Alleanza Nazionale and the Legacy of Fascist Anti-Semitism in Italy

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Abstract: This article examines the process that led Alleanza Nazionale to openly reject anti-Semitism. An Italian conservative party that was formally established in 1995, Alleanza Nazionale was a key component of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s cabinets before merging with the premier-led Forza Italia party in 2009 so as to give birth to Il Popolo della Libertà. Throughout its existence Alleanza Nazionale had to struggle with the legacy of the Fascist dictatorship, as the party was heir to the neo-Fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano and such disgraceful roots questioned its legitimacy to rule the country. Anti-Semitism was obviously the most serious liability of the Fascist past. Therefore, the leader of Alleanza Nazionale, Gianfranco Fini, made a point of distancing himself and his party from that troubling political inheritance. Fini’s campaign included a public apology to Jews for the 1938 Fascist anti-Semitic decrees in 2002 and the stigmatization of such measures as “infamous” during a 2003 visit to Israel. Although Fini’s moderate turn met with strong criticism within the radical Right, his denunciations of anti-Semitism were not without ambiguities. Consequently, Fini managed to win the electoral benefits of his political operation, but his strategy did not necessarily mark the demise of Italy’s anti-Semitic undercurrents.
Introduction

Contrary to previous interpretations stressing the Italians’ alleged imperviousness to anti-Semitism especially under the Fascist regime and at the time of the Nazi occupation of their country during World War II, in the last few years studies have highlighted the anti-Jewish attitudes emerging from Italian history since the unification of the peninsula, have placed it within a Juadeophobic cultural tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, and have argued that a few Italians did take an active part both in the discrimination and persecution of Jews in the late 1930s and in their deportation to death camps at wartime (Feinstein 2005; Zimmerman 2005; Pavan 2006; Matard-Bonucci 2008; Dell’Era et al. 2009; Pavan and Pelini 2009; Visani 2009). While research has addressed primarily the years of the Fascist dictatorship, the postwar decades have received little attention even in the case of Right-wing parties and movements, namely the segments of the political spectrum that were most likely to nurture anti-Jewish feelings and claims. For example, in an investigation into the echo of Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism within Italy’s radical Right, Francesco Germinario (2001a) has not addressed their reception by political movements and has confined his analysis to the thought of a handful of intellectuals who had a negligible influence among their comrades by his own admission. The only systematic and extensive inquiry into the position of Italy’s radical Right toward Jews in the second half of the twentieth century has suggested that anti-Semitism was a marginal, underground, and embarrassing phenomenon that few dared to show in broad daylight (Rossi 2003). As such, this volume has made an additional contribution to what historian David Bidussa (1994, pp. 57-81) has called the myth of the “good Italian,” the idea that there is hardly any room for anti-Jewish sentiments in the hearts of the Italian people.
This article intends to help fill the above-mentioned gap in scholarship about postwar anti-Semitism in Italy. It reconstructs the ideological trajectory that eventually led the latest and most representative epigone of the radical Right at the turn of the third millennium to condemn anti-Semitism. It focuses on Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) – a party that resulted from the 1995 dissolution of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement), which was in turn the postwar political heir to the Fascist Party – and examines how it coped with the most vicious legacy of fascism. Specifically, this study analyzes the political reasons for the disavowal of anti-Semitism on the part of Alleanza Nazionale, stressing a post-Fascist strategy that aimed at winning legitimization for the party in Italian politics. It also points to a few qualifications and ambiguities in the stand of Alleanza Nazionale that may have somehow limited the significance of its political turn.

Fascist Anti-Semitism and Postwar Developments

Anti-Semitism was a key feature of the Italian Fascist regime even before the enactment of the 1938 racial legislation. Although the early Fascist movement enjoyed the support of a few Jews, research by Michele Sarfatti has revealed that dictator Benito Mussolini elaborated his initial plans to protect the “Italian race” as early as 1927, paving the way for the subsequent 1938 anti-Jewish measures (Sarfatti 2006). Furthermore, in the eyes of the Duce’s henchmen, Jewry had become a synonym for anti-Fascism by December 1933. At that time, the police discovered that Jews made up the bulk of the members of Giustizia e Libertà, a Turin-based prominent group of Mussolini’s opponents (Blatt 1995; Nemeth 2002).

Anti-Jewish persecution, however, reached a climax after the demise of the Fascist regime on July 25, 1943, and Italy’s subsequent armistice with the Allies on September 8, 1943.
The Nazis invaded the northern and central regions of the country, and created a puppet government – the Italian Social Republic – under Mussolini’s nominal rule. This new Fascist state was instrumental in carrying out the Shoah in Italy under the German occupation between September 1943 and April 1945 (Mayda 1978). As Liliana Picciotto Fargion has demonstrated, at least 27 percent of the Jews who were deported from Italy and the Dodecanese islands after the establishment of the Social Republic had been arrested by Fascist Italians alone and another 4 percent by Fascist Italians with the help of Germans (Fargion 1991, pp. 30, 823-35). Actually, Sarfatti has concluded that the Italian Social Republic reached an agreement with the Nazi regime to the effect that Mussolini’s stalwarts committed themselves to hand over the Jews they had captured to the German troops operating in Italy for deportation to death camps (Sarfatti 2005, pp. 107-8).

In response to the hatred toward Jews that Mussolini had inspired and promoted while in power, the Movimento Sociale Italiano became a receptacle for many Italian anti-Semites in the postwar years. Giorgio Almirante was the head of this neo-Fascist party from its establishment in 1946 to 1950 and again between 1969 and 1987, when he retired a few months before dying (Cannistraro 1982; Setta 2002). He had previously been the assistant editor of La Difesa della Razza (the defense of the race), the most vicious anti-Semitic magazine during Mussolini’s regime besides working for Il Tevere (the Tiber), a similarly rabid anti-Jewish newspaper (Gillette 2002, p. 79; Cassata 2008; Servi 2005, pp. 116, 151; Michaelis 1998).

Writing about Almirante’s political activities after World War II, historian Richard R.J. Bosworth has contended that “there can be little doubt that he encouraged such unreconstructed philosophers of neo-fascism as Pino Rauti and Julius Evola, the latter once his colleague on La Difesa della Razza” (Bosworth 2002, p. 422). Nonetheless, Almirante was most cautious on
ignominious issues such as anti-Semitism and usually operated behind the scenes. The Movimento Sociale Italiano never openly acknowledged its anti-Semitic orientation (Rossi 2003). Almirante himself took pride in circulating the rumor that he had saved a Jewish friend of his from the death camps by hiding him in the guest quarters of the Ministry of Popular Culture while he was serving as the chief of staff to Mussolini’s propaganda head Fernando Mezzasoma in the last few months of the Italian Social Republic (Almirante 1974, p. 133). After succeeding Arturo Michelini as secretary general of the Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1969, Almirante endeavored to make his party come out of a political ghetto and to offer Italian conservative voters a less nostalgic and more modern party that pursued primarily anti-Communist goals. Since the early postwar years such a cohort of the Italian society had been deluding itself into believing that Mussolini had been a benign dictator who had never enforced his own anti-Semitic measures and that Italian Jews had not been persecuted until the Nazi’s 1943 partial occupation of the country (Baldassini 2008, pp. 40-43). Against this backdrop, blatant and overt anti-Semitism would have been incompatible with Almirante’s search for respectability within a strategy that culminated in 1972, when the Movimento Sociale Italiano polled roughly three million votes and elected fifty-six deputies and twenty-three senators to the Parliament (Ignazi 1994a, pp. 177-78).

The relationship between Almirante himself and Evola offers an illuminating example of the ambiguous attitude of the Italian Right toward anti-Semitism after the end of World War II. In the late 1930s, Almirante and Evola entered a sort of ideological competition to determine who was more anti-Semite. The former drew upon a biological interpretation of the alleged superiority of the so-called Aryan race. The latter made the case for the supposed spiritual inferiority of Jews (Germinario 2001b; Chiantera-Stutte 2001, pp. 226-36; Gregor 2005, pp. 195-
In the post-war years, however, the Movimento Sociale Italiano marginalized Evola in the effort to downplay its own anti-Semitic bending in the eyes of the broader Italian society. Evola’s popularity with Italy’s radical Right was confined primarily to the radical membership of Ordine Nuovo (New Order), an extra-parliamentarian and neo-Fascist movement – established by Rauti in 1954 – that lived a semi-clandestine existence before going underground when it was outlawed in 1973 (Ferraresi 1996, pp. 52-63).

Racial issues were not a primary concern to Mussolini’s political “orphans” (Carioti 2008). Furthermore, during a 1967 political debate on television, in which the matter of Fascist anti-Semitism was brought up, Almirante himself stated that he had “no trouble” in rejecting racism. On a similar occasion, in 1988, the new secretary general of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, Gianfranco Fini, affirmed that he was not racist nor was his party (Rossi 2003, pp. 96-97, 104-5).

The Search for Political Legitimization and the Rejection of Anti-Semitism

It was only in the mid 1990s that the retreat of the Italian radical Right from anti-Semitism gained momentum. In the wake of a wave of corruption-related criminal investigations and scandals that swept away Italy’s political establishment at the beginning of the decade but did not touch Mussolini’s heirs because of their virtual exclusion from the party system, the Movimento Sociale Italiano increased its votes in the parliamentary elections from 5.6 percent in 1992 to 13.5 percent two years later and lived a short experience as a component of the center-right coalition government – led by Silvio Berlusconi – that briefly ruled Italy from March to December 1994 (Sani 1995, p. 57). It was the first time that members of the Movimento Sociale Italiano became part of an Italian cabinet after nearly half a century in the political wilderness
since its establishment in December 1946 (Ignazi 1989; Chiarini 1991; Tarchi 1993). The one and short-lived exception to such marginalization occurred between March and July of 1960, when the votes of the Movimento Sociale Italiano enabled Christian Democrat Premier Fernando Tambroni to form his government and stay in power for a few months, although no member of the party served in his cabinet (Radi 1990).

The 1994 entry of the Movimento Sociale Italiano into the government was a major achievement on which further accomplishments could be built in the near future providing that the party most Italians still identified with fascism revealed a less extremist face (Scoppola 1997, pp. 516-19). Therefore, in January 1995, the Movimento Sociale Italiano dissolved itself to give birth to a more reputable political party by the name of Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) that planned to operate along Gaulliste lines. At the very beginning, Alleanza Nazionale was nothing more than an umbrella coalition of right-wing parties that the Movimento Sociale Italiano had promoted and monopolized on the occasion of Italy’s 1994 parliamentary elections. However, in January 1995, after the Berlusconi government had resigned, Alleanza Nazionale turned into the successor party of the Movimento Sociale Italiano itself (Ignazi 1994b; Campi 1995; Tarchi 1997; Nello 1998, pp. 55-69).

The platform of Alleanza Nazionale emphasized nationalistic values, but made a point of severing ties to its Fascist roots. In particular, it included the “explicit condemnation of [...] all forms of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism even if disguised as anti-Zionistic propaganda or as polemics against Israel” (Alleanza Nazionale 1995). Therefore, besides disavowing anti-Semitism, the program of the party also rejected anti-Zionism, which had similarly been a related component of the ideology of the radical Right (Chiarini 2006). Furthermore, the blueprint proclaimed that Alleanza Nazionale intended to ban “any prejudice paving the way for anti-
Semitic intolerance, which has been the cultural means for pogroms and the *Shoah* over the centuries” (Alleanza Nazionale 1995).

This initial break with the Fascist past of the Italian Right contributed to a first wave of secessionists from the ranks of Alleanza Nazionale. Under the guidance of former secretary general of the Movimento Sociale Italiano Pino Rauti, a radical wing of Fascist nostalgics refused to join the new party and founded an organization of their own, the Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore (Three-Colored Flame Social Movement). This latter received 0.9 percent of votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 2.3 percent for the Senate in Italy’s subsequent 1996 parliamentary elections (Bufacchi and Burgess 2001, pp. 235-36).

Rauti’s defection might have contributed to corroborating the new moderate image of the heirs to the Movimento Sociale Italiano. Yet those who joined Alleanza Nazionale included politicians such as Senator Pasquale Squitieri, who did not refrain from stating that the Protocols of the Elders of Zion were a genuine document (Gallagher 2000, p. 78).

The leader of Alleanza Nazionale – Gianfranco Fini, the secretary general of the Movimento Sociale Italiano at the time of its self-dissolution and Almirante’s heir designated (Locatelli and Martini 1994, pp. 97-102) – further distanced himself and his party from their troubling Fascist anti-Semitic legacy through gestures of goodwill toward Jews. This approach was part of a broader make-up operation that aimed at winning legitimacy for the moderate turn of his own party in the eyes of both Italian voters and Italy’s partners in the European Union. Fini’s purpose was to show off that the policy of the Italian Right was oriented toward the center and was no longer synonymous with Fascist nostalgia (Carioti 1996). This operation implied not only an outspoken repudiation of anti-Semitism but also the reversal of the xenophobic policies that had theretofore characterized the nationalistic approach of the Movimento Sociale Italiano.
In autumn of 2003, for instance, Fini came out for a reform of the electoral rules to the effect that unnaturalized immigrants would be granted the right to vote in the elections for local offices (Donovan 2004, p. 117). His statement overturned the previously xenophobic stand of Alleanza Nazionale (Wal 2000).

In hindsight, the presence of post-Fascist members in the cabinet had been a major source of embarrassment for the first Berlusconi government at international summits, where foreign ministers even refused to shake hands with their Italian counterparts who belonged to the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Caprettini 1995, pp. 102-3; Tarchi 1996, p. 181; Bufacchi and Burgess 2001, pp. 194-95; Romano 2002, pp. 5-6). In addition, Fini endeavored to position himself as Berlusconi’s most likely successor as the undisputed leader of Italy’s center-right coalition in case Berlusconi’s legal problems forced him out of the political arena (“Sondaggio” 2005; Lane 2004).

In his quest for political respectability, Fini took a number of gradual steps toward the denunciation of the persecution of Jews. In December 1993, he went to pay homage to the Ardeatine Caves, a labyrinth of catacombs used by the early Christians outside Rome, where the Nazis had massacred 335 people on March 24, 1944, in retaliation for the killing of thirty-three soldiers of the SS police by Italian partisans one day earlier (Manno 1993). In this case, however, Fini’s stand against anti-Semitism was vague, to say the least. Indeed, seventy-five Jews – including Mussolini’s former deputy minister of the Interiors Aldo Finzi – fell victims to the Nazi fury (Katz 1967; Portelli 2003; Carafoli and Bocchini Padiglione 2004). But the mass execution was not motivated by anti-Jewish feelings. In addition, though dramatic, this episode paled in comparison with the roundup and deportation to Auschwitz of 1,023 Jews of the Roman
ghetto the previous October. Only seventeen of them survived (Katz 1969; Zuccotti 2000, pp. 155-56).

The following year, in a book-length interview with conservative journalist Paolo Francia, Fini called the Fascist 1938 racial legislation “a tragic mistake” (Francia 1994, p. 142). But he carefully avoided any reference to the anti-Semitic purpose of such measures as if he intended to buy at face value the early Fascist rationale that those measures targeted non-Aryan people in general, including primarily individuals of color in Italy’s African empire, and were not tailor-made for Jews (Casali 1996, pp. 12-13).

Fini’s actions were more trenchant a few years later. He visited Auschwitz in February 1999 and the Risiera di San Sabha, Italy’s one death camp at wartime (Fogar 1995), in June of the subsequent year. However, he made no effort at all to link the Shoah to nazism and fascism while he was in Auschwitz (Longo 1999). Moreover, on his way back from the Risiera di San Sabha, Fini also visited the nearby foiba in the area around the village of Bassovizza (“Fini, la prima volta” 2000). There, as in other foibe, at the end of World War II, Yugoslavian Communist partisans had massacred several thousand Italians who had allegedly supported the Fascist regime by shooting them or precipitating them in natural depressions of the limestone plateau in the Carso area (Pupo and Spazzali 2003). Italy’s Right had overemphasized the foibe, the Italian word to call such depressions, as an example of Communist war crimes targeting a national minority and verging on genocide, while the Left had tended to dismiss such events as lesser phenomena in comparison to the mass murder of Jews. Following the political conflict over the memory of San Sabha and the foibe (Sluga 1996), Fini’s pilgrimage to Bassovizza was an implicit attempt at questioning the uniqueness of the Holocaust and at suggesting that the Communist atrocities were the morale equivalent of the Shoah. It seemed as if pointing to other
war crimes to which Mussolini’s supporters and supposedly Fascists had fallen victims might cut down to size the responsibility for the extermination of Jews.

Indeed, in the following years, the Alleanza Nazionale members of the Italian Parliament successfully struggled to have Italy proclaim an official day in commemoration of the victims of the foibe (10 February) within two weeks from the Remembrance Day for the Shoah (27 January). It was first observed among political controversies in 2005 (“Memoria e polemiche” 2005; “Foibe” 2005). In addition, twenty-four hours after the 2005 Holocaust Memorial Day, Alleanza Nazionale staged an event that was devoted to the victims of the foibe and preceded the beginning of the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of its own foundation (Latella 2005).

The turning point in Fini’s handling of the issue of anti-Semitism was a 2002 interview to Tel Aviv’s daily Ha’aretz. It followed the return of Alleanza Nazionale to power after Berlusconi’s center-right coalition won the 2001 parliamentary elections and the appointment of Fini to the position of deputy prime minister. In that interview, the leader of Alleanza Nazionale apologized to Jews for Italy’s 1938 anti-Semitic legislation. Significantly, however, Fini maintained that “the Italians bear responsibility for what happened after 1938, after the racist laws were enacted.” Fini also made a point of explaining that he meant “a national responsibility, not a personal one” (as quoted in Primor 2002). His particular wordings seemed to denote an effort to conceal the specific guilt of Mussolini and the Fascist regime for the passing and enforcement of the racial measures by referring to an allegedly broader anti-Jewish attitude of the Italian people (Salvadori 2002; La Spina 2002; Salvia 2002).

Such qualifications were eventually dropped a year later, when Fini’s strategy came to a climax. While visiting Israel in November 2003 in what was the crowning of the legitimization process for his own party, the leader of Alleanza Nazionale stated that Mussolini’s racial
measures were “infamous” and spoke of an “absolute evil” with an unclear reference to either the Duce’s regime as a whole or the part fascism played in the discrimination and extermination of Italian Jews (Stabile 2003). Fini’s latter definition, in particular, won praise even from Jews as a demonstration that Alleanza Nazionale had definitively broken with its Fascist past. Amos Luzzato – the president of the Jewish communities in Italy – specifically commended Fini because “for the first time [he had] mentioned fascism and linked it to the infamy of the racial laws” (Cangini 2003a; Casadio 2003). Conversely, one year earlier, Luzzato had remarked that Fini’s plea for Jews’ forgiveness was not enough because it did not include a political evaluation of the role of the Fascist regime (Galluzzo 2002; Luzzatto 2002). Even Shimon Peres, the former Israeli premier and minister for Foreign Affairs, concluded in 2003 that Fini and Alleanza Nazionale had taken “the road of democracy” by coming out against Fascist anti-Semitism (Rosaspina 2003).

The Response of Rightist Diehards

Notwithstanding praises from outsiders, Fini met with strong criticism within his own party. Mirko Tremaglia, a serviceman at the time of Mussolini’s Social Republic and the head of the Ministry for the Italians in the World in Berlusconi’s cabinet, lashed out at turncoats, a category that presumably included Fini himself. In his paradoxical views, those Italians who did nothing to save Jews were not Mussolini’s henchmen like himself but people such as Aldo Moro, Paolo Emilio Taviani, Giulio Andreotti, and Amintore Fanfani, all prominent statesmen and leaders of the Christian Democratic Party in the postwar years, who – according to Tremaglia – had been supporters of fascism under the Duce’s regime (Scalabrin 2003). With reference to Fini’s words, another former fighter in the army of the Italian Social Republic during World War
II bitterly but anonymously complained in undoubtedly anti-Semitic overtones that “our blood [...] is sold off in synagogues” (De Gregorio 2003a).

Francesco Storace – one of the leaders of Destra Sociale (Social Right), the populist wing of Alleanza Nazionale – threatened to spearhead a rebellion within the party ranks but temporarily patched it up with Fini and remained in the party for four additional years (Cangini 2003b). Alessandra Mussolini, a member of the Italian Parliament and the Duce’s granddaughter, did resign from Alleanza Nazionale. She joined the Independent Caucus in Italy’s legislative assembly and subsequently established a party of her own by the name of Libertà di Azione (Freedom of Action) (Longo 2003; Jerkov 2003). The following June, standing for the European Parliament on the ticket of Alternativa Sociale (Social Alternative), an umbrella coalition of extreme right parties, Alessandra Mussolini was elected with 39,385 votes (Ministry of the Interior 2004). Her farewell to her former comrades in Alleanza Nazionale was the prediction that Fini would have all of them circumcised to ingratiate himself with the Israeli government (Mussolini 2003).

However, whether or not they eventually left Alleanza Nazionale, almost all the dissenters censured less Fini’s admission of responsibility for the persecution of Jews under Mussolini’s regime than his outspoken condemnation of the Italian Social Republic. After all, Storace himself had previously visited the Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. It seemed as if coming out against anti-Semitism was appropriate in their views providing that fascism did not become the target of the barbs of criticism. As Storace ironically contended, he did not want to turn into an anti-Fascist (Cangini 2003c). After eventually leaving Alleanza Nazionale and establishing his own party, La Destra (The Right), in 2007, Storace stated at the first national convention that “no coalition can ever ask us to enter a travel agency and purchase
a ticket to fly to Jerusalem to curse fascism” (Fasanella and Grippo 2009, p. 51). Once more, the defense of Mussolini’s regime was Storace’s priority and anti-Semitism did not seem to be worth any remark.

It may have been just a coincidence that, two days after Fini made his 2003 speech in Israel, a wall of the headquarters of the Rai – Italy’s state-owned broadcasting corporation – was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti that “accused” the editor of the Channel One news program, Clemente Mimun, of “being a Jew” (Michilli 2003). In any case, the weekend following Fini’s visit to Israel, Italian soccer stadiums offered a visual, though impressionistic, response to his statement. In Turin, soccer fans raised a banner reading “Fini traitor of Italy.” In Rome, another banner compared the leader of Alleanza Nazionale with Pietro Badoglio, the marshal who replaced Mussolini as Italy’s prime minister on July 25, 1943, following a palace coup against the *Duce*, subsequently signed the armistice with the Allies, and eventually declared war on Nazi Germany. The joke circulating among rightist soccer fans was that Fini intended to challenge Ariel Sharon in the election campaign for premier of Israel. Of course, not all the opponents of Fini’s turn were members or voters of Alleanza Nazionale. For instance, the banner in Turin bore the signature of the ultra-rightist movement Forza Nuova (New Force) (De Marchis 2003).

Yet a few figures are available to evaluate dissent within Alleanza Nazionale in less impressionistic terms. An opinion poll taken as soon as Fini went back to Italy from Israel provided some quantitative data about the impact of his disavowal of Fascist anti-Semitism. Only 75 percent of the likely voters of Alleanza Nazionale thought that Fini’s condemnation of the Fascist racial laws was appropriate. A quarter of the potential electorate of the party criticized it. The percentages were 80 percent and 20 percent respectively among the members of the party (Mannheimer 2003).
Furthermore not even Alessandra Mussolini’s secession managed to eradicate revisionist temptations from the ranks of Alleanza Nazionale. This phenomenon does not necessary imply an identity between Fascist nostalgists and anti-Semites in the party membership, although these two cohorts may in part overlap. In any case, in their attachment to the Duce’s legacy, many present-day Fascist hardliners take at face value historian Renzo De Felice’s exculpatory and outdated interpretation according to which Mussolini’s regime did not persecute Jews but confined itself to discriminating against them, was a lax enforcer of its own racial legislation, and even endeavored to shield Jews from the Nazi ferocity (De Felice 2001).

A subsequent episode offers a case in point. On January 24, 2005, back from a visit to the Yad Vashem, a lesser leader of Alleanza Nazionale and a former member of the Italian Parliament – Domenico Gramazio – contended that “the Italian Right was not responsible for the mass extermination of Jew.” As for the racial legislation of 1938, he specifically added that Germany coerced Mussolini’s regime into passing such laws and that Fascist Italy as a whole in fact disagreed about their anti-Semitic contents to such extent that she helped Jews (“Gramazio, An” 2005). Gramazio’s words stirred up a hornet’s nest (Red 2005). Besides reiterating De Felice’s above-mentioned obsolete differentiation in the Fascist attitude toward Jews as opposed to Nazi behavior, Gramazio’s statement was most untimely. It was not only an insult against Jews three days before the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. It was also a source of embarrassment to Alleanza Nazionale as the party was about to celebrate the tenth anniversary of its foundation in less than a week (Jerkov 2005b).

Yet the leadership of Alleanza Nazionale was rather slow in addressing this controversy. It was only three days later that the party posted on its website passages from a letter that Gramazio had sent to Riccardo Di Segni, the chief rabbi in Rome, in which he maintained that
his own words had been misinterpreted (“Shoah” 2005). Even more notably, however, was Fini’s reaction. In spite of heavy criticism from the Jewish community in Rome for his silence (“Gramazio, gli ebrei” 2005), it took forty-eight hours for him to come out publicly and criticize the contents of Gramazio’s statement. Within the much broader framework of a television interview about the first decade in the political life of Alleanza Nazionale, Fini eventually declared that “those who downplay the role of the 1938 racial laws in the extermination of Jews should only feel ashamed.” It was an obvious reprimand of Gramazio (“Fini: Sì al partito” 2005). But, remarkably, it was also an indirect rebuff because Fini never mentioned Gramazio’s name throughout the interview (“Fini: ‘si vergogni’” 2005). A similar attitude characterized Francesco Storace, the president of the Latium region, who had nominated Gramazio to the position of chairperson of the regional agency for public health in his own administration. Storace forced Gramazio to retreat and to write to the chief rabbi in Rome. Yet, when he was asked to dismiss Gramazio from his appointive job, Storace retorted that he could not address all the requests coming from the opposition parties within the regional assembly of Latium (Zuccolini 2005).

Even progressive historian Paul Ginsborg bestowed praise on Fini for the turn against anti-Semitism of Alleanza Nazionale. As he put it, “for someone who less than ten years earlier had called Mussolini ‘the greatest statesman of the twentieth century’ this was progress indeed. It was also in very marked contrast [...] to Berlusconi’s grasping of every occasion to minimize the defects of the regime” (Ginsborg 2004, p. 181).

Yet this citation clearly reveals that Ginsborg was interested less in commending Fini than in censuring Berlusconi by a comparison between the political strategies of these two party leaders. Despite Ginsborg’s academic standing, his eulogy of Fini was not the result of a scholarly assessment but an indirect means to reprimand Berlusconi. Indeed, an evaluation of the
rejection of anti-Semitism by Alleanza Nazionale implies deeper considerations than Ginsborg’s hasty judgment.

On the 2005 Holocaust Memorial Day, a court in Cagliari had a book by Pietro Melis seized throughout Italy on the grounds that this volume contained “anti-Semitic ideas” and “fomented racial hatred.” An obscure professor of philosophy at the University of Cagliari, Melis wrote among other things that “being anti-Semite against devout Jews is legitimate and we cannot regret that they ended up in the Nazi gas chambers,” according to newspaper reports (Luesu 2005; Pinna 2005, to which the quotations also refer).

Notwithstanding the extremist language of his text, Melis was not an isolated case in Italy. According to a poll taken in December 2004, 31 percent of the Italian people maintained that Jews should give up playing the victims of events that had happened sixty years ago and another 12 percent even thought that the Holocaust had never occurred. This latter figure meant a significant increase over the 8 percent who had contended that the Shoah was a forgery just one year earlier. Additional data pointed to the existence of anti-Semitic prejudices and bias among Italians. For instance, 42 percent believed that Jews “have a special relationship with money” and 16 percent assumed that Judaism is intolerant (Mannheimer 2005).

Assets and Drawbacks of Fini’s Turn

Against the backdrop of the widespread persistence of anti-Jewish attitudes, one may reasonable suggest that the delay and ambiguities of the Alleanza Nazionale leadership in coping with anti-Semitic stands à la Gramazio within its own ranks resulted from the unwillingness to further antagonize the cohorts of the Italian electorate that were still hostile toward Jews. In conclusion, Alleanza Nazionale had gone a long but crooked way to dissociate itself from the
anti-Semitic legacy of the Fascist regime since it was established in 1995, but it had hardly traveled the extra miles to reject the potential support of anti-Jewish voters.

Lack of an ideological reassessment of anti-Semitism on the part of Alleanza Nazionale may also suggest that political expediency underlay Fini’s denunciation of Mussolini’s racial legislation. The 1938 anti-Semitic measures resulted in part from the hyper-nationalistic views of the Fascist regime. The theoretical foundation of the racial laws was the so-called “Manifesto of Racial Scientists,” a report by a group of little-known university professors who made the case for the existence of an “Italian race” and concluded that Jews did not belong to it (now in Sarfatti 1994, pp. 18-20). Therefore, ruling Jews out of the Italian people was the premise for their subsequent discrimination and persecution (Bernardini 1977; Gillette 2001; Toscano 2003, pp. 175-84). The Italian Social Republic reiterated such a stand. The Verona Manifest – a declaration of principles issued on November 14, 1943, to provide the reborn Fascist Party with a new ideological foundation – stated once more that “those who belong to the Jewish race are aliens. They belong to an enemy nation during this war” (as quoted in De Felice 1997, p. 611).

Although Alleanza Nazionale repudiated anti-Semitism, it stuck to nationalism. The cult of the fatherland had remained central to the political culture of the party and its programmatic documents since its creation in 1995 (Koff and Koff 2000, p. 47; Tarchi 2003, pp. 145-47, 173). For instance, the 1995 platform defined a “people” as a “national community” and urged the European Union to preserve the single national identities of the countries that were its members (Alleanza Nazionale 1995). The slogan for the 2005 celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the party offered a further case in point. It significantly read “We were among the few who called Italy our fatherland. Today we are the majority” (Jerkov 2005a). In view of the nationalistic basis of Fascist anti-Semitism, such a stand might have contributed to the
persistence of anti-Jewish feelings both within the Italian Right in particular and in Italy in general. Actually, data from the poll mentioned earlier show that 20 percent of the Italian people also thought that Jews were not full-fledged Italians and that as many as 54 percent deemed that Jews had a mentality and a behavior that made them different from the Italians (Mannheimer 2005).

The nationalistic stand of Alleanza Nazionale was unrelated to anti-Semitism. It resulted from both the patriotic tradition of the Italian Right and the necessity for Fini’s party to compete with the Lega Nord (Northern League) for the votes of the supporters of the center-right coalition who were not aligned with Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (Go Italy!) Party. Jockeying for a position to gain more political influence and power to the detriment of Berlusconi’s other allies, Fini identified the defense of Italy’s national unity as a paramount issue to distinguish Alleanza Nazionale from the blueprint of the Lega Nord that, after advocating the secession of the northern regions from the southern provinces, retreated toward the call for devolution and the transformation of Italy into a federal state (Bull and Gilbert 2001). Yet, against the backdrop of the widespread misrepresentation of Jews as aliens to the Italian people (Scalise 2005), the hyper-nationalism of Alleanza Nazionale may have not helped defuse the persistence of anti-Jewish stereotypes and intolerance that, according to newspaper accounts and journalistic reportages, were still alive in the country in 2009 (Rumiz 2009; Stella 2009, pp. 193-203).

After all, the ambiguity of the Alleanza Nazionale concerning anti-Semitism survived the demise of the party itself. On the eve of Italy’s 2008 parliamentary elections, Fini strengthened his political alliance with Berlusconi. He decided to merge Alleanza Nazionale with Forza Italia and to give birth to a new conservative party by the name of Il Popolo della Libertà (The People of Freedom) (Carbone and Newell 2008). The leaders of Alleanza Nazionale who joined Il
Popolo della Libertà revealed the ambivalence that had previously characterized their own party. On the one hand, when some radical Left-wing groups launched a campaign to boycott Jewish shops in Rome as a form of economic retaliation against the Israeli attacks against Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009, the city’s mayor, Gianni Alemanno, distanced himself from such a protest. A former prominent member of Destra Sociale who had been elected on the fusion ticket of Alleanza Nazionale and Forza Italia few months earlier, Alemanno showed up wearing a kippa – the traditional Jewish skullcap – in the heart of the historic ghetto to patronize those very merchandisers in sympathy against anti-Semitic feelings (Spadaccino 2009; Brera 2009). Alemanno subsequently stigmatized the graffiti reading “Juden raus” (Jews out in German) or reproducing swastikas that appeared on the windows of some shops in the district (Capponi 2009; Mambelli 2009). The Il Popolo della Libertà leadership coming from Alleanza Nazionale also seized the opportunity of a number of anti-Israeli rallies in major Italian cities, equaling Zionism and nazism, to criticize these gatherings and to show off its support for Israel in the effort to prove that there was no room any longer for anti-Semitism within the ranks of the parliamentary Right (Caccia 2009; Di Caro 2009). In particular, replicating Fini’s national strategy at the local level, Alemanno embarked on a policy of reconciliation with the Jewish community in Rome, which not only was the largest in Italy but had also paid the heaviest death toll to the Shoah in this country (Di Franco 2009, p. 136; Di Frischia 2009).

On the other hand, Fini – who had became the Speaker of the House of Deputies after the victory of Il Popolo della Libertà in the 2008 election – continued to make a point of condemning the 1938 racial law. So did Alemanno who, visiting the Yad Vashem in September 2008, repeated that such Fascist legislation was the “absolute evil” (Menicucci 2008). Yet, at the same time, Fini also endeavored to shed the responsibility for those provisions. For instance, in a
speech made in December 2008 on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the passing of that legislation, Fini voiced again his disavowal of Mussolini’s anti-Semitism, but added that Fascist ideology could not account by itself for the hostility toward Italian Jews in the late 1930s (Politi 2008). He pointed in particular to the failure by the Catholic Church to come out officially against the 1938 measures. In other words, according to Fini, while the anti-Jewish legislation was an “infamy,” the blame for Italian Jews’ plight could not be laid on fascism only (Calabrò 2008).

As a result, Fini secured two major benefits. On the one side, the reiterated censure of anti-Semitism contributed to reinforcing his image as a moderate statesman who had definitively broken with the legacy of fascism. Indeed, progressive commentators such as Mario Pirani congratulated Fini on his courageous words (Pirani 2008). Even the leader of the Center-Left coalition, Walter Veltroni, stood by him (Amabile 2008). On the other, the controversy ensuing from Fini’s statement helped shift the debate from the role of Mussolini’s regime to the stand of Catholicism (Battista 2008).

In a subsequent volume published on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Communist regimes in eastern Europe, Fini restated his condemnation of anti-Semitism and the Shoah. Yet, he referred to the role of the Nazi regime alone and did not mention fascism (Fini 2009, pp. 48, 59-60).

**Conclusion**

This article has outlined the path that Alleanza Nazionale undertook to condemn anti-Semitism and, thereby, to dissociate itself from the legacy of a most disturbing Fascist past that undermined its viability in Italian politics and questioned the legitimacy of the radical Right to
govern the country. The specific disavowal of Mussolini’s 1938 racial legislation and the stigmatization of anti-Jewish attitudes in general were part of the broader efforts of its leader, Gianfranco Fini, to reshape Alleanza Nazionale into a less extremist conservative force that could successfully appeal to moderate voters and possibly pave the way for Fini’s succession to Silvio Berlusconi as a less divisive head of the center-right coalition. This metamorphosis, however, did not reflect a shift in the position of many rank-and-file militants of the radical Right, as the vociferous criticism of Fini’s statements demonstrated.

While political and electoral expediency played a significant role in the rejection of anti-Semitism by Alleanza Nazionale, one can hardly accuse Fini of merely “political opportunism,” as conversely the Osservatore Romano – the Vatican’s mouthpiece – charged in an unsigned editorial (“A proposito” 2008). Indeed, Fini’s 2008 address probably brought the dispute about the ideological heritage of fascism within the ranks of Italy’s parliamentary Right to a close, letting the Alleanza Nazionale leader reap the political and electoral gains of his strategy. Nevertheless, that post anti-Semitic turn did not necessarily mean stifling the undercurrents of anti-Jewish sentiments in Italian society. Fini’s qualifications and ambiguities may have contributed to keeping such feelings alive within the radical Right itself out of the impression that many of his assertions were nothing more than pragmatic declarations which served the purpose of cultivating the favor of the public opinion in the pursuit of votes and political power. After all, it has been reported that, following his 2003 “absolute evil” speech in Israel, Fini sent the members of Alleanza Nazionale a confidential letter stating that “the meaning of words changes according to the place where they are uttered” (Rampino 2009).
References


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