Abstract: In the decade following the Second World War, the process of reconstituting fractured and traumatized European communities was paralleled by the necessary task of physical reconstruction. In making decisions about what should be rebuilt and, in particular, about the aesthetic forms that such rebuilding should take, communities asserted their cultural identities and, implicitly, addressed local or national understandings of recent events. This paper examines one such example, the postwar reconstruction of the Benedictine monastery of Montecassino, which had been destroyed by Allied bombs during the winter of 1944. It argues that the postwar reconstruction of Montecassino to a near-replica of its prewar form expressed the popular narrative of a local history of suffering, martyrdom and rebirth, and so helped to restore a shattered space, to heal a demoralized society, and to rehabilitate a discredited political structure.

During the Second World War and, in some cases, in its aftermath, nearly all European countries suffered large losses of life, the temporary or permanent dispersal of surviving populations, and the destruction of cities and towns, factories and homes. In the decades after the war, communities both national and local produced histories that purported to explain the events that had befallen them. Constructing such narratives was no simple matter, particularly in places where the conflict had been experienced as a civil war, and where people had been cleaved apart by ideology and by violence visited upon one another. These histories – often partial, obfuscatory, and self-congratulatory – have, in the past few decades, become the focus of intense scholarly attention, particularly those “imagined communities” created through narratives of suffering and heroism.¹

These communal narratives took a physical form beyond the “intentional” memorials constructed across the continent. The process of reconstituting European communities was paralleled and complemented by physical reconstruction, as much of the Continent had been devastated, its cities burned, bridges and roads mined, and cultural heritage destroyed or looted. The process of deciding what should be reconstructed and the aesthetic form it should take symbolically expressed identities, values, and claims of innocence and guilt, blame and responsibility. In this paper I examine one such example, the post-war reconstruction of the Benedictine monastery of Montecassino – destroyed in an Allied bombing attack as the front stalled below Rome during the winter of 1944 – as an example of what historian Frank Biess has called “‘meaning making processes,’ that is, the perceptions and representations that Europeans developed in order to make sense of unprecedented experiences of displacement, upheaval, and violence” at the end of the Second World War.

The story of the Benedictine monastery of Montecassino occupies an infamous place in the annals of the war due to the bloody inefficiency of the battle waged to capture it, and to the apparently pointless devastation of one of the most famous religious sites in the West. Despite

---


5 In 1944, Montecassino was a site of notable cultural and religious importance, with a rich, complicated history that encompassed the more than fourteen hundred years of Western culture since its founding by St. Benedict of Nursia in 529 C.E. Here was conceived the rule of St. Benedict, which ordered monastic life in the West for centuries; over time, the monks assembled a renowned library and archives, and the monastery acquired the works of great artists, including paintings, murals and sculpture, and valuable treasures and relics. (The latter reportedly included the bodies of St. Benedict and his sister, St. Scholastica; rumors that the two saints had been buried at Montecassino were proved true when, in August 1950, the remains of a man and woman were discovered in a miraculously undamaged, previously unknown chamber beneath High Altar of the basilica.)

The monastic community had shrunk and its influence had lessened greatly since its eleventh century peak under the abbot Desiderius (1058-87; later Pope Victor III from 1086-97). Nonetheless, well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Montecassino continued to attract to its remote mountaintop location many pilgrims eager to consult the renowned and archives, frescoes and paintings, and the bronze doors commissioned by Desiderius from artisans in Constantinople. See Herbert Bloch, “Origin and Fate of the Doors of Abbot Desiderius of Monte Cassino,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Harvard University, Vol. 41 (1987), 89-102. In both Britain and the United States, fascination with the Abbey of Montecassino had long roots. In 1866, British parliamentarians, including William Gladstone, debated protested the proposed dissolution of the monastery by the new Italian state, characterizing it as “a matter which went far beyond the limits of Italy, and one in which other countries were greatly interested.” Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 3rd Series, Vol. 184, 8 June-10 August 1866 (London: Cornelius Buck, 1866), 1841-1843. In the United States, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the nineteenth-century poet popular in both America and Britain, wrote of the monastery in the poem “Monte Cassino,” published in *Masque of Pandora and Other Poems* (1875). The American Council of Learned Societies and the Defense Harvard Group, two organizations formed during the Second World War by civilians concerned about the destruction of European cultural heritage, collaborated on a public/private initiative to compile lists and maps of important monuments and buildings that should be spared by Allied bombers. At the Frick Museum in New York, scholars used art history books and popular guidebooks to assist them in their work. One such list of important monuments in Lazio, the
its remote mountaintop location, Montecassino was enmeshed in the communities of surrounding towns, and its destruction was a shared event. Indeed, precisely because Montecassino, an important, well-known building, suffered a fate common to many towns in the region made it a powerful symbol for post-war Italian governments and civilians. While the destruction of the monastery by Allied bombers marked the total collapse of Italian strength and sovereignty in the Second World War, its reconstruction to a near-replica in the following decade displayed Italians’ determination to see their nation rise from the ruins, and attempted to resolve longstanding tensions between various rival claimants to sovereignty within Italy. Italian memory of the war was and remains greatly divided, both by geography and ideology. Nonetheless, I argue that Montecassino constituted a site through which local and national “constituents” – the Benedictine monks and nuns, local civilians, Vatican officials, Christian Democrats in Rome, state bureaucrats, and the Soprintendente (Superintendents) who managed Italian cultural heritage – expressed a functional consensus, if not complete agreement, about the past, using narratives of suffering and rebirth. Guided by narratives of martyrdom and rebirth, through the reconstruction of Montecassino, Italians embarked upon the practical problems of restoring a shattered space, a demoralized society, and a discredited political structure.

THE DESTRUCTION OF MONTECASSINO

In September 1943, the Allies signed an armistice with Italy’s government (headed by the King and by Marshal Badoglio since the fall of Mussolini that July). The Badoglio government failed to warn the Italian army or to plan a defense against the Germans, who swiftly occupied the country and set about constructing fortifications to frustrate the Allies’ northward advance.

Thus, by January 1944, the venerable Benedictine monastery found itself on the front lines of a battle between the Allies, who were forcing their way up the Liri Valley north to Rome, and the Germans, who had constructed a fortification system, the so-called “Gustav Line,” which reached from east to west across the Italian peninsula. The Germans had evacuated most of the monks to Rome in November of 1943, along with the bulk of the abbey’s archival and artistic holdings. The Allied advance bogged down in the rugged mountains and muddy plain around Cassino, which rendered their tanks and trucks useless. Soldiers relied on primitive mule chains that picked their way up the mountains at night to deliver supplies. On February 12, 1944, the region in which Montecassino was located, noted the abbey’s location and cultural assets (“Picture galley with frescoes and paintings; Library [Biblioteca dell’ Abbazia di Montecassino] one of the greatest monastic libraries in the world, with early MSS., etc.; church with paintings, etc.” [emphasis added]). The information for this particular entry came from a 1935 edition of the Touring Club Italiano for Lazio, thus underlying the monastery’s popular fame in addition to its importance to scholars. M1944, Roll 144, “Records of the American Council of Learned Societies Committee for the Protection of Cultural Treasures in War Areas, 1943-46,” US National Archives [NARA], College Park, MD. It had also been listed first as a “quintessential [creation] of world-famous importance” in a report made in autumn 1943. Lt. C. Norris, Report, “Schedule of Deposit of Works of Art,” 1 October 1943, letter to A.O. Commander-in-Chief; quoted in Major J. B. Ward Pekins, letter to Director of Subcommission of Monuments and Fine Arts, Allied Military Government Headquarters, “Prevention of Unnecessary Bombing of Works of Art, Air Force measures,” 3 February 1944, NARA.

tasked with capturing so-called Monastery Hill, located just below the abbey, Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, commander of the New Zealand 2nd Division, balked. German soldiers occupied the monastery, he insisted (erroneously), and to attack the site without first bombing it was unfair to the infantry. On February 14, Allied planes dropped thousands of tons of bombs upon the monastery. Artillery shells followed. The handful of monks still remaining, including the abbot, Gregorio Diamare, fled to Rome; of the approximately two thousand civilians who had sought shelter within the abbey’s walls, scores were killed.

So began a process of sustained destruction that ended only with the capture of the monastery on May 18, 1944, by Polish troops.

---

7 For a detailed account of the decision, see General Alfred Gruenther, Dictated Statement, 13 Feb. 1944, Mark W. Clark diary, pg. 78-81, General Mark W. Clark Papers, Diaries, Vol. 1-5, Box. 64, The Citadel Archives & Museum, Charleston, South Carolina.

8 The exact number of civilian casualties is a matter of dispute, complicated by the general chaos in the region at the time of the bombing. The commune of Cassino as estimated that 264 Cassinese died during the bombing of the monastery (see above), but it is difficult to account for all of the civilians from the surrounding towns who may have been there as well, especially as some people had sought shelter at the monastery, but left before the bombing.
Montecassino’s ruination was not particularly unusual in the context of war within the European theater. Though the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the U.S. Army Air Force largely spared most Italian cities the firebombing that incinerated Dresden and Frankfurt, they did raid Italian cities – Milan, Genoa, Turin and Naples in particular – in the attempt, first, to undercut the Fascist regime through a collapse in civilian morale, and second, to cut off the German supply chain. The RAF had bombed Italy since the beginning of the war, but Allied bombing increased in intensity as more advanced planes and weaponry were developed and as success in North Africa brought the front closer to the Italian mainland.

More importantly, however, the bombardment of the monastery mirrored the destruction visited upon the surrounding towns and cities. As former allies of the Germans and enemies of the Allies, Italians were in an ambiguous, vulnerable position, and Italian cities remained targets of bombing raids. The Allied advance was marked by extreme violence and, as it sputtered to a halt in the mountains near Cassino, by frequent indifference to the welfare of Italian civilians. At the same time the Germans contemptuously viewed their former allies as traitors. As Gabriella Gribaudi has described, Italian civilians found themselves caught in a “no man’s land” between the Allies forcing their way north and the Germans attempting to hold the line; Italy’s national government provided little help or protection against German and Allied air raids, rapes, and reprisals.

Many of the towns and villages scattered around the Liri Valley were completely destroyed or experienced significant loss of life. Indeed, the bombing of Cassino in the valley below had preceded Montecassino’s destruction: starting on 10 September 1943 and continuing through spring 1944, the town was pulverized by air strikes, artillery fire, and tank action. The population fled first to nearby villages and then to surrounding hilltops, fearful of Allied bombs and German forced labor brigades; work and family life were disrupted. The villages in the commune – Cassino, San Angelo in Theodice, Caira, and Sconsciuti – lost 1,912 civilians by one account. This number included 1,505 civilian victims from Cassino alone, an estimated 264 of whom died at Montecassino. Civilians had not expected the bombing to continue after the Armistice, nor had they anticipated that a holy site like Montecassino would not be safe from the violence. The danger remained even for civilians who did not live in towns expressly targeted

---


10 Daria Frezza, “Cassino 1943-1944: la memoria,” Da Volturno a Cassino. http://www.davolturnoacassino.it/DOC/Daria_Frezza_La_memoria.pdf (accessed February 20, 2012); and Gribaudi, Guerra totale and “Bombing and Land War in Italy.” Gribaudi also points out that, from the perspective of those civilians being bombed, whether the bombing was “strategic” or “tactical,” nighttime or daytime “precision” bombing, “in most cases were in reality devastating bombardments, and it is no coincidence that collective memory categorizes them as ‘terror’ attacks” (“Bombing and Land War,” 122).

11 Studi Cassinati 1, n. 2 (settembre 2001): 723.

12 Frezza; Gribaudi, “Bombing and Land War” and Guerra totale. Baldoli and Fincardi note that “two thirds of the
for attack: to take just one example, the accidental bombing of Venafro during the March 15, 1944 assault on Cassino, killed approximately 40 civilians and wounded 100.  

War not only devastated buildings, infrastructure, and the rhythms of daily life, but shattered the authority of the state as well. As scholars have noted, the Fascist regime’s inability to protect civilians against air strikes destroyed its credibility, while the subsequent government of the King and Marshal Badoglio disgraced itself by fleeing the country after announcing the Armistice. Tancredo Grossi, a resident of Cassino, reported that during air raid warnings, people left their houses in terror and fled to the countryside, since the Fascist authorities had set up only “a parody of shelter” under the middle-school building. In the days immediately following the Armistice, the Germans took control of the town, occupying the train station, the telegraph, and even the elementary school, where they situated a German Red Cross. Grossi’s extended family split up and fled from one provisional shelter to another, scurrying home to Cassino in between bombing raids to salvage what they could. Life was chaotic with no government plan for evacuation, no system of rationing, and no organized attempt by the civilians or the government to dig survivors out from under collapsed buildings.

The displaced monastic community was forced to wait in Rome until the city fell to the Allies, at which point a few monks hurried back to Montecassino. Even after the front had passed, life was bleak and dangerous. The bodies of soldiers and of refugees laid among the ruins. Allied guards were an inadequate protection against looters, and there was no water, electricity, or shelter. Decades later, one monk remembered, “Some nights, in the summer of ’44, it seemed that at Montecassino there was still war: red and green flares; fusillades; bursts of machine gun fire, detonations of hand grenades, tracer bullets like shooting stars coming up into the sky.” The monastery remained in danger; he recalled caches of weapons that tempted soldiers into a sort of destruction as sport. The monks, however, immersed themselves in the effort to rebuild. One monk, Don Francesco Arnaudo Vignarelli, combed through the rubble

total number of Italian casualties [from bombing] occurred between the armistice and the end of the war” (1).

13 March W. Clark diary, 15 March 1944, pg. 149, Papers, Diary, Vol. 6-9, Box 65, Citadel Museum & Archives, Charleston, South Carolina.


searching for decorative building fragments. To a limited extent, Allied soldiers aided them in clearing rubble, and some foreign aid groups sent practical necessities.18

Below, in Cassino, the destruction was so total as to be awe-inspiring. The battle had pockmarked the streets with craters large enough to swallow a tank, and the fields were sown with landmines. Most of the former residents therefore remained in their makeshift shelters through August and beyond. At night the hills flickered with the flames of campfires. Later that year, a journalist accompanying King George VI on his visit to the Italian battlefields called Cassino “the most harrowing sight of the war-ravaged Italian peninsula.” In a memorable passage, he described how “one can look straight at Cassino without seeing it. So complete is its destruction that the gray stone rubble merges with the gray stone of the mountain from which the building stones once were carved. ...The ruins are piled on ruins, for there was no room for all to fall on the ground. This is perhaps what Troy and Carthage looked like when they were destroyed.”19

Reconstruction

All of the constituents and organizations involved in the rebuilding of Montecassino seem to have understood the site’s symbolic utility. Indeed, the importance of reconstructing Montecassino in its pre-war form can be garnered by the many obstacles to such a rebuilding. Given the extent of the physical destruction of the building and surrounding region, the disruption caused to the communities therein, and the incompetence of a government even then in flux, the monastery’s reconstruction provided a practical challenge, while the relative speed with which a plan for reconstruction was treated demonstrated a strong prioritization to rebuild on the part of the new Bonomi government and the bureaucrats of several government ministries. The Ministry of Public Works began clearing the site in December of 1944 and by 16 February 1945, a year after its destruction, it had established a commission headed by Gennaro Cassiani, the Undersecretary of Public Works, to examine the process of rebuilding and to determine any restraints.20 As evidence of the state’s commitment to rebuilding, Prime Minister Ivano Bonomi laid the foundation stone on 15 March 1945. In early 1945, the Vatican’s Pontifical Commission for Italian Religious Art, headed by Monsignor Costantini, presented the so-called Castelli Plan, named after the firm, Leone Castelli that was to do the work. (Abbot Diamare was not a member of the commission). Three young architects proposed razing the rubble-strewn site and replacing the old structure with a modern building; the proposed model was put on public display, but it was not well-received, apparently because it was both impractical and ignored the history of the site.21 In the meantime, the Public Works commission soon discovered that any reconstruction

---

19 John Chabot Smith, “George VI Sees The Ruins That Were Cassino: Royal Procession Drives Like a Funeral Cortege Through Dead Italian City,” Herald Tribune 3 August 1943: 3; clipping preserved in Microfilm M1944, Roll 40, Target 7, NARA.
20 The Ministry of Public Works was in this matter directed by Law N. 26 of 29 January 1946, itself a modification of Article 3 of Law 1460 of 18 October 1942. This material was originally published in the Gazzetta Ufficiale 45 (22 February 1946); it can be consulted in Guida Monarcha, Leggi e decreti 1 (1946), 133-34.
would be greatly aided by the documentation done in the decade before the war. One monk in particular, Don Angelo Pantoni, had done planemetric reliefs; there existed also detailed paintings of some of the murals, mosaics, and floors in the Basilica, as well as building fragments combed from the rubble. On 16 January 1946, the government commission, which included the new abbot Ildefonso Rea, concluded that the monastery would and should be reconstructed “dov’era e com’era” (“where it was, and as it was”). The work was to be divided into nine different lots, or sections, to be completed as funding became available, and involved the cooperation of both secular and religious authorities. For example, Public Works predicted that Lot One would cost L. 264,941,000; the Pontifical Commission for Italian Religious Art approved the budget and plan, and presented it to the board of the Ministry of Fine Arts, which followed its own Commission’s recommendations in approving it. However, Public Works “exclusively” provided the funds. Indeed, the architectonic rebuilding efforts, which lasted through 1956, were financed entirely by the Italian state—a considerable allocation of resources given the dire conditions prevailing in post-war Italy that made it one of the largest recipients of UNRRA aid by 1947. Still, work was done in remarkable accordance with the wishes of the Benedictine community: to prioritize, in any plan of reconstruction, the community’s history and needs, and to enable them to continue their millenium-long tradition of worship.

Montecassino’s monastic community believed that the government officials tasked with funding and planning its reconstruction “had intended to symbolically give a beginning to the reconstruction of Italy.” The monks and the Vatican also believed that the reconstruction of the monastery symbolized more than the restoration of a building. Their challenge was not, as some contemporary Italian architects and preservationists thought it should be, primarily a question of “authenticity,” since relatively little of the original site remained. In fact, the decision to


22 Ildefonso Rea replaced the deceased abbot Gregorio Diamare on 21 November 1945.


24 As Montecassino had been the property of the Italian state since the 1866 Law of Suppression, its rebuilding was governed by Law No. 1089, passed on 1 June 1939 under the Fascist government. Law No. 1089 was a comprehensive attempt by the state to centralize power; its purview included a wide range of material heritage, and claimed for the state the right to regulate the restoration, display, export, and sale or exchange, and reproduction of such objects and places, and to levy fines against offenders. However, there was some leeway: according to Article 8, in matters pertaining to ecclesiastical orders, the Minister of National Education was to take into account the “needs [esigenze] of worship,” in agreement with ecclesiastical authorities. The full text can be found in Guida monarcha. Legge e decreti 5 (1939), 3405. Though the Vatican formed its own commission, the Central Pontifical Commission for Italian Religious Art, in the end, the authority rested with the state.

25 UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1943-48), was formed for the purpose of aiding European and Asian civilians affected by the war. Though the United States provided the bulk of the funding, monies also came from others of the forty-four member nations or national committees, Britain and Canada in particular. Programs included aid to displaced persons, including now-stateless Jewish civilians; food and medicine for mothers and children; and vocational training for refugees. UNRRA aid to Italy was limited before 1945 – until September 1945, aid and recovery efforts in the country were led by the Allied Military Government – but thereafter expanded.


72
rebuild the monastery was oriented around a notion of an “authenticity” at odds with contemporary preservationist theory, and was instead defined by the return to traditional practices at an historic site and the use of “residual elements: every Cloister will have either an arch or a pilaster or a column or an original architectural fragment.” Moreover, although unprecedented in its physical destruction, the bombardment of the Second World War was not the first time the monastery had faced a threat to its existence; for the religiously inclined, Montecassino’s destruction fit into an existing institutional narrative of martyrdom and resurrection. Here, supporters of reconstruction looked backward in order to look forward. On the second anniversary of the bombing, Abbot Ildefonso Rea argued that the turmoil of barbarian invasions at the close of the Roman Empire had not prevented a Christianized Europe from developing; rather, “the life-giving sap” of St. Benedict’s rule had flowed down the mountain “into the furrows of the new Europe.” St. Benedict’s monastery might act as a religious counterpart to the more secular ideals of emerging internationalism. As one writer urged, arguing for an Italian Committee of Reconstruction of the Abbey of Montecassino:

Montecassino is the emblem of the past that fell in this age of the diminishment of moral values. Montecassino is for all humanity a profound lesson in deep humility. ...

On the ruins of Montecassino we must discover our Italian and Christian unity. Without distinction of social class, of political ideology, of party, of hatred past and potential, we must reconstruct it, stone by stone, with a deep sense of fraternal abnegation.

From all parts of Italy and of the world where there are sons of Italy there must flow toward Montecassino pilgrims turned into artisans, to build a new temple to the glory of our Creator. ...

And in the slow rise of the Abbey will rise our redemption.

Thus pairing Catholic fervor with Italian nationalism, the author suggested that an embrace of religiosity might succeed in unifying the nation where secularism and Fascism had not. Yet its transformative power could also be exemplary, and perhaps make Italy, once again, the leader of all the world. From the smoldering ruins once again would emerge a spiritual beacon – for Italy, for all of Europe, perhaps, even, for all mankind.

For the Holy See, alienated from the nineteenth-century “rebirth” of Italy, Montecassino’s reconstruction was part of an attempt at broader spiritual reinvigoration of Italian society from

28 Documenti di vita italiana, 1306.
29 Lombards and Saracens sacked Montecassino in 580 and 884, respectively; French troops looted it in 1799; and, in 1349, an earthquake caused further damage. It was largely reconstructed in the 17th and 18th centuries. In 1866, the monastery once again faced an external threat to its existence, this time from the new Italian state, which planned to dissolve the monastery and to send its artistic and scholarly treasures to Naples.
32 Tommaso Leccisotti, Montecassino: La vita, l’irradiazione (Badia di Montecassino: 1956).
the ruins of fascism and a Risorgimento\(^{33}\) with the full participation of the Catholic Church, as well as a bulwark against Communism. By 1952, the Central Pontifical Commission for Italian Religious Art had embarked upon a campaign to restore all the Italian church bells melted down in the course of the war, and then to build a new network of parish churches across the country. It also sought to play a role in the form that reconstruction would take. Church leaders like Cardinal Schuster of Milan remained in close contact with Abbot Rea throughout the process of reconstruction.

In the local context, the common experience of suffering and destruction tended to strengthen the bonds between Catholic institutions and civilians in the regions. Significantly, Abbot Gregorio Diamare, acting in his role as abbot nullius, had provided a notable exception to the breakdown of social cohesion in Cassino. After the town was first bombed, in September 1943, he came, blessed the dead lying under the rubble, and distributed medals with the image of St. Benedict.\(^{34}\) The next month, after a botched partisan action, Abbot Diamare intervened, sparing an entire neighborhood from being burnt due to German reprisal.\(^{35}\) The monastic community retained credibility through the abbot’s attempted intercessions on the part of the civilian population, and later, by the commonality of the trauma suffered by both the monks and the town.

Moreover, the post-war fates of Cassino and Montecassino were twinned just as their destructions had been. When Luigi Einaudi, then President of the Italian Republic, visited the town of Cassino in April 1949 to view the plans for rebuilding and to present the Medaglia d’Oro to the town fathers, he followed this secular consecration with a visit to Montecassino, where Abbot Rea showed him around the Cloister of Benefactors. Their fates of suffering and rebirth were thus paired. Moreover, Cassinese civilians had a real impact upon the reconstruction of the neighboring monastery. Though one should not necessarily conflate employment and belief, the majority of the four hundred workers who cleared and rebuilt Montecassino were local to the region. There is little evidence that they resented the expenditure of scarce state funds on a monastery: in fact, a little less than a decade after his death, in February 1953, the commune’s authorities raised a plaque commemorating the late abbot on the wall of the rebuilt parish church of Cassino. More generally, as Daria Frezza and Claudia Baldoli have noted, in the Italian South, Catholicism generally retained its authority as a belief system and as an institution.\(^{36}\) Like the Abbot Diamare, many churchmen blessed bombed shelters and homes, visited destroyed towns, and provided crucifixes to their congregants. Even when “all forms of civil authority had

\(^{33}\) The Risorgimento (“resurgence” or “rising again”) refers to the decades-long process of Italian unification, which culminated in the 1861 domination of most of the country by the Piedmontese royal house. Until that point, the peninsula had been ruled by city-states and foreign powers. The Papal States remained significant exceptions, as Pope Pius IX was unwilling to cede his authority to temporal powers, and it was not until the 1870 capture of Rome that the city became the nation’s capital. The Pope receded into the walls of the Vatican, and the alienation between church and state, and the opposition between “Italian” and “Catholic,” lasted until the 1929 Lateran Accords.

\(^{34}\) Grossi, 15.


\(^{36}\) Baldoli, “Religion and Bombing in Italy, 1940-1945,” in Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe, 136-153; and Frezza.
disappeared” in towns like Benevento and Avellino, bombed in September 1943, it is significant that “one image that stands out is that of a bishop ‘in the street helping the dying and burying the dead.’” The cult of Padre Pio acquired new prominence, and Marian sightings spiked following the increase in bombings from 1942 on, and then again in the lead-up to the 1948 elections, when the Church encouraged fears of a Communist takeover of government. Moreover, despite some lingering controversy following the 1929 Concordat between the Holy See and Mussolini’s Fascist government, members of the Church hierarchy endeared themselves to Italian civilians by intervening in matters of local importance. After the Allied raid on Sonnino, in April 1944, the bishop of Terracina protested, prompting the Holy See’s involvement as well. Similarly, Baldoli points to “the Church’s role in replacing the state” after the Allied bombing of Rome, when the Pope visited the damaged church of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura. In the absence of a functioning government, “...the Pope had become the only reference point for the Roman population, a symbol of peace and security.” As during the Risorgimento (the nineteenth century unification of Italy), when the Pope had served as figure of Italianità and as an inspiration even for some Republicans, many Italians came away from their wartime experiences inclined to identify with the Pope, who they understood as they identified themselves – victimized, blameless, held hostage by the war.

Conclusion

Should we term this reconstruction of Montecassino and the accompanying narrative of Italian victimhood the “whitewashing” of the past, or a case of “amnesia,” as some scholars have suggested? Certainly the decision to rebuild the monastery to its prewar form could seem like an attempt to erase the recent Fascist past, as with Abbot Ildefonso Rea’s public promise that, with time, “this place, one of the most historically important in the world, can be again ‘as it was’ and completely close the painful parenthesis...” For contemporaries inclined to forget Italy’s roll in the war before 1943, or its two-decade-long experience of Fascism, Montecassino’s destruction and reconstruction functioned as a convenient milestone in a history that began with Germany’s post-Armistice invasion in September 1943. The abbey’s destruction provided a prominent metaphor for Italy’s “martyrdom” during the war, its essential moral blamelessness. Italian civilians therefore might claim a moral power rooted in the experience of

38 Ibid., 235.
39 Padre Pio (1887-1968, b. Francesco Forgione) was a charismatic Capuchin monk from the town of Pietrelcina who claimed to have experienced mystical visions and received stigmata. He attracted a large following in his own lifetime. His cult was popular with lay Catholics but less so with the Vatican. Michael A. Di Giovine, “Re-Presenting a Contemporary Saint: Padre Pio of Pietrelcina,” Critical Inquiry, Vo. 35, No. 3 (Spring 2009): 481-492.
41 Baldoli, 139.
44 Rea, 4.
powerlessness, as did many groups in post-war Europe. Moreover, Gabriella Gribaudi has criticized the absence from official commemorations of specific, traumatic experiences, such as the mass rapes suffered by women by Allied soldiers along the Gothic Line.

I do not argue here that the reconstruction of Montecassino entailed an accurate recognition of the entirety of the Italian civilian experience, nor that those who stressed their own victimhood might not have evaded a sense of responsibility for the past. Rather, I argue only that the narrative of martyrdom and rebirth was sufficiently unifying to allow theoretical rivals to power – the Catholic church and the Italian state – to coexist, even to work together, in the post-war era. Any authority hoping for legitimacy, whether state, church, or both, needed to construct a narrative about how the monastery’s destruction had occurred, and to address the tremendous violence experienced by Italian civilians in the region around the monastery. In rebuilding the shattered monastery, the Catholic Church, eager to create a spiritually renewed Italy, partnered with a newly sovereign Italian state, in an attempt, though sometimes fraught, to renew the authority of both. Nor was the narrative’s potency limited to potential authorities. Unlike the polarizing experience of civil war that followed the Armistice in the north of Italy, Montecassino, destroyed and then rebuilt, generally functioned as a unifying symbol that expressed to many Italians, particularly local civilians, their own experiences of bombing, occupation, and humiliation, and translated this trauma into the constructive language of martyrdom.

45 Fincardi, 253.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources, Published


Guida monarcha: Leggi e decreti 1 (1946): 133-34.


Smith, John Chabot. “George VI Sees The Ruins That Were Cassino: Royal Procession Drives Like a Funeral Cortege Through Dead Italian City.” Herald Tribune, 3 August 1943: P3.

Studi Cassinati 1, n. 2 (September 2001): 723.

Primary Sources, Unpublished

Clark, Mark W. Diary entry, 15 March 1944, pp. 149. General Mark W. Clark Papers, Diary, Vol. 6-9, Box 65. The Citadel Museum & Archives, Charleston, SC.

Gruenther, Alfred. Dictation, 13 February 1944, pp. 78-81. General Mark W. Clark Papers, Diary, Vol. 1-5, Box. 64. Ibid.

Protection of Cultural Treasures in War Areas, 1943-46.” US National Archives [NARA], College Park, MD.

Secondary Sources


Cortesi, Elena. “Evacuation in Italy During the Second World War: Evolution and Management.” In *Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe*, 59-75.


