

Viali della Rimembranza : les allées du souvenir italiennes

Memorial Avenues and Remembrance Parks in Italy

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The Great War started in Italy on May 24, 1915 and ended on November 4, 1918, one week before all other European countries. In 1911, the Italian population was around 35 million: more than 5 million did participate directly in the war (generally speaking one out of seven, but in many villages even one out of five, the entire male population aged 18-39). 750.000 soldiers died, according to accredited estimations obtained by counting soldiers who died in combat, went missing in action, died of illness in Italy or abroad because prisoner of war.

Even during the war, the soldiers' families, friends, and sometimes war veterans or spontaneous citizens committees started erecting monuments, gravestones and memorials in all towns and villages, united by the desire to preserve the memory of their relatives and acquaintances and, at the same time, by the need to mourn, seeking a plausible motivation for the "useless slaughter".

This was the situation when, end of 1922, two Italian politicians changed the story: Dario Lupi and Arnaldo Mussolini.

Dario Lupi was born in San Giovanni Valdarno (Arezzo) on March 28, 1876 and deceased in Rome on December 14, 1932. He graduated in law, became a lawyer known throughout the region as a brilliant and sought-after speaker.

Interventionist, fighter in the Great War, organizer of the first fascist squads in Valdarno, in 1921 he became deputy for the constituency Siena-Arezzo-Grosseto and, after the march on Rome (October 1922), he was in the first Mussolini government as undersecretary for Public Education.

Starting from December 1922, he spread propaganda all over Italy with the Memorial Avenues and Parks of Remembrance, a symbol of the rebirth of the soldiers who died in the Great War. As the French Revolution entrusted the "tree of freedom" as the testimony of its ideals, so fascism wanted to entrust the memory of those killed in war to the tree-lined avenues and park.

The idea had arisen in him - according to what he wrote end of 1923 - after hearing about an Avenue of Remembrance in Montreal, flanked by young trees, each bearing a plaque with the name of a deceased.

Instead, according to "Il Mondo" newspaper, Lupi took up mind and phrases from the correspondence of an army medical officer, pioneer of Italian aviation and at that time in Canada, L. Falchi, without ever mentioning the source.

On December 27, 1922, Lupi sent an official mail to all Italian school directors, the "Regi Provveditori agli Studi". In this document, Lupi advised that "the school children of Italy should be initiated by the implementation of a noble and compassionate idea: to create a Memorial Avenue or a Park of Remembrance in every city, in every country, in every village. They will plant a tree for every dead soldier in the Great War".

The day after, the Ministry of Education published a document on the "Official Bulletin" adding the "Rules for the Memorial Avenues and Parks of Remembrance".

The ministerial document provided for the establishment of special "Executive Committees" owing the task of carrying out all the administrative and logistical procedures for the success of the initiative.

The Ministry stated rules and indications on how to build the Parks and Avenues:

A list of the most suitable tree species, according to various geographical areas of the peninsula;

Advice on the necessary soil preparation for planting trees;

Indications about the right size of the wooden protection supports for the metal plate;

Instructions about the placement of the metal plate with the degree, the generality and the cause of death of the soldier.

[...] three wooden rulers of the national flag three colors [...] describe a triangular pyramid trunk consolidated by six thin iron crosspieces [...]

[...] One of the rulers, the white one (somewhat longer than the other two), must have had an enameled iron label at 10 cm from the upper end, with the words:

IN MEMORY
OF (degree, first name, last name)
DIED IN THE GREAT WAR
ON (date)
AT (name of battle) “.

Only the soldiers who died on the battlefield or following the injuries reported in the combat could be associated to trees. This way, the initiative excluded all the soldiers died for illness, even if due to the extreme and unhealthy living conditions during the war.

The mail to the Royal “Provveditore agli Studi” (Director of Education) of Ravenna, on January 27, 1923, again signed by the Undersecretary of State Dario Lupi, corrected this choice. In this document, Lupi stated that there was no limit to the minimum number of trees, set at first at 20, and that military deaths caused by illness could be included in the lists at the discretion of the individual Executive Committees.

The initiative, full of triumphalism and regime rhetoric however, responded to the popular desire to pay homage and preserve the memory of the soldiers who died during the war and many people all around Italy received it with great participation.

Arnaldo Mussolini, (January 11, 1885 – December 21, 1931) was an Italian journalist and politician. He was the brother of Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, and a fascist himself.

After some years as a professor, Arnaldo Mussolini, like his brother Benito, participated in World War I, attaining the rank of lieutenant and in 1919 after the war's end, he moved to Milan.

In Milan, Arnaldo became managing director of the newspaper founded by his brother, “Il Popolo d'Italia” (“The People of Italy”) and took over leadership of the newspaper when Benito became prime minister in 1922.

His interest in nature led himself to dedicate to environmentalist causes, such as forests revival, the agriculture organization, the drainage projects, and becoming the first president of the Comitato Nazionale Forestale (National Forest Committee).

He also started publishing “Il Bosco” (“The Wood”), a fortnightly supplement of the newspaper, as the official magazine of the National Forestry Committee, deeply describing and explaining forestry and, in general, urban and extra urban green landscapes. On this supplement, he published every two weeks long lists of newly built memorial avenues and remembrance parks in towns and villages.

The institutions involvement was for sure an important element for the success, as we can argue by reading the book published by Lupi himself “Viali e Parchi della Rimembranza” (“Memorial Avenues and Parks of Remembrance”). As of October 15, 1923, there were 5735 Executive Committees out of a total of 8305 Municipalities and 1048 avenues and parks already inaugurated.

With the establishment of the Parks and Memorial Avenues, the fascist regime appropriated the commemoration of the dead soldiers of the First World War, making it an instrument of political propaganda and a way to increase and consolidate popular consensus.

The role of the school

The school played a fundamental role in the realization and diffusion of Dario Lupi's project in Italy.

All teachers, along with the representatives of the municipal administrations, the most authoritative associations and citizens, formed the "Executive Committees" and had the responsibility for the establishment and coordination of all the phases of the construction of the Parks and the Avenues of Remembrance.

Moreover, the Committees had to compose the list of the soldiers (by obtaining data from the Municipalities and the Military Districts), establish the number of trees, identify the place, find the necessary funds through public events and initiatives and organize the inauguration ceremony.

The students had the task of planting and caring for the young trees, as each tree represented a hero dead for the country, renewed in the memory and in a physical place, so again in the survivors community.

However, behind the declared intention of the government to honour the memory and instil respect for the dignity of the dead soldiers, there was the will to transmit and develop in the school activities related to the cult of the Homeland and the Hero and to educate the pupils to the values of fascist ideology. Many illustrious presences of the political world and hymns to the regime took part in every inauguration of these parks. Furthermore, the project was part of the broader and more complex program of the school reform promoted by Giovanni Gentile, aimed to a strict and elite school, dedicated to "the best".

In fact, the Royal Decree n. 2747 of 9 December 1923 established the annual election of Guard of Honour of the Park of Remembrance among the most deserving students.

The results:

By looking at the data published in 1923, can easily figure a new avenue of remembrance in almost every small to medium Italian village (around 8000), while in big towns a new park dedicated to dead soldiers. First park was in Florence (1923), followed by Naples (many terraces on Naples's Gulf), Rome (six thousand trees) and Turin (inaugurated in 1925 by the King Vittorio Emanuele III, 44 hectares, 5000 trees, 400 species, 12 km roads and paths, the winged victory bronze statue was the largest in the world).

Protection

The law n. 559 of March 21, 1926, assumed the Parks and Avenues of Remembrance as "public monuments".

The law n. 78 of March 7, 2001, protect every monument related with the First World War, so the avenues and related trees.

Unfortunately, in 2008, Italian government abrogated all laws issued before 1970, so the law 559 should be no more valid too; but parliament built a list of still useful laws, and 559 was in the list.

Anyway, law 78 of 2001 and Codex "Urbani" for the landscapes still protects memorial avenues and parks of remembrance.

Memorial Avenues and Park of remembrance today

After the Second World War, avenues and gardens were gradually forgotten and, in many cases, radically transformed. Due to a form of "damnatio memoriae", were locations considered symbols of past governments have had to pay, these places changed radically, transforming also their authentic significance.

We do not have a general directory for memorial avenues and park of remembrance in Italy; there are partial lists for villages, or sometime an aggregate view for some province and two regions (Abruzzo, and Basilicata). We can anyway guess the remaining memorial avenues and park of remembrance: at least one thousand, probably many in bad conditions, with old trees suffering from bad pruning, or no care for many years. We have some comparative data for Abruzzo, were in 1923 we count 188 committee for Memorial Avenues, and 27 completed projects. A recent (2014) study from Aldo Giorgio Pezzi and Patrizia Luciana Tomassetti analyzed 52 remaining Memorial Avenues and Parks of Remembrance in Abruzzo.

An Italian organization, "Istituto centrale per il catalogo e la documentazione" (Central institute for lists and documentation) started a project for the cataloguing of all the remaining Memorial Avenues and monuments related to WW1; at the moment they completed only the section for monuments, collecting info about more than 6000 ones.

We think only a new initiative involving municipalities, schools and Alpine troops could complete this important task; as Memorial Avenues and Park of Remembrance Cataloguing is the first step for protecting and restore this historic heritage.



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Angelo Porta is a counsellor of Legambiente, the leading Italian association for environmental protection with more than 100,000 members. His main area of environmental interest is trees and tree-lined roads in Italy. Angelo's action started as a result of unmotivated tree felling along roads in Asti province where he lives, fighting local public administrations by writing in newspapers, organizing events, developing presentations, gathering much info about Italian laws and actions performed in a 200+ page e-book freely available at <http://bit.ly/2Dd1weZ>. Angelo is also the author of "Roatto nella Grande Guerra", a book about the soldiers from a small village in the Lower Monferrato who lost their lives in the First World War. He has a degree in electronic engineering and works as a computer engineer for large ITC projects in Italy and around the world.

Angelo Porta est conseiller auprès de Legambiente, la plus grande association italienne de protection de l'environnement, avec plus de 100 000 membres. Il s'y occupe principalement des arbres et des routes bordées d'arbres en Italie. Son action a démarré avec des abattages d'arbres injustifiés le long des routes de la province d'Asti où il vit. Il s'est opposé aux administrations publiques locales en écrivant dans la presse, en organisant des événements, en faisant des conférences, en rassemblant des informations sur la législation italienne et les actions réalisées, rassemblées dans un e-book de plus de 200 pages disponible en ligne <http://bit.ly/2Dd1weZ>. Angelo est aussi l'auteur de "Roatto nella Grande Guerra", un livre sur les soldats d'un petit village du Bas Monferrato morts pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Il est ingénieur en électronique et travaille comme informaticien sur de très gros projets TIC en Italie et dans le monde.

