https://doi.org/10.31871/WJRR.20.5.16
World Journal of Research and Review (WJRR)
ISSN:2455-3956, Volume-20, Issue-5, May 2025 Pages 20-28

The Challenges of Public History: The Case of the "Italian Ideological Chernobyl"

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Abstract— **This article analyses the tensions between contrasting narratives in Public History, focusing on debates surrounding the perception of the history of fascism in Italy, using as a case study the proposals for the creation of a museum of fascism in Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace. Public History refers to the process of communicating history, based on its academic study, to a wider audience, often outside academic contexts and, in this and many other cases, it clashes with an already 'public' communication: the contours of fascism can be disseminated through distorted, minimised or even invented narratives and certainly through politicisation.**

This phenomenon represents an urgent challenge for Italian historical memory and also involves opposing political ideologies. The case of Predappio mixes past and present and has been described by its mayor as 'Italian Chernobyl [historical and ideological]', dividing the country along the fault lines of many historical and political divisions: between fascists, post-fascists, anti-anti-fascists, anti-fascists and a-fascists (i.e. those who are not interested in opening a serious dialogue on the Italian 20th century) and reopens a 'wound that has never healed' in the country's history

The article begins by providing an overview of the origins and evolution of the debate on the memory of authoritarian regimes.

Index Terms— **Fascism; Museum; Mussolini; Public History**

I. Introduction

This article analyzes the tensions between conflicting narratives in Public History, focusing on debates surrounding the perception of Italy's history of fascism, using the example of proposals for a museum of fascism in Predappio, Italy, as a case study. Public History refers to the process of communicating history—bassed on the academic study of this—to wider audiences, often outside of academic settings; it is therefore different to traditional academic history by targeting a broad, non-specialist audience.

The article begins by providing an overview of the origins and evolution of the debate on the memory of authoritarian regimes.

II. Origins and Evolution of the Debate

The academic debate on the memory of authoritarian regimes is so vast that one can only recall that it began after World War II, initially focusing on the analysis of totalitarianism and its manifestations in the 20th century.

In the 1950s, Hannah Arendt (1951) published The Origins of Totalitarianism, a foundational work that examined Nazism and Stalinism as examples of totalitarian regimes. This analysis provided a theoretical basis for understanding the oppressive dynamics of such political systems.

During the same period, Theodor Adorno and other scholars (1950) published The Authoritarian Personality, exploring the psychological traits that predispose individuals to accept authority and conformism, helping explain adherence to authoritarian regimes.

In the following years, while the debate on Nazism remained closely tied to a sense of repentance for the Nazi era (and its horrors), in Italy, Renzo De Felice (1975)—considered the leading historian of fascism—defined fascism as an "authoritarian regime", focusing primarily on the elites and the constitutional structure.

Meanwhile, in the 1980s in Germany, the Historikerstreit (1986–1987) emerged—a heated debate among historians on the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust (Sandford 2013). Ernst Nolte proposed comparing Nazi and Stalinist crimes, raising concerns about a possible relativization of the Holocaust (Nolte, 1987). Jürgen Habermas and others criticized this position, emphasizing the importance of preserving the memory of Nazi atrocities (Wiggershaus 1992).

In Italy, the debate on the memory of fascism began to face challenges related to trivialization and collective denial. In the postwar period, there was already a tendency to minimize the responsibilities of the fascist regime, often blaming wartime errors (the sole catalyst for public discontent) solely on the German occupation. This influenced the construction of public memory and the perception of Italy's authoritarian past (Focardi 2013).

Fascism is a complex political phenomenon that defined an era and left indelible marks on the political and social dynamics of the 20th century. Emerging as a response to the political, economic, and social crises between the two world wars, it found its fullest expression in Benito Mussolini's regime. Based on principles of totalitarianism (as demonstrated by De Felice's student Emilio Gentile (De Felice 1975; Gentile 1995)), extreme nationalism, and autarky, fascism promoted the idea of a strong, centralized state in which sovereignty was exercised by a charismatic leader embodying the nation's will. Its ideology was characterized by a rejection of liberal democracy—seen as an obstacle to order and national identity—and a strong aversion to leftist ideologies, particularly socialism and communism. Fascism was also marked by the use of political violence and the militarization of society—tools that enabled coercion through intimidation, censorship, and the repression of opposition. However, this was not its only method: many Italians were genuinely "fascist" in the hope of improving

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their living conditions and giving purpose to their "nation", which was still very young (1861–1871).

In opposition to this authoritarian and exclusive vision, the anti-fascist movement emerged, standing as a bastion in defense of democracy, human rights, and individual freedom. Although anti-fascism took many forms and nuances, it was driven by a shared will to oppose not only fascism as a political system but also its methods of domination and political violence (Collotti 1999). In Italy, anti-fascism was especially realized at the end of the regime, during the Resistance: a movement that united various political forces, from the left to liberalism, in a struggle also against the occupation. Anti-fascism was thus a transversal movement that, despite the variety of its components, shared a commitment to restoring freedom and opposing all forms of authoritarianism. Nonetheless, anti-fascism itself was not free from internal tensions: different social and political groups, though united against the regime (which was nearing its end), had divergent visions of how to build a postwar society, leading to debates on issues such as social justice, the role of the state, and political participation. For this reason, for decades, it was decided not to speak openly about civil war among Italians during the transition from the end of fascism to the establishment of the new republican institutions (Pavone 1991).

A. Post-Fascism and Anti-Antifascism

In the context of republican Italy, it is necessary to mention a third ideological position that defined itself as post-fascism (or neo-fascism), which emerged in the 1970s. However, the ideological roots of fascism were never completely eradicated. Some political movements, while rejecting classic fascism with its most violent and authoritarian traits, have continued to maintain defining features of that political vision. Post-fascism has been characterized by a resurgence of nationalism, the preservation of a strong national identity, and hostility toward left-wing forces. It has tried to adapt to new political contexts, seeking legitimacy within Western democracies (Orsina 2023; Traverso 2023).

Post-fascist movements, such as those in Italy or France, have attempted to incorporate elements of modernization and respect for parliamentary democracy. Still, they have continued to pursue goals of cultural and political exclusivity, often fueling fears—particularly around immigration—and promoting authoritarian economic policies, especially in reaction to the Italian left's earlier support for European socialism "independent" from Moscow (Eurocommunism 1976). The main challenge of post-fascism lies in its attempt to maintain a discourse consistent with fascist principles while avoiding a relapse into the violent and coercive practices of the past (Ignazi 1989).

In response to these movements, a stance emerged in some circles that can be described as anti-antifascism—a perspective that criticizes antifascist rhetoric and views it as a form of ideological repression. Anti-antifascists argue that radical antifascism has become a form of intolerance against anyone who does not align with leftist politics or democratic values. They believe that antifascist movements, although born as a reaction to authoritarian regimes, have themselves become instruments of repression against "non-conformist" ideas, often labeling anyone with right-wing or conservative views as fascist (Fiori 2023).

This school of thought is rooted in the belief that freedom of expression and political pluralism are absolute values. It warns against the danger of ideological homogenization, which, according to them, would undermine the very foundations of a democratic society. In some cases, anti-antifascism results in a sort of critical revival of fascism, without accepting its violent methods, driven by the conviction that excessively radical opposition to fascism risks turning into a form of cultural dictatorship (Ignazi 1989).

The relationship between fascism, antifascism, post-fascism, and anti-antifascism reveals the complexity of the ideological dynamics that shaped the 20th century and continue to influence contemporary political discourse, especially in Italy (Gentile 1995). While fascism represents a form of totalitarianism that aimed to establish a hierarchical and racist order (though public opinion is not unanimous on this point), antifascism played a fundamental role in resisting this order, defending values of freedom and equality. However, postwar political transformations, with the emergence of movements that sought to preserve traces of that ideology, gave rise to post-fascist forms that, while adapting to democratic structures, never completely abandoned their authoritarian and nationalist roots (Broder 2022; Gozzini 2023).

III. Public Memory in Italy and the Case of Predappio

This debate has recently become widespread among the public and citizens—exemplified by historian and popularizer Alessandro Barbero, who in 2021 attracted massive public attention (with numbers usually reserved for music bands) during a presentation aimed at high school students for the television series M—The Son of the Century, based on Antonio Scurati's bestselling novel [Scurati, 2018).This widely successful event reflects a contemporary historical moment that is beginning to grapple with the repercussions of how fascist history is remembered in postwar Italy, particularly the trivialization of that history.

The expression "Italians are good people" (italiani brava gente), which emerged in the cultural and political context of the postwar period, encapsulates a process of memory revision that seeks to minimize or justify Italy's historical responsibilities during the fascist era and its colonial atrocities (Del Boca 2005). This expression has been used to paint Italy as a nation that, while it experienced fascism, did not commit war crimes as grave as those of other colonial powers like Germany or Britain. Such simplification has distanced the country from a critical awareness of its own culpability—especially regarding its attempts to build an empire through wars in Ethiopia, Libya, and Somalia (as well as Albania).

This process of trivialization has been a hallmark of Italy's collective memory since the postwar period, enabled by mechanisms of denial or minimization of Italian responsibility for these colonial atrocities.

A significant example of this trivialization of fascism is the work of renowned writer Giovannino Guareschi (1908–1968), particularly his Don Camillo series and the

publication of the satirical magazine Candido. Guareschi, known for his conservative views and sympathy toward fascism, played a crucial role in constructing a more "acceptable" narrative of the fascist past for later generations—one that portrayed fascist Italy as less frightening and culpable than it actually was. His literary work, especially his satire, fits into a context that promotes the image of Italians as "good people", projecting an essentially benevolent view of Italy's history. (Conti 2008).

The newspaper Candido, for instance, reduced fascism to a sort of tragicomic misunderstanding, depicting the dictatorship's evils superficially and often humorously—as the result of misunderstood good intentions. Through his humorous and detached style, Guareschi glorified a simplistic view of fascism, avoiding the political and moral implications of its atrocities. In doing so, he contributed to perpetuating a distorted image of fascist Italy, highlighting supposedly human and "innocent" traits rather than criminal responsibilities (Zollino 2001; Andrini 2013).

Alongside this debate, some right-wing magazines, such as Il Borghese, leaned toward deconstructing the myth of the Resistance, attempting to rehabilitate fascism and break the antifascist pact that had characterized Italian politics since the postwar period. These publications often sought to reevaluate fascism, even at the risk of veering into outright apology for the regime, with the goal of shifting the dominant Christian Democratic Party (which governed Italy from 1943 to 1992, dissolved in 1994) toward more conservative or reactionary positions (Liucci 2002).

This approach, although not shared by all right-wing media, has become part of a broader rhetoric that, over time, has helped preserve a popular and political perception of fascism in Italy that remains largely unaltered.

This perspective was soon revived and amplified in postwar Italy—a NATO ally—fueling a romantic and mythologized perception of fascism among generations who had not directly experienced the era. The rewriting of history through figures like Guareschi had a devastating effect on the collective understanding of Italy's colonial (and broader) atrocities, as it helped cultivate a national narrative that separated fascist Italy from its violent reality (De Felice 1975).

The trivialization of fascism and Italian colonialism, therefore, remains a crucial component of the memory that permeated postwar Italian society and continues to influence the nation's relationship with its own past. This memory, shaped by Guareschi's work and others like it, has the power to construct a collective narrative that has allowed the country to avoid a genuine critical reckoning, thereby preserving an idealized and often disengaged vision of fascism—at times portrayed, as in the "Italians are good people" phrase, as an innocent mistake rather than an oppressive regime (Bidussa 1994).

A. Mussolini's Birthplace: Predappio and the Museum Debate

The debate over the idea of a fascism museum in Predappio is rooted in a complex historical and social context, intertwined with the transformation of Predappio itself throughout the 20th century. Originally a small hill town, Predappio was reshaped through the fascist foundation of "Predappio Nuova" in the 1920s, becoming the heart of Mussolini's personality cult. Symbolic buildings such as the Casa del Fascio e dell'Ospitalità, designed by Arnaldo Fuzzi and inaugurated in 1937, were constructed as part of this transformation (Bisicioni and Giovannetti 2008).

After World War II, Predappio became a problematic site for Italy's public memory. The Casa del Fascio, a symbol of the regime, went through various phases—left unused, later repurposed as a community center, and in 1983, for Mussolini's centenary, it drew thousands of visitors. In the years that followed, under a municipal communist-led administration, shops selling fascist-themed souvenirs opened, and in 1999, Mussolini's birth house was restored.

By the 2000s, after safety measures were taken at the Casa del Fascio, the site was officially classified as cultural heritage. Meanwhile, Predappio continued to draw interest from historians and filmmakers exploring its fascist legacy. The town remained a symbol of controversial memory—a place where fascism has never fully disappeared.

The debate about Predappio and fascist memory is further complicated by the sociopolitical landscape of postwar Italy. The decision in 1957 by the communist mayor Egidio Proli to bury Mussolini in the San Cassiano cemetery—under the statement, "He didn't scare us alive, and he won't scare us dead"—marked the first official stance on how to manage the regime's legacy (Mario Proli, 2020).

. However, with Mussolini's centenary in 1983, the spotlight returned to the town. On that occasion, the Forlì prefecture revoked a ban on selling fascist souvenirs, signaling a significant turning point in welcoming neo-fascists and so-called fascio-curious visitors, as described by the writing collective Wu Ming (2017) 1 in their report Predappio Toxic Waste Blues.

In the following years, events and ceremonies linked to fascism increased, and Mussolini's birth home was reopened, with Villa Mussolini transformed into a mausoleum (Cortesi 2024). The town became a focal point for neo-fascist celebrations as well as a controversial memory process mixing nostalgia and historical interest (Giuffrida 2019).

B. The Museum Proposal and Cultural Controversy

It is within this context that the proposal emerged to transform the Casa del Fascio e dell'Ospitalità into a museum on the history of fascism. Promoted by then-mayor Giorgio Frassinetti, from the Democratic Party (center-left), the initiative aimed to address fascist memory through modern historical standards. A consultative committee of historians and intellectuals proposed that the museum should not be a celebration of the regime but rather an educational tool to understand fascism through contemporary values and knowledge (Novecento.org n.d.).

Frassinetti, inspired by his experience in Braunau am Inn—Hitler's birthplace—developed the idea of combating fascist nostalgia by enhancing historical awareness (Langeder 2023). In 2011, Predappio joined the Atrium project, funded by the Council of Europe, which aimed to create a European itinerary of totalitarian architecture. Within this context, serious discussions began on restoring the former Casa del Fascio as part of a broader memory valorization process (Atrium n.d.).

The activism of Mayor Frassinetti sparked wide debate and

international attention: in 2011, The New York Times reported repeatedly on Predappio (Nov. 2, 2011), and in 2012, French journalists Cyril Bérard and Samuel Picas produced a web documentary titled La Duce vita, examining the symbolic context of the site (now online on Vimeo). In 2013, the Union of Municipalities of Romagna Forlivese tasked the City of Predappio with developing a reuse and management plan for the former Casa del Fascio, presented in February 2014. The project envisioned a cultural hub with a documentation center and a permanent museum, supported by a historical study of the building prepared by Ulisse Tramonti (Povoledo 2011).

However, this approach sparked intense debate among historians and intellectuals. Some, like Sergio Luzzatto, David Bidussa (1994), and Alberto De Bernardis, supported the idea that such a museum could help demystify the site and Mussolini's figure, detaching them from neo-fascist movements by placing them within a historical context. Others, like Giovanni De Luna, Carlo Ginzburg, Mario Isnenghi, and Simon Levi Sullam, feared that the museum might instead normalize or legitimize neo-fascist narratives, framing the project within a problematic "shared memory" context. This clash of opinions was explored by Mirco Carrattieri (2018) in his study on the Casa del Fascio debate.

C. Challenges, Political Tensions, and the Museum's Evolution

Historian Marcello Flores played a crucial role in the project. In 2014, the Lewin Foundation supported Flores' initiative, emphasizing the critical value of history and the need to avoid the risks of "self-produced memory" which, according to Luhman, is the set of premises and traces of previous communications that a social system generates and reproduces internally in order to take them as given and guide its operations without having to reinsert or justify them each time

(Luhman, 1995). In 2015, an interdisciplinary working group coordinated by Flores outlined the guidelines for the museum project. This vision proposed an innovative educational and communicative tool, with participation from historians like Giovanni Gozzini (2023).

That same year, the proposal became part of the Eurom project—the European Observatory on Memory (EUROM n.d.). In June, the city council approved the site enhancement program, and on 2 March 2016, the building of the former Casa del Fascio was officially transferred to the municipality, marking a key step toward the museum's realization (Comune di Predappio 2024).

Despite progress, cultural and political debates intensified. Some historians and intellectuals remained supportive of the project, seeing it as a necessary cultural challenge to neutralize current neo-fascist rhetoric. Others began expressing skepticism.

Italian newspapers like Il Manifesto provided extensive coverage of the debate. Supporters like Serge Noiret (2019) saw the museum as a historicizing opportunity. Critics like David Conti (2008) feared a "paradox effect". David Bidussa (1994) referred to it as a "cultural challenge" that could reconnect memory sites through the combined work of professionals.

Politics soon entered the historiographical discussion. Democratic Party MP Emanuele Fiano (Camera dei Deputati n.d.) proposed a law to ban fascist propaganda and souvenir sales—a move considered the epitome of anti-commercialism.

The Predappio museum project continued to provoke intense debate, especially following the April 2017 presentation of the scientific and museographic plan titled Totalitarian Italy: State and Society in the Fascist Era, prepared by the Parri Institute, a national network of Resistance history institutes (Storchi 2019). The project received approval from the municipality and was evaluated by regional and national cultural institutions, which endorsed its core principles (Carrattieri, 2018).

Still, the Italian press paid little attention at this stage. Meanwhile, external commentators like Sabina Loriga (The Conversation) and Fernando (Politika) (Devoto 2017) began reflecting critically on the proposal. On August 18, the mayor visited Mauro Robba of Dongo (where Mussolini was executed), promoter of the Museum of the End of the War, to discuss parallel experiences. In late September, a European competition was launched for the museum's design.

A major critique came from Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2017), who questioned the possibility of building a museum in such a symbolic location as Predappio. Her article, published in The New Yorker on 5 October 2017 and republished by the widely read Internazionale, reignited the debate. On 23 October, the exhibition plan was presented in Rome, followed by a local presentation in Predappio on 9 December. During these presentations, Flores and De Bernardi reaffirmed their intent to expose fascism's violent and totalitarian nature, dismantle clichés, and confront the complexities of historical memory (Carrattieri, 2018).

D. Criticism, Location Issues, and Alternative Proposals

In response, the Wu Ming (2017) published a critical dossier on their blog Giap, raising two main objections: the overwhelming symbolic power of the site, which could overshadow the museum's critical intentions, and the perception that the project risked becoming a "generator of clichés" aligned with the post-fascist thinking still prevalent within parts of the Italian left. According to Wu Ming, the project appeared "patched together and confused", with serious flaws in both content and exhibition choices. They criticized the installations and the lack of focus on key aspects of fascism, such as the Italian Social Republic, the reconquest of Libya, and the incomplete purge of fascists after the war. They likened the project to FICO, the food-themed park in Bologna, but with fascism instead of food: a spectacle rather than critical reflection (Radio Città Fujiko, 2019).

Many intellectuals, historians, and politicians criticized the lack of local involvement and the top-down approach of the operation, often pointing out the decision to sacrifice the documentation center in favor of a permanent exhibition.

These diverse voices and critiques paint a complex picture of the debate over how to handle the memory of fascism in Italy, particularly in such a symbolic location as Predappio. Despite its aim to historicize and critically examine the fascist past, the museum project remains at the center of interpretive conflicts and political controversies, raising questions about Italy's capacity to confront its history

without risking a resurgence or trivialization of fascist ideology.

Meanwhile, Mayor Frassinetti's ambiguous positions led Professor Paolo Pezzino (2018) to change his stance on the museum, shifting from supporter to critic, as expressed in a 2018 article in Patria Indipendente. The 2018 elections halted both the museum project and the Fiano bill (Camera dei Deputati n.d.). A year later, Roberto Canali, a member of the far-right populist Lega Nord, became mayor of Predappio—likely benefiting from the political fallout of the controversy. Canali drew attention when he denied public funds for school trips to Auschwitz, claiming they were too ideologically biased. In January 2020, the new Predappio administration announced the abandonment of the fascism museum project, transforming the Casa del Fascio into a center focused on local history.

E. Public History, the "Predappio Model", and Interpretive Approaches

The topic of Public History in the context of the Predappio museum is of central importance, as it presents a major challenge for contemporary history in Italy. As mentioned previously, Public History differs from traditional academic history in that it targets a broad, non-specialist audience. This approach was exemplified in the discussions and debates surrounding the museum project in Predappio, a topic that was addressed in various forums, including the first National Conference of Italian Public History held in Ravenna in June 2017 (Noiret 2017, 2019).

One specific panel at that conference focused on the museum, with Marcello Flores and Alberto De Bernardi outlining the motivations and intentions behind the creation of a space meant to treat fascism in a scientific, non-celebratory way. The discussion was crucial not only in the Italian context but also internationally—at the 2nd International Public History Congress in Bogotá in July 2016, for example, Serge Noiret had already raised the idea of a "borderless museum", open to the web and capable of reaching a global audience. This concept was supported by Marcello Ravveduto and Enrica Salvatori, key proponents of Public History in Italy, who stressed the importance of a digital or online component to engage a wider public beyond physical limits (IFPH, 2016).

The reflection on Public History also relates to the need to overcome short circuits between history and memory, as emphasized by historians who supported the initiative. The historicization of fascism, they argued, should be approached without ideological bias, aiming for a method that respects the complexity of fascism and is open to new languages. From this perspective, the museum becomes a place not only for static transmission of history but also for active engagement and questioning by new generations.

Italian Public History is thus facing a significant challenge: how to narrate fascism in a way that is accurate, updated, and accessible to the general public without falling into nostalgia, celebration, or outdated 1950s-style antifascism.

Criticism of the Predappio project—especially from some historians and the Wu Ming collective—focused on the risk that the museum might become a cliché machine rather than a site of true historical exploration. Nevertheless, the approach taken by the historians behind the initiative aimed to use Public History as a tool to challenge collective memory and revitalize public debate about fascism, with the goal of shedding light on aspects too often obscured or minimized (Wu 2017).

F. Alternative Proposals, the Role of Memory, and the Challenge of Museum Design

The evolution of Public History in Italy, including the founding of a specific association like AIPH (Associazione Italiana di Public History), marks an important step toward creating a new historical narrative. This narrative, while rooted in academic research, seeks to reach a broader and more diverse audience through ongoing dialogue between history, memory, and identity.

Criticism of the Predappio museum is layered and often intersects multiple ideological perspectives and historical goals.

The first major line of objection concerns the very necessity of creating a museum solely dedicated to fascism. Many critics argue that such a focus might be premature or even misleading. Alternatives have been proposed: Aldo Giannuli and Ferrari suggested a 20th-century museum or one focused on Italian identity (Sullam 2016); Francesco Perfetti advocated for a Shoah museum—a project still pending in Italy despite frequent political declarations of support, as noted by Guido Crainz (2023). Others have proposed institutions dedicated to fascist crimes, antifascism, or neo-fascism, such as Luca Baldissara's idea for a museum on these themes. These alternatives reflect the need for a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to historical memory, suggesting that focusing on just one aspect of fascist Italy may be reductive and insufficient (Morganti n.d.).

Another widely discussed concern is timing. Some historians, like Schwarz, argued that the museum project was too late and failed to meet the urgency for a critical and historical analysis of fascism (Schwartz, 2016). On the other hand, figures like Luciano Canfora and Antonio Pennacchi viewed the project as premature, suggesting that a broad public processing of the fascist past—like Germany's—should have preceded any definitive museum proposal (Storchi 2019).

Critics also focused on the methodology of the project's development, describing it as a top-down initiative lacking thorough regional or disciplinary consultation. This led some to label it a "hasty and improvised" effort, lacking proper preparation and dialogue with the various communities involved.

Even within the political left, the proposal was criticized as a waste of public funds or at least as having a dubious purpose. The project had received significant funding without a clear plan for long-term management, particularly when there were suggestions that a mixed public–private foundation would be established.

G. *The Debate over Predappio as a Location, Museum Content, and International Comparisons*

The choice of Predappio as the museum site ignited the most intense part of the debate. Critics approached the issue from two main angles: principle and practicality.

From a principled standpoint, historians like Mario Isnenghi argued that reducing fascism solely to Predappio risks creating a dangerous synecdoche—compressing the entire phenomenon of fascism into the figure of its leader (Mario Isnenghi, 2019). This perspective could lead to an overly personalized and narrow interpretation of fascism, neglecting the widespread consent and complex socio-political mechanisms that supported the regime.

Practically speaking, Predappio is a remote and poorly connected town, unlikely to attract large numbers of visitors. Additionally, its proximity to highly symbolic locations like Mussolini's birth house and tomb could inadvertently turn the museum into a place of pilgrimage or celebration, rather than critical examination. This raised fears that, despite the original intentions, the project might backfire, turning into a commemorative rather than educational space.

Several alternative locations for the museum were proposed. One suggestion was to establish it in a major city like Rome, which would be a natural home for a national museum of fascism, given that it was the regime's political capital and retains much of its fascist-era architecture and symbolism. Another option was to place the museum in a location more closely linked to the regime's crimes, such as Fossoli, a site of deportation. A third proposal advocated for a decentralized or "diffused" museum model, leveraging the many memory sites of fascism already existing across Italy to offer a more widespread and integrated historical understanding (Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri, 2019).

The criticism and alternative proposals converge on the idea that such a museum must be contextually sensitive, and that its location plays a decisive role in shaping public perception and the educational value of the initiative.

Debate also centered on the museum's intended content and how it should be approached. Initially, the plan was to create a museum focused specifically on fascism or on fascist Italy. However, the project later evolved into an exhibition titled Totalitarian Italy: State and Society in the Fascist Era, which aimed to broaden the perspective to include reflections on totalitarianism and its impacts on Italian society more generally.

This shift sparked further discussion, especially when compared to international examples. Proponents of the museum often cited Munich, Germany, as a successful case of transforming a site with heavy historical significance into a center for study and education.[1] Critics, however, pointed to Berlin's more sobering and grassroots approach, arguing that museums dedicated to totalitarian regimes should adopt a restrained and community-driven model, avoiding overly grandiose or symbolic gestures that might undermine the critical intent (Diepgen 2000; Young, 2021).

The Predappio fascism museum project continues to stir significant debate over how—and where—Italy should address the memory of such a controversial era in its history. While some propose a critical and sober approach, others worry that a traditional museum setup might inadvertently promote a distorted or even celebratory view of fascism. The uncertainty around the project's scope and format underscores the need for continuous dialogue among historians, citizens, and institutions to ensure that such a museum fosters reflection rather than myth-making.

IV. Discussion

This section draws on the theoretical debates and concepts introduced in the Introduction to this article and the case study of Predappio to illustrate how debates about collective memory and Public History play out in real-world scenarios, and what these practical examples illustrate about the theoretical study of fascism and Publish History. The section will begin by discussing the ways in which fascism and colonialism have been discussed and portrayed in Italy more widely.

A. *The Representation of Fascism, Colonialism, and National Memory*

The portrayal of fascism and Italy's colonial past, as reflected in the ongoing debate, encounters a range of narratives and responses, oscillating between minimization, justification, denial of historical crimes, and the urgent need for more critical and overdue analysis.

The rhetoric in some right-wing periodicals, in particular, tends to trivialize and reduce the violence of fascism, shifting focus from the political dimension to a more humanizing portrayal of Mussolini. This involves rhetorical strategies such as silence about the regime's crimes, emphasis on Italian suffering, and ad hominem attacks against political opponents. The result is a narrative that diverts attention from fascism's political and historical realities, framing it instead through themes of victimhood and martyrdom.

A significant contribution to this discussion comes from an interview with Polish human rights jurist Michal Balcerzak by historian Angelo Del Boca (2005). Balcerzak highlights how historical ignorance of Italian colonialism is a major factor in contemporary Italian racism—a view Del Boca supports, retracing the challenges Italy has faced in acknowledging its colonial responsibilities.

Del Boca emphasizes the severity of Italy's colonial practices, which are often viewed as less violent than those of other European powers but actually involved numerous human rights violations. An example is the creation of concentration camps during the war in Libya, where entire populations were forced into inhumane conditions, resulting in 40,000 Libyan deaths (Castiglione, 2022). These actions expose the brutal, unjust, and cruel nature of Italian colonial violence.

The issue extends beyond historical interpretation to how memory is transmitted. The difficulty in confronting and recognizing Italy's colonial past is deeply linked to a reluctance to acknowledge its culpability. The refusal to recognize such violence and racial discrimination directly affects collective memory and sustains ongoing societal racism.

Comparisons between Italian colonialism and that of France or Britain have never been fully addressed in terms of historical responsibility. Yet it is crucial to understand how

minimizing fascist and colonial atrocities perpetuates a distorted narrative that can legitimize or even rehabilitate fascist ideology.

The debate surrounding the legacy of Italian colonialism is complex and multifaceted. One of the most persistent narratives is the self-praising view that emphasizes the "positive aspects" of colonization, such as the construction of infrastructure and the expansion of services in the colonized territories. However, as Francesco Filippi (2021) highlights in his book But We Built the Roads, these justifications often omit the human rights violations and systemic discrimination that characterized Italian colonial rule, ultimately contributing to a distorted collective memory.

Even when infrastructure left a tangible impact, it served colonial interests rather than genuine improvements to the lives of local populations. These projects were part of a broader strategy of domination and subjugation, rather than efforts at emancipation or development (León, 2023).

Filippi (2021) argues that we can still speak today of a historical amnesia regarding the true nature of Italian colonialism. Despite the emergence of a more critical historical reflection, public discourse in Italy often clings to the notion that the colonial experience was fundamentally benevolent, helped by the stereotype of the naturally "good-natured" Italian. This narrative minimizes the violence and inequalities inflicted on colonized peoples and perpetuates the myth of Italians as "good people", thereby diverting attention from the crimes and atrocities committed.

A central element of this narrative is the role of education, a frequently underestimated factor. Unlike French or British colonies, where attempts were made to train local elites, Italy significantly limited access to education in its colonies. According to Filippi (2021), the highest level of schooling available to colonized subjects was fifth grade, designed not to empower them but to prepare them as obedient laborers. This repressive educational approach had a long-lasting impact, creating a deeply unequal colonial society and preventing the emergence of an independent leadership capable of challenging colonial rule.

Filippi also highlights the silence around systemic violence during colonialism—not merely as a historical omission, but as part of a deliberate rhetorical strategy aimed at erasing a violent past. The narrative of "roads" and "good works" has dominated public discourse for decades, reinforcing the notion of colonization as inherently positive or, at worst, harmless.

In conclusion, the reflections of many historians call for a more honest and politically engaged re-evaluation of how Italy remembers its colonial past. Selective memory that celebrates the infrastructure of the colonial regime while ignoring its atrocities has helped perpetuate myths and justifications that continue to shape collective memory and reinforce contemporary racism in Italy.

B. The Contemporary Fascism Debate and Historical Distortion

One of the most striking aspects of the debate on fascism and its memory is the trivialization of violence, which permeates periodicals and magazines of the era. This creates a narrative that downplays the scale and impact of the regime's acts of repression and violence. In many publications, fascist violence is depicted as low-level, almost a normal part of political life in postwar Italy (Foot, 2021). This helps obscure its bloody and totalitarian nature.

Such trivialization operates on multiple levels. It reduces the ideological weight of fascism, characterizes its violence as youthful mischief or prankishness, and uses victimhood narratives to delegitimize antifascism while distorting historical facts.

A clear example is the euphemistic depiction of squadristi (fascist enforcers) as "quick, cheerful boys, as dumb as turnips", downplaying their violence as playful rather than politically organized and brutal. Fascist violence is often reframed as a necessary reaction against communism—almost as a means of defending public order and stability. Mussolini himself is sometimes portrayed as a "dangerous yet providential man".

These narratives are frequently accompanied by historical falsifications. For instance, prominent ex-fascist journalist Indro Montanelli (2003) once described fascist repression, particularly internal exile (confinement), as akin to a beach vacation. This mythologizing of fascist violence reframes the regime's totalitarian control as a benign or even benevolent system.

Postwar reinterpretations of fascist violence have also followed an anti-communist trajectory, often portraying it as justified or inevitable. An infamous case is former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's 2003 statement describing Mussolini's dictatorship as "benign" and claiming Mussolini "never killed anyone" (Farrell 2003). Though controversial, Berlusconi later dismissed the comment as a drunken slip, illustrating how fascism is still often treated as unserious in Italian political discourse.

This attitude echoes earlier revisionist trends seen in postwar magazines like L'Uomo Qualunque, which aimed to rehabilitate Mussolini by arguing that the fascist regime, despite its repressive nature, brought infrastructural improvements absent under the republic (Cocco 1943–1948).

The function of the Special Tribunal and other fascist repression mechanisms is also often reduced to a mere imitation of Soviet models, portrayed not as acts of homegrown repression, but as misguided emulations. This interpretation feeds into longstanding divisions about fascist crimes, such as the Foibe massacres (mass killings of Italians and fascist collaborators in 1943–1945), where fascist repression of Slavic populations is rarely contextualized (Pupo and Spazzal n.d.).

Even the memory of victims like Giacomo Matteotti (a socialist politician murdered by fascists in 1924) is distorted, sometimes inverting the roles of victim and perpetrator by portraying fascist violence as a response to communist provocation (Canali 2004).

In sum, these strategies of trivialization and historical distortion have muted the full horror of fascism, creating a collective memory that frames its criminal actions as isolated or minor. Fascism, despite being a regime of terror, is still often described as having brought order and stability, and even as a less harmful alternative to democratic inefficiency.

This distorted judgment has long benefited from the postwar narrative of German occupation, which shifted blame to the Nazis and cast Italians as passive victims. While

it is true that fascist and Nazi personnel were often left in place after the war, this conspiracy of silence was gradually challenged—especially from the late 1960s—by a new generation unwilling to bear their parents' guilt, and later with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the search for a new post-Cold War identity.

C. Selective Memory and Fascism in Popular Culture and Youth Movements

The phenomenon of metapolitics and the infiltration of fascist ideologies into punk and metal music is a significant aspect of how Italian post-fascism evolved within radical right-wing circles during the 1970s. In this period, groups like the Fronte Nazionale began to use the music scene as a vehicle for spreading ideology, taking advantage of the rebellious and anti-establishment ethos typical of these genres to attract young followers.

This strategy, inspired by the European New Right, aimed to root fascist ideas within alternative cultural movements, laying the groundwork for the later expansion of the alt-right (Shekhovtsov 2009; Bland 2019; Froio et al. 2020). The political youth event Atreju, organized by the Italian right, is emblematic of these efforts. Referencing the character from The NeverEnding Story, it positioned itself as a fight against "Nothingness" and the perceived decadence of modern society (Donato, 2018). At the same time, the adoption of symbols like the Celtic cross by young members of the Italian Social Movement (MSI) during the 1970s shows how fascism sought to embed itself in a broader cultural and mythological context, using esoteric and spiritual motifs to appeal to new generations.

Recent studies on the far-right in Italy highlight its growing influence both institutionally and in extra-parliamentary movements, with significant implications for Italian politics and society. The normalization of far-right discourse has not necessarily shed its historical roots. Parties like Fratelli d'Italia, led by Giorgia Meloni (who continues to participate in Atreju events), have gained electoral traction and brought the far-right into government. Despite claims of moderation, ideological links to neo-fascism persist—evident in controversial actions and continued use of fascist-era symbolism, such as the reluctance to participate in April 25th Liberation Day celebrations (Atreju 2024).

Groups like CasaPound and Forza Nuova remain active, promoting neo-fascist ideologies and engaging in violent acts. In 2021, Forza Nuova was involved in the assault on the CGIL (leftist trade union) headquarters in Rome, and in 2024, a neo-Nazi cell plotting attacks against public officials was dismantled 8 Reuters

October 20, 2021).

The rise of the far-right has been attributed to factors such as the political representation crisis, the erosion of the welfare state, and fears surrounding immigration. These elements have fueled support for parties advocating a return to "traditional values" like "God, country, family".

Scholars emphasize the importance of analyzing the far-right not only ideologically but also as a set of political practices that adapt to social and cultural changes. They stress the need for a renewed theoretical framework to understand contemporary dynamics rooted in a historically confused political debate(Mudde, 2007). The use of historical symbols like the Celtic cross and references to myths and esoteric ideologies present fascism as a legitimate cause or a movement of redemption, obscuring its totalitarian and oppressive nature and blurring distinctions between historical fascism and its neo-fascist reincarnations (Berizzi 2018; Vercelli 2021; Griffin 2022).

In short, the Italian far-right is experiencing a phase of consolidation and transformation, deeply influencing the country's political and social landscape—often without clearly confronting or distinguishing its ideological roots, which are more neo-fascist than truly fascist.

V. Conclusion

This article has sought to report on the debate between historians, politicians (through politics and policies) and citizens on a very sensitive issue for Italian public history. It is clear that divisions over memory, but also within historiography and politics regarding fascist Italy, are still very marked, partly due to a prolonged, self-absolving and consoling silence. In recent years, the positions of almost all observers and actors have hardened, which does not help the historical debate that objectively exists and will certainly have to continue for many years (and not without pain) in order to express a minimum of shared values.

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