

An Inappropriate Memorial Day

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The Italian Parliament recently approved a statute that institutes a Memorial Day for the sacrifice of the Alpine Troops in the battle of 26th of January 1943, during WWII. The battle took place in Nikolajewka, a village which is now in Ukraine (and part of another village, Livenka). The decision, taken with an almost unanimous vote, might have raised a few eye-brows for at least a couple of reasons: first, the Alpine Troops were acting as part of a fascist army invading another country; second, in the current context, it is, say, surprising to choose as a symbolic date a battle which took place on the Ukrainian territory. Yet, despite all of this, there has not been much of a public debate or opposition. A possible explanation is that this statute is part of the process of building up a [‘shared memory’](#) between political parties for legitimising the current political system. The problem is that, in the meantime, aggressors are presented as victims, and the multiplication of Memorial Days produces contradictory outcomes.

Shared Memory in the Italian Constitutional Order

The [statute](#) that introduces the Memorial Day for the sacrifice of the Alpine Troops on January 26 was approved by the Senate of the Republic on April 5, almost unanimously: 189 votes in favour, and only one abstained. No Senator voted against it. A similar outcome had already materialised in the vote on the same legislative proposal in the lower chamber, which in 2019 approved the draft with 456 votes in favour, 7 abstained and, again, no one against it. The statute intends to promote the celebration of the Alpine Troops and their contribution to Italian history, but the date chosen for the Memorial Day is obviously a poisoned fruit in the politics of shared memory, as the following the day (January 27) is the Memorial Day of the *Shoah*. As art. 1 of the approved Statute explains, the Memorial Day intends to celebrate not only ‘the defence of sovereignty and the national interest’, but also ‘the memory of the heroism shown by the Alpine Troops in the battle of Nikolajewka during WWII’. It is worth pausing and explaining a few things about the battle, which took place, indeed, on the 26th of January 1943. The battle was part of the chaotic retreat of Italian, German, and Hungarian troops from the Soviet Union front. The Soviet army had encircled the Alpine Troops near the village of Nikolajewka, and only after a tragic battle (with enormous losses), the Italian troops were able to break the Soviet line and find a path to move back west. The statute approved by Parliament invites schools and institutions to celebrate the spirit of sacrifice and sense of duty exemplified by those soldiers. It is surprising to see that in the preparatory works and in the statute itself there is no reference to the fact that the war in which this battle took place was a war of aggression. On the contrary, the emphasis is put on the (*verbatim*) heroism and sacrifice of the Alpine Troops. The heroic dimension is seen in the ability of the Alpine Troops to open a passage for completing the retreat

despite the lack of means and low number of soldiers compared to the Soviet troops. In other words, the battle is represented as just a skilled and brave military action.

The Gift of Shared Memory: From Aggressors to Victims

How is it possible that such a statute has been approved with no significant opposition? One can consider the statute the culmination of a politics of shared memory that serves as a legitimating and unifying factor for a political system whose lack of representativity is often recognised by [commentators](#). Shared memory assumes that the constitutional order has an inclusive capacity. In fact, by agreeing to a shared memory, symbolic politics can emerge on which all parties (including those who previously were excluded for political reasons) can agree. For this reason, the politics of shared memory aim at finding sources of legitimacy that can be accepted by everyone. In this case, the symbolic dimension is ensured by the fact that the Alpine Troops are one of the most respected military bodies of the country. Moreover, many soldiers of the Alpine Troops died during the battle, re-enforcing the perception of a loyal and reliable military body.

However, to make this episode a staple of shared memory, more is required. In order to turn the actions of the Alpines into a meaningful sacrifice, their status as victims of brutal violence had to be asserted by the legislator. [As it has been noted](#), the search for a victim-like status has been part and parcel of the politics of shared memory. The acknowledgment of a victim status brings clear advantages with it. For a start, the attitude towards a victim tends to be less controversial and less divisive. It allows for a convergence of different political forces not on a political project but on compassion for the suffering of the affected. This identification with the pain and suffering of the victims generates a short-circuit as [it allows to separate the event from the chain of reasons that brought it about](#). The battle of Nikolajewka is a textbook case of the approach to the culture of shared memory: the attempt made by this statute is to portray the Italian troops as exceptionally brave soldiers, but [victims](#) of the brutality of war. In the case of the Alpine Troops, it is easier to promote the logic of victimisation because many of those soldiers were against the war and many of those who survived joined the resistance later. But the victimisation of this episode comes with a price: the memory of the battle obscures the wider context of the war. Those who were aggressors are now portrayed as victims of a generic violence.

Re-interpreting Anti-Fascist Constitutionalism

This leads to an important point of current Italian political culture, which might provide an explanation for the adoption of this statute. If both parliamentary chambers vote unanimously for establishing a Memorial Day for a battle fought during a war of aggression, then this means that the entirety of the political system shares the same view not only on the specific event, but also on how to promote a common culture of sensitivity towards victims of all sides. The stabilisation of the political system after WWII was a project supported by anti-fascist political

parties whose legitimacy rested, partially, on having opposed the rise of the Fascist party. That political system does not exist anymore: not only have those parties disappeared, but the structure and the aims of political parties [have changed dramatically](#). The possibility of appealing to the direct participation in the resistance against fascism is no longer on the table. A politics of shared memory has provided an alternative source of legitimacy to a weakly legitimised political system. The original anti-fascist spirit of the Italian constitutional order is re-interpreted, though not dismissed. Yet, some of the reasons supporting anti-fascist constitutionalism have now changed: the main [constitutional commitment](#) is no longer to the exclusion of fascist politics on the basis of a political decision, but to the rejection of any form of totalitarian and authoritarian politics. It is a rather vague commitment which is prone to the recognition of the reasons, and most importantly, the suffering, of all affected political and civil subjects. A common political culture with low political intensity is supposed to develop out of this recognition: we should all pay due tribute to the pain and violence inflicted upon all political and civil agents, no matter which side they chose. The problem is that it is very difficult to obtain a rational constitutional synthesis: which type of political culture celebrates on January 26 a battle fought in a war of aggression which, among many things, delayed the unveiling and liberation of concentration camps, and then dedicates the following day (January 27) to remembering the *Shoah*?

