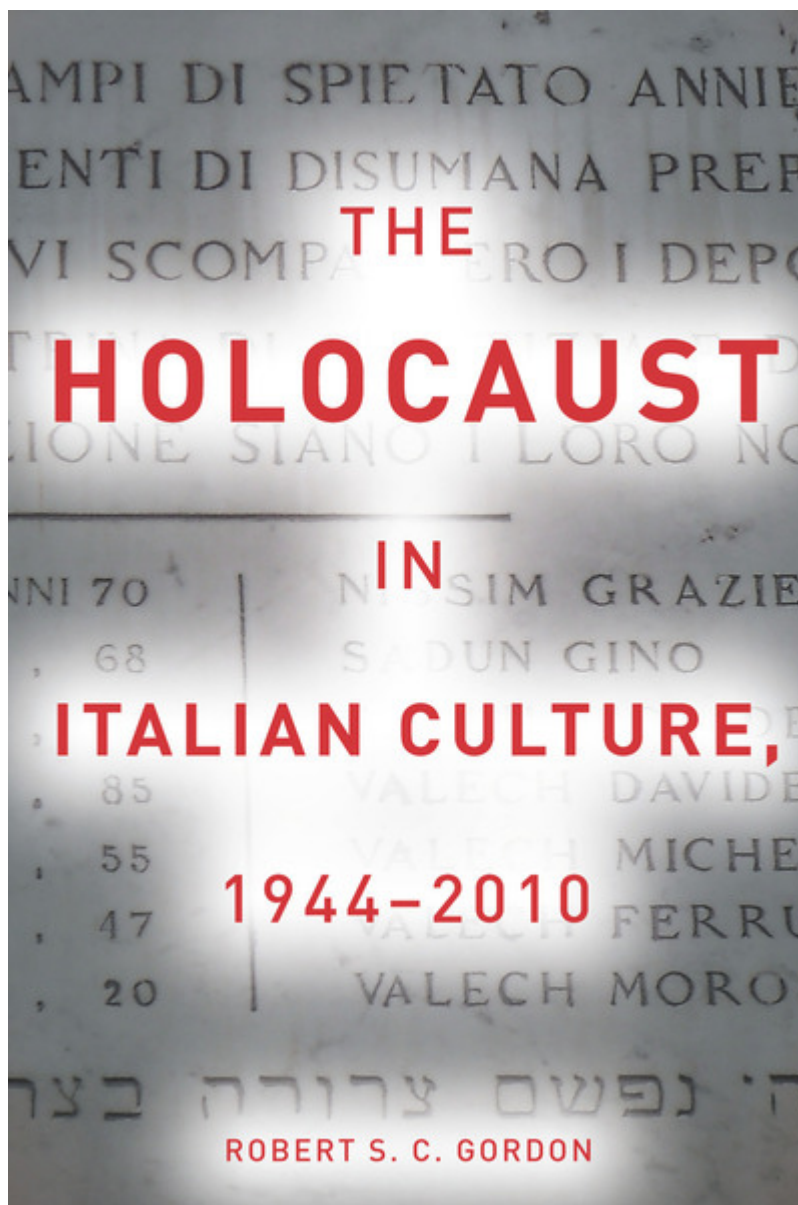


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The Holocaust in Italian Culture: 1944-2010



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The Holocaust in Italian Culture: 1944-2010. By: Robert S. C. Gordon.
(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) pp. 284. Paper, \$24.95.

The well-known Historikerstreit affair in Germany—the German Historians’ Controversy—in the 1980s did not signify the end of the debates surrounding the memory of the Holocaust. Though memory of the Holocaust continues to be of interest to scholars across disciplines, some recent interventions in the debate are seeking to move beyond

memory studies as a method of inquiry – a method, which, for some scholars has been *de rigueur* for too long and a not always adequate tool for understanding the post-war legacy of the Holocaust. One such noteworthy intervention is Robert S. C. Gordon's *The Holocaust in Italian Culture: 1944-2010*, which “challenge[s] assumptions about mechanisms of collective memory, seeing instead cultural form as a means to shared knowledge about or awareness of aspects of the past, which become part of a shared cultural conversation (with its own codes and markers), of which ‘memory effects’ are only one element” (8).

Gordon, a professor of Italian literature and culture, devotes much of the book to the production of knowledge about the Holocaust—in film, literature and scholarship and through cultural events, memorials, and days of memory (Italy instituted a day of memory of the Holocaust in 2001 called *Il Giorno della Memoria*)—and to the reception of the particular shape of this knowledge. Integral to the cultural mediation of the Holocaust in Italy are those who Gordon has termed “knowledge producers,” people and institutions such as Primo Levi and the CDEC (the Centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea, The Centre for Contemporary Jewish Research), and the ANED (the Associazione nazionale degli ex-deportati politici, the National Association of Ex-Political Deportees), have been responsible for the spread of knowledge about the Holocaust in Italian society. Gordon also engages with significant questions about the distinct heritage of the Holocaust in Italy, such as how the trope of the “Good Italian” came to be produced as well as the nature of Italian victimhood, which, especially in the early years after the war, had glorified the political deportees and those who had taken part in the anti-fascist resistance. For a long time, the Italian nation favored the anti-fascist resistance narrative, which was seen as particularly useful in mending the fractured Italian state in the immediate years after the war.

Still, as Gordon rightly points out, the Holocaust is—and always has been—a supranational phenomenon (but, also, a transnational and international one) symbolized by the universal symbol of Auschwitz, and it cannot be fully understood if it is only examined within the confines of a single nation-state. The national and supranational must be seen together, as each influences the other. To this end, Gordon traces the trajectory of representation of the Holocaust in post-war Italian culture,

placing the Italian case within its larger supranational context, showing how wider trends in Holocaust memory and cultural representation as well as political events outside Italy, such as the Eichmann Trial and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, influenced cultural responses to the Holocaust in Italy.

One drawback of Gordon's argument, however, is his frequent use of terms such as "transnational," "international," and "supernational" without adequately providing readers with definitions at the outset. Though Gordon defines transnational as "a term which tells of the fluid and migratory ways that the Holocaust and the language and imagery surrounding it have constantly crossed national cultural borders, been inflected and absorbed in peculiar ways in each local setting, have forged and shaped new representations and responses which have themselves in different, unpredictable arenas and forms migrated out into other cultures," the definition itself is a bit inchoate and does not come until chapter nine of the book (158). It is not clear, for instance, what exactly the difference is between transnational and international and how each level interacts with the other. Since Gordon's argument is based not only on the process of transmission of knowledge within Italian culture but also between distinct cultures and across geographical boundaries, it would have been useful to understand exactly how this transnational or international exchange of knowledge occurred.

Despite this particular drawback, Gordon's book is a significant and elegantly-written addition to the historiography of Holocaust memory. It will be useful to both scholars of modern Italian history and culture and those interested in the legacy of the Holocaust more generally. Undoubtedly it will also be useful to graduate students of modern Italian history or culture, though it is probably too restricted in its scope for undergraduate students.

Stephanie De Paola

Fordham University



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