THE BASOVIZZA MONUMENT: CONSTRUCTING MEMORY AND IDENTITY

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Abstract: *The Foiba di Basovizza monument in northeast Italy commemorates victims of mass killings instigated by communist partisans at the end of World War II. These killings are known as "foibe" in the Italian literature. This word has come to signify the "ethnic cleansing" of Italians by Yugoslavians, despite evidence indicating that the majority of victims of these killings were from Slovenia and Croatia and that the killings were politically motivated. The Foiba di Basovizza was designated a national monument in Italy in 2007 and the narrative of "ethnic cleansing" it presents has been accepted throughout Italy as a legitimate version of history. Nationalistic comments made by European Parliament president Antonio Tajani at the monument's annual commemoration on 10 February 2019, however, sparked international outcry and revealed that the site is still a vortex for longstanding discursive battles over territorial rights and victimhood contests. This paper argues that the Basovizza monument outmaneuvers questions of historical and scientific accuracy by constructing an exclusive notion of Italian identity that galvanizes nationalism and fuels fear of foreign infiltration. My analysis is a case study that investigates how productions of public memory can be used politically to influence the formation of national, ethnic, and cultural identity.*

Key-words: *monuments, memory, identity, nationalism, Foibe, Italy, Slovenia*

1. Introduction

The Foiba di Basovizza monument in northeast Italy, which stands about three kilometers from the Slovenian border, commemorates victims of mass killings instigated by Tito's communist partisans at the end of World War II. These killings are known as "foibe" (plural of "foiba") in the Italian literature, a word that has come to signify the "ethnic cleansing" of Italians by Yugoslavians, despite evidence indicating that the majority of victims of these killings were from Slovenia and Croatia and that the killings were politically motivated. Among the victims were Fascist and Nazi military personnel,

Fascist officials, and anyone considered to be a threat to the developing communist regime, including Slovene and Croat landowners and industrialists (Burigo 2005, 320). Recent Slovene scholarship documents research expeditions that have uncovered some mass graves in caves in Slovenia (Dežman 2008; Ferenc 2008; Mihevc 2013, 2017; Podbersič 2016). Their research, and continuing research by scholars at the Study Centre for National Reconciliation in Ljubljana, is informed by ongoing discoveries and excavations of caves in Slovenia that began in the early 2000s, in which remains are analyzed according to established scientific methods. This type of scientific research has not been conducted in Italy, yet foibe commemorative artifacts and events in Italy far outnumber those in Slovenia.

The discovery of mass graves in Slovenia and commemoration of the victims of mass violence is often positioned in competition with remembrance of Nazi and Fascist violence. Discussions of how to memorialize victims are tied to competing understandings of World War II and postwar national history and are mythologized to varying degrees in current political deliberations in Slovenia. In Italy, however, foibe remembrance has successfully been promoted as non-political and is accepted by both right and left. Initially, the inauguration of the site at Basovizza as an Italian national memorial was controversial: ultra-right political actors and nationalist civic organizers constructed the monument and called for its national recognition while opponents said it made claims that lacked evidence and presented a pro-Fascist view of World War II. Since its designation as a national monument in 2007, however, the monument and the narrative of "ethnic cleansing" it presents have been accepted across political divides in Italy as a legitimate version of history.

At the annual commemoration of the monument on 10 February 2019, however, nationalistic comments made by European Parliament president Antonio Tajani sparked international outcry, revealing that the site is still a vortex for longstanding discursive battles over territorial rights and victimhood contests. The situation also shows an attempt, by Tajani, his cohorts, and the many Twitter followers who defended his comments, to energize a concept of Italian national identity that is narrowly defined through the trope of ethnicity. Although this exclusive construction of Italian identity and the rendition of history presented by the Basovizza monument reflect a forceful political stance, the monument normalizes this stance through persuasive rhetorical strategies that work to convince visitors of its neutrality.

My analysis of this monument is an examination of how a public memory artifact can be used to impose a political agenda by enforcing particular

notions of identity. I aim to show here how the monument constructs a specific definition of Italian identity that summons a sense of belonging that is more powerful than empirical evidence. Debates regarding the accuracy of what the monument presents have been rendered moot by a rendition of Italian identity that galvanizes nationalism and fuels fear of foreign infiltration. I propose that this case study speaks to broader global issues, since scientific research is increasingly overshadowed by arguments that revolve around belonging to whichever side of an issue claims to represent truth, often silencing marginalized minorities.

2. Foibe: The Power of Naming

The words "foibe" (plural), "foiba" (singular), and "infoibati" (those killed and thrown and buried in the foibe) are derived from the Latin *fovea*, which, as stated in the leaflet available at Documentation Center (a small, one-room museum at the monument site), refers to the "natural chasms typical of the karst landscape," which, "since ancient times" have been used "to dispose of objects and corpses which nobody wanted found." The term "foibe," states the leaflet, "came into use in 1943, after the discovery on the bottom of some chasms of hundreds of bodies of victims of massacres of that period; in some cases they had been thrown in alive" (Documentation Center Brochure, n.d., n.p.).[1] Stories in the Italian press in and around Trieste began using the word "foibe" to describe more generally any type of Yugoslavian violence against Italians during WW II (Pupo and Spazzali 2003; Fumich 2008; Orecchia 2008; Pirjevec 2009). Thus, the term "through a synecdoche became a way to refer to the whole Yugoslav anti-Italian violence" (Dato 2013, 38). The Basovizza monument further generalizes the term "foibe" by mourning Italy's territorial loss of Istria after World War II as part of the foibe violence. Italians who lost land or property to Yugoslavia are presented as victims alongside those who were killed and Italy itself is presented as a victim of territorial invasion.

The Foiba di Basovizza monument presents foibe victims as Italian civilians who were subject to an ethnic cleansing campaign instigated by the Yugoslavians. This gives the word "foibe" a highly emotional metaphorical significance by not only referring to horrific physical burial but by suggesting burial of Italian identity. The word invokes what Accati and Cogoy refer to as the "perturbante" (Accati and Cogoy 2010), a pathological fear of annihilation

[1] This leaflet, "Foiba di Basovizza: Monumento Nazionale," is printed by the Lega Nazionale (LN) in Trieste. The LN is a national civic organization that receives federal funding; the LN in northeast of Italy is controlled by local right-wing political parties.

of self and of identity. The word "foibe," therefore, coalesces an understanding of Italian identity that is based on the notion of ethnicity and of blood kinship. According to this notion, all Italians *could have* been targeted by the Yugoslavian communist regime, and therefore all Italians can identify with the narrative of victimhood. This rendition of the foibe skews the historical context, omitting the violence carried out by the Fascist regime and the occupation and dismemberment of Yugoslavia during World War II. Instead, it advances a narrative of Yugoslavian westward territorial expansion and presents Italians as a persecuted ethnic group.

Furthermore, unlike memorials in Slovenia, which are constructed at the sites of caves in remote forest areas after scientific analyses of exhumed remains, the Basovizza "foiba" is not even an actual foiba cave. The monument is constructed over a pit from an old mineshaft. A thorough process of exhumation and identification of remains, like those conducted in Slovenia, was never completed after initial explorations of the cave were abandoned soon after the war. The pit has been sealed shut since 1959. By naming the pit a "foiba," however, the site is imbued with the significance and emotional weight granted by the rhetorical power of the word.

My aim in analyzing the Foiba di Basovizza monument is to identify the strategies that have convinced Italians across political divides to believe that the site is a mass grave where Italians were subjected to "ethnic cleansing." In what follows, I first explain why monuments are particularly powerful memory artifacts and why I chose the Basovizza monument for this case study rather than any other form of foibe remembrance. Next, I analyze three rhetorical strategies central to the success of the Foiba di Basovizza monument in promoting a particular rendition of memory and Italian identity. The first is the use of mystery as proof. I show how the claim that excavations are impossible is used to create an aura of mystery and calls upon the trope of the unknowable, eliciting belief in a limitless number of victims. The second is the terminology of ethnic cleansing and the appropriation of the terms "genocide" and "holocaust," terms used in Italy, but not elsewhere, for the foibe (I use "holocaust" in quotes here to refer to the Italian use of the word to describe the foibe; I use Holocaust, capitalized and not framed by quotation marks, to refer to the genocide of Jews, Roma, and thousands of others instigated by the Third Reich). The third strategy I analyze is the mass publicity of the story of a foibe victim named Norma Cossetto, the personality known as the "Anne Frank" of the "Italian holocaust." An embodiment of traditional Fascist values of beauty, femininity, and patriotism, Norma Cossetto elicits empathy and produces identification with the foibe narrative while equating the foibe in trauma value to the Holocaust.

3. The Power of Memorial Sites

The Foiba di Basovizza monument is one of many forms of foibe remembrance in Italy, which include the television mini-series *Il Cuore nel Pozzo*, which was produced by Italy's national television station and reportedly watched by over six million viewers (Knittel 2014, 172), an array of fictionalized memoirs, public speeches, and a national holiday. I chose to analyze the monument, however, because of the rhetorical power of public memory sites. The monument references these other commemorative artifacts through an interaction of material, visual, and discursive elements, yet, as Endres and Senda-Cook argue, "places, imbued with meaning and consequences, are rhetorical performances" (Endress and Senda-Cook 2011, 260), rather than merely reflections of prior discourses. The monument performs a narrative that summons belief and constructs a particular, and narrow, understanding of Italian identity. Those who identify do so through believe in the shared memory produced by the monument; those who believe can share that memory and identity.

As Maurice Halbwachs initially articulated, memory and identity are co-constituted and memory itself "could not function without words and ideas, instruments the individual has not himself invented but appropriated from his milieu" (Halbwachs 1950, 51). Alison Landsberg asserts that interactive and experiential sites, such as memory places, can enact "prosthetic memory," producing a sense of physical remembrance that "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative" (Landsberg 2004, 2) and becoming "part of one's personal archive of experience, informing one's subjectivity as well as one's relationship to the present and future tenses" (Landsberg 2004, 26). Landsberg argues that increasingly fluid and accessible forms of media make it possible for previously disconnected groups of people to connect through common memory and identity (albeit problematized by cultural hegemonies), yet I argue that, additionally, the connectedness produced by some shared memories can also produce what Reisigl and Wodak refer to as "ingroups and outgroups" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 45), that is, a connectedness that is fueled by exclusion and that demands definitions of belonging and not belonging.

According to Dickenson, Blair, and Ott, the physical structure and location of a memory place can "mobilize power in ways not always available with other memory *techné*." (Dickenson, Blair, and Ott 2010, 29). As Edward Casey argues, a memory place "is both attached to a past (typically an originating event of some sort) *and* acts to ensure a future of further remembering of that same event. Public monuments embody this Janusian trait; their very massiveness and solidity almost literally enforce this futurity" (Casey 2004,

17). The Basovizza monument's massive concrete slab, towering cross, and memorial stones bestow a sense of timelessness and claim this contested location, characterized by intermingling populations, shifts in borders, and changes in nationhood, as the site of purely Italian memory. It marks the past in a way that ensures a future in which Italian identity is defined through this narrative of victimhood and sacrifice.

4. Rhetorical Strategies

4.1. Mystery as Proof

A memorial stone at the monument site is inscribed with the words "a section of 500 cubic meters contains infoibati corpses." According to historians Cernigoi (2012, 193; 2018) and Kersevan (2006, 187), however, a photograph of the stone from 1996 shows that the inscription read "a section of 300 cubic meters contains infoibati corpses." The estimated depth of the pit on the memorial stone was changed from 300 to 500 cubic meters, even though the pit has been permanently sealed since 1959. Yet the fact that this change is not based on exploration of the pit and actual measurements has no bearing on the credibility of the claim it makes. The inscribed memorial stone summons belief without question.

The validity of the Foiba di Basovizza relies on the claim that further exploration of the pit, and discovery and excavation of any other foibe in Italy, are impossible. Although this claim is disproved by the ongoing excavation missions of caves in Slovenia, Italian foibe remembrance disregards these missions and their findings. At the Foiba di Basovizza, lack of evidence is used to impart an aura of mystery to the pit and to present the horror of the foibe as an Italian trauma too vast to ever comprehend. Initial explorations were conducted in 1945 by the Allied Military Government after local inhabitants reported that Yugoslavians had thrown Italians they had shot into the pit.[2] The explorations were called off shortly after they had begun, however, due

[2] From a memo written by Alexander Kirk, US Ambassador to Italy 1944-1946, and sent to U.S. Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., June 22, 1945, received June 23; Number 2725; DC/L:MAS:MEM 7/18/45; 16-248-1; Unclassified/Declassified Holdings of the National Archives (U/DHNA); National Archives Trust Fund (NWCT-2R/Room # 2710); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (NACP).

to hazardous conditions.[3] In 1948 a team of Italian speleologists led by police inspector Umberto De Giorgi attempted to excavate the pit. De Giorgi and his team exhumed the bodies of German as well as Italian soldiers, a Soviet officer, and Slovene civilians (Pirjevec 2009, 141-147, quoted in Dato 2013, 41), yet their initial explorations of the pit were abandoned before completion. In 1953 a scrap metal company "declared that it was able to reach the bottom of the abyss without encountering any corpses" (Dato 2013, 41). What appeared in the local Italian press during these years, however, were not these inconclusive findings but estimations of how many corpses could fit into the pit based on mathematical calculations: for example, if five bodies could fit per cubic meter and the pit were estimated to be more than 600 square meters, the total number of victims could potentially be more than 3000. Articles reporting these calculations swayed public opinion and helped transmit the notion that, as De Giorgi stated, the Basovizza mine shaft was "the biggest natural burial ever heard of" (Pupo and Spazzali 2003, 233, quoted in Dato 2013, 42), even though it was not even a "natural" cavity.

Local veterans' groups, priests, and the Lega Nazionale, an association whose stated purpose is to promote Italian culture, organized commemorations and Masses at the mine shaft site that drew larger and larger crowds. In 1959 the pit was sealed shut with a concrete slab at a Mass attended by over two thousand people. The dedication of the concrete slab signaled a shift in the conceptualizing of the pit. Queries about empirical evidence and scientific research were ousted by Catholic iconography and terminology, evident in the writings of Flaminio Rocchi, the priest who dedicated the concrete slab and the memorial stone whose estimated depth inscription was changed. Rocchi refers to the "Calvary of the Infoibati," the victims' "via crucis," and "il cammino verso il sacrificio" – the path towards the sacrifice. As historian Pamela Ballinger states, "Rocchi depicts these victims in Christ-like terms" and "as having been sacrificed for the sins of others" (Ballinger 2003, 141).

Mystery regarding numbers of victims and lack of evidence worked in tandem with the Catholic narrative of martyrdom: we need not, and dare not, ask for physical proof if we believe in the power of the sacrifice. Belief in this mystery, promoted by Italian nationalist organizations and Catholic priests, is tied to a normative view of Italian identity. In a region historically

[3] From memos submitted by the Eighth Army Headquarters to U.S. Secretary of State, July 1, 1945; AFHQ/A GSI (b); M 465 I. U/DHNA; NWCT-2R/Room # 2710; File No. G-1/Br/15110/-3. 10 July 1945; U/DHNA; NWCT-2R/Room # 2710; NACP.

characterized by competing claims of autochthony between Italian-speaking and Slovene-speaking populations, belief in the Catholicized, mystery-imbued Basovizza "foiba" grants membership to the category of "true" Italian – an Italian identity that is white, Catholic, not Slavic, and not immigrant.

4.2. Terminology of Ethnic Cleansing

Rebranding the foibe as ethnic cleansing was a crucial step in lifting the narrative of the Foiba di Basovizza from its local context to a national stage. Recasting foibe discourse in ethnic terminology silences political controversy by presenting the narrative as an unarguable human rights concern. Additionally, this terminology deflects attention away from Italy's intense political rivalries after World War II and instead focuses on linking the foibe killings to the "esodo," the mass departure of Italians from Istria when it was allocated to Yugoslavia in 1947.[4] This linkage promotes the notion of an ethnically homogeneous population of Italians who were being "cleansed" from territory overtaken by Yugoslavian expansionism.

With the foibe conceptualized as acts of ethnic cleansing, the Foiba di Basovizza invites visitors to understand themselves as potential victims, potential "infoibati." This allows the monument to work through what Barbie Zelizer calls "the subjunctive voice" (Zelizer 2004, 157). "Technically defined as the mood of a verb used to express condition or hypothesis, the subjunctive creates a space of possibility, hope, and liminality through which spectators might relate to images" (Zelizer 2004, 163). The monument coalesces the notion of "Italians" by creating a space of horrific possibility of mass extermination. By presenting Italian lives lost as sacrificial deaths, the monument conjures hope through the act of remembering the so-called genocide.

A combination of circumstances in Italy and internationally influenced the public acceptance of the ethnic cleansing narrative. Political scandals in the early 1990s led to a complete overhaul of the Italian government, resulting in disorganization of the left and an energizing and coalescing of the right. Several prominent historians published works in the early and mid-1990s that devalued the largely communist-led Italian Resistance in World War II and rehabilitated Fascist soldiers. The breakup of Yugoslavia brought the terminology of ethnic cleansing and genocide into Western European public discourse, providing a "ready-made label for the foibe" (Franzinetti 2006, 89) and giving Italians "new occasions to denounce the Slavs as wild animals"

[4] Most of Istria is now part of Croatia, with a small area in the north that is part of Slovenia.

(Wolff 2006, 112). The terminology of ethnic cleansing churned up longstanding antagonism between Italian-speaking and Slovene-speaking populations along the border to construct a notion of "Italian" as an ethnic category, as a discrete ethnic group that could be distinguished biologically from "Slav," the opposing and equally fabricated discrete "ethnic" group.

Terminology and the names we give things shape the way we conceptualize and understand reality. In his articulation of the "terministic screen," Kenneth Burke states "not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the *at*tention [sic] to one field rather than to another. Also, "*many of the 'observations' are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made*" (Burke 1966, 46). The terminology of ethnic cleansing directs attention towards a definition of Italian identity based on blood kinship and presents the foibe as an exclusively Italian tragedy. It creates a terministic screen that masks the memory of the vast numbers of Slovene, Croatian, Roma, and many other non-Italian victims of mass violence and that excludes understandings of "Italian" that are complicated by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural hybridity, immigration, and many other incarnations of difference.

4.3. Norma Cossetto

The monument guides visitors past the outdoor memorial stones and their Catholicized inscriptions that honor martyrdom, sacrifice, and Italian unity and into a small museum called the Documentation Center. Inside the building visitors can read a series of panels describing the events of the foibe and can watch a DVD of personal testimonies about the "esodo." Nostalgic descriptions of beautiful Italian homes that were taken over by Yugoslavia and depictions of the bucolic days of Italian Istria are intertwined with horrific descriptions of mass extermination in the foibe, and all are brought to life through the character of Norma Cossetto, the "Anne Frank" of the Italian "holocaust." Her sepia-toned photograph is a familiar icon in foibe discourse and is displayed prominently in the Documentation Center.

Like Anne Frank, Norma Cossetto dies only because of her ethnicity. In a circular logic, then, she affirms a definition of "Italian" as an ethnic group. She echoes the trope of mystery as evidence; unlike Anne Frank, Norma Cossetto never produced a diary, and her life and death, like the unknowable numbers of victims who might possibly lie buried in the unexplored pit, are only documented in fictionalized texts. Nonetheless, Norma Cossetto is one of the most salient symbols of the foibe and she is the subject of fictionalized

memoirs, social media sites, a film, and a graphic novel.[5] According to an account by Arrigo Petacco, echoed by many other authors, Norma Cosetto was a 23-year-old university student in Istria when she was captured and arrested by Croatian communists in 1943 and subjected to "every kind of agony" (Petacco 2000, 61). She is said to have died "per l'italianità dell'Istria," for the Italian-ness of Istria, after an "excruciating via crucis" (Petacco 2000, 62). Norma Cossetto animates the notion of a Catholicized Italian "holocaust" through the character of an innocent and vibrant young girl who is transformed into a sacrificial character, a martyr whose death saves Italian identity by suggesting the possibility of resurrection through her memory.

5. Conclusion

The Foiba di Basovizza monument illustrates how identity construction can outmaneuver politically contentious questions of historical accuracy. While researchers in Slovenia seek to find accurate information about victims of mass violence through established scientific methods, monuments in Slovenia that commemorate victims of postwar communist mass killings do not rally the nation the way the Foiba di Basovizza does in Italy. Movements towards reconciliation in Slovenia have only deepened political divisions and heightened memory contests. In Italy, on the other hand, Italian foibe remembrance has evaded obligations to scientific research and historical accuracy yet appeals to Italians across political divides. The Foiba di Basovizza deploys mystery, "ethnic cleansing" terminology, and the heavily publicized heroine character, Norma Cossetto, in order to construct a rendition of the foibe that is understood as a narrative about human rights rather than a political issue.

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[5] See, for example, Giuseppina Mellace *Una Grande Tragedia Dimenticata: La Vera Storia Delle Foibe* (NewtonCompton, 2014); Emanuale Merlino and Beniamino Delvecchio, *Foiba rossa. Norma Cossetto, Storia di un'Italiana* (Ferrogallico, 2018); Gianni Oliva, *Foibe: Le stragi negte degli italiani della Venezia Giulia e dell'Istria* (Mondadori, 2002); and the 2018 film *Red Land (Rosso Istria)*, in which "Norma Cossetto emerges as a key figure - a young Istrian woman, student of the University of Padua, barbarically raped and murdered by Tito's partisans - chosen for this brutal crime only because she was guilty of being Italian" (quoted from the IMBd website: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7548328/?ref_=ttpl_pl_tt).

This reinvention of public memory rhetoric enacts a specific notion of Italian identity that cuts a boundary between those who belong and those who do not. This boundary separates so-called "true" Italians from multicultural and multilingual populations, such as those living in Italy's border regions. Furthermore, as Tajani's comments illustrate, this boundary can be useful in fueling a fear of immigrants, energizing a distrust of many types of difference, and promoting exclusionary actions in political and civic arenas. Basovizza is a vivid example of a monument that is palatable across Italy's political spectrum because the spectrum itself has veered towards a right-wing agenda, affirming a notion of "pure" Italians based on exclusion and calling upon values that are no longer considered Fascist, but are seen as Italian.

In order to move towards just and equitable remembrance and to take steps towards reconciliation today, I ask whether it might be useful, for the purposes of honoring the dead, to dislodge the remembrance of crimes committed by totalitarian regimes from comparisons of left- and right-wing ideologies. I propose that it could be beneficial to find alternate terminology that separates violent acts instigated by totalitarian regimes from the modern political spectrum that incorporates functional democratic political systems that necessitate deliberation and open elections. Nazism, Fascism, and Communism are totalitarian regimes whose similarities in intention and action are far more significant than their differences in political ideology.[6] In commemorating lives lost, is it productive to align perpetrators and victims with left- and right-wing ideologies? This alignment only perpetuates divides, reinforces assumptions and stereotypes about allegiances, and generates victimhood contests in a world in which many families suffered severe losses instigated by more than one totalitarian regime.

[6] Although some might contend that Fascism was never a totalitarian regime, I argue that it was because it carried out violent measures against those who questioned its practices. It was the Italian journalist Giovanni Amendola who coined the term "totalitarian" in 1923 to describe Fascism. Amendola wrote on May 12, 1923 that the "Fascist refusal to allow the opposition to prepare and present its list for the election is a 'totalitarian system' (*sistema totalitaria*) as opposed to the 'majoritarian' and 'minoritarian' systems previously prevailing" (Gleason 14). Amendola was beaten to death by Fascists four years later.

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