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TELEVISIONISM

MEMORY REDUX: THE *FOIBE* ON ITALIAN TELEVISION

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This article argues that the overwhelming success of the television drama Il cuore nel pozzo *(Alberto Negrin, 2005) signals a shift in the conception of national history and identity in the Italian popular imagination. In conjunction with Negrin's earlier film* Perlasca: un eroe italiano *(2002), the film can be read as a calculated and politically motivated attempt to re-code the memory of the Second World War as one of heroism and shared victimhood. Ultimately,* Il cuore nel pozzo *forms part of the broader movement to establish the* foibe *as the 'Italian Holocaust', deflecting attention away from the crimes of Fascism. The crucial difference between the two films is that* Perlasca *is based on the real historical person of Giorgio Perlasca, whereas the characters in* Il cuore nel pozzo *are purely fictional and their story is merely set against a specific historical backdrop. The film nevertheless makes various explicit and implicit claims to historical veracity, for example the interpolation of ostensibly documentary footage, which, however, turns out to be a fabrication. The intrusion of this documentary idiom into this fictional representation in fact mirrors the ongoing campaign to superimpose a fictional narrative on the historical record more generally in contemporary Italy.*

KEYWORDS: foibe, *Holocaust, memory, Fascism, repression*

INTRODUCTION

In April 2002, the Italian daily *La Stampa* published an interview with then communications minister Maurizio Gasparri (Alleanza Nazionale) about the future of Italy's state television network RAI following Silvio Berlusconi's electoral victory the year before. Among other things, Gasparri discussed plans to produce a miniseries for Italian television on the subject of the *foibe*. The term *foibe* refers to a series of executions that were carried out in 1943 and again in 1945, mainly (but not exclusively) by Yugoslav partisans at Italy's north-eastern border. The bodies were disposed of in deep, cavernous pits, called *foibe*, in the mountains of the region.[1] Since the 1990s, the memory of the *foibe* has occupied an ever more prominent position in public discourse in Italy. Its proponents, especially on the political right, have sought to present the *foibe* as a forgotten episode in Italian

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history, the memory of which was suppressed by the communists in the aftermath of the war.[2] Bringing the *foibe* to the small screen would go a long way toward raising public awareness of this episode. Rather than a documentary, however, Gasparri was envisioning a fictional story that would play to the emotional sensibilities of the viewers:

> Se facciamo un documentario, magari con la riesumazione delle ossa, provochiamo soltanto ripulsa. Penso che sarebbe più efficace una fiction che raccontasse la storia di una di quelle povere famiglie. Sono grandi tragedie. Come quella dell'Olocausto o di Anna Frank.[3]

This statement is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was made just two months after the overwhelmingly successful premiere of the television miniseries *Perlasca: un eroe italiano* (Alberto Negrin, 2002), about the 'Italian Schindler' Giorgio Perlasca. An unprecedented number of viewers — *circa* thirteen million — tuned in to watch celebrated actor Luca Zingaretti as Perlasca outwit the evil SS commander Bleiber while attempting to save thousands of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. Negrin's film focuses entirely on the heroic actions of its protagonist and leaves unexplained the complex historical and political background of Nazi-occupied Hungary at the end of the Second World War (Mauro Sassi's contribution to this volume discusses the film's appropriation and modification of the source material in greater detail). At base, the film is a conventional Holocaust rescue narrative that relies on familiar clichés and topoi and plays down Perlasca's ties to the Fascist party. Indeed, the film has been read as a milestone in the ongoing rehabilitation of Fascism in Italy.[4]

To be fair, it may be unreasonable to expect a high degree of historical rigour from the genre of television melodrama; after all, the primary aim of the *fiction* is emotional identification rather than the transmission of historical knowledge.[5] Negrin himself counters criticism about historical inaccuracy and allegations of revisionism in his films by insisting on his artistic freedom as a storyteller: 'Il mio mestiere è di raccontare storie […]. Non ho mai girato […] per motivi politici'.[6] It is difficult to demonstrate any direct political influence on Negrin's aesthetic choices, but it is nevertheless striking that Negrin's films have met with such enthusiasm on the part of the right-wing political establishment in Italy, and it would in any case be naive to assume that any film about the memory of World War II, especially one made for Italian television under Berlusconi, could ever be entirely apolitical. When it comes to Fascism and the Second World War, memory is always political.

Negrin may genuinely believe that the films he makes are free of political bias, but this very fact opens them up to instrumentalization. So when Gasparri claims that a fictional drama is more 'effective' than a documentary, what exactly does he mean? The success of *Perlasca* proved that the Italian viewing public was enthusiastic about historical melodrama to an unprecedented degree. Documentary filmmakers can only dream of reaching such a vast audience. If the *foibe* could be given the Perlasca-treatment, so to speak, this episode in Italy's history — and, crucially, a specific version of this history — would be catapulted to the centre of public consciousness overnight, something a documentary would be far less likely to achieve.

Negrin's next major historical production was *Il cuore nel pozzo*, broadcast in February 2005. A record-breaking sixteen million watched the two-part miniseries about an Istrian-Italian boy whose parents perish in the *foibe* in the aftermath of the Second World War. As early as summer 2004 the press had begun reporting on the film, its plot, as well as its background, presenting the *foibe* as a disavowed tragedy that had been hushed up for largely political reasons. According to the weekly *Panorama*, for example, the *foibe* were 'una tragedia rimossa costata non meno di 20–30 mila vittime, uccise dalla feroce repressione del regime di Tito. Un massacro e una persecuzione di massa con un solo obiettivo, ancora attuale: la pulizia etnica'.[7] The rhetoric of the piece is emblematic of the way in which the discourse on the *foibe* seeks to align them with the great persecutions and genocides of the twentieth century, from the Holocaust to the 'disappeared' of South America to the war in Kosovo — indeed, it is important to note that the renewed interest in the *foibe* coincided with the atrocities being committed in Yugoslavia in the early to mid-1990s, and these two acts of 'Slav barbarism' were seen as directly correlative. This undoubtedly is what the article's author means when, in describing the *foibe* as an act of ethnic cleansing, she maintains that this is 'ancora attuale'.[8] This subtext was not lost on the people of the former Yugoslavia. That summer, the still unfinished film was the object of a minor diplomatic incident between Italy and Slovenia, when the Slovenian foreign minister Ivo Vajgl issued a statement calling the film 'una provocazione e un'offesa per il popolo sloveno' as well as a 'falso storico, che trasforma in colpevole un popolo che per tutta la sua storia è stato invece sottoposto all'aggressività dei popoli vicini'.[9] Maurizio Gasparri responded to these allegations in an interview with *La Repubblica*, saying that talk of a diplomatic incident was exaggerated, and that, as for allegations of historical falsification, it would be up to the viewers to judge for themselves. He went on to say that he had supported the film because of its value in restoring a piece of collective memory that had been suppressed through the cultural hegemony of the left.[10] Whatever Alberto Negrin's opinion on the matter, the film was thoroughly politicized long before it was ever shown on television.[11]

Il cuore nel pozzo was broadcast by RAI on two consecutive evenings leading up to the first *Giorno del ricordo*, a national memorial day instituted by the Berlusconi government to commemorate the victims of the *foibe* and the Istrian exodus. On 10 February 2005, thousands attended the commemorative ceremonies in Trieste, Rome, Turin, and other Italian cities. The following year, the national *foibe* memorial at Basovizza underwent a significant artistic and architectural overhaul, and since then has been attracting tens of thousands of visitors every year.[12] In 2008, a monument to the victims of the *foibe* was inaugurated in Rome, and in 2010, a special exhibition opened at the Italian Chamber of Deputies, inaugurated by former Alleanza Nazionale-leader Gianfranco Fini. The film and the institution of the memorial day represent the pivotal moment of a process by which the *foibe* have moved from the margins to the centre of the Italian memory landscape. In this article I read *Il cuore nel pozzo* as an expression of a broader shift in the conception of national history and identity in the Italian popular imagination. I examine the strategies employed in the film and in the discourse on the *foibe* as a whole that aims to establish the events as a genocide perpetrated against the Italian people. While *Perlasca* is based

on the real historical person of Giorgio Perlasca, the characters in *Il cuore* are purely fictional and their story is merely set against a specific historical backdrop. It nevertheless makes various explicit and implicit claims to historical veracity, for example, the interpolation of ostensibly archival footage, which, however, turns out to be a fabrication. I argue that the intrusion of this documentary idiom into the fictional representation mirrors the ongoing campaign more generally to superimpose a fictional narrative on the historical record of the *foibe*, for instance at the Foiba di Basovizza memorial near Trieste.

The creation of an Italian tragedy

Neither historians nor the public have come to a consensus about the 'truth' of the *foibe*: on the contrary, they are the subject of ongoing heated debates concerning, for example, the number of victims. While the historical sources speak of between 1500 and 2000 *infoibati*, the numbers circulating in public discourse range between 10,000 and 30,000.[13] Opinion is sharply divided also on the motivation for these killings and on the identity of the victims. Some see the *foibe* as reprisals for Fascist crimes against the Yugoslav population and thus consider the victims to have been members or supporters of the Fascist regime. Others see the killings as an act of ethnic cleansing where Italian men, women, and children were indiscriminately massacred because they were Italians: an 'Italian Holocaust'.[14] In this context, the emigration (or *esodo*, as it is often termed in Italian) of a large part of the Italian population of Istria and Dalmatia (between 200,000 and 350,000 people) to Trieste and other Italian cities in the decade following, is seen as another component of this anti-Italian ethnic cleansing campaign.

Until the mid-1990s, the memory of the *foibe* and the *esodo* was confined almost exclusively to Trieste and the surrounding region, particularly among the families of the exiles and various right-wing nationalist organizations. In public discourse, the subject was neglected and/or avoided for various reasons; most importantly the Cold War tensions between Italy and Yugoslavia regarding the north-eastern border, but also because an investigation into the *foibe* would inevitably have triggered an investigation into Italian war crimes in Yugoslavia. This began to change when, following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and facilitated by the shift to the right in Italian politics marked by Berlusconi's electoral victory, investigations into the *foibe* killings began in Italy.[15] The efforts to establish the *foibe* and the exodus as a key moment in Italian history and not just a matter of local concern culminated in 2005 in the establishment of the *Giorno del ricordo* observed on 10 February, the date in 1947 when Italy officially ceded the territories of Istria, Fiume, and Dalmatia to Yugoslavia. The day is dedicated to the memory of the 'tragedia degli italiani e di tutte le vittime delle foibe, dell'esodo dalle loro terre degli istriani, fiumani e dalmati nel secondo dopoguerra e della più complessa vicenda del confine orientale'.[16] This 'Italian tragedy' is set implicitly against the 'Jewish tragedy' of the Holocaust; and indeed the *Giorno del ricordo* is itself closely modelled on the *Giorno della memoria*, International Holocaust Memorial Day, observed just two weeks earlier, on 27 January. The marked similarity of the names of the two days and their temporal proximity is on the one hand an expression of the effort on the part of its promoters to establish the *foibe* as a rival memory of specifically Italian

victimhood, but on the other hand it reveals the extent to which the *Giorno del ricordo* and the proponents of the *foibe* narrative rely on the familiar iconography and terminology of Holocaust memory in order to legitimize it as a genocide. Created on the model of the *Giorno della memoria*, the *Giorno del ricordo* presents the Italians who died in the *foibe* as victims of genocidal persecution, as evinced by the slogan 'Infoibati, perché italiani'. In this context, it has become common to refer to the victims of the *foibe* as 'martyrs', and many Italian towns now have a 'Via Martiri delle Foibe'. The term not only emphasizes the innocence of the victims but also the deliberate religious connotations in the commemorative discourse that presents the *foibe* as sacred shrines to the victimhood of the Italian people. This narrative of Italian innocence is reinforced in popular representations and images, for example on posters of the *Giorno del ricordo*, depicting a little girl holding a suitcase bearing the inscription 'esule giuliana'. Such a presentation of local history as one of Italian national victimhood blots out the historical events that preceded them, namely the persecution of Slovenes and Croats under Italian Fascism.[17] Furthermore, the narrative presented plays down the fact that Italian partisans as well as German troops used the *foibe* to dispose of enemies and that the remains of German soldiers were also found there.[18] It further disregards the fact that several thousand Slovenes and Croats, who were equally threatened because they did not approve of the new Yugoslav government, emigrated from Istria as well.[19]

Il cuore nel pozzo should be seen in this context as an example of the deliberate attempt to align these two events, as illustrated also by Gasparri's stated wish to have a miniseries about the *foibe* that takes the 'grandi tragedie […] dell'Olocausto o di Anna Frank' as models. While Gasparri's remark has generally been taken to refer to the Holocaust as such, it is more likely that he is in fact referring to the American television miniseries *Holocaust* (Marvin J. Chomsky, 1978), and the fictional story of the Weiss family in Nazi Germany, which was broadcast in Italy in 1979 under the title *Olocausto*. In Germany, the series had been an immense success, serving as a catalyst for an intense public outpouring of grief and prompted an entire generation of young Germans to engage their parents and grandparents in a conversation about the Nazi atrocities and to begin a process of coming to terms with the past that had been largely suppressed up to that point.[20] Gasparri clearly saw the potential in producing a comparable melodrama in order to present the Italians as victims of a tragedy on par with the Holocaust.

MANUFACTURED HISTORY: *IL CUORE NEL POZZO*

Let us now turn our attention to *Il cuore nel pozzo*. The film is set in Istria in 1945, in the period following the retreat of the German *Wehrmacht* and the arrival of the Yugoslav partisans, who have come to claim the territory. The narrative centres on Novak, a Yugoslav partisan commandant, whose unit is engaged in reclaiming the land from the Italian occupiers. Novak is also engaged in an increasingly desperate search for Carlo, an illegitimate son he has by Giulia, a local Italian woman whom he raped shortly before the outbreak of the war. Giulia hides Carlo with a well-to-do Italian couple and their son Francesco. Walter, a friend of the family, warns them to flee the town, since the advancing Yugoslavs will not spare anybody. Walter is a member of the Italian Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (CLN), the

part of the Italian Resistance that was initially aligned with the Yugoslav resistance in the struggle against Fascism but subsequently broke with them. We watch as the partisans systematically round up all the Italians, including Francesco's parents, and throw them into a *foiba*. Francesco and Carlo manage to escape, with the help of a ragtag group of characters: Walter, Ettore, an Italian soldier, his Slovene fiancée Anja, and Don Bruno, an Italian priest who runs an orphanage on the edge of town. Novak, whose search for Carlo has turned into a sort of private war, hunts them down again and again. Giulia throws herself into a *foiba* to save her son's life, Walter and Don Bruno are killed trying to protect the children, and at the end only Ettore and Anja remain. In a dramatic showdown, Ettore kills Novak and they join the enormous mass of people who are fleeing Istria.

Structured around the simplistic dichotomy of good versus evil, the film portrays the *titini* (the Tito-partisans) as a gang of thugs and criminals driven solely by their hatred of the Italians, and the Italians as innocent victims who are persecuted and driven out of their home only because the 'Slavs' want their land. The entire story is told from the perspective of eight-year old Francesco who records the events in a diary given to him by his mother prior to her death. The trope of the diary recalls Anne Frank, and the focus on the fates of these orphaned children allows the filmmakers to dispense with any reflection on the complex political aspects of the Italian presence in Istria. The children's innocence is beyond question, regardless of whatever crimes the Fascists may have committed in the region.[21] Nor does Negrin hesitate to employ the familiar iconography of Holocaust cinema. The Yugoslav partisans are endowed with the attributes commonly associated with representations of Nazis: they wear uniforms and jackboots, are accompanied by German Shepherds, and they round up men, women, and children to be driven away in large trucks. In contrast, the few Italian soldiers we see at the end of the film are shown as a dispersed and poorly clad group, led by Ettore, the 'good Italian', who is opposed to violence and only uses it to defend himself and those he loves. The only figure who does not fit into this division is Anja, the Slovene woman who sides with the Italians and who pays a high price for the 'betrayal' of her compatriots: her rape at the hands of one of Novak's men.

As Don Bruno's housekeeper, Anja in fact represents the other cultural stereotype regarding the 'Slavic' people, namely that of the humble and devoted servant.[22] Femininity in general is coded as maternal and martyrial, and Anja, like all the other women in the film, is presented as good-natured, apolitical, passive, and innocent. The status of masculinity is more ambiguous and fundamentally threatening. On the one hand there are the barbaric *titini*, who are associated with rape as a specifically 'Slav' form of violence, and on the other are the Italians, all of whom are weak and emasculated in one way or another. Don Bruno, a celibate man of the cloth; Ettore, the pacifist anti-hero who in the first scene of the film throws away his rifle in a gesture of symbolic auto-castration, and finally Walter, the crippled intellectual, whose failure represents the wounded inefficacy of the Italian resistance. Heroism is reserved for the child Francesco, who lives to tell the tale, preserving this story of sacrifice and victimhood without having been implicated in the political turmoil that caused it.[23] He, the future of Italy, has no blood on his hands.

As in Negrin's earlier film, the historical context — the Fascist persecution of Slovenes and Croats, and the German occupation of the region — is almost

entirely absent. Only in the beginning do we get a glimpse of a few German soldiers who then quickly retreat. With the exception of Ettore and a handful of soldiers, all the Italians are civilians. There is not a single Italian Fascist in the entire film; the Fascists' collaboration with the Nazis between 1943 and 1945 likewise goes unmentioned. Nor are there any Slovene or Croat inhabitants in the village, leaving viewers with the impression that Istria was exclusively inhabited by anti-Fascist Italians. The swarthy and unshaven *titini* are referred to (and even refer to each other) generically as 'Slavs', rather than as Slovenes and Croats — and no attempt is made to acknowledge the fact that the units led by Tito in 1945 also included Italians and Greeks.[24] Furthermore, apart from the red star on their berets, there is nothing to identify the Yugoslav partisans as communists engaged in the fight against Fascism — indeed, as in *Perlasca*, the political dimension of the Second World War is entirely suppressed in favour of a Manichean narrative of good versus evil. This political and historical vacuum is ostensibly justified by the fact that the film relates a personal story that is seen through the eyes of the child Francesco. The few bits of historical information the film provides are mainly through Walter. There are two crucial exchanges between Walter and Novak which give insight into Novak's motivations and on the political and ethnic background to the conflict. In the first of these, Walter tries to argue with Novak to save Giulia, who has allowed Novak to catch her in order to help Ettore and the orphans escape:

> WALTER: Con quale diritto stai massacrando dei civili? Quello che stai facendo non c'entra nulla con questa guerra!
> NOVAK: Credi ancora a queste storie? [Novak's men laugh.] Sei proprio un illuso, Walter, un illuso!
> WALTER: Devi fermarti! E devi farlo subito, Novak!
> NOVAK: Non hai capito? Ovunque arriverà il nostro esercito l'Italia non esisterà più. Perché questa terra è nostra, non è Italia, e l'avete sempre saputo!
> WALTER: È un massacro! Questa non è una guerra, questo è un massacro di civili innocenti! Perché?!
> NOVAK: Perché? Per pareggiare i conti, amico mio, e purtroppo per voi ne avete ancora un bel po' da pagare. Io ho tutto il tempo. È a voi che ne rimane poco.
> WALTER: Novak tu sei un pazzo!
> NOVAK: Credi? Forse hai ragione. [He tears up the list of prisoners.] E allora non ti stupire per quello che mi vedrai ancora fare.[25]

This exchange reveals the broader expansionist and genocidal ambitions of the 'Slav' aggressor that threaten the Italian nation. This becomes even clearer in the next exchange, which takes place at the edge of a *foiba* where a group of prisoners are about to be executed:

> WALTER: Fermali, Novak! Non potete fare questo, fermali! Sono solo dei civili, cosa c'entrano?
> NOVAK: Quando i fascisti ci trattavano come schiavi, voi civili, che cos'avete fatto? Avete mai mosso un dito per aiutarci? Avete impedito che accadesse?
> WALTER: Ma per questo tu massacri degli innocenti? Non farlo, ti prego, non farlo! Il loro sangue non servirà a lavare il vostro.

NOVAK: Invece sì. Io non conosco nessun altro modo.
WALTER: Ascoltami, Novak! Noi dobbiamo cercare di porre fine alle vendette. Dobbiamo imparare a vivere in pace e per questo abbiamo lottato! È il nostro dovere.
NOVAK: Davvero, speri di fermare la guerra con le chiacchiere? Per vincerla non dobbiamo avere pietà di nessuno!
[Novak's men shoot the prisoners who fall into the foiba.]
WALTER: Assassino!
NOVAK: Capisci ora? Lo senti quanto mi odi? Quanto vuoi la mia morte? È lo stesso odio che provo io in ogni momento. È così che vanno le cose. Siamo fatti tutti così!
WALTER: Assassino …

Walter urges Novak to see that his reprisals are disproportionate and misguided. As a member of the Resistance, Walter feels that with the routing of the Fascists he and Novak should be on the same side, since they are both anti-Fascists. Now that the war has ended, they should all be able to live peacefully. Walter sees the conflict in political terms, whereas for Novak it is an ethnic question. While Walter clings to the distinction between Fascists and Italians, for Novak the civilian population is complicit in the crimes of Fascism; all Italians are responsible for the oppression of his people. Thus, the indiscriminate massacre of Italian women and children is not an aberration as Walter sees it, but rather central to what Novak and the *titini* are trying to achieve, namely the total de-Italianization of the region: wherever his army arrives, says Novak, Italy will cease to exist.

The scenes in which the Yugoslav partisans round up Italian men, women, and children in broad daylight contradict historical sources and many eyewitness testimonies, which assert that the arrests happened at night and with the help of lists that rarely included women and never children.[26] In the light of Novak's ethnic conception of the conflict, it is clear that the film seeks to associate his methods with the techniques of repression and persecution employed by the Nazis and the Fascists before them. This results not only in an inversion of the perpetrator-victim dichotomy, but also presents the *foibe* killings as a genocide of the entire Italian population of this region prompted by the 'Slav' hatred of the Italian race. It is surely no coincidence that the mother of Novak's son is named Giulia: her rape at his hands thus symbolizing the 'Slavic rape' of the entire region of Venezia Giulia.[27] Like for the Jews in Nazi Germany, the film suggests, the only alternative to a certain and cruel death in the *foibe* is for all the Italians to flee.

The final scene thus shows a stream of refugees, in rags and with suitcases and bundles. It is this last scene that brings the film's problematic relation to historical accuracy into sharp focus. Once Ettore has killed Novak and theatrically broken his rifle in two with tears streaming down his face, the crying Francesco at his side, the film undergoes an abrupt shift in style. The insistent musical score that has pervaded every scene up to this point suddenly falls away, and we see a procession of people, mainly women, children, and the elderly, in grainy black and white with only the sound of their footsteps on the dirt road. In voice-over we hear Francesco say 'alcuni dicono che sono storie che si dovrebbero dimenticare e che è inutile di parlarne, ma io non ci riesco'. These images, reminiscent of the countless newsreels and documentary films about World War II and the Holocaust, give the impression that we are now seeing archival footage of this exodus. It is only after a few

minutes, as we see Anja and then also Carlo among the refugees, that we realize that the scene is still part of the film's fiction. The camera zooms in on Anja's face, and then Ettore and Francesco come running, calling Anja's name, and the four are reunited. The music resumes, as does Francesco's voice-over:

> ancora una cosa, mamma: non siamo stati solo noi a dover lasciare le nostre case. C'era moltissima gente che scappava, più di 300·000 m'hanno detto. Ma migliaia di persone sono rimaste giù, in fondo al pozzo, come voi. Ti voglio bene, mamma, ti voglio bene, papà.

As Francesco says this, the film cuts to a panoramic long shot showing a seemingly endless line of refugees proceeding along a winding path down the hill towards a bay where a large steamship awaits to take them to safety.

Despite the documentary idiom employed by this scene, the mass exodus presented here could never actually have taken place in this way. The emigration from Istria, which lasted more than ten years, is here distilled into a single scene, suggesting that all these people left their homes at the same time, on foot, taking almost nothing with them.[28] As an artistic device, the condensation of a larger event into a single powerful image is of course perfectly legitimate, but in switching to this archival aesthetic, it is as if the film were trying to present itself as *evidence* of the events it depicts, in an attempt to legitimize itself as a source of actual historical knowledge, and it is this spurious bid for historical authenticity that renders *Il cuore nel pozzo* a far more problematic cultural artefact than something like *Holocaust*. Although the Weiss family, which stands at the centre of the latter, is purely fictional, the historical backdrop and chronology of events that propel their story are authentic, and it is precisely this sort of legitimacy that *Il cuore nel pozzo* is aiming for. By embedding this pseudo-archival footage in the end, however, it oversteps a boundary, revealing its aspirations to actual historical authenticity. This device is a common feature of films that are 'based on a true story', which at the end point beyond the internal logic of the narrative and toward an actual historical referent. In *Perlasca*, Negrin makes a similar move, showing a brief clip from an interview with the actual Giorgio Perlasca, but in the case of *Il cuore nel pozzo*, this gesture is empty and false. For viewers familiar with the historical details, this final scene will highlight the artificiality of what comes before it, but, for the majority of viewers who are not familiar with the history of the *foibe* and the exodus, it serves to imbue the preceding fiction with an unwarranted air of authenticity. Even if, as Negrin claims, *Il cuore nel pozzo* draws on witness testimony and memoirs written by Istrian exiles,[29] this final shift in representative strategy invalidates even that. Had the film begun with an indication that it was a fictionalized version of individual exiles' memories of the events depicted, it might have achieved a higher degree of validity as a memory text. But this turn to the archival shows that it is not satisfied with the status of memory but rather wishes to cast those memories as historical fact.

Let us return to the statement by Gasparri from April 2002. If the ultimate goal is to establish the *foibe* as the Italian tragedy, then the *fiction* is 'effective' because it invites the viewer to identify with the characters, and is thus able to provoke sympathy for the victims of the *foibe* and the Istrian exiles. The *fiction*'s status as a

popular genre that is not subject to the same standards as a documentary is a further advantage in this regard, since it can pass certain historical inaccuracies off as artistic freedom. Thus, the two phases of *foibe* killings from 1943 and 1945 are condensed into one image, as is the exodus of the Istrians and Dalmatians. The film's incorporation of this final archival element, however, complicates the relationship between history and fiction. It both highlights the tension between fiction and documentary and at the same time attempts to elide it by seemingly substituting the actual historical events with this fictional account. The aim of *Il cuore nel pozzo* is not, as it would have its audience believe, to recover a 'forgotten and repressed' memory, but rather to create a uniform memory at the centre of which lies the suffering of the Italians and the exclusion of the suffering of the Slovenes and Croats.[30]

The foiba di basovizza

A visit to the national *foibe* memorial at Basovizza outside Trieste reveals to what extent just such a one-sided and exclusionary narrative of sacrifice and victimhood is characteristic of the official discourse on the *foibe* as a whole. Pronounced a 'Monument of National Interest' in 1980 and then National Monument in 1992, the Foiba di Basovizza is in fact a *foiba* in name only: far from being a natural karstic sinkhole, it is actually the shaft of an abandoned coalmine. During the major redesign the site underwent in 2006, a documentation centre was built to provide visitors with background information. Its narrative begins with the last days of the war in 1945, when Basovizza was at the centre of the combat between the Yugoslav liberation army and the Germans, who were retreating from Trieste.[31] What exactly happened during the brief Yugoslav occupation of Trieste and its surroundings is entirely unclear to this day. The exhibition cites a number of newspaper reports to support its claim that, besides German and Italian soldiers, hundreds of civilians were executed at the site in early May and their bodies were disposed of in the mine shaft. In the immediate aftermath of the war, several attempts were made by the Allied and Italian information services to exhume and count the bodies and collect information about the executions, but to no avail. No precise information on the actual number of victims is given. Large reproductions of photographs of corpses and coffins serve to illustrate the exhumation attempts, but, upon closer inspection, they all turn out to be victims from other *foibe* and not from the mineshaft at Basovizza.

The largest portion of the exhibition is dedicated to the historical context of the events, and it begins in 1943 with the first series of *foibe* killings in Istria. The acts of violence carried out by the Yugoslavs are described as characteristic of a 'pre-modern' form of violence: burning and looting, lynching, rape, and *infoibamento*. The historical narrative continues with the race between the Yugoslav army and the Allies to liberate Trieste in the spring of 1945. One entire panel is dedicated to the Trieste uprising on 30 April 1945: the CLN in Trieste went against the CLN Alta Italia's instructions to treat the advancing Yugoslav army as allied forces and instead decided to liberate the city unaided and thus claim it for Italy to prevent its annexation to Yugoslavia. They occupied the city's major public buildings, including the town hall, but had to yield to the Yugoslav army the next day. The emphasis on the role of the Triestine CLN is significant because it serves to cast the

Yugoslavs as cruel occupiers rather than as liberators. The forty days of Yugoslav administration have become known as the 'quaranta giorni del terrore', a traumatic event in the city's history that almost overshadowed the horror of the 'biennio' of the Nazi occupation and served to cast the 'ventennio' of Fascist rule in an even more favourable light by comparison.

The discourse on the *foibe* revolves almost exclusively around the number of victims because on it depends not only the historical relevance of the killings (and, of course, the genocide theory), but also the degree of attention in the media and the public. Recent scholarship by historians such as Jože Pirjevec and Nevenka Troha, as well as the journalist Claudia Cernigoi, has cast doubt on the number of victims reported at Basovizza and questioned whether the Foiba di Basovizza was ever the site of mass executions. Quoting extensively from newspaper articles and reports from between 1945 and 1995, Cernigoi, for instance, illustrates how the number of victims reported has grown exponentially from eighteen to upwards of three thousand, despite the fact that a complete excavation of the shaft, which would go a long way toward putting an end to speculation, has never been undertaken or even attempted.[32] The doubts and insecurities about the victims of Basovizza also raise questions about the memorial itself, most importantly: why choose a site which is not a 'true' *foiba* and which may not contain any bodies at all as the central site of commemoration of all the *foibe* killings?

The last panel of the documentary exhibition zooms out to provide the larger historical context. Here, the history of the region is presented as one of repeated occupation and constant battle between the Italians and foreign forces and aggressors. In this sweeping overview, the region becomes a 'laboratory' of twentieth-century history, and of:

> contrasti nazionali intrecciati a conflitti sociali; guerre di massa; effetti imprevisti della dissoluzione degli imperi plurinazionali; affermarsi di regimi antidemocratici impegnati ad imporre le loro pretese totalitarie su di una società locale profondamente divisa; scatenamento delle persecuzioni razziali e creazione dell' 'universo concentrazionario'; trasferimenti forzati di popolazione capaci di modificare irreversibilmente la configurazione nazionale di un territorio; persecuzioni religiose in nome dell'ateismo di stato; conflittualità est-ovest lungo una delle frontiere della Guerra fredda. Una sintesi, insomma, delle grandi tragedie del secolo scorso, concentrata su questo fazzoletto di terra. (pp. 65–67)

On the surface, all of these statements are indisputable. But what emerges from them is a narrative of an Italian population that has had to endure a series of occupations by external forces, including — depending on how one interprets the phrase 'regimi antidemocratici' — the Fascists themselves. The litany of twentieth-century tragedies — two world wars, the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, the rise of totalitarianism, the Holocaust, the Istrian exodus, Communism, and the Cold War — which have befallen the region and into which the *foibe* are inscribed, implicitly places them all on the same level. And it is here that the ever-growing number of victims buried in the *foibe* begins to assert itself. In order to qualify as the 'Italian tragedy', its victims must rival those of the other tragedies in number. We may never know how many died in the *foibe*. In fact, this does not appear to be a priority at Basovizza. In any case, Basovizza is not so much about the past as it

is about the present. On a deeper level, the grand historical sweep of the exhibition's final panel paints a picture of Trieste as the staging ground of Italian national identity, a process in which the memorial itself is engaged.

Conclusion: 'basta con le rimozioni!'

Television dramas about the past, such as *Perlasca* and *Il cuore nel pozzo*, turn local history into a national spectacle that privileges one memory over another, and are instrumental in shaping a communal identity based on a shared narrative of heroism and victimhood in the face of an external aggressor. In other words, what these narratives are ultimately engaged in is the negation of complexity. This is especially problematic in a multi-ethnic and historically multi-layered border region such as Venezia Giulia. Both parts of *Il cuore nel pozzo* are preceded by a title card, stating that '[q]uesto film è dedicato alla memoria delle migliaia e migliaia di italiani uccisi nelle foibe e ai 350·000 profughi giuliani, istriani, e dalmati costretti a lasciare le loro case'. One notes first of all the discrepancy between the precise number of refugees and the vague 'thousands upon thousands' of victims of the *foibe*. But even more problematic is the designation of these victims as 'italiani', which ignores the fact that not everyone who died in the *foibe* was Italian. In a certain respect, one might somewhat provocatively invert the popular slogan 'infoibati perché italiani' and say instead that these victims are 'italiani perché infoibati'. The entire rhetoric employed in the discourse on the *foibe* in Italy is geared toward fostering a sense of unified national identity through a narrative of shared sacrifice. In the decades after the Second World War, Italy venerated the Resistance as the true saviours and was grateful for its members' sacrifice. But in the wake of the crisis of the left in the early 1990s, the anti-Fascist Resistance's star began to wane and the ascendant right-wing political forces began to cast around for new heroes. In the past twenty years we have witnessed the rise of 'good Fascists' such as Giovanni Palatucci and Giorgio Perlasca, two 'eroi italiani'. At the same time, we see the ever-increasing emphasis on the *foibe* as not just a gruesome series of events at Italy's north-eastern border, but as a national tragedy — 'la tragedia degli italiani', the tragedy that unites the Italian people.

The law instituting the *Giorno del ricordo* makes reference not only to the 'tragedia degli italiani' and the esodo, but also to the 'più complessa vicenda del confine orientale'. It is a striking formulation in that it seems to ascribe a lesser degree of complexity to the *foibe* and the exodus and to detach them from the issues pertaining to the eastern border which remain unspecified. If the question of Italy's eastern border is complex, it is because it is not *a priori* clear where that border should lie, and historically it has been and continues to be a contested issue. But, as I have argued, it is impossible to understand the significance of the *foibe* and the exodus in isolation, without looking closely at the historical, ethnic, and political forces at play in the region. The question of Italy's eastern border *is* very complicated and everyone involved in it, Italian, Slovene, Croat, Communist, Fascist, has something to hide. There is more buried in those *foibe* than the bodies of innocent Italian civilians, and one of the prime reasons that a full inquiry into the *foibe* killings has never been launched is the awareness of or fear that any investigation into Yugoslav war crimes will necessarily raise questions about the

crimes of Fascism in the area.[33] This is what makes the memorial at Basovizza such a strikingly apt metaphor for the official memory discourse on the *foibe*: an ominous structure built on top of a gaping hole in the landscape, effectively closing off any further investigation, preferring to leave open the question of how many people actually died there.

Time and again, the *foibe* are referred to as a repressed memory that must be retrieved. The psychoanalytic terminology is certainly apt when describing a phenomenon like the *foibe*, which, like a black hole, marks an absence that cannot be seen directly but only deduced from its effects on its surroundings. In the same way, a repressed memory is only visible through the symptoms it produces, which are brought about through the displacement of the traumatic memory. When Maurizio Gasparri exclaims 'Basta adesso con le rimozioni',[34] he is referring to the repression of the memory of the *foibe* carried out by the Italian left in the decades after the end of the war. *Il cuore nel pozzo* would thus represent an act of exhuming this memory and undoing the repression that has blocked it. But, as we have seen, the memory of the *foibe* as it appears in Negrin's film is a highly contentious and limited version. Indeed, rather than alleviating the repression, it in fact constitutes a further symptom of the actual repressed memory, which is that of Fascism. Italy's guilt and responsibility for the violence and brutality of the Fascist regime is denied and displaced onto a series of Others, be they the Nazis or the 'Slavs' or even the Fascists themselves, as distinct from 'real' Italians. The vehemence of the reactions to any suggestion that Italians could have been anything other than innocent victims testifies to the fact that the wound of this trauma is still open.

Notes

1 The word *foiba* (pl. *foibe*) was originally a term used only by geologists to describe deep natural sinkholes formed by water erosion. In 1943 the Fascist press popularized the term in reference to these killings, which have been known collectively as *le foibe* since then. See Marta Verginella, 'Geschichte und Gedächtnis. Die Foibe in der Praxis der Aushandlung der Grezen zwischen Italien und Slowenien', in *Das Unheimliche in der Geschichte. Die Foibe. Beiträge zur Psychopathologie historischer Rezeption*, ed. by Luisa Accati and Renate Cogoy (Berlin: Trafo, 2007), pp. 25–76 (pp. 56–57). For more recent scholarship on the *foibe*, see Elio Apih, *Le foibe giuliane: note e documenti* (Gorizia: LEG, 2010) and Jože Pirjevec, *Foibe. Una storia d'Italia* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009).

2 See Pamela Ballinger, 'Who Defines and Remembers Genocide after the Cold War? Contested Memories of Partisan Massacre in Venezia Giulia in 1943–1945', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2 (2000), 11–30.

3 Fabio Martini, 'Gasparri: Ora spero di vedere una seria fiction sulle foibe', *La Stampa*, 18 April 2002, p. 5.

4 This argument has been put forward most forcefully by Emiliano Perra in 'Legitimizing Fascism Through the Holocaust? The Reception of the Miniseries *Perlasca: un eroe italiano* in Italy', *Memory Studies*, 3 (2010), 95–109. In her book *Italian TV-Drama and Beyond: Stories from the Soil, Stories*

from the Sea (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), Milly Buonanno, on the other hand, emphasizes the film's role in promoting a unified Italian identity via a communal memory embodied in an Italian hero who can 'testif[y] to the dissention and resistance of Italians to regimes of violence' (p. 222). For Buonanno, the crucial thing about Perlasca is not his 'militant Fascist past' (ibid.) but rather his act of selfless heroism in the face of brutal oppression. Buonanno does not at any point problematize the version of 'Italianness' presented through figures such as Perlasca and Giovanni Palatucci (on the latter, see Emiliano Perra's article in the present volume). It is, however, important to emphasize that in both cases the regime of violence that these Italian heroes are resisting is the Nazi occupiers, not the Fascists. Ultimately, these are versions of the 'lesser evil' narrative, which sees Fascism as comparatively harmless vis-à-vis Nazism. Furthermore, the resistance to Fascism remains inextricably linked to the Italian left. Buonanno states that stories such as Perlasca's, Palatucci's and that of the *foibe* have been recovered from the 'heavy silence of repression and denial [that] had fallen' for the purpose of 'building a common memory' (p. 216). But it is imperative to consider the political reasons for this silence and to ask why now, in the wake of the crisis of the Italian left, these stories are being told and precisely what kind of Italian identity is being presented.

[5] See Buonanno, p. 213.

[6] Gabriella Gallozzi, 'Rai uno gira una fiction sulle foibe', *L'Unità*, 13 August 2004, p. 19.

[7] Laura Delli Colli, 'Foibe. Un film per capire', *Panorama*, 16 July 2004.

[8] For more on the characterization of the *foibe* as an instance of ethnic cleansing, see Pamela Ballinger, 'Exhumed Histories: Trieste and the Politics of (Exclusive) Victimhood', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 6 (2004), 145–59 (pp. 11–14). In her book *History in Exile. Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), Ballinger notes that 'almost every exile I have spoken with has told me, "What the Slavs now are doing to one another, they did to us fifty years ago". Seen to confirm widely held stereotypes about Balkan butchery and fanaticism, the specific events of the *foibe* have thus been attached to broader discourses about the exodus as an act of ethnic cleansing. At the same time, the problematic of Fascism and possible complicity lurks at the margins of these accounts. By positing absolute Italian innocence, these stories labor to counter an alternative narrative to those depicting such events as retribution for Fascist sins' (p. 146).

[9] 'Foibe: "Il film offende gli sloveni"', *Il Piccolo*, 19 August 2004, p. 1.

[10] 'Non fermeranno la fiction sulle foibe', *La Repubblica*, 23 August 2004, p. 20.

[11] The issue of the *foibe* has continued to generate tensions between Italy and the former Yugoslavia, most prominently in 2007 when, in a speech given on the occasion of the third *Giorno del ricordo*, Italian president and former Communist Giorgio Napolitano referred to the victims of the *foibe* as victims of 'un moto di odio e furia sanguinaria e un disegno annessionistico slavo che prevalse innanzitutto nel trattato di pace del 1947, e che assunse i sinistri contorni di una pulizia etnica' ('Napolitano: "Foibe, ignorate per cecità"', *Corriere della sera*, 11 February 2007). The speech divorces the *foibe* from the historical context of Fascist Italy's politics of occupation and expansion in Yugoslavia. Slovenia's foreign minister sent a diplomatic note condemning the allegations made in the speech, while Croatian president Stjepan Mesić publicly accused Napolitano of overt racism, historical revisionism, and political revanchism. The incident had no further consequences and the press reported shortly thereafter that an agreement had been

reached. Diplomatic relations aside, the speech remains a clear indication of the way in which the interpretation of the *foibe* as an act of unilateral and premeditated ethnic cleansing has now become the official line across the political spectrum in Italy.

[12] In May of 2011, *Il Piccolo* reported that 254,000 people had visited the Foiba di Basovizza since the documentation centre opened in February 2008, with over 51,000 visitors in the first four months of 2011 — roughly twice as many as in 2008. The vast majority of visitors to the site are school groups: 3,737 on one day in April 2012 — a record, but not an anomaly. Well over 12,000 students visited the site in that month alone. Laura Tonero, 'Foiba di Basovizza, 51mila visite in 4 mesi', *Il Piccolo*, 7 May 2011, p. 40, and Fabio Dorigo, 'Boom delle gite scolastiche: Alla Foiba 12mila studenti', *Il Piccolo*, 20 April 2012, p. 26.

[13] Renate Cogoy, Introduction to *Das Unheimliche in der Geschichte. Die Foibe. Beiträge zur Psychopathologie historischer Rezeption*, ed. by Luisa Accati and Renate Cogoy (Berlin: Trafo, 2007), pp. 9–24 (pp. 17–18).

[14] The terms 'olocausto italiano' and 'olocausto giuliano' are popular among neo-fascist politicians and appear to have been coined by Padre Flaminio Rocchi, *L'esodo dei 350 mila giuliani, fiumani ed dalmati* (Rome: Difesa adriatica, 1998). Similar accounts may be found in the works of Luigi Papo, Marco Pirina, and Giorgio Rustia. Some historians and journalists tend towards less polemical but essentially similar interpretations. Giampaolo Valdevit, for example, sees the *foibe* killings as an attempt at the physical elimination of the enemy, and thus an act of violence comparable to Fascism and National Socialism. Raoul Pupo interprets the Yugoslav acts of violence as 'epurazione preventiva', that is, as a facet of the civil war in the region and thus pertinent to the consolidation of the communist regime. Historians Jože Pirjevec, Nevenka Troha, and journalist Claudia Cernigoi, on the other hand, consider the killings as reprisals for the persecution suffered during Nazi-Fascism. See *Foibe. Il peso del passato*, ed. by Giampaolo Valdevit (Venezia: Marsilio, 1997); Raoul Pupo, *Il lungo esodo. Istria: le persecuzioni, le foibe, l'esilio* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2005); Jože Pirjevec, *Foibe. Una storia d'Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009); Nevenka Troha, 'Fra liquidazione del passato e costruzione del futuro', in *Foibe. Il peso del passato*, ed. by Giampaolo Valdevit (Venezia: Marsilio, 1997), pp. 78–80; and Claudia Cernigoi, *Operazione 'Foibe' tra storia e mito* (Udine: Kappa, 2005).

[15] For a detailed account, see Ballinger, 'Contested Memories', pp. 15–17.

[16] Parlamento Italiano, 'Legge 30 marzo 2004, n. 92: Istituzione del "Giorno del ricordo" in memoria delle vittime delle foibe, dell'esodo giuliano-dalmata, delle vicende del confine orientale e concessione di un riconoscimento ai congiunti degli infoibati', *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 86 (2004).

[17] On the proliferation of memorial days in the Italian calendar and its relation to the overarching narrative of Italian victimhood, especially as presented through popular media such as television, see Giovanni De Luna, *La Repubblica del dolore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011).

[18] Cf. Verginella, p. 58.

[19] Cf. Aleksej Kalc, 'L'emigrazione slovena e croata', in *Friuli e Venezia Giulia. Storia del '900*, ed. by IRSML (Gorizia: IRSML-LEG, 1996), pp. 535–50; and Piero Purini, 'L'emigrazione non italiana dalla Venezia Giulia dopo la prima guerra mondiale', *Qualestoria*, 28 (2000), 33–53.

[20] For a discussion of the reception of *Holocaust* in Germany, see Andreas Huyssen, 'The Politics of Identification: "Holocaust" and West German Drama', *New German Critique*, 19 (1980), 117–36; and *Holocaust: Briefe an den WDR*, ed. by Heiner Lichtenstein and Michael

Schmid-Ospach (Wuppertal: Hammer, 1982). By comparison, the broadcast of the miniseries in Italy was a complete non-event, undoubtedly because the Italian audiences did not feel personally implicated in the atrocities depicted. The crimes of Nazism were not a taboo subject in post-war Italy — if anything, they served as a convenient distraction from the crimes of Fascism. For a detailed description of the Italian reception of *Olocausto*, see Emiliano Perra, *Conflicts of Memory. The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programmes in Italy, 1945 to the Present* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), ch. 5.

[21] On the role of the children, see especially Silvia Zetto Cassano, 'I cuori e la frontiera: rappresentazione dell'esodo nel cinema', *Qualestoria*, 33 (2005), 89–111 (p. 109). Milly Buonanno also discusses the film and the role of children in her book *Italian TV Drama*, pp. 216–21.

[22] Cf. Verginella, p. 51.

[23] Cf. Zetto Cassano, p. 109.

[24] Glenda Sluga, 'Trieste: Ethnicity and the Cold War, 1945–54', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29 (1994), 285–303 (p. 286).

[25] *Il cuore nel pozzo*, dir. by Alberto Negrin (RAI, 2005). The scene ends with a shot of the torn-up list of prisoners, a nod to the lack of historical records and the impossibility of establishing definitively the number and identity of the victims.

[26] Cf. Zetto Cassano, p. 108, see also, among others, Raoul Pupo and Roberto Spazzali, *Foibe* (Milano: Mondadori, 2003) and Pupo, *Il lungo esodo*.

[27] Verginella offers a similar interpretation (see p. 53).

[28] See also Zetto Cassano, p. 111.

[29] Dino Messina, 'Foibe, un film per rievocare la tragedia al lungo negata', *Corriere della sera*, 12 July 2004, p. 16. On the same page there is an interview with historian Giovanni Sabbatucci, who is credited as historical consultant on the film. Sabbatucci distances himself from the version of events depicted, saying that his influence was limited. He emphasizes that the *foibe*, terrible as they were, did not constitute 'un genocidio totale, paragonabile a quello del'Olocausto degli ebrei'. He goes on to say that it is important to remember the atrocities committed by the fascist regime in the region and to keep in mind 'che non tutto il negativo era dalla parte degli jugoslavi e il positive da quella degli italiani'. Dino Messina, 'Sabbatucci: atroce, ma i torti non furono da una parte sola', *Corriere della sera*, 12 July 2004, p. 16.

[30] Verginella relates the constructed memory at work in *Il cuore nel pozzo* to Paul Ric?ur's concept of 'excess of memory', which allows victims to attribute the tragedies of the recent past to coercion or malevolence on the part of others, thus confirming their own innocence. 'The gap in knowledge that each individual would have to make up for', Verginella writes, 'is thus completely filled up with his or her own nation's memory, while the others' memory sinks into oblivion. This makes it much easier to divide the *us* completely from the *them* and to posit a community of the oppressed against a community of oppressors' (p. 43, my translation).

[31] Giuseppe Parlato, Raoul Pupo, and Roberto Spazzali, *Foiba di Basovizza. Monumento nazionale* (Trieste: Stella Arti Grafiche, 2008), p. 11.

[32] See Cernigoi, p. 190. For more recent scholarship on Basovizza, see Pirjevec, pp. 110–24, 131, 285–91, and 309–15.

[33] For more on this issue, see for example Filippo Focardi and Lutz Klinkhammer, 'The Question of Fascist Italy's War Crimes: The Construction of a Self-Acquitting Myth (1943–1948)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9 (2004), 330–48.

[34] *La Repubblica*, 23 August 2004, p. 20.