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Abuses of the past by the Italian far right: a first assessment of the Meloni government

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ABSTRACT

Collective memory plays an important part in the ideational and cultural battlegrounds that characterise current European politics. The mobilisation and manipulation of the memory of Nazi-fascism, in particular, is a growing political and academic concern, related to the rise of far right parties throughout the continent and the mainstreaming of their ideas and positions. Focusing on the case of Italy, this article examines three recent examples of abuses of the country's past committed by *Fratelli d'Italia*, a far right party with a direct lineage to fascism, and the pivot of the current Italian government. By analysing the three episodes in light of a conceptual triad of abuses of the dark past – historical reassessment; fake history; evocation-cum-denial of fascist connections – the article shows how post-fascist Fdi has engaged in the whole gamut of memory abuses rapidly, and shortly after rising to power. This in turn raises concerns about the effects of such mnemonic manipulations on the cultural underpinning of Italian democracy, given the party's current position of political, institutional, and cultural influence.

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1. Introduction

In the ideational battlegrounds that have defined European politics in the past few decades, the politics of memory plays an important role. This is particularly true of those European countries with a direct historical experience with Nazi-fascism, as the latter is increasingly revised, reinterpreted, and contested as a result of two factors. First, the success of far right political parties and movements across the continent, proposing more or less openly revised versions of their countries' dark past as part of their discursive repertoire (e.g. Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann 2023; Griffini 2023; Kahn 2022; Veas-Gulani 2021).¹ Historical revisionism, defined as the manipulation of the past in order to construct, solidify and defend the identity of a political or social group, has been identified by Mudde (2000) as a key ideological feature of the far right along with nationalism, exclusionism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, and traditional ethics. The second factor, connected to the foregoing, is the temporal distance that separates us from the experience of Nazi-fascism, which is, on the one hand, long enough to permit distortions, if not outright manipulations – facilitated by the waning of the last generations with first-hand experience of said events (Mammone 2006; Verovšek 2014) – and, on the other hand, still short enough for the Nazi-fascist past to remain societally resonant, hence relevant as an object of political discourse (Levi and Rothberg 2018; Manucci 2020).

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While abuses of the fascist past span much of Europe, the Italian case deserves special attention when examining this phenomenon: the country saw the birth of fascism as a political doctrine and movement, was ruled by it for two decades, and never managed to fully come to terms with this chapter of its political history (e.g. Cento Bull 2016; Foot 2009; Manucci 2023). The legacy of, and nostalgia for, the *ventennio* has played a non-negligible role in Italian politics and society from the start of the country's post-WWII republic, supported and embodied both within the constitutional system – above all by the post-fascist *Movimento sociale italiano* (MSI) – and outside of it by a number of extreme right extra-parliamentary groups (Broder 2023).

Nonetheless, it was really with the collapse of Italy's post-war system, and the inception of the 'second republic' in the mid-1990s, that the memory of fascism and of the Second World War started to gain increasing prominence in cultural and political struggles, as the whole political spectrum of the country began to move rightward. *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), the MSI's successor, played an important role in this politics of memory, as it embarked on an ambivalent path treading revisionist accounts of history and acknowledgments of fascist brutalities (Ignazi 2005; Newell 2000). AN's occasional revisionism was taken over by *Fratelli d'Italia* (Fdl), founded in 2012 by a part of the AN old guard and led by Giorgia Meloni. Fdl's triumph in the September 2022 elections and the formation of a government led, for the first time, by a post-fascist party, has brought the question of fascist memory to the foreground of Italian politics.

Joining a growing number of studies of the politics of memory on the part of the far right (e.g. Couperus, Rensmann, and Tortola 2023; Griffini 2023; Levi and Rothberg 2018; Marchese and Tortola 2024; Proglia 2019; Wodak and Forchtner 2014), this article focuses on the case of Fdl to investigate the extent to which the party has engaged in memory politics from its new position of dominance in Italian politics and institutions. It does so by examining three distinct and illustrative episodes that occurred in the spring of 2023 in light of a typology of abuses of the past recently proposed by Couperus and Tortola (2019), namely: a) the reassessment of the past; b) the deployment of 'fake history'; c) the evocation (and immediate denial) of ideas and tropes associated with fascism. By showing how the Fdl leadership committed all three types of memory abuses in fast sequence, and shortly after taking charge of the country's government, the analysis validates the conceptual triad, and more importantly highlights how Fdl's memory politics spans the entire gamut of abuses of the past. This, in turn, raises concerns about the manipulation of a dark chapter of the Italian past, given the position of political, institutional, and cultural power from which Fdl currently operates.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section contextualises the discussion by charting the transition from the 'first' to the 'second' Italian Republic, and showing how the latter provided a favourable setting to various revisions of the country's fascist past. Building on this, the third section dissects the politics of fascist memory by presenting the conceptual triad of abuses of the past. Section four applies the triad to the case of Fdl by examining three emblematic episodes: Giorgia Meloni's Liberation Day open letter to the *Corriere della Sera*; Ignazio La Russa's falsification of the Via Rasella attack; finally, Francesco Lollobrigida evocation of the idea of 'ethnic replacement'. The fifth section concludes.

2. Memory politics in the Italian second republic

The transition from the 'first republic' to the 'second republic', which occurred in the mid-1990s, constitutes a key juncture in Italy's recent political history, and a turning point in the public discourse on and politicisation of the memory of fascism. The republican political system created in the wake of WWII gravitated around two major anti-fascist parties, namely the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia cristiana*, DC) and the Communist Party (*Partito comunista italiano*, PCI). The former dominated government for practically the next five decades, either alone or in coalition with smaller parties. The latter was kept out of national government via a *conventio ad excludendum* meant to maintain Italy firmly within the western camp but remained a key force in structuring and mobilising important sectors of Italian society, and an important player in many local governments.

Remnants and sympathisers of the old regime regrouped in the post-fascist MSI, a party that retained an ambiguous attitude towards the new democratic system, and remained largely shunned by the mainstream political system (Broder 2023; Ignazi 2023).

The political system described above ended in the early 1990s, as a result of, on the one hand, the reverberations of the collapse of the Soviet Union – which led to the dissolution of the PCI – and, on the other hand, a series of corruption scandals, which brought down most government parties, and most notably the DC. With the collapse of the ‘first republic’ came an overall reordering of the political system – soon dubbed ‘second republic’ – around two poles: a centre-left one, led by the post-Communist *Partito democratico della sinistra* (PDS), and a centre-right one gravitating around Silvio Berlusconi’s newly formed *Forza Italia* (FI). Importantly, the centre-right pole included the MSI’s heir AN, thus incorporating post-fascists into the mainstream of Italian politics, and soon into national government as a result of the centre-right’s 1994 electoral victory.

The overall right-wing shift of the second republic party system opened up space for more or less explicit reformulations of the memory of fascism in public and political discourse. Such reformulations were no doubt facilitated by the shaping of AN as a more moderate vehicle of post-fascist positions – which in turn brought post-fascists fully into the public sphere of the second republic. They were, however, also underpinned by a broader willingness and readiness among conservative sectors of Italian society to reassess the historical experience of fascism in a more benevolent light. This was reflected in and reinforced by Berlusconi’s frequent nods to the *leitmotif* ‘Mussolini also did many good things’, as well as a more general revisionist mood across the media and popular historiographical work (e.g. Pansa 2003; Petacco 2004), which had started already in the 1980s. To put it like Gagliardi (2024, 5), in this period, ‘discourses marked by themes and feelings of an indulgent memory of fascism acquired a consistency and strength that would have been unthinkable in the past’.

Revisionist popular historiography in turn built on a substantial body of research produced over the previous decades, most notably by historian Renzo De Felice and his disciples. This strand of historiography proposed an alternative interpretation of the birth and development of fascism to the one propounded by the then dominant left – wing scholarship. Among De Felice’s main departures from the existing historiography of the time were his focus on fascism’s revolutionary roots and middle-class support, as well as his insistence on the need to conceptually separate the fascist experience in Italy from the Nazi one in Germany (De Felice 1975)

While De Felice became one of the most highly respected scholars of fascism, its work lent itself to political use. Interestingly, De Felice rightly predicted that Italy ‘cannot settle accounts with its past’, thus being susceptible to ‘disintegrative tensions’ (De Felice 1995, 20), and his own work became the substratum of political polarisation and disintegration. To put it like Traverso (2019, 135, emphasis in original):

[A]ll forms of ‘revisions’ (whatever their aim and their impact) transcend the boundaries of historiography and put into question the *public use of history*. Revisionism is a delicate topic not because it criticizes some canonical, dominant interpretations, but rather because it affects a shared historical consciousness and a feeling of collective responsibility towards the past.

The memory of the fascist *ventennio* thus became an object of public debate and political contestation in the second republic. In this context, actors at the far right end of the political spectrum faced the problem of, on the one hand, looking for legitimacy as political actors in the republican system, and on the other, accounting for their more or less direct links to the fascist political experience and doctrine, from whose ashes the republican system had been established. AN navigated this ambiguity, in part, by making amends for the worst excesses of fascist history. AN leader Gianfranco Fini’s 2003 trip to Israel and his condemnation of Mussolini’s 1938 racial laws exemplified these efforts at disassociation from an uncomfortable past (Fella 2006; Tarchi 2024). In part, however, the party tackled this tension by recasting the fascist experience in a new and more palatable light, to make post-fascists ‘presentable’ via historical reassessment.

Over its three decades of existence, the party system of Italy's second republic has gone through a number of transformations, the details of which are outside of the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the overall effect of these transformations has been the shift of the entire spectrum of the party system further to the right. For one thing, the post-communist PDS – the pivot of centre-left electoral alliances – has gone through a number of metamorphoses pushing it ever closer to the centre. This trend culminated in the 2007 foundation of the new *Partito democratico* (PD) from the merger of the post-communist social democrats and the Christian-left *Margherita* party. At the same time, centrifugal shifts have taken place on the right-hand side of the spectrum, with ever more voters deserting *Forza Italia*, and far right parties within the centre-right coalition gaining electoral weight: the *Lega*, which has morphed from a regionalist movement into a nationalist and nativist party under the leadership of Matteo Salvini since 2013, and *Fratelli d'Italia* (Fdi), founded in 2012 by a number of former AN members as a reaction to the party's increasing moderation (Ignazi 2023).

The recent growth of the far right inside the centre-right coalition has accelerated efforts and strategies of reassessment of the country's fascist past, which have been incorporated into a broader political effort to establish a new ideational and cultural mainstream in the country (Giovannini, Valbruzzi, and Vampa 2023; Newth and Maccaferri 2022). Of the two far right parties just mentioned, Fdi presents the most interesting case for our purposes. First, relatively scarce scholarly attention has so far been paid to this young and, until recently, minor political actor, who has nonetheless grown so rapidly as to become the country's largest party after the 2022 election, and the key player in Italy's most right-wing government since the *ventennio*. Second, and perhaps more importantly, our interest in Fdi stems from its direct genealogical connection to the MSI (to which many prominent Fdi leaders previously adhered), which in turn makes Fdi the main descendant of the fascist regime and doctrine within Italy's current political landscape.²

As Puleo and Piccolino (2022, 2023) have recently shown, ideologically speaking, Fdi has clearly reversed the (albeit bumpy) road of AN towards a more moderate conservative identity, and fully embraced authoritarianism, nativism, anti-elitism – a number of traits that put the party squarely into the fold of the far right. While this, in their words, 'did not explicitly reverse [Fdi's] process of separation from the fascist legacy' (Puleo and Piccolino 2022, 362), it did rekindle Fdi's ideological connection to it. This ambiguity has also been highlighted by longstanding scholar of the Italian post-fascist right Piero Ignazi, who contends that Fdi has not solved the question over its relationship with its past (Ignazi 2023). In the remainder of the article, we will explore how and to what extent this ambiguous connection to fascism translates into the sphere of historical memory.

3. Three ways of abusing the past

In a recent contribution comparing the politics of memory in the Dutch and Italian contexts, Couperus and Tortola (2019) have formulated a tripartite typology to order and analyse different kinds of discursive abuses of the 'dark' past, and their respective links to the dynamics of political support and the mainstreaming of the far right. The three mnemonic strategies are: a) the reassessment of the dark past; b) the deployment of 'fake history'; c) the evocation and immediate negation of dark past symbols and language. We shall examine briefly how each relates to the memory of fascism.

The reassessment of the past is the simplest of the three strategies. It indicates the (more or less explicit) recasting of certain chapters and aspects of the fascist past in a new and better light. Reassessments of the past need not include false information or data (although these reassessments are at times combined with fake historical accounts of the sort examined below), but work instead at the level of historical interpretations, framing historical details and events from alternative angles. This in turn aims to alter the overall normative implications of said details and events, by mitigating or minimising their negative connotations or, in a form of historical 'whataboutery', measuring them against someone or something else's sins. By far the most frequent way of reassessing the fascist *ventennio* in Italy is the notion that 'Mussolini also

did many good things' (*Mussolini ha fatto anche cose buone*), an oft-repeated idea aimed at glossing over the evils of the fascist regime dictatorship by highlighting some of its beneficial policies and initiatives – the presence of which is virtually inevitable in any regime spanning two decades (Corner 2022; Gagliardi 2024).

Another common trope in the reassessment of fascism hinges on a distinction between a 'good' and a 'bad' fascism, in which the latter has unfairly sullied the memory of the former with misdeeds and mistakes such as the 1938 racial laws or Italy's decision to go to war by Hitler's side. Blaming fascist actions on the Nazi is indeed a frequent supplement to these narratives, promoting the idea of Italians as artless victims of evil Germans (Focardi 2016; Ventresca 2006). A third recurring reassessment trope is the moral equivalence between partisans and *repubblichini* in the 1943–45 civil war, depicted as a struggle between two sides moved by equally respectable ideas, and equally guilty of horrible deeds (Cooke 2011; Mammone 2006). In general, reassessing the dark past is an easy yet subtle and treacherous mnemonic strategy, which builds on historical distinctions and interpretations that are, as explained above, not devoid of truth. As such, reassessments of the fascist past – at times presented as examples of courageous 'out of the box' thinking – are the most likely to find sympathy among sectors of the political, intellectual and societal mainstream, thereby contributing to the popularisation of far right positions and ideas (Cooke 2011).

The second way of abusing the fascist past is the deployment and promotion of fake history, i.e. more or less grossly fabricated historical facts and data. A less refined mnemonic strategy than the previous one, fake history nonetheless has a similar objective – casting fascism in a better light – and therefore often accompanies broader reassessment attempts and narratives. What clearly distinguishes the two strategies, however, is the level at which they operate: intersubjective (normative) interpretation in the case of reassessment, and false facts and evidence in the case of fake history. This makes fake history easier to debunk at a historiographical level and, generally, among a more sophisticated audience. At the same time, just as it happens with fake news, fake history is rather effective outside of these realms, and more generally, in societal contexts relying on faster, shallower, and less nuanced modes of information and communication – such as the internet and social media (Fuchs 2022; Zannettou et al. 2019; Zhukova 2021).

Compared to reassessments of the past, fake history is unconstrained by the boundaries of factual reality, and hence can lend itself to all sorts of conspiratorial constructs. Further, it can be a powerful rhetorical tool in the Manichean political discourse of the populist right, by providing it with ready-made snippets of fake evidence that can be quickly deployed to spread certain ideas and gain political support. Applied to the *ventennio*, cases of fake history tend to fall into two broad categories: on the one hand, falsely attributing achievements to the fascist regime. A case in point is the claim, repeated time and again by far right supporters, that Mussolini introduced the first pension system in Italy (Sgobio 2020). On the other hand, fake historical accounts may diminish or even erase fascist crimes and excesses. An emblematic example of this historical falsification was Berlusconi's statement, in a 2003 interview, that 'Mussolini never killed anyone, Mussolini sent people on holiday' (referring to the regime's political internment policies) (Hooper 2003).

The third mnemonic strategy adopted by the far right consists of hinting at a connection with and sympathy for certain aspects of fascism and related ideas – often via the use of certain buzzwords, mottos, gestures or imagery – only to immediately deny or dismiss such a connection. This is a compound rhetorical strategy made up of two equally important parts: the first, nodding to fascism and its ideology, serves to restate a connection between the far right and that historical experience and ideology in a way that is notedulcorated by reassessments or fake historical accounts. This part of the strategy is helpful for the far right to maintain a link to, and the support of, more extreme movements and sectors of society that still openly call themselves (neo)fascists. Matteo Salvini's frequent use of fascist(–like) mottos is a case in point (Newth and Maccaferri 2022), and so are his connections with the openly neo-fascist Casapound movement – symbolised among other things by his keen display of the Casapound-linked *Pivert* apparel (Froio et al. 2020). Another recurring case is the public use of the Roman salute by far right members, for instance recently

Romano La Russa, an Fdl Member of the European Parliament and the older brother of Senate speaker and Fdl notable Ignazio (Boccia Artieri, Giglietto, and Stanziano 2023).

Evoking connections with (neo)fascism is, however, a risky move for the far right with respect to its mainstreaming ambitions, for it may scare and alienate more moderate sectors of society. The second part of the strategy then – the denial, dismissal, or qualification of said connections, which follows their display virtually without fail – serves to reassure these sectors about the inoffensive and equivocal nature of the link. In balancing the two sides of this mnemonic strategy, the far right ultimately manages to hold together its moderate and extreme supporters, each of whom may pick a most congenial version of this rhetorical bait-and-switch. To put it like Brown and Newth (2024, 5), this discursive strategy creates ‘both distance and affinity with fascism, therefore forming part of a wider process of mainstreaming’.

4. The Meloni government abusing the past: three episodes

Fdl has been an active contributor to all three kinds of memory abuses described above since its inception. The party’s recent electoral growth, which allows it to be the linchpin of Italy’s current executive, makes it particularly important to examine its relationship with the memory of fascism. Fdl’s position gives it unprecedented prominence in the media landscape – and, more generally, the public sphere of the country – and therefore opportunities to publicly promote its views of the past. Furthermore, governmental control enables the party to embed such views tangibly into the country’s public policies and institutions. In the remainder of this section, we show that the party leadership has not shied away from abusing the past since in government, by examining three illustrative cases across the typology discussed above. The three episodes should not be viewed as perfectly representative of the relative weight of the three types of abuses of the past in Fdl’s discourse, nor as exhaustive of the ways in which such abuses are articulated. Rather, their selection is guided by timing and prominence: by showing how key Fdl leaders engaged in all mnemonic strategies described above in rapid sequence and shortly after the start of the Meloni government, we aim to demonstrate how important (ab)uses of the fascist past are to Fdl’s discursive strategy and foster a reflection on their role in contemporary Italian politics.

4.1. *Giorgia Meloni’s letter to the Corriere della Sera*

Italy’s liberation from Nazi-fascism is celebrated every year on 25 April. This is a national holiday and an anniversary that holds tremendous symbolic power among the population and within the political arena – a power that, in turn, regularly attracts manipulations and revisions for political purposes. Controversies and debates around the meaning, implications, and ‘ownership’ of 25 April have accompanied the second republic virtually from the start. AN, in particular, was a keen proponent of what Mammine (2006) has termed a ‘daily revision of the past’ vis-a-vis the liberation, with the sanctioning and support of its larger ally, Berlusconi’s FI. In keeping with the post-fascist revision of the Italian resistance and liberation, on 25 April 2023, on the occasion of the first Liberation day of her government tenure, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni inserted herself into this public and political debate by penning an open letter to the *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most prestigious Italian broadsheets (Meloni 2023). The letter provided Meloni with an opportunity to showcase, from the vantage point of her political role, a reassessed and polemical version of the country’s liberation and its implications for Italian democracy. In doing so, Meloni appropriated this foundational event and revised it through its partial purification from Nazi-fascist violence.

In a move reminiscent of what Wodak (2015) terms an authorisation strategy, typical of the far right, Meloni opens her letter with ‘On my first 25 April as President of the Council [of ministers]’, thereby establishing herself and her own argument as authoritative. From this commanding standpoint, Meloni embarks on a mission to portray herself, Fdl, and her government as defenders of democracy and freedom, and above all of a ‘non-partisan’ view of

Liberation day as a celebration for 'all those Italians who put the love for their fatherland before ideological conflicts' (Meloni 2023 - authors' translation). The attempt to gloss over the anti-fascist character of the country's liberation and the resulting republican institutions is not new among Italy's right and is perhaps best exemplified by Silvio Berlusconi's 2009 proposal to turn Liberation day into a more inclusive 'Freedom day', to which Meloni reverentially refers in her letter as a way to let the country 'overcome past divisions' (Meloni 2023 - authors' translation).

The notion of a post-ideological reconciliation between the victors and the vanquished of the liberation struggle is a recurring theme throughout the letter – not least in the pairing of the term 'partisans' with 'patriots', which is for Meloni a more appropriate word to indicate those who fought for the country's freedom regardless of their ideological affiliation. This connects to a historical reflection on the post-war political legitimization of post-fascists forces (most notably the MSI) as crucial in 'bring[ing] millions of Italians into the new parliamentary republic by moulding a democratic right' (Meloni 2023 - authors' translation), which in turn serves to reinforce Fdl's rooting within the current democratic sphere. This apparently democratic message cloaking strategic goals is a typical move of the far right to frame itself as 'civic' (Halikiopoulou, Mock, and Vasilopoulou 2013), to which Fdl is clearly not extraneous (Griffini 2021).

To the idea of the liberation as a moment of reconciliation, Meloni links two typical tropes of far right historical reassessment: first, an implied moral equivalence between the two sides – partisans and *repubblichini* – in the 1943–45 Italian civil war. Second, and connected, a rhetorical juxtaposition of fascist misdeeds with the exile and suffering of Italians in Yugoslavia by the hand of Marshal Tito's communists – a blame reversal which, as Wodak (2015) notes, aims to cleanse the far right from guilt and responsibility by assigning negative moral values to a perceived 'enemy':

[O]n that [liberation] day, as millions of Italians regained their freedom, a second wave of mass murders, and the tragedy of exodus, began for hundreds of thousands of their compatriots in Istria, Fiume [Rijeka] and Dalmatia. (Meloni 2023 - authors' translation)

Contextualised within the present, the moral equivalence between the two sides of the resistance morphs into a firm condemnation of 'all totalitarianisms' of the twentieth century (namely the Nazi-fascist and the communist ones), which Meloni reminds us to have supported in a 2019 European Parliament resolution. The pairing of Nazi-fascism and communism in a sort of 'all evil, nobody evil' logic is another well-known rhetorical trick used by the Italian far right when confronted with – and as a way to evade – the question of its antifascism. Here, Meloni makes a connection between communist totalitarianism and the ideological confrontation during the Italian resistance, which included communists who would then establish very close links with the Soviet Union.

To anchor the democratic credentials of Fdl – and its post-fascist genealogy – internationally, Meloni concludes by reminding us of her government's staunch support of Ukrainian democracy in her fight against the February 2022 invasion by authoritarian Russia. This, Meloni argues, is 'the best way to take the message of the 25 April anniversary to our days' (Meloni 2023 - authors' translation). Projecting her democratic mantra beyond national confines once again serves Meloni's purpose of restating Italy's liberation as jointly 'owned' by anti-fascists and post-fascists and underplaying the deeply partisan nature of the country's resistance struggle. Her letter, she writes, should:

contribute to making this anniversary a moment of newly found national harmony, in which the celebration of our newly attained freedom should help us understand and strengthen Italy's role in the world as an indispensable bulwark of democracy. (Meloni 2023 - authors' translation)

Meloni's historical reassessments, and the stress on her government as a bastion of liberty, are designed to reject the attacks of those political enemies who 'use the category of fascism as a tool of political delegitimation against all political opponents' (Meloni 2023 - authors' translation).

Ultimately, the message is instrumental to cementing Fdl's position within the fold of respectable conservatism, in spite of the party's numerous transgressions of the principles of liberal-democracy, e.g. its flirtations with illiberal democratic models such as Orban's Hungary, or its deep-rooted exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants.³

4.2. Ignazio La Russa on the via Rasella attack

'[The partisan attack of] Via Rasella was a not-so-noble page in the [Italian] resistance; those who were killed were not cruel Nazis from the SS, they were a musical band of quasi-pensioners', claimed President of the Italian Senate Ignazio La Russa in a recent interview with right-wing *Libero* newspaper (*Corriere della Sera* 2023 - authors' translation). La Russa's remarks came as the interview hosts and their guest were commenting on a recent commemoration of the Fosse Ardeatine massacre – a Nazi execution of 335 people as a reprisal for the Via Rasella attack – during which Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni honoured the victims as 'slaughtered because they were Italians' (ANSA (2023) - authors' translation). What Meloni did was another – and clumsier than the ones described in the previous section – reassessment of the history of the resistance. By highlighting the Italianness (as opposed to the anti-fascism) of the victims, Meloni was not only committing a historical mistake (there were nine foreigners among them) but more importantly reducing the resistance to a struggle between Italians and Germans. This reductionism is yet another iteration of the good-Italian-bad-German trope, which downplays the ideological and political struggle between partisans and Nazi-fascists.

What caused more outrage in this case, however, were La Russa's follow-up comments, as these were a blatant falsification of historical events, and an exemplary case of what we have referred to as 'fake history'. The Via Rasella bomb attack was in fact carried out by a communist partisan group against troops from South Tyrol that were under Nazi control and fully operational during the German occupation of Italy. The attack killed 33 soldiers and two civilians.

La Russa, the scion of a prominent fascist family and an Fdl (and formerly MSI and AN) notable, who at some point bragged about keeping a statue of Mussolini in his house, is not new to questionable statements about (neo)fascism. His statements on Via Rasella, however, were seen by many as particularly outrageous, not only because of the nonchalance with which they were uttered (and accepted as true by his interviewers) but also because of La Russa's new position as Senate speaker – the second highest office in the Italian institutional system after the President of the Republic. From this position, La Russa proposed a grossly adulterated version of the historical events, the implication of which was to depict the attackers as having incompetently overestimated the importance and danger of their target – a group of quasi-retired, ill-equipped, and virtually harmless soldiers (Toniolo, Fontana, and Canetta 2023).

More importantly, La Russa's statements on Via Rasella implied a sort of blame reversal (Wodak 2015), whereby the fault for the subsequent Fosse Ardeatine retaliation should lie, at least indirectly, with the partisans and their foolish act. Indeed, he noted, Meloni 'knows very well that those Italians were murdered in retaliation for what partisans had done in Via Rasella' (*Corriere della Sera* 2023 - authors' translation). To leave no doubt about the subtext of his utterances, in a ham-fisted attempt to clarify his words a few days later, La Russa stated:

I confirm, word by word, my strong condemnation of the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, which I defined, only a few days ago, as 'one of the most brutal pages of our history'. I also confirm that the trigger of the odious Nazi reprisal was the killing of a military band of South Tyrol Nazis, and I want to stress that I did not define that action as 'inglorious' but rather as 'one of the least glorious of the Resistance'. (Il Sole 24 Ore 2023a - authors' translation)

Far from being an innocent mishap, La Russa's casual deployment of a snippet of fake history exemplifies a broader attempt on the part of Italy's main governing party to (re)construct national

history through distortions and false facts. In approaching this issue, we draw inspiration from Niezen's (2018) observation that the conflicts punctuating the politics of memory fester until they enter identity politics. It is exactly identity politics that constitutes the centre-piece of Fdl's ideology and policies, in its efforts to build an exclusionary national identity for Italians, opposed not only to the typical out-group of immigrants but also to the Italian left, and, by extension, the resistance. In doing so, Fdl behaves in a way resembling the 'mnemonic warriors' described by Petrovic, Raos, and Fila (2023), who carry out a construction of the national past through a skewed revision of critical and controversial historical events.

4.3. Francesco Lollobrigida and the idea of ethnic replacement

On 18 April 2023, while speaking at an event organised by the CISAL trade union in Rome, Francesco Lollobrigida, the Minister of Agriculture and Food Sovereignty in the Meloni government, as well as the Prime Minister's brother-in-law, lamented that:

we cannot give in to the idea of *ethnic replacement*, [...]: Italians have fewer kids, so we replace them with someone else. That is not the way to go. I see [...] immigration as a natural fact [...]. I am the grandson of an emigrant so I would never say that emigration and immigration are a problem. On the contrary, they are an opportunity for a nation's growth—if there is demand for labour. [...] But we need to be clear about the fact that the main enemy of regular immigration [...] is illegal immigration. (Il Sole 24 Ore 2023b - authors' translation, emphasis added)

Lollobrigida's words stemmed from a reasonable concern over the problem of Italy's demographic decline – a recurrent theme in Fdl's public discourse (see d'Italia 2017, 2022, 2024). This concern, however, quickly turned into a chance for the speaker to squarely enter the domain of anti-immigrant nativist ideology. Lollobrigida's 'ethnic replacement' remark hints not so subtly at Renaud Camus's (2011) racist theory of the great replacement, which in turn bears obvious similarities with the anti-Semitic Kalergi plan conspiracy theory, which theorised a Jewish plot to dilute and eventually eliminate Europe's white Christian civilisation via immigration from non-Western countries. Building on these ideas, Camus argues that powerful global elites, including oft-targeted Hungarian billionaire George Soros, as well as an allegedly oligarchic European Union, are orchestrating the gradual replacement of Westerners with non-white immigrants, and the annihilation of Western civilisation (Bergmann 2021). The ultimate objective of the great replacement operation is the creation of an ethnically hybrid population that is weak and vulnerable to elite control.

In addition to evoking a fake theory deep-seated in a fake historical interpretation of migrations, Lollobrigida's statement bears uncanny echoes to racist beliefs rife under fascism and in Fdl's forebear MSI. In particular, the statement recalls the fascist fear of Italy being submerged by 'the African race', due to the latter's high fertility rates. Such fear had deep roots in the fascist conception of Italian national and racial identity, which had replaced the southern Italian 'others' of the country's liberal era with the colonised Africans, now deemed to be inferior and threatening (Giuliani 2018). Four decades later, the MSI collected this ideological heritage with regard to racial and national identity, though through the necessary recontextualisation within contemporary times. In the early 1990s, with the increase in immigrant arrivals in Italy, post-fascists amalgamated fears of immigration with their distinctive obsession with ethnic mixing, which would inevitably adulterate Italian ethnic purity (Furlong 1992).

Hints at the great replacement theory had already been a favourite piece of the Italian far right well before the 2022 electoral campaign. In a 2016 Tweet, for instance, Meloni thunderously warned that, while a sizable number of Italians were moving abroad, immigrants were arriving in Italy in great numbers, due to the misjudgement of political elites. On this occasion, Meloni explicitly included a nod to the great replacement theory, by calling immigration 'a rehearsal for ethnic replacement' (Meloni 2016). In 2017, Matteo Salvini abrasively criticised the attempt at ethnic replacement taking place via the welcoming of immigrants who only pretended to flee war, and

to whom the then Italian government offered 'breakfast, lunch, dinner, a telephone, and playing ball' (Salvini 2017). More importantly, the great replacement theory was mentioned explicitly in Fdl's 2017 programmatic document, the so-called 'Theses of Trieste', which fretted over the magnitude of 'uncontrolled' immigration to remedy demographic decline.

Nor is the evocation of the great replacement theory only a rhetorical strategy of the Italian far right: Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Freedom party, for instance, claimed that 'our population is being replaced. No more!' (cited in Bergmann 2021, 38). On an even more aggressive note, *Rassemblement National's* leader Marine Le Pen suggested reading Jean Raspail's 1994 novel *Le Camp des Saints*, emphasising that 'stinking' dark-skinned immigrants and 'rat people' were taking Europe by storm through a 'river of sperm' (cited in Symons 2017). The animal-like characterisation of immigration clearly refers to the far right's dread of immigrant's fertility: another core element of the great replacement theory, which posits a mass invasion of immigrants ready to reproduce at incredible rates.

Critical reactions to Lollobrigida's words came immediately from across the political spectrum – not just from the opposition but also, notably, from conservative corners, such as newspaper *Il Foglio*. The latter defined the minister's remarks on ethnic replacement as 'abominable', a 'colossal nonsense', and the 'unacceptable remnants of certain ideas' that 'still remain in the culture and language of the right' (*Il Foglio* 2023 - authors' translation). Condemnation on the part of a newspaper that is normally not hostile to the government exemplifies the uneasiness of more moderate sectors of the right with regard to expressions that belong unmistakably in an extremist and antidemocratic discourse.

Lollobrigida's response came rapidly and predictably centred on disabusing his many critics of any ill-intention on his part. A brush-off being impossible in the circumstances, Lollobrigida's chosen strategy was to simply plead ignorance:

I have used words that have been connected to conspiracy theories which I do not follow and about which I am ignorant. [...] I do not think it is against the law [for me] not to waste my time with writings that have no meaning. (cited in Cangemi 2023 - authors' translation)

Given how liberally the idea of ethnic replacement has been used by the Italian far right – including, as mentioned above, by Giorgia Meloni herself – it is difficult to believe that Lollobrigida truly ignored the implications of his wording choice. But, as it is common in this sort of situation, what matters is the presence of a corrective gesture rather than the content or credibility of it. By distancing himself, however ludicrously, from the extremist implications of his previous words, Lollobrigida succeeded in appeasing everybody: the moderate as well as the extreme sectors of Fdl's political base – ultimately giving yet another contribution to the mainstreaming of the far right in Italy.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined three recent episodes illustrating the memory discourse and politics of *Fratelli d'Italia's* leadership vis-a-vis Italy's fascist past: Giorgia Meloni's reassessment of the country's liberation in her *Corriere della Sera* letter; Ignazio La Russa's fake historical reconstruction of the Via Rasella attack; finally, Francesco Lollobrigida's 'ethnic replacement' incident. In extending the study of far right (ab)uses of memory to the hitherto neglected case of Fdl, the analysis presented here has also validated the tripartite typology presented in Couperus and Tortola (2019) as capable of capturing the range of far right mnemonic strategies for the rehabilitation of the dark past. The three strategies are distinct yet connected and complementary in their support of far right mainstreaming, as they employ different discursive tools aimed at different audiences: historical reassessment operates at the level of intersubjective (re)interpretation and is aimed at a more mainstream and sophisticated audience; fake history is most often based on snippets of false information that lend themselves to faster consumption; finally,

the evocation-cum-denial of (neo)fascist sympathies contributes to holding together the moderate and extreme parts of the far right electorate, on which its mainstreaming rests, by speaking and making discursive concessions to both at the same time.

The episodes examined in this article are just three particularly blatant examples of how Fdl abuses the past. That they happened within only a few weeks, however, signals the ease with which the party moves along the entire gamut of mnemonic strategies for political gain. Combined with analogous incidents occurred before and after the time window discussed here, these abuses of the past do not only indicate Fdl's troublesome relationship with the experience and legacy of fascism but point to a deliberate effort to condition and alter the collective memory of the country's fascist past – the ultimate goal of which is to make the latter more palatable to an electorate whose experiential connections with that historical juncture are vanishing, and in a wider context of similar revisionist processes taking place elsewhere in Europe and beyond (e.g. Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann 2023; Levi and Rothberg 2018; Zavatti 2021). In this respect, we disagree with Tarchi's (2024, 31–32) assessment of some of the episodes examined here as occasional instances of 'verbal slippage' from a party that has otherwise fully replaced its post-fascist ideological orientation with a pragmatic and opportunistic 'sovereign patriotism'. The occurrences of such 'slippage' vis-a-vis the country's past seem to us to be too many and too frequent to be considered mere accidents.

Does this make Fdl fascist? This is a longer discussion that obviously hinges, first and foremost, on how extendable we think the concept of fascism is across time and space.⁴ Generally speaking (and leaving aside the hardline *Duce* nostalgics still residing within the party), we are satisfied with the recent characterization of Fdl as an 'afascist' party, i.e. one that regards the fascist experience as confined to the inter-war period, and therefore refuses to engage with the question of its adherence to the fascist ideology in the first place (Pedullà and Urbinati 2024; Vassallo and Vignati 2023). There are two caveats to this definition, however. The first is that, while being afascist is different from being fascist, it is also different from being anti-fascist, as underlined by the analysts employing this category. In fact, the denial of the current relevance of the category of fascism is quite often advanced disingenuously by Fdl members – above all Giorgia Meloni – simply as a way to avoid taking a position on anti-fascism.

A second, and more important caveat, is that even if we do not define Fdl as fascist, it is undeniable that this party has a troubled relationship with the tenets of post-WWII liberal-democracy, in ways that are resonant, if not with fascism *stricto sensu*, certainly with an authoritarian view of politics. The Meloni government's open disdain for its political opposition and unaligned intellectuals, media and civil society; its frequent flirtations with illiberal political movements and regimes; finally, its project of reforming the Italian constitution in a plebiscitary direction, are just a few markers of such a view. In this context, abusing the fascist past to offer benevolent interpretations of this experience is part and parcel of the far right's attempt to build an ideational and cultural scaffolding for its political agenda. Even conceding that the past remains in the past, the memory of this past is very much in the present, and can be deployed in the service of mainstreaming far right positions.

From its new position of governmental power, Fdl can pursue its mnemonic strategies with the benefit of great media visibility (much of Italy's mainstream media still displays a significant degree of conformism with regard to sitting governments: see e.g. Reporters Without Borders 2023), and above all control over a good deal of the country's information and cultural system. It can do so, moreover, in a societal context that seems generally receptive to the sort of historical reassessments discussed in this article. A 2016 survey on the memory of Nazi-fascism, for instance, found that 16–25-year-old Italians see fascism as 'a dictatorship to be partly condemned, but which has also benefited the country' (Ipsos 2016 - authors' translation). A more recent survey highlighted how one-third of Italians see fascism either as a historical experience that no longer deserves to be discussed – the 'afascist' standpoint described above – or as a topic to be examined in order to highlight its positive sides (Fonda 2023).

Everything considered, regardless of how long the current Meloni government will remain in power, its ideational and cultural stance, and more specifically its positioning with regard to the

memory of fascism, are noteworthy for their potential to further reinforce, if not cement, the overall shift to the right that has taken place in the Italian political system since the end of the Cold War.

Notes

1. In this article, we use ‘far right’ as an umbrella term containing the radical as well as the extreme right – two phenomena that are not always fully separable conceptually or empirically (Pirro 2023).
2. See Tarchi (2024) for a recent and effective summary of FdI’s genealogy as Italy’s third ‘flame party’ (referring to post-fascism’s symbolic tricolor flame) after the MSI and AN.
3. On the intense debate about the relationship between democracy and the far right, see Finchelstein and Urbinati (2018).
4. For an extreme view on fascism’s ability to travel beyond the experience of the *ventennio*, see Umberto Eco’s (1995) oft-cited analysis of ‘ur-fascism’.

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