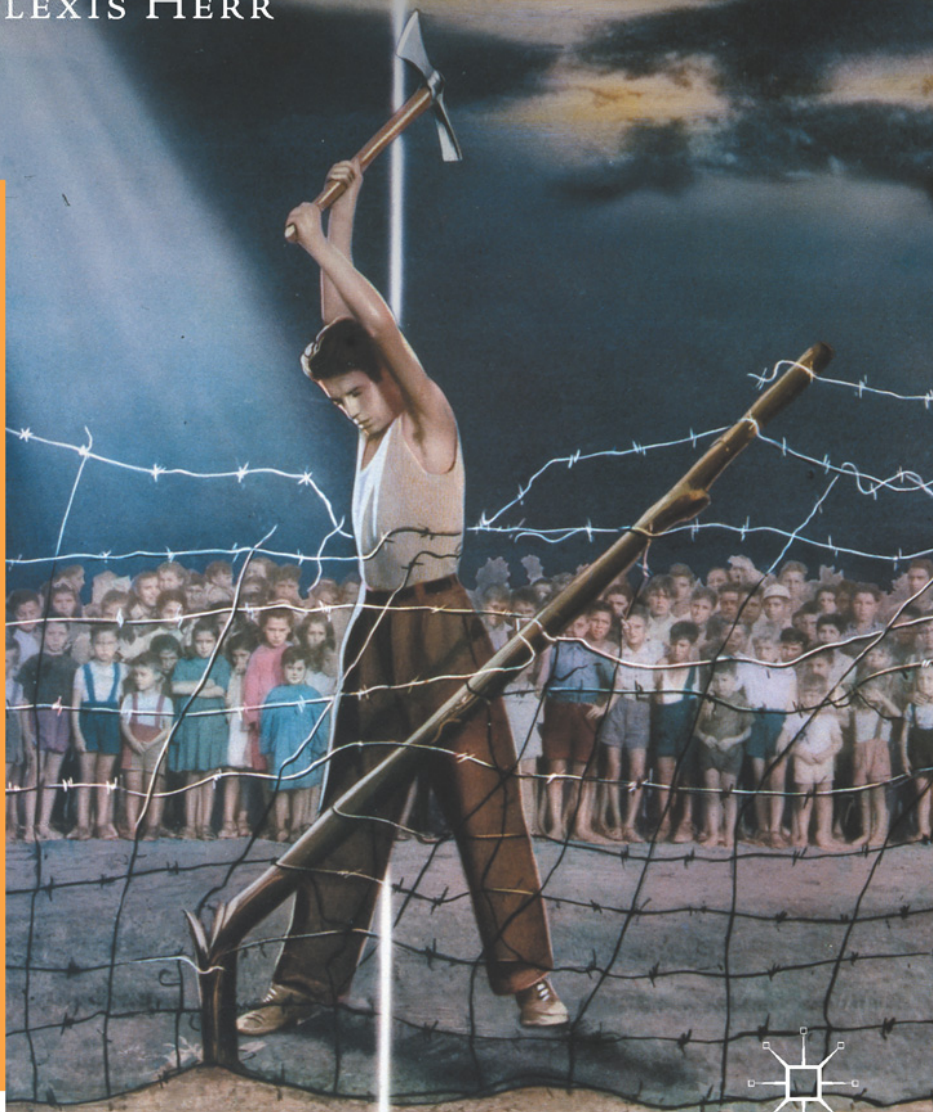


THE HOLOCAUST AND COMPENSATED COMPLIANCE IN ITALY

Fossoli di Carpi, 1942-1952

ALEXIS HERR

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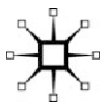
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THE HOLOCAUST AND COMPENSATED COMPLIANCE IN ITALY

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*In dedication to those whose scholarship inspires me to study
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Abbreviations and Foreign Words

German Terms

Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA)	Reich Security Office
Geheime Staatspolizei	Gestapo
Sicherheitsdienst (SD)	Security Service
SS-Obersturmbannführer	Lieutenant Colonel
Sicherheitspolizei (Sipo)	Security Police
SS-Oberscharführer	Sergeant First Class
Wehrmacht	German Army

Italian Terms

Questura	Police
Podestà	Mayor
Il Repubblica di Salò (RSI)	Italian Social Republic
Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana (GNR)	National Republican Guard
Partito d'Azione (PdA)	Action Party
Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI)	Italian Communist Party
Comitato di liberazione nazionale alta Italia (CNLAI)	National Liberation Committee for Upper Occupied Italy
Democrazia Cristiana (DC)	Christian Democracy
Comitato Liberazione Nazionale (CLN)	National Liberation Committee
Democrazia del Lavoro (DDL)	Labor Democratic Party

Partito Liberale Italiano (PLI)	Liberal Italian Party
Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia (ANPI)	National Association of Italian Partisans
Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI)	Italian Socialist Party
Gruppi di azione patriottica (GAP)	Patriotic Action Group
Azione Cattolica (AC)	Catholic Action
Carabinieri	Italian Police
I camici neri	The Blackshirts
Movimento dei cattolici comunisti (MCC)	Movement of Catholic Communists
Fronte Democratico Popolare	Italian Popular Front

Archive Abbreviations

Archivio del centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea, Milano (CDEC)
Archivio dello stato di Modena (AdSM)
Archivio storico del comune di Carpi (ASCC)
Imperial War Museum Archive, London (IWMA)
International Tracing Service (ITS)
National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (NARA)
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)

Introduction

Sixty-seven years have passed since Italian Holocaust survivor Primo Levi published his memoir *Se questo è un uomo* (*If this is Man*, released in the United States under the title *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*).¹ Untarnished by the passage of time, Levi's testimony remains a touchstone of Holocaust study.² His narrative extends beyond descriptions of physical suffering of camp life and offers a philosophical inquiry into humanity and inhumanity in Auschwitz. For Levi, the camp was a "social experiment" that released "the human animal in the struggle for life." In the fight for one's survival, commonplace categories of opposites such as "the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the unlucky and the fortunate," became far more complex.³

Reflecting upon humanity and the erosion of ethics in concentration and death camps, Levi arrived at a fundamental insight. "We do not believe in the most obvious and facile deduction: that man is fundamentally brutal, egoistic and stupid in his conduct once every civilized institution is taken away," Levi declared. "We believe, rather, that the only conclusion to be drawn is that in the face of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts are reduced to silence."⁴ He went on to explain that "survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world—apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune—was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints."⁵ In Auschwitz, survival required moral compromise.

Levi understood that determining the morality of behavior in Auschwitz was far from straightforward. It is with this thought in mind that he coined the term "gray zone" in his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, published 40 years after his memoir. "Anyone who today reads (or writes) the history of the *Lager* reveals the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to emulate Christ's gesture on Judgment Day," explains Levi.⁶ The camp, however, promoted a "moral collapse" and thus attempts to apply simplified ethical constructs are inadequate.⁷ "It is a gray zone," Levi argues, "poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray

zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.”⁸ The camp world, in short, was not black and white. And scholars’ attempts to reduce prisoner behavior to “right” or “wrong” obfuscates a far more complicated history of human behavior.

Looking at Auschwitz through the lens of the gray zone illuminates key aspects of camp life created intentionally by the perpetrators to dehumanize Jews. In the struggle to survive Auschwitz, a person had to rely on one’s animalistic nature to live another day. “It is neither easy nor agreeable to dredge this abyss of viciousness,” Levi confesses, “and yet I think it must be done, because what could be perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, could overwhelm us and our children.”⁹ Levi’s gray zone avoids placing blame, but it does not shy away from close scrutiny of victim behavior in the *Lager*.

The term “bystander,” used by scholars to describe gentiles who fell somewhere between perpetrators and victims, has taken on a gray-zone-like quality. Researchers hold bystanders part of a broad category of action—or inaction—difficult to label or judge. Gentiles had many reasons to remain silent, including their own survival. Using the term “bystander,” scholars acknowledge what Levi stressed in *Survival in Auschwitz: the Holocaust is rarely a history of neatly defined black and white categories.*

A fundamental difference exists between Levi’s gray zone and scholars’ bystanders, however. The former leads to greater understanding of the Holocaust, while the latter stymies sharper analysis of gentile contributions to the genocide. “Bystander” has come to mean less than perpetrator, or less responsible. Yet, less responsible does not mean uninvolved.

The Holocaust and Compensated Compliance in Italy: Fossoli di Carpi, 1942–1952 is first and foremost an investigation of gentile silence and the ambiguity of the bystander category in Italy during the Holocaust. This study scrutinizes a ten-year history of Fossoli—the camp from which Germans transferred Levi to Auschwitz—and its relationship with the neighboring town of Carpi to address how civilians not targeted for annihilation took part in a system set on mass murder and then evaded responsibility for Judeocide after the war.¹⁰

ChapterS tructure

The Holocaust and Compensated Compliance in Italy is divided into two chronological and thematic sections in order facilitate clear analysis of a decade of camp operations, local involvement in each phase, and the incongruity between the public memory and the historical reality of

Fossoli.¹¹ “Part I: The War Years” concentrates on the reasons for and modes by which ordinary gentiles participated in camp affairs during the war. “Part II: After the War” examines the postwar political, social, and economic conditions that shaped Fossoli’s legacy as a symbol of Italian victimization during the German occupation.

The wartime uses of Fossoli discussed in “Part I” illustrate how individuals, some of whom did not self-identify as Fascist or antisemitic, carried out actions that supported both Fascism and antisemitic programs. Chapter 1 situates Fossoli’s creation as an Italian Prisoner of War Camp for Allied soldiers captured in North Africa (May 1942–September 1943) within the historical context of Benito Mussolini’s violent rise to power in the 1920s, Italians’ waning support for Fascism in the early 1940s, and political ambiguity during the Pietro Badoglio period. The next three chapters trace the camp–town dynamic under the German occupation of northern Italy and the Repubblica di Salò (RSI), the Italian Social Republic. Chapter 2 scrutinizes the relationships forged between Carpi and Fossoli during the camp’s use as an Italian-administered concentration camp for Jews (December 5, 1943–March 14, 1944). Chapters 3 and 4 analyze local and regional involvement in Fossoli’s use as a jointly run Italian and German deportation camp for Jews and non-Jewish victims (March 15–August 1944). Despite the changing political tides and shifting operations at Fossoli, camp–town interactions remained a constant throughout the war.

“Part II” explores the camp–town interconnection throughout Fossoli’s operations in the postwar period to illuminate the pressing political, social, and economic demands that overshadowed and then elided Italian contributions to the Holocaust. Chapter 5 examines Fossoli’s use as an Allied prison for war criminals (spring–summer 1945), an Italian-run prison for RSI Fascists (winter 1945–spring 1946), and an Allied—then Italian—managed refugee/displaced persons camp (February–May 1947). Chapter 6 details Fossoli’s repurposing as a Catholic orphanage and humanitarian center (May 1947–February 1952). In continuing our analysis through the immediate postwar era, *The Holocaust and Compensated Compliance in Italy* lays bare not only the pattern of silence that facilitated mass murder, but also the economic, political, social, and religious motivations for that silence first during, and then after, the Holocaust.

Terms

While “bystanders” are often considered silent witnesses, the term remains opaque. Political scientist Raul Hilberg conceived of bystanders as

helpers, gainers, and onlookers.¹² Historians Robert Ehrenreich and Tim Cole conceptualize a more fluid category than that proposed by Hilberg. In their view, a nonvictim/nonperpetrator is capable of transitioning from bystander to perpetrator according to her/his decision to engage actively in the persecution of the victim group.¹³ Philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen's study, on the other hand, meditates on a bystander's ability to resist. He contends that "bystanders represent the potential of resistance," and that an onlooker's capacity for action renders her/him responsible for acts of genocide.¹⁴ Political scientist Ernesto Verdeja similarly argues that a bystander's choice not to act removes her/him from a passive to an active state. He further asserts that, "although knowledge and ability to act certainly characterize the bystander category, this category is by no means uniform."¹⁵ Indeed, it is this lack of consensus that makes the bystander category so difficult to define and analyze.

Despite the diversity of the bystander category, however, studies that examine towns and cities neighboring camps elucidate a pattern of support of and acquiescence with genocide. Scrutinizing local contributions to camp operations, two modes of civilian support of atrocity outside of the perpetrator-victim dichotomy emerge. The most common is the passive action of individuals whose lives remained separate from all matters concerning the camp. Others came to engage in camp affairs through active action, as individuals seeking or presented with opportunities to gain financial compensation for their contributions to camp functions. Here I speak specifically of economic incentives for cooperating with a totalitarian regime set on genocide. I call this *compensated compliance*, or acquiescence for economic gain. This differs from safety. Passive action may have brought security and protection, which in itself was a type of compensation. And safety may have been a byproduct of compensated compliance, but it was not the sole profit tendered.

Let us consider how civilians' actions affected prisoners in Fossoli. In the first few pages of *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi describes the day of his deportation from Fossoli and the intersections between the town and his deportation emerge.

Dawn came on us like a betrayer; it seemed as though the new sun rose as an ally of our enemies to assist in our destruction. The different emotions that overcame us, of resignation, of futile rebellion, of religious abandon, of fear, of despair, now joined together after a sleepless night in a collective, uncontrolled panic...

Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that there remain no memory. With the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. At the end the officer asked "Wieviel Stück?" The corporal saluted smartly and replied

that there were six hundred and fifty “pieces” and that all was in order. They then loaded us on to the buses and took us to the station of Carpi. Here the train was waiting for us, with our escort for the journey. Here we received the first blows: and it was so new and senseless that we felt no pain, neither in body nor in spirit. Only a profound amazement: how can one hit a man without anger?¹⁶

This shows Fossoli’s integral role in the genocide of European Jewry and infers the mechanisms of its success. Carpi’s train station was located just a few blocks from the town center. Who are the enemies to whom Levi referred? Was the Carpi construction cooperative *Cooperativo Muratori* that built the camp an enemy? What about Autoservizi Dita Valenti-Carpi, the local car service that drove Levi from the Fossoli camp to the train station? Were the bread rations Levi received from Carpi bakery Forno Chiesi for the journey to Auschwitz from an enemy? If *Cooperativo Muratori*, Autoservizi Dita Valenti-Carpi, and Forno Chiesi were not enemies, what were they? Were they part of the “first blow” on Levi’s life?

An analysis of the camp’s financial transactions reveals the profit companies in Carpi and the surrounding area enjoyed due to business conducted with Fossoli. Their dealings demonstrate some local residents’ compensated compliance through economic incentives. It also shows that locals had the opportunity to see the camp and its prisoners. Thus, they knew what took place within their town limits and to what they contributed.

Construction and expansion of Fossoli by *Cooperativo Muratori* provides one example of how compensated compliance enticed locals’ involvement. Local and regional officials from town mayors to Fascist offices in Rome employed this cooperative to build the camp, and then reengaged it for all subsequent repairs and expansions from 1942 to 1945. Similarly, locals in the town neighboring the Operation Reinhard death camp Sobibór built that annihilation camp.¹⁷ While Sobibór and Fossoli had very different functions—Fossoli served as a transit camp to deport Jews to death camps, whereas Sobibór was a mass murder site—in each case those neighboring the camp built the facility. Does the camp function shape how we understand the labor of Carpi and Sobibór civilians? Or, perhaps more importantly, what does viewing the two locations and situations from an economic perspective say about material motivations for genocide?

Questions Surrounding Italian “Consent”

Questions surrounding Italian “consent” to Fascism, anti-Jewish policies, and the Holocaust focuses on Italian antisemitism and the legacy of the

Resistance, both of which intersect with the “*brave gente*” (“good folk”) myth. Renzo De Felice brought attention to these issues in the 1960s when he examined the mechanisms and structural components set in place by Fascist authorities to engender support for Mussolini’s regime and policies. While he admits that Fascists were responsible, in part, for the persecution of Jews during the German occupation, he concludes that antisemitism was a foreign concept imposed by Nazi Germany. He also argues that Italians did not support the anti-Jewish campaign.¹⁸

Scholars analyzing Italian antisemitism reject De Felice’s claims and so doing demonstrate Italian consensus for antisemitic legislation. Works by Historians Giorgio Fabre, David Bidussa, and Aaron Gilette refute the common assumption that Benito Mussolini was not antisemitic.¹⁹ Scholars Mauro Raspanti, Giorgio Israel, and Pietro Nasti examine how Italian racial theories influenced Fascist policies.²⁰ Research by historians Giuliana Marisa and Garbiella Cardosi’s assess Fascist racial laws and their application to Jews of “mixed marriages” (marriages between Jews and gentiles).²¹ Historian Michele Sarfatti’s scholarship details how Italian Fascist laws predating the occupation were employed under German occupation to streamline deportations of Jews.²² Works by historians Carlo Capogreco, Davide Conti, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, and Liliana Picciotto Fargion demonstrate the ways in which deportations and camps rallied support for xenophobic and racial policies.²³ And recent research by historian Guri Schwarz sheds light on how denial of Italian antisemitism intertwines with the “*brava gente*” myth.²⁴

The “*brava gente*” myth—which refers to a public memory of the Holocaust that omits Italian participation in Fascism and the Judeocide—ignores Italian consent completely.²⁵ Again, the historiography does not reflect popular memory because scholars have scrutinized the many ways by which Italians supported Fascism.²⁶ In part, the absolution of Italian autonomy in the Holocaust originates in early postwar claims that Italians were not antisemitic or racist. Historian Filippo Focardi, among others, demonstrates that the nascent Italian republic elided evidence of Italian antisemitism and racism (particularly in regards to Italian colonialism in north Africa) in order to separate Italy from Germany.²⁷ The failure to hold Italian officials and soldiers accountable for war crimes after the liberation and the popularization of the Italian Resistance also supported claims that painted Italians as “good” and Germans as “bad.” The issuing of a widespread amnesty for Fascist criminals in 1946 was thus part of an Italian political strategy that severed popular memory from the historical memory of the war years. Indeed, the Italian republic unilaterally depicted “ordinary” Italians as Resisters, not collaborators or perpetrators.²⁸

Consent and Compensated Compliers

My argument regarding the consent of some *Carpigiani* to Fascism, National Socialism, and genocide hinges on the documentation of compensated compliance. The prospect of working either with or for the camp for financial gain facilitated individuals and local businesses to seek contracts to supply and work at Fossoli. Similarly, historian Harold Marcuse explains that “during the months of the Nazi takeover in Dachau, local businessmen were optimistic about the economic impact of the new concentration camp.”²⁹ And historian Gordon J. Horwitz finds an analogous pattern of civilian involvement with Mauthausen. “Establishment of the concentration camp,” he notes, “brought business to local artisans and tradesmen which they welcomed and pursued. The camp needed their skills.”³⁰ While Horwitz refers to these individuals as “observers,” I (as we shall see) view them as active participants because of the information such observations provided them.³¹

Thus, I trace the creation of the camp under Italian Fascism and its transition to Nazi rule, laying bare the local collusion at each stage that facilitated the victimization and deportation of Italian Jews, as well as Resistance efforts that sought to save them. Locals’ consent to Fascist and then Nazi demands did not occur overnight. The groundwork for business with and the administration of Fossoli was laid years prior to German occupation, when the camp was a Fascist institution built to house Allied Prisoners of War (POWs) in 1942. A pattern of compensated compliance emerges in the interactions between the camp and town throughout the era of Nazi-occupied Italy. *Carpigiani* who benefited financially from the camp were not necessarily perpetrators; rather, they were compensated compliers and active participants in genocide. It is worth noting, however, that their compensated compliance often afforded them personal knowledge of how the Holocaust unfolded in Italy.

Horwitz notes that local citizens’ involvement in camp operations at Mauthausen yielded mounting evidence of camp violence. In much the same way, *Carpigiani* gained varying degrees of knowledge regarding Fossoli’s inner workings and its function through their financial relationships with the camp. In particular, Carpi officials acquired extensive information through their financial oversight of camp operations. Paying for and facilitating prisoner transport back and forth between the Carpi train station and the camp located six kilometers outside of the town afforded town leaders detailed knowledge of population transfers and arrivals. And Carpi businesses such as Forno Chiesi supplied food for camp inmates and Autoservizi Dita Valenti-Carpi transported

prisoners to and from the camp and train station; their employees must have appreciated the constantly arriving and leaving prisoner population. Indeed, far from mere onlookers, Carpi's municipal leaders and the businesses they hired and paid actively contributed to operations at Fossoli.³² What are we to make of such seemingly mundane acts of compensated compliance?

The local Carpi and Modena governments' fulfillment of German orders paint an even more complicated picture. Officials in both areas began to work with the camp before its transformation into a deportation site. It is unclear what they could have done to save Jews and others and what the cost would have been to their own safety. Had they joined the Resistance would they have ended up at Fossoli? Were they "compliers" like local companies, or were they something more? Were they perpetrators? Without a doubt, Carpi town administrators knew their actions facilitated the deportation and death of thousands. This fact could not have escaped them. And this knowledge very well may have prevented their opposition out of fear for their own lives.

Even faced with the threat of death, however, many people chose to resist. The legacy of the Resistance fighters remains the hallmark of Italian Holocaust history.³³ Many of those who fought against Fascism and Nazism ended up at Fossoli. Their courage and bravery loom large in public memory. The legend of Italians as "*brava gente*" gains credibility from the stories of Resistance fighters, many of whom lost their lives in defense of freedom. There is no popular memory of Italian compliance, although including the stories of compliers would make the Resistance fighters shine even more brightly.

The final two chapters scrutinize the underlying postwar mythology that divided public memory from historical memory: the victim myth, debate over Italian antisemitism, and the "*brava gente*" narrative. Historian Rosario Forlenza argues that public memory of the Holocaust portrays Italians as victims of Fascism and denies—or at best reduces—their Axis membership.³⁴ In short, the victim myth fails to distinguish between targets of German reprisals and those marked for genocide.³⁵ In so doing Italian responsibility for the Judeocide is overlooked. Just as the victim myth elides Italian involvement in the persecution of Jews, claims that Italians were not antisemitic further detract from some Italians' participation in the Judeocide. The myth of Italian benevolence allowed for a collective pardon for Italian Fascism, violence, joining the Axis in 1940, racism, war crimes, and genocide. And despite scholars' best efforts, public memory of the Holocaust remains tethered to the "*brava gente*" myth.

In *Holocaust City*, historian Tim Cole realized that the ordinariness with which gentiles played small and big roles in setting spaces for the Holocaust to unfold constitutes an important component of why and how the Holocaust occurred. Reconstructing the formation of ghettos during the Holocaust, primarily in Budapest, Cole found himself pondering the engineer who had worked diligently in an office in Berlin to create an efficient door for the crematoria oven in Auschwitz. This thought led him to contemplate the Budapest municipal government's role in implementing a ghetto, as well as that of the non-Jewish neighbors to the ghetto. "In short," he explained, "I'm interested in that question which obsesses anyone who encounters the Holocaust: Why?"³⁶ *The Holocaust and Compensated Compliance in Italy* scrutinizes compliance and acquiescence with genocide in order to explain why and how silence prevailed for the majority of Italians in the occupied zone during and then after the Holocaust.

Part I

The War Years