Ricerche storiche

"Redefining peace: Fascist Italy and fallen soldiers of the First World War"

Hannah Malone

Abstract

Italy's Fascist regime exploited the difficulties that arose from the transition to peace after the First World War. As a highly contested event, the war destabilised Italy's liberal state and paved the way for Benito Mussolini's rise to power. Although Italy was on the winning side, a disappointing peace treaty deepened divisions between Italians who remembered the war as a glorious triumph or as a pointless slaughter. Having taken hold in a society fractured by war, Fascism adopted a narrative of victory as a unifying device, a foundational myth, and a source of legitimacy. This article focuses on a group of ossuaries, or bone depositories, which were built by Mussolini's regime in 1929–39 for the reburied remains of fallen soldiers in order to show how Italian Fascism rewrote public memories of the war and its outcomes. Through their architecture, their uses, and related discourses, the ossuaries helped to project a positive image of the war, to bolster Mussolini's power, and to prepare Italians for future military engagements.

Keywords

First World War, peace, Fascism, commemoration, architecture

Biography
Max Planck Centre for the History of Emotions, Lentzeallee 94, Berlin 14195
hannaholiviamalone@gmail.com

As a researcher at the Max Planck Centre for the History of Emotions in Berlin, Hannah Malone is writing a book on Italy's Fascist ossuaries of the First World War. After completing a doctorate at the University of Cambridge, she worked as a Rome Fellow (2013–14) at the British School at Rome, as a Research Fellow and Lecturer (2014–17) at Magdalene College Cambridge, and then as a Humboldt Fellow (2017–19) at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her first monograph is entitled *Architecture, Death and Nationhood: Italy's Monumental Cemeteries of the Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 2017).

“Redefining peace: Fascist Italy and fallen soldiers of the First World War”

Peace did not come easily to Italy after the First World War. Three years of fighting and hardship together with the loss of over half a million Italians left the country socially divided and politically unstable. The effects of the war, combined with the difficulties inherent in the transition to peace, contributed to the emergence of the Fascist movement. Once in charge from 1922, the Fascist leader Benito Mussolini endeavoured to rewrite the history of the war and its outcomes by means of a narrative based on triumph, which might also help to impose unity within a fragmented nation. In challenging the results of the peace treaty, and in continuing the war by other means, the Fascist regime hindered a return to attitudes appropriate to peace. Meanwhile, it sought to appropriate the notion of a victorious war through a range of different policies and practices.

Within that context, Mussolini ordered that the remains of hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had died in the war be exhumed and reburied in new ossuaries (bone depositaries), which were built close to the former frontlines in north-eastern Italy and present-day Slovenia. Large and impressive, those monuments were intended to influence public perceptions of the First World War, and to promote the fallen soldier as a model from which images of heroism and self-sacrifice might be spun. This article examines those ossuaries as a window onto how Mussolini and the Fascist regime sought to manage the legacy of the war, and how they aimed to gain power through the exploitation of memories of Italy’s war dead.

From war to Fascism

Within Italy, the First World War generated a number of different narratives. In 1915, the country had been dragged into the conflict by a small, but vocal, minority working largely against the wishes of the Parliament and the population. Unlike the majority of the combatant nations, Italy's reasons for entering the war could not be portrayed as defensive. Moreover, while it shared with other countries a situation in which support for the war was mostly limited to the upper and middle classes, the anti-constitutional manner in which Italy entered the war was symptomatic of a lack of participation on the part of Italians in the life of the state.[1] As a relatively new state that dated back to 1861, Italy was young, partly modernized, and largely undemocratic. Moreover, as a nation that was relatively divided and unprepared, the war constituted a reckless and potentially damaging venture.[2] This raised expectations with respect to the peace treaty through which Italy gained the regions of Trento and Trieste, but failed to win possession of the coveted city of Fiume, or territory in the Balkans as promised by the allies under the Treaty of London of 1915.[3] Although Italy was on the winning side, for some

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[1] M. Isnenghi, *Il mito della Grande Guerra*, Bologna, 1989, p. 19; Gibelli, 'Italy', p. 468; M. Isnenghi-G. Rochat, *La Grande Guerra: 1914-1918*, Milano, 2004, pp. 123-125; D. Veneruso, *Vittoria mutilata*, in *Dizionario del fascismo,* edited by V. De Grazia-S. Luzzatto, Torino, 2005, pp. 792-793; Gooch, *The Italian Army*, p. 95.

[2] J. Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 2.

[3] The Treaty of London signed with the Entente powers on 26 April 1915 stipulated that, in case of victory, Italy would acquire Italian-speaking Trentino, German-speaking South Tyrol (Upper Adige), Trieste (predominantly Italian), Istria (with Italian minority), all of which was granted by the peace agreement in 1919 – although Italy was forced to return Istria after the

Italians the conclusion of the war felt like a defeat or 'mutilated victory' (*vittoria mutilata*). At the same time, a disappointing peace treaty made the human and economic costs of the war harder to bear, and fuelled a feeling that Italy had lost much but gained little.[4] Although Italian leaders had hoped that the war would establish Italy as a great power, it had the opposite effect of highlighting the country's weaknesses with respect to political leadership, military prowess, and foreign relations.[5] Italy had proven capable of withstanding the war militarily and economically, but its political and social structures were impacted by a conflict that shook the relatively weak foundations of the state.

Second World War. However, the London treaty also promised Italy a large part of Southern Slav Dalmatia and Albania, in addition to possible colonial expansion in North Africa – promises which remained unfulfilled: G. Rochat, *The Italian Front, 1915-18*, in *A Companion to World War I*, edited by J. Horne, Hoboken, 2010, p. 84; A. Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism*, 2017, p. 51.

[4] A. Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli italiani: 1915-1918,* Milano, 1998, pp. 333-334; P. Dogliani, *Constructing Memory and Anti-Memory*, in *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*, edited by R. J. B. Bosworth-P. Dogliani, New York, 1999, p. 12; G. Sabbatucci, *La Grande Guerra come fattore di divisione*, in *Due nazioni: Legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell'Italia contemporanea*, edited by L. di Nucci-E. Galli della Loggia, Bologna, 2003; M. Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani: parole, immagini, ricordi, 1848-1945*, Bologna, 2005, pp. 342-345.

[5] E. Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista (1918-1925)*, Bologna, 1996, pp. 125-126.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the war largely private initiatives drove the construction of monuments to the fallen in squares and streets across Italy.[6] Although stimulated by an outpouring of public grief, those initiatives exhibited a lack of consensus about how to remember the conflict. While reactions ranged between the poles of pacifism and triumphalism, socialism and nationalism, the diversity of those early monuments expressed deep divisions between those for whom the conflict was a victory and others for whom it represented a futile slaughter. Moreover, those differences mirrored the nature of a destabilized democratic system, fuelled class conflict, and stoked political violence; which after 1918, helped pave the way for Fascism. Initially, declining living standards and a widespread sense of resentment led, for example, to strikes and a stronger Italian Socialist Party (PSI); which garnered considerable electoral support during the 'red biennium' of 1919–21. While it capitalised on a growing sense of injustice, the PSI was also coherent in its opposition to the war, and its condemnation of profiteering in the face of a pointless loss of life. However, increasingly from 1919, Italy's

[6] C. Canal, *La retorica della morte. I monumenti ai caduti della Grande Guerra*, in «Rivista di Storia Contemporanea», XI, 4 (1982), pp. 659-669; A. Negri, *Monumenti ai caduti della Prima Guerra Mondiale. Un'indagine in Lombardia*, in *Notiziario dell'Istituto storico della resistenza in Cuneo e provincia* (1983), pp. 201–24; R. Monteleone-P. Sarasini, *I monumenti italiani della Grande Guerra*, in *La Grande Guerra: esperienza, memoria, immagini*, edited by D. Leoni-C. Zadra, Bologna, 1986; M. Isnenghi, *L'Italia in piazza: i luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai giorni nostri*, Milano, 1994, pp. 251-258; V. Vidotto-B. Tobia-C. Brice, *La memoria perduta: I monumenti ai caduti della Grande Guerra a Roma e nel Lazio*, Roma, 1998; O. Janz, *Mourning and cult of the fallen (Italy),* in *1914–1918 online: International Enciclopedia of the First World War*, pp. 4-6, [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918online.net/article/mourning_and_cult_of_the_fallen_italy, accessed July 2018].

socialists, trade unions, and other Leftist groups were subject to violent attacks initiated by well-armed Fascist paramilitary squads – whose actions were tolerated, or supported, by an establishment that feared the threats posed by bolshevism and internal sources of unrest. In addition to attacking people and property, those squads vandalized and demolished pacifist monuments, while new monuments were created that celebrated the war and cast the fallen as heroes who gave their lives for the good of the nation. Meanwhile, by 1921, political opinion in Italy had shifted to the Right. Even before the Fascists came to power in the following year, the pacifists and those who were neutral with respect to the war had lost the 'battle of the monuments'. Their defeat was due in no small part to the violence exerted by the Fascist squads, but it also followed from a growing public unwillingness to accept that the war losses might be meaningless. In short, by means of violence and propaganda, the Fascists managed to propagate memories of a victorious war to the point that they were taken up by a majority of the population.

Essentially, Fascism as a movement took hold in the fissures of a fractured nation with a vulnerable political structure. In that the war resulted in divisions within the Italian population, and between the state and its citizens, it offered Fascism a major entry point into the collective consciousness, which the regime used by overlaying divergent visions of the war with official memories of triumph.[7] While skilfully deploying the nationalist notion of a 'mutilated victory', the Fascist authorities also sought to further Italy's territorial claims, and eventually to underpin

[7] C. Fogu, *Fare storia al presente. Il fascismo e la rappresentazione della Grande Guerra*, in «*Memoria e Ricerca. Rivista Di Storia Contemporanea*», 7 (2001), pp. 49-69; O. Janz, *Grande Guerra, memoria della*, in *Dizionario del fascismo*, edited by V. de Grazia-S. Luzzato, Torino, 2005, pp. 627–30; E. Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista (1918-1925)*, Bologna, 2011.

its role in future wars. Thus, the memory of the First World War remained of paramount importance to the regime throughout its existence. As part of the identity of Fascism, its ideology, and its interpretation of history, the war presented an inexhaustible wellspring of myths, symbols, and images that could be used to promote and legitimize the Fascist cause.[8] While previous liberal governments had been reluctant to claim responsibility for the war, they also failed to draw political capital from a victory that might have been held to signal the enhanced status of Italy and its people. Rather, it was the Fascist regime that took charge of the fallen, and which used memories of the dead to forward its political agenda. Concurrently, it restricted initiatives led by veterans, mourners, and civic committees that might deviate from the image of a victorious war, and attempted to smother narratives that ran counter to that image.[9] Mussolini summarized the nature of the counter-narrative promulgated by Fascism in a speech given in 1928, which is frequently quoted in relation to the reburial of the fallen in Italy's new and impressive ossuaries. Essentially, that narrative was based on five 'truths': that the war had been welcomed by the Italian population; that it involved the participation of all Italians; that Italy had won; and that from the ensuing victory, a new Fascist Italy had been born.[10]

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8 O. Janz, *Grande Guerra, memoria della*, in *Dizionario del fascismo*, edited by V. de Grazia-S. Luzzato, Torino, 2005.

9 *Decennale della Vittoria*, 4 November 1928, quoted in full: http://www.adamoli.org/benito-mussolini/pag0439-.htm [accessed 2 December 2019].

10 *Decennale della Vittoria*, 4 November 1928, quoted in full in: Associazione Nazionale Volontari di Guerra, *Il Decennale, X anniversario della Vittoria*, Firenze, 1929, pp. 12–14; also quoted in relation to an ossuary: Comune di Asiago, *Il Comune di Asiago per la inaugurazione del Monumento ai caduti : Altipiano dei Sette Comuni*, Asiago, 1938.

Although neither new nor exclusive to Italy, the idea of war as a path to the rebirth of a nation was essential to the nature of Fascism, and the First World War was therefore presented as glorious, potentially painful, but absolutely necessary to the creation of a new social and political order.[11] Within that context, the war became a foundational myth for Fascism, and a vehicle through which it might be legitimized. To promote that myth, the regime instigated a programme that involved new rituals, orchestrated discourses, and the creation of numerous new objects, monuments, and urban spaces. The ossuaries that were built in 1929–39 for the reburied remains of the fallen were major elements in a complex web of strategies that was in part physical, and which included the creation of monuments to the fallen and remembrance parks, museums and archives, and the renaming of streets and squares. That web also took less tangible forms, such as, for example, ceremonies, speeches, and the publication of pamphlets.[12] However, underlying those strategies and their effects, there was the manipulation by the regime of a cult of the fallen soldier as an ideal symbol for a Fascist rhetoric of rebirth earned through sacrifice, and for its ambition to 'bequeath to posterity the memory of the victorious war'.[13] Simultaneously to the creation of the ossuaries, the dictatorship also produced a rash of buildings that suited the managerial nature of its social programmes and political intentions;

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[11] R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Londra, 1991, pp. 32-36; E. Gentile, *Le origini*, p. 77; A. Baravelli, *La vittoria smarrita*, p. 30.

[12] A. Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra*, p. 378; P. Ferrari, *The Memory and Historiography of the First World War in Italy*, in «*Comillas Journal of International Relations*», 2 (2015), pp. 120-122, https://doi.org/10.14422/cir.i02.y2015.009.

[13] *'tramandare ai posteri il ricordo della guerra vittoriosa'*, *Discussione del disegno di legge: Sistemazione definitiva delle salme dei caduti in guerra*, in *Atti Parlamentari*, Camera dei Deputati, 29 May 1931, p. 5096.

such as, local Fascist headquarters, schools, and care home for disabled veterans. The period under Fascism also witnessed the creation of new central railway stations, post offices, and major projects such as the University of Rome (1932) and the E42 and Palace of Italian Civilization (1938). The regime also invested heavily in the excavation and restoration of the remains of Ancient Rome; and encouraged the emergence within architecture of a concocted *romanità* (romaness) as a style based on Italy's classical precursor, and therefore suited to its identity. The evident intention on the part of the regime to build its way into the collective mind through the creation of symbolic buildings and monuments, together with its ambition to exploit the war dead as a source of propaganda, resulted in the creation of the ossuaries.

The re-burial of fallen soldiers

Originally, Italy buried soldiers who had died in the First World War in small cemeteries, or in mass graves close to the battlefields. However, by the late 1920s, the Fascist authorities judged these modest burial places to be unsatisfactory, or rather, unsuited to their ambitions regarding the fallen. Thus, having drawn power over the war dead from veterans' groups, local councils, and the Catholic Church, the state was in a position to manipulate the commemoration of the fallen to suit its political needs. From 1929, Mussolini had the remains of over 300,000 soldiers that were located in roughly 2,650 cemeteries transferred to 36 purpose-built ossuaries; which were created along former frontlines that stretched across north-eastern Italy and into what is now Slovenia.[14] While the process of re-burial meant that the remains of the fallen were

[14] A.M. Fiore, *La monumentalizzazione dei luoghi teatro della Grande Guerra* (PhD thesis, IUAV, 2001); L. Bregantin, *Per non morire mai: la percezione della morte in guerra e il culto*

concentrated within fewer and larger sites, the dead were also firmly placed under the control of the military; which in turn, afford greater agency to the state with respect to the memory of the war. In fact, the campaign of re-burial was run entirely by a military commission that was initially established to oversee the burial of Italy's fallen soldiers in 1919, but which took on new powers from the late 1920s.[15] The commission was headed by a succession of generals who, from 1935, responded directly to Mussolini. Although initially, the creation of the ossuaries was subject to a range of influences, for example, from architects with divergent views, over time they reflected the centralization of power in the hands of the commission, its close relationship to Mussolini, and the evolution of strategies regarding the interpretation of the war and the propaganda value of the fallen. In effect, the design of the ossuaries evolved over the period of their creation, and in step with political developments. Hence, while the ossuaries established before 1935 were more varied, later projects resulted from stricter controls, and for example, from the recurring influence of the partnership between the architect Giovanni Greppi and the sculptor Giannino Castiglioni.

Remembering the war

Although the ossuaries were built more than a decade after the end of the war, its impact on the public consciousness had since gathered new meanings associated, for example, with the sacrifices that were necessary to the 'glory of the fatherland', and with imagery that followed

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dei caduti nel primo conflitto mondiale, Padova, 2010; L. Bregantin-D. Vidale, *Sentinelle di pietra: i grandi sacrari del primo conflitto mondiale*, Villorba, 2016.

[15] The commission still exists today and is known as the Commissariato Generale per le Onoranze ai Caduti.

from the popularization of a Fascist myth of triumphant war.[16] The ossuaries carried that myth through symbols and signs encoded in their art and architecture, the uses and rituals that they accommodated, and propaganda in the form of a battery of newspaper articles, pamphlets, postcards, and films. For instance, the ossuary at Redipuglia (1938) exemplifies how, twenty years after the end of the war, the Fascists sought to keep its spirit alive (Figure 1). Following a strategy of 'super-concentration', Redipuglia housed remains from 89 smaller burial sites in the surrounding area, the largest of which was the renowned cemetery of Colle Sant'Elia (1919–23).[17] The differences between Sant'Elia and Redipuglia demonstrate how, in transferring the bodies of the dead, the Fascist regime sought to reform the image of the war. The cemetery of Colle Sant'Elia had contained roughly 22,000 fallen soldiers in graves arranged along ascending paths that encircled a conical hill.[18] Created to resemble a battlefield, the cemetery offered a relatively realistic view of combat in the form of 22 kilometres of concentric terraces that were blasted into a barren and stony landscape as an evocation of the trenches. While the authorities likened the ascending rings to Dante's purgatory, veterans compared them to the circles of hell. Each grave, whether of a known or unknown soldier, bore a personalised marker; for example, a memento, a souvenir from the trenches, or even battlefield debris such as helmets, boots, tools, weapons, barbed wire, and defused bombs. In

[16] '*dei sacrifici e della gloria della Patria*', plaque at the foot of the monument.

[17] '*formula … del super-concentramento*', AOCG, Pian de Salisei, letter from Gen. Giovanni Faracovi to Ministry of War, 29 November 1933; AOCG, "Elenco dei cimiteri da cui sono tratte le salme", uncatalogued.

[18] Fabi, *Redipuglia*, pp. 9-12; Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, pp. 46-49; P. Nicoloso, *Architetture per un'identità italiana: Progetti e opere per fare gli italiani fascisti*, Udine, 2012, p. 91.

addition, as mourners and comrades also left personal memorabilia at the site, the cemetery evolved beyond the control of the authorities. However, in the early 1930s, Colle Sant'Elia was judged to be ill suited to the strategies of the Fascist regime. It was chaotic and individualistic, and signalled the reality of warfare rather than the images of glorious sacrifice preferred by the regime. Rusting iron suggested the passage of time rather than the eternal light of an everlasting victory, and the diversity of the graves conveyed a sense of personalized commemoration rather than of remembrance in a homogenized and patriotic nation. On visiting the cemetery in 1932, the Fascist sympathizer and critic Ugo Ojetti was horrified to see 'bad taste perform the dance of death upon the bodies of thirty thousand dead'.[19] Similarly, for the commissioner in charge of military burials, Sant'Elia '*completely* misrepresented the function of a war cemetery', with its evocation of loss rather than of triumph.[20] Dismissing the cemetery as a 'scrap metal yard', Mussolini ordered the construction on a hill opposite the cemetery of Sant'Elia of the new ossuary of Redipuglia, which was to be designed by Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni.[21] While Sant'Elia embodied a 'glorious past', Redipuglia signalled the existence of a 'secure future'.[22] Moreover, after the bodies of the dead had been moved across to the new ossuary, Sant'Elia was destroyed despite public opposition; and whereas Sant'Elia had

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[19] '*Il cattivo gusto italiano balla su questi trentamila morti la sua danza macabr*a', Q. Antonelli, *Cento anni di Grande Guerra. Cerimonie, monumenti, memorie e contromemorie,* Roma, 2018, p. 241.

[20] '*la funzione di un cimitero di guerra era* completamente *travisata*', Fiore, *La monumentalizzazione* (2001), p. 143.

[21] '*deposito di un ferro vecchio*', quote from Cei's memoirs in Fiore, *La monumentalizzazione* (2001), p. 143.

[22] '*passato glorioso'*, '*sicuro ... avvenire*', Fuiano, *Credo nella risurrezione*, p. 200.

commemorated the war as remembered by veterans, Redipuglia arose as a powerful expression of war that was idealized for political purposes.

As if to illustrate that difference, veterans were reduced to an ancillary role at the inauguration of the Redipuglia, while Mussolini and the military authorities took centre stage.[23] Meanwhile, in shifting the focus from individual deaths to the regeneration of the war dead as a collective, Redipuglia gathered into one monument the remains of over 100,000 soldiers, of which around 60,000 remained unidentified.[24] Whereas, in the cemetery of Sant'Elia the dead were buried in individual graves, Redipuglia is a vast structure of 22 terraces, each 140 metres long. As one journalist explained, the ossuary 'was inspired by a principle of unity with the intention to arrange the hundred thousand fallen … in compact masses'.[25] Thus, there is little distinction between one set of remains and the next. The names of the known were written in black upon a dark background, and the nearly forty thousand bronze slabs were tightly controlled with respect to their uniformity. The white marble of the new ossuary was also intended to convey a sense of permanence and to dispel any sense of loss or discontinuity; with the result that,

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[23] "Sulle vie della vittoria: visita dei reali d'Italia alla Venezia Giulia", YouTube video, 0:23-0:29 (1922), https://youtu.be/KxrQmMlimiA?t=1699 (accessed 13 August 2019); Dogliani, *Redipuglia*, pp. 385-386; Fabi, *Redipuglia*, 27; Dato, *Redipuglia*, p. 34.

[24] '*formula … del super-concentramento*', AOCG, Pian de Salisei, letter from Gen. Giovanni Faracovi to Ministry of War, 29 November 1933; AOCG, "Elenco dei cimiteri da cui sono tratte le salme", uncatalogued.

[25] '*La concezione del nuovo Ossario cimitero monumentale è stata ispirata da un principio unitario con l'intento di sistemare i centomila Caduti … in masse compatte*', *Morti più vivi dei vivi*, in «Il Popolo del Friuli» (20 September 1938), p. 2.

while Sant'Elia had shown signs of aging, Redipuglia reflected the endless time of Fascism rather than the limited life of the individual. Equally, a narrative based on the notion of rebirth displaced a sense of mourning. The giant ascending steps of Redipuglia lead to three large crosses; an obvious reference to Calvary and to Christ as a figure who, like the fallen soldier, died for a cause; and whose image might be compared to those who sacrificed their lives to redeem the nation. Visitors were expected to ascend the demanding staircases that were fitted to each side of the ossuary, and through the effort expended on those staircases, to express their indebtedness to the fallen, and their faith in a fatherland for which lives have been lost. A monumental avenue that leads from the entrance of the site to the terraces and their flanking staircases was also intended to inspire emotions that might take the form of awe, respect, obedience, or pride. Known as the Heroic Route (*Via Eroica*), the avenue is lined with 38 horizontal slabs that commemorate individual battles, and which tend to cast the main body of the ossuary as a *gran finale*, or a final and victorious battle as represented by 100,000 of the fallen (Figure 1). Similarly, at Mount Grappa a monumental avenue is flanked by vertical slabs that commemorate battles in the surrounding area (Figure 2). Originally, the beginning of the avenue at Monte Grappa was marked by a large statue depicting Italy as a robust female figure in the company of a foot soldier; an arrangement that symbolized how the military aided the nation's heroic route to a victory. Over twelve metres tall, the statue was illustrated in the contemporary press, but later disappeared under mysterious circumstances.[26]

[26] The most plausible explanation is that the statue was not ready in time for the inauguration of the ossuary in 1935 and a plaster model of the statue was erected in its place: M. Pa. [Mario Paniconi], *Cimitero del Grappa*, in «Architettura», XIV, 12 (Dec. 1935), pp. 663-667, here 666; anon., *Cimitero monumentale del Grappa*, in «L'Architettura Italiana», XXX, XI (Nov. 1935), pp. 376-381, here p. 380; *Il cimitero monumentale del Grappa*, in «Rassegna di

While they gained additional symbolic capital from their location close to major battlefields, the ossuaries contributed to an official policy to establish those battlefields as national monuments and symbols of Italy's victory. Unique in grandeur and form, they also drew on the symbolism of war-torn landscapes; for example, at Monte Grappa, where an ossuary shaped like a tower of Babel accommodates the remains of over 12,000 Italian soldiers at an altitude of nearly 2,000 meters (Figure 3). Monte Grappa derives part of its meaning from the ferocity with which Italian and Austrian forces fought to gain the advantages afforded by high ground – which once attained, was marked by the ossuary as a monument to the victor's success over his enemy. Similarly, the ossuary at Montello marked 'a very important place' from which the Italian army 'leapt beyond the [Piave] river … and pushed the enemy back up the valleys from which he had descended with arrogant confidence' (Figure 4).[27] Equally, the location of the ossuary at Fagarè commemorated 'the heroic defence by our marvellous soldiers' that forced the enemy to renounce 'all plans of invasion' – an event that Italians saw as 'the dawn of the great decisive victory'.[28]

Architettura», XIV, 7 (Nov. 1935), pp. 385-391, here p. 391; H. Malone, *Monte Grappa: Il sito, il sacrario e la memoria,* in *Per non dimenticare: sacrari del Novecento*/*Lest we forget: Cemeteries and military ossuaries of twentieth-century Europe*, edited by M.G. D'Amelio, Roma, 2019, p. 40.

[27] '*importantissima località … balzare oltre il fiume sacro alla Patria onde ricacciare il nemico su per le valli che aveva, un giorno disceso con orgogliosa sicurezza*', AOCG, Montello, Disegni, *Relazione del Gen. Faracovi al Ministero della Guerra*, 31 July 1931.

[28] '*a ricordo dell'eroica difesa ivi fatta dai nostri meravigliosi soldati in quelle indimenticabili giornate del giugno 1918 che determinarono, per il nemico, la definitiva rinuncia ad*

In combination with natural attributes of the landscape, architecture was used to exploit both the symbolism inherent in a battlefield, and the memory of ferocious battles. For example, at Redipuglia, stepped terraces ascending a hill accommodate the remains of a homogenized army of the dead; and the readiness of like-minded and determined soldiers is conveyed by the repeated use of the term *presente*, which is inscribed as a recurring rallying cry across the face of each row of gridded tombs (Figure 5). At other sites, ossuaries combine relatively innovative architecture with hints of historical types; and notably, of the medieval fortress and classical temple. However, whatever their form, the making of the ossuaries constituted an exercise in the reconfiguration of the collective memory, and the creation of new memories that were fashioned by the regime as a network of dominant forces and institutions.[29] As monuments, they supported Fascist efforts to foster retrospective images of a victory that was shared by all Italians, and a sense of 'gratitude towards the Government of Benito Mussolini', as it alone had been able 'to awaken in the soul of each Italian consciousness of their moral value and strength'.[30]

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oltrepassare il fiume sacro all'Italia mentre per noi si levò l'alba della grande decisiva vittoria', AOCG, Fagarè, b1, f2, *Doc. Commissario del Governo per le onoranze in guerra al Ministero della Guerra – Direzione Generale di Sanità Militare*, December 1930.

[29] S. Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War and Remembrance in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940*, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 15-17. See also C. Burdett, *Journeys to the Other Spaces of Fascist Italy*, in «Modern Italy», 5, 1 (May 2000), p. 9 and M. Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris, 1997.

[30] '*riconoscenza verso il Governo di Benito Mussolini*', Biastrocchi, *Discussione*, p. 5096; '*Governo Fascista … ha saputo, sola, far prosperare e fiorire nell'animo di ogni italiano la*

Forgetting the war

While the ossuaries encouraged a form of remembrance, they also represented an invitation to forget. They helped to restore the nation's dignity in the face of the military, political, and diplomatic failures of the war and their effects on an Italian sense of honour.[31] They also assuaged a sense of inferiority that resulted from an international, and stereotypical, image of Italy as an unsoldierly nation.[32] In particular, the regime promised to avenge the severe blow dealt to the nation's pride by Italy's defeat at Caporetto (now Kobarid in Slovenia), and the subsequent retreat that placed millions of Italians and 20,000 square kilometres of territory under enemy occupation. The Fascists sought to mitigate the shame attached to Caporetto through a narrative of victory snatched from the jaws of defeat; whose impact was such that, in the first years of its existence, the regime's ability to restore confidence was central to its capacity to appeal to Italians. In fact, the sensitivities surrounding that defeat were such that there was an initial proposal to call the ossuary near Caporetto by another name, so it could not be 'exploited by internal and foreign [enemies] to diminish the value of our war'.[33] However,

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coscienza del proprio valore e della propria forza morale, sia attraverso la rivalutazione della vittoria, sia nella rievocazione palpitante della grandezza della stirpe…', G. Peressutti, report of 23 November 1931, quoted in full in Fiore, *La monumentalizzazione*, p. 157.

[31] Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra*, p. 335.

[32] '*della gloria della Patria*', plaque at the foot of the monument; see also: Wilcox, *Morale*, p. 144. Wilcox, *Morale*, p. 7. See also on the trauma of Caporetto: Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary*, p. 44.

[33] '*sfruttamento all'estero e all'interno per la svalorizzazione della nostra guerra*', *Discussione del disegno di legge: Sistemazione definitiva delle Salme dei Caduti in guerra*, in *Atti*

as an insight into the nature of propaganda employed by the regime, the ossuary was named Caporetto as a sign that the lost territories were ultimately retrieved, and as a warning in the event of future threats of invasion. In short, in the official account of the war Caporetto was cast as a symbol of renewal, and of a nation that had rallied, pushed on to victory, and then to its rebirth under Fascism. In that respect, the symbolism of the Passion pervades the ossuary at Caporetto as a monument to the belief that triumph may result from death. Built on a hill around 400 metres above the town of Caporetto, the ossuary contains the remains of over 7,000 dead, and is connected to the town by means of the *Via Sacra* (Sacred Way); a route whose 'mystical atmosphere' is augmented by 14 Stations of the Cross composed of carved slabs and small piazzas where visitors can stop and pray on their ascent to the ossuary.[34] Moreover, the ossuary incorporates a seventeenth-century church that stands at the apex of the hill, and takes the form of a structure of ascending octagonal terraces with the character of a military bastion.[35] In that Catholic symbolism is integrated with Fascist iconography, the ossuary was meant to deliver a powerful message of redemption. It also reflected an instruction given by Mussolini to a

Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati (29 May 1931), 5096. See also: M. Bresciani, *The Post-Imperial Space of the Upper Adriatic and the Post-War Ascent of Fascism*, in *Akteure der Nueordung. Ostmitteleuropa und das Erbe der Imperien*, edited by T. Buchen-F. Grelka, Berlino, 2016, pp. 47–64.

[34] '*atmosfera mistica*', Archivio Commissione Generale Onoranze ai Caduti (ACGOC), Sezione Tecnica, Caporetto, Atti amministrativi 1935–9, *Capitolato ditta Vittorio Marchioro*, 22 August 1936.

[35] Wilcox, *From Heroic Defeat to Mutilated Victory,* p. 56.

historian who was planning to write an account of Caporetto, to the effect that 'Now is not the time for history. This is the time for myths'.[36]

Rewriting the peace

Given that the ability of the Fascist regime to prepare the nation for further military engagements depended on its capacity to manipulate memories of the First World War, the ossuaries were part of an array of initiatives that helped to mobilize Italy on the basis of Mussolini's dictum to 'remember [the dead] and prepare [for battle]' (*ricordare e prepararasi*).[37] That objective gained greater significance over the period of 1935–9, which witnessed Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, and the outbreak of the Second World War. That period also marked the construction of most of the ossuaries as places within which visitors were to be 'inspired and encouraged by the heroic sacrifice of the fallen' and by their love of 'the fatherland'.[38] Equally, the arrangement of the dead in 'military formation' was intended to act as 'the most solemn reminder and powerful stimulus for the new

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[36] V. Wilcox, *From Heroic Defeat to Mutilated Victory: the myth of Caporetto in Fascist Italy,* in *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, edited by J. Macleod, Londra, 2008, pp. 51-52.

[37] V. Wilcox, *Morale*, pp. 147.

[38] '*dal sacrificio eroico dei Caduti stessi*, *incitamento e sprone a sempre più amare quella patria*', G. Faracovi, *Memoria sulla sistemazione definitiva delle salme dei militari italiani caduti in guerra*, in *Leggi, decreti e disposizioni varie riguardanti il servizio del Commissariato Generale Onoranze Caduti in Guerr*a, I (1962), quoted in Bregantin-Brienza, *La guerra dopo la guerra*, p. 59.

generations'.[39] Thus, for example, at the time of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the ossuary at Mount Grappa was described by a journalist as 'a blazing light which the Nation watches so as to attain, through one victory after another, peace through justice'.[40] Similarly, at the opening of the ossuary at Asiago in 1938, the Chief of the Italian General Staff Pietro Badoglio stressed that to be 'worthy' of the fallen, all Italians 'must be ready to follow their example'.[41]

The ossuaries also lent support to the regime's ambitions to renegotiate the peace in the belief that the Versailles treaty had denied Italy its proper rewards with respect, for example, to a large part of Dalmatia that was promised to Italy under the Treaty of London of 1915. Additionally, in that a number of the new ossuaries were located in, or close to, territories that Italy won from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they acted as markers of newly acquired land and bore witness 'to the heroic sacrifices' of those who died 'so Italy could be expanded'.[42]

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[39] '*schieramento ... sarà il più solenne monito, sarà lo stimolo più potente per le nuove generazioni*', Baistrocchi, *Discussione*, p. 5096. See also: Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra*, p. 378; D.G. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War,* New York, 2008, p. 268.

[40] *L'Ossario del Grappa,* in *Le vie d'Italia* (November 1935), pp. 836-839, quoted in C. Burdett, *Journeys to the Other Spaces of Fascist Italy*, in «*Modern Italy*», 5, 1 (May 2000), pp. 7-23, https://doi.org/10.1080/13532940050003014, p. 13.

[41] '*degni*', '*si sentano sempre pronti a seguirne il mirabile esempio*', *Il Comune di Asiago per la inaugurazione del Monumento ai caduti: Altipiano dei Sette Comuni*, Padova, 1938, p. 10.

[42] '*testimoniare, attraverso i secoli, i sacrifici eroici ivi compiuti*' (ACGOC, Sezione Tecnica, Montello disegni, 18 July 1931, progetto disegni, dettagli per la costruzione, Felice Nori); '*che*

Those ossuaries also contributed to efforts to assimilate or 'Italianize' about 500,000 new citizens through a process of 'internal colonization', which involved the violent repression of local languages and cultures, and the mass settlement of Italians from other regions.[43] In the period beyond 1936, the commission built three ossuaries in the newly annexed region of South Tyrol/Alto Adige which, while they were located far from battle sites, served as a 'warning' to Italy's real and potential, internal and external enemies. In that respect, Mussolini insisted that the war dead should be buried in such areas given their 'special political situation', and in a manner that reminded the conquered that they were under the Italian rule.[44] Thus, for example, at Colle Isarco close to the Brenner Pass, ossuaries are located on elevated sites adjoining roads

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serenamente morirono ... onde vivesse una più grande Italia' (ACGOC, Sezione Tecnica, Fagarè, b1, f5, December 1930, letter from General Faracovi to the War Ministry, 'Richiesta approvazione del progetto').

[43] While the populations of Trentino and Trieste were largely Italian speaking, Alto Adige had a majority of German speakers, while Venezia Giulia was inhabited by a mixture of Italians, Slovenes, and Croats. See also: Dogliani, *Constructing memory and anti-memory*, p. 16; A. Vinci, *Sentinelle della Patria: Il Fascismo al Confine Orientale: 1918-1941*, Roma, 2011, pp. 161-168; R. Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire: Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922-1943,* Cambridge, 2017, pp. 12-13, 64-65.

[44] '*in considerazione della speciale situazione politica*', AOCG, Colle Isarco, b1, f1, Doc. Presidenza del Consiglio al Commissario straordinario per le Onoranze ai caduti di guerra, 4 gennaio 1936. OGGETTO: Sistemazione Salme Caduti in guerra provincia Bolzano (4 January 1936).

that lead to the frontier.[45] In effect, Mussolini was determined 'to let the Tyrolians, the Austrians, [and] the world know that all Italians – living and dead – stand ready by the Brenner'.[46] Similarly, the ossuaries in Alto Adige, in the region of Venezia Giulia, and at Redipuglia, Oslavia, and Caporetto served to dissuade Croat- and Slovene-speakers, who comprised nearly half the population, from aspirations of revisionism or autonomy. Again, the repressive and political functions of the ossuaries ran together with the fact, for example, that those at Oslavia, Passo Resia, and San Candido resemble medieval fortresses, while Pocol takes the form of a military watchtower.

[45] '*sulla strada che … conduce al confine*', AOCG, Colle Isarco, b1, f3, 1/9/1937, Doc. Commissario Straordinario del Governo Onoranze Caduti in guerra in Italia ed all'Estero, "Convenzione a trattativa privata tra il Ten. Col. Soddu-Millo Comm. Pasquale…', 1 September 1937. See also: Fiore, *La monumentalizzazione*, p. 177.

[46] '*noi oggi facciamo sapere ai tirolesi, agli austriaci, al mondo, che sul Brennero c'è in piedi con i suoi vivi e con i suoi morti tutta l'Italia*', Atti parlamentari. Legislatura XXVII, Prima sessione, Discussioni, Tornata del 3 marzo 1928, Roma 1928, 8361–4, quoted in K. Tragbar, *Die Inszenierung der Toten. Italienische Kriegsgräberstätten im Alpenraum als Mittel faschistischer Propaganda*, in «RIHA Journal», 0164, 13 (27 June 2017): http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2017/0150-0176-special-issue-war-graves/0164-tragbar.

Preparing for war

With respect to Redipuglia, the authorities envisaged 'the dead … lined up in battle, as watchful custodians of our sacred borders'.[47] However, while they evoked sentinels located at Italy's frontiers, the ossuaries were also symbolic outposts for future conquest.[48] They helped celebrate Italy's war gains, but also fostered support for both further wars and calls to redress the 'mutilated victory' of the First World War. While Redipuglia was inaugurated around the time of the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, by the time of its completion Europe was heading towards the Second World War. In fact, Mussolini visited Redipuglia on his way to sign the Munich agreement, and during his visit to the region announced the introduction of racial laws against Italian Jews, thereby reflecting Italy's tightening bond with Nazi Germany.[49] Although poetic rather than factual, propaganda published in 1941 describes Redipuglia as the 'spark' that ignited the Second World War, while depicting Italian soldiers gathering at the ossuary and ready to march into the Balkans.[50]

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[47] '*... i nostri morti saranno tutti schierati in battaglia, vigili custodi dei nostri sacri confini*', *Discussione del disegno di legge: Sistemazione definitiva delle Salme dei Caduti in guerra*, in *Atti Parlamentari*, Camera dei Deputati (29 May 1931), p. 5096.

[48] B. Tobia, *Dal milite ignoto al nazionalismo monumentale fascista (1921-1943)*, in *Storia d'Italia. Annali*, edited by W. Barberis, Torino, 2002, pp. 593-642, here p. 642; see also Dogliani, *Constructing memory and anti-memory,* p. 15.

[49] 'Morti più vivi dei vivi', in «Il Popolo del Friuli» (20 September 1938). See also Dogliani, *Constructing memory and anti-memory,* p. 15.

[50] '*scintilla*', Fuiano, *Credo nella resurrezione*, p. 218.

As an instrument of future wars, Redipuglia was 'not a Cemetery, but a rally of devout sons and warriors … of the Fatherland'.[51] As already noted, the word *presente* was written in raised lettering along the face of each of Redipuglia's ascending terraces (Figure 5). In fact, the term refers to the Fascist ritual of the *appello* or roll call whereby, when the leader called out the name of the dead, remaining comrades answered *presente*.[52] There was a major precedent for the inscription within the 'shrine' of Fascist martyrs at the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Rome – a precedent that, in itself, represented a bid on the part of the regime to appropriate the war dead.[53] In Redipuglia, *presente* is repeated 880 times as a measure of the size of its army of the dead, its place in the memory of the living, and its readiness to serve the nation.[54] However, the writer Carlo Emilio Gadda, who was taken prisoner during the battle of Caporetto and then suffered at the hands of the German army, mocked that sentiment; noting that, after the roll call, 'the corpse remained alone in the ground to rot … The grim, vile echo of that "*presente"* had not yet faded, and already they [the Fascists] sat at the table, with their snouts in their maccheroni'.[55] That negative view was countered by images of the dead as an

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[51] '*Redipuglia non è, dunque, un Cimitero, ma una adunata di figli devoti, di guerrieri … della Patria'*, A. Fuiano, *Credo nella resurrezione degli eroi*, Milano, 1941, p. 227.

[52] R. Suzzi Valli, *Il culto dei martiri fascisti*, in *La Morte per la patria: La celebrazione dei caduti dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica*, edited by O. Janz-L. Klinkhammer, Roma, 2008, pp. 101-117, here p. 108; Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio*, pp. 47488.

[53] Taiss, *Presente! I memoriali del fascismo italiano*, p. 76.

[54] Gentile, *Il culto del Littorio*, p. 200.

[55] '*E il vessato cadavero si restava solo nella sua bara e nella sua terra a marcire … Ed eglino non era spenta la eco lugubre e turpe di quel "presente", che già e' siedevano a tavola, co*

army that was still present, which did not 'demobilise', but remained in the service of the nation to the point that 'the combatant still answers "*Presente*!" whenever the fatherland calls upon him'.[56] Hence, that 'army' appears to be led by the large tomb of the commander, the Duke of Aosta, which is backed by the smaller tombs of his five generals, and in turn by the serried ranks of common soldiers. As described by the writer Gino Rocca, a friend of Mussolini, 'the army of the dead is permanently deployed under the Duke who admonishes and commands, and presides over the conquered hill with the generals at its head'.[57] Yet, in that image there is no hint of the fact that, unlike the 100,000 soldiers fallen under his command, the Duke of Aosta died a natural death in 1931, or roughly 13 years after the end of the war.

Conclusions

Essentially, Fascism used the ossuaries to maintain a rhetoric that first developed in its struggles against the Italian Left in 1919–20, when it portrayed the continuation of the war as

i'grifo sui maccheroni.', *Eros e Priapo. Versione originale*, edited by P. Italia-G. Pinotti, Milano, 2016, p. 193, quoted in Gervasi, *Anger as Misshapen Fear*, p. 336.

[56] Fuiano, *Credo nella risurrezione*, p. 135.

[57] '*l'esercito di morti schierati perennemente in linea con il Duca che ammonisce e comanda e i generali in testa, presidia il vertice conquistato*', *Sacrario di Redipuglia,* Milano, 1939, pp. 3-5, quoted in Dato, *Redipuglia*, p. 43. See also Bregantin-Brienza, *La guerra dopo la guerra*, p. 73.

a justification for the use of violence in its 'war on bolshevism'.[58] The authorities used the ossuaries and the fallen to help remodel the image of the war, to paper over divisions in Italian society, and to instruct Italians in how to interpret the past.[59] The ossuaries also expressed how Fascism used the past as if it belonged to the present, and in a manner that collapsed the distance between historical layers;[60] hence, the slogan 'here victory lives on', which was coined by Mussolini and repeated on war memorials. Equally, that slogan might be taken to represent how the regime exploited the remains of the fallen, and the importance awarded to the memory of the war as an instrument through which Fascism gained power, and prepared the country for future wars. While the war did not cause Fascism, it did lay the ground for its ascent as a reaction to injuries inflicted on Italy's political and social institutions. In defending the war against its detractors, and in its approach to an unsatisfying peace treaty, the regime appropriated a notion of victory through which it depicted both the past and the future. Its capacity to annex a mythical view of victory to the Fascist cause was fundamental to its success. In that respect, the ossuaries were major political vehicles in that they communicated images of an invented past and an ideal future. Through architecture and rituals, and sites whose

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[58] Dogliani, *Redipuglia*, p. 381; V. Wilcox, *Public Ceremonies, Private Mourning: The First World War in Roman Memory*, in K. Hall-K. Jones*, Transmitting Memories of the Past in European Historiography, Literature and Culture*, Berna, 2011, p. 181.

[59] Claudio Fogu, *Fare storia al presente. Il fascismo e la rappresentazione della Grande Guerra*, in «Memoria e ricerca. Rivista di storia contemporanea», 7 (2001), p. 55; *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Toronto, 2003, p. 11.

[60] R. Griffin, 'I am no longer human. I am Titan. A god! The Fascist Quest to regenerate time', in *A Fascist Century*, edited by M. Feldman, Londra, 2008, pp. 3-13; A. Kallis, *The Third Rome, 1922–1943: The Making of the Fascist Capital*, Basingstoke, 2014, pp. 2-3.

symbolic value sprang from their location within areas charged with symbolism, they forged individual deaths into a homogenised political tool that was aimed at the remobilization of a nation engaged in a war that did not end, and in those that were to come.