

The Milan riots of 1853: history and remembrance

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Abstract

The article recounts the revolt that took place in Milan on February 6, 1853 and investigates its presence in the official memory of the city. The main figures in the rebellion were from Milan's working class: while the movement was fomented by Mazzini, it was carried out independently by badly organized groups of workers; unlike the "Cinque Giornate" of 1848, the upper classes were not involved. Barricades were erected and Austrian soldiers were killed, but order was promptly restored by the Austrians. The occupying forces arrested hundreds of people, executed 16 working class men and ordered the seizure of the goods of exiles who had left Lombardy after 1848. The article looks at how the events of 1853 were treated by historiography and local commemoration from unification to the present day. It discusses the meaning of the inclusion of that failed, impracticable uprising – a divisive one, involving as it did only figures from the lower classes – in the official justification of the city's heroism, sanctioned in 1948 when Milan was awarded the gold medal for military valour.

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Introduction

This article has two main intentions: to commemorate the Milan riots of February 6, 1853, and to discuss the different ways in which these events were remembered in a unified Italy, and especially in Milan, up to the post-Second World War period and beyond. The theme is therefore that of commemorating an episode from the past – one with a number of controversial aspects – to arrive at the negotiation of an official version: a "cultural memory", in other words (Misztal 2003, 5; Erll and Rigney 2009), of the uprisings, as one of the identitary elements of the city.

The enquiry process involves official commemorative initiatives and historiography, given that historical research is also an active protagonist in the construction of memory. Historiography has focused in particular on the political and diplomatic consequences of the 1853 riots, which could be summed up as a drastic worsening of relations between the occupying power, Austria, and the city of Milan, and between Austria and the kingdom of Sardinia. In short, the events produced a collective trauma (Caruth 1995, 8; Alexander et al. 2004) that affected various segments of the population, as well as helping to strengthen the moderate element of Milanese nationalist public opinion – one that looked to the kingdom of Savoy and abandoned Mazzini-style ideas of insurrection.

The consolidation of that revolt in the Risorgimento narrative, however, also had its own urban history, composed of reticence and second thoughts, marked by absences and presences in the public space designed by commemorative plaques and toponymy. This article addresses the evolution of those memorial forms in order to read the interpretations on which they were based. After reconstructing the genesis, events and consequences of the revolt of 1853, the analysis of memorializing instants will move backwards in time, starting with the institutionalization of the

commemoration carved in marble on the facade of Milan city hall in 1948. In that year, cultural memory of the 1853 events was adapted to the new context of republican Italy, with the uprising included, as heroic episode in the city's modern history, to represent the heroic contribution of the working classes. The new republic paid Milan its highest tribute, awarding the city the gold medal. In the preceding ninety years, however, its divisive nature meant that the memory of the uprising had struggled to assert itself. Even after its consecration with the commemorative inscription, it was an episode that failed to burn with a vivid light, perhaps because it was unsuitable in terms of representing working-class activism, which by then, in post-war national society, had evolved into quite other forms and dimensions.

The uprising of February 6, 1853, and its consequences

After 1849, the Austrians maintained the Lombard-Veneto kingdom in a state of emergency. This meant the widespread presence of the army as an occupation force and the validity of *giudizio statario*, "summary judgment" – a swift trial followed by immediate execution of the sentence – used to counter any form of opposition. The members of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy compromised by the 1848 revolution were almost entirely exiled to the constitutional kingdom of Sardinia, and only groups of republican conspirators were left to attempt to undermine Austrian military power. Giuseppe Mazzini was, or had been, the inspiration behind these secret cells of resistance, but he was not their organizer. In particular, autonomous cells had developed among the city's artisans, galvanized by Mazzini's revolutionary message, but having no direct contact with him, and often not even with the Mazzinian intellectuals in Italy who were still in touch with their leader. The February 6 uprising in 1853 (De Castro 1893; Pollini 1930; Della Peruta 2004, 289-267) was triggered by the convergence – partly fortuitous, partly improvised – between these realities.

There were working class groups spurred on by Mazzini's call to insurrection and further exasperated by worsening living conditions following the economic crisis of 1851-53. Then there was Mazzini's urgent wish to organize a series of insurrections in Italy in order to take advantage of the contemporary instability of the French Second Republic; this, in his opinion, would bring about a revolutionary crisis in Europe, similar to the events of 1848-49. The Mazzinian Committees in Italy were the operational tool of the republicans, but Mazzini was far away, and the most eminent members of that particular militant network, with contrasting opinions at a strategic and tactical level, did not consider an acceleration of insurrectional activity feasible at that moment. The outbreak of the uprising must also therefore be seen in the context of Mazzini's attempt to reaffirm his political hegemony with action.

In particular, in the early months of 1850, the *Comitato centrale per la Lombardia*, the “Lombardy Central Committee”, was organized, establishing itself above all in Milan, Mantua, Pavia and Brescia. It was in charge of selling the ten million lire *Prestito Nazionale obbligazionario*, the “National Bond Loan”, launched by Mazzini in September 1850, and of spreading the republican press. In parallel with the Mazzinian committees, members of the Milanese working classes had also begun to group together in brotherhoods with several thousand members, organized by profession. While their intentions were, therefore, possibly trade union in nature, they inevitably made use of secret structures – ones, however, not unknown to the police. In 1851, these working class organizations came together in the *Comitato dell’Olona*, the “Olona Committee”, headed by the Modenese republican Giovanni Battista Carta, until his arrest in October 1852, and the innkeeper Gioacchino Giussani. Some Mazzinians were also involved, including Giuseppe Gutierrez, Carlo De Cristoforis, Attilio De Luigi and Giuseppe Mora.

These followers of Mazzini wanted to expand the conspiratorial network to the working classes, spreading their political teachings throughout worker organizations and so, in turn, increasing their significance and operational capabilities. Furthermore, the Olona Committee had a covert level dedicated to activities that were more radical and exemplary, such as the murder of the provincial Milanese doctor, Vandoni (June 1851), responsible for the arrest of a republican colleague. Plans were also developed for attacks on Austrian dignitaries and aristocrats (Bargoni 1897, pp. 629-631; Arrigoni 1955). Terrorist actions were not, then, something alien to militant movements or to political organizations themselves, such as the Chartists (Goodway 2002), and some Mazzinians were also involved in the Olona Committee’s covert operations, run by G.B. Carta and the dyer Gaetano Assi. Actions of this type, however, were not typical of Mazzini’s political practice. The direction of the republican conspiracy was, therefore, in the hands of Milan’s most radical elements, and they were determined to expedite matters in their own way.

The Austrians, meanwhile, starting in August 1851, had begun to dismantle the network of conspirators, arresting over a hundred militants and condemning fifty-seven. Ten of the latter were executed between 1851 and 1853 in the Belfiore fortress, near Mantua – another tragic “place of memory” in the history of the Lombard Risorgimento (Mortari, Ferrari and Manzoli 2002; Cipolla 2006). The accelerating repression, which gradually took the conspiracy apart, forced the Mazzinians to react quickly in order to keep the hope of insurrection alive. The brutality of Austrian coercion induced the most radical elements of the Olona Committee to sensational acts of revenge. Mazzini was, therefore, eventually convinced of the feasibility of an insurrection in Milan. Two figures in particular were designated to link up with the forces present in the field: Eugenio Brizi, a Mazzinian from Umbria who had already been exiled to London, would handle military planning

and relations with the workers, while Giuseppe Piolti de' Bianchi was a nobleman with friends amongst the educated and affluent classes.

The reconstruction of the genesis of the February 6 uprising and its failure is essentially based on the memories of its protagonists, and interpretative dispute centres around who pushed for immediate action and who counselled prudence. Establishing where the main responsibility lay is of course not an irrelevant problem, but neither is it a wholly resolvable one. Mazzini (1853) assumed full responsibility, since, from Switzerland, he took part in the attempt to coordinate the Milanese event with other insurrections that were in varying stages of readiness (Cassola 1896), provided money and tried to supply weapons to the participants.

For their part, the leaders of the Milanese workers had informed Brizi that 5,000 militants were ready to strike. This was a considerable number, capable of creating an impact even in a large city of 250,000 inhabitants, but realistically insufficient and ill-equipped to hold its own against the Habsburg occupation army, with a strength numbering tens of thousands. To weaken the Austrian ability to respond, Mazzini and his emissaries had also sought a nationalistic alliance with the Hungarians present in the Hapsburg army in Milan. This was attempted through the ambiguous figure of Mattia Gergics (alias Füzesy), a follower of Lajos Kossuth who had deserted from the Austrian army and was living in hiding (Pollini 1934). One way to catch the occupying force off guard was the choice of date: the afternoon of the Sunday following carnival, a day of relative relaxation for military garrisons, with many soldiers on leave and strolling around the city.

Even this tactic, however, was probably not opportune: the carnival, following the Ambrosian Rite, culminates with *sabato grasso*, "Fat Saturday", the day of greatest excitement in the city, with numerous out-of-town visitors present. In order to prevail, any strategic expedient would in any case have required successfully involving the population – especially the bourgeois classes and the liberal aristocracy, who had the resources, and sometimes the weapons, to carry out a city revolt, as had happened in 1848. The so-called *marsine*, the anti-Austrian bourgeois and intellectuals, had however already declared their refusal to take part and communicated this to Mazzini. In the event of a successful insurrection, Mazzini envisaged a provisional government with the veteran revolutionary Colonel Enrico Cosenz and politician Emilio Visconti Venosta, in the hope of reassuring, and then also involving, Milan's progressive bourgeoisie. Both men, in reality, opposed the uprising (Casoni 1925). The involvement of the Milan upper classes was more of a hope than a viable option: on the whole, anti-Austrian Lombardy sought to keep its distance from Mazzinian insurrectionism and working class elements (*La sommossa di Milano*, 1853). But in Piedmont, Liguria and the Canton of Ticino, Lombard emigrants and Mazzinians had collected weapons and

men, ready to rush in to play their part if the rebellion was successful. The governments of the kingdom of Sardinia and the Swiss canton, however, had reported the movements of armed exiles to Austria and in some cases had intervened to disperse them.

The foot soldiers of the Milan uprising were therefore made up almost exclusively of members of the working class and immediately given the name *barabba*, even in Austrian police reports. The dialectal, untranslatable epithet was meant to be offensive, referring as it did to that idle mass of drunkards and occasional thieves who populated the area of Porta Ticinese in particular. Piolti de' Bianchi had organized the payment of a battle allowance to each of the rebel leaders, at the rate of two lire for each available man. The sum of ten thousand lire was distributed, but at 4.45 pm on February 6, an hour before sunset, when the insurrection was planned to begin, only about 400 militants were available. It was not simply that the rebel combatants could not be relied upon – news had, above all, certainly reached the police, who, on February 4 and 5, had made numerous arrests (*Dépêche télégraphique*, 1853; *Italy*, 1853). Weapons were also lacking. The guns collected by the Mazzinian network would perhaps have reached the city had the insurrection been successful. Crates of rudimentary bombs, similar to those that Felice Orsini would hurl against Napoleon III's opera-bound carriage in 1858, had arrived, but the skills to assemble them were absent. The only arms available were hefty knives.

The plan included an assault on the castle, to plunder the armoury; other attacks were planned on the guard post of the royal palace and on the three small military forts near the city gates. Smaller groups were meant to circulate, rousing working-class areas, erecting barricades and disarming isolated soldiers. The insufficiency of the forces and weapons available, however, meant that improvisation was necessary. The only attack that produced any result was the one on the royal palace guardhouse ("The Insurrection", 1853; Seidl 1898; Pollini 1930). Under pouring rain, about twenty men (instead of the expected 200) managed to break through the first defences, appropriating the weapons of some sentries and two cannons without ammunition. But they were immediately driven away by the Austrian counter-attack. The assault on the castle, designed to take possession of the 12,000 guns in the armoury, was not even attempted – only thirty rebels turned up instead of the expected 500, and there were 200 soldiers on guard. The absence of orders, and the non-appearance of leaders designated by the insurgents, made it very difficult to organize the uprising and spread it through the population. Some spontaneous barricades were set up, but only in the central working-class area of Porta Tosa. Isolated groups, reprobates, and even some common criminals, took advantage of the situation to attack bourgeois passers-by and isolated soldiers. By around 7 pm, the city was already back under Austrian control. Ten Austrian soldiers were dead and

fifty-one wounded. No reliable estimates of civilian deaths exist, with the international press reporting a number somewhere between forty and sixty (*Austria*, 1853, 1853b; *Italy*, 1853b).

During the riots and in the hours that followed, over 400 people were arrested. They were almost exclusively members of the working-class (apprentices, porters, shoemakers, workers). Sixteen of them, caught red-handed (allegedly), were subjected to summary judgment and executed by hanging along the walls of the castle between February 8 and 17.¹ The judicial enquiry then increased the number of arrests to eight hundred and ninety-five: only two hundred and seventy-six went to trial, one hundred and seventy-five were acquitted and twenty were sentenced to death (the sentence later commuted to imprisonment). The rest were sentenced to a great many years in prison in the fortress. The main organizers of the revolt – Brizi, Piolti de' Bianchi, Assi and Giussani – managed to escape from Milan, finding refuge abroad, as did a number of other Mazzini sympathizers (Tivaroni 1895, 86). As the international press quickly realised, the rebellion had been a “flash in the pan” – unlike 1848, it had been unable to involve the population and it had posed no threat to Austrian control over the city (Timon-David 1853; *The Milanese Insurrection*, 1853; Marx 1853). The insurrections that had been planned in support did not take place and in the same period there were only sporadic protests in central Italy.

The political consequences of February 6, however, following the Austrian response, had a lasting impact. The insurrection offered Austria the pretext for a “crackdown”, with the intention of bringing the Lombard upper classes to heel, definitively distancing them from any revolutionary intent, and of undermining the anti-Austrian activity present in Piedmont and financed by the wealthiest Lombard emigrants (Waldenegg 2002). A project that had already been developed in January 1853 (Romeo 1977, 760), before the Milanese revolt, was put into practice with a proclamation by Marshal Radetzky on February 18. On the very day that the emperor survived an assassination attempt in Vienna, the Marshall ordered the seizure of all the assets of political refugees from Lombardy-Veneto, even those who had now obtained citizenship of the Kingdom of Sardinia (Cattane 2017; De Fort 2017).

Further measures involved charging the costs for assisting the wounded and pensions for the families of Austrian victims to the city of Milan. The most important international impact, however, came from the seizure of assets, an explicit act of hostility towards the kingdom of Sardinia, since it also had an effect on its citizens. The response of the kingdom of Savoy was moderate, aimed above

¹ Those executed on February 8 were: Cesare Faccioli (waiter), Pietro Canevari (porter), the brothers Luigi and Camillo Piazza (carpenter and typographer), Alessandro Silva (hat maker), Bonaventura Brogginì (shop boy). On February 10: Antonio Cavallotti (carpenter), Alessandro Scannini (private teacher), Benedetto Diotti (apprentice carpenter), Giuseppe Monti (apprentice carpenter), Luigi Brigatti (small-scale liquor trader). On February 14: Gerolamo Saporiti (worker), Siro Taddei (milkman). On February 17: Angelo Galimberti (shoemaker), Angelo Bissi (porter), Pietro Colla (blacksmith).

all at demonstrating to chancelleries and European public opinion the iniquity of the measure and its illegality under international law (Odorici 1872, 268-276). There was no formal break in diplomatic relations with Vienna, but an intensification of control over exiles from every Italian state, with over one hundred and fifty Mazzinian sympathizers expelled from the kingdom. To support the most needy Lombard immigrants – those not politically unwelcome – the Piedmont government set up a relief fund to provide cash loans, while favouring the election to parliament of certain of the more politically reliable Lombard exiles. The dispute between the kingdom of Sardinia and Austria did not trigger international solidarity against the Habsburg measures and no diplomatic resolution of the question was reached. Austria followed its own calendar in relation to gradually relaxing its strictures in Lombardy-Veneto. In 1854, on the occasion of the emperor's wedding, this led to a partial restitution of some seized assets and to the lifting of the state of emergency in Milan. The situation remained unchanged until the general amnesty announced in December 1856, when the imperial couple visited Milan.

The city's working-class revolt had triggered an acceleration of friction between Milan's educated and wealthy classes and the Austrian administration, though this did not proceed in the direction that the rebels of February 6 had hoped for. There was a general consolidation of moderate feeling, in both Milan and Turin, amongst those who regarded plebeian revolt and Mazzinian plotting with hostility. The kingdom of Savoy was, above all, their point of reference for national policy, which they believed would lead to the overthrow of Austrian rule.

The fluctuating fortunes of 1853 in Milan's cultural memory

On March 18, 1948, to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the start of the *Cinque Giornate* revolt, which had led to the temporary expulsion of the Austrians from much of Lombardy and the outbreak of the "First Italian War of Independence", the city of Milan was awarded the gold medal for military valour.² The motivation for the decoration referred to the admirable examples of "civic and warrior virtues that the Republic honours". The Italian republic had just passed its constitutional charter and was in the midst of a hard-fought electoral campaign to elect its first parliament. The main contenders were, on the one hand, the Christian Democrats, who had governed with a coalition of centrist parties since June 1947, and on the other, the Popular Democratic Front, consisting of socialists and communists. A Socialist-Communist victory would, as US Secretary of State Marshall pointed out, disrupt American funding to the republic. The

² The medal was awarded by a decree from the President of the Republic on March 15, 1948, after a proposal by the Ministry of Defence and the opinion of a military commission, as established by the 1932 law. My request for access to the documents of the commission of validation was not successful. The official site: <https://www.quirinale.it/onorificenze/ricerca/insegna/20>.

commemorations and recognitions of that period of transition had, therefore, to take into account the balance of international power. They had also, however, to commemorate with appropriate solemnity, in the memory of this very young republic, the glorious phase of anti-fascist resistance that had brought together all the main parties involved in the electoral contest.

This need to establish an official republican memory, to ease electoral tensions and to valorize Milan's symbolic role, gave rise to the balancing act of reasons behind the gold medal. This was not a very evident interpretation even to the citizens of the time, and even less so over the following decades, for those who read these reasons on the large marble plaque placed on the city hall façade. The basic idea was to celebrate the anti-fascist resistance as a patriotic epic with working-class participation (Focardi 2020), designed to liberate Italian soil from foreigners. Sharing the moment with the anniversary of the centenary of the *Cinque giornate* established a natural connection between the Risorgimento struggle and anti-fascist endeavour – both forms of opposition to foreign domination, first Austrian, then German. The choice of the four examples of patriotic virtue to be included in the motivations for the medal followed along these lines. This explained the *Cinque giornate* of March 18-22, 1848, and the Milan insurrection of April 25, 1945, which had been the final blow in the defeat of fascism, still present in Northern Italy with the support of the occupying German troops. The other two episodes of patriotism were less easily interpreted in this perspective. For the period of the Second World War, the date of September 9, 1943, was chosen, when the news spread regarding the armistice granted to Italy by the Allies. The anti-fascist parties formed themselves into the *Comitato di liberazione nazionale*, the “National Liberation Committee” (CLN) and, in Milan, they sought to organize a national guard, with civilians and soldiers, to defend the city from a German counter-attack. The initiative failed, however: the military hierarchies present in the city did not support the move, and, on September 11, the German Waffen SS took control of the city. During the last two years of the war, the struggle in Milan against the German occupation and revived republican fascism had taken two main forms, guerrilla warfare and sabotage, led principally by the Communist-inspired *Gruppi di azione patriottica*, the Patriotic Action Groups (GAP). In the factories, the network of support for the resistance had, in secret, grown stronger, but a struggle for wages and working conditions had also developed. This culminated in the strikes of December 13-18, 1943, in tandem with the workers of the large factories in Turin, and again with the general strike of March 1, 1944, which was followed by hundreds of arrests and the deportation of workers to concentration camps (Della Valle 2017). While these were other manifestations of heroism – ones, moreover, with an explicitly patriotic and anti-German dimension – they had been organized almost exclusively by the communists, albeit with the consent of the CLN. For this reason, perhaps, it seemed unsuitable to immortalize them with the gold medal for valour. The

labour conflict during the German occupation, at least in terms of its methods, was too similar to the social conflict taking place in 1948: to make use of it in order to illustrate the city's heroic virtues did not, therefore, seem appropriate. The other "minor" example of patriotic virtue, taken from Risorgimento history, was February 6, 1853, the main characteristic of which was its proletarian nature, with the almost exclusive participation of the working classes. The hypothesis, therefore, was that choosing that particular episode served, with a gesture towards the common people, to complete the patriotic message that the gold medal and plaque intended to bestow upon Milan, without however giving too much space to the political and social oppositions of the present. The inclusion of the *barabba* rebellion also resolved numerous uncertainties that that episode had provoked in the city's memory for almost a century.

Periodically, in fact, following unification, the 1853 uprisings became the subject of public debate, in newspapers and in the City Council, nourishing the production of commemorative prints and popular literature.³ The writer Cletto Arrighi (1862), for example, for the first time defined the literary movement of the young Milanese using the term *Scapigliatura*, with a novel actually inspired by the February 6 events. In reality, the rebellion only provides an unlikely backdrop here for a romantic tale involving a young bourgeois lad who, disappointed in love, finds a "beautiful death" in the uprising – this, despite the fact that all the victims were working class. In 1870, a petition from the democratically-inclined brotherhoods of workers called for the exhumation of the remains of the executed men, who were buried in a cemetery on the outskirts. The idea was to consecrate these martyrs of the people, creating in Milan a Communards' Wall similar to the one in Paris (Rebérioux 1984). This understandably caused some perplexity within the moderate administrations of the municipality, and only in 1877 did Mayor Giulio Bellinzaghi agree to the exhumations. The remains of only 13 men were found, and these were moved to Milan's Monumental Cemetery, which was currently being developed in order to accommodate the city's most illustrious citizens. The memorial plaque referred to the "bones of the martyrs", words that had not been greeted with unanimous consent in the City Council.⁴

Historiography and memoir came late to the theme of the February 6 riots. Apart from some dryly factual chronicling (La Cecilia 1853), Aurelio Bianchi Giovini (1853) had been quick off the mark to write about it in a book of journalistic investigation, putting forward a "conspiracy theory" idea: aware of the rebels' plan, Austria had allowed it to develop with the aim of bringing in tougher

³ Images regarding February 6, made after 1861, in the *Raccolta delle Stampe Adalberto Sartori*, a private collection: <https://raccoltastampesartori.it/la-raccolta>.

⁴ The plaque reads: *Tolte dall'oblio / dell'antica inonorata sepoltura / le ossa dei martiri / del 6 febbraio 1853 / in questo avello compose / memore e reverente / il popolo di Milano / addì 6 febbraio 1877*, "Rescued from oblivion / of the ancient dishonourable burial / let the bones of the martyrs / of February 6, 1853 / in this tomb be laid / mindful and reverent / by the people of Milan / on this day February 6, 1877."

repression, especially against the liberal, anti-Hapsburg bourgeoisie and city aristocracy. Mazzini was partly in agreement with this idea (1871, 216-314), indicating the inertia of the liberal bourgeoisie as the main cause of the revolt's failure. The first memoirs from the protagonists were produced essentially to rectify this interpretation. One of the first to solicit accounts was Cesare Correnti, in preparation for the Risorgimento exhibition to be held in 1884 as part of the Italian General Exposition in Turin. Two of the Milanese statesman's cousins, Piolti de' Bianchi (Bargoni 1897), a leading figure, and Ambrogio Correnti (1915), whose contribution had been marginal, responded to the request. Other memoirs followed, either in response to Mazzini's accusations or to clarify the reconstruction of the facts by Piolti de' Bianchi. Printed between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the memoirs of Gaetano Assi (Ottolini 1887; Soriga 1929), Brizi (1896), Majocchi (2020; De Castro 1893, 347-418), Aurelio Saffi's report for Mazzini (Spadoni 1909), the testimonies of the brothers Giovanni and Emilio Visconti Venosta (1904, 229-262) – Mazzinian moderates who had tried to discourage their leader from getting involved – and other contributions (Mondaini 1905). With varying levels of emphasis, all the memoirs admitted that the February 6 revolt had been a consciously risky move, which even the most politically astute had not been able to prevent: essentially, they highlight the insufficient ability to control and guide the most impulsive elements of Milan's democratic movement.

In 1898, Italy organized celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary of the 1848 revolt and the first war of independence in various places around the peninsula (Tobia 1991, 151-159). In March that same year, Milan was the first city in the kingdom of Italy to be decorated with a gold medal, as a "worthy contributor to the national Risorgimento" (GUF 1898). There were those who had also proposed to celebrate the unfortunate episode of 1853, and in the city, organized by socialists and republicans, popular commemorations took place as an alternative to the official ones (Caldara 1898). The conservative municipal council of the mayor Giuseppe Vigoni preferred to adopt a low profile, however, affixing a commemorative plaque to Piolti de' Bianchi's house and nothing more. Two months later, a state of emergency was proclaimed in the city following riots over the high cost of living, when the Italian army turned their cannons on the demonstrators (Canavero 1998). The repression of May 7-9, 1898, which caused from 80 to 110 deaths, caused a far greater bloodbath than Austrian repression in 1853. In the memory and propaganda of the left (especially socialists, republicans and anarchists), celebrations of the "old" *barabba*-style anti-Austrian heroism were replaced by anti-Savoy rancour linked to the recent massacre of Milanese workers.

As other events, and other griefs, took their place in the antagonistic narrative of working-class movements, the memory of 1853 lost its spark, becoming less adversarial in nature. This meant it

could be extended to wider public use, suitable for celebrating working-class participation in the national cause in a context of reconciliation rather than of opposition.

The first moderate-left (democratic-radical) Milan municipal administration moved explicitly in this direction, led by the mayor Giuseppe Mussi. In March 1900, he gave the name “6th February 1853” to a square in front of the new parade ground in what was then the city’s north-west suburbs. It was a newly urbanized area, which in 1906 would become one of the exhibition centres for the International Exposition. The terse sobriety of the toponymic name was, however, compensated for by the municipal administration itself, which, on the fiftieth anniversary of the riots (Luzio 1903), placed a commemorative plaque at the main entrance to the castle. A gallows had been erected here, and the plaque was more explicit in laying claim to the working-class, Mazzinian nature of the uprising:

Inspired by the faith of Mazzini / by their homeland and by the enslaved citizenry/ they rose up / with the anger of the people / against the Austrian oppressor / and hastened the events of Italy/ these insurgents / of February 6, 1853.⁵

In the Giolitti era, various municipal administrations committed themselves to the commemoration of minor Risorgimento events in order to valorize local acts of courage, especially if working class in origin. In each case, the choice of event was mainly designed to weave the country’s various political strands into a single nationalistic fabric, accompanying urban expansion with balanced, commemorative activities of an toponymic kind. In Milan, the moderates once again took charge of the municipal council with Mayor Ettore Ponti, and in 1905, in the castle, the latter placed a high-relief memorial in homage to King Umberto I, assassinated in Monza in 1900. He also installed a new memorial to Piolti de’ Bianchi, a plaque embellished with a bronze bas-relief by Donato Barcaglia, a well-known sculptor of the time. Fate, however, intervened with regard to this matching importance bestowed upon commemorating both the monarch and one of the leaders of the failed uprising: the plaque dedicated to Piolti de’ Bianchi fell from the external wall and was damaged. Later, it was relocated to a more secluded position (Pietrantonio 1997; Basso and Soravia 2017).

The delicate balance imposed by the party dialectic present in the Milan city council in relation to toponymic decisions (Bracco 2012) meant that street names could not be dedicated to individual martyrs of 1853 until the period after the First World War. This naming, however, took place in 1920 in the neighbouring municipality of Baggio, a decision of the administration there led by the

⁵ The ceremony for erecting the plaque actually took place on February 8.

socialist Cesare Stovani – the district’s last mayor before its incorporation into the city of Milan in 1923. Baggio still retains the names of (almost) all the rebels executed in 1853.⁶

In the following decades, in terms of its identitary function for the city, the memory of February 6 continued to fade, despite the formal tribute to the event every year by Milan’s press and administration (*I martiri* 1933; *L’anniversario* 1937). However, the fallen of the First World War, and then the fascist regime, led to the city’s ononymic and commemorative decisions being taken in other directions. Historiography continued to show an interest (Piolti de’ Bianchi 1940), while fascism worked to appropriate the figure of Mazzini and the actions attributable to him (Benedetti 2007-2008). In contrast to this approach, Carlo Rosselli (1935), the socialist activist murdered in France by fascist killers, advocated going back to the “working class, revolutionary Risorgimento, still unfamiliar to too many, tearing away the partisan veils of official historiography”. He set this against the “official, scholastic, Piedmontese Risorgimento”, referring to the events of 1853 and Carlo Pisacane’s revolutionary expedition in 1856 (Venturi 2017).

Calling for the historiographical restoration of working-class protagonism seemed to be able to instil the Milan revolt with identitary vigour. In the post-war period, however, it was difficult to cultivate and actualize a memory associated with the adventurism of working-class minorities – one that had set itself up in explicit divergence not only with the Austrians but also with the city’s bourgeoisie and liberal aristocracy. The historian and important political figure, Giovanni Spadolini (1953; 1973), said that, for the 1953 centenary, it was no easy matter to place an account of the revolt in the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, a bastion of Lombard moderatism. Prompted by the centenary anniversary, historiography substantially echoed late nineteenth century interpretations (Bonfadini 1886; Tivaroni 1896), settling for a low-key reading of the event. Above all, the rebellion was situated in the historiographical mainstream as a stage in the worsening relations, in nationalistic terms, between Austria and Savoy Piedmont (Morelli 1957; Marchetti 1965; Davis 2000). Thus, reference was made in particular to the diplomatic disputes regarding the seizures inflicted on the exiles, neglecting, except in some cases (Catalano 1953), the aspirations of the working-class activists, a more difficult subject to explore.

120 years on from the revolt, Milan’s socialist mayor Aldo Aniasi (1973) tried to restore its memory with a public evocation of the events. In a speech, he clearly indicated the connection with the anti-fascist struggle in Milan during the Nazi occupation, while also recalling the workers’ strikes of 1943-44. He thus reformulated the memory of working-class participation by reconnecting the *barabba* uprisings to proletarian resistance during fascism, two movements that

⁶ Angelo Galimberti’s remains were not found in the exhumation, while Giuseppe Monti and Antonio Cavallotti had surnames identical to other prominent personalities with city streets already named after them.

perhaps should already have been explicitly linked on the city hall's 1948 plaque. The 1970s and 1980s were not, however, a favourable period for putting forward street riots and the killings of soldiers as elements of the city's historical identity. When this was done in scholarly publications, the risky comparisons with the *anni di piombo* and terrorism were of little use in shedding light on the uprising or the value of its memory (Foà and Agnoletto 1983). Only in 2011, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Italian unification, did the State Archives dedicate a small exhibition to February 6, conceived in the conciliatory spirit of national celebration. It was by then an innocuous memory, something that could upset no one in a city that, with the 2015 Expo on the horizon, was already deep in the midst of urban regeneration.

Conclusions

The article has provided a reconstruction of the events of February 6, 1853 and their consequences, and developed certain hypotheses regarding the reasons that decreed their inclusion, after the liberation from Nazi-fascism, as a foundational moment for Milan's identity in the Italian republic. It has also shown, furthermore, that memory of the revolt, progressively blurred by other emblematic episodes of political confrontation, was already passé in 1948, when it was chosen as a symbol of working-class participation. When, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, left-wing townships had revived the memory of those events, it had above all been a matter of inviting the working classes to social and political participation. In 1948, commemoration probably had the opposite goal – in other words, to resituate working-class protagonism in a nationalist context and paper over ongoing social conflict. As a result, the cultural memory of the *barabba* uprising, carved into the 1948 plaque, lacks force, with no real ability to propogate and establish itself with the public as a shared memory (Namer 1991).

The memory of 1853 in Milan has never been adequately developed in public discourse. With content lost sight of, there is a fatal diminishing of memory and a melting away of the reasons why 1853 had been linked together with other episodes to form a pedagogical strategy – one aimed at reconciling Italy's various outlooks in the post-World War II reconstruction. This is, indeed, the fate of many memories, as their meaning transforms over time – either to disappear, or to open up to reinterpretations that are often wholly unrelated to the events they are intended recall. Nowadays, browsing about 1853 around the web, what we find in particular are attempts at a rather hazardous public use of history. Blogs and articles by leftist activists often make instrumental use of working-class participation as an element of class conflict (*Risorgimento, rivoluzione* 2005; *La rivolta di*

Milano del 1853 2016). In contrast, rather anachronistically, there is the legitimist and pro-Hapsburg viewpoint (*Tentativo mazziniano* 2013).

Finally, returning to the plaque of 1948 and the commemorative decisions it expresses, another element suggests itself. While accepting the evaluation of the necessary balancing act involved in choosing the episodes to be inscribed in the city's memory, the alternation shown on the plaque between victories (1848, 1945) and defeats (1853, 1943) is also interesting. Unity, independence and democracy are narrated in marble as an inevitable succession of ups and downs, of conquests and failures. In order for that message to remain valid, however, it is necessary to return with a certain constancy, generation after generation, to giving meaning to each of the episodes selected for commemoration. This pedagogical aspect of the plaque therefore remains a genuine one, even though certain elements of the memorial narrative blur or disappear as time goes by.

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