**Italians and the Holocaust**

***Background***

The classroom lessons *Righteous Italian Heroes*, *Italy and the Holocaust*, along with a lesson on *Primo Levi,* give students amble opportunities to explore this very dark period that also provides glimpses of light, where Italian citizens risked life and limb to protect and rescue their Jewish fellow Italians. To get an appreciation of how 80-85% of Italian Jews were able to survive a vicious assault on European Jewry, students need to at least have a brief overview of what was going on in Italy. The Fascist Italian government ruled Italy since 1922 and allied with the Nazis in Germany in 1938, beginning persecutions of Italian Jews. In 1943, the Fascists were overthrown, leading the German army to invade the peninsula to Cassino, south of Rome. Immediately, the Germans began a ferocious campaign to deport and exterminate all the Italian Jews. Students will see that many Italians who harbored and rescued the Jews from annihilation were members of the Catholic hierarchy, clergy, and religious orders. Of course, many lay Italians also contributed to the protection of Jews; nevertheless, most of the clandestine rescues and asylums had the sanction and even direction from the Vatican or members of the hierarchy. Most of these directions and sanctions were issued verbally to avoid any paper trail the Nazis could follow. To understand what went on in Italy, one must explore the role of the Church, the only institution that had the authority and reach to hold the Fascists and then the Nazis somewhat at bay. Students will see that there are contentious debates about the extent to which the official Church facilitated those protections, asylums, and rescues of Jews. Students should be given the opportunity to explore all research and arrive at their own conclusions.

Historically, Italy’s treatment of its resident Jewish population, though by no means stellar, compares well when juxtaposed with many other European nations. In 1848, the northern Italian Kingdom of Sardinia and Piedmont, under the House of Savoy, emancipated Jews from their confinement in special ghettos. Jews were given civil and political equality with Catholic Italians. They no longer had to hide their ethnic and religious identities in the Savoy kingdom, nor later in the subsequent, descendent Kingdom of Italy.[[1]](#footnote-1) By the time Benito Mussolini (*Il Duce-*the Leader) and the Fascists took control of Italy in 1922, Italian Jews had nearly assimilated into Italian society. Roughly 8% of the Fascist Party was composed of Italian Jews, the same percentage of Jews as in the general Italian population. Jews also participated in the *March on Rome* to take power, and they held high government posts in the Mussolini regime.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Il Duce* had earlier been a Marxist, socialist leader. Marxist socialism, however, promoted internationalism, which Mussolini came to reject. From his experiences fighting for Italy during the First World War, Mussolini changed his worldview from an internationalistic outlook to a more nationalist one. He wanted to promote the Italian nation, its history, and its imperial heritage. He aspired to recreate the ancient Roman Empire, with the Mediterranean Sea as Italy’s national lake. One might infer that *Il Duce* sought a racially pure Italy, but early on that just was not the case. Mussolini exhibited no real interest in the accepted science of the time, eugenics, or any ideology centered on racial superiority based on blood.[[3]](#footnote-3)

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, eugenics was considered a “settled” science in much of the western world. Scientists and researchers in the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany conducted zealous explorations to establish a “scientific” definition for the “superior race.” For example, leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Neville Chamberlain all believed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Germans similarly believed the Teutonic Germans were a bit higher on the evolutionary scale than the Germanic Anglo-Saxons. From the mid-19th century, Englishman Charles Darwin held that Anglo-Saxons were the superior race, but down the road, evolution would produce a new race far superior to the Anglo-Saxons.[[5]](#footnote-5) He later even advocated the elimination of the African and Australian (Aborigines) peoples to protect humanity from possible *contamination* on its evolutionary progression toward the *superior race*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Between the 1922 March on Rome until 1925, Mussolini consolidated power over Italy. The 1922 “March” was not a coup. Italian King Victor Emmanuel III had appointed Mussolini Prime Minister, and Mussolini initially worked within the Italian parliamentary system. By 1925, *Il Duce* eliminated his need for parliamentary or judicial approval. Like Julius Caesar, he declared himself dictator, a title that had not yet the negative connotation it has today. Ancient Romans often used the title for Consuls who had to temporarily take total control of the ancient Roman Republic; whereas, Mussolini, like Caesar, took the title for life.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. “Italy,” *Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of AICE.* <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/italy> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Roman Correspondent, “Fascist Regime is Not Unfriendly to Italian Jews,*” Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (archive), February 21, 1928. <https://www.jta.org/archive/fascist-regime-is-not-unfriendly-to-italian-jews>; Michele Sarfatti (Author), John Tedeschi (Translator), Anne C. Tedeschi (Translator), “The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: From Equality to Persecution” (George L. Mosse Series in the History of European Culture, Sexuality, and Ideas), December 15, 2006, in *Printed Matter - Centro Primo Levi Online Monthly*, March 7, 2009. <https://primolevicenter.org/printed-matter/the-jews-in-mussolinis-italy/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Christopher Hibbert, *Mussolini: The Rise and Fall of Il Duce* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, July 22, 2008). <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780230606050/mussolinitheriseandfallofilduce> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American in the Progressive Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). <https://www.amazon.com/Illiberal-Reformers-Eugenics-Economics-Progressive/dp/0691175861/ref=sr_1_fkmrnull_1?crid=XR0V5P6YJ77T&keywords=illiberal+reformers+leonard&qid=1550535596&s=books&sprefix=illiberal+refor%2Caps%2C375&sr=1-1-fkmrnull>; Kara Goldfarb, checked by John Kuroski, “21 Historical Figures You Didn’t Know Supported the Eugenics Movement,” *All That’s Interesting*, July 19, 2018. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/eugenics-movement#1>; Heather, checked by Jamie Frater, “10 Widely Admired People Who Supported Eugenics,” *List Verse*, July 10, 2015. <https://listverse.com/2015/07/10/10-widely-admired-people-who-supported-eugenics/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Charles Darwin letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker, May 10, 1848. [https://yecheadquarters.org/#](https://yecheadquarters.org/); Leonard. *Illiberal Reformer.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hibbert, *Mussolini.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)