

Italy

Country in southern Europe. By the twentieth century Jews were quite integrated into Italian life, and there was almost no antisemitism in the country.

Benito Mussolini, the leader of the Italian Fascist movement, took control of the Italian government in October 1922 (see also Fascism). Antisemitism was not part of Mussolini's political platform; nonetheless, Italy's Jewish community was nervous about the new regime. Mussolini was quick to assure them that the Fascists were not antisemitic and did not seek to harm the country's Jews. For the next ten years, Mussolini and the Jews enjoyed civil relations. In fact, many Jews even joined the Fascist Party, as they supported Mussolini's national agenda.

After the Nazis rose to power in Germany in 1933, Mussolini spent several years trying to balance his relationship with the West and his support for Adolf Hitler. However, in 1936 Italy moved away from the Western powers and edged towards Germany: that year, Italy joined Germany in the Spanish Civil War, and soon thereafter, Mussolini first used the term "Rome-Berlin Axis" to denote the countries' alliance. That fall, Mussolini initiated an antisemitic press campaign to satisfy Hitler. In September 1938 the Italian government committed itself to the "Axis" by issuing racial anti-Jewish legislation, similar to Germany's Nuremberg Laws. Foreign Jews living in Italy were ordered to leave the country.

Italy officially entered World War II in June 1940. At that point, Mussolini felt compelled to step up his country's anti-Jewish measures. Masses of foreign Jews who had not left the country in 1938 were thrown in prison. In early September the Italian Ministry of the Interior ordered the establishment of 43 camps, where "enemy aliens" (including foreign Jews) and Italian opponents of the Fascist government were to be detained. These camps, although by no means comfortable, were a far cry from the Nazis' concentration camps. In Italy, families were allowed to live together, schools were set up for the children, and there were social and cultural activities for all.

Mussolini was completely dependent on Hitler, both economically and militarily, so he could not afford to stop his program of anti-Jewish persecution within Italy itself (although Mussolini never agreed to deport his country's Jews to extermination camps). However, the Italians asserted their independence by helping those Jews living outside Italy, in Italian-occupied territories, such as in France, Yugoslavia, and Greece. In 1942, after Germany began deporting Jews to the east in earnest, the Italian military began a serious rescue operation throughout the territories it administered. In all, the Italian authorities saved some 40,000 non-Italian Jews.

In early September 1943 the Italians decided to end their participation in the war and make peace with the Allies. Mussolini was overthrown, and the Allies began liberating Italy, starting with the south of the country. At that point, Germany stepped in to reoccupy all the parts of Italy not already taken by the Allies. A government was set up with Mussolini as a puppet ruler, and the Germans as the real power. This signaled the beginning of the Holocaust for the Jews of Italy.

From mid-September 1943 to the end of the war in April 1945, the Germans hunted down Italian Jews; more than 20 percent of the country's Jewish population was imprisoned in jails and concentration camps, and then sent on to extermination camps. From September 1943 to January 1944, 3,110 Jews were deported to Auschwitz. Throughout the rest of 1944, another 4,056 were deported to the east. Another 4,500 Italian Jews living in territories formerly under Italian rule were also deported. An additional 173 Jews were murdered in Italy itself.

In all, some 15 percent of Italy's Jews perished during the Holocaust. The great majority of the country's Jewish population survived with the help of both Italian civilians and the Italian military.