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Redipuglia and the dead

Hannah Malone

Figure 1 Redipuglia, Italy 1935-8.

Over a hundred thousand bodies are buried in the ossuary of Redipuglia. Created in north-eastern Italy under the fascist state in 1935–8, it is the largest burial site of the Great War worldwide.[1] It encloses the remains of Italian soldiers who died in battle within a colossal stone staircase that emits a powerful sensation of absence, and a silence that suggests that the dead have been submitted to the rule of the dictatorship. Over thirty ossuaries were created by the fascist regime in the 1920s and '30s as part of a campaign to exploit death for political gain. The memory of the Great War was harnessed as propaganda for the promotion of militarism, nationalism, and imperialism. When Benito Mussolini opened Redipuglia in 1938, Italy was

[1] Bruno Tobia, "Dal milite ignoto al nazionalismo monumentale fascista (1921–1943)", in *Storia d'Italia*, *Annali* 18 (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 2002), 605.

stumbling into another global conflict. Thus, Redipuglia is a powerful example of how funerary monuments may act as instruments of power, or how the memory of the dead may serve political ends that overwhelm, or erase, the identity of the individual.

Between 1915 and 1918, over 650.000 Italian soldiers died in a relatively small area that stretches across the Italian regions of Trentino, Friuli, and the Veneto, and which extends into what is now Slovenia. Those who fell in battle were buried wherever possible, in makeshift cemeteries or in mass graves close to the battlefields. Immediately after the war, those burial places were rearranged into small cemeteries that were scattered along the former front lines.[2] They were relatively small, modest, similar in form to minor civilian cemeteries, and under the control of local councils. In 1927, the fascist authorities declared that state of affairs to be unsatisfactory and launched a major campaign to award 'glorious burial' to the war dead. Hundreds of thousands of bodies were exhumed from the existing cemeteries and re-buried in new ossuaries that were built relatively close to the earlier burial grounds and what had been the battlefields. The older cemeteries were then demolished.

The main objective of the programme of re-burial, as outlined in a report of 1930, was 'centralization'.[3] A large number of small burial grounds were replaced by fewer large ossuaries. Redipuglia accommodated remains from eighty-nine smaller, local burial sites[4] – the largest of which was the cemetery of Colle Sant'Elia, which was established in the aftermath of the war and opened in 1923 (fig. 2). Colle Sant'Elia housed the fallen from the army of the 'undefeated' ('*invitti*') – so called because for its reputation to hold ground against the enemy.[5] The cemetery embodied a tower of Babel with concentric rings like Dante's Purgatory. The dead were placed in graves in the ground that bore individual markers, or memorials, to which comrades and relatives contributed personal memorabilia, such as helmets, boots, or individual epigraphs. By the early 1930s, Colle Sant'Elia was judged to be unsuited to the strategies of the fascist regime. Its trench-like terraces recalled the reality of warfare, rather than glory or other politically useful abstractions. Already aging, the cemetery suggested the passage of time,

[2] Lisa Bregantin, *Per non morire mai: la percezione della morte in guerra e il culto dei caduti nel primo conflitto mondiale* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2010), 193–233.
[3] Archivio del Commissariato Generale per le Onoranze ai Caduti, "Memoria sulla sistemazione definitiva delle salme dei militari italiani caduti in guerra", 11 March 1930.
[4] Archivio del Commissariato Generale per le Onoranze ai Caduti, "Elenco dei cimiteri da cui sono tratte le salme", uncatalogued.
[5] *Per gli Invitti della terza armata: Consacrazione del cimitero degli Invitti* (Udine: Tipografia E. Passero, 1923); Ministero della Difesa, *Sacrari Militari della Prima Guerra Mondiale: Redipuglia, Oslavia (ed altri sacrari del Friuli Venezia Giulia e d'oltre confine)* (Rome: Ministero della Difesa, 1988), 22–36 and 42–4; John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 46–8.

instead of an unfading victory. Moreover, the diversity of its graves conveyed a sense of personalised commemoration, rather that the massed unity of a collective memory. In 1935, Mussolini dismissed Colle Sant'Elia as a 'scrap metal yard'.[6] Work began on the new ossuary of Redipuglia and the old cemetery was eventually destroyed.

Figure 2 Colle Sant'Elia, 1919–23. Source: *Per gli Invitti della terza armata: Consacrazione del cimitero degli Invitti* (Udine: Tipografia E. Passero, 1923).

The process of centralisation meant that the remains of the dead were reorganised within the new, and remarkably different, 'social structures' of Redipuglia that underlined the contrast between individual and mass burial. In the new ossuary, rather than individual graves, the fallen were packed into a vast monument, with little or no distinction between one set of remains and the next; as, in a totalitarian regime, the individual is subordinated to an all-embracing authority and subsumed within the mass. Identified bodies were slotted into small niches marked by names and arranged in a grid within a stepped structure, which ascends a slope that is delineated

[6] '*deposito di un ferro-vecchio*', Anna Maria Fiore, "La monumentalizzazione dei luoghi teatro della Grande Guerra: Il sacrario di Redipuglia di Giovanni Greppi e Giannino Castiglioni", *Annali di Architettura* 15 (2003): 239.

by cypress trees. Unknown remains belonging to over sixty thousand men were massed into a crypt at the top of the monument, which is reached by a prescribed route of crisscrossing stairs flanking the hill. As expressed in 1938, the aim was 'to immortalize and exalt the memory of heroes', rather than to satisfy 'individual affections, feelings or memories'.[7] Individual memories, and the capacity for private mourning, were practically eliminated in favour of meanings that reinforced the unity of the state, its power over the individual, and visions for a cohesive and unified society.[8]

Figure 3 Redipuglia

The collective order is overlaid by an established military hierarchy, and thus by an allied structure of social relationships that divided the commanders from the commanded. Six tombs stand apart (fig. 3). The largest, which is at the front, is that of the commander, the Duke of Aosta, Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia, a cousin of the King, and a fervent fascist. Behind him are his five generals. Behind them, the dead are arranged in serried ranks, as in a zombie army that is ready to march into battle under the leadership of its commanders (who in real life were seldom at the front). As described in 1941, 'Redipuglia is not a Cemetery, but a rally of devout

[7] '*eternare la memora degli eroi e di esaltarla nel tempo*', '*più che ad affetti, sentimenti e ricordi individuali*', anon., "I sacrari per le salme dei caduti nella Grande Guerra", *Rassegna di architettura* X (Oct. 1938): 401.
[8] Paolo Nicoloso, *Architetture per un'identità italiana: Progetti e opere per fare gli italiani fascisti* (Udine: P. Gaspari, 2012), 94–7.

sons and warriors […] of the Fatherland'.[9] The soldiers' readiness to fight is suggested by the obsessive repetition of the word PRESENTE that runs along the face of the ascending steps (fig. 4). This is the fascist ritual of the *appello* or roll-call, when a leader calls out the name of the dead and his comrades answer 'presente', meaning that the dead are forever present in the memory of the living and always ready to serve. Yet, at Redipuglia, the actual identities of the fallen are practically annihilated. The dead are not remembered as husbands, fathers, and sons, but only as soldiers. Despite the reiteration of 'presente', individual histories and memories are notably absent. This annulment is elitist rather than egalitarian. The celebrated commanders are separated from the mass, despite their reputation for incompetence, and their elevation was line in a fascist attachment to the principle of hierarchy and to the cult of the leader.[10] Thus, there is no sense of the fact that, unlike the hundred thousand soldiers, none of the commanders died in battle but passed away peacefully in post-war Italy.

[9] '*Redipuglia non è, dunque, un Cimitero, ma una adunata di figli devoti, di guerrieri* […] *della Patria*', Attilo Fuiabo, *Credo nella resurrezione degli Eroi* (Milan: Corticelli, 1941), 227. See also Ministero della Difesa, *Sacrari Militari della Prima Guerra Mondiale: Redipuglia*, 7.

[10] Patrizia Dogliani, "Redipuglia", in *I luoghi della memoria: Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, ed. Mario Isnenghi and Ersilia Alessandrone Perona (Rome: Laterza, 1996), 383–4.

Figure 4 Redipuglia

The geographical concentration of the fallen was accompanied by a process of political centralisation. The programme for re-burial was run entirely by a special commission under the aegis of the Ministry of War (now the Ministry of Defence). Initially, the commemoration of the fallen was left to mourners, local councils, and Veterans' groups. However, in 1927, a law was introduced that supressed local initiatives, and curtailed rights to build monuments and to hold ceremonies to the dead. Effectively, the fascist regime monopolised the right to pay homage to the fallen; although, in demolishing Colle Sant'Elia and the other front-line cemeteries, it was going against the wishes of many of the bereaved. The state met with some resistance, particularly from veterans, and from the clergy as a group that had a stake in commemoration. However, the regime's objective was not to provide solace and consolation, but rather to monopolise and control commemoration, and to benefit from the cultural and political advantages associated with remembrance.

Redipuglia was begun in 1935, as Italy's invasion of Ethiopia reinforced the need to use commemoration for the promotion of war. In the same year, the new director of the commission charged with the construction of the ossuaries, the General Ugo Cei, dissolved its advisory committee and responded directly to Mussolini. Cei also replaced the designers selected by his predecessors with his own appointees; namely, the architect Giovanni Greppi (1884–1960) and the sculptor Giannino Castiglioni (1884–1971). Together, they completed Redipuglia and eight other major ossuaries between 1935 and 1941, but are now largely forgotten, perhaps because of a reluctance to acknowledge artists and architects who were once associated with the fascist dictatorship.

The creation of Redipuglia was a massive undertaking that was driven by specific political aims. Having seized control in 1922 by undemocratic means, the fascist regime needed to legitimize and strengthen its power. Redipuglia served both to express, and in turn to reinforce, fundamental elements of fascist ideology. The first objective was to 're-write' the memory of Great War. The war represented a caesura, or rupture, in Italian history.[11] There were many who thought that, although Italy was on the winning side, the nation had lost much and gained little. The peace negotiations brought disappointment, and deepened the divisions between those for whom the conflict was a triumphant victory and others for whom it represented a pointless slaughter. Resentment was such that veterans were spat upon in the street. The fascist leadership drew strength from that social fracture and, once in power, imposed its own memory of the past. In effect, the war became a keystone of fascist ideology, which could exploit the fact that the conflict had exposed Italy's weaknesses in terms of its military skills, foreign relations, and international standing. As a monument to the 'sacrifices and glory of the fatherland', Redipuglia was part of the cultural mechanisms put in place by the regime to restore the nation's honour and dignity.[12] It made a retrospective claim for a glorious victory that fascism appropriated as its own. Ultimately, it helped to prepare the nation for new wars. Its 'Heroic Route' (*Via Eroica*) was marked by plaques commemorating thirty-eight battles in the surrounding area. Thus, while Redipuglia and the other ossuaries might help commit history to memory, they were also about forgetting in that they served to repress unfavourable memories of the war and to silence discordant voices, particularly those of pacifists and neutralists.

[11] Giovanni Sabbatucci, "La Grande Guerra come fattore di divisione," in *Due nazioni: Legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell'Italia contemporanea*, ed. Loreto di Nucci and Ernesto Galli della Loggia (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003).

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

Redipuglia also served to foster a cult of the dead through the veneration of the fallen. The process of gathering what might have been millions of bones in one location afforded scale, and created a secular site of pilgrimage that could host large, officious public ceremonies and provide a 'source of profound grateful reverence and just pride' (fig. 5).[13] To that end, the ossuary was situated close to the railway and was promoted by means of propaganda, guidebooks, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and other publicity that was targeted particularly at veterans and young people. The number of recorded visits under the dictatorship suggests that the propaganda was relatively successful.

Figure 5 Inauguration of Redipuglia, 18th September 1938.

The veneration of the fallen was a useful political instrument. First, it helped bind the living together by means of a common memory of the dead, thereby bolstering a sense of unity among the Italian population, or at least that part of it that was sympathetic to fascism. Second, the celebration of political martyrdom served as a call to arms, as the living were persuaded that they owed it to the dead to fight for their country. Redipuglia was described as a 'virile school for the living'.[14] Italians were encouraged to ask if any death could be 'more beautiful than that

[13] '*fonte di profonda grata reverenza e di giusto orgoglio*', Renato Michelesi, "Dove riposano gli eroi della Grande Guerra", *Le vie d'Italia: rivista mensile della consociazione turistica italiana* XLV, 11 (Nov. 1939): 1436.
[14] '*virile scuola per i viventi*', Fiore, "La monumentalizzazione dei luoghi teatro", 233.

of a soldier in battle'.[15] That rhetoric underpinned the exaltation of war as something that was necessary to the rebirth of the nation. It prepared the Italians for future military engagements, and functioned in relation to the regime's imperialist ambitions and colonial wars.

Redipuglia combined mechanisms of propaganda that were political and religious. The three crosses at the top of the steps were intended to represent the Calvary of the fallen. Like Christ, the dead were seen to have sacrificed their lives to redeem the nation. Visitors were meant to ascend via the demanding lateral staircases to give thanks for the sacrifices of the dead. They were akin to pilgrims who must express indebtedness and also faith in that for which lives have been lost. The iconography shows how fascism borrowed opportunistically from Catholicism. The fallen are depicted martyrs and Redipuglia is called a *sacrario*, or a shrine that enclose relics. That convergence of politics and religion is symptomatic of how, with the rise of modern nationalism, the nation became an object of faith – as politicians adopted the ideological instruments of the Church under conditions that marked an uneasy alliance between competing forces.[16]

The monument was a geographical marker in the landscape of war. It was located in the region of Friuli that was appropriated from the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a result of the Great War. Thus, it staked a claim on land acquired through the loss of military lives, thereby justifying the price paid for the new territory. It was also part of efforts to 'italianize' the local population, which involved the repression of Slavic languages and local culture. The monument projected a myth of unity for the Italian cause in an area where most of the local men had fought on the Austrian side.[17] In a rural region that was economically deprived, the ossuary was also a social project that carried political and economic value. Its vast budget of over ten million Lira represented a significant opportunity to alleviate unemployment and to generate revenue.[18] However, it is perhaps strange that Slavic workmen were employed to inscribe each one of the 5784 letters commemorating their former enemy, at the cost of seven Lira per letter, or under half the daily wage of a manual labourer.[19]

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[15] '*quale più bella, più pura morte sia quella del soldato sul campo*?', Giannino Antona-Traversi-Grismondi, "Cimiteri di guerra", in *Il Decennale, X anniversario della Vittoria* (Florence: Associazione Nazionale Volontari di Guerra, 1929), 465.

[16] Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[17] Paolo Rumiz, *Come cavalli che dormono in piedi* (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 2014), 19–21.

[18] Archivio del Commissariato Generale per le Onoranze ai Caduti, *Dati dei principali sacrari riferiti alla loro costruzione*, uncatalogued.

[19] Archivio del Commissariato Generale per le Onoranze ai Caduti, "Capitolato n. 17", b. 4, f. 2; Lucio Fabi, *Redipuglia: Storia, memoria, arte e mito di un monumento che parla di pace* (Trieste: Lint, 2002); Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 49.

Redipuglia was strategically placed on the Carso Plateau, thereby giving value to a major battleground and, in turn, gaining power from its proximity. In that sense, it politicised the landscape by turning it into a national monument, or a repository for a national memories. The relationship between architecture and landscape was physical, as well as symbolic. The staircase exploited the topography of the hillside, its views, and the sense of ascension. Thus, the monument formed an artificial addition, or extension, to the landscape. The balance between architecture and landscape defines the two main traditions in the design of cemeteries. Redipuglia, like the other Italian ossuaries of the Great War, is an architectural mausoleum, unlike the landscaped war cemeteries created by France, the United States, and the Commonwealth. If parallels are to be drawn with Redipuglia, then they must be with Germany and the re-burial of the fallen in *Totenburgen*, or 'fortresses of the dead', in the 1930s.[20] Although it is difficult to ascertain direct Italian influences, similarities in form might be due to ideological affinities between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and common tendencies involving nationalism and militarism. Equally, the difference between the architectural approach adopted at Redipuglia and the landscaped model adopted by the Commonwealth countries might reflect differing attitudes towards the dead. In burial grounds of the Commonwealth, efforts were made to preserve the identity of the fallen by providing individual and separated graves, without distinctions of rank, and in broadly horizontal layouts that suggest egalitarianism and fraternity.[21] This is in marked contrast to the monolithic, hierarchical, and vertical arrangement of Redipuglia.

Architecturally, Redipuglia was formed by a typically fascist interplay between modernity and tradition. It responded to a demand for mass burial that was relatively new, and which resulted from the unprecedented bloodshed of modern warfare. The designers, Greppi and Castiglioni, exploited the lack of an obvious prototype to develop a format that was innovative and suited to the needs of the dictatorship. Although that format draws on classical planning traditions and is axial and symmetrical, its style is far from the bombastic classicism that is often associated with totalitarianism. Redipuglia was shaped by a process that minimised detailing

[20] George Mosse, "National Cemeteries and National Revival: The Cult of the Fallen Soldiers in Germany", *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, 1 (1 January 1979): 5–6; Gunnar Brands, "From World War I Cemeteries to the Nazi 'Fortresses of the Dead'", in *Places of Commemoration: Search for Identity and Landscape Design*, ed. Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001).

[21] Gavin Stamp, *Silent Cities: An Exhibition of the Memorial and Cemetery Architecture of the Great War* (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1977); Edwin Gibson and G. Ward Kingsley, *Courage Remembered: The Story behind the Construction and Maintenance of the Commonwealth's Military Cemeteries and Memorials of the Wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1989).

in order to expose the essential nature of architectural forms, such as the monumental staircase, the stepped fountain, and the ancient Roman columbarium. Although the layout points to historical precedents, the surfaces eschew historicism in favour of a stripped or abstracted language that may owe something to Italian 'modernism'. The conjunction of tradition and innovation reflected underlying tensions between reactionary and revolutionary elements in fascist culture. It also mirrored a desire among architects of the fascist period to create architecture that was simultaneously modern and Italian, or an architecture that was both rooted in Italy's history and suited to the new status of Fascist Italy. However, the aesthetics of Redipuglia also followed from the economics of a regime that maximised the ideological value of architecture by focusing on impact and mass, while limiting the costs of decoration and detailing that might require high levels of skill and expense.

Redipuglia might also be understood in terms of its voids, rather than its solids. It is composed of a sequence of spaces, or a processional route, that is intended to accommodate mass gatherings, ceremonies, and rituals. It that respect, there are resonances with ecclesiastical architecture and the Italian tradition of the *sacro monte*, or up-hill pilgrimage of Renaissance origin.[22] The staircase appears taller as it tapers at the top – an illusionistic effect that may point to the architect Greppi's previous employment as a set designer. Basically, Redipuglia is a theatrical stage for the unholy tragedy of the war and a silent travesty of the Italian piazza. As a collaborative design, it lies at the border between architecture and sculpture. That fusion between architecture and art, as realised at Redipuglia, was a central objective of the cultural programme of fascist regime and its ambition to generate consensus or shared beliefs.

In time, the dictatorship fell, but Redipuglia remained. As ideologies moved on, it was 'de-fascistized' or stripped of some, but by no means all, of its fascist symbols. Having lost its original function as an instrument of fascist propaganda, Redipuglia was re-invented as a monument of Republican Italy and, from 1948, accommodated state and military ceremonies.[23] It is uncanny that, despite its militarist symbolism, it has also been re-cast as a monument to pacifism. In that respect, it offers a vivid example of the versatility of funerary monuments, or how they may be re-employed. It also testifies to the enduring manipulation of the memory of the dead to suit the politics of the living. Ultimately, however, Redipuglia is a monument to

[22] Rudolf Wittkower, "'Sacri Monti' in the Italian Alps", in *Idea and Image: Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), 175–83; Mauro Quercioli, *I Sacri Monti* (Rome: Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato), 2005.
[23] Fabi, *Redipuglia*, 32–4; Foot, *Italy's divided memory*, 50–2.

the silence of a hundred thousand dead, whose bodies were institutionalised by Mussolini's dictatorship and appropriated to serve the fascist cause

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