

September 2021

The Intrepid One: Fascism & the Death of Antonio Ascari

Paul Baxa

Ave Maria University, Paul.Baxa@avemaria.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/jmotorsportculturehistory>



Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baxa, Paul (2021) "The Intrepid One: Fascism & the Death of Antonio Ascari," *Journal of Motorsport Culture & History*. Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/jmotorsportculturehistory/vol2/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Motorsport Culture & History by an authorized editor of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu.

The Intrepid One: Fascism & the Death of Antonio Ascari

Paul Baxa (Ave Maria University)

Death of Hero

During lap 23 of the 1925 French Grand Prix at the Montlhéry Autodrome near Paris, a voice on the loudspeaker informed spectators that the leading Alfa Romeo, driven by Italy's Antonio Ascari, had crashed. Later in the race, the same voice announced that Ascari had died on his way to hospital. According to reports in French and Italian newspapers, the spectators in the main grandstand stood up in silence, and the men removed their hats. It was a sign of respect for the driver from an Alfa Romeo team that had dominated the sport since 1924 and was on the cusp of winning the first ever World Championship for manufacturers. The reaction of the crowd at the race was only a prelude of what was to come.

Over the next few days, Ascari's body was transported back to Italy in triumph and his funeral in Milan would attract some 20,000 mourners. Tributes poured in from around the world. The French lauded Ascari as an "artist" behind the wheel known for his "gentlemanly and chivalrous" demeanor.¹ The Italian press, meanwhile, elevated Ascari to the status of national hero and martyr. *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, Italy's most popular illustrated magazine, devoted its front cover to Ascari and declared him a hero who had contributed to the progress of national industry. "Antonio Ascari is the typical representative of modern heroism," exclaimed the obituary, "of a heroism that was at once tranquil and audacious."² Every sport has its heroes, wrote the Fascist Party's newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, and the "taciturn" Ascari "is a hero like all heroes who give so much of themselves for their country."³

More than a sporting hero, Ascari was treated like a fallen warrior. The Fascist Party's newspaper proclaimed Ascari a martyr "who had died on the battlefield like a soldier who is hit by an unknown sniper in the midst of battle."⁴ Arturo Mercanti, aviator, war hero, race car driver, and representative of the Royal Automobile Club of Italy, declared at the Paris train station, where Ascari's body was loaded onto a train, that Ascari had experienced "the most beautiful death, that of a soldier."⁵ Ascari's status as national hero and martyr was confirmed when the train carrying Ascari's body crossed the frontier into Italy. There, a wreath from the Fascist Prime Minister of Italy, Benito Mussolini, was placed on the coffin. The inscription on the wreath simply read, "To the Intrepid One." Mussolini's wreath remained prominently displayed on Ascari's casket over the next few days.

¹ "Delage enlève brillamment les deux premières places du Grand Prix de l'A.C.F. avec R. Benoist e Wagner," *L'Auto*, 27 juillet 1925, p. 1.

² Tartaglia, "La morte di Ascari," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, anno II, no. 31 (2 agosto 1925), p. 82.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Ascari," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 28 luglio 1925, p. 2.

⁵ "Le corps d'Ascari est parti pour l'Italie," *Le Petit Journal*, 29 juillet 1925, p. 2.

The unprecedented reaction to Ascari's death intersected with several important developments in Italian politics and culture after the First World War. First, Ascari represented the growing popularity of Grand Prix racing in the 1920s and its identification with nationalism. Second, it embodied the rise of celebrity culture in the 1920s, which included sporting figures as well as film stars.⁶ Third, the image of Ascari as a fallen warrior, and the ceremony around the return of his body to Italy, tapped into the memory of the First World War and the rituals surrounding the return of the Unknown Soldier to Rome in 1921. Finally, the popular reaction to the death of Ascari provided an important example of the role sports played in politics at a pivotal point in Italian history. When Ascari was killed, the Fascist regime led by Mussolini was only just beginning the process of dismantling the liberal democratic state and replacing it with a one-party dictatorship. In the summer of 1925, Milan was a city riddled with social and political tension. In the days of Ascari's funeral, the dead racer's body briefly allowed the city to transcend these tensions as Fascists, Socialists, Communists, and Liberals all mourned his death. However, Mussolini's wreath and its inscription demonstrated that the fallen sportsman was being appropriated as a Fascist martyr. This paper will demonstrate how the death and funeral of Antonio Ascari came to represent an important stage in the Fascistization of sport in Italy even as the Fascist Revolution was only just getting underway.

The events surrounding Ascari's death and funeral demonstrated the increasingly important role of sport in the Fascist regime. Not long after Ascari's death, Mussolini's regime began putting into place its sporting policies. These included the creation of the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) organization to encourage athletic activities for youth; the strengthening of the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), and the issuing of the Charter of Sport in 1928.⁷ Professional sport like soccer was organized into a new league system in 1929 and other spectator sports were encouraged, including cycling and motor sport. All of these activities became part of the Fascist regime's desire to create the New Fascist Man.⁸

When Mussolini came to power in 1922, Fascism did not have a set vision for sport nor did it yet grasp the possibilities of spectator sports for building political consensus.⁹ It was the success of Grand Prix racing, and in particular, the accomplishments of the Alfa Romeo team in 1924 and 1925 that helped change this. Although motor sport originated at the turn of the century, its popularity soared after the First World War. In Europe, this increased popularity coincided with the rise of national Grand Prix races. First run in 1906, the Grand Prix de l'A.C.F. (French Grand Prix) was the oldest and most prestigious race. In the 1920s, the Italian, Spanish, German, and British Grand Prix races joined it. With these races came the construction of purpose-built autodromes in Germany, France, and Italy.¹⁰ These large sites could accommodate vast crowds of paying spectators in concrete and wooden grandstands. They catered to the increased enthusiasm for the sport and became spectacular examples of the large sports facilities built in many countries in the 1920s.

⁶ Ascari came to represent a form of celebrity in the 1920s that was tied in with modernity. This can be seen in the reactions to Rudolph Valentino's funeral in New York in 1926. See Amy Lawrence, "Rudolph Valentino: Italian-American," in Patrice Petro, ed. *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 87-107.

⁷ Patrizia Dogliani, "Sport and Fascism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2000), pp. 326-348.

⁸ Daphné Bolz, "Sport and Fascism," in Alan Bairner et al, *Routledge Handbook of Sport and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 57-58.

⁹ Simon Martin, *Sport Italia: The Italian Love Affair with Sport* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 25.

¹⁰ These were Avus (1921) and the Nurburgring (1927) in Germany, Montlhéry (1925) in France, and Monza (1922) in Italy.

Motor sport's appeal for the new postwar political movements like Fascism was enormous.¹¹ Since its origins, motor sport was used as a barometer to demonstrate the technological and industrial prowess of nations, which further appealed to the heightened nationalism of the postwar years. Fascism, as an ultra-nationalist ideology, had a natural affinity for the sport. In September 1923, during his first year in power, Mussolini attended the Italian Grand Prix at Monza as honorary starter.¹² The influence of Futurism was also significant in Fascism's attraction to the sport. Futurism's founder, Filippo Marinetti, who joined the new Fascist movement when it was founded in 1919, had declared the racing car as "more beautiful than the Victory Samothrace" in the Futurist Manifesto.¹³ Furthermore, Mussolini was an automobile enthusiast and was often photographed in Lancias and Alfa Romeos.

Like Fascism, the Great War also played an important role in the rise of Grand Prix racing in the 1920s. The impact of the First World War was felt in motorsport through the development of new technologies such as the supercharger and the use of new metal alloys in airplanes.¹⁴ Aviation also contributed to the new image of the racecar driver. Aviators and racecar drivers were increasingly identified with decorated war heroes. Racecar drivers in particular were no longer referred to as *chaffeurs* but as *piloti*, thus linking them with the air aces of the war.¹⁵ The link between drivers and World War I aces was not unique to Italy. Sir Henry Segrave, winner of the 1923 French Grand Prix, had been an air ace as was Georges Boillot, the defeated hero of the 1914 French Grand Prix who was killed during the war. In the United States, racer Eddie Rickenbacker became America's leading air ace. In Italy, this association between aviation and motor racing was especially strong. Enzo Ferrari, after winning a race at Ravenna in 1923, was given the prancing horse symbol from the parents of Francesco Baracca, one of Italy's greatest aviators killed during the war.¹⁶ Italy's leading poet and inventor of the Fascist style, Gabriele D'Annunzio kept the broken steering wheel from Henry Segrave's fatal crash mounted on an altar at his villa on the Lago di Garda.

The New Garibaldi

The image of the racer changed in the 1920s to reflect this new ideal of a hero risking his life for the sake of his country's honor. It also implied a new approach to racing that differed from how the *chauffeurs* of the pre-war world were viewed. Prewar racers like Felice Nazzaro and Vincenzo Lancia were considered more as "mechanics" and test drivers whose job was to finish the grueling, long-distance races that marked early Grand Prix racing.¹⁷ For example, it took Ferenc Szisz 12 hours to win the first French Grand Prix in 1906. These early Grand Prix races were akin to endurance contests. This was accentuated by the track conditions, which usually included unpaved

¹¹ There is surprisingly little written about this close connection between motorsport and Fascism by scholars. The only important work is in Italian. Enrico Azzini, *Bolidi rossi & camicie nere. Storia delle competizioni automobilistiche durante il Fascismo* (Roma: IBN Editore, 2011).

¹² Enrico Landoni, *Gli Atleti del Duce. La politica sportiva del fascismo, 1919-1939* (Milano: Mimesis, 2016), p. 50.

¹³ F. T. Marinetti, "Founding Manifesto of Futurism," <https://www.italianfuturism.org/manifestos/foundingmanifesto/>.

¹⁴ Jeff Daniels, *Driving Force: The Evolution of the Car Engine* (London: Haynes Publishing, 2002), p. 59.

¹⁵ Cesare De Agostini, *Ascari. Un mito italiano* (Milano: Giorgio Nada Editore, 2005), p. 29.

¹⁶ Luca Dal Monte, *Enzo Ferrari: Power, Politics, and the Making of an Automotive Empire* (Phoenix, AZ: David Bull Publishing, 2018), pp. 96-97.

¹⁷ William Court, *Power and Glory: The History of Grand Prix Motor Racing* (London: Patrick Stephens Limited, 1992), p 112.

roads. Mechanical sympathy seemed the main skill for a prewar Grand Prix driver.¹⁸ Ascari was part of a new generation of drivers known as the “gentlemen professionals.”¹⁹ In Italy, this group included Ascari, Enzo Ferrari, Tazio Nuvolari, Emilio Materassi, the Masetti brothers, Giuseppe Campari, Gastone Brilli-Peri, Pietro Bordino, and Achille Varzi. Many of these men saw action in the First World War and some were aristocrats.

The drivers who took up racing after the war were more motivated by the thrill of adventure and speed than testing mechanical endurance.²⁰ The postwar era signaled a greater acceptance of speed and those who indulged in it. Whereas the drivers of automobiles were considered a menace to public safety before 1914, after the war they became celebrities and heroes.²¹ Tazio Nuvolari, racing his motorcycle while wearing a cast in 1925, immediately struck a chord with racing fans. Nuvolari and drivers like him were tagged as *garibaldini* meaning that their daring and flare resembled the swashbuckling hero of the Italian Risorgimento, Giuseppe Garibaldi. Furthermore, the new “ace” of the wheel was endowed with an aggressive vision of masculinity where the car was likened to a woman that had to be dominated. In a famous note to FIAT boss Giovanni Agnelli, the poet and notorious womanizer Gabriele D’Annunzio declared that the “automobile is feminine,” suggesting that the driver had to subdue her.²² The idealization of aggressive masculinity became one of the salient features of the postwar era as can be seen with Futurism and with radical right movements like Italian Fascism and its vision of the New Man.²³

The postwar, daredevil image of the new racecar driver/aviator suited Antonio Ascari. Although he competed in his first race in 1911, it was not until 1919 that his racing career began with a victory in the Parma-Poggio di Berceto hill climb. The car he drove was a 4-cylinder FIAT 14B/S.57, a pre-war machine built for the 1914 French Grand Prix.²⁴ In 1920, Ascari switched to Alfa Romeo, beginning a partnership that would bring him his greatest successes. In the Alfa Romeo, Ascari immediately became known for his aggressive, never-say-die approach to racing. So much so that the chief steward, Arturo Mercanti, gave him a warning during practice sessions for the 1924 Italian Grand Prix. This was the same man who later eulogized Ascari at the train station in Paris. Ascari, it turned out, was cutting too close to the sandbags at the edge of the banked curve leading back onto the start/finish straight. While Mercanti fretted, Ascari thrilled the spectators in the grandstands. The correspondent of the *Corriere della Sera* described Ascari’s driving at Monza in breathtaking terms:

¹⁸ Darly Adair, “Spectacles of Speed and Endurance: The Formative Years of Motor Racing in Europe,” in David Thoms et al, *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20th Century* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 120-134.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

²⁰ The most famous example of this approach to the sport in the 1920s can be found with the so-called “Bentley Boys” in Great Britain. See Ameer Kim and Elton G. McGoun, “The Rise of the Bentley and Broad War Boys: Converting Nascent Automotive and Computer Technologies into Mainstream Sports,” *Journal of Motorsport Culture & History*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2019): pp. 1-21.

²¹ Kurt Moser, “The Dark Side of ‘Automobilism’, 1900-1930,” *The Journal of Transport History*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2003), pp. 238-258.

²² Formula 1 champion Sir Jackie Stewart echoed these sentiments in the 1970s. See “Jackie Stewart-Paul Ricard 1973”, Youtube, 0:50, October 11, 2006, Accessed on November 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkq8Q26N52g>

²³ Marinetti pronounced a “contempt of women” as one of the key tenets of Futurism. See Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*.

²⁴ Graham Gauld, “Fiat Grand Prix Cars,” *Veloce Today.com*, October 16, 2018, <https://velocetoday.com/flat-grand-prix-cars/>.

Among the audacious, the most audacious was Ascari. On several occasions he made the crowds scream with horror when he came off the banking, with the car fishtailing. Four times, he reached the rim of the banking—a few centimeters more and he would flown off. However, the heart and hands of the racer do not tremble. The car is under his control, and all that is left of the danger is a puff of yellow dust.²⁵

Ascari's heart stopping performance at Monza confirmed his *garibaldino* status as a racer. His lack of results before 1924 was often attributed to bad luck due to several accidents, some of which left him with broken bones. These accidents, however, cemented his reputation as a driver who took risks. The tendency to crash would not have garnered him any credit in the pre-war years. After the war, however, this approach to racing of either crashing or winning made him the racing equivalent of Garibaldi's famous slogan, "Roma o morte!" Ultimately, Ascari's reputation rested with his outright speed. At the same Italian Grand Prix mentioned above, Ascari set a lap record that would outlive him for several years. At the car's debut at Cremona in June 1924, the headlines emphasized Ascari's top speed down the circuit's long straightaway and the record he set for the flying kilometer. In the postwar era, speed became more important than keeping a regular, steady pace and Ascari, more than any driver, best represented the image of a speed demon.

The Garibaldi did not necessarily make Ascari amenable to Fascism. In many ways, Ascari fit the image of the Liberal businessman and professional that appealed to Italy's Liberal middle classes. When he decided to race in 1911, he was already a successful car sales representative having run a dealership in Brazil with his brother. Like the early racers, Nazzaro and Lancia, Ascari came from a modest background. He was born in a village on the Lombardy-Veneto border where his father worked as a corn merchant. An unsuccessful student, Ascari worked as an apprentice for the De Vecchi factory in Milan working his way up to the commercial side of the business. His switch to Alfa Romeo racing cars in 1920 was concomitant with his operating a new Alfa Romeo dealership in Milan. He was described as a gentle and friendly man with a passion for automobiles—hardly, the hardened New Man of Fascism.²⁶ Photographs of him show a man who smiled often and seemed to enjoy a bonhomie with those around him. When compared to photographs of later stars like Achille Varzi and Tazio Nuvolari, who often looked at the camera with unsmiling faces, it is difficult to picture Ascari as a black shirted Fascist.

Ascari, as the representative of the New Italy under Mussolini, was indelibly linked to the car he raced—the P2 Alfa Romeo Grand Prix car. Founded in 1910 in Milan, the Alfa Romeo firm did not take racing seriously until the introduction of the 2-litre formula in 1922. Until then, Italy's racing banner was carried mainly by FIAT, the Turin-based company founded by Giovanni Agnelli at the turn-of-the-century. FIAT found success in the early years of Grand Prix racing with drivers like Felice Nazzaro, Vincenzo Lancia, and Alessandro Cagno. After the First World War, Nazzaro returned to lead FIAT to victory at the 1922 French Grand Prix at Strasbourg. In 1923, FIAT introduced a supercharged car designed by the Hungarian-born designer Vittorio Jano. Although they made a brief return to Grand Prix racing in 1927, this was FIAT's swansong in the sport.

²⁵ Arnaldo Fraccaroli, "Quadruploci vittoria Italiana all'autodromo di Monza," *Corriere della Sera*, 20 ottobre 1924, pp. 1-2.

²⁶ After his victory at Poggio in 1919, the *Gazzetta dello Sport* described him this way: "He has a calm and tranquil visage, almost like that of an American." Quoted in Cesare De Agostini, *Antonio e Alberto Ascari* (Roma: Automobile Club d'Italia, 1968), p. 14.

The Rise of Alfa Romeo

The rise of Alfa Romeo proved conducive to the new Italy after 1922. The success of FIAT was a reminder of the pre-war, Liberal Italy that Mussolini and his Fascists repudiated. Founded in Milan in 1919, the Fascist Party naturally favored Milanese products like Alfa Romeo. A smaller company compared to the much larger FIAT firm, Alfa seemed to embody the more “dynamic” image of Milan compared to the staid image of Turin. Furthermore, while FIAT saw motorsport as only one part of a vast operation, Alfa came to embrace motor racing as a fundamental part of what one historian has called the “Alfa ideology,” the idea of a small, specialized, avant-garde manufacturer designed for success on the racetracks.²⁷ Alfa’s commitment to Grand Prix racing began with the P1 model in 1923 designed to challenge the FIATs. When FIAT withdrew from racing in order to concentrate on its mass-produced models, its chief engineer, Vittorio Jano, was persuaded to move from Turin to Milan to take over the design department.²⁸

The passing of the baton from FIAT to Alfa Romeo was represented in Jano’s first design for the Milanese team, the P2. This car was a development of the last car that Jano had designed for FIAT, the 805. Powered by a straight eight, supercharged engine, the P2 was quick out of the box. Low and sleek, the car was incredibly fast as shown in its first race on the high-speed Cremona circuit in June 1924 where it clocked 195 km/h on the long straightaway. Although it was a modified FIAT, the P2 came to represent a new era in Italian motorsport and introduced Alfa Romeo as “one of history’s few great specialists in thoroughbred high-performance cars.”²⁹ The car’s legend was tied to its successes on the circuits of Europe in 1924 and 1925. The Alfas did not merely win races, but they dominated them. While the FIATs had some challengers in 1923, the P2 obliterated all of its competition.

Not surprisingly, the success of the Alfas appealed to the ambitions of the Fascist regime. Speed and winning counted for a great deal in the Fascist imagination. One of the movement’s slogans was *Vincere* (Winning), and the triumphs of the Alfas in those two years provided ideal publicity for the quality of Italian manufacturing and for the pretensions of Mussolini’s regime. The P2’s debut on the Cremona circuit took on an extra significance due to the patronage of the local Fascist leader, Roberto Farinacci. One of the most violent and intransigent Fascists, Farinacci was named the Secretary of the Fascist Party in February 1925.³⁰ His appointment reflected the strength of the old guard Fascists who embodied the violent *squadrisimo* (the Blackshirt paramilitary squads) of the early Fascist movement. In the wake of the Matteotti Crisis in 1924, which nearly toppled the regime, Farinacci’s appointment signified the regime’s intent of transforming Italy into a dictatorship and thoroughly Fascistizing Italy. In this context, Alfa Romeo’s emergence as a specialized, “thoroughbred” carmaker, with roots in Milan, Fascism’s founding city, reflected developments in the regime on the cusp of its dictatorial turn.³¹

²⁷ Duccio Bigazzi, *Il Portello. Operai, tecnici e imprenditori all’Alfa Romeo 1906-1926* (Milano: Franco Angeli Libri, 1988), pp. 534-535.

²⁸ Luca Dal Monte, *Enzo Ferrari*, pp. 104-106. Enzo Ferrari, “Vittorio Jano: L’uomo che io ho conosciuto,” in Angelo Tito Anselmi and Valerio Moretti, eds, *Le Alfa Romeo di Vittorio Jano* (Roma: Edizioni di Autocritica, 1982): pp. 25-32.

²⁹ Griffith Borgeson, *The Alfa Romeo Tradition* (Kutztown, PA: Automobile Quarterly Inc., 1990), p. 73.

³⁰ Like some other leading Fascists, Farinacci fancied himself a racing driver. In 1928, he competed in the second edition of the Mille Miglia with little success.

³¹ It is possible to trace the image of Italy’s carmakers with the changing policies of the Fascist dictatorship. For example, FIAT’s time would come in the 1930s, when the regime turned its attention to the masses with its “andare verso il popolo” policy introduced under PNF Secretary Achille Starace. Unlike Farinacci, Starace aimed to make the

National Martyr

All of this set the stage for Antonio Ascari's "martyrdom" in 1925. The fact that he was Milanese and that he found rapid and spectacular success in the P2 suggested that Italy's New Order under Fascism had finally allowed personalities of his caliber to attain success. Even though he had not fought in the war, Ascari came to be associated with the "war generation." His death at Montlhéry placed him in the company of the war dead and the Fascist dead. The presence of Gabriele D'Annunzio's wreath next to that of Mussolini's at the funeral made this association clear as the poet represented both the war generation and the love of speed and death often found in his work.³² Death, speed, and martyrdom became the leitmotifs in the days after Ascari was killed in France.

The elevation of dead racing drivers as martyrs began with Ugo Sivocci who was killed at the Italian Grand Prix in 1923 in an Alfa Romeo. Sivocci's memory was invoked frequently in the days after Ascari's death and at his funeral. Much had happened between Sivocci's death and that of Ascari. By 1925, Alfa Romeo and Ascari had become sporting legends due to their great success on the racetracks. In addition, the political context had changed dramatically. In April 1924, parliamentary elections held under the new Acerbo Law resulted in victory for Mussolini's Fascist Party. Numerous acts of violence during the campaign led the Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti to denounce Mussolini in the Chamber of Deputies. In June, a group of Fascists kidnapped Matteotti, plunging Italy into a profound political crisis. While the crisis was raging in Rome, Giuseppe Campari gave Alfa Romeo its first major victory at the French Grand Prix in August 1924. During an emergency meeting of the Fascist Party leadership on the day of Campari's victory, Francesco Giunta interrupted the proceedings in order to report the news of the triumph.³³ The next day, Alfa Romeo's victory shared the front page of the *Corriere della Sera* with a report on the Matteotti Crisis. The popularity of the Alfa victory in that race also led the editorialist of the *L'Illustrazione Italiana* to suggest that cheering sporting victories was the perfect tonic for the insistent discussions on Matteotti.³⁴ A few days after this article was published, Matteotti's body was found in a shallow grave north of Rome.

The future of Mussolini's government was still uncertain when Ascari won the Italian Grand Prix in October. This victory too made the front pages of Italy's national newspapers. When the 1925 season opened at Spa in Belgium in June, the Matteotti Crisis had passed, and Mussolini had been re-affirmed as Prime Minister by the king. This marked the beginning of the Fascist dictatorship and the end of the Liberal regime. That year also marked a new milestone in Grand Prix racing as the governing body of motorsport, the International Association of Recognized Automobile Clubs (AIACR), introduced a World Championship for manufacturers. There would be no competition as the Alfa Romeo squad made up of Antonio Ascari, Giuseppe Campari, and Gastone Brilli-Peri completely dominated the race in Belgium. In fact, they ended up being the race's only finishers once all the French cars dropped out. The last 25 laps of the race saw only two of the Alfas circulate with Ascari finishing nearly 22 minutes ahead of Campari.

This demonstration of superiority suited the increasingly strident tone of Fascism and might explain the alleged behavior of the team during the race. Stories began to circulate that the Alfa team had deliberately taunted the partisan crowd once the opposition had dropped out.

Fascist Party a mass party. During the Starace era, FIAT introduced its famous Topolino and Balilla cars aimed for a mass market.

³² Azzini, *Bolidi Rossi & Camicie Nere*, p. 14.

³³ "Mussolini biasima il voto dei combattenti," *Corriere della Sera*, 4 agosto 1924, p. 1.

³⁴ Tartaglia, "Il figlio del mio portiere," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, anno LI, no. 32 (10 agosto 1924), p. 154.

Responding to the apparent hostility of the Belgian crowd, the Alfa team took their time during pit stops even going so far as to eat lunch while mechanics worked on the cars, much to the derision of the spectators. This story was exaggerated by the press, but it was a useful myth that served Fascist propaganda, which liked to play up the hostility of the democracies towards Fascism.³⁵ Whatever the truth, the demonstration was an indication of the New Italy's ambitions. The draping of a large Italian flag on the car during Ascari's victory lap demonstrated the new nationalist tone preferred by the regime. An illustration of this graced the cover of *Domenica del Corriere*. When the Alfa team arrived home, a large and festive crowd in the Milan train station greeted them. According to reports, the normally "taciturn" Ascari was shocked by the reception and thought it was for someone else.³⁶

Triumphs on foreign circuits increased the prestige of the Alfa victories at home, which suited Italy's nationalist and authoritarian turn after 1925. Success in the next event, the Grand Prix de l'A.C.F. would carry even greater weight as the French race remained the sport's premier event. Italy's sporting ambitions seemed to depend a great deal on France. In 1924, at the Olympic Games in Paris, Italian athletes won 16 medals at those games placing them fifth on the overall table. In cycling, Ottavio Bottecchia won two consecutive Tours de France in 1924 and 1925; becoming the first Italian to win cycling's most prestigious event. Italy's successes in France led the Italian sporting magazine, *Guerin Sportivo*, to exclaim "Sister France, what a beating! Ascari wins the Grand Prix of Europe, and Bottecchia leads the Tour de France."³⁷

That year's Grand Prix was held on the new Montlhéry-Linas Autodrome south of Paris. The race, run on July 26th, was scheduled for 80 laps. As expected, the Alfas led away from the start. Ascari's leading Alfa looked secure at the front when one of his wheels caught the catch fencing which lined the circuit at one of the faster corners. The fencing caused the car to flip over and then land on Ascari as he was being thrown from the car. His injuries were extensive, and he died on the way to hospital. Photographs of the accident show Ascari's body being carried away on a stretcher carried by French soldiers while the overturned car can be seen in a ditch on the opposite side of the track. Other photographs show curious spectators looking at the wrecked Alfa in the ditch. Many of these images as well as illustrations made their way into the Italian newspapers and magazines making Ascari's death very public.

The death of such a high profile driver during the inaugural event of the new autodrome was not without controversy. The French newspapers, led by the pioneering motorsport journalist Charles Faroux, suggested that Ascari's ragged edge driving was to blame, reminding his readers of Ascari's driving at Monza the previous year and the warning he received from the race's chief steward. Faroux claimed that Ascari showed signs of fatigue as he had misjudged the corner and

³⁵ Cesare De Agostini, *Antonio e Alberto Ascari*, p. 43. What actually happened remains unclear. The race report in the *Corriere della Sera*, once again front-page news, noted that the crowd did not give enthusiastic applause to the winner: "Perhaps they recognize that these Italians win too much..." The reporter was also amazed at the sight of Ascari's mechanic cleaning the car during the driver's last pit stop. Arnaldo Fraccaroli, "Un altro trionfo italiano nel terzo Gran Premio automobilistico d'Europa," *Corriere della Sera*, 29 giugno 1925, pp. 1-2. Part of the controversy over the Alfa team's actions in the pits comes from the fact that Giovanni Canestrini, the dean of Italian motor sport journalists, gave conflicting accounts in his memoirs. See Cesare De Agostini, *Ascari. Un mito italiano* (Milano: Giorgio Nada Editore, 2005), pp. 39-43. Ascari himself made no mention of the incident in an article he wrote for a British racing magazine. Instead, he noted the warm and enthusiastic reception he received from the spectators. Antonio Ascari, "How I Won the Grand Prix D'Europe," *Motor Sport*, vol. 2, no. 2 (August 1925), p. 45.

³⁶ "Ascari," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 28 luglio 1925, p. 3.

³⁷ Quoted in De Agostini, *Alberto e Antonio Ascari*, p. 42. The magazine appeared to forget the Grand Prix of Europe was held in Belgium!

nearly crashed on the two previous laps.³⁸ The *Petit Journal*, recognizing that Ascari was an artist at the wheel, warned of the “dangers of too much virtuosity.”³⁹ Others noted that the picket fence was the problem as it was placed right on the edge of the circuit, although Ascari’s driving style, and his aggressive lines through the corners, no doubt were partly to blame. Tragically, Ascari himself had complained about the fence to the race director and had requested that they be removed.⁴⁰ For the Italians, the blame rested firmly with the “absurd” Montlhéry course and its tight turns and “useless insidiousness.”⁴¹

Funeral for a Hero

When Ascari’s body was loaded onto the train at the Gare de Lyon in Paris, the Italian delegation shouted “Presente!” declaring him a Fascist martyr and national hero.⁴² It was the start of what became an epic journey back home to Milan. Once the train crossed the frontier at Bardonecchia and loaded Mussolini’s wreath, the details of the journey were given ample coverage in the Italian newspapers. It stopped at various places where it was greeted by local officials and loaded with more wreaths and flowers. At Turin, the home of FIAT, Senator Giovanni Agnelli and other executives from Alfa Romeo’s rival greeted the train. At Novara, the city’s mayor gave a short speech. When the train reached its destination at Milan’s Stazione Centrale, a large crowd was there to meet it. The *Corriere della Sera* reported that the piazza in front of the station had become a massive parking lot and that more flowers kept arriving on flatbed trucks.⁴³ These vehicles then formed a procession that followed the coffin to the Alfa Romeo factory at Portello. According to the Fascist Party newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, the procession took over twenty-five minutes to pass with the wreaths alone occupying two trucks and nine cars.⁴⁴

The return of Ascari’s body to Italy and the ceremony surrounding it echoed, albeit on a smaller scale, the rail journey of the Unknown Soldier from Northern Italy to Rome in 1921. It too made stops at various stations where dignitaries greeted it, and wreaths were piled onto the train as it passed. The wake and funeral that followed Ascari’s return also came to resemble that event thus placing Ascari in the company of a fallen national hero. Some 2,000 people paid their respects to Ascari as he lay in state at the Alfa Romeo factory at Portello.⁴⁵ At 3:30pm the next day, the coffin was taken to the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at Cagnola for the funeral. Despite the church’s proximity to the factory, it took over half an hour for the slow moving cortège to get there. Prominently displayed on the casket throughout were the wreaths from Mussolini and Gabriele D’Annunzio. At the church, mourners included Milan’s mayor, Luigi Mangiagalli, the last elected mayor before the regime imposed a *podestà* in 1926. Mario Giampaoli, the highest-ranking Fascist Party official in the Province of Milan, joined him. In this way, Italy’s Liberal past and Fascist future came together over the body of Ascari.

The high point of Ascari’s funeral came when the body was taken from the church to the cemetery. As the body left the church, it was greeted by four airplanes that dropped leaflets

³⁸ Charles Faroux, “Après le Grand Prix de l’A.C.F.” *L’Auto*, 28 juillet 1925, p. 1.

³⁹ “Le Français Benoist, sur Delage, gagné,” *Le Petit Journal*, 27 juillet 1925, p. 1.

⁴⁰ “Delage enlève brillamment les deux premières places du Grand Prix de l’A.C.F avec R. Benoist et Wagner,” *L’Auto*, 27 juillet 1925, p. 1.

⁴¹ “La tragica morte di Ascari. L’impressione a Milano,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 28 luglio 1925, p. 4.

⁴² “Il commovente ritorno della salma di Ascari,” *Corriere della Sera*, 30 luglio 1925, p. 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “L’Arrivo della salma di Antonio Ascari,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 30 luglio 1925, p. 4.

⁴⁵ “Grandiose e solenni onoranze funebri,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 31 luglio 1925, p. 4.

equating Ascari to those who died at the front in World War I. This too suggested that Ascari's place was among the dead of the First World War. The route to the cemetery saw the cortège pass through the working-class part of the city where many of Alfa Romeo's employees lived and where the Socialist and Communist parties had strong support. For those concerned with keeping a Fascist tenor to the proceedings, this route posed some potential problems. Would Ascari be greeted as a hero of the Socialists or of the Fascists? If Ascari was a Fascist martyr, would there be indifference or even protests? The reactions to Ascari's funeral and the interpretations given to it reflected the still unresolved and unsettled political fate of the country. The Fascist Revolution had only just started, and non-Fascist alternative voices still had space to be heard. The Fascist newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, noted that these "once left-wing bastions" had come out in droves to greet the procession despite the wind and rain.⁴⁶ So large was the crowd that the procession had to move very slowly. Flowers from tearful women were thrown from the balconies of working-class homes. The newspaper noted in its report of the funeral that the cortège passed the spot where a "Fascist martyr" had been "savagely murdered" in 1922.⁴⁷ That "martyr" was Edoardo CRESPI, for whom the Fascist cell, to which Ascari belonged, had been named.⁴⁸

A Fascist reading of the funeral might suggest that these reactions reflected a consensus behind the new regime. Rather, it demonstrated that Ascari's body still could be claimed by different political ideologies. For example, the Socialist newspaper, *Avanti!*, noted the favorable reception given to Ascari by the city's working classes, attributing it to a natural response from a city that was "industrial and eminently sporting."⁴⁹ The newspaper described the setting including the number of wreaths draped on the coffin. Entirely missing from *Avanti!*'s account was any mention of Fascism, Mussolini's wreath, or the airplanes. For this newspaper, Ascari's funeral was about a sporting hero and son of Milan, not a Fascist martyr. Nor did the Socialist paper describe the final act of the funeral—the ceremony at the cemetery gates.

This final part of the funeral ceremony represented the "apotheosis" of Ascari and his elevation into the pantheon of Fascist heroes. The location of burial was clearly an indication of this new status as Ascari was to be buried in the Cimitero Monumentale amongst the wealthiest families of Milan. The concluding rites were performed on the steps of the *Famedio* mausoleum reserved for Milan's most famous citizens. Built in 1866, this crypt contained the likes of Alessandro Manzoni. The final rites of the funeral were held on these steps. In front of a massive crowd, a series of speakers gave their eulogies. These included Nicola Romeo, the boss of the Alfa Romeo Company, who used battlefield metaphors to describe Ascari's sacrifice. According to newspaper reports, he managed to get a rise out of the crowd when he mentioned that Ascari held on tenaciously to the steering wheel of the summersaulting car.⁵⁰

The most significant eulogy came from Lando Ferretti. A Fascist deputy in the Italian parliament, Ferretti had once served as the editor of the Milanese sporting newspaper, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. In 1925, he was appointed the President of the Italian Olympic Committee. Ferretti would go on to shape much of the discourse that surrounded Fascist sport in upcoming years. According to Simon Martin, the appointment of Ferretti clearly indicated the regime's serious

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Crespi's death came on a day when the Fascist squads started an uprising in Milan. See Mimmo Franzinelli, *Squadristi. Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista 1919-1922* (Milano: Mondadori, 2003), pp. 385-386.

⁴⁹ "L'ultimo saluto di Milano alla salma di A. Ascari," *Avanti!* 31 luglio 1925, p. 3.

⁵⁰ "Grandiose e solenni funebri tributate alla salma del pilota vittorioso caduto in terra straniera," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 31 luglio 1925, p. 4.

intentions towards sport.⁵¹ Notably, Ferretti was also a strong supporter of motor sport seeing it as a necessary preparation for the “war of tomorrow.”⁵² In an emotional address to the crowd, Ferretti claimed that Ascari was both an Italian and international sporting hero. He noted as well the wreaths offered by Mussolini, “who is the living power of Italy”, and D’Annunzio. Ascari was a “warrior,” according to Ferretti, “whose beating heart ceased when the mechanical heart of his car ceased.”⁵³ Ferretti ended his eulogy with a mention of Ugo Sivocci, who died at Monza in 1923, the first racer to die during the Fascist era.⁵⁴

Ferretti’s eulogy united Ascari the racecar driver with Ascari the warrior. He was both a sporting hero and a hero of the Italian people who brought glory to Italy through his victories on foreign racetracks. The evocation of Mussolini and D’Annunzio placed Ascari firmly within a tradition that linked motorsport with Fascism, D’Annunzio’s Fiume, and the Great War.⁵⁵ In order to emphasize this point, the ceremony concluded with Ferretti invoking the Fascist rite. This was described in *Il Popolo d’Italia*: “‘Comrade Antonio Ascari!’ A thousand voices responded, ‘Presente!’ Ferretti told the crowd, ‘On your knees!’ The crowd kneeled, greatly moved. The silence was broken by sobs while standards were lowered. Five minutes of absolute silence followed. Then the trumpet sounded.”⁵⁶ The Fascist newspaper noted that even the “workers with bronzed faces and calloused hands” were moved to tears.⁵⁷

From National Martyr to Fascist Martyr

The Fascist finale of the funeral clearly stated the regime’s intentions in appropriating Ascari as a martyr for the regime, yet the funeral also suggested that Ascari could be claimed by non-Fascists. The funeral included among its participants numerous non-Fascist associations and elected members of municipal government. They also included workers, many of whom did not support Fascism. In fact, many of the workers of the Alfa Romeo Company continued to agitate on the left in this period. In his magisterial history of the Alfa Romeo Company, Duccio Bigazzi has shown how the successes of the P2 Alfas served to unite management and workers and how the funeral of Ascari, in particular, brought out tremendous “pathos” from the factory workers who participated in the funeral in large numbers.⁵⁸ Yet, the outpouring of grief did not represent a coming together of management and workers in the way the regime hoped, according to Bigazzi. Instead, it demonstrated the pride that the Alfa workers took in the success of the marque and the

⁵¹ Simon Martin, *Sport Italia*, p. 55.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

⁵³ “Grandiose e solenni onoranze funebri,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 31 luglio 1925, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Ferretti played an important role in elevating dead racecar drivers as national heroes. He would include the racer Giulio Masetti, killed at the Targa Florio in 1926, in his anthology of Italian heroes. Lando Ferretti, *Esempi e idee per l’Italiano nuovo* (Roma: Libreria del Littorio, 1930). He was also a regular contributor to motor sport magazines and reserved a great deal of space to the sport in his journal, *Lo Sport Fascista*.

⁵⁵ In 1919, Gabriele D’Annunzio along with a group of war veterans, seized the contested city of Fiume on the Adriatic Coast claiming it for Italy. D’Annunzio was able to rule the city for over a year before the Italian government sent gunships to chase him out. During his time at Fiume, D’Annunzio “invented” what became the Fascist style of oratory and spectacle that was later adopted by Mussolini. See Michael Ledeen, *The First Duce: D’Annunzio at Fiume* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1977).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Duccio Bigazzi, *Il Portello. Operai, tecnici, e imprenditori all’Alfa Romeo, 1906-1926* (Milano: Franco Angeli Libri, 1988), pp. 540-541.

great sympathy they had for the drivers.⁵⁹ The regime's claim that Alfa Romeo's successes ended labor strife was a fiction promoted by the regime friendly newspapers like the *Gazzetta dello Sport* of the *Popolo d'Italia*.

The responses to Ascari's funeral demonstrated that the dead racer could be a hero for the different Italies that still existed in 1925. For the 20,000 people who participated in Ascari's funeral in Milan, the racecar driver could stand for many things. He embodied several discourses that intersected at the same time. He could stand for a Liberal Italy with a patriotism grounded in the Italian Risorgimento. He was also a civic hero that brought together Milan's working and middle classes. Socialism, Liberalism, and Fascism could find a hero in Ascari. What held all these together, however, was the memory of the Great War. All could see in Ascari a "fallen hero" who died on a "foreign battlefield." Echoes of the war dead were present throughout Ascari's funeral and made their way into the epithets and commemorative markers of his death. For example, the plaque on Ascari's birthplace reads, "To Antonio Ascari, who, on 26 July at Montlhéry, while driving his unsurpassed automobile, was tragically stripped from the Fatherland by Death, invidious of Italian glory."⁶⁰ In his memoirs, the dean of Italian motorsport journalists Giovanni Canestrini concluded the chapter on his friend Ascari by quoting the journalist and theater critic Renato Simoni:

We have discovered three syllables, "Ascari," in our consciousness, in our hearts, in our esteem, as if we possessed them. These syllables did not form a name, rather the name of all Italian youth, the youth of the Great War, always ready and willing to surpass itself, to do greater deeds, hungry to make the impossible possible, resolute to make the world aware of our victories, in which the eternal spirit is renewed in victories attained in all fields.⁶¹

His funeral was unprecedented for a sporting hero, and it reflected the growing celebrity status of athletes in the 1920s. It also demonstrated the growing popularity of sport and motorsport, in particular. The reaction to Ascari's death set a precedent for future dead racers. While none would approach Ascari's funeral in scale, similar tributes came in for the numerous Italian racers killed between 1925 and 1933. All of them were treated as national and Fascist martyrs. When Giuseppe Campari and Mario Borzacchini were killed at Monza in 1933, the LUCE newsreel superimposed the Fascist salute "Presente!" over images of their wrecked cars.⁶²

After 1925, though, it was clear that Ascari was made into a Fascist martyr to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, the death and funeral of Ascari opened the door to the Fascistization of sporting heroes. This was evident in the subsequent treatment of dead sporting heroes. However, not all sporting figures were given the same treatment even though their international successes were just as prestigious. For example, when Ottavio Bottecchia died in 1927 as the result of an accident, his funeral was small and local, despite the fact that he had won the Tour de France two years running. Fascist officials also ignored it.⁶³ Suspected of harboring leftwing sympathies, Bottecchia's mysterious death has often been attributed to Fascist violence. When Bottecchia was killed, the

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 537.

⁶⁰ An image of the plaque is posted on the website of the town: <https://comune.sorga.vr.it/contenuti/50591/casa-natale-ascari>. Accessed June 1, 2021.

⁶¹ Quoted in Giovanni Canestrini, *Una vita con le corse* (Bologna: Edizioni Calderini, 1962), p. 29.

⁶² Archivio LUCE, "Le manifestazioni automobilistiche di Monza," *Giornale LUCE* B0334 (1933).

⁶³ Enrico Landoni, "Regime e ciclismo: Ai margini o ai vertici dello sport nazionale?" in *Il Giro d'Italia e la società italiana*, Gianni Silei, ed. (Roma: Piero Lacaita Editore, 2010), p. 139.

Fascist dismantling of the Liberal state was well under way, and there was no longer room for sporting heroes who might be associated with suspected anti-Fascist sympathies.⁶⁴

Fascism, on the other hand, could easily appropriate Ascari. His exploits at the wheel of the P2 Alfa Romeo thrust him onto the front pages of the national newspapers. Not only his successes, but also his style made him emblematic of the New Fascist Man. Hardly known before 1922, Ascari's reputation emerged in parallel with the rise of Fascism. As a representative of the Fascist type, Ascari became known for his outright speed and his willingness to "live dangerously," a Fascist slogan introduced by Mussolini in 1924 and inspired by the rhetoric of the likes of Marinetti and D'Annunzio. In his memoirs, Canestrini reflected on the nature of Ascari's risk-taking drive during the 1924 Italian Grand Prix where he was warned by the race director to slow down. Setting one lap record after another, Ascari was encouraged by the shouting crowds to go faster. Wrote Canestrini, "There was no reason for Ascari to insist on such a rapid and risky pace, if not for his need for speed. His position as race leader was under no threat."⁶⁵ Ascari's desire for speed, his ability to excite the crowds, and his position as Alfa's leading driver made him the perfect representative for the aspirations of the Fascist regime.

The rising popularity of Grand Prix racing, and its privileged place in the Fascist imagination also made Ascari an icon of the "mythical modernity" that formed an integral part in the Fascist Revolution.⁶⁶ Ascari himself contributed to this myth in a column he wrote for the British *Motor Sport* magazine after his dominant victory at Spa in June 1925. In that article, published posthumously, he described his sensations driving the Alfa Romeo. "I was literally astounded at the wonderful improvement made in the engine," wrote Ascari, "and the feeling when at the wheel that I was being propelled through the air by some indescribable power, which at one moment would drive me through space at an incredible speed and the next become submissive to my will."⁶⁷ In the same article, Ascari made an overt reference to Fascist slogans when he described the "eight cylinders giving out a rhythmic song which sang 'Victor, Victory, Victory!'"⁶⁸

In May 1929, Ascari's place in the pantheon of Fascist martyrs was made complete when a bust of his likeness was unveiled at the Cimitero Monumentale. By then, the Fascist dictatorship was firmly in place. The previous March, Mussolini won 98% of the vote in an election where he was the only candidate. The regime's opponents had been either killed, jailed, or exiled. Grand Prix racing, meanwhile, was enjoying a revival following Alfa Romeo's withdrawal from the sport in 1925. New Italian stars like Achille Varzi and Tazio Nuvolari were winning races for Fascist Italy on tracks throughout Europe. Ascari's achievements and his death could now be seen as forerunners of this new era in Italian sport and politics.

The ceremony surrounding the unveiling of the bust proved that Ascari's legacy was now firmly in the hands of Fascism. In a lengthy report on the ceremony, the Milanese paper, *Corriere della Sera*, began with the assertion that Italians had not forgotten the late driver. "Ascari is still too alive in the memory of Italian sportsmen [...] attracted by the fascination of his races and of his records. He was a dominant figure [...] in the most exciting era of postwar Italian motor

⁶⁴ The hypothesis that local Fascists murdered Bottecchia remains unproven and his death remains shrouded in mystery. See Paola Treppo, "A 90 anni della morte resta il giallo sulla morte di Ottavio Bottecchia," *Il Gazzettino.it*: https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/udine/mistero_morte_campione_ciclismo_ottavio_bottecchia_trasaghis-3218846.html.

⁶⁵ Canestrini, *Una vita con le corse*, p. 24.

⁶⁶ On the importance of "mythical modernity", especially as it is applied to aviators, see Fernando Esposito, *Fascism, Aviation, and Mythical Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁶⁷ Antonio Ascari, "How I Won the Grand Prix D'Europe," *Motor Sport*, vol. 2, no. 2 (August 1925), p. 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45. *Vincere, Vincere, Vincere* was a popular Fascist slogan and song.

sport.”⁶⁹ The article recalled the 1924 Italian Grand Prix as Ascari’s “consecration.” It also recalled the moment that the death of Ascari was announced on the loudspeaker at Montlhéry and the “immense crowd” standing up in silence and removing their hats. “That impressive silence,” recalled the article, “represented the greatest and most spontaneous demonstration of pain that a crowd could ever express.”⁷⁰ Various sporting and motor clubs gathered in front of the Ascari tomb to unveil the sculpture made by Orazio Costante Grossoni, the well-known Milanese artist who had sculpted many monuments in the cemetery.⁷¹ After a few speeches and a blessing from a priest, the group went to the Musocco cemetery across town to visit the graves of other racecar and motorcycle drivers who were buried there, including Ascari’s old teammate Ugo Sivocci, whose death and funeral was the prototype for the appropriation of racers who died for the “New Italy.” This pilgrimage to dead sporting heroes included stops at the graves of Fascist martyrs. The group also visited the graves of the victims of the Diana Theater bombing in 1921 and the 1928 bombing at the Fiera di Milano, both terrorist acts blamed on leftwing activists.⁷² In this way, the appropriation of Ascari, Fascist martyr, was made complete.

Conclusion

The death of Ascari and his subsequent funeral serves as an illustration of the changing perceptions of the racecar driver after World War I in Italy. He was at once a fallen warrior, celebrity, and national hero. In 1925, Ascari’s Garibaldian image made him amenable to Italians of all political stripes who agreed that Ascari was a national hero who died giving glory to Italy. Both his death and the successes of Alfa Romeo in the years 1924 and 1925 came at a turbulent time in Italian politics, however. Although Ascari could unite the nation, the rise of the Fascist dictatorship in 1925 made his appropriation as a Fascist martyr inevitable. This account of Ascari as Fascist hero reflects the growing politicization of sport in the 1920s and Grand Prix racing’s increasing identification with nationalism and dictatorship. Racecar drivers came to represent the Fascist New Man and those who died in racing were depicted as martyrs for the regime. The funerals of drivers like Pietro Bordino (1928), Emilio Materassi (1928), Gastone Brilli-Peri (1930) and Mario Baconin Borzacchini (1933) among others, was a testimony to the celebrity status achieved by these men, and also their elevation to martyrdom. Notably, this process of sacralizing dead racers and exalting racing victories achieved their apotheosis in the victories of the Nazi-backed German teams in the 1930s. The death of Ascari proved the first step in the increasing identification between motor sport and Fascism.

⁶⁹ “Un monumento in memoria di Ascari,” *Corriere della Sera*, 13 maggio 1929, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Cristina Sirigatti, “Oreste Costanti Grossoni,” *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 60 (2003): [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/orazio-costante-grossoni_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/orazio-costante-grossoni_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

⁷² The perpetrators of the Fiera bombing were never caught and the theory that it was committed by anarchists never proven. A recent book on this largely forgotten terrorist attack suggests that it may have originated in a fratricidal war among Milanese Fascists. See Carlo Giacchin, *Attentato alla Fiera. Milano 1928* (Milano: Mursia Editore, 2009). An account of the procession to the graves at Campo 37 of the Cimitero Maggiore (Musocco) is found in the Fascist Party newspaper. “Un monumento ad Antonio Ascari al Cimitero Monumentale,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 14 maggio 1929, p. 6.