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Museographical Perspectives on Modern Fortified Landscapes: World War I Defensive Lines in Italy¹

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Stop killing the dead,
Shout no more, do not shout
If you still want to hear them,
If you hope not to perish.

Imperceptible is their murmur,
They make no more noise
Than the growing grass,
Glad where man treads not.²

The urgency of placing the safeguard of natural and anthropic landscapes at the centre of the European and international policies has been increasingly asserted over the past few years. The paralysis imposed in many countries by the pandemic in 2020 partially subdued the public pressure on environmental improvements to the cold phrasing of the emergency data. Bulletins and counting of the deceased suddenly became part of the daily lives of millions of people, as in a war scenario. Still, most nations are not in the state of war and the enemy is invisible.

- 1 This paper ensues from the research project “TRACES – Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts: From Intervention to Co-production,” which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement no. 693857; TRACES, <http://www.traces.polimi.it> (access: 21 April 2020).
- 2 “Cessate d’uccidere i morti, / Non gridate più, non gridate / Se li volete ancora udire, / Se sperate di non perire. / Hanno l’impercettibile sussurro, / Non fanno più rumore / Del crescere dell’erba, / Lieta dove non passa l’uomo.” Giuseppe Ungaretti, “Non gridate più” [Shout no more], [in:] *Il dolore: 1937–1946* [The pain: 1937–1946], Milano 1947.

People live on hold, closed in their homes, rediscovering a forced domesticity, harbouring mistrust towards what opens up beyond their door, yet still feeling part of a community which shares the same uncertain fate. And while the environment benefits from the lockdown, localisms and nationalisms return to prevail forcefully in the perceived helplessness of the European Commission.

Looking beyond the contingency, it is essential to implement the best practices to holistically improve the quality of our environment. It is also necessary to reflect on the basic assumptions on which the European Union is founded and claim the constitutive values of the European identity that is still hardly acknowledged.

What are the objectives that could give meaning to the European Union? What are the heritages and values which can contribute to the recognition of a shared European cultural identity and memory?

European cultural heritage is intrinsically multifarious, resulting from a secular history rich in enhancing factors, such as intense economic and cultural exchanges, travels and transfers of skilled personalities, arts patronage, and scientific research, but also divisive events, such as alternating dominations, wars, religious clashes, forced migrations, genocides. Accordingly, “difficult heritages”³ mark the landscape of the continent, as well as natural resources and cultural assets preserved as prestigious expressions of various communities. Their presence evokes the past and impacts on the present, potentially engendering frictions.

Europe is home not only to pasts that bring different groups and nations together but also to ones that threaten to tear us apart or generate negative emotions. If heritage is what we inherit from the past and what informs our sense of who we are today, then contentious heritage is that which is capable of throwing this sense into doubt and disrupting potential commonalities.⁴

Policies of silencing are not acceptable in democratic societies, nor could they potentially extinguish social conflicts. Discourses on identity must therefore be considered as permanent processes of dialogue

3 Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, London - New York 2009.

4 Sharon Macdonald, “Contentious Heritage,” [in:] *TRACES* no. 5 (2018), p. 6 (6-7), <http://www.traces.polimi.it/index.html?π=3646.html> (access: 21 April 2020).

across diverse positions, acknowledgement of differences,⁵ negotiation, and reinterpretation. In this view, the preservation and transmission of contentious heritages could contribute to the conscious and inclusive identification of a set of cultural, moral, and ethical values and traditions, constituting the base of the European collective identity.⁶

The article relates to the research on difficult memories, focusing on a heritage that dates back to an era in which the continent was ravaged by fierce conflicts, frictions, and dominance aspirations. These events profoundly marked Europe and cast shadows on the present. Modern fortified landscapes are a peculiar museographical theme. The article proposes a reflection on the case of the Defensive Line at the North Border in Italy.

The Defensive Line at the North Border in Italy

Wars, conflict, triumph over foreigners, the plunder of riches from overseas – these provide the essence of most national histories. Yet whether they are perceived as troubling for contemporary identity may vary considerably; what was once seen as a sign of a country's achievement may later come to be understood as a reason for regret.⁷

The Defensive Line at the North Border is a complex and wide system of fortifications, built in the alpine area along the Italian-Swiss-Austrian borders, mainly in the years of World War I. Constituted by an extensive network of artefacts disseminated along hillsides, dominating valleys, or hidden in the woods, it is commonly, though improperly, referred to as “Cadorna Line,” a denomination which derives from the name of General Luigi Cadorna, Chief of Staff of the Italian Army during the war and at the time of the construction of fortifications. Despite the attribution, the project was the result of a long planning process that began right

5 This concept moves from Chantal Mouffe's idea of “agonistic pluralism” and the extension of the idea of “agonism” to memory studies suggested by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen. See: Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism,” [in:] *Social Research*, vol. 66 no. 3 (1999), pp. 745–758; Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, “On Agonistic Memory,” [in:] *Memory Studies* vol. 9 no. 4 (2016), pp. 399–401 (390–404). See also the European Funded research project *UNREST - Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe*, <http://www.unrest.eu> (access: 21 April 2020).

6 See: Gerard Delanty and Chris Rumford, *Rethinking Europe: Social Theory and the Implications of Europeanization*, London 2005, pp. 55–56.

7 Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage...*, op. cit., p. 2.

after the national unification in 1861 and had been repeatedly reviewed to adapt to political and tactical changes, in view of the unstable setting of European alliances.

The purpose of the Line was to stop a possible invasion from Austro-German troops, who, coming through the central Swiss Alps, could have quickly reached and occupied the crucial industrial and economic cities in Northern Italy.

In 1911 the Department of Defence devised a new plan, extended from Ossola to the Orobie chain, and entrusted the Milan division of the Corps of Engineers to realise it. The Italian High Command established a defensive line with advance and rearward garrisons, made up by forts, entrenchments, artillery bunkers, barracks, shelters, and hundreds of kilometres of carriage roads, mule tracks and paths, primarily gathered in the flanking heights of the Pre-Alps in the provinces of Varese, Como, Lecco, and Bergamo. Still, the entire system extended from Val d'Ossola to the Orobie Alps.

In 1915 Italy ordered a general mobilisation, then declared war on Austria-Hungary; those occurrences expedited the construction works considerably. In the meantime, Switzerland started to build equivalent fortifications along the Italian border to protect the Canton of Ticino, resulting in a line called Lona, which was modernised regularly in alignment with the concept of the "armed neutrality" of the Swiss Confederation till 1995.

The Italian structures responded to a general plan but were largely adapted to the landscape morphology, using concrete and other local materials. In the final construction report, General Ettore Mambretti, who was coordinating the works, declared that the defensive system included 72 kilometres of entrenchment, 88 military emplacements, among which 11 in caves, 25,000 square metres of barracks, 296 kilometres of roads open to heavy traffic, and 398 kilometres of mule tracks.

The work sites were structured according to the criteria of autonomy and self-sufficiency, and the requisitions of existing handicraft activities on the territory concurred to satisfy particular constructive necessities. The number of labourers who worked on this project ranged from 15,000 to 20,000, most of them civilian. Due to a shortage of men labourers as well as the constant recall to arms, a relevant part were women, but also youngsters under the age of 15 were hired as unskilled workers. In spite of the safety provisions adopted, numerous work accidents would occur on a daily basis, mainly involving miners and usually with very

serious consequences. The construction of the Defensive Line had therefore a high impact on the local populations.

Indifferent to any military plan, history evolved in a completely different direction. In the early phases of the war, the front lines moved to the Italian-Austro-Hungarian border, with dramatic battles in Karst and in the alpine plateaux of Adamello and the Dolomites. Indeed, as the conflict progressed, the Italian-Swiss border seemed increasingly secure, to the extent that even artillery pieces were moved from the Verbanò sector to the Isonzo fighting line, beginning in April 1917.

At the end of the war, the fortifications sat unused and mostly undamaged, left neglected except for few isolated maintenance works in the interwar period. During World War II, part of the structures belonging to the Defensive Line at the North Border harboured smugglers, fled prisoners, partisans, and German and Italian military units, but played no strategic role in the battles.

A different fate befell the fort in San Martino Valcuvia, which gained a doleful notoriety on 15 November 1943, when its bunkers hosted one of the first battles of the Italian Resistance. Nazi-fascist forces heavily bombed the peak of Monte San Martino and defeated a group of partisans commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Carlo Croce. At least 38 partisans and 240 German soldiers died, and the little church of San Martino was completely destroyed. A memorial to the victims and a new church have since been erected in remembrance of the event.

Just a few artefacts of the Defensive Line survived the oblivion that followed the cessation of their strategic interest, mostly thanks to sporadic private or public initiatives. Still, an overall museographical project is missing.

Museographical perspectives for diffused war heritage in Northern Italy

Military relics of World War I are still visible in Northern Italy, scattered over large territories and often hidden in the landscape or in civil settlements, but their future is largely uncertain.

The preservation and transmission of this symbol of division is actually challenging, due to several factors. First of all, the territorial extension of the network and the fragmentation over diverse jurisdictions thwart the coordination of the interventions, due to diverse sensitivity, unequal availability of resources, or purely political reasons. The plural typologies of constructions and the original use of various building techniques

further complicate the establishment of a clear set of guidelines for the restoration of the artefacts and require the involvement of multidisciplinary teams of experts. Moreover, the sites encountered really different fates, transforming them into theatre of war episodes or just neglected places.

The course of the hostilities determined three diverse zones: the Defensive Line at the North Border (“Cadorna Line”), the “White War,” and the Isonzo River territory. Trees, wild bushes, layers of leaves and debris have slowly concealed most of the fortifications in the provinces of Varese, Como, Sondrio, and Bergamo. Ascribable neither to *lieux de mémoire*,⁸ nor *lieux d’oubli*,⁹ they were just forgotten. For decades, only occasional tourists and enthusiasts visited the artefacts, whose neglect was often due disrespectful people who ignored their historical value, which accelerated the effects of natural forces. What is surprising is the detachment that local communities would sometimes develop towards this heritage.

A different trend started at the turn of this century, when these structures aroused a new interest and specific preservation laws were promulgated.¹⁰ A key factor was certainly the approaching centenary celebrations of the Great War. Scholars and local government institutions, supported by regions and the state, initiated conservation and transmission actions, primarily repairing the most meaningful and accessible parts, providing a specific signage, and publicising the existence of the fortifications through scientific papers, brochures, articles, and educational activities. The first outcome was the realisation of nine tourist and didactic routes in the Alps nearby Varese, equipped with up-pointing signs, maps, and brief descriptions at each starting point.¹¹ A website was created, sharing the same information, but a serious museum or

8 Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Paris 1984; idem, “Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Memoire,” [in:] *Representations*, no. 26 (1989), special issue: *Memory and Counter-memory*, pp. 7–24.

9 Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*, Oxford – New York 1999, p. 10.

10 Milestones were the Italian National Law no. 78/2001 for the safeguard of the Historical Heritage of World War I and its implementation decree.

11 The project was supported by the Cross-Border Cooperation Program Interreg III/A Italy-Switzerland 2000–2006, which enabled a wide mapping of artefacts of relevant historical interest. The Program Interreg VI Italy-Switzerland 2007–2013 later funded “Forti e Linea Cadorna,” finalised to preserve and promote the most remarkable military structures along the Italian-Swiss frontier, with a view to integrated tourism.



Trenches surrounding the chapel of San Giuseppe, Cassano Valcuvia, Varese. © Cristina F. Colombo

a scientifically set visitor centre were missing. The Municipality of Cassano Valcuvia compensated for this, opening a small documentation centre focused on their territory.¹²

The scenario is different in those territories that were battlefronts.¹³ In the area of the Carnic Alps, of the Dolomites in Veneto, and Adamello-Brenta peaks between Lombardy and Trentino, a number of forts and entrenchments can still be seen, dating back to World War I. The phase of the conflict which was fought here was labelled as the “White War”

See: Linea Cadorna: Sentiero della Pace [Cadorna Line: The Peace Trail], <http://www.provincia.va.it/lineacadorna> (access: 21 April 2020).

12 Centro Documentale Frontiera Nord “Linea Cadorna” [“Cadorna Line” North Border Documentary Centre], <https://www.centrodocumentale.it> (access: 21 April 2020).

13 Trench warfare had a particular impact on landscapes and environments. On this issue, see Dorothee Brantz, “Environments of Death: Trench Warfare on the Western Front, 1914–18,” [in:] *War and the Environment: Military Destruction in the Modern Age*, Charles E. Closmann (ed.), eBook Comprehensive Academic Collection – North America 2009, pp. 68–91.

due to the extreme climatic conditions that afflicted the soldiers and the perennial presence of glaciers and snow.

Several local museums offer an overview of the “White War” and some small forts have been safeguarded and opened to the public; for instance, the Ossuary-Monument at Passo del Tonale hosts frequent official commemoration services led by military organisations from both Italy and Austria. The network “Rete Trentino Grande Guerra” [“Trentino Great War network”], led by the Italian War History Museum in Rovereto, coordinates 19 small centres.¹⁴ At Forte Strino and Paradiso Pass multimedia exhibitions are on permanent display. “Suoni e voci della Guerra Bianca” [Sounds and voices of the White War] at Paradiso Pass is an audio installation which accompanies the visitors inside a former military gallery dug into the rock at the altitude of 3,000 metres, where some relics and educational panels are exposed. The museographical project benefits from the nature of the space – combining darkness, claustrophobic isolation, and an utter feeling of space-time bewilderment – to create an evocative and immersive environment, pervaded with a feeble sound reproducing voices and faint noises, apparently coming from outside. Additionally, single louder audio messages can be activated to enhance the narration in relation to particular themes, such as shots and bombing, avalanches, etc. The sound effects are suggestive but in no way aim to simulate a war experience.¹⁵ A richer collection of relics is on display at the Vermiglio War Museum.

The Museo della Guerra Bianca in Adamello [Museum of the White War] in Temù also houses a group of findings and memorabilia dating back to World War I, including arms, cannons, ammunition, army uniforms, and an extensive photographic archive. A traditional museographical

14 The Italian War History Museum was founded by a group of citizens from Rovereto in 1921 in remembrance of World War I, though its collections range from the 16th to the 20th centuries. See: Trentino Grande Guerra [Trentino Great War], <http://www.trentinograndeguerra.it> (access: 21 April 2020). Another informative website is: Sulle Tracce della Grande Guerra [On the traces of the Great War], <http://sulletracedelagrandeguerra.it> (access: 21 April 2020).

15 Debating on the representation of war in museums, Jay Winter wrote: “It is the business of war museums to resist the temptation to appeal to [...] stylized fascination with combat and to offer a series of alternative ways of approaching the terror of the battlefield.” The exhibition at Paradiso Pass is successful in this sense. See: Jay Winter, “Museums and the Representation of War,” [in:] *Museum and Society*, vol. 10 no. 3 (2012), pp. 162 (150–163).



“Sounds and Voices of the White War,” multimedia installation at Paradiso Pass, Trento. Courtesy of Vermiglio War Museum, Archivio sgs Vermiglio.

setting reveals the prevailing scientific mission of the centre, which shuns theatricality to privilege an essential communication. The museum proposes a full programme of events, cultural and educational activities, supports research and specialised publications. Moreover, it became a key point for the mapping and restoration of fortified assets in Lombardy (such as Forte Montecchio in Valtellina).¹⁶ Another well-known centre is the Museum of the Great War in Marmolada,¹⁷ where an emphatic *mise-en-scène* presents original objects, photos, panels, as well as

16 Museo della Guerra Bianca in Adamello [Museum of the White War], <https://www.museoguerrabianca.it> (access: 21 April 2020). Antonio Trotti, “La valorizzazione delle grandi opere fortificate della Frontiera Nord: La Difesa del Lario” [The Valorisation of the Large Fortified Assets at the North Border: The Defence of the Lario], [in:] idem (ed.), *La valorizzazione delle fortezze moderne dell’arco alpino: Atti della giornata di studio. Forte di Montecchio Nord, Colico - Domenica 18 ottobre 2009* [Valorisation of the Modern Fortifications in the Alpine Chain: Conference Proceedings. Forte di Montecchio Nord, Colico - Sunday 18 October 2009], Temù 2011, pp. 45–53.

17 Museum of the Great War in Marmolada, <http://www.museomarmoladagrandeguerra.com> (access: 21 April 2020).

an interactive, multimedial and multisensory installation, aimed at making the visitors feel the atmosphere of the war at high altitudes. Still, the result is artificial.

Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia were a theatre of fierce trench warfare. The two Regions launched two websites to celebrate the centenary of the Great War, achieving different results.¹⁸ The platform proposed by the Friuli Region actually offers a complete narration of the entire conflict, organising the records into main sessions and sub-themes, with an interactive map, a timeline, suggested itineraries, and information regarding sites of memory, memorials, visitor centres, and local artefacts. The website is part of a wider touristic and cultural project, linked to pages presenting the main natural, architectural, and historical assets of the territory, as well as numerous museums. All of those centres display small or extended collections of documents and memorabilia, sometimes investigating peculiar topics. For instance, the historical museum “The Carnic Zone during the Great War 1915–1918” in Timau, Paluzza, hosts a special section dedicated to the Carnic women porters.

Two places emerge among the rich heritage in Friuli: Fogliano Redipuglia and Mont San Michele. Redipuglia is a multilayered, complex memormscape. The monumental heritage area revolves around the largest Italian memorial of World War I, but three thematic museums – the Multimedia Museum of the Great War of Redipuglia, the museum “House of the III Army,” and the Open-air Museum of the Sinkhole of the 15th Marksmen Regiment illustrate the history of the site and offer an overview of the European hostilities. Traditional exhibition settings and advanced multimedia technologies are here exerted to effectively contextualise the dramatic battles which occurred in this territory against the wider panorama of the war.

The museum “House of the III Army” retains a large weapon collection. The display system is dated; still, the museum illustrates the story and the projects behind the Cemetery of the Thirty Thousand Undefeated and the Memorial of Redipuglia. The monument was commissioned by the Fascist regime and designed by the architect Giovanni Greppi and sculptor

18 Centenario Grande Guerra: Storie di guerra, luoghi di pace. Regione Veneto [Centenary of the Great War: War histories, peace places. Veneto Region], <http://www.venetograndeguerra.it> (access: 21 April 2020); Itinerari della Grande Guerra: Friuli Venezia Giulia [Great War Routes: Friuli Venezia Giulia], <https://www.turismofvg.it/GrandeGuerra> (access: 21 April 2020).



Room dedicated to the virtual reality experience, Museum of the Great War of Mt San Michele in Sagrado. Courtesy of Museo Multimediale del Monte San Michele

Giannino Castiglioni to celebrate the sacrifice of the soldiers who fell in the Great War. Built on the slopes of a hill, the majestic structure contains the remains of six generals, 39,857 identified soldiers, and 60,000 unknown recruits. The extraordinary dimension of the memorial, the outstanding void, and the view over the landscape are highly symbolical and moving, but they are also revealing of the Fascist rhetoric. In the aftermath of World War II, the Fascist signs were removed, and the place has been re-legitimised through official Republican ceremonies, yet it unquestionably remains an awkward heritage, whose history should be transmitted.¹⁹

19 For further insights, see (in alphabetical order): Gaetano Dato, "Lineamenti storiografici, memorie pubbliche e miti all'origine del Sacratio di Redipuglia: La fondazione di un tempio della Nazione" [Historiographical Features, Public Memories and Mythologies at the Origin of the Redipuglia Shrine: The Foundation of a Temple of the Nation], [in:] *Acta Histriae* no. 3 (2014), pp. 695-714; Patrizia Dogliani, "Redipuglia," [in:] *I luoghi della memoria: Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita* [The Sites of Memory: Symbols and Myths of the United Italy], Mario Isnenghi (ed.), Roma - Bari 1996, pp. 375-389; Hannah Malone, "The Republican Legacy of Italy's Fascist Ossuaries of the First World War," [in:] *Modern Italy*, vol. 24 no. 2 (2019), pp. 199-217; Paolo Nicoloso, "The Fascist

The Museum of the Great War of Mt San Michele in Sagrado uses virtual and augmented reality to offer an immersive visiting experience.²⁰ The digital technologies adopted here are certainly appealing and allow tailoring the communication to the needs of a specific audience, nevertheless, they present some criticalities as well. While the augmented reality provides valuable information in some specific points of the outdoor museum itinerary, with texts, audio files, and 3D holograms, the immersive virtual journey results in a fictional, defused reconstruction, leaving out the most disturbing aspects of war, namely suffering, injured bodies, blood, dirt, and smell. Obviously, the representation must respect the sensitivity of the visitors; thus, an integrated educational support is fundamental to guiding people in perceiving the device as a powerful learning instrument, rather than an engaging spectacle. The Museum of the Great War of Gorizia and the homonymous centre in Ragogna are further meaningful specialised institutions.

The potential of a museum network

As Luca Basso Peressut observed, World War I made clear that war museums should start to include in their representations the social effects of conflicts and introduce concepts such as commemoration and admonishment,²¹ in this sense remarking the message conveyed by monuments and memorials. Remembrance architectures, ossuaries, sculptures, steles, commemorative plaques, and toponyms have been built or adopted since the 1920s to honour the memory of the numerous soldiers who died fighting for their countries.²² Indeed, the official rheto-

Memory of the War and Its Legacy: Two Cases. The Redipuglia War Memorial and the Ara Pacis of Medea," [in:] *Architecture as Propaganda in Twentieth-century Totalitarian Regimes: History and Heritage*, Håkan Hökerberg (ed.), Firenze 2018, pp. 81-105.

20 Museum of the Great War of Mt San Michele, <http://www.museodelmontesanmichele.it> (access: 21 April 2020).

21 Luca Basso Peressut, "Narratives of Conflicts: Architecture and Representation in European War Museums," [in:] *European Museums in the 21st Century: Setting the Framework*, vol. 3, Luca Basso Peressut, Francesca Lanz, and Gennaro Postiglione (eds.), Milan 2013, p. 651 (638-738).

22 These forms of celebration are particularly common. A research team from the Politecnico di Milano led by Alberta Cazzani mapped the memorials and commemorative parks and gardens dedicated to World War I in the provinces of Brescia, Milan, and Monza e Brianza, to realise a tentative quantitative and qualitative evaluation of this heritage. See: Alberta Cazzani, "wwI Memorials and Connected Commemorative

ric largely disregarded the personal miseries suffered by both civilians and recruits, privileging an epic celebration of collective values such as heroism, might, and sacrifice.

The magniloquent representation staged at the Memorial of Redipuglia was certainly not an isolated case. Among the most remarkable memory sites dedicated to the Great War is the Ossuary and Cemetery at Douaumont, erected to hold the bodies of 130,000 French and German soldiers fallen during the battle of Verdun, France, in 1916, and officially inaugurated in 1932. The remembrance building designed by architects Léon Azéma, Max Edrei, and Jacques Hardy is full of symbolism, among which the religious and funerary symbols prevail, alluding to sacrifice and immortality.²³ An almost coeval and complementary monument dedicated to the Victory of France and imbued in military imagery was erected in Verdun city centre. The commemorative complex grew over time, revealing a progressive variation and differentiation in remembrance practices,²⁴ and the monuments are now part of a large memoryscape, including the Memorial of Verdun built at the battlefield and the Forts of Vaux and Douaumont.

The musealisation of war heritage in the 20th century revealed a paradigmatic change in the formation of collective memory²⁵ and an increasing attention to human feelings and trauma: pain, fear, anguish, uncertainty – feelings that were annihilated in the cold representation of massive lists of names – were later included in the museum narration.²⁶

Parks and Gardens in Lombardy: A System to Preserve and Valorize,” [in:] *Re-enacting the Past: Museography for Conflict Heritage*, Michela Bassanelli and Gennaro Postiglione (eds.), Siracusa 2013, pp. 200–213.

- 23 Jean-Paul Amat, Paola Filippucci, and Edwige Savouret “‘The Cemetery of France’: Reconstruction and Memorialisation on the Battlefield of Verdun (France),” [in:] *War and Cultural Heritage: Biographies of Place*, Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Dacia Viejo-Rose (eds.), Cambridge 2015, pp. 48–52 (46–68). See also: Antoine Prost, “Verdun: The Life of a Site of Memory,” [in:] *Republican Identities in War and Peace: Representations of France in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford - New York 2002, pp. 45–72.
- 24 Jean-Paul Amat, Paola Filippucci, and Edwige Savouret “‘The Cemetery of France’...,” op. cit., pp. 54–62.
- 25 For insights on the passage from national memory to cosmopolitan memory, see: Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory,” [in:] *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 5 no. 1 (2002), pp. 87–106.
- 26 For an insight on the essentially propagandistic representation of the conflict in exhibitions and museums during the war and, in Germany, in the interwar period, see:

Local museums have a particularly important role in informing on the dramatic impact of conflicts on societies, communities, and individuals. They supplement the often scarce “spectacularity” of their collections – usually made of ordinary relics such as mess and food tins, bullets, guns and small arms, uniforms, sledges in the mountains, photos, and letters – with narrations that bring apparently remote events close to the personal experience, tracing history back to its local implications and kindling in the visitors a sense of empathy. Local museums should also play a primary role in the narration of the impact that warfare had on the environment, which is frequently depicted as a mere backdrop of human actions and tragedies, but often suffered extreme and long-lasting damages. Dorothee Brantz aptly noted that “[w]ar created a new *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate) between men and nature, who threatened each other in the daily practice of warfare, but who also amalgamated into a new symbolic unity born out of their mutual annihilation.”²⁷ Site-based museums, Basso Peressut continues, “work as ‘pilgrimage stations’ on the sites that witnessed military events, where the physical traces produced by the wars become an object of preservation and valorisation, thus creating a conscious geography of places of memories.”²⁸ Maintaining the focus on World War I remembrance, exemplary museums, in this sense, are the aforementioned Memorial of Verdun; the Historial de la Grande Guerre [History of the Great War] at Péronne and Thiepval, in France, located in the sites of Somme Battlefields; the Musée de la Grande Guerre du Pays de Meaux [Museum of the Great War in Meaux], France, where the Battles of the Marne were fought; In Flandres Field Museum at Ypres in Belgium, dedicated to World War I in the West Flanders front region.

Digital devices, immersive and interactive displays are emerging as powerful resources for difficult heritage transmissions by means of their appeal, the capacity of provoking sympathetic reactions, and offering targeted information to a heterogeneous audience. Moving from

Susanne Brandt, “The Memory Makers: Museums and Exhibitions of the First World War,” [in:] *History and Memory*, vol. 6 no. 1 (1994), pp. 95–122.

27 Dorothee Brantz, “Environments of Death,” op. cit., p. 84. See also: Chris Pearson, “Creating the Natural Fortress: Landscape, Resistance, and Memory in the Vercors, France,” [in:] *War and the Environment*, Charles E. Closmann (ed.), op. cit., pp. 150–155 (150–170). Orlando Prestidge, “Forêt de Guerre: Natural Remembrances of the Great War,” [in:] *Exchanges: The Warwick Research Journal*, vol. 1 no. 1 (2013), pp. 16–34.

28 Luca Basso Peressut, “Narratives of Conflicts...,” op. cit., p. 686.

different museographical approaches, local museums and visitor centres operate as outposts in a wider educational and cultural mission aimed at promoting the public awareness of history but also collective memories and identities.

Knowing about war is the business of an informed citizenship and museums are those sites where questions are posed concerning morality, war, sacrifice, suffering, brotherhood, courage, love, recovery, and transcendence. Museums enable visitors to pose these enduring questions by converting wartime into museum space.²⁹

World War I military heritage is extremely diffused in the Italian Alps, complex and heterogeneous. A complete museographical transmission is therefore difficult, perhaps even utopian. A scientifically coordinated selection of the most relevant structures – implemented according to their architectural, historical, memorial, or social value – must be done in order to economise financial and human resources and guarantee shared narrations. Moreover, the fortified systems and, in general, the heritage related to the conflict are made up of structures that can only occasionally function as isolated, meaningful memory sites or cultural attractions, and can be easily reached by people lacking proper training.

National and regional legislations, specifically focusing on World War I heritage preservation,³⁰ marked progress towards the draft of operational criteria, essential for the coordination of the interventions on the entire territory. They are the prerequisites for establishing common lines of action for a shrewd protection of the Defensive Line at the North Border, as well as engaging in a constructive dialogue with other Italian and foreign realities.

The cooperation with people involved in the safeguarding of coeval military systems and the sharing of the know-how and experience gained studying them or through completed pilot projects could considerably ease the creation of interactive, maybe even collaborative, informative platforms.

Ambitious and successful museographical projects related to diffused archaeology and military architecture could serve as examples. I refer

29 Jay Winter, "Museums...", *op. cit.*, p. 150.

30 The aforementioned Italian National Law 78/2001 was later followed by regional juridical prescriptions: Lombardy Regional Law no. 28/2008, later replaced by the Lombardy Regional Law no. 25/2016; Veneto Regional Law no. 17/2011; Friuli Venezia Giulia Regional Law no. 11/2013.

to cases like “Hadrian’s Wall” in the UK (listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987), the thematic “Cultural Routes” launched by the Council of Europe in 1987, and “Frontiers of the Roman Empire – The Lower German Limes.”

Through the Cultural Routes programme, the Council of Europe offers a model for transnational cultural and tourism management, and allows synergies between national, regional, and local authorities, as well as a wide range of associations and socio-economic actors. The Cultural Routes cover numerous themes: architecture, landscape, religious influences, gastronomy and wine culture, intangible heritage, military and war heritage. The networks implement innovative activities and projects pertaining to five main objectives: cooperation in research and development; enhancement of memory, history, and European heritage; cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans; contemporary cultural and artistic practice; cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development.³¹ Examples comparable to the Italian fortified system are the “Iron Curtain Trail” and the “Liberation Route Europe.”

The project “Frontiers of the Roman Empire – The Lower German Limes,” in particular, involves sixty component sites in Germany and the Netherlands, which were nominated or already listed as World Heritage Sites, with the inception of coordinated initiatives to present the local accents of each site within the framework of a common history and branding.³²

Interpretative regions were defined through the evaluation of geographical core areas combined with key archaeological assets, namely sites and collections.

An Interpretation Framework consists of a univocal structure, a main storyline where all sites and museums play a specific part in the storyline. This can be picked up by any organisation working in the

31 Giovanni Mangion and Isabel Tamen (eds.), *European Cultural Routes*, Strasbourg 1998; Council of Europe, *Cultural Routes Management: From Theory to Practice*, Strasbourg 2015; Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe Programme, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes> (access: 21 April 2020).

32 UNESCO Tentative List, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire – The Lower German Limes*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6298> (access: 21 April 2020); Renger de Bruin, Astrid Hertog, and Roeland Paardekooper (eds.), *The Roman Frontier along the River Rhine: The Role of Museums in Revitalizing Cultural Landscapes*, ICOM Netherlands 2018, <https://www.icomnederland.nl/pdf/ICOM-RomanFrontier.pdf> (access: 21 April 2020).

area of the Interpretation Framework and, therefore, offers a strong message, part of the tourism branding of the area. [...] In connecting memoryscapes and museums that are geographically distant or that extend across borders, a storyline becomes a trail and creates coherence.³³

The very same perspective should be adopted, in my opinion, for preserving the Defensive Line at the North Border in Italy. A lot remains to be done in order to achieve an adequate coordination of the interventions along the Italian Line, as well as a comprehensive museographical perspective. The fragmentation of the information concerning World War I fortifications and the scarce transregional interrelations between museums dedicated to these events are emblematic.

This raises a question: is heritage a local matter?

Conclusion

The transmission of important historical events and heritages regarding wide, transborder territories requires establishing networks of memory sites and museums capable of presenting local microhistories within the framework of major events. In the case of wars, sites of memory could report occurrences that had a local impact, but became relevant for the collective identity of the inhabitants; or narrate the involvement of the resident communities in the military actions; or even show the daily routine and the feelings soldiers experienced at the battlefield, considering both sides of the frontline. A similar approach could truly engage visitors, connecting individual suffering with a greater – and to a certain extent returnable – tragedy for humanity. Training people to open up to pluralist perspectives has a crucial educational value.

Further considerations could emerge concerning the role these artefacts can play in defining the identities of the communities living next to them nowadays, when identities have assumed a prevailing postnational and transcultural nature, and cultural boundaries have become fluid.³⁴

33 Renger E. de Bruin, Astrid Hertog, and Roeland Paardekooper, “The Roman Limes on the Lower Rhine: A European Border’s Visibility in Landscape,” [in:] *Museum International*, vol. 69 no. 273-274 (2017), pp. 117-118 (114-125).

34 Sharon Macdonald, “Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities,” [in:] *Museum and Society*, vol. 1 no.1 (2003), pp. 1-16.

the suggestion is that centred, singular identity constructions are being superseded by identities predicated on cultural mixing and crossover, on intercultural traffic rather than boundary demarcation. How widespread such conceptualisations are or will become is at present an open question.³⁵

In the aforementioned essay, Luca Basso Peressut stressed the relevance of a complete transmission of the recent past and an institutionalisation of shared recollection for “overcoming the ‘divided memories’ that have dramatically marked the populations of the European continent,” which is “an essential requirement to build the political and cultural identity of Europe.”³⁶ Memorial sites and museums are the ideal theatre in which contentious histories, social struggles, and multiple narrations could be investigated, questioned, and debated to achieve shareable representations. They are key places for understanding, remembrance, commemoration, and deterrence.

For a citizen living in contemporary Europe and used to travelling under the aegis of the Schengen Treaty, the events of World War I could seem historically distant, so the preservation of its sites of memory could appear as a minor priority. Nonetheless, the relics of that war, as well as others that followed in Europe in the 20th century, convey a strong message and historical value.³⁷ Those relics tell of a recent past characterised by hostilities, disharmony, and antagonisms in the European history, in which the construction of national identities was echoed, and at the same time reinforced, by the creation of material borders.³⁸ Notwithstanding the negative reminiscences, this heritage

35 Ibidem, p. 6.

36 Luca Basso Peressut, “Narratives...,” op. cit., p. 731.

37 Analysing the relationship of mutuality between building and ruin, Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell noted that “[r]uin is most often not the end point of structure but is a new and transitory form of confinement for social processes.” Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell, “Disturbing Structure: Reading the Ruins,” [in:] *Culture and Organization*, vol. 17 no. 2 (2011), p. 120 (107–121).

38 Stefan Berger shares interesting considerations regarding the 19th- and 20th-century national identity discourses and the creation or dissolution of contested borders. See: Stefan Berger, “History and Forms of Collective Identity in Europe: Why Europe Cannot and Should Not Be Built on History,” [in:] *The Essence and the Margin: National Identities and Collective Memories in Contemporary European Culture*, Laura Rorato and Anna Saunders (eds.), Amsterdam – New York 2009, p. 27 (21–35).

calls for a critical reflection on the importance of producing a persuasive collective identity in Europe,³⁹ conscious of its diversities,⁴⁰ but promoting shared values and cultural similarities to pursue a stronger political, economic, and social unity.

39 Regina Römild, “Reflexive Europeanization, or: Makings of Europe,” [in:] *TRACES*, no. 5 (2018), pp. 4–5.

40 Stefan Berger, “History...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 32–33.

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