

From *Olocausto* to *Shoah*: Naming Genocide in 21st-century Italy¹

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1

It has long been a commonplace of studies of memory and collective trauma that the language in which one captures historical events of extreme violence and suffering, and the otherness of their victims, as well as the language through which they are transmitted to the wider cultural sphere, are essential and conditioning filters for how those events are processed and understood. The long and complex history of the terms for the Nazi genocide of Europe's Jews in the 1940s, including the term "genocide" itself but also "Holocaust", or *Olocausto* in Italian, and other cognates and synonyms, provides one of the most intense instances and indeed – for the language of 20th-century memories of violence at least – arguably lays the foundation for this heavily weighted, often politicized and even theologized problem of language and violence.

This article looks at Italy and Italian at the turn of the 20th to 21st centuries, in part as a useful case-study of this important historico-linguistic phenomenon, but also, and more strongly, as an exception to commonly assumed rules and patterns in this field, in particular in regard to the late dissemination there of the Hebrew-derived term for the genocide, *Shoah*. The article draws on a variety of sources in order to trace such local patterns of linguistic usage, from memorials and published literature, to databases and catalogues of books and media, to official law and state documents, throwing light onto the coded discursive practices surrounding the Holocaust in the public and cultural spheres in contemporary Italy and beyond. The article first sets out some general lines in the international history of the post-war naming of the genocide; drawing on the sources noted above, it moves on to examine in detail the particular shifts and balances in Italian nomenclature in the late 20th and early 21st centuries; and finally it offers a series of lines of interpretation of the striking prominence of the term *Shoah* in Italy in the period.

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Anna-Vera Sullam Calimani, in her excellent book *I nomi dello sterminio*, traces the uses of “Holocaust” as the principal among ten competing terms and epithets, sourced from and used in several languages (English, French, Hebrew, German, Italian, Latin, Greek), for the Nazi programme of murder of European Jews and other closely related programmes of eugenic, racial and ethnic elimination carried out between 1933 and 1945 (Sullam Calimani).² As she explains, “Holocaust” derives from the Greek biblical term for “burnt offering” or “burnt sacrifice”. It was in rare but regular use in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in the language of war memorials and public mourning, with of course no association with violence against Jews or indeed racial or ethnic violence of any kind. Indeed, it can even be found in early post-Second World War memorials, even in instances later closely associated with the murder of Europe’s Jews, such that the antiquated usage now seems strikingly anomalous. Here, for example, is the stone inscription at the Fosse Ardeatine memorial on the outskirts of Rome, greeting mourners who commemorate the 335 victims of the Nazi massacre that took place there, of whom over seventy were Jews:

Viatori assetati di libertà
fummo a caso rastrellati
nelle strade e nel carcere
per rappresaglia
gettati in massa
trucidati murati in queste fosse
Italiani non imprecate
mamme spose non piangete
figli portate con fierezza
il ricordo
dell’olocausto dei padri
Se lo scempio su di noi consumato
sarà servito al di là della vendetta
a consacrare il diritto dell’umana esistenza
contro il crimine dell’assassinio.³

“Holocaust” was first used with authoritative cultural weight to refer to the Jewish genocide by the French writer François Mauriac, presenting Elie Wiesel’s testimonial work *La Nuit* in 1958. Wiesel himself – to his later

2 Sullam Calimani’s ten terms are: *Hurban*, *Shoah*, the catastrophe or disaster, the *univers concentrationnaire*, deportation, the *Lager*, genocide, the Final Solution, Auschwitz, and the Holocaust itself, to which we might add the “extermination” of the book’s title.

3 Emphasis added. On this memorial, see Clifford “Limits”.



Figure 1. Plaque at Fosse Ardeatine Memorial (Rome 1949). Author's photo.

regret – then picked up the term and by force of rhetoric and sheer presence anchored it in American discourse on the genocide during the 1960s. Sullam Calimani further points out that, from the early 1950s, at Yad Vashem and other official Israeli institutions, “Holocaust” had already become the established standard term for the genocide when such institutions translated their documents from Hebrew into English (97–8).

From the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the term lost its ambiguous status between generic and specific noun and became widely recognized as a proper noun, “the Holocaust”, a term no longer requiring gloss or explanation, detached from its history and etymology, a code word for a specific, singular historical event of the 1940s. This latter stage of dissemination was given a massive boost by the 1978 NBC television mini-series *Holocaust*, a watershed in international awareness and reception of this event, even if in stereotypical form.⁴ In Italy, according to Sullam Calimani, the term *Olocausto*, whilst only weakly established before the mid-1970s in this specific meaning, quickly spread to general usage during and after 1979, in a rapid and widely accepted

4 On *Holocaust* in America and Germany, see, respectively, Shandler and *New German Critique*. There were clear limits to the normalization of the term, however: the *Oxford English Dictionary* in its 1989 second edition includes the following remarkably arch comment in its definition “*holocaust* n. [...] 2.d. *the Holocaust*: the mass murder of the Jews by the Nazis in the war of 1939–1945 [...] *The term is in common use among Jews, but seems to be otherwise relatively rare except among specialists*” (last emphasis added). The sentence was removed for later editions.

“escalation” shared across much of Europe (97–101). Already in a 1979 interview, Primo Levi confirmed its ascendancy: “the word cannot be avoided now” (Levi 269).

As the regretful tone of this last comment by Levi suggests, however, for much of the longer history of the affirmation of the term “Holocaust” in public discourse, a thread of discomfort, if not outright rejection, has also been persistently present: the term is, after all, biblical, sacrificial, deeply entwined with Christian understandings of Judaism, but also of the Crucifixion (itself a form of renewed “sacrifice”, rejecting Jewish tradition) and bound up with notions of the sacred. Implicit in the term, for these protesters, is a deeply problematic understanding of the genocide as in some way ordained, a form of mystery or ennoblement, possibly even a form of divine punishment; or, more neutrally but still problematically for some, as closely in tune with a millennial history of Jewish suffering. For many, especially amongst the ranks of the survivors, experts and “gatekeepers” of this history and its cultural dissemination – Wiesel included, after a certain point and despite his own openness to a “spiritual” understanding of the Holocaust – the term was and remains deeply inappropriate.

Of the many alternatives proposed by such gatekeepers or protesters, the Hebrew word *Shoah* has been the most persistently adopted. Two threads of history of this term converge to establish its particular status and value. First, *Shoah*, or “catastrophe”, “disaster”, quickly became the standard Hebrew term, adopted in Israel in the 1940s (this is the term which in the early 1950s Yad Vashem started to translate into English as “Holocaust”).⁵ Like most modern Hebrew, it too has its origins in biblical terminology but is commonly seen to be more neutral and less loaded with sacred or providential meaning, connoting something akin to total desolation or destruction. As a usage that labels a secular disaster, it also has a strong and discomfiting parallel in the Palestinian diaspora’s labelling and definition of its own 1948 trauma as the “disaster”, the “*Nakba*”, a term already in use before the war to refer to the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire in 1920. Secondly, if NBC’s *Holocaust* dramatically boosted the status of its title term, with its stunning impact in the US and in particular in Germany in 1978–79 (although not necessarily in Italy),⁶ in 1985 Claude Lanzmann’s epic and, for many, definitive documentary, *Shoah*, performed something like the same service for its title term, if in a sphere restricted to art-house audiences and intellectual elites. Slowly since 1985, and with increasing weight since the mid-1990s, those Europeans and Americans who wish to declare their intimacy with and sensibility to the

5 Sullam Calimani 19–24.

6 Emiliano Perra has called the Italian broadcast of *Holocaust* in 1979 a “non-event” (*Conflicts* 117–47).

events and victims of the genocide mark this element of cultural and ethical capital by using *Shoah* in place of Holocaust. One particularly telling instance was its endorsement by Steven Spielberg, whose 1993 film *Schindler's List* has every claim to be the heir to NBC's *Holocaust* in the history of the massification and Americanization of the Holocaust.⁷ Ploughing profits from the film into a vast oral history project, Spielberg launched in 1994 the Survivors of the Shoah [sic] Visual History Foundation, which quickly gathered a video archive of over 50,000 survivor testimonies, as if sealing the official status of the term *Shoah* in the English-speaking world, at least amongst gatekeeper figures and communities.⁸

Nevertheless, in English "Holocaust" has remained overwhelmingly the most common term to refer to the genocide. A Lexis search of the UK *Guardian* newspaper (an organ of precisely that lay intellectual, liberal, "gatekeeping" elite mentioned above – although one with a complicated history of relations with the state of Israel)⁹ shows that from January 1985 to April 2010, there were 177 usages in the paper of the word *Shoah* (ranging from one to a maximum of fifteen in any single year), compared with over 3500 usages of "Holocaust". For a broader sample still, we can turn to Google Books Ngram Viewer, which allows us a search for key terms and for word frequency in over five million books: a comparative graph for the usage in English (US and UK) of *Shoah* and "Holocaust" between 1945 and 2008 (Table 1) shows a striking prominence of the latter, despite relative growth in the former after 1985 and again 1990.¹⁰

It is against this context of the seemingly inexorable growth and dominance of the term "Holocaust" that the development presented here takes on striking significance. Sullam Calimani's 2001 book hints at the phenomenon, but the book appeared too early to chart it thoroughly. Put simply, in Italy as almost nowhere else (with the possible exception of France),¹¹ the gatekeepers have won their language struggle and appear to have successfully renamed the genocide across a broad spectrum of the intellectual sphere

7 On this history, see Cole.

8 Since 2005, Spielberg's Foundation has been housed at the University of Southern California's USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

9 See Baram.

10 On the corpus and methodology of the Ngrams Viewer, see Michel et al.

11 French cultural influence on Italy has a long history, especially in the modern era, and it is not unreasonable to argue that Italy's adoption of *Shoah* is merely a further example of this. There are crucial differences, however, in the dynamics of the term's assimilation (e.g., Lanzmann's film was far more influential in France than in Italy in this as in other respects), but also in its trajectory, which shows in the Italian case a more radical transformation of usage, from *Olocausto* to *Shoah*. In France, the term *Shoah* held sway for longer and was given a definitive boost by Lanzmann's film, but "*Holocauste*" in any case had not taken such deep root, as a Ngram search of French material in Google Books confirms. For a contrary view, however, see Perra "Review".

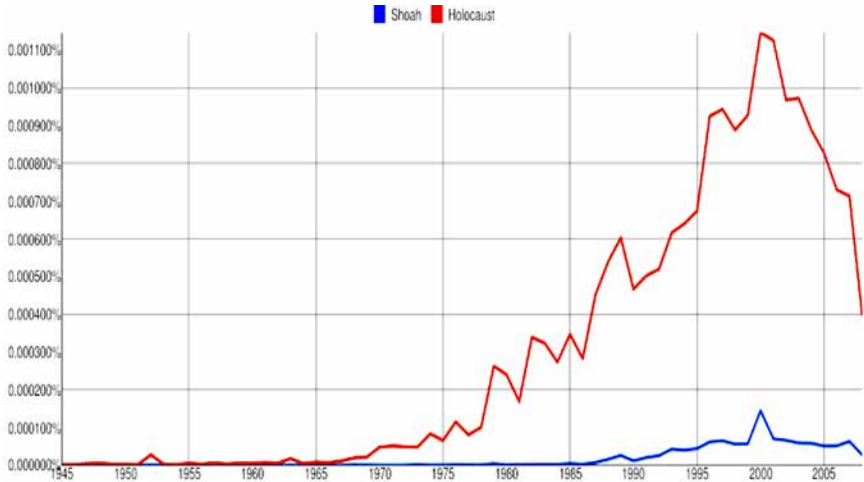


Table 1. Usage of *Shoah* and “Holocaust” in books in English 1945–2008. Google Books Ngram Viewer.

and the wider media culture: the term *Shoah* has challenged if not actually overtaken “*Olocausto*” and other commonly used terms in the Italian context, such as “*Lager*”, “*Auschwitz*” or “*genocidio*”, becoming widely acknowledged and deployed as the apt, precise, accepted and often also official term for the Nazi genocide of the Jews. The processes of this turn-of-the-century shift and the possible reasons for it are worth documenting and reflecting on, but first we need to establish a body of indicative evidence for the change.¹²

2

In the absence of a searchable database of printed material in Italian to rival Google Books, we can look at three levels of evidence for the emergence of *Shoah* in Italian public language: official, state documents, newspapers and book title catalogues.

The key international, intergovernmental forum for the dissemination of Holocaust memory and education of the late 20th century was the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, initiated in May 1998. The first phase of the Task Force’s work culminated in the declaration on 28 January 2000 of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, drafted in eleven languages (“Declaration”). The first paragraph of the declaration declares, “The Holocaust (*Shoah*) fundamentally

12 For the wider field of Italy’s responses to the Holocaust, see Gordon, *Holocaust* (I draw for this article on pp. 177–80 of that book).

challenged the foundations of civilization” (“Declaration”). In ten of the eleven published languages of the declaration, the first term of the opening paragraph is a close cognate of “Holocaust”; and in all eleven languages, the parenthesis that follows repeats, or rather corrects, the term Holocaust with what looks like a more precise term, *Shoah*, in a manner similar to the English-language version. *Shoah*, however, does not appear again in the rest of the declaration in any language, whereas “Holocaust” (or its cognates) recurs a total of fourteen times. In other words, *Shoah* seems to stand as described above as a correct, but unfamiliar, privileged and rare usage.

In paragraph 6 of the declaration, the Task Force calls for an annual memorial day for the Holocaust in all the signatory countries:

We share a commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honour those who stood against it. We will encourage appropriate forms of Holocaust remembrance, including an annual Day of Holocaust Remembrance, in our countries.¹³

On this basis, Italy, and a cluster of other countries, went on to establish memorial days on 27 January, the date of the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945, marked for the first time in 2001.¹⁴ Once again, however, hidden currents lie beneath the naming of this memorial day. In paragraph 6, several variants to name the day are used across the eleven languages, as the following collation shows:

English	Day of <i>Holocaust</i> Remembrance
German	<i>Holocaust-Gedenktag</i>
Danish	<i>Holocaust-mindetag</i>
Estonian	<i>holokausti mälestuspäeva</i>
Greek	Ημέρα Μνήμης του Ολοκαυτώματος [Emera Mnemes tou Olokautomatos]
Italian	<u>Giorno della Memoria</u>
Latvian	<i>Holokausta atceres dienu</i>
Norwegian	<u>minnedag</u>
Polish	Dnia Pamięci <i>Holokaustu</i>
Spanish	Día de Recordación del <i>Holocausto</i>
Swedish	dag till minne av <u>Förintelsen</u> ¹⁵

13 This commitment was reaffirmed on a global, inter-governmental level with the 1 November 2005 United Nations General Assembly Resolution (A/RES/60/7), which urged all nations to mark a Holocaust memorial day (“United Nations”). The Resolution uses the term “Holocaust” eight times, including in the heading, as well as “genocide” (four times) and “concentration camps” and other camps (six times).

14 See Gordon, “The Holocaust”; Clifford, *Commemorating* 171–80, 221–53.

15 Drawn from the sixth paragraph of the Stockholm Declaration, published in eleven languages (“Declaration”). Emphases added.

“Holocaust” and its cognates again dominate, present in eight of eleven cases (italicized above), and all eleven use the terminology of memory, confirming the dominant link from Holocaust to “memory cultures” in this phase of cultural history. But three exceptions (underlined above) stand out: Swedish, which throughout the declaration used *Förintelsen* or “annihilation” as its standard term for Holocaust; and, most striking of all, Norwegian and Italian, which both eliminate any specific mention of the Holocaust from the naming of their days, preferring instead simply “Memory Day”. Italy’s 27 January was indeed established in Italian law and celebrated from 2001 simply as “Il giorno della memoria”.

This minor, but quite bold variant in the multi-lingual official draftings of an intergovernmental declaration suggests a weakened valency or purchase of the term *Olocausto* in official Italian language, a linguistic and perhaps also cultural and political doubt surrounding the naming of a national day including the term *Olocausto*. The text of the Italian national legislation to establish “Il giorno della memoria” pushes this element of ambivalence one stage further. Law 211 of 20 July 2000 is a short text of two articles in which the term *Olocausto* is entirely absent; *Shoah* seems to have taken its place. The first article reads as follows:

Art. 1. La Repubblica italiana riconosce il giorno 27 gennaio, data dell’abbattimento dei cancelli di Auschwitz, “Giorno della Memoria”, al fine di ricordare la Shoah (sterminio del popolo ebraico), le leggi razziali, la persecuzione italiana dei cittadini ebrei, gli italiani che hanno subito la deportazione, la prigionia, la morte, nonché coloro che, anche in campi e schieramenti diversi, si sono opposti al progetto di sterminio, ed a rischio della propria vita hanno salvato altre vite e protetto i perseguitati.¹⁶

Shoah alternates with *sterminio* (extermination) as mutually defining terms in this text, with other close cognates (“Auschwitz”), and historically contemporary and overlapping events within Fascist Italy, or Nazi persecutions beyond the Jewish genocide, rubbing up against the *Shoah*, creating a broad field for remembrance.

The trend for the official adoption of the term *Shoah* and the relative muting of the term *Olocausto* is repeated in 2003 legislation to establish and approve funding for a national Holocaust museum in Italy, a project that has passed through several phases and planned locations and still has not been realized (as of early 2015). Echoing similar grand museum and monument projects in Washington, Paris and Berlin, the 2003 legislation names the project Il Museo Nazionale della Shoah, the National Museum of the Shoah. Article 1 (of 3) reads as follows:

¹⁶ “Legge n. 211”.

Art. 1.

1. È istituito a Ferrara il Museo Nazionale della *Shoah*, di seguito denominato “Museo”, quale luogo simbolico per conservare nella memoria della nazione le drammatiche vicende delle persecuzioni razziali e dell’Olocausto.

2. Il Museo ha i seguenti compiti:

a) raccogliere ed esporre le testimonianze sulla *Shoah* e sulla deportazione degli ebrei italiani;

b) promuovere attività didattiche nonchè organizzare manifestazioni, incontri nazionali e internazionali, convegni, mostre permanenti e temporanee, proiezioni di film e di spettacoli sui temi della pace e della fratellanza tra i popoli e dell’incontro tra culture e religioni diverse;

c) organizzare l’assegnazione di premi nazionali e internazionali per libri e opere a persone o enti che hanno contribuito a promuovere la conoscenza della *Shoah* e il mantenimento della sua memoria.¹⁷

This is an interestingly poised and ambivalent text, where *Shoah* is italicized and therefore marked as foreign (see below); where *Olocausto*, not italicized, is used anomalously once, as if in partial explanation of *Shoah*; but where *Shoah* is officially declared as the standard term for the legislation and for the museum.

One final point to note about the acts of legislation for “Il giorno della memoria” and the museum is the effect of opening up both memory and moral purpose by thinning out the historical specificity of the event (Day of Memory rather than Day of Holocaust Memory) and of therefore stretching the scope of remembrance to include “themes of peace and brotherhood amongst peoples and encounters between different cultures and religions” (“Legge n. 91”). This pattern of loosening remembrance and prospective pedagogy is consistent with the wider thrust the Stockholm Task and indeed the UN Resolution, which uses the Holocaust as a bridge to instigate education programmes about the Holocaust and other “manifestations of religious intolerance, incitement, harassment or violence against persons or communities based on ethnic origin or religious belief, wherever they occur” (“United Nations”). What is particularly striking in the Italian case is the paradox that a shift in usage from *Olocausto* to *Shoah* – therefore ostensibly a shift to a more specific term for the genocide of the Jews – seems to run alongside and reinforce this stretching or broadening of the scope of remembrance.

More specific evidence comes from newspapers. If we look at the Italian-language daily newspaper that is most closely comparable to the *Guardian*, *La repubblica*, the contrast is striking. Whereas the *Guardian* between 1985 and early 2010 split 177:3500 or approximately 1:20 in the respective use of *Shoah* and “Holocaust”, as noted above, for the same period, *La repubblica* split

¹⁷ “Legge n. 91”. Emphasis in the original.

2587:4410, or approximately 3:5.¹⁸ This is in itself a remarkable difference, but a year-on-year breakdown of the *Repubblica* figures is even more illuminating, as Table 2 illustrates.

La repubblica. Digital archive search, 1985-2010

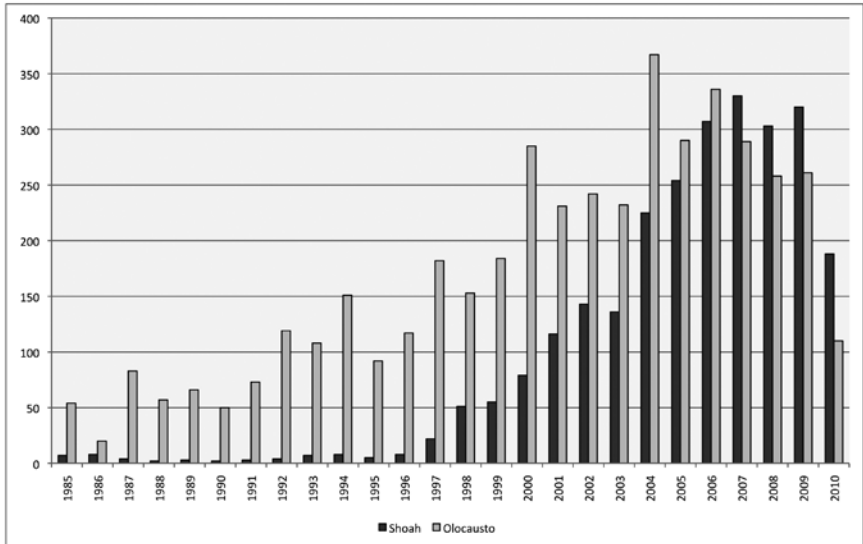


Table 2. Annual usage of *Shoah* and *Olocausto* in *La repubblica*, January 1985–April 2010.

Several features of this table are worth commenting on. First, it is striking that there is next to no usage of *Shoah* between 1985 and 1996: in other words, the influence of Lanzmann’s film, which appeared in 1985, at the level of linguistic usage in daily journalism is close to negligible here and for several years after its first showings; so the rise to prominence of the term cannot strictly be tied to the immediate impact of that work, despite its cultural significance and the acclaim it received. Indeed, it takes well over a decade for the term to enter a phase of rapid growth. This holds for Italy, but also

18 Search carried out using the online archive of *La repubblica*. The data from both this search and the Lexis search of the *Guardian* should be used with caution, as there are inaccuracies and duplications in the figures. Control searches carried out on the online archives of both *Corriere della sera* and *La stampa* showed less marked although comparable tendencies (respectively, 1:2 and 2:5), with a clear acceleration in the occurrences of *Shoah* in the late 1990s and again in the early 2000s: certain differences are ascribable to the political and cultural positioning of each title and their editors. In Italian, there is a further problem of transliteration, since *Shoa*, *Shoà* and other forms also occur, invisible to searches for *Shoah* (cf. Sullam Calimani 107).

for the UK, where the *Guardian* shows an average of only two occurrences per year between 1984 and 1993. Further, in these handful of instances, the term is typically explained or glossed, suggesting an unknown usage; for example, “the Shoah (the Hebrew for the Holocaust)” (*Guardian*, 21 August 1987). The very few references found in 1985–86 in *La repubblica* are to Lanzmann; the first usage not to be tied to Lanzmann comes in 1987, in reference to the Waldheim affair (over the Austrian presidency of former UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim and his equivocations over his record of Nazi military service).

Secondly, there is a marked and rapid rise in the use of *Shoah* in the late 1990s leading up to the new millennium (with a 1500% rise between 1996 and 2001), whilst at the same time there is also a parallel, rapid rise in the use of “Holocaust”. This is, in other words, a period of intense and increased attention to the genocide generally, with whatever label applied, one reproduced globally as the Ngram graphic in Table 1 confirms. End-of-the-century retrospection (coupled with new genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia) produced an upsurge in contemplation of the horrors of the 1940s, across Europe and beyond.

Thirdly, the trend for global growth in both terms continues during 2001–04, with a further 300% growth in the use of *Shoah*. The repeated staging on a larger scale of the “Giorno della memoria” starting in 2001 had a direct impact on this (usage clusters typically around 27 January in all these years). After 2004, however, “Holocaust” begins a decline from a high level, whereas *Shoah* continues its rise until a striking moment of cross-over in 2007 when it overtakes and remains the more prevalent term in each of the following three years to 2010.

A comparable picture emerges, finally, if we look at a series of book title searches of the Italian national library catalogue (“SBN”), with date limits between 1985 and 2010 (and control searches for the period 1945–84).¹⁹ This is a particularly important sector to look at alongside the more public and civic spheres of legislation and print media, since it taps into the key influence of academic and scholarly work in this field, work which often precedes and leads the way in developing new insight and new terminological usage in many fields but which only rarely has sufficient purchase to influence wider public usage.²⁰ The particular and unusual weight given to expert researchers in the press, other media and in state deliberations in regard to the Holocaust and indeed the politics of public collective memory in late 20th-century Italy

19 Once again, we need to be cautious about using these raw figures, which, for example, count republications and new editions of books as separate entries; although in a sense such reissuing is a legitimate measure to use, itself a key index of cultural and commercial interest in the field.

20 On the academic ‘sphere’ in Holocaust culture, see Gordon, *Holocaust* 31–3.

is powerfully in evidence here in the synergies between book publications and the wider public spheres discussed above.

In this period, 235 books appear in Italian with *Olocausto* in the title, although a significant minority of these are translations from other languages where “Holocaust” or cognates were standard in the source language. Between 1945 and 1984, sixty-two titles use *Olocausto* also, although many of these do not use it in reference to the Nazi genocide but in its more general or antiquated meanings. *Shoah* appears in 290 book titles after 1985, or more precisely and more strikingly, in 289 titles after 1994. There is, that is, only one instance of its use as in a book title between 1985 and 1994, in a tie-in to Lanzmann’s film and indeed not a single other instance between 1945 and 1994. In 1994, it was used in the subtitle of a degree dissertation and only in 1995 does it appear in a cluster of books: a translated history published by the PCI newspaper *L’Unità*, a short collection of testimonies, *Voci dalla Shoah*, a book on children and the Holocaust, and a translated work of history on Israel, America and the genocide.²¹ As in the newspaper usage, indeed if anything more conclusively, *Shoah* emerges in the mid-1990s and rapidly overtakes *Olocausto* in its incidence in Italian book titles.²²

3

Why has this unusual lexical shift occurred and what was its particular force around the turn of the millennium in Italy? What is it symptomatic of, in Italian collective conceptions of the Holocaust in particular and in Italy’s cultural politics in general at that moment? It is plausible to suggest that it speaks of complicated, overdetermined vectors of cultural anxiety and instability, a form of border anxiety in the geopolitics of language after the end of the Cold War and in particular in a period of dramatic geopolitical realignment within Italy as well as across Europe as a whole? Language shifts in line with the tectonic plates of macro-historical categories shift. These shifts manifested themselves in this instance in multiple dynamics relating to present events but also to history and memory, as the widespread emergence of anxieties in late -20th-century public debates in Italy on the divided memory of the

21 See, respectively, Scortegagna; *Voci dalla Shoah*; Papa; Grynberg; Donno.

22 Another note of caution: if we take as a further control a search for the term “Auschwitz”, we find a higher incidence than either *Shoah* or *Olocausto*: 396 book titles since 1985, with 57 before 1985 and none of these any earlier than 1958. “Auschwitz”, as Sullam Calimani documents (71–6), emerges as an emblem for the entire genocide, with no need for translation, although it is not usable as a discursively precise label for the historical event of the Nazi genocide(s) in all its or their complexity.

Resistance, the problem of equivalence of “red” and “black” or anti-Fascist and Fascist memory, or of failed responses to the state and anti-state violence of the 1970s (and so on), all demonstrate.²³ More generally, too, the period is marked by conceptual anxieties in the postmodern sense of coming “after” (post-anti-fascism, after history and so on), and in the simultaneous fraying, fragmentation and intensification of stable categories of value and ideology.

In the specific case of the shift from *Olocausto* to *Shoah*, we can point to several possible lines of explanation and interpretation that might fill in both its sources and causes and its implications. First, there is the self-evident “foreignness” of the term *Shoah* (although, as in French and unlike English to a degree, the word is eminently pronounceable in Italian phonetic patterns). The adoption of a new, foreign term might suggest the need to name and define a new and awkwardly assimilated phenomenon: but this is not quite the case here. Rather, the Holocaust is, precisely, in the process of being redefined and repositioned in its value and weight within Italian conceptions of its own national history, just as this new term rises to general use. On the one hand, the use of a foreign term to define the Holocaust repeats an operation that was familiar from as early as the 1940s post-war phase, when Italy – collectively, culturally and also in diplomatic strategy – did all it could to distance itself from the Axis alliance and from Germany, to redraw the boundaries of war narratives with the Nazis as “other” and Italy as “victim”.²⁴ So this “otherness” was, in different ways, connoted by the earlier spread of terms such as “*Lager*” or “Auschwitz”, German or Germanized terms and sites that were, among other facets, not Italian. And *Shoah* too fed the recognizable pattern of deflection or disavowal – the Holocaust as an external cataclysm, like a natural disaster, visited upon Italy’s Jews, or resisted by Italy’s Jews together with their “naturally” good Italian neighbours. And yet the late 1990s and early 2000s also saw something of a contrary dynamic, that is the promotion of an open acknowledgement of Italy’s complicit role in the Holocaust, alongside more consolatory stories of Italians’ virtuous efforts to resist it. Indeed, the growth in the use of *Shoah* coincided with campaigns to put Italian complicity for the first time at the heart of Holocaust history and, even more importantly for a national sense of collective memory, to put the Holocaust at the heart of national narratives of Fascism and the war.²⁵

These inversions and paradoxical associations – the *Shoah* as, yes, a foreign phenomenon in origin and kind, as an event in Jewish history and European

23 On the highly problematic issue of “divided memory” and the legacy of the Resistance in post-war Italy, see, e.g., Foot. On the intersection of this with the legacy of the Shoah, see Consonni.

24 See, e.g., Focardi.

25 The most polemical assertions of this “anti-innocentist” line to date is Levis Sullam.

history, but with and through that, as also an *Italian* event – were forcefully captured at the time the lexical shift we are examining was in process, in journalist and writer Furio Colombo's emblematic slogan for the promotion of the project for an official Italian Holocaust memorial day. As Colombo repeatedly put it, in newspaper articles, media and parliamentary debate leading up to the first "Giorno della memoria" of 2001: "La Shoah è anche un delitto italiano" (Colombo). There were, in other words, specific, historical Italian victims and specific, historical Italian perpetrators and abettors of this "crime"; Jewish history and Italian history intersected, tragically. Relabelling the event as the *Shoah* from a position such as Colombo's, then, enacted a dual process, of tightening of moral and historical specificity (giving a unique and unambiguous term to name the "Event"), and then recalibrating it at a local level to record the national inflection the term and the events took on in Italy.

Shoah is, of course, more than merely foreign. It is a specifically Hebrew word and so its emergence connotes also more open acknowledgement of the Jewishness of the vast majority of the victims of the Holocaust and the distinct nature of the genocidal violence visited upon the Jews compared with other groups and categories of Nazi victims. This clear connotation also, conversely, risks marginalizing, or at least subordinating other genocides, which were garnering greater attention themselves in historiography and memory during this period: the Rom, Sinti, homosexual, Slav, mentally ill or other victims of Nazi persecution, euthanasia and genocide are encompassed in only the most strained manner by the Hebrew term, although as we saw above, legislation at both national and international levels simultaneously attempted to broaden the scope of official memorializing to include other genocides and other experiences of war and extreme suffering.

Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of the Holocaust's Jewishness marks a distinct and important shift in Italy away from the loose post-war assimilation of Jewish victims of the Holocaust to deportation experiences generally, and from there to (often fraught) national narratives of the Resistance and/or the military or civilian labour deportation and concentration camp internment. The latter tendency had been facilitated by the prevalence of terms such as *Lager*, deportation, even the phrase *univers concentrationnaire* coined by the French political deportee David Rousset in an influential 1946 book. This move fits also into the dual process noted above, so that Colombo and his like were proposing to integrate a specifically Jewish event into Italian history, with Jewish-Italian experience included alongside stories of non-Jewish Italian perpetrators and virtuous neighbours. This coincides with and is plausibly linked to the emergence of something like a multicultural identity politics in Italy – prompted by the (highly fraught and contested)

rise in immigration to Italy during the 1990s. From within the sphere of the Jewish community in Italy, the shift to *Shoah* can be seen in this light as part of the emergence of something akin to the North American phenomenon of hyphenated identity; Jewish-Italian as, say Hispanic-American.²⁶ There is a strikingly high public profile for the Jewish community and for figures of the Jewish intelligentsia in Italian public and media life in this period, mostly in relation to the *Shoah*, but also to the Papacy, Israel/Palestine, and other important public historical and political issues.

Outside the community, the Jewish quality to *Shoah* is echoed in a remarkable wave of high-cultural philosemitism in liberal intellectual circles in Italy, starting in the 1980s with a vogue for and translation of the literature of Jewish Mitteleuropa, and sustained into the 1990s–2000s through the lionization of a new generation of politically active, “pro-peace” Israeli literary novelists, such as David Grossman, Amos Oz and Abraham Yehoshua. This vogue sat awkwardly alongside the historical and still unresolved problem of the Italian left’s post-1967 hostility to Israel and general support for its Arab opponents in the Middle East.²⁷ This was especially acutely felt in the 1990s and after, since the new Italian right – led Gianfranco Fini and his Alleanza nazionale – had responded by systematically courting Jewish-Israeli recognition, including participation in solemn ceremonies at Auschwitz and at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The trend for borrowing from Hebrew to rename the Holocaust undoubtedly fed into this complex nexus of cultural attention and political affinity.

A corollary of these first two characteristics of the term *Shoah* – its general foreignness and its specific Jewishness – as well as the doubling back from these to a qualified sense of its Italianness (Colombo) was reflected in the new historiography and collective memory of the Resistance. As noted, collective consensus about the role of the Resistance in Italian memory and politics was deeply weakened in the 1990s, and the shift to *Shoah* meshed with the post-ideological, moral analysis of the Resistance initiated by Claudio Pavone’s work, which among other things, drew on the category of the “grey zone” first developed by Primo Levi in his discussion of the camps in *The Drowned and the Saved*.²⁸ Resistance historiography began to assimilate the Holocaust as a result: a powerful recent example is Sergio Luzzatto’s work on the early weeks of the Resistance in late 1943 and early 1944 in the Val d’Aosta, a work which garnered intense attention, and indeed a good deal of hostility, because it centred its narrative and analysis of the Resistance on the micro-history of

26 On the coincidences in America between Holocaust talk and the emergence of a “victim” politics and hyphenated ethnic identity categories, see Novick.

27 On the Italian left and Israel see di Figlia; Molinari.

28 Pavone, *Una guerra civile* and “Caratteri”.

Primo Levi's partisan experience and the group of Jewish companions who might have been involved in the summary execution of two fellow partisans. Luzzatto poses new questions to the historical problem of the Resistance by framing it within Holocaust lines, and vice versa.²⁹

Shoah did not emerge, however, in the 1990s–2000s exclusively in relation to terms such as “Holocaust” or to Italian labels and histories from “Resistance” to “Fascism” and the like. It also emerged alongside contemporary events of the 1990s, including as noted genocidal violence in Rwanda and ex-Yugoslavia. The latter in particular, for its terrifying vocabulary of “ethnic cleansing” and its specific threat to Europe's sense of its own history and the present, has particular relevance for the qualities and language of talk about the Holocaust in this period. Indeed, the phrase “ethnic cleansing” points to another aspect of the implications of the use of *Shoah*, namely the presence in this moment of a jumbled juxtaposition of vocabularies of genocide and other catastrophic histories. In a (post-modern or post-ideological?) period of globalized, mestizo language and multi-culturalism such as characterized the late 20th century, *Shoah* sits alongside a panoply of other terms from past and present, each more or less assimilated into host languages: Rwandan massacres of Tutsis by Hutus, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and a host of loosely analogous earlier terms of horror, from killing fields to *desparecidos*, from the Gulag, to the *Holodomor*, the *Medz Yeghern*, the *Nakba*, and so on. Each has its own specific valency and strangeness, but the spectrum as a whole connotes attention to micro-history over macro-history, and an ethical acknowledgement of other histories and other languages, and so “other” victims of historical persecution.

One final thread seems to feed into the authoritative establishment of *Shoah* as the default term to describe the Nazi genocide in Italy, a thread associated with renewed or adapted forms of religious language. Hebrew is not only a language of Jewish identity or indeed Israeli statehood: it is also, and markedly so outside Israel, a language of prayer and liturgy. Although, as with “Holocaust”, this could be a source of discomfort for circles of survivors and other gatekeepers since the association of the genocide with the sphere of the divine or of faith is at best troubling, in other spheres this carries with it its own undoubted cultural force, perhaps especially in a country like Italy conditioned as ever by the cultural presence and weight of the Church.³⁰ Before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, and indeed in collective memory thereafter, the Latin Mass connoted a respectful sense of ritual, an aura of piety and sacredness which is properly due and the deployment of a

29 Luzzatto. On the polemic surrounding Luzzatto's book, see Allegra.

30 For a recent analysis of the religious dimensions embedded within Italian culture, see De Donno and Gilson.

term from the holy language of the Old Testament can be said to share this same resonance, possibly at an even higher pitch of intensity.

This “liturgical” aura to the term *Shoah* works at several levels at once. It chimes with the emergent practice in late 20th-century Italy as elsewhere in Europe and North America of something akin to a transnational civic religion of the *Shoah*,³¹ in which sites of memory and mourning, dates in a memorial calendar and collective rituals and recitations all contribute to a sense of the Holocaust as a none-too-hidden mythical origin narrative for modern Europe. It is worth noting in this respect, furthermore, that this was only one of a competing set of civic religious practices of the period, shared with often competing rituals surrounding the Resistance or the victims of Communist violence or of extremist terrorism of the 1970s in a growing calendar of commemoration and identification, all complicated by the echoes and resonances of the totalitarian ritualizations of public life undertaken under Fascism.

Such broad analogies speak of a generalizable drift in which “pious” commemoration of the *Shoah* – and the use of the term itself – is part of a broader late-century secular ritualization of the public sphere. The piety of the term *Shoah*, however, also needs to be linked in a much more specific and narrow way to the Catholic Church. A key influence on its emergence was undoubtedly its adoption in a series of papal pronouncements under the charismatic aegis of John Paul II (1978–2005), who boldly and often controversially confronted as part of his papal mission the problem of the Holocaust, whether regarding the role of Pius XII, the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz or the Church’s millennial relations with the Jews. For example, John Paul commissioned a highly significant report from the Catholic Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, published in 1998 as *We Remember. A Reflection on the Shoah*. The document tellingly adopts the term *Shoah* throughout, as it offers key gestures in reconciliation and in acknowledgement of the gravity of the Holocaust on the part of the Catholic Church. John Paul himself signed a prefatory letter to *We Remember*, declaring “the *Shoah* remains an indelible stain on the history of the century”.

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Sullam Calimani talks of the power of the word *Shoah* as an empty label, one that can be filled by any number of meanings and associations, and suggests that this explains its general acknowledgement, by those who have contemplated the problem in all its ramifications, as the most appropriate – for which read least objectionable – term available (Sullam Calimani 108). We see evidence of this malleability in the way its adoption in Italy has been driven

31 See, e.g., Hansen-Glucklich.

by a series of diverse, even contradictory impulses and implications, for state and Church, left and right, Jewish and general culture and community. This is not so much, however, a sign of the term's emptiness, as of the complex loading onto it of a great deal of historical, collective baggage, and of the overburdened legacies of other terms as they have made their way through the minefield of post-war response and representation. This perhaps is the most telling symptom of all of the state of public discourse in Italy at the turn of the millennium, and not only in the field of memory and history of the Holocaust.

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