Piazzale Loreto and the Securitisation of Emotion: Affective Memory from 1945 to Meloni

By Massimo D'Angelo

Abstract: This article examines the emotional, political, and ethical complexities surrounding the 1945 execution of Benito Mussolini by partisan forces and the subsequent public display of his body in Piazzale Loreto. Focusing on the role of emotions in politics and the social sciences, as well as on the study of emotions in crowds, it explores how collective anger – intensified by years of Fascist oppression – influenced both the decision to execute Mussolini and the choice to exhibit his corpse alongside those of his companion and other associates. Drawing on eyewitness testimonies and contemporary media reports, the article investigates the immediate reactions of the populace, highlighting the potent mixture of relief, vengeance, and moral conflict at the war's end. It further evaluates the public debates that ensued, offering insights into how such intense emotional responses shaped Italy's evolving political discourse. By tracing the broader repercussions in post-war politics, the study reveals the profound and enduring impact of Mussolini's downfall on national identity-formation and historical consciousness. Ultimately, this contribution underscores the central role of emotions – both individual and collective – in shaping social and political outcomes during periods of profound turmoil. By foregrounding the significance of crowd emotions in the closing phase of the Second World War in Italy, the article offers a nuanced understanding of how the charged sentiments of 1945 reverberated through subsequent decades, leaving an indelible mark on Italian political culture and collective memory.

Keywords: *Italian politics and memory*; *Fascism and Anti-Fascism*; *Piazzale Loreto*; *Benito Mussolini*; *Giorgia Meloni*

1. Introduction

Eighty years later, Piazzale Loreto is still an emotional space. The public display of Mussolini's body in April 1945 generated competing moral and affective scripts that have endured: a punitive, unforgiving narrative that licensed revolutionary justice, and a conservative, nostalgic register that turned the scene into a lament for the massacre of fascists. This article asks how such emotions were produced, circulated and instrumentalised from 1945 to the present, and why that matters now.

First, the article reconstructs the emotional repertoire attached to Loreto: humiliation, shame, compassion, resentment and honour, across key commem-

orative moments and media cycles. Second, it shows how contemporary right-wing actors and aligned outlets deploy emotional inversion: not erasing Loreto but re-coding it to underwrite victimhood and moral equivalence between fascist atrocities and partisan reprisals. Methodologically, the article pairs historical discourse analysis of press and political speech with close reading of commemorative rituals and imagery, treating newspapers and ceremonies as vehicles that convert private feelings into public claims.

Why emotions? The article treats emotions as learned, culturally shaped practices, named, framed and validated through language, institutions and rituals, not raw impulses. Naming and framing are constitutive: without shared vocabularies and scripts, sensations do not stabilise into socially recognisable emotions that can be mobilised politically. Individual feelings matter here precisely because they are scaffolded by collective templates that enable action and legitimation in the public sphere. Moreover, emotional politics is not an epiphenomenon: regimes routinely cultivate, channel and instrumentalise emotions; shame and humiliation have proven politically potent in contemporary publics.

The article pursues three objectives: first, to map the emotional lexicon around Loreto; secondly, to trace how right-wing discourse transforms compassion for the defeated into a durable grievance; finally, to explain how moral equivalence is built affectively, not only argumentatively. In this sense, the core contribution is to show that the durability of post-fascist legitimation does not rest on historical revision alone but on successful emotional labour: a sustained re-templating of Loreto that normalises a politics of equivalence. This emotional lens clarifies why familiar factual rebuttals often fail: they confront claims, not the feelings that anchor them.

2. Emotions between history and politics

The study of emotions in history and political science has undergone significant transformation. Scholarship first treated emotions in an essentialist, biological way and only later moved towards social and cultural understandings. Early figures such as Febvre (1973) saw emotions as primal, irrational forces, echoing a classical model in which feelings are universal, evolved responses shared across eras and cultures, as in the work of Freud and Darwin. Huizinga (2018) and Elias (2010) further reinforced this view by depicting medieval emotions as childish and by linking increasing emotional self-restraint to the civilising advance of courtly society and the modern state.

A significant shift occurred with Peter and Carol Stearns' introduction of *emotionology* in the 1980s, which focused not on emotions themselves but on the societal norms and rules governing their expression (Rosenwein 2002, 824). Drawing from Hochschild's (1979) sociological work on feeling rules and emotional labour, the authors explored how emotional standards were shaped and enforced, particularly in modern middle-class settings. However, there has been criticism challenging the classical model and the unilinear grand narrative of emotional development. Rosenwein (2002) proposes instead the concept of *emotional communities*, groups with shared norms about emotion, that exist across all historical periods, undermining any simplistic evolution from primitive to rational emotional expression. More recent scholarship (see Feldman Barrett 2017), increasingly influenced by cognitive theories of emotion, rejects the idea of emotions as universal forces. Instead, it views them as context-dependent, shaped by appraisal, perception, and cultural framing. This constructivist turn has encouraged historians to explore how emotions are produced, performed, and interpreted within specific historical settings.

As Frevert (2024) reminds us, to look at emotions historically means to investigate not only what people felt but also how they learnt to feel, how they were taught to feel, and how they were allowed to express these feelings. In other words, emotions are not transhistorical entities but socially situated practices that evolve through institutions, language, and collective expectations. The author further stresses that the historian's task is to trace the regimes of emotion that govern specific periods, constellations of norms, hierarchies, and representations that make certain feelings legitimate while silencing others. This understanding displaces the notion of emotions as spontaneous inner eruptions and reframes them as historically mediated phenomena. In this sense, this article demonstrates how studying emotions connects micro-level experience to macro-level outcomes in memory politics, offering a transferable framework for other contentious sites. If, as Falasca-Zamponi (2023) shows, the misguided decisions and unresolved structures of feeling of 1945 paved the way for the re-emergence of fascism and more recent flirtations with it, this article traces how those unresolved emotions are subsequently reworked around Piazzale Loreto, culminating in contemporary attempts to hollow out and reassign its meaning.

From this perspective, studying emotions historically entails recognising their dual nature: they are simultaneously embodied experiences and communicative acts. Frevert (2024) argues, language, gestures, and performative practices constitute the historian's evidence for identifying how emotions circulate within societies. The history of emotions, therefore, is not merely about recovering feelings from the past but about reconstructing the discursive and cultural

frameworks that made those feelings intelligible, shareable, and politically meaningful.

In political scholarship, the integration of emotions also marks a significant departure from the dominance of rationalist paradigms, which have traditionally relegated the affective dimension to the margins. During the early twenty-first century, there was an *emotional turn* in social sciences, signalling a deeper analytical engagement with how emotions shape political behaviour (Koschut 2025). This transformation owes much to the influence of political psychology and interdisciplinary engagement with neuroscience, sociology, and cultural studies (Clément & Sangar 2018). According to such literature, emotions are broadly defined as internal states that nonetheless manifest through physiological, cognitive, and behavioural expressions (Crawford 2000). Hall (2015) introduces *emotions* as outward displays, particularly in discourse, used by states to frame and justify policies. These collective emotions, such as fear, pride, and humiliation, are deemed inherently public and thus traceable in communication and representation (Wolf 2018; Mercer 2014).

This idea aligns with Frevert's (2024, 27) argument that language is fundamental to understanding emotions at the public level, since without language "emotions would be unknown even to the person experiencing them". She insists that "language reflects experience, but it also shapes and constructs experience: naming and framing emotions is constitutive of experiencing emotions". Consequently, public discourse and political communication are not neutral vehicles of expression but active sites where emotional meanings are produced and contested. Focusing on language when analysing emotions helps to overcome the difficulty researchers face in accessing the genuine inner states of political actors (Pratt 2017). Scholars like Koschut (2018) also propose shifting the focus from internal experiences to their discursive and performative articulations, highlighting how emotions are socially constructed and communicated through language or actions. Political actors frequently deploy emotions instrumentally, humiliation or fear, not to disclose genuine inner states, but to legitimise political objectives or galvanise group cohesion. This accords with Bleiker and Hutchison's (2018) claim that, while emotions resist quantification and assertions of authenticity, they nonetheless exert considerable force when analysed through their public representations.

Thus, emotions serve as bridges between individual experience and collective order. They bind communities through shared symbols, rituals, and narratives, making the emotional sphere a crucial arena of power. By mapping these affective connections, researchers can reveal how emotions underpin legitima-

cy, obedience, and resistance. This is because emotional regimes are never static: they change as societies redefine what is considered honourable, shameful, patriotic, or subversive. This fluidity explains why emotions remain central to understanding both stability and transformation in political life. In Italy, across both the Fascist regime and the subsequent republican period, emotions remained constitutive of Italian politics, including in the neo-fascist milieu. Historians such as Morris, Ricatti and Seymour (2012) show how fascism cultivated an emotional political culture, through spectacle, ritual, and propaganda, the legacies of which did not simply vanish with the regime's collapse. Here, the notion of emotional regimes helps to conceptualise fascism as a system that codified and enforced emotional expectations: pride, virility, devotion, and sacrifice were exalted, while empathy, doubt, and dissent were pathologised. After 1945, these emotional codes did not disappear but were reconfigured within a democratic framework that sought to replace authoritarian loyalty with civic empathy and moral renewal.

Post-war memory work then reorganised collective feeling. As Forlenza (2025) argues, contested recollections of civil war and liberation were structured by cultural memories sedimented around themes such as suffering, sacrifice, solidarity, equality, remembrance and amnesia, and democratic identity, enabling both continuity and renewal in republican politics. Frevert's insight that emotions are "repositories of shared meaning that connect past experiences with present interpretations" (2024, 42) illuminates this process of emotional sedimentation. Through rituals of commemoration, monuments, and anniversaries such as 25th April, the new republic institutionalised certain affective repertoires, gratitude, mourning, pride, while marginalising others, including vengeance or humiliation. In a similar vein, more recent scholarship such as Simonetti's (2025) oral history of Allied occupation in Italy conceptualises a "contact zone" in which asymmetrical encounters with otherness were emotionally transformative and continued to shape biographical trajectories long after 1945.

Subsequently, emotions became a battleground for re-legitimations on both the right and the left. Studies of the immediate post-war years highlight fear, shame, and courage as drivers of choices by militants and leaders, while analyses of later decades trace the emotional grammars that sustained neo-fascist victimhood and left-wing mobilisation alike (Morris, Ricatti, & Seymour 2012). These opposing camps inhabited different emotional communities, each with its own hierarchies of feeling and moral vocabularies. The neo-fascist right, for example, cultivated indignation and nostalgia as sources of identity, while the anti-fascist left valorised hope, solidarity, and moral redemption. Over time, these

competing emotional frameworks structured public discourse, influencing how Italians narrated their recent past and envisioned their political future.

3. Piazzale Loreto: horror and vengeance

Piazzale Loreto had already been emotionally and politically charged prior to 1945. On 10th August 1944, fifteen anti-fascist partisans were executed and their bodies left on display in the square, following orders from the fascist authorities. This event left a deep scar on the collective memory of Milanese citizens and the anti-fascist Resistance. A partisan who worked near the square, reported:

> What I did in front of those lifeless bodies, I don't know – anger, despair, sorrow, and such hatred for the murderers, especially because I recognised among those poor bodies a dear friend of ours, Tullio Galimberti. How can one ever forget such infamy, such cruelty towards our fellow human beings? (Cenati 2014)

The witness's anger endured as the tragedy proved difficult to forget in the months and years that followed; the Church was no exception, evidenced by Cardinal Schuster's consternation (Messina 2025). According to some accounts, upon hearing news of the massacre, Mussolini is said to have exclaimed: "The blood of Piazzale Loreto will cost us dearly" (quoted in Scirocco 2023). On the same day as the Piazzale Loreto massacre, a leaflet issued by the partisan Lombardy Delegation of the General Command of the Garibaldi Brigades and Assault Detachments announced that, in retaliation for the execution of the fifteen innocent hostages, fifteen fascist militiamen had been executed. It ordered

> all Garibaldi partisan formations, both in the mountains and the plains, and in particular the Patriotic Action Groups, to immediately avenge the innocent victims. It calls on the entire population of Milan to support the armed struggle for Italy's liberation by any means necessary. (Brigate Garibaldi 1944)

Therefore, the choice of Piazzale Loreto for Mussolini's public humiliation was neither coincidental nor solely practical, it was a deliberate act of emotional and historical vengeance. As Arthurs (2015) shows, such retributive violence and public disorder were not merely irrational outbursts but rituals through which communities negotiated grievances, social hierarchies and competing claims to legitimacy. Reading Piazzale Loreto through this lens highlights how the choice

of the square and the choreography of vengeance enacted there formed part of a broader repertoire of emotionally charged practices through which Italians sought to settle accounts with fascism and redraw the moral boundaries of the nascent Republic. The Resistance sought to invert the violence of 1944 by returning it, in outrageous symmetry, upon its original perpetrators. This was vengeance not in its impulsive or chaotic form but as a performative, collective emotion that aimed to communicate a new moral order. Emotions here acted not simply as ephemeral reactions but as structured political tools, carrying social meaning and intention (Crawford 2000). Thus, vengeance can be understood as a causal emotion that linked past trauma to present action, offering moral clarity to a population devastated by war and dictatorship. The desecration and public display of Mussolini's mutilated body in Piazzale Loreto served not only as the end of Fascist rule in Italy, but as a ritualistic act of revenge loaded with emotional and political meaning.

Following Mussolini's execution by members of the National Liberation Committee for Northern Italy (*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia*, henceforth CLNAI), his body, alongside those of Claretta Petacci and other fascist officials, was transported to Milan and laid in the centre of Piazzale Loreto. Before being hanged upside down, the bodies were first dumped unceremoniously onto the ground in the square, a deliberate rejection of funerary norms meant to emphasise the complete rejection of fascist leadership. Over the course of several hours, a growing crowd gathered, reacting with fury and euphoria: kicking, spitting, urinating, and hurling insults at the corpses (Felicetti 1994). As presented in Figure 1, someone had then placed a fascist stick in Mussolini's hand, the most representative symbol of his regime, laying his head on Petacci's breast. This prolonged exposure prior to the hanging transformed the act from a mere spectacle of death into a form of collective emotional release and symbolic judgement.

Figure 1 – Mussolini holding a fascist sceptre laying on Petacci's breast (Wikimedia)

Eventually, since many people were unable to see the bodies due to the crowd, it was decided to hang them by their feet from the canopy of a nearby petrol station, the same spot where the mutilated bodies of anti-fascists had been displayed the year before, thereby sealing the performative symmetry of revenge, as presented in Figure 1. This act of symbolic retribution by the Resistance was not merely a spontaneous outburst of hatred; it was a carefully orchestrated moment where vengeance was enacted as a form of political and emotional justice, functioning as a causal emotional mechanism, shaping both the immediate political narratives and the transitional ruptures surrounding Mussolini's death.

The crowd's reaction to the corpses – kicking, spitting, throwing stones – can be read as a collective emotional release, a catharsis of years of repression, fear, and rage. It is possible to interpret these actions through both empirical observations, such as photographs and newspaper articles from the time, and contextual interpretation, including political commentary and contemporary analyses. The scene at Piazzale Loreto illustrates how collective vengeance was not only expressed but also received as legitimate, even necessary. As Luzzatto (2011) suggests, the grotesque display of Mussolini's corpse channelled a societal desire to make the dead speak, reasserting control over history by mutilating its oppressor.

However, the practice of displaying the bodies of slain enemies was not a defining feature of the political culture of the Resistance, although there had been isolated incidents of executed fascists being publicly exposed (Portelli 1985). The events of 29th April have been passed down through numerous eyewitness

accounts. The national newspaper *Corriere della Sera* reported scenes of extraordinary rage. Firefighters and the partisans' security detail struggled to contain the crowd. Mussolini was described as "barefoot and wearing a short-sleeved shirt. Petacci was in a gabardine suit, without shoes" (Castoldi 2020). There was certainly an element of vengeance in the display, but it also conveyed a clear message: the nightmare was truly over. For instance, on 29th April 1945, a Jewish woman from Milan, who had managed to escape the racial laws by using her mother's Catholic surname, wrote: "I'm going to Piazzale Loreto. I'm going because only when I've seen it with my own eyes, I will be able to convince myself that the nightmare is really over" (Ferri 2005). Such testimony reveals another dimension of that moment: not only revenge, but also profound relief. For those who had suffered under the dictatorship, especially Jews, it marked the realisation that the nightmare was finally ended.

By examining the intentions of the CLNAI and key political actors within the Resistance, one can trace how vengeance was mobilised as an emotional and political tool. Public statements and wartime communiqués framed Mussolini's execution and display not merely as punitive justice but as an act of national redemption. The emotional intention was thus to transform grief and humiliation into agency and justice. Although the CLNAI was unanimous in its decision to execute Mussolini, describing it as "the necessary conclusion of a historical phase that has left our country still covered in material and moral ruins" (CLNAI 1945), the official statement nonetheless revealed some unease over the turn events had taken, particularly the public display and humiliation of the bodies. It acknowledged that the explosion of popular hatred "can only be understood within the climate created and encouraged by Mussolini himself", while expressing the hope that in the new era "such excesses will no longer be repeated. Nothing could ever justify them again" (CLNAI 1945).

Even those who had once been swept up by Mussolini's stirring rhetoric and had eagerly joined the mass rallies could now, after years of war and hardship, find in that brutal ritual a way to bury, if not atone for, a part of themselves and their complicity. As the Italian-Jewish poet Umberto Saba wrote at the time,

> on the evening the execution became known […] in Rome's working-class neighbourhoods, there was a disquieting air of festivity […] But, as these things lie beyond politics, beyond right and wrong (they follow ancient instinctive paths), already the next day I sensed, in the tavern where I take my meals, the first stirrings of remorse. (Saba 2011, 64-65)

The emotional mechanism of vengeance helped shape the immediate transitional discourse of the post-fascist state. Through the desecration of Mussolini's body, the Resistance and its supporters articulated a rupture with fascist ideology and a reconfiguration of national identity. Vengeance thus served as an emotional bridge from occupation to liberation, from tyranny to democracy. Giorgio Bocca, first a partisan and later a famous journalist and historian, wrote that the exposure of the bodies in Piazzale Loreto was a "revolutionary act about which unnecessary moralising will be done" (Bocca 1977, 336).

Political parties within the CLNAI, including communists, socialists, and Christian democrats, differed in their ideological outlooks but largely converged on the symbolism of Mussolini's death. While some leaders, particularly within the Communist Party, openly embraced the spectacle as a triumph of the people, others were more ambivalent, fearing that excessive cruelty might taint the moral legitimacy of the Resistance. Still, the emotional narrative of vengeance persisted, and was reflected in the immediate public reactions, media coverage, and the political atmosphere that followed the Liberation.

Importantly, an emotional history reveals that vengeance was not an isolated expression of rage but part of a chain of actions and interpretations that shaped long-term political outcomes. The images of Piazzale Loreto have shaped debates on transitional justice, the role of the monarchy, and the definition of civic identity since the early days of the post-fascist republic (Bodei 2022). The event also immediately forced political actors to position themselves: for some, it solidified the resistance as a moral force; for others, particularly moderates and conservatives, it became a reason to advocate for a more restrained and legally formal transition.

4. Left vindication, right victimhood: Loreto as a battleground of memory

In Italy's First Republic (1948-1994), party competition operated within the so-called *arco costituzionale*, the set of parties that had drafted and upheld the 1948 Constitution, while deliberately sidelining anti-system forces. The neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano* henceforth ISM), mainly composed of former fascist officials, sat outside this constitutional arch and was systematically excluded from national office and influence (Ignazi 2023). By contrast, the Italian Communist Party (henceforth ICP), though inside the arch as a constitutional actor, was kept out of government through the informal *conventio ad excludendum*, a cross-party understanding that the ICP should not enter cabinet, rooted in Cold War alignments and the need to anchor Italy in the Western camp (Bellucci, 2015). In effect, the arch constrained policy and coali-

tions at the centre, while the *conventio* denied alternation by barring the ICP from office and the ISM from legitimacy (Russo 2015).

On the left side, this exclusion from government shaped the emotional and historical reconstruction of the events at Piazzale Loreto. It was largely subsumed into the triumphalist narrative of Liberation. For many partisans and their political heirs, particularly the ICP and the Italian Socialist Party (henceforth ISP), the site symbolised justice rendered upon tyranny. According to Castoldi (2020), Mussolini's public display in the very square where fifteen partisans had been executed by fascists the year before was seen as a form of Dantean *contrappasso* (retaliation). Emotionally, this narrative mobilised a mixture of vindication and moral closure, positioning the new republic as the cathartic consequence of collective rage.

However, unease soon emerged. While the newly founded republic enshrined 25th April as Liberation Day, the visceral imagery of Loreto proved problematic. Leaders within the ICP, in their pursuit of institutional legitimacy during the Cold War, began to distance themselves from the more violent aspects of the events. There was a degree of hesitation among the communists to assume full responsibility for the most radical acts of the Resistance, given the tragic rupture with twenty years of fascism (Luzzato 2011). President Napolitano, a long-standing figure of the Italian Communist tradition, described it as "a scene of horror that replicated other horrors staged in the same place, Piazzale Loreto" (Napolitano 2010). Furthermore, as the communists sought alliances with Christian Democrats and promoted a broader democratic respectability, Loreto's rawness risked undermining the dignity of anti-fascist commemoration (Focardi 2012). This ambivalence was further heightened by the transformation of anti-fascist memory into a tool of state-building. The public rituals surrounding 25th April became increasingly solemn and institutionalised. Communist and socialist parties contributed to a narrative in which the partisan struggle culminated in a just republic, guided by legality and unity. Yet this very institutionalisation prompted a loss of emotional authenticity. Piazzale Loreto, too extreme for official commemoration yet too significant to be forgotten, was gradually de-emphasised. The violent character of the event was increasingly relegated to the footnotes of the memory of the Liberation: an inconvenient and excessive episode in an otherwise dignified national rebirth, hardly to be proposed "as a founding myth of the new Italy" (Luzzato 2011, 55).

However, while the mainstream political forces struggled to lay claim to the events of Piazzale Loreto, its symbolic power was instead reclaimed by radical movements on the right and the left. From the student and worker uprisings of

the late 1960s, extra-parliamentary leftist groups such as *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio* have celebrated Piazzale Loreto as a blueprint for revolutionary justice. Militant slogans such as "Piazzale Loreto taught us: killing a fascist is not a crime!" (*"Piazzale Loreto ce l'ha insegnato: uccidere un fascista non è reato!"*) recast the event not as a moment of historical closure but as an ongoing call to arms. Another frequently heard chant, "From Tibet to Peru, all the lamas upside down!" (*"Dal Tibet al Perù, tutti i lama a testa in giù!"*), foreshadowed what would become a recurring image in extra-parliamentary political struggle: the portrayal of political opponents, almost exclusively on the right, as inverted bodies, turned into a lasting metaphor of class revenge and revolutionary violence (Guerra 2020, 475-476).

This imagery was repurposed as a rallying cry for militant action against perceived authoritarian and reactionary forces. For these groups, Piazzale Loreto was not a closed chapter but a precedent for continued struggle. Emotions of vengeance and unfinished justice were repurposed by these groups to legitimise new cycles of political conflict. Through these radical reinterpretations, the site was emotionally reloaded, not with closure but with mobilisation. Since the violent *Anni di Piombo*,[1] Piazzale Loreto remained forcefully into Italy's public imagination. Political violence intensified among the entire country, and historical memory continued to be weaponised. For the radical left, the site served as both historical warning and ideological justification. Activists issued threats to contemporary political figures by referencing Mussolini's fate. Effigies of perceived reactionaries were hung upside-down during protests. Posters and leaflets proclaimed, "There is still room at Piazzale Loreto!" (*"C'è ancora posto a Piazzale Loreto"*). Such rhetoric reinforced the emotional legitimacy of violence against political adversaries (Guerrieri 2010).

Conversely, the neo-fascist movements and parties, starting from the ism, has casted Piazzale Loreto as the original wound, a national disgrace born of communist savagery. The ism leader and MP Giorgio Almirante famously described Liberation Day as the "date that public opinion, not only in Italy but worldwide, will never separate from the horrid faces of the communist murderers of Piazzale Loreto" (Almirante 1955, 1). In 1955, writing for the far-right Italian newspaper *Il Secolo d'Italia*, he emotionally framed 25th April as a day of mourning, not celebration: "The law of my State declares that tomorrow shall be a day of celebration. But the law of my morality, my character, my very life, the law written in blood, commands that tomorrow be a day of mourning" (Almirante 1955, 1). Here, Almirante appears to invoke the Sophoclean myth of *Antigone*, suggesting that no human decree (the Creontian *nomos*) can override the imperative to uphold a higher moral law. Thus, for far-right forces, the

memory of Loreto was shaped not by guilt but by humiliation, which they used to portray themselves as a silenced minority, much like the tragic figure of Antigone.

Right-wing press also played a role in reshaping the affective perception of Loreto. The post-war media, particularly those sympathetic to the right, began softening Mussolini's image for example by amplifying the voice of his widow, Rachele. Her interviews and memoirs "still ringing with resentment" presented the Mussolini family as tragic, persecuted figures, victims of historical injustice (Sprigge 1960, 246). This emotional recoding presented the dictator not as an architect of violence, but as a fallen father and husband. Pilgrimages to the sites of execution or burial emerged within far-right subcultures as affective practices aimed at reclaiming agency through memory (Pavolini 2011). These practices reflect the role of emotions in anchoring collective memory, whereby they bind together past experiences and current political or social identities through symbolic and ritual expression of historical trauma. This moment constitutes an inflection point where shame was being replaced with a search for dignity. The right did not seek to erase Loreto; it sought to invert its emotional meaning. Therefore, Piazzale Loreto was long instrumentalised to spotlight alleged crimes by anti-fascists and so suggesting a moral equivalence between fascist and anti-fascist violence. In doing so, the right aimed to rebalance blame and symbolically atone for its own historical culpability by distributing guilt across both camps.

In summary, since the immediate post-war years, two competing narratives coalesced around Piazzale Loreto. One, associated with the most uncompromising anti-fascist factions, was unforgiving towards the regime's executioners; the other, rooted in conservative nostalgia, regarded the events of Piazzale Loreto with compassion for the dead. Over time, these sentiments hardened: the merciless stance was invoked to provide moral warrant for further political violence on the left, while the compassionate reading was instrumentalised on the right to suggest an equivalence between fascist atrocities and partisan reprisals.

5. Entering office, recasting memory: the Right's strategy on Loreto

The post-fascist tradition's path to power was slow but steady. With the collapse of the First Republic and the disappearance of the major parties that had dominated Italian politics for over forty years, the heirs of traditional fascism finally entered government in 1994. This occurred above all with the participation of the ISM, now led by Gianfranco Fini, in Silvio Berlusconi's coalition, marking the political normalisation of a post-fascist identity. To rebrand the

party, Fini convened the 1995 Fiuggi Convention, formally dissolving the ISM and launching the National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*). He openly rejected fascism, describing it as an "absolute evil" (Fini 2013, 130); he visited Rome's Ardeatine Caves to honour the victims of Nazi massacres in 1944, where publicly asserted that fascism belonged to the past and no longer had a place in contemporary Italian politics. As Deputy Prime Minister, he later condemned the fascist racial laws of the late 1930s, which had targeted Jews. His most striking rejection of Mussolini's legacy came during an official visit to Israel in November 2003, where he acknowledged Italy's responsibility for the 1938 racial laws, affirming that true condemnation requires the acceptance of responsibility (Fini 2013). Yet his past statements, including his 1994 assertion that Mussolini was "the greatest statesman of the twentieth century" remained (quoted in Statera 1994, 5). He additionally added an explicit reference to an old motto of the ISM such as "don't deny, don't restore" ("*non rinnegare, non restaurare*"), sufficiently vague to cast doubt on the exact nature of the relationship between the party's present reality and its fascist past (Ventresca 2006).

Despite rebranding and attempts to distance themselves from aspects of fascism, the Italian right has continued to pursue a strategy of neutralising Piazzale Loreto and equating anti-fascist atrocities with those perpetrated by the regime. A revealing episode coincided with the post-fascists' arrival in power. In 1994, *Combat Film*, a late-night series on the public broadcaster Rai 1, aired American footage from the Italian campaign of 1943-45. The programme subsequently spawned a successful VHS collection and further projects, including the documentary *Alleati* (*Allies*) and the radio series *Combat Radio*, all based on original wartime reels and interviews with American combat cameramen. These works depicted pivotal events, notably the death of Mussolini and the desecration of his body, as well as those of others killed and displayed in Piazzale Loreto. The 1994 broadcast of the TV series sparked intense public debate. For some, it served as a necessary reminder of the true nature of fascism; for others, it was seen as a deliberate provocation that undermined efforts at national reconciliation. Leading figures of the far right were now able to continue drawing equivalences between the atrocities committed by partisans and those of the Fascist regime. Assunta Almirante, wife of the historic ISM leader, declared that "the left should now engage in an act of *mea culpa*". Once again, a victimhood narrative emerged, as she added that the left "talks about the barbarity of others, but what happened there made it perfectly clear what they themselves did […] There was no respect, not even for the dead" (Almirante 1994, 2). The broadcast was widely criticised for appearing to blur the moral distinction between fascist and anti-fascist violence, exactly what the post-fascist forces have long aimed to

do. Critics from the historical community argued that the film failed to assert the moral superiority of the anti-fascist Resistance, thereby potentially legitimising the fascist side, which was exactly what the right-wing forces have often trying to do, by exploiting the Piazzale Loreto events (Ventresca 2006).

The episode suggested that the moral narrative of Piazzale Loreto was no longer hegemonic. Berlusconi's governments actively promoted the remembrance of Italian victims of post-war Yugoslav partisans during the Foibe commemorations,[2] once again to equate communist and fascism crimes (Ballinger 2006). Here two dynamics are at play: on the one hand, these actions represent an emotional substitution, from national guilt to a narrative of victimhood; on the other, the governing right gradually began, through the evocation of pity for the events at Piazzale Loreto, to draw comparisons between the atrocities of war, moving from partisan justice to claims of moral equivalence.

5.1 Breaking the taboo, rewriting the memory: Meloni in power

With her victory at the 2022 general election and subsequent appointment as the Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni decisively broke the long-standing exclusion that had kept neo-fascist forces out of national government. Meloni's party Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, hereinafter BoI), was established in 2012, positioning itself as the heir to Italy's conservative and nationalist traditions, directly inheriting the ideological legacy of the ISM, the post-1946 neo-fascist party founded by veterans of Mussolini's Italian Social Republic. She underlined the historic weight of the result as it was announced:

> Obviously, the fact that BoI is the leading party in Italy means many things, for many of us. Tonight is, for many of us, a night of pride; a night of redemption; a night of tears, of embraces, of dreams and of memories. It is a victory I wish to dedicate to all those who are no longer with us and who deserved to see this night. (Meloni 2022)

Meloni founded her own party precisely in opposition to the moderate turn taken by *Alleanza Nazionale*, the party to which she had belonged, after it merged with Silvio Berlusconi's liberal formation, the People of Freedom (*Popolo della Libertà*, PoF). As she put it, "the merger into the PoF risked, and in part proved, to be a way to dilute and weaken our positions" (Meloni 2021, 43). The BoI logo, a tricolour flame, is a clear reference to the ISM and its symbolic ties to Mussolini's tomb, emphasising its continuity with Italy's far-right nostalgic culture (Kirby 2022).

As such, BoI has faced the enduring challenge of negotiating the fascist legacy within its political identity. Meloni has walked a fine line: publicly distancing herself from fascism while openly contesting anti-fascism as an ideological marker. Her words are revealing:

> I have no fear whatsoever in reiterating, yet again, that I do not worship Fascism. On the other hand, I know every name and every story of the young people sacrificed in the 1970s on the altar of anti-Fascism, sometimes merely for having written an essay at school, and for that condemned to death. This violence, cultural as well as physical, has undoubtedly instilled in me a deep sense of rebellion against political anti-fascism. I do not deny this in the slightest. But this is where my relationship with Fascism ends. (Meloni 2021, 205)

Meloni's statement performs a dual manoeuvre. First, she linguistically disaffiliates herself from the cult of Fascism, adopting the lexicon of repudiation, ("I have no fear… of not holding the cult [of Fascism]"), to assert moral distance. Yet she immediately recentres the narrative on the "victims of anti-fascism", shifting the historical axis from fascist culpability to anti-fascist excess. The deictic movement from *me* ("within me a firm rebellion"), to collective remembrance, "every name and every story", constructs an affective community of grievance. In this way, anti-fascism is re-signified not as a democratic virtue but as a source of "cultural and physical violence", enabling her to appropriate the moral register of victimhood that the right has traditionally been denied.

Discursively, this constitutes an act of moral equivalence through emotional inversion: fascist violence is linguistically displaced by the evocation of anti-fascist brutality, while her personal rebellion becomes a legitimising affective claim. Meloni's rhetoric operates as a mechanism of narrative deflection, an attempt to neutralise historical shame by projecting it onto the antagonistic memory of anti-fascism. In doing so, she transforms the affective grammar of Italy's post-war political culture: the right no longer seeks to erase Piazzale Loreto but to reinterpret its humiliation through the idiom of wounded dignity.

Within this context, 25th April and the events at Piazzale Loreto remain a contested terrain of emotional and political meaning. Official commemorations continue to uphold it as a symbol of anti-fascist victory. Yet the surrounding discourse has fragmented. On the progressive side, it retains its sanctity, albeit with a more subdued tone. Figures like Presidents of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano and Sergio Mattarella – both coming from progressive and openly anti-fascist parties – have emphasised the need to preserve the memory of the Re-

sistance and its sacrifices (Graziani 2025). Cultural projects, public school materials, and documentaries continue to revisit Loreto as a cornerstone of democratic memory. However, with the governmental normalisation of post-fascism, Meloni's party has faced a double task: to drain Piazzale Loreto of its political energy as the founding myth of anti-fascism and, at the same time, to reframe that site as a national wound that authorises a grammar of mourning, violated dignity and shared memory (Tortola & Griffini 2025). Situating Loreto within Foot's (2009) paradigm of Italy's divided memory helps explain why consensus proves elusive: post-war events are persistently read through rival mnemonic communities whose rituals and media sustain incompatible truths. In this landscape, claims of moral equivalence endure less through new evidence than through parallel commemorative and press infrastructures that keep non-communicating memories alive. Therefore, the strategy that emerges from senior leaders' statements and the allied media ecosystem is twofold.

The first strategy is to weaken and universalise 25th April through the lexicon of freedom and the condemnation of all dictatorships, thereby invoking experiences beyond Italy's own history, particularly that of communism. This was precisely what Silvio Berlusconi had proposed back in 2009, when Meloni was a minister in his government, arguing that "the time has come for the Liberation Day to become the Day of Freedom" (Berlusconi 2009). A similar practice had already been employed by the right, particularly using the *Foibe* massacres as a means of equating communist crimes with those of the fascists (Ballinger 2006). Another example occurred with the death of Pope Francis prompted the government to declare five days of national mourning, an unprecedented period compared with the death of previous popes that overlapped with, and in practice subsumed, the eightieth anniversary of 25th April. Within this altered commemorative landscape, the government, through BoI minister Musumeci (Editorial 2025), called on all parties and movements to adopt a "sober" demeanour during the anniversary events. As the BoI-owned newspaper *Il Secolo d'Italia* reported, 25th April demonstrations had too often in the past descended into confrontation, an appeal it set in stark contrast to the protests that followed. The newspaper claimed that the Italian left not only failed to heed the government's appeal for sobriety as a mark of respect, but that "for years the left, partisans and social centres have been unleashing hell in the streets", adding that "on 25th April, in Italy's squares, it turns into a settling of scores by the left, partisans and social centres against anyone who thinks differently" (Maurelli 2025). Similarly, the newspaper *Libero* argued that "it takes a great deal of imagination to interpret the government's call for 'sobriety' as a form of censorship or diktat", when every year a certain segment of the left needs a "fascist enemy" on whom

to vent during the Liberation Day celebrations (Capezzone 2025). In this way, the right's rhetoric of *sobrietà*, which depoliticises the event, is made visible precisely through the indignation of sympathetic media, who deploy it to denounce opponents' double standards. This analysis complements, but also departs from, Mammone's (2006) account of the daily revision of Fascism and anti-fascism in contemporary Italy, showing how political and cultural elites have sought to reconsider the constitutive moment of the republic and to equate the memories of Fascism and the Resistance, producing an "artificial history" in which Mussolini's regime is partially rehabilitated and anti-fascism is dissolved into a neutralised, "shared" past (220). By contrast, this research focuses on the emotional and securitising mechanisms through which this equivalence is now pursued. Rather than treating revisionism primarily as a historiographical drift, it traces how Loreto has been recoded through scripts of victimhood, humiliation and "sobriety", reframing anti-fascism as a source of hatred and instability while casting the contemporary right as guarantor of order and dignity. In this sense, the article updates Mammone's diagnosis for a context in which post-fascist actors have broken the institutional "glass ceiling" and use state office and sympathetic media ecosystems to routinise an emotional inversion of the fascist past.

The second strategy is to invert Loreto emotionally: to recast it from a judgement on Fascism into an emblem of desecration that legitimises a claim of right-wing victimhood, past and present. In this rhetorical twist, BoI leaders consistently invoke the danger allegedly stoked by others: not only the memory of 1945, but contemporary threats that invoke Loreto against figures on the right. This discursive device transforms the symbol of the regime's collapse into ongoing evidence of political hatred directed at the governing camp. Humiliation here is a social practice that publicly lowers status, strips honour and violates claims to dignity. It becomes politically potent only when an audience recognises the degradation and when institutions (media, ceremonies, offices) provide the language and scripts that stabilise it. In modern polities, where dignity is prized, public shaming is normatively suspect yet remains available as a resource; naming and framing are constitutive of what is felt and done. In short, humiliation is relational, staged, and judged, and its effects depend on how communities learn and are licensed to feel.

This lens clarifies Loreto's afterlife. Actors on the right recode the shame of 1945 into past suffering borne by "their" dead, then translate that suffering into present dignity claims. The move unfolds in three steps: narrating Loreto as desecration; curating contemporary incidents (placards, effigies, slogans) as proof that Loreto is still weaponised; asserting a moral title to order, restraint

and reconciliation. Thus: shame-suffering-dignity. Operationally, this recoding travels through a securitisation of memory: allied outlets compile a rolling dossier of Loreto threats and present memory as a live risk, justifying depoliticising gestures (e.g., "sobriety", "national unity", "against all dictatorships") while pathologising opponents' affect. The vignettes that follow exemplify how leaders mobilise this script and how sympathetic media amplify and archive it.

Giorgia Meloni, for example, has repeatedly responded in public to photomontages, threats and references to Loreto. In 2018 she condemned a Democratic Party councillor who depicted her hung upside down in Piazzale Loreto (Prati 2018); in 2022 she denounced an anonymous message "There's still room in Piazzale Loreto" targeting an BoI group leader; and in 2024 she spoke of "civil-war tones" in Parliament when an opposition MP openly invoked Loreto, stating explicitly: "in effect, I should be slaughtered and hung upside down" (Meloni 2024). In each instance, the leader converts the Loreto reference into evidence that morally legitimises her camp as the target of hatred, a choreography of victimhood that wrests from opponents the monopoly over Resistance memory.

The same logic operates in the reactions of other senior BoI figures. For example, Ignazio La Russa, whose personal history and public actions often stir controversy. As president of the Senate and substitute for the president of the republic in the event of the latter's inability, he triggered a backlash for suggesting the Italian Constitution makes no reference to anti-fascism, and for diminishing the partisan operations against Nazi forces during the liberation war (La Russa 2023). He has never concealed the fact that he keeps a bust of Mussolini in his home, nor has he ever distanced himself from Fini's remark describing Mussolini as "a great statesman" (La Russa 2013a, 6). Moreover, he has never shied away from describing the events of 28th April 1945 as tragic. In 2015, during a parliamentary debate on electoral reform, someone accused the then Renzi government of authoritarianism for imposing a confidence vote on the reform, thereby preventing open parliamentary discussion. On that occasion, opposition MPs drew parallels between Renzi's move and Mussolini's actions in 1923, when he too used a confidence vote to push through his electoral law. La Russa objected to the comparison, arguing that "today, among other things, is 28th April, the date of Piazzale Loreto, and I believe all Italians should show a degree of restraint when speaking about that time" (La Russa 2013b). Once again, the post-fascist right recasts that day as one of mourning and respect, echoing the position taken sixty years earlier by Almirante, whose political legacy La Russa claims as his own. These interventions reveal an affective unease: a reluctance to fully internalise the symbolic moral weight of Italy's anti-fascist foun-

dations. This constitutes a dynamic of narrative deflection, wherein shame is displaced onto an abstracted historical past, allowing present actors to signal patriotism without reconciling with past complicities. Similarly in 2018, La Russa mocked the revocations of Mussolini's honorary citizenships by speaking of the "the butchery of Piazzale Loreto" ("*macelleria di Piazzale Loreto*"), shifting the locus of censure onto the supposed "perpetrators" of that outrage (the left) and relocating the trauma not in the regime's crimes but in the spectacle of its punishment (La Russa 2018). When, in 2024, an actor posted an inverted image pairing La Russa with Mussolini, he publicly disclosed a solidarity call from the Quirinale: once again, contemporary victimisation was welded to Loreto to certify who is now allegedly subjected to "hatred" (RAI 2024). The message is consistent: Loreto is cast as a threat reactivated by today's opponents, positioning the right as the actor demanding order, dignity and protection.

This strategy of inversion is systematically amplified by the media ecosystem aligned with the governing right, which operates across three registers: pathologising anti-fascism; securitising references to Loreto as contemporary threats; and constructing a moral equivalence between partisan excesses and the crimes of the regime. On the pathologising anti-fascism, government-aligned outlets such as *Libero* and *Il Giornale*, both controlled by an MP within Meloni's coalition and the best-selling titles on the Italian right, portray the left as fixated on Loreto. An editorial from *Libero* titled "The Left in Italy is Still Stuck at Piazzale Loreto" ("*Sinistra, in Italia è rimasta ancora a Piazzale Loreto*") refers to the "perverse fascination" with the image of the hanging corpses (Patricelli 2025). On the eve of 25th April 2025, parts of the press treated the anniversary as fodder for satire, with headlines such as "The left dreams of Trump at Piazzale Loreto". With Donald Trump in Rome for the pope's funeral, *Libero* imagined a "Piazzale Loreto 2.0" in which Trump would be publicly ridiculed like Mussolini, a fantasy he called "the great orgasm of a politically impotent left", evidence, he argued, that a rhetoric of hatred has never truly abated (Capezzone, 2025). Attacking not the past, but the punitive desire projected onto their opponents. Thus, anti-fascism is defined not by its values but by its impulses.

Regarding securitising references to Loreto as contemporary threats, aligned newspapers compile contemporary cases: the threat "God willing, we'll hang you in Piazzale Loreto" ("*Inshallah ti appendiamo in Piazzale Loreto*") against Salvini (Galici 2024); the effigy of Elon Musk hung "upside down" ("*a testa in giù*") precisely in Loreto (Capezzone 2025); and the slogan "there's still room in Piazzale Loreto" ("*c'è ancora posto a Piazzale Loreto*") appearing on BoI offices (Galici 2021). The repetition of such episodes produces cumulative evidence of a cli-

mate of hatred, enabling the right to present itself not as the heir of a regime needing justification, but as a victim to be protected.

As for constructing a moral equivalence between partisan excesses and the crimes of the regime, the moral equivalence frame is built not by insisting on Fascism as a regime of crimes, but by presenting Loreto as an abomination. *Il Giornale* speaks of a "barbaric and cowardly revenge" and publishes photographic dossiers that multiply the effect of revulsion, "blood, insults, laughter", shifting the focus from the origins of violence (twenty years of dictatorship) to the spectacle of punishment, and therefore to partisan "horror" (Guerri 2013). *Il Secolo d'Italia* attacks Giuliano Pisapia for describing Loreto as a "model of civilisation", citing Parri's reference to a "Mexican butchery" and Montanelli's similar language: the genealogy of anti-fascist excess thus becomes a tool to delegitimise republican memory once it becomes normative (Sirocchi 2015).

Taken together, this ecosystem constructs a causal chain running from contemporary symbolic abuses (posters, slogans, effigies) to a diagnosis: anti-fascism as an ideology of hatred that has never reckoned with Loreto. On this basis, the right can claim the space of reconciliation, invoking 25th April as a "sober day", a celebration of "national unity", and a condemnation of "all dictatorships". The result is a dual displacement: de-antagonising the anniversary (by universalising its content) and re-antagonising the opponents (by presenting them as the true perpetuators of Loreto's hatred). This does not occur in a vacuum. Meloni's personal profile, already in 2021 declaring that she had a firm rebellion against political anti-fascism, marked the point of equilibrium: lexical separation from fascism, yet ideological opposition to anti-fascism as an identity (Meloni 2021). The subsequent sequence of hung upside down threats from 2018 to 2024 enabled her to perform that balance as a defence of democracy against those who evoke Loreto.

This operation constitutes a shift from shame to dignity: instead of atoning for the past, it neutralises it by portraying Loreto as a weapon now wielded by others. Methodologically, what it is observed is the securitisation of memory. Loreto is no longer merely a historiographical terrain, but a contemporary threat invoked by adversaries; 25th April is no longer the boundary marker of anti-fascism, but a universal ritual, of freedom, democracy and opposition to all dictatorships; conversely, those who seek to restore the national holiday to its anti-fascist values are often portrayed as extremists. Sympathetic media serve both as amplifiers and archives: they accumulate incidents (placards, mannequins, online posts) that transform an iconic repertoire into evidentiary material, and they repeat key adjectives, "barbarity", "hatred", "desecration", "butch-

ery", to consolidate the affective community of the right as one of offence and pacification.

From this follows the central thesis: *Fratelli d'Italia*, together with its affiliated media ecosystem, does not seek to erase Loreto; it seeks to hollow it out and reassign its meaning. It does so by universalising 25th April into an abstract "Festival of Freedom", while recoding Loreto as a warning against hatred now attributed to political anti-fascism and its militant fringes. The strategy is effective because it operates on two temporal planes: in the present, it builds consensus around moderation; in the past, it morally settles the accounts by shifting the axis from fascism to the "butchers of Loreto". In between, a friendly media circuit records, amplifies and normalises the transition, from anti-fascism as civic ethos to its pathologisation as a punitive impulse.

6. Conclusions

Re-reading Piazzale Loreto through the history of emotions changes the stakes. The right did not try to delete Loreto; it learned to feel it differently, and to teach others to feel it differently. By elevating compassion for fascist dead and suturing humiliation and shame to claims of moral equivalence, right-wing leaders and media have recast Loreto from a symbol of liberation to a scene of grievance. At the same time, a moral script around anti-fascist justice hardened into a stance that left space for the charge of symmetrical violence. When sectors of the radical left brandish images of the hanged corpses as a fantasy of repetition, they inadvertently nourish this script of victimhood, confirming the right's claim to speak in the name of the dead. The result is a vicious circle in which opposed actors share, and mutually reinforce, an emotional template of injury.

Language, ritual and media routinise feeling. The press, commemorative calendars and recurrent political soundbites operate as infrastructures that stabilise and circulate emotions, converting fleeting sensations into durable public claims. Emotions here are practices learned and policed within institutions; individual expressions, letters, testimonies and editorials can therefore scale up into collective moods and repertoires (Frevert 2024). Shame and humiliation are especially instructive: far from waning, they have proved salient in modern politics, offering ready-made grammars of injury that can be re-attached to old sites with new meanings.

The argument is straightforward: Loreto endures as a contested memory because its affective codes have been strategically re-written. The right's key move

is emotional inversion, transforming a scene long read as the symbolic end of a dictatorship into a tableau of victimhood. Attending to emotions exposes how this works and why it persists despite factual rebuttal: emotions anchor identity, supply moral permissions and travel through media rituals.

There are disciplinary dividends. Bringing the history of emotions into dialogue with discourse and media analysis provides a method for linking micro-experience and macro-political consequence. It also clarifies what responsible commemoration requires: not only historical accuracy, but work on institutionalised emotional grammars, acknowledging grief without collapsing categories and naming shame without licensing equivalence. Similar recodings mark other European sites; mapping their emotional economies helps explain revisionist resilience and inform more effective public history responses. In short, emotions do not merely accompany memory politics, they make them.

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[1] The Years of Lead (*Anni di Piombo*) were a period of intense political violence and social turmoil in Italy, spanning from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. This era was characterised by a wave of politically motivated terrorism and violent confrontations involving both far-left and far-right groups.

[2] This Italian commemoration honours the victims of the *Foibe* massacres and the subsequent Istrian–Dalmatian exodus, a wave of forced displacement carried out under Tito's communist regime. In the aftermath of the Second World War, between 230,000 and 350,000 ethnic Italians, mainly from the Istrian and Dalmatian regions, were compelled to leave Yugoslavia due to political persecution and violence.