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[Klein on Levis Sullam, 'The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy'](#)

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Simon Levis Sullam. *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 208 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-17905-6.

Reviewed by Shira Klein (Chapman University) **Published on** H-Judaic (June, 2019) **Commissioned by** Barbara Krawcowicz (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54172>

The book *Italian Executioners* draws attention to Italy's culpability in hunting down Jews during World War II. Simon Levis Sullam, professor of history at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, traces the two crucial years in the genocide of the Jews of Italy, 1943 to 1945. He demonstrates that during this time, Mussolini's Republic of Salo' carried out a relentless and efficient manhunt, delivering Jews to the Germans and seizing their property. With this argument, Levis Sullam dissipates a prevalent myth, the idea that Italians mostly saved Jews and bore no responsibility for their suffering and murder. Although Germans held the military power in the Republic of Salo', the Italians remained independent in their control over the police, who carried out the roundups of the Jews.

This book comprises nine short chapters that trace Italians' role in persecuting Jews in the peninsula. Chapter 1 examines the context of anti-Semitism in Italy, focusing on vocal anti-Semitic ideologues such as Giovanni Preziosi, director of Italy's General Inspectorate of Race, who wrote in 1943, "The first task to be tackled is ... the total elimination of the Jews" (p. 16). Chapters 2 and 3 survey the complicity of police, civil authorities, and ordinary Italians acting as informers, without which the extermination of Italian Jews would not have reached the scale it did. Rounding up Jews involved the entire gamut of Italian authorities, including low- and mid-level officials. In Rome, for example, a local police commissioner personally searched for a six-year old child, Emma Calo', who had been hidden by the concierge of her building after her parents' arrest. He hunted her down tirelessly and finally arrested her, tearing her away from the concierge's skirts. She died in Auschwitz two months later (p. 30). Instances abounded of civilians informing on Jews. One woman in Livorno turned two Jewish acquaintances over to the police, explaining that she was helping the "campaign against the Jews who are ruining the world" (p. 66). Chapter 4 traces the seizure of Jewish property. Italian authorities confiscated anything and everything owned by Jews, from villas to cars, from grand pianos to socks. EGELI, the agency charged with seizing and selling the property, was supposed to allocate the revenues to assisting the poor. In fact, Levis Sullam shows, many objects were not sold at all; more often, they ended up in the homes of Fascist Party officials or policemen. Chapters 5 through 8 examine cases of Jews being deported from, respectively, Venice, Florence, the Italian-Swiss border, and Brescia. In all these places, Italian arrests and betrayals led to Jews' incarceration and later deportation to Auschwitz.

Chapter 9 reveals an especially fascinating, and hardly studied, phenomenon in wartime Italy, that of Jews who informed on their coreligionists. Take the story of Mauro Grini, a Jewish man from Trieste

who left for Venice in 1944. Settling in a hotel near the train station, Grini took it upon himself to hunt down Jews from his home city who had fled south to where they hoped nobody would recognize them. Grini methodically searched Venetian hotels, cross-checking guest registers with lists he received from the police. He lurked in back alleys and walked up and down train carriages, betraying fellow Jews to the Italian authorities, who delivered them to the Germans. He did the same in Trieste, Brescia, and Milan, where he was said to catch an average of two Jews a day and to earn seven thousand lire for every Jew he helped arrest (p. 120). The reader is left wondering about motives. Why did Grini turn against his brethren? For financial gain? Because he believed it would save him? (It didn't; he was most likely killed at San Sabba, by the Germans). Levis Sullam suggests no explanations, perhaps because the sources don't reveal them. Still, reconstructing Grini's story—which Levis Sullam does with the help of police records and court proceedings—sheds light on a painful, and therefore barely studied, chapter of World War II.

Although Italians played a key role in perpetrating the Holocaust, Levis Sullam shows in his conclusion that they later cultivated a culture of amnesia and denial. In the postwar years, government officials publicized exaggerated claims about Italy's saving of Jews and downplayed their country's responsibility in sending Jews to their death. In the postwar period, perpetrators served minimal prison sentences for their crimes against Jews, and sometimes none at all. Often, officials involved in hunting down Jews went on to enjoy sparkling careers. In one astonishing case, the very same person who had supervised the seizure of Jewish property in Venice, Mario Cortellini, not only walked free after the war; he also headed the postwar office in charge of returning that property to Jewish survivors (p. 141). These acquittals helped bolster the belief that Italians had done no wrong, that it had been only the Germans who had persecuted Jews in World War II. Levis Sullam demonstrates that even today, in public commemorations of the Holocaust, Italians rarely acknowledge the role their ancestors played as, to use the book's title, "Italian executioners."

While it makes worthy points, the book's weakness is its lack of original research; most chapters synthesize the works of other scholars, rather than uncover new archival material (chapter 6, for example, relies entirely on one study, Marta Baiardi's "Persecuzioni antiebraiche a Firenze," in Enzo Collotti's 2007 anthology *Ebrei in Toscana tra occupazione tedesca e RSI*). Levis Sullam's contribution is therefore a limited one. As he himself acknowledges, scholars before him have already challenged the "Myth of the Good Italian." Historians like Michele Sarfatti (*The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, 2007) and Liliana Picciotto (various essays) revealed the gravity of Italy's persecutory measures, and scholars like Guri Schwarz (*After Mussolini: Jewish Life and Jewish Memories in Post-Fascist Italy*, 2012) and Rebecca Clifford (*Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy*, 2013) traced the history of Italy's self-acquittal. Thus, Levis Sullam's book ends up echoing recent scholarship rather than substantially expanding it.

Despite its shortcomings, however, this is an important work. This may be the first time an Anglophone readership is exposed to such brutal examples of Italian anti-Semitism as the transmission in late November 1943 by Radio Roma asking that "the Jews be burnt, one by one, and their ashes scattered in the wind" (p. 60). Moreover, where Sullam does conduct original research—namely, in his work on arrests in Venice (chapter 5) and in his recounting of Jewish informers (chapter 9)—the reader will find meaty scholarship. Finally, the book is wonderfully readable, written in an accessible style. The shortness of its chapters makes it easy reading, as does Levis Sullam's knack of condensing elaborate data into concise text. Therefore, it will be an excellent

book to assign to students (although it will best be paired with a survey text providing some basic facts on how World War II unfolded in Italy). This is a significant accomplishment, since the field of Italian Jewish studies has few engaging texts in English.

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