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Review of Elizabeth Schächter, *The Jews of Italy, 1848-1915: Between Tradition and Transformation* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011)

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Comments

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Elizabeth Schächter, *The Jews of Italy, 1848–1915: Between Tradition and Transformation*. London & Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011. Pp. 268. Cloth \$79.95. ISBN 9780853039037.

A well-funded library could fill dozens of bookshelves with monographs on modern French Jewish history, but it would need a fraction of that space to stack the books available on the recent Italian Jewish past. Although Italian readers have more choices than English audiences, even their options are mostly limited to histories of particular Jewish communities or specific organizations. Studies spanning the peninsula's Jewish population as a whole are rare. As a result, sweeping histories of modern Jewish history, such as those by Lloyd Gartner or David Vital, contain few references to Italian Jewry. Elizabeth Schächter is one of several scholars who have recently set out to fill this gap. Her book, *The Jews of Italy 1848–1915: Between Tradition and Transformation*, traces the Italian Jewish community from emancipation until World War I. In this period, Italian Jews transformed from ghettoized subjects of the peninsula's splintered states to free citizens in the nascent Kingdom of Italy.

Five thematic chapters explore this transformation. Schächter begins by showing how select Italian Jewish individuals, mostly well-known male figures of the time, defined their Jewish identity amid pressures to conform to non-Jewish society. These individuals range from Luigi Luzzatti (1841–1927), Italy's only Jewish prime minister, who renounced Judaism at the age of sixteen, to Giorgio Franchetti, president of the Jewish community of Florence and inaugurator of its beautiful

new synagogue in 1882. Next, Schächter traces the development of the Italian Jewish community structure. She shows that in the wake of the unification of Italy (1848–1870), Italian Jews worked on establishing a centralized representative body, much as French Jews had done in the early nineteenth century. Although it took until World War I to establish a consortium of Italian Jewish communities, in the meantime each community oversaw the education and welfare of its members. Another chapter examines Italian anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Catholic newspapers popularized the age-old charge of ritual murder, while Italian nationalists alleged international Jewish conspiracies. A worried Italian Jewish press responded by recording and protesting such accusations. The book concludes with two chapters on the birth of Italian Zionism at the start of the twentieth century. Rethinking what it meant to be Jewish, some Italian Jews supported Theodore Herzl's political ambitions, others aspired to find a philanthropic solution for the persecuted Jews of Eastern Europe, and still others debated the meaning of Jewish culture in conferences and periodicals.

The Jews of Italy makes a significant contribution to the field by situating Italian Jewish history in its European context. Throughout the book, Schächter compares Italian Jewish history to parallel developments in the rest of Europe, countering the prevalent notion that Italian Jewry was somehow unique. By comparing Italy's anti-Jewish prejudice to Austrian and German anti-Semitism, for instance, Schächter challenges the widespread myth that Italy was free of anti-Jewish prejudice before Fascism. Similarly, Schächter highlights the European context of Italian Zionism, and shows the influence of Eastern European Zionists in the peninsula. Her comparisons also throw light on how Italian Jewish history *did* differ substantially from German or French Jewish history, such as in the absence of a large immigration of Eastern European Jews to Italy.

This book advances our knowledge of Italian Jewish history in the modern period, but there is still much to uncover. Schächter's question is clear enough, namely, how did Italian Jews respond to emancipation? The answer, however, is harder to pinpoint. Schächter focuses on only a small part of Italian Jewry. She gives pride of place to Jewish organizations, male leaders, and especially Italian Zionists, even though they made up only a small minority of Italian Jews in the period under study. The Italian Jewish rank and file, especially women and children, receive less attention. Readers will find only snippets of information on Italian Jewish family life, daily interactions between Jews and non-Jews, Italian Jewish religiosity, or the effects of socioeconomic status on Italian Jewish identity. Still, Schächter shows that Italian Jews had varying experiences of emancipation. In evoking this rich diversity, she charts a path for continued research.

Schächter's comparative angle is a welcome contribution to the field. Thanks to her research, and that of other scholars currently working in the field of Italian Jewish history, libraries will soon need to look into purchasing new bookshelves.

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