Viva il Duce: The Memory of Benito Mussolini

Michael Angaran

Before his death, my grandfather would often praise his two favourite historical actors; Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Italy’s Fascist leader Benito Mussolini.¹ How powerful was the memory of a man that decades after his death, an Italian-Canadian immigrant who left Italy in 1958 still held him in such high regard. The cult of Benito Mussolini is an institutionalized phenomenon of the twentieth century in which no other nation, or leader could replicate. When British Prime Minister Sir. Winston Churchill proclaimed that history is written by the victor, he was presumably speaking of historical actors – such as United States President John F. Kennedy, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and Trudeau – who have been remembered by their fellow countrymen well after their deaths because they are victors. Seldom do the losers of history, like Mussolini, have such a renowned memory. Yet, Italians worldwide continue to hail Il Duce as a saviour, thinking of him as “…the greatest statesman of Italy,”² or speak of him as immortal, and often await his return as Christians await Jesus.³ For many Italians, Mussolini’s fascist ideologies are still alive within the nation — as one pilgrim to Mussolini’s crypt in 2010 wrote, “Men die, but ideas not! Viva il Duce.”⁴

The ambiguities of Italy’s fascist past are indicative of a larger public outcry for the return of their fallen leader. Yet, this could not be possible without a hegemonic memory of Mussolini within Italian society. Although the Second World War was damaging to the political and social structures in Italy, the legacy of Benito Mussolini and fascism has persisted. The resurgence of the Duce is a result of a powerful and positive public memory amongst Italians and resistance by anti-fascists in the immediate postwar period. Both factors suggest that Mussolini’s totalitarian regime was far stronger than many perceive. This paper will investigate why Italians remember Mussolini so clearly by examining Italian public memory and oral histories.

The historiography on Benito Mussolini is quite conflicting. An image of Mussolini as a mere buffoon or as a promiscuous, arrogant, cruel and incompetent leader has been the subject of early historical literature on the Duce.⁵ These images arose out of the immediate post-war world and must be seen in this context. Mussolini historian R. J. B Bosworth suggests that this critical analysis of Mussolini and Italy’s fascist past is a result of an “Anglo-Saxon racial prejudice towards lesser breeds outside the law and especially to southerners, Mediterraneans,” and to those still referred to as “Eucalitians.”⁶ This historiographical view of Fascist Italy is glorified by English historian A. J. P Taylor who argues that,

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.⁷

To condemn Mussolini as a corrupt, fraudulent, blundering man without aim is damaging to history. Mussolini achieved many things for Italians which they may not have received without him. In an interview, a 93 year old Italian-Canadian immigrant, Carmela, mentioned that when Mussolini first came to power, he awoke citizens and provided pensions, unemployment insurance, child benefits, made schools in poor communities – especially in the south where she was born – and looked to reduce the power of the mafia, the King, and landowners who kept citizens oppressed.⁸ To scorn Mussolini’s image as Taylor does and insinuate a lack of legitimacy to his reign is ignorant to Mussolini’s own goals,
My objective is simple; I want to make Italy great, respected, and feared; I want to render my nation worthy of her noble and ancient traditions. I want to accelerate her evolution toward the highest forms of national co-operation. I want to make a greater prosperity forever possible for the whole people.9

Contrary to Taylor’s analysis, Mussolini was guided in his action. Taylor’s argument is evident of the Western bias which condemns undemocratic institutions like Fascism. If this is not the memory of Mussolini to Italians, where is the silver lining?

Italian historian Renzo De Felice took the opposite approach to Taylor and glorified the Duce. In his biography, De Felice gave more credit than some thought should be given to Mussolini,10 and many contemporaries questioned his impartialness.11 Many see De Felice’s work as containing “remarkable omissions of sources and of interpretively inconvenient facts or areas of the regime.”12 Other historians argue that by De Felice not apologizing for Mussolini or Fascism, he fails to write the truth which devalues his work to Mussolini historiography.13 However, De Felice may not offer an apology for this period in Italian history because to him being an anti-socialist Italian, perhaps Mussolini and Fascism was good for Italy. Perhaps he glorifies Fascism as a what could have been if Mussolini was able to retain power – as mentioned in the written testimonies at his Crypt.14 This paper does not wish to suggest that Mussolini was inherently good, however, condemning his name is problematic. These conflicting paradigms in Mussolini historiography serve to establish his public memory.

Memory is the way people construct and come to terms with the past, and is established on two fronts; first by survivors of a time period, and second by a shared representation of the past through commemorations, literature, and popular culture.15 Thus, attempting to display, critique, and understand public memory is extremely difficult without context. Memory is everywhere as society, “constructs a sense of the past from the most mundane, everyday-life objects… but, then, not everything is a memory case in the same way.”16 Often, memories can be extremely useful to historians, especially on topics like Mussolini. But, they are only valuable when they are linked to historical questions.17 As it is argued, “… perhaps the final task of the history of memory is to historicize memory,”18 and once done, a better understanding of historical events is brought which allows society to make sense of their past. Academic literature from the West and from Italy – as has been illustrated – is far too polarized in their approaches by merely condemning or glorifying Mussolini rather than contextualize his actions and memory.

This paper questions what the public memory of the Duce and Fascism in Italy’s social, political, and cultural histories suggests about the power of his totalitarian regime. In order to achieve this end, particular memories will be utilized as it is not always about how memories are represented, but why certain ones are kept or rejected.19 The memory of a particular event from the past is indicative to how society currently views their history, which is extremely hegemonic and may allude to the struggle of representation for certain social groups or to the resistance of political movements. Both cases are apparent in Italian public memory of Fascism and the Duce.

According to Italian public discourse, Mussolini was the embodiment of the Italian nation and reflected class and gender struggles.20 The plight of the poor has been used since Mussolini’s death to maintain a memory of benevolence on part of the fascist leader. During the economic stagnation of the 1930s, Mussolini increased national welfare for women and families needing assistance by 20 percent – from 1.5 billion to 6.7 billion lire.21 Public work programs increased and the establishment of the Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale in 1933 allowed for the economic survival of steelworks, shipyards, electricity facilities, telephone systems, and other vital infrastructure.22 What resulted from these actions
was a rhetoric in which the Duce was able to protect his people and mitigate the effect of the Great Depression on them in a benevolent manner.

Letters written to the Duce mirrored this thought with statements such as, “Excellency, I place myself in your humanitarian hands...” or “Duce, I venerate you as the Saints should be venerated...” or “Supreme benefactor of the working people”, with aid being provided in the name of the Duce. Between May 1936 and January 1937, 56 million lire was spent to support the building of schools, roads, houses and churches, as well as, to provide food assistance, household goods like sewing machines, or anything else that citizens needed. A statement written by a collective group of citizens near Assisi in 1938 thanked Mussolini’s generosity,

You who know how much we have suffered for lack of water can understand our uncontainable joy and infinite gratitude. We used to feel truly forgotten by everyone... You, DUCE, though beset by the most pressing work, have seen and have thought even of us. Citizens across Italy and especially in the south who were central to this goodwill became “...ever more sympathetic to the Duce and ever less so to Fascism,” and thus, have established a biased lived memory. This trend indicates that more Italians were buying into his leadership and totalitarian regime as a personal entity rather than supporting fascist ideology. Mass emigration of citizens following the war, particularly from areas affected by the Duce’s aid has led to the establishment of strong Italian immigrant communities across the world who nurture this pro-Mussolini memory. In all, the oppression of the poor was noticed and supported by Mussolini which is a reason for his intimate memory amongst Italians.

Another social group which served as a conduit for Mussolini’s memory is women. In 1932, an eighteen-year-old student Maria Teresa Rossetti became so captivated by Mussolini, she stated, “The whole of Italy appeared to me to be stretching out in its blue sea under its golden sun, with thousands of strong smiling children...as the clear and incisive words of the Duce greeted them and gave them words of encouragement.” As Maria suggests, the image of Mussolini as a saviour was not lost throughout the nation. Prior to war on 30 August 1939, a seventeen-year-old Tuscan schoolgirl Atie Gracci wrote, “O Duce, Duce of our life, commander of an entire people, everyone places their love in you, everyone hopes in you, and if you do not succeed in securing peace, your people will still be faithful to you; and we will admire every aspect of you just the same.” The pervasiveness of Mussolini’s image in Italian society, especially among women, has created a specific memory of the man. The fascist party conveyed a psychological image of closeness between Mussolini and his people in order to legitimize the power of his totalitarian regime. Coincidentally, it led to an innumerable amount of women desiring sexual contact with the Duce. A Bologna housewife alone sent 848 letters to the Duce over a six year span to profess her love. In one particular letter, she states,

My great lord and beautiful Duce. I have done nothing but trouble you, but you have always been generous in supporting me, because you have experienced the love that I have felt for you and still feel, and I will always love you. And you too have loved me, and your love has felt so sweet and beautiful that my heart will never forget. I feel your love strongly, and this gives me the strength to remain yours and wait.

It is unclear whether or not she and Mussolini consummated their love, although historians suggest that they may have met once at a Cattolica resort where the Duce spent his summer holidays. Yet, the lure
of Mussolini to this married woman – and other Italian women – cannot be overlooked and suggests that his memory is tied to this. In the same passage, she closes, “So many kisses and caresses I would give my dear Benito. I would embrace him so he could not escape!”

In Mussolini’s hometown of Predappio near Bologna, there were schools, theatres, football pitches, and overall, the people in Predappio had “all things that people from other places did not have.” In fact, life was extraordinary for the young women of his hometown, “Every memory is beautiful when you are twenty years old! Forget about politics. We were young women with jobs, and every time we went out people would say: ‘Ah, you are from Predappio!’” It is possible that the memory of the Duce in Predappio may be skewed based on its importance, but from these examples, the lives of young women in his hometown and across Italy were exceptional. The public memory of the Duce that persisted for generations amongst poor Italians, youth, and women suggests the overall success of his totalitarian regime by supporting these typical oppressed groups. It is important to note, however, that in Predappio the memory of Mussolini is a “relationship of love and hatred,” suggesting that not everybody’s lives were good and that not everyone was as captivated as others were.

In the case of Predappio, the public memory of Mussolini has overwhelmed anti-fascists for decades. Since his death in 1945, public discourse in the town shifted as socialists attempted to destroy his name by presenting Mussolini as “crazy, violent, and a traitor.” In Italy more broadly, resistance leaders used the image of Mussolini as a sick dog or as subhuman to dispossess his myth and give legitimacy to the anti-fascist movement. In post-war Italy, anti-fascists used his capture, death, and public hanging as a means to dehumanize him and to teach Italians about the ills of fascism, as well as, to make anti-fascism a shared moral virtue. The strength of the Italian Communist Party enhanced anti-fascist discourse following the war and attempted to coercively change society’s memory of the Duce. However, for many Italians, fascism served as a pragmatic government, an “anti-ideological ideology” that focused on fact rather than theory, something socialism was not. In this, Mussolini recognized the issues in Italian society and through fascism, addressed them, which resulted in a particular aesthetic of fascism for Italians. According to a message left at his crypt in 2012, the political scene in Italy is dire due to the friction between the left and right and a strong, Mussolini-like leader is needed again for Italy.

Ciao Benito, I have returned … I am here to cry out against these thieves who are killing our Italy … if, and by what means we can get out of this chaos, I don’t know … I can only say that once again it was your idea that was the best, and I so much hope that we can return if not exactly to how it was before at least to something approaching it … we need a great leader, honest and effective.

Long-time Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi discussed the importance of Mussolini’s death to modern Italy and politics in a newspaper article written after his 1994 election, “April 25 [anniversary Mussolini’s death] in not a chance for revenge for the left or an annoying hiccup for the moderate coalition; it is, on the contrary, the symbolic date of a new beginning, a new phase of the republic… [it can] now be recovered and re-launched.” How it was to be relaunched was based on the citizenry. In Predappio, it is relaunched every year on his birthdate and on the anniversary of the March on Rome with celebrations, cumulating in a wooden cross being laid in front of his tomb. Those who celebrate are old and young, male and female, and of mixed political parties. It was celebrated by those who await his return and pilgrimage to his crypt avidly. Berlusconi – an avid supporter of Mussolini – argues that there is validity to Italy’s fascist past that cannot be forgotten, suggesting that fascism “was a democracy in a minor way.” The aesthetic that fascism still has for many Italians speaks to the power of the totalitarian state – defined by Mussolini as, “Everything in the state, nothing outside the state,
nothing against the state.\textsuperscript{45} One cannot separate fascism from Mussolini regardless of the actions of the left following the war and the fact that the Duce is still synonymous with Italy suggests that the rejuvenation of Italian public memory on these two topics has already occurred. As put by Mussolini, “no one can tear out these great pages from Italian history,”\textsuperscript{46} or from the collective memory of Italians.

Italian historian Luisa Passerini suggests that Mussolini is Italy. His story, his successes and failures, his background, his ambitions and fate is reflective of Italians and the country itself.\textsuperscript{47} Empirically this is true. The memory of Mussolini, as a collective memory, is interwoven with public narratives of being Italian.\textsuperscript{48} As argued in this paper, memory is not fixed, but is fluid and shaped by events, time, personal experiences, and resistance. Historians argue that fascism could not survive in Italy at any other period of history,\textsuperscript{49} but for reasons listed, the memory still does today. In the grand scheme of history, the legacy of Mussolini is superficial,\textsuperscript{50} but to Italians it is legitimate. In Italy, there are souvenirs, books, posters, magazines, and calendars to commemorate the Duce as the cult of Mussolini has established a market for these items. So, is fascism dead in Italy? As explored in this paper, the power that Mussolini’s totalitarian state has on contemporary Italy suggests otherwise. However, perhaps not enough time has passed to critically analyze Mussolini, as he put it, “History is a sequence of eternal returns. The phases in the lives of nations are measured in terms of decades. Sometimes of centuries,”\textsuperscript{51} but for Italians, mere decades have brought a memory of good character, benevolence, and leadership to their fallen Duce.

Notes

1 My grandfather immigrated to Canada from Italy in 1958 and he often stated phrases similar to this.
3 See Duggan, 2013: 431-435. These testimonies at his crypt glorify Mussolini as a Christ-like saviour.
4 Duggan, Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy, 434.
6 Ibid., 2.
10 Bosworth, Mussolini, 424.
11 Ventresca, “Debating the Meaning of Fascism in Contemporary Italy,” 194.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 See Duggan, Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy, 431-435.
16 Ibid., 1387-8.
17 Ibid., 1388.
18 Ibid., 1403.
19 Ibid., 1390.
20 Bosworth, Mussolini, 35.
21 Duggan, Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy, 239.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 241- 42.
24 Ibid., 242- 43.
25 Ibid., 243- 44.
26 Ibid., 232. Memory from a Naples man’s diary.
27 Bosworth, Mussolini, 422. The memory of Carmela and my grandfather is indicative of this. She came from Calabria, a poor region of the south while my grandfather came from a poor family in the north. It is important to note, however, that both of these memories are 60 years or more old.
28 Duggan, Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy, 206.
29 Ibid., 229. This entry in her diary continues by outlining Mussolini’s sexual appeal.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 217.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Sofia Serenelli, “It was like something that you have at home which becomes so familiar that you don’t even pay attention to it”: Memories of Mussolini and Fascism in Predappio, 1922–2010,” Modern Italy 18, no. 2 (2013): 163. This is an oral memory from Piersante, born 1930.
36 Ibid., 159. Oral memory again from Piersante.
37 Serenelli, “It was like something that you have at home,” 160. Coercive in this case means forced onto citizens.
39 Ibid., 96-97. This is mirrored in the pro-West literature of Taylor (1964) as mentioned earlier in the paper.
41 Duggan, Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy, 434-35.
42 Silvio Berlusconi, “25 Aprile, festa per tutti….” La Repubblica (April 17, 1994).
43 Serenelli, 168. His 100th birth in 1983 was also celebrated in Predippo and across Italy.
44 Duggan, Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy, 428.
45 Cited in the preface to Mussolini, My Rise and Fall. Vol. .2, My Fall, 53. He is known as the first to coin the term.
47 Vetrascia, “Mussolini’s Ghost: Italy’s Duce in History and Memory,” 90.
48 Serenelli, “It was like something that you have at home,” 158.
49 Ibid., 426.
50 Ibid., 428. According to many academics and historiography.
51 Mussolini, My Rise and Fall, Vol. .2, My Fall, 199. It is interesting that many Italians who hold Mussolini in high regard merely disagree with one aspect of his reign; the war effort. Many see that was his downfall and suggest that if he never allied with Nazism or focused on the war, he would have kept his power.