Debating the Meaning of Fascism in Contemporary Italy

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This article takes up the question posed by Claudio Pavone—‘Have the Italians truly known how to come to terms with their past?’—and argues that Italians have indeed grappled with their Fascist past, albeit in varied, contradictory, ambiguous and incomplete ways. This article demonstrates the myriad ways in which Italians—historians, politicians, intellectuals, and segments of the general public—have debated the meaning of Fascism since the fall of Mussolini and the end of the Second World War. What follows below argues that selective remembering and wilful forgetting of the Mussolini regime are nevertheless evidence of an ongoing process of confronting the legacy of Italy’s recent past.

Introduction

The eminent Italian historian Claudio Pavone asked recently, ‘Have the Italians truly known how to come to terms with their Fascist past?’ There is something of a consensus emerging among scholars that the simple answer to that question is no. Not only have Italians not confronted fully their Fascist past, the argument goes, but they—politicians, intellectuals, the general public—have cultivated, promoted and internalized the myth of the Italians as brava gente, or what Pavone describes as the myth of the ‘inherent goodness of Italians’ (Pavone 2004, pp. 271–274).

The belief that Italians have not confronted fully their Fascist past has become orthodoxy among historians of the contemporary era. But what, precisely, does it mean to ‘know how’ to come to terms with their Fascist past? That is, how are we to determine when and if the legacy of Italian Fascism has been reckoned with fully by Italians? By what means is such a reckoning accomplished, or at least attempted? Is there a threshold to cross, or some bar to be met as a measure of a successful reckoning with the Fascist past?

What follows below argues that while there are certainly omissions in the documentary record and in historical interpretations of Italian Fascism—what the historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2003–2004) refers to as ‘gaps’ in Italian collective memory—these seeming ‘gaps’ should be understood as part of the ongoing
reckoning with the memory and legacy of Mussolini’s regime. In short, this paper argues that selective remembering and wilful forgetting of the Mussolini regime is nevertheless evidence of an evolving process of confronting the legacy of Italy’s recent past. It is hard to imagine a historical question that has animated and dominated contemporary political and social discourse in Italy more than the legacy of Fascism. In fact, debates over the legacy of Mussolini and of Fascism were (and are) a common feature of political discourse in postwar Italy. As the historian John Whittam (2001, p. 163) observes, Italian historiography has witnessed ‘a ceaseless torrent of books and articles seeking to recount, analyse and explain the Fascist ventennio, its origins and its legacy’. At the end of the 1990s, it was impossible to think of a topic related to Italian Fascism, including anti-Fascism and the Resistance, that had not been studied, debated, revisited or revised in one form or another, to a greater or lesser degree.

The literature on Fascism and related themes boasts numerous studies of varying quality in many different languages, drawing upon different methods and sources, and reaching divergent conclusions about a wide range of issues, including but by no means limited to the role of Mussolini, the nature of Fascism as ideology, the relationship between church and state, the ‘brutal friendship’ between Hitler and Mussolini, the events of the Second World War, the Resistance and, most recently, debates over the legacy and memory of Fascism, anti-Fascism and the origins of Italy’s Republic. We have histories of Fascist cultural politics, demographic policies and women’s experiences under the Mussolini regime. Students of the period can read about Fascism’s colonial ambitions, about its destructive colonial practices and of how much we have yet to learn about the full extent and consequences of these practices. Students today can debate the role of anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy, or argue about the nature and extent of resistance to the Mussolini regime, before and during the Second World War. If comparatively sound and substantive historical analysis and debate were not edifying enough, interested readers could turn to the many popular expressions of reckoning with Italy’s Fascist past, or what John Whittam aptly describes as ‘polemical writing, character assassination of the dead and the living, culminating in a tumultuous Historikerstreit, when historians wage war on each other’ (2001, p. 163).

Invariably, scholarly and public debates over the legacy of Fascism and anti-Fascism involve grappling with the question successive generations of Italians have faced since 1945; namely, how should history judge Mussolini and Fascism? Perhaps even more pertinent to contemporary Italy’s political reality is the question of legacy: what has been Il Duce’s legacy for postwar Italian life? Is it the case, as a recent biography of Mussolini would have it, that his story is ‘mainly more than ‘sound and fury’, and that his legacy is ‘largely confined to the superficial’ (Bosworth 2002, p. 428)? Or is it the case that Mussolini’s legacy is still felt in enduring and substantive ways, whether in public memory, in historical scholarship, and in public policy debates?

In short, I argue that Italians have indeed known how to come to terms with their Fascist past, albeit in varied, contradictory and ambiguous ways. At the very least, this paper will demonstrate the myriad ways in which Italians—historians, politicians, intellectuals and segments of the general public—have debated the meaning of Fascism since the fall of Mussolini and the end of the
Second World War. While acknowledging the distinctive features of the Italian case, I suggest that Italy has reckoned with its own legacy of repression and violence as have other societies, notably postwar Germany and Japan: by means of a selective remembering and wilful forgetting of the recent past, a process reflected in historical scholarship, and public memory, but also institutionally as public policy. If there is a common thread linking the various patterns of public and private remembering in places such as Italy and Germany, it is this: the declared imperative to hasten the country’s democratic transition and consolidation entailed coming to terms with the recent past in ways that disassociated national identity from Fascism and Nazism. A measure of accountability in the form of trials and perhaps reparations was present, to be sure. Yet never far behind public expressions of mea culpa for the legacy of Fascism were positive evaluations of the country’s national identity that allowed the crimes of the former regimes to appear as aberrations, or what Benedetto Croce famously described as a ‘parenthesis’ in history.

I do not mean to minimize the obvious and disconcerting omissions in the documentary record and the concomitant weaknesses in our understanding of, say, Italian Fascism’s repressive, racist and murderous policies, both at home and abroad. Rather, my purpose is to survey the competing claims and evolving interpretations of Italian Fascism—what Alon Confino (1997) calls ‘memory’s contestation’—to tell the story of how Italians are working to come to terms with their past. I want then to offer an alternative approach to assessing debates over the meaning of Fascism in contemporary Italy, one that takes the competing claims about the past—as articulated by historians, politicians, the media and segments of the public—and moves them to the centre stage of our analysis, thus constituting an ‘analysis of contestation’ (Confino 1997, pp. 1386–1403). As we shall see, ongoing debates over the legacy of Mussolini, or of the proper role of anti-Fascism in contemporary Italian public life, challenge commonplace assertions that the Italians have failed to reckon with their Fascist past.

Life after Death: Mussolini’s Legacy

As Moeller (1996) notes in his study of public memory in the Federal Republic of Germany, public and scholarly controversy over the meaning of the end of World War Two is evident in many countries whose contemporary history was indelibly marked by that conflict. In the United States, for example, controversy ensued when the National Air and Space Museum planned to use an exhibition on the Enola Gay mission to discuss the meaning and the wider significance of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So intense was the public debate over the purported political use of history that the museum eventually cancelled the original plan (Kohn 1995; see also Kristof 1995, Buruma 1995 and Hogan 1996). In Japan, historian John W. Dower (1999) argues that the way in which the war is remembered (and, he adds, forgotten) lies ‘at the heart of contemporary Japanese society’: the various forms of public memory of the war, he concludes, have remained a ‘touchstone’ for Japanese national identity and the nature of its democracy.

In Europe, of course, history books, public ceremonies, monuments, war cemeteries and political speeches offer a constant demonstration of how closely
intertwined the Second World War is with the memory, politics and national identity of various states. The most prominent case, as we shall see, is that of Germany, where debates over the meaning of the war and its end have raged since May 1945. Moeller (1996) and others have documented the changing ways in which the final destruction of Hitler’s regime was ‘understood, described and commemorated’ in the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany. According to Moeller, by the late 1960s and 1970s, West Germans had arrived at a more critical, and self-critical, understanding of National Socialism, but through the 1950s, public memories of German victimization were dominant.

For people in the former Axis countries, the process of coming to terms with the legacy of authoritarianism and mass violence varied according to the nature of the respective regimes and the dynamics of their collapse and defeat. Postwar Germany—occupied and divided by the victorious powers—had to deal with the weighty question of collective responsibility for the Holocaust. By contrast, after the defeat of Fascism and Mussolini’s execution, the Italians were readily able, and willing, to minimize their own agency with regard to the Fascist regime and its repressive and violent practices, at home and abroad. This owes something, no doubt, to the fact that Italians had a hand in orchestrating Mussolini’s demise and led the country’s democratic transition. As we shall see, a central motif of postwar Italian memory juxtaposes the ‘good Italian’ against the ‘bad German’ and casts Italy as a victim rather than a partner of the Nazis. Of course, even postwar Germany engaged in similar patterns of public memory: recognizing that crimes had been committed by the Nazis in the name of the German people, but at the same time minimizing the agency of ordinary Germans and casting them as victims of both Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism.

The ambiguous nature both of Fascism and of the end of the war in Italy makes it easy to forget that the country’s democratic transition was arguably the most contentious of the postwar era (Di Palma 1982). Assessing how Mussolini is remembered by various segments of Italian society, and abroad, is also to ask what the legacy of Fascism has been for postwar Italian politics and society. As Richard Bosworth (2002, p. 421) puts it: after 1945, ‘did Mussolini’s soul in some way go marching on?’

The answer to that question is both yes and no. And the answer varies according to what one understands the concept of legacy to mean. Should a kind of inarticulate nostalgia for Mussolini—such as is to be found among many postwar Italian immigrants—be considered part of Il Duce’s legacy in the same manner as the institutional traces of Fascism left over from the abortive purges of the immediate postwar era (Bosworth 2002, pp. 422–423)? Should a public exhibition on Fascist economic policy—such as the enormous The Italian Economy between the Wars, 1919–1939, held in Rome’s Colosseum in 1984—be judged as akin to the hooliganism of football fans chanting Fascist slogans? Is the presence of Benito Mussolini’s granddaughter in parliament evidence of his legacy in the same way as the political terrorism of neo-Fascist groups or the political activism of men like Giorgio Almirante and Julius Evola?

Beyond the question of how to assess what is meant by the term ‘legacy’, there is the question of whether or to what extent Mussolini’s memory is even responsible for all that has been said and done in his name since 1945 (Bosworth 2002, p. 423).
In other words, how are we to distinguish between what is fleeting and superficial in the public memories of Mussolini, and what is more enduring and substantive? The challenge here is to move beyond the strictures of public and scholarly paradigms that for too long have confined our understanding of Mussolini and of his legacy to crude caricatures of *Il Duce* as buffoon, villain or, in the hands of certain apologists, a good enough statesman.

On the latter point, it is clear that even Mussolini’s biggest fans faced serious problems in characterizing him as a great statesman. As Bosworth (2002, p. 423) reminds us, for neo-Fascists in the postwar era, Italy’s ‘humiliating’ defeat in war proved ‘a heavy legacy fully to deny or overcome’. Indeed, on the bare facts of Italy’s disastrous war efforts alone, many historians preferred to see Mussolini as a colourful and noisy, but ultimately ineffectual and largely insignificant individual. The renowned English historian A. J. P. Taylor (1964) cast the die with his conclusion that Italian Fascism was not only the ‘lesser evil’ when compared to Nazism, it was also the lesser everything. Taylor wrote:

Fascism never possessed the ruthless drive, let alone the material strength of National Socialism. Morally it was just as corrupting—or perhaps more so from its very dishonesty. Everything about Fascism was a fraud. The social peril from which it saved Italy was a fraud; the revolution by which it seized power was a fraud; the ability and policy of Mussolini were fraudulent. Fascist rule was corrupt, incompetent, empty; Mussolini himself a vain, blundering boaster without either ideas or aims. (Taylor 1964, pp. 84–85)

Taylor can be excused for being overly dismissive of Fascism since, at the time of writing, historians had scant understanding of the true nature of Mussolini’s regime, let alone a complete documentary record from which to draw their assessments. The abortive administrative purges of the immediate postwar era, coupled with the failure to fully investigate and prosecute both Nazi war crimes in Italy and Italian Fascist war crimes in occupied Europe and Africa, has impeded a detailed analysis of Mussolini’s regime.

This, in turn, has helped to perpetuate the widespread perception of Mussolini’s regime as a ‘lesser evil’ than Nazism, and as a form of ‘imperfect totalitarianism.’ That Mussolini’s regime ‘oppressed and repressed national minorities, racial minorities, [and] political adversaries’, as Enzo Collotti notes (quoted in Benghiat 2003–2004, p. 15), seems to have escaped Taylor’s normally incisive eye, and that of an entire generation of historians. Mussolini’s colonial misadventures in Africa, for example, with their murderous results, would have been overlooked or underestimated in the interpretations of an earlier generation of historians.

But to dismiss Mussolini as a ‘blundering boaster’ (which he could be at times) and Fascism as simply fraudulent does a disservice to history. It does nothing to advance our understanding of what really happened during Mussolini’s two decades in office. To say that Mussolini was ‘without either ideas or aims’, as Taylor (1964) opined, is to ignore basic facts for one; that those ideas and aims were vague, contradictory, and ill-advised, to say nothing of morally repugnant, is beyond question. But ideas and aims they were nonetheless, and they left an enduring legacy in the form of policy initiatives during the interwar and war years, and in public memory of the
Fascist ventennio. This is not to defend Mussolini, as some historians would have it, if defending Mussolini means saying that what he said and did was good for Italy.

This is precisely the charge levied against Mussolini’s biographer Renzo De Felice and his students, the so-called ‘De Felice school’. De Felice was arguably the leading spokesperson of a generation of Italian historians who, in reaction to the dismissive tone of the Anglo-American historians, sought to document more precisely the many things Mussolini said and did during his time in office. In his critical assessment of De Felice’s work, Bosworth (2002, p. 424) suggests that De Felice was perhaps not a ‘champion’ of Mussolini’s cause, but at least a ‘kind of defender…more and more ready to give some credit to Mussolini’s achievement and ideals.’

The use here of the term ‘credit’ is interesting. It would seem to imply that De Felice and his students judged Mussolini and Fascism in normative terms and ascribed to the Duce a positive legacy. In other words, not only did De Felice and company seek to document the history of Fascism in, as they claimed, empirical and objective terms, but they judged much of what Mussolini said and did as in some way good for the country. De Felice and his students insisted that normative assumptions were entirely absent from their work. On the contrary, where a generation of avowedly anti-Fascist historians and other commentators had produced a static, selective and essentially politicized view of Mussolini’s regime, De Felice proudly asserted his impartiality and serene detachment from the events in question. ‘The thing that has annoyed many people’, De Felice reasoned, ‘especially the old hands, has been what has been called my impartiality, my detachment [serenità] in judging events as though they were events of two or three centuries ago’ (quoted by Knox 1995, p. 348).

De Felice could thus justify his role in helping to organize, among other things, the 1984 Rome exhibition The Italian Economy between the Wars, 1919–1939 as proof of his impartiality and his overarching interest in simply writing the history of Mussolini’s regime, leaving the normative judgements for another time (MacGregor Knox 1995). That the exhibition was sponsored by the government of Socialist Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, and with the blessing of the former partisan and Socialist leader Sandro Pertini, President of the Italian Republic, seemed to underscore the organizers’ claim that the exhibition was about history: the history of the Italian economy under Fascism. But some of De Felice’s critics were (and remain) unconvinced by his claims of impartiality. Some commentators (Bosworth 2002; Mason 1986), for example, have characterized the 1984 Rome exhibition as an ‘attack on anti-Fascism’, while others saw it as an attempt to demonstrate the ‘originality of Fascism’ in certain aspects of Italian life. Others have pointed out that for all his claims of impartiality and empiricism, De Felice’s mammoth multivolume biography of Il Duce contains ‘remarkable omissions of sources and of interpretatively inconvenient facts or areas of the regime’. According to MacGregor Knox (1995), these omissions are glaring and persistent enough to have earned De Felice the mantle of spokesperson for the so-called ‘anti-anti-Fascist’ orthodoxy; hardly a neutral and serene observer of the history of Mussolini’s regime.6

The historian Tim Mason (1986, p. 30) argued that De Felice’s approach to the history of Fascism was a particularly insidious attack on anti-Fascism; a kind of wolf in sheep’s clothing. According to Mason, De Felice offers ‘no overt apologias for Fascism. In the foreground is a disarming plea that everyone join without
preconceptions in a common effort of understanding—a peaceful, disinterested enterprise’. Like so many of De Felice’s critics, Mason was unmoved by such calls for understanding and for empathy. Speaking of the 1984 Rome exhibition, Mason (1986, pp. 31–32) argued that the notion that empathy is the ultimate aim of historical analysis is ‘a dangerous engine of mystification’. An empathetic understanding of Mussolini and of Fascism thus opens the door to a kind of moral relativism. To say that Mussolini and Fascism actually accomplished something positive is to demonstrate that ‘not everything which happened in the 1920s and 1930s was “bad”’ (Mason 1986, pp. 31–32). For De Felice’s critics, it was precisely this sort of normative judgement about Mussolini’s regime that revealed the insidious nature of his attempts to revise commonplace understandings of Fascism. That such a reassessment of Fascism should emanate from a selective presentation of the history of Mussolini’s regime—the 1984 exhibition, for example, said nothing about Fascism at war—made De Felice’s claims of impartiality appear all the more vacuous.7

For his part, De Felice remained unapologetic. De Felice charged that since the end of the Second World War, Italy’s political and intellectual classes had perpetuated what can be described simply as the ‘myth’ of Italy as the anti-Fascist nation par excellence. That is, through a particular construction of the memory of the Second World War and the fight against Fascism, Italy’s postwar political leaders propagated the idea of anti-Fascism as a political and moral virtue shared by the whole of the Italian people. Indeed, said De Felice, the official ‘culture of anti-Fascism’ made it seem as if democracy and anti-Fascism were interchangeable. In other words, to be a democrat was to be an anti-Fascist, and vice versa. In De Felice’s view, the net effect of this ‘myth’ had been both to obscure the actual history of Fascism and the war, and to allow many decidedly undemocratic political elements (Fascists and Communists) to hide behind the mask of Italy’s so-called anti-Fascist republic.8

The debate sparked by De Felice became polarized and even personal at times, and was mirrored in wider political debates over the legacy of Fascism, the true nature of Italy’s anti-Fascist pedigree and how the past influenced Italy’s present and future. The anti-Fascist paradigm made possible the coexistence and cooperation of the two main pillars of Italy’s postwar political culture—Catholic and Communist subcultures. Already by the 1980s, both subcultures had lost some of their appeal and much of their overt dominance, making the anti-Fascist paradigm less vital to Italian identity and more practically, less necessary for governance. Indeed, voices were raised across the political spectrum blaming the anti-Fascist paradigm for what critics saw as ‘a poverty of ideals and a decline into clientelism which, they claimed, was stifling the political life of the nation’ (Neri Serni 1995, p. 368).

As Bosworth suggests, the political changes heralded by Berlusconi’s electoral victory in 1994, and the concomitant ascent of the National Alliance, were seen by many segments of Italy’s political and cultural elite as ‘an occasion to make peace between Fascists and anti-Fascists; their past conflicts should be redefined as only “a piece of history”’ (Bosworth 2002, p. 16).9 As with earlier bouts of revisionism, the intent was to create what the Italian historian Nicola Gallerano describes as ‘a new historical common sense...in which the relationship with the past was cheerful and nostalgic, and above all “pacified”’ (Crainz 1999, p. 134).
A similar pattern was evident in West Germany a decade earlier, with the so-called *Wende*—a rightward shift in West German politics and then later the fall of Communism and German reunification. With the rise of Helmut Kohl and the Christian Democrats, in coalition with the Free Democratic Party, the rhetoric of German victimization moved back into prominence to create an equivalence of suffering for the many victims, Germans included, of totalitarianism. So it was that when US President Ronald Reagan visited Germany in May 1985 to mark the 40th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe, he could visit both the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (to honour the victims of the Germans), and the German military cemetery at Bitburg (to honour at least some of the German victims). That the Bitburg cemetery held the graves of SS soldiers turned Reagan’s visit into an international controversy. Nevertheless, both Reagan and Kohl pressed the familiar line of German suffering. Reagan declared that the soldiers buried at Bitburg ‘are victims of Nazism also... They were victims just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps’ (Hartmann 1986).10

**Sins of Omission? Between Legal Activism and Collective Memory**

After 1945, as Italians sought to rebuild the country after decades of Fascist rule and a ruinous war, the question of how to reconcile the destructive legacy of Nazi occupation and partisan warfare with the needs of a transitional society was met with an uneasy combination of legal activism—that is, the prosecution of Nazi and Fascist war criminals—along with a sweeping political amnesty and an even broader form of collective amnesia. The collective amnesia was institutionalized, in a sense, by the Italian government’s refusal, backed by the Allies, to agree to a thorough investigation and prosecution of war crimes committed by Italians in formerly occupied areas, namely the Balkans, Greece and Africa. While this approach worked in the short term to accelerate Italy’s democratic transition, it also meant that Italians did not fully confront their Fascist past. Nor was the divisive legacy of partisan and anti-partisan warfare fully acknowledged. Some would argue that, in the long run, this has been to the detriment of the historical record, of public memory of the war, and of the overall political health of Italy’s democratic Republic.

At the same time, while plans were made at the war’s end for public trials of prominent Nazi leaders responsible for war crimes in Italy, the Italian authorities were reticent about attempts to investigate and prosecute the hundreds of Italian military and civilian authorities accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Balkans, Greece and Africa (Pankhurst 1999). In fact, in part to spare the Italians the embarrassment of a very public airing of Fascism’s imperialist, racist and murderous occupation practices, the Allied authorities decided to shelve the planned ‘Italian Nuremberg’, that is, a major trial of the entire Nazi ‘machinery of reprisals’ that operated in Italy between 1943 and 1945, and was responsible for killing upwards of 100,000 Italians, mainly civilians. Yet, as Michele Battini (2004) has demonstrated, the Allies, the British in particular, renounced the idea altogether, largely in acquiescence to the pressing political objectives of Italy’s postwar transition. Predominant among these objectives was the declared need to avoid inflaming the revolutionary impulse evident among segments of the population,
which manifested itself in early electoral successes for Italy’s Socialist and Communist parties. In the end, a handful of high-ranking Nazi officers were put on trial for crimes committed during the Nazi occupation of Italy—including Kesselring, Kappler and others—while literally hundreds of other cases of alleged war crimes, committed by Germans and Italians, were ‘buried for decades in a closet’. Battini considers this a:

most Italian solution that favoured the normalization of relations between the Italian Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany and in compensation allowed the persecution of the Italian war criminals guilty of the massacres in Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece to be forgotten. (2004, pp. 356–358).11

But is it the case, as the truism would have it, that the absence of a full and thorough legal investigation and prosecution of these various crimes actually produced the so-called ‘grave consequences’ scholars and jurists often speak of, either in juridical or historical terms? Michele Battini (2004), for one, is convinced that the absence of an Italian Nuremberg, for instance, and the concomitant absence of procedures to investigate and prosecute Italian war criminals had the twin effect of limiting the ‘juridical horizon’ of international law after 1945, while at the same time contributing indirectly to a ‘deformation of historical memory that was founded on the separation of Germany’s responsibilities from those of other European nations’ (p. 359). In the process, Battini says, ‘the faults of the allied armies and the responsibilities of the European ruling class’ (p. 359) for its role in Nazism–Fascism in the first place were too easily forgotten.

As we saw above, many historians insist that such omissions in the documentary record, and in historical interpretation, in turn contribute to ‘gaps’ in Italian collective memory (Ben-Ghiat 2003–2004, p. 17). These gaps may not matter much to the day-to-day lived experiences of most Italians; it is arguable whether such gaps really do constitute a deformed or immature ‘civil conscience’ that, in turn, harms the health of Italy’s democratic polity. True, these gaps in public memory may influence debates over national identity and public policy; further research is needed to test this, in any event. The historian Ernesto Galli della Loggia is convinced that these gaps do, indeed, matter; they contribute, he says, to the ‘singular schizophrenia’ of Italian public opinion, which reflects the ‘bad German–good Italian’ dichotomy discussed above (quoted in Ben-Ghiat 2003–2004, p. 17). To repeat, further research is needed to test whether and how this ‘singular schizophrenia’, by influencing public opinion, also influences public policy and even domestic and international relations.

Yet the Italians are not alone in this kind of schizophrenic handling of the legacy of Fascism and the Second World War. It is tempting to presume that public memory of the Second World War is far more advanced and self-aware in the other former Axis countries. Both Germany and Japan, it may be argued, have had to confront the legacy of the war and questions of collective guilt or responsibility (which are not the same thing) by virtue of their total defeat in war and subsequent occupation by the Allied powers for many years. Popular understanding of how Germany and Japan faced defeat in war was defined largely by the unprecedented war crimes trials at Nuremberg and Tokyo. As John Dower (1999, p. 443–444) notes, both Nuremberg and Tokyo ‘captured the imagination of a war-weary world’.
To this day, the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials are synonymous with the principles of justice and accountability that are presumed essential to peaceful democratic transitions. And while there were obvious and substantive differences in Allied occupation policies of the former Axis countries—Germany divided among the four major Allied powers; Japan unilaterally controlled by the Americans—both countries were subject to concerted campaigns of denazification, demilitarization and democratization. This was a fate the Italians were able to avoid by virtue of the fact that the agents of Mussolini’s demise and Italy’s liberation were in large measure domestic forces, albeit backed by Allied forces. Italy’s postwar reconstruction and its democratic transition, however, were to be largely an Italian affair (Moeller 1996).

Still, popular perceptions notwithstanding, German and Japanese responses to the end of the Second World War were complex, varied and often contradictory. Speaking of West Germany, Moeller (1996, p. 103) writes of the ‘many accounts’ of Germany’s recent history making the rounds in the years after 1945, ranging from what appeared to many as ‘collective amnesia’, to what Moeller describes more appropriately as ‘remembering selectively’. John Dower (1999, p. 25) argues that there was ‘no single or singular “Japanese” response’ to the end of the war; just the opposite—one finds ‘kaleidoscopic’ responses to defeat in war and foreign occupation.

It is not surprising to hear that the way in which the Second World War is remembered (and often forgotten) in former Axis countries is at the very heart of national identity and informs how people approach such issues as democratic governance, militarism and foreign affairs. Doubtless, the German case (and let us deal with West Germany for brevity’s sake) is the most prominent. As we saw above, Germans have been debating the meaning of the war and how it ended since May 1945. Given the particularly destructive legacy of National Socialism, with its unique association with the Holocaust as a benchmark of systematic mass murder in the 20th century, one would expect to find that debates over the war and legacy of Nazism entail ‘particularly wrenching soul-searching’ (Moeller 1996, p. 1009). Some commentators argue that it was not always so. In fact, for many decades after the war, the conventional wisdom had it that ordinary Germans and their institutions had suffered from a ‘loss of memory’, a ‘collective amnesia’, and the ‘inability to mourn’ their recent past. Other historians suggest that a closer examination reveals an ‘established pattern’ of selective remembrance in the public and in the private sphere, rather than amnesia. Moeller (1996) insists that for virtually all of its history since the end of the war, public memory in West Germany has been fixed on this ‘established pattern’ in which the ‘victims of the Germans’ were held to be equivalent to ‘German victims’. The victims of the Germans, of course, included some 6 million Jews, and millions of other civilians and soldiers of competing armies and occupied territories. The German victims included ethnic Germans expelled from eastern Europe after the war, as well as German POWs and civilians who were captured and/or brutalized by the Soviet Red Army. The equivalence between victims of the Germans and German victims was measured by the same numerical benchmark—what Moeller (1996, p. 1017) calls ‘a language of “millions”, a denomination associated with Jewish victims of National Socialism, prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, and expellees’.
From the first decade after 1945, then, and continuing in various forms to the present day, German society has structured public memory to give voice to ‘competing pasts’ in which Germans were both perpetrators and victims. Public acknowledgement of the crimes of Nazism and of the immense suffering caused by Hitler’s regime, especially the war of extermination inflicted upon European Jews, was accompanied by ‘rhetorics of victimization’ in both public policy and in the writing of contemporary history (Zeitgeschichte). West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer embodied this approach better than anyone. He was masterful at using public policy, diplomacy and speeches to help lay the foundations for an institutionalized form of remembrance in which ‘victims of the Germans’ and ‘German victims’ shared the centre stage. On the one hand, Adenauer orchestrated a reparations scheme with the state of Israel in the early 1950s, to make what he called ‘moral and material amends’ for the ‘unspeakable crimes [that] were committed in the name of the German people’ against Jews in Germany and in Nazi-occupied Europe (quoted in Moeller 1996, pp. 1015–1016; originally in Vogel 1967, p. 36). At the same time, Adenauer was the chief architect of a republic whose ‘social contract’ was based on basic principles such as ‘honouring the dead, bringing home the POWs and others unjustly held, and meeting the needs of all German victims of the war’ (Moeller 1996, pp. 1013–1014). At Adenauer’s behest, the West German government committed itself to a series of initiatives designed to ‘make good’ (Wiedergutmachung) in the form of compensation for other victims of Nazism, including expellees, POWs, and war widows, for example (see Ludtke 1993). Far from mere window-dressing, these social welfare schemes constituted institutionalized forms of remembrance with concrete social and political consequences. Specifically, these schemes helped lay the foundation for the post-Nazi democratic republic, and helped to bridge political differences between Adenauer’s government and the opposition Social Democrats. As Moeller (1996, p. 1016) observes:

Defining the just claims and rights to entitlement of some and the moral obligations of others was part of establishing the bases for social solidarity in West Germany. The Germany that committed crimes against others was an aberration; it was succeeded by a Germany that helped to ease German suffering. All major political parties could agree on the version of the legacy of National Socialism embodied in parliamentary discussions of the victims of the expulsion and the survivors of Soviet captivity; the suffering of these groups remained outside the realm of party-political wrangling. The deep divisions between Social Democrats and Adenauer’s government were at least momentarily bridged by a shared relationship to the last consequences of a common past.

Just as Italy’s postwar leaders could bridge their deep ideological differences by means of shared commitment to anti-Fascism and to a sharp disassociation with the image and legacy of Benito Mussolini, so too could West Germans overcome their recent history by means of selective remembrance in which German victims were as much a part of public memory as victims of the Germans. And just as in Italy, public memory in Germany after 1945 has been marked by a constant tension created by the need to balance collective accountability and responsibility with the positive evaluation of national identity.

14
Triangle of Death, Blood of the Vanquished

When the Cold War ended and Italy’s postwar political paradigm collapsed, further weakening the already diminished Catholic and Communist subcultures that underlay the political framework of the postwar era, the history and memory of Italy’s Fascist past was once again front-page news as political and social actors vied to redefine what was being called the Second Italian Republic. For some historians, the revival of old debates about the legacy of Fascism and anti-Fascism, and especially about the retributive violence witnessed against former Fascists after 1945, speak of a society uprooted from any concrete sense of its recent past. Richard Bosworth (1998, pp. 14–15) goes so far as to say that the Second Republic was (and is) ‘without history’. Clearly, this is saying too much, or perhaps not quite enough. After all, it is one thing to acknowledge and even criticize the bouts of revision of the mid-1990s, which challenged the so-called ‘Fascist/anti-Fascist antithesis’ that constituted one of the organizing principles of the postwar era. It is also understandable and acceptable for historians to want to assert in normative terms the morality of the Resistance, when certain forms of historical revisionism emerge to insist on the virtue of the Fascist cause (Ventresca 2006). But bouts of historical revisionism, as disturbing as some arguments may be, are not evidence of a polity ‘without history’. The more apt characterization is of an Italian Second Republic without a settled, authoritative and legitimizing history of the country’s Fascist past. On the contrary, one of the striking features of scholarly and public debate over the legacy and memory of Fascism is the extent to which history is called upon, invariably in selective, often distorted ways, to serve distinct political and ideological ends.

In a stimulating survey of the public uses of the past in contemporary Italy, Simone Neri Serni (1995, pp. 369–370) argues that much of the public debate over the legacy of Fascism and the Resistance was framed through Italy’s mass media, in particular print and television journalism. Certain elements of the broadcast and print journalism displayed a rather predictable propensity to dwell on what was sensational, shocking and controversial about Italy’s recent past, with little regard for any distortions created in the process. This pattern was unmistakable during public debate over the so-called triangolo della morte (triangle of death), which took place largely in the Italian press in 1989–90. The debate centred on episodes of retributive violence committed at the end of the Second World War, mainly by Communist partisans against former Fascists and Fascist sympathizers in the central and northern parts of Italy. The most controversial dimension of these public debates over the end of the war in Italy entailed a historical and moral–ethical assessment of Fascist versus partisan violence. Did a discussion of partisan retributive violence open the door to a kind of moral relativism with regard to contemporary judgments of Fascism and anti-Fascism? That was the question.

As in previous bouts of revisionism, Italian journalists latched onto the story of the triangolo della morte, making the sensational claim of new ‘revelations’ of a widespread campaign of retributive violence by Communist partisans in 1945. According to Neri Serneri, the public debate over the triangolo della morte served two clear purposes. For one, it served to question the Italian Communist Party’s role in the fight against Fascism, as a way to tarnish the party’s claims of being a
legitimate democratic alternative for Italian voters. At the same time, the revisionist
debate over the triangle of death was yet another way of spreading an alternative
version of the history of the Resistance, one in which the Resistance itself was
‘contaminated, if not dominated, by private and party acts of violence’. What is
more, the argument went, these private and party acts of violence were ‘no less
savage’ than those of the Fascists. In this alternative version of Italy’s recent past,
Neri Serni notes, ‘the Resistance had been, in fact, a bona fide civil war, where the
warring parties had each had their own interests, some culpable, others
praiseworthy’. It is not difficult to see how the kind of revisionism offered in
public debates about the triangle of death opened the door to normative conclusions
that the ‘divisions linked to such tragic and far-off crimes could no longer be
perpetuated’.

Evidence of the enduring relevance of partisan retributive violence in debates over
the legacy and memory of Fascism/anti-Fascism can be found in the controversy
violence against the ‘vanquished’—that is, defeated Fascist soldiers and Fascist
sympathizers after the Liberation in April 1945. Pansa’s critics charged that the book
was the latest instalment of a dangerous brand of revisionism that sought to
undermine the legacy of the Resistance as a way of undermining the hegemony
of anti-Fascism in postwar Italian politics and society. Others defended the book as an
honest and important look into a painful moment of the nation’s recent past. Indeed,
a good many of his critics reasoned that Pansa himself was not an apologist for the
Mussolini regime, or a neo-Fascist historical revisionist. At the same time, they
warned that Pansa had not done enough to avoid the danger of having his book
manipulated by those who were indeed eager to undermine the legacy and memory of
the Resistance and anti-Fascism (Coletti 2003–2004). Although it was acknowledged
that there was nothing particularly new or sensational about the story of partisan
violence at the war’s end—this was well known both at the time and in the histories
of the period—questions were raised about Pansa’s methods and sources, including
his reliance on statistics from the Italian Social Republic of the number of Fascists
killed at the hands of partisans after April 1945 (Dondi 2003–2004).15

Among ordinary Italians, debates about historiography and political ideology
were not nearly as compelling as the image of Mussolini, and even more so the
history and memory of his arrest, execution and the public exhibition of his body in
April 1945. Almost 50 years after those events, in March and April 1994, Italian state
television, the RAI, began airing a series entitled ‘Combat Film’ which featured
footage taken by American soldiers in Italy in the final weeks of the war. The most
jarring episode depicted the gruesome scene in Milan’s Piazzale Loreto where
Mussolini’s corpse, along with that of his mistress Clara Petacci and other Fascist
officials, were hanged upside-down for public viewing and later mutilated by angry
mobs of ordinary citizens. Although the historical record tells the details of this
macabre episode, few Italians, especially those born during or after the war, had ever
seen the images.

The public broadcast of ‘Combat Film’ in the mid-1990s sparked a new interest in
the historical figure of Mussolini, his execution, the war and Italy’s democratic
transition.16 The film coincided not only with the political and social changes that
accompanied the end of the Cold War; it was broadcast on the eve of the 50th anniversary of Mussolini’s execution. As we saw above, since the early 1980s, various schools of revisionism gained national and international attention in challenging previously held, hegemonic interpretations of the nature of Fascism, popular consensus under Fascism and the details of Mussolini’s summary execution. Not surprisingly, this work of revision contested what we have been describing as the ‘official’ version of the fatti di Dongo, the version offered by Walter Audisio and enshrined by the dominant intellectual establishment of the Italian Left. This contestation of the official version of the story came from two distinct sources. On the one hand, there were repeated controversial claims made by Renzo De Felice that Audisio’s version of Mussolini’s execution left some hefty questions unanswered. At the same time, there was a concerted campaign on the part of right-wing and neo-Fascist revisionists to question such fundamental elements of Audisio’s story as the who and the how of Mussolini’s execution. Contesting the official version of the fatti di Dongo, we shall see, entailed calling into question the role of the venerable war leader, Winston Churchill.

As the 50th anniversary of Mussolini’s execution approached, Renzo De Felice seemed to breathe new life and newfound academic credibility into a longstanding, but marginal conspiracy theory: that British intelligence agents, not Communist partisans, killed Mussolini. There was nothing new in such a theory. In the early 1980s, the historian Franco Bandini argued that the partisans who were said in the official version to have killed Mussolini—Audisio and Lampredi—actually lied to cover the identity of the real executioners, British agents who killed Il Duce to keep him from revealing his secret negotiations with Churchill (Phillips 1995). The story goes that Churchill had promised Mussolini major territorial concessions back in 1940—including sovereignty over Dalmatia and the Dodecanese islands—to keep Mussolini out of the war. The correspondence between the two men, widely referred to as the ‘carte segrete’ or the ‘secret letters’ of Churchill–Mussolini, was reported to have been in Mussolini’s possession when he was arrested and executed in April 1945. The file disappeared within days of the execution, never to be found again, despite sensational and spurious claims to the contrary.17

While Renzo De Felice was making waves in the mid-1990s by asking uncomfortable questions about unsubstantiated claims, Italian newspapers and magazines carried a number of stories that revisited the fatti di Dongo on the eve of the anniversary of Mussolini’s death. The popular Italian magazine Oggi, for example, carried interviews with Mussolini’s sons, Vittorio and Romano. So it was that Italians could read, in the pages of an established magazine, Vittorio Mussolini’s long-held belief that his father was killed while struggling with one of the partisans who had tried to rape Clara Petacci. In the pages of the same magazine, Romano Mussolini, the father of Alessandra, ventured his hypothesis—backed by medical science, he claimed—that Il Duce was not shot to death, but rather beaten.18

Still another reputable magazine, Panorama, used the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Mussolini’s execution to carry an interview with Urbano Lazzaro, the man who arrested Mussolini and Petacci on 27 April 1945. Lazzaro maintained that Mussolini and his mistress were shot ‘by accident’ and that the man to pull the trigger, albeit inadvertently, was the partisan fighter Alfredo Mordini. Lazzaro did not actually witness the shooting. Still, he felt confident enough to offer his version
of events, in which Petacci tried to warn Mussolini and grab the sub-machinegun away from Mordini. When Il Duce jumped out of the car in response to Petacci’s cries of warning, he was fatally shot. Petacci was next. According to Urbano Lazzaro, the partisan credited for 50 years by ‘official Communist party history’ with having killed Il Duce in reality ‘played no direct part’ (Phillips 1995, pp. 68–118).\(^{19}\)

Contesting the ‘official Communist party history’ of the fatti di Dongo inevitably meant challenging Walter Audisio’s version of events, but it also entailed finding alternative explanations, alternative ‘myths’ if need be, with concomitant symbolic value. For example, the Panorama report (see Phillips 1995), challenging Walter Audisio and by extension the official version of the fatti di Dongo, was accompanied by the exploration of the myth—or theory, hypothesis—that the real authors of Mussolini’s execution were not Communist partisans, even less the Italian people, but rather British agents acting on orders from Churchill’s government. According to Panorama the secret Churchill–Mussolini correspondence—part of two cases of documents reportedly seized from Mussolini when he was arrested—was taken to the Dongo town hall and then moved to an inn called the Albergo Bazzoni, in the town of Termezzo, near Como. Presumably, the move was intended to safeguard this vital documentation so that it could be used at any eventual trial of Mussolini and other Fascists for war crimes. According to one theory, when Mussolini was first arrested, the British agreed with the American view that Mussolini ought to be kept alive and tried for war crimes. The alleged existence of this secret correspondence, Panorama suggested, was reason enough for British intelligence to change its mind. ‘Was it by chance’, the magazine asked, ‘that the Albergo Bazzoni was bombed by two RAF airplanes on April 30, leaving dozens of dead and wounded?’ The discovery of the secret correspondence in Mussolini’s hands, Panorama concluded, ‘justifies more than a little doubt over British motives’ (Phillips 1995).

Of course, reports about the secret Churchill–Mussolini correspondence have been circulating since April 1945, although allegations that the British masterminded Mussolini’s execution in order to protect Churchill’s reputation are more recent. Why, then, did De Felice’s foray into the debate in the mid-1990s spark such a reaction from scholars and from the Italian press? No doubt, the end of the Cold War and the concomitant end of the Italian Left’s hegemony over Italy’s intellectual and cultural life played some part (Stille 1999).\(^{20}\) De Felice’s caustic style and rhetorical flourishes did not help things much either. Nowhere was this more evident than in the publication of the very controversial Rosso e Nero, which consisted not of the exhaustive research for which De Felice was famous, but rather was the published version of an extended interview with an Italian journalist. It was this book, more than De Felice’s biography of Mussolini, that sparked howls of protest. The reaction was in large measure over what was interpreted to be De Felice’s support for the theory that British intelligence agents executed Mussolini. For some foreign observers, the reaction of the ‘Italian intellectual establishment’ was immediate, if less than consistent or even balanced. Writing for The Independent (London), Andrew Gumbel (1995) noted that Italian intellectuals and scholars reacted to Rosso e Nero with a ‘mixture of stupor and skepticism’ about reputed claims of evidence to support the old theories of a British role in Mussolini’s execution. That such claims seemed to come from De Felice, rather than neo-Fascist cranks, compelled the intelligentsia to respond, and fast. ‘Newspaper after
newspaper’, Gumbel wrote, ‘have run replies to the professor, analyzing the archives and recalling eyewitness testimony’.

The immediate reaction to the book’s publication speaks volumes about the delicate and highly contested nature of memory in contemporary Italy. That such revisionism was surfacing and finding new and credible allies at a time of political and social change, when the neo-Fascist political parties were emerging as a bona fide force in Italian politics, helps to account for at least some of the response. And yet, what is truly remarkable—what Andrew Gumbel (1995) calls the ‘real surprise’ of the story—is that a closer reading of *Rosso e Nero* suggests that the reaction to De Felice was somewhat off the mark. Nowhere does De Felice claim that the British were the ones to execute Mussolini; nor does De Felice suggest that Churchill tried to have evidence of secret negotiations with Mussolini destroyed. Gumbel explains that ‘virtually none of the elements of the conspiracy theory’ can be found in the book. ‘Yes, Professor De Felice suggests that the British had reasons to see Mussolini killed’, Gumbel notes, ‘but he says the secret services did little more than egg on the partisans, and certainly were not involved in the shooting themselves’. Similarly, De Felice believed that a volume of the Churchill–Mussolini secret letters did exist at some point, but that it was probably of very little value, and certainly contained nothing that could alter the course of history or our interpretation of one of the great statesmen of our time.

It would appear, then, that this particular instalment of the ongoing contestation of the memory of Fascism’s end was indeed much ado about nothing. Even so, the controversy over alleged new theories about the *fatti di Dongo* was about something: the perennial negotiation of a collective memory of Mussolini and of Fascism by successive generations of Italians who cannot escape the enduring political legacy of Fascism. As Gumbel notes, the De Felice controversy assumed the ‘dimensions of a farce…One can perhaps conclude that the whole episode illustrates Italy’s melodramatic fascination with one of the most traumatic moments in its recent history’ (Gumbel 1995).

To speak of Italy’s ‘melodramatic fascination’ with the defining moments of Italy’s recent history is to invite further reflection on the complex interplay between the history and memory of Mussolini’s execution. It is also to invite further exploration of the connections between how the past is remembered, and the lived experience of contemporary society. As stated at the outset, our analysis of the complex interplay between the history and memory of Mussolini’s execution is an admittedly narrow example in what can best be described as political memory or ideology, rather than collective memory. The much broader and ultimately more important project of writing what Alon Confino (1997) might call an ‘everyday history of memory’ in postwar Italy is in the very early stages. Indeed, Italian historiography awaits a comprehensive study of postwar memory that looks at the construction, transmission and reception of memory as an interrelated whole. For the most part, historians of postwar Italian memory have limited themselves—and I am guilty of the same above—to a rather confined conception of memory as created ‘from above’. In this sense, Italian historiography has tended to mimic that of memory in postwar France. In assessing the legacy of the Vichy regime, for example, French historians have tended to reduce their analyses of memory to politics, and to political use and/or abuse of the past. The net effect has been to conflate collective memory and political
memory, thereby ignoring what Alon Confino (1997, p. 1394) describes as the ‘construction of popular memories of Vichy and their links to the everyday level of experience’. Put simply, to conflate collective memory and political memory is to ignore the critical question of how and why certain constructions of the past—for example, what Henry Rousso calls the Vichy syndrome or what we have been referring to as the *fatti di Dongo*—are received, accepted, rejected, and reworked at the level of people’s everyday experiences.21

**Conclusion**

While some work has been done to measure how the history and memory of Mussolini and Fascism has been received by ordinary Italians—one thinks here of Luisa Passerini’s interviews with Turin workers—the history of the construction of popular memories of Mussolini’s execution and the end of the war has yet to be written. This is due, in part, to the bifurcation of postwar Italian memory. As many observers are fond of putting it, there are two collective memories of the history of 1943–45: there is the memory of 1943–45 as the heroic period of *la Resistenza*, the Resistance as a second Risorgimento, versus the memory of 1943–45 as a ‘civil war’, or even as ‘*la morte della patria*’, the death of the fatherland.22 Until recently, these two collective memories did not bother to engage one another—not in public debate, not in historiography. It was as if, according to Mario Isnenghi (1994), the one did not exist in the eyes of the other, and vice versa.23

Surely, ongoing debates over such questions as the legacy of Mussolini or of Fascism, and of the proper place of the anti-Fascist paradigm in Italian public life challenge commonplace assertions that the Italians have failed to reckon with their past. On the contrary, from the fall of Mussolini onward, Italians have been grappling with the lingering effects of the Duce’s presence in history, arguably more so than in other former Axis countries. The challenge for the present generation, and for the future, is to ensure that an honest and open reckoning with Italy’s Fascist past does not obscure the very real and ever-present need to keep Mussolini’s ghost and the spirit of Fascism from becoming anything more than objects of memory.

**Notes**

[1] For a brief overview of the role anti-Fascism played in Italy’s democratic transition after 1945, see De Luna & Revelli (1995).

[2] On the controversial exhibition on Fascist economics, which was organized with the guidance of Renzo De Felice, see Mason (1986).


[5] See Collotti (2001, pp. 9–10), an introduction to a recent study of concentration camps in Italy. In recent years, Italianists have turned to document and analyse the full extent of Italian occupation practices during the war. See, most notably, Rogogno (2003) and Walston (1997).


[7] Mason (1986, p. 31) notes, for example, that the 1984 exhibition made much of the trade links between Fascist Italy and Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, while saying virtually nothing about
the far more extensive and important commercial links between Italy and the western powers. For Mason:

the material on Russia had a curiosity value; above all it made an underhanded political point for today... the exhibition must end up by confusing the trivial with the vital, the contingent with the historically necessary, the passing fashion with structural development, the self-image of historical actors with the real meaning of their actions.


[8] The debate begun by De Felice has been summarized in a useful survey by Jacobelli (1988).

[9] Bosworth maintains that the bout of historical revisionism associated with Renzo De Felice’s very public comments on the history of Fascism and its legacy for Italy and for Europe was integral to this political ‘revision’ of the Fascist–anti-Fascist antithesis. An example was De Felice’s role as consultant to the 1984 exhibition The Italian Economy between the Wars, 1919–1939, held in Rome’s Colosseum from 22 September to 18 November. For a fascinating account of the exhibition, which was considered a major popular success, see Mason (1986). For a concise, if somewhat thin, summary of De Felice’s place in the historiography of Italian Fascism, see Painter (1990).

[10] The debate begun by De Felice has been summarized in a useful survey by Jacobelli (1988).


[13] For a useful general survey of relations between West Germany and Israel, see Feldman (1984), especially pp. 32–86.


References


