

Italian Jews and the Catholic Reformation: Ghettoization, Restriction, and Demarcation in Rome, Venice, and Florence

SPIRIT WAITE

Instability had characterized the lives of Italian Jews long before the Catholic Reformation broke out in the early sixteenth-century. However, once reforming zeal was kindled in earnest, Italian Jews became targets of the heightened hostility toward non-Catholics. The popular attitudes and official policies that developed throughout the politically fractured Italian peninsula during this era demonstrate that hostility toward Jews increased dramatically during the zenith of the Catholic Reformation, and that tremendous variance existed in the manifestations and severity of this hostility from state to state.

For centuries before the Catholic Reformation ushered in an era of religious reform in the early decades of the sixteenth-century, instability had characterized the lives of Italian Jews. This tumult resulted from the perpetual election of new popes, whose individual proclivities determined to a great extent how many rights and privileges, if any, the Jews in their dominion enjoyed. Just as new pontiffs continually changed the status of Jews, Italy's political fragmentation throughout the early modern period complicated it further. Indeed, Jews living outside the Papal States were subject to the laws of other rulers. Even during the most favorable pontificates, political rivals sometimes used their Jewish subjects to rebuff papal authority. As the Catholic Reformation flourished during the last three quarters of the sixteenth-century, reformist attitudes and policies concerning Jews as religious outsiders destabilized their position throughout the peninsula further still. An examination of popular sentiments and official policies concerning the Jews in three separately

governed Italian cities – Rome, Florence, and Venice – Demonstrates that, although both personal and political sentiments became more consistently hostile toward Jews during the zenith of the Catholic Reformation, they nevertheless differed throughout the peninsula as they reflected the proclivities and motives of various regional rulers.

As a religious minority outnumbered by a vast Catholic majority, early modern Italian Jews had tenuous relationships with the states in which they resided. Although their presence in Christian realms was technically abominable, many Catholic leaders held a paradoxical conception of the Jews, which posited that Jewish financiers and merchants simultaneously benefited Christian economies while also threatening their desired religious conformity. Thus, the presence of Jews in Christian dominions demanded justification, and one of the most famous defences posited that Jewish moneylenders filled a vital economic function.¹ The stereotype of the Jewish usurer is a remarkably well-preserved medieval trope considering, as Robert Bonfil has convincingly argued, that Jews did not own or operate Italy's largest banks, but instead "filled the vacuums left by Christian financiers, who were forbidden by local authorities with increasing zeal as the fifteenth-century progressed to number among their economic activities small consumer loans."² Despite the exaggeration of Jewish financial prowess, even Bonfil concedes that money lending was a visible minority occupation among Italian Jews. Indeed, doctrinally speaking, Jews made

¹ Stefanie B. Siegmund, *The Medici State and the Ghetto of Florence: The Construction of an Early Modern Jewish Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 96. The prominence of this justification is perhaps eclipsed only by Saint Augustine's supposition that Jews bear necessary witness to Christian truth.

² Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 32.

convenient lenders, as the Bible condemns the practice of lending at interest between persons of the same faith.³ As non-Christians, Jews could fill the need for small loans while simultaneously protecting Catholics from the sin of usury.⁴

Predictably, lenders were often unpopular among their debtors, and as visible religious ‘others’ collecting on debts, Jews became intrinsically linked with popular conceptions of avarice and usury. Thus, Jews throughout the peninsula were targets for popular hostility, and zealous mendicant friars exploited this resentment to excite audiences against the presence of Jews in their communities.⁵ In his analysis of two seminal fourteenth-century mendicant friars, Giovanni Dominici and Bernardino da Sienna, Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby demonstrates how the anti-Jewish polemic of these men became foundational for the generations of Catholic reformers that emerged in force in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries.⁶ Indeed, the fiery preaching of their successors sometimes resulted in pogroms, as in Florence in 1448, as well as malicious allegations of ritual murder. The most notorious such accusation concerned the death of a Christian child called Simon, whose body was found by two Jews in Trent in 1475 following the ill-timed preaching of Fra Bernardino de Feltre against the blood libel (the fictitious allegation that Jews

³ Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, eds. *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 8, 55.

⁴ Ibid., 12, 55. Although this excuse satisfied the need for justification, as Bonfil notes in *Jewish Life*, Christian banks provided the majority of large loans.

⁵ Siegmund, *The Medici State*, 54.

⁶ Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, “Jews and Judaism in the Rhetoric of Popular Preachers: The Florentine Sermons of Giovanni Dominici (1356-1419) and Bernardino da Siena (1380-1444)” *Jewish History* 14, no. 2 (January 2000): 175. A notable beneficiary of their combined anti-Jewish polemic was the Dominican Girolamo Savonarola, who affected the expulsion of the Florentine Jewry in 1494.

killed Christian children and used their blood in their religious rituals). After being imprisoned and tortured, thirteen Jews were executed for the child's murder.⁷ Although the incident in Trent has received particular attention, scholars and archivists have identified at least twelve similar accusations from the second half of the fifteenth-century.⁸ Such violent outbreaks were both serious and frequent enough to elicit admonitions from Rome. Popes Martin V (1417-1431) and Eugene IV (1431-1447) both wrote multiple letters ordering provocative preachers not to incite violence with anti-Jewish polemic.⁹ These incidents of violence demonstrate that enough hostility against Jews prevailed in pre-Reformation Italy for charismatic preachers to move their audiences from passive hostility to acts of violence.¹⁰

As the Catholic Reformation began in earnest, unsanctioned outbursts of hostility transformed into formal actions such as Talmud burnings. Papal concerns about heresy and religious non-conformity began to increase dramatically in the fifteenth-century. As reformers disseminated unorthodox interpretations of the Bible, proponents of orthodoxy feared that those Hebrew writings that directly contradict Catholic doctrines could exacerbate the problem.¹¹ Intent on stamping out ever-growing subversion, the Cardinal and Inquisitor Giovanni Pietro Carafa, who would later become Pope Paul IV, instructed the Roman Inquisition to burn the Talmud in 1553, and, as Sam Waagenaar has noted, the poverty of literacy in Hebrew among the middling officials who collected copies of the text led to an

⁷ Sam Waagenaar, *The Pope's Jews* (La Salle: Open Court Publishers, 1974), 126-128.

⁸ Bonfil, *Jewish Life*, 25, 28.

⁹ Debby, "Jews and Judaism," 187.

¹⁰ Bonfil, *Jewish Life*, 28.

¹¹ Seigmund, *The Medici State*, 78.

“indiscriminate confiscation of Jewish books.”¹² Inconsiderate of the blow to Hebrew culture, Pope Julius III sanctioned Carafa’s decree and, in addition to the Papal States, his order was carried out in Florence and Venice, which hosted a subsequent mass burning of Hebrew texts in 1568.¹³

In addition to these various manifestations of anti-Jewish prejudice, the lack of consistent papal attitude toward Jews and Judaism made life in the popes’ dominion unpredictable for the Italian Jewry. Whenever a pope died, Roman Jews could not be sure whether the newest pontiff would treat them kindly, indifferently, or harshly. In the fifteen-tens Julius II (1503-1513), who was committed to converting the Jews, advocated kindness, and by the fifteen-twenties his position was entrenched, as evidenced by more than five hundred papal letters that reflect his position.¹⁴ Despite the establishment of this gentle policy, subsequent Popes departed from it during the zenith of the Catholic Reformation, and living conditions for Italian Jews, especially those residing in Papal States, correspondingly deteriorated. Revealing their reforming spirits, Paul IV (1555-1559) and Pius V (1566-1572) were particularly hostile and restrictive.¹⁵ Even the more lenient pontificate of Pius IV, who served between them, offered little respite.¹⁶

¹² Waagenaar, *The Pope’s Jews*, 166.

¹³ Siegmund, *The Medici State*, 53; Benjamin Arbel, *Trading Nations: Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 10.

¹⁴ Stow, “The Papacy and the Jews: Catholic Reformation and Beyond,” *Jewish History* 6, 1/2 (January 1992): 258, 262, 268. Julius II’s policy actually echoed the ninety-year old position of Martin V, which indicates that enough deviation had occurred between their pontificates to necessitate an admonition against cruelty.

¹⁵ Siegmund, *The Medici State*, 57; Bonfil, *Jewish Life*, 65.

¹⁶ Siegmund, *The Medici State*, 57.

By the time Paul IV was elected it was evident that passivity was failing to deliver satisfying numbers of converts. Thus, fostered by the enthusiasm of the Catholic Reformation, the papacy inverted its strategy from one of gentleness to one of brutality.¹⁷ Less than two months after his election, Paul IV demonstrated that time had not tempered his anti-Jewish prejudice: issuing the papal bull *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, he ordered the Papal States to observe diligently existing canons that subjugated the Jews.¹⁸ Among its fifteen tenets, the most relevant here are those that demanded that Jews always wear “a hat or some obvious marking” to distinguish them from Christians, restricted employment options (and by extension, livelihoods), and called for ghettoization.¹⁹ Paul IV did not decree that all non-papal states must abide by the bull; however, Pius V, who first reaffirmed *Cum Nimis Absurdum* and then expanded it with his own bull of expulsion, *Romanus pontifex*, did.²⁰

It was in this atmosphere of zealous reform that the Roman Jewry was confined to a repugnant ghetto to facilitate conversion; however, the papacy was not content simply to segregate the Jews and wait. Indulging the Jews had failed, and thus the new strategy was to make life so unpleasant that conversion seemed preferable.²¹ Yet, despite the vile and unsanitary living conditions, the restriction to earning a living by dealing second hand items, and the forced sermons wherein preachers beseeched them to abandon their false rejection of

¹⁷ Stow, “The Papacy and the Jews,” 263.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Benjamin Ravid, “Cum Nimis Absurdum and the Ancona Auto-da-Fé Revisited: Their Impact on Venice and Some Wider Reflections” *Jewish History* 26, no. 1/2 (May 2012): 86.

²⁰ Siegmund, *The Medici State*, 55, 57. Once again this Bull excluded from expulsion the Jews confined to ghettos in Rome and Ancona.

²¹ Stow, “The Papacy and the Jews,” 263.

Christ, few Jews chose to convert.²² To the chagrin of the reforming popes, most of the Jews were, as Waagenaar writes, “bad joiners.”²³ Although it failed to instigate mass conversions, *Cum Nimis Absurdum* was the tool with which the papacy tried to instigate uniformity concerning the position of Jews across all Catholic states.²⁴ Its timely reinforcement of existing anti-Jewish canons reflects the reforming desire to neutralize Judaism as a potential threat to Catholic orthodoxy.

While Pius V exempted Roman Jews from expulsion with the aim of converting them, their coreligionists in the Papal States trading city of Ancona were likewise confined rather than banned, although toward a different end. Since the expulsion of Jews from Portugal and Spain in 1492 and 1497 respectively, many Jews had journeyed east to the Ottoman Empire, and some of these exiles later removed to Italian trade cities.²⁵ Ancona was only one of several cities that tried to attract Jewish merchants who might bring with them mercantile relationships with the Ottomans.²⁶ Paul III had invited “merchants of various origins,” including Jews, to Ancona for trade, thereby setting a precedent of Jewish residency which was later exploited, rather than undone, by reformist popes.²⁷

Unlike Rome, where ghettoization followed the issue of *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, Venetian Jews had already been confined to a ghetto since 1516, one year before Martin Luther posted his inflammatory theses, and decades before the decrees of the reformist popes. Indeed, the term *ghetto* seems to have been a

²² Waagenaar, *The Pope's Jews*, 172-173, 175, 194-195.

²³ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁴ Stow, “The Papacy and the Jews,” 257.

²⁵ Arbel, *Trading Nations*, 3; Benjamin C. I. Ravid, The First Charter of the Jewish Merchants of Venice, 1589, *AJS Review* 1 (January 1976): 188.

²⁶ Arbel, *Trading Nations*, 3.

²⁷ Siegmund, *The Medici State*, 106; Arbel, *Trading Nations*, 4, 10.

Venetian invention of uncertain origins.²⁸ Similar to Ancona, many of the Jews who migrated to Venice had been banished from Spain and Portugal and had subsequently spent time in the Ottoman Empire.²⁹ Venetian rulers hoped that these Jews, if controlled, could promote profitable trade in the state; however, as the number of Jewish merchants in Venice increased, discontent grew among its Catholic majority. A ghetto was created as a compromise.³⁰ Yet, by 1541 there were enough Jews in Venice to necessitate a second ghetto.³¹ Already banned from owning real estate in Venice since 1423, once segregated Jews could not buy homes even in the ghetto. They also faced employment restrictions confining them to specific trades, and had to wear distinguishing apparel at all times.³² Such loathsome garments had a long history within European Jewry, and this legacy of visible distinction did not make them more welcome. By the time that Venice instituted its second ghetto the state had already established its reputation for rebuffing papal authority, and it should be noted that the state did not restrict its Jews as much as either Paul IV or Pius V recommended. It was perhaps some consolation that, after the issue of *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, Venetian Jews, who were already living in ghettos, continued to enjoy the freedom to practice Judaism and to have synagogues within the ghetto walls.³³

Throughout the fifteen-forties the Venetian Senate continually issued short-term contracts, permitting Jewish merchants to trade.³⁴ In addition to these merchants, the Venetian

²⁸ Ravid, "Cum Nimis Absurdum," 88; Waagenaar, *The Pope's Jews*, 173-174.

²⁹ Arbel, *Trading Nations*, 3; Ravid, "The First Charter," 188.

³⁰ Ravid, "The First Charter," 189.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

³² Ravid, "Cum Nimis Absurdum," 89, 91.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

state also wished to exploit Jewish moneylenders. As early as 1516 the Senate began negotiating five-year contracts with the ghettoized Jewry, who obtained small concessions that allowed physicians to leave the ghetto after nightfall to treat patients and reduced the number of night-time hours the gates were locked in return for making loans.³⁵ Through these negotiations, Jewish lenders effectively became pawnbrokers in 1523, when they agreed to pay ten thousand ducats per year in exchange for issuing pledge-based loans at fifteen per cent interest and selling *strazzaria* (literally, rags; colloquially, second hand goods) inside the ghetto.³⁶ The Senate granted similar charters as each one lapsed until 1565, when the senators briefly decided to let it expire.³⁷ This decision, made while the Tridentine reforms were still relatively fresh, meant that those Jews who were no longer under contract would have to leave the ghetto once the charter expired. However, pecuniary concerns overcame other reformist considerations, and the contract was renewed just before its expiry “in light of the realization that the Christian poor... had nowhere else to turn.”³⁸

Regardless of these partial concessions, the perceived economic usefulness of the Jews did not nullify the long-standing anxiety that many Catholics held about the presence of religious outsiders. On the contrary, the prevalence of acute anti-Jewish sentiment during the Catholic Reformation is evidenced by discussions that commenced between Venice and the Papal States in 1570 with regards to expelling the Jews from Venice and Ancona simultaneously. The idea was to remove them from both cities without either competitor gaining a long-term advantage

³⁵ Davis and Ravid, *The Jews*, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

from their trade connections.³⁹ Such an expulsion was not realized, but other restrictions continued to plague the Venetian Jewry.

Like Venice, Florence was unwilling to yield completely to papal authority. In her work on the Florentine ghetto, Stefanie B. Siegmund argues that it was primarily “statecraft” that drove the ghettoization of the Medici State.⁴⁰ According to Siegmund, Cosimo de’ Medici, who became duke in 1537 and continued to enjoy de facto power after abdicating in favour of his son in 1574, was a cunning statesman whose self-promotion induced him to defer to papal authority while simultaneously asserting his own power within Florence in order to negate any need for papal interference.⁴¹ Toward this end, in 1570 Cosimo made Florence the first city outside of the Papal States to establish a ghetto in accordance with Pius V’s papal bull, thereby demonstrating esteem for the papacy, while simultaneously affirming his control over the city.⁴²

Despite Siegmund’s emphasis on political motivations, the ghettoization of Florence was still fostered by the climate of Catholic reform. Regardless of his motives, Cosimo exploited the heightened anti-Jewish hostilities and anxieties of the moment to curry papal favour. This is evidenced, as Siegmund herself concedes, by the sudden change in Cosimo’s position toward his Jewish subjects that followed the conclusion of the Council of Trent. From the beginning of his ducal reign, Cosimo had encouraged and even invited Jewish merchants into his realm in order to grow its trade economy, and he maintained this pragmatically neutral approach for the first three decades of his

³⁹ Arbel, *Trading Nations*, 69.

⁴⁰ Siegmund, *The Medici State*, 55.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴² *Ibid.*

rule.⁴³ Despite the relatively favourable environment that Cosimo had fostered in Florence, his position toward the Jews changed radically in the post-Tridentine years.⁴⁴ In 1563 he acquiesced to papal policy by ordering his Jewish subjects to wear distinguishing garments, and 1570, in accordance with Pius V's sweeping call for ghettoization or expulsion, the duke initiated the segregation of the Florentine Jewry.⁴⁵

The reforming zeal of post-Tridentine Italy affected Cosimo's subjects as well as the duke himself. Indeed, the men who administrated the creation of the ghetto, in particular Carlo Pitti, invoked "the language, feeling and faith concerns of the Catholic Reformation and of longstanding anti-Semitic traditions" as they prepared to sequester the Jews.⁴⁶ Pitti, who actually favoured expulsion, worked for the *Magistrato Supremo* investigating the Jews, and in this position he collected materials that claimed to demonstrate Jewish crimes. The existence of such an investigation demonstrates the prevalence of hostile suspicion toward the Florentine Jewry. Moreover, Pitti, like his master Cosimo, exploited this unfriendly climate to advance himself socially and politically. Although Siegmund downplays the role of virulent anti-Jewish sentiments in post-Tridentine Florence in favour of her "statecraft" hypothesis, it is clear that they were present and that they worked in concert with individualistic political manoeuvring. In their acts of self-advancement, Florentine politicians exploited the popular anti-Jewish sentiments that the Catholic Reformation had bolstered, expressing anti-Jewish sentiments and pursuing anti-Jewish

⁴³ Ibid., 51-52.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 58, 67.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 70.

policies.⁴⁷ By their very expressions and actions against Florence's Jewish population, notwithstanding their own personal prejudices, these politicians reinforced and likely heightened the anxieties that the population held concerning Jews as harmful Others.

As a testament to the fervour and spirit of the Catholic Reformation, cities and towns with Jewish populations throughout the Italian peninsula followed the example of Venice, Rome, Ancona, and Florence, and built the ghettos that would continue to confine Italian Jews for centuries. Whether the religious and secular leaders who established the ghettos and restricted their occupants were simply prejudiced against religious Others, as the case seems to be with Popes Paul IV and Pius V, or whether they dispassionately capitalized on the desire for religious conformity and the heightened sense of religious insecurity of the period, as Cosimo di Medici did, the Catholic Reformation played a vital role in both inspiring and facilitating the sudden shift from hostile indifference, peppered with bursts of violence, to widespread systematic subjugation. With the general population increasingly hostile toward Jews, and governmental institutions simultaneously unwilling to suffer the financial losses that they feared would result from total expulsion, religious and secular institutions alike settled instead for a grim compromise; by controlling the movements, occupations, and even apparel worn by their Jewish populations, the leaders of Rome, Venice, and Florence attempted to negotiate the precarious relationship between their Catholic states and the undesirable but seemingly necessary Jews that resided within them.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 55.

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