

Fascism and the Radical Right

By [Gustavo Corni](#)

Summary

The First World War was not only the precondition of the rise of fascist movements in a general way: more definitely, the fascists presented themselves as the heirs of the trench combatants. German Sturmtruppen and Italian arditi were chosen by the right-wing movements of National Socialism and Fascism as models for a new “political soldier”; they also became part of the mythology created by the regimes to strengthen popular consent. The militias of both movements took over symbols and practices of the stormtroopers in order to contrast themselves to the political status quo. After the access to power, the heritage of the war was adopted by the symbolic systems of reference of the regimes as a unifying and legitimizing factor, although in a secondary rank.

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Introduction

The First World War represented a turning point in the history of the world and had important consequences. In the first place, it was, perhaps, the “brutalization of politics” that would leave a deep mark on the life and political behaviour of millions of people, and of entire political systems. It was a brutalization that brought with it the dehumanization of the enemy, the acceptance of any type of violence as something normal or acceptable, and the outburst of racism. Recently, authors such as [John Horne](#) and Benjamin Ziemann have warned against over-stretching the term brutalization, introduced by [George Mosse \(1918-1999\)](#) in analysing the German case,¹ asserting that it cannot be used as a general explanation for the complexity of post-war politics and [culture](#).² Tiredness and desire for peace and stabilization

were also important factors for many ex-combatants at the end of the conflict, in their return to civil life.

The experience of war undoubtedly left deep marks. One can reflect on the consequences and lessons that were derived from the First World War as regards economic policy, and on the exasperation that underlay [nationalism](#), which U.S. President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), tried to remedy by proposing the principle of national self-determination. Furthermore, one can think of the politicization of vast numbers of ex-servicemen who, throughout the world, tried to organize themselves, convinced that after the sacrifices in the trenches, their moment had finally arrived, when they would become part of the ruling class. Huge numbers of ex-servicemen throughout Europe did not simply return their arms: they either did not want to go back to civil life, or were not able to. They were also driven by political reasons, even though these were complex and varied: the battle against the threat of [revolution](#) (or, conversely, revolutionary militancy); the national and border issues that emerged after the dissolution of the great [empires](#) and in the face of post-war rearrangement; and the political conflicts within single states. Thus, a complex trend of [paramilitary formations](#) spread through most of Europe, and functioned as causes of disorder until at least 1923.³ As far as chronology is concerned, in the case of Balkans we have to go back to the early 20th century, before the outbreak of the Great War, in order to find the roots of paramilitary violence.⁴ However, there is no doubt that the most trenchant consequences of the war were to be found in [Germany](#) and [Italy](#), where they contributed to the rise and triumph of the radical movements of National Socialism and fascism.

“The experience of World War I was the most decisive immediate precondition for fascism.”⁵ In other words, without that war there would have been neither fascism in Italy nor National Socialism in Germany. “Without the First World War and its consequences, but also without the October revolution and the symbolic strength of Leninism, fascism would have remained a sectarian movement.”⁶

The rise and success of these two movements were conditioned in a crucial way by the conflict and its outcome: a terrible defeat for Germany accompanied by the humiliation of the “*Diktat*” of Versailles and a frustrating “mutilated victory” in the case of Italy. But this cannot mean that war was the only cause of the success of these movements. Other elements such as the frailty of democratic and representative institutions, as well as in later years the dramatic consequences of the economic crisis have to be taken into consideration. The two movements were founded as a reaction to this outcome, created by two young people who had personally lived through the war experience. [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#), in particular,

would go on to exalt it as a turning point in his life (which, until then, had been inconclusive). The appeal of [Benito Mussolini \(1883-1945\)](#) fascism to the “Italy of the trenches”, in which the movement presented itself as the political heir, corresponds with the reiterated wish of Hitler’s *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) to bring Germany back to the rank of a great power, thereby wiping out the [Treaty of Versailles](#). Many servicemen considered the war as a “bloody dawn of a new era of Italian history, consecrated by the blood shed by the heroes and by the martyrs to give life to the new Italy”.⁷ Of course Hitler had to overcome the competition of German conservatism of every shade, which shared the idea of rejecting the Peace Treaty of Versailles and of reinstating the role of Germany as a great power. However, he showed that he was not only able to act, but to successfully launch a political message in all directions. If we draw a comparison with the greatest movement of German veterans, the *Stahlhelm*, the political superiority of National Socialism clearly emerges. The latter was able to look at the whole society of servicemen and non-servicemen, whereas in the *Stahlhelm* (as in other similar associations) the perspective was limited to those who had personally lived through the war experience.⁸ The radical desire to get the German military power to rise again is also one of the factors that explain the electoral success of National Socialism between 1930 and 1933. Besides, on this basis, Hitler was able to strengthen the alliance with the ruling groups of the imperial era (the armed forces, the state bureaucracy, the vested interests of industry, the banks and the great landowners). One has only to think of how his speech of 3 February 1933 was positively welcomed by the *Reichswehr* elite, just a few days after he had assumed the role of chancellor. He stated (in the concise notes of one of those present):

Adjustment of youth and of the whole people to the idea that only a struggle can save us and that everything else must be subordinated to this idea...Armed forces most important and most Socialist institution of the State.⁹

There are numerous references to the First World War in the culture of the two regimes, in the [literature](#), ideology, [propaganda](#) and political practice of the two dictatorships. However, there are also negative references: one of the driving reasons behind Hitler’s economic policy in preparation for the war – according to the pioneering intuition of Tim Mason¹⁰ – was the fear of what was seen as the “collapse” of November 1918, and by the desire to avoid this ever being repeated. The “processes of learning,” on which Ulrich Herbert concentrated in an essay, from the experience of the First World War, nevertheless show great differences between the two movements/regimes.¹¹ Fascism could evoke a victory, achieved with great sacrifices, not a bitter and unexpected defeat.

The grounds on which the German extreme right drew lessons from the war are numerous. This article shall try to summarize them: a condemnation without appeal of the democracy and the parliamentary system that had provided reasons for disunity and weakness and, closely connected to that, the criticism made of the left-wing parties, that were branded as anti-national and disruptive to the social body. On the economic level, the awareness that the internal resources available, even though exploited in the most rational way, were not enough. The memorandum on the four-year plan drafted by Hitler himself in the summer of 1936 is very clear; there it was stated that a hastened preparation of the war would form only the precondition for creating a vital space of great size, from which Germany could draw in full. However, this was not enough: in Hitler's opinion, it was necessary to build a *Kampfgeist* in the young generation in order to strengthen the view of a *Volksgemeinschaft* that could resist disintegration.

In other words, the idea was to take "war as teacher to prepare the next war".¹² These were themes widely diffused in the nationalist and conservative right-wing field. However, National Socialism distanced itself from them by radicalizing these reasons and taking them to the extreme. First, the war would have to be utterly unreserved in order to be won. Second, the forms of exploitation of the resources to be attained (from food products to manpower) would need to have no limits. Finally, the next war – in order to end in a different way from the previous one – would have to include the elimination of the main reason for the weakness of the German *Volk*: the Jews. In this regard, Hitler's speech, the infamous prophecy on 30 January 1939, is significant:

Today I will once more be a prophet: if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevizing of the Earth and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.¹³

For Mussolini and the fascists, the parliamentary democracy and the anti-national left wings also represented an enemy to be fought in the light of the experience of 1915-1918; however, it seems that fascism in its ascending phase resumed the confrontation of 1914-1915 between [interventionists](#) and [neutralists](#), rather than drawing lessons from the war in itself. The fascists, in their newspaper "*Popolo d'Italia*" attacked the liberal government of [Francesco S. Nitti \(1868-1953\)](#) and defined the ongoing political conflict in the following terms:

On one side of the barricade and on the other, the bourgeois and the working class are mingled. What joins them, or divides them, is something that is above the interests of the

classes or of the ideologies of the old parties. It is the war.¹⁴

Of course, with the strengthening of the dictatorships and the approach of a second conflict, which was very different from, and more brutal than, the previous one, the references to 1914-1918 (for Italy 1915-1918) began to disappear, leaving an ever-widening space for other elements. In Italy, the myth of the trenches, of the Italy of "[Vittorio Veneto](#)" (the final victorious battle) was progressively replaced with the more resplendent reference to the imperial Roman spirit. In Germany, the themes of *Lebensraum* and *völkisch*, and racial policies prevailed from the second half of the 1930s. However, after the war had begun, they definitely passed into the background since, at that time, there were clearly other triumphs to celebrate. One only has to think of the hate directed towards the *Novemberverbrecher* ("November criminals")¹⁵ which then changed direction and concentrated on the Jews as the only ones responsible for the defeat. This is the distinctive feature in the few references Hitler made in his speeches to the topic of the war,¹⁶ culminating in the above-quoted threat declared on 30 January 1939. Nevertheless, on the whole, we may note in the comparison, that "the NSDAP internalized the spirit of the front more than any other European political movement in the period between the two wars".¹⁷ The following pages will concentrate on the emergence of the extreme right-wing movements and on the more direct tie between them and the war which had just ended. The focus will be on Italy and Germany, in which the link between war experience and the rise of the extreme right-wing movements is more direct. In many other cases, in both Western and Central Eastern Europe, the different semi-fascist movements emerged a decade later and their connection with the war is more tenuous, overshadowed by the consequences of the economic crisis and by other factors, among them the imitation of the successful Italian and German examples.

Sturmtruppen and Arditi: From Soldiers to Political Soldiers

The most direct connection between the war and the fascist movements immediately after the war, initially in Italy and Germany, is to be found in the special units set up during the conflict. It is a structural link, because at the end of the conflict there was a movement of men from these special units to the fascist militias. It is also because there were ideological reasons, models of behaviour and ideals that were derived from the units of [arditi](#) or *Sturmtruppen*, which would go on to condition the first movement-like phase of the European fascisms. Additionally, in [Austria](#) the first militias, founded at the end of the war in order to defend the new state body from the attacks by Bolshevism and by the [ethnic minorities](#) (such as Slovenes at the Carinthian border), were formed by officials and members of the k.u.k. *Sturmtruppen* and nominated themselves explicitly as *Frontkämpfer*. They would become the

forerunners of the *Heimwehren*, whose character at least partially leaned towards fascism.¹⁸

In Germany, in order to prevent the best soldiers from becoming worn out in the trenches, units were set up consisting of volunteers, chosen for their motivations and their psycho-physical characteristics. Armed lightly (with [hand grenades](#), knives and pistols for ordinary soldiers, in order to facilitate mobility), their task was to storm the enemy trenches, exploiting the surprise factor.¹⁹ They were elite units which were distinguished by special uniforms, better food rations and special treatment in camps far from the front line, so as not to suffer from its attrition.

In Italy, it was General [Luigi Capello \(1859-1941\)](#), commander of the Second Army Corps, who first established the *arditi*, in May 1917. The idea was immediately extended to the whole army. These were special units, made up of volunteers. They underwent special training, but, since they were able to enjoy better treatment than the other troops, the *arditi* were conceived as units which were capable of rapid and astute attacks on the enemy positions. They had to attack bravely and audaciously.

There was considerable friction between *Sturmtruppen* or *arditi*, on the one hand, and the normal troops, on the other, precisely because of the privileges they enjoyed and their self-confidence. Their achievements were surrounded by a legendary aura. In Germany, it was [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#), himself an officer in the *Sturmtruppen*, who sang the praises of this “new type of man. A man who has achieved the highest intensification of all human qualities and blended them so harmoniously and yet so violently that one can only describe him with one word: fighter”.²⁰

In Italy, their actions, which were at the very end militarily mediocre, were praised by the official bulletins and cherished by the [press](#) and public opinion. Thus, during the final phase of the war, a real myth developed of soldiers who did not fear the “beautiful death” for love of the homeland; they were almost regarded as a “symbol of a gifted race”.²¹

At the end of the war a deep frustration spread among the *Sturmtruppen* and some of the ex-soldiers because of the defeat which was regarded as undeserved. The so-called “[stab-in-the-back myth](#)” (*Dolchstoßlegende*) was imbued with great success by the military leaders themselves. According to this interpretation, the blame for the defeat lay on the traitors, the “November criminals”, i.e. the revolutionary working class. Added to the frustration for the defeat, there was also the fear of a communist revolution. Moreover, in the German case, there was the problem of eastern territories that were supposed to become part of the newborn [Polish state](#). Nationalist and class reasons incited the phenomenon of the so-called

[Freikorps](#) (Freecorps) which acted with great determination on different internal and external front lines: from the repression of the [revolutionary attempt](#) by the *Spartakus League* in January 1919 to the *Kapp Putsch* in March 1920, from the battle in the Baltic against the Bolsheviks in 1919 to the guerrilla attacks against the [French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923](#).²²

In Italy, just after the war, the situation was stormy but nothing in comparison with that in Germany. The political-militant activism of the *arditi* was noteworthy, but less intensive than that of the *Sturmtruppen*. When the war ended, most of the *arditi* units were disbanded. On the one hand, the legend continued to blossom. On the other hand, many of the ex-*arditi*, frustrated because of the lack of acknowledgement of their merits and unable to reintegrate in post-war life, continued to support, even in civilian clothes, the values and virtues of the war just ended. The extreme right wing regarded the *arditi* as the possible saviours of the homeland from the post-war crisis. There were particularly close connections with the futurists, many of whom joined the National Association of *arditi*, founded in Rome on 1 January 1919. "What *arditi* and futurists had in common, apart from an interventionist profile, was a confused but sincere desire for radical political, social and moral renewal."²³ The Association devoted itself to a programme that contained revolutionary ideas; but these were organized "in a confused and haphazard manner".²⁴ It had a significant number of similarities with the founding programme of the *Fasci di combattimento* (Leagues of Combatants) founded by Mussolini in March 1919 at a meeting in San Sepolcro Square in Milan.

Mussolini's relationship with the *arditi* was calculated; he saw them as a starting point for entering the ex-servicemen's world. Indeed, at the founding San Sepolcro meeting many *Arditi* joined the *fasci* and, in the subsequent months, it was the *arditi* who started the first *fasci* in various towns. A crucial moment of this initial symbiosis between *arditi* and fascists was the attack on the headquarters of the socialist newspaper "*L'Avanti!*" in Milan on 15 April 1919, which aroused a great commotion. *Arditi*, futurists and fascists took part together in the political elections of 1919, in the constituency in Milan, with disastrous results. The continuity with the movement of the "shock troops" was recognized and laid claim to by the fascists. [Giuseppe Bottai \(1895-1959\)](#), a leading exponent of fascism and already lieutenant of an attack squad, described the *arditi* as "an ideal category of the Italian people, that in them expressed certain new talents of it, revealed by the battle and from the battle infused in its way of life".²⁵

It was a "political" army – according to Bottai – in which the unity of the nation was reflected: it did not allow signs of non-homogeneity or dissent. Some components of the fascist symbolism, such as the black shirt, the skull and dagger, the call "*a noi!*" (to us!), and even

the song "*Giovinazza*" (Youth), were adopted from the experience of the *arditi*.

The [young people](#), who grew up in the passion of the war, had to destroy at their roots the political and mental structures in force, which were an outcome of the past. The desire to be and to appear youthful was a characterizing aspect in many variants of European fascism, in the profile of both the composition of those who adhered to it and the ideologies, and it had a remarkable influence also in the case of Italy.

The relations between the *arditi* and fascism soon became hostile. It should be noted that the *arditismo*, how the movement and the mood of the *arditi* is collectively called, was a political organization that had very little ideological coherence and swayed between extremism and conservatism. In 1920-1921, there was even an affiliation with class undertones in the so-called *Arditi del Popolo*. The more Mussolini and fascism compromised with [Giovanni Giolitti \(1842-1928\)](#) and the liberal forces, the more difficult the relations became with the political *arditismo*. The *arditi* began to look more towards [Gabriele D'Annunzio \(1863-1938\)](#) than to Mussolini and they chose the former as their honorary president. It was D'Annunzio's occupation of [Fiume](#), from September 1919, that determined the definitive separation between fascism and *arditismo*.²⁶ The lack of support given to the legionaries by Mussolini on 24 December 1920, during the "*Natale di sangue*" ("The bloody Christmas", when the Italian armed operation that put an end to the adventure of Fiume) and the personal clash between the two leaders caused the final breakup. Yet, there was *arditismo*, which supported a vague political and social rebelliousness; but on the other side there was Mussolini and fascism, launched towards the conquest of power by interacting with the old ruling classes.

Unlike the *Freikorps*, which, after 1920 left the political scene, the *arditi* tried to develop a vague programme of social and political renewal. According to an Italian historian, "the *arditi* were subversive, yet in a confused, unrealistic and often contradictory way, and their actions are to be placed in the area of the left-wing forces".²⁷ However, they were quickly affiliated, or swept aside by the fascism that reached power in 1922. They flowed into the vast riverbed of *combattentismo* (the national movement founded by ex-servicemen after the First World War), of which the regime took control.²⁸ The last outbursts of political activity of the *arditi* and ex-servicemen assumed an antifascist touch in 1924-1925, during the crisis following the assassination of the socialist Member of Parliament [Giacomo Matteotti \(1885-1924\)](#).

In its turn, National Socialism, especially after 1933, reaffirmed that the *Freikorps* had been its direct forefathers and inspirers; they represented the model of "political soldier", which was adopted later by Hitler's "brown shirts". Instead, it is obvious that the *Freikorps* never had a real political programme; their culture itself was steeped in nihilism. Rather than being

political militants, they were driven by a predominating desire to act, even though in vague and contradictory directions. The claim of the regime to celebrate the *Freikorps* as the forerunners of its instinctive anticommunism is not very plausible either. Indeed, if it is true that many subscribed to National Socialism, it is also true that others were influenced by a confused subversion – similar to that of the Italian *arditi*. In fact, they were enemies of liberalism, of the status quo, and of the democratic republic. Certainly, they contributed to the National Socialist mentality through “a well-developed principle of the leader, the work camps, the youth groups, a violent racism and the mystic adoration of the spirit of the German people”.²⁹ One should not forget that in Italy a considerable part of the ruling class came from the *arditi*: [Italo Balbo \(1896-1940\)](#), [Giuseppe Bastianini \(1899-1961\)](#), Giuseppe Bottai, [Cesare De Vecchi \(1884-1959\)](#), [Ettore Muti \(1902-1943\)](#), [Renato Ricci \(1896-1956\)](#) and [Carlo Scorza \(1897-1988\)](#).

The *Sturmtruppen* are part of the mythology created by the regime to strengthen popular consent, just like the *arditi* in Italy: “to purely link together the glories of the Great War and the birth of the fascist regime, as a continuity not only temporal, but also political”.³⁰ However, the events that later took place and the wars effectively carried out in the 1930s (in Ethiopia and [Spain](#)) pushed the call to the glories of the past into the background, proposing new heroes and new models.

The Squadristo and the Heritage of the War

A characteristic of the fascist movements established immediately after the war was the intense and programmatic use of political violence by means of their own militia which were well organized according to paramilitary models. This was a result of the war that had just ended, in which many of the founding members of these paramilitary organizations were involved. According to Sven Reichardt, the army represented “the incarnation and the model of their desires”.³¹ There was violence in the language, but it was also very tangible and performed in the daily actions of the militants.

The fascist *squadristo*, which would soon pervade in the country, would be an exceedingly political phenomenon, with precise ideological and class connotations, but it would also witness the resurfacing of the widespread custom of violence, obscenity, and the collapsing of rules of protection from contagion.³²

The propensity to subversion and the use of force, the cult of action, the taste for the “low” and the “vulgar” present in the customs, in the language, and in the political practice after the war, and particularly in fascism, were an inheritance of the war, as well as the tendency

to abandon the rules of civil living, and the brutalities associated with surviving. Hence, the rules of decency and good taste seemed to be superfluous. The contemptuous motto "*Me ne frego!*" (I couldn't care less) coined by the *arditi* and taken up by the *squadristi* (fascist action squads) drew from this register. A classic example of simplifying virulence in the language was the writing, handwritten probably by *arditi* on the walls of the tumbledown houses on the front in the period following the [defeat of Caporetto](#): "*Tutti eroi! O il Piave o tutti accoppiati*" ("We are all heroes! Either Piave or we are all dead"). The motto was widely circulated in [photographic](#) reproductions and schoolbooks.³³

A comparative analysis of the actions of the *squadristi* in the period preceding the march on Rome and of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA, "brown shirts"), in the three-year period before Hitler was appointed as chancellor of the Reich, shows that similarities prevailed; yet there are some differences. The paramilitary action of these squads had an offensive character in order to strike and weaken the organizations regarded as the most dangerous: the socialists in Italy, the communists and (in second place) the [social democrats in Germany](#). The amount of violence was higher in Italy, partly due to the availability of a much greater arsenal than that which the SA had at their disposal a decade later. The time difference from the war contributes to explain this clear-cut difference.

The organizational form of the occupations of the towns by the *squadristi* in 1921-1922 had a decidedly military imprint; the most blatant example was the occupation of Ferrara in 1922. Manoeuvres were organized in fine detail and put the weak state apparatus in crisis. The so-called *Landpropaganda* realized by the SA in 1931-1933 had a more symbolic character; however, even in this case nothing was left to chance. "The implementation of the plan took place according to military-tactic criteria."³⁴

One of the crucial phases of these actions was represented by the marches of the militia units in the towns which had been taken under control. These actions followed the typical model of military parades. Roll calls, torchlight processions, assemblies in central places in the towns, ceremonies of honour to the monuments of the fallen (often present in the Italian case), attest the military character of the actions of the fascist militia. Though they took inspiration from models of political action which were already common in the pre-war socialist and trade union movement, the actions of the squads in Italy and Germany are characterized by a more accentuated military and nationalistic form.

The model of the camaraderie was transported – in an idealized way – from the experience of the war which had just ended to the movement of the *squadristi*, making a sort of "spiritual communion of it".³⁵ Whereas, during the war the camaraderie was directed towards the

inside, centred as it was on the relationship among the comrades-in-arms, it was now directed towards the outside: one had to fight against “all those who threatened the rebirth of an energetically-combative nation”.³⁶ Likewise, there was an intensification of an anti-bourgeois feeling, which contrasted those who had fought and those who had stayed at home. After the war, the bourgeois were those who did not share the patriotism, the commitment of the youth and ex-fighters to the greatness of Italy and its rebirth. A vague vision sprang from this that pointed towards a “new man”, a “soldier citizen”.

In the genesis of the movements, 1919-1922 in Italy and 1930-1933 in Germany, the militancy of the squads was often of a spontaneous and anarchic nature that was difficult to control even for those who established the political line of the movement. Hence, tensions rose between the militia and the heads of the party; in Italy it culminated in decisional conflicts between the militaristic and the political wings of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) as a result of the crisis provoked by the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti. In Germany, one should remember the serious crisis caused in 1930 by the intolerance of [Walther Stennes \(1895-1989\)](#), leader of the SA in Berlin, to Hitler’s orders. The tensions were overcome by militarizing the militia and establishing a strong hierarchy within it. In the words of Mussolini: fascism had to be “an army that can be recognized by its passion and by voluntary discipline”.³⁷ The military leaders successfully tried to cushion the conflict with the most agitated wing of the militia by introducing a rigidly structured hierarchy with well-defined forms and ways of behaviour, from the uniform to the salute. The result was complete submission to the leadership of the party, and particularly to the charismatic leader. This result was reached with less effort in Germany, where Hitler had had ten years longer than Mussolini to impose his guiding role.

If one analyses the generational composition of the *squadristi*, one will find confirmation of the incidence of the war experience. The available data on some of the most important centres of the Italian *squadristi* movement show an important over-representation of those born in the second half of the 1890s and, hence, of those who had taken part in the war. However, there was an even greater number of younger militants born in the first years of the 20th century, who had not taken part in the war, but who had grown up under its spell. Of the founders of the *fasci di combattimento*, in March 1919 in Milan, the so-called “*sansepolcristi*”, 55 percent had taken part in the war.³⁸ In the case of the SA, the time lag of almost ten years changes the empirical data collected. The overwhelming rise of the enrolments in the “brown shirts” began in the period 1929-1930. In a militia that exalted the values of youth, two-thirds of the militants were born in the first years of the century, or even during the war. According to the data collected by Peter Merkl, only one third of the

squadristi belonged to the generation of the ex-servicemen.³⁹

Nevertheless, the vision that fascism and National Socialism gave of themselves, as movements originating from the groundbreaking experience of the war (Mussolini, as is known, in December 1917 had defined fascism as a “*trincerocrazia*”, or trench aristocracy), seems questionable in many ways. If one analyses the percentages of the *squadristi* who had been servicemen, and maybe decorated, in the sample surveys available on a local scale, it could be concluded that they cannot maintain *tout court* that having been a serviceman influenced in a decisive way the joining of the fascist or the National Socialist movement. First, this consideration arises from the empirical verification that there was a higher percentage of the *squadristi* belonging to the generation of the “non-servicemen”, i.e. those born at the beginning of the century. Second, in all the ex-belligerent countries, the political mobilization of ex-servicemen after the war involved minimal numbers compared with the millions of officers, petty officers and privates called to arms in 1914-1918. What one can maintain is that the ex-servicemen who adhered to fascism and National Socialism “had evidently lived the war on the front very intensely” as a “tremendous experience of life”.⁴⁰

What is more significant, especially in the German case, in which the militia developed almost a decade later, is the incidence, among the members, of young people who were born at the beginning of the 1900s. These people were adult enough to experience the massive patriotic propaganda put forward during the war; for them, the war had been a sensational collective event, in which an apparently united national community had fought heroically. Even more so, they were then motivated by the frustration of these ideals after the war into being politically involved: a defeat or “mutilated victory”, a society torn apart by ideological conflicts and threatened by the internationalist communist revolution. In Italy and, even more so, in Germany, these young people “clung to the fascism that promised to prolong the war” to offset the sacrifice of their fathers.⁴¹

The paramilitary militia which sprang up in Italy and Germany immediately after the war were subsequently taken up again by other extreme right-wing groups: from the Romanian Iron Guard to the British Union of Fascists, from the Spanish Phalanx to the Rexists of [Léon Degrelle \(1906-1994\)](#). They also evoked the war in their symbols and rites. Although many of the members of these militias were too young to have actively participated to the war, they were nevertheless influenced by its cultural legacy, as well as by its concrete consequences: the rise of revolutionary leftist movements, or the national factor (the dramatic loss of territories in the case of Hungary, the national mix in Romania). Of course, there are relevant differences in each national case, due to historical peculiarities. So, in the case of [Romania](#), the war gave birth to a new radicalized [nationalism](#), but the rise of student movements such

as the Iron Guard came with a great time delay and was caused primarily by the inadequacy of the traditional Romanian ruling elite in the post-war period to face the economic and social crisis of the early 1930s.⁴² In [France](#), paramilitary violence remained weak and isolated in the social context, due not only to the fact that France had won the war, but also to a complex of specific national situations.⁴³

In other situations, the heritage of war was taken over by leftist movements; in the case of the [Hungarian revolutionaries](#), headed by [Béla Kun \(1886\)](#), it was not so much the direct experience of war as the trauma of imprisonment, and the following turmoil in [revolutionary Russia](#), that played a major role in influencing their political behaviour.

This symbolic and ritual apparatus, on which Mussolini and the chief of the brown shirts (SA) [Ernst Röhm \(1887-1934\)](#) strongly insisted, was, on the one hand, supposed to consolidate a sense of identification and “belonging” within the militia and, on the other hand, to stress their diversity and particularity to those outside. Thus, the uniforms, often adorned with the military decorations obtained during the war, became a theme that connoted the fascist militia, together with flags and pennants. Roll calls and oath taking were ceremonies directed within the movement, but also intended to be recognized outside. The identity and, at the same time, the hierarchy were thereby consolidated. It should be borne in mind that a militarization with so much stress on symbols was not easily reached. The fascist and National Socialist militia remained characterized by a jumble of colours and symbols for a long time. It should not be forgotten that there were concrete problems: the uniforms were costly and neither the movement nor the individual member was always able to afford to buy one.

The war itself, transposed in the procedure of the everyday political procedure, was idealized and rendered heroic; the experience that many of the *squadristi*, ex-servicemen themselves, had gone through (the tough, enervating trench war that wore people out both physically and mentally) was pushed aside and the political militancy was venerated as a heroic war, in which the virtues and courage of the individuals could return to shine. As a matter of fact, this individualism was interpreted by the *squadristi* and by their press differently (even though the terms of the distinction were not very clear) with respect to the bourgeois individualism that was seen to have an egoistic trait. The individual promoted himself – according to the view of the *squadristi* – in the small, well-organized group that was hierarchically framed. It was a group held together by the camaraderie which reflected that *Frontsozialismus*, stressed by National Socialist exponents such as [Robert Ley \(1890-1945\)](#).⁴⁴ It was camaraderie with a strong sexist touch that underlined the in-group and additionally emphasized the distinction with respect to the external world which was lazy and impotent,

maybe even traitorous.

Myths and Rituals in the Regimes

When the movements took over power and consolidated the institutional, cultural and mental structures that gave life to the regimes, the references to the Great War changed tone and modified their objective. They were no longer essential in order to endorse the identity of the movements on their way upwards and in opposition to the status quo. Instead, the reference to the war and to its heroes and victims was aimed at consolidating the national campaign at the centre of which lay the regime (fascist or national socialist). In this functional changeover, what carried weight was the fact that commemorative and remembrance events were already taking place, organized by the previous governments to dignify the war. In Italy this manifested as steadfast confirmation of the rank of great power assumed during the conflict; in Germany it aimed to vindicate the heroism and victories achieved while, at the same time, demanded the revision of the peace treaty and the restitution to Germany of the rank of great power. It was a commemorative system to which the [associations of ex-servicemen](#) – such as the *Stahlhelm* – had contributed, as well as the associations that looked after the military cemeteries (such as the *Volksbund für Kriegsgräberfürsorge* and the National Union for the care of war cemeteries) after the war. Thus, features of continuity prevailed, in respect of the period prior to the rise to power. This was especially so in the German case, given the great commitment of one part of the Weimar political system (right-wing and nationalist parties, and associations of veterans) to give visibility to the memories of the war.

What is significant here is the interpretation of the war in the context of Italian history as it was presented to the visitors in the successful exhibition for the tenth anniversary of the fascist revolution, organized in Rome in 1932. There was much extravagance in the preparation of the exhibition, created according to the personal wishes of Mussolini, and with leading artists and architects involved. It exalted the war as the “genesis of fascist thought and action” that under the stimulation of the “geniality of a providential man” would develop into fascism. However the exhibition made reference to a very wide genealogy of victorious fascism, drawing attention to [Giuseppe Mazzini \(1805-1972\)](#) and [Giuseppe Garibaldi \(1807-1882\)](#) as well as the heroes of the war, from Gabriele D’Annunzio to [Cesare Battisti \(1875-1916\)](#). It also put great emphasis on the soldier-king, [Victor Emanuele III, King of Italy \(1869-1947\)](#). The mainstay of Italian history, among the interventionists, is obviously Mussolini who, after the war, was acute enough to summon “the men of the interventionism and of the war” to take moral responsibility for saving Italy. The enemies so emphatically exposed in the exhibition to the millions of visitors were especially the neutralists and the defeatists of 1915, the direct forefathers of the threatening Bolsheviks of 1919. At that point, the fascist story of the war was national and inclusive.⁴⁵ Also, for the regime of Hitler, the

reference to the war soared to the rank of an “all-purpose weapon” of [propaganda](#).⁴⁶

The Commemoration of War and the War Dead

The two regimes used certain rituals and methods to elevate the war, commemorate it and make it heroic.⁴⁷ For all the warring countries, one important feature was that of cemetery monuments. Giving importance to the [commemoration](#) of the deceased was decisive for re-processing the grief in collective and politically convenient ways for these countries. The system of celebrating and commemorating Unknown Soldiers was planned and carried out with similar methods and aims in [France](#), [England](#) and [Italy](#) between 1919 and 1921. In [Germany](#), numerous factors, including a marked regionalism, made it impossible to find a central location. The debate about this intensified in 1924 on the tenth anniversary of the *Neue Wache* in Berlin (redesigned in 1931), which had only a slight impact because it did not undermine the importance of local [monuments](#), as did the one in Munich, and it could not sing the praises of great victories, unlike the imposing monument built in 1927 in Tannenberg. The *Totenburg*, designed by the architect [Robert Tischler \(-1958\)](#), and resembling an unassailable mediaeval fortress, were built with similar methods and designs from the 1920s to the 1950s (the last one was built in the desert at El-Alamein in 1959). The National Socialist regime was able to adapt without any problems: the values of the moral strength of the people, of their heroic ability to suffer and the immersion of the individual in the community of the trenches, were all completely reflected in this type of monument.⁴⁸

In Italy, monuments to the dead were constructed in great numbers, in small and large centres, from the end of the war. There is no doubt about the centrality of “*Il Vittoriano*” in Rome, (inaugurated in 1911 for the fiftieth anniversary of unification), where – once again – the values of the Risorgimento, of ancient Rome, of the monarchy of Savoy and of the victorious war intermingled, without fascism being able to change them in depth.⁴⁹ Fascism gave to the monuments that celebrated the fallen soldiers a more rhetorical and grandiose nature, in order to boost imperial superiority through their design and size. However, it was more a formal change rather than a concrete one. The Redipuglia ossuary is a significant example; it was built on the southern side of the Karst section of the [Isonzo Front](#), in one of the areas that had witnessed the bloodiest battles. In 1935, it was decided to transform the pre-existing military cemetery, inaugurated by Mussolini in 1923, into a grandiose structure. In 1938, the monumental shrine was inaugurated in the presence of the Duce himself. The Redipuglia shrine, built on a hill in the shape of a line-up of a Roman legion, was conceived as the greatest and most majestic military cemetery in Europe. “Redipuglia was transformed from an ossuary of the fallen soldiers into a gigantic open-air fascist shrine.”⁵⁰ Here too, as in

the tenth-anniversary exhibition, there is a marked reference to the monarchy: in the centre of the line-up, the monumental tomb of Prince [Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Aosta \(1869-1931\)](#), commander of the Third Army, is placed. Other ostentatious ossuaries/shrines were built in the same vein and to which fascism gave the imprint of its architectural rhetoric, annihilating the individuality of the victims and giving a united and national interpretation of the sacrifice in war.

As previously stated, the appropriation by the two regimes of the essential myths of the war, reworked in a self-serving manner, was persistent. It was pervasive. In Italy, for example, heroes, such as Cesare Battisti, a socialist member of parliament from Trento (hence, an Austro-Hungarian subject) and a volunteer in the Italian army who was executed after a trial for high treason in July 1916, were appropriated by the fascist regime; Battisti, had he been alive, would certainly have fought against this. The appropriation of Battisti was not an easy one, especially because of the opposition of his widow. There were also oscillations inside the fascist ruling class. The *Monumento alla Vittoria* (Victory Monument), built in Bolzano between 1926 and 1928, was originally foreseen as *the* shrine dedicated to Battisti and a sculpture of him carved onto a large stele sits in this monument. However, while it was being built, it was readapted as an ante-mural of the Italian character on the northern border, in a clear anti-German interpretation. So, it was decided to build a monument dedicated to the hero on a hill overlooking Trento, so its dimensions would not overshadow the monument in Bolzano.⁵¹ Another person that the regime appropriated was [Enrico Toti \(1882-1916\)](#), a proletarian from Rome, made hero because of his voluntary sacrifice (due to his disability, he was not called to arms).⁵²

The same thing happened in Germany: a nationalization of the war experience, at the centre of which stood the regime, was made possible by the National Socialist appropriation of all the underlying values and myths as their own. This is the case in respect of [Langemarck](#). "To the west of Langemarck, young regiments, accompanied by the singing of Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, attacked the first front of the enemy and conquered it." This excerpt from the official bulletin of the [German high command](#) of 11 November 1914, paved the way to a long-lasting myth. The fight itself was unexceptional. About 7,000 soldiers, belonging to a reserve unit, mostly volunteers, launched an attack against the British lines in northern Flanders. At the time, the British were still entrenched in a haphazard way and the German soldiers, suffering great losses, conquered them. Some of these soldiers were high-school students. In fact, the battle took place near Bikschote, but the small town of Langemarck, situated about seven kilometres away, was selected, probably because of the name which sounded a bit German. From the beginning, the attack soared to mythical dimensions, and was enhanced by the [war propaganda](#). The newspapers again took up the biblical theme of

“the massacre of the innocents” and exalted the value of these young volunteers who had sacrificed themselves, driven only by their patriotic enthusiasm. The myth mirrored the spirit of the time: a strong adhesion to the war that was regarded as defence and as personal sacrifice to the benefit of the homeland in danger. The young people were protagonists of the initial enthusiasm when the war broke out. The bloody battle of Langemarck somehow reflected these expectations, and gave strength to the enthusiasm of the youth for the war.

Thus, the episode at Langemarck became a long-lasting myth.⁵³ Each year there were memorial ceremonies; a coin was minted and countless monuments were inaugurated in many cities. The myth intensified after the war. The nationalist right wing contrasted the enthusiasm and the spirit of sacrifice of the young people of Langemarck with the betrayal of the republican parties, who, striking, in 1918, had caused the defeat. The glorification of the fallen soldiers of Langemarck became the cause of the political battle in the republic of Weimar, exploited by the right-wing parties and lauded by Ernst Jünger in his bestseller *Storm of Steel* (1920). Between 1928 and 1932, a committee of citizens, supported by distinguished financiers, organized the restoration of the cemetery of the heroes at Langemarck, which contained about 11,000 corpses.

In 1924, an important touch was added to the myth: Adolf Hitler, who was then detained in prison after the failure of the coup in Munich, inserted in *Mein Kampf* a passage referring to the battle:

We marched in silence on a cold damp night in Flanders and, as soon as the sun began to dispel the fog, an iron greeting came towards us: grenades and shrapnel exploded all around us... . We could hear the metallic sound of gun fire and, singing and shouting, and with wild eyes, we threw ourselves forward and forward again, until we were all one body that let loose in the fields of turnips. And, in the distance, we could hear the strains of a song that got closer and closer to us, leaping from company to company and then, just as the men were dying all around us, it reached our rank and we passed it onto the others: ‘*Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles, über alles in der Welt*’.⁵⁴

The future dictator also credited himself with being in the rank of those youths who had sacrificed themselves for the glory of the homeland. This does not correspond to the truth since the soldier Hitler did not directly take part in the battle at Langemarck; however, that does not matter for these purposes. After National Socialism rose to power, the myth became even more forceful. Emphasis was now moved from the voluntary students to a mixture of students, workmen and farmers, almost prefiguring the *Volksgemeinschaft*, of which National Socialism declared itself the incorporation. Their sacrifice was placed at the centre of a complex system of honour towards the fallen in war, and National Socialism declared it was

the direct heir of these people. It was part of the education of German youth to a new, victorious war.⁵⁵ In November 1933, the philosopher [Martin Heidegger \(1889-1976\)](#) gave the official speech for the anniversary celebrations. The same year, a radio play, entitled *Deutsche Passion 1933*, written by a war hero named [Richard Euringer \(1891-1953\)](#), won the first prize for national literature. Next to the Olympic stadium being built, a space was annexed in memory of the regiments involved in the battle, in order to emphasize the connection between war and sport, and between the cult of the body and the cult of sacrifice.⁵⁶

The leader of the National Socialist youth, [Baldur von Schirach \(1907-1974\)](#), invited the young people not to “talk” about Langemarck, but to “live” Langemarck. Thus, a link of continuity was drawn between the sacrifice of the youth in war and the commitment of the youth in the Third Reich: an ideal bridge was tossed towards those who would soon fight and die for Germany in the Second World War. On 29 May 1940, a public statement was made by the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, announcing that the Third Reich flag was now flying over the fields of Langemarck. A few days later, Hitler himself paid homage to the cemetery. The circle was completed and a kind of triumph for the fallen of Langemarck was thus accomplished. Now Germany, victorious, got revenge for its fallen soldiers. The “martyrs have come home and have found eternal peace”, von Schirach proclaimed in the commemoration speech held in the cemetery on 11 November 1940.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though during the hereditary phase of the movement the seizure of the legacy of the 1914-1918 war for their own flags was a strong element of identification in respect of others, this legacy soon became merged with more complex mechanisms of propaganda after power was achieved. Now it served to unite the scattered parts of the community in view of the war, not to demonstrate the differences. At the same time, other watchwords and other symbols acquired a predominant role: on the one hand, the legacy of imperial Rome and, on the other, the myth of the superior people who, using all possible methods, had to build their *Lebensraum*.

Gustavo Corni, University of Trento

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Key Person(s)

[Jünger, Ernst](#); [Mosse, George L.](#); [Garibaldi, Giuseppe](#); [Toti, Enrico](#); [Mazzini](#); [Bottai, Giuseppe](#); [Matteotti, Giacomo](#); [Balbo, Italo](#); [Bastianini, Giuseppe](#); [Vecchi, Cesare De](#); [Muti, Ettore](#); [Ricci, Renato](#); [Scorza, Carlo](#); [Stennes, Walther](#); [Degrelle, Léon](#); [Röhm, Ernst](#); [Ley, Robert](#); [Tischler, Robert](#); [Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Aosta](#); [Heidegger, Martin](#); [Euringer, Richard](#); [Schirach, Baldur von](#); [Wilson, Woodrow](#); [Nitti, Francesco Saverio](#); [Mussolini, Benito](#); [Hitler, Adolf](#); [D'Annunzio, Gabriele](#); [Giolitti, Giovanni](#); [Kun, Béla](#); [Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy](#); [Battisti, Cesare](#); [Capello, Luigi](#)

Key Location(s)

[Fiume \(Rijeka\)](#); [Milan](#); [Neue Wache, Berlin](#); [Munich](#); [Tannenberg Memorial](#); [Langemark \(Langemarck\)](#); [Redipuglia](#)

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Author(s)

[Gustavo Corni](#)

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