contains two further chapters. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a single, contemporary and still unresolved case study, the plan for Italy's first national Holocaust museum; its purpose is to suggest how the long-term issues and complexities of Holocaust talk mesh with every single attempt to give it cultural form and engage, from within Italy's cultural field, with the legacy of the Holocaust. If the single case study of Chapter 2 teases out at a micro level several persistent conjunctions in Italian responses to the Holocaust, Chapter 3 takes a macro perspective and attempts to set out a model for the entire field of Holocaust culture in postwar Italy, mapping its various spheres of activity and cultural production, and offering some examples of how these spheres intersect and overlap to give shape and cultural form to Italy's Holocaust.

Having set the parameters from below and above, in Part II the book explores in depth the spectrum of cultural phenomena around which Holocaust responses have clustered or come into focus. Part II is not systematically structured in chronological sequence, but its first and last chapters (4 and 10) frame the rest by focussing on two specific phases, one early and one late, that included defining or watershed moments in the shaping of Holocaust culture and knowledge in Italy. As Chapter 4 shows, the 1940s saw the emergence of the earliest formations of knowledge, images and stories of the genocide, necessarily tentative and incomplete, with an uneven legacy until a first moment of broad cultural dissemination in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In contrast, as Chapter 10 describes, the period stretching from the late 1980s to the early 2000s witnessed an extraordinary late flowering of intense interest in the Holocaust, not only in its own right and for its own sake, but also as a filter for essential debates and doubts about Italy's relationship with its own identity and history.

In between these two framing phases, Chapters 5 through 9 look in turn at a series of orders of cultural phenomena, always with a sense of historical positioning and contextualisation, but focussed as much on the patterns and networks of cultural formation these orders brought with them. So Chapter 5 looks at how a single individual voice of witness—in this case, the Auschwitz survivor and writer Primo Levi—came to shape, or at the very least reflect for a wide tranche of Italians, the warp and weft of Holocaust talk in Italy. Chapter 6 takes a single, but historically

and culturally laden, site of events and of postwar commemoration and representation, the city of Rome. Rome was far from the only important site of Holocaust history and culture in Italy, but one where the threads of complexity in the way it intersected with Italy's national history and culture are woven together with telling vividness. Chapter 7 moves onto the terrain of language and looks at a cluster of material, from high literature to popular song, focussing on the 1950s to the 1970s. It shows a certain loosening of the language of Holocaust talk in the period, as it was adopted by a wide panoply of cultural voices, in part to refer to the historical event but also, crucially, as part of a metaphorical and often highly political source of rhetoric referring to modernity and its evils. Metaphors of the Holocaust permeated the youthful, countercultural arenas characteristic of the period. Chapter 8 is concerned with language also, but here in specific relation to Italy's history and historiography of Fascism, anti-Semitism and the war. The chapter looks at two stock phrases, two stereotypes of national character circulating with particular force in the 1980s and after, used to navigate the tricky moral borderlands around Italian complicity, guilt and innocence, in relation to Fascism, war and the Holocaust. Chapter 9, finally, embeds several of the lines of development of Italy's Holocaust culture into fields of transnational cultural exchange, showing how the processing of cultural knowledge and representation of the Holocaust in any single nation is constantly in negotiation with international and transnational cultural lines and networks.