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Politics of relics: On the celebration of the fallen of the First World War during the interwar period in Italy

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Abstract

This paper explores the way in which the fallen of the First World War were commemorated in Italy between 1918 and 1940. At the end of the war, numerous spontaneous local monuments were constructed. At the same time, the many small war cemeteries established near the former battlefield areas began to be perceived as a problem. Shortly before the Second World War, in order to bury all the exhumed bodies, the Fascist Regime constructed huge war memorials (ossari and sacrari). However, this was also a means of taking advantage of the fallen for ideological and political purposes. This paper focuses on the connection between the sacralisation of the battlefields by way of raising ossari and sacrari, on the one hand, and the spread of 'fragments' of these battlefields all around the country, on the other. The latter phenomenon has not yet attracted significant interest from researchers. Boulders from the battlefields began to appear in the middle of village, town, and city squares across the country. They were considered 'sacred' since they were where hundreds of thousands of soldiers had fallen, ensuring Italy's victory. As the boulders themselves were imbued with the fallen's sacred blood, they were not carved but rather displayed within the monuments in their 'natural' shape. They were not intended to represent anything or communicate a specific message regarding war and death; they simply had to present themselves. The stone of which they were made was their main feature: just like relics, they emanated a sacred aura. Through their physical dissemination, the whole national territory could therefore be sacralised. To take their cue from this rebirth of relics were the ossari and sacrari of the late Fascist Regime, which used them as a propaganda weapon.

Keywords

Commemoration, Fascists, First World War, Italian history, War memorials

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> Among the boulders of the Karst and the Snežnik, here rises a cippus of the new border in the reclaimed Venezia-Giulia; a mix of sand from the Pivka, gravel from the Isonzo, cementum from Salona, water from the Timavo; bound together with iron taken from the wire fences of the Krn Mountains.
>
> *Epigraph in the Monumental Cemetery of the Colle Sant'Elia*

Introduction

Italy emerged from the First World War as one of the victorious powers, although it was a victory bought at an exorbitant cost. Its war dead numbered between 600 000 and 700 000, with almost a million more wounded or maimed. The financial and social costs were equally shocking, with the country effectively bankrupted by war debt, food shortages, and poor harvests. In the post-war period, the burial and commemoration of the fallen was not only a matter of public order but also a burning political issue. It was the Fascist Regime (1922-1943) that claimed possession of this military legacy. Therefore, to speak about the monuments to the fallen and war memorials in Italy between the two wars inevitably means speaking about politics. But as Italian politics never came closer to being a laic religion than during the Fascist period, the cult of the fallen and its architectural expression assumed a sacred dimension. Nevertheless, there has been only limited research into this feature of Fascist commemorative architecture. This article will investigate the Regime's approach to commemoration, and how certain monuments and memorials can be characterised as 'relics.'

Towards a Laic religion

The Italian politician Massimo D'Azeglio is often erroneously credited with having said that "Having built Italy, we must now build the Italians." The Unification of Italy, which was proclaimed in 1861, required the unifying of territories that had been separate and often hostile for centuries. In addition, it also became necessary to perform a complex work of 'moral regeneration' now that Italy had been 'liberated' from foreign occupation, one characterised as a moral 'resurrection' or 'Risorgimento' (literally New Rising). Following the example of the United States and of revolutionary France, it was a matter of articulating a new civil religion, with its own myths and rituals, upon which a Nation State could be established (Tobia, 1990; Gentile, 1993; Perkins, 1997; Levis Sullam, 2004; Banti & Ginsborg, 2007).

Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, Italian politics was marked by the attempt of laic institutions to not only emancipate themselves from century-old ties to the Catholic religion but also to propose themselves as the latter's replacement in its privileged position in society. Before his death, Giuseppe Mazzini openly expressed his opposition to having his body embalmed, preserved, and turned into an object of worship by his 'disciples', though this subsequently occurred (Luzzatto, 2011). In contrast, other heroes of the Risorgimento like Giuseppe Garibaldi consciously used their popularity to elevate their image to one endowed with thaumaturgic powers (Mengozzi, 2008). Fascism, which was greatly interested in elaborating a form of mysticism aimed at obtaining an unconditional adherence to the new totalitarian State (Gentile, 1993), challenged the ideals of the Risorgimento. Between Unification and the outbreak of the Second World War, Italian society was therefore dominated by a religiosity that was no longer the prerogative of the Church, but widespread nonetheless.

Perhaps even more than most of the other belligerent countries – where the processes of national integration were more advanced – the First World War was a watershed moment in the nation's history. In recent decades it has increasingly been characterised as an authentic anthropological transformation (Gibelli, 1991). Abstract concepts like 'sacrifice' or 'death for the Fatherland,' which were already ideals fostered by the Risorgimento, became concrete realities both for the millions of soldiers and for their families. Death left a mark on both the survivors and their loved ones. The consequences of this transformation would become evident, as this article

will explain, from the moment that Fascism – with its veneration of heroic death – proved itself capable of channeling the trauma of the conflict and the forces it subsequently unleashed toward its own ends (Pisani, 2011; Pisani, 2017).

Monuments to the Fallen and war memorials: The altars of a cult

At the end of the First World War, successive Italian governments interred the remaining unburied soldiers or transferred their bodies from small makeshift cemeteries along the battlefront to larger and more accessible ones. Meanwhile, thousands of monuments were constructed on the initiative of local authorities so that the various communities could commemorate the memory of their own fallen soldiers. Countless small Italian parishes, neighbourhoods, and villages saw monumental sculptures with a plaque bearing the names of the fallen soldiers rise in their main square in the years immediately after the war. Each Italian community paid homage to their dead in a manner that implied a kind of tacit exchange: the fallen had given their lives for the prosperity of the living, and now the latter reciprocated by honouring the memory of their benefactors.

Figure 1. Monument to the Fallen, Rovaré, ca. 1925
Photo © Teresa Cos

In the absence of dedicated official state policies, the legacy of the war and its fallen remained a contentious issue. The rising Fascist movement had already identified the appropriation of it as one of its main objectives. The phrase which Benito Mussolini is incorrectly credited with using when he introduced himself to the King of Italy, upon taking power on 30 October 1922, nevertheless highlights just how determined this appropriation would be: "Your Majesty, I bring you the Italy of Vittorio Veneto." This was a reference to the 1918 battle which marked the end of the war on the Italian Front, the location of which was renamed 'Vittorio' for King Vittorio Emanuele II.

Figure 2. Monument to the Fallen, Spresiano, ca. 1925
Photo © Teresa Cos

Figure 3. The sentence “Maestà, vi porto l’Italia di Vittorio Veneto” (*Your Majesty, I bring you the Italy of Vittorio Veneto*)
in a room of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (*Exhibition of Fascist Revolution*)
Rome, 1932 (from the 1933 exhibit catalog)

Precisely one year earlier, the democratically elected government had attempted to stem the rise of Fascism by relegating it to a subsidiary role in a nationwide ritual of mourning and commemoration. Following the example of France and England, in 1921 it was decided to inter the Milite Ignoto (Unknown Soldier). A special commission was sent to the battlefields to exhume the bodies of eleven unidentified victims. These bodies were already perceived as holy, as evidenced by the reaction of women in the small town of Gallio who "presented themselves to the president of the commission, pleading that no one had the right to remove those relics from those sites, sanctified by sacrifice" (Tognasso, 1922, p. 43). Each of the bodies was then transported to Aquileia. Here, a solemn ceremony took place, during which the mother of a fallen soldier chose one of the eleven bodies to be sent to Rome. A convoy then left from Aquileia and travelled slowly to the capital, stopping en route at various stations among uninterrupted walls of people. Just like a relic in its reliquary, the coffin was clearly visible within its special wagon, designed by the architect Guido Cirilli. With a ritual conducted in the capital in absolute silence, the Milite Ignoto was finally buried on 4 November in the Vittoriano, henceforth known as 'Altare della Patria' (Altar of the Fatherland). At the exact same moment, countless smaller similar rituals took place in front of monuments to the fallen all over Italy (Labita, 1990; Pozzi, 1998). At the heart of the celebrations in the city of Milan, through which the convoy did not pass, was an enormous boulder from Mount Grappa (Pisani, 2014). The altar of the Crypt of the Milite Ignoto in Rome – inaugurated in the 1930s in the Vittoriano – was also made from stone of the Grappa, with walls made from stone of the Karst (Leone, 1988).

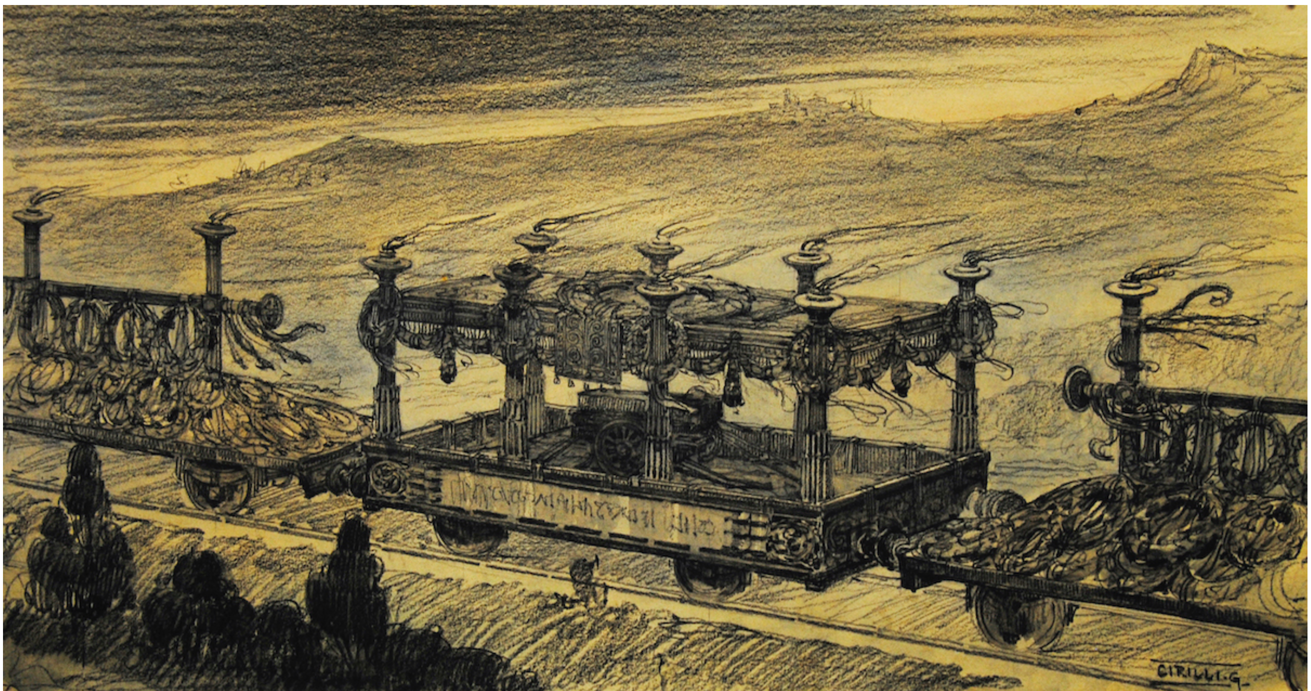

Figure 4. Guido Cirilli, Reliquary-Wagon of the Milite Ignoto, 1921
(Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti, Venezia)

Although it was an undeniable success, the celebration of the Milite Ignoto merely delayed the rise of Benito Mussolini. The fascists still managed, nevertheless, to exert only a partial control over the monuments to the fallen. They dismantled some of the more openly pacifist examples mourning the dead but not celebrating the Fatherland (Isola, 1990), 'corrected' other ones, and intervened through local authorities in determining the outcome of design competitions or in demanding modifications to winning projects.

By the mid-1920s, the sense of urgency to pay tribute to the fallen began to fade. By then, most of the fallen had been commemorated. During the same period, Italy began replacing smaller war

cemeteries with war memorials known as 'ossari' (ossuaries), like that of the Pasubio (1920-1926). These were massive buildings located along the northeastern front, where the war had taken place, largely made up of two elements: a lower part for the burial of the dead and an upper one acting as a monumental landmark. This was not, however, an original solution, as it had already been used during the Risorgimento. More importantly, it was unsatisfactory; it answered the need to bury the fallen, but it did not fully exploit their sacred – and political – potential.

After Mussolini and the fascists took control in 1922, the new regime searched for a signature way to celebrate the fallen, one that was unified and consistent with its objectives (Tobia, 2002a; Giuffrè, Mangone, Pace, Selvafolta, 2007; Janz, Klinkhammer, 2008; Spiazzi, Rigoni, Pregnolato, 2008; Pisani, 2011; Pisani, 2017). The answer to the problem emerged only in the 1930s with the construction of war memorials known as 'sacrari.' Their function was the same as the ossari but the transition from the use of one term to the next – 'ossario' derives from 'ossa' (bones), whereas 'sacrario' derives from 'sacro' (sacred) – highlights a significant change in focus. The mournful dimension was no longer predominant. The dark spaces of the ossari (often underground hypogea), in which the remains of the soldiers were laid to rest, began to disappear and all direct reference to death and grief disappeared along with it. It is at this point that sacrari took their place. These were no longer actual buildings with an interior and an exterior, but rather – starting from the Sacrario del Monte Grappa (1932-1935) – a collection of burial sites of the fallen set upon enormous open expanses (Pisani, 2011; Pisani, 2014; Pisani, 2017).

Figure 5. Ferruccio Chemello, Ossario del Pasubio, Monte Pasubio, 1920-1926
Photo © Teresa Cos

If sacrari – and in particular that of Redipuglia (1935-1938), the largest one – are to be understood as the definitive example of the Regime's approach to the issue of the fallen (but also to that of the First World War and of the theme of war in general), it is because their peculiar features not only expressed but actually *embodied* Fascist ideology. What they achieved was the transfiguration of all the individual lives that had been lost during the war into a unitary construct that completely removed any vestige of individuality. They were now perfectly aligned and, not by chance, an article published at the time spoke of Redipuglia as formed by and constructed with "serried ranks of invincible heroes" (Anon., 1938, p. 401). All macabre content was removed. Light was cast on everything. The focus was no longer death, but transfiguration. Sacrari in fact did not

seek to act as witnesses to the tragic loss of young soldiers but as a means of glorifying their sacrifice. They concealed the mortal remains of the fallen in order to better present death-in-war as an ultimate ideal to the Fascist youth (Amadori, 1940). This became even more imperative with the approach of the Second World War as it became necessary to prepare Italian youth to again sacrifice themselves for the Fatherland.

Figure 6. Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni, Sacrario del Grappa, Monte Grappa, 1932-1935
Photo © Teresa Cosa

Sacred area

Almost all the ossari and sacrari were built along the old war front between Italy and Austria-Hungary. The burial sites remained adjacent to the original site where soldiers had fought and died, even after their conversion from temporary to definitive. Both during the war and following it, a specific part of the national territory was thus immersed in a massive propaganda effort. Despite it being a peripheral area from a geographic point of view, it became a central one ideologically. Throughout Italy, countless streets and squares were named after significant battle sites, especially victorious ones, like Ortigara, Sabotino, Mount Grappa, Vittorio Veneto, and the Piave River; the latter, which was almost unknown before the war, was even celebrated in the most famous patriotic song of the time: *La leggenda del Piave* (Minniti, 2000).
The war had placed the mountains and rivers of North-East Italy at the center of the national collective imagination, and the nationalist rhetoric would then continue to fuel the mythical essence attributed to them. Over the years, some monuments were therefore built and dedicated not only to the fallen but also to the actual places of victory. However, it was ossari and sacrari, above all, which gave a definitive look to the sites considered significant for the present and future grandeur of the country. And when they did rise near the old battlefields for the obvious sake of convenience, they certainly contributed to monumentalising them and perpetuating their memory. In this sense, they were required to act as 'sentinelle della memoria' (sentinels of memory), physically marking the sites where many had fought and died to ensure victory.

To this day, these places still are a sort of symbolic barrier: a "sacred area" established with the double purpose of inspiring pride in compatriots and fear in foreigners (Tobia, 2002b, pp. 7-21). In many publications of the time, there is the recurring image of the fallen in the act of "watching over the sacred borders" (Cobòl, 1922, pp. 39-40), often threatening and ready to take up arms again: "Our dead will all be lined up in battle, vigilant custodians of our sacred borders" (Baistrocchi, 1931, vol. IV, pp. 5096-5097). Therefore, if ossari and sacrari "are located along the battlefronts where the fight was harshest and the sacrifice bloodiest," it is because "their sacred Remains, vigilant and safe at Italy's borders" could find a home "in the same sites where our brave soldiers fought and fell, under the same ground that witnessed their heroic deeds and was soaked in their blood" (Michelesi, 1939, p. 1436). It was a "santa terra" (sacred ground), observed General Ugo Cei, "sown with dead soldiers for the fruitful sprouting of Victory" (cited in Malone, 2017).

Both for their location and for the dead they contain, ossari and sacrari are a sort of central station emitting a strong and dense sacred presence. The arrows indicating the sites of the main battlefields create a vectorial network that expands as far as the eye can see over the entire territory. This network was then layered with a second one, less intense but more widespread throughout the country. And it is here, at this point of our discourse, that the relics of the Great War come into play.

Figure 7. Guido Cirilli, Monument to the Piave River, San Donà, 1934
Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti, Venezia

Figure 8. Arrow indicating the site of the battlefield from the Ossario del Pasubio
Photo © Teresa Cos

Figure 9. Arrow indicating the site of a battlefield from the Sacrario del Grappa
Photo © Teresa Cos

A new chapter in the history of pilgrimages, reliquaries, and relics

After the so-called "Fiume Endeavour" – during which the city (today's Rijeka, Croatia), claimed by Italy but not assigned to it by the peace treatises, was seized by force of arms (Ledeen, 1975; De Felice, 1978, pp. 3-140) – Gabriele D'Annunzio, the leader of the operation and one of the key figures in European culture of the time (Mosse, 1980, pp. 87-103), retired into a sort of voluntary exile near Lake Garda. Here he bought a villa – promptly renamed 'Vittoriale' – that he would continue to develop and transform until the time of his death (1922-1938), as if it were a sort of autobiography designed to build an image to be handed down to posterity (Terraroli, 2001).
D'Annunzio had been a war hero, and the gardens of the villa recall many of his exploits: for example, the helmet of an infantryman and howitzer shells, the hull of the Italian cruiser *Puglia* and the *MAS 96* torpedo armed vessel in which he had engaged in a famous raid, or the *Ansaldo SVA* aircraft in which he had undertaken a propaganda flight over Vienna.

Figure 10. Gabriele D'Annunzio and Giancarlo Maroni, Giardino delle Reliquie (*Garden of Relics*) at the Vittoriano, Gardone Riviera, 1926 from *L'Illustrazione Italiana* LIII, 26, 1926

A particular detail I would like to draw attention to is found in one of the Vittoriale's more intimate gardens: here, under the leaves of a great purple-leaf beech tree, there used to be a red rose bush with its falling petals seemingly dyeing the ground the colour of blood. This is also where a few misshapen boulders from the major battlefields were placed. Under a pseudonym, D'Annunzio spoke of this himself: "In the garden, under the purple beech tree, between the boulder from Mount Sabotin and the one from Mount Grappa, between the Lion of Šibenik and the Austrian machine-gun from Asiago, there is a bit of lawn, almost a strip of prairie […]. Among these memorial stones, among these boulders that have descended from the mountains of War, there is a narrow open space" (Cocles, 1935, p. 338). In an effort to emphasise its character, D'Annunzio called this spot the 'Giardino delle Reliquie' (Garden of Relics); and it was by this name that it became known to his contemporaries (Viator, 1926; Vergani, 1927). Yet many of the monuments to the fallen that were erected in city and town squares in those years were actually made of the stones and boulders from the same battlefields, often preserved in their 'natural' state. And, in some circumstances, we also find something else, as is the case of the war memorial inaugurated in 1933 in the small mountain village of Sant'Eulalia, on the slopes of Mount Grappa.

Figure 11. Monument to the Fallen, Pedescala, ca. 1925
Photo © Teresa Cos

It is an unpretentious memorial. It includes the figure of an infantryman, a flagpole, the list of local fallen soldiers, some Fascist emblems, and, most notably, an irregularly shaped boulder. Both for its size and its placement within the composition, the boulder is the dominant element. Even the soldier seems to step aside to leave it the place of honour. Moreover, this great stone mass was transported down to the valley with great difficulty by the inhabitants of the village themselves (Mondini, 2006). They evidently believed that the best way to commemorate their dead was to give the pre-eminent spot to a boulder retrieved from the battlefield.

In the case of the monument to the fallen of Sant'Eulalia, the center of the composition is occupied by a shapeless block of stone that instead of *representing* war and victory, *embodies* them: it is a fragment of that blood-drenched stone that was considered more sacred than anything else and, as such, it occupies the central position in this monument (Pisani, 2011; Pisani, 2014).

The monument of Sant'Eulalia and the Giardino delle Reliquie of the Vittoriale are only two examples among the many possible, of a particular type of memorial. Although there is no definitive census or inventory of the monuments including boulders from the 'sacred' mountains, or drawing inspiration from the place of origin of the stones that constitute them – like the Crypt of the Milite Ignoto mentioned above, or the monument to the fallen of the city of Como by Giuseppe Terragni, upon the entrance of which lies the inscription "WITH THE STONES FROM THE KARST THE CITY CELEBRATES THE GLORY OF ITS SONS" – it is clear, however, that they are numerous. Some have officially been listed and recorded (Ferlenga, 2014; Pisani, 2014), while many others still wait to be. However, beyond their mere number, their importance lies in how they allow us direct access to an important, yet still quite hidden aspect of Italy's commemoration of its fallen.

Figure 12. Monument to the Fallen, Sant'Eulalia, 1933
Photo © Teresa Cos

In his important study on the cult of saints, Peter Brown noted how – differently from both pagan and Jewish sensibilities – early Christianity began to perform its ceremonies in places where saints were actually buried. The tomb of a single individual thus became the focal point of forms of worship that extended to the entire community. Another unique feature of Christianity was the use, when necessary, of practices such as exhumation, transfer, and dismemberment of the bones of the dead. It is in this way that a "grid of shrines" began to mark the Christian Mediterranean and the Middle East (Brown, 1981, p. 11). One of the main practices of the new religion also emerged from this development: pilgrimages not only to the tomb of the saint, but to locations connected with them, even if only for the presence of objects they had touched (Brown, 1981, p. 88). It was not only the faithful that flocked toward relics, but it was also the relics themselves that began to spread across the territory and make their way toward the faithful. The advancement of Christianity thus became increasingly more widespread and far-reaching (Brown, 1981, p. 120).

The analogies with what happened at the end of the First World War are compelling on three points. The first may seem obvious: the conflation of places of martyrdom with places of worship. The second point is the development in both cases of a few great *sancta sanctorum* and the dispersion of their sacredness; the construction of ossari and sacrari on the one side, and the phenomenon we are examining here on the other. In order to better understand the reason for the sacredness that came to permeate the historical battlefields, it may be useful to recall a literary *topos* that recurred at the time. In a poem written during the war, D'Annunzio (1915) referred to a fallen soldier in these terms: "And the pool of blood that ran, warm, from your ribs was guzzled by the hard rock. O mountain of thirst, rock of drought, how much you drank! O Karst of insatiable mouths ..." (p. 3). The memoir of a soldier, Giuseppe Reina, was entitled *Noi che tingemmo il Carso di sanguigno* (We who dyed the Karst blood-red). These two are only a couple of the countless examples available. In short, the earth and the stones of the battlefields were largely considered to be so permeated with the blood of the fallen soldiers that they were themselves considered

sacred: “sacred for the blood that has drenched it, and for the remains that it still holds” (Cobòl, 1922, p. 32).

This was not only a convenient metaphor. When the war ended, a dilemma arose. Loyalty to the memory of the conflict led to a desire to maintain the battlefields untouched; it was believed that, somehow, nothing but the remaining battered natural landscape could best bear witness to what had taken place. Nevertheless, life had to go on. In order to honor the memory of the war without hindering the natural progress of life, on 29 October 1922 the Italian government designated some monumental areas to be preserved as natural parks. However, this type of provision could not be extended to the entire war front, especially considering that nature itself, in the years to come, would inevitably attenuate or erase the traces of the war. It was therefore necessary to accept that, gradually, many traces would largely disappear from the area. But this loss had to be compensated by actions in the opposite direction. For instance, with the development of ossari and sacrari marking the territory for future memory with presences able to act – even if only thanks to the tens of thousands of fallen soldiers buried in each of them – as enourmous sources emitting sacral waves (Pisani, 2012).

Not by chance, the locations of ossari and sacrari were chosen to facilitate pilgrimages toward these temples of a new form of worship, which also initiated a new form of tourism. The most important national publishing house in the tourism sector, Touring Club Italiano, after having organised a series of visits to “sacred areas” immediately after the war, began publishing a series of guides entitled *Sui campi di battaglia* (On the battlefields) in the late 1920s (Pivato, 2006, pp. 103-112). These guides offered both a detailed itinerary of the ‘sacred locations’ for the pilgrim, and practical information for the tourist. Even the government itself favored visits to ossari and sacrari, providing discounts and exemptions for relatives of fallen, mutilated, and invalid soldiers.

From representation to presentation

Built near the battlefields, ossari and sacrari benefitted directly from the fact that they were made from the same stones that had been soaked in the blood of the soldiers who had died for the Fatherland. If the Ossario del Pasubio or the Sacrario del Monte Grappa were made of stone from Mount Pasubio and Mount Grappa respectively, it was not only due to the advantageous logistics of having the raw material available on site. It was also a programmatic choice; the fallen and the blood-drenched stones would, together, eternalise the victory and those who had sacrificed their lives for it.

If ossari and sacrari represent the equivalent – in the commemoration of fallen soldiers – of what the sancta sanctorum had represented for early Christianity, the pieces, shreds, and fragments of stone they were made of became the vehicles for the dissemination on a national scale of the sacredness that was stored and treasured in the mountains of the Pasubio, Grappa, and Redipuglia; that is, in those battlefields that were transformed into war memorials. In Milan, as we have seen, the focus of the celebrations held on 4 November 1921 was focused on an enormous boulder from Mount Grappa.

Both for the coincidence of places of martyrdom and places of worship, and for the coexistence of grand *sancta sanctorum* and widespread diffusion of sacred remains, the commemoration of the fallen soldiers of the First World War in Italy between the two World Wars presents precise analogies with the spread of Christianity in the early centuries of the modern era with its relics and martyrs. A third analogy should be added to these first two: just as the celebration of the Milite Ignoto revolved around a body – recovered, ideally recomposed, transferred, and buried in the nation’s capital, in one of the most visible spots of the city – so did the celebratory nature of a monument like that of Sant’Eulalia revolve around a boulder. In both cases, the dead on the warfront were considered so sacred that *nothing could represent them*. But what is a relic, if not “what presents the sacred without mediation” (Leone, 2014, p. S53).

Figure 13. Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni, Sacrario di Redipuglia, Fogliano Redipuglia, 1935-1938
Photo © Teresa Cos

The more the Fascist Regime tried to transform politics into a cult, the more any form of mediation tended to disappear. What followed was a transition from representation to pure and simple *presentation*. A boulder like the one at the center of the monument of Sant'Eulalia constitutes, in some ways, the purest expression of the *presentation without mediation* that is a distinctive feature of relics. In a sacrario like that of Redipuglia, every form of representation – in terms of iconographic tradition – was also expelled in favour of a pure physical display of materials. However, something had changed; what started as the result of popular devotion in Sant'Eulalia became the fruit of a deliberate political strategy in the late war memorials of the Fascist Regime (Fiore, 2003; Pisani, 2014).

Conclusion

In reference to the commemoration of millions of fallen soldiers of the First World War, historical studies speak of the "lacerating discrepancy between the accelerated [...] experience of death and the growing difficulty in establishing, fixing its memory" (Koselleck, 2003, p. 11). This discrepancy undoubtedly played a role in the departure from the traditional formal support of figurative arts – which were now considered ineffective – in the late Fascist war memorials. But, as we have seen, it was a more complex process than this might suggest. A sacrario like that of Redipuglia was the most radical outcome of a search for the most effective way to celebrate the war dead; a search that began in Italy during the Risorgimento – among the efforts to develop a "laic religion" for the new nation – which was later transformed, during the Fascist era, into one of the main propaganda vehicles to help prepare the Italian people for a new war. In the ossari, like that of Pasubio, the contribution of painting and sculpture to the elaboration of the visual message was still important; in Redipuglia – the ultimate incarnation of Fascist ideals in the field of the commemoration of the fallen of the First World War – both painting and sculpture were banned. The message, in its entirety, was conveyed by an enormous open-air space: a great mass of one hundred thousand

burial sites that was sacred both because it held the fallen soldiers' graves and because it was made of the same stone that had been figuratively drenched in their blood.

The choice of no longer representing a message but of simply presenting it was a seemingly innocent way of letting facts speak for themselves. In reality, cleansed from iconographies that had become useless or had been deemed inappropriate, the communication came to develop an extraordinary level of intensity. Any refined allusion or articulated narration disappeared. What remained was an object, an *almost* mute object that only spoke with its physical presence, thus directly conveying what it embodied. It did not allude to the mountains of the Grappa or the Karst, it *was* those mountains. Left without the intermediation of a rational message to be decoded, the viewer was alone in front of an object that belonged to a sacred sphere and that, with its own presence, seemed to attest to an indisputable truth. A heroic and, at the same time, a softened vision of the fallen and of the war – one that was the fruit of a deliberate political strategy – was presented as "natural" (Barthes, 1957, pp. 201-204) as the only possible way of seeing things.

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