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Fossil Memory: Unaltered Narratives of Resistance and Deportation in the Oldest Italian Holocaust and Resistance Museums

<https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2023-0025>

Received June 11, 2023; accepted February 26, 2024; published online April 3, 2024

Abstract: In Italy, after the victory of Giorgia Meloni's post-fascist party, "Fratelli d'Italia," several studies began to discuss whether or not the country has come to terms with the memory of fascism, its role as an inspirer of Nazism, and the collaboration with Nazi Germany in the Holocaust. Especially the latter, scholarly literature pointed out, has failed to receive the attention it deserves. This article argues that this is particularly true with regard to public history, the way historical information and events are interpreted and presented to the general public, and focuses on public museums exhibiting the Holocaust and resistance. Evidence for this article comes from two in-depth case studies regarding the oldest yet unaltered Liberation Museum in Rome and the Museum-Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi. The article contends that within these museums, the narration of resistance prevails, whilst evidence of Italy's past collaborationism remains hidden and unexhibited. In essence, these museums emphasise national heroism and sidestep Italian accountability in the Holocaust.

Keywords: nationalism; Holocaust; museums; Italy; public memory; resistance

1 Introduction

Primo Levi, one of the first Holocaust survivors to write an extensive account of his experience in the death camps, *If This is a Man* (1947), wrote that memory is "as

This paper is an outcome of the research project "When Nationalism Fails: A Comparative Study of Holocaust Museums," funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

Gerda Henkel website: <https://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/en/>

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marvellous as fallacious” (2007 [1986], 13). For him, even witnesses are not the possessors of crystal-clear truth. Indeed, he pointed out that history and memory do not go hand in hand, but preserving the latter might help spread the former. This is particularly important vis-à-vis the Holocaust, whose magnitude and the physical and psychological torment inflicted upon its victims made it the prototypical genocide and the emblem of all violence.¹

Undoubtedly, today, the Holocaust is a matter of global collective memory. It represents the cultural antibody of the century we live in, a fundamental cultural weapon to avoid new cycles of violence that are already occurring against, i.e. the different, the uninvited, and the immigrant. Most countries worldwide have established Holocaust Remembrance Day, and crucially, the memory of the Holocaust is preserved and perpetuated through various institutions, including research centres, schools, and museums. These institutions embody what Lea David called the principles of “moral remembrance”: the duty of facing the past, remembering, and doing justice for victims (2020, 41). To silence them is to avoid facing the past, to forget, and to lose the opportunity to learn from this immense tragedy so that similar catastrophes are avoided in the future. However, it is important not only for the materialisation of memory in institutional buildings such as museums but also for the content and message these institutions transmit. All museums, including Holocaust museums, must decide which objects and information to preserve for future generations (Posocco 2022). The process of selection is understandably challenging. The fundamental questions guiding this decision-making are: What aspects of the Holocaust should we remember, how should we remember it, and what should be forgotten?

As this article attempts to prove, these matters are inextricably linked, among others, with nationalism and its revival worldwide (Jenne 2018), specifically in the country under consideration here, Italy, one of the allies of Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

Without detracting from the Italian partisans, which arguably developed one of the most active grassroots movements against Nazism and fascism in Europe, data also shows that, following the great enthusiasm aroused by fascism, most of the Italian population, as in Germany and Poland,² remained passive and indifferent (Greppi 2016; Liucci 2011; Rebecchi 2022).³ Alongside the account of the partisans who, in a notable minority, defeated the Nazis with the aid of civilians, evidence has

¹ Wiesel et al. (1977), and Hansen-Glucklich (2014).

² Browning (1992) and Friedländer (1998 [1997]; 2007) for Germany and Gross (2001) for Poland.

³ De Felice (1995) gives a rough count of how many Italians, fascists or partisans, were actively involved: four million out of 44. The rest of the population was on the sidelines as a spectator.

emerged of Italians who collaborated with the Nazis, such as those who assisted in identifying Jews and transporting them to national borders.⁴ Levis Sullam (2015) stressed that: (1) one-third of the Jews arrested in Italy, 2210 out of 6746, were at the hands of the Italians, (2) one-third are unknown, and (3) the other arrests were made by Nazis actively supported by the Italians by providing the *Logistik* of the round-ups and profiling of the Jews. Between 1943 and 1945, there were episodes in which Italian Jews were killed by Italian soldiers of the Social Republic, such as the 24 casualties between September 5 and 17, 1944 in Forlì, and six Jews killed in Cuneo on April 25 or 26, 1945 by a group of “Black Brigades.”⁵ These episodes were not carried out by isolated groups of racist killers: as Ferrari and Franzinelli (1998) pointed out, the Social Republic’s soldiers were trained in racism.

Representing this collaboration has always been a thorny problem. This article shows that there is almost no trace of this past in the museums investigated here, the Liberation Museum in Rome and the Museum-Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi, the oldest museums on resistance and Deportation in Italy. In their exhibitions, the narrative of the resistance takes priority, with heroism as the primary focus. Nazis are the main culprits, while fascism is presented as an alien entity rather than Italy’s most prominent authoritarian regime. Collaborationism is almost nonexistent. Therefore, when visiting these museums, it is challenging to comprehend the extent to which fascism was a national ideology rooted in racial hatred, inequality, violence, and subjugation.

This article argues that the museums examined here, i.e. what they display and what they do not, are emblems of an interpretation of memory rooted in, and promoted by postwar Italian political and cultural elites. Italy is mainly represented as a country of heroes: partisan-liberators and/or victims.⁶ This article has a special definition for these museums: “fossil museums.” They have not changed since they were built, and, for this reason, they function as active repertoires of a bygone era that does not update, or to use an expression by Ulrich Beck, it does not “re-modernise” (2008). These museums refrain from discussing the various ways in which the Italians supported the Nazis, creating narratives that are only partly correct and in line with the political elites emerging in the immediate aftermath of the war in Italy. Their emphasis lies on the bravery or the suffering of the Italians, while negative aspects of collaboration, including the fascist alliance with the Nazis, remain unmentioned and unscrutinized. Considering Italy today, and the resurgence of a highly debated

4 On the topic, among other studies, see Osti Guerrazzi (2006), Gordon (2012), and Capogreco (2018).

5 These episodes are reported in Levis Sullam (2015, 52). See also Mayda (2002, 216–218) and Picciotto Fargion (2002, 764).

6 On the mythology of Italian resistance, see Gundle (2000, 113–132), Cooke (2011), Schwarz (2010) and Focardi (2020).

political discussion surrounding historical events such as the attacks on Via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, this article intends to highlight the significance of maintaining a fresh and unambiguous narrative of the crimes committed by fascism in such important public institutions as these two museums.

That said, the study primarily concentrates on the exhibits, particularly examining them through visual elements, and discusses historical inconsistencies and omissions. It does not delve into administrative aspects, curatorial decisions, or the reasons why these museums have remained unchanged. Although interviews with the museum staff have been conducted, this data will hopefully be more thoroughly integrated into a future publication dedicated to these aspects.

2 The Italian Resistance and Holocaust Narratives: Memory, Politics, and Identity

“Citizens, workers! General strike against the German occupation, against the fascist war, for the salvation of our lands, our homes, our factories. As in Genoa and Turin, put the Germans in front of the dilemma: surrender or perish”.⁷ This proclamation by Sandro Pertini, which sums up the concept of the Italian resistance – a movement of opposition and armed struggle against Mussolini’s fascist regime and the Nazi occupation in Italy during the Second World War – was broadcasted on the radio at 8 a.m. in the name of the Committee of National Liberation of Upper Italy (CLNAI) chaired by Alfredo Pizzoni, Luigi Longo, Emilio Sereni, Sandro Pertini, and Leo Valiani. These figures, among whom was the future President of the Italian Republic from 1978 to 1985 (Sandro Pertini), contributed to shaping Italy’s political life after the war and for a good part of the latter half of the twentieth century. They also played a role, along with many other individuals, organisations, and institutions, in creating a collective vision of the resistance.

Many studies have focused on this phenomenon and shed light on various aspects of it, the connections between resistance and anti-fascism since the 1920s, the dynamics and actors of the resistance, the connections between the resistance and the Allied forces, the connection between the Church and the resistance, and other factors (Ceci 2022; Flores and Franzinelli 2022; Focardi 2020; Peli 2017). What matters here, however, is the distinction to be made between resistance, on the one hand, and the public use and memory of the resistance, on the other. This distinction is fundamental and is at the basis of this work, which does not deal with the resistance

⁷ Translation is ours. <https://www.rainews.it/archivio-rainews/media/25-aprile-liberazione-Sandro-Pertini-460c51e8-d6af-4e63-8d4f-da2e4a85093d.html> (last accessed on January 24, 2024).

per se, but with how the resistance has been used, and the memory that has been made of it. More than anything else, because one of the case studies we deal with in this article, the Liberation Museum in Rome, is itself a purveyor of public memory of this phenomenon. In this regard, the resistance becomes a narrative, something recalling and yet different from the event itself, and museums are leading institutions, alongside public schools, media, and other cultural institutions, in constructing and reproducing official narratives. By “official,” we mean “authorized,” as in Smith’s (2006) definition of “authorized heritage,” a discourse based on the power/knowledge claimed by these institutions. Heritage is authorized as its subjects and content are decided by “experts” (curators, historians, politicians in public discourse, etc.).

Currently, there are 51 museums of the resistance all over Italy, from north to south, according to National Association of Italian Partisans (ANPI).⁸ On one hand, this brings more evidence to the already acknowledged strength of the resistance as a narrative (Pavone 1991), on the other hand, it shows the need to study the phenomenon of resistance in terms of public memory and public history. While many works have been produced in recent years, one might say that the connections between the museum and resistance are understudied. This work aims to fill the gaps. Although it acknowledges that it just scratches the surface of a bigger phenomenon, one hopes its study will be deepened in future publications.

That being said, in relation to the public use of the resistance narrative, to which the museum under our study is connected, Chiarini (2006) contends that this usage commenced right after the downfall of fascism, serving to validate the newly formed democratic institutions. In particular, Chiarini contends that for the left-wing opposition (including communists and socialists), the resistance would provide a balance of the political system in their favour and serve as an insurmountable barrier to the area of republican legality. For the governing centre (Christian Democracy and further coalitions), the resistance endorsed the principle of fighting against opposite extremisms, fundamental for the survival of democratic institutions. For Chiarini, during the long season of the Cold War (one could argue, even today) the memory of the resistance has remained divided and opposed, with fascists and anti-fascists maintaining opposing roles and memories. This has prevented the formation of a “shared memory” that could be accepted by all parties.

In addition, Cooke (2011) has shown the way in which memories of the resistance are produced and the manner in which scholars examine the history of the resistance have been consistently influenced by the prevailing political-ideological forces and the cultural milieu of the post-war decades. This influence has often led to the distortion or modification of these recollections to align with the changing historical contexts. As a result, it could be argued that there are not just one, but many different

8 At <https://www.anpi.it/luoghi-di-memoria-e-resistenza> (last accessed on January 20, 2024)

recollections of the resistance, leading to the concept of multiple “resistances.” This is not only because numerous actors were materially involved in it and later produced memories of it, but also because many others collected and reworked these memories, integrating them into museum exhibits, memorials, and other forms of mediated historical accounts that gave birth to the collective memory of the resistance.

The same can be said of the Holocaust’s narratives. As Subotić (2018) notes, the Holocaust is a foundational ritual in many European Union countries, so central that Holocaust remembrance has become a European entry ticket, symbolising, for the countries that embrace it, a kind of guarantee of their restored humanity (Judt 2005). This centrality might explain why Holocaust studies have proliferated since the 2000s exploring diverse aspects of the Holocaust from historical, sociological, anthropological, psychological, and educational perspectives.⁹

The construction of Holocaust narratives, which includes the roles of museums and memorials, is deeply rooted in complex networks of influences, similar to the narratives of the resistance. This phenomenon has been extensively studied.¹⁰ These and other studies suggest that Holocaust museums, or museums with exhibits on the Holocaust, began to appear in Italy soon after the end of the Second World War. Although, as this article suggests through the case of The Museum-Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi, the first Italian exhibition on the Holocaust was only inaugurated 10 years after the end of the Second World War, in 1955. Regarding Rome, Italy’s capital, it was not until 1964 that a plaque was erected in the Roman Ghetto to commemorate the roundup of October 16, 1943 (21 years after the event). To this day, Rome is one of the few cities in Europe without a dedicated Holocaust museum, despite the existence of the *Fondazione Museo della Shoah*, a small museum that compensates as much as possible for the lack of a clearer stance by institutions regarding Holocaust education. For clarity, there is a commemorative plaque at the Portico of Octavia in Rome, which states that 2091 Jewish people were deported from Rome during the German occupation, of whom 1067 were men, 743 women, and 281 children. Only 101 returned (73 men, 28 women, and no children) (Musu and Ennio 1999, 94).

The year after the inauguration of the plaque, in April 1965, President Giuseppe Saragat (from the Italian Democratic Socialist Party) declared the Risiera di San

⁹ For a comprehensive overview, see Hayes and Roth (2010).

¹⁰ This phenomenon has been extensively studied. Among many, see Bourgeois (2020), Gutwein (2009), Hartman (1995), Linke (2002), Milton (2018), and Shapira (1998). On the Italian case, see (Gordon 2012a) Cimino (2017), and Perra (2010). Specifically on museums, see Gordon (2012b), Clifford (2013), Manca (2022), and Beccatini (2022).

Sabba a National Monument, as, he mentioned, it was the only example of a Nazi lager in Italy. Other monuments and museums dedicated to the Holocaust emerged in Italy during the First Republic (lasting approximately until 1994, which marked the entrance of Silvio Berlusconi into Italian politics and a more pronounced return of the Italian right-wing in the country's politics). It is safe to argue that, as these examples suggest, until that moment, the Christian Democrats, Socialists, Republicans, and Italian Communists had been at the core of the institutions born to remember the Holocaust. This does not mean there were no influences and debates; the recent book by Chiara Beccatini (2022) discusses, among other things, tensions between representatives of various parties at the openings of Holocaust exhibits, including right-wing parties whose strong return to the political scene since the 1990s has sparked various discussions. Of particular discussion is the fascist legacy of parties that have been prominent in politics, such as Alleanza Nazionale and more recently Fratelli d'Italia, led by current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Despite the lack of studies on the more recent period of the rise of the right in connection with museums and exhibitions on the Holocaust, it is possible that what Subotić (2018) writes about Holocaust museums in Europe is also applicable to Italy. Subotić contends that the European unification process in Europe was performed also around the tragedy of the Holocaust, to avoid it happening again, and therefore needed a reconciled and unified Holocaust memory among the countries.

This is exemplified by Giorgia Meloni's visit to the Jewish Synagogue in Rome on the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust in January 2023. Her conciliatory remarks were, "The Shoah represents the abyss of humanity. An evil that deeply affected our nation too, with the infamy of the 1938 racial laws" (Official discourse at the *Presidenza dei Ministri*).¹¹ However, it is important to note that Meloni did not mention the word "fascism" in her speech, attributing the Holocaust solely to the Nazis.

In this regard, the work of Lea David (2020) is enlightening. Studying the role of the Holocaust in the context of human rights memorialization and nationalism, David highlights how different European countries have engaged with Holocaust remembrance, often shaping it to fit their national narratives and political agendas. This article will contribute, albeit partially, to this discourse by bringing some data about the case study of Italy. As David puts it, the adoption of Holocaust remembrance is often done in a way that reinforces nationalist narratives rather than dissolving them. It can be used to minimize the state's own culpability in past human rights abuses or to equate the suffering of local populations with that of the Jews

¹¹ At <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-message-holocaust-remembrance-day/21603> (last accessed on January 20, 2024)

during the Holocaust. Governments may use Holocaust education and remembrance as part of their official agendas, but they interpret it through the lens of their national struggles, which can lead to a distortion of historical facts. In addition, public apologies and monuments related to the Holocaust can be used as a way to display a commitment to human rights, but they may also reinforce nationalist sentiments.

Scholarly work supports the idea that this can be linked to attachment to, and identification with the nation leading to what has been termed as “national priority” (Posocco and Watson 2022). National priority implies that the reputation and interests of one’s own nation can take precedence over other concerns. This perspective leads to a primary focus on domestic affairs and a reluctance to critically evaluate the nation’s history or current issues.

3 Methodology

This article brings evidence from a qualitative research methodology. It uses direct observation of the museums’ exhibits, analysis of transcripts in Italian and English, audiovisual materials, historical analysis, and one-to-one interviews with museum personnel. The article’s comparative framework allows the combination of different data sources for the purpose of (1) investigating whether the museums selected historical events that would avoid casting a shadow on the crimes of Italians, in particular, their role in the Holocaust, (2) assessing the reasons that might have led the museum not to consider the inclusion of existing evidence, (3) studying the strategies through which evidence of participation in the Holocaust is removed and/or replaced with alternative accounts of facts, making these museums the “cement and brick” materialisation of how these museums do not escape politics.

The first step was the museum visit, followed by data collection with a camera (video and pictures) and thoroughly examining each object in the context in which they are exhibited. Interviews with the museum personnel followed. Most of these interviews targeted museum directors, managers, and curators. We proposed open-ended questions to allow respondents to discuss facts and events that the researcher had not considered beforehand. If applicable to answer the research questions, the researcher deepened the points raised by the interviewee and raised further questions, which lie at the core of investigative social research (Douglas 1976).

The theoretical framework guided the choice of museums. The goal was to study museums that, for some fortunate (or unfortunate, it depends on the point of view) reasons, have not changed in 50 years or more. Their investigation opened a historical window on Italian museology and the public history of the Holocaust and resistance, which is also part of this article’s original contribution.

4 The Nation at All Costs: The Liberation Museum of Rome

Between the Colosseum and the district of San Giovanni, there is a place that elderly Roman citizens have avoided naming for the last 70 years or so: they called it simply “Via Tasso,” (Tasso Street) (Sabbatini Paladini 2001, 59). This is where the Liberation Museum is located. After the Nazis occupied Rome during the Second World War, this building functioned as a prison, and Colonel Herbert Kappel was in charge.¹² The building soon became the headquarters of the Security Police (SIPO), which converted the rooms into cells. They removed the furniture and bricked up the windows from the inside while the storerooms became segregation cells. “Via Tasso” ceased to be a prison after June 4, 1944, when the Allies officially liberated Rome.

The story of the building hides a story of collaboration that the museum avoids remembering. The building was the property of the noble Francesco Ruspoli, a collaborationist and frequenter of Nazi circles. He rented it to the German Embassy. In 1950, Ruspoli’s wife, Princess Josepha Ruspoli in Savorgnan di Brazzà, donated four apartments in the building to create a museum focusing on the liberation of Rome (Simonetti 2016, 285). According to one of the museum curators (Interview with X, 2022), Princess Josepha did not act out of charity. By donating those apartments, she acknowledged the family’s mistake in maintaining relations with the Nazis and marked an apparent change of direction in the family’s alliances, whose members had been arrested as collaborators. In other words, the Princess hoped that the donation would accelerate their release.

From 1953 to 1955, the committee for the realisation of the museum, led by Alberto Maria Ghisalberti, president of the Historical Institute of the Risorgimento, and Guido Stendardo, the director of the Archaeological Library and a member of the Christian Democrat party, collected the material that the museum still exhibits today (Simonetti 2016). Officially opened on June 4, 1955 (the commemoration day of the liberation of Rome), the museum was meant “to preserve the documentation regarding the struggle for the liberation of Rome, from September 8, 1943, to June 4, 1944” (law No. 277, April 14, 1957). The presence on the committee of people such as Antonello Trombadori, Gaetano Borruso, General Mario Girotti, and Mayor Santi Maria Carta, i.e. former partisans and members of the army, shows the desire to represent the resistance as the natural continuity of the *Risorgimento*, the period of the events that led to the unification of the country. The names and influences at the core of this museum coincide with the political and cultural forces that emerged

¹² Herbert Kappler (1907–1978) served as head of German police and security services in Rome and was responsible for the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine.

victorious from the Second World War: the Christian democrats (i.e. Guido Stendardo), the communists (i.e. Antonello Trombadori), and the socialists (i.e. Gaetano Borruso). The exhibit and the general narrative of the Liberation Museum were the direct extension of these forces that, after the war, were not only in charge of reconstructing the country but also providing its people with a new national ideology (Cooke 2011).

Since the museum's opening in 1969, Giulio Stendardo, a partisan from the ranks of the Christian Democrats, served as the museum president. Following Stendardo's tenure, Paolo Emilio Taviani, a Senator and recipient of the *Medaglia d'Oro della Resistenza*, also from the Christian democrats, took over the leadership of the museum. He has been its president since 2001. Alongside him, were Arrigo Paladini, a former detainee in the same prison, and his wife, Elvira Sabbatini Paladini, who assisted in the role of directors. The former was director until his death in 1991, while the latter until 2009. Antonio Parisella, a Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Parma and LUMSA in Rome, with expertise in the history of Catholicism and Christian democracy, led the museum until 2024. He was recently succeeded by Roberto Balzani, the mayor of Forlì-Cesena for the Democratic Party.

To date, the museum's institutional context continues to reflect the legacy and ideas of the political forces that shaped it in the post-war period.

Regarding curatorial changes since the museum's opening, they have been limited to the addition of a teaching room and some structural alterations. In the 1990s, the installation of a dividing wall on the ground floor was authorized, along with the creation of a teaching room. After 2001, following the establishment of Holocaust Remembrance Day, a small room dedicated to the deportation of Roman Jews was added to the museum.¹³

4.1 The Exhibit of the Liberation Museum

Today, the museum displays the prison in the exact condition the Nazis left behind when they left Rome. The exhibition path informs the visitor about the historical events related to the Second World War in Rome, such as the American bombardment of the San Lorenzo district, on July 19, 1943, killing more than seven hundred people, or the partisan attack on "Via Rasella" on March 23, 1944, which claimed 33 Nazi victims.¹⁴ The descriptions of the historical events refer to episodes of "real heroism" (quoting a panel in the second room) of the Roman population. Precisely,

¹³ Information can be freely retrieved from the website of the museum at <https://www.museoliberazione.it/it/il-percorso-espositivo/> (last accessed on January 25, 2024)

¹⁴ On the Rasella attack (Maurizio [1996] 2013).

the English audio guide recites that “the regime was completely out of touch with people, who were crying out for freedom;” “the population supported the partisans;” and “the people of Rome continued to struggle for freedom.” A photograph titled “Imprisoned City” represents the rhetorical and patriotic pattern of the exhibition. In the photograph, there is a plaque built in 1967 to remember the people who died fighting the Nazis. The plaque recites: “In this building, during the inauspicious occupation, the Nazis tried in vain to repress the freedom aspirations of the Roman people with violence. SPQR MCMLXVII.” So, it features the typical Roman style, such as the use of Roman numbers to write the date and the use of “V” instead of “U”, much used by the fascists themselves. In other words, the nationalist rhetoric is the same, albeit used for anti-fascist purposes.

The exhibition also focuses on the passage from the Kingdom to the Republic of Italy. The result of the 1946 constitutional referendum decreed a not-so-large victory for the Republicans, 12,717,923 against 10,719,284 votes. However, showing a photograph of a graffiti wall reciting “Down with the traitor king!” the audio guide states that most of the population was against the kingdom (see Figure 1 below).

On the first floor, several information panels showcase the culprits responsible for crimes committed in Rome and Via Tasso. While there is an audio guide available, it is worth noting that the description of the room does not match the exhibition’s actual content. Specifically, the audio guide suggests that the panels provide information on the notorious Italian collaborators Pietro Koch and Antonella di Cesare. However, these panels only depict the Nazi officers who operated in Via Tasso and do not reference the aforementioned individuals or their actions. Surprisingly, such an oversight affects the museum’s only mention of Italian collaborationism. As a result, only visitors equipped with an audio guide can hear their names. However, even in this scenario, the actions of these criminals remain unreported.

Another room shows, without contextualisation, some video reports made by the Istituto Luce, the fascist broadcaster for propaganda, on the bombings in Rome (see



Figure 1: “Down the traitor King!”.
All photos taken by the authors.

Figure 2 below). Those reports were made by the fascist propaganda regime in the 1940s but are used as non-partisan sources of information by the museum. In one of them, the Italian Queen appears in the act of carrying out charity to the battered population (see Figure 3 below). They seem to fit very well in its narrative: the nationalist point of view of the Istituto Luce emerges in this video in which the monarchy is strategically resumed helping the population. The curators selected this video as proof of the suffering of the Italian population, with which Italians today are brought to identify. However, there is no mention that the King of Italy, Emmanuel III, called Mussolini to form his fascist government (there had been no election) and supported fascism through the *Ventennio*.

Except for the segregation rooms, there are Italian flags everywhere. As mentioned above, flags are the “banal” national symbols that best represent the forces that ensure the existence and continuation of the nation-state. Besides the tricolour flags, there are flags adorned with police force symbols at the exhibition. This is because many of the individuals being commemorated were Italian police officers that fought against the Nazis. Among these heroes are Colonel Giuseppe Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo (Figure 4), who was the former leader of the partisan group Fronte Militare Clandestino, and the *carabiniere* Salvo D’Acquisto (Figure 5), who sacrificed himself to save 22 civilians rounded up by the Nazis. The museum pays tribute to them through statues, paintings, and displays of their personal belongings, including the rope with which the German police hanged Montezemolo.¹⁵ From this perspective, this

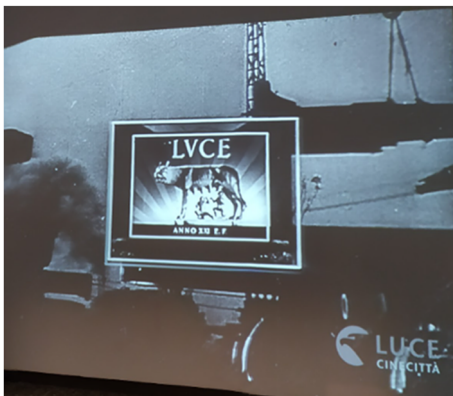


Figure 2: The Istituto Luce logos: the Roman *Lupa* and the fascist Eagle.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo (Rome, 1901–1944) became a partisan after the establishment of the Italian Social Republic. He was arrested on January 25, 1944, and detained in Via Tasso for 58 days before dying in the Fosse Ardeatine massacre (<https://www.museoliberazione.it/it/il-museo/le-celle/cella-montezemolo/>).



Figure 3: Queen Helena, an Italian army officer, and two Roman women.

museum evokes a sense of sacredness similar to ceremonial monuments such as churches, shrines, and temples. As Duncan and Wallach (1980) and Bourdieu (2014) have noticed, this narrative strategy is common in museums that deal with nationalist narratives. In the Liberation Museum, this approach is used to honour national heroes and give them a sense of reverence. Additionally, there is a resurgence of the semiotics of the Christian martyr throughout the exhibition. The technique of juxtaposing the proto-Christian martyrs' semiotics with the resistance hero was a typical narrative approach in the aftermath of the Second World War, namely when the museum was established, particularly within the political parties that contributed the most to its creation. For instance, consider the novels of Socialist deputy Ignazio Silone, such as *Bread and Wine* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow*, in which resistant hero Pietro Spina is portrayed as a martyr.

The same type of consecration is given to less famous partisans. Every room has objects that belong to them. Glass cases hold uniforms or even food found on the heroes and weapons used by the Nazis to kill them. The room dedicated to the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine resembles a sanctuary. On March 24, 1944, a Nazi commando killed 335 Italians because the day before, a group of partisans detonated a bomb in Via Rasella that caused 33 casualties among the Nazis.¹⁶ A large glass case in the centre of the room contains belongings found on the victims, such as a shirt still stained with blood, a watch, or a sock (see Figures 6 and 7 below).

A section of this top floor accommodates offices, a video archive, and a permanent exhibition room dedicated to the Holocaust. This room was opened on January 27, 2001, on the occasion of the first Italian Holocaust Memorial Day, thanks to the support of the Spielberg Shoah Foundation, and was inaugurated by the Minister of Culture, Giovanna Melandri (Gordon 2012a, 290). Among the documents on display in

¹⁶ On the selection of the victims, see also Maurizio (1997).



Figure 4: Colonel Giuseppe Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo half bust.



Figure 5: The bas-relief to Salvo D'Acquisto.

the room is the text of the 1938 Racial Laws, which unequivocally indicates that the fascist state became a racist one well before the Nazi occupation:

It is time that Italians proclaim themselves genuinely racist. [...] The question of racism in Italy must be treated primarily from a biological point of view [...] The understanding of racism in Italy must be essentially Italian, and its orientation must be Northern-Arian (Extract from *The Defense of Race*, August, 5, 1938).



Figure 6: The *Fosse Ardeatine* sanctuary.



Figure 7: The bloodstained shirt.

These laws paved the way for the deportations and killing of the Italian Jews. Interestingly, these documents are exhibited in a room that is somehow detached from the rest of the exhibition, located after the offices of the museum personnel on the very last floor. This means that when the museum was built, there was no intention of focusing on the Holocaust and, consequently, on the crimes of Italians. Furthermore, the documents are in the very corner of the room, not very visible. Indeed, given the importance of this event in the Second World War and the narrative of resistance against fascism and Nazism, perhaps it would be wise to put them in a more central position. It should also be pointed out that, in this case, documents that could cast a shadow on the Italian nation are given little space and importance, a factor that is in line with the principle of national priority (Posocco and Watson 2022), according to which national interests are given the utmost importance; criticism towards the nation has to be minimised while national heroism is given more space and visibility.

Finally, a document in the corridor (third floor) goes in the same direction. It is General Kappler's report of the round-up in Rome on October 16, 1943, which made more than one thousand prisoners, including two hundred children (from Auschwitz, only a woman, Settimia Spizzichino, and 15 men would return). What the audio guide says is not coherent with Kappler's writing. The audio guide underlines that, according to Kappler, Romans did not collaborate with the Nazis, while the text says that most Romans offered a "passive resistance" to the police. Thanks to this passive resistance, Kappler concludes, they could round up the Roman Jews in one morning. The shift from Kappler's statement of the passive resistance of the population to the statement of their non-collaboration by the museum might be a subtle difference, but it is not. This shift covers the fact that most citizens remained indifferent to what happened. This strategy is coherent not only with the ever-positive narrative this museum displays but also with the principle of national priority that works to protect the nation at all costs.

5 The Museum-Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi

The Liberation Museum of Rome is not the only museum overplaying the narrative of the resistance while avoiding the crimes Italians committed against humanity in the events of the Second World War. The Museum-Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi shows the extent to which, and how the narration of the resistance has been (and still is) an influence over it. An interview with one of the museum administrators (we call it Y) left no doubt that "the narrative

of the resistance was a mandatory step in introducing the memory of the deportations since it had to be part of the liturgy of resistance” (Interview with Y, 2022). The term “liturgy” here is noteworthy, as it belongs to religious semantics and suggests that resistance is a dogma that cannot be discussed, only observed. So far, due to the numerous stories about local and national heroes under the resistance’s umbrella, its narrative has reached the label of “mythology” (Di Scala 1999, 67–72). Yet, “liturgy” seems to be a step forward. It refers to an unquestionable power above the human, a mystery of faith.

5.1 Fossoli and the 1955 “National Exhibition on the Nazi Lagers”

Fossoli is a fraction of Carpi, a city in the region of Emilia-Romagna. The most prominent Italian transit camp was located there.¹⁷ Established in May 1942, it operated until November 14, 1943, when the Italian Social Republic signed Verona’s Manifesto officialising its alliance with Germany and Japan. However, deportations to Germany, primarily Auschwitz for work and extermination, started on January 26, 1944, when the Italian Social Republic was still in control of the camp (Luppi and Tamassia 2016, 7–8). This must be added to the fact that the Italian police were in charge of finding and arresting the Jews within the Italian territory and controlling them in Fossoli (Picciotto Fargion 2010, 41), which confirms the crucial role of Fossoli in implementing the “Final Solution.”

With the advancement of the frontline, the Nazis decided to move from the camp of Fossoli to the one of Bolzano-Gries. When the war ended, the camp reopened to host foreign refugees, including Holocaust survivors. From 1947 to 1952, under the direction of Father Zeno Saltini, it hosted war orphans. Finally, before the closing, from 1954 to 1970, the camp accommodated ethnic Italian refugees from Yugoslavia (Benz and Distel 2005, 298).

The Museum-Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi opened in 1973. However, its history dates back to December 8 and 9, 1955, when Carpi hosted the first Italian exhibition on deportation, titled “National Exhibition on the Nazi Lagers.” December 8 is not a casual date but commemorates the gold medal for the resistance of Modena, Carpi’s provincial capital. This exhibition closed the “Commemoration of the resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” curated by The Modena Historical Institute for the resistance and the mayor of Carpi, who was an ex-partisan and a member of the Communist party, Bruno Losi. The

17 On Fossoli, see D’Amico (2015), Duranti and Ferri Caselli (2000), Herr (2018), Luppi and Schintu (2020), Ori (2010), and Cassani Simonetti, Mira, and Salerno (2021).

exhibition aimed to inform people about the Nazi concentration camps. It was an important event and toured Italy until 1961, including Rome in 1958.¹⁸ In this exhibition, the memory of the resistance played a crucial role, to the point of “obscuring” the memory of deportation (Luppi and Tamassia 2016, 14). In fact, from 1946 to 1955, the main historical event to remember was the Cibenno Massacre, which occurred on July 12, 1944, when the SS shot 67 internees in Fossoli. Although the 1955 exhibition included only a section specifically on the resistance in Nazi concentration camps, the curators combined the memory of deportation with the one of resistance. Furthermore, a plaque was installed in the oldest part of Fossoli on the same occasion. The plaque bears an epigraph by Piero Calamandrei, a jurist and politician associated with the Socialist Party, who played a key role in drafting the Italian Constitution.¹⁹ The text is a hymn to the values of the resistance:

From this grave that satiated itself with innocents/From these squares that horrified/Under the shadows of the nooses/From these generous lands/From where heroic bands of people departed/To escape the armies of the barbarity/From the bleak graves of Kefalonia/From the ashes of the extermination camps/Rises from a hundred voices a unique voice/Not of hate but redemption // The town hall of Carpi/the glorious Camp of partisan war/in the tenth year from the Liberation/Collect this voice/And consecrate it to the future/So that the children of children understand/As yearning of hope/What moved *Cirio Menotti*/Is embodied in this vow/To ensure the homeland forever/Freedom, Independence, Justice // When the vow will be accomplished/Fossoli altar of Martyrs/Will blaze through the centuries/Dawn of a better world/Free, industrious, pacified world (Luppi and Tamassia 2016, 22).²⁰

Like the Liberation Museum of Rome, the interview reveals that the 1955 exhibition was also a creation of the political forces that emerged victorious after the war. In fact, according to the interviewee, Alcide De Gasperi, the historic leader of the Christian democrats and eight-time premier of Italy who died suddenly in August 1954, wanted this exhibition to be consistent with what he agreed to in the 1947 Treaty of Paris (Interview with Y, 2022). In this meeting, a crucial step for the entering of Italy into the UN, Prime Minister De Gasperi admitted: (1) Italy’s responsibility at the start of the world conflict as an ally of Germany and Japan, (2) the illegal occupation of Ethiopia and Albania, but also that (3) on July 25, 1943, “with the help of the democratic elements of the Italian people, the fascist regime was overthrown” (Sforza, February 10, 1947).²¹ Point number (3) is crucial as it highlights that national political institutions chose to emphasise the resistance as a central narrative of the

¹⁸ On this exhibition, see Luppi and Ruffini (2017), and Luppi and Tamassia (2016).

¹⁹ On Calamandrei and his ambivalent relationship with fascism, see Levis Sullam (2021).

²⁰ Translation is ours.

²¹ See https://documenti.camera.it/_dati/Costituente/lavori/DDI/23.pdf (last accessed on January 24, 2024).

newborn Italian Republic and its national ideology in the 1955 exhibition (Cooke 2011).

Ten years later, in the commemorative speech on December 16, 1962, when the idea of turning this exhibition into something permanent was born, political institutions continued to put the memory of the deportations under the umbrella of the resistance. According to Losi, the exhibition and museum to come intended:

to valorise the sacrifice and resistance of thousands of Italians in the Nazi deportation and extermination camps, to perpetuate in time not only the tragic memories of their imprisonment but, above all, the ideals that animated and sustained the resistance in its little-known aspect of political and racial deportation (Luppi and Tamassia 2016, 5).

This pattern matches and materialises what is mentioned in the following section: the narrative of the resistance vehiculated and then influenced the memory of the deportations to which Italy had actively contributed. This had the result in shifting the attention from Italian responsibility to heroism. Coherently, to remember the heinous facts of Fossoli, the curators preferred to install a giant photograph of Anne Frank. For clarity, Anne Frank was never in Fossoli, nor was she Italian. Although more than two thousand mostly Italian Jews, including Primo Levi, entered Italy's most important concentration and transit camp, the curators opted for a foreign symbol. Once again, the shift of responsibility seems rather evident.

5.2 The Exhibit of the Museum-Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi

The 1973 Museum-Monument confirms this self-acquittal mechanism. The exhibit is constructed through 13 rooms with the main goal of evoking emotions in the visitors. It consists mainly of wall inscriptions in Italian, photographs, and objects selected from Lica and Albe Steiner's archives (ex-partisans and communists). Among the inscriptions are five commissioned graffiti pieces created by renowned artists: Longone, Guttuso, Leger, Cagli, and Picasso.

The exhibition starts at the entrance with an excerpt from *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1957) by Bertolt Brecht. By combining the semantics of resistance with the one of deportation, this inscription indicates the goal of the exhibition: presenting what happened by celebrating the resistance. Figure 8 below shows the text.

A graffiti by Longone dominates the first hall (Figure 9, below). Reproductions of living skeletons stand in front of the visitor. Most of them are naked. Some are represented in the act of covering their privates. This is not a detail: the museum is dedicated to the resistance in the lager, and the exhibition stresses the resilience of the victims, namely their attempt at staying human in an inhuman environment.

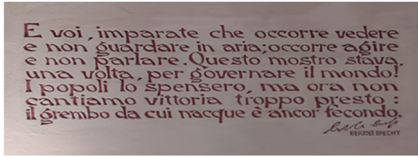


Figure 8: “You will learn that you must see and not look up in the air; you must act and not talk. This monster was once to rule the world! The people extinguished it, but now let us not sing victory too soon, the womb from which it was born is still fertile.”



Figure 9: “The graffiti by Longone”.

This message is coherent with the mural inscriptions on the museum’s walls, which are taken from the *Letters of condemned prisoners of the European resistance* (1954) (see from Figures 10–13 below). The absence of explanatory captions and panels does not help inform visitors about these episodes’ causes, facts and effects. This means that the goal is to touch the visitor emotionally, not to inform. All the inscriptions are red, which is, among others, the colour of the resistance. Many of these writings emphasise the false myth of a “happy death”, “continuous fight,” death in the camp as a soldier or worker, something that makes life purposeful, and even redemptive death. As mentioned above, this is consistent with the goal of the Historical Institute of the resistance in Modena and its 1955 exhibition: the idea of death in the camps as a sacrifice in the struggle for the political liberation of Italy. Although Fossoli is only 5 km away, in this museum on deportation, there is no mention of what happened there, nor the active role of (Italian) fascists in the Holocaust.

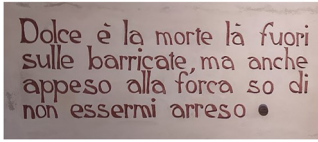


Figure 10: “Death on the barricades is sweet, but I know that I have not surrendered, even if I am hanging from the gallows”.

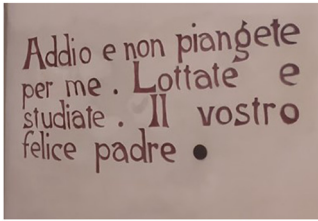


Figure 11: “Farewell, and do not weep for me. Fight and study. Your happy father”.

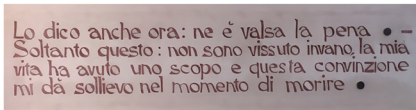


Figure 12: “I say it now: it was worth it. Just that: I did not live in vain; my life had a purpose, and this conviction relieves me at the moment of dying”.

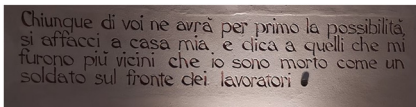


Figure 13: “Whichever one of you gets the chance first, come to my house and tell my beloved that I died as a soldier on the workers’ front.”

Once the visit finished, the museum personnel, who guided us, asked us for suggestions on updating the museum. This is a challenging undertaking, as their enquiries imply they are already aware. The museum holds the status of “monument,” disallowing for relevant updates and changes. Unfortunately, this poses a problem as the exhibition was initially designed for an audience who lived through the events. Consequently, there is a heightened risk of disconnecting from the intended message of the exhibition currently. For example, Figure 14 below represents Hitler, Mussolini, and Ciano at the Munich Conference in 1938. No further information is provided to the visitor, who is supposed to have a historical background on the subject and orient himself. Figure 14 (upper right corner) shows Mussolini and Hitler together without giving temporal and spatial information.



Figure 14: The captions from left to right are: “Hitler, Mussolini and Ciano”; “Mussolini and Hitler”; “Himmler with the head of the camps”; “Himmler with Nazi hierarchs visiting the Nazi camps”.

6 Conclusions

This article analyses two museums, the Liberation Museum in Rome and the Museum Monument to Racial and Political Deportees in the Nazi Lagers in Carpi. They focus on the Holocaust and Italian resistance against Nazi Germany. The article provocatively labels them as “fossils of memory” because the exhibition are 50 and 70 years old, therefore, still highlight anachronistic narrative patterns that align with the political forces that emerged as dominant after the Second World War: the Christian Democrat, the Socialist, and the Communist parties. This study suggests that these exhibitions might respond to “national priorities” of the time: to emphasise the heroism of the Italian population while minimising those aspects that could cast a shadow, such as the Italian collaboration with Nazi Germany in the deportation and extermination of the Jews and the support of the Italian population to fascist forces.

On the other hand, it is possible that the fossilisation of these museums mirrors a similar fossilisation in the political-cultural discourse over the following decades, at

least until the resurgence of Holocaust memory in the latter half of the 1990s and 2000s. In fact, we have observed minor changes in the exhibits during the 2000s, at least in the case of the Liberation Museum. Here, a room dedicated to the Holocaust was added, educational activities were expanded, etc., suggesting that shifts in the political discourse had a modest impact on the museums.

However, it must be said that the reason why these museums have not changed was not a central question of this article and remains open to debate. Interviews with staff at the Liberation Museum suggest that the reasons could be numerous and varied, including a lack of funding and/or willingness, as well as challenges in reaching agreements among the many diverse (political and non-political) actors involved, each with their own specific interests.

For the sake of clarity, the celebration of the resistance in these museums is not merely a simplistic or “optimistic” concealment of the darker chapters of fascist racism. It embodies a reflection of the foundational values that shaped the Republic of Italy in the aftermath of the Second World War. This narrative serves as a critical reminder of the collective struggle for freedom and democracy often involving great sacrifice. In this regard, it encapsulates a broader socio-political context where the resistance is seen as a pivotal movement, instrumental in dismantling of the fascist ideology and the establishment of a new democratic order. The problem with the “fossils of memory” is that they do not evolve, for reasons that go beyond the scope of this article, necessitating further research also beyond the Italian case study. In fact, we believe that the concept of “Fossil Memory” could be applied well beyond this case.

That said, the article highlights that while these museums promote resistance, they also convey an ever-positive idea of the Italian nation as (1) a victim of Nazi Germany, (2) a victim of fascism, presented as if it was an alien body, and (3) a country of partisans-liberators. In particular: the Liberation Museum stresses an ever-positive image of Romans in the efforts against the fascist and Nazi forces; the Museum-Monument frames the memory of the deportations under the umbrella of resistance, creating an ideological, cleaned-up, and ultimately cathartic patina of death in the lagers. In both museums, the result is a lack of explicit recognition of human rights violations occurring on the part of Italians during the Second World War. Alarmingly, the fact that in the Museum-Monument there is no explicit mention of fascism does not help to transmit the idea that it has been a horrific regime of the 20th century, the carrier of an ideology based on violence, misogyny, and hatred against the “different” that originated in this country. In doing so, these museums have lost the opportunity to put history at the service of Italian society (and beyond), and produce much-needed antibodies to avoid similar cycles of violence and hideous ideological attitudes in the present.

An investigation into the history of these museums has shown that their birth and exhibits were the results of a direct interest by the political forces that emerged victorious from the Second World War: the Christian Democrats, with Guido Stendardo for the Liberation Museum, and Alcide De Gasperi for Carpi's 1955 exhibition; the Communists, with Antonello Trombadori for the museum in Rome, and Bruno Losi for Carpi's. The significance of politics in the histories of these museums confirms that they are hardly immune to political influence but instead are significantly entwined in political (national) tendencies and their impacts.

At the time we are completing this article (April 2023) in Italy, there is an intense political debate about the historical episodes related to the Fosse Ardeatine massacre. On March 24, while honouring the victims of the mass killing, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni did not openly recognise that in the massacre, anti-fascists had been killed,²² and, on March 31st, the President of the Senate, Ignazio La Russa, a politician with a strong neo-fascist background, stated that the attack in via Rasella was useless because partisans killed a "retired music band."²³ Since the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine was the consequence of the Via Rasella bombing, La Russa has implied that what happened at the Fosse Ardeatine was the fault of the partisans – indeed, he said: "partisans were aware of the consequences". There is no need here to discuss these words: historians have already proved that La Russa's do not have any historical basis,²⁴ while Meloni's served to downplay the historical fault of the Italian extreme right from which her party, "Fratelli d'Italia", was born. However, these statements highlight that Italy's two highest political authorities are currently engaged in a revision of the nation's historical past. This current discussion prompts us to conclude this article by emphasising its purpose, which is not to challenge the vital role of these museums as guardians of anti-fascism. On the contrary, as this article acknowledges, they played, still play, and possibly will continue to play an indispensable and strategic role in post-war and post-fascist Italian culture. The restructuring and renovation of these museums, on one hand, and the construction of new museums that educate about anti-fascism without fear of offending national pride – therefore in a critical manner – on the other, might serve as important cultural Beccatini (2022) antibodies against the dangers emerging from the neo-

22 "The massacre marked one of the deepest and most painful wounds ever inflicted on our national community: 335 innocent Italians were killed simply because they were Italian." <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-statement-anniversary-fosse-ardeatine-massacre/22190>.

23 <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2023/03/la-russa-via-rasella-partigiani-polemica-politica-banda-musicale-12bdcaf3-9fdf-477c-95c4-60fa2646a7c0.html>. On March 2, La Russa partially retracted his statement, apologizing for having labelled the victims of the attack as a retired music band.

24 Historian Lutz Klinkhammer said that "La Russa believes in a mythology with no historical basis" (2023) <https://www.open.online/2023/04/01/roma-via-rasella-fosse-ardeatine-storico-klinkhammer-vs-la-russa/>.

fascist drift. This highlights the reasons why such an approach is, at the very least, desirable.

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