

DEATH TOURISM

DISASTER SITES AS RECREATIONAL LANDSCAPE

EDITED BY BRIGITTE SION



LONDON NEW YORK CALCUTTA

Seagull Books 2014

Individual essays © Individual authors

This compilation © Seagull Books 2013

ISBN 978 0 8574 2 107 4

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by Seagull Books, Calcutta, India

Printed and bound by Hyam Enterprises, Calcutta, India

BORDERLINE MEMORY DISORDER: TRIESTE AND THE STAGING OF ITALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY¹

SUSANNE C. KNITTEL

The first time I visited Trieste, Italy, to research its Second World War history and memory was in the summer of 2007. Driving on the Autostrada 4 that leads from Venice to Trieste, I passed signs pointing visitors to all the major sites of the region: landmarks such as the Grotta Gigante, the world's largest tourist-accessible stalactite cave; the small coastal town of Duino with its steep cliffs that inspired the poet Rainer Maria Rilke; the romantic Miramare Castle built directly on the Gulf of Trieste; and of course the many attractions the city itself has to offer, from the ancient Roman ruins and the mediaeval castle to the splendid seafront and Piazza Unità d'Italia, lined with majestic buildings from the Habsburg era. But try as I might, I could not find any signs to the Risiera di San Sabba, a former Nazi-Fascist death camp that is now a memorial. I knew it was located in the industrial district in the city's south. But as soon as I left the Autostrada, my GPS stopped working and showed me nothing but an undifferentiated, green, no-man's land. It took numerous attempts to eventually reach my destination.

While most tourists come to see the crumbling splendour of the former Habsburg seaport, I had come looking for an altogether different Trieste, whose remnants spoke of Fascism, the Nazi occupation and the cold war. Two sites in particular had sparked my interest because they seemed to be competing with one another, not only for visitors but also for a definitive version of local (and ultimately national) history. One of these sites was the Risiera di San Sabba, where thousands of Slovenes, Croats, Jews and Italian anti-Fascists were imprisoned, killed or interned pending deportation between 1943 and 1945. The Risiera was declared a national monument in 1965 and the memorial in its present form, designed by Triestine architect Romano Boico, was inaugurated in 1975. It receives approximately 100,000 visitors a year, primarily Italians, 50–60% of whom are school groups, between 12 and 18 years old. The remaining

40% comprise groups of adults (seniors, parish groups etc.), families and individual visitors, including a few foreign visitors. Most of the school groups come on a four- or five-day trip accompanied by several teachers, stay in Trieste and visit other historical sites as well. The locals come to the Risiera mainly on 25 April, Liberation Day, to commemorate the end of the Second World War, and on 27 January, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which in Italy is known as 'Giorno della memoria', to commemorate the Holocaust, but also the deportation of political and military prisoners to Nazi concentration camps.² Of the sites that narrate Trieste's younger history, the Risiera was for the longest time the site that received the most visitors.

Over the past two decades and especially since 2007 this has changed, for another memorial in the immediate vicinity has been attracting tens of thousands of visitors every year. Just a few kilometres away from the Risiera is the Foiba di Basovizza, the main memorial to commemorate a series of mass killings carried out by Yugoslav partisans in 1943 and 1945. The bodies of the victims, including Italian civilians, were disposed of in deep, cavernous pits, called *foibe*, in the mountains of the region.³ Situated on the karst plateau towards the east of Trieste, the Foiba di Basovizza was declared a national monument in 1992 and underwent a significant artistic and architectural overhaul in 2006–07. Since then it has been attracting tens of thousands of visitors every year: in May 2011, *Il Piccolo* reported that 254,000 people had visited the Foiba di Basovizza since the documentation centre opened in February 2008, with over 51,000 visitors in the first four months of 2011—roughly twice as many as in 2008 (Tonero 2011). The vast majority of visitors to the site are school groups: 3,737 on one day in April 2012—a record, but not an anomaly. Well over 12,000 students visited the site in that month alone (Dorigo 2012). Like the Risiera, Basovizza receives mostly Italian visitors and the same school groups that visit the Risiera also go to Basovizza, often on the same day. However, the opposite does not seem to be the case, as the Foiba now receives more visitors annually than the Risiera: evidently, not everyone who visits the Foiba also goes to the Risiera.

The Foiba di Basovizza has also been the main site to host the *Giorno del ricordo*, a recently introduced national memorial day that takes place only two weeks after the *Giorno della memoria*, on 10 February, and that commemorates the *foibe* killings and the mass emigration, prompted by the intimidations of the Yugoslav government, of 200,000–350,000 Italians from Istria and Dalmatia in the decade after 1945. The chronological proximity of the *Giorno della*

memoria (27 January) and the *Giorno del ricordo* (10 February) as well as the fact that they have similar names may seem confusing, and in fact there is reason to assume that this resemblance is quite deliberate. Modelled after the international *Giorno della memoria*, the *Giorno del ricordo* is a home-grown, specifically Italian day of remembrance, which presents the Italians who died in the *foibe* as victims of genocide: following Silvio Berlusconi's electoral victory in 1994 a campaign grew to establish the *foibe* as the 'Italian Holocaust', an act of genocide perpetrated against Italians, which had been suppressed by the Italian Left. This narrative of Italian victimhood blots out the historical events that preceded these killings, namely the persecution of Slovenes and Croats under Italian Fascism and the atrocities committed during the Italian occupation of Yugoslavia. Furthermore, the narrative presented plays down the fact that Italian partisans as well as German troops used the *foibe* to dispose of enemies and that the remains of German soldiers were also found there (Cogoy 2007: 17–18). The renovated Basovizza memorial and the *Giorno del ricordo* are the result of a continuous effort, on the part of Berlusconi's centre-right government, to create a new national site of memory (see Ballinger 2000). Formerly a memory upheld mainly by members of the extreme right, the *foibe* killings and the 'exodus' have moved from the margins to the very centre of Italian cultural memory in the space of just a few years. All appearances to the contrary, the geographical and temporal proximity of these two commemorative projects is not historically organic but rather motivated entirely by memory–political concerns and the conscious attempt to shift the framework of national memory towards a specifically Italian narrative of innocence and victimhood.

In what follows, I will examine in more detail the conceptions of local and national history, memory and identity that these two sites reveal. By analysing the documentary exhibition at each site I show how each memorial is primarily concerned with presenting a specific, unified memory of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. They present two perspectives of the region's memory that, although not mutually exclusive, nevertheless continually seek to undermine each other's relevance in the public sphere. As a consequence, both narratives serve to marginalize not only the memories of other groups in this multi-ethnic border region but also the broader context of the Fascist politics of Italianization prior to and during German occupation as well as tensions during the cold war. As anthropologist Pamela Ballinger writes, 'the ritual performances of identity in Trieste enacted at the Risiera and *foibe* sites make a claim for suffering and victimhood as exclusive' (2004: 146).

VISITING THE RISIERA DI SAN SABBA

The Risiera, which, as the name suggests, was originally a rice-husking factory, is a complex of several brick buildings nestled amidst a disorienting labyrinth of intersecting city highways, construction sites, large factory buildings and the nearby soccer stadium. Once the heart of Trieste's booming industry, the San Sabba district now reveals the city's steady decline since the fall of the Habsburg Empire, the neglect and mismanagement during the interwar years and under Fascism, and the post-war insecurity about the city belonging to Italy or to Yugoslavia, all of which led to its slow economic marginalization.

The entrance is a long and narrow passageway framed by tall concrete walls. At the end of this imposing corridor, visitors step through an archway into a larger walled-in courtyard framed by similar concrete walls on the north and west sides and by three of the Risiera's original buildings on the south and east sides. The only colours are grey and brick-red; the glassless windows are gaping holes. At the far end of the open space, a tall needle-like sculpture made up of black iron girders pierces the sky. On the ground is a rectangular indentation paved with dimly reflecting metal plates, and a long narrow path (also paved in metal) leads straight up to the iron sculpture. This metal imprint outlines the crematorium, the smoke channel and the base of the chimney, which the Nazis dynamited before abandoning the site at the end of April 1945. On the spot where the chimney stood, black smoke, symbolized by the wrought iron of the sculpture, rises eternally into the sky. The outline of the crematorium is still visible on the front of the main building—a pale, ghostly silhouette that stands out against the red-brick wall. Between 1943 and 1945, the Nazis killed and cremated between 3,000 and 5,000 people here. In what looks like a door in the wall is a white stone slab with the inscription 'ashes of the victims' in four languages: Italian, Slovene, Croat and Hebrew. Behind the stone is an urn containing ashes and bone remains found in 1945 among the rubble of the blasted crematorium. Apart from the iron sculpture and the metal imprint, the courtyard is empty, which reinforces the austerity of the place (Fig. 1).

Of the complex that the Nazis used as a concentration, work, transit and killing camp, only a fraction remains: a small building with 17 prison cells, in which partisans and political prisoners destined for torture and execution were held; a large building that temporarily housed the deportees (more than 20,000 Jews and Italian and Yugoslav partisans passed through the Risiera on their way to the camps in Poland or Germany); the main building, containing the



FIG. 1. The courtyard of the Risiera di San Sabba memorial. The steel sculpture (*La Pietà P.N. 30*) symbolizes the smoke from the crematorium. Photograph courtesy of Kári Driscoll, 2010.

kitchen, barracks and offices of the SS and the guards; as well as the former garage. The main building houses a small museum with drawings, letters and objects found in the rubble of the camp. The former garage contains a documentary exhibition that tells the history of the site.

Created by the Triestine historian Elio Apih in 1982, and revised and expanded in 1998, this exhibition consists of 50 panels that offer a rough sketch of the historical context of the Risiera, the rise of Fascism and Nazism, the Holocaust, the German occupation and the Resistance. This history is narrated by means of a large number of archival documents (photocopies of maps, photographs, newspaper clippings, letters, tables, lists and so on) with very brief explanatory texts in six languages (Italian, Slovene, Croat, English, German and French). The Fascist regime is presented as oppressive but ultimately somewhat inept or inconsistent: it ruined Trieste's economy and was unable to solve the minority 'question' in the region. Anti-Semitism was imported wholesale from Germany (Apih 2000: 80). Unlike Fascism, the exhibition suggests, Nazism was a mass movement based on a broad popular consensus in Germany, and

an efficient and merciless machinery of death that spread all over Europe and in the end also over Venezia Giulia. Much space is dedicated to the photographs of the Nazi perpetrators and their crimes. Just as much space is reserved for the Resistance, which was well organized in the region. But no mention is made of Triestine collaboration or involvement with the Nazis.

Apih's account specifically emphasizes the role of the pro-Italian, anti-Fascist Resistance (Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale or CLN), which acted independently of the Communist, pro-Yugoslav Resistance in the liberation of Trieste. Most historical accounts credit the Yugoslav army for liberating Trieste (Fogar 1988: 91; Pupo 2005: 87–98), but Apih suggests that it was in fact the CLN-led uprising against the Nazis on 30 April that did it, neglecting to mention that the Yugoslav army had already reached the outskirts of the city (see Apih 2000). By emphasizing the role of the CLN in the city's liberation, a hierarchy is established that posits the CLN as the 'authentic' liberation force and thus implicitly justifies why Trieste should indeed be under Italian and not Yugoslavian rule (Sluga 1996: 404–05). Both the documentary exhibition and the post-war history of the Risiera establish a narrative of Italian sovereignty not only over the city but also over the memory of the war and the German occupation.

The documentary exhibition does not explain what exactly happened at the Risiera in the 18 months of its operation, who the victims were or where they came from. Only one panel explains the different functions of the Risiera, but nowhere does it say how many were killed or how exactly the killings were carried out (Apih 2000: 120). A photograph of an iron-tipped mace found in the rubble, a copy of a list of names from a Slovene newspaper and a photograph of the arrest of one of the Risiera perpetrators, SS-Obersturmführer Franz Stangl in Brazil, are presented on another panel as evidence of the events at San Sabba (ibid.: 126). Nowhere is there a precise account of these events. The crematorium, one learns, was ordered from an unnamed company in Trieste, which, it is emphasized, was not aware of the purpose of the oven. But who helped the Nazis run the camp? Who helped them administrate the entire region? Who translated for them? Who identified the Jews and partisans for them? None of these questions are answered or even raised. There is also no information about the post-war history of the site. What has been done to preserve the Risiera? How did it become a memorial? Visitors learn nothing about the struggle for memorialization in the aftermath of the war. For an answer to these and other questions, one must turn to the historiography concerning the Risiera, Trieste and its surrounding region.

THE RISIERA IN THE PAST

The Risiera memorial itself does not have a library or a bookshop where one could find materials for further reading. Besides the local libraries, the best place to get more information about the Risiera and its history is the Istituto Regionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione nel Friuli Venezia Giulia (Regional Institute for the History of the Liberation Movement in Friuli-Venezia Giulia), which has its main office in the city centre. Reading the more recent historiographical publications on the Risiera, one learns that a large number of Triestines, including so-called *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans living outside the Reich) but also Italians, Slovenes and Croats, worked for the Nazis as interpreters, drivers, informants, secretaries, telephone operators and administrators. The industrial elite in Trieste did not hesitate to collaborate with the Germans, keen on gaining access to new markets. The press were quick to issue praise and publish propaganda. Many of the local Fascists who had been the leading agents of the persecution of Slovenes and Croats saw the solution to the 'Slav' question as the most valid reason to collaborate with the Nazis. Alongside this more explicit collaborationism, there was also the tacit consensus among the bourgeoisie in particular, and the public in general, that the Germans would guarantee their safety from the Yugoslav threat (Fogar 1988: 54).

The Risiera was established in October 1943 and was used as a barracks, a prison and extermination camp for partisans, political prisoners and Jews, a labour camp, a transit camp for deportees to Poland or Germany and a depot for seized goods. Some 22 deportation convoys left Trieste between October 1943 and November 1944. Almost all the Jews still living in Venezia Giulia were deported, with more than 1,200 from Trieste alone (see Bon Gherardi 1972: 221; Picciotto Fargion 1991: 55–60). The majority of those killed directly at the Risiera were Yugoslav partisans and civilians suspected of collaboration with the partisans.⁴ Ultimately, it proved impossible to keep the events at the Risiera a secret. Situated in the busy industrial area with factories, refineries, repositories and working-class housing, it was well within city limits and thus the news of the goings-on at the Risiera gradually spread (Fogar 1988: 87).

The Allied military government, which administrated the city from 1945 to 1954, showed no interest in investigating the crimes of the Risiera; instead it pursued a politics of normalization, which was extremely lenient towards ex-Nazis and Fascists, and focused on preventing the spread of Communism to the Italian peninsula. Until 1965, the Risiera had been considered almost exclusively a site of memory for the Communists and the Left. This changed on 15

April 1965 when Italian president Giuseppe Saragat officially declared it a national monument. According to the president's decree (n. 510), a copy of which is exhibited in the Risiera museum, the site was to be preserved because of its status as 'the only example of a Nazi Lager in Italy' (Civici Musei di Storia ed Arte 2003: 8, translation mine; Galluccio 2002: 136–54).⁵ This formulation ignores the fact that several Nazi concentration camps existed in Italy between 1943 and 1945 (such as the one in Bolzano-Gries) as well as more than 40 other concentration camps were established much earlier by the Fascists and then taken over by the Nazis (such as Fossoli near Carpi or Arbe in Istria). In erroneously insisting on the Risiera's uniqueness, the law tacitly affirms the commonly held notion that the persecution of Italian Jews and anti-Fascists was carried out exclusively by the Nazis, and that the Risiera needs to be preserved as a memorial to the victimhood of the Italian people. It further seems to suggest that Fascist concentration camps are not worth preserving. In fact, to my knowledge, not a single Fascist concentration camp site has received national monument status.

When the Risiera memorial was inaugurated on 24 April 1975, a day before the 30th anniversary of the liberation of Italy, the public was invited by *Il Piccolo*, the major Triestine newspaper, to 'undertake pilgrimages to the Risiera in order to pay homage to the martyrdom of the victims of Nazism that took place here in one of the darkest times in the history of this region' (in Viola 1998: 37; translation mine). And indeed, architect Romano Boico's memorial design presented the Risiera as a shrine. His concept rested on the transformative power of the authentic structures of confinement, torture and mass murder and on the placement of the recovered ashes as a sacred relic at the heart of the space. The most important aspect of his design was the complete 'silence' in the memorial: not a single explanatory sign was to be placed. The architectural space and the authentic structures were to speak entirely for themselves. The Risiera was to be understood as a mass grave, a site of supreme sacrifice and of mourning. This narrative of sacrifice was taken up by the press and by the speakers on the day of the memorial's inauguration. The mayor of Trieste, Marcello Spaccini, declared: 'This place is sacred. [. . .] Here, thousands of men gave their lives to safeguard the universal values of mankind' (in Mucci 1999: 23; translation mine). Italian president Giovanni Leone similarly emphasized that these victims were the founding fathers of the Italian Republic, which was born of their sacrifice. These speeches excluded all non-partisan victims of the Risiera in favour of a narrative of national sacrifice and redemption. The

differences between racial and political persecution were erased; it was suggested that the murders in the Risiera, including the murder of the Jews, served some greater purpose, namely, the liberation of Italy from the Nazi occupier. The fact that women and children were also among the Risiera's victims was completely ignored. Furthermore, the role played by Communist partisans was suppressed. The architectural conception of the Risiera as a shrine lends itself to such readings of the dead as fallen soldiers, whose glorification as war heroes is reminiscent of First World War memorials, as well as martyrs, whose remains become sacred relics. Re-conceived as a de-politicized, secular site of mourning, the Risiera no longer belonged to the Communists. However, the lack of historical context and specificity left the site open to re-politicization by the Italian Resistance who appropriated it for their narrative of anti-Communist and anti-Fascist liberation.

THE RISIERA TODAY

After its completion, the Risiera memorial was incorporated into the administrative system of the Musei Civici of the City of Trieste. This meant not only that the Risiera was one among many museums the city had to administrate and finance but also that it did not have a dedicated curator. In 1986, historian Galliano Fogar wrote a polemical article in the local history journal *Qualestoria* in which he raised two main complaints, both of which had to do with the fact that the memorial was severely underfunded. As the Risiera was conceived as a site of mourning and a tomb, no entrance fees were charged. Thus, income was relatively limited and the Risiera depended on funds from the city, the region and the state and on donations. Besides criticizing the lack of funding for the training of tour guides, Fogar addressed structural problems at the Risiera itself: the small conference room that could not accommodate groups of visitors or scholars, the absence of a heating system at the Risiera to make the offices and the small meeting room usable in the winter, and the fact that there was no efficient way of distributing and re-printing the exhibition catalogue and booklet (1986: 106–07). The Risiera, Fogar claimed, was leading a marginal existence in Trieste, not only geographically but also administratively and culturally, all of which fundamentally prevented it from fulfilling its educative role as a memorial. The Risiera, he continued, was more or less entirely ignored by the local population (*ibid.*: 108).

What has changed in the years since Fogar published his critique? The site is still in need of funding, a heating system and even an adequate meeting

facility to accommodate the ever-increasing number of visitors. The memorial space was opened to cultural events to encourage Triestines to come to the Risiera. Art and documentary exhibitions were displayed and musical or theatrical performances were organized, such as the opera *Brundibár*, composed by the Bohemian musician Hans Krása, who was killed in Auschwitz, and a scenic reading of *I me ciamava per nome: 44.787*, a play about the Risiera and the deportation of Italian Jews, based on historical materials and testimonies, written and produced by Triestine director Renato Sarti.⁶ In addition, a few general improvements were made in the mid-1990s. Explanatory signs were put up in each of the buildings. A multilingual exhibition catalogue and booklet to accompany the exhibition, which gives historical context as well as basic explanations of the memorial complex, and an educational film, which is available in multiple languages and can be screened upon request, were produced. (When I visited the Risiera in 2010, both the catalogue and the booklet were out of print.) During the late 1990s, the number of visitors reached a new high of 50,000 a year. A firm selling household goods caused a scandal in 1994, when it organized group excursions to the Risiera to promote its linens (Matta 2000: 516–17). Despite these efforts at updating and improving the site, the local population still considered the Risiera ultimately extraneous to the city's everyday life. In May 2004, the moderate daily *Trieste Oggi* published a survey it had conducted among Triestine high-school children, asking them about the Risiera memorial and museum. Only 5% had visited the memorial and most of the children did not even know what the Risiera was (Viola 1998: 142).

While most of the locals still seem to prefer to forget about the Risiera, the number of visitors from all over Italy has doubled over the past decade. In an interview I conducted on my visit to the Risiera in 2010, Francesco Fait, one of the Risiera's historians, explained that in the months of April and May the memorial provides free guided tours for school classes (during the other months a tour costs €2.70 per student), as a result of which most of the groups come in these two months and the guides at the Risiera have great difficulty accommodating all of them.⁷ The Italian-language tours with the Risiera's historians take an hour—not enough time to discuss the historical background at length or to go through the long documentary exhibition, which has remained unchanged since the 1998 update.

The multilingual documentary film is shown upon request, but neither do many classes have enough time for the 26-minute screening nor is there enough space to seat more than 20 people in front of the TV screens. Directed by

Gianfranco Rados and Piero Pieri (1994) and awarded a national prize for video productions, the making of *La Risiera di San Sabba* was advised by local historians Elio Apih, Marco Coslovich and Giampaolo Valdevit. Along the lines of the documentary exhibition, the film focuses on the Nazi persecution of the Jews and gives minimal explanation of the historical background of Nazism and anti-Semitism, and basically no information on Italian Fascism and the pre-1943 history of the region. The film spends some time explaining the rise of Nazism in Germany and then shifts focus to Italy and Trieste, which was, the narrator explains, 'an environment more amenable' to the ideology of the Nazis than elsewhere. The viewers get a brief explanation of the Fascist racial laws and see photographs of the destruction of the Triestine synagogue in 1941. Three Risiera survivors tell their stories and describe the atrocious conditions during their imprisonment. The film ends with a brief overview of post-war efforts to prosecute some of the Risiera perpetrators and with a warning about the slow and 'uncertain march towards democracy. To be aware of this is therefore the real basis from which to look to a future of greater and more solid democratization.'

No connection is made in the film between the crimes of the past and problems in today's society. It remains unclear what relevance the events at the Risiera might have in our lives today. The post-war history of the Risiera is entirely left out, as is a reflection on the difficulties connected to the Risiera's memory. This lack of self-reflection is also a problem of the memorial itself. The site is successful in eliciting an empathetic response in visitors, but in-depth pedagogical work does not seem to have a place there. Without a guide or a teacher to prepare visitors and who knows how to connect the past and the present, the Risiera's relevance today is lost on most visitors to the site.

THE FOIBA DI BASOVIZZA

Visiting the Foiba di Basovizza is completely different from visiting the Risiera, mainly because there are no authentic structures, nothing that has remained and that could help establish a connection to the past. The site is integrated into the scenic landscape of hills, bushes and trees, five minutes outside the city by car. Unlike most of the other *foibe*, which are natural sinkholes created by water erosion, the one at Basovizza is actually the shaft of an abandoned coal mine, more than 250 metres deep, excavated between 1901 and 1908. Thus, 'Foiba di Basovizza' is in fact a misnomer and historians prefer to use the term *pozzo* (pit, well, or mine shaft). In the north-western corner is a small low-roofed stone

building which houses the documentation centre and from which extends a long line of stone or marble commemorative markers and plaques in different shapes and sizes that include names or prayers and were erected over the years by various interest groups or families. At the centre of the site is the mineshaft, covered by a large concrete block sheathed in metal, and behind it a looming black steel structure topped with a cross. The steel sculpture is meant to echo the crane structures that were used for the exploration of the *foibe*, and it lends an eerie sense of threat to the otherwise unimposing site. In the background is a large stone slab bearing a prayer for the victims (Fig. 2). Like the Risiera, the Foiba di Basovizza is conceived of as a shrine to the victims who, in both cases, are referred to as martyrs. Whereas the Risiera was to be a 'secular basilica' (Mucci 1999: 49), the cross and prayer at Basovizza inscribe it within a distinctly Christian framework. Nevertheless, the most striking feature of this site, with all its markers and stone slabs, is that it is effectively structured around an absence: the invisible mineshaft.⁸

The brand new documentation centre has a small documentary exhibition, site maps, a few art objects and a small but varied selection of books and other



FIG. 2. The Foiba di Basovizza memorial. The sculpture by Livio Schiozzi looms over the covered mineshaft. Photograph courtesy of Kári Driscoll, 2010.

information materials for visitors to leaf through or buy. Like the Risiera, the site is free to visit but for a small fee visitors can receive a guided tour. The documentation centre is the only building on the site; there are no facilities for research, workshops, meetings or conferences. Like the Risiera, the documentary exhibition here consists mainly of reproductions of photographs and archival documents with explanations in Italian (international visitors can buy a multi-lingual exhibition catalogue that reproduces each panel with translations). The narrative begins in 1945, with the last days of the war, when Basovizza was at the centre of the combat between the Yugoslav liberation army and the Germans retreating from Trieste (Parlato et al. 2008: 11). After the end of the battle, the locals cleaned up the bodies, horse carcasses and munitions by throwing everything into the shaft. What remains unsaid is that, as various historical records and testimonies indicate, the mineshaft was used for the disposal of all kinds of refuse and to dispose of the bodies of political adversaries by the Fascists and the Nazis prior to the 1940s (Cernigoi 2005: 165–6). What exactly happened during the brief Yugoslav occupation of Trieste and its surroundings remains unclear. The exhibition cites a number of newspaper reports to support a claim that, besides German and Italian soldiers, hundreds of civilians were executed at the site in early May and their bodies disposed of in the mineshaft. In the months after the end of the war, the Allied and Italian information services made several attempts to exhume and count the bodies, and collect information about the executions, but to no avail. The actual number of victims is still unknown. Large reproductions of photographs of corpses and coffins serve to illustrate the exhumation attempts, but, upon a closer look at the captions, they all turn out to be victims from other *foibe* and not from the mineshaft at Basovizza. The acts of violence carried out by the Yugoslavs are described as characteristic of a ‘pre-modern’ type of violence: burning down of buildings and villages, lynching, rapes and *infoibamenti*.

The end of the war is narrated in strikingly similar terms as at the Risiera: isolated from the CLN in the rest of northern Italy and unable to unite with the Communist partisans because of their pro-Yugoslav stance, the Triestine CLN decided to free the city without help and thus be able to claim it for Italy. They occupied the city’s major public buildings, including the town hall, but had to give way to the Yugoslavs the next day. This emphasis on the role of the CLN is an important point of intersection between the exhibitions at Basovizza and at the Risiera. The narratives at both sites depend on a de-legitimization of the Yugoslav liberation movement: at Basovizza in order to cast the Yugoslavs

as cruel occupiers, and at the Risiera in order to keep up the narrative of heroic sacrifice that gives birth to the new Italy. At Basovizza, a long description of the deportations and executions that occurred during the 40 days of Yugoslav rule in Trieste portrays the Yugoslav army on par with the Nazis: a process of violent purging began, during which all those who were ‘enemies of the people’—tens of thousands of Italians—were killed or deported on ‘death marches’ to the ‘concentration camps’ near Ljubljana.⁹

The discourse on the *foibe* revolves almost exclusively around the number of victims because on it depends not only the historical relevance of the killings (and hence their status as the ‘Italian Holocaust’) but also the degree of attention in the media and the public. Scholarship by historians such as Jože Pirjevec (2009) and Nevenka Troha (1997) as well as the journalist Claudia Cernigoi (2005) has cast doubt on the number of victims reported at Basovizza and questioned whether the Foiba di Basovizza was ever the site of mass executions. In *Operazione ‘Foibe’ tra storia e mito* (2005), Cernigoi calls into question whether the Foiba di Basovizza was ever the site of mass executions. Quoting extensively from newspaper articles and reports published between 1945 and 1995, she illustrates how the number of victims reported has grown exponentially from 18 to more than 3,000, even though the shaft has never been completely excavated (ibid.: 190; see also Pirjevec 2009: 110–24, 131, 285–91, 309–15). The doubts and insecurities about the victims of Basovizza raise questions about the memorial: Why choose a site that is after all not an actual *foiba* as the central site of commemoration of all the *foibe* killings? The memorial at Basovizza is a site of constructed memory created around a mineshaft that may in fact not contain any bodies at all. It seems as if its proximity to Trieste was a determining factor in the decision, since the documentary exhibition makes explicit reference to the Risiera in its last panel. On this panel, which zooms out of the narrow historical focus of the years between 1943 and 1945 to provide the larger historical context, the history of the region before the Second World War is described as one of repeated occupation and constant battle between the Italians and the Slovenes and Croats in the region, followed by the violent Nazi occupation, of which the Risiera is the most prominent example: ‘After the armistice on September 8, 1943 and the first persecutions against Italians in Istria, the German occupation of Venezia Giulia led to the Risiera di San Sabba’ (Parlato et al. 2008: 65). Putting the ‘persecutions’ of the Italians side by side with the Risiera, the narrative presents these two different events as two sides of the same coin. In this sweeping overview, the region becomes a ‘laboratory’ of twentieth-century history,

[of] complex national and social conflicts; mass warfare; unforeseen effects of the dissolution of multinational empires; the rise of anti-democratic regimes intent on imposing their totalitarian demands on a deeply divided local society; the unleashing of racial persecutions and the creation of the ‘universe of the concentration camp’; deportations that irreversibly changed the national make-up of the region; religious persecution in the name of state atheism; East–West conflicts along one of the fronts of the Cold War. A synthesis, in short, of the great tragedies of the past century (ibid.).

On the surface, all of these statements are indisputable. But what emerges from them is a narrative of an Italian population that has had to endure a series of occupations by external forces, including—depending on how one interprets the phrase ‘anti-democratic regimes’—the Fascists themselves. The litany of twentieth-century tragedies—two world wars, the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, the rise of totalitarianism, the Holocaust, the Istrian exodus, Communism and the cold war—which have befallen the region and into which the *foibe* are inscribed implicitly places them all on the same level. And it is here that the ever-growing number of victims buried in the *foibe* begins to assert itself. The numbers must rival those of other tragedies, particularly, of course, those of the Risiera, Basovizza’s direct competitor. How many died in the *foibe* may never be known. In fact, this does not appear to be a priority at Basovizza. Beyond the possible danger of unexploded ordinance among the detritus, concerns may arise that a real archaeological excavation of these sites would confirm the low estimates that some historians have put forward. In any case, Basovizza is not so much about the past as about the present. At a deeper level, the grand historical sweep of the exhibition’s final panel paints a picture of Trieste as the staging ground of Italian national identity, a process in which the memorial itself plays an active part.

Each of these two memorials is primarily concerned with presenting a particular version of the events during and after the Second World War that blots out or ignores the one presented at the competing memorial as well as the memories of various other groups in the region. Instead of cooperating to provide a more comprehensive picture of the region’s history, they each treat their narrative as definitive. This competition is especially problematic in light of the fact that both sites marginalize the broader context for the events they commemorate. Both leave out the history of Fascism. Following the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, growing preoccupations about the political and cultural

heterogeneity of this border region resulted in the eager embrace of Fascism. The Triestine *fascio* was among the first to be founded, only a few days after the one in Milan in April 1919. The Fascist government enacted a brutal policy of enforced Italianization and began campaigns designed to claim Yugoslavian territory for Italian *spazio vitale* (vital space). The Basovizza centre glosses over the fact that the *foibe* can also be seen as retaliation acts for the hundreds of thousands of Yugoslav civilians killed by the Italian occupying forces between 1941 and 1943 (Mantelli 2000; Del Boca 2005). The recent wave of interest in the *foibe*, spurred by the centre-right government, must be seen in relation to the ongoing rehabilitation of Fascism and its memory in Italy (Mattioli 2010). Ultimately, Italy never had to come to terms with its Fascist past because it could fall back on the Resistance as a founding myth for the new Republic, a narrative that still governs the presentation of Italian history at the Risiera. More recently, the image of the Italians as fundamentally *brava gente* (good people) who could never have been involved in persecutions and war crimes has come to include the Fascists as well: in comparison to the Nazis and the Yugoslavs, the Fascists were the lesser evil (Ben-Ghiat 2004).

At the same time, memory tourism, or rather educational memory tourism associated with the Second World War, is growing in Italy as evinced by the increasing visitor numbers at these two memorials. If these developments are representative of a broader trend in society, then they indicate that Italians are beginning to express more interest in their recent history. However, the version of history presented to tourists is incomplete at best and by no means challenges received notions of identity and heritage. The growing interest in the *foibe* and the increasing number of visitors that Basovizza receives annually are indicative of a broader shift in public attitudes towards Italian history and identity, which seems to be linked to political developments over the past two decades. The Risiera remains tied to the leftist glorification of the anti-Fascist Resistance, which is on the verge of being superseded by the predominantly right-wing anti-Communist *foibe* narrative. Both of these ideologically motivated accounts of Italy's role in the Second World War and its aftermath are inherently auto-exculpatory in nature. The ongoing competition between the two versions of Italian history embodied by these sites ultimately serves only to divert attention away from the crimes of Fascism. Until sites such as the Risiera di San Sabba and the Foiba di Basovizza begin to present a more nuanced and multifaceted version of Italian history, visiting these locations will remain an escapist fantasy rather than an opportunity for a critical engagement with the past.

NOTES

- 1 Some sections of this article are based on Chapter 4 of the author's PhD thesis, 'Uncanny Homelands: Disability, Race and the Politics of Memory' (Columbia University, 2011). Relevant details have been updated to reflect the latest information available.
- 2 For an extensive analysis of the origins of *Giorno della memoria*, the law that inaugurated it and media coverage of the event in 2001, see Robert S. C. Gordon (2006).
- 3 The word *foiba* (pl. *foibe*) was originally a term used only by geologists to describe deep natural sinkholes formed by water erosion. In 1943, the fascist press popularized the term in reference to these killings, which have been known since then collectively as *le foibe*. Whereas historical sources estimate the number of victims to be between 1,500 and 2,000, the numbers circulating in public discourse range between 10,000 and 30,000 (see Verginella 2007: 56–7).
- 4 Most accounts estimate the number of victims killed at the Risiera between 3,000 and 5,000 and the number of deportees between 10,000 and 20,000 (see Fölkel and Sessi 2001: 46).
- 5 The precise wording is 'unico esempio di Lager nazista in Italia', an ambiguous formulation because of the lack of a definite article: it would be possible to read it as 'a unique example' rather than 'the only example'. The Risiera was certainly a unique example, but it was not the only example of a Nazi lager in Italy.
- 6 Renato Sarti's play, staged on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Italy's liberation in July 1995, was a great success and seen by more than 4,000 people. Consisting of testimonials and historical and documentary materials in Italian, Slovene, Croat and Hebrew, it presents not only a comprehensive introduction to the crimes of Fascism and Nazism in the region but also the personal stories of several of the Risiera's victims. The play has since toured through Italy's major cities and is mainly performed in schools.
- 7 The Risiera guides trained in the history of the site, Francesco Fait told me, are not the only guides who give tours in the memorial. Often, schoolteachers lead the classes by themselves or tourist guides include the Risiera as one stop on their list of cultural and historical sites. The problems with such guides, Fait explained, are that they are not necessarily able to present a nuanced picture of the events at the Risiera and are often not in a position to answer detailed questions (personal interview, 25 May 2010).
- 8 Several critics have used the image of a 'black hole' to describe the *foibe* and their history and memory, and argue that it is precisely this characteristic that continues to exert such a powerful hold over the people's imagination

because it invites them to fill this absence with meanings and associations of their own (see Ballinger 2003; Accati and Cogoy 2007).

- 9 The use of terms familiar from the discourse on the Holocaust is deliberate here, since the site aims to inscribe the *foibe* into the larger narrative of the genocidal persecutions of the twentieth century (see Parlato et al. 2008: 44–51).

WORKS CITED

- ACCATI, Luisa, and Renate Cogoy (eds). 2007. *Das Unheimliche in der Geschichte. Die Foibe [The Historical Uncanny: The Foibe]*. Berlin: Trafo.
- APIH, Elio (ed.). 2000. *Risiera di San Sabba: Guida alla mostra storica [Risiera di San Sabba: Guide to the Historical Exhibition]*. Trieste: Comune di Trieste.
- BALLINGER, Pamela. 2000. 'Who Defines and Remembers Genocide after the Cold War? Contested Memories of Partisan Massacre in Venezia Giulia in 1943–1945'. *Journal of Genocide Research* 2(1): 11–30.
- . 2003 *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2004. 'Exhumed Histories: Trieste and the Politics of (Exclusive) Victimhood'. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 6(2): 145–59.
- BEN-GHIAT, Ruth. 2004. 'A Lesser Evil? Italian Fascism in/and the Totalitarian Equation'. In Helmut Dubiel and Gabriel G. H. Motzkin (eds), *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices*. London: Routledge, pp. 137–53.
- BON GHERARDI, Silva. 1972. *La persecuzione antiebraica a Trieste (1938–1945) [The Persecution of the Jews in Trieste (1938–1945)]*. Udine: Del Bianco.
- CERNIGOI, Claudia. 2005. *Operazione 'Foibe' tra storia e mito [Operation 'Foibe' between History and Myth]*. Udine: Kappa.
- CIVICI MUSEI DI STORIA ED ARTE. 2003. *Risiera di San Sabba: Monumento Nazionale [Risiera di San Sabba: National Monument]*. Trieste: Stella Arti Grafiche.
- COGOY, Renate. 2007. 'Einführung' ['Introduction']. In Luisa Accati and Renate Cogoy (eds), *Das Unheimliche in der Geschichte. Die Foibe [The Historical Uncanny: The Foibe]*. Berlin: Trafo, pp. 9–24.
- DEL BOCA, Angelo. 2005. *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire [Italians, Good People? A Myth That Refuses to Die]*. Vicenza: Pozza.
- DORIGO, Fabio. 2012. 'Boom delle gite scolastiche: Alla Foiba 12mila studenti' [School Trips Are Booming: 12,000 Students at the Foiba]. *Il Piccolo*, 20 April, p. 26.
- FOGAR, Galliano. 1986. 'La Risiera sepolcro. Breve storia di un lungo abbandono' ['The Risiera Tomb: A Brief History of Long Neglect']. *Qualestoria* 14(3): 106–12.

- . 1988. 'L'occupazione nazista del Litorale Adriatico e lo sterminio della Risiera' ['The Nazi Occupation of the Adriatic Coast and the Extermination at the Risiera']. In Adolfo Scalpelli (ed.), *San Sabba: Istruttoria e processo per il Lager della Risiera* [*San Sabba: The Investigation and Trial of the Risiera Camp*]. Milan: Associazione nazionale ex deportati politici nei campi nazisti, pp. 3–138.
- FÖLKEL, Ferruccio, and Frediano Sessi. 2001. *La Risiera di San Sabba*. Milan: Rizzoli.
- GALLUCCIO, Fabio. 2002. *I lager in Italia: La memoria sepolta nei duecento luoghi di deportazione fascisti* [*The Camps in Italy: The Memory Buried at the Two Hundred Fascist Deportation Sites*]. Civezzano: Nonluoghi.
- GORDON, Robert. S. C. 2006. 'The Holocaust in Italian Collective Memory: Il "Giorno della memoria", 27 January 2001'. *Modern Italy* 11(2): 167–88.
- MANTELLI, Brunello. 2000. 'Die Italiener auf dem Balkan 1941–1943' ['The Italians in the Balkans']. In Christof Dipper, Lutz Klinkhammer and Alexander Nützenadel (eds), *Europäische Sozialgeschichte. Festschrift für Wolfgang Schieder* [*European Social History. Festschrift for Wolfgang Schieder*]. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, pp. 57–74.
- MATTA, Tristano. 2000. 'La Risiera di san Sabba: un "luogo della memoria" attivo' ['The Risiera di San Sabba: An Active "Site of Memory"']. *Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell'800 e del '900* 14(3): 513–17.
- MATTIOLI, Aram. 2010. *Viva Mussolini! Die Aufwertung des Faschismus im Italien Berlusconi* [*Viva Mussolini! The Rehabilitation of Fascism in Berlusconi's Italy*]. Paderborn: Schöningh.
- MUCCI, Massimo. 1999. *La Risiera di San Sabba: Un'architettura per la memoria* [*The Risiera di San Sabba: An Architecture for Memory*]. Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana.
- PARLATO, Giuseppe, Raoul Pupo, and Roberto Spazzali. 2008. *Foiba di Basovizza: Monumento nazionale* [*Foiba di Basovizza: National Monument*]. Trieste: Stella Arti Grafiche.
- PICCIOTTO FARGION, Liliana. 1991. *Il libro della memoria. Gli Ebrei deportati dall'Italia, 1943–1945* [*The Book of Memory: The Deportation of Jews from Italy, 1943–1945*]. Milan: Mursia.
- PIRJEVEC, Joze. 2009. *Foibe. Una storia d'Italia* [*Foibe: A History of Italy*]. Turin: Einaudi.
- PUPPO, Raoul. 2005. *Il lungo esodo. Istria: le persecuzioni, le foibe, l'esilio* [*The Long Exodus: Istria, the Persecutions, the Foibe, Exile*]. Milan: Rizzoli.
- RADOS, Gianfranco, and Piero Pieri (dirs). 1994. *La Risiera di San Sabba*. Trieste: Videost, DVD, 26 minutes.

- SLUGA, Glenda. 1996. 'The Risiera di San Sabba: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Italian Nationalism'. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 1(3): 401–12.
- TONERO, Laura. 2011. 'Foiba di Basovizza, 51mila visite in 4 mesi' ['Foiba di Basovizza, 51,000 Visitors in 4 Months']. *Il Piccolo*, 7 May, p. 40.
- TROHA, Nevenka. 1997. 'Fra liquidazione del passato e costruzione del futuro' ['Between the Liquidation of the Past and the Construction of the Future']. In Giampaolo Valdevit (ed.), *Foibe. Il peso del passato [Foibe: The Weight of the Past]*. Venezia: Marsilio, pp. 59–98.
- VERGINELLA, Marta. 2007. 'Geschichte und Gedächtnis. Die Foibe in der Praxis der Aushandlung der Grenzen zwischen Italien und Slowenien' ['History and Memory: The Role of the *Foibe* in Negotiations over the Italo-Slovenian Border']. In Luisa Accati and Renate Cogoy (eds), *Das Unheimliche in der Geschichte. Die Foibe [The Historical Uncanny: The Foibe]*. Berlin: Trafo, pp. 25–76.
- VIOLA, Gaia. 1998. 'Dalla rimozione alla riscoperta: la Risiera di San Sabba nella stampa locale (1965–1995)' ['From Repression to Rediscovery: The Risiera di San Sabba in the Local Press (1965–1995)']. MA Thesis. Trieste: Università degli Studi di Trieste.