ABSTRACT

"Between Myth and Memory: The Case of Italian Fascist World War I Monuments" examines the relationship between Italian soldiers' testimonies from the First World War and later Italian Fascist monuments that commemorated their sacrifices. During the First World War, soldiers' diaries and letters home expressed feelings of abandonment, dehumanization, and a lack of patriotic enthusiasm for the war effort. Combined with the Supreme Command's widespread use of summary executions, the mass desertion at the Battle of Caporetto, and the Italian government's complete abandonment of its prisoners of war, the First World War was a tragic experience for many. By contrast, Italian Fascist World War I memorials largely omitted the negative aspects of war and painted a more positive, usable memory of the war. Through the examination of three local and three national monuments, I argue that Fascist World War I monuments displaced the reality of the war experience and promoted a Fascist narrative of the First World War. Moreover, the messages conveyed in these monuments suggest that the memorialization of fallen soldiers remained secondary to the goals of the regime. For the regime, it was critical to generate a Fascist narrative of the conflict as it attempted to cultivate support for a Fascist society that rejected the liberal values of the past and looked to an idealized future in which Italy would become a strong, imperial state.

Between Myth and Memory: The Case of Italian Fascist World War I Monuments

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Introduction

During the First World War, the Italian army suffered tremendous losses along what is the northeastern part of present-day Italy. When traveling to former battlegrounds today, one will find the largest Italian World War I memorial ever created. Inaugurated under Mussolini's Fascist regime in 1938 on the Karst Plateau, a site of numerous battles on the Italian Front, *Il Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia* (*Figure I*) contains the remains of over 100,000 Italian soldiers.



Figure I. Il Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redipuglia_War_Memorial#/media/File:Sacrario_redipuglia.jpg)

The structure features the symmetrical, minimalist style that was a hallmark of Italian Fascist aesthetics. The winding staircases on the perimeter, the symmetrical placement of crucifixes at the memorial's apex, and the use of travertine marble all work to reflect the totalitarian doctrine of Mussolini's regime. Upon closer inspection, along the front of each stair of the memorial

appears the word "*Presente"*.[1] Because this is a final resting place, the word invokes the idea that the sacrifices of the Italian soldiers who died in the First World War live on, an outcome that could only be possible through Italian Fascism, an ideology which above all promoted "Ideas of regeneration, of sacrifice, and a vision of utopia."[2] But as Roberta Suzzi Valli has shown, the use of "Presente!" also had a deeper meaning in the Italian Fascist liturgy. The word "Presente!", she notes, represented "the fascist ritual of calling the roll."[3] At ceremonies honoring Fascist martyrs, the ritual's leader called the names of each martyr and the Fascist crowd replied: "Presente!", alluding to the idea that the martyr's sacrifice had not gone in vain. The design of the *Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia* on some level made – or at least attempted to make – Fascist martyrs out of the hundreds of thousands of Italians who gave their lives in the First World War despite not living to see the Fascist period, let alone call the roll in a Fascist ritual.

Examining the *Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia* in conversation with the Italian war experience described in soldiers' letters and diaries reveals two different narratives. While *Redipuglia* presents a grandiose, though asynchronous, image of sacrifice and rebirth, the words of soldiers who fought on the Karst Plateau tell of a war of pain, brutality, and sorrow. Indeed, the world of the trenches was one in which death was omnipresent, often occurring in the most brutal of ways. Cesare Bertini described his experience in a trench he and his company simply labeled the "*Trincerone della morte*", or the "Great Trench of Death":

The place is rightly called 'the Great Trench of Death'.

[1] In English, "Present".
[2] George Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 2000), xv.
[3] Roberta Suzzi Valli, "The Myth of Squadrismo in the Fascist Regime," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (April 2000), 144.

Yes, that trench could not be named better than that.

The corpses there were simply piles. There were those dead for a day, others for ten to fifteen days from which they exhaled unbearable stenches.

We were all demoralized to see those poor unfortunate comrades of ours, some with bloody faces, some decapitated and some horribly torn apart.

But here unfortunate children, those mutilated bodies, they were not supposed to have peace even after death!!

Whenever a grenade exploded, we were terrified because we had to witness, in spite of ourselves, horrible scenes.

At each explosion, corpses, arms, and legs were launched into the air which then smashed on the rocks of the Karst.

How many mothers and brides will cry without imagining their loved ones in pieces, in dust! This is what the war is… An infinity of sufferings!![4]

Reading his letter, one gains a sense – however small – of the suffering that the battles on the Karst plateau generated. While perhaps difficult to put into words, Bertini's anguish comes

[4] Cesare Ermanno Bertini, "Il trincerone della morte", digital reproduction of original manuscript, 18 November 1915, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=66. From the Italian: Il luogo è giustamente chiamato "Trincerone della morte". Si, meglio di così non poteva essere denominata quella trincea. I cadaveri colà vi erano semplicemente a mucchi. Ve ne erano di quelli morti da un giorno, altri da dieci e quindici giorni dai quali esalavano fetori insopportabili. Eravamo tutti demoralizzati nel vedere quei poveri disgraziati compagni nostri, chi con la faccia insanguinata, chi decapitati e chi squarciati orribilmente. Ma qui sfortunati figli, quei corpi mutilati, non dovevano aver pace anche dopo morti!! Ogni qualvolta che scoppiava una granata rimanevamo terrorizzati perché dovevamo assistere, nostro malgrado, a scene orrende. Ad ogni esplosione venivano lanciati per aria cadaveri, braccia, gambe che poi andavano a sfracellarsi sulle rocce del Carso. Quante madri e quante spose piangeranno senza che s'immaginino che i loro cari sono in briciole, in polvere! Ecco cos'è la guerra… Una infinità di dolori!!

across clearly, for he emphasized the omnipresence of death and destruction. Additionally, Bertini expressed condemnation for the war by describing it not as something noble or heroic, but as an "infinity of sufferings" and something he later described as "seven months of sad and painful life."[5] In doing so, his words conflict with the writings of those such as poet Gabriele D'Annunzio who promoted intervention in the First World War and later wrote texts to "glorify the conflict in order to sustain the country's willingness to fight."[6]

In addition to depictions of pain and suffering, Italian soldiers also left behind firsthand evidence attesting to the Italian government's complete abandonment of Italian prisoners of war. Moreover, scholars have identified a widespread lack of patriotism all along the frontlines from firsthand accounts in soldiers' diaries and letters to home. Mario Matteo Costa, a prisoner of war living in Germany in 1918, for instance, despised the horrible conditions in which Italian prisoners of war lived due to the neglect of the Italian government which decided not to provide necessary aid to its prisoners even when the law required it.[7] In 1918 he wrote in his diary: "In us [Italian prisoners of war] lived the painful impression of being completely abandoned by our government," for the "Government of Signor Nitti, stamped by D'Annunzio. . .among so many ingenious ideas had prohibited the sending of ranked garments and all leather objects, caps with visors included."[8] Pertaining to patriotism, Arturo Busto, a member of the Friuli brigade, recounted that at times the morale in his regiment deteriorated so low that "the regiment had to

[5] *Ibid*. From the Italian: "7 mesi di vita triste e dolorosa"
[6] Marja Härmänmaa, "Gabriele D'Annunzio and War Rhetoric in the 'Canti della guerra latina'," *Annali d'Italianistica* 33, no. 1 (2015): 33.
[7] Giovanna Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri italiani nella Grande Guerra* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000), 192.
[8] Matteo Mario Costa, "Abbandono", digital reproduction of original manuscript, 1918, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=111. From the Italian: "In noi era viva la sensazione dolorosa di essere abbandonati completamente dal nostro Governo. Governo del Signor Nitti bollato da d'Annunzio. . . fra tante trovate geniali aveva proibito l'invio di indumenti con i gradi e tutti gli oggetti di cuoio, visiere dei berretti comprese"

execute [one of its own men], a soldier who, during his service in the Seltz sector trench had incited his comrades to rebellion, in order to set a healthy example to the weak and hesitant."[9] In many cases, the low morale and lack of faith in one's superiors drove men to rebel which, in turn, led to summary executions. Overall, soldiers' experiences in the trenches and in prisoner of war camps caused them to question the purpose of the war.[10]

The relationship between memorials and testimonies was incongruent, for the sacrificial and spiritual rebirth that memorials depicted did not align with the horror and disillusionment that soldiers described in their writings. This suggests that the Fascist regime had political aims when designing World War I monuments. To be sure, Italian Fascists were not unique in imbuing their monuments with political messages. Monuments are products of the period in which they are constructed. In Great Britain, France, and Germany, among most other combatant nations, monuments dedicated to the fallen of the First World War highlighted and promoted tenets of each culture. In the Italian case, I argue that Fascist World War I monuments displaced the reality of the war experience and promoted a Fascist narrative of the First World War. Moreover, the messages conveyed in monuments from Cernobbio, Bolzano, Redipuglia, and beyond suggest that the memorialization of fallen soldiers remained secondary to the goals of the regime. For the regime, it was critical to generate a Fascist narrative of the conflict as it attempted to cultivate support for a Fascist society that rejected the liberal values of the past and looked to an idealized future in which Italy would become a strong, imperial state.

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[9] Arturo Busto, "Fucilato," digital reproduction of original manuscript, March 1916, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=713. From the Italian: "il reggimento dovette fucilare per dare un esempio salutare ai deboli e ai tentennamenti, un soldato il quale, durante il servizio in trincea nel settore di Seltz aveva incitato i compagni alla ribellione."

[10] Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front, 1915-1919* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 1.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous theme that appears in Fascist World War I monuments is the promotion of the cult of Fascist *romanità*, or the mythical connection that linked the heroes of the Ancient Roman Empire with the modern Fascist man. In both national and local war memorials, statues often depict an Ancient Roman legionary standing next to, and even sometimes lifting, a dying World War I soldier. Likewise, the inclusion of *fasci littori* in monuments commemorating the First World War is only further evidence of the appropriation of Ancient Roman symbols for Fascist gain.



Figure II. Monumento ai Caduti in Pieve Fosciana, Tuscany. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c5/Pieve_Fosciana%2C_Monumento_ai_caduti_01.jpg)

Beyond *romanità*, depictions of the New Fascist Man (*uomo fascista*) are present in monuments across the peninsula (*Figure II*). While there is no single image of the New Fascist Man, in Italian monuments he is often sculpted as a muscular, nude or semi-nude man,

sometimes fighting heroically in battle and sometimes standing triumphantly in victory. A prototypical example stands in Pieve Fosciana, Tuscany, where a lone First World War soldier stands triumphantly, semi-nude at the *Monumento ai Caduti* (*Figure 2*). As historians have noted, the concept of a "New Fascist Man" was a long-term goal for other Fascist nations such as Germany, but for Mussolini's regime the *uomo fascista* was the utopian goal of fashioning men that would "carry out the 'moral reform' of the Italians, which in turn would allow Italy to fulfill its imperial destiny."[11] Simply put, upon taking power, Mussolini's regime craved expansion and the New Fascist Man, built on the back of the idealized version of the First World War soldier, was supposed to devote himself to the cause of the fatherland. In real terms, this meant sacrificing his life for the expansion of the Italian Empire. As Italian Fascism was a direct product of the First World War, the glorification and sacralization of the war experience "played a major role in Fascist ideology: to have experienced the war led to true manhood as opposed to the bourgeoisie who knew neither how to live nor how to die."[12] In Pieve Fosciana, the link between the First World War and Fascism could not be clearer; the implementation of the New Fascist Man is just one example of how the regime used monuments to promote its ideology and reform young Italian men who were, at least in the eyes of the regime, destined to join the Italian military upon age and fight in service of the *patria*.

Finally, themes of rebirth and regeneration, expressed through both Christian and natural symbols, are among the most common that appear in Italian First World War monuments and memorials. As seen at Redipuglia (*Figure 1*), Fascist architects commonly utilized Christian symbols such as crucifixes to reinforce the notion that death was not the end; rather, it was a

[11] Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 167.
[12] George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 158.

transcendental force. Likewise, the appropriation of natural symbols such as trees and greenery served to mask the harsh reality of the most destructive war in human history. It is worth remembering at the outset of the study that at its most fundamental level Italian Fascism claimed to be a regenerative ideology; violence, however, was the driving force. The experience of the First World War, the most violent war in human history up to that point, proved to be a key rallying point of Italian Fascism, for Fascist leaders "wanted to abolish the existing social and economic order so that the nation could be regenerated through the searing experience of war."[13] One of the most influential developments that came from the glorification of the First World War experience was the creation of the Blackshirts (named after the *Arditi*, the most elite Italian soldiers of the First World War) a paramilitary wing of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) that used violence to intimidate and persecute socialists, a group which opposed extreme nationalism and Italian intervention in the First World War. In a speech at Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini defended the paramilitary group – despite the extreme violence they had committed – as the "real" Italians, stating that "The Blackshirts represent then the pride of the party, the faithful, vigilant, and invincible guard of the fascist revolution, culminated in the March on Rome, an inexhaustible reserve of enthusiasm and faith in the destinies of the Fatherland, symbolized in the venerable person of the King."[14] The violence on the ground, couched in regenerative rhetoric, found its visual companion in First World War monuments which sanctified the war experience as a regenerative force through the use of Christian symbols and nature. Overall, there is an interesting dichotomy between Italian accounts of the First World

[13] Mosse, *Fascist Revolution*, 7-8.
[14] Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. XIX, *Dalla marcia su Roma al viaggio negli Abruzzi (31 Ottobre 1922 - 22 Agosto 1923)* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1956), 334. From the Italian: "Le camicie nere rappresentano quindi il fiore del Partito, la guardia fedele, vigilante e invincibile della rivoluzione fascista, culminata nella marcia su Roma, riserva inesauribile di entusiasmo e di fede nei destini della Patria, simboleggiata nell'augusta persona del re."

War and the later memorialization of their sacrifices. In the end, Italian Fascists created monuments that appropriated the sacrifices of ordinary soldiers and made them into Fascist martyrs which primarily served the interests of the Mussolini's regime.

Historiography

Historians of Modern Italy have made significant breakthroughs in the study of First World War Italian soldiers' diaries and letters in recent decades.[15] Though the studies are numerous, Giovanna Proccaci's *Soldati e prigionieri italiani nella Grande Guerra* captures the essence of many of the major historiographical discoveries. Most importantly, Procacci argues that the Italian military was exceptional in its use of draconian disciplinary standards. She states that "on 24 May 1915, [General] Cadorna had already sent a circular, with which he specified discipline needed to be iron wrought, seeing as how the punishment needed to serve to set a 'healthy example.'"[16] While such discipline aimed to yield absolute obedience, Procacci notes that it often produced the inverse effect. She states that "at times [the rigidity of the Italian military] resulted in open and desperate rebellion, and more often gave rise to desertions; a rebellion tied to an alternative hope of survival."[17]

[15] For an overview of select studies, see Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1994); *Leo Spitzer, Lettere di prigionieri di guerra italiani, 1915-1918* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1976); Fabio Caffarena, *Lettere dalla grande guerra: scritture del quotidiano, monumenti della memoria, fonti per la storia. Il caso italiano* (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli, 2005); Claudio Staiti, "«Vedi dunque che il caso è molto grave» Lettere di familiari a sospettati di diserzione nella Grande Guerra: tre esempi 'siciliani'," *Humanities* 5, no. 9 (January 2016); Lorenzo Benadusi, "Borghesi in Uniform: Masculinity, Militarism, and the Brutalization of Politics from the First World War to the Rise of Fascism," in *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini's Italy*, eds. Giulia Albanese and Roberta Pergher (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 29-48; Vanda Wilcox, Morale and the Italian Army in the First World War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[16] Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri*, 43. From the Italian: "già il 24 maggio 1915 Cadorna aveva inviato una circolare, con la quale precisava che la disciplina doveva essere ferrea, poiché la punizione doveva servire di 'salutare esempio.'"

[17] *Ibid*., 82. From the Italian: "che sfociò talora in aperta e disperata ribellione, e più spesso dette origine a fughe; una ribellione legata a una speranza alternativa di sopravvivenza"

Beyond this, *Soldati e prigionieri* studies firsthand accounts and provides conclusions pertaining to the mood and conditions of life on the front. Utilizing the letters in the book's appendix, Procacci explains that "the sentiments that predominate are those with a strong aversion to war, and all that it entails: the confiscated correspondence expresses grave desperation, a distressing search for how to escape death, helpless rage, [and] desire for revenge."[18] While these feelings were not ubiquitous as there was no "universal" war experience, these experiences confirm that the relationship between officers and soldiers was deeply flawed. In other words, the idea of the soldier who is "disciplined and obedient, confident in his superiors, and therefore able to adapt to the horror of the war" never materialized on a large scale on the Italian Front.[19] In addition to mood, Procacci notes that letters from Italian soldiers often describe an intense desire to maintain relationships with their families via the written word. She states that unlike the British and French soldiers, for Italians, writing letters was "the main means to manage and survive physically."[20] Procacci explains that, in many cases, the desire to remain attached to the family was so strong that those who did not receive return letters from their families felt abandoned and lost the will to live. Literally, the lack of return letters or packages could worsen the morale of soldiers who, fed up with the insufficient amount and terrible quality of food, relied on shipments from home to maintain a calorie-dense diet. In short, Procacci's volume explains many of the common – though not universal – sentiments and experiences of Italian soldiers.

[18] *Ibid*., 103. From the Italian: "i sentimenti che predominano sono quelli di una forte avversione alla guerra, e a tutto ciò che essa comporta: le corrispondenze sequestrate esprimono cupa disperazione, ricerca angosciosa del modo col quale sfuggire alla morte, rabbia impotente, desiderio di vendetta."
[19] *Ibid*., 105. From the Italian: "disciplinato e obbediente, fiducioso nei propri superiori, e pertanto capace di adattarsi all'orrore della guerra"
[20] *Ibid*., 109. From the Italian: "il principale mezzo per riuscire a sopravvivere psichicamente"

Another theme that appears in letters and diaries is the Italian soldier's strong attachment to his *comune* (municipality) as opposed to the still young Italian nation. Fabio Caffarena's *Lettere dalla grande Guerra* has proven influential in explaining this fact as his volume features a plethora of contemporary accounts. Though just one example, in a 1917 letter from Agostino Gemelli, a soldier on the Italian front, he writes, "The fatherland for him [the Italian soldier] is the small village, the small field, its small bell tower, the cemetery, his old mother."[21] Gemelli's words do not necessarily hold true for every Italian soldier; however, they do signify a larger sentiment that some Italians did not identify their sacrifice as one for the Italian nation. Rather, the thought of returning to one's village and family was in many cases a primary motivator for the individuals who fought. In this regard lies an important theme of this project: the notion that the Fascist state made martyrs out of people who never identified with the nation in the first place. Rather, soldiers felt a larger commitment to loved ones in their respective village. And while this sentiment existed in other nations as well, in general, there had never been a strong sense of national identity in Italy prior to the First World War; in fact, that Italians use the term *campanilismo*, an ambiguous word that roughly translates to "attachment to one's belltower", to describe how Italian identity is innately tied to localities, regions, and villages.

Another important theme of this study is martyrdom. Despite many associating the concept of martyrdom with the distant past, the violent twentieth century did not come to pass without its fair share of martyrs. The First World War was the first time in modern history that millions traveled abroad to give their lives for their homeland. If Benedict Anderson is correct that "nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love", then the First World War

[21] Caffarena, *Lettere dalla grande guerra,* 114. From the Italian: "La patria per lui è il piccolo Villaggio, il piccolo campo, il suo campanile, il cimitero, la vecchia madre."

was the height of national self-sacrifice, at least until the even more bloody Second World War.[22] Whether conscripted or not, in committing their life for the nation, each fallen soldier became a martyr among millions, sacrificing their life either to preserve the nation's way of life or expand its territory. As noble a cause as it may seem, the regrettable fact is the Great War produced mass death, often in the most brutal of ways, at best for modest territorial gains and at worst for nothing. In just one example, at the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Battles of the Isonzo (14 September – 4 November 1916), the casualty totals on the Italian side amounted to 80,000. The result: "several villages and a couple of kilometres [*sic*] of limestone."[23] This was the reality of the First World War.



Figure III. Monument to Garibaldi on the Janiculum Hill, Rome. (Author's Photograph)

[22] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016), 83.
[23] Thompson, *The White War*, 225.

Though soldiers in the First World War died for different reasons than the religious and philosophical martyrs of the past, the post-war living perceived the fallen on the Isonzo, Karst, and beyond as martyrs, nonetheless. Accordingly, each nation recognized its obligation to preserve their legacy and create meaning out of their sacrifices. As the most visible medium to do so was with the construction of cemeteries, memorials, and monuments, the post-war period began with combatant nations all over Europe breaking ground on a new type of structure: national war memorials that "emphasized the universality of loss and the special features of national political and aesthetic traditions" of each nation during the First World War.[24] And while memorials had played a role in European architecture prior to the Great War, scholars note that the First World War changed their function in that they gave "equal honor to all of the dead" in egalitarian fashion unlike those of the past which focused on generals, typically on horseback in battle dress.[25] One such example is the monument dedicated to Giuseppe Garibaldi, famous contributor to Italian Unification, that stands atop the Janiculum Hill in Rome (*Figure III*).

Scholars have, indeed, conducted national and comparative studies of World War I sites of memory, but the focus has mainly centered on Great Britain, France, and Germany, while English speaking historians have largely neglected the case of Italy.[26] Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* provides a useful framework when examining the Italian case at the local level. Winter explains that "War memorials were places where people grieved, both

[24] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 79.
[25] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 49.
[26] Notable volumes include: Winter, *Sites of Memory*; Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Historical Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers.* In Italian, notable volumes include Renato Monteleone and Pino Sarasini, "I monumenti ai caduti della Grande Guerra," in *La Grande Guerra: Esperienza, Memoria, Immagine*, eds. Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra (Bologna: Mulino, 1986); Vittorio Vidotto, Bruno Tobia, and Catherine Brice, eds., *La memoria perduta: I monumenti ai caduti della Grande Guerra a Roma e nel Lazio* (Roma: Argos, 1998).

individually and collectively."[27] What is more, especially local memorials "used collective expression, in stone and in ceremony, to help individual people – mothers, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and comrades-in-arms – to accept the brutal facts of death in war."[28] In other words, war memorials dedicated to the victims of the First World War help to explain how local communities mourned the loss of loved ones.

George Mosse's *Fallen Soldiers* examines how two Fascist nations – Germany and Italy – handled the post-war construction of memory. Mosse explains that the defeated nations modified the reality of the war into something he calls the "Myth of the War Experience." In short, he argues that the Myth of the War Experience masked the death of millions but legitimized their sacrifices, thereby displacing the brutal reality of the war.[29] Additionally, though fewer in numbers, those who regarded the martyrdom of millions as something to praise became leading voices in the post-war period, for "it was the accounts of volunteers" – or those most eager to fight – "which were most apt to become part of the national canon."[30] Even though Italy was not a defeated nation in the literal sense, the aftermath of the Battle of Caporetto, what with hundreds of thousands of deserters, not to mention the over 250,000 captured, along with D'Annunzio's coining of the "mutilated victory" to express nationalist displeasure at Italy's territorial acquisitions after the war both fostered a psychological sense of defeat to which Fascists clung when promoting their ideology after the Great War.

Regarding memorials, Mosse's volume argues that in both Germany and Italy themes of resurrection and rebirth featured prominently to foster a type of religious nationalism. He states

[27] Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 79.
[28] *Ibid*., 94.
[29] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 7.
[30] *Ibid*., 8.

in the two nations, "The Goddess of Liberty took the place of the Virgin Mary, and revolutionary hymns replaced those of the church."[31] In other words, "the death in war of a brother, husband, or friend became a sacrifice; now, at least in public, the gain was said to outweigh the personal loss."[32] Furthermore, *Fallen Soldiers* examines the use of nature as predominant aspects of memorials and cemeteries. He argues that the nation benefited from the use of natural symbols in war memorials, for "if a piece of eternity [i.e. nature] was appropriated by the identification of nature with war, the nation was spiritualized; if war was masked by the myth [of the War Experience], it was the nation and its war experience, present and future, which would benefit from the masking process."[33] Put differently, utilizing nature in the architecture of war memorials and cemeteries served to further the notion that death in war was sacred. In doing so, death through war became "natural" – an ordinary sequence of events.

Scholars' advancements in the history of memory will also guide this study; Pierre Nora's work has been especially influential. Nora notes, "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition."[34] This could not be truer than in the case of Italy, as a uniform national memory of the First World War never crystallized – and still has not. Competing narratives of national remembrance struggled to take hold in the postwar era which led to political violence and the erasure and Fascist mythologization of soldiers' experiences.

The organization of this study is thematic. Beginning with the depictions of life in the trenches and concluding with an examination of the lives of Italian POWs, Chapter One will

[31] *Ibid*., 34.
[32] *Ibid*., 34.
[33] *Ibid*., 114.
[34] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989): 8.

analyze themes – from poor morale to helplessness – that appear in Italian soldiers' diaries and letters. Given that the goal of the first chapter is to create a portrait of an overall experience, the picture will obviously lack the precision of case studies or books that focus on a single regiment or company. However, the advantage of this approach is that it allows for the crafting of broader conclusions about a unique Italian experience in the First World War. While undoubtedly there is variety in how soldiers on the Karst and Isonzo wrote about their experiences, it is impossible for a single study to analyze the experiences of several million men. The images and themes presented here will provide unique portraits of some of the most common experiences on the Italian Front in the First World War. These portraits will stand in contrast to later depictions of the First World War in Fascist monuments.

Chapter Two will study selected monuments and the themes that appear in them. More broadly, the narrative of Chapter Two will contrast greatly from Chapter One as it attempts to describe the Fascist narrative of the First World War. On a cautionary note, it is worth mentioning that this study does not claim to be a comprehensive study of every First World War monument in Italy. Rather, I seek to analyze a few monuments that are perhaps the most egregious offenders of displacing the reality of the war experience as a Fascist achievement. The most common themes – Fascist *romanità*, the concept of the New Fascist Man, rebirth and regeneration through war, the geographic placement of war memorials in "contested" lands, and martyrdom – will be subjects of analysis. While all monuments include Fascist elements, generally speaking, Fascist World War I monuments fall on a spectrum. On the one hand, there are monuments that are "hyper-Fascist", bearing witness to multiple themes of Italian Fascism that glorify the war experience. On the other, there are some monuments that feature more somber themes, focusing on the tragic aspects of the First World War. Despite these differences,

the central argument remains that the goal of Fascist World War I monuments was to create a more serviceable memory of the war experience and make the Fascist memory the official Italian memory of the First World War.

This study will add to the historiography of the Italian War by examining the war experience and the creation of postwar memory in concert with one another; typically, historians of Italy tend to limit their analysis to either side of 1918. Examining both periods simultaneously allows for a greater understanding of how the Fascist memory of the war omitted specific realities of life on the front. While historians have uncovered a great deal about either period, there is still much work to be done with regards to the interplay between the real experiences of soldiers and how the Fascist regime memorialized the war.

Chapter I: The War Experience

Italy stands apart from other nations in how it entered the First World War, both in timing and in aim. While the initial declarations of war by major powers occurred in late July and Early August of 1914, the Kingdom of Italy remained directly uninvolved in the conflict until May 23, 1915 when it declared war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Italy had been an ally of Austria-Hungary before the outbreak of war. However, the Triple Alliance specified that Italy would only be legally obligated to assist if France attacked Germany. Given that Germany and Austria-Hungary were the first to aggress, Italy did not have a duty to intervene and thus abstained from the conflict for the first nine months. As outbursts of patriotic jubilation in other European nations swelled, Italy remained torn on multiple levels. For one, there was the essential question of whether Italy should enter the conflict. Though political factions were split and internal debate ensued, it was not until December of 1914 – over five months after the war began – when Prime Minster Salandra would finally allow formal debate on the topic in the Chamber of Deputies. Even then, "deputies were not allowed to query the government's foreign policy or the army's readiness."[35]

The Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which at that time constituted the second largest political party in Italy, did not support Italian intervention in the First World War. Though some socialists changed their positions drastically over the course of the war, the socialist position of abstention aligned closely "with the majority of the population who from the outset had been hostile to Italian participation in the war."[36] Indeed, scholars Paul Corner and Giovanna Procacci explain that "This hostility was determined in part by the pacifist tradition of Italian socialism

[35] Thompson, *The White War*, 18.
[36] Paul Corner and Giovanna Procacci, "The Italian experience of 'total' mobilization 1915-1920," in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe During the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 223.

which, unlike the socialism of other countries, did not rally to the flag once war was declared, but continued to argue that workers and peasants had nothing to gain from a war between competing imperialisms."[37] In short, non-interventionists believed that the devastating effects of war – which they witnessed on the Western Front while remaining uninvolved themselves – did not outweigh the potential gains.

Beyond the socialist party's views, there was another reason for Italian hesitation: pragmatism. Most Italians, including Salandra, who would later favor intervention, agreed that the young nation was not fully equipped nor well-trained enough for a large-scale conflict in 1914. In his 1928 memoir, reflecting upon the Italian decision of neutrality, Salandra agreed that "no State was less prepared than our own to take part in a struggle already revealed as the greatest, most inhuman and most devastating of our times".[38] Italy's manpower and military equipment had consistently lagged behind when compared to Great Britain and Germany.

This is not to say, however, that there was not an interventionist camp. As Italy of course joined the war on the side of the Allies on May 23rd, 1915, it would be disingenuous to not mention the smaller, yet vocal, crowd that promoted and celebrated Italian entry into the First World War. Who were they and what was their justification? Some of the most vocal Italian interventionists were the Futurists, a group known for their avant-garde art style and intense nationalism.[39] To gain popular support for intervention, the Futurists labeled the Trentino Alto-

[37] *Ibid*., 223-4.
[38] Antonio Salandra, *Italy and the Great War: from Neutrality to Intervention*, trans. Edward Arnold (London: Butler and Tanner, 1932), 98.
[39] The Futurists did not hold political office, nor did any Futurist sign the Declarations of War. Indeed, they were a marginal group with respect to Italian interventionism and historians have frequently overstates their impact on fostering social consensus for the war. The intent of this case study is to illustrate how Futurist rhetoric – which frequently described death in war – compared to the lived experiences of soldiers. For more on Futurist interventionism, see Selena Daly, *Italian Futurism and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

Adige region extending to the port city of Trieste as *terra irredenta*, or "unredeemed land." Simply put, Italian irredentists believed that the Unification of Italy, officially ending in 1870, had not successfully unified all Italian lands. In the buildup to the First World War, irredentists viewed the conflict as an opportunity to complete the *Risorgimento*. In this way, Futurist interventionism "had nothing in common with the rhetorical interventionism of other nationalists. […] The Futurists introduced into interventionist politics their bizarre spirit and the almost sportsmanlike and unconventional mystique of their 'parade'".[40]

To further this point, comparing Italian Futurist poetry to war poetry in Great Britain reveals that while British poetry "bore witness to monstrous inhumanity, the epic betrayal of civilized ideals," Italian poetry was more closely associated with Italian identity.[41] To be precise, one must understand that the reason Italy went to war was because "Italians were told by their leaders in spring 1915 that they should not be happy in their own skin."[42] Alternatively stated, Italian leaders expounded the idea that Italians should be seething at the sight of Austro-Hungarian control of the Northeastern lands. Thus, the war became just when Italians realized that fighting along the Isonzo, for territory that was "unredeemed" – inherently Italian was their destiny. A poem from Futurist Giuseppe Ungaretti illustrates the point well:

> This is the Isonzo
>
> And here I best
>
> Recognise myself:

[40] *Ibid*., 11.
[41] Thompson, *White War*, 180.
[42] *Ibid*.

A yielding fibre

Of the universe[43]

What is more, much of the published Italian poetry at the start of the war served to glorify war and inspire a wave of patriotism among Italians. In one of Futurist Corrado Govoni's poems entitled "War!", for example, the author wrote:

Make a red spring

Of blood and martyrdom

Bloom from this old earth,

And life be like a flame.

Long live war![44]

Bloodthirsty images and the exaltation of war became fast hallmarks of Futurist rhetoric. By doing so, the Futurists became a driving force behind the official declaration of war as not only their poems, but their passionate speeches assisted in fostering a sense of duty among some Italians. Of course, their populist approach succeeded in the end as Italy joined the war; however, the task of generating popular support for intervention also fell on the hands of Gabriele D'Annunzio, a renowned poet who would later serve as an aviator during the First World War. While not a Futurist, his speeches and poetry began to sow the early seeds of Fascism in the weeks before the official declaration as his nationalist rhetoric promoted and glorified death through war:

[43] *Ibid*., 179.
[44] *Ibid*., 181.

> O blessed are they that have, for they have more to give, they can burn more brightly. Blessed are the twenty-year-olds, pure of mind, well-tempered in body, with courageous mothers. Blessed are they who, waiting with confidence, do not dissipate their strength but guard it in the discipline of the warrior. Blessed are they who disdain sterile love-affairs to be virgins for this first and last love. Blessed are the young who hunger and thirst for glory, for they shall be sated. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have splendid blood to wipe away, radiant pain to bind up.[45]

For D'Annunzio, "every good citizen is a soldier against the internal enemy, without rest and unrelenting."[46] In this case, the internal enemy was the socialist, the non-interventionist, the man who was unwilling to engage in the conflict that would at last complete the unification of Italy. On May 25, during the height of those "radiant days" of May and after Salandra's government officially declared war, D'Annunzio doubled down on his exaltation of bloodshed:

> Companions, can it be true? We are fighting with arms, we are waging our war, the blood is spurting from the veins of Italy! We are the last to join this struggle and already the first are meeting with glory … The slaughter begins, the destruction begins. One of our people has died at sea, another on land. All these people, who yesterday thronged in the streets and squares, loudly demanding war, are full of veins, full of blood; and that blood begins to flow … We have no other value but that of our blood to be shed.[47]

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[45] *Ibid*., 44.
[46] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Per la Più Grande Italia, Orazioni e Messaggi* (Milano: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1915), 83. From the Italian: "ogni buon cittadino è soldato contro il nemico interno, senza tregua, senza quartiere."
[47] Thompson, *White War*, 46.

Or in another speech,

> The slaughter begins, the destruction begins. One of our people has died at sea, another on land. All these people, who yesterday thronged in the streets and squares, loudly demanding war, are full of veins, full of blood; and that blood begins to flow … We have no other value but that of our blood to be shed.[48]

Italian rhetoric contrasts with the rhetoric of interventionists in other Allied nations, for in Germany and Great Britain, official declarations of war in August 1914 produced nationalist outbursts almost immediately. In no other nation was a soldier said to "have no other value but that of our blood to be shed." By contrast, in Germanic lands, people celebrated in the streets, conjoined in a sense of unity among all German speaking peoples.[49] Rather than just a small, vocal group being at the forefront of intervention, the masses joined in to celebrate:

> At about 8:00 P.M. a large mass of humanity moves along the Unter den Linden, Berlin's grand central boulevard, toward the Schloss, the imperial palace. At the armory there are loud cries of *Hoch Österreich*[50] and at the Schloss the crowd bursts into the song "Heil Dir im Siegerkranz."[51] Another throng, thousands strong, moves to the Moltkestrasse, to the Austrian embassy, where it encamps,

[48] *Ibid*.
[49] While many supported the war effort in Germany, Jeffrey Verhey notes that "much of the 'enthusiasm' of these days was a naïve, carnivalesque enthusiasm. For many youths and students, August 1914 was a time when they could sing boisterously late at night in the streets. The young boys who marched like solders believed war to be glorious, chivalrous, and heroic." In short, while many sects of Germany society were eager to go to war, it is not fully accurate to characterize all Germans the same way. For more on German attitudes towards the war, see Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[50] Long Live Austria!
[51] "Hail to You in Victory Wreath."

singing, “Ich hatte einen Kameraden,”[52] one of the most popular of German marching songs.[53]

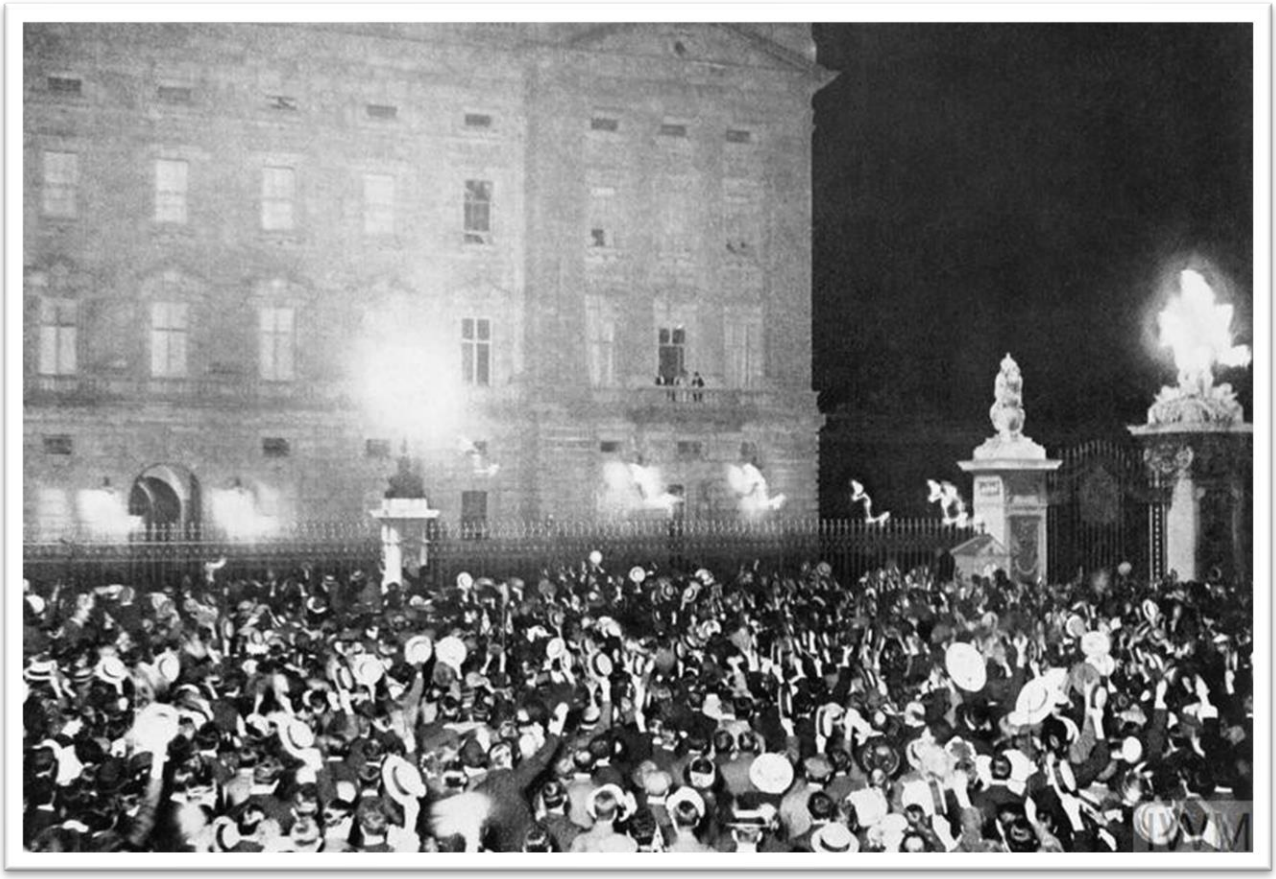


Figure IV. "Crowds outside Buckingham Palace cheer King George, Queen Mary and the Prince of Wales (who can just be seen on the balcony), following the Declaration of War in August 1914. © IWM (Q 81832)"

Similarly, in Great Britain, national newspapers reported large gatherings outside Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament after the Declaration of War on August 4th, 1914 (*Figure IV*). The Daily Telegraph wrote:

> The patriotic fervour of the hour was reflected in a series of remarkable scenes outside Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament yesterday.

[52] “I Had a Comrade.”
[53] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: First Mariner Books, 1989), 57.

> Their Majesties had a stirring welcome during a short drive in the West-end.
>
> Ministers and prominent politicians, on proceeding to the House of Commons, were greeted with great enthusiasm by enormous crowds.
>
> The Prime Minister and the First Lord of the Admiralty were singled out for special ovations.[54]

In conclusion, out of all the nations, popular enthusiasm for involvement in the First World War was probably the least in Italy as "Catholics, socialists, pacifists, many Giolittians, some republicans and above all the peasantry saw little reason to support intervention in 1915."[55] To further place Italy in perspective, one must remember that the Italians underwent intense debate about which side to join; for all other nations, the decision was obvious. Great Britain would join France and come to the assistance of Belgium, Russia would join the Allies, and Germany and Austria-Hungary would unite. But for Italy, it took months and months of deliberation to foster and arrive at a national consensus about which side to join and what the nation's war aims would be.[56]

The Nature of Death on the Italian Front

Given that the Italians took months to decide on intervening – and even then, public support was low – it is unsurprising that many Italian soldiers did not write positively about their

[54] "PATRIOTIC OUTBURST. THEIR MAJESTIES CHEERED. OVATIONS FOR MINISTERS. SCENES OUTSIDE PARLIAMENT," *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 1914, accessed November 11, 2020, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02987/Telegraph1914_0408_2987637a.pdf.
[55] Wilcox, *Morale*, 44.
[56] Scholars have questioned the level of enthusiasm that British society had with regards to intervention in the First World War. The traditional view is that Britishers rallied to the flag when the government declared war. Adrian Gregory, however, has pushed back against the notion that large swaths of the population were eager to fight. Still, the point remains that popular support for the war was higher in Great Britain than in Italy. For more, see Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

experiences. In some cases, their diaries and letters home emphasized the negative material aspects of fighting on the Italian front. These diaries give the historian a sense of the conditions and the vast amount of suffering that soldiers experienced. In other cases, soldiers' writings focused on their attitudes towards Italian involvement the First World War. While D'Annunzio's earlier depictions of war and his exaltation of bloodshed partially influenced the ultimate decision to go to war, it is prudent for this study to explore in detail how life and death on the Italian Front looked in real terms, contrasting it with the rhetoric of those who influenced the Italian decision to go to war.

Just as on the Western and Eastern fronts, death on the Italian front was impersonal. Despite this, there were some artists, like many Futurists and D'Annunzio, who glorified violence, death, and sacrifice in war. The real experiences of soldiers reflected none of these values. Instead of exalting violence and death, Piero Rosa, an artillery sergeant, in a 1917 entry recounts a bombardment that rendered a young man "lordo di sangue":[57]

> It is two in the afternoon. I received a phonogram and I take it to the captain at his post. Arriving near the hut I hear a very close whistle and explosion. It is a 105 shrapnel exploded on the mule track. But like an anguished echo, we hear shouts begging for help.
>
> We immediately rush to help. At the first corner of the mule track, Corporal Soave Francesco lies wheezing with his forehead smashed by a bullet.
>
> Soldiers Favalli and Germini are also wounded respectively in the leg and arm, but not too seriously. The carriers of the wounded immediately proceed to

[57] "Filthy with blood"

> transport Soave to the Case Drakka medical post. It is impossible for me to forget that agonizing sight!
>
> Poor boy! Transported in arms, with his head thrown back, he reveals the exit of the bullet hole; his adolescent face is filthy with blood; his pale complexion has become waxy, his eyes are closed, while a wheezing gasp of breath, the only sign of his fleeting life exits his lips.[58]

The most striking aspect is his emphasis on how disturbing Corporal Francesco's death was, for the entry suggests that the death of a young boy severely affected him mentally and emotionally. Furthermore, there is no mention of a valiant death here; Rosa's entry does not provide the reader with the sense that one should exalt this type of death in war.

What is more, the shell that hit Corporal Soave came under no warning from the enemy. As a large portion of deaths in World War I were because of artillery – a rather impersonal type of death – it does not follow that one should describe death on the Italian Front as valiant or heroic. In fact, effects of artillery shells were permanent mutilation, and sometimes complete destruction, of humans. One soldier, Giuseppe Lucarelli, recounted, "This morning a poor *alpino* descending from Sella Nevea towards us was fully hit by an enemy 305. Nothing of him was

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[58] Piero Rosa, "Viso d'adolescente lordo di sangue," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 12 July 1917, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegli editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=276.
From the Italian: Sono le due pomeridiane. Ho ricevuto un fonogramma e lo porto al capitano in postazione. Giunto nei pressi della baracchina odo un sibilo ed uno scoppio vicinissimi.
È uno shrapnell da 105 esploso sulla mulattiera. Ma come un'eco angosciosa, echeggiano grida invocanti aiuto. Subito accorriamo. Al primo angolo della mulattiera, giace rantolante il caporale Soave Francesco con la fronte spaccata da una pallottola.
I soldati Favalli e Germini sono anch'essi feriti rispettivamente alla gamba ed al braccio, ma non in modo grave. I portaferiti provvedono subito a trasportare Soave al posto di medicazione di Case Drakka. È impossibile ch'io dimentichi quella vista straziante!
Povero ragazzo! Trasportato a braccia, col capo arrovesciato, lascia scorgere il foro d'uscita della pallottola; il suo viso d'adolescente è lordo di sangue; la carnagione da pallida è diventata cerea, gli occhi sono chiusi, mentre un flebile rantolo, unico segno della sua vita fuggente gli esce dalle labbra.

able to be found with the exception of a hand which we buried in a small box."[59] To be sure, Italian soldiers did exhibit bravery by existing on the frontlines; however, Fascist monuments dedicated to the war tended to either or omit or glorify the pain and suffering that most soldiers experienced on the Italian Front. The First World War obliterated bodies and made unrecognizable the human form; the myth that "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have splendid blood to wipe away, radiant pain to bind up" never materialized on the Italian Front in the First World War.

Dehumanization and Execution

Rosa and his fellow soldiers also witnessed a cheapening of the value of human life during their time on the front. To reiterate, this was not a phenomenon unique to the Italian Front, for soldiers on the Western Front and beyond experienced a similar cheapening of human life; despite this, it is important to emphasize that Italian Fascism relied on the trivialization of mass death and the transcendence of soldiers as heroes and martyrs to survive, themes that we will see later in the Fascist monuments. While ostensibly a paradox (how could one trivialize death while also considering it a transcendent experience?), "Through this dual process of trivialization and transcendence…Death and suffering lost their sting; the martyrs [Italian soldiers] continued to live as a spiritual part of the nation while exhorting it to regenerate itself and to destroy its enemies."[60] In other words, mass death became an acceptable part of life as the dead became martyrs for the *patria* after the war.

[59] Giuseppe Lucarelli, "Di quel soldato è restata solo una mano," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 3 September 1915, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegli editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=84. From the Italian: "Questa mane un povero alpino scendendo da Sella Nevea verso di noi è stato colpito in pieno da un 305 nemico. Di lui nulla è stato potuto rinvenire ad eccezione di una mano che rinchiusa in una cassettina abbiamo sotterrato."
[60] Mosse, *Fascist Revolution,* 17.

The reality of the war experience could not be farther from the myth. Oliviero Sandri, a 2nd Lt. In the Italian Army stated he was fortunate to receive special privileges given his rank as an officer, but described how the war had dehumanized the rank-and-file:

> Imagining if I had not been an official I would have broken someone's head, given the tiredness, the hunger, the resentment I had. . .
>
> There was a moment I would have started to cry not knowing out of anger or out of pain of seeing in what regard we are held, that in the end, then, we are just slaughter.[61]

Disciplinary records from the Italian front corroborate the evidence of the dehumanization of soldiers as they provide qualitative and quantitative evidence regarding the state's dynamic apparatus of control and high rate of summary executions against ordinary soldiers. Of course, summary executions existed in other nations; however, "only in Italy did the commander-in-chief *urge* this punishment."[62] Indeed, scholars agree that General Luigi Cadorna's policies were extremely harsh, even for military standards, as they permitted the most severe punishments – even execution – for minor violations. The justification for Cadorna's intolerance came through a piece of correspondence in which he stated, "discipline needed to be iron wrought, seeing as how the punishment needed to serve to set a 'healthy example.'"[63]

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[61] Oliviero Sandri, "Un inferno di fango e acqua," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 15 January 1917, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=864. From the Italian: Figurati che se non fossi stato ufficiale avrei rotta la testa a qualcheduno, data la stanchezza, la fame, la bile che avevo. . . Ci fu un momento che mi sarei messo a piangere non so se per la rabbia o per il dolore di veder in quale considerazione siamo tenuti noi, che in fin dei conti, poi, siam proprio carne da macello."

[62] Thompson, *White War*, 263.

[63] Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri*, 43. From the Italian: la disciplina doveva essere ferrea, poiché la punizione doveva servire di 'salutare esempio.'

To illustrate this point, let us turn to the diary of Giuseppe Mimmi, a soldier of the Catanzaro Brigade who witnessed its decimation. In the Summer of 1917, the Brigade was sent on leave, and when the news spread that the Brigade was returning to the front line, members of the Brigade revolted. The Supreme Command sent a company of Carabinieri to quell the unrest, but their intervention led to approximately ten dead and thirty wounded. Mimmi explained the reasoning and nature of the summary executions:

> The Supreme Command in fact ordered immediate decimation. This is a provision of extreme gravity, which is used only as a law in war when following events of the kind that have occurred when it is not possible to identify those directly responsible. On the basis of the names written in the unit's roster, [the officers] assign a number to each soldier, and those who are selected are shot in the back. The system is clearly inhuman, because some innocent people can also end up among those designated, but what about this is humanitarian about war?[64]

The immediate response from the Supreme Command was decimation, implying that officials believed in its efficacy. However, decimation often had the reverse effect for two reasons. For one, "Units were summoned not just to watch but also to participate in the execution of their members."[65] On the frontlines, soldiers grasped to any sense of camaraderie as a means for survival. Given that soldiers often had to execute their own men, the resulting effect was an intense demoralization. And two, summary executions had a deeply dehumanizing effect, for it

[64] Giuseppe Mimmi, "La decimazione della Catanzaro," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 15 July 1917, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegli editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=655. From the Italian: "Il Comando Supremo dispose infatti l'immediata decimazione. È questo un provvedimento di estrema gravità, al quale per la legge di guerra si ricorre, quando in seguito a fatti del genere di quello accaduto, non è possibile individuare i diretti responsabili. In base ai nomi iscritti nei ruolini dei reparti e scegliendone uno ogni un dato numero, i designati vengono fucilati alla schiena. Il sistema è evidentemente inumano, perché nel numero dei designati può capitare anche qualche innocente, ma che cosa vi è di umanitario nella guerra?"
[65] Wilcox, *Morale,* 80.

was not uncommon that an officer would draw names from a helmet, practically guaranteeing that innocent men would die."[66] This was a practice that Mimmi experienced in its totality. He later wrote,

> I do not dispute the legitimacy of the exceptionally serious provisions, because I know of the repressive provisions in wartime, but I allow myself to strongly doubt the practical effects of exemplary punishment. In fact, due to insubordination of the same kind and gravity as that of the Catanzaro Brigade committed by other units in this period of time and caused by the same reasons, they experienced the same repression. But the example was not at all able to ensure that new cases of this kind did not occur.[67]

In total, Italian officers executed more of their men than any other nation despite the French army being twice as numerous. While official figures for Italian front line executions range around 300, scholars estimate that "the real total may run to several thousand."[68]

Returning to Piero Rosa's diary, he describes how during the First World War it was not just soldiers, but also civilians who experienced the dehumanizing effects of the First World War. Rosa recounts that one morning while watching the enemy positions, he saw a farmer taking advantage of the lull in fighting by tending to his land. He signaled to his Lieutenant the presence of the man, who then made a wager to a Corporal in the regiment: "See that stuff moving over there? A flask of wine if you make him fall on the first shot." The entry continues:

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[66] Thomspon, *White War*, 263.
[67] Mimmi, "La decimazione della Catanzaro," LA GRANDE GUERRA. From the Italian: "Non discuto la legittimità del provvedimento eccezionalmente grave, perché conosco le disposizioni repressive in tempo di guerra, ma mi permetto di dubitare fortemente sugli effetti pratici dell'esemplarità della pena. Infatti per insubordinazioni dello stesso genere e gravità, di quella della brigata Catanzaro, commesse da altre unità, in questo periodo di tempo e causate dagli stessi motivi, si ebbero le identiche repressioni, ma l'esempio non è valso affatto a far sì, che nuovi casi del genere, non si verificassero."
[68] Thompson, *The White War*, 273

> My soul is locked in the thought that perhaps soon that man will not exist anymore. The corporal scrupulously points the piece with the scope aimed at that unfortunate man who is unaware of the danger that looms over him.
>
> 'Fire!' an abrupt blow an abrupt blow, the whistle of the bullet drifts away. . .A few seconds later a white cloud rises and a body on the ground.[69]

Thus, an innocent man's life was gone in exchange for a flask of wine. But what lies deeper is that he seems to understand that the trivialization of death was inherent to the First World War experience. He recounted, "The cook brought the flask, but I do not drink; it is like drinking blood. And I remain where my eyes chained where a humble life had been sacrificed for a useless act of skill. Well, it's war…"[70] In other words, the war allowed for anything; Rosa's comrades could justify the death of an innocent man because there were no rules.

Fascist attitudes toward life during the war extended into the post-war period. These examples of dehumanization were just the beginning of a more widespread phenomenon, for in the post-war period, the trivialization of death was necessary for Italian Fascism to thrive. The violence of the Italian Blackshirts against socialists did not spawn from nothing; it found its beginnings in the trenches with the actions of Lieutenants and Corporals such as those in Mimmi's and Rosa's diaries. Giuseppe Bottai, though a man who would later view the war with

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[69] Piero Rosa, "Non bevo sangue," digital reproduction of original manuscript, August 1917, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=280. From the Italian: "Vedi quella roba che si muove laggiù? Un fiasco di vino se la butti giù al primo colpo".
Ho l'animo rinserrato al pensiero che forse fra poco quell'uomo non esisterà più. Il caporale punta scrupolosamente il pezzo con il cannocchiale di puntamento rivolto a quel disgraziato ignaro del pericolo che lo sovrasta.
"Fuoco!" un colpo secco un colpo secco, il fischio del proietto che s'allontana…. Pochi secondo dopo una nuvoletta bianca s'innalza ed un corpo giace sul terreno.

[70] *Ibid*. From the Italian: Il cuciniere porta il fiasco, ma io non bevo; mi parrebbe di bere del sangue. E rimango con gli occhi incatenati dove per una bravura inutile era stata sacrificata una umile vita. Mah, è la guerra…

nostalgia as a transformative experience and become a leading figure in the Italian Fascist Party, wrote from the front on September 9th, 1915, that after the war, "Nothing will be renewed. The human soul will be brutalized by this swarm of bodies, flesh, and material. The stench of corpses will darken its outlook."[71] Though Italian Blackshirts did not inflict death on a mass scale, Fascist anger over the disaster of Caporetto, the Socialist anti-interventionist position, and the result of the war as a whole, motivated Blackshirts to injure – and even sometimes kill – large groups of people who were deemed harmful to the Fascist Revolution.

Disillusionment and Desertion

The nature of war caused intense demoralization on the Italian front. But on an institutional level, the Italian military's policies contributed to a sense of disillusionment with the nation's war aims among officers and soldiers. In most First World War armies, officers enjoyed special privileges over enlisted soldiers. However, Italian diaries explain that tensions rose between officers and the rank-and-file as time went on during the conflict. Perhaps the largest point of contention was the fact that earning a promotion in the Italian military was almost exclusively not due to merit; instead, save a few exceptions, officials granted promotions based on age or nepotism. Giuseppe Carruba Toscano, a Lieutenant who asked for a promotion to Captain, understood this fact:

> My paperwork for the position of captain is still in division. If it had been some father's child, by now it would be in Rome and the name published in the military bulletin. Poor Italy! There are two justices, one for the crass bourgeoisie and the

[71] Giuseppe Bottai, *Quaderni Giovanili, 1915-1920* (Milano: Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, 1996), 19. From the Italian: "Niente sarà rinnovato. L'anima umana imbestierà in quaestor bulicare di materia, di corpi e di carne. Il lezzo dei cadaveri la offuscherà."

nobility, the other for the people (worker, peasant, professional, civilian employee).[72]

In total, only "1 in every 200 promotions were merit based." The long-term result of this was a "system that damaged officers' own morale as good service went largely unrecognised [sic] while perceived injustices led to resentment and disaffection."[73] Consequently, those who never received a promotion to officer felt mistreated and further removed from the cause.

In addition to the injustices related to promotions, the most pervasive issue that officers had to combat was the high rate of desertion which partly stemmed from a lack of belief in the nation's war aims. As soldiers deserted, their letters and diaries recount times of joy and peace that stand in stark contrast to earlier letters about the horrors of war. In one entry from a group of 270 deserters, a soldier wrote home, stating "Here there are 270 deserters. If you could hear us this evening singing and playing the mandolin, you would have the impression that you were at a concert."[74] But maybe the best representations of soldiers' sentiments come from letters that the Italian censor seized during the war.

The censor was a unique institution in Italy as "instead of serving as an instrument of information to implement the necessary measures to eliminate soldiers' discontent, [it] acted

[72] Giuseppe Carruba Toscano, "Quando mai sarò capitano?," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 8 August 1917, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=902. From the Italian: La mia pratica per la nomina a capitano è ancora alla divisione. Se si fosse trattato di qualche figlio di papà a quest'ora sarebbe a Roma e il nome pubblicato nel bollettino militare. Povera Italia! Ci sono due giustizie, una per la crassa borghesia e la nobiltà, l'altra per il popolo (operaio, contadino, professionista, impiegato civile).
[73] Wilcox, *Morale*, 34.
[74] Leo Spitzer, *Lettere di prigionieri*, 65. From the Italian: "Qui siamo 270 desertori. Se la sera potessi sentirci cantare e sonare il mandolino, avresti l'impressione di essere al concerto."

almost exclusively for a repressive purpose."[75] In other words, the censor was another vehicle through which the Italian military sought to control and discipline soldiers for what they perceived led to low morale. In one letter during the height of the conflict that the Italian censor seized, an anonymous soldier wrote:

> Is it true that in Torino and also Milan they made some motions to end the war? …these criminals who are solely responsible for this slaughter are still not stuffed of blood, or is it necessary to them like a sore beast's continuous blood?...and you all at home do not let the gossip in the newspaper deceive you that trench life is very different, and certainly the collective thinking of soldiers is neither in the continuation of the war nor the idea of victory, but rather the return to their families.[76]

From this letter, one notices that this soldier was indifferent to the nation's war aims. Rather than fighting for the *patria*, the most important thing for him was to make it out of the war alive so he could return to his family. We do not know if he lived; however, his sentiments were common among frontline soldiers. In a similar entry on June 2nd, 1917 near Redipuglia during the 10th Battle of the Isonzo, Giuseppe Manetti wrote:

> What a bombardment that one feels, what an impression it makes, and think that this evening we will have to go over the top too. They gave us the cartridges and

[75] Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri*, 31. From the Italian: "più che servire come strumento di informazione per attuare i necessari provvedimenti per eliminare il malcontento dei soldati, essa rispose quasi esclusivamente a uno scopo repressivo."
[76] Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri*, 477. From the Italian: "È vero che a Torino ànno fatto dei movimenti per far finire la guerra e così pure a Milano? […] questi criminali che sono i soli responsabili di questo macello non sono ancora sazi di sangue, oppure bisogna a loro come a belve stibonde continuo sangue […] e voi che siete a casa non lasciatevi illudere dalle chiacchiere del giornale che nelle trincee la vita è molto differente, e certo il pensiero collettivo dei soldati non è certo né la continuazione della guerra né l'idea della vittoria, ma bensì il ritorno alla proprie famiglie."

> made us prepare for departure, but I already said goodbye to life, and it seems that not even the saints can save themselves under that rainfall of bullets. Whoever reads [this entry] will be able to imagine in what conditions I find myself thinking that I will not be able to see my dear family. The sorrow of dying is what gives me the least to think about. What gives me and my family the most to think about is that I have so many duties [at home] and to be left mutilated. I wish to die than be mutilated and not be capable neither for myself nor for the others.[77]

In the end, man's instincts for survival often beat out the willingness to fight and die for the *patria*. These entries and the underlying sentiments of thousands of soldiers suggests that morale and the overall willingness to fight, generally speaking, was low among many soldiers. Simply put, Italian soldiers were not rallying to the flag in large numbers and prioritized their health and safety over the national cause.

The climax of disillusionment – and, in turn, desertion – came at the Battle of Caporetto in which hundreds of thousands of Italians retreated toward the Tagliamento and Piave rivers, abandoning their post to save themselves. Scholar Giovanna Procacci explains that the Italian retreat from the Austro-Hungarian advance causes so much chaos that after the battle "many soldiers, whose quick return to headquarters was often not voluntary, or otherwise not connected

[77] Giuseppe Manetti, "Meglio morto che mutilato," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 2 June 1917, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=266. From the Italian: che bombardamento che si sente che impressione che fà e pensare che questa sera dovremo andare su anche noi ci anno dato le cartucce e ci anno fatto preparare per la partenza o già detto addio alla vita e mi pare che neanche i santi non si possino salvare sotto quella pioggia di proiettili chi legge potrà in maginare in che condizioni mi trovo pensando che non potrò più vedere la mia cara famiglia il dispiacere di morire e quello che mi da meno da pensare quello che mi da più da pensare e la mia famiglia che ò tanti doveri e quella di dover rimanere mutilato mi auguro morire che restare mutilato di non potere essere piu abile ne per me ne per li altri". Note: Modified due to lack of punctuation.

to the idea of desertion, decided to leave [the front] permanently, dispersing in the countryside."[78] What could have motivated men to desert in such high numbers?

Given the scale of the catastrophe, it is unsurprising that the Italian Supreme Command and the rank-and-file (those who deserted) disagreed about where to assign blame. General Cadorna, who was at the time of the battle the highest ranking General in the Italian military, claimed that the Italian defeat was the result of the traitorous attitude of Italian soldiers who deserted and surrendered *en masse*.[79] However, the modern consensus is that the Italian Supreme Command was to blame for the defeat due to its lack of preparedness and outright negligence to the imminent threat. As the Austro-Hungarian and German forces were gearing up for another offensive, General Cadorna's order was to place the Italians on a defensive footing while he tended to other matters that had little to nothing to do with the war effort. In the weeks before the battle, Cadorna filled his days responding to personal criticism in newspapers and vacationing with his wife in Venice for a short holiday, among other things. While there were rumors of an Austro-Hungarian offensive, General Cadorna took none of them seriously; he was convinced that no offensives would occur until the new year at the earliest. This ended up making the difference at Caporetto, for General Cadorna's army was oblivious to any out of the ordinary developments occurring in the enemy lines. Consequently, this meant that the Italian army had yet to complete restorations to the front lines after the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo – a battle in which Italy lost around 150,000 men – allowing the Austro-Hungarian and German forces easy advances if they could just progress past the first gaps in the lines.

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[78] Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri*, 47. From the Italian: molti soldati, il cui non tempestivo ritorno alla sede era spesso non volontario, o comunque non legato all'idea di disertare, decidevano di allontanarsi definitivamente, disperdendosi nelle campagne."

[79] Giovanna Procacci, "The Disaster of Caporetto," in *Disastro! Disasters in Italy since 1860: Culture, Politics, and Society*, eds. John Dickie, John Foot, and Frank M. Snowden (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 143.

Among the many stories of retreat and capture during the Caporetto disaster, one in particular illustrates the realities of the battle. Before the artillery fire on the morning of October 24th, Lieutenant Carlo Emilio Gadda[80] and his forces were perched upon a mountain, east of Caporetto. Awoken by the heavy artillery fire in the early morning, Gadda's men assumed that there would be an advance on their position in the coming hours. Still, as over a day passed with no action, "the men lie down beside their machine guns, expecting the enemy to storm the ridge at every moment." Without any intelligence from Supreme Command due to the German encirclement of his position, they remained helpless and in waiting. Finally, Gadda and his forces received orders via a messenger sent in the early hours of the 25th stating that they must retreat across the Isonzo river. As they climbed down the mountain, Gadda and his men saw swaths of unarmed troops in the darkness, believing them to be Italians. Crossing the only bridge remaining – a rickety plank bridge mended together with telephone wires – the Italians finally realize the truth: "the Germans are on both sides of the river." Literally walking the plank, the Austro-Hungarian and German forces surrounded over 1,000 Italians, forcing them to surrender amidst machine gunfire. The captured Italians would eventually march to Caporetto that day and shortly after to Austrian prisoner of war camps where they would remain for the rest of the war.[81]

The disaster that was the Battle of Caporetto was a major turning point on the Italian Front; the Italian loss of territory and manpower nearly pushed the Kingdom of Italy to total defeat. Moreover, the battle had profound effects on the Italian army's morale. Scholars note that while the Battle of Caporetto "was disaster on the battlefield", the long-term effect was that it turned "Italian disaffection into demoralisation."[82] Comparing sentiments before and after the

[80] Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973) was also a world-renowned Italian author and poet after World War I.
[81] For more on Gadda's surrender, see Thompson, *White War,* 302-4, 309-10.
[82] Vanda Wilcox, "Morale and the Battlefield Performance at Caporetto, 1917," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, nos. 6-7 (April 2014): 853.

battle, there is little evidence to suggest that most Italian soldiers were outright unwilling to fight at its outset. Indeed, some soldiers felt disillusioned as the above diary entries suggest; however, this did not mean that Italian soldiers did understand their duty to fight. It follows that "If morale in Second Army before 24 October [the beginning of the Battle of Caporetto] was at least adequate then events during the battle itself must have caused morale to break down."[83] At the Battle of Caporetto, morale broke down almost completely as hundreds of thousands of soldiers deserted, simply leaving their post to never return. Angelo Gatti, an officer who was close to General Cadorna, stated that there "had never been a day as tragic in my life" as the 6th of November 1917, a day in which Italy lost tens of thousands of men both as deserters and prisoners of war. In the end, Caporetto was the event that led King Vittorio Emanuele to appoint General Armando Diaz as Cadorna's replacement.

In total, scholars estimate that "more than 128,000 cases of desertion came before military tribunals during the war", a number that does not include the hundreds of thousands that did not get resolved in a tribunal.[84] While there was no uniform reasoning for Italian soldiers' to finally commit the act of desertion both before and after Caporetto, the rates at which soldiers deserted during the course of the war suggests that many favored saving themselves over sacrificing their lives entirely or spending years in Austro-Hungarian prisoner of war camps.

Italian Prisoners of War

As the dust from Caporetto settled, nearly 300,000 thousand Italian officers and soldiers found themselves in Austro-Hungarian prisoner of war camps due to the Italian Supreme Command's lack of preparedness. While their experiences varied, one can draw broad

[83] *Ibid*., 847.
[84] Wilcox, *Morale,* 173.

conclusions about the Italian prisoner of war experience and their sentiments toward the war by reading their letters and diaries. From anger and helplessness to famine and disease, Italian diaries explain that the life in prison was often as bad, if not worse, than life on the frontlines.

Maybe the most common sentiment that soldiers expressed was a sense of having been abandoned by their own government. This was not without justification, for the Italian government's treatment of its own prisoners was unlike any other nation. While the Italian Supreme Command had a legal obligation to send supplies to its prisoner under various international laws, officials decided to restrict the sending of aid as a way to support the mythical notion that anyone who was a prisoner was undeserving of aid; in short, they were traitors to the cause. Coincidentally, "This was the official version of the facts also adopted by fascism, a version that largely echoed the one officially supplied by the government during the war."[85] No doubt a point of frustration, prisoners felt disrespected despite serving Italy as best they could during the war. In turn, helplessness and desperation became common sentiments among soldiers of the Italian Second Army, the group that had suffered the majority of the losses at Caporetto. From a prisoner of war camp in Mauthausen, Austria, a soldier from the Second Army wrote:

> The first restriction, the suspension then of packages to people who are dying of hunger is shameful, just as it is shameful to have let D'Annunzio's degenerate puppet say that we are draft dodgers from beyond the Alps and some shameless people.

[85] Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri*, 173. From the Italian: "Fu questa la versione ufficiale dei fatti adottata anche dal fascismo, versione che riprendeva del resto in larga misura quella fornita ufficialmente dal governo nel periodo bellico"

> We will return in due time to all this and all the bitterness we must swallow, and I cannot wait to be in Italy to register for the anarchy party.[86]

The prisoner's words first highlight the desperation for food in Austro-Hungarian camps, but more broadly, the prisoner shamed the Italian government's handling of the situation. He felt helpless to the reality of the suspension of packages and, in turn, flatly rejected any future allegiance to an Italy run by a liberal government. Indeed, patriotism was not found in abundance among prisoners:

> At the moment I find myself as a prisoner, but I am not. Excuse me so I can explain and you can understand. With regards to the Fatherland, I can never return there. I do not think about it at all, because the Fatherland is everywhere. Thinking about the moment in which I find myself, for me Fatherlands do not exist. The war is called war and he who does not escape will be buried by it.[87]

Famine and its associated diseases such as dysentery and tuberculosis became the most common causes of death as the Italian government neglected to send supplies to its prisoners, rebelling against various international laws. Letters home reveal that the Italian experience in prisoner of war camps was dire. One prisoner who witnessed the Battle of Caporetto, Francesco Isola, and later became a prisoner recounted an instance in which a fellow soldier died of hunger:

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[86] *Ibid*., 511. From the Italian: "La restrizione prima, la sospensione poi dei pacchi a gente che sta morendo di fame è vergognoso, come è vergognoso aver lasciato pronunciare da qualla marionetta degenerata di D'annunzio che noi siamo degli imboscati di oltr'Alpe e degli svergnognati.
Ci ritorneremo a tempo debito su tutto questo e su tutta l'amarezza che dobbiamo ingoiare, e non vedo l'ora di essere in Italia per iscrivermi al partito anarchico."

[87] Spitzer, *Lettere di prigionieri*, 193. From the Italian: "Nel momento mi trovo priggioniere però, non lo sono, scusa che vi spieco mi capite per conto della Patria che non ci posso tornare piu Non ci penso per niente, perchè la Patria e da per tutto Pensanto al momento in cui mi trovo, per me non esistono Patrie. La guerra si chiama guerra e chi non scappa lo sotterra."

> this food was not sufficient to sustain us and only with some other devices were we able to survive in greater numbers, while many others after long months of agony, affected by the horrible misfortune of exhaustion, slowly died begging: 'bread!'[88]

In a June 20, 1918 letter, one soldier mentions that he sold his underwear and socks to buy food:

> I sold my underwear and socks to buy something to eat [...] here it is always cold [...] I haven't sold my shirt yet and I am keeping it as long as I can; but before dying of hunger I will sell everything; it is terrible having to undress to eat at 41 years old […][89]

What is more, "To alleviate hunger, soldiers ingested large quantities of water, and swallowed grass, earth and even stones, wood, paper, with lethal consequences."[90] In short, the intangible and physical conditions of Austro-Hungarian prisoner of war camps were devastating. Out of the 600,000 total Italian prisoners, over 100,000 never returned to Italy, and only a small fraction remained to live in Germany and Austria after the war. Out of the more than 100,000, "one can presume that only a small portion remained to live in the former enemy countries."[91] Knowing

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[88] Francesco Isola, "Ferito a morte per un pezzo di pane," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 1917, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano, https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=183. From the Italian: "Ma questo cibo non era e non fu sufficiente a sostenere le nostre vite e solo con qualche altro espediente riuscivamo a sopravvivere in tanti, mentre tant'altri dopo lunghi mesi d'agonia, colpiti dall'orribile sventura dell'esaurimento, lentamente morirono invocando: "pane!"

[89] Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri*, 498. From the Italian: "Le mutande e i calzetti li ho venduti per comprare da mangiare [...] qui fa sempre freddo [...] la maglia non l'ho ancora venduta fin che posso; ma prima di morire di fame vendo tutto; è brutto doversi spogliare per mangiare a 41 anni […]"

[90] *Ibid*., 278. From the Italian: "Per lenire la fame i soldati ingerivano grandi quantità di acqua, e ingioavono erba, terra e anche sassi, legno, carta, con conseguenze leteali."

[91] *Ibid*., 169. From the Italian: "solo una minima parte si può supporre che fosse rimasta a vivere negli ex paesi nemici"

these statistics, one can only assume that tens of thousands of Italians lost their lives because of hunger and its associated diseases.

Conclusion

The above analysis has highlighted the various points of trauma that the Kingdom of Italy experienced during the war. Though most Italian citizens were not in favor of intervention, due to interventionist passion among the higher rings of Italian society, the young nation entered the war in full force in May of 1915. The result was the death of approximately 650,000 Italian men along with another million wounded, leaving a brutal mark on Italian society and question marks as to how the nation would recover not only economically, but also politically. But these were not just statistics; the lived experiences of soldiers told a harrowing story of dehumanization, disillusionment, and abandonment. In many cases, soldiers' experiences were so harrowing – and their morale so low due to the exceptional disciplinary measures in the army – that they were willing to desert the front altogether to preserve their own lives. Furthermore, the disaster that was Caporetto revealed many of the fundamental issues with the Italian war effort. Lies, conspiracies, and the mass surrender of hundreds of thousands at Caporetto were just some of the major points of controversy for which politicians had to answer. Finally, the fact that the territorial gains that the Allied Powers afforded Italy after the war did not encompass all of what nationalists wanted was reason enough for some to label the entire war as "*la vittoria mutilata*", or "the mutilated victory." In sum, nationalists believed that Italian involvement in the First World War was not something at which to look fondly.

The question remained, however, as to how a new regime would memorialize the sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands who gave their lives during the war. Furthermore, how would a new regime create a more serviceable memory – a memory upon which Italians *could*

look fondly? Certainly, all combatant nations shared an individual burden to create a long-term legacy of the war experience. The following chapter will study how Fascist war memorials depicted a war narrative without poor morale and desertion, and furthermore attempted to erase the negative consequences that the war had wrought on Italian society.

Chapter II: The Fascist Memorialization of the First World War

In the immediate post-war period, all European nations recognized the moral obligation to preserve the legacy and create meaning out of the sacrifices of the millions who lost their lives in the First World War. While the methods ranged from educational trips to the battlefield to the search for the remains of loved ones, all combatant participated in the creation of local and national war monuments dedicated to the nation's servicemen. But while the practice of creating monuments dedicated to the fallen of World War I was not unique to any one nation, what makes Italy individual is that monuments across the peninsula invoke the various symbols of Italian Fascism – empire, the image of the New Fascist Man, symbols of sacrifice and regeneration through death, the glorification of war and violence, and the cult of Fascist *romanità* – while simultaneously commemorating the sacrifices of First World War soldiers. In doing so, the monuments paint a different picture of the First World War than the one I have described in Chapter One. To be specific, Fascist monuments had the effect of displacing the reality of the war experience and helped to promote a Fascist memory of the war. While it may be easy to trivialize the effect that the monuments had on Italian society, scholars have rightly pointed out that "the fascist aesthetic itself reflected the needs and hopes of contemporary society". In short, aesthetics were "the means through which most people grasped the fascist message, transforming politics into a civic religion."[92] In this way, it is important for today's scholars to analyze the Fascist messaging in monuments to fully understand how the regime depicted its ideology in relation to the war. As Michael Mann stated, "Fascist ideology must be taken seriously, in its own terms. It must not be dismissed as crazy, contradictory, or vague."[93]

[92] Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution*, 46.
[93] Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

Following the wisdom of taking Fascism seriously, the aim of this chapter is to examine the various themes that appear in both local and national Fascist monuments to understand how the Fascist regime successfully displaced the reality of the war experience and replaced it with a Fascist narrative. Indeed, in most cases the messages that Fascist monuments portray regarding the war experience frequently omit the voices and sentiments of ordinary Italian soldiers. Italian memorials to the First World War ranged from national mass graves to marble plaques on a wall to commemorate a village's war dead. I have chosen six monuments – three local and three national – of varying size and structure that feature Fascist themes for analysis. As each monument did its own part to contribute to a Fascist narrative of the war, the emphasis of this chapter is to understand the Fascist memory of the First World War as one that erased the real experiences of soldiers who witnessed mass desertion, execution, and dehumanization from 1915-8. Moreover, this chapter will analyze the role of monuments in fostering a consensus for a Fascist memory of the war and study the symbols and themes that the Fascist regime implemented to commemorate the war experience.

Local Remembrance

At their most fundamental level, "War memorials are reminders of how communities created sites for the public expression and public recognition of their grief."[94] Indeed, it was this original purpose – to assist in the grieving process – that European nations embarked on the process of building First World War memorials. However, in Italy, as more and more towns and businesses erected monuments to their war dead, their purpose shifted. Broadly speaking, with the rise of the Fascist regime in Italy came a new form of commemoration that "expressed a form

[94] Joy Damousi, "Mourning practices," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War: Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 371.
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of a cult to the fallen that is unprecedented in history."[95] This cult to the fallen fostered a new narrative of the war that either hid from view or completely omitted the realities of the Italian First World War experience. Local monuments transmitted messages pertaining to the myth and cult of the fallen, albeit on a much smaller scale and through more tenuous symbolism that developed strength and uniformity over time.[96]

Before the regime came to power in 1922, there was intense debate about what form remembrance of the war should take. Historians of Modern Italy have labeled this period as "The Monument War" as competing narratives between local Fascist and socialist factions struggled to take hold in many towns and villages. On the one hand, socialist factions wanted to remember the war as a negative and futile event in Italy's recent history that ultimately wiped out a significant portion of a generation. In one such example, in the small town of Barengo, a small town in Piedmont, the original proposal for a local war monument read: "'The People of Barengo for its sons who gave up their youth for the progress of capitalism.' After a long debate the final version – in 1922 – was this simple text: 'Barengo for its sons'", likely persuaded by liberal or local Fascist forces to ease the pejorative nature of the inscription.[97] In another socialist memorial from the town of Cossato in Piedmont, the proposed inscription read:

> *the injured and the veterans of the Proletarian league, the socialists, the organisers, do not take refuge in the fiction of posthumous tears for those who died in the barbaric conflict of the world war but remember the agonizing waste of human life…and await calmly the final victory of the working class*[98]

[95] Monteleone and Sarasini, "I monumenti," 631. From the Italian: "si espresse una forma di culto ai caduti che non ha precedenti nella storia."
[96] *Ibid*., 634.
[97] John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 38.
[98] *Ibid*.

Clearly, the narrative of the war that socialist factions favored remembering emphasized a negative stance towards the war.

Their messaging came during a period of high political instability and unemployment known as the *Biennio Rosso* (Two Red Years) of 1919-20. During this period, socialists protested the inefficiencies of Italy's liberal government by striking *en masse* and, in extreme cases, occupying metal-working factories by force. Their political actions – which "weakened Italy's fledgling parliamentary democracy irretrievably (the so-called 'crisis of the liberal state') and paved the way for the rise of fascism" – paired well with their message regarding the war. The individuals who gave their lives during the war were not martyrs; those who died, argued the socialists, were the true victims. What is more, these socialist commemorations of the war largely reflected the experience of millions of ordinary Italian soldiers. Knowing the nature of death and rates of summary execution in the Italian military, indeed, one *could* argue that it was a "barbaric conflict" and that a large portion of deaths were a "waste of human life".

Most local monuments conveyed positive messages regarding the war that contributed – though, were not the final say – to the creation of the Myth of the War Experience. Historians today only know of non-Fascist monuments thanks to archives and newspapers. While there a few reasons for this, a case study from the town of Gubbio reveals some reasons as to why there are so few socialist anti-war monuments in Italy. Gubbio, like all other Italian towns, sent thousands of its men to fight in the First World War. Of the approximately five thousand that mobilized, about seven hundred either died or went missing and hundreds more were left wounded, disabled, or severely mutilated. To commemorate their sacrifices, in 1919, local officials proposed "the erection of a marble memorial to be made by the Gubbio artist Ubaldo

Pizzichelli."[99] Pizzichelli agreed at the outset, however, after the local elections of 1921 which delayed the bureaucratic process and an anonymous article in *La Sentinella*, a periodical of the Gubbio fascists, that criticized the design, Pizzichelli found himself in 1922 still waiting for the funds to commence his project. A short time later, in November 1922, Gubbio's Fascist party had organized a competition for the creation of the monument. In short, the Gubbio Fascists had usurped the standard process – likely by force – and set aside 100,000 lire for the funding, an indication that monuments were of considerable importance for Fascist-controlled municipalities. The winner of the competition, Enrico Cagianelli, used indigenous limestone for the external cladding, stairs, and the main platform of the monument, as well as bronze for the figure of an infantryman. The local Fascist Party's monument was finally inaugurated in 1924 in the presence of King Vittorio Emanuele III and many civil, military, and religious leaders.[100]

The process at Gubbio represents the fact that militant Fascists succeeded in taking over the official memory of the war in towns and villages, setting the stage for the national remembrance. While socialists were vocal and, in a few cases, did manage to create smaller memorials (which were often mere plaques on a wall) before Mussolini's rise to power, after 1922, the possibility of creating a local anti-war monument became near impossible. As evidence, "Of 168 such monuments examined in the Turin Province (and not in the city itself) only two carried even mild criticism of the conflict. With Mussolini in power after 1922, and the end of democratic debate, the fascist version of the war began to suffocate what was put forward by the socialists and pacifists."[101] Furthermore, the case of Gubbio suggests that the inauguration

[99] Fabrizio Cece, "Come nasce un monumento: Il monumento ai caduti di Gubbio nella Grande Guerra," Associazione Storica Cimeetrincee, accessed April 11, 2021, https://www.cimeetrincee.it/monument.htm. From the Italian: "l'erezione di un ricordo marmoreo da far eseguire all'artista eugubino Ubaldo Pizzichelli"
[100] For more on the *Monumento ai Caduti* in Gubbio, see *Ibid*.
[101] Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 43.

of local monuments were events of considerable importance to the regime, for in this case, Gubbio, a relatively small town, secured significant funding in the local budget for its creation and inaugurated its *Monumento ai Caduti* in the presence of the King.

Despite these points, one must still use caution before labeling local monuments Fascist. Certainly, the monuments in this study expressed a positive narrative of the war. However, the idea of there being a uniform Fascist culture by 1923 in every part of the peninsula is misleading. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes, just a few months before assuming the role of Prime Minister, "With an impossibly heterogenous coalition of supports, which included Nationalists, monarchists, national syndicalists, squadrists, and conservative clericals, Mussolini did not really intend to clarify his movement's ideological identity."[102] In sum, in the early days of Fascism, there was not a wide sense of what the ideological tenets of Fascism were. It was ambiguous. Beyond this, it is hard to say to what role the regime played in the construction of each local monument that municipalities erected. While some inaugurations such as the one in Gubbio enjoyed the presence of the King and other political leaders, there are countless others in which no heads of state were present. Still, as time went on and local Fascist parties and organizations were part of the creation of local monuments, the Fascist view of the war became more homogenous. All this to say, local monuments in the early Fascist period in many ways set the stage for a more uniform, Fascist remembrance in national war memorials that were more explicit in how they presented the war in uniquely Fascist terms.

[102] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 17.

Monumento Giordano Ottolini, Milan, Italy (1923 Construction)



Figure V. Monumento Giordano Ottolini on via Gerolamo Tiraboschi, Milan. Note the Roman legionaries holding up the dying First World War soldier. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Milano_-_via_Tiraboschi_(1).jpg)

The *Monumento Giordano Ottolini* which stands on Via Gerolamo Tiraboschi in the city center of Milan was one of the first large-scale local monuments that appeared in the Fascist period and is evidence of the fact that there was no uniform Fascist version of the war in 1923 (*Figure V*). In short, while almost all local monuments either conveyed pro-war messages or sacralized the soldiers' sacrifices, the designs varied wildly from town to town: where some simply listed the names of a town's war dead and a small inscription, others included sculptures depicting war heroes. The variety of designs in local monuments represent the ambiguous nature of Italian Fascism's relationship to the First World war in the early days of the regime. With that being said, the *Monumento Giordano Ottolini* presents a positive image of patriotic sacrifice and

supports a type of militant masculinity that later developed into the concept of the New Fascist Man.

The *Monumento Giordano Ottolini* includes a sculpture of a First World War soldier – in this case a figure resembling Giordano Ottolini, a painted veteran who died during the war – dramatically dying while the two Ancient Roman legionaries lift him up. When discussing this particular monument, it is critical to understand Ottolini's background to gain a sense of the heroes that Fascists desired to elevate from the First World War. Ottolini, born in Milan, was a Second Lieutenant in the 71st Infantry Regiment and fought along the Italian Front until 1916 when he gave his life during close quarters combat in the Austro-Hungarian lines. For his sacrifice, he received the *Medaglia d'Oro*, the highest honor in the Italian military. The award reads:

> With few men he rushed to the assault of an enemy machine gun close to his position. Remaining isolated and surrounded, he courageously defended himself, inflicting heavy losses to the enemy. Having been ordered by an officer to surrender, he killed him with a blow of a pickaxe. As the fight was rekindled more fiercely, with his pickaxe blows left and right, he managed to escape the attackers and returned to our lines, passing through the enemy's. Wounded, he healed himself and then returned to fight, immediately after being shot dead.[103]

[103] "Medaglia d'Oro," Albo d'Oro dei Caduti Lombardi della Grande Guerra, accessed March 21, 2021, http://www.albodorolombardia.it/main/get_soldier/50713. From the Italian: "Con pochi uomini si slanciava all'assalto di una mitragliatrice nemica, vicina alla sua posizione. Rimasto isolato ed accerchiato, si difendeva strenuamente, infliggendo gravi perdite all'avversario. Avuta da un ufficiale l'intimazione di arrendersi, lo freddava con un colpo di piccone. Riaccesasi più feroce la lotta, menando colpi di piccone a destra e a manca, riusciva a sfuggire agli assalitori e faceva ritorno alle nostre linee, passando attraverso quelle nemiche. Ferito, si medicava da se e ritornava poi a combattere, rimanendo subito dopo colpito a morte".

Given that First World War combat was often impersonal, instances of individual heroism were fewer. Still, there were still a few individuals that Fascists sought to single out, sacralizing their deaths in the process. In the case of Ottolini, it follows that Fascists wanted to worship his deeds, for his actions went against the grain of what typical World War I combat was. Fundamental to Ottolini's experience was that he fought in close quarters utilizing a pickaxe; he did not use a rifle, nor was he miles behind the line firing a piece of artillery. A seemingly unfavorable weapon, he was nonetheless able to kill one Austro-Hungarian soldier and likely maim a few more. Ottolini's sacrifice stands in contrast to soldiers' letters and diaries that expressed disillusionment with the cause at Caporetto and elsewhere. Ottolini was not an individual who wavered at the sight of combat against the Austro-Hungarians; instead, he welcomed it and became more violent as the battle became more intense. He was not like the socialist, non-interventionist, or deserter at Caporetto who was not willing to sacrifice their life for Italy.

The *Monumento Giordano Ottolini* was representative of a type of militant masculinity, a fundamental aspect of Fascism that later developed into the concept of a New Fascist Man. In a word, the New Fascist Man was the model of how Italian men should comport themselves during the age of Fascism. Coincidentally, the First World War "made the greatest contribution to the formation and goals of the fascist man."[104] The New Man – just like Ottolini – had to be disciplined and enjoy a love for combat and violence. The concept of the New Fascist Man first descended from the Italian Futurist movement as literary and artistic figures within the movement wrote and hypothesized about how a new man would look. In one such example from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a leading figure of the movement, he philosophized about war as a

[104] Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 156.

positive force in the world and an experience that would unlock man's full potential. He speaks of war "as *adventure, record, performance*. The entire war – appropriately taken in all of its aspects of glorious devastation – transforms for Marinetti into a colorful and grandiose spectacular polyphony in which he [the New Man] is both spectator and actor, director and background extra."[105]

Essential to the image of the New Fascist Man in monuments was first and foremost the either fully nude or semi-nude portrayal of a muscular man, either triumphantly standing or dramatically suffering during war. While societies before the First World War had generally regarded the male nude as an obscene figure, public sensibilities changed in Italy during this period, and photographs of nude or semi-nude men became more acceptable.[106] So acceptable, in fact, that Mussolini would be one of the first world leaders to appear in pictures and art unclothed, a new development to define what Fascist men should look like. As Alessandra Antola Swan states, these "Aesthetics [surrounding fully or partially nude men] played a determining role in promoting the stereotype of the new Fascist man with the body beautiful becoming an important symbol." What is more, "In Fascist thought and practice, the healthy and strong body promoting a healthy mind stood in contrast to the old 'decadent and sick' bourgeois society led by 'feeble, effeminate and desexualized' leaders."[107] Indeed, while the New Man was a flat rejection of the liberal bourgeois society that the Fascists viewed as weak and effeminate, he also looked back at an idealized past – in this case the legacies of First World War soldiers like Ottolini – to craft an image of a virile man willing to attach his identity to the state.

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[105] Mario Isnenghi, *Il Mito della Grande Guerra* (Bologna: Mulino, 1989), 180. From the Italian: "come *avventura, record, spettacolo*. Tutta la guerra -- colta proprio nei suoi aspetti di gloriosa devastazione -- si tramuta per Marinetti in una colorita e grandiosa polifonia spettacolare in cui egli è insieme spettatore e attore, regista e comparsa."
[106] For the development of the nude male as an acceptable figure in Italian society, see Alessandra Antola Swan, "The Iconic Body: Mussolini Unclothed," *Modern Italy* 21, no. 4 (November 2016): 361-81.
[107] Antola Swan, "The Iconic Body," 364.

Interestingly, in this monument – though he is dying – Ottolini still appears as a muscular, virile man, free of any physical harm. By idealizing *Giordano Ottolini* in a public space, the monument promoted a more usable, heroic memory of the First World War while simultaneously contributing to a new type of masculinity.

While it is difficult to know the full history of the *Monumento Giordano Ottolini*, one can deduce Fascist forces likely played a role given other anecdotes from the Piedmont region. As John Foot explains, "One conflict over the very definition of 'war dead' exploded at Prato Sesia, in Piedmont, a town to the northwest of Novara." In July 1920, after singing antiwar songs in a bar, local *Carabinieri* arrested a man called Achille Baraggiotta and sent him to jail. It was not long until "he was later found dead – hung – in a *carabinieri* barracks." For the socialists, they favored the version in which *carabinieri* had hung him, while those on the right, including many Fascists, were proponents of the view that he had committed suicide. Regardless of the facts, hundreds of socialists with red flags attended his funeral and added his name to the local plaque that memorialized the First World War. The Mayor of the town supported the monument, and by October of 1920, a Royal Decree forced his resignation. The Decree "signed by the king and Giolitti, made direct reference to the plaque, 'which offended the holy sentiments of the love of the nation.' The plaque itself was also later removed." Baraggiotta's unfortunate demise illustrates that the official memory of the war in Piedmont – already by 1920 – was being shaped as exclusively patriotic. It follows that "only the 'glorious dead' were worthy of mention."[108] Though themes and imagery vary from town to town, the *Monumento Giordano Ottolini* reinforced a patriotic view of the war in Piedmont.

[108] For more on Baraggiotta's death and the Royal Decree, see Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 38-9.

Monumento ai Caduti, Cernobbio, Italy (1923 Construction)

The *Monumenti ai Caduti* sits on the shores of Lake Como in Cernobbio, Italy (*Figure VI*). Like in Milan, the monument in Cernobbio illustrates the abstract nature and liberty artists enjoyed when constructing local monuments. While the themes of masculinity and victory at Cernobbio are not as concrete as those in later national memorials, one can only characterize this monument as one that presents a positive memory of the First World War, for the figures transmit triumphant body language. Lombardian native Angelo Galli designed the monument, and local authorities celebrated the inauguration on March 23rd, 1923 (*Figure VII*). As *Figure VII* illustrates, the inauguration of local monuments was an event that drew in mass crowds and afforded local officials the opportunity to espouse Fascist ideals.



Figure VI. Il Monumento ai Caduti in Cernobbio, Italy. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MONUMENTO_AI_ CADUTI_-_CERNOBBIO_01.jpg.)



Figure VII. The Inauguration of the Monumenti ai Caduti in Cernobbio, Italy. Note the presence of local officials on the left surrounded by the masses of Cernobbiesi. (Credit: fotovasconi.it, http://www.fotovasconi.it/en/component/content/article/16-blog/355-riva-di-cernobio-nel-1923.html.)

The monument features five men that represent distinct episodes of the Italian past. Beginning in the back right, there appears a nude man who is in shackles, likely symbolizing the former Austrian domination of the *terra irredenta*. Still, the man remains triumphantly looking forward toward a victorious future alongside his brothers in arms. In this way, he is in the process of overcoming Italy's many historical disasters such as those at Caporetto, the worst episode in Italian military history. Essential to his character is his nude body that Galli portrays as muscular and unharmed. In this way, the man's character resembles similar notions of masculinity seen at the *Monumento Giordano Ottolini*. On the left side appears two Ancient Romans, one who resembles a Roman citizen and the other a Roman legionary who are both fully nude except for the soldier's galea, the timeless symbol of the Ancient Roman military. The two men represent the First World War soldier's mythological descendance from the Ancient

Romans, often referred to as *romanità*. Moving back to the right side, there is another nude man sounding a trumpet to signal victory in battle. Given his presence in the middle of the monument, it is logical to assume that he is representative of the Italian Wars of Unification, the first modern moment of Italian nationalism. Finally, spearheading the monument is the First World War soldier who is fully nude save his helmet, like that of the Roman. Leading the charge, he is raising a flag and declaring victory.

The theme that connects the five men together is the image of the New Man, the idealized version of man that celebrated his masculinity and virility, combined with the glorification of wartime sacrifice and victory. As previously stated, the New Man was the antithesis of the deserter at Caporetto; he was, in short, the man who raised the banner at Italy's previous military victories and the man who would raise the banner in future Italian wars. Fundamentally, the New Man was always willing to fight and die for his nation. Lorenzo Benadusi, a scholar on masculinity, notes how the new identity of the New Man cooperated with nationalism, stating that "The search for a new identity and collective order also influenced the male image and the model of masculinity that, with the spread of nationalism, had increasingly become associated with 'warrior-like' characteristics." Indeed, the New Man was destined to be involved in the construction of an Italian Empire. He continues, "Since a strong, powerful nation had to be made up of virile men, masculinity was associated with the ability to fight for the homeland; it became symbolic of virtue, health, vigor, and national regeneration."[109]

The depiction of nude men, strong and virile with their identity attached to the nation instead of weak and adverse to the nation's war aims (such as at Caporetto) offered a positive

[109] Lorenzo Benadusi, *The Enemy of the New Man: Homosexuality in Fascist Italy* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 14.

outlook on war in general, but especially a positive, more usable version of the First World War. It told the viewer that the men who fought were proud to fight for the nation when, in reality, letters and diaries communicate that many did not align themselves this intensely with the nation.

Viewing this memorial within a larger context also reveals an important distinction: local monuments in Italy often depicted an idealized version of man whereas other nations produced more realistic depictions. In local monuments in Great Britain, for instance, the standard depiction was a soldier wearing the standard issued helmet, putties, and a khaki uniform. Men in British memorials were often meant to be recognizable whereas in Italy they present an idealized version of man. Comparing it to the monument in Cernobbio that features not one, but five virile men helps put into context the uniquely pro-war narrative and the masculine ideals that local Italian war memorials transmit.

Monumento ai Caduti, Borgo San Lorenzo, Tuscany (1926-7 Construction)

The creation of local memorials persisted into the mid-1920s. One of the later local monuments was the 1927 *Monumenti ai Caduti* of Borgo San Lorenzo, Toscana (*Figure VIII*). The *Monuento* provides evidence of the increasingly homogenous Fascist culture, for by 1927 Fascist symbolism had become more explicit in local monuments. One concept that Fascist leaders proposed was the idea that there was an inextricable link between Italian Fascist society and Ancient Roman society. In short, this cult of Fascist *romanità* was the regime's attempt to establish a connection "between contemporary Fascist and ancient Roman society through a teleological relationship where Fascism was presented as having had its roots within *romanità* as

its necessary and inevitable outcome."[110] The idea of deriving Italian heritage from the Ancient Romans became a vital tenet of fascism, a way to establish itself as a type of political religion.



Figure VIII. Monumento ai Caduti, Borgo San Lorenzo, Tuscany. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giorgio_Rossi,_monumento_ai_caduti_di_borgo_san_lorenzo,_1926-27,_01.jpg)

Beyond the attempt to establish a type of political religion, Fascist *romanità* served another important purpose. Notably, there was value in the use of the cult of *romanità* as a rhetorical and symbolic element "especially in propaganda concerning the Italian imperialism of

[110] Flavia Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: the Augustan Exhibition of Romanità," *Modern Italy* 16, no. 3 (August 2011): 224.

the 1930s", for at its core, Italian fascism was an ideology that craved expansion.[111] Thus, perpetuating a mythological descendance from the Ancient Romans, a civilization that, in Mussolini's words, "dominated the civilized world", held the keys to future Italian expansion. He asserted in an interview in 1925:

> The word 'empire' does not have a sole meaning in the Italian language. It may designate a form of Government and more particularly, that marvelous state organization that from Rome, in the first centuries of the Christian era, dominated the civilized world. But 'empire' also means powerful strength, domination, command. The empire, as the will of life and of power, is the basis of all living organisms.[112]

Though Mussolini's attempt to imperialize via conquest did not come until the mid-1930s, the use of Roman symbols in monuments as early as 1927 – and Mussolini's voicing of his desire to imperialize by 1925 – suggests that there was an inclination to create a link with an Ancient Roman past.

The *Monumento ai Caduti* stresses the theme of Fascist *romanità* in observable language. This is in part because sculptors for war monuments in the surrounding Florence area (of which Borgo San Lorenzo is a part) came from the Florence Academy of Fine Arts, an institution that specialized in Roman classicism.[113] However, another reason for the heightened emphasis on

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[111] Romke Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the *Romanità*," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (Jan 1992): 5.

[112] Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. XXII, *Dall'Attentato Zaniboni al Discorso dell'Ascensione (5 Novembre 1925 - 26 Maggio 1927)* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1957), 44. From the Italian: La parola «impero» non ha un solo significato nella lingua italiana. Essa può designare una forma di Governo e più particolarmente quella meravigliosa organizzazione statale che da Roma, nei primi secoli dell'éra cristiana, dominò il mondo civile. Ma «impero» significa anche forza possente, dominio, comando. L'impero, come volontà di vita e di potenza, è alla base di tutti gli organismi viventi.

[113] Elisa Marianini, "LA MEMORIA DEI CADUTI DELLA GRANDE GUERRA IN MUGELLO:

Ancient Rome is due to the fact that the town carries with it an ancient past, for it currently occupies the space "where the ancient Roman town of *Annejanum* once stood."[114] The two figures in the monument portray the link between Ancient and Rome and modern Italy, for it is "composed of two figures, one standing (a legionary) holding his arms outstretched for protection, and a semi reclining figure resting on an altar (the dying soldier)."[115] Protecting the dying soldier, the monument presents a narrative of the First World War in which death is numbed by the presence of the soldier's mythical ancestors. Themes of Fascist *romanità* also appear in other local monuments. In Rome, for instance, twenty-three monuments utilize similar Roman imagery that "connects the idea of death to that of eternal glory, conquered through sacrifice."[116] In the surrounding areas of the Lazio region, eighteen monuments utilize a gladiator or Roman legionary in some form.[117] Fascist designs felt compelled to include their image to depict their narrative of the war, stressing the mythical link between Ancient Rome and Fascist Italy.

One final element that contributes to the monument's Fascist essence is the inclusion of a *fascio littorio*, the iconic symbol of Italian Fascism that derived from the Ancient Romans.[118] This symbol appears below the image of the two men and above the inscription, clearly asserting that it was a Fascist creation. This was part of a growing phenomenon in Fascist culture, for the

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Una ferita salvata dalla bellezza," accessed April 12, 2021. http://elisamarianini.it/files/Saggio-La-memoria-dei-caduti-della-grande-guerra.pdf.

[114] "Borgo San Lorenzo," Visit Tuscany, accessed March 20th, 2021, https://www.visittuscany.com/en/destinations/borgo-san-lorenzo/.

[115] "6021 - Monumento ai Caduti di Borgo San Lorenzo nella Grande Guerra," Pietre della Memoria, accessed April 12, 2021, https://www.pietredellamemoria.it/pietre/monumento-ai-caduti-della-grande-guerra-di-borgo-s-lorenzo/.

[116] Simona Battisti, "La fabbrica dell'arte: tipologie e modelli," in *La memoria perduta*, 41. From the Italian: "lega l'idea della morte a quella della gloria eterna, conquistata attraverso il sacrificio."

[117] Vidotto, Tobia, and Brice, eds., *La Memoria Perduta*, 263.

[118] In English, "Fasces". In classical antiquity, the *fascio littorio* was a symbol that represented the power of the magistrate. There are three elements: the bundle of sticks represents the population, the leather bands represent the Roman law that binds the people together, and the axe represents the local magistrate's authority. During the Fascist period, the *fascio littorio* became the symbol of the Italian Fascist Party.

fascio littorio "was frequently omitted in party propaganda before 1926". After 1926 – and in the case of this 1927 monument – "it assumed a ubiquitous presence in Fascist imagery."[119] Its presence in Borgo San Lorenzo helped to reinforce the Fascist memory of the war in Tuscany.

From Local to National

Though the Fascist elements that appear in local war memorials are not particularly assertive and the ideals they espouse vary from town to town, overall, these structures promoted a pro-war narrative that drowned out any dissenting opinions about the Italian First World War experience. By 1927, however, the regime found it time to construct national war memorials to further define the official memory of the First World War. One method in which the Fascist regime did so was through the creation of ossuaries.[120] What were essentially bone depositories, the Fascist regime disinterred and reburied soldiers who were buried in makeshift cemeteries close to the battlefields and placed their remains within large, state-sponsored ossuaries.[121] Hannah Malone states that these structures "depicted the dead as martyrs and their death as a sacrifice for the redemption of the fatherland." Furthermore, "By imposing a narrative that spoke of salvation, they also helped to silence the discordant memories of the Great War as pointless slaughter."[122] In other words, they offered a more positive version of death in the First World War in which soldiers' sacrifices had not gone in vain.

[119] Dennis Doordan, "In the Shadow of the Fasces: Political Design in Fascist Italy," *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 42.
[120] Two of the three monuments selected for analysis are ossuaries.
[121] Hannah Malone, "Architecture, Politics and the Sacred in Military Monuments of Fascist Italy," in *Modern Architecture and the Sacred: Religious Legacies and Spiritual Renewal*, eds. Ross Anderson and Maximilian Steinberg (New York: Bloombsury, 2020), 222.
[122] *Ibid.*

Ossuaries and other national memorials "helped advance specific political aims."[123] First, memorials legitimized and strengthened the regime by promoting a narrative that effectively re-wrote the history of the war. The war was a divisive event in Italian history which led to political violence and persecution that ultimately benefited the Fascist party. Once in power and the Fascist movement became more cohesive, memorials imposed their version of the war that were "meant to restore the nation's dignity, after the conflict exposed Italy's weaknesses in its military skills, foreign relations and international standing."[124] Second, war memorials promoted the view that all fallen soldiers were faithful Italian martyrs, effectively unifying an Italian citizenry that the war had divided. In other words, national memorials especially removed the voices of the deserters and those who were not in favor of the war. Overall, these structures were products of Fascist propaganda that influenced Italian "perception of history, society, war, nationhood, and the state."[125]

Monumento alla Vittoria, Bolzano, Italy (1926-8 Construction)

Beginning with one of the earliest monuments, Mussolini's Regime broke ground on the *Monumento alla Vittoria* (MaV) in Bolzano in 1926 (*Figure IX*).[126] The architect of the MaV was Marcello Piacentini, a notable member of the Italian Fascist Party and, later, one of Mussolini's preferred architects for other monuments and civic structures. Over the course of fascist rule, Piacentini led the urban redevelopment programs that rebuilt parts of the historical

[123] *Ibid.*, 224.
[124] *Ibid.*, 224-5.
[125] Hannah Malone, "Fascist Italy's Ossuaries of the First World War: Objects or Symbols?" *RIHA Journal* 0166 (June 2017): 2.
[126] In English, "Monument to Victory".



Figure IX. HIC PATRIAE FINES SISTE SIGNA / HINC CETEROS EXCOLVIMVS LINGVA LEGIBVS ARTIBVS. "Here at the border of the fatherland, plant the insignia / From here we educated the others with language, law and the arts." (Credit: Wikimedia Commons. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monumento_alla_Vittoria_(Bolzano)#/media/File:Bolzano,_monumento_alla_vittoria_(13995)_01.jpg)

centers in Brescia, Turin, Genoa, and Rome. One cannot understate his contribution as the lead architect for the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* in Rome, an event that honored the tenth year of Fascist rule. Regarding the *Monumento alla Vittoria*, the regime inaugurated the structure in 1928 and the funding came from a nationwide funding campaign with Italians donating out of their own pockets to help build the structure. In this way, the monument in Bolzano "was the

first truly fascist monument", and certainly the first national monument to victory of its kind which emphasized the relationship between Italian Fascism and the First World War.[127]

When considering locations for the first national war monument, Bolzano was a provocative choice; even to this day, the MaV carries deeply political undertones and has been the target of multiple terrorist attacks. The reasons for this are multiple. For one, the MaV sits on the site of an unfinished monument that the Austro-Hungarian Empire planned to dedicate to a group of Tyrolean rifle-regiments who died during the First World War. But instead of destroying and symbolically asserting Italian dominance over the newly acquired territory, Piacentini suggested that the Italian state ingest the Austrian monument in the design for the MaV, just as Italy had ingested the Sud-Tyrol region in the conditions in the Treaty of London. To do so, "the granite remains were used to reinforce the new monument's foundation and to line its crypt." Furthermore, the Italians melted down over 200 Austrian coins to make the trowel for the opening ceremony.[128] And finally, the Fascist regime demolished much of the surrounding area to create a new Piazza della Vittoria and a new boulevard, Via Armando Diaz – an homage to the acting General when in Italy declared victory – that points to the MaV. All in all, "from an urban planning point of view, the regime's operation is [was] to construct, around the monument, the new city of Bolzano, entirely characterized by the Fascist architectural style and destined to be inhabited by the Italian immigrant population."[129]

[127] Kay Bea Jones and Stephanie Pilat, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture: Reception and Legacy* (London: Routledge, 2020), chap. 42, Kindle.
[128] *Ibid*.
[129] Vincenzo Calì, "Il Monumento alla Vittoria di Bolzano. Un caso di continuità fra fascismo e post-fascismo," in *La Grande Guerra: Esperienza, memoria, immagini*, 667. From the Italian: "dal punto di vista urbanistico l'operazione del regime è quella di costruire, intorno al monumento, la città nuova di Bolzano, tutta improntata allo stile architettonico fascista e destinata ad essere abitata dalla popolazione italiana immigrata"

This was an area that Italy had only recently annexed thanks to the conditions prescribed in the Treaty of London. When Piacentini finished construction of the MaV, Bolzano was technically Italian territory; however, a large group of people living in the region did not identify as Italian, nor did the Fascist regime consider them truly "Italian".[130] In other words, there was a discrepancy between what legal Italy was – its borders and laws – and what the "real Italy" was – its people and culture. Regarding the annexed territories [Sud-Tyrol, Trentino Alto-Adige] as a whole, Roberta Pergher notes that "Italian nationalists regarded these as genuinely Italian territories, 'redeemed' from foreign rule through the sacrifice of war. Even they had to admit, however, that much of the indigenous population did not meet any of the prevalent criteria of Italianness."[131] Italianness was, in short, something that Tyroleans did not have.

Though asserting Fascist dominance geographically was a step in the "Italianization" of the region in and of itself, the text on the monument indicates that there was a type of colonial motive in building a monument in Bolzano. It reads:

> HIC PATRIAE FINES SISTE SIGNA / HINC CETEROS EXCOLVIMVS
> LINGVA LEGIBVS ARTIBVS
>
> In English:
>
> Here at the border of the fatherland, plant the insignia / From here we educated
> the others with language, law and the arts[132]

[130] Before the outbreak of World War I, Bolzano was a city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Annexed by Italy after the war under the Treaty of London, Bolzano became an Italian city overnight. In this way, Bolzano was a contested land.
[131] Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire: Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 11.
[132] Andrea Carlà and Johanna Mitterhofer, "Transforming a Controversial Heritage: The Case of the Fascist Victory Monument in South Tyrol," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Studia territorialia* 17, no. 2 (2017): 12.

The text suggests that the Fascist regime had to modify the native Tyroleans in some way; for though they lived in Italian territory, they had never identified with the state. The MaV is one method the Fascists implemented to establish Italian hegemony over the region. It confirms that the territory is Italian, but also reiterates the need to "Italianize" the "others". All in all, "Piacentini's Monument to Victory was constructed as a bold assertion of power by Italians but viewed as a despised symbol of occupation by German speakers aligned with Austria. It was, in other words, a symbol of perpetual conflict."[133]

Despite being a monument to victory in the First World War, the goal of the MaV was to become an architectural symbol of the Fascist ideology. But in the process of doing so, the monument also suggested a different memory – a uniquely Fascist memory – of the First World

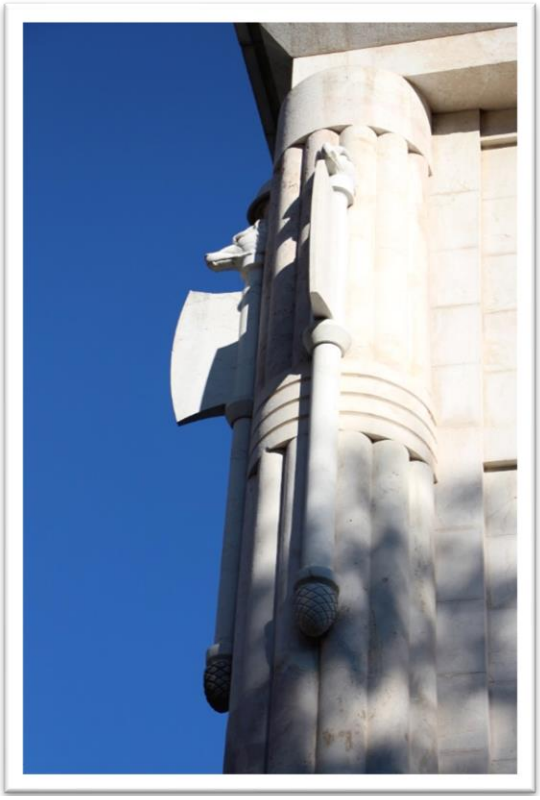


Figure X. Detail of the MaV. Note the use of fasci littori as pillars. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bolzano,_monumento_alla_vittoria_(13995)_05_fasci_littori.jpg.)

[133] Jones and Pilat, eds., *Routledge Companion*, chap. 1, Kindle.

War. Consider first that the twelve pillars that align the outside of the structure take the form of *fasci littori* (*Figure X*).[134] Though Fascist symbolism is ubiquitous throughout the monument, one must remember that the Italian Fascist Party did not exist during the First World War, and nowhere in frontline diaries and letters did soldiers label themselves Fascists.

The appropriation of classical antiquity – otherwise known as *romanità* – extended into the period of national remembrance. At its most fundamental level, Italian Fascism was an ideology that looked toward the future; but at the same time, scholars note that it also looked back "at an idealized Roman past" to foster a sense of unity among Italians.[135] In a speech entitled *Passare e Avvenire*[136], Mussolini asserted the connection that Ancient Roman society would have on the coming years during the rise of fascism. From his 1922 speech:

> Rome is our point of departure and reference; it is our symbol or, if you like, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, that is wise and strong, disciplined and imperial. Much of what was the immortal spirit of Rome, resurges in fascism: Roman is the Lictor, Roman is our organization of combat, Roman is our pride and courage: *Civis romanus sum* [I am a Roman]. . .[137]

[134] For more, see Paolo Salvatori, "Liturgie Immaginate: Gioacamo Boni e La Romanità Fascista," *Studi Storici* 53, no. 2, pp. 421-38. Specifically, the introductory chapter mentions that "The crucial moment in the institutionalization of this symbol [the *fascio littorio*] is generally identified in 12 December of 1926, when the *fascio* was declared an emblem of the state."
[135] Jan Nelis, "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of the 'Romanità'," *The Classical World* 100, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 393.
[136] In English, "Past and Future"
[137] Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. XVIII, *Dalla conferenza di Cannes alla marcia su Roma (14 Gennaio 1922 – 30 Ottobre 1922)* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1956), 160-1. From the Italian: "Roma è il nostro punto di. partenza e di riferimento; è il nostro simbolo o, se si vuole, il nostro mito. Noi sogniamo l'Italia romana, cioè saggia e forte, disciplinata e imperiale. Molto di quel che fu lo spirito immortale di Roma risorge nel fascismo: romano è il Littorio, romana è la nostra organizzazione di combattimento, romano è il nostro orgoglio e il nostro coraggio: «Civis romanus sum».

Given the appropriation of Ancient Roman symbols that appears in the design of the MaV, it is logical to conclude that the Fascist regime was also willing to appropriate mass death in World War I for Fascist gain as well by presenting the dead as fallen Fascist martyrs in later monuments.

Besides the inclusion of the *fasci littori*, there are other asynchronous elements to the MaV. One of these is the relief of the Greek Goddess of Victory, Nike, the centerpiece that rests at the top of the monument. While her presence affirms the notion that World War I was a victory for Italy, when combined with the Fascist symbolism, the monument distorts fact. Simply put, combining these two elements suggests that World War I was a victory for Italian Fascists. However, the reality was that in various parts of Italy, D'Annunzio-led far-right groups in 1918-9 labeled the outcome of the war "*la vittoria mutilata*" – or the mutilated victory – to express discontent at the territorial gains Italy received under the Treaty of London. It was this term, after all, that assisted the Fascist Party in its acquisition of power as discontent became widespread among far-right groups. In this way, the MaV suggested a different version of World War I that heralds the Fascist state as a victorious empire rather than one still insecure with its territorial gains.

Overall, the MaV presents a different portrait of the First World War when one compares its imagery to that of the soldiers who fought. As one of the Fascist regime's earliest monuments, it necessitated the portrayal of a strong Italian state, unified by a shared Roman past and a major victory in World War I. Instead of presenting the war as tragedy by invoking the reality of mass death and suffering, the MaV afforded the Fascist regime an opportunity to project its desire for the nation: an Italy that was unified and strong.

Il Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia, Redipuglia, Italy (1938 Construction)

The *Sacrario Miiltare di Redipuglia* (*Figure 1*) is the largest war memorial in Italy, containing the remains of over 100,000 soldiers who died on the Asiago Plateau, roughly 60,000 of which the regime was unable to identify. Located on the physical battleground, the *Sacrario* in many ways presents a more sacred image of the First World War. In addition, the geographic placement of the *Sacrario* on the battlefield emphasizes the mass death that occurred on the Asiago Plateau during the twelve battles of the Isonzo. In other words, this monument is not a clear exaltation of the Fascist state. This is not to say, however, that it is absent from Fascist symbolism; rather, the *Sacrario* simply takes a different form – still, a Fascist form – in the way it presents the First World War.

Rather than a celebration of victory, the *Sacrario* emphasizes the mass death that occurred during the First World War, and the size of the memorial certainly tells part of the story. As the largest of all the memorials, the *Sacrario* promotes notions of equality as the tens of thousands of names of Italian soldiers line each step.[138] An attempt to illustrate the regime's awareness to the age of mass politics, Redipuglia was one example of the major shift in the way the memorialization process functioned in Italy after the First World War. Looking back to the Wars of Unification 1860-1 in which Giuseppe Garibaldi led his one thousand men from Sicily to Rome to unify Italy, monuments that commemorated this achievement primarily centered on Garibaldi himself, in the process, omitting the communal nature of war. However, George Mosse notes that a change occurred after the First World War as war memorials (such as Redipuglia) "did not so much focus upon one man, as upon figures symbolic of the nation—upon the

[138] Note that at Redipuglia, while the memorial honors over 100,000 Italian soldiers, the structure is somewhat offset by the presence of the crypt to the Duke of Aosta at the bottom of the memorial (Figure 1). The presence of a crypt as a centerpiece of the memorial provides evidence for the regime's attention to hierarchy when referring to certain military and government positions.

sacrifice of all of its men. Here the common soldier was recognized long before he received separate burial."[139] However, Redipuglia still accepted the hierarchical nature of Fascism and the military, for at Redipuglia, "the dead are represented in military formation."[140] The tomb of the Duke of Aosta and the tombs of five generals appear in the foreground, illustrating an unequal distribution of importance as the 100,000 dead remain practically unidentified, yet nonetheless ready to march into battle under the leadership of their commanders.

What separated Fascist monuments like Redipuglia from other Allied monuments such as the Thiepval Monument in Picardy, France (*Figure XI*) was that the Fascist regime went a step



Figure XI. Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thiepval_m%C3%A9morial_(noms_grav%C3%A9s)_1.jpg.)

[139] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 47.
[140] Malone, "Modern Architecture and the Sacred," 230.

further to label the fallen in World War I as Fascist martyrs. By contrast, at the Thiepval Memorial, for instance – a structure that honored the British and South African soldiers who died at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 who had no known grave – one fundamental aspect of its design was the inclusion of the name of every soldier at the memorial's base.[141] In this way, the nation recognized the sacrifices and commemorated the communal nature of modern warfare and allowed the British soldier to assume a higher status.

But at the *Sacrario*, the Fascist regime went further to posthumously label the dead as Fascist martyrs. One way to do so was with the use of the word "*PRESENTE*" that appears along



Figure XII. Close up of Il Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia. Note the obsessive use of "PRESENTE" along with the names of soldiers along each row. In addition, the three crucifixes that sit atop the memorial. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Redipuglia_Presente_22.jpg)

[141] The reason for comparing the Thiepval Monument to the *Sacrario Militare di Redipgulia* is because both monuments are mass graves for the nation's servicemen. Despite a much different architectural style, the two memorialize a similar group of people.

the rows, both above and below the names of the soldiers (*Figure XII*). Interestingly, "*PRESENTE*" appears in bolder, larger letters, than the names of soldiers in such a way that it overshadows the individual names. Furthermore, the word "*PRESENTE*," as many scholars have noted, had liturgical significance within the fascist ideology. Specifically, "*PRESENTE*" referenced a key Fascist ritual: "during fascist ceremonies, the names of murdered Fascists, 'martyrs' names,' were called out loud and those present responded: 'Presente.'"[142] Additionally, the use of the word in Fascist architecture also had precedent; at the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution) in Rome in 1932 honoring the tenth-year anniversary of the March on Rome, the regime constructed a shrine honoring Fascist martyrs. The small room utilized the word to an obsessive level to signify the presence of Fascist martyrs who were instrumental to the Fascist regime's ascent to power.[143] In a similar vein, Redipuglia was the Fascist regime's attempt to make Fascist martyrs out of the over one-hundred thousand soldiers who gave their lives First World War despite having never lived to see the Fascist period, let alone call the roll in a Fascist ritual. The ironic part of depicting Italian soldiers as Fascist martyrs is that "The actual identities of the fallen are practically annihilated and the dead are not remembered as husbands, fathers and sons, but only as soldiers." Malone argues – and this author agrees – that "The annulment of the identities of all but the very highest ranks was elitist, rather than egalitarian" in its commemoration.[144]

Furthermore, because this is a final resting place, the use of the word "*PRESENTE*" also invoked the idea that Fascism had resurrected the Italian soldiers who died. A phenomenon that is not unique to Redipuglia, inscriptions that appear in Italian war memorials across the

[142] Jones and Pilat, eds., *Routledge Companion*, chap. 28, Kindle.
[143] *Ibid*.
[144] Malone, "Fascist Italy's Ossuaries," 7.

peninsula tend to "counterpose, and at times remove, the physical death [in war] with the immortality that one bestows to heroes."[145] Critics lament the fact that the usage of such phrases only contributed to a "sterilization" of death in the First World War. Falling in line with George Mosse's theory of the "Myth of the War Experience", "In each case, these memorials belie the brutality of war" and present a more beautiful image of the sacrifice of soldiers who were also perpetrators of extraordinary violence against the enemy.[146] At Redipuglia, the regime solved this tension by making the official, state-sponsored memory of the First World War one in which mourners could more readily utilize. Simply put, it was easier for the living to mourn when presented with a beautiful image of sacrifice rather than gruesome images of war. However, this presentation only contributed to the asynchronous narrative that the Fascist regime proposed. Monteleone and Sarasini note a side effect of this in that "It is a symptomatic fact that monuments to the fallen accurately reflect the official interpretation of the war, one constructed and accredited by the instruments of the formation of public opinion controlled by those in power". In other words, the official interpretation of the war ran counter to the testimonies of soldiers who described a general aversion and sometimes traitorous attitudes to the Italian cause. Furthermore, the official interpretation also presented an admirable version of the First World War. With the advent of war memorials, the Fascist regime spoke for all soldiers; in turn, soldiers consented to their martyrdom and the war became "the just war, the war for liberty, the war of the Risorgimento – all converging on the motive of the fight against the *German*, the enemy and longstanding oppressor."[147]

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[145] Monteleone and Sarasini, "I monumenti ai caduti," 657. From the Italian: "contrapporre, ed a volte rimuovere, la morte fisica con l'immortalità che si tributa agli eroi."
[146] Scates, Bruce and Rebecca Wheatley, "War Memorials," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War: Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 541.
[147] Monteleone and Sarasini, "I monumenti," 632. From the Italian: "È un fatto sintomatico che i monumenti ai caduti riflettano fedelmente l'interpretazione ufficiale della guerra, quella costruita e accreditata dagli strumenti di

On a related note, Redipuglia also featured themes of Christianity in the form of three crucifixes that stand at the apex of the memorial (*Figure XII*). Just like in other Allied memorials across Europe, the *Sacrario* highlighted the redemptive and regenerative power of Christianity, Within Fascism, though, the use of crucifixes was tactical and had precedent within the Fascist liturgy alongside the use of "Presente". During the occupation of Fiume in 1919, Gabriele D'Annunzio invoked the Christian martyr, Saint Sebastian, juxtaposing his death with the death of Italian soldiers during World War I:

> "The archer of life cried out in his death agony: 'I die in order not to die.' He cried, bleeding: 'Not enough! No enough! Again!' He cried, 'I will live again. But to live again it is necessary for me to die.' Immortality of love! Eternity of sacrifice! The paths of immolation are the surest; and the blood of the hero and the heroine is inexhaustible. You know this, sisters in Christ, brothers in the living God. This is the sense of this mystery. This is the meaning of this gift."[148]

An obvious attempt to equate Saint Sebastian's martyrdom with the martyrdom of the hundreds of thousands Italian soldiers, D'Annunzio's words were typical for those promoting the "Myth of the War Experience" that sanctified the life and death of the soldier through Christian symbolism. Similarly, invoking Christianity in a national memorial at Redipuglia combined the religious celebration for martyrdom with the nationalist devotion to the nation. As part of making Fascism a type of civic religion, George Mosse notes that "the myth [of the War Experience] used the traditional Christian means of consolation, the belief in the death and resurrection of Christ, as well as themes from antiquity. Death in war was a sacrifice for the nation, which, using

formazione dell'opinione pubblica controllati dal potere: la guerra giusta, la guerra per la libertà, la guerra risorgimentale – tutto convergendo sul motivo della lotta contro il *tedesco*, il nemico e l'oppressore di sempre."
[148] Fernando Gerra, *L'Impresa di Fiume* (Milan: Longanesi, 1974), 230.

Christian or classical themes, the monuments to the dead symbolized."[149] Indeed, Christianity could not escape the clutches of the Fascist regime's ideology.

The use of staircases also reinforces the element of sacredness. Rather than functionality, ritual was the main concern when creating the long, winding route to the top, at the end of which visitors look down on the monument in awe. As Malone states, "The obvious precedent [for Redipuglia] is the *Scala Sancta* (Holy Stairs), a recreation of the staircase that Christ ascended before his interrogation by Pontius Pilate, which Catholic pilgrims climb on their knees as an act of penance – the most famous example of which is in the Lateran Palace in Rome."[150] The parallels to spiritual ascension are clear.

Comparing this image of Christianity as a redemptive and regenerative force with the words of soldiers reveals an incongruent narrative. During the early part of Italian involvement, Eugenio Lavatori wrote about his aversion to war in purely religious terms:

> We hope in God that he is our ruler he can do what he wants. We hope and we pray that this ends soon, this war that daily ruins thousands of families. So, it will be destined like this: if we have to die, we will die. It is hard to die without seeing our loved ones again but we always hope that this does not happen.[151]

[149] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 32.
[150] The *Scala Sancta* inspired other monuments in Italy, imbuing national memorials with a recognizable, Catholic liturgical ritual. One such example was Giuseppe Terragni's memorial at Erba Incino near Como. For more,see Malone, "Architecture, Politics and the Sacred," 233.
[151] Eugenio Lavatori, "È dura morire," digital reproduction of original manuscript, 5 November 1915, LA GRANDE GUERRA 1914-1918: I diari raccontano, L'Espresso e Finegil editoriale con l'Archivio diaristico nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano https://racconta.gelocal.it/la-grande-guerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=322. From the Italian: "speriamo in Dio che lui è il nostro padrone lui puole fare ciò che vuole speriamo a preghiano che presto finisca questa guerra che rovina giornalmente migliaia di famiglie ebbene sarà destinato così se dobbiamo morire moriremo é dura morire senza rivedere i nostri più cari ma speriamo sempre che questo non succeda." Note: minor grammar changes at author's discretion for readability.

From this document, one recognizes that Lavatori did not conceive of himself as a martyr for Italy. On the contrary, he expressed fear at the thought of dying without seeing his family again. And overall, his wish was for the conflict "that daily ruins thousands of families" to end. Lavatori's words align with the many Italian soldiers who were Catholic, for in general, "Many Catholics felt a profound religious and spiritual desire for peace, believing that the sinfulness of war was damaging the nation, as well as creating social and political divisions."[152]

In sum, the *Sacrario* presented a different picture of the First World War than the MaV in Bolzano, yet it still retained a uniquely Fascist form in its technique of commemoration and use of Christian symbols. The main idea of the *Sacrario* was to exalt the sacrifices of Italian soldiers and place them on the same level of the religious martyrs of the ancient past. At the *Sacrario*, death in the First World War had a meaning; the Fascist regime honored every soldier's death. While one could characterize death on the Italian Front as highly destructive, brutal, and frankly anonymous, Lorenzo Benadusi accurately states, "In official representations of the war the tragic side of the conflict tended to be either erased or altered to make the sacrifices of the men at the front appear all the more heroic."[153] The regime was willing to use the deaths of Italian soldiers for political ends. In the process, death was meant to lose its sting; "Fascism, with its organizations and its ceremonies had the ability to wedge itself into the circle of mourning, and to meet the needs of many who had lost a husband, a father, a son, or a friend."[154]

[152] Wilcox, *Morale*, 146.
[153] Benadusi, "Borghesi", 35.
[154] Fabio Todero, "War and Memory: The Fascist Instrumentalization of the Italian Front," in *The Great War and Memory in Central and South Eastern Europe*, ed. Oto Luthar (Lieden: Brill, 2016), 130.

Il Sacrario Militare di Oslavia, Oslavia, Italy (1938 Construction)

The final national monument under examination is the *Sacrario Militare di Oslavia* (*Figure XIII*). Built in 1938 near the *Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia*, the *Sacrario* in Oslavia takes a different appearance with the presence of four small towers that surround and compliment the monument's focal point, the large tower in the middle. Pisan Ghino Venturi was the lead architect for this structure, and the form it takes illustrates the diversity of thought among Fascist architects. While the MaV in Bolzano celebrated Italian victory through the use of Fascist symbolism and the *Sacrario* of Redipuglia exalted and mythologized the sacrifices of soldiers through its reiteration of Fascist liturgy, the *Sacrario* in Oslavia intended to be a display of nationalism through the use of local stone on the exterior, the wording on the outside inscription, and through its modern take on Medieval architecture. The *Sacrario* contains the



Figure XIII. Il Sacrario Militare di Oslavia. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P39.266-01_Oslavia_-_prospetto_del_Monumento_-_Ossario_ai_caduti_(in_via_di_ultimazione).jpg)

remains of approximately 57,000 soldiers. Along the walls inside of the memorial appear 20,000 names of soldiers the regime was able to identify. The remaining 37,000 unknown soldiers are buried inside the memorial in three ossuaries.[155] Located in Gorizia, Italy, the *Sacrario* is in another area of contested land. Today, the small town is just a few kilometers from the Slovenian border.

The decision to build with local Karst stone rather than the Fascist favorite, travertine marble, was an approach unique to structures in this region.[156] Indeed, utilizing the stone from newly annexed territory was one method the Fascist regime implemented to Italianize the region. Simply put, constructing a national memorial with local stone signified that not only was the material Italian, but the context in which the regime was using it – to memorialize victims of the First World War – was an appropriate method of national remembrance. By contrast, structures such as the *Palazzo della Civilità Italiana* in Rome, another one of Marcello Piacentini's famous works, were almost entirely made of travertine marble, a material that became a symbol of the Fascist regime. In the case of the *Sacrario* in Oslavia, Venturi's choice to build with local stone was likely in some part due to practicality, but even he had to admit that the use of this material to commemorate Italian soldiers carried political undertones. On the one hand, at the time Italian soldiers were dying near Gorizia, the region was not self-evidently Italian and those who died did not recognize the land in which they were fighting as part of the Kingdom of Italy. On the other, the civilians living in Gorizia after the war did not identify as Italian either (similar to Bolzano).

[155] "Ossuary of Oslavia," Itenerari della Grande Guerra, accessed March 1, 2021, https://www.turismofvg.it/en/109244/ossuary-of-oslavia.
[156] Other monuments in the region such as the *Sacrario Militare del Monte Grappa* and the *Sacrario Militare di Asiago* are made of stone.

In this way, the Fascist regime's reclamation of indigenous stone for the *Sacrario* represented a claim of nationhood and an attempt to further define the borders of Italy.

Furthering these claims of Italian nationhood, Mussolini visited the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region in 1938 and on one of his many stops, he visited Oslavia to pay respects to the fallen on the twentieth anniversary of Italian victory in World War I. At these various stops which included factories, memorials, and battlefields, he gave small speeches to reiterate these claims. From the documents of the voyage, it is clear that Mussolini was aware of the implications the First World War had on the region. In a speech in the city of Udine on September, 20th, 1938, the same day of his visit to the *Sacrario*, he exclaimed:

> Blackshirts!
>
> I return to you on the twenty-year anniversary of victory, exactly sixteen years after my speech announcing the March on Rome…
>
> Italy was then a population that was suffering because the peace had not been adequate to its immense sacrifices, a population that was not able to believe anymore in the governments that followed one another too quickly and with increasingly ephemeral figures. It is in these conditions that fascism undertook its battle. We were determined to do everything, even to fight if it had been necessary, to win and implement the project that I announced in your city.[157]

[157] Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. XXIX, *Dal viaggio in Germania all'intervento dell'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale (1 Ottobre 1937– 10 Giugno 1940)* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1959), 152. From the Italian: "Camicie nere!
Torna tra voi nel ventennale della vittoria, esattamente secidi anni dopo il mio discorso annunciatore della marcia su Roma.
L'Italia era allora un popolo che soffriva perché la pace non era stata adeguata ai suoi immensi sacrifici, un popolo che non poteva più credere nei governi che si succedevano troppo rapidamente e con figure sempre più effimere. È

The project, of course, was to make the Venezia-Giulia region self-evidently Italian. Venezia-Giulia, its surrounding areas, and especially locations near the border had long been areas of contention; a 1922 Washington Post article explained:

> The political consolidation of the new kingdom of Oslavia is not proceeding as rapidly or satisfactorily as friends of the country [Italy] might wish.
>
> There are not lacking among the [unintelligible] racial elements in the population evidences of antagonism and lack of cooperation.[158]

While the claims to Italian nationhood were tenuous, he still asserted in the same speech that "Italy today is a people proudly standing; Italy today is an empire. The people, those of the offices and of the fields, is not extraneous to the life of the state, one feels like a protagonist of the life of the State: this is the profound meaning of the fascist revolution."[159] Despite years of nation-building in the northeastern regions, anxiety among Fascists led to similar trips across all areas of the northeast. More often than not, Mussolini traveled with his convoy to give speeches and celebrate at imperial ceremonies to ignite a sense of national pride among local populations that had not been aligned with Italy before the war.

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in queste condizioni che il fascismo impegnò la sua battaglia. Eravamo decisi a tutto, anche a combattere se fosse stato necessario, pur di vincere e di attuare il programma che io enunciai nella vostra città,"

[158] "OSLAVIA SLOW TO GAIN SOLIDARITY: FRIED RACIAL GROUPS IN NATION CLASH OVER DIRECTION OF NEW-STATE'S POLICIES. AUSTRIA PRODDED RIVALRIES. PARTY DISCORD, COUNTRY EXPECTED TO REACH UNIFICATION WITHOUT UNDUE DELAY," *Washington Post*, February 12, 1922, https://search-proquest-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/docview/146064405/fulltextPDF/3ECC06C9B19540CCPQ/1?accountid=14214 (accessed March 2, 2021).

[159] *Ibid*. From the Italian: "L'Italia oggi è un popolo fieramente in piedi; l'Italia oggi è uno Stato; l'Italia è un impero. Il popolo, quello delle officine e quello dei campi, non è estraneo alla vita dello Stato, si sente protagonista della vita dello Stato: questo è il significato profondo della rivoluzione fascista."

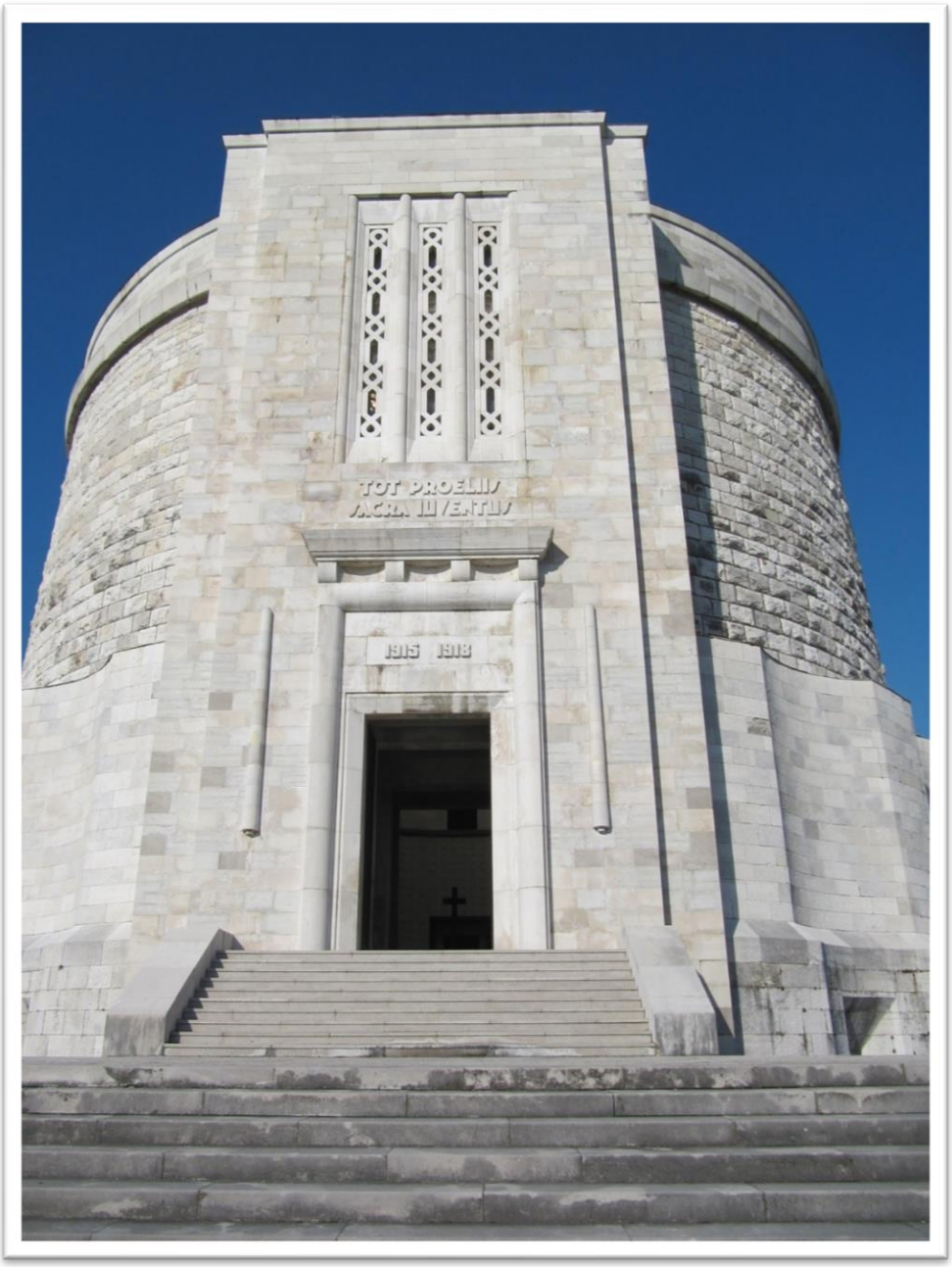


Figure XIV. Front image of Il Sacrario Militare di Oslavia. Note the inscription, "TOT PROELIIS SACRA JUVENTUS". (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacrario_militare_di_oslavia_5.jpg)

The aim of ossuaries in the annexed parts of Italy "was to serve the ambitions of the regime by politicising [sic] the memory of the dead."[160] The geographic placement of this monument certainly aided in this politicization as Gorizia as its neighboring towns were symbols

[160] Malone, "Fascist Italy's Ossuaries," 2.

of the fight along the Isonzo Front during the war. However, the monument itself reveals other methods by which the regime politicized the dead. Most notably, the inscription on the front reinforces the Fascist attitude towards Italian males during the age of Fascism (*Figure 15*). It reads:

TOT PROELIIS SACRA JUVENTUS

In English:

"Youth destined to many battles"

The *Sacrario* reinforced the notion that the official destiny of young Italians was to fight for the *patria*. The soldiers of World War I, then, had set the example for Italian boys who would die in future wars for the Fascist regime. Mussolini reaffirmed this notion during his visit to Gorizia on the day of his visit in which he exclaimed: "the children of today will be tomorrow soldiers, and Italian soldiers that will always have victory in their hands."[161] Fascism – which "does [did] not believe in the possibility nor in the utility of perpetual peace" – wanted to create a new generation of young boys who were militant Fascists.[162]

Ossuaries – like most Fascist architecture – combined the traditional and the modern. While having already spoken of Ancient Rome, the Middle Ages were also a source from which architects drew when designing Fascist memorials. In the case of Oslavia, though its design was based on "the sixth-century mausoleum of King Theodoric near Ravenna," it took a much

[161] Susmel and Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia,* vol. XXIX, 151. From the Italian: "i piccoli di oggi saranno domani soldati e soldati italiani che avranno sempre in pugno la vittoria."
[162] Susmel and Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. XXXIV, *IL MIO DIARIO DI GUERRA (1915-1917); LA DOTTRINA DEL FASCISMO (1932); VITA DI ARNALDO (1932); PARLO CON BRUNO (1941); PENSIERI PONTINI E SARDI (1943); STORIA DI UN ANNO (1944)* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1961), 124. From the Italian: "non crede alla possibilità né all'utilità della pace perpetua."

simpler form and utilized much simpler geometry to give it a modern feel.[163] This style "reflected a pan-European trend of medievalist war memorials since the nineteenth century, which ennobled warfare through suggestions of medieval chivalry."[164] Indeed, other memorials such as the ossuary at Pocol (1935) recreated Medieval architecture in a modern way. In most cases, these structures resembled fortresses and bastions which emphasized long-past chivalric notions of warfare and the strength of the Fascist regime. All in all, the desire to blend tradition and modernity was the Fascist method to sacralize the space.[165] It gave a sense of familiarity to the space, but also reinforced the idea that Oslavia was uniquely Fascist.

Conclusion

The themes and images in ossuaries and memorials clarified a Fascist narrative of the First World War that eased the pain that the war had wrought. The MaV was perhaps the most explicit in its use of Fascist symbolism. From the configuration of pillars in the shape of *fasci littori* – the symbol of the regime – to its geographic placement in Bolzano that reinforced Italian claims of nationhood in a "contested land", the design of the MaV suggested that the First World War was a Fascist achievement. Italy had literally ingested German-speaking Bolzano, and the monument "was a concrete reminder of the Fascists' domination and oppression of the region."[166] It was, in short, a symbol of the regime itself.

The *Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia*, on the other hand, did not hide the reality of mass death. But while the emphasis on mass death pervaded the memorial, it also told a story of the First World War in which those who died were Fascist martyrs. Through its repetitive use of the

[163] Malone, "Architecture, Politics and the Sacred," 227.
[164] *Ibid.*
[165] For more, see Malone, "Architecture, Politics and the Sacred," 226-37.
[166] Andrea Carlà, "Transforming a Controversial Heritage," 12.

word "*PRESENTE*", the *Sacrario* asynchronously labeled Italian soldiers as martyrs for the *patria* who voluntarily gave their life for the future of Fascist Italy. As we know, however, at the Battle of Caporetto, soldiers deserted in the hundreds of thousands. Likewise, there are countless diaries in which soldiers expressed their lack of faith in the nation's war aims. Omitting these voices, the *Sacrario* presented a more usable memory of the war in which all soldiers were faithful to the cause.

In Oslavia, the regime further defined Italy's borders through its use of indigenous stone. Though the land was not self-evidently Italian when soldiers were fighting in the war, the Fascist state found the natural resources useful Italianizing the region. Further evidence for "Italianization" came through Mussolini's visits to the Friuli Venezia-Giulia region in which he gave speeches to reiterate Italian claims of nationhood. In addition, Oslavia emphasized that the destiny of young boys was to fight in future wars for the Fascist state. Italian Fascism was a violent ideology that believed in the utility of violence and in the notion that the State lay above ideas of individualism. The Doctrine of Fascism proclaimed, "the Fascist conception is that life is for the State; it accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State which is the conscience and the universal will of man in his historic existence."[167] Oslavia promoted the Fascist destiny of young boys and put in official language that it was their duty to follow in the footsteps of First World War soldiers.

[167] Susmel and Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia*, vol. XXXIV, 119. From the Italian: "la concezione fascista è per lo Stato; ed è per l'individuo in quanto esso coincide con lo Stato, coscienza e volontà universale dell'uomo nella sua esistenza storica."

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how the Fascist regime appropriated the First World War experience through the creation of war memorials. Memorials across the peninsula promoted Italian victory in the First World War as a Fascist achievement and displaced the lived experiences of soldiers in the process. Memorials frequently hid from view the humiliating aspects of the war such as the mass desertion and defeat Caporetto, one of the darkest events in Italian history, fostering a more useable memory of the First World War on a state-sponsored level. Overall, the themes that appear in both local and national monuments suggest that memorials primarily served the aims of regime while the memorialization of the masses who died remained a secondary goal.

The Italian entrance into the First World War stood as an outlier to other nations. Abstaining from the conflict for nearly a full year, the Kingdom of Italy joined the war on the side of the Allies on May 23rd, 1915 when it declared war against Austria-Hungary. The stated war aims were to take back what Italian nationalists called *terra irredenta* – unredeemed land – from the Austro-Hungarian aggressors. In short, Italians in power believed that doing so would reunite the cultural homeland of Italy, fulfilling the aims of the *Risorgimento* once and for all. While many – especially Italian nationalists – were excited about these prospects, a larger portion of Italians did not favor intervention into the conflict. Large numbers of Socialist, Catholic, peasant, and pacificist groups did not believe in the supposed benefits Italy was to gain through involvement in the largest European war to date.

Given the lack of support for intervention, it is not a surprise that Italians typically did not write positively about their experiences. Letters and diaries from Italian soldiers that described the nature of death on the Italian front contradicted depictions of war from poets like

D'Annunzio and Futurist groups who glorified violence before the First World War to cultivate support for intervention. Death on the Italian Front was often impersonal, and soldiers' diaries frequently described bodily mutilation and death via artillery, machine guns, and snipers. Deaths of this kind had a mentally distressing effect on witnesses, but the larger significance of these accounts is that they illustrate how death on the Italian front was impersonal. The mythologized version of a glorious death for the *patria* was not a widescale phenomenon along the Italian lines.

The war also had a dehumanizing effect on Italian soldiers. While some officers described how little the Supreme Command cared about the rank-and-file in more vague terms, other diaries noted that officers frequently implemented summary executions to foster obedience in the lines. While their intent was to eliminate dissent and mutinous behavior, entries from Giuseppe Mimmi of the Catanzaro Brigade, for instance, illustrated that the randomness of summary executions frequently had the reverse effect of creating more dissent. Additionally, Mimmi's diary showed that disciplinary measures dehumanized soldiers, giving them little reason to believe in their efficacy.

Disillusionment with the nation's war aims – a key sentiment that memorials erased – was a common theme in Italian diaries and letters. For one, the lack of merit-based promotions within the Italian military produced feelings of resentment among the lower-ranked officer class. Officers felt that there was not much to gain by exceeding their normal duties which also trickled down to the infantry. Among the enlisted, the will to fight for the *patria* often failed to exceed an individual's want for self-preservation; many soldiers described that their personal aim in the conflict was merely to make it back to their families. This sentiment reached its apogee at the battle of Caporetto where 300,000 Italians deserted *en masse*.

Austro-Hungarian prisoner of war camps were the last stops for tens of thousands of Italian soldiers. Life in these camps varied, but we can say with certainty that abandonment was among the most common sentiments. Indeed, the Italian government *had* abandoned their prisoners under the justification that anybody who was a prisoner was a traitor, therefore undeserving of aid. The suspension of packages and foodstuffs left prisoners to resort to selling their last pieces of clothing to relieve their hunger. In other cases, prisoners could not survive the camps and died while begging for food. The long-term effect of hunger was that Italian prisoners' immune systems outright failed as tens of thousands died due to dysentery and tuberculosis, among other famine-related diseases.

Overall, the portrait of the Italian First World War experience was a bleak one. How would a liberal regime in crisis handle the creation of memory of a war for which they were responsible? More specifically, how would the regime memorialize the sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands of Italians who lost their lives? In the immediate postwar period, the liberal regime did not take over the memorialization of the war; a figurative "Monument War" broke out between socialist and Fascist forces. Whereas left-wing groups tended to spotlight the mass suffering and futility of war, local Fascist parties sought to promote a positive narrative of the war. To do so, they intimidated socialists and – like in the case of Gubbio – took over the local memorialization by creating new competitions for individual towns' local war memorials.

Themes and imagery varied from town to town, but the *Monumento Giordano Ottolini* in Milan reinforced a patriotic view of the war through its hyper masculine portrayal of the *Medaglia d'Oro* recipient. This type of portrayal closely resembled contemporary perceptions of the New Fascist Man, or the model of how Italian men should behave during the age of Italian Fascism. Most importantly, Fascists favored an aggressive and militant masculinity, one that

would foster a new generation of Italian soldiers who would be willing to fight for the *patria*. It was no coincidence that Ottolini appeared as a muscular, semi-nude man dying dramatically in war, for his image promoted a more usable memory of the war in which soldiers willingly exhibited acts of bravery for the national cause.

In a similar fashion, the *Monumento ai Caduti* in Cernobbio offered a more positive outlook on the First World War experience as it told the viewer that the men who participated in war were proud to fight for the nation. As we know, however, letters and diaries often explained the opposite. The monument featured five men from various points of a mythologized Italian past dating back to the Ancient Romans. The theme that connected these men together was the New Man, an idealized version of man defined by heroic wartime sacrifice and a militant masculinity. The body language and nude images of the five men also worked together to overshadow the humiliating and devastating aspects of the war. They stood as fundamentally opposite to the deserter at Caporetto or the left-wing non-interventionist.

Finally, the *Monumento ai Caduti* in Borgo San Lorenzo illustrated the importance of Fascist *romanità* and its value in establishing Fascism as a type of political religion in Italy. The monument promoted a historical link between modern Italy and the Ancient Roman past through its depiction of a Roman Legionary protecting a dying World War I soldier. This mythical link (which was essentially propaganda), was influential in promoting Italian imperialism in the 1930s. Mussolini looked back at the Ancient Romans – a society that excelled at territorial conquest – to create a strong imperial state during his time as Prime Minister. All in all, the portrayal of the two men was asynchronous and did not have any basis in reality as it pertained to the lived experiences of soldiers. In Borgo San Lorenzo, Fascist political aims were more important than the memorialization of the dead.

As the Fascist view of the war became more homogenous, by 1927 the regime found it time to create war memorials to cultivate a national narrative of the war. The regime built the first "truly fascist monument" in Bolzano and called it the *Monumento alla Vittoria*, emphasizing that Italians were victorious in the First World War. The *MaV* was to be a symbol of the regime itself, and its geographic placement and use of *fasci* in the design of the pillars served to reinforce this fact. The political climate surrounding the *MaV* remains tense up to the present, for the regime sought to stake its territorial claim on the newly acquired city of Bolzano by building the structure on an unfinished Austro-Hungarian monument dedicated to a group of Tyrolean rifle-regiments. Even though the inhabitants of Bolzano did not self-identify as Italian, the conditions in the Treaty of London had made the area Italian territory; this assertion of Fascist domination was one step in the Italianization of the region. Overall, rather than depicting the war as tragedy and memorializing the dead, the *MaV* ultimately served to project the Fascist desire for a strong imperial state after a major victory in the First World War.

In contrast to the *MaV*, The *Sacrario Militare di Redipuglia* accentuated mass death and suffering in the First World War. Despite this, the *Sacrario* featured many Fascist themes, most notably its repetitive use of the Fascist liturgy and representation of familiar Christian symbols. At Redipuglia, rather than simply listing the names of the dead, the Fascist regime labeled the Italian soldiers who died in the war Fascist martyrs through the utilization of the word "*PRESENTE*", a key element of the Fascist liturgy. Because this was the final resting place, "*PRESENTE*" appealed to the idea that Fascism had acted as a resurrecting force for those who gave their life for the nation. In addition, religious symbols in the memorial such as the three crucifixes at the memorial's apex and the winding staircases that alluded to spiritual ascension on either side worked together to reinforce Italian Fascism's ability to act as a civic religion. Still,

the promotion of the ideas that Fascism – and war in general – could be regenerative forces in the world only served the regime's political ends; death in war was meant to lose its sting.

The *Sacrario Militare di Oslavia* asserted Italian domination of newly acquired territory and proclaimed the destiny of young Fascist boys. Fascist insecurity with the nation's borders led the regime to build memorials in areas that were not self-evidently Italian (like in the case of Bolzano), and in Oslavia the regime's use of Karst stone in the design bolstered Italian territorial claims. To further these claims, Mussolini visited the inauguration on his tour through the Friuli Venezia-Giulia region and emphasized that the land was rightfully Italian. Finally, the monument politicized the dead by asserting that the destiny of young boys was to fight for the *patria*. First World War soldiers were the example-setters for the next generation of males who would devote their life to the nation.

As time has passed, these memorials have lost much of their Fascist aura. The northeastern monuments are stops on educational field trips for Italian schoolchildren, and the removal of Fascist symbolism combined with the additions of new exhibits now make Redipuglia – a site that once promoted Italian imperialism and offered a positive message towards war – a site of peace.[168] Fascism, in all its various forms and offshoots, has been responsible for the most monstrous inhumanity the world has ever seen. Let these memorials be reminders of its injustices.

[168] Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 52.

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Vita

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Education

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, 2019-2021

- Maxwell School of Citizenship, History, M.A.

Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, 2014-2018

- History, B.A.
- Political Science, B.A.

Teaching Experience

Syracuse University Department of History, Graduate Teaching Assistant

Europe in the Age of Hitler and Stalin – Fall 2019

- 300 level course
- Facilitated monthly discussions with an average of 30 students over secondary source material
- Engaged with students during office hours
- Graded exams and research papers

Modern Europe – Spring 2020, Spring 2021

- 100 level course
- Created weekly discussion materials and lesson plans
- Facilitated class discussions with an average of 20 students across three discussion sections
- Graded exams and papers

Early Modern Europe – Fall 2020

- 100 level course
- Created weekly discussion materials and lesson plans

- Facilitated class discussions with an average of 20 students across three discussion sections
- Engaged with students in a virtual setting
- Graded exams and papers

Scholarships

Goss Discovery Scholarship, 2016 – Kansas State University

Kansas State Orchestra Scholarship, 2014-2017, Kansas State University

Foreign Languages

Italian – 5+ years of experience – Advanced Reading and Writing Proficiency

English - Native

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