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'The Real Italians': The Politics of National Character in the 1940s

Abstract (paper presented October 2, 2002)

The paper examines the reconfiguration of the discourse of national character in the momentous 1940s by looking at a number of texts of different political orientation that purported to provide a comprehensive representation of the Italian character, in particular of its (political) vices and virtues. In that period negative reflections on Italian-ness reached a peak, both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum, but also a new image emerged, the Italians as a basically "good" and peace-loving people. The paper critically analyzes the themes, stereotypes, and argumentative strategies of the texts that produced these images and argues about the functionality of these images to the political projects of their authors. It also examines the way in which the past and "history" were used in this discourse and offers some critical reflections on the recent historiography on collective memory.