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Remembrance or revisionism?

By omitting the context of Italian war crimes, the Giorno del Ricordo commemoration fuels a revisionist narrative that downplays Italy's fascist past

This 10 February marks 20 years since Italy's *Giorno del Ricordo* was first commemorated. Instituted during Silvio Berlusconi's second premiership, the day ostensibly honours Italian victims of the post-World War II *foibe* killings and the expulsion of ethnic Italians from Istria and Dalmatia. The official narrative emphasises the violence committed by Yugoslav communist partisans in the aftermath of WWII. However, it largely omits the broader context of Italy's fascist occupation of Slovenia and Croatia during the conflict. During this period, the Italians were responsible for mass killings, forced deportations to concentration camps and, where possible, systemic Italianisation — actions that paved the way for the subsequent retaliation.

While *Il Giorno del Ricordo* was initially introduced as a day of remembrance for innocent victims, it has, over time, been shaped by a political agenda that decontextualises the violence committed by Tito's partisans. Moreover, the portrayal of Yugoslav partisans as war criminals has been instrumental in criminalising the broader Resistance movement, with the clear goal of discrediting the Italian partisans. If the partisans were no better than the fascists, the implication is clear: everyone is guilty, therefore no one is accountable.

History dept.

Yugoslavia, under Prince Regent Paul, joined the Tripartite Pact with the Axis powers in late March 1941. However, the Yugoslav Army, with British support, staged a coup, removed Prince Paul and withdrew from the Pact. In retaliation, Germany and Italy invaded the country in April 1941, dividing it into zones of occupation alongside Hungary and Bulgaria. Also, the newly formed Independent State of Croatia, under *Ustaša* rule, fell under Italian and German influence.

Italy's occupation of the region began with a rushed advance to Ljubljana,

aiming to outpace the German forces already in Zagreb. The following years were marked by widespread violence against the local population, fuelling resistance and sabotage efforts. In 1942, in an attempt to quell the partisans, the Italian military administration under General Mario Roatta issued the infamous Circular 3C. This decree was based on the brutal 'head for a tooth' doctrine – an escalation of the 'tooth for a tooth' principle – which held that for every act of resistance, the occupying forces would retaliate with disproportionate violence against civilians. As a result, it sanctioned reprisals, deportations, property confiscations, hostage-taking and summary executions.

The Italian authorities waged a brutal war against civilians. Nevertheless, General Mario Robotti, who succeeded Roatta in 1943 and led the Podhum massacre, complained that his troops were not killing enough people. In less than four years, in the province of Ljubljana alone, 33 000 lives were lost — equivalent to 10 per cent of the entire population. Over 100 000 people were imprisoned in concentration camps. It is in this context that Yugoslav partisans, as they liberated areas previously under Italian occupation, retaliated against ethnic Italians. By the end of the war, an estimated 5 000 Italians had been killed in reprisals, and between 250 000 and 350 000 residents were forced to leave Istria and Dalmatia, relocating to Italy.

Remembering what?

It is impossible to fully understand the *foibe* killings without acknowledging the prior institutionalised violence carried out by the Italians during the occupation. However, the celebration of *Il Giorno del Ricordo* largely overlooks this crucial context. Mainstream media, ministerial notes circulated in schools and official commemorations across Italy often prefer not to mention the Italian atrocities committed against the local population. Instead, they focus solely on a narrative of innocent Italians brutally slaughtered by communist partisans.

When *Il Giorno del Ricordo* was established in 2004, during Berlusconi's second government, the post-fascist National Alliance was only a junior partner in the right-wing coalition. The bill to establish the day was presented by its leading members, alongside other MPs from across the right and centre. It followed two previous failed attempts in the 1990s and was passed with bipartisan support. However, it was already evident that the day would be instrumental in undermining the legacy of the anti-fascist resistance and rehabilitating Mussolini and his political heirs. This revisionist trend was not incidental but part of a broader shift in Italy's political and cultural landscape. During these years, Berlusconi and his allies actively sought to rewrite history, downplaying the crimes of the

fascist regime and portraying Mussolini in a softer light — most notoriously when Berlusconi dismissed the dictatorship's brutality by claiming that 'Mussolini never killed anyone; he just sent political prisoners on vacation to exile.'

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Today, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, the third iteration of the post-fascist movements that began with the Italian Social Movement (MSI) and later the National Alliance (AN), dominates Italian politics. Its leading members, including the President of the Senate and senior ministers, do not hide their fascist roots and sympathies. In this context, *Il Giorno del Ricordo* has become an even more powerful tool for their revisionism, used to legitimise a controversial past.

By focusing on the suffering of Italians at the hands of communist partisans, while ignoring the violence of the fascist regime, this revisionist narrative serves to discredit the partisan movement. The aim is to portray the partisans as violent and extremist — just like the fascists they fought against. This distorts history and undermines the moral authority and the legitimacy of the anti-fascist resistance in shaping post-war Italy and Europe.

However, the response to this revisionist tendency should not be to minimise the tragedy of the *foibe* killings and the expulsion of ethnic Italians from Istria and Dalmatia. We must recognise the victims of the *foibe* as the last casualties of the fascist war of aggression and its racist policies in occupied Yugoslavia, remembering them alongside the hundreds of thousands of victims of Italian violence in the region. This is what an honest day of remembrance should truly focus on.

Memory should not serve as a self-victimising ritual to absolve ourselves of our own responsibilities or to ignore the complexity of historical events. Instead, it should be an exercise in active learning, one that encourages us to reflect critically on the past and recognise the mistakes made. Only by doing so can we ensure that the tragic history of violence and injustice does not repeat itself, and that we remain vigilant in building a more just and accountable future.



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