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From Iconoclasm to Museum: Mussolini's Villa in Rome as a Dictatorial Heritage Site

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ABSTRACT

In the last couple of years, public attitudes towards Fascist material legacies in Italy have been at the centre of a heated debate in the academic world, which has by now grown to involve the press and social media. This paper will look specifically at how this is reflected in a museum display at a heritage site that was once Mussolini's residence in Rome. The underlying question of this paper is what role museums as heritage sites play in the renegotiation of a problematic past, and whether they can also have an active role in either supporting or challenging the official narrative. As heritage is socially constructed and defined through present circumstances, the narratives of this particular museum reveal a conflicting past as mirrored by the national narrative. The paper also questions whether public perception of this site has changed over time and considers how the recent transformation into a museum signifies a shift from the post-war interpretation, which may or may not reflect a high-level political agenda.

KEYWORDS

Italian Dictatorship, Fascist legacies, Villa Torlonia, Difficult Heritage, Mussolini.

Heritage of the dictatorship in Italy

This research, which began as a pilot study for the author's doctorate carried out in 2016, focuses on Mussolini's residence in Rome—Villa Torlonia—which will be analysed as a dictatorial heritage site using visual and textual analysis and ethnographic interviews. This site is today a museum with a dual function: 1) it showcases the original eighteenth-century property formerly owned by the Torlonia family; and 2) it is the only state-owned museum with a display on Mussolini.[1] To this day, Italy lacks both a national museum providing an interpretation of the country's Fascist past and a War Museum debating Italy's role in World War II, which makes Villa Torlonia a crucial case study in understanding the renegotiation of Italy's Fascist past.[2]

The results of the pilot study shed light not only on how the museum has decided to remember Mussolini's life, but also on the public perception of the place: far from being a place of negative emotions, this site is today a leisure place for Romans and tourists alike. From *damnatio memoriae* in the post-war period, followed by abandonment and neglect, to full rehabilitation, it becomes clear that the dark memories once attached to Villa Torlonia have been removed, which raises questions regarding the role and shift of emotions in relation to a dictatorial heritage site.

This paper will be divided in three parts. Firstly, I will discuss the current political debate around Mussolini's material legacies, and how the decision to open a museum inside Mussolini's residence fits within that debate. Secondly, I will describe the museum

1) For details of a privately owned collection of Mussolini iconography, see G. Pieri (2013: 235).

2) The city of Bolzano was the first to display a permanent exhibition on the Italian dictatorship in the basement of the Monument to Victory, a Fascist memorial to the annexation of South Tyrol by Italy in World War I. For details about the Fascist dictatorship exhibition, see *BZ '18-'45. Un monumento, una città, due dittature. Un percorso espositivo nel Monumento alla Vittoria* (Vienna/Bolzano: Folio; Milano: Morellini, 2016).

display and how Mussolini's life at the Villa is depicted, along with the contemporary perception of the place as revealed by interviews with staff and visitors. Thirdly, I will present some concluding remarks on the role of museums in showcasing difficult histories and the impact that these interpretations have on public debate.

The theoretical framework of this article starts from and challenges Sharon Macdonald's book on Nazi heritage in Germany. According to Macdonald, "difficult heritage" arises when a past is recognised as worth remembering but at the same time creates difficulties in the present, as it generates conflict in dealing with contemporary identity (Macdonald 2009: 7). Similarly, the "difficult" Fascist heritage generated a fear of perpetuating social division and fuelling divided memories in the post-war period, so a process of removal of Fascist symbols from public buildings was put into place (Arthurs 2014).

When, after a global or civil war, a country needs to rebuild its identity, negotiating a dictatorial past creates tremendous tensions around the concept of "shared memory." Aside from national memorials to the victims—which might also reveal some contested memories—other places associated with the dictatorship may be "forgotten" and therefore be an expression of taboo, amnesia or denial (Carr 2014; Connerton 1989, 2008). Given that the ideologies conveyed by such heritage produce dissonance, contested memory and social division (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), this paper will show how the display on Mussolini is an example of a national struggle to come to terms with a particular regime.

The transformation of places associated with the dictatorship and the way they have or have not been reused, testifies to the shift in meaning attributed to these places. The creation of a museum can serve both to remember or forget a difficult past, or even provide a selective narrative of the dictatorial past. As we shall see, Villa Torlonia was an attempt to present Mussolini as a historical figure, but one which spoke of a national difficulty in dealing with the Fascist past.

Mussolini's cult of personality

The cult of Mussolini was at the core of the strategies implemented through propaganda to build consensus among Italians; this pervaded not only the twenty years of his dictatorship but continues to be present in popular culture today in a diluted form (Gundle *et al.* 2013). The cult of Mussolini opened a direct communication channel between the leader and Italians in a way which polarised sympathies toward *Il Duce* but not necessarily the Fascist party (Bosworth 2005). This division has also allowed the cult of Mussolini's personality to survive in the post-war period, regardless of criticism of Fascism itself.

Mussolini's memory in popular culture is today preserved in Predappio, *Il Duce*'s birthplace. Regarded as a place sacred to the cult of the leader, it has been a site of pilgrimage since the foundation of the modern town in 1925. The regime encouraged people to pay tribute to the "Dux" by making an almost mandatory visit to the house where Mussolini was born, the church where he was baptised, and the school were his mother worked (Serenelli 2013). From 1957, when Mussolini's body was buried in Predappio, neo-fascist gatherings started again to pay tribute to their mythical leader. At present, thousands of neo-fascists visit Predappio three times a year—to celebrate Mussolini's birth, death, and the March on Rome —, giving rise to a new, disturbing form of "dark tourism" (Luzzatto 2014). However, despite plans for building a museum of the History of Totalitarian Italy, which should open in Predappio in 2020, places in Predappio directly linked to Mussolini have not undergone a process of heritage-making:

Fig. 1 Rome, Villa Torlonia: façade of the Villino Nobile. Photo credit: Flaminia Bartolini.

Fig. 2 Rome, Villa Torlonia: rear façade of the neglected Villino Nobile in 1977. Photo credit: Archivio Storico Capitolino

none of his properties has been transformed into a state-owned interpretation site, nor have any been destroyed (Bartolini 2018). They simply stand there as places of nostalgic worshipping, an expression of the Italian state's impasse over dealing with the dictator's material legacies.

Villa Torlonia: historical background

Located on the Via Nomentana, Villa Torlonia is an eighteenth-century Villa, formerly owned by the Torlonia family from 1797 to 1978 (Fig. 1-2). Marino Torlonia, originally from France, purchased the property in 1797 after he made a fortune as a banker in Rome. The new owner had great plans for the property and hired Neoclassical architect Giuseppe Valadiertore to design the Villa. The result was a main building, Casino Nobile, and an additional building for parties, Casino dei Principi, as well as fountains and sculptures. The main hall of the Casino Nobile is decorated with sculptures, and a series of rooms attached to it are decorated with flowers and grottoes with neoclassical copies of Roman murals. A description of the Villa made at the time by Giuseppe Checchetelli shows how the inspiration for this work was in fact Adriano's Villa at Tivoli (Agati 2010: 12). False ruins were created as a visual reminder of an inspiring past: the Temple of Saturn was inspired by the temples of Antonius and Faustina in the Forum, and fake obelisks were positioned around the garden.

What makes the property original is the number of different styles and false ruins, including an amphitheatre, a nymphaeum, a sports arena, and a coffee house. Approached from Via Nomentana, the property was meant to recall a Roman villa: even the walls around the property were built using

Roman construction techniques—*opus incertum* and *opus reticulatum*. The final decorative touch was the erection of two obelisks in pink marble in front of the main entrance. A replica Etruscan tomb was found during the restoration of the Villa, with imitation frescoes and decorations (Agati 2010). The layout of the property, its obelisks and the murals made the Villa a perfect Roman replica, which is why, I argue, Mussolini probably choose it as his home. The Roman style of the property supported the dictator's desire to be seen as the successor of the Emperor Augustus, embracing and performing a Fascist reframing of the Roman past as the basis of the new Fascist State.

Mussolini at Villa Torlonia

According to the official narrative, in 1925 the property was offered by Giovanni Torlonia to the Mussolini family to use as their residence in Rome, but arguably this property also suited Mussolini's desire to live like a Roman Emperor. Within the Fascistization of *Romanità*—the actualised concept at the basis of the new Fascist State—to live in a Roman-like villa was for Mussolini consistent with his constant preoccupation for his image. As other scholars have noted, the reuse of the symbols and ideals of the Roman Empire characterised the Fascist propaganda from the 1922 March on Rome onwards, when Mussolini's attitude towards the city strategically changed (Gentile 2007; Arthurs 2014; Neils 2011). As Arthurs argues, for Mussolini the Roman past was not just a mere repository of symbols that he could reuse; on the contrary, Fascism built its new State on the fundamental principle of recreating the Roman Empire in the modern era. For Mussolini it was crucial to be seen as either Caesar or Augustus in public, using iconography to support his resemblance (Neils 2011): the Villa Torlonia, with its grand Roman style, allowed the dictator to feel and be seen as a modern-day Emperor.

Fig. 3 Rome, Villa Torlonia: Mussolini's bedroom. Photo credit: Flaminia Bartolini.

This property was to be Mussolini's residence during the entire time of the dictatorship, and in the collective memory, this place represents his home. The Mussolini family continued to pay a symbolic rent after the death of Giovanni Torlonia, occupying the Palace or Casino Nobile until Mussolini's arrest on July 25, 1943. The Orangery was utilised as a cinema to watch newsreels and as the headquarters of the *Istituto Luce*. Mussolini modified some features of the property, creating a covered corridor above the first-floor balcony to link the two main bedrooms and two adjoining bathrooms. (During works to restore Valadier's early nineteenth-century neoclassical design of the Villa, all Mussolini's "edits" of the property were removed.) On the mezzanine, which was not in use at the time, he allocated bedrooms for the children and created an area for the servants, which is ultimately the most extensive remodelling of the property. Further corridors and stairs were added at this time, some of which are not open to the public today, while outside he set up a tennis court.

The first floor is where Mussolini and his wife Rachele had their apartments, symmetrically distributed around the main central marble staircase (Fig. 3-4). Similarly to other eighteenth-century properties, several ante-chambers and study rooms preceded the main bedroom itself. The

Fig. 4 Rome, Villa Torlonia: Rachele Mussolini's bedroom. Photo credit: Flaminia Bartolini.

current furniture in these rooms belonged to the Torlonia family, and the description of the rooms in the guidebook barely mentions the fact that Mussolini and Rachele lived in those bedrooms for twenty years. The Mussolini family made three structural changes to the property: the master bathrooms on the balcony, the mezzanine, and the two shelters and bunker.

After the liberation of Rome in 1945, the property was occupied by the Allies. When the property was returned to the Torlonia family in 1947, some of the buildings were in such an advanced state of disrepair that they decided to demolish rather than restore them. After 1938, when Giovanni Torlonia died, no direct descendants lived on the property, a situation which later led to a legal battle among relatives.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the property was abandoned, with overgrown grass, dead trees, and anti-fascist graffiti on both the exterior wall of the Casino Nobile and the main precinct of the property. Today, the only graffiti are some neo-fascist ones on the south-west corner of the external precinct.

In 1977, following a popular demonstration, the Villa was acquired by the State and the park was opened to the public in 1978 (Agati 2010). Despite being opened to the public, the buildings within the park were not restored, and many of the objects inside were stolen or damaged as a sign of protest. During that period, all the furniture from the time of Mussolini was burned or removed, and the Casino Nobile in particular sustained considerable damage.

Mussolini's comfortable residence in Rome, which he occupied at a time when many Romans had been displaced from their homes either because of his urban redevelopment plans or later because of the Allied bombings, became a place for collective remembrance for people who had experienced the war.

From 1996, the City Hall financed several conservation projects that started with the park and culminated in 2001 with the refurnishing of the property (Agati 2010). In 2002, the *Casino dei Principi* was re-opened as a museum to host the Torlonia collection and the archive of the Roman School of Painting (1920-1940); it was only in 2006 that the *Villino Nobile* was finally opened to the public, with furniture and sculptures from the *Casino dei Principi* and the Orangerie. In the catalogue Mussolini's alterations of the property were classified as "twentieth-century wrong-doing," and, where possible, the structures of his time were removed or abandoned in the garden (Agati 2010: 8). As for the second floor, which was in effect a space that the museum could use, it is now the home of the permanent collection of the Roman School of Modern Art.

Former centre-left wing Mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, declared in the pages of *La Repubblica* "I give you back the Villa of *Il Duce*," claiming that it was time to give the monuments of Fascism back to the public and that "it was not a good strategy to be afraid of Fascism and to hide it under the carpet" (qtd in Silvestri: 2006). In Rome he supported a crucial re-opening of Fascist frescoes, namely the uncovering of the apotheosis of Fascism in 1996—the wall painting on the Salon of Honour in the Foro Italico complex, which had been covered up with stucco (Carter and Martin 2017). This shift in perception of places linked to Fascism has been interpreted by scholars as a sign of the political revisionism which

Fig. 5 Rome, Villa Torlonia: information panels about the Torlonia family. Photo credit: Flaminia Bartolini.

Fig. 6 Rome, Villa Torlonia: information panels about the Mussolini family. Photo credit: Flaminia Bartolini.

Fig. 7 Rome, Villa Torlonia: information panels about the restoration of the villa. Photo credit: Flaminia Bartolini

started during the Berlusconi era in the 1990s (Carter and Martin 2017; Malone 2017; Ben-Ghiat 2017). From Veltroni's statements, however, it is clear that the initiative did not come only from the right, but also from the centre-left.

Mussolini's display

In my research, I looked at how Mussolini's life at Villa Torlonia has been presented to the public and I used visual and textual analysis to disentangle internal narratives. The visual analysis consisted of examining the visual effect of the descriptive panels about Mussolini's life displayed at the Villa and comparing the spaces devoted to the Mussolini and to the Torlonia families, respectively. Textual analysis considered the text produced in the form of catalogues, marketing materials, and display panels in order to discern the message that the museum chooses to share with the public. Finally, the narratives and discourses emerging from interviews with both staff and visitors gave a sense of how public perception of places linked to the dictatorship has changed from the post-war period to recent years.

The Museum of Villa Torlonia has one room dedicated to historical information about the property (Fig. 5-7). The room is divided into four sections: half of the room is dedicated to the previous owners of the Villa, namely the Torlonia and the Mussolini families, and the other to the state of ruination the property was left in the post-war period, prior to its restoration in 2006. The section on Previous Owners is evenly divided between the Torlonias and the Mussolinis, even though the former lived on the property for almost two centuries and the latter for only twenty years. Visually the layout of the two panels is the same—white on a black background—with the Mussolini photos also in black and

white, giving a general sense of uniformity. Overall, the visitor is made to compare these two families as two "equal" owners of the Villa, creating an imbalance in terms of historical relevance. The black and white effect gives a sense of antiquity, placing the protagonists in the same distant past.

In contrast, the part of the room which documents the ruination and subsequent restoration is full of colour, with a "modern/contemporary" feel to the display. Visual observation allows the visitor to chronologically distinguish the past, immediately to the left of the entrance in black and white, followed by the colourful contemporary period on the right. Mussolini is presented as just one of the historical figures that lived on this property, just as relevant as the original owners, but with even more personal photos of him at the Villa than there are paintings of the Torlonias. While his historical presence is made readily available visually, as the panels are the first thing the visitor sees on entering the room, there is, however, a substantial amount of information missing from the display, as we shall see below.

The textual description of the property consists of the official museum catalogue and the interpretation panels. The catalogue favours description over photos compared with the display, as the interpretation panels are not too densely written. Most of the information on Mussolini refers to what, for simplicity, are called the Bunkers, even though they are two bunkers and a shelter, and as mentioned before, no reference is made to Mussolini as a dictator or to Fascism as an authoritarian regime. Mussolini is not introduced—knowledge of who he was is assumed—and the only kind of information provided to the visitor by the catalogue and the interpretation panels is about his activities at the property. Separate entities manage the Museum of Villa Torlonia and the Bunkers: the former is managed by Soprintendenza Capitoline, and the latter by a privately owned organisation.

Mussolini's shelter and the bunkers

Once Italy entered World War II, Mussolini feared for the safety of his family under the threat of Allied bombing. The first option for a shelter was the wine cellar underneath the Fucino Lake, at the back of the Villa. Two steel doors, anti-gas masks, a ventilation system, electricity, telephone line, and beds were all installed there. A second exit was created beneath a hill on the other side of the lake. Believing the lake itself to be easily recognisable from the sky, Mussolini had it covered with mud. However, as there was an open-air walk to reach the shelter, he decided it would not be safe enough to reach at night (Agati 2010).

Consequently, he decided to use the basement area beneath the ballroom as a bunker, which would be easily accessible from the rooms above. The first bunker was an anti-gas one equipped with an ante-chamber supplied with decontamination showers. A new protective cover of concrete, 1.2 meter thick, was put on the roof of the bunker. There were two exits within the Villa; these are not currently accessible to the public. Both bunkers were supplied with a complete military support system including gas masks and a manually powered electricity generator in case of blackout.

When the bombings became more frequent, Mussolini decided to build a new nuclear bunker. This was built under the fake ruin of a fountain, and it is today accessible from the area in front of the fountain. The bunker is 6.5-meter deep and consists of a series of rooms connected by a corridor. There were two safety exits: the current main entrance and a second one found next to the recently discovered replica Etruscan tomb. The bunker has a cylindrical shape to absorb the impact of bombing better and 4-meter thick concrete walls around a steel framework (Fig. 8). One section of the interior wall is on display today to show that the quality of steel was poor because of the

Fig. 8: Villa Torlonia, Mussolini's bunker, central corridor.
Photo credit: Flaminia Bartolini.

war conditions. During a tour, the guide made fun of the fact that even Mussolini himself couldn't get things done properly in Rome and that the final price was three times more expensive than the first quote. It is also said that Mussolini had bad feelings about this place, and the bunker was still unfinished when he was arrested. The main entrance door to the bunker had not been installed, and the interior had not been furnished.

The opening of the Bunkers to the public was part of an outsourcing project that, in 2014, saw the management of the Villa given over to a private association of tour guides. The general ethos and the way the bunkers and shelter sites have been presented to the public reveal a new tendency for promoting Fascism as a tourist opportunity, a trend. Tours of the so-called Mussolini's Bunkers proved immediately to be very popular, partly due to the lack of information on this period in the city of Rome and in Italy generally. Information panels were on display only in the Villa shelter and the bunkers, as the old wine cellar had no space for panelling. Both the shelter and the bunkers have recently been renovated, providing the visitor with a good understanding of the space and its use. A variety of information about World War II, the Allies, and Mussolini is randomly distributed on the walls, including yet more family photos of the Mussolini family, but with no general chronology or exhibition narrative.

What emerged immediately from the visitor interviews was that the concept of "difficult heritage," attached to places of post-dictatorial memory, is not always perceived in that way. Neither the Villa nor the Bunkers were seen as negative, or shameful, or associated with any other sub-definition of "difficult heritage." Regardless of age, there was more interest in the historical events, but no negative value was attached to them. Visitors to the Villa were mainly interested in the older historical features of the property; for them it was simply "history," something that stays in the past. A sense of ownership surfaced in the comments on how the park had finally been given back to the Romans—as has traditionally happened with the other estates that had once belonged to noble families.

There is always a strong positive value attached to monuments and cultural heritage, associated with a nostalgic and idyllic past. Visitors to both the Bunkers and the Villa were principally coming here for leisure, to a place where they could enjoy a day out with family and friends, and where they could reconnect with a traditional Roman place. As already emphasised, possibly because the connection with Mussolini was not that evident or because his role as a family-man was stressed, this place was not perceived as "difficult."

Conclusions

As the analysis of Mussolini's Villa has suggested, heritage involves a continuous process of renegotiating the past, which can tell us more about the present than about the past. The concept of "heritage of dictatorship" can be a useful tool, helping our understanding of the shifting narratives that societies have constructed around dictatorial heritage sites in different political climates. As we have seen, the heritage-

making process at Mussolini's Villa reflects the diverse values which Italian society has attributed to Mussolini himself and which have informed heritage decisions at different times.

The theoretical framework of this paper was that Fascist heritage belongs to "difficult heritage," and its aim was to analyse Mussolini's Villa in Rome as a place of conflicting memories. Based on previous ethnographic work, most notably Sharon McDonald's work on Nazi heritage, there was an expectation that the public would experience a sense of uneasiness, if not trauma, walking around Villa Torlonia, known in the post-war period as the "Villa of the Evil" among Roman residents—a dark place, closed to the public. As we have seen, interviews proved that expectation to be wrong.

Defining places of the dictatorship as unequivocally "negative" gives a selective perception of how the public might experience these sites. I argue that categorising places tainted with the memory of a dictatorial past as "heritage of dictatorship" rather than "difficult heritage" would foster a conceptualisation of this particular heritage that allows for conflicting memories and interpretations to co-exist.

From a museum display point of view, the interpretation panels would have benefitted from a critical approach to the primary sources used, particularly the photographs from the *Istituto Luce,* which as they stand, leave the visitor without any form of contextualisation. The Villa is not any property, it is where the Italian dictator lived for the entire duration of his regime, first as prime minister and later as absolute leader. It was also the place that witnessed his first major defeat, when the Fascist Parliament deposed him on July 25, 1943, followed by his arrest and deportation to Mount Gran Sasso.

This is the place that, together with his office in Palazzo Venezia, saw the rise and fall of Fascism and of Mussolini as a leader. None of this is acknowledged in the current display. A detailed description of Mussolini's life at the Villa and what happened in the post-war period is totally missing from the interpretation panels. Possibly because the destruction and abandonment of the property underlines how highly symbolic this place is for Fascism, inclusion of substantial references to Mussolini would have led to further problematic questions on how historical narratives about Fascism have been presented or omitted.

The museum display in the Villa, with its lack of reference to Mussolini as the Fascist leader, in contrast to the extensive display on Mussolini's family life, is an example of conflicting national narratives of the regime, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of the image of Il Duce in popular culture and the post-war de-Fascistization process that divested the country of Fascist insignia. As we saw in Gundle *et al.* (2013), the cult of the dictator survived this fall and is still strongly rooted in the Italian public perception, promoted by films and cultural media. Sometimes Mussolini is subject to ironic reinterpretation, as a ridiculous version of the dictator in vignettes and satirical shows, but at other times, a humanised version of the leader is presented as a "family man" (Pieri 2013).

The display on the one hand gives a flavour of Mussolini's life as Head of State, and on the other hand, it deliberately omits any reference to Fascism and dictatorship, while the black and white rendering suggests almost a desire for this past to be distant. The selection of photos shown on the interpretation panels is the same as the one used by Mussolini's propaganda team, some of which are quite well-known: pictures of him meeting Heads of State or participating in family weddings and ceremonies. Showing such propaganda pictures, which were at the core of Mussolini's personality cult, in a national museum setting without any context of when and why those photos were taken is a dubious museological process which is arguably supporting the

portrayal of Il Duce in a more acceptable, "humanised" way.

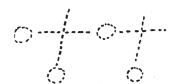
The renegotiation of Fascism that followed the fall of communism in 1989, which coincided with the beginning of the Berlusconi era in Italy, and the so-called crisis of the anti-fascist paradigm, has been defined as an "edited" version of Fascism (Ventresca 2004; Focardi 2014). The absence of any reference to Fascism or dictatorship in the Mussolini display might suggest the museum's intention to avoid political debate on this problematic past, while at the same time offering a "softer" and "better" version of Mussolini as a historical figure.

As in Spain and several other post-dictatorial societies, the need for unity and reconciliation after the devastation of war overcame the need to analyse and understand the events. After the first fall of Mussolini in July 1943, there was an immediate attack in Rome on the material symbols of Fascism, the Villa Torlonia being one of the victims of this de-Fascistization process: in this case it was not simply a question of Fascist symbols being removed, but the entire Villino Nobile was targeted, as the house was perceived as a symbolic reference to Il Duce himself. However, at the time of its reopening in 2006, given the stated intention of the Mayor Walter Veltroni that the country should finally come to terms with its Fascist past, it is questionable whether the display on Mussolini could really address the Italian interpretation of the past, or yet again sought to avoid doing so.

Elsewhere, in contemporary Spain for instance, the way the country is renegotiating its Fascist past has seen a different trend. Following the post-Franco "pact of silence," in 2007 legislation on Historical Memory was passed during the Zapatero administration, and the country is now trying to come to terms with the trauma of the Civil War, including a national campaign for the exhumation of mass murder sites (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2017). Franco's apartment in the Retiro Palace was closed to the public in 2008, with the explanation that there was nothing "historical" about his belongings. Furthermore, in Austria, following a long debate between the owner of the property and the City Hall, Hitler's house in Braunau has recently been transformed into the House of Responsibility, run by a charitable association whose aim is to ensure "difficult" history is not forgotten.

To conclude, I argue that the absence from the display of an in-depth analysis of Mussolini as a historical figure might be seen as a strategy by the museum to transform a place of negative memory into a positive one, but it also reflects a national struggle to question and confront the past. As emerged from my interviews, neither the museum visitors nor the visitors of the Bunkers have felt any kind of emotional discomfort in visiting these places: by eliminating the most traumatic events and any links to Mussolini as a dictator from the display, the visitor is not challenged, and the overall result is a pleasurable experience.

But, I must ask, what are the consequences of this over-simplification? Indeed, the visitor experience is a positive one, but at what price? What has emerged is that this comfortable narrative is in line with a renegotiation of Fascism as less divisive to meet the needs of a population characterized by conflicting memories. But when a "soft" reading of a dictatorship enters a national museum, this misinterpretation becomes part of the official narrative, and it may well lead to a distortion of the historical facts and serve attempts to construct an apologetic version of the past.



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