

## Orphan Memories and Difficult Pasts. The Present Memory of the Casa degli Orfani di Guerra of Clusone at the Centenary of its Foundation (1925-2025)

Lorenzo Migliorati<sup>a</sup>, Micol Meghnagi<sup>b</sup>, Fabio Fregona<sup>a</sup>

### Abstract

The article analyses the centenary of the “Casa degli Orfani di Guerra Vittorio Emanuele III” in the province of Bergamo, as a case of difficult heritage, investigating how an institution’s past is rendered publicly communicable when moral narratives of care intersect with politically compromised origins. Established in 1925 under the direction of Monsignor Giovanni Antonietti, an influential local figure embedded in Fascist-era political and patronage networks, the Casa is commemorated today through a predominantly philanthropic and moral register that foregrounds protection, education, and social mobility while attenuating the political density of its genesis. Based on a qualitative case-study design triangulating institutional digital communications, guided engagements with the site, and former residents’ biographical accounts, the Casa constitutes a micro-site through which the “good Italian” paradigm is locally reproduced via care-based moral legitimation. The article advances the notion of “orphan memories” to designate a double condition: memories carried by those who were literally made orphans by war, and, at the same time, an institutional memory that is itself “orphaned” insofar as it is selectively detached from the political genealogies and historical antagonisms that would render its past more openly conflictual in the present.

Keywords: Difficult heritage, public memory, Fascism, *Italiani brava gente*, orphan memories.

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<sup>a</sup> University of Bergamo, Italy

<sup>b</sup> University of Bologna, Italy

Corresponding author:  
Lorenzo Migliorati  
E-mail: [lorenzo.migliorati@unibg.it](mailto:lorenzo.migliorati@unibg.it)

Received: 11 March 2026  
Accepted: 22 July 2026  
Published: 02 October 2026



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## 1. Introduction

In a small village in Northern Italy, in the province of Bergamo, there survives a modest yet revealing “cultural fossil” that bears witness to the devastating social consequences of the First World War. This is the Casa degli Orfani di Guerra Vittorio Emanuele III (Home for War Orphans Vittorio Emanuele III), an institution devoted to the moral and material assistance of children orphaned by the conflict. The home was founded in 1925 by a local priest, Monsignor Giovanni Antonietti (1892–1976) – a military chaplain, recipient of the Silver Medal for Military Valor, and Knight of the Crown of Italy – who also served as president of the provincial board for war orphans in Bergamo. Monsignor Antonietti remains, however, a debated and, in certain respects, controversial figure, owing to his proximity to leading representatives of the Fascist regime (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. *Casa dell'Orfano di Guerra Vittorio Emanuele III, Casa dell'Orfano Archive.*



*Figure 2. Monsignor Giovanni Antonietti, Casa dell'Orfano Archive.*



These preliminary considerations already help explain the scholarly motivations that led the authors of this contribution to undertake the research presented in the following pages: the memory of difficult pasts; the micro-histories of a small community caught in the turbulence of Great History; and the oscillations between memory and oblivion that emerge when societies confront controversial objects of remembrance. At the same time, the research also stems from the concurrent celebration – promoted by local “moral entrepreneurs of memory” (Pollak, 1993) – of the centenary of the foundation of the Casa dell’Orfano (2025). This commemorative moment provided an opportunity to revisit one of the key *topoi* of public memory in the recent history

of our country – the memory of the major tragedies of the twentieth century – through the prism of the meritorious story of the care of war orphans. Beyond facile ideological or normative positions, this history refracts the events of the past into beams of light that continue to illuminate the present, a dynamic we summarise through the productive notion of “orphan memories.”

The article reports on the theoretical and empirical research conducted between March 2025 and December 2025 on the memory of the Casa dell’Orfano. The project combined a critical reflection on the processes through which collective memories are constructed – particularly in relation to difficult pasts – with an empirical investigation of the contemporary materials through which the Casa’s memory is articulated. This included an analysis of current institutional narratives as well as a series of interviews with what may be described as genuinely privileged witnesses: war orphans who spent a large part of their lives within the institution. These testimonies, refracted through the passage of time and offered by individuals now of very advanced age, nevertheless retain the intrinsic value of authenticity and of experience sedimented over time. Our aim is to reflect on the meaning of remembering the past in the present, even where such an act must come to terms with a past that does not pass and that calls above all for the elaboration of conceptual categories capable of making it possible to remember what might otherwise be more easily consigned to oblivion.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 frames the Casa dell’Orfano, on the occasion of the centenary of its foundation, as a case of “difficult memory”. It clarifies the paper’s core conceptual coordinates (selection and forgetting) and introduces the notion of “orphaned memories” to account for local ambivalences surrounding the Fascist past. Section 3 outlines the research design, combining the analysis of institutional digital narratives with guided engagements with the site and semi-structured interviews; it also explains how these materials are read across one another to connect public representation, spatial mediation, and lived recollection. On this methodological basis, Section 4 develops the empirical analysis of the Casa dell’Orfano’s public memory – its postwar mnemonic frameworks and forms of banal nationalism – and shows how Fascist legacies are managed within institutional and digital narratives through selection, euphemism, omission, and moral framing. Section 5 shifts from representation to institutional experience, reading interview accounts through the lens of heterotopia and approaching the Casa dell’Orfano as a protective enclosure governed by thresholds of access. It examines the intertwined dimensions of protection and enclosure, a future-oriented programme of care (schooling, selection, patronage), everyday discipline and tactical micro-evasions, and the mnemonic afterlives of this institutional world, including moral framings of Antonietti and the ways in which the Fascist past

is remembered, neutralised, or contested. The conclusion sharpens the contribution by theorising the configuration as “orphan memories” – a double condition in which care-based moral legitimization sustains public speakability while political genealogies and antagonisms (most notably fascism) are kept at a distance through euphemism, omission, and personalization – thereby situating the case within scholarship on difficult pasts and indicating avenues for comparative research.

## **2. The Casa dell’Orfano one hundred years after its foundation: the orphanhood of a difficult memory**

At first glance, the expression “collective memory” seems to name a paradox. Remembering is ordinarily understood as an individual faculty: individuals store, preserve, and retrieve images of the past in the present. How, then, can memory be collective? Bastide formulates this problem with characteristic irony when he asks whether society possesses a “collective mind” capable of remembering in the same way as individual minds do (Bastide, 1970). Taken literally, such a view would reify society and reproduce a familiar sociological fallacy. The alternative, however, is not to abandon the concept of collective memory, but to specify the social operations through which remembering becomes collective. We approach this apparent paradox through two further paradoxes. The first is that the person who remembers does not deal directly with the past, but rather with themselves in the present as they remember the past. Memory is, therefore, an act of reconstructing the past, carried out through the categories of the present, rather than the mere re-emergence into consciousness of events that once occurred. The second paradox is that remembering would not be possible if forgetting were not also possible. Without oblivion, the act of remembering would itself be impossible. We would resemble Funes the Memorious, the protagonist of Borges’ well-known short story (Borges, 1944/2003). “I alone have more memories than all men have had since the world began. My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap” (Borges, 1944/2003, pp. 95-105).

Memory, in other words, is an act of selection rather than the mere accumulation of fragments of the past. Selection and reconstruction, however, are not actions we perform alone. They are processes carried out, whether in cooperation or in conflict, with others. They are, therefore, operations of collective memory. Understood in this way, collective memory contains a radical methodological ambivalence, constantly oscillating between the individual and the collective, between personal experience and social choice. Memory is thus simultaneously the product of the witness’s inward gaze upon

themselves and a deliberate political act concerning what we choose to remember and why we choose to do so, or not.

This duality is precisely what remains in the collective memory of the Casa dell'Orfano among the last and now elderly witnesses, among the "carrier groups" that sustain cultural memory (Alexander, 2012), and among the wider communities concerned. On the one hand, there is the memory of individuals as testimony to their own past and as fragments – sometimes substantial – of their lived lives: testimony that is at times vivid because inscribed in the living fabric of experience, and at times reshaped and smoothed by the passage of time; at times fallible – subject to the fallibility that affects all memory (no event experienced by several individuals ever coincides exactly in their respective accounts) – yet nonetheless always bearing the value of experiential truth. On the other hand, there exists a situated memory, observable through the depth of historical time and rooted in the context of its production. It is at this second level that the symbolic dispositif of orphanhood becomes analytically useful. The term first retains its literal reference: the memories of the Casa dell'Orfano are carried by those who were made orphans by war. Yet it also designates a second, institutional condition: a memory partially orphaned from the social and political genealogies that would render it openly conflictual in the present. Analytically, then, "orphan memories" do not simply designate forgotten, silenced, or traumatic memories. Rather, they name a specific configuration of selective transmissibility: memories that remain publicly available and morally meaningful precisely because they are detached from the contexts of authority, conflict, and responsibility that shaped their conditions of possibility. In this sense, the concept develops from the article's broader discussion of collective memory as selection, reconstruction, and socially situated framing, while specifying a particular mechanism through which difficult pasts are rendered speakable. Orphan memories are neither erased memories nor merely instances of organized forgetting. They are memories held in tension between attachment and detachment: attachment to narratives of care, gratitude, protection, and institutional continuity; detachment from political origins, conflicts, and responsibilities.

These orphan memories also forced us to confront a double discomfort. The first concerns the very act of asking witnesses to retrieve fragments of life that constitute the deepest layers of their identity, with the uneasy sense of almost snatching away something that belongs intimately to them: their *Erfahrung* (Benjamin, 1962/1995), understood as lived, accumulated, and sedimented experience. (Jedlowski, 2002). The second discomfort is more explicitly political: it concerns the handling of historical events embedded in radically situated contexts and in a period, the Fascist Ventennio (1922-1943), so deeply marked by ideological and historical conflict. In doing so, we

approach the margins of what has often been called the “past that does not pass,” to borrow the well-known expression used by Gian Enrico Rusconi to describe the revisionist debates in Germany in the late 1980s (Rusconi, 1987), and we enter the terrain of those difficult pasts on which sociological and historical scholarship has produced an extensive body of reflection.

From our perspective, the aim is neither to condemn nor to sanctify. The aim is to understand. A small anecdote may clarify this point better than many words. Half-seriously and half in jest, and with a knowing smile, one of the authors (whose identity shall remain undisclosed) once suggested that the article be titled: “Monsignor Antonietti Did Some Good Things Too.”<sup>1</sup> As any Italian reader can easily imagine, the suggestion provoked bursts of laughter. Yet that same reader will also recognise that this widely circulated meme encapsulates the full ambivalence and latent symbolic conflict of the country’s public and political debate. In a sense, our laughter had something apotropaic about it. It is precisely such conflicts of symbolic attribution that we seek to examine in the pages that follow.

### 3. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative case-study design based on four on-site visits to La Casa dell’Orfano (hereafter “CDO” or “Casa”) conducted between March and November 2025, combined with semi-structured interviews and documentary/digital-source analysis. The study examines how memory, institutional narratives, and representational practices are produced and negotiated through situated encounters, institutional self-presentations, and material-symbolic arrangements (Bowen, 2009; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The research strategy integrates three complementary components: (1) structured on-site observation during site visits, (2) semi-structured interviews with former residents, and (3) documentary and digital-source analysis. Bringing these materials into dialogue allows triangulation across different forms of

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<sup>1</sup> The expression “Mussolini also did some good things” has by now become an idiomatic phrase in Italian and has long entered common usage. It is typically invoked in contexts where political conflict over the interpretation of Italy’s past becomes particularly sharp. Supporters of the Fascist past, who are increasingly numerous in contemporary Italy, invoke it to suggest that the long-dominant interpretation of the Fascist Ventennio advanced by antifascist traditions, whose adherents, they claim, are increasingly few, is at best partial and more often distorted or ideologically biased.

evidence, clarifying both convergences and tensions between institutional representations, spatial mediation, and lived recollection (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018).

The four visits to CDO involved guided access to key spaces and moments of institutional self-narration (e.g. tours, routine interactions, and the display and circulation of commemorative or educational materials). Observational attention focused on how institutional history and moral authority are staged in situ, as well as on the practical organisation of space, symbols, and visitor-facing narratives. Observations were documented through fieldnotes written during and immediately after each visit, following qualitative research practices that treat fieldnotes as analytically productive texts rather than neutral records (Emerson et al., 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Given the limited number of visits, observational materials are used primarily for contextualisation and interpretation – mapping the institution’s representational ecology and situating interview narratives – rather than to claim sustained immersion in everyday institutional life.

We conducted six semi-structured interviews with former residents (“ex allievi”) of the Casa dell’Orfano. At the time of the interviews, participants were 79-95 years old (four women and three men), had entered the institution as children (ages 5-12), and had resided at CDO for between 8 and 19 years. Most interviewees belonged to the wartime and immediate post-war cohorts (entries 1936-1942; residence extending into 1949-1960). Interviews lasted approximately 90-150 minutes and followed a flexible guide designed to balance comparability across interviews with responsiveness to participants’ biographical trajectories and interpretive frames (Galletta, 2013). Two interviews (P3 and P4) were conducted jointly at participants’ explicit request: each initially responded individually to questions, but the discussion frequently evolved into a dialogic exchange involving mutual prompting, elaboration, and occasional contestation. Local dialect was used extensively, and some interviews were conducted entirely in dialect. For transparency and traceability, an anonymised interviewee matrix and the interview guide are provided in the appendices (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Interview transcripts follow a unified tagging system in which participants’ responses are labelled P1-P6 (see Appendix C). Fieldwork also included one informal, unstructured conversation with a CDO staff member conducted during a site visit. This exchange was not designed or treated as a formal interview and was not guided by a standardised schedule. Rather, it was approached as contextual conversational material intended to clarify institutional routines, contemporary self-representations, and the practical conditions under which memory work is curated and communicated (Emerson et al., 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Notes from this conversation were recorded shortly after the encounter and used

analytically as contextual and interpretive cues rather than as an evidentiary unit equivalent to the recorded interview corpus. In the fieldnotes, the staff conversation is referenced as SC1 (see Appendix D), thereby maintaining a clear analytic distinction between recorded interview data and informal conversational material.

Documentary analysis provided an additional evidentiary layer by reconstructing the institutional and public-discursive environment within which memory claims are produced and circulated (Bowen, 2009). Materials included website texts, online statements, Facebook posts, and other publicly available digital communications, as well as dissemination and educational events organised by the institution. These sources were analysed both as evidence of institutional narrative strategies and as sites where legitimacy, continuity, and value are publicly articulated.

All materials were analysed through thematic analysis supported by qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA). Thematic analysis was selected for its capacity to identify patterned meanings across heterogeneous materials while remaining compatible with context-sensitive, interpretive readings of narrative and institutional discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analysis followed a mixed inductive-deductive strategy: coding began with broad categories informed by the research questions and relevant literature while remaining open to themes emerging from interviews, fieldnotes, and documents (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Coding proceeded iteratively, supported by analytic memos documenting emerging interpretations, conceptual tensions, and negative cases (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021). Interpretive claims were systematically evaluated across the full corpus of materials, allowing comparison between institutional narratives and biographical accounts. In line with current qualitative research standards, attention was paid to credibility, coherence, and reflexivity throughout the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

#### **4. The Casa dell'Orfano as a *Lieu de Mémoire*: managing fascist legacies**

##### **4.1 *Public memory, banal nationalism, and postwar Italian mnemonic frameworks***

In his famous lecture “What Is a Nation?” (1882), Renan underscored the extent to which oblivion and historical manipulation function as foundational mechanisms in the formation of nations (Renan, 1882/1990). Similarly, Alexander (2004) argued that the interaction between what is publicly

commemorated and what is publicly omitted is a constitutive dynamic of power: institutions do not simply transmit the past but actively script it through authorized narratives, ritual forms, and moral classifications. As Halbwachs states, remembering is never a purely individual act: what can be recalled and rendered intelligible is organised through socially shared “frameworks” that orient perception, language, and temporal/spatial positioning, and that are reproduced and stabilised through group life and institutional supports (Halbwachs, 1925/2024). Grande and Migliorati emphasise that Halbwachs’s move is explicitly Durkheimian in its aim to demonstrate the “primacy of society over the individual” even in domains conventionally “treated as intimate or psychological” (Grande & Migliorati, 2016, p.88). In their words, Halbwachs’s project implies that psychic life, since it is oriented toward “institutions and customs, cannot but be collective, because it is permeated by collective realities that shape the very categories through which individuals feel, remember, and narrate” (Grande & Migliorati, 2016, p.94).

Nora’s work on *lieux de mémoire* further develops this point by showing that sites of memory are also sites of power: through selection and omission, they are made to stand as symbols of collective identity (Nora, 1984-1992). In such processes, removals, inventions, and falsifications may become stabilized and at times institutionalized (Nora, 1984-1992; Ricoeur, 2004; Trouillot, 1995). This scripting is not necessarily “hot” or overtly coercive; it often unfolds through ordinary vocabularies of moral worth and belonging (Billig, 1995; Paasi, 2016). Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism” captures how collective identity is reproduced in routine forms through familiar symbols, settled narratives, and everyday cues that appear natural precisely because they are unobtrusive (Billig, 1995). Paasi’s hot/banal continuum is particularly relevant for memory sites, where celebratory rituals and moral narratives can fold violent pasts into normalized continuities, what he describes as “the hot in the banal” (Paasi, 2016). Malešević similarly emphasizes that nationhood is sustained not mainly through spectacular violence, but through institutional penetration, micro-solidarities, and inherited symbolic repertoires that bind moral community to political history (Malešević, 2019). Across memory studies, these dynamics have been conceptualized as organized forgetting, selective tradition, and regimes of visibility, mechanisms through which legitimacy is protected by regulating what is narratively central and what is backgrounded (Connerton, 2008; Olick, 2007; Assmann, 2011; Huyssen, 2003).

In the Italian context, these mechanisms intersect with a postwar mnemonic template that has structured public understandings of Fascism and the Second World War. When questions of responsibility for fascist violence, racial persecution, and wartime crimes increasingly came to the surface, the newborn Republic (1946) proved structurally reluctant to integrate Italian

culpability into a shared public memory (Pavone 1991; Focardi 2020). Postwar memory tended to crystallize around two mutually reinforcing poles: the displacement of responsibility onto Germany as the primary agent of wartime suffering and a unifying mythology of the Resistance narrated as national redemption (Focardi, 2020). Over time, this configuration enabled what scholarship has described as a durable binary, “the bad German” versus “the good Italian”, through which the Italian experience of the Second World War was widely interpreted and narrated (Del Boca, 2005). Consolidated into a dominant template, the myth of the “good Italian” functioned as a selective economy of visibility: Italian violence could be acknowledged in fragments while being deprived of interpretive centrality; responsibility could be displaced onto exceptional actors or external forces; and the nation could be recognized primarily through stories of solidarity, rescue, and moral decency (Focardi, 2020). More broadly, scholarship shows how such mnemonic regimes persist and adapt rather than disappear, producing layered strategies, often described as “multidimensional forgetting”, that incorporate partial acknowledgements while preserving self-exculpatory interpretive frames (Connerton, 2008; Ricoeur, 2004).

Within this analytical horizon, the Casa dell’Orfano (CDO) can be approached as a *lieu de mémoire* whose public-facing digital discourse performs both remembrance and containment, organizing what can be said about origins, authority, and moral worth (Nora, 1984-1992; Alexander, 2004). The CDO is particularly revealing in the Italian context because its public image is built through idioms central to postwar self-recognition, such as charity, Catholic morality, care, and “values,” precisely the idioms through which narratives of benevolence have historically coexisted with the marginalization of fascist and colonial entanglements (Assmann, 2011; Macdonald, 2009). In this sense, the CDO offers an especially apt site for studying forgetting as an institutional practice rather than a mere absence (Connerton, 2008; Trouillot, 1995).

#### ***4.2 Managing fascist legacies at Casa dell’Orfano***

The institution’s origins date to the interwar period, and in the CDO’s official discourse, its founder, Monsignor Giovanni Antonietti, is presented as the institution’s moral cornerstone (Fondazione Casa dell’Orfano, n.d.). By contrast, archival descriptions situate Antonietti in explicitly political terms, portraying him as a “committed supporter of Fascist ideology” (Soggetti & Del Bello, 2016, p.8). What is at stake, therefore, is the institutional procedures through which certain descriptors become sayable while others are displaced; the distribution of narrative centrality between moral biography and political

embeddedness; and the ways legitimacy is secured through patterned strategies of selection, naming, and omission (Trouillot, 1995; Connerton, 2008; Olick, 2007; Alexander, 2012). The tension between what is materially present and what is narratively managed is immediately legible upon arrival at La Casa dell'Orfano. Approaching the complex along a long, tree-lined path, visitors are met with large fasces displayed in proximity to a Catholic crucifix (see Figures 3 and 4). A few metres away, a commemorative stele dedicated to the fascist general Antonio Locatelli extends the monumental grammar into the register of Fascist-era militarism and imperial memory (see Figure 5). Locatelli's association with the Ethiopian campaign and Fascist political culture is documented, and his commemoration participates in broader practices of heroization that have often occluded the violence of colonial conquest (Del Boca, 2005; Labanca, 2002). Notably, however, the commemorative text does not frame Locatelli's public biography through the language of colonial violence or responsibility; no reference is made to atrocities or war crimes. While the stele can partly be understood as a historical remnant of earlier commemorative regimes, its continued presence within the site's visitor-facing memorial landscape contributes to a narrative configuration in which imperial entanglements remain materially visible yet narratively neutralized through commemorative form and selective omission.

Nearby, Antonietti's tomb and lists of benefactors contribute to a local pantheon of institutional gratitude, where inscription functions as moral authorization, an economy of recognition in which some names are stabilized as publicly honourable while others become problematic to display (Nora, 1984-1992; Olick, 2007). Drawing on an archival reconstruction compiled by the University of Bergamo (currently in preparation for publication), the absence of Benito Mussolini's name from the publicly displayed lists of benefactors is noteworthy, particularly insofar as the reconstruction documents a donation made by the Fascist Party, channelled through Mussolini, to the Casa during the regime period.

One possible, benign explanation is pragmatic: if the amount was comparatively small relative to other benefactions, its omission might reflect a thresholding criterion for public display. Yet another possible reading is that the omission operates as a form of narrative sanitisation, removing from view a politically compromising source of support and thereby containing the Fascist genealogy of the institution's benefaction. This interpretive tension was rendered unusually explicit in an on-site exchange with staff (SC1), in which a member of personnel remarked that listing Mussolini's name "would have been too much even for the Casa dell'Orfano" (SC1 November 2025).

Against this backdrop, the CDO's institutional website can be read as a key instrument through which the CDO positions itself within Italian postwar

moral frameworks. The homepage foregrounds the 1925-2025 centenary through a prominently displayed, downloadable PDF, presenting the anniversary as an institutional memory project in which legitimacy is curated through the selective distribution of visibility, naming, and interpretive weight. The official centenary guide presents the anniversary as an invitation to *fare memoria* (“to engage in remembrance”), that is, to revisit the institution’s history by foregrounding “how much good has been done” and reaffirming an educational vocation grounded in “moral and religious values”. The centenary’s visual-didactic materials incorporate traces of the Fascist period in a documentary register (e.g., photographs of children in Balilla uniforms), without supplying the vocabulary that would render those traces historically contentious in the present. Immediately below this centenary entry-point, the homepage offers a brief descriptive section on “La Casa dell’Orfano” addressed to visitors who may not engage the commemorative materials in depth. In a few lines, the institution is introduced as a historical foundation, committed to supporting and educating young people in difficulty. Founded with the aim of providing a safe refuge and moral support to orphans, it continues today to draw inspiration from Christian values and to promote social and cultural solidarity. (Fondazione Casa dell’Orfano, n.d.<sup>2</sup>).

The CDO is framed through care, hospitality, and community, and “memory” appears as an institutional asset rather than a contested field (Assmann, 2011). In this setting, the website’s moral grammar functions as a stabilizing frame that produces continuity and legitimacy through “goodness,” echoing a broader Italian tendency to foreground decency and rescue narratives while keeping fascist complicity narratively marginal, exceptional, or backgrounded (Del Boca, 2005; Focardi, 2020). This representational strategy is even clearer on the webpage dedicated to Monsignor Antonietti. The site constructs the founder through a sanctifying biographical template, vocation, service, and pastoral care, positioning him as the ethical origin of the institution’s mission. “Difficult pasts” (Macdonald, 2009) are acknowledged only through a compressed formulation: Antonietti is said to have collaborated with “prominent figures of the regime,” without naming fascism explicitly or specifying the political implications of such collaboration. The contrast with archival description explicitly naming Antonietti’s fascist ideological alignment highlights how a “difficult heritage” can be narratively miniaturized while moral biography expands to occupy interpretive centrality (Macdonald, 2009; Assmann, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Italian appearing in the text and from the institutional website are the authors’ own.

The same logic structures the “History” section. The CDO’s origin and development are narrated primarily as a welfare trajectory, war orphans, assistance, education, hospitality, producing a teleology of uninterrupted vocation and civic-good continuity. Interwar Italy appears largely as a temporal background, not as an ideological and administrative environment

that shaped welfare institutions, youth governance, and Catholic-state relations under fascism. Political discontinuities are converted into administrative milestones; violent contexts are re-coded into a story of functional growth and ethical persistence (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Assmann, 2011). This mode of narration is particularly effective within the Italian postwar framework precisely because it does not require denial: it allows “goodness” to function as interpretive default while responsibility remains structurally non-central (Focardi, 2020).

Importantly, the website does not eliminate national-militarized cues; it curates them in “calm” and heritage-friendly forms. Pages describing spaces such as the “Entrance Hall” and “Hall of Honour” emphasize mottos, inscriptions, and institutional aphorisms in “typical 1930s characters,” and reference commemorative crests tied to the “Piave and the Isonzo”, digitizing a national-martial repertoire as part of the institution’s identity landscape. In the same register, the site references the Locatelli memorial and related ceremonial practices (e.g., flag-raising), presenting militarized commemoration as tradition within a visitor itinerary. What remains absent is the genealogy of these commemorative forms, how Fascist hero-cults and imperial narratives normalized such rituals and symbols, and how colonial conquest was accompanied by extensive violence later minimized in Italian public discourse (Labanca, 2002; Del Boca, 2005; Focardi, 2020). The result is a representational arrangement in which nationalist and militarized elements persist, but their interpretive charge is neutralized by heritage framing and moral continuity (Macdonald, 2009). Seen in this light, the CDO’s digital self-presentation illustrates, at a local level, dynamics that scholarship has identified in the broader politics of memory in post-war Italy. Legitimacy is anchored in moral-Christian vocabularies of care; continuity is stabilized through teleological history-writing; politics is contained through euphemism (e.g., “regime” rather than fascism); and militarized-national cues are curated as heritage features rather than posed as interpretive problems.

In this sense, and in Nora’s terms, the CDO can be read as a *lieu de mémoire* that simultaneously functions as a site of oblivion: while fascist and colonial traces remain materially present and publicly encounterable, they are rendered narratively peripheral through an institutional digital discourse in which “goodness” operates as the dominant interpretive frame, organizing what becomes publicly legible about the past and what is relegated to the margins.

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*Figure 3. Entrance of the Casa dell'Orfano. A Catholic crucifix and a fascio littorio (fasces) are displayed at the entrance of the complex. Photograph by Micol Meghnagi, November 2025.*



*Figure 4. Detail of the fascio littorio at the entrance of the Casa dell'Orfano. Photograph by Micol Meghnagi, November 2025.*



*Figure 5. Commemorative stele dedicated to the Fascist general Antonio Locatelli at the Casa dell'Orfano. Photograph by Micol Meghnagi, November 2025.*



## **5. Remembering Heterotopia: interviews and individual memory of care, discipline, and the fascist past at the Casa dell'Orfano**

### ***5.1 The CDO as a “crisis heterotopia”: protection, enclosure, ordinary safety***

Drawing on Foucault’s deliberately schematic formulation of heterotopia (Foucault, 1967/1986), we conceptualize the CDO as a “heterotopia of crisis”: a materially bounded counter-site reserved for subjects in a socially recognized “state of crisis,” designed to bracket disruption through enclosure, regulated access, and the re-ordering of everyday life. Crucially, heterotopia is not defined by separation alone but by a threshold regime: a “system of opening and closing” that both isolates the site and makes it selectively penetrable (Foucault, 1967/1986). To avoid treating heterotopia as a loose synonym for alterity or as an automatic marker of resistance, we follow philological and methodological

clarifications that insist on specifying what the concept does analytically (Johnson, 2006; Beckett et al., 2017<sup>3</sup>).

Topinka's (2010) reading is particularly useful in re-centering heterotopia as a relational operator, i.e., a way of grasping how "other spaces" reorder relations among practices, spaces, and regimes of intelligibility. In line with an institutional reading, we therefore mobilize heterotopia primarily as an analytic of spatial ordering: how concrete sites translate utopian projections into practical arrangements of enclosure, routine, and governance (Hetherington, 1997). We situate this move within a broader consolidation of Foucauldian approaches to space, especially the uptake of Foucault in geography and political theory (Crampton & Elden, 2007; Elden, 2007; Taylor & Crosby, 2018; Raffnsøe, 2018), and note an empirical precedent close to our case: orphanages have been discussed through the heterotopia lens as sites where "home" attributes coexist with experiences of displacement or "un-placing" (Kurzynoga, 2012)<sup>4</sup>.

Former residents consistently narrate protection as a material effect of remoteness: the CDO is remembered as "set apart" in ways that reduced the war's reach and salience. As one participant explains, "the house was quite isolated, a good place to protect oneself from the war" (P1 October 2025)<sup>5</sup>. Read through this lens, isolation is not merely withdrawal; it is a spatial condition that helps stabilize an "inside" where everyday life can be sustained with fewer interruptions from the outside.

The protective effect of enclosure is also narrated as an experienced detachment from the war: external violence is not denied but backgrounded and accessed through mediated fragments – filtered news, regulated exits, and scheduled communication – rather than lived as a constant threat. As another participant recalls: "from inside there we did not even notice the war; those who went out brought some news, or the President told us something in the evening after the dinner prayer" (P5 October 2025). Detachment is then stated explicitly: "we were 'detached' from the war – except that we noticed there was less food – even if we never lacked anything" (P5 October 2025). P1 echoes the affective register of this managed distance: asked whether they were afraid, he answers "No! ... It was a quiet, normal life," while noting that older boys who

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<sup>3</sup> Beckett et al. (2017) warn against conceptual inflation, noting the risk that heterotopia becomes a modish "hurrah word" (Cranston, 1967). Building on Johnson's (2006) philological re-reading, they stress that heterotopias are best treated as "unsettling spaces" rather than taken as inherently emancipatory sites of freedom or resistance.

<sup>4</sup> For a wider positioning of heterotopia within urban/architectural debates, see also Dehaene & De Cauter (2008).

<sup>5</sup> All translations from Italian and local dialect are the authors' own.

went out more often “brought news of the outside world” (P1 October 2025). Ordinary safety, in this sense, is produced not only through separation from danger but through selective permeability and a baseline of provisioning that makes normality plausible under wartime scarcity.

P5’s account further frames the CDO as a compensatory microcosm: “it was like a medieval village... we had cows (for milk), vegetables (the garden), pigs, eggs... we were autonomous... we were like a fief”. (P5 October 2025). Here, enclosure is not only a boundary but a capacity: the institution organizes a local ecology of subsistence that partially substitutes for a disrupted outside world.

Importantly, this insulation is not remembered as total: P5 recalls witnessing “in 1943 the bombing of Dalmine” from above Parre (P5 October 2025), a brief intrusion that underscores how the outside remained visible, yet episodic and at a distance.

Taken together, these accounts show “protection” as an effect of enclosure plus regulated permeability: a bounded space that filters access, mediates news, and sustains routines through provisioning. In Foucauldian terms, these narratives render the CDO’s “opening/closing” dispositif legible as an everyday infrastructure of protection: isolation and permeability are co-produced rather than opposed (Foucault, 1967/1986; Topinka, 2010).

## ***5.2 Utopia of care and social mobility: schooling, selection, patronage***

If CDO can be read as a crisis heterotopia – a protected “elsewhere” that brackets disruption through enclosure and selective permeability (Foucault, 1967/1986; Topinka, 2010) – its heterotopic function is coupled with a pragmatic utopia of care: not only keeping children safe during wartime but producing trajectories that the “outside” could not reliably secure.

Schooling is recalled as a core infrastructure of care. Former residents remember in-house teachers as part of everyday provisioning: “there were young women/teachers to whom he provided room and board ... and he had them come even in the summer” (P3 October 2025). Care, however, is also narrated as selective: some were encouraged to continue studying, others were oriented toward work.

Selection becomes visible in mundane evaluative moments. In P5’s account, a Santa Lucia letter<sup>6</sup> functions as an informal “test”: the President

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<sup>6</sup> Santa Lucia is a regional gift-bringer in the Bergamo area (akin to Santa Claus), to whom children wrote wish-lists (often for essentials such as shoes or sweaters, plus small sweets), believed to visit during the night of 13 December

reads it and says, “look how well this girl writes in Italian, she must go on studying...” (P5 October 2025). Such micro-judgments route biographies (exams, further schooling) and translate the institution’s future-oriented promise into concrete pathways.

Mobility is further sustained through patronage, understood as institutional sponsorship and recommendation. Residents recall that “X ... studied and became an engineer ... with the money of the CDO ... the President made him study” (P4 October 2025). While we lack systematic data on wartime schooling in rural Clusone, interviewees repeatedly position this promise against an “outside” remembered as scarcity: upon entering factory work, a former resident is told she was “lucky” to have lived at the CDO because others had little to eat, slept in stables, and washed only sporadically (P5 October 2025). Even for those routed into work rather than further schooling, patronage operated through Antonietti’s recommendations, which could secure placements in local factories.

Taken together, these accounts specify the CDO’s utopia of care as a concrete assemblage: education as infrastructure, selection as trajectory allocation, and patronage as sponsorship and recommendation. This is also the point where the paper’s argument must remain institutional: the same mechanisms that produce opportunity rely on routines, hierarchies, and forms of governance that are not incidental but constitutive.

### *5.3 Strategies of discipline vs. everyday tactics: gender, labor, micro-evasions*

To move from the CDO’s utopian promise to its everyday functioning, we read ordinary life through Foucault’s discipline – partitioned time, ordered spaces, routine inspection (Foucault, 1975) – and de Certeau’s contrast between institutional “strategies” and everyday “tactics”, the opportunistic “arts of doing” through which ordinary actors appropriate or momentarily evade those arrangements. (de Certeau, 1990). This section reads the CDO precisely in this tension: an environment where strategies of care and discipline were pervasive, yet never total, and where children’s inventive tactics opened recurring “cracks” in the institutional order.

At the strategic level, order was materially anchored in a dense scheduling of daily life and work – wake-up, mass, school, chores, prayer – explicitly linking heterotopia to a segmented temporality: “times of study and times of work” (P2 October 2025). Labor itself was distributed with near-assembly-line granularity (“one cleared the table, another wiped it, another swept” – P4 October 2025), and checked through hierarchical routines: a woman (P5 October 2025)

“arrived at five years old” recalls her duty as drying cutlery, done quickly to be able to play; yet “first, vice-president carried out the inspection and checked the work done” (P5 October 2025).

The strategic level also operated through gendered partitioning and bodily surveillance: despite being mixed, residents recall boys and girls being kept apart (floors, play areas), alongside hygienic/sexual checks – “a nun checked underwear and handkerchiefs” in search of traces of virility or female development, “she made you undress to check you” (P3 October 2025). Taken together, these materials show discipline operating less as spectacular punishment than as a routine management of hygiene, gender, and sexuality, embedded in the ordinary reproduction of institutional order.

Yet, as de Certeau would predict, tactics flourished in the cracks of predictability. For example, children climbed a nearby light pole to vault the wall and bathe in the river. More often, they exploited timed absences: P1 describes how fruit theft was calibrated to the exact moment when the nuns had to leave the kitchen for prayer – “we studied everything: what time they went, how long they stayed away” – and how, from a barred kitchen window, pears were effectively “harpooned” using a belt with a pocketknife tied to its end (P1 October 2025). The same tactical logic informed egg theft: through the small coop windows, pans were slid under the hen and the boys simply waited “until she laid the egg”, turning a prohibition into a repeatable technique; as well as clothing tricks: “make a hole in the pockets”, tighten the trousers under the knee, and let apples drop down “by gravity” so pocket-patting found nothing. Finally, tactics could scale up into more infrastructural breaches: P5 recalls that a boy managed to fabricate a key to the storeroom, enabling them to steal salami and hide it above the curtains, inside the shutter mechanism (P5 October 2025).

In short, the CDO’s order was enacted through strategies of care and control, but continually re-occupied through small, inventive tactics that produced fleeting autonomy within the institution’s frame.

#### *5.4 Mnemonic afterlives of the institution: moral framing and the management of the fascist past*

The strategic ordering and tactical micro-evasions discussed above did not end at the gates of the institution: they also structure how the CDO is remembered. In what follows, we examine how former residents retrospectively re-code discipline, care, and authority into a moral narrative centred on

Antonietti, and how this narrative, in turn, becomes a device for managing the fascist past.

Mnemonic afterlives in former residents' accounts often hinge on Monsignor Giovanni Antonietti, remembered less as a political actor than as a father-substitute in a world of absent fathers: protective and providential, yet also feared. P6 condenses this moral biography when he portrays Antonietti as *il burbero buono* ("the gruff good man"), "severe in the right way," and memorable enough that he names him alongside his own father as one of the two deaths he wept for (P6 October 2025). Yet recollections diverge sharply on the texture of that paternal authority: in the joint recollection, P4 insists on "botte e pesade" (vernacular form for "beatings and kicks"), while P3 – who, as a child, spent her after-school time in the director's office, serving him and helping with everyday tasks, even dressing him – professes not to remember him as "so heavy" (P3 & P4 October 2025).

When the topic shifts to fascism, memories often work through separation and minimization: asked about "fascio stuff" and about symbols or portraits, P1 recalls being "outside politics" and not experiencing overt fascist practices, even if they "knew his tendencies" (P1 October 2025). This narrative of depoliticized care, however, sits uneasily with other traces: the CDO's built environment and commemorative apparatus preserve explicit fascist iconography (e.g., prominent fasces near a crucifix as shown in section 4.2), and centenary materials reproduce photographs of children in *Balilla* uniforms, while making the fascist salute. Read together, these mnemonic afterlives do not place elderly narrators "on trial"; rather, they show how a moral framing stabilizes Antonietti as benefactor-father while fascist embeddedness is backgrounded, personalized, or occasionally reasserted – as when P4 bluntly describes him as *un grande fascistone* ("a very big fascist") (P4 October 2025).

## 6. Conclusion

This article set out to examine how a difficult institutional past becomes governable and publicly shareable in the context of the centenary of the Casa dell'Orfano. By triangulating institutional digital narratives, guided engagements with the site, and interviews with former residents, the analysis shows that memory is not merely "represented" but actively assembled across heterogeneous dispositifs that stabilize certain meanings while marginalizing others. Three findings emerge. First, the institution's digital heritage layer promotes a predominantly philanthropic and depoliticized narrative: the Casa is framed as a meritorious project of care and social mobility, while the political density of its origins is attenuated through euphemism, selective silences, and

the personalization of responsibility. Second, the site itself functions as a material operator of meaning. Spatial arrangements, objects, and ritualized tours organize a controlled regime of attention in which care, enclosure, and institutional continuity are rendered mutually compatible. Third, the memories of former residents both reinforce and complicate this authorized narrative. While narrators frequently mobilize gratitude and moral recognition, they also recall experiences of discipline, surveillance, and constraint, alongside the mundane tactics – small appropriations, micro-transgressions, and informal exchanges– through which everyday life within the institution was negotiated.

To name this configuration, we use the notion of “orphan memories.” These memories are selective, as argued; in this sense, they are “orphaned” from the political histories (above all fascism) that would make them publicly contentious. Held together by a moral economy of care (protection, education, gratitude), they remain shareable because conflict and responsibility are kept at a distance through euphemism, omission, and personalization. The concept captures how moral legitimation can coexist with depoliticization, without treating the process as either simple forgetting or conscious denial. Empirically, the case contributes to scholarship on difficult pasts by clarifying the organizational work through which an institutional past is rendered publicly presentable. It also shows how biographical accounts relate to authorized narratives through partial alignment, pragmatic accommodation, and occasional friction, rather than straightforward opposition. Future comparative research could extend this analytical framework to other welfare, educational, religious, or commemorative institutions whose benevolent self-narratives depend on separating lived experiences of care from compromised regimes of authority. The broader analytical value of the notion of “orphan memories” lies precisely in identifying cases in which memory is not erased, but made publicly acceptable through the partial severing of moral attachment from political genealogy; further work might also examine how different publics (i.e., local communities, descendants, and political actors) reframe, contest, or appropriate such pasts over time, particularly at commemorative junctures that intensify both visibility and normative claims.

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Orphan Memories and Difficult Pasts. The Present Memory of the Casa degli  
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