



Italy and the Holocaust

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects: World History / Sociology

Categories: Immigration and Prejudice / History and Society / Italians and the Holocaust

Standards:

NJ Core Content Standards for Social Studies

- 6.2.12.C.4.d Analyze the ways in which new forms of communication, transportation and weaponry affected relationships between governments and their citizens and bolstered the power of new authoritarian regimes during this period.
- 6.2.12.A.4.d Assess government responses to incidents of ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- 6.2.12.D.4.i Compare and contrast the actions of individuals as perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers during events of persecution or genocide, and describe the long-term consequences of genocide for all involved.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. Describe the level of support or non-support provided by Italians in World War II for the Holocaust against the Jews sponsored by Italy's ally, Nazi Germany.
2. Speculate on reasons why many Italians, both in and out of the government, did not support or actively opposed the anti-Jewish policies of Nazi Germany.
3. Compare and contrast attitudes toward government institutions and the concept of patriotism between Italian and German citizens in the 1930's and 1940's.

Abstract:

In this lesson, students will learn how Italy, though an ally of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and early 1940s, was considerably less cooperative with the terrible Nazi persecution of Jewish people than many people would expect. In fact, Italy committed much fewer atrocities against Jewish people than many other countries which were attacked and taken over by Germany in World War II. Not only did Italy commit fewer atrocities, but many Italians, both within and outside the government, took positive action to help Jewish people and prevent them from discovery, capture or death at the hands of the Nazis.

In addition to learning this history, students will research the period on the Internet and be asked to identify reasons why the Italians responded to this situation as they did and why they did not eagerly follow the road of genocide as the Germans and some other European countries did. These activities will involve students developing and fine-



tuning their research, writing, and thinking skills in addition to learning new historical content.

Key Terms:

Concentration Camps	Labor and Death camps organized by the Nazi to concentrate slave labor and those destined for systematic execution.
Gentile	A non-Jew
Holocaust	The attempted extermination of the Jewish population and other people considered “undesirable” by the German Nazis.
Nazi	The National Socialist German Workers’ Party in Germany under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. They ruled Germany from 1933 to 1945.

Background:

Of all the horrific events that took place during the World War II era, none is more grotesque or unsettling than the Holocaust, the systematic plan of Nazi Germany to segregate, imprison, exploit and eventually exterminate groups that the Nazi’s defined as racially inferior or politically dissident. That Hitler and his staff could plan such a project is awful enough, but the fact that it was carried out, with the often un-coerced support of thousands of German citizens and even citizens and officials in countries invaded by the Nazi’s such as, Poland, Russia and France makes it even more terrible. Twelve million people, six million of them Jews, died before the fall of Hitler’s Reich pulled the plug on the so-called “final solution.” They died in a war, but not on a battlefield. They died like cattle in a slaughterhouse, a high-tech, low-cost mass murder.

Few events in history have had as deep a moral impact on society as the Holocaust, even to the point that some deny it even happened. Few events in the history of the world are as well-documented as the Holocaust: the Nazi’s themselves kept meticulous records of their outrages, in written, statistical, photographic and motion picture form. The Allied forces that liberated the concentration camps also carefully recorded what they found. There are literally hundreds of thousands of people who personally witnessed these events. To deny the obvious truth behind these mountains of evidence only acknowledges the impact of the Holocaust.

From the ashes of the Holocaust came the realization of re-establishing Israel after nearly 2000 years. In reaction to the newsreels and *Life* magazine photos of the Holocaust, Americans in the post-World War II years, black and white, began to rethink the smoldering condition of race relations in the U.S. by being forced to see what the ultimate result of racism could be. It could easily be said that the shock of the Holocaust revived the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. that had been struggling in vain since the end of Reconstruction.



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A little recognized but remarkable aspect of this history that actually leaves the researcher with some sense of cautious optimism is that the closest ally of Hitler's Third Reich, Italy under the rule of Benito Mussolini, was an unwilling and often uncooperative partner in terms of the Holocaust. Italy, as other European countries, had had a Jewish community for centuries and the Jewish community had been assimilated into Italian society relatively well. Even under Mussolini's rule, Jewish Italians were accepted. There were even Jewish members of the Fascist Party, in about equal proportion to the Gentile members. (About 8% of Italians, either Jewish or Gentile, were members of the Fascist Party.)

When Hitler's regime began to ratchet up the anti-Jewish program in Germany and its allied and occupied countries, Mussolini's government unenthusiastically enacted legislation restricting some of the rights of Jewish citizens and complying with Nazi demands that they turn over Jews who were not Italian citizens to the Germans. At the enforcement level, however, Italian officials were usually slow to act on these orders. Italian officials and military personnel were often willing to ignore restrictions on the Jews and often assisted Jews in evading the edicts of Nazi Germany. Many private citizens and Catholic clergy also went out of their way, sometimes at risk to themselves, to help Jewish people keep out of the reach of the Nazi's.

When the Fascist government was overthrown and Mussolini was ousted in 1943 by anti-fascist Italians, the new Italian government made peace with the Western Allies, but the German Army occupied Italy north of Naples. It would take an American/British invasion force to liberate Italy. With the German Army on the ground in Italy, the persecution of Jews in Italy escalated. Attempts were made to round up the Jews in Italy and relocate them to concentration camps. Even in the face of hostile German troops, Italians often ignored, refused compliance or forcefully resisted directives by the Germans regarding the capture, relocation or killing of Jews in Italy. There developed an active armed resistance movement among Italian civilians against Nazi occupation in general. When the war ended in 1945, the Italians could take some pride in the fact that between 80-85% of the Italian Jewish population of about 40,000 people had survived the war. Most other countries under Nazi occupation could not make that claim.

Procedures:

- I. Anticipatory Set: Students will answer a "DO NOW" question at the start of the period for five minutes:
Which countries would be most likely to support and actively participate in the persecution of Jewish people by Nazi Germany in the 1930's and 1940's:
 - i. Allies of Nazi Germany?
 - ii. Countries that were attacked invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany?



- II. Briefly discuss student answers and reach some consensus. (Most would probably expect Germany's allies to be more likely to support anti-Jewish actions.) Explain briefly to students that Germany's chief European ally during World War II, Italy, actually was considerably less cooperative and more opposed to the activities leading to the Holocaust than several countries that were attacked by the Germans.

- III. Students will be divided into five study-groups, and each will be assigned to read and discuss one of the five websites listed above on the history of Italy during the Holocaust.

- IV. Students can also read the unit essay, broken into five chapters, or watch the 5 part documentary, and/or view the unit PowerPoint.

- V. Students will answer the following questions in written form or in class discussions:
 - a. What actions did the Italian government under Mussolini take against Jewish people in Italy?
 - b. What actions did the Nazi leaders in Germany expect the Italians to take?
 - c. What had been the history of relations between Jewish people and Gentiles in Italy before World War II?
 - d. Did the Italians actively oppose any of the actions taken by the German government against the Jews? Which ones and how were they opposed?
 - e. How did the collapse of Mussolini's government in 1943 affect the persecution of Italian Jews?
 - f. Approximately how many Jewish people were living in Italy at the start of World War II?
 - g. How many of the Italian Jews were killed in the Holocaust?
 - h. Was the survival rate for Italian Jews higher or lower than the survival rate for Jewish people living in other European countries during WW II?
 - i. What aspects of Italian culture might explain the survival rate of Italian Jews during WW II?

Assessment:

Each student will write a two-paragraph essay explaining the reasons why the effects of the Holocaust were relatively minor in Italy, Nazi Germany's main European ally. The essay will consider the relations between the Jewish community in Italy before the war and the characteristics of Italian culture that might have contributed to this result.

Homework:

Students can view the film, *The Garden of the Finzi-Cantinis*, which portrays the life of Jewish Italians in the 1930's and 1940's. Students will compare the way the film presents this time with the information developed in this lesson.

Resources:



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<https://www.holocaustrescue.org/chronology-of-rescue-by-italians>

Chronology of Rescue of Jews in Italy and by Italians in Occupied Zones.

<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/history/they-must-never-be-forgotten-priests-and-nuns-who-rescued-people-from-the-holocaust.html>

They Must Never Be Forgotten: Priests and Nuns Who Rescued People From the Holocaust.

<http://www1.yadvashem.org/download/education/conf/Aureto1B.pdf>

Detailed narrative about Jewish community in Italy and how the Holocaust was resisted by Jews and non-Jews in Italy during WW II

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/22514/italian-priest-honored-for-sheltering-jews-during-wwii>

Italian priest honored for sheltering Jews during WWII

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/italian-priest-who-saved-jews-in-wwii-beatified/>

Italian Priest Who Saved Jews in WWII Beatified. Father Giuseppe Girotti helped refugees escape Turin, was informed upon, and perished in Dachau in 1945

<https://www.aish.com/ho/p/Beneath-a-Scarlet-Sky-Italian-Heroism-in-the-Holocaust.html>

Beneath a Scarlet Sky: Italian Heroism in the Holocaust